**The Nature of Purim in Halakha and *Machshava***

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Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: “The earthly court instituted three things, and the heavenly court agreed to them… the reading of the *megilla*, as it is written, ‘The Jews established and accepted’ (Esther 9:27) – they established on high what they accepted below.” (*Makkot* 23b)

After what has happened between 1939 and now… Esther is strange no more. What if this once-strange book in the Jewish Bible had to be moved from the periphery to the center, so as to provide the new principle uniting the whole? (Emil Fackenheim)[[1]](#footnote-1)

No greater injustice could be done to the holiday of Purim than to consider it a children’s festival. Despite external appearances of fancy dress, humor and levity, Purim contains central themes which should be as challenging and relevant for adults as those of Pesach, Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur. This article will attempt to sketch a common choreography that binds together the presentations of Purim in Halakha and in Jewish thought. As we examine each area we will ask how Purim is different from the other festivals, not only in its content but in its nature and character as well. Our aim is to show that across the different areas a single theme characterizes the nature of Purim, which sets it apart from all other holidays.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Purim in Halakha**

We will pose a number of questions concerning various aspects of the laws of Purim that set them apart from those of other holidays.

***Matanot la-evyonim***

*Matanot la-evyonim,* or gifts to the poor, is one of the four *mitzvot* of Purim (along with *mishloach manot,* the Purim feast, and listening to the *megilla*). Yet *matanot la-evyonim* appears very similar to the mitzva of *tzedaka* (charity) that exists throughout the year. Is *matanot la-evyonim* simply the mitzva of *tzedaka* in the context of Purim, or does it have an independent identity? When we examine the sources, we see that a number of factors distinguish *matanot la-evyonim* from *tzedaka*.

First, *tzedaka* has both a lower limit and an upper limit: one must give at least one tenth of one’s earnings to charity but no more than one fifth. (Rema YD 249:1; *Iggerot Moshe* YD 1, 143) Second, the mitzva of *tzedaka* dictates an order of preference regarding its recipient, most succinctly expressed by the principle of “the poor of your own city come first.” Those in greater proximity (geographically or otherwise) to us have a greater claim to our resources than those who live at a distance (*Bava Metzia* 71a).

By contrast, we find that these checks and regulations are absent from the laws of Purim:

We do not scrutinize the money we give on Purim; rather, anyone who extends his hand to take, we give to him. (*Yerushalmi*, *Megilla*,1)

Based on this we derive that on Purim there is no upper limit to the amount we dispense, nor any discrimination between potential recipients. The Shulchan Arukh quotes the *Yerushalmi* verbatim and adds that giving to non-Jewish causes is also considered part of the mitzva of *matanot la-evyonim* (OC 694:3).

Why, then, is the mitzva of *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim different from *tzedaka* throughout the year?

**The principle of *makdimin***

The mishna in *Megilla* 5a discusses a scenario in which a small town holds *minyanim* on only Mondays and Thursdays for the purpose of reading the Torah*.* In such a case, if Purim was to fall on a day other than Monday or Thursday, the mishna stipulates that *makdimin ve-lo me’acharin* – the reading of the *megilla* is pushed earlier and not later. Thus, if the 14th of Adar fell on a Sunday, the town would read the *megilla* on the preceding Thursday, the 11th of Adar, rather than waiting until the following day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, the mishna goes on to discuss various other occasions for which a *minyan* is required – such as *Tish’a Be-Av*, the *hakhel* ceremony and the festival *chagiga* offering – where the opposite rule is applied: *me’acharin ve-lo makdimin*. In other words, the ceremony is postponed rather than advanced. The Gemara explains that the postponement of *Tisha Be-Av* is due to the principle that we do not advance remembrances of punishments and suffering. This reason clearly cannot suffice to explain why the *chagiga* offering and the *hakhel* ceremony are postponed, so the Gemara continues:

*Chagiga* and *hakhel* [are postponed] – since the time of their obligation has not yet arrived.

This line provides a strong logic to explain why, if one cannot perform a given commandment on time, it is preferable to perform it later rather than earlier. To perform an obligation at a later date is simply to fulfill one’s duty late, but to push it to an earlier date is meaningless; the obligation simply does not exist prior to its allotted time. Yet the very strength of this explanation raises an obvious difficulty. If *chagiga* and *hakhel* are postponed rather than advanced because the time of their obligation has not yet arrived, why are we able to advance the reading of the *megilla* when a community is unable to read it on the 14th of Adar? Surely the time of the obligation to read the *megilla* has also not yet arrived!

**The obligation of the convert to read the *megilla***

The Rambam writes:

…all are obligated in the reading of [the *Megilla*]: men, women and converts. (*Hilkhot Megilla* 1:1)

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Mesorah*, Volume 8, p. 9)pointed out that the explicit mention of converts in the delineation of those obligated in the mitzva of *megilla* appears superfluous. Should they not fall under the general commandment obligating all Jewsish men and women to read the *megilla*? Indeed, when it comes to *mitzvot* of a similar nature such as lighting Chanukah candles or drinking four cups of wine on the *seder* night, the Rambam simply writes that men and women are obligated in the mitzvah. This seems to imply that converts, being either male or female, are included in the general obligation of all Jewish adults. What is it about the mitzva of *megilla* that could give us reason to think that converts are exempt, in order to warrant their explicit mention by the Rambam to inform us that they are indeed obligated in the mitzva?

Let us recall our three questions on the nature of the *halakhot* of Purim:

* Why does *matanot la-evyonim* differ from the mitzva of *tzedaka*, lacking both an upper limit on the amount one may give and an order of preference for its recipients?
* Why, when a *minyan* is unavailable, are *chagiga* and *hakhel* postponed while, under the same circumstances, the reading of the *megilla* is advanced? Surely the time of the obligation to read the *megilla* has similarly not yet arrived?
* Why, in contrast to other similar *mitzvot*, does the Rambam include converts in the list of those who are obligated in the reading of the *megilla*, rather than simply assuming that they are included in the obligation incumbent upon all Jewish adults?

Common to all three questions is a sense that the *halakhot* of Purim differ from our expectations upon comparison with parallel areas of Halakha.Can we then identify a single theme in the nature of Purim that would serve to explain these discrepancies and answer all of our questions?

Rav Soloveitchik, in answering his question regarding converts and the mitzva of *megilla*, hints at such a theme:

It seems to me that the nature of Purim is different from other enactments of *Chazal*, for the origin of the *Yom Tov* was what the Jews at the time practiced themselves... and only later did Mordekhai formalize what they had started to do, and since converts were not part of the nation at the time, and they would not have begun to observe Purim, were it not for a specific enactment of “all those who attach themselves to the Jewish people,” there would be no obligation upon converts at all.

In other words, commandments should generally be considered formal obligations that come from the outside, leaving no room to discriminate between converts and non-converts. Yet the nature of Purim is fundamentally different in that its origin was not in any formal commandment but in the spontaneous celebration of the Jews at the time of Purim after their salvation from their foes, and only later were these celebrations formalized into the annual practice of the *mitzvot* of Purim.[[4]](#footnote-4) Rav Soloveitchik’s insight is that the origin of the celebration of Purim continues to impact upon the nature of the *mitzvot* even once they have been formalized. On Purim, we step back into the shoes of our ancestors as it were, celebrating spontaneously as they did. Yet converts do not have ancestors whom they can emulate. Because of this, were it not for a specific enactment, the obligation of converts to read the *megilla* (and presumably other attendant *mitzvot* as well) would not exist. Thus the Rambam explicitly mentions that converts are obligated in the mitzva of *megilla*, for there would indeed have been reason to suppose that converts might not celebrate Purim, given its unique character.

We can now answer our question of why, when the *megilla* cannot be read on the 14th of Adar, its reading is pushed to an earlier date. We noted that under similar circumstances *hakhel* and the *chagiga* are postponed, “since the time of their obligation has not yet arrived” and asked why this reasoning should not also apply to Purim. On the basis of Rav Soloveitchik’s insight we can now suggest that the nature of Purim is fundamentally different from that of other periods of the year. Where *hakhel* and the *chagiga* are formal obligations, which can be celebrated only at the appointed time (or after if necessary), the celebration of Purim is spontaneous and initiated by *Am Yisrael* themselves, just as it was at the time of the original celebration of Purim. Given this, as the concept of “the time of obligation has not yet arrived” is simply not relevant for Purim; its observance, while normally held on the 14th of Adar, is actually flexible and can occur whenever Jews begin to celebrate it.

We can also now understand why the mitzva of *matanot* *la-evyonim* differs from the obligation to give *tzedaka* throughout the year. Conceptually, the obligation to give *tzedaka* also comes “from the outside,” stemming from the presence of a person in need, standing in front of us, whose situation needs to be ameliorated. As a result, we are entitled to conduct various checks: is this person in fact deserving of our help? Even if so, are there people to whom we have a greater obligation to give? Have we perhaps already given as much as we need to give to fulfill our own minimum obligation of *tzedaka*?

Yet on Purim it is not the poor who need to receive. It is we who need to give! Helping others is a spontaneous expression of our own internal joy on the festival, welling up from within. As such, it cannot be subject to the limits on *tzedaka* throughout the year. Indeed, the Ritva seems to make this point:

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Megilla* 1:4) explains the line of “anyone who extends his hand to take, we give to him” to mean that we give *tzedaka* to everybody on Purim and we do not check to see if he is a poor person and deserving of the money [as we do throughout the rest of the year], **because this giving is not solely due to the law of *tzedaka*, but from the law of *simcha* (joy)**, [as] we even send gifts to the rich, and therefore it is customary to give money to non-Jews and even to the rich on Purim. (*Chidushei Ha-Ritva*, *Megilla* 7a)

In the Ritva’s view, *matanot la-evyonim* and *mishloach* *manot* derive from the same source. Giving – whether to the poor, to the rich, or to our gentile friends – is an expression of our own internal celebration, which, as we have seen, is a central motif of the celebration of Purim as a whole.

We have shown that the nature of the *halakhot* of Purim differs significantly from other areas of Halakhathroughout the year. If throughout the year obligations come from the outside, from God or from *Chazal*, on Purim the source of our obligations is the natural spontaneity and joy that well up from within.[[5]](#footnote-5) If this is so, it would not be surprising if we were to find a parallel notion in the thought and philosophy that accompanies Purim.

**Purim in Jewish Thought**

One of the most striking features of *Megillat Esther* that set it apart from the rest of the *Tanakh* is that the salvation of the Jews is not brought about through the direct intervention of God (who goes unmentioned throughout the *megilla*), but by the faith and bravery of the human characters, primarily Mordekhai and Esther. For *Chazal*, this point is not coincidental to the story, but has direct bearing on the theological meaning of the *megilla*:

Where is Esther hinted at in the Torah? “And I will surely hide (*haster astir*) My face on that day from all evil” (*Devarim* 31). (*Chullin* 139b)

It is God Himself who warns at the conclusion of the Torah that there will come a day when He will hide His face from the world, when His presence will not easily be discerned. The *midrash* points out that the name Esther bears striking similarity to the word used to describe the hiding of God’s presence (*haster astir*), and draws the conclusion that it is Esther, both the individual and the *megilla* as a whole, which represents just such a time of God’s hidden nature.

It is clear, then, that Purim represents a fundamental change in the relationship between God and Israel from what we find in the *Tanakh* until that point. How are we to respond to such a dramatic shift? The Gemara presents a nuanced and complex answer:

Rav Assi said: Why is Esther compared to the dawn? To tell you that just as the dawn is the end of the night – so too Esther marks the end of all miracles. (*Yoma* 29a)

There appears to be a lack of symmetry between the “dawn” metaphor and its interpretation. On the one hand, the imagery of the dawn, the emergence into light from a long, dark night – is surely a positive statement. Yet the “end of all miracles” seems to be a negative statement. If miracles are manifestations of God’s presence in this world, then surely their cessation, and presumably God’s corresponding withdrawal from the world, is a situation to be regretted?

Such an imbalance forces us to adjust one of our assumptions; either the dawn is actually a negative phenomenon, or the absence of miracles is a positive development. Of the two, it seems that it is the latter assumption that must be corrected. Miracles and divine intervention, while displaying God’s presence in the world, nevertheless reduce by necessity the potential scope for man’s own action and agency. Israel cannot escape from Egypt without assistance, they cannot cross the Red Sea without a miracle, and they cannot survive in the desert without the daily manna falling from the heavens. In a certain sense, such an existence is one of theological infancy. Although one lives with constant awareness of and interaction with God, one is only a receiver, utterly dependent for survival upon miracles – as a small child relies upon its mother.[[6]](#footnote-6) One does not initiate or create; the relationship is not merely unequal – it is one-directional.

By contrast, a world without miracles is replete with fear, danger and doubt; the security of God’s protective presence is sorely missed. Yet it is also a world that allows for a more mature, more adult faith, one that obligates us to act, initiate, and respond of our own accord. Not only are people in such a world unable to rely on miracles for physical survival, they also do not depend on miracles for the survival of their faith. Esther is compared to the dawn, for she marks the end of all miracles. Just as the dawn brings in a new day full of possibility and opportunity, Esther ushers in a new chapter in our relationship with God, in which our faith is strong enough to persist without miraculous divine intervention.

Purim, then, marks a watershed in the religious history of the Jewish people. It represents the new hiddenness of God’s face, yet it also represents the revelation of Israel’s religious and national maturity. Purim highlights our ability to maintain our faith and fight for our beliefs and survival in a world in which we cannot rely on any external salvation. As contemporary writer Yoram Hazony has put it:

The most remarkable aspect of *Megillat Esther* is not God’s absence itself, but the fact that this absence does not induce defeat and despair.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is presumably for this reason too that the Rambam makes such an astonishing claim regarding the status of the *Tanakh* in the days of the Messiah:

All the books of the Prophets and the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, with the exception of *Megillat Esther*, which will survive just like the Five Books of Moses and the *halakhot* of the Oral Torah that will never be annulled… (*Hilkhot Megilla* 2:18)

The revolution that the book of Esther represents – of a new stage in the relationship between God and Israel – gives it a unique position in contrast to the rest of the Bible, ensuring its eternal significance.

**Conclusion – Between *Midrash* and Halakha**

Too frequently do we assign *midrash* and Halakha to separate spheres in our religious consciousness. Yet we would do well to remember that the authors of the *midrash* are the very same people who forged the halakhic fabric of the Oral Torah. *Midrash* and Halakha complement and complete one another. Halakha turns abstract ideas and values into concrete action and service of God, giving our religiosity discipline and regularity. *Midrash* endows Halakha with life, spontaneity and spirituality, preventing it from becoming mechanical and rote.

A correspondence exists between *midrash* and Halakha in many areas. Indeed, on the basis of our discussion we can discern a shared choreography between the *halakhot* of Purim and the holiday’s attendant philosophy, as presented in the *midrashim*. The critical movement is an emergence from within, spreading from the inside out, rather than an approach from the outside in. Holidays throughout the rest of the year commemorate events that feature the external intervention of God, and whose *halakhot* take the form of decrees commanded by the Torah or by *Chazal*. Purim stands in direct opposition to this. Its philosophy celebrates a point in our history when Jews could not rely on God sending plagues or splitting seas to assist them, but had to discover resources for faith and bravery within themselves to do what was necessary. Similarly, the *halakhot* of Purim are characterized by their internal, spontaneous nature where, among other examples, charity is given without limit and without discrimination as an expression of our own internal joy.

Let us conclude by reading afresh one of the most famous statements of *Chazal* on Purim:

“And they gathered at the foot of the mountain” (*Shemot* 19:17) – Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: “This teaches us that God suspended the mountain above them like a barrel and said to them: ‘If you accept the Torah – good, but if you do not – there will be your burial place.’” Rav Acha bar Ya’akov said: “From here emerges a great protest about the Torah” [i.e., since the people were coerced into the covenant, they are not responsible for the agreement]. Rava said: “Nonetheless, they reaffirmed their acceptance in the days of Achashverosh, as it says: ‘The Jews established and accepted’ (Esther 9:27) – they established what they had already accepted.” (*Shabbat* 88a)

What does it mean for the Jews to be coerced into the covenant? Conceivably, free will cannot be said to truly exist when the only possible response to a question is yes. This is to say that for the generation who left Egypt, who had witnessed the plagues and the splitting of the sea, who saw God’s direct role in their liberation – what possible reason could they have had for rejecting God’s offer of making their relationship permanent? The response could have been only *na’aseh ve-nishma*, we will do and we will listen. Yet such an acceptance, by the very fact that there is no good reason to say no, cannot be considered a full and true acceptance. For such a complete acceptance of the Torah to take place, we would need to live in a time when there is every reason to say no, to reject God’s covenant, and nevertheless to respond with an emphatic yes. The days of Achashverosh were just such a time – when God’s face was hidden, and when the eventual salvation could be put down to secular reasons of political savvy, chance, or luck. That the Jews at the time nevertheless responded to the events of Purim by re-establishing their commitment to their national and religious identity – accepting the Torah without the faintest hint of coercion – was the truest acceptance of the Torah.

What was the impetus for *Chazal* to draw this contrast between the Jews who stood at Sinai and those in the days of Achashverosh? Living in the shadow of the destruction of the Second Temple, they saw themselves as equivalent to their ancestors in the days of Achashverosh, who had committed themselves to their religion and identity despite the presence of so many reasons to act otherwise. To enter into a relationship with God at Sinai or in the courtyard of the Temple is not difficult. But to accept the yoke of Heaven and to serve God when He has hidden His face, when the Temple lies in ruins – or, in more recent memory, to rebuild Jewish identity, Torah scholarship and the State of Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust – is the truest acceptance of the Torah.

1. *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One of the main inspirations for this piece is Rav Yoel Bin-Nun’s essay, “*Megillat Ha-hefekh*,” in *Hadassa Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut, 5757), pp. 47–54. Rav Bin-Nun points to similar themes in the nature of Purim, but focuses on their presentation in *Tanakh* rather than in *midrash* and halakha, as this essay will do. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Megilla* 1:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This distinction between the original spontaneous celebration and Mordekhai’s later formalization of those original celebrations into formal *mitzvot* emerges very clearly from a reading of the second half of Chapter 9 in the *megilla*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A similar argument on the nature of Purim in contrast to the rest of the year is made by Rav Yoav Shacham in *Alon Shevut* 165, who focuses specifically on *aveilut* and *aninut*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Perhaps for this reason, *Chazal* used the metaphor of a child running away from school to describe the litany of failings in the book of *Bemidbar* after the people journey on from Mount Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem, 2000),
p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)