



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ה Purim

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Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for joining us!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

תשפ"ה Purim

Our Sages have revealed a deep and profound insight into human nature:

אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו

A person's character. is shaped by his actions

This means that a person's day-to-day deeds profoundly affect his character. The 13th century *Sefer Hachinuch*, attributed to R. Aharon HaLevi, Mitzvah 16, develops this concept. A completely righteous person who for some reason engages in bad acts, *e.g.*, he would become the chief executioner of a despotic evil king, would eventually become evil; his negative actions would influence his good character and change it to evil. Similarly, if an evil person would engage in good deeds, eventually those deeds will transform his evil character to good.

We now understand why our Torah is a Torah of actions – *mitzvot*. The human being comprises an earthy body and an elevated, spiritual soul. How does one transform his earthy body into a more spiritual one? By engaging it in holy deeds designed to bring holiness into the person. The constant spiritual influence of the holy deeds (*mitzvot*) done by the body, slowly but surely penetrates it and transforms it from an earthy vessel to a holy one. This in turn allows the holy soul to expand within the now holier body and create within the person good character instead of bad. Each *mitzvah* corresponds to a specific part of the body, which corresponds to a specific facet of the soul. The more spiritual one is, the closer he can get to Hashem. This is a Jew's mission in life. To perfect himself - the entire person, body and soul - through the performance of the *mitzvot* and the study of Torah, and, through them, create a wholesome, balanced, and sterling character within ourselves - a person worthy of being close to Hashem.

For each Jewish holiday, the Torah sets down special mitzvot in honor of that special time designed to help us absorb the holiday's unique message . For example, Pesach commemorates and celebrates our redemption from Egyptian slavery to freedom. To help us absorb Pesach's lessons, we celebrate the *Passover seder* to tell the story of our exodus to our children, eat only *matzah* to remember the slavery and our hasty exodus from Egypt, and eat *maror*, bitter herbs, to recall the bitter slavery from which we were freed. Through performing these Torah commanded mitzvot, we imbue ourselves with the essence of the holiday: On Pesach we do not merely contemplate and reminisce over what occurred to our ancestors; on Pesach, on a certain level, we, ourselves, via our actions in participating in the seder, are transformed and become free.

Similarly, on Sukkot, to remember and celebrate Hashem's protection throughout our 40-year journey in the wilderness, we "live" in a sukkah for seven days and, ourselves, experience divine protection.

Via performing these physical actions – the mitzvot-- the ideas that they represent influence us and imbue us with its message and change us for the better.

When the אנשי כנסת הגדולה - *the Men of the Great Assembly*- added Purim to the Jewish calendar (it is post-biblical), they instituted four mitzvot that one needs to fulfill on Purim. These four rabbinic commandments are: (1) מקרא מגילה - To hear the Megillah read both night and day. (2) סעודה - To have a festive meal of celebration on Purim day. (3) מתנות לאביונים - To give charity to at least two poor people. (4) משלוח מנות - To send two foods to a friend. Designed to capture the essence of the Purim miracle, these mitzvot help us absorb its message into our souls. Each of the four mitzvot helps us appreciate a different aspect of the Purim miracle and provides us with the tools that we need

to experience the holiday to the fullest and to maximize the lessons of the day.

The first mitzvah, to read the Megillah on Purim night and, again, the next day, gives us an appreciation of the miracle that Hashem brought to His people, saving them from Haman's murderous decree, which came about as a punishment for a sin that they had committed. When they completely repented from their sin, Hashem saved them. As we listen to the story as related in the Megillah, we appreciate how, behind the scenes and unbeknownst to anyone, Hashem carefully orchestrated the salvation of the Jewish people.

Here is the story in a nutshell:

The Megillah begins with a lavish, over the top, 180-day party made by Achashverosh, king of 127 lands, in the third year of his kingdom. After the long party for the kingdom's high officials, Achashverosh made a second seven-day party for the residents of Shushan, the capital city. King Achashverosh invited even his Jewish subjects to the second party and provided kosher food and kosher wine for his honored guests.

Mordechai, a prophet and the leader of the Jewish people, directed the Jews not to attend the party. King Achashverosh was serving drinks in the vessels of the Holy Temple, and he was wearing the holy clothing of the High priest. He did this to demonstrate his belief that these sacred items would never again be used by the Jews and that they would remain permanently banished from their homeland. How could a Jew be present as Achashverosh made a mockery of the Holy Temple? Yet, most of the people ignored Mordechai's directive; they attended and had themselves a ball. The unfortunate upshot from enjoying the forbidden party was to put the Jewish people in spiritual danger and to render them subject to Haman's evil decree.

Even though the Jewish people acted inappropriately by going to the party that was designed to disgrace Hashem and the Holy Temple, Hashem in His great love for His people, nevertheless planted the seeds for the redemption at that time.

On the last day of the party, when Achashverosh and his cohorts were deeply inebriated, an argument ensued as to which country has the most beautiful women. *Achashverosh*, who claimed that his wife was the most beautiful of all, sought to end the argument by requesting that his queen, Vashti, come in her birthday suit to grace the gathering. Vashti was prepared to fulfill the king's request, but she strangely developed an unsightly rash over her body and was in no condition to appear before the judges. Not wanting to admit that she wasn't fit to appear, she sent an insulting refusal to the king through his messengers. Vashti was the daughter of *Balshetzar*, the former king, and *Achashverosh* came to power through marrying her. So, she felt that she could treat the king poorly, since she was the source of his power. However, *Achashverosh* was so deeply humiliated in front of his officers and dignitaries that he decided that Vashti needed to suffer dire consequences for her insolent behavior. He put the question to his advisors, and Haman, who was nobody special at that time, came up with the idea that Vashti should be killed. (Haman had a daughter whom he hoped would become the next queen, and therefore came up with an excuse that would look like a service to the entire kingdom, to kill Vashti.) The king took his advice and killed Vashti.

This was the first step in the potential redemption because it created a vacancy in the position of queen.

When *Achashverosh* recovered from the party, he became lonely for a queen. His advisors suggested that he hold a beauty contest to choose the next queen.

There was a holy and righteous man living in the capital city Shushan, Mordechai, a descendant of the tribe of Binyamin. His niece Esther, was an orphan, and Mordechai adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. She had a special way about her, and anyone who saw her found her to be beautiful. When the proclamation came forth from the palace that the king is looking for a new wife, all eligible women were encouraged to present themselves to *Hageh*, the person in charge of processing the candidates. Scouts were also retained to find candidates for the king.

The last thing Mordechai and Esther wanted was for Esther to become the queen of the gentile king, *Achashverosh*. Hence, knowing of Esther's unique quality of finding favor in the eyes of all who beheld her, Mordechai hid Esther and did not allow her to leave the house while the search for a queen was going on. However, as Mordechai entered the house one day, a scout who stood opposite the door, was able to see in and spotted Esther. Her magic worked on him, and he immediately realized that this was possibly the girl who would capture the king's heart. Four years after the contest began, Esther was taken to the king's palace where she was ultimately chosen as the queen.

This was the second crucial step in the redemption. Now that Esther is the Queen, if the Jewish people should act appropriately, she will be in position to intervene with the king.

Shortly after Esther became the queen and all the pieces were in place, Achashverosh appointed Haman to be his second in command.

Touting his new power, Haman decreed that all must bow down to him when he passed by. Mordechai, however, would not bow since he was from the tribe of *Binyomin*, the only one of Yaakov's sons who did not bow down to Haman's ancestor, Esav. Hence, Mordechai *was not permitted* to bow down to Haman. In his rage, Haman asked

Achashverosh to exterminate all the Jews, and Achashverosh granted his request. The date was set for the 13th day of the month of Adar. All non-Jews would be encouraged to kill any Jew they could, and the Jews' possessions and wealth would become theirs.

Letters went out to Achashverosh's kingdom that on the 13th of Adar, all gentiles are encouraged to kill every Jew that they could, men, women and children, with the goal of totally eradicating the Jewish nation. There was an extra incentive for anyone who killed a Jew. He would get that Jew's wealth.

Had the Jewish people been a unified entity, Hashem would not have allowed Haman to bring a decree to annihilate them, for when the Jews are unified, they are invincible. Since they are one unit, the good among them will eventually influence all the rest, and it is just a matter of time until they all get it. However, at that time they were fragmented and vulnerable, as we see from this passage in the Talmud (Megillah 13b):

אמר רבא ליבא דידע לישנא בישא כהמן

*Rava said: No one knew how to speak **lashon hora** (evil speech) better than Haman. And what was the ultimate **lashon hora** that he said?*

ח) וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ יֵשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפָּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכֹל מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתָךְ

8) And Haman said to the king Achashverosh. "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples, in all the provinces of your realm." (Esther 3:8).

If Haman was alleging that the Jewish people were a threat to Achashverosh's kingdom, their being unified would have harbored a greater threat because they could band together and rise up against him. Why would he mention that they were scattered and dispersed? It would be a reason *not* to feel threatened.

Our Sages explain Haman's statement: the Jewish people were scattered and dispersed among *themselves* - they were not unified; and, because of that, they were vulnerable and could be annihilated.

Upon hearing Haman's decree, Mordechai sent a message to Esther to go to the king to save her people. Esther refused, saying that it would be suicidal to go to the king without having first been summoned. Mordechai told her that time is of the essence and that she cannot wait until the king calls for her; she must go now, even at the risk of her her life.

Esther agreed, but only under one condition. She told Mordechai,

טז) לֵךְ בְּנוֹס אֶת כָּל הַיְהוּדִים

*“Go and **gather all the Jews together** and fast for me three days and three nights ...”*

All the Jews of Shushan must join and fast for three days and pray for her success.

Mordechai conveyed Esther's request to the people, and they agreed to fulfill it. They would join as one, to support Esther when she approached the king unsolicited. We, today, struggle with a *one* day fast; it is hard to imagine how difficult a three day fast would have been, but all the people did it.

Armed with the fast and the prayers of Shushan's Jews, Esther agreed to approach the king even though she had not been requested. In fasting, the people repented for the illegal enjoyment at Achashverosh's party, and, in uniting in fasting and praying behind Esther, they corrected the second problem of being fractured. This was the turning point in the story. Unifying in fast and prayer accomplished its goal, allowing Esther to succeed. Her request to the king bore fruit.

Haman's decree was overturned, and he was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordechai.

There are many twists and turns in the details of the story that reveal how Hashem had put all the pieces in place for the salvation long before Haman's decree. When the Jewish people repented, Hashem merely activated them, and the salvation was right at hand.

The Purim story took place towards the end of the Jews' 70-year exile, between the first and second Holy Temples. These were extremely difficult times for the Jewish people because they had just experienced the trauma of the Holy Temple's destruction and the expulsion from the land of Israel. Being in a foreign land without the Holy Temple and its daily service to connect them to Hashem and to protect them, the Jewish people could easily have thought that they were done for. The Purim miracle proved that, even in the darkest of times, Hashem was still with them protecting them behind the scenes.

This is why the Purim holiday is so meaningful to us. We are in exile now for over 2,000 years, and it is heartening to understand, through the Purim story, that Hashem is still with us, even in these dark times. As we listen to the Purim story, we are able to internalize that, just as then, Hashem stood behind the scenes pulling the strings that brought about His People's salvation; so, too, He is doing the same for us now. Though we cannot see Hashem putting each piece carefully into place to bring the ultimate salvation, when we do teshuva and the correct time comes, Hashem will activate the process, and all the pieces will fall into place and miraculously bring the Mashiach and the final redemption.

Surprisingly, on Purim we do not say *Hallel*, the prayer added to the Festival and Chanukah prayers, to praise and thank Hashem for His salvation. The Talmud explains that reading the Megillah on Purim takes the place of saying Hallel. As we hear the story of Purim read, our hearts

should fill with praise and thanksgiving to Hashem for the miracle that He brought for our people.

This realization is great cause for celebration with food and drink, which brings us to Purim's second mitzvah, having a festive meal. Because Haman posed a *physical* threat to the Jewish people by seeking to kill every Jew, we celebrate *physically* with food and drink, something that people enjoy, to show that we are still alive and fully enjoying life. By eating and drinking *for the sake of the mitzvah*, we counteract the illegal enjoyment that the people had many years ago at Achashverosh's party. The festive Purim meal is often celebrated with relatives and friends, creating love and friendship between Jews.

This second vital component is the source of the day's last two mitzvot, giving charity to the poor and giving food presents to each other. Their purpose is to create unity among Jews.

Why is being unified such a powerful force for the Jewish Nation?

The Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato 1707-1747) writes in מאמר החכמה.

וצריך שתדע שהנה האדון ב"ה הוא אחד, ואין הארתו מתחזקת אלא במה שמתאחד, והנה ישראל אע"פ שבאישיהם הם רבים נקראים גוי אחד, והם ראויים לשתתחזק במ הארתו ית'

*You must know that Hashem is אחד— **One**, and His influence can only be manifest in something that is also one. The Jewish nation, even though it comprises individuals, is called **one nation**, and only through them can Hashem convey His influence to the world.*

Our mission as a nation is to reflect Hashem's godliness to the world. By keeping the Torah's perfect laws, we become models of perfect behavior in all areas of life and show the world the greatness of Hashem and His perfect prescription for life. If the world saw one completely

unified nation, Hashem's nation, all doing the right thing, the world would follow our example. This was the Divine plan for humanity: that the Jewish nation, through keeping the Torah, be the role models for the rest of the world, and then, through following our example, they would also become elevated.

When, however, the Jewish nation is not unified in its fulfillment of the Torah and each person acts as he sees fit, we present a *disunified* picture to the rest of the world, and we fall short of our mission. This is why Jewish unity is so essential to our existence. It defines our purpose in the world. When we are fulfilling the purpose for which we were created, we are indispensable to the world, and, thus, invulnerable. But when we do not fulfill our mission in the world, we are dispensable and can be destroyed.

The Talmud (Berachot 6a) beautifully expresses this idea :

After informing us that just as we wear Tefillin, Hashem, so to speak, also wears Tefillin, Rav Nachman son of R' Yitzchak said to R' Chiya son of R' Avin, *"What does it say in Hashem's Tefillin?"*

אמר ליה ומי כְּעַמֶּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל גּוֹי אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ

*He answered him, "Who is like your nation Israel, **one nation** in the land."*

Our Tefillin contain the Shema, which proclaims Hashem as the One and only G-d. We proudly wear them daily on our arms and heads declaring that we are the nation of the One and Only G-d. At the same time, Hashem also (so to speak) wears His Tefillin, which proclaim our oneness as His people. When we do Hashem's will as one unified nation, we reflect to the world the oneness of Hashem.

When an orchestra's different musicians join to play a Beethoven symphony and obey the conductor's directions, the music that emanates from their different instruments produces the magnificent and

harmonious music that Beethoven composed. If, however, they ignore the conductor and play what they want to play when they want to play it, not only will it sound nothing like what Beethoven intended his symphony to be, but it will also be a musical disaster.

In the same sense, when we all follow our conductor, Hashem, and keep the Torah as He has instructed us, our orchestra conveys His beautiful harmonious message to the world. But when we each do as we please, we convey no unified message, and we are not fulfilling our mission, so we are vulnerable.

This is the basis for the last two mitzvot, (1) charity to the poor and (2) food presents to each other. Since the unification of the nation was a vital component in the salvation, creating unity must be a takeaway of the Purim holiday. It counteracts the *lashon hora* that Haman told Achashverosh, that the Jews are “scattered and dispersed,” and that every man is for himself.

How do we create unity? By taking care of each other and by giving to each other. Showing concern for the needy by giving them money that they need shows that we are one people who feel responsible for one another.

Giving presents to one another fosters closeness and love between us. It would seem that there should already be a closeness between the people, or they would not be giving gifts! However, our Sages teach us a counterintuitive concept: Conventional thinking is that we give to those whom we love as an expression of the love that we feel for them. The reality, the rabbis teach us, is just the opposite - we love those to whom we give! In other words, *giving* is what creates the love in the first place. (Once again, we are influenced by our actions) We love our children because we have given them so much of ourselves. Try it some time. Find someone you don't particularly like and find a way to help that person. It

may take one or two attempts, but the relationship will surely turn for the better; and if you persist, you will come to love that person.

This is one of the themes of Purim, *viz*, creating friendships and bonds between Jews. We accomplish this by taking care of the needy and sending presents of food to others.

Before Purim, people who are aware of families in need, collect money on their behalf to be distributed on Purim, so they don't need ask for donations on Purim. Giving to the poor in this way saves them that embarrassment.

Anyone who wishes to fulfill this mitzvah this Purim should give money to one of the Partners in Torah staff members, to be distributed to a needy family on Purim day, this Friday.

What a beautiful sight it is in Detroit on Purim to see so many families, often in costume, crisscrossing the streets of our town delivering משלוח מנות to each other. The feeling of unity and friendship that pervades the streets of our community is a sight to behold and a privilege to be a part of.