

Dear Community,

As Purim approaches, we spend our time preparing our Mishloach Manot, Purim costumes, kreplach and tenuous political puns. The meaning of the day is often relegated to the token dvar torah uttered amid the sugar-crazed cries of Manot raiders and the rumblings of our stomach as we stare at the elaborate Purim repast. As we busily fulfill the mitzvos of the holiday, raising Cain at the mention of Haman, delivering Mishloach Manot, and giving charity, we are not left with enough time to reflect on a day so holy and integral to our Jewish identity that the Rabbis even equate it to Yom Kippur.

The Talmud in Tractate Shabbos (88) writes that the acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai was incomplete. The full-fledged acceptance of the Torah was over a millennium later, during the Purim episode. As supporting evidence, the Talmud quotes the following verse from the Megilla: "The Jews stood and accepted..." The question, of course, is why this verse is understood to allude to an acceptance of the entire Torah (and, for that matter, why would an acceptance occur by Purim)? All this verse seems to be referring to is an acceptance of the holiday and the mitzvot introduced by Esther and Mordechai.

The Talmud (Chullin 139) asks, "Where do we find an allusion to Haman in the Torah?" The answer provided is a verse in Genesis wherein G-d informs Adam of the single tree from which he cannot eat, "המן העץ" "from this tree you may not eat." The letters of the word, מןהמ, "from it," are identical to the Hebrew spelling of Haman. The obvious question is, why would the Talmud bother looking for a source in the Torah for a story that would occur so many centuries after the Torah was given?

Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer explains that the Talmud is teaching us a powerful lesson about life and faith. Haman was at the height of his power. Money was his, power was his, fame was his, he was the Grand Vizier and second-in-command to the king. But all it took to drive him into a genocidal rage was the knowledge that one old Jew would not bow to him. The taste of his greatness turned to ash at the sight of the one thing he did not have. It was this same quality that drove Adam to sin. He had all the trees in the Garden of Eden, but he could only focus on the one that he could not enjoy.

We live with all the good that G-d continuously grants us, but our focus is often on what we don't yet possess. Instead of thinking about our wealth, we obsess about our poverty. Instead of rejoicing in our bounty, we dwell on our desires. This Achilles heel that destroyed Adam and Haman remains a very real danger to us all.

Purim is here to help us work past this problem. We are enjoined to share our bounty with our neighbors, rejoice together as a community, and focus on our joy and forget our sorrows. The challenge that remains is how can we ignore our lacks? Our needs and desires are often valid and painfully salient. How, then, can we focus on our joy and see the half-full glass?

The answer lies in the first Talmud passage that we've mentioned. If one thinks about the story of Purim, the idea that there was a miracle requires a leap of faith. It's easy to take at face value the story of Esther, a Jewish Queen who lobbied her husband to save her people. In fact, Mordechai, one would have thought, could have been hated by the Jews once the decree for destruction was issued. Why did he not just bow down to Haman and the idol around his neck? Why did he have to be the 'frumock'?

But as soon as the Jews hear of the decree, they all follow Mordechai in a path of fasting and prayer, accepting this decree as a fitting consequence of their attendance at Achashveirosh's party (celebrating, among other things, the downfall of the Jewish Temple). Instead of focusing on their narrow world and seemingly natural cause/effects, the Jews were able to look at the bigger picture and see G-d's hand at work. When they accepted the holiday of Purim, they showed their faith in the narrative of G-d's hidden hand at work, even in the gloom of the Exile. This is the most powerful and sustainable type of acceptance of the word of G-d.

It is this ability to perceive G-d and understand his message that enabled the Jews to survive the threat of Haman. In Purim, they were able to see G-d even in the mundane everyday events that populate all our lives. This strength is what gave them a strong foundation for the observance of the Torah and the acceptance of its mandates, and this is what led to the re-acceptance, and complete acceptance, of the Torah. It is this ability that helps us focus on what we have as well. By focusing on G-d's hand and omnipresent providence in our lives, we can focus on what we have and accept what we don't.

Good Shabbos and a Frelichen Purim,  
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein