One of the puzzling halachot of Purim is Shushan Purim. Jews living in Yerushalayim and towns that have been surrounded by a wall since the days of Yehoshua Bin Nun celebrate on the 15th of Adar instead of the 14th. In fact, Purim is the only festival in the Jewish calendar on which Jews do not all celebrate on the same day. It is even more surprising, since one of the major lessons of Purim is unity.

The Talmud Yerushalmi provides the following explanation of this unique halacha: “They wanted to honor the Land of Israel, which was in ruins at that time, and therefore they made it dependent on the time of Yehoshua” (Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:1). How does the fact that some Jews celebrate Purim on a different day bring honor to the Land of Israel?

I believe that in order to understand the intention of our Sages, we must learn what happened “behind the scenes” of the story we know from the Megillah. The first question we must ask is, what was Mordechai doing in Shushan? Mordechai was part of the first wave of aliya in the days of Ezra, and was a member of the Knesset HaGedola: “And these are the people...who went up from the captivity of the exile... Mordechai Bilshan...” (Ezra 2:1-2). So why did Mordechai return to the exiled community in Shushan?

The 42,000 people who returned with Zerubavel to Yerushalayim had one major goal – to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. However, the local residents did everything possible to stop the builders (Ezra 4:5). The turning point was when Achashverosh became king: “And in the reign of Achashverosh, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the dwellers of Yehuda and Yerushalayim... Then the work of the House of G-d, which was in Yerushalayim, was stopped” (Ezra 4:6/24).

Mordechai was sent to Shushan, to try to cancel the decree. The original name of Mordechai was Mordechai Bilshan. The root of the word Bilshan is lashon = language, and this was his major strength: “Rabbi Shimon said: Come and see the wisdom of Mordechai, for he knew seventy languages” (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 50). This explains how Mordechai was able to stop the plot of Bigthan and Teresh: “Bigthan and Teresh were two Tarsians, and they would talk with one another in the Tarsian language. They said: From the day that she (Esther) arrived we have not slept. Come, let us cast poison in the goblet from which he drinks so that he will die. But they did not know that Mordechai...knew seventy languages” (Megillah 13b).

Achashverosh did not hate the Jews. On the contrary, he wanted the Jews to stay in his kingdom, and he even tried to build them an alternative Beit Mikdash. That is why he arranged the feast in the third year of his reign: “Rabbi Nechemia says: ‘Since it was three years since cancelling the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash, he made a feast for all of his officers and servants’ (Esther Rabbah 1:15). He wanted the Jews to join his feast and made sure to serve kosher food and wine: “Every people who ate its food in purity had its food provided in purity, as it is said, ‘That they should do according to every man’s pleasure’ (Esther 1:8)” (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 49). Achashverosh tried to recreate an environment of the Beit HaMikdash by wearing the garments of the Kohan Gadol and by using its stolen vessels: “‘When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom’...[this] teaches that he wore the garments of a high priest’” (Megillah 12a); “Vessels that differed from one another’ (Esther 1:7) ... He brought his own vessels and the Temple vessels, and he found them more pleasing and beautiful than his own” (Megillah 11b).

Mordechai tried to warn the Jews not to participate in the feast, but no one listened to him: “As soon as Mordechai saw this, he arose and proclaimed over them and said to them, ‘Do not go to eat at the feast of Achashverosh, for he invited you only to create a prosecution against you... But they did not heed the words of Mordechay, and they all went to the banquet hall” (Esther Rabbah 7:13).

We see that the regulations of the court of Achashverosh were similar to those of the Beit HaMikdash. Just as the Kodesh HaKodashim was a restricted zone, and anyone who entered without permission was liable to die, Achashverosh had similar rules: “All the king’s servants... who went up from the captivity of the exile... Mordechai Bilshan...” (Ezra 2:1-2). So why did Mordechai return to the exiled community in Shushan?
comes to the king, into the inner court, who is not summoned, there is but one law for him, to be put to death, except the one to whom the king extends the golden scepter” (Esther 4:11). When Achashverosh graciously offers Esther half of his kingdom, he is unwilling to give her the second half, which was the Beit HaMikdash: “Half of the kingdom’ but not the whole kingdom, and not a thing that would divide the kingdom. And what is that? The building of the Holy Temple” (Megillah 15b).

One more significant detail is required to complete the picture. Achashverosh tried to be friendly to the Jews. He did not oppose the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash overtly but rather used messengers, the descendants of Amalek, Haman and his 10 sons: “Achashverosh wondered saying: Mordechai seeks to build the Temple; it is impossible to build… Rather I will incite Haman against him; one will build and the other will destroy” (Yalkut Shimoni 1053). We see that the sons of Haman were the ones who wrote the accusation against the Jews of Yerushalayim in the first year of the reign of Achashverosh, as Rashi explains: “I saw in Seder Olam (chapter 29): ‘These are the 10 who wrote a false accusation against Yehuda and Yerushalayim…Now what was the accusation? To stop those who ascended from the exile ...who had commenced building the Temple” (Rashi, Esther 9:10). However, Haman took his mandate much further and decided to annihilate all the Jews. Achashverosh didn’t know about this decree, and that is why he was furious when he found out at Esther’s party that Haman had exceeded the authority given to him.

Eventually, Mordechai’s plan succeeded. “Then the work of the House of G-d… was stopped, and it was suspended until the second year of the reign of Darius, the king of Persia” (Ezra 4:24). Who was Darius? Rashi explains: “After Cyrus, Achashverosh, who married Esther, reigned, and after Achashverosh, Darius the son of Achashverosh, who was the son of Esther, reigned” (Rashi ibid). Darius, the son of Esther, was the person who renewed the permission to build the Beit HaMikdash.

Despite this permission, all the Jews, including Mordechai, remained in Shushan HaBira, enjoying full civil rights and royal protection. This is one of the reasons that we do not recite Hallel on Purim: “Why don’t we say Hallel (on Purim)? …Rava said: ‘Since we are still the servants of Achashverosh’” (Megillah 14a). The Jews got confused and regarded Persia as their homeland, with Shushan as their capital city.

There is only one other place in Tanach where the word bira appears. When Nechemia appealed to Darius: “And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, may letters be given to me...that he gives me wood to make beams for the gates of the bira that belongs to the Temple’” (Nechemia 2:7–8). Rabbenu Bechaye explains the meaning of the word bira: “Anywhere you find the expression ‘Shushan HaBira’ in the Megillah, it refers to the castle of the king… since bira is a castle” (Kad HaKemach, Purim 130). Bira, the castle of the king, is the source of the power of the kingdom. For that reason, in modern Hebrew bira means the capital city.

The words of Nechemia are a strong reminder that we have only one bira: Yerushalayim. This is what the Jews in Persia forgot. Their comfortable life caused them to become confused regarding their capital city. For this reason, our Sages designated a special celebration date for Yerushalayim, Shushan Purim, “to honor the Land of Israel, which was in ruins at that time.” Shushan Purim is a reminder that Shushan is not our bira, nor Washington DC. We have only one capital city: Yerushalayim HaBira.

According to Rava, we forgo saying Hallel on Purim because we forgot the importance of dwelling in the Land of Israel. Instead, that lost Hallel has found its place on Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, the days on which we were blessed to restore the honor of the Land of Israel and Yerushalayim as its capital city.

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