



A Corona Purim

Purim has special meaning for us this year, and not just because we have prepared for it by wearing masks all year. It marks a year since Corona began to affect our lives.

העיר שושן נבוכה

Confusion and Bewilderment

More significantly, our new reality reminds us of the Purim story. Megillat Esther (3:15) tells us that when Haman's plan became public knowledge, the city of Shushan was bewildered and confused. The Jewish people had become used to a reality they assumed would continue. Suddenly, their survival was threatened. The security they felt in Shushan and throughout Achashverosh's empire turned out to be a mere facade.

Our lives and our basic assumptions have also been turned upside down. So many things we took for granted have changed dramatically. We have lost world and community leaders and many of us have lost loved ones and friends. Others have suffered with sickness, employment issues, and professional and personal challenges.

What lesson can Purim – the holiday that celebrates the happy resolution of such confusion – teach us? What *chizuk* can Purim offer to us in these difficult times?

ונהפוך הוא

Megillat Esther describes the Purim miracles as וְנִהְפָּךְ הוּא. Why is this particular salvation described this way? The Jewish people were threatened many times by enemies they ended up vanquishing. For example, why not describe the drowning of the Egyptians

in the water they hoped to drown the Jews in as וְנִהְפָּךְ הוּא?

וְנִהְפָּךְ applies uniquely to the Purim miracle, not just because the Jews were saved, but because it was the very system Haman constructed to murder the Jews that ended up being used by the Jews against him and their enemies.

Chapter 8's description of how Mordechai and Esther got permission for and notified the kingdom of the Jewish people's right to defend themselves is parallel to chapter 3's description of what Haman had initially done to threaten the Jews. After receiving the king's signet ring (3:10 / 8:2) and confirming the king's agreement (3:9–11 / 8:5–8.), the plan is read by the king's scribes and then sent to the officers and all the provinces in their difference languages (3:12 / 8:9) through an elaborate postal system (3:13–15 / 8:10–11,14).

The Megillah accentuates the parallel between attack and salvation by contrasting Mordechai's clothing and the atmosphere in the capital Shushan and around the empire after Mordechai and Esther's reversal with those described in the wake of Haman's decree. Chapters 3 and 4 describe Mordechai donning mourners clothing (4:1), the city of Shushan confused (3:15), and the Jews throughout the empire mourning, fasting and crying (4:3). Chapter 8 concludes by describing Mordechai wearing royal garments (15), and the Jews in Shushan (15) and throughout the empire celebrating (17).

Chazal¹ describe this phenomenon as Hashem "using the wound as the bandage." Because only the One who orchestrates reality can coordinate such a miraculous process. Hashem does this

to help us appreciate the involvement of His hidden hand.²

As opposed to the miracles of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and many others, the Purim miracles were hidden ones – Hashem acted behind the scenes.³ Purim teaches us the importance of seeing Hashem's hand even in natural occurrences⁴ by appreciating extraordinary phenomena like reversals.

Our Corona Reality

We all pray that the pandemic ends in the near future. When it does, it will be critical that we appreciate Hashem's hand in it and what He wants us to learn from the process. Not only in His ending the pandemic, but also in His having driven it. The more we appreciate the lessons He intends for us to learn from these times and the aspects of salvation we have experienced, the more we will grow from this difficult period.

1 Shemot Rabbah 23:3. We use the phrase in the Selichot we say on Ta'anit Esther.

2 See Shalah, Pesachim Bi'ur Aggada 1.

3 See Chullin 139b.

4 See Ramban, Shemot 13:16.



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Repairing Rivalry & Jewish Brotherhood

Megillat Esther, one of the last works of *Ketuvim* to be written and canonized, employs numerous allusions to earlier stories in Tanach. Many of the analogies serve the ideological purpose of ‘redeeming’ the lineage of Binyamin from the shortcomings of *Shaul haMelech*, particularly in fighting Amalek and not adhering to the Divine commandment of complete annihilation. The Book of Esther highlights Esther’s “success in overcoming the drawbacks of a reticent personality [and] offsets the pivotal failure of Saul to do the same.”¹ She does so not only by ‘fixing’ the faults of Shaul in properly eradicating our enemies and declining to take the spoils even when permitted to do so (Esther 9:5–16), but in contrast to Shaul, who sought to kill his innocent young rival, David, at a second-day royal feast, Esther prepares parallel feasts to bravely save her Jewish brethren, descendants of David.

In redeeming Shaul, Esther rises above tribal affiliation and unifies the Binyaminites and Yehudim (Judeans) who were exiled together in 597 BCE (2:6). How did she succeed in overcoming rifts and creating solidarity between the descendants of Yehuda and Binyamin (without four rounds of elections in two years)?

The answer lies in Esther’s recollection not only of the Shaul/David feud, but of the earliest story of rivalry between the children of Leah and Rachel, manifested in the desire to kill and sell Yosef as a slave. Though there are many allusions and parallels between the monarchical success of Esther and Mordechai in Persia to the rise of Yosef in Egypt, Rabbi David Fohrman² notes another phenomenon of intertextuality. As

Esther stands before Achashverosh at her second banquet, pleading for the survival of her nation, she remembers the sale of Yosef proposed by his brother Yehuda: “And Yehuda said unto his brethren: ‘What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh’” (Bereishit 37:26–7).

Esther revisits his argument of betrayal – “for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace, for the adversary is not worthy that the king be damaged” (7:4).

Haman is hanged as a result of her accusations, but the survival of the Yehudim is still in severe jeopardy until Esther recalls not only the rift and rivalry of Yehuda (children of Leah) vs. the children of Rachel, but his repair and repentance as well. She revisits how Yehuda risked his life for his brother Binyamin and pleaded for his salvation before the viceroy: “For how shall I go up to my father, if the lad be not with me? Lest I look upon the evil that shall come on my father (בְּרַע אֶשֶׁר יִמָּצֵא אֶת אָבִי)” (Bereishit 44:34).

And she echoes his anguish before the king: “For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people (בְּרַעַה אֶשֶׁר יִמָּצֵא אֶת עַמִּי)? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?” (Esther 8:6).

Esther recalled the bitter animosity between siblings, the sale of a brother as slave and the resentment that follows. But inspired by Mordechai “HaYehudi”

(from the fallen kingdom of Judea), an “Ish Yemini” (from tribe of Binyamin), who implores her to link her familial and tribal affiliation to the survival of all her Jewish brethren, she remembered the repentance of Yehuda, who risked his life for his brother Binyamin and pledged himself as a slave in his stead.

Esther took advantage of the opportunity to “repay” Yehuda and achieve lasting brotherhood as a descendant of Binyamin who could and would risk her life for her brothers from Yehuda.

Recognizing how fragile the balance of brotherhood is to maintain throughout history, Mordechai and Esther incorporated the *mitzvot* of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la’evyonim* as annual remedies for ‘sibling’ rivalry. Remembering the stories of Binyamin, Yehuda and Esther, as we celebrate together and recall our mutual responsibilities to care for and defend one another, help assure a lasting legacy of Jewish brotherhood, solidarity and survival.

1 Yitzchak Berger, “*Esther and Benjamite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion*” (JBL, 2010).

2 Rabbi David Fohrman, “*Family Feud: The Ominous Background to Esther’s Story*” (AlephBeta).

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