



TAKE A SECOND LOOK

The Megillah begins with וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ, “it was in the days of Achashverosh.” The first chapter describes in elaborate detail the 180-day celebration the king arranged for all of his subjects. Achashverosh plays a major role in the entire story, his name and position being mentioned countless times throughout the Megillah. But it doesn’t stop there. Even *Chazal* seem to say that Achashverosh defined the entire time period. The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) tells us that *Am Yisrael* re-accepted the Torah at the time of the Purim story. The language used by the Gemara is הָדוּר הַדוֹר, “they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh.” Why do our Rabbis define those days as the days of Achashverosh, and not, for example, in the days of Mordechai and Esther? It seems as if *Chazal* are using him, or at least his personality, to hint to us the secret of this special day.

The centerpiece of Purim day is, of course, the reading of Megillat Esther. There is a fascinating controversy as to the level of obligation regarding reading the Megillah. Some (Ran, Ta’anit 7a) assume it’s a purely rabbinic obligation, while others (Tosfot, Rid, Megillah 20a) suggest it might even be Biblical. Many others (Ramban, Rashba) assume it’s a strong rabbinic law, rooted in a *pasuk* in Tanach, while still others (Turei Even, Megillah 4a) suggest it’s somewhere in between a Biblical and a rabbinic law. After the dust settles, what are we to make of the discussion itself? Why is it so unclear to our great

leaders as to the categorization of this *mitzvah*?

Moreover, let’s look at the Megillah itself as one of our *kitvei hakodesh*, holy writings in the Tanach. Shmuel (Megillah 7a) tells us that although Esther is included in our canon, it is not מְטַמְא אֶת הַיְדִיּוֹת, it does not have full sanctity as do all the other books of Tanach. Why such an exclusion? Shmuel explains, “since it was given to be read and not to be written.” What does that mean? Is it or isn’t it part of our *kitvei hakodesh* (see Tosfot and Pnei Yehoshua *ibid.*)? The Ritva suggests it is sanctified enough to be included in the Tanach, but it’s not exactly called Torah *shebichtav*. It’s somewhere in the middle. What does this mean, and what is its message? We have no other parallel among the other 23 books of Tanach.

There seems to be a pattern here. The level of obligation of *kriat Megillah* is not clear, and the status of the *sefer* itself is surprisingly under discussion. What is the underlying message?

The secret of Purim, as we know, is *haster panim*, G-d’s acting behind the scenes of world events: אֲסַתֵּר מִן אֲסַתֵּר מִן – “From where in the Torah can one find an allusion to Esther? as the verse states: “And I (G-d) will hide (*haster astir*) My face...” (Gemara Chullin 139b).

The Megillah seems like a natural, explainable story of a nation in distress, followed by a logical salvation. Yet we know and understand

that it’s so much deeper. The dozens of “coincidences” that happened to work out for the salvation to occur must be seen in the broad strokes of the Master Artist. The real *Melech* is pulling all the strings. The message of Purim, therefore, is that what you see is not always what it seems. It looks like a purely rabbinic obligation, but maybe it’s not so simple. It looks like *kitvei hakodesh*, but then again, there’s more than meets the eye.

Achashverosh himself perhaps captures the essence of this entire idea. He appears at times foolish and at other times evil. At times whimsical and at times decisive, at times controlling and at times being controlled. We recognize that we always have to dig deep and view our own lives, and the world around us, with a discerning eye, one that recognizes there is always a הַסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר element. Let it be G-d’s will that very soon, He will reveal Himself in all His glory, and we will be able to merit open closeness with the One Above.

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