The holiday of Purim has a somewhat surprising etymology. Its name derives from a minor episode in chapter 3 of the Megillah that, if the holiday were not named after it, many of us probably wouldn’t even remember:

“In the first month... ‘the lot’ was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar” (3:7).

Later in the Megillah, the topic of lots is mentioned again as the source for the holiday’s name.

“Haman son of Hammedatha the Aggagit, the foe of all the Jews, had plotted to destroy the Jews, had cast a pur— that is, the lot, with the intent to crush and exterminate them. But when [Esther] came before the king, he commanded, ‘With the promulgation of this decree, let the evil plot, which he devised against the Jews recoil on his own head!’ So they impaled him and his sons on the stake. For that reason these days were named Purim, after the pur.”

The holiday of Purim celebrates a chain of events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people. How interesting then, that the author of the Megillah didn’t choose to name the holiday after the brave deeds of its heroes, or after the brave deeds of its heroes, or even after one of the more significant, climactic events of the story, but rather the relatively small act of lot casting performed by the villain of the story. In the Second Book of Maccabees, for example, the day is referred to as “Mordechai’s Day,” which at first blush, seems to make a lot more sense than “Purim.” However, a close look at lot casting, and how it was understood in the ancient world, reveals the profound theological message embedded in the name.

Today, when we talk about casting lots, or the rolling of dice, we are essentially speaking about random odds, and about leaving things up to chance.

The irony of Haman’s impalement during the very month that “was chosen” for his plan, would not have escaped the attention of ancient Jewish readers. At the very least, it would have given them pause to reflect on whether, perhaps, G-d was working behind the scenes the entire time. Like those ancient readers, we experience the Megillah the way one stares at a perfectly drawn optical illusion. We look for what we think we see, or perhaps what we want to see, but we are never convinced that we are seeing the only reality. That very experience, intentionally cultivated by the author, remains the challenge, and the joy of Jewish history. As such, the holiday is named for everything Haman’s pur encompasses.

“Purim” is a name that connects them to us and to our children, grandchildren and future generations. It is a name that means peace of mind, knowing you have preserved your legacy. It is a name that encompasses. The greatest gift we can give our children is not money or possessions, but a story – a real story, not a fantasy, of what it means to be part of your family. It is the insight and wisdom into what it means to be part of your family’s heritage.

What’s in a Name?

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