

Esther, Chapter Nine

– מגילת אסתר, פרק ט –

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THE JOY OF JEWISH UNITY

Every Jew is obligated to perform four *mitzvot* on Purim, and all are learned from the ninth *perek* of Megillat Esther: “They were to observe them as days of feasting and gladness, and for sending delicacies to one another, and gifts to the poor” (9:22).

1. Feasting and gladness – *seudat Purim*.
2. Sending delicacies to one another – *mishloach manot*.
3. Gifts to the poor – *matanot la'evyonim*.

The fourth *mitzvah*, reading the Megillah, is learned from the words, “These days should be remembered” (9:28).

The obligation to hear the reading of the Megillah makes sense, since this teaches us the Purim story. The special feast is also logical since we express our thanks to G-d for saving us from Haman’s decree by celebrating with a meal of thanks and gratitude. But why are we obligated to send food to others and to give charity over and above the daily obligation to help the poor? What does this have to do with Purim?

Let us first ask another question: why were the Jewish people deserving of Haman’s decree to annihilate them?

Haman himself answers this question. When he speaks to Achashverosh to present his case for the decree to exterminate the Jewish people, he tells the king the Jews are “scattered and dispersed” (3:8). He says outright that the Jewish people are not unified. That was our flaw at the time. We were a polarized and divided nation. This is why Esther instructs Mordechai, “Go bring all the Jews together” (4:16). She understood the only way she could be

successful in convincing Achashverosh to spare the lives of the Jews was if they unite and rectify the flaw which led to the decree in the first place.

Sure enough, the Jewish people respond. According to the Gemara in Shabbat (87a), the Jews reaccepted the Torah when they experienced G-d’s salvation – קִיְמוּ וְקִבְלוּ. But the word which we read as קִבְלוּ, which means “they accepted,” is written in the Megillah as וְקִבַּל, “he accepted,” in the singular. The Sfat Emet explains that this קָרַי וְקָרַיב, the written word in the singular as opposed to how we read it in the plural, comes to teach us that just like the Jews were unified at Sinai and camped together “as one people with one heart” (see Rashi to Shemot 19:2 on the singular language used there), the Jews in the Purim story unified as one to reaccept the Torah.

That same singular language is used when the Megillah describes the Jews accepting to observe the obligations of Purim. Right after these *mitzvot* are mentioned, the Megillah says וְקִבְלוּ הַיְהוּדִים, “And the Jews accepted” these laws upon themselves, using the singular – וְקִבַּל. The Vilna Gaon says the singular language teaches that the Jews were unified in accepting the holiday of Purim and these *mitzvot*.

The Sfat Emet explains that a clear underlying theme of Purim has emerged. The decree to annihilate the Jews came because the Jews were polarized. They learned the lesson and rectified that flaw, coming together to become one people again, thereby meriting salvation.

This is why we have two *mitzvot* on Purim that relate to unity – sending

food to one another and a special concern to make sure everyone has money for a Purim feast. We want to replicate the lesson the Jews learned during the Purim story.

Based on this, the ideal would not be to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot* by sending food to a good friend or familiar neighbor but to seek out someone with whom you do not have a connection or perhaps, even better, to someone with whom you have a negative history. Purim is the time to break down barriers and bring more Jewish unity into our lives and communities.

This also explains a word in the song שׁוֹשְׁנֵי יַעֲקֹב, which we sing after reading the Megillah. When describing the joy of the Jews upon seeing Mordechai in royal clothing, the song adds the word יַחַד – “together.” The joy was magnified because the Jews experienced it with unity.

As we look to Heaven for help in these challenging times, let us learn this lesson from the *mitzvot* taught in the ninth chapter of Megillat Esther. Most of our struggles come because we are polarized. Unity is the key to our salvation.

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