



# THE INNER LIGHT OF PURIM

To hear the great *tzaddik* Rabbi Shalom Rockeach, the *Sar Shalom*<sup>1</sup> of Belz, *lein* the Megillah, was an unforgettably uplifting experience. When he was a young man, still an unknown budding student of the *Chozeh* of Lublin, he was called upon to read the Megillah in the *Chozeh's Beit Midrash*. Those assembled didn't recognize the young scholar, but sensed they were experiencing something special. At the completion of the Megillah *leining*, the *Chozeh* remarked: "I have heard the Purim story many times, but I've never heard it told quite like this."



Megillat Esther describes how we celebrated upon hearing of Haman's downfall and the miraculous turnabout of Purim. לְיְהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשֵׁשׁ וַיִּקְרַח, "The Jews experienced light, happiness, joy and honor" (8:16).

The Gemara (Megillah 16b) explains the four terms in this verse: אֹרֶחַ, "light," alludes to Torah, שִׂמְחָה, "happiness," alludes to Yom Tov, שֵׁשׁ, "joy," alludes to *brit mila*, and וַיִּקְרַח, "honor," alludes to *tefillin*.

However, this explanation seems to miss a basic point in the narrative of the Megillah and the experience of the Jews of Shushan, namely that the decree of Achashverosh and Haman against *Am Yisrael* had nothing to do with the *mitzvot* described here! In the Purim story, the goal was clear: לְהַרְגוּ וּלְאַבְדוּ – to annihilate us physically, regardless of religious observance or Jewish expression.

It was Antiochus, the villain of the Chanukah narrative, who outlawed *mila*, *moed* and Shabbat. And it was the Roman Era persecution which forced Jews into hiding to "illegally" study Torah. There is no indication in the Megillah that Haman or the Persian authorities interfered with our observance of *mitzvot*.

Another *drasha* in the Gemara (Megillah 10b) explains Haman's description of the Jews: וְשָׁנוּ עִם מְפֹזָר וּמְפֹרָד, "There is a people that is spread out and set apart..." וְשָׁנוּ can also be read as "they slept," i.e., our Yiddishkeit was "sleepy;" our *mitzvah* observance had become stale, lacking *chiyut*, vitality. We were distracted, pulled in all sorts of directions away from what truly mattered.

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin offers a moving interpretation: we did learn Torah, but by rote, lifelessly turning pages as if studying a secular text. There was no *ora*, light, in our *limmud*. In the days of the Persian exile, Jews kept Shabbat and Yom Tov, but our experience of those exalted, holy days lacked the main ingredient: *simcha*. Even *brit mila*, circumcision, became just another lifecycle event, lacking *sasson*, the deep joy of appreciating what our covenant with G-d means. Wrapping *tefillin* day in and day out had become labor-intensive in our eyes, our daily prayers but a heavy obligation.

The miraculous salvation and turnabout of Purim was a spiritual jolt that woke us out of this state of sleep ("וְשָׁנוּ"). It put the *ora* back in Torah, restored

the *simcha* of the *Yamim Tovim*, and revealed the *sasson* of our Covenant and the honor of wearing *tefillin*. *Mitzvot* that were taken for granted and had become perfunctory observances were filled with life once again.

May this Purim be one we experience with attunement to real inner growth and renewal. In the spirit of the *Chozeh* of Lublin, may we say, "It's a celebration I've enjoyed many times, but never quite like this."

Wherever we may be, and from whom ever we hear the Megillah, may we listen and internalize the story like never before – *lishma*. And may Purim and our *mitzvah*-observances all year round be drenched with this light, happiness, joy and honor!

1 Literally, "Prince of Peace".

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