The Inner Light of Purim

To hear the great tzaddik Rabbi Shalom Rockeatch, the Sar Shalom 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. The Jews experienced light, happiness, joy and honor” (8:16).

The Gemara (Megillah 16b) explains the four terms in this verse: אוֹרָה, “light,” alludes to Torah; שִׂמְחָה, “happiness,” alludes to Yom Tov; שָׂשֹׂן, “joy,” alludes to brit mila; and יָקָר, “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: לַיְּהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשֹׂן וִיקָר, “The Jews experienced light, happiness, joy and honor” (8:16). The miraculous salvation and turnabout of Purim was a spiritual jolt that woke us out of this state of sleep (יֶשְׁנוֹ). It put the oray back in Torah, restored the simcha of the Yamim Tovim, and revealed the sason 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 whomever 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!

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