



# The Hidden Message of Ta'anit Esther

וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֶבְדְּתִי אֶבְדְּתִי.  
(אסתר ד:טז)

**E**sther and her attendants fast before she enters the inner chamber to present herself to the king.

What feelings should we have today when we commemorate her fast? And what lesson are we to learn from the salvation channeled through Esther?

Let us try to answer these questions based on a study of one *mitzvah* in the Torah, the *mitzvah* of returning a lost object, הַשְׁבַּת אֲבֵדָה. Our analysis of this *mitzvah* is based upon a metaphoric rather than a literal understanding of אֲבֵדָה. We will apply the methodology of אֲבֵדָה<sup>1</sup> and suggest that this *mitzvah* – at the level of *remez* (lit. hint) – is more than a particular obligation engendered by a lost object, but rather a symbolic representation of all of our service to G-d.

Every experience, every moment, every encounter in our lives generates both an opportunity and a challenge to fulfill G-d's Will. Whether obligations – מִצְוֹת – or prohibitions – לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה – we must find within ourselves the spiritual energy necessary to overcome the formidable barriers created by the *yetzer hara*. No one can succeed all the time; even the *tzaddik* fails sometimes. The אֲבֵדָה, conceptually, represents the wasted energy, the opportunity lost, and we are obligated to retrace our steps, seek and find our אֲבֵדוֹת, and transform them into a positive force. The Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva, 2:1) describes the situation of one who failed a test but now finds himself in the same situation, facing the same challenge. If he overcomes those passions that

brought him down the first time, he is considered a genuine *ba'al teshuva*.

The story of Megillat Esther is the story of the Jewish nation facing its greatest ever threat, the terror of Amalek. On a spiritual level, what is Amalek's agenda? Amalek seeks to find our אֲבֵדוֹת, and to prevent us from re-acquiring them and becoming *ba'alei teshuva*; to seize these אֲבֵדוֹת and prevent us forever from reclaiming them. If Amalek succeeds, Heaven forbid, we are lost. As Haman proclaims: אִם עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדֶּם, “If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed (לְאַבְדֶּם), which shares a root with the word אֲבֵדָה.”

Divine Providence chose a modest young woman to face the greatest challenge of Amalek in all of Jewish history. Why was such a pure soul selected to enter the palace of the king, a place of vulgarity and contamination, of immorality and idolatry? Why does Esther declare: וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֶבְדְּתִי אֶבְדְּתִי, “and if I am to perish, I shall perish (אֶבְדְּתִי, literally, “I shall be lost”)?

Esther recognizes that so much spiritual energy was lost when the Jewish people were dazzled by the magic of the King's banquet. The spiritual forces of our adversaries seized these אֲבֵדוֹת and now it was her challenge to free them and return them to their rightful owners. In His infinite wisdom, the Almighty knew that Esther and no one else could prevent Amalek from stealing the אֲבֵדָה. With the support of Mordechai, she would demand that *Klal Yisrael* fast and repent and retrieve their lost אֲבֵדוֹת. She recognized the unique opportunity that Providence had offered her, to stop Amalek dead in his tracks. She accepted her responsibility to enter the king's

chamber and risk losing not only her own life but the opportunity to save her people as well. She would pray for Divine assistance and recite Psalm 22, אֵלֵי אֱלֹהֵי לְמַה עֲזַבְתָּנִי. In doing so, this great woman becomes the expediter of the redemption of Israel.

On Ta'anit Esther, we are called upon to experience the emotions and the prayers of אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלְכָה as she entered the chamber of the king. We must rededicate ourselves to search for our own אֲבֵדוֹת and recognize that if we do so, we will surely merit our own salvation and advance the final redemption, may it come speedily in our days!

1 Literally, 70 facets to Torah, meaning there is a broad variety of ways and approaches through which to interpret the Torah.

**Rabbi Azarya Berzon** has over 4,800 shiurim online and has served as a Scholar-in-Residence in many communities worldwide.



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