The Hidden Message of Ta’anit Esther

Esther 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, שבועות אבות (the lost object). Our analysis of this mitzvah is based upon a metaphorical rather than a literal understanding of אבות. We will apply the methodology of הרמב”ם (Rambam) who describes the situation of one who failed and now finds himself in the same situation. The Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva, 2:1) describes the situation of one who failed and now finds himself in the same situation. He atones for his sins and we are obligated to retrace our steps, seek and find our תשובה and transform them into a positive force. The Rambam 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 תשובה.

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 אבות and prevent us from re-acquiring them and becoming בָּאָלֶת תֵּשׁוּוֲה; to seize these אבות and prevent us forever from reclaiming them. If Amalek succeeds, Heaven forbid, we are lost. As Haman proclaims: אָמַר הָא הַמֶּלֶךְ_An, “If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed.”

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: “and if I am to perish, I shall perish”? (אֲבֵדָה, 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 אבות 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 these אבות. With the support of Mordechai, she would demand that קָלַי יִשְׂרָאֵל and repel and retrieve their lost אבות. 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, “אָֽלַי אָלֶ֣לֶךְ לְכֵּ֔ם.” 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 אסתר המלכה as she entered the chamber of the king. We must rededicate ourselves to search for our own אבות 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.