Rabbi Hart Levine

Purim as a Diaspora Holiday?

Purim, perhaps more than any other holiday, has particular resonance for Religious Zionists in America.

It is the only holiday that isn't connected directly to Israel – there were no special Purim offerings offered in the *Beit HaMikdash*, and the story of Purim doesn't take place in or on the way to Israel.

I want to share some ideas from the Megillah about our calling as Jews living in the Diaspora.

Uncovering Hiddenness

The Rabbis in the Talmud (Chullin 139b) connect the name Esther to G-d's prophecy about a time when He will hide His face, וְאָנֹכִי הַסְתֵּר אַסְתִּיר פָּנַי (Devarim 31:17). Indeed, G-d's name is missing, hidden, from the Megillah.

That doesn't mean G-d isn't in the story of Purim, nor that G-d isn't found in Exile, but rather that He is hidden. Until we are able to experience the richness of Judaism and G-d's presence in Israel, this presents an opportunity and a mission to uncover and discover G-d in our lives in Exile.

That takes many different forms, including Torah, *tefilla*, *mitzvot*, and good deeds, and can occur in any place in the world. And the same way Esther brought salvation from her hidden identity, we may be able to play a unique role in the redemption of the Jewish people and of G-d's hiddenness.

Gathering Jews

While Yerushalayim contains a natural spiritual quality that brings Jews together, the story of Purim reminds us of the role we have in the Diaspora to gather Jews together.

Before Esther goes to see the king, she tells Mordechai לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים (Esther 4:15), gather all the Jews to fast and pray for her. More than mass prayer rallies that often use this verse, the idea of gathering Jews evokes the opportunity of Jewish outreach. In the current state of Judaism in the Diaspora, the majority of Jews are not part of any Jewish community and are spiritually מְפֻזָּר וּמְפֹרָד בֵּין הָעַמִּים (ibid 3:8).

I believe that Religious Zionist Jews in the Diaspora should reach out to other Jews and welcome them in, and connect them to a Judaism and Jewish communities that are full of light, joy, gladness, and honor (ibid 8:16).

Fighting Antisemitism

Haman's hatred for the Jews led to his plan to annihilate them, which was only stopped by Esther's and Mordechai's heroic actions to stand up for themselves. Antisemitism and anti-Zionism continue to rear their ugly heads in countries around the world, and Religious Zionist Jews in the Diaspora must stand up for being Jewish and for Israel. That is true on college campuses, in the halls of power, online, and whether dealing with adversaries from the left or the right. Even if antisemitism will never disappear, having proud Jews in all these places and spaces gives us an important tool in shaping hearts and minds, and defending our country, our people and our religion.

At the same time, there definitely are Purim connections to Israel highlighted in text and in practice. For example, the Megillah frames Mordechai's ancestry exiled from Yerushalayim (Esther 2:6), and the Talmud teaches that the vessels used by Achashverosh were from the *Beit HaMikdash* (Megillah 11b) – both sections which are read to the tune of Eicha. There's also Shushan Purim, which the Rabbis tie to Yehoshua "so as to give honor to *Eretz Yisrael*" (Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah 1b), and which practically is celebrated nowadays almost exclusively in Israel. And two of the three reasons given by the Talmud (Megillah 14a) for why we don't say Hallel on Purim are connected to Exile – because the miracle didn't happen in Israel, and because the story still ends under foreign rule.

Perhaps those connections show us that our past is in Israel, and our future is in Israel, but in the meantime, some of us are still in the Diaspora – and surely we have a purpose and a calling while here. To quote Mordechai (Esther 4:14), וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעְתְּ and who knows if precisely for a time like this you are here!

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