

הקורא את המגילה למפרע לא יצא

*One who reads the Megillah backwards has not fulfilled the obligation* (Megillah 17a)

On a Halachic level, Talmud teaches that one who reads the verses of the Megillah “backwards” – i.e., out of order – does not fulfill his or her obligation. Although he or she has technically read every word of the Megillah, the errant order obscures the meaning and prevents fulfillment of the actual Mitzvah.

The Baal Shem Tov classically taught his students that embedded within these words lies an additional spiritual truth. If one reads the Megillah “backwards” – that is, retrospectively, looking back as if it was merely a historical tale of the past, he or she has not fulfilled the obligation. Like the rest of Torah, the Megillah is a timeless prophetic document (cf. Megillah 7a) that speaks directly to Jews in each and every generation, in whatever challenges they may face. Jews are commanded to look beyond the historicity of the Megillah, to see the additional layers of meaning relevant to them in their lives, each and every year.

The national relevance of the Megillah, along with its introductory Parashat Zachor and Haftarat Zachor, in the year 5784 likely needs little elaboration, and I imagine has likely already been discussed by many far wiser than I. But sometimes, even that which may be obvious is still worth repeating.

Parashat Zachor, which describes the surprise attack of the Amalekites from behind on the unsuspecting Jewish people, reminds us of the dangers of complacency. Then and now, our enemy always attacks when we are most exposed and unprepared. Finding us “tired and weary,” Amalek had a prime target, and took advantage. Similarly, our current enemy timed its attack carefully to a holiday on which we would be slower to respond, and according to some reports, initiated its attack earlier than planned when it saw the opportunity at the Nova Music Festival. Moreover, the horrifying Midrashic depiction (cf. Rashi Devarim 25:18) of Amalek's mocking disfigurement of the bodies of its Jewish victims brings up a whole host of new traumatic memories that we are all still reeling from this year.

As the Torah teaches, whenever we fall into a state of smugness and entitlement, we forget about G-d and our Divine mission, and instead become distracted by petty divisiveness, unimportant material concerns, and selfishness. It is specifically in this environment that Amalek comes to attack (cf. Shemot 17:1-7). Tragically, this also rings familiar with our current enemy, who attacked us at a time of unprecedented fragmentation and internal discord. Parashat Zachor impresses upon us the critical need for constant vigilance (“זכירה”) for the existential danger of venomous enemies – external and internal – who attack us from the rear and by surprise, during moments of physical and spiritual weakness.

The Haftarah of Parashat Zachor from the Book of Shmuel continues this theme, reminding us of the timeless dangers of stopping short in our mission of self-defense, and showing unethical compassion towards those who seek our destruction. As the Navi describes, King Shaul was Divinely commanded to destroy all of Amalek and its animals, but he failed to finish the job. Caving to both public pressure and his own internal rationalizations (cf. Yoma 22b), King Shaul spared the Amalekite King Agag and the choice Amalekite livestock. But his compassion ultimately proved to be a grave mistake.

As the medieval commentator Meiri (ibid.) describes regarding this incident:

לעולם לא יהא אדם רחמן במקום הראוי לאכזריות ולא אכזרי במקום הראוי לרחמנות שכל הנעשה רחמן לרשעים הראויים למיתה אותה רחמנות חוזרת לאכזריות על שאר בני אדם ונעשה סניגורו קטיגורו

*One must never be compassionate in a situation that deserves cruelty; nor cruel in a situation that deserves compassion. For anyone who becomes compassionate to the wicked who deserve death, that same compassion will turn to cruelty against other people, and his defender will become his accuser.*

As the Meiri teaches, acting with meekness, false-compassion, and appeasement; willingly stopping short of fully completing the war goals against a sworn enemy with genocidal aspirations, will only result in greater tragedy. In the face of such evil, only swift and uncompromising strength taken to maximum completion can work. The blood of any innocent bystanders who may be unintentionally harmed in the process – tragic and heartbreaking as it is to see – rests entirely on the hands of the cowards who hide behind them, not on those engaged in protective self-defense. Caving to pressure to stop a war before its goals have been achieved is dangerous and disastrous.

Of course, this lesson runs entirely counter to a Jew's essence. The Talmud (Yevamot 79a) describes the 3 fundamental "identifiers" of the Jewish People as רחמים ביישנים וגומלי חסדים -- *compassionate, bashful, and performers of kindness*. Naturally, we detest violence and destruction of any human life. And yet, when given no other choice by an attacking enemy, we are Divinely commanded to fight ruthlessly and without compassion. This is done without fanfare – no blessing is recited over the killing; there is no glorification of bloody hands raised out the window to cheering crowds; and no mutilation of enemy corpses for fun – but, like King Shaul, we are commanded to override our natural disposition to use whatever aggression is necessary to ensure our safety.

Finally, after Zachor and its Haftarah, the Megillah itself speaks to us directly, as the ultimate prophecy of hope. The Megillah comes to remind us that in every generation, even when G-d seems completely absent from the scene and we appear on the verge of destruction by our enemies, hope is never lost. The Talmud (Megillah 11b) teaches that the Purim story occurred specifically at the moment when Achashverosh concluded that G-d had abandoned the Jewish People. Yirmiyahu's prophecy of a redemption that would occur after 70 years of exile had failed to materialize (according to Achashveirosh's faulty calculation), thereby destroying the hopes and dreams of the Jewish

People. Celebrating the end of the Jewish future, Achashveirosh throws a lavish party using the holy vessels of the Mikdash, and the story of the Megillah begins.

But then came Mordechai and Esther. They taught the despairing Jewish nation that a Jew never gives up, and that even in the darkest of moments, it is not too late for G-d to turn things around. They inspired a national movement of Teshuva, and experienced a miracle that will forever be remembered. Similarly, when we awaken from our state of מפוזר ומפורד בין העמים – *scattered and separated among the nations*, bickering and fighting over inconsequentials – and transition to a state of לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי – *go gather all the Jews of Shushan together and fast for me* – united as one, returning towards the Almighty – we live the legacy of Mordechai and Esther. We recognize that we are never forgotten, and that G-d is always present, even when He seems most absent.

Challenging as it may naturally be for us to feel full-hearted joy during times as painful as these, it is still incumbent upon each one of us to try the best we can for this one special day. The unmissable similarities between the story of Purim and our own current story should only increase our confidence and trust in G-d as our Protector. As He saved our ancestors, so too will He save us. The celebration of this holy day should not be focused on self-centered hedonism or on our social status, but rather, on what *G-d* wants: strengthening the bonds of love between each other; reconnecting to G-d through the powerful emotions of joy and gratitude; and reawakening our awareness that ultimately, victory comes from Him – not any other person, government, or international organization. In the merit of this special day of Divine closeness, may He bring each of our brothers and sisters home safe to their families immediately, reversing our agony to joy, and bringing a spirit of אורה שמחה וששון ויקר shine upon the Jewish People and all ethical people of the world.