

Mishpatim/ Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5781

Rabbi Zev Wiener

To a Jew, happiness is an “עבודה,” a service, like any other. Just as we are commanded to recite the Shema, to shake a Lulav, and to consume Matzah regardless of what is happening in our lives, the Halacha expects us to try to summon feelings of increased joy during certain periods -- most notably, the annual festivals -- irrespective of personal temperament or circumstance. And yet, when it comes to the holiday of Purim, the Halacha expects us to increase our joy not just for the festival itself, but for the entire month of the festival-- משנכנס אדר מרבין בשמחה. The significant amplification of joy associated with Adar begs the question of why Purim would be treated differently from all other festivals.

In truth, as others have noted, the celebration of Purim appears quite different from that of other festivals. On all the other festivals, our joy stems from gratitude to G-d for what was good. G-d liberated us from Egypt. G-d protected us in the wilderness. G-d gave us the Torah. G-d brought us victory over the Greeks. But on Purim, we thank G-d *even for that which did not seem good*, recognizing that it too ultimately became part of the good. Indeed, what is remarkable about the Purim story, in contrast to all other holidays, is that salvation was brought about specifically by the enemy himself. Every single step that Haman took to destroy the Jews actually served to destroy himself, digging his own grave deeper and deeper. When Haman attempted to solicit Achashveirosh for a royal procession of honor, the suggestion was used directly against him, resulting in Haman humiliatingly leading Mordechai around the city on horseback. When Haman perceived his invitation to Queen Esther's party as a mark of prestige and strength, it ultimately ensnared him for inescapable justice. And, perhaps most iconic of the holiday's theme, when Haman built a 50-Amah gallows upon which to hang Mordechai, it ended up serving as the very gallows to hang Haman himself. Purim is thus the quintessential holiday of “ונהפוך הוא” -- complete and utter inversion: the bad is not merely removed, but rather -- far greater -- the bad is seen to become good.

This central theme of Purim underlies the most curious Halachic requirement that a Jew become "intoxicated" on Purim --perhaps literally, perhaps figuratively -- to the point that he can no longer distinguish between the phrase "blessed is Mordechai" and "cursed is Haman." The wording of this Halacha, specifically citing Mordechai and Haman as the foils which are to be confused, is not coincidental. On Purim, we are

granted the vision that in retrospect, both Mordechai and Haman were equal "heroes" in bringing about Jewish salvation; the only difference between them -- which made all the difference in the world -- lay in their respective intentions. As the Talmud states, "all is in the hands of Heaven, except for fear of Heaven." Goodness will always prevail, one way or the other; our choice lies purely in whether we choose to be complicit in achieving this goodness or not.

While the Jews of the Purim story were fortunate to see this truth play out in front of their very eyes, not everyone lives to see the fruition of this promise in this world. Seldom does a person leave this world without some measure of unresolved anguish or regret. Indeed, Judaism very much acknowledges the realities of pain, suffering, and depression, and does not seek to whitewash them with avoidant platitudes and soundbites. And yet, even as a person experiences the rawness of these emotions, Judaism gently reminds a person that there is also more than meets the eye. In fact, Halacha requires a person to regularly say, "כל מה דעביד רהמנא לטב עביד" -- "All that the Almighty does is ultimately for the good" (Shulchan Aruch, OC 219:5). This does not mean that everything in life is presently good, but rather, *for* the good: even if inconceivable to us at the present moment, it can somehow eventually become a vehicle towards goodness. As Jews, we straddle two worlds, being deeply invested in the importance of improving and enjoying this world, while simultaneously maintaining an awareness that our fleeting bodily existence on this earth constitutes but a small piece of our true existence. It is this critical awareness that allows us to continue to recite this affirmation, even amidst great difficulty.

Purim is the day of the year in which we are most clearly reminded that even bad can become good. The joy of this truth is so great that it illuminates an entire month, in a way that no other holiday's joy is capable of achieving. In Adar, the final month of the year, we taste a small hint of the final phase of the world, the Messianic era, which the Talmud (Pesachim 50a) teaches will be characterized by the ability to perceive unequivocal goodness in everything.

The Talmud (Megillah 4b) teaches that whenever the date of Megillah reading must be moved from its usual time -- for example, if Purim falls on Shabbat -- the Mitzvah of מתנות לאביונים, gifts to the poor, follows suit. That is, the special charity of Purim must always be given on the same day that the Megillah is read, "מפני שעיניהם של עניים נשואות למקרא מגילה" -- *For the eyes of the poor look longingly towards the reading of the Megillah*. While the simple meaning of this teaching refers to the fact that paupers

often come to public Megillah readings to collect funds, there is likely a deeper meaning as well. Regardless of our bank account status, so many of us may enter Purim feeling like paupers -- beaten, depleted, ashamed, for one reason or another. This year in particular, our communal poverty is perhaps far greater than in recent memory. And yet, year after year throughout the generations, no matter what losses the Jewish people sustained individually or communally, our ancestors always entered Adar and Purim looking longingly towards the Megillah -- the ultimate reminder that G-d is always with us, and the hope that even our suffering can catalyze eventual joy. May this month of Adar bring with it joy and salvation for each and every one of us.