

# Purim's Hidden Agenda

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**SOMETIMES WHEN WE** approach Purim, we feel we have no new thoughts or insights to distinguish this year's Purim from any of our Purims of previous years. I would like to offer a new perspective to Purim that will hopefully enhance our experience for years to come. There is a concept known as *nistar*, being hidden, which is very apropos when discussing Purim and the Megillah. Usually, we think of the link between *nistar* and Purim in the context of costumes, which disguise or hide our identities, and the absence of Hashem's name in the Megillah. However, I would like to offer a different approach to the concept of *nistar* as it relates to why we don't recite Hallel on Purim.

While discussing when Hallel should be recited, the Gemara in both Megillah (14a) and Arakhin (10b) asks why we do not recite Hallel on Purim despite the fact that Purim is a commemoration of the Jews being saved throughout the Persian Empire. In both places, the Gemara offers three answers. The first answer, recorded anonymously in Megillah and sourced to Rabbi Yitzchak in Arakhin, posits that such salvations merit the recitation of Hallel only if they occur within the confines of Israel, whereas Purim primarily happened in Shushan. Rav Nahman Bar Yitzchak challenges this position by noting that we recite Hallel on Pesach even though the miracle occurred in Egypt. The Gemara defends Rabbi Yitzchak's position by stating that the rules of where miracles merit Hallel changed after the land of Israel was sanctified during the conquest that began forty years after *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Rav Nahman<sup>1</sup> gives a second answer, explaining that the reading of the Megillah is a fulfillment of the recitation of Hallel. In his words, "*Kriyata Zu Halila* - [the Megillah's] reading is its [Purim's] praise."<sup>2</sup> Rava gives a third answer, explaining that the salvation of

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1. Usually, when the Gemara cites Rav Nahman without any qualifiers, it is Rav Nahman Bar Yaakov. However, it is unclear if in this instance it is Rav Nahman Bar Yaakov or Rav Nahman Bar Yitzchak (who challenged the position of Rabbi Yitzchak). Rava, who gives the third answer, is a Talmid of Rav Nahman Bar Yaakov and the teacher of Rav Nahman Bar Yitzchak.

2. The Gemara is playing off of the linguistic similarity between halila and Hallel.

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Purim was incomplete and therefore does not necessitate the recitation of Hallel, as the narrative did not finish with the Jews acquiring sovereignty and being subjects solely to Hashem but as subjects of the Persian Empire.

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon offers a different explanation.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that in reality, Hallel is not appropriate for Purim. The recitation of Hallel is intended for open and revealed miracles (*nigleh*). Therefore, reciting Hallel on Purim, which is about G-d's hidden involvement in the world (*nistar*), is not the right response. On the other hand, when it comes to Hanukah, Hallel would be completely appropriate. Hanukah is described in *Al Hanisim* as “*V' Kavu shemonat Yimei Hanukah eilu Lehodot U-Lehallel L'shimkha Ha-gadol.*” Moreover, the Rambam refers to the days of Hanukah as “*yimei simkha vi-hallel*” and days that are “*Lehodot U-lehallel,*” days that are meant for praising Hashem through prayer and thanks.

## The Theme of *Nistar* in the Megillah

Through reading and studying the Megillah, one will discover the hidden miracles that took place. This is precisely the correct goal of Purim. This fits nicely with Rav Nahman's approach that reciting Hallel and reading the Megillah are fundamentally similar. Both are ways in which we acknowledge Hashem's involvement in the world and thank Him for intervening to save the Jewish people. Both Hallel, where we express our thanks and love to Hashem in a very overt way and the Megillah where we read about the hidden miracles and where we search for Hashem in the story are forms of *halila*, praise to Hashem, however they differ only in what type of miracle they address. Overt miracles such as the splitting of the sea and the ten plagues are impossible to miss Hashem's direct hand in those stories. The entire Holiday of Pesach is describing the open miracles to the extent where the Haggadah tries to count the number of miracles that occurred even just by the Kriyat Yam Suf. Hanukkah as well as described in *Al Hanisim* lists just how unlikely it was for the Maccabees to overcome their Seleucid Greek oppressors. Hashem handed the many into the hand of the few and the mighty into the hands of the weak. For miracles that are overt and revealed such as these, we can not simply say thank you in a roundabout fashion, we must declare it and even sing it out loud! But for Purim, where it is unclear where Hashem's presence was, what specific miracle occurred, then we need a different response. We need something more subtle like reading the Megillah.

When codifying the halakhah, the Shulhan Arukh states that Hallel is not recited on Purim, without giving any explanation.<sup>4</sup> The Magen Avraham,<sup>5</sup> Arukh Ha-Shulhan,<sup>6</sup> and Mishnah Berurah<sup>7</sup> provide Rava's explanation that we don't recite Hallel because unfortunately, we

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3. R. Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Halachah Mi-M'korah* (Koren, 2016), 191.

4. *Ohr Ha-Hayim* 693:3. However, In his work, *Beit Yosef*, he quotes both Rav Nahman's and Rava's opinions.

5. 693:2.

6. *Ohr Ha-Hayim* 693:4.

7. *Mishna Berurah* 693:7.

were still *ovdei Ahashveirosh* (servants of Ahashveirosh), and not fully *ovdei Hashem*. Therefore, reciting Hallel would not be the proper response.

## The View of Meiri

Several years ago, I wanted to search into the practicality of saying Hallel according to Meiri's view.

דבר ידוע הוא שאין אומרי' הלל בפורים אבל טעם מניעתו נחלקו עליו בגמ' והוא שאחד מהם אמר שקריאתה זו היא הלולא ונראה לי לטעם זה שאם היה במקום שאין לו מגלה שקורא את ההלל שהרי לא נמנעה קריאתו אלא מפני שקריאת המגלה במקומו.

*It is known that we do not say Hallel on Purim, however the reason for not saying it is debated in the Gemara. One of the reasons given is that the recital of the Megillah is as if you had said Hallel [and] reading the Megillah is in place of reciting Hallel. According to me, according to this reason that if one were to be in a place that did not have a Megillah he would say Hallel, because we only do not recite Hallel because the Megillah is read in its stead (therefore if there would be no Megillah one would say Hallel).<sup>8</sup>*

If one didn't have a Megillah with them on Purim or if one was unable to hear the Megillah, should one say Hallel like the Meiri suggested? For example, a soldier on guard duty who won't finish their shift until it is no longer possible to hear the Megillah that night or that day? What about during Covid where often people find themselves in quarantine and potentially even in an unfamiliar country, and no one is around to come and read the Megillah for you. Perhaps some could be traveling and their car breaks down and won't make it back in time for Megillah reading. What should they do? Should they say Hallel? Or to Hallel or not to Hallel, that is the question. If they should, would one say a *brakha* or not? While living in Yerushalayim, I had the privilege of asking several prominent Rabbis, on different occasions, this very question. Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl, Rabbi Asher Weiss, and Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon all concurred that one without the means to hear the Megillah would, in fact, recite Hallel without a *brakha*. The reasoning being, if the conclusion of the Gemara is that we follow Rav Nahman's answer that *kriyata zu halila*, then if there is no Megillah to be heard and or read then the natural replacement is the very Hallel which is usually replaced by the Megillah! However, it said without the *brakhah*, because Hazal (our Sages) are very careful regarding saying a *brakhah livatala* (a wasteful blessing). Because there is doubt if Rav Nahman's explanation is the main answer from that section, it is better to be cautious and avoid making an extra blessing in this case.

After addressing the technical and halakhic side of the story, we are still left with several fundamental questions regarding the esoteric side of this story. After all is said and done, what is the nature of Purim and the theme of *Megillat Esther*? If the Megillah is instead of Hallel, then we need to understand what is so special and unique about it? To enable us

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8. Meiri, *Beit Ha-Behirah*, *Megillah* 14a.

to tackle this question then we need to preempt it with another question; Is the story of Purim a cause for unrestrained celebration or is it a cautionary tale which should command our sober attention? The answer is both. The Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, sensitive to dialectics that often emerges within halakhah, expounds on the inherent duality of *Megillat Esther* and the holiday of Purim in general. In discussing the requirement of reading the Megillah twice, once on the evening of Purim and then again, the following morning, the Gemara (*Megillah* 4a) cites two prooftexts:

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום, שנאמר "דאלקי אקרא יומם ולא תענה ולילה ולא דמיה לי."

איתמר נמי, אמר רבי חלבו אמר עולא ביראה: חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום, שנאמר "הלמען יזמרך כבוד ולא ידם ה' אלקי לעולם אודך."

*Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi cites the verse from Psalms, "O my G-d, I call by day but You answer not, and at night and there is no surcease for me" (Tehillim 22:3)[...]*

*While Rabbi Helbo in the name of Ulla brings a different verse from Psalms, "So that my glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent; O Lord my G-d, I will give thanks to you forever" (Tehillim 30:13).*

The Rav notes that these two *pesukim* seem to be contradictory. One verse cited in the Gemara sees the obligation of reading the Megillah on Purim as rooted in a verse depicting total despair while the other verse cited for the same obligation reflects rejoicing. How can it be that two diametrically opposite *pesukim* are both being used as the source for why we read the Megillah at night and during the day? The Rav explains that in reality they each express a different facet of *Megillat Esther*. Our Sages tell us that before entering Ahashveirosh's inner chamber, Esther, in a moment of despair, recited the Psalm that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi quotes in the above Gemara, entreating the Almighty when all hope was lost." However, this emotion of despair is diametrically opposed by the verse cited by Rabbi Helbo, which expresses jubilation, praise and thanks to Hashem. The Rav further notes that the Gemara's axiom of *keriata zu halilu* that the reading of the Megillah is equivalent with the recitation of Hallel, is consistent with Rabbi Helbo's view. The Rav explains that both verses are accurate characterizations of *Megillat Esther*. The Megillah is both a *tze'aka*, a cry of distress arising from insecurity and fear, while also being a *shira*, a song of joy that marks Purim as no less an occasion for celebration than the other festivals on which Hallel is recited.<sup>9</sup>

By Hallel we saw the answer given by Rava that we were still *ovdei Ahashveirosh* and we were not yet fully and solely *ovdei Hashem*. Hallel which where we say "*Hallelu avdei Hashem*" would then not be completely truthful. The duality of the day, as one being somber and at the same time one for rejoicing requires us to have self-introspection. An *oved Hashem* is one who is asking themselves what is that Hashem wants from and they are also looking to see Hashem in their daily lives. There are times when we relate to Hashem through both of

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9. Simon Posner, Eliyahu Krakowski, and Moshe Genack (ed.), *Megillat Esther Mesorat HaRav* (Orthodox Union/Koren), 2017. For a full excerpt see [www.jewishpress.com/indepth/front-page/the-rav-on-purim-and-the-megillah/2018/02/21](http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/front-page/the-rav-on-purim-and-the-megillah/2018/02/21).

these emotions, happiness and sadness. The *oved Hashem's* job is to try and see the balance of how and when to use each.

There is another duality that exists within Purim. It appears that Purim is compared to Yom Kippur. At first glance, one would be hard pressed to find another two days in the Jewish calendar that are seemingly more unrelated than Purim, a day of joy and feasting, and Yom Kippur, a day of awe and fasting. However, the Zohar explains that inherently there is a deep connection between these two days. This is reflected in the name that the Torah uses for Yom Kippur, *Yom Kippurim*, which can be read *Yom ki-Purim*, “a day like Purim.”<sup>10</sup>

R. Soloveitchik explains that the Zohar is pointing to a common theme shared by both the sacred Yom Kippur and the exuberant Purim. Both holidays revolve around the key theme of a lottery. The *pur* (lottery) that stands as the central motif of Purim is Haman's lottery. Haman believed that ultimately he control the fate of the Jewish people. Haman drew a lottery to decide the date of the Jewish people's extermination. In contrast, Yom Kippur's lottery is found in its central ritual, the *avodah*, the service in the Temple. There, the lottery determines the fate of two identical sacrificial goats, one to be sacrificed on the altar while the other to be “ingloriously” cast off a cliff in the desert. These two days, Purim and Yom Kippur, which are very different in tone, express the same theme. What may seem careless, accidental, a mere lottery, can be transformed into *Kedushah*, holiness, with the realization that Hashem is behind the scenes directing all that occurs. It is not random, accidental, or arbitrary, rather it is Hashem who is pulling the strings.

There is another similarity between Yom Kippur and Purim. Both are days of *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah. On Yom Kippur, the second tablets of the Ten Commandments were brought down by Moshe from Mount Sinai. Purim also has an attribute of a day of *matan Torah*. The Megillah (9:27) states:

קימו וקבל וקבלו היהודים עליהם ועל זרעם ועל כל הנלוים עליהם ולא יעבור להיות עשים  
את שני הימים האלה ככתבם וכזמנם בכל שנה ושנה.

*They established and accepted, for themselves and for their children.*

Rava (Shabbat 88a) interprets this as a reacceptance of the Torah akin to that of Mount Sinai:

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב "קימו וקבלו היהודים", קיימו  
מה שקיבלו כבר.

*Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it willingly in the time of Ahashveirosh's, as it is written: "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them" (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews ordained what they had already taken upon themselves through coercion at Sinai.*

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10. Tikunei Zohar, Tikun 21.

After establishing the Jewish people's reaffirmation of keeping the Torah, we see the parallel drawn between the two *matan Torahs*. These events were not just one that impacted that specific generation, such as that of the desert or of Mordechai and Esther but even to this very day and for all time. This might be why *Megillat Esther* and the Torah are linked together. As Rambam writes, even though other *sefarim* of the prophetic works will cease to exist in the times of *Mashiah*, *Megillat Esther*, just like the Torah will never cease to exist. In the words of Rambam:

*All Prophetic Books and the Sacred Writings will cease during the messianic era except the Book of Esther. It will continue to exist just as the Five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah that will never cease...The days of Purim will not be abolished, as it is written: "These days of Purim shall never be repealed among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never cease from their descendants" (Esther 9:28).*<sup>11</sup>

According to Rambam, the Megillah is unique among the Books of the Prophets and Sacred Writings, and will not be nullified when *Mashiah* comes, but, just like the Five Books of Moses, will continue to exist forever.

The question that remains is, what is so unique and special about *Megillat Esther* that it alone shall remain when all other *Sefarim* from *Neviim* and *Ketubim* shall not? I believe the answer lies within our initial premise, that if we were truly *ovdei Hashem* then we could have said Hallel on Purim. The goal of the Megillah is for us to reaffirm our connection to Hashem and declare him as the true king "*Hamelekh!*" In the beginning of the Megillah we failed to do just that, and the entire point is us looking back contemplating our actions. Being aware of our mistakes which might lead us to being sad and more humble but then to jubilation as we see Hashem's hand revealed as he yet again spares, saves, and redeems us.

There is another comment of the Gemara which highlights yet another duality of Purim. The Gemara (*Megillah* 19a) comments that *Megillat Esther* is referred to as both a letter (*iggeret*) and a book (*sefer*). R. Soloveitchik explains that a *sefer* is written on parchment and is designed to last, representing permanence. An "*iggeret*" is intended only to transmit a communication and symbolizes fleetingness. *Megillat Esther*, shares both of these qualities. It is an *iggeret*, a record of no lasting importance. Yet, *Megillat Esther* is also a *sefer*, a profound book that expresses the fundamental principles of our *emunah* (faith), a *sefer* that testifies to our belief in Divine Providence, even in the depth of despair when all hope seems lost.<sup>12</sup>

Now we can begin to understand the "hidden agenda" of Purim, its significance, and why Purim and the Megillah will never be forgotten or abolished. *Megillat Esther* is a *sefer* which describes our *emunah* in Hashem, which we will never lose (our *emunah*), it is also compared to a *sefer Torah* which is for all eternity. The Torah and now *Megillat Esther* are inherently bound together even in the times of *Mashiah*. The *oved Hashem* needs to be tapped into this

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11. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Megillah* 2:18.

12. *Megillat Esther Mesorat HaRav*.

connection and realize that Hashem is there for us in both the here and now as well as in the unforeseen future. The Megillah symbolizes this with its duality and our job is to see and have *emunah* in Hashem that he is always there with us and for us even when we cannot see him. Furthermore, we can comprehend the messages derived from the different answers as to why we don't say Hallel on Purim. We need to uncover Hashem's presence and make it *nigleh* and not *nistar*. We need to say thank you to Hashem and have *hakarat hatov* for all the everyday miracles Hashem does for us. By being *ovdei Hashem*, we are able to truly express our profound gratitude to Him, both through extreme happiness and immense sadness. When we are constantly *ovdei Hashem*, we will find that we see Hashem in everything and at all times. Through being *ovdei Hashem*, we finally will have brought to light what Hashem wants from us. Hashem wants us to return to his Torah, mitzvot, and Land.<sup>13</sup>

The *iggeret* and *sefer* that we call *Megillat Esther* is the perfect example and reminder of these aspects of our relationship with Hashem. That is why the hidden agenda of the *sefer* is for us to be *ovdei Hashem*, people who can reveal the unrevealed. People who can see the present, past and future Hand and actions of Hashem.

May we merit to uncover and reveal Hashem's *ratzon* in this world, return fully to Hashem, and to be *ovdei Hashem* and not *ovdei Ahashveirosh!*

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13. Perhaps this is what the Gemara (Shabbat 88a) means when it says, "Kimu v'kiblu mah shekiblu kvar."