

THE LANGUAGES OF FRIENDSHIP

Vayikra/Zachor 5779

I.

This morning, we – along with shuls around the world – participated in one of the strangest stringencies. There is a biblical *mitzvah* to remember what Amalek did to us, which we fulfil each year by reading *parashat zachor* the Shabbat before Purim. But a once-a-year opportunity to fulfil a biblical command becomes a breeding ground for neurosis. In this case, a question: how exactly do we read *parashat zachor*? Because the Torah is not vocalized – there are no vowels under the words – the command to wipe out the memory of Amalek might be read two possible ways: *timcheh et zeycher amalek*, or *timcheh et zecher amalek*, depending on which vowel you think goes under the *zayin* of *zeycher*. We want to get it right – and so we read both, following the advice of the 20th-century halakhic work *Mishnah Berurah* (685:18), repeating the verse itself twice.

But there was an even greater possible stringency that this morning's Torah-reading presented – not from *parashat zachor* but from our *parashah*, *vayikra*. Every week I get an email, *Torat Ha-Kore'*, from an organization that lists potential mistakes a Torah reader might make, as well as helpful reminders of challenging words that have a particular pronunciation. And there was a fascinating note about the beginning of *vayikra*. The Torah begins *vayikra* by giving general instructions concerning *korbanot*, sacrifices, which include the location where *korbanot* take place in the *mishkan*:

אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יִקְרִיב אֹתוֹ לְרִצּוֹנוֹ לְפָנַי ה':

He shall bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance in his behalf before the LORD (Lev. 1:3).

Here's the thing: because my school taught me how to pronounce Hebrew with a (somewhat) Israeli pronunciation, I read the opening instruction *el petach ohel mo'ed*, "at the entrance to the tent of meeting." But, warns *Torat Ha-Kore'*, if you pronounce your Hebrew with a true Ashkenazi pronunciation, you'll read it, not as *el petach ohel mo'ed*, but as *el pesach ohel mo'ed*. And that, it worries, might be heard differently. People might think you are saying the word *pesach*, like the holiday, which means "skip over" or "avoid." Someone might think the Torah is instructing a would-be offeror to avoid the *ohel mo'ed*.

I don't know anyone who actually observes this stringency and, as I'll mention shortly, it's a concern that doesn't actually make any sense. But both the stringency of pronouncing *zeycher* two ways and specifically pronouncing *petach* as *petach* and not *pesach*, highlight, for me, one of the crucial themes of Purim.

II.

Why do we celebrate Purim in Adar? Because that, the *megillah* tells us, is the time Haman planned to kill us all:

בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא חֹדֶשׁ נִסָּן בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עָשָׂה לְמַלְךְ אַחֲשֵׁרֶשׁ הִפִּיל פּוּר הוּא
הַגּוֹרֵל לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִיּוֹם | לְיוֹם וַיִּמְחֹדֶשׁ לְחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר הוּא חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר:

In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, a pur – in other words, a lot – was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar (Est. 3:7).

But here's the thing: Haman cast his lot in Nisan, and it fell, fortunately, on the final month of the year, Adar, giving Mordechai and Esther an entire year to counter his plot. But what if the month had been Iyyar? We'd all be dead. There wouldn't have been enough time for the Jewish people to figure out a solution. In other words, our entire redemption in the Purim story hinges on the flukiest of flukes: had it gone any other way we would not have been saved.

Even the slightest permutation in the Purim story changes everything: Haman kills us all. Even the slightest permutation in how we pronounce *parashat zachor* or *vayikra* changes everything: potentially to the point of violating a command.

III.

I mentioned last year how the goal of *mishloach manot*, of sending gifts to one another Purim, is to increase a sense of fellowship, friendship, and community among the Jewish people. But the truth is that all of the mitzvot of Purim are instituted to achieve that goal. *Matanot la-evyonim*, our obligation to give charity to all who ask, furthers our sense of community – it sensitizes us to everyone around us. The *seudah*, naturally, increases bonds of friendship. By coming together and sharing a *yom tov* meal, we become closer to one another. And even the *megillah*, as we explored in the most

recent Wednesday-night series, is, in a major sense, about us all coming together as a community to hear it. We saw, for example, how R. Yechiel Michel Epstein, the 19th-century halakhist and author of *Arukh ha-Shulchan*, insists that there be no breakaway *megillah* readings so that there is a full sense of community present (o.c. 690:25).

Yet, there's something striking about all of these *mitzvot*: *they're all specific actions*. And that's very strange. Because if I were thinking of ways to increase friendship, fellowship, and community, I'd insist on people getting together and talking. Finding out what they share in common. All those kinds of things.

And yet, Judaism insists on the opposite. If I knock on your door and you don't answer but I leave a package – which, by the way, has a very specific set of guidelines regarding what it should contain – on your doorstep, without ever once actually speaking to you, I still fulfilled *mishloach manot*! If I turn up for *megillah* reading and then walk out straight afterwards, I'm good. I don't actually have to see the person to whom I'm giving charity, I just need to give it. Even the halakhic discussion surrounding the *seudah* focusses on what we eat and drink and not on what we say! Why does Purim insist on constructing bonds of friendship with actions and not words?

IV.

Several years ago, Ruthy's mom insisted that everyone in the family read a book, *The Five Love Languages*, by Gary Chapman. Now, you know me well enough at this point to know that I am one of the last people you could imagine enjoying such a book, and there's almost no way I would ever recommend you to read such a book.

But I think everyone should read it.

Yes, it's fluffy. It's very self-helpy. You get the feeling the author is trying to sell you something else at the same time. It is guilty of all the crimes the worst parts of the self-help genre are guilty of – and I say this as someone who happily reads a lot of books that could be categorized as self-help. But its thesis is brilliant.

While the book is talking about marriage it works well with any relationship. Here's its point: you act towards the other person in the relationship the way you want to be treated. And so, if you are the kind of person who feels loved by receiving gifts, you buy your spouse lots of gifts. But, here's the problem: your spouse has his or her own expectations of how to feel loved and they are different to yours. And so, while you're busy buying lots of gifts with the best of intentions – feeling like you couldn't be more loving – you're being frustrated by the lack of gifts you've received. And, on the flip side, while your spouse is busy washing the dishes every day, thinking that helping is the

quintessential expression of love, you aren't noticing that, and your spouse is growing frustrated that you aren't showing enough love yourself.

The book's solution is the flip to *ve-ahavata le-reyakha kamokhah*, "treat your fellow the same way you wish to be treated." Treat your fellow the way they wish to be treated.

V.

The reason Purim mandates action and not conversation is because we, as humans, are terrible at it. We think we are being friendly towards someone else while the other person finds it insufficient. We don't know each other's languages of love (and it's almost impossible to know them outside of our closest relationships). And so, we inevitably offend when we never intended to, we hurt when we never thought that was possible. But it happens. We thought we were obviously referring to the opening of the *ohel mo'ed* when we said "*el pesach*," but someone misunderstood and thought God was commanding something different.

Here's the thing. That insistence on *el petach* regardless, it makes no sense! As a friend of mine pointed out who knows his Biblical grammar, the word *pesach* meaning "avoid" would not conjugate and would not appear as *el pesach* if that's what the Torah meant. It's impossible to actually confuse someone this way! It can only ever mean "the opening" no matter how it's pronounced. It's impossible!

But this only emphasizes how easily we can be misunderstood. When we do something with intentions that seem obvious, our words can be taken the wrong way – even if it's impossible to construe our intentions that way.

VI.

There is a famous *chassideshe derush* that notes the Torah's description of Yom Kippur as *yom kippurim*, which can be read creatively as *yom ki-purim*, it's a day like Purim. And while the connections between Yom Kippur and Purim are explored in a variety of contexts, there is one element I want to highlight. There is a custom in the run up to Yom Kippur to reflect on our interpersonal relationships with others and apologize for the misdeeds we have done. And I think the *mitzvot* of Purim underscore that same need: to realize that we often offend others – either without realizing or more than we thought we had – with the words we say, the looks we give, and the things we do. I know I am guilty of it and I know everyone else is guilty of it, too. *Because we're human.*

And so, I want to encourage everyone here to do two things: to forgive and seek forgiveness. First, forgive others. Think about the languages of love: did the person actually do something offensive,

did the person actually intend to upset you, or is it a misunderstanding? As I've said before, never ascribe to nefariousness what can be chalked up to ignorance or incompetence. It's most likely a misunderstanding. One person's friendliness is another person's snubbing; one person's polite concern is another person's nosiness.

But you also need to seek forgiveness, because there may have been genuine times you caused offense. But I don't recommend people adopt a custom prevalent in the run-up to Yom Kippur, of just asking anyone you know for forgiveness for any general misdeed. Rather, we seek forgiveness by being more mindful of how we may be interpreted. In the back of our mind, we have to know that though it's impossible for *el pesach* to ever mean avoid, someone might still think it. Seeking forgiveness is not about apology – though if you know of a genuine offence you should apologize – it's about committing to act differently.

The *mitzvot* of Purim and our Torah readings today underscore how fragile our relationships are and how easily we can be misunderstood. But to move forward and build fellowship, friendship, and community we must see the Purim in Yom Kippurim and forgive and seek forgiveness.