**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT KI TISA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**In memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph I. Singer z"l,**

**Rabbi Emeritus of Manhattan Beach Jewish Center,**

**and son-in-law of Dr. Chaim Heller z"l,**

**whose yahrzeit falls on 12 Adar,**

**by his daughter, Vivian Singer**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (4a) establishes that one is obligated to read (or listen to the reading of) *Megillat Ester* both on the night of Purim, and during Purim day. This requirement is inferred from the verse in Sefer Tehillim (22:3), “My God, I call in the morning but You do not answer, and even at night I am not silent.” Rashi explains that we read the *Megilla* both at night and in the morning to commemorate the Jews’ around-the-clock pleas to God for help when they were threatened by Haman. The verse cited by the Gemara, Rashi explains (based on Yoma 29a), appears in a Psalm which was written about Ester, and thus refers to the time of the Purim story. It demonstrates that the Jews of the time beseeched God by both day and night, and so in commemoration, we read the story of Purim both at night and during the day.

This inference made by the Gemara expresses the notion that our celebration of the end of the crisis must not be any less fervent and passionate than our fears during the crisis. If the Jews cried, panicked and prayed both night and day, then our festive commemoration of this miracle must also be held during both the night and the day.

This concept perhaps touches upon a broader theme of the Purim celebration – the theme of joy borne out of a positive outlook. The unbridled festivity of Purim expresses our belief in the goodness of the world, that life, notwithstanding its difficulties and challenges, is something to relish and celebrate. The sudden reversal that the Jews experienced at the time of the Purim story reminds us that what appears negative is not necessarily negative, that hardship and fear can instantly transform into joy and celebration. And thus the Gemara requires drinking on Purim to the point where one cannot distinguish “between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’.” Normally, Judaism discourages inebriation, which is generally used as a means of escaping life’s problems and challenges, rather than confronting them. One day a year, however, we are required to do just that, in order to acknowledge that “Haman” and “Mordekhai” – adversity and good fortune – are not always clearly distinguishable from one another. We are reminded that the negative aspects of our lives are not as negative as we think, and are outweighed manifold by the positive aspects. On Purim, we ignore our troubles and our fears to celebrate all that is good, to gain a healthier perspective on our lives, viewing them from a fresh, positive outlook.

Hence, the celebration of the Jews’ salvation cannot be any less than the period of their fear. Purim specifically teaches us of the need to minimize our feelings of anxiety and worry, and increase our feelings of joy, contentment and vitality. To this end, we celebrate both day and night, proclaiming that our happiness must never be outweighed by our fears and sorrow.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s ruling in Masekhet Megilla (4a) that one is obligated on Purim to read the *Megilla* at night and then to “repeat” the reading during the daytime.

The *Sefat Emet* finds it significant that the Gemara formulated the daytime requirement as an obligation to “repeat” the reading. Rather than state simply that one is required to read the *Megilla* both at night and during the day, the Gemara establishes that one must read the *Megilla* at night and repeat it during the day. On this basis, the *Sefat Emet* proposes a novel theory regarding the nature of the *Megilla* reading obligation. He postulates that the daytime obligation is defined as a requirement to repeat the *Megilla*. Meaning, the essential obligation of *Megilla* reading is to read the *Megilla* for the second time on Purim day. The nighttime reading, then, is merely a preparation, of sorts, for the daytime reading. We are required to read the *Megilla* on Purim night so that on Purim day we can fulfill the obligation to repeat the *Megilla* during the day.

The practical ramification of this theory, the *Sefet Emet* notes, arises in the case of a resident of Jerusalem who visits a community outside Jerusalem for only the night of the 14th of Adar. Since he will back in Jerusalem during Purim day, and will thus not be obligated in *Megilla* reading in the day (as Jerusalemites observe Purim on the 15th), he is not required to read the *Megilla* on the night of the 14th, either, despite his being outside Jerusalem. Since the nighttime reading serves only to facilitate a repeated reading the following day, it is required only if one will be required to read the following day, to the exclusion of the case described, where the Jerusalemite will be back home on the 14th, and will thus have no obligation to read the *Megilla* that day. (This is, indeed, the accepted *halakha*.)

Rav Zvi Ryzman, in his *Ratz Ka-tzvi* – Purim (28), adds that the *Sefat Emet*’s theory may also underlie the *Shulchan Arukh*’sruling (O.C. 692:4) permitting reading the *Megilla* even before sundown on *Ta’anit Ester*, the day before Purim. The *Shulchan Arukh* writes, based on the ruling of the *Terumat Ha-deshen*,that one may conduct the nighttime reading before sundown if he is “*annus ketzat*” – even “somewhat” compelled to do so (as long as he does not read earlier than the point of *pelag ha-mincha*). This marks an unusual measure of leniency, allowing an obligation which takes effect in the nighttime to be discharged already before the sun sets. Rav Ryzman suggests that this ruling may perhaps be rooted in the *Sefat Emet*’s theory, that the nighttime reading is required purely to facilitate a repetition on Purim day. As the nighttime reading does not constitute an independent requirement, and is purely preparatory in nature, there is perhaps greater room for flexibility, such that when necessary, the obligation can be fulfilled even before sundown.

Monday

The Midrash (*Ester Rabba* 8:1) draws an intriguing parallel between Mordekhai’s reaction upon hearing of Haman’s edict, and Yaakov’s reaction upon seeing Yosef’s bloodstained cloak. We read in *Megilat Ester* (6:1) that after the announcement was made that the Jews in the Persian kingdom would be killed, “Mordekhai rent his garments and wore sackcloth and ashes,” just as Yaakov tore his clothing and donned sackcloth when he saw what he assumed to be proof of his beloved son’s death (Bereishit 37:34). The Midrash links these two incidents, stating that Yaakov was punished for his mournful response, through the decree of annihilation which was issued against his descendants in Shushan.

It stands to reason that the Midrash linked these two episodes because of the obvious resemblance between them: in both instances, the mourning ultimately proved unnecessary. In Yaakov’s case, Yosef was actually still alive, on his way to becoming the leader of the most powerful empire on earth, in the capacity of which he would save millions of people – including his own family – from starvation. And Haman’s plan, of course, was devised after Providence had already put in place the mechanism for its foiling. Neither Yaakov nor Mordekhai actually had reason to mourn, because, unbeknownst to them, the tragedy they mourned did not actually unfold.

It would thus seem that the Midrash here does not seek to criticize Yaakov – who could not have realistically been expected to assume that Yosef was still alive – but rather warns against the tendency to lament prematurely. Very often, when adverse circumstances present themselves, we immediately rush to “rend our garments” and “don sackcloth.” We right away find reason to “mourn,” without trying to see the positive side of the situation, or patiently waiting to see how it will unfold. The stories of Yaakov and Mordekhai demonstrate that “mourning” can sometimes be premature, that unfortunate circumstances are not always as unfortunate as they may seem. The Midrash here urges us to exercise optimism and patience in periods of hardship and challenge, to delay our “mourning” and aggravation, and to recognize that very often, behind pain and sorrow often lies blessing and good fortune.

Tuesday

One of the obligations of Purim is *matanot la-evyonim* – the requirement to give charitable gifts to at least two poor people (*Shulchan Arukh* O.C. 694:1).

Rav Yosef Engel, in his *Gilyonei Ha-Shas* (Shabbat 10b), finds it halakhically significant that *Megilat Ester* (9:22) refers to this *mitzva* with the term “*matanot*” – “gifts.” A “gift,” Rav Engel writes, differs from ordinary charity. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (10b) and Masekhet Beitza (16a) comments that when a person gives his fellow a gift, he must inform the recipient. The example given by the Gemara is the case of a person who feeds somebody else’s child. The Gemara establishes that the person must ensure a way of informing the parents that he fed their child for them that day. (The exception to this rule, as the Gemara notes, is where the recipient will in any event find out about the gift, in which case the giver is not required to inform the recipient about the gift. According to Meiri, in such a case the giver should specifically not make a point of informing the recipient, as this would appear arrogant.) Rav Engel cites the Maharal as explaining that a “gift,” by definition, requires both a benefactor and a beneficiary. The concept of a gift is not merely the transfer of some asset from one person to another, but rather the forging of a bilateral relationship of sorts, nurturing the bonds of friendship between the two parties, and this requires that both the giver and the recipient are aware of the gift.

If so, Rav Engel writes, then we must, necessarily, distinguish between a regular gift and charity. Tosefot (there in Masekhet Shabbat) write that although one who gives a gift must notify the recipient, when it comes to charity, the opposite is true: it is preferable to donate charity anonymously, in order to avoid embarrassing the recipient. Rav Engel explains that charity is intended solely for the purpose of providing financial support to a person in need, whereas a gift serves to facilitate social bonding and friendship. Accordingly, when one gives charity to the poor, the key concern is that the funds or goods reach those in need, not to facilitate emotional bonding; to the contrary, such bonding is to be discouraged in the context of charity, due to the embarrassment this would cause the recipient. A gift, however, is intended not merely to give somebody something he could use, but to strengthen bonds of friendship, and this requires informing the recipient of the gift.

On this basis, Rav Engel arrives at a surprising conclusion regarding the obligation of *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim. Since the *Megila* formulates this requirement with the term “*matanot*,” referring to this donation as a “gift,” we should apparently treat it not as charity, but rather as a gift. In Rav Engel’s view, *matanot la-evyonim* differs from ordinary charity in that it must be given as a “gift,” and thus one must inform the recipient. As opposed to other charitable donations to the poor, which should ideally be kept anonymous, *matanot la-evyonim* requires that the beneficiary knows from whom he received the gift.

This is also the view of Rav Chaim Kanievksy (cited in *Pardeis Yosef Ha-chadash – Purim*, p. 324), who claimed that *matanot la-evyonim* resembles the obligation of *mishloach manot* – giving food packages to one’s fellow on Purim. Both requirements, Rav Kanievsky maintained, are intended to engender a feeling of friendship and affection among Jews, and this can be achieved only if the recipient knows the identity of the benefactor.

A different view, however, is taken by Rav Asher Weiss (*Minchat Asher – Moadim*), who notes several sources indicating that *matanot la-evyonim* is required in order to enhance the joyful spirit of Purim. For example, the Rambam (Hilkhot Megila 2:17) famously writes that it is preferable to spend more on *matanot la-evyonim* than on the other *mitzvot* of Purim, and explains, “because there is no greater or more glorious joy than bringing joy to the heart of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the foreigners…” The clear implication of this remark is that *matanot la-evyonim* serves the purpose of enhancing the feelings of joy on Purim. (This point is made even more explicitly by the Ritva in his commentary to Bava Metzia 78b, as Rav Weiss cites.) If so, then it stands to reason that the gifts to the poor should be given in a manner which maximizes the recipients’ joy, which would seemingly be an anonymous gift, which helps to preserve the recipients’ dignity and protect them from humiliation.

This view, that *matanot la-evyonim* should preferably be given anonymously like ordinary charitable gifts, is also taken by Rav Yechiel Michel Goldshlag, in his work *Imrei Emet* (cited by Rav Asher Anshel Schwartz, *Ma’adanei Asher*, Purim 5778).

Rav Weiss concludes his discussion with an interesting suggestion for satisfying both views. He writes that one may fulfill the obligation of *matanot la-evyonim* by giving food products to two needy people, who will assume that the gifts are given for the purpose of *mishloach manot*, as opposed to *matanot la-evyonim*. This way, one is able to give *matanot la-evyonim* in a manner whereby the recipients know who gave them the gifts, but without causing them shame.

Wednesday

Commenting on a verse in Shir Hashirim (6:10) which likens *Am Yisrael* to the moon (“*yafa ka-levana*”), the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 15:6) explains this as a reference to Ester, who “shone for Israel” like the moon. Just as the moon provides light in what is otherwise the thick darkness of night, similarly, Ester provided light for the Jews at a time of darkness, when their future was threatened by Haman. In order to substantiate this metaphor, comparing Ester to the moon, the Midrash points to Ester’s remark to Mordekhai, “I have not been called to come before the king for thirty days now” (4:11). Just as the moon begins “growing” in the sky every thirty days, similarly, Ester had not been invited before Achashveirosh for thirty days, and she was thus reluctant to approach him and plead for the annulment of the decree against her people. Thus, Ester may be compared to the moon.

What is the significance of this seemingly tenuous parallel between Ester and the lunar cycle, and how does this relate to the theme of “illumination,” Ester’s providing light to the Jewish People in what was otherwise a period of darkness and gloom?

Ester’s fear of approaching Achashveirosh may perhaps be viewed as symbolic of the Jews’ thoughts at that time regarding their relationship to God. Just as Ester felt she had become distanced from Achashveirosh, assuming he no longer loved her or had interest in her, the Jews likewise felt distant from King of the world, and assumed He no longer felt any affection for them. Having lived for decades in exile, distant from the Land of Israel and entrenched in a foreign, pagan culture characterized by overindulgence and vanity, they naturally felt that they could no longer come before the King, that their relationship was permanently broken.

Their mistake, however, was overlooking the fact that *Am Yisrael* is, as King Shlomo teaches in Shir Hashirim, “beautiful as the moon.” The moon declines and nearly disappears, only to resurge. From a thin, barely visible sliver in the dark sky, the moon gradually rebuilds until it brightly illuminates the night. This is the “beauty” of *Am Yisrael* – that, like the moon, its periods of decline are always temporary, and are invariably followed by periods of recovery and resurgence. Just as Achashveirosh adoringly welcomed Ester upon seeing her standing before his throne, God similarly welcomes His beloved nation when they return to Him after a prolonged period of “absence,” despite having plunged themselves into spiritual darkness. Like the light of the moon, our relationship with the Almighty is always capable of restoration, regardless of how sharply or for how long we have declined.

This is the great ray of “light” that Ester shone for the Jewish People. Her appearance before Achashveirosh represents for us our ability to appear before God under any circumstances, no matter how distant we have become. She reminds us that like the moon, our periods of decline – our failures and mistakes – can be transformed into growth and resurgence, that no matter how far we fall, we are capable of picking ourselves up and once again shining brightly, and God always welcomes us back.

Thursday

We read in the opening chapter of *Megilat Ester* that during Achashveirosh’s seven-day feast which was held for the residents of Shushan, he ordered his officials “*la-asot ki-rtzon ish va-ish*” – to serve every guest according to his individual preferences (1:8).

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (12a) comments, curiously, that this phrase refers to Mordekhai and Haman. Noting later verses in the Megilla (2:5, 7:6) where we find the word “*ish*” associated with Mordekhai and Haman, the Gemara interprets the phrase “*ki-rtzon ish va-ish*” as a reference to these two figures. Rashi explains the Gemara’s comment to mean that Mordekhai and Haman were the chief butlers responsible for the wine at the celebration. However, the Maharsha notes the difficulty in this explanation, as the Gemara here discusses the verse “*la-asot ki-rtzon ish va-ish*,” which speaks of the guests at the party, and not the officers in charge of serving them. The Maharsha therefore offers a different explanation, suggesting that Achashveirosh ordered that kosher food and drink be made available for his Jewish guests. The Gemara intends to say that the “Hamans” – the non-Jews at the feast – were served foods and drinks that were appropriate for them, and the “Mordekhais” – the Jews – were served foods and drinks that were suitable for them.

Others, including the Maharal of Prague (*Or Chadash* commentary to *Megilat Ester*) and Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (*Ma’or Va-shemesh*), suggest interpreting the Gemara’s comment as viewing the feast in Shushan as an allegorical allusion to the doctrine of free will. Just as Achashveirosh sought to ensure that his feast would suit the taste of each and every one of his subjects, similarly, God allows our world to sustain everybody, both the righteous (“Mordekhai”) and the wicked (“Haman”). Every “guest” in the Almighty’s “feast” can choose how to conduct himself or herself, to become the kind of person he or she wishes to be. The world itself does not compel us to be “Mordekhai” or “Haman”; the choice is made by each and every one of us. Only we decide how we will act as we enjoy the great “feast” – the countless blessings provided by the world around us.

This understanding of the Gemara’s comment gives rise to the question of how the doctrine of free will relates to the story of Achashveirosh’s feast. Why would the Gemara seek to associate the king’s desire to accommodate his guests’ individual wishes, with the fundamental belief in our free will to choose good or evil?

Possibly, the Gemara’s comment hearkens back to an earlier, more famous, passage, stating that the Jews of the time were initially condemned to annihilation “because they enjoyed the feast of that wicked man [Achashveirosh].” The Jews participated in the royal feast, presumably, because they were fully integrated in Persian society, and thus felt it necessary to join their Persian friends and neighbors in their merrymaking and gluttonous indulgence. The Gemara perhaps points to the fact that the Jews saw themselves as driven by circumstance to betray their values and fully participate in the vulgar, decadent culture of Persia. They saw this process of complete integration as a natural progression over which they had no control, due to their condition in exile. The Gemara notes the folly of this misconception by way of an analogy to Achashveirosh’s policy of accommodation at his feast. In any situation in which we find ourselves, we have the choice to be either “Mordekhai” or “Haman.” No circumstance compels us to act righteously or sinfully; the decision is entirely ours. Even when we find ourselves submerged in “exile” of any sort, when we feel that our surroundings or circumstances do not lend themselves to wholehearted religious devotion, we still have the choice, and are empowered to make the decision to act the right way.

Friday

We read in Parashat Ki-Tisa of God’s instruction to Moshe that he relay to *Benei Yisrael* the command of Shabbat observance: “You shall speak to the Israelites that you shall observe My Sabbaths, for it is a sign between Me and you for all your generations, to know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (31:13). This command appears in conjunction with the commands regarding the construction of the *Mishkan*, and is thus commonly understand as emphasizing to the people that the lofty project of building the *Mishkan* does not override the Shabbat prohibitions, and must be suspended on Shabbat.

The Gemara in Masekhet Beitza (16a) cites this verse as a source for the requirement to inform the recipient when giving him or her a gift. Unless the recipient is bound to reveal this information eventually in any event, the one who gives the gift must inform the recipient. The Gemara explains that God told Moshe to convey to *Benei Yisrael* not merely the command of Shabbat observance, but also its great reward, the “gift” we receive by observing Shabbat – something which otherwise we would not have become aware of. And thus God instructed Moshe to convey to the nation this information so that they “know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you” – they realize that God has given us this remarkable gift.

Elsewhere, we find a different source for the concept that God wanted Moshe to inform us of the great “gift” of Shabbat observance. The *Midrash Lekach Tov* infers this from Moshe’s declaration to the people on the first Friday after the manna began falling: “See that the Lord has given you the Shabbat; therefore, He gives you bread for two days on the sixth day” (Shemot 16:29). According to the *Midrash Lekach Tov*, it was then, when *Benei Yisrael* first received the manna shortly after the Exodus, that Moshe was told to tell *Benei Yisrael* about the great gift of Shabbat, which absolved them of the need to collect manna on Shabbat.

Rav Menachem Kasher (*Torah Sheleima* to Shemot 31:13, note 44) writes that the version in *Lekach Tov* seems more accurate, as it marks the first time that *Benei Yisrael* were told about Shabbat. It stands to reason that the first time Moshe was instructed to tell the people about Shabbat is the occasion when God expressed the need for him to inform them of the precious gift they were receiving.

Apparently, the Gemara felt that there is something unique about the gift of Shabbat that is expressed specifically in the command here in Parashat Ki-Tisa, which is given in the context of the commands of the *Mishkan*. For some reason, the special “gift” of which Moshe needed to inform the people is associated with the command of Shabbat given in Parashat Ki-Tisa, and not with the command of Shabbat given earlier, in the context of the manna.

The explanation might lie in the different themes of Shabbat reflected in these different contexts. (These themes are developed at length by Rav Mordechai Breuer, *Pirkei Moadot*, vol. 1.) The command of Shabbat given in reference to the manna relates to our daily pursuit of our physical needs. We human beings, like animals, must scurry about in search of food and the other commodities we need in order to sustain ourselves. *Benei Yisrael* were told upon entering the desert that on Shabbat, this is not necessary. Six days a week, we need to leave our homes to collect our manna, to work to receive the livelihood which God makes available to us, but on Shabbat, we are assured that we can remain home. In the context of the *Mishkan*, however, the command of Shabbat observance reflects a different concept. The project of the *Mishkan*’s construction represents, perhaps in the extreme, the human being’s role as God’s partner in the world’s development. While we are, on the one hand, like other animals who must struggle to sustain ourselves, we are also fundamentally different creatures, endowed with a divine image, invited to take part in the Godly project of continuing the process of creation through our creativity and mastery of the natural world. This is most clearly manifest through the construction of the *Mishkan*, when human beings were called upon to build an earthly abode for the Almighty. Here, the command of Shabbat serves the function of forcing us to stop to recognize that ultimately, God is the sole true Creator and Ruler over the universe. In the context of the *Mishkan*, Shabbat observance is a vitally important reminder that although all week long we work as God’s “partners,” we are subordinate to Him and under His absolute authority.

In light of this distinction, we can perhaps explain why the hidden “gift” of Shabbat, which Moshe needed to reveal to us, is associated with the command in Parashat Ki-Tisa, and not with the earlier command given in reference to the manna. In the earlier command, the “gift” element of Shabbat is clear and obvious, as it absolves us of the need to struggle to earn a livelihood one day a week. Here in Parashat Ki-Tisa, however, the “gift” aspect of Shabbat is less evident. In this context, Shabbat is about limiting our power and stature, reminding us of our status of subservience. At first glance, this aspect of Shabbat is not a “gift,” a precious privilege, but rather a restrictive force, setting limits on our capacity to build and produce. This does not appear as a gift. And thus specifically in this context, God told Moshe to inform us that Shabbat is, in truth, a precious gift that we should cherish. Our status as God’s servants who work strictly under His command is a great privilege. Even this aspect of Shabbat observance should be embraced as a precious treasure. While we normally associate servitude with deprivation and shame, our status of servitude vis-à-vis the Almighty should be viewed as a source of honor, pride and exhilaration. In commanding *Benei Yisrael* to halt their work building the *Mishkan* on Shabbat, Moshe was to inform us that even this is a precious gift, for there is nothing more precious and valuable than serving our Creator.

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