**S.A.L.T. - PARASHAT VAYIKRA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

One of the sacrifices discussed in Parashat Vayikra is the *par he’alem davar shel tzibur*, the special sin-offering that the *Sanhedrin* must bring after issuing a ruling which they later realized was incorrect. The Torah introduces this law by describing a case where “the entire congregation of Israel erred, and something was concealed from the eyes of the congregation…” (4:13). As Rashi explains, citing *Torat Kohanim*, this refers to an incorrect ruling issued by the *Sanhedrin* permitting something which is, in fact, forbidden and for which one is liable to the severe punishment of *kareit*. If such a ruling was issued and people committed the wrongful act in question on the basis of this ruling, then the *Sanhedrin* must bring a special sacrifice, which the Torah proceeds to describe.

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* notes that there is only one other instance in the entire *Tanakh* where the word “*yishgu*” (“err,” or “stray”) is used. The prophet Yechezkel (34:6) sharply condemns the failed leadership of his time, comparing them to shepherds who negligently disregard their flock: “My sheep stray [*yishgu*] in all the mountains and on every tall hill; My sheep are scattered throughout the land, and there is no one looking after or searching [for them].” The connection between these two contexts, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* observes, lies in the fact that both deal with failures of leadership. The Torah here in Parashat Vayikra addresses a case where the highest halakhic body issued an incorrect ruling, thus leading the people towards forbidden conduct, just as Yechezkel censures the nation’s “shepherds” for their ineffective leadership.

This connection drawn by the *Ba’al Ha-turim* between these two contexts underscores the stark difference between them, as they speak of two distinct failures of leadership. Yechezkel describes criminal neglect, charging that the leaders enjoyed the perks and benefits of leadership without assuming the responsibilities of leadership. They simply did not care about the people who relied on them or for their needs, and allowed them to be “scattered throughout the land,” lost and misguided. Here in Parashat Vayikra, by contrast, the Torah speaks of a mistaken ruling. The *Sanhedrin* did not knowingly neglect its duties, but rather reached an incorrect decision. This is a much different kind of failure than the failure of neglect and indifference described by Yechezkel.

By associating these two failures of leadership, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* perhaps conveys the message that for people in positions of leadership, an “innocent” mistake is not entirely “innocent.” When a person who exerts a great deal of influence needs to reach a decision, the stakes are especially high, and extreme care must be taken and every effort must be made to decide correctly. Certainly, a *Sanhedrin* that issues an incorrect ruling is not guilty of the kind of neglect described by Yechezkel, and innocent, honest mistakes will occasionally happen. However, the association drawn between these two verses warns that rash or shoddy decision-making reflects an attitude of indifference. If leaders truly understood the importance of their role and the gravity of their duty, they would ensure to invest the time and effort needed to avoid avoidable mistakes.

On some level, this applies to all of us, and not only to leaders. While mistakes are an inevitable part of life, not all mistakes are innocent. Very often, our mistakes are the result of insufficient concern. While we of course cannot expect to never make mistakes, we must ensure, at very least, that we care enough to try hard to avoid them.

Sunday

The Gemara towards the end of Masekhet Ta’anit (29a) introduces the famous *halakha* of “*mi-she’nikhnas Adar marbin be-simcha*” – that we increase our joy when the month of Adar begins. This *halakha* was stated by Rav Yehuda bar Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat, who cited it in the name of Rav.

Numerous writers (including Rav Moshe Wolfson in [*Emunat Itekha*, vol. 1, p. 293](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=51137&st=&pgnum=301&hilite=); and Rav Petachya Menken in [*Pardes Petachya*, Parashat Beshalach](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41905&st=&pgnum=30&hilite=)) noted the significance of the fact that this *halakha* was conveyed specifically by Rav Yehuda bar Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat. The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (96b) and Masekhet Gittin (57b) famously tells that Haman had descendants, or a descendant, who taught Torah in the city of Bnei-Brak. The *Ein Yaakov* cites the Gemara’s comment with an additional phrase, identifying this descendant as Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat. Indeed, the Gemara elsewhere (Bava Batra 8b) tells about Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat’s exceptional and selfless commitment to the schoolchildren whom he taught. Interestingly enough, Rav Shemuel’s son – Rav Yehuda – is the one whom the Gemara cites as introducing the *halakha* of “*mi-she’nikhnas Adar marbin be-simcha*.” It was a descendant of Haman, of all people, who conveyed to us the requirement to rejoice with the onset of the month of Adar.

If so, then Rav Yehuda’s ruling is another expression of the “reversal” theme that features prominently in the Purim story. The *Megilla* (9:1) describes how the situation in the Persian Empire was reversed as the Jews dominated their foes, as opposed to the original plan, which was for their enemies to dominate them. Later (9:22), the *Megilla* speaks of the month of Adar being transformed from a month of calamity to a month of jubilation. In Rav Yehuda bar Rav Shemuel’s halakhic ruling, we encounter the transformation of Haman himself, in a certain sense, as he had planned Adar to be the month of the Jews’ annihilation, and ultimately his descendant introduces the obligation to rejoice during this month.

Additionally, the ironic emergence of a Torah scholar from Haman demonstrates that ultimately, everything is good. *Chazal* famously instruct, “A person is obligated to become inebriated on Purim until he cannot distinguish between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’” (Megila 7b). The message underlying this seemingly peculiar statement is that on Purim we recognize the “Mordechai” within every “Haman,” the blessing within every curse. Although we must confront and struggle against evil in all its various forms, Purim reminds us that ultimately, everything is for the best. The story of Purim itself conveys the message that even the darkest and gloomiest circumstance is eventually shown to be something positive. Somewhere behind the mask of evil and suffering there is goodness, though it may take many generations for us to identify it. Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat came along many centuries after Haman and revealed the good latent even within this evil family. Appropriately, his son announces to us the message of the special of joy of Purim, the joy of knowing that whether or not we can see how, all that happens is ultimately for the best.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s comment (Sanhedrin 96b, Gittin 57b) that many generations after the Purim story, descendants (or a descendant) of Haman taught Torah in the city of Bnei-Brak. One of the questions that arise is why the Gemara found it significant to note the city where this occurred. Certainly, it is meaningful on several levels that Haman, who set out to eradicate the Jewish Nation, had a descendant who converted and who became a Torah educator. But what difference would it have made if this descendant had lived and taught somewhere else? Why did *Chazal* find it worthwhile to mention that he taught in Bnei-Brak?

It has been suggested that Bnei-Brak is mentioned for the sake of associating this descendant of Haman with Rabbi Akiva, who, as we know from several sources, lived and worked in this city. Among the characteristics that made Rabbi Akiva unique was his unparalleled optimism. This is perhaps most pronounced in the famous story told in the closing passage of Masekhet Makkot, where Rabbi Akiva’s colleagues wept as they saw the ruins of the Temple after its destruction. To their astonishment, Rabbi Akiva reacted to seeing the sight with laughter. He explained to his colleagues that when he saw the Temple ruins, the fulfillment of the prophecies of destruction, he was reminded and reassured of the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecies foreseeing Jerusalem’s spectacular restoration. Rabbi Akiva had the ability to see the good in even the darkest and gloomiest circumstances, and indeed, the Gemara (Berakhot 60b) tells that Rabbi Akiva regularly declared, “*Gam zu le-tova*” – “This, too, is for the best” – even under the harshest conditions.

For this reason, perhaps, the Gemara wanted to draw our attention to the fact that Haman’s descendant taught Torah specifically in Bnei-Brak, in the city of Rabbi Akiva, the place associated with unbridled optimism and positivity. The emergence of a Torah scholar from Haman is itself a powerful expression of “*gam zu le-tova*,” that ultimately, on some level, in some way, all is good. Even within an evil man such a Haman, there is a kernel of goodness that can and will, at some point, blossom.

On Purim there is a *mitzva* to drink to the point of (mild) inebriation – an obligation which stands in stark contrast to our tradition’s strong stance discouraging intoxication. Throughout the rest of the year, we are not given the option of escaping from the troubles and evils of the world. We are to confront the harsh realities of life, carefully distinguishing between “Mordekhai” and “Haman,” between the good that needs to be promoted and the evil that needs to be defeated, and work to achieve these objectives. On Purim, however, we drink to the point where the lines are blurred, reminding ourselves that ultimately, everything is good. We draw inspiration from Bnei-Brak, from Rabbi Akiva’s optimism and from Haman’s descendant who became a righteous scholar, encouraging ourselves with the knowledge that hope is never lost, and optimism and joy can be found in all situations and under the most trying circumstances.

Tuesday

Earlier this week, we noted the Gemara’s comment (Sanhedrin 96b, Gittin 57b) that a descendant of Haman was a Torah educator in Bnei-Brak. As we saw, the version of the text of the Gemara brought by the *Ein Yaakov* identifies this descendant as Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat.

The Gemara tells of Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat elsewhere, in Masekhet Bava Batra (8b), where we read that his colleague, Rav, once saw him standing in his garden. Rav suspected that Rav Shemuel was neglecting his duties, leaving the children under his charge unattended while taking a leisurely stroll through his garden. He turned to Rav Shemuel and criticized him for his neglect, and Rav Shemuel explained that he had not been in his garden for thirteen years, and that even as he strolled in his garden, he was thinking about his students and their educational needs.

If, indeed, Rav Shemuel was a descendant of Haman, then we might view this story in light of the theme of *hester* – illusion and concealment – that features so prominently in the story of *Megillat Ester* and the Purim celebration. The nation of Amalek, from which Haman hailed, is often associated with the doctrine of random happenstance, the belief that all world affairs unfold randomly, without any rhyme or reason and without being governed by Providence. Amalek’s assault on *Benei Yisrael* is described in the Torah without any background or context, suggesting that this was a random, spontaneous attack. The story of the *Megilla* appears to be merely a random sequence of events that coincidentally result in a threat to the Jews which ended up being averted. But behind this “mask” of random happenstance was the Hand of God orchestrating events and lovingly protecting His people. Moreover, the Jews at the time were distant both geographically and culturally from their homeland. *Chazal*’s famous description of the vessels of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* being used at Achashverosh’s feast is likely intended to underscore the contrast between what should have been and what was; between the Jews’ solemn, soulful service of God in the Temple, and their decadent revelry in Achashverosh’s palace. But just as it appeared that they had detached themselves entirely from their spiritual roots, it became apparent that they were still under God’s protection and that the spark of religious devotion had remained intact throughout the Babylonian exile and simply needed to be reignited.

And so we celebrate the Purim miracle by hiding behind masks, by concealing our true identity, and by conducting ourselves in a manner that appears very distant from anything connected to God and Torah. The great joy of Purim is the joy of knowing that even when it seems as though we have drifted away from our roots, God still accompanies us, and deep inside we remain forever devoted to His service.

This concept is reinforced by Rav Shemuel bar Sheilat, who avowed that he tended to his students’ educational needs even when he was not actually in the classroom with them. A descendant of Amalek strolling in a garden does not outwardly appear as something significant or sacred. But Rav Shemuel teaches us that even activities which seem distant from spirituality can, indeed, be imbued with meaning and holiness if performed the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons and with the right motivation. As we demonstrate on Purim, *avodat Hashem* is not limited to the inherently sacred realms of prayer, *mitzvot* and Torah study. Even ordinary, outwardly insignificant pursuits can be made lofty and meaningful if they are approached with a sincere desire to serve God and further our spiritual goals.

Wednesday

Following *Benei Yisrael*’s successful war against Amalek, who had launched an unprovoked offensive against them, God declared on oath that He would wage an eternal battle against the nation of Amalek (Shemot 17:16). The *Mekhilta* cites Rabbi Eliezer as interpreting this proclamation to mean that converts from Amalek would not be accepted: “If somebody from any of the world’s nation comes to convert, they should accept him, but [if somebody comes] from the house of Amalek – they should not accept him.”

Many *Acharonim* raised the question of how to reconcile the *Mekhilta*’s comment with the Gemara’s account of descendants from Haman working as Torah educators in Bnei-Brak (Sanhedrin 96b, Gittin 57b). Clearly, if Haman had descendants teaching Torah, then either they or an ancestor of theirs had converted and joined the Jewish Nation. How was this allowed, if God specifically proclaimed that no converts would be accepted from Amalek?

Indeed, several writers, including the Chida, in *Petach Einayim*, contend that this matter is subject to debate, and the Talmud does not follow Rabbi Eliezer’s view. Elsewhere, in his *Ein Zokher*, the Chida adds that the *Mekhilta* cites a different interpretation of this verse, in the name of Rabbi Elazar Ha-moda’i, who explained that God here proclaims that He will ensure no descendants of Amalek would remain on Earth. Hence, Rabbi Eliezer’s view is not unanimously accepted even within the *Mekhilta*, and we may therefore assume that the Gemara does not follow his position.

Others, however, have attempted to reconcile the two sources. Rav Yosef Engel, in his *Gilyon Ha-Shas* (Gittin 57b), suggests that the Gemara refers to the offspring of a woman from Amalek who had married a member of a different nation. As *Halakha* follows patrilineal descendant when it comes to the personal status of gentiles, the product of such a union does not, halakhically speaking, belong to the nation of Amalek. Hence, the offspring of this marriage was permitted to convert and join *Am Yisrael*, but the Gemara nevertheless notes the irony that a biological descendant of Haman became a Torah educator.

Another answer is suggested by the *Shevut Yehuda* (cited in *Torah Sheleima*, Shemot 17:16, note 131), who noted that a slightly different version of Rabbi Eliezer’s remark appears in the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Ki-Teitzei, 11). According to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, God proclaimed that He would not accept converts from Amalek, as opposed to the version found in the *Mekhilta*, which indicates that *Am Yisrael* is not to accept such converts. The *Shevut Yehuda* explains the *Midrash Tanchuma* to mean that God, in His contempt for the nation of Amalek, does not instruct us to accept converts from Amalek, as He instructs us to accept sincere converts from other nations. This is not to say, however, that it is forbidden to accept converts from Amalek, and thus it is entirely possible that a descendant of Haman converted to Judaism and was accepted as part of the Jewish Nation.

Thursday

Yesterday, we noted the seeming contradiction noted by many writers between the Gemara’s account of Haman’s descendants working as Torah educators (Sanhedrin 96b, Gittin 57b) and the *Mekhilta*’s comment that converts may not be accepted from the nation of Amalek. As Haman descended from Amalek, it would seem that any of his descendants who wished to convert should have been rejected. The question thus arises as to how he ended up having descendants working in Torah education.

Rav Reuven Margoliyot, in his *Mekor Chesed* commentary to the *Sefer Chasidim* (1219), as well as Rav Menachem Kasher, in *Torah Sheleima* (Shemot 17:16, note 131), noted an alternate version of the text of the Gemara, according to which this question never arises. This alternate version is indicated by the *Ba’al Ha-turim*, commenting to Parashat Tetzaveh (28:7). The *Ba’al Ha-turim* there notes that the phrase “*el shenei*” (“to the two”) appears three times in *Tanakh*, and he attempts to identify the point of connection between the three contexts. First, this phrase appears in Parashat Tetzaveh as part of the Torah’s description of the priestly garments (specifically, in reference to the shoulder straps of the *kohen gadol*’s apron, which were attached to the two edges of the apron). The second instance is the beginning of Sefer Shemuel I (2:34), where God warns Eli, the *kohen gadol*, of the calamity that would befall his two sons on account of their having disgraced the priesthood. “*El shenei*” appears a third time in Sefer Melakhim II (5:23), in reference to Na’aman, the general of Aram who was miraculously cured by the prophet Elisha, whereupon he had two servants bring a special gift to the prophet. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* observed that the common thread that runs through these three contexts is the priesthood. In Parashat Tetzaveh, of course, the Torah discusses the priestly garments, and Eli’s sons were punished for bringing shame upon the *kohanim*. Na’aman, the *Ba’a Ha-turim* notes, showed respect for the service of the *kohanim* by asking Elisha for some earth of *Eretz Yisrael* with which he would construct an altar for serving God in Aram (Melakhim II 5:17). The *Ba’al Ha-turim* concludes by contrasting the fates of Eli’s sons and of Na’aman: Eli’s sons were killed, whereas Na’aman begot children and had descendants who taught Torah.

There is no known source for such a tradition – that Na’aman had descendants who became Torah teachers. It thus stands to reason that the *Ba’al Ha-turim* had a variant text of the aforementioned Talmudic passage, which read “Na’aman” instead of “Haman.” According to this version, it was Na’aman, and not Haman, who ended up having children who taught Torah. While this is certainly ironic, it is entirely plausible, as Na’aman himself, according to tradition, become a Jewish convert (more precisely, a “*ger toshav*”). This version of the text quite obviously does not contradict the comment of the *Mekhilta* concerning converts from Amalek.

Rav Petachya Menken, in his [*Pardes Petachya* (Parashat Beshalach)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41905&st=&pgnum=29), argues that the *Ba’al Ha-turim*’s version must be incorrect. He notes that the Gemara in this context also mentions two other enemies of *Am Yisrael* – Sisera and Sancheiriv – who had descendants who taught Torah. The Gemara mentions first Sisera, followed by Sancheiriv and then Haman, corresponding to their chronological sequence (Sisera lived during the period of the *Shoftim*; Sancheiriv lived toward the end of the First Commonwealth; and Haman lived after the First Temple’s destruction.) According to the text of the *Ba’al Ha-turim*, in which the name “Haman” is substituted with “Na’aman,” this passage does not follow chronological sequence, as Na’aman’s name appears after that of Sancheiriv, who lived after him. It therefore stands to reason that the prevalent version of the Gemara’s text, which mentions Haman, and not Na’aman, is the correct version.

Friday

Dedicated in honor of my sons, Gavriel and Yehuda, on the occasion of their putting on *tefillin* for the first time.

We read in the *Megilla* of the festivity and jubilation experienced by the Jews upon hearing of Haman’s downfall and their being granted the right to defend themselves: “*La-Yehudim hayeta ora ve-simcha ve-sasson vi-ykar*” (“The Jews experienced light, joy, jubilation and glory” – 8:16). The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (16b) explains the four terms in this verse (“*ora*,” “*simcha*,” “*sasson*,” “*yekar*”) as allusions to four *mitzvot* to which the Jews recommitted themselves at this time. The final term, “*yekar*,” is associated with the *mitzva* of *tefillin*.

The word “*yekar*” appears earlier in the *Megilla*, in two contexts. The purpose of Achashverosh’s first feast, held for his servants and officers, was to show “*yekar tiferet gedulato*” – the glory and majesty of his wealth (1:4). Later, Achashverosh asks Haman what should be done to a person “whom the king wishes to give glory” (“*asher ha-melekh chafeitz bi-ykaro*” – 6:6). The word “*yekar*” in the *Megilla* thus denotes lavish displays of grandeur, objects or actions intended to draw people’s attention and gain their respect and admiration. The Gemara teaches that for us, “*yekar*” is achieved through *tefillin*, the sign of our bond with God and His Torah. The only outward display that brings us honor is the *tefillin* on our arms and heads, which signifies our special relationship with the Almighty.

In truth, the connection between *tefillin* and the Purim story may run even deeper.

One of the concepts underlying *tefillin* is our quest to make the words of the Torah part of our being and essence. *Tefillin* is not just worn; it is tied onto our bodies, signifying our intrinsic bond with the Torah, portions of which are contained in the *tefillin*. Perhaps more than other *mitzvot*, *tefillin* represents our desire to internalize Torah to the point where it is an inherent part of who we are.

On Purim, we celebrate the fact that even when we appear distant from spirituality and the service of God, deep down we remain committed and connected to the Almighty. The threat of Haman had the effect of igniting the spiritual spark within the Jews of Persia which had faded over the course of their assimilation and engagement in the Persian culture of indulgence and decadence. We therefore celebrate Purim through merrymaking and frivolity, acting in a manner that would seem to belie the presence of any spiritual ambitions and potential. We do this to show that as in the time of Mordekhai and Ester, we are, at our core, committed to God even when we appear distant and detached from Him. And we are enjoined to drink to the point of inebriation, where we act on instinct and impulse, incapable of patient, rational decision-making, in order to show that our deepest instincts are to obey God’s laws and connect to Him.

In Kabbalistic tradition, Purim is associated with what we might describe as its antithesis – Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, we work and struggle to rise to the greatest possible heights of spiritual achievement. On Purim, we do just the opposite – we disengage the mind and act on instinct, without any struggle or effort, to show that our deepest instinct is to serve God. Although we are as yet far from perfect, and although throughout the rest of the year we are to work and exert ourselves to grow and improve, on Purim we celebrate the fact that spirituality is part of our very core and essence. Even when we fail, we are, at our core, committed to God and to His laws. And thus both Yom Kippur and Purim reflect our unique potential for greatness. On Yom Kippur, we show how great we can become, and on Purim, we show the immensity of our spiritual potential even when it outwardly seems we have none.

In the kingdom of Achashverosh, “*yekar*” is achieved through external displays of wealth and prestige. For us, “*yekar*” is achieved internally, by making Torah part of our very essence, as represented by the *tefillin*, the words of Torah tied tightly onto our bodies so they become integral to our beings.