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[**Purim and Yom Kippur**](http://etzion.org.il/en/purim-and-yom-kippur)

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At first glance, the similarity of the names between Purim and Yom Kippur has no significance, as there appears to be no pair more opposite than these two days. The days of Purim are days of feasting and gladness, whereas Yom Kippur is a day of fasting and the dread of judgment, a day of repentance and penetrating reckoning of the soul.

The *Zohar*, however, sees in the similarity between the names Purim and Yom Kippur the key to their meaning (*Tikkunei Zohar*, *Tikkun* 20 and 21):

This is Yom Kippurim, when [the High Priest] is clothed in beautiful clothing, clothing of atonement: the *tzitz*, the *mitznefet*, the *avnet*, the four white garments from the right side, and the four garments of gold from the left side. At that time, she [Esther] beautified herself with clothing of forgiveness. That is what is meant by the verse: "And Esther put on royal clothing." And with these garments she entered into the inner sanctum. That is the meaning of the verse: "She stood in the inner court of the king's house." And with them "she found favor in his eyes"… Purim is named for Yom Kippur, for in the future they will delight in it and change it from affliction to delight.

The *Zohar* sees a similarity between Esther – who, on the day when the Jews of Shushan fasted, entered the inner courtyard of the king – and the High Priest – who, on the fast of Yom Kippur, enters the Holy of Holies. Esther entered to stand before the king and entreat him for the lives of the people of Israel, just as the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. The High Priest does this before the King of kings, rather than before a king of flesh and blood, but as *Chazal* expound, every instance of "king" in the book of Esther alludes to His holy name (*Esther Rabba* 3:10).

This similarity joins other parallels found in the book of Esther that teach us that in many senses, King Achashverosh's palace is a mirror image of the Temple in Jerusalem. The king's palace is divided between "the inner court of the king's house" (*Esther* 5:1) and "the outer court of the king's house" (6:4), similar to the division between the "outer courtyard" and the "inner courtyard" of the Temple (*Yechezkel* 40:17-19). And just as it is prohibited to enter the Holy of Holies all year long, so it is prohibited to enter the king's palace for anyone to whom the king does not hold out his golden scepter (*Esther* 4:11).[[1]](#footnote-1)

### The Lots

Another striking similarity between Purim and Yom Kippur is the role of the lots. When Haman wishes to determine the appropriate day for destroying the people of Israel, both young and old, little children and women, he casts lots:

In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Achashverosh, they cast *pur* – that is, the lot – before Haman, from day to day and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. (*Esther* 3:7)

On the face of it, what is important is the day that was designated for destroying the Jews; the way by which that day was determined should be of no importance at all. Why is it important for us to know whether that date was decided by way of lots, through negotiations, or in a meeting of the king's officers? To our surprise, however, the book of Esther does not tell us the results of the lottery and which day was picked by it. From this it is clear that importance is attached to the lottery itself, and not just to the results. Indeed, at the end of the book of Esther, we find that the lots are of such importance that the holiday of Purim is named for them:

Therefore they called these days Purim, after the *pur*. (9:26)

What, then, is the importance of the lottery?[[2]](#footnote-2)

We know from historical documents that it was the customary practice in Babylonia to celebrate the first ten days of the year, which begins in Nisan, with feasts and parties to mark the New Year. A detailed description of these celebrations as part of the worship of the god Marduk has been preserved, from which we learn that this was the most important holiday of the year. The Babylonians believed that on these days, everyone's fate for the coming year was determined. The holiday celebrations were conducted before all the people, and they reached their climax when the king entered the temple of the god Marduk on the sixth of Nisan, while removing his scepter, his ring, and his crown, and declaring that he had not sinned toward that god. On the ninth of Nisan, the image of Marduk was taken out of the temple in a grand and impressive public ceremony. The people drank and danced, and on the next day, the tenth of Nisan, the image was returned to its place. After Marduk's image was returned to its place, the priests would cast various lots and clarify what was expected to take place over the coming year.

Against this background, it would appear that the lot cast by Haman "in the first month, which is the month Nisan" is directly connected to the lots that were cast at the Babylonian New Year celebrations conducted at that very time. The Babylonians believed that certain days are determined by the gods at the beginning of the year to be days of success or days of calamity, and the lots are intended to reveal those days. When the thirteenth of Adar was selected in Haman's lottery, he thought that this was a day ready for calamity befalling Israel, and so he fixed the decree of destruction for this day.

### Two new Years

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As noted above, lots are cast on Yom Kippur as well. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest takes two he-goats and places a lot on each of them, one lot for God and the other lot for Azazel. One of the he-goats will serve as a sin-offering for the people, and its blood will also be sprinkled in the Holy of Holies between the two *keruvim*, while the second he-goat will be sent to Azazel, carrying the sins of Israel to a “land that is cut off”:

And Aharon shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for Azazel. And Aharon shall present the goat upon which the lot fell for the Lord and offer him for a sin-offering. But the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be set alive before the Lord, to make atonement over him, to send him away for Azazel into the wilderness. (*Vayikra* 16:8-10)

The similarity between the ceremony involving the Babylonian king and his god and the Yom Kippur service performed by the High Priest is both surprising and troubling. There is a clear connection between the month of Nisan and the month of Tishrei, both of them serving in certain senses as the first month. The climax of the Babylonian ceremony on the tenth of Nisan parallels the tenth of Tishrei. The king – who removes his royal clothing, his scepter, his ring, and his crown when he enters his god's temple to discuss his sins – brings to mind the High Priest – who removes his golden garments and the *tzitz* on his forehead and enters the site of the *Shekhina* in the Holy of Holies in a servant's clothing, where he confesses his sins. But even if we do not clearly understand the meaning of the similarity between the pagan Babylonian service and the High Priest's service of God, it seems that we can point to the striking differences between them.

First of all, the Babylonian king deals exclusively with his own sins and his own declaration. He does not deal with the sins of the Babylonian people and does not ask his god to relate to them. In contrast, the High Priest confesses his sins, and then he confesses the sins of his priestly brothers, and at the end he confesses the sins of the entire people of Israel.

Second, the Babylonian New Year is marked by a coronation ceremony of a king of flesh and blood, whereas the Jewish New Year is marked by a ceremony in which God is crowned as king. The Babylonian king stands before his god, declares that he has not sinned, and receives the authorization and agreement for another year of kingship. The High Priest enters into the Holy of Holies, confesses his sins and transgressions, puts his fate in the hands of God, and asks Him to forgive him and all the people for their sins.

Third, the Babylonian king declares before his god that he has not sinned. He offers no confession for his sins, and there is certainly no process of repentance and atonement, paralleling the High Priest's standing before God on Yom Kippur. The Babylonian god does not recognize forgiveness or repentance. One who sins against him must be punished, with the full force of the law and in the manner of human laws.

Fourth, the Babylonian king presents himself as subject to his god, but his actions testify that this is not the case. We can assume with no little certainty that from time to time the Babylonian king sinned in various areas. "For there is not a righteous man upon earth, that does good and sins not" (*Kohelet* 7:20), said the wisest of men, and even the Babylonian king was not as perfect as he presented himself to be. If the king declared before his god, in a ceremony dictated in advance, that he had never sinned, it would appear that this god lacked the means to determine on his own whether or not the king had sinned. What is even more reasonable – the god would not dare to contradict the king, who maintains him and watches over him. How far is this god – who fears the king who rules below him – from the Holy One, blessed be He, from whom nothing is concealed and who certainly is not afraid of a mortal king! About the Holy One, blessed be He, it is stated: "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? says the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? says the Lord?" (*Yirmeyahu* 23:24). God's judgment is true, and the only way to save oneself from it is through repentance and repair.

### TWO LOTS

Alongside the differences between Yom Kippur and the Babylonian New Year celebration, we should note the contrast between the lots that the Babylonian priests would cast on the tenth of Nisan and the lots cast by the High Priests on Yom Kippur.

One difference between the two is the purpose of the lots. The lots cast by the Babylonian priests on their festival – and like them, the lot cast by Haman for destroying the Jews – are lots that are entirely for the sake of man, to direct his actions toward his goals and thus bring about his success. The deity is not asked for his opinion about the action that the person wishes to perform, and there is no way to know whether it is pleasing in his eyes or not. The person decides about his actions as he sees fit, and it is the job of the god, and of the lot that operates in his name, to determine when the action should be performed and how to ensure that it will succeed. Haman decided to destroy the people of Israel for the sake of his own glory, because of his jealousy and because of his base passions. His god had to allow him to succeed, and Haman left for him only to decide in which month and on which day his decree should be carried out.

In absolute contrast, the lots cast by the High Priest are for the sake of God, in order to know the blood of which of the he-goats God desires be brought before Him. The lots come to remove the decision about this question from man and place it entirely in the hands of God. In this way, the High Priest brings to mind the patriarch Avraham, for whom it must have been very unpleasing to send away his son Yishmael like the he-goat that is sent to the wilderness on Yom Kippur. It may be assumed that it was also not pleasing to him to slaughter his son Yitzchak, similar to the he-goat whose blood is brought before God into the Holy of Holies. Avraham did not understand, but he whole-heartedly fulfilled the word of God. The High Priest puts the fate of the he-goats into the hands of God and declares thereby his readiness to fulfill His commandments and act in accordance with His instructions.

There is another difference between the two lots. The lot cast by Haman, which represents the Babylonian lots, was connected to celebrations and feasting: "And the king and Haman sat down to drink" (*Esther* 3:15). The lots cast by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, in contrast, took place on a fast day observed by the High Priest himself and all of the people. In similar fashion, Mordechai and Esther did not contend with the lot cast by Haman with a counter-lot. The Jewish struggle against the lot cast by Haman was by way of fasting, prayer, and acceptance of responsibility:

Then Esther bade them return answer to Mordechai: Go, gather all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast you for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish. (*Esther* 4:15-16)

### The difference between chance and providence

Another difference between the two lots is the difference between free choice and determinism.

Haman's lot expresses the pagan deterministic conception, which pays no attention to human morality. The lot is cast "before Haman" (*Esther* 3:7), and its goal is to reveal the forces operating in the world and to allow man to harness them – and the gods themselves – to his service. The Babylonians believed that on the New Year they can see what the future holds for them and reveal which days are prepared that year for each and every event. Once the pagan succeeds in revealing the fixed laws of the world, he can be confident that these laws will not change and that from now on he can get drunk and commit adultery.

Against the deterministic Babylonian New Year, the people of Israel set a moral New Year, which recognizes free choice. The Jewish lot is cast "before the Lord" (*Vayikra* 16:7) on Yom Kippur – a day of fasting, confession, and repentance. These express an idea diametrically opposed to the meaning of the Babylonian New Year. Even after a person stands trial for his religious and moral sins, his verdict is not sealed and the gates of repentance are never locked. Judaism scorns determinism and believes a person can always return to God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At the end of the book of *Esther*, the *pur* cast by Haman is turned into our days of Purim. A day which was supposed to be a day of mourning for the Jews turns by surprise into the day of their victory. The days of Purim are called by that name because of the *pur*, the blind lot, through which a blind and lame god answered the whims of wicked Haman, a man of flesh and blood who acted out of his basest passions. God intervened in the deterministic world of the lot and showed that there are no fixed laws and times that cannot be changed. The results of the day, opposite of those of the lot cast by Haman, are the decision of an all-seeing and all-powerful God, whose decision is made of His free will, in consideration of the purity of the repentance of the individual and the nation and of the genuineness of their desire to repair their sins. In light of the fast of the Jews of Shushan and in the wake of their prayers, God turned the fixed Babylonian world into a world where "it was turned to the contrary" (*Esther* 9:1), showing that against all odds fate can be overturned.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Chazal* added to these parallels, relating that Achashverosh donned the priestly garments and used the Temple vessels at the feast that he made (*Megilla* 12a; *Esther Rabba* 2:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. What appears below is based in part on the words of R. Dr. Yonatan Grossman in his book, *Esther – Megillat Setarim* (Jerusalem, 2013), pp. 97-108, 169-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In contrast to Haman's blind faith in predetermined fate, Mordechai expresses his belief in the eternity of Israel and in the reward awaiting those who repent: "For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish" (*Esther* 4:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)