

THE UPSIDE-DOWN POWER OF PURIM

by Pinchos Lipshutz

Did you ever wonder what it is about Purim that generates so much joy and happiness? What is it about this holiday that differentiates it from all others ? that seems to speak to Jews of all ages and backgrounds? It is a mitzvah to be happy on Passover and Sukkot as well, yet despite our best efforts, we don't always manage to attain the level of happiness that Purim seems to trigger automatically.

What supernatural power was invested in the Purim miracle that led the Sages to declare that its commemoration would endure for all time? Perhaps the reason for its universal and timeless appeal is that everyone can relate to the Megillah. We all know someone who reminds us of one or another of the Purim protagonists and villains. We can all point to someone we can compare to Achashveirosh, a fickle person straddling both sides of the fence, usually making a foolish spectacle of himself. Vashtis abound. We all know someone whom we can caricature as Haman, and we often see virtuous Mordechai-like figures ridiculed, even by their own constituents.

Often we find ourselves in dire situations from which escape seems impossible without Divine intervention. We have nowhere to turn for rescue. Purim tells us never to give up hope. Purim teaches us that all that transpires in this world is part of a Divine plan. Everything will turn out for the good, if we are only patient and follow G-d's word. The Purim expression, "v'nahafoch hu," it was turned about, reminds us that God can bring about a stunning reversal of a nation's destiny in the blink of an eye.

We are commanded to drink wine ? to celebrate the miracle of Purim and to savor the joy of knowing that we are under God's constant supervision even when His presence is hidden ? so much wine that we can no longer differentiate between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai." Of course, this injunction must be carried out responsibly and in the context of the festive Purim meal.

But why do the Sages say that losing the awareness of the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai" is the yardstick that determines that one has fulfilled his obligation? Should one become inebriated to such a degree?

Throughout the year, we are confronted with all kinds of people representing the vast spectrum of human behavior ? from righteous and noble to incorrigibly evil, and the many shades of gray in between. Because the Torah expects us to embrace good and reject evil, it is imperative that we

train ourselves to discern one from the other. Because evil often masquerades as virtue, the task of unmasking the imposter is often extremely difficult. It demands constant vigilance and sensitivity, as well as emotional and intellectual honesty. Once a year we are released from this demanding task, and that is on Purim, when one is, in fact, instructed to become so intoxicated that one confuses Haman and Mordechai.

But this once-a-year release only underscores the extreme importance of our mandate during the rest of the year: to constantly scrutinize ourselves and our surroundings in order to guard against evil in its myriad guises. We live in a time where up is down and down is up. We have to resist being influenced by societal pressures.

How are we supposed to maintain equilibrium in a topsy-turvy world? How are we supposed to trust that good will be victorious over evil? When good things happen to bad people and bad things to good people, the Megillah reminds us that appearances are deceptive, that the wheel of fortune is manipulated by God for His own purposes. The Megillah reminds us that all that happens is part of a Divine plan that we can't expect to understand until the entire story has unfolded. The evil force may appear to be advancing, but it is only in order for Divine Providence to set that power up for a more drastic descent to the destruction. Evil may be on the rise, but it is a passing phenomenon, destined to fail...

That message resonates for all time, wherever Jews find themselves. As we masquerade about, exchanging mishloach manos (food gifts) with friends and distributing charity to the less fortunate, we tap into the holiness of the holy day. That message never loses its timeliness. Every year we gain a new appreciation of what took place in those critical times and of its relevance to us today. We also gain a new perspective. Was Haman consumed by hatred or was it jealousy that drove him mad? Was he a megalomaniac? Or was he just a generic anti-Semite? Perhaps he was all of the above.

The lesson for us is that we should avoid all these forms of evil. Humility might have saved Haman, as would have his high status as a trusted confidant of King Achashveirosh, had he been satisfied with that prestige. Had he been less greedy for power, he might not have suffered a devastating downfall, and would not have ended up on the gallows. Had he not been in such a mad rush for power he could have steadily continued climbing up the corporate ladder until he reached the topmost rung. He would have remained there at the height of power instead of ending up dangling from the end of a rope.

As we read the story of Purim we think of people we know who engage in self-destructive behavior, and we thank God that we are not like them. We internalize the tale and take its message to heart, and feel grateful for the clarity that enables us to be happy with our lot. Often we wish we had the courage to do what is right, but we are worried about the repercussions. What will people say about us?...

Then we read the Megillah and study the various Midrashim about what Mordechai did and realize that his actions, though unpopular when he did them, in fact led to the rescue of the Jewish people. Not everyone in his time agreed with him, but he was vindicated by the Megillah and by history. This is not to be understood as giving blanket permission for headstrong, irresponsible behavior, but rather to convey the truth that when one acts according to Jewish tradition, one need not fear negative consequences.

Mordechai's words, "and who knows whether it was just for such a time as this that you attained the royal position" (Esther 4:14), resonate in the ears of every Jew who is about to make a fateful decision. As one weighs the risks of taking the more ambitious but nobler route, Mordechai's profound words prod him on. They are an eternal charge inspiring one to be undaunted by the obstacles in one's path, and rather to pour one's energies into productive projects that benefit themselves and/or our people.

Esther was afraid that she was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Mordechai was prompting her to appeal to Achashveirosh eleven months prior to the date Haman had chosen to annihilate the Jewish people. She would have preferred to delay, in the hope that between Nissan and the following Adar there would be a more opportune time for her to appeal on behalf of her brethren. Why did it have to be then?

The tendency to postpone doing what we know we should do immediately is familiar to most of us. We say that tomorrow will be a better time. We say we have several months during which to get the task/project done and maybe next week we will feel more inclined; perhaps next month the other party will be more receptive, why rush into it now? Mordechai's message calls out to us, telling us, "Now is the time. Don't push it off. Don't find excuses to do it some other time. Time is of the essence."

Esther is tested time and again throughout the Megillah. Each time it appears as if there is no way she can outmaneuver the evil facing her. But she is the heroine of the story because she is galvanized by her hopes rather than by her fears. She relies upon the sage counsel of her uncle. With Mordechai supporting her, she refuses to allow fear to paralyze her.

Faced with situations from which we think there is no way we can extricate ourselves without getting hurt, we can remember Queen Esther and gain strength from the knowledge that she, by doing the right thing, saved her people from certain destruction. By following Mordechai's instructions, she became immortalized in the consciousness of the Jewish people as a righteous and strong woman who put the fate of her people ahead of her own personal safety and happiness.

The Jews of Shushan, too, taught us a message that echoes down through the ages. They had given up all hope. They felt doomed. The lot was drawn and their fate was sealed. But Mordechai and Esther taught them the power of prayer and fasting... A day marked for sadness and death was transformed into a day of celebration and deliverance. During the rest of the year we may become

despondent and lose our smiles, but on Purim we are reminded never to become depressed or downcast. We all have problems, but on Purim we are reminded that just as our ancestors were delivered from despair, so, too, can we be relieved of our day-to-day burdens. The sun will shine again, good will triumph over evil.

It's Purim. Come on, lift up your feet and dance, erase your frowns and turn them into smiles. Let the happiness overcome the sadness today, and every day. Look at the positive and not at the negative; be optimistic, not pessimistic. Let the spirit (and spirits!) of Purim pervade your psyche and influence your outlook. Joy is contagious. It happened in Shushan. It can happen here.