

CRY TO HASHEM

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"The prophets and the beis din in the days of Mordechai and Esther commanded that we should read the megilah on Purim in order to proclaim the praises of Hashem and the salvations that He wrought through the merit of our tefilos. In this way we will bless and praise m'varech and m'hallel Hashem, and establish for all generations the truth of which the Torah writes "Which nation is so great that Hashem answers them when we cry out to Him." (Rambam in his introduction to his minyan hamitzvos).

Face to face with the threat of complete annihilation, Mordechai directed us to turn our hearts to Hashem in prayer. On the thirteenth of Adar, before going to war against our adversaries, the Jewish people fasted and prayed that they should succeed in battle. Ta'anis Esther was established to commemorate this day of fasting and prayer tzom and tefilah (Rosh, Megilah 1,1).

If we have tzaros we usually consider davening as a means to be freed from them. In truth however, troubles are the "illness" and tefilla is the "cure." The real reason for our tzaros is that Hashem wants to hear our tefillos (Rav Chatkel Levenstein zt"l). Before we can appreciate the myriad of hidden miracles that Hashem did for us during the days of Mordechai and Esther, we first need Ta'anis Esther in order to focus on the fact that all the tribulations and subsequent redemption were for the purpose of reestablishing a relationship with our Creator.

Purim On Sunday

When Purim is on Sunday, we are presented with a problem in regards to Taanis Esther. Since we do not fast on Shabbos (with the exception of Yom Kippur), the fast should be observed on Friday. However in most cases our Sages did not allow a public taanis on Friday, due to the numerous additional prayers which would seriously cut into Shabbos- preparation time and cause us to enter Shabbos famished after the fast. We therefore observe Taanis Esther on the previous Thursday.

Altering the date of the fast has an impact on how the day is observed. Since the ta'anis is coming to commemorate an event that took place on a specific day, changing the date of the fast allows us to be lenient in regards to certain halachos. Understanding where our Sages allowed leniencies offers us insight into the nature of this special fast day.

One ramification regards the issue of making a bris on the day of Taanis Esther. The Rema argues that since this is not the official time of the fast, the baal bris and all of his guests may break the fast for the sake of the seudas milah. They are nonetheless obligated to make up for the fast on Friday

(Shulchan Aruch 686,2).

If our Sages saw a danger in establishing a taanis on Friday, then why should it be alright for the sake of a bris? Since everyone else is fasting on Thursday, the extra tefilos will be recited then and not on Friday, so this issue ceases to be a problem. A number of great halachic authorities concur with this ruling of the Rema (Shvus Yaakov and Mor Uketzia).

Some opinions, however, take a more stringent view and argue that when Chazal established Thursday as the altered date of the fast, Thursday is now its correct time and the taanis may not be pushed off for the sake of a milah. The seudah should then be celebrated after breaking the fast, as is usually done when a bris takes place on a fast day (Taz and Elia Raba ibid, Chaye Adam 155,3).

At this point we might be tempted to ask, "Isn't it preferable to stay clear of dispute, and just put the seudah off until after the fast has concluded?" It is worthwhile to consider that bris milah transforms the day into a Yom Tov for the person who makes the bris. Yom Tov is a time for celebration and rejoicing, and in this light, delaying the seudah is not a simple matter.

On the other hand, pushing off the fast to the following day is also problematic, because eating on a day when everyone else is fasting is considered separating oneself from the rest of the community. Furthermore, fasting on erev-Shabbos is problematic, for one would enter Shabbos in a famished state. Since there are many factors to be taken into account before arriving at a final ruling on this complex halachic question, a rabbinic authority should be consulted (Mishna Berura 686,7).

Backwards and Forwards

There is a striking difference between when Ta'anis Esther comes out on Shabbos, and when the fast of Tisha B'Av falls on a Shabbos. While the fast of Esther is moved forwards, the fast of Tisha B'Av is pushed off until Sunday. Why is one tzom made sooner and the other postponed?

The fast of Esther was established to remember the miracles that took place in the days of Mordechai. With regard to miracles, we do not want to delay their commemoration. Conversely Tisha B'Av commemorates Hashem's punishment of the Jewish people. Therefore we try and delay the fast as long as we can (Shailtos, Vayikahal 20).

The poskim note another interesting difference between the altered dates of the two fasts. Some opinions allow everyone invited to the bris on the fast of Esther to break their fast in order to participate in the seudas mitzvah. However regarding a bris on the tenth of Av, only the baal bris, sandak and mohel are allowed to break the fast after mincha. The reason for this is that all opinions agree that in such a case the tenth of Av is the proper time for the milah, [1]and consequently we must treat this fast day more stringently. After the ta'anis has ended, the main seudah is celebrated (Shaar Hatzion 686,13).

Asarah B'Teves, Sheva Asar B'Tamuz, and Tzom Gedalia are days of sadness. Accordingly there is a custom to observe a minimum amount of mourning beforehand and not to take a hot shower on the

night before (Sha'ar Hatzion 550,8). Others have the custom to treat the night before these fasts (excluding Tzom Gedalia) as they would the nine days, and do not hold weddings and some of the other restrictions of the Nine Days (Biur Halacha 551,1, see also Daas Torah 551,2). Since Ta'anis Esther is a joyous day, none of these restrictions are applicable (Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l as cited in Halichos Shlomo 18,6).

Generally we recite Avinu Malkeinu during mincha of a fast day. However on Taanis Esther, which falls just before the Ytom Tov of Purim, we do not say this tefilah. Nevertheless if Purim falls on a Sunday, and the fast is pushed off until Thursday, then Avinu Malkeinu is recited (Mishna Berura 686,3).

Making Up the Fast

There was once a woman who had to meet with the sultan on the thirteenth of Adar. Traveling was not an easy matter, and she was afraid that if she fasted, she would be too worn out to meet with the ruler of her country. Could she eat on the day of her journey, and make up the fast on Friday?

Her question was brought before Rashi, and he responded that the halachos pertaining to Taanis Esther are more lenient than those of other fast days, for it is a custom and not an obligatory taanis. Nonetheless eating on the thirteenth of Adar is considered to be separating oneself from the rest of the community, a possible Torah prohibition (Devarim 14,1). Therefore, Rashi obligated her to fast on that day (cited in Shebulei HaLeket 194, Mishna Berura 686,6).

A person who is sick however, is not permitted to fast on Taanis Esther or on any other fast days except for Yom Kipur, and in doing so is not considered to be separating himself from the community. How sick must one be in order to fit into this category? On Taanis Esther, even an eye ache that makes one very uncomfortable would be sufficient grounds to break the fast (Shulchan Aruch 686,2).

Depending on the situation, the missed taanis may have to be made up later in the month of Adar. Since the fasts comes to commemorate the tefilos and fasting before Purim, what is the point of fasting afterwards? [J2]Some have the custom to fsat Bahab after Purim in commemoration of the three days of fasting that Esther declared necessary for the entire Jewish nation preceding her momentous confrontation with Achashverosh to plead for the plight of her people (Shaarei Tzion 686,11). Therefore the end of Adar is also considered an appropriate time to "make up" Taanis Esther. In all cases a halachic authority should be consulted (Mishna Berura 686,5).

Annuling Harsh Decrees

Kabalistic literature reveals another reason behind the fast of Esther. Even though Haman's plans were overturned, a small part of the decree remained. Every year, at the time that his plans were to be carried out, the Satan comes to Hashem, claiming that the Jewish people should be destroyed. In this vein some mekubalim find an indication in the megilah about the massacres of Tat VTach

(pagroms that took place in those years), for the letter teis (in the word tichtov) and the letter cheis (in the word chor) hint to the tragic year of "tach", the start of these assaults (as cited in Responsa Shevet HaKahasi 1,203).

The Rambam writes that when the Jewish people are experiencing such tragic situations, the Torah obligates us to cry out to Hashem and sound trumpets to arouse us to repentance (Bamidbar 10:9). If we realize that our own actions are at the root of our difficulties, we will learn to mend our ways and cause the harsh decree to be rescinded. If we don't follow this path, and instead relate to what is happening as mere coincidence, the tzaros will simply increase (Rambam, Hilchos Taanis 1:1-3, Mishna Berura 576:1).

In the merit of our fasting and prayers this Taanis Esther may all past decrees on the Jewish people be overturned, all future decrees annulled, and may all of Haman's evil intentions be put to an end once and for all.

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