

# THE DAYS OF PURIM

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

The first Mishna in Massechet Megillah states:

"The Megillah is read on the 11th (of Adar), the 12th, the 13th, the 14th and the 15th - no earlier and no later. \*Krakhin\* which have been walled since the times of Yehoshua bin-Nun read on the 15th. Villages and towns read on the 14th - except that the villages read early, on the \*Yom haK'nissah\*. How so? If the 14th fell on Monday, villages and towns read on that day and K'rakhin read the next day. If it fell on Tuesday or Wednesday, villages read early on Yom haK'nissah, towns read on that day and K'rakhin read on the next day. If it fell on Thursday, villages and towns read on that day and K'rakhin read on the next day. If it fell on Erev Shabbat, villages read early on Yom haK'nissah, towns and K'rakhin read on that day. If it fell on Shabbat, villages and towns read early on the Yom haK'nissah and K'rakhin read the next day. If it fell on Sunday, villages read early on Yom HaK'nissah, towns read on that day and K'rakhin read on the next day."

Several questions about this Mishna:

**Q1:** Why did the Rabbis allow the villagers to read Megillah early?

**Q2:** Where did the villagers read?

**Q3:** Who read the Megillah for the villagers?

**Q4:** What happened to the Megillah reading at night for the villagers?

**Q5:** Why don't the villagers read on the 15th if it is a Monday or Thursday? (this would also allow us to limit the scope from 12-15, there being no need to read on the 11th).

**Q6:** Why was the distinction between cities for Megillah reading set at Yeshoshua's time, rather than Ahashverosh's (or contemporary - whatever is presently walled)?

**Q7:** Why is there more than one day for Purim at all?

THE DAYS OF PURIM

Yitzchak Etshalom

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This Shiur is presented in memory of the victims of the last two Sundays of terror in our Holy City. May their memories all be for a blessing and may we speedily see an end to the hatred and violence

from within and from without. Yehi Zikhram Barukh

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## I. THE SOURCES

### **Adar 14 and 15**

In the Megillah itself, we find that the Jews throughout the Persian Empire fought and defeated their enemies on the 13th of Adar and celebrated the victory (that year) on the 14th (Esther 9:17); whereas the Jews in the city of Shushan needed an extra day to defeat their enemies and, therefore, celebrated on the 15th of Adar (9:18). This, however, only points to the celebrations as they happened that year, in direct response to the relief and victory. In verse 19, the text tells us that those Jews who lived in \*Prazim\* (unwalled cities) celebrate every year on the 14th. No mention is made here of a yearly celebration on the 15th...although in verse 21, the "days of Purim...done...every year" are defined as the 14th and 15th of Adar. In these sources, there are two significant lacunae:

(a) no explicit mention is made of Jews in other walled cities (besides Shushan) fighting, although the text seems to include all of them;

(b) no mention is made of a yearly celebration - even in Shushan - in non-walled cities. This last question must be tempered a bit; since the text indicates that both the 14th and 15th were to be yearly days of celebration, and the text also states that the Prazim celebrate on the 14th, it stands to reason that the 15th was the yearly celebration in Shushan - but other walled cities are ignored, at least in the explicit text.

### **Adar 11,12,13**

In the Gemara (Megillah 2a), textual justification for allowing the reading of the Megillah to take place on the 11th, 12th or 13th is demanded, for a reason based in legislative procedure. The Mishnah in Eduyot (1:5) rules that no court may negate the rulings of another court unless it is greater in both number (members on the court) and wisdom. That being the case, the Gemara reasons that the original enactment of Purim had to include these early alternatives and at least a hint of this must be found in the text of the Megillah.

Two possible sources are presented:

(a) "To fulfill these days of Purim in THEIR TIMES..." (9:31) - indicating "many times" - or

(b) "LIKE THE DAYS in which the Jews found respite from their enemies (9:22) - hinting to other "days -- like the [explicitly mentioned] days".

Both exegeses result in two more days (either because the minimum of any plural is two, and a

plural of extra "times" or "days" is found here) - which are then assigned to the 11th and 12th.

Why are they not assigned to the 16th and 17th? Because the verse states: "The Jews accepted and took upon themselves and upon their descendants and upon all who join them THAT IT SHALL NOT PASS, to observe these two days..." (9:27). The exegetical understanding of this phrase is that Purim may not be celebrated later than the 15th.

Why, then, are the two days not assigned to the 12th and 13th? The Gemara answers that the 13th is a "day of assembly for everyone, and needs no extra verse to include it". Therefore, we assign the two "extra" days to the 11th and 12th - and, by logical inference, the 13th is already included. (Keep in mind that these days are not obligatory days - rather they are alternative options for part of the celebration, given certain circumstances and for a select part of the population.)

II.

ADAR 13 - "Z'MAN KEHILLAH LAKOL"

This understanding of the nature of the 13th raises two questions -

(a) If the 13th is such an obvious day for Purim celebration, that it needs no extra verse to include it, why do we not know about it without the extra verse?

(b) What is the meaning of the "day of assembly"?

To answer the first question, we have to look back at the exegesis which gives us the extra two days - these two days are presented (according to either verse) as a pair - an equally qualified pair of days. Since the thirteenth is a more obvious day to include in the Purim celebration (see below), once we add the 12th, the 13th becomes obvious by the inference of "Kal vaHomer" (the less obvious implying the more obvious), as follows: If the 12th, which has no obvious connection to Purim, becomes an alternative day for celebration, certainly the 13th, which has a strong tie to Purim, should be included - therefore, no verse is needed. In other words, without the extra verse and extra two days, I would have not known to include the 13th; but, once I include any other days besides the 14th and 15th, the 13th becomes obvious and needs no verse.

To the second question: Rashi explains that the 13th of Adar was a day of assembly since that was the day when the Jews in Shushan (and everywhere else) assembled to defend themselves and exact vengeance from their enemies; i.e. Rashi relates the statement in the Gemara as to the nature of the 13th to the events of the year of Purim itself.

Rabbenu Tam (quoted in many Rishonim; see e.g. Rosh, Megillah 1:1, Ran on the Rif, 1b) explains the 13th differently: This is the day of Ta'anit Esther, the commemorative fast of Esther, a name which is misleading. First, some chronology:

All of the "central" events in the Megillah directly involving Haman occurred during the month of Nissan (the month of Pesach) during the 12th year of Ahashverosh's reign (Esther 3:7). On the day

when Haman approached Ahashverosh with his request to destroy the "scattered and dispersed people", Mordechai sent word to Esther to approach the king and beg his mercy for her people. On that same day, she finally consented and told Mordechai to assemble the people for a three day fast (the original Ta'anit Esther), at the end of which she would approach the king. The same day that she approached him was the day of the first party, to which Haman was invited, and where she invited the two of them to another party on the morrow. That night, the king could not sleep and "coincidentally" Haman was traipsing around the palace. He wanted to approach the king to ask permission to hang Mordechai, while the king invited him in for advice on how to honor "the person in whom the king finds favor. (i.e. that self-same Mordechai)". The next day, Haman led Mordechai through the city in the king's clothes and on the king's horse - that same day was the second party at which Haman was exposed and subsequently hanged.

It was nearly 11 months later, when the first set of letters, sent out by Haman (sealed with the royal signet ring), were set to be opened, that the Jews actually fought - supported by the second set of letters, sent out by Mordechai and Esther (again, sealed with the royal signet ring).

Therefore, referring to the 13th of Adar as "The Fast of Esther" must be interpreted in one of two ways. Either it is a commemoration of the 3 fast days decreed by Esther which actually took place in Nissan - or it refers to fasting which actually took place on the 13th of Adar while the warriors among the Jews were fighting.

Rabbenu Tam cites a Gemara in Ta'anit which indicates that when Moshe, Aharon and Hur went to the top of the mountain to lead the prayers during the war against Amalek (Shemot [Exodus] 17), that they were engaged in a public fast. Hence the notion that when we are at war, those Jews who cannot fight are engaged in both prayer and fasting (as part of the "war effort").

### III. WALLED CITIES FROM THE TIME OF YEHOSHUA BIN-NUN

Using the era of Yehoshua bin-Nun (i.s. the conquest of Eretz Yisrael) to determine which cities are considered "walled" for Purim is hard to understand - and the Gemara questions this demarcation. Although, as we asked, using contemporary standards (what's a walled city today) might have been a reasonable measuring stick, this option is not raised in the Gemara. However, the Gemara does cite opinions (see Tosefta Megilla 1:1) that favor cities which were walled at the time of Ahashverosh. In explaining the position of our Mishna (which is the Halakha), the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 2b) infers the rule from the similar word "Prazi" used to refer to unwalled cities in the Megillah and unwalled cities during the time of the conquest (Devarim [Deuteronomy] 3:5). This leaves Shushan itself in limbo (on the assumption that Shushan was not yet built during Yehoshua's time) - so the Gemara answers that Shushan is excluded from the rule (and celebrates on the 15th) because that is where the miracle took place. This seems to indicate one of two possibilities: that the inference from "Prazi" is not a strong one (hence, we can "sneak" Shushan in), or that it only applies to cities within

Israel (see the Rishonim here, who cite opinions that only walled cities inside Israel - plus Shushan - read on the 15th).

Some of the Rishonim offer an interesting alternative answer: Since Yehoshua was the first to do battle against Amalek (Shemot 17), we celebrate our victory over Amalek (=Haman) by associating some of the laws to Yehoshua (or, at least, his conquest and his era). (see Ritba on Megillah 2a).

The most well-known answer is that provided by the Yerushalmi (Megillah 1:1): "To give honor to Eretz Yisrael which was destroyed at the time." We will look at several explanations of this statement.

### **The Ran**

The Ran (in his commentary on the Rif, 1a) offers two explanations to this statement, preference of one over the other being predicated on the resolution of another, much more basic and far-reaching issue.

The Gemara in several places (e.g. Megillah 10a, Arakhin 32b) debates whether the original sanctity bestowed upon Eretz Yisrael during the conquest of Yehoshua was eternal - or was nullified when that conquest was reversed under the Assyrians and, later, under the Babylonians. (A parallel discussion exists about the sanctity of Yerushalayim from the time of Shlomo's dedication of the Temple - see MT Beit HaBechira 6:14-16 and RABD there).

If we accept the position that the original sanctity of the Land is irreversible, then the sanctity of walled cities (see Mishna Kelim 1:7; MT Beit HaBechira 7:13) from that time is still in force (even if the walls are no longer there). That being the case, it would be "shameful" for those cities to celebrate Purim like unwalled cities - sort of a denigration of the sanctity. This is one way of understanding the honor of Eretz Yisrael which is protected by using the time of Yehoshua bin-Nun.

If we do not accept that position and rule that these formerly walled cities no longer have any special sanctity, then the result is that nearly all the walled cities which celebrate on the more significant day - the 15th - will be outside of Israel. That would be a general denigration of the sanctity and special position of Eretz Yisrael.

### **The Ramban**

Ramban (novellae on Megillah, first comment) addresses the "Days of Yehoshua bin-Nun" issue with a more basic question - why is there more than one day of Purim at all? Why did the Sages who enacted this holiday see fit to create separate days for walled cities and for unwalled cities (and, by extension, alternative days for villagers)?

He begins with an analysis of the text of the Megillah along with (debatable) historical points from the period of the Purim story.

As pointed out above, the Megillah does not record any celebration being established (yearly) on the

15th; nor does it record what the walled cities did (except for Shushan) during the actual events. Ramban explains that at that time, most of the Jews [who were going to return to Israel] (this is the only way to explain his words and have them make any historic sense) had already returned - although they were, of course, still under the rule of the Persian Empire. In addition, Ramban understands from a discussion in the Gemara about the definition of a walled city (what if it is walled by the sea, like Tiberias?) that the issue at hand is one of defensibility. He goes on to posit that all of the Jews in unwalled cities were, of course, in danger - as well as the Jews in Shushan. However, those Jews who lived in other (segregated) walled cities were in no danger and did not have to fight - and, therefore, did not celebrate Purim that first year...nor did they establish on their own a day of celebration. Only later, when Mordechai and Esther sent out the second set of letters to the Jews, establishing Purim as a national holiday, did they join in - and were given the "secondary day" of the fifteenth. However, in order to ensure that those Jews in Israel would not feel that their cities - of former glory but present ruin - were less important than Shushan, the Sages established that any city that had been walled during the glory days of Eretz Yisrael (Yehoshua's time) qualified as a "Shushan-equal".

Thus, Ramban explains the reason for separate days (reflecting the eager acceptance of the Jews in unwalled cities and the later acceptance of all the other Jews) and why the separation is marked by cities walled at the time of Yehoshua bin-Nun, rather than Ahashverosh. (see the Rishonim ad loc. who challenge Ramban on historic grounds). There is still something missing from his argument - he never really explains why there isn't just one day of Purim, or, as he himself asks "one Torah and one law."

#### IV. THE VILLAGERS

In our Mishnah, we read that the villagers were allowed to read the Megillah early - back to the Monday or Thursday before the 14th. The Gemara (Megillah 4b) explains that this was a reward for the villagers, who provided food and drink for their brethren in the big cities. This "reward" is a bit difficult to understand: Where and when would the villagers read and how did that serve as a reward?

#### **Rashi**

Rashi (Megillah 2a s.v. ela) explains that the villagers would enter the cities on Mondays and Thursdays to do business. This was why Ezra ordained that the courts be in session on those days - and why he established that the Torah be read on those days (Bava Kamma 82a). He goes on to explain that the villagers did not know how to read the Megillah and they needed a city-person to read it for them - and the Sages did not trouble them to return to the cities on another day for Purim; rather, they allowed them to hear the Megillah on the Monday or Thursday before the 14th.

Rashi's approach answers one question - if the 14th was on a Wednesday or a Sunday, why didn't

the Sages allow the villagers to read it on the next day, a market day, which is the 15th? Since the villagers were entering the cities (but not the walled metropolises) - and they needed a city-person to read for them, it wouldn't help to allow them to read on the 15th, for on the 15th, the city people are already "past" Purim.

However, his approach leaves us with several problems:

(a) What happens to the nighttime reading?

(b) How can we permit two different days to be celebrated in one town? What of the prohibition of \*Lo Titgodedu\* - which is Halakhically translated to "do not make yourselves into separate groups" - at least within one town (see Yevamot 14a)?

(c) How can a city-person read on behalf of the villagers on the 11th, 12th or 13th? He is not obligated to read on that day and should not be able to read on behalf of another?

The Ran answers that the Sages exempted the villagers from the night reading, which is less significant than the daytime reading (this issue itself is subject to debate among the Rishonim).

He goes on to respond to the second question, that since the villagers are assembling separately (in the town) and holding their own reading, it is like two courts in two separate towns, so there is no issue of "separate groups."

However, that means that he must explain that one of the villagers reads on behalf of his fellows, and not a city-person - which also solves the third question. However, if at least some of the villagers are knowledgeable to read, why allow them to read early at all? Why not let them read on time?

## **Rambam**

The Rambam (MT Megillah 1:6) has an entirely different approach which avoids these pitfalls. He maintains that the villagers would enter the villages on Monday and Thursday; i.e. they lived on farms and only came in to the villages twice a week and that that was where the courts sat. They also had a Beit-K'nesset (synagogue) there, where they would assemble to hear the Torah read on those days. Therefore, as a reward for their service on other days of providing food to the cities, the Sages allowed them to use the market-day before the 14th for Megillah reading. There was clearly no problem of "separate groups" and, since at least some of them were capable of reading, they would perform the nighttime reading of the Megillah in their homes - and, since one of them would read for the rest during the day, there was no issue of a non-obligated person reading for on their behalf.

We can also understand (according to either approach) why the Sages did not allow them to read on a Monday or Thursday that was the 15th. Since they were basically obligated on the 14th (since their farms were certainly unwalled), and since the Megillah stipulates "it shall not pass" which is

Halakhically interpreted as "do not read later than the given date", we cannot allow them to read on the 15th. In addition, there is the possibility that would mistakenly think that the 15th was their "real" day and not just a leniency since, in that self-same reading, they would hear about the celebration in Shushan on the 15th; that concern does not apply to the earlier days.

V.

## THE BIGGER QUESTIONS

Now that we are armed with the basic information about the days of Purim, let's turn our attention to a more basic problem.

Ramban asks why there are separate days...I'd like to add to that question: why any days at all? Every celebration we have is either a Zekher liY'tzi'at Mitzrayim (a commemoration of the Exodus - the three festivals in the Torah) or Hannukah. In both cases, the result of the event we are celebrating was a significant step up in our status. In Egypt, we were slaves; the Exodus was our national freedom, our march to Sinai to become God's holy nation and our subsequent march home to Israel. Hannuka is a bit tamer, yet it is also a story which ends on a much happier and victorious note than it begins. Yet, for all the rejoicing, drinking and partying of Purim - what did we really accomplish? As Rava points out (Megilla 14a), it is inappropriate to recite Hallel on Purim because, with all the miracles and salvation - we were still enslaved to Ahashverosh. At the end of the story, we were back at square one - still under the foreign rule, still spread throughout the nations. The entire accomplishment of the Purim story was - that we weren't destroyed.

There is a well-known Midrash, quoted by Rambam at the end of Hilkhos Megillah (2:18) that states that even though all other holidays will be annulled in the future (with the coming of Mashiach), the days of Purim will never disappear (Midrash Mishlei 9:2). What is the meaning of this Midrash?

VI.

## PURIM - THE CELEBRATION OF JEWISH CONTINUITY

The Tosefta in Berakhot (1:14), building on a passage in Yirmiyah (23:7-8), states that in the future (when Mashiach comes), the remembrance of the Exodus will take a back seat (this is how the Gemara explains it) to the more recent redemption. The remembrance of glories past will be overshadowed by recent success and salvation. This is true so long as we are dealing with celebrations of Jewish glory...

...but Purim is a celebration of a different stripe altogether. Whereas on Pesach we celebrate an event that took place several thousand years ago (which, of course, shaped our very identity to this day) - on Purim we celebrate our continued existence in spite of the long and terrible exile which we continue to endure. On Purim we are as much rejoicing about today as we are about the days of Shushan. It is a celebration of Jewish existence - in spite of exile. The nature of our existence in exile is, as Haman put it, to be spread out among the nations. We celebrate on different days because we



realize that we are not together -but we fast on the same day because that is, more than anything else, what binds us. We can be happy in our own towns, but we fast as a nation; it is Jewish tragedy and the threat to our people which binds us.

Indeed, much was accomplished in the Purim story - we made it! We weathered another madman, another despot, another tyrant. He was hanged and we remain. And this will never be forgotten; even when we are ultimately redeemed and all ancient glories become overshadowed by the more recent miracles of the Messianic era, the essential miracle of Jewish existence which will have made Messianic redemption possible will never be forgotten.