

MEN FIRST - LADIES FIRST - EVERYONE FIRST!

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

I came across an idea on Purim that seemed not only to capture the underlying theme of that festival, but also sheds light on the opening lines of this week's Torah portion.

We read in the Megillah how Mordechai bids Esther to appear before Achashverosh and plead with him on behalf of the Jewish people who were slated to be annihilated. Mordechai encourages her with the poignant question, "Who knows? Perhaps it was precisely and only for this critical occasion that you attained your royal position?"

Esther immediately replied, "Go assemble all the Jews in Shushan and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day; I with my attendants will fast as well. Esther then uttered a seemingly superfluous word: "U'vchen."

And thus (or consequently), I will enter the king's presence against the law of the land." What is hinted at by this extra word, "u'vchen?"

Let us consider what is the most efficacious prayer that our sages tell us is guaranteed to elicit a favorable answer from above. It is when someone sincerely entreats Hashem on behalf of his disadvantaged fellow Jew even though he too desperately needs the very thing that he requests for his friend. Such an entreaty is considered the quintessential selfless prayer, for, rather than being preoccupied with one's own travails, he has focused instead on his friend's plight.

Hashem responds first to the needs of such a caring, unselfish person for in recognition of his selflessness and total bonding with another Jew's needs, Hashem ensures that he becomes the conduit of His divine blessing, and will therefore be the first to receive His bounty and goodness.

This is what Esther was alluding to when she told Mordechai, "The Jewish people face a life-threatening decree from Haman, just as do I when I enter unlawfully into the king's presence. We both are in mortal danger. Let the Jews fast for my welfare and I and my attendants will fast similarly for the salvation of the nation. 'U'vchen', and consequently, armed with this great merit that we are begging for Divine favor and mercy for one another, I will enter the king's presence.

We similarly mention this identical declaration 'U'vchen' numerous times in our Rosh Hashana prayers as a prelude to each major appeal for salvation. The commentaries explain that it is placed before each prayer as a reference to Queen Esther's prayer to Hashem before she interceded with the king on behalf of her people. By omitting any personal requests from our Rosh Hashana

supplications and directing our pleas on behalf of the entire nation we too trust and anticipate meriting Divine assistance and deliverance .

This thought kept buzzing in my mind throughout Purim for it crystallizes the key theme of the day: by caring for one another, sending gifts and mending frayed relationships, caring for the poor and reaching out to one another in friendship, we demonstrate the inner unity that lies at the core of our people. With that demonstration of brotherhood and solidarity, we merit a unique outpouring of Divine favor and closeness.

This perhaps, is why Moshe deemed it necessary to assemble the entire people after the sin of the Golden Calf, before introducing them to the mitzvah of the building of the Mishkan. By bringing together the entire Jewish people, he paved the way for them to be reunited with the Divine, for only when we are united down here in this world, can we be connected at the most exalted Source in heaven. The building of the Mishkan fused together the entire people in the transcendent mission of its construction, and it was the unity of the people that secured Hashem's presence in this world.

May this theme of our oneness as a people and our readiness to put others first that makes Purim such a joyous and spiritual day, continue throughout the year. For only when we uncover that wonderful unity and discover the genuine caring and sharing for one another, can true joy prevail.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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