

THE ELEMENTS OF PURIM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Letters were sent by courier to all countries under the King's power, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, from children to the elderly, babies and women, on one day, the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and plunder their property." [Meg. Esther 3:13]

We see an apparent redundancy in the use of several different words to describe the murder and plunder which Haman planned. The Vilna Gaon, however, teaches us that Haman planned to strike at every element of every Jew.

The Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, explains that there are four elements to a person in Jewish thought: the basic life-force (Nefesh), spirit (Ruach), soul (Neshamah), and the body. Rabbi Chanan Nobel, in his excellent commentary on the Vilna Gaon on the Megillah, directs us to the Gaon's own commentary to the Book of Proverbs. There, the Vilna Gaon says that these correspond to the four basic levels of Creation in our living world: those things which do not grow or live, such as rocks and earth; those which grow, like plants; those which move about, such as the animal kingdom; and that which speaks - humankind.

Yet the Gaon goes further and says that the Nefesh, the basic life-force, is intertwined with the body itself. One does not attack a body, but the life inside it. But there is indeed a fourth element of a person: his or her possessions. The Maharal in Nesivos Olam writes that a person's money is considered part of him, as we see from our Sages (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Bava Kama 119a): "a person who steals even a dime from his neighbor, it is as if he had taken his life."

Thus there is no redundancy - Haman planned "l'akor hakol," to uproot everything. The word "l'hashmid," to destroy, refers specifically to a spiritual destruction - taking a person away from Mitzvos, from deeds which elevate his or her soul. "To kill" corresponds to the living spirit within a person. "To annihilate" corresponds to the more basic life force and the body itself, meaning to remove all trace, to destroy even any remnant or name of Israel. And the plunder of property, of course, corresponds to the property itself. Haman wanted to destroy every last trace of the Jews.

The Vilna Gaon concludes that our celebration of Purim contrasts with Haman's goal in every aspect. We add a purely spiritual Mitzvah to the day, with the reading of the Megillah, to uplift our souls. For

the spirit, the "ruach" which lives in the heart of a person, this is a day of joy. For the body, it is a day of feasting. And for the sake of our property, we are commanded to give special gifts to the poor, in order that even they should have property of their own on Purim.

And indeed, on Purim, we should invest our whole selves in the celebration!

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken