

MEGILLAH - DON'T LOOK BACK

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

One of the halachos (laws) of reading Megilas Esther is that "one who reads the Megillah le'mafreah - out of order (lit. backwards) - has not satisfied his obligation. (Tractate Megillah 17a)" Since this would appear to be obvious, mefarshim (commentaries) offer different interpretations of this law's deeper meaning.

Some say that this halacha applies not only to the way we read the Megillah, but to the way we incorporate it in our lives. There are people who think that the idea of celebrating Purim, among other Yomim Tovim which commemorate other instances of salvation such as Pesach or Chanukah, is simply as an act of remembrance. Hashem performed miracles for us, and we celebrate and observe the laws of the Yom Tov in commemoration of those miracles. In truth, there's far more to it than that.

Among the blessings over the Chanukah candles and the Megillah reading, we say, "Blessed are You Hashem... Who performed miracles for our forefathers, in those days, [and] in these times." Why do we add the words, "In these times?" Even when Hashem does miracles for us today, what's it got to do with the miracles He did back then? We should just make a blessing every day on the miracles He does. (We do indeed thank Him each day for these miracles, in the Modim prayer, "We thank You... for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and for Your goodness that are constant.") Also, why do we find that only with regard to very specific mitzvos did the Torah (Pesach) and the Rabbis (Chanukah and Purim) enact a yearly commemoration, while other miracles (such as the Jewish army's miraculous victory over Sancheirev [see Melachim-II 19]) don't get this type of treatment?

They explain (see Kedushas Levi) that while most miracles are there for the sole enjoyment of their beneficiaries, in the case of certain essential miracles not only did the miracle provide salvation for those who needed it, it also imprinted itself into the Jewish calendar, so to speak, so that every year during that period, the same spiritual light that brought about the original salvation radiates once again in the world, and we have the potential to benefit from it as our forefathers did. It is these miracles that the Torah and the Rabbanan commemorate with some form of yearly observance, and it is with regard to this ongoing salvation that we thank Hashem for the miracles that He did back then, and in these days.

So if someone celebrates Purim simply as a recollection of a nice story that happened way back when, he really misses the point. He, they explain, is the one who, "reads the Megillah backwards," as

if it were a distant event that took place way back in time. One who doesn't internalize the idea that during the days of Purim, even today, we can tap-in to the light of salvation that brought deliverance to our forefathers in Shushan, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

Perhaps we can offer another interpretation. If you were asked what was the main miracle of the Purim story, what would you answer? Most probably the annulment of Haman's decree, and its being reversed, "That the Jews may use force against their enemies.(9:1)" Not so, says the Chasam Sofer. At this point the Jews had already cried out to Hashem with prayer and repentance; even the wicked people of Ninveh (see the Book of Yonah) were forgiven and their decree annulled as soon as they repented from their ways.

The main miracle of Purim, he says, is found at the very beginning of the Megillah. For 186 days Achashveirosh celebrated with food and drink, and never once do we find him losing his cool. Yet on the very last day, he lost it, and asked Vashti to appear before everyone, "to display her beauty," as if she were a simple maidservant. And for Vashti to answer him so brazenly, "Tell him that my grandfather could drink 1,000 glasses of wine and not get intoxicated - yet you get drunk after one glass! [Megillah 12b]" And for Achashveirosh to so succumb to his anger as to kill his wife, the queen - all these were certainly extraordinary events. Remember that were all this not to happen, Esther wouldn't have become queen, and the Jews would have G-d forbid perished as a result of Haman's decree. But above all, the fact that Hashem was pulling all these strings even as the Jews were improperly enjoying themselves at Achashveirosh's feast, for which they truly deserved the fate that Haman was preparing for them (see Megillah 12a: "At the time of the feast, a decree of annihilation was placed upon the Jews)," - even so Hashem was getting everything ready to bring about their salvation. That, he says, is the greatest miracle of all! From here we see that even when we don't deserve His love, Hashem still watches over us and performs miracles for us.

The Gemara (Megillah 7a) asks: "Why is Esther compared to the sunrise? Just like the sunrise puts an end to the night, so too Esther was the last of all the miracles." This seems to contradict the wording of the blessing we discussed earlier, "Who did miracles for our forefathers in those days, and in these times!" Perhaps what the Gemara means is that Esther was the "last word" - the defining quality for all further miracles. Until those times, if you deserved it you got a miracle, and if you didn't, you didn't.

From Esther on, Hashem saw it would not be possible to continue like this. Times were coming when the Jews would no longer have their Beis HaMikdash, be exiled and spread out among the nations of the world, and often we simply wouldn't deserve special treatment and Heavenly assistance. With the Purim miracle, Hashem demonstrated that even when we weren't living up to our expectations, He was still pulling the strings to bring about our ultimate redemption.

Perhaps reading the Megillah backwards refers to one who sees the main point of the story as coming at its climax, when the Jews repent, and Hashem revokes Haman's decree. One who sees

only this, "has not satisfied his obligation," i.e. he didn't get the point, for he has failed to see that things were being put in place long before the Jews deserved it to be so.

Maybe this is why Chazal instruct us to "get so inebriated on Purim that you don't know the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed is Mordechai'. (7b)" Getting drunk is generally shunned by halacha. But on Purim, when we celebrate the fact that Hashem watches over us even when we don't deserve it, perhaps it is appropriate that we demonstrate this by conducting ourselves in a manner not altogether consistent with da'as Torah. Perhaps as well this explains the strange way in which the obligation to drink is expressed, "Until one doesn't know the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed is Mordechai'" - i.e. until we realize that Hashem loves us always, even if chas ve-shalom it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between the curses of Haman and the blessings of Mordechai.

Lest we rest too peacefully, let us remember that had the Jews not ultimately repented, they would not have received the salvation Hashem prepared for them. We may not be walking a tightrope, but it's not a free ride either. If Jews want to reap the benefits of being the chosen people, they must ultimately prove themselves worthy of the title.

Have a good Shabbos and a freilichen Purim.

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