

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn

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A COMMITMENT BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

We can learn about the significance of a given *Yom Tov* in two ways: by examining its name, and through observing its *mitzvos*.

The holiday of Purim derives its name from “*pur*”, or casting lots, which Haman did for the purpose of decimating the Jewish people; but that was the source of our troubles, not the cause for our celebration! Aren’t *Yomim Tovim* supposed to be named after the event they are marking, like Pesach, when Hashem “*pasach*”, skipped over the Jewish homes, or Succos, because Hashem housed us in huts, “*succos*”, like Chanukah which spells “*chanu chofhey*”, they rested on the 25th, or refers to the *mizbeiach*’s dedication, “*chanukas ha’mizbeiach*”? Why is this holiday named after the lots, “*pur*”, which Haman cast in order to annihilate us?!

WHY THE DRINKING?

Among Purim’s numerous *mitzvos*, there is one that seems particularly peculiar. There are a number of *mitzvos* which must be performed at some point during the day: The *Megilah* needs to be read, *mishloach manos* have to be sent, *matanos la’evyonim* must be given, and all of these can and should be maximized; but the *mitzvah* of drinking, “*mishteh*,” can’t just be performed at any point during Purim: The *Megilah* terms Purim ‘days of drinking’, “*y’mei mishteh*”, this day by definition is a day of inebriation, which means that this *mitzvah* embodies Purim’s essence more than the rest.

Drinking on Purim is famously defined as follows: “A person must become inebriated until he cannot distinguish, “*lo yada*”, between cursed is Haman, ‘*Arur Haman*’, and blessed is Mordechai, ‘*Baruch Mordechai*.’” This too is rather strange. We’re supposed to be thanking Hashem for the miracle which resulted in *Arur Haman* and *Baruch Mordechai*! Every holiday has its own *mitzvah* designed for expressing our thankfulness: On Chanukah, it’s lighting the candles and

reciting *Hallel*, and on Purim it’s through drinking. But it should be the type of drinking where thanks is offered for *Arur Haman* and *Baruch Mordechai*; if the drinking results in all of that being forgotten, then what connection does it have to Purim? It’s just plain drinking, unrelated to Purim!

WHERE NOTHING MATTERS

This is how Chassidus explains the significance of a lottery, a “*goral*”: A lottery is only necessary when there are two things of equal value; if one were superior to the other, there would be no need for a lottery, because one is simply better,

while the other is worse! A lottery is only relevant in the context of equality, when there is no distinction between things.

These contrasting paradigms correspond to the two systems with which Hashem runs the world. On one level, our actions matter; whether we behave, whether we perform *mitzvos* or commit *aveiros*, makes a big difference. But it’s also

said of Hashem, “if you’re righteous what have you given Him, if you’ve sinned a lot what have you done to Him?” There’s a level where nothing we do matters to Hashem.

The wicked Haman was very much aware that if he were to prevail, it wouldn’t happen through competing with us. If Hashem would take our deeds into account, his chances of winning would be nil. No matter how many complaints he’d lodge against us, like “they don’t observe the king’s laws”, which the Gemara interprets to be referring to the laws of the “King of the world”, namely asserting that we don’t observe Hashem’s laws, he’d still never be able to claim that he was any better. He was quite aware that “even Jewish sinners are full of *mitzvos* like a pomegranate”, and that he by contrast was an utter nobody. If Hashem were to

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rate our behavior, he knew it would be impossible to win.

So what was his strategy, or more accurately, that of his corresponding Heavenly angel? His calculation was that he needed to get through to Hashem on the level where our actions don't register, where *tzadikim* and *resha'im* don't matter, they're all the same. He reckoned that if he could achieve that, he'd be able to win.

WE STILL WIN

How was Haman's plot foiled? The decree he initiated could have been annulled in two ways. The obvious approach would be to restore the default system, for our deeds to begin mattering again, in which case he'd be thwarted, since no matter what state the Jews are in, Jewish sinners are full of *mitzvos* like a pomegranate, and considering that he was the polar opposite, we would certainly have triumphed.

But that isn't what happened. The lottery was cast, and the system where everything is equal, and nothing matters, came into dominance. But in spite of that, it was revealed that "I love Yaakov, and I hate Esav". It transpired that Hashem's love and affection for us is not contingent on our good behavior, on the fact that even Jewish sinners are full of *mitzvos* like a pomegranate; even on the level where nothing registers and everything is equal, Hashem bonds with us in love that lies at our essence. Even on a plane where "Esav is Yaakov's brother", still "I love Yaakov, and I hate Esav".

And that's precisely why the holiday is called Purim. This holiday doesn't celebrate the annulment of the lottery; our actions still didn't matter, and the world was being run like a lottery. When lots were cast down here, the same occurred Above. The world was in the state of a lottery, where our deeds didn't register, and everything was equal. And yet, even though "Esav is Yaakov's brother", yet "I love Yaakov, and I hate Esav"

WHETHER WE KNOW IT OR NOT

Now all of this describes Purim on Hashem's end, but celebrating Purim is when we do our part to thank Him, and the expression of our gratitude must reflect the means by which He saved us. *Arur Haman* represents *sur mei'ra*, the notion that evil must be avoided; *Baruch Mordechai* embodies *asei tov*, loving everything involving *Torah* and *mitzvos*. But how that becomes our mindset can occur in one of two ways: We can study the greatness of *mitzvos* and the lowliness of *aveiros*, be aware of the distinction between good and evil, *yada*, learn and understand that Haman is cursed and Mordechai is blessed, and that's in fact how it should be throughout the year. But there comes a time on Purim when we need to express that we can't distinguish, *lo*

yada, between *Arur Haman* and *Baruch Mordechai*; we can't tell the difference, we're drunk, we don't understand how Haman is cursed, nor do we understand how Mordechai is blessed.

This isn't to imply that we bless Haman and curse Mordechai instead; we still say *Arur Haman* and *Baruch Mordechai*. It's just that "lo yada", we can't make the distinction, we don't

understand how bad is out of the question and how good is precious. We drink another cup, and say *l'chaim* again, we make another resolution to increase our *Torah* and *mitzvos*, more of *Baruch Mordechai*, and that *aveiros* should be even more unthinkable, more *Arur Haman*. Cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai are just not a result of "yada"; instead, it's "lo yada". But despite that fact, we shout and promise, that the day after Purim we'll expand our studying and knowledge, and be aware that *Arur Haman* and *Baruch Mordechai*, the importance of *sur mei'ra* and *asei tov*, but without 'knowing', beyond 'knowing', without limitations.

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