

The Meaning of *Ta'anit Esther*

Based on a *sicha* by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion • RIETS '59

Honorary Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS and Honorary Director of the Gruss Institute

Adapted and Translated by R. Dov Karoll, YC '00

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Ta'anivot* 1:4) writes that fast days are designated as times for repentance. In the first chapter, he discusses fasts decreed in a time of distress, during which one should cry out to God:

This practice is one of the paths of teshuva, for when a difficulty arises and the people cry out [to God] and sound the trumpets, everyone will realize that [the difficulty] occurred because of their evil conduct... and this [realization] will cause the removal of this difficulty.

Hilkhot Ta'anivot 1:2

If the people attribute the distress to their sinful ways, if they interpret it as a punishment rather than as happenstance, this will help them merit Divine mercy.

In the Rambam's view, this is true not only regarding fasts decreed for a contemporaneous distress, but also for the set fasts of the calendar:

There are days when the entire Jewish People fast because of the calamities that occurred to them, to arouse [their] hearts and initiate [them in] the paths of teshuva. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors, which resembles our present conduct and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve [our conduct], as the verse states (Vayikra 26:40), "And they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors."

Hilkhot Ta'anivot 5:1

The Rambam thus speaks of fasts that arise in two contexts: immediate crisis and remembrance of past occurrences. Whether one views *Ta'anit Esther* as a custom or as an actual rabbinic decree, it is clearly rooted in a past remembrance, and the element of *teshuva*, as per chapter 5, should therefore be dominant in its observance.

דבר זה מדרכי התשובה הוא, שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו עליה ויריעו ידעו הכל שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הורע להן ... וזה הוא שיגרום להם להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

הלכות תעניות א:ב

יש שם ימים שכל ישראל מתענים בהם מפני הצרות שאירעו בהן כדי לעורר הלבבות ולפתוח דרכי התשובה ויהיה זה זכרון למעשינו הרעים ומעשה אבותינו שהיה כמעשינו עתה עד שגרם להם ולנו אותן הצרות, שבזכרון דברים אלו נשוב להיטיב שנאמר (ויקרא כ"ו) והתודו את עונם ואת עון אבותם וגו'.

הלכות תעניות ה:א

It is worth noting, however, that while the Rambam emphasizes the need for *teshuva* regarding both types of fasts, the nature of the link to *teshuva* varies between the two. Let us analyze this difference in light of two *parshiot* in the Torah, the two main *parshiot* that speak of a link between times of distress and *teshuva*. One of these is in *Parashat Vayelekh*, in the gloomy forecast that God delivers to Moshe:

And God said to Moshe: Behold, you shall sleep with your fathers; and this people will rise, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land ... and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them. So that they will say in that day, "Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?" And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evils which they shall have done, in that they are turned to other gods.

Devarim 31:16-18

טז ויאמר ה' אל משה הנך שכב עם
אבותיך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אלהי
זכר הארץ אשר הוא בא שמה בקרב
ועזבני והפר את בריתי אשר ברתי
אתו: יז וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא
ועזבתים והסתרתני פני מהם והיה
לאכל ומצאנהו רעות רבות וצרות
ואמר ביום ההוא הלא על פי אין
אלהי בקרבי מצאנוי הרעות האלה:
יח ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום
ההוא על כל הרעה אשר עשה כי פנה
אל אלהים אחרים:
דברים לא: טז-יח

In speaking of the “many evils and troubles shall befall them,” these verses teach us that the appropriate response is to note the relationship between the punishment and the betrayal of God. This is the proper reading of the historical map; the proper perspective lies in seeing a close bond between the trouble that befalls us or threatens us and our way of life. There is nothing more than that here – there is no mention here of *teshuva*, no mention of prayer. Reading the historical map in this manner implies recognition of sin and, apparently, regret for the sinful ways. There must be a corrective turn in order to escape the troubles.

If we turn back to chapter 1 of the Rambam, this question of how the troubles are understood and attributed is central: “Everyone will realize that [the difficulty] occurred because of their evil conduct... and this [realization] will cause the removal of this difficulty” (1:2). The “paths of *teshuva*” described here are primarily the association between the troubles and the sinful ways that brought them about. The Rambam also includes the importance of crying out and fasting as tools to help people appreciate that it is not that “Our God is not among us,” but rather that we have shut the door, thereby enabling this trouble to come upon us, and we can escape it by performing *teshuva*.

Elsewhere in the Torah, this process is described quite differently. In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, in the passage read on Tisha Be-Av morning, the Torah states as follows:

When you shall father children and grandchildren, and you shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make an engraved image or the likeness of any thing, and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke Him to anger - I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you shall soon completely perish from the land which you are going

כה כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים
ונושנתם בארץ והשחתם ועשיתם
פסל תמונת כל ועשיתם הרע בעיני
ה' אלהיך להקעיסו: כו העידתי
בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ
כי אבד תאבדון מהר מעל הארץ
אשר אתם עברים את הירדן שמה

over the Jordan to possess; you shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall completely be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the Lord shall lead you. And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But if from there you shall seek the Lord your God, you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress, and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your God, and shall be obedient to his voice.

Devarim 4:25-30

לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא תִאָּרְיֵבוּ יָמִים עֲלֶיהָ כִּי
הַשְׁמִד תִּשְׁמָדוּן: כִּי וְהַפִּיץ ה' אֶתְכֶם
בְּעַמִּים וּנְשַׁאֲרְתֶם מִתִּי מִסָּפֵר בְּגוֹיִם
אֲשֶׁר יִנְהַג ה' אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה: כַּח
וְעַבְדְתֶם שָׁם אֱלֹהִים מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם
עֵץ וָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִרְאוּ וְלֹא
יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלֹא יֵאָכְלוּ וְלֹא יִרְיָחוּ: כָּט
וּבְקִשְׁתֶּם מִשָּׁם אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ
וּמִצְאֹתָ כִּי תִדְרָשׁוּן בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל
נַפְשְׁךָ: ל בַּצָּר לָךְ וּמִצְאוּךָ כֹּל
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים
וְשָׁבַתְּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ:
דְּבָרִים ד:כח-ל

Both the troubles and the response to them are described differently here than they are in *Vayelekh*. In *Vayelekh*, the punishment comes in the form of *hester panim*; God, so to speak, hides His face, causing a disconnect, heaven forefend, between the Almighty and the Jewish People and leading to the false sense among the people that “Our God is not among us.” The account in *Parashat Va’etchanan*, however, differs greatly; what is described in *Va’etchanan*, to use *Chazal’s* phrase, is that “They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence went with them” (*Megilla* 29a). *Va’etchanan* discusses exile, which is certainly a troubling reality, but not in the same sense as in *Parashat Vayelekh*, where the bond to God is broken, so to speak. In the latter scenario, there are “many evils and troubles befalling them,” without being relocated, but with an ongoing, existential trouble. And the response on the part of the people is also limited – they merely recognize how they arrived at this problematic position.

In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, on the other hand, the punishment is not as sharp or acute, and the existential problem is more readily overcome: “From there you shall seek out the Lord.” The central issue is not geographic but existential – you can seek Him out from there and find Him. This notion is not mentioned in *Parashat Vayelekh*. To summarize: In *Parashat Vayelekh* the problem is a broken bond with God; this problem can be understood, but the Torah does not describe the bond being reestablished or sought out. In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, however, God Himself can be sought out.

The common denominator between these two *parshiot* is that distress brings about *teshuva* in some form or other. Whereas *teshuva* can come about unrelated to national crisis, these two *parshiot* address *teshuva* that arises out of a difficult situation but constitutes a religious-moral response, a yearning for spiritual growth, growing out of reflection and appreciation of the situation.

When we turn from *Hilkhos Ta’anuyot* to *Hilkhos Teshuva*, we find a different phenomenon: repentance that is not necessarily brought about by external distress. A person sinned, he was aroused spiritually, and performed the various aspects of *teshuva* out of a desire to come closer to God. This is a completely different reality than the ones described above. This type of *teshuva* may develop as a result of failure, but there is a difference between failure and trouble. This is the type of *teshuva* described in the verse, “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God,

for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (*Hoshea* 14:2). The prophet does not proclaim there, “We are in a state of national crisis! Let us perform *teshuva* so we can be saved from it.” Rather, “you have stumbled in your iniquity” – the sin itself is a failure. But there is a path that leads away from failure, a path of introspection, of awakening, of aligning one’s will to the will of God, and thereby improving one’s existence on both the individual and collective level.

Beyond the distinctions outlined above, there is a fundamental difference between *teshuva* that results from punishment and *teshuva* that arises from introspection. On the one hand, if we ask ourselves honestly which *teshuva* has greater passion, greater depth, greater drive, greater hope, which will bring greater *teshuva*, it is clear. Recognizing human nature for what it is, we know that the community unites and turns to God, seeking any means, any path of hope, any solution, to be saved from crisis. It is clear that the *teshuva* emerging from distress, whether of the kind described in *Parashat Vayelekh* or of the kind described in *Parashat Va’etchanan*, will carry greater depth and passion. *Teshuva* that emerges from a person who appreciates that his situation is desperate, that he is in danger – this leads him to recognize that his choice is between life and death, as described in *Parashat Nitzavim* (*Devarim* 30:19), “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life.” It is true that even this recognition requires a religious sensitivity and religious orientation, and the feeling of the “sword pressed to one’s neck” can bring that out passionately.

Although crisis and danger are powerful motivators, *teshuva* that is inspired by love of God achieves a level beyond the level of *teshuva* born of fear. *Chazal* make this point in a number of contexts.

Aside from these two forms of *teshuva* – one arising from immediate distress and one unrelated to distress but rather arising from love of God and truth – there is a third form, to which we have already alluded. It, too, arises from a sense “a sword pressed to one’s neck,” not in the sense of immediate danger but rather from recalling historical precedent – a nation sinned and was punished; they floundered in their religious observance and they suffered. This is the reality of, “They will forsake Me and break My covenant” and the reaction of “I shall hide My face.” The people are not experiencing this reality at the moment – currently they are in no such distress – but they have learned this lesson from history, from remembering the events of the past.

In reflecting on the reality of the Purim story, there are presumably a variety of factors that are relevant for this process. The story is, among other things, a story of sin and *teshuva*. The *megilla* itself does not address this directly, but it emerges between the lines, and *Chazal* emphasized it. A reading of the *megilla* that is sensitive to these issues should note it, whether from Esther’s call, “Go, gather together all the Jews... and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink...” (*Esther* 4:16), or from the attribution, “Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one” (*Megilla* 12a). Whatever the particular explanation, the religious state of the Jewish people at the time led to total destruction being decreed against individual and nation. The *teshuva* which needed to follow needed to take all this into account; this crisis led them to the path of *teshuva*. On the one hand, “Esther was exceedingly distressed,” she underwent personal distress, and on the other hand, the nation underwent great distress and there was communal *teshuva*.

But *Chazal* understood the events of the *megilla* not simply as a means to solve the immediate crisis, via fasting and prayer; they saw the reaction as being one of an overall spiritual uplifting. The *teshuva* is understood not simply as a response to the crisis. Rather, inspired by the crisis, they recognized the perverse culture of Achashverosh's empire – with its perverse sense of priorities and perverse social norms, its sybaritic culture.

While beforehand they may have started to lose their sense of uniqueness, as a result of Haman's decree they caught themselves and realized that there is a Mordechai in the world! "And Mordechai would not kneel or bow" (3:2). There is a proud Jewish identity, with a national and spiritual culture. What are we doing floating around Shushan in this culture of moral impropriety? Is this how we want to live? The crisis was a catalyst, but it was more than that. The passion brought about by the "sharp sword pressed against the neck" led to a search for truth out of an interest in ascent and growth. "The Jews ordained, and took upon themselves, and upon their descendants" (9:27) – this was not a return to the point of departure but rather an ascent and upgrade of spiritual reality.

One who reads the *megilla* senses that there is a drama of danger and salvation, but, at the same time, despite the absence of God's name from the *megilla*, one senses the Divine Presence – it is part of the drama. There is more to the story than is spelled out. Out of fear, the nation recommits itself to God.

There is an inspiring message of *teshuva* in the *megilla*, a lesson that, according to the Rambam's approach in chapter 5, is one of historical recollection. From a certain perspective, they performed *teshuva*, everything was reversed, and they got a new start. We can appreciate the depth of this message, the great lesson of the *megilla*; the nation arose, not militarily, economically or socially, but spiritually.

This is an ancient story, and millennia have passed since that time. But the Rambam in chapter 5 speaks about a time, not when the sword is pressed against one's neck, but when one seems to sit "beside the still waters." Even at this time, one recalls the events of the past to learn the moral lesson of that history, the lesson of *Megillat Esther*. It is a lesson of Jewish survival in exile, after God has scattered the Jews among the nations, a lesson of Jewish presence, Jewish existence, and the challenge of Jewish endurance. But just as the original event was more complex than it first seemed, carrying greater depth and significance, the lesson learned should also be more complex, deeper, and, mainly, more demanding.

Fortunate are we to have merited the return to our land. Fortunate are we to have been freed from the yoke of exile and of foreign rule. Fortunate are we to have been freed from "serving those who serve" other gods. But this is only part of the story. Is this all the *megilla* can teach us – how to endure in exile? Were it only the case that we would not be faced with any more travails and threats! But the lesson of spiritual uplifting, of rising against the spiritual challenges that threaten us and the problematic culture that impinges upon us, should be instructive in helping us improve – both on the individual and collective levels.

If when we read the *megilla* we listen not only with our ears but with our hearts, we hear the remembrances of the past, the "*zakhor*." We can appreciate the remembrance, not only of what

Amalek has done to us, but what we, God forbid, are doing to ourselves. As those who study Torah, we need to feel a sense of responsibility not only for ourselves but for our fellows, for the nation, and toward the Almighty. We must understand that this responsibility means that if you have not improved your surroundings, if this does not stand at the peak of your goals, you are a spiritual egoist. Is it enough merely to work on yourself? Is that called self-improvement? Is that how Avraham Avinu acted? Is that how Moshe Rabbeinu acted? Is that how the Chafetz Chaim acted?

To properly incorporate these lessons, we must strive to achieve *teshuva* and improvement, and with divine compassion and deep introspection appreciate who we are, what we are, who we need to be, and who we want to be.

Thank God we are living in an era of rebuilding, where opportunity abounds for personal and national growth. We need to improve ourselves, but we cannot suffice with that. We need to choose for ourselves lifestyles that will enable us to bring the imprint of the *beit midrash* to the street, to bring the signet of the synagogue, the signet of the truth of Torah, and the remembrance of the past which is part of that reality, to society as a whole. This is the hope of those “who wait upon the Lord,” that they shall “mount up with wings as eagles” (*Yeshayahu* 40:31), seeking to be uplifted, and acting accordingly.

This is an ancient story, with an inspiring message on the one hand, but a demanding one on the other. Its message needs to pervade our consciousness, enrich our service of God, enable us to take those first steps, and continue along that path – for improving ourselves and improving the world. The very core of *teshuva* and its power lies in this yearning: “From there you shall seek the Lord your God, you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

[*This sicha was delivered on Ta’anit Esther 5769 (2009).*]