



JEWISH UNITY

A few years ago, Rabbi Menachem Penner spoke to the faculty at Central, discussing the achievements and growth Am Yisroel has enjoyed in modern times. This success, he emphasized, is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing, as our numbers have increased and we have enjoyed success in many arenas, despite the desire of our enemies to destroy us. But it is also a curse, in that as we have grown, our communities have splintered due to both halachic and hashkafic differences. As a result, we have become more tribal and less communal.

Looking back, we see similar differences in the times of Esther and Mordechai. In Megillat Esther (3:8) it is written:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ יִשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפָּזָר וּמִפָּרָד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכֹל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוּתָךְ וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכֵּל עִם וְאֵת דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלִמְלָךְ אֵין שׁוּה לְהַנִּיחֵם.

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them."

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Haman describes the people of Israel as an *"am mefuzar umfard,"* a nation that is scattered and dispersed. Although the Jews were not a unified people, they were considered "other" with a unique set of laws. These differences incensed Haman and he was determined to eradicate them, as he says to Ahasuerus in the next pasuk:

אִם עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִקְתָּב לְאַבְדֵם וְעִשְׂתֶּם אֲלֵפִים כְּכַר כֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁקוּל עַל יְדֵי עֲשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה

לְהַבִּיא אֶל גְּבוּי הַמֶּלֶךְ.

If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.

Additionally, the midrash tells us:

אֵין אַתָּה מוֹצֵא יָמִים קִשִּׁין שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאִפְיֵלָה, וְיוֹשְׁבֵינּוּ בַחֲשֶׁךְ וּבִצְרָה, כְּאוֹתָן הַיָּמִים שֶׁהָיוּ בִימֵי הַמֶּן, שֶׁאָמַר לְאַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ יִשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפָּזָר וּמִפָּרָד (אֶסְתֵּר ג' ח).

There were no days that were more difficult for the people of Israel, these were the darkest days, where they sat in pain and anguish. What were these days? The days of Haman.

Midrash Tehillim no. 22

These verses and their explanation lead to a series of questions. What does it mean that the people of Israel were a nation that was both scattered and dispersed? Why the seemingly double language of scattered and dispersed? And why were these days the darkest? Bnei Yisroel had been through slavery in Egypt, went

through the episode of the *meraglim* in the desert and the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, which ultimately lead to the expulsion of the Jews from Israel. Yet only these days are described as *yamim kashin*, difficult days. Why?

To answer these questions, we need to first parse the Megillah for details of the lives of Bnei Yisroel during this time, the 5th century B.C.E., to fully understand what they were going through.

Megillat Esther opens by describing how Ahasuerus ruled over 127 different nations. At the end of the Megillah (9:16) we are told, *ush'e'ar haYehudim asher b'medinot hamelech* — and the rest of the Jews lived in the king's other provinces. Clearly, the Jews were living throughout the kingdom separate and apart from each other. But is this enough reason for Am Yisroel to be described as *mefuzar umforad*?

When describing the parties that Ahasuerus held, especially in chapter 1, verse 7, there is a belief that the vessels used during the party may have been from the Beit Hamikdash. According to the Gemara, *Megillah* 11b, Ahasuerus miscalculated the time when the *galut* of the Jewish people would end. Yirmiyahu the prophet had predicted a 70-year exile for the Jewish people followed by the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. Ahasuerus calculated that the 70 years had passed since the exile, and believed that God had abandoned the Jews and that they remained in exile permanently. According to the Gemara,

מיפרכי אפיק מאני דבי מקדשא ואשתמש בהו.

Ahasuerus decided to take the vessels of the Beit Hamikdash and use them at his party.

As a nation in exile, the Jews had lost what unified them — a homeland and their central place of worship, where everyone came together in religious practice to serve God. Furthermore, the nation was beginning to fragment.

According to the Gemara, *Megillah* 13b, Haman tells Ahasuerus, *yashnu min hamitzvot*, the Jewish people have been asleep with regard to the mitzvot. Spiritually, they are disconnected from their God and ultimately from each other. This is the Jews' darkest time, when they are not just distant from one another physically, they are distant from Hashem — and as such, this is when they can be hurt. This is the time Haman could strike a decisive blow against the Jewish people.

So what hope do the Jews have? In this time when they are so vulnerable, how could they fight such a powerful enemy? Esther, in her wisdom, knew what needed to be done to combat Haman.

She tells Mordechai (4:16):

לך כגוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי אצום כן ויבכו אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי.

Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!

In order to unify the Jews, she must gather them together starting with those in Shushan. And as they come together, Esther wanted them to take the next step by turning to Hashem together as a nation and pray for their salvation. They may have been lax in

their performance of the mitzvot until that point, but at that moment, they have an opportunity to make up for their deficit by fasting and performing teshuvah.

And as we all know, the Jews' fortune turned. Megillat Esther (9:2) states:

נקהלו היהודים בעריהם בכל מדינות המלך אהשורוש לשלח יד במבקשי רעתם ואיש לא עמד לפניהם כי נפל פחדם על כל העמים.
Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews gathered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples.

The Jews were successful in beating back the evil forces of Haman. Not only that, the Megillah draws attention to the unity of the Jews by specifically mentioning the Jews in their cities throughout the province. It wasn't just the Jews in Shushan banding together to fight Haman and his forces, it was also all the Jews in the rest of the provinces throughout the kingdom coming together. The root ק.ה.ל — come together — appears three more times in chapter 9. Once in verse 15, ויקהלו היהודים אשר בשושן — And the Jews in Shushan came together. Again in verse 16, ושאר היהודים אשר במדינות — The rest of the Jews, those in the king's provinces, came together. And once more in verse 18, והיהודים אשר בשושן נקהלו — *but the Jews in Shushan came together.*

And what did they do upon completion of their victory? The Megillah continues in chapter 9, verse 19:

שמחה ומשתה יום טוב ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו.
A day of merrymaking and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.

The immediate response is a shared service celebrating God, where they feast together and send each other gifts in celebration of their victory and in appreciation of God. Mordechai sends letters to the people far and wide to memorialize this newfound unity, reminding them that to maintain this unity they must do mitzvot together.

It is written in the Megillah (9:27):

קִיְמוּ וְקַבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַל יָרְעֵם וְעַל כָּל הַגִּלּוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוּר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכִזְמָנָם בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה.
The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

According to the Gemara in *Megillah*, the Jews accepted upon themselves all the mitzvot of the Torah:

אמר שמואל אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדפיא מכולהו שנאמר קימו וקבלו קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה.

Shmuel said: Had I been there (among the Tana'im), I would have stated a matter that is superior to them all, as it is stated: "They confirmed, and took upon themselves," which can be interpreted to mean: They confirmed above in heaven what they took upon themselves below on earth.

While they accepted all of the mitzvot and were no longer "sleeping" with regard to the mitzvot, the *Megillah* describes four specific mitzvot: reading the *Megillah*, giving *matanot leevyonim* (charity to the poor and oppressed), *mishloach manot* (gifts to our friends), and eating a *seudah*. How do each of these fit into this message of unity of Purim?

Let us look at the mitzvah of reading the *Megillah*. We must read it not

once but twice — first to demarcate the beginning of the holiday and once again in the morning. In order to fulfill our mitzvah, we must hear every word. There is no other such communal mitzvah in which we must hear every word or the mitzvah is not fulfilled.

We are forced to come out of our homes, to come to our central place of worship — to our *mikdash me'at* (miniature Temple), as a *Beit Kneset* is often referred to. There, we come together equal as a people — we all have the same obligation, to hear the reading of the *megillah*. We all have to come together and remember this dark and terrible time of spiritual upheaval and (separation) of the Jewish people.

What else must we do? We continue this unity by giving gifts to people — the *mishloach manot*. There is a minimal number of food items we give (2) to a person, and ideally, we would give to each other enough for our meal.

And we have a specific mitzvah of giving *matanot leevyonim*. We always have a mitzvah to give *tzedakah*, but no other holiday has a specific, unique mitzvah of giving *tzedakah*, except for Purim. Why? This is a time when we must be unified and think of every single person in our community — our neighbor, our friend and also the stranger in our midst who may not have what we have. This individual must be a welcome part of the community, and must be part of this mitzvah.

And then, finally, we come together for a meal. Rambam, *Megillah* 2:15, writes:

כיצד חובת סעודה זו שיאכל בשר ויתקן סעודה נאה כפי אשר תמצא ידו, ושותה יין עד

שישתכר וירדם בשכרות.

What is the obligation of the meal of seudah? One must eat meat and have a nice meal according to what they can afford and drink wine until they fall asleep.

Studies have shown that families that eat together, stay together. [See "9 Scientifically Proven Reasons to Eat Dinner as a Family" (<https://www.goodnet.org/articles/9-scientificallly-proven-reasons-to-eat-dinner-as-family>).] By coming together over food and wine we show that we care about one another and are committed to each other.

When faced with such adversity, when separated and scattered and lacking in our religious devotion to God, we need to look at Purim to remind us of our ability to come together in *achdut*. Purim is not simply a nice, uplifting story; it provides a roadmap to achieve this unity. It is the uniqueness of these mitzvot that show us how we can achieve this unity.

One of the more striking aspects of these mitzvot is that they all touch on a sense of community; having a shared experience in which we remember our past in a very meticulous fashion (the reading of the *Megillah*), showing our care for others in the community and thinking beyond ourselves (*matanot leevyonim* and *mishloach manot*), and coming together as family and friends around a festive meal (the *seudah*). These are all ways that we can come together and overcome any potential differences — regardless of who we are religiously today and where we are, we all have a shared past that brings us together. It behooves us as a people to remember this for the future.