

PURIM

תש"פ

One aspect of the Purim story gives a perspective on how people relate to other people—how you view another human being. We have various personalities in the Megillah: Homon, Achashveirosh, Esther and Mordechai. Achashveirosh was a stable boy who married the king's daughter Vashti, and rose to power. Her father, Belshatzar, was the king of Bavel—the previous malchus before Poras and Modai took over. He was struck dead on the night he celebrated what he thought was the passing cheshbon of the nevuah of seventy years that the Jews were supposed to be redeemed. He celebrated that day because he felt he triumphed over the G-d of the Jews. He is now keeping Hashem's people in golus forever and made a big feast to mark the occasion. For that, Hashem killed him.

His son-in-law, Achashveirosh, took over the empire and made his own cheshbon of when the seventy years would be up. He was trying to figure out if he is truly in charge of these 127 provinces, or is Hashem is running the world. On the third year of his reign, his cheshbon was up and he threw a party of 180 days—a wild, drunken feast with non-stop food, wine, and zenus. He brought out the keilim of the Beis Hamikdash to get drunk on to celebrate the victory of the Persian empire over Hashem.

Who participated in that celebration? Only the Persians? No—Achashveirosh wanted davka the Jews to participate—to join him in this debasing, dehumanizing party. Mordechai protested and told the Jews not to go. But Achashveirosh insisted they come and made sure the food and wine would be completely kosher lemechadrin. So the Jews came.

Achashveirosh was accomplishing two things with his feast. He was using the keilim of the Beis Hamikdash to demonstrate his supremacy over Hashem. Something which is a total denial of anything Jewish. He invited the Jews to participate—they want to be like the Persians. A tremendous chillul Hashem and chillul kedushah of Klal Yisroel.

This is the background. And throughout, we see how people relate to other human beings.

Achashveirosh came from humble beginnings and needed his wife Vashti—a daughter of a king—to achieve royal status. He should have had tremendous hakoras hatov to her. But once he solidified his power, Achashveirosh lost all respect for Vashti. He saw her as a rival monarch and felt threatened by her. He needed to put her in her place and humiliate her—show everyone who's boss. He tried to put her on display for his own selfish ego—to show off her beauty to his governors and generals.

Now Homon had his own domestic troubles. He couldn't get along with his wife Zeresh—she is too domineering. Homon wanted to assert himself as master of the house. He noticed what Vashti is doing by refusing Achashveirosh and found the perfect opportunity. He would get Achashveirosh to make a statement that all husbands run the household and had him kill Vashti to make an example of her. He manipulated Achashveirosh who was manipulating Vashti. Everyone is using other human beings as tools for their own agenda.

By contrast, we read about Mordechai and Esther. What is their relationship? Mordechai has a cousin who is orphaned at birth. He raised her—some say married her—in order to take care of a vulnerable human being. Genuine caring in an honest way, with no thought of selfish reward.

Then we have two pesukim about the plot of Bigsan and Seresh. Mordechai was sitting there and overheard the plot. Mordechai could have thought it is in his best interest to let them go ahead with the plan and kill Achashveirosh, and Esther would be a free woman! But no. Mordechai decided to do the right thing and save Achashveirosh's life. He didn't ask for rewards.

Homon saw Mordechai refusing to bow and stepping on his overblown ego. But he can't just kill Mordechai alone—that's too petty. He had to get rid of Mordechai's entire nation. He offered Achashveirosh a lot of money to do it. Achashveirosh desperately needed the money because he was in serious debt from all the wars he has fought. If that meant he has to commit genocide and kill all his Jews in his empire—men, women and children, so be it. He needed the money—and he'll take all the Jewish wealth when they are all gone as a bonus. Not only do they make the deal, they celebrate with a toast.

It reminded me of the visit I made to Eastern Europe a number of years ago. We went to Radin and I asked the elderly mayor of the town if he remembered the time when the Nazis invaded. I asked him: what was the average goy in Radin doing when the Nazis rounded up and shot the Jews? He answered we were in our houses and heard the shooting. We were listening, waiting for the shooting to stop—which meant all the Jews were dead. Then we ran out to loot all the empty Jewish houses. Whenever I can manipulate the situation to my advantage, I will. Homon wanted to kill all the Jews? Great! That means I can make a quick buck on the side. This is Achashveirosh.

What about Mordechai and Esther? When the decree against the Jews was announced, Mordechai rushed to tell Esther to do something about it. Esther hesitated—it's dangerous to simply appear before the king without being invited. But Mordechai told her that if you refuse, you are betraying your family and your whole life's mission. Don't think you became the queen because of your own charm and beauty. Hashem put you in the palace to be in position for this very moment—do something for Klal Yisroel. Esther decides to be moser nefesh for the Jewish people—completely selfless.

Esther requested for Achashveirosh and Homon to come to one seudah and then another seudah. Achashveirosh got paranoid: what's going on between Esther and Homon? This is only natural—because all Achashveirosh understands is manipulation and advancing one's position at the expense of the next guy. So desperately he needed someone to tell him the truth: how is he being played here? He can't sleep. We read this posuk with a special niggun—Hashem's hashgocho is also awakening from the hester ponim.

Achashveirosh needed an ally. Is there anyone who genuinely cared about him and didn't manipulate him? He read about Mordechai's selfless act which saved his life—and he didn't ask for any reward in return! Imagine that! He's the one person I can trust!

There are Torah-based relationships and non-Torah relationships. The Torah-based relationship is built on an appreciation of the other person's tzelem Elokim. And you only have that appreciation when you are sensitive to your own tzelem Elokim. You relate to yourself and to other human beings on a much higher level. This was Mordechai and Esther.

You aren't focused exclusively on your social status, your wealth, your popularity, and influence. You aren't constantly trying to maximize your advantage at the expense of other people. When you think like

that with your ego in front and center, your whole interaction with other people becomes a game of manipulation. This is Achashveirosh, Vashti, Homon and Zeresh. These are the different ways of relating to people.

At the end of the Megillah the Jews make a seudoh—a very different type of seudoh than the one we started with. The seudoh at the beginning of the Megillah was totally self-indulgent—it was all about maximizing one's own selfish pleasure and enjoyment. When Vashti started to block Achashveirosh's maximum ego gratification, he had her eliminated. When Zeresh blocked Homon's ego gratification, he manipulated Achashveirosh to issue a royal decree to put him in control. That is one type of seudoh—no concern for anyone but yourself. You lose all perspective of your tzelem Elokim—people are just pawns to be used, and then quickly discarded when they are no longer useful.

At the end of the Megillah, we find genuine Jewish simcha because you understand there are other human beings with a tzelem Elokim. We focus on maximizing other people's enjoyment. And the beauty is that it doesn't come at the expense of your own enjoyment. On the contrary—there is no greater simcha than giving selflessly of yourself to someone else. You become more like the Shechinoh.

We have a mitzvah of mishloach manos and matanos le'evyonim. Giving to others and increasing their simcha. You can do the mitzvah in two ways. You can just perform the technical mitzvah or you can

get the message of Purim. You can ask your Rav: "how much is the minimum?" or you can give as much as necessary to generate genuine simcha in the person receiving your heartfelt gifts. This is being marbeh besimcha in Adar—yours and theirs!

Purim is about getting a Torah perspective regarding who we are as human beings and what our human relationships should be focused on. Am I merely a body with taivos and self-interests— trying to maximize my own pleasure and ego gratification by manipulating other people? Is that what we pursue on Purim?

I don't leave my house on Purim anymore. It's too depressing. Is that why Jews are staggering in the streets shouting at traffic in a drunken rage? Which seudoh in the Megillah are they going to? The one at the beginning? Where is our tzelem Elokim?

Purim is a tremendous simcha! But what is the simcha? We are happy because Hashem is close to us—He listens to our tefillos and He will save us from harm when we daven to Him sincerely. Is this what goes through bochurim's minds when they are cavorting around in the street making a total nuisance of themselves?

Purim isn't holelus—it is simcha. While reading the megillah, we learn to contrast how goyim get happy and how they interact with each other, and how Jews get simcha and how they interact with each other. Let's really learn the megillah this year and understand what true Jewish simcha is all about.