

PURIM

תשפ"ב

The gemara says that when the decree of Homon was sealed to annihilate the entire Jewish people – man woman, and child – Esther asked Mordechai: what was the spiritual failing which allowed this to happen?

Mordechai responded that it was because the Jews partook of the feast of Achashverosh. That was reason enough. But this only explains why the Jews of Shushan deserved destruction. What about the rest of the Persian empire? For them, the reason was because they bowed to the idol of Nevuchadnezer.

There is another gemara – in Megillah daf 11a which explains why the Jews were put in such danger in those times: Rav Elozor says it was because they were lazy regarding limud Torah. Is this a contradiction? Does this opinion argue on the other two?

I believe there are three approaches and they all work together. They tell us what Purim is about, what limud haTorah is about, and why the megillah calls Torah "orah" – light.

One gemara in Yoma daf 9 says the first Beis Hamikdosh was destroyed because of the three most serious sins of avodo zoro, gilui arayos and murder. The gemara then asks – during the second Beis Hamikdosh the Jews all learned Torah so why was it destroyed? The answer was that they had sinas chinom.

But there is another gemara in Nedorim 81 which says the chachomim and nevi'im asked Hashem why the Jews lost Eretz Yisroel with the churbon bayis rishon, and Hashem Himself had to tell them that it was because of bitul Torah. Again, is there a contradiction here? Can these different explanations for churbon be reconciled?

The Netziv answers that the protective power of limud haTorah is so great that it can even prevent a decree of churbon caused by the three most severe aveiros from being carried out. Once Klal Yisroel lost the merit of Torah learning, they were susceptible to the consequences of these other aveiros which brought about the churbon. Remember that the gemara in Megillah specified that they were lazy regarding limud Torah – not that they didn't learn Torah altogether. They took breaks, they went for coffee, they were schmoozing about the latest news, etc. Had they taken their learning seriously, it is possible that the decree would not have been passed.

Another approach is to look more carefully about what this seudoh of Achashverosh was all about. For this we need some background in Novi. After the churbon, the kings who came after Nevuchadnezer were anxious to know – were they only a tool of Hashem to bring Klal Yisroel into golus, and when their usefulness is done Hashem will get rid of them? Or did they really conquer Klal Yisroel and defeat Hashem Himself, and they no longer need to worry that they will pass from scene? They made a test – they knew about the prophecy that after 70 years of golus the Jews would return to build the second Beis Hamikdosh. These kings said to themselves – if we calculate when these 70 years are up, and the Jews are still in golus, it means we really defeated Hashem and we have nothing to fear.

Belshazzar made his calculation of the 70 years – and when the time was up and the Jews did not leave, he celebrated his assumed victory over Hashem with a big feast. He made a tremendous drunken party, and then Doniel came and mysterious words appeared on the wall. Belshazzar fell dead on the spot.

You would think that people would get the message from this incident

that there is no such thing as defeating Hashem. But people have too much vested interest in continuing to live the way they want to, so they came up with all kinds of reasoning to interpret Belshazzar's death as an accident. Belshazzar had a daughter called Vashti. She married her father's stable boy, Achashverosh, and suddenly he becomes emperor. He was very much against the Jews building the second Beis Hamikdosh. When he offered to grant Esther's wishes, he always said she can have up to half his kingdom. Why? Because the half that has Eretz Yisroel in it is not negotiable. He will not let a second Beis Hamikdosh be built to prove that he has not defeated Hashem.

So, like Belshazzar before him, Achashverosh makes his calculation of when the 70 years of golus were supposed to end. When that time came up – three years into his reign – and the Jews were still in golus, he too made a big party of 180 days of drinking and znus to celebrate his victory over Hashem. But this party was only for the important, upper class people in his empire. Then he made a separate feast for all the residents of his capitol city, Shushan, for seven days.

The Jews have always had an immigrant mentality. It means they want to prove that they really belong to the country they emigrated to and aren't outsiders. In order to prove they are real citizens of Shushan, they feel they need join the party. But they shouldn't have – even though everything was technically kosher about the food and wine. It should have been too disgusting to them to attend! How could they enjoy a feast meant to celebrate a victory over Hashem using the keilim of the Beis Hamikdosh? How could they attend an event that was a total violation of a life of kedushoh and taharoh – full of drunkenness and znus – everything the Torah is against? But they went anyway – their sensitivity to kedushoh and taharoh had been dulled because of their eagerness to integrate into Persian society. They forgot what it means to be a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh.

How can you counteract such a mentality? If they took their limud haTorah seriously, they would have withstood the temptation to assimilate. They would have appreciated that they are fundamentally different from the non-Jews and we can have nothing to do with their lifestyle. Serious limud haTorah would have instilled that pride in their special spiritual identity and they would not have felt in any way inferior to the Persians nor have any need to gain their favor.

There is another pshat to connect limud haTorah with the decree of Homon. Rashi explains in Megillah daf 11 that by being lax in limud Torah, Klal Yisroel took away the means by which Hashem could have protected Klal Yisroel from danger. The question is, if Hashem is all-powerful, how is this possible? Can't Hashem do anything He wants? Rav Chaim of Volozhin explains in Nefesh Hachaim that just as Hashem set up a system of natural law that He operates within and doesn't violate except for very rare circumstances, Hashem also set up a system of spiritual law for the spiritual world that controls what happens down on Earth. By our mitzvos we increase the kedushoh in this world and by our aveiros, we increase the tumoh.

The gemara says the act of passing the royal ring from Achashverosh to Homon achieved more than all the prophecies of the nevi'im. What does this mean? The royal ring symbolizes the power of the king over his realm. By passing this ring to Homon, it meant the power over Klal Yisroel – Hashem's people – was given over to the forces of tumoh. How did this happen? Because Klal Yisroel with their actions, can either empower tumoh or empower kedushoh over tumoh. The level of hashgocho that protects Klal Yisroel from harm is dependent

on Klal Yisroel's spiritual level. When Amolek came to Refidim, Chazal said that it was because they were lax in learning Torah. If Klal Yisroel are closely connected to Hashem through learning Torah, we increase kedushoh in this world, and the hashgocho protecting us gets stronger. If the connection through limud haTorah is weak, we increase tumoh in this world and the hashgocho is weaker and Klal Yisroel are more vulnerable to their enemies.

So by Klal Yisroel being weak in their limud Torah, they themselves empowered Homon to make decrees against them. Esther realized that unless there is serious teshuvoh by Klal Yisroel first, there is no point for her to go to the king to ask for mercy. Only after the third day of teshuvoh is Klal Yisroel ready to be saved. This is why Esther asked for another day to make another party.

She is talking to Achashverosh and Hashem simultaneously. She knows there is a decree in shomayim which was sealed with the royal ring of Hashem given to Homon to condemn Klal Yisroel. Esther's tefillos have to penetrate all the way to the inner chambers of Hashem's heavenly realm to tear up the decree. The only way this will happen is if Klal Yisroel's spiritual level is on a high enough level after teshuvoh for three days. Initially, Esther realizes she still isn't getting through, Hashem is still distant – so she asks for another day. Why will it help to wait till after the days of fasting are over? Because then you can see if the teshuvoh made a lasting impact on Klal Yisroel's spiritual level and they will merit salvation.

That night, Achashverosh can't sleep because of his insecure paranoia. But it is really a reflection of the turmoil going on in shomayim with the teshuvoh of Klal Yisroel impacting the decree. Achashverosh asked for the sefer zichronos, and no matter how its pages get turned, it always came out to the page recording how Mordechai saved the king's life. At that time, Homon with his inflated ego saw Mordechai not bowing down and decided to hang Mordechai on a tall tree. The very next day everything came together and Esther felt she was ready to approach Achashverosh and ask for Klal Yisroel's salvation. She is a prophetess who sensed that Klal Yisroel's teshuvoh has been accepted in shomayim. The decree has been cancelled, and it is time to turn everything around.

The megillah refers to Torah as "orah" – light. Why not just say Torah? Because Torah enlightens people to the truth. It could be the truth about the Torah itself, and it could be enlightening us to the truth about what life is all about.

We will skip Simcha and go to Sosson and Yekor.

Yekor refers to tefillin shel rosh. Why? The Torah says that when non-Jews see us wearing tefillin they will instinctually be in awe and fear of us. They will see how we represent Hashem in this world and they will appreciate how valuable and special we are. This is what we need to project to the world. If this is Klal Yisroel's message, then it has to be clear to everyone – even other Jews.

Sosson is bris miloh. There are two important lessons we learn from bris miloh. One is what the midrash teaches us about why Dovid Hamelech composed a chapter of Tehillim about miloh. Dovid was in the bathhouse and realized he has no talis, no tefillin, no mitzvos – until he realized he has bris miloh. The message is that people often think of their avodas Hashem in terms of things external to them. But it doesn't penetrate to the core of who they are. With bris miloh, we have a sign that our very bodies are imprinted with Hashem's mitzvos, and avodas Hashem is an integral part of who we are.

Also it is not just on any part of the body. It is on the organ that has the most intense drive for taivoh – even this area of life is incorporated into our avodas Hashem and is subject to our control. It doesn't control us. We enjoy the pleasures of the physical world in a Torah way. The rest of the world is controlled by taivoh and they are rolling drunk in the streets. That is not who we are. We control our taivoh and we can have an enjoyable seudas mitzvah. It is the opposite of the seudoh of Achashverosh. We had no business going to that seudoh celebrating the victory over Hashem with taivoh and znus. We are a different people – we are a higher-level people and we have to project that image to the rest of the world.

The Rambam says that the message of Purim is to show the power of tefilloh and teshuvoh. We say we have bitochon that when we daven and do teshuvoh, we are guaranteed that Hashem will save us. This is our simcha – that Hashem will always be there for us when we call out to Him sincerely and are intensely connected to Him.