

THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

Lots of Joy

Two and a half thousand years ago is a very long time, and Persia is very far away. Nonetheless, the dramatic events that took place in that distant place at that distant time are still celebrated with undiminished joy by Jewish people the world over. The festival is called Purim, and it is characterized by merriment, masquerades and an exhilarating joy unequalled at any other time of the year.

Two and a half thousand years ago, the Jewish people reached the lowest point of their history since leaving Egypt nearly one thousand years before. The Holy Temple in Jerusalem was razed to the ground. The city and the land lay in ruins. The kingdom was no more, and its people were carried off into captivity. Fifty years later, a Persian minister named Haman, a man of Amalekite descent, paid the King of Persia a large sum of money for the right to exterminate the Jewish people once and for all. The situation seemed hopeless. But fortuitously, the new Queen of Persia was a secret Jew, and she cleverly engineered Haman's downfall. The Jews then rose up against their oppressors and slaughtered them, and disaster was averted.

So how do we characterize this great deliverance? Do we give it a name that will memorialize Haman's downfall? Or perhaps the victorious Jewish uprising? Not at all. It is called Purim in remembrance of the lottery (*pur* is the Persian word for lot) that determined the date on which Haman would exterminate the Jews.

The questions are obvious. Why is the festival named for such a seemingly minor aspect of the entire harrowing episode? Why does this festival warrant a more exuberant outpouring of joy than all others? Why does masquerade play such a prominent role in the Purim festivities?

The commentators explain that the miracle of Purim had the most profound significance for the future of the Jewish people. Unlike the Exodus, the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people from Haman's genocidal plot was not accompanied by supernatural phenomena. Rivers did not turn to blood. The sea did not split. The Divine Presence did not appear on smoldering mountaintops. In fact, the Name of the Almighty does not even appear in the Book of Esther, which chronicles the Purim story. Yet this is the very message of Purim, that the seemingly natural course of events actually conceals the guiding hand of Providence.

Historically, the Amalekites had always sought to disrupt the special relationship between the Creator and His chosen people. They were determined to prove that the Creator only intervenes with supernatural manifestations, and that human affairs are otherwise governed by random happenstance and the designs and machinations of man.

Haman was the supreme expression of that philosophy, plotting and scheming to turn the tide of natural events against the Jewish people. But ultimately, an extraordinary turnaround in natural events caused his downfall. The king, in a drunken stupor, orders the execution of his queen, and she is replaced by a secret Jew. A palace plot against the king is uncovered by a Jewish nobleman. And suddenly, disaster turns to triumph. Clearly, the hand of Providence had guided these developments and not abandoned the Jewish people to the mercy of random events.

What could be more encouraging to the embattled Jewish people through the ages than the knowledge that Hashem would never forsake them? What could bring them more exhilarating joy than the knowledge that even the insignificant, seemingly random events are actually controlled and guided by the loving hand of Hashem?

Therefore, our Sages chose to name the festival Purim, indicating that even a simple roll of the dice is not determined by a random luck of the draw. For the same reason, we frolic in masquerade, indicating that all the world is a masquerade under which nothing exists but the will of Hashem.

In our own lives, we all fall victim to the vicissitudes of life at one time or another, and it is hard not to become disheartened or even depressed. Let us, however, stop and think for a moment. What exactly gets us down when we run into a brick wall? Surely, it is the sense of utter futility and hopelessness, the thought that all our efforts are useless against an overwhelming world. But if we reflect on the message of Purim, we will understand that we are in the hands of our loving Father in Heaven, and that in the blink of an eye, our fortunes can turn completely around.