

THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

A Fistful of Flour

If vengeance is sweet, as the old saying goes, then Haman must have been licking his fingers. Ever since Mordechai had refused to bow down to him, Haman had thirsted for revenge, and now it was at hand. He had paid ten thousand talents of silver into the coffers of King Ahasueros for the rights to exterminate all the Jews of Persia lay in his hands, and now nothing stood in the way of his evil designs.

But first Haman wanted to gloat, to savor his moment of victory to the utmost. And so, the Midrash tells us, he went on a tour of the Jewish quarter of the capital city of Shushan. The word of the murderous decree had already spread among the Jewish people, and Haman wanted to see their consternation and despair with his own eyes. He wanted them to see them look upon their tormentor, helpless to prevent their annihilation.

Meanwhile, Mordechai had also been busy with his preparations. He assembled the young men of Shushan, and together, they devoted themselves to study and prayer in order to ward off the evil decree. When Haman arrived, Mordechai was studying the laws of the *minchah* offering with his young disciples. When he saw Haman, he declared defiantly, "One fistful of the *minchah* offering will counteract all your thousands of silver talents! We will prevail, not you!"

Two questions immediately present themselves. One, why was he studying the laws of the *minchah* offering at this time? Two, how would the *minchah* offering serve as a countermeasure to Haman's designs? Let us look into this week's Torah reading for a clue. When the Torah describes the other Temple offerings, it refers to "a person" bringing them. Here, however, the Torah speaks about "a soul" who brings a *minchah*. Why is this so?

The commentators explain that the *minchah* is the simplest of all the offerings. It consists of flour, oil and frankincense. The one who brings this offering approaches the Almighty not with the pride of a person bringing a beautiful animal but with the brokenhearted humility of a poor and simple person, an abject supplicant declaring his unworthiness before the Master of the Universe. This is so precious to the Almighty that He considers it as if the person has delivered his soul to Him.

This is what Mordechai was saying to Haman. The simple fistful of flour that represents the *minchah* offering is the symbol of the special

bond of devotion between the Jewish people and the Almighty. When the Jewish people study the *minchah* offering and bring the concept of the fistful of flour into their hearts, they become so enfolded by the protection of the Almighty that no enemy can prevail against them.

The family of a great sage made a lavish party for him on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. All his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren came, each bearing a special gift. After the guests had all left, the sage drank a glass of tea with one of his disciples near the mountain of gifts.

“Which gift was the most precious?” asked the disciple. “The rare books? The works of art? The luxurious garments?”

The sage shook his head. He rummaged through the gifts and held up a makeshift hat constructed of sticks and paper. “This was made by my five-year-old granddaughter,” he said. “She was not showing me her generosity nor her cleverness nor her good taste. All she was showing me was her love. That is the most precious of all.”

In our own lives, we need to penetrate the outer crust of our affectations and focus on the soul that shines within each of us, the spark of the divine that yearns to connect with its Creator. Admittedly, this is a difficult thing to accomplish on a daily basis, but at least on Purim, we must make a special effort. As we are swept up in the spirit and revelry of the festival, let us dedicate this celebration to the Almighty as a fistful of flour, as an expression of our love, humility and overwhelming gratitude for all the blessings He has bestowed on us despite our unworthiness. Let us say thank you with our very souls.