

PURIM

תשע"ט

The megillah can be understood on many levels. The Vilna Gaon wrote a pirush on Megillas Esther on four different levels: Pshat, Remez, Drush and Sod.

Achashveirosh started out at a lowly station in life and then rose to power. He was a slave who worked in the royal stables. The king's daughter fell in love with him. The pasuk in Mishlei says one should tremble from three things. One of them is a slave who becomes a king.

Malchus is power. Most people raised among royalty understand that power needs to be used responsibly for the greater good and not be abused to satisfy one's own petty, selfish fantasies. Because Achashveirosh began as a simpleton, occupied with his own personal needs, he didn't know how to use power properly.

The Gra says that Achashveirosh is a symbol of the yetzer horo in every person. Hashem created a yetzer tov and a yetzer horo. The yetzer horo has a positive purpose in a human being. It supplies the drive to achieve and accomplish. Hashem declared that everything He created was very good—"tov me'od". Chazal say this refers to the yetzer horo in a human being. But it is only good if it is subject to the guidance of the yetzer tov. It is supposed to be an eved. But when it begins to rule then disaster follows.

The midrash tells us a story. Chazal saw how difficult it is to stand up to the yetzer horo and wanted to abolish it. They davened to Hashem to get rid of it. Hashem listened to their request, and immediately afterwards, no-one had any drive to get up and do anything! So they davened for Hashem to restore it.

The yetzer horo isn't intrinsically evil. Hashem would never create something intrinsically evil and call it "tov me'od". But it is only good when it is used in a constructive manner.

There are different yetzer horos people have which drive people in different directions and they need the yetzer tov to channel them properly.

Achashveirosh represents the yetzer horo of taivoh and extreme indulgence in physical pleasure. He made drunken feasts which lasted for half-a-year! We discussed in previous years that the reason Achashveirosh was celebrating was because he reckoned that it had been seventy years since the churbon, and the promise that Klal Yisroel would be redeemed had not been kept. He was celebrating his victory over Hashem in keeping the Jews in golus.

But, Achashveirosh also represents the yetzer horo of gaivoh. He thinks he is running the world and the rules that apply to normal people simply don't apply to him. This is the natural effect that power has on people. It swells their ego to the point where they feel that they are above normal standards that constrain regular people's behavior.

Vashti was the daughter of Belshatzar who fell in love with this stable boy and married him. After Belshatzar was killed and this stable boy rose to power, he didn't change his basic mentality. He remained a stable boy and didn't understand that great power needs to be used responsibly. Instead, just like the yetzer horo, Achashveirosh used his power to promote his own ego and his own petty whims in very destructive ways.

We have various personalities in the megillah. Achashveirosh and Vashti, Haman and Zeresh, and Mordechai and Esther.

Achashveirosh uses Vashti to build himself up as the emperor because

through her, he connected to royal blood. Otherwise, he would have remained a stable boy. He uses Vashti further to promote himself at the drunken feast—to show her off in front of his peers for his own ego gratification. Achashveirosh shows that he is capable of seeing another human being as a mere tool to be used and then discarded when proven no longer useful, in pursuit of his selfish agenda. Not recognizing any intrinsic value in anyone else. The biggest yetzer horo in this world is kovod—gasus haruach—seeing your own ego as the be all and end all.

In Achashveirosh's cabinet we have Memuchon who is Haman. And he has an agenda all of his own.

Haman has severe sholom bayis issues with his wife Zeresh because she doesn't give him the respect he feels he deserves. So when Haman notices Vashti doing the same thing towards the king, he figures it is the perfect opportunity to make this crisis as broad as possible. He tells Achashveirosh that Vashti has not only dishonored the king; she has made herself an example of female assertiveness for all the women of the empire to follow! This will destabilize the very social fabric we all live in!

So Haman looks at Vashti as a tool to regain the upper hand in his own household against his wife. He recommends Vashti be executed for purely selfish interests. Memuchan is really interested in his own problems. But in order to solve his own private issue, he makes a sweeping decree to cover the entire empire! The entire Persian Empire is being used as a pawn to take care of his domestic squabbles. The scope of Haman's ego is staggering.

This is how reshaim relate to other people.

Then Achashveirosh calms down. How does Achashveirosh pick a new queen? By holding a beauty contest. It is an interesting attitude towards marriage. And each contestant has to spend one night with him and then is permanently imprisoned and put on call for the rest of her life—in case he desires her again. A complete baal taivoh who has no problem treating other human beings as complete objects.

Then, in stark contrast, we have the personality of Mordechai. He was exiled in golus Yechoniyoh along with the Sanhedrin. He unassumingly takes care of his cousin, a yesomoh, and brings her up. He married Esther out of total chesed since she was vulnerable. He displays genuine concern of one human being for another.

If you look at human relationships described in the megillah, we see two very vast extremes. On one extreme we have people manipulating other people, using them as pawns to further their ambitions for power and taivoh and kovod. In this world, no human being has intrinsic value—it's all about my ego and my desires. The yetzer horo takes over completely.

Out of nowhere, Hashem arranged that Esther should find favor in the eyes of Achashveirosh and be gracious to her, and grant her every wish. Mordechai instructed Esther not to reveal her true identity. She keeps his trust and obeyed his instructions even while she occupies the highest position of power a woman can achieve in the Persian Empire. She doesn't forget that she owes allegiance to Mordechai because of the selfless chesed he performed for her.

Hashem is running the world. He so arranged that Esther become the queen of the realm. Why? Klal Yisroel failed the first nisayon of attending the feast of Achashveirosh and celebrated their being in

golus under his rule. Hashem knows in advance that Klal Yisroel needs to do teshuvoh and in His infinite wisdom, He prepares how Klal Yisroel will escape the decree of Haman. The first accomplishment of Esther and Mordechai recorded in the megillah is the foiled plot of Bigson and Seresh. It is a small incident which takes up a scant few pesukim at the end of the 2nd perek—right before the rise of Haman. But Hashem neatly fits this minor incident to be in position for when it will play its crucial role three perakim later.

Hashem is doing two things with Haman. He takes a direct descendant of Agog king of Amoliek and makes him the highest advisor to the king, and gives him the authority to make sure everyone bows down to him. Haman, for his part puts an idol around his neck to make sure everyone worships it. He is pushing the limits of his power—waiting to see who will defy him and exercise even more power. All bow down before him—even the Jews—except one. Mordechai refuses to even make an outward, insincere show of avodo zoro.

Here, Klal Yisroel are being put through another tremendous nisayon. They failed the nisayon of the seudoh and they failed the nisayon of bowing to the idol. In response to this, Hashem passes the royal ring over to Haman—He is withdrawing His hashgochoh over Klal Yisroel and handing their fate over to Haman's control.

Hashem has prepared everything in the background. Esther is the queen in the palace, Mordechai foils the plot of Bigson and Seresh, Haman is elevated to tremendous power, and Mordechai is inciting Haman into tremendous hatred for the Jewish people.

Until now, Klal Yisroel have been trying to curry favor in the eyes of Achashveirosh; they participated in his feast, not wanting to stand out, bowing to his highest minister. All of a sudden, they become public enemy number one—marked for complete and total annihilation. They have been hit between the eyes and realize they have been taking the wrong path. They need Hashem's help to survive.

The reason Mordechai instructed Esther not to reveal her identity was because he didn't want the Jews of the empire to have an excuse to relax and get too comfortable with their situation in golus. They need to daven to Hashem for survival and not take it for granted because they have a Jewish sister inside the palace. This was the feeling people have today with Trump's daughter and son-in-law being so close to the President of the United States. Having an insider on our side gives the Jews too much complacency and not enough reliance on Hashem's protection. Without Hashem's protection, we're finished!

Mordechai instructs Esther to go in to get an audience with Achashveirosh—without being invited—to plead on Klal Yisroel's behalf. She hesitates because Achashveirosh's ego has swelled to such huge proportions that without an invitation to see the king, even the queen herself could be executed on the spot. Mordechai says it's now or never. "Hashem didn't put you in the palace because of your talents or your beauty. You are in the palace for one reason only—to save Klal Yisroel."

Everyone has a purpose that Hashem put us here for. We are in a position to realize what that purpose is. But, sometimes we are blinded by our own inflated self-image that we think we are worthy all on our own with no greater purpose to serve. Maybe I have the talents and position that I find myself with because Hashem needs me in this position to do the job I was meant to do? Not because I'm so great?

So Esther asks Mordechai, if this decree is so severe that it is threatening Klal Yisroel's very existence, there must have been an aveiroh that precipitated it! I can plead to Achashveirosh all I want, but what good will it do if Klal Yisroel don't do teshuvoh for this aveiroh that started the problem in the first place?

Esther commits to fasting for three days straight before going in to see the king. It is a powerful testimony to Esther's deep emunoh—any yeshuoh that will come is completely in Hashem's hands. She barely

does the basic hishtadlus to win Achashveirosh's favor—coming in pale and emaciated after three days of fasting!

She is davening to Hashem the entire time, and Achashveirosh extends his scepter to allow her to approach. She davens for a strategy and Hashem inspires her to ask for a feast with Achashveirosh and Haman. Does Esther know what this party will lead to? Not at all. When the first party comes and nothing happens, she is forced to stall and asks them to come back tomorrow for a second party!

Haman's ego is soaring. He thinks he is being warmed up for something really big. He runs and tells all the people he likes, and Zeresh his wife, about this exclusive invitation. He is boasting about his wealth and all his sons, revealing that in Haman's mind, his children mainly exist for pumping his ego and elevating his social status. They don't have intrinsic worth as human beings. The pursuit of kovod of Haman knows no limits.

There are two general types of taivos in this world. This is a fundamental rule in describing human behavior. There is physical taivoh and there is spiritual. Physical taivoh has its limits. When you go overboard, you stop. Spiritual taivos like gaivoh never end—you will never feel satisfied and it ultimately destroys a person. If there is one Jew who doesn't give Haman what he thinks he is due, nothing has any meaning to him. All that he has is worthless!

So Zeresh gives him advice how to deal with Mordechai.

That night, Achashveirosh couldn't sleep. Chazal say that really Achashveirosh hated the Jews worse than Haman and at that point there was no way the decree could be reversed.

That night, Hashem Himself was awakened from His pattern of sleep, of hester ponim, and will now orchestrate the yeshuoh. Klal Yisroel had two paths they could travel on. If they wouldn't do teshuvoh, the decree of annihilation would be carried out. If they did teshuvoh, all the necessary elements were already put in place to bring about the yeshuoh—from Vashti being killed to Esther becoming queen, to Mordechai foiling the plot, to Haman building the gallows for Mordechai.

Chazal say Achashveirosh's sleep was disturbed by the suspicious invitations that Esther was extending to Haman. Maybe they are both conspiring to kill me and take over the empire? (And it's probably true. Haman has nowhere to go but to be number one.) Achashveirosh asks himself: "Why don't I have an ally who is supposed to inform me of such schemes? Maybe it's because my whole outlook on life is about manipulation and using other human beings as pawns and other people using me as their pawns? Is there someone who genuinely did something for me out of genuine concern? Let me do some research..." And he takes out the royal records.

Simultaneously, Haman's gaivoh is going out of control. He is restless in his pursuit of killing Mordechai and he comes to Achashveirosh at three in the morning to discuss it. Imagine the combination: Achashveirosh is wondering perhaps Haman is out to get him, Mordechai is probably the only one in the world who would help him, and here Haman is coming, asking to kill his only ally!

But it doesn't work so simply. Hashem is still waiting for Klal Yisroel to go through their process of teshuvoh.

Here, we have another nisayon.

Klal Yisroel could have looked at the whole situation as Mordechai's fault! He is the fanatic fundamentalist who isn't willing to use any heteirim to avoid making Haman angry. Everybody else is able to bow down to Haman and avoid a chillul Hashem—but Mordechai has to give Haman an excuse to hate the Jews and kill all of us! He's putting everyone in danger because of his frumkeit! You could just imagine the Jewish media pundits today making such arguments to deflect

the blame from themselves and put the entire blame for decree on Mordechai's head.

But Mordechai tells them it was Klal Yisroel's failures which led to this danger. Klal Yisroel were saved because they accepted it and didn't shrug off the blame.

We had a similar situation with Eliyahu and Achav trading blame for who is causing the drought. Klal Yisroel was confused. Maybe Eliyahu was the problem and not the solution? Sometimes, Klal Yisroel don't know who their true leaders are.

Achashveirosh tests Haman by asking him what he should do for someone who should be honored. He knows Haman will be thinking about himself and wants to see what his ambitions are. Predictably, Haman asks to ride the royal steed and wear the royal crown and be paraded in the street—the ultimate pursuit of kovod. Achashveirosh realizes that this is what he is after and tells him to do it all for Mordechai. The whole story unravels, and Haman goes down till he is destroyed.

Here we have one manipulator after another trying to outdo the other one with their megalomania and paranoia. In the end, it was Mordechai's sincere, genuine care for another human being—whether it is in raising his cousin or saving the king—which brings about the yeshuoh.

After it's all over, Klal Yisroel make a mishteh vesimchoh. But there can be two ways of going about mishteh and simchoh—the Jewish way and the non-Jewish way.

The feast in the beginning of the megillah is devoted exclusively to physical indulgence and using other human beings as objects and pawns for self-gratification. That is what taivoh does to a person—all his relationships are manipulative at the core.

Then there is a genuine Jewish simchoh at the end of the megillah. Klal Yisroel understand that Hashem runs the world behind the scenes—putting everything exactly into place, and He responded to their teshuvoh. Klal Yisroel understood who their true leaders are and what it takes to stand up to the pressure to assimilate and be accepted by non-Jewish society.

That deep sense of Hashem running the world, that He is intimately

involved in our lives, and responds to what we do, filled them with tremendous simchoh. Hashem responds to our mitzvos and aveiros, our teshuvoh and our tefilloh.

Everything we are and our entire future is totally tied into how Hashem orchestrates history, whether we understand it or not. That is simchoh.

Our simchoh is not based on taivoh and using other people. It is matonos le'evyonim and mishloach manos. We are united by a common purpose of being avdei Hashem. We have genuine relationships where we value each human being and have friendship and care.

It's interesting how Achashveirosh has an epiphany on the night of his paranoia. He suddenly realizes: do I have any genuine friends who care about me? Have I benefited from someone's genuine kindness and consideration without showing gratitude? Have I been wrapped inside my own ego never appreciating the value of genuine friendship? That thought—of genuine relationship—in that moment of sanity, opened up a new way of thinking about other human beings besides manipulation.

That is a true Jewish simchoh. This is why it is so painful to see how people act on Purim in our generation. They are completely clueless as to how it should be celebrated without any thought of what brought about the decree of annihilation and what the yeshuoh of Purim is all about.

The simchoh of Purim is confronting our position in this world—we are Hashem's people and we have an intimate relationship with Him. It matters if we do mitzvos and aveiros. It affects our relationship with Him. There are two ways to interact with other people—see them as pawns and objects to manipulate for our own selfish needs, or have genuine care and concern for them by seeing the tzelem Elokim.

The events of the first two perakim are like seeds that are planted, to be ready for the decree of Haman to be able to neutralize it. But the seed will only sprout into yeshuoh when Klal Yisroel does teshuvoh.

The simchoh of Purim is recognizing our unique status in this world and the genuine relationship we have with Hashem and with other people. A simchoh shel mitzvoh is not about our own taivoh. We recognize that every person has a tzelem Elokim, and every Jew is a member of the Am Hanivchar.