

PARSHAS TERUMAH - PURIM 5778

We are approaching Purim. It is important to focus on what simchas Purim means, why we have a simchas Purim in the first place, and what the story of Purim is all about.

Purim is an unusual Yom Tov. The Megillah begins in a strange way. It begins with a description of a wild orgiastic feasting, lasting 180 days. Achashveirosh was in charge of a tremendous empire, but he was such an insecure individual that he couldn't even be an authority in his own home. He reigned over 127 provinces—from Hodu till Kush—and made a feast for all of their governments in the capitol city of Shushan.

The story occurs after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. People don't appreciate what the churban meant as a historical watershed event in the ancient world.

All the major powers in the ancient world—Bavel, Ashur and Mitzrayim—were all vying for dominance in the region. Sancherev was the first to try to conquer Yerushalayim and he was utterly defeated in disgrace. His entire army was wiped out overnight. It was clearly the hand of Hashem which thwarted his army and protected Yerushalayim.

Each country was trying to prove themselves to be the true conqueror of Jerusalem. It would be difficult to prove because the *novi* was already predicting churban in advance—because of the moral degradation of the nation. Bavel wanted to show that it was the more powerful nation and would be able to conquer the most powerful G-d. They would be in charge of the world if they would destroy the Beis Hamikdash. The Beis Hamikdash represented Hashem's presence in the world. As much as Klal Yisroel sank into *avodo zoro*, the Beis Hamikdash still represented One G-d as the supreme absolute power over the universe.

Nevuchadnezar wanted to take credit for the churban, but he knew that the *novi* had predicted the churban. But he knew there was a *nevuah* that the *golus* would last only 70 years. If that prophecy wouldn't come true, then he would know retroactively that it was their might which conquered and not the spiritual downfall of Klal Yisroel.

A successor to the throne of Nevuchadnezar—Belshatzar made a calculation for when the 70 years would arrive. When this date came and went without any *geuloh* for Klal Yisroel, he made a big feast to celebrate the fact that his empire was truly victorious over the Jews and their G-d. But during the feast, there was a mysterious hand which came and wrote a message on the wall which spooked all the people present at the feast. That very night, Belshatzar was assassinated and the Persians took over the empire from Bavel.

The human being has an infinite capacity to rationalize away certain uncomfortable facts. He fools himself into thinking that life will go on as usual even in the face of clear and unambiguous messages from Hashem to the contrary. We've spoken about

this human foible many times.

So even though everyone was shaken up by this incident, people just kept on going undeterred. Achashveirosh the son-in-law of Belshazar made a different calculation about the 70 years. When that was up—on the third year of his reign, he also made a tremendous feast. And now he wanted to show that the Persian-Babylonian empire is the dominant force in the world and that the Jews are in *golus* indefinitely. Hashem has been defeated. He made a tremendous celebration. To emphasize their supposed conquering of the Beis Hamikdash, he took the *keilim* of the Beis Hamikdash and used them for people to get drunk with.

The Jews seeing all this could have one of two reactions.

The reaction should have been one of absolute *aveilus*—mourning the fresh *chilul* of the *kedushoh* of the *keilim*, and more despair over the lengthening of the *golus*.

But the reaction was otherwise. The Jews were so desperate to be accepted and feel 'normal' in the empire, that they joined the feast. Mordechai warned everyone not to go, but to no avail.

Achashveirosh was bringing all the cultures of the vast Persian empire to eat and drink together. He wanted everyone to feel comfortable and he arranged for each nation to prepare the food according to their unique tastes. So Mordechai took this opportunity and arranged for the Jews who were going to participate anyway—despite his protests—to at least have a kosher kitchen to serve their food and minimize the extent of the *aveiros* being committed there.

So we have an impossible scene being described at the very beginning of the Megillah: Achashveirosh is inviting the Jews to participate in a feast which is celebrating his victory over Hashem and his conquering of the Beis Hamikdash! Any self-respecting Jew should be repulsed by this. But they were somehow tempted to join a feast of 180 days of non-stop food, alcohol, and *zenus*—the antithesis of everything the Torah stands for. Why? Jews are so desperate to be like *goyim* and be accepted by them, that they lose all self-respect and all sense of Jewish identity.

More than that, the Jews were also drinking from the *keilim* of the Beis Hamikdash. How was that possible?! First you are attracted to a lifestyle which appeals to the base, animalistic nature of people, which is the absolute opposite of what a human being should be. Once you lose your sense of *kedushas odom* and you sink to the lowest of the low, then you can justify any kind of travesty of *halacha* and violation of propriety. They forgot who and what they were and their identity as a *mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh*.

Achashveirosh's entire legitimacy to be the emperor of the Babylonian kingdom comes from *Vashti*—Belshazar's daughter.

She married him as a simple stable boy and he rose to the throne through her royal lineage. But once he achieved what he wanted from his marriage to her and solidified his rule, there is no hakoras hatov. The minute she stops being useful to him and she brazenly defies his command, he gets rid of her. Every human being is using others and is being used by others.

There are two groups of personalities in the Megilloh.

There is Achashveirosh, Vashti, Homon and Zeresh, and Charvonoh—all of them treat other people as objects of their ambition and desire. There is no personal loyalty, no sense of genuine relationship between them. They are all in it for themselves and each one is using the other one to get ahead and further their own selfish interests.

If you view yourself and an animal, then you naturally view other people as other animals in competition for limited resources. So you use them and throw them away when they stop being useful.

Memuchon explains to Achashveirosh that what Vashti is doing is undermining not only his rule, but the rule of every man over his household. So he should kill Vashti—Why? Because I'm afraid of my dominating wife Zeresh! If you will kill Vashti, I can intimidate her to stop dominating me. Even though all the other advisers advise against killing Vashti because she is providing legitimacy to his rule over the empire, Achashveirosh only listens to Memuchon because he is insecure about his own household. Killing Vashti is his way of getting on top. He didn't care about her effect on the kingdom at large and neither does Memuchon. No-one cares about anyone but himself in this feast.

Then we have the other type. Ester was an orphan. Her uncle has to raise her as his own. So even though he was a member of the Sanhedrin and of high social rank, he still has to do chessed and take care of a family member.

There is the outlook of an animal and the self-centered focus of only looking out for your own interests. Then there is Mordechai who was one of the greatest talmidei chachomim of his generation, and he takes care of a neglected abandoned orphan. He marries her out of chessed.

The drunken feast in Shushan represents the non-Jewish way of approaching life and other people. Mordechai represents a whole other way of approaching life and other people. The contrast between this marriage and Achashveirosh's marriage is stunning. Mordechai didn't marry Esther because of looks and ego or position.

The Megilloh tells a story on many levels. One of the messages is to contrast the way a Jew relates to himself and other human beings, and the way a non-Jew relates. There is a Torah lifestyle of kedushoh and chessed, and there is a non-Jewish lifestyle of indulgence and selfishness. The tragedy at the beginning of the Megilloh is that the Jews allowed themselves to drift from their Torah lifestyle, to forget who they really are, and lose all sense of self-respect. They try to become part of the decadent, selfish indulgent culture of Persia and the result is near annihilation. Seeing goyim acting like a bunch of animals should have produced feelings of disgust and revulsion. But instead, they longed to join it.

We live in very difficult times. The availability of the media that surrounds us has corrupted our thinking. It distorts our approach to life and our approach to other people.

There is a simple divide between these two approaches.

The Beis Hamikdosh represented Hashem's presence in our everyday lives. This was the purpose of the Mishkon after the Divine revelation at Har Sinai. The Ramban says the Mishkon was designed to take that immense closeness of the Shechinoh with us when we left Har Sinai. There is spirituality in this world—not just beyond the natural existence at Har Sinai. People could feel that spirituality within this world through the Mishkon.

But the ancient avodozoros have their own version of spirituality. They find a way to celebrate zenus as a part of their spiritual experience. They celebrated their animalistic urges and base emotions as a part of their religion. They saw no contradiction. We say the human being is a tzelem Elokim and our neshomo is supposed to dominate and elevate our body. The physical world is not the be-all-end-all of our existence.

2400 years ago, and still today, we have the same challenge to resist the culture of the non-Jewish hedonistic world. We have to regularly stop and reflect how we are being affected by this culture. It affects the way we relate to ourselves and to other people. The way we relate to Torah and to Hashem.

The job of science in the western mind is to be able to explain our world, how it functions and how it came to exist—without any input from Hashem. The role of science is to remove Hashem from our lives and from our world. They are always trying to theorize ways to say the world always existed, but they proved that there must have been a Creator. There is no such thing as pure physicality that creates itself without any spiritual source. There is no such thing as human being without a neshomo. That is the fundamental principle of the Torah.

We say Adar comes in with simchoh—it doesn't mean going to a rock concert. But people—even from Jews—lose balance of what is Torah and what the Jewish people stand for, and what the human being is all about.

Purim is an incredible day. Because as much as Jews want to act like animals and conform to non-Jewish norms, the non-Jews reject us and try to destroy us. Then we woke up. We then showed the world the power of tefilloh. It not your power plays and manipulations that run the world. In one night, Achashveirosh loses sleep and all of Homon's plans collapse on top of him. Our survival doesn't depend on anything but Hashem. He is running it alone.

The Megilloh ends with Klal Yisroel making a seudoh. It is starkly contrasted with the seudoh at the beginning of the Megilloh—built on chessed and sharing our happiness with others. Not manipulation. If you view yourself as a neshomo, you view others as a neshomo. But if you view yourself and others as animals, then you couldn't care less about the other person. You may need him and be nice to him because he serves your interests for the moment. But you don't see any tzelem Elokim because he is an animal just like you.

When Homon came in that night to Achashveirosh, Homon is thinking this is how he can use Achashveirosh to gain higher rank in the empire, Achashveirosh is worried about the security of his throne, and through these instincts playing off on each other, Hashem saved the Jewish people and listened to their tefillos and their teshuvoh.

This is a very deep story that we have to learn and apply to our lives. We live in a world dominated by electronic devices and anonymous and technical communication. There is no genuine communication between people anymore—even with your friend sitting right next to you. We don't know how to relate to other human beings anymore. People's information

and communication and time are controlled by these small electronic devices. People have to pull themselves back and realize what is grabbing their minds and occupying their headspace.

The Jews joined a drinking party for 180 days!!! Hashem Yirachem! I'm sure they made an eiruv to be able to carry to the palace on Shabbos. They lost all sensitivity to kedushoh

and were capable of using the keilim of the Beis Hamikdosh, but they made sure everything was glatt kosher. That is the paradox of today's frum Jewish society as well.

The Megilloh is not just another story about ancient Shushan and the Persian empire of 2400 years ago. This story is specifically and tragically about our times.