

Megillat Esther

The Secret of Jewish Celebration

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INTRODUCTION - THE WINE PARTY "THEME"

Megillat Esther has many hallmarks, many themes. One of these central features of the Megilla is the phenomenon of the *משתה* - the feast, or wine party. The institution of *משתה* appears to be the most common and consistent feature of Persian culture as we read of it in the Megilla.

No fewer than Ten feasts are listed in the Megilla. Amongst them we find:

- Achashverosh's party (1:1-8)
- Vashti's feast (1:9)
- The feast of Esther's coronation. (2:18)
- The wine drinking of Haman and Achashverosh as they sentenced the Jews to their death. (3:15)
- The two "intimate" parties to which the only invitees were Esther, Haman and Achashverosh. (5:5; 7:1)

- The notion of feasting is dominant in the Megilla¹.

THE JEWISH CELEBRATION FEAST

The Jews would appear to **emulate** this culture of feasting as they celebrate their victory. Repeatedly in the closing chapter of the Megilla we find the notion of *משתה* – the feasting or rejoicing that has added connotations of drinking.

17 On the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and they rested on the fourteenth day and made it a **day of feasting and rejoicing**.

18 And the Jews of Shushan gathered on the thirteenth and fourteenth [of Adar], and rested on the fifteenth and made it a **day of feasting and rejoicing**.

19 Thus the provincial Jews, those who live in unwallied cities, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a holiday, a day of **feasting, rejoicing and sending portions of food** one to another. the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar...

22 ...which had been transformed for them from one of sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity to make them days of **feasting, rejoicing, sending food portions one to another and giving gifts to the poor**. (Chapter 9)²

¹ See <http://www.vbm-torah.org/purim/pur63-yg.htm> for a shiur that deals with many of these feasts.

אסתר פרק ט

(יז) בניים שלשה עשר לחדש אדר ונוח בארבעה עשר בו ועשה אתו יום משתה ושמחה: (יח) >והיהודיים < ויהודים אשר בשושן נקמה בשלשה עשר בו ובארבעה עשר בו ונוח בחמשה עשר בו ועשה אתו יום משתה ושמחה: (יט) על כן היהודים >הפרושים < הפרזים הישבים

Why is the notion of feasting - *משתה* - so prominent here in the Jewish commemoration of Purim? Some will say that any Jewish society is affected and influenced by the wider genre of the host culture. The Jews engage in *משתה* because the Persian environment celebrates in that way.

Others will claim that there is a deliberate attempt, to mirror the events that constituted the Purim miracle. In this vein, the Ralbag, states:

"It is called a *Mishteh* – a feast – defined by the drinking of wine, for that is an apt manner of commemoration, in order to remember the feasts of Achashverosh and Esther!"

The Ralbag tells us then, that there is a deliberate link between the Persian parties and the Jewish parties. He suggests that the latter commemorate the former.

In this shiur I would like to suggest a more complex relationship between the feasts and to learn, by comparison and contrast, a little about the joy of Purim.

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THE TWO FEASTS OF CH.1 AND CH.9 – A CHIASTIC "ENVELOPE" TO THE MEGILLA

Of all the parallels and contrasts that may be made between the various feasts in the Megilla, I would like to spend some time engaging in a comparison between Esther Chapter 1 and Chapter 9. The two chapters mirror each other in certain ways, forming a symmetrical "envelope" or *inclusio* to the Megilla. Let us explain.

We find TWO feasts at the start of the Megilla and TWO at the end of the Megilla.

The first Chapter finds Achashverosh throwing a party for all his 127 States:

3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast **for all his ministers and servants**; the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and all the ministers of the provinces in his service. **4** For many days, one hundred and eighty days, he displayed the glorious wealth of his kingdom and the splendid beauty of his majesty. (1:3-4)

This is followed by a further feast – a week long – solely for the inhabitants of Shushan:

5 And when these days came to an end, the king made a seven-day feast in the courtyard of the king's palace garden, for **all the people in Shushan**

At the end of the Megilla, in ch. 9, we also see TWO feasts, this time feasts of Jewish victory. Once again, the first *משתה* is for the 127 States:

19 Thus the **provincial Jews, those who live in unwallied cities**, make the **fourteenth** day of the month of Adar a holiday, a day of feasting, rejoicing and sending portions of food one to another.

בערי הפרזות עשים את יום ארבעה עשר לחדש אדר שמחה ומשתה ויום טוב ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו: פ (כב) כימים אשר נחו בהם היהודים מאויביהם והחדש אשר נהפך להם מיגור לשמחה ומאכל ליום טוב לעשות אותם ימי משתה ושמחה ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאיביונים:

Followed by a feast in Shushan:

18 And the Jews of Shushan gathered on the thirteenth and fourteenth [of Adar], and **rested on the fifteenth** and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing.

So the Megilla is framed by the dual feasts:

1. the "international" celebration, and
2. that of Shushan.

After noticing this parallel, we might wonder as to its significance.

CONTRAST

Rather than comparing ch.1 and 9, drawing a connection between them, we shall suggest that the parallel is there in order to articulate a contrast.

In our introductory comments I mentioned that TEN feasts are mentioned in the Megilla. There is lots of drinking, lots of celebrating. However, until the victory of the Jews in ch.9, not one of these feasts is associated with the word שמחה! - Lots of revelling, but no happiness. One wonders why? In this section we shall attempt to answer this question. Let us understand the contrast between the feast of Achashverosh and the feasts of the Jews.

THE PERSIAN FEAST

A spirit of wealth, indulgence and opulence characterises Achashverosh's parties. It is all about "בהראותו" - the exhibitionism and display of Achashverosh's kingdom, his wealth. And the aim is to entertain: "to fulfil the whims of every person" (1:8) לעשות כרצון איש ואיש. This would appear to be an explicit objective of the feast.

To fully understand what is happening here we need to delve a little into the detail of chapter 1. What is the nature of the parties here? There are two parties. The first lasts a full half year – 180 days (six months!) To whom is this feast directed? It is for the leaders, officials and dignitaries of all the 127 nation states³ that constitute the Persian Empire.

"For all the officials and courtiers – the army of Persia and Media; the nobles and the governors of the States in his Empire." (1:3)

It is designed to impress:

"To display the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty." (1:4)

³ Sometimes we talk of 127 Provinces. I'm not sure what this word brings to mind. But in truth, we must think of Persia as an imperial capital. There are 127 conquered nation states (and maybe even more, as some are conglomerated into regions.) The Persian occupation policy was to grant autonomy to the occupied cultures hoping that if the host populations were happy in their relative freedom, they would remain loyal to the Empire, keeping the calm and paying their taxes. (see Ezra 1:1-6 and Tattenai in 5:6.)

There are a number of theories as to why Achashverosh might have thrown such an exuberant party in the 3rd year of his reign in particular. Some suggest that it took him a while to stabilize his regime, and that now, he invites the Foreign Ministers of all his vassal states to come and convene in Shushan. He wanted them to be impressed by the grandeur of the Imperial centre; to feel proud of their association with the central government of the Empire and to be awed by its dimensions. They probably wanted to discuss trade rights, tax tariffs and the like. At any rate, this was a global meeting of world leaders, maybe like the annual conference of Heads of State that takes place at the UN. More of a convention (with side entertainment) than a "party."

The 180 days for the international community was followed with a week of celebration for the inhabitants of Shushan "young and old." But despite the more limited scope, it is precisely here that the text emphasises the wealth and rich décor which are, once again at the forefront of the occasion.

"fine linen and purple cloth to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on floor of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl, and mosaics. Royal wine was served in abundance, as befits a king, in golden cups ... and the rule for drinking was "no restrictions!" For the king had given orders to fulfil any man's desire." (1:6-8)

The glitzy atmosphere, a spirit of hedonism and pleasure, of luxury and indulgence, dominates; the golden tableware, the excessive wine flow, the demand to fulfil every man's desire, and obviously, the drunkenness. Even the משתה נשים organized by Vashti should be seen in this context. Our assumption being that this separation was not in order to facilitate excessive *tzniut*, but rather to allow the men greater license and freedom in their "enjoyment." All of this comes to its climax when in a drunken state of mind, Achashverosh calls upon Vashti to appear before him. Once again the purpose is exhibitionist:

...to show her beauty to the nations and ministers, for she was indeed beautiful.

And her negative response expresses her refusal to be abused; to be "used."

THE CONTRAST. JEWISH CELEBRATION

Back to Chapter 9. The Jews escape the threat of annihilation. How do they respond? How do the Jews celebrate? We have noted that the manner in which the Jews celebrate their victory is through a day dedicated not just to שמחה but to משתה! Why do the Jews need to drink as well? What is the notion of drinking here?

First, as we said above, let us note that this party is the first time that we hear the notion of "joy", or "happiness." What was different here that generated this rare commodity of שמחה? The happiness does not come from the wine itself. The joy of the Mishteh – the party – here is due to another factor. The critical element is the texture, the mode of celebration.

LACK OF INDULGENCE

First, let us remind ourselves the military victory scored by the Jewish community is devoid of any materialistic motive. In the Megilla we read how the Jews were authorized by government permit to take the spoils of the Persians – "and the loot may be plundered" (8:11). However the Jews were very particular not to touch the property of their adversaries: They did not touch the booty (9:15,16).

The Jewish victory was far from an event of mob violence; it was not a pogrom. The Jews were disciplined, they acted in a dignified and restrained manner. They killed those who sought to kill the Jews, but they did not loot or steal.

EXCHANGE OF GIFTS – A CLASSIC MODE OF JEWISH CELEBRATION.

But let us return to the mode of שמחה and celebration. Rather than a lavish, bombastic and selfish celebration, the Jews mark their victory by (9:19):

"a holiday, a day of feasting, rejoicing and **sending portions of food one to another.**"

And later we read (9:22):

"days of **feasting, rejoicing, sending food portions one to another and giving gifts to the poor.**"

The prime commemoration is the sending of food to friends, and gifts to the poor. Now, where did the Jews get such an idea? How did they know that this was the appropriate mode of response? Or maybe I should pose the question this way. We have many Chagim in which we have a mitzvah of Simchat Yom Tov but only Purim has Mishloach Manot and Matanot Le'evyonim. How did the Jews intuit that this practice was the appropriate response to the Purim victory?

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ESTABLISHING THE INSTITUTION OF PURIM

Here let me talk for a few moments on what may seem like a digression about Chapter 9 of Esther. It is clear that the central topic of the latter half of this chapter is the establishment of Purim as an official day of celebration and its institutionalisation as a fixture in the Jewish calendar. It would appear that there was some trouble here, a certain resistance in accepting Purim⁴ as a festive day, a fixture in the calendar. After all, there had never been a precedent of a *chag deRabbanan* (Rabbinic holiday) before. This is the first non-Biblical festival. I imagine that the Beit Din of the times, the *Anshei Knesset Hagedola* (Men of the Great Assembly), engaged in serious and learned debate regarding the establishment of Purim as a festival. And much as in our own times, Yom Haatzmaut still remains a topic of debate, the institution of a new day of celebration in the annual calendar was far from smooth or subject to consensus.

In the text, we can see the different stages of development:

1. The victory (9:15-18)
2. the people accept Purim (but only in Shushan) (9:19)
3. Mordechai's letter (9:20-28)
4. Esther's letter. (9:29-32)

לחיינו in the Gemara relate קיימו וקבו – The Jews acceptance of the Festival - to a renewed association with Torah law, and they are sensitive to the deeper pulse of this Perek. The BIG question here relates to the limits of Torah Sheb'al Peh and the question of how much we may absorb or institute a new festive day.

⁴ See Ruth Rabba 4:7 for the discussion there.

And here, I believe is the root of the origin of the practice of distributing gifts to the poor, and sharing food between the community - משלוח מנות ומתנות לאביונים. If Mordechai and Esther wanted to promote Purim as a true and legitimate Chag, then people must ACT like they do on a chag. Here is the nexus of the concept of Mishloach Manot. I think that the classic, historic mode of Jewish celebration is precisely this. And I think we can prove it!

In Sefer Nechemia when we read about the manner in which people celebrated Rosh Hashanna, we read

"He said to them; Go! Eat rich foods, drink sweet beverage and **send food gifts** ... for today is a sacred day to our God ... and the people went to eat and drink **and to send food** and to make great merriment." (Nehemia 8:10-12)

(ו) ויאמר להם לכו אכלו משמנים ושתו ממתקים ושלחו מנות לאין נכון לו כי קדוש היום לאדנינו ואל תעצבו כי חדות ידוד היא מעוזכם: (יא) והלויים מחשים לכל העם לאמר הסו כי היום קדש ואל תעצבו: (יב) ויגלו כל העם לאכל ולשתות ולשלח מנות ולעשות שמחה גדולה כי הבינו בדברים אשר הודיעו להם: ס נחמיה פרק ח

In other words, when you tell somebody to "celebrate Yom Tov," then that intrinsically involves the sharing of food⁵. It has earlier roots as well in the Torah itself:

דברים פרק טז

(יד) ושמחת בחגך ויבנד אשה ויבנד אבדך ויעבדך ויעבדך וילוי והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בשעריך:

"You shall rejoice in your festival with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow in your communities."

The Torah is informing us that the prime aim of the Mitzva of Simcha and participation in the Aliya Laregel is to look out for the unfortunate, depressed and lonely within our society.

This practice is codified in the Rambam. (Laws of Yom Tov 6:17-18)

: 'You shall rejoice on your festival.' Even though the Torah here is describing "simcha" in terms of the Chagiga sacrifice ... the celebration of the family is included too. For children, one buys food treats, for women one buys new clothes and jewellery - all in accordance with one's budget, and men eat meat and drink wine ... and when one eats one must include the stranger, the orphan and widow and all the poor who feel neglected. **One who closes his front door, eating and drinking with the family, but does not feed the poor and the outcast letting them share his drink, this is not the "celebration of mitzva" (simchat mitzva) but rather a self fulfilling indulgent celebration."**

⁵ Maybe we can include this instance – one of the rare instances in which the Tanach uses the Rabbinic term יום טוב. Here it would seem to mean a festive day rather than a Chag. And yet David says to Naval, that since this is a day of plenty, of ingathering today – a day of feasting, maybe you could think also about people more unfortunate than yourself.

שמואל א פרק כה

(ז) ועתה שמעתי כי גוזלים לך ... וימצאו הנערים חן בעיניך כי על יום טוב <בנו> באנו תנה נא את אשר תמצא ידך לעבדך

So the notion of food sharing and taking care of the poor is a classic mode of celebration within Judaism. How did it find its way into Purim? Why is it so emphasised at Purim time?

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THE HALLMARK OF A JEWISH FESTIVAL.

Put very simply, when Esther and Mordechai wanted to establish Purim as an annual day of celebration, they asked themselves what the critical ingredients of a Jewish *משתה* a Jewish day of *שמחה* were. The answer is clear. Not indulgence but sharing; not individual hedonism but rather, the inclusion of the unfortunate. Rather than opulence and the showiness of wealth we have the gesture of giving.

By virtue of these practices, rather than being a celebration that was marked ensconced in the private domain of people's homes and residences suddenly came out into the open. On the basis of these Halakhot, and the atmosphere automatically transformed into a public festival; the public space being filled with Purim.

UNITY

Not only that, but we this practice acts as reinforcement to the themes of unity and mutual responsibility. Mishloach Manot refutes the notion of an *מפורד ומפורד* – a scattered and divided nation - but rather of a people who take responsibility for one another.

Maybe it is not surprising then that we have here a clear *passuk* that relates to one of the classic expressions of getting together as a community in times of trouble, we can now unite in joy: – *ונהפוך הוא*

אסתר פרק ט

ללא לקים את ימי הפורים האלה בזמניהם *כאשר קים* עליהם *מךדכי היהודי* ו*אסתר המלכה* ו*כאשר קימו* על נפשם ועל זרעם *דברי הצמות וזעקתם*:

אסתר פרק ד

והאמר אסתר להשיב אל מךדכי:
טו לך *כנוס את כל היהודים* הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי אצום כן ובכו אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי:

SUMMARY

We have drawn a parallel between Chapter 1 and chapter 9 expressing the fact that they both share the pattern of dual feasts⁶; international and Shushan. We have drawn a distinct contrast between these feasts by suggesting that Chapter 1 is dominated by an atmosphere of opulence and sensual pleasures whereas the Jewish celebration is made communally with an eye to giving and sharing.

I do not think that this issue can be underemphasized. The central ingredient of Purim celebration is the notion

⁶ There is another parallel between ch.1 and 9: The notion of law. Both ch.1 and 9 are codified in law – the notion of *דת* which has a status of *יעבור* ולא *יבטל* a non retractable legislation. These laws are sent to the entire kingdom by means of legal declarations and letters. Compare the content and language of 1:19,22 with 9:20,22.

of caring, the feeling of community, the looking out for those who need support and attention. This is the very OPPOSITE of the Persian feast that is essentially individualistic, materialistic, selfish and indulgent. Purim represents how we are instructed to differentiate ourselves from cultures that see wealth and glamour, luxuries and pleasures as the classic key to happiness. These things create *MISHTEH* but not *SIMCHA*.

The Jewish secret of Happiness is GIVING.

Have a Happy Purim!

For further study

Here I would like to refer to a final parallel between Chapter 1 and 9.

There is a subtext throughout the Megilla, but particularly prominent here, a subtext that deals with Mikdash and Yerushalayim.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יב עמוד א

בהראתו את עשר כבוד מלכותו אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא: מלמד שלבש בגדי כהונה: כתיב הכא +אסתר א'+ יקר תפארת גדולתו וכתוב התם +שמות כ"ח+ לכבוד ולתפארת.

We are all familiar with the Eichah tune of *וכולים מכלים שונים* and we cannot help hear of *והב וכסף* without our minds turning to the notion of Mikdash.

The obvious question here suggests that on the one hand Achashverosh's palace reminds us of the Mikdash. However, the obvious subtext is that this is not OUR center, it is not the place which we view as dominant in our national culture.

Quite interestingly the notion of Yerushalayim returns as a subtext to Chapter 9. After all, there is a basic question to be asked here. If the victory happened on a different day in Shushan – hence Shushan Purim, then why does JERUSALEM have this status too?!

ירושלמי מגילה פ"א הל' א

ר' סימון בשם ר' יהושע בן לוי חלקו כבוד לארץ ישראל שהיתה חריבה באותם ימים ותלו מימות יהושע בן נון

And the question still stands; why not limit it just to Shushan? Maybe this is related to the problem of fixing a *chag* not in relation to Eretz Yisrael. The very notion that a *chag* may be fixed