

## Maimonides 613 Series

### *Purim*

#### **Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Megillah 1:1**

It is a Rabbinic commandment to hear the Megillah read twice on Purim: once at night and once during the day. Every Jewish man and woman is obligated in this commandment, and each teacher is enjoined to make sure that all children hear the Megillah twice, as well.

#### **Purim – What's in a Name?**

In the twelfth year of King Achashverosh's reign, the wicked Haman cast a lot – a *pur* – to choose the month in which he would annihilate the Jewish people (G-d forbid). The end of the Megillah says that we call this holiday Purim “*al shem ha'pur*” – because of the lot Haman cast.

The name of a thing represents its essence, vitality, and theme. For example, Pesach is called so because G-d jumped over (*pesach*) the Jews' houses on the night of the Tenth Plague. Why, then, is Purim called after the lot that Haman cast to destroy the Jews? This name signifies the exact opposite of the miraculous salvation we celebrate on Purim.<sup>1</sup>

When Haman's lot of destruction fell out on Adar, Haman rejoiced – Adar is the month in which Moshe Rabbenu, the savior of the Jews, passed away, so Haman thought the month was unlucky for the Jews. The Talmud tells us Haman failed to realize that Moshe Rabbenu was also *born* in Adar, and therefore the month is actually *lucky* for the Jews.<sup>2</sup> Moshe was the first savior of the Jewish people, and so shall he be for all time – against any Pharaoh, any Haman that wishes to destroy us. Could it be this is why Purim is named after the lot?

This explanation is insufficient. If the significance of the lot's falling out in Adar is Moshe's birthday, then call the holiday, “Moshe's Birthday”! The question remains – why do we call Purim after Haman's lot?

A second question presents itself: the holiday is called *Purim*, in the plural, but the Megillah says. “*al shem ha'pur*”, in the singular. Why?

We can also ask a third question: Purim and Megillah are a Rabbinic commandment. Every Rabbinic commandment has its source in a Scriptural commandment. From which Scriptural commandment do Purim and Megillah come?

#### **Rambam's Positive Commandment #49 – Yom haKippurim Service**

The Scriptural source for the Rabbinic commandment of Purim and Megillah is the High Priest's service of Yom haKippurim. Yom haKippurim, literally translated, means “The Day That is Like Purim”.<sup>3</sup>

One similarity between Yom Kippur and Purim is that both are connected to a lottery. In the story of Purim, Haman casted a lot; on Yom Kippur, the High Priest cast a lot between two identical he-goats to choose which one would be sacrificed on the Altar and which would be pushed over the cliff to Azazel. The casting of the lots is beyond logic, beyond time and space. There is no reason why one goat was designated for the altar and the other for Azazel since they were both the same.

Another similarity is the purifying effect of Yom Kippur and Purim. On Yom Kippur, we are told, “Before Hashem shall you be purified.” On one level, you are standing in prayer before G-d, and so you are purified. On a deeper level, our souls ascend on Yom Kippur to a level that precedes the four-letter name of G-d, known as the Tetragrammaton, to a level *before* G-d. When we reach this place spiritually, we are beyond the concepts of good and bad. In this reality, we have never sinned, and so we are purified. This concept also is found in Purim. How?

### **Purifying Purim**

The name of G-d is not found once in the entire Megillah. The *halachic* explanation for this says that when Mordechai and Esther obtained permission to send the Megillah to the 127 provinces of Achashverosh’s kingdom, Mordechai was concerned that the nations would replace G-d’s name with the names of their deities. To avoid inadvertently promoting idolatry, Mordechai and Esther omitted G-d’s name from the Megillah.

The *Chassidic* explanation delves deeper: on Purim, the essence of G-d itself was what saved the Jews from destruction. Because the Jews reached a spiritual level that was beyond G-d’s name, His name is not mentioned. Every Purim, we ascend spiritually to this level of '*before* G-d', and so we are purified and our sins are forgiven.

If both Yom Kippur and Purim have purifying powers, which is greater?

Purim.

Yom haKippurim is “a day *like* Purim” – *like* it, but not quite the same. On Yom Kippur, we achieve purification through *teshuvah*. If we do not do *teshuvah*, we do not receive atonement. But on Purim, the day *itself* purifies. It is so high that every single Jew receives atonement, no matter what. And we access this power for ourselves through joy and feasting – the opposite of our service on Yom Kippur.

### **Beyond Nature**

Why did Haman use a lottery to decide when to destroy the Jews? Because he knew that within nature, there was no way G-d would allow the Jews to be annihilated. They were (and are) good people - even the simplest and least religious among us are full of mitzvahs. The only way Haman could accomplish this dastardly plan was by casting a *pur*, a lot, because a *pur* raises everyone and everything above time and space. At this level, there is no difference between Haman and a Jew. Now he could negotiate and turn the tables.

Why did this ploy not work? Because we call the day *Purim* and not *Pur*: there were *two* lots at work here: Haman’s and G-d’s. In a lottery, you are dealing with two equal things. In G-d’s lottery, not only does He cast lots, but He chooses what he wants. As it says in Psalms, “G-d, You are my lot,” and, “G-d, choose for us our inheritance, the pride of Jacob.” Even though Jacob is in the same lottery as Esav, the father of Amalek and Haman, G-d chose *us*. And because G-d chose us, so did Haman single us out, and his lot fell in Adar, when Moshe was born. Not only did the merit of Moshe save us in Egypt, but also from Haman.

### **Making G-d Choose**

If Purim is all about a lottery, why did G-d choose us over Haman? We made G-d choose us, because *we* chose *Him*. The Megillah says that on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar, the nations had permission to go out and destroy the Jews living amongst them. The Jews had two choices – to bow down to Haman’s idol and be spared, or to be killed. And not a single Jew bowed down. Every single one felt that it would be better to die as a Jew than live as a heathen. When G-d saw their commitment, He was compelled to choose them beyond all logic and reason, just as they had chosen Him beyond all logic and reason.

And indeed, we each continue to choose G-d every day. The very last verse in the Book of the Prophet Daniel says about the coming of Moshiach, “You will arise to your lottery in the end of days.”<sup>4</sup> We will see the promises and blessings of this lottery materialize, the manifestation of G-d’s immeasurable and eternal love for us, as ours is for Him. May we see this with our fleshly eyes, immediately with the coming of Moshiach!

### **Footnotes**

- 1) *Torah Ohr*, p.194 and *Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat Purim* 5713
- 2) Megilah 13b
- 3) *Torah Ohr* and *Sefer Hammamarim, Ibid.*
- 4) Daniel 12:13