

PURIM

תשפ"א

What is Purim all about?

We say in Shoshanas Yaakov that Hashem's salvation is eternal – because it can happen again, and Hashem will save us again – when we have hope in Him. The message of Purim is that anyone who has trust in Hashem's salvation will never be humiliated. The Rambam writes that Purim teaches us the power of prayer. If we sincerely trust that Hashem looks out for us and we genuinely ask Him to save us, He will never disappoint us. The verse says Hashem is close to those who call to Him in sincerity.

Klal Yisroel were given a test. They failed it and received a decree of total annihilation. Why? The Jews of Shushan partook in the feast of Achashveirosh. But at the very time that this decree is being constructed – while the Jews were enjoying the feast – the seeds of the eventual salvation were being sowed. Because of Homon's advice, Achashveirosh decided to kill Vashti which allowed Esther to replace her as queen.

A little while later, we have a seemingly random incident. With every decree, Hashem is always arranging a pathway for the decree to be avoided through teshuvoh and tefilloh. But Hashem needs to first set in motion a chain of events that can bring about that eventual salvation. Bigson and Seresh plotted to kill Achashveirosh, Mordechai foiled the plot, and the incident was recorded in the king's chronicles for later reference.

We know that the Jews of Shushan failed the test by participating in the feast of Achashveirosh. But why were all the Jews in the entire Persian Empire subject to the same decree if they weren't guilty of this sin? The answer is that there was another test – the test of bowing down to the idol. All Jews did it in the times of Nevuchadnezzar and again Homon hung an idol on his chest forcing people to bow to it as they bowed to him. So Hashem said not only do the Jews of Shushan deserve to be destroyed, but all the Jews.

Homon was an ego maniac. He saw one Jew refusing to bow and he had to kill all the Jews of the entire empire in response to this one slight to his honor. He made a deal with Achashveirosh in secret, but Mordechai found out about it and started to scream about it in the streets. Rashi explains that Mordechai was told in a dream that Heaven approved of Homon's decree because they bowed to his idol as well as the idol of Nevuchadnezzar. Jews are always trying to find favor in the eyes of the dominant culture. They want to be accepted at any cost – even if the price is bowing down to idols and living a non-Jewish lifestyle. Because of this, Hashem decided there had to be a decree of total annihilation. The whole plot of Homon is ultimately from Heaven.

Mordechai inspired all the Jews to cry out in prayer. Esther didn't realize what was happening and sent her trusted servant to bring clothes to Mordechai and find out what is going on. Chazal explain that Esther understood that if Mordechai is crying out in the streets, he must know this is happening because Hashem wants it to happen – it is because of some spiritual failing of the Jewish people. This is Chazal's approach to Jewish history. Persecutions, expulsions, genocide aren't just the product of natural historical forces. There has to be a reason. Some spiritual failing on the part of Klal Yisroel which is bringing danger and calamity.

Mordechai told her why things are happening and he instructed her to go directly to the king to plead on the Jewish people's behalf. Esther responded that she can't go to the king now. Chazal tell us that with

many references to 'the king' in the megilloh there is also a hidden reference to Hashem. Esther is not only telling Mordechai that she can't go to meet Achashveirosh without being called beforehand. She is also telling Mordechai that she can't daven effectively to Hashem to save the Jewish people if she doesn't see a reason why the decree should be changed. What has Klal Yisroel done so far to deserve salvation?

She says it has been thirty days since she was last called by Achashveirosh. In parallel, she is saying that it has been thirty days since she last had a nevuoh from Hashem. She is also a nevi'ah but has been locked out and has had no access to Heaven. This is why Esther said "Keli Keli lomoh azav'toni". It is because she felt rejected and her connection to Hashem had been severed.

Mordechai responded. There is open hashgocho happening here. Why do you think Achashveirosh fell in love with you and made you the queen? Do you think it was just because of your own attributes? Vashti was killed at the exact time the Jews were enjoying the forbidden feast. It wasn't a coincidence. There was obviously a plan by Hashem to put you in the royal palace for this specific time. It is only to save the Jewish people. If you don't do it, your whole purpose for becoming the queen will become irrelevant and Klal Yisroel will be saved by some other means. But don't think you will be spared from Homon's decree just because you live in the palace. Open your eyes. If Hashem made sure Achashveirosh got rid of Vashti, He can make sure he gets rid of you too. Your position and your mission is purely to plead on behalf of the Jewish people.

Esther accepted Mordechai's rebuke. But she answered that if Klal Yisroel don't first do teshuvoh, all her efforts and pleading will be for nothing. Go get the Jews to gather and fast for three days and then I will go to 'the King'. Again the double-meaning. As she walks into the chamber of Achashveirosh she is also davening to Hashem – pleading not to be abandoned. She knew that Hashem is the only One who will determine her success. Meeting Achashveirosh at the end of the three-day fast, Esther didn't look too healthy and robust. She was pale and weak and barely able to move. But it doesn't matter because she knew whether Achashveirosh would spare her or not has nothing to do with her appearance and her charm. It all had to do with Hashem hearing our prayers and seeing Klal Yisroel's teshuvoh.

She went in, but sensed Hashem was not yet responding to her prayers. The time hadn't come. So she delayed asking directly to spare the Jewish people at that moment. Instead she invited Achashveirosh and Homon to an intimate party, and then to another party, waiting for the hashgocho to start making things happen. Finally, on the night before the second party, the sleep of 'the King' is disrupted. Things start turning around. That night, there are changes in Heaven and the decree is cancelled. Klal Yisroel are davening and doing teshuvoh. They had deep trust in Hashem that through their teshuvoh and tefilloh, the decree would be cancelled. This is the lesson of Purim.

We are being shown that Hashem is running things down to the finest details and things are planned well in advanced. Nothing is happening by accident. The cancelling of Homon's decree has nothing to do with political maneuvering and schemes. Hashem is putting all the pieces into place to be ready for the exact moment when Klal Yisroel reach the level they need to achieve and activate the redemption. Then everything clicks into place and the whole story is turned around. Without teshuvoh and tefilloh the pieces of the puzzle don't come

together. This process from golus to geuloh didn't happen just once. We say that this process is occurring all the time. The Rambam writes that the purpose of Purim is to know the power of teshuvoh and tefilloh.

Let us fast-forward to a year ago. Hashem brought an unbelievable decree to the world and the entire globe has been shaken. These things were all planned in advance in Heaven.

There is a total chaotic situation today. There is complete social collapse in the United States, Brexit is causing chaos, and Europe is paralyzed. There have been natural disasters over the past year on a scale unseen thus far – from raging fires in California to the snow storms freezing people to death in the state of Texas, famine from locust swarms in Africa and Asia causing millions to die of starvation. There is tremendous social upheaval and chaos after Donald Trump got elected as president. He happened to have advisors and close family members who are Jewish and very pro-Israel. They shape his Middle-East policy which radically departs from all previous administrations. Is that all a coincidence? Nothing happens by accident. Hashem saw to it that the people of the U.K. voted for Brexit and that Boris Johnson would be Prime Minister now.

Hashem is clearly planning everything down to the finest detail. It has always been this way throughout our history. The fact that twelve years ago Obama was elected and four years ago Trump got elected was a decree from Heaven. But it means we have to wake up.

There is a horrible virus ravaging the planet now. There are halachos of how to deal with pandemics. You deal with the medical reality in front of you with the proper hishtadlus – together with tefilloh and teshuvoh. But Esther asked Mordechai, and we have to ask ourselves – what is the reason for this decree? What is it that we have to do teshuvoh for? Nothing just happens without a reason. Without the proper teshuvoh, all the crying in the streets won't make a difference. Do we stop and hear the message Hashem is sending us?

A year ago, Hashem made an unbelievable decree on the world. Over the past year, more people have died in the U.S. than all American soldiers in the Vietnam and Korean wars combined. Whole industries are ruined. There is economic chaos throughout the world. It doesn't really matter where the virus came from – whether it was a bat in a Chinese market or a scientist in a Chinese laboratory. It couldn't have affected anything if Hashem didn't want it to be released into the world.

Titus felt triumphant when he destroyed the Beis Hamikdosh. He boasted that he defeated Hashem Himself. Hashem showed Titus that even an insignificant fly can defeat him. Hashem sent a fly to go up his nose and enter his sinuses and drove Titus mad until he died. Hashem doesn't need to use massive force of nature to humble mass amounts of people. He can use a simple virus and release it on the world.

The Rambam says if there is a decree on a global scale, it means there is a global spiritual failing which needs correction. If the decree is against a particular community, it means that this community needs to correct its ways. Hashem put His attribute of judgment into action and it is affecting the Jewish people in a very serious way. To a degree we are a part of the world, we will be included in the decree against the world.

The world we live in is completely unstable and without any grounding in reality. The State of Washington school system instituted

a new curriculum of "ethno-mathematics". The problem with the old mathematics was that it was based on the white-supremacist assumption that there are absolute truths. If you believe that there is only one correct answer to $7+7$ means you are a racist! "Ethno-mathematics" means there might be more than one correct answer to these questions. An entire state in the U.S. changed their curriculum! This is just one example of how crazy the world has become. They have lost any balance. The City of Chicago is starting to change names of places and remove statues of historical American figures who were universally revered – George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, etc.

It is a world gone berserk. Hashem has brought not only a chaotic health situation but a chaotic social situation. There is no stability – no normalcy on any level. To the degree we are a part of that world culturally and ideologically, we will be sucked into the void. Hashem is telling us not to be part of this corrupt world which is completely devoid of spirituality. Unlimited pursuit of pleasure is the purpose of life. Why are so many people addicted to drugs or alcoholic? It is because they are basically depressed and don't know how to feel true joy in life – so they escape. They are not having a good time – even though they claim to be. Hashem is telling us to divorce ourselves from the entire culture of this world. The world denies spirituality and does not see beyond it. We believe that we are unique because we have a neshomo and our mission in this world is to serve Hashem. Remember who you are. Be an authentic Jew. This is what Esther is telling the Jewish people before she goes in to meet Achashveirosh. When there is a decree from Heaven, it requires sincere teshuvoh – a deep soul-searching and genuine tefilloh. This is what Purim is all about. Don't just pay lip-service.

My responsibility as Rosh Yeshiva is that everyone has an environment where they can function well and grow in learning. As talmidim, your responsibility is to make sure to use these opportunities in order to grow and make sure not to squander them. We were given an unbelievable bracha from Heaven to have a successful year of uninterrupted learning on a serious level even though this was an enormously difficult period of time. It didn't just happen by itself. It happened because we displayed a strong mesirus nefesh to keep up our learning no matter what, and Hashem responded with this gift. True, we put in tremendous hishtadlus, but Hashem only grants success to those efforts when He sees people take their avodas Hashem seriously. As the Ramban says in his essay on emunoh and bitochon, that bitochon works if you are determined and do the maximum hishtadlus to achieve spiritual goals.

Purim-time last year the talmidim and staff made a decision to take our limud Torah very seriously and Hashem blessed our commitment with surprising success.

We need to understand that Hashem has made a decree against the entire world and He wants the world to be shaken up. There was a poll taken in the United States which asked people if the events of the past year strengthened their religious beliefs or weakened it. Only 24% said it strengthened it. The decree of Hitler and WWII was really a decree against Klal Yisroel. This time it is not only a decree against Klal Yisroel. It is a decree against the world – and to the degree that we are a part of this world of insane falsehood and mad pursuit of pleasure is the degree that we are affected by this decree. We need to reject the culture of this world and only then will we be spared the horrible decree that is upon it.