



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

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IN THE PARSHA

Purim in Hell

The Jewish calendar is punctuated by many happy occasions. The Torah requires us to celebrate three major festivals—Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—and to do so joyously. Our Sages instituted two additional festive holidays, Chanukah and Purim. Without question, it is this latter holiday that evokes the greatest exhibitions of joy and gaiety. Already at the time of its inception, the 14th day of Adar is described as “a day of merrymaking and feasting, as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.” (*Esther* 9:21) For many centuries, Jews have emulated those practices and have attempted to recreate the atmosphere of that historic moment when “the Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness, and honor.” (*ibid.* 8:16)

There have certainly been times in Jewish history when it has been relatively easy to recapture the mood of that triumphant time. But the nature of Jewish history is such that almost every year is marred by tragedy, national or personal, which makes joyous celebration challenging, if not impossible. It is difficult to make merry when one is burdened by woes, particularly when those woes threaten the very existence of our people. One wonders, for example, how the joyous holiday of Purim was celebrated in

the ghettos and concentration camps of Eastern Europe during the terrible years of the Holocaust.

One prominent Holocaust historian, Dr. Esther Farbstein, has investigated this very question. In her book, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives of Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*, she examines numerous documents which describe the religious experiences of those who were condemned to celebrate Purim while enslaved in the hellish conditions of places like the Warsaw Ghetto.

Before drawing upon her research, I must point out that this Shabbat immediately precedes the Purim festival, which occurs later next week. In anticipation of the imminent holiday, we supplement the weekly Torah portion, *Parashat Vayikra* (*Leviticus* 1:1-5:26), with a brief paragraph from the *parasha* of *Ki Tetzei* (*Deuteronomy* 25:17-19). There, we are instructed, “Remember what Amalek did to you... after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he happened upon you...when you were famished and weary...” We are further urged to never forget his stealth and treachery. This passage urging us to remember, *Zachor...*, is thus known as *Parashat Zachor*.

We anticipate Purim by recalling the enemies from whose genocidal threats we were delivered by Divine Providence. We especially recall Amalek, who was both

the biological and ideological ancestor of the villain of the Purim story, Haman, the archetype of all subsequent persecutors of our people.

Our task is now expanded. Not only must we reflect on how Purim was celebrated in the throes of the Holocaust, but we must also contemplate the unbearable task of remembering foes of the very distant past at the very moment when the blades of Nazi bayonets touched our throats. Why remember ancient Persia and the biblical wilderness when the dreaded furnaces of Treblinka were already spewing smoke?

Dr. Farbstein describes in comprehensive detail the Purim “festivities” in the jaws of the Nazis, and so I recommend her book to you. I will limit myself to descriptions of Purim in the Warsaw Ghetto, as recorded in the journals of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the martyred Hasidic leader known as the Rebbe of Piascesna. These journals were hidden in a milk can and recovered from the rubble years after World War II. Quotations from these journals were read into the record by the prosecution as evidence against Adolf Eichmann at his notorious trial.


Most fascinating is the sharp contrast between the Rebbe’s homiletic interpretations of a key phrase in the Amalek passage at the time of the first Purim in the Ghetto, in March 1940, versus his interpretation two years later in 1942.

The phrase in question is *asher karcha baderech*, which I have translated above

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as, “how he happened upon you.” The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, creatively suggests that the word *karcha* contains the root *kor*, which means “cool” or “cold.” Hence, the phrase could be translated as “how he cooled you off.” As Rashi puts it, the Jewish people were “on fire” with spiritual enthusiasm when they left Egypt. No enemy dared to confront them. Amalek extinguished that “fire,” “cooled them off,” and diminished their enthusiasm.

In the early spring of 1940, the conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto were extremely difficult. Yet, as the Rebbe reports, they were bearable. He, of course, had no way of knowing that the Nazis had designated that very day of Purim 1940 as the beginning of their *Aktion*, their diabolical scheme to systematically “eliminate” the Ghetto’s Jewish population.

And so, the Rebbe broadens the interpretation of “cooling off” to refer to German culture. He writes: “Before Amalek attacked the Israelites, many Jews admired Amalek’s culture. They were ‘cooled off.’ to our own Torah culture. They thought that Amalek’s culture was beautiful, ethical, and had much practical wisdom. So too it is with German culture. We admired its literature, philosophy, and scientific contributions. We were thus ‘cooled off’ to our own culture. Now we see German culture for what it is—immoral, murderous, and brutal.” The Rebbe thus sees the Ghetto experience as a lesson not to be seduced by the facades of alien cultures, but to recognize their immoral essence.

Fast forward two years to Purim 1942. By that time, the Rebbe is aware that

the Ghetto experience is much worse than “extremely difficult.” In his own words, it is “unprecedented evil...Unique in the history of the human race...Heretofore unimaginable decadence...” The Rebbe now sees that his reality cannot be compared to previous Jewish suffering. It transcends all prior persecutions, destructions, exiles, and pogroms. It is unspeakable.

Nevertheless, he persists with his Torah teaching, but this time he lends a different homiletic twist to “how he cooled you off.” Now he is concerned that the tortured remnants of the Ghetto would become “cooled off” to future spiritual repair. They had become so reduced in their humanity and in their religiosity that they could never be rehabilitated. For two full years, Torah study and *mitzvah* observance were absolutely impossible. He feared that they had become “cooled off” to future Torah study and *mitzvah* observance. He pleaded with his audience, by now drastically reduced in size and barely clinging to life, that they retain their religious enthusiasm and resist being “cooled off”.

Two very different levels of hell forced the Rebbe to adopt two very different homiletic interpretations.

So much for the supplemental Torah readings about Amalek on the Shabbat before Purim. So much for *Parashat Zachor*.

But what about his homily for the day of Purim itself? On that day in 1940, the Rebbe imparted a moral *tour de force* to his audience and, through them, to all of us. He noted the time honored word-play comparing *Purim*, to *Yom HaKippurim*, or

Yom Kippur. What connection can there be between a day for “feasting and merrymaking” and a day for repentance and atonement?

The Rebbe answers: The Talmud, citing the view of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, states that on Yom Kippur the essence of the day affects atonement, so that even if the individual’s repentance is insincere he nevertheless receives atonement. Similarly with regard to Purim: even though one may not have experienced a joyous holiday, nevertheless, the divine salvation and joy which Purim bestows upon are active and effective even here, even now.”

The Rebbe’s message was designed to encourage his audience, deprived as they were of any semblance of “light and joy”. For deep within them was a tiny spark of hope which, in the eyes of the Almighty, counted as “feasting and merrymaking.”.

Today, more than eighty years since he delivered his message, it must also encourage us. We may have ample reasons to feel discouraged, depressed, perhaps even desperate. However, if the half-starved and wretchedly bereaved members of the Rebbe of Piaczesna’s community could respond to his plea to find within themselves a modicum of joy, so can we overcome our moods and concerns, and celebrate this year’s Purim joyously.

Let this Purim echo that Purim of long ago so that our people enjoy “light and gladness, happiness and honor”.

Happy Purim! ■

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