



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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### “A Prelude to Purim”

The great man, who died late in the 19th century, 1892 to be exact, was known as the progenitor of a group of one of the most outstanding Talmudic dynasties of modern times. In fact, his biographer, Rabbi Chaim Karlin-sky, titled the book about this great man *Rishon L'Shoshélet Brisk*, the first of the dynasty named for the town of Brisk, Brest-Litovsk, in Belarus.

I am, of course, referring to Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, author of the multi-volume masterpiece, *Beit HaLevi*. His offspring include Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik; his grandsons, Rabbis Yitzchak Zev and Moshe Soloveitchik; and his numerous great-grandchildren, including his namesake, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, under whom many of the readers of this column studied and who is revered as the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University's Yeshivat Yitzchak Elchanan Rabbinical Seminary and a major influence upon many sectors of contemporary Orthodox Jewry all over the world.

Now, this Shabbat, we read the weekly portion known as *Tetzaveh* (Exodus 27:20-30:10). But since it is the Shabbat before the festival of Purim, we add a supplemental reading known as *Parshat Zachor*, describing the hostile attack against the people of Israel, then wandering in the wilderness, by Amalek. Haman, the villain of Purim story, was a descendant

of Amalek.

I am, therefore, dedicating this week's column to the upcoming festival of Purim. I will primarily draw from one teaching of the 19th century sage, to whom I will generally refer as “the” *Beit HaLevi*, a teaching which is based upon a verse near the beginning of the Book of Esther, the heroine of the Purim story.

This teaching, as far as I can tell, is not to be found in the standard impressive work *Beit HaLevi* but rather can be found in a recently published collection that includes precious material which does not appear in *Beit Halevi*.

The editor of this collection is a resident of Israel, an eminent scholar in his own right. His name is Rabbi Yosef Shimon Presser, and he has published similar collections which include his own comments and elaborations. This specific volume is centered upon the two festivals of Chanukah and Purim. I recommend this collection, and the author's other publications, to all of you.

The verse in question is to be found in the Book of Esther/*Megillat Esther* 2:5. It is at this point that we first encounter the hero. It reads, “*Ish Yehudi haya B'Shushan HaBira...*, There was a Jewish man in the Great City of Shushan...” That's pretty much all we are told about him. We are not told that he was a “prominent Jew”, “a master of Torah”, “a pious man”, “a leader of his people”. He is, simply, “a Jewish man”. Yes, we learn that he was a refugee exiled from Jerusalem and that he generously raised his orphaned cousin Haddassa, better known as Esther. But was it unusually praiseworthy for a displaced person

in an alien land to adopt a homeless waif, and a close relative to boot?

In dealing with this question the *Beit HaLevi* asks us to consider the following verse in Isaiah 44:5. It reads: “This one says, ‘I am the Lord’s’; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand ‘the Lord’s’; but they all bear the name ‘Israel!’”

The *Beit HaLevi* elucidates this verse using his powerful creative homiletic skills. Here is what he has to say, in my own rough translation:

“In the future, all will come to realize that most worldly matters are trivial, ‘vanity of vanities’. Only *Torah* and *mitzvot* have significant value. Then, in that distant future, many types of Jews will be present.

“One will say, ‘I am the Lord’s’, having always kept *Torah* and *mitzvot* and having been a devout, God-fearing person.

“Others, having spent their lifetimes in pursuit of what they now recognize as insignificant, begin to introspect and dredge up memories of *mitzvot* that they did perform, long ago and perhaps only once in a lifetime. An example would be a son who one day remembers to recite *Kaddish* on the *yahrzeit* of his long-deceased father, Jacob. That’s the second category who ‘call themselves by the name of Jacob’.

“And then there is a third category: those who never recited *Kaddish*. They too will call upon a long-forgotten *mitzvah*. One may recall his bar mitzvah day, when he wound *tefillin* around his hand for the first, and last, time. Or another will remember how he once reached out with his hand to extend charity to a poor fellow. That category is described by Isaiah as ‘they who will inscribe upon their hand that they are the Lord’s.’

“There is yet another category,” suggests the *Beit HaLevi*, “Jews who lived their entire lives as gentiles. They never recited *Kaddish*, never donned *tefillin*, and never even knew of Jewish charity. But they too can point to the fact that they never agreed to baptize themselves. They defined themselves as totally secular atheists, but they—to resort to popular jargon—identified as Jews and would never convert to another religion.

“The concluding words of Isaiah’s verse sums it up: ‘They ALL will take the name Israel’. Every category is numbered as a *Yehudi*, a Jew.

“Therefore,” concludes the *Beit HaLevi*, “the verse the Book of Esther need not describe Mordechai with any of his deserved titles or allude to his degree of religiosity. It need only say, *Ish Yehudi*, he was a Jew. That is all that matters.”

Rabbi Presser footnotes the above analysis of the *Beit HaLevi* by sharing a similar approach given about a century earlier by the Gaon of Vilna, the *Gra*, to be found in *Sefer Aderet Eliyahu* in *Parshat VeZot HaBeracha*.

There the Gaon writes: “Even if a person has no claim other than that he calls himself a Jew, the name of Israel is upon him, and he is grasped by and connected to *Klal Yisroel*, the Jewish community...”

I close with a humorous but penetrating anecdote told by Rabbi Yechiel Yakov Weinberg, author of *Seridei Aish*. He was once present at a conference discussing the age-old question, “Who is a Jew?”

Various professors, sociologists, and Jewish political figures each delivered long-winded speeches declaring who was, and who wasn’t, Jewish.

In the audience was a member of Rabbi Weinberg’s synagogue, who was a devout but

unsophisticated Yiddish speaking individual. He asked for the floor and, after dismissing all the various discourses given by the “experts”, exclaimed, “*Ah Yid iz ah Yid! A Jew is A Jew!*”

May every Jew have a joyous and inspirational Purim festival, and may all the *Yehudim* know only *orah v’simcha*, *sasson v’Yekar*, light and joy, happiness and honor—and I would add *shalom*, peace! ■