

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Purim

Parshat Tzav

In this week's Parsha, the Torah commands the priest to wear linen clothes while performing the service in the Temple. Rabbeinu Bachya (1255-1340) explains that the reason the priests wore linen is because linen grows in individual stalks, similar to human hair. The individualistic nature of each grain signifies the concept of unity. They reflect an inner harmony, or a unified essence. As the descendants of Aaron, the paradigm of peace, the priests had the responsibility to uphold this tradition.

This coming Sunday is the holiday of Purim. The main focus of the holiday of Purim seems to be the miracle of being saved from destruction by the evil Haman. However, after analyzing the *Mitzvot of Purim*, there seems to be an additional theme as well. *On Purim there are four Mitzvot. One must read Megillat Esther, a recounting of the story of Purim, have a holiday meal, give money to the poor, and give food gifts to friends and neighbors. The first two Mitzvot seem to focus on the miracle, by reading the story and rejoicing. However, the other two do not seem to fit this theme. How does giving food and money help us thank G-d for saving us from annihilation?*

Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, the sixteenth century kabbalist from Safed, explains that these *Mitzvot are focusing on an entirely different aspect of Purim. To fully understand their significance we must study the conversation between Haman and King Ahasuerus in which Haman convinces King Ahasuerus to sign a decree to wipe out the Jewish Nation. Haman says to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from [those of] every people, and they do not keep the king's laws; it is [therefore] of no use for the king to let them be."* (Esther 3:8)

Haman's intent in pointing out that the people were "scattered and separate," was to make sure that King Ahasuerus would not worry that annihilating the Jews would leave a large area uninhabited. Potentially, this could present a military weakness in the kingdom, which may cause the king to resist Haman's plan. Therefore, Haman pointed out that the people were scattered, so their lack of presence would pose no such threat. However, Rabbi Alkabetz points out that there is a deeper meaning to these words as well. The Jews were scattered and separate from each other, not only in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense as well. They did not have the unity that has always been an attribute of the Jewish people. There was hatred and fighting among them. This was why G-d allowed the decree against the Jews to come into fruition.

For this reason, when Esther tells Mordechai to pray for her success in meeting with the king, she begins by saying "Go, gather all the Jews." (Esther 4:16) She was pointing out that in order for there to be any hope of salvation, the Jews first needed to be gathered and



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continued ...

united.

It is for this reason that it is incumbent upon us to strengthen ourselves in this area on the holiday of Purim. We do this by giving charity to the poor and food gifts to other Jews. This is a tremendously powerful lesson about the importance of unity. In fact, the Midrash (Berashis Rabah 38:6) uses this concept to explain G-d's punishment of two generations of sinners: the generation of the flood and the generation of the Tower of Babel. The Midrash points out that at first glance it would seem that the sin of the generation of the Tower of Babel was greater than the sin of the generation of the flood. The tower was designed to fight G-d, making their sin a complete rebellion against G-d. The generation of the flood merely gave into their animalistic desires. However, the flood seems like a much more severe punishment than the dispersion that G-d forced upon the builders of the Tower of Babel. What merit did these builders have that saved them from ultimate destruction? It was their unity, the Midrash explains, that saved them. Although they rebelled against G-d, they did it together.

At first glance this seems very strange. How could it be that although they rose up against G-d, since they did it as a group they were saved? When remembering that G-d is not only the King of the universe, but also a Father in heaven, the answer begins to unfold. Imagine a family with two young boys. The brothers are always at each other throats, as only brothers can be. One morning the parents wake up to the sound of their sons coming from the kitchen. However, instead of their usual bickering and fighting, the sound of laughter is in the air. After a minute it becomes clear from their conversation that the two boys have raided the pantry and helped themselves to a "nutritious" breakfast of cookies and candy. Although the parents realise that maybe they should intervene, the joy at the fact that their boys are actually getting along and have done something together, overwhelms their logic and they leave them alone.

G-d, too, is pained to see His children fighting. When the Jews are not fighting, G-d is willing to tolerate a lot more than He might when they do not get along. May the unity that we achieve this holiday of Purim find merit for the entire Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom

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