



Inspiration and Action

By Rabbi Dr. Michael Atlas

After experiencing 210 years of brutal slavery in Mitzrayim, the Jews, as part of the redemption, witness a series of incredible miracles. The Ten Makkot, each in their own way, were breaks from the natural order. Everyone witnessed the Yad Hashem throughout the process. This process culminated with the ultimate miracle, Kriat Yam Suf, an event which the midrash writes was heard by all mankind. It is recorded in the Mechilta that even a lowly maidservant experienced prophecy on a level that Yechezkel HaNavi did not achieve. In fact, this was one of the events which led Yitro to leave his priesthood and recognize Hashem. All were inspired by the events in the first several Parshiot of the Sefer.

The Torah then describes, in Parashat Yitro, the scene of the Jews receiving the Torah at Har Sinai. There were awe inspiring sights and sounds. The supernatural occurred again. The Torah describes the Jews hearing the thunder and seeing lightning. It was an experience unlike any other. Another inspiring and enlightening event that broke the laws of nature.

The Torah then shifts gears. The inspiring and exhilarating experiences recorded turn to an extremely detailed and technical discussion about the construction of the Mishkan. Why the sudden shift? How did we move from a world of miracles, inspiration, and awe to the seemingly mundane, technical and detailed instruction of the construction of the Mishkan?

Positive feelings are enjoyable. Being inspired is one of the many positive feelings of the human experience. We feel alive, activated and energized and it is what enables us to build and create. Yet while there is great joy in these emotions, the feelings themselves are just that, feelings. Our world however, is one of action. This often requires hard work, persistence, and attention to detail.

Perhaps the Torah's shift from inspiration to perspiration is a message that while good feelings and

inspiration are critical components of our lives, they are ideally to be used as a springboard for action, rather than a hammock for our comfort. The inspiration is a means to an end. Feelings "come and go" but the Mitzvot that we engage in, many of which are through hard work and dedication is what binds us to Hashem. While the Torah's commandments of the construction of the Mishkan is rather detailed, Hashem is reminding us that this world is one of human action and perseverance and not just of good feeling.

Keruvim: Guardians of the Sanctity or Guardians of the Soul?

By Shimon Ross ('23)

In Parshat Terumah, the Torah tells us, in great detail, about the construction of the many different Keilim in the Mishkan. Perhaps the most prominent of these Keilim is the Aron Kodesh. The Aron is unique in so many ways. It was the only one of the Keilim in the Kodesh HaKodashim, meaning it was only ever seen once a year by one individual. Also, it housed some of the holiest articles the Jewish people had at the time, including both pairs of Luchot, a jar of Man, and Aaron's staff. Lastly, it was unique in its construction. Rashi writes that the Aron was actually made of three boxes, with one stuck inside of the other (Shemot 25:11). The innermost box contained the Luchot and other artifacts.

Additionally, the Aron had a unique lid, known as Kaporet, which played the very important role of covering the top of the Aron, a role repeatedly stressed in the Pesukim as very important. Lastly, the most unique part of the Aron was the Keruvim, the two golden angels built on top of the Aron. Rashi points out that these Keruvim were made out of the same piece of gold as the Kaporet. The Pesukim describe the Keruvim in a couple of very interesting ways. One of these is the description of the wings. The Pasuk says that the wings were spread upward, and yet, at the same time, they covered the Aron (ibid. 25:20). As Rav Dovid Gottlieb points out, while this is architecturally possible and isn't an explicit miracle, it is still very impressive and unique and deserves further analysis.

That same Pasuk also says that the Keruvim are supposed to be facing each other, but at the same time, it says that their faces are supposed to be turned down toward the Kaporet.

The big question that arises from these seemingly contradictory descriptions is: how were the Keruvim able to be built in such a way that they fit all of these criteria and what is the significance of them being built and described in this very unique, specific way? Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch answers this question by teaching us a very fundamental idea about the Keruvim. They actually served in a dual-function capacity. One of the roles of the Keruvim is a protective one, as they serve to guard the Aron Kodesh and its holy contents. Their construction makes this role clear. The wings are clearly spread out in a way that covers the Aron. They also look down towards the Aron which, Rav Hirsch says, is how a guard presents himself in order to appear serious and focused. However, the Keruvim also serve a second purpose, and that is “to bear the glory of Hashem” as Rav Gottlieb put it. This is clear in the way that the wings spread upwards as if they are carrying something. They are supposed to look like they are carrying the Shechinah.

However, a question arises from this answer. When discussing the protective role played by the Keruvim, the Pasuk says that they specifically guard the Kaporet. But, as we saw earlier from Rashi, the Kaporet and the Keruvim are made from the same piece of gold. So how can we say that the Keruvim protect the Kaporet if they are, in many ways, the same thing? Why would the protector need protection? The answer to this question provides us with an invaluable lesson for life and our personal Avodat Hashem. The bottom of that piece of gold is the Kaporet. It serves a limited role, that of simple protection and covering the Aron Kodesh. But as that piece of gold rises, it turns into the Keruvim, the ultimate protectors of such high levels of Kedusha. This shows the value of the Kaporet-although it only serves one role, because that is the role of guarding the Torah, it ultimately is able to rise up to the lofty level of the Keruvim. This is a lesson we must all apply to our own lives as well. We must understand that by guarding the Torah, you become someone who not only fulfills that important task of guarding the Torah, but you also become the source of your own protection, as the Torah will continue to raise you up to higher and higher levels of Kedusha and will bring you closer to Hashem. This idea is even more powerful when you understand where it was coming from. Rav Hirsch spent a large portion of his life fighting against people who attempted to modernize Judaism. He showed that if you protect the Torah and its integrity, you are able to achieve extraordinary spiritual heights. May we all use the many Torah opportunities we are presented with on a daily basis to help

ourselves grow in all areas of our life and become more capable Ovdei Hashem.

Insider Insights into Haman

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Imagine we had a hidden recorder taping the conversation in which Haman convinced Achashverosh to eliminate the Jews. Chazal, in their profound wisdom, present us with a transcript of their conversation¹. There are multiple lessons just waiting to be gleaned from this rich and insightful Gemara.

Lashon Hara Master

The Gemara (Megillah 13b) cites Rava, who states that, “No one was as skilled at Lashon Hara (slander) as was Haman,” meaning that Haman was a master manipulator.

The first lesson we learn is the incredible damage inflicted by Lashon Hara. Our entire nation was nearly eliminated by Lashon Hara! No wonder the Rambam (Hilchos Dei’ot 7:3) equates Lashon Hara with murder! What a powerful motivator to refrain from Lashon Hara – just as we hated being victims of Lashon Hara, we should make every effort to refrain from victimizing others in this horrendous manner.

Rava interprets Haman (Esther 3:8) as convincing Achashverosh to view the Jews as a threat to his kingdom who could be eliminated with no cost to his rule. This passage provides a fascinating behind the scenes look at the conspiracies and thought processes of our enemies. The conversation that Rava describes between Haman and Achashverosh seems, regrettably, to have occurred on many occasions throughout our turbulent history.

Haman Does Not Fear Hashem

Haman begins the conversation saying, “let’s eliminate them (the Jews).” Achashverosh responds, “I am afraid of their God,” for he knew that the enemies of the Jews are severely punished. Haman, in turn, says, “They neglect the Mitzvot,” and their God will not save them. Achashverosh responds that their Rabbis, though, observe the Mitzvot faithfully. Haman responds, “They are one nation,” and their Rabbis will not save them.

¹ Students ask how Chazal found out what was said in this private conversation. One possibility is that Eliyahu HaNavi informed Chazal, as we find Eliyahu occasionally interacting with the Chachamim and providing “insider information”. Another possibility is that they reconstructed the conversation based on the sketch of the interaction recorded in the Pasuk and typical thought patterns and speeches of Jew-haters.

This passage teaches that each Jew must assume spiritual responsibility and not assume that others will perform Mitzvot on his or her behalf. We have a tendency to either consciously or unconsciously think we can outsource our Mitzvah observance to our rabbis. Haman, ironically, teaches us to utterly reject this line of thinking.

It is also highly significant that Haman, like Amalek of yore, had no fear of Hashem (see Rashi and Ibn Ezra to Devarim 25:18). He adopts the same stance as Titus who recognizes the greatness of the Jewish people, but that he can make a Faustian choice of accepting his eternal punishment in order to accelerate his rise to power by leading the charge against the Jews (see Gittin 56b). Haman tragically mimics Nimrod who Rashi (to Breishit 10:9) is fully cognizant of Hashem and intends to rebel against Him.

We should not be shocked at the depth of Haman's grasp of Jewish life. Adolph Eichmann, Yimach Shemo VeZichro, the chief architect of the Sho'ah, acquired extensive knowledge of Jews and Jewish life that he used to help him execute his diabolical plan.

Of course, Haman conveniently omits in his discussion with Achashveirosh that those who act as God's agent to punish the Jews, wind up punished severely (as we find, for example, happened to Paroh). A master manipulator, Haman omits highly relevant information in his efforts to sway the foolish (according to Rava) Achashveirosh.

A Bald Spot in his Kingdom

Haman then tells Achashveirosh (because, according to this view, Achashveirosh is too simple to perceive these threats) that he should not be concerned that eliminating the Jews will create a "bald spot" in his kingdom, meaning that a vacuum will not be created by eliminating the inhabitants of a portion of his kingdom, which would cause instability and a major disruption in the empire. Haman explains that since the Jews are scattered throughout the empire, their elimination will not create a vacuum.

This portion of the Gemara communicates the critical importance of Jews living together in large communities. The isolated Jew is both at spiritual and physical risk, as taught by the Netziv in his comments to Shemot 1:7.

Jews as Mules?

Haman continues that Achashveirosh should not be concerned that the empire benefits from the Jews, because they are comparable to mules that do not produce any offspring.

We Jews have understood throughout the generations that we must benefit the national weal, in order for our presence to be tolerated. On a global scale, the State of Israel must contribute to the world's economy lest its existence not be tolerated².

Haman then tells Achashveirosh not to be concerned about an entire area in which there is a large concentration of Jews (who could effectively resist an extermination plan), since they are spread out throughout the kingdom (this again teaches us that Jews should live in close proximity to each other; see the Netziv's comments to Shemot 1:7).

Hashem helped dispel this notion from Achashveirosh by arranging for Mordechai to uncover the Bigtan and Teresh plot and for Achashveirosh to be reading about this episode just as Haman approached the emperor to ask permission to kill Mordechai.

Kashrut Observance and Lack of Inter-marriage

Haman then tells Achashveirosh that the Jews' rules differ from everyone else's, as the Jews do not eat with the Persians nor intermarry with them.

This point teaches that Kashrut preserves our cultural identity. It is for this reason Chazal forbade us to consume non-Jews' wine and cheese as a bulwark against intermarriage. Jews who work in the business world do report on the awkward nature of having to respond to colleagues' questions as to why wine must be kosher.

Jews Never Work

Haman adds that the Jews do not honor the king's rules, as they always have some sort of excuse for why they cannot work, such as by claiming that "today is Shabbat" or "today is Pesach."

This is a typical technique of a slanderer; they make a claim that bears a minor resemblance to the truth, which is far removed from its proper context and proportion (see Rashi to

² In 2001 the French ambassador to Great Britain disparagingly referred to Israel as a "garbage little country." Significantly, Israel today contributes dramatically more to the world community than does France.

BeMidbar 13:27). This continues to be a tactic of many current anti-Israel slanderers, who make spurious claims of Israeli massacres, for example, in their efforts to demonize the Jewish People and the Jewish State.

Nonetheless we should never use Shabbat or Yom Tov as a tool to “slack off” at work. We must make up the time taken off for Shabbat and Yom Tov observance by working nights or on Sundays if necessary.

Paying Taxes

Rashi here adds that Haman claimed that Jews did not pay their taxes. This teaches that paying taxes is not only Halachically required (see Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 369) but is also quite a threat to our safety if ignored.

Haman's Clincher

Haman concludes his speech to Achashveirosh in a most dramatic and effective manner. We must recognize that many of our enemies are effective speakers who have the ability to sway audiences with their words; Hitler, Yemach Shemo VeZichro, unfortunately, was a mesmerizing speaker.

Haman clinched his point by telling Achashveirosh that he should destroy the Jews because they eat, drink and disgrace the king. Haman explained, "If a fly falls into a Jew's wine, he removes the fly and drink the remaining liquid. If, however, the king would touch the wine of a Jew, the Jew would stamp the goblet into the ground and not drink the wine." This is yet another example of the deceptive exaggerations of the anti-Semite.

The separations we make are to preserve our identity and not intended to denigrate those outside our community. The accusation of the Jews stamping the king's goblet in the ground is entirely baseless. Sadly, ignorant fools often uncritically accept such ugly accusations without making the slightest effort to investigate their veracity.

Rava portrays Achashveirosh as a fool who was manipulated by Haman to annihilate the Jews. A basis for this approach is that in the first chapter of Megillat Esther, Achashveirosh is manipulated by one of his advisors (whom Chazal, not surprisingly, identify as Haman; see Megillah 12b) to kill his own queen. We should note that even according to this approach, Achashveirosh is not an individual of strong

moral character who was overtaken by Haman. In addition, he harbors negative feelings towards Jews and needed only a Haman to overcome his inhibitions to express them.

Conclusion

The Gemara's presentation of Haman's verbal violence against our people is not intended to satisfy our curiosity. Chazal share this conversation due to the vital and manifold lessons we must derive from it. Sometimes there is nothing we can do (other than pray for Hashem's intervention) to protect ourselves from anti-Semitic slander. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon us to stay far away from behaviors that unnecessarily reinforce the anti-Semite's foul allegations.

God forbid for us to bend even one millimeter in regard to Kashrut, working on Shabbat, and respecting the social barriers created by Chazal, to mollify Jew-haters. However, we must be contributing, hard working, tax-paying and law abiding citizens. While we cannot completely prevent the baseless accusations of virulent anti-Semites, it is the height of recklessness and irresponsibility to provide fodder for these vile individuals. Poor citizenship is not only Halachically forbidden and Hashkafically condemned (see Yirmiyahu 29:7), it is short-sighted and profoundly foolish.

Megillat Esther informs us that our enemies accuse us of failing to honor the king's laws. We dare not prove our enemies correct!

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