



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

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STIFF PRICE?

Chanan Dahl from Vøyenenga, Norway
<torgerd@online.no> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Why can Purim be one of the happiest holidays in the Jewish calendar when the Jews in King Ahasuerus' kingdom took revenge by killing more than 75,000 of their enemies (Book of Esther's 9:6, 9:16)? Of course it's a reason for joy that all the Jews were saved by Esther's and Mordechai's plot, but was not the price the people of the kingdom paid a bit stiff?

Dear Chanan Dahl,

First of all, I think it should be said that the Jews didn't take *revenge*. They defended themselves. By Persian law, "an order written in the name of the king and signed with the king's ring can not be rescinded" (*Esther 8:8*). Therefore, Haman's decree to kill the Jews was never actually *rescinded*. Instead, Achashverosh issued a *second* decree in which "the king gave permission to the Jews in every city to gather and defend themselves...against any who wage war against them" (*Esther 8:17*).

And Purim doesn't celebrate the death of our enemies. In fact, we celebrate Purim the day *after* the battle ended. The Jewish way is not to revel in the death of our enemies — we celebrate the fact that G-d saved us from Haman's genocidal plan.

Also, the death toll may not seem so large when you consider that it accounted for Achashverosh's entire kingdom, which stretched throughout the known world.

STAMP IT OUT

Yaacov Simon from Larchmont, NY
<yaacovs@cloud9.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

It occurred to me during the Megillah reading that we only make noise and "stamp out" Haman's name when he is referred to as "Haman." Why don't we "stamp out" the name of Memuchan, who the Sages tell us was actually Haman? For that matter, why don't we do the same during other Torah reading when any bad guy, Amalek for instance, is mentioned?

Dear Yaakov Simon,

Good question! The answer may be that although Memuchan refers to Haman, it is not his actual name. Part of the original custom to "stamp out Haman's name" was to say "*shem reshaim yirkav* — may the *name* of evil people be erased."

Now for your second question, why don't we "stamp out" the name of Amalek and other "bad guys?" The truth is, it's not really appropriate to make noise during the Torah reading in the first place, but it's permitted during the Megillah reading because of the special joy of the day. There are in fact authorities who discourage it even during the Megillah reading, and they only allow it because it is already an established custom.

Also, it is only appropriate to make noise when referring to a story in which we emerged as the clear winner, and with Amalek, that has not yet happened.

Sources:

- Rema Orach Chaim 690, 17

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MEGILLAH MARRIAGE

Name@Withheld wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

How does one explain the fact that Queen Esther married a non-Jew when it is written that no daughter of Israel shall marry a non-Jew? Furthermore, how does one explain that the Jewish People actually benefited from this "intermarriage?" Many thanks, again. Shalom.

Dear Name@Withheld,

Let me make your question even stronger: The Talmud says that Esther was already married ... to Mordechai! With that in mind, Esther's "marriage" to Achashverosh seems to be an even worse sin than intermarriage.

The answer is that Esther did not marry Achashverosh willingly, she was forced into it. So she is blameless in that regard. Even when she went willingly, since the salvation of the entire Jewish People depended on this, it was permitted.

But your second question is, why did the Jewish People benefit from this mismatch? Why did G-d allow the redemption of the Jews to sprout from Esther's ignominious "marriage" to a drunken, idol-worshipping king?

I think the answer is as follows: The main theme of Purim is that even when we Jews are in exile, G-d directs every aspect of history for our ultimate benefit. Even seemingly bad events further G-d's hidden plan to bring the final redemption.

Sources:

- Esther 2:8
- Targum Ibid.
- Even Haezer 178, Beit Shmuel, Chochmat Shlomo

NO PRAISE ON PURIM?

Name@Withheld from Calgary, Canada

Dear Rabbi,

Why do we not say Hallel on Purim?

Dear Name@Withheld,

We recite "Hallel" on the festivals which celebrate our freedom from Egypt. *Hallel* begins with the words, "Give praise, servants of G-d." Thus, we recite "Hallel" to celebrate the fact that we are no longer "servants of Pharaoh," but rather we are "servants of G-d."

The Megillah, on the other hand, begins with the Jews in exile, subservient to Achashverosh, and ends with the Jews in exile, subservient to Achashverosh. In this sense Hallel is inappropriate.

Sources:

- Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 693, Mishna Berurah 7

LETTER PERFECT

Michael Willen, MD from Slingerlands, NY
<willem@rpi.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

In the Book of Esther, why are certain letters in the names of Haman's sons written so much smaller than the others and why are some letters in the text (such as a tav towards the end of the book) larger than the others?

Dear Dr. Michael Willen,

In Megillat Esther, and elsewhere in the Torah, you find several places where a letter is written slightly larger or slightly smaller than the other letters. This is an ancient tradition, and the reason for each instance isn't always explained.

The particular ones you mentioned (*Esther* 9:7,9) aren't explained in any classical sources. Recently, however, it has been discovered that these letters, which occur in the section describing the hanging deaths of Haman's ten sons, may contain an uncanny hint to the Nuremberg trials in which ten Nazis were tried and hung for their anti-Semitic crimes, as follows:

As you may know, the Jewish calendar year is represented by Hebrew letters. The small letters in the names of Haman's ten sons are: "tav" "shin" "zain." The large letter is "vav." These letters represent the year 707 ("tav shin zain" equal 707) of the sixth millennium (represented by the large "vav" which equals 6). Thus you have the Jewish date 5707, or 1946 by the civil calendar. On the first of October, 1946 — 6 Tishrei 5707 on the Jewish calendar — the Nuremberg Military Tribunal tried ten Nazis and sentenced them to death by hanging for their modern "Hamanism." One of them, the notorious Julius Streicher, even cried "Purim-Fest 1946" as his cryptic last words.

Sources:

- The Jewish Observer, "March 1986, pp. 56-57

TAKE A BOW

Ari Trachtenberg, University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign <trachten@uiuc.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I am thinking about taking a class in Tae Kwan Do this semester to get some exercise. After sitting in on the first class, it seems that there is a lot of bowing involved, in addition to various "spiritual" lessons: Students are supposed to bow to the training room, to each other, to the instructor. The instructor told me that this bowing is a typical gesture of respect,

that it is bi-directional (instructors bow to students too), and is not a supplication. Given the Purim story, however, I am hesitant to participate in this class. Do you know of any conflicts between this type of martial art and Judaism? I appreciate your time, and thanks for the great "Ask the Rabbi" column!

Dear Ari Trachtenberg,

Bowing to people as a gesture of respect is perfectly okay. Abraham bowed to his guests (*Genesis 18:2*), the brothers bowed to Joseph (*Genesis 42:6*) and Moses bowed to his father-in-law (*Exodus 18:6*). So if *Tae Kwan Do* bowing is nothing more than a gesture of respect

toward others, I see no problem with it. If however, they are bowing to an object or the room that would be forbidden.

Why then in the Purim episode did Mordechai refuse to bow to Haman? The Midrash answers that Haman claimed divine powers for himself. He even went so far as to attach an idolatrous icon to his clothing. Under these circumstances, bowing to him was tantamount to bowing to an idol.

Sources:

- Rashi on Megillat Esther 3:2
- Ibn Ezra, *ibid.*

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked:

"What verse in the Torah contains the same *shoresh* (root) four times in a row?"

Answer:

Bamidbar 4:47. In describing the Levites' Sanctuary service, the verse says "*la'avod avodat avodah v'avodat masa — to serve the service of Service and the service of carrying...*" This verse contains the Hebrew root for service, "*ayin, bet, daled*" four times in a row.

Riddle and answer submitted by C. Blum, Toronto <catriel@stellapharm.com>

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