

CHANCE AND PROVIDENCE



*Discourses on the
Inner Meaning of Purim*

by

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Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak

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2005/5765

I INTRODUCTION

FIRST

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LAST,

BEGINNINGS

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ENDINGS

Adar comes at the end of the year, and with it Purim. "Esther is the end of prophecy," the Gemara informs us.¹ In the hierarchy of the Jewish holidays, Purim appears to be right at the bottom. It lacks the majestic quiet and the sanctity of *Shabbat*. It has none of the holiday flavor of the *Yomim Tovim*. Drink and frivolity are its calling cards. Those experiences that are usually kept at arms length are embraced wholeheartedly on Purim.

It is puzzling, then, to read in the Midrash:

In the future, all of the holidays will be abrogated except for Purim, as it says, "these days of Purim will never pass from amongst the Jews" (Esther 9:28). R' Elazar said, even Yom Kippur will not be canceled as it says, "this will be an eternal law: to atone for all of Israel's sins once a year" (Vayikra 16:34).²

We find similarly in the *Tikkunei HaZohar*: "Purim is named after Yom HaKippurim." Chasidim took this even further: *Kippurim* *k'purim*. Not only is Purim considered to be of more importance than the other holidays, but Yom Kippur actually derives its own sanctity only from its similarity to Purim! Yom Kippur—the height of the year—and Purim which comes at its tail, are compared to each other. The secrets of reversal of fortune are tied together, beginning to end.

II

CLOTHING

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CONSUMMATION

The first person we meet in the Bible to wear a disguise is Yaakov; Yaakov assumes the guise of Easav, his brother, his enemy. "The voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands are the hands of Easav." Yaakov's hands are wrapped in goat skin—the same goat that will be cast to *Azazel* on Yom Kippur. He also wears the garb of Easav, his outer appearance, in order to win the blessings of his father.

"He called to Easav." The blessings [that Isaac promised to Easav] belong to this temporal world. In truth, Jacob cannot receive any good in this world, which is always open to question. But, Easav, because he has no place in the World to Come, should be given something in this world. The solution, then, is to "tempt him with the *shofar*" on Judgment Day. This temptation is a lie... This means that Jacob denies the narrow dictum of truth. That is, although in truth it is Easav that should receive something in this world, through deception, Jacob also can gain in this world. ... but only when he claims to be Easav—that is when he manipulates the judgment itself, even though there is no [objective] change on account of his manipulation. To do this requires subterfuge... for the outward appearance of Easav is good—deceptively, as our Sages mention.... Yaakov on Rosh Hashanah appears shaken, as it is written, "Will a *shofar* be blown in the city and the inhabitants not tremble?" (Amos 3: 6). However, he repents and [he too] appears good.... He shows his good side and hides his sins like Easav. This is the attitude of Easav, not Yaakov which is "my sins are always before me." However, in place of the stricture of true judgment, comes the temptation through deception and circumvention of the truth which is the genius of Jacob. For this world is the world of falsehood and as each type meshes only with its own kind, in the field of worldly jurisprudence, the false will be victorious. However, this can only occur when falsehood receives the good via the legal aspect [of this world]. This [only] occurs when the good [is made to] appear [on the surface]. These are very deep matters and here is not the place to expand on them.³

Yitzchak wants to bless Easav with the material blessings of this world—"the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land." Yaakov, the innocent, the spiritual, the innerwardly focused, cannot win in this world. He lacks the power of falsehood and the chutzpah needed to do so. The only way that he wins the blessings of Easav is by acting like Easav, by becoming his "brother in falsehood." He is not Easav, but he dresses like him: the lamb in wolf's clothing. Here is the first reversal of many to come.

However, things are not so simple. Yaakov is punished for tricking his father.

"Mordechai went out into the city and cried a great and bitter cry" (Esther 4:1).

Yaakov inflicted one cry upon Easav, as it is written, 'When Easav heard his father's words, he cried an intensely great and bitter cry'. How was this account settled? In Shushan, as it says, 'he cried a great and bitter cry'.⁴

The struggle that began with Easav and Yaakov reaches its dénouement with the reversal of Haman and Mordechai. Yaakov disguises himself as Easav. But, Easav, too, cloaks his own identity. He dresses up as Yaakov.

'Yitzchak loved Easav for game (tzide)⁵ was in his mouth'. What does 'game in his mouth' mean? He would trap Yitzchak the righteous with his tongue. All of the transgressions that G-d abhors were found in Easav. 'Six G-d hates, and seven he despises: haughty eyes, a devious tongue, hands that spill innocent

blood, a scheming heart and feet that run to evil...' (Mishle 6). When Easav would come from outside he would ask his father, 'Father, how does one tithe salt?'. Yitzchak would be impressed, 'How exacting is my son's observance!' He would ask him, "Son, where were you today?" and he would answer him, 'In the study hall. Isn't the law thus, didn't so-and-so prohibit and so-and-so permit?' Thus he ensnared him with his tongue, and so Yitzchak loved him. But the Divine Spirit cried out, 'When he entertains with his voice do not believe him for seven sins lie in his heart' (Mishle 26).⁶

"For game was in his mouth"—his power lies in his mouth. Easav also inherits Yaakov's voice. He wraps himself in his voice, the sound of the Torah. Easav lacks the truth of Yaakov. All of his actions are false. All are done merely for the sake of appearance—but he dares to be Yaakov. This is the religiosity of this world; religiosity founded on lies.

"How is Easav revealed, sprung from his hiding" (Ovadiah 1: 6). Easav's disguise is discovered. This is his fate. Despite his attempts to appear as Yaakov, he is caught in his lies, in his imbroglia of deceit. "I have made you the smallest of nations, utterly despised...[even] if you fly like an eagle, among the stars make your nest—from there will I topple you', says G-d" (Ovadiah 2:4).

So Yaakov impersonates Easav who impersonates Yaakov. Back and forth. Religious truth in this world appears firmly secular. The large measure of self-negation that true religiosity demands from its adherents seems to arouse stern judgment's

opposition. The righteous must then clothe himself in the garb of false external religiosity so that he may appear as a tzadik in this world. Not only in order to gain from the material world must he lie, but even in order to retain his persona of spirituality. If he will be true to himself, he will not be thought of as righteous, and will not be able to act in the world as such. He gives up that most dear to him—his own inner self—in order to be understood by others.

The wicked attempt to imitate his garb, making a mockery of righteousness itself. Dressed the part, the wicked man does not feel the absurdity of his situation. Judging all by external appearances, he truly believes that he is one of the righteous. The trickery of Esav is not simple. It is not conscious subterfuge, but runs much deeper than that. It is utter self-deception. He sees this world as true; he identifies reality with mere appearances. From his point of view, the attempts to find favor in his father's eyes are honest. They even bear fruit. The side of strict judgment, the source of this world, is satisfied with his efforts. Only the true tzadik is capable of seeing through the facade of the wicked, but cannot expose him lest he himself be seen as one of the wicked as well.

III

THE DEEPER MEANING OF DISGUISE

R' Yitzchak Luria taught:

Our Sages obligated intoxication to the point of not being able to differentiate between blessed is Mordechai and cursed is Haman with the following intention: It is known that there is a spark of the Holy in every bull that gives it life. If this spark disappears, it will immediately disintegrate. On this great day, when there

is great illumination, we want this spark to receive part of the light, but not so much that it will illumine the bull itself. Therefore, we need to drink to the point that we cannot differentiate between blessed is Mordechai and cursed is Haman, so that we may mistakenly bless this spark within its shell. However, the blessing will not be with full and proper intent so that its potency will also not be great [enough] to bless the bull as well. Therefore, we say, 'blessed is Haman' to draw light to this spark, but without the [proper] intention, because of our drunkenness and lapsed state of mind. If it was said with full intent, Heaven forbid, it would illumine the bull as well.⁷

Even evil has a kernel of good. More importantly, we see that this kernel comes from above and it is what brings life to evil. Haman needs blessing so that the spark of holiness within him can be blessed. This cannot be done with full consciousness, however, and so we need the intoxication of Purim. The Kabbala teaches us that the source of the holy sparks that reside within evil is even higher than of those that reside within the good. They stem from the primordial chaos, a place that was shattered because of the greatness of the powers it contained. Man's task is to build the proper vessels that will be able to contain these holy sparks.

Herein lies the need to bless Haman. In Kabbalistic terms, this blessing is the enriching of the blessed by directing G-d's abundance towards him. We do not seek the annihilation of Haman, for this would entail the destruction of the holy spark contained within him. On the other hand, we cannot condone or legitimate the evil that he represents. We are sworn to fight

against it. Therefore, the "holy deception": perhaps the drunk will let a blessing slip out. Only the drunk is capable of the sympathy necessary to bless that which the sober must solemnly stand on guard against.⁸

→ This is the reversal inherent in Purim: the mighty is revealed in the weak—the great light appears by way of concealment, the hidden miracle of Purim. Purim consciousness, the consciousness of intoxication, enables us to accept that evil, which in times of sobriety, disturbs us so much. And even if we cannot immediately purify the good within it, we come to realize that even the husks have a role to play, even if their end is obliteration.

Let us return to Yom Kippur. This is the holiest of days wherein through shedding the garb of this world—work and sustenance—we reach beyond this world to the upper heights of truth. Here is the illumination of repentance whose source lies in *bina*. By erasing inner evil and purifying the soul, Yom Kippur enables the holiest of lights to shine within our consciousness.

Purim, however, is not one of the holidays. It is not a *Yom Tov*, tied to the strictures of forbidden and permitted. But through Purim a greater truth is revealed. We come to see that even the fully clothed soul in this world, in all its filth, has within it a spark of holiness. A spark that twinkles in the eyes of the nescient drunk. Here is an even deeper catharsis: The soul accepts itself as divine reality without the need for disrobing, without the need to leave this world. Perhaps this is the meaning of the Lurianic explanation of how the light of Wisdom descends directly into *malchut* (royalty).⁹ Wisdom, which is negation, a mere flash of insight, penetrates reality itself without distillation through *bina*

(understanding). Evil is evil, but there is good at its core, for in the world of *chochma* (wisdom) nothing else exists.

This is the illumination of Purim: illumination that is eternal, beyond even that of Yom Kippur. The need to purify one's self from evil stems from understanding evil on a substantive level. In the world-to-come, however, death is finally defeated and the impure spirit will be cast away (Zachariah 13:2). There is no longer any need for self-purification. Once we can fully accept ourselves as we are—acceptance that stems from our understanding that we are G-d's creations, and we were created as we are, with all the good and bad within us - we become truly part of the Divine. Then, "our mouths will be filled with laughter." This is the mirth of Purim when evil is revealed as absurd, as a bad joke, as a mere plaything in the world-to-come, a toy to be shared by man and G-d. We can only attain this level of consciousness in this world by losing our rational hold on reality through drink. Then evil is revealed in its own ridiculousness, loosing any threatening power it may have held over us. On the contrary, it merely adds to our enjoyment.

For the Maharal of Prague, Purim reveals the true identity of Israel.

The lot fell on the twelfth month, for Adar hints at the lack of reality that is Israel. Adar is the end of all the months and represents endings and completions.... Haman, however, thought that this final month pointed to the end of Israel....Do not think that the way the lottery turned out was insignificant because Haman's plans did not succeed. This is not true. Rather, Israel certainly has only a limited autonomous existence. It is

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only from [the connection with] the Holy One that they exist. From their own vantage point, however, they do not. This is expressed by the “el” at the end of the name Isra-el. It is G-d Himself who grants them existence, even though they themselves have no autonomous existence. For this reason, the lottery fell on the end of all the months, for Israel on its own is a [mere] terminus. The wicked Haman rejoiced when the lottery fell on the twelfth month, thinking that this represented the end of Israel, not realizing that while they in themselves do have a limited autonomous existence, their real existence is only that given to them by G-d. All of the nations have a greater autonomous existence than Israel, but lack the Divine existence that Israel possesses. Accordingly, all the nations will eventually perish, while only Israel will not, so it is written, “he cast lots...” .. For this reason the lot fell on the month of Adar, the last of all months and their end as well. ... For their lack is actually the very source of their existence from the vantage point of the Holy One—their eternal existence...

When Haman saw that the lot fell on this last month he was pleased for he said that this will be their end. Just as the Exodus was their beginning in the first month, so their end will be in the last month. His mistake, however, was that he considered this to be the terminus and not a completion, for the end is attached to the beginning and all that is complete returns to G-d. Just as the beginning came from G-d, as He brought them out of Egypt in the month of Nissan, so too their end is from G-d. So it only fitting that their end comes

in Adar, the end of all months which is attached to Nissan...

When this is understood, then the saying of our Sages, “all the holidays will eventually be canceled, but Purim will not be canceled” can also be understood. All the holidays are memorials to the Exodus from Egypt—this is the beginning of Israel’s autonomy. Now, even though this beginning came from G-d, just like any other creation it too is finite in and of itself. The holidays which commemorate this Exodus, then, are also finite and will eventually come to an end. The days of Purim, however, have no independent existence, but stem directly from G-d—the source of Israel. Since Israel is directly connected to G-d, there can be no end to them. Therefore, the days of Purim occur in the last month. Accordingly, the days of Purim stem directly from G-d, the Giver of Form to Israel (who have no autonomy of their own); they have no salvation from any other than the Holy One.

Yom Kippur also is directly connected to G-d, as our Sages hinted, “How praiseworthy you are Israel, that you purify yourselves. Before whom do you purify yourselves and who is it that purifies you? The Holy One purifies you as it says, “G-d the mikveh of Israel.” Therefore, Yom Kippur also is not canceled....¹⁰

The words of the Maharal are remarkable. Everything is finite, even Israel. The history of Israel which began in the Exodus will end like all histories. For this reason, the holidays which commemorate this history will eventually come to an

end and this part of our history will come to a close. The eternal existence of Israel, though, is not this historical existence, but a meta-historical existence, a divine existence, independent of any particularity for all particularity is finite.

Purim is not tied to history and its values. It lies beyond good and evil. *Ad d'lo yada* gives expression to its unique a-historicity. Purim is the celebration of the Infinite; of the loss of particularity. It is thus a post-Exodus celebration. Its carnival atmosphere, its frivolity, breaks all the vessels that attempt to restrain it. This is the breaking of the history and ideology of the Exodus. It is because of this, however, that these days are open to receiving the Divine Infinite. At first, this is terribly dangerous—the end of history and ideology. Its next incarnation, though, appears as a cleaving to the Unending—“then our mouths will be filled with song.” Our drunkenness breaks all boundaries and signals more than anything these post-modern times in which we find ourselves. Cultural chaos threatens humanity as a whole, and the Jewish world specifically: the dissolution of the subject and his values. The fragmentary nature of the post-modern that shatters all vessels, the pluralistic colorful nonsense that intoxicates all comers.

But, perhaps here we are witness to the Kabbalistic vision itself wherein all this cultural carnage is actually bringing us not to a shattering of vessels, but rather to their recasting: A reawakening of religiosity on a higher, more intelligent, more exciting level revealing the light within chaos and thus allowing Man to finally become a true partner of the Creator in creation.

(Footnotes)

¹ TB Yoma 39a

² *Midrash Shocher Tov, Mishle 9:2*

³ R' Zadok HaCohen, *Kometz HaMincha*, chapter 67.

⁴ *Bresheit Rabba 67, 4.*

⁵ The Hebrew can mean both game, as in captured quarry, and to hunt or trap.

⁶ *Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 8.*

⁷ *Pri Etz Chaim, Purim, 76.*

⁸ An interesting example of this tension is found in Rav Kook's attitude to apostasy. At heart, apostasy aims at purifying belief. Its inner objectives are actually good. It reveals a higher truth that cannot be expressed in the normative religious truth, and so cloaks itself in the garb of something anti-religious. However, it is impossible to condone, let alone bless, these apostates. Only when disguised, only when drunk, can Haman be blessed. We need to differentiate between the normative halachic approach of Rav Kook to the apostate and his understanding of what they represent on an esoteric level. We cannot allow ourselves to confuse the two as many have done. His approach is dialectical and maintains a tension between the exo- and esoteric.

⁹ In kabbalistic symbolism, this is a radical departure from the normal course of emanation. The highest emanation delivers its light directly to the lowest.

¹⁰ *Ohr Chadash 133-135.*