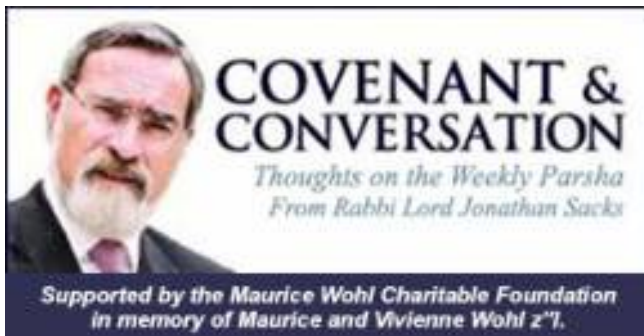


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The Sins of a Leader

As we have discussed so many times already this year, leaders make mistakes. That is inevitable. So, strikingly, our parsha of Vayikra implies. The real issue is leaders respond to their mistakes.

The point is made by the Torah in a very subtle way. Our parsha deals with sin offerings to be brought when people have made mistakes. The technical term for this is *sheggagah*, meaning inadvertent wrongdoing (Lev. 4:1-35). You did something, not knowing it was forbidden, either because you forgot or did not know the law, or because you were unaware of certain facts. You

may, for instance, have carried something in a public place on Shabbat, perhaps because you did not know it was forbidden to carry, or you forgot what was in your pocket, or because you forgot it was Shabbat.

The Torah prescribes different sin offerings depending on who made the mistake. It enumerates four categories. First is the High Priest, second is “the whole community” (understood to mean the Great Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court), a third is “the leader” (*Nasi*), and the fourth is an ordinary individual.

In three of the four cases, the law is introduced by the word *im*, “if” – *if* such a person commits a sin. In the case of the leader, however, the law is prefaced by the word *asher*, “when” (Lev. 4:22). It is *possible* that a High Priest, the Supreme Court or an individual may err. But in the case of a leader, it is probable or even certain. Leaders make mistakes. It is unavoidable, the occupational hazard of their role. Talking about the sin of a *Nasi*, the Torah uses the word “when,” not “if.”

Nasi is the generic word for a leader: a ruler, king, judge, elder or prince. Usually it refers to the holder of political power. In Mishnaic times, the *Nasi*, the most famous of whom were leaders from the family of Hillel, had a quasi-governmental role as representative of the Jewish people to the Roman government. Rabbi Moses Sofer (Bratislava, 1762-1839) in one of his responsa¹ examines the question of why, when positions of Torah leadership are never dynastic (never passed from father to son), the role of *Nasi* was an exception. Often this role did pass from

father to son. The answer he gives, and it is historically insightful, is that with the decline of monarchy in the Second Temple period and thereafter, the *Nasi* took on many of the responsibilities of a king. His role, internally and externally, was as much political and diplomatic as religious. That in general is what is meant by the word *Nasi*.

Why does the Torah consider this type of leadership particularly prone to error? The commentators offer three possible explanations. R. Ovadiah Sforno (to Lev. 4:21–22) cites the phrase “But Yeshurun waxed fat, and kicked” (Deut. 32:15). Those who have advantages over others, whether of wealth or power, can lose their moral sense. Rabbeinu Bachya agrees, suggesting that rulers tend to become arrogant and haughty. Implicit in these comments – it is in fact a major theme of Tanach as a whole – is the idea later stated by Lord Acton in the aphorism, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”²

R. Elie Munk, citing the Zohar, offers a second explanation. The High Priest and the Sanhedrin were in constant contact with that which was holy. They lived in a world of ideals. The king or political ruler, by contrast, was involved in secular affairs: war and peace, the administration of government, and international relations. They were more likely to sin because their day-to-day concerns were not religious but pragmatic.³

R. Meir Simcha ha-Cohen of Dvinsk⁴ points out that a King was especially vulnerable to being led astray by popular sentiment. Neither a Priest nor a Judge in the Sanhedrin were answerable to the

people. The King, however, relied on popular support. Without that he could be deposed. But this is laden with risk. Doing what the people want is not always doing what God wants. That, R. Meir Simcha argues, is what led David to order a census (2 Sam. 24), and Zedekiah to ignore the advice of Jeremiah and rebel against the King of Babylon (2 Chr. 36). Thus, for a whole series of reasons, a political leader is more exposed to temptation and error than a Priest or Judge.

There are further reasons.⁵ One is that politics is an arena of conflict. It deals in matters – specifically wealth and power – that are in the short-term, zero-sum games. ‘The more I have, the less you have. Seeking to maximise the benefits to myself or my group, I come into conflict with others who seek to maximise benefits to themselves or their group.’ The politics of free societies is always conflict-ridden. The only societies where there is no conflict are tyrannical or totalitarian ones in which dissenting voices are suppressed – and Judaism is a standing protest against tyranny. So in a free society, whatever course a politician takes will please some and anger others. From this, there is no escape.

Politics involves difficult judgements. A leader must balance competing claims and will sometimes get it wrong. One example – one of the most fateful in Jewish history – occurred after the death of King Solomon. People came to his son and successor, Rehoboam, complaining that Solomon had imposed unsustainable burdens on the population, particularly during the building of the Temple. Led by Jeroboam, they asked the new King to reduce the burden. Rehoboam asked his

father's counsellors for advice. They told him to concede to the people's demand. Serve them, they said, and they will serve you. Rehoboam then turned to his own friends, who told him the opposite: Reject the request. Show the people you are a strong leader who cannot be intimidated (1 Kings 12:1-15).

It was disastrous advice, and the result was tragic. The kingdom split in two, the ten northern tribes following Jeroboam, leaving only the southern tribes, generically known as "Judah," loyal to the king. For Israel as a people in its own land, it was the beginning of the end. Always a small people surrounded by large and powerful empires, it needed unity, high morale and a strong sense of destiny to survive. Divided, it was only a matter of time before both nations, Israel in the north, Judah in the south, fell to other powers.

The reason leaders – as opposed to Judges and Priests – cannot avoid making mistakes is that there is no textbook that infallibly teaches you how to lead. Priests and Judges follow laws. For leadership there are no laws because every situation is unique. As Isaiah Berlin put it in his essay, 'Political Judgement,'⁶ in the realm of political action, there are few laws and what is needed instead is skill in reading a situation. Successful statesmen "grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation – this and no other." Berlin compares this to the gift possessed by great novelists like Tolstoy and Proust.⁷ Applying inflexible rules to a constantly shifting political landscape destroys societies. Communism was like that. In free societies, people change, culture

changes, the world beyond a nation's borders does not stand still. So a politician will find that what worked a decade or a century ago does not work now. In politics it is easy to get it wrong, hard to get it right.

There is one more reason why leadership is so challenging. It is alluded to by the Mishnaic Sage, R. Nechemiah, commenting on the verse, "My son, if you have put up security for your neighbour, if you have struck your hand in pledge for another" (Prov. 6:1):

So long as a man is an associate [i.e. concerned only with personal piety], he need not be concerned with the community and is not punished on account of it. But once a man has been placed at the head and has donned the cloak of office, he may not say: 'I have to look after my welfare, I am not concerned with the community.' Instead, the whole burden of communal affairs rests on him. If he sees a man doing violence to his fellow, or committing a transgression, and does not seek to prevent him, he is punished on account of him... you are responsible for him. You have entered the gladiatorial arena, and he who enters the arena is either conquered or conquers.⁸

A private individual is responsible only for their own sins. A leader is held responsible for the sins of the people they lead: at least those they might have prevented.⁹ With power comes responsibility: the greater the power, the greater the responsibility.

There are no universal rules, there is no failsafe textbook, for leadership. Every situation is

different and each age brings its own challenges. A ruler, in the best interests of their people, may sometimes have to take decisions that a conscientious individual would shrink from doing in private life. They may have to decide to wage a war, knowing that some will die. They may have to levy taxes, knowing that this will leave some impoverished. Only after the event will the leader know whether the decision was justified, and it may depend on factors beyond their control.

The Jewish approach to leadership is thus an unusual combination of realism and idealism – realism in its acknowledgement that leaders inevitably make mistakes, idealism in its constant subordination of politics to ethics, power to responsibility, pragmatism to the demands of conscience. What matters is not that leaders never get it wrong – that is inevitable, given the nature of leadership – but that they are always exposed to prophetic critique and that they constantly study Torah to remind themselves of transcendent standards and ultimate aims. The most important thing from a Torah perspective is that a leader is sufficiently honest to admit their mistakes. Hence the significance of the sin offering.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai summed it up with a brilliant double-entendre on the word *asher*, meaning “when” in the phrase “when a leader sins.” He relates it to the word *ashrei*, “happy,” and says: Happy is the generation whose leader is willing to bring a sin offering for their mistakes.¹⁰

Leadership demands two kinds of courage: the strength to take a risk, and the humility to admit when a risk fails.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think people are shocked when a leader makes an error in judgment?
2. What behaviour would you like to see from a leader after a mistake?
3. Which requires more courage – taking a risk, or admitting a failure?

NOTES

1. *Responsa Chatam Sofer, Orach Chayyim*, 12.
2. This famous phrase comes from a letter written by Lord Acton in 1887. See Martin H. Manser, and Rosalind Fergusson, *The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs*, New York: Facts on File, 2002, 225.
3. Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah, Vayikra*, New York, Mesorah Publications, 1992, 33.
4. *Meshech Chochmah* to Lev. 4:21-22.
5. This, needless to say, is not the plain sense of the text. The sins for which leaders brought an offering were spiritual offences, not errors of political judgment.
6. Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, Chatto and Windus, 1996, 40-53.
7. Incidentally, this answers the point made by political philosopher Michael Walzer in his book on the politics of the Bible, *In God's Shadow*. He is undeniably right to point out that political theory, so significant in ancient Greece, is almost completely absent from the Hebrew Bible. I would argue, and so surely would Isaiah Berlin, that there is a reason for this. In politics there are few general laws, and the Hebrew Bible is interested in laws. But when it comes to politics – to Israel's Kings for example – it does not give laws but instead tells stories.
8. Exodus Rabbah, 27:9.
9. “Whoever can prevent the members of his household from sinning and does not, is seized for the sins of his household. If he can prevent his fellow citizens and does not, he is seized for the sins of his fellow citizens. If he can prevent the whole world from sinning, and does not, he is seized for the sins of the whole world” (Shabbat 54b).
10. Tosefta Baba Kamma, 7:5.



Blessed Be Haman?

The Zionist plan appeared to have failed. God had kept His word; He had fulfilled his part of the covenant forged with the patriarchs. Their descendants had inherited the Land of Israel, as He had promised, but the Children of Israel had failed to honor their side of agreement, and the default clauses were set in motion: Destruction and death took the place of the vibrant society and thriving economy of Zion. The Jews were cast into exile, into hopelessness. It appeared that the Jewish Commonwealth was destined to be one more chapter in the annals of failed civilizations, a nation-state whose golden age dissipated as prosperity evaporated, political and religious freedom were lost, and self-determination was erased, the once-glorious Temple reduced to ruins. The Jews of Shushan no longer dared to dream of a national future. Their glory days, they believed, were no more than a fading memory, part of a history that was eclipsed by a frightening present.

It was clear to them that God had rejected them: Prophecy had gone dry, leaving a hollow but resounding silence in its place. They lacked the resources they would need to rebuild the Temple, which was the most important tool for repairing

the rift they had created with God. The new rulers who controlled their once-independent homeland would not allow them to return to or rebuild their ruined country.

The exile was more than a geographical challenge; it tore apart the very fabric of their peoplehood. Scattered across vast expanses of the ancient world, they became a people divided. The forces of entropy began to break the bonds between communities and individuals. In the end, they believed, it was every man (or woman) for him- or herself. The Nation of Israel would cease to exist. They had lost their monarchy, they had lost their Temple, they lost their land, and now they would move forward and abandon their national identity.

The supreme ruler of the conquering empire invited everyone to a feast, and these assimilating Jews saw it as the perfect opportunity to fit in - despite the fact that this gluttonous debauch would be a veritable smorgasbord of values and behaviors antithetical to Jewish law and morals. Non-kosher food and wine (and far too much of it), immodest revelry - and to make matters worse, rumors that the utensils of their Holy Temple would be used to serve up their national humiliation - none of this was enough to keep the Jews of Shushan from participating. They were a people who had lost their dreams, lost their identity, and lost their pride.

But then, something happened. The Kingdom of Persian had intrigue of its own. There were plots and insurrection, and a sudden opening for the position of queen. As luck would have it, a Jewish girl was selected. Almost no one knew Esther's

identity, but even if they had known, that might well have considered this the most successful step toward full integration into Persian society.

Unbeknownst to them all, the wheels had been set in motion, but the shift was so subtle it was all but imperceptible. The first stage was the creation of Jewish unity, without which no salvation would be possible, and began at a most unlikely source. Haman, a misanthrope with seething hatred for Jews, accused them of being a fifth column, a subversive force spread through the kingdom. He harped on their disunity (Esther 3:8), but brought them together by sentencing them all to the same fate: death. The second stage in the rebirth of Jewish unity was Esther. Hearing Haman's decree, she instructed Mordechai to gather the Jews, to bring them together for communal prayer and fasting. (Esther 4:15)

The tide had turned. The people were reminded of their common history, and the dispersed Jews who had imagined their future as stateless individuals, who thought that the Jewish People had ceased to exist as a national entity, now realized that they shared a common destiny. They were one People. They prayed as a People, and God heard their prayers.

The wealthy, powerful Haman soon became a victim of his own scheming. The vast fortune he had amassed is transferred by royal decree to his most bitter enemy, Mordechai. (Esther 8:2) Haman inherits the fate he had planned for the Jews - death - and the plot to eradicate the Jewish People is foiled as Esther's identity is revealed. (Esther 8:1) The book of Esther ends, but the story of the Jewish People is far from over; in

fact, it is a new beginning. The Jews find their way; they remember they are a people. They remember God. They remember their destiny; many (but not enough) return to Israel. Jerusalem is re-populated; somehow, they find the funds to rebuild the Temple.

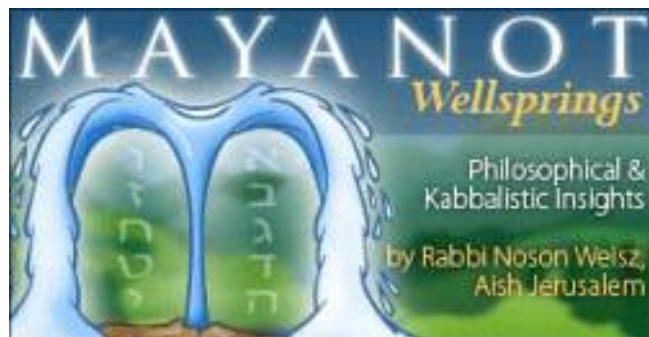
Perhaps it's a good thing God doesn't speak in the book of Esther; had a prophet been instructed to convey God's plan of how things would work out, who would have believed it? The story seems too fantastic - but it is actually even more "far-fetched" than we might think. The post-script to the Book of Esther found in rabbinic tradition¹ completes the picture:

The king who eventually allowed the Jewish exiles to return to the Land of Israel was Darius, the son of Ahashverosh and Esther. According to one source, Darius was only seven years old when he granted the Jews the right of repatriation. Apparently, a certain queen, known for her beauty and regal comportment, was a major influence on this boy-king. Esther, who always knew precisely what to say and when to say it, pulled the appropriate strings behind the scenes and engineered the Jews' return to their homeland.

One additional point should give us food for thought:² The wealth amassed by Haman was transferred to Mordechai, and eventually made its way to Jerusalem, where it was used to rebuild the Temple. Perhaps there should have been a plaque affixed to the Temple's vestibule, to be read aloud every year on Purim: "This building was paid for by the notorious Haman, who united the Jewish People. May his memory be blessed." Such a "blessing" would most certainly have brought a

smile to the lips of the triumphant celebrants as they raised their glasses - and thumbed their noses - in Haman's memory, and shouted, "L'chaim - Happy Purim!"

1. See Maharal, *Or Chadash* Chapter 2, based on Midrash Tanchumah B'shalach 28. Also see Rabbi Moshe Turiel, *Nes Purim V'Eretz Yisrael*, in *Ki Sarita: Essays on Purim in Memory of Menachem Yisrael Ganz*, 1988, pp. 233-238, Rabbi Turiel's essay influenced this essay.
2. This "thought" is attributed to God: See *Sefer D'Aggadota on Esther- Midrash Abba Gurion* Parasha 3, also found in the *Yalkut Shimoni - Esther* remez 1058 and Maharal, *Or Chadash* Chapter 3.



Jewish Joy

This week, Mayanot focuses on the holiday of Purim.

Purim is the last of the Jewish holy days to enter the Jewish calendar. To understand what this specific holy day has to offer, we must understand something about the nature of the Jewish holy days in general. Purim is a rabbinic holy day. Let us begin by looking at the Torah-mandated holy days before we consider the rabbinic ones.

The Torah describes two sets of holy days:

1. The three festivals -- Passover, Shavuot, and Succot (which were times of

pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Temple era).

2. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, (occasions for reconciliation, repentance and forgiveness.)

The Torah was written for all times and all ages and we have to assume that all the holy days it prescribes are there to help us maintain a healthy relationship between God and Israel.

A closer look at these holy days leads to the discovery that the three festivals are all related to the food cycle. Passover, in the spring, falls at the time of the earliest annual harvest, the barley crop. The *omer* sacrifice brought on the second day of Passover permits the consumption of the new harvest. Shavuot coincides with the wheat harvest, the source of the annual supply of the main staple of the human diet. Two loaves of bread are sacrificed on the Altar to mark the occasion. Succot marks the end of the summer when the produce, which has been left in the fields to dry in the summer heat, is finally gathered into the granaries and storage houses in preparation of winter. We celebrate the occasion with the four species. Man's physical survival depends on the success of these harvests, or to put it another way, on the stability of the tripod that rests on these three festivals, called in Hebrew the three *regalim*, or the three "legs."

According to Jewish thought, the world of physicality is arranged to correspond with the world of spirituality. The physical world presents us with a window through which we are able to catch a glimpse of spiritual events, which are otherwise invisible to our physical eye.

The fact that the three festivals mark the times of the delivery of the physical inputs on which human survival depends, implies that there are corresponding spiritual inputs at these times which are just as essential for man's spiritual survival.

SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS

If we analyze the implications of this correlation, we see that, on Passover, we celebrate the freedom from bondage to physicality that instills us with the potential for leading a spiritual life. On Shavuot, we celebrate the delivery of the necessary staple for leading a spiritual life, the instructions detailed in the Torah. And on Succot, we celebrate the recognition afforded to us by God for our spiritual achievements. The spiritual festivals are the perfect counterparts of the physical ones.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur do not have this dual aspect. They are purely spiritual holidays when our relationship with God is mended and restored to its freshness.

Interestingly, the Torah has no holy days through the winter, although the entire potential for physical renewal rests on the rainfall of the winter [at least in Israel where rain falls at no other time of year]. The water supplied by the winter precipitation is the essential fuel that powers all future growth. This teaches us that ordinarily, the input of potential is not worthy of celebration. Only when the potential is actualized and its fruits are finally reaped are we instructed to celebrate. As the winter is a time of preparation only, and provides no harvest that can be reaped, it contains no Torah holidays.

However the rabbis added two holy days to these Torah holidays which both fall in the winter -- Chanukah and Purim. These holidays are not only distinct in being winter holidays. They are special in another way as well. They are also "exile" holy days. Chanukah celebrates the end of the Greek occupation, while Purim was instituted to celebrate the end of the Persian exile and the victory over Haman.

ADDITIONAL HOLY DAYS

The Maharal explains that the rabbis added these holy days because we require greater inputs of spiritual power in times of exile in order to maintain our spiritual integrity in the face of the special problems it presents.

The Torah, which was written for all times and ages does not present these holidays, because the necessity of the inputs which they symbolize is related to survival in exile. In such a time, Israel has greater spiritual needs than in normal times.

When Israel is in exile, it experiences a spiritual winter. Just as all the potential of future growth is powered by the precipitation that falls during the winter, the spiritual winter of exile is meant to power future spiritual growth. The spiritual precipitation of the special inputs during exile will eventually lead to a bountiful spiritual harvest that was not designed into the original creation. Every exile is designed to produce a spiritual profit. For this reason, the arrival of this new spiritual potential is itself worthy of celebration. Hence the rabbinic holidays of Chanukah and Purim.

Living among the nations forces the Jewish people to confront two distinct threats to their survival, the twin threats of spiritual assimilation and physical annihilation. Chanukah celebrates the delivery of the spiritual input required to overcome the threat of spiritual assimilation, while Purim is dedicated to the celebration of the input required to counteract the problem of physical annihilation.

While it is relatively simple to comprehend how an infusion of spiritual power might stave off the threat of assimilation, the connection between spiritual inputs and physical annihilation is not obvious at first glance. A physical threat must surely be counteracted by physical means. What does spirituality have to do with it?

HAMAN'S EDICT

The Talmud (Megilah 12a) discusses the spiritual origins of Haman's edict:

The students asked Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: "Why did the Jews of that generation deserve annihilation?" He told them, "What do you think?" They said, "Because they enjoyed partaking in the great party of Achashverosh [an event that took place roughly nine years before Haman issued his edict]." He objected, "In that case, the Jews of Shushan, the capital, [the Jews who attended this party] would deserve such a punishment, but why would all the Jews in the world who did not participate be included in the edict of destruction?" They said, "You're right, so you tell us." He said, "They bowed to the idol of Nebuchadnezzar [an event that took place roughly seventy

years earlier]." They objected, "If so why indeed were they not wiped out? Does God show favoritism?" He said, "They didn't mean it in their hearts and only did it out of respect to the king, so the edict against them was also not issued by God with finality and therefore could be revoked."

A bizarre conversation indeed! How could events of seventy years earlier, whose perpetrators were no longer in the world, cause the destruction of people who did not participate in them? What is more, if the Jews only bowed to the idol out of respect for the ruler, why did they deserve annihilation in the first place?

The key to all this, and the beginning of understanding of the spiritual input represented by the Purim story and all that it encapsulates, can be found in the words of Nachmanides (Shabbat 88a).

NACHMANIDES EXPLAINS

Nachmanides begins by examining a Talmud passage stating that the Jews were forced by God to accept the Torah. God suspended Mount Sinai over their heads and told them, "Accept the Torah or this will be your burial place." Thus they had a legitimate reason to back out of their agreement with God on the grounds of coercion. It was only in the days of Achashverosh, in the context of the Haman story, that they willingly surrendered this claim of coercion and fully accepted the Torah with all their hearts. Thus the Purim holiday marks the celebration of the true acceptance of the Torah.

Nachmanides has several problems with this passage of Talmud. What is the point of protesting

coercion after all has been lost? If the Jews were unwilling participants in the Torah covenant till this point in their history, how could they be punished by God with the preceding exile? If God is satisfied with a coerced agreement why celebrate its willing acceptance as though one were ushering in a brand new era?

Explains Nachmanides: Adhering strictly to the dictates of Torah Judaism in times of exile cannot be compared to Torah observance in times of redemption. As long as God provides the ideal milieu for Torah observance, the issue of coercion never arises. It is always understood and accepted as self evident that the condition for conquering and holding the land of Israel, for playing host to the Divine Presence in the Temple in Jerusalem, for the establishment of the Jewish monarchy, for the maintenance of direct communication with God through prophecy, must be the strictest standard of Torah observance. As long as Judaism works and provides Israel with all the trappings required to lead a successful holy existence no one dreams of protesting coercion.

THE PROTEST OF COERCION

The protest of coercion first rears its head in exile. The strict observance of Judaism after the Jewish people are stripped of all the demonstrations of Divine favor seems like a one-sided proposition indeed. We Jews are asked to go to extraordinary lengths in terms of what most people consider adequate to fully discharge religious duty. We must seek to please God through observing all the dictates of His Torah, while God appears only to regard us with positive disfavor. In the exile, not

only are we Jews unequal to our host nations, we are positively persecuted.

It is from this background that we have to consider the events related in the Talmudic passage above. Nebuchadnezzar's command to bow to his idol was not directed at Jews specifically. All his subject peoples were expected to demonstrate this sign of respect to their monarch's deity.

It was precisely at this point in their history that the Jews issued their protest of coercion, and even then it was stated mildly. In effect they said to God, "As you have chosen to withdraw your special protection from us, we must learn to live in the world as ordinary people. Our beliefs have not changed one iota. Our commitment to the Torah and its observance is sacrosanct. However, we cannot refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar. Our practice of Judaism must conform to the realities of the situation in which we find ourselves, a situation that You have created by sending us into exile. As You have made it clear that you will no longer extend us the embrace of Your special protection, we cannot afford to live under Nebuchadnezzar's rule and disobey his edicts. He will certainly destroy us if we do."

When, nearly seventy years later, Achashverosh threw his grand party and invited the dignitaries of all his subject peoples to attend, although there was much emphasis on the fact that no one was compelled to attend, the Jews once again decided that the prudent course was not to offend him by their conspicuous absence. But Mordechai told them not to attend. Why?

CELEBRATING THE DEMISE OF JUDAISM

The occasion for calling the party was to celebrate the fact that the anticipated Jewish redemption, which had been predicted to take place in the seventieth year of their exile never materialized. The captured Temple vessels -- treated with great reverence to this point because of the fear of the arrival of the Jewish Messiah -- were taken out at the party and used in profane ways.

Mordechai argued against the propriety of attending a celebration organized to mark the demise of the Jewish religion. The people decided to attend anyway out of what they protested was merely sensible realism. But then they enjoyed it. What began as a reluctant adaptation to the so-called realities of the exile seventy years earlier, gradually developed into a positive enjoyment of the pagan way of life and its pleasures. So deep was the Jewish desire to fit in by this time, that Jews could actually enjoy their own public humiliation. Making fun of religious Jews was then the politically correct thing to do.

We have finally come to the point of understanding what is meant by physical annihilation as opposed to spiritual assimilation. The Jews of Babylon were unshaken in their faith and remained spiritually untainted. They simply adapted realistically to their altered physical circumstances in order to ensure their physical survival. However as time wore on this adaptation began to extract a spiritual price.

While outwardly, the practice of Judaism continued, inwardly the Jews began to look at the world in the same way as the pagans around them.

They no longer dreamed of Jerusalem. They aspired to the same trappings of success and enjoyment as the rest of Achashverosh's subjects. Their inner vision of their unique mission in the world was so lost to them that they managed to enjoy the party whose very purpose was the celebration of their demise as a unique spiritual force.

In the end, the threat of Jewish annihilation that arises from the apparently harmless adaptation to reality turns out to be as real as the threat presented by the positive desire to abandon Jewish beliefs in favor of the beliefs of the nations.

God waited seventy years from the time Israel bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idols before He allowed Haman to issue his edict of destruction. He wanted to demonstrate to the Jewish people that their apparently realistic and reasonable adaptation to their changed circumstances was really much more than that. He wanted them to realize that they were lying to themselves. The true source of their desire to adapt was a deep longing to be just like everyone else.

STAYING JEWISH IN EXILE

There is much more to Judaism than the outer trappings of observance. Observance is the body of Judaism, but its soul requires the Jews to place their relationship with God at the very center of life. The observance of the commandments is only meaningful when it is the outer manifestation of this inner reality. One cannot be truly Jewish without dreaming of the Temple and of Jerusalem. Jews who manage to find a good life in the absence of this dream are on their way

to annihilation as a distinct people no matter what their level of observance may be.

There is a famous saying in Yiddish, *S'is shver zu zein a Yid!* "It's hard to be a Jew." Israel has lost far many more Jews through its history to this statement than to the persuasive power of foreign ideologies.

The spiritual input of the Purim holiday is provided to counter this tendency. In essence, it comes to counter the protest of coercion. We see the Torah as coercion as long as we feel that strict observance is impractical and burdensome in the context of the realities within which we are forced to live. But Jews in exile must be able to find joy in the practice of Judaism to be able to maintain their commitment to Judaism as the focus of their existence. They must still feel that despite all the hardships of exile, their commitment to the Torah is the force that gives them life.

When they were faced with Haman's edict, the Jewish people found the strength to reach deep into their collective soul. Israel realized that the physical annihilation which threatened them was an indication of the spiritual level to which they had sunk. They were threatened with outward physical annihilation only because they were close to dying as a people spiritually on the inside. They reexamined their attitude to their own commitment to Judaism, located the protest of coercion in their collective Jewish soul, and gave it up for good. As a result, the physical edict was rescinded and the Jews were blessed with "light, happiness, joy and honor."

The joy that comes from Torah observance under seemingly unfavorable circumstances is the

spiritual input that God offers on Purim. May we all merit receiving a powerful dose of it.



Hearing the Voice

God "spoke to Moshe from the Tent of Meeting." Rashi explains that the voice of Hashem reached Moshe's ears, but the Jewish people did not hear it. The voice stopped at the walls of the Tent. One might think that it stopped because it was soft and faint, but Rashi assures us that this is not the case. It was a powerful voice, a voice that "breaks cedar trees." And yet, this powerful voice came to a sudden stop and was not heard outside the Tent of Meeting. Had someone placed his ear right up against the wall of the Tent, he would also not have heard Hashem's voice.

How could such a thing be? Was it a miracle?

Not necessarily, writes Rav Yaakov Neiman in his *Darchei Mussar*. It is possible that only Moshe heard the voice of Hashem because only he was attuned to it. As for the others, it passed right by them without their being aware of it.

We all know that different ears are set for different audio frequencies and that sounds heard by one species may not always be heard by

another. In order to hear the voice of Hashem, a person's ears would have to be set to a high spiritual frequency. Otherwise, he would hear nothing. Moshe was attuned to that frequency, and he heard Hashem's voice. The rest of the Jewish people were not attuned.

The Mishneh tells us (*Avos* 6:2) in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, "Every day a heavenly voice (*bas kol*) goes forth from Mount Chorev and proclaims, 'Woe to humanity because of the Torah's humiliation.'" Has any of us ever heard this heavenly voice? I don't think so. But that does not contradict Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's statement. He certainly heard that voice, as did other people of his stature in his times, people attuned to the spiritual frequency on which heavenly voices travel. We, however, who are not attuned to that frequency, cannot hear the heavenly voice.

Having the faculty of hearing does not guarantee that we will really hear. Having the faculty of sight does not guarantee that we will really see. The sounds and the images may reach us, but that does not mean they will make an impression on our brains and hearts. They may just be left to languish on the surface.

By way of illustration, I would like to discuss an event that most of us remember vividly and all too painfully – the Persian Gulf War of 1990. We all recall our terror and anxiety as we waited for Iraq to carry out its threat to rain Scud missiles on Israel. And then it happened. Thirty-nine Scuds landed in Israel, but miraculously, only three people were killed.

I say miraculously not as a figure of speech but as an internationally acknowledged description of what had happened. It was beyond incredible that thirty-nine Scuds should cause such minimal casualties. And if we had any doubt about it, a Scud missile struck an American barracks in Saudi Arabia and killed scores of American servicemen. These were no firecrackers. But they did virtually nothing to Israel.

We all knew we were witnesses to a great miracle, but did it penetrate deep into our hearts and minds? Was our appreciation just superficial or did it cause profound changes in our lives, in the way we thought and felt, in the essence of who we are? Did we really "see" the miracle, or did it go right by us at the edge of our superficial awareness?

Rav Eliahu Lopian once said that *emunah*, faith, is not manifest in the intensity of the prayers we say during a crisis but by the intensity of the praises we offer up to Hashem when the crisis has passed. To pray when in danger is a natural reaction; as the common saying goes, there are no atheists in a foxhole. But faith reaches much deeper. It reflects a profound relationship with Hashem sometimes forged in the fire of experience. But when the fire passes, is the relationship still as intense? That is the test of true faith. We may have seen miracles in our time, but did they penetrate beyond the surface and effect changes in who we are? That is the question we must ask ourselves. Did we really "see" the miracles?