



Thoughts on Purim

by Rabbi Bernie Fox



Thoughts on Purim 5774 - March 14, 2014

Who Cares about Purim? Let's Have a Good Time!

And these days will be remembered and observed in every generation, by every family, in every country, and every city. These days of Purim will not pass away from among the Jews and its memory will not cease from their descendants. (Megilat Esther 9:28)

1. The fate of temporary minor festivals.

The above passage explains that the celebration of Purim will be observed in all generations. From our contemporary perspective, this is a difficult statement to understand. After all, we are observing the celebration of Purim and more than two thousand years have passed since the events took place that it commemorates. We regard Purim as one of our festivals and as on par with Pesach and Succot. Of course, it will be observed in all generations. Why does the Megilah need to make this assertion?

In order to understand the intent of the Megilah's statement, some background is required. Purim is unique and different from our other festivals. Before the establishment of Purim, all major festivals were established by the Torah.

Other minor festivals not recorded in the Torah were observed. These festivals recalled significant events or occasions of salvation. We have a record of these minor festivals. They are recorded in Megilat Ta'anit. These minor festivals were observed through refraining from fasting or refraining from fasting and eulogizing. These minor festivals were not permanent enactments of the Sages and their observance has been abandoned by the Sages.

Purim was enacted by the Sages as a permanent festival. Unlike the minor festivals enumerated in Megilat Ta'anit, it is not subject to repeal. Its observance will continue for all generations.

And Esther the queen, the daughter of Avichayil, wrote with Mordechai, the Jew, an account of the potent miracle in order that the words of this second Purim epistle should be established.

(Megilat Esther 9:29)

*This week's
Thoughts
sponsored by
Rabbi Bernie Fox
and NYHS
in memory of
Herbert Smilowitz
Z"l*

To sponsor the Thoughts on the Parasha in honor or in memory of a loved one and/or to donate to NYHS, please contact Melissa Rivkin at mrivkin@nyhs.net or call 206.232.5272, extension 515 or visit us online at www.nyhs.net.



**NORTHWEST YESHIVA
HIGH SCHOOL**

5017 90th Avenue SE
Mercer Island, WA 98040
206.232.5272
www.nyhs.net
Graphics by Edison L. Leonen

2. Two Purim epistles and their impact.

The Talmud explains that the establishment of Purim as a permanent enactment was not easily accomplished. Esther proposed this enactment. The Sages resisted. They questioned their authority to add a permanent festival to the Torah's calendar. Ultimately, Esther prevailed and the festival of Purim was established. The resolution of this controversy also established the basis for later creating the festival of Chanukah.

The above passage explains that Esther and Mordechai sent to all of the Jews this epistle – Megilat Esther – and directed the people to observe the Purim festival. The passage notes that this was the second epistle sent to the people. Earlier in the chapter, the Megilah explains that Mordechai composed a prior epistle and sent it to the Jews. In his epistle, he directed the Jews to observe the Purim festival. The Megilah explains that the Jews accepted this directive upon themselves. Why did Esther and Mordechai compose the second epistle and send it to the people? Why was Mordechai's first epistle not adequate?

The Talmud explains that this second epistle represents Esther's triumph over the Sages' resistance. Mordechai's original epistle established the observance of Purim as an accepted practice among the people. However, his epistle did not establish the observance as a festival enacted by the Sages applicable to all generations of Jews wherever they live and for all eras. The second epistle announced this enactment.¹

3. The messianic era, Purim observance, and the Megilah.

Maimonides ends his presentation of the laws of Purim with a passage that opens the above discussion. He explains that in the messianic era we will no longer contemplate past persecutions and suffering. Celebrations commemorating our deliverance from such persecutions will be abandoned. However, Purim will be observed. Its observance will not be abandoned.

Preceding these comments Maimonides records an amazing ruling. He explains that in the messianic era all of the books of the Prophets and Hagiographa – NaCh – will be annulled. However, Megilat Esther will retain its place as part of the canon. In other words, in the messianic era the canon will be composed of the five books of the Torah and Megilat Esther.²

Maimonides' comments are drawn from the Jerusalem Talmud.³ The ruling poses two problems. First, why will the books of the Prophets and the Hagiographa lose its canon status? Second, why is Megilat Esther an exception? Why will it remain included in the canon?

4. The purpose of the Prophets and the Hagiographa.

Karban HaEydah addresses the first issue. His explanation is based upon a vision of the messianic era. This vision is described by Maimonides in the final sentences of his code. He explains that in the messianic era humanity will achieve wisdom and understanding. We will understand secrets that are now hidden from us and we will understand the Creator to the extent that such wisdom is attainable by a human being.⁴

Karban HaEydah explains that the books of the Prophets and the Hagiographa are designed to elucidate and expound upon the message of the Torah. Through the works of the Prophets and the Hagiographa we are able to identify and better understand messages in the Torah that might be hidden from us without these works. Because in the messianic era humanity will achieve a much higher level of understanding, these lessons of the Torah will be obvious to us without the aid of the books of NaCh. These works will no longer be needed. Therefore, they will be dropped from the canon.⁵

1 Mesechet Megilah 7a.

2 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Megilah 2:18.

3 Mesechet Megilah 1:5.

4 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Melachim 12:5.

5 Rav David Frankel, *Karban HaEydah on the Jerusalem Talmud*, Mesechet Megilah 1:5 (7a).

5. The unique content of Megilat Esther.

Why will Megilat Esther retain its status? Maimonides does not directly answer this question. However, perhaps there is an allusion to an explanation in his phrasing which is a paraphrase of the Talmud's comments. Maimonides writes that Megilat Esther will remain intact in the messianic era "just as the five books of the Torah and the Oral Law." This is an odd statement. Maimonides comparison of the stature of the Megilah to the books of the Torah makes sense. He is explaining that, unlike the other elements of NaCh, the Megilah will remain part of the canon. However, Maimonides also compares the Megilah to the Oral Law. Why did he add this comparison?

This comparison seems to reflect a unique aspect of the Megilah's content. Other books of NaCh include references to Torah law and occasionally laws are derived or supported from passages in NaCh. However, these works are not works of Torah law. They deal with the Torah's spiritual and ethical message. Megilat Esther does include an extensive presentation of the laws of Purim.

Similarly, Purim differs from other enactments of the Sages. Other enactments are presented in the Talmud or other works of the Oral Law. Purim is presented in one of the works included in the canon.

In short, Purim and Megilat Esther are both unique. The Megilah includes a presentation of the law. Purim is a rare and perhaps completely unparalleled instance in which an enactment of the Sages is presented though a work of the canon.

6. The Megilah is a work of law.

Now, let us reconsider Maimonides' comments. He explains that Megilat Esther will remain a permanent part of the canon. It is like the Torah and comparable to the Oral Law. It is like the Torah because it is a permanent part of the canon. Its status will not be nullified like the other books of NaCh because it is different from them. These other works are an amplification of laws in the Torah. They add nothing that is not accessible in the Torah to the astute student. This cannot be said of Megilat Esther. It contains laws that are not recorded in the Torah. It includes laws that were enacted by the Sages and included in the Megilah.

7. Appreciating Purim.

Purim can mistakenly be regarded as a minor festival. After all, it is not accompanied by the prohibition against work – *melachah*. It is arguably the most festive of our celebrations. It includes a feast. It is a time for jovial conduct and mirth. However, the conclusion that Purim is a minor celebration or that it lacks the grandeur or spiritual content of our other festivals is incorrect.

Purim and its Megilah are beautiful and unique. The preceding discussion only touches open their special character. The Sages created a festival and they incorporated its laws into TaNaCh – the canon. Through this they gave Purim and its Megilah eternal life within the Jewish people. Purim and the Megilah represent the merger of human initiative and the Divine will. The Sages augmented the Torah's festivals and created a permanent addition to TaNaCh.



Photos by Meryl Alcabes Photography

Thank you sponsors!



DARRYL LYNCH

SKIP & LIZ ROSEN