

Taanis Esther

Rabbi Dr. Darrel Ginsberg

Taanis Esther is today, meriting an analysis of some of the concepts and halachos surrounding this fast day. Taanis Esther is best described as an anomaly in the category of fast days. There is no clear reference in the Talmud for it. It is not mentioned in the siddur of R Amram HaGaon. One of its earliest references is in the responsa of Rav Achai (680-756). Virtually all the major Rishonim, however, discuss this taanis.

The halachic nature of this taanis as well takes on a different form as well. Whereas normally, taanis is considered to be obligatory, or chayav, the language of the poskim is quite different in this instance. The Tur (OC 686) writes that today we are “נוהגין להתענות”, meaning it is our custom today to fast. The Rama (OC 686:2) writes that it is not obligatory (אינה חובה) to fast, offering numerous leniencies where one could break the fast. Nonetheless, all poskim conclude it is incumbent on every healthy Jew to fast on this taanis.

Reason for the Taanis – There is an interesting debate as to the reason for this taanis. In one of the earliest references to the taanis, Rav Achai (Sheiltot De-Rav Achai: Parshas Vayakhel 67) writes that on the thirteenth of Adar in the days of Mordechai and Esther, the Jews gathered together to fast (קהילה) prior to their battle against their enemies. Today, the Jews accepted this as their minhag to fast on the thirteenth of Adar.

The Ran (Megilla 3a) elaborates on Rav Achai’s opinion, explaining that the Jews gathered to request mercy from Hashem prior to the upcoming battle against their enemies. He alludes to the fast that Moshe, Aharon and Chur engaged in prior to the battle against Amalek (see Mechilta Beshalach...). This opinion is reiterated by many poskim, with the Mishna Berura (OC 686:2) who quoting the above in his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch.

Other poskim, however, maintain that the taanis is in remembrance of the fast Esther and the rest of the Jews took upon themselves before her meeting with the king. While that taanis was three days, and took place in the month of Nissan, it was accepted as a one day taanis on the thirteenth of Adar (Shibolei Leket 194, Machzor Vitri 245). What is the nature of this debate?

The clear goal of this taanis is to create a certain state of mind prior to entering the celebration of Purim. Rather than jump into this day defined by happiness and joy, we transition using the concept of taanis. The dominant theme on the day of Purim is our avoidance of annihilation and subsequent vanquishing of our enemies, thereby creating an atmosphere of incredible joy. However, it is crucial that we enter this celebration prepared.

Normally, a taanis is undertaken for a present calamity (such as a drought) or a previous tragedy (such as the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash). The taanis serves as a vehicle to teshuva, helping us perfect ourselves, and hopefully meriting a positive response from Hashem. In the case of Esther, she also engaged in taanis before meeting with the king, the crisis of Haman’s edict at the forefront of her mind. She was a very intelligent person, someone who was formulating a brilliant plan to turn the king against Haman. Yet she realized that before engaging in this plan to save Bnai Yisrael, both her and the rest of the nation had to undertake a process of teshuva. There had to be recognition that

while mankind is capable of conceiving remarkable plans like the one Esther developed, there is a world of cause and effect she had no control over, and an infinite number of factors beyond her knowledge were at play.

The process of fasting, tefila and teshuva puts a person in his/her proper place. The reality of sin exposed to the person and the recognition of dependence on Hashem is necessary to achieve the proper perspective. We look to Esther to understand the idea that it is not through man's actions alone that he/she can save Bnai Yisrael. This idea is crucial to our celebration, to ensure we see the necessity of Hashem's role in these unfolding events.

On the other hand, there is the taanis before battle. In a situation of war, especially a war against Amalek, strong emotions of vengeance come to the surface. They attacked us, they wanted to kill us – revenge would naturally be the overriding emotion.

While there is some truth to this, one has to be very careful. The objective in מלחמת מצוה is more than defeat of our enemies. We are being מקדש שם שמים, and this must be the ultimate objective in battle. By going through the process of teshuva and tefila, a person is ready to enter into these battles in the right state of mind. With all that Hashem had done for Bnai Yisrael, from the makkos to the splitting of Yam Suf, Moshe could have assumed that the same can be said as we enter the day of Purim. We should not approach this victory celebration as a bloodthirsty retribution. Rather, it is the victory of being מקדש שם שמים that should characterize our simcha on Purim.

Leniencies – Taanis Esther has been accepted universally by Bnai Yisrael; nonetheless, it still does not merit the same level of stringency as other fasts. As a result, numerous leniencies exist for not fasting, or prematurely breaking the fast. The Rama (OC 686:2) writes that pregnant and nursing women, a person who is sick (even if not in danger), and even someone who has “pain in the eyes” is exempt from fasting. Most poskim understand this last scenario to mean a general high degree of pain. However, the Eliya Rabba (686) cites numerous poskim who maintain that only if the pregnant/nursing woman is weak can she rely on this leniency. In general, anyone who is healthy should participate in the fast.

There are other interesting leniencies that emerge. The Rama (ibid) writes that if Purim falls out on Sunday, pushing the taanis to the prior Thursday, and a bris takes place the morning of the taanis, the participants in the simcha may eat, but they must then fast on Friday. The Taz (686:2) argues with this, and maintains the seuda should take place the prior evening, meaning Wednesday night.

Both the Chaye Adam (Chelek 2/3 – Klal 155) and the Mishna Berura (686:7) agree with the Taz's opinion. However, they both write that the actual baalei bris would be allowed to eat on Thursday. The Vilna Gaon (Biyur Hagra 686:8) is even more lenient. He writes that the baalei bris could eat their seuda on any “minor” fast, and certainly on Taanis Esther. R Ovadya Yosef (Yechave Daat 2:78) concurs with the Vilna Gaon's leniency on Taanis Esther, writing that the father of the boy, the sandik and the mohel must partake of the seuda at the bris. This leniency (Yechave Daat ibid) is extended to the case of Taanis Esther falling out during the seven days of celebration after a wedding. During this period of time, the chasan should not fast, and should participate in the seuda.