

FROM FASTING TO FEASTING

Parshas Vayikra

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The Tikunei Zohar (21, 57b) and other authorities compare Purim to Yom KiPurim; (Yom Kipur is mentioned in the Chumosh (Vayikro 23:27,28) in the plural "Yom Kipurim"). One of the comparisons may be the following. The fast day Yom Kipur follows erev Yom Kipur when it's a mitzvah to feast, Purim (in the reverse) is preceded by the fast day of Esther Taanis.

Precisely this year when the megilah is read on Saturday night, following Sholosh Seudoth (the third Shabos meal) it is timely to give emphasis to the above connection. The Taanis (fast) aspect is accentuated in the code that (other than Saturday night) the Megilah is read while the fast is still continued (692:4). It should be noted that in ratifying the acceptance of the holiday for all future generations (9:31) it includes the fasts and lamentations for posterity.

The Purim Seuda is unique in many ways. While the Shabos meal and the Yom Tov meal is a basic component of the observance of the holy day, the Purim Seudah possesses exclusive features:

a) It is scheduled following Mincha, continuing into evening, thereby embracing Shushan Purim as well (Ramo 695:1).

b) The Purim Seuda is the only festivity which calls for family gathering to enjoy the seuda together (see Rashi, Esther chapter 9:28 on the word MISHPACHA).

c) Every Mitzva observed the first time is preceded by the BRACHA SHEHECHEYONU. The same before reading the Megilah. On Purim morning the SHECHYONU is repeated because it refers to ALL four mitzvohs of the day: reading the megilah, shalach manos, gifts to the poor, and the SEUDA. This is the only time in the year when the seuda is preceded by this BRACHA. This unique emphasis on the seuda on Purim is worthy of deliberation.

In the very opening chapter of the Megila (1:10) we learn about the intensity of the festivities specially upon reaching the seventh day. The Talmud (Megila 12b) teaches that this was on Shabos. Commentators expound the emphasis on this day to demonstrate the gulf separating Israel from the nations. When Jews, observing Shabos, sit at a Shabos meal, they recite BROCHOS, sing praises to Hashem, discuss words of Torah, the very Seuda is a form of a religious ceremony, elevating the participants to spiritual heights. The nations in the contrary, as witness the gala affair in Achashveirush's Shushan, leading to the abyss of moral deficiency and murder (of Vashti).

The Havdala recital upon completion of Shabos includes the separation between Israel and the nations. And most appropriately it is expressed in the context of Shabos sanctity, because there at the festivities the differences are so glaring.

The word MISHTEH (feast) is mentioned in the scroll of Esther nineteen times. It is because it is crucial in the Havdala between Israel and the nations. When Esther gathers the courage to enter the inner court of the King's palace to plead for her people, she invites the king and Haman to a feast she prepared. Obviously she had an urgent request, and the festive meal will create the atmosphere for a positive response. However, at that festive meal, she requested another festive meal with Haman's participation. [Some commentators assert this was a way Esther sought to create the king's jealousy of Haman.] It may be suggested that Esther sought divine help to save the Jews in the zchus (merit) of Jewish festivities absorbed in holiness, versus Haman's festivities steeped in murderous designs, in bloodshed.

In Tehilim (23:5) King David speaks about a table placed against an enemy, "You prepare a table before me opposite my tormentors". The table is a reference to a festive meal at the table. It is a table over which words of Torah are shared (see Avoth 3:3). Such a table can serve as protector against the enemy. This must have been in Esther's mind when she invited Haman to her table with the king.

A striking comment in the Midrash on Parshas Amalek (which is read on the Shabos before Purim) brings this concept into focus. The word Zochor, says the Midrash, is found in the context of Shabos "Zochor", Remember to sanctify the Shabos, and it is also found in the portion of Amalek "Zochor... remember what Amalek did to you on the way when you were leaving Egypt..." "But what a difference between the two Remembrances. The Zochor of Shabos is meant to remember on a table filled with all the good and the blessings but the Zochor of Amalek is an empty table" (Tanchuma Parshas Saitza 7). Obviously, the good is a reference not only to food and drink, but moreso to the Zmiros and spiritual closeness to Hashem.

The extra emphasis on the Purim Seuda, to the point that it is included in the Shehecheyonu blessing, manifests the special opportunity therein. "Hashomayim, the heavens are heavens for Hashem, but the earth is given to mankind" (Tehilim 113:16). Some commentators expound: the earth was given to mankind to make it Shomayim, heavenly. The earth, every organ in the body, every fiber, can be elevated in service of Hashem.

Parshas Vayikra speaks of a meal offering to Hashem, i.e. fine flour baked with oil (2:1). The kohen places on the altar only the flour scooped in his three fingers, called Kmitza. The Talmud teaches (Megilah 16a) that Haman visited a Talmud Torah, asked the students what they learn, they replied, they learn the laws of Kmitza.

Homiletically, the students revealed their secret strength against Haman and his cohorts. When we serve Hashem with all the bones "Kol Atzmosei"... then "He saves us from one who is stronger" (Tehilim 35:10).

This, then, is the vital instruction of the Purim Seuda. A table, SHULCHAN, feeding the body, can be elevated to SHULCHAN ARUCH, feeding the mind and soul, "a table before Hashem" (Yechezkel 41:22). This may be the meaning in the comparison of Purim and Yom Kippurim (KiPurim, as Purim). The fasting on Yom Kippurim and the feasting on Purim, both with one goal, to deserve, and achieve, a closeness to Hashem.

