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Purim: Hidden Miracles Rabbi Jeffrey Fox

Rosh Yeshiva, Maharat

What was so special about the miracle during time of Mordechai and Esther that drove the rabbis to create a new holiday? After all, there are other miracles recorded in the Tanach that also seem worthy of establishing a commemoration. Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740 - 1810) asked this question in his first essay on Purim, *קדושת לוי, קדשות לפורים, קדשה ראשונה* (קדושת לוי).

In order to understand the unique status of Purim he reminds us of a central Talmudic passage:

Bavli, Shabbat 88a

בבלי שבת דף פח עמוד א

And they camped underneath the mountain (Exodus 19) Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said, "This teaches that the Holy Blessed One hung the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah – Good! If not – there will be your burial place.'" Rav Acha bar Yaakov said, "This is a great challenge [to the authority] of the Torah." Rava said, "Even so, they re-received her (Torah) in the time of Achashverosh. As it is written *The Jews fulfilled and accepted* (Esther 9). They fulfilled [of their own free will] that which they had already received [against their will].

(שמעות יט) *ויתיצבו מתחתת ההר*, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שזכה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגת, ואמר להם, "אם אתם מקבלים התורה – מוטב, ואם לאו – שם תהא קבורתכם". אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה ביום אחישורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט) *קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו* כבר.

The Rabbis here are picking up on the psychological reality of the Jewish People immediately following the Exodus. They had just witnessed super-natural miracles including: the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea and the destruction of Egypt, could they possibly have said, "no thank you," to God at Sinai? After all, they were at this point entirely dependent on divine protection for food and water in the wilderness. In a certain very real sense the experience of the revelation of the Torah of Sinai was one of duress (*גוזען*).

In fact, in a world in which there are divine miracles changing the natural order, there really is no free will around the questions of obedience to God. How could any human being possibly deny their own experience of *hashem* and reject the Torah? In a deep sense, as long as God's voice - either through super-natural miracles, or the existence of prophecy - pervades human reality, we do not have a true choice regarding divine obedience.

Only once we reach a point in human history where commanding voice of Sinai is experienced internally can we have a true acceptance of the Torah of our own free will. At what stage in Jewish History was a true free-will acceptance of the Torah first possible? Only once *hashem* was no longer publicly perceived to be in full view of humanity. What makes Purim and Megilat Esther unique, is

that God's name is absent from the book. This famous problem led to a debate amongst the Rabbis regarding whether or not Esther was written with divine inspiration (see Bavli, Megila 7a).

However, for the Kedushat Levi, it is the apparent silence of *hashem* that amplifies the miracle of Purim to warrant the establishment of a new Holiday. He wrote:

Since the miracle was within the boundaries of nature, in which the Kingdom of God is covered, therefore it was a great miracle. Here is an analogy: A king who is with his vast armies, is victorious in battle. This is not as wondrous as when the king sometimes goes out alone in the forest without his articles of war, and his soldiers are not with him, and he is victorious based on his great strength alone...

So too this matter. When the Holy Blessed One changes nature and shows God's kingship it is not such a wonder – for the one who created [nature] can change nature. But if God does miracles within the rules of nature, and the divine Kingship is hidden, and God none the less does wonders, like in the days of Mordechas and Ester – that is a great wonder. Therefore the miracle was so great in the eye of Israel that they received the Torah...

כיוון שהנשׁ היה בטבעים אשר בה מלכותו מכוסה, لكن הוא נס גדול. כי דרך משל הוא, מלך אשר בא ברוח חייליו ומנצח את המלחמה, אין כל קר פלא כמו שהמלך בא לעמיים בעיר ייחידי בלי מלחמתו וחילוותיו אינם עמו והוא מנצח בגבורתו לבדו... כן הדבד הזה כשהקב"ה משנה הטבעים ונראה מלכותו אשר הוא עוזה ממשמי שמים וכל צבאים אינו כל קר פלא, כי מי שבראמ יכול לשנותם. אבל אם עוזה נסים בטבעים, ומלכותו בהסתדר, ואף על פי כן עוזה פלאים, כמו ביום מרדכי ואסתר, הוא פלא גדול. ولكن גדלה הנס כל קר בעניין ישראל עד שקבלו את התורה

In a certain way, we are living in a world in which it is always Purim. Especially in a post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian time at which one need not posit the existence of God to make sense of the universe, we are constantly making a choice to be part of the world of the Torah. Today God is “alone in the forest without articles of war.” It our job to find the forest to encounter the divine.

One place that I personally find God is in the learning and teaching of Halakha. To be able to see God's hand gently guiding the *poskim* of every generation is truly inspiring. May this Purim remind of what it means to seek God in times when God is silent.



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevi Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Kesher: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Kesher, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevi Torah as well as the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Bergen County. He also served on the board of the Synagogue Leadership Initiative of the UJA of NNJ. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and has also been a member of the faculty of the Drisha Institute, the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Westchester County, and Hadar.