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Purim: Celebrating the Joy of Purim with Rambam Rabbi Jeffrey Fox Rosh Yeshiva, Maharat

It is sometimes difficult to summon a sense of joy simply because it is Purim. For many in our community Purim has lost its luster. We focus on our children, rightfully so, and we forget to reflect on the power of the day. Let us take a look at a few texts from Rambam (b. Cordoba 1125, d. Cairo 1204) that may help put this exciting holiday in a different perspective.

In his introduction to the Mishneh Torah, after he lists all 613 *mitzvot*, Rambam explains how the Rabbinic *mitzvot* fit into this system. In giving an example of what a Rabbinic *mitzva* is meant to accomplish Rambam writes:

Rather, this is what we are saying, that the prophets and the courts ordained and commanded that the *Megillah* be read at its time in order to recall the praise of the Holy Blessed One and the salvation He wrought for us, and His response to our cries, so that we will bless Him, extol Him, and inform the future generations of the truth of the Torah's promise (Dvarim 4:7) "*What nation is so great that it has God [close to it....]*"

אלא כך אנו אומרים, שהנביאים עם בית דין תקנו וצוו לקרות המגלה בעונתה כדי להזכיר שבחיו של הקב"ה ותשועות שעשה לנו והיה קרוב לשועינו, כדי לברכו ולהללו וכדילהו דיע לדורות הבאים שאמת מה שהבטיחנו בתורה כי מי גוי גדול אשר לו אלקים קרובים אליו כי" אלקינו בכל קראנו אליו.

In this brief articulation of the goal of reading of the Megillah, Rambam frames this holiday as a reminder of God's involvement in human history. The awareness that God responds to our cries is an important piece of the Purim puzzle. In the middle of this wild celebration we must try to find a place to bring God into the conversation. This is not a simple task and requires stepping back from the standard Purim culture and asking different questions.

We often focus on trivial aspects of the day: What will be the theme of our *Mishloach Manot*? How will our family's costume coordinate? What will we drink at the *Seuda*? It is sometimes hard to see the forest because of all the trees and we have to determine which parts of the day are essential and which are not.

Rambam teaches the laws of Purim in two concise chapters. At the end of the second chapter, after clearly laying out the four *mitzvot* of the day, Rambam then says the following:

Laws of Megillah 2:17

It is better for a person to increase in giving gifts to the poor than increase in his festive meal or in the sending of portions to one another, because there is no greater joy than causing joy in the hearts of the poor, the

הלכות מגילה ב:יז

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב

orphan, the widow and the stranger. Causing joy in the hearts of those oppressed is like the Presence of God; as it says, "to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones (Isaiah 57:15)."

עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים, שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר (ישעיהו נ"ז) להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים

Rambam here claims that the highest joy is the joy of helping another human being. Perhaps the best way to spend the Holiday of Purim might be to volunteer at a soup kitchen? The Rabbis teach us that just as God clothes the naked and visits the sick, so too we are meant to do the same (See Sifrei Ekev Piska 49, Bavli Sota 14a, Rambam Positive Commandment 8). One of the core values of the religious personality is to walk in God's ways. What Purim offers us is an opportunity to fulfill this central aspect of our religion.

The value of walking in God's ways through the fulfilling of simple acts of *chesed* is what makes Purim eternal. In the very last *halakha* of Laws of Megilla Rambam writes:

Laws of Megilla 2:18

הלכות מגילה ב:יח

All the prophetic works and all the writings, with the exception of Megilat Esther, during the Messianic age will be nullified. Behold, the Megilla will remain in force like the five books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah that can never be nullified. And even though the memories of the tragedies will be nullified...The days of Purim will never be nullified.

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר הרי היא קיימת כחמשה חומשי תורה וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן בטלין לעולם. ואע"פ שכל זכרון הצרות יבטל... ימי הפורים לא יבטלו...

This year, may we all be blessed to have the opportunity to bring our friends and family together to perform simple acts of *hesed*. If only we are able to hear the cries of our fellow human beings and give clothing to the naked and food to the hungry, maybe then God will hear our cries.

פורים שמח!



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Keshet: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Keshet, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevei 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.