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Parshas Vayikra

Taanis Esther:
Avoiding
the Decree

SELECTED DRASHAS
FROM
THE AUTHOR OF
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THAT HAVE **SOMETHING**
TO DO WITH
THE WEEKLY TORAH
PORTION

Taanis Esther: Avoiding The Decree

History of Jewish Genocide

Haman wanted to destroy all of the Jewish people – men, women, and children. We have had many decrees, but there was never a decree like this before: a decree of total genocide on our entire people.

There is a similar occurrence in our history, but it was not quite the same thing: when the people sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem wished to destroy the entire nation and leave only Moshe *Rabbeinu* alive, and continue the Jewish people with him. Although Hashem had made a promise that the Jewish people will never be destroyed, the promise was not made to the people as a whole, but only to Moshe. Hashem was ready to continue everything through Moshe alone. Moshe entreated Hashem and said to Him that he would rather be erased from existence. Hashem listened to his prayers and the decree was nullified.

But it wasn't the same thing as Haman's decree. When Hashem wanted to destroy the people after the sin with the Calf, He wanted the Jewish people to continue, through Moshe. But Haman's decree was to wipe out every single Jew, so that there should be no remainder of the Jewish people left. Thus, only Haman's decree was a decree of total genocide.

This decree of Haman was given credibility by Achashveirosh, who ruled the entire world then, which gave even more power to the decree. It was a decree that could have destroyed the entire Jewish people.

Redemption: Worthy Vs. Not Being Worthy

According to one opinion in the Sages, we are redeemed from exile if we do *teshuvah*, but if we don't do *teshuvah*, we cannot be redeemed, and we will be given "a king as harsh as Haman" which will spur us on to do *teshuvah*. According to the other opinion of

our Sages, we are redeemed whether we do *teshuvah* or not, because there is a promise from Hashem that we will be redeemed.

Purim is the time when the decree of Haman was sealed, and the time when it was nullified. Although Haman was destroyed and his decree was nullified, the decree still remains in Creation, conceptually; it returns every year during this time, where it is once again nullified, due to the special power of the time of Purim. Haman's decree was nullified then, but it can always come back again one day.

This is the meaning behind the opinion in the Sages that in order to be redeemed from this exile, we will be given "a king as harsh as Haman", which will prompt us to do *teshuvah*. The decree of Haman can always come back. The meaning of this opinion of the Sages is that Haman's decree of genocide will return in the End of Days, which will make us all do *teshuvah*.

According to the first opinion in the Sages, it will be "a generation that is entirely deserving" of redemption. According to the other opinion, we will be entirely undeserving, and then genocide will have to be decreed on us, until we all do *teshuvah*. If we are deserving of redemption, there is no need for genocide, because then the entire generation would be worthy. Only if we are entirely undeserving, decrees are necessary. So the decree of Purim is still around in Creation, and it can come back in the End of Days (according to one opinion in our Sages).

Two Views On Purim

Thus, there are two ways to view Purim.

One view is that it is a time of miracles, just as it was a time of miracles then. On Purim, there wasn't just a nullification of the decree; it was a symbol of

the future, that we will be saved in the future as well, from decrees. The Sages said that “Mordechai knew of the decree, and he knew it would be nullified.” The meaning of this is that he knew it would be nullified both in his own time and in the future.

But the other way to view Purim is that the decree of Haman returns every year. It was nullified on Purim, but it can return in the End of Days, if the generation is undeserving of redemption, where we will be given a king as harsh as Haman.

Taanis Esther: Remembering The Decree

Purim is different than all other festivals, which begin on the 15th. Remembering the events of Purim doesn't begin with the 14th or 15th. It starts with *Taanis Esther*, which is the 13th. Although the *Halachos* of Purim do not begin until the 14th, we begin to remember Purim already on the 13th, which is *Taanis Esther*.

This is in contrast with the other Yomim Tovim. Pesach begins on the 15th, and we have no remembrance of the prayers that we davened then to be redeemed. We remember the exodus, but not more than that. On Sukkos, we remember the day of Sukkos, which is the 15th. But Purim remembers not only the day of Purim itself, but even the prayers and fasting which preceded it: *Taanis Esther*.

A regular Yom Tov begins with the Yom Tov itself, but Purim begins with fasting and prayer. The deep reason behind this is because the decree of Haman really returns every year! Although we have no Haman today, his decree is still here in time. Our avodah before Purim every year is to feel the decree, before Purim begins.

Thus, *Taanis Esther* wasn't just a historical remembrance of the decree. It was to remember the *avodah* we had then, when there was a decree. If Purim was just about the remembering the past, it would suffice to only remember the 14th and 15th of Purim. The fact that we remember also the 13th of Adar shows us that there is more to Purim than just

remembering the time we were saved: it is because we are supposed to also remember what came before our salvation, when there was a decree hanging upon us, and we had to fast, pray and do *teshuvah*.

When The Generation Is Not Worthy: The End of Days

In the recent generations, as we get further and further away from “a generation that is deserving” of redemption, we are instead closer and closer to being undeserving. As we get further into the End of Days, we are further from purity, and we are becoming less and less deserving of the redemption. We are instead heading into the other alternative – that since we are undeserving, the only way we will be redeemed is through getting “a king as harsh as Haman”, which will make us all do *teshuvah*.

Thus, Purim begins from our fasting on *Taanis Esther*, when we did *teshuvah* to nullify the decree. Before Purim, we have an avodah of *Taanis Esther*: to feel the decree in the air - that it is still around.

This doesn't mean, of course, that the decree will happen. But what it means for us is that the decree should be in front of one's eyes and move us to *teshuvah*, just as it did then.

In the times we live in, one must realize that he is in a situation of a ‘generation that is entirely undeserving’ of the redemption. This has been true already for many years, but now it is even more relevant than ever.

Even If A Tzaddik Cannot Be Saved In An Unworthy Generation

When one lives in a generation that is entirely undeserving of redemption, even if he is a *tzaddik*, he is in danger. Mordechai was the *tzaddik* of the generation, but he was included in the decree. That means that the decree of genocide was on Mordechai as well!

How are we to understand this? Why should *Mordechai* be included in the decree?? We can understand why the rest of the generation was deserving of death, as the *Gemara* says: either because they enjoyed Achashveirosh's party, or because they bowed to the idol. Mordechai was the only one who didn't bow to the idol. He did not bow to Haman either. He was totally apart from the evil acts of that generation. So why was he included in the decree??

It is because if the rest of the generation is undeserving, he was in danger too. Although he knew it would be nullified, that was from the perspective of his level; he did not deserve to be part of the decree. But in totality, the rest of the generation was undeserving, so that made him was included with them. The *Maharal* says that in an undeserving generation, even the *tzaddikim* are included in the decree. These are mysterious words to understand. But it can be understood as follows: even a *tzaddik*, who is fighting evil, is not spared from the decree on the generation he is in.

There is an ongoing war between the forces of good and evil in Creation. Sometimes good wins, and sometimes evil wins, but there is always a war. *Chazal* say that the *yetzer tov* rules *tzaddikim*, and the *yetzer hora* rules the wicked, and with *beinonim*, both are ruling. A 'generation that is entirely undeserving', simply speaking, means that the generation, as a whole, is leaning towards being undeserving of redemption. Of course, one can still avoid the evil of the generation, but he is still part of a generation which is entirely undeserving.

In deeper terms, the *avodah* for a person, when he is in an undeserving generation - if he is a *tzaddik* - is not an *avodah* for the generation. The generation is entirely undeserving, so there is no *avodah* for the generation. The generation, in such a situation, will need "a king as harsh as Haman", who will decree genocide on all Jews, so that everyone will be moved to *teshuvah*. Being part of the generation means that a person is part of the decree of genocide.

What Should The Tzaddik Do?

What should one do if he wants to live, when he lives in a generation which is entirely undeserving of being saved??

If one is part of a generation that is undeserving, the generation deserved to be wiped out, and even a *tzaddik* like Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Mordechai HaTzaddik are included in the decree!

By the sin with the Golden Calf, Hashem said to Moshe *Rabbeinu* that He will destroy the nation, and that instead he will be made into a great nation. Moshe prayed for the people and saved them, and so did Mordechai in his time. But in either case, the generation was undeserving.

On one hand, the *tzaddik* who prays for the generation, such as Avraham in his time and Moshe in his time, who prayed for others to be saved, can be considered the '*teshuvah*' that redeems the generation. But the question is: What should the *tzaddik* himself do? What should he do if he wants to be of those who are like the "36 *tzaddikim* who greet the *Shechinah*" each day, when his generation is undeserving?

Separating (Inwardly) From the Generation

The *avodah* for the *tzaddik* is: Don't be of the members of the generation! One has to separate from the generation and not consider himself to be a part of it! In this way, he won't be a part of the generation, and then the decree won't affect him.

"Once the Angel of Death is given permission, he doesn't differentiate between the righteous and the wicked"¹. Once there is a decree of death on the Jewish people, the Angel of Death is given permission to kill anyone, even *tzaddikim*. That is true, but there is a deeper way which can avoid this: don't be a part of this generation in the first place, so that you're not part of the decree!

¹ *Bava Kamma 60a*

In the past, we had a Haman, and we had a *Mordechai*, the *tzaddik* who would not bow to the idols. The *Gemara* tells us that the other Sages in the generation did not agree with him, and in fact, they were upset with him, because his refusal to bow to Haman angered him to make the decree. What, indeed, was Mordechai thinking? It was because he knew that the decree was coming anyway, and that it was not because of him. He knew that the generation deserved to be destroyed, so he didn't consider himself to be a part of the generation.

If even the *tzaddik* considers himself to be a part of the generation, he is included with the rest of the generation's situation. If he doesn't consider himself to be part of the generation, that is how he can be saved.

We can see this from Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Hashem wanted to destroy the people and instead continue the Jewish people through Moshe. Why wasn't Moshe *Rabbeinu* part of the decree? If the generation was entirely undeserving, why should Moshe be any different? Is it because he didn't sin with the Calf? That can't be the reason, because *Chazal* say that the women didn't sin with the Calf, yet they were part of the decree as well. Hashem wanted to destroy the entire people, including the women, who did not sin with the Calf. So why should Moshe be spared?

The answer is: when the sin with the Calf took place, where was Moshe? He was in Heaven. He wasn't on this earth. He wasn't part of the generation anymore.²

If most of the people in the generation are wicked, even if there are a few *tzaddikim*, it is considered that the generation is entirely undeserving of redemption, and then even the *tzaddikim* are not saved.

Moshe was above in Heaven during the time of the sin with the Calf, so he wasn't part of the generation,

² *The Rav* added, "This was the depth behind how the Satan confused them with showing an image of Moshe's coffin in the sky. For the time being, Moshe was "dead" in the sense that he was totally separated from the generation at that time. They thought he was dead, they thought he was separated from them, and that was why they were led to sin.

and that was why he wasn't part of the decree. In contrast, Mordechai, although he didn't bow to the idols - "he knew of the decree and he knew it would be nullified" in the sense that he knew he was undeserving of the decree on the generation - but he was still on this earth, thus he was still part of the generation. That was why he was included in the decree.

The Avodah of Taanis Esther

Taanis Esther is the point in time in which the decree returns, where each of us must summon the power of free choice, to use our power of the 'Moshe *Rabbeinu*' within. In every generation, a person can attain a spark of Moshe *Rabbeinu*'s soul and shine that light onto the generation. (This is the meaning of the matter discussed in our *sefarim hakedoshim* that there is a Moshe *Rabbeinu* in every generation).

A person has the power to rise above even the most depraved depths of evil, such as the impurity created by the sin with the Golden Calf (the root of all sins thereafter), and separate himself from all that is going on in the generation; he can step outside of it.

The power to be saved from the decree of destruction upon the Jewish people – which is decreed due to the sins of the generation – is the power which returns to us in the End of Days. In the End of Days, we can be saved from a generation that is entirely undeserving, through the lesson we learn from Purim.

The people as a whole can be saved through getting "a king as harsh as Haman", which cause us to do *teshuvah*; but there are individuals in the generation who can be spared from this harsh king in the first place, by separating themselves in the first place, from this generation.

On one hand, a person has an *avodah* of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, to have *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice) for the Jewish people; to be willing to be erased for the Jewish people (*ahavas Yisrael*).

But the other side of our *avodah* is, that each person needs to separate himself from the generation. This is the deeper meaning of “Therefore, a man was created individual.” Moshe was told that he would remain alone and be made into a great nation; he was being told that he would become an ‘individual’. Mordechai was the only ‘individual’ who didn’t bow to the idol; he resembles Avraham Avinu, the only one in the world who would not bow to idols.

The depth of our *avodah* on Purim, on one hand, is to increase our love towards other, as the *Megillah* is called *divrei shalom v’emes*, “words of truth and peace”; this is through sending *mishloach manos*, which increases love and friendship with others. On the other hand, there is also the decree that comes back each year, and in order to counter it, each person must be an “individual” - to be apart from the generation.

The Prerequisite of Purim

Therefore, if Purim to a person is only about our *avodah* on the 14th and 15th of Adar, which is about love and friendship with others - and he forgets about the 13th of Adar, *Taanis Esther*, which is about the decree – he has not realized the prerequisite to Purim, which is to first separate himself from the generation. He only connects to the *avodah* on Purim, but he has skipped the *avodah* that must become before Purim.

Such a person has not learned how to separate from the generation, and if the generation is undeserving of being saved, *chas v’shalom*, he will fall down together with them! And if *chas v’shalom* there would be a decree of genocide on the Jewish people, he will be part of it....

Therefore, practically speaking, our *avodah* for Purim begins the day before Purim: with *Taanis Esther*. It is not only the time to remember history, that there was a decree many years ago at this time. It is to realize, in our very soul, that we need to avoid the decree upon us [which is still present in Creation and looming above us]: by becoming the individual *tzaddik* who is apart from the generation. At the same

time, we also need to realize that Purim is about increasing our love and friendship with others.

Through these two forms of *avodah* on *Taanis Esther*, we can then be able to “know of the decree and its nullification”. We can then be confident in knowing that the decree will be nullified, and that will enable us to reach true and deep *Ahavas Yisrael* with other Jews, on Purim.

“Words of Truth and Peace”

In the time of Purim, after the Jewish people won the war with Amalek, there was a fear that descended on the nations, in awe of Mordechai and the Jewish people, and there were many gentiles who converted to the Jewish people because of this.

In our times as well, there are many gentiles converting, but they are insincere, and they stem from the Erev Rav, who are the fake “converts” to the Jewish people. The Erev Rav converted because they were scared of what was happening to the Egyptians, but they had no intention of joining the Jewish people. “*Divrei shalom v’emes*” (words of truth and peace) is only applicable towards members of the Jewish people.

So the *avodah* is two-fold: on one hand, one needs to have *mesirus nefesh* in his love for other Jews, and there also needs to be a development of one’s holy sense of individuality: to be apart from the generation.

This is the true way to enter into Purim, and then one can connect with the Jewish people – “*divrei shalom v’emes*”.

Translated from the Hebrew shiur: פורים 060 שיחה דברי הצומות וזעקתם תשעו