

perspectives

on the Parsha



פרשת תצוה - פורים

18 Adar 5773

February 23, 2013

The Midrash says that when Achashveirosh and Haman sat down to toast their plan of Jewish annihilation, this itself was a punishment to Bnei Yisrael. Just as the Shevatim's sale of their brother Yosef occurred despite the benefit of food and drink, so too the terrible decree against the Bnei Yisrael continued as the king and Haman sat to drink. This *middah k'neged middah* took many generations to unfold, but the way of Hashem is to kindly bide His time and, if need be, to eventually collect His debt.

The Yefei Anaf explains the significance of food and drink in this *middah k'neged middah*. The brothers sold Yosef during or right after their meal, enabling them to be clear-minded, deliberate and calm. In this sense, their error in judgment was worse than one who sins in anger, because at least they were in their right mind and should have used that for good. The punishment was in kind: even though Achashveirosh was settled, and sat down to eat and drink, "he did not revert from his evil design."

The Yefei Anaf is thus saying that the *middah k'neged middah* that we can appreciate is this: just as we could have expected the great Shevatim to have used their opportunity of a clear mind to make the right decision, so too the belief that Achashveirosh would gain a new perspective and come to reverse his evil decision was to be reasonably expected. The fact that he did not live up to expectations is like a mildly surprising slap in the face, and should be viewed as a punishment.

However, a brief sketch of Achashveirosh the person, as well as his circumstances, might not lead to the same conclusion. Consider: we have a wicked man; an historic anti-Semite, who himself wanted to kill the

Jews but was afraid, and thinks Haman is doing him a favor; 10,000 silver talents coming to him to do this (or already forgiven because he was so eager!); and a pathological flatterer who now sits before the man whom he feels the need to flatter to the extent that he killed his own wife.

This wicked man, Achashveirosh, summoned the Persian Printing Press and Postal Service to print and urgently deliver letters – with the irrevocable seal of the king – to the entire kingdom (world?!); the whole city knows that he is resolute; he did not come to re-think but to celebrate; and if he reverses himself, he is the laughingstock of the entire world.

It is hard for the objective observer to imagine that Achashveirosh would sit down to some fine food and drink in his beautiful palace, across the table from Haman, take a deep breath and relax, and bring himself to say, "Haman, I've just been thinking... Upon further reflection, what we're doing is really wrong. I'm reversing course."

For the ordinarily straight thinker, or one who is not addressing a personally sensitive emotional issue, it is understandable how a clear frame of mind aids in evaluating matters clearly. But here? Whether owing to his personal character or due to external factors, Achashveirosh clearly had every reason to remain steadfast in his plan.

Additionally, the comparison with the Shevatim and the language of "he did not recant from his evil design" imply the motive for reversal would have been a moral imperative, not merely some practical consideration.

The Midrash must be assuming that two things are true. First, that every human being has an inextinguishable moral compass.

Second, that *yishuv badaas*, settling one's mind, is a key to gain access to it.

Our innate G-dliness is always in our DNA, so even if we pervert our character, *chas v'shalom*, we still know right from wrong. But to better be in touch with it and let it become part of our active decision making, among the tools is just being able to settle down. It is at least effective as a form of disarming the *Yetzer Hara*, thereby allowing our moral compass to emerge and guide us. If it can be expected and reasonable that

It is uplifting to know that food and drink can be such an effective tool in our Avodas Hashem.

even a man such as Achashveirosh, under those circumstances, would actually reverse course just through *yishuv badaas* and getting in touch with himself, it is hopefully instructive and encouraging for us.

The lesson in this Midrash is coupled with food and drink. Obviously, the Shevatim were held liable for not properly capitalizing on its use, because it can lead us to Avodas Hashem. It is a responsibility, and also uplifting to know, that something so mundane can be such an effective tool to access our true selves whose strong sole desire is Avodas Hashem. This should bring us much happiness! ■

This week's Perspectives on the Parsha was written by R' Yehudab Goldish, talmid in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim.



HAPPY PURIM!

