

# חורזת אייל

## קלס

### **Purim: The Antidote to Amalek**

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*Purim* is perhaps the happiest day of the Jewish calendar. It is a day filled with laughter and light-heartedness, and with a large measure of Jewish pride. We have *mitzvot* that ask us to come together in communal celebration: we read *Megillat Esther* together; we share *mishloach manot*; we are generous with those less fortunate than we; and we come together around festive meals.

In order to really appreciate what we are celebrating, and why *Purim* was added to our calendar, we need to look at what went wrong with *Bnei Yisrael*, and then at what went right.

In *perek 3* of *Megillat Esther*, we meet Haman the Aggagite, who has been elevated to the position of closest advisor to King Achashveirosh. The *Gemara* tells us that Haman was a descendant of King Agag, the Amalekite king whom King Shaul failed to kill. We have a *mitzvah de-Oraita* to wipe out all remnants of Amalek—all people, all animals, all physical traces—because they attacked us in the *midbar*, right after we had left Egypt (*Shemot* 17:8-16). They attacked us without provocation or cause, they attacked us from behind, and they attacked the weak, the defenseless and the young. Nevertheless, the *mitzvah* to annihilate Amalek seems to be an extraordinarily draconian measure, especially for a people and a religion that is based on *chesed*. It is a *mitzvah* that has given many commentators and philosophers



pause as they grapple with understanding the reason for the extreme measures.

The Malbim takes both a moral and political perspective to explain why Amalek's actions were so heinous. He posits that there are basic reasons why all countries and peoples go to war: geography, religion, economics and power. None of these were what motivated Amalek. *Bnei Yisrael* had no geography at this early point in their national history, and their future land did not include Amalek's territory. *Bnei Yisrael* had been slaves until weeks before Amalek attacked them; clearly Amalek's economy was far more stable. Amalek was not fighting a war with *HaShem* as Pharaoh was, and attacking women, children, the elderly and the weak clearly does not indicate strength or military prowess. According to the Malbim, and many others, Amalek attacked simply because they wanted to. They took joy in killing. They did not value human life, and therefore felt no compunction about killing. They

were a people without ethics, whose primary law was "might makes right." This type of ideology is to antithetical to monotheism and so toxic to the world's psyche that *HaShem* decreed that it must be eradicated.

Amalek's philosophy was based on nihilism and anonymity; humans have no inherent value. Each human is ultimately alone, fighting for his survival. The only values are survival and power, and the more power, the greater survivability, the better. Judaism, on the other hand, is founded on the opposite principle. "*Ve-ahavta le-re'acha kamocho*" (*Vayikra* 19:18) is declared by the *Gemara* to be a foundational concept in Judaism.

All people are created *be-tzelem Elokim* and therefore each person is inherently *kadosh*, valuable and deserving of the same rights as I want for myself. There is a relationship between me and each person around me, a relationship with every individual in my community. I cannot survive without the community, and the community cannot stand without each individual.

Haman's near-success was due to the fact the Jewish community was dispersed and disunited. He was right when he told Achashveirosh (*Esther* 3:8) that there is a people that are dispersed and scattered among the peoples. Indeed, the Jewish nation was in *galut*, and was geographically broken apart, but we were also disunited and rapidly assimilating into the surrounding culture. We were all busy ensuring our own survival and the survival of our immediate families, and this struggle led to us becoming anonymous to one another. According to many opinions, *Megillat Esther* actually occurred after the permission to return to *Eretz Yisrael* had been granted, even after the second *Beit HaMikdash* had already been built. Our opportunity to become a united geographic and religious community was presented to us, but many didn't seize that opportunity. Even Esther herself was reluctant at first to step forward and to identify herself as part of the Jewish community and Mordechai, rightfully so, accuses her of hiding and remaining anonymous (*Esther* 4:13-14).

Then, in one brilliant moment, Esther sees clearly what has gone wrong and what is needed to make it right. She orders Mordechai to actively go out and gather together all the Jews, and that the entire community fast together with Esther. The entire community will express their solidarity with one another and show their commitment to Jewish values, Jewish identity, Jewish law and the King of kings. That one moment of clarity and unity was so powerful that it changed the course of history; Haman's fall was meteoric and Jews and Jewish values were saved.

*Purim* celebrates what makes us not-Amalek. We celebrate life, not death. We come together, rather than break ourselves and others apart. We praise *HaShem* rather than brute strength. We value the quality of the person rather than the quantity of his possession by sharing both with those who have as much as we do and with those who have less. We dress up to remind ourselves that only *HaShem* knows all secrets, and that we should never judge a person or even a

situation by what we can see with our limited vision. And we celebrate the foundation of our faith: love and respect for each other, love and awe of the Creator.

*Chag Sameach!*



### Dressing up for Purim

Julie Schwartz ('13)

Almost all of my childhood memories of *Purim* consist of both children and adults dressing up in costumes in the spirit of the holiday. But where did the idea of disguising one's identity for a few hours originate, and what is its significance?

The custom of dressing up is believed to have originated as far back as the late 15<sup>th</sup> century in Italy, and was later practiced in Middle Eastern countries. A reason commonly given for dressing up is that we disguise ourselves to parallel the concealed miracles that took place during the story of *Purim*. For example, had Vashti agreed to attend Achashveirosh's party at the beginning of *Megillat Esther*, Esther would never have become queen and the Jewish people might not have been saved. Vashti's refusal, therefore, was actually an important catalyst in the story and a hidden miracle. Only when looking at the story as a whole can one understand the great hidden miracles that occurred. These hidden miracles are one inspiration for the custom of dressing up.

In addition, several characters in the *megillah* remain hidden throughout the story. During Esther's stay in the palace, her identity as a Jew remains concealed. Furthermore, Mordechai's identity as the one who saved



Achashveirosh's life from Bigtan and Teresh remains unknown to the king for part of the *megillah*. On *Purim* we conceal ourselves, just as Esther and Mordechai's true identities and achievements were concealed.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov writes in *The Book of Our Heritage* that we dress up as non-Jews so that we not be recognized as Jews. The reason we do this is to show that even though we may occasionally act in a manner that is not proper and appear to be just like other nations, it is merely something superficial. Externally, we may look like non-Jews, but on the inside, we are really a Jewish, God-fearing people. Dressing up, therefore, reflects a custom of dressing a certain way to show our true internal dedication to God.

On a related note, the issue of a man dressing up as a woman on *Purim* and vice-versa is a significant halachic issue. It is stated in the *Torah*, "A man's attire shall not be on a woman, nor may a man wear a woman's garment" (*Devarim* 22:5). While the Rama states that it is permitted to cross-dress on *Purim*, the *Mishnah Berurah* brings several opinions stating why the practice should immediately be stopped. Mahari Mintz interestingly says that he saw people cross-dressing on *Purim* in front of *chachamim*. Because the *chachamim* did not object, he writes, cross-dressing must be allowed in the spirit of the holiday, even though it usually is prohibited. Rav Ovadia Yosef, the pre-eminent contemporary Sephardic *posek*, says that even on *Purim*, the practice should not be allowed. Generally, however, we follow the opinion that it is in fact permissible to cross-dress in the spirit of *Purim*.

The ancient custom of dressing up on *Purim* brings the story and significance of the *megillah* to life. Through this practice, we are better able to understand the hid-

den miracles that took place and to wear our Jewish pride on our sleeves.

### Dream On Adina Cohen ('14)

Imagine being invited to lavish party at the White House. You will be served a kosher meal, but would there be a problem attending? Most of us would immediately respond that there is no problem and we would be honored to attend such an event. And yet the *Gemara* states in *Massechet Megillah* that the Jewish people in the time of Haman were punished because they benefited from the feast of Achashveirosh. The *Gemara* implies that there was kosher food at the feast because the Jews are not criticized for eating *treif*. What, in fact, was the transgression of the Jews who ate in Achashveirosh's palace that made the Jews worthy of annihilation? The answer lies in the *pesukim* that describe the feast. *Esther* 1:7 states: "And they gave them drink in vessels of gold--the vessels being diverse one from another--and royal wine in abundance, according to the bounty of the king." This *pasuk* is sung to the tune of *Eichah* because of the interpretation of the *Gemara* that the golden vessels were from the *Beit HaMikdash*. Achashveirosh used the vessels to celebrate the fact that the Jewish people would never again return to the land of Israel. This was the sin of the Jews. They ate at a meal that celebrated their exile and the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*. By attending the feast, the Jews were openly abandoning all hope of returning to Israel, making them worthy of annihilation.

How could the Jews have forgotten the dream of returning to Israel? It had only been around 60 years since they had left. There is a short story that demonstrates the possibility of becoming immune to the effects of a trauma when faced with it on a regular basis. In the short story "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, there is a town that congregates yearly to have a lottery. Throughout the story, it is unclear what happens to the winner of the lottery. By the end of the story it is



evident that the winner of the lottery is really not a winner at all because he or she is stoned to death by the rest of the town. Upon reading the story, my immediate reaction was horror towards the willingness of the people of the town to openly murder their friend. One character even hands the victim's son stones to throw at his mother. The lottery had existed in the town for as long as even the oldest man in town could remember. Just as someone who sees something he or she dislikes every day eventually becomes indifferent toward it, so too the people of the town had become immune to the tragedy of the lottery. The same is the case with the Jews in exile. Every day, the Jews were faced with the cold fact they no longer lived in Israel with the *Beit HaMikdash*. Eventually, they became accustomed to it, and later they decided to try to accept their exile and move on. This was the Jews' mistake. They failed to realize that there always is hope and they would one day return to their homeland. The townspeople in "The Lottery" made the same mistake. They could not see beyond what existed and strive for a better future; they conformed to the status quo and allowed the annual murders to continue.

Today we live in exile. At times it may seem difficult to believe that one day *Mashiach* will come and there will be peace in the world. However, we must realize that 64 years ago many people would never have dreamed of a State of Israel, and yet today we are able to go to Israel and publicly declare it our own. There is always hope, and by believing and never giving up we will hopefully merit to see the rebuilding of the *Beit HaMikdash*.

### Unwrapping the Laffy Taffys for a Deeper Meaning Tali Spier ('13)

Laffy Taffys, chocolate, potato chips, and soda are definitely what give us a sugar rush on *Purim*. No matter how old you are, everyone loves giving and receiving *mishloach manot*. Is there something deeper about these bags filled with junk food, though? Although we have the idea of having a *se'udah* on many holidays, the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot* is unique to *Purim*. What is distinctive about *Purim* that we have this additional *mitzvah*?

One way to understand the *mitzvah* is that the goal of *mishloach manot* is to create *achdut*, unity. Rav Shlomo Alkabetz explains that when Haman describes the Jews as a "separate nation," he is subconsciously alluding to the truth that the only way one can harm the Jewish people is if there is internal conflict within them. Only when there is a break in *Klal Yisrael* is there an opportunity for a nation to come and attack us. The *Kli Yakar* expands on this idea and explains that when the nation of Amalek came to destroy *Bnei Yisrael* in *Refidim*, they were initially unsuccessful because *Bnei Yisrael* were internally peaceful. However, after the incident of *Massa u-Merivah* in *Shemot* 17, when Amalek saw that *Bnei Yisrael* were arguing with one another, they came and attacked again. The second time, *Bnei Yisrael* did not have *HaShem's* immediate protection because they were not united.

The *Kirei Melei* says that when we are united, we enter into a different dimension that makes us invincible. In the realm of the individual, there are no *tzaddikim* and we recognize that people sin. However, the *klal* is different: "*ve-amech kulam tzaddikim.*" When we are a united whole, no sin is able to touch us, and we are *tzaddikim*. This is one of the reasons for the prohibition of counting *Bnei Yisrael*. If we count individuals, we are singling out each one of them and creating a potential for sin for them. However, when we focus on the group, we become untouchable and invincible. We must be able to look at *Klal Yisrael* as a united group, and not look at each and every individual with a critical, judgmental eye.

As part of *Bnei Yisrael*, we simultaneously recognize the beauty in our own individuality, and realize that when we come together, our differences create our unity. Mrs. Shira Smiles offers a comparison to the human body that helps us understand this duality. Every part of the human body has its own specific function. We appreciate the differences between each part of our body that allow us to function as one whole. So too, we must view each member of *Klal Yisrael* as we do each part of the human body. When we are all together in love, brotherhood and friendship, and we are all interested in the betterment of our community, then all of our limbs are healthy and useful. Only when we act united can we live with a Godly soul where nobody can harm us or touch us. Haman says that we are disunited, and disunity opens us up to attack. Ironically, Haman is

the one who teaches us to appreciate one another and come together as one unit.

Rashi comments on the *pasuk* “*va-yichan sham Yisrael neged ha-har*” (*Shemot* 19:2) regarding *Har Sinai*. He says that the verb “*va-yichan*, he camped” is written in singular, even though it is referring to all of *Bnei Yisrael*, because they were united and therefore were considered one unit. Rav Moshe of Kobrin in *Torah Tavlin* expands on this idea and explains that the only way *Bnei Yisrael* can truly be “*neged ha-har*,” and fight the obstacles that come their way, is if they are “*va-yichan sham Yisrael*” – if they are united as one group.

There is a commandment in the *Torah* to love your friend like yourself. The *Torah* uses the word “*re'ah*” for friend, but this word can also mean “broken.” We must look at ourselves as a “broken part” of the Jewish people who together are able to unite into one whole unit. If we look at every person as a part of the whole, and love, honor and cherish every person because we realize that each part is important in making the united whole, then we will become invincible.

This idea of unity can also answer the question of why Haman was so angered by Mordechai’s refusal to bow down to him, even though Mordechai was just one simple Jew. Rav Reich explains that Haman subconsciously realized that when an individual in *Klal Yisrael* refused to bow down to him, there was no point in taking it out on the individual, because in Judaism there is no such thing as an individual. The actions of each and every Jew are taken out on all of us for the positive and the negative. We don’t live in a vacuum; we live in one cohesive unit.

Mordechai tells Esther that if she is silent now, salvation will come from a different place, but she and her father’s house will be destroyed. He tells her that she cannot hide in the palace and separate herself from the group. If Esther separates herself, she will be destroyed but the group will be saved. The motto of *Klal Yisrael* is: “We’re in it together.”

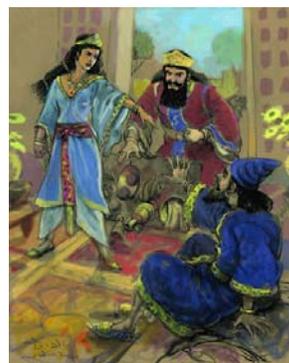
In addition, Mordechai understands that when Esther tells him to collect “*kol ha-Yehudim*” she is asking to create unity and brotherhood among them because that will be the reason for the salvation. As the *Sefat Emet* points out, and based on the *Kli Yakar* in *Shemot* 17, when *Klal Yisrael* are united, it is impossible for

Amalek to rule them.

The entire essence of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la-veyonim* is for us to take this lesson of unity and bring it into action. On this level, we appreciate that when someone gives us *mishloach manot*, it is not only about the food that she gives us, it is important to take some time and appreciate that person and her uniqueness. We must understand that the giving of *mishloach manot* creates brotherhood, friendship, closeness and appreciation for one another. When we appreciate the time that a person invested to make the *mishloach manot*, we create a deeper feeling of *achdut*, and only then is the *mitzvah* fulfilled.

Rav Shlomo Alkabetz explains that Haman’s critique of the Jews was that they were dispersed around the nations. We counter this critique by giving *mishloach manot* and proving that there is a great sense of partnership and friendship among the Jewish people. When you unwrap your Laffy Taffy this *Purim*, take a moment to appreciate the person who gave it to you and recognize the unity within *Klal Yisrael*. May our *mishloach manot* this year help us to understand the idea of connection and brotherhood within *Klal Yisrael*, and may our *achdut* help us merit the coming of *Mashiach* this *Purim*!

Based on a shi’ur by Mrs. Shira Smiles.



### Esther’s Motives

Miriam Jacobson (’12)

We are all familiar with the story of Esther and how she saved the Jews. One of the methods she used was to invite Achashveirosh and Haman to dinner. One question that has always bothered me is: why did she invite Haman? Esther’s goal was to convince Achashveirosh

not to kill her people. Why was Haman's presence necessary? *Chazal* in *Megillah* 15b offer many different reasons why Esther invited Haman to her party.

According to R. Nechemyah, Esther wanted to ensure that the Jews did not become overconfident in their "royal connection" and refrain from seeking the help of *HaShem*. If Esther, their one hope, was fraternizing with Haman the enemy, the Jews would worry and turn to *HaShem*, as was proper. R. Shimon ben Menasya offers that Esther thought that if God saw that she associated with the enemy, and that this lessened her own honor, He would then perform a miracle for the Jews. Another option given by R. Yehoshua ben Karcha is that Esther thought that if she showed Haman friendship, the king would become jealous and kill them both.

R. Yehoshua ben Karcha's answer is the one that troubles me. It is understandable that perhaps Esther arranged it so that the king would find Haman and Esther in a compromising position and kill Haman out of jealousy. It is less understandable that Esther intended for the king to perhaps kill them both.

The idea that Esther would sacrifice herself to save her nation, the idea of being a martyr, however, is one that occurs elsewhere in *Tanach*, specifically with Shimshon, who knew he would die in his battle with the Philistines. Martyrdom is an act which requires great bravery, but Esther's martyrdom also demonstrates her unique humility. At that point, Esther was not even known to the public as a Jew. In fact, according to R. Yehudah, Esther invited Haman in the first place to ensure that no one suspected she was Jewish. She was willing to quietly sacrifice herself for her nation, without recognition.

The quality of humility is related to the quality of gratitude, because we can be grateful only if we humbly acknowledge that someone has helped us. Humility and gratitude are qualities inherent in the Jewish people, and are manifested in two of the *mitzvot* of *Purim*. These qualities are exemplified by the giving of *matanot le-eyyonim* (gifts for the poor), and exchanging gifts between friends. When the Jews were ultimately saved, they recognized that they were not saved on their own merit, but rather on the merit of the prayer and fasting of their fellow Jews. Out of gratitude, they gave charity to the poor among them and sent gifts to each other to acknowledge the merit of their friends. In

this way, the feelings of love between fellow Jews became stronger. This love and strength will, with the help of *HaShem*, bring the ultimate salvation and *ge'ulah*.

### Is the *Megillah* Out of Order?

Gali Sadek ('13)

The *Gemara* in *Megillah* 17a states: "One who reads the *megillah* out of sequence has not fulfilled his obligation." One may ask why this is so. Why is it so imperative for one to read the *megillah* in order? Can't a person still grasp the miracle of *Purim* by reading the *megillah* in the incorrect order?

Michael Behe, in his book *Darwin's Black Box*, introduces the concept of "irreducible complexity." This phrase explains the complexity and perfection of everything in this world. Every object in this world contains irreducible complexity, a point beyond which it cannot be simplified and still function as that object. For example, picture a mouse trap. A mouse trap contains many parts: the cheese used as bait, a spring, a wooden board. All of these individual parts would be useless if not put together. What good is a wooden board if there is no spring to catapult it? What good is the board and spring if there is no cheese to lure the mouse in? Rather, all of these parts must be combined together in order for the trap to work at its fullest capability.

Another example is a poisonous snake. A poisonous snake requires a hypodermic needle-like tooth and venom to be contained within the tooth. Without the tooth, it can not inject its venom. Without the venom, what good is the poison-injecting tooth? It is obvious that both parts of this sophisticated system are required in order for the snake to properly ensure its survival.



This is the same way we must look at the *megillah*. We must appreciate the sequence of the seemingly random actions that led to the victory of the Jewish people. All of these arbitrarily recorded events were not, in fact, arbitrary; rather, a chain of events was deliberately

planned by *HaShem* in order to reach a predetermined result. If one piece had been left out, the whole chain would lose its uniqueness and would not fully capture the “irreducibly complex” system *HaShem* put in place for the miracle of *Purim* to occur.

When the *megillah* is not read in the correct order, the readers do not appreciate that all the “randomness” truly shows a complex and beautiful order that was intentionally set by *HaShem*. *HaShem* wants us to understand that if Esther had not found favor in the king’s eyes or if Achashveirosh had taken a sleeping pill as opposed to reading his book of remembrances, history would have been altered forever. *HaShem* puts all the events in perfect order so that we can come to the realization that it would be incorrect to read it any other way.

Now, when we read the *megillah* on *Purim*, let us be sure to have in mind the significance of the order of its events, and remember that if one event had been changed, history would have been different forever. Have a *Purim sameach!*

*The ideas in this devar Torah were taken from an essay by Rabbi Label Lam.*

### A Day Like *Purim*

Tamar Fishweicher ('13)

We know another name for *Yom Kippur* is “*Yom Kippurim*,” which literally translates as “day of atonements” but can also be interpreted to mean “a day like *Purim*.” If *Yom Kippur* is compared to *Purim*, then both holidays must be alike and share a similar level of *kedushah*.

As we learn from the Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuvah perek bet*, “*ha-vidui she-nahagu bo kol Yisrael ‘aval anachnu chatanu, ve-hu ikar ha-vidui.*” The Rambam says that the main *vidui* that we say on *Yom Kippur* is introduced by the words, “*aval anachnu chatanu,*” “but we have sinned.” What is the significance of the word “*aval*”? The word “*aval*” is used to include transgressions that we attempt to rationalize into being permis-

sible by saying “*aval*,” “but,” to ourselves. These transgressions are the hardest to do *teshuvah* for because, on the surface, we transform them into normal behavior. On *Yom Kippur*, it is easier to understand the need to do *teshuvah* for blatant sins, but repenting for the sins that we rationalize by using the word “but” is more difficult. This is why the Rambam says that the essence of *teshuvah* is to ask for forgiveness for the sins that have “*aval*” attached to them.



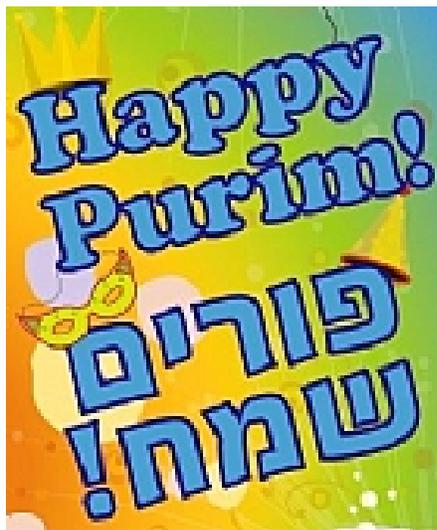
We read in *Megillat Esther* that the entire Jewish population, which included young and old, children and women, was condemned to annihilation. The *Gemara* in *Massechet Megillah* asks: what did *Bnei Yisrael* do so to deserve this harsh decree? The *Gemara* answers: they took part in the feast of a wicked person (Achashveirosh).” However, we know this cannot be the actual

sin since the *megillah* explicitly writes that Achashveirosh made a party, “*la-asot ke-rtzon ish va-ish,*” “made according to the wishes of every man who attended.” This means that every person, no matter his religion, was afforded the appropriate food according to his own personal custom. For example, if a Jew at the party was required to eat only *glatt* kosher food, the *pasuk* implies he would be supplied with it. If a Jew at the party was required to drink kosher wine, he was provided with it. In essence, the Jews were allowed to practice all of their religious beliefs at Achashveirosh’s party. If so, why did they deserve this horrific decree?

We can learn that the sin of the Jews in attendance at the party was that they rationalized and said, “We should not attend the party of a *rasha*, but since he is supplying kosher food and wine, it is permissible.” The *Gemara* in *Megillah* reiterates that the decree on the Jews was a result of attending and socializing at the party of a *rasha*. This act is the essence of what the Rambam was referring to in doing *teshuvah* for sins that don’t appear to be actual sins. For this reason, the Jews were harshly punished with this decree to teach them a lesson that the rationalization of a transgression can be just as bad as committing an actual sin.

This concept can also be seen in *Bereishit* 32:5. When Yaakov is about to meet Esav he says, “*im Lavan garti*,” “I lived with Lavan.” Rashi explains the word “*garti*” as having the same numerical value as “*taryag*,” the 613 *mitzvot*. Yaakov said, “I lived with *Lavan*, the *rasha*, was able to keep all 613 *mitzvot*, and did not learn from his evil ways.” Why does Rashi find it necessary to add the last line that Yaakov did not learn from his evil ways? If he kept the 613 *mitzvot*, then of course he did not learn from Lavan’s evil ways! Rashi shows that even if someone is perfect in his *mitzvot*, association with a *rasha* can eventually affect his commitment to doing *mitzvot*. Of course this did not happen with the great Yaakov, but that is why Yaakov felt it necessary to exclude the possibility. Rashi implies that association with a *rasha* can affect a person, even if he is righteous and keeps all the *mitzvot*. Even though the Jews attending Achashveirosh’s party kept all the *mitzvot*, they were transgressing by attending the party of a *rasha*, which ultimately would cause them tremendous spiritual harm.

We can now understand why *Yom Kippur* is called “*Yom Kippurim*,” “like *Purim*.” The holiday of *Purim* teaches us the Rambam’s concept of “*aval chatanu*,” rationalizing transgressions that appear to be permissible but are really not. When celebrating *Purim* this year, we should be happy and joyous, but understand that *Purim* is also very holy because of the lessons that it teaches us about *teshuvah* on *Yom Kippur*.



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