

Shvilei Pinches

Purim

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The Amazing Lesson We Learn from Mordechai and Esther: The Proper Balance between Silence and Speech!

In honor of Purim, let us explore several issues concerning this festival. Firstly, in Megillas Esther (which was written with Divine inspiration, as explained in the Gemorah (Megilah 7.): "אסתר ברוח" (הקודש נאמרה), Mordechai, the heavenly-chosen instrument of the Purim miracle, is referred to both as "איש יהודי" and as "איש ימיני"—as we find in the possuk (Esther 2,5): "איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי בן יאיר בן שמעי בן קיש איש ימיני".

The Gemorah (Megillah 12:) explains that these two descriptions attest to that fact that his father was from the tribe of Binyamin and his mother was from the tribe of Yehudah. This is somewhat puzzling, since we have a well-established principle that Jewish males are affiliated with their father's tribe and not their mother's. So, why is Mordechai also described as "איש יהודי", a reference to his mother's tribe?

Secondly, we find that the miracle of Purim carries a unique distinction, affecting all the generations of Yisroel that followed—a renewed commitment to observe the entire Torah and its tenets. This fact is stated in the Gemorah (Shabbos 88.):

"ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר (שמות יט יז). אמר רבי אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא, מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם, אם אתם מקבלים את התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם... אמר רבא, אף על פי כן הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש, דכתיב (אסתר ט כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים, קימו מה שקיבלו כבר".

Rashi explains that this refers to the times of Achashverosh, when the people of Yisroel recommitted themselves to the Torah out of love and appreciation for the miracle performed on their behalf. What, however, is the deeper connection between the miraculous events that transpired on Purim, the salvation from Haman's evil decree, and Yisroel's reacceptance of the Torah—this time motivated by "ahavah," love?

Thirdly, it is worthwhile examining the heated argument that took place between Mordechai and Esther when he became aware of Haman's wicked plans and intent. Mordechai urged her to approach the king. She responded (Esther 9,27):

"כל עבדי המלך ועם מדינות המלך יודעים, אשר כל איש ואשה אשר יבוא אל המלך אל החצר הפנימית אשר לא יקרא אחת דתו להמית, לבד מאשר יושיט לו המלך את שרביט הזהב וחייה, ואני לא נקראתי לבוא אל המלך זה שלושים יום".

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She claimed that approaching the king without a proper summons was punishable by death. To this, Mordechai replied harshly (ibid. 13):

“אל תדמי בנפשך להמלט בית המלך מכל היהודים, כי אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת, רוח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממוקום אחר ואת ובית אביך תאבדו, ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות.”

As a result, Esther willingly accepted her fate and sacrificed her life by approaching King Achashverosh without a formal invitation; this led to the annulment of Haman’s decree. Let us try to gain a deeper understanding of this argument that took place between Mordechai and Esther.

The Power of Speech Versus the Power of Silence

Let us begin our journey with a wonderful insight found in the teachings of the Sfas Emes (Purim 5648). He addresses the question as to why Mordechai merited affiliation with both the tribes of Yehudah, “איש יהודי”, and Binyamin, “איש ימיני”, based on a teaching concerning Rachel and Leah. We find in the Midrash (B.R. 71,5):

“לאה תפסה פלך הודיה, ועמדו הימנה בעלי הודיה, יהודה (בראשית לח כו) ויכר יהודה ויאמר צדקה ממני, דוד אמר (תהלים קיח א) הודו לה' כי טוב, דניאל אמר (דניאל ב) לך אלהא אבהתי מהודא ומשבח אנה.

רחל תפסה פלך שתיקה, ועמדו כל בניה בעלי מסטירין, בנימין ישפה - יש פה, יודע במכירתו של יוסף ואינו מגיד, שאול (שמואל א י) ואת דבר המלוכה לא הגיד לו, אסתר (אסתר ב כ) אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה ואת עמה, על כן קראה שמו יהודה.”

Rachel and Leah embody two incredible forces that the Almighty created in mankind—the power to remain silent versus the power to speak out. Examples of Leah’s descendants who followed her doctrine and glorified the power of speech were Yehudah (who confessed his wrongs publicly), Dovid (who praised Hashem in his psalms), and Daniel. Rachel’s doctrine of silence was evident when she allowed Lavan to put Leah in her place, on her wedding night, and she did not reveal the ruse to Yaakov. Examples of Rachel’s descendants who followed her doctrine of silence are Binyamin (who knew of the sale of Yosef into slavery and kept silent), King Saul and Esther (who did not reveal the identities of her family or her people).

Thus, the Sfas Emes explains the reason Mordechai is described as belonging to both the tribes of Yehudah and Binyamin, since he possessed these two incredible forces; he inherited his power of speech from his mother’s side, the tribe of Yehudah, the son of Leah; he inherited his power of silence from his father’s side, the tribe of Binyamin, the son of Rachel.

Wine and Spices Allude to the Powers of Speech and Silence

The Sfas Emes goes on to explain why our blessed sages established the days of Purim as a feast involving wine, as it says in the Megillah (Esther 9,22): “לעשות אותם ימי משתה ושמחה”. He also explains why the Almighty arranged that the savior and hero of the Purim miracle was named

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Mordechai. The Gemorah (Chullin 139:) teaches: **“מרדכי מן התורה מנין, דכתיב מר דרור ומתרגמיהן מירא דכיא”**. In other words, the name Mordechai derives from the spices used for the incense.

We have learned (Yoma 76:): **“אמר רבא, חמרא וריחני פקחין”**—“Rava said, wine and spices made me clever.” Let us endeavor to understand this Talmudic riddle; surely, Rava’s statement cannot be taken literally. The Sfas Emes explains that we find that wine and spices have opposite effects. When checking the wine, it was important to keep quiet, as the Gemorah explains (Menachos 87.): **“כשם שהדיבור יפה לבשמים כך דיבור רע לין”**. On the other hand, when grinding the spices, it was important to speak, as taught (Kritoos 6:): **“מסייע ליה לרבי”**. From these two Gemorahs, we see that sound and speech is detrimental in the preparation of wine, whereas it is beneficial in the preparation of spices.

This is the key to deciphering Rava’s riddle: **“חמרא וריחני פקחין”**. He is conveying a very important lesson learned from wine and spices. From the wine we learn that it is sometimes important to be silent; from the spices we learn that sometimes it is important to utilize our power of speech. These lessons made Rava clever.

“With a Wine-filled Cup and Branches of Myrtle”

How beautifully this explains the mitzvah of making Kiddush over wine on Friday night. The Gemorah states (Pesachim 106.): **“זכור את יום השבת לקדשו, זוכרהו על היין בכניסתו”**. We have learned (Shabbos 113:) that on Shabbos we should refrain from mundane, weekday conversation. Therefore, it is necessary to make Kiddush, on Friday night, over wine, which is damaged by sound, to remind us to refrain from idle, weekday chatter.

Similarly, this helps us understand the Rabbinical institution to make Havdalah over both wine and spices. For, on motzaei Shabbos, when it is already permissible to engage in regular, weekday conversation, one might mistakenly believe that it is no longer necessary to guard one’s tongue and control one’s speech. Therefore, the making of Havdalah over both wine and spices, is a reminder that a constant balance must be sought between our power of speech and our silence—we learn from the spices to utilize our speech for divrei Torah and we learn from the wine to abstain from idle chatter.

This idea can also explain the Arizal’s custom of smelling spices on Friday night, as he established in the piyut (Azamer Bishevachin): **“בחמרא גו כסא ומראני אסא”**—“with a wine-filled cup and branches of myrtle.” While we must learn from the wine to avoid weekday conversation on Shabbos, we must learn from the spices, as well, to focus our speech on Shabbos on Torah study.

Let us return now to the words of the Sfas Emes. The Almighty chose Mordechai—whose name is derived from the spices-- to facilitate the miracle of Purim and, also, established Purim as a time to feast and drink wine, in order to hint at the respective powers of speech and silence, alluded to by spices and wine. Mordechai was endowed with both forces and is, accordingly, described as both **“איש יהודי”** and as **“איש ימיני”**.

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What remains to be explained is (a) where do we actually find that Mordechai possessed the appropriate power of speech and the corresponding power of silence? (b) why are these two forces so important and instrumental to the miracle of Purim?

And Mordechai Was Aware of All that Had Transpired

Concerning the possuk (Esther 4,1): **וּמֹרְדֵכַי יָדַע אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה וַיֵּצֵא בִתּוֹךְ הָעִיר וַיִּזְעַק זַעֲקָה גְדוּלָּה**—**וּמֹרְדָה**—“And Mordechai was aware of all that had transpired, . . . ; he went out into the midst of the city and cried out loudly and bitterly”—the Yismach Moshe (Terumah) writes the following: Mordechai already knew that the Almighty would perform miracles on behalf of Yisroel on the days of Purim, nevertheless, he concealed this fact from the people. He did so, so that they would perform teshuvah for their transgressions—partaking of Achashverosh’s feast and bowing down to the idol in the times of Nevuchadnetzar.

In this light, we see where Mordechai employed the aforementioned forces. He displayed his power of silence when he refrained from telling the people of Yisroel that the Almighty planned to perform a miracle on their behalf—out of fear that they might not repent appropriately. This was the power he inherited as a **אִישׁ יְמִינִי**, a member of the tribe of Binyamin the son of Rachel, who embraced a doctrine of silence. On the other hand, it was necessary for him to utilize his power of speech to “cry out loudly and bitterly,” in order to arouse the people of Yisroel to perform teshuvah. This second power, he inherited as a **אִישׁ יְהוּדִי**, a descendent of Yehudah the son of Leah, who embraced the doctrine of appropriate speech.

We find a sweet gematriah to illustrate the fact that Mordechai incorporated the doctrines of both Rachel and Leah. In Machberet Purim in the notes of the Moharnash (the divine kabbalist Rabbi Natan Shapirah), he points out that the numerical value of **מֹרְדֵכַי** (274) is equivalent to the numerical value of **רַחֲלֵל לֵאָה** (238+36).

Where is Haman Alluded to in the Torah?

Let us rise to the occasion and provide a more in depth explanation of the association between the miracle of Purim and the incorporation of these two somewhat opposing forces within Mordechai. We will begin with a teaching in the Gemorah (Chullin 139:): **“הַמֶּן מִן הַתּוֹרָה מִנִּין, הַמֶּן הָעֵץ”**—an allusion to Haman is found in the Torah in the words **“הַמֶּן הָעֵץ”**. The Bnei Yissoschar (Adar 7,9) explains this teaching based on writings in the name of the Arizal. By partaking of Achashverosh’s feast, Yisroel awakened the original sin of Adom horishon eating from the etz hadaas. So, this is how we interpret the Gemorah above: **“הַמֶּן מִן הַתּוֹרָה מִנִּין”**—from where did Haman have the power to prosecute and oppose the people of Yisroel? The Gemorah answers: **“הַמֶּן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צוּיְתִיךְ לְבַלְתִּי אֲכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ אֲכַלְתִּי”**—by partaking of that wicked man’s feast, they awakened the sin of the etz hadaas.

The Bnei Yissoschar goes on to elucidate the possuk (Esther 4,16): **“לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת כָּל הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאֵל תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֵת תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לִילָה וַיּוֹם”** based on writings of the Chida in Dvash L’fee (1,4), citing Rabbi Chaim Vital. He teaches that Esther was a reincarnation of Chava (Eve). Therefore, she requested that the Jews of Shushan fast on her behalf, **“וְצוּמוּ עָלַי”**. Her intention was to rectify her part in the sin of the etz hadaas, which led to Haman’s decree to destroy all of the Jews.

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A similar interpretation is presented by the divine kabbalist Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Lantzhout, zts"l, the author of Chomas Ariel. Here is part of his explanation:

“בימי אחשוורוש, עיקר גזירה זו היה בחטא הראשון מאכילת עץ הדעת שנתעורר עליהם, על ידי שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע, כמו שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל המן מן התורה מנין, המן העץ, ואמרו חכמינו ז"ל (שבת קמו.) שבא נחש על חוה והטיל בה זוהמא, וישראל שעמדו על הר סיני פסקה זוהמתן, ובימי אחשוורוש נתעורר שוב זוהמת הנחש... על ידי אכילת סעודתו, ולכן אחשוורוש עולה זוהמת הנחש... וזה ששלחה אסתר לדעת על מה ז"ה ראשי תיבות זוהמת הנחש... וכן עולה ושת"י המלכ"ה כמנין זוהמת הנחש”.

He explains that the primeval serpent contaminated Chava during the sin of the etz hadaas; this contamination was eradicated at Mount Sinai; by partaking of Achashverosh's feast the contamination of the serpent returned. Therefore, the numerical value of **אחשוורוש** equals **זוהמת הנחש**, the serpent's contamination.

Conversing with the Serpent Led to the Sin of the Etz hadaas

If we investigate the source of Adom and Chava's downfall in the sin of the etz hadaas, we find that they were lured into conversation by the primeval serpent. The possuk states (Bereishis 3,1):

“והנחש היה ערום מכל חית השדה אשר עשה ה' אלקים, ויאמר אל האשה אף כי אמר אלקים לא תאכלו מכל עץ הגן, ותאמר האשה אל הנחש מפרי עץ הגן נאכל, ומפרי העץ אשר בתוך הגן אמר אלקים לא תאכלו ממנו ולא תגעו בו פן תמותון”.

Rashi comments that the serpent drew them into conversation concerning matters he was already familiar with, in order to ultimately involve them in conversation regarding the etz hadaas. We see clearly, that had Chava avoided conversation with the serpent, she wouldn't have fallen into his trap. The wisest of men, Shlomo hamelech, warns us of the hazards of unnecessary, lengthy conversation (Mishlei 10,19): **ברוב דברים לא יחדל פשע וחושך שפתיו משכיל”**

We have now gained a deeper insight into Esther's original reluctance to approach Achashverosh and engage him in conversation. As we learned from the Bnei Yissoschar, Esther was a reincarnation of Chava. We also learned from the Chomat Ariel that **אחשוורוש**, Achashverosh, has the same numerical equivalent as **זוהמת הנחש**, the serpent's contamination. In order to correct the sin of the etz hadaas and to avoid her previous mistake and downfall, she tried to keep her distance from Achashverosh and avoid entering into conversation with him.

“If You Keep Silent at a Time Like This”

We have also achieved a better understanding of the vehement argument that took place between Mordechai and Esther. He pleaded with her to approach the king on behalf of her people; she adamantly refused on the grounds that it was prudent to keep her distance from the evil serpent and refrain from conversation with him—after all, it was conversation with him in their previous incarnation that caused her downfall.

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Additionally, she had two more reasons for refraining from conversation with King Achashverosh: (a) she was from the tribe of Binyamin the son of Rachel, who embraced a doctrine of silence, and (b) the gemstone of Binyamin, the "ישפה", can be read as the words "יש פה", indicating one who has the ability to speak, but knows when to remain silent—as Binyamin did concerning the sale of Yosef. Therefore, she concluded that she should follow in the footsteps of her ancestors and embrace a doctrine of silence.

Fortunately, Mordechai, also a product of Binyamin and Rachel, was also an "איש יהודי", a descendant of Yehudah the son of Leah from his mother's side. From his mother's side, he inherited the doctrine of speech; therefore, he knew better when to adopt the doctrine of silence and when to adopt the doctrine of speech: "עת לחשות ועת לדבר"—"there is a time to remain silent and there is a time to speak up."

Due to the assistance of Divine wisdom, he recognized that it was time to speak up. So, he urged Esther: "אל תדמי בנפשך להמלט בית המלך מכל היהודים, כי אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת". In other words, you cannot adhere to a doctrine of silence at this time, and if you do: "רוח והצלה יעמוד". "ליהודים ממוקום אחר ואת ובית אביך תאבדו, ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות".—salvation for the Jews will come from elsewhere, and you and your family will be lost, and who knows if you did not become queen precisely for this moment.

"Speak of Them" but Not Nonsense

In this manner, we are able to explain why Yisroel were able to receive the Torah anew specifically by means of the Purim miracle: "קיימו וקבלו היהודים" - "קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר". A true understanding and acquisition of Torah is only possible if one has the ability to find the proper balance, in my opinion, knowing when to speak up and when to remain silent.

The Gemorah (Yoma 19:) deduces this point as follows: "ודברת בם, בם יש לך רשות לדבר, ולא בדברים אחרים"—the power of speech is to be utilized in the study of Torah, while the power of silence is to be used to avoid speaking nonsense. In reality, these two skills are intertwined; if one controls his speech and avoids inappropriate, meaningless speech, he is given the strength from above to learn Torah.

This concept illuminates our understanding of a statement by Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Avos 1,17):

"כל ימי גדלתי בין החכמים ולא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה, ולא המדרש הוא העיקר אלא המעשה, וכל המרבה דברים מביא חטא"

"All my days I have been raised among the sages and I did not find anything beneficial for the body besides silence; and it is not study that is the main thing, but, rather, practice; and anyone who talks excessively, invites sin." Only a person who can control his urges to speak loshon horah and other types of undesirable speech—one who knows when it is best to remain silent—only he has the kedushah and power to use speech as a means to influence and teach Torah to others.

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This is Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel's meaning: "כל ימי גדלתי בין החכמים"—I've spent my time among the sages, who use the power of speech to influence others with their Torah; "ולא מצאתי לגוף טוב אלא שתקה"—I saw how they appreciated and utilized the power of silence. He continues: "ולא המדרש הוא העיקר"—the main thing is not the study out loud; "אלא המעשה"—but, rather, knowing how to control one's speech and knowing when silence is more appropriate.

Correcting the Etz hadaas and Preparing to Receive the Torah

Reviewing all that we have learned, we understand why Mordechai is referred to as "איש יהודי", "איש ימינו". The Sefas Emes taught us that these two appellations allude to the two powers he inherited from his ancestors—the power of speech and the power of silence. Both strengths were instrumental in the miracle of Purim. Haman tried to invoke the sin of the etz hadaas, in order to destroy the people of Yisroel; the root of that sin was Adom and Chava's inability to adhere to the doctrine of silence, when necessary. The tikun for that sin, therefore, came in the form of Mordechai's silence. On the other hand, by receiving the Torah anew, Yisroel possessed the proper vehicle to exercise their power of speech in the appropriate manner.

Let us conclude with another fantastic idea of the Sfas Emes (Purim 5648). Although we have learned that wine alludes to the power of silence—since sound damages wine in its preparation—we find that wine also allows us to open our mouths in song and praise of Hashem—as we have learned in the Gemorah (Berachos 35.): "אין אומרים שירה אלא על היין". Apparently, this means that only he who initially adheres to a doctrine of silence and guards his tongue from inappropriate speech, merits to speak, teach, observe and live a life of Torah.

This is the secret lesson we learn from wine. In its preparation, we must be very careful to follow guidelines of silence, so as not to ruin the wine. Once the wine is mature and ready—and silence is no longer demanded—wine has the power to elevate us to praise and sing to Hashem. Alas, this explains why our blessed sages established Purim as a feast with wine; we must exhibit both qualities of wine. In matters of nonsense and inappropriate speech, we must follow a doctrine of silence; this will allow us to reach the next stage—utilizing the power of speech in its most exalted form, the study of Torah and praise of Hashem.