Purim Pieces

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Let’s get into it. I mean really into it.

Every story in Torah has an eternal lesson. Every Jewish holiday – in addition to commemorating an event of the past – has a modern application and inspiration.

And yet, on top of all of that, the Baal Shem Tov made special note of Purim and taught us that if we read the Purim story as a tale from the past, לֶמֶרֶךְ הָוֹקֵר, we haven’t celebrated the Holiday. To really celebrate this holiday we have to read the story as if it were happening now. We need to find ourselves in the details and nuances of the Purim story.

We need to get into it.

To keep the party moving and to make sure we’re really into it, I will at a few occasions during the evening share a short thought to help us enter the Purim story and have the Purim miracles and joy excite our lives.

לֶכֶת כְּנֻסֵת אַתָּלִי לְכֹלֶּי הָיוֹדֻדִים

One of the most fascinating, yet often overlooked, elements of the Purim story is the strategy employed by the two heroes, Esther and Mordechai.

Esther and Mordechai had some high clout. Esther was the queen of the Empire. Mordechai was a minister of the king. It seemed if there was ever a time in Jewish history that had the right players in the right place for high level lobbying and advocacy to thwart an anti-Semitic decree, this was it!

Yet Mordechai and Esther’s actions seemed to be counterproductive, politically speaking.

Mordechai heard of the evil decree on the street. How do you think he reacted? Well I would guess he put on his official ministerial garb, ran immediately to the high offices of government-

1 He frames it like this, that Purim is more so than other Yomim Tovim, in Megliah Nikra’as 5737.
where he held position, made a few eloquent and heart rendering speeches, lobbied his friends, and put an end to his terrible decree. Sounds like a good plan.

But in fact, Mordechai did nothing of the sort. When Mordechai heard of the decree he began to pray, and donned sackcloth and ashes, attire which actually barred him from entering the royal courts and chambers. What good is he now?!

Then Esther heard the news. Mordechai wanted her to go to the king. But the king was a little crazy. He had a law in place that if you entered his chamber without invitation you were killed on the spot. Esther hadn’t received an invitation in 30 days. But Mordechai persisted that she go to the king anyway.

Esther was a great woman and she was willing to risk her life for brethren. But how could she get the kings attention without getting killed?

That seems easy to me. The king seemed pretty shallow in addition to being crazy. To choose a queen he held a mandatory beauty contest for all the maidens of his land; and he found Esther to be the most beautiful. She could use her beauty now to get what she wants. Quickly, get a full manicure and pedicure, hairdo, facial - the works, and charm your way into the king. But she doesn't do that. Instead she fasts for three days! Do you know what you look like and feel like after not eating or drinking for three days?!

Mordechai and Esther were no fools. They had the best strategy. They knew that salvation would come from G-d. The rest of the pieces would just be vehicles for G-d’s miracle to unfold. So first they prayed and fasted to G-d. First they went to the one who really calls the shots. Once they got G-d on board, they were able to approach the king and open the natural channels for G-d’s miracles to flow.

We are right there. We too face anti-Semitism, whether it is here, globally or against Israel. To make miracles happen we need to learn from Mordechai and Esther: The first thing we should do whenever we want to help Israel or to fight anti Semitism, is a Mitzvah. We must first beseech G-d to get on board and help us out. Once that is done we get to work on advocacy etc. and create channels for the G-d’s miracles to unfold.

Let’s not get obsessed with the channels while forgetting about the divine flow.

L’Chaim. Let the party flow.

Here is another ironic element of the Purim story. The girls taken into the contest had every beautification product and treatment at their disposal. For 12 months! This was a yearlong beautification retreat on the king’s tab.

Then, on the day she was brought to the king, each girl could request any makeup, perfume, adornment etc. she desired, and it would be given to her.

Esther asked for nothing. She went to the king only with what was given to her by palace orders.

2 Based on Chayov Inish L’bsumei B’Purya 5717.
And yet, irony of ironies, of all the girls, it was Esther who the king found most beautiful. “Esther found favor in the eyes of the king”.

Here too, this is our story.

The ultimate king is G-d. Each soul is like a maiden wishing to be in a relationship with G-d. The best recipe for finding favor in the eyes of the King is to ask for nothing for ourselves. Ask not what Judaism can do for you; ask what you can do for Judaism.

Once a Rabbi was giving a lecture about how ‘unJewish’ a particular act was. During Q&A a woman asked, “how could you say that is ‘unJewish,’ I do that all the time and it makes me feel so close to G-d.”

The Rabbi answered with a twinkle in his eye: “Who said G-d wants you so close to Him. Maybe you’re cramming His space.” Perhaps a little sharp, but very profound.

The best way to get close to someone is not by doing what feels good to you; rather by doing what they feel is good! In fact, the less focus you put on you, your needs, and your feelings in a relationship, the more you will be loved, and the more you, your needs and your feelings will be valued by the other.

This applies to our relationship with G-d, and our relationship with our fellow. Irony of ironies, if you want to be liked, stop thinking how to get people to like you, stop thinking about you; start thinking about them, start thinking about what other people like.

I like to talk. But it looks like you like to party. Let’s party.

**כשתירס בשמן המור**

The girls in the beauty contest prepared for 12 months before they came before the king. The Megillah tells us that spent six months with Shemen Hamor... and six month B’Besamim, good fragrances.

Mor can also mean bitter. Chassidim would say, in spiritual beautification one needs to spend time both removing the bitter, removing the negative from our lives, and time improving the positive, becoming adorned in the sweet.

There was a Sephardic family and an Ashkenazi family who were neighbors in a building in Netanya. Mishpachat Benamu and Mishpachat Weiss. They were very good friends, and often they ate Shabbat meals together. At Shabbat lunch in the Weiss’s home they always served a traditional Ashkenazic shabbat dish, Kishke. This is an old eastern European Jewish delicacy which is essentially a flavorfully stuffed intestine of the animal. You can get it today in America, except the stuffing is in an artificial liner rather than an animal intestine. But the Weiss family in Netanya had a generations old recipe, and they made it the real way, in an intestine. It was delicious. And Mr. Benamu loved it!

Giveret Benamu often asked Rebbetzin Weiss for the recipe, but like all good cooks, she was very protective over her recipes and would not disclose this one either.

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3 **Sipurim Chassidim, Purim, in name of Chassid of Admor HaZakein**
In preparation for Mr. Benamu’s 50th birthday, Giveret Benamu approached Rebbetzin Weiss again and asked if she could make a special exception and give her the kishke recipe. She really wanted to make it in honor of her husband’s 50th birthday. They were going to have a big family Shabbat lunch… after initial resistance and further insistence, Mrs. Weiss finally gave her friend the recipe.

Delighted, she took great care to prepare it... and, it was disgusting! She ran across the hall yelling, you lied to me, you embarrassed me in front of all my family...

Taken aback, Mrs. Weiss assured her that she did not trick her or lie. “Yes, you did! Yours tastes delicious, the recipe you gave me was disgusting.” So they reviewed the recipe to see where it went wrong. Everything seemed right. Then Rebbetzin Weiss thought she knew what went wrong. “Tell me,” she said, “tell me exactly how you made it.” Giveret Benamu answered, “I followed the recipe step by step as directed,” and she explained that she had bought an intestine, measured the ingredients etc. etc. “I have one more question,” says Mrs. Weiss, “before putting in the stuffing, did you wash the inside of the intestine!?”

Sometimes we try to increase the good in our life, but we are reluctant to kick a bad habit, to get rid of some bitter poison. And we wonder why things aren’t improving.

Spiritual beautification requires both. Washing the intestine and introducing delicious stuffing. Removing negative traits and beginning positive ones.

Jewish law tells us that on Purim the celebration needs to be so great that we reach a point in which we don’t know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai.

Don’t know”, can also be read as “Know the don’t”. On Purim our joy and celebration needs to bring us to a point at which we know ‘the don’t’, the א is very much ידוע. In all the joy we can see what is holding us back; in the positive we can clearly spot that negative area. We need to know it well and get rid of it.

This is our story. We can be in the beautification process. Each day, each week, each month, each year, we get rid of little negativity, and increase a little positivity.

This is the deeper meaning of the statement that on Purim we need to drink so much that we don’t know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai.

Let’s get back to the simple meaning for a moment. Let’s party.

In discussing the proper times to read the Megillah, the Talmud designates different times, divided for three groups: village dwellers, city dwellers, and dwellers of metropolises—large fortified cities that were walled at the time Joshua first led the Jewish children into Israel some 3,300 years ago.

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4 Sefer Hasichos 5705, Purim, p. 72. (I toned it down here. The Friediker Rebbe’s lashon there, in the name of the Alter Rebbe, is very powerful).

5 Ideas inspired by מגילה נקראת גם
Raise your hand, how many of you would say you come from a big city? How many of you from a small town? And how many average?

How many of you had a first language other than English? How many of you have parents who had a first language other than English? How about grandparents?

Culture, geography, every-day language is not identical among Jews. It is not a unifying factor. What makes us a people is that we share one Torah, share one history and celebrate the same holidays. We are one big family. Sometimes we are a happy family, and sometimes... oh well... but tonight it is Purim; tonight we are definitely one big happy family.

Let us make a pledge to be more involved with our Torah, more involved with our tradition and holidays. Let us be a happy Jewish family more often.

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We spoke about the three types of locales in which Jews live: the metropolis, the village, and the average city. The essence of this distinction in the Jewish context has nothing to do with skyscrapers and farms, thoroughfares or dirt roads. The distinction is centered on the degree of Jewish life.

Right now in this room we probably have representation of this. Some of you come from “metropolises” – cities with large and vibrant Jewish communities. Some of you come from “villages”, cities with hardly a Jewish population and never mind Jewish activity. And some of you come from “average cities” – somewhere in between.

These are very different Jewish climates: in a big Jewish city it is easier to be a Jew. It’s simple: the more Jewish the environment, the easier and more opportunities to express/live Jewish. That’s the beauty. The challenge is hard to know if that Jewishness is your identity or circumstance.

In a small Jewish city, it could be harder to be a Jew. Not as many opportunities. Not as much going on Jewish wise. You might have to make a real effort to have a Jewish experience or expression. That’s the challenge. The beauty is that whatever you have or do come from inside you. You know for certain you are not simply being influenced by your surroundings. The Jewishness is an expression of self.

But since we are one people, really each one of us has to find the beauty of both possibilities, wherever it is that we find ourselves. When we are in big Jewish environment and active, we must make time for introspection (at least once a week, before Shabbat) and see if internally we are feeling our Jewishness. Is the Jewishness reaching and coming from deep in our core. We need to create the deep rooted intimate feeling of the village Jew. This comes about through Torah study, and particular in a small setting, with a chavrusa; or through meditative prayer. Thinking Chassidus as a preface to prayer.

On the other hand when we are in a “village”, and our Jewish identity is very real at our core, we must also be a city dweller and make sure our Judaism is expressed in our environment, by being proud Jews, and by inviting fellow Jews do to Jewish things together. Creating a semblance of City Judaism.
Esther was not at risk of being harmed by Haman’s decree. No one knew she was Jewish, and she was the queen of the empire.

Yet on behalf of other people who were in danger, Esther risked her life, literally, by going to the king. In an instant, before she uttered her first word on behalf of the Jews, she could have been killed. Esther knew this. And it was difficult. Heroic acts don’t always come easy, even to heroes. Heroes work hard themselves and push themselves to do what is uncomfortable and difficult.

I need not even explain how this is our story. Wherever you look you will see other Jews who have problems, Jews from across the world, or across the hall in your dorm. Problems with physical issues or spiritual needs. It is so easy to say, “That is not my problem.” It is so easy to think, “I would love to help, but it will risk my health, it will put me out on time, money, energy.

The joy of Purim is a celebration of this exceptional love for a fellow. To be willing to help even when the problem in no way affects you, but providing the solution might.

*You can tell a firsthand story where you experienced/witnessed/encounter such Ahavas Yisroel. Or you can use this:*

Once when I was a child we took my father to JFK for a flight to Israel. We wanted to walk my father into the terminal to check in and say goodbye, but of course you are not allowed to park in front of the terminal. This is NY and a security guard tells my brother, who was driving, “if you give me $5 I will let you stay here for 5 minutes.” 5 minutes was all we needed so we gave him the $5.

We went in, checked in, said goodbye and came out. The car was gone. And so was the so called security guard. It was a scam. The dude was some con artist dressed with a security guard jacket; he made a quick $5 and walked away. Airport nature took its course; a tow truck came and towed our car away.

Make a long story short we had to take a long bus ride on this dark cold night to some remote corner of the airport. We walked through chain link fences to a small trailer in middle of a yard of impounded cars, and they wanted $200 to release our car.

My mother takes out her checkbook and begins writing out a check. They say, “Sorry we don’t accept checks.” So she takes out a credit card. They say, “Sorry, no credit cards, only cash.” My mother says, “This is Brooklyn, late at night, I don’t just carry around $200 cash.” In DMV style the woman just shrugs her shoulders. There is nothing doing. She suggests we take a taxi home – 30 minutes away, pickup money, and return in a taxi to pick up the car. My mother pleads, “Come on, have some mercy, I am here with two small children, it is late a night, we were scammed by a man dressed as a security guard etc. etc.”

Our pleas are falling on deaf ears, when we hear some loud and angry voices outside. A group of Israeli men had their car impounded as well. They were mad. They were yelling.

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6  Inspired by Sefer Hasichos 5705, Purim.
They walk in and as soon as they see us their entire focus shifted. In a soft voice the leader of the group asked my mother what the problem was. Hearing the problem he pulled out $200 cash and gave it to my mother. As simple as that, without having been asked.

My mother took the checkbook back out and asked him what his name was so she could give him a check for the cash. He said no need, keep it, it is my Mitzvah.

The guy didn’t know us. His every-day language was different than ours. He grew up in a different country. On this cold night he had his own problem which, judging by the tone of his voice and choice of words, was clearly bothering him. Yet he put his problems aside, dished out $200, to help total strangers.

Be a hero. Do something difficult for the sake of someone else’s problem.

אורה זו תורה ויקר אלו תפילין?

My friends, this party has to come to a close, but the joy hasn’t.

To the contrary, the joy can’t be over. It must to be channeled and continued.

Story of steam boat and fog horn. The first steam boat is ready to set out on its journey. Many people come to see this great boat off. They crowd the port, eagerly waiting to see the boat pull away. The Captain wants to show off to all the onlookers waiting at the port. He uses the steam to sound the horn many times. People are amazed. Wow! Such a loud horn. Wow! So much steam. Then, when it comes time to depart there is no more steam left to make the boat move.

In describing the joy of the Jewish people at the time of Purim the Megillah says, “The Jews experienced light, happiness, joy, and honor”. The Talmud translates those four terms to mean: “The Jews experienced Torah, Holidays, circumcision and Tefillin.”

What?! How’d you get there?!

The answer is simple: the energy of Joy, not just to blow off steam; but to energize our boat. Bottle the energy, the Jewish joy and Jewish pride of this party, and turn it into fuel to do something Jewish.

Immediately on Purim, we have four special Mitzvos; hear the Megilla tomorrow, mishloach manot, charity and another feast. And while it is important to do all four, each one carries its own independent value. This is not an all or nothing deal!

Then take the joy with you, and fuel many more Mitzvos in the coming months. Make it a Happy Purim every day. Happy Purim!