

Happy is the Jewish Way

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Purim was approaching and the people were apprehensive. And who could blame them? It was 1941 and they were in the Warsaw Ghetto. There were few reasons to smile. Everyone locked in the ghetto was worried about what the next day would bring, as the threat of death at the hands of the evil Nazi butchers hung over them. Hunger and disease seemed destined to be the two species of mishloach manos that year.

The Piacezna Rebbe, who was in the ghetto, gathered a few broken souls around him. He quoted to them the Tikkunei Zohar, which states that Purim is as holy as Yom Kippur, as evidenced by the name of the holiest day of the year, Yom Hakippurim, which can be read as Yom K'Purim, meaning that the holiest day is like Purim. Many interpretations are offered in explanation of the comparison.

The rebbe addressed the suffering souls. When the sun begins its descent on Erev Yom Kippur, he told them, no Jews would say that they won't fast this year because they aren't in the mood. As Yom Kippur begins, no one says that it is too hard to do teshuvah now and they need to wait until they are more tuned in to the feelings of the day. Yom Kippur arrives and you get yourself into it, ready or not. You follow the tzivuy Hashem.

Purim is no different, said the rebbe. Purim arrives with the obligation to be joyous. Even when surrounded by evil murderers, illness and suffering, Jews are obligated to be joyous on this day.

“You,” the rebbe told the poor souls in the Warsaw Ghetto, “must also be happy today.”

Boruch Hashem, our situation is nothing close to that of the poor people in the Warsaw Ghetto, but our world is a scary place and it appears to be getting scarier by the day. Wherever you look, there is tragedy and trouble brewing. Just this week, two brothers on their way to learn Torah were killed in Eretz Yisroel, for no other reason than the fact that they were Jews. They left home to go to yeshiva shel matah but ended up going to yeshiva shel maalah. Their killing followed the murder of two young brothers, who left home dressed in their Shabbos clothes to travel to a family simcha and ended up going to the olam shekulo tov. Terror in Eretz Yisroel continues unabated and there doesn't appear to be anything the army or police can do about it.

Also in Israel, a legitimate Jewish government was established and it seeks to right many wrongs. It seeks to complete the revolution begun when Menachem Begin rose to power and remove leftist elites from their hold on the judiciary. For this, the left, which was just trounced in an election brought on by their disastrous coalition, is engaging in an international campaign to vilify the current prime minister and his

government. With venomous propaganda and duplicitous charges, the gang that just lost a democratic election is seeking to stymie the work of a duly elected government by charging that they are anti-democratic. Not only that, but they plant stories in the international media and lobby Israel's allies to besmirch the country and harm its economic and political strength.

The United States is led by an increasingly inept president and administration, causing severe economic and moral damage to the country, and the country is governed by misguided woke ideologies that can only cause further harm. Crime is out of control in cities and towns, and police appear powerless to stop it. Despite fears of an impending recession, prices keep rising and housing prices have reached crisis levels even as mortgage rates climb.

In Europe, Russia continues to battle Ukraine, causing hundreds of billions of dollars of losses, severe loss of life and millions of refugees, as the specter of a nuclear attack hangs in the balance. Nobody has an end game or is working to end the war and bring peace to the area before the war spins further out of control.

Iran is becoming increasingly strident, working to empower Russia and become more of an international player, as it beefs up its nuclear efforts and plans terror acts against Israel and Jews.

That's on a political level. But there are so many local problems and so many people suffering from so many different tzaros from which they see no solution. We wish we could help everyone, but we can't. We wish we had solutions for all the problems, but we don't. But even so, we can care and offer chizuk.

There is no better time to do so than Purim time.

When we study the Megillah and think about Esther Hamalka and what was going on in her mind, we can all relate to her and derive encouragement from her sad tale.

After suffering as an orphan, her life was restored by Mordechai. Then it all crashed in again when the egomaniacal king, who had his first wife killed, selected Esther to be his wife. The fairy tale wedding was a cause for sadness and trepidation, as Esther and Mordechai feared where it would lead. The dangerous situation she found herself in was compounded by the added challenge of the king's wicked Jew-hating advisor, who sought to kill all the Jews in the vast area the king ruled over. Seemingly, there was no way to win. She feared for her life, as did all of the Jews in Achashveirosh's dominion.

But a Jew is never alone, and through their emunah and bitachon, they brought about geulah. Instead of despairing, they repented for the sins that caused them to be in peril. They davened and they fasted. Hashem helped them and the wicked Haman was neutralized, to use a current euphemism. The Jews were saved and they slaughtered their enemies, causing a celebration we commemorate until this day.

Wherever Jews found themselves in the centuries since and despite the situation they found themselves in, they celebrated the deliverance of the Jews of that day and were invigorated that just as Hashem brought salvation for Esther and the Jews of her day, so will He deliver us from our personal and communal tribulations.

Like a beacon of light on a dark, stormy night, Purim shines into our world. Everyone has struggles. We have days when the rushing waves of tzaros threaten to engulf us. We encounter people and situations we find intolerable. People feel lost and abandoned. So many people are sick and in need of a refuah. Others can't make ends meet no matter how hard they try. They find themselves adrift in a downward spiral.

Do you remember ever seeing a small airplane buzzing overhead with a banner trailing behind it? You craned your neck and strained your eyes to read its message. Purim is like that plane, flying a banner that all can read. The banner proclaims,

“Revach vehatzolah ya’amod laYehudim.” Help can come. Help will come. Don’t despair.

Purim teaches us that all that happens to us in this world is part of Hashem’s plan. It will all turn out for the good if we are patient and follow Hashem’s word. We sing various tunes to the eternal words of “Venahafoch hu,” reminding us that Hashem can quickly bring about a stunning reversal of any situation. At no time should we give up hope of recovery, no matter how bad the prognosis. There is never a situation bad enough that it forces us to throw up our hands and quit.

During one of my visits to my rebbi, Rav Avrohom Yehoshua Soloveitchik, he asked me about one of his talmidim. He said, “Vos hertz zich bei Yankel?” I responded, “Es geit em shver. Things are rough for him.” To which he responded, “Bei der Aibishter iz gornit shver. Nothing is difficult for Hashem.” In other words, he should maintain his faith, and daven to Hashem, and he will be helped.

We live in a world where up is down and down is up. We have to resist being blown about and led astray. No matter what comes over us and the world, we must maintain our equilibrium and faith.

When good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people, the Megillah reminds us that appearances are deceptive. The “wheel of fortune” is manipulated by Hashem for His own purposes. The Megillah reminds us that all that happens in this world is part of a Divine plan, which we can’t expect to understand until the entire story has unfolded.

Esther was ripped from her home and snatched away. Everyone pitied her and her situation as she led a double life. The second most powerful man in the country made demands, and Mordechai, the righteous leader of the Jewish people, flouted them. To all, it appeared that Mordechai’s actions were to blame. The vise was getting tighter and a day of death was set. The end seemed near. The people were on the brink of despair. It was only when the story neared its end, tragedy was avoided, the good triumphed, and evil was vanquished that it was understood that all had been orchestrated by Hashem to lead to a miraculous finish and then a refurbishing of the Bais Hamikdosh.

The lesson was learned for all time that even as a wicked force appears to be gaining, it is only in order for Hashgocha to set up that power for a more drastic defeat. Evil may be on the ascent, but it is merely a passing phenomenon and is destined to fail. Goodness and virtue may appear frail and unimposing, but those who follow Hashem’s path will ultimately triumph.

In every generation, there are vicious people who plot our destruction, but we are still here, thriving and prospering, and we will do so with Hashem's help until the coming of Moshiach.

That message resonates for all time, wherever Jews find themselves. As we masquerade about exchanging mishloach manos with friends and distributing Purim gelt to the less fortunate, we tap into the kedusha and message of the holy day.

Mordechai's admonition to Esther as she feared to act upon his advice and confront the evil, "Umi yodeia im le'eis kazos higaat lamalchus – And who knows if the reason you were chosen as queen was to take this step to help save your people," should ring in the ears of every Jew who is about to make a fateful decision.

We never know the cause behind the dire situation we find ourselves in, but it surely has been brought upon us by Hashem to bring out the good in us and to help strengthen ourselves and others.

Mordechai's words are an eternal charge inspiring us not to be daunted by difficulties, but to know that what happened and whatever happens is from Hashem, who ultimately cares for us and for the good.

There is a multi-million-dollar industry in this country that revolves around motivation. People pay to hear speeches or purchase books that they hope will motivate and encourage them. Most people sense that they possess more potential than they utilize and are desperate to be inspired and empowered. They don't realize that the Torah is the ultimate inspiration, and those who study it and the words and stories of Torah, Nevi'im and Kesuvim will be much stronger for it. When in a time of tzarah, studying Mishlei, Iyov, Pirkei Avos and various seforim on Chumash and mussar will strengthen and buttress you as you imbibe their timeless wisdom and absorb the kedusha they impart.

Studying Megillas Esther will empower you to view life through the lens of a Torah Jew. You will be motivated and inspired. When we see and experience events that are painful and frightening, we are reminded through Purim that miracles happen via the course of natural events. We don't have to await supernatural occurrences to spare us and to save us from that which frightens us. Rather, we see that through the natural course of human events, Hashem can save us.

Esther was afraid that she was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Mordechai was prompting her to appeal to Achashveirosh eleven months ahead of the date Haman had chosen to annihilate the Jewish people. She preferred to have stalled, in the hope that between Nissan and the next Adar there would be a more opportune time for her to appeal on behalf of her brethren. Why did it have to be now?

Esther is repeatedly tested throughout the period in which the story takes place. Each time, it appears that there is no way she can outmaneuver the danger facing her. She emerges as the heroine of the story because she is galvanized by her hopes rather than her fears. She relies upon the sage counsel of her uncle, the Rosh Sanhedrin. With Mordechai's support, she refuses to allow fear to paralyze her, maintains her faith, and acts as the Torah wants her to, not as her emotions and intelligence would direct her to.

Faced with situations from which we think there is no way we can extricate ourselves without getting hurt, we should remember Queen Esther and gain strength from the knowledge that by doing the right thing, she saved her people from certain destruction. By following Mordechai's instructions, she became immortalized in the consciousness of the Jewish people as a righteous and strong woman who put the fate of her people ahead of her personal safety and happiness.

The Jews of Shushan, too, taught us a message that carries down through the ages. They felt doomed. The lot was drawn and their fate was sealed. But Mordechai and Esther taught them the power of teshuvah and tefillah. They rose to the challenge. Thanks to the leadership of Mordechai and Esther, Hashem heard their tefillos and accepted their teshuvah. A day marked for sadness and death was transformed into a day of celebration and deliverance.

On Purim, we are reminded not to be depressed or downcast. Despondency is not the Jewish way. On Purim, we are reminded that just as our ancestors were delivered from despair, so too we can be spared of our burdens. The world is being prepared for Moshiach. All the wars, recessions, inflation, earthquakes, pain, tragedy, and terror are steps along the way to the geulah.

It's Purim. Learn Torah. Dance, smile and be happy. Look at the positive. Be optimistic. LaYehudim hoysah orah v'simcha vesasson vikor kein tihyeh Ionu. Amein.