

We Are Here!

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

People wonder how we can celebrate Purim with true joy while a war is going on in Eretz Yisroel. People ask us how we can sing when Jews are being held hostage in terrible conditions, barely hanging on to life. How can we smile when Jews are being chased around the world and anti-Semitism is on the rise? How can you dance, they ask us, when people can't make ends meet, when children can't get into a school of their choice, when children are falling through the cracks? How can you be enveloped by joy when so many people are lacking, confused, lost, and disillusioned? How can we be happy when there is so much strife?

The questions are not new. As a people, we have suffered tremendously over the years. Every country we were in eventually tormented us and showed us the door. We have been killed, mutilated, separated, and isolated, plundered and murdered. We were led to the gallows, guillotines, and gas chambers for the sin of being Yidden. We were chased in the streets, our children robbed from us, and, most recently, Jews were shot as they sat in their homes and celebrated at a music festival.

It is not new. It has been going on for thousands of years.

Ever since the Yom Tov of Purim was established, Jews have been celebrating it exactly as prescribed by Chazal. No matter where we were, Purim was Purim. For just as there is a mitzvah to be sad during the month of Av, there is a mitzvah to be happy during Adar and especially on Purim.

Twenty-plus years ago, I was sitting by myself at an airport gate waiting to board a flight to Eretz Yisroel. An elderly man sat down next to me. I noticed that he had a patch over his left eye, and as our conversation began, I noticed that he did not hear well.

He started the conversation. "How do I look?" he asked in heavily accented English.

I wasn't sure how to respond. He needed help walking, couldn't hear well, and was blind in one eye.

I told him that he looked quite fine to me and that I hoped that whatever the problem with his eye was, he would have a refuah sheleimah.

He had something else in mind.

He smiled and said, "Let me tell you how I look. I look at Hitler. Ich bin nuch du. He took me away as a youngster to der lager. He took my wife to Auschwitz for three years, un geb ah kuk: How do I look? I lived here 50 years. I have children and grandchildren. At my age, I am about to travel to Israel. That's how I look. Boruch Hashem, I can go. Boruch Hashem, I am here. Farges vegen altz. Ich bin du. (Forget about everything else. I am alive and here.). That's how I

am looking at it. They tried so many times in my lifetime to get rid of us, and now they are trying again. But we are still here.”

An old, crippled, partially blind Czechoslovakian Holocaust survivor understands it. Shouldn't we, as well?

We should look at it the way he did. Look at everything they did to destroy us, to kill us, and to wipe us out. Hashem saved us from all those who seek our destruction, and we are still here, thriving and flourishing. As the man said, farges vegem altz. Mir zenen noch du. Despite everything, we are here. Is that not a reason to celebrate?

It was just before Purim in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto. There were few reasons to smile. Everyone locked in there was worried about what the next day would bring. Hunger and disease seemed destined to be the two species of mishloach manos.

The Piacezna Rebbe gathered a few broken souls around him. He quoted 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 Kippurim, which can be read as Yom K'Purim, meaning that the holiest day on the Jewish calendar is like Purim. Many interpretations are offered in explanation of the comparison.

The rebbe opened his heart and addressed the suffering people. When the sun sets on Erev Yom Kippur, he told them, no Jew says 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, so they will wait until they are in the mood.

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 those poor souls in the Warsaw Ghetto, “must also be happy today.”

That was then, in the darkest hour our people have known since the churban Bais Hamikdosh. Today, boruch Hashem, we are surrounded by so many reasons to be happy, not the least of which is our relative comfort and freedom and the right to live as ehrliche Yidden. We have no excuse to hold back and sit in our homes depressed, forlorn, and worried about the future, depressed and complaining.

The simcha that Hakadosh Boruch Hu shone into His world in Shushan is felt on Purim in the streets of Jewish neighborhoods the world over. No matter what challenges we are faced with, when Purim approaches, our hearts beat a bit faster, our smiles stretch a bit wider, and we look at things differently. On this day, we reflect on the situation the Jews were in, as the king's main deputy targeted them all for death, and how Hashem turned his plan on his face and had him and his sons killed, while the Jews were given a new lease on life.

The increase in simcha experienced by all sorts of Yidden, from wherever they might come, is an enduring testimony to the reality of the greatness of the day and the depth of our belief in Hakadosh Boruch Hu, who saves us from our many enemies, generation after generation.

It was at that last Purim hour, during the moments when day slowly recedes to night and the sky begins to darken. Inside the crowded room, a rebbi and talmidim surrounded a table, as songs, Torah, and quips joined into a burst of sound, the holy noise of Purim rising heavenward.

At one end of the long table, covered with a wine-stained cloth and festively-arranged bottles, a talmid raised a question. He quoted the well-known Gemara, referred to extensively in halachic discussion of the obligations of the Purim seudah, which recounts how Rabbah rose and slaughtered Rav Zeira (Megillah 7b).

Rav Zeira had accepted Rabbah's invitation to join him for the seudas Purim. Rabbah fulfilled the dictum of Chazal to drink, and he became inebriated to the point that he killed his guest. When he realized what transpired, he begged for Divine mercy and Rav Zeira was revived.

Rishonim and Acharonim utilize p'shat, remez, drush, and sod to explain the Gemara on so many levels. But the talmid had a basic question. Once Rav Zeira's soul left him, what was Rabbah thinking when he rose to daven? Can a person request techiyas hameisim? Can we ask that the order of creation be reversed?

The rebbi smiled, enjoying the question, and the talmidei chachomim around the table offered various interpretations. Then the rebbi spoke.

"It was Purim," he said, "and during the season of Purim, it isn't a question. Because on Purim, on the deepest level, there is no teva and neis, there is no nature and no miracle. There is no saying that this is what is supposed to have happened. On Purim, everything that happens proclaims, 'Ein od milvado. It's all about Hashem.'"

On Purim, we can ask for anything, because after reading the Megillah, it becomes clear once again that there is but one Hand, and nothing else, that bestows and controls life.

The men around the table sang another song, because at that moment, it was so obvious, almost tangible, that it's all Him. How can one not rejoice?

Yes, there is a world, and everyone has their issues, and there are many out there lined up against us, but on Purim, it's all about "Ein od milvado." It all doesn't matter, because we are in the hands of Hashem, Who will protect us and care for us.

Purim is a beacon of light on a dark, stormy night that shines into our world. Every one of us has struggles. We have days when the rushing waves of tzaros threaten to engulf us. We encounter people and situations that we find intolerable. We all sometimes feel lost and abandoned. So

many people we know are sick and in need of a refuah, or suffering in other ways and eagerly are awaiting a yeshuah. People across Eretz Yisroel fear what the enemy's next move will be and what new laws the "friendly" government will accost them with.

Purim is an unfurled banner that reads, "Revach vehatzolah ya'amod laYehudim." Help can come. Help will come. Don't despair. Purim reminds us that all that transpires 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.

Wherever you go, you hear the same words being sung to a variety of tunes. It's all "venahafoch hu," over and over again, reminding us that Hashem can quickly bring about a stunning reversal of any situation. At no time should we give up hope, no matter how bad the prognosis, no matter what anyone says.

When Esther went into Achashveirosh, she didn't ask what her chances of success were. When Mordechai told her to appeal the case of the Jewish people to King Achashveirosh, they didn't consider what their chances of victory were. They davened, fasted, and did what was right. They placed their faith in Hashem, ignoring everything and everyone else, and Hashem answered their tefillos and responded to their teshuvah.

When good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people, the Megillah reminds us that appearances are deceptive. The Megillah reminds us all that everything that happens is part of a Divine plan, which we can't expect to understand until the entire story has unfolded.

An evil force may appear to be advancing, but it is only in order for Hashgocha to set up that power for a more drastic descent to 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 triumph.

In every generation, there are evil 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. That message never loses its timeliness.

Rav Yaakov Galinsky related that in Novardok, Purim was a more uplifting day than Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, he said, was all about the past – teshuvah, charotah, and azivas hacheit. Purim was all about the future. We look ahead to the good times, to deliverance from exile, to the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdosh.

It's Purim. Dance, smile, and be happy. Look at the positive. Be optimistic. Remember that Hashem is in charge, not anyone else. As powerful as they may think they are, they are but pawns in the Hands of the Master Puppeteer.

Rav Shlomo Bloch wrote a diary of life in the Talmud Torah of Kelm. He describes Purim in the town whose name is synonymous with single-minded avodah. In Kelm, the talmidim took the mandate to drink alcohol on Purim very seriously, he wrote, and the entire community seemed to be "a tefach higher" than usual, suspended above the ground in joy and spiritual uplift.

May we merit to appreciate Hashem's goodness and kindness all year round, especially on Purim. The great day of Purim, whose joy is connected to its holiness, causes us to rise higher and higher, closer and closer to Hashem, becoming holier and better on this day and every day in the future as we merit Hashem's embrace.

May we, as the Jews of Shushan did, merit much happiness and joy, as we become liberated from our personal and communal issues, and experience the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdosh very soon.