

Purim: Predictably Unpredictable

The Dignity of Difference

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, pp. 24-25

The year: 2020. Dawn breaks on a world of global prosperity and peace. Information technology and high-speed communication have doubled real incomes in the space of 20 years. The spread of birth control techniques has finally removed the danger of overpopulation. Genetically modified crops and disease-resistant strains have increased food production to the point where starvation is a thing of the past. Using the latest curricula, downloaded by Internet, schools in African villages have reached the level of their Western counterparts. International agreements on employment, pay and work conditions have put an end to the sweatshops, child labour and low pay that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, were the source of so much inequity and exploitation. Low-cost medical treatments have brought AIDS, TB and many other forms of disease under control. Genetic intervention has opened the way to preventing hereditary illness and disability. Research on the human genome has enabled doctors to alter the genetic switches responsible for aging. Life expectancy of 120 years is no longer a rarity. Observers agree that humanity is in the midst of a new golden age.

The time: 2020. The world has just been rocked by the latest terrorist attack on New York. A so-called 'dirty bomb' has spread nuclear waste over a wide area centred on Manhattan. As many as 20 million people may be affected. Meanwhile, in a co-ordinated attack on the subway systems of London, Paris, Munich and Rome, canisters containing deadly chemicals have been released in crowded stations. The toll of casualties is expected to be in the thousands. Air travel is at a standstill, following a series of highly publicized hijackings. Government collapses in Africa have left that continent reeling from an outbreak of vicious local wars. Meanwhile, revolutions in Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Saudi Arabia have created a Middle East dominated by fundamentalist regimes. The global economy is in a state of collapse and, in one country after another, unemployment is at a record high. Throughout the West, city centres and public spaces have become derelict and decaying no-go zones with vagabond populations of drug addicts, the homeless and the violent. The wealthy live in gated enclaves protected by massive, privately funded security systems. Hundreds of thousands die annually as a result of freak weather conditions - droughts, floods and typhoons - brought about by global warming. Pollution has made it impossible to walk in city streets without a protective mask. Most commentators agree that the world is in the midst of a new dark age.

Two scenarios, equally possible, and between them defining what is at stake in the years ahead. Uncertainty is constitutive of the human situation: whatever else we know, we can never know what tomorrow will bring. Yet there are degrees of uncertainty, and the sheer pace of change in the twenty-first century in almost every aspect of life - economic, political, cultural and technological - is sweeping away many of the continuities that allowed previous generations to look forward to the future with confidence.

ESPNLosAngeles.com

**Kobe Bryant rips
Lakers management**

By Dave McMenamin

"I talked to [Gasol] a little bit about it," Bryant said. "It's just tough for a player to give his all when you don't know if you're going to be here tomorrow. I'd rather them not trade him at all. If they're going to do something, I wish they would just [expletive] do it. If they're not going to do it, come out and say you're not going to do it. This way he can be comfortable, he can go out, he can play and he can invest all of himself into the game."

Los Angeles Times

**Kobe Bryant's Latest
Rant Hurts Lakers,
Pau Gasol**

By T.J. SIMERS

In every sport, teams work their way toward the trading deadline, and it's not uncommon to hear talk about trades, though many are never made.

It's just part of the business, one of the downsides that come with Gasol's being paid a guaranteed \$18.7 million while left to wonder whether he'll have to find a new Mercedes dealership elsewhere.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Worldmask, Targum Press, pp.94-97, based on Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin.

The Gemara asks "*Haman min haTorah minayin* – Where is Haman's name found in the Torah?"... The Gemara finds Haman's name close to the beginning of the Torah. After Adam eats from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, God appears in the garden and asks him "*Hamin ha'etz* ... – Did you eat from the tree ...?" Now the word "*hamin*" is Haman. Without vowels, as the Torah is written, the word is Haman. "Did you eat from the tree?" What has this to do with Haman? The message being conveyed here must be most fundamental because it is located in the beginning of Creation. This is the beginning of transgression – what Haman is in the world must somehow be intimately connected with the root of transgression itself.

This question which God asks man, "Did you eat ..." is an expression of the distance which has come between man and his Creator as a result of man's transgression. Adam has become so blind to reality, so confused that he tells himself that he can hide from the One Who sees all. Only moments before he was in direct communication with his Creator; has he forgotten with Whom he is dealing? No; he knows God, and that is precisely why he is hiding! But he has entered the world of illusion, and in his guilt and shame before the Master of the World, he somehow thinks he can hide from Him.

Adam has lost his clarity; in moving away from the Creator, he has lost his vision and he has lost contact with the source of reality. But the consequence is much more bitter: God conducts Himself in the same way! Now that Adam is hiding, pathetic and ridiculous as that may be, God plays by those rules that Adam has set up – "Where are you?" As if to say that the Master of the Universe cannot see him. "Did you eat ...?" as if the Master of the Universe doesn't know.

Doubt has entered the world. Perhaps it is possible to hide. Perhaps He does not see, perhaps He does not know that man has transgressed. A gap has opened between God and His creation; the gap, the chasm, of doubt. And the name of that gap, the name of that doubt is Amalek. The source of Amalek has entered the world; Haman has been born.

• **Mishnah, Megillah 2:3** - From where must one read the Megillah so as to fulfil his obligation? R. Meir says [he must read] the whole of it; Rabbi Judah says [he must read] from the verse "There was a Jew"; R. Jose says from "After these things."

משנה מגילה ב:ג - מהיכן קורא אדם את המגילה, ויוצא בה ידי חובתו—רבי מאיר אומר, כולה; רבי יהודה אומר, מ"איש יהודי" (אסתר ב,ה); רבי יוסי אומר, מ"אחר הדברים האלה" (אסתר ב,א; אסתר ג,א)

• **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 16a** - "And Esther said, 'the adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman' (7:6)-R. Eliezer says: this teaches that Esther began to face Ahashverosh, and an angel came and forced her hand to point to Haman."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף טז עמוד א - ותאמר אסתר איש צר ואויב המן הרע הזה אמר רבי אלעזר: מלמד שהיתה מחווה כלפי אשורוש, ובא מלאך וסטר ידה כלפי המן

• **Esther Rabba 3:10** - "Everywhere in the Megila where it says, 'King Ahashverosh,' the text refers to Ahashverosh; every instance of 'the king' has a dual holy-secular meaning (i.e., it refers both to God and Ahashverosh at the same time)."

אסתר רבה (וילנא) פרשה ג - אשר למלך אשורוש, ר' יודן ור' לוי בשם ר' יוחנן כל מקום שנאמר במגלה זו למלך אשורוש במלך אשורוש הכתוב מדבר וכל מקום שנאמר למלך סתם משמש קדש וחול

• **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 15a** - "And Mordechai knew all that had been done" (4: 1)~what did he say? Rav says: Haman has triumphed over Ahashverosh. Shemuel says: the higher King has triumphed over the lower king (Rashi: a euphemism for "Ahashverosh has triumphed over God")

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף טז עמוד א - מדרכי ידע את כל אשר נעשה, מאי אמר? רב אמר: גבה המן מאשורוש. ושמואל אמר: גבר מלכא עילאה ממלכא תתאה

• **Talmud Bavli, Megillah 14a** - If that is the reason we should say Hallel also? Hallel is not said for a miracle which occurred outside of the land of Israel... R. Nahman said: The reading of the Megillah is equivalent to Hallel. Raba said: There is a good reason in that case [of the Exodus from Egypt] because it says [in the Hallel], Praise ye O servants of the Lord, who are no longer servants of Pharaoh — But can we say in this case, Praise ye, servants of the Lord and not servants of Ahasuerus? We are still servants of Ahasuerus!

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יד עמוד א - אי הכי הלל נמי נימא! לפי שאין אומרים הלל על נס שבחוצה לארץ... רב נחמן אמר: קרייתא זו הלילא, רבא אמר: בשלמא התם הללו עבדי ה' - ולא עבדי פרעה, אלא הכא - הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי אשורוש? אכתי עבדי אשורוש אנן

Rabbi Hayyim Angel
Review Essay, Hadassa Hi Esther: Issues of Peshat and Derash in the Book of
Esther

A. Ahashverosh as the Main Character

In determining the literary framework of the Megilla, David Henshke notes that, viewed superficially, chapter one only contributes to the plot Vashti's removal, making way for Esther. However, the text elaborately describes the king's wealth and far-reaching power. This lengthy description highlights the fact that there is a different plot in the Megilla: the king's power is described in detail, because it is central to the message of the Megilla (Henshke, p. 97). Moreover the Megilla does not end with the Jews' celebration; it concludes with a description of Ahashverosh's wealth and power—just as it begins.³⁴ Thus, the Purim story is played out on Ahashverosh's stage.

The other major characters of the Megilla, Esther, Mordekhai, and Haman, find their lives completely dependent on the good will of the king. For example, the political influence of Esther and Mordekhai appears to have contributed significantly to the salvation of the Jews.³⁵ However, the Megilla repeatedly reminds the reader how their authority was subject to the king's moods (see Henshke, p. 93): Esther knew that Vashti had been deposed in an instant, and therefore her own position was precarious. The king held a second beauty contest immediately after queening Esther (2:19). Finally, Esther was terrified to confront the king to plead on behalf of her people—the fact that she had not been summoned for thirty days reminded her of her lack of power and her precarious position (4:11).

Mordekhai, who rose to power at the end of the Megilla, likewise recognized the king's fickleness (Henshke, pp. 94-95). Just as the previous vizier was hanged, so too Mordekhai could not feel secure in his new position.

Perhaps the most striking example is the Megilla's portrayal of the conflict between Haman and Mordekhai. Although many (including Breuer and Sabbato) consider this struggle primary to the plot of the Megilla, Henshke points out that after Haman parades Mordekhai around Shushan (a tremendous moral victory for Mordekhai over his archenemy), Mordekhai returns to his sackcloth and ashes.³⁶ After Haman is hanged (when the conflict between Mordekhai and Haman should be over), only *the king* is relieved (7:10); even after Ahashverosh turns Haman's post over to Mordekhai, Esther still must grovel before the king (8:1-6). The Jews remain in mortal fear because of the *king's decree*, irrespective of Haman (see Henshke, p. 95). To conclude, then,

Casting of Lots Signifies Uncertainty

Purim and Yom Kippur are also alike in another respect. Both involve the casting of lots (*goral*), a characteristic of games of chance. As for the Purim *goral*, it determined the date chosen by Haman for the destruction of the Jews (Esther 3:7, 9:24, 26). Indeed, the very name *Purim* means "lots." What, we may ask, is so significant about the method that Haman employed to choose a date? Why should the holiday itself be so named? It seems only a tangential and insignificant detail of the Purim story.

The Megillah is a book of contradictions. It is filled with events that are unreasonable, even absurd, coincidental, pure chance. At one moment the Jews live in security in Persia; at the next, they face destruction. Mordecai is threatened with execution; then, suddenly, he is the Prime Minister. Irrational events and moods transform fear into festivity; and entire situations are suddenly reversed. Purim, therefore, epitomizes the instability, uncertainty, and vulnerability which characterize human life generally but particularly govern the destiny of the Jews. Thus, the name *Purim* (*goral*) expresses the erratic capriciousness of events. It alerts the Jew to the sudden turns of fortune, lurking dangers, the fickleness of life, even as the *goral* itself seems to operate through blind chance.

Chazon Ish, Emuna u-Bitachon

There is an old misconception rooted in the hearts of many when it comes to the concept of *bittahon*. This term ... has mistakenly become a term to describe the obligation to believe that if a person finds himself in a situation where he faces an undecided future, with two ways apparent - one good and the other not - surely the good outcome will be the one to occur; if one is doubtful and fears the opposite of good occurring, he is lacking in *bittahon*. This understanding of *bittahon* is not correct, for as long as the future has not been revealed through prophecy, the future is not decided, for who knows Hashem's judgments and rewards? No - *bittahon* is not that, but rather the belief that nothing happens by chance, and that everything that occurs under the sun is the result of a decree of God.⁴⁷

When a person encounters an event that according to the ways of the world involves danger to him...his intense feelings weaken his resolve to remember that we do not live by chance and that there is nothing stopping the Almighty from saving him and from arranging causes that will change the outcome. When one exercises self-restraint at such a difficult time and internalizes the known truth that this is not a chance misfortune but rather it is all from Hashem, blessed be He, for better or for worse; when one allows one's faith to alleviate the fear and give one the courage to believe in the possibility of salvation; when one allows oneself to understand that nothing one is facing necessarily tends more towards a bad outcome than a good one - then one has achieved the trait of *bittahon*.