



UNITY IS STRENGTH

A FAMOUS PARABLE OF THE SAGES TELLS US THAT while it is difficult to break a whole bundle of sticks bound together, if the sticks are separated from each other even a child can snap them one by one. The moral concerns the need for unity among the Jewish people¹.

This idea is also expressed in the Purim festival which we celebrate in the coming week, on Monday evening and Tuesday (9-10 March). Let us see how.

As we know, the Jewish people were in exile under the Persian king, Ahashverosh. His Prime Minister, the evil Haman, plotted to destroy our people. Through the intervention of Mordechai and Esther the plot was thwarted and Haman suffered the fate he had planned for others.

How did Haman describe the Jewish people to King Ahashverosh? "There is one people, scattered and divided up amongst the peoples, and their laws are different from those of other nations."²

His words are revealing. How was it possible for this evil man even to contemplate the destruction of a whole nation? The Rabbis explain: Yes, we are *one people*. But when we are scattered and divided, not so much amongst other nations, but amongst *ourselves*; when *unity is lacking and Jew attacks Jew*, then we are in danger of being prey to the forces that seek to destroy us.

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What is the antidote?

Togetherness and unity. In ancient Persia our determination to stand up for being Jewish in the face of Haman's decree revealed a profound level of our inner being: the point at which we are united with G-d and also united with each other. This evoked the miraculous response from G-d which saved us. The healthy mode of standing up for our Jewish identity is that which also expresses our unity as Jews³.

The Sages point out that the laws of Purim have the effect of recreating that feeling of unity. *We gather together* to hear the reading of the Megillah (Book of Esther) evening and morning; we send food gifts to friends; we give charity to the needy; and last but not least, we make a dinner party and invite others to share it with us (on Tuesday afternoon, this year)⁴.

Through these laws we strengthen our unity together as a people, and have the power to stand against the Hamans of any time.

The Sedra⁵ also refers to this innate unity of the Jewish people. It begins with the commandment to prepare olive oil for the lighting of the Menorah - the golden seven branched candelabrum in the Temple. Chassidic teachings explain that the Menorah represents the Jewish people. There are seven branches - representing different types of Jew - but the Menorah had to be made from *one* piece of gold. There could be no soldering, no cutting and no bolting together: it had to be made of just one piece. All the different types of Jew are one.⁶

The Menorah gives light. When we are one, we too become a light unto ourselves and to the nations. Through this unity there was and will be for the Jewish people, in the words of the Megillah: "...light, joy, rejoicing and honour."⁷

1. Yalkut Shimoni beginning of Nitzavim. 2. Esther 3:8. 3. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.26, 438-9. 4. See *Sefer HaSichot 5749* vol.1, pp.334-337, citing the commentary of R. Shlomo Alkabetz (n.91). 5. Exodus 27:20-30:10. 6. See R. Shneur Zalman's *Likkutei Torah* Beha'alotecha 39c. 7. This verse (Esther 8:16) is loudly proclaimed by the participants during the Megillah reading.

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PURIM

THE GREATEST PURIM SHPEIL

Beth Chana High School was a beehive of activity. There was Mrs. Rogalsky, the secretary, who was giving nonstop instructions into the phone, and Mrs. Cohen, the drama teacher, who was running around with clipboards and trying to organize the last minute details for the play. There were some Year 12 girls who were decorating a life-size poster that read "Welcome to The Purim Shpeil", and three Year 11 girls who were setting up the stage.

Beth Chana High School was bustling, as the High School play was set to begin in just two hours.

The girls acted, sang, and danced away, and the Play was a great success. The costumes were incredible, and the drama, hysterical. King Achashveirosh was dressed in a beautiful red cloak and Haman had a three pointed hat. Mordechai trailed a long white beard and wore a long black jacket. The best actress was Queen Esther, who wore a spectacular, yet modest dress, and really showed royal gracefulness and charm.

As the girls gathered around to discuss the play, their drama teacher, Mrs. Cohen came running over. "Girls you did a great job" she exclaimed, "I was so proud of all of you. Yet there was one thing of which I was *specialy* proud."

"What?" asked the girls as they looked at each other quizzically.

“I loved the costumes, the scenery, the acting and the songs,” continued Mrs. Cohen, but the main idea that this Shpiel portrayed was that Hashem, G-d, is always looking out for the Jewish People, and we are so lucky!”

“Do you mean, like when Esther became the Queen and so she was able to save the Jews?” asked one of the girls.

“Exactly,” exclaimed Mrs. Cohen. “The idea that this was the real reason Esther was chosen to be Queen. Just so that later she could save the Jews.”

“But that’s the whole point of the Purim story” said Sara, a blond haired, tall, 12th grade student. “Like when Mordechai was able to save the King, and later when the King couldn’t sleep he was reminded about him, and wanted to reward him, and just then Haman came, and that was the beginning of Haman’s downfall...”

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Cohen, “and the way you girls acted in the play really brought out this point. You could feel how special and significant every detail was. As I was coming over to talk to you girls, I passed by some ladies, who were talking about how they never noticed the huge role that Hashem has in the Purim story.”

“It is as if Hashem had the whole story planned out,” remarked Goldie, a shy Year 9 student. “As if – Hashem was making it all happen... And it makes you think...”

“I know,” said Sara. “It makes you think we might be in some kind of Purim story ourselves..”

“Don’t be such philosophers,” yelled out a girl from the back, “let’s go and have our party for Purim and for putting on the greatest Purim Shpiel ever!”

“Great idea”, the girls exclaimed, and excitedly trooped downstairs for their Purim Bash.

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