

Purim, the Anti-Passover: A Holiday for People Who Don't Expect God to Save Them

I. Lining up the Dates: Fasting in Purim instead of Observing the Seder

Exodus ch. 12

5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs...
14 This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

שמות פרק יב

(ה) שנה תמים זכר בו שנה יהיה לכם מן הכבשים וימן העזים תקחו:
(ו) והיה לכם למשמרת עד ארבעה עשר יום לחודש הזה ושחטו אתו כל קהל עדת ישראל בין הערבים: (ז) ולקחו מן הדם ונתנו על שתי המזוזות ועל המשקוף על הבתים אשר יאכלו אתו בהם:
(ח) ואכלו את הבשר בלילה הזה צלי אש ומצות על מררים יאכלהו: ...
(יד) והיה היום הזה לכם לזכרון וסגתם אתו חג ליקנך לדורתכם חקת עולם תסגהו:

Esther ch. 3

12 Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. 13 Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.
14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

אסתר פרק ג

(יב) ויקראו ספרי המלך בחודש הראשון בשלושה עשר יום בו ויקתב בכל אשר צוה המן אל אסתר פני המלך ואל הפחות אשר על מדינה ומדינה ואל שרי עם ועם מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ועם ועם פלשונו בשם המלך אסחורש נכתב ונקתם בטבעת המלך:
(יג) ונשלוח ספרים בידי הרצים אל כל מדינות המלך להשמיד להרג ולאבד את כל היהודים מנער ועד זקן טף ונשים ביום אחד בשלושה עשר לחודש שנים עשר הוא חודש אדר ושללם לבז:
(יד) פתשגון הכתב להנמנו דת בכל מדינה ומדינה גלוי לכל העמים להיות עתדים ליום הזה:
(טו) הרצים יצאו דחופים בדבר המלך והדת נתנה בשושן הבירה והמלך והמן ישבו לשחות והעיר שושן נבוכה:

אסתר פרק ד

Esther ch. 4

15 Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, 16 "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I

(טו) ותאמר אסתר להשיב אל מרדכי:
(טז) לה כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי אצום בו ויבנו אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי:

will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

(יז) ויעבר מרדכי ויעש ככל אשר צוהה עליו
אסתר:

Rashi to Esther 4:17

"And Mordechai went/transgressed" - the law forbidding fasting on the first day of Passover. Since they decree was published on the 13th of Nissan, they fasted on the 14th, 15th, and 16th.

רש"י אסתר פרק ד פסוק יז
(יז) ויעבר מרדכי - על דת להתענות בי"ט ראשון של פסח שהתעני י"ד בניסן וט"ו וט"ז שהרי ביום י"ג נכתבו הספרים:

II. Mordechai and Esther as Joseph's Uncertain Reincarnation

(table by Yonah Bar-Maoz)

Don't get too caught up on all the details here - the point is to skim them to appreciate the many many literary parallels between Joseph and Esther/Mordechai. Make sure to look at the last one though - God is a major figure in Joseph's statement, but absent in Mordechai's!

Esther	Joseph
3:4: When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them,	Gen. 39:10: And when she spoke to Joseph day after day, and he did not listen to her [request] to lie beside her, to be with her.
8:2: The king slipped [and] removed his ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai.	41:42: Pharaoh removed his signet ring from his hand, and gave it on Joseph's hand.
6:9: And let them dress the man whom the king desires to honor	41:42: and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck.
6:9: and have him ride on the horse through the city square,	41:43: He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command

6:9: and let them cry before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor.	41:43: and they cried before him, "Abrek!" Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt.
2:7: The maiden was shapely and beautiful	39:6: Now Joseph was well built and handsome.
5:2: As soon as the king saw Queen Esther...she found favor in his eyes.	39:4: Joseph found favor in his eyes.
2:3: Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm	41:34: And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint officers over the land
2:3: Gather all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege...guardian of the women.	41:35: Gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food in the cities to be safeguarded.
2:4: The proposal pleased the king	41:37: The plan pleased Pharaoh
2:12: for such is the full period spent on beautifying them	50:3: for such is the full period of embalming.
4:16: and if I am to perish, I shall perish!	43:14: As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.
8:6: For how can I bear to see the disaster which	44:34: For how can I go back to my father

will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred!	unless the boy is with me? Lest I see the disaster that would befall my father!
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Esther	Joseph
4:14: On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter... ¹ who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.	45:5: It was to save life that G-d sent me ahead of you. 45:7: G-d has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. 45:8: So, it was not you who sent me here, but G-d 45:9 G-d has made me lord of all Egypt. 50:19:20: G-d intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result – the survival of many people.

III. Could Anything Keep it From Happening Again? From Turning Out Worse Next Time?

This piece of Talmud is answering the question of how the celebration of Purim can be added to the Jewish calendar, overriding the standard assumption that nothing can be added or changed after the death of Moses.

Bavli Megillah 14a

Rabbi Hiyya bar Avin said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korhah: "Since we celebrate the passage from slavery to freedom [in Egypt], how much more should we celebrate salvation from death to life?!"

If so, shouldn't we also recite Hallel [Psalms of praise sung on joyous holidays] on Purim [as is done on Passover]?...

Rava responded: "There [on Passover] it makes sense to say (Psalm 113:1) 'Give praise, servants of God' [the first verse of Hallel] - and not servants of Pharaoh. But here [on Purim, can we say] 'Give praise, servants of God - and not servants of Ahashverosh?' We are still servants of Ahashverosh"

בבלי מגילה דף יד עמוד א

אמר רבי חייא בר אבין אמר רבי יהושע
בן קרחא: ומה מעבודת לחירות אמרינן
שירה - ממיתה לחיים לא כל שכן? -

אי הכי הלל נמי נימא!...

רבא אמר: בשלמא התם הללו עבדי ה' -
ולא עבדי פרעה, אלא הכא - הללו עבדי
ה' ולא עבדי אחשוורוש? אכתי עבדי
אחשוורוש אנן.

IV. The Anxiety of Choice

Bavli Shabbat 88a

R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, all the better; if not, you will be buried here.'

R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong refutation of the Torah [that it is not binding, since contracts cannot be agreed to under duress].

Said Rava: Yet even so, they [the Jews] re-accepted it [the Torah] in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and accepted upon themselves [etc.]: [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

Esther 10:3

"And Mordechai the Jew was second to the king Ahashverosh and head of the Jews, and popular among his brethren [literally 'favorable to most of his brethren']" -

Rashi: "to most of his brethren", but not all of his brethren. This teaches that some of the high court did not support him because he abandoned Torah study for politics

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד א
ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר
חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא
עליהם את ההר כנגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם
מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא
קבורתכם.

אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה
לאורייתא.

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי
אחשורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו
מה שקיבלו כבר.

אסתר יג:

כי מרדכי היהודי משנה למלך אחשורוש וגדול
ליהודים ורצוי לרב אחיו

רש"י אסתר פרק י פסוק ג
לרוב אחיו - ולא לכל אחיו מלמד שפירשו ממנו
מקצת סנהדרין לפי שגעשה קרוב למלכות והיה
בטל מתלמודו:

