

# Machat Shel Yad

## מחט של י"ד

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פורים

מאת

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Revised 3-04-09

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# Purim

## What Makes Purim Different?

Purim seems to have a special connection to *bein adam l'chaveiro*. With its special mitzvos of *matanos l'evyonim* and *mishloach manos*, it seems to emphasize unity among Jews. But does Purim really differ from the other Yamim Tovim in this way? Doesn't the special *hachnasas orchim* of every Yom Tov put an emphasis on unity among Jews? Doesn't Pesach have a special forum for Jewish neighbors to get together: the joint *korban Pesach*? Doesn't Sukkos have its *ushpizin*, which places special importance on inviting guests?

Purim really does have a unique connection to *bein adam l'chaveiro* and *achdus K'lal Yisrael*. But we have to understand why. Let us start by understanding the impact that the Purim miracle had on *K'lal Yisrael*. Besides all the joy and celebration that surrounded this great *yeshua*, it brought *K'lal Yisrael* to a certain realization: קימו וקבלו היהודים. “The Jews affirmed and accepted” (*Esther* 9:27). What did they now affirm? What they had earlier accepted (*Shabbos* 88a). *Chazal* tell us that thanks to the Purim miracle, *K'lal Yisrael* reaccepted the Torah—and that is what Purim is really all about.

After all the drinking and merrymaking is over, Purim's special *Kabbalas HaTorah* is what remains with us. At the time of Purim, *K'lal Yisrael* came to a recognition of Hashem equaling that of *Har Sinai*. Although *Har Sinai* was characterized by a great *gilui Shechinah*, Purim supersedes it nonetheless. This is because the events of Purim brought *K'lal Yisrael* to recognize Hashem in a time of *hester panim*, when Hashem was hidden. They looked for Him in the darkness of the Persian exile, and found Him.

אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור  
קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט' כ"ז) קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה  
שקיבלו כבר. (שבת פ"ח ע"א)

Said Rav Acha bar Yaakov: This, [the fact that Mount Sinai was held threateningly over their heads,] is a powerful pretext for [not having to observe] the Torah.

Said Rava: Nevertheless, they reaccepted the Torah in the days of Achashveirosh. For it says (*Esther* 9:27), “The Jews affirmed and accepted.” They affirmed what they had already accepted. (*Shabbos* 88a)

Finding Hashem in the midst of *hester panim* is what Rava means when he says, “They reaccepted the Torah in the days of Achashveirosh.” After *Har Sinai*, *K’lal Yisrael* still had an excuse for not keeping Torah and mitzvos. They could claim that holding the mountain over their heads constituted coercion, and use this as a legal pretext to unhook themselves from the Torah obligations they accepted upon themselves at *Har Sinai*. Even though *Har Sinai* had a tremendous *gilui Shechinah*, even though the *Borei Olam* spoke to them face to face, their acceptance of Torah could not be considered complete. But here in the darkness of Shushan, in the gloom of Haman and Achashveirosh, *K’lal Yisrael* accepted the Torah in a way that supersedes *Har Sinai*.

The *Kabbalas HaTorah* that took place at *Har Sinai*, though, was based on unity among Jews. The first step was:

ויחן-שם ישראל נגד ההר: (שמות י"ט:ב')

ויחן שם ישראל. כאיש אחד בלב אחד (רש"י שם)

*Israel encamped there, across from the mountain.* (Shemos 19:2)

“*Israel encamped there*” – Like one person, for they had one heart. (*Rashi, ad loc*)

If the *Kabbalas HaTorah* of *Har Sinai* was based on unity and harmony among Jews, this surely must have been true with the *Kabbalas HaTorah* of Purim as well. Also Purim had to be “Like one person, for they had one heart.” And this unity wasn’t just an inconsequential detail of Purim. It was not a minor spin-off of the miracle. It was fundamental to the establishment of Purim as a Yom Tov! The *achdus* of *K’lal Yisrael*, the fusing of Jewish hearts into one, was what rectified the state of *עם מפוזר ומפורד בין העמים*, “*A people scattered and divided among the peoples*” (*Esther* 3:8). Now they were united into one unit.

Only thanks to Purim’s “*Israel encamped there, across from the mountain*” was the Jewish people able to reach a level of, “*The Jews affirmed and accepted.*” It underlies Purim’s true significance. That is why *mishloach manos* and *matanos l’evyonim* are fundamental to Purim’s meaning. As they represent the *achdus* of *K’lal Yisrael*, they express what Purim is all about.

## The Other Side of Afghanistan

הוא אַחַשְׁוֵירוֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהֹדוּ וְעַד כּוּשׁ שְׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה: (אסתר א':א)  
*He was Achashveirosh, who ruled from Hodu to Kush—127 provinces.*  
(Esther 1:1)

It's not so easy to put Achashveirosh on the map. *Chazal* tried:

– מהדו ועד כוש רב ושמואל, חד אמר: הודו בסוף העולם וכוש בסוף העולם, וחד אמר: הודו וכוש גבי הדדי הוּו קיימי, כשם שמלך על הודו וכוש – כך מלך מסוף העולם ועד סופו. (מגילה י"א ע"א)

“*From Hodu to Kush.*” Rav and Shmuel disagreed: one said that *Hodu* is at one end of the world and *Kush* is at another end of the world. The other said that *Hodu* and *Kush* are next one another—just as Achashveirosh ruled over *Hodu* and *Kush*, so did he rule from one end of the world to another. (*Megilah* 11a)

Our *pasuk* is telling us what a powerful ruler Achashveirosh was. About that, everyone agrees. The question is: how does the *pasuk* convey its point? One way is by telling us the breadth of his kingdom: it was not just 127 little provinces in one cluster, rather it stretched from one end of the civilized world to the other. The other way is by telling us the stability of his regime: Achashveirosh had control over his 127 far-flung provinces just like he had control over the two that were close by.

But this just begs the question: how can there be a *machlokes* about simple facts? Either *Hodu* and *Kush* were next to each other, or they weren't. It's not reasonable to say that no one knew where *Hodu* and *Kush* were. *Hodu* is India, and *Kush* is commonly identified with Ethiopia. If we take out a map and check where they are, we will readily see that these countries are on different continents, far from one other. The land route from India to Ethiopia is a very big U. It traverses Southern Asia, Asia Minor, the entire Middle East, and then crosses over into North Africa, passing through Egypt until it reaches Ethiopia. Quite an empire. If so, how do we understand the opinion that *Hodu* and *Kush* were next to one another?

The answer is that when we take another look at the map we discover that Pakistan, which until recently was part of India, is separated from Afghanistan on its northwestern border by a mountain range. Amazingly enough, this range is called the Hindu Kush Mountains. While some linguists explain the name Hindu Kush as deriving from the Arabic word meaning “Mountains of

India”,<sup>1</sup> this telling name appears to be more than a mere coincidence. Whatever way we look at it, it is clear that there were two places bearing the name of *Kush*.

Saying that Achashveirosh’s empire reached from *Hodu* to *Kush* is sort of like saying that the United States reaches from Augusta to Portland. If you’re talking about Augusta, Georgia, and Portland, Oregon, that’s a vast country. But if you’re talking about Augusta, Georgia, and Portland, Maine, it’s not so big anymore. These places are relatively close to one another. And what if you’re talking about Augusta, Georgia and Portland, Georgia?

Getting back to our *pasuk*, Rav and Shmuel both knew the map, and both knew that *Hodu* is India. But there are two places called *Kush*, and they disagreed over which of them the *pasuk* is referring to. This is like every other *machlokes* in *p’shat*. It is not at all a disagreement over basic facts, as we initially assumed. Rather, there was a *Kush* that was close to *Hodu*, and another *Kush* that was far from *Hodu*, and that is what the *machlokes* was all about.

This explains a puzzling Rashi:

אתרוג הכושי פסול. (משנה סוכה ל"ד ע"ב)

אמר מר: אתרוג כושי פסול. והתניא: כושי – כשר, דומה לכושי פסול – אמר אביי:  
כי תנן נמי מתניתין – דומה לכושי תנן. רבא אמר: לא קשיא, הא – לן והא – להו.  
(גמרא שם דף ל"ו: ע"א)

הא לן והא להו – לעולם מתניתין כושי נמי פסיל, ולא קשיא, מתניתין – לבני ארץ  
ישראל שרחוקין מארץ כוש, ואינם רגילים בהם, ברייתא – לבני בבל שקרובים לכוש  
ורגילין בהם, ומכל מקום, בגדל כאן ודומה לכושי – נדמה הוא, ופסול. (רש"י שם  
וכן הוא ברא"ש שם פרק ג' סימן כ"ב)

The *Kushian esrog* is invalid. (*Mishnah, Sukkah* 34b)

The master stated: “The *Kushian esrog* is invalid.” But was it not taught in a Baraisa, “*Kushian* is valid, and similar to *Kushian* is invalid”?

Said Abaye: The Mishnah, too, was speaking of “similar to *Kushian*.”

Rava said: It is no question. This is for us, and that is for them. (*Gemara, Sukkah* 36a)

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1. Encyclopedia Britannica

“This is for us, and that is for them” – Indeed, the Mishnah holds that *Kushian*, too, is invalid. And “it is no question” because the Mishnah is speaking of the residents of *Eretz Yisrael*, who are far from the land of *Kush* and are not used to such *esrogim*. Whereas the Baraisa is speaking of the residents of Babylonia, who are close to *Kush* are used to such *esrogim*. In any case, if it grows in Babylonia but is similar to *Kushian*, it is abnormal and therefore invalid. (*Rashi ad loc; Rosh ad loc 3:22*)

This Rashi is quite perplexing—if we assume, as most people do, that *Kush* is Ethiopia. Then it is impossible to explain why Babylonia, situated in modern Iraq, is close to *Kush*, while *Eretz Yisrael* is far away from it. But the answer is as we explained. There is another *Kush*, and it is located to the east of Iraq. Northern Pakistan is just a little east of Iraq, but it is far from Israel.

## Everyone Thinks They're Right

It strikes some people as strange and even unsettling that every religion claims to be the true religion. How do we handle this problem, when we know the truth is ours?

It is stated in the *Megillah* that Esther was Achashveirosh's queen. Did the Jews know who Esther was? Did they know of her Jewish identity? Absolutely, she lived among them. She had to be a well-known woman since she was Mordechai's cousin. Everyone must have known who she was. So why didn't Achashveirosh just send out spies to find someone out there who knew Esther? Then he would know that she was Jewish. Yet, when it came out at the end of the story that she was indeed a Jewess, it was a complete surprise to him. How could it be that he did not know all along?

רבי יהודה אומר: הדסה שמה, ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר – על שם שהיתה מסתרת  
דבריה, שנאמר אין אסתר מגדת את עמה וגו'. (מגילה י"ג ע"א)

R. Yehudah says: Hadassah was her name. And why was she called Esther?  
Because she would hide (*masteres*) her matters, as it says (*Esther 2:20*), "*Esther did not tell of her people...*" (*Megillah 13a*)

Esther was a hidden princess, and she wouldn't reveal where she came from. The Gemara tells us that this is what the very name Esther implies. Thus, all the peoples of the ancient world claimed her as their own, and this enabled her to conceal her true identity. The Turks said she was a Turk, the Arabians said she was Arabian, the Ethiopians said she was Ethiopian, the Egyptians said she was Egyptian. Everybody claimed her as theirs, seeking to connect themselves to the new Empress.

ותהי אסתר נשאת חן אמר רבי אלעזר: מלמד שלכל אחד ואחד נדמתה לו כאומתו.  
(שם)

"*Esther would find favor in the eyes of all who saw her*" (*Esther 2:15*). Said R.  
Elazar: This teaches that to each person, she seemed as if she was from his nation.  
(*Megillah 13a*)



Nevertheless, the Jews knew all along that she was Jewish. When the Turks spoke up, did the Jews begin to suspect that maybe they were wrong, and Esther was in fact a Turk? Of course not. The people who knew her, among whom she grew up, remained a hundred percent sure about her identity. No one could tell them they were mistaken just because other peoples made counterclaims.

This serves as an allegory for the true religion of Judaism. Everybody makes a claim to the true religion, but only one really has it. We have Esther and Esther is ours.

## The Names of the Months

People often ask about the names of the Hebrew months, which are not really Hebrew. These names are Babylonian in origin. Why were these names accepted by the Jewish community of that time?

וכבר הזכירו רבותינו זה הענין, ואמרו שמות חדשים עלו עמנו מבבל (ירושלמי ר"ה א':ב', ב"ר מ"ח:ט'), כי מתחלה לא היו להם שמות אצלנו, והסבה בזה, כי מתחלה היה מניינם זכר ליציאת מצרים, אבל כאשר עלינו מבבל ונתקיים מה שאמר הכתוב (ירמיה ט"ז י"ד – ט"ו) ולא יאמר עוד חי ה' אשר העלה את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים כי אם חי ה' אשר העלה ואשר הביא את בני ישראל מארץ צפון, חזרנו לקרא החדשים בשם שנקראים בארץ בבל, להזכיר כי שם עמדנו ומשם העלנו הש"י כי אלה השמות ניסן אייר וזולתם שמות פרסיים, ולא ימצא רק בספרי נביאי בבל (זכריה א':ז', עזרא ו':ט"ו, נחמיה א':א') ובמגילת אסתר (ג':ז') ולכן אמר הכתוב בחדש הראשון הוא חדש ניסן, כמו הפיל פור הוא הגורל (שם) ועוד היום הגוים בארצות פרס ומדי כך הם קוראים אותם ניסן ותשרי וכלם כמונו והנה נזכיר בחדשים הגאולה השנית כאשר עשינו עד הנה בראשונה: (רמב"ן שמות יב:ב')

Our Rabbis have already mentioned this matter, and said that new names came back with us from Babylon (*Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 1:2; Bereishis Rabbah 48:9*). Originally, we did not have names for the months. This reason for this is that originally, their count was a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt. [I.e., the months were called by numbers, not names, and the 1<sup>st</sup> month was that of the Exodus.]

But when we came back from Babylon, the following verse was fulfilled: *“It will no longer be said, ‘May Hashem live, Who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,’ but rather, ‘May Hashem live, Who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north.’”*

Thus, we went back to calling the months by the names they were called in the land of Babylon, as a commemoration for the fact that we were there, and Hashem

brought us up from there. These names of Nissan, Iyyar, etc, are Persian names. They are found only in the books of the prophets of Babylon (*Zechariah* 1:7; *Ezra* 6:15; *Nechemiah* 1:10), and in *Megillas Esther* (3:7). Thus the verse says, “*In the first month, which is the month of ‘Nissan’.*” This is similar to: “*He cast the ‘pur’, which is the lot*” (*ibid*). [I.e., the verse offers the meaning of the foreign terms ‘*Nissan*’ and ‘*pur*’.]

Today as well, the nations dwelling in the lands of Persia and Media so call them—Nissan, Tishri, and all the others—like we do. We make a remembrance of the second redemption by means of the months, as we did until then for the first redemption. (*Ramban, Shemos* 12:2)

This explanation of the Ramban is oft quoted. The main point we gain from the Ramban is that our usage of these Babylonian names commemorates the Babylonian exodus. But we are still left with a question. These Babylonian-Persian names are quite pagan; they are related to various forms of idolatry that were prevalent at that time. Why would Hashem want these patently pagan names incorporated into the *Tanach*? Why did Hashem approve them as the new names for the Jewish months?

Let’s take a closer look at where exactly the Babylonians got their months from. How did their calendar system originate?

In the book *The Discoverers*<sup>2</sup> it is claimed that in 432 BCE the Babylonians invented the lunar calendar that follows a nineteen-year cycle, i.e., the system that uses intercalation—insertion of extra months—in order to keep it consistent with the solar year. This is termed the Metonic cycle (after the astronomer Meton of Athens). Also *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in the entry on Meton, makes a similar claim, saying that Meton of Athens worked with another Athenian astronomer,

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<sup>2</sup> P. 5, authored by Daniel J. Boorstein, published by Random House 1983

Euctemon. Based on a series of observations they provided the basis for integrating the lunar calendar with the solar cycle.

In truth, the Babylonians were latecomers to this calendar system, as we have been using it since we left Egypt in 2448 (1311 BCE). See *Shemos* 12:2. History accords the system to the Babylonians and their Athenian researchers because in practice, the Jewish calendar was always based on actual sightings of the moon by witnesses. It was not codified into a perpetual calendar until much later, by Hillel II. Nevertheless, the Sanhedrin always knew in advance when the moon would appear each month. They examined the witnesses based on their prior knowledge of the new moon's exact position and time of visibility. The Sanhedrin also expertly intercalated the months so the holidays would not migrate into different seasons. Pesach had to be after the spring equinox and Sukkos after the autumnal equinox. In other words, since the inception of the Jewish people our sages knew the calculations on which the nineteen-year cycle was later based and codified. The Sanhedrin thoroughly understood the patterns of the celestial bodies that mystified the ancient world.

And in olden times, as is the case today, the establishment of an accurate calendar was the domain of the government. In those days, the king had a "bureau of astronomy" which employed expert astronomers who were charged with maintaining the calendar. This was not always an easy task. Finding trustworthy experts was an important concern of kings.

It is known that in *galus*, some sages of the Sanhedrin held advisory positions in ancient kingdoms. Daniel and Mordechai are examples of this. It seems that members of the Sanhedrin were the custodial astronomers of the calendar in the Babylonian Empire. In other words, they introduced the Jewish calendar to Babylon.

ויאמר המלך לחכמים ידעי העתים כי־כן דבר המלך לפני כל־ידעי דת ודין: (אסתר

א'י"ג)

ויאמר המלך לחכמים, מאן חכמים – רבנן, ידעי העתים – שיודעין לעבר שנים  
ולקבוע חדשים. (מגילה י"ב ע"ב)

*The King said to the wise men, knowers of the seasons, for so was the way of the  
King before all knowers of law and ruling. (Esther 1:13)*

*“The King said to the wise men”* – Who were the “wise men”? They were the  
rabbis. *“Knowers of the seasons”* – They know how to make leap years and set  
the months. (*Megillah 12b*)

King Achashveirosh, inheritor of the Babylonian empire, was confronted by a disobedient Queen Vashti. To whom did he first turn for advice? The verse states that he consulted the “*knowers of the seasons.*” These were the Jewish sages who knew how to calculate the timing of leap years and predict the appearance of the new moon. It always struck me as odd why, of all the titles one could give to the sages of the Sanhedrin, *Megillas Esther* describes them as “*knowers of the seasons.*” Now the answer is clear: because that was the position they held in the kingdom. They were in charge of the calendar!

During what historical period did Jewish sages hold this governmental position in Babylon? The destruction of the Second Temple was around the year 68 CE. Counting backwards, there are the 420 years that the Second Temple stood (*Yoma 9a*). Then there are the 70 years of Babylonian exile (*Yirmeyah 29:10; Daniel 9:2*). This brings us to the year 422 BCE. Albeit, historians cite 432 BCE as the year when the nineteen-year calendar cycle was introduced, and this is 10 years before the Babylonian exile. However, it is recorded in *Melachim II*, 24:14 that King Yechoniah of Yehudah went into Babylonian exile eleven years before the destruction of the First Temple. And it says there that all the leading scholars of Jerusalem were exiled along with him (see *Gittin 88a*). This was in the year 433 BCE. It comes out that a year before history attributes the Babylonians with inventing the nineteen-year calendar cycle, the sages of the Sanhedrin were brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the previous piece we quoted *Chazal* as saying that Esther was so called because she would hide (*masteres*) her Jewish identity. But actually, there are two opinions about this matter:

רבי יהודה אומר: הדסה שמה, ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר – על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה, שנאמר אין אסתר מגדת את עמה וגו'. רבי נחמיה אומר: הדסה שמה, ולמה נקראת אסתר – שהיו אומות העולם קורים אותה על שום אסתהר. (מגילה י"ג ע"א)

אסתהר – ירח, יפה כלבנה. (רש"י שם)

R. Yehudah says: Hadassah was her name. And why was she called Esther? Because she would hide (*masteres*) her matters, as it says (*Esther 2:20*), “*Esther did not tell of her people...*”

R. Nechemiah says: Hadassah was her name. And why was she called Esther? Because the nations of the world called her after the moon (*Esthahar*), since she was beautiful as the moon. (*Megillah 13a, Rashi ad loc*)

One of the aspects of the Babylonian exile was the double entendre. This is how Esther was able to use a Hebrew name, yet not be known as a Jewess. “Esther” had a meaning in Persian as well. Thus, the Persians thought her name meant she was “beautiful as the moon,” whereas in Hebrew it means “hidden”.

And so it was with all the names of the Jewish months. These names are directly related to the events of each month, and are interpreted as such by *Chazal*. For example, Nissan means “miracles”. It would be counterproductive to make a commemoration of the Babylonian exile by reminding ourselves of idolatrous pagan practices. Rather, it seems that our sages not only introduced the nineteen-year cycle of the lunar calendar to the Babylonians but also gave these months special “Babylonian” names that had double meanings. To the non-Jewish masses, the names of the months were understood as relating to pagan practices.

But hidden within these Babylonian names were allusions to the eternal truths of our Torah, according to the months’ corresponding Hebrew meaning. This hidden meaning was an

expression of the *hester panim* of that period, so aptly represented by Esther's very name. And this is what we brought back to *Eretz Yisrael*, as the above-quoted Ramban explained.