

Purim and Man's Existential Crisis

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“And who knows if not for just such a time as this that you arrived at royalty.” (4:14).

אסתר פרק ד פסוק יד, יז
ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות :

To whom was this said?

Before you blurt out an answer, lets learn a bit about Megillat Esther from a powerful essay of Rav Soloveitchik entitled “The Megilla and Human Destiny” (in *Days of Deliverance*).

Rav Soloveitchik begins by noting that Megillat Esther is referred to as both an Iggeret and a Sefer – an Epistle and a Book:

אסתר פרק ט פסוק כו, כז
(כו) על כן קראו לימים האלה פורים על שם הפור על כן על כל דברי האגרת הזאת
ומה ראו על ככה ומה הגיע אליהם :
אסתר פרק ט פסוק כט - ל, כט-ל
(כט) ותכתב אסתר המלכה בת אביחיל ומרדכי היהודי את כל ותקוף לקיים את אגרת
הפורים הזאת השנית :
אסתר פרק ט פסוק לב, לב
(לב) ומאמר אסתר קים דברי הפרים האלה ונכתב בספר : פ
אסתר פרק י פסוק ב - ג, ב-ג
(ב) וכל מעשה תקפו וגבורתו ופרשת גדלת מרדכי אשר גדלו המלך הלוא הם כתובים
על ספר דברי הימים למלכי מדי ופרס :

Rav Soloveitchik explains that an Iggeret is a historical document, it relates that facts of events along with their interpretation. That is, it is not merely “a dead story, but a living history... [it] not only informs but instructs.” (p.26). On the other hand, a Sefer, like all the Sifrei HaTanakh, are written with divine inspiration (nevua/ruach hakodesh) and point not to the past but to the future – they have relevant messages for all time:

“If the Book of Esther is an integral part of the Holy Scriptures, then its relevance is not limited to the narration of events, to the plot that took place once upon a time. The book of Esther is important to us as the story of the eternal destiny of man.” (p.27)

What, then, is the eternal message of this topsy turvy story (sipur hafach pach) that begins with a liberal nation eating, drinking and partying for days on end only to turn in to a tyrannical nation bent on genocide?

Rav Soloveitchik explains that it is all about man's existential crisis. Every individual who takes but a moment to think about their life realizes that their existence is finite – and it is this awareness of one's finitude that leads to what is called the existential crisis. Simply put, we have no idea why we are here, but we know that time is short and we don't know what to do about it.

“He knows that his power is restricted, his knowledge nil, his vigor ebbing with age, his years numbered, his successes few, his frustrations many, and his existential prospects bleak. He knows that his existence is ... a tragicomical affair. Ecclesiastes deals quite clearly with the experience of human finiteness.”
(p. 31)

“Vanity of vanities all is vanity” (2:2).

קְהֵלֶת פְּרָקָא פְּסוּקָא בִּבְיָב
(ב) הִבֵּל הַבְּלִים אָמַר קְהֵלֶת הִבֵּל הַבְּלִים הַפֶּל הַבֵּל :

Rav Soloveitchik explains that there are two ways that man deals with this crisis – Orgiastic and Arrogance (be'hitholellut and be'gaavtanut).

Orgiastic / Hithollelut (p.33)

The simple solution, that we are quite aware that of Greek philosopher Epicurus who essentially said: Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. This hedonistic solution works to annul the existential crisis by running away from time, by immersing in the now.

“Simply by intoxication or drunkenness, by the rapturous, hypnotic hedone experience, which overpowers man and takes him out of the world of flowing time, of anticipation. For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts.... with the non-existence of the morrow, death is non-existent as well.” (p. 33)

Now while this may seem relatively harmless, I mean, people just waste away their lives seeking pleasures, the problem is that they also seek to build societies based on the principle of maximum pleasure. This means that they legislate for a society with maximal freedoms with minimal governance, “it resents controls and demands unrestricted freedom in matters of sex-morality.”

"הוא מתרעם על שליטה ודורש חופש בלתי מוגבל בענייני מוסר הקשור למין".

And, Rav Soloveitchik notes that hedonism is not just in food and sex but in all “boundlessness” – seeking ever after more – goods, money, houses, fame. The individuals are no longer rational – no longer use reason to guide their existence – they seek the aesthetic in orgiastic fashion.

Arrogance / Gaavtanut (p. 35)

And then there is the path of arrogance to run from the existential crisis. Instead of forgetting himself in orgiastic pleasures he aggrandizes himself. If the existential crisis says, “you are worthless (klum),” man responds by saying, “I am everything, I am god.” He makes himself into a god. He, with his wisdom, will conquer the world. He, with his reason, will define ethics, define right and wrong. So, unlike the orgiastic man who follows no norms, arrogant man follows norms – but only those he defines himself. He makes laws to fit his needs, and if need be, will even legislate murder. He uses his norms to organize society – like a tyrant – and undertake grandiose endeavors. It is arrogant man who built the Tower of Babel.

From Orgiastic to Arrogant (p.38)

Now what is really interesting, if not downright scary, is that one society, explains R. Soloveitchik, gives way to the other society – the orgiastic society is overtaken by arrogant society. And herein lies the real danger in orgiastic society. It is not merely that they are immoral amongst themselves but rather that their attitude leads directly to the tyranny of the arrogant.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that we see this in the Torah right from the beginning. Eve lusted the apple, and then she became prey for Satan to push her to arrogance, to be like God, to define Good and Evil:

בראשית פרשת בראשית פרק ג פסוק ה, ה

כִּי יִדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקָחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהֵייתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע :

Rav Soloveitchik explains this paradigm as follows:

“A pleasure-loving aesthete is ready prey to the intrigue and scheming of a power-hungry, satanic mind... the orgiastic man ... is too absorbed in his hedonistic experiences. He is too involved in himself.” (p. 38).

”האיש אוהב תענוגים הוא טרף מוכן למזימות של המוח השטני הרעב לכוח... האיש האורגיאסטי (של התהוללות) ... שקוע מדי בחוויותיו ההדוניסטיות. הוא מעורב מדי בעצמו.”

And thus, he explains the paradigm explains exactly what happened in the the Purim Story. Feasting and partying gave way to the rise of Haman and his decree to destroy, to kill, to annihilate.

אסתר פרק א

(א) וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ ... (ג) בַּשָּׁנָה שְׁלוֹשׁ לְמַלְכוּ עֲשָׂה מְשֻׁתָּה ... (ה) וּבְמִלּוֹאת הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה עֲשָׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ ... מְשֻׁתָּה שְׂבַעַת יָמִים ... :

אסתר פרק ג

(א) אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה גָּדַל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ אֶת הָמָן בֶּן הַמְּדֵתָא הָאֲגָגִי וַיְנַשְׂאֵהוּ וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת כִּסְאוֹ מַעַל כָּל הַשָּׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אֵתוֹ :

And, explains Rav Soloveitchik, this is what happened in Nazi Germany:

“An overindulgent, permissive, hedone-drunk society tolerated, alas, promoted the rise to power of a tyrant and madman... Only people who were pursuing pleasure – for whom values had no fixity, norms no ultimate validity – could tolerate man-Satan, irrational and destructive; only people addicted to the beautiful and the pleasant could have stood by and watched the smoke rising from the chimneys of the crematoria climbing to the heaven.” (p.38-39)

Rav Soloveitchik warns that is what can happen in the west today:

“The same may happen in Western world. By rejecting all norms, every semblance of regulated, self-limiting life and preaching boundless liberty and freedom from all authority, Western society is blazing the trail for irrational man to come and take over.” (p. 38)

אותו הדבר יכול לקרות בעולם המערבי. בדחיית כל הנורמות ... ומטיפים לחירות וחופש ללא גבולות וחופש מכל סמכות, החברה המערבית פורצת דרך לגאווותן הלא רציונלי לבוא להשתלט.

The Jewish Approach (p.40)

So what are we to do? Judaism approaches the existential crisis from a different angle. We don't run away to immerse ourselves in orgiastic pleasure seeking. Nor do we aggrandize ourselves to be gods. Rather, we face existential reality courageously. We accept four aspects of our finitude:

- 1) Man cannot defeat death. Only in God is man's salvation from the crisis.
- 2) Man can never know everything about the universe.
- 3) Man can never answer the “why” of existence.
- 4) Man can never define morality – must come from God.

- 1) אדם אינו יכול לנצח את המוות. רק באלוהים נמצא ישועת האדם מן המשבר.
- 2) אדם אינו יכול לדעת כל דבר ביקום.
- 3) אדם אינו יכול לענות על “מדוע” של קיומינו.
- 4) אדם אינו יכול להגדיר מוסר – שחייב לבוא מאלוהים.

Accepting these things allows man to realize his place, they allow man “the defeat of arrogant or orgiastic man by his own I awareness” (p. 40). Man thus seeks not that which is beyond himself – neither aesthetically and arrogantly.

Acknowledging these four aspects of man's finitude allows him to also look to the positive aspect of his being as taught by Judasim: that everyone has a place and a purpose in creation. Everyone has a role in the effort to perfect creation, to bring the Mashiach:

“Each person was anointed by the Almighty to contribute something to the great redemption... He is called to participate in the great march of generations blazing the trail for the King Messiah.” (p. 43)

The task, explains Rav Soloveitchik, is accomplished in a twofold nature – (1) on a daily basis of fulfilling God’s will, and (2) in a one-time unique nature where only the individual can fulfil a special role, as we read of Esther:

“And who knows if not for just such a time as this that you arrived at royalty.” (4:14).

אסתר פרק ד פסוק יד, יז
ומי יודע אם לעת קִזאת הגעת למלכות :

“Many events that at first glance seem completely irrelevant may transpire in order to give the individual an opportunity to perform his mission. He is catapulted into the strangest place, since only there it is possible for him to serve.” (p.44).

אירועים רבים שנראים במבט ראשון לא רלוונטיים עשויים להתרחש בכדי לתת לאדם אפשרות לבצע את משימתו. הוא הוזנק למקום המוזר ביותר, מכיוון שרק שם הוא יכול לשרת.

Accordingly, as can be seen in the case of Esther, to fulfill one’s unique role demands courage and self-sacrifice. This is how we answer our existential crisis – not in hedonism, not in arrogance, but in humble, courageous servitude to the Creator (avodat Hashem).

To conclude, the Megilla is referred to as an Iggeret because it is a true historical record, but it is also referred to as a Sefer because it’s a message is relevant to each and every one of us in each and every generation.

So, to whom was it said:

“And who knows if not for just such a time as this that you arrived at royalty.” (4:14)?

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ומי יודע אם לעת קִזאת הגעת למלכות :

To each and every one of us.