

BS"D

Pirumei Nisa

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Beit HaKenneset HaSefaradi BeRimon – Hannuka (Vayishlach) 5780

R. E. Berkovitz, God, Man And History, p15

The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God *is*, but that God is concerned with man and the world; that, having created this world, he has not abandoned it, leaving it to its own devices; that he cares about his creation.

יסוד הדת איננו בהצהרה שאלוקים קיים, אלא שאלוקים דואג לאדם ולעולם; פְּלוֹמֵר, לאחר שברא את העולם, הוא לא נטש אותו אלא שאכפת לו מהיצירה שלו.

So explains R. E. Berkovits. I believe that this point will help us to understand the value of Pirumei Nisa.

[Please note that I have not lost track of the calendar; I am perfectly aware that we are still 2 weeks away from Hannuka. Nevertheless, I was in the mall yesterday and I saw that they have long begun to sell sufganiot. So, if it is permissible to sell sufganiot for Hannuka, it is permissible to give a drash about Hannuka. ☺].

The gemara mentions PIRSUMEI NISA (publicizing a miracle) in relation to 3 holidays: Purim, Pesah and Hannuka.¹

PURIM

The Gemara in Megilla discusses the relative importance of listening to the Megilla versus performing the mitzvah of burying the dead (specifically a corpse that has no one else to attend to it). Without getting into the details of this mahloket, the only reason that listening to the Megilla is even a consideration against such a weighty mitzvah of “met mitzvah” is because it carries with it the aspect of PIRSUMEI NISA.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ג עמוד ב

בעי רבא: מקרא מגילה ומת מצוה הי מינייהו עדיף? מקרא מגילה עדיף משום פרסומי ניסא, או דלמא מת מצוה עדיף - משום כבוד הבריות? בתר דבעיא הדר פשטה: מת מצוה עדיף. דאמר מר: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה את לא תעשה שבתורה.

PESAH

The Gemara in Pesachim discusses the principle that one should never avail oneself of charity – “one should reduce one’s shabbat foods to one’s everyday level and not be dependent on other’s to fund you.” That said, one should always have 4 cups of wine at the Pesah Seder, EVEN if one must do so by accepting charity – because they carries with them the aspect of PIRSUMEI NISA.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת פסחים דף צט עמוד ב

משי... ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין, ואפילו מן התמחוי. ... [פסחים קיב.] ואפילו מן התמחוי וכו'. ... לא נצרכא אלא אפילו לרבי עקיבא, דאמר: עשה שבתך חול ואל תצטרך לבריות - הכא משום פרסומי ניסא מודה.

¹ It also mentions it in relation to Hallel but we will leave this aside since it Hallel is an explicit expression of the miraculous – that is, the whole point of Hallel is to recognize the miraculous. This is as opposed to the three mitzvot associated with the holidays in which they each have a value on their own, but also are said to inhere of an additional aspect – that of pirumei nisa.

HANNUKA

The Gemara in Shabbat discusses the case when one has only enough funds for one mitzvah: wine for shabbat kiddush or candles for hannuka. The conclusion is that Hannuka candles take precedence because they carry with them the aspect of PIRSUMEI NISA.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף כג עמוד ב

... בעי רבא: נר חנוכה וקידוש היום מהו? קידוש היום עדיף - דתדיר, או דילמא: נר חנוכה עדיף, משום פרסומי ניסא? [לאחר ששאלה חזר ופשטה] בתר דאבעיא הדר פשטה: נר חנוכה עדיף, משום פרסומי ניסא.

AF HEN

Interestingly, these 3 mitzvot are again singled out by the Gemara by Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi who teaches that women are obligated in them. That is, even though these mitzvot are timebound (mitzvot she'hazman grama), nevertheless, women too are obligated since they were in the miracle.

שבת כג. דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: נשים חייבות בנר חנוכה, שאף הן היו באותו הנס. פסחים קח. ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: נשים חייבות בארבעה כוסות הללו, שאף הן היו באותו הנס. מגילה ד. ערכין ג. ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: נשים חייבות במקרא מגילה, שאף הן היו באותו הנס.

I would like to suggest that deep down, women are not obligated in them because “they too were in the miracle,” but rather, they too were in the miracle IN ORDER that they be obligated in publicizing the miracle (l'farsem haNess)! That is, there is a deep value to publicizing the miracle incumbent on everyone – men and women alike.²

VALUE OF PIRSUMEI NISA

And that brings us to the question: what exactly is the value underlying Pirsumei Nisa?

Obviously, the idea is to publicize the events that show there is something not natural, something *super* natural going on. But this publicization is not only to get the word out, but most importantly to get the word IN – that is we need to inculcate IN OURSELVES this notion that there is a God and He is INVOLVED in our world. That is why we have an obligation to perform these mitzvot even when no one is around. (True the aspect of “publicizing” drops from the act, but the aspect of “publicizing” to ourselves, which may not properly be called “publicizing” but “inculcating,” persists).

THREE?

So the great value of PIRSUMEI NISA is to remind the world and remind OURSELVES that fundamental notion, of religion as R. E. Berkovits said:

The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God is, but that God is concerned with man and the world.

יסוד הדת איננו בהצהרה שאלוקים קיים, אלא שאלוקים דואג לאדם ולעולם

² Rav Moshe Soloveitchik (in “The Seder Night” by R.D.Schreiber): [“Af hen...” obligates women only in mitzvot where the kiyum ha-mitzva includes the component of pirsumei nisa. Arba kosot, mikra megilla, and ner chanuka, are unique in that they are mitzvot which are animated with the objective of promoting pirsumei nisa.]

But if there is such a fundamental value in publicizing miracles, why just these three? Were there not other miracles!?

- Was not the giving of the **Torah on Sinai** a miracle? Why not have the Torah reading on **Shavuot** be a Pirsumei Nisa mitzvah?
- And wasn't surviving in the desert for **forty years** a miracle? Why not have the mitzvah of **Sukkot** (which symbolizes the divine protection in the desert – whether clouds of glory or real sukkot that GOD MADE – see Gem. Sukkah 11b)?
- And what about the miraculous **manna**? Why not make the two **hallot** on Shabbat a Pirsumei Nisa mitzvah?
- And why specifically the 4 cups of wine to remind us of the miracle of the Exodus? Why not the **Matzah**, the **Korban Pesah**, the reading of the **Haggada**?
- What about the **Mezuzah**, modeled after the blood on the doorposts in the 10th plague? Why not make that a Pirsumei Nisa mitzvah?

I suggest that these three mitzvot are singled out not because there are no others, but rather because they are representative of the three fundamental categories in the human condition. In his book, *Worship of the Heart* (pp. 40-42), Rav Soloveitchik divides human endeavor into three “gestures”: the intellectual, the ethical, and the aesthetic. That is, all of man’s activities can be classified in one of these three categories.

ר' סולוביצ'יק, עבודה שבלב, עמ' 69, 71

- “ה-להים איננו פונה אל האדם רק באמצעות השכל (הלוגוס), בהאצילו על הנפש חכמה ודעת,
- ולא רק באמצעות האתוס – בגלותו מערכת נפלאה של ערכים ואידיאלים לאדם הטבעי, המונע בידי תשוקות נטולות רגש ובידי דחפים
- אלא גם באמצעות האסתטיקה, היא התפיסה הבלתי אמצעית של החושים את המציאות היפה והנשגבת.”

Rav Soloveitchik (p. 56) explains that in each of these gestures, the goal is to reach the truth, to reach God.

INTELLECTUAL

The intellectual gesture is one in which man applies his thinking, his cognitive powers, to understand the world. This is represented by the act of reading the Megilla. Here we read a story to understand history, to understand the implication of history. The history of the world, we learn intellectually from the megillah reading, includes the hidden hand of heaven. PIRSUEI NISA.

AESTHETIC

The aesthetic gesture is one in which we involve our senses to appreciate the world. This gesture is, of course, a very dangerous one, because one can easily fall sway to simply satisfying the self and losing site of seeking the truth in this gesture, to find God in the beauty and awesomeness of nature. Be that as it may, the aesthetic gesture allows us, explains Rav Soloveitchik, to apprehend God as opposed to only comprehend God.

“Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend God instead of comprehend Him, feel the embrace of the Creator, and the warm breath of infinity hovering over a finite creation” (p.59).

”רק באמצעות יצירת קשר עם היפה והמרומם יכול האדם לתפוש את האלוקים במקום להשיגו בשכלו...”

The mitzvah of drinking four cups is representative of this gesture which is all about the senses. Through our senses, the aesthetic gesture, we are to also appreciate that God's hand is involved in the world. PIRSUMEI NISA.

Perhaps we could add to the interpretation of the Gemara that teaches: "Wine goes in and secrets come out" to mean not that the individual starts divulging his own secrets, but that he now apprehends God and the secrets of His providence. Could this understanding not be the difference of drinking on Purim versus Pesah?

ETHICAL

And finally, there is the ethical gesture. Here man seeks moral truth. This gesture is one which is so elusive to man who believes he can reason everything (ala Kant). But man has been shown to be ever so fallible in this area:

"We have assumed that *mishpatim* are prompted by reason. Yet, in our modern world, there is hardly a *mishpat* which has not been repudiated. Stealing and corruption are the accepted norms in many spheres of life; adultery and general promiscuity find support in respectable circles; and even murder, medical and germ experiments have been conducted with governmental complicity. The *logos* has shown itself in our time to be incapable of supporting the most basic of moral inhibitions" (Reflections of the Rav, Vol. 1, p. 105).

R. Soloveitchik teaches that ultimately all the commandments, even those that we see as having a rational basis, must be viewed as *hukkim*, performed solely because they were commanded by God.³ He writes:

A *mishpat*, even when it is based on reason, must be accepted as a *hok*; otherwise, even rational social and moral laws may be corrupted or distorted, as is often demonstrated by our modern secularized society. The *hok* differs from the *mishpat* only in the degree of its intelligibility; both, however, need the Divine imperative to sustain their religious fulfillment.⁴

Ultimately, we are to recognize that truth in morality lies in God, that the line between good and bad is lit by the divine candle. As it says in Proverbs (6:23):

כִּי נֵר מְצֹנָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר וְדָרֶךְ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוֹסֵר. (משלי ו: כג)

The mitzvah of lighting the Hannukia represents this ethical gesture – it represents our seeing the hand of God in our endeavor to reach moral truth. Indeed does not the Hannukia light symbolize the victory of the Maccabim who would not compromise on morality. And is not the light of the menorah in the Temple the representation of God's moral light that is to guide our lives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three mitzvot of Pirsumei Nisa are coming to teach us that we must see the divine in every gesture of our being, in every act of our lives. The three mitzvot

³ R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. 1, KTAV, N.J., 1993, pp. 99-106.

⁴ Reflections of the Rav, Vol. 1, p. 110.

were singled out, not because there are no other such mitzvot, but as examples to awaken us to the deep ethic of Pirsumei Nisa in all our endeavors.

And while no other mitzvah than three have the same halachic implications as these three,⁵ all other mitzvot do have the philosophical, religious, aspect that awakens us to the “fundamental of religion: that God is concerned for man and the world.”

So, just as the reading of the Megilla teaches us that we must realize God’s hand through our intellect, we should similarly realize this when we read the Haggada on Pesah or the Torah on Shavuot. And just as the drinking of the four cups of wine inspires us to recognize God’s providence when we are engaged in the aesthetic, so too this applies eating the korban pesah or korban hagigah on any holiday.⁶ Similarly, dwelling in the Sukkah and eating Hallot. And perhaps we could argue that putting up the Mezuzah which itself emphasizes God’s providence, with the words of the Shema that we must learn Torah and guide our lives by it, is another Pirsumei Nisa in the ethical realm.

To conclude, all mitzvot that are related to a miraculous event should inspire us with the philosophical notion inherent in Pirsumei Nisa, the notion that:

The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God *is*, but that God is concerned with man and the world; that, having created this world, he has not abandoned it, leaving it to its own devices; that he cares about his creation.
יסוד הדת איננו בהצהרה שאלוקים קיים, אלא שאלוקים דואג לאדם ולעולם.

⁵ G:\MAN\Torah\Shiurim\ResearchEtc\PirsumeiNisa_YHE_chan66-ml.htm:

My grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l, suggested an additional answer to the difficulty raised by Tosefot. His analysis was known by word of mouth for many years, and we were recently privileged to have it included in the newly published book, Iggerot Ha-Grid Ha-levi (in Hilkhot Chanuka 4:9-11)[9][10]. In a letter written during his stay in Berlin to his father, Rav Moshe zt"l, Rav Soloveitchik wrote:

"It seems clear that this entire reason of 'af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes' applies only to those mitzvot where the miracle constitutes an independent halakhic entity within the actual fulfillment of the mitzva, that it [the mitzva] entails a fulfillment regarding the miracle and publicizing the miracle. We see, for example, that [when one cannot afford both] kiddush and Chanuka candles, Chanuka candles takes precedence because of pirsumei nisa [the interest in publicizing the miracle]. At first glance, this requires explanation. Does not kiddush also involve pirsumei nisa? It is clear, however, that the halakha of pirsumei nisa constitutes an independent halakha and requirement within the actual mitzva act; it has nothing to do with the reason behind the mitzva, whether it is due to a miracle. Therefore, this applies only to Chanuka candles, regarding which the halakha of the miracle and publicizing the miracle is established as part of the actual mitzva act and requirement. Moreover, regarding Chanuka candles and Megilla reading, a separate berakha was instituted – 'she-asa nisim,' for this halakha concerning the miracle constitutes a fulfillment within the actual mitzva itself, and so a berakha is established over it. Indeed, we find 'af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes' only regarding Chanuka candles, Megilla reading, and the four cups. This is due to the fact that in all these mitzvot, the halakha concerning the miracle is not merely the reason behind the mitzva, but is rather established as part of the actual fulfillment and act of the mitzva, as evidenced by the special berakha instituted over it. Regarding kiddush and matza, by contrast, although they involve a commemoration of the miracle, there is no independent halakha, requirement or entity within the actual mitzva act. It would therefore seem that the entire factor of 'af hen hayu be-oto ha-nes' does not apply." [Iggerot Ha-Grid Ha-levi, pp.91-92.]

⁶ Gemara [Pes. 109a] records that “joy is only through meat and wine” - "אין שמחה אלא בבשר ויין". I would add eating matzah to the list of sensual “pirsumei nisa” acts but some may argue there is not an aesthetic pleasure in eating matzah.