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שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

Kiyemu veKibelu:

Creating a Jewish Identity
in a Post-Divine World

by Ruth Balinsky Friedman

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

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Year after year, I fulfill my obligation on Purim to hear the reading of the Megillah both at night and during the day. And, year after year, I turn the page in confusion when the heart of the Purim tale ostensibly ends in Chapter Eight—and then the book continues. Our story has reached a positive denouement with the elimination of Haman and the empowerment of the Jewish people to fight in their own defense. What critical developments remain in the final two chapters?

The first half of Chapter Nine details the bloody revenge that the Jews took on those who nearly initiated their demise. Though gruesome, the reprisals establish the power and authority of the Jewish community throughout the region, and the Jews celebrate their victory. This celebration sets the stage for the second half of Chapter Nine, in which the Jews attempt to establish Purim not as a day of celebration in that year alone, but as a lasting holiday for the Jewish people. As the verses tell us, these efforts were successful.

(כו)...על כן על כל דברי האגרת הזאת ומה ראו
על פניה ומה הגיע אליהם: (כז) קימו וקבלו (וקבלו)
היהודים עליהם ועל זרעם ועל כל הגלגלים עליהם
ולא יעבור להיות עשים את שני הימים האלה
בכתבם וקמנם בכל שנה ושנה: (כח) והימים האלה
נזכרים ונעשים בכל דור ודור משפחה ומשפחה
מדינה ומדינה ועיר ועיר וימי הפורים האלה לא
יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם:

(26) ...In view, then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them,
(27) the Jews fulfilled and accepted upon themselves and their descendants, and all who

¹ Ruth Balinsky Friedman is in her final year of study at Yeshivat Maharat, the first institution to train Orthodox women as spiritual leaders and *halachic* authorities. She lives in Washington Heights with her husband Yoni.

might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. (28) Consequently, these days are recalled and observed in every generation: by every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants.

The Jewish people erect an eternal marker of their survival and victory over this particular group of foes. On the Purim holiday, they accept upon themselves and upon their descendants a holiday which they are obligated to celebrate for time immemorial.

This is the literal meaning of the verses. The rabbis of the Gemara, however, read even greater significance in this moment. The Gemara in Shabbat tells us:

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר. אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, 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 אחשוורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

And they camped underneath the mountain.

(Exodus 19:17) Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said, “This teaches that the Holy Blessed One hung the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah—Good! If not—there will be your burial place.’” Rav Acha bar Yaakov said, “This is a great challenge to the authority of the Torah.” Rava said, “Even so, they re-received [the Torah] in the time of Achashverosh. As it is written The Jews fulfilled and accepted (Esther 9:27). They fulfilled [of their own free will] that which they had already received [against their will]. (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a)

In exploring *matan Torah*, the moment of Divine Revelation at Sinai, Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa attempts to justify the perplexing language of Exodus 19:17 ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר “and they camped underneath the mountain.” He interprets the verse to mean that God literally

picked up the mountain and hung it over the Israelites' heads, threatening them with annihilation if they did not accept the Torah. Rav Acha bar Yaakov responds that this interpretation presents a troubling image, and potentially undermines the significance of the covenant made with God through revelation. After all, what is the meaning of *matan Torah* if the Israelites had no choice but to accept? It is to this question that Rava responds with a verse from the Book of Esther. According to Rava, the language of *קימו וקיבלו*, or “[The Jews] fulfilled and accepted” refers not just to the Jewish community’s acceptance of the institution of Purim as an official holiday, but of the Torah and its laws in their entirety. In other words, Rava understands this acceptance not as one localized to the holiday of Purim, but rather as the first moment in our history as a people in which we willingly accepted the Torah upon ourselves.

This is a fascinating text for multiple reasons. First, there are a few instances in the events leading up to and following *matan Torah* in which the Israelites do proclaim that they will follow God and the Torah.² However, the Gemara disregards these, and instead makes the Israelites entirely passive, accepting the Torah only because death is the alternative. Second, there is no obvious reason to read *קימו וקיבלו*, fulfilled and accepted, as referring to the Jews accepting anything beyond a Purim holiday; the language of the verses is straightforward, and lacks such peculiar wording as in Exodus 19:17, which prompts alternative readings. Therefore, why did Rava attribute these words in Esther as meaning something so much greater than their literal meaning?

In order to begin to understand the significance of Rava’s words, we must understand the historical context in which the story of Esther occurs. Although there is some debate as to the exact dating of the Megillah, we know that the story takes place during the Babylonian exile, following the destruction of the first *Bet haMikdash*. This was a perilous and new time in our history as a

people. Previous to Nebuchadnezzar’s conquering of Jerusalem and exiling of the Jews, we had been a people oriented toward conquering and inhabiting the land of Israel. Although the political climate was often rocky and unstable, Jews reigned in Judea for hundreds of years with a centralized religious authority. Exile presented them with a host of challenges they had previously never faced. First, they were subject to a political power thoroughly unconcerned with their welfare, as we see in Achashverosh’s ease in signing the Jews’ death warrants. Second, they lacked a central authority or body of representatives. Throughout the Megillah, Mordechai appears to act of his own volition, without consulting any Jewish peers; his character represents the sole active Jew advocating before the king for his people’s interests. Finally, the Jewish communities were scattered throughout other nations, rather than living in one land with greater ease in communication. They were truly a people in exile.

As a nation, we bemoan our exile. It is a punishment—and one that represents our detachment from God and the loss of a spiritual connection to our Creator. On both Tisha B’Av and Yom Kippur we pray for our exile to expire and implore God to renew our days of old—*חדש ימינו כקדם*. However, in the eyes of the Gemara in Shabbat, exile represents something different entirely. On the one hand, there is no moment in which the Jewish people are more connected to God and further from exile than the moment of *matan Torah*. And yet, according to Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa, at this moment the Israelites were powerless, forced to submit to God’s authority. This encounter with God is unrivaled, yet the acceptance of the Torah is incomplete until a Jewish community in exile—a time in which God is hidden from us—arises and accepts the laws of Purim upon themselves. This is a profoundly striking tension; our ultimate hope as a people is to return to closeness with God, yet that same closeness rendered us paralyzed. It was only when we lost our connection with God, in exile, that we were able to complement our experience at

² See Exodus 19:8; Exodus 24:3,7.

Sinai and fully and actively realize our potential as God's people.

The final question we must ask is why the rabbis of the Gemara envision these two moments in this way. As we have said, Purim meets the Jewish community at a crucial point in their history; they have survived a serious brush with communal devastation and want to transform this into a communal holiday. However, they are in the Diaspora, scattered across a broad region, without a prophet or a leader to take charge and institute this policy. They must therefore organize themselves to spread the message, and thus they establish the holiday of Purim as one celebrated by all Jews everywhere. It is no accident that it is this moment in our history that the rabbis of the Talmud choose to represent the moment at which the Jewish community first voluntarily assumed the responsibility of God's commandments. For though they live hundreds of years later, the rabbis of the Gemara, the creators of rabbinic Judaism, inhabit a similar universe. Like Esther and Mordechai, the rabbis live in a post-Temple world, and are faced with the daunting task of adapting the Jewish people to a new reality. Through demonstrating that a post-Temple generation in Persia led a revival of Judaism centuries earlier, the rabbis of the Gemara prove to their contemporaries that it is possible not only to sustain Judaism in their context, but to enable it to thrive.

Our close examination of the Gemara in Shabbat demonstrates a tension that is still very present in Orthodox Judaism today. We can often feel stifled, that our mission is solely to practice and transmit what has been established by our spiritual forebears. However, while we must always remain true to *halachah*, we should not assume that our inherited tradition is sealed. Although we live centuries later, we, like our Persian ancestors, must assume the responsibility for maintaining and invigorating our religion, so that our communities will joyfully fulfill, accept, and further Jewish life.

l'Simcha! l'Yom Tov!

לשמחה! ליום טוב!

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*This issue is dedicated to the memory of
Eva (Chava) Schindler Oles
our mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.*

*She was a proud member of JOFA who
advocated strongly for broadening opportunities
for women's learning and participation in
Orthodox Jewish life. A rebbetzin with a Ph.D.
in clinical social work and a talented pianist,
she showed us how to live a life combining
profession, devotion to family, and passionate
involvement in Jewish life and scholarship.*

*She often quoted these words from Mishlei
(Proverbs): "...al titosh Torat imecha — Do not
forsake the teachings of your mother." May we
be inspired by her memory as we were by her life.*

*The Oles, Weinberger, Pollack,
and Zukowsky Families*

JOFA

520 Eighth Avenue, Fourth Floor • New York, NY 10018
212-679-8500 • www.jofa.org

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