

Planetary Simcha

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Parshat Pekudei
Chazak!

One of the traditional Jewish catch phrases that is often heard at this time of year is “MiSheNichnas Adar, Marbin B’Simcha” (with the advent of the Jewish month of Adar, it is appropriate to engage in more joyful activities than usual).

While this concept is often invoked by bands of students dancing through the halls of day schools on Rosh Chodesh Adar chanting these words and seeking opportunities to exemplify the second meta-theme of the period, “VeNahafoch Huh” (and it was reversed) (1) by turning classrooms upside down and inside out, the primary source from which “MiSheNichnas Adar...” is derived, according to the Talmud, appears to be more of an afterthought than a forthright statement in terms of itself.

Whereas we might have expected a comment that deals with Adar and Purim to appear in Tractate Megilla, which discusses Megillat Esther and its accompanying Halachot, in fact “MiShenichnas Adar...” is a quotation from Tractate Ta’anit, which primarily is concerned with the spiritual responses of the Jewish community in Israel when experiencing a drought endangering its economy and viability. The tractate not only deals with fasts precipitated by difficult environmental conditions, but also those commemorating tragic moments of Jewish history.

Mishna Ta’anit, Chapter 4 (26b)

...MiShenichnas Av MeMa’atin B’Simcha... (With the advent of the Jewish month of Av (in which Tisha B’Av occurs), it is appropriate to limit joyful activities) (2)

Ta’anit 29a-b

Said R. Yehuda son of R. Shmuel bar Sheilot in the name of Rav: Just as with the advent of the Jewish month of Av, it is appropriate to limit joyful activities, so too “MiSheNichnas Adar, Marbin B’Simcha”.

From the context in Ta’anit, it appears that in order to not convey the impression that Judaism overly emphasizes mourning for its many national tragedies, Rav wanted to stress that even as we continue to mourn the destruction of the Temples, we must also make sure to celebrate the joyous periods that we have experienced, and approach not only such days, but also the months in which they occur, accordingly.

However, there is reason to insist that the month of Adar deserves to be treated in a special manner independent of whatever our approach to Av might be. A Biblical source for viewing the entire month of Adar as a time for joy is a phrase in Megillat Esther. When Mordechai and Esther write to the general Jewish community urging them to annually observe the 14th and 15th of Adar so that this Jewish triumph will be remembered throughout the generations, they add,

Esther 9:22

They (the 14th and 15th) should be like the days upon which the Jews rested from battling their enemies, “VeHaCHODESH” (and the MONTH) that was reversed for them from groaning to joy, and from mourning to a holiday, to make them days of feasting and joy and sending portions one to another and gifts to the poor.

While the simple meaning of the verse would define the antecedent of “them” as the 14th and 15th rather than the entire month, one could otherwise conclude that while the specific practices of reading the Megilla, having a festive meal, sending portions of food and charity might apply only to Purim proper, the month in general should be marked by a spirit of “Simcha” as a result of the special events that took place within it.

A Halachic manifestation of the entire month of Adar being viewed as an extension of the days of Purim appears in Yerushalmi Megilla 1:1. Rabbi Natan states that if for some reason an individual is unable to read the Megilla on either the 14th or the 15th, e.g., s/he must travel and on the appropriate day will not have a Megilla available to him/her, s/he can read it on any day of Adar. R. Chelbo however immediately limits R. Natan’s leniency by pointing out that it would be inappropriate for anyone, even under the most difficult of circumstances, to read the Megilla beyond the 15th of Adar because of an implication of Esther 9:27. He interprets the phrase, “VeLO YA’AVOR’ (and it will not pass by, i.e., will have to be celebrated) to observe these two days in accordance with how they have been recorded at this precise time each year”, as not only stipulating that a year should not go by without a Purim observance, but that such an observance cannot take place beyond the 15th of the month. One could distinguish between a general mood of “Simcha” and the specific ritual of reading Megillat Esther, and contend that even if the end of the month is not appropriate for this particular Mitzva, nevertheless, joyous practices should pervade all of the days of Adar. But if we come to conclude that the statement “MiSheNichnas Adar...” is meant to apply only to the days between Rosh Chodesh and the 15th of Adar, such an approach would then in fact closely parallel the statement “MiSheNichnas Av...” which appears to apply only to the first portion of the month, i.e., from Rosh Chodesh Av through Tisha B’Av and not beyond. Consequently, one would have to conclude that when Rav used the terminology

“MiSheNichnas” (with the advent of) he did not intend that the mood of either mourning or joyousness should pervade the entire month, but only the period leading up to either Tisha B’Av or Purim.

When the Gemora in Ta’anit gives an apparent illustration of how one is to limit his/her joyous activities when Av begins and increase them with the advent of Adar, several questions arise:

Ta’anit 29a-b

Said R. Papa: “HILKACH” (therefore) a Jewish individual involved in a lawsuit with a non-Jew should try to avoid coming to trial during Av because “Rei’ah Mazlai” (his “Mazal” is bad), but someone in the same situation should make himself available for trial during Adar because “Bari Mazlai” (his “Mazal” is healthy, strong). (3)

Had R. Papa simply said that due to the poor “track record” that Jews have during the month of Av, and in light of our cyclical view of Jewish history whereby different periods of the calendar year even in the present day are associated with the events that took place within them long ago, it would consequently be prudent not to put oneself in jeopardy, his view would have been more comprehensible. (4) But for this Amora to have introduced his comment with “Therefore” after the Talmud quotes Rav to the effect that one must limit his/her “Simcha”, implies a cause-and-effect connection between Rav’s comment and R. Papa’s example. One approach for accounting for R. Papa would entail suggesting that he understands Rav to be advocating further extensions of the principle enunciated in Mishna Pesachim 10:5, and incorporated into the Haggada:

In every generation an individual is obligated to see/portray (5) himself as if s/he left Egypt, as it is said (Shemot 13:8) “And you will recount to your child on that day saying, ‘For the sake of this did HaShem Do for ME when I went out of Egypt.’”

R. Papa might be contending that we should ideally empathize with the history of the Jewish people—be it the exhilaration of the Exodus, the confidence of a victory over Haman, or the depression and mourning of the inevitable destruction of the Temples—to such a degree, that we are required to literally reexperience our ancestors’ moods, fears and joys, in addition to whatever rituals we may engage in to commemorate these events. If an individual wishes to internalize fully the Jewish experience, it is insufficient to eat Matza, read the Megilla and sit on the floor and fast, no matter how seriously and thoughtfully one may carry out these activities. When a person feels that all around him, things are going badly, even if those “things” may have actually taken place thousands of years ago, it should be difficult for him/her to go about his/her normal everyday business, let alone expose him/herself to

the tensions and possible devastating consequences of a lawsuit. Would an individual living during the period around the destructions of the First and Second Temples have given thought about going to court? And conversely, when one senses that everything couldn't be going better, s/he can with greater confidence and self-assurance engage in adversarial situations, sensing that in addition to whatever personal abilities s/he brings to the situation, the time of year is and has been pervaded with positive significance for the Jewish people from time immemorial. Rav's comments about Av and Adar then align these periods of the year more closely with the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance, where one is expected to evolve a mood of Repentance, in addition to finite rituals of Selichot, blowing the Shofar and fasting on Yom HaKippurim.

A second aspect of R. Papa's remarks concerning lawsuits in Av and Adar is perhaps even more curious. One would think that invoking astrology as a reason for following or not following a particular course of action would be antithetical to Jewish thought. Devarim 18:13 states, "You will be wholehearted with the Lord, your God", which many commentators explain as referring to not attributing any significance to various forms of soothsaying, oracular instruction, magic, and necromancy. Yet the term that R. Papa uses, i.e., "Mazal", is typically associated with the attempts to employ the particular arrangements of planets and constellations at certain times in order to determine the characteristics of a particular individual's personality and what courses of action one should either follow or avoid. Wishing someone "Mazal Tov" (a good "Mazal") or similarly "BeSha'ah Tova U'Mutzlachat" (in/at a good and successful hour) or the shorter version "BeSha'ah Tova" would appear to be alluding to, if not out-and-out invoking, horoscopic themes when hoping for another's success.(6)

In fact, the Talmud is replete with references regarding the influence of heavenly bodies upon the personalities, predilections and actions of human beings, of which the following constitutes a particularly disturbing and evocative example:

Shabbat 156a

A person, who is born "under" Mars, will spill blood.

Said Rav Ashi: He might be a surgeon, a thief, a slaughterer, or a Mohel (one who performs circumcisions).

R. Papa's perspective in Ta'anit therefore complements the above passage in Shabbat by suggesting that not only can an individual's personality be influenced by planetary effects, but that particular periods of time are similarly more conducive to one type of activity or another.

Furthermore, the twelve signs of the Zodiac, normally associated with various constellations, according to Rabbinic sources correspond to each of the

months of the Jewish year. (7) While the significance of the correlations are not always eminently clear, examples of obvious parallels include, Tishrei and “Moznayim” (scales) or Libra—a time of judgment; Nissan and “Taleh” (ram) or Aries—commemorating the “Akeida” during which a ram eventually is substituted for Yitzchak; and Av and “Aryeh” (lion) or Leo—the Temples are symbolized by the lion.

With regard to the reputed astrological influences specifically at work during the month of Adar, R. Eliyahu KiTov, in his Sefer HaToda’ah (8) (the English translation of the work is entitled “Book of our Heritage”) points out that the sign for this time of year is “Dagim” (fish) or Pisces, a symbol of blessing and success. Among the allusions of the theme of “Dagim” listed by the commentator are the following:

- a. Fish are hidden from sight so the “Ayin HaRa” (lit. evil eye, a reference to others being jealous of their great numbers and success and thereby being drawn to oppose them) will not affect them.
- b. Curses do not apply to fish. Even during the flood the fish did not die because they hadn’t sinned, in contrast to other forms of animate life.
- c. Just as fish require water to survive, so too the Jewish people, when they engage in Tora, often compared to water, they too survive. Specifically with respect to Adar, Megillat Esther 9:27 states that the Jews ratified their acceptance of the Tora, in light of the miracle of their survival.

Even when questions are raised by the Talmud regarding the affects of astrological influences, during a long debate at the end of Tractate Shabbat, those who were skeptical did not go as far as one might have expected, as exemplified by the following comments:

Shabbat 156a

R. Yochanan said: From where do we know that there is no “Mazal” (planetary influence) over Israel? (Yirmiyahu 10:2) “So says HaShem: The way of the nations do not learn, and from the signs of the heavens do not be afraid, because the nations will be afraid of them.” They will be afraid, but not the Jews.

...R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: From where do we know that there is no “Mazal” over Israel? As it is said (Beraishit 15:5) “And He Took him (Avraham) outside and He Said, ‘Look now towards the Heavens and count the stars if you can count them...’” Avraham said before the Holy One, Blessed Be He,

(Beraishit 15:3) "...The son of my household (Eliezer) is going to inherit from me!"

He Said to him, "No!" (15:4) "...But rather one that will come from your loins will inherit you."

He said to Him, "Master of the Universe. I have consulted my horoscope and have seen that I am not worthy to have a son."

He Said to him, "Abandon your horoscope, for there is no "Mazal" for the Jewish people. Why have you reached such a conclusion? Because "Tzedek" (Jupiter) is in the west? I will Turn it back and Place it in the East..."

The objection to the concept of astrological influence is not comprehensive, but rather only whether it also applies to Jews. It appears to be taken for granted by utilizing Biblical support, that planets and constellations do influence non-Jews. Furthermore, even with respect to Jews, God's Manipulation of the planets so that they will affect a desired result is at odds with stating that the planets have no influence at all. RaShI too implies that planetary influence is relevant to Jews, should they not conform to God's Commandments:

RaShI on Shabbat 136a d.h. Ein Mazal LeYisrael

That by means of prayer and merit, he can change his "Mazal" for good results.

However, I would maintain that RaShI not only aids in understanding the passage in Shabbat 156a, but also the nature of "Mazal" and its relationship to the religious lifestyle. It would appear that "Mazal" was the means by which ancient man was able to account for why certain things happened which otherwise did not seem to have any explanation, as well as why different people had different personality traits and skills, even when coming from the same family and/or community and having an ostensibly similar upbringing and education. What the ancients attributed to planets and constellations, we look to "nurture" and "nature" for explanations. However, whatever a person may be, as a result of his/her family history and formative experiences, s/he is not necessarily irrevocably bound to these parameters, should s/he choose to try to transcend them. Granted it is rather difficult to change one's physical characteristics, although that becomes more and more medically and technically possible as modern science continues to make breakthroughs. But fundamental change is certainly possible in the moral and ethical realms, as well as in the intellectual sphere. If an individual determines that s/he wishes to become someone else, someone not bound by the personal examples of adults and peers that s/he has observed while growing up, or even the behaviors and lifestyles of those that currently surround him/her, it is within his/her power to

do so, given strong commitment, discipline and a work ethic. RaShI is advocating that the system of Mitzvot inherent in Judaism, when adhered to fully and precisely, offers the Jew the potential for significant personal change and transcendence, whereby s/he literally becomes someone else, to whom different parameters, opportunities and challenges apply.

Understanding “Mazal” in the manner outlined above results in a particular approach to Rav’s comment about how one is to increase opportunities for joy with the advent of Adar. Unfortunately, many seem to feel that “Simcha” associated with the season of Purim means self-indulgence. Many are of the opinion that they are happiest when they have filled themselves with food and drink, when they are resting or napping all day, when they are “left alone” and not expected to do anything for anyone but themselves and that Rav is encouraging such activities for this time of year. But it is hard for me to imagine how such behaviors complement a system of Tora and Mitzvot designed to change everyone for the better. Perhaps the “Simcha” that should be increased during Adar is the “Simcha” that one senses when s/he has increased the “Simcha” of others. Clearly, the Mitzva on Purim of “Matanot LeAniyim” is designed to help those in need. Some suggest that even “Mishloach Manot” is intended to create a pretext whereby in a non-embarrassing manner, those who are hungry can be provided with additional food. RaMBaM declares in a definitive fashion which Mitzvot he believes to be the central ones with regard to Purim:

Mishna Tora, Hilchot Megilla U’Chanuka 2:17

It is preferable for an individual to increase his involvement in giving gifts to the poor than to enlarge his own feast and send additional portions to friends. For there is no greater and glorious joy than to cause the hearts of the poor, the orphaned, the widowed and the sojourners to rejoice, for s/he who causes joy on the part of these unfortunate individuals, emulates the Divine Presence, as it is said, (Yeshayahu 57:15) “To Revive the spirit of the lowly ones and to Revive the spirit of those who are downtrodden.”

Shabbat Shalom, and may we experience this year true Simcha Shel Mitzva by reaching out to the needy, in our community, in Israel and throughout the world, so that we can be “Marbeh B’Simcha” in the very best sense.

(1) Derived from Esther 9:1, referring to the “turning of the tables” whereby the Jews of Persia gained the upper hand over their declared enemies.

(2) This statement is applied to very specific types of activities in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 551:1-2. Behaviors and practices that are either prohibited or discouraged include:

- a. A Jewish individual involved in a lawsuit with a non-Jew should try to avoid coming to trial during Av.
- b. Scaling back one's business dealings.
- c. Avoiding building projects that are for pleasure as opposed to those constructions that are deemed necessities.
- d. Delaying landscaping improvements needed solely for aesthetic considerations.
- e. No weddings are to take place. While engagements are allowed in order to demonstrate to one's intended spouse the seriousness of one's intentions, parties and feasts celebrating the occasion are to be put off until after Tisha B'Av.

Additional prohibitions are added during the week in which Tisha B'Av will be commemorated.

(3) It is notable that of all of the various possible manifestations of "Simcha" (joy) that one could imagine—just reversing the examples that are listed in fn. 2 appearing in the Shulchan Aruch, would provide possible contexts for joyous activity, i.e., one should try to become engaged and/or married during this month, one should embark on improvements to one's home or grounds, etc.—pursuing a lawsuit is suggested.

Furthermore, it would seem that had the original statement not been made to the effect that one should avoid lawsuits in Av, there would have been no reason to suggest that trials should be pursued in Adar. Certainly if a plaintiff is assured that s/he will win his suit, this possibly could be cause for joy and celebration, but it does not appear to be the first thing that would come to mind when searching for examples of actions particularly precipitating joy.

(4) Tosafot on Ta'anit 29b, d.h. "Amar R. Papa Hilkach Hai Bar Yisrael D'It Laih Dina BaHada Nachri Lishtamait VeChulai" suggests that R. Papa's comment is a response to a Baraita that had been quoted earlier on Ta'anit 29a "MeGalgin Zechut LeYom ZaKai VeChova LeYom Chayav" (Good things come to pass on an auspicious day and bad things on an unlucky day). But then one does not understand why the editors of the Gemora left R. Papa's comment for this later section of the Talmudical discussion, when it appears that the previous analysis of this Baraita had been concluded by the Gemora's moving on to the next section of the Mishna (see last lines of Ta'anit 29a).

(5) RaMBaM's gloss changes "Liro" (to see) into "LeHarot" (to illustrate by means of one's self). Mishna Tora, Hilchot Chametz U'Matza 7:6.

(6) Marcus Jastrow (A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushlami, and the Midrashic Literature, Pardes Publishing House, New York, 1950, p. 238) explains that the term "Gil", appearing in Yevamot 120a, is a reference not to people of the same age, but those born under the same planetary influence, a form of the term "Galgal" or sphere.

(7) See "Zodiac" in The Jewish Encyclopedia, Isidore Singer man. Ed., Vol. 12, Ktav, pp. 688-9.

(8) Machon LeHotzo'at Seforim, Yerushalayim, 1969, pp. 229-30.