Jewish Tribune – Purim

**A Purim Postscript**

Question: What happened at the end of the Purim story? And was there a happy ending? Discuss.

If I were to poll Jewish Tribune readers with these two questions, I imagine the vast majority would say they are very familiar with the storyline and know what happened at the end, and yes, it does indeed have a happy ending. After all, Chazal fixed a day of celebration and we happily read and sing לַיְּהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשֹׂן וִיקָר. We dress up and it is one of the highpoints of the Jewish year.

But contrary to popular conception, the Purim story does not have an entirely happy ending. At least for Esther Hamalka; and a somewhat enigmatic one for Achashverosh and Vashti.

Esther Hamalka remains in the palace of Achashverosh, no longer married to Mordechai, and has one child who is halachichally Jewish but grows up largely as a Persian.

Picture the tragic scene of the heroine of Klal Yisroel putting her baby Daryovesh (Darius) to bed every night. Petrified that her child will abandon his Jewish heritage and become a Persian prince, she whispers into the ear of her baby the words that have sadly been said too many times: “Bleib ah Yid! – remember you are Jewish my sweet little child – remain a Yid!”. And then, through her tears, she says the Shema with him.

Not the Purim postscript that we always consider.

And that’s just Esther Hamalka. The postscript for Achashversosh and Vashti is as fascinating as it is unknown.

The Rema MiPanoh, the famous 16th century kabbalist and talmid of Rav Moshe Cordovero, wrote a sefer called Gilgulei Neshomos. In אות ו, he writes a remarkable postscript to the Purim story.

The Gemoro is Yoma (9a) makes reference to a Tanna (a Rabbi at the time of the Mishna) named רבי יוחנן בן תורתא – Rebbi Yochanan ben Turta, literally Rebbi Yochanan the son of an ox. The Tosfos Yeshonim refers us to a Pesikta Rabbati (Piska 14, Parah) which explains that Rebbi Yochanan was given this unusual name based on the following incident.

It once happened that a G-d fearing Jew fell on hard times and had to sell his ox to a non-Jew. The new owner worked the animal for six days and then when Shabbos came, the animal didn’t budge. The new non-Jewish owner tried everything, but the animal refused to work. He therefore took the animal back to the seller and demanded his money back.

The G-d fearing Jew understood what had happened. The animal was used to working for him and to resting on Shabbos as demanded by halocha. He therefore went over to the ox and whispered in his ear: “My dear ox, when you were in my possession, it was proper for you to refrain from working. But due to my sins, I had to sell you, and you now belong to a non-Jew. For him, you need to work seven days a week.”

The animal immediately stood and began to work. The non-Jew was incredulous. “What did you say to him?”

The Jew repeated what he had said, and the non-Jew was amazed. He thought to himself, if an ox, who cannot speak and has no da’as, yet recognises his Creator, how much more should I, who can speak and think. He converted, immersed himself in Torah and later became known as Rebbi Yochanan ben Turta, Rebbi Yochanan the son of an ox, as a result of this incident.

The Rema MiPanoh explains that Vashti was a gilgul of that ox. She was reincarnated in the form of an ox who did not want to work on Shabbos and was sold to a non-Jew in order that she was forced to work in the same way she forced Jewish women to work on Shabbos. Moreover, the non-Jew who converted was none other than Achashverosh. His role was to bring about the tikkun for Vashti.

The beauty of Purim and of Torah generally is that it is layered and multi-faceted. There are layers of meaning and it is fascinating to learn different and new interpretations to a familiar story.

The Purim postscript is nuanced. Yes, it is a day of celebration and a landmark in Jewish History but for Esther herself, the postscript was bittersweet in the extreme and for Vashti and Acheshverosh, somewhat enigmatic.

The overall message is that HKBH runs the world. This is seen not just in the puppeteering that takes place from the beginning to the end of the Purim story, but in the deeper and multi-faceted layers that point to a huge Master Plan that we only have a very small window to.

Wishing all readers a freilichen Purim and IYH we should all hear besuros tovos very soon.

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