



PurimBurst 2008 / תשס"ח

by A Still Small Voice

(based on *Pri Tsadik*,¹ *Ohev Yisrael*² and *Heichal HaBrocha*³)

“Let the king and Haman come to the banquet.”⁴ The Talmud asks, “Why did Esther honor Haman with an exclusive invite to this tête-à-tête between her and the king? ... R. Joshua answers: She learned this strategy (encapsulated by a verse from Proverbs) in her father’s house: ‘If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat and if thirsty ply him with drink. For in so doing you heap coals of fire upon his head, and...God will cause him to make peace with you.’⁵” (TB Megila 15b and *Ein Yakov* there)

Haman was a ruthless foe with genocidal aims. His cunning scheme to destroy all Jews was a first in Jewish history. Yet the ease with which Esther averted his menace—no bribes, no lives, no collateral damage—was equally unsurpassed.⁶ How did she execute that turnabout? Is there a lesson that we can apply to parry *our* enemies with equal grace?

The Talmud says yes! Esther preserved her family tradition and heeded its cautions well. R. Tsadok HaKohen explains what this means. Esther, we’re told, was Mordecai’s niece,⁷ and Mordecai hailed from Binyamin,⁸ a pugnacious tribe⁹ whose quarrelsome ways nearly caused it to go extinct.¹⁰ A remnant was spared but their reprieve was conditional: The survivors must learn to sublimate aggression, for their next provocation would bring certain demise. Threat of extinction is a strong motive to change. The tribe of Binyamin learned to “make peace, not war”—to accomplish their aims by more skillful means. This is the legacy that guided Esther as she prepared to face off with Haman, the kingpin of Amalek in those days when Persia (now Iran) ruled the world.

Now, every virtue requires the wisdom of temperance to employ its golden rule. Damage comes from both overusing or under-applying its holy (but relative) truth. Just as a sailboat does not face into the wind but tacks to the right and then to the left and then to the right again, so is this true for inner work. We hold an ideal but overshoot the mark and then back off (a bit too much) and then exert again. The zigs and zags become more subtle but do not disappear. The Midrash reports that the clansmen of Binyamin followed this tack when they metamorphosed from warriors into diplomats.

Their guiding motto was encapsulated by King Shlomo generations further on, “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat and if thirsty ply him with drink. For in so doing you heap coals of fire upon his head and...God will cause him to make peace with you.”¹¹ The tribesmen of Binyamin reinvented themselves, though their change would only endure if

they could find their dignity inside this new path—if they discovered even sweeter wins than the glory of military triumph.

Yet, they would have to cultivate their inner senses to access these new and more subtle delights—pleasures (infinitely more precious and stable) that lie beneath the surface, on the inner planes. The tribe of Binyamin learned to relish these wholesome and elusive joys—to take true delight in holy things like good and light and consciousness. Binyamin’s worldview completely transformed when it stretched to include the inner planes. A whole new set of factors appeared that—when incorporated into their cost-benefit analysis—changed its verdict and the life-decisions that were based upon it. The tribe of Binyamin looked *in* and *up* and this is what they found:

The entirety of creation is a single universe-encompassing *Adam* that spans from heaven to earth and includes the entire cosmos within its fuzzy bounds. The manufacturing method that HaShem employed to bring forth this *Adam*—as an autonomous creature distinguished by its capacity for free choice—entailed a chaotic interval of history called the “breaking of the vessels,” where HaShem created and destroyed seven worlds.

The shards of these seven shattered kingdoms are called sparks, and they are the raw materials out of which our world is built. They were injured, darkened and dirtied by their ordeal. Every spark must be cleaned, repaired, raised and actualized. Now we are a work in progress. The messianic era is nothing but the completion of this spark-raising effort.

Some of these sparks are already raised and integrated into the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual planes of our world, which comprise the conscious layers of *Adam*. Some of these sparks continue to lie shattered in the dark invisible abyss, which constitutes the unconscious layer of *Adam*’s universe-encompassing soul.

The universe is holographic, which means that *Adam*’s structure repeats itself on every scale. Each individual soul (which is a cell in the cosmic *Adam*) also contains conscious layers (consisting of sparks

that have already been rescued) and unconscious layers (which are sparks connected to its soul-cell that are yet to be raised).

These unactualized (subconscious) sparks are strewn throughout the universe. Wherever they lie, they always remain linked back to their true root, and will eventually return there when the time comes for them to be raised. Until then, these still-fallen sparks are likely to be temporarily lodged within the soul of someone (or something) else. Everything contains a mixture of sparks that truly belongs to it, and sparks that belong to others and must eventually be returned to their true owners.

The only thing that will ultimately make us happy is to collect all the scattered sparks of our soul and finally become whole. The still-fallen-sparks connected to our soul are not yet part of our conscious self. They appear as not-us, for they lie outside the confines of our self-image. The most fallen and estranged of them can even appear as an enemy who is so extremely not-us that he is actually trying to harm us.

An enemy holds an alienated spark connected to our soul that was severely disfigured in the primordial breaking of vessels and that we no longer recognize as a piece of our very own self. In its wounded condition, this disowned sliver of fallen light lacks vision and emotional intelligence. Yet on a primal level it has chosen us as its opponent because it is trying, in its deluded way, to connect back to its root, which really is us.

The sparks of ourselves inside the enemy must be recovered. It is critical to our well-being, and we cannot finish with this world until we get them. The enemy is performing a service by bringing these lost sparks to our attention, though his methods may be hurtful and unscrupulous.

The question becomes: How do we both protect ourselves and reclaim our sparks? What is the most spiritually productive way to succeed at this paradoxical mission? That is the task that Esther faced and she sought the counsel of her ancestral line. The tribesmen of Binyamin became as tenacious in their spark collecting as they had been stiff-necked in their warfare.

King Sha'ul (a Binyamite and Esther's holy forebear)¹² carried this motto inside his heart as he waged his war with Amalek. Yet this was not a time for that, HaShem had made it clear. There is one enemy so fearsome and irredeemable that all compassion for him is misplaced. Amalek will exploit any glimmer of benevolence to advance its godless cause. Sha'ul lost his inner balance and veered to the

side of mercy—his compassion overruled HaShem's explicit will and he let King Agag live. Rav Tsadok explains Sha'ul's lapse of judgment as a consuming concern for the holy spark of R. Shmuel ben Shilat (a tsadik and Talmudic giant) that was trapped inside King Agag's soul. How could Sha'ul not risk his crown to save this precious cargo? Haman's lineage was conceived that night and the spark of R. Shmuel bar Shilat, now saved from extinction, passed with Agag's seed to the great, great grandfather of wicked Haman whose soul touched ground that fateful eve.

Now, five hundred years later in the Purim story, these two pedigrees again converge: Esther, a descendent of Sha'ul (king of the Jews) meets Haman, a descendent of Agag (king of the Amalakites).¹³ And Esther follows her family precedent, but this time for good. Haman, chancellor to the king, promulgated a royal edict that on a certain date, nearly a year away, the populous can annihilate its Jewish neighbors. The king did not realize that he sentenced his beloved Queen Esther to death when he signed this decree. Esther's job was to plead for her people—to reverse the edict and secure amnesty.

Wrapped in light, clothed with Divine inspiration, Esther entered the king's chambers unbidden, an act that carried certain death unless his majesty showed mercy. The king's heart softened—he extended his scepter and allowed Esther to live. “What are you seeking my queen? Ask for anything—up to half the kingdom—and it is yours.”¹⁴ Esther, alone with her instincts, had to find God's holy word that speaks through *them* as surely as He spoke at Sinai. There were no neon signs or prophetic voices (or even a battle plan). She cleaved to the wisdom of her family line and applied its guiding truth:

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat and if thirsty ply him with drink. For in so doing you heap coals of fire upon his head, and...God will cause him to make peace with you.

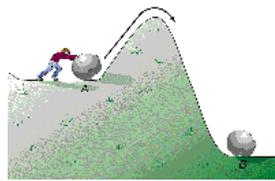
“Let the king and Haman come this day to the wine banquet that I have prepared for him.”¹⁵

Instead of requesting Haman's death right there on the spot (and losing any captive sparks trapped inside his wicked soul), Esther invited Haman *in*. R. Tsadok explains that Esther hoped (by her wine and grace) to arouse the spark of R. Shmuel bar Shilat that was locked inside Haman's soul. If she could revive that inner *tsadik* Haman might awaken to *teshuva*. Who knows what miracle HaShem would employ to redeem his holy nation. The turnabout could easily be for Haman to see the light, renounce his hatred, and dedicate his life to God and good and truth.

Esther’s plan actually worked...for a moment, says R. Tsadok. “Haman [left the banquet] that day joyful and of good heart (שמח וטוב לב).”¹⁶ Scripture does not employ that phrase (*good heart*) casually. It is an honorific term for joy that comes from tasting light (and truth). When referring to more material pleasures, Scripture adds a qualifier, and the phrase then reads, *a kind of good heart* (כטוב לב).¹⁷ There is no qualifier here, notes R. Tsadok. Esther kindled the holy spark and Haman awakened to *teshuva*...for real!

Yet when Haman left Esther’s presence he could not sustain this awakening. His narcissistic tantrum resurged triggered by Mordecai’s refusal to bow. Haman lost his “good heart,” his *teshuva* collapsed, and the spark of R. Shmuel bar Shilat transferred to Mordecai via the channel of hatred directed toward him. And now, without this holy spark to prop him up, to draw down life-juice and to shield him from the fallout of his evil ways, Haman plummeted to his demise.

In the twenty-four hours following Esther’s invite: Haman did *teshuva*, regressed, lost his holy spark to Mordecai, planned Mordecai’s execution, had the gallows made, came for the king’s permission to conduct the hanging *today*, instead received the job of saluting Mordecai by leading him through the city streets and publicly proclaiming his praise, was rushed to Esther’s second tête-à-tête, was exposed for plotting the queen’s demise, fell on top of Esther, and was executed on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai. This dramatic tumble was catalyzed by Esther’s wine party for it awakened a glimmer of *teshuva* in Haman which threw him off-balance and precipitated his downfall.



Rebbe Akiva roused his dozing students with a curious remark: By what merit did Esther rule over 127 provinces? Because her ancestor, Sarah the matriarch, lived for 127 years.¹⁸

Sarah and Esther dealt with threats to Jewish survival in very different ways. When Sarah witnessed Ishmael endangering Isaac’s life she pushed him faraway. When Esther confronted Haman’s genocidal menace she invited him to the party. Ishmael remained an antagonist, while Haman self-destructed.

The *Ohev Yisrael* explains that when evil rises above its station it destabilizes and, like a helium balloon, it bursts and disintegrates. Esther invited Haman up into the inner chamber, into the private banquet between herself and the King. In this rarified atmosphere (where only truth shines) the hostage spark quickens while its captor’s illusion of legitimacy crumbles and a

reversal occurs. The spark overpowers its abductor and their power relations invert. If the captor does *teshuva* the spark will bring him along—he will go through changes but he will be redeemed. If the captor does not accept this reversal and attempts instead to domineer, the spark will break loose and the captor, now bereft of the spark’s merit (and protexia) will tumble to his demise.

How does Esther’s model apply to us? The *Ohev Yisrael* explains that our mind has an inner chamber, called *chokhma*, where only truth resides. It is the place where conceptions and opinions deconstruct, reduce to their elementals, get flushed of impurities, rectify and emerge clean. Lies and illusions cannot survive in *chokhma*’s rarefied air (בחכמה אתברירו).¹⁹ *Chokhma* is also the place of memory, says he. To recall the travesty of Amalek (as the Torah commands)²⁰ is the same as inviting Haman to a private banquet prepared in the inner chamber for ourselves and the King.

The Hebrew letters that comprise the term *chokhma* (חכמה) break down into two smaller words (כח מה), the “power of what,” meaning the power of knowing that you don’t know. To invite your enemy into *chokhma* is to invite him into the place of wonder, above judgment, where there are only questions: Why did HaShem create this enemy? Why did HaShem bring him into my life? How do I reconcile my faith in God’s unswerving goodness with the brutality and injustice He allows in His world? How does HaShem want me to respond to this antagonist? What lessons am I supposed to learn? Are there captive sparks that can (and must) be rescued from this foe? What is the most efficient and least painful way to redeem what I can redeem and be rid of the rest...for good?

The state of consciousness that enables this perspective is called “lots,” i.e., literally *purim*. One goes deeply inward (and upward) to find a place inside that transcends craving and aversion. One’s love-bond to G-d gets so deep, one’s vision so vast, that the truest (and normally hidden) truth becomes real: Every moment is an opportunity for closeness with G-d and it is not clear which builds intimacy more, the joy or the pain, the blessing or the curse, Mordechai or Haman. Would there be Purim without Haman? Who do we thank more for this day?²¹

Esther had two paradoxical goals and refused to compromise either one:

- 1) She insisted on extricating the soul-spark of R. Shmuel bar Shilat (and any other holy sparks trapped inside her Amalekite foe).²²

2) She sought to disarm (and ultimately eliminate) the murderous enemy who was plotting genocide against the Jewish people, as the Torah commands:

...you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; you shall not forget.²³

Esther accomplished her objectives without resorting to force.

A helium balloon stays stable because the atmosphere exerts pressure from the outside that matches the pressure within. But when the balloon rises, the atmosphere thins and the pressure from without no longer offsets the push from within. The balloon distends, destabilizes, pops and disintegrates...just like Haman. The "pressure from within" is the narcissist's inflated sense of power and importance. The "pressure from without" is our judgments and conceptions of him. When, for a moment, we suspend all these certainties and enter a state of "knowing-that-we-don't-know" what is *really* happening here, the pressure changes and, with nothing to push against, the narcissist's ego suddenly over-inflates, bursts, and self-destructs.



As warriors, the tribe of Binyamin learned to fight left-handed to surprise their enemies and throw them off balance.²⁴ Esther, true to her ancestry, applied exactly that strategy on the inner planes.

When we get stuck in our hatred the enemy toughens, says *Heichal HaBrocha*.²⁵ Esther tried something new. She invited the enemy up into the inner, holy chamber of *chokhma*, the place of wonder where certainty and judgment momentarily suspend. And there, suggests *Heichal HaBrocha*, she prayed for her enemy to do real *teshuva*—not a flimsy apology, but real, soul-transforming *teshuva*.²⁶ Esther, a shrewd strategist, understood that this would yield the best possible outcome: The captive sparks of her own countrymen trapped inside her enemy's soul would be safely returned and the enemy itself would cease to be a danger, permanently, without need of a hyper-vigilant and massive army to avert future attacks.

And, according to *Heichal HaBrocho*, this prayer for the enemy's *teshuva* is a failsafe tactic that cannot backfire. Either it achieves its aim by redeeming the

spark and its enemy in tow or—if the enemy lacks all merit—that very prayer for his *teshuva* will (as we see with Haman) accelerate his demise. Either way, the prayer for an enemy's *teshuva* will produce positive results for the one who speaks it (sincerely).²⁷

If your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat: Invite the-thought-of-him into the inner chamber of *chokhma*, the place of wonder and suspension of certainty. The place where a special bread is served (a quality of light) that nourishes truth and exposes lies. The

temporary surrendering of judgment breaks down the old form which expels impurities and allows the elements to rearrange into a new (and hopefully more rectified) structure. In the shorthand of kabbala:

(78 = מזלא = לחם = החכמה).

If he is thirsty give him water to drink: Pray for the holy sparks trapped inside this evildoer. Pray that they find the strength to rise and shine and awaken the enemy himself to a true and complete *teshuva*. "Pour out your heart like water in the Presence of G-d...for the life of your young children [the unborn sparks, like Shmuel ben Shilat, that are trapped in the *other side*], who are faint from famine [from scarcity of light and truth and love and all things holy]..."²⁸

For in so doing you heap coals of fire upon his head: A *teshuva* process almost always entails some fiery purgation. Perhaps it is the burning shame a person feels for their past misdeeds, or perhaps the sufferings of life. Either way, these purgations cleanse the soul and facilitate (possibly even initiate) the *teshuva*.

And HaShem will cause him to make peace with you: Either because he transforms into a true ally or self-destructs.

Let it be, on this very Purim day, as we reenact Esther's wine party (on both the outer and the inner planes) that we access the place above knowing—the Chamber of Knowing-That-We-Don't-Know (א"לול) which is open to the public on Purim—and as we stand inside that holy inner recess let us remember our enemies and pray for their complete and total teshuva exactly as we pray for our own three times daily. ²⁹And the power of our collective prayer echoing from that inner sanctum should catalyze the cosmic turnabout—sparks should rise, evil should disintegrate and mashiach should appear, NOW.

EndNotes

¹ R. Tsadok HaKohen, *Pri Tsadik*, Purim 2 (part 2).

² R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, *Ohev Yisrael*, *Parshat Zachor* 1.

³ R. Y.Y. Y. Safrin (the Komarna Rebbe), *Netiv Mitzvotcha*, *netiv hayichud*, *shvil* 6, *ot* 3-5. This material is the subject of a new book, about to be published by Sarah Yehudit Schneider, entitled *You Are What You Hate—A Spiritually Productive Approach To Enemies*.

⁴ Esther 5:4. This is also the one place in the *Megilla* where the letters of God's essential name appear in their proper order as the acronym of the four Hebrew words (יבוא הלך והמך היום), "...let the king and Haman come today..."

⁵ Proverbs 25:21.

⁶ The real turnabout occurred with Haman's defeat. The subsequent war was a *fait accompli*. Mordecai and Esther's new decree only permitted the Jews to kill those who took up arms and attacked them despite the king's obvious change of heart. Haman's original decree functioned as a "strange attractor." It drew the hate mongers out from the pack, those who could not control their bloodlust. The gate now opened, the fantasy let loose, there were those who could not hold themselves back. They alone were slain by the Jews on that fateful pre-Purim day.

⁷ Esther 2:7. The Midrash elaborates that Mordecai's father hailed from Binyamin. while his mother's roots were Yehuda.

⁸ Esther 2:5.

⁹ Judges 3:15-21; Judges 20:16; 1 Chronicles 12:2; 1 Chronicles 8:40 ; 2 Chronicles 14:7.

¹⁰ Judges 19-21.

¹¹ Proverbs 25:21.

¹² T argum Sheni (Quoted by Shlomo Alkabez, *Menot Halevi* [Venice, 1512]).

¹³ *ibid*.

¹⁴ Esther 5:3.

¹⁵ Esther 5:4

¹⁶ Esther 5:9

¹⁷ Esther 1:10

¹⁸ MR Gen. 58:3

¹⁹ Zohar 2:254b; R. Isaac Luria (Ari), *Aytz Chaim*, 8:5 (and throughout his writings 35 times).

²⁰ Dev. 25:17.

²¹ Sarah Idit (should be Yehudit) Schneider, *PurimBursts* PurimBurst 1995, pp. 21-25.

²² *Heichal HaBrocha* in *Ketem Ofir* 7:1 suggests that there was more than one spark in Haman, the Amalekite.

²³ Deut 25:19.

²⁴ Judges 3:15-21 ; Judges 20:16 ;1 Chronicles 12:2.

²⁵ *Netiv Mitzvotcha*, *netiv hayichud*, *shvil* 6, *ot* 4-5.

²⁶ There is no free lunch in the universe. When a person does *teshuva* they must pay the full spiritual debt that they incurred from their wrong-doings. Their *teshuva* allows them to pay some portion of that debt through their remorse. To pray for someone's *teshuva* is not a request for them to be relieved of the measure-for-measure consequences of their deeds. It is simply asking that they realize the error of their ways, turn their lives to good and God, and make their reparations in this world, now.

²⁷ And really, the prayer for an enemy's *teshuva* produces the best possible outcome for *all* parties involved. It might be that the best thing for the evildoer (who is not going to do *teshuva*) is to self-destruct and in that way stop generating more spiritual debts, which are very painful to repay.

²⁸ Lamentations 3:19.

²⁶ *Heichal HaBrocha* 5:4.

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