

# What is the Megillah's Message for Jews of the Diaspora?



What is the purpose of Purim? What is the focus of our celebration? Certainly, we celebrate our salvation from annihilation. But beyond that basic point, the Megillah is rather ambiguous regarding its ultimate religious message. The story is not given a theological frame. Nowhere does God explicate the takeaway lessons that we are supposed to glean from the events of Purim.

This ambiguity leaves Purim as a form of a religious gestalt image—one that registers differently for different people. Jewish thinkers who engage in close readings of the Megillah can legitimately depict its ultimate message in radically divergent ways.

In this essay, I would like to briefly trace two contrasting perspectives about the message of Megillat Esther regarding the Diaspora-Land of Israel divide. All concur that the story of Megillat Esther unfolds in the Diaspora—it begins and ends in Shushan. What this means, however, is hotly debated. Some describe Purim as celebrating a certain form of diasporic existence, while others understand Megillat Esther to be nothing short of a Religious Zionist manifesto.

## **Purim as a Holiday of the Diaspora**

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The Lubavitcher Rebbe often described Purim as a Diaspora-centric holiday. This shaped his understanding of the Megillah's actionable lessons, as well as the holiday's underlying theology.

On a practical plane, the Rebbe highlighted Mordechai as a model for American Jewry. One key element here is Mordechai's conduct at the Megillah's close, when he is appointed as the viceroy of the Persian empire. Through an intricate textual analysis, the Rebbe argued that Mordechai remains a recognizable and proud Jew even as he works for the material and spiritual betterment of society at large. This, the Rebbe emphasized, is an important message for American Jews who were reaching positions of influence in American society. On several occasions, the Rebbe pointed to Mordechai as an example of how a Jew is to live when he is welcomed and integrated into his country in the Diaspora.

The Megillah's messages to Jews in exile connect to a deeper theological claim about Purim. The Rebbe noted the Purim story does not conclude with a triumphant return to the Land of Israel. The salvation of Purim takes place in the depths of exile itself. This teaches that the Jew's mission is not to flee exile, but to transform it by bringing the light of Torah and God to every corner of the world.

As the Rebbe said:

The main matter of Purim is that even when the Jewish People are in the depths of exile, nonetheless there is a miracle of transformation.

Purim demonstrates that the Jewish People can transform even the dark exile itself into a place shining with the light of godliness. The Rebbe continued that this prefigures the messianic reality in which all things in the world will shine with the light of divinity:

This form of service of God which transforms [things that are not overtly connected to God] is akin to the service of the messianic future ... in which the three impure *kelipot* ... will be transformed into merits through a return to God out of love.

The Rebbe goes on to explain that Purim represents the transformation of all things exilic—non-Jewish society and impure elements of the world and ourselves—into vehicles of godliness. Importantly, this aspect of redemption does not require changing one's locale.

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This understanding of the message of Purim dovetails with the Rebbe's decision to not encourage a mass aliyah after the founding of the State of Israel. Several factors shaped his thinking, but one central idea stands out in this context: Exile is part of God's plan. Being outside of the Land of Israel can be seen as an act of Divine providence. There is work to be done in the exile itself.

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According to Tanya, the purpose of creation is for God to have a *dira batachtonim*, a dwelling place in our lowly material world. The Rebbe interpreted this as a global mission. Every place on Earth must become a fitting home for God. Of course, the Land of Israel is the ultimate destination of the Jewish People. But for the time being, the Jewish People have a mission in the Diaspora itself, be it Shushan or America.

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The Lubavitcher Rebbe understood Purim as a holiday celebrating the ability to transform everything—including the Diaspora—into a fitting home for God.

### **Purim as a Call to Return to the Land of Israel**

Several rabbis and thought leaders, mostly from the Religious Zionist world, offer a contrasting message of Megillat Esther. They argue that in addition to the location of the story, the historical context of the Megillah is key to understanding the book's place in Tanach. Achashveirosh's reign occurred after the declaration of Cyrus, which allowed the Jewish People to return to the Land of Israel. Yet only a handful of Jews took advantage of Cyrus's goodwill and actually made aliyah. The majority of the Jewish People stayed in the Diaspora.

According to this school of thought, this sense of exilic complacency triggered God's anger and brought about Haman's decree. This was epitomized through their participation in Achashveirosh's party which the Talmud describes as celebrating the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*.

As Rav Shmuel Eliyahu cites from the *Chatam Sofer*:

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As the Jews were living in the quiet and tranquil Persian empire, they did not desire the Land of Israel nor King David and they were worried and concerned lest the end of the 70 years [of exile] arrive. In fact, when the time came, only 40,000 Jews returned ... Therefore, the Jewish masses were happy and enjoyed the party of Achashveirosh.

The Megillah's opening sin is the embrace of exile.

If the Jewish People's sin was their enthusiasm in exile, then the purpose of the story must be to move the Jewish People closer to their redemptive return to the Land of Israel. Accordingly, Rav Shmuel Eliyahu notes that the *Shem MiShmuel* associates Ezra's immigration to the Land of Israel with the religious awakening that took place at the end of the Megillah. In addition, it was Esther's son Daryavesh who allowed the Jews to finish building the *Beit HaMikdash*.

What, then, is the takeaway from the story for Jews in the Diaspora? Ultimately, it is to not be complacent in exile and to take advantage of God-given opportunities to return to the Land of Israel. Rabbanit Shani Taragin describes Megillat Esther as "one of the most Zionistic books in all of Tanach." Megillat Esther, read together with the other biblical books of the Persian period, is a sustained call for aliyah.

This perspective on the Megillah's message complements Rav Hershel Schachter's explanation of the legality of the rabbis instituting the new holiday of Purim. Drawing on dozens of sources, he argues that the key element that justified the establishment of Purim as a holiday is that the events of the Megillah advanced the process of redemption.

The Talmud teaches that the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek must precede the building of the *Beit HaMikdash*. Accordingly, the rabbis viewed their defeat of Haman and his allies as the fulfillment of a crucial prerequisite to returning to the Land of Israel and rebuilding the *Beit HaMikdash*. In Rav Schachter's view, Purim is the model for our contemporaneous celebration of Yom HaAtzmaut.

## **What Now?**

Both of these perspectives on Purim emerged from serious, careful Torah scholarship. Both present coherent readings of the Megillah and of Purim. Yet they leave the reader with opposing orientations toward the relationship between the Land of Israel and the Diaspora today.

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Some of this confusion is inherent to the nature of Torah study in general, which assumes that divinely inspired words are open to multiple interpretations. Perhaps, though, there is a unique Purim angle to this ambiguity. No matter how one slices Megillat Esther, the story unfolds without explicit prophetic predictions or guidance. God is not overtly present, leaving the Jews of the time to try to make sense of the events on their own.

We, as contemporary readers of the story, have the advantage of knowing the sequence of events and the conclusion of the saga. However, we are also included in this confusion through not having a single authoritative perspective on the overall message of Purim. The ambiguity of the text of the Megillah that we reckon with is akin to the lack of clarity that the actual Jews of Shushan must have experienced.

Yet for all this ambiguity, one message is shared by all religious readers of the Megillah: that God is in charge of the Jewish People's destiny. Even as we may not see God's hand in the moment nor understand the purpose of certain historical events, nonetheless, God protects His people. God cares for us and guides our historical trajectory.

Does the Megillah teach us to elevate the exile or to run towards the Land of Israel? It is up for debate. But both sides agree on this: God is always there with us, watching us from behind the wall and peering through the cracks. In a world that lacks prophecy we may not know precisely what God wants of us, but we must never stop looking for Him or feeling His presence. As Rambam writes, the ultimate message of Purim is that God is close to us whenever we call out to Him. And that is certainly something to celebrate.

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