

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter LVIII: Esther

Essay 1. Salvation from the evil inclination

מגילה פָּרַק קמ"א רב נחמן בַּר יִצְחָק פָּתַח לָהּ פִּתְחָא לְהַאי פִּרְשֵׁתָא מִהֲבָא, "לִוְלֵי ה' שְׁהִיָּה לָנוּ בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם", אָדָם וְלֹא מֶלֶךְ ע"כ. קוֹשֶׁה מֵה חִידוּשׁ לָנוּ בִּדְרָשָׁא זֹה, וְהֵלֵךְ אֲדַרְבָּא נִמְן לָנוּ מִקוּם לְהַקְשׁוֹת אִם הָאָמַת שְׁלֹא קָם פִּי אִם אָדָם וְאֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ, אִם כֵּן הִנֵּס שְׁל הַהֲצֵלָה אֵינוּ כָּל כּוֹף גְּדוֹל, וְלֹא שִׁיף לִזְמַר "לִוְלֵי ה' שְׁהִיָּה לָנוּ".

Tractate Megillah, first chapter:

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak opened [his teachings on Megillat Esther] **with an introduction from here: “Were it not for the L-rd Who was with us, when a man rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us.”**¹ [It says] **“a man”** [who rose up against us and] **not “a king.”**

- Megillah 11a

Rashi says that “a man” refers to Haman,² and if so, “a king” was Ahasuerus. **A difficulty is that what is the novelty there for us in this explanation? To the contrary, it gives us room to question: If it’s true that only a man arose and not a king, if so, the miracle of salvation was not so great, and it’s not relevant to say, “Were it not for the L-rd Who was with us, when a man rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us.”**

וְכַדֵּי לְתַרְזֵי קוֹשֵׁיָא זֶה מִשּׁוּם הֵכִי רַב נַחְמָן בַּר יִצְחָק הִיָּה פּוֹתַח בְּמַגִּילַת אֶסְתֵּר בְּפָסוּק זֶה, וְהֵינּוּ שְׂבִינְס הַפּוּרִים נוֹדַע לָנוּ בְּבִירוֹר שְׁהִקְב"ה מְקַדִּים לָנוּ רְפוּאָה לְמַפֵּה, כְּמוֹ שְׁאָמְרוּ ו'ל אֶלְמֵלָא אֵיגְרוֹת הִרְאִשׁוֹנוֹת לֹא נִשְׁתַּיִר מִשׁוֹנְאֵיהֶן שְׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁרִיד וּפְלִיט".

In order to resolve this question, Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak opens his interpretation **in Megillat Esther with this verse, that through the miracle of Purim it is clearly known to us that the Holy One, Blessed be He, provides a remedy before an affliction.** This is as [the Rabbis] of blessed memory said in Megillah 12b, **“Were it not for the first letters [sent by Ahasuerus, which led people to lose respect for the king], there would not have been left among**

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¹ Ps. 124:2–3.

² Rashi on Megillah 11a.

the enemies of the Jewish people, [a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves], ‘**a remnant or a refugee.**’”³ That is, Ahasuerus sent two batches of letters. In the first batch, he wrote: “That every man shall wield authority in his own house and speak according to the language of his people.”⁴ The people felt that this was obvious, and began to ridicule the king. In his second batch of letters, he called upon the people to destroy the Jews. Since the people were by now accustomed to ridicule the king and disregard his directives, they didn’t immediately harm the Jewish people.

ובכל שאר הניסים ואפילו הנס של יציאת מצרים לא נודע ממנו זה בברור, שאם נאמר כדברי העשרה מאמרות (במאמר אם כל חי) שהקב"ה עשה שקודם ישלחו אחיו על יוסף ואחר כך ישלח על המצריים, דאי לאו הכי לא היה חס ושלום תקומה לישראל לצאת מקליפת מצרים, והיינו שהקדים רפואה למכה, הלא כנגד זה יש מי שסובר שעקר טעם של הגלות מצרים היה אדרבא בשביל חטא מכירת יוסף, ואם ממה שהבטיח הקב"ה לאברהם "ואחרי-כן יצאו ברכש גדול", גם זה לא מקרי רפואה קודם למכה, ד"משל אומרים לצרעה לא מעוקציה ולא מדובשיה".

In all of the other miracles, even in the case of the Exodus from Egypt, this concept that G-d first provides a remedy before an affliction is not known as clearly. You might disagree, and think to say, as the words of *Asara Ma'amarot (Em Kol Chai, Part 1, se'if 8)*,⁵ that the Holy One, Blessed be He, made it so that Joseph’s brothers would first dominate him before the Egyptians would rule over him, because if not this way, then G-d forbid there would have been no hope for Israel to escape from the spiritual impurity of Egypt. If so, this would indeed be seen as providing healing before the affliction. I.e., with this thinking, the remedy before the affliction of the Egyptian exile was the fact that Joseph had been placed there, obligating G-d to later redeem his descendants, per the halacha to redeem a Jew who has been sold by his fellow Jew as a slave to an idolater.⁶

However, contrary to this is one who holds that the principal reason for the Egyptian exile was, to the contrary, because of the sin of the sale of Joseph. I.e., not only was Joseph’s sale to Egypt not the remedy before the affliction of the exile, rather, the Egyptian exile would not have even occurred if the brothers hadn’t sold him!

Even though the Holy One, Blessed be He, promised Abraham, “and in the end they shall go free with great wealth,”⁷ this would not be considered a remedy before the affliction, but rather a promise of reparations after the affliction ends. There is “a parable, people say to the bee, ‘Neither [give me] your sting, nor your honey.’”⁸ The benefit of the honey is not necessarily worth the pain of the sting; i.e., the reparations of wealth received from the Egyptians did not make the exile worthwhile, and cannot be considered as part of the remedy for the exile.

³ Joshua 8:22.

⁴ Esther 1:22.

⁵ Rabbi Menachem Azaria da Fano (“Rema M’Pan”) (1548–1620), Italian Kabbalist and commentator on the Talmud. *Asara Ma'amarot* (“Ten Utterances”) was published in Venice in 1597.

⁶ *Asara Ma'amarot*, *ibid.*, referencing Lev. 25:47–48.

⁷ Gen. 15:14.

⁸ Cf. Rashi on Num. 22:12 (based on Midrash Tanchuma, Balak 6:1).

אֵלָא וְדַאי שְׁבַפּוּרִים בְּלִבְד נֹדַע לְכָל הָעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה לְהַקְדִּים לָנוּ רְפוּאָה לְמַכָּה, שְׁכַתְּבַת הַכְּלִי יָקָר בְּסוּף שְׁמוּאֵל עַל פְּסוּק "ה' סִלְעִי וּמַצְדָּתִי וּמִפְלִטִי־לִי", כִּי "לֵה' הִישׁוּעָה" מִכָּל צָרָה בְּהַקְדִּים רְפוּאָה לְמַכָּה, וְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶת הָאָדָם מִכָּל חַטָּא וְאַשְׁמָה שֶׁהֵם צָרוֹת צָרוֹרוֹת לַנֶּפֶשׁ הַרוּחָנִית, וְזֶהוּ שְׁכַתּוֹב "ה' סִלְעִי וּמַצְדָּתִי וּמִפְלִטִי־לִי", לֹא מֵהַזֹּלַת כִּי אִם לִי, רְצָה לוֹמַר מִפְּלִט אוֹתִי מִמְּנֵי מִמֶּשׁ, שְׁלֵא יַעֲשֶׂה זְדוֹן לְבִי לְנַפְשִׁי מֵה שְׁלֵא יוּכַל הָאוֹיֵב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

Rather, certainly for Purim alone, the kindness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is known to the entire world, to provide the means for healing before the affliction. This is as the *Kli Yakar*⁹ wrote in his commentary at the end of Samuel on the verse, “The L-rd is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, for me.”¹⁰ Why does it add “for me”? For “deliverance is the L-rd’s”¹¹ from every distress in advancing a remedy before an affliction. He saves man from sin and guilt, which are the greatest spiritual sufferings. This is the meaning of what is written, “The L-rd is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, for me,” not a deliverer from others, but from myself. The intent is to say, “give me refuge from myself, that my heart should not lead my soul to sin, something that even an enemy cannot do.”

וּכְיוּצָא בְּזֶה פִּירֵשׁ הַר"ב[ע] "בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם" שֶׁהוּא בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ הַכֹּחַ שֶׁבָּנוּ בְּמַה שְׁאַנּוּ אָדָם, כִּי בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ הֵיכָר צָפוּן בְּמַה שֶׁהוּא אָדָם, הַקַּב"ה הִנֵּה לָנוּ לְעִזְרָה וְהַצִּילָנוּ מִיָּדוֹ, וְסִיבַת הַצִּלְתָּנוּ הִיְתָה שְׁלֵא בְּלַעֲוֵנוּ הָאוֹיְבִים הַקָּמִים עָלֵינוּ, וְהִינּוּ דִפְתַח בְּלִשׁוֹן יְחִיד "בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם" וְסִיִּים בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבִּים "אֲזִי חַיִּים בְּלַעֲוֵנוּ" עכ"ל.

Similarly, the Rabbi *Ba'al Akedah* explains the text, “When a man rose up against us” as referring not to an external enemy, such as Haman, but to the power within us as human beings, i.e., the evil inclination. For when the evil inclination rises up against us, it is within our nature as humans. The Holy One, Blessed be He, was our help and saved us from it. That was the reason for our salvation, such that our enemies, who rose up against us, did not consume us. Thus, the verse opened with singular language, “when a man rose up against us,” referring to our evil inclination, and concluded with plural language, “they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us,” referring to the physical enemies that can have power over us when we weaken ourselves with our evil inclination.¹²

⁹ Samuel ben Abraham Laniado, *Kli Yakar* (Venice 1603), a commentary on the Prophets, not to be confused with the more famous *Kli Yakar* commentary on Torah authored by Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (Lublin 1602).

¹⁰ II Sam. 22:2.

¹¹ Ps. 3:9.

¹² Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama (c. 1420–1494) (“the Ba'al Akeida”), *Akeidat Yitzchak* (Salonica 1522) 61:1:5.

ונודע שישׁרָאֵל שְׁבָאוֹתוֹ הַדּוֹר נִתְחַיְיבוּ כְּלִיָּה לְפִי שֶׁהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְצִלְמֵם שֶׁל נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר, אֱלֹא הוֹאִיל שֶׁלֹּא עָשׂוּ אֱלֹא לְפָנִים מִירְאַת הָעוֹנֵשׁ שֶׁל נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר, אִם הִקַּב"ה לֹא עָשָׂה עִמָּהֶם אֱלֹא לְפָנִים, וְאִם הָיוּ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִוִּים לְצִלְמֵם אִם בְּלִבָּם לֹא הִיָּתָה לָהֶם תְּקוּמָה חֹס וְשָׁלוֹם. נְעוּד אָמְרוּ ו"ל עֲבִירָה גּוֹרְרַת עֲבִירָה, וּמִי שֶׁמִּתְחִיל בְּעֲבִירָה קִלְהַ הַיֵּצֵר הַרַע מוֹשְׁכּוֹ לְעֲבִירָה חֲמוּרָה, וְזֶה דָּרְכוֹ כָּל הַיָּמִים, בְּתַחֲלָה "הַלֵּךְ" וּלְבִסּוֹף "אוֹרֵחַ" וּלְבִסּוֹף בְּעַל הַבַּיִת.

It is known that the Israelites of that generation were deserving of destruction because they bowed to the idol of Nebuchadnezzar.¹³ However, since they only did so for appearance, out of fear of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment, the Holy One, Blessed be He only dealt with them for the sake of appearance.¹⁴ They only pretended to worship the idol, so G-d only pretended that they would be destroyed.

Had they bowed to the idol even in their hearts, they would not have had a way to escape, Heaven forbid. Furthermore, [the Rabbis] of blessed memory said, "A transgression leads to another transgression,"¹⁵ and regarding one who begins with a light transgression, the evil inclination leads him to a serious transgression.

In the Torah, the prophet Nathan criticizes David with a parable: "One day, a traveler [הַלֵּךְ] [*helech*] came to the rich man, but he was loath to take anything from his own flocks or herds to prepare a meal for the guest [אוֹרֵחַ] [*oreach*] who had come to him; so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man [אִישׁ] [*ish*] who had come to him."¹⁶ David condemned the rich man in the parable, and Nathan explained that was representative of David himself. In the Gemara, Rava cites this verse, noting that **this is the way throughout the days: Initially**, [the verse] called [the evil inclination] "**a traveler**" [coming from far away]. **Subsequently**, [the verse] calls it "**a guest**" [as one welcomes it]. **Ultimately**, [the verse] calls it "man" [a more significant title], as the evil inclination became **the homeowner**.¹⁷

Thus, as we read Ps. 124:2–3, "Were it not for the L-rd Who was with us, when a man rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us," we can understand "a man" who rose against us as referring to our own evil inclination.

ומעתה שישׁרָאֵל כְּכָר הִתְחִילוּ לַחֲטוֹא בְּמַעֲשָׂה, הוּא גַם גְּדוֹל שֶׁהִפְחֵם שִׁישׁ בָּהֶם בְּמַה שֶׁהֵם אָדָם דִּהְיִינוּ הַיֵּצֵר הַרַע, לֹא הִמְשִׁיכּוֹן לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת אִם בְּלִבָּם, שֶׁלְפִי הַטָּבַע וּמִנְהַג הָעוֹלָם הָיָה רְאוּי לְהִיּוֹת כִּף כִּי עֲבִירָה גּוֹרְרַת עֲבִירָה, אֱלֹא וּדְאִי שָׁמָּה שֶׁלֹּא הִמְשִׁיכֶם הַיֵּצֵר הַרַע הָיָה מִפְּנֵי ה' שֶׁהָיָה בְּעֲזָרְתָנוּ וְעַל זֶה זָכִינוּ לְגְאוּלָּה.

Now, since Israel had already begun to sin with their actions, it was a great miracle that the power within them, that is, the evil inclination, did not lead them to bow even with their hearts. According to nature and the custom of the world, this would have been expected, because sin leads to sin. But the fact that the evil inclination did not lead them in this way was because of G-d, that He was our help, and this is why we merited the redemption.

¹³ Dan. chapter 3; Megillah 12a.

¹⁴ Megillah 12a.

¹⁵ Pirkei Avot 4:2.

¹⁶ II Sam. 12:4.

¹⁷ Sukkah 52b; see also Gen. Rabbah 22:6.

ומשום הכי ר' נחמן התחיל לפרש מגילה זו בפסוק זה, שהקב"ה הקדים לנו רפואה להצילנו מיד הנצח הרע דהיינו פח אדם בשביל שהוא אדם, שזה היה יכול להרע לנפשנו יותר ממה שהיה יכול לעשות המלך בעצמו. ולפי שלא היינו ראויים לגס בשביל חטא ההשתחוויה נתן לנו המכה, כדי שמתבאר הרפואה רפואת הנפש ורפואת הגוף, כמו שכתב החידושי אגדות בפירוש "כי לא ענה מלבו ויגה בני-איש" על האי דאמרינן התם אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהם אלא לפנים ועיי"ש.

For this reason, Rav Nachman began his interpretation of the Megillah with this verse. He was explaining that the Holy One, Blessed be He, first provided healing for us, to save us from the evil inclination, the power of man, which could have harmed our souls more than the king could have done by himself. Since we were not deserving of the miracle because of our sin of bowing down, [G-d] gave us the affliction, so that the healing would come, the healing of the soul and the healing of the body.

As explained by the *Chidushei Aggadot* (Maharsha in Megillah 12a), in explaining the verse, "For He does not willfully bring grief or affliction to man,"¹⁸ that as it says there in the Gemara, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, only acted with them for the sake of appearance.

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¹⁸ Lam. 3:33.