

Amalek and the Torah of Purim

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The Purim most of us celebrate is one that marks a moment of redemption – when a descendent of Amalek tried and failed to destroy the Jews. It is the holiday that best encapsulates the sentiment “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat”. And yet, Jewish thinkers have also understood Purim as a day that touches upon the cornerstone of Judaism itself: the covenant between God and Israel via the acceptance of the Torah. How is this connection formed? What is the relationship between Torah and Purim? And, in a calendar already chock full of holidays celebrating the Torah, what place is left for Purim?

In order to understand this aspect of the holiday, it is important to reflect first on the ways that the giving of the Torah is marked on the Jewish calendar more generally. Of these days, the most well-known is Shavuot. The biblical text relays that the Torah was first given to the People of Israel in the third month (Exod. 19.)—i.e., Sivan—and early rabbinic texts explicitly state that this occurred on the month’s sixth day—i.e., the holiday of Shavuot (*Seder Olam*, Ch. 5). The Shavuot liturgy brims with references to this theme, and the holiday is even referred to as *Hag Matan Torah*—“the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah.”

Of course, not everything goes as planned. Moses breaks the Tablets, and after some pleading on his part, the Torah is given yet again—this time on the holiday of Yom Kippur. To be sure, the theme of Torah does not come up in the liturgy for the day. But the holiday is, at its essence, about the opportunity for second chances, and the giving of the Tablets for a second time—this time, written in Moses’s hand—is a model for the process of *teshuvah*, repentance. A few days later, Jews celebrate Simhat Torah, marking the completion of the Torah just as they read of Moses’s tragic death at the end of Deuteronomy. These holidays thus reflect varied aspects of the Torah and its acceptance:

Shavuot marks the covenant itself; Yom Kippur introduces the concept of repentance, without which Torah observance would be impossible; and Simhat Torah marks the continued vitality of the Torah after the lawgiver himself, Moses, no longer leads the people.

In Hasidic traditions, Purim introduces yet another aspect: It is imagined as a celebration of the Oral Torah, the *Torah shebe’al peh*. In a famous Talmudic passage, God is depicted as hanging Mt. Sinai over the People of Israel, threatening them to accept the Torah—or else. The passage ends by saying that despite this lack of agency, the Jews eventually accepted the Torah willingly at the conclusion of the Esther story: “Rava said: nonetheless, they returned and accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, as it is written ‘the Jews fulfilled and accepted (Esther 9.27)—they fulfilled what they had already accepted’” (b. Shabbat 88a). While the Torah was essentially forced on them at Sinai, in Shushan the Jews accepted it by choice. In another rendition, found in the *Midrash Tanhuma* (Noah, 3), this refers not to the Torah writ large but specifically to the Oral Torah, for while the Israelites willingly accepted the Written Torah, the Oral Torah needed to be forced upon them due to its “myriad commandments, easy ones and difficult ones,” and was taken on by choice only in the time of Esther.

R. Tsadok haCohen of Lublin (1823–1900) connects this idea to a concurrent historical event from the rabbinic imagination—the cessation of prophecy (*Pri Tzedek*, Mikeitz 7, relying on *Seder Olam*, Ch. 30). In R. Tsadok’s interpretation, when prophecy was waning and God’s presence no longer felt, Jews filled the void by reaffirming their commitment to the Oral Torah. Purim, then, is a holiday that marks the cessation of prophecy and the acceptance of the Oral Torah—a mode of Torah that contains “myriad commandments, easy ones and difficult

ones,” but also one that necessitates human agency and that requires analysis, intervention, and interpretation on the part of its adherents.

But our celebration of the Oral Torah on Purim is threatened by the presence of Amalek. In the Hasidic tradition, Amalek is connected to *safeg*, doubt, its numerical equivalent. The absence of prophecy—indeed, the lack of any explicit mention of God in the Scroll of Esther—could lead one down a different path, towards one of doubt, and to ways of knowing and making sense of the world that conflict with the rabbinic path of Oral Torah. In this framework, Amalek is re-imagined not as an external threat to the nation, but as an internal threat located within the individual psyche. The Talmud asks, “Where is Haman found in the Torah?” and the rabbis answer with a pun, “From the tree—*ha-min ha-etz*—I commanded you not to eat” (Gen. 3.11). Similarly, it asks, “Where do we find Esther in the Torah?” and answers that it is in the verse, “I will surely hide—*hester astir*—My face” (Deut. 31.18)” (b. Hullin 139b). The danger presented by Haman, Amalek’s descendant, comes about on account of the absence of prophecy and the resulting difficulty of finding God. And the danger is that one will choose not the Oral Torah, but some other way to lean into this doubt, a way that is likened to eating from the forbidden fruit.

It may seem odd to celebrate the Oral Torah not by knowing and interpreting the Law, but rather, by *not* knowing—by confusing oneself to the point of “being unable to differentiate between the wickedness of Haman and the blessedness of Mordechai” (b. Megillah 7b). But for R. Tsadok and other Hasidic thinkers, the carnivalesque is indeed an appropriate celebration, as it is through not knowing and through “Purim Torah” that one reflects on why it is that they *want* to know, checking their intentions as they fill the void. And thus, as a celebration of the Oral Torah—the analytical Torah of human interpretation—Purim reminds us that we must be aware of where our doubt takes us: is it to a place of Amalek-like urges, or to a place of serving God?