

# A Day Like Purim

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In the last edition of "Kol HaKehila" (Pesach 2011) I pictured the surprising relationship between Pesach and Purim. Here I'd like to draw your attention to the even more surprising relationship between Purim and Yom Kippur.

The biblical name of this day is *Yom haKippurim*, spelled in the Torah defectively—i.e., without a *yud* in the first syllable: יום הכפרים (Lev 23:27 et al.). The Kabbalists found new meaning by vocalizing the consonants slightly differently. They explained that *Yom haKippurim* is so called because it is a day like Purim—*yom k'Purim* (Sefer Tikkune haZohar II: Tikkun 21, 57b).

***On Purim salvation comes from God alone, though God is not mentioned in the megillah.***

***On Yom Kippur God is mentioned over and over, but all is in our hands.***

Indeed, according to Midrash Esther Rabba, King Ahashverosh wore the holy garments of the High Priest (EstR 2:1), and so did Vashti (EstR 3:9). Midrash Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez says that the seven-day banquet in Shushan, to which the king invited all the people of the city (Est 2:18), took place during the Ten Days of Repentance and was to run through Yom Kippur (Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez 1:5). Mordechai urged the Jews of Shushan not to be tempted by the king's invitation, but to fast and pray and do repentance. However, the Jews preferred to go to the banquet (EstR 7:13).

The dates of the midrash are not to be understood historically, but metaphorically. They are used to interpret the events told in the megillah. They link the last days of Vashti and the first days of Esther at the royal court in Persia with the days of repentance and Yom Kippur. It is up to us to try to understand this link.

On both days, on Purim as on Yom Kippur, the important event involves divination: on Purim the casting of lots (*purim*) that represent annihilation, on Yom Kippur the use of lots (*goralot*) to determine which of two goats will become a sacrifice, and which will be sent to the wilderness—i.e., selected for life (Mishna Yomah 4:1). On both days Jews are saved from a disastrous decree. On Purim this decree would have ensured the Jews' physical destruction; on Yom Kippur it is about spiritual destruction. But on Purim salvation comes from God alone, though God is not mentioned in the megillah. In contrast, on Yom Kippur God is mentioned over and over, but all is in our hands—it is essential that we humans repent. Our observance on both days is marked by atypical behaviour, but whereas on Purim we are extremely frivolous, feasting and drinking to excess, on Yom Kippur we behave as if we wish to deny our humanity: we fast and do nothing but pray. Purim is our most physical day of the year, Yom Kippur our most spiritual.

All our festivals and fast days are half spiritual and half physical. Usually on our festivals we eat and drink and pray and study; and on our fast days we typically follow our usual occupations. On Purim, however, we are only physical, on Yom Kippur only spiritual. Neither is a normal situation, as without the other either our body or our spirituality would die. These

two days need each other like the two sides of a coin.

Aristotle taught (and Maimonides took this from him) that life is best lived in the middle, never at the extremes. To find the right path, somebody who tends to one extreme should try living at the other. For example, a very shy person should deliberately behave as assertively as possible. As a shy person can never become really assertive, he or she will end up somewhere in the middle. Purim and Yom Kippur may serve a similar educational purpose. By spending one day focusing purely on the physical, and another focusing purely on the spiritual, we may be able, during the rest of the year, to find the happy medium: the place precisely between caring for our material needs and building our spirituality.

Purim starts with a fast (*Ta'anit Esther*) and Yom Kippur with a feast. The food before and after the fast on Yom Kippur is therefore not just an emergency solution to enable us to survive the day. It is an essential part of Yom Kippur. It reminds us that these 25 hours are unusual, a way of bringing ourselves to an extreme, to ensure that our lives include a bit of spirituality every day. In this, Yom Kippur takes a little bit further the reminder carried by the brachot we say every time we eat: we acknowledge that the material earth, the place of our physical being, is God's. ■■■

