The Purim Paradox: Guest blog by Rabbi Alan Zelenetz

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Arguably the happiest day of the Jewish year, traditionally originating in the time of the ancient Persian Empire, perhaps the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., Purim is considered an occasion so joyous that its festive atmosphere pervades the entire month of Adar in which it occurs. This is capsulized in a famous dictum in tractate Ta’anit, “When Adar arrives rejoicing is boundless.” The spirit of Purim is perhaps no better represented today than in the national observance in Israel, where the cast of characters includes citizens of all stripes, secular to Haredi, and where Purim sets the stage not only for centuries-old religious observances first and foremost, but for a countrywide carnival as well, from parades in Jerusalem to street parties in Haifa and even an annual nighttime Purim Zombie Walk in Tel Aviv.

And yet, one of the lesser known ironies of the Jewish cycle of holidays is that Purim as we know it – with its Megillah and masks, its sharing of mishloach manot with friends, its family meals, flowing drink, and free-hearted gifts to the poor – this happiest of holidays, paradoxically, almost never came to be celebrated at all. What’s more, the famous Purim narrative of salvation, the Book of Esther, almost never made the final cut of the biblical canon. For, according to later Talmudic lore, although Queen Esther herself requested the religious leaders of her day a) to establish Purim as an annual festival, and b) to include the Book of Esther in the canonized collection of Tanach, the Holy Scriptures, their assent to both requests was granted only after great debate, for reasons we need not go into here. Even hundreds of years after their adoption, these same two matters resurfaced as subjects of contention in the Palestinian and Babylonian academies until the dispute was settled in the Talmud and in the affirmative once and for all, as witness Purim’s continued widespread practice around the world.

There is an added irony. This apparently minor holiday of one day’s duration (not including the Shushan Purim addition and an occasional anomalous three-day spread in Jerusalem known as Purim Meshulash), seems to pale in the shadow of the major Festivals and Days of Awe that are proclaimed in the Chumash. And yet, it is nonetheless described by the Gaon of Vilna as a “twin” of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. The happiest day and the holiest as twins? A day of feasting, partying, and merrymaking the paradoxical equivalent of a day of fasting, praying, and meditating?

Yes, indeed, for the insight here is that the coupling of Purim and Yom HaKippurim represents more than an onomatopoetic echo of one another’s names. It represents the two necessary halves of a whole human being – the physical and the spiritual. The message of Purim presages the observation of the modern French philosopher Teilhard who observed, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” Only by exerting the wholeness of our being can we fulfill our task, as described by A.J. Heschel, “to humanize the sacred and to sanctify the secular,” to bridge Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and to justify both the
canonization of Megillat Esther – where the Divine name appears nowhere in the text but Divine salvation permeates the narrative – and the commemoration of Purim day, when celebration through physical pleasures paves a path towards spiritual awareness.

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