



Punishment Consequences

vs.

The speech at the Oscars was difficult to hear, but not shocking if you know Jewish history.

The Big Speech

At the Oscars on Sunday, a Jewish director won the award for Best International Film, for his film on Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Of all things, the director chose to criticize Israel during his speech.

“Our film shows where dehumanization leads at its worst. Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people, whether the victims of October 7 in Israel or the ongoing attack in Gaza.”

He doesn't want 'his Judaism' and the memory of the Holocaust to be used to justify the occupation. He blamed the occupation—meaning Israel—for the troubles of both Jews and Arabs. This is what was said by a Jew, no less, in one of the most important events watched the world over...

Naturally, many people expressed shock and anger. Even people who find themselves on his side of the political aisle were upset; they argued that even if he is right, it's not the time to make such statements, when antisemitism is rampant and Jews are under attack all over the world.

But my friends, I'm sorry to say that there is nothing new in Jewish history. We've experienced similar things time and again.

The Purim Oscars

The Talmud (Megillah 12a) describes an interaction that took place between Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his students when the holiday

of Purim approached.

“Why,” they asked him, “were the Jewish people sentenced to annihilation?”

This wasn’t a question about Haman; Anti-Semitism is not something that they needed explained to them. It was a spiritual question, a question about G-d. Why did G-d allow circumstances to come to a place where the Jewish people are threatened with total annihilation? Why did he allow Haman to orchestrate such a terrible plan?

Instead of answering the question, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai did something that is unparalleled in the entire Talmudic literature (Toras Menachem 5733 v. 2 p. 308): he posed the question back to them. “You answer.”

Usually, the Talmud records questions from students and answers from teachers. It’s not a therapy session where we want to know how everybody feels. But in this unique instance, he chose to return the question to them.

The students suggested a famous answer: “Because they had enjoyed the feast of that evil man (Achashverosh).”

As you probably remember from the beginning of the Purim story, King Achashverosh hosts a massive party for the entire capital city of Shushan and invites the Jewish residents as well. In fact, not only were the Jewish people invited, but they were also treated quite cordially. The king arranged for kosher food of the highest degree, food that Mordechai himself would approve of.

So what was so evil about the party? Why were they punished for attending?

The answer lies in the backstory of the feast.

The Temple Vessels

The Talmud relates that one of the attractions at the feast was a display of the vessels of the Holy Temple that were plundered from Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This was very important imagery, because it was displayed to demonstrate the eternal destruction of Jerusalem, versus the power and success of Persia.

There was an entire history here.

Before the destruction of the first Temple, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied that after 70 years of exile, G-d would return the Jewish people to their land. This deadline was apparently known to the Babylonians and weighed down on their grandiose plans. What if the prophecy was right? Would it mean that they would lose their empire?

50 years after the destruction, a feast was held by King Belshazzar—the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar—to celebrate a victory over Cyrus of Persia and Darius of Media. As he celebrated with no less than 1000 ministers, it suddenly occurred to him that the prophecy had failed. Somehow, he had miscalculated, and arrived at the conclusion that seventy years has already passed and thus the Jewish people would remain in exile forever. The Jewish G-d had forsaken them, and Babylon would reign supreme. In drunken celebration, he commanded that the vessels of the Holy Temple be brought out, and he began to eat and drink out of them.

Suddenly, a hand appeared on the wall and wrote a cryptic sentence in blood-red ink on the wall, *“mina mina tekem ufarsin.”* (thus the source of the saying, *‘The handwriting on the wall.’*)

Belshazzar was incredibly frightened by the sight, and immediately called all his advisors and diviners to interpret it for him. Nobody had an explanation, and he was literally shaking from fear.

Finally, following his wife’s advice, he called Daniel the prophet, who had served as an advisor for Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel interpreted the sentence: “G-d is counting the years of your reign and weighing your deeds. He will slice your kingdom.” Belshazzar was going to lose his seat and his kingdom would fall to Persia and Media.

Hearing such drastic news, Belshazzar became paranoid and instructed that the palace doors be locked that night. Nobody was to be admitted, “even if they claim to be the king.”

He seemed to have forgotten that his outhouse was beyond the gates. In the middle of the night, he exited to relieve himself, and was accosted by his own guards on his way back inside. In the dark, they didn’t recognize him. He claimed he was the king, to no avail. In the end, he was killed in the confusion (Daniel chapter 2).

The Second Desecration

After such a dramatic aftermath to the desecration of the Temple vessels, nobody dared touch them—until the Purim story.

At the beginning of the Purim story, Achashverosh arrived at the conclusion that Belshazzar had miscalculated. According to his own calculations, the 70 years of the Babylonian exile were now over in actuality. The Jewish people were still in exile, so this time, it really meant that G-d would never redeem them again. Again, to celebrate this milestone, he ordered the vessels of the Temple to be brought out.

Mordechai begged the Jewish people not to participate in an event that celebrates the demise of the Jewish people, but as usual, Jews have an excuse for everything.

“Everyone else is going, why shouldn’t I go?”

“He’s such a good king for the Jews”—Jews had full civil rights and were very integrated into society. Many of them became quite successful. When the king invited them, they felt compelled to attend. The Midrash relates that 18,500 Jews attended the feast (Esther Rabbah 7:13). The king arrived, dressed in the clothing of the high priest, and ate and drank out of the Temple vessels. (As punishment for the desecration, G-d caused the king to kill his wife Vashti in a drunken stupor. Vashti was the daughter of Belshazzar, the king who had similarly used the Temple vessels.)

Cause and Effect

This story is very interesting and makes a more compelling case for what was wrong about that feast. It was celebrating the destruction of the Jewish people—obviously inappropriate for Jews to attend. But the question still stands. Was that enough to deserve annihilation? Did the Jews really deserve to die for attending a feast?

The Rebbe has a revolutionary response (Likkutei Sichos v. 31 p. 171).

Very often, we make the mistake of attributing bad events to a divine punishment. But more accurately, we should understand that in many cases it is a result of our own behavior. When we eat spoiled food, we get food poisoning. That’s not a punishment, that’s cause and effect. It’s a simple physical consequence. Cause and effect exists in our world because it exists in the spiritual universe as well.

Our sages say that the Jewish people are compared to a sheep among 70 wolves. How do we survive? Only in merit of the great shepherd, G-d himself, who shields us and protects us. This is our *natural, normal* state.

Occasionally, the Jewish people succeed even in this environment of 70 wolves. For a moment, we begin to believe that the wolves like us, respect us, and even welcome us into their club and give us Oscars. When that happens, we begin to think that our own achievements will keep us safe. We no longer need the constant watch of a shepherd. "We are big kids, and now we can take care of ourselves."

But at that moment, when we declare our independence from G-d, we submit ourselves to the whims of nature.

The decree of annihilation which followed the participation in the feast was not a punishment; it was a natural reaction. The Jewish people had removed themselves from G-d's 'Iron Dome'; they were so convinced of their safety in the Persian Kingdom that they no longer needed G-d's miraculous protection.

Suddenly, when the 70 wolves woke up, the Jews were left at their mercy.

What To Do?

When Mordechai heard about the decree, he gathered 22,000 Jewish children in the capital and studied Torah with them.

Other efforts were made to stop the decree as well. The adults fasted for three days and three nights, and Esther, of course, approached the king. But that's not what changed the reality.

The Midrash relates that G-d suddenly asked, "What are the voices of the young kids (baby goats) that I hear?"

"Those are the voices of Jewish children praying for the salvation of the Jewish people," the angels told Him.

When G-d heard those prayers, he tore the decree of annihilation, and chose to save the Jewish people (Toras Menachem 5735 v. 2 p. 311).

Today, we concluded the book of Shemos, and we all declared together, "*chazak chazak venis'chazek*, be strong, be strong, and let's be strengthened."

Anyone acquainted with the story of the Jewish people knows that we went through more difficult situations. There have been Jews who rejected their Judaism, and Jews who behaved poorly towards their Jewish brethren for all sorts of reasons, whether to ingratiate themselves in the eyes of the entire world, or to ensure that they

don't get thrown out of the elite clubs, or simply to make money.

Regardless, the Jewish people have not only survived but thrived. Today, we find ourselves in a situation far better than ever before.

G-d willing, we will do our part, and the Shepherd will do his.

Chazak Chazak *Venis'chazek*