



# Finding G-d in Gaza and Persia

Category: Ki Sisa

*Everyone seems to be experiencing a spiritual revolution—from the hostages down to regular Americans. It's really the story of Purim.*

## The Hostages

The stories we've been hearing from the hostages who were freed from Gaza over the past few months are incredible. One after another, they describe how they found G-d there. Specifically in the dark tunnels, without seeing the light of day, they found light. They found the power of faith and trust in G-d.

One of them shared that while in captivity, he started saying Shema Yisrael every morning and evening. Another recalled the blessing Hamotzi Lechem Min Ha'aretz—and every day, whenever he was given pita to eat, he would recite it. He knew that Hamotzi is only for bread, and that other foods require different blessings, but he didn't remember those.

One day, when he was allowed to watch the news from Israel, he saw a segment about a restaurant. A customer in the video recited the blessing Borei Minei Mezonot. From that moment on, whenever he ate something that wasn't bread, he would say Borei Minei Mezonot.

Yarden Bibas recounted that his captors told him that if he converted to Islam, they would treat him better. His response? "I was born a Jew, and I will die a Jew." After that answer, he was denied food for two days.

Almost every hostage who returned from captivity has a story of deepening their Jewish connection. But it's not just them.

## **The Tefillin Debacle**

Not long ago, a major controversy erupted over a prestigious high school in Ramat Gan. The school principal banned a student from putting on tefillin at a designated tefillin stand inside the school. He confiscated the boy's tefillin and announced that from then on, tefillin would no longer be allowed on school grounds.

The student didn't accept this quietly. He went straight to the principal's office and argued with him about it. A friend secretly recorded their entire conversation and posted the video on social media.

The video quickly went viral. In the clip, the student can be heard asking the principal, "Here, in the Land of Israel, I'm not allowed to put on tefillin in school?!" That was all it took—by the next day, a large protest broke out at the school gates. Many

students put on tefillin, some just to defy the principal's decision.

The story spread through the media, politicians weighed in, and eventually, a meeting was held between the student, his friends, and the principal. In the end, the student apologized for the public backlash, and the principal reinstated the tefillin stand in the school.

The student, who had now become a celebrity, announced that he was launching a campaign to set up 100 tefillin stands in 100 high schools across Israel.

## **A Clear Change**

From the stories of the freed hostages and the public schools, it's clear that there is a strong movement of people returning to their Jewish roots. Experts and psychologists studying the phenomenon estimate that hundreds of thousands of Israelis are undergoing a profound shift in consciousness—observing more mitzvot and doing so out of a deep need to connect to G-d.

One clear indicator of this trend is the growing number of Tel Aviv restaurants becoming kosher. Many are now koshering their kitchens and committing to serving only kosher food. When journalists asked these restaurant owners why they made the change, they responded that it was a financial decision—businesses that went kosher saw their customer base double!

What's fascinating is that this shift isn't just happening in Israel.

A similar trend is being observed in the United States. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center on religious beliefs in America revealed something surprising. Since the 1990s, there has been a consistent decline in the number of people who identify as religious or believe in G-d. But for the first time, that trend has reversed—more and more people are now declaring their belief in G-d.

According to the survey, 86% of Americans believe that a person has a soul in addition to their physical body. 83% believe in G-d or a spiritual force, and 79% believe there is something spiritual behind the nature of the world. When asked whether their level of spirituality had changed over their lifetime, 43% said they had become more spiritual, while only 11% said they had become less spiritual.

One sociologist involved in the study remarked that there are very few topics on which 86% of Americans agree. So discovering that such a high percentage believe in the soul or in G-d is nothing short of an earthquake.

Those sociologists are trying to find an explanation for the shift in religious belief among Americans. Some argue that it began during the COVID-19 pandemic—a crisis that pushed many people toward faith. But maybe there's something deeper happening.

## **The Forgotten Details**

Yesterday, we celebrated Purim. Everyone knows the first part of the Megillah—the public listens attentively and enjoys following the story. But when it gets to the second half, the

noise in the room starts to rise, people lose patience, and as a result, the second half of the Megillah suffers from bad PR.

Even in classes where the Megillah is studied, the focus is mostly on the opening chapters. By the time they reach the later chapters, Purim has already arrived, and right after Purim, attention shifts straight to preparing for Pesach and learning the Haggadah.

Everyone knows pretty much until the part where Haman is hanged on the gallows. But what happens afterward? That part is much less well-known.

Haman had convinced the king to enact a law declaring that on the 13th of Adar, anyone in the vast Persian Empire could rise up and kill their Jewish neighbor, taking over their homes and businesses as spoils.

Later, Esther went to the king and revealed that she too was Jewish and that Haman was plotting to destroy her people. In a fit of rage, the king ordered Haman to be hanged—mazel tov!

But while Haman was gone, the decree against the Jews remained in effect. The even bigger problem was that Persian law stated that once a royal decree was issued, it was irreversible. So what to do?

The king suggested that Esther and Mordechai issue a new decree in the king's name to help the Jews—and that's exactly what they did. They wrote that on the 13th of Adar—the same day the original decree allowed people to attack the Jews—the king was now giving the Jews the right “to assemble and protect

themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate any armed force that might attack them... and to take their property as spoils.” And this was “publicized to all nations so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves upon their enemies” (Esther 9:11-13).

On that very day, the 13th of Adar, the Jews were granted permission to rise up and defend themselves—and more than that, to take revenge on their enemies. The Jews rejoiced. There was “joy and celebration, feasting and a holiday,” wherever the news arrived. It sounds wonderful—but let’s take a moment to think about what actually happened here.

## **The Crisis**

There were now two laws standing against each other. The first law allowed the antisemites to kill Jews. The second law permitted Jews, on that same day, to take revenge on their enemies. So tell me—who was going to win this war? The antisemites or the Jews? After all, the Torah describes the Jewish people as “the fewest among the nations.” The number of antisemites was vastly greater.

Beyond that, who was stronger? Who was healthier? Jews are constantly running to doctors—this guy has back pain, the other is awaiting surgery, and every Jew seems to have at least one medical appointment lined up. Meanwhile, the enemies of the Jews were stronger and in better health. For those eleven months leading up to the battle, the Jews had no idea how things would turn out.

Now, the Rebbe—quoting the Alter Rebbe—explains that

throughout that entire year, the Jews had an easy way out—they could have saved themselves by simply converting to the dominant religion of Persia. And yet, not a single Jew did so. Every single Jew remained steadfast in their faith, ready to sacrifice everything rather than abandon their identity.

What caused this incredible spiritual awakening? Haman's decree ignited an immense surge of Jewish pride and commitment. Instead of weakening their faith, it did the opposite—Jews grew even closer to Judaism. For eleven months, from Pesach until the following Purim, they stood with unwavering devotion, prepared to die rather than relinquish their faith in G-d.

It was just like Yarden Bibas who declared, "I was born a Jew, and I will die a Jew." The same awakening that the Jewish people are experiencing across the world today—we lived through back then, too.

## **The Mass Conversions**

As a result, something extraordinary happened—something that most people who hear the Megillah reading aren't even aware of. The Megillah tells us that during that year, "many of the peoples of the land became Jewish." Many Persian citizens decided to join the Jewish people, undergoing circumcision, immersing in a mikvah, and most importantly, committing to keeping mitzvot. And this happened while the fate of the Jews was still hanging in the balance—no one knew who would emerge victorious on the 13th of Adar! Yet despite the uncertainty, thousands of people chose to tie their fate to the Jewish nation.

Why did they do it? The Megillah gives the reason: “For the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.” On a simple level, this means that since the Jews had gained favor with the government, the non-Jews feared their power. But that explanation doesn’t fully answer the question—why did they need to convert? If they were merely afraid, they could have supported the Jews without becoming Jewish themselves.

The Rebbe explains that the deeper meaning of “the fear of the Jews fell upon them” is that the fear the Jews themselves had—meaning their awe of G-d—fell upon the non-Jews. The Jews had demonstrated absolute devotion to G-d, refusing to abandon their faith for an entire year even when it meant risking their lives. This dedication affected the non-Jews so deeply that they, too, wanted to be part of a people who had such an unbreakable bond with G-d.

The fear of a Jew—yiras Shamayim, awe of Heaven—is what influenced the misyahadim, those who converted.

And this is exactly what is happening today. The spiritual awakening since October 7 isn’t limited to the hostages, nor only to Jews in the Land of Israel. The profound shift is being felt by Jews everywhere. But it’s not just affecting Jews—it’s influencing the entire world. The resurgence of faith, the renewed connection to G-d, is spilling over into the nations of the world as well. It has inspired them to believe again, to turn to G-d in prayer. Because when we, as Jews, strengthen our connection to G-d, it doesn’t just transform us—it transforms the entire world.