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SHEMOT

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What Purim Can Teach Us About Fake News

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WHAT PURIM CAN TEACH US ABOUT FAKE NEWS
SEPARATING THE REAL FROM THE UN-REAL

ABSTRACT

We've been hearing a lot of talk about "fake news." It seems like everywhere you turn, someone is accusing someone else of being untruthful. And things seem to be getting more muddled by the minute. Take the most recent accusations that the Trump administration's colluded with the Russians, and the counter-accusations of illegal wiretapping and leaking information. Who is telling the truth, if anybody?

This is especially unsettling in a world such as ours, undergoing much upheaval and confusion. How can we make sense of the world around us if we don't know who to turn to for the facts? How can we find guidance, clarity, direction in the storm of growing schisms in the U.S. and abroad? How do we filter all the information and misinformation and discern what is really going on in the world?

Purim provides us with the answer. Throughout history the Purim narrative empowered the Jewish people to never take the ostensible "facts" for granted, no matter who tells them to you and no matter how things appear. Rather, we always look for the inside story – the story behind the story.

The mystery of G-d name not mentioned in the Purim Megillah, the reason why we wear costumes on Purim, the elusive search for truth, the story of Pravda and Emes (two Russian newspapers ironically asserting that they are offering the truth), peppered with a powerful anecdote from Zhou Enlai and the unique role of Jews – reminds us (Zachor) of the secret to our survival.

It teaches us – a lesson relevant today more than ever – how to see through the fogs of deception and untruth; how to view times of upheaval and uncertainty beyond their face value; how to tap into the deeper reality of the situation in which we find ourselves, globally and personally, and see the bigger picture.

1. Is The Modern World More Truthful? (Joke)

A young American man was having a conversation with his elderly grandfather, who originated from the old home in Eastern Europe. His grandfather was trying to educate his grandson in the need to be skeptical about government, media and all establishment. "You can't trust anything they say," his grandfather adamantly declared.

The young gentleman dismissed his zeide's suspicions, and was trying to convince his zeide that things are different in the new world. "Today, we have a democratic government with checks and balances. We have a free media."

To which his grandfather replied: "You can't believe anything in the newspaper. Even the date is a lie, because the paper was printed the night before!"

2. The Search for Truth in a World of Fake News

We've been hearing a lot of talk about "fake news." It seems like everywhere you turn, someone is accusing someone else of being untruthful. And things seem to be getting more muddled by the minute. Take the most recent accusations that the Trump administration's colluded with the Russians, and the counter-accusations of illegal wiretapping and leaking information. Who is telling the truth, if anybody?

This is especially unsettling in a world such as ours, undergoing much upheaval and confusion. How can we make sense of the world around us if we don't know who to turn to for the facts? How can we find guidance, clarity, direction in the storm of growing schisms in the U.S. and abroad?

3. Is the Media the Way to Discover Truth?

Many – or at least some – people turn to the media for the "truth." It gives them information that shapes their understanding, views, and beliefs.

But let's be honest: Journalism and media has always had its biases; journalists have been known to sometimes mislead, skew facts, and harbor biases. But recently it's gotten out of control. The media – on both ends of the spectrum – has been exposed as partisan, and far from objective. For some Trump can do nothing right. For others he can do nothing wrong.

You know the truth is elusive when the venerable New York Times has to stoop to claiming (in their Twitter subtitle) "discover the truth with us." "No alternatives, just facts."

When was the last time you felt you can trust someone who claims that they are offering you the truth?

Case in point: Pravda – which means "truth" in Russian – is a Russian newspaper, which was formerly the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when it was one of the most influential papers in the country with a circulation of 11 million. People would always joke, how can anyone trust a newspaper called "Truth"?

Not to be outdone, back in the former Soviet Union the Yiddish Communist paper was called “Emes,” “truth.” It was so patently false that the name was even spelled wrong: ayin, mem, ayin, samach (the correct spelling is alef, mem, sof). I kid you not. (Maybe it was the editor’s way of telling his readers that they cannot trust anything they read, even the very name of the paper...)

Today’s media may be not quite that fabricated, but it still leaves a lot to be desired. Despite its contributions, the media is hardly a reliable source for “the” objective truth.

Perhaps that zeide was right after all...

So the question on everyone’s minds right now is: How do we filter all the information and misinformation and discern what is really going on in the world?

Purim provides us with the answer.

4. Shabbat of Remembrance

We’ll be celebrating Purim tonight and tomorrow. In addition to this Shabbos being Erev Purim, it is also “Shabbat Zachor,” when we read the extra chapter of Zachor¹ and remember what the nation of Amalek did to the Jewish people [attacking them from behind after they left Egypt]. Every year this added chapter is read right before Purim to remind us that Haman—a descendant of Amalek—attempted genocide of our people. We remember—”zachor”—that in both of these incidents, we endured and survived the threats to our existence. And, quite miraculously, we’ve outlived the many empires and nations who sought to destroy us.

The holiday of Purim has always given the Jewish people the inspiration to view times of upheaval and uncertainty beyond face value, to tap into the deeper reality of the situation.

Throughout history the Purim narrative empowered the Jewish people to remember – *zachor* – to never take the ostensible “facts” for granted, no matter who tells them to you and no matter how things appear. Rather, we always look for the inside story – the story behind the story.

5. G-d Incognito

Let’s take a deeper look at the Purim story we read in the Megillah.

As we know, Purim celebrates the divine salvation of the Jewish people from the clutches of Haman’s genocidal decree to kill all Jewish men, women, and children.

¹ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

And yet we see something bizarre: G-d's name is never mentioned in the story! Compare this to the Exodus from Egypt, when G-d's name is mentioned many times. In fact, the Purim story is the only narrative in Tanach that does not mention G-d's name.

The answer to this question is that G-d's hand is *hidden* in the events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people on Purim.

There are two types of miracles. Overt miracles, where you openly see the hand of G-d (for example, the stories of Chanukah and Passover), and hidden miracles, where you may not notice the hand of G-d, because it is disguised in ostensibly natural events. Purim falls into this second category.

Indeed, the Purim story happened over a span of nine years, which on the surface tells one story of seemingly disjointed events, but when you look beneath the surface, an entirely different, miraculous, story emerges

Here is the story in a nutshell: The king, Achashverosh happens to want his wife Vashti to come to a party; she refused, so he had her killed. Mordechai happens to overhear a plot to kill the king and thwarts the conspiracy. Then an evil man named Haman, an advisor to the king, wanted the Jews dead and plotted to accomplish this with the king's approval. The king remarried, and his new wife Queen Esther happened to be Jewish. The king couldn't sleep one night and the story of Mordechai saving his life happens to be read to him and he chooses to reward him. Queen Esther ultimately overturns the king's decree to carry out Haman's plot.

Nothing that happened in the Purim story was overtly supernatural. Anyone living at that time and witnessing – or reading (figuratively speaking) media accounts about – the story unfolding over those nine years could have easily mistaken G-d's miracles for a chain of fortuitous, random, unrelated events that happened to work out very well for the Jews. And surely, many did see it that way. Only after the fact, when one looks at the story in retrospect, can we connect the dots and realize the great miracle that transpired.

This is why G-d's name is not mentioned in the Purim Megillah, because G-d's hand was concealed behind these events. To see G-d in the Purim story, you have to look deeper, at what lies beneath the surface.

And, if you've ever wondered the reason behind the custom of dressing in costume on Purim² (other than to be fun and silly)—this gives us the answer. The act of hiding one's identity, once again, represents the Purim miracle, which G-d's identity was hidden within natural events.³ Dressing in costumes reminds us that a surface level look at something never tells the real story. You need to peer beyond the mask to discover the truth of who someone or what something is.

² See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 697:8.

³ Minhagei Kol Aryeh. See Rabbi Moses Hagiz (18th century), Eileh Hamitzvot, p. 293.

6. Seeing the Bigger Picture

The same is true when it comes to current events. Jews have always known, in the best and worst of times, that we cannot rely on the “news” of the day to tell us the real story. Whether it’s coming from the left or right, from the Russians or the Americans, from Facebook or Twitter, from Trump or his adversaries, from FOX or CNN, from the New York Times to the Wall Street Journal—we cannot depend solely on these sources for the objective truth. Because they all wear a mask, in one form or another. And even when it comes to the things we see happening with our own eyes—the crazy events of the world, the uncertainty, the confusion, the darkness, the suffering—we cannot rely solely on our limited perspectives for a “true” view.

So then what are we supposed to do on our quest for truth?

Instead, we must humbly remember and learn from the Purim story, that what we see is not what we get. We must not get caught up in the minutiae and the details of the moment. They are at best frames in a larger narrative, and at worst, simply false. Look for the outcomes, for the larger goals.

Purim teaches us: Always keep your eyes open to the story beneath the story, to the bigger emerging picture. Always remember that G-d has a plan. That’s true in both a macro and micro sense—both in regard to the world at large and our own lives.

7. Jewish History

Indeed, the story and history of the Jewish people reflects the Purim story.

How many times did our people face near extinction? How many obituaries have been written professing the end of the Jewish nation? Despite what things appeared like to the naked eyes, against all odds, the Jews are living witnesses that there is a greater story, an invisible hand, behind the scenes.

And it is our belief and trust in this hidden hand that has kept us going.

I once heard a very powerful story regarding Elie Wiesel:

He was once asked: is it true that marching into the gas chambers Jews would sing Ani Maamin [a heart stirring melody expressing one’s complete and unwavering faith in the coming of the Messiah, who will usher in a new world order of peace]?

Elie replied that the barracks where the Jews were held was a distance from the death chambers. But very often he did hear the whimpering prayers of the Jews near him. The cry of the Shema, the recitation of Kaddish, the Shabbat or holiday prayers, and also, the singing of Ani Maamin and other songs of hope.

“If I may ask,” the questioner continued, “How do you explain this seemingly “absurd” devotion? In face of utter abandonment, of a G-d that was totally concealed, allowing His people, His children, to be decimated, the Jews had the total right to be angry at G-d. How do you explain the fact that instead they thanked G-d, they prayed to Him, they sang His praises, and declared their absolute belief that G-d will redeem them?!”

Wiesel responded: “Things really don’t make sense. Life is mostly absurd. We have seen man at his worst. But for the Jew insanity is not abnormal. I can’t tell you what was going on in the minds, hearts and souls of the Jews who walked to their deaths. But I can tell you that every single one of these sacred people knew one thing. And they declared it with their prayers and their songs:

“You can take our bodies, but you can’t take our souls. You can take our lives but not our faith. We will prevail. If not today, tomorrow. If not tomorrow, the next day. If not us, our children. If not our children, our grandchildren. But we will prevail.

“Ani Maamin... I believe with complete faith...”

Jews never allowed themselves to be seduced by the “news” of the moment. They always sought out the bigger picture. They always looked to connect the dots of their experiences and discover the Divine pattern and plan.

This brings to mind an old story of a king who asked six blind men to discern what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of its body. The blind man who felt its leg concluded that the elephant was like a pillar. Another who felt its tail surmised that it was like a rope. The one who felt its trunk said it was like a tree branch. The man who felt its ear said the elephant was like a hand fan. Feeling the elephant’s belly, another blind man sagely replied that the elephant was like a wall. Lastly, the one who felt its tusk said it was like a solid pipe.

The king acknowledged that they were all right, but only partially so. He then explained that each of the blind men had touched a different part of the elephant. But in truth, the elephant was the sum of all of those parts.

Like the blind men, it is easy for us to get distracted by the details and miss the bigger picture. Even when the “news” of the moment tries to convince us that the world is chaotic and confusing and dark, we always remember —zachor—that there is something much bigger at work; G-d’s hand is hidden within current events. We’re always asking, what is G-d’s plan in this circumstance? What does G-d want from me in this situation?

8. The Secret to Our Survival

And holding on to that vision allowed the Jews the fortitude to forge ahead.

I'm reminded of an anecdote:

China was a country entirely closed to the West until 1972, when President Richard Nixon famously visited Beijing. During that visit, the new Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, was asked about the impact of the French Revolution. Speaking of an event that took place close to two centuries previously, Zhou famously commented, "It's too early to say."⁴

I hear from friends who do business in China that the Chinese have great respect for the Jews. (Not sure they *love* us, but they respect us.) Why? Simple: Longevity. The Jewish people are the only ones here longer than them. In advertising, we also find an emphasis on things that have been around for a long time: "Brewing beer since 1885," "Selling furniture for 73 years," "Founded in 1912." Longevity, something that is tried and true, resonates with people as something you can trust.

Now, the Jews certainly fit that description. We boast an unbroken chain lasting 3,800 years. Everyone wonders how we made it through the millennia, especially considering that for many of those years we existed without a country or an army or an empire. How did we endure so many years being persecuted, oppressed, massacred? How did we not only survive through all of this, but *thrive*?

A business that's been around for 100 years must be doing something right. So, too, the Jews must be doing something right? So, what's our secret sauce? How did our nation stay around for almost four millennia?

The secret is our faith in the story behind the story, the bigger picture that is unfolding through the events of our lives. Though we may not understand what or how, the Jews have always recognized that G-d's hand is at work. We are working toward a much larger goal, in service of a much broader plan.

And we have seen the success resulting from this attitude. The belief and commitment in virtue and kindness, the sacrifices made by our ancestors over millennia, have proven to produce a far more refined and humanitarian world today, incomparable to how it was in the past.

And we are confident that we will soon realize the fruition of a world where there will be "neither famine nor war, neither envy nor competition," "the entire occupation of the world will be to know G-d."⁵

⁴ Some have debunked this, explaining that Zhou may not have correctly understood the question. Rather than referring to the 1789 revolution, his interlocutor was speaking of the events of May 1968, and the Chinese leader's comment was directed toward those far more recent developments. As reported in the Financial Times, a diplomat present at the time called it a misunderstanding that was 'too delicious to invite correction.' The story became legend.

⁵ Rambam end of Laws of Kings chapter 12.

And then we all of history will make sense, as we will see how G-d's hidden hand was at work all the time, helping lead us to personal and global redemption.

9. Two Types of Concealment

The Baal Shem Tov teaches⁶ that there are two types of concealment. One type of concealment is when we are fully aware that something is being concealed. For instance, we see something that seems bad on the surface but we know that it's actually good. (Example: seeing the doctor give our child a shot—we see the pain, the child crying, but we know that this is simply a surface reality; the true reality is that the child is being given the gift of health and strength to fight off illness.)

The second type of concealment is when the *concealment itself* is hidden from us. We believe that the reality we see is the true reality, and we don't recognize that the real truth is being concealed. We are fooled into thinking that evil is really good, that illness is really health, darkness is really light . . . or vice versa. This is obviously a much bigger challenge, and danger, than the first type of concealment. When we don't even know that the truth is hidden from us, what motivates us to seek it out?

In today's whizzing, quick-paced world, with data streaming at us 24/7 in the form of sound bites from millions of directions, with everyone is battling waning attention spans, we can too easily take the information we are fed at face value, not even realizing that the truth is being hidden from us. The hiddenness of the truth is itself, hidden.

This is why the message of Purim is so relevant today. It urges us to not be blinded by what's going on around us and what everyone is saying, be they pundits, media, or our coworkers at the office cooler. It compels us to see G-d's hand in events both global and personal. And to recognize that this is all part of a plan, and we are partners with G-d in making that plan happen.

10. Seeing G-d's Hand in Every Situation

This offers us a personal lesson as well:

Obviously, it's easier to recognize G-d's involvement after the fact. When we face difficult times, we may feel sad, anxious, scared. But when all is said and done, we look back and say, "Ah! *That's* why X had to happen. It seemed like a terrible situation at the time, but if it weren't for X, I wouldn't have met Y and had the incredible opportunity to do Z..." and so on.

⁶ Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshas Bereishis. Degel Machne Efraim Parshas Tzav. Likkutei Sichos vol. 9 p. 193ff.

But what if we could acknowledge the divine providence *while* the events were unfolding? What if we could internalize the fact that it's all part of a bigger plan? How would we live and treat others differently? How much happier would we be? How many more goals would we be able to achieve?

Let's learn from the Purim story to never allow setbacks, or even short-term gains, define our lives, for they are but pieces of a much larger puzzle. We must live in the here and now, but also see it as part of a past and a future, part of a greater story leading us to redemption—personal and global.

Let's teach ourselves and our children to always see their experiences as a part of a larger emerging mosaic. Not only after the fact, but as we live through those experiences. When things seem muddled and confusing in the world, let's remember the endurance and resilience that the Jewish people have always had in difficult times, because they kept their sights high and connected to the greater picture and the larger narrative. Let's draw on the strength of our predecessors to see G-d's hand in every situation.

This week, we can start by turning off the news (just for a little bit!), and having discussions with our children, with our friends, family and coworkers, about the bigger story of our lives – the one beneath and within our surface experiences.

They say that there are three types of people: Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen and those who ask “what happened?” In today's world of media spin there seems to have emerged a fourth category: Those who try to tell you what happened, even if it never happened.

The Jewish people always made things happen. They did not buy into what others told them, nor did they remain bystanders and observers; our ancestors were pioneers, always breaking new ground.

The story behind the story of Purim captures this message: Mordechai refused to bow to Haman, as everyone else did. The Jews refused to buy into the story being imposed upon them.

Let us retell and relive the story of Purim and what it means for us today. Let's take a pause from being the consumers of the news and become people who generate the news and partner with G-d to bring His ultimate plan of world peace to fruition by making the world better and kinder and more meaningful, wherever and whenever we can.

Here's to seeing through the chaotic haze of current events and finding the truth... or at least never giving up the search.

Good Shabbos, and a Happy Purim!