

# Free From All (*Purim*)

By Harav Shlomo Aschkenasy

One day years ago, when I was davening in the neighborhood *shtieblech* and I saw a tumult around one of the *mispallelim*. He was an elderly Yid, tall but bent over, with a warm, wise smile and rosy cheeks. I asked around why there was such a stir about him and was told that this was Reb Leizer Nanes, a Jew who had survived twenty years of captivity in Siberia without ever being *mechalel Shabbos* nor allowing his beard to be shorn. He committed some of his experiences to writing in a breathtaking book called *Sabota*.

I got to know him personally and asked him to share the secret of his endurance with the members of our Kollel, the Boston Kollel. On Assarah Beteves we sat mesmerized for three hours as he described how he survived his personal siege, an *assarah beteves* which lasted two decades. He stood up fearlessly against the attempts of the KGB to subdue him, thanks to the parting words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, *zy"ta*.

Just prior to the expulsion of the Lubvitcher Rebbe from Russia, Reb Leizer came clandestinely to take leave of him and get his *brachah*. The Rebbe just said a few words to him: "If you will remember my *sichah* of Purim 5681 you will survive unscathed." That became his motto, the secret formula which sustained him and kept him steadfast.

What was that *Sichah*? The Megillah describes the fortitude of Mordechai vis-à-vis Haman. While everyone around him subserviently bowed down to Haman, the Megillah tells us twice that "Mordechai would not bow nor prostrate himself" (3:2, 5). On another occasion when Haman exuberantly exits from the wine feast with Esther and Achashveirosh he notices "Mordechai in the king's gate and that he *did not stand up nor did he stir* before him" (5:9). Why is there a change of wording in the last time?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained that besides Haman forcing people to bow to him as to an idol, *Chazal* say that he actually wore an idol around his neck. Thus when Mordechai refused to bow to Haman it was out of adherence to the law prohibiting idol worship even at the risk of one's life. (While there was room for halachic debate in this issue, Mordechai held that it was also a matter of *kiddush Hashem* and no *heter* should be applied.)

Later the situation deteriorated. The *gezeirah* had been issued against the Jews and Haman was using his position of power to unleash his diabolical plot. This called for additional courage, and a new aspect of Mordechai's spiritual prowess surfaces.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe revealed a fundamental principle about the functioning of our world. Good and evil are both part of Hashem's creation, as the *passuk* describes: "Who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil, I am Hashem Master of all these" (*Yeshaya* 45:7). Hashem gave free choice to mankind to give expression to these various forces. To the extent that man gives recognition to them they will have strength, to the extent that we acknowledge their strength they have power to rule. If man appreciates Hashem's goodness, the goodness people do and the good he himself does, he generates

positive energies in the whole creation and causes kindness and goodness to pour down from Above. Whereas when we acknowledge the forces of evil, and concede their strength, we automatically default to their mastery and will succumb to their reign. (Author's note: A similar idea is found in the writing of the Chofetz Chaim about the power of speech – life and death are in the hands of the tongue. Whatever we say can bring blessing or calamity.)

“Mordechai knew all that was happening” (4:1). He knew the world's principles and acted to defuse the destructive force of Haman. It was not enough to merely adhere to the prohibition of idolatry. It was not enough to make a *kiddush Hashem*. The forces of evil were rampaging and they had to be stopped.

That is when the Megillah tells us that Mordechai manifested total indifference to Haman. “He didn't stand up nor stir.” He simply didn't notice him. He didn't even “bat an eyelid” as Haman passed by. It was as if Haman wasn't there. Before such behavior, the power of evil was powerless. Mordechai believed with utmost clarity and conviction that Haman had no control over him, and the existence of *Am Yisrael* was solely in the Hands of Hashem. Haman was impotent unless *Am Yisrael* allowed him to wield his strength. Mordechai's defiance burst Haman's balloon. All of *Am Yisrael* were represented by Mordechai's actions. After days of fasting and prayer, they were all imbued with faith in Hashem alone. Full-faith and total-denial saved *Am Yisrael* from annihilation.

This was a remedy for the malaise which beleaguered *Am Yisrael* in the reign of Achashveirosh. It began when they responded to the invitation to the feasts of Achashveirosh, which Mordechai warned them not to participate. Although everything seemed kosher and innocent, Mordechai saw the veiled fangs of evil waiting to succumb *Am Yisrael*. He cautioned that mingling and being part of other people would lead to their downfall. He urged them to stay away.

Esther, in her situation followed the guidelines of Mordechai.. Although taken to the king's palace she was indifferent to all the offers made to her. She asked for nothing, and took nothing. She only adhered to Mordechai's instructions. She kept herself totally private, not even disclosing her identity. Although Achashveirosh crowned her and honored her, she retained her self-determination “Esther did not reveal.”

The stubborn steadfastness of Mordechai and Esther throughout the Megillah secured the demise of Haman and the salvation of *Am Yisrael*.

With this in mind, when Reb Leizer was called in for interrogation by the KGB, he resolved to show no deference to their authority and took every opportunity to show his denial. Right from the start when he was brought before the officer in command. Reb Leizer didn't wait for permission, took a chair and calmly sat down. The indignant officer looked up in surprise and rasped, “What are you doing sitting down without permission?” Reb Leizer responded with an insolent smile. “What's the difference? Today I sit tomorrow you'll sit. We all end up sitting [in jail] at some stage or other!” And so he carried on for two decades, never acceding that there was anyone empowered to rule over him. He lived and survived with Mordechai as his model.

In occurred to me that this behavior may have been Mordechai's *tikkun* for the sin of his ancestor Shaul Hamelech, as defined by Harav Aharon Kotler, *zt"l*. *Chazal* say that David Hamelech had two sins, (Batsheva and taking census) and yet his reign lasted, while Shaul had only one sin, that of allowing Agag to live, and his sovereignty did not last. Why was there such a disparity? The Rosh Yeshivah explained that it was because David Hamelech's sins were personal ones, whereas Shaul's was in the realm of *malchus*, sovereignty.

Shaul tried to exonerate himself from his wrongdoing by explaining to Shmuel that the people had pity on the flock and he had surrendered to their pleas. This showed an inability to stand fast, follow Hashem's will and be indifferent to anything contrary. Such qualities disqualified him from being the king who was to uphold the Word of Hashem and elevate the people.

Mordechai remedied this with his brave actions despite the initial weakness of the people. With his clarity Mordechai blew Haman away and spruced our true sovereignty. No matter where Jews are, and whoever the king may be, they are masters of themselves and are subordinate only to the will of Hashem.

Reb Leizer's formula can be applied to free us from bothersome elements in our daily lives through proper focus and enable us to live in the light of Hashem with everlasting joy – *orah vesimchah*.

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