

Keeping Up Appearances

When Achashveirosh first ascended the Persian throne, he was concerned about the fulfillment of a prophecy from Yirmiyahu. After seventy years, declared the prophet, the Jews would return to the Land of Israel. He wasn't the first to worry about Yirmiyahu's words. Belshatzar, the king of Babylonia, had expressed similar concerns. And so he brought in his actuarial team and they created a statistical model: forty-five years of Nevuchadnetzar, and twenty-three of Evil-Merodach, and two of his own, for a total of seventy years, had passed without redemption. Concluding that Yirmiyahu's prophecy would no longer be fulfilled, Belshatzar took out the vessels of the Holy Temple and began to use them, publicly flaunting his derision of Heaven. But that night, a coup took place and he was slain.

Aware of the story of his predecessor, Achashveirosh said to himself, "Belshatzar miscalculated and erred. I too will calculate, but I will not err. Yirmiyahu didn't say, 'Seventy years for the kingdom of Babylonia.' He said, 'Seventy years for Babylonia,' meaning seventy years of the exile of Babylonia. How many years are still lacking from the seventy years? Eight years." He calculated, inserting in their stead the third year of Belshatzar, five years of Darius and Cyrus, and two years of his own, bringing the total to seventy. Once he saw that seventy years had been completed, and the Jewish people were still not redeemed, he said,

“Now they will certainly not be redeemed. Therefore, I will take out the vessels of the Holy Temple and use them.”

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם כְּשֶׁבַת הַמֶּלֶךְ וְכָתִיב בְּתַרְיָהּ בְּשָׁנָה שְׁלֹשׁ לְמַלְכוּוֹ אָמַר רָבָא מַאי
 כְּשֶׁבַת לְאַחַר שְׁנַתֵּי־שִׁבְעָה דַּעְתּוֹ אָמַר בִּלְשַׁצַּר חָשַׁב וּטְעָה אָנָּה חֲשִׁיבָנָא
 וְלֹא טְעִינָא מַאי הִיא דְכָתִיב כִּי לְפִי מְלֵאֶת לְכָבֵל שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה אֶפְקֹד
 אֶתְכֶם וְכָתִיב לְמַלְאֹת לְחֶרְבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה חָשׁוּב אַרְבַּעִין וְחֲמִשׁ
 דְנִבְכַדְנֶצַּר וְעֶשְׂרִים וְתֵלֶת דְאִוִּיל מְרוּדָךְ וְתַרְתֵּי דִידֵיהָ הָא שְׁבַעִים אֶפִּיק
 מֵאֲנִי דְבִי מְקַדְּשָׁא וְאַשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּהוּ הֵינִי דְקֶאָמַר לִיה דְנִיּוֹאֵל וְעַל מְרִי שְׁמִיָּא
 הַתְרוּמַמַּת וְלִמְאֲנִיָּא דִּי בֵּיתֵיהָ הֵי תִּיּוֹ קְדָמָךְ וְכָתִיב בֵּיה בְּלִילֵיָא קָטִיל
 בִּלְשַׁאצַּר מְלָכָא (בְּשַׁדְּאָה) וְכָתִיב וְדָרְיוֹשׁ מְדָאָה קָבַל מְלְכוּתָא כְּבַר שְׁנַיִן
 שָׁתַּיִן וְתַרְתֵּינָן אָמַר אִיהוּ מִיטְעָא טְעִי אָנָּה חֲשִׁיבָנָא וְלֹא טְעִינָא מִי כָתִיב
 לְמַלְכוּתָא בְּכָל לְכָבֵל כָּתִיב מַאי לְכָבֵל לְגַלּוּת בְּכָל כְּמָה בְּצִירָן תַּמְנֵי חֲשִׁיב
 וְעִיל חִילּוּפֵיהּוּ חָדָא דְבִלְשַׁצַּר וְחֲמִשׁ דְּדָרְיוֹשׁ וְכוּרְשׁ וְתַרְתֵּי דִידֵיהָ הָא
 שְׁבַעִין בֵּינָן דְחַזֵּי דְמָלוּ שְׁבַעִין וְלֹא אִיפְרוּק אָמַר הַשְׁתָּא וְדַאי תּוּ לֹא מִיפְרָקִי
 אֶפִּיק מֵאֲנִי דְבִי מְקַדְּשָׁא וְאַשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּהוּ.

“In those days when the king sat,” and afterward it is written, “In the third year of his reign.” Rava said: What is the meaning of “when he sat” (k’sheves)? It means after his mind was settled (she’nisyashvah) [and he had overcome his anxiety with regard to the redemption of the Jewish people]. He said: Belshatzar calculated and erred. I will calculate, but I will not err. What is this calculation? As it is written, “After seventy years are accomplished for Babylonia I will remember you,” and it is written, “That He would accomplish for the desolations of Jerusalem seventy years.” He calculated: Forty-five years of Nevuchadnetzar, and twenty-three of Evil-Merodach, and two of his own, for a total of seventy. He therefore said: I will take out the vessels of the Holy Temple and use them. This is that which Daniel said to him, “But you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of Heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His House before you.” And it is written, “On that night Belshatzar, the king of the Chaldeans, was slain.” And it states, “And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.” Achashveirosh said: He erred. I will

calculate, but I will not err...I will take out the vessels of the Holy Temple and use them.

When it comes to our service of Heaven, we all have little things we struggle with. Some of them are very personal and we know that we're far from perfect. And we're able to keep those struggles behind closed doors, knowing that we'll achieve self-mastery in good time. And that's okay because nobody is perfect. We're all working to become better Jews.

Maybe you pride yourself on not having a TV at home. That might be true, but you know and God knows that you do watch the odd movie on Netflix. Or maybe you are proud of your family's commitment to keeping *yashan*. All the bread you purchase has come from last year's crop, just as the Torah prescribes. But then there's the small matter of those irresistible cookies that you occasionally can't help but indulge in, right?

One day you tell yourself, "Who am I kidding? I know I'm eating the cookies. God knows I'm eating the cookies. It's time to quit this hypocrisy and just be honest with myself. I don't actually keep *yashan*." And so, you drop the whole *yashan* facade. Now you're eating all those cakes and cookies of which you always dreamed.

I've chosen a bit of a comical example to bring out the idea in a way that is relatable, but consciously not too pushy. Everyone knows for himself where he's up to in life and what he considers to be a vice or a virtue. The key element in the story is the moment a person decides that his vice is no longer worth hiding from the world.

Why were Belshatzar and Achashveirosh so eager to use the Temple vessels? They had all the utensils in the world at their disposal. Were all those utensils not sufficient for their needs?

Take a closer look at the wording of the Gemara. We're not simply informed that these wicked kings used the Temple vessels. The Gemara emphasizes that each one declared, "I will *take out* the vessels of the Holy Temple and use them." We don't know how they acted behind closed doors; that's immaterial. What we do know is that each time our Sages censure them for their brazenness, they make it clear that these

kings not only acted inappropriately, but they put their acts on display for all to see. In fact, so desperate were they to publicize and normalize their behavior, they even made the Jews eat off the vessels as well.

Of course, we're not wicked rulers like Belshatzar and Achashveirosh, but we do have behaviors that are best kept behind closed doors, between us and God. When you bring those behaviors out into the open, it means you've abandoned all hope of ever improving in those areas of your spiritual life.

The story is told of the fellow from New York who gets a job in middle America. He arrives in town to find that the only synagogue is Conservative. He's always been a shul-goer and he decides to give the new community a try. After all, he tells himself, he's not that *frum*, so why should he limit himself denominationally? So Shabbos morning, he gets into his car, as he's always done, and heads in the direction of the synagogue. Once Waze has brought him to his destination, he drives around the corner and finds a parking spot. He then heads back over to the synagogue by foot.

The security guard welcomes him, but then looks at him quizzically, "Sir, you know, I did see you drive past five minutes ago. You didn't have to park on the street. We're a Conservative synagogue. We have a wonderful, spacious parking lot alongside our building!"

"Yes, I realize," replies the New Yorker, "but I'm Orthodox."

You might not yet completely be at a level of observance that aligns with your perspectives on Torah and mitzvos. Or you might even have a pretty decent track record when it comes to *frumkeit*; it's just the occasional *taavah* that's not quite right. But the main thing is that you know where you'd like to be. May you keep those inner struggles between you and Hashem so that one day you can become the Jew you know you truly are!