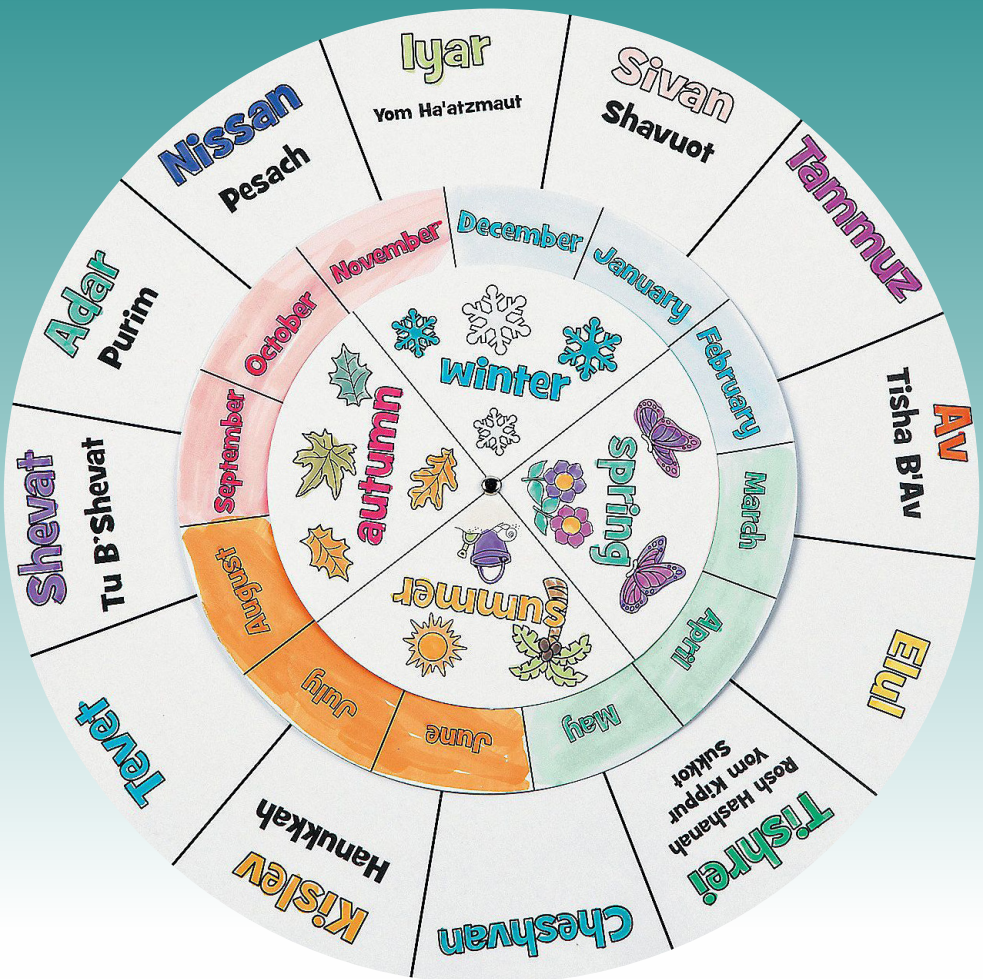


Connecting to Our Festivals



Designed by Rabbi Daniel Fine

Connecting to Our Festivals

This mini-book was designed to aid familiarity with and connection to our festivals.

It goes through each festival, pointing out practical and deeper ideas – for the whole family to digest.

May we always merit to celebrate meaningful and happy festivals,

Rabbi Fine

Rosh Hashanah

The Mishnah at the start of Rosh Hashanah (2a) lists Rosh Hashanah as a Day of Judgment, whereby *all pass before Hashem individually like sheep*. The Gemara (10b) lists the various things that happened across the ages on Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Eliezer enumerates that on this date Adam was created, the Avos were born, Sarah, Rachel and Chanah conceived, Yosef was released from prison. And though Rabbi Yehoshua contends that Adam was created in Nissan, Rav Hutner explains (based on Tosafos 27a *ke'man*) that there is no disagreement. As per Rashi's comments on the Torah (1:1), Hashem initially created a world which would endure on strict justice – a world whereby one would receive exactly what one put out and one's deeds would be carefully and precisely measured. This was made at Tishrei time. Yet only the very righteous can survive such levels of scrutiny and exactness. Therefore, in Nissan Hashem added the layers of Divine mercy – delayed judgment and opportunities to repent. Note that even on Rosh Hashanah itself, the Magein Avraham (591:13) contends that the first three hours invoke harsh judgment and the next hours are softer judgment, with Rav Dessler applying this distinction in part to the first day (justice) versus the second day (mercy) of Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara (16a) tells us that there are three books open on Rosh Hashanah – the book of the righteous, to be inscribed for life; the book of the wicked to be inscribed for death, and the book of those in the middle whose verdict is pending until Yom Kippur. Note that several commentaries do not define 'righteous' and 'wicked' in terms of quantities of sin and mitzvot – the calculation is much more nuanced and refined than that, and takes into account one's essence, background, effort and other factors (see Rambam, Laws of Teshuva 3:2). There is much debate regarding what the judgment on Rosh Hashanah centres on – are we judged for physical wealth and survival, or are we judged for our spiritual account? (see Tosafos, Tosafos Harosh and others Rosh Hashanah 16a). The Vilna Gaon writes that on Rosh Hashanah we are judged for our spiritual reward whilst on Yom Kippur we are all judged for our physical and material matters.

The puzzling elements of Rosh Hashanah are that the Torah does not refer to it in judgment terms, and that it is the first of the Ten Days of Repentance yet we do not mention sin? There are several approaches here:

1. Rav Shlomo Wolbe (AleI Shur p44) proves that on Rosh Hashanah we are judged based on our present conduct: we are judged on *how we act on Rosh Hashanah* itself. Our past deeds require repentance and will be dealt with when we leave this earth, but they are not matters for Rosh Hashanah. Further, on Rosh Hashanah we lay down the *emunah* principles which are prerequisites for repentance.

The Maharal (Gevuros Hashem perek 46) writes that Rosh Hashanah's essence is a day of crowning Hashem as King – a day of *malchus*. It is merely as a corollary of *malchus* that Hashem judges us by calling His soldiers to account.

Laws

There are two days of Rosh Hashanah everywhere. There is much debate whether they are considered as two separate days or one long day (see MB 601:3 who says it is one day but Ashkenazim do say shehechyanu on both days – implying it is two days 600:5. Moreover, an egg hatched on the first day remains forbidden on the second (600:1) and yet it is forbidden to cook on the first day of Rosh Hashanah for the second day (503:1).

Sephardim begin saying slichos for the entire month of Elul. Ashkenazim recite *ledavid Hashem* (chapter 27 in Tehilim) from Elul until Simchas Torah at Shachris and Maariv, and sound the shofar for Elul after Shachris. Ashkenazim begin Slichos from a week before Rosh Hashanah, or on the week of Rosh Hashanah if Rosh Hashanah does not begin until Wednesday. Slichos should not be said during the first half of the night, as the 13 Attributes cannot be said then (aside from the evening of Yom Kippur itself). An individual may recite slichos alone, but should lead the 13 Attributes; if one can stand one should do so.

On the morning before Rosh Hashanah one also annuls vows, in front of three people. Many have the custom to fast for half a day before Rosh Hashanah, and to go to the mikveh. One should also give tzedaka. One should have a haircut before Rosh Hashanah and dress in Yom Tov clothes – we are happy and confident that we will be judged for the good (SA 581:4 and 597:1). A pruzbul is written at the end of the Shmittah year too.

On the night of Rosh Hashanah we eat symbolic foods (simanim) at the start of the meal. For foods which require their own blessing one recites the *yehi ratzon* request after eating the food. The Maharal (Be'er Hagolah) explains this practice that in order for a good decree to be expressed in this world, some action is needed. Eating these simanim are considered such an action. Many also dip an apple/challah in honey as a sign for a sweet year.

On Rosh Hashanah many have a custom not to sleep during the daytime, though others are lenient after midday. Tashlich is normally recited on first day Rosh Hashanah.

On the second night of Rosh Hashanah one should try and have a new fruit/clothing

on which to recite shehechyanu, but if not one may recite shehechyanu on the Yom Tov nonetheless.

Shofar

The central mitzvah of Rosh Hashanah is to hear the shofar. The Maharal (Chiddushei agados rosh Hashanah 11) explains that the shofar is the vehicle via which we are gathered together to be freed; from enemies and from our internal negative drives and yetzer hara. The Beis Yosef writes that the tekiah sound represents mercy and the teruah represents justice – we sandwich the justice with Divine mercy. Rav Hersh writes that *trumpet chatzotzros* are man-made but shofar is God-made – it is Him calling us home, helping us remove ourselves from any bad habits and entanglement. Rav Hirsh also writes that the *tekiah* blast symbolises singular clarity but *teruah* is a broken blast and represents our struggle to gain that level of clarity.

The shofar must be kosher – from a kosher animal, preferably curved and preferably a ram. It can be blown any time during Rosh Hashanah but we blow it during the service. The Gemara (16a) says that the main blowing seems to be during the Amidah, but we blow earlier too *in order to confuse the Satan*. Rashi explains this to mean ‘to show that we love mitzvos’ whilst Tosafos understands it to refer to making as if the final redemption has arrived, heralded by the shofar blasts. We learn the type and blasts from the Yovel (see Rosh Hashanah 33b). The bare minimum is to hear 10 blasts: three times the sequence of *tekiha-teruah-tekiah*’ but we hear 30 as we are unsure whether *teruah* in the Torah refers to *teruah*, *shevarim*, or *shevarim-teruah*. The Rabbis added a further 30, and the common custom is to blow a final 40 after mussaf (though mistakes in the last 40 do not need to be corrected if one has heard the first 60). The shofar should be blown by someone who is fully aware of the various laws regarding the type and length of note, and someone of righteous character too.

The Shofar is not sounded on Shabbos – the Gemara writes that the Rabbis were concerned lest we come to carry on Shabbos. The Maharal explains that this is because the requisite love of Hashem that emanates from obeying a Rabbinic decree *covers up* for the lack of shofar.

When one listens to the shofar one should have in mind to fulfil the mitzvah, one should listen intently, and one should not speak whatsoever. One should have sincere thoughts of repentance in mind.

It is permitted and praiseworthy to cry in prayer on Rosh Hashanah, as is it permitted to pray requests for others.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. The Torah describes it as a *Shabbos Shabbason* – a Shabbos of Shabbason; it is a Day of Atonement. The Gemara speaks about the power of the day itself to effect atonement – though we rule that teshuva is required too. The Gemara also notes that Yom Kippur is one of the happiest days in the Jewish calendar – for it is a day of atonement and forgiveness and it was on Yom Kippur that we received the second tablets.

Yom Kippur is a day enveloped in prayer: there are five prayer services over the course of the day. The evening begins with Kol Nidrei, the next morning is Shachris, Mussaf, Mincha, and Neilah. Each tefillah contains the *viduy* confession which lists the various sins we repent for – communally and individually. (One may also insert one's individual sins in the *viduy*). As detailed by the Rambam, the *viduy* confession and teshuva incorporate three elements: regret of past deeds, resolve not to repeat and desisting from sin. The largest part of the Tefillah is Mussaf, in which we recite the parts of the Temple Yom Kippur service. The 13 Attributes of Mercy feature heavily in the prayers too – the vehicle for forgiveness and salvation.

Men customarily wear white for the entirety of Yom Kippur: often donning a *kittel*, which is a burial garb, symbolising submission to the Divine will.

The day is one in which we replicate angels. The Gemara writes that the *yetzer hara* has no handle over us on Yom Kippur, and we scale back our involvement in the physical world. Thus, on Yom Kippur the Torah mandates various restrictions. Yom Kippur is like Shabbat inasmuch as the forbidden melachot activities are carried over from Shabbat to Yom Kippur. Yet the Torah also bans any eating or drinking (for this reason there is a special mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur). Similarly, it is prohibited (either Rabbinically or Biblically) to anoint oneself with cream/oil, to have marital relations, to wash oneself (unless minimal hand-washing for davening) and to wear weather shoes.

Motzai Yom Kippur is accompanied with Havdalah from a flame that was burning throughout Yom Kippur, and there is a mitzvah to begin building a Succah as soon as Yom Kippur ends.

Succos

1. Background

As detailed in parshas Emor (Vayikra 23:33-44) Succos is a 7-day festival, with Shmini Atzeres being the eighth day. It begins on 15th Tishrei. Though Succos is the climax of a busy Tishrei period – one which included Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – the Midrash writes that initially Hashem’s plan was to have a month gap between each festival. However, the Midrash concludes, once the Jewish People sinned at the golden calf Hashem created a three-month festival gap and bunched the festivals together in Tishrei. The depth of this is that the sin of the golden calf saw us fail to internalise what Mattan Torah was. To sink to serving idols soon after the most powerful mass Divine revelation known to man meant that the people had not connected properly with the giving of the Torah. Thus, Hashem proceeded to ordain a three-month pause on the festival front, putting in place the busy month of Tishrei which has no let-up, forcing us to internalise each festival. (Perhaps this is one reason that the verses of the festivals follow the sin of the golden calf in parshas Ki Sissa). Nevertheless, there is a clear sequence that runs through Tishrei – evidenced by the *ledavid Hashem ori* psalm that we recite throughout, and evidenced by the Rambam grouping the laws of shofar, succah and lulav and esrog together too. The theme is the interlocking of purity, direction and simcha. Rosh Hashanah sees us re-orientate our direction, Yom Kippur sees us correct past deeds and Succos is the resulting joy of celebrating a new, rededicated and re-orientated *you*, surrounded by mitzvos and trust in Hashem. Alternatively, true simcha comes from knowing that there is a bigger picture, plan or agenda (Rosh Hashanah) and that we make ourselves part of that (Yom Kippur) [Rav Noach Orloweck].

There are two main mitzvos on Succos – sitting in the Succah and taking the four species.

The Torah speaks about sitting in a Succah in parshas Emor (23:43-44):

For a seven day period you shall live in booths.
Every resident among the Israelites shall live in booths,

מב בסֹּטת תִּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־
הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַסֹּטת:

43 in order that your [ensuing] generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God.

מג לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דִרְתִּיכֶם כִּי בַסֹּטות
הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי
אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

The Gemara in Succah (11a) debates the origin of the mitzvah. Rabbi Akiva opines that the Jewish People dwelt in 'real huts' upon leaving Egypt. There are two approaches found in the commentaries on Vayikra 23:43. The Ramban explains that we are reminding ourselves that even though we lived in primitive huts in the desert, we still lacked nothing - Hashem provided us with absolutely everything we needed. The Rashbam puts another slant on it, suggesting that we are reminding ourselves that we did not always live in houses and cities and did not always have a hold in the Land of Israel. Once we are able to appreciate that even our very houses are cause to thank Hashem, we are imbued with a feeling of humility and gratitude to our Creator. This is especially apt for Sukkos which falls at the time of the harvest, because it ensures that we do not have the arrogant attitude that "I achieved all of this without needing Hashem," and instead thank Hashem for the success of the harvest. This is why the word *eizrach* (guest) is used by the Torah (Vayikra 23:42) in reference to living in the sukkah, because the sukkah reminds us that we are only temporary guests. Just like a guest who is dependent upon his host, we can take nothing for granted and we must appreciate everything that we have. However, we seem to pasken like the view of Rabbi Eliezer, who holds that the Succos were a reminder to the clouds of glory which sheltered and protected us in the dessert. Though the Bach tracks this as a continuation of the Exodus, others do not. Indeed, the Ben Ish Chai writes that the Clouds of Glory were a special unnecessary gift from Hashem as they did not save any lives (unlike the *mannah* or well of Miriam) – it just made our journey more comfortable by normalising temperatures and flattening mountains. This was an extra show of love from Hashem for which we celebrate. Certainly, sitting in a temporary hut is a sign of faith and trust in Divine security – it is He who takes care of us and not our solid houses.

The four species are lulav, esrog, hadas and arava. They are mentioned in Vayikra 23:40

And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the hadar tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for a seven day period.

מִן־לִקְחֶתֶם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הַדָּר
כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵגֶרֶף עֵץ־עֵבֶת וְעַרְבֵי־נַחַל
וְשִׂמְחֶתֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

The Gemara makes clear which species these are referring to. Note that outside the Temple, only the first day is a Torah obligation to take the four species – the mitzvah on the other days is of Rabbinic origin. The four species represent the entirety of the body as well as the entirety of the Jewish People. As the Sefer Hachinuch writes, we take the four species and recognise that Hashem is the source of the harvest. In doing so, we correct a popular error whereby the more happy a person is the more self-enclosed they are and the less they tend to recognise their Creator. We direct our joy and achievements towards Hashem and in doing so complete the atonement of Tishrei. The Gemara adds that waving the four species in all direction is a form of subtly prayer or request that the rain and winds should be beneficial this year.

Thus, the themes of the Succah and four species are complementary: joy and Hashem's protection.

The final two days of Succos are Shmini Atezeres and Simchas Torah. In Israel these are one day, whilst in the Diaspora these are separated into two days. We begin saying *mashiv haru'ach*, praising Hashem for His ability to provide rain, on Mussaf of Shmini Atzeres: this is also the judgment of how much rainfall we will have in the coming year, as the Mishnah writes at the start of Rosh Hashanah. The day before Shmini Atezeres is known as Hoshanah Rabah – it is a mini day of judgment and the prayers of the day reflect this.

2. Assorted Laws

a. Succah

The laws of constructing a Succah can be complex. The walls should be a minimum of ten tefachim (60cm) and the schach must be laid only after the walls are in place. In some circumstances, the height of walls can be made up via string, and in some cases three walls can be used. A halachic authority should be consulted. The height the s'chah is placed at should be no lower than 60cm and no higher than 20 amos (10 metres). The custom is to decorate the Succah.

There is a mitzvah to be in the Succah for as much time as possible. One should sleep in the Succah (unless it is bitterly cold or raining) and when one eats bread, mezonos and according to many wine too, must only be eaten in the Succah. Fruit and drinks do not need to be eaten in a Succah, though it is a mitzvah to do so. On the first night of Succos there is an enhanced obligation to eat in the Succah such that even though normally when it rains one does not need to be in the Succah, many opinions obligate one to remain in the Succah for kiddush and hamotzi even

on the first night. The Mishnah Brurah writes that in the case of rain on the first night of Succos one should try waiting for the rain to stop, but if not, one should make kiddush and hamozti in the Succah (eating a kezayis of bread) and then one can complete the meal inside. One does not recite the bracha of *leyshev ba'succah* if it is raining. There are varying customs about whether one still dwells in their Succah on Shmini Atzeres outside of Israel; the prevalent custom is to eat in the Succah but not sleep in it.

b. Four species

There are various laws about the four species – ideally one should check with a competent halachic authority before buying a set. The four species must be owned by you on the first day (borrowing does not fulfil one's obligation; though one may receive them as a temporary gift). The four species are normally taken during the Halel prayer and later for Hoshanos: though some take them in the Succah before Shul also. Given its proximity to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and given the Torah's description of the four species as a *beautiful* fruit, many Jews are meticulous to invest in purchasing a beautiful set of four species. The lulav is not taken on Shabbos.

The most common issues when it comes to the four species are:

1. The Lulav

a. Niktam Rosho – Cut at the Top

Lehatchila the middle leaf cannot be cut at all. *Bedieved* as long as the majority of the middle leaf is not cut, you can still make a bracha.

b. Yavesh – dry

One must buy a lulav that has not completely dried out – if it is white, this is far too dried.

c. *Nechlak Rosho* – the leaves split

If the tiyomes leaf is split, then as long as it is not a *tefach* or *rov* it is fine. If it looks like a *hemnek* i.e. a fork, then it is totally passul

2. The Esrog

a. Chaser – a bit of the esrog is missing/has been scraped

If the hole is not as large as an *issar* coin and not mefulash (permeated completely) then it is ok on the second day yom tov or in cases of need even on the first day

b. Niklaf – peeled

If there is any change of colour this is a problem

c. Chazazis

If the dots cover the majority (when a circle is drawn to connect them) it is unkosher; so too if they are on the top part of the esrog. If they are not thick dots it is ok. A crusted *blettel* mark is only ok in cases of need. There is no need to use microscope to identify dots.

d. Pitom fallen off

If none of the esrog itself came off it is fine, though there is a debate if it is kosher if the tip was cut off without the branch

Regarding the Hadassim, there is a debate whether the three hadassim leaves need to be perfectly in line or if one *chut hamakif* can be drawn through all three. Even after the *chut*, some hold that a tiny gap (1mm) is fine. Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurebach held that as long as it *looks like* they are the same level from afar (even without a ruler, etc.) they are fine.

Aravos should be stored carefully so they do not dry out. It is perfectly acceptable (and rather common) to replace one's aravos halfway through Succos as they tend to dry out quickly.

Table

- Note: According to Rabbi Akiva Eiger and the Pri Megadim the difference between *hadar* and *lekicha tamah* is that *hadar* is nikar le'ayin i.e. if you need a microscope to see it, that does not disqualify it from being *hadar*

Psul	Reason	Halachos	Size of psul	Lechatchila	Bedieved
Niktam Rosho – leaves cut (seif vav)	Hadar	Ra'avad – shidrah Ran – most of the upper leaves Rema – middle leaf	Levush – any amount Achronim - most of the leaf (see MB 6:26)	Use a lulav which does not have any of its middle leaf cut	If there are no others, one may use a lulav which does not have majority cut (but only make a bracha if most of middle leaf is not cut)
Nechlak Rosho – leaves are split (seif gimmel)	As if all is lackng – pasul all 7 days (mechaber). Lekicha Tamah (Rema)	Mechaber – most leaves Rema – middle leaf	Majority	Mitzvah min hamuvchar to use a lulav which is not nechlak at all	No need to use a different lulav if yours is a little <i>nechlak</i> – Taz says a tefach and Rema says majority
Nisdak (seif zayin)	Himnak – looks like two	Magein Avraham – lekicha tamah R'A'E - hadar	When it looks like twi		Posul
Yavesh – seif heh	Hadar (Rashi) Lo Hameisim (Ra'avad)	Mechaber – most leaves Rema – middle leaf	Mechaber – leaves go white Rema – break with finger nail Gra – any amount (Chazon Ish cholek)	Find a lulav which is not dry at all	MB – machmir in a place where you can find a non-yavesh one

Psul	Reason	Halachos	Size of psul	Bedeived
Chaser (beis)	Lekicha tamah (Rashi) Hadar (Ritva)	Muttar after day 1 wherever chaser	Mechaber – any amount, though some say only if ke'issar	If not mefulash or not k'issar can make bracha on second day YT and besha'as hadechak even on first day YT
Niklaf (vav)	Manumar (Rashi) Treifah (Rabeinu Chananel)	Only possul when on two or three places (not if on all) – Rashi. Rabeinu Chananel learns the other way round.	Ran – Even if outer peel is missing Teshuvos Harosh – only if inner peel (this is machlokes MB – Ch'Ish too)	If there is a change of colour that is passul anyway.
Chazazis (tes)	Hadar	If on one place – pasul be'rubo If on chotam, any amount	2 or 3 places posul if counted as rov Chotam is posul if it can be seen	Bletal is a machlokes – can be meikeil be'dechak. If not thick it is ok
Pitom falls (zayin)	Chaser (some say hadar)	Mechaber – posul only if dado falls too Rema – Posul even if shoshanto falls	If a bit of the pitom remains then it is tov to use a different lulav if possible	If can't find another one then muttar levarech (Magein Avraham). MB uses as snif le'hakel.

When binding the lulav and esrog, the lulav is held in the right hand (some say that a left-handed person takes the lulav in their left hand) with the esrog in one's left hand – clutched close together. The three hadas leaves are on the right of the lulav and placed so they are slightly higher than the two aravos leaves. One makes two blessings the first time one takes the four species – *al netilas lulav and she'hechyanu*. One shakes the lulav in all six directions after the blessing and during halel.

(see the siddur for instructions; there are different customs whether one rustles the four species when shaking them, or whether one simply moves them to and fro in all six directions – either way take care not to point the lulav downwards). The tradition is to hold the esrog with the pitom faced down before the bracha and then turn it over immediately after the bracha.

Since they are time-bound positive mitzvos, women are exempt from the mitzvos of the four species and succah: though of course women may perform them and they receive spiritual reward for doing so. Ashkenazim hold that women may make the brachos on these mitzvos too. Children should be trained in fulfilling these mitzvos – there is a debate whether a child needs to own their set of four species or can borrow them. The age a child should be educated in these mitzvos is when a child is old and capable enough to shake a lulav, and when they can sleep at night without calling their mother.

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Chanukah

Historically-speaking, Chanukah is the last festival we have. It was deep into the second Temple period; an era characterised by lack of prophecy, lack of Hashem's Shechinah residing in the Temple too – veritable darkness. In fact, Chanukah was the festival that *was never supposed to have happened*, in a way. For according to some, the Chashmonaim were not attempting to overthrow the Syrian-Greek army – they simply felt that they had an obligation to give up their lives to protect their Jewish values. Indeed, the Maharal writes that our festivals come at times of mild weather whilst times of the year during which the other nations scored victories over us come at extreme weather times (*Tisha b'Av* in summer and *Asara be'Teves* in the winter). The exception is Chanukah – a festival during the cold and dark of the winter; an emerging element of light at a time of darkness, Divine miracles when all thought miracles had ceased.

Chanukah is also relatively unique inasmuch as we have two miracles we are celebrating: the miracle of winning the war against the Syrian-Greek army, and the miracle of the oil burning for eight days. Yet which is the main miracle?

There is a rather cryptic Gemara^[1] which opens up the central topic of Chanukah. After having discussed the obligation of lighting the Chanukah candles, the Gemara asks a shocking question: “What is Chanukah?” The Gemara proceeds to answer: “On the 25th of Kislev...when the Greeks entered the *heichal* and made all the oil there impure...the kingship of the House of the Hasmoneans defeated the Greeks, but they checked and were only able to find one jug of oil which had the Kohen Gadol's seal on it; which would only suffice for one day. A miracle occurred and this oil burned for eight days, and so the next year they made these (eight) days a festival with Hallel and thanksgiving (*hodaah*).” Nevertheless, the actual question of the Gemara is difficult to understand at best.

Fortunately, we are not the first people to ask this obvious question. In four brief words, Rashi implies this question and answers it, paraphrasing the question *mai chanukah* as “based on which miracle did they institute it?” To explain this, two miracles occurred during the Chanukah story: the victory over the Greeks in war, and the oil which burnt for eight days. Rashi understood that the Gemara wished to ask which of the two miracles caused Chazal to institute the festival? The Gemara then proceeds to answer that the main miracle was that of the oil, and based on this Chazal instituted the festival. The Gemara hardly mentions the miracle of the victory over the Greeks. That is Rashi's opinion, but there are other approaches on the subject amongst the Rishonim.

Although the Gemara prefers to dwell on the miracle of the oil, the *al hanissim* prayer which we insert into our Shemoneh Esrei and Birkas Hamazon during Chanukah takes the opposite stance. In *al hanissim* the miracle of the oil makes a cameo appearance at best, while centre stage is reserved for the description of the miracle of the war. Accordingly, Rav Yonassan MiLunille^[2] is of the opinion that the main miracle behind Chanukah is that of the war. Indeed, he writes that we would have had this festival even if the miracle of the oil had not occurred (and it would have been eight days anyway).^[3] The miracle of the oil merely gave us the mitzvah to light candles, but the Hallel and *hodaah* are based on the victory in war. Presumably Rav Yonassan MiLunille would have understood the Gemara's question 'what is Chanukah' to be asking "for which miracle do we light candles on Chanukah," as the Maharsha^[4] explains. Thus we have a dispute as to which was the central miracle behind the establishing of the festival of Chanukah: the miracle of the oil burning for eight days (Rashi), or the victory at war (Rav Yonassan MiLunille).

It would seem that this is connected to another dispute regarding Chanukah. Where does the name 'Chanukah' come from? The Ran^[5] cites an explanation that 'Chanukah' is made up of the words *chanu kaf heh*, which means "they rested on the 25th," which is when the war ended. Others^[6] explain that the name Chanukah refers to the '*chanukas hamizbeyach*' - the (re)inauguration of the altar and Beis Hamikdash. This could be viewed as an outgrowth of the dispute between Rashi and Rav Yonassan MiLunille. A name describes the essence of the festival, and so the name 'Chanukah' refers to the main event of the festival. Thus, the opinion cited by the Ran holds that the main miracle of the festival was the war (hence the name 'Chanukah' refers to the war), while the opinion which explains the name 'Chanukah' to refer to the re-inauguration of the Beis Hamikdash holds that the main miracle was that of the oil, which signified the first mitzvah done in the process of inaugurating the Beis Hamikdash.

Another potential outgrowth of the dispute is regarding the novel *chakira* question of the Rogerchover Rav as to whether Chanukah is one festival of eight days or eight separate festivals of one day each. If the main miracle is the war then the whole festival could easily be considered one eight-day long unit, whereas if in fact Chanukah is a collection of eight day-long festivals one would certainly have to assume that the miracle of the oil was the basis for each new day-long festival. There is room for pondering this question further.^[7] Thus far we have only laid down the opinions, but what are the underlying reasons for each side of this dispute?

It seems to depend on which angle one takes in looking at the greatness of a miracle. The miracle of the war was very great in terms of its result – the survival

of Jewish spirituality and sovereignty, as well as its sheer 'surprise factor' - who would have thought that a handful of Kohanim could beat the huge, well-armed and trained Greek army?! However, the miracle was not an open one. The war lasted for years and years, and the Jews suffered casualties along the way. The miracle of the oil, on the other hand, did not have as magnificent results as the miracle of the war, but it *was* an open miracle. There was no natural explanation for such an occurrence. Thus, the dispute hinges on whether one considers the scale of the miracle or its openness. Rav Yonassan MiLunille saw the scale of the miracle as the deciding factor, therefore he held that the war was the main miracle. Rashi, on the other hand, valued an open miracle above all else, in which case the oil miracle was greater.^[8]

Alternatively, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz answers that the oil miracle rated so highly precisely because it was technically unnecessary. It showed us that Hashem is not content simply to give us the necessities in life, such as life itself and religious independence, but in fact He wants us to have even the things which are not absolutely necessary. This shows that He cares for us. As Rav Shmulevitz puts it, that is the greatest kiss of love. Indeed, that is why on Chanukah we have a double layer of *hiddur*. Since Hashem 'went out of His way' to perform an unnecessary miracle for us, therefore we all tend to perform the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah candles on the maximum *mehadrin min hamehadrin* level, going way beyond the letter of the law for Him.

Third, the primacy of the oil could stem from it being the goal of the war. For once the Jewish People recaptured the Temple and lit the Menorah, they realised that this was the end-goal of everything they had achieved during the war.

There is, however, a third opinion on the subject - that of the Rambam and the Meiri.

In his introduction to the laws of Chanukah, the Rambam^[9] gives equal 'airtime' to the miracle of the war and that of the oil. After telling us that the war ended on the 25th of Kislev, he goes on to stress that the beginning of the festival is on this same 25th. It seems, as the Pri Chadash^[10] points out, that the Rambam understood, like the Meiri,^[11] that the first day of Chanukah is all about the war, while the other seven days of Chanukah are based on the miracle of the oil. (It could be argued that the miracle of the oil only lasted seven days, since there was already enough oil to burn for the first day. The Beis Yosef asks a famous question at the beginning

of Hilchos Chanukah for which literally hundreds of answers have been given: why do we celebrate for eight days – surely there was no miracle on the first day since there was sufficient oil to burn for one day! According to the Rambam and the Meiri the question never really starts – in fact the first day is a celebration of the victory in war, while the remaining seven days celebrate the miracle of the oil.)

In summary, we have encountered three opinions regarding the main miracle of Chanukah: the victory in war (Rav Yonassan MiLunille), the oil lasting for eight days (Rashi), or both (Rambam and Meiri).

[1] Gemara Shabbos 21b

[2] Chiddushei Rabbi Yonassan MiLunille, Shabbos 9b in his format

[3] For, as Rabbi Yonassan writes, Chazal wanted to show such gratitude for the miracle of the war that they decided to make Chanukah the longest festival there is (Sukkos is only seven days and Shemini Atzeres is considered a separate festival, as the Gemara tells us).

[4] Maharsha Shabbos 21b 'mai'

[5] Ran Shabbos 9b 'asa'um' in the Rif

[6] Maharsha Shabbos 21b

[7] The Gemara Shabbos 21b does say 'they made them *Yamim Tovim*', which implies that there are eight separate Yamim Tovim. This would also explain why we say full Hallel on all eight days like Sukkos, each day of which is considered like a separate Yom Tov, and not just on the first day like Pesach, when all seven days are considered one Yom Tov, hence the same number of *ofkorbanos* each day. See Mishnah Berurah 644:4 and Tur there

Practical

Chanukah sees us make two changes to our tefillos. Hallel is recited (with a bracha) each of the eight days, as well as *Al Hanissim* being added to the Amidah and to birkas hamazon (if one forgets *al hanissim* one does not need to go back). At night we light Menorahs.

There is a difference between lighting Menorahs in Israel and in the Diaspora. In Israel, *publicising the miracle (pirumei nissa)* is the operative point – people light their Menorahs by their windows or at their doors facing outwards so people on the street can see it. In the Diaspora most light indoors, either behind their front door or near the window.

The Menorah should be placed no higher than 20 amos from street level (10meters approx.), and should not be placed below 3 tefachim (18cm) from the ground. Ideally it should be put between 18cm and 60cm from the ground.

The universal custom is to follow the *mehadrin min hamehadrin* way of lighting –

we light one candle corresponding to the night of Chanukah. The new candle is lit first (the one to the left), and one should stand slightly to the left in order not to pass over any other candles. The candles can be wax or oil, though oil is preferable is possible. Ashkenazim have everyone in the family light their own Menorah (the husband and wife tend to share one), whilst for Sephardim, one Menorah is lit for the entire family.

In Israel the main custom is to light at sunset, whilst in the Diaspora most light at nightfall. In Israel one may light until a time where people no longer tend to be walking in the street. Certainly in the Diaspora one may light all night – though there should preferably be another person awake for some level of publicising the miracle. The lights should burn for half an hour, and technically speaking one may blow them out afterwards. Three brachos are recited on the first night – *lehadlik ner shel chanukah*, *she'asah nissim* and *shehechyanu*, whilst on subsequent nights only the first two are recited.

If one is away for Shabbos, if one is married then one may rely on one's wife lighting. Alternatively, one may light where one is staying or contribute financially to the Menorah and fulfil the mitzvah with the host.

Purim – Megillas Esther: The Story of Purim like never before

Introduction

The festival of Purim is a unique day of joy and celebration. Purim is not simply about being saved from Haman's decree of annihilation. Purim is partly about realising that Hashem is controlling and dictating events even when it seems as if He is behind the scenes. The name of Hashem does not appear in the Megillah; it is hinted to twice via the first/last letters in pesukim referencing Haman's rise and then downfall but that is it. But Purim is also about the power of prayer and extent of repentance. In the Rambam's words, the Purim story affirms that Hashem is there whenever we call out to Him.

The Purim story is described in Megillas Esther; reading this Megillah is the central mitzvah of the day: the mitzvah which obligates the other laws, customs and mitzvos of the day. Many of us are familiar with the basic outline of the Megillah story. Yet, befitting of the theme of Divine relevance and action under the radar, there are layers and layers of depth to discover – whether previously unknown parts of the story or the themes and messages themselves. It is a story that we know, but a text that we have rarely examined in great depth; certainly not with full context and thorough analysis.

We shall be presenting the story predominantly through the eyes of the Vilna Ga'on^[1], adding a few Midrashim and commentaries for context and added explanation too. It must be pointed out that though to the *uninformed* onlooker, the Vilna Ga'on's version of events seems to be far from the plain text of the Megillah, all the Vilna Ga'on reveals *is* mentioned in the pessukim (if one looks at the words with pinpoint accuracy). Sometimes we will point out where the passuk hints to each event, but other times we will leave it to the reader to consult the commentary itself for full details and explanation. Much of the Vilna Ga'on's work on Esther deals with the revealed meaning of the text - showing the underlying meaning behind the text and showing the background to the story; plots and subplots. There is also a *nistar* part of the Vilna Ga'on's commentary here, but we shall not be delving into this. Any light comments are to break up the text and make it more digestible.

In terms of historical context, the Purim story occurred during the period of exile between the two temples. The first temple had been destroyed and the Jews exiled to Babylon decades earlier. Koresh had given permission for the second temple to be built; the foundations had been laid and some had returned to Israel. However, the

building was stopped due to (mistaken) claims that the Jews were rebelling. It was during this hiatus that the Purim story occurred. Geographically, subject to a dispute cited in the Ran at the start of Megillah, most Jews were not living in Israel at the time. The Purim story is part of a wider story of our return to the temple. But no temple can exist or survive without the people being on a high spiritual level; we must first examine our ways, want to build our relationship with Hashem, repent, then move towards increased mitzvah performance and ultimately the Mikdash. The Purim story laid down the spiritual foundations for this return.

The Story Begins: The New Capital

Once upon a festival there was a king called Achashveirosh. There is much debate as to Achashveirosh's upbringing. Some opine that he was originally a 'horse-breeder' of non-royal lineage; Achashveirosh had become the front-runner in usurping the throne of the Babylonian Empire (previously moulded by Nebuchadnezzar) using various underhand means. Unsurprisingly, as king of this 'grand national' Empire of 127 countries over which he had no hereditary right to rule, Achashveirosh was looking for ways to legitimise his rule. He was looking to win the people over to allay his fears of a rebellion or of people questioning his right to rule. Thus, he married a lady called Vashti, who, apart from being particularly externally beautiful, was Nebuchadnezzar's granddaughter. She would be his claim to the throne and his legitimacy in ruling. And, given that she was his 'security' to the throne, and that he was looking to legitimise his power, there was no chance he'd ever part from her according to natural law, logic or sense. At least that's *before* Hashem had other ideas. Remember, there was also no chance he would marry a Jewish lady either. At least that's *before* Hashem had other ideas.

Others opine that Achashveirosh was the son of the previous king Cyrus (Koresh). It was Koresh who had given permission for the Temple to be rebuilt, yet this permission was rescinded (either by Koresh or by Achashveirosh). Achashveirosh had an interesting family background. A Person king called Astyages had a single daughter called Mandane, who was seduced by a member of the palace staff and became pregnant. This impregnator was killed by the king, and Mandane jailed – the child was left to grow up in the wild. This child was Koresh, and he later killed Astyages. Upon seeing Koresh's survival and rise, Daryavesh the king of the Medes offered his daughter to Koresh in marriage; the child of this union was Achashveirosh. And now he ruled over 127 countries – 100 provinces and 27 islands. Indeed, man contend that his empire was initially larger – it was reduced to 127 as a punishment for his refusal to allow the Jews to rebuild the Temple.

Who was Vashti? Vashti also had an interesting life story. She was the daughter of King Belshazzar (and therefore granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar). Daryavesh spared her on the night of Belshazzar's assassination, and six years later she married Achashveirosh – she was eighteen years old at the time.

To provide one example of how the Vilna Ga'on's explanations are based on the close reading of the pesukim, let us examine pasuk 2 and 3:

In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital, in the third year of his reign...

Why do we need to be told that the king sat on his throne - we know that? And why is Shushan stressed as the capital, and what are the three years? The Gra explains the following...

Having the destructively common combination of paranoia and greed, Achashveirosh had another 'interesting' idea: he decided to begin a major project regarding a royal throne. But he did not want simply any old throne. He wanted Nebuchadnezzar's own throne - the one Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Israel: the throne built by Shlomo Hamelech. The problem was that this was no ordinary throne. This throne was made with deep spiritual kabbalistic secrets, this throne had lions engraved onto it and birds hovering above it. And this throne was very particular and exclusive as to who sat on it; should an unfitting king sit on it, the chair would 'spit out' its occupant. Pharaoh Necho tried to sit on it but he was attacked by one of the lions and ended up with a permanent limp. Achashveirosh knew that *he* would never be able to sit on this throne, so his craving soon turned to carving. He ordered an exact replica throne to be made for him – one carved to the finest detail to be a perfect match for the original; again a way of consolidating his power and presenting himself as a legitimate king. Yet there was a problem with some of the logistical planning. The only suitable workmen he could find for this ambitious project lived in a city called Shushan. Shushan was not normally the capital city of such an empire; it would be Ninveh or Eilam. In fact, only in the Purim story does Shushan seem to be the centre of the action. When the craftsmen of Shushan finally completed the project, after three years' work, the grand chair was too heavy to move. Thus, in order to keep his ambitious throne project alive, the absurd became the impossible: Achashveirosh had his entire capital (with all its government ministers) move from to a city called Shushan. Thus the verse states that (1:2) 'it was in those days *when the king took residence on his throne* in Shushan the (new) *capital*' – this was the first time he had sat on his new throne, and Shushan was now officially declared the capital. But why did Hashem pick Shushan? This secret we are let into three verses later: 'For a Jew lived in Shushan by the name of Mordechai' (2:5) – it would later be this same. Mordechai who would be able to overhear a plot against Achashveirosh's life and be on-hand to advise Esther about what to do to save the Jewish People. Mordechai's life was somewhat of a microcosm of Jewish history of the time. Exiled three times from Jerusalem, downtrodden and berated, he led the people to repent and then oversaw their salvation and ultimately laid the foundations for the return to the Temple and Jerusalem. In order to achieve all of this Mordechai needed to live near

the palace, in the capital, and that meant Hashem arranging for the capital to be switched to Shushan. This was not a supernatural miracle, but *atzas Hashem* - the plans ('advice') of the Divine - as the Gra puts it. To accompany his new throne and new capital, Achashveirosh decided to throw a party. But still, the king would never have Vashti removed. Not in a million years according to *natural* logic and rules.

Unless...

The Party

Chazal^[2] tell us that Nebuchadnezzar was a very stingy person; he was a successful king in terms of his conquests but a lowly person in terms of his morals and values. Therefore, after he plundered all the riches of the dozens of countries he conquered, in his later years he was very concerned that somebody else would take his riches and enjoy all his 'hard work' for themselves. Therefore, he ordered these treasures to be stored in iron ships which he then sunk purely so no-one would enjoy these (*his*) riches after he died. When Koresh took over the reigns (it was he who allowed the Jews to begin rebuilding the Temple) he found these sunken ships and the treasures therein – according to one version he diverted a river to dry up the location of these ships and then gradually took out the treasures. This was his reward for granting the Temple permit. All in all, the treasures filled 1080 storehouses. Thus, by the time Achashveirosh came to the throne and took possession of these storehouses (according to a different version, it was Achashveirosh who discovered these sunken treasures) he 'decided' to dabble in a phenomenally unprecedented display of showboating. In order to impress his subjects with his vast wealth (thus augmenting their subservience to him) the idea 'was put into Achashveirosh's head' to order a giant festival, during which various *important* ministers from the various constituent countries would be shown round these 1080 storehouses. But, due to the sheer volume of treasures, there was only enough time for the ministers to see six storehouses per day. So, with six storehouses to get through each day and 1080 storehouses to survey in total, Achashveirosh declared a feast for 180 days. Indeed, these six storehouses per day are hinted to in the six words of wealth in pasuk four: *osher, kevod malchuso, yakar, tiferes, gedulaso*. The 180 days were also a means of ensuring that even dignitaries who lived far away would be able to make it. Whether the people of Shushan were invited so far is a matter of debate, but they were definitely invited to the showpiece finale. At the end of these 180 days Achashveirosh decided to play the ultimate card to win over the local populous in Shushan. Now why did Achashveirosh decide to party now? Some say he had calculated the end of the seventy years that the Jewish exile was supposed to last for – he was celebrating their irreversible stay under his rule. This is one reason why the Jews were Divinely

condemned for attending the feast; they were expressing that they had given up hope of being redeemed. Further, he was celebrating his new throne and capital, alongside having been married to Vashti for a year.

According to many the general feasting was (also) a celebration of the end of seventy years of Jewish exile, as the Gemara writes, Achashveirosh had miscalculated the starting time for these seventy years. The Maharal writes that the final day of the Shushan feast was on Yom Kippur and that Achashveirosh entered the feast dressed as the Kohen Gadol, with the cups heralding from the Temple. Yet the Gra provides another angle. It was of utmost importance for Achashveirosh to gain favour in the eyes of the people of Shushan. For, as residents of the capital, they would be the 'first line of defence' in case of rebellion. Thus, whereas the 180 days of feasting were to show his might and wealth, the Shushan party would be about showing that Achashveirosh was *a man of the people*, so he'd be loved. So, with the plan being to get the people to *love him* (not just feel subservient to him – after all, he was aiming to guarantee their loyalty should they be called on to defend him), Achashveirosh went all out. *Chur*, *Karpas*, and several other amazing materials decorated the banquet hall to welcome every resident of Shushan into the king's palace. Achashveirosh wanted to show that he was a lovable character, a real 'man of the people,' so he engaged in an illusory feat of democracy. He also made sure that all five senses were engaged and catered for; lovely sights, smells, taste, even touch of the seats and waiters listening to every order. Interestingly, there is no mention of music at the party – Achashveirosh did not want to risk offending anyone by choosing a specific type of music –for everyone has their own taste of music! In order to make every person feel 'he belonged there' not only were personal invitations handed out, but every attendee was able to order the cuisine of his choice – as well as their favourite wine. But (in true democratic spirit) they could all do what they wanted at the party. If you wanted to drink then you drank, but if you didn't want to drink then that was also fine – 'there was no forced drinking' (1:8). Indeed, some write that nobody drank from the same cup twice; new cups were constantly being supplied. However, it was at this culmination of the 180 days' feasting, in the presence of all the important ministers and his 'beloved' residents of Shushan, that Achashveirosh (who would never part with Vashti, remember) was about to be visited by the real Orchestrator of events.

By now Vashti was getting tired of her husband's constant partying. Coming from royalty herself, she knew that it was most unbecoming of a real king to behave in such a way to publicly feast and gulp down wine for 180 days. So, at this 'final supper', the culmination of the half-year-long festivities, 'Vashti decided to make a feast for the ladies in the *beis ha'malchus*' (1:9). Vashti made a bold move here; she decided on a room for the feast called the *beis ha'malchus*. This was the only place in the palace where the king could go alone – it was his special, private room used for contemplation,

and nobody else was ever allowed in. Irrked by her husband's public dining, Vashti provocatively chose the *beis ha'malchus* as a form of protest. Yet Achashveirosh could not publicly rebuke her for he was maintaining his guise as the kind man of the people. Not only that, but this *beis ha'malchus* room 'happened' to be situated adjacent to the main banquet hall where the men were indulging in their alcohol-inspired gluttony. Hearing women's voices, the conversation in the main banquet hall immediately took on a more crude and perverted tone. Thus, Mr. 'man of the people' Achashveirosh, smiling at the head of the table, soon saw his smile wiped from his face as an altercation broke out in the banquet. Things had started not going according to plan (well, not according to Achashveirosh's plan anyway).

The men were vocally arguing about whether Persian women or Median women are prettier. This was very worrying for Achashveirosh, for this could derail his entire party. As the battle raged, Achashveirosh decided that he had to play arbitrator here, lest this 'deeply intellectual' debate derail his party. So, tempting fate somewhat, Achashveirosh sent for his wife, declaring that *'neither Persians nor Medians are the most beautiful – I married a Babylonian and she is the prettiest out of everyone.'* Putting their personal bickering aside, a hushed silence descended on the hall, as the people waited for Vashti to make an appearance. Others write that this was a plan Achashveirosh had hatched to entrap the Jews. He would invite Vashti to enter the hall naked, other women would follow suit, and the Jews would sin – thereby guaranteeing Divine wrath and no further Temple. Either way, this was *the moment* for Achashveirosh. Vashti's appearance was supposed to prove his re-jigged identity as 'man of the people' and would be the success of the feast. All eyes were on what would happen next. Yet, due to a combination of spots and anger, Vashti turned down her husband, adamant that she would not be dancing at this *simcha*. The Taz commentary writes that the messengers actually got the message wrong; whereas Achashveirosh had used the soft form of speech (*amirah*) in his request for Vashti to appear (1:10), the messengers reported a harsh order to Vashti, using the *dibbur* form of speech (1:12). In fact, Chazal reveal that she sent back a most insulting reply to the effect of *my grandfather was a real king who could handle his drink but you are not a real king -you are a drunkard*. Initially the servants did not want to say this report to the king, but he insisted that they report this aloud. Publicly insulted and embarrassed, Achashveirosh, now all eyes on him, began to flare up in particularly unnatural anger – 'the king was very angry, and his anger burnt inside of him' (1:12). Yet still, Achashveirosh was not about to do away with his darling Vashti so easily – after all, it was in his interests to keep her around. So, ever the democrat and sensing a way out of this royal mess, Achashveirosh ordered that the case be referred to the courts there and then. The idea made sense - a man of democracy would deflect the situation on to the courts; this was a wonderful solution and would save the day for Achashveirosh.

The Courtroom Drama

In those times, the Empire had two types of courts. One was legal - a standard court - and the other one crooked. The first was a normal panel of judges who would judge a case according to its rights and wrongs; they would hear the arguments and litigants and decide the case accordingly; a fair trial and a normal court. But the second type of court consisted of judges who would 'know what to say' – they would work out what the king wanted the verdict to be, and they would deliver the verdict accordingly. Thus, Achashveirosh took his case to (1:13) 'the wise people who know the times' (i.e. they know when to say what; which verdict to give to please the king the most). In fact, some say that Achashveirosh first turned to some Jewish judges to reach a verdict. They did not want to risk their lives if they would reach a verdict the king would not agree on, so they told him that since the destruction of the Temple and removal of the *urim ve'tumim* they cannot judge such critical cases. In the king's referral he stated that 'Queen Vashti did not follow the king's order' (1:15) – he was hinting strongly that he wanted her to remain his Queen. Yet there was a cog in the system, one by the name of Haman (called Memuchan at this point). For just recently, Haman 'happened' to have been appointed to this 'know what to say' judicial panel. And what's more, Haman 'happened' to have been having *shalom bayis* issues with his (foreign) wife: she was imposing her culture on his household, and he didn't like it; they were arguing about the language of instruction at home to their children. This was not a superficial argument - language reflects a culture; their argument was about what the dominant culture of their household was going to be. So Haman planned to use this opportunity to take his vendetta against his wife to a new level and to also raise his profile with the king. Some also write that Haman had a personal vendetta against Vashti –she had not invited Haman's wife Zeresh to the party, and Haman wanted his own daughter to marry Achashveirosh. Haman spoke *before* the king (1:16) - not simply in the king's presence (we know that fact), but he spoke out of line and out of turn. For the younger judge normally spoke last, out of deference and respect to seniority. Yet Haman spoke first, before any of the other judges. Haman argued that this insult to the king could not possibly be ignored and that it was a public issue and not a private one. The king must take strong measures against Vashti, lest any other wife (i.e. his) follow suit. Thus, he proposed that Vashti be removed, and all men should be formally granted rule over their wives. Waxing lyrical, Haman's premature speech swung the case, and the other judges voted in favour of the new judge's suggestion. However, despite this unlikely achievement for a newly appointed judge, Haman did not stop at that. Seeing this as an opportunity to further his career, Haman proposed that the laws of the entire Empire be amended in a very important way. Whereas previously only matters of direct national security could be decided by the king alone (without a court hearing), Haman argued that anything which affected the king (or his image) was, by nature a 'matter of national security.' Essentially,

Haman argued for the institution of emergency powers whereby the king could rule on any matters deemed relating to the king, without having to consult a court. These new 'emergency powers' will be of critical importance later on. For when Haman was sentenced to death these laws allowed the sentence to be carried out without going through the courts - and the courts were full of Haman's friends and appointees by then.

With Vashti gone, stage one was complete. Some note that Haman did not overtly order Vashti's death – he simply had her removed as Queen. But since there would be nothing else for her to do, death was decreed upon her. Hashem was the only One dancing at this simcha. In fact, matters were so much beyond Achashveirosh that 'he thought that this was good for him' (1:21); Hashem put it into Achashveirosh's head that it was a good idea to have killed Vashti. Now it's one thing to rid himself of Vashti. But it's completely different to marry Esther. After all, which king looking to validate his regal authenticity would ever go for a Jewish girl – a member of an exiled, 'downtrodden' nation. No king in their right mind would do that. Certainly not Achashveirosh. Or perhaps ...

Esther: A Most Complex Chemical Formula

After the impossible became the improbable, then the possible, likely, and then actually happened, Vashti's death created a void in the king's heart. Achashveirosh slumped into deep melancholy and loneliness. What's more, his normal wise advisers, scared by the combination of a king in a bad mood together with these new emergency powers putting their lives on a knife-edge, stayed away from the king as much as possible. Thus, the only people who were left advising the king in his state of depression were 'the young servants of the king' (2:2) ^[2b], whose advice was about as immature as the mouths which they came from. They feared that the king would die of this depression, which meant that they would be replaced by whoever succeeded him. They therefore needed to come up with a plan to get the king married. Noticing that the king was pining for the lost beauty of Vashti, these youngsters advised the king that the most beautiful women should be gathered for the king to select a wife. Yet the most shocking thing about this suggestion was that these advisers went for beauty alone. There was a case that Vashti's downfall was because of her haughtiness at her royal lineage, but the servants were probably too immature to realise that the king wanted fame and *yichus* as well as looks, they advised that physical beauty be the *only* criteria. Arguably more shocking, however, was the king's acceptance of their plan. Ignoring Haman's implicit advice (1:19) to go for a woman of some impressive lineage, Achashveirosh went with the plan of these youngsters (it's amazing what a combination of sadness, desperation and Divine string-pulling can do

to someone). And sure enough, the painstaking process of gathering all the eligible maidens in 127 countries began. But still, it would never be Esther who was chosen. After all, as soon as she heard about the plan to gather the women, she went into hiding – for three years according to some! Not only that, but according to one view Esther was not young (at least according to the Targum Sheini, who puts Esther at 75 years old at the time). But natural odds are no deterrent for the Boss...

The way this grand beauty pageant worked was that initially officers were sent undercover to each province to seek out the most beautiful girl in the land. The ‘best’ girl from each province would then be sent to the king. The girls would undergo a rigorous preparation process; immersion in various oils and spices, and when they were called to the king that night they could request whatever they liked to charm him. However, they only had one night – they were not allowed to return to the king – on pain of death. In fact, after they had slept with the king they had the status of a royal *pilegesh* – they were not allowed to marry anyone else. Esther was reluctantly taken to the palace and found herself in a most unpleasant situation.

Once Haggai (the officer put in charge of this plan) discovered Esther he was convinced that she was *the one* for Achashveirosh. Haggai took good care of Esther and gave her all she requested, including seven maidservants, which she used to safeguard which day was Shabbos - she used a different maidservant each day of the week. Further, Esther was even granted her request to only eat natural (and uncooked) foods; her adherence to the laws of Kosher did not alert any suspicions for she masked them well. Esther, who by now had found favour in all who met her due to a rare combination of beauty and refinement, religiously followed Mordechai’s command not to reveal her nationhood and origins; he had feared that her reluctance to marry the king would be noticed and this would spell danger for the entire Jewish People if she revealed that she was Jewish. Even after this was no longer a fear (the palace treated her wonderfully) she still obeyed Mordechai’s advice. This was yet another piece of the grand tapestry which would become significant later - had she revealed her nation perhaps Achashveirosh would never have married her, and perhaps Haman would have crafted his edict against the Jews a bit more carefully.

Esther was ‘called to the king in the tenth month’ (2:16), the month of Teves – another small miracle in that the coldness of the nights helped endear Esther to Achashveirosh. Yet still, her chances were unlikely at best. Unlike the other girls who saw this as their opportunity for stardom, Esther did not take in any special musical instruments when she was called to Achashveirosh. On the contrary, she was forced in against her will, and by this time she was visibly green from sickness. A combination of Esther’s piety and Divinely inspired admiration in Achashveirosh’s eyes saw the most unlikely of conclusions; Achashveirosh had decided that Esther would be chosen. The King had decided. Esther was to be the new Mrs. Achashveirosh. And instead of consulting

with his advisers, Achashveirosh decided on the spot that Esther was to be his wife - there was to be no background check and no trying to force her to reveal her origins and nationhood first. So the impossible had become the unlikely, then odds on and then actually happened: a Jewish girl had married into royalty. In fact, Esther successfully convinced Achashveirosh not to throw another lavish feast celebration in honour of their marriage. Instead, she convinced him to send gifts and food parcels to the people of Shushan (especially the poor) so they could all celebrate at home.

Esther: Our Eyes in Shushan

The long winter nights can be rather cold, and Achashveirosh quickly took to staying up until the early hours of the morning drinking, even after his mood had improved with the coronation of his new queen). Now, this added consumption of wine took its toll on his two chief butlers, by the names of Bigsan and Teiresh. After too many sleepless nights due to Achashveirosh constantly calling them in to serve him more wine at all hours of the night, the butlers decided that they could not cope with this any longer; it would be their lives or Achashveirosh's life. Thus, they conspired against the king, planning to spike his drink with a most deadly poison. Mordechai, however, was on-hand to overhear their plans, and he understood their language as being a judge had to understand many languages to understand the litigants properly. Others opine that Bigsan and Teiresh knew that Mordechai was listening but thought nothing of it – they thought that Mordechai would be happy to see the king dead. Some write that Bigsan and Teiresh were Vashti's relatives and wanted to avenge her death. Either way, Mordechai he sent a message via Hatach to Esther to warn the king (according to some Hatach was Daniel, former adviser to previous kings). It was 'fortunate' that Achashveirosh had moved his capital to Shushan, otherwise Mordechai would never have been there to play such a major role. The king, who then had this treason independently and objectively confirmed, organised for the plotters to be put in their own plot (in the ground), and recorded the event in his Book of Chronicles. Note the speed of events here: Esther's quick ascendancy to the throne, followed almost immediately by the plotters and Mordechai's inscription in the royal book. The speed of events will be an important theme later in the Megillah too.

There are those who opine that Mordechai was rewarded somewhat at this early stage – he was made a judge, or an officer, hence his position to stand by the royal gate. One of Mordechai's early pieces of advice to the king regarded what to do about Esther's identity; the king was desperate to know where Esther came from. Esther refused to reveal, saying 'my father died when I was very young, my mother died in childbirth.' Achashveirosh probably knew that Mordechai raised Esther, but he did not know where Esther's heritage lay. Even after Achashveirosh offered a tax cut for

everyone (with the aim of a nation coming forward and claiming credit for the tax cut, for being Esther's people) he was none the wiser. Mordechai advised the king to gather a second group of ladies for his purposes – that way Esther would get jealous and perhaps reveal her heritage. In truth, Mordechai just wanted to give Esther some respite from Achashveirosh – the other ladies would distract him for a short time. Nevertheless, given that the royal scribes were Haman's sons, they made sure that Mordechai would not be recorded too positively – any reward due to him would be minimised and glossed over, in fact delayed. What they were unaware of is that the fact that Mordechai would not receive his reward yet would be key to the later events of the Megillah, and critical to their father's downfall. For there would come a time when Haman would think the king was rewarding him, but in fact Mordechai would be rewarded.

Haman's Plan

Meanwhile, back at the palace, after Haman's heroics as part of the judicial panel in perek 1, the king had decided to promote Haman to chief adviser/minister. Haman, who was a barber by profession before his judicial big break, began to allow his newfound power go to his hair (head). Thus, when Mordechai would not bow down to him Haman became incensed. Some point out that Mordechai and Haman had some past history. They were both generals of legions of the same army, but whilst Mordechai's legion saved their rations and ate them at the correct time, Haman's legion used them up too quickly and were on the verge of death. Haman begged Mordechai to share their rations, which he did on condition that Haman sell himself as a slave to Mordechai. They inscribed this transaction on some form of belt (some say it was inscribed on a shoe sole) and Mordechai joyously waved this aloft when Haman walked past. Interestingly, it seems from the pesukim that Haman did not notice Mordechai not bowing down – he was too haughty to notice individual people; he looked up the whole time. However, after Mordechai had notified the servants that he was not bowing down for he was Jewish, they informed Haman – who purposefully walked up to Mordechai to see if he would change his mind. Given that Haman considered himself a deity, and had an idol necklace around his neck, Mordechai was not going to comply. Despite being criticised by other Jews, Mordechai held firm – in fact, he purposefully went outside when Haman was walking past to publicly show his opposition.

Yet, for some reason, Haman felt it too lowly to kill one person (and besides, Chazal tell us that there was some past history between these two^[31]). So instead, Haman went for the jugular: he set about planning to annihilate the whole nation. Haman approached the king, claiming that he had some important business to discuss with

him. And, after laying into a certain nation who 'did not keep the laws of the king,' he requested that they all be put to the sword. The king agreed, especially when Haman offered a handsome sum of money to fund the operation. Here comes an important detail as outlined by the Vilna Ga'on. In his request to the king, Haman did not mention the name of this abhorrently wayward nation. The main letters, sent out signed with the king's seal, merely stated that 'everyone prepare yourselves to rise up against a certain nation on the 13th Adar.' In fact, the Jews in other places around the Empire themselves waited eagerly for the day they would be able to rid the country of this 'despicable nation,' whoever they were! Why did Haman not name and shame the nation immediately? For he wanted to keep his 'lucky date of in Adar 13th,' and he wanted to make sure the Jews would not rally and apply political pressure to prevent this decree from being executed. In the lottery selecting Adar 13th, Haman felt secure and happy – this was the day after the mourning period for Moshe Rabeinu had ended years ago, and it was a time of reduced merits for the Jewish People, Haman reasoned. So the identity of this 'nation' was a secret to everyone. It was to be announced by Haman a short time before Adar 13th. The letters were sent out to every country, area and province – Haman made sure that it reached everyone. The people of Shushan were initially confused⁽⁴⁾: they were awaiting the 13th Adar but they didn't know who would be the victims of this massacre; Divine hand was ensuring that there were several months between the casting of the lottery and the Adar date that the lottery chose. The decree did include that the other nations would take our spoils – this looting would encourage everyone to take part in massacring the Jews. There is considerable debate about Achashveirosh's involvement in Haman's plan. Some say he was fully aware that the intended nation were the Jews – he was happy for it to go through because he had been told that a Jew would take his crown (unbeknownst to him, this was Daryavesh, his and Esther's son). Others say that Achashveirosh was unaware of the full extent of the plans. Nevertheless, some high ranking officers did know, it seems, and they revealed this to some Jews in various provinces. The Jews found out through this secret means or via Mordechai himself.

There was one man who did know that Haman meant to kill the Jewish People. His name was Mordechai. Told so by a prophetic dream or another form of *ru'ach ha'kodosh* (another little miracle), Mordechai quickly went to work to resolve the situation. He first found out that Hashem had agreed with this decree; the people were at fault for having bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idol and for having attended the feast of Achashveirosh. Mordechai spread the word and made sure that the Jewish People reacted correctly and inwardly; repentance over political noise and strategic attempts to foil the plan at this stage. Therefore, he led the people of Shushan in fasting and in devout prayer. Note that this fast occurred on the first night of Pesach – this situation of impending danger allowed them to override the usual mitzvos of Seder Night. The Fast of Esther observed before Purim is either a throwback to this,

or else commemorates the fast that the Jews undertook before going out to war against Haman and his colleagues. This was the start of a mindset turnaround, in that the people of Shushan had originally blamed Mordechai for causing this decree (they thought it was all his fault, that he had refused to bow down to Haman). Yet now things had turned around; now they recognised Mordechai's genuineness and authority in leading them in repentance; after all it was their sin of going to the feast that was a main cause of Haman's decree. They took responsibility instead of outsourcing blame. Mordechai stood at the king's gate wearing sackcloth. This was a garment of mourning and a throwback to what Yaakov wore after finding out that Yosef was gone (Bereishis 37:34); Mordechai had seen a parallel between Haman's decree and the brothers selling Yosef – the money was one feature, and the presence of a feast was another (the brothers feasted after selling Yosef, and Haman's rise to power began with Achashveirosh's feast). The sackcloth was also to conjure up memories of Avraham Avinu – who said *I am but ashes and dust*. There were 12,000 Kohanim who blew shofars, and many were equipped with Torah scrolls. This was a tremendous outpouring of fasting and repentance. This was the correct spiritual response to Haman's evil decree. One source depicts the students of Mordechai being taken to jail by Haman's officers upon discovering that they were learning pesukim that expressed their disdain for Haman's plan and their assurance that he would not succeed. It was their heartfelt prayers of themselves and their families that provided the extra impact for the Divine decree to be rescinded and for Haman to be consigned to death.

Esther was told that Mordechai was at the gate wearing sackcloth and urged him to remove this poor garment. Via a messenger he refused – he had promised to keep the sackcloth on. After relaying the danger of the decree to the oblivious Esther, Mordechai convinced Esther to do the unthinkable – he persuaded her to appear before the king uninvited. Turning up to Achashveirosh's throne without an invite was certain suicide; guards were stationed outside the throne room to kill anyone on the spot. And what's more, Esther was observing a prolonged and difficult fast at the time: she hardly had that 'glamorous look' about her that would make the king want to spare her life.

[At this point there are two interesting themes to discuss; one mentioned by Rav Tzadok Ha'kohen and the next a halachic issue which various Rishonim discuss. Mordechai urged Esther to go to the king, which would almost certainly involve Esther having relations with Achashveirosh. The words of Mordechai to Esther are (4:14) "For if you are quiet at this moment, then salvation will sprout for the Jews from another place, and you and your house will be lost/destroyed." Why would Esther and her household be lost and destroyed if Bnei Yisrael are to be saved anyway? Rav Tzadok explains this with the similar principle of Rav Hutner that 'one action proves the other action.' Esther embodied the trait of modesty like her household. But there

are two types of people with the trait of modesty; those who are naturally modest and cannot act otherwise (and so for them there is no real decision to be modest) and those who can act immodestly, but choose not to. The test to determine the real motives behind a display of modesty is when one needs to be immodest. This is what Mordechai conveyed to Esther here; 'If you do not act immodestly now (when you can save lives), then you will have proved that your modesty was only because you have been programmed that way and you cannot act differently. You will receive little reward for this superficial modesty, so your name (and that of your household) as someone who is genuinely modest for Hashem's sake, will be lost/destroyed.' Regarding how Esther could have been allowed to have relations with Achashveirosh according to the views that she was indeed married to Mordechai (and getting divorced first would have given away that they were married as people would hear about it: Tosafos), there are a few views here. Rabeinu Tam writes that having such relations with a non-Jew is not a cardinal sin, whilst the Rivam maintains that Esther was passive; the Meiri maintains that this was ok to save the entire Jewish People.]

So, with the fasting Jews of Shushan waiting with baited breath, repentance at its peak and the royal guards ready to pounce as soon as they saw an uninvited guest (even the queen), Esther entered the lion's den...

'Boys, I'm going in'

You might have noticed a Divine pattern in proceedings so far: Hashem is not limited by odds or *natural* order - it is His plan that ultimately wins out. Esther had been fasting, she looked drained, but Mordechai told her to put on special royal clothes, and the radiance from her post-fast high spiritual level was noticeable. Thus, it 'happened' to be that on the day that Esther strode into Achashveirosh, Achashveirosh had decided to move his throne to the next room along: he was now 'sitting on his throne in the *beis hamalchus opposite* the entrance to his palace' (5:1). This was a critical move, for it meant that as the guards readied themselves to pounce on Esther, Achashveirosh had a view of Esther coming towards the entrance. The guards were unsure what to do – they did not want to kill another queen, and now that Achashveirosh could see her approaching was it not his decision now? That moment of hesitation on the part of the guards saved Esther's life. What's more, the fact that Esther looked so drained and that she had risked her life to see Achashveirosh only served to endear her in his eyes: he felt that he had to do something for his poor Queen who was obviously in distress. Now, as if hidden Divine intervention was not enough, at this point Hashem's intervention became a bit more 'involved.' The Gemara^[5] reveals that Hashem ordered three angels into action at this point: one held Esther's head up (she was too weak to support her own head properly), one

endeared her to Achashveirosh, and the third pushed him to extend his golden sceptre to her – guaranteeing her survival. So, with these secret agents pulling off one of the most remarkable espionage missions to date, Esther had a trick of her own to pull out of her crown: the *seudah*. It is unclear whether Esther planned to invite Haman and Achashveirosh to a feast initially, but seeing that Achashveirosh was not fully ready to grant her request, she decided a feast would be a better idea. Inviting the three to a feast also had the effect of making Achashveirosh jealous and suspicious of Haman – *why was he invited?* Further, Haman himself was confused – he did not know whether Esther was on his side or not (remember, Haman did not know that Esther was Jewish).

At that feast, Esther invited them to a second feast (the Ibn Ezra writes that this is because Esther did not see that she'd be successful in the first feast). Here's where the speed factor comes into play again. Because Haman was so happy at being invited to this most exclusive VIP dinner, it hurt him all the more when he walked outside and was faced with Mordechai, again refusing to bow to him. The dissonance was painful - and he could not bring himself to ignore Mordechai, and he had to then focus on his material wealth and prestige to boost his self-esteem again. He went home, telling his family how important he was. Consequently, Haman (at the advice of his erstwhile wife) had a gigantic gallows built ready to have Mordechai hanged in the morning. It seemed that at this point Haman *was* ready to stoop so low as to kill an individual Jew (that's what pride does to a person). Why was the tree so tall? It depends who you ask. Haman built it at such a height so he could have the joy of seeing Mordechai's hanging corpse from far away. Hashem had it built at such a height because later on Achashveirosh (in one of the worst moods known to man) would be able to sight the tree and make a quick-fire decision to have Haman hanged on it. Some write that Zeresh played music whilst Haman and co were building the gallows that night. Haman even tested that the rope would work – of course he would be hung on it later on! Further, as well as advising her husband to turn lumberjack and build this gigantic tree-come-gallows, Mrs Z. Haman advised her husband (5:14) to go to Achashveirosh first thing in the morning to request to hang Mordechai. Getting there first thing in the morning would both allay Haman's impatience and mean that no-one could plead Mordechai's case – he'd be killed too early for the people to kick up a fuss. So, after pitching his tent outside the palace to get front-row seats at centre court for the morning, Haman was waiting for the cockerel to crow before marching into the palace. In fact, he arrived there before dawn – further arousing the king's suspicions as to whether Haman was plotting to kill the king in his sleep. In fact, some write that Haman did have plans to assassinate the king after the Jews had been destroyed first.

But this was kept secret – only Charvonah knew about it (he would reveal this later when suggesting that Haman be hanged). Besides, Haman was not the only sleep-deprived person that night – Achashveirosh was tossing and turning in his sleep too...

Mordechai: A Star for A Day

Achashveirosh was up all night trying to second-guess what his queen's request was. In the midst of his turning, he came to the following intelligent conclusion. First, he figured that Esther would never risk her life requesting something for herself – and given that she had no immediate relatives to his knowledge, it must be something to do with Mordechai (it seems the king also knew an Esther-Mordechai connection^(4b)). Second, in order to bolster her request she'd probably claim that Mordechai had done a favour for the king. So, as one does in such a situation, Achashveirosh got out the Royal Chronicles and saw that, lo and behold, he owed one to Mordechai. Achashveirosh also had a dream that Haman was walking up to him and removing the crown; he saw this as a sign that Haman was rebelling. He also heard a voice telling him to *pay back the person who saved you* – he didn't know what this was; he became paranoid that his food had become poisoned and he was hallucinating. He began to suspect many people, but never Mordechai – the fact that Mordechai had saved the king's life meant that his loyalty was proven.

In fact, the Gemara reports that another angel was sent into the front line at this point; as Achashveirosh was reading what Mordechai had done, his servants were trying to erase the text (they did not want a Jew to be honoured); the angel was rewriting the words in. Delighted at finally cracking the mystery as dawn neared Achashveirosh asked the unlikely-to-be-answered question 'who's in the courtyard' (6:4). After all, who would be in the courtyard at such an early hour? Yet Haman, who had waited there all night to submit his 'hang Mordechai petition' first thing in the morning, was right on-hand to be ushered in for some 'important business' of the king. Haman was shocked at hearing what the request was. The king asked Haman's advice about honouring an individual for what they had done for the king. Haman, convinced it was himself, advised that the person be paraded astride the royal horse, with the crown and royal garb. Achashveirosh was initially suspicious of lending the crown – but later was happy to give it to Mordechai. Some opined that Achashveirosh did not want to initially mention that this person was Mordechai, for he feared that Mordechai, Esther and Haman were all in league with each other, and Haman would inflated the reward if he knew it was for Mordechai. How little did Achashveirosh know! And how paranoid he was! Haman was shocked at the king's response: to honour Mordechai?! Haman was convinced that *he* was the one to be publicly honoured, not his nemesis Mordechai! Yet Haman could not refuse. Facing a huge

swing in expectations from thinking Mordechai would be hanged that morning to instead having to lead Mordechai on a horse across the town, Haman stammered to accede to the king's request to lead Mordechai around the city on horseback; not any horse by the way, but a special horse; *the horse that the king rode on* (6:8) - an honour that not even Haman himself had enjoyed thus far! Not only that, but this former hairdresser had the indignity of being reminded of his lower-class past by being made to trim Mordechai's hair for the occasion, upon Mordechai's request. Mordechai was too weak from fasting, and when Haman arrived Mordechai requested that he first be fed and helped to mount the horse; Haman now had to bow down to allow Mordechai to step on him. Mind-games indeed! Further, Haman now did not know what to think; was Mordechai now promoted to be second in command? Had Mordechai taken over Haman's role? How was Haman supposed to play things?

Speed is a most important factor, especially when it comes to evil, ill-tempered people who are forced to cope with extremes of emotions. As Haman was finishing up with Mordechai, still smarting at his public humiliation (at which according to Chazal his daughter had fallen off a balcony in shock after accidentally pouring rubbish on her father, thinking Mordechai would be leading the horse), he was called in for a second feast with Esther and Achashveirosh (in the middle of his mourning). Thus, when Esther revealed her request and pointed the finger at Haman for trying to have her nation killed, Haman was too flustered to allow his usual eloquence to get him out of this sticky situation. In fact, the angels were employed again here – this time so save Esther from a royal hash. For Esther, by now utterly exhausted, mistakenly began to point the finger at Achashveirosh when saying the words 'this evil enemy'. But an angel pushed her finger towards Haman, and the danger was averted. Haman was now cornered. With the king and queen looking on, he had nothing to say. He could not argue that the Jewish nation is evil and deserved to be killed anyway, because Esther was there to argue back. And he could not say that had he known that Esther was Jewish he'd never have ordered their death, for Achashveirosh had already heard him decry 'the wickedness of this nation who deserve to be killed;' further, Haman was too flustered to think about what he should say in his defence. Thus, 'Haman trembled in fright *in front of the king and queen*' (7:6) – because both were there he had no response. Now Achashveirosh was not a fool. Paranoid, angry and a megalomaniac yes, but idiot no. He was not about to part with his prize officer just yet: he liked Haman, and he was indebted to him for helping him consolidate power. So in reality, there was no chance a 'snag' like this would make Achashveirosh do away with his trusted advisor. Lucky the real King was running the show ...

Haman's Downfall

As Achashveirosh left the feast in a rage (not the first time this had happened), his plan was to cool down by taking a relaxing stroll through the lush expensive royal gardens. But the real King had other plans. Cue the angels again. Entering his beautiful garden, the king's mood went from lukewarm to boiling over when he saw a team of workers uprooting his gorgeous grove, favourite foliage and royal roses. Appalled, he demanded to know why they were destroying his garden. 'Haman commanded us to do so,' was the answer he received. The king was about to explode. Poor Achashveirosh, he wasn't to know that this team of gardeners were really angels on a mission! As if that was not enough, when the king strode back inside to consult Esther, Haman was so distressed that he had fallen on top of Esther (and angel preventing him getting up) – giving the impression to the on-looking king that Haman was trying to kill her (or sleep with her according to others). Three events in quick succession: Haman's time had come.

Witnessing this scene happened to be a fellow called Charvonah, who had initially sided with Haman, and now that the chips were down he switched sides. Seizing on his opportunity, Charvonah sighted the gigantic edifice of a tree Haman had built to hang Mordechai (it was tall, after all), and suggested that Haman be hanged on it instead. The king, still irate, agreed at once. Now normally the case would have had to go to a judicial panel. And this would have meant certain acquittal – for by now Haman had ensured that all his cronies were appointed to the judiciary. But not so long ago at the initial Shushan feast, a certain young judge had orchestrated a change in the constitution. A certain Mr. Haman had provided Achashveirosh with emergency powers to be able to decide a case unilaterally if the case affected him. So, with as many as two words, the king bypassed the courts and had Haman hanged. Speed was again an important factor – had there been a protracted court case Haman could have ordered for his tree gallows to be taken down and smashed meanwhile. But he was afforded no such respite. He was hanged on his own gallows.

But there was still a major obstacle to hurdle: the letters ordering the mass killing of the Jews had already been delivered to all citizens of the Empire. And it was firmly entrenched in the constitution that a letter that had the king's stamp could not be rescinded under any circumstances – after all, such an act would lead to the devaluing of such letters in the future. And not everyone would believe another letter sent out saying that 'Haman made a mistake: that's not what the king ever meant to say and the previous letters should be destroyed'. Esther was given Haman's estate, but she did not ask for any privileges for Mordechai – she still feared that Achashveirosh could think that they had staged everything to further Mordechai's career or wealth. Even when the letters of Haman's decree were rescinded, Mordechai did not allow the Jews to take the spoils (save for a few people in Shushan, it seems). Haman's ten sons

– his chief supporters – were killed, but Zeresh fled with some other relatives. The villain might have been ‘put to bed,’ but there was still a mighty issue to deal with...

Rescinding the Letters and Decree

Fortunate that Haman never mentioned ‘the Jews’ expressly in his main initial letter then! Remember – Haman was waiting for the day to arrive before he revealed that his victims would be the Jews (it was a safe way of guaranteeing no political lobbying to save the Jews). So Mordechai simply sent out new letters ‘confirming’ that the secret ‘enemy nation’ referred to in Haman’s letters was ‘the enemies of the Jews.’ Yet there was still a danger. There might still be some people who had not realised that the Jews were killing their enemies legitimately - based on a royal edict. Thus, there was a danger of ‘enemy backlash’ against the Jews for what they had done. Not to fear: the king agreed to allow (and publicise) the Jews to have another day of killing their enemies in Shushan – so everyone would realise that their initial killings were also under the king’s direct orders. So, it came to pass that not only did Haman never see his plan fulfilled, but it was *his* letters that allowed the Jews to rid themselves of their enemies. Outside of Shushan, the Jews gathered to avenge their enemies on the 13th Adar, whilst within Shushan they were allowed the 14th. Despite some resistance on the second day from local Amalekites, the Jews prevailed and were given *carte blanche* to destroy their enemies. They then rested and celebrated the day after.

The remainder of the Megillah focuses on how the events became a festival. As the Gemara expands upon, Jews do not celebrate everything, and there are limits and parameters regarding how to celebrate. Esther had the Megillah text ratified and added to Tanach, and the people were told to celebrate via reading the Megillah, sending *mishloach manot*, sending gifts to the poor and having a festive meal. This mitzvot counteract his criticism of the people for being separated, lacking unity and lacking loyalty to Hashem. These mitzvos brought Jews together, encouraged unity and acts of togetherness and kindness, and increased their commitment to Hashem and His Torah. Not only that, but as a result of the four aspects of Bnei Yisrael Haman wanted to destroy, we got four compensation packages. He wanted to destroy our physical bodies – we got the mitzvah of a Purim seudah. He wanted to destroy our spirit – we got major doses of simcha. He wanted to take our money – we got our enemies’ money. And he wanted to destroy our souls – we got the mitzvah of reading the Megillah.¹⁶ As the Gemara makes clear, Purim constituted a new national acceptance of Torah – out of sheer love and appreciation of the greatness of Hashem and His constant control and supervision over us. The Jewish People accepted the festival, celebrating it subsequently and rediscovering a new loyalty, excitement and verve for various important mitzvos; including *bris milah*, tefillin, and Shabbos.

And, as the very end of the Megillah tells us, Mordechai was so loved by all that even after he died no-one thought of exacting revenge from the Bnei Yisrael. So we ended the Megillah as a repentant nation safe from our enemies, with extra spiritual and physical wealth too. The Megillah ends by noting that Achashveirosh also increased taxes; we are reminded that even after the Purim miracle, we were still under the dominion of Achashveirosh and subject to his whims – the job was not fully complete.

That's the *real* story of the Megillah according to the revealed parts of the Gra's explanation. There are deeper parts of his commentary too, such as the changing of the *mazalos* – which the Gra^[7] calls 'the main miracle of Purim;' let us now digest and isolate certain themes to take with us.

Summary: Lessons for life

Megillas Esther is not a history book: no-one has ever bothered to check the '*Sefer Divrei Hayamim Lemalchei Madai U'Paras*' (10:2) in which we are told the story is also recorded. And the Megillah certainly did not make it into Nach solely due to its excitement factor.

A primary theme of Megillas Esther is that though Hashem's presence in the world is often hidden, if you look hard enough (with an objective lens that is not afraid to seek truth) you will see that He is orchestrating everything. Though our world might often look disjointed and disparate, Hashem has His Master-plan. Hashem's Name is not mentioned in the Megillah. But if you look hard enough He is there: every time the word 'king' is used without the adjunct 'Achashveirosh,' it refers to the King of Kings^[8]. He's there orchestrating the big events, and He's there in the little events too – the first letters of the words '*let the king and Haman come*' ('Yavo Hamelech Ve'Haman') in Esther's invite to her feast spell Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh, as the Yosef Lekach points out. There is also the theme of *emunas chachamim* in showing how Mordechai was not the cause of the danger, but the cause of the long-lasting salvation.

On this note, it is fascinating that the name of the festival is Purim; this literally means a lottery. Yet the festival celebrates that nothing is by chance - this is the 'extinction' of chance and fluke, even the luck of a lottery; it's all a Divine plan.

However, perhaps most striking is the depth of the statement of the Gemara that 'Hashem prepares the cure before the malady.' Chazal^[9] tell us that Haman's decree was caused by our bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol plus our attending Achashveirosh's feast. Yet, as we saw above, even before we repented (and even before we sinned in coming to the feast in the first place) Hashem was already preparing the stage for the various miracles of the Purim story (think Nebuchadnezzar's treasures, Haman's judicial speech, etc.). Hashem wants us to survive and fulfil our potential as the Chosen People. He wants us to spread His light across the world. And

if we can take in this important message of the Megillah and start recognising His Hand in our lives we will have gone a long way to achieving that ends.

The lesson for us is simple to understand but difficult to apply. Next time you are faced with an event you cannot understand, or next time something 'goes wrong' in your life, know that Hashem takes care of every one of us. No matter how difficult a challenge, He is orchestrating events and caring for us all; coincidences in life are only from our perspective - from the objective Divine perspective everything is there for a purpose.

[1] As Rev Shlomo Brevda comments, much of the Gra's insights in the Megillah are from the Yosef Lekach: a commentary on the Megillah by Rav Eliezer Ashkenazi around 400 years ago

[2] Esther Rabbah 2:1

[2b] I think this is actually Rav Brevda's own explanation regarding the normal advisers being scared off

[3] As soldiers, Haman and Mordechai once found themselves in the desert. Haman bought some food and drink from Mordechai in return for selling himself as a slave. When Haman approached Mordechai to accuse him of not bowing down, Mordechai brandished the 'document of sale' to try and put Haman in his place.

[4] The Gra explains the passuk 'and the people of Shushan were *navochah*' (3:15) to mean that they were confused – and that this does not only refer to the Jews of Shushan. This does not concord with Rashi's explanation of the passuk.

[4b] The Gra explains that Achashveirosh knew that Esther was an orphan taken in by Mordechai – but that he did not know which nation she came from

[5] Megillah 15b. It is cited by the Gra 5:2 and he explains how this can be seen from the passuk.

[6] See Gra 3:13. The Megillah is a mitzvah – it uplifts the soul.

[7] See Gra 9:26

[8] Esther Rabbah 3:10, Gra 1:10 and 7:10

[9] See Rashi 4:1

An overview of some of the pertinent Halachos of Purim

There are four mitzvos of Purim: hearing the Megillah, sending mishlo'ach manos, giving money to the poor (*mattanos la'evyonim*) and having a Purim seudah; these are all recorded in the Megillah itself. Below are some of the laws that pertain to these mitzvos; please check with your Rabbi for personal guidance and clarity.

1. When is Purim?

In a regular year, on the 13th Adar we observe Ta'anis Esther, the fast before they went out to war; this is a special day for prayer. Nursing mothers and pregnant women do not fast. At the afternoon service before Purim it is customary to give three coins of equal value to charity in memory of the three "half-shekels" given to the Temple for the upkeep of the communal sacrifices.

For most cities in the world, Purim is celebrated on the 14th Adar. For cities who can trace their walls back to the times of Yehoshua bin Nun (the cities of Jerusalem and Jaffa, for example), (Shushan) Purim is celebrated on the 15th Adar. The reason for this is that the Jews of Shushan were given an extra day to fight against their enemies. Unlike some other customs, the day one celebrates Purim is determined on where you are on Purim itself (not where you come from). Therefore, if you live in New York but spend Purim in Jerusalem, you will be celebrating Purim on the 15th Adar. An adjunct (either in proximity or in being able to see) to a walled city is considered part of that city, hence all of Jerusalem (even the neighbourhoods outside the Old City) celebrate Purim on the 15th. If you have celebrated Purim outside of Jerusalem and then plan to travel to Jerusalem on the 15th consult your Rabbi as to what to do. On a year in which the 13th, 14th, or 15th Adar falls on Shabbos, the days of celebration are different. Similarly, when there is a leap year, Purim is celebrated in the second Adar month.

2. Hearing the Megillah

There is a mitzvah for both men and women to hear the Megillah, read from a kosher scroll, both at night (after nightfall) and during the day of Purim (the main mitzvah is the daytime reading). This is preferably done in the presence of many people in order to publicise the miracle. One must hear the entire Megillah and one must not talk during the Megillah. If one does miss a few words one may quickly catch up by reading the words in an undertone in one's own Megillah. The reader of the Megillah makes the blessings before the Megillah for everyone, and

traditionally we recite the blessings after the Megillah (when the Megillah is read in the presence of ten people). Ashkenazim recite the blessing of *she'hechyanu* both before the night-time reading and the daytime reading (during the day have in mind that this blessing should apply to the other mitzvot of that day), whilst many Sefardim only recite *she'hechyanu* at night. Customarily, one bangs when Haman's name is read.

3. Purim prayers

Purim is a very special time for prayer; prayer was the main catalyst of our salvation during the Purim events. Indeed, there is discussion among the halachic authorities whether a prisoner who is allowed to be released for one day to pray with a *minyan* whether they should pick Purim. Aside from the Megillah, we recite the *al ha'nissim* prayer in our Amidah; if one forgets to say *al ha'nissim* as long as one has already said Hashem's Name in the subsequent blessing, one does not go back. No Hallel or Mussaf are recited; tachanun and la'menatzeyach are also not said. One should pour out one's requests on Purim and utilise this day for heartfelt prayers; for this reason many people try and pray at sunrise on Purim - this is a special time for prayer.

4. Mishlo'ach Manos

Both men and women are obligated to send Mishlo'ach Manos portions. The basic mitzvah is to send two different types of food (or drink) to one person. This is best done via a third party where possible, but it should be clear that it came from you – writing a note or adding a 'from family x' label for example. The idea behind this mitzvah is twofold; to increase friendship and unity, and to help provide food for the Purim seudah where applicable. The items must be food which is immediately edible; not things like raw meat or food vouchers. The mishlo'ach manos are to be given during the daytime of Purim, and must be given to somebody who is celebrating the same day of Purim as you do; if you are in Jerusalem you fulfil the mitzvah by giving to someone else in Jerusalem.

5. Mattanos La'evyonim

The Rambam and others write that one should spend more on mattanos la'evyonim than mishlo'ach manos. Again, obligatory on both men and women, this mitzvah

involves giving an amount of food or money to a minimum of two poor people on Purim. The amount should preferably be roughly the amount one spends on a basic meal themselves (in Israel this is traditionally anything between 25 and 50 shekels approximately for each poor person). Again, the *mattanos la'evyonim* are to be given during the daytime of Purim, and must be given to somebody who is celebrating the same day of Purim as you do ; if you are in Jerusalem you fulfil the mitzvah by giving to someone else in Jerusalem. One may give the money to an emissary before Purim if they will be distributing the money on your behalf on Purim day itself. The gift should be a commodity which is able to be spent or used immediately on Purim; cash and food is ok, but best to avoid giving cheques. Similarly, on Purim we give (a little bit of) money to any poor person who asks for money, with no questions asked.

6. The Purim seudah

The Purim seudah is a mitzvah opportunity to celebrate Purim in appropriate style. It should involve good food and appropriate conduct as befitting of celebrating Hashem's kindness in saving our nation. There is a mitzvah for men to get drunk during the Purim seudah; the idea being to submit one's inner consciousness to Hashem's will. But the Rema writes that it suffices to drink a little more than one regularly drinks and then to sleep. Certainly, if getting drunk will mean compromising on a mitzvah (or any personal safety) then the Rema's option is the one to take. Ideally one should drink wine, but other alcoholic beverages suffice. The Seudah should take place sometime during the daytime of Purim, and the bulk of the meal should be completed before nightfall; it should be with friends preferably. If Purim falls on a Friday, care should preferably be taken to finish the meal early enough to have an appetite for Shabbos (unless one is doing *mafris mapah u'mekadesh*; a Friday meal that runs into Shabbos - consult one's Rabbi for the best way to do this). Customarily, at night one has a bigger meal than usual (though there is no mitzvah to get drunk at night). The Mishnah Brurah writes that Shabbos clothes should be worn on Purim. Customarily people dress up in costumes for Purim; the deeper significance here is to reflect that Hashem was 'hiding' throughout the Purim story yet was orchestrating all the events.

Pesach

Pesach is the first of the shalosh regalim festivals. Pesach begins in the evening of the 15th Nissan and lasts for 7 days in Israel and 8 in the Diaspora. On Pesach we relive our Exodus from Egypt and the miracles that Hashem performed for us. The climax of Pesach is Seder Night, a phenomenal night of tremendous spiritual voltage whereby via 15 stages we discuss the Exodus flanked by various mitzvos such as matzah and marror. On Pesach one may not eat, own or benefit from chametz (these prohibitions start from mid-morning the day before Pesach), and there is a positive mitzvah to clean one's home from chametz.

What is considered chametz is complicated and depends on the makeup of various products. There may be products that seem innocuous yet actually contain chametz, and there are other products that do not contain chametz at all. One's local kosher list, Beis Din and Rabbi should be consulted for all guidance when it comes to products. The same goes for medicines and toiletries. Ashkenazim have an 800-year old custom not to eat kitniyos either (rice and other grains similar to chametz), whilst some do not have gebroktz (things that have come into contact with water).

Jews avoid the prohibition to own *chametz* in three ways. First, they nullify their *chametz* on the night of the 14th and again in the morning of the 15th Nissan. This is known as *bittul* and declares one's *chametz* ownerless and valueless. The text of *bittul* is in the Machzor, and it is crucial that a person who recites it must understand what it means (it may be recited in English). As well as this, many Jews sell their *chametz* to a non-Jew (most Shuls do this via their Rabbi, by filling in special forms). Selling *chametz* allows a person to keep some *chametz* in the home over Pesach – locked away in clearly-marked cupboards, and preferably in a garage away from use. If a person only did *bittul* but did not sell their *chametz*, the retained *chametz* is forbidden to be eaten after Pesach. Third, people clean the house for Pesach. There is an easier part to this (the non-eating areas) and a more difficult part (the eating areas). Any areas which never come into contact with food do not need to be cleaned at all (for families with young children, this is rare, since the children often bring food to all areas of the home). Further, areas which are not used for eating (such as the kitchen or dining room) are very easy to clean – one just has to make sure that there are no olive-sized pieces of *chametz* and that any other *chametz* is spoiled (standard floor-cleaner will suffice).

It is cleaning the kitchen and dining room area that is more difficult. This is because the cleaning of these areas is not just to prevent ownership of *chametz* – it is to

make sure no crumbs of *chametz* find their way into any food on Pesach. Therefore, the fridge and all cupboards must be cleaned very well – some line their cupboards with paper. People have separate sets of cutlery and pots for Pesach (though in many cases one may *kosher* their regular sets for Pesach; ask one's local Rabbi for guidance). Toys and benches which have *chametz* in them are advised to be put away for Pesach. Even though the cleaning can be a lot of work, the general mood before Pesach should be one of joy, privilege and gratitude to Hashem for having taken us out of Egypt and sustained us for so many years.

Some areas will require *koshering* instead of just cleaning. Surfaces will need to be treated by pouring hot water from the kettle, and many cover the surfaces; the same is true of a sink. There are different types of ovens: self-cleaning (pyrolytic) ovens may be koshered by cleaning, waiting 24 hours and putting on a self-cleaning cycle. Regular ovens are subject to a dispute – some hold that one may *kosher* a regular oven by cleaning it, waiting 24 hours and then putting it to its top heat for an hour. Others add that a person doing so should cook all their food *before* Pesach. Others still hold that one may not *kosher* an oven for Pesach and should instead use an oven insert or purchase a separate oven for Pesach. One should also consult with their own Rabbi about whether a dishwasher and microwave may be *koshered* for Pesach. Hobs can be cleaned in the same way as an oven, with many covering their hobs with aluminium foil too. Hotplates are cleaned and covered with aluminium foil. Care must be taken to be safe – hotplates should be covered on the top only (not all the way round) – and to make sure one does not damage their kitchen appliances!

If a person is going away for Pesach and leaving before the 14th Nissan, they may arrange for a sale of *chametz* in such a way that exempts them from checking their home for *chametz*. They must do *bittul* wherever they are, but they do not need to clean their house at all – they can simply lock their home. If anyone is planning to use the home over Pesach, a Rabbi should be consulted.

On the night of 14th Nissan at nightfall, *Bekidas Chametz* is done. This is where we check the house for *chametz* with the aid of a candle (or good electric lighting or a torch). A blessing is said before the search starts. Many have the custom to distribute ten pieces of bread throughout the home (they should be placed in bags to avoid leaving crumbs). After the *Bedikas Chametz*, the *bittul* is said. These pieces of bread are burned or crumbled and discarded the next morning before the stated halachic time, and the *bittul* text is then said again.

One should not speak between reciting the blessing and beginning the search, and any speech during the search should pertain to the search itself. Within half an hour of nightfall, a person should not have a meal nor engage in any time-consuming work, so one can be ready to start the search for *chametz* on time.

The laws and stages of Seder Night are outlined below, as per Ashkenazi custom, based on the Mishnah Berurah (MB). During the course of Seder Night we fulfil three Torah mitzvos (discussing the Exodus, eating matzah, and [if one is full] birkas ha'mazon – and when Seder Night is on Friday night four, *kiddush*), we fulfil three main Rabbinic mitzvos (eating marror, drinking the four cups and reciting Hallel), and many other general and subsidiary laws and accepted customs (*karpas*, leaning, washing hands, etc.). The order of the seder night is very precise and forms a whole sequence: many recite in song each stage at the start of the evening.

1. KADESH

We make *Kiddush* on a cup of wine

Background: Kiddush sanctifies the day (or notes/recognises the holy day's arrival). This is also the first of the four cups of wine – a mitzvah whose essence is either a mitzvah 'to *drink* four cups to express freedom' or else 'to *recite* the important sections of the night over cups of wine to lend importance to them'. There is also discussion as to whether the four cups of wine are four separate mitzvos or one large mitzvah (which affects how many brachos we make) – Ashkenazim make a new *ha'gafen* bracha on each cup, whilst Sepahrdim only make a bracha on the first and third cups.

Laws: Everyone should hold a cup during Kadesh. Before Kiddush one should have in mind five things: a) to fulfil the mitzvah of kiddush, b) to fulfil the mitzvah of the first of the four cups, c) to fulfil the mitzvah of *simchas Yom Tov*. [If it is too hard to think of these three, then just think "I am fulfilling the mitzvah of my Creator."] d) that the bracha of *shehechyanu* applies to Yom Tov and the mitzvos of the seder e) that if you forget to lean that you want to drink another cup. Remember to recline comfortably to your left, even if you are left-handed. The cup should hold a minimum of 86ml. Ideally one should drink the entire cup, but the majority of the cup suffices. It is ideal to drink the entire cup without pausing, but one has up to four minutes to drink it. After Kadesh one should not eat; non-alcoholic drinks are acceptable (have them in mind first so one does not need to make a separate brachah on them). It is generally best to have wine for the four cups, but if this is hard or will ruin concentration during Maggid, one can dilute them slightly with grape juice. If one cannot even use a cup that is majority wine, or at least enough wine to be able to taste the wine, grape juice is fine. Though women are obligated in the mitzvah of the four cups there is a dispute among various *poskim* as to whether women are obligated to recline; certainly if they forget to recline they do not need to drink another cup.

2. URCHATZ & KARPAS

We wash our hands and then eat *Karpas*, dipped in salt water

Background: The prevalent custom is for everyone to wash their hands, though there is a rare custom for only the leader of the seder to do so (either way, *no bracha* of *al netillas yadayim* is recited. The dipping here is to encourage the kids to ask: that they notice something out of the ordinary that arouses their curiosity and therefore they begin to ask questions about all aspects of the seder night. For the main method of relating the story of the Exodus is via question and answer, as it says in the passuk *and when your child asks you...* (Mishnah Brurah 473:21). *Karpas* is a type of vegetable, and can be read as *samech parech*, which refers to the 600,000 Jews who were enslaved with hard labour (M.B. 473:20).

Laws: The salt water should preferably be made before Shabbos/Yom Tov. If one needs to prepare it on Yom Tov, then one should use a low concentration of salt (M.B. 473:21). Less than a *kezayis* of *Karpas* is eaten (for Ashkenazim at least), though how much a *kezayis* is here depends on which vegetable is used. The *Karpas* should be held with the fingers (it is thus preferable to use a type of vegetable that is normally eaten with one's fingers, i.e. not a potato) and no after-brachah is made. Before making the brachah of *ha'adamah* one should have in mind a) that the brachah should include the *maror* eaten later and b) to fulfil mitzvah of eating *karpas*. One may recline if one wishes.

3. YACHATZ

The middle matzah is broken

Background: The leader of the seder breaks the middle matzah; half of it is returned to the table and the other (preferably larger) half is hidden for the *Afikoman*. In breaking the matzah we fulfil the description of matzah as 'a poor man's bread – eaten in bits' (M.B. 473:57).

MAGGID – We read the Haggadah and relate the story of the Exodus

Background: Maggid forms the crux of our seder night. Men, women[viii] and children are all summoned whilst we tell of the amazing story of the Exodus. Based on the text of the Rambam's Haggadah, some have the custom to act out parts of the seder. The overarching structure of this retelling is (as the Gemara rules) 'start with the bad times and end with the good times.' Thus, we begin from Avraham's idolatrous roots and end with the glorious Exodus. If some do not understand the Haggadah then it is crucial to translate and explain for them (see Rema 473:6).

Laws: Before Maggid one should have in mind to fulfil the mitzvah of telling over the story of the Exodus. This includes relating: a) the wickedness of the Egyptians, b) the sufferings they inflicted on us, c) the miraculous plagues and d) our thanks and praise of Hashem. We do not recline during Maggid. During the spilling of the wine (at the ten plagues) one should think that Hashem should protect us from such terrible plagues and bring them upon our enemies.

At the paragraph '*bechol dor vador*' one should visualise being in slavery in Egypt and then being redeemed by Hashem. The cup of wine should be held from '*lefikach*', but if this is difficult, at least from the start of the brachah of '*asher gaalanu*'.

When drinking the second cup one should have in mind a) to fulfil the mitzvah of drinking the second cup, and b) if one will be drinking wine or grape juice during the meal, one should have this in mind too. Recline! If you did not recline, drink another cup immediately without a brachah. Note: many Sefardim have the practice to make only two brachos of *borei peri ha'gafen* on the four cups – on the first and third cups.

4. The 10 Plagues:

The following is mainly taken from the Me'am Loez, seasoned with some other sources too. Although many deeper ideas have been put forward, the basic purpose of the plagues was to show Hashem's mastery over all the elements of the world: water, land, sky, animals and people. Each plague also punished the Egyptians for their acts of cruelty to the Bnei Yisrael. There is a *machlokes* between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah in the Midrash as to whether each plague lasted for 7 days or 24 days.

1) **Dam** (blood) - Rabbi Nechemiah says that all forms of water turned into blood. Even saliva turned to blood, and the Egyptian idols filled up with blood too. In addition, the Egyptians' clothes were stained by their beds having collected blood. Bnei Yisrael became wealthy by selling water to the Egyptians. The plague of blood punished the Egyptians for banning Jewish women from immersing themselves in the *mikveh*, as well as for throwing the Jewish babies into the river. When Pharaoh's magicians copied this plague by creating their own blood it was only an optical illusion. They never created real blood - the fish in their 'blood' did not die.

2) **Tzfardeya** (frogs) - even a cup of water which an Egyptian was holding filled up with frogs. The frogs managed to break through walls to get into people's houses. They even went inside some people's bodies and made them impotent, as a punishment for banning the Bnei Yisrael from having children. According to Rabbi Akiva there was one giant frog which split in two, and each subsequent frog would split in two when struck, until the land was full of them. Why did the Egyptians

continue hitting them? The Steipler Gaon answers that anger completely circumvents logic. The word *tzfardeya* comes from the Aramaic words *tzafra* and *da* (meaning 'morning' and 'know') for the frogs had croaking shifts, and it would be clear to all when morning had arrived because the night-shift frogs stopped croaking and handed over the baton to their morning-croaking colleagues. The plague of frogs punished the Egyptians for preventing Jewish women from giving birth - Jewish women had to give birth in secret and could not scream to alleviate their labour pains. Therefore, the Egyptians themselves were disturbed by the incessant croaking (screaming) of the frogs. This was also a punishment for the cries of Bnei Yisrael after seeing their babies mercilessly thrown into the river.

3) **Kinnim** (lice) - there were either 14 or 24 types of lice which wreaked havoc in Egypt, and the smallest one was the size of a chicken egg. The lice attached themselves to the bodies of the Egyptians so tightly that even showering did not remove them. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing the Bnei Yisrael to sweep the dust off the streets, as well as for not allowing Bnei Yisrael to shower.

4) **Arov** (wild animals) - many different types of animals came to Egypt for this plague, and even those which would not normally live together made peace with each other to bombard the Egyptians. The Egyptians realised that the animals did not attack the Jews, and began asking Jews to escort them wherever they went. However, the animals were given the capability to discern between Jews and Egyptians, so they still attacked the Egyptians. When the Egyptians saw this violent herd of beasts approaching they closed their doors and windows to make sure that they could not enter their houses. Therefore Hashem sent some form of sea beasts to break open the houses and expose the Egyptians to the marauding herds. Many Egyptians were killed by the wild animals. This plague punished the Egyptians for sending Bnei Yisrael out into the forests to trap wild animals so that the animals would attack them. It was also a punishment for Pharaoh's mass slaughter of 300 Jewish babies in order to bathe in their (mixed together) blood when he contracted *tzaraas*. Finally, the mingled herds of all different animals punished the Egyptians for their widespread sexual immorality and adulterous practices; the society was one of over-mingling.

5) **Dever** (animal epidemic) - the domesticated Egyptian animals died in this plague. No Jewish cattle died at this time, and even animals which were dying anyway survived for the duration of the plague so that it would be clear that the plague did not affect the Jews whatsoever. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing Bnei Yisrael to shepherd their herds for obscenely long hours in order to give them no opportunity to have relations with their spouses in order to procreate. It also punished the Egyptians for stealing the Jews' cattle.

6) **Shechin** (boils) - the boils suffered by the Egyptians included *tzaraas*, and took up residence on every part of the Egyptians' bodies, so much so that it became too painful for them to bathe. Pharaoh's magicians actually died from these boils, for it was upon their advice that the Jewish babies were thrown into the river. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing the Jews to clean the Egyptians in the bath. Furthermore, as a punishment for intentionally preventing the Jews from having babies, these boils prevented the Egyptians from having relations with their spouses.

7) **Barad** (hail) - the hail miraculously contained both ice and fire. Moshe warned the Egyptians of the plague of hail and told them to bring their belongings indoors. Although Pharaoh sent messengers ordering the Egyptians to leave everything outside, some people feared the word of Hashem more than that of Pharaoh (Meshech Chochmah). In fact, Hashem made the hail fall only in outdoor areas - it did not fall on anything covered by a roof (Brisker Rav). When the Egyptians saw that their cattle was doomed they slaughtered their animals, hoping at least be able to eat them. However, as they were carrying the animals home on their backs to eat, huge birds came and snatched the carcasses from their owners. The Egyptians who did stay outside were frozen to death by the hail's ice and then burnt by its fire. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing the Jews to plant gardens and vineyards. Additionally, because the Egyptians stoned the Jews and made them cry out in pain, they were pelted by hailstones and shaken by the loud booming of the thunder.

8) **Arbeh** (locusts) - all seven types of locust took a trip to Egypt to devour the Egyptian crop for this plague. Normally, locusts do not enter houses, but the locusts in this plague knew no bounds - they went into houses too. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing the Jews to attend to their fields.

9) **Choshech** (darkness) - normal darkness does not have an existence in and of itself; it is simply an absence of light, but the plague of darkness was a new creation, a tangible form of darkness which could not be removed by lighting candles (Sforno). The plague was even more painful because no Egyptian helped his friend out (Chidushei HaRim). More than that, it cut the Egyptians off from their material possessions, which formed the basis of their self-image (Rav Lippa Rabinowitz). During the final three days of this plague the darkness was so thick that it stifled movement. The Bnei Yisrael were unaffected by the darkness; they had light wherever they went. This plague punished the Egyptians for forcing the Jews to work late into the night, as well as forcing them to hold torches for them in the streets at night.

10) **Makkas Bechoros** (the plague of the firstborns) - all Egyptian firstborns

died in this plague. Since many children were born as a result of adulterous relationships, many Egyptians found out who their real children were in this plague. Why is *makkas bechoros* the only plague which has the prefix '*makkas*'? The Midrash (quoted in Tosafos Shabbos 87b) notes that when the firstborns heard Moshe's warning about the imminent plague of the firstborns, they rebelled against Pharaoh to try and force him to let the Jews go free, and many firstborns died in this rebellion. It is this rebellion that we hint to with the extra word '*makkas*' (Birkas Chaim).

5. RACHTZAH

We all wash our hands

Background: Washing hands before eating bread (matzah in our case) is either an added facet of cleanliness and *kedusha* or else a Terumah-inspired measure to ensure that Kohanim (will) eat their Terumah in a state of ritual purity (see M.B. 158:1). Even if one has washed their hands already for *karpas*, one still washes them again due to the time-lapse during Maggid (see M.B. 473:6). All the laws for the next stages of the seder should be recounted now.

Laws: One may not speak from washing hands until after *korech*, unless it involves these mitzvos.

6. - 7. MOTZI and then MATZAH

We eat the Yom Tov *lechem mishneh* and we fulfil the Biblical mitzvah to eat matzah on the 1st night of Pesach

Laws: One should have in mind to fulfil one's *bracha obligation* by listening to the brachah, and the leader of the seder should have in mind to include everyone in his brachos. One should have in mind to fulfil the Torah mitzvah to eat matzah on the first night of Pesach – if you did not have this in mind you should eat the matzah again. On the first night one must eat at least 25g, but it is a mitzvah to eat a full two *kezeisim* (30g). It's best to eat a little more, since some matzah gets stuck between the teeth. For a young child or ill person, 17g is enough. (On the second night in the Diaspora it is enough to have 15g, while a child or ill person only needs to have 10g). Have in mind that the brachah applies to *korech* and the *afikoman* too, and do not forget to recline! If one did not recline, another must be eaten, this time reclining! One should eat the matzah within two minutes, but four minutes suffices. Note that according to several Rishonim all matzah eaten on Seder Night is a mitzvah (even beyond the normal obligation); the Gra holds that the same holds true of the entirety of Pesach. According to the letter of the law, only the

Seder Night matzah must be *shmurah* – this means that it is made with the intention of being used for the mitzvah of matzah. There are different customs about whether *shmurah* must be hand-made or if machine *shmurah* is fine too.

7. MARROR

We eat bitter herbs, dipped in *charoset*

Background: The Marror represents our bitter slavery, whilst the *charoset* represents the cement that we worked with in Egypt - this is why one should make a thick *charoset* (Rema 473:5). The *charoset* is made from fruit that represent Bnei Yisrael in Shir Hashirim, such as apples, figs, nuts and pomegranates (Rema ibid.)

Laws: One should eat 27g, not reclining, as quickly as possible, but in no more than 4 minutes. Before the brachah have in mind a) to fulfil the mitzvah to eat *marror* and b) that the brachah should apply to *korech* too. One may use lettuce for Marror (in many ways this is easier to eat such quantities) for when left for a while it becomes bitter-tasting; for this reason the Chazon Ish used to insist on buying older lettuce. Do not use any bitter herbs that might be too dangerous due to their bitterness or that they are inedible (for example stick horseradish). Marror should not be soaked in water for a long time, nor should it be covered in *charoset* since this takes away its taste.

8. KORECH

We eat a sandwich of matzah and marror

Background: Here we fulfil Hillel's view that the mitzvah is to eat matzah and marror together (the verse *on matzah and marror one should eat it* is to be taken as a literal command to eat the three simultaneously). Yet this is only a remembrance of what we'd do in Temple times - for due to an intricate Talmudic discussion, one cannot actually fulfil a combination of matzah and marror nowadays: for matzah is Biblically-mandated, whilst marror is of Rabbinic obligation, see M.B. 575:16. There are different customs as to whether *charoset* makes it into this sandwich (see Shulchan Aruch 575:1 and M.B. 575:18-19).

Laws: One should eat 15g of matzah (some say 9g). Recline - if you forgot, you need to eat again, reclining. It should be eaten as quickly as possible but in no more than 4 minutes. Regarding the marror there are differently opinions: most opinions require a *kezayis* to be eaten (that's the same as that which is eaten for the mitzvah of marror), though others hold that any amount of marror suffices.

9. SHULCHAN ORECH

We eat the meal (customarily beginning with egg dipped in salt water)

Background: As with every other Yom Tov (and Shabbos) meal, this meal honors the day and allows us to feel a sense of physical completion to mirror the spiritual completion of the day (Ramchal, Maharal). The custom is to begin the meal with an egg dipped in salt water. It is praiseworthy to recline during this meal but one does not have to. Try to speak about things relevant to Pesach, if possible, and befitting of Seder Night. The Netziv writes that the meal is part of our Hallel.

TZAFUN

We eat the Afikoman matzah

Background: This is a remembrance of the matzah eaten with the Korban Pesach: some say that it is also a remembrance of the Korban Pesach itself. This is why we eat it at the end of the meal – for the Korban Pesach was to be eaten on a (just about) full stomach. Rashi and the Rashbam hold that it is with the Afikoman that one fulfils the Biblical mitzvah to eat matzah (Shulchan Aruch 477 and Sha’ar Tzion 4).

Laws: One should eat 30g. Have in mind to fulfill the mitzvah of eating the *afikoman*. Recline! If you forgot to recline, eat another one, this time reclining (unless you have already done mayim achronim or started bentching). One should try to finish eating the *afikoman* before halachic midnight. One may not eat or drink after the *afikoman*, but water and tea are ok.

10. - 12. BARECH

Birkas Hamazon (*bentching*) with the festival (& sometimes Sabbath) additions

Background: This is the mitzvah to thank Hashem after eating bread. We attest to our faith in Hashem and His role throughout our history.

Laws: have in mind a) to fulfil the mitzvah of Birkas Hamazon and b) to fulfil the rabbinic obligation to drink the third of the four cups. The cup of wine should be held throughout bentching, but if this is too difficult, one can put it down at the start of the *Harachamans* and pick it up again before the brachah on the wine. One should recline whilst drinking the wine, but there is no need to re-drink if one forgot.

HALLEL – We recite the second part of Hallel

Background: This completes the recital of Hallel. There is discussion as to why

Hallel is broken up into two parts, and indeed how these two parts differ. Based somewhat on a comment of Rav Hai Ga'on, Rabbi Soloveitchik used to comment that this second part of Hallel is supposed to be a spontaneous outpouring of gratitude and yearning for the final redemption after having lived through the Exodus on seder night. Before Hallel the custom is to recite *shefoch chamascha* and open the door, to remind us that on this night Hashem protects us from demons – in the merit of this display of faith in Divine protection we pray that our enemies be thwarted (Rema 480:1).

Laws: One should have in mind to fulfil the mitzvah to recite Hallel. It is ideal to hold the cup of wine throughout Hallel, and raise it at the words '*kos yeshuos essa*'. One does not recline. When drinking the fourth cup, have in mind to fulfil the mitzvah of drinking the last of the four cups. One should drink at least 86ml in order to be able to make an after-brachah. Recline, but if you forgot you do not have to re-drink.

13. NIRTZAH

We end with various themed songs and rhymes

Background: *Nirtzah* marks the culmination of seder night, and the songs have deep messages and themes (the Vilna Ga'on's explains how the *Chad Gadya* tells the story of all the exiles in our national history).

Laws: there is a mitzvah to stay up after seder night as late as possible to learn about Pesach-related laws and discuss the Exodus (Shulcah Aruch 481:2), but if one is too tired one may go to sleep. Note that some of Kriyas Shema al Hamittah is omitted on Seder Night, for it is a *leil shimurim* time of Divine protection from *sheidim*, the protection of which was why the Kriyas Shema al Hamittah was instituted.

The Omer

1. Background and philosophy

The Omer is the 49 day period between the second night of Pesach and the first night of Shavuot. The name *omer* is a reference to the *omer* sacrifice, which would have the effect of permitting consumption of the new grain. For a farmer to wait until the *omer korban* was offered before partaking of his hard-earned produce is a great recognition of Hashem's hand in providing all of our sustenance; this mitzvah was a central merit to enable us to live in Israel. Our noting and counting from this sacrifice is a show of tremendous emunah – building on the miracles of Pesach. Pesach and Shavuot are connected: the fourth expression of redemption from Egypt is the giving of the Torah; and thematically, our national freedom of Pesach was given mission and purpose on Shavuot. In fact, the Ramban writes that the omer is an extended quasi-*chol hamo'ed* period between Pesach and Shavuot. The commentaries refer to two elements of the spiritual depth of the omer period: we are preparing for Shavuot, building our commitment to Torah. Second, just as the infant Jewish nation stepped away from the impurity of Egypt during this period and rose incrementally from the forty-eighth level of impurity (the seven weeks are akin to the seven clean-days of a niddah), we too use this period to purify ourselves. The Kedushas Levi thus writes that there is no blessing of *she'hechyanu* recited on the mitzvah of counting the omer, since we are slowly shaking off impurity.

However, there is an important added facet to the omer. Since the students of Rabbi Akiva died during the omer period - for they did not give appropriate honour to each other - we inject an element of mourning to this period. The Taz adds that various other tragedies occurred to the Jewish People in the last days of the omer. This does not contradict the Torah's vision of the omer period being a build-up to the giving of the Torah, it merely underlines key themes of Torah study – that Torah study must be acted upon and expressed; and the importance we attach to those who transmit our Torah from generation to generation.

2. The Mitzvah to Count the Omer

The Torah speaks about the mitzvah of counting the omer, and the Gemara notes that there is a mitzvah to count the days and weeks of the omer (which is the

principal way of counting, or indeed if both are necessary, is a matter of debate). There is also a *machlokes* as to whether counting nowadays is a Torah mitzvah or since we no longer have the *korban omer* it is relegated to being Rabbinic. Similarly, there is a debate whether the omer is one large mitzvah or 49 separate mitzvos.

The first night of the omer is counted on the second night of Pesach (either at Ma'ariv or during the Seder), and on all subsequent nights. The counting involves a blessing of *asher kideshanu be'mitzvosav ve'tzivanu al sefiras ha'omer* and then counting of the requisite day. The custom is to add a request for the rebuilding of the Temple and also a perek of Tehillim - some also add further prayers before and afterwards; see the siddur. We reference both days and weeks - for example on the 8th night we say *today is the 8th night, which is one week and one day of the omer*. If one only mentioned the weeks one must count again (with another bracha if enough time has elapsed) but if one mentioned the days without the weeks there is a debate whether this suffices - one should count again, without a bracha. One should count oneself - not via somebody else - and there is also a debate whether writing down the omer is accepted as counting; we hold that it is not. If one used a different numerical way to pronounce the night of the omer (such as instead of saying *today is the twelfth night* one said *today is the square root of 144*) one has *bedi'eved* fulfilled the mitzvah. The Pischei Teshuva cites a custom to include the *omer day* in one's written correspondence too. One may count the omer in any language, provided that one understands it - even when counting in Hebrew one must understand what one is saying. Similarly, before one recites the bracha one should know what night he is about to count.

Given the importance of counting the omer, it is a mitzvah to make the bracha and count while standing up, though if one failed to do so one has still fulfilled the mitzvah.

When can one count the omer from? Unless in times of extreme difficulty and need, one may not count the omer at *plag hamincha* time (if one did, one re-counts with a bracha later). There are those authorities who allow counting with a bracha after *shkiyah*, before nightfall, but the common practice is to wait for nightfall. The Shulchan Aruch mentions that between *shkiyah* and nightfall one should not tell a friend the night of the omer, for one will not be able to count that night with a bracha.

If one forgets to count one night, one may count the following day, without a bracha - and then continue counting the following night and subsequently with a bracha. If one forgets to count at night and then again during the daytime, one should still count the omer each night but one may not recite the bracha - one should ask someone else who is counting to recite it for you. If one accepted

Shabbos early but then realised that one had not yet counted the previous day, some authorities maintain that one may still count the previous night's count (without a bracha) and then continue counting with a bracha. If one is not sure whether they skipped a night or not, one may continue to count with a bracha.

Since the omer count is a positive time-bound mitzvah, women are exempt from counting the omer. The Arizal writes that according to kabbalah women should not count the omer, but the common practice is for women to count the omer, and they may also recite the blessing too.

3. Laws of the Omer period

The omer period is 49 days, but in terms of its halachic mourning restrictions, these are observed for 33 days, with three main customs. Some observe from Pesach until lag b'omer. Some observe from just before rosh chodesh Iyar until the 3 days before Shavuos, and some observe from immediately after rosh chodesh Iyar until Shavuos.

One may not dance or listen to music during the omer (the custom is to permit during chol ha'moed Pesach). Some allow learning to play a musical instrument. Many forbid music during the entire 49-day period. According to some poskim one may dance at a seudas mitzvah such as a hachnasas sefer torah. Children should be trained from an appropriate *chinuch* age in these matters too. One may not shave nor take a haircut during one's 33-day omer period; this applies to children too, though *tziniyus* and medical reasons permit haircuts. One may not get married either, though one may get engaged. Women may also not cur their hair, though plucking eyebrows or eye lashes is permitted – but not other body hairs; a man may trim his moustache if it is making eating difficult.

There are poskim who cite that one does not make *she'hechyanu* during the omer; thus one should not purchase valuable clothes (under-garments are fine); one may renovate one's home.

Lag B'omer allows one to shave and have a haircut, and according to many, listen to music too. The Mishnah Brurah (493:11) cites those who allow this on the night of Lag B'omer, though the Shulchan Aruch says one must wait until the end of Lag B'Omer. When Lag B'Omer begins on a Motzai Shabbos, one may shave and have a haircut on Friday.

Shavuos

Background

Shavuos is the festival of Giving of the Torah. It lasts for one day (two days in the Diaspora) and its date is the 6th Sivan. The Torah refers to Shavuos in reference to Pesach – it is the fiftieth day of the Omer, though we do not count the Omer on Shavuos night. The selection of the date 6th Sivan is an interesting one. For there is a machlokes in Gemara Shabbos (86b) between the Chachamim and Rabbi Yossi about when Matan Torah took place: when did Hashem speak to us and give us the Ten Commandments? The Chachamim say it was the 6th Sivan, whilst Rabbi Yossi maintains it was the 7th Sivan. The debate hinges on the laws of ritual purity, though in the laws of ritual purity we seem to paskens like Rabbi Yossi!. If so, Shavuos should be on the 7th Sivan, not the 6th?! The Magein Avraham answers that perhaps our paskening like Rabbi Yossi elsewhere is just an added stringency, but that the baseline halacha, and the date of Shavuos, follows the Chachamim. The Beis Halevi, however, understands that Shavuos doesn't primarily celebrate the Ten Commandments; rather it celebrates human involvement in Torah - the Oral Law. Accordingly, the 6th Sivan was the day Moshe added to the pre Mattan Torah preparations - human involvement in Matan Torah. Either way, we did not *receive* Torah on Shavuos - we sinned with the golden calf and did not receive the Ten Commandments until the following Yom Kippur. Yet Shavuos celebrates our worthiness and preparedness to receive the Torah, and Hashem having revealed Himself to us on Har Sinai. On Shavuos we are also judged on the produce of the trees.

Practicalities

Shavuos observes all the normal rules of a Yom Tov. Kiddush (and usually Ma'ariv) is recited at nightfall, in order to fulfil the *temimus* full omer period. Based on Hashem having to wake up the Jewish People on the morning of Matan Torah, the custom is to stay up all night studying Torah, known as *tikun leil*. The Zohar extols the virtues and spiritual blessings of one who stays up all night studying Torah on Shavuos night. This is done on the first night Shavuos, though some do so in the Diaspora on the second night too. If one did stay up all night, one washes their hands in the morning (at *alos* or before davening), and only after going to the

bathroom does one recite *asher yatzar* and *al netilas yadayim*. Similarly, one should endeavour to hear *birkas hatorah* and *ha'ma'avir shena* from somebody who has not been up all night. However, if one took a daytime nap the afternoon before tikun leil, one may recite birkas hatorah in the morning themselves. Similarly, one who stayed up all night should not make a bracha on one's tzitzis that morning - he should make the bracha when putting on the tallis to exempt the tzitzis. Though we try to daven shachris from sunrise and only in strictly necessary cases daven from dawn, the Mishnah Brurah allows one who has stayed up all night to daven Shavuos shachris at dawn - as is a prevalent custom in the Diaspora. The Mishnah Brurah also cites that one should not have relations with one's wife on Shavuos night.

The custom is to decorate Shuls with flowers for Shavuos, replicating Har Sinai. Similarly, trees are placed in Shuls, since on Shavuos we are judged on the produce of the trees.

The custom is to have a milky dish on Shavuos - since after hearing the laws of kosher at Mattan Torah, the Jewish People could only prepare milky dishes. Alternatively, the two dishes (one milk and one meat) are a remembrance of the Chagigah, ad Pesach. This can be done in three ways: either have an entirely milky meal: those who do so assume that the mitzvah to eat meat is not an obligation, just a *hiddur*. Alternatively, the Rama writes that one should have a milky first course and a meaty second course. If one does so, one must not use the same bread for your two parts of the meal, and one should either eat the milky dish not at the table or change the table cloth. Also, one must eat something hard and wash one's mouth out/have a drink between the milk and meat (alternatively one may wait for half an hour). If one consumes hard cheese, one must bensch in between and wait six hours

Simchas Yom Tov, as detailed by the Shulchan Aruch 529:2, dictates that one should drink wine (or grape juice) at every Yom Tov meal, as well as giving money to the poor before Yom Tov to enable the poor to enjoy Yom Tov too.

The Torah reading for the first day of Shavuos is the Ten Commandments and the Haftarah is intricate *chariot vision* of Yechezkel; the custom is to stand for the Ten Commandments.

Tisha B'Av and the Three Weeks

The Ninth of Av historically has been a day enveloped in tragedy. The Mishnah at the end of Ta'anis records five tragedies that occurred on Tisha b'Av. The nation wept at the evil report of the spies, both temples were destroyed, the large city of Beitar was savaged by the Romans, and Turnus Rufus ploughed over the Temple site. In reference to the nation's tears at the spies' reports the Gemara records Hashem's statement that *you cried tears for no reason, I will give you something to cry about on this date throughout the generations*. The tears of that generation severed our connection with the land of Israel and the Shechinah. The five tragedies were an expression of these themes. Many other tragic events have befallen us on that date too, as noted by historian Cecil Roth:

- 1312 B.C.E. – Spies report after reconnoitring the Promised Land
- 586 B.C.E. – Destruction of the First Temple
- 70 C.E. – The Second Temple Destroyed by the Romans
- 117 C.E. – Massacre of the Jews of Alexandria
- 135 C.E. – Fall of Betar
- 136 C.E. – The Site of Jerusalem Ploughed
- 1095 C.E. – First Crusade
- 1190 C.E. – Mass suicide of the Jews of York
- 1290 C.E. – Expulsion from England
- 1306 C.E. – Arrest of the Jews in France
- 1492 C.E. – Jews Leave Spain
- 1555 C.E. – Ghetto Established at Rome
- 1571 C.E. – Ghetto System Introduced into Florence
- 1579 C.E. – Death of Joseph Nasi
- 1626 C.E. – Birth of Sabbetai Zevi
- 1630 C.E. – Expulsion from Manus
- 1670 C.E. – Expulsion from Vienna
- 1684 C.E. – Attack on Jews of Padua
- 1914 – Start of the Great War
- 1929 C.E. – Arab Riots in Palestine
- 1941 – Approval of the Nazi "Final Solution"
- 1942 – Deportation from Warsaw Ghetto
- 1994 – Jewish Community Centre in Buenos Aires bombed
- 2005 – Evacuation of Gush Katif, Gaza, leading to current Gaza situation

As seen from the above, the Jewish concept is that time is causative; it is not *because of the tragic events that this particular time is sad*, but *because this date has a propensity for sadness that the tragic events occurred*. Judaism has a place for tragedy and even for sadness – it is a way we reflect on the reality of our situation, and it is ultimately a stepping-stone to redemption. *A tzadik falls seven times and then gets up*. Were a person to laugh off or ignore the falls and failings, they would never become a tzadik, for they would never self-appraise successfully to grow from their mistakes. Thus, the Jewish day begins at night – the darkness of challenge, tragedy and struggle precipitates the light of the day’s successes. Deeper still, Hashem gives us certain tragedies, challenges or exiles in order that we learn specific lessons and correct particular errors, as Rav Dessler writes.

Yet there is more to Tisha B’Av than sadness. There are certainly elements of mourning on Tisha b’Av. Thus, the Gra (552) writes that the meal before Tisha b’Av resembles that of *animus*, when a person’s relative has passed away and they have not yet been buried. Similarly, the Beis Yosef sources a mourner’s permissibility to attend the night-time Tisha b’Av services at Shul in the mourning facet of Tisha b’Av. Yet Tisha b’Av does not have full overlap with mourning: the Mishnah Brurah (559:21) explains that there is no need to change one’s fixed seat in Shul on Tisha b’Av because we have shown sufficient elements of mourning already. This is a show of mourning, but not full-blown mourning. In addition, the Chassam Sofer writes in a Teshuva that Chazal were not given the authority to institute a day of mourning: their mandate was limited to simcha or teshuva. Furthermore, the Tisha b’Av mourning is unlike regular mourning in two ways: from the start of the Three Weeks the elements of mourning are gradually toned up (whilst regular mourning sees the peak of mourning reached immediately, for it to be toned down after shloshim, a year, etc.). Indeed, even though the Temple burnt on Tisha B’Av afternoon this is when we laws of mourning become more relaxed: we may sit on regular chairs after midday. Why is this? The understanding seems to be that regular mourning revolves around the deceased: we echo certain processes that the deceased goes through (see Beis Yosef Yoreh Deah 380). Yet our mourning during the Three Weeks is for *us* – it sensitises us to the loss of the Temple, to the Shechinah in exile, and reminds us of our current incomplete national state and situation. It is a quasi-mourning that guides us to teshuva via a real self-appraisal. In addition, Tisha b’Av is called a *mo’ed* (festival) in Eicha, which is why *tachanun* is omitted on this day. For the word *moe’d* means *meeting*, in our case a meeting between Hashem and the Jewish People (as in the *Ohel Moe’d*, tent of meeting). Tisha B’Av was a meeting between Hashem and the Jewish People – as Chazal tell us, Hashem chose to destroy the bricks of the Mikdash instead of His nation. It was kindness laced with sadness.

Central to the prayers of Tisha b'Av are the destruction of the two Temples. However, the Maharal writes (and the Sifsei Chaim on Tisha b'Av explains at length) that the two Mikdashs were very different. The first Mikdash stood on the merit of the Avos and was infused with the Shechinah, the Divine presence. This Mikdash was destroyed by our committing three key sins – murder, adultery and idolatry – each sin undermined one of the pillars of the Avos. The second Mikdash did not have the same daily miracles as the first – there was no Shechinah either. Yet it stood in the merit of our unity. Once we engaged in baseless hatred for one another we destroyed that unity and this Mikdash too was destroyed. The Gemara in Succah records the obligation to remember the Mikdash at various occasions. And scarily, the Yerushalmi writes that *any generation in which the Mikdash is not built in their lifetime, it is as if they have destroyed it.*

In outlining some of the halachos of the Three Weeks and Tisha b'Av, it is crucial to note that there exist many differences between Ashkenazim and Sefardim (many Sefardim begin restrictions of *the nine days from the week of Tisha b'Av*, with various permutations). The guide below follows mainstream Ashkenazi practice.

- Fasting

Shiva Asar Betamuz and Tisha b'Av are both fast days, but the fasting of Tisha b'Av begins at night (some opine that initially all fast days began at night). Pregnant or nursing women do not need to fast on Shiva Asar betamuz, and some opine that they do not need to fast on Tisha b'Av either – but the majority view seems to be that they do fast on Tisha b'Av (see Rema and Mishnah Brurah 554:6 and 550:1); this includes those who have given birth within thirty days too. Those who are within a week of having given birth do not fast. A (doctor and) Rabbi should be consulted in cases of pregnancy and feeding and all cases of medical necessity or doubt. Children under bar and bas mitzvah do not need to fast, though they should not necessarily eat treats. On 17th Tamuz one may rinse one's mouth with water or mouthwash in cases of discomfort.

- The Three Weeks

During the Three Weeks one may not get married, nor listen to music nor shave or have a haircut. Engagements are permitted, though the majority view is not to allow music at an engagement party. The blessing of *shehechyanu* is also not recited during this period. Thus, one should not purchase new items that are particularly expensive. Dangerous activities are also to be avoided. According to most opinions the laws of the Three Weeks begin at nightfall of the 17th tamuz.

- The Nine Days

The restrictions of the Nine Days begin on nightfall of Rosh Chodesh Av. These restrictions include home improvements, laundering clothes or sheets (also wearing new/freshly laundered clothing), eating meat and drinking wine, and pleasure-bathing. Younger children's clothing which are normally dirtied often may be washed. Towels, sheets and table-cloths may also not be laundered. Ironing is also forbidden. If one has not worn their clothes before the Nine Days, one may place them on the floor to remove their freshness before wearing them. The main custom is to allow wearing fresh clothes on the Shabbos of the Nine Days.

The prohibition on meat and wine includes chicken and grape juice but does not include pareve food cooked in a meaty pot. One may eat meat and drink wine on Shabbos, as well as at a siyum – though many restrict the numbers of those invited to such a siyum. For Havdalah one should try and give the wine or grape juice to a child to drink, but if not, one may drink it themselves.

Bathing for medical or hygiene purposes is permitted – using soap and shampoo when necessary. Lukewarm water is best, and some do not bathe the entire body at once. According to some views one may bathe as normal for Shabbos; and one who goes to the mikveh every week may do so before Shabbos during the Nine Days too.

- Erev Tisha b'Av

The seudah hamafsekes meal eaten before Tisha b'Av has several restrictions to it – not too many dishes and a simple meal. The common custom as quoted by the Rema is to eat a regular meal earlier in the afternoon. The seudah hamafsekes later then consists of an egg dipped in ashes, together with water – one says the line *this is the meal of Tisha b'Av*. This meal is eaten whilst sitting on the floor. One may eat after this meal as long as it is before the fast comes in at sunset.

- Tisha b'Av

Tisha b'Av has a combination of the laws of Yom Kippur and the laws of mourning. Thus, one may not eat and drink, one may not bathe or apply oils to oneself, one may not wear leather shoes, and one may not have marital relations (the Rema writes that this last restriction applies on Shabbos of a *pushed-off* Tisha b'Av too). Similarly, one may not learn Torah (according to some there is no obligation to learn Torah at all on this day) – though one may learn the parts that deal with mourning or the destruction of the Temple, or general mussar. One may not greet people, one may not sit in a regular chair until halachic midday.

Upon awakening one should wash hands to the knuckles, though Kohanim may

wash their entire hands to the wrist before duchening. After the bathroom or before davening one should also wash only up to the knuckles. One may not engage in any time-consuming work before midday.

The day of Tisha b'Av is a solemn one, and one's actions should reflect this.

The Tisha b'Av davening has some unique features – the paroches curtain is removed and the Shul is dimmed. Eicha (written by Yirmiya the prophet over the destruction of the first Temple) is recited at night as well as several kinnos lamentations. During the day many more kinnos are recited, though there is no obligation to complete all of the kinnos – though kinnah number 11 (*vayekonen Yirmiyahu*) is the most important. One does not wear tefillin or a tallis at Shachris (nor does one duchen) – one wears them at mincha. The additional *nachem* prayer is added in boneh yerushalayim at Mincha. The regular fast-day *anenu* prayer is recited by the Chazan at Shachris and by everyone at mincha.

- Tenth of Av

On a regular year some restrictions follow to the tenth of Av, since the Temple was burning then too, and we were mourning during daytime earlier that day. Thus, Ashkenazim wait until midday for all of the Nine Days restrictions to end. Sephardim will normally wait the entirety of the Tenth to have meat and wine but the other restrictions end immediately. When Tisha b'Av is pushed off until Sunday, the restrictions end immediately, but meat and wine may not be eaten and drunk until the morning of the tenth. When Tisha b'Av is on Thursday one may bathe on the Friday for Shabbos as normal. Kiddush Levana is often recited after Tisha b'Av too (some wait until after they have eaten)

ⁱ See Toras Zvi for an essay on the topic

ⁱⁱ Gemara Yevamos 62b

ⁱⁱⁱ Taz 493:2

^{iv} Gemara Menachos 66a

^v Rambam and Sefer Hachinuch

^{vi} The Tur and Shulchan Aruch. This is how we pasken - see bi'ur halacha 489:1 *lispur*. The Rishon Rabeinu Yerucham argued that the there is a distinction between the counting of days and weeks in reference to which is Torah obligated nowadays.

^{vii} See Shulchan Aruch 489:8 with Mishnah Brurah and Bi'ur Halacha *sofer*

^{viii} Mishnah Brurah 489:10

^{ix} See Mishnah Brurah 489:5 for full details and debate about whether *shomeya k'oneh* applies here

^x Sha'arei Teshuva

^{xi} Mishnah Brurah 489:5

^{xii} See Mishnah Brurah 489:28

^{xiii} Shulchan Aruch 489:1, explained by the Aruch Hashulchan 489:4 - he compares the omer count in a way to the Amidah

^{xiv} See 489:3 with Mishnah Brurah and Bi'ur Halacha *mi'be'od yom*

^{xxv} See the Mishnah Brurah for details, and that this does not apply if one had in mind not to be yoztei, nor if one didn't mention 'hayom' or if one did not mention both the days and weeks.

^{xvi} Fascinatingly, Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurebach held that one who is no longer counting with a blessing may nevertheless recite a bracha for one who is counting, if necessary, due to the *arvus* notion.

^{xvii} According to nearly everyone, with the notable exception of the Ramban at the end of the first perek of Kidushin

^{xxviii} Mishnah Brurah 489:3

^{xix} See Mishnah Brurah 493:3 that music was banned due to it leading to dancing

^{xx} Rav Elyashiv, though others disagreed. See Pri Megadim 47:102 who forbids it, whilst the Sha'arei Teshuva 534:1) permits.

^{xxi} Rav Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe chelek gimmel siman 87

^{xxii} A bris permits the father and the mohel and sandak to shave and have a haircut: see Mishnah Brurah 493:14

^{xxiii} See Shulchan Aruch 551:12

^{xxiv} See Piskei Teshuvos 493:2

^{xxv} Rav Shlomo Zalmen says that if one may not shave or cut one's hair on motzai shabbos in this instance

^{xxvi} Question of the Magein Avraham at the start of 495.

^{xxvii} Beis Halevi al Hatorah, parshas Ki Sissa

^{xxviii} Gemara Shabbos 87a

^{xxix} Opening Mishnah of Rosh Hashanah

^{xxx} Magein Avraham at the start of 494.

^{xxxi} Mishnah Brurah 494:1

^{xxxii} Rabbi Akiva Eiger, cited in Mishnah Brurah

^{xxxiii} Mishnah Brurah 495:1

^{xxxiv} Mishnah Brurah 89:1

^{xxxv} Mishnah Brurah 495:1 - see 240:7 that if the night is the mikveh night, or one is concerned for a discharge then one should have relations that night

^{xxxvi} Mishnah Brurah 494:10

^{xxxvii} Mishnah Brurah 494:12

^{xxxviii} Rama 494:3

^{xxxix} See Bi'ur Halacha 529:2 *keitzad* who seems to understand so

^{xl} Rama, Yoreh Deah 89 and sha'ar tziyun 494:15. There is a debate among our poskim whether any cheese nowadays is considered hard cheese for this.

^{xli} Though the Rambam in Teshuvos (46) did not approve of this custom

