

The Megillah and Parkland, Florida
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Rambam teaches: “All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will become annulled, will be extraneous, will be vaporized in the messianic age, except for Megillat Esther. It will endure like the five books of the Torah and like the laws of the oral Torah...and even though all memory of troubles will be erased, the days of Purim will not be erased.”

So in the messianic times, when the world is perfect and all our suffering and troubles will be wiped from our memories -- when there is no memory of Solomon’s Temple in flames and Jews being led into exile; when we no longer need prophets to goad and inspire us, or David’s psalms to help us sing -- still the Megillah will exist.

What is Rambam getting at?

I had this teaching in front of my mind because I taught it this week to about 130 Jewish professionals at the start of the week, as part of a Beit Midrash on what we can learn about resilience from the history of the Jewish people.

But it came to me again immediately when, just as I left the conference, I heard about the shootings and killings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

The violence out of nowhere, in the kind of place where millions of us send our kids every day without thinking -- that’s the Megillah, that’s Purim.

The roll of the dice, that of all the ways this young man could deal with his life, his lot, he chose to take it out against these children and these teachers -- that’s Purim.

The fact that even so, we want to make some sense and take some action, restore some safety and some sanity -- that’s Purim.

This what Rambam is saying: The Megillah is the basic definition of our world, so much so that maybe even the *Mashiach* can’t erase it. And therefore, we need the Megillah to give us somehow the roadmap to interpret our world, and give us lessons for how to respond.

One of the key phrases in the Megillah that is often quoted to stand for the whole story is וְנִהְפָּךְ וְנִהְפָּךְ hu, which means -- it’s upside down, it’s the opposite of what we thought, it’s overturned. Vashti, so powerful, becoming banished. The young girl Esther, a foreigner in exile, becoming the queen of an empire. A peaceful land where Jews have religious freedom, turning into an realm ruled by an edict of genocide.

That's one way to see Parkland. A school -- everything that a school is -- in a small town, smaller than ours... וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא *v'nahafoch hu* -- this is the opposite, this is a world upside down.

But I think what is even scarier, and even more at the center of the Megillah, is another phrase. It's the one I put in my bulletin column, words that Mordechai says to Esther: מִי יוֹדֵעַ *mi yode'a*. Who knows.

Who knows?

This, I think, is at the core of Rambam's teaching about why the Megillah has to stay, has to be in any Torah that is worth being an enduring Torah. The sufferings and the troubles in the other parts of the Bible all come from some intent. From an enemy on the outside or a corrupt ruler on the inside, or even from God (that's how they saw it, not me). But the troubles of the Megillah come from מִי יוֹדֵעַ *mi yode'a*, from the who-knows aspect of life. Purim means the roll of the dice. Which date shall be the date when we kill them. The randomness of: which day of calm and quiet and regularity will become the high school in Parkland.

Most days aren't the day that the lot falls on. Most schools aren't that school. Most troubled people don't become that shooter. Most, even overwhelmingly most -- but מִי יוֹדֵעַ *mi yode'a*?

The who-knows world is a world where what is supposed to happen often happens, but not always. It's the world where what we intend can come to pass, but it's not guaranteed. And it's the world where our actions have some impact, but the effect is sometime imperfect or murky, partially blocked or hard to see. It's a world not of moral order, but a world of a moral-ish order. Sometimes more so, and on terrible days less.

So how does the Megillah show us how to live in that world?

Mordechai says to Esther: מִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לַעֲתָה כֹּזֵאת הַגַּעַת לַמַּלְכוּת? *U'mi yode'a im l'et kazot higat lamalchut?* Who knows whether it's for this kind of moment that you have become the queen?

It's not obvious what to do, it's not a slam-dunk -- but act like the queen anyway, even though the king hasn't asked to see you.

Act as though there is some order, as though intentions lead to outcomes, as though actions lead to change -- not because they always do, but because they might, and they should.

So Esther acts like the queen she isn't, knowing as she says to Mordechai that she could die because of it.

And the Jews gather, and pray and fast for her. Not because thoughts and prayers are enough, but because they might help the one who is in a position to do something.

No one in the Megillah says: It's all for naught. There is no moral order here, it just doesn't matter, violence is all there is.

The Megillah says that when there is trouble, when there is violence, when things seem random -- that's when you act as though you can earn some redemption for the world.

So if you are in power, you get on the ball about the guns, the powers of law enforcement to act on leads, and the imperative to make sure there are more resources for mental illness. It's simply not possible for a person to kill this many people without the semiautomatic. Some, but not as many. You work on these things if you are in power, not because we know that with the right policies, no one will ever kill someone in a school -- but because there is some relationship, and who knows if you were put in office to save a life?

And if you work in schools or in law enforcement or as a counselor, and you worry about someone who is too alone or too bitter or at risk, you err on the side of pushing the issue, of following up. Not because you will for sure stop someone from doing something terrible, but because who knows if you were put in that position to save a life?

And if you are neither of these, you lobby those who are, you thank those who are. You find someone you know who is still suffering because they or someone close to them is the victim of violence, or an illness out of nowhere, and you don't just pray in the synagogue but you try to bring them comfort. Not because you know for sure they will get through it with your support, but because who knows if you are that friend for just that reason?

And when the troubles have ebbed, keep connecting, build community. משלוח מנות ומתנות **לְאֲבִיּוֹנִים**, *mishlo'ach manot, matanot la'evyonim*. Exchange food with your neighbors, take care of the poor. It doesn't ensure that no Parklands will happen. It's just a way to live the opposite, in the face of what we know could happen anytime.

But first, most of all, an Esther moment. Risking something, to save lives, taking a chance your words or your actions, my words or my actions, might matter, even though the force on the other side is powerful.

And that's what gives real meaning to the first phrase I mentioned, **וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא** *v'nahafoch hu*, it's inverted, it's overturned. The Megillah uses this phrase at the end -- when Esther's vulnerability has turned into her power, when Haman's edict has turned into the saving of the Jews. **וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא** *v'nahafoch hu* means the *disorder* was turned over, and things that were upside down are now turned right side up.

I am thinking that I get now the reason for the strange custom of getting so drunk on Purim that you can't distinguish between **אָרוּר הָמָן** *Arur Haman* and **בָּרוּךְ מֹרְדֵכַי** *Baruch Mordechai*, "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." The point isn't to get drunk. It's so you can wake up from the fog and get clear, and experience what is like to realize the difference. To know that you know the difference, and you can do something about it.

“All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will become annulled, will be extraneous, will be vaporized in the messianic age, except for Megillat Esther.” But actually, this is a teaching about now, about those days and weeks when the Megillah suddenly seems like the truest Torah we have.

We’ve heard enough prophetic calls after shootings in schools. And it’s not enough to recite Psalms for the dead and the survivors. מי יודע’א *mi yode’a* -- Who knows, maybe exactly for a time like today, you have arrived.