

# PURIM

Connecting to and Through God

# PURIM Connecting to and Through God

Od's name is expressed throughout the universe and yet the skeptic will never see it. And God's name isn't mentioned in the megilla recounting the miracle of Purim and yet His guiding Hand is felt throughout. The task of humanity is to dig beyond the doubt, discover the dots and connect them. And yet, while countering that doubt is one of our greatest exercises in free will, it remains a dangerous pitfall on the guest toward faith.

The weaponization of this doubt is also the main tactic of the archnemesis of the Jewish people, Amalek, and of his descendant, Haman, the villain of the Purim story. In the mystical understanding of the Purim story, Haman believed that the Jewish people were extremely distant from God and could be uniquely destroyed in his lifetime. To do so, Haman sought to make a separation in the spiritual world, which would affect the holy four-letter name of God (otherwise known as the Tetragrammaton) that allows the Jewish people to call out and be saved, spelled with a yud and hey, vav and hey. Each of the mitzvot of Purim is mapped onto one of the four letters of this name:

•	Mishte, eating and drinking a festive meal, maps onto the letter yud
π	Mishloach Manot, giving at least two types of food to someone else, maps on the first hey
١	Megilla - reading the scroll of Esther that recounts the story of Purim, both in the evening and the day, maps on the vav
N	Matanot l'evyonim, giving gifts to at least two poor people, maps on the second hey

This mapping communicates two mystical truths about the mitzvot of Purim: 1) each mitzva of Purim draws us into a different spiritual state, and 2) together, all of the mitzvot create one full structure just like the Divine name. Through performing these mitzvot one is invited to unify the Divinity, and connect in the highest way.<sup>3</sup> It is no coincidence that one of the words for miracle in Hebrew, 'ot,' a sign, is also the same word for "letter."

This guide will serve as an explanation of one element of the Pnimiyut or inner depth of Purim while also introducing a mystical approach to this name of God. To aid this journey, following a brief introduction to orient the specific letter, each section will be formatted as follows:

A text from Ketem Ophir, the commentary on the megilla by R. Yitzchak Eizik Safrin of Komarno, a unique and inspired mystic who saw the megilla as a roadmap to spiritual and collective redemption.

<sup>1</sup> Shem miShmuel on Vayikra 10:16. Both Amalek and Safek (doubt in Hebrew) have the same Gematria or numerical value (240).

<sup>2</sup> Sha'ar haKavanot, Drush Purim.

<sup>3</sup> De'a Chochma leNafshecha, Teruma 5768.

### INTRODUCTION

Digging Deeper to unpack the specific mitzva and letter supported by further sources to deepen our understanding. Point to Ponder that allows for a practical reflection, helping us integrate these ideas into our own lives.

Thank you, Hashem. I am grateful to live these ideas together with the amazing Share team, whose purpose is to help bring them to life for more people. Thank you to Rabbi Jeremy Tibbetts for being a study partner and teacher in sharing the sources and developing these ideas; Ari Levisohn, Rivka Bennun Kay and Aliza Crook for their careful edits and Yoel Bender for his beautiful design.

### TEXT:

The light that is in the soul as an infinite illumination and vitality, which the mind cannot fathom from its great sweetness... is the great love and light which prevails in the heart of those who serve in calamity and concealment. It is more beloved than all the service performed in the time when [God's presence] is revealed.<sup>4</sup>

מאיר על הנפש באור והארה וחיות אור אין סוף, לא יכליהו הרעיון מגודל מתק האור... זהו גודל אהבה והאור שמתגבר בלב העובדים ביסורין ובהסתרות, הוא יותר אהוב לפני השם יתברך, מכל מה שהיה עובדיו בעת התגלות.

### **Digging Deeper:**

Despite the centrality of the Divine name, the book of Esther is curiously the only book of the Bible which does not explicitly mention God's name as mentioned above. Even in the verse where Mordechai charges Esther with saving the Jewish people, he terms the source of salvation as "another place" rather than explicitly from God.<sup>5</sup> The Kabbalists identify an astounding 41 places where Divine names are spelled out by the first or last letters of consecutive words.<sup>6</sup> Why conceal the Divine name in a story full of miracles?

Purim is the story of the miraculous — the salvation of the Jewish people as their lives were literally hanging in the balance. Instead, the epitome of evil was hung in what was such a dramatic upheaval that the megilla describes it as topsy-turvy.<sup>7</sup> And it is also a tutorial in how one can and should notice the miraculous, even in the mundane.

Many Kabbalists have explained that while earlier generations saw the holiday of revealed salvation, Passover, as a paradigm for our redemption, contemporary generations should seek the Divine Hand in history through the holiday of hidden salvation, Purim.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas on Pesach, we were saved in a flash of light, the Midrash describes Purim occuring in darkness, and

<sup>4</sup> Ketem Ophir on Esther 2:17.

<sup>5</sup> Esther 4:14. It is noteworthy that even this seems to be a hint as the term used "place" or Makom is another name for God.

<sup>6</sup> Ateret Mordechai Siddur, Kavanot LePurim, pgs. 77-78.

<sup>7</sup> Esther 9:1.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Birkat haReyach 4:25.

### INTRODUCTION

slowly but surely, light grew until we found ourselves basking in the radiance of redemption. Though darkness still exists across the world, Purim reminds us that this is the feeling before the greatest dawn. The hints to God's name in the megilla constitute the first flowerings of redemption and call us to bring about the day where all the world will attain Divine consciousness.

### **Point to Ponder**

Where does God's anonymity beckon your attention in your own life?



### VISUALIZE THE MESSAGE

### Mishte - The Letter Yud

At times, our responsibilities can get in the way of enjoying life. When burnout kicks in we can begin to question why it's all worth it. And yet the right balance between happiness and obligation is of paramount importance. The Kabbalists explain that the creation of the world was motivated by a desire to do good for others and to make creations who can benefit from God's benevolence. Through God's giving, our lives become joyous, inspired, and truly happy. The joy we experience at the world's culmination mirrors God's joy at the creation of a world which will recognize and praise God's goodness. This prospective joy preceded and motivated the desire to create.

It makes sense therefore that the most basic obligation of Purim, higher than the rest, is the festive meal. There is an idea that this meal is a space that can bring us beyond our normal day-to-day state of mind.<sup>12</sup> Through song, quality time, great food, and wisdom shared at the meal, we tap back into the fundamental positivity that animates the world. It is our chance to be reminded of what matters most and to recheck our priorities.

This is also reflective of the letter yud. As the first letter of the four-letter name, it is the starting point for writing it, and the other letters follow only when it is finished. So in a sense, it is the root and source of the other letters. There is an even deeper level to it, as well. Yud is the smallest letter, drawn with such little movement, that it calls our attention back to the first moment of writing. When pen hits paper, before any writing has begun, the creative possibilities are still endless. This tip of the yud, called the kotzo shel yud, is the true beginning point of the Divine name. From this joyous possibility emerges the rest of the yud, signifying the desire to draw out the rest of the name, and in doing so, to sketch something special and Divine.

### TEXT:

The explanation of "the great feast" is for the righteous and the pious who suffered difficulties in hiddenness... that there will be [for the whole world in their merit] unity, rest, and the cessation of all impurities.<sup>13</sup>

הפירוש משתה גדול על צדיקים וחסידים שסבלו בהסתרה כמה יסורין... שיהיה היחוד והמנוחה והשתבות הקליפות.

### **Digging Deeper:**

There are two facets of the letter yud — the point, which represents endless joy, and the body of the letter, which represents the Divine desire and plan. The highest point, called the Reisha DeLo Ityada, literally "the unknowable head" is so lofty that it is considered synonymous with the Infinite.¹⁴ Normally, this light is totally concealed from us. Yet according to R. Isaac Luria (the Arizal), on Purim, we are able to access it for the entire day.¹⁵

- 10 Etz Chaim 1:2.
- 11 Emek HaMelec,h Sha'ar Sha'ashuei haMelech 1:1.
- 12 Megilla 7b.
- 13 Ketem Ophir on Esther 2:18.
- 14 Etz Chaim 11:8. It is also known by its acronym Radla.
- 15 Sha'ar HaKavanot, Drush Purim.

Through this light, our focus shifts from Being to Becoming. Radla is a level which is constantly shifting, ever-changing in response to the conduct of the worlds. Every time we glimpse this light it appears different than how we previously have seen it. Contrary to intuition, the secret of Radla is that the world is not stable but constantly changing. At this highest level of possibility, good and bad are just relative perspectives which coexist rather than conflict. For the mystics, this is one of the most powerful perspectives: We can take on bad, and through developing this new perspective of Radla on it, we cause it to disappear. This is the radical idea that the Komarner Rebbe hints to in the text cited above: It is precisely from the difficulties that one finds their way to transformational joy.

We might have thought that a world which was fundamentally stable and consistent would make more sense. Why build it this way? Anything finite, anything which is a Being, is limited and confined. But a Becoming is not yet determined. Its potential remains unlimited as long as it remains dynamic. Think back to the point of the yud: For the yud, all of the potential letters it could become are equally real, and even in the process of becoming a particular letter, it's not always clear which it will be until it's completed. If the world were a Being, there would be a limit to our growth and our ability. Only certain types of change would be feasible. Anything bad, for us, would constitute a fundamental challenge. But as a Becoming, the possibilities remain endless. Even the bad becomes a stepping stone which leads to good. On Purim, the light of Radla helps us recognize that we are still in the middle of the ultimate story of collective self-actualization. As long as we maintain our faith in who we can become, our potential for growth is unlimited. Much like the story of Purim itself, we can even transform anything which comes our way, into something which reveals true good.

### **Point to Ponder:**

What potential did you identify in your life to achieve but lost focus on actualizing?



### VISUALIZE THE MESSAGE

## Mishloach Manot - The First Hey

It's easy to feel isolated in our modern world. Many tools which were created to facilitate deeper connection have led to disconnection and isolation. And yet, we must try to connect in the deepest ways we can nonetheless.

In their darkest moment, Esther urged Mordechai to "go and gather all the Jews," for them to join together rather than to sit in pain alone. When the Jewish people were miraculously saved, they celebrated as one, "sending gifts from [each] one to their friend." The megilla reminds us that having others to rely on can help us both in pain and in joy.

The mitzva of mishte, the festive meal associated with the letter yud as discussed above, can be done alone. Mishloach manot, however, requires a giver and a recipient. This is even symbolized in the way the mitzva must be fulfilled, as one has to give at least two foods as part of the gift, and the purpose according to many is to create connections between people. Through and through, mishloach manot draw our attention to the importance of togetherness, to correct Haman's curse of being a dispersed and divisive people.

This mitzva is associated with the first letter hey in the four-letter name. Hey is one of only two letters that consists of two separate parts. Each is a different letter on its own, but when they come together, they become something new. This is why the letter hey is the place of growth and change for the mystics: It is the power of two individuals, with diverse desires, putting those differences aside to achieve something greater.<sup>21</sup>

### TEXT:

The secret of "gifts from one to another" [is that these words have the same] numerical value as [the Shema:] "hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, God is one." When the lights ascend to awaken infinite unity, then we receive the true effusion which can be shared from the light [that one receives for themselves] to another.<sup>22</sup>

סוד מנו"ת אי"ש לרעה"ו במספר שמ"ע ישרא"ל הי אלקינ"ו הי אח"ד, כי כשעולין האורות למעלה לעורר היחוד עד אין סוף, אזי מקבלין שפע אמיתי להשפיע מן האור לזולתו.

### **Digging Deeper:**

Our quest to ascend upwards and to achieve self-actualization cannot be at the expense of other people; quite the opposite! The more we rise upwards, the more we should find ourselves drawn to thinking about those around us. As the Komarner Rebbe explains in the text above, when we awaken unity on the highest level, we become ready to receive enough light not only for ourselves, but for those around us.

- 16 Esther 4:16.
- 17 Esther 9:23.
- 18 Aruch haShulchan 695:14.
- 19 Manot HaLevy 9:16-17; Bach 695.
- 20 Esther 3:8.
- 21 Pardes Rimonim 22:4.
- 22 Ketem Ophir on Esther 9:19.

### MISHLOACH MANOT

The connection drawn between mishloach manot and the Shema also indicates an important lesson. It would have been a much simpler existence to always experience connection with our Source, but this was not our Creator's intent. When we recite the Shema and proclaim God's unity, we do so from our lived and separate experience. We cannot achieve true unity with spirit and remain in the physical world. Yet this is exactly God's desire: When we can feel far away, we can come closer, just as the more one bends their knees to jump, the higher up they can go.<sup>23</sup>

The letter hey symbolizes this fluid and dynamic movement. The mystics juxtapose the letter hey to the letter chet. The latter is closed off, and if one found themselves inside of it, there would be nowhere to go but back the way they came. The letter hey has two openings, allowing for change as one passes through. Maor vaShemesh writes that originally the letter hey was like the chet, closed and impenetrable, but that our desire to change knocks on its wall until it opens up.<sup>24</sup> We uncover something new when we are far, the desire to be close once again.<sup>25</sup> Through this process, we can connect with the satisfaction and feeling that we are becoming who we need to be.

### **Point to Ponder:**

Who do you think in your life is looking for connection right now? How could reaching out to them affect them and affect you?



### VISUALIZE THE MESSAGE

<sup>23</sup> Ba'al Shem Tov Al HaTorah, Shemini #6.

<sup>24</sup> Maor vaShemesh, Rimzei Pesach.

<sup>25</sup> Maggid Devarav LeYaakov #41.

## Megilla - The Letter Vav

Foundational stories and epic tales inspire and shape collective identity. In addition to describing someone else, these archetypal tales help us understand who we are. The Purim story focuses on the human actors in a story too intentional to be a coincidence. Through Mordechai's and Esther's eyes, we can see our own day-to-day lives as infused with a higher purpose.

This is part of why the book of Esther is called a megilla, which shares a root with megule, "revealed." Sometimes we begin to contemplate something not when it is revealed and in front of our faces, but when it is absent. The megilla is a special type of book which reveals a new perspective through concealment.

So too, the letter vav is the most versatile of letters. It connects. When pronounced, two vav's make a "w" sound, while one alone makes a "v." But there is a whole other aspect of the letter vav which is unique to it: It can also be a vowel, sometimes signified only as a dot, which helps another letter come to its full expression. Through the letter vav we can achieve balance as we can pay attention to not only the revealed, but the concealed.

### TEXT:

The reading of the megilla, [which is also called] a "book" or "letter," is because the megilla is the secret of the revealing [hitgalut] of our holy fortune with great light, to destroy all the wicked ones.<sup>26</sup>

ענין קריאת מגלה ספר אגרת. כי מגל"ה בסוד התגלות מזל"א קדישא באור רב, להמית כל אלו הרשעים, והוא בא מאין.

### **Digging Deeper:**

The megilla does not only reveal God's concealed hand guiding the world through the story it tells. The very structure of this scroll helps reveal this secret. Parchment for holy texts are scored with lines which indicate where each sentence should be written. Concealment doesn't just balance with revealing, but precedes and shapes it.<sup>27</sup> The Purim story is filled with moments of irony and recurring themes or phrases, and no moment proves inconsequential on the way.

This dynamic of concealment and revealing can be traced back to the very beginning of creation. After the tzimtzum, the contraction of the Infinite to make room for creation, a ray of the Infinite's light shone into the space where the worlds would be created. This ray of light is the prototypical letter vav. This beam of light, called the kav, allows for gradation in creation: the lower it descends into the open expanse of a vacuum known as chalal, the more the light diminishes, which allows for the seeming existence of bad.

- 26 Ketem Ophir on Esther 9:20.
- 27 Kedushat Levi, Kedusha Sheniya.
- 28 Etz Chaim 1:2.
- 29 Leshem Shevo veAchlama, Sefer haKlalim 17b.
- 30 Klach Pitchei Chochma #33.

In fact, according to the Kabbalists, the letter *vav* is itself concealing a secret related to this which will be revealed in the future. One interpretation of the four-letter name is that it combines the Hebrew words for past [haya], present [hove], and future [yihiye].<sup>31</sup> It is impossible to imagine a future which is not inextricably linked to our past and present. We cannot escape them even as we dream of a better tomorrow. The Kabbalists explain that ultimately, the bottom half of the *vav* will fold up into the top half and the four-letter name will become just *yihiye!*<sup>32</sup> Since everything exists as an expression of the Divine will, once we have fixed the world there will be no need for the lowest elements of existence anymore, and so the light sustaining them will return to its source. The future which we dream of now will one day be present and real to us before our very eyes. In fact, if the world we want to see is already latent and concealed in the world we find ourselves in, then our inability to see it is only because we are not yet ready to manifest it.

### **Point to Ponder:**

Where is your time invested in something not good for you? How can you redistribute it into things which are better for you?



### VISUALIZE THE MESSAGE

<sup>31</sup> Abudraham, Birkat haMitzvot 32.

<sup>32</sup> Divrei Chaim Dov on Otzrot Chaim Sha'ar Tanta #2.

# Matanot L'Evyonim - The Last Hey

Numerous studies in the field of positive psychology confirm that helping others generates greater satisfaction than being helped. In fact, one study in particular found that we don't even need to know who the recipient is, or to interact with them at all, to experience a heightened sense of happiness. Perhaps even more astounding is that the act of helping another person activates the same feel-good part of our brain as food and other basic self-sustaining activities.<sup>33</sup> In short, we are hardwired to take care of others.

Even amidst their boundless joy, the Jews in Persia kept an eye on the impoverished and the needy to ensure that they had what they needed. This was not something they did when they needed a break from celebrating. On the contrary, they understood that to be selfish in happiness is to misunderstand what happiness truly is. Like a candle whose light is not diminished no matter how far it spreads, joy can cause a shift in consciousness that actually magnifies it by sharing it.

This brings us to the final letter of the four-letter name, another hey. Especially since some of the similarities to the first hey are apparent (both are relational and focused on giving), one might wonder what is added to God's name by repeating a letter. But while the upper hey passed goodness and giving to the lower letters of the name, this hey faces us and brings new levels of connection down into our world.

### TEXT:

"And gifts for the impoverished," [has the same numerical] value as "the fifty gates of understanding," which [one can] ascend [into] in the merit of giving a lot of charity, into the fiftieth gate [which is] freedom.<sup>34</sup>

ומתנו"ת לאכיוני"ם, במספר [חמשי"ם] שער"י בינ"ה, שעולין בזכות הרבות הצדקה, לשער החמשים חירות.

### **Digging Deeper:**

Kabbalists drew a distinction between the first three letters of the name and the last one. Before creation, they explain, the name was only three letters. Only when creation was actualized did the last letter come to be.<sup>35</sup> If this happened, why would creation not culminate in a new letter rather than the reproduction of a letter that was already utilized?

The point of creation is to reveal and actualize what was invisible in the Source. This final hey reveals an ability to be rooted and relates to a higher Source. While the first hey indicated the fullness of two pieces coming together, this hey indicates the inherent imbalance and lack of separation. The most prominent part of this last hey, a stand-in for all of creation, features two pieces which are unequal. The smaller leg of the hey is like a yud, representing the fewer moments where we can feel truly connected and present. Much more prominent is the body of the hey, which resembles a daled. This part of the hey connotes for the

<sup>33 &</sup>quot;Happiness Comes From Trying to Make Others Feel Good, Rather Than Oneself." Titova M., Shelton K. Journal of Positive Psychology 17(1):1-15.

<sup>34</sup> Ketem Ophir on Esther 9:22.

<sup>35</sup> Sulam on Zohar, Naso #59.

<sup>36</sup> Likutei Moharan 1:49.

### MATANOT L'EVYONIM

Zohar the phrase deleit la megarmei klum, "it has nothing of its own," as it is fundamentally and intrinsically lacking, only holding what it receives from above. We, too, are looking to fill the pieces of ourselves that are lacking, and in this, we desire to imitate and capture the wholeness that is emblematic of the first hey. This is why the last letter is a hey, as well.

In the language of the sefirot, this last hey is associated with malchut, or the divine kingship over the world.<sup>38</sup> This would seem to suggest that God's rulership is somehow lacking, but upon deeper reflection, it fits perfectly. It is our job to take this world and make it a place where goodness can dominate. As the saying goes, "there is no king without a nation."<sup>39</sup> This last letter depends on us to stand tall and put all we have into making this world a better place, where no one who is in need has to fear. Through this, we draw down the light of the first letter hey, which is associated with the highest gates of knowledge and freedom, into the latter one. Free from concern about filling our own needs, and overwhelmed with a feeling of completion, that all we receive can be shared, as we learn to take only so we can better give.<sup>40</sup>

### **Point to Ponder:**

What is plentiful in your life? What could you accomplish by sharing it?



<sup>37</sup> Zohar, Vayeshev 168b.

<sup>38</sup> Sha'arei Ora, Sha'ar haChamishi.

<sup>39</sup> Gevurot Hashem, chap. 47.

<sup>40</sup> See Introduction to the Zohar by Sulam.

### Conclusion

Purim, in truth, is not about knowing. To know something intellectually is great, but knowing through experience is greater. This is the meaning of the cryptic Rabbinic system that a person must arrive at ad delo yada, "a level of unknowing."

Purim is a unique opportunity to open ourselves up emotionally and to be drawn into the drama of the Divine guidance of the world. This experience can change us not only on Purim day, but for the entire year. The mystics compare us on Purim to a silver vessel — to change it into something else, it has to be melted down to its most basic element and then it can become something new and better.<sup>42</sup> The emotional space of Purim allows us to take a look in the mirror and to delve into how we truly feel about where we are at and where we want to go.

This is one reason the day of atonement is called Yom HaKippurim, meaning a day like Purim.<sup>43</sup> While on Yom Kippur we try to return and become better through seriousness, on Purim, we attempt the same through joy. Through both, we discover that these two opposites combine and create a greater whole, which propels us ever higher.

### TEXT:

"Esther placed Mordechai over Haman's household," as explained by the Rama miPano, that Gehenom [the Jewish underworld where souls rest until they can ascend into the Garden of Eden] will transform and become like the Garden of Eden, and [there will be a] celebration with the Garden of Eden which will extend even into gehenom, and there they will point [and say] "this is my God!" with their fingers. This is the light of Mordechai.<sup>44</sup>

ותשם אסתר את מרדכי על בית המן, כמבואר בדברי רבינו הקדוש מ"ע מפאנו, כי הגיהנם יחזור להיות גן עדן, והמחול יהיה עם גן עדן שיתפשט לגיהנם, ושם מראין זה אל-י באצבעו, שהוא הארות מרדכי.

### **Digging Deeper:**

There's a famous joke that every Jewish holiday can be summed up by the same nine words: "They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!" The mitzvot of Purim, fit this paradigm well. But there is a moment which precedes that, where Mordechai inherits Haman's belongings. As a mortal enemy of the Jews, shouldn't Haman's property have been destroyed and forbidden to keep. 45 Something deeper must be going on here.

The Komarner Rebbe in the text above spells out that this moment hints to the greatest redemption, and in this, ties together all of the fourfold letters of the name. Mordechai's taking of Haman's property reveals how even the bad will come to be a part of the good, the revelation of Radla which the yud signified. In doing so,

- 41 Megilla 7b.
- 42 Ahavat Yisrael, Drushei Purim 1.
- 43 Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 57.
- 44 Ketem Ophir on Esther 8:2.
- 45 R. Yerucham Perla's Biur leSefer haMitzvot leRaSa"G #59.

### CONCLUSION

he allows even the lowest parts of the world to connect to God, embodying the connective experience of the first hey. There is a rebalancing of concealment and revealing, where the Divine Presence is revealed in the lowest and most concealed places, which is the aspect of the letter vav. Finally, through this, even those in gehenom will accept God, the culmination of the final letter hey.

In the Zohar, the progression of these four letters is compared to a song. 46 A song has different parts which sound beautiful on their own, but when combined, they become something even greater. The world is not only built on the progression of one element to the other, but thrives on the concordance of each of them. The more we improve our world the more they produce a symphony, where all of creation can sing a new song in harmony and wholeness.

### **Point to Ponder:**

What new song will you express?



### VISUALIZE THE MESSAGE

