



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת תצוה תשס"ט 5769

LOTS TO TALK ABOUT

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Purim. Mention of its name immediately brings to mind a familiar, festive atmosphere and an exciting narrative.

Many are also aware of the origins of the holiday's name. The Megillah itself (*Esther 9:24-6*) states that "Purim" – meaning "lots" – is a reference to the lottery conducted by the wicked Haman in selecting the date of the Jews' extermination. His scheme was reversed, and Haman found himself hanging from the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai.

What might not be so familiar, however, is the significance of this name: what exactly is the "big deal" about lots? The Purim story is a gripping account of peril, heroism, and salvation. The aspect of the lots seems to be but a minor detail amongst these epic events. Why did the Megillah see fit to name this *yom tov* for the lots that were cast in the course of the events described in the Megillah?

This issue may be clarified by examining the topic of lots in general, a subject which appears in various places throughout Talmudic and *halachic* literature.

A prime example exists in connection with the Beis Hamikdash. The daily service began with the *terumas hadeshen* (removal of coals and ashes from the altar). The Mishnah in Yoma (2:2) delineates the method employed in selecting the *kohen* who would perform this initiating task:

התקינו שלא יהו תורמין את המזבח אלא בפיס.

"The Rabbis instituted that the privilege of performing the *terumas hadeshen* would only be determined through lots."

WHAT PASSED FOR ENTERTAINMENT IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Halachic-responsa literature records an interesting episode of a lottery conducted many years ago:

Some time during the 1600s, twelve cronies held their Purim *seudah* (feast) together. During the course of the festivities, they decided to engage in a contest of sorts.

The activity of choice was a raffle. Contributing equal amounts to a collective "fund," a silver goblet was purchased and designated as the prize.

This lottery was conducted in the following way: Two receptacles were procured, each one containing twelve prepared slips of paper. On the papers in the first receptacle were written the contestants' names (one name per paper). The papers in the second receptacle remained blank, with one exception: the words "*mazal tov*" were inscribed on one of those papers.

A child was brought in to carry out the drawings. He would jointly remove a slip of paper from each vessel: one name together with one "blank." The process would be repeated until a match was found; i.e., when a name was removed with the "*mazal tov*" paper, the winner was declared. (Apparently, this was the going thing at parties in those times.)

In this particular instance, the winner was picked by the sixth drawing. He received the "*mazal tov*" and the silver goblet.

One of the losers, however, decided to conduct an "investigation." He inspected the remaining, undrawn slips of paper, and discovered – to his horror – that there had been a gross error. One of the names was missing! In other words, instead of twelve names being entered into the raffle, in reality, there had only been eleven, with a twelfth having been left blank. In light of this omission, he charged, the results should be discounted.

לזכר ולעילוי נשמת
הגאון ר' מרדכי ב"ר אליהו זצוק"ל

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

MISHNAS CHAYIM is brought to you by CHEVRAH LOMDEI MISHNAH, a network of Torah scholars dedicated to bringing the merits of Mishnah study to the greater Jewish public. Encompassing Mishnah, Gemara, and variety of other services, CHEVRAH LOMDEI MISHNAH primarily assists mourners interested in acquiring the merit of Torah study for their loved ones.



MISHNAS
CHAYIM

משנת היום

פרשת תצוה תשס"ט 5769

The winner, on the other hand, saw no need for a “do-over.” The mistake was amongst the *unpicked* papers, and so, ultimately, did not affect the outcome. Furthermore, the only one who may have had reason to complain was that individual whose name was omitted. The winner took care of this potential snag by providing that individual with a sizeable cash consolation prize. As such, *he* was not challenging the results, and so – contended the winner – no one else should, either.

The issue was brought before the Chavas Yair, the venerated *posek* of that era (*Shailos U'teshuvos Chavas Yair, sec. 61*). His answer is not only interesting from a *halachic* standpoint, but is also very illuminating as to the *spiritual* factor inherent in a lottery.

(Note that the Chavas Yair was not dealing with the question of the *permissibility* of engaging in such pari-mutuel activities; that issue is addressed by the Ben Ish Chai in *Shailos U'teshuvos Rav Pe'alim, vol. 2, Yoreh De'ah, sec. 30*. The focus of the Chavas Yair's responsum was the technical question of legal ownership resulting from the case at hand.)

The Chavas Yair ruled that the lottery was, in fact, invalid. True, the claimant's chances were not diminished by this particular omission, as the winner soundly argued. However, based on what really transpires “behind the scenes,” it becomes apparent that even a seemingly inconsequential mistake would disqualify the lottery.

For – declared the Chavas Yair – the results of a lottery are effected through *Divine intervention*. Heaven will only become involved, however, if the lottery is conducted properly. A botched drawing is an incomplete lottery, not subject to the special *Siyata Dishmaya* usually directed at such endeavors. In such a case, then, the results are unreliable.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Bearing in mind the Chavas Yair's enlightening perspective on lotteries, we may better understand why the name “lots” was chosen to serve as the title

Better than a Segulah

A personalized program of
Limud Torah in
your zechus



732.364.7029 | ChevrahLomdeiMishnah.org

for this *yom tov*. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the Purim narrative is the nature of its events. In contrast to most other holidays, whose miracles were *nisim giluyim* (overt miracles), the Purim story is characterized by *nisim nistarim* (hidden miracles). That is, the series of events of this period appeared to be natural occurrences, lacking any “supernatural” wonders.

However, this is only the superficial view. Part of our task on this *yom tov* is to take a deeper look, which will reveal the clear presence of Hashem's guiding Hand every step of the way (*No'am Si'ach, p. 146*).

As contended by the Chavas Yair, a lottery is actually a quintessential manifestation of Divine intervention. By using “lots” as the name for this *yom tov*, the Megillah is emphasizing the central theme of the day: recognizing Hashem's Hand in the (seemingly) ordinary events of Purim and everyday life.

To sponsor MISHNAS CHAYIM, to distribute it to your shul, or to receive this publication via email, please contact CHEVRAH LOMDEI MISHNAH at 732-364-7029 or info@chevrahlomdeimishnah.org.