



Purim 5768

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Maimonides defines the obligation of *mishlochei manot* – sending packages to one's fellow on Purim – as follows: "A person is obligated to send two portions of meat, two kinds of cooked dishes, or two kinds of food to his fellow... And whoever increases his sending [of food packages] to friends – he is praiseworthy" (Hilkhos Megila 2:15).

*Mishlochei manot* is among a small group of *mitzvot* regarding which Maimonides encourages performing beyond the minimum requirement, describing additional performance as "praiseworthy" (*harei zeh meshubach*). A more famous instance appears in Hilkhos Chametz U-matza (7:1), where Maimonides, based on the Mishna, encourages intensive, elaborate discussions of the Exodus on Pesach night, beyond the minimal requirements: "There is an affirmative command to tell of the miracles and wonders that were performed for our forefathers in Egypt on the night of the fifteenth of Nissan... And whoever elaborates on the events that occurred and took place – he is praiseworthy." In a somewhat similar vein, in Hilkhos Teshuva (2:4), Maimonides urges penitent sinners to undergo certain measures to express and reinforce their resolve to change, beyond the narrowly-defined obligations entailed by the *mitzva* of repentance.

Rabbi Israel Schepansky (writing in the journal *Or Ha-mizrach*, vol. 31) suggested that the common thread running through these three contexts relates to famous distinction drawn by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik between a *mitzva* act (*ma'aseh ha-mitzva*) and the essential fulfillment of the *mitzva* (*kiyum ha-mitzva*). Whereas generally the two occur simultaneously – that is, the act itself marks the complete fulfillment of the *mitzva* – in certain instances the *mitzva* act does not itself constitute the *kiyum* – the essential fulfillment. With regard to these *mitzvot*, the act is meant to help one achieve a broader or less tangible goal, beyond the formal execution of the act.

In such situations, Maimonides understandably encourages continued involvement in the given *mitzva*, in order to achieve the desired goal to the greatest possible extent. In the case of *teshuva*, for example, the formal act of confession must lead to a fundamental change of heart and lifestyle, and should therefore be followed by a sustained program of self-improvement. Telling the story of the Exodus similarly serves as the means of achieving genuine awe of, and gratitude towards, the Almighty, and thus the more vigorously one delves into the subject of the Exodus, the more "praiseworthy" he is.

*Mishlochei manot*, it would seem, is intended to bring a sense of festive camaraderie among Jews. We are therefore encouraged to deliver more packages than *Halakha* strictly requires, in order to further enhance this aura of friendship and affection.

The theme of social camaraderie as part of the Purim celebration likely relates to Maimonides' comments towards the end of his listing of the commandments after his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*:

The prophets...commanded to read the *Megila* in its proper time in order to mention the praises of the Almighty and the salvations He performed for us, that He was close to our pleas...and in order to inform future generations that it is true what He promised in the Torah, "For who is a great nation who has a God close to it..." (Devarim 4:7).

Maimonides here describes the Purim miracle as a clear manifestation of God's "closeness" to the Jewish people's prayers, as described by Moshe in the Book of Devarim: "For who is a great nation who has a God close to it like the Lord our God, whenever we call to Him?" Elsewhere (Hilkhot Teshuva 2:6), Maimonides, based on the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18a), cites this verse as the source for the notion that public repentance is always accepted. When Moshe speaks of the Almighty as "close to us whenever we call to Him," he refers specifically to situations where a community – or certainly where the entire nation – joins together in sincere repentance and prayer.

It thus follows that the Jews' response to Haman's edict, as described in *Megilat Ester*, serves as the paradigm of public repentance, of *Am Yisrael* joining together as a single entity, rather than a group of individuals, to appeal to God for mercy. When Ester instructs Mordechai, "Go, assemble all the Jews found in Shushan" (Ester 4:16), she in effect bids him to bring the Jews together into a single, organic whole, and inspire them to collectively return to God and plead for mercy.

Accordingly, the theme of friendship and mutual goodwill, as reflected in the obligation of *mishlochei manot*, assumes a critical role in the proper observance of Purim, as we endeavor to commemorate and perhaps even reenact the "assembly" of the Jews in Ester's time, so that we, too, can appeal to God as a single, unified nation and thereby be worthy of miraculous salvation.