

Dear, dear, dear friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation (we'd like to tell you how dear, but our accountant advises against it), we address you this Purim from a different place than in past years (we got evicted). As you know, this is the year of *Shmita*, literally a device for paying for parking, but here meaning the year of letting fields lie fallow (except for baseball), of letting go of our ownership over the earth (if we had any), of stepping back from our busy, productive lives (we're speaking theoretically here) and seeing a deeper meaning than just work, work, work all the time (we've filed for unemployment). We, the rabbis, teachers, sages, and scholars of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation, have been spending this year in deep, deep contemplation (we're just resting our eyes) of the central place of rest in our lives (we put pillows in the conference room). It has been an eye-opening (when we're awake), soul-stirring (but maybe we should have shaken), and liver-shaking (it's Biblical; look it up) experience for us all.

But wait – there's more! During this time of deep spiritual work (as opposed to actually doing anything) we have been blessed with insight into a new vein of Harvonah knowledge that has opened up in a mother lode (we love mining metaphors) of Torah that we have been learning (when we could find the time), processing (in the Cuisinart), and integrating (we failed Calculus) throughout this time, even when it seemed to the untrained eye that we were only napping, and drinking, and drinking, and napping, and, and.... Sorry, we lost our train of thought (it's probably been rescheduled). Anyway, the point is that we have found an amazing new source about our favorite holy eunuch, and we have rounded up the best (or at least most conscious) of us to present it to you (look, it's a gift!) on this blessed holiday of Purim, or as it's also known, the Feast of Lots (of drinking and hamantaschen). So, without further ado (we don't) or fuss (did we mention we're tired?), we will now share the words of the beautiful (at least to us) and wise (comparatively) tractate known as Masechet Hafseket, and our study this year is found on page 29b:

"Rabbi Al Ta'avod [but call me Al] taught: From where do we know that the Purim story took place during a *Shmita* year? As it is written, 'In those days, *k'shevet ha-Melech*' ['when the King sat'] [Esther 1:2]. Do not read *shevet* ['sat'] but rather *shavat* ['ceased']. The King knew it was a *Shmita* year, so he ceased from all labor. Rav Tashmet responded: *Raminhu!* [literally, 'a noodle dish,' but here meaning 'you are wrong and an idiot']. Did the King do any work?! Did he not have many manly eunuchs to do the work for him?! So what effect would his 'ceasing' have had? Huh? Huh? Rabbi Al replied: *Amar kra* [literally, an ancient martial art, but here meaning 'read the text dummy!'] 'He gave a banquet for all the officials' [Esther 1:3]. The King gave a banquet for 180 days in order to prevent anyone from violating the *Shmita* year by working the land. Rabbi Ke'ev Rosh asked: Wasn't the King *akum*? [literally, 'an awkward guy at parties', but here meaning 'a person not exactly knowledgeable in the ways of Torah']? How did he know that it was a *Shmita* year in the first place? Rabbi Al replied: *Pshita!* [literally, 'I need some clean sheets' but here meaning 'thanks for the softball question']. As it is said, 'Then Harvonah said *lifnei* ['before'] the King' [Esther 7:9]. Do not read *lifnei* ['before'] but rather *l'fanai* ['to be unoccupied']. Harvonah told the King to follow the laws of *Shmita*."

Rashi gets very excited doing the math to trace back the *Shmita* year to the time of Shushan, and he catalogues all of the other events in the Tanach that also, according to his calculations, took place during a *Shmita* year, and speculates on what that means for each (not much, it turns out). He then turns his attention to the idea of a 180-day-long banquet and how many

dishes one could serve in that time before finishing off with an impassioned plea to pair each dish with an appropriate wine, and he has a few suggestions.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, write endless paragraphs about the laws of *Shmita*, which don't apply to any of them but are, perhaps for that reasoning, the most fascinating thing they could imagine. They fantasize about the wonderful grapes that would grow on the vines during the year of release, that anyone could just pick and make into wine and drink and drink and drink.... In the original manuscript, the rest of the page is strangely purple.

Modern commentators find it interesting that the King would be portrayed as both a zealous follower of the law and a complete buffoon who can't do anything without consulting eunuchs. They speculate that perhaps the King's decision to prevent his subjects from working was more of a "bread and circuses" ploy to distract them from the dire economic state of the kingdom, and Harvonah was actually in cahoots with Vashti to prevent the whole thing from crashing down on their heads. Or maybe the King just liked to party, which sounds like a good idea to the commentators if they could only get invited to the right parties.

"Rav Hakeh-Rega came from Babylonia and objected: But isn't it true that the laws of the *Shmita* year only apply in the Land of Israel? Why would Harvonah have told the King to follow them in Shushan?! Wouldn't that have meant being overly *mahmir*? [literally, 'a spread for bagels,' but here meaning 'going ridiculously overboard']. Rabbi Oneh answered him: The Megilah itself teaches us that the story of Purim actually took place in the Land of Israel! Where was the King's throne? As it is written: *b'Shushan ha-birah* ['in the capital of Shushan'] [Esther 1:2]. *Hachi k'amar kra* [literally, an ancient form of hackey-sack, but here meaning 'let me make the words say something totally different']: *b'sasson ha-birah* ['in the capital of joy']. And what city is the capital of joy? Of course, only Jerusalem, the holy city, as it is said, '*Sisu* ['Rejoice'] with her [Jerusalem] *masos* [in jubilation]' [Isaiah 66:10]. The entire story of Purim actually took place in the Land of Israel, and this explains why the majority of the people in the land are Jews, as it is written, 'And many of the people of the land suddenly said they were Jewish!' [Esther 8:17].

Rashi waxes rhapsodic about the need for joy, not only in Jerusalem but in all places and at all times, and then segues into another long sales pitch for wine, particularly wine from Northern France in the 11th century [*acheter mon vin* in Old French]. He then critiques the whole idea of being *mahmir* about anything, with the notable and glaring exception of Purim, which requires immense concentration on hearing the words of the Megilah, giving to the poor, sending unwanted portions of food to friends, and, most importantly, feasting with plenty of wine, on sale now at a cave near you.

Tosafot enter into a very enjoyable argument about whether Shushan could be Jerusalem, Israel could be Persia, up could be down, and night could be day (it's just a little cloudy). They then catalog all of the stories in the Talmud set outside of the Land of Israel – there are 879 – and reinterpret them as being inside the Land using gematria, *kal va-homer* arguments [literally, "a very drinkable wine"], and blatant misreadings of the texts.

What this all leads to is never clear, but when they've gone on at such length in incomprehensible medieval Aramaic, it hardly seems to matter.

Modern commentators focus all of their attention on the idea that places are not what they seem, and they then reinterpret the entire Megilah as a story about what happens when an incompetent, non-Jewish king is ruling over the Land of Israel, which they compare favorably to their previous interpretations, none of which got published in the best journals anyway. Wherever the story – which, they want to stress, probably never happened at all – took place, it is clear to them that its major message is rejoicing, which they have never managed themselves but really are hoping to at that next conference in Geneva, which, they can now definitively prove, is actually in Iowa.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's heroic example by ceasing from all work, telling the boss to stop bothering you, and concentrating all effort on rejoicing, resulting in (we hope) a large (figurative) reward (but we'll take cash or check). Thus will we merit the time of Moshiach, may it come speedily in our days, hopefully by next Purim, Amen, Selah.

This concludes the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. Please always remember and never forget to donate generously to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation to continue its support of this lecture series. Note that many halachic authorities (only 99% of whom have at one time or another been paid advisors for the Harvonah Memorial Foundation) argue that this support constitutes *matanot la'evyonim* – the mitzvah of giving gifts to those in need that is mandated on Purim. As a friendly reminder, you can find the Foundation and donate on the web at: www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubey.org

Hag Sameah!