

To all of the many, many friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation (we hope you're both listening), we come to you on this Purim with heavy, heavy hearts (maybe it was all the hamantaschen). Even from our high and lofty place at the Foundation (metaphorically; we're actually in the basement), we have noticed that something has shifted in the world this year, and we are quite concerned about it (when we can rouse ourselves). We have seen how justice has fallen to the wayside (it was pushed), how the rule of law has been ignored (but who noticed?), and how the very foundations of society (like us) have been shaken (we spilled our drinks). We, the rabbis, teachers, sages, and scholars of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation, have stayed up late at night (we have insomnia), contemplating this state of affairs (or is it a province?), lamenting the workings of the world (it works too hard), and searching our souls (for loose change). Our message to you: we care (when we can find the time), we are with you (on alternate Thursdays), and we are going to do something about it (just as soon as we can find our way out from under this table).

But you might ask (we hoped you would): what does Harvonah have to do with justice? Oh, we shake our heads in wonderment (actually, we're just trying to wake up) at the depths of your ignorance (really deep), the wellsprings of your lack of knowledge (even deeper), and the paucity of your understanding (you really don't know much, do you?). As we have discovered through our intense research (mostly at bars late at night) and endless investigation (how many bottles of beer really *are* on the wall?), Harvonah is the very embodiment of justice (he wasn't a small man), the source of righteousness (he wasn't left-handed), and the emblem of judgment (he wasn't very artsy). Now it is our role (we prefer the seedy kind), our obligation (it's just a pledge), nay, our great privilege (isn't it amazing that we get paid for this?) to enlighten (don't worry, they're LEDs) not only our listeners (both of you) but also the entire Jewish world (such as it is) and all of humanity (if they would only pay attention) about the crucial teaching that Harvonah brings us, to shine light (hey, not in our eyes!) into the darkness (we were sleeping) that shrouds our world (or maybe it's just cloudy) at this time (it was so much better in the old days). To wit (we're funny), we bring you this year the teachings of the recently unearthed (it was really dirty) manuscript of Masechet Shofet Bofet, and we begin our study on page 97b:

"Rabbi 'Ein Mishpat opened: Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace [Pirkei Avot 1:18]. And Harvonah embodied all three. Rav Nary A Mitzvah challenged him: *Ini?! [literally, 'a kind of sushi,' but here meaning 'you are so wrong' in a passive aggressive kind of way]*. Harvonah was a *saris!* [literally, 'someone who likes drapery clothing,' but here meaning 'a manly eunuch']. Was such a person even eligible to serve on a court? He [we have no idea to whom this refers so we just have to guess] countered: A lot you know! [See reference to the Feast of Lots in Masechet Megillah.]. Harvonah was not only a judge but also the chief judge of the court of Shushan, and the text proves it, as it is written, '[The King] ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harvonah...' [Esther 1:10]. The King ordered these three, and for what? To make up a Beit Din [literally, 'a second-class restaurant,' but here meaning 'a place that rabbis hung around'], as it is well-known that courts should have three judges. Not only that, but Harvonah was named as the third judge, and it is known to *kula alma* [literally, 'a very cheap soft drink,' but here meaning anyone who is anyone] that the number three in gematria equals the word *av*, the head of the Beit Din. So Harvonah was the source of justice, truth, and peace for all of Shushan, *ka mashma lan* [literally, 'a very mushy breakfast cereal,' but here meaning 'so there!'].

Rashi compares all of the different criteria for who can sit on a Beit Din to each other, only to find that they make a hopeless mess with no clear guidelines. Failing to find any guidance elsewhere in the Talmud, he “looks into his heart” to come up with his own criteria, which are mostly about the ability to sit for a long time, write huge volumes of text, and drink even larger quantities of wine. He then tries to come up with a derivation for the word *saris*, claiming that it is a combination of *sar* [‘minister’] and *rosh* [‘head’], and he then goes on to argue that the merry band of eunuchs in the Megillah were not judges at all but instead the chief ministers of the kingdom, which explains a lot about how it managed with a foolish king who spent all his time drinking and ordering around his wives.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, have a wonderful time cataloging all of the groups of three that appear in the Talmud, but after they have moved from judges to the patriarchs to types of slugs, they grow slightly discouraged that any of these mean anything to anyone. To make up for it, they create their own Beit Din, rule that all of their contemporaries are wrong about everything, and adjourn to whet their appetites and wet their whistles in a convenient vineyard down the road that just happened to belong to Grandpa Rashi.

Modern commentators triumphantly conclude that this passage proves that the ancients had a much wider and more liberal view of gender and sexuality than is sometimes assumed, but they disagree bitterly about the significance of this fact, and they end up creating rival departments, attracting rival students, and founding rival journals to argue about it, which all works out very well for everyone. At least for a while.

“Bruriah raised a clear objection [get it?]: But isn’t it true that when judgement was declared on the wicked Haman, it relied only on a woman, namely Queen Esther? As it is written, ‘And Esther said: The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!’ [Esther 7:6]. Rabbi Meir [who really didn’t know what was good for him] replied: *Al tikra elah* [literally, ‘a gazelle on the ceiling,’ but here meaning ‘let’s read this creatively, shall we?’] – Don’t read *tzar* [‘adversary’] but rather *tzar* [‘narrow’]. The wicked Haman was so thin and wily that he could slip past anyone and not be brought to justice! It required the combined efforts of Esther, the King, and Harvonah to bring him to justice, as it is written, ‘The King rose in fury’ [Esther 7:7] and it is written, ‘Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, “What is more, a stake is standing at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai—the man whose words saved the king’ [Esther 7:9]. Only then is it written, ‘And the King said, Impale—or maybe hang—him upon it!’ [Ibid.]. Bruriah, not to be outdone, said: Do not read ‘one of the eunuchs’ but ‘the first among the eunuchs’ – for without Harvonah, the crimes of the wicked Haman would never have ended.

Rashi loves Bruriah [or at least his daughters do], and he takes this opportunity to name all of the other places in Tanach that women take crucial roles over men, from Eve to Devorah, which takes him quite a while. When he recovers, he notes that all of the action in Chapter 7 takes place at a party, that all parties in Shushan took place with lots and lots of wine [see Esther 1:7], and that the King’s special rule for party-goers was “no rules!” [see Esther 1:8]. He concludes that this is the way all Torah study should

take place, and the text then records an ellipsis as Rashi takes a break from writing and heads out murmuring something about “no rules”...

Tosafot enjoy going through all of the times that the word “one” could be interpreted as “first,” and they get so involved and so confused that they inadvertently write the famous Pesach song “Echad Mi Yodea” [‘Who Knows One?’], which was originally the title of their debate. They then catalog all of the things that are actually both “first” and “one,” go in circles for 27 pages, and then conclude that of course it all comes back to the Holy Blessed One, which they knew all along.

Modern commentators note that according to Rabbi Meir, it is the combination of a woman, a man, and a eunuch that brings justice to the world, defeats evil, and provides for inedible packets of food to be exchanged between friends for the foreseeable future. This seems like the apotheosis of the valorization of diversity that drew them to rabbinic texts in the first place, and they need to go lie down in a quiet place for a while until the euphoria wears off a bit. When it does, they decide that really all that’s left is to party, and they go off in search of one as soon as they possibly can.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah’s heroic example by getting appointed to a high position, playing nicely with others, and waiting to pass judgment at the appropriate time, 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.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoube.org

Hag Sameah!