

# MISHLOACH MANOT ON PURIM AND ROSH HASHANAH

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The practice of sending portions to one another on a holiday is generally associated with Purim, as it is mentioned in Esther 9:22, *They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts (mishloach manot) to one another and presents to the poor.* The practice was codified in TB *Megillah* 7a, described by R. Yosef as an obligation to send two portions of food to one other person.

However, this term, *mishloach manot*, also appears in Nehemiah chapter 8 in connection to the observance of what we now call Rosh Hashanah. There we are told that when Ezra read the Torah to the people *on the first day of the seventh month* (Neh. 8:2) the people began weeping and had to be instructed that *This day is holy to the Lord your God, you must not mourn or weep* (Neh. 8:9). Instead, they were to *eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions (v'shilchu manot) to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord* (Neh. 8:10). The people did this, they *went to eat and drink and send portions (u'leshalach manot) and make great merriment* (Neh. 8:12).

A further connection between *mishloach manot* in Esther and Nehemiah is the twinning of this practice with providing food for the needy. In Esther 9:22 we find that Purim is *an occasion for sending gifts (mishloach manot) to one another and presents to the poor*, and in Nehemiah 8:2 the people are told to *send portions (v'shilchu manot) to whoever has nothing prepared.*

Based on this, it would seem that the sending of *mishloach manot* was a standard component of any holiday celebration.<sup>1</sup> It made sure that everyone had food to eat as part of their festivities. This practice of sending portions on all holidays seems to have been preserved in Rabbinic literature, as it is referred to in the Mishnah, *Beitzah* 1:9, where the terminology *meshalkhin manot* is used in a general holiday context.<sup>2</sup>

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Of course distribution of food among celebrants is a fairly obvious way of expressing a festive mood, as seen for example in 2 Samuel 6:19. However the use of the specific terminology of *mishloach manot* is used in the Bible only in Esther and Nehemiah. The fact that both of these works take place in the Persian era may well indicate that this practice was a standard method of celebration in the Persian milieu.

Thus it is not surprising that many have identified this practice, and even the holiday of Purim in general, with Persian celebrations. A number of different holidays have been suggested,<sup>3</sup> most prominently Nowruz, the Persian New Year festival, which takes place at the vernal equinox,<sup>4</sup> a time when it was customary to send portions of sweet foods to others.<sup>5</sup> This Persian holiday can be connected to both biblical *mishloach manot* occasions. Since it is a Persian New Year celebration it can be connected to the celebration of the New Year in Nehemiah; and in terms of when it is celebrated, it falls out around the time of Purim. This connection is even brought in a note in the traditional *Da'at Mikra* commentary.<sup>6</sup>

However, just because they have certain practices in common there is no need to suppose that Purim is a Jewish version of a Persian holiday. From Nehemiah we see that *mishloach manot* was considered a standard component of holiday celebrations in Persian times, and not exclusively associated with the celebration of Purim. Thus, when explaining to the Jewish people that the first day of the seventh month is to be treated as a festive day, it is reasonable that a description of these festivities would include elements that people living in a Persian milieu would associate with an expression of joy. So too with Purim. Since it was established as a festival in the Persian era, the festivities are described in a manner acceptable and reasonable for that time and place. It was not that it was a celebration based on a Persian holiday; it is a Jewish holiday that used local contemporary expressions of joy and festivity.<sup>7</sup>

This is not the only example of this phenomenon; another example can be brought from Purim itself. TB *Sanhedrin* 64b records an unusual Purim custom while describing the idolatrous Molech worship, which involved children passing through fire. There are two opinions as to how exactly Molech worship was performed, what did the "passing through fire" entail? "Abaye said: There was a loose pile of bricks in the middle, and fire on either side of it.

Rava said: It was like the leaping about on Purim." Rashi explains that according to Rava, a pit was dug and a bonfire was lit inside, and children leaped over it. Apparently this was something that Jews did, irrespective of Molech worship, on Purim. The practice is described in greater detail in the 11th century work, the *Aruch*. "It is a custom all over the world that lads make a dummy of Haman and hang it from their roofs for four or five days. On Purim they make a bonfire and throw the dummy into it and they stand around and sing. And they have a ring hanging in the fire and they hang on it and jump from one side of the fire to the other."<sup>8</sup>

This unusual custom recalls the Chahar Shanbeh Suri, the Wednesday before Nowruz, where children jump over bonfires to ensure a lucky new year.<sup>9</sup> This practice takes place a little before the vernal equinox and was something Jews living in Persia would have seen happening amongst their neighbors close to Purim. Although children jumping over bonfires seems to the modern mind to be an unusual and inappropriate way to mark a festive occasion, for Jews living in Persia, this was a culturally appropriate way to express holiday joy. It is not that Jews were celebrating Purim as a Judaized Chahar Shanbeh Suri, rather they incorporated into Purim a local way of expressing holiday happiness.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, as Jews would live among other cultures and in different times, local conceptions of holiday joy would shift and change. However, the rule to celebrate Purim by sending *mishloach manot*, as required in Esther 9:22 and codified by the Sages, would continue to be observed. Taken out of its original Persian context where this was a standard holiday practice, it would become more ritualized and associated with the holiday of Purim only, so that the *mishloach manot* mentioned in Nehemiah 8 would seem strange, as they are connected to an entirely different holiday there.<sup>11</sup> Yet both of these *mishloach manot* originated the same way, as an expression of festivity that Jews living in a Persian world were very familiar with.

#### NOTES

1. Alter Hilevitz, *Hikkrei Zmanim – vol. 1* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976), pp. 14-15. See also R. Refael Kook, *Kehunat Refael* (Jerusalem: 2008), p. 147.

2. See David Henshke, *Festival Joy in Tannaitic Discourse* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007), p. 39, note 68.

3. A.W. Streane, *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges - Esther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), pp. 67-68; Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary – Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. xlvi; Dan Shapira, "Judaean-Persian Translations of Old Persian Lexica: A Case of Linguistic Discontinuity" in Ludwig Paul, ed., *Persian Origins – Early Judaeo-Persian and the Emergence of New Persian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), p. 231.
4. Carey Moore, *The Anchor Bible – Esther* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Compny, 1971), p. xlvi; Lewis Patton, ed., *The International Critical Commentary – The Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), p. 85.
5. Abraham Yahuda, *Ever va-Arev* (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1946), p. 91.
6. Mordechai Zer-Kavod., *Da'at Mikra – Ezra Nechemiah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 106, note 13\*. The reference given there is to Abraham Yahuda, *Ever va-Arev*.
7. Abraham Yahuda, *Ever va-Arev* (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1946), p. 91.
8. Natan ben Yechiel, *Sefer ha-Aruch* (Tel Aviv), p. 551. Note that the lads jumped over the bonfire using the ring, they did not just wave the ring back and forth over the fire as found in Israel Abrahams, *The Book of Delight and Other Papers* (Philadelphia: 1912), p. 266 and J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough – vol. 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 393. The Aramaic term for this is *mashvarta d'Puriah*, *shavar* means "to jump".
9. William Crump, *Encyclopedia of New Year's Holidays Worldwide* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2008), p. 120.
10. See Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael – vol. 1* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), pp. 16-18 for other possible origins of the custom to jump over a bonfire on festival occasions, all based on external cultural influences.
11. See David Henshke, *Festival Joy in Tannaitic Discourse* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007), pp. 37-40. Note that R. Hezekiah da Silva, the *Pri Chadash* (1659-1698) states that he would in fact send mishloach manot to poor people before Rosh Hashanah based on the verses in Nechemiah, Orach Chayyim 581:4. For a discussion of the possible halachic obligation to give mishloach manot on Rosh Hashanah, see Shemtob Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tov – vol. 6* (London: Shraga, 1955), p. 60; Yosef Cohen, *Sefer Va-yeshev Yosef* printed in *Be-kaneh Echad – vol. 3* (Ashdod: 2016), p. 248, siman 38.