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## Adar IV

### **Jews in the Persian State—an Experience of Timeless Value** **ויהי and היה: Perfection Through Suffering**

ר' תנחומא בשם ר' חייא רבה וכו'. זה המדרש עלה בידינו מהגולה כל מקום שנאמר ויהי בימי צרה וכו' אתא ר' שמואל בר נחמן ועבר פלגא בכל מקום שנאמר ויהי משמש צדה, והיה שמחה (ב"ד מ"ב)

R. Tanchuma said in the name of R. Chiya Rabba. . . . This interpretation has come down to us from the Diaspora. Each time Scripture uses the future form ויהי בימי to report a historical happening, it indicates a sad event. R. Samuel bar Nachman disagreed: Each time Scripture uses the future form ויהי, it indicates a sad event, but when it uses the past form היה in connection with a future happening, it indicates a joyous event.

When our forefathers returned from the Babylonian exile they illustrated their experiences with this linguistic commentary: Wherever Scripture introduces the description of an event from past history with the future verb form ויהי, particularly with ויהי בימי, the connotation is one of suffering. Conversely, when the past verb form היה is used to introduce an occurrence that is still in the future, the implication is one of rejoicing.

ויהי: What is the connotation of ויהי? It refers to an event of the past seen from the perspective of the future. What is the connotation of היה? It refers to an event that still lies in the future, as envisioned from the perspective of the past.

ויהי defines a past event not as something past, but takes us back to the time when that which is now past still lay in the future, when that which already happened was yet to happen. It views the past as part of the future; it does not mean, "it came to pass," but "it became; it was in the process of becoming."

היה, conversely, defines an event which has yet to take place, as one which has already come to pass. It takes us into the future, when the

events will already have been completed, when it will no longer be in the process of coming to be but will already have come to pass. It views the future in terms of its completion. It does not mean, "it will be," or "it will come to pass," but "it will then have come to pass." It views the future as a product and result of the past.

If an event connected with the past, especially an historical event, is introduced with the verb form *ויהי בימי*, particularly with *ויהי*; if, in other words, a happening that has already come to pass is defined by the future form in terms of its growth and development, the connotation is one of pain and distress. All growth, all development, is painful. No matter how much joy and happiness may result from this development once it has been completed, no matter how greatly we may eventually rejoice in the blessing which comes to us as a result of this development, it was all *ויהי*; its origin, its growth involved pain. Even the most wonderful creation is born of trials and sorrows, amidst pain and anxiety. Every transition or change entails pain. For in every change for the better, old ties must be broken so that new ties may be formed. Everything to which we have become accustomed is pleasant, but everything new is alien.

And how does all this apply to history, particularly the history of the Jewish people? Israel has never received even one true, lasting blessing without undergoing a time of trial and tribulation. Beginning with the first centuries of slavery in Egypt, that dark night which gave birth to Israel's first period of independence, until the most recent centuries of exile from which Israel's final deliverance will yet emerge, Israel must always pass through a wilderness before it can arrive at Sinai and the Promised Land. Israel's path to life has always led through death, and its path to new dawns has always led through long, dark nights. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: *שלוש מתנות נתן הקב"ה לישראל וכלם לא נחננו אלא על ידי יסורים (ברכות ה')* "God gave to the people of Israel three gifts, and He gave them each one only through suffering." These gifts are: *תורה*, *עולם הבא*, and *ארץ ישראל*.

Of the Torah it is written: "Fortunate he whom You chasten in order to teach him Your Torah." Of *ארץ ישראל* it is written: "For even as a father chastens his son to educate him, so does your God chasten you," and immediately: "For your God will bring you into a good land." Of *עולם הבא* it is written: "The Law is a lamp and the Teaching a light, but the path of life is made of *מוסר*, instruction through chastisement."

This should be quite clear. The more precious the blessing we are to receive, the brighter the future toward which God wishes to lead us, and the sharper the contrast between the future and our present condition. We will have to modify all those facets of our lives that are incompatible with the future promised to us.

God desired to give the Torah to Israel, and God still seeks, to this very day, to make that Torah the invaluable possession of each and every one of us. However, the Torah is not a mere credo to be satisfied with a few philosophical concepts and declarations of faith. It is also not just a "religious" accessory to our lives to occupy a few short festive hours or days. Torah is the law for all of life; it seeks to embrace man in his entirety. It lays claim to all his inclinations, needs, sensations, and emotions, to all his thoughts and words, his pleasures and his actions at every moment of his life. It seeks to place the development of all these aspects of human life on an entirely new basis. The principle of Torah that establishes the will of God as the standard regulates every phase of our lives and is sharply at variance with all other principles of worldly wisdom and ethics. It follows that the true recognition of this Teaching of God presupposes a series of experiences that would remove the blindfold from our eyes, make us realize the error of our previous misconceptions and make us aware of the Divine presence in the world and within our own selves.

Only such experiences can teach man the truths of Torah. But any experience piercing the veil that clouds our vision and that cuts through existing ties and bonds must bring pain. Thus, the path to the recognition of Torah is fraught with pain and suffering. Fortunate he whom God "chastens" in order to teach him the precepts of His Torah.

God wished to grant to Israel a land of its own, a physical and material frame within which to carry out the Divine law of life. This land was to be Eretz Yisrael, the land whose flowering and prosperity would depend not only on the dew and sunshine from heaven and on the waters below, not only on the skills and diligence of its inhabitants and on their efficiency in utilizing its resources, but on the morality and sanctification of its inhabitants and their loyalty to the Law. Israel was to receive Eretz Yisrael so that the glorious flowering of the land would demonstrate to all mankind the one truth with which Divine revelation begins and ends: that עיקר שכינה בחתומים, the glory of God seeks to dwell not only in heaven above but particularly here below.

The presence of the Shechina will manifest itself in the prosperity of all human enterprises provided that the sole aim is the fulfillment of God's will.

Thus, the prosperity of the land is not unconditional: "When you eat and are satisfied you shall bless the Lord your God" (Deut. 8,10). Abundance must not become your idol and your life's purpose, but should only be and remain your means for serving your God in peace. You are to seek and find your happiness in the devotion of your whole self to His service, so that wealth should not overwhelm you, that you should not succumb to *ישמך ישראל ויבצע* (Deut. 32,15) and that your heart should not "become proud" (Deut. 8,14) and you would "say in your heart: My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth" (v. 17): *כחי ועצמי די עשה לי אה החיל הזה*.

There cannot be another path to the Promised Land than through the wilderness, where we will learn, amidst hunger and thirst, amidst want and privation, that we are upheld solely by the eagle's wings and Divine support, and that "man does not live by bread alone but can live by anything that is decreed by the mouth of God" (Deut. 8, 3). To lead us into the good land God would first have to "chastise" us even as a father would need to train his child by chastising him.

Knowledge of the Law alone is not enough to gain Paradise in the world to come; if that Paradise is to be won and the earth is also to be transformed into a Paradise, this Law must be not only known but also observed. And there remains a very wide gap between the knowledge of the Law in theory and its observance in practice. True, the precept is a lamp and the Teaching is the light that shows us the way to *עולם הבא*, the way to Paradise on earth and Paradise beyond, the way to the Tree of Eternal Life. But upon this same path there is also the deceiving Tree of Knowledge; there is the serpent which tempts you: "Why do you need instructions from Above to teach you what is good and what is evil? Open your eyes and see what is good to eat and a delight for the eyes and the mind! All that is pleasant is good, and whatever is repugnant to your mind and to your senses is evil. Sensuality is Divine, and your discriminating intelligence was given you from Above!" And so, even though man may hold the lamp of God in his hands and the light of God may shine before his eyes, he might walk upon the path of sin and sell his Paradise on earth and in heaven for the fleeting pleasures of the moment—unless God's fatherly chastisement, in the form of pain and suffering, will be there to warn

him against the temptings of the serpent. Ultimately, in his struggle against his afflictions, his better self will rise again and will guide him back to the path that leads to the Tree of Life. Indeed, that is why God has placed the warning and ever-changing flaming sword of affliction (להט החרב המהפכת) alongside the cherubim of His Torah and mitzvot in order to guard for man the path to the Tree of Life (לשמר את דרך עץ החיים). Thus, even as the lamp of God's precept and the light of His Teaching show man the path which he should choose, the sufferings ordained for him by Divine Providence to test and to train him will guide him, cleansed and uplifted, so that he will indeed walk upon that path.

This is the noble meaning of suffering in the life of every man. Each one of us is like a world history in miniature reflecting the cleansing and chastening guidance of Divine Providence. For each and every one of us, every ירה, every gift that has come to him as a truly permanent gift was always the product of a past filled with trials and sorrows. Rarely have we been permitted to remain in possession of gifts that fell to us without pain and sacrifice, without trouble and toil, destined to prepare us to become worthy of that gift. But that which man has acquired through pain and sacrifice, for which he has risked his very life, can be compared to plants imbedded in soil that was thoroughly turned over before receiving the seed, and it will be inextricably bound up with every drop of his blood, every impulse of his nerves. It will be rooted deeply within man and become his most personal possession. And therefore that which the historical experience of our Sages taught our people is applicable to every individual: כל מצוה שנחנו ישראל נפשן עליה מתקיימת בידם "Every mitzvah for which the sons of Israel have risked their lives has attained permanence in their hands (וכל מצוה שלא נחנו נפשן עליה עדין מרופפת בידן (שבת ק"ל) "but any mitzvah for which they did not risk their lives is still not firmly in their hands."

But that which holds true for the individual Jew applies in full measure to Israel as a whole. All the splendid gifts that are to be Israel's inheritance on earth and in eternity have been granted to it only as a result of pain and suffering.

Hence, when the seventy years of the Babylonian Exile had come to an end and Israel, under the leadership of Ezra and Zerubbabel, returned to the land of its fathers to possess it again for a time, the past that lay behind them, the present that surrounded them and the future

that awaited them certainly entitled our forebears to teach their children: *כל מקום שנאמר יהי אינו אלא צרה* that whatever was given to them they had won only through suffering. Before Israel went into exile in Babylonia, it was a people that had leaned toward the idolatry practiced by the nations. But by the time Israel returned from Babylonia it had broken with idolatry forever and renewed its oath to God. That was the great fruit of exile, produced and ripened amidst great suffering.

However, the break with idolatry is only the beginning of Jewish existence. Judaism can reach perfection only through fulfillment of the whole of God's Law, which alone makes a Jew a Jew and Israel the messenger of the God-ordained salvation of all mankind.

If we were to summarize the entire history of the era of the Second Temple in terms of one single thought, we would surely view it as a preparatory period for the great migration through the ages that lay in store for Israel. In these wanderings, Israel would find itself among many nations of many different kinds, but the lives of none of these nations would be compatible with the ideals of Judaism. In the midst of these nations, Israel would have to preserve its unique individuality. Beneath the eye of its alien overlords, and in its relations with the subjects of these mighty rulers, Israel was expected to refuse to bow to the gods of the nations. It was to translate into consummate reality, to the greatest extent possible, the full abundance of God's Law, thus demonstrating, to the amazement of the rest of the world, the awesome sustaining power of this Law. It seems that the entire era of the Second Temple was intended to prepare the Jews to maintain such independence in the midst of a life that conflicted sharply with their ideals. The political independence that had been granted them at that time was limited from the outset. It was only an act of homage from Cyrus, King of Persia, to the God of Israel, a gesture which was splendid, to be sure, penetrating even the remotest future, but which Ezra from the very beginning interpreted in these words: *ועתה כמעט רגע היתה חננה מאת ה'*: "And now, for a moment, we were shown grace from our God, to leave us a remnant, to give us a stake in the place of His Sanctuary, to enlighten our eyes and to grant us some measure of independence in our bondage. For we are still bondsmen and even in our bondage we have not forsaken our God" (Ezra 9, 8-9). Tiny Judea confronted them all, one after the other, the powerful civilized empires that moved across the stage of world history in the course of those

centuries: the Persians, the Greeks, the Syrians, the Egyptians and the Romans. In most instances Judea was dependent on these nations, but there were times when it met them as their equal and their ally. Regardless of their relationship with these alien empires, the Jews were to learn to remain Jews even among strangers.

זוהו בימי אשורש This lesson, like every other lesson that Israel would have to learn, was a painful one.

בימי אשורש, during the early flowering of the Persian empire, which had smashed the power of Babylonia and dominated all the nations of the world, Israel came into close contact with the political life of this alien empire. Thus, Israel first became acquainted with the political and cultural forces that would henceforth shape its destinies. Israel, under alien dominion, was exposed to all the temptations of the splendor and the grandeur of an alien culture. But even amidst these alien influences, it was expected to remain aware of its own light and joy, of its own salvation and dignity, and to seek and find its light only in its Torah, its joy in its service of God, its salvation in the covenant of Abraham and its honor in the covenant that bound it to the Law of God.

The Babylonian exile cannot be compared with Israel's bondage in Egypt. The prophet Jeremiah had explicitly instructed his people to settle down in the land of their exile, to take root in the life of its cities and its countryside and to promote faithfully the welfare of their new adopted home. "Build houses and dwell in them, and plant gardens and eat the fruit of them. . . . And seek the peace of the city to which I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it, for in its peace shall you have peace." (Jeremiah 29, 5-7) Moreover, it seems that the new homeland, in its turn, graciously welcomed its new citizens who acted in accordance with the prophet's instructions. There seems to have been no thought of a Jew tax, of ghettos or of anti-Jewish laws. The highest offices in the land were open to the best of Jewish youth, and, in general, the Jews in the empire of Persia and Media enjoyed a status which we today would describe as full civil and political equality, or complete emancipation. It certainly is worthwhile to note that one can conceive of *galuth*, the God-ordained exile of the Jews, without anti-Jewish restrictions and oppression at least during a limited span of time.

When, after the fall of Babylonia, Darius of Media and Cyrus of Persia founded the world empire of Persia and Media, Cyrus paid



tribute to the God of Israel by allowing the rebuilding of His Temple and permitting His people to return to their homeland. The Jews fared so well in the Persian-Medean empire that only a small part of the Jewish people availed themselves of the opportunity to return. Apparently, they were unwilling to sacrifice a comfortable life for the toil and trouble of rebuilding the Jewish State and the Jewish Temple.

“In the days of Ahasuerus,” when the far-flung monarchy of Persia and Media began its peaceful development, those Jews who remained in the territory of Persia and Media were to come to know the inner workings of this empire. They were to learn what they might expect if they entered and merged into the life of such an alien nation. All the people of the empire had access to the king’s court and this included the Jews. In fact, a Jewish woman became queen, a Jew became the king’s minister, and the Jews were given entrance into the inner circles of royal politics and court life.

The Book of Esther affords us some insight into the life of the Persian state. The elegance displayed at the royal banquets suggests no small degree of culture and refinement, and the state, with its complex hierarchy of officials, its provincial governments and its sophisticated, far-flung network of communications, appears to us a well-organized entity. No attempt was made to eliminate ethnic differences within the empire but rather, every province was most generously granted the right to preserve its own individuality and its own language. We refer particularly to the emphasis that was placed throughout the empire on “law and judgment” (Esther 1,13). By no means do we observe an absolute Oriental dictatorship. Rather, we see before us a political entity with its written “Common Law of the Persians and the Medes” and its judges and jurists, and its “chronicles and chroniclers who knew the times,” a state based on the rule of the law and well aware of its place in history.

Ahasuerus himself does not appear all that evil. He seems to have had a penchant for luxury, but then nations tend to fare better if their princes take pride in the development of royal pomp in an atmosphere of peace than if they aspire to the blood-soaked laurels of military glory. Ahasuerus likes to drink, but he never drinks alone. It does not merely please him to have all his princes and nobles dine with him but he is so gracious and affable—a quality not often found among rulers of his day—that he does not think he has done enough for “the people” if he and his companions feast at an open banquet and merely

permit the people to watch them dine. He invites all his subjects, or at least the entire population of his capital, to be his guests at the palace, where he entertains them with truly royal hospitality. And whenever he celebrates a joyous occasion in his personal household, he grants his people tax remissions and gives them royal gifts so that they may share his happiness. He is careful to observe the forms of law in whatever he does. He keeps near him at all times his experts on national history, the writers of the chronicles, those who know "law and judgment." His choice of a queen might indicate that he is free of all racial and social prejudice. He generously shows his gratitude for personal service rendered to him.

And yet, all this culture and refinement has one denominator: the craving for worldly delights. It is completely subservient to the objects of sensuality which are accorded the same serious thought as the most important affairs of state.

And what about the role of law and justice in the empire of Ahasuerus? The Megillah cites the written laws and the living interpreters of these laws. But these laws are little more than meaningless rules mainly enacted to serve the passions, feelings and moods of the king. With all its executors and interpreters, this "law and judgment" affords very little security to the people of Persia and Media. If a queen commits a breach of court etiquette, her case is heard by jurists and wise men who know historic precedent. But if an ordinary human being has incurred the displeasure of one of the king's favorites, it takes little effort to have the offender hanged. In fact, a simple decree signed and sealed in the name of the king is sufficient to permit the slaughter of an entire population, including women and children, "for political reasons."

And Ahasuerus himself, who seems to be rather good-natured, becomes a completely different man when he is aroused by anger and strong drink. Everything hinges on his mood and temper of the moment. If the queen wishes to plead with the king, in the name of justice and humanity, to spare the lives of thousands of innocent people, she must give a banquet and wait for a moment when the king is in a good mood before she may safely dare to state her request.

In reality, Ahasuerus himself has very little control over his empire. How little of the evil that is done in his name is really his work! This man who reigns over 127 provinces can be swayed easily by courtiers. Indeed, Ahasuerus himself is dominated by that very same all-

powerful favorite who rules in the king's name. Haman, casting lots in the name of the king to decide the life and death of the king's subjects, misuses his position of supreme power to satisfy his own base lust for revenge under the cover of protecting the welfare of the state.

All this time the heart of the man upon whom the nation's fate depends remains aloof from his subjects in unapproachable majesty. Whoever comes near to him without being summoned is condemned to death. No one may appear in the king's chambers dressed in the sackcloth of mourning; the sorrows of the world outside must not enter the rooms of the royal palace. "The king and Haman sat down to drink while the city of Shushan was thrown into confusion" (Esther 3,15). And though any order written and sealed in the name of the king is irrevocable, so that not even the king can change a decree once issued in his name, he nonchalantly allows others to write and to seal in his name documents which he has never seen.

Haman has nothing but contempt for the king who has elevated him. He considers this king incapable and corruptible. He delivers to the king a most statesmanlike lecture about the pernicious character of a people on which he wants to take his personal revenge, and he explains to the king how the welfare of the state requires that this people be annihilated. Haman knows only too well how little the welfare of the state matters to the king. His speech is only a pretext for his cruel revenge on Mordechai and his compatriots. To lend emphasis to his sinister plan, Haman has the effrontery to offer the king a generous donation of 10,000 pieces of silver for the royal treasure. True, Ahasuerus proves to be more of a king than Haman expected and refuses the bribe. Instead, he gives him the Jews to do with as he pleases. But the mere fact that Haman made such an offer, and that he expected him to accept it, is a most shocking aspect of this monstrous story. That is the reason why Mordechai, in his message to Esther, makes a point of stressing this offer (Esther 4,7), even though the king never accepted it.

The Jews were taught an unforgettable lesson by the events of Purim. Indeed they basked in the royal splendor, they tasted its delights, they took pleasure in the honors it had to bestow and blossomed in the sunshine of its goodwill. But they also experienced the full impact of the misery that lies in store for them wherever the weal and woe of men depend on the pleasure or displeasure, the moods and the whims of the ruler.

However, at the same time, the Jews came to know the unchanging faithfulness of the King in Heaven that protects them. They came to know the one sole path in which they would have to walk through the centuries amidst the misery of exile. They learned to rejoice with redoubled fervor in the light of their own truths, their own festivals, their own joys and honors; they learned to resolve to remain Jews, and nothing but Jews, before the nations and princes of the world, to seek and find their light in their Torah, their joy in their festivals, and their ultimate satisfaction in the covenant that bound them to the Law of God.

Much suffering lay in store for them over the centuries that were to follow. The story of Ahasuerus and Haman was to repeat itself a thousand times in their history. But *ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר* (Esther 8,16), even in the darkest periods of their history the Jews preserved for themselves their own light and joy, their own salvation and honor. And this could come to pass only because, as history, unfolding before our eyes from year to year, tells us: They learned this lesson from the days of Ahasuerus—*יהי בימי אחשורש*.