

# From the teachings of Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

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## PURIM THE REVERSAL

### 1. Introduction

One of the 13 principles by which the Torah is analyzed is “equivalent text” (גְּזֵרָה שְׂוָה). The idea behind this principle is that whenever a word or phrase appears in two separate passages in the Torah, given particular conditions, the meaning and laws pertaining to that word or phrase found in one passage may be applicable to the same word or phrase in the other passage.

When searching for interesting mathematical phenomena in the Torah, equivalent texts are a good marker for focusing our attention. They stand out, and as the longer the marker, the greater the length of the equivalent text, the more it warrants our attention.

### 2. A marker in the Book of Esther

One such equivalent text can be found in the Book of Esther. There we find the following two verses:<sup>1</sup>

“And in every province, wherever the king’s edict and his decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.” (4:3)

“And in every province, and in every city, wherever the king’s edict and his decree arrived, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a holiday; and, many of the people of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.” (8:17)

Both these phrases contain the same six word phrase, “wherever the king’s edict and his decree arrived” (מְקוֹם (אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיְדַתּוּ מִגִּיעַ

One of the cantillation marks, the *etnachta* (ֿ), acts like a comma in every verse it appears in thus providing a first level division of the verse into two parts. In both these verses, the text contained between the marker text and the *etnachta* contains exactly 6 words and 27 letters, another important structural similarity between the verses. These two contained texts are:

“...there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing...” (אָבֵל גָּדוֹל לַיהוּדִים וְצוּם וּבְכִי וּמְסַפֵּד)

“...the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a holiday...” (שִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן לַיהוּדִים מִשְׂתָּה וַיּוֹם טוֹב)

Note that these two texts are diametrical opposites of one another. This is one of the strongest illustrations of the complete reversal of the Jewish people’s fate so central to the Book of Esther and to the holiday of Purim.

### 3. Reversal of fate and the first commandment

What brought about this reversal of fortune? The answer is alluded to in the values of the two contained texts. The value of the first contained text is 551. The value of the second is 1944. Their sum is 2495, also the value of the first of the Ten Commandments, “I am Havayah your God who has taken you out of the Land of Egypt, from a house of slavery” (אֲנִי יְיָ הוּא אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים אָבֵל גָּדוֹל לַיהוּדִים וְצוּם וּבְכִי וּמְסַפֵּד שִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן לַיהוּדִים מִשְׂתָּה וַיּוֹם טוֹב = טוב

אֲנִי יְיָ הוּא אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים

Clearly, the point being made is that because of the Jewish people’s absolute faith in God as the redeemer from Egypt, they merited to be saved in this case as well.

### 4. Figurate text

Now, note that the marker text together with the contained text, in both verses, comprises 49 letters. We are therefore motivated to draw both texts in a 7 by 7 square configuration, like so,

מ	ק	ו	ס	א	ש	ך
ד	ב	ר	ה	מ	ל	ך
ו	ד	ת	ו	מ	ג	י
ע	א	ב	ל	ג	ד	ו
ל	ל	י	ה	ו	ד	י
ס	ו	צ	ו	ס	ו	ב
כ	י	ו	מ	ס	פ	ד

and,

מ	ק	ו	ס	א	ש	ך
ד	ב	ר	ה	מ	ל	ך
ו	ד	ת	ו	מ	ג	י
ע	ש	מ	ח	ה	ו	ש
ש	ו	ן	ל	י	ה	ו
ד	י	ס	מ	ש	ת	ה
ו	י	ו	ס	ט	ו	ב

Let us highlight the four corners of the first square,

מ ק ו ס א ש ר  
 ד ב ר ה מ ל כ  
 ו ד ת ו מ ג י  
 ע א ב ל ג ד ו  
 ל ל י ה ו ד י  
 ס ו צ ו ס ו ב  
 ד י ו מ ס פ ד

The sum of the corner letters, מ, ר, ב, ד, is 264.  
 Doing the same for the second square,

מ ק ו ס א ש ר  
 ד ב ר ה מ ל כ  
 ו ד ת ו מ ג י  
 ע ש מ ח ה ו ש  
 ש ו ן ל י ה ו  
 ד י ס מ ש ת ה  
 ו י ו ס ט ו ב

We find that its corner letters, מ, ר, ב, ו, total 248.

The total value of all 8 corners is therefore 512 or  $2^9$ . The significance of this is that 512 is the value of the idiom, “carrying of opposites” (נְשִׂאת הַכִּבִּים), the quality of the Almighty that allows Him to peacefully contain two opposing forces or objects. “Opposites,” in Hebrew also stems from the same root as the word “reversal” (וּנְהִירוֹתָהּ). Thus, it is clear that these corner letters allude to the power of God to “carry opposites” and thus to create the reversal of fate so prominent in the story of Purim.<sup>2</sup>

If we add the central letters of the two squares, ל and ח, respectively, then the corners plus the centers equal 550. Since there are 10 letters that comprise this sum, the average value of each letter is 55, which alludes to the word “everything” (הַכֹּל) and to God’s final assessment of creation on the sixth day, “And everything is very good” (הַכֹּל טוֹב מְאֹד). Not only is everything destined to turn out for the best, but the power of God’s carrying opposites ensures that at every moment along the way it is possible to transform something that seems negative into something good. This is the secret of *teshuvah* (return to God), which has the power to transform a transgression into a merit.

Moreover, 550 is the value of two concepts, the first Kabbalistic, the second Chassidic, both of which harbor the essential power of transformation, “great mercy” (רַחֲמִים רַבִּים) and “sweetening” (הַמְתָּקָה)!

## 5. The Shema

Now, let us focus on the marker text. The value of these six words, “wherever the king’s edict and his decree arrived” (מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ מֵנִיעַ) is 559. Since the marker text appears twice, its total value is therefore  $2 \cdot 559 = 1118$ . But, 1118 is the value of the essential statement of Jewish faith, the *Shema*: “Hear o’ Israel, *Havayah* is our God, *Havayah* is one”<sup>3</sup> (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָהוָה אֶחָד).

So, again we have that the great faith in the oneness of God—the most important trait of Mordechai and Esther’s generation—led to the reversal of fate that is the recurring motif of Purim.

These two verses, the first of the Ten Commandments and the *Shema* are the foundation and cornerstone of the entire Torah.

## 6. Literal interpretation

Looking at the words preceding the marker text we find another hint to the reasons for their reversal. In the first words, the edicts arrived in “every province,” while the second verse mentions “every province and every city.” The word for “province” in Hebrew (מְדִינָה) is cognate for the word for judgment, indicating that in the first verse there was only judgment governing the Jewish people. As the sages say, “Why were the Jews of that generation tried to be destroyed? Because they partook of that evil one’s meal (i.e., *Achashverosh*).”

But, the word for “city” in Hebrew (עִיר) is cognate with the Hebrew word meaning “awakening,” or “excitement.” The second verse includes a particularization (there are many individual cities in a province), and implies that the awakening (to do *teshuvah*) reached every individual. When the generation is willing to listen to its *tzadik*, its true leader (and in that generation the *tzadik* was Mordechai) then their awakening at the individual level fosters a reversal of fortune.

Notes: 1. Note that the sum of these two verses is  $9616 = 8 \cdot 1202$ , or 8 times the value of the first three words of the Torah, “In the beginning, God created” (בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים). 1202 is also the value of “Torah, Prophets, Writings” (תּוֹרָה נְבִיאִים כְּתוּבִים), the three parts of the Bible. Exodus 21:9. 2. 512 is also the value of the idiom, “I am who I am” (אֲנִי מִי שְׂאֲנֹכִי). This idiom’s source is found when Isaac questioned Jacob, “Who are you my son?” Jacob, not wanting to lie, replied, “I am – your firstborn son Esau” (Genesis 27:18-19). The Ibn Ezra explains that the meaning of his response is “I am who I am; and, your firstborn son is Esau.” 3. Deuteronomy 6:4.

# Purim Same’ach