

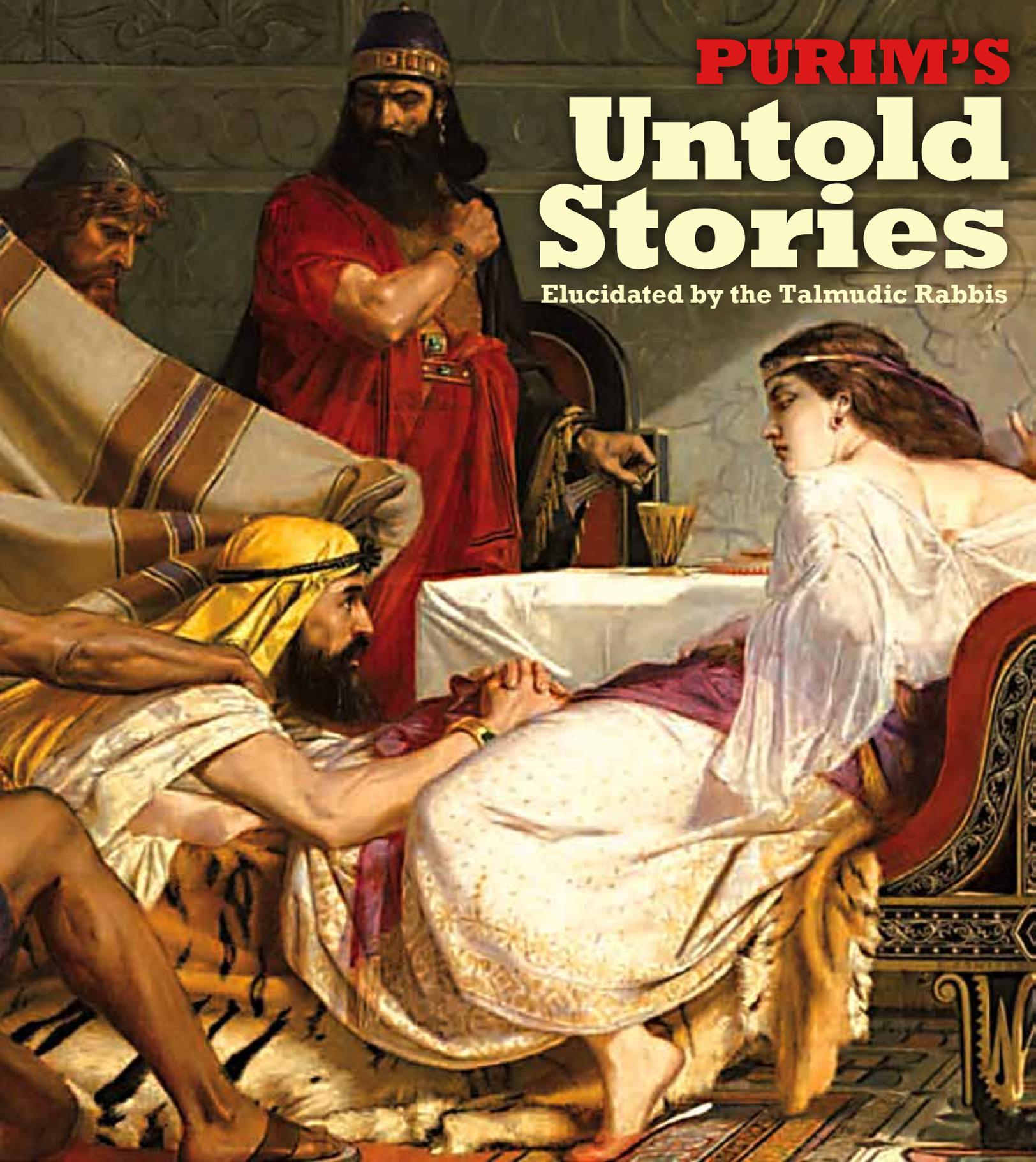
JewishTimes

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PURIM'S

Untold Stories

Elucidated by the Talmudic Rabbis

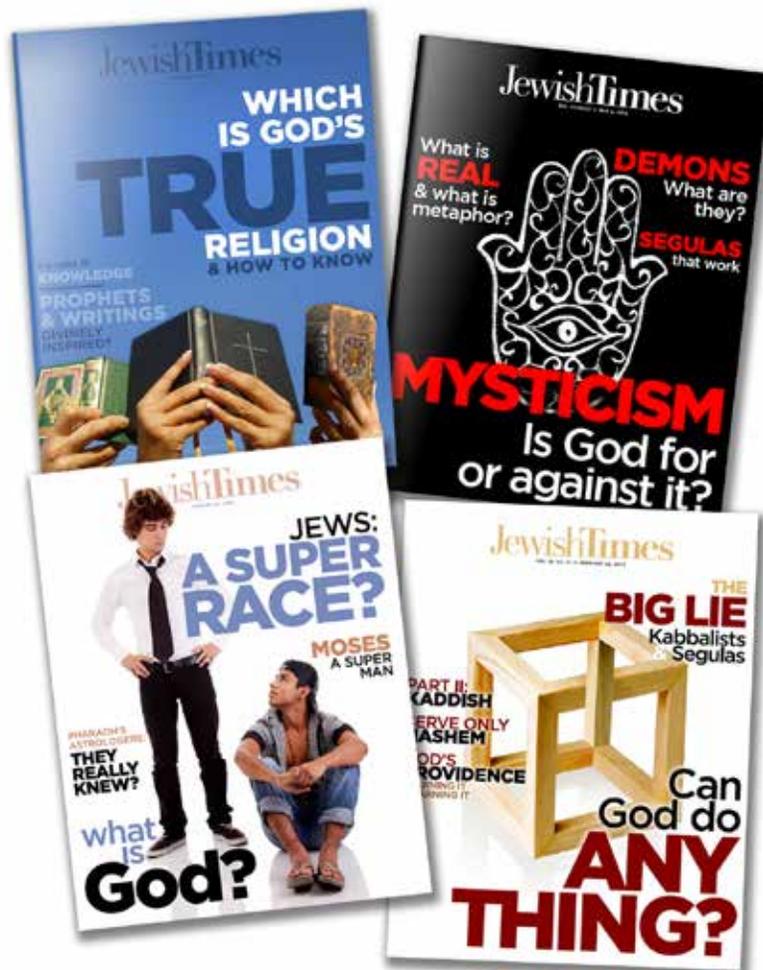


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LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

The Purim Letter (Megilla) will suffice for this issue!

NEXT ISSUE:

The Monsey Maggid questions how the heavens and Earth "sing God's praises."



PURIM

Human Initiative & Divine Providence

THE MEGILLA

Rabbi Reuven Mann

The holiday of Purim occupies a special place in Judaism. The Rabbis compare the miracle of deliverance from the destruction planned by Haman to the miracles at Mount Sinai. They say that the Jewish nation accepted the Torah under a certain amount of duress. To express this idea, they say that G-d held the mountain over the Jews like a dome, saying that if they accepted the Torah, all would be fine, but if they didn't, the mountain would be their burial place. However, the Rabbis conclude, in the days of Purim they reaccepted the Torah, and this time it was out of love.

On the surface, this matter is very strange. The miracles that took place at Sinai were much greater than those of Purim. In fact, there are no overt miracles in the book of Esther. What is so special about this episode that warranted such a revolutionary change in the people's attitude toward Judaism?

The decree to annihilate the Jews was triggered by a strange cause. Haman had been elevated to a position of supreme power, second only to King Achashveirosh. He issued a proclamation that all who came into his presence were obligated to bow down to him.

Everyone in the realm complied, except for Mordechai haYehudi (the Jew). When word of this insubordination reached Haman, he considered his course of action. He was not content to strike Mordechai alone, because he realized that Mordechai's

obstinacy derived from his Jewishness. Thus, Haman determined to solve this problem in a "global" fashion by destroying the Jewish people.

The question arises, why did Mordechai refuse to bow to Haman? Such an action would demonstrate respect to the authority of the land, something that Judaism takes very seriously. Indeed, when Mordechai discovered the plot of Bigsan and Seresh to assassinate the king, he loyally reported it, and the ruler's life was saved.

However, bowing to Haman was a different matter. Haman was a proponent of the ideology of Amalek. He believed in the deification of man as the highest power and thus denied Hashem. To bow to Haman would be an affirmation of this idolatrous notion. Mordechai's refusal was based on his absolute determination not to recognize Haman's blasphemous philosophy.

His actions placed the Jews in extreme danger, yet he did not recant. When Mordechai heard about the edict of annihilation, he donned sackcloth and ashes and screamed a "loud and bitter wail." He instructed Esther to violate protocol, even at the risk of her life, and make a dramatic appearance before the king to plead for her nation.

At first, Esther demurred, preferring to wait until an appointment could be secured. Mordechai insisted that, only by putting her life on the line, would she make an impact on the king. She then agreed and called on

the people to fast for 3 days to effectuate a teshuva (repentance) for the entire Jewish nation.

It seems that, after the fast, Esther emerged with an original strategy for dealing with the problem. Responding to the king's request to tell him what had motivated her dramatic appearance, she invited him and Haman to attend a party she was planning just for the two of them, at which she would reveal her heart's desire. However, at the party, she refused to divulge her request. She asked only that the king and Haman attend another celebration the next night, and then she would reveal what it was that she wanted.

Chapter 6 of the Megillah (scroll of Esther) describes the events that took place on the night of Esther's first party. The queen's dramatic action unleashed powerful emotions in both the king and his prime minister. Neither of them could sleep that night, but for two completely different reasons. Divine Providence was awake and active.

In the course of that miraculous night, the king discovered Haman's fatal flaw: he had failed to reward Mordechai for saving the king's life. Disturbed by the implications of Esther's invitation to Haman, his entire attitude toward the power-hungry minister underwent a complete change. He subjected Haman to the indignity of dressing Mordechai in royal garments and leading him through the streets, proclaiming, "This shall be done to the one whom the king wants to honor."

This was the worst day of Haman's life. It had started out with the great honor of being Esther's only guest at the party she threw for the king. It ended in a state of absolute degradation, as he suffered a cruel humiliation at the king's hands. Haman was now on the fast track to being hanged on the scaffold he had prepared for Mordechai.

The miracle of Purim was different from that of Sinai, where the people were passive as they witnessed the awesome might of Hashem. On Purim, Divine Providence manifested itself by bringing the bold, wise strategies of Esther and Mordechai to a successful conclusion. This inspired the people to appreciate the great wisdom of Torah and how it can be applied to all the challenges life offers.

In the Purim story, the Jews experienced the interface between human initiative and Divine Providence. By clinging to the ideals of Torah and implementing its wisdom, they experienced the "hand" of Hashem directing the success of their plans, and this renewed their acceptance and love of Torah.

Shabbat shalom. ■



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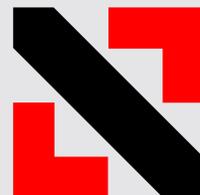
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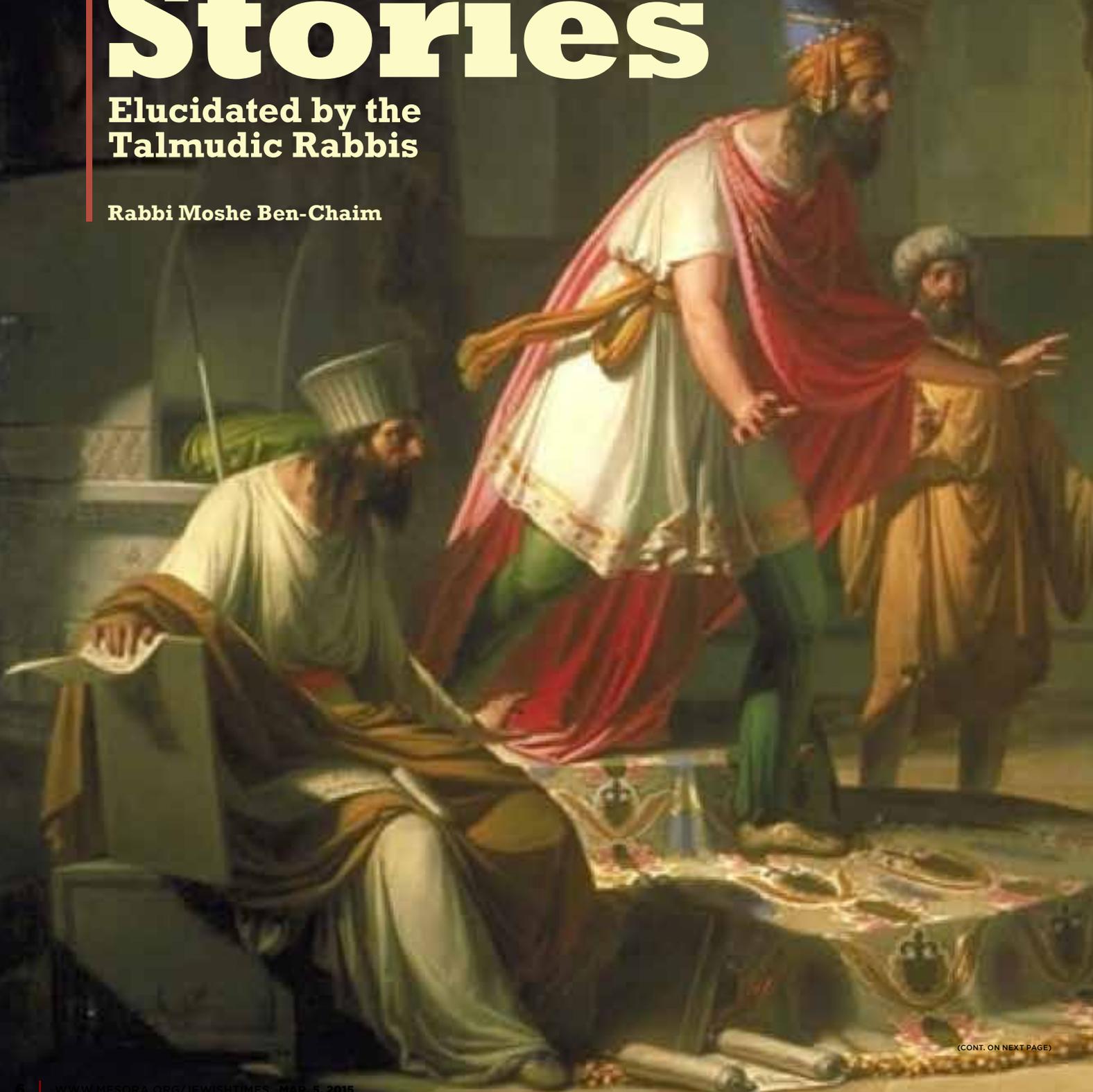
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PURIM'S

Untold Stories

**Elucidated by the
Talmudic Rabbis**

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim



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King Achashverosh ruled in Shushan, with his reign extending over 127 provinces. He created a lavish banquet lasting 180 days. Tapestries of white, turquoise and purple hung from pillars of marble. Variegated marble paved walking paths, lined with beds of gold and silver. The king decreed that wine should be older than the guest who imbibed it. For this ploy, I give credit to the king. I wondered why he wished this to be. Certainly, any ruler's position is in constant jeopardy: on the one hand, you must placate your viceroys and ministers to remain popular and in power. On the other hand, a leader's firm hand must be displayed. Aged wine was a solution: The king treated his guests with honor by providing wine older than themselves, a respectful drink, securing his popularity. But he also kept his officers humble. By implication the king said, "This wine was around long before you." Reminding one of a time when he was not yet around is quite humbling, and an affective maneuver to keep subjects in check.

The Celebration

The king was celebrating his faulty calculation that redemption would not occur for the Jews. His outright denial was seen in his use of the Temple's vessels for his haughty affair. Rabbi Yossi son of Chanina commented that the king dressed in the High Priest's clothing during this affair (Talmud Megilla, 12a). This was a further extension of his denial, as if to say that the institution of the High Priest was nonsense, and that King Achashverosh better deserved this clothing. It is understood that one leader – Achashverosh – would be jealous of another, the High Priest. (The Rabbis teach that one tradesman is always jealous of another in his field.) Thus, the king jealously denied any honor due to the High Priest by donning his garments. The Talmud teaches that the king was equally anti-Semitic as was Haman. For when Haman later offered to pay for a war against the Jews, the king told Haman to keep his money – the king covered the war's expense. But this very feast celebrating the lack of truth to the Jews' salvation is itself openly anti-Semitic.

Most people view Haman alone as the villain of the Purim story. However, we see clearly that the king was equally anti-Semitic. Keep this idea in mind, for it returns as a pivotal piece of information regarding another central character.

Exchanging Queens

During his feast, the king boasted that his Chaldean wife, Vashti, surpassed the beauty of other women. He demanded her to appear naked before him and other officials. She refused. Haman the wicked suggested she be killed for such an insult to the king, and this was so. An interesting metaphor is found in Talmud Megilla 12b explaining why Vashti refused, "Gabriel came and

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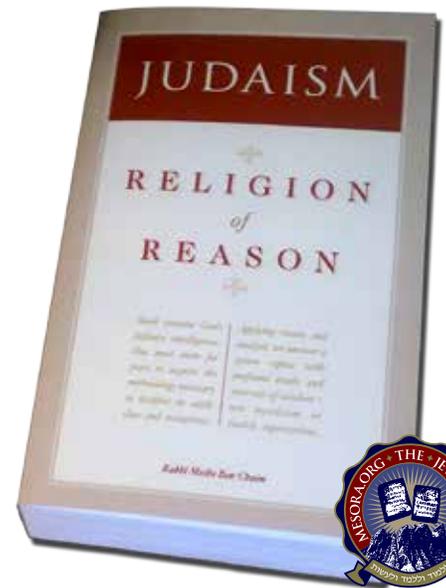
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attached a tail to her.” A psychologically healthy individual does not desire to face his instinctual side; nudity exposes a purely animalistic aspect of man. We learn that Queen Vashti tormented the Jewish women by forcing them to work in the nude. (The Talmud says Vashti received payment, measure for measure; she abused others with nudity, so she too was afflicted in this measure.) So we learn that Vashti was a friend to nudity. Why then did she refuse to come unclothed?

Vashti desired to expose herself when summoned by Achashverosh. But the Talmud states she didn’t, as “Gabriel came and attached a tail to her”. What does this mean? What is a “tail”? Why this organ? A tail is the one organ possessed by animals and not man. A tail is definitively “animal”, as opposed to any other organ. “Tail” symbolizes Vashti’s own instincts. Vashti was normally inclined towards sensuality and nudity, as seen by her nude labor of women. But Divine intervention strengthened her ego above her lusts in this one instance. Due to Divine intervention – Gabriel – Vashti did not wish to show her “tail”, admitting her animalistic side. We learn that Vashti’s ego – her dignity – won out this time, and did not surpass her lusts.

Man’s ego will normally sway his decisions more than his instinctual need for gratification. But Vashti’s self-image was less important to her, than was her desire to act lustfully. We understand Achashverosh’s selection of her as a marriage partner. These two people both enjoyed the life of sensuality. The last few words on Megilla 12a state, “He with large pumpkins, and she with small pumpkins.” Meaning, they both desired similar “currency”, i.e., immoral behavior.

The statement, “Gabriel came and attached a tail to her”, indicates that Vashti’s disappearance was essential to the Jews’ salvation. Otherwise, a Divine act of God sending Gabriel to intervene would not be required.

Salvation Already in Place

Along with killing Vashti, Haman advised that a letter be issued, stating that unlike Vashti’s opposition, a man is to be the ruler of his house. When received by the townspeople, they disregarded the king’s letter as they viewed it as foolish. The Talmud states that due to the absurdity of this first letter demanding domestic, male domination, the townspeople also disregarded the second letter calling for the destruction of the Jews: “Were it not for the first letter, not a remnant of the Jews would be left (Megilla 12b).” Rashi states that since the people dismissed the king as foolish based on the first letter, they did not attack the Jews until the day commanded. Had they never viewed the king as a fool, they would have preempted the verdict of annihilation, and killed the Jews sooner. We now realize something: the king’s second letter to annihilate the Jews was actually countered by his first letter.

This is consistent with the statement that God never intended to annihilate the Jews, only to scare them into repentance. That is, even before the second “deadly” letter, a prior letter conveying the king’s foolishness already set the groundwork to save the Jews. Thus, God’s salvation was part of the plan first, meaning, this salvation was primary. Only after the salvation was in place, did He allow the apparent threat to enter the stage.

After the death sentence of Vashti, a new queen was sought. This now paved the way for Esther to be placed in the palace as queen, which occurred soon afterwards. Later, after Esther’s appointment as queen, Mordechai overheard a discussion between two

men plotting the king’s assassination. They spoke in a foreign language, but as an advisor, Mordechai knew their language. Mordechai informed Esther to warn the king. The matter was investigated, and the would-be assassins were killed.

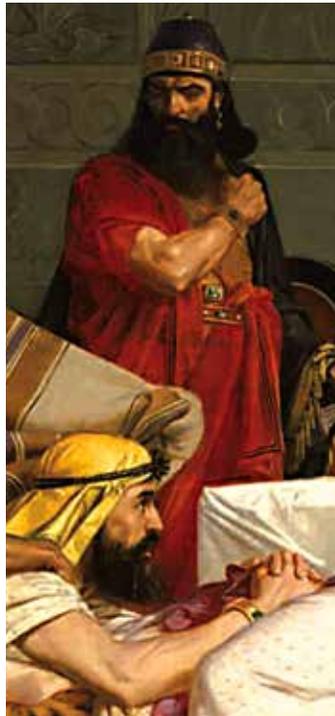
Haman’s Ego: His Downfall

Afterwards, Haman was elevated in position. He moved the king to agree to a decree that he be bowed to. When confronted with Haman’s decree to prostrate before him, all obeyed, all but Mordechai the pious. Haman was filled with rage at Mordechai for his violation. Haman conjured charges against Mordechai, then against the rabbis, and finally he planned to annihilate the Jews as a whole. Letters were sent throughout the kingdom to this effect. Mordechai responded by wearing sackcloth, mourning this fate, and praying for God’s salvation.

Mordechai’s Declaration

We learn that Mordechai joined the exiled Jews in Shushan of his own will – he was not forced to be there. This may explain his overt opposition to Haman. Mordechai’s refusal to prostrate to Haman was not only correct in its own right, but it also opposed the very flaw of the Jews. Mordechai made a public statement that bowing is idolatrous, as Haman made himself as an object of worship (Megilla 19a).

His refusal would awake the Jews to their flaw. It may very well be that Mordechai understood the flaw of that generation and therefore chose to move them to repentance with such an overt repudiation of idolatry.



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We find more on this topic in the Talmud. The students of Rabbi Shimone bar Yochai asked him why the Jews deserved extermination. It could not be due to their participation in the feast of that wicked man Achashverosh. For if this were the reason, we would find no just reason why Jews who did not attend were also subject to death. Rabbi Shimone bar Yochai concluded that the Jews deserved punishment because earlier, they had prostrated themselves before Nevuchadnetzar's idol. However, the Talmud concludes that as the Jews only prostrated out of fear, and not based on any conviction in the idol, God too was not going to truly exterminate the Jews, but He desired merely to instill fear in them (Megilla 12a). We thereby learn that it is a severe crime to recognize idolatry in this fashion, even outwardly. We also learn that Mordechai was correct to oppose idolatry, even though his act would result in such a threat.

Esther's Intervention

Haman succeeded at convincing the king to annihilate the Jews. Mordechai told Esther that she must intervene, using her position to save the Jews. She was reluctant at first, as one who approaches the king uninvited faces death. Mordechai told her that if she did not act, salvation would come from another direction, and her house would not be saved. Esther agreed, but devised a cunning plan, in addition to her request that all Jews fast with her.

The Talmud says that on Esther's approach to the king, she encountered a house of idolatry, at which moment, the Divine Presence removed from her. Why was this so? Why could the Divine Presence no longer accompany her? It is not as though God's presence is "there" with her. God has no relationship to the physical world, and therefore He does not exist in physical space. Why should Esther's proximity to a house of idols warrant God to remove His Shechina from her? Furthermore, if Esther deserved Divine Providence, and had no choice but to pass by this house of idols en route to the king, what fault is it

of hers? There are no grounds to suggest any fault of Esther. In fact, God's removal of His presence at this time is not a punishment. Maharsha suggests that Esther initially viewed Haman alone as the sole villain. She did not realize that the king was also against the Jews. Now, as she was approaching the king, passing the house of idols, God's Presence left. Perhaps God was teaching that the issue at hand is concerning idolatry, i.e., the sin of the Jews. That is why the Shechina – God's Presence – left at the precise point she neared the house of idols, and not because if any infringement an idol can impose on God's "whereabouts". God causes His Shechina to leave Esther, thereby teaching that His Shechina left the Jews for this reason, i.e., their approach to idolatry by bowing to Nevuchadnetzar's idol. God intended to alert Esther to information essential for her to calculate an intelligent plan.

As she was about to approach the king, if she was ignorant of crucial information concerning her enemies, she could not effectuate a salvation...thus, lesson number two: God intended to indicate that the Jews' enemies included another party – the king himself! Knowing this, Esther could now devise a plan, which would address all players. God wished that Esther be successful. The Talmud records

that when Esther ultimately raised her finger to point to the culprit, she pointed at the king, but God caused her finger to move towards Haman. Esther saw that the king was the ultimate enemy, but salvation could not arise if she accuses the only man who can save the Jews.

God assisted again to save the Jews.

We learn that as Esther approached the king, God indicated new information essential for her success: the removal of His Shechina was due to the Jews' idolatry, and their punishment was being directed by someone other than just Haman, i.e., the king. Now Esther was ready to devise a plan.

Esther enters to see the king, uncalled, risking her death. Rabbi Yochanan said three ministering angels were prepared for her at that moment: 1) her neck was lifted; 2) a thread of kindness was upon her, and 3) the king's scepter extended to her. Esther was in day three of her fast and praying, and was drained physically and emotionally. Either Esther transmitted these events, which transpired in the king's chambers, then they traveled down through the generations, or, the Rabbis concluded these events must have occurred. In either case, what do we learn?

By the mention of "ministering angels", we learn two things; 1) that God intervened, and 2) if He had not done so, disaster would strike. We learn that it was essential that Esther possess the physical strength to approach the king. Thus, her neck or head was lifted through Divine help so she might address the king. We may also add that it was essential that her composure was not lacking, as a king may not pay heed to one disheveled. One's head in a drooped state is not becoming, so the angels lifted her head high. Number two: It was essential that Esther find favor in the king's eyes, even though already his wife. It appears that her status as queen do not ensure the king's favor. His attention to his desires

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overshadowed his attention to Esther. Therefore, a renewed attraction was necessary at this point. Number three, when the king extended his scepter to be touched by those entering his chamber, Esther could not reach it, perhaps again out of weakness. So the angels assisted her here as well. God intervened in all three areas of need; Esther's composure, the king's feelings towards her, and politics, i.e., touching the scepter. Esther placed her life on the line, and God stepped in, sustaining Esther with a polished presentation before the king. We learn that the greatest plans still require God's assistance, and also, that God assists those who work in line with the Torah's philosophy, i.e., risking life to save the nation.

Esther's Plan

How did Esther orchestrate her plan? Esther invited the king and Haman to a private party. Once there, the king asked what her request was, and up to half the kingdom would be awarded to her. She responded by requesting that both the king and Haman attend yet another party. What was Esther doing? Why didn't she speak up now, informing the king that Haman planned to annihilate her people? A

Rabbi taught that Esther used her honed psychological knowledge to devise her plan. She felt, that had she directly accused Haman, the king's appointed officer, she would not necessarily meet with success; the salvation of the Jews. She planned to create suspicion in the king's mind, as the Talmud states. The king thought, "Perhaps Haman is invited to this private party of three, as Esther and Haman are plotting against me. Is there no one who loves me who would not be silent in this matter?" That night the king could not sleep, and for good reason: Esther successfully aroused the king's suspicion. The king called for the Book of Remembrance to be read, "Perhaps I have not properly rewarded those who love me, and they do not wish to inform me." It was found that Mordechai's previous favor of saving the king's life went unrewarded.

Divine Intervention

It was precisely at this moment, in the middle of the night, that Haman approached the king's courtyard. His approach in the middle of the night exposed his haste and desperation to hang Mordechai. The king just finished reading of Mordechai's kindness to him, and Haman wants to kill this loyal officer! Esther's plan

is seen to be taking effect. She successfully drove the king to ponder Haman's business. While in this state of suspecting Haman, God orchestrates Haman's arrival. Be mindful too, that Mordechai only made it into the Book of Remembrance, as he was "fortunate" enough to be passing by, precisely when the two assassins were discussing their plot. We begin to appreciate that these events are not coincidences, but God's hand at work. Since the king was still concerned if he never rewarded someone, and now learned that Mordechai went unpaid for saving his life, he ordered Haman to parade Mordechai around town on the king's horse in royal garb.

The underlying message here is that the king is no longer thrilled with Haman. He questioned Haman on how one deserving of the king's honor should be treated. Haman (thinking the king referred to him) exposed his desire for the crown – literally – by suggesting such an individual be paraded around on the king's horse in royal garb, wearing the king's crown. Hearing this, the king observed Haman as simply out for himself, and not truly loyal. However, "loyalty" was the very issue the king was bothered by, meaning, who did he not recognize, and could possibly be withholding

helpful information. This commanding of Haman to parade Mordechai through the streets is clearly the king's way of degrading Haman. Perhaps this is significance enough to make it into the Megilla, as it precipitates Haman's downfall. Here, the king first develops ill feelings towards Haman.

The Second Party

Now that the king was bent on suspecting Haman, now was the time to accuse Haman! The Talmud states one reason Esther invited Haman to the second party was she knew the king to be fickle. She wished to have the king kill Haman while he was in that mindset. She therefore invited Haman to be on hand if she was successful at exposing Haman.

At the second party, the king again questioned Esther of her request. She finally accuses Haman. The king is angry, and storms out of the party. According to the Talmud, metaphorically, he gazes at trees being plucked out of the kingdom by ministering angels. The king demanded, "What are you doing?" The angels responded, "Haman ordered us to do this." This metaphor means that the king interpreted his kingdom – the trees – to be falling into Haman's hands. The king returns to the party, only to see Haman fallen onto Esther's bed. (Haman had been pleading for his life; he got up, and then fell down on her bed.) To the king, Haman's close proximity to Esther, on her bed, was a display of Haman seeking the throne. The king responded, "Will you conquer the queen while I am yet in the house?" The Talmud again says that ministering angles were at work, this time, forcing Haman onto the queen's bed. How do we understand this metaphor of these angels?

It would appear that once Esther accused Haman, all the king had on his mind was the fear that all leaders have: a close supporter is really seeking the throne. Looking at "trees being plucked" means the king was now viewing his kingdom (trees) as being destroyed. The king began interpreting all events as Haman's usurping of his throne. Once the king was this suspicious of Haman, and then that suspicion was

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confirmed by Haman's desire to kill the loyal Mordechai, the king needed nothing else but his own paranoia to interpret matters against Haman. What would be conclusive? A clear demonstration. This was also afforded to the king in the form of Haman's position, falling onto the queen's bed! This too was generated by God's intervention, i.e., the angels. In both cases, "angels" refer to some force, physical or psychological, which influenced the king.

At this moment, Charvona, a Haman supporter, saw Haman's impending doom and switched sides from Haman to Mordechai. He was an opportunist, also out to save his neck. Charvona suggested hanging Haman on the very gallows built by Haman for Mordechai. Haman was hung, and Mordechai was elevated in status. The Jews were then victorious over their enemies, and Purim was instituted as a holiday for generations.

Reaccepting the Torah

The Jews arose and reaccepted the Torah out of a love, whereas Sinai was acceptance with some coercion. Seeing an undeniable revelation of God at Sinai, Torah acceptance carried with it some fear. However, when these Jews saw the brilliance demonstrated by Esther and Mordechai, and how God worked within

their plan to save the Jews, the Jews now appreciated the Torah with no coercion. They saw a prime example of how using wisdom is the one path to the proper life, and that God does in fact intervene when one operates in this manner.

It is interesting to note that the initial cause for the tragedy of Purim was Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman's idol. (Rashi and Ibn Ezra state Haman carried an idol.) This was the precise sin the Jews committed overtly that deserved this punishment. (Inwardly they did not commit idolatry) The very same institution – idolatry – acted as both the obligation for punishment (the Jews' prostration to idols) and the delivery of that punishment (Mordechai's refusal to bow enraged Haman to annihilate the Jews). Perhaps the identical nature of these two events displays God's hand in this matter.

In reviewing the personalities of the Megila, Haman taught us that self-aggrandizement is fatal. His initial intolerance that one, single person would not recognize him drove him to seek permission from the king to murder Mordechai, leading to his downfall. Mordechai taught us that certain principles are worth sacrificing for, and he therefore did not bow to idols or Haman. And Esther taught us that with wisdom, a well-devised plan

has the greatest hope of success, and God may intervene.

Omission of God's Name

One final question: What is the significance of God's name being omitted from the Megilla? We know God intervened, but behind the scenes. What demanded such a covert method of Divine intervention? In all other events, God's miracles are quite apparent; from the Ten Plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, to the sun and moon standing still, to the oil burning eight days on Channukah...miracles are purposefully and definitively apparent. Why not during the Purim story?

We already mentioned that the Jews arose and reaccepted the Torah again. This is based on Esther 9:27. This acceptance was bereft of any Sinai coercion. They truly appreciated the Torah system. Since Sinai was apparently lacking this unbiased devotion, perhaps God's purposeful covert methods during Purim were designed to allow such an appreciation to surface. The very words included in the Megilla that the Jews reaccepted the Torah are significant – they teach that this was essential. Therefore, we can suggest that to enable the Jews this opportunity, God minimized His presence, which allowed the Jews to focus

love of the Torah system and wisdom as exemplified by Mordechai and Esther, we drink more than our usual quantity to reach this blissful state of mind. Our drinking today enables that feeling when God rendered this great good upon us. We often hear the term "drunk with love". This shows that man does equate these two emotional states. Additionally, this Rabbi taught that to demonstrate our trust in God's salvation, we drink, so as to place ourselves in a vulnerable state. Our vulnerability when in a drunken state is our demonstration of our trust in God: we have no concern to be on guard, as our true trust is in God, not in our own devices.

So drink, not as an ends, but to experience a gladness which commemorates the Jews' gladness of old as they marveled at the great benefit of a true Torah existence. They were overwhelmingly impressed by Mordechai and Esther, who stood firmly by Torah values, and engaged reason and a cunning plan forged in line with nature and human psychology. A plan that earned God's intervention. An ingenious plan that worked. But without God, Mordechai and Esther would have failed. So drink to enjoy the abandonment of guarding yourself this one day, to demonstrate your conviction that it is God who determined the fate Mordechai, Esther and the Jews, and all humans who follow Him.

May our continued attachment to Torah and mitzvot bring us all to this state where we too arise and reaccept the Torah, not from coercion, but based on understanding, appreciation and love of God's acts. And the only way to obtain such appreciation is through study. This year, allow Purim to instill in you a renewed commitment to minimizing our attention to distractions, entertainments, and wealth, redirecting your time to the one involvement God desires we focus on over all else: Torah study. Unlike the empty values presented to us by society of chasing wealth and fame...Torah study will truly avail you to the most enjoyable life, the life outlined by God and the Rabbis. If the wisest of men followed this philosophy, they must know better.

A happy Purim to all. ■

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