

JewishTimes

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Talmudic
Insights on

PURIM

Hitler
Haman &
Achashverosh



LETTERS

THE AFTERLIFE

LETTERS

HOW MAN

WAS MADE IN

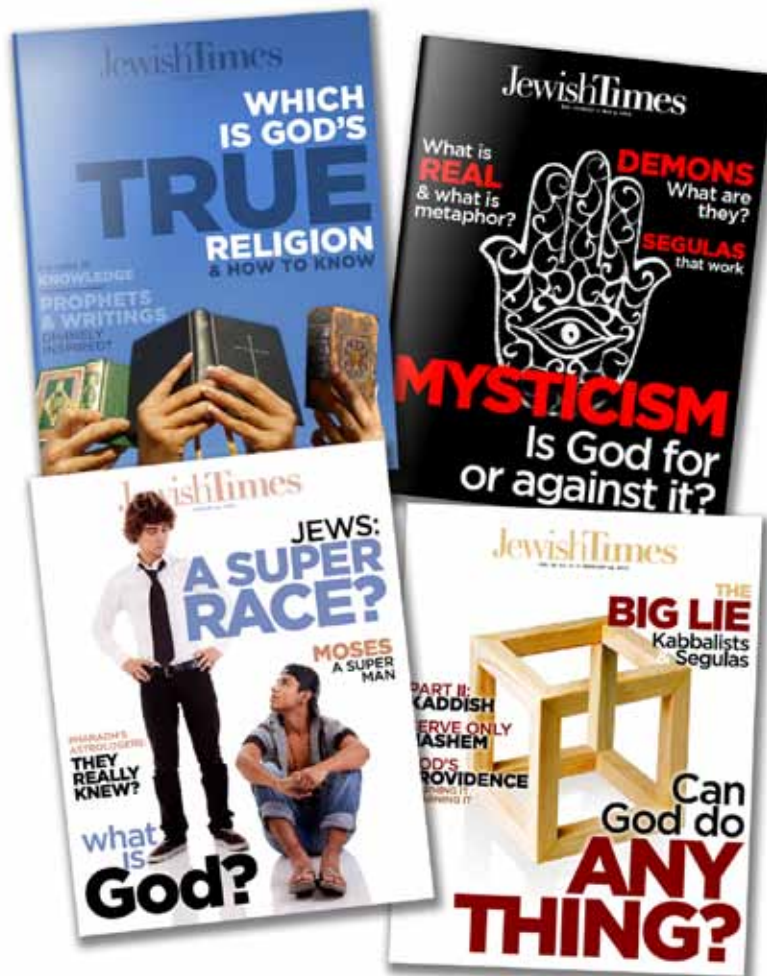
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LETTERS

"In God's Image"

Reader: What is the meaning behind the Torah's words, "...in the image of God He created him (Gen. 1:27)?"

Rabbi: "And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27)."

Many people have erred regarding this verse. Some baselessly assume part of God is within man. However, God, along with the greatest minds of Judaic thought, have already dispelled this notion. Ibn Ezra (Gen. 1:26): "Forbid,

forbid that man could be similar to God, as Isaiah says, 'To what shall you equate (40:25)?'. Therefore, this theory (there are parts of God) cannot be true, for this would equate God to creation, and God said nothing equates to Him. "In God's image" must mean something else...but it cannot mean man is like God, in anyway. In fact, God is unknowable, as He told Moses (Exod. 33:20).

In his "The 13 Foundations of Judaism" (foundation 2), Maimonides treated of the impossibility of God possessing parts, that a part of God might be in man. Division – the

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Talmudic Insights on PURIM

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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 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

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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 before him and other officials naked. 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 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 working of nude 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, and physical pleasures. 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 displayed, 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: Haman's second letter – his advice to annihilate

the Jews – was actually countered by his first letter. This is consistent with the previous 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 adviser, 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, and 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

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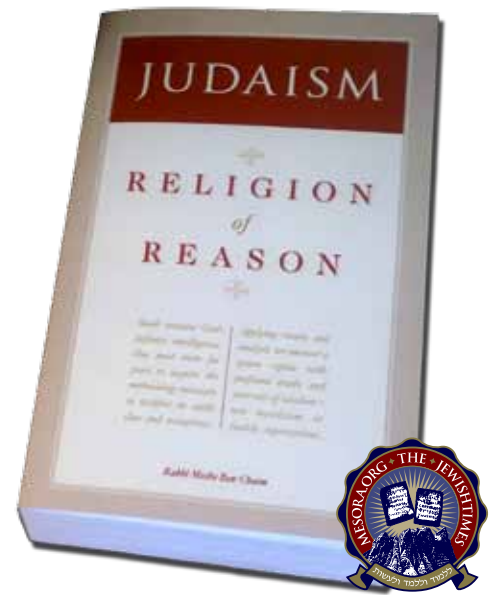
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REVIEWS



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RABBI STEVEN WEIL — Executive Vice President, The Orthodox Union

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim asks critical, crucial and defining questions that any thinking Jew needs to ask. His method enables the reader to explore and engage our theology in a meaningful and serious way. Following the Rishonim, he forces us to define, weigh and analyze each phrase of chazal, showing there is no contradiction between an investigation of Science and an investigation of Judaism. Rabbi Ben-Chaim has written a work that addresses the thinking person of all faiths. This work speaks to the scholar and lay person alike and will help you gain insight into how the great Rishonim define how we view the world. Rabbi Ben-Chaim's website, Mesora.org is a very serious tool and resource for thinking human beings who want to engage and explore the Almighty, the Almighty's universe and do so within the realm of wisdom, rationality and intellectual honesty.



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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.

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 communicated to 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 does He 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, number one; 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 bereft of crucial information about who are 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 factors at play. God wished that Esther be successful. The Talmud records that when Esther ultimately raised her finger to point to the culprit,

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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 to address him. We may also add that it was essential that her composure was not lacking, as a king may not pay heed to one who is 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 marriage rights do not reserve the king's attention. His attention to his desires 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 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, or salvation for 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 his life went without reward.

Divine Intervention

It was precisely at this moment, in the middle of the night, that Haman was in 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, just 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

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make it into the Megilla, as it precipitates Haman's downfall. Here, the king first develops ill feelings towards Haman.

The Second Party

Now 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, 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 angels 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 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 point, 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

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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 and coercion. 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 all know that this era was where 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 Sinaic 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 instead on Esther and Mordechai, admiring how their lives, guided by Torah wisdom, yielded remarkable results.

A Rabbi once taught: Drinking brings a man to a happy, uninhibited state of mind. Just as when in love, man is completely happy and exclusively bound up in that happiness, so too when he is drinking. In order to mimic the state of the Jews who were saved, who were euphoric in their 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.

So drink, not to engage in drinking, but to experience a gladness, which commemorates the Jews' gladness of old, marveling at the benefit of a true Torah existence. May our continued attachment to Torah and mitzvot bring us all to this state where we too arise and reaccept the Torah, not reminiscent of the coerced feelings we still carry from day school, but an acceptance based on understanding and appreciation. And the only way to obtain such appreciation is through study. Let Purim this year instill in us all a renewed commitment to minimizing our attention to distractions, entertainments, and wealth, redirecting our time to the one involvement God desires we focus on, over all else; Torah study and teaching. Unlike the false arguments presented to us by society in their 9-to-5 work ethic praising wealth and success over all else...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! ■

■ MEGILLAS ESTHER

Getting a Handle on Achashverosh

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg



Megillas Esther presents a stark contrast between good and evil, as represented by the Mordechai/Esther duo one side vs. Haman on the other. However, if we limit ourselves to the simple peshat, it would be difficult to get a handle on which category Achashverosh fit into. He agrees with Haman's plot to kill the Jewish people. Yet, when faced with Esther's accusation against Haman and subsequent pleas, rescinds his edict. Chazal, through the Torah She'beal Peh (the Oral Law) introduce various ideas to assist us in getting a better handle on this complex personality.

The Talmud's first introduction of Achashverosh discusses his unique name (as I will be providing the English translation, the "play on words" aspect will be lost):

"Ahasuerus: Rab said: He was [as his name implies], the brother of the head and the counterpart of the head — 'The brother of the head': the brother of Nebuchadnezzar the wicked who was called head, as it is written, Thou art the head of gold. 'The counterpart of the head': the one slew, the other sought to slay; the one laid waste, the other sought to lay waste, as it is written, And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. Samuel said that [as his name indicates], the face of Israel was blackened in his days like the sides of a pot. R. Johanan said that [his name indicates that] everyone who thought of him said 'alas for my head'. R. Hanina said, [it indicates that] all became poor in his days, as it says, And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute."

We see four distinct possibilities as to the "meaning" of his name. The first is a compare/contrast to Nebuchadnezzar. The second seems to indicate some lowering of the stature of the Jewish people. The third represents a derogatory attitude towards the king. And the final one is pretty self-evident.

As is the standard with this type of exposition, we must try and develop a deeper understanding of each of these different opinions. What specific idea is being conveyed with each? Why is it necessary to even mention these points? Furthermore, each explanation is fairly vague. What is the concept of Israel's face being blackened, or the derogatory thoughts of Achashverosh's subjects? Finally, and above all, we must use these different interpretations to piece together the puzzle of Achashverosh.

Following the order given to us by the Talmud, we first see Achashverosh compared and contrasted to Nebuchadnezzar. On the one hand, he seems to be his "brother", sharing some important feature with the hated enemy of the Jewish people. On the other, he seems not to have quite accomplished the feats, namely the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and killing and exile of the Jewish people, which Nebuchadnezzar achieved (Achashverosh put a stop to the re-building of the Beis Hamikdash). What message does this send to us about Achashverosh? The obvious trait shared between the two, creating the bond of "brotherhood", is the hatred of the Jew. However, the anti-Semite is not always categorized by someone like Nebuchadnezzar, who set out to destroy and annihilate. There are times when the hatred of the Jew is not a completely blind hatred. Instead, there is a conflict that exists. Yes, the ideology of the Jew is anathema to the anti-Semite. However, he sees the value of the Jew as well. He understands that the religion values chachma, and therefore produces great minds. Achashverosh was this very individual. He was tied to the same outlook as Nebuchadnezzar, but he was unable to carry out the final sentence. We see clear evidence of this with Mordechai's position within the kingdom (shades of Abarbanel and the King and Queen of Spain). He was an officer to the very king who detested the

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"I went to the Ravella for 3 years. It used to be the Ritz Carlton Lake Las Vegas. Very nice hotel! I've also have gone to Booky's program and he does a very nice job!"
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Jew. It is possible that knowing this trait was critical in understanding how Haman was able to convince Achashverosh to agree to wipe out the Jews. Haman recognized this conflict, and sought to portray the Jewish people as undermining the power of the king, among other arguments.

The next explanation is a bit more obscure. The Talmud emphasizes that the face of Israel was “blackened”, which clearly implies something negative. However, one can also see that Achashverosh did not force this upon the Jews – he did not “blacken” them. It is possible that this is giving us an insight into the type of society and value system Achashverosh brought to his kingdom during his reign. One of the byproducts of being in exile is our vulnerability to the surrounding society’s moral ethos. A corrupt society, where the world of the instinctual is glorified and the pursuit of the physical is the ideal, counters the foundations of Judaism. Our vulnerability allows many of these concepts to begin seeping into our philosophical outlook. We clearly see this with the Jews living in Shushan; they attended Achashverosh’s party, and participated in the denigration of the vessels

captured from the Beis Hamikdash. Thus, we see that the reign of Achashverosh was defined by a morally corrupt society, an important idea in light of the precipitous situation the Jewish people found themselves in.

The one common theme we see between the first two positions is the relationship Achashverosh had with the Jewish people. Achashverosh was an anti-Semite, but he was able to see, in his very hatred, the value of the Jew. At the same time, he produced a society defined by immorality, creating the framework for the potential downfall of the Jews.

The next explanation demonstrates a derogatory feeling the subjects of Achashverosh had towards him. One could argue that the problem here is not just limited to “kings”. Many times, prime ministers and presidents evoke similar responses in those they lead (just as an example, President Bush was the subject of ceaseless jokes and insults throughout his presidency). While the reactions to his kingship may not have been completely justified, they certainly demonstrated a defect in Achashverosh’s leadership. A great leader inspires the people, creating awe and admiration. When

the people cease to have this view of their king, the king ultimately fails to lead them. Part of the people’s reaction to Achashverosh may have emerged through the method of how he became king. Without getting into all the details, Achashverosh did not “earn” his way into the position – Vashti was the one who came from the line of kings and queens. And we know what happened to her. One could go so far as to say that Achashverosh sensed this reaction in the people, leading to his desire to be loved by them. Hence, the tremendous party thrown at the beginning of the megillah was open to all. It was a blatant attempt to buy their love and respect, but it failed to help the people overcome their initial view of him.

Finally, the last explanation tells us that Achashverosh made everyone in his kingdom poorer. One critical feature of leadership is the ability to inspire. Another is the actual ability to run the kingdom. In that arena, the Talmud is bringing out the fact that he was not really good at this job. He was unfit to be the leader, and this was evidenced in his monetary policies. The great reigns are many times defined by the prosperity brought to the people. Achashverosh seemed to tax and spend (relax Democrats), seemingly having no handle on managing the affairs of his kingdom. This may have been evident to Achashverosh, leading to an overall sense of insecurity in his ability to be king.

Thus, we see in these last two explanations, that the Talmud is focusing on the personal defects of Achashverosh. The issues in his leadership without question played a role the unfolding of the story and the subsequent plans of Esther. She understood his insecurities and paranoia, and played off of them to save the Jewish people.

What kind of person was Achashverosh then? Clearly, he was an enemy to the Jews. And he was not a great king. What is important, though, is not just bringing out the negatives in his personality. We need to understand his perception of the Jew and the underpinnings of his psyche to truly comprehend the unfolding of the story of the megillah. ■

Haman & the Holocaust

RABBI REUVEN MANN

This Motzei Shabbat Jews throughout the world will begin the observance of Purim with the reading of the Megilla. This book tells the entire story of the miracle which we celebrate on this holiday. While there is great similarity between the miracle of Chanuka and that of Purim...there is some difference. In both cases the Jewish people came up against cruel tyrants who sought and almost attained their destruction (Heaven Forbid!). However, in the case of Chanuka the evil decrees of the brutal Hellenistic Empire were not aimed at the physical existence of the Jews, per se. Their goal was the eradication of Torah and Judaism which was at odds with their own, idolatrous and hedonistic philosophy. The Greeks fought an ideological war whose aim was to obliterate the performance of the commandments and convert the Jews to Hellenism.

The case of Purim was different. The antagonist, in this instance was not a nation but one particular individual. It is hard to believe that a single person can be the cause of so much harm but history confirms this to be true. The annihilation of the Jews of Europe was the handiwork of Adolf Hitler, Y"SS. Of course, as Daniel Goldhagen says, he had many "willing executioners" who were only too happy to join his evil project. However, he was the founder and force behind the genocidal movement. He made anti-Semitism and the "war against the Jews" the central goal and purpose of the Third Reich. With his great oratorical skills he mesmerized the People and seduced them into blind and absolute obedience to his will. He sold them his psychotic view of history and paranoid assessment of the Jews and what "needed to be done to them." The details of the extermination policy



were worked out in "secret" by his underlings and henchmen. However, in my opinion, the entire German nation bears the guilt for the Holocaust and other atrocities which were the outcome of Hitler's misbegotten "ideologies." The Holocaust was Hitler's brainchild but he made no secret of what he

intended to do to the Jews. He was explicit about his extreme Jew hatred in his writings and speeches. He came to power in 1933 and immediately implemented the systematic delegitimizing, persecution and violence against the Jews which culminated in the crematoria. The Germans were fully aware of his anti-Semitic aspirations and wholeheartedly supported him. In my opinion the designation of Amalek should apply not only to Hitler and the Nazis but to the entire German nation of that time. I do not apply the guilt to subsequent generations of Germans if they sincerely repudiate the evil of the Holocaust and the sins of their forebears and dedicate themselves to the support of Israel and Jews everywhere. If they fail to do this then the iniquity of the fathers clings to the children and they bear the stigma of Amalek.

Haman and Hitler have a lot in common. Both suffered from a moral psychosis that predisposed them toward extreme hatred of the Jews. Haman had a depleted ego which could not be assuaged unless he was elevated to the level of a deity and all people would acknowledge his greatness by bowing to him. The two tyrants were extremely dangerous because of their ability to manipulate the state to carry out their will. Hitler sold his insane racial theories and his primitive caricatures of the Jews to the German people. The Germans were an advanced society in terms of scientific and cultural development. They readily agreed to be seduced by this "evil genius" who promised to restore their greatness and blamed all of their troubles on the Jews. Haman had a much easier task. All he had to do was convince the person who had absolute authority to issue an order of extermination, King Achashverosh.

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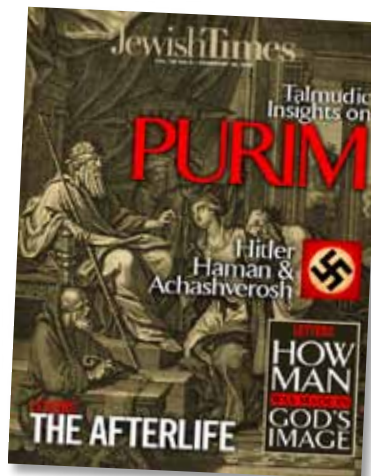
Appealing to his lust for extravagance and great wealth he assured him that the Jews were disloyal and an economic drain on the treasury whom the King would be better off getting rid of. The decree of Achashverosh was even worse than Hitler's for it aimed to destroy the entire Jewish people "children and women" in one day – just one day.

The difference between the plot of Haman and that of Hitler is that Haman's was thwarted. The merit of Mordechai who would not "kneel and not bow" prevailed. He was able to convince Esther to risk her life and use her position to influence Achashverosh to rescind the decree. The fearless idealism of Mordechai and the ingenious maneuvers of Esther brought Haman and his ten sons to utter destruction. All this could not have happened without the help of Hashem, who responded to the people's fasting and repentance. There are important

lessons for us in the Megilla. We should not underestimate the potential danger of any anti-Semite, no matter how much of a sick madman he appears to be. Nor should we overestimate the intellectual and moral level of seemingly advanced nations. The "Unthinkable" has happened before and can happen again. Even the "civilized" Western countries are becoming increasingly hostile to Jews and Israel. We must do everything we can to support and strengthen Israel. We should be grateful to America for the tremendous assistance it renders to the Jewish State. Most important is that we affirm our special relationship with Hashem who hearkens unto us "whenever we cry out to him." May we return to Hashem with perfect Teshuva and be worthy of His blessings and Salvation.

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Purim Sameach ■

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process of creating parts – applies to physical entities alone. Suggesting that God possesses part, that "part of Him" can be spoken of, is a heretical notion. It is crucial that we possess correct notions of God, explaining Maimonides' formulation of the 13 Principles. He wished to benefit mankind by highlighting those ideas vital to our purpose to live intelligently here, and also to inherit the next world. Many other Torah giants have explained God's indivisibility as part of God's unity.

Ibn Ezra teaches (Exod. 26:40) what "form" means. It is something that depends on a created entity. Thus, the form "circle" depends on the existence of matter, that can be round-shaped. But a circle and all forms cannot exist without matter. And, as God is unrelated to the physical creation He made, "form" or "image" of God, cannot mean that man possesses some semblance of God. "Image" of God is used, as the Rabbis state, since "Torah speaks in the language of man." God conveys ideas to man in expressive terminology. "With a mighty hand did God take us out of Egypt" is God's manner of conveying strength, in terms man can grasp. We don't assume God has a hand, but as we associate strength with an arm, God's employs its use.

So what does "image of God" mean?

Sforno refers to the faculty of intelligence; that we are thinking beings like God. As a wise Rabbi once stated, God emphasized the greatness of the the most precious faculty of man – his mind – by naming it after Himself, "Tzelem Elohim; image of God." No other creation was gifted intelligence, but man alone. This also explains the prohibition of idolatry or accepting any other willful force or power. Thus, Torah prohibits the fallacy of demons, Molech, idols, superstition, mysticism, magic, horoscopes and many other such beliefs.

This must be understood: God "created" man's soul, and He did not mold some pre-existing thing. Yes, when God made man's body from the dust, the term used is "vayitzare; and He formed (Gen. 2:7)" — although this dust too was once nonexis-

tent. The word vayitzare refers to the manipulation of existing matter. But when creating man's soul (Gen. 1:27) God uses the term vayibara (the same root as in beraishis "bara"). "Bara", as Maimonides teaches^[1], refers not to manipulating existing entities, but to creation ex nihilo, creation from nothingness. Thus, when God created the universe, He was not acting upon any existence, for nothing existed yet aside from Himself. Thus, "bara" indicated God's action upon nothingness. This term is again used when creating man's intelligence/soul, for man's soul was not yet in existence, nor was it created from any of the entities God already made in the physical universe, and it was also not created from God Himself. As we said, God is not subject to division. So the creation of the human soul was just that: a new creation from nothingness. But since this soul has the capacity of understanding, it is called something that is "in God's image", to indicate it can partake of wisdom and understand some ideas about God. This is Sforno's fine point.

The primary message is this: God created man unique. He granted our species alone this additional faculty of a soul, His intent in gifting us this soul is to reflect on our sense perceptions, thereby acknowledging what exists, and what does not; to use reason to determine what must be true, what must be false, what is possible and what is impossible. Thus, all of our convictions and choices are to be based on this single faculty called Tzelem Elohim, intellect. We are not to live where we ignore the use of the Tzelem Elohim, as many do when blindly accepting mysticism and superstition. No Tzelem Elohim is required for such blind faith, thereby teaching us that a blind faith lifestyle not the path God wishes. Otherwise, this Tzelem Elohim would be futile.

"And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him." This means God created man with intellect.

[1] Guide for the Perplexed, Book III, chap. X ■

Nothingness?

Reader: We pray daily to Hashem, "Please do not make our life's efforts be in vain." We also experience daily negative input from life's experiences; "Man plans, and G-d laughs!" When we study King Solomon's Koheleth, "All is futile!" we are constantly made aware that no one has ever come back from the dead. This awareness has instilled into man's psyche, a "finality of death" if you will. As we get older, "the Promise of the Future" wanes. How can a person who has just lost a close friend or relative, and surmises he might be next, and has become spiritually distraught, overcome their "down" state of mind, and keep from focusing on nothingness?

How do we overcome all these negative inputs which we observe through our lives?

Rabbi: "...life and death I place before you, blessing and curse....and choose life (Deut. 30:19)." Here, Moses tells the Jews they have the choice between life and death. Meaning, by selecting one, we cannot obtain the other. Thus, selecting death, a life violating Torah, we will not have life. And by selecting life, we will not have death, in the eternal sense, as Sforno states. The Talmud [1] too discusses how the afterlife is taught in the Torah.

A wise Rabbi taught that King Solomon's lesson is that living for the physical enjoyments as an end, is "futile." For God said in Genesis of each day, "and it was good," when used to live a Torah life. The King cannot argue with God.

Torah must be our barometer of truth; "God is not a man that He would lie (Num. 23:19)." His promise of the afterlife is unshakeable, and if we dedicate our days to Torah study, we will arrive at the most enjoyment here, and we give eternal life to our souls.

[1] Sanhedrin chap. 11 ■

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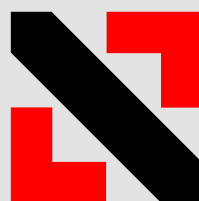
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Lessons from Achashverosh

Rabbi Bernie Fox



And it was in the days of Achashverosh – the Achashverosh who ruled from Hodu to Kush – one hundred and twenty provinces. (Megilat Esther 1:1)

1. The messages of the Megilah story

The story related in Megilat Esther is constructed around the interplay between four personalities. Mordechai and Esther are the hero and heroin of the narrative. Haman is villain. Achashverosh is somewhat of an enigma. He is initially deftly manipulated by Haman, but later he emerges as the protector of the Jewish people. In other words, Achashverosh seems to be a passive figure in the narrative. Rather than initiating action, he is acted upon by others. Given this role, it would be expected for the Megilah to give him scant attention. Yet, the Megilah lavishes its attention upon Achashverosh and devotes the entire first chapter to developing a portrait of his personality.

According to the Talmud, the events described Megilah had a significant impact upon the attitudes of the Jewish people. Their experiences during the events, portrayed in the Megilah, provided compelling evidence of Hashem's ongoing providential relationship with the Jewish people. In addition, the events provided a moving lesson regarding human behavior and its consequences. They observed two powerful figures – Achashverosh and Haman – trapped by the failings of their own personalities. Their observations of these two personalities provided an object-lesson in the consequences of blind pursuit of honor and power or self-indulgent pleasure. Therefore, the Megilah does not only include a description of events unfolding according to the irresistible plan of providence. It also explores the behaviors, attitudes, and personalities of the main characters. This biographical component is designed to communicate the rewards of virtue and the consequences of evil and corruption. The first character sketch in the Megilah is of the king – Achashverosh. In the following discussion, a few aspects of that sketch will be explored.

In the third year of his reign, he made a party for all of his ministers and servants, the army of Paras and Madai, the nobility and the ministers of the provinces, before him. (Megilat Esther 1:3)

2. Achashverosh's celebration provides insight into his character

Megilat Esther begins with a description of the celebration convened by Achashverosh in the third year of his ascent to the throne. This celebration ultimately led to a confrontation between Achashverosh and his queen, Vashti. Her defiance of the king resulted in her removal from the throne. This created the opportunity for Esther to replace Vashti as queen. In other words, Achashverosh's celebration played an important role in the

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events that are described in the Megilah. Nonetheless, the reason that the Megilah devotes so much attention to the celebration is not evident from the text. It would seem adequate for the Megilah to explain that Vashti was deposed as a consequence of a dispute with the king and that Achashverosh, in response to his loneliness, sought out a new consort. Why does the Megilah devote so much attention to Achashverosh's celebration? Apparently, the details of celebration and the events that occurred there provide a revealing portrait of Achashverosh's personality and his failings.

There, he displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty, many days – one hundred and eighty days. When these days were completed, the king made a feast for all of the people that were present in Shushan the castle, both great and minor people, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. (Megilat Esther 1:4-5)

3. The strange design of Achashverosh's celebration

The Megilah explains that Achashverosh's celebration was composed to two separate feasts. The first was conducted for a period of 180 days. All of the dignitaries, ministers, and nobility were invited to this fete. The second feast was held for seven days. At this party, Achashverosh hosted the entire population of Shushan. Even the most common citizens were invited to attend. What was the purpose of Achashverosh's celebration and why did he create two events?

In discussing the first celebration, the Megilah explains that Achashverosh wished to display his wealth and glory. This objective becomes very meaningful when considered in the context of a comment by Rashi. Rashi explains that the celebration was occasioned by Achashverosh's consolidation of power and authority. Apparently, Achashverosh felt it necessary to impress upon the leaders, ministers, nobility, and the bureaucracy of his extended kingdom that he was now firmly in control and that he was the absolute monarch of the realm.

This explains Achashverosh's motives for convening the first feast. Why did he follow this 180-day fete with a second feast on behalf of the citizens of Shushan?

And they gave them drink in vessels of gold – vessels of diverse types – and the royal wine was abundant, according to the bounty of the king. The drinking was according to the instruction; no one was compelled. For so the king had directed to all the administrators of his household, that they should do according to every man's desire. (Megilat Esther 1:7-8)

4. Achashverosh's dual objectives and their relationship to one another

In describing the second party, the Megilah explains that the participants were served wine in vessels of gold of diverse styles. An unlimited quantity of drink was made available to the guests. Then, the Megilah adds that Achashverosh instructed his household servants to carefully respect the preferences of his guests. Every guest was to be given as much wine as he wished. No one was to be denied the opportunity to fully indulge his appetite for drink and no one was to be forced to drink more than he wished. Rashi explains the importance of this instruction and its intention. At many parties, guests are required to drink cup after cup of wine as a courtesy to the host. Achashverosh specifically instructed his staff to not create such an expectation. Achashverosh wanted his guests to truly enjoy themselves. He did not want their enjoyment to be marred by the necessities of protocol or social custom. Each guest was free to conduct himself – in regards to drink – as he pleased, free from the imposition of protocol or custom.

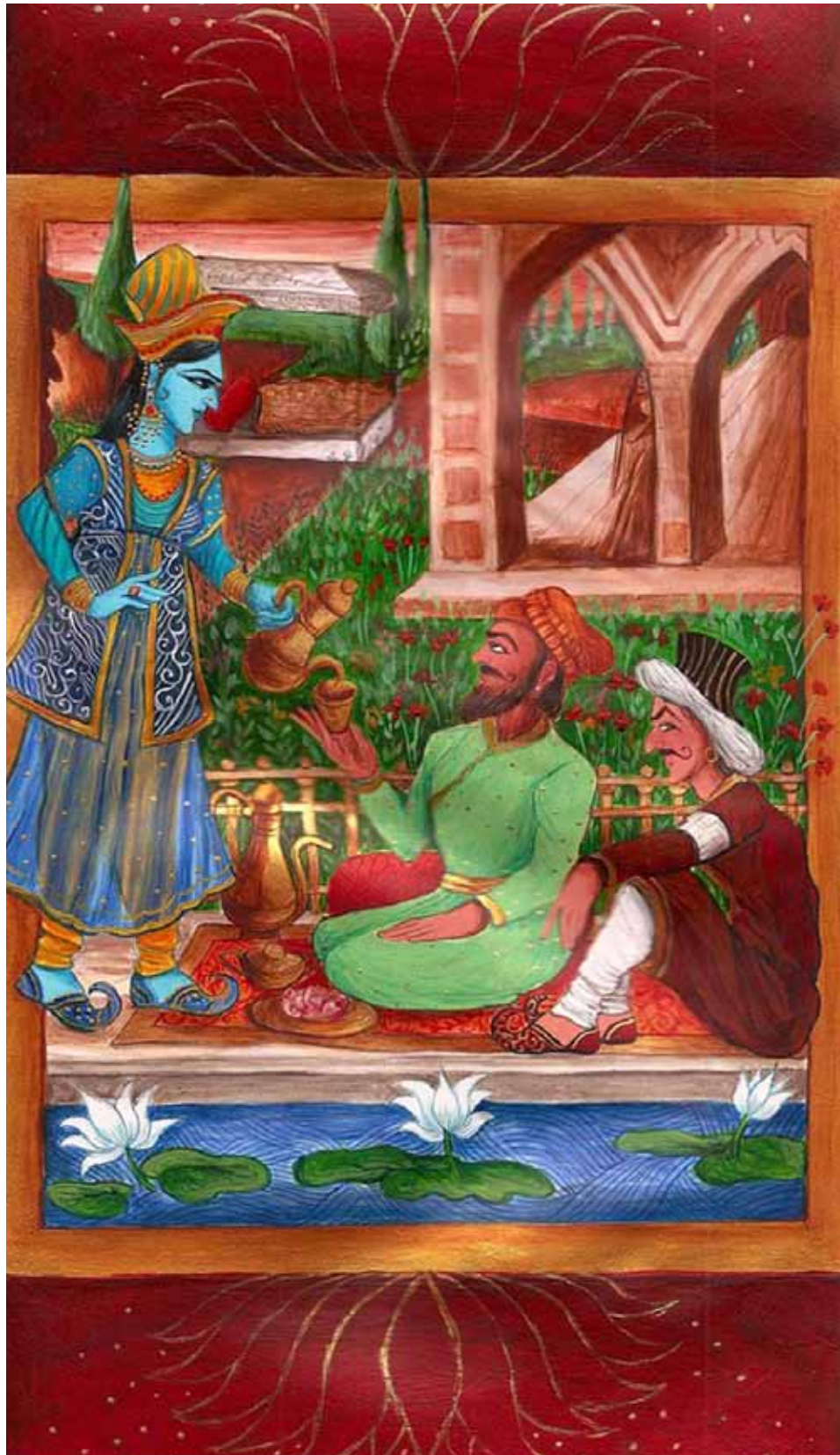
This suggests that Achashverosh had a second objective in creating his celebration. He wished to create a party in which the participants would be encouraged to fully indulge their desires free of social protocol or restrictive custom. This objective was achieved in the second feast. This party was a hedonistic experience.

In short, each of the two component feasts of the celebration had its own purpose. The first fete was designed to impress upon the political and social leadership of the kingdom that Achashverosh was their supreme and absolute ruler. The second component focused on pure pleasure, unfettered by social protocol. However, the identification of the objectives of each component feast does not completely explain Achashverosh's plan. Why could the two objectives not be combined in a single feast? Why did each feast with its unique objective also have its unique guest list?

In order to understand the odd structure of Achashverosh's celebration, it is necessary to know more about his background. The Sages explain that Achashverosh was not the scion of noble lineage. He was a commoner who rose to power and deposed the royal family. This insight adds a dimension to the purpose of the first party. For 180 days Achashverosh hosted the leadership, royalty, and bureaucracy of his vast kingdom. He asserted his authority. The common people of Shushan were not included among the invited guests to this affair. Achashverosh did not need to impress the commoners. He did not need to assert his power over or demonstrate his authority to the plebeian class of Shushan. However, after the first feast ended, he immediately convened a party for the common people of Shushan. What does this reveal about Achashverosh?

Apparently, the second party was Achashverosh's response to the first affair. For 180 days he had been required to appear before and to impress the notables and nobility of his kingdom. Furthermore, his objective was to impress upon his guests his authority and grandeur. In order to accomplish his objective, he was required to conduct himself with dignity and restraint. He succeeded and he completed the 180-day celebration without mishap. However, the lengthy, dignified, and restrained affair was an ordeal for Achashverosh. Therefore, he immediately convened a second celebration. The second party was designed to correct the defect of the first party and provide Achashverosh with a release that he needed desperately

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and felt he had earned. The second party paid no attention to protocol or social convention. Demonstrations of authority were replaced by abandonment to pleasure. This was not a feast for royalty and dignitaries. Achashverosh realized the elite of society would scoff at such an undignified adventure in hedonism. Instead, Achashverosh chose as his companions the common people – the members of the plebeian class who were his brothers. For Achashverosh, this second feast was the true party and the reward for his previous ordeal. However, at this second feast, Achashverosh faltered and thereby, he placed his reign in jeopardy.

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Bizta, Harbona, Bigta, Abagta, Zetar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered before the king Abasuerus to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was fair in appearance. (Megilat Esther 1:10-11)

5. Achashverosh's motives for precipitating a confrontation with Vashti

On the final day of the second feast, Achashverosh precipitated a fateful confrontation with his queen, Vashti. After 186 days of celebration, Achashverosh became mindlessly drunk. In his intoxicated state, he commanded that Vashti appear before his guests so that he might display her astounding beauty. How was Achashverosh able to contain his appetites and remain sober until this point and why did he now permit himself to become intoxicated? Furthermore, why did his loss of control express itself in his precipitation of a confrontation with his queen? Even drunk, Achashverosh must have realized that he was inviting a confrontation with Vashti!

Our Sages provide an additional bit of information that is essential to understanding the confrontation that unfolded between Achashverosh and Vashti. They explain that Achashverosh and Vashti came to the throne from very different backgrounds. In contrast to Achashverosh's humble origins, Vashti

boasted royal lineage. Achashverosh was a commoner and usurper who seized the throne and took Vashti as his queen. It is very likely that his marriage to Vashti was designed to consolidate and legitimize his position as sovereign.

In this context, Achashverosh's treatment of Vashti provides another insight into his personality. His treatment of Vashti expresses a need to demean her and to deprive her of dignity. This suggests that Achashverosh felt intimidated by Vashti's royal lineage and somewhat inadequate in comparison to his queen. In other words, despite his power and authority, Achashverosh remained insecure. He could not dispel his own sense, that ultimately, he was a commoner who had usurped the throne from the royal family. Vashti evoked a deep sense of inadequacy. Under normal circumstances, Achashverosh was in control of his feelings and did not give public expression to his attitude toward Vashti. Now, in his drunken state, his resentments and his sense of inferiority overpowered his good sense and he engineered a showdown with his royal queen.

It is not surprising that only now – well into his second feast – did Achashverosh become drunk and lose his self-control. As explained, Achashverosh was intimidated by Vashti's noble heritage. If this was Vashti's affect upon him, one can imagine the strain he experienced during the first 180-day feast. For 180 days, Achashverosh was surrounded by nobility and notables. He was required to impress his guests and demonstrate authority. However, these very people, whom he labored to impress, reminded him of his own plebeian origins and evoked a deep sense of inferiority. Now, at his second feast, his ego was buoyed by the company of the common people of Shushan – the people among whom he felt secure and confident. In this environment, he felt comfortable fully indulging his hedonistic desires. He also became engrossed in his resentment of those who made him feel inferior and unworthy. To Achashverosh, no person represented the class of privilege more than his own queen – Vashti. Eventually, his state of mind and judgment were compro-

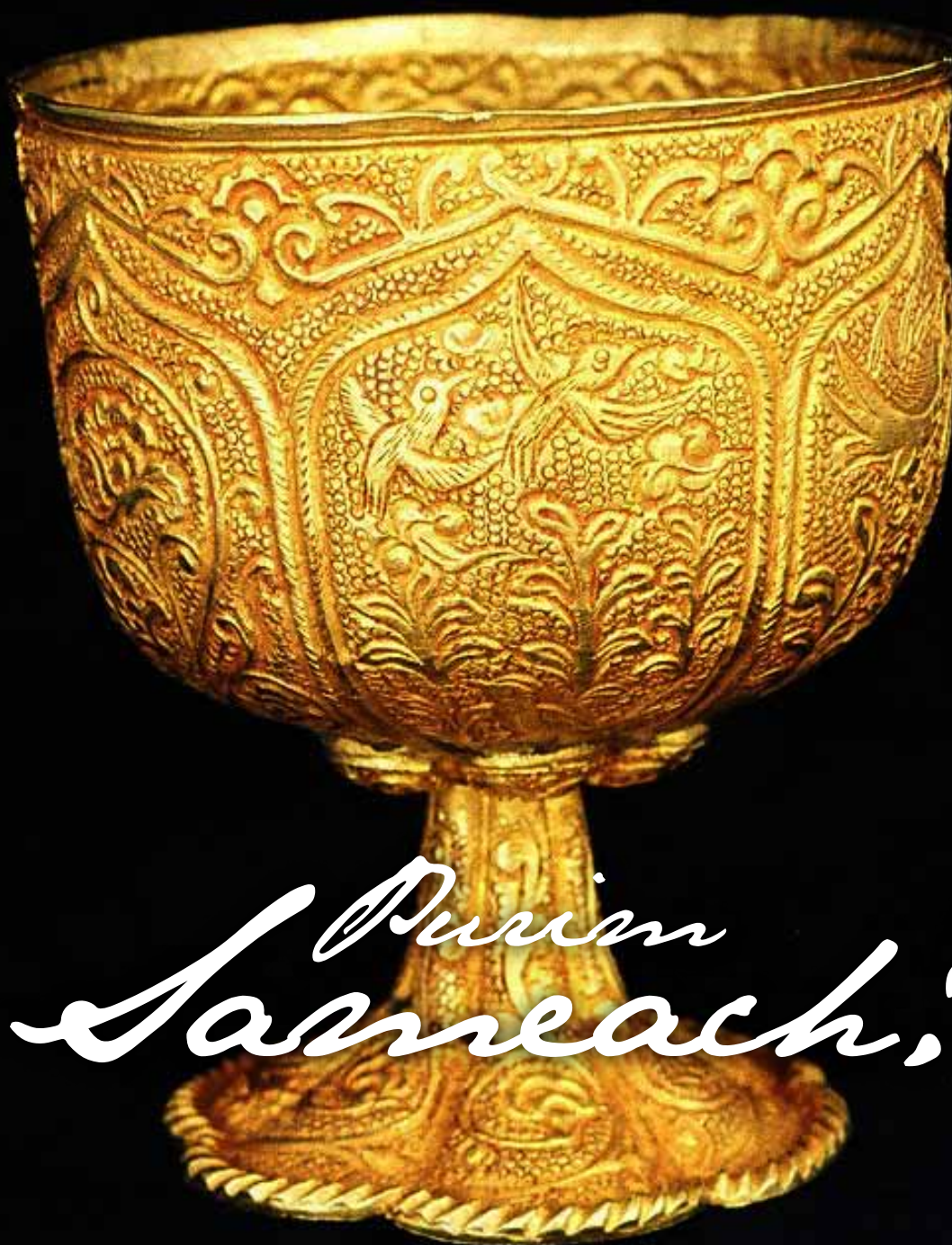
mised by his drunkenness. His anger and resentment gained control over him and he precipitated the confrontation with Vashti.

And the queen Vashti refused to come at the instructions of the king through the chamberlains. And the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him. (Megilat Esther 1:12)

6. Vashti's refusal and Achashverosh's reaction

Achashverosh's reaction of Vashti's refusal to attend to his wishes was immediate and extreme. He was overcome with anger. The remarkable intensity of Achashverosh's reaction can be appreciated in the context of another comment of our Sages. They explain that in response to Achashverosh's ill-mannered invitation, Vashti delivered a sharp rebuke. She reminded Achashverosh of his humble origins. She attributed his drunkenness and boorish behavior to these origins and contrasted Achashverosh to her own regal father who never demeaned himself publicly. In other words, rather than achieving his goal of humbling Vashti, Achashverosh was reminded by her of his own inadequacy. The very insecurities that motivated his confrontation with Vashti were intensified and transformed into indignant anger.

In summary, the first chapter of Megilat Esther provides two important insights into Achashverosh's personality. First, despite his ascent to the throne, in his heart he remained a member of the plebeian class. He was capable of acting with restraint and dignity – for a period of time. However, he was drawn toward the hedonistic lifestyle and could not resist its allure. Second, Achashverosh was a powerful king. Yet, he was plagued by a sense of inferiority and inadequacy. He had risen to the highest rank within society. Yet, he viewed himself as a usurper and interloper. These character traits fatefully combined and led Achashverosh into a confrontation with Vashti and ultimately caused him to depose and kill his queen. ■



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