Insights into Megillat Esther

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We would like to offer a number of short and unrelated insights into major themes and ideas in Megillat Esther, to serve as food for thought as you hear the Megilla this Purim.

I. THE STORY'S STARTING POINT

Every story that is made up of a chain of events has a starting point. However, it is not always clear from where the story should begin. The Sages debate the question, "From which point does a person read the Megilla in order to fulfill his obligation?" In fact, the parties to this debate reflect differing views as to where the crux of the story begins:

Rabbi Meir says: The whole thing.

Rabbi Yehuda says: From [the words, "There was] a Jewish man [in Shushan, the capital…]."

Rabbi Yossi says: From "After these things, [King Achashverosh promoted Haman]." (Mishna Megilla 2:3, 19a)

On the other hand, the Megilla conceivably could have started earlier than it actually does, such as with the coronation of Achashverosh, or with Mordekhai's adoption of Esther.

In fact, the Megilla opens with Achashverosh's banquet for his servants, even though, at first glance, this seems to have nothing to do with the main plot. Attention should be paid to the fact that the main events of the Megilla take place in the twelfth year of Achashverosh's reign, but the story begins with the banquet in the third year of his reign. Apparently, this is meant to emphasize the foresight of Divine Providence: it was the removal of Vashti in the third year that prepared the ground for the salvation of the Jews in the twelfth year. At the time, her removal looked like a regular royal scandal, with no ramifications for history. Only a perspective of many years revealed this event to have paved the way for the salvation of Israel from the terrible fate that awaited them.

In the Megilla, Divine Providence operates in hidden ways; therefore God's Name is not mentioned anywhere in it. This may be what the Sages allude to in their teaching:

Where is there a hint to Esther in the Torah? [From the words (Devarim 31:18),] "Va-Anokhi haster astir, I shall surely hide [My face…]." (Chullin 139b)

Through the manner of its writing, Megillat Esther presents its readers with a challenge of faith: one has to seek the Divine Providence leading events to unfold the way we see them – even if God's hand is not clearly revealed in them.

II. THE MAIN CHARACTER OF THE MEGILLA

The two main characters of the Megilla – Mordekhai and Esther – bring about the salvation of the Jews. Why is the Megilla named after Esther and not after Mordekhai?

If we seek the true main character of the story, we must divide the Megilla into two parts. Up until the moment when Mordekhai convinces Esther to appear before the king and to beseech him on behalf of her people (chapter 4), Mordekhai is presented as the main character. He is extremely active, while Esther is presented as subordinate to him and passive ("Whatever Mordekhai said, Esther would do"). In this first half, Mordekhai is the hero, and the plot revolves around him (his refusal to bow down before Haman, his overhearing Bigtan and Teresh, etc.).

However, once Esther agrees, with great self-sacrifice on behalf of the Jewish people, to enter the king's presence, she begins to lead events, while Mordekhai becomes subordinate to her ("Mordekhai came before the king because Esther had told what he was to her"). Henceforth, the plot centers on her (the two parties that she hosts for the king and Haman, her accusation and request, etc.), and the Megilla as a whole is named after her.

When festival is accepted by the Jews of all the provinces, we again find an emphasis on Esther's request rather than that of Mordekhai: "And Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book" (9:32). The fact that the Megilla is named after her serves to emphasize the self-sacrifice that led to the eventual salvation. It was Esther's human action on behalf of her nation that brought to realization the machinations of hidden Divine Providence, and ultimately also the acceptance by the Jews of Shushan and of all the provinces of Esther's wish that thanks and praise be offered to God for their redemption from their enemies.

III. "HE HAS FALLEN IN THE PIT HE DUG" (TEHILLIM 7:16)

Towards the end of the Megilla, the text describes the turnaround which is the essence of the story: "…On the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, it was turned upside down – that the Jews themselves would rule over their enemies" (9:1). The same idea finds expression in the "boomerang" literary structure of the Megilla narrative, as we shall set forth.

In the first half of the story (episodes A-F below), Haman rises to power and causes the king to carry out his wish: a decree of annihilation against the Jews. This half concludes with Haman's relatives proposing "that Mordekhai be hanged… then go joyously with the king to the banquet…" (5:14). The second half of the story (episodes F1-A1) represents a symmetrical inverse, in which the star of Esther and Mordekhai rises, Haman himself is hanged on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai, and his decrees are nullified. This half of the story opens again with the advice of Haman's cronies: "If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish lineage, then you will not prevail against him; you will surely fall before him" (6:13).

The turnaround itself takes place "on that night," when the king could not sleep (episode G). The Gemara expounds: "Rabbi Tanchum said: The King of the Universe was unable to sleep" (Megilla 15b). By the end of this fateful night, the king commands Haman to lead Mordekhai upon his own royal horse in the streets of the city. This image represents the turning point: Haman, instead of hanging Mordekhai, as he had planned, leads the horse upon which Mordekhai is seated. The point where the "turning" structure is most strikingly apparent is the contrasting parallel between Haman's letter and Mordekhai's letter (see below).

It should be noted that the bookends of the story (see A and A1 below) focus specifically on Achashverosh, king of the Persian empire. This emphasizes the "hidden" nature of the miracle. To mortal eyes, it appears that Achasheverosh – a mortal king – rules and controls his kingdom, but behind the scenes, the hand of Providence is apparent; it is this force that withholds sleep from the king on the fateful night.

We may summarize the "boomerang" structure of the story as follows:

A: Introduction: presentation of Achashverosh

B: Achashverosh's banquet for all the provinces, and the special banquet for the inhabitants of Shushan

C: Haman casts lots: war against the Jews set for 13th of Adar

D: Haman's letter

E: Esther's first party

F: Haman consults with his cronies

G: "ON THAT NIGHT THE KING COULD NOT SLEEP…"

F1: Haman consults with his cronies

E1: Esther's second party

D1: Mordekhai's letter

C1: "It was turned upside down" – the Jews' war against their enemies on the 13th of Adar

B1: Banquet of the Jews in all the provinces (14th) and special banquet for the Jews of Shushan (15th)

A1: Conclusion: Achasheverosh's powerful reign

IV. "SOMETHING WRITTEN IN THE KING'S NAME CANNOT BE REVOKED"

As demonstrated above, the structure of the Megilla reflects the concept of "turnaround." This is particularly striking in the parallel between the letters that Mordekhai writes, permitting the Jews to gather and defend themselves, and the writing and dispatching of the previous letters by Haman. The results of the dispatch of these two missives are similarly presented in a contrasting parallel: following Haman's letter, Mordekhai tears his clothes and dons sackcloth; after the second letters are sent, Mordekhai emerges from before the king "in royal robes."

This parallel shows up Achashverosh in all his weakness and fickleness: he hands his ring to Mordekhai with the same ease with which he previously handed it to Haman, although the purposes to which he is committing himself are diametrically opposed. Ironically, it is the king himself who highlights his own absurdity when he tells Mordekhai and Esther, "You may write as you please concerning the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; but writing which has been written in the king's name, and which has been sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked" (8:8). Despite the unthinking "rule of the ring", the king repeats his mistake and hands the ring to whoever seeks it.

On the other hand, this comparison also highlights the wheel of history, which turns in accordance with the wishes of the King of kings. That which Haman planned to do to the Jews ends up happening to him and to all the others who sought to cause evil to the Jewish nation.

V. MEGILLAT ESTHER AND THE STORY OF YOSEF

The Megilla contains many expressions that are borrowed from the description of Yosef in Egypt, in Sefer Bereishit. The two narratives are indeed very similar in content: both concern a Jew who rises to power in a foreign country, and seeks the welfare of the Jewish people in dealing with the ruling powers. Chazal note this connection:

"And it was, when they would tell him, day after day" (Esther 3:4) – R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Binyamin, son of R. Levi: The sons of Rachel (Yosef and Mordekhai) are equal in the miracle that they brought about and are also equal in their greatness.

Their miracles are equal: There it is written, "And it was, when she [Potifar's wife] would speak to him [Yosef], DAY AFTER DAY" (Ber. 39:10), while here it is written, "And it was, when they would tell him [Mordekhai], DAY AFTER DAY."

They are also equal in greatness: There it is written, "Pharaoh removed his ring from his hand it gave it into the hand of Yosef, and he had him dressed in clothes of fine linen" (Ber. 41:42), while here it is written, "The king removed his ring, which he had transferred from Haman, and he gave it to Mordekhai" (Esther 8:2).

Further on it is written, "He [Pharaoh] had him [Yosef] ride in the chariot of his second-in-command, and they called before him: Bow down!" (Ber. 41:43); here it is written (Esther 6:9), "Let the royal robes and the horse be handed over, and let them call before him: So shall be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor!" (Esther Rabba, parsha 7)

This connection hints at that which is left hidden in Megillat Esther but made explicit in the story of Yosef: just as God protected Yosef and brought success to all his endeavors in Egypt, so God watched over Esther and made her successful.

However, the connection to Yosef may also hint at a teaching of the Sages that explains why Hallel is not recited on Purim: "For we were still the subjects of Achashverosh" (Megilla 14a). In other words, even after the happy ending of the Megilla, the Jews of Shushan were still in exile; this had not been a complete redemption. Through the veiled connection to the story of Yosef, the reader is reminded also of the continuation of that story – the bitter slavery in Egypt. Even if a Jew is placed at the very highest echelons of power in a foreign land, this is no guarantee for the safety of the Jewish nation so long as it dwells in exile. In the next generation, a new "Haman" may arise, "who did not know Yosef"…

VI. THE TIME OF THE STORY

When did the story of the Megilla take place? This depends on the identity of King Achasheverosh. According to the Sages (Megilla 11b), Achashverosh ruled immediately after Koresh (Cyrus), "at the end of seventy years of Babylonian exile," as Rashi explains (in his commentary on the beginning of the Megilla). This assumption appears to be based upon a unique chronological perception of the order of the Persian kings; even the early commentators note that this view does not sit well with the literal text.

The generally accepted view identifies Achashverosh as Xerxes, who ruled during the years 486-465 B.C.E. This identification is supported by the record in the Book of Ezra:

The people of the land weakened the hands of the nation of Yehuda… all the days of Koresh, king of Persia, until the reign of Daryavesh, king of Persia. And in the days of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote to him accusing the inhabitants of Yehuda and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artachshasta…" (4:4-6)

In this list of kings, Achashverosh parallels Xerxes.

According to this identification, the story of the Megilla unfolds after the rebuilding of the Second Temple. At the same time Haman plotted in Shushan, the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel was fighting for its survival (see Ezra's description of Achashverosh's decrees "upon the inhabitants of Yehuda and Jerusalem," which highlights the viewpoint of the returnees from Babylon).

Various midrashim contrast the description of Achashverosh's palace with the description of the Temple. Chazal explain, for example, that the vessels that Achashverosh used at his banquet were in fact vessels plundered from the Temple (Megilla 11b), that the clothes that Achashverosh wore during the banquet were the special garments of the Kohen Gadol (Megilla 12a), etc. Perhaps the point of these midrashim is to criticize the Jews of Shushan, who remained in Persia and enjoyed the banquets held at the royal palace, instead of serving God in the Temple. The shape of the king's palace is presented in the Megilla as being similar to the form of the Temple (an outer court and an inner court); similarly, an uninvited commoner who approaches the king's inner court is put to death, just as is one who approaches the Sanctuary of the King of kings without being entitled to do so. Esther, who enters the king's inner court while fasting, resembles the Kohen Gadol who enters the "inner court" of the Temple on Yom Kippur. This parallel hints at a condemnation of the Jews of Shushan, who have "traded" the King of kings, as it were, for a mortal king, whose person and whose reign are the subject of considerable mockery in the Megilla.