



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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PURIM: MEGILLAT ESTHER, HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OR DIASPORA PARODY?

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INTRODUCTION

What is Megillat Esther? What are its roots and what does it come to teach us? Some historians place the story of Purim during the reign of any one of three Persian kings, between 486 and 359 BCE. They have attempted to link the Biblical king Ahashverosh with Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes I or Xerxes I and to link Mordechai and Esther with other historical figures at the time. The story of Purim and its observances are well known by the year 200 BCE, since an entire tractate of the Mishnah and then the Talmud are devoted to the subject. With this understanding, the Megillah is a straightforward account of Jewish history, where Jews were first persecuted and then saved.

However, there is another layer under the historical story of Purim — that of a parody of an ineffectual king and a diaspora Jewish community living without connection to their roots. The book opens by describing King Ahashverosh as the ruler of 127 provinces “from Hodu to Kush.” Instead of being hard at work as a ruler, the King hosts a months-long feast for all the men in his kingdom in his ornate palace. The king’s love of wine and feasting comes up throughout the megillah, where he is continually portrayed as an ineffectual king, controlled by others and by his desire to feast rather than govern.

After many days of drinking, Ahashverosh orders his wife Vashti to display her beauty before the guests. When she refuses, Ahashverosh deposes her as queen. Ahashverosh then orders all “beautiful young girls in his kingdom” to be presented to him, so he can select a new queen. This “beauty contest” takes place after each woman has prepared herself physically over many months, and occurs overnight in the king’s private chamber. The winner of this questionable contest is the orphaned Esther, who has been raised by her cousin Mordechai. Though she becomes the new wife of the king she does not reveal that she is Jewish. Her name, which is linked to the pagan goddess Ishtar — hardly a traditional Jewish heroine — is also an element of this parody.

King Ahashverosh and the men of his court, and later all the men of Shushan, drink and feast with abandon, they do so amidst gold and silver, *techelet* and *argaman* — making the palace sound suspiciously like the Mishkan. The same materials that, earlier in the Jewish journey had been assembled to glorify God, now serve as the backdrop for drinking and debauchery. Although the king is not Jewish, this allusion to the sacred space of the mishkan turns the reader’s attention to the question of the strength of the new queen’s Jewish identity. Is she a Jew in exile who painfully feels the hardship of staying hidden or is she an assimilated Jew, disconnected from her Jewish heritage, for whom remaining hidden does not take a large toll. This is a question asked of all Jews living in the diaspora — how connected are they to their homeland and their historical and religious heritage? We hear Esther speak up for the Jewish people only after she is reminded that she will not be saved if Haman’s plot is carried out.

The rest of the story of Purim plays out exactly as the reader thinks it should, adding another element to the parody. Esther accuses Haman of plotting against her and her fellow Jews, Haman is hanged on the gallows reserved for Mordechai and Mordechai is elevated to Haman’s position. Mordechai, the only person who maintains a connection to his Judaism throughout the story, is the hero. Esther, who comes to identify with her people in the course of the story is its heroine. When viewed as a parody of Jews in the diaspora, the reader learns that it is those who cling to their Jewish identities who will prevail and those who hide or assimilate are in danger. This is particularly paradoxical, as a logical assumption would be that, if surrounded by prejudice, hiding one’s identity would be the safest act.

HAMAN, ANTI-SEMITISM AND POWER

The many varied observances of Purim highlight the holidays seemingly conflicting themes of persecution and gaiety. One of the most familiar observances seems to reflect both of these themes: blotting out the name of Haman with *groggers*. This ensures that Haman, a descendant of Amalek, is struck from our public record, in accordance with the verse, “You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”¹ Amalek is seen as the enemy par-excellence of the Israelites in the Torah, based on his practice of preying on the weakest of the people, and as such we are commanded to annihilate him and his descendants even to this day. Over the course of Jewish history, enemies

¹ Deuteronomy 25:19



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of the Jewish people, most notably Hitler, are often compared to Amalek and Haman, two Biblical figures who sought to destroy the Jewish people.

However, the villain of the megillah is more complicated than just someone who hates the Jewish people. The Megillah explains that Haman's rage at Mordechai is rooted in the fact that Mordechai won't bow down to him. Haman vows to destroy this foe before he knows of Mordechai's identity, and it is only after realizing that Mordechai's refusal to bow down is rooted in his religion that Haman decides to enact his crusade against all the Jews. In other words, Haman's initial aversion to Mordechai is tied to Mordechai's refusal to recognize his power and authority, and only later is it linked to religion. Like King Ahashverosh when Vashti does not obey him, Haman is wrapped up in his own power. However, unlike the ineffectual king who needs his advisors to tell him how to handle Vashti, Haman knows what he wants to do to Mordechai and how to accomplish it. He is more dangerous because he is able to set his plan in motion by manipulating a weak king and because he does not limit his persecution only to Mordechai, but expands it to include all Jews. Ahashverosh feels no need to expand his power beyond banishing Vashti — indeed he is too lazy to do so — but Haman's desire for power knows no limits, and turns him into one of Judaism's greatest villains.

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Purim is a holiday, fundamentally, about turning things upside down and inside out. God, whose name is never mentioned in the megillah, is hidden from the story. Esther, whose name also means hidden, conceals her true identity from the king. Haman starts high and ends low—from prestige and power to execution—while Mordechai starts low and ends high—from sitting at the city's gates, threatened by Haman, to taking over his property and offices.

The observances of the holiday reflect these themes as well. Before the day of great merriment comes a day of fasting known as *Ta'anit Esther*, or the Fast of Esther. Just as in the Megillah, Esther exhorted her people to fast and to take on the customs of mourning, so to do many contemporary Jews refrain from eating and other customs associated with pleasure. And yet when day turns to evening, the seriousness of the fast gives way to the merriment and humor of Purim. We wear costumes to hide ourselves, to show our zany side, the side that may not find a place in the synagogue or community any other time of year. For modern day Jews, Purim also provides opportunities to engage with contemporary issues, through the lens of masquerade. It is not uncommon to see Israelis on Purim dressed as Nazi soldiers or as Hamas militants — or to see secular Israelis dressed as their religious brethren. By subsuming these frightening elements of the Jewish experience into the experience of parody, Israelis claim a kind of power over the image of Jews as being weak and powerless.

It is not just we who reveal our humor — Purim is also a holiday where Torah can be manipulated, changed, and mocked, through the Purim *shpiel* or Purim Torah. At other times of year, Torah study is a serious and scholarly endeavor. During Purim, that is turned around as the story is told through the media of song and theater.

Perhaps nowhere is the free spirited nature of Purim reflected better than in the permission to drink copious amounts of alcohol on the holiday. However, that permission is conflicted, as is reflected in a Talmudic story about drinking on Purim. The Talmud teaches: Rava said, "It is one's duty to make oneself fragrant [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between '*arur Haman*' (cursed be Haman) and '*baruch Mordechai*' (blessed be Mordechai)." It seems, from this text, that getting drunk is an important part of observing the holiday, and indeed alcohol consumption is often part of the festive Purim meal. Yet immediately following this commandment to get drunk, the Talmud tells the following story: Rabbah and R. Zeira got together for Purim *seudah* (the feast on the afternoon of Purim). They got very drunk, and Rabbah got up and cut R. Zeira's throat (literally, Rabbah butchered him). The next day, Rabbah prayed on R. Zeira's behalf and brought him back to life. A year later Rabbah asked, "Would you like to have Purim *seudah* with me again this year?" R. Zeira replied, "One cannot count on a miracle every time."

As such we see that the commandment to drink is not as straightforward as the initial text would make it seem. In fact, there are those who claim that the ambiguity of the Talmudic text is linked to concerns over the troubling association between alcohol and violence, a theme which is embedded in the Purim story itself. Reflecting this concern, later



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codes also raise doubts about what constitutes appropriate levels of alcohol consumption at the *seudah*. Rambam, for example, modifies Rava's statement and says that one should have a nice meal, with food and drink, until one falls asleep. Both these texts remind us that, while one may drink on Purim, it is best not to do so in excess.

IS PURIM A FEMINIST HOLIDAY?

The fact that Megillat Esther has at its center a female heroine is notable. First, Queen Vashti is seen as a feminist heroine by many. Her refusal to display her body before her drunken husband and his associates, even at the expense of her marriage, wealth and possibly her life, is seen as a courageous act of standing up to power and the inappropriate sexual desires of men. Whether or not Esther is a heroine by contemporary feminist standards is a matter of discussion. Esther can be read as a strong and empowered woman who sees a problem and figures out how to solve it, and prevails through a mixture of intelligence and sexuality. Esther can also be read as the anti-feminist, submitting to the authority of her husband and her uncle and taking orders from a man about how to solve problems. Still, the presence of a female leader around whom the action initially takes place — and her transformation to becoming a risk-taker who saves her people — represents a break with the majority of narratives within the Hebrew Bible.

The hidden, inside-out nature of the holiday also lends itself well to questions of sexual identity. For many gay and lesbian Jews, Megillat Esther and the observances of Purim resonate. They equate Esther concealing her Jewish identity from the King with the societal pressure that some gays and lesbians feel to keep their sexual orientation a secret. Esther's triumph in ultimately revealing that she is Jewish and saving her people serves as an affirmation to gay and lesbian Jews of revealing their sexual identities.

THE JUSTICE OF PURIM

If Purim is about turning things upside down, then the final two mitzvot of Purim allow Jews everywhere to try to right some of the injustices in the world. The Megillah recounts: "Mordechai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jewish throughout the provinces of King Ahashverosh, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and the fifteenth days of Adar, every year – the same days on which the Jewish enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor."

We learn from this text that while it is a mitzvah to fill Purim with celebration, our joy is coupled with mitzvot of responsibility. From the final verse, we learn that we are obligated to give gifts to our friends (*mishloach manot*) and presents to the poor (*matanot le'evyonim*). We must take care of others during our merrymaking, by giving gifts of food to the poor, to ensure that everyone is able to participate in a Purim *seudah*, or festive Purim meal. No one has to ask for charity — the impetus is on the giver to fulfill the mitzvah by giving without being asked, although if someone asks you for charity, you are also obligated to give. While there are some who make a big production over the *mishloach manot* to send to their friends, there are others who choose to minimize these gifts and maximize their giving to the poor. It is our obligation on Purim to see that the world is turned upside down — that the injustices of poverty and hunger that many live with on a daily basis are alleviated, even if only in a small way, on one day.



PURIM – TEXT 1

מגילת אסתר ג

(ז) בַּח דָּשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא-ח דָּשׁ נִסָּן בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֲשָׂרָה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁוֹרוֹשׁ הַפִּיל פּוֹר הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לְפָנַי הֶמֶן מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם וּמַח דָּשׁ לַח דָּשׁ שְׁנַיִם-עֶשְׂרֵה הוּא-ח דָּשׁ אָדָר. (ח) וַיֹּאמֶר הֶמֶן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁוֹרוֹשׁ יִשְׁנֹנוּ עִם-אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֹד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינוֹת מְלְכוּתְךָ וְדַתֵּיהֶם שׁ נֹת מְכָל-עַם וְאֶת-דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלְמֶלֶךְ אֵין-שׁ וְהֵן לְהַנִּיחֵם. (ט) אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדֵם וְעֲשֶׂת אֶלְפִים כֶּסֶף-אֶשְׁקוּל עַל-יָדַי עֲשִׂי הַמְּלָאכָה לְהַבִּיא אֶל-גַּגְזֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ. (י) וַיִּסַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְהֶמֶן בֶּן-הַמְּדַתָּא הָאֲגָגִי צָרָר הַיְהוּדִים. (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהֶמֶן הַכֶּסֶף נָתוּן לְךָ וְהָעַם לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ.

MEGILLAT ESTHER 3:7-11

In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasheverosh, Pur, that is the lot, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month to month, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar.

Then Haman said to King Ahasheverosh, “There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of all other people and they do not observe the king’s laws, so it is not in the king’s interest to let them remain.”

“If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the king’s business, to put into the king’s treasuries.”

Then the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

The king said to Haman, “The silver is yours, and the people also, to do with them as you please.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Who is responsible for the edict against the Jews -- Haman or Ahashverosh?**
- **What does this passage teach us about Ahashverosh's character? About Haman's character?**
- **Based on what you can glean from this text, what is the apparent relationship between the Jews and non-Jews in Persia at the time these events transpire? How does this resemble or differ from your view of Jews' place in non-Jewish societies historically?**



PURIM – TEXT 2

מגילת אסתר ד

(יב) וַיִּגִּדּוּ לְמֶרְדֵּכַי אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֶסְתֵּר. (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֵּכַי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל-אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-תְּדַמִּי בְּנִפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים. (יד) כִּי אִם-הִחַרְשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רֹחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיְּהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תִּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לֵעֵת כֹּזֵאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת. (טו) וְתֹאמְרִי אֶסְתֵּר לְהָשִׁיב אֶל-מֶרְדֵּכַי. (טז) לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצְאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְעַל-תְּאֲכִלוּ וְעַל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לִילָה יוֹם גַּם-אֲנִי וְנִעְרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כִדָּת וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי. (יז) וַיַּעַבְרֵן מֶרְדֵּכַי וַיַּעַשׂ כִּכֹּל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָה עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר.

MEGILLAT ESTHER 4:12-17

They related Esther's words to Mordechai. Then Mordechai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordechai, "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." So Mordechai went away and did just as Esther had commanded him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Describe the relationship between Mordechai and Esther. Who is the dominant party? Is this a feminist narrative?
- What roles do feasting and fasting play in the Purim story? How is the consumption of or abstinence from food understood to affect our mindset? our relationship with God?
- What does the Purim story teach us about self-sacrifice?



PURIM – TEXT 3

תלמוד בבלי מגילה דף יא ע"א

המולך אמר רב שְׁמֵלֶךְ מֵעֶצְמוֹ. אָמְרֵי לֵה לְשִׁבְחָהּ, וְאָמְרֵי לֵה לְגִנְאֵי. אָמְרֵי לֵה לְשִׁבְחָהּ דֵּל אֵהָהּ
אֵינִישׁ דְּחָשִׁיב לְמִלְכָּא כְּנֻתִיהָ. וְאָמְרֵי לֵה לְגִנְאֵי דֵּל אֵהָהּ חֲזִי לְמִלְכוּתָא וּמְמוֹנָא יְתִירָא הוּא
דִּיהָב וְקָם.

TALMUD, MASECHET MEGILLAT 11A

“*Who reigned.*” Said Rabbah: He [Ahashverosh] was a self-made king. Some say, it was in his praise, there was none so fit to be a king as he; and some say it is to his disgrace—he was not fit to be a king, but he had much money, and the money made him king.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What is the role of wealth in the story of Purim?
- Who is King Ahashverosh in the Purim story -- a masterful king or someone who was unfit to rule?
- What is the nature of legitimate kingship according to this rabbinic text?
- How does this agree or disagree with our own society’s notions of who deserves to hold power?



PURIM – TEXT 4

משנה תורה הלכות מגילה פ'ב סימן יא

כָּל סְפָרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים וְכָל-הַכְּתוּבִים, עֲתִידִין לִיבָטֵל לְיָמֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ, חוּץ מִמְּגִילַת אֶסְתֵּר--הִיא קִיּוּמָת פְּחַמִּישָׁה חוּמִישֵׁי תוֹרָה, וְכִהְלָכוֹת שֶׁל תוֹרָה שֶׁבַעֲלֵ פָה, שְׂאִינָן בְּטִילִין, לְעוֹלָם. וְאֵף-עַל-פִּי שֶׁכָּל-זְכוֹרֹן הַצָּרוֹת יִבָּטֵל, שְׁנֵאָמַר "כִּי נִשְׁכַּחוּ, הַצָּרוֹת הָרֵאשׁוֹנוֹת, וְכִי נִסְתָּרוּ מֵעֵינַי--יָמֵי הַפּוֹרִים לֹא יִבָּטְלוּ, שְׁנֵאָמַר "יָמֵי הַפּוֹרִים הָאֵלֶּה, לֹא יִעָבְרוּ מֵתוֹךְ הַיְּהוּדִים, וְזָכְרָם, לֹא יִסּוּף מִזְרָעָם.

RAMBAM: M. TORAH: HILCHOT MEGILLA 2:18

All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, apart from Megillat Esther. It will continue to be binding like the Five Books of Moses and the entire Oral Law which will never be invalidated. Even though all memory of our suffering will be erased...still the days of Purim will not be annulled.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What are some of the dominant messages of the prophetic books and writings (Nevi'im and Ketuvim)? What is the point being made by the Rambam when he claims that these books “will be annulled in the days of the Messiah”?
- What is it about the message of the Megillah that will continue to resonate in the Messianic age?
- What does Rambam understand as the message of the holiday of Purim?



PURIM – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

LUBITCH, RIVKAH, “A FEMINIST’S LOOK AT ESTHER,” *JUDAISM*, 42:4, 1993

The story of Esther is the story of many women. Esther needed a severe jolt to snap her out of the conventions of her upbringing. This jolt may come from within, or from society itself (in our case – Mordechai), which makes conflicting demands on women. As in the case of our story, society, too, raises women with certain expectations and then is surprised when they cannot fulfill other adult roles. The author of the *Megillah* clearly puts forth the argument that it is not only she as an individual – but society as a whole – who prospered from the irreversible change that Esther underwent. It is interesting to note that she was able to transform so thoroughly [from a mute, highly dependent follower to an articulate, empowered actor] in so short a time – which proves that Esther 2 had really been present in potential.

Yet Esther need not be seen only as a “woman.” She was a person who underwent a change in personality, allowing certain latent characteristics to appear. Anyone, regardless of gender, who has found or is still seeking to discover their specific capabilities, their special role in life and the contribution that they can make to the community around them, can identify with Esther. Esther can, and should, be a role for any reader, not only for female readers. Just as the traditional male heroes are not necessarily seen as males but as “great people,” by the same token, female heroines ought to be presented and understood as “people” who are also “women”.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- The Purim story (*Megillat Esther*) is often held up as one of the great triumphs of women in the Tanakh. In what ways is it the story of a woman (or of women)? In what ways is it – as Lubitch argues – a more universal story?
- Think about the character of Esther as portrayed in the *Megillah*? How is she presented at the beginning of the story? At the end? What if any explanations are we given to account for her development?
- If we read the Purim story as an example of an individual (or a people) realizing potential which they didn't know they had, what does this suggest about the ways in which we grow (or fail to grow) in response to circumstances? What steps can we be taking to enable our own growth? To make our communities spaces in which others can realize their potential? Is such change possible only under conditions of extreme hardship?





Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



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