

Shiur #01: The Artistic Structure of the Book of Esther

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The importance of the artistic structure of large literary units is overshadowed only by the highly problematic nature of the issue. To discuss the structure of an entire book one must first define its secondary units – no simple task, especially in light of the interconnectedness of juxtaposed units. Thus, for instance, should the story of Mordekhai foiling the attempted assassination of the king (2:22-23) be viewed as the conclusion of the previous scene (the choice of Esther as queen), as maintained, for example, by Fox (pp. 40-41), or should we regard it as an independent unit, as Moore would have it (pp. 29-32)? [1] The more general question is of great importance when exploring the possibility of a unified artistic structure to the narrative [2]. Clearly, any proposal for a complete literary structure rests upon earlier exegetical assumptions, based on some preconception of the plot and the connections between the smaller units. Given this reservation, I would now like to suggest an artistic structure that I believe emerges from the narrative's design.

A survey of the principal scenes comprising the plot suggests a chiastic structure to the narrative – i.e., two halves that parallel one another in inverse form, divided by a central axis that carries the reader over from the first half to the second: [3]

- A. Introduction – Achashverosh's kingdom
- B. Two private feasts – one for the princes of the provinces (180 days), and the other, a special feast for the inhabitants of Shushan (seven days)
- C. Esther appears before the king and is chosen as queen
- D. Description of Haman's stature: "...King Achashverosh promoted (gidal) Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite, and advanced him (va-yenaseihu)"
- E. Casting of the lot: War on the 13th of Adar
- F. Giving the ring to Haman; Haman's letters; Mordekhai rending his clothes; fasting of the Jews
- G. Esther's first feast
- H. Haman's consultation with his associates
- I. THE KING CANNOT SLEEP; EPISODE OF THE HORSE
- h. Haman's consultation with his associates
- g. Esther's second feast
- f. Giving the ring to Mordekhai; Mordekhai's letters; dressing of Mordekhai in royal garments; feast for the Jews
- e. War on the 13th of Adar
- d. Description of the stature of the Jews and of Mordekhai: "All the princes of the provinces... were favoring (menase'im) the Jews... for the man Mordekhai was becoming increasingly powerful (gadol)"
- c. Esther comes before the king to request an additional day of battle in Shushan
- b. Two feasts for the Jews: one for the Jews of all the provinces (14th of Adar), and the other, a special feast for the Jews of Shushan (15th of Adar)
- a. Conclusion – Achashverosh's kingdom

This structure emphasizes one of the most fundamental insights into the narrative: this is a narrative of "reversal." In fact, this idea is mentioned explicitly towards the end of Esther: "It was reversed, such that the Jews dominated their enemies" (9:1), and now it is clear that the entire structure of the narrative emphasizes this idea of reversal of fortune. However, the reversal is not limited to Jewish control over their enemies. Fox claims, correctly, that this idea should be regarded as an overarching principle that envelops the entire Megilla. The reversal of the situation serves as more than a mere literary-esthetic motif. Beyond the theme of reversal of fortune, there hides a covert polemic against pagan Persian beliefs, as we shall see further on.

In any event, aside from the sense of a general reversal that arises from the chiasmic structure of the narrative, there are also some hidden readings that come to light when viewed in the context of the narrative structure. In future discussions we shall return to them, but for the meantime we may already focus on a number of principles that emerge from the structure.

The central axis – with its image of Mordekhai being led upon the royal horse as the heart of the entire Megilla – will be addressed later at length [4]. Right now, and in the context of our main discussion, let us focus on the point when, supposedly, the great reversal occurs: "On that night the king could not sleep" (6:1). The fact that the revolution takes place at night has symbolic importance for the design of the narrative. The timing hints at the existence of hidden undertones. During the day, reality is clear and may be explained, as it were, in terms of rational, logical cause and effect. The literary symbolism of night hints to that which is hidden beneath the surface, and which suddenly burst forth into the narrative.

Thus, for example, Yaakov wages battle with the angel during the night (Bereishit 32:24). Similarly, God smites the firstborn of the Egyptians, and Pharaoh expels the Israelites from the country, "at midnight" (Shemot 12:29-31). In each of these sources, the plot itself does not mandate that the event take place at night. Rather, the timing is meant to bring the characters described in the narrative (along with the reader) to a state of uncertainty, a lack of confidence in the stable, concrete world, a state in which hidden truth might burst forth into the revealed story. The night – a hidden time – is well suited to the central axis of our narrative, which argues for a hidden truth that is not revealed to all. At the same time, later on we shall have to clarify whether this literary unit, situated at the heart of the narrative's structure, represents the true turning point, or whether this is just another instance of concealment.

Beyond the discussion of the central axis, it is also worth commenting at this point on the literary framework of the narrative as a whole. The framing narratives deal with King Achashverosh and his grandeur (A-a). It would seem that this framework, too, hints to a discrepancy between the revealed and concealed levels of the narrative. According to the plain reading of the narrative, which is strengthened by its framework, it would seem that Esther seeks to tell the story of Achashverosh; Achashverosh is its protagonist. As we shall discover, the author of the Megilla mocks this protagonist in various ways, and while the framework tells its story loudly and clearly, asking the reader to keep his eye on the king (after all, the story begins and also ends with a description of his kingdom), the literary truth whispering beneath the surface of the palace is entirely different – or, more accurately, the exact opposite.

The parallel between the next two chiastic "arms" likewise carries a hidden reading. The narrative begins (B) and ends (b) with a pair of feasts; the first pair is hosted by Achashverosh, while the second pair is held by the Jews [5]. Does the author seek, through this device, to compare the feasts? Is there a hint here that, in fact, the Jews of Esther are not all that far removed from the Persians surrounding them? Indeed, this is the conclusion that we draw from the plain reading, and in this context we are speaking not only of the reader's literary experience, but also of a description of Jewish culture on the literal level of the plot.

An outside observer of the king's feasts and the feasts of the Jews would not see any difference. In other words, there is indeed a connection between B. and b. or, as Goitein puts it: "We are far from the contrast between the 'inebriated gentile' and the Torah-studying Jew." [6] At the same time, we should not get carried away in drawing the comparison between the feasts. Even if both parties are drinking wine, the author drops various hints – which we shall discuss later – as to the differences concealed beneath the surface: once again, not only beneath the literary surface, but beneath the surface of Jewish existence in Exile.

In summary, we may say that the chiastic structure serves a dual purpose. First, it highlights the reversal of the events: Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews versus the Jews ultimately controlling their enemies. Fortune – the "lot" - is not as reliable or authoritative as Haman believes it to be. Second, the chiasm that creates a parallel between the two halves of the story hints at the abyss separating the plain reading, according to which there are indeed connections between the parallel elements, and the hidden reading, which mocks this comparison and argues that the reversal in the plot is also related to internal processes that the Jews undergo during the course of the narrative, and that in fact there is no room for comparison at all.

A final introductory subject that remains to be clarified, before embarking on the actual reading, is the time period when the story occurred. We shall address this issue in the next shiur.

Notes:

[1]Actually, the question is even more complex, since there is room to debate whether the verses preceding the foiling of the assassination (the description of the additional gathering of the virgins) concludes the choice of Esther as queen (Fox), or whether they introduce the story of the plot against the king (Moore; Paton, 186-193.)

[2]Moreover, in order to trace the contours of an entire literary structure, we must proceed from the assumption that the narrative in question is indeed organically whole, and that it has not undergone corruption or absorbed additions.

[3]The structure I propose is similar to the one presented by Radday and Berg, who likewise argue for a concentric structure, but with different details: Y. T. Radday, "Chiasm in Joshua, Judges, and Other," LB 27-28 (1973), 9-10; Berg, 106-113.

[4]In Fox's discussion of the feasts as a central motif in Esther, he proposes that the feasts themselves are arranged in chiastic form: six feasts in each half, with the two innermost

ones the private parties organized by Esther (Fox, 157). His view accords well with the overall structure of the narrative as proposed above. At the same time, Fox's suggested structure for the book as a whole is different (159-162.)

[5]Tractate Sofrim (chapter 14) testifies to the interesting custom of reading Esther on the Sabbaths during the month of Adar, with a break in the reading at the beginning of chapter 6: "How is it read? On the first Sabbath of [the month of] Adar the people read together up to 'On that night...,' and on the night when the second Sabbath [of the month] ends they read from 'On that night...' to 'Speaking peace to all of his descendants'".

[6]S.D. Goitein, "Iyyunim ba-Mikra," Tel Aviv 5727, pg. 60.

Translated by Kaeren Fish