The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
Megillat Esther
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #07: The Attempted Rebellion Against the King, and the Promotion of Haman

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The conspiracy of two of the king's chamberlains, and its disclosure by Mordekhai, is described in three brief verses (2:21-23). In contrast to the style of the text thus far, which has been characterized by flamboyant descriptions of the royal palace and its customs, this event is recorded in terse form:

"In those days, and Mordekhai sat at the king's gate, Bigtan and Teresh – two of the king's chamberlains, among those who kept the door – grew disaffected and sought to lay hand on King Achashverosh. The matter became known to Mordekhai, and he related it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king, in Mordekhai's name. Then the matter was investigated and found out, and the two of them were hanged on a tree, and it was written in the book of chronicles before the king".

The extreme brevity leaves us with several unanswered questions, on even the most basic level of understanding:

a. Why did Bigtan and Teresh want to assassinate Achashverosh? Was this part of a broader attempt at rebellion, they perhaps being agents meant to carry it out (since they were keepers of the door), or was this a momentary caprice of the two chamberlains alone?
b. How did the matter become known to Mordekhai? Was there an attempt to involve him in the rebellion? Did he hear of it coincidentally?[1[
c. Why does Mordekhai decide to save the king? Is this an act of simple loyalty to the king, or does Mordekhai have other, hidden motives?
d. Why does Mordekhai choose to inform the king via Esther? Since the narrator has already noted that Mordekhai "sat at the king's gate," the reader understands that he had some official status in the royal court; it is reasonable to assume that he could have approached the king through official, formal channels, rather than via the king's wife.[2[
e. Finally, how is it possible that the king offers Mordekhai no suitable reward for having saved him from death?

Although these questions pique our interest, the narrator leaves them unanswered, and we can only conclude that the significance of this unit pertains to what it does say, and not to the information that has been omitted - which, apparently, plays no role in the development of the plot. The brief description of this episode leads us to the clear conclusion that what is important for the reader is that which we are told explicitly: that Mordekhai's saving of the king is recorded in the king's book of chronicles. As we know, this fact is of significance later in the plot, along with the fact that it was not Mordekhai himself who revealed the conspiracy to the king, but rather Esther, and therefore it is possible that not all of the royal court were aware that Mordekhai was involved in obstructing the rebellion of the chamberlains.[3[

In any event, it is specifically in view of the extreme conciseness of the scene that the use of the passive form is so prominent: "The matter became known," "The matter was investigated," "It was found out," "Were hanged," "Was written." This form of writing is well suited to a scene in which the narrator wishes to skip the details. He hints to the readers, as it were, that it does not matter who was involved, or who did what; what is important is the final outcome – "It was found out," "They were hanged," "It was written." At the same time, this sort of writing leaves a psychological impression with regard to the consciousness of the characters involved: to what extent to they themselves understand the significance of their actions? Perhaps the most important result arising from this scene is concealed from them, too, and they will also encounter the hidden results of their actions, together with the reader – only later on.

This scene is interesting particularly against the background of the preceding one. Just prior to the attempted rebellion, we are told: "Esther did not divulge her descent and her people, as Mordekhai had commanded her; and Esther obeyed Mordekhai's word, as she had when she was in his care (2:20)." We have already noted that this is meant as a slight dig at the king, since Esther obeys Mordekhai's word, despite the explicit law legislated by the king – "That each man should rule in his own house." In describing the special and secret relationship between Mordekhai and Esther, we sense a very slight nuance of rebellion, of political tensions: who is loyal to the king, and who is building himself a personal band of loyalists? And now, against the backdrop of that sensation, it immediately turns out that it is specifically this secret connection between Mordekhai and Esther that saves the king from the attempted rebellion against him. It is because of Esther's loyalty to Mordekhai, and not only to her husband, the king (in contravention of the law, as noted), that the king is saved from his opponents! The juxtaposition of these two images gives rise to one of the fundamental questions in Esther – the matter of loyalty to the king: the way in which it is measured, and the way in which it is appreciated.[4] This subject will continue to simmer beneath the surface throughout the narrative, at times bursting into the open (starting in chapter 3, with Haman's words to the king concerning the nation that does not keep the king's laws.(

After these things

Chapter 3 starts with a description of Haman's promotion: "After these things, King Achashverosh promoted Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite, and advanced him, and he placed his seat above all the officers who were with him" (3:1). The sensitive reader, who is prepared to imbibe the verse slowly, senses the surprise lurking in this verse. As noted previously, the reader expects the king to reward Mordekhai handsomely for saving him from the chamberlains' plot. The narrator encourages the reader to expect such reward, by noting that the incident is recorded in the book of chronicles before the king (2:22). Indeed, it seems at first that this is the direction in which the verse is headed: "After these things…" – i.e., after the revelation of Mordekhai's loyalty to the king, "King Achashverosh promoted…" – and at this stage the innocent reader who is not familiar with the continuation of the narrative is certain that the next words will be, "Mordekhai the Jew, who sat at the king's gate." Needless to say, he is astounded to discover that it is not Mordekhai who is promoted by the king, but rather some other person: "Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite."[5] This surprise is related, of course, to the uniquely ironic structure of Esther; the reader's expectation of some reward for Mordekhai is realized in a most unexpected way later on, when it is specifically Haman who delivers his reward for having saved the king (chapter 6.(

The special status granted to Haman assumes day-to-day meaning, since "all the servants of the king who were at the king's gate would bow and prostrate themselves to Haman" (3:2). Can we define the significance of Haman's role? Why must everyone bow and prostrate before him? At the outset of the discussion it should be pointed out that the position of "second to the king" was a recognized one in ancient times (like Yosef in Egypt, for example). According to Persian tradition, this person was called hazārapatis (meaning "officer of a thousand"), and one was legally obligated to prostrate oneself before both the king and the second-to-the-king.[6[

At the same time it would seem that, at least from the literary perspective, there seems to be a specific reason why the king feels a need to appoint Haman to this honored position.

The unit begins with the words, "After these things" (3:1). This is a common introduction in Tanakh, especially in Sefer Bereishit. It has multi-directional significance: on one hand, it introduces a new literary unit; on the other hand, it hints that the new unit should be read against the background of the preceding one. In other words, more than just a chronological notation - "After the events described thus far" – it means "In light of these things," or "Against the background of these things." As Amos Chakham puts it: "The words, 'After these things' are meant to connect the events that are about to be recounted to what was recounted before."[7[

According to this introduction, then, we are to interpret what we are told in chapter 3 (concerning the promotion of Haman) in light of the preceding unit – in other words, in light of Mordekhai having saved Achashverosh from the attempted assassination.[8] It is possible that in light of the attempted rebellion, the king wanted to appoint a man upon whom he could depend, and to whom he could entrust the task of ensuring that there would be no repeat of this incident. This renders a very simple reading: After these things – against the backdrop of the attempted assassination of the king by his guards – Achashverosh appointed a man whose main job would be "head of personal security." The obligation to bow before Haman should be viewed as a symbolic act indicating that Haman had the right to interrogate any person throughout the kingdom, to invade the privacy of anyone who sat at the king's gate (in the event of suspicion), to arrest anyone he deemed necessary, etc.[9[

Haman, Son of Hamedata, the Agagite

Whatever Haman's exact historical role was, it appears that by means of the appellation attached to his name, the author hints at the essence of his role in this narrative: he is Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite. The title "Agagite" would seem to point to his family; it is a Persian name (as opposed "Haman" and "Hamedata," which are Ilmi-Iranian names).[10] The most widely known identification of these two characters is set out in the liturgical poem, Asher Hani'a, which is customarily recited after the reading of Esther on the festival of Purim: "Haman gave voice to his ancestors' hatred, and passed on the grudge of the fathers to the sons; he did not remember the mercy of Shaul, for it was through his pity for Agag that the enemy was born." In this context a clear distinction should be drawn between the etymological meaning of the name and its literary significance. It is possible that the title "Agagite" in and of itself is not meant to connect Haman with the descendants of the Agag who was killed by Shemuel, but it is certainly reasonable to posit that the author deliberately mentions this title because of its biblical connotations, thereby hinting at the ancient Amalekite king as the reader encounters

Haman. This literary significance is supported by other allusions, scattered throughout the text, to Shaul's battle against Amalek and the replacement of Shaul with David in the wake of his failure in this battle. (We have noted some of these allusions in previous shiurim.) Hence, Haman's title would also appear to contribute towards this connection.

In any event, in Esther, Mordekhai – a descendant of Kish (a reminder of Shaul's father) fights against Haman the Agagite (a reminder of the Amalekite king). Thus, the battle recounted here becomes a "second round" in the ancient historical battle, and Amalek is defeated, once again, by the Tribe of Binyamin. It should be noted that this battle itself is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in our text. The name "Amalek" does not appear even once, but in keeping with the concealed level of Esther, the slightest of hints in this regard is sufficient to convey this idea, which does, as we shall see, play a role in the molding of the story and its significance.[11[

"And placed his seat above all the officers who were with him"

The description of Haman's promotion contains an allusion to another narrative, thereby imbuing the occasion with a profound historical dimension that whispers beneath the plain level of the text. We read: "King Achashverosh promoted Haman, son of Hamedata the Agagite, and advanced him, and placed his seat above all the officers who were with him" (3:1). This description is highly reminiscent of the concluding verses of Sefer Melakhim, in the description of Yehoyakhin in Babylon: "And it was in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Yehoyahkhin, King of Yehuda, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, that Evil-Merodakh, King of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, advanced Yehoyakhin, King of Yehuda, from prison. And he spoke well with him, and placed his seat above the seat of the kings who were with him in Babylon. And he changed his prison clothes and ate bread regularly with him, all the days of his life. And his allowance was a continual allowance provided for him by the king, daily portion every day, all the days of his life" (II Melakhim 25:27-30).[12[

In the twelfth month (Adar), the King of Babylon advanced the status of the exiled king of Yehuda, Yehoyakhin, and placed his seat above the seats of the other kings who were in Babylon. He also had his prisoner's clothing changed – apparently for royal garments.

To clarify the intention behind this allusion we should first consider the significance of the concluding unit of Sefer Melakhim. Clearly, there is a special reason and purpose in ending the book with these verses, since the preceding image is one of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Tzidkiyahu and his contemporaries to Babylon. This would seem to be an appropriate ending for Sefer Melakhim: it presents the end of Israelite sovereignty, and starts a new era – the period of exile. In terms of the chronological continuity of Sefer Melakhim, there is a considerable jump to the "thirty-seventh year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, King of Yehuda," when Yehoyakhin's status is upgraded. Clearly, there is a deliberate effort not to conclude the narrative with a description of the exile, but rather on an optimistic note, recording that the King of Yehuda is restored to his status, if not his place in Eretz Yisrael. It seems reasonable to suggest that beyond the desire to end the narrative on an optimistic note, this also represents a message to the exiled nation, and to the reader. Yirmiyahu, we recall, prophesied that the exile would last seventy years. Here, following just half of that period, Divine Providence signals the first signs of appeasement. In the advancement of Yehoyakhin, the reader (like the exiles themselves) should perceive a glimpse of the beginning of the redemption. It is still too

early to speak of a physical return of the exiles to their land, but their status in Babylon is improving, and the reader – as he completes the story of the destruction as recorded in Sefer Melakhim – starts to dream of the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael. Thus, Sefer Melakhim ends not with the punishment and exile of Israel, but rather with the message that there is another period that will eventually come about; even if Sefer Melakhim does not record it, it hints – through its conclusion – to this future development.

Indeed, after the second half of the period of exile is over, and following Cyrus's declaration, some of the exiles rally behind Sheshbatzar, and afterwards – Zerubavel, and go up to the land to rebuild its Jewish settlement. However, as we know, may of the exiles of Yehuda remained in Babylon. Esther recounts the story of those who chose to remain in exile, to root themselves in Persia, and even to become part of its institution of royalty.

Perhaps, in the veiled allusion to the promotion of Yehoyakhin, the author means to guide the reader as to the proper interpretation of the promotion of Haman by Achashverosh. Since the Jews of Shushan did not obey the prophets' call to return to their land, since they did not respond to the Divine message of Yehoyakhin being brought out of prison, God will therefore appoint over them "an evil king like Haman"; He will award prominence to another man who will remind the Jews of the Diaspora that they are not in their proper place. This reading relates to other hints scattered throughout Esther, and the scope of this shiur does not allow for a full treatment of this complex subject. In future shiurim we shall take note of this hidden theme, which runs like an undercurrent through the narrative as a whole and bursts through the surface at its conclusion.

Translation by Kaeren Fish

[1]Fox notes that the expression, "The matter became known to Mordekhai" indicates that someone told him about the brewing rebellion (Fox, p. 39.(

[2]Theoretically, we could posit that Mordekhai never intended for the information to reach the king; after all, the text specifies only that he passed it on to Esther. From the verses we might conclude that it was Esther who decided to notify the king – but she does so "in Mordekhai's name." But this reading seems unlikely, because Esther is presented (at this stage of the narrative) as passively obedient to Mordekhai.

[3]This scene may be hinting at the opening scene: There we read, "In those days, when King Achashverosh sat upon his royal throne" (1:2), while here it is written, "In those days, while Mordekhai sat at the king's gate…." Corresponding to the anger mentioned there - "The king was exceedingly angry (va-yiktzof)" (1:12), here we read: "Bigtan and Teresh… became dissatisfied (katzaf)." There, a new law is propagated – "Let it be written among the laws of Persia and Mede… that Vashti come no more before the king" (1:19), and likewise here: "It was written in the book of chronicles before the king." Just as there an office-bearer in the Persian court lost her status (Vashti), so here there are two office-bearers who lose their status (Bigtan and Teresh). In addition to these parallels, it is difficult not to notice the similarity between the names of the chamberlains mentioned in these two scenes. One of the chamberlains who was sent to bring Vashti was named "Bigta" (1:10), while one of the officers that the king assembled in light of Vashti's refusal to present herself was "Tarshish" (1:14). If this similarity is indeed intended, then we may posit that just as the removal of Vashti paved the way for Esther's highly honored position, so the removal of Bigtan and Teresh paves the way for Mordekhai's honored position.

[4]Concerning this subject in Esther see Berg, pp. 59-93 ("Obedience / Disobedience.(″
″ [5]This verse sets up a sharp contrast between the unrewarded merit of Mordecai and Haman's unmerited rewards" (Moore, p. 35); see also Laniak, pp. 69-70.

[6]M. Heltzer, Esther, Olam Ha-Tanakh, Tel Aviv 1994, p. 241.

[7]Chakham, p. 22. See Rashbam's commentary on Bereishit 22:1, where he notes this phenomenon. Hence, to translate these introductory words as "Some time later on" (as Moore does, p. 33) is not sufficiently accurate. The more common translation, "After these things" (as JPS renders it, among others) is preferable.

[8]Admittedly, among the instances listed by Rashbam (mentioned in note 7) of this stylistic phenomenon, we find this example from Esther. To his view, the connection between the events of chapter 3 and Mordekhai's saving of the king becomes clear within the wider context of the narrative. In other words, it is not the actual promotion of Haman that the introduction seeks to explain in light of what preceded it, but rather Haman's lack of success in his plot. To Rashbam's view, then, the introductory words which begin chapter 3 represent an all-inclusive heading for the rest of the story as a whole. Since Mordekhai is not ultimately hanged on the gallows, as Haman wished, because he saved the king from Bigtan and Teresh (as recounted in chapter 6), it is appropriate to introduce chapter 3 and onwards with the words, "After these things″.…

[9]Since this is Haman's job, we are not surprised later when it appears that Haman does not hesitate to call on the king whenever he chooses to (6:4), despite the Persian law stating that no person has the right to come before the king of his own initiative; he may come only when called upon by the king (4:11). Admittedly, though, Haman enters only "the outer court of the king's house," while the law is more concerned with the inner court.
″ [10]Haman" is the name of the god who heads the Ilmi pantheon. The Gemara connects his name with God's words to Adam when the latter justifies his hiding as a result of his nakedness: "Have you eaten from the tree (ha-min ha-etz…) concerning which I commanded you not to eat of it?" (Bereishit 3:11) (Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 139b; Esther Rabba, parasha 9,2). It should be noted that Haman will, later in the narrative, expect to receive the royal garments, but will merit only to dress Mordekhai in them, and will eventually be hanged on the very tree that he prepares for Mordekhai.
The name "Hamedata" most probably means "solidly made"; see: A. R. Millard, "The Persian Names in Esther and the Reliability of the Hebrew Text" JBL 96 (1977), pp. 481–488.

[11]As stated, the connection between our narrative and Shaul's war against Amalek is given expression in midrashim and ancient liturgical poetry. Many modern scholars have also pointed out this connection. See, for example: G. Mattingly "Amalek," ABD, Vol. 1, pp. 169 – 171

[12] This connection is noted by A. Frisch, "Beit Megillat Ester le-Sefer Melakhim," Mehkarei Chag 3 (5752), p. 26.