The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
Megillat Esther
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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Dedicated by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in memory of our grandparents
Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, and Shimon ben Moshe ,
whose yahrzeits are this week.

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Shiur #10: Does The King Know of Haman's Decree?

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

As noted in our introduction to the Esther series, in a narrative that makes special use of concealed messages, even the characters themselves are sometimes somewhat in the dark; the situation itself hints that not everything in the story is clear and known, and therefore attention should be paid to what is going on below the surface. Needless to say, if it is the king himself – on whose word everything in the kingdom depends – who is acting out of lack of knowledge, then the concept of concealment is emphasized manifold. This would seem to be the case in Esther, and not only in minor contexts in the plot (such as the king being unaware of the fact that Esther is Jewish); rather, at its major junctures, too, the king acts out of ignorance of the real situation.

After Haman cast the lot, the text describes him visiting the king. In their secret conversation Haman proposes his plan: "If it is agreeable to the king, let it be written that they be destroyed, and I shall weigh out ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those responsible for the labor, to be brought into the king's treasury" (3:9.(

Haman's requests Achashverosh that the nation which is scattered and dispersed throughout the provinces of his kingdom be "destroyed" (le-abed).[1] His intentions are opaque; there is no indication of the concrete method by which he intends to "destroy" the nation that he is talking about. The Bible offers several possibilities for "ibud" of a nation. Most commonly the word is used to mean annihilation, or killing.[2] This meaning is reflected in many different sources, such as: "Her princes in her midst are like wolves, devouring prey, to spill blood and to destroy souls, in order to make dishonorable gain" (Yechezkel 22:27). Further on in Esther, too, the decree is formulated by Haman with the words, "To wipe out, to kill and to destroy" (3:13). It is in this sense that modern translators have rendered Haman's request of the king; for example: "Let it be written that they may be destroyed."[3[

The Bible, however, recognizes other forms of "destruction" – as, for instance, in the curses of the covenant forged in the plains of Moav: "And it shall be, just as God rejoiced over you to do good for you and to multiply you, so God shall rejoice over you to have you destroyed, and to wipe you out, and you shall be plucked off the land to which you come, to inherit it. And God shall scatter you among all the nations, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall worship other gods, which you have not known –

neither you nor your ancestors; of wood and of stone… and you shall be sold there to your enemies for servants and maidservants, and none will buy…" (Devarim 28:62-28.(

In these verses, "destruction" is meant in the sense of exile ("You shall be plucked off the land") and loss of freedom ("You shall be sold there to your enemies for servants and maidservants") since a slave lacks the legal status of a person, and a nation that is conquered and becomes a nation of servants ceases to exist as a national entity.[4[

The opacity of Haman's words to the king, concerning the manner of "destruction" that he has in mind, stands out starkly in comparison with the explicit elaboration in the letters that Haman sends to all of the provinces: "To wipe out, to kill and to destroy all the Jews, young and old, children and women" (3:13). Since "destruction" is mentioned here along with "killing," it is clear what the intention is. But Haman tells the king only, "Let it be written that they be destroyed".

On the other hand, even if the expression that Haman uses is technically equivocal, the general atmosphere that he creates through his monologue may lead the king – as well as the reader – to understand the "destruction" to which he refers in the economic sense – as, for example, by selling the nation as slaves and maidservants.

This possibility arises from the economically oriented framework within which Haman presents his request. At first, he tells the king: "It is of no worth (ein shaveh) for the king to tolerate them" (3:8). This is usually interpreted to mean, "It is of no benefit to the king to leave the nation as it is."[5] Indeed, the phrase itself in no way necessitates any economic associations. However, following his request, Haman goes on to add: "I shall weigh out ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those responsible for the labor, to be brought into the king's treasury" (3:9.(

The meaning of this offer is obscure; as Chakham writes: "Haman's intention in offering the money is not made clear."[6] In any event, as several commentators have noted, the sum is exorbitant; it is clearly not Haman's own money that is being discussed.[7] From where did Haman hope to obtain such a huge amount of money? Some view his words at hinting to a plundering of the Jews,[8] but others note the improbability of this reading.[9[

The simpler understanding of the offer – and the way in which Achashverosh appears to have understood it – is that the monetary value of that scattered and dispersed nation would be added to the kingdom. In other words, a great sum would accrue to the crown if they were to be sold into servitude. The construct of Haman's monologue, with the juxtaposition of "Let it be written that they be destroyed" to "I shall weigh out ten thousand talents of silver"[10] lends an economical atmosphere to his conversation with Achashverosh, and it seems likely that the king understood it in this way.[11[

It must be remembered that a decree of this type concerning Jews is not exceptional in biblical literature. Suffice it to recall Pharaoh's decree of subjugation of the Jews in Egypt: "And the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with rigor. And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with mortar and bricks and all types of labor in the fields; all of their bondage, which they made them serve, was with rigor" (Shemot 1:3-4). In effect, Haman exploited the ambiguity of his own words, and specified in the actual decree: "To wipe out, to kill and to destroy".[12[

Why did Haman deliberately mislead the king by using ambiguous language? Achashverosh is depicted in Esther as enjoying his indulgence in wealth and honor. It is perhaps for this reason that Haman felt that a decree that carried with it some economic benefit would be easier for the king to accept.

As already noted, this image of Haman asking to "destroy" Mordekhai and the Jews is presented as an analogy to the image of Achashverosh seeking to rid himself of Vashti (chapter 1). The two scenes share certain common elements: in both cases, a person who holds a position in the royal court refuses to carry out the king's orders (Vashti refuses to show herself; Mordekhai refuses to bow down); in both cases the refusal of the individual is expanded and presented as a universal problem affecting the entire kingdom (Memukhan's speech in light of Vashti's defiance; Haman's suggestion to Achashverosh in light of Mordekhai's brazenness). In both cases, the person whose wishes were not fulfilled seeks to do away with the violator ("That Vashti should not come…"; "Let it be written that they be destroyed"); and in the wake of this, in each case letters are sent to all of the king's provinces.[13[

From the perspective of our discussion, I wish to point out that just as Memukhan's suggestion that Vashti be banished is ambiguous as to the manner in which this is to be carried out, and it seems that Memukhan is not suggesting that physical harm be done to the queen, but rather that she be demoted from her status as the king's wife, so Haman's parallel proposal is somewhat ambiguous: he does not explicitly propose physical harm towards the dispersed nation; rather, he recommends only that they not be "tolerated" or "left in their place" (le-hanicham); he wants them to be "destroyed" (as a nation.(

It would seem that Haman's deception of the king represents a strong element throughout the plot; two further images from further on in the narrative, recalling his decree, connect with it. The first is where Mordekhai informs Esther of the decree; the second is where Esther informs the king.

a. Mordekhai tells Esther

The message that Mordekhai sends to Esther via Hatakh contains three pieces of information, and a request – that Esther go before the king (4:7,8:(

"Mordekhai told him

- all that had happened to him
- and the matter of the money, which Haman had said that he would weigh out to the king's treasury for destroying the Jews
- and he gave him a copy of the document of the edict that had been proclaimed in Shushan - to wipe them out, to show it to Esther and to tell her

] - and the request:] to command her to go to the king and to plead to him and to entreat him for her people".

It is reasonable to assume that the first point ("All that had happened to him") hints at the personal conflict between Mordekhai and Haman – i.e., Mordekhai's refusal to bow before Haman, and how this had led to the casting of the lot.[14] The third point is likewise clear: Mordekhai shows Esther the decree promulgated by Haman, concerning the annihilation of the Jews. But how are we to understand the second point? What is the meaning of "the matter of the money"? Why is Haman's proposal of payment to the king so important that it warrants being mentioned again in Mordekhai's message to Esther?

Some commentators have suggested that the mention of the money "reinforces the malice of Haman's plan."[15] But this reading is problematic. Does an emphasis on the monetary benefit that will accrue to the kingdom from the destruction of the Jews render the decree any more "malicious" than the annihilation of an entire nation for no rhyme or reason!?

It seems more likely that by noting how Haman presented his case to the king in economic terms, while actually promulgating a decree of annihilation, Mordekhai is conveying to Esther the approach that she should adopt: revealing to the king how he was misled by his trusted advisor.

To fill in the literary discrepancy between the intimate, secret conversation between Haman and Achashverosh and the fact that Mordekhai knows about it, the narrator introduces this scene with the words, "Mordekhai knew of all that had been done" (4:1). By means of this innocent statement, the narrator hints to his readers that Mordekhai knows what is going on in the royal court.[16] This assumption also rests upon the manner in which Mordekhai was presented earlier in the plot, and his knowledge of the attempt to assassinate the king (2:21-23).[17[

Indeed, in Mordekhai's message to Esther we discern a discrepancy between "The matter of the money which Haman had said that he would weigh out to the king's treasury for destroying the Jews," and "He gave him a copy of the document of the edict that had been proclaimed in Shushan, to wipe them out." In other words, Mordekhai is pointing out to Esther the difference between what Haman had "said" (to destroy) and the document of the edict that actually "had been proclaimed" in Shushan, explicitly speaking of physical annihilation.

b. Esther tells Achashverosh

The second image – in which Esther informs the king of Haman's decree (chapter 7) is one that raises a number of difficulties. We may question Esther's choice of tactic – expressing herself so forcefully against the decree and its proponent ("A man who is an adversary and an enemy"), rather than adopting a more conciliatory stance, or appeasement, bribery etc. We may also question why Haman sought to plead for his life before Queen Esther – whom, he has just found out, is included in the edict of annihilation that he has dispatched throughout the Persian kingdom – rather than making his appeal to Achashverosh, whose closest advisor he has been.

But the most perplexing problem facing the reader in this scene is the king's reaction. There is a sense that the king knew nothing of the existence of the decree ("Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed in his heart to do this?") But Haman received the king's permission to write his decree! The decree even bears the royal seal!

The narrator emphasizes the king's great surprise by repeating the verb: "King Achashverosh said, he said to Queen Esther" (7:5).[18] This serves to portray the king as surprised and angry; as Ibn Ezra comments ad loc.: "'King Achashverosh said, he said' – twice, showing that the king immediately grew angry, and in his great anger he said, 'Who is he….'"[19[

What is the meaning of the king's surprise? Is the narrator suggesting that he has forgotten his agreement to the decree of annihilation that Haman proposed?[20] We may point to three exegetical approaches to this fundamental question:

a. The king is surprised that the decree applies to Esther and to her nation. Since Esther's identity was not known to the king (2:10; 20), he did not know that she belonged to the nation that was the subject of Haman's decree.[21[

b. As part of the caricature of Achashverosh, here too the "drunken, foolish" king fails to recall the decrees that Haman agreed upon with him.[22[

c. The king actually knows "Who is he, and where is he," but he pretends not to know. The king does not wish to show himself as having agreed to such a decree, and so he feigns surprise.

But none of these three approaches suits the molding of this scene or the development of the plot. It is difficult to posit that the king's surprise is related to the identity of the queen, since these are not the words that the narrator places in his mouth. What the king splutters, in his wrath, is not: "Are you, then, also of the Jewish people?!" or the suchlike. Rather, the king's words relate to the actual establishment of the decree in his kingdom, without his knowledge: "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed in his heart to do this?" In other words, the king does not imagine for a moment that this is a decree to which he gave his agreement, and that the man "who has presumed in his heart to do this" is in fact Haman, who is sitting right in front of him. This reading is given extreme emphasis in the Targum Yonatan:"Who is he, and where is he – a brazen, guilty, and rebellious man – who has presumed in his heart to do this." The king regards the proponent of this decree a rebel against the crown, and it is clear that this goes beyond Haman's ignorance of the fact that Esther belongs to the nation that is the subject of the decree. From the king's words "[i]t is also clear that he has no memory whatsoever, at least not at this moment, of Haman's insidious plot against the Jews or of his own part in it."[23[

Moreover, the continuation of the scene likewise does not sit well with an interpretation that views Esther's belonging to the Jewish nation as the focus of the king's surprise. It is difficult to imagine that just because of Haman's ignorance (and his own) in this regard, the king would sentence Haman to death and have him hanged. This is a punishment suited to traitors, not to a king's second-in-command who has made an innocent mistake – especially since the king himself is party to this mistake and has placed his royal seal upon the decree.[24[

It seems similarly unlikely that this scene is based on the drunken king having forgotten the decree to which he previously agreed. Were this the case, the reader would expect Haman to plead for his life before the king, and to remind him of their secret conversation and the king's agreement to the letters that Haman wrote in his name. The development of the plot shows that Haman, too, understands that "evil was destined against him by the king" (7:7). Any suggestion of momentary forgetfulness is out of place here.

As noted previously, the molding of the narrative indicates that the king is astounded at Esther's words informing him of the decree. This impression arises both from the repeated introduction ("King Achashverosh said, he said to Queen Esther") and from his exit to the palace garden. As many scholars have noted, the narrator provides no explanation for the king leaving the site of the party. Various opinions are offered,[25] but attention must be paid to what the narrator does choose to say: "The king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine, to the palace garden" (7:7). In other words, the impression that the narrator seeks to convey is that the king's exit is related to his wrath.[26] Bush adds that the narrator recounts the king's actions from Haman's point of view, too: "Haman saw that

evil was destined against him by the king" (7). From this perspective, too, the king's anger is evident.[27[

For the above reasons, a reading that perceives the king as feigning surprise and shock, while actually fully aware of the decree, seems unlikely. The narrator takes pains to paint this scene in such a way as to present the king as (genuinely) surprised and (genuinely) angry over the existence of a decree of destruction concerning which Esther has informed him.

We conclude, then, that the simplest reading of this scene indicates that the king is truly unaware of the decree that Esther is talking about. It is for this reason that he is so surprised, and so angry, and therefore Haman pleads for his life before Esther, rather than before the king himself.

This scene, too, fits in with our previous assumption that the king understood the decree as involving servitude, while what Haman wrote – in the king's name – was actually a decree of annihilation.[28[

It seems reasonable that it is not enough for Esther to reveal to the king Haman's inaccuracy in formulating his letters. The connection between the king and Haman – at least at the beginning of the plot – is presented as a sound one. Something more is needed. Apparently, the undermining of the king's faith in Haman is also connected to Esther's parties, to which she invites Haman, too;[29] it also has something to do with the king's sleeplessness, and Haman's suggestion to Achashverosh as to what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor (the key concept there being "royalty"), as we shall see further on.

After undermining the king's faith in Haman, Esther comes to the second party and presents her case. Now the fateful moment has arrived; Esther seeks to emphasize to the king the abyss separating what he agreed to and what Haman has done:

"For we have been sold, me and my people, to be wiped out, to be killed, and to be destroyed. Had we been sold as servants and maidservants, I would have remained silent, for the affliction would not be worth the damage to the king." (7:4(

To my mind, Esther's declaration should be read as a pretense at innocence – as though she had no knowledge of the private conversation that took place between the king and Haman behind closed doors, while at the same time indirectly giving the king the impression that his moral judgment is correct and justified. For his part, he did agree to the nation being sold as servants and maidservants, and had this been the case – Esther hints – she would have remained silent, for the affliction of her nation would not have equaled the king's damage. However, against the king's sound judgment, Haman has acted behind the king's back, and the nation has been sold for annihilation and slaughter.[30[

This is of critical importance, because Esther must drive a wedge between the king and Haman, despite the royal seal that adorns the decree. Through her words, Esther opens the abyss separating a decree of servitude and a decree of annihilation, thereby in effect creating an abyss between the king and Haman.[31[

Esther's mention, at the outset, of the idea of "being sold" also plays a role in the molding of the irony of her words, since the first connotation that arises in the mind of the reader, upon encountering this expression, is economic.[32] Since there is a slight delay in the text, because of Esther's mention of the subject ("I and my people"), there is a moment when the reader wonders what "selling" Esther is talking about. Thus, this expression hints at the discrepancy between the king's impression of what was going to happen and what was actually taking place; the discrepancy between "Sold as servants and maidservants" and "Sold to be wiped out, killed and destroyed".

Achashverosh hears of the decree for the first time, and he is taken completely by surprise. He was unaware of the precise wording of the letters that Haman had written, and he never imagined that this was what Haman was plotting. Now the king realizes that his closest advisor has violated his trust and has acted behind his back. This is compounded, as noted above, by the king's suspicion of imminent betrayal. Haman is already "marked" by Achashverosh as a matter requiring deeper investigation. Now the king, still in shock over the decree of annihilation, knows that he must remove this subversive advisor who has sent letters in the king's name without his knowledge.

It is clear why Haman understands that there is no point in pleading his case before the king,[33] for the latter has just discovered Haman's deception, and so all that he can do is to plead before Esther. From this perspective, the dialogue between Esther and Achashverosh in chapter 8 also assumes new significance. Esther asks that the king nullify the letters sent by Haman: "If it please the king and if I have found favor before him, and if the matter seem proper before the king and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, son of Hamedata the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews in all the provinces of the king" (8:5). Esther adopts a carefully ambivalent attitude towards the king's measure of responsibility for the decree. On one hand she emphasizes, "Devised by Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite, which he wrote…," thereby presenting Haman as the main party responsible for the decree of annihilation.[34] At the same time, her use of the expression "to destroy" (le-abed) – the word that misled the king in the first place, rather than "to wipe out and kill," as mentioned in Haman's decree – hints to the king that he bears some indirect responsibility. His agreement – even if based on misunderstanding – led to the decree of annihilation, and now Esther expects the king to "revoke the letters".

But here the king avoids the trap that Esther has laid for him. In his response, he changes her words: "Behold, I have given Haman's house to Esther, and they have hanged him on the gallows because he set his hand against the Jews" (8:7). The king, for his part, intimates that Haman was hanged because he "set his hand" against the Jews, and not because of his attempt at "destruction." Behind this change in verb there lies a veiled conflict between Esther's position, seeking to place some of the responsibility upon the king, and the king himself, who blames Haman alone for the decree of annihilation.

Is the king partly responsible for the decree, of which he was unaware? The reader will likely take a dim view even of the relatively "minor" decree of selling an entire innocent nation into servitude, but does the narrator give any hint as to his own position in this conflict?

A hint at a moral judgment of the king is to be found in an allusion concealed in the description of Haman's writing of the letters. The narrator "refers" the reader to the story

of Achav and the vineyard of Navot (I Melakhim 21), such that the letters dispatched by Haman in the name of Achashverosh parallel the letters sent by Izevel in the name of her husband, King Achav:[35[

Esther 3:12-13–
"In the name of Achashverosh it was written
And sealed with the king's seal
And the letters were sent by couriers to all the provinces of the king"

I Melakhim 21:8–
"And she wrote letters in Achav's name
And sealed them with his seal
And she sent the letters to the elders"

This allusion encourages the reader to pay attention to Achashverosh's ignorance of the exact content of Haman's decree, for in the story of Navot's vineyard this is one of the most important images in the story: Achav is unaware of the actions of Izevel, his wife, and even though his seal appears on the letters that have been sent in his name, he does not know what is written in them. Likewise, the narrator tells us, Achashverosh, whose seal appears on Haman's letters, is unaware of their content.

However, by hinting at Izevel, the author is also conveying a moral judgment of the characters, thereby answering our question as to the king's responsibility for the decree dispatched by Haman. In the story of Achav and the vineyard of Navot, the discrepancy between the reader's impression, in view of the actions of the characters in the story, and the judgment of the prophet, is striking. This discrepancy is revealed in the concentric structure of the first part of the narrative:[36[

A. Achav – Navot: "Give me your vineyard… if it please you, I shall give you its price in money".
B. Izevel – Achav: "Izevel said to him… Arise, eat bread, let your heart be merry".
C. Izevel – elders: "She sent letters to the elders… stone him, that he may die".
D. Elders – Navot: the fictitious trial, and Navot's execution
C1: Elders – Izevel: "They sent to Izevel… Navot is stoned, and he is dead".
B1: Izevel – Achav: "Izevel said… Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Navot"
A1: Achav – vineyard: "Achav arose to go down to the vineyard of Navot.. to take possession of it".

This structure emphasizes the various levels of involvement of the characters in this terrible incident. In the outer framework of the story (A-A1) we find Achav, who has no idea whatsoever of Izevel's plan to kill Navot. Closer to the murder of Navot we find Izevel, vis-à-vis her husband and vis-à-vis the elders (B-B1; C-C1). She causes the murder to happen, but her own hands are clean of Navot's blood. At the center of the narrative (D) we find the elders, who murder an innocent man with their own hands.

However, while man can know only what he can see, God sees to the heart. As the reader moves on to the second part of the story, where the prophet judges the various participants, he is surprised to discover that the perspective is now reversed: the main guilty party is Achav ("Have you murdered and also inherited? …In the place where the dogs licked the

blood of Navot, the dogs shall lick your blood, too… Behold, I bring evil upon you, and I shall sweep you away, and I shall cut off from Achav every male, as well as him that is shut up and him that is free in Israel" (21:19-21). After his blazing condemnation of Achav, the prophet makes brief mention of Izevel ("Concerning Izevel, too, God spoke, saying: The dogs shall devour Izevel by the wall of Yizre'el" – 21:23). As to the elders, we hear no rebuke whatsoever from the prophet. Thus, the prophetic judgment places the principal blame upon the king – even though he was unaware of the content of the letters that were sent in his name. Zakovitz sums up the significance of the narrative most succinctly: "This narrative is not one of the Eliyahu narratives, nor a narrative showing the greatness of the prophet. Rather, it is a narrative that comes to teach a moral lesson; it is a fable or parable about 'a vineyard that belonged to…,' with its moral: that a ruler's responsibility extends to all actions that are undertaken in his name and by his authority, even if he seeks to ignore them and not to know about them."[37[

In describing Haman's dispatch of his letters with the same language used to describe the dispatch of letters by Izevel, the narrator seeks to remind the reader of the prophet's clear judgment of the characters in the story of Navot. This in turn hints at Achashverosh's responsibility, despite the fact that he was misled by Haman. In light of this connection, the reader projects onto Achashverosh, too, the conclusion that "the ruler is responsible for all actions undertaken in his name and by his authority".

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Attention should be paid to the fact that Haman's plan is formulated in passive form: "Let it be written that they be destroyed" – as though this result would come about of itself (Fox, p. 51.(

[2]BDB, p. 1, KBL, p. 3.

[3]KJV. Similarly, "Let an edict be drawn up for their destruction" (Bush, 376); "To be destroyed" (Moore, 34.(

[4]As noted by P. Haupt in his "Critical Notes on Esther," AJSLL 24 (1907-1908), p. 135.

[5]KBL, pp. 1333-1334 ("Denn das ist keine Not, die für eine Belästigung des Königs ausreicht"); A. Ben-Yehuda, Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, Tel Aviv 1952, p. 6955. Berlin raises the possibility that Haman is suggesting to the king that there is no economic benefit to him (in the context of the tax that the king receives) from this nation (Berlin, p. 99.(

[6]P. 25

[7]According to Herodotus (III 90-95), during the reign of Darius the annual tax in silver and gold came to a sum of 14,500 talents of silver. Haman's offer of 10,000 talents of silver, then, in Achaemenid Empire terms, was a most significant sum. See, for example, Bush, pp. 381-382; Clines, p. 296.

[8]H. Bardtke, "Neuere Arbeiten zum Estherbuch," EOL 19 (1965-1966), p. 322, and many others who adopt his view.

[9]Clines, pp. 296-297; Bush, p. 382. Admittedly, Bush's proof – based on the fact that later it appears that the plunder is meant for the looters and plunderers rather than for the crown – is not a strong one (since it is possible that the king forewent the silver.) Chakham even proposes that the sum mentioned by Haman was "a gross exaggeration, his intention being much money" (Chakham, p. 25, note 13.(

[10]Fox notes the haste in Haman's words ("To destroy," with no elaboration), as follows (p. 51): "Haman slips it in offhandedly, then hurries on to the monetary inducement".

[11]It must be emphasized that "I shall weigh" is not identical with "I shall pay," despite the impression created by certain translations (such as: "And I will pay ten thousand talents of silver" - J.D. Levenson, Esther, OTL, London 1997.) One may "weigh out" silver to the kingdom even if the silver does not come from the private account of the "weigher".

[12]A similar interpretation is proposed by Malbim: "The second aspect of his trickery was that he did not tell [Achashverosh] that he wished to wipe them out, only to destroy them. This could be most simply understood as destroying their national identity, i.e., their religion – to nullify their religion and to force them to observe the religions of the other nations, or other such ideas, that they should conspire to disrupt the dealings of that nation, their laws and their customs. [Thus] Achashverosh never intended slaughter or killing." (Commentary on 3:15; see also his commentary on 4:7, and on 8:4.(

" [13]The language that repeats the issuance of this second royal edict is strikingly close to the language that reported the issuance of the first" (Levenson, 73.(

[14]Chakham, p. 31; Levenson, p. 79 (also suggesting that Mordekhai is presented here as a "representative" of the nation as a whole); Berlin, p. 105.

[15]Berlin, 106

[16]This hint also finds expression in the unusual form of the sentence, beginning with the subject: "U-Mordekhai yada," instead of "Va-yada Mordekhai." This change encourages the reader to deduce that Mordekhai has some prior knowledge, based not only upon Haman's sending of the letters (Chakham, p. 29.(

[17]As Fox implies, p. 60

[18]The repetition of the verb has led many scholars to change the wording here (following the example of the Septuagint). Some have defined it as an example of dittography (Moore, p. 68) or as a scribal error (Gerleman, p. 121), while others have defined it in gentler terms as "strange" (A. Meinhold, Das Buch Esther, Zurich 1983, p. 65). For other approaches and a discussion on the subject, see: Bush, pp. 428-429. An acceptable proposed correction is an amendment of the first verb to "va-yemaher." "King Achashverosh made haste and said to Queen Esther…" (Ehrlich, Ringren). However, as noted, there is no need for any amendment; the repetition should be regarded as part of the literary expression of the king's astonishment, as proposed, for example, by H. Striedl, "Untersuchung zur Syntax und Stilistik des hebräischen Buches Esther," ZAW 14 (1937), p. 106; W. Dommershausen, Ester, Die neue Echter Bible, Würzburg 1980, p. 95; Meinhold, p. 65, note 19, and the sources mentioned in note 19 hereunder. To Bush's view, the repetition is meant for the purposes of "delay" (Bush, 432.(.

[19]Similarly, Chakham p. 45; Berlin, p. 127.

[20]From a reading of the narrative it is not clear exactly how much time elapses between the sending of the letters and the second party arranged by Esther, with the subsequent hanging of Haman. We know of three days of fasting before Esther presents herself before the king, and another day that passes between the first party and the second one, such that at least four days have gone by. But before Mordekhai sends the copy of the decree to Esther, we read: "In each and every province where the king's word and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing." Thus, it is possible that the letters were sent off and publicized, and Esther heard only afterwards. It is reasonable to assume that it would have taken the couriers two or three weeks to reach all of the king's outlying provinces and to publicize the edict. Hence,

it would seem that about a month passes between the sending of the letters and the hanging of Haman.

[21]Moreover, Haman does not mention, in his proposal to the king, the identity of the nation in question. Weiser suggests that this is what surprises the king: "The king perceives Haman's deviousness in hiding from him the name of the dispersed nation, and understands the plight that has befallen it" (A. Weiser, "Megillat Esther," Sefer Korngin, 5724, p. 136) and, similarly, Clines, p. 295.

[22]Levenson, p. 103 [his third suggestion[

[23]Bush, p. 432

[24]Some opinions agree that the king cannot punish Haman for the actual decree, and conclude that the punishment meted out to him is for his falling upon the couch upon which Esther lies (such as, for example, Clines, 1984, above, note 110, p. 313). According to the suggested reading discussed above, the king punishes Haman for the actual writing of the letters since, from the king's point of view, he is not party to them.

[25]For example: in order for Haman to be hanged, there is a need for a more serious crime than the writing of letters that the king himself has signed. In order for the following image to materialize – with Haman falling down on the couch upon which Esther lies – the king must be removed from the scene (L. H. Brockington, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, NCB, London 1969, p. 239; Moore 1971, above, note 106, p. 71; Clines 1984, above, note 110, p. 312, etc.) See also note 26 below, concerning Fox's hypothesis.

[26]In contrast to Fox's reading, according to which the king remembers and knows that he signed the decree, he therefore goes out to the palace garden at a loss: "The king certainly cannot handle this predicament on the spot" (p. 86.(

[27]Bush, 1996, above, note 106, p. 430. Some readers may associate this expression ("Evil was destined against him by the king") with the words of Naval's attendant to Avigayil: "Evil is destined against our master and against all of his household" (I Shemuel 25:17). In our instance, though, in contrast to the story of David and Naval – where Avigayil intervenes and appeases David - the intervener in Haman's case (Charvona) serves only to exacerbate the king's anger, and an evil end indeed awaits Haman.

[28]Therefore, those scholars who define the image of Achashverosh asking "Who is he, and where is he" as an ironic one, are correct – for Haman is right in front of him. At the same time, we may describe this image as "artificial, dramatic irony" (rather than situational irony), since the king's ignorance is the result of Haman misleading him. (Based on Sedgewick's definitions in "The Irony of Sophocles" in D. Gilula (ed.), "King Oedipus and Sophocles: The Creation and Its Creator" [Heb.], Jerusalem 1991, p. 75(.

[29]As we find in Megilla 15b

[30]Similarly, Barton and Muddiman, The Oxford Biblical Commentary, Oxford 2001, p. 328, suggest: "Perhaps, because Esther mentions an alternative scenario — that the order might have been to enslave the Jews rather than annihilate them — he had thought he was authorizing a servitude plan".

[31]Therefore, Esther's words should not be regarded as a "hypothetical threat of servitude – a serious matter, to be sure, but one that appears of lesser import than the threat of physical extinction" (as Berlin reads it, p. 125). This is no mere "hypothetical" decree that emerges from Esther's imagination, but rather the actual decree that the king believes that he agreed to.

[32]Moore, p. 70; Bush, p. 432 ("Idiom with a double entendre"); Berlin, p. 125. Levenson (p. 102) quotes, in the context of this verse, the following verse from Nechemia 5:8 – "And I said to them: We have redeemed our brethren, the Jews who were sold to the

nations, to the extent that we were able; will you then also sell your brethren, or shall they be sold to us? And they were silent, and found no answer".

" [33]It is ironic, but perhaps inevitable, that Haman does not follow the outraged king into the garden, and therefore that he turns to plead for his life with one whom he had previously contrived to condemn to death" (W.J. Fuerst, The Five Scrolls, CBC, Cambridge 1975, p. 75.(

[34]Belin, p. 133

[35]Zakovitz notes the connection between the writing of the letters in Esther and the writing of the letters by Izevel. He compares the language describing the dispatch of the letters by Mordekhai and Esther (8:10) and those of Izevel, emphasizing the difference between Mordekhai, who obtains the king's permission before writing, and Izevel, who writes without her husband's knowledge (Y. Zakovitz, "Kerem Haya le-Navot," in M. Weiss, Ha-Mikra Ki-demuto, Jerusalem 5747 [3], p. 356, as well as Belin, p. 134.) A further image from Esther is molded in light of the dialogue between Achav and Izevel in the story of the vineyard of Navot: the scene in which Haman returns home and Zeresh, his wife, and all his close associates suggest that he build a gallows and hang Mordekhai upon it (5:14). We shall address this literary connection later on.

[36]For a similar explanation, see: Y. Zakovitz, "Kerem Haya le-Navot," in M. Weiss, Ha-Mikra Ki-demuto, Jerusalem 5747 [3], p. 356; Y. Amit, Likro Sipur Mikra'i, Published by the Israeli Ministry of Defense, 5760, pp. 61-64.

[37] Zakovitz, Ibid., p. 371. To our view, this narrative may be viewed alongside the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden: he ate of the forbidden fruit because he was tempted by his wife; nevertheless, he was punished as being responsible for his actions. But this parallel enhances the acute sensitivity to the ruler's responsibility in the case of Achav, more than in the story of the Garden of Eden, for Adam ultimately ate of the fruit out of free choice, while Achav had no knowledge (even after the fact!) of Navot's murder.