

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
Megillat Esther
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #02: Timeframe and Chronology (Chapter 1)

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The question of when a certain biblical narrative transpired historically is not necessarily relevant to comprehending it completely. Thus, for example, Iyov is not anchored in some specific historical moment, and the narrative and its moral lesson can be understood without knowledge of the historical context of its occurrence or composition. Its historical situation neither adds to nor detracts from Iyov's suffering, and it has no effect on the fundamental positions expressed by any of his companions, nor on God's reaction to these events.[1]

Seemingly, one could imagine that Esther falls into the same category. This is undoubtedly an "Exile narrative," and it clearly occurs during the period of the Persian Empire, but any attempt to locate it more precisely on a historical continuum may appear unnecessary. What does it matter whether these events take place immediately upon the ascent of Persia as the ruling empire, or sometime later, during the empire's decline? The wickedness of Haman remains the identical either way; the wisdom and selflessness of Esther are unchanged; the plot will bring a smile to the face of its readers, regardless .

Indeed, some scholars maintain that Esther is not meant to reflect any historical event that happened at a specific time; rather, it is a fictional story: "The story narrated in the Megilla is historically improbable, and several contemporary scholars concur that it should be regarded as a fictional tale, like other narratives that were popular among the Jews in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora during the Persian period and during the Hellenistic period." [2] A less extreme formulation is proposed by other scholars who regard Esther as a historical novel – i.e., the main plot of the narrative contains a kernel of genuine historical truth. Indeed, during Achashverosh's time, a decree was passed to annihilate the Jews, and this decree was rescinded in the wake of Esther's intervention; however – according to this view – the author elaborated on this historical core and added details at his own discretion. [3]

The question is not whether the narrative, as it appears in Esther, actually happened or not, [4] but rather whether a specific historical context represents the background that is crucial to our understanding of it. In other words: does the historical period in which the narrative is set have any special significance for our understanding of the narrative and its hidden messages?

The narrative opens by noting an historical point when the events take place: "It was in the days of Achashverosh – he was Achashverosh who ruled from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces" (1:1). This introduction does not sound foreign to anyone familiar with Tanakh, although only four other narratives begin in this way. [5] The setting of the narrative at a specific historical point establishes a reading consciousness and has a significant influence on the analysis of the events. In a narrative that makes no mention of any timeframe, the reader tends to ignore the issue of its historical location (as, for example, in Iyov), while in a narrative that begins by noting its historical context, it is reasonable that this background influences our understanding of the events or their significance.

Indeed, it would seem that the historical setting of Esther is of considerable significance as pertains to the work's hidden messages, and that a fundamental aspect of that message is profoundly connected to the specific historical period within which the plot is narrated. Interestingly, the introductory verse focuses the reader's attention on the Persian regime rather than the corresponding state of the Jewish nation (for instance, "It was during the seventh year of the exile of Judea," or the suchlike).[6] In this respect, the narrator plays innocent and conveys the sense that he is about to tell a story of the Persian Empire – as we noted in our discussion of the literary framework of the narrative as a whole. As we shall see later on, this is one of the motifs interwoven throughout: the disparity between the Persian exterior of the narrative and the Jewish perspective within it.

Any discussion of the historical setting that opens the narrative must mention the well-known debate as to the identity of King Achashverosh. Clearly, he was one of the Persian kings of the Achaemenid dynasty (539-330 B.C.E.). This dynasty, comprising ten generations of kings, began with Cyrus, who defeated the Babylonians (539 B.C.E.) and ended with the death of Darius III (330 B.C.E.), approximately three years after the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander of Macedon (Alexander the Great), ushering in the Hellenistic period.

But which of the Achaemenid kings was Achashverosh? Among contemporary scholars, opinions are divided into two main schools of thought:

A. Giving the narrative a later date tends to identify Achashverosh with Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.E.). This view is supported by the Septuagint (where the king's name appears as "Artaxerxes") and by Josephus Flavius.[7]

B. An earlier – and more widely accepted – date identifies Achashverosh as Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.E.).[8]

This latter view rests upon four major proofs:

.1The king's Persian name – חשיארש – is very similar to the name in Hebrew – ,אחשורוש, especially when attention is paid to the way in which the name is written in 10:1, without the vav.[9]

.2The Greek historian Herodotus, who describes the Achaemenid Persian dynasty in vivid colors, speaks of Xerxes as a king overcome with lust for women and wine (echoing the description of Achashverosh in Esther), and also as having a magnificent palace in Shushan, and reigning from India to Ethiopia.

.3In the Babylonian city of Sifar, an administrative record was discovered noting that during the period of this king there was a senior official from the city of Shushan who served as the royal treasurer by the name of Mardukâ. This name is highly reminiscent of Mordekhai the Jew.

.4Finally, the only other biblical reference (outside of Esther) to Haman's decree, in Ezra, would seem to identify Achashverosh as Xerxes: "The people of the land would weaken the hands of the people of Judea, and frightened them off from building. They hired advisors against them, to frustrate their planning, throughout the time of Cyrus, King of Persia, and until the reign of Darius, King of Persia. And during the reign of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote accusations against the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem. And during the days of Artaxerxes they wrote..." (Ezra 4:4-7). If, indeed, Achashverosh was Xerxes, then we have an orderly account of the beginning of the dynasty: Cyrus – Darius – Xerxes (Achashverosh) – Artaxerxes.[10]

As noted, this is the most widely accepted identification among the scholars of that period, and – as we shall discover – this information is of great importance in unearthing the concealed meanings of the narrative.

Let us now turn our attention to one fact of extreme importance for our understanding of the real context of Esther. If Achashverosh is indeed Xerxes, then the narrative transpires about 100 years after the destruction of the First Temple and – more importantly – about thirty years after the dedication of the altar of the Second Temple.

Thus, it becomes immediately apparent that the people of Shushan – including Mordekhai and Esther – were not among those Jews who returned to the Land of Israel, who acceded to Cyrus's Proclamation of freedom to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. While the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel is struggling to exist, to survive, to build the Temple – the Jews of Shushan are sitting comfortably, enjoying the sumptuous feast organized by the Persian king for all the inhabitants of his capital.

The situation of those Jews who had returned from the Babylonian exile was dire. This was true both in the politico-religious realm (since the other nations living in the land opposed the rebuilding of the Temple) and especially in the economic sphere, to the point where some were forced to sell their children into indentured servitude so as to be able to pay the heavy taxes imposed upon them (Nehemiah 5:1-4). Towards the end of Nehemiah's leadership, the priestly tithes and other gifts were no longer given, for lack of financial ability (Nehemiah 13:10.)

Yet, while this battle for survival was going on in their homeland, the Jews of Shushan flourished and enjoyed an abundance of material comforts. At the beginning of Esther we discern no hint of any discrimination against the Jews of Shushan. On the contrary – some of them attain senior positions in the Persian kingdom, and some of their children even marry into Persian royalty. As noted previously, the introductory words, "It was in the days of Achashverosh..." serve to focus our consciousness of historical time away from what was going on in the Land of Israel and towards the events in Persia. But, is this an innocent declaration of intent, implying that the story has nothing to do with the Jewish history going on in the Land of Israel, or is it an pretense of innocence, whereby the narrative indeed appears to be disconnected from the goings-on there, while in fact it points to the author's discomfort at focusing on the Jews of Shushan while ignoring their brethren who are struggling desperately in the Land of Israel?

In this context it is interesting to go back to the description of Haman's decrees as recorded in Ezra – a description that reflects the perspective of those who had returned to Zion: "During the reign of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:6). If the accusation recorded in this verse refers to Haman's decree, then it is described in a most surprising manner.[11] Was Haman's decree really only written concerning "the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem"? From the description of the decrees in Esther, we know that they applied throughout "all of the king's provinces" – i.e., all 127 provinces!

This is a rare instance in which we discern a dual attitude towards the same event, from the two real, historical perspectives of the authors of two different works (as opposed to a mere change of literary perspective). Esther, narrated from the Shushanite perspective, expresses the danger hovering over the continued existence of the entire Jewish nation, and the great

salvation that comes to the Jews thanks to the actions of Mordekhai and Esther. In Ezra, in contrast – written from the perspective of the Land of Israel – the focus of the decrees is the danger that they pose towards the Jewish settlement in the land. The book's focus on the Jews' attempt to renew their national existence in their land places the events of that period under a "Land of Israel" magnifying glass, and it is from this perspective that Haman's decrees are conveyed.

The difference in perspective is no mere literary discrepancy; it hints at a political difference of opinion, or – as we might call it – an idealistic-moral debate. The two Jewish centers of the time were at odds, and the historian seeking to record the story of Jewish history is forced to choose where his focus will be: the Land of Israel – where the Jewish settlement is struggling for its survival and trying to build the Second Temple, or the majority of the Jewish nation, which is still in the Babylonian-Persian exile.

As noted, the midrashim of the Sages in the Babylonian Talmud (especially in Tractate Megilla) contain hidden literary readings of Esther. The tension between the inhabitants of Shushan and the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, busy building the Second Temple, surfaces in several different teachings.[12] Thus, for example, Achashverosh is described as counting seventy years from the time when Israel was led into exile, and when he saw that after seventy years (according to his count) they had not been redeemed, he assumed that they would never be. At that point he brought out the Temple vessels and used them at the feast that he held for the inhabitants of Shushan (Megilla 11a).[13] The use that Achashverosh made of the Temple vessels is presented, in this Midrash, as an alternative to their intended use in their original home. In other words, because the Jews were not going to be redeemed and the Temple was not going to be rebuilt, the vessels could serve the Persian king at his feasts.[14]

Can we find any hint to this tension within the text itself? Does the author hint in any way to the Jewish center in the Land of Israel and to the Temple being built there? It would seem that the answer is yes. There are hints throughout the narrative, but for now let us concentrate on the description of the royal palace, and the description of the feasts in chapter 1.

Paton comments on some literary connections between the palace of Achashverosh and the Sanctuary and the Temple in Jerusalem.[15] These connections exist both on the architectural level and on the linguistic level of the description of the feast; the description of the structure of the royal palace is reminiscent of the structure of the Temple – especially as recorded in the vision of Yechezkel.[16] The comparison is striking in the arrangement of the royal palace in two halls, "The inner court of the king's house" (5:1) and "the outer court" (6:4). This connection may find further support in the author's use of the title "capital" (bira) for the palace precinct in Shushan.[17] It is clear that this was an accepted name for this region of Persia. Daniel, too, refers to it in his vision: "I saw in a vision, and it was when I saw, that I was in Shushan the capital, which is in the province of Elam" (Daniel 8:2). Still, it may be no coincidence that the other place in the Bible that is referred to as "bira" is Jerusalem (and the Temple within it), as, for example, in David's prayer: "And to Shelomo, my son, grant a whole heart to observe Your commandments, testimonies and statutes, and to perform all of it, and to build the capital which I have prepared" (I Divrei Ha-yamim 29:19.)

It is not clear when this title began to be used for Jerusalem and for the Temple (it is definitely a later word[18]). However, if the author of Esther was familiar with it as a name for Jerusalem, it is possible that he sought thereby to hint at the tension discussed above:

which is the "bira"? Which is the royal city – the city of Achashverosh's kingdom, or the city in which the Temple is located?[19]

In the description of the feast that is held in the royal palace, too, it seems that the author of Esther seeks to bring the Temple to the mind of the reader. Attention should be paid to the materials listed in the description of the feast: "Hangings of white, of fine cotton, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple" (1:6). A quick comparison shows that the associations aroused by these materials are clearly related to the Temple:

" -Blue" (tekhelet) is mentioned in Tanakh forty-nine times. Out of these, forty-two appearances are connected to the Sanctuary and the Temple.[20]

-The "cords of fine linen" likewise are reminiscent of the Temple. "Fine linen" (butz) is mentioned in Tanakh seven times. It appears twice in Esther, and once in Yechezkel's prophecy concerning Tzor (27:17).[21] The other four appearances are connected to the Temple and the Ark of God's Covenant (I Divrei Ha-yamim 15:26; II Divrei Ha-yamim 2:13; 3:14; 5:12.)

-Finally, the purple, which is mentioned in juxtaposition to these other materials. Out of thirty-eight appearances of this word in Tanakh, twenty-nine times it is related to the creation of the Sanctuary and the building of the Temple.

It is possible that the use of the unusual verb y-s-d, with reference to the establishment of law and custom ("For so the king had instructed all the officers of his house, to do according to the wishes of each person" – 1:8), may be meant to arouse associations of the verb y-s-d in Tanakh – which concern the establishment of God's city and God's House (I Melakhim 6:37; Yishayahu 14:32; 28:16; Chaggai 2:18; Zekharya 8:9). Against this background, the reader learns of the "establishment" of a special law by the king – that anyone who attends the feast is entitled to drink as much as he chooses to, and whichever type of wine he prefers.

Clearly, then, by invoking these materials and colors, the author seeks to arouse associations of a different place with a different atmosphere. One could still argue that the two palaces are not meant to compete with one another, but rather that one teaches us something about the other. Timothy Laniak raises this idea in a different context, after arguing for an associative relationship between the description of Achashverosh's kingdom and a description of God's Kingdom: "... In Esther 1, a similar sentiment might be evident: If a human king has the right to banish any subject guilty of disrespect, how much more would God, the King of the Universe".[22]

To my mind, the situation is quite the opposite. The author of Esther seems to present the Temple in Jerusalem as an alternative to his description of the royal palace in Shushan. The unlimited drinking and exaggerated self-aggrandizement with wealth and riches (see further below) are not noted as an introduction to God's Kingdom, as Laniak argues, but rather as an antithesis. A sophisticated reader who hears the sounds of the Temple from behind the description of the royal palace senses, through the author's hints, something of the difference and contrast between the two edifices.[23]

The relationship between the two readings is quite surprising. The associations do not serve to deepen the message that arises from the text. In this instance, attention to the Temple associations turns the narrative upside down: the atmosphere of gaiety that characterizes the descriptions of the king's feasting, turns, in the mind of the reader (the target reader, to whom the narrative is addressed) into an atmosphere of anguish and destruction. The vivid colors of the feast that – on the level of the plain reading – add majesty to the narrative, suddenly turn into symbols of destruction for the Jewish people, a commemoration of the Temple and a

condemnation of the Jews of Shushan, luxuriating in the lavish royal feast rather than helping their brethren who had returned to their land.

Where should the narrative begin?

The focus on the king's feast and on its strong colors is emphasized from another angle, too – the matter of the timeframe of the narrative; not its historical context (which we have discussed above), but rather the literary timeline of the plot.

The question we pose as a heading for this section – "Where does the narrative begin?" – may surprise some readers: surely a narrative should begin at the beginning. However, a plot that is composed of small units, each drawing the next along, requires a decision that is not always easy to make: what is the first image with which the narrative should begin, so as to present the plot to the reader in the most perfect form possible?

To illustrate the difficulty, every reader is invited to think about which point he would choose with which to start telling the story of his life, or more specifically, the part of his life in the present that led him to his present workplace or place of residence. Some people would start the story with their interview, over the summer, with their boss, at which point they were hired. Others would start with some significant experience during adolescence, which led them to their field of occupation (from there everything just fell into place...). Another approach would be to start the story from childhood, where the various aspects of one's personality are formed. There may even be some people who would choose to start with the story of how their parents met each other, since their parents are the basis for their world of values and culture. I imagine that readers would agree that, in a certain sense, every story starts from the ultimate "beginning": "In the beginning God created..." (Bereishit 1:1), but anyone choosing to start his life's story in this way would have few listeners...

The question may appear to be sophistry, but there are some fateful issues that depend on it. Similarly, for example, the question as to where the story of Yitzchak's blessings to his sons (Bereishit 27) begins will significantly affect our judgment of the characters. If we start from the beginning of chapter 27 ("It was when Yitzchak was old..."), then we are likely to be critical of Yaakov and of Rivka. How can a son and his mother exploit the weakness of the elderly father so as to "steal" the blessing meant for the other son?! If we use this as our point of departure we feel that Yaakov and his mother have violated a moral principle which, in Sefer Vayikra, is given formal definition: "You shall not place a stumbling-block before the blind, and you shall fear your God; I am the Lord" (Vayikra 19:14). If, on the other hand, we read the episode of the stolen blessing as part of the series of narratives – i.e., if we read it against the background of Eisav's sale of the birthright to Yaakov, and of Rivka's prophecy as to the younger son's superiority in relation to his elder brother ("The elder shall serve the younger")^[24] – then, of course, our moral perception and judgment will be entirely different.

This question is of fundamental importance in the context of Esther. The plot is built from small literary units, each of which may be analyzed in its own right, but at the same time each influences the next and represents its foundation and background. A narrative constructed in such a way lends this question critical significance.

Indeed, when we examine the narrative from this perspective we discover an interesting phenomenon. Esther is full of dates, of important landmarks in the plot (Achashverosh's feast; Queen Esther; the dissemination of Haman's decrees; the dissemination of Mordekhai's

letters, etc.). The highlighting of these dates serves to emphasize the chain of events, each drawing the next along and influencing it. The chronology, hints the author, is the basis of this sort of narrative, and it must be read in the proper order.[25]

In any event, this serves to make it easier for us to follow the narrative. The actual plot takes place during the twelfth year of the reign of Achashverosh: at the beginning of that year (Nissan) Haman decides to take revenge on Mordekhai and his nation, and he casts the lot ("In the first month, which is the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of King Achashverosh, they cast the pur – that is, the lot – before Haman" – 3:7). Later in that same month he sends dispatches of his wicked decrees (on the 13th of Nissan – 3:12). A short time later Haman is hanged on the gallows that he prepared for Mordekhai, and in Sivan of that same year Mordekhai sends his letters, permitting the Jews to defend themselves ("The king's scribes were called at that time, in the third month – which is the month of Sivan – on the twenty-third day of the month..." – 8:9). In the last month of the twelfth year of Achashverosh's reign, in the month of Adar, the battles are waged; the Jews defend themselves and prevail over those who hate them (chapter 9.)

It would have been possible, then, for the Esther narrative to begin in that year (i.e., with the events recounted in chapter 3). If the reader were unaware of the circumstances of Esther's presence in the palace, the integrity of the plot would in no way be diminished. On the other hand, an earlier point could have been chosen as the beginning of the narrative: it may have begun with the death of Esther's parents and her adoption by Mordekhai, or Achashverosh's ascent to the throne, or the process of Haman's promotion to his senior position, etc.[26]

What is the significance of choosing to begin the narrative with Achashverosh's feast and the banishing of Vashti? Why is the feast presented as the beginning of the story?[27] To answer this question we must clarify which stages and developments the author gains by starting at this point. In other words – what would the reader be missing if the story began in the twelfth year, from Haman's rise to power (chapter 3)? Two images would disappear: first, Achashverosh's feast and the manner in which Vashti was banished (chapter 1); and second, the manner in which Esther was chosen as the new queen (chapter 2.)

The inclusion of the story of Vashti's removal and the selection of Esther within the narrative serves to expose some of its fundamental principles. The first of these is what the Babylonian Talmud refers to as "Preceding the affliction with its cure": "After these things" – Rabba taught: [This means,] after the Holy One, blessed be He, had created the cure for the affliction. As Reish Lakish taught: The Holy One does not strike at Israel without first creating their healing" (Megilla 13b.)

The innocent reader (unaware of the continuation of the story) who finishes chapter 2 never imagines the possibility that Esther's arrival in the royal palace holds the seed of salvation for all of the Jews. Not only the innocent reader, but also the characters themselves would never dream of such a scenario. The "neutral" event of Esther's selection assumes its proper significance only years later (more accurately, five years later), when it becomes clear how Esther's position plays a decisive role in the development of the plot and in saving her entire nation. When the story develops in this way, the reader enters a reading experience in which he relinquishes in advance his full understanding of the significance of every episode, as examined individually. Against his will, the reader finds himself in perpetual tension with the images that he has not yet encountered, illuminating anew those with which he is already familiar, and imbuing them with new meaning.

Beyond the molding of the narrative in such a way that the seeds sown in the beginning will ripen later on and assume an important role in the development of the plot, it seems that attention should also be paid to the concealed reading that lies behind the description of the feast. It is at this feast that Achashverosh ascends the literary stage, with the feast revealing something of his values and culture. In other words, aside from the actual development of the plot (the removal of Vashti and her replacement with Esther), these images serve to form the image of the king in the narrative.

In the next shiur, then, we shall address the beginning of the story: the presentation of the king and of his feasts.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

[1]Chazal hint to this in their proposition of numerous and varied opinions as to when Iyov lived. This multiplicity of views hints that we can understand the book and its moral message with no connection to the historical context of its occurrence or its composition. Whether the narrative occurs during the period of the forefathers or whether the Second Temple period is its backdrop (or even whether it never actually took place at all, but rather – as the Talmud maintains – is merely a parable), the book's message remains equally valid and relevant.

[2]Berlin 2001, p. 3. It must be remembered that no record of this story has been found in Persian sources (N.S. Doniach, *Purim or the Feast of Esther*, Philadelphia 1933, pp. 9-53; P. Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, Philadelphia 1949; Moore 1980, pp. 220-226. At the same time, from a Persian perspective, the Purim story is not all that extraordinary: it is quite reasonable to assume that political tensions, like royal decrees disseminated throughout the royal realm, were fairly common. Still, the lack of any sign of Persian interest in the story is not proof that it never took place.

[3]O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, an Introduction* (tr. by P. R. Ackroyd), Oxford 1966 and, following his example, Y. Kaufman, *History of the Israelite Faith*, vol. VIII, Tel Aviv 5720, p. 440 [Heb.] ("In its details the narrative is an artistic creation, but it is based upon a historical event.")

[4]To clarify the matter: it is clear to me that the story did take place – if only because Chazal and the great Jewish sages of all generations treated it as historical fact. What I seek to clarify is the difference between the historical question in and of itself and the historical question raised from the perspective of the intention of the narrative.

[5]The war of the four kings against the five, and the salvation of Lot (Bereishit 14: "It was in the days of Amrafel..."); the war of Aram and Israel against Achaz, King of Judea (Yishayahu 7: "It was in the days of Achaz..."); Yirmiyahu (Yirmiyahu 1: "It was in the days of Yehoyakim, son of Yoshiyahu"); Ruth (Ruth 1: It was in the days when the judges judged.)...

[6]Compare, for example, the beginning of Yechezkel: "In the fifth month in the fifth year of the exile of King Yoyakhin..." (Yechezkel 1:2.)

[7]Antiquities of the Jews XI 6,1. This view is adopted, for example, by M. Heltzer, "Introduction to Megillat Esther," *The World of the Bible* [Heb], Tel Aviv 1994, p. 216.

[8]Thus, for example, G.H. Cohen, "Introduction to Esther," *Da'at Mikra*, Jerusalem 5733, pp. 4-6. For an elaboration on this complex issue see: J. Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in Light of History*, Philadelphia 1923, pp. 42-80; 125-129; 166-168; 236.

[9]There is an Aramaic inscription in which the king is called) אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ with an aleph prefix), similar to its appearance in Esther. Some opinions maintain that the addition of the aleph was meant to ease the difficulty of pronouncing the opening consonantal combination as it appears in Persian) (חַשְׁיֹאֲרֵשׂא) M. Haltzer, Ezra, The World of the Bible [Heb.] Tel Aviv 1994, p. 150.

[10]The omission of any explicit mention of Cambyses may be explained by the expression "Until the reign of Darius," hinting that the period of Cambyses is included within this description.

[11]The question of whether the text in Ezra is hinting at Haman's decrees is a complicated one; for some reason, the text there does not explicitly set out what the accusation was. In any event, since Achashverosh is mentioned, it is reasonable to posit that the reference is to the same event .

[12]An echo of the discomfort at the excessive and hedonistic conditions of the Jews in Shushan is discerned in the Babylonian Talmud's attempt to clarify which sins of the Jews made them deserving of such a terrible decree of destruction: "The students of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai asked him: For what reason were [the enemies of] Israel in that generation deserving of annihilation? He said to them: You tell me. They said to him: Because they enjoyed the feast of that wicked one" (Megilla 12a). Although Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai goes on to suggest a different explanation, it is difficult not to sense the critical view arising from the Talmud toward the Jews of Shushan for the very fact of their living in Persia and their very participation in the king's feast.

[13]See also 19a.

[14]Other midrashim hint at a tension between the two edifices: "'When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom' – Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina taught: This teaches that he wore the priestly garments. In this context [Esther] it is written, 'The honor of his excellent majesty,' while there [in the context of the Temple] it is written, 'For glory and for majesty'" (Megilla 12a). Thus, according to the Sages, not only the vessels of the Temple were put to "alternative" use, but also the priestly garments. Once the reader imagines the holy vessels of the Temple being passed around at the king's feast, and the king himself dressed in the priestly garments, then the next Midrash is obvious:

"Next to him was Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish" – Rabbi Levi taught: This entire verse recalls the sacrifices. "Karshena" – The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, have they offered before You year-old lambs (karim benei shana), as Israel used to offer before You? "Shetar" – Have they offered before You the two turtle doves (shetei torim)? "Admata" – Have they built an earthen (adama) altar to You? "Tarshish" – Have they served You, dressed in the priestly garments, as it is written: Beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper. "Meres" – have they stirred (mirsu) [sacrificial] blood before You? "Marsena" – Have they stirred meal offerings (mirsu menachot) before You? "Memukhan" – Have they prepared (hekhinu) a table for You? (Megilla 12b)

Similarly, we find another midrash:

"Ten thousand talents of silver" – Reish Lakish taught: It is clear and known before Him Who spoke and the world came into existence that Haman was destined to weigh shekels against Israel; therefore [God] ensured that their shekels preceded his. This is as it is written, "On the first of Adar they proclaim as to shekels and as to kilayim" (Megilla 13b). The conflict between the feast of this Gentile king and the sacrificial feasting that was held in the Temple of the King of kings is clearly discernible, and serves as a basis for further midrashim. To summarize, we may mention the Talmudic exposition on the threat that the king sensed to be facing his kingdom: "The king said to her, to Queen Esther: What is your request? Up to half of the kingdom – it shall be performed." 'Half of the kingdom' – but not the entire kingdom,

nor something that will block the kingdom. What would that be? The building of the Temple." (Megilla 15b)

[15]Paton 1908, pp. 138-139

[16]Rabbi Y. Bin-Nun, "Book of Reversals" [Heb.] in Hadassa Hi Esther, *Alon Shevut* 5757, pp. 47-54.

[17]Which was located inside the city of Shushan, which was the capital of Eilam, and which Darius made into the major administrative capital of the Persian Empire. On its western side, Darius built a fortified royal city that was called "Shushan the capital". The source of the name 'bira' (capital) seems to be the Akkadian "birtu," meaning "fort" (see further in Berlin 2001, pp. 60-61).

[18]BDB p. 108

[19]It is possible that this is the tension that the Sages hint at in their teaching that Achashverosh ruled over only half of his ancestors' kingdom (127 provinces rather than 252): 'Seven and twenty and a hundred' – Rabbi Elazar taught in the name of R. Chanina: Are there not 252 prefectures in the world? David ruled over all of them... Shelomo ruled over all of them... Achav ruled over all of them... Nevukhadnetzar ruled over all of them... Cyrus ruled over all of them... Darius ruled over all of them... Achashverosh ruled over half of them! Why only half? R. Huna, representing the position of R. Acha, argued with the Sages. R. Huna taught in the name of R. Acha: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You divided My Kingship when you said, 'He is the God who is in Jerusalem.' By your life, I shall divide your kingdom." But the Sages taught: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "You divided the structure of My House, by saying: 'Let it be sixty cubits high and sixty cubits wide.' By your life, I shall divide your kingdom" (Esther Rabba, parasha 1,5). According to these midrashim, the kings of Cyrus's dynasty were punished and their kingdom was divided because Cyrus caused (even if indirectly) a desecration of God's Kingship in the world. (The Midrash may seek to create an analogy to the division of Shelomo's kingdom, between Rechavam (the Kingdom of Judea) and Yeravam (Kingdom of Israel).) The Midrash does not explain why it was specifically during the period of Achashverosh that this punishment came into effect, such that the kingdom was divided. Perhaps there was a sense that specifically during the period of Achashverosh's reign the tension between the two kingdoms – that in Jerusalem and that in Shushan – was especially apparent.

[20]As regards the other appearances, there is room to discuss whether these, too, are not perhaps connected – at least indirectly – to the idea of the Temple in Israel. Thus, for example, the mention of tekhelet in the commandment of fringes on one's garments (Bamidbar 15:38) is apparently connected to the gold diadem worn by the High Priest, and which was tied with a blue thread to the turban (Shemot 28:37).

[21]Not surprisingly, this prophecy also mentions the world of the Temple, in indirect contexts. In this respect the mention of "fine linen" fits in well.

[22]Laniak 1998, p. 58

[23]It is appropriate to conclude this comparison between the two feasts with the comment of the Sages concerning the words, "When the king's heart was merry with wine": "R. Yitzchak said: Idolaters have no good, as it is written, 'There shall be no good for the wicked...!' How, then, can the text say, 'When the king's heart was merry (lit. "good") with wine?' The answer is: It is not written 'When the king's heart was merry...' (be-tov lev ha-melekh), but rather 'ke-tov lev ha-melekh' – it was 'sort of' good. But the goodness of Israel is complete, as it is written: 'They went to their tents joyful and merry of heart (tovei lev) for all the goodness...' (Esther Rabba, parasha 3,11). The verse that is cited to describe the complete goodness of Israel is from the celebration of the establishment of the First Temple (I Melakhim 8:66). The reason for Israel's joy at that time was "all the goodness that God had performed for David, His servant, and for Israel, His nation" (Ibid.).

[24]In accordance with the translation of Onkelos and the interpretation of the Rashbam, ad loc.

[25]However, the multiplicity of dates should also be regarded as an ironic play of innocence: the author presents the kingdom as a place of law and order, while festivity and wine reign supreme. On the basis of this element Israel Rosenson analyzes several motifs in Esther, revealing – beneath the formal, legal veneer - profound scorn for the procedures of the Persian kingdom (Y. Rosenson, *Massekhet Megillot*, Jerusalem 5762 (second, expanded edition), pp. 184-185.)

[26]It is possible that this deliberation stands as the basis of the Tannaitic debate concerning the point in the story from which a person must hear the reading in order to fulfill his obligation: From which point must a person read the Megilla in order to fulfill his obligation? Rabbi Meir said: The entire Megilla. Rabbi Yehuda said: From [the words], "A Jewish man...." Rabbi Yossi said: From [the words], "After these things..." (Mishna Megilla, chapter 2, Mishna 3). The Gemara brings a fourth opinion: "We learn: Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: From "On that night..." (Megilla 19a) [In the Tosefta this opinion is attributed to R. Shimon ben Lazer – Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar. Tosefta Megilla, parasha 2, law 5, Lieberman p. 350. In some manuscripts the "son of Lazer" is omitted; the reference, then, is to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (who is usually referred to simply as "Rabbi Shimon"), and thus it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (chapter 2, law 3). For further discussion see S. Lieberman, "Tosefta Ke-peshuta," New York 5722, p. 1150)]. Thus, there are four different opinions as to the point from which a person must start reading (or hearing) the story in order to fulfill his obligation. According to Rabbi Meir, the entire story must be read. Rabbi Yehuda maintains that one must at least read from the moment when Mordekhai appears on the literary stage. Rabbi Yossi insists that the reading must begin at least from Haman's rise to power – i.e., the events of the twelfth year – as we proposed above. And Rabbi Shimon boldly proposes that even if someone reads only the half of the story where everything was reversed – from "On that night the king could not sleep..." – he has fulfilled his obligation.

[27]Sandra Berg emphasizes, quite correctly, that feasting is one of the central motifs accompanying the reader throughout the narrative (Berg 1977, pp. 31-35). It is reasonable to suggest that introducing the story with such a detailed account of the king's feasts serves to focus the reader's attention on the feasts in the story. In a future shiur we shall return to the various feasts and their significance.