

Shiur #15: Mordekhai is Led on Horseback

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

"These with chariots, and those with horses, but we shall invoke the Name of the Lord our God; they have bent over and fallen, while we have arisen and been strengthened"

On the night between the two parties that Esther holds for the king and Haman, sleep escapes the king. As we have discussed previously, the king's insomnia invites us to take a glimpse into his thoughts. The very fact that in order to calm himself he asks for the "Book of Records of the Chronicles" (a legal and historical work),[1] and that he opens it to the section recording "rebellions against the king," testifies most eloquently to the reason for his insomnia. Esther has succeeded in planting in the king's heart a suspicion that insurgency is imminent, apparently on the part of Haman. From the text itself, it is difficult to know whether Haman is really planning a coup, although the narrative soon makes it clear that he is enamored with the insignia of royalty and certainly has no objection to decorating himself with them.

The passive mood that characterizes the beginning of this scene is striking: "And they were read before the king"; "It was found to be written"; "What honor and grandeur was done"; "Nothing was done for him." The text does not specify who read the Book of Chronicles before the king, and the expression, "It was found written," is also unusual (we would expect to find the accepted expression, "He found," or the like). Likewise, the king inquires what was "done for" Mordekhai, rather than – more appropriately – "what did I do." [2]

This language plays a role in creating the sense – particularly powerful in this scene – that things are happening "of their own accord," as it were: the king's sleep "escapes him" (rather than "the king could not sleep"); the Book of Chronicles is "read" by itself, as it were, before the king; the story of Mordekhai "is found," and - surprisingly enough - it is discovered that no reward "was done" for him. Through this style, the text hints at a hidden hand that is especially manifest in this scene.[3] Here, too, "the narrator avoids involving God"[4]; indeed, in this scene the omission is most striking.[5] In many communities it is customary to read the first verse of our chapter – "On that night, sleep escaped the king" – to the special prayer melody used on the High Holy Days, thereby hinting that the King of kings Himself was "restless" that night...[6]

The pace of the narrative might give the impression that Haman came to the king that very night, seeking to have Mordekhai hanged, for the two accounts are closely juxtaposed: "On that night, sleep escaped the king, and he commanded to bring the Book of Records of the Chronicles... and it was found to be written that Mordekhai had told about Bigtan and Teresh... And the king said: What honor and grandeur were done for Mordekhai on account of this? And the king's servants that ministered to him said: Nothing was done for him. And the king said: Who is in the courtyard? – And Haman had come to the outer courtyard of the king's house, [in order] to tell the king to hang Mordekhai upon the

gallows that he had prepared for him. And the king's servants said to him: Behold, Haman is standing in the courtyard. And the king said: Let him come" (6:1-5). The continuous style of the king's two questions to his servants ("The king said") gives the sense that his second question, "Who is in the courtyard?" is part of the dialogue that he held with his servants concerning Mordekhai; it seems almost like a reaction to their words – "Nothing was done for him." This impression causes certain scholars to question why Haman comes to the king in the middle of the night.[7] Could Haman possibly have known that the king was unable to sleep? Or – alternatively – did he have to "take his place in line" and wait from the night for the king to awaken in the morning? But such questions are out of place. Despite appearances - arising from the way in which the story is molded - that Haman comes to the king at night, he actually arrives only in the morning. We know this from two indirect pieces of information:

- a. Firstly, Zeresh already told Haman, "In the morning, tell the king, that Mordekhai should be hanged" (5:14), and there is no indication that Haman deviated from this plan.
- b. Secondly, at the end of his consultation with Haman, the king declares: "Quick – take the garments and the horse, as you have spoken, and do that for Mordekhai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate" (6:10). This is immediately followed by Haman's execution of the king's command: "Haman took the garments... and led him on horseback through the street of the city... and Mordekhai returned to the king's gate" (6:11-12). Immediately following this, Haman is taken to Esther's party, where it is decreed that he will be hanged. We must conclude that this happened in the morning, while Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate, at a time when the street of the city is bustling.

Haman therefore did not come to the king at night, but rather in the morning. But if this is so, why does the narrator "mislead" his readers, creating the sense that Haman approaches the palace at night, in the midst of the king's conversation with his servants as to the reward owed to Mordekhai? It would seem that this false continuity serves to highlight the irony of this scene, reaching its climax in this image. While the king deliberates as to the proper reward for Mordekhai, Haman comes with a request to hang him on the gallows. While the king is being reminded of Mordekhai's loyal service in protecting him from insurgents who are members of the royal court, Haman comes with his claim that Mordekhai himself is a traitor and should be hanged.

It seems reasonable to assume that the king's intention in asking Haman what reward should be bestowed on someone whom the king seeks to honor is intended from the outset as a trap. This idea arises, inter alia, from a careful comparison of his question to Haman and his words to his servants the previous night: "The king said to him: What should be done with a man whom the king seeks to honor" (6:6), as opposed to, "The king said: What honor and grandeur were done for Mordekhai on account of this?" (6:3) Why does the king omit any mention of "grandeur" when he describes to Haman the man whom he seeks to honor? This may simply be an abbreviated expression of the same idea, but it is possible – as Levenson maintains – that the omission is intentional. After all, Haman's special promotion was previously described in exactly these terms: "After these things, the king promoted (gidel – gave grandeur to) Haman son of Hamedata, the Agagite, and elevated him" (3:1). Perhaps the king suspects that if he mentions grandeur as well, Haman may think that the king has someone other than him in mind, since Haman has already attained "grandeur" in Achashverosh's kingdom.[8] The king, seeking to test Haman and uncover his true desires, apparently wants Haman to think that it is he whom the king is talking about .

When Haman hears the king wondering what to do for someone whom he wishes to honor, he has no doubt that the person in question is himself: "Haman said to himself: Who would the king seek to honor, more than me?" (6:6). But the wicked, whose hearts are full of their own importance, have big surprises in store for them...as the wise man teaches in Mishlei: "Sedition is in his heart; he is continually devising evil, he sows discord. Therefore his downfall will come suddenly; all of a sudden he shall be broken, with no repair" (Mishlei 6:14-15).[9]

In responding to the king, Haman incriminates himself by requesting (for himself) the royal regalia, thereby supplying the king with additional proof that he longs to wear the royal robes and to ride upon the king's own horse: "Let the royal garments be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse upon which the king rides and upon the head of which a royal crown is placed. And let the garments and the horse be given into the hand of one of the king's ministers, and let them dress the man whom the king seeks to honor, and lead him upon the horse in the street of the city, and proclaim before him: So shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor" (6:8-9).[10]

The expression, "Upon the head of which a royal crown is placed," which Haman uses to describe the horse, has already appeared in our narrative, in the description of Esther's coronation: "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and grace before him more than all of the virgins, and he placed a royal crown upon her head and made her queen in place of Vashti" (2:17).[11] This expression appears nowhere else in all of Tanakh, and it is reasonable to assume that, at least in the king's mind (even if Haman does not intend it that way), the two images are connected: Haman hints at a different scene, in which the present queen replaced the previous one ("And made her queen instead of Vashti"); now he himself seeks to complete the picture and to take the throne in place of the ruling king!

The king's anger is palpable in his order that Haman himself lead Mordekhai through the street of the city. Haman had suggested that "one of the king's ministers" lead the man whom the king sought to honor, but the king places the mission squarely on the shoulders of Haman – the king's second-in-command! This is clearly an outlet for the king's anger. Through the very same act, the king does Mordekhai a favor in punishing Haman, his closest advisor.

The narrator dwells once again on all the details, describing how Haman takes the garments and the horse, how he dresses Mordekhai, how he leads him on horseback through the street, and how he proclaims, "So shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor" (11-12). Only one detail is ignored: the narrator makes no reference to any dialogue between Haman and Mordekhai. How did Haman explain his actions to Mordekhai? How did Mordekhai respond? Fox provides the following apt insight:

"But the silence itself speaks, leaving the impression that nothing was said. Haman gritted his teeth and did what he had to, while Mordecai taciturnly accepted the honor" (Fox, p. 78.)

A fundamental question with regard to this image of Haman leading Mordekhai on horseback through the streets is: what is the point of it? What need is there for this scene? Every other scene in the narrative serves in some way or other to advance the plot. In this

case, however, it would appear that the plot could develop just as well without the image of the horse.

There are various approaches to this question. Let us examine three of them, and then propose a fourth:

a. Rav Mordekhai Breuer maintains that the episode of the horse should be interpreted in light of the fundamental duality of Esther; the "two aspects" that are taking place in the narrative. Throughout the story, he posits, we discern two separate plots. The one concerns the personal conflict between Mordekhai and Haman, while the other concerns the grudge that Haman harbors against the Jewish nation. To his view, the scene of the horse represents Mordekhai's unequivocal personal victory over Haman. (He emphasizes that the final blow comes when Haman is hanged upon the gallows that he had prepared for Mordekhai, but in the "horse scene" it is already clear that Mordekhai has the upper hand). The function of this scene, then, is not to advance the plot; rather, it serves as a concluding image in the story of the personal conflict between Mordekhai and Haman.[12]

b. Along similar lines to the distinction drawn by Rav Breuer, other scholars have sought to view the personal struggle between Mordekhai and Haman as a representation of the broader national battle between Israel and Amalek. For the purposes of clarification, we may recall the battle between David and Goliath, the Philistine, as described in I Shemuel 17. There, too, the personal struggle is perceived by all the soldiers on both sides as a reflection of the general battle between Israel and the Philistines. Perhaps the idea is that the military heroes should be regarded as representatives of the gods of the two nations (as arises from the words of the Philistine and from David's response), or perhaps it is simply the application of an ancient military norm. In any event, if we look at the story of the personal conflict between Mordekhai and Haman in this light, the image of Mordekhai being led on horseback by Haman serves as a preview of the results of the national struggle. This idea is supported by Zeresh's words to Haman after he returns home: "If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, then you will not prevail against him, for you shall surely fall before him" (6:13). Perhaps Zeresh's words should be understood as being based upon the view of the personal struggle between Haman and Mordekhai as reflecting the general struggle between Haman and the entire Jewish nation, or at least as a real-life hint of what is going to happen in that general struggle.[13]

c. Rav Mordekhai Sabbato has proposed that the significance of the scene of Mordekhai being led on horseback lies in the closing of the circle that began with Mordekhai's refusal to bow before Haman. In the past, Mordekhai had avoided prostrating himself before Haman, despite the king's order to do so, but Haman could still console himself and save his honor: "Haman could claim that were he given the opportunity, he, too, would violate the king's command and would not bow before Mordekhai. For this reason there is a need for a further confrontation; a confrontation in which Haman is commanded by the king to show submission before Mordekhai. This confrontation is realized in the episode of the horse, where Haman is commanded to run in front of Mordekhai; he is commanded, and he submits." Mordekhai thereby prevails over Haman not only in the concrete reality, but also in psychological courage, in standing up for his principles.[14]

However, aside from all of these readings, it would seem that this scene holds a special status in the narrative, and from a certain perspective it may be seen as the turning point of the entire story. This idea arises from the overall literary structure of Esther. As we have noted in the past, the narrative has a concentric structure, a structure of "it was overturned," with the scene of the horse serving as its central axis, as follows:

- a. Introduction – extent of Achashverosh's kingdom
- b. Two banquets held by the king: one for the princes of all the provinces (180 days), and the other a special party for the inhabitants of Shushan (7 days)
- c. Esther is taken to the king, but conceals her identity
- d. Description of Haman's status: "...And elevated him, and placed his seat above all the princes who were with him"
- e. Casting of the lot: war destined for the 13th of Adar
- f. Passing of the ring to Haman; Haman's letters, Mordekhai rending his garments, fast of the Jews
- g. Esther's first party
- h. Haman's consultation with his close friends
- i. Scene of the horse
- h1. Haman's consultation with his close friends
- g1. Esther's second party
- f1. Passing of the ring to Mordekhai; Mordekhai's letters; Mordekhai is dressed in royal robes; partying of the Jews
- e1. Jews wage war against their enemies on the 13th of Adar
- d1. Description of the status of the Jews and of Mordekhai: "And all the princes of the provinces... held the Jews in esteem... for the man Mordekhai grew increasingly great"
- c1. Esther comes to the king and asks for an additional day of fighting in Shushan
- b1. Two parties of salvation: one of the Jews of all the provinces (14th of Adar), and the other a special party for the Jews of Shushan (15th of Adar)
- a1. Conclusion – extent of Achashverosh's kingdom

As we noted at the beginning of our Esther series, this structure serves to emphasize the "turnaround" of the narrative. We may say that the expression that appears at the end – "It was reversed" – is a central motif in the narrative, manifest even in the literary structure. The episode of the horse is the central axis upon which the turnaround occurs. Up until this point Haman has been on the rise; from this point onwards, Haman is destined to fall (except for one last time when he is "raised," upon a very tall gallows...).[15]

It would seem that this itself is the function of the scene of the horse: to point to the turnaround of the plot; to express the "it was reversed." The horse scene shows up very clearly the chasm separating the emotions with which Haman approaches the king, and the emotions with which he returns home. In this scene it is clear who it is that is "upon the horse," and who it is that leads others towards their new success. The contribution of this scene is to sharpen the turnaround that takes place on that night when "sleep escapes the king." This reversal plays an important role in molding one of the fundamental aims of the Esther narrative, pertaining to the spiritual, cultural conflict between Israel and Persian paganism; we shall discuss this further at a later stage. The statement that is concealed behind the image of the horse pertains to the profound gap between a person's plans to bring about the downfall of someone else while gaining glory for himself, and the recompense that awaits him: he himself paves the way for the success that becomes the lot of the person whom he sought to harm (the idea of the horse, after all, originated in

Haman's own mind), and he himself digs his own pit, with the intention that his enemy will fall into it (Haman apparently invested considerable resources in the construction of the gallows that eventually awaited him). The horse scene is a central axis for the reversal of fate – not just because of the great irony itself (which adds considerably to the molding of the special drama of this narrative), but also because of the idea that lies behind it:

"He has made a pit and dug it out, he has fallen into the ditch that was his doing. His efforts will return upon his own head, and his violence will descend upon his own skull" (Tehillim 7:16-17.)

Alongside the literary turnaround that takes place in this scene, there is also – as we have mentioned in the past – an inner revolution in the psychological state of Esther, when she proclaims a fast, serving to warn the Jews of Shushan not to go back to the banquets of the Persian king, but rather to return to their Jewish identity through fasting and prayer. As part of the "coverings" of this narrative, her psychological, spiritual turnaround is hidden, while the revolution that serves as a central axis for the plot is the one undergone by Achashverosh, or the turnaround as viewed from the perspective of Haman. The reader – like Esther and Mordechai – is meant to understand that the real turnaround happens "somewhere else," on a more delicate, intimate psychological level, when Esther demonstrates her self-sacrifice for the sake of her nation.

Moreover, a superficial reading would suggest that Mordechai is indeed given great honor: he is led on horseback through the street of the city, with a proclamation that the king seeks his honor. It is no coincidence that the expression "honor" appears several times in this chapter. It should be viewed as the key word here since everything, in this chapter, turns around the idea of the honor ("yakar") that the king wishes to bestow upon his loyal subject.

But this "honor" is valuable only to someone who "seeks the honor" of the king! After all, this is the very meaning of the declaration: "So shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor!" It is clear to everyone that the simple fact of being led on horseback is no special privilege; however, for someone who seeks the king's honor, the declaration that accompanies the ride is of great importance, since it conveys the message that the king seeks to honor the person who is being led. In other words, Haman longed to have the whole world hear that the king sought to honor him – since it was by such standards that he judged himself, his status, and his success. Does the author of Esther share this position? Was being led through the street, with a proclamation that the king sought to honor him, really his reward?

Henschke proposes that Haman's words are interpreted by the inhabitants of the city, observing this spectacle, in different ways. On one hand, Haman's declaration ("So shall be done to the man...") clearly refers to Mordechai: he is the man whom the king seeks to honor. But who is the real "man" whom the king has sought to honor throughout the story? Obviously, the answer is Haman – whom the king promoted and elevated "above all the ministers." Haman's declaration, then, hints at another meaning: "So shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor" – "So – this humiliation and disgrace that have befallen Haman – so shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor." [16]

Along with this humorous reading, the narrator hints at his estimation of the great honor that is bestowed on Mordechai through a linguistic allusion to a different source that serves as a background to this scene: the law of chalitza, as set out in Devarim 25.

Haman's proclamation as he leads Mordekhai – "He called out before him: So shall be done to the man whom the king seeks to honor" (6:11) hints at the declaration that a widowed woman is required to make if her deceased husband's brother refuses to fulfill his responsibility of perpetuating his brother's name by marrying his widowed sister-in-law and bearing children (yibum – levirate marriage): "His sister-in-law shall approach him, in the presence of the elders, and shall remove his shoe from his foot and spit in his face and she shall answer and say: So shall be done to the man who will not build his brother's house" (Devarim 25:9). There is no need to elaborate on the disdain and mockery that the text directs, by means of this comparison, towards the king and the honor that he proposes. The honor that the king bestows resembles a spit in the face...[17] Mordekhai is indeed led through the street, but it is clear that he attaches no special importance to this event; he regards it as the embodiment of the expression, "Deceit is the horse for salvation." The narrator emphasizes this immediately at the conclusion of this scene: "Mordekhai returned to the king's gate, while Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with bowed head" (6:12). The mention of Mordekhai taking up his usual position at the king's gate is not significant for the rest of the story, nor does it add anything to this scene itself. Its entire purpose seems to be to hint that the honor to which Mordekhai is treated in no way influences his discretion and good judgment; he returns to his routine as though nothing had happened. For Haman, on the other hand, this has been a catastrophe. Having started out with the expectation that "the royal crown would be placed upon his head," he returns home "with his head bowed." [18] Apparently, he senses that he has borne out the words of the sage that we quoted above, from Mishlei; indeed, "his efforts come down upon his own head"....

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Cf. "Aharon shall bear the names of the children of Israel on the breastplate of judgment upon his heart when he comes into the Sanctuary for a remembrance before God at all times. And you shall place upon the breastplate of judgment the urim and tumim, and they shall be upon Aharon's heart when he comes before God, and Aharon shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before God at all times" (Shemot 28:29-30.)

[2]Compare the words of the Gemara: "He commanded to bring the Book of Records of the Chronicles, and that they be read' – this teaches that they were read by themselves. 'And it was found to be written' – by whom? This teaches that Shimshai [a scribe] erased [in favor of Mordekhai] and [the angel] Gavriel wrote" (Megilla 15b-16a.)

[3]I heard in the name of Rav Binyamin Tabory (Yeshivat Har Etzion, Alon Shevut) that it is no coincidence that Massekhet Megilla opens in the passive voice: "The Megilla may read on the eleventh, on the twelfth, on the thirteenth, on the fourteenth, or on the fifteenth; no earlier and no later" (Megilla 1:1), in contrast to, for example, Massekhet Berakhot: "From when do we read the Shema in the evening?" (Berakhot 1:1). Esther "is read," as it were, by itself, while we need to "read" the Shema.

[4]Paton, p. 244

[5]Cf: Moore, p. 66. In the Septuagint and in the Aramaic translations it is emphasized that it is God who withholds sleep from the king.

[6]As we learn from the words of Rabbi Tanchum: "'On that night, sleep escaped the king' – Rabbi Tanchum said: Sleep escaped the King of the world. The Rabbis said: The upper worlds and the lower worlds were restless. Rabba said: This refers to the actual sleep of King Achashverosh himself" (Megilla 15b.)

" [7]Haman apparently cannot wait until morning to ask permission to hang Mordecai on his high gallows, but comes in the middle of the night to the palace, although there is no reason to expect a summons from the king at that hour" (Paton, p. 246-247.)

[8]J. D. Levenson, *Esther*, OTL, London 1997, p. 96

[9]Levenson maintains that the king's consultation with Haman is meant to be viewed against the backdrop of Pharaoh's consultation with Yosef as to how to manage the imminent years of famine (Ibid. p. 97). If he is correct, the irony is clear: Haman thinks that his future will be like that of Yosef, i.e., that he is about to be promoted to greatness. In reality, though, he is going to bestow that same greatness upon the person he hates most.

[10]For a comparison of Haman's proposal for honor with the honor that was given to Yosef when he rose to power (Bereishit 41:42-43), see Fox, pp. 76-77. To his view, a careful comparison shows that Haman sought to amplify the honor to which he felt himself entitled, in relation to the honor that had been given to Yosef.

[11]As Moore points out, the expression "seeks to honor" – so central to this scene (Fox, p. 76) – likewise recalls the scene in which Esther is chosen as queen, since the term "seek" (*chafetz*) is used there, too: "She would not go in to the king again unless the king sought (or "desired") her and she was called by name" (2:17) (Moore, 64.)

[12]Rav M. Breuer, *Pirkei Mo'adot*, Jerusalem 5746, 2, pp. 600-614.

...] [13]The reader sees it to augur well for Esther's success before the king and for the Jews' ultimate victory over their enemies" (Moore, p. 67.)

[14]Rav M. Sabbato, "He Increases the Nations and Destroys Them" [Heb], *Alon Shevut* 81 (5741), pp. 21-32.

[15]A hint at this reading is to be found in the testimony recorded in *Massekhet Sofrim* (chapter 14) concerning a Jewish custom of reading the Megilla on the Shabbatot of the month of Adar, and dividing up the reading at the beginning of chapter 6: "How do they read? On the first Shabbat of Adar, all the people read together up to 'On that night sleep escaped the king,' and on Motzaei Shabbat of the next week they read from 'On that night' up to 'Speaking peace to all of his descendants'".

[16]D. Henschke, "Megillat Esther – Tachposet Sifrutit," in *Hadassa Hi Esther*, p. 104.

[17]Henschke, *ibid.*

[18]While some opinions maintain that Haman's intention was for the crown to be placed on the head of the horse, this in no way detracts from the connection noted here.