

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
Megillat Esther  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #20: Mordekhai's Letters

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"When the righteous man prospers, the city rejoices, and at the death of the wicked there is jubilation" (Mishlei 11:10)

The king responds to Esther's entreaties that he "revoke the letters devised by Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite" (8:5): "King Achashverosh said to Queen Esther and to Mordekhai, the Jew: Behold, I have given the estate of Haman to Esther, and him they hanged upon the gallows for laying his hand upon the Jews. As for you – write as you please concerning the Jews, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring, for writing that was written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked" (8:7-8.)

This speech gives rise to three interesting points:

Firstly, the king asserts that Haman was hanged for "laying his hand upon the Jews." Seemingly, though – at least formally – Haman's verdict was pronounced for having fallen upon the divan where Esther lay; an act that was interpreted by the king as an attempt to assault the queen even in the king's presence. It is possible, of course, that the king is simply trying to protest his innocence, presenting himself as having had nothing to do with the decree of annihilation.[1] However, it is also possible – as we have proposed on previous occasions – that the king truly had no idea of the decree, and that at least retroactively he regards the hanging of Haman upon the gallows as punishment for having sent out the letters without the king being aware of their exact content. Indeed, the king has Haman hanged for having laid his hand upon the Jews, an initiative for which he never obtained the king's approval.

The expression "laying his hand" refers the reader to an earlier stage in the narrative, where the king's chamberlains sought to "lay their hands" on Achashverosh (2:21-23). Attention should be paid to the various elements of that scene: "In those days, while Mordekhai sat at the king's gate, Bigtan and Teresh – two of the king's chamberlains, among the keepers of the door - became disaffected and sought to lay a hand upon King Achashverosh. And the matter became known to Mordekhai, and he recounted it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king, in Mordekhai's name. And the matter was investigated, and it was found out, and they were both hanged upon the gallows, and it was recorded in the book of chronicles before the king".

This connection is very interesting, since now, as the narrative is about to draw to a close, the reader is able to go back to that scene in which Mordekhai reported those who wanted to assassinate the king, and interpret it within a broader perspective. I refer here not only to the obvious function of that scene later on, on that fateful night when sleep eludes the king, but also to its covert function of summarizing the narrative in its entirety. All of the literary elements of that scene are developed over the course of the plot:

The fact that Mordekhai sits at the king's gate and that he "neither rose nor stirred" causes one of the king's chamberlains (Haman) to become disaffected.

This man then seeks to "lay a hand" upon Mordekhai. Attention should be paid to the wording: "It was disdainful to him to lay a hand upon Mordekhai alone" (3:6.)

The matter becomes known to Mordekhai (4:1.)

He tells it to Queen Esther (4:7-8.)

Esther tells the king, and also reveals her connection to Mordekhai (7:1-6.)

The king commands that Haman be hanged upon the gallows (7:9-10.)

Finally, this episode is "recorded in a book" (9:32.)

The king's use of the expression, "to lay a hand" is meant to create an association in the mind of the reader, linking the two attempts to lay a hand on someone in the story; neither attempt is successful, and the plotters are hanged.

The significance of hiding the entire plot in a single episode that takes place at the beginning is an emphasis on the inability on the part of the viewer or reader to fully comprehend the meaning of the events in the narrative. Only in retrospect is it possible to understand the significance of each individual event. This concept is closely bound up with the "hidden writing" style of the narrative as a whole.

Secondly, the king makes excuses to Esther, asserting that he cannot revoke Haman's decrees because "writing that was written in the king's name and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." The absurdity of the king's position reaches a climax: "the king" is mentioned twice in the law that Achashverosh quotes, and it is clear that the purpose of the law forbidding any change to a decree promulgated in the king's name is to give glory and grandeur to the king. His word cannot be revoked! However, lurking

below the surface of this "revealed reading" lies the reality: even the king cannot revoke his own decree. In other words, even the king himself is subjugated to the external image that he has sought to create. The aggrandizing of his name in the world has had the effect of diminishing himself, significantly.[2] The absurdity is highlighted in Esther's use of the verb "to avert (le-ha'avir) the evil of Haman, the Agagite." This recalls the description of the transfer of the ring from Haman to Mordekhai ("the king removed his ring which he had taken [he'evir] from Haman, and gave it to Mordekhai" – 8:2), thereby hinting to the reader how ridiculous it is that while the ring may be transferred from one hand to another, the content that has been sealed with that ring cannot be revoked under any circumstances.[3]

The scorn inherent in this scene arises from another aspect, too. The order of the king's speech is peculiar: the explanation as to why Haman's decree cannot be revoked ("because writing that was written...") does not appear at the beginning of the king's response to Esther; rather, it appears at the end, immediately after he gives permission to Esther and to Mordekhai to write "as you please in the king's name." This creates the following strange pair of clauses:

"As for you – write as you please concerning the Jews, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring,

for writing that was written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked".

The clause starting with, "For writing that was written," is, of course, the explanation for not revoking Haman's decree, but the order of the clauses suggests another reading: right after Esther and Mordekhai are given license to write whatever they want ("in the king's name," "and seal it with the king's ring"), the king reminds the readers of the finality of writing written in his name and sealed with his ring. The reader is left wondering how it is possible that the king has learned nothing from all that has transpired; he once again hands over his "all-powerful" ring to members of his court and even encourages them to write "as they please," without even demanding to see what it is that he is putting his seal to.

In any event, Mordekhai takes up the king's offer and sends letters which he has written "as he pleases." As we have noted, the narrative as a whole is constructed in concentric form, with two halves that parallel one another. As part of this sophisticated structure, which strongly underlines the reversal, we find Haman's letters (chapter 3) corresponding to Mordekhai's letters (chapter 8). Indeed, one cannot ignore the striking connection between the two scenes. At the same time, as is usually the case wherever we find repetition in a biblical narrative, there are also slight differences, which likewise hint at the author's veiled messages. Thus, along with the obvious similarities, we must also

consider the differences and discrepancies between the descriptions of the two sets of letters:

Haman's letters (3:12-4:3)

-The king's scribes were called

On the thirteenth day of the first month

And it was written according to all that Haman commanded

To the king's satraps, and to the governors of every province, and to the rulers of every people;

To every province according to its writing, and to every people in their language.

-In the name of King Achashverosh it was written and sealed with the king's ring.

And letters were sent by couriers to all of the king's provinces

-To annihilate, to kill and to destroy all the Jews, both young and old, children and women,

-On one day – the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to take their spoil for plunder.

-The copy of the writing, to be issued as law in every province, was publicized to all the peoples, to be ready for that day.

-The couriers went out in a hurry at the king's command, and the decree was given in Shushan, the capital

-And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was in consternation.

-And Mordekhai knew all that had happened, and Mordekhai rent his garments and wore sackcloth and ashes, and he went out in the midst of the city and cried with a loud and bitter cry. And he came up until the king's gate, for no-one may enter the king's gate wearing sackcloth.

-And in every province, wherever the king's word and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping and wailing; many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Mordekhai's letters (8:9-17)

-Then the king's scribes were called at that time,

in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day,

-And it was written according to all that Mordekhai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the rulers of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, each province according to its writing and each people in its language, and to the Jews, according to their writing and in their language.

-And he wrote in the name of King Achashverosh, and sealed it with the king's ring, and he sent letters by couriers on horseback, riding on the swift horses used in the royal service, bred from stud mares,

-By which the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather together and to defend their lives, to annihilate and to kill and to destroy the army of any people or province that might assault them, with their children and women, and to plunder their spoils, on one day in all of the provinces of King Achashverosh – on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

-The copy of the writing to be given as law in each province was publicized to all the peoples, that the Jews might be ready for that day, to avenge themselves on their enemies.

-The couriers who rode on horseback, riding the swift horses used in the royal service, went out in a hurry and hastened by the king's command, and the decree was given in Shushan, the capital.

-And Mordekhai went out from before the king dressed in royal robes of blue and white, which a great golden crown and a wrap of fine linen and purple, and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.

-The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's word and his decree came, the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday, and many of the people of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.

We shall focus here on three main types of differences, and their respective contributions to the molding of the narrative and its messages.

Most obviously, some differences arise from a reversal of the situation. It is hardly surprising that, as a reaction to Haman's letters, there is "great mourning for the Jews, with fasting and weeping and wailing," while in response to Mordekhai's letters "the Jews had gladness and joy, feasting and holiday." Similarly, it is clear from the development of the plot why Mordekhai at first rends his garments and dons sackcloth and ashes (and is therefore disqualified from entering the royal court, since "no-one comes to the king's gate wearing sackcloth"), while at the end he emerges from before the king "dressed in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a wrap of fine linen and purple."

These differences stand out starkly, and represent the essence of the comparison between the two scenes. Their presentation in chapter 8 as the complete opposite of those in chapter 3 serves to emphasize the reversal: the way that Mordekhai and all of the Jews have climbed from the lowest pit to the highest peaks.[4]

Another group of differences is related to the narrator's desire to broaden and highlight Mordekhai's letters to a greater degree than those of Haman and to award them an air of festivity and magnanimity, thereby – as Klein comments – "emphasizing the advantage of good over evil." [5] This broadening is achieved through several dimensions:

In the dimension of space – Haman's letters commanded the satraps, the governors and the rulers, while Mordekhai commands the Jews (obviously), the satraps, the governors and the rulers "from India to Ethiopia, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces." This addition – which could certainly have been written in the description of Haman's decrees, too – appears specifically in the context of Mordekhai's letters, so as to imbue them with a festive and magnanimous character.[6] Similarly, in Mordekhai's letters we find the additional expression, "On one day in all the provinces of King Achashverosh – on the thirteenth [day] of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar." The definition of scope – "in all the provinces of King Achashverosh" – would likewise be appropriate in describing Haman's letters, too, but it is mentioned specifically in connection with Mordekhai's dispatch, giving rise to a sense of Mordekhai's overall and comprehensive control, the all-embracing nature of the salvation.[7] At the conclusion of this episode, too – in the description of the Jews' reaction – the text enlarges the location of the celebrants. While in response to Haman's decrees we read, "In every province, wherever the king's word and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews," while in response to Mordekhai's letters, "In every province and in every city, wherever the king's word and his decree came, the Jews had gladness and joy...." There is great rejoicing not only in the provinces, but "in every city!"

In the dimension of time – in this context we must take note, first and foremost, of the speed with which the letters are dispatched. Haman's letters are described as being sent with couriers who depart in a hurry ("the couriers went out in a hurry at the king's command"), but when the text describes their dissemination of Mordekhai's letters, it adds another special verb: "The couriers... went out in a hurry and hastened by the king's command." It is as though the couriers themselves are more eager to publicize Mordekhai's letters than they were to publish those of Haman.[8] To emphasize their haste, the text goes on to add into its description the fine horses upon which they rode (an element missing from the description of the dispatch of Haman's letters): "By couriers on horseback, riding on the swift horses used in the royal service, bred from stud mares... The couriers who rode on horseback, riding the swift horses used in the royal service...." [9]

However, the special ceremoniousness in the dimension of time is not limited to the speed with which the couriers depart. It relates also to the date of the writing of the letters. Concerning Haman, we read: "The king's scribes were called on the thirteenth day of the first month," while with regard to Mordekhai the text elaborates as follows: "The king's scribes were called at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day." The narrator emphasizes the timing of the dispatch of Mordekhai's letters with these two slight changes: the insertion of the expression, "at that time," which adds nothing to our understanding of the plot itself, and the clarification that the third month is "the month of Sivan." In this context it should be noted that it would have been appropriate to dwell on the month when Haman's letters were dispatched, too, since "the first month" (Nissan) has special significance in Jewish history (Shemot 12:1). However, the narrator chooses to highlight the date of Mordekhai's letters rather than that of Haman's letters, apparently with the intention of awarding them an extra ceremonious flourish. As to the date itself, it should be noted that in the transition from Nissan to Sivan the text seeks to lend the Jews' salvation a dimension of miraculous redemption and national building, since the reader associates these months with the nation's most primal process of consolidation: from the Exodus from Egypt (in Nissan) to the Revelation at Mount Sinai (in Sivan).[10]

On the human level – there is an interesting difference between the description of the writing (and dispatch) of Haman's letters vis-à-vis those of Mordekhai. The former are described in passive form: "In the name of King Achashverosh it was written and sealed (nikhtav ve-nechtam) with the king's ring. And letters were sent (ve-nishlo'ach) by couriers...." The narrator moves to the active voice when describing the dispatch of the letters by Mordekhai: "In the name of King Achashverosh he wrote it and sealed it with the king's ring. And he sent letters by couriers on horseback...." In other words, in generating the first set of letters, Haman is depicted as observing what is going on: he commands the scribes, and it is they who write on his behalf. Mordekhai, in contrast, is presented as taking a more active role. It is as though he himself writes the letters; he himself seals them with the king's ring, and he himself dispatches them.[11] It is a matter of supreme personal importance to him – like a groom who goes personally to the post office in order to send off the invitations to his wedding, rather than leaving this task in the hands of someone else...

The final difference that we shall address between the two sets of letters concerns the description of the Jews. Haman's letters are sent to "every province according to its writing, and each nation in its language." When Mordekhai sends his letters, an additional expression appears: "Every province according to its writing, and each nation in its language, and to the Jews, according to their writing and in their language." This addition, of course, is understandable in light of the development of the plot itself: the crux of Mordekhai's letters is directed towards the Jews themselves; it is therefore clearly appropriate that they be written in the language of the Jews, too. At the same time, this addition makes an important statement concerning the national identity of the Jews. A nation's language is one of the primary factors on which its special identity and culture are built. It is no coincidence that, along with the geographical dispersion into seventy nations and the story of the Tower of Bavel (Bereishit 10-11), the text also focuses on the

multiplicity of languages (as, for example, in the verse: "These are the children of Shem by their families, by their languages, in their lands, according to their nations" – Bereishit 10:31). Language characterizes culture, and a nation that speaks its own language, rather than the languages of other nations, thereby testifies to its independence.[12] In other words, in the description of the letters being sent out in the language of the Jews as well, the reader is being informed that the Jews in Achashverosh's kingdom had resumed speaking Hebrew. Mordekhai sent special letters written in Hebrew – and this identity is awarded its place and recognition by the Persian kingdom. Since at the beginning of the narrative the Jews were mired in the depravity of a Persian banquet, with no signs of their unique identity, this development should be viewed as part of the process that the Jews undergo over the course of the story: a return to their unique national identity.[13]

In light of this we may cautiously point to a further discrepancy between Haman's letters and those of Mordekhai. Following Mordekhai's dispatch, the text describes a mass movement of conversion, motivated by fear of what the Jews might do: "Many of the people of the land became Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." In vain will the reader seek a parallel for this phenomenon among the Jews following Haman's decree. Although one might have expected that, in light of the decree, many Jews would have converted out of fear for their lives, no such thing happens (or, at least, no such phenomenon is described). The absence of any counterbalance to the movement of conversion to Judaism demands some explanation. Apparently, despite Haman's decree, the Jews did not forsake their national identity, preferring to die as Jews. Their reaction to the decree of annihilation was not to shed their national identity, but rather to turn inward: "Fasting and weeping and mourning." In other words, not only did they not abandon their faith, but actually – by maintaining it at this time – returned to a hidden part of themselves, and presented themselves as Jews. Hence, the king's proclamations must now be sent to them in their own language, in Hebrew.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]As suggested, for example, by Fox (p. 94), and Berlin: "If Achashverosh is seeking to present himself as protector of the Jews, then – quite the contrary" (Berlin, p. 133.)

[2]Cf. D. Henchke, "Megillat Esther – Tachposet Sifrutit," *Haddasa Hi Esther*, pp. 93-106 ("The king himself, as a being of will and substance, is nothing; the power and greatness are for royal niceties, for the external symbols of royalty. The king himself is the first of his kingdom's servants"); Y. Weiss and Y. Grossman, *Megillat Esther Meluveh be-Iyurim Meva'arim*, Alon Shevut 5762, pp. 20-21. In the Septuagint (version A), the king agrees to cancel the decree; this simplifies the plot, at the expense of the intentionally ironic design of this scene.

[3]Cf. Fox, p. 92

[4]It should be noted that there is no clear parallel to the description of Haman and Achashverosh in chapter 3 ("The king and Haman sat down to drink"). Chakham proposes that the image of Mordekhai emerging from the king should be viewed as a dual parallel:

on one hand it corresponds to the description of the rending of his garments; on the other hand it corresponds to the party held by the king and Haman (pp. 54-55). However, it is possible that the author intentionally avoids any parallel to that party: it serves as the clearest indication of the immense cruelty of these two characters who, having passed a decree of annihilation for an entire nation, sit down to drink. It is indeed appropriate that this image have no parallel in the description of the Jews. (We recall that the banquet of the Jews following their salvation corresponds to their earlier fasting, and not to the party of Haman and the king).

[5]Y. Klein, *Megillot, Olam ha-Tanakh*, Tel Aviv 1994, p. 255.

[6]For this reason it would be inaccurate to assert, as Paton does, "Just as the dispatches were formerly prepared at Haman's dictation, so now at the dictation" (Paton, p. 273). It is generally accepted that this is the longest verse in all of Tanakh (43 words; 192 letters) (Paton, p. 273). The syntactical span of these sentences may likewise express the narrator's wish to award special length to Mordekhai's letters.

[7]Extensive debate among researchers concerns the change in the location of the license to "plunder the spoils" in Mordekhai's letters as opposed to its location in Haman's letters. The majority view upholds the connection between the respective verses, despite this difference (thus, for example, Fox, p. 284; Bush, p. 447). Some, however, propose that this difference indicates a lack of connection between the decrees (R. Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 95 (1976), p. 50).

[8]As noted in a previous shiur, the verb "hastened" (*dechufim*) should recall the description of Haman, at the beginning of his downfall: "Haman hastened (*nidchaf*) to his house, mourning and with his head covered" (6:12). This creates a continuum of falling, starting with Haman's personal downfall and carried through into the cancellation of his decree.

[9]The word "rekhes" appears to refer to an especially swift horse, or pair of horses (cf. I Melakhim 5:8; Mikha 1:13). "Achashteran" in ancient Persian means "royal" (based on the Persian word "hšatra," meaning "royalty"). "Ramakhim" are fine, fast horses (see Klein, *ibid.*). The verse as a whole, then, may be translated literally as follows: "The riders on horses, who are the professional riders on royal horses bred from swift horses" (cf. Berlin, p. 135).

[10]The Maharal, in his commentary on Esther (*Or Chadash*), comments that seventy days separate the dispatch of the two sets of letters (from the 13th of Nissan to the 23rd of Sivan). This is a very interesting point, since the number seventy also has special significance in our narrative, symbolizing the exile of Israel, in view of Yirmiyahu's prophecy that the exile would last seventy years (Yirmiyahu 25:11-12). Clines goes so far as to suggest that for the purposes of arriving at this total of seventy days, the narrator "postpones" the dispatch of Mordekhai's letters until the 13th of Sivan:

"The narrator has obviously been torn between his attachment to the symbolic number seventy and his desire for a rapid progression of the narrative; the latter impulse has evidently predominated, but not to the extent of involving him in a contradiction" (Clines, p. 316).

The problem with this hypothesis is that had the narrator sought to point to the number seventy as the number of days and to the duration of the Babylonian exile, it is reasonable to assume that he would have integrated that number explicitly – "seventy days" – rather than leaving it to the reader to calculate (Berlin, p. 134). It would seem that in this instance, this is a hidden reading that leaves no clue for the reader, which in turn suggests that the narrator did not have this connection in mind.

[11]It should be pointed out that Mordekhai also opens his own letters, underlining the king's permission: "In which the king had permitted the Jews in every city..." (8:11). The need for this emphasis is clear: these letters appeared to contradict the first ones that had been sent out in the king's name by Haman. Therefore Mordekhai now needs to emphasize that the Jews' right "to gather together and to defend their lives" likewise emanates from the king (Fox, p. 99.)

[12]Nechemia likewise presents the mixture of the Hebrew language amongst the other local languages as an indication of a mixture of culture: "In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, of Amon, and of Moav. And their children spoke half in the language of Ashdod, and could not speak in the language of Yehuda, but rather in the language of other nations" (Nechemia 13:23-24). These ideas were discussed intensively prior to the revival of the Hebrew language at the end of the 19th century.

[13] Similarly, Fox, p. 99.