

Shiur #24: Stages of Acceptance of the Festival
(continued)

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In the previous shiur we tracked three stages of the acceptance of the festival. First the text described the spontaneous celebrations that took place on the day after the battles; thereafter it described the custom that began to spread throughout the king's provinces (the "un-walled cities") of celebrating every year on the 14th of Adar; and finally Mordekhai sent letters to all of the Jews, "near and far," asking that two days be celebrated throughout the Jewish Diaspora – both the 14th and the 15th of Adar. Following this stage we find verses that are clearly meant to serve as a conclusion, with a brief summary of the story ("For Haman, son of Hamedata the Agagite, enemy of all the Jews, schemed against the Jews to destroy them..."), and ending with a general statement looking towards the distant future of the Jewish nation: "And these days of Purim would not cease from among the Jews, nor would their memory perish from their descendants".

Owing to the molding of this stage as the conclusion of the discussion conducted between the Jewish leadership in Shushan and the Jewish Diaspora, the reader is surprised to encounter the dispatch of a new set of letters – i.e., yet another stage (the fourth):[1]

"Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote – with Mordekhai the Jew – with all emphasis to confirm this second letter of Purim. And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Achashverosh, [with] words of peace and truth, to confirm these days of Purim at their appointed time, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and as they had established for themselves and for their descendants – concerning the fasts and the lamentations" (9:29-32.)

Now it turns out that Queen Esther ("daughter of Avichayil") and Mordekhai ("the Jew") were forced to send out additional letters in order for the festival to be accepted. From the point of view of content, this stage offers nothing new; these letters simply ask to formalize and carry out in practice that which "Mordekhai the Jew" had already established for them. In other words, this stage seeks merely to award renewed validity to the previous one, in which Mordekhai requested that all the Jews celebrate two days of Purim, on the 14th and the 15th of Adar. What need is there for more letters that add nothing new?

The hint concealed in these letters as to the reason for their dispatch is the definition of their content as "words of peace and truth." There is a need to send "words of peace," words of reconciliation, to those who are involved in disagreement and conflict. Apparently, for some reason (which will be discussed below) the Jews of Achashverosh's kingdom do not readily respond to Mordekhai's order that the 15th be celebrated, too, along with the celebration that they have already established for themselves, on the 14th.

Only after these additional letters is a calm achieved, and the festival is accepted (or at least so it seems from the concluding image of the text): "And Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book" (verse 32).[2]

What caused the change? Why did these letters convince the Jews of the "other provinces of the king" to accept upon themselves the celebration of the 15th of Adar, too? Let us compare this new dispatch of letters (stage 4) with the first letters sent out by Mordekhai (stage 3):

First letters (9:20-28):

- a. Then Mordekhai wrote these things
- b. and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far,
- c. to establish for them the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days when the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which had been turned for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and the sending of portions to one another, and gifts to the poor.
- d. And the Jews undertook that which they had started to do and as Mordekhai had written to them....

Second letters (9:29-32):

- a. Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote – with Mordekhai the Jew – with all emphasis to confirm this second letter of Purim .
- b. And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Achashverosh, [with] words of peace and truth,
- c. to confirm these days of Purim at their appointed time, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and as they had established for themselves and for their descendants – concerning the fasts and the lamentations.
- d. And Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book.

A quick comparison reveals that we may summarize the development of the letters from stage 3 to stage 4 in two main areas:

Firstly, Esther also signs the second letters, not Mordekhai alone. More accurately it should be noted that Esther is referred to as "Queen Esther" (twice!), and at the same time Mordekhai is also given his full title – "Mordekhai the Jew." At the end of these two stages this discrepancy is emphasized: at first it seems that the Jews accepted that which "Mordekhai had written to them," but as we see further on, this situation did not last. In contrast, at the end of the second set of letters the text tells us that "Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim." As Ibn Ezra notes, ad loc: "It was not confirmed by [virtue of] Mordekhai alone, until Esther [too] wrote." Why does Esther succeed in this while Mordekhai fails? We may assume that two considerations influenced the Jews of that generation. Firstly, Esther sends the letters in her position as queen. The letters bear a royal seal, and this symbol of authority should not be taken lightly. The subjects of the kingdom are obligated towards the royalty under whose patronage they exist, and it is possible that in this context, Esther makes use of her special status. But beyond this (and almost in contradiction to it) it is reasonable to posit that had there been someone who was not willing to accept Mordekhai's new position, and who held a grudging criticism of the exilic Jew who did not go up to the land to help rebuild the Temple, it would be difficult to

cast such aspersions on Esther. She was taken against her will to the royal palace, and her selfless devotion to her nation had certainly become known to the Jewish communities far and wide. In this sense, Esther is identified in the letters not only as "queen," but also as "the daughter of Avichayil." Her Jewish identity, too, is emphasized in these letters, and Mordekhai is accordingly identified here as "the Jew."^[3]

Aside from Esther adding her signature, there is a sense that these letters are formulated with greater gentleness and sensitivity than the previous ones. This impression arises from several slight differences between the two dispatches. The first letters were sent to all the Jews, "near and far." This formulation highlights the distinction between the Jews of Shushan and those of the other provinces and, more importantly, clearly reflects a Shushan-based perspective. "Near" and "far" are, obviously, relative terms; where is the speaker standing? What is his point of reference and his basic assumption? Mordekhai, at the time of sending the first letters, feels that he is at the center of the events; the Jews of Shushan are "near" (to him!), while everyone else (including the Jews of the land of Israel, for example) are "far." In the second set of letters this expression is omitted; instead, this time Mordekhai sends "words of peace and truth."^[4]

Similarly, there is a difference in the fundamental basis upon which the demand to celebrate two days of Purim rests. In the case of the first letters, the basis is, "According to the days when the Jews rested from their enemies" – i.e., Mordekhai expects the Jews of all the provinces to make a special celebration for the day of salvation of the Jews of Shushan (the 15th). In the second letters, the matter is presented differently: "And as they had established for themselves and for their descendants, concerning the fasts and the lamentations." What are these "fasts" that are suddenly mentioned here? For what reason do Esther and Mordekhai introduce fasting and lamentation into the celebration of Purim?

The medieval commentators debate two different interpretations, as set forth by Ibn Ezra in his commentary *ad loc*:

"The meaning of [the phrase], 'Established for themselves and for their descendants concerning the fasts and the lamentations' is, according to many, the day of the Fast of Esther... but to my mind... 'the fasts' refers to the fasts mentioned in the Book of Zekharya, which occur in the months of Tammuz, Av, Tishrei and Tevet. What this means is that the Jews took upon themselves to celebrate the days of Purim just as they had taken upon themselves and upon their descendants to fast on the days of their mourning, when the walls of the city [of Jerusalem] were breached and the Temple was burned".

It is possible that the "fasts" here refer to the Fast of Esther, which the Jews took upon themselves prior to Esther entering before the king. The advantage of this interpretation is its connection with the narrative. It is as if Mordekhai and Esther are telling all the Jews, "Just as you accepted upon yourselves to fast at the time of trouble, so at the time of rejoicing it is proper to celebrate and to thank He Who performed all of this salvation."^[5] The problem is that the context here would seem to refer to a custom that had been prevalent in Israel for generations already ("upon themselves and upon their descendants"). Just as this custom of fasting was accepted then, argue Mordekhai and Esther, despite having no basis in the Torah, so the celebration of the days of Purim should now be accepted. It is clear, then, why the alternative interpretation proposed by Ibn Ezra is preferable. The "fasts and lamentations" refer to the fasts which the Jews had taken upon

themselves in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple, as enumerated in the prophecy of Zakharya: "So says the Lord of Hosts: the fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth month, and the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become, for the house of Judah, times of joy and gladness and happy feasts; therefore, love truth and peace" (8:19).[6] According to this reading, Mordekhai and Esther ask that the establishment of Purim be confirmed on the basis of the precedent of the fasts which the Jews had previously taken upon themselves.[7]

Based on the precedent of the "fasts over the destruction" there is added significance to the new round of letters: Mordekhai and Esther thereby demonstrate their link with the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the builders of the Temple. They emphasize that their intention is not to establish some new religion or practice for the period of the exile, but rather regard the establishment of the days of Purim as a direct continuation of the Jewish tradition of lamenting over the destruction of the Temple. It is possible that the emphasis of this position contributed towards the acceptance of the festival by the Jews of all the provinces.

This leads us to the very heart of the debate surrounding the establishment of the days of Purim. Why was the acceptance of the festival so complicated? Why did the Jews of the "other provinces of the king" not willingly and unquestioningly accede to Mordekhai's request? Why were they inclined to refrain from celebrating the festival for two days, which would mark the salvation of the Jews of Shushan, too, and their special contribution towards the salvation?

A hint at the answer would appear to lie in the unusual title for the Jews of the other provinces of the king, "The Jews of the villages, who dwelled in the un-walled towns." As previously noted, this expression awards an independent identity to the Jews of the other provinces that is separate from the goings-on in Shushan. Moreover, the term "perazim" (translated here as "un-walled towns" or "villages") is mentioned in Moshe's speech in Devarim, where he describes the conquest of the territories on the eastern side of the Jordan: "All of these cities were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, aside from a great many outlying towns (arei ha-perazi)" (Devarim 3:5). From the contrast here between the cities that are "fortified with high walls, gates and bars" and the "arei ha-perazi," it appears that the term refers to an un-walled town, which is easier to conquer.[8] By using this description for the Jews of the 127 provinces of the king (aside from Shushan) – an expression that reminds the reader of Israel's journey to Canaan under the leadership of Moshe – the narrator hints at the ancient conquest of the land of Israel and its environs. The reader is thereby discreetly reminded of an alternative Jewish center to that in Shushan, a center that apparently hesitates to commemorate the day of celebration of the Jews of Shushan. What are these "un-walled towns" where the Jews celebrate their own salvation, but are not easily convinced to accede to Mordekhai's request that they also celebrate the salvation of Shushan? The reference, of course, is to the Jewish center in the land of Israel, which has been revived with the return to Zion, and is battling for survival. It is reasonable to propose that even if the Jews of the land of Israel are grateful towards the Jews of Shushan for their selflessness and their contribution towards the salvation of the nation, they are not prepared to regard the Jews of Shushan as being authorized to establish Jewish tradition and its themes. This political argument, concerning the true center of the Jewish nation, exceeds the bounds of narrow politics. The question of whether all Jews must make special commemoration of the salvation of the Jews of Shushan is connected to the profound tension between the Jews of the land of Israel at the

beginning of the Second Temple period, who have returned to their ancestral land with great self-sacrifice and are now fighting for the survival of the Jewish center in that land, and the Jewish center in Persia, embodied in our narrative in the person of Mordekhai. Mordekhai, second-in-command to the Persian king, wants the entire Jewish nation to make special commemoration of the salvation of those Jews who have chosen not to leave the comforts of Persia and return to the land of Israel. It is not difficult to understand the reservations of the Jews in the land of Israel regarding such an initiative.

This, it seems, is the background to chapter 9 in its entirety, and to the letters that Mordekhai and Esther repeatedly send out with a view to convincing all of the Jews. The Jewish center in Shushan must dispatch "words of peace and truth" to the alternative Jewish center – apparently, the center located in the land of Israel.

The Megilla ends, following these four stages, and the conclusion seems to be that, ultimately, the Jews did accept upon themselves to celebrate both days of Purim.[9] However, this is not the custom as we know it today. Jewish law stipulates that in cities that were surrounded by a wall at the time of Yehoshua, Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar, while in other places it is celebrated on the 14th. Apparently, then, the narrator is describing the four stages that had developed up until the time of Megillat Esther being committed to writing, but there is another stage that is extra-biblical; it took place at a later time – apparently at the beginning of the tannaitic period.

The fifth stage is mentioned in Mishna Megilla: "Towns that have been surrounded by a wall since the days of Yehoshua bin-Nun read [the Megilla] on the fifteenth. Villages and large towns read on the fourteenth" (1:1.)

What is the meaning of this division, and how did it develop out of the previous stages enumerated in the text? There are two main innovations at this stage that require clarification. Firstly, the actual division of the festival into separate celebrations, is itself surprising and unprecedented. There is no other festival that is celebrated at different times by different communities,[10] and – as noted – the simple reading of the text does not give rise to such a possibility. Aside from this, it is most surprising that the criterion for the definition of "cities surrounded by a wall" goes back to the time of Yehoshua. What does the story of Esther have to do with Yehoshua?[11] Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud records the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha, who maintains that the question of whether a city is defined as being surrounded by a wall is determined not from Yehoshua's time, but rather "from the days of Achashverosh" (Megilla 2b)! It must be admitted that this is a more historically appropriate period to use as a criterion, since the reading of the Megilla and the celebration of Purim are meant to commemorate a victory that came about at the time of Achashverosh. In the words of the Gemara (ad loc): "What is the reasoning of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha? He reasons that just as Shushan was surrounded by a wall from the time of Achashverosh, and there the Megilla is read on the fifteenth, so in any city that is surrounded by a wall from the time of Achashverosh we read on the fifteenth".

The discussion there goes on to clarify the view of the Sage in the Mishna whose opinion is accepted as being definitive, and according to whom the date is dependent on the status of the city at the time of Yehoshua. For him, the connection rests on the expression "perazi," as discussed above: "What is the reason of our Tanna? He derives 'perazi' 'perazi.' Just as there the expression refers to cities surrounded by a wall from the time of

Yehoshua bin-Nun, so here, too, we apply the term to cities surrounded by a wall from the time of Yehoshua bin-Nun".

The course of the discussion in the Gemara appears to hint at its conclusion. By using the term "perazi" for the other provinces of the king, the narrator hints at the independent status of these places as being separate from Shushan. Similarly, then, the halakhic decision that the definition of "cities surrounded by a wall" is determined according to the time of Yehoshua, rather than in relation to Shushan, represents a gesture to the alternative Jewish center, which is not located in Shushan.

This idea also features prominently in the other reasons given in the Jerusalem Talmud for the reading of the Megilla taking place on the basis of the time of Yehoshua: "Rabbi Simon said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: Honor was thereby shown to the land of Israel, which was desolate at that time, but they defined it [on the basis of its status] at the time of Yehoshua bin-Nun... Rabbi Abahu explained the term 'yeshiva' (settlement, habitation): Just as the habitation mentioned there is defined in accordance with the days of Yehoshua bin-Nun, so likewise the habitation mentioned here is traced to the days of Yehoshua bin-Nun" (parasha 1, 1). The opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi is clear: the establishment of the date for the reading of the Megilla on the basis of the period of Yehoshua reflects the honor shown to the desolate land of Israel! In fact, even the reliance on the concept of "yeshiva" (dwelling, habitation) (according to Rabbi Abahu) emphasizes the habitation of the land of Israel, as opposed to dwelling in exile.[12]

In light of the above we can also understand the splitting of Purim into two separate days. On one hand, Mordekhai's suggestion that not only the Jews of Shushan celebrate on the 15th is accepted. On the other hand, the position of the Jewish center in the land of Israel is also accepted: not all the Jews of the world will hold a special day of celebration to commemorate the salvation of the Jews of Shushan. Moreover, even the definition as to who will make special commemoration of the salvation of Shushan is not determined on the basis of "Shushan time" (i.e., those cities that, like Shushan, are surrounded by a wall from the time of Achashverosh), but rather according to the history of the land of Israel – on the basis of the conquest of Yehoshua!

Thus, a complex compromise is created between the two opposing positions in the background to chapter 9. Even if our impression, at the end of the chapter, is that Mordekhai won the argument and the royal seal of Esther adorns the final decision that the festival will be celebrated for two days, a new stage came about in later Jewish tradition, bringing a compromise according to which the victory of Shushan is given special recognition by many Jews – even some who live outside of Shushan – but the identity of that group is determined according to a parameter that relates to the land of Israel.[13]

In conclusion it should be noted that the unexpected recollection of the period of Yehoshua in the midst of the discussion as to the celebration of Purim may also rest on a linguistic allusion that we have noted in the past. The Megilla's description of Jewish valor in the face of the enemy – "And no-one stood against them, for fear of them fell upon all of the nations" (9:2) recalls, for the reader, the description of Israel's valor and success against their enemies in the summary of the settlement of the land at the end of the Book of Yehoshua: "And God gave them rest all around, according to all that He sword to their forefathers, and no-one stood against them, of all their enemies; God gave all their enemies into their hand. Nothing failed of all the good that God had spoken for the house

of Israel; it all came to pass" (Yehoshua 21:42-43). According to one of the possibilities that we have raised, the purpose of this recollection is to create continuity between God's salvation of His nation during the conquest and settlement of the land, and the salvation for the Jews that is described in the Megilla. According to this reading, it is proper that the date chosen to celebrate Purim be determined in accordance with Yehoshua's conquests, thereby demonstrating this continuity.

To conclude our study of Esther we shall devote a discussion to a comparison between Megillat Esther and the Book of Yehoshua, which would appear to give rise to other connections. We shall then attempt to understand the significance of these connections.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Not surprisingly, many readers have the impression that the dispatch of Esther's letters was "another conclusion" to the narrative, added at a later stage (see especially S. E. Loewenstamm, "Esther 9:29-32: The Genesis of a Late Addition," HUCA 42 (1971), pp. 117-124. As often happens, the tendency of some scholars to solve literary difficulties by discussing the historical construction of the text has the effect of missing some important messages, which are actually emphasized in those places where the story surprises the reader and has a textured feel to it.

[2]Rashi regards the words, "And it was written in the book" as a hint to the writing of Megillat Esther and its canonization as part of Tanakh: "Esther asked the sages of that generation to establish it, and to write this book together with the rest of the Hagiographia; this is the meaning of 'it was written in the book.'" This is a possible reading, and among modern commentators there are those who adopt it, even if they offer other readings, too (see Moore, p. 93). However, in this instance the writing of Megillat Esther must have been later, so as to coincide with the time of the redaction of the Tanakh. It is apparently for this reason that Ibn Ezra suggests that "the book" in question is one that is no longer known to us: "The book was lost, just as we have no Midrash Iddo, or Books of Shelomo, or the Books of Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, the Sefer Milkhamot Hashem, or the Sefer Ha-yashar" (all of which are mentioned in the Tanakh itself.)

[3]Cf. Fox, p. 125.

[4]The addition of the word "emet" (truth) alongside "shalom" (peace) should be understood here as an adjective rather than another noun. Mordekhai sends letters of "true peace," of "firm peace," as it were. This usage of the word "emet" appears elsewhere, both when joined to the abstract noun "peace," as in our case (see II Melakhim 20:19 [= Yishayahu 39:8]; Yirmiyahu 14:13; 33:6), and when joined to the abstract noun "chesed" (kindness) (see, for example, Bereishit 24:49; 47:29; I Shemuel 33:6(?); Yehoshua 2:14; II Shemuel 2:6.)

[5]A further advantage of this interpretation is the covert (and surprising) connection that is thereby created between the days of fasting and the days of celebration, between fasting and feasting (a theme on which I elaborated in "Bein Mishteh le-Tzom be-Ta'anit Esther" in Hadassa Hi Esther). Rabbi Yoel bin-Nun offers a similar explanation in "Anshei Keneset ha-Gedola Hem Chotmei ha-Amana be-Ma'amad Ezra ve-Nechemya," Mashlev 36 (5761), PP. 5-20.

[6]This interpretation is also preferred by Fox, p. 126, and Berlin, pp. 149-150. However, Fox notes that the reference need not necessarily be to the fasts mentioned in Zekharya: "It refers generally to any communal fast that can be proclaimed following or preceding a disaster" (p. 127.)

[7]It is possible that the expression discussed above – "words of peace and truth" – alongside the mention of "the fasts and lamentations" is meant to hint at Zakharya's prophecy, which concludes with the same words: "Therefore love truth and peace".

[8]The same conclusion arises from I Shemuel 6:18: "Both fortified cities and outlying villages" (see also Yechezkel 38:11; Zakharya 2:8.)

[9]Rabbi Yoel bin-Nun suggests that the expression "at their appointed times," "Hints at a possibility that may have been born out of this controversy, such that each would celebrate the festival at its appointed time, with the appointed time of one group (the villages) not coinciding with the appointed time of the other group (the walled cities), in accordance with the Midrash of the Sages and the Mishna Megilla" (in his article mentioned above, p. 17-18). (Similarly, Fox, p. 114; Berlin, p. 147.) However, the words that appear in such proximity to the expression in question – "as Mordekhai the Jew had established for them" – shows that this stage concluded as the previous one had (Mordekhai's letters) – i.e., with celebrations held over two days.

[10]The "second day" of each festival that is celebrated outside of Israel does not contradict what we have said above, since it represents an additional day of the festival (originating in the doubt concerning the timing of the new moon), rather than the establishment of a different date for the festival.

[11]It should be noted that the status of a town at the time of Yehoshua's conquest defines it as being walled or un-walled with regard to other aspects of Jewish law, too. See Arakhin 32b (concerning the definition of "houses of a city surrounded by a wall.")

[12]Rabbi Ovadia Bartenura makes an interesting comment in his commentary on the Mishna: "Because Yehoshua was the first to wage war against Amalek, and it is written, 'Write this as a memorial in a book and declare it to Yehoshua's ears,' therefore the link is made to the time of Yehoshua" (Bartenura's commentary on Megilla, 1:1.)

[13]The revolutionary nature of this decision is well highlighted in the discussion recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, proposing that Shushan, which was not surrounded by a wall at the time of Yehoshua, should actually celebrate on the 14th of Adar!