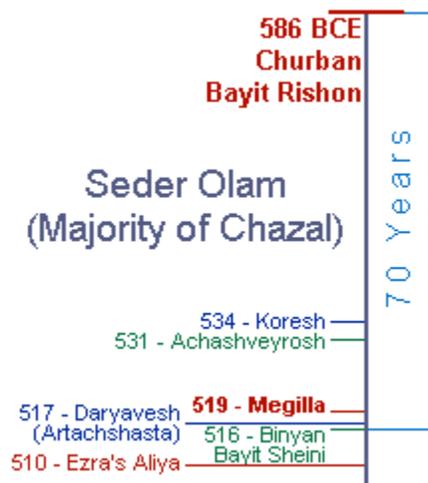


Part VI - Megillat Esther and Sefer Zecharya

Up until this point we have explained how the satire in the Megilla may reflect a prophetic censure of Am Yisrael in Bavel for not returning to Yerushalayim when the opportunity arose during the time of Koresh. Now, by identifying which specific Persian King Achashveyrosh was, we will find additional textual and thematic support from Sefer Zecharya as well as the possible reason for many of the customs of Purim.

The topic of the history of the Persian time period is very complicated and the subject of a major controversy between most Midrashei Chazal on one hand and the historians (and a minority opinion in Chazal) on the other. An explanation of this controversy is beyond the scope of this shiur; instead we will simply present the two conflicting opinions concerning **when** Achashveyrosh reigned.

According to [Seder Olam](#) (and hence the majority opinion in Chazal), Achashveyrosh was the Persian King immediately **after** Koresh, but **before** Daryavesh, and thus the story of the Megilla takes place after "shivat tzion" (the return to Zion during the time of Koresh) but before the second Bet HaMikdash is actually built. (See Diagram)



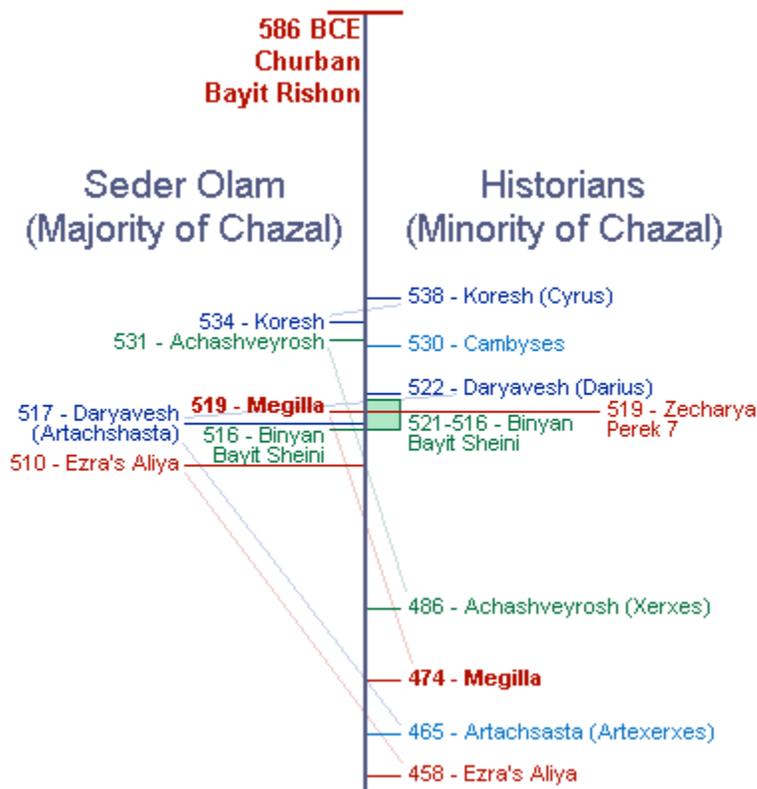
According to this opinion, the events of the Megilla had a tremendous affect on the situation in Yerushalayim. Only two years after the story of Megilla, King Darius, son of Esther, gives the Jews permission to return and build the Second Temple. Construction began during the second year of Darius (=Daryavesh).

The events of the Megilla also appear to have catalyzed a major aliya movement. According to Chazal, Ezra's aliya from Bavel took place only a few years afterward,

during the seventh year of the reign of Daryavesh (whom [Chazal](#) identify with Artachshasta - [see Ezra 7:1-9](#)).

Thus, according to Chazal's opinion, the events of the Megilla **indeed** had a major effect on the rebuilding of the Temple and "shivat tzion" - the return to Zion.

According to most historians (and a minority opinion in Chazal - see Targum HaShiv'im and Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer chapter 49), Achashveyrosh was the Persian king who succeeded Darius (486 - 465 BCE), and thus the story of the Megilla takes place some forty years **after** the second Bet HaMikdash was built, and thus after Chagai and Zecharya's plea to return and fulfill the potential of Bayit Sheni. [Its construction began in 521 BCE, the 2nd year of Darius; the story in the Megilla would have, according to this explanation, taken place in 474 BCE.] (See Diagram)



According to this opinion, no major event takes place immediately after the events in the Megilla. In fact, about two decades pass before a new wave of olim come with Ezra and Nechemya to help strengthen the city of Yerushalayim. [The historians identify Artachshasta with Artaxerxes, who is not the same king as Darius.]

If our assumption concerning the satire of the Megilla is correct, why don't we find a mass aliya movement immediately after the miracle of Purim? [Jews of the twentieth century could ask themselves a similar question!]

Furthermore, according to either opinion, shouldn't the manner in which we celebrate Purim relate to this theme and satire?

Finally, why is it necessary to celebrate Purim for all generations? Purim is not the only time in our history when we were saved from terrible enemies. Chazal go even one step further. They claim that Purim will be the **only** holiday kept at the time of the final redemption! (See [Rambam Hilchot Megilla](#), [Esther 9:28](#) and commentaries).

To our surprise, the prophecies of Zecharya contain several interesting parallels to the Megilla. We posit that these parallels are intentional. In doing so, the author of Megillat Esther (most probably a member of Anshei Knesset HaG'dola during the time period of Ezra) suggests that Am Yisrael's predicament during the time period of Achashveyrosh may have been caused because Zecharya's prophecies were not taken seriously!

To appreciate the message, we must study [Zecharya chapters 7-8](#), the same chapters that describe an "**Ish Yehudi**" ([8:23](#)).

Do We Fast on Tisha B'Av?

The first six chapters of Sefer Zecharya focus on one primary theme - the return of the **Sh'china** to Yerushalayim. Its return, Zecharya warns, will be a function of Am Yisrael's covenantal commitment ([see 6:15](#)). Redemption is indeed possible; however Zecharya insists that both spiritual **and** physical return are necessary: "Shuvu eilai... v'ashuva aleichem." ([1:3](#); see also [8:7-8](#)) [It is highly suggested that you read at least the [first two chapters of Zecharya](#) (note "hadasim" and "ish rochev al sus" in [chapter 1](#), and "prazot teshev Yerushalaim" in [chapter 2](#)) and then [chapters 7-8](#) before continuing.]

Construction of the Temple begins in the second year of Daryavesh. Two years later, an official delegation from Bavel arrives in Jerusalem to ask Zecharya a very fundamental question:

"Ha'evkeh b'chodesh hachamishi? Should we continue to fast in the 5th month (the fast of Tisha B'Av)?" ([see 7:3](#))

The question appears to be quite legitimate. After all, now that the Temple is rebuilt, there is no reason to fast on Tisha B'Av anymore! However, Zecharya's lengthy and official reply ([7:4-8:23](#)) to this question, his prophetic answer to the Babylonian Exile, contains an eternal message that relates to the nature of the ideal redemption process.

By analyzing Zecharya's answer, we will find the basis for certain "minhagim" (customs) of Purim.

From Zecharya [7:4-7](#) it appears that God is quite disturbed by their question, for the Jews in Bavel should have been excited about the prospect of returning to Jerusalem. Instead, their only interest was whether or not they have to fast. In the eyes of the prophet, their question reflected a general attitude problem in regard to the entire redemption process.

Zecharya answers that the fast of Tisha B'Av is not a divine commandment; rather it was a minhag instituted by Chazal to remember not only the Temple's destruction, but also the reason **why** the churban took place ([see 7:5-6](#)). Thus, God explains, feasting or fasting is man's decision, while God is interested in something much more basic - that Bnei Yisrael keep the mitzvot that they had neglected during the first Temple period ([see 7:5-14](#)).

Zecharya continues his answer with two chapters of 'musar' (rebuke) in which he emphasizes the most basic mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael must keep in order for the **Sh'china** to return:

"Mishpat **emet** shiftu, v'chesed v'rachamim asu **ish** et **achiv**. V'almana v'yatom, geir v'**ani** al ta'ashoku..." ([7:8-10](#))

Zecharya stresses truth, social justice, helping the poor and needy, and thinking kindly of one's neighbor, etc. God is anxious for His Sh'china to return, but in order for that to happen, Yerushalayim must first become a city characterized by truth ([8:1-3](#)). God foresees the return the exiles from lands in the East and West. With their return, God and His nation will become once again covenantal partners, through "**Emet and Tzdaka**" ([see 8:7-8](#)).

Finally, after many words of encouragement and repeated 'musar' ([see 8:11-17](#)), God answers the original question concerning the fast days. Should Am Yisrael return to Israel and keep "**Emet V'Shalom**," the four fast days commemorating the destruction of Yerushalayim will become holidays:

"**Tzom** ha'.... [the four fast days] will be instead for Yehuda days of celebration... [on the condition that] they will love **emet** and **shalom**." ([see 8:18-19](#))

Only through **emet** and **shalom**, Zecharya's theme in these two chapters, will the redemption process be complete. Then, numerous people from many great nations will come to Yerushalayim in search of God. They will gather around the "**Ish Yehudi**", asking for his guidance, for they will have heard that God is with His people ([8:20-23](#)).

Had Am Yisrael heeded this prophetic call in the time of Koresh and Daryavesh, then they would not have been scattered among 127 provinces during the time of Achashveyrosh. Instead of celebrating with the Persians at the party in Shushan, the Jews should have been celebrating at the Bet HaMikdash in Yerushalayim.

According to this explanation, we can explain Zecharya's prophecy as follows: Zecharya tells Bnei Yisrael that if they show their devotion to God, i.e. if they practice "**Emet umishpat shalom**" ([8:16](#)), then the fast days, the days of crying for Jerusalem, will become **holidays** instead.

One could suggest that the Mordechai's institution of the yearly celebration of Purim reflects this prophecy, for we find the turn around from "yagon" to "simcha," from **mourning** to **holiday** (see [Esther 9:22](#)). Purim may symbolize the manner in which the fast days for Jerusalem will one day become holidays.

This could explain the reason for the special mitzvot that we keep on Purim. They reflect Zecharya's repeated message of helping the needy (matanot l'evyonim; note [7:10](#)) and thinking nicely of one's neighbors (mishloach manot **ish l'rei'eihu**; note [8:16-17!](#)). Once a year we must remind ourselves of the most basic mitzvot that we must keep **in order** that we become **worthy** of returning to Yerushalayim and rebuilding the Bet HaMikdash.

Certain halachot instituted by Chazal reflect this message. Interestingly, Shushan Purim is **replaced** with Yerushalayim Purim, for the walled cities from the time of Yehoshua bin Nun replace the walled city of Shushan! [[See Yehoshua 21:42](#) and its context; compare to [Esther 9:2](#).]

Shalom V'Emet

Although this explanation for certain minhagim of Purim may seem a bit 'stretched', textual proof is found in the closing psukim of the Megilla ([9:29-32](#); read it carefully!).

Mordechai and Esther need to send out a second "igeret" (letter) explaining and giving authority ("tokef") to the minhagim of Purim explained in the first "igeret." What was the content of this special second letter? To our surprise, one short phrase: "Divrei **shalom v'emet!**" [[See 9:30](#); read carefully.]

These two key words point directly to Zecharya's prophecy about the fast days becoming holidays (read [Zecharya 8:18-19](#) again)! They explain not only **when**, but also **why** the fast days will become holidays - i.e. if Bnei Yisrael keep **shalom** and **emet!** The second 'igeret' may simply be an explanation of the purpose of the minhagim of Purim; Mordechai and Esther use this letter to explain to

Am Yisrael **why** Purim has been established - as a yearly reminder of the prophecies of Zecharya that remain unfulfilled.

The continuation of this "igeret" strengthens this interpretation. Under what authority ("tokef") does Mordechai institute these halachot?

"Ka'asher kiymu al nafsham divrei hatzomot v'za'akatam." ([9:31](#))

[Compare these psukim carefully to [Zecharya 8:18-19](#).] Recall that God had told Zecharya that fast days and feast days are up to man to decide. Now, according to the second "igeret," just like ("ka'asher") the prophets instituted four fast days in order that we remember Yerushalayim, Mordechai institutes a **'feast day'** to remember Yerushalayim.

So why didn't everyone return immediately afterward?

Most probably, after the events of the Megilla, a mass return to Yerushalayim was not realistic. Nonetheless, Mordechai wanted to institute a holiday that would remind Am Yisrael that should such an opportunity once again arise, that they will know how to relate to it properly. Sefer Zecharya and its theme of "shalom v'emet" will serve as the spiritual guide. [This interpretation may help explain why the celebration of Purim will remain even after our final redemption.]

Purim, therefore, has deep meaning for all generations. Its message may have been 'hiding' behind the costumes, the drinking ("ad d'lo yada"), the "purim Torah" and "shalach mannos." It may have been lost within our ignorance of Tanach. Its message, however, remains eternal, just as our aspirations for Yerushalayim remain eternal.