

"He Makes Nations Great and Destroys Them" – The Turning Point of the Megilla

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I

Upon examination of the book of Esther, we find that only after we have finished reading the entire book can we retroactively appreciate the significance of all the events it relates. Only after we have seen the picture in its entirety, from the third year of King Achashverosh to the twelfth year of his reign, do the many details join together to form a whole mosaic. Only then do we understand the contribution of each and every detail to the final miracle.

Thus, for example, the story of the feast at the beginning of the book can only be fully appreciated after we have witnessed Esther's role in Israel's deliverance. Only then does it retrospectively become clear that the whole feast was only necessary to serve as a backdrop for Vashti's offense and her being replaced by Esther. Mordechai expresses this idea when he says to Esther:

And who knows whether you are not come to royal estate for such a time as this? (*Esther* 4:14)

The same is true about the story of Bigtan and Teresh. In its place in the narrative, it seems to be an insignificant detail, but when we reach the night that the king is unable to sleep, it becomes evident that the earlier incident has an important function – raising Mordechai's standing in the eyes of the king at a crucial moment. Many other details appearing in the book should also be understood in this manner.

The *gemara* also adopted this approach:

Rava said: Had it not been for the first letters, there would have been left no shred or remnant of the enemies of Israel.¹ (*Megilla* 12b)

Rashi explains:

Had it not been for the first letters sent by Memuchan (who is Haman) that every man should bear rule in his house and speak according to the language of his people, through which [the king] was established as a fool in the eyes of the nations, no shred or remnant would have been left of the enemies of Israel, as [the nations] would have made haste to kill them in accordance with the king's command in the middle letters, and they would not have waited until the appointed day.

¹ A euphemism for Israel.

Thus, even a seemingly minor and unimportant detail, such as the dispatch of the first set of letters, is interpreted in the *gemara* as one of the factors that contributed to the final miracle.

In light of this, we might ask: What is the significance of the incident involving the king's horse? The story of Mordechai being brought on horseback by Haman through the street of the city is fine in itself. The story lifts our spirits and teaches us what is done to the man whom the King of the Universe wishes to honor, and, in contrast, what is done to the man whom the King of the Universe wishes to shame. It would seem, however, that the omission of this story from the book would not have detracted from the miracle in any way. If so, the essential point eludes us: What is the significance of the incident involving the king's horse within the narrative, and in what way does it contribute to the final miracle?²

II

It is readily apparent to one who examines the book of Esther that the motif of "*ve-nahafokh hu*," "it was turned to the contrary," is a central motif of the book. This is clear from a comparison of the wording of the letters sent by Haman and Mordechai. The two letters are formulated in identical fashion; only the names of the attackers and the attacked are reversed. This idea is evident in other details as well. The tree that Haman had prepared for Mordechai is used in the end to hang Haman himself, while the house that Haman had built with great toil for himself is given in the end to Mordechai. The ring that the king had removed from his hand at an early stage and given to Haman (3:10) is removed at a later stage and given to Mordechai. At first it is reported that "the city of Shushan was in consternation" (3:15), but in the end we read that "the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad" (8:15). Whereas the response of the Jews to Haman's letters is: "And **many** lay in sackcloth and ashes" (4:3), the response of the non-Jews to Mordechai's letters is: "And **many** of the people of the land became Jews" (8:17).

We see, then, that the entire book is divided into two contrasting sections. The situation described in the second part stands in total contrast to the situation described in the first part. This interpretation of the book makes it necessary for us to clarify the moment when the tide begins to turn. What is the center point of the book, which divides it into two parallel and contrasting parts?

Without a doubt, the book's center of gravity is located in the incident involving the horse. Until that moment, Haman is on a continuous rise. He begins as one of the seven princes "who see the king's face"³ in the first chapter, and Haman rises in the wake of the counsel he offers regarding

² R. Mordechai Breuer deals with this question in his book, *Pirkei Mo'adot* (Jerusalem, 1986), vol. II, pp. 600-617. In this article, I will propose my own answer to this question, and with it clarify the meaning and causes of the miracle. [Editor's note: See also D. Henshke, "*Megillat Esther – Tachpošet Sifrutit*," in *Hadassa Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut, 1997).]

³ According to *Chazal*: "It was taught: Memuchan is Haman" (*Megilla* 12b).

Vashti (blind to the fact that this counsel would in the end lead to his utter downfall) until he reaches the rank of viceroy:

After these things, King Achashverosh promoted Haman the son of Hamdata the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. (3:1)

Haman also acquires a position of awe and respect among the king's princes:

And all the king's servants... bowed, and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. (3:2)

Haman is so important in his own eyes that he contemplates exterminating an entire people because of a single person who was not quick to show him the proper respect:

But he disdained to lay hands on Mordechai alone... so that Haman sought to destroy all the Jews... the people of Mordechai. (3:6)

To further this end, Haman succeeds in obtaining the king's consent and even his ring. That which is sealed with the king's ring cannot be undone, and thus the ring bestows on the one who holds it greater authority than that enjoyed by the king himself.⁴ At this point, Haman functions in essence as the king, as it is he who seals his orders with the king's ring.

The next stage in Haman's apparent ascent is the invitation that he receives to Esther's banquet:

“Even Esther the queen let no one come in with the king to the banquet that she had prepared other than myself.” (5:12)

Haman reaches the climax of his imaginary rise when the king asks him:

“What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” (6:6)

Haman has no doubt that the man the king is referring to is none other than himself:

“To whom would the king delight to do honor more than to myself?” (6:6)

In his mind, he sees himself already as king:

“Let the **royal** apparel be brought which the **king** has worn, and the horse that the **king** rides upon, and on the head of which a **royal** crown is placed.” (6:9)

He imagines himself as one who has reached the pinnacle of success – kingship.

⁴ See *Daniel* 6:15-16.

This point marks the beginning of Haman's rapid downfall. As great as is his rise, so is his fall. As the verse says: "He makes nations great and destroys them" (*Iyov* 12:23).

Haman is first forced to lead Mordechai on the king's horse and run before him as a servant. He has just arrived home, in mourning and with his head covered, when the king's chamberlains are already rushing him off to the banquet, where he is accused by Esther of attempting to destroy her people. His downfall finds concrete expression in his own actions: "And Haman was **fallen** upon the couch" (7:8). Even though Haman did this in order to beg for his life, it only exacerbates his fall: "Then the king said, 'Will he even assault the queen in my own presence in the house?'" At this point, only one sentence is needed to complete Haman's rapid fall:

And Charvona said... "Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman has made for Mordechai... stands in the house of Haman." (7:9)

This sentence completes Haman's fall and seals his fate: "The king said, 'Hang him on that'" (7:9). In the words of *Chazal*: "*Me-igra rama le-bira amikta*," "from the greatest heights to the lowest depths."

Mordechai, on the other hand, undergoes the reverse process. Until the incident involving the king's horse, Mordechai finds himself at the bottom of the ladder. His clothes rent and clad in sackcloth, Mordechai walks about with the threat of death hanging hovering over his head. He even loses his standing at the king's gate:

And he came even before the king's gate, though none might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. (4:2)

All this is true until the incident involving the king's horse. From this point on, Mordechai begins a rapid rise. Initially, Mordechai mounts the horse; later, he is appointed over the house of Haman and receives the king's ring:

And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordechai. And Esther set Mordechai over the house of Haman (8:2).

At this point, Mordechai reaches the rank that Haman had enjoyed prior to his fall. At the next stage, Mordechai ascends to an even higher station:

And Mordechai went out from the presence of the king **in royal apparel** of blue and white, and with a great **crown of gold**. (8:15)

The very things that Haman had envisioned but never attained – royal apparel and the royal crown – are now given to Mordechai.

In summary, we can say that the entire book is but an account of the struggle between Mordechai and Haman, the confrontation between the

representative of the Jews and the representative of the gentiles, between the Binyaminite and the Agagite, between the seed of Rachel and the seed of Amalek. This struggle is divided into two: Until the incident involving the king's horse and from that incident and on. These two parts parallel and contrast with each other.

Until the incident involving the horse, Haman is rising and Mordechai is falling. From that incident and on, Haman falls and Mordechai rises, in fulfillment of the verse:

The Lord makes poor, and makes rich; He brings low, and raises up. (1 *Shemuel* 2:7)

The very same act that marks the beginning of Haman's downfall also marks the beginning of Mordechai's rise. Mordechai builds himself up on the ruins of Haman.

We see, then, that the incident involving the king's horse symbolizes the reversal of fortune. Any answer that is suggested to explain the incident's role and contribution to the overall miracle will also have to explain why this specific incident begins the fall of Haman and, simultaneously, the rise of Mordechai.

We stated earlier that the entire book is but an account of the struggle between Haman and Mordechai. This struggle is mostly hidden; only twice does it express itself in direct conflict. This happens first in 3:2:

And all the king's servants who were in the king's gate, bowed and did obeisance to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordechai did not bow, nor do him obeisance.

If at first Haman is not aware of this conflict, the king's servants come and sharpen the clash:

And they told Haman, to see whether Mordechai's words would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew. (3:4)

At this point, both sides are aware of the conflict, and yet Mordechai does not submit:

When Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow or do him obeisance, then Haman was full of wrath against Mordechai. (3:5)

The struggle erupts into direct conflict a second time in 6:10 in the incident involving the horse:

Then the king said to Haman, "Make haste and take the apparel and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordechai the Jew."

Unlike what happened at the previous confrontation, Haman obeys the king's command:

Then Haman took the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordechai, and brought him on horseback on the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor." (6:11)

There is an element that is common to both conflicts. In each of them, one of the parties is bound by the king's command to act in a servile manner towards the other. In the first episode, Mordechai is subject to the king's command to bow to Haman – "for the king had so commanded concerning him" (3:2). Without a doubt, bowing down to another person is a clear act of servitude. In the second episode, Haman is ordered by the king to lead Mordechai on his horse and to run before him. This too is clearly an act of servitude, as *Chazal* noted:

"In that which he wants" (*Devarim* 15:8) – [This includes] even a horse to ride upon and a servant to run before him. (*Ketuvot* 67b)

There is, however, a difference between the two cases. In the first case, Mordechai transgresses the king's command and refuses to submit to Haman, whereas in the second case, Haman submits to Mordechai and fulfills the king's order. We see, then, that the two main characters in the book are subject to a double test. This test will clarify who will succumb to the other and who will reject the king's order and risk his life so as not to submit to his foe. The results of this test will determine the results of the entire struggle.

In the first episode, Mordechai rejects the command issued by a king of flesh and blood because of a command given by the King of the Universe.⁵

⁵ The commentaries disagree regarding whether or not Mordechai was permitted to bow down to Haman according to strict law. The *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Esther* 1054) brings several views:

They said to him: Know that you cause us to fall by the sword. What did you see to annul the king's command?

He said: For I am a Jew.

They said to him: But surely we find that your forefathers bowed down to his forefathers, as it is stated: 'And he bowed down to the ground seven times' (*Bereishit* 33:3).

He said to them: My forefather, Binyamin, was in his mother's womb and did not bow down, and I am his descendant, as it is stated: 'a Binyaminite' (*Esther* 2:5). Just as my forefather did not bow, so I do not bow or bend...

Mordechai said to them: Our master Moshe admonished us in his Torah (*Devarim* 27:15): 'Cursed be the man that makes any carved or molten idol'; and Yeshayahu said (*Yeshayahu* 2:22): 'Cease from man though his breath be in his nostrils'...

R. Binyamin bar Levi said: I am the knight of the Holy One, blessed be He; does a knight bow down before a commoner?"

According to the first and third opinions, bowing down to Haman was not subject to a prohibition, as we are dealing with an issue of honor, as in the case of Yaakov's bowing down to Esav. Mordechai had special reasons for acting as he did. According to the second opinion, bowing down was an act of idol worship. This view is adopted by other *midrashim* as well,

Mordechai risks his life and ignores the king's command, refusing to submit to Haman. How bold an act this was may be deduced from the response of the rest of the king's servants:

Then the king's servants... said to Mordechai, "Why do you transgress the king's commandment?" (3:3)

They do not understand how a person can risk his life and transgress the commandment of the king. It cannot be argued that Mordechai does not understand the severity of his action, for even after Haman sends out his letters, Mordechai stands fast in his refusal to bow down to him:

And Haman went out that day joyful and with a glad heart; but when Haman saw Mordechai in the king's gate, that he did not stand or stir for him, he was full of indignation against Mordechai. (5:9)

We see, then, that Mordechai's refusal to submit to Haman is a matter of principle. Mordechai leaves this confrontation enjoying the upper hand. But Haman can still argue that were he given the opportunity, he too would disregard the king's command and not succumb to Mordechai. Another confrontation was therefore necessary, a confrontation in which Haman would be commanded by the king to submit to Mordechai. This confrontation takes place in the episode involving the king's horse, in which Haman is commanded to run before Mordechai and he submits.

It should be noted that it was much more difficult for Haman to fulfill the king's command than it was for Mordechai. Bowing down to Haman when he was at the height of his greatness and at a time when everyone was doing so would not have involved Mordechai's humiliation, but Mordechai nevertheless refuses to succumb and disregards the royal command. However, there could be nothing more humiliating to Haman than having to run before Mordechai when Haman was in the prime of his glory and everyone knew that Mordechai was his personal enemy and that Haman was plotting to destroy all of Mordechai's people. Despite all this, the king's commandment weighs heavily upon Haman, and he succumbs to Mordechai.

This act teaches us about the gravity of the king's commandment and reveals retroactively what dedication and self-sacrifice were required of Mordechai in order to transgress it.

e.g., *Esther Rabba* (7:6), which states that Haman engraved an idolatrous image on himself; Rashi adopts a similar explanation in his commentary.

According to the plain sense of the text, it would seem, in accordance with the first and third opinion, that this bowing down was not a religious act, but rather a matter of honor. (See the comment of A. Chakham in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary [Jerusalem, 1974], p. 23, end of note 2, who notes that in the Persian religion in the time of Achashverosh, bowing was a matter of honor, and not an acceptance of a divine being.) Mordechai, however, maintained that his Judaism does not allow him to bow down before a man of flesh and blood.

[Editor's note: See also R. Y. Medan, "*U-Mordechai Lo Yikhra Ve-Lo Yishtachaveh – Madu'a*," in: *Hadassa Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut, 1997).]

Haman's running before Mordechai ends the confrontation and completes Mordechai's victory. From the moment that Haman falls before Mordechai of his own free will, he can no longer be revived, and perforce he falls to the lowest depths. This is what Haman's wise men and his wife Zeresh tell him after he lead's Mordechai about on the king's horse:

“If Mordechai, before whom **you have begun to fall**, be of the seed of the Jews, then you shall not prevail against him, but **you shall surely fall before him.**” (6:13)

They prophesied without understanding what they were prophesying. If "you have begun to fall" before Mordechai of your own free will, "you shall not prevail against him, but you shall surely fall before him" against your will.

It is clear now why the incident involving the horse serves as the turning point in the story and as the beginning of Haman's downfall. At this time, Haman falls of his own free will, and in the end he will fall under duress. Now the incident's role in the book is also clear. This incident is not one of the factors that helped bring about the miracle, nor is it one of the details that were reversed in the wake of the miracle. If we search for a parallel in the first part of the book, we will find it in the first confrontation between Haman and Mordechai, when Mordechai is commanded to bow down before Haman and refuses to submit to him. It is not by chance that in the seven verses which describe the first confrontation between Haman and Mordechai (3:1-7), both the name of Mordechai and that of Haman appear seven times.

III

What we have said thus far accords with what is stated in the following Talmudic passage:

R. Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why were the enemies of Israel [i.e., a euphemism for Israel] in that generation deserving of extermination?

He said to them: You answer.

They said: Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one.

[He said to them]: If so, those in Shushan should have been killed, not those in the rest of the world.

They then said: Give your answer.

He said to them: It was because they bowed down to the image.⁶
(*Megilla* 12a)

Thus, according to R. Shimon bar Yochai, Israel's sin was bowing down to the image. This being the case, that sin would be repaired through Mordechai's refusal to bow down before Haman. As we have said, according to the simple understanding, Mordecai was been permitted by strict law to bow down before Haman, but nevertheless Mordechai does not submit to Haman. Mordechai refuses to bow down to Haman even when he is permitted

⁶ Rashi: "They bowed down to the image in the time of Nevuchadnetzar" – see *Daniel* 3.

to do so, and this atones for the people of Israel, who bowed down to the image when that was forbidden. However, as we stated earlier, Mordechai's self-sacrifice can only be fully appreciated after Haman, in the second round of the confrontation, submits to Mordechai. Through his action, Haman teaches us about the gravity of the king's commandment, the greatness of Mordechai's self-sacrifice, and his clear superiority to Haman.

It is worth noting the difference between human vision and Divine vision. Through human eyes, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman might be seen as the direct cause of the decree of destruction issued against the people of Israel. But through Divine eyes, Mordecai's self-sacrifice is in fact the direct cause of Israel's salvation. This is what the prophet says:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. (*Yeshayahu* 58:9)

IV

According to the Talmudic passage cited above (*Megilla* 12a), another factor played a role in the decree issued against the people of Shushan: "Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one." R. Shimon bar Yochai only proposed another explanation because this offense was the sin only of the people of Shushan, and not of all of Israel. It turns out, then, that while the people of Israel in general committed one sin, those living in Shushan sinned twice. It stands to reason then that their repentance should be two-fold. Indeed, in addition to Mordechai's self-sacrifice, which came to repair the sin of bowing down to the image, we find in the book of Esther a second act of repentance – that of the people of Shushan:

Then Esther bade them return Mordechai this answer, "Go gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night and day." (4:15-16)

In other words, while Mordecai, through his refusal to bow down before Haman, repairs the sin of all of Israel of bowing down to the image, the people of Shushan through their fasting repair the sin of partaking from the feast. The three-day fast of the Jews **who are present in Shushan** atones for the seven-day feast that was made for all the people **that were present in Shushan**. Through this fast, the people of Shushan strengthen the power of Esther, who risks her life and appears before the king to plead on behalf of her people.

If the people of Shushan sinned in two-fold manner and also repented in two-fold manner, by right they should also be consoled in two-fold manner. This is what Esther says to the king:

"If it pleases the king, let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do tomorrow also according to this day's decree." (9:13)

While the Jews in all the lands of the kings "gathered themselves together, and stood up for themselves, and had rest from their enemies... on the thirteenth of the month Adar" (9:16-17), the Jews in Shushan the capital gathered together on the thirteenth and on the fourteenth and rested on the fifteenth of that month. This difference was perpetuated for all future generations:

Therefore, the Jews of the villages, who dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of gladness and feasting and holiday (9:19),

whereas the Jews in the walled towns celebrate the fifteenth of the month.

Ostensibly, it might be argued that those who live in walled towns should have to make two days of feasting, one for the deliverance of the people of Shushan along with all of Israel and one for their separate deliverance. The *gemara* in fact proposes such an idea:

But say that the unwalled towns should read on the fourteenth, and the walled towns on the fourteenth and on the fifteenth? (*Megilla* 2b)

According to the *halakha*, however, this is not the case. It may be suggested in explanation that the two-fold consolation that Shushan enjoyed was not two days of feasting, but rather two days of vengeance, as this was the miracle:

On the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, and it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over those who hated them. (9:1)

Shushan did in fact enjoy two-fold vengeance. Yet it was not the days of vengeance and killing that were perpetuated for all future generations, but rather the day of rest and feasting that came in their wake, and in this, Shushan was like all other towns. They all rested for a day after striking their enemies. Therefore, the difference between Shushan and other cities does not find expression in future generations in the number of feast days, but in the date – unwalled towns on the fourteenth, walled towns on the fifteenth.

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