

The essence of Purim

I

At first glance the detailed account of the removal of Vashti and the accompanying gender war in the opening chapter of *Megillat Esther* seems to have little relevance to the narrative of Purim, other than to explain how Esther ascends to the throne. However, the truth is that the Vashti-Achashveirosh narrative serves as the foundation for the entire *sefer*.

Let us picture the *sefer* as a stage, with two sets of footprints at its center – those of Achashveirosh and Vashti. Every major actor in the Megillah occupies one of these spots on the stage at any given moment. All interactions between them are modeled after the modes of interactions defined in the first chapter:

- י ביום השביעי כטוב לב המלך ביין אמר למהומן בזתא חרבונא בגתא ואבגתא
זתר וכרכס שבעת הסריסים המשרתים את פני המלך אחשורוש:
- יא להביא את ושתי המלכה לפני המלך בכתר מלכות להראות העמים והשרים
את יפיה כי טובת מראה היא:
- יב ותמאן המלכה ושתי לבוא בדבר המלך אשר ביד הסריסים ויקצף המלך
מאד וחמתו בערה בו:
- יג ויאמר ממוכן לפני המלך והשרים לא על המלך לבדו עותה ושתי המלכה כי
על כל השרים ועל כל העמים אשר בכל מדינות המלך אחשורוש:
- יד כי יצא דבר המלכה על כל הנשים להבזות בעליהן בעיניהן באמרם המלך
אחשורוש אמר להביא את ושתי המלכה לפניו ולא באה:

יח והיום הזה תאמרנה שרות פרס ומדי אשר שמעו את דבר המלכה לכל שרי
המלך וכדי בזיון וקצף:

יט אם על המלך טוב יצא דבר מלכות מלפניו ויכתב בדתי פרס ומדי ולא יעבור
אשר לא תבוא ושתי לפני המלך אחשורוש ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה
הטובה ממנה:

כ ונשמע פתגם המלך אשר יעשה בכל מלכותו כי רבה היא וכל הנשים יתנו יקר
לבעליהן למגדול ועד קטן:

כא וייטב הדבר בעיני המלך והשרים ויעש המלך כדבר ממוכן:

כב וישלח ספרים אל כל מדינות המלך אל מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ואל עם ועם
כלשונו להיות כל איש שרר בביתו ומדבר כלשון עמו:

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the King was merry with wine,
he commanded Mehuman, Bizta, Harvona, Bigta, and Abagta, Zetar, and
Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of the King
Achashveirosh,

11 to bring Vashti the Queen before the King with the royal crown, to show
the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was beautiful.

12 But the Queen Vashti refused to come at the King's command by the
chamberlains; and as a result, the King was very angry, and his fury burned
in him.

16 And Memuchan answered before the King and the princes: "Vashti
the Queen has not merely done wrong to the King alone, but also to all
the princes and to all the peoples that are in all the provinces of the King
Achashveirosh.

17 For this deed of the Queen will become known to all women, to make
their husbands denigrated in their eyes, when it will be said: 'The King
Achashveirosh commanded Vashti the Queen to be brought in before him,
but she did not come.'

18 And this day the princesses of Persia and Medes who have heard of the
deed of the Queen will tell it to all the King's princes, and there will arise

much contempt and wrath.

19 If the King approves, let him promulgate a royal edict, and let it be written in the statutes of Persia and Medes irrevocably, how Vashti did not come before the King Achashveirosh; and her kingdom shall be given to her better.

20 And the King's decree will be heard throughout all his kingdom, which is great, and all the wives will give to their husbands honor, great and small."

21 And this pleased the King and the princes; and the King acted according to the word of Memuchan.

22 And he sent letters to all the King's provinces, to every province according to their writing, and to every people in their language, that every man should rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people.

The first to step into the shoes of Achashveirosh and Vashti are Esther and Haman. Esther obviously replaces Vashti and Haman tries his best to step into the shoes of Achashveirosh at every opportunity. The most obvious symbol of this is the King's ring which is handed from Achashveirosh to Haman.

In light of this, it is very interesting to see that the interaction between Haman and Mordechai replicates that of Achashveirosh and Vashti. Haman (like Achashveirosh) tries to force Mordechai to comply with a royal decree, and he refuses to comply. Haman reacts by being filled with rage (*chemah*), associated with the idea of shame (*bizayon*). This is, of course, exactly what we have in the first chapter; and this is how it plays out in chapter three:

ב וכל עבדי המלך אשר בשער המלך כרעים ומשתחוים להמן כי כן צוה לו
המלך ומרדכי לא יכרע ולא ישתחוה:

ג ויאמרו עבדי המלך אשר בשער המלך למרדכי מדוע אתה עובר את מצות המלך:

ד ויהי באמרם/ כאמרם אליו יום ויום ולא שמע אליהם ויגידו להמן לראות היעמדו דברי מרדכי כי הגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי:

ה וירא המן כי אין מרדכי כרע ומשתחוה לו וימלא המן חמה:

ו ויבז בעיניו לשלח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי ויבקש המן להשמיד את כל היהודים אשר בכל מלכות אחשוורוש עם מרדכי:

ז בחדש הראשון הוא חדש ניסן בשנת שתים עשרה למלך אחשוורוש הפיל פור הוא הגורל לפני המן מיום ליום ומחדש לחדש שנים עשר הוא חדש אדר:

ס

י ויסר המלך את טבעתו מעל ידו ויתנה להמן בן המדתא האגגי צרר היהודים:

2 And all of the King's servants who were in the King's gate bowed down, and prostrated themselves before Haman; for this is what the King had commanded concerning him. But Mordechai would not bow down, or prostrate himself before him.

3 And the King's servants who were in the King's gate said to Mordechai: "Why do you violate the King's commandment?"

4 And they spoke daily to him, and he did not listen to them, and they told Haman, to see whether Mordechai's words would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew.

5 And Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to him, nor prostrated himself before him, and Haman was filled with wrath.

6 And he considered it insufficient to lay hands on Mordechai alone; for they had made known to him Mordechai's nationality; therefore, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Achashveirosh.

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of King Achashveirosh, they cast pur, that is, the lot [goral], before Haman

from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.

10 And the King took his ring off his hand, and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedata the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

The roles are reversed as we move into the second half of the Megillah. Now the royal trappings that Haman thought would be used to enhance his status as stand-in for Achashveirosh are instead used for Mordechai, who steps into the shoes of Achashveirosh, pushing Haman into the position of Vashti. The dynamic between them once again echoes that of Achashveirosh and Vashti; however, the direction is reversed.

In the first chapter the king decrees that all women must accord honor (*yekar*) to their husbands. This is precisely what Achashveirosh orders Haman to do in chapter six:

ז ויבוא המן ויאמר לו המלך מה לעשות באיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו ויאמר המן בלבו למי יחפץ המלך לעשות יקר יותר ממני:

ז ויאמר המן אל המלך איש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו:

ח יביאו לבוש מלכות אשר לבש בו המלך וסוס אשר רכב עליו המלך ואשר נתן כתר מלכות בראשו:

ט ונתון הלבוש והסוס על יד איש משרי המלך הפרתמים והלבישו את האיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו והרכיבהו על הסוס ברחוב העיר וקראו לפניו ככה יעשה לאיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו:

י ויאמר המלך להמן מהר קח את הלבוש ואת הסוס כאשר דברת ועשה כן למרדכי היהודי היושב בשער המלך אל תפל דבר מכל אשר דברת:

יא ויקח המן את הלבוש ואת הסוס וילבש את מרדכי וירכיבהו ברחוב העיר ויקרא לפניו ככה יעשה לאיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו:

6 And Haman came, and the king said to him, “What should be done for a man whom the king wishes to be honored?” Haman thought, “Who would the king wish to honor more than me?”

7 And Haman said to the king: “A man whom the king wishes to be honored,

8 There should be brought for him royal garments that were worn by the king, and a horse that the king rode upon, and that a royal crown had been placed upon.

9 And the clothing and the horse should be placed in the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes, and he shall dress the one whom the king wishes to honor, and cause him to ride on horseback through the street of the city, proclaiming before him: ‘Thus shall be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor.’”

10 The king said to Haman: “Quick, take the clothing and the horse, as you suggested, and do so to Mordechai the Jew, he who sits at the king’s gate; omit nothing from what you have said.”

11 Then Haman took the clothing and the horse, and dressed Mordechai, and caused him to ride through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him: “Thus shall be done to the man whom the king wishes to honor.”

Furthermore, it is absolutely fascinating that in the Megillah, Mordechai is very often referred to as “the man” (*ish*), and that he is ultimately placed in charge of the house of Haman. He is introduced to us in the following way (2:5):

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשָׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֵרְדֵּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן שְׁמַעִי בֶּן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי:

There was a Jewish man [ish] in Shushan, the capital, and his name was Mordechai, the son of Yair the son of Shimi the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

The same description repeats many times, through the end of the *sefer* (9:4):

כי גדול מרדכי בבית המלך ושמעו הולך בכל המדינות כי האיש מרדכי הולך
וגדול:

For Mordechai was great in the house of the king, and his fame spread throughout the provinces, for the man [*ish*] Mordechai was becoming increasingly great.

This echoes the plan in the first chapter that each man (*ish*) should rule over his household!

Just as Mordechai usurps the place of Haman and switches places with him (over the course of the latter chapters), so too Esther moves into Achashveirosh's place alongside Mordechai and pushes Haman slowly but surely into the role of Vashti.

This gives context to the fact that Esther invites Haman to a party. This is how she ultimately disposes of him, just as the king's invitation to a party marked the beginning of Vashti's downfall.

The ultimate reaction to Haman is that of *chemah* on the part of Achashveirosh (7:7):

והמלך קם בחמתו ממשתה היין אל גנת הביתן והמן עמד לבקש על נפשו
מאסתר המלכה כי ראה כי כלתה אליו הרעה מאת המלך:

And the king arose in his fury from the wine-feast and went into the palace garden; and Haman remained to plead for his life from Queen Esther; for he saw that the king was determined to harm him.

This is, of course, parallel to his reaction to Vashti after she was invited to

the king's party. This culminates with the ultimate switch in places, and the final echo of the Vashti-Haman identification (7:9-10):

ט ויאמר חרבונה אחד מן הסריסים לפני המלך גם הנה העץ אשר עשה המן
למרדכי אשר דבר טוב על המלך עמד בבית המן גבה חמשים אמה ויאמר
המלך תלהו עליו:
י ויתלו את המן על העץ אשר הכין למרדכי וחמת המלך שככה:

9 Then Harbonah, one of the chamberlains before the king, said: “Behold, the gallow that is fifty cubits high – which Haman made for Mordechai, who spoke well for the king – stands in the house of Haman.” And the king said: “Hang him on it.”

10 So they hung Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai. Then the king's wrath subsided.

It is not surprising that in the latter part of the *sefer*, the ring that represents the identity of Achashveirosh finds its way to Mordechai (chapter eight):

א ביום ההוא נתן המלך אחשורוש לאסתר המלכה את בית המן צרר היהודיים
היהודים ומרדכי בא לפני המלך כי הגידה אסתר מה הוא לה:
ב ויסר המלך את טבעתו אשר העביר מהמן ויתנה למרדכי ותשם אסתר את
מרדכי על בית המן:
ד ויושט המלך לאסתר את שרבט הזהב ותקם אסתר ותעמד לפני המלך:

1 On that day the King Achashveirosh gave the house of Haman, the Jews' enemy, to Esther the Queen. And Mordechai came before the king; for Esther had revealed their relationship.

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

4 Then the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose, and stood before the king.

All of this is a manifestation of one of the major aspects of the Megillah, namely that of *venahafoch hu*. The beginning and end of the Megillah are extremely similar but in reverse. The Megillah (9:1) emphasizes:

ובשנים עשר חדש הוא חדש אדר בשלושה עשר יום בו אשר הגיע דבר המלך
ודתו להעשות ביום אשר שברו איבי היהודים לשלוט בהם ונהפוך הוא אשר
ישלטו היהודים המה בשנאיהם:

And in the twelfth month, which is Adar, on the thirteenth day, on the day when the king's commandment and his decree were to be put into execution, on the day that the enemies of the Jews thought to have rule over them; it was reversed [*venahafoch hu*], and the Jews had rule over their enemies.

The question that we need to ask is, what is the significance of this phenomenon?

II

In addition to the question that we raised above, there are several critical issues that we need to explore regarding the Megillah and the Purim festival.

One of the questions that is fundamental to understanding the Megillah is: What did the second letter accomplish? This letter seems to be the essence of

Esther's achievement and the catalyst for the salvation of Purim. And yet, it is not at all clear what its significance was. The exchange over the letter is described in chapter eight:

ה ותאמר אם על המלך טוב ואם מצאתי חן לפניו וכשר הדבר לפני המלך
וטובה אני בעיניו יכתב להשיב את הספרים מחשבת המן בן המדתא האגגי
אשר כתב לאבד את היהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך:
ו כי איככה אוכל וראיתי ברעה אשר ימצא את עמי ואיככה אוכל וראיתי באבדן
מולדתי: ס

ז ויאמר המלך אחשוורש לאסתר המלכה ולמרדכי היהודי הנה בית המן נתתי
לאסתר ואתו תלו על העץ על אשר שלח ידו ביהודיים ביהודים:
ח ואתם כתבו על היהודים כטוב בעיניכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטבעת המלך כי
כתב אשר נכתב בשם המלך ונחתום בטבעת המלך אין להשיב:

5 And she said: "If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the king deems it proper, and I am good in his eyes; let it be written to retract the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedata the Agagite, which he wrote to annihilate the Jews that are in all of the king's provinces.

6 For how can I stand to see the evil that will befall my people? And how can I stand to see the destruction of my birthplace?"

7 Then the King Achashveirosh said to Esther the Queen and to Mordechai the Jew: "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hung him upon the tree, because he laid his hand upon the Jews.

8 And now, write concerning the Jews, as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring; for writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, cannot be revoked."

It is clear that the letter did not rescind the original letter's license to kill the Jews, let alone prohibit such action. Not only is there no mention of such a thing in the letter, but Achashveirosh could not have revoked that which was written in the first letter even if he had wished to.

Similarly, the second letter contained no mention of any support given to the Jews (whether military or financial). It is also hard to imagine that the benefit of the letter was that it gave the Jews permission to fight back. This is implausible, as they were all aware and forewarned that their enemies intended to totally wipe them out, man, woman, and child. Under such circumstances, were they really waiting around for permission to defend themselves? That leaves us with the question of what the letter accomplished.

The next question that we need to consider is why the holiday is referred to as Purim. The Megillah (9:26) emphasizes that the holiday is called Purim because of the *pur*:

על כן קראו לימים האלה פורים על שם הפור על כן על כל דברי האגרת הזאת
ומה ראו על ככה ומה הגיע אליהם:

For that reason, they called these days “Purim,” on account of the *pur*; therefore regarding all of the words of this letter, and what they saw regarding this, and what happened to them.

Of all the aspects of the Purim story, Haman casting lots seems to be amongst the least significant. Why isn't the festival named after Mordechai or Esther, or our survival, or the clash with Amalek? Why is the *pur* placed center stage?

This bewildering aspect of Purim is compounded by another puzzling detail in the Megillah: Of all of the foreign words in the Megillah (see *Megillah* 18a), only *pur* is translated – not just once, but twice (3:7; 9:24). Why should this be so? Why the major emphasis on *pur*?

The key to the entire Megillah, and by extension to understanding Purim, resides in one further question: Why did Haman cast lots in the first place?

The standard answer is that he used the lots to determine which day was most auspicious for his attack on the Jews. However, the Megillah (9:24) provides a different explanation:

כי המן בן המדתא האגגי צרר כל היהודים חשב על היהודים לאבדם והפיל פור
הוא הגורל להמם ולאבדם:

For Haman, the son of Hammedata the Agagite, the enemy of all of the Jews, plotted against the Jews to annihilate them; and cast lots [pur], that is the goral, in order to confound them and thereby destroy them [*lehumam ule'abdam*].

The purpose of the lots was *lehumam ule'abdam*, to confound and thereby to destroy them (the phrase *lehumam ule'abdam* is similar to a hendiadys). It was an integral part of Haman's diabolical plot. Haman did not want a war; he wanted a massacre. The way he intended to pull off this massacre was by creating a certain mindset among the Jewish People. He wanted them to feel that resistance was hopeless and that their destruction was inevitable.

Haman attempted this via a constellation of methods. First, he cast lots, *purim*, which are explained in the Megillah as *goral*, meaning fate. He wanted to impress upon the Jews that he hadn't simply picked out a date; rather, he had divined their destiny through the use of lots. Second, he sent out the first letter. This is why the Megillah emphasizes that the meaning of *pur* is *goral*!

As a result of Haman's actions, the streets were filled with official messengers and irrevocable proclamations all containing one coherent message: The Jews are going to be wiped out! The result was that the Jews were psychologically paralyzed. In the words of the Megillah (3:15):

הרצים יצאו דחופים בדבר המלך והדת נתנה בשושן הבירה והמלך והמן ישבו
לשתות והעיר שושן נבוכה:

The runners made haste at the instruction of the king, and the decree was promulgated in Shushan, the capital; and the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was thrown into a state of turmoil.

The second letter transformed the Jews' frame of mind. Now they were hearing that they were going to gather and avenge themselves of their enemies. As a result, they were energized and psychologically prepared for the task of defending themselves. The way this is described is a clear literary contrast to the previous description of their state of mind. The text reads (8:15):

ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך
בוץ וארגמן והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה:

And Mordechai went out from the king's presence in royal garments of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.

The message of the Megillah now begins to emerge. The essence of Purim is the negation of the message of Haman; namely, that we have no control over our own destiny and fate. This fatalistic approach is rejected by the Megillah.

It is true that the fundamentals of our life are decreed in advance and that we have no say in them. We don't control our genetic makeup or who our parents are or most of what happens to us. Much of life is indeed *goral*. So too, Mordechai and Esther were given certain basic components of the situation that they could not alter (the Achashveirosh-Vashti dynamic, the confrontation on

the thirteenth of Adar, the tree that was fifty *amot* tall, and so forth).

On the other hand, how those basic components were assembled (e.g. who was being hung on the tree by whom) was determined by their courageous and ingenious actions (with the help of Hashem). Through prayer and repentance, politics and warfare, they redefined their fate. This is the concept of *venahafoch hu* which is so central to Purim. Esther and Mordechai were the authors of the final version of their destiny, which turned out to be the opposite of the fate that Haman claimed awaited them.

For this reason, Purim is a time of joy. When we realize that we have control over our destinies, it is the cause of great joy.

One final note: It is interesting that throughout the Megillah, Esther is referred to as “Esther,” her Persian name, rather than being called “Hadassah,” her Hebrew name – except for one time (2:7). Why?

The basic meaning of the name “Esther” (aside from the Midrashic interpretation) is “star.” The Megillah is telling us that the final version of our destiny and fate is not written by the celestial stars, but by the human ones, such as Esther. This is the central message of Purim.