

Purim: The Proper Outlook

Rabbi Dr. Darrell Ginsberg

Megillat Esther occupies a unique literary position within the canonized books of Tanach due to the simple relatability of the story. In fact, the people presented in the story almost seem to fit a simple labeling: Mordechai and Esther the “good guys”, Haman and Achashveirosh the “villains”. When we turn to the words of the Sages, we are witnesses to a much more complex picture of these personalities. In the Tractate of Megilla, there are pages and pages dedicated to expositions regarding the main characters of the Megilla narrative. Many of these, through careful analysis, reveal deeper insights into the minds of these important people, aiding us in our study of this monumental story.

The Gemara Megilla teaches a cryptic exposition based on a verse in Kohelet (10b):

“R. Abba b. Kahana introduced his discourse on this section with the following text: For to the man that is good in his sight he giveth wisdom, and knowledge and joy. This, he said, is the righteous Mordecai. But to the sinner He giveth the task, to gather and to heap up; this is Haman. That he may leave it to him, that is good in the sight of God; this refers to Mordecai and Esther, as it is written, And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.”

We see three points in this application of the verse. The first is that Mordechai is the individual with wisdom, knowledge and happiness. The second is Haman’s trait of evil is accumulating material items. And finally, there is the “karma” message, where Haman’s possessions and power are transferred to Mordechai and Esther.

There are some striking problems with this interpretation. For one, Haman is considered the paradigm of evil; among the litany of evil acts include the attempt to exterminate the Jewish people and the creation of himself as a focal point of idolatry. The Sages though are focusing on what no doubt is a harmful trait, but it seems quite benign when compared to the various actions Haman performed during his reign. Another question concerns this message of “karma”, where there is a lesson to be learned in Mordechai and Esther inheriting Haman’s position. Again, this seems to be a detail in the story, while the Sages are treating it as a pivotal lesson. Finally, while it makes sense to see Mordechai described as smart and wise, the trait of “happiness” is not one we necessarily see at any point on display in the Megilla story. Why is this being used in reference to Mordechai?

Of course, Haman was an appalling person. And we know Mordechai was a great individual. However, the Sages want us to understand the underlying qualities that create this persona. It is not as simple as describing him as an irrational murderer or megalomaniac. This verse and subsequent exposition prove this point.

When we see the world around us, we tend to try and immerse ourselves in the physical, pursuing satisfaction and happiness. This can emerge through satisfying our instinctual drives, or through the more abstract realms such as power and honor. Ultimately, as is pointed out in many sections of Kohelet, such a pursuit never brings about true fulfillment. It is an endless pursuit of futility.

However, there is another significant distortion that can emerge as we acquire these items. We can relate to them with a mindset of complete control. The acquisition is perceived as being permanent, and the control is intrinsic. This does not just express itself in material acquisitions. Quite often, when a person rises to a level of power, he cannot fathom the possibility of losing his position. He sees the current state of reality as being permanent. On a deeper level, a person expands this perception to the world surrounding him. For example, ask a person how they achieved their power and fame, and they will always point to hard work, dedication, and a myriad of other traits indicative of the individual. All of this presupposed that the person was in control of every step of the process. It is almost a natural response. It is also an extremely dangerous approach, as it both denies the reality of how little knowledge of control a person has as well as the overestimation of self that allows for such an outlook.

Haman personified this distorted view of the world around him. He fabricated an image of himself being intrinsically important, standing on a pedestal in relation to the rest of humanity. With that came a sense of complete control of the physical world around him. He was the master of the scheme, plotting his rise to power. He was always planning, always seeing himself in control of the unfolding of events. And it was his very attachment to this world, his belief that he was in control of events, which was his Achilles heel. Esther sensed this weakness in Haman and exploited it. The invitations to the parties, and the paranoia planted in the king, all were done to foil Haman's plot. As Haman came face to face with his plan unraveling, he was unable to comprehend how it was coming apart at the seams. The ownership of his plan had been rescinded, but Haman was incapable of accepting such a reality. The transfer of ownership of his assets and position was the ultimate expression of just how little control Haman had, and how his plan was completely outside of his control. To present to Haman the possibility that this reversal of fortune could occur would be too absurd for him to even consider.

Mordechai, of course, possessed wisdom and knowledge. However, there is another critical part of his personality, a trait found in all righteous people. In truth, we can plan all we want, but we can never have complete knowledge of the world of cause and effect. There is only so much in our hands. For many people, this develops into insecurity and fear. Not so with Mordechai. He understood what it meant to have little control – and he was comfortable with it. A person like Mordechai exists in an equilibrium with the world of cause and effect. He understands that possession does create some degree of ownership, but there is no intrinsic control that emerges from this relationship. His satisfaction with his state leads to the happiness referred to in the verse.

The lesson from this elucidation is quite apparent. When we study the characters in the Megilla, it is critical to look past the simple caricatures. Haman's entire outlook was one guided by an outsized sense of self, leading to his absurd contention that he was in control of events. On the other hand, Mordechai was someone who was content knowing his knowledge of the world of causality was limited. As the story pits the struggle between good and evil, it is critical to understand that these terms extend way beyond simplistic moral labels. We must turn to the words of the Sages as they guide us in understanding the deep underlying traits of the personalities of the Megilla.