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Thoughts on Purim 5776

March 24, 2016
14 Adar

An Important Message from Achashverosh

I wish that every student with whom I work developed according to a predictable, linear path. Such is not the case. Students graduate and each develops uniquely. Some continually grow in their commitment to Torah and Judaism. Others struggle. Some of those who struggle experience periods during which observance becomes a daunting challenge. Some surrender to the challenge and abandon observance. For an educator, this is disheartening. However, it is encouraging that many of those who stray from observance rediscover their commitment later in life. This raises an interesting question. Is there something unique about the outlook of those who return to observance? How can we explain their experience? How do they find the path back to observance after abandoning their commitment?

This question is relevant to each of us. We each have our individual struggles with observance. The expectations of the Torah are intentionally endless. By design, each step of our spiritual growth is intended to be followed by a new quest and challenge. Sometimes, that next step seems a little too steep and we feel unable to meet the test. Hopefully, we will not give up but instead, strive to meet the challenge. And if not today, then perhaps, tomorrow or the next day we will discover the inner courage and tenacity to meet the challenge that now overpowers us. Can we learn something from these individuals, who have abandoned their observance and yet, found a path home? Can these individuals who somehow found a beacon that brought them home teach us something about responding to the challenges that we face?

Now it came to pass in the days of Achashverosh – he was the Achashverosh who reigned from Hodu to Cush, one hundred twenty-seven provinces. (Megilat Esther 1:1)

1. Megilat Esther tells two stories

Megilat Esther tells two stories. One is the narrative of the salvation of the Jewish people from an evil adversary who would have destroyed them. In this narrative, a set of unlikely events leads to placing the heroine, Esther, in a position from which she is uniquely suited and situated to intervene to save her people. At the same time, a series of equally unlikely events, leads the king, Achashverosh, to suspect the loyalty of his most trusted advisor – the evil Haman. As the story unfolds, one unlikely event establishes the foundation for the next unlikely event. The message of the narrative is that an invisible hand is at work behind the scenes. This hand – Hashem's providence – is preparing the means for Bnai Yisrael's salvation even before, and while, Haman executes his plan for their destruction.

The second story told by the Megilah concerns the interactions of disparate personalities. The characters in this narrative are Achashverosh, Haman, Mordechai, and Esther. Each is unique and different from the others. The account of their interactions with one another and the influence that each has on the others is an exploration of human personality, our strengths and our challenges. If we study these characters, we discover that a little of each of us can be discerned in each of these disparate characters.

And when these days were over, the king made for all the people present in Shushan the capital, for [everyone] both great and small, a banquet for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's orchard. (Megilat Esther 1:5)

In the evening she would go, and in the morning she would return to the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, the guard of the concubines; she would no longer come to the king unless the king wanted her, and she was called by name. (Megilat Esther 2:14)

2. Achashverosh the hedonist

Let us begin with Achashverosh. What type of person was this mighty king? What does the Megilah reveal about his personality? He was a powerful ruler. He demanded and received the loyalty and obedience of princes and ministers from throughout the far-flung territories of his vast kingdom. Yet, the formality of the Persian court and its standards of decorum made the mighty King Achashverosh uneasy. After celebrating the consolidation of his rule for 180 days with the princes, ministers, and officers of his kingdom, Achashverosh convened a second seven-day feast. Unlike the first celebration, this feast was not intended primarily for the dignitaries of the kingdom. It was held for the common citizens of Shushan – his capital. Apparently, Achashverosh needed a release. The demands of the court were oppressive. The prolonged celebration and the responsibility of entertaining the royalty and dignitaries of his kingdom placed enormous strain upon Achashverosh. He rewarded himself with a celebration with the common people, in which wine flowed freely, and each person drank as he desired. At this party, Achashverosh finally felt at ease. He allowed himself the indulgent pleasure of drunkenness, with an outcome that he later regretted.

Achashverosh was also a person of enormous appetites. In his loneliness, he sought the companionship of women. He created a harem populated by the most beautiful women of his kingdom. Women were recruited from every province and presumably the king would select one to be queen in place of the deposed Vashti. But Achashverosh spent only one night with each young woman. His quest for a queen was replaced by an adventure in lust. Appetite ruled his actions. Achashverosh was a hedonist. Yet, this uncouth hedonist fell completely in love with Esther. Who was Esther and how did she secure the devotion of such an unlikely suitor?

And the maiden pleased him, and she won his favor, and he hastened her ointments and her portions to give [them] to her, and the seven maidens fitting to give her from the king's house, and he changed her and her maidens to the best [portions in] the house of the women. (Megilat Esther 2:9)

3. Esther: Beauty and virtue

The Megilah reveals two qualities of Esther. She was beautiful. She was also a woman of charm and virtue. In the above passage, we are told that while held in the harem, she earned the respect and devotion of its master. This man – who was essentially a purveyor of women to the king – lavished upon Esther his care and attention. Something about her won the admiration of even this base creature.

The Talmud in Tractate Ketubot describes a practice of Rav Shmuel the son of Rav Yitzchak. This sage would dance before the bride while grasping three myrtle branches. The Talmud applauds his practice of celebrating before the bride and groom and specifically his enthusiasm in the practice of this mitzvah.¹ But the Talmud does not comment on the significance of the three myrtle branches that Rav Shmuel grasped while dancing.

There is a hint to the significance of these branches in the Megilah. The Hebrew word for myrtle is *hadasah*. The Megilah tells us that Esther had a Hebrew name. That name was Hadasah.² Perhaps, the significance of the branches that Rav Shmuel grasped when dancing before the bride is that they represent the Hadasah of the Megilah – Esther. In grasping these branches, Rav Shmuel compared the bride to Esther.

The declaration of Rav Shmuel is consistent with an earlier discussion in the Talmud. There, the school of Hillel rules that one should declare before every bride that she is pleasant in both appearance and character. The school of Shamai disagrees. This school rules that although it is appropriate to praise a bride, one's praise should be truthful. Therefore, the praise should be adapted to the actual qualities of the

¹ Mesechet Ketubot 17a.

² Megilat Esther 2:7.

particular bride. If she is, in fact, pleasant in appearance and character, then that praise should be used. But if such praise would be untruthful, then a more accurate praise should be substituted.³

Rav Shmuel grasped his myrtle branches at every wedding celebration and danced with them before the bride. He compared every bride to Esther – pleasant in appearance and in character. Through this practice he adopted the position of the school of Hillel.

The discussion in the Talmud stresses the importance of virtue in a bride in addition to beauty. It is the combination of both traits that secures the love of the husband. Beauty may secure the groom's fascination and even infatuation. But it is the combination of beauty and virtue that secures his devotion.

Now, let us return to Esther and her relationship with Achashverosh. Esther was beautiful. But so were the other members of the extensive harem created for Achashverosh. It is not likely that she was the most beautiful woman with whom the king had a liaison. What won his devotion? Esther was unique in her character. Apparently, this character earned Esther the dedication of the master of the harem and also secured the absolute devotion of Achashverosh.

In short, the hedonistic Achashverosh, who was seeking only orgiastic pleasure, was completely taken by Esther. But his complete devotion was not because of some unique physical beauty that Esther possessed. It was a result of a spiritual character that somehow radiated from her. How strange that the hedonist was smitten by virtuous Esther! How can this be explained?

But it seemed contemptible to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had told him Mordechai's nationality, and Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout Achashverosh's entire kingdom, Mordechai's people. (Megilat Esther 3:6)

4. Haman's hatred of Mordechai

We will return to this issue. But first let us consider another of the relationships described in the Megilah – the relationship between Haman and Mordechai. What do we know about these characters? The Megilah describes Haman as driven by the desire to secure power and influence. At first, this drive propelled him to the highest levels of influence in the court. Eventually, this same drive led to his downfall when Achashverosh recognized Haman's true character and motives.

Mordechai was above all guided by his religion and ethics. He protected his sovereign from conspirators who sought to depose and murder him. He guarded Esther and cared for her. He fought for the welfare of his people. He absolutely refused to bow to Haman and worship him. And Haman intensely hated Mordechai.

How strange! Mordechai and Haman, Achashverosh and Esther. Two pairs of opposites. In one pair the opposites repel one other. Haman hates Mordechai and is consumed by a hatred that he can only conceive of satisfying through the murder of his adversary and the total annihilation of his people. In the other pair, opposites are attracted. The hedonistic Achashverosh is completely smitten by the virtuous Esther. He must have her as his queen. How are such different reactions to be explained?

5. Responding to those who have virtues we lack

The answer is very simple and basic. Despite his many shortcomings, Achashverosh had the capacity to appreciate virtue. He did not have the capacity to achieve it and he struggled to just contain his passions and impulses. But he recognized virtue and he appreciated it. He was drawn to Esther and eventually he placed his trust in Mordechai.

In contrast, Haman was threatened by virtue. He could not tolerate it and sought to destroy it. Mordechai's refusal to bow to him was intolerable. It evoked in Haman a self-awareness of his own inescapable humanity and mortality. Haman was attempting to kill not just Mordechai and the Jewish people but a fundamental truth. We are all finite, mortal human beings. Our power is illusory and even the illusion can last no longer than the fleeting passage of a lifetime.

Haman and Achashverosh had much in common. Both were confronted by individuals who represented to them a set of virtues very alien to their own values and lifestyles. Both were challenged by their respective partners to consider an alternative to their own path in life. Haman was confronted by Mordechai. Achashverosh was challenged by Esther. Haman responded by attempting to uproot and destroy the truth he could not endure. Achashverosh had the capacity to recognize and value that truth even though he could not personally live his life according to its demands.

Some years ago I had an interesting conversation with a former student. This young man had given up many aspects of his Torah observance. I told him that I understood that many Torah practices were difficult for him. But certainly, many other aspects were not so challenging. Why

³ Mesechet Ketubot 16b.

not continue those practices that resonated with him? He responded that were he to resume those practices, he would be reminded of his failure to observe other practices. If he observed kashrut, he would be reminded of his failure to observe Shabbat. Rather than be haunted by this reminder of failure, he preferred to abandon virtually all observance.

Years passed and he slowly began to increase his level of observance. What changed and allowed this person to reverse course and reengage in Judaism? He came to see life as a journey. We travel toward a distant goal. That goal is to make the most of ourselves. At every moment, we are more than the person we might have been and less than the person we may yet become. If we understand that we are on a journey, then we can be like Achashverosh. We can recognize virtue, value and even treasure it, even though at the moment it escapes our grasp. But if we see ourselves only as we are at the moment, without the vision of a great journey that lay before us, then every virtue we lack is an insult hurled at us. We become Haman – intolerant of the virtues that remind us of our failings.

I believe that this young man, as he matured, came to see his life as a journey. The realization that he could be more than he was at the moment, gave him the capacity to travel the path toward self-realization and fulfillment.



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