

The Different Sides of Mordechai

Ushering in a New Era

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

It would be an understatement to describe the story of *Megillat Esther* as a “mere” roller coaster of events. The personalities involved reflect the purest forms of good and evil. The fate of the Jewish people hung in the balance, rescued by the brilliant machinations of Mordechai and Esther. The parties, the intrigue, the wisdom, all of these and more are on display in *Megillat Esther*. For all of these various elements, the story ends with what would appear to be an anti-climactic thud.

The final section of the *Megillah* is quite short (Esther 10):

“And King Ahasuerus imposed a tribute on the land and on the isles of the sea. And all the acts of his power and his might and the full account of Mordecai's greatness, how the king advanced him-are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was viceroy to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and accepted by most of his brethren; seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all their seed.”

What are these verses adding to the story? It is strange to mention that Ahasuerus implemented a new tax on the people (an important issue, but not for this article). Mordechai, though, is portrayed in a different way than expected.

The order of the final verse begins with his role as viceroy to the king, obviously a position of tremendous power. He is described, clearly from the perspective of the Jewish people, as having traits like “seeking the good” and “speaking peace”. Prior to these descriptions is the subtle mention of his being “accepted by most of his brethren”.

One *Midrash* picks up on the lack of unanimity in the perception of Mordechai. For all he had given to the Jewish people, even liquidating Haman’s assets to be used for the building of the future Temple, he was not beloved by all the Jews. Thus, one can assume that no matter how much good a person does for others, he will never find universal approbation.

The Talmud (Megillah 16b) raises a more insidious possibility. The respect being given Mordechai rose not just from the average Jew, but from the Sanhedrin, the High Court of Sages. Yet, as the verse indicates, there was some conflict from within the group (the above mentioned “*brethren*”), and there was some who were not pleased with Mordechai.

What did he do wrong? In taking over Haman's position, and staying by the king's side as viceroy, Mordechai was suspending his learning, in favor of the role as savior of the Jews. The Talmud then offers an even harsher critique of Mordechai's actions (ibid):

"R. Joseph said: The study of the Torah is superior to the saving of life. For at first Mordecai was reckoned next after four, but afterwards next after five. At first it is written, Who came with Zerubabel, [namely] Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, and subsequently it is written, Who came with Zerubabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan."

As we see, his stature was reduced due to his position as viceroy.

While the Talmud's interpretation successfully picks up on the subtle nuance of the word "most", it raises a slew of other questions. It is peculiar that the Sages choose at all to critique Mordechai for what should be viewed as the ultimate sacrifice. One cannot imagine Mordechai thirsting for political power, as it contradicts his entire portrayal throughout the story.

If indeed Mordechai is engaged in something problematic, why wouldn't the entire High Court, ostensibly his peers, be uniformly critical? The idea of a partial consideration is not the normative manner used in such situations.

On a broader level, the entire ending of the story, focusing on Mordechai and his political success alongside the criticism, stands in stark contrast to how he is introduced to us. In describing Mordechai's lineage, we are told (2:5):

"There was a Judean man in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite"

The Talmud (Megillah 12b) offers a deeper explanation of these descriptive terms, framing Mordechai in a praiseworthy light:

"A Tanna taught: All of them are designations [of Mordecai]. 'The son of Jair' means, the son who enlightened [he'ir] the eyes of Israel by his prayer. 'The son of Shimei means, the son to whose prayer God hearkened [shama']. 'The son of Kish' indicates that he knocked [hikkish] at the gates of mercy and they were opened to him."

Who was Mordechai? He was the individual who inspired the Jewish people to return to God and pray for their salvation. He was a spiritual leader, an example to live by. He was highly perfected and had deep insights into the realm of Divine Providence.

He is portrayed at the beginning of the story essentially for his religiosity, exemplified by his refusal to bow to Haman. The bookends of the story regarding Mordechai then truly do see two completely

different individuals – the *tzadik* (righteous) at the start, viceroy and protector of the Jews in the end. What are we to learn about these different images being portrayed?

There is one more portrayal of Mordechai in the story that stands out, in what one might call the apogee of the entire *Megillah* (8:15):

“And Mordecai left the king's presence with royal raiment, blue and white and a huge golden crown and a wrap of linen and purple, and the city of Shushan shouted and rejoiced.”

The text seems to emphasize the incredible regal standing of Mordechai, clothed in garments fit for someone of the highest stature in the kingdom. Following this description comes the famous verse (8:16):

“The Jews had light and joy, and gladness and honor.”

The Talmud (*Megillah* 16b) offers a parallel interpretation of the nature of the celebration:

“Rab Judah said: ‘Light’ means the Torah, and so it says, For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light. ‘Gladness’ means a feast day; and so it says, And thou shalt be glad in thy feast. ‘Joy’ means circumcision; and so it says, I rejoice at thy word. ‘Honour’ means the phylacteries, and so it says, And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee, and they shall be afraid of thee; and it has been taught: R. Eleazar the Great says that this refers to the phylactery of the head.”

The terms like *“light”* and *“joy”* allude to something more important than photons and smiles. There was a renaissance of Torah, with the Jewish people reclaiming their attachment to the correct path of life. Indeed, this is the only celebration worth rejoicing.

The Vilna Gaon notes this interpretation, and proceeds to use a similar approach in recasting Mordechai at this incredible moment. Rather than see Mordechai as exiting the palace draped in royal clothing, which to some might appear as the consolidation of power and expression of royal might, we should see Mordechai clothed in both the *tallit* and *tefillin*. These were the *“garments”* he wore as he exited the palace.

What concept is the *Megillah* teaching us with these disparate images of Mordechai? Why end the story emphasizing Mordechai’s role as viceroy? Why the *“incomplete”* criticism?

The idea of Mordechai being perceived as the scion of the righteous, is the image portrayed throughout the *Megillah* story. His recognition (as brought forth by the various commentaries) that the evil plan about to befall the Jewish people was the result of their sinful ways was of paramount

importance in their eventual victory. Mordechai was able to convince Esther (as noted in the fourth chapter) of the need for haste, identifying that the fate of the Jewish people hung in the balance.

Mordechai understood clearly that the danger facing the Jewish people was not a political matter that could be resolved through meetings and discussion. Their failure in religious observance had led to a vulnerability, and repentance was the key to salvation. All of this reflects the leadership of the *Tzadik*, and it is how the people saw Mordechai, regardless of his role as adviser to the king.

The replacement of Haman as viceroy represented a culmination of the entire arc of the story. Mordechai resplendent in kingly clothes exits the palace, followed by the rejoicing of the Jewish people in Shushan. The Sages rightly point out that the celebration was not merely of their lives being saved. Their repentance and return to Judaism, coupled with the brilliance of Mordechai and Esther, allowed for this remarkable turn of events.

The Vilna Gaon builds off of this concept, where Mordechai appeared to the people with *Tallit* and *Tefillin*. They saw intertwined in Mordechai the *Tzadik* and the eradicator of evil, his clothes reflecting the unification of these ideas. They saw Divine Providence at work, Mordechai's ascension reflecting how the world of causality is outside of man's control. Again, the focus of the *Megillah* is on how Mordechai appeared to the people.

The story then ends with a much different description of Mordechai. Why is it important to focus on Mordechai's new role? A crossroads was open at this very juncture, one pivotal for the future of the Jewish people. What was going to happen after their reversal of fortune?

It is easy to imagine that the euphoria and fear among the non-Jews (as described in the eighth and ninth chapters) wearing off over the subsequent years. The "normative" relationship between the Jews and the surrounding peoples would reappear. The insecurities and tensions evoked by Haman to the king (in the third chapter) would once again dominate the scene. Was this a momentary eclipse in the history of the Jews? The answer was clear: not this time.

Mordechai understood that the Jews needed a protectorate. The Torah Temimah, when discussing the muted criticism of the Sages against Mordechai, notes that it must be that Mordechai chose this role willingly. Had he been forced to take on such a role, no criticism could have been leveled against him.

In other words, Mordechai became viceroy to ensure the moment of saving transformed into an era of peace and prosperity for the Jewish people. In fact, sensing the shift in political winds, Mordechai understood how the path to the re-building of the Temple now lay open.

The Midrash alludes to his directing all funds towards the Temple, a clear indication of Mordechai's insight into the unique time in Jewish history. Ensuring strength and stability for the Jewish people would bring about this desired outcome.

Such a selfless act would seem to welcome universal praise. As we have said up till now, the *Megillah* emphasizes a view the people had of Mordechai.

It could be here that the problem wasn't a flaw in Mordechai. Having a job alongside learning Torah is something praiseworthy, and at first glance, it would appear that Mordechai was busier with his new role. The people, though, seeing Mordechai ascend and retain his position alongside the king, no longer related to him as the *Tzadik*.

A shift began to take place, where he was viewed more as a politician by the Jews, as he became more entrenched in the kingdom. He was part of a world filled with corruption and malice. Granted, he exhibited noble traits among the den of wolves, but it was still a destructive environment.

It is quite possible he was learning fewer hours prior to his elevation in role. But the perception of him as someone setting aside Torah that was the key to the issue. He lost the essential identification as *Tzadik*, and this raised the ire of some of the Sages. In fact, this would explain why the criticism was not universal.

There was certainly a tremendous amount of merit in the decision to stay on as protectorate, as it meant ushering in an age of stability. But there was a sense by some that the shift in how the Jewish people saw Mordechai, the necessity of seeing him as the pure *Tzadik* reflecting the highest values, may not have been worth his selfless act.

While the last section of the *Megillah* may lack the dramatic highs and lows of the storyline, this should not mean important concepts are not able to be derived. We see through Mordechai's actions that the miraculous redemption of the Jewish people would not remain a solitary event, but would presage a new era. In taking on this role, Mordechai's relationship to the people lost some of its luster, evidenced in the critique. One should reflect at the end of the *Megillah* that from the joy of victory rose a challenge unlike any other for Mordechai.