

Thoughts on Purim

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Hidden Messages

And Esther said: If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him. (Megilat Esther 5:4)

And the king arose in his fury from the wine feast to the orchard garden, and Haman stood to beg for his life of Queen Esther, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king. (Megilat Esther 7:7)

I. Hashem's hidden presence in the Megillah

These above passages capture contrasting moments in Haman's life. In the first passage, Esther summons him to accompany the king to a banquet she plans for them. Haman believed that this reflected his ascension to the highest level of influence in the Persian empire. The queen invited him to accompany the king!

The second passage describes Haman's downfall. The king turned against Haman. He recognized his duplicity. He was convinced that Haman was his mortal enemy.

Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi notes that Hashem's name is hidden in the key phrase of each passage. The first Hebrew letters in the words "Let the king and Haman come today" are *yud*, *hey*, *vav*, and *hey*. These are the letters of the Tetragrammaton – Hashem's most sacred four-letter name. The final Hebrew letters in the words "that evil was

determined against him" also spell the Tetragrammaton.¹ The name of Hashem does not appear in the Megillah. Instead, Hashem's role in the narrative is implied. Perhaps, as Rabbaynu Eliezer suggests, it is "coded" into these passages. Why does the Megillah not explicitly describe and acknowledge Hashem's role in our salvation?

II. The dilemma confronting Mordechai and Esther

Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra comments:

"It is the case, that in this megillah there is no mention of Hashem's name. [Yet,] it is one of the books of the Canon.... In my opinion, the proper [explanation] is that this megillah was authored by Mordechai. This is the meaning of 'And he sent forth books.'² All [these books] were copies of a single text – that is the Megillah....

The Persians copied it and wrote it into the history of their kings. They were idolaters. They [would have] written the name of their abominations in the place of the Exalted and Awe-inspiring Name... [Therefore,] it was an honor for the name of Hashem for Mordechai to not mention it in the Megillah." (Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, Commentary on Megilat Esther, introduction)

Let us consider these comments closely. Ibn Ezra begins with a question. How can Megilat Esther be part of TaNaCh – the Canon – but not include mention of Hashem? The narrative portions of

¹ Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi, Yosef Lekach, Commentary of Megilat Esther 1:1.

² Megilat Esther 9:20.

TaNach focus upon Hashem's interaction with humanity. The Torah describes His creation of the universe and His providential relationship with the Avot – the Patriarchs – and the Jewish people. The Prophets continue this discussion. None of the works included in TaNaCh are histories composed from a secular viewpoint. Megilat Esther is different from these other books of TaNaCh. It does not mention Hashem or explicitly attribute to Him a role in the salvation of the Jewish people.

Ibn Ezra responds that this deviation from the style common to TaNaCh is in response to a practical consideration. Esther was Achashverosh's wife and Mordechai was his minister. Their record of the events recalled by Purim was regarded as authoritative. It was adopted by the Persians and incorporated into the court's official history.

Mordechai and Esther composed the Megillah aware that this would occur. They faced a dilemma. If they composed their narrative in the style common to TaNaCh, they would provoke the Persians to modify it. A typical TaNaCh-style account would describe Hashem intervening in human affairs to rescue His people. The Persians were idol worshippers and would not adopt such a document as their official account of the events. Instead, they would edit it to replace Hashem with their own deities. A work composed to give thanks to Hashem would be perverted into an instrument of idolatry.

Mordechai and Esther address their dilemma by leaving out of the Megillah any overt mention of Hashem. The work describes an unlikely series of events that lead to the rescue of the Jewish people from destruction. The astute reader understands that these events reflect Hashem's providence. However, the Persian or secular reader can conclude that the Jews benefited from good fortune. The overt religious neutrality of the text was not offensive to the Persians and did not conflict with their idolatrous beliefs.

A similar explanation is suggested by Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi. Based on this explanation he develops an interesting insight into a strange passage in the Megillah.

And all the acts of his power and his might and the full account of Mordechai's greatness, how the king advanced him – are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

III. An imperfect work

The above passage notes that the events recalled by Purim were recorded in the official court history of Media and Persia. Why is this mentioned? Perhaps, these chronicles are cited as corroboration for the Megillah. Rabbaynu Eliezer suggests another explanation:

“The passage states that [the Megillah] was recorded in the chronicles of Media and Persia. This accords with that which our Sages of blessed memory said there [in the Talmud]. When she asked that [the Megillah] be incorporated into the Hagiographa, Esther said, ‘It is already recorded in the chronicles of Persia.’ The benefit of this – making known that it was recorded in the chronicles of Persia and Media – was to explain why the name of the Blessed One is not mentioned and why many aspects are stated in [the account] through hints and in a hidden manner. These are elements that were appropriate to mention explicitly!

For this reason, they are [mentioned] through allusion and recorded in a hidden manner – because of fear of the sovereign. He might be angered and say, ‘They praise their god for that which I did out of my love for Esther. [Instead of acknowledging my role] they say our strength and might through our faith did this for us’” (Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi, Yosef Lekach, Commentary of Megilat Esther 5:4)

Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi suggests an alternative description of the dilemma that confronted Mordechai and Esther. The chronicles of the king record his activities and achievements.

Achashverosh – the king – viewed himself as the hero of this story. He saved the Jewish people as an expression of his love for his queen, Esther. An accurate account that acknowledged Hashem’s role would reduce Achashverosh to a minor character in the story. He would resent this portrayal of his role. Also, he would resent the Jewish people for their failure to express their gratitude to him and for instead, directing their gratitude toward their god.

According to Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi the above passage is included in the Megillah to explain the absence of Hashem’s name from the text. The text was incorporated into the chronicles of the Persian kings. This prevented Mordechai and Esther from explicitly acknowledging Hashem in its text. The above passage is essential to the Megillah. It explains its strange style.

Both these explanations characterize the Megillah as an imperfect work. Ideally, the Megillah would explicitly describe Hashem as saving His people. Circumstances prevented Mordechai and Esther from composing this ideal work. Instead, they resorted to hint, allusion, and suggestion.

IV. Hashem hides His face

Another comment of Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi suggests an alternative explanation for the Megillah’s atypical style.

“When our iniquities multiplied and our merits became fewer, and our Sacred Temple was destroyed, we were not worthy of the performance of a overt miracle for us when He fought [on our behalf] on the day of battle. Then, He saved us [acting] in a hidden manner... Thus, Hashem, the Blessed One, since He is with us in exile [but] hides His face, He brings about causes through which we

are saved from the hand of those who arise against us. However, it is not overtly evident that this salvation is from Him, the Blessed One.

We are the sheep of his flock. He makes known to Bnai Yisrael His actions and makes them explicit to us through the many, immediate, events [that are] unnatural [and] uncommon. This is even more the case, when we see the overturning of the counsels [of our enemies] and the nullification and reversal of their plots. This affirms to us even more [that these events] are the result of the One in Whose hand is every life and Who searches the innermost thoughts [of every person].” (Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi, Yosef Lekach, Commentary on Megilat Esther 1:1)

Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi explains that the Jewish people of the Purim story did not deserve to be saved through overt miracles. However, they were not abandoned by Hashem. He saved His people through manipulating events and engineering a rescue. This rescue might seem natural and unextraordinary. The objective of the Megillah is to identify the many key events that occurred at precise times and in a critical order designed to bring about our salvation. Through its description of this timing and order, the Megillah reveals to the sensitive and astute reader the hand of Hashem.

V. Portrayal of a hidden miracle

These comments suggest an explanation for the Megillah’s unusual style. The Megillah is the story of a hidden miracle. In bringing about our rescue, Hashem did not overtly reveal Himself. Instead, His providence was hidden and evident only through careful study of the events that combined to save the Jewish people. The Megillah’s style is perfect for describing this type of salvation.

The Jews saved by Hashem did not experience an overt miracle. Hashem did not manifestly reveal Himself. The Megillah describes this experience. Hashem is evident only through the unusual and

remarkable combination of events it describes. His name does not appear because His influence is not manifest in the events.

This explanation of the Megillah's style differs from the explanation offered by Ibn Ezra and Rabbaynu Eliezer Eskenazi. They concluded that the Megillah is an imperfect work. Ideally, it would clearly describe Hashem's role. Perhaps, the Megillah is not an imperfect work. Its style is ideal for describing the experience of the Jews of the Purim story.

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