

Thoughts on Purim

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What's in a Name?

And the Jews took upon themselves to do as they had begun, and as Mordechai had written to them. For Haman, the son of Hammedata, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast a pur, that is, the lot, to discomfit them, and to destroy them. But when it came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked plot, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head; and he and his sons were hanged on the gallows. Therefore, they called these days Purim, after the name of the pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and that which had come to them, (Megilat Esther 9:23-26 Translated by Neima Novetsky, with minor revision)

I. Purim – a strange name

The above passages describe the Jewish people's acceptance of the observance of Purim. The passages state that they accepted the observance in response to Mordechai's instruction. The passages summarize the events that Purim celebrates. They explain the origin and meaning of the name of the celebration – Purim. The name is derived from the lottery Haman conducted to determine the day on which the Jews should be destroyed.

The names of our festivals and celebrations communicate important ideas. The name Succot refers to the *mitzvah* of dwelling in the *succah*. The name Shavuot refers to the seven weeks that connect the celebration to Pesach. It emphasizes

the connection between the two festivals. The name Chanukah refers to the rededication of the *Bait Hamikdash* – the Sacred Temple. To what does the name Purim refer? It refers to the lottery conducted by Haman. Why is this lottery so important? What if Haman had arbitrarily picked a date for his pogrom against the Jews? What if he had picked a date that best fit his schedule or a date that had a strategic significance? Would the salvation of the Jewish people be less worthy of celebration and commemoration? To understand the message of the name Purim, we must better understand Haman's lottery.

II. Haman's lottery

Haman's behavior is not easy to understand. He wanted to destroy the Jewish people. What would we expect him to do to achieve his goal? We would expect him to devise a strategy to win the support of the king. Then he would launch his strategy. Once he would convince the king to endorse his pogrom, he would launch it as soon as possible. By acting quickly, he would prevent his victims from escaping. Also, he would minimize the possibility that shifting circumstances might cause the king to reconsider and withdraw his support.

Haman did not act as we would expect. First, Haman conducted his lottery to determine the date for the Jews' destruction. Through the lottery, he determined that the date would be the thirteenth of Adar. Then, he went to the king and persuaded him to support his plan. With this support, Haman issued a decree that the Jews should be attacked

and destroyed on the designated date. All these events occurred in the month of Nisan. Haman issued his decree eleven months before the date selected for his vicious campaign. How can this behavior be explained?

III. Haman's confidence

Two conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, Haman believed that the date determined by the lottery was enormously significant. The date was essential to the success of his plan. Second, he was very confident in its success. He was not concerned about the eleven-month delay between the issuance of his decree and its execution. He believed that this delay could not undermine his plan. How did he come to these conclusions?

IV. Studying the Megilah in its context

Before addressing our questions, we must identify an important characteristic of Megilat Esther. The work was composed by Mordechai and Esther and addressed to the Jews of their generation. However, it is not just an epistle intended for their specific generation. It is a work of eternal significance. It is a paradoxical document. It addresses an ancient generation with a message relevant to all future generations. Our study of the Megilah must consider this paradox. We study it to uncover and understand its eternal messages. But we must also recognize that these messages are expressed in the context of an ancient generation.

Consider a simple illustration. If a student of the classics decides to study Aristotle, he or she must put aside modern science. If the student studies Aristotle from the scientific perspective of the twenty-first century, he or she will immediately conclude that Aristotle was naive and even foolish. To appreciate Aristotle's science, the reader must project oneself into the ancient era in which he wrote. If the student can achieve this, then he or she can appreciate Aristotle's effort to organize the phenomena of the material universe into a comprehensible system. To understand the

Megilah, we must take the same approach. We must put aside our twenty-first-century assumptions and project ourselves into the era in which it was composed. Let's travel back to antiquity.

Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his supporters all that had happened to him, and his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Truly, since Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Judean descent, you will not prevail over him, for you will surely fall before him." (Megilat Esther 7:13 Translated by Neima Novetsky)

V. Haman's surprise

Why did Haman select a date for the destruction of the Jews through a lottery? The above *pasuk* – passage – provides an important insight into his and his contemporaries' thinking.

Haman went to the king to ask that he sanction hanging Mordechai. Haman's timing was critical. The king – Achashverosh – had just discovered that Mordechai had saved his life. He had uncovered and reported a plot to assassinate the king. Achashverosh was startled to discover that Mordechai had not been recognized and rewarded for his loyalty.

Haman arrived at the king's residence prepared to ask for Mordechai's execution. Instead, the king, learning that Haman was in his antechamber, summoned him and enlisted him to reward Mordechai. He was to attire Mordechai in royal robes and lead him through the streets upon the king's horse. He was to declare that this is how the king treats one he wishes to honor.

Haman's only option was to do as the king directed. He executed the king's orders and returned home frustrated and humiliated. He told his wife and companions all that happened.

The above *pasuk* is his wife's response. She tells Haman that his destiny has changed. These events are the beginning of his fall. It will end in his destruction. How did Zeresh – Haman's wife – come to this conclusion?

VI. Haman's beliefs

The Gaon of Vilna explains that Haman accepted astrology as a true and exact science. The movements of the stars and their positions in the heavens control the destinies of nations and individuals. He believed that the stars had caused his ascent to power. This conviction underlay his campaign against the Jewish people. He was convinced he would be successful because the stars favored him.

Haman was not an outlier in his belief in the power of the stars. His view was the conventional wisdom of his era. Zeresh also subscribed to this view. According to this view, the impossible had occurred. Haman had been humiliated and forced to lead Mordechai through the streets of Shushan. Something was terribly wrong. Zeresh concluded that the destiny of Mordechai and the Jews was determined by forces more potent than the stars. These forces now favored Mordechai and his people. Haman's plan was unraveling, and disaster awaited.¹

VII. An instrument of astrology

This insight into Haman's beliefs explains his use of a lottery to select a date for his evil campaign. He was searching for a date on which the stars would be best aligned in his favor. He was convinced that his lottery would reveal this date.² This also explains Haman's odd confidence. He believed that the eleven-month delay in the execution of his plan would not undermine it. The stars were on his side. His plan could not fail.

Now, we much more clearly understand Haman's lottery and the belief it represented. Haman conducted the lottery to take advantage of the influence of the stars. The lottery represents the belief that the destiny of nations and individuals is determined by the movement of the heavenly bodies.

VIII. Purim's message

Megilat Esther does not dismiss or even attack this view. Instead, it asserts that the destiny of the Jewish people is not subject to these influences. The fates of others may be dictated by the stars. But ours is directly determined by Hashem. This is the idea communicated by Purim. Haman believed that the destinies of all nations are determined by the stars. The events celebrated by Purim communicated that the Jewish people are unique. Our destiny is in only Hashem's hands.

IX. The message in a modern context

As explained above, the message of Purim is expressed in the terms of an ancient time's beliefs. But the message is eternal. We do not take astrology seriously. We know that the movements of the stars do not dictate events and are not portents. But we have replaced astrology with other influences that we believe determine the destiny of nations and individuals.

For example, we believe that international conflicts or alliances are determined by historical trends, cultural values, political realities, and economic considerations. These influences take the place of the defunct science of astrologers. Economists, sociologists, and political scientists are our modern astrologers.

The story of Purim tells us that these factors and influences may dictate the destinies of other

¹ Rabbaynu Eliyahu of Vilna, *Commentary on Megilat Esther* 7:13.

² See Rabbaynu Eliyahu of Vilna, *Commentary on Megilat Esther* 3:7. The balance of the above does not completely correspond with the Gaon's position.

nations. But they cannot determine our future.
Only Hashem controls our fate.

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