

# PURIM READER

**THE BOOK OF ESTHER,  
TORAH READING AND PSALM 22  
WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION,  
HALAKHOT AND COMMENTARIES**



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## **Purim Reader**

### **Second Edition**

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# Halakhot of Purim

Rabbi Moshe Shamah

## I. Overview

Subsequent to the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.E.) the Persians defeated the Babylonians in war (538 B.C.E.) and became the ascendant power in the Near East. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been exiled by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. The Southern Kingdom of Israel, essentially the tribe of Judah together with Benjamin, had been exiled from the land of Israel by the Babylonians and now lived in the huge Persian Empire. The setting of Megillat Esther is in the city of Shushan, capital of Persia, during the time period between the Babylonian exile and the Return to Zion (late sixth century B.C.E., perhaps 516 B.C.E.). The megillah contains an account of a major attempt during that epoch to annihilate the Jewish people, men, women and children, undertaken by Haman, chief advisor to King Ahashverosh. In a beautiful narrative it describes Esther's ascension to becoming queen, Haman's reason for his diabolic intent (the steadfast refusal of a Jewish leader, Mordekhai, to bow to him), details of the king's decree, and the amazing confluence of events including Queen Esther's intervention that brought about the miraculous saving of the Jewish People. Their extraordinary victory over their enemies was achieved on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, days ever since celebrated as Purim.

## II. Prior to Purim

1. On the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Adar, or on Rosh Hodesh Adar itself when it falls on Shabbat, we read Parashat Sheqalim (Exodus 30: 11-16) after the regular Torah reading for that day. The portion describes the past

requirement of contributing a half-sheqel toward construction of the Mishkan, and subsequently toward the service performed in it. This obligation was later transposed to that of the Temple when it replaced the Mishkan. Since Haman proposed to pay ten thousand sheqalim to the king's treasury to destroy the Jewish people, this mitzvah has been seen as symbolizing our intentions to counteract the negative intentions of the enemies of the nation.

2. On the Shabbat immediately before Purim, after the regular Torah reading, we read Parashat Zakhor (Deut. 25: 17-19). This portion calls upon Israel to remember what Amaleq did to us upon our leaving Egypt, while we were traveling in the desert, fatigued and weary. Unprovoked, Amaleq perpetrated evil acts against Israel, specifically attacking the stragglers and weak, having no fear of G-d. We are told to eliminate Amaleq - understood to represent evil-doers - from the world. (On Shabbatot following Purim we read Parashat Parah and Parashat Hahodesh.)

3. Adar 13, usually the day before Purim, is Ta'anit Esther, a day commemorating the fast the Jewish People observed, according to tradition, to prompt repentance when battling their enemies. When Purim falls on Sunday, the fast is observed on the preceding Thursday, Adar 11.

4. From the entry of the month of Adar, in anticipation of Purim, to be followed by Pesah, we increase joyousness and happy events.

5. One going on a trip to where he does not expect to find a megillah should try to take a megillah with him. If not practical, he may read the megillah from Rosh Hodesh Adar onwards, but without a berakha. Nevertheless, the other mitzvot of Purim should be fulfilled on Purim day.

### III. Reading of the Megillah

1. Both men and women are required to read the megilla or hear it read from a kosher megillah scroll twice on Purim, at night and during the day.
2. The mitzvah of reading the megillah is more properly fulfilled in the presence of a congregation in order to participate in publicizing the miracle (*pirsume nissa*). If one cannot come to the synagogue or otherwise participate in a minyan, he/she may read it or hear it read individually.
3. **Berakhot:** Three blessings are recited on the megillah prior to the evening reading:
  - a) *Al Miqra Megilla* (for the reading itself)
  - b) *She`asah Nissim La'abotenu* (mentioning the miracles Hashem performed for our fathers)
  - c) *Sheheheyanu* (expressing gratitude that Hashem has kept us alive to participate in this occasion). When reciting *Sheheheyanu*, one should also intend to cover the other mitzvot of the day.

One blessing is recited at the conclusion of the reading, *Harab et Ribenu* (acknowledging that it was Hashem who fought our battles). At this point, there are various customs concerning the recital of celebratory statements.

The same blessings are recited for the daytime reading except for *Sheheheyanu*.<sup>1</sup> If one omitted *Sheheheyanu* in the evening it should be recited in the day.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ashkenazic custom is to recite *Sheheheyanu* by day as well. According to this custom, the intent to cover the other mitzvot of the day should be with the daytime *Sheheheyanu*.

4. The berakhot before the reading are recited even when the megillah is being read individually (that is to say, without a minyan), whereas the berakha at the conclusion of the reading is only recited in a minyan.

5. The same berakhot are also to be recited by or for women who are reading or hearing the reading without a minyan.<sup>2</sup> If ten women are hearing the reading together, although it does not constitute a ‘minyan’ for other rituals, it is *pirsume nissa* and the concluding berakha is also recited.

6. One holding a kosher megillah scroll may read along with the hazzan. One who does not have a kosher megillah scroll should not read along but listen to every word said by the hazzan and have in mind to fulfill his/her obligation. It is important the hazzan be one who enunciates each word clearly.

7. Every person who reads Hebrew should preferably have at least a printed text of the megillah in front of him/her to follow along quietly. If one misses some of the words read by the hazzan, it is permitted to read them from the printed text and catch up providing this is only done with a minority of the megillah.

8. From the recitation of the first berakha until the conclusion of the last berakha there should be no talking or interruptions. Stamping feet during the reading is disturbing and inappropriate and should not be done. Very young children or those with noise-making toys, who will possibly create a disturbance and interfere with the fulfillment of the mitzvah, should not be present in the

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<sup>2</sup> The Ashkenazic custom is that when the megillah is read for or by women, the first berakha is changed to ‘*Lishmo`ah Miqra Megillah.*’

synagogue during megillah reading. If such children are in the synagogue, a baby-sitter should be provided in another area.

9. Unlike the case with the Torah, it is permissible to directly touch the megillah scroll when reading (with clean hands of course).

10. Since in the megillah the text is termed a “letter,” it is a widespread custom that as a page is read it is not immediately rolled up as is the case with a Torah scroll. At the conclusion of the reading it is rolled up before beginning the concluding blessing.

11. The time for reading the megillah in the evening begins at *set hakokhabim* (the appearance of stars), the time that the fast ends. One should not eat until performing the mitzvah. As the day concluding with *set hakokhabim* is usually Ta’anit Esther, it may be that one is hungry or thirsty. If necessary, one may have a light snack before the reading.

#### **IV. Mahasit Hasheqel**

It is customary to give a half-sheqel or half-dollar to charity for each family member before or on Purim, in commemoration of the mitzvah of *mahasit hasheqel*.

#### **V. Mishlo’ah Manot**

1. Each man and woman must send a food gift composed of at least two types of food or drink that may be used for that day’s festive meal to at least one person. The primary purpose of this mitzvah is to increase friendship between people. To some extent it may also provide for some needy.

2. It is praiseworthy to send *mishlo'ah manot* to many people and to send portions according to the standards of the giver, increasing harmony and amity in the nation.
3. At least the primary food gift that one sends to fulfill the mitzvah must be sent and received during the day of Purim.
4. The mitzvah is not fulfilled by sending money.
5. A mourner is required to fulfill the mitzvah of *mishlo'ah manot*. Others do not send to the mourner but may send to a spouse or other member of the family.

## **VI. Matanot La'ebyonim**

1. In addition to *mishlo'ah manot*, during the day of Purim we must give food, substance or monetary gifts to at least two poor people or their representatives.
2. If one can afford it, it is appropriate to give to many more than the minimum two poor people or their representatives.
3. On Purim, we are not very particular with the recipients of charity – “Whosoever extends his hand, we give him.”

## **VII. Se'udat Purim**

1. Everyone must partake of a festive meal on Purim. This mitzvah is not fulfilled at night but only during the day.
2. As the miracle of Purim came about through festive banquets with drinking of wine, to some extent the Purim *se'uda* should have such a quality, including alcoholic beverages for the adults. The Talmud states that one should become so joyous until he does not know the difference between “Cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordekhai.”

Whatever interpretation is given to this statement, and there are many, it is absolutely clear that one may only drink to the extent that he does not violate a halakha and is able to recite birkat hamazon and relevant prayers with proper concentration.

### **VIII. Purim on Friday**

The festive meal celebrating Purim is not to be held at night but at some point during the day. When Purim falls on a Friday, it is necessary to have the meal early enough in the day so as not to interfere with having the Friday night meal of Shabbat with appetite.

Some rabbis have advised having the meal in the morning. When impractical, the meal may be had in the early afternoon. For example, sunset on Purim day in the New York area (2008, when Purim last fell on Friday) is at 7:10 and the standard Friday minha-arbit services began at 6:40 for Shir Hashirim and 6:55 for minha. A festive meal beginning at 1 o'clock or 1:30 should allow enough time to have a Shabbat meal with appetite at 8 o'clock. (Those for whom it is practical may choose to pray with a minha gedola minyan at 1:05 p.m.).

Other rabbis have advised having the Purim meal attached to the Shabbat meal, essentially combining both into one great meal. In this option, the first part of the great meal is had shortly before Shabbat. Arbit should not be prayed beforehand. At candlelighting time, the women light the Shabbat candles and Shabbat is accepted by all, a covering is spread over the bread and Shabbat *qiddush* is recited. Assuming the berakha had already been said over the wine in the Purim portion of the meal, the *qiddush* is recited without the berakha on the wine. Assuming *hamosi* had already been said on bread in the Purim portion of the meal,

that berakha also is not repeated in the Shabbat portion of the meal. In Birkat Hamazon, *`al hanisim* is recited for Purim and *reseh vehahalisenu* for Shabbat.

## IX. Prayers

1. In the amida of Purim and in birkat hamazon we recite *Al Hanissim* followed by *Bimeh Mordekhai VeEsther* in their proper places as specified in all siddurim. If one forgot to recite them, he does not repeat the amida or birkat hamazon. If one remembered before having mentioned Hashem's name in the berakha following them, he may "return" and say them at that spot and then proceed from there. One who remembered too late, but still is in the amida or birkat hamazon, should insert them at the end of the amida before *oseh shalom* or in the *harahman* portion of birkat hamazon.

2. Tefillin are donned on Purim.

3. Hallel is not recited on Purim. Some Talmudic sages say the megillah takes the place of Hallel. Others say Hallel is reserved for miracles that occur in the Land of Israel (subsequent to having originally entered the land). Others explain that we did not achieve freedom on Purim to be fully "servants of the Almighty," but remained under the rule of Ahashverosh in exile.

4. *Tahanunim* are not recited on Purim and Shushan Purim. There is no musaf on Purim.

5. Before arbit and in *shahrit* we recite Psalm 22. Here, the psalmist is in a grievous, life-threatening situation from his enemies and is ill from the troubles besetting him. He recalls G-d's saving intervention on behalf of the nation in the past and His caring for him from birth and is able to



overcome his despair with prayer that obviously leads to salvation. The Sages applied this psalm to Haman's attempt to annihilate the Jewish People and Mordekhai and Esther's endeavors that brought salvation.

6. In arbit, the megillah is read after the amida followed by *ve'ata qadosh*. In *shahrit*, it is read after the Torah, just before *ve'ata qadosh*. (The verse of *ve'ata qadosh* is from the psalm we read on Purim (Psalm 22:4), and immediately follows the verse which the Talmud links to the halakha of reading the megillah by day and night.) On Saturday night, the blessing *boreh me'oreh ha'esh* is recited before the reading.

7. There are three olim to the Torah on Purim. The portion read - from Parashat Beshalah (Ex. 17: 8-16) - speaks of Joshua's battling and weakening Amaleq. As the passage contains only 9 verses, Shulhan Arukh requires the repetition of the last verse.<sup>3</sup> It contains the famous scene of Moshe on the mountaintop. When his hand was raised Israel was ascendant, when lowered, Amaleq was ascendant. The Mishnah (R.H. 3:8) explains this as an allegory meaning that when Bene Yisrael turn their hearts to Hashem, they are successful, otherwise they are not.

## **X. General Halakhot**

1. Purim is celebrated on Adar 14 in most of the world. In order to commemorate the one-day-later celebration of Shushan, where the battle continued for a second day, cities that were walled (like Shushan) when Joshua led the nation into the land of Israel (for example, Jerusalem) celebrate Purim on Adar 15.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ashkenazic custom is not to repeat the last verse, given that the passage is a complete unit with the 9 verses.

2. It is prohibited to fast or have eulogies on Purim.
3. Public aspects of mourning are suspended for the day similarly to Shabbat. This is one of the cases where Shulhan Arukh codifies the halakha differently in two different chapters. We follow the later, lenient codification.
4. Working is permitted on Purim except in those places that have a specific custom not to work. In any event, doing business by buying and selling merchandise is permitted.
5. It is permitted to have weddings on Purim.

## Insights into *M'gillat Esther*

*Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik delivered this 1973 lecture. The lecture was given in Lamport Auditorium on March 14.*

The *M'gillah* and the story of Purim occurred at the sunset of the glorious day of prophecy. The nation as a whole was facing the sad reality of a nonprophetic future. During the Passover story (which happened during the prophetic era), Moses, the messenger of God, received clear, exact instructions how and what to do in fulfilling his mission. But Mordekhai and Esther, also messengers of God, living in a nonprophetic age, had no clear guidelines how to implement their goal. They had to use their own initiative, imagination, and ingenuity to carry out their divinely ordained “mission impossible”: to save the nation from annihilation. This period of Esther is described as a period of *hester panim*, a time during which God seems to have hidden His Presence. All it really means is that He directs the action from the sidelines, from the shadows, without the glaring spotlights to pinpoint His involvement.

In every generation there are people whom God chooses to be His messengers, to become history makers. In the nonprophetic existence, they have to use much imagination and ingenuity to fulfill their mission. Whom does God choose? People who aren't simply individuals, but those in whom a multitude abides; individuals who contain within them a whole nation. Their role within Israel is that of the heart among the organs of the body. The heart is affected by anxiety, joy, fear, anger, and any other stresses to the body, yet it remains the hardest and strongest of all the organs. The individuals whom God chooses are those who see themselves affected by whatever happens to the nation, who cry with the pain of Israel, and rejoice at its happy moments. (By extrapolation, this is also

the role of Israel among the nations, according to the *Kuzari*.) Such individuals are more than single persons; they personify a whole nation within themselves. This is the concept of *shakul k'neged shishim ribo*, of one person being equal to the whole of Israel. Just as a nation doesn't die, so these unique individuals who represent the whole nation never really die. As long as *Am Yisrael hai*, then *David Melekh Yisrael hai v'kayam*. Haman realized that Mordekhai was such a person, and that it would be futile to kill Mordekhai alone (3:6), for Mordekhai is the embodiment of the nation Israel and the nation is the extension of Mordekhai, so only total eradication of the whole nation could erase the power of Mordekhai. Such is the stuff from which Jewish leaders are made.

In the story of Purim, both Mordekhai and Esther were chosen by God to play crucial roles in saving the nation. From the time of Sarah onward, women have been on equal, or even superior, footing with men in the history-making process. However, though both play equally important roles, they are different roles. A man cannot assume a woman's role and neither should a woman play a man's role. According to Judaism, men and women are spiritually and physically different, and though their complementary roles are of equal importance, they are fundamentally unique positions. Man initiates action while woman completes it. He is the theoretician while she put it in practice. He thinks in the abstract, she in pragmatic, realistic plans. Man is often a "schlemiel"; fortunately woman is crafty.

Mordekhai was to initiate the salvation of the Jewish nation. When the evil proclamations were posted, he didn't panic. Instead, he carefully analyzed the historical developments and came to the conclusion that Esther had been selected by God to save the nation. This "theory" made all the strange facts about Vashti, the feasts, and

Esther's glorious rise to royalty fit into a coherent scheme. He knew that he was to initiate the rescue but that Esther was the one to fulfill it. He had two tasks ahead of him: (1) inform Esther of the events that had transpired (4:2-9) and (2) make Esther realize that she was charged by the Almighty for this task (4:13-14). His task as a teacher and educator was to inspire Esther to accept the responsibility. Up until this point, Mordekhai was the hero, the central figure, the leader who was giving orders and attempting to inspire Esther to follow his ideas. As soon as Esther agrees to take the challenge, we notice a sudden reversal of roles: Esther becomes the more prominent character and Mordekhai is assigned a less important role. She is now the master, giving instruction (4:16) which Mordekhai obeys submissively (4:17). After he fulfilled his task as initiator of the salvation, Esther, the woman, gains prominence as the one to actually implement the plan and use her own ingenuity to bring it to fruition. This is the cunning, the *binah y'teira* (Nida 45b) which was endowed to womankind.

In fact, Mordekhai had his own ideas about how to implement the rescue of the Jews. But it was the plan of the woman Esther that prevailed. Mordekhai wanted Esther to go immediately to the king and plead for the nation (4:8). Esther disagreed, feeling that slow, diplomatic channels were to be preferred. She made one wine party and then another, procrastinating for some seemingly unfathomable reason. However, if we delve into the personality of Ahashverosh we will understand why Esther acted the way she did, and how the realities of the situation totally excluded the possibility of following Mordekhai's plan.

The king had a paranoid fear of an insurrection against the throne. The Talmud relates that he was not the legitimate heir to the kingdom, rather the son of the steward of the royal stables. His only connection with royalty was through his wife Vashti, daughter of Belshazzar. She

obviously despised him as a social climber who lacked any royal grace and dignity. There was an underground movement to overthrow the government and restore the old order, as evidenced by the assassination attempt by Bigtan and Teresh. Ahashverosh tried to “buy” the country’s loyalty by making those lavish parties and inviting everyone to eat and drink and view his wealth and women. But this is all clearly the workings of a mind that feels very insecure and fears revolt. The absurd law (4:11) proclaiming death to anyone who entered the throne room without an appointment seems also to be an outgrowth of his paranoid fear of revolt or assassination. When Vashti publicly insults him, he was worried that if he should kill her, this would inspire a revolution. M’mukhan (1:16-20) gave him the following brilliant analysis: “True, if you kill Vashti you may trigger off a revolt, but if you allow her to survive after publicly insulting the king, then she will serve as a model for all the women of royal blood to insult their husbands.” It was the custom in antiquity for the victor to marry the widow or daughter of the vanquished power. Thus, many of Ahashverosh’s officers had married women of the old order. “If they saw that the queen was not punished for her insolence, they too would start fighting their husbands and join the underground movement to restore the old order. The way to nip that in the bud is to execute Vashti.” Thus M’mukhan, whom the Talmud tells us was Haman, gained the confidence of the paranoiac king, appearing as one who loyally defended the throne. Immediately following the assassination attempt by Bigtan and Teresh, we find that Haman was appointed Prime Minister. The king was really frightened, and in his paranoia he turned to the person who had proven his loyalty M’mukhan (Haman)—and placed his faith in him.

Feeling slighted by Mordekhai, Haman decides to destroy the Jews. He plays on the king’s paranoia by casting suspicion on the loyalty of the Jews. He tells the

king (3:8) that the Jews are a unified nation, widely dispersed in the kingdom, with queer laws and customs. Being a strange nation, no one can guess whether they are planning a revolt. Should they decide to join the underground, their unity as well as their dispersion geographically could make the insurrection very successful. The king fell for this ploy and agreed to kill the Jews. When a paranoid lives in fear of an imaginary monster, all moral controls are abandoned. He has only one irresistible urge—to destroy. Esther understood all this very well and therefore could not agree to Mordechai’s plan of immediate action. Once Haman had succeeded in arousing in the king fear of Jewish revolt, no human power or pleading could dissuade him from destroying his imaginary enemies. In grappling with the realities of the situation it was a woman’s mind, not a man’s ideas, that was needed. Esther decided that the only way out would be to turn the tables on Haman and accuse him of plotting against the king. She procrastinated day after day, waiting to find a possible opening, a possible way to shatter the king’s faith in his trusted Prime Minister. It seemed that only a miracle could weaken his trust and indeed a miracle happened: *Balaila ha-hu nad’da sh’nat ha-melekh* (6:1). This is the turning point in the whole story, the prime miracle. The most significant aspect of that night was not so much the king’s new respect for Mordechai, but his loss of confidence in Haman. You feel the king’s malicious joy in taunting Haman while ordering him to honor “Mordechai the Jew” (6:10). Whether it was Haman’s mention of the royal crown (6:8) that made the king suspect his loyalty, or his failure to reward the king’s benefactor Mordechai, or the shifting perception of the universe in the mind of this paranoiac king, it was time for Esther to plant the seeds of distrust in his mind. This is the kind of subtle *hester panim* miracle, a change of mood in the mind of a deranged king, for which we give thanks to God on Purim. The next day, when

Esther charges Haman with treason, the king willingly accepts the accusation. She explains to the king that had Haman really felt concern for the better interest of the king, he would have placed the Jews in forced labor camps, thereby keeping them under surveillance in a profitable set up. “But the villain is not concerned about the threat to the king” (7:4). By proposing to arm the countryside with weapons to kill the Jews, he was really making it much easier for the revolutionary elements of the population to organize their revolution. Esther made the king believe that Haman was plotting against the throne. The king’s paranoia took over where Esther’s words ceased. Upon returning from the garden to find Haman on the couch where Esther was lying he screams, “Do you even plan to seduce the queen while I am in the house?” (7:8). He was so convinced of Haman’s treachery that everything he did was viewed through the lenses of his paranoia. He “saw” Haman not only planning the revolt but even trying to steal the queen! This was the ultimate sign of revolt. Haman’s fate was sealed. The very strategy and the fate planned for the Jews now backfired on Haman and his associates.

This was exactly what Esther had planned. Notwithstanding the end of the Prophetic era, the young girl managed to fulfill the impossible mission given her by God. Mordekhai was the initiator, inspiring her to act, but she worked out the strategy herself and, with the help of God’s miracle, brought it to fruition. God’s spirit descended upon her and subtly directed her actions (See Rashi’s comment on 5:1). It was the Divine Spirit from its hiding place (*hester panim*) that really engineered the whole production—not by direct instructions as in the prophetic era, but through the more delicate and subtle channels of the human mind.

Esther taught the Jewish people how to fast and how to pray (4:16). The inspired charismatic woman is superior to



man in two ways: (1) applied practical action and (2) prayer. Hanah, the mother of Samuel, taught us all how to pray (*B'rakhot* 31). Though she herself can never be counted to a *minyán*, she is responsible for showing us how to confront God. While Hanah taught the individual person how to pray in a time of stress, Esther taught us how we should pray together as a nation at times of peril. It is strange that these two traits, pragmatic cunning and the ability to pray, are really opposite, and yet women excel in both. Cunning is to be found only in adults whose years of experience with life mature them to be able to correlate all the possible factors and devise a scheme of action. Immature people may be brilliant, but they cannot be policymakers. Prayer, on the other hand, is an art in which the child excels. An adult is too realistic, too cynical, too hardened by life. To truly pray you must believe the unbelievable and hope for the impossible. True prayer is also that which swells up from either total despair or complete ecstasy. The adult moderates his emotions and doesn't allow himself to "let loose" and go to the extremes of feeling. But a child gives free reign to the feelings of anger, happiness, disappointment, and joy. The child knows how to pray *mimaamakim* ("out of the depths of despair"), and also how to sing a *shir hadash* ("a new song of rejoicing"). The Jew is asked to be an adult and a child at the same time. When called upon to act as a historymaker, as a messenger of God, one must act with maturity and cunning. But when one prays, he should shed his mature sophistication and let his overwhelming enthusiasm or unlimited grief pour out to God. One must hope for the impossible or know that nothing is impossible for God. These two opposing character traits find their most perfect reconciliation in womankind, symbolized to us by Queen Esther.

# **Remember Amalek**

by Nehama Leibowitz a"h

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could not be placed online because of copyright  
reasons.**

# The Turning Point<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The sedra [parasha] of Beshallah is beautifully constructed. It begins with a battle; it ends with a battle; and in the middle is the great miracle, the turning point - the crossing of the Red Sea. As so often in the Mosaic books, we are presented with a chiasmus, a literary structure of the form ABCBA, in which the end is a mirror image of the beginning, and the climax is at the centre.

Occupying the central role in Beshallah is the episode of the Red Sea, which turns out to be a division in more than one sense. Literally, the waters are divided. But metaphorically the fate of the Israelites is also divided: into a *before* and *after*. Before, they are still in Egyptian territory, still - that is to say - under the sway of Pharaoh. It is no accident that Pharaoh and his chariots pursue the Israelites to the very edge of their territory. Anywhere within Egypt Pharaoh rules; or at least, he believes he does.

Once across the sea, however, the Israelites have traversed a boundary. They are now in no-man's-land, the desert. Again it is no accident that here, where no king rules, they can experience with pristine clarity the sovereignty of G-d. Israel become the first - historically, the only - people to be ruled directly by G-d. The Red Sea is what anthropologist Victor Turner called "liminal space," a boundary between two domains that must be traversed if one is to enter into a new mode of being - in this case the boundary between human and divine rule. Once crossed, there is no going back.

The symbolism of the Sea does not end there however. It reminds us of the ancient ceremony of covenant-making.

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<sup>1</sup> This was written for Shabbat Parashat Beshallah, February 7<sup>th</sup> 2004, and applies to the Purim morning Torah reading from Exodus 17: 8-16.

The key verb of covenant is “to cut.” An animal, or animals, were divided and the parties to the covenant stood or sat between them. The division of things normally united or whole, stood as symbol of the unification of entities (persons, tribes, nations) previously divided. In this context a key passage is the covenant “cut” between G-d and Abraham in Bereishith 15 (vv. 9-18):

So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.” Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half . . . As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made (literally “cut”) a covenant with Abram. . .

So at the Red Sea the Israelites passed “between the pieces” (the waters, rather than the halves of animals) in a ratification of the covenant with Abraham. They passed from one domain to another, from being slaves - *avadim* - to Pharaoh to becoming servants -- *avadim* - to G-d. This surely is the meaning of the phrase, in the Song at the Sea:

. . . until your people pass by, O LORD , until the people *you have acquired* pass by. (Ex. 15:16)

The crossing of the sea is both an act of covenant-making and a transfer of possession. The Israelites are now G-d's possession rather than Pharaoh's. They have entered new territory, not just geographically but also existentially. What does this mean? What difference does it make? The answer is surprising, counter-intuitive. To understand it, we must compare the two battles, one before, the other after, the Sea.

The first is marked by extreme passivity. Having let the Israelites go, the Egyptians change their mind. Pharaoh decides to pursue them and assembles a force of six hundred chariots. We have to think ourselves back to an age in which the horse-drawn chariot was the ultimate weapon of war. In biblical times, Egypt was famous for its horses. No other nation could rival them. This meant that they could out-manuever any rival military force. Horses gave them speed, and chariots gave them protection. They were impregnable, and the sight of six hundred of them approaching would have been terrifying to a well-drilled army, let alone an unruly, disorganized group of slaves. Predictably, the Israelites lose heart and blame Moses for bringing them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness.

Moses' reply is short and sharp:

Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you, but you must remain silent." (Ex. 14: 13-14)

He says, in effect, *do nothing*. G-d will do it all. The sages, their ear ever attuned to nuance, detected four responses in Moses' words:

Our ancestors were divided into four groups at the Sea. One group said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea." Another said, "Let us go back to Egypt." A third said, "Let us wage war against them." A fourth said, "Let us cry out against them." To the first, who said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea," Moses said, "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring." To the second, who said, "Let us go back to Egypt," he said, "The Egyptians you see today you will never see again." To the third, who said, "Let us wage war against them," he said, "The LORD will fight for you." To the fourth, who said, "Let us cry out against them," he said, "you must remain silent."

The battle against the Egyptians was a divine act, not a human one.

Not so the Amalekites. Here the battle is fought by the Israelites themselves:

The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of G-d in my hands." So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up-one on one side, one on the other-so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. (Ex. 17: 8-13)

There is no hint here of a miracle. The Israelites fought; the Israelites won. The only hint of a supernatural presence is the reference to Moses' hands. Somehow, they held the key to victory. When Moses lifted them, the Israelites prevailed. When he lowered them, the tide turned against them.

Strangely, but significantly, the Mishnah makes a comment on this passage. The Mishnah is a law code. It is not a book of biblical interpretation. It is therefore very rare for a biblical exegesis to appear in the Mishnah - all the more so given its content. The sages, far from *emphasizing* the supernatural factor in the battle against Amalek, went out of their way to *minimize* it:

It is written, "As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning." Now, did the hands of Moses wage war or crush the enemy? Not so. The text signifies that so long as Israel turned their thoughts above and subjected their hearts to their Father in heaven they prevailed, but otherwise they fell. (RH, 3:8)

G-d, implies the Mishnah, makes a difference not "out there" but "in here." Moses' hands did not perform a miracle. They merely pointed upward. They directed the eyes, and thus the minds, of the Israelites to heaven. That gave them the courage, the inner strength, the hope and faith to prevail.

This transition - as we will see, it forms the underlying argument of the book of Shemoth - is signaled in an extraordinarily subtle verse immediately prior to the battle against Amalek.

G-d had performed a miracle for the Israelites of the most majestic kind. For them, he had divided the waters of the sea - and for once, the Israelites *believed*. "The Israelites saw the great power that G-d had unleashed

against Egypt, and the people were in awe of G-d. They *believed* in G-d and in his servant Moses.” But the change of heart did not last. Three days later they were complaining about the water. Then they complained about the lack of food. Miracle follows miracle. The water is made drinkable. G-d sends manna from heaven. They move on to Rephidim, and again there is no water. Again the people complain. This time Moses comes close to despair. “What am I to do with these people?” he says to G-d, “They are almost ready to stone me.” G-d then sends water from a rock. But the memory of the Israelites’ ingratitude remains. Moses incorporates it into a place name:

And he called the place Massah (“testing”) and Meribah (“quarreling”) because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us [*bekirbenu*] or not?” (Ex. 17:7)

Immediately thereafter we read that “The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.” There is an obvious connection. The Israelites’ doubt is punished. Having protected them throughout, G-d gives them a glimpse of what life is like without his protection. They will be exposed to great dangers. This is on the surface of the narrative.

However, beneath the surface is a surpassing irony. The Hebrew word *bekirbenu* can mean two things. It can mean “among us” (a *spatial* sense) but it can also mean “within us” (a *psychological* sense). The real meaning of the battle against Amalek, as understood by the Mishnah, is that it showed the inner, psychological, spiritual and emotional dimension of the Divine presence. The Israelites won not because *G-d fought the battle for them*, but because *G-d gave them the strength to fight the battle for themselves*. G-d was not “among” them but “within” them. *That was the crucial change between before and after the crossing of the Red Sea.*



One of the most remarkable features of Judaism - in this respect it is supreme among religious faiths - is its *call to human responsibility*. G-d wants us to fight our own battles. This is not abandonment. It does not mean - G-d forbid - that we are alone. G-d is with us whenever and wherever we are with him. "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." What it means is that G-d calls on us to exercise those qualities - confidence, courage, choice, imagination, determination and will - which allow us to reach our full stature as beings in the image of G-d.

The book of Shemot teaches this lesson in the form of three narratives, of which the division of the Red Sea is the first. The others are the epiphany of G-d at Mount Sinai and later in the Tabernacle, and the first and second tablets Moses brings down from the mountain. In all three cases we have a double narrative, a *before* and *after*. In each, the first is an act performed entirely by G-d (the drowning of the Egyptians, the revelation at Sinai, and the first tablets). The second involves a *partnership* between G-d and human beings (the battle against the Amalekites, the construction of the Tabernacle, and the second tablets, carved by Moses and inscribed by G-d). The difference is immense. In the first of each pair of events, what is evident is the power of G-d and the passivity of man. In the second, what counts is the will of G-d *internalized* by man. G-d is transformed from *doer* to *teacher*. In the process, human beings are transformed from dependency to interdependency.

This is the astonishing message contained within a single Hebrew word, *eved*, which can mean either "servant" or "slave." In Egypt, the Israelites were Pharaoh's *avadim*. Leaving Egypt they became G-d's *avadim*. The difference, however, is no mere change of masters. The slave of a human being is one who lacks freedom. The servant of G-d is one who is called to freedom - a specific kind of

freedom, namely one that respects the freedom of others and the integrity of the created world (the difference, as seventeenth and eighteenth century writers used to put it, between *liberty* and *license*, freedom with and without *responsibility*).

At the heart of the Hebrew Bible is a specific view of humanity, set out in the first chapters of Bereishith. Human beings are not incurably evil, tainted by original sin. Nor are we inescapably good. Instead we are defined by the ability to choose. If we choose well we are “little lower than the angels.” If we choose badly, we are worse than the beasts. We are not condemned to a perpetual condition of arrested development in which we are utterly dependent on a parent figure, human or divine. Such a view fails to accord with the concept of parenthood as articulated in the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic literature.

Bereishith, which is about families, is a series of variations on the theme of *human* parents and children. Shemot, about the birth of a nation, is about a *divine* parent and his human children (G-d’s first command to Moses is, “Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the LORD says: *Israel is my firstborn son*, and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me”).

Neither parenthood nor childhood are - the Torah teaches - static conditions. They are developmental. In its early years, a child really is dependent. Without the attentiveness of a parent, it would not survive. But over the course of time, it develops those capacities that allow it to mature. During that period, a parent learns progressively to make space for the child to act on its own. This can be doubly heartbreaking. Not only does it involve letting go, which is always a form of bereavement. It also demands that a parent be strong and self-restrained enough to allow the child to walk, knowing that it will fall; to choose,

knowing that it will make mistakes; to travel, knowing that it will take wrong paths and false turns.

The “anger” of G-d, so often expressed in the Hebrew Bible, is actually not *anger* but *anguish*: the anguish of a parent who sees a child do wrong but knows that he or she may not intervene if the child is ever to grow, to learn, to mature, to change, to *become responsible*.

That is the turning point marked by the battles before and after the division of the Sea. The opening and closing verses of Beshallah both contain as their key-word, *milchamah*, “war”. The opening verse states:

When Pharaoh let the people go, G-d did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For G-d said, “If they face *war*, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” (Ex. 13:17)

The closing verse says:

The LORD will be *at war* against the Amalekites from generation to generation. (Ex. 17:16)

The difference between them is between the war *G-d fights for us*, and the war *we fight for G-d*. The first is miraculous, the second only metaphorically so. The war G-d fights changes *nature*, even to the point of dividing a sea. But the war we fight changes us - and that is something G-d cannot do for us. We can only do it for ourselves. As long as the Israelites were totally dependent on G-d, they remained querulous and quarrelsome, in a state of arrested development. Only when they fought their own battles did they eventually - and painfully slowly - begin to acknowledge G-d. (In Jewish law, the command to honor our parents does not apply to a child under the age of thirteen for a boy, twelve for a girl. *Only responsible adults can truly honor parents*).

A true parent is not one who fights battles on our behalf, but one who gives us the inner strength to fight for ourselves. That is the difference between the war before and the war after the crossing of the Red Sea.

# Why God's Name Does Not Appear in The Book of Esther

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

One of the strongest questions we can ask about Purim is why God's name doesn't appear anywhere in the Book of Esther. After all, the Megillah (Scroll of Esther) - in addition to being one of the 24 Books of the Bible - is a work that burns with the question of Jewish survival. Haman wants to destroy the Jewish people because Mordechai is the lone man who refuses to bow down to him. And why does Mordechai refuse? He is committed to the Jewish tradition which insisted - from the earliest time of our first Patriarch Abraham - that Jews bow down only to God. And Haman finds Mordechai's refusal a thorn in his glory. This means that in the drama of Purim we are presented with a struggle between a representative of the One God, and a representative of the belief in ultimate earthly power. When Haman makes his general appeal of the necessity to annihilate a certain people scattered and dispersed among the provinces in the kingdom, whose laws are different from others, he is publicly announcing his goal to destroy the laws the One God commanded Moses. Thus the entire story of the Book of Esther begins because of one Jew's refusal to weaken his total commitment to God. If, therefore, God is truly at the center of this book, how ironic it is that His name never appears!

The traditional answer given is that concealing the name of God is intentional, a subtle way for the Torah to teach another aspect of God's existence, a God whose ways are hidden and invisible. During other Biblical moments the hand of God is visible as He issues commands and directs the words of prophets and kings. When the events call for a miracle, like the time when the Israelites are

pursued by an army of Egyptian charioteers, God splits the Red Sea.

But back in Persia with Esther and Mordekhai, the intervention of the divine requires a discerning eye. The teaching of the Book of Esther is that God appears in history not only through the fire and thunder of Sinai, but also as the invisible source behind a particular pattern to seemingly random events.

The characters in the stage of history may even themselves not necessarily be aware of how their roles will help determine the fate of the Jewish people. Since there is no prophecy outside the land of Israel, God moves from one who speaks through the prophets lips to a shadowy presence behind the scenes — but nevertheless even the Hidden God guarantees the destruction of Haman and the evil he represents in his relentless pursuit of the Jews and their values.

Let us look at the Purim story from a religious perspective. At first it looks like another major ball, the king of a great empire displaying his vast wealth and power, a celebration that will last for 180 days. Ahashverosh had much to be proud of. It's not easy to hold onto an empire of 127 nations. His reign is perfect, but then a blotch appears on his spotless kingdom. Queen Vashti, perhaps the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, refuses to appear before the assembled, an action which undermines everything Ahashverosh has been celebrating for half a year. What good are 127 nations if his own wife defies him? Enraged, he seeks advice from his advisors. They recommend death, an act that restores the king's power.

With Vashti's death, the wheels start turning. A new queen must be found, and out of the entire kingdom fate points toward a Jewish girl named Hadassah (Esther). Joining the royal court, it's not surprising that her uncle

Mordekhai will be in the right place at the right time to overhear a plot against the king's life. Though it's recorded in the royal chronicles, it won't become a turn in the plot until the night the king can't sleep and Haman comes knocking on the king's door with his plan to hang Mordekhai on the gallows. This proves to be disastrous timing on Human's part, because from that moment on, the tables turn on him completely.

Now it's apparent that behind the scenes God has arranged everything to insure Haman's downfall. Even the gallows he prepared for Mordekhai will eventually be used for him. Except one point! When it becomes clear that Haman wants to kill the Jews, Mordekhai rends his garments, and lets Esther know she must approach the king and plead for mercy, but this request throws her into a terrible quandary. The king hasn't called in more than 30 days. If she enters his chambers without being called, she risks death unless the king raises his golden scepter.

Unmoved, Mordekhai sends a second message, "For if you do indeed maintain silence at this time, enlargement and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place; but you and your father's house will perish: and who knows whether for a time such as this you reached the royal position?" [Esther 4:14]

If what we've been saying about God's invisible presence is true, why doesn't God simply arrange that Ahashverosh would call for her this night, just as he calls for the chronicles to be read to him on the very night that Haman shows up in the court. In line with everything else, God could have managed this without any difficulty.

And precisely because God does not intervene at the moment when Esther has to risk her life leads us to conclude that God guides the events of the world to a certain point. But in the end there has to be 'mesirat nefesh,' the willingness to take the final step, to risk one's

life for the sake of God. Esther has to make the most difficult choice of all, she has to decide if she's willing to risk her life to save her people. It's not easy. At first she looks for a way out, but in the end, Esther triumphs over her fears.

This dilemma is the critical moment of the book of Esther - the heart of the message. For the redemption of the Jews God will set up many things, but in the end if we're asked for 'mesirat nefesh' and we avoid putting our lives on the line, we won't be saved. In the final analysis, we must be willing to risk even death in order to attempt to redeem ourselves.

The Talmud connects Purim with Passover. Even though God performs one miracle after another in Egypt, Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to let Moses' people go— until the last plague. And what's radically different about the killing of the first born sons is that the Jews had to take a distinct risk in heeding God's command to sacrifice a lamb and smear blood on their doorposts. Since this lamb was an Egyptian god, there must have been those who argued it would be safer to find a substitute, perhaps another animal, rather than risk the wrath of the Egyptians. But the Jews defied Egyptian law, and followed God's command. At that moment, they joined in the miracle - for them it was 'mesirat nefesh' and they were saved.

The absence of God's name in Megillat Esther not only directs us toward a way to discern invisible patterns in the unfolding of our history, but it also reminds us that we must do our acting as well if our people are to be saved. The last effort, the final leap, must be taken on our own. Without 'mesirat nefesh,' there is no redemption. A journey of two thousand years ends only when we take the final step. One who acts himself in order to be purified is helped from on High.



# Some Serious Aspects of Hag Purim

Rabbi Ezra Labaton

*Adar* is a month of joy and frivolity. We drink, we laugh, we celebrate the holiday of Purim. Yet, one who avoids the serious implications of the holiday flirts with danger and may pay a heavy price for his avoidance. Nowadays, as then, evil is no playful thing, and is very much an item on the world agenda. People in positions of power who call for the destruction of Israel must be taken seriously as perpetrators of evil, as was *Haman* in Persia. Indeed, *Megillat Esther* is a profound reminder of the radical evil that lurks in the hearts of men and the extent of one man's perfidious intentions. The *Megilla* must be studied, absorbed and digested to understand this evil, and more significantly, to learn how to react.

Evil has many faces. There is, for example, the historical aspect of evil, which deals with the most evil men and events in history. There is, as well, a theological dimension to evil, which raises the question: how could *Bore Olam* allow such evil in the world that He benevolently created and supervises. In addition, there is a psychological side to evil, where the student of evil attempts to understand the inner workings of the satanic mind.

Our concern here is not with the history of evil, nor with its theological implications. Rather, we would like to approach the *Megilla* psychologically – trying to penetrate the emotional depths and states of mind of the main characters– emphasizing the evil of *Haman*, though not limiting our analysis to his twisted, perverse perspective. First, we will concentrate on the psychological traits of those who brought about this near tragedy, and then focus on those who accomplished the last minute heroics that

pulled the iron out of the fire. We start with the King of Persia.

What sort of person was *Ahashverosh*? Was he strong and powerful or silly and weak? Did he feel as secure as the Rock of Gibraltar or as insecure as a young teenager on his first date – not really sure what to say or what to do? Rabbi Soloveitchik has suggested that King *Ahashverosh* was the latter: fearful, insecure, and even paranoid. The Rav brings a whole host of textual evidence to support this psychological claim. For example, the Rav asks, what King establishes a policy of immediate death to all those who enter the King's chambers, unless the King happens to point his royal scepter in their direction? (See 4:11) Paranoia at its best. Indeed, *Haman* knew how to portray the Jews, as a scattered enemy, disloyal to the pronouncements of the throne– yet united (*Am Ehad*), and thus more threatening– to convince the King that for self-protection, he best do away with them (3:8). The fearful king readily agrees.

And what about *Haman*? How are we to explain this crazed, irrational hatred that possessed him? What sort of man seeks to obliterate every vestige of a people who did him no harm? To kill every man, woman and child is to strike at the core of human decency. It is satanic– anti-Selem Elokim– behavior at its worst. Truth to tell, *Haman* was not the first to engage in such demonic, humanly perverse, behavior; witness his ancestor Amalek. Nor was he the last: Hitler must have been a close relative! We need to probe and ask, what are the underlying psychological causes that motivate such hatred? From what deep recesses does the he who hates draw his energy to hate? We submit that “ego” is not sufficient to explain the behavior of one who reaches to the depths of hell to find models for his actions. Certainly, there were no economic or religious reasons for this hatred, as has been the case throughout

history; nor were the Jews a political or military threat. Why did *Haman*— why does the world— hate the Jews so intensely? Why are we the victims of the world’s longest and most intense hatred? It boggles the mind. Satre’s masterful essay, “Anti Semite and Jew,” is a penetrating exploration of the psychological underpinnings of such hatred and such behavior. To understand *Haman* psychologically- the depths of evil- Satre would be a good first step.

Now, however, we must turn our attention to Esther – the central personality of the *Megilla*. We may begin by asking: Why is she so important? Wherein do we find her greatness? Why do we celebrate this holiday, with her as the pivotal character? Or to pinpoint the issue: Why is the *Megilla* known as *Megillat Esther*, and not *Megillat Mordekhai*? Only a close analysis of the text will reveal what kind of person she was and what kind of person she has to become. In this, we will discover the essence of her greatness.

As is clear from the early chapters of the *Megilla*, Esther plays no role whatsoever in the opening narrative. She is introduced to us, almost parenthetically— though anticipatorily— as the niece of Mordekhai, the more prominent personality. The text first reveals her as *Hadasa*, but quickly records a name change. What is the significance of this change from the Hebrew *Hadasa* to the Babylonian/pagan name Esther (2:7)? Could this change in name reflect a change in her destiny or a change in her own self- perception? Perhaps this change indicates a change in the role she will play in the narrative. As the events unfold, these questions will be answered.

Further, note the word “*vatilaqah*” in 2:8. The word tells us much about Esther’s character. At this point, she is a young, naïve woman and is thus “passively” taken to the

King's palace – involuntarily. Yet, the impression she makes is profound. All are appreciative of her gentle demeanor; she finds favor in their eyes (2:9,15,17). *Hesed*, the quintessential Jewish characteristic, is her defining feature. Verse 12, in addition, tells the reader something striking about Esther: although absolute authority was given to all of the women to request and receive whatever they desire – she chooses nothing. Esther follows instructions – whatever Hegai says, she does: passive and obedient. And, of course, she follows the clear cut instructions of Mordekhai – unquestioningly (2:10). A certain naiveté, modesty and innocence characterize her every step. These character traits deeply impress the King as well. How could they not? Her lack of assertiveness makes the insecure King feel secure; her non-concern with power makes *Ahashverosh* feel more powerful. He is carried away by her *Hen* and *Hesed*, and responds with a *Hanaha* – an act of kindness to his subjects. She turns him, at least for the moment, into a better person. The King loves her, trusts her and needs her.

Years pass and all is well, or so we think. Mordekhai feels secure enough to challenge the power of *Haman* and the power of his office. Yet, events take a turn for the worst. Mordekhai does not really understand the corridors of power, nor really understand *Haman's* ego needs or the King's insecurity. *Haman* does, and therefore plays upon this insecurity to secure the King's consent for his evil intention. The evil decree is agreed upon and proclaimed. Chapter 4 verse 1 records Mordekhai's intense involvement in all these happenings and surprisingly notes Esther's complete absence from all these events. His reaction: panic and mourning. He screams the bitter cry of defeat. Further in his depressed state he commands Esther to beg and plead for her nation. But now he is told that her distance is self-protective (4:11). After her initial response, however, there

is a perceptible change in personality. No longer do we see the innocent, naïve, withdrawn demeanor of *Hadasa* – she becomes Queen Esther.

Mordekhai speaks in desperate tones. He sees only darkness ahead for his people. Esther perceives more profoundly, at this point, the needs of the hour. Wild desperate pleas of mercy would fail to turn the cold, cruel heart of *Haman* and the same for the insecure, paranoid king. Esther, however, understands her husband well. Because she has not been summoned to the King for thirty days, her wild entry into the King's presence could only mean death, nothing positive could result. Thus, Esther thinks craftily and pragmatically. A plan must be formulated, rooted in the King's insecurity and need for attention, taking into account *Haman's* arrogance and need for power.

Queen Esther understands her responsibility; the historical role given to her has now become clear. All past events are fully understood in light of the present crisis. But given her understanding of the events as they have unfolded and her uncanny insight into human nature, she knows that Mordekhai's impetuous plan of action is off the mark; her more deliberate formulation begins to take shape. The Queen's command of the situation is total. Now she takes charge and instructs Mordekhai what he must do, while she is galvanized into action. A transition indeed!! The follower becomes the leader, while the leader becomes the follower.

*Hadasa* has changed. The woman who requested nothing in her first visit to the King, now dresses regally. Her physical appearance will play a role in turning the tide against *Haman*, as does her "Hen" – graciousness. *Ahashverosh*, upon seeing his Queen is transfixed and is willing to give her half of his Kingdom. No, all she

requests is for the King and *Haman* to attend the next day's party- thereby empowering *Haman*. Note how he reflects upon this attention. "Esther, the Queen, brought no one else to the party with the King but me. And tomorrow I am invited with the King" (5:10). But this invitation with *Haman* must have deepened the King's insecurity. He must have thought, "Why is she inviting *Haman* to this private party? Is a coup in the making?" The plot thickens. The pieces are all in place – even *Harbona* is properly instructed to play his role.

At the precise moment, once the King has had his fill and is feeling particularly happy with his Queen – offering her once again half the throne – Esther begs for her life, pointing her accusing finger at *Haman*. *Ahashverosh* is enraged, while *Haman*, half drunk and not totally aware of what's happening, falls on the Queen's couch. *Harbona*, perfectly placed, feeds the King the right line. *Haman* and his sons are hung. But the now, very aggressive Queen, is not yet finished. *Haman*'s sons must be publicly displayed, while another day is given to the Jews – *Lehinakem Meoyvehem* – to seek revenge from their enemies.

At this point, Mordekhai plays no role at all. Esther has become a powerful person, craftily using her position and womanly charm to save her people. Note how impressed the King is with her "Hen and Hesed" - not only at the beginning of their relationship, but years later. (As Esther expresses in 8:5 and the King must have agreed – she puts the right words in his mouth, mind and heart). Esther uses this to turn the King against *Haman*, thereby saving her people. That which was at one point innocent and natural was turned into a political tool to influence events.

Esther has become another person. From the shy, quiet, innocent, and naïve woman we met at the beginning of the *Megilla*, she has become – had to become – a player in the

game of political intrigue. Queen Esther has become a powerful, charismatic personality. She takes all the necessary steps of dealing with *Haman's* family, and all others who rise up against the Jews. Further, the *Megilla* in 9:29, emphasizes that Esther the Queen (mentioned first) writes the narrative of events. She maintains power, not Mordekhai. She is Esther the Queen, while he is characterized as “Mordekhai the Jew.”

This dramatic change in personality was not simple, nor easy. It would have been much simpler and easier to remain under the wings of a protective uncle, passively accepting the events as they unfolded. She chose a different path. When destiny called, she answered – no matter what the price – to act on behalf of her people. Esther is praised by our tradition, not only for the role she played in saving the Jewish people, but for the self change she engineered and endured for the sake of *Am Yisrael*. Evil, once again, is temporarily defeated. We thank *Bore Olam* for such self-sacrificing people.

# Purim and Joseph: Design or Coincidence?

Rabbi Dr. Moshe Sokolow

Dear Teacher:

This lesson can be used in a variety of disciplinary settings: *Humash (Bereishit)*, *Ketuvim (Esther)*, Festivals/Holidays (Purim), *Mahshevet Yisrael (Hashgahah/Behirah)*, and Jewish History (the status of “coincidence”).

We have arranged the contents in a straightforward didactic format, which you may vary according to your particular needs. We have also included additional bibliographical and pedagogic suggestions. We would be glad to hear about your classroom experience with this unit, and welcome your comments and suggestions.

**STEP ONE: I’m going to tell you a story, anonymously, and I’d like you to identify the character I’ll be describing.**

“A young Jewish man is taken away from Eretz Yisrael by force, and grows up in a foreign country. In spite of the difficulties, he perseveres and succeeds, but not without exciting a noticeable measure of jealousy and hostility (including what we, today, might call ‘anti-Semitism’). Eventually, he uses his abilities to provide the local ruler with some life-saving advice, and is rewarded by being appointed ‘viceroy’ (second to the king).

“The king gives him his royal signet ring, symbolizing his high office, and has him dressed in royal garments. He is driven around on the royal horse and chariot, while a page goes before him, announcing his promotion and instructing the people to bow.



“Now fully mature in years, the young man does not let all this go to his head. He remains a loyal Jew, faithful to God, and uses his position and influence for the benefit of the Jewish people.”

*You might add, if you choose, that a crucial episode in the young man’s story occurs at night while someone is either asleep and dreaming, or unable to sleep.*

## **STEP TWO: Whose story have I just told?**

*Note: While the answers we are looking for are “Yosef” and “Mordekhai,” you may get some other (anticipated or unexpected) responses, which will indicate that the students have recognized isolated parts of the story, but have not successfully put the composite portrait together. Some answers I have gotten are: Shemuel HaNagid, Moses Montefiore, and Henry Kissinger.*

*If you are using this unit in a Tanakh class, it would probably be best to dismiss these answers promptly by simply indicating where they don’t match the story. In a history class, however, I would suggest that you also reinforce the points of actual similarity, and reserve the right to call these witnesses later in the proceedings.*

**STEP THREE:** The class’s assignment now is to document each of the points in the story by supplying the pasuk in Bereishit or Esther which allows us to identify the character as either Yosef or Mordekhai.

For example, let's take the opening sentence, which describes our hero as someone taken forcibly from Eretz Yisrael. The pesukim are as follows:

Yosef: Ber. 40:15: "gunov gunavti me-eretz ha-ivrim"

Mordekhai: Est. 2:6: "asher hoglah mi-Yerushalayim"

The "life-saving advice," in the case of Yosef, refers to his grain storage program, while in Mordekhai's case it refers to the warning he gave Ahashverosh about Bigtan and Teresh.

*Note: If you elect to give the students this part of the unit as homework, be sure to have a copy of the story – in prose or outline form – ready for them to take along. Alternatively, have them do it in class individually, or, if you're bold, assign them to work on it in pairs, with one researching Bereishit and the other Esther.*

**STEP Discuss whether these similarities are FOUR: significant or merely coincidental.**

*Note: Before proceeding to the discussion, however, you may elect to add some literary evidence to the case. A complete list of literary correspondences between these two stories appears in the works of Gabi Cohen that are cited in the Bibliography; we will cite just two examples here:*

**YOSEF**

(Gen. 41:34): veyafked  
pekidim...veyikbetzu

(44:34) pen er'eh bara`  
asher yimtza et avi

**ESTHER**

(2:3) veyafked hamelekh  
pekidim... veyikbetzu

(8:6) eikhakha ukhal  
vera'iti bara`a asher yimtza  
et ami

It appears, then, that the author of Esther made a deliberate attempt to pattern his description of the story of Mordekhai after that of Yosef. (There are far too many points of both actual and literary correspondence to be dismissed as coincidence.) Why? What parallels did he see between them? What is it about Yosef that he wanted us to think of, and be reminded of, when we read the story of Mordekhai and Esther?

*Note: The challenge to the students is to spot a common theme, idea, or message, which transcends these specific similarities.*

**STEP FIVE: There are several themes common to these two stories. We will briefly cite four of them and follow up one in detail.**

- A. Even a lone individual can play a crucial role in the history of the Jewish people, providing that individual is sufficiently devoted to his faith and his nation.
- B. “History repeats itself.”  
In its classical Jewish formulation:  
ma`aseh avot—siman lebanim  
Or, in a beautiful passage from the Midrash Esther Rabbah (7:8):  
baneha shel Rahel, nissan shaveh ugedulatan shavah  
i.e., Rachel’s children are alike in their miracles (trials?) and in their greatness.
- C. The promise of redemption is inherent in every exile. Just as the refuge that Yosef provided his family in Egypt was followed by yeti’at Mitzrayim, and the haven that Esther provided for the Jews of Persia was followed by shivat Tziyon, so will each and every exile be followed by our redemption and restoration in Eretz Yisrael.

D. Historical events which appear, on the surface, to be the results of ordinary human activities, or even of coincidence, are revealed – upon closer inspection – to be divinely ordained.

**STEP SIX: A closer examination of item “D,” above.**

*Note: We will use the stories of Yosef and Mordekhai as a springboard for a discussion of whether the students’ own – or others’ – personal experience has led them to see what goes on in the world as primarily “chance” or “design.” Have them consider whether their answer to this question affects the way they live and behave.*

**Question: At which points do the Yosef or Purim stories appear to hinge upon a coincidence?**

*Note: For our purposes, “coincidence” will be defined as an episode or encounter not under the exclusive control of the principal characters.*

**Answer: There are numerous ostensible coincidences in each story.**

**Yosef:** A Yishmaelite caravan passes by just as the brothers weaken in their resolve to kill him. Yosef is imprisoned in the cell into which Pharaoh’s officers are subsequently thrown. His brothers’ arrival in Egypt to purchase grain comes to Yosef’s personal attention; etc.

**Purim:** Ahashverosh peremptorily discards Vashti, who is replaced by Esther, whose uncle, Mordekhai, uncovers a plot to assassinate the King. That same Mordekhai incurs the wrath of Haman, whose plot to destroy the Jews can only be thwarted by Esther, etc.

Do the students agree that these are mere coincidences, or is there a point when the accumulation of several sequential coincidences gives us pause to consider whether they aren't, in fact, part of a plan?

If, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," are we "ad libbing" our way through life, or, unbeknownst to us, are we actually reading lines from a designated script?

**STEP SEVEN: Is the fate of the Jewish people ever left entirely to chance?**

*Note: In this final part, we will demonstrate – via Midrash and Parshanut – that even when minor, anonymous, characters appear to be acting of their own volition, they may really be performing a divinely ordained mission.*

One of the most striking "coincidences" in the story of Yosef (following our definition of "coincidence" in Step Six, above) is his encounter, in a field outside Shekhem, with "a man" who just "happens" to know the whereabouts of his brothers. Yet without this encounter, Yosef would not, ostensibly, have fallen into his brothers' hands to be sold into Egyptian bondage.

Who was this anonymous man, and how "freely" did he fulfill his crucial role in this drama? Let us sample four of the most outstanding medieval parshanim on this question: RASHI, IBN EZRA, RASHBAM, and RAMBAN.

**Gen. 37:15 yayimtza'ehu ish vehinei to'eh basadeh**

- A. RASHI: zeh Gavriel
- B. IBN EZRA: ehad me'overei derekh
- C. RAMBAN: mal'akh

On the surface, this appears to be a typical exegetical falling-out: RASHI, basing himself upon the Midrash (Tanhuma), identifies “the man” with “the man (actually the archangel) Gabriel” mentioned in Daniel (9:21). IBN EZRA, adhering more strictly to the peshat of the verse, rejects RASHI’s identification and says, matter-of-factly, that it was an ordinary passerby. RAMBAN, who often arbitrates between RASHI and IBN EZRA, does so again, siding – as he most often does – with the former against the latter.

It is RASHBAM, however, who confronts the larger question of why the Torah takes the trouble to recount this episode at all.

D. lehaggid shivho shel Yosef nikhtav zeh, shelo ratzah lahazor le-aviv keshelo metza’am biShekhem. Ella biksham ad shemetza’am. Ve’af-al-pi shehayah yode’a she mitkan’im bo, halakh ubiksham kemo she’emar lo aviv.

i.e., “This episode was written to tell us the importance of the fact that Yosef was reluctant to return to his father when he failed to find his brothers in Shekhem; rather, he searched for them until he found them. Despite his knowledge that they were hostile towards him, he continued to search for them as his father had requested.”

**STEP EIGHT: What are the consequences of this exegetical dispute?**

Have your students consider the following questions (to which we have provided possible answers):

- Was Yosef – following RASHBAM’s interpretation – a “free agent?” Yes and no. On one hand, he could have

stopped his search at any time and returned home, yet on the other hand, the magnitude of his devotion to his father weighed so heavily upon him as to deprive him of much of his freedom of choice in this regard.

- Was “the man” who directed him – following this line of argument – a “free agent?” Likewise: yes and no. No one was forcing him to intercept Yosef and direct him to his brothers (and his fate); but what if “the man” was weighed down by the burden of an overriding obligation, similar to that of Yosef, which would render him as incapable (or unlikely) of declining his role in the play as Yosef was of declining his own?
- To whom, though, could the man have been so obliged? Answer RASHI, IBN EZRA and RAMBAN: “To God!” Rather than disagreement among the parshanim, as we suggested at first, they are actually all in accord, and RAMBAN is harmonizing the positions of RASHI and IBN EZRA, rather than choosing between them.
- How, RAMBAN asks, do we call “a man” who, although surely mortal (IBN EZRA), was acting out of the same immutable obligation towards God as that of an archangel (RASHI)? Answers RAMBAN: “a *mal’akh*; an agent of God’s purpose and design.

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Hayyim Cohen:      (Yerushalayim, 5766)

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# Zachor\*

Rabbi Ralph Tawil

**Value: Eradicating evil.** Real evil exists in the world, and it must be rooted out completely. Although this idea has become popular again during the war against terrorism, it has always been a part of the Torah. How can we eradicate evil? How do we define evil? Who does the defining? These are all questions that can confuse the application of this value. This lesson will explore some of these issues.

**Background:** As a fulfillment of the Torah's commandment to "remember what Amaleq did to you" and in anticipation of Purim, we read one of the sections of the Torah where the Torah describes the battle against Amaleq. According to most Halakhic authorities, this is the only Torah reading of the year that is *de`oraita* (commanded by the Torah).

**Text: Debarim 25:17-19 (NJPS)**

Remember what Amaleq did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amaleq from under heaven. Do not forget!

**Analysis:** Samuel the prophet defined the term "blotting out the memory of Amaleq" to mean: "Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and

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\* From Rabbi Ralph Tawil's Shabbat-Table Talk for Shabbat Zachor.

sheep, camels and donkeys” (1 *Samuel* 15:3). This stands as a most important commandment. The section begins with the commandment to “remember,” and ends with the order “don’t forget.” Yet the value of eradicating evil and its connection to Perashat “Zachor” (the opening Hebrew word of the above section) is somewhat difficult to teach. Of course, everyone agrees that we should eradicate evil. However, it is hard to understand the Torah’s commandments to kill every man, woman and infant of Amaleq. In the period of the war against terrorism that we are presently in, it is somewhat easier to understand it, but not completely. Rambam has mitigated the absoluteness of this law when it comes to practice. In addition, the Torah has limited the practical application of the law to only the nation of Amaleq. Our Rabbinic tradition has already decided that it is impossible, after the Assyrian empire’s mixing up the various nations, to identify any one nation as Amaleq. Still the commandment stands and can be applied towards evil in general. Evil must be eradicated.

**Discussion:** What did Amaleq do? (This nation attacked Bne Yisrael when they left Egypt. Amaleq attacked the stragglers—the weak and defenseless).

Why is that so bad? (The Torah describes Amaleq as “not fearing God” and as “attacking the stragglers.” These traits are destructive to society. Society is based on fearing God, and not attacking those that are weak. The honesty and integrity and the protection of the weak that define a God-fearing society are essential to have in a cohesive society. Amaleq’s behavior is destructive to society; therefore it must be eradicated.)

How can it be right to kill even Amaleq’s infants? After all, they are innocent? (This question must be addressed, even though there is hardly a very satisfactory answer for

it. This is a seeming clash between our sense of right and wrong and the Torah's commandment—at least, in the way that Samuel the prophet has defined it. What the Torah is teaching is that some nations are so evil, that every person who identifies with that nation must be destroyed. Perhaps, if anyone of that nation is left alive, the evil culture of that nation will resurface and create more problems in the future. We must be aware that the torah's commandment of the total eradication of a nation only applies to the nation of Amaleq, which does not exist today.)

Rambam, when discussing the Torah laws pertaining to war, explained that the law of blotting out the memory of Amaleq only applies if they have not made peace with Bne Yisrael, and have not accepted upon themselves the seven Noahide laws. If they have, then Bne Yisrael is not to go to war against them. From this we could learn that if Amaleq accepted these conditions they have changed their basic culture and are no longer targets for annihilation. The evil culture must be eradicated, either by destroying the people that hold fast to this culture of evil, or by having them change their beliefs and culture. The seven Noahide laws contain within them: respect for God (not to curse God) and the setting up of a legal justice system. An Amaleq nation that accepts these conditions is essentially not Amaleq culturally and therefore not slated for annihilation.

If the nation of Amaleq doesn't exist today, how are we supposed to understand this misvah? (We could understand it as talking about eradicating all evil—not only by killing, but also by educating. Evil exists in the form of taking advantage of the weak, lying, cheating, and stealing. We must develop our society and educate it to the point where these practices are eliminated.)

Evil also exists today in the form of terrorism. Why is terrorism evil? (Because its victims are innocent and defenseless.) Terrorism and those who support it and incite towards it must be eradicated. Yielding to the terrorist's demands is not the way to accomplish this. Giving in to the demands of terrorists invites more demands and further terrorism. Eradicating terrorism can only be done by an all-out war against terrorists until the people who remain renounce terrorism. It does not require killing of every person, but only those people who commit or support terrorism and those that incite terrorism.

We pray to Hashem that the United States will be successful eradicating world-wide terrorism, so that we can work together peacefully towards resolving the many problems that face us.

# Peshat and Derash in Megillat Esther\*

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

## Introduction

Elisha ben Avuyah said: one who learns as a child, to what is he compared? To ink written upon a new writing sheet; and one who learns [when] old, to what is he compared? To ink written upon an erased writing sheet (*Avot* 4:20).

Megillat Esther is among the most difficult biblical books to study anew, precisely because it is so familiar. Many assumptions accompany us through our study of the Megillah, occasionally clouding our perceptions of what is in the text and what is not.

Any serious study of the *peshat* messages of the Megillah must begin with a clear sense of what is explicitly in the text, what can be inferred legitimately from the text, and what belongs primarily in a thematic exposition, using the text as a springboard for important religious concepts. In this essay, we will consider some pertinent examples from Megillat Esther.

## *Peshat Considerations in the Megillah*

### A. The Shaul-Agag Rematch

On five occasions in the Megillah, Haman is called an “Agagite.”<sup>1</sup> Several early traditions consider this

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\* This article appeared originally as a Review Essay of *Hadassah Hi Esther* in *Tradition* 34:4 (Winter 2000), pp. 79-97; and that was reprinted with minor modifications in my book, *Through an Opaque Lens* (NY: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 307-330. This is a modified version that has not previously been published.

appellation a reference to Haman's descent from King Agag of Amalek, whom Shaul defeated (I Sam. 15).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, several midrashic traditions identify the Kish of Mordekhai's pedigree (2:5—*ben Yair ben Shimi ben Kish*) with King Shaul's father (I Sam. 9:1).<sup>3</sup> From this vantage point, Mordekhai's recorded pedigree spans some five centuries in order to connect him and Esther to Shaul. If indeed Haman is of royal Amalekite stock, and Mordekhai and Esther descend from King Shaul, then the Purim story may be viewed as a dramatic rematch of the battle between Shaul and Agag.

However, neither assumption is rooted in the text of the Megillah. The etymology of "Agagite" is uncertain; while it could mean "from King Agag of Amalek," it may be a Persian or Elamite name.<sup>4</sup> Had the author of the Megillah wanted to associate Haman with Amalek, it could have dubbed him "the Amalekite" explicitly. The same holds true for Mordekhai and Esther's descent from King Shaul (Ibn Ezra). It is possible that the Kish mentioned in the Megillah is Mordekhai's great-grandfather, not a distant ancestor.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the historical factuality of the aforementioned identifications, a strong argument can be made for a *thematic* rematch between the forces of good and evil which runs parallel to Shaul's inadequate efforts to eradicate Amalek. In this case, the association can be inferred from the text of the Megillah itself.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the conflict between Mordekhai and Haman, symbolic of a greater battle between Israel and Amalek, is well taken conceptually. But it is tenuous to contend that the biological connections are manifest in the text of the Megillah itself. However, if the Midrashim had received oral traditions regarding these historical links, we accept them—*ve-im kabbalah hi, nekabbel*.

## B. Assimilation

Based on various midrashic readings, it is often argued that the turning point of the Megillah is when the Jews fast (4:1-3, 16-17; 9:31), thereby repenting from earlier assimilationist tendencies demonstrated by their sinful participation in Ahashverosh's party. However, there is no theological explanation of why the Jews "deserved" genocide in the Megillah; on the contrary, the sole textual motivation behind Haman's decree is Mordekhai's refusal to show obeisance to Haman (3:2-8). By staunchly standing out, Mordekhai jeopardizes his own life and the lives of his people.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, there is no indication in the Megillah that the Jews ever did anything wrong. On the contrary, the references to the Jews display them mourning and fasting,<sup>8</sup> first spontaneously, and then at Mordekhai's directive (4:1-3, 16-17; 9:31). They celebrate their victory (9:16-28), sending gifts to each other and giving charity to the poor. Moreover, the Jews were given express permission to plunder their adversaries (8:11), yet the Megillah repeatedly stresses that they refrained from doing so (9:10, 15, 16).<sup>9</sup>

Consider also Haman's formulation of his request to exterminate the Jews: "their laws are different from every nation" (3:8). Several Midrashim find in Haman's accusation testimony that the Jews observed mitzvot, and stood distinctly apart from their pagan counterparts.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously, the only overt indications of foreign influence on the Jews in the Megillah are the names Mordekhai and Esther, which probably derive from the pagan deities Marduk<sup>11</sup> and Ishtar.<sup>12</sup> However, the use of pagan names need not indicate assimilation of Mordekhai and Esther, nor of the community at large.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the only implicit indication of Jewish wrongdoing is the fact that the Jews already had been permitted to return to Israel by Cyrus the Great (538 b.c.e.), yet a majority did not return, comfortably remaining in Babylonia and Persia.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, scholarly consensus recognizes that the Temple already was built (516 b.c.e.) by the probable time of the Purim story (483-474 b.c.e.), magnifying the Jews' misdeed of not returning.<sup>15</sup> But these are inferences not made explicit in the text of the Megillah.

Not only is there no textual evidence of Jewish assimilation—on the contrary, the Megillah consistently portrays Jews positively—but there is no rabbinic consensus on this matter, either. The oft-quoted Gemara used to prove assimilation reads:

R. Shimon b. Yohai was asked by his disciples, Why were the enemies of Israel (a euphemism for the Jews) in that generation deserving of extermination? He said to them: Answer the question. They said: Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one. [He said to them]: If so, those in Shushan should have been killed, but not those in other provinces! They then said, answer the question. He said to them: It was because they bowed down to the image. They said to him, then why did God forgive them (i.e., they really deserved to be destroyed)? He replied: They only pretended to worship, and He also only pretended to exterminate them; and so it is written, "For he afflicted not from his heart" (*Megillah* 12a).<sup>16</sup>

R. Shimon b. Yohai's students suggested that the Jews deserved to be destroyed because of their willing participation in Ahashverosh's party, without stating what was wrong with this participation. *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7:8 states that the Jews sinned at the party by eating non-



kosher food. Alternatively, *Esther Rabbah* 7:13 considers prostitution the primary sin at the party.<sup>17</sup>

A contrary midrashic opinion is found in *Midrash Panim Aherim* 2, which relates that the Jews specifically *avoided* the party. In related sources, the Jews cried and mourned over Ahashverosh's festivities.<sup>18</sup>

From the aforementioned rabbinic opinions, we find controversy over what was wrong with the party, and the extent of the Jews' participation (if any). But this entire discussion becomes moot when we consider that R. Shimon b. Yohai *rejects* his students' hypothesis on the grounds that only Shushan's Jewry participated; the Jews in other provinces never attended either of Ahashverosh's parties.<sup>19</sup>

R. Shimon b. Yohai then submits his own opinion: the Jews bowed to "the image." Rashi avers that the image refers to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel chapter 3), while Meiri (*Sanhedrin* 74b) quotes an alternative reading of our Gemara, which indicates that the "image" was an idol that Haman wore as people bowed to him.<sup>20</sup>

Both possibilities present difficulties: According to Rashi, the Jews were to be punished for the transgression of their ancestors, though there is no evidence in the Megillah that they perpetuated this sinful conduct. According to Meiri's alternative reading, the question of R. Shimon b. Yohai against his students simply becomes more acute: only the members of the king's court in Shushan bowed to Haman. Most Jews of Shushan, and all Jews from the outer provinces, never prostrated before Haman.

In any case, the Gemara concludes that the Jews bowed without conviction. God "externally" threatened the Jews in return, i.e., the threat was perceived, not real. Thus, the Gemara never resolves the theological question. The Jews in the Megillah are consistently portrayed in a favorable light, and the Gemara's ambivalence over the theological

cause of the Purim story only supports this reading. As a result, we must relegate discussions of assimilation completely to the realm of *derekh ha-derash*, i.e., assimilation is something to be criticized, but the Megillah is not engaged in this condemnation—it has other religious purposes.

### **C. Religious Observance**

The Megillah makes no mention of the distinctly mitzvah-related behavior of the heroes, nor of the nation. Other than the term “*Yehudi(m)*,” there is nothing distinctly Jewish in the Megillah. Most prominent is the absence of God’s Name. Also missing are any references to the Torah or specific mitzvot. The holiday at the end of the Megillah could be viewed as a nationalistic celebration of victory. The only sign of Jewish ritual is fasting; but even that is conspicuously not accompanied by prayer.<sup>21</sup> The omission of God’s Name and prayer is even more striking when we contrast Masoretic Text with the Septuagint additions—where the Jews pray to God and God intervenes on several occasions. In the Septuagint version of the Megillah, God’s Name appears over *fifty* times<sup>22</sup>. It appears unmistakable that the author of the Megillah intended to stifle references to God and Jewish religious practice. In the second section of this essay, we will address this question.

### **D. Mordekhai’s Disobedience**

Mordekhai’s rationale for not prostrating involves his Jewishness (3:4), but the Megillah does not explain how. Many biblical figures bow to kings and nobles as a sign of respect, not worship; notably Esther bows to Ahashverosh in 8:3.<sup>23</sup> The text suggests that Mordekhai did not want to honor the *king* and his command (see 3:2-4), but this explanation seems puzzling. Would Mordekhai endanger

his own life, and the lives of all Jews<sup>24</sup> for this reason? *Esther Rabbah* 6:2 finds it unlikely:

But Mordekhai did not bow down nor prostrate himself before him (3:2). Was Mordekhai then looking for quarrels or disobedient to the king's command? The fact is that when Ahashverosh ordered that all should bow down to Haman, the latter fixed an idolatrous image on his breast for the purpose of making all bow down to an idol.<sup>25</sup>

Other rabbinic sources contend that rather than wearing an idol, Haman considered himself a deity.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the text never alludes to idolatry in regard to Haman, nor anywhere else in the Megillah.<sup>27</sup> It appears that technical idolatry did not figure into Mordekhai's refusal to bow to Haman. In the second section of this essay, we will consider alternative responses to this question.

To conclude, we find that certain midrashic assumptions are without clear support in the biblical text, and there often is disagreement in rabbinic sources. Both Mordekhai and Esther's biological connection to Shaul and Haman's descent from King Agag of Amalek are debatable. There is no evidence of Jewish assimilation in the Megillah, nor is there testimony to overtly Jewish religiosity. Finally, it is unclear why Mordekhai refused to bow to Haman, which is surprising given the centrality this episode has in the narrative.

Although these ambiguities make an understanding of the Megillah more complicated, they also free the interpreter to look beyond the original boundaries of explanation, to reconsider the text and its messages anew. We now can turn to some of the central messages which do arise from the text of the Megillah.

## *The Central Messages of the Megillah*

### **A. Ahashverosh as the Main Character**

In determining the literary framework of the Megillah, Rabbi David Henshke notes that, viewed superficially, chapter one contributes Vashti's removal, making way for Esther. However, the text elaborately describes the king's wealth and far-reaching power. This lengthy description highlights the fact that there is a different plot in the Megillah: the king's power is described in detail, because it is central to the message of the Megillah. Moreover the Megillah does not end with the Jews' celebration. It concludes with a description of Ahashverosh's wealth and power, just as it begins. Thus, the Purim story is played out on Ahashverosh's stage.<sup>28</sup>

The other major characters of the Megillah—Esther, Mordekhai, and Haman—are completely dependent on the good will of the king. For example, the political influence of Esther and Mordekhai ostensibly contributed significantly to the salvation of the Jews. However, the Megillah repeatedly reminds the reader how their authority was subject to the king's moods. Esther knew that Vashti had been deposed in an instant. The king even held a second beauty contest immediately after queening Esther (2:19). Finally, when the moment to use her influence arrived, Esther was terrified to confront the king to plead on behalf of her people. The fact that she had not been summoned for thirty days reminded her of her precarious position (4:11).

Mordekhai, who rose to power at the end of the Megillah, likewise recognized the king's fickleness. Just as the previous vizier was hanged, so too Mordekhai never could feel secure in his new position.

Perhaps the most striking example is the conflict between Haman and Mordekhai. Rabbi Henshke points out that after Haman parades Mordekhai around Shushan (a tremendous moral victory for Mordekhai over his archenemy), Mordekhai midrashically returns to his sackcloth and ashes (see *Megillah* 16a). After Haman is hanged (when the conflict between Mordekhai and Haman should be over), only *the king* is relieved because the threat to his own wife is eliminated (7:10); even after Ahashverosh turns Haman's post over to Mordekhai, Esther still must grovel before the king (8:1-6). The Jews remain in mortal fear because of the *king's decree*, irrespective of Haman.

## **B. God and Ahashverosh**

The main characters of the Megillah have counterparts: Mordekhai opposes Haman; Esther is contrasted to Vashti (and later Zeresh). On the surface of the Megillah, only Ahashverosh does not have a pair—but behind the scenes, he does: it is God.<sup>29</sup> While God's Name never appears in the Megillah, "the king" appears approximately 200 times. It would appear that Ahashverosh's absolute power is meant to occupy the role normally assigned to God elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

Everyone must prostrate himself to the king's vizier—how much more respect is therefore required for the one who appointed him! And one who enters the throne room without the king's permission risks his or her life—reminiscent of the Jewish law of the gravity of entering the Holy of Holies, God's "throne room." Even the lavish parties at the beginning of the Megillah fit this theme. Instead of all the nations of the world flooding to the Temple in Jerusalem to serve God (Isa. 2:2-4), all the nations of the world flood to the palace in Shushan to see Ahashverosh's wealth and to get drunk.

### C. The Megillah as Satire<sup>31</sup>

Although the king's authority and power are demonstrated amply throughout the Megillah, so are his caprice and foolishness. Ahashverosh rules the world, but his own wife does not listen to him. He makes decisions while drunk, and accepts everyone's advice. Rabbi Henshke convincingly argues that the primary point of the Megillah is to display the ostensible power of a human king, while satiring his weaknesses.

The patterns established in chapter one continue throughout the Megillah. Haman is promoted, simply because the king wants to promote him. This promotion occurs right after Mordekhai saves the king's life and is not rewarded at all. Despite the constant emphasis on the king's laws, giving the impression of orderliness, Ahashverosh readily sells an innocent nation for destruction and drinks to that decision (3:11-15). Later, he still has the audacity to exclaim, "*mi hu zeh ve-ezeh hu!*" ("who is he and where is he," 7:5). Despite the king's indignant proclamation, the reader discerns the answer to Ahashverosh's question: it is the king himself!<sup>32</sup>

The striking parallel between Haman's decree (3:11-15) and Mordekhai's (8:7-14) further illustrates the king's inconstancy: both edicts follow the identical legal procedure and employ virtually the same language, yet one allows the Jews to be exterminated while the other permits the Jews to defend themselves. Ahashverosh is subservient to his own decrees to the point where he cannot even retract them himself (1:19; 8:2, cf. Dan. 6:9, 13, 16). Finally, the Bigtan and Teresh incident (2:21-23) serves as a reminder that the king's power itself was precarious, and that his downfall could arise suddenly from within his Empire.<sup>33</sup>

## D. Mordekhai's Disobedience

What does Haman's parading of Mordekhai add to the plot of the Megillah? Rabbi Henshke responds that this question is based upon the assumption that the Megillah revolves around the conflict between Mordekhai and Haman. However, once it is demonstrated that Ahashverosh is the primary character of the Megillah, the parade becomes vital to the plot. True, Mordekhai had rescued the king; but he had also flouted the king's laws by not bowing to Haman, a dangerous move considering Vashti's fate for a similar crime. Moreover, Mordekhai was still subject to the impending decree against the Jews! Thus, Mordekhai's victory over Haman failed to end the story, so long as he and his people still were subject to the menacing decree of the king. Haman's parading Mordekhai illustrates the absence of values in Ahashverosh's world.

One should add that the Megillah ascribes great importance to this parade: Zeresh and Haman's advisors all recognized that somehow, this parade was the harbinger of Mordekhai's triumph over Haman (6:13)—and they were proven correct.

To summarize: In the surface plot of the Megillah—reflecting the conflict between Mordekhai and Haman, the parade marked the beginning of the victory of Mordekhai over Haman. On a deeper level, the parade is a striking example of the perverse and capricious world of the king.

In a similar vein, we may identify two layers of motivation for Mordekhai's not bowing to Haman: Rabbi Yaakov Medan asserts that Mordekhai does not bow because he needs to send a strong message to Israel: passivity in the face of evil can cause even more harm in the future.<sup>34</sup>

In light of Rabbi Henshke's analysis, another answer emerges: Mordekhai wishes to oppose the king's command (3:2, 4). Once the king promotes Haman (especially right after Mordekhai had saved the king's life yet received no reward), Mordekhai recognizes the repulsive character of the king. Even further, Mordekhai perceives that Ahashverosh had "replaced" God as the major visible power in Shushan. Thus, Mordekhai finds himself battling on two spiritual fronts. On the surface, he opposes Haman, but he also engages in a spiritual battle against Ahashverosh. Therefore, the text stresses that Mordekhai was violating the king's decree by refusing to prostrate before Haman.

The Gemara lends conceptual support for this dual-battle of Mordekhai: After Mordekhai learns of the decree of annihilation, he begins to mourn:

"And Mordekhai knew all that had been done" (4:1)—what did he say? Rav says: Haman has triumphed over Ahashverosh. Shemuel says: the higher king has triumphed over the lower king (Rashi: a euphemism for "Ahashverosh has triumphed over God") (*Megillah* 15a).

According to Rav, Haman was the primary threat to Mordekhai and the Jews. Mordekhai bewails Haman's manipulation of the weaker Ahashverosh. But according to Shemuel, Mordekhai perceives that Ahashverosh was too powerful. His allowing such a wicked individual to rise to power weakens the very manifestation of God in this world. Rav's response addresses the surface plot, the conflict between Haman and Mordekhai. Shemuel reaches to the deeper struggle behind the scenes—God's battle with Ahashverosh.



## E. An Alternative to the World of Ahashverosh

Instead of stopping at its satire of the king, the Megillah offers an alternative lifestyle to the world of Ahashverosh. As mentioned earlier, the Megillah consistently portrays the Jews' character in a positive light. In 3:8, Haman contrasts the laws of the Jews with the laws of the king. In 4:13-14, Mordekhai challenges Esther to risk her life on behalf of her people, forcing her to choose between "the king's house" and salvation from "*makom aher* (another place)."<sup>35</sup> Thus, the Megillah stresses that the Jewish laws and practices are an admirable alternative to the decrepit values represented by Ahashverosh's personality and society.

Ahashverosh is a *melekh hafakhpakh*, a whimsical ruler. His counterpart in the Megillah, God, works behind the scenes to influence the Purim story through the process of *ve-nahafokh hu* (9:1), a primary theme in the Megillah. In the world of the *hafakhpakh* everything is arbitrary, self-serving, and immoral. There is no justice: a Haman can be promoted as can a Mordekhai. In contrast, God's world of *ve-nahafokh hu* is purposeful and just.<sup>36</sup> Although the reader is left wondering why the Jews were threatened in the first place, God had justice prevail in the end.

However, one must note that God does not emerge completely victorious over Ahashverosh. The Megillah concludes with Ahashverosh's power, eclipsing the full manifestation of God's glory:

[Why do we not say Hallel on Purim?...]Rava said: There is a good reason in that case [of the Exodus from Egypt] because it says [in the Hallel], Praise ye O servants of the Lord, who are no longer servants of Pharaoh — But can we say in this case, Praise ye, servants of the Lord and not servants of Ahashverosh? We are still servants of Ahashverosh! (*Megillah* 14a).

## Conclusion

The showdown between Haman and Mordekhai is central to the surface plot of the Megillah, whereas the more cosmic battle between God and Mordekhai against the world of Ahashverosh permeates the very frame of the Megillah from beginning to end.

The reader is left helpless in the face of the question of why the Jews deserved this decree. The Jews appear completely righteous, and it specifically is the religious and national heroism of Mordekhai which endangers them in the first place. Yet, the reader of the Megillah, like Iyyov, is led to confront God honestly, confident by the end that there is justice in the world, even when it is not always apparent to the human eye. This piercingly honest religiosity has been a source of spiritual inspiration throughout the Jewish world since the writing of the Megillah. The Megillah challenges us, and brings us ever closer to God—who is concealed right beneath the surface of the Megillah, battling the insidious and arbitrary world of Ahashverosh.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24.

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah *Megillah* 3:4 requires that *Parashat Zakhor* (Deut. 25:17-19) be read the Shabbat preceding Purim. Mishnah 3:6 mandates that the narrative of Amalek's attack on the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 17:9-17) be read as the Torah portion of Purim. Josephus (*Antiquities* XI:209) asserts that Haman was an Amalekite.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Megillah* 16a.

<sup>4</sup> Yaakov Klein, Mikhael Heltzer & Yitzhak Avishur et al., *Olam HaTanakh: Megillot* (Tel Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1996, p. 217) assert that the names Haman, Hamedata, and Agag all have Elamite and Persian roots.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1973), in his comments to 2:5.

<sup>6</sup> Hakham suggests that “Agagite” may be a typological name, intended to associate Haman conceptually with “Amalek,” i.e., he acts as one from Amalek (the same way many contemporary Jews refer to anti-Semites as “Amalek,” regardless of their genetic origins). Jon D. Levenson (*Old Testament Library: Esther* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997], pp. 56-7) argues similarly, adding that Shaul lost his kingdom to David as a result of not killing Agag; now, Mordekhai will reclaim some of Shaul’s glory by defeating Haman the Agagite—while the Davidic kingdom stopped ten years after Jeconiah was exiled (2:6).

<sup>7</sup> See discussion in R. Hayyim David Halevi, *Mekor Hayyim ha-Shalem* (Hebrew), vol. 4, pp. 347-351.

<sup>8</sup> Although the Jews’ mourning and fasting may indicate that they were repenting from sins, the text avoids any reference to what these sins might have been. These religious acts just as easily could indicate a petition to God in times of distress.

<sup>9</sup> This emphasis may serve to demonstrate that the Jews were fighting for their very survival (Hakham). On a more conceptual level, the Megillah may be contrasting the Jews’ behavior with that of Shaul and his soldiers, who plundered Amalek (Gavriel H. Cohn, introduction to *Da’at Mikra: Esther*, p. 14).

<sup>10</sup> See *Esther Rabbah* 7:12; cf. *Megillah* 13b; *Abba Gorion* 26; *2 Panim Aherim* 68; *Aggadat Esther* 30-31; *Esther Rabbah* and *Targum Esther* 3:8. Cf. Carey Moore (*Anchor Bible: Esther* [New York: Doubleday, 1971], p. 39), who translates *mefuzzar u-meforad* as “scattered, yet unassimilated.” Hakham (3:8) suggests this possibility as well.

<sup>11</sup> Mordekhai is a variant of “Merodakh” (=Marduk). See Jer. 50:2; cf. II Kings 25:27 (~Jer. 52:31); Isa. 39:1. See *Megillah* 12b; *Esther Rabbah* 6:3; *2 Panim Aherim* 62; *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* 50; 1 and 2 Targum Esther 2:5, for midrashic explications of Mordekhai’s name.

<sup>12</sup> See *Megillah* 13a (several alternative midrashic etymologies of the name Esther also are given there as well). Yaakov Klein, Mikhael Heltzer & Yitzhak Avishur et al., *Olam HaTanakh: Megillot* (pp. 238-9) argue that the name Esther derives from the Persian word “star” (meaning “star” in English as well). They reject the derivation from Ishtar, since a *shin* in a Babylonian word (*Ishtar*) would not be transformed into a *samekh* in the Hebrew (*Esther*).

<sup>13</sup> Even if pagan names suggest assimilation, it is quite possible that their host rulers gave them these names, like Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:7). Cf. *Megillah* 13a: “the *nations of the world* called Esther this after Ishtar.” At any rate, it is clear that Esther needed to conceal

her Jewish identity, so her using the name Hadassah would have been unreasonable.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Heltzer and Michael Kochman (*Olam HaTanakh: Ezra-Nehemiah* [Tel-Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1997], p. 142) suggest that the list in Ezra 2 might count only adult males (as in the name list in Ezra 8:1-14), which would bring the total of people – including women and children – to approximately 200,000. Abarbanel (*Mayanei HaYeshu'ah: Ma'ayan 11, Tamar 1*) had proposed the same. However, from the fact that some mothers and female singers are included on the list, it appears that roughly 50,000 total people (including servants) came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between the midrashic sources of the Persian chronology and other historical sources, see Shemuel HaKohen, *Introduction to the Books of the Return to Zion in the Bible* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University, 1987), pp. 59-79. Cf. Gavriel H. Cohn, introduction to *Da'at Mikra: Esther*, pp. 4-6. For other traditional opinions regarding the Persian chronology, see Simon Schwab, “Comparative Jewish Chronology,” in *Ateret Tzevi: Joseph Breuer Jubilee Volume* (New York: Feldheim, Inc. 1962), pp. 177-197. Hayyim Hefetz, “The Persian and Median Kingdoms in the Second Temple Period and Before: A New Study” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 14 (1991), pp. 78-141; and the introductory essay by R. Yaakov Medan, pp. 47-77. For a book-length analysis and survey of the various rabbinic opinions, see Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict: A Study of the Major Discrepancy between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Translations of passages from the Talmud and Midrash Rabbah taken from Soncino, with minor modifications.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Esther Rabbah* 2:11; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 48. Other *Midrashim* look to other eras for theological causes of the Purim decree: *Esther Rabbah* 1:10 turns to the Jews' violation of Shabbat in the time of Nehemiah. *Esther Rabbah* 7:25 considers the threat in the Purim story retribution for the brothers' sale of Yosef; *Esther Rabbah* 8:1 blames Yaakov's deception of Yitzhak.

<sup>18</sup> See *Midrashim* cited in *Torah Shelema* I:52, 60, 61.

<sup>19</sup> *Shir Rabbah* 7:8 concludes that even if only a few Jews participated in the party, all of Israel still could be held responsible because of the principle of *arevut*.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., *Esther Rabbah* 6:2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Josh. 7:6; I Sam. 7:6; Jer. 14:12; Joel 2:12; Jon. 3:8; Ez. 8:21-23; Neh. 9:1ff., which all combine fasting and praying.

<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of the Septuagint additions, see Carey Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions (Anchor Bible)*, New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 3-16; 153-262.

<sup>23</sup> See Gen. 23:7; 27:29; 33:3; Gen. 42:6; I Sam. 24:8; II Sam. 14:4; I Kings 1:23. Amos Hakham notes that the terms “*keri'ah*” and “*hishtahavayah*” (in Est. 3:2, 5) are collocated exclusively in regard to God, or to pagan deities.

<sup>24</sup> Mordekhai is a hero in the Megillah, but it is less evident whether his actions always should be considered exemplary (majority opinion), or whether he should be considered a hero for reacting properly to a problem that he had created in the first place. See Rava's opinion in *Megillah* 12b-13a; *Panim Aherim* 2:3 (quoted in *Torah Sheleimah* III:17). One also could argue that Mordekhai was willing to assume personal risk, but did not anticipate a decree of genocide against his people. Cf. Kara (10:3), who argues that some Jews resented Mordekhai even at the end of the Megillah for jeopardizing their lives. For discussion of R. Yitzhak Arama's (*Akedat Yitzhak*) fascinating views on this issue, see Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 68-72.

<sup>25</sup> See also *Esther Rabbah* 7:5; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 50; *Abba Gorion* 22; *Panim Aherim* 46; *Esther Rabbah* 2:5, 3:1-2; *Targum* 3:2; Josephus *Antiquities*, XI, 6.5 and 8; Ibn Ezra; Tosafot *Sanhedrin* 61b, s.v. Rava.

<sup>26</sup> *Megillah* 10b, 19a; *Esther Rabbah* 7:8; Rashi. Cf. *Sanhedrin* 61b, with Tosafot ad loc., s.v. Rava.

<sup>27</sup> R. Yitzhak Arama was perhaps the first to argue that the reasoning of idolatry is *derekh ha-derash*. See Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, p. 69. The closest implicit reference to pagan practices in the text is Haman's lottery.

<sup>28</sup> R. David Henshke, “Megillat Esther: Literary Disguise” (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1999), pp. 93-106.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Esther Rabbah* 3:10: “Everywhere in the Megillah where it says, ‘King Ahashverosh,’ the text refers to Ahashverosh; every instance of ‘the king’ has a dual holy-secular meaning” (i.e., it refers both to God and Ahashverosh).

<sup>30</sup> Earlier commentators also address the issue of why God's Name is not mentioned in the Megillah. Ibn Ezra opines that the Megillah would be translated for distribution throughout the Persian Empire; since pagan translators may substitute the name of a pagan deity for God's Name, the author of the Megillah deliberately avoided referring to God. Rama (*Yoreh De'ah* 276) suggests that there was doubt whether the

Megillah would be canonized (cf. *Megillah* 7a); therefore, they omitted God's Name anticipating the possibility of rejection, which would lead to the mistreatment of the scrolls. For a more complete survey of medieval responses to this issue, see Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, pp. 76-79.

<sup>31</sup> For a thorough analysis of the use of irony in the Megillah, see Moshe D. Simon, "Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man...": Irony and Theology in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 31:4 (Summer 1997), pp. 5-27.

<sup>32</sup> *Megillah* 16a: "And Esther said, 'the adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman' (7:6)—R. Eliezer says: this teaches that Esther began to face Ahashverosh, and an angel came and forced her hand to point to Haman."

One should not overlook Esther's remark to the king (7:4): were she and her people to be sold into slavery, she wouldn't have protested, indicating that the king and his interests are too important to trouble for anything short of genocide! Cf. 8:1-4, where Ahashverosh turns Haman's wealth over to Mordekhai and Esther, but does nothing to address his diabolical decree. The king's priorities are depicted as incredibly perverse in these episodes. Compare *Megillah* 11a: "He was Ahashverosh' (1:1)—he was wicked from beginning until his end." This Gemara penetrates beneath the king's ostensible benevolence towards the Jews at the end of the Megillah, remarking that he was no better than before.

<sup>33</sup> Although Bigtan and Teresh failed in their efforts, King Xerxes was assassinated by other court officials within ten years of the Purim story (465). See Moore (*Esther*), p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> R. Yaakov Medan, "Mordekhai Would Not Kneel or Bow Low—Why?" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1999), pp. 151-170.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Ezra (introduction to the Megillah) argues that "*makom*" here does not refer directly to God. But even if this is not literally a reference to God, Mordekhai doubtlessly had God in mind.

<sup>36</sup> See R. Avraham Walfish, "An Ordinance of Equity and Honesty" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1999), pp. 107-140.

# Psalm 22- From the Depths of Divine Abandonment to the Pinnacle of Hopeful Vision<sup>1</sup>

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The goal of this paper is to analyze the relationship between the superscription of Psalm 22 (the heading at v. 1) and its body. A proper understanding of the superscription will illuminate many of the otherwise unclear phrases in the psalm and will provide a better sense of its meaning. We will first review the psalm's structure and basic themes, and point out several aspects of its form, including word counts and recurring words and phrases.

## Structure and Theme

Psalm 22 divides into two main sections: vv. 2-22, in which the psalmist complains that God has abandoned him in his time of trouble and vv. 23-32, in which he commits himself to praise God publicly. While feeling abandoned by God (vv. 2-3), he recalls God's past closeness to his ancestors who were rescued by Him and were not embarrassed by their belief in Him (vv. 4-6). Unlike his ancestors, he is not being saved from his enemies; on the contrary, he is scorned and mocked. He feels himself "a worm and not a man" who is the "derision of everyone" (v. 7), put to shame by all who see him. They speak about him, shake their heads at him and mock him with the implied thought, "Look at that fool, he trusts that God will save him" (v. 9). Yet, he still tells God that he has depended on and trusted in Him from the moment he was born (vv. 10-11).

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<sup>1</sup> This is a modified version of a longer article to be published soon in an academic journal.

Furthermore, the psalmist prays to be saved (v. 12) from his powerful enemies (presumably the political and religious authorities), who are like powerful animals that have surrounded him and are about to devour him (vv. 13-14). He is infirmed, weak, “poured out like water,” melting away, dry, and on the verge of death (v. 15-16). Certain that he will soon die, his enemies have begun casting lots to divvy up his clothing (vv. 17-19). He pleads with God to save him from the “sword,” i.e., those who want to murder him outright (vv. 20-22).

In the second section, he declares his intention to praise God’s name to his brethren, prompting them to realize that God does indeed respond to the prayer of those who suffer (vv. 23-27). That idea will spread around the world, as people experience it in their own lives and it becomes a part of the world’s spiritual legacy (vv. 28-30). Future generations will adopt the notion of a God who hears prayers and saves the petitioners (vv. 31-32). The implication appears to be that he is confident that God will ultimately save him.

Section 1 (vv. 2-22) can be further divided into two subsections: 1a (vv. 2-11) is a prayer about the psalmist’s abandonment by God contrasted with His past closeness while 1b (vv. 12-22) describes the current danger he is in, surrounded by his adversaries. Section 1a (vv. 2-11) alternates between outright complaint and remembrance of God’s help in the past. Verses 2-3 contain the opening complaint of abandonment despite his repeated calls for help; vv. 4-6 recall how God answered the cries of his ancestors. Verse 6 ends with וְלֹא בִּזְיוֹן – “they were not disappointed.” This contrasts with vv. 7-9 where the psalmist feels disappointed because he has *not* been answered and this causes others to deride him. Verses 10-11 recall that God has been his savior since his birth and so he reconfirms his commitment to rely on His help. Section



1b (vv. 12-22) repeatedly uses animal imagery to describe the psalmist's predicament and this imagery virtually holds the subsection together and also connects it with both the superscription and section 1a, as we shall see shortly.

Other significant aspects of the Psalm's structure are the refrain-like repetitions and central words, i.e. the words that appear at the center of the two sections and the subsections indicated above. The root רחק appears three times in section 1. In v. 2, it is used to express God's current distance from the psalmist. In vv. 12 and 20 (i.e. the beginning and end of section 1b, which is the center and end of section 1), it is used as part of the phrase אֶל תִּרְחַק that forms the plea to reverse the current situation. This root is not just a recurring word but is strategically located at the beginning, middle, and end of Section 1, thus highlighting that God's distance is the major theme of this section.

Verse 3 continues the opening of section 1 with the words, וְלֹא תַעֲנֶנּוּ יוֹמָם אֶקְרָא – “I call daily and you do not answer.” Section 1 ends with the words וּמִקְרָנֵי רְמִים עֲנִיתָנִי – “from the horns of rams you have answered me” (v. 22). The root ענה thus forms another “envelope” around the first section, which begins with the pessimistic view that God has chosen not to answer him and ends with optimistic hope that He will answer. Although understanding עֲנִיתָנִי as “you have answered me” makes a nice counterpart to “you have not answered me,” to form an inclusion, such usage seems awkward. A perfect tense does not sit well at the end of a sequence of imperatives. We prefer to take עֲנִיתָנִי as expressing a hope, an interpretation that fits better with the imperatives - viz., “may you answer me,” or “please answer me.”

In ascertaining the central words of a psalm it is important to remember that the superscription can be

considered either as distinct from the psalm or as part of it, a matter we have demonstrated elsewhere. We will consider the central words counted in both ways significant. Without the superscription, the central word of this text is אֶסְפֹּר<sup>2</sup> of verse 18, “אֶסְפֹּר כָּל עַצְמוֹתַי - I take the count of all my bones.” The center of the psalm thus places us at the moment of the psalmist’s most extreme fear when he worries for his physical survival.

Usually, the word אֶסְפֹּר in the *piel* form means, “to tell, to recount” but here it apparently means simply “to count.” This unusual usage connects with the next occurrences of the root ספר in this psalm, also in *piel* form, in vv. 23 and 31. Interestingly, the word אֶסְפֹּרָה begins section 2 (v. 23) and the word יִסְפֹּר occurs towards the end of that section (v. 31), thus forming an envelope around that section. The center word of the text, אֶסְפֹּר, has the prophet describing a difficult point in his life. He counts his limbs to make sure they are all fine. In contrast, in the second section the verb is used as part of the psalmist’s praise of God for saving him. His recounting of his situation and how God helped him will cause a worldwide recognition of God which will extend to future generations. The use of the same words (and the unusual *piel* form!) links the depth of despair in section 1 with the praise in section 2, underscoring the hope for a complete reversal of the psalmist’s situation from distress to giving thanks.

Section 2 describes many groups of people praising God beginning with himself, “אֶסְפֹּרָה שְׁמִי” (v. 23). The

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<sup>2</sup> This word is also the 130<sup>th</sup> word of the text from the beginning, including superscription. For the significance of this number see Rabbi Shamah’s article: *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*. For the use of word counts see: Ronald Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6 Article 5 (2006).

groups progress from a small clan of brothers – לְאָחֵי (v. 23), to a congregation of those who fear God or Israelites – קָהָל (v. 23), יִרְאֵי יְהוָה, זָרַע יַעֲקֹב, זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל (v. 24), קָהָל, כָּל אֲפָסִי (v. 26), דְּרָשׁוּ (v. 27), to the entire world – כָּל מְשֻׁפְחוֹת גּוֹיִם, אָרֶץ, and the healthy – כָּל דְּשָׁנֵי אָרֶץ, and the sick – כָּל יוֹרְדֵי עֶפְרַיִם וְנָפְשׁוּ לֹא חַיָּה (v. 30). The section ends with the next generation praising God – זָרַע יַעֲבֹדֵנוּ (v. 31). This progression holds this section together as a literary unit.

## Superscripture

The psalm's superscripture is unique. The noun אֵילָת ("doe") and its modifying noun הַשָּׁחַר ("of the morning") are especially puzzling. The Targum translates, עַל תְּקוּף, קוּרְבָן תְּדִירָא דְקָרִינָתָא – "for the strength of the daily morning sacrifice." The Septuagint translates: "concerning the help that comes in the morning." These translations understand אֵילָת as "strength" or "help," based on the meaning of a similar word, "אֵילוּתִי," in v. 20.<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra explains that it refers to someone experiencing the power of a sunrise. His preferred explanation is that אֵילָת has a similar sense to that in Prov. 5:19, viewing it as introducing a song with a beautiful melody like a love song. Rashi considers it to be the name of a musical instrument. Radak mentions the possibility that אֵילָת is the name of a morning star that is mentioned in the Talmud (JT Ber. 2a, JT Yoma 40b). His preferred interpretation is that אֵילָת refers to the Israelites who are compared to a deer in Shir. 2:7 and 3:5, while הַשָּׁחַר describes Israel's beauty as in Shir. 6:10.

Modern commentators mostly repeat these interpretations. There are, however, some exceptions. One suggests that the association of *deer* with the sun-god might shed light on this superscripture. More recently, Claissé-

<sup>3</sup> See also Ps. 88:5.

Ward appears to suggest that a midrashic tale of a deer saving David from a lion may be the backdrop for the superscription.<sup>4</sup> None of these explanations, traditional and modern, significantly relate to the contents of the psalm.

We propose that the אֵילַת of the superscription is related to the אֵילַת of Jer. 14:5. Only three verses in the Bible, Jer. 14:5, Ps. 22:1, and Prov. 5:19, contain the precise form of this word (that is as אֵילַת in contrast to אֵיל, אֵילָה, and אֵילוֹת). The latter appears to have little connection with either of the first two verses, but Jer. 14:5 and Ps. 22:1 offer considerable intertextual play.

A number of superscriptions in Psalms refer to well-known historical incidents that provide a setting for the rest of the psalm. Many refer to incidents in the life of David as recounted in Samuel 1 and 2 and Kings 1 and 2 (Pss. 9, 18, 34, 51, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, and 142). In the superscription of Psalm 22 the words אֵילַת הַשָּׂחַר function in a similar manner, albeit not as a reference to a particular time or event, but to a specific pericope in Jeremiah.

Jer. 14:5 reads, כִּי גַם אֵילַת בְּשָׂדָה יִלְדָה וְעֵזוֹב כִּי לֹא הֵיָהּ, אֵילָה – “Even the hind in the field forsakes her newborn fawn because there is no grass.” In the first four verses of that chapter, Jeremiah informs us of a prophecy he received regarding the drought and the sad events that it causes. In verse 5, he describes a situation that is so bad that, after giving birth, even the hind in the field is forced to abandon her newborn fawn because of a lack of water and grazing. The imagery is devastating. The delicate newborn fawn, which seeks its mother, alone and terrified, hungry and thirsty, is abandoned and unprotected from the hungry

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy de Claissé-Ward, “An Intertextual Reading of Psalms 22, 23, and 24,” in Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, *The Book of Psalms. Composition and Reception*. SVT 99 (2005), pp. 147-48.

predators that at any moment might attack and kill it. Dawn –שחר– may be the moment when the fawn would be most vulnerable to predators, at the beginning of their daily stalking.<sup>5</sup>

In Psalm 22, the psalmist’s sorrowful awareness of the details of abandonment from the Jeremiah context is the backdrop to his prayer to God. This adds depth to his petition, making it more effective in requesting God’s compassion. Like the abandoned newborn fawn who presumably fears the predators of the new day, so the prophet feels abandoned by God and is alone to face the predators that surround him. This association provides a frame of reference for the rest of the psalm. In fact, much of the phrasing in this psalm and in the next three psalms make reference to Jer. 14.

In the opening words of the prayer, “אֱ-לֹהֵי אֱ-לֹהֵי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי – my God, my God, why have you *forsaken* me,”<sup>6</sup> the psalmist uses the same root (עזב) that described the abandoned fawn, “אֵילַת בְּשֶׁדָּה יִלְדָּה וְעִזּוֹב – the hind in the field *forsakes* her new-born.”<sup>7</sup> The double invocation of God, אֱ-לֹהֵי אֱ-לֹהֵי, uncommon in the Bible, conveys the extreme

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<sup>5</sup> Stalking is done by lions at all times. However, the peak times are dawn and dusk when they have an advantage of excellent low-light vision. Another possibility is that the doe only noticed the lack of food at the light of the dawn at which point she abandoned her fawn.

Interestingly, note Ps. 63:2 where the seldom-used phrase אֱ-לֹהֵי אֶתָּה (Ps. 22:2) is written in conjunction with שַׁחַר and the lack of water – אֱ-לֹהֵי אֶתָּה אֲשַׁחֲרֶנּךָ צָמְאָה לָךְ נַפְשִׁי כַּמָּה לָךְ בְּשָׂרִי בְּאֶרֶץ צִיָּה וְעֵינַי בְּלִי מַיִם. The connection between the verb שַׁחַר (“to seek”) and the noun “dawn” is that the person who seeks diligently arises early to do so.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 14:8-9 similarly use לָמָּה to ask why God acts like a stranger who abandons the nation.

<sup>7</sup> The psalmist here has hope even though Jer. 14:11-12, 15:1 portrays a situation where there is no hope and where even God says there is no point in praying. See the discussion of קוֹה in: Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms,” pp. 11f.

urgency of the sufferer's situation.<sup>8</sup> The word אָלִי consists of the first three letters of the word אֵילָת; perhaps they are used purposely to emphasize or play on אֵילָת and evoke the imagery of the abandoned fawn. Later in the psalm, God is invoked with the word "אֵילוֹתִי – my strength" (v. 20) which also contains the same letters of and plays off of אֵילָת. (See more on this below.) The effect, however, is this: the fawn in Jeremiah has been abandoned by the אֵילָת, while the psalmist has been abandoned by אָלִי.

The phrase דְּבַרֵי שִׁאֲגָתִי (v. 2b), literally, "words of my roar," combines an animal sound (שִׁאֲגָתִי) with a term denoting human communication (דְּבַרֵי). While שאג is used a number of times in the Bible to refer to human crying,<sup>9</sup> this is the only instance when it is joined with "words." The point here is that by combining the animal and the human, the psalmist equates himself with the abandoned fawn; the words of his prayer are equivalent to the fawn's cry.<sup>10</sup> It is tempting to say that the sounds of the words - "ehlee ehlee" - convey the sound that the fawn would make when crying out for its mother.<sup>11</sup> From the point of view of the structure of the psalm, שִׁאֲגָתִי ironically anticipates אָשׁ of v. 14, because the latter is used of the animals who threaten him.

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<sup>8</sup> A double call to G-d occurs elsewhere only one other time, in Ex. 34:6 as YHVH YHVH. In fact, the word אָלִי occurs only 12 times in the Bible, 10 of them in Psalms.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Ps. 32:3, 74:4.

<sup>10</sup> Of course the fawn does not "roar." Yet the prophet wanted to express the power contained in his complaint to God. The word "moan" or "bleat" would not have accomplished that for him. Once the prophet uses animal imagery in this psalm, he "amplified" the fawn's bleats to his roar. Interestingly, adult deer make a sound that is described as a roar. For a sample of such a sound, visit [http://www.deer-uk.com/Red\\_roaring.wav](http://www.deer-uk.com/Red_roaring.wav).

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.sonic.net/dana/fawns/sound.html> for description of a fawn sound and [http://www.allpredatorcalls.com/New\\_Folder/FP%20Sounds/255voice.wav](http://www.allpredatorcalls.com/New_Folder/FP%20Sounds/255voice.wav) for the actual sound.

(Such irony of comparing hunter and hunted with lions is found elsewhere in psalms: 7:16; 31:5; 35:7; 57:7).<sup>12</sup>

The central words of section 1a are תולעת ולא איש (v. 7). With them, the psalmist expresses his feeling of powerlessness and denigration by comparing himself to a worm. First, he had felt he had been reduced to the level of the animals that surround and threaten him. Now he is taken even lower, equated to a defenseless worm.

This psalm, especially section 1b, contains a remarkable number of animal references. The enemies are called bulls (v. 13), roaring lions (vv. 14, 17, 22), dogs (vv. 17, 21), and wild oxen (v. 22). Some of these terms are repeated and, in fact, they appear in chiasmic order:

סבבונני פרים רבים אבירי בשן פתרוני :	(v. 13)	A
פצו עלי פיהם אריה טרף ושאג :	(v. 14)	B
כי סבבונני כלבים עדת מרעים הקיפוני		C
פארי ידי ורגלי :	(v. 17)	B
הצילה מחרב נפשי מיד כלב חידתי :	(v. 21)	C
הושיעני מפי אריה		B
ומקרני רמים עניתני :	(v. 22)	A

Whatever might be the correct way to interpret the odd expression involving ידי ורגלי פארי at the end of v. 17, the meaning of “lion” does not disrupt the chiasm of the sequence of animal names, because פארי occupies the midpoint.

Bulls and oxen, which form the outermost element of the chiasm, are essentially the same animal, even if they might be used for different purposes. Lions and dogs then

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<sup>12</sup> See Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?. Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 212 (Fribourg/Göttingen: Acedmica Press/Vandehoeck & Ruprecht, 205), pp. 54. Strawn also discusses another possibility (after emendation) at Isa 38:13, also using שאג.

alternate in between. All of these animal references extend the metaphor inferred from the superscription. The psalmist is like a helpless fawn or a powerless worm encountering the dangers of wild animals all around him.<sup>13</sup> The threat is heightened when we compare section 1a with section 1b. The central words of section 1a are the psalmist's comparison of himself to a worm. They contrast with the center of the chiasm describing the enemy like a lion. He is small and powerless while his enemies are mighty and ferocious, like the kings of the jungle. He is so insignificant that his enemies ought to have no interest in him.

To understand the symbolism of the animals and particularly the phrase קַרְנֵי רְמִים “horns of oxen,” it is useful to refer to Ps. 75. In that psalm, upraised horns are applied to haughty people:

To boastful men I say, ‘Do not boast!’ to the wicked, ‘Do not raise (תְּרִימוּ) your horns (קַרְנֵי)!’ Do not raise (תְּרִימוּ) your horns (קַרְנֵיכֶם) up high (לְמַרוֹם) and talk down to people (vv. 5-6).<sup>14</sup> All the horns of the wicked I will cut; but the horns (קַרְנֵי) of the righteous shall be uplifted (תְּרוֹמְמָנָה) (v. 11).

Even though oxen are not mentioned in these verses, the verb to raise (תְּרִימוּ) echoes the word oxen (רְמִים) of our psalm. Raised oxen horns that threaten the psalmist

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<sup>13</sup> In this psalm, there are three places where the psalmist uses the metaphor of lions to describe his enemies. Interestingly, in all of the times “lion” is used in Psalms, the word describes the psalmist’s enemies. Jeremiah is the only other biblical book to use the word “lion” to describe the prophet’s personal enemies. Although, Zephaniah and Ezekiel (in chapters that are dependent on each other) indeed use the word “lions” to refer to enemies of prophets in Jerusalem, they do not use the word to describe their enemies specifically. The occurrences in the book of Jeremiah are the only ones to use “lion” in this way.

<sup>14</sup> The phrase בְּצִנְאָר עֵתֶק (lit. arrogant neck) might also be translated “with their nose in the air.”



refer to the boastful political or religious authorities who are his enemies. The spelling רמים is not the historical spelling. The more natural meaning for the word spelled this way would be “high” (or “haughty”). Perhaps the *aleph* of the more correct spelling ראמים is deliberately omitted to make the reference to the haughty enemies more obvious.

The psalm makes another allusion to the abandoned fawn in vv. 10-11: עָלִיךָ, עָלִיךָ כִּי אֶתָּה גָחִי מִבֶּטֶן מִבְּטִיחִי עַל שְׁדֵי אִמִּי, עָלִיךָ<sup>15</sup> - “You drew me from the womb, made me secure at my mother’s breast. I became Your charge at birth; from my mother’s womb You have been my God.” The psalmist recalls how God has taken care of him since his birth implying that He should continue to do so. God has now abandoned him just as the doe abandoned her newborn fawn.

At the end of v. 11, after the birthing imagery, the psalmist again uses אָלִי, recalling that same word in v. 2 and the similarly sounding אֲנִלֶּת in the superscription. In v. 11, he calls God אָלִי while remembering how God took care of him at birth and was his personal guardian, like a parent.<sup>16</sup> This contrasts with the fawn abandoned by its mother. It also contrasts with his own current feeling of abandonment, calling out to God to once again be אָלִי. The repetition of אָלִי in vv. 1 and 11 and their play on אֲנִלֶּת, not only form an envelope around section 1a, but also force us to compare the two contrasting scenarios: God’s care of the psalmist from birth vs. His current abandonment of him.

<sup>15</sup> For similar usage of גָּחִי see Mic. 4:10 and Job 38:8.

<sup>16</sup> Note the use of the word אָבִי in Psalm 27:9,10 - כִּי אָבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי - וְיִהְיֶה זֶאֱקֻפָנִי וְאֵל תִּעֲזָבֵנִי - which is preceded in the previous verse by - אֵלֹהֵי יִשְׁעִי - another example of the prophet seeing Hashem as his parent. (Ps. 22:5 is the first of 13 psalms containing the word father - כִּדְבַר בְּטַחֲוֹ אֲבֹתַי - perhaps this is more than coincidental, more investigation is necessary here.)

The word אֲגִלּוֹתַי – “my strength” (v. 20) – is another play on אֱלִי,<sup>17</sup> and is an almost exact repetition of the word אֲגִלָּת in the superscription. אֲגִלּוֹת is an unusual word for strength.<sup>18</sup> The psalmist seems to have chosen this odd word because it is similar to the word אֲגִלָּת, meaning doe, so that he could create another link between the doe and God. This again creates a contrast in our minds between God’s presence and strength in general, and the psalmist’s current feeling of being abandoned by God similar to the fawn’s case. The psalmist is hinting that God, who was his strength from birth but has now forsaken him, is just like the doe that gave birth to her fawn but then left it to die. The very word which the psalmist uses to call God “my strength,” also intimates that he thinks of God as “my doe,” my parent who has deserted me. This is the closest the prophet gets to explicitly calling God his parent who abandoned him and who should therefore return to him.

אֱלִי is a “poetic” word that only appears in poetic passages. It occurs in seven more psalms, Ex. 15:2, and Isa. 44:17. At six verses, we have the statement “You are my God,” with the pronoun אַתָּה (you) either before or after אֱלִי.<sup>19</sup> Of particular interest, because it falls in neatly with the God-as-parent-motive, is the phrasing of Ps. 89:27 where אֱלִי is equated with father - הוּא יִקְרָאנִי אָבִי אַתָּה אֱלִי - “He shall cry out to me *Thou art my Father, my God,*” where the latter three words are lexically, but not

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<sup>17</sup> The first three letters of אֲגִלּוֹתַי are the same as the letters of אֱלִי. The full word is even more similar to the phrase אֱלִי אַתָּה (v. 11) with which it also shares the letter “ת.”

<sup>18</sup> This form occurs only once in the Bible. The root noun אֲגִל only appears again in Ps. 88:5.

<sup>19</sup> Isa. 44:17, Pss. 22:11, 63:2, 89:27, 118:28, 140:7.

grammatically, a masculine counterpart of Ps. 22:11 אָמִי אֱלֹהִים.<sup>20</sup>

The words אֱלֹהִים, אֵלֶיךָ, and אֱלֹהֵי, recur at key points in our psalm. They function as a refrain with variations and form the backbone of section 1. These words occur at the beginning of the psalm as אֵלֶיךָ (v. 1) and אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי (v. 2), at the end of section 1a as אֱלֹהֵי (v. 11) and towards the end of section 1b as אֱלֹהֵי (v. 20).

Verses 1 and 2:

(א) לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל אֵלֶיךָ הַשָּׁחַר מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד :

(ב) אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי רְחוֹק מִישׁוּעָתִי דַּבְרֵי שְׁאֵגוֹתֵי:

Verses 11 and 12:

(יא) עֲלִידָה הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם מִבְּטֶן אִמִּי אֱלֹהֵי אֵתָּה :

(יב) אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמְּנִי כִּי צָרָה קְרוּבָה כִּי אֵין עֹזֶר :

Verse 20:

(כ) וְאַתָּה יְהוָה אֵל תִּרְחַק אֱלֹהֵי לְעִזְרָתִי חוֹשֶׁה :

Each occurrence of אֱלֹהֵי or אֱלֹהֵי in the psalm is adjacent to a complaint that God is far away, רְחוֹק. The words אֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי in v. 2 are immediately followed by the question לָמָּה עֲזַבְתָּנִי רְחוֹק. The words אֵתָּה אֱלֹהֵי in v. 11 are immediately followed by a prayer, אֵל תִּרְחַק, in the next verse. In v. 20, אֱלֹהֵי is expanded to אֱלֹהֵי “my strength” and the words אֵל תִּרְחַק now precede it. This is a direct play on vv. 11-12. It should be noted that the second occurrence of this juxtaposed pair occurs in the last verse of 1a and the first verse of 1b, i.e. when vv. 2-22 are taken as a single section, אֱלֹהֵי and אֵל תִּרְחַק sit at the very center.

We are now in a position to see what happens when we trace the progression from one occurrence of these key words to the next. In the first verses of the psalm, the

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<sup>20</sup> Note Ex. 15:2 where אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי “God of my father,” as well as the use of אֱלֹהֵי in the descriptions of God as protector in Ps. 18:3. We intend to return to this theme in another paper.

psalmist addresses God with the uncommon term אֱלֹהִים. God is now distant but the psalmist makes no plea to have God come closer. He is just describing his dire situation. Note that even though the psalmist describes God as distant, he still considers Him close enough to address directly.

The second iteration of the refrain spans the seam between sections 1a and 1b thus connecting the sections and affirms that God is indeed the sole true Power. It also extends the idea back to the moment of his birth. This section makes the first plea of the psalm, “do not be distant.”

The third and final iteration of the refrain is the fullest and most explicit. It contains God’s proper name, YHVH, and expands the word אֱלֹהִים to אֱלֹהֵינוּ. Even the plea is amplified. The positive “come quickly to my aid” has been added to the negative “do not be distant.” The psalmist’s confidence builds as the psalm progresses. By the time he reaches section 2, he envisions what he will do when he is saved. The repeated words help us notice this progression.

Sections 1a and 2 both close with the idea of birth, Section 1a (vv. 10-11) with the birth of the psalmist, section 2 (vv. 31-32) with the birth of the nation’s next generation, עַם נִוְלָד. Just as God supported the psalmist from the moment of birth, the future generations will be aware of a supportive God. The positive connotations of these two births contrasts with the tragic events symbolized by the birth and abandonment of the fawn alluded to at the beginning of the psalm. The psalmist prays that his current feeling of abandonment will change for the better and the generations to be born will feel God’s justice and interventions.

## Jeremiah Context

Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon has demonstrated that Jeremiah was the primary author of Psalms. Such linkage has a venerable history. It can also be traced to the very beginnings of modern biblical scholarship. The linkage depends on many points of similarity in content, diction and style. Ps. 22 has a number of points of contact with the drought of Jer. 14.

A notable feature of the book of Jeremiah is the selection from the womb. In Jer. 1:5 God is quoted as saying, בָּטַרְם אֶצְרֶךְ בְּבֶטֶן יְדַעְתִּיךָ וּבְטַרְם תִּצְאָ מִרְחֹם הַקֶּדֶשׁ שִׁתִּיךָ - “Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; Before you were born, I consecrated you.”<sup>21</sup> God has designated Jeremiah from birth and has been close by his side. But now, Jeremiah feels that God has abandoned him in his time of distress. In 22:10-11, the psalmist says, כִּי אֶתָּה גַחִי עָלֶיךָ הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם מִבֶּטֶן מִבְּטִיחִי עַל שְׂדֵי אִמִּי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי אֵלַי אֶתָּה. The sentiment is the same: the relationship between the human protagonist and God goes back to the womb.

Ps. 22:11 uses the word הִשְׁלַכְתִּי – “I was cast.” A parallel verse at Ps. 71:6 uses נִסְמַכְתִּי - I was dependent.

11:22 עָלֶיךָ הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי אֵלַי אֶתָּה  
6:71 עָלֶיךָ נִסְמַכְתִּי מִבֶּטֶן מִמְעֵי אִמִּי אֶתָּה גּוֹזִי<sup>22</sup>

נִסְמַכְתִּי seems to fit in more smoothly than הִשְׁלַכְתִּי, which almost always has a negative connotation.<sup>23</sup> Why is הִשְׁלַכְתִּי

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<sup>21</sup> The words בָּטַר and רְחֹם occur together in a verse only six times throughout the Bible: the above two verses, and Ps. 58:4, Isa. 46:3, Job 3:11, and 31:15. “Knowing (יְדַעְתִּיךָ)” is used here in the sense of being close to, interested in, and caring for as in Ex. 33:12, 17.

<sup>22</sup> The meaning of גּוֹזִי is the one who cut the umbilical cord separating him from the insides - מִמְעֵי - of his mother. In other words, God is the one who delivered him.

used in this psalm? It resonates with the theme of the abandoned (cast aside) foal introduced in the superscription.<sup>24</sup> The psalmist uses that word because he is feeling abandoned like the fawn. See a similar usage in Ezek. 16:5, וַתִּשְׁלַכְנִי אֶל פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּגֵעַל נַפְשֶׁךָ בְּיוֹם הַלֵּדָת אֶתְךָ – “On the day you were born, you were left lying, rejected, in the open field.” The psalmist imagines that he was cast out at birth with nobody but God to take care of him. הַשְּׁלִיכְתִּי connotes a stronger dependency than נִסְמַכְתִּי, as if his parents abandoned him and dropped him at God’s doorstep. God has been there for him since birth, but now the psalmist once again feels abandoned like the foal because God is far away.

In Ps. 22:16, the psalmist describes himself in a state of weakness because of the surrounding enemies and compares his situation to one who lacks water.<sup>25</sup> נִבַּשׁ כְּחֶרֶשׁ וְלִשׁוֹנִי מְדַבֵּק מִלְּקוֹחֵי – “My vigor is dry like a shard, my tongue cleaves to my palate.” These words are often

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<sup>23</sup> Could the verb שלך have the specialized meaning of English “throw” as “to give birth to,” (horses, etc.), “create” (potters)? For the former see *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, 2003), p. 1303, col. b, meanings 15 and 5 respectively.

<sup>24</sup> The root שלך in the *hof’al* form also appears in Jer. 14:16. That verse also uses וְשִׁפְכְתִּי which occurs in Ps. 22:15. Although these words are not very rare, their presence in these psalms that are connected in other ways serves to strengthen the overall connection.

Interestingly, the roots שפך and שלך also occur in connection with Joseph and his brothers at Gen. 37:20, 22, and 24. The scene where his brothers cast Joseph into the pit has similarities to Psalm 22. He is indeed surrounded by his “enemies” who mock him and take his garment. Just as the psalmist in Ps. 22 uses the metaphor of the wild animals that surround him, Joseph is said to have been devoured by a wild animal.

<sup>25</sup> The connection between the imagery of a tongue sticking to the palate and a time of drought and famine is also seen in Lam. 4:4, “The tongue of the suckling clings to its palate for thirst, little children beg for bread, none gives them a morsel.”

understood as symptoms of an illness, but assuming Jer. 14:1-6 as the backdrop a simpler explanation emerges: the psalmist's condition, metaphorical or otherwise, is the result of drought. The famine also allows us to explain the subsequent references to eating. Ps. 22:27 is a prayer for food, *וַיִּשְׂבְּעוּ וַיֵּאָכְלוּ עַנְוִים* – “let the lowly eat and be satisfied.” Those who lack food because of the famine should receive enough to satiate themselves. Ps. 22:30 continues, *אָכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ כָּל דְּשֻׁנֵי אֶרֶץ לְפָנָיו יִכְרְעוּ כָּל יוֹרְדֵי עָפָר* – “All those in full vigor shall eat and prostrate themselves; all those at death's door, whose spirits flag, shall bend the knee before Him.”<sup>26</sup> Those who were at the edge of death because of famine will now eat and thank God in prayer and prostration.

Both the psalmist and the prophet are addressing the issue of God listening to prayer. In Jer. 14:11-12, God specifically tells Jeremiah not pray to Him because He will not listen (This theme continues in Jer. 15:1). Nevertheless, Jeremiah continues to pray in vv. 19-22. And ultimately that prayer is answered. In Ps. 22, the psalmist feels abandoned or claims to have been abandoned. Nevertheless, Ps. 22:25 emphasizes that God did listen when the lowly cried out, *כִּי לֹא בָזָה וְלֹא שָׁקַץ עֲנֹתַי עָנִי וְלֹא הִסְתִּיר פְּנֵי מִמֶּנִּי וּבִשְׂעוֹ אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַע* - “For He did not scorn, He did not spurn the plea of the lowly; He did not hide His face from him, when he cried out to Him, He listened.”

Another example of similar language between Jer. 14:17 and Ps. 22:3 is their descriptions of ceaseless praying and crying:

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<sup>26</sup> *כִּי לֹא חָיָה* in this verse is similar to *וְחַי לְבַבְכֶם לְעַד* in v. 27. In both cases the verb *חיה* means not just to live but to be healthy. See also Ps. 119:25, *דְּבַקָה לְעָפָר לְפָנָי כְּדַבְּרְךָ* - “My soul clings to the dust, revive me in accordance with Your word.” Rabbi Sassoon explains that this verse refers to illness. Notice how similar Ps. 119:25 is to the end of Ps. 22:30, *כָּל יוֹרְדֵי עָפָר וְנִפְשׁוּ לֹא חָיָה*.

Ps. 22:3
Jer. 14:17
 אֱלֹהֵי אֶקְרָא יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה תַעֲנֵה וְלַיְלָה וְלֹא דַמִּיָּה לִי :  
 וְאִמְרַתְּ אֲלֵיהֶם אֵת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה תִּרְדְּנָה עֵינֵי דַמְעָה  
לַיְלָה וְיוֹמָם וְאֵל תִּדְמִינָה

Although the pair יוֹמָם and לַיְלָה (day and night) is common, connecting it with the root דוּם only occurs in these two verses. This is stylistic similarity that reflects the connection between Ps. 22 and Jer. 14.

Jer. 14:7 is a request to God, עֲשֵׂה לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ – “Act for the sake of Your name.”<sup>27</sup> Each of these words takes on special significance in Ps. 22.<sup>28</sup> The word עֲשֵׂה is repeated at the end of Jer. 14 – כִּי אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ אֵת כָּל אֵלֶּה – “For You have made all these things” (v. 22), though in a different sense. Significantly, Ps. 22 ends with almost exactly the same phrase כִּי עֲשֵׂה. In both cases, the normally transitive verb is used without a direct object.

The phrase לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ recurs shortly after Ps. 22 in Ps. 23:3, נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּב וְיַחֲנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ, and in 25:11, לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ יִהְיֶה וְסִלַּחְתָּ לַעֲוֹנֵי כִי רַב הוּא.<sup>29</sup> Although this exact phrase does not occur in Ps. 22, a similar idea is expressed by the words אֶסְפְּרָה שְׁמֶךָ and the contents of Section 2 in which the psalmist promises to praise God’s name publicly if He will only save him. Section 2 is arguably the psalmist’s most elaborate expression of gratitude to God for saving him in the entire book. It presents a detailed program through which he will cause God’s name to be

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<sup>27</sup> The words לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ used as an argument to gain divine intercession occur only in two places outside of Psalms, both are in Jeremiah 14 (vv. 7 and 21).

<sup>28</sup> Section 2 begins with the psalmist promising to proclaim God’s name, אֶסְפְּרָה שְׁמֶךָ. As noted above, the end of the section repeats the verb סַפַּר saying that the future generation will proclaim God’s fame and tell of His beneficence כִּי עֲשֵׂה – “for He has acted” (v. 31). The opening and closing of section 2 pick up on two key words from Jer. 14:7 – שְׁמֶךָ and עֲשֵׂה.

<sup>29</sup> לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ are the center words of Ps. 25 without superscription.



exalted and is thus an extended elaboration on the idea of עֲשֵׂה לְמַעַן שְׂמַח.

Ps. 22 also has many connections to other chapters of Jeremiah, most notably Jer. 20. In Ps. 22:13-17, the psalmist's enemies surround and torment him. These predators are about to maul and devour him. This is strikingly similar to Jeremiah's experience in Jer. 20:1-3 when a temple functionary (who was also a priest and a prophet), פִּשְׁחוּר בֶּן אִמֶּר, struck Jeremiah and had him placed in the מַהֲפָקֶת (usually translated as stocks) until the next morning. Jeremiah coins a name for him, calling him מְגוֹר מִסָּבִיב - "terror all around." Jeremiah uses the same phrase to describe his own plight later in the same chapter at v. 10, כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי דְבַת רַבִּים מְגוֹר מִסָּבִיב הִגִּידוּ וְנִגִּידוּ כֹל אֲנוּשׁ שְׁלוּמִי - "I heard the whispers of the crowd—Terror all around: 'Inform! Let us inform against him!' All my [supposed] friends are waiting for me to stumble: 'Perhaps he can be entrapped, And we can prevail against him And take our vengeance on him.'" Jeremiah's experience is that the people surrounding him are plotting to destroy him. This is very similar to the psalmist's statement that he is surrounded by lions, bulls, and dogs that wait to pounce on and devour him, סָבְבוּנִי סָבְבוּנִי כְּלָבִים עֲדַת מְרַעִים הַקִּיפוּנִי וְרִבִּים פְּרִים רַבִּים (v. 13) and סָבְבוּנִי כְּלָבִים עֲדַת מְרַעִים הַקִּיפוּנִי (v. 17). Indeed, the concentric arrangement of the animals that threaten the psalmist may be thought of as reminiscent of the yoke of the stocks surrounding Jeremiah's neck.<sup>30</sup>

Ps. 22:9 quotes either the mockers deriding the psalmist or the psalmist reciting words of encouragement to rely on God, גַּל אֶל יְהוָה וְיַפְלֹטְהוּ וְצִילָהוּ כִּי חָפֵץ בּוֹ - "Let him commit himself to the LORD; let Him rescue him, let Him save him,

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the "stocks" in Jeremiah, see Holloday, ad. loc.

for He is pleased with him.”<sup>31</sup> Jer. 20:12 uses a similar sounding word in a similar usage, כִּי אֶלֶיךָ גָּלִיתִי אֶת רִיבִי - “For I lay out my case before you.” Both verbs are attached to the preposition אל and in both cases God is the object of the preposition. Even though these words are from different roots (גל is from גלל and גליתִי is from גלה), they sound alike and both express full reliance on God.

Interestingly, both of these occurrences of גל and גליתִי are followed by a reference to the prophet’s birth. In Psalms 22, it is followed by reference to God as the one who had taken him out of the womb while in Jer. 20:14, the prophet then makes reference to his birth. Although the reference is extremely negative, the fact that these two ideas occur in succession is remarkable.

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<sup>31</sup> The commentators, both classical and modern fall into two camps regarding who is saying these words: a) the tormentors mocking the psalmist or b) the psalmist (Rashi, Radaq and Ibn Ezra).

Psalms 22	Jeremiah 20
<p>(ז) וְאֲנֹכִי תוֹלַעַת וְלֹא אִישׁ  <b>חָרַפְתָּ אָדָם</b> וּבְזוּי עִם :  (ח) כָּל רֹאֵי יִלְעָגוּ לִי וַפְטִירוּ  בְּשִׁפָּה יִנְיֵעוּ רֹאשׁ :</p>	<p>(ז) פְּתִיתֵנִי יְדֹד וְנֶאֱפַת חֲזַקְתֵּנִי  וְתוֹכַל הִיִּיתִי לְשֹׁחֵק כָּל הַיּוֹם  כִּלְהַ לֵּעָג לִי :  (ח) כִּי מִדֵּי אֲדַבֵּר אֲזַעַק חֶמֶס  וְשׂוֹד אֶקְרָא כִּי הִזָּה דְבַר יְדֹד לִי  <b>לְחַרְפָּה וּלְקָלָס כָּל הַיּוֹם :</b></p>
<p>(ט) <b>גַּל</b> אֶל יְהוָה יִפְלְטֵהוּ יַצִּילֵהוּ  כִּי חָפַץ בּוֹ :</p>	
<p>(י) כִּי אֲתָה גַחִי <b>מִבְּטָן</b> מִבְּטִיחִי  עַל שְׂדֵי <b>אֲמִי</b> :  (יא) עָלֶיךָ הִשְׁלַכְתִּי מִרְחֹם <b>מִבְּטָן</b>  <b>אֲמִי</b> אֵלֵי אֲתָה :</p>	
<p>(יב) אֵל תִּרְחַק מִמֶּנִּי כִּי צָרָה  קְרוּבָה כִּי אֵין עֹזָר :  (יג) <b>סִבְבוּנֵי פְרִים רַבִּים</b> אֲבִירִי  בְּשֵׁן פְתָרוּנִי :  (יד) פָּצוּ עָלַי פִּיהֶם אֲרִיֵה טֹרֶף  וְשֹׂאֵג :  (טו) כַּמִּים נִשְׁפַּכְתִּי וְהִתְפָּרְדּוּ כָּל  עֲצָמוֹתַי הִזָּה לְבִי כַּדּוֹנֵג נִמְסַ  בְּתוֹךְ מַעֵי :  (טז) יָבֵשׁ כַּחֲרֹשׁ כַּחֵי וּלְשׁוֹנֵי  מִדְּבַק מִלְקוֹחֵי וְלַעֲפָר מִנּוֹת  תִּשְׁפְּתֵנִי :</p>	<p>(ט) וְאִמַּרְתִּי לֹא אֲזַכְרֶנּוּ וְלֹא  אֲדַבֵּר עוֹד בְּשִׁמּוֹ וְהִזָּה בְּלִבִּי  כָּאֵשׁ בַּעֲרַת עֶצֶר בַּעֲצָמֹתַי  וְנִלְאִיתִי כְּכֹל וְלֹא אוֹכַל :  (י) כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי דְבַת <b>רַבִּים</b> מְגוֹר  <b>מִסְבִּיב</b> הִגִּידוּ וְנִגִּידְנוּ כֹל אֲנוֹשׁ  שְׁלוֹמִי שְׁמַרְי צַלְעֵי אוּלֵי יִפְתָּה  וְנִיבְלָה לוֹ וְנִקְחָה נִקְמַתְנוּ  מִמָּנוּ :  (יא) וַיִּדְוֹד אוֹתִי כַּגְבוּר עָרִיצַי עַל  כֹּן רֹדְפֵי יִכְשְׁלוּ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ בְּשׂוֹ  מֵאֵד כִּי לֹא הִשְׁפִּילוּ כְּלַמַּת  עוֹלָם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח :</p>
	<p>(יב) וַיִּדְוֹד צָבָאוֹת בַּחַן צַדִּיק  רָאָה כְּלִיּוֹת וְלֵב אֲרָאָה נִקְמַתְךָ  מֵהֶם כִּי אֵלֶיךָ <b>גִּלִּיתִי</b> אֶת רִיבִי :</p>
<p>(יז) כִּי סִבְבוּנֵי כְּלָבִים עֲדַת  <b>מְרַעִים</b> הַקִּיפוּנִי כְּאֲרִי יְדִי  וּרְגָלִי :</p>	<p>(יג) שִׁירוּ לִידְוֹד הַלְלוּ אֶת יְדֹד  כִּי הֲצִיל אֶת נַפְשׁ אֲבִיוֹן מִיַּד  <b>מְרַעִים</b> :</p>
	<p>(יד) אֲרוּר הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר <b>יִלְדַתִּי</b> בּוֹ  יּוֹם אֲשֶׁר <b>יִלְדַתֵּנִי אֲמִי</b> אֵל יְהוָה  בְּרוּךְ :</p>

Additionally, both contexts use the roots לעג (Jer. 20:7, Ps. 22:8), חרפ (Jer. 20:8, Ps. 22:7),<sup>32</sup> and the word מְרַעִים (Jer. 20:13 and Ps. 22:17). Taken together, all of the similarities between these two chapters suggest that the writer of Ps. 22 used Jer. 20 as a secondary backdrop. Furthermore, the psalmist's reference to Jeremiah's placement in the מְהַפְּכֵת in order to express his own feeling of being surrounded by enemies is a further indication that the author of this psalm may be Jeremiah himself. The enemies throughout Ps. 22 can now be better identified as the false prophets who constantly torment Jeremiah. Pashhur is himself a member of the false prophets, see Jer. 20:6. Jeremiah rails against the false prophets in Jer. 14:14-16, a context closely connected with Ps. 22, as seen above.<sup>33</sup>

The connection to Jer. 20 may shed light on a difficult phrase in Ps. 22:17c: “כַּאֲרֵי יָדַי וְרַגְלָי” – like a lion, my hands and my feet.” The missing verb is not necessarily a problem since, as in many cases of Biblical poetry, the verb from one colon may apply to the next one. But how does the verb of the previous colon, “הִקְיִפוּנִי – surrounded me” fit with the last colon? How can a lion surround anything and what is the connection to hands and feet?

Many psalms juxtapose threats of being surrounded by lions with being tied up. Ps. 10:9 compares the enemy with a net to a hidden lion ready to attack. Ps. 17:11-12 similarly says that the enemies “hem in our feet from every side” and compares them to a lion waiting for its prey. Ps. 57:5-7 once again describes threatening lions all around followed

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<sup>32</sup> Notice that Ps. 22 reverses the order of these words compared to Jer. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Another context concerning false prophets is Jer. 23:9-40. Interestingly, Jer. 23:27-28 uses the verb יִסְפְּרוּ to refer to telling false prophecies, the same verb used in Ps. 22:23 and 32 to refer to the praise the psalmist will give to God as indicated above.

by mention of the net set out to catch his feet.<sup>34</sup> These parallel texts help to fill in the missing verb in Ps. 22:17 by linking the imagery of the lion with having one's feet ensnared.

By identifying the psalmist with Jeremiah, and associating the psalm with a specific incident in his life, we can better explain this difficult verse. In Jer. 20:3, the prophet describes how Pashhur placed him in a *מִהֶפְכָּת*. Although the precise description of this instrument of torture or interment is not known, we can presume that Jeremiah was bound so that he could not move. (Perhaps it is called *מִהֶפְכָּת* because the individual is partially turned over.) We can thus identify Pashhur with the *אַרִי* and so *יָדַי וְרַגְלֵי* would refer to the binding of Jeremiah's hands and feet. The colon can thus be translated as, "the lion (a reference to Pashhur) [tied] my hands and feet" where tied is an extension of "surrounded me" from the previous colon.

We have attempted to demonstrate how understanding Psalm 22's superscription illuminates many of the otherwise unclear phrases in the psalm and provides a better sense of its meaning. Many scholars have failed to recognize the importance of superscriptions in psalms, claiming that they were added as part of a later editing process. But this psalm is not the only one whose superscription informs on its content; on the contrary, Psalm 22 is not the exception, but rather the rule. This process is demonstrated more extensively in our forthcoming commentaries on the *בְּנֵי קִרְחָא*, *אַסּוּף*, and *מִכְתָּם* psalms.

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<sup>34</sup> See also Ps. 35:7 (nets) and 17 (lions).

# Megillat Esther Points of Discussion<sup>1</sup>

## Perek Aleph

1. Ahashverosh made a party for 180 days while his Queen Vashti, had her own separate party. What could be the real purpose for such a party for Ahashverosh and for what purpose did Vashti make her party?
2. Ahashverosh made two parties - one for the officials of the kingdom and one for the common people in Shushan. What could possibly be the motivation behind making both parties?
3. In the proclamation sent throughout the empire to each household one of the decrees was that the language spoken in the home must be that of the husband. What is it about language that makes it such a crucial factor?

## Perek Bet

4. Did Esther want to be selected as Queen? Bring an indication from the text.
5. How is it possible that Mordekhai overheard the plot to kill the King without being noticed by the conspirators?
6. The text tells us that Mordekhai always sat at the king's gate. What does the "King's Gate" symbolize and what does that tell us about Mordekhai?

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<sup>1</sup> From the Sephardic High School Study Guide.

## **Perek Gimal**

7. If Haman was angry with Mordekhai only, what made him want to destroy all Jews?

8. Haman convinced Ahashverosh that the Jews should be destroyed. Describe his arguments. How does this relate to anti-Semitic tactics throughout history?

9. If Haman convinced Ahashverosh that the Jews were a threat to the Kingdom, why did he pay Ahashverosh for the privilege of killing the Jews?

10. Rather than pick an appropriate day, Haman drew lots. What does this indicate about Haman's beliefs?

11. The megillah indicates that, after the decree, the city of Shushan was "bewildered." Explain this reaction.

## **Perek Dalet**

12. When Mordekhai heard of the plan to destroy the Jews, he reacted in what became the classic Jewish way - he rent his garments, put on a sackcloth with ashes, and cried. How do these symbolize the emotions that he felt?

13. The Megillah states that there was a rule that if one called upon the king without being summoned, he could be put to death. What does this reflect about that society?

14. The Jews of Shushan fasted in their time of distress. What is the explanation of this practice?

## **Perek Heh**

15. Why didn't Esther tell Ahashverosh of the terrible plot against the Jews immediately? Why did she organize a series of parties?

16. What reason could Esther have had for inviting Haman to the party she made for the king?

17. What do we learn about Haman's personality and character from Chapter 5?

18. After his boastful account, Haman said that all the glory does not outweigh his unhappy feelings when he sees Mordechai. What does this indicate about Haman's personality?

## **Perek Vav**

19. When Ahashverosh couldn't sleep one night, he ordered the book of records be read to him. What was his purpose?

20. How was it that Mordechai was never previously rewarded for his act of saving the king's life?

21. Haman's response to Ahashverosh's question of how to honor someone was a description of kingly treatment. Since Haman thought this would be for himself, was he not obviously overreaching in expressing his ambition to the king?

22. What could have been the historical background to prompt Zeresh to say to Haman at this time that "If Mordechai is Yehudi, you will surely fail before him?"



## **Perek Zayin**

23. Esther tells Ahashverosh that the Jews were not even “sold as slaves” in Haman’s plot. What was her intention in mentioning this?

24. When Ahashverosh heard that Haman was the perpetrator of the plot against the Jews he immediately went outside. What does this indicate?

25. When Ahashverosh returned inside, he thought Haman was trying to seduce Esther. Does this reveal anything further about the personality of Ahashverosh and his relationship with Haman?

26. The King’s anger was abated when Haman was hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordekhai. What exactly was the king angry about?

## **Perek Het**

27. What is the nature of the reasons Esther used to convince Ahashverosh to help save the Jews?

28. It was necessary to make another royal decree to save the Jews as the first decree could not be canceled. Why was it that the king could not simply cancel a royal decree?

29. The new decree gave Jews the right to fight on Adar 13 “against their enemies.” Without the decree would they not have fought back?

## **Perek Tet**

30. Chapter 9, verses 2-5, indicates that the Jews defeated their enemies partly because of “psychological” factors. What role could these factors have played?

31. The megillah tells us that, after the defeat, the Jews did not take any of the spoils. What does this tell us?

32. As a reaction to the battle, the Jews spontaneously made parties and practiced “mishloah manot ish le're`ehu umatanot la'ebyonim.” How do these actions relate to the emotional feelings they must have felt.

33. Of all the events that occurred, the “lottery” aspect was just one detail. Yet the holiday was called Purim - lots. What was the reason for this?

34. The megillah states that the Purim holiday will never cease. The Talmudic sages expounded that even if all other holidays are annulled in the time of redemption, Purim will continue to be celebrated. Why was Purim singled out from all the holidays?

