

The King's Party and the Human Appetite for Control

Rabbi Noah Cheses¹

RIETS Class of 2011

As the curtain opens, Megillat Ester begins with a wildly lavish party. For half a year, Achashverosh entertains his ministers and advisors with endless food, plentiful drink and exquisite vessels (Ester 1:3-7). Without any reference to the Jews or their enemies, the first chapter of Megillat Ester appears to be superfluous to the narrative. If it serves as background for how Ester came to be chosen as queen, there is no need to provide such detail about the king's parties. One has to ask why the Megilla didn't begin at the beginning of the second or even third chapter, when the plot against the Jews begins to come together.

Perhaps this question compelled the rabbis to suggest that there were Jews at the royal party and that their participation in this decadent affair was sinful, making them almost deserving of the hatred that fueled the plot to destroy all the Jews (*Megillah* 12b).

Yoram Hazony in his book *The Dawn* suggests that the purpose of the party is to acquaint us with its host and his unquenchable desire to flaunt his power and demonstrate his control. The verses themselves point us in this direction:

He showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the splendor of his excellent majesty, for many days, one hundred and eighty days.

Ester 1:4

בהראתו את עשר כבוד מלכותו ואת-יקר
תפארת גדולתו ימים רבים שמונים ומאת
יום.
אסתר א:ד

Achashverosh provides a drinking carnival for his friends and then extends this merriment to the rest of his kingdom, peasants included, for seven days. The point of this ostentatious project was to create the impression, in the eyes of his subjects, that Achashverosh is in control of the whole civilized world, from Ethiopia to India (*The Dawn*, pg. 11).

One wonders why a party was necessary to win over the people. Wouldn't a strong and intelligent leadership over the citizens have been a superior strategy?

¹ Rabbi Cheses is an associate Rabbi at the Slifka Center for Jewish life at Yale where he is also co-director of the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC). He is currently pursuing a graduate degree in Religion at Yale.

The Midrash (*Ester Rabba* 2:2) explains that Achashverosh was an incompetent king, unable to exercise leadership with vision and courage. Indeed, from the beginning to the end of the Ester narrative, Achashverosh never makes a decision of substance on his own. He defers to others—from Memuchan to Haman and later Ester—and then throws the full weight of his authority behind their decisions. Unable to secure the respect of his people through political prowess, Achashverosh exploits his wealth and his capacity to throw a good party in order to generate the appearance of power and control.

It is worth considering more carefully the appetite that people have to assert control over their environments. Emerging from the very creation of man, it is clear that the capacity to rule over and control others is a primary aspect of human nature:

G-d said 'let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they will rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the skies, and over the animals, and over the entire earth and over the creatures that crawl upon the earth.

Bereishit 1:26

ויאמר אלקים נעשה אדם בצלמנו
כדמותנו וירדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים
ובבהמה ובכל-הארץ ובכל-הרמש
הרמש על-הארץ.
בראשית א:כו

Two verses later, G-d explicitly charges humanity with the mandate of exerting power over the earth in order to subdue it:

G-d blessed them and said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and conquer it and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the skies and all living things that crawl on the earth.

Bereishit 1:28

ויברך אתם, אלהים, ויאמר להם אלהים
פרו ורבו ומלאו את-הארץ, וכבשה; ורדו
בדגת הים, ובעוף השמים, ובכל-חיה,
הרמשת על-הארץ.
בראשית א:כח

From the creative narrative in Genesis 1, it is clear that humanity was endowed with a deep desire to regulate and impose order upon nature.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explores the positive dimension of this thirst for control in his characterization of “Adam the First” in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. The Rav explains how the desire for control can serve a crucial, life-sustaining and dignified purpose:

Adam the first is overwhelmed by one quest, namely, to harness and dominate the elemental natural forces and to put them at his disposal. This practical interest arouses his will to learn the secrets of nature...

Man of old who could not fight disease and succumbed in multitudes to yellow fever or any other plague with degrading helplessness could not lay claim to dignity. Only the man who builds hospitals, discovers therapeutic techniques and saves lives is blessed with dignity. Man of the 17th and 18th centuries who needed several days to travel from Boston to New York was less dignified than modern man who attempts to conquer space, boards a plane at the New York Airport at midnight and takes several hours later a leisurely walk along the streets of London.

Hence, the human appetite for bold, victory-minded behavior fosters creative work that brings about human progress.

When the appetite for control is not so directed, however, it can lead to darkness and even result in grave human suffering. Thomas Mann, a German novelist in the early 20th century, delves into the destructive dimension of this natural human desire for control. In his short story, *Mario and the Magician*, he writes about a magician named Cipolla who performs tricks in order to captivate his audience and to convince them to do humiliating and unethical activities. Cipolla's devious personality serves as a reminder of the manner in which the controlling impulse that we all have can easily slip into manipulative and harmful behavior.

With this in mind, let us return to the king's party. Toward the end of the party, Achashverosh's quench for power turns ugly as he summons his wife to appear unclothed (according to the rabbis) in front of the entire kingdom. This gesture is meant to represent the extent of the king's authority, that on a whim he has the capacity to subjugate and humiliate the queen. When the plan backfires, as Queen Vashti refuses to surrender her dignity, the king has to scramble to reconstitute his authority by demonstrating his potency through a decree to the entire kingdom.

The theme of human control in the first chapter of Ester sets the stage for the theological undercurrent of the remaining chapters. The king's superficial display of power serves as a contrast to the Divine force that ultimately guides the twisting and turning plot that follows. The implicit message of Megillat Ester is that human history is orchestrated by G-d, even if He is behind the scenes. Amazing stories, like that of the Jews' salvation from the plot of Haman, remind us that G-d is in control. He certainly has crucial human agents, like Mordechai and Ester, but He is the puppeteer pulling all the strings and wires behind the curtain.