

Those Who Bowed Down Were No Better Off

The text of the Megillah shares important details with us about the specific historical and geographical settings of the Purim story. In the opening lines of the Megillah we are introduced to Achashverosh, the governing ruler over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia, his capital city — Shushan — and the goings on during the first months of Achashverosh's newly established kingdom. Yet as we read on, it becomes clear that some of the thematic overtones of the Purim story were not meant to be considered as unique to the Biblical events of Mordechai and Esther, but rather as being part of a tale that has unfolded time and again during many different moments and milieus throughout Jewish history.

In particular, Megillat Esther is the story of a geographically spread out minority Jewish community dwelling among an overwhelmingly non-Jewish populace. The Jew of history would recognize the unceasing challenge of having to simultaneously maintain a Jewish identity and commitment to Jewish tradition, while at the same time attempting to be accepted by the non-Jewish society around him. This struggle was best illustrated during the Jewish people's experience in Egypt in the years leading up to their enslavement at the hands of Pharaoh. "The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and increased and



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became very very strong, and the land became filled with them."¹ The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his *HaAmek Davar*, placed the final words of the verse, *and the land became filled with them*, in their broader historical context:



לא ארץ גושן לבד שהיתה מיוחדת לישראל, אלא אפילו כל ארץ מצרים מלאה את ישראל. והיה כל מקום פנוי שמצאו ישראל לקנות ולדור – נתיישבו שמה... ובא הכתוב להקדים בזה סיבת שנאת מצרים, משום שבקשו לצאת ממצרים יעקב אבינו שיישבו דווקא בארץ גושן כדי שיהיו בדם ונבדל ממצרים, אבל הם לא רצו כן... אשר היא הסיבה שבכל דור עומדים עלינו לכלותנו בשביל שאין אנו רוצים להיות נבדלים מן האומות.

Not only the land of Goshen that was set aside for Israel, but even the entire land of Egypt was filled with Israelites. And it was in every open place that an Israelite found to purchase and dwell in — they lived there... and this verse is coming to introduce the reason for the Egyptian's hatred, because they attempted to divest from Ya'akov Avinu's desire for them to dwell specifically in the land of Goshen to enable them to be isolated and separate, but they [the Israelites] didn't want to do this... this is the reason that in every generation they [our enemies] rise up against us to destroy us, because we do not want to be separate from the nations.

This theme continued in the early stages of the Purim narrative. Achashverosh threw a kickoff party for his new kingdom and he invited all of the citizens of Shushan. Included in the party were members of the Jewish community. Our rabbis say that the Jewish community's willing and active participation in this party is partially what led to the Divinely orchestrated plan to eradicate the Jews.² Herein lies another moment where a Jewish community's decision to attempt to blend into the surrounding culture produced a negative outcome.

The pinnacle of this theme's evolution unfolded during the events following Achashverosh's appointment of Haman as his prime minister. The Megillah records that Achashverosh had commanded his subjects to kneel and bow before Haman, and so they did, with the exception of Mordechai, "for he had told them that he was a Jew."³ By bowing to Haman, the party-going Jews of Shushan had now made another concession in order to blend in. Only Mordechai defied Haman, because for him, the actions of that moment would be a blueprint for the role of the Jewish people for generations to come.

The actions of Mordechai incensed Haman, but for Haman, "it seemed contemptible to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had told him Mordechai's nationality, and Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout Achashverosh's entire kingdom, Mordechai's people."⁴ Haman's logic is difficult to comprehend. Mordechai was the only individual who refused to bow, yet Haman was determined to eliminate the entire Jewish people, despite the fact that they had obeyed and bowed to him! In his presentation to Achashverosh, Haman used Mordechai's actions as a pretext for obtaining permission to destroy the Jewish people: "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from [those of] every

people, and they do not keep the king's laws; it is [therefore] of no use for the king to let them be."⁵

Mordechai understood that it made no difference whether or not one bowed down to Haman; it was the very existence of the Jewish people and what they stood for which Haman could not handle. Haman's hatred and desire to eliminate the Jewish people was not a result of their behavior, because many Jews bowed to Haman. Haman's hatred was directed at *am Mordechai* — Mordechai's people. Mordechai was the embodiment of the world's moral consciousness, a living, breathing symbol of a God-given value system that entered the world many centuries before with the giving of the Torah. It was this which Haman saw at the core of all Jews, regardless of whether they bowed or not.⁶

Throughout subsequent generations, Jews attempted to "fit in" to the various cultures surrounding them by taking on non-Jewish names, casting aside Torah observance, relocating away from the Jewish enclaves and integrating among the non-Jewish populace:

We have seen in our own times how true this is. The most sophisticated, assimilated German Jew, who was more German than the Germans, who had Goethe and Schiller flowing from his lips, who was married a blond blue-eyed Aryan woman, who knew every symphony of Mozart and Wagner, who was an avid student of Nietzsche and

*Schopenhauer—this Jew was sent to the Treblinka and Dachau gas chambers with the same glee as the OustJude—the ultra-religious Chassidic Jew of the East, immersed day and night in the study of our sacred texts and complete Jewish observance.*⁷

As the Netziv expressed, the more the Jewish people have tried to fit in, the more they have stuck out. Throughout history, Jews around the globe have deluded themselves into thinking that if they managed to blend in, the haters and enemies would treat them as equals. In era after era, the opposite effect occurred, and the hatred only grew. The Purim story reminds us that we are all part of *am Mordechai*, the people who have no reason, and for that matter, no possibility to hide, but rather the people who are called on to embrace and be proud of our unique value system given to us by God at Sinai, and through this be a blessing and source of inspiration for all of humanity!

Endnotes

- 1 Shemot 1:7.
- 2 See Talmud Bavli, *Megilla* 12a.
- 3 Esther 3:4.
- 4 Ibid 3:6.
- 5 Ibid 3:8.
- 6 Based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe printed in *Sichos Kodesh* 5729 vol. 1 pp. 401-414.
- 7 Rabbi YY Jacobson, "Why the Glee in Murdering a Jewish Child?" available at: <https://www.theyeshiva.net/jewish/928>.



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