

Shoshanat Ya'akov: Seeing Mordechai through Rose-Colored Glasses

Shoshanat Ya'akov / Tzahala
Ve'Samecha / Bir'otam Yachad /
Techelet Mordechai.

The rose of Jacob / was cheerful
and glad / when they jointly saw /
Mordechai robed in royal blue.

A Jewish liturgical poet (*paytan*), of unknown identity and time, wrote this line toward the end of his *piyyut*, *Asher Heini*.¹ Despite its shroud of anonymity, *Asher Heini* is recited in Ashkenazic communities on Purim night immediately following the after-blessing on the Megillah reading.² *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is recited again after the daytime reading.³ What critically important message does *Shoshanat Ya'akov* convey that demands such prominent placement in the Megillah service?

Piyyutim reinforce and elucidate lessons from Tanach and other authentic Jewish sources. The best *piyyutim* succinctly recast these foundational ideas by borrowing phrases, language and motifs from our sacred writings and adeptly layering meaning upon meaning — even within one phrase or word. *Piyyutim* are popular because they condense ideas into easily remembered phrases and are timeless because they challenge the reader to pore over our primary texts and discover their messages. These qualities may help explain why our sages chose to incorporate selected *piyyutim* into formal Jewish prayer.



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The Source Verse

Shoshanat Ya'akov restates the triumphant verse in Megillat Esther — its source verse — in which Mordechai, having been promoted to the lofty position of viceroy in King Achashverosh's court, leaves the king's presence robed in royal garments to the exultation of the citizens of Shushan (Esther 8:15):



וּמִרְדֵּכָי יֵצֵא מִלְפָּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, בְּלְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת
תְּכֵלֶת וְחוּר, וְעֵטְרַת זָהָב גְּדוּלָה, וְתִכְרִיף בַּרְזֵל
וְאַרְגָּמָן; וְהָעִיר שׁוּשָׁן, צָהָלָה וְשִׂמְחָה.

And Mordechai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan shouted and was glad.

Shoshanat Ya'akov was happy in seeing Techelet Mordechai

Shoshanat Ya'akov and *Techelet Mordechai* are the most interpretively rich phrases of the *piyyut*-line. What do they mean?

Shoshanat Ya'akov — The Rose of Jacob

Shoshanat Yaakov is a moniker for the Jewish People on two levels: poetic and figurative.⁴ On a poetic level, the word *shoshana* is a substitute for the similar-sounding Shushan. *Shoshanat Ya'akov* denotes the Jewish citizens of Shushan.⁵

Shoshanat Ya'akov carries an additional, allegorical, connotation. *Shoshana*, rose, is a word rarely used in Tanach, but used repeatedly in King Solomon's Shir HaShirim.⁶ Ostensibly a song to a lover, Shir HaShirim is interpreted by our sages as a metaphor about the deepest concepts of Jewish philosophy. King Solomon writes (Shir HaShirim 2:2), "Like the *shoshana* among the thorns; so is my beloved among the daughters." Rashi (based on Shir HaShirim Rabba 2:5) interprets this verse as a

comparison of the Jewish People to a rose: as a rose retains its vibrancy and beauty despite being surrounded by thorns, so do the Jewish People remain faithful to Hashem even when subjected to the spiritual trials of exile. *Shoshanat Ya'akov* metaphorically refers to the Jewish People who are faithful to Hashem.

Thus, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* describes the Jews of Shushan and those Jews who were faithful to Hashem. The *piyyut* informs us that these Jews were elated when they saw Mordechai wearing royal blue clothing.

On the surface, however, this statement sounds shallow, insignificant and not worthy of presentation in a *piyyut*. What is the significance of *Techelet Mordechai*?

Techelet Mordechai — Mordechai's Royal Blue

Techelet Mordechai I: Mordechai's Royal Clothing

Techelet is the first piece of clothing described in the source verse, and *Techelet Mordechai* can be understood as a reference to the multiple royal items of clothing that Mordechai wore when he left the presence of King Achashverosh.⁷ Hence, *Techelet Mordechai* connotes Mordechai's political promotion.

Significantly, Mordechai did not venture into the public arena immediately upon being named viceroy in the wake of Haman's execution. Instead, he remained in the king's presence until Esther successfully petitioned King Achashverosh to issue a new edict authorizing the Jews of each city to destroy those allied with Haman's plot. Only then did Mordechai leave

the king and venture into the public square wearing royal clothing.⁸

Malbim suggests that Mordechai's delay is an indication of his righteousness showing that he was solely focused on the welfare of the Jewish People. Although his new position assured his own safety, Mordechai ventured out in his royal garb only when he was sure that salvation had also arrived for his downtrodden Jewish brethren. The Brisker Rov suggests that the Jewish People understood how focused Mordechai was on the public good and the seriousness with which he took his own leadership responsibility.⁹ Therefore, when the people saw Mordechai wearing royal garb, they were overjoyed. They understood that his presence in public dressed in royal garments was not an act of self-aggrandizement — it was an indication of their miraculous salvation.

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Techelet Mordechai II: End, in Contrast to the Beginning

Related to the Hebrew word *tachlit*, *techelet* has an alternate connotation — end.¹⁰ From this perspective, *Techelet Mordechai* refers to the

conclusion of the Mordechai saga — the end of his story in contrast to the beginning.¹¹

When King Achashverosh promoted Mordechai and issued a decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves against all enemies, the trajectory of the Jewish People's fate instantly changed from destruction to exaltation. When the Jewish People saw that Mordechai had experienced a total reversal of fortune, they were happy because this turn of events also communicated their own miraculous salvation.

Techelet Mordechai III: Promoting Torah in the Public Square

In addition to its basic meaning, royal blue, *techelet* carries a halachic meaning. *Techelet* refers to the biblically-obligated blue string that a Jew must attach, along with white strings, to each corner of his four-cornered garment.¹² Therefore, *Techelet Mordechai* also refers to the halachic garb that Mordechai wore into the public space.¹³ Mordechai, with the consent of the king, promoted Torah values and dramatically displayed the importance of commitment to Torah observance. The Jewish People were happy because the sea-change in society's stance toward the Torah indicated their own miraculous salvation.

To summarize, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* gives context to the Purim story — it shares the perspective of those faithful Jews who reacted with exultation in seeing Mordechai wearing royal blue clothing. These Jews were overjoyed because they: understood that Mordechai, through wearing royal garb, was declaring their salvation; interpreted Mordechai's meteoric political rise as evidence of their

salvation; and, viewed Mordechai's freedom to publicly promote Torah values, in a society that had been hostile to these values, as an indication of their salvation. Thus, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* helps the Megillah-reader better appreciate (and emulate) the exultation of the Jewish People of Shushan.

Societies need Righteous Leaders

Shoshanat Ya'akov also conveys a universal message about a society's need for righteous leaders. The Talmud (*Megillah* 11a) teaches that the fourth-century *amora*, Rava, connects the source verse for *Shoshanat Ya'akov* (Esther 8:15) with a verse from Proverbs (29:2): "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people sigh." Rava teaches that "the righteous" refers to Mordechai and Esther and "a wicked man" refers to Haman. Rava's lesson anticipates an outcome from having righteous leaders — exultation, like that which the Jewish People experienced under the leadership of

Mordechai and Esther.

How does a society benefit from righteous leaders? Universalizing the interpretations above, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* outlines three such benefits.¹⁴ First, a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, acts selflessly and the public benefits from his or her total commitment to the common welfare. Second, the public's fate is tied up with that of its leader — the beneficial influence that Divine Providence has on a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, flows to those under his or her authority. Third, a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, will promote and teach positive values.

In conclusion, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is prominently placed because it enhances the Megillah reading experience. In eight significant words, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* helps us strengthen our identification with the jubilant Jews of Shushan by disclosing their mindset at that pivotal moment in the Purim story. Furthermore, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is a clarion call to the members of all types of social structures — familial, communal

and national — exhorting us to seek righteous leaders. The selflessness of these leaders and their promotion of eternal Jewish values, through word and deed, will help the Jewish People receive Hashem's blessings and achieve ultimate salvation.

Endnotes

- 1 See A. Frankel, "Asher Heini: toledoteha shel beracha mefutetet" accessible at piyut.org.il.
- 2 *Hagahot Maimoniyot, Hilchot Megilla v'Chanukah* ch. 1.
- 3 *Machzor Kol Bo* (1699) v3 p373.
- 4 *Siddur Avodat Yisrael* (1901) p 448.
- 5 See Purim morning *Krovetz* for a similar play on words.
- 6 See also Psalms 69:1.
- 7 *Machzor Kol Bo* *ibid*.
- 8 Esther 8:1-14.
- 9 See *Reshimot Talmidim miMaran HaGriz HaLevi Soloveitchik* p. 209.
- 10 *Machzor Kol Bo* *ibid*.
- 11 *Midrash Tanchuma, Miketz* 3.
- 12 Bamidbar 15:38.
- 13 *Be'ur HaGR'A* on Esther 8:15.
- 14 See *Ralbag and Metzudat David* on Proverbs 29:2.

