

Collected Insights from Members of the Masters of Arts in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation Program at Stern College for Women

Megillat Esther: Challenging Fate¹

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SCW, MA 2014

Megillat Esther is all about fateful events: being in the right place at the right time (or in the wrong place at the wrong time), or being privy to information that might just save the king's life and cause him to be indebted to you, the savior, (or incurring the wrath of a person both powerful and vindictive). At the end of the third chapter of the *megilla* we read of one such fateful event, one which could mean destruction for all of the Jews under Ahashverosh's reign. Haman, with the king's approval, sends out a letter to enact a murderous decree against the Jews:

... Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahashverosh, the people of Mordechai. But it seemed contemptible in his eyes to lay hands on Mordechai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordechai; In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahashverosh, they cast pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. And Haman said unto king Ahashverosh: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither do they keep the king's laws; therefore it would not profit the king to suffer them." And

וּבְקִשׁ הָמָן, לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר
בְּכָל-מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--עִם מֶרְדֵּכָי. בַּחֹדֶשׁ
הָרִאשׁוֹן, הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ נִסָּן, בַּשָּׁנָה שְׁתִּימִים
עָשָׂרָה, לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: הִפִּיל פּוּר הוּא
הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הָמָן, מִיּוֹם לַיּוֹם וּמִחֹדֶשׁ לְחֹדֶשׁ
שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר--הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר. וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן,
לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--יִשְׁנֹו עִם-אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֵד
בֵּין הָעַמִּים, בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוֹתָהּ; וְדַתֵּיהֶם
שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל-עַם, וְאֶת-דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים,
וְלְמֶלֶךְ אֵין-שׁוּנָה, לְהַנִּיחָם. אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב,
יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם; וְעָשְׂרַת אֲלָפִים כֶּסֶף-כֶּסֶף,
אֲשֶׁקוּל עַל-יְדֵי עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה, לְהַבִּיא, אֶל-
גַּנְזֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ. וַיִּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ, מֵעַל יָדוֹ;
וַיִּתְּנָהּ, לְהָמָן בֶּן-הַמְּדִתָּה הָאֲגָגִי--צָרָר

¹ Based on a lecture from Dr. Shmuel Wygoda at Migdal Oz for Purim 2009/5769.

the king said to Haman: “The silver is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seem good to you.”

Esther 3:6-11 (JPS Translation)

הַיְהוּדִים. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהֶמָּן, הַכֶּסֶף נָתוּן לָךְ;
וְהָעָם, לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ.

אסתר ג:ו-יא

In the following chapter, we find that Mordechai already knows the contents of the fateful letter written at the end of the third chapter. Mordechai therefore goes to Queen Esther to tell her to appeal to the king to annul the decree, but she refuses because she knows that King Ahashverosh had not recently called her into his chamber. Esther protests: " כל-עבדי המלך ועם-מדינות המלך " (ibid. 4:11)—“Everyone knows that he who comes into the king’s chamber without being called upon, his fate (*'dato'*) is to be killed!”

The theme of determinism (*dat*, i.e. law, or justice) appears throughout the book of Esther. Some examples among the many in the *megilla* are: when Queen Vashti refuses to appear before King Ahashverosh, the king wonders how to respond—“כדת מה לעשות במלכה ושתי” (1:15); when the king throws a grand party for the city of Shushan, the drinking is described as “והשתיה כדת” (1:8); in the king’s search for a new queen, each woman is brought to Ahashverosh after “מקץ היות לה כדת הנשים” (2:12); when the decree against the Jews is written, the *pasuk* says “בשושן הבירה, בשושן נתנה, והדת נתנה, the decree was given out in Shushan the capital” (3:15), and that exact phrase is repeated when the decree goes out for the Jews to avenge themselves against their attackers.

Dat is deterministic in the sense of “this is how it is supposed to happen, and so it will be.” In a life according to *dat*, one conforms to reality for the sake of reality, in a mode of passive acceptance. One might not be pleased or find particular value in the way things are at present, and yet one will accept reality as it is without a struggle. When Haman returns home “mourning and having his head covered” (6:12) his wife Zeresh says to him, “אם מזרע היהודים מרדכי אשר, If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you shall not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him” (6:13). Why? Because Zeresh accepts the principles of determinism (*dat*)—that is the way it is set to be, and you, Haman, cannot change your fate nor that of the Jews.

Esther rebels against the staunch determinism displayed by Haman and his wife Zeresh. Esther goes to Ahashverosh “אשר לא-כדת, not according to the law” (4:16). In doing this, Esther displays a non-deterministic worldview, and with the declaration “אבדתי, וכאשר אבדתי, if I perish, I perish,” (ibid.) she in effect says: “I am ready for whatever comes, as I have seized my fate in my hands.” We see that Mordechai, too, is active in the face of an undesirable reality. For example, at the end of the *megilla* we read of how Mordechai co-opts the people of Persia’s paganistic mode of revelry with excessive food and drink among the wealthy, transforming their way of celebrating into one that includes a ritual act of *matanot la-eyyonim*, giving to those who do not have. The poor do not have, but the act of charity is a statement that an individual has the power to change that reality by giving to them, and thus changing their fate.

Megillat Esther is a story of fate, but it is also a story of the meeting of two opposite worldviews with their opposite reactions to fate, represented in the characters of Haman and Zeresh on the one hand, and Esther and Mordechai on the other. Haman and Zeresh live by *goral*, fate, assuming that once laws have been put in motion, no one can or should escape their consequences. Esther and Mordechai act against the accepted *dat*, taking their fate and the fate of their people into their own hands with the belief that a dire reality need not be accepted out of hand.

Our sages (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Megilla* 1:5) teach that in the future, when all the books of the Bible will become invalid, Megillat Esther will remain valid. Why is this so? Megillat Esther will remain even after all other books are lost because its story is one that espouses non-determinism, and not accepting reality for reality's sake. As such, in the past and into the future, Megillat Esther will not be relegated to the rules of fate.

Ester 1 and Ester 2

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Many are familiar with the image of Adam I and Adam II as developed by Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik in his work *The Lonely Man of Faith*, in which he contrasts the portrayal of Adam in the first chapter of Genesis as the “majestic man, of dominion and success,” who rules over the land, with the Adam of the second chapter, “the lonely man of faith,” who submits himself to the will of Hashem. Yet far fewer are aware of the *sicha* of Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein, in which he puts forth a similar dichotomy for the character of Ester in the *megillah*.¹ It is this contrast between Ester I at the start of the *megillah*, a passive and naïve young woman, with Ester II, the active savior of the Jewish people that emerges by the end of the *megillah* that I would like to explore here.

Ester arrives on the scene of the *megillah* as an entirely passive personality. While living under Mordechai's roof, she is dependent on him for her well-being and is treated as his child. Once taken to the palace, Ester attempts to avert the fate of an unwanted marriage by remaining unnoticed; while the other women hurry to beautify themselves, she meekly awaits her turn for the king. She submits herself to the orders of Mordechai (“ואת-מאמר מרדכי אסתר עשה”, Esther did the commandment of Mordechai”; Ester 2:20) and of the royal officers (Hegai, *srus hamelech*) and refrains from making any of her own demands. Thus, Ester I is, as her name connotes, hidden, her birthplace and nationality a secret even from those closest to her.

Yet by the close of the *megillah*, Ester transforms into an active and powerful figure. Ester's remarkable transition occurs when Mordechai informs her of the impending decree of death upon the Jewish people. Urged by Mordechai to take action, her eyes are opened to the suffering of her people and of her unique powers as queen. Suddenly, it is Ester who is giving directions,

¹ Rabbi Dr. Aaron Lichtenstein, “*Ki Im Hacharesh Tacharishi Ba'Eit HaZot- HaDa'agah LeK'lal Yisrael*,” (5766) available at: www.etzion.org.il/vbm/update_views.php?num=3160&file=/vbm/archive/11-lioro/20light.rtf

instructing the Jewish people to gather and fast. She beseeches Hashem in prayer, seeking divine salvation from the impending doom of her people (*Ester Rabbah* 8:7). So too, she strategizes to have the mortal king, her husband Achashverosh, recognize Haman's evil plan and to overturn his decree. By the end of the *megillah*, it comes as no surprise that it is she who requests of the sages "*kitvuni l'dorot*," to be inscribed for generations, and that the story is recorded by her hand (*Megillah* 7a). Thus, Ester II sees the suffering of her people and, recognizing her ability to respond to their pain, chooses to become their unlikely savior.

The transformation from Ester I to Ester II was spurred by a sense of responsibility for her brethren's misfortune and recognition of the great responsibility that comes with power. Just as Ester understood the need to take an active role in the deliverance of her people, so too we must recognize when times call for us to respond to suffering. By constantly asking ourselves whether we have adequately responded to the cries of those around us, we too, with Hashem's help, will be able to answer the divine call to serve as active participants in the course of history.

Remaining Strong in the Face of Failure

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It is no secret that Judaism is a demanding religion, so much so that at times it asks something of us that seems impossible. It is at these moments that we require the strength to remember our overwhelming commitment to always keep it even if sometimes we may fail. In the fourth chapter of *Megillat Esther*, Mordechai asks Esther to appear before the king even though the king has not called her. We are told that in doing so, Esther would be risking her life. Ultimately, Mordechai is able to convince Esther, despite her better judgment. She asks Mordechai to gather the Jews and tell them to fast for three days. She says that she and her maidens will do the same. Then she tells him "ובכן אבוא אל-המלך, אשר לא-כדת, וכאשר אבדתי, אבדתי," and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." (*Esther* 4:16) Using a very literal understanding of the passage, Esther is telling Mordechai that she will do as he asks and approach the king illegally. She is telling him that she is willing to suffer the consequences of breaking the law.

God's name is not mentioned in the *megillah*, and whenever it says "king" (without Achashverosh's name) it could also be referring to God (*Ester Rabbah* 3:10). Therefore, using a less literal reading of the verse, when it says "so will I go in unto the king," it is referring to God. The Gemara, *Megillah* 15a, notes that when Esther said "not according to the law," it was a reference to the fact that she felt she was violating Torah law by willingly approaching Achashverosh. Yet this did not deter her from approaching God. She felt she could still have a relationship with God despite her perceived wrongdoing. This verse is not endorsing violating the law in difficult times. However, it is teaching us that even in trying times, when we have moments of failure, we should not be deterred from approaching God. After these moments, we should know not to despair and continue to uphold our commitment to God and His laws.