

The Intrigue Behind Mordechai's Approval Rating

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At a rabbinic conference a number of years ago, the rabbis present were asked to identify their greatest frustration in their role as rabbi. One younger rabbi in the group, who had only been in the rabbinate for a few years, spoke about his personal struggle in feeling that, there are some congregants “who he knew” were not fond of him. Some of the participants suggested that the rabbi go out of his way to engage those particular congregants and make them into his fans. The leader of the group discussion then pointed out that his frustration was common to those who are in leadership positions, and that the rabbi needed to get accustomed to it. When one is a rabbi, or serving in any leadership position, there will always be those who are critical of the leader. Noting the last verse of Megillat Esther, that even Mordechai Hatzadik was not loved by all, the rabbi was asked “and you think you should be?”

The verse states:

For Mordechai the Jew was a minister for King Achashveirosh, a great man among the Jews, and pleasant to most of his brothers. A man who sought good for his nation and advocated peace for all of his people.

Esther 10:3

כִּי מֵרַדְּכַי הַיְהוּדִי מְשֻׁנָּה לְמַלְכָּה
אֶחָשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיְהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרַב
אָחִיו דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדִבֵּר שְׁלוֹם
לְכָל־יְרֵעָיו.
אֶסְתֵּר י:ג

The words “*v’ratzuy lero v’echav*, pleasant to most of his brothers” are deeply troubling. After all that Mordechai did in saving the Jews who lived in the kingdom of Achashveirosh, he remained with only a majority approval rating. There were Jews who were not fond of Mordechai! How could that be? Not too long before, they and their families were facing death at the hands of Haman and his counterparts. It was Mordechai’s courageous leadership in advising Esther that led to the survival of these people. What part of the story are we missing? What was their dislike of Mordechai at this point in the Purim story all about?

The Alshich offers two approaches to the final pasuk of the Megilla that will hopefully give us insight into this perplexing difficulty. The first approach contrasts Mordechai with another

member of the Sanhedrin, Menachem who is discussed in *Masechet Chagigah* (16b). There was a respected rabbinic leader named Menachem at the time of Hillel and Shamai. Menachem was to become the Av Beit Din of the Sanhedrin together with Hillel when he suddenly left the Sanhedrin and Shamai filled his place. The Gemara wonders where he went and offers two opinions. Abaye's opinion is that Menachem went off the path of Torah. Rava, however, suggests that Menachem left the Sanhedrin to serve the king. The Gemara suggests a third opinion, similar to that of Rava, that Menachem went to serve the king and took with him eighty students that wore the special royal clothing. The Alshich points out that in most cases when a person is appointed to such a prestigious position as minister to the king, they tend to forget the other relationships that were important to them, even their own people. Positions of power often test the ethics and morals of the most valued and respected members of society. Mordechai was unique. He not only remained a member of the Sanhedrin, he didn't act differently towards his people once he assumed his new position. Because he remained a *dayan* (judge), he didn't have a 100% approval rating. Naturally, when one loses a case in court there is no love lost for the individual toward the judge who ruled against them. It is for this reason that the Megilla records that some were unhappy with Mordechai.

This approach can be seen clearly by looking at the verse. The verse opens with the word *ki*. The Gemara, *Gittin* 90a, teaches that the word *ki* has a number of different meanings. The word *ki* can be translated as despite (see Ibn Ezra to Bereishit 48:14 explaining כִּי מִנְשֵׁה הַבְּכוֹר). In this context, we would read the verse, "Despite [the fact that] Mordechai the Jew was a minister for King Achashveirosh, [he was] a great man among the Jews." He did not turn his back or leave the Sanhedrin.

The Alshich uses his approach to explain the rest of the verse. Mordechai was "*ratzuy l'rov echav*." He found favor with most of his brothers, but not all of them, since he continued to serve as a judge and some of those who he ruled against felt a sense of ill will towards the judge of their case. The Alshich notes that if a judge is loved by all people, it is a sign that he is avoiding making difficult, but just decisions. He continued to serve as a *dayan* despite his royal position. He was seen as a great representative among the righteous who appreciated what he was doing (*doresh tov l'amo*, he sought good for his nation) and he sought peace for the entire Jewish people (*dover shalom l'chol zaro*, he advocated peace for all of his people), even those who were critical of him.

The Alshich's second approach to this verse is based on the concept that prominence and stature is dangerous for righteous people. The concern is that the righteous would become haughty and act favorably toward their own family members while distancing themselves from the good people that they were previously engaged with. In this regard, Mordechai was a true *tzaddik*, uncorrupted by his prominence and stature. He saw his role as minister to the king as being for the people, not about him as an individual, or his personal greatness. To Mordechai, there was no inherent value to being a minister for a non-Jewish king. He was a "*gadol layehudim*"—great among the Jews because they recognized this fact about him. He saw his role as simply representing the Jewish people but not enjoying his role for personal gain. Those Jews who were connected to Jewish values were able to appreciate Mordechai's approach to his role as minister. Why then were there those who were not happy with Mordechai? The Alshich suggests that

there were some members of his tribe, the tribe of Binyamin that were disappointed with him because they wanted him to show them preferential treatment. Instead he was “*doresh tov l’amo*,” he sought the good of all of his people and sought peace “*l’chol zaro*,” for all Jews, even those from his tribe who disliked him.

This edition of Torah To-Go is dedicated to our dear friend and my beloved congregant Herbert Smilowitz z”l, upon the occasion of his first yahrtzeit. Herb was a true *mensch* in every sense. What impressed me most about Herb was not only that he was always one of the first in shul on Shabbos mornings, but his character and *menschlichkeit* were spectacular. Like Mordechai Hatzaddik, Herb had great success in life but was one of the most humble people that I knew. This is not only my observation of Herb, it has been shared by many if not all who knew him. His love of Yeshiva and RIETS, as well as his respect for the rabbinate was truly exemplary. He was a communal leader par excellence and a great advocate for Torah and Medinat Yisrael. May his *neshama* have an *aliyah* and may he serve as a *maylitz yosher* (advocate on high) for his wife Marilyn and his family.