

Esther and Bas Paraoh: Reaching for What is Out of Reach

At perhaps the most tension-filled moment in the Megilla, Chazal make a curious and enigmatic comment.

Esther is about to enter, brazen and unsolicited — “*asher lo chadas* (not according to the law)” — into her husband’s throne room to appeal to the king about the impending plight of her people. After three days of fasting, Esther dons her royal garments and slowly begins her approach, and Achashverosh’s reaction was all she could have hoped for:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה, עֹמֶדֶת
בְּחֵצֵר—נִשְׂאָה חֹן, בְּעֵינָיו; וַיּוֹשֵׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ
לְאַסְתֵּר, אֶת-שֵׁרְבִיט הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ, וַתִּקְרַב
אֶסְתֵּר, וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשֵּׁרְבִיט.

And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his eyes; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. And Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter.

Esther 5:2

Here, Chazal say what, to many, has become a well-known part of the story. As Achashverosh holds out his scepter, it miraculously stretches (Megillah 15b; Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1056) — ostensibly to cover the distance between its master and Esther. As wondrous as it is, one question begs to be asked: *Why* do Chazal say this? The verse itself seems to give no indication at all of any supernatural occurrence. And, when considering the overall narrative of the



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story, this miracle seems remarkably insignificant. Does the stretching of the scepter really add all that much to the story? The *true* miracle is that Achashverosh allowed Esther’s intrusion; the true marvel is that Achashverosh did not sentence her to death, but responded graciously: “What troubles you, Queen Esther, and what is your request? [Ask] up to half the kingdom, and it will be granted” (5:3)! Does it matter whether the length of Achashverosh’s scepter was two cubits or twelve? What do Chazal intend with this puzzling comment?

The key to understanding this midrash may be not to view it in isolation but to pull the zoom lens back and consider its theme more globally. Indeed, this is not the first time Chazal tell us of a moment in which one extends one’s hand and it — or, in our case, that which the hand is holding — miraculously stretches. About a millennium before the Purim story,¹ when Bas Paraoh sees a basket floating in the Nile, “*vatishlach es-amasah vatikachehah*” — Bas Paraoh sends her *amasa* to fetch it. The simple translation of *amasa* is “her maidservant,” but,

noting the relationship between *amasa* and *amah/amos* (cubit/cubits), Chazal famously offer an alternative explanation: Bas Paraoh extended her hand and it miraculously stretched the length of many cubits (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:23, *Sotah* 12b).²

While the circumstances of the two stories are certainly different, the thematic connection between the rabbinic interpretations are unmistakable. In fact, Chazal themselves already make this very connection:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה אֹמֶר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: שְׁלֹשָׁה מַלְאָכֵי הַשֵּׁרֶת נִזְדַּמְּנוּ לָהּ בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה... וְאַחַד שִׁמְתַּח אֶת הַשֵּׁרְבִיט... וְכֵן אֶתָּה מוֹצֵא בְּאַמְתָּהּ שֶׁל בַּת פְּרַעֲהָ.

“And it was so when the king saw Queen Esther.” R. Yochanan said: Three ministering angels were appointed to help her at that moment... And one [of the angels was appointed] to stretch the golden scepter... So too you find with the arm of the daughter of Paraoh.
Megillah 15b

The connection between the two statements of Chazal — indeed, self-proclaimed — is inescapable. But what are we to make of it? Are the two linked only through haphazard

similarities? Or is there something far more intentional in this perplexing connection? I want to propose that, by suggesting that link, Chazal are teaching that to understand their words in Esther, we must first appreciate their words in Shemos.

Yes, in Shemos, Chazal were capitalizing on a textual homonym (*amah*), but my *rebbe*, Rabbi David Fohrman, suggests that their translation of the verse is more than just a cute play on words. Consider the scene as Bas Paraoh notices a mysterious basket floating in the Nile and sends her maidservant to fetch it. Who *was* Bas Paraoh? She is, quite literally, the daughter of the king — the very king who just decreed genocide against Israelite male babies. Her father is the reason that this basket needed to be placed in the Nile to begin with. And it is his own daughter, the princess of Egypt, who saves the Israelite child from her father's decree. When she opens the basket, she knows immediately that the child is "*miyaldei ha'ivrim*," an Israelite. And, "*vatachmol alav*," she has compassion on him. She chooses to raise the child in the home of he who decreed the child's death. And, as later verses make clear, Moshe *knows* that he is an Israelite; his adopted mother brings him up that way.

Next to Paraoh himself, Bas Paraoh might be the least likely person to do this. Raising an Israelite in her father's palace seems utterly out of reach. And yet, Bas Paraoh reaches for it. And when she does, Chazal tell us that her arm, figuratively, stretches. God ensures that when one acts heroically for something moral, when one stretches oneself and reaches for a good that seems out of reach, the desired outcome becomes well within

one's capacity to grasp.

And now let us return to *our* midrash regarding Esther. Whether Achashverosh's scepter actually stretches is hardly the point. Chazal are urging us not to overlook the significance of that moment, because it is quite easy to; when Achashverosh extends his scepter, nothing changes for the Jewish people. They are not spared, and they hardly seem closer to salvation. But, in fact, that moment was the catalyst of all that was about to come.

Just moments before, Esther is faced with a terrifying choice: She can let her people succumb to the malicious plans of Haman, or else barge into the throne room unsolicited and risk death. Esther is ambivalent at first; when Mordechai suggests that she choose the latter path, she seems unwilling to risk her life. And quite understandably so: even if she were to be personally pardoned, it remains extremely unlikely that she would persuade the king to save an entire nation by reversing decrees issued by his most trusted advisor. That seems entirely out of reach.

Yet, ultimately, she obliges. Like the king's *daughter* back in Egypt, Esther, the king's *wife*, opts to reach for that which is, figuratively, beyond her grasp. And when she does, God ensures that Achashverosh's scepter stretches; that the impossible becomes within reach. Just like Bas Paraoh's courage sets in motion the events that would lead to the salvation of the Israelite people, it is Esther's courage, in this very moment, that does precisely the same thing for the Jewish people many years later.³

It is well known that Purim is the only holiday that does not commemorate a *nes nigleh*, an open miracle. If one

would want to see the trajectory of the Megilah's events as coincidental or political maneuvering, one *could*. Indeed, that is precisely what makes the celebration of Purim so poignant: we celebrate God's protection and intimacy even when it is not overtly recognizable. But to notice the remarkable confluences of "coincidences" as Providence, to appreciate the intricacies of God's intervention at every moment, is not easy. So, in their subtle yet powerful way, Chazal try to assist us. They leave clues, disguised as dramatic details of the story, that help us recognize God's subtle yet timeless wink. We simply have to open our eyes.

Endnotes

1 Or, according to some, closer to 800 years.

2 Significantly, in the *Midrash Tanchuma's* (*Tanchuma*, Warsaw, Shemos 7) version of this midrash, the text uses the word "*venismascha* (and it stretched)" — precisely the same word used to describe Achashverosh's scepter in the the Gemara — "*shemasach* (that it stretched)."

3 It should not be ignored that the similarities between the two midrashim are not perfectly parallel. In Shemos, Bas Paraoh reaches and it is her own arm that stretches; in the Megilah, Esther does the figurative reaching, but it is *Achashverosh's* scepter that stretches. While the purpose of the imperfect parallel is not entirely clear, I suggest that it might have to do with the circumstances of each situation. In the Shemos story, it is Bas Paraoh who is in control of the outcome — the decision as to whether to bring Moshe in and raise him in the palace is her own. In Shushan, it was in Esther's control to try to reach; whether she would be successful was in the hands of Achashverosh. So, when Esther reached, it was Achashverosh's scepter that stretched. In either case, the significance is the same: when one reaches for what seems out of reach, with the help of God, the impossible becomes attainable.