



# GRAND DRESS AND DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

In “On Account of a Hat,” Sholem Aleichem tells the story of a Jewish businessman named Sholem Shachnah.<sup>1</sup> We meet Sholem at the train station in Zolodievka, as he waits to catch the train that will take him home for Passover. He realizes with trepidation that the only open seat in the station is next to a sleeping Russian official, who Sholem nicknames “Buttons” due to his uniform. The prospect of sitting next to this official terrifies Sholem, but he is exhausted and so he reluctantly does sit down. Feeling himself drifting off, Sholem pays a Russian peasant to wake him up when the train arrives. A short time later, Sholem awakes on his own to find a long line forming. Panicking that he will miss his train, he jumps up and rushes to the ticket



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line and, in his haste, he accidentally grabs the hat of the Russian official instead of his own. Unknowingly wearing the wrong hat, Sholem is amazed to be treated with deference by all around him — he is even given a first-class cabin! When Sholem finally catches a glimpse of himself, he curses the peasant: “Twenty times did I tell him to wake me...and what does he do, that dumb ox, may he catch cholera in his face, but wake up the official instead! And me he leaves asleep on

the bench!” Sholem, convinced that he is actually the Russian official and that the real Sholem is still asleep in the Zolodievka train station, jumps off the train and goes back to the station, missing Passover at home.

In reducing the identities of Jews and Russians to mere clothing, this story skewers the anti-Semitism rampant in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russia. Leora Batnitsky, in *How Judaism Became a Religion*, notes that the humor of the story stems from “the underlying assumption that it would be absurd to think that a Jew could be mistaken for a Russian official. In fact, the only imaginable relationship between Jews and Russian officialdom...is the tremendous fear that Sholem Shachnah exhibits toward Buttons.”<sup>2</sup>

Sholem Aleichem wrote this story in 1913. Batnitsky points out that only two years earlier, in Kiev, Menachem Mendel Beilis was accused of murdering a Ukrainian boy and using his blood to make matzah. And even though Beilis' lengthy trial ended with an acquittal in 1913, the incident itself was not soon forgotten. A Jewish reader in this period would finish the story with a sense of trepidation. Shachnah is stuck in Zolodievka for Passover, and without the official's hat, Shachnah is defenseless against the ever-present anti-Semitism of his society.

"On Account of a Hat" emphasizes the tenuous position of the Jewish characters by using costume changes to represent status changes. Megillat Esther does the same. In the Megillah, what is easily slipped on can just as easily be stripped off. Costumes cannot form a real defense against anti-Semitism.

The first perek of the Megillah reports that Vashti, a queen with apparently impeccable royal lineage,<sup>3</sup> was called to pay obeisance through wearing her "royal diadem." Refusing to do so, Vashti is stripped of her status and removed. Esther ultimately replaces her: "So [the king] set a royal diadem (*keter malchut*) on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (Esther 2:17). Never mind her carefully withheld lineage, it seems Esther's transition to queenship consists entirely of a few months soaking in myrrh, some cosmetics, and, as the crescendo, having the royal diadem placed on her head. Despite the apparent significance of the diadem though, Esther is well aware that it does not confer any real power, as she explains to Mordechai in chapter four. She could be put to death, she points

out, for visiting the king without a proper summons — diadem or not.

After hearing of Haman's plans for eliminating the Jews in the kingdom, "Mordechai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes" (Esther 4:1). Esther "was greatly agitated" (Esther 4:4), though the cause of her agitation is left ambiguous. Is she reacting to the news of the decree, or to Mordechai's unbecoming garb? In any event, she sends a change of clothing to Mordechai so that he may enter the palace gates. The absurdity of this gesture is not lost on Mordechai, who declines the clothing knowing that changing his clothes cannot change the horror of the Jews' situation. Mordechai charges Esther to make a stand and confront the king: "Perhaps you have attained your royal position (*malchut*) for just such a crisis" (Esther 4:14).

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The word *malchut* in this context refers to Esther's change in status, her royal position she can now use to her advantage. Earlier, this word referred to the royal diadem that was transferred from Vashti to Esther. As Esther prepares herself to go to the king and reveal her true identity, the text emphasizes the communal prayer, the climactic three-day wait, and, finally, Esther's royal attire: (*vatilbash Esther malchut*, Esther 5:1).

The dual use of the word *malchut* in the Megillah underscores the facade of power that both Mordechai and Esther acknowledge as they nervously undertake their plan to counter Haman's influence.

The bizarre significance that characters in the Megillah afford to clothing resurfaces in the next chapter. Ahashversosh seeks Haman's advice for devising an appropriate repayment for someone to whom the king owes a favor. Haman, not realizing that the king is seeking to reward Mordechai, suggests that "the attire and the horse be put in the charge of one of the king's noble courtiers..." (Esther 6:9). Ahashverosh happily accepts this plan. But what possible honor could the royal costume confer upon someone publicly recognized as Mordechai ha-Yehudi, when the fate of the Jewish people has already been decided? This episode serves to expose, in a particularly stark manner, the superficiality of the kingdom and the illusion of power (or perhaps the power of illusion) in the court.

This point is emphasized yet again when Haman's decree is overturned. Before describing the communal joy, the Megillah emphasizes Mordechai's royal clothing and newfound status: "Mordechai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries" (Esther 8:15).

The use of clothing to represent status changes again highlights the superficial nature of these changes. Mordechai and Esther seem to attain positions of high status at the end of the Megillah, yet, by now, we are familiar with the precarious nature of status in Ahashverosh's court.

So is the ending of Megillat Esther truly happy? Is there any reason the Jews of Shushan and throughout the kingdom can be confident that this will not happen again? Mordechai and Esther's positions of power are as tenuous as those of Vashti and Haman; in this corrupt, superficial court, they are just a costume change away from another calamity. They are Sholem Shachnah, but in royal Persian garb instead of a Russian uniform. And, as is the case for Sholem Aleichem's story, appreciating the historical context can help us understand the deeper message of the Megillah.

Professor Yonatan Grossman<sup>4</sup> asserts that the specificity of the opening of Megillat Esther, "It was in the days of Achashverosh" (Esther 1:1), demands that we view the story in its historical context. Grossman notes that the vast majority of scholars identify Achashverosh with the Achaemenid king Xerxes, who ruled from 485–465 BCE. In mentioning that Mordechai was the grandson of Kish, who was exiled from Judea (Esther 2:6), the Megillah appears to open in the shadow of the destruction of the First Temple. Yet identifying Achashverosh with Xerxes would place this story at the very beginning of the Second Temple Era. Consequently, it seems the Jews in Shushan mentioned in the Megillah chose to remain in Shushan, and did not join the rebuilding of the Second Temple.

The book of Ezra describes

the faltering efforts to rebuild the Temple and Jewish life in Jerusalem. The returning Jews are humble in stature and few in number. Shushan, in contrast, sparkles with pomp and glitter. The Megillah's emphasis on costume changes, however, points to the superficiality of that society and underscores its danger. Violence and chaos can only partially hide behind a veneer of order and stability in Shushan, but they never completely disappear. Megillat Esther begs us to consider a number of questions: What would it look like if Jews could define their own destiny, in their own land, without the need to hide their identity? What does humble and authentic leadership look like? Megillat Esther begs the Jews of Shushan return home and be true to themselves. Otherwise, they consign their fate to the whims of a superficial, capricious, and uncertain society.

### Endnotes

1. "On Account of a Hat" translated by Isaac Rosenfeld, from *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Revised Edition. Copyright 1989.
2. Batnitzky, Leora, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 139-141.
3. See *Esth. Rabbah* 3:5; *Esth. Rabbah* 3:14; BT *Megillah* 12b.
4. Grossman, Yonatan. "Timeframe and Chronology in Megillat Esther." The Israel Koschitsky Virtual Beit Midrash, available at: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-timeframe-and-chronology-chapter-1>.

### R. Moshe Chagiz on the Custom of Wearing Costumes on Purim

נלע"ד בנתינת הטעם למה לא נהגו מנהג זה של לבישת הפרצופים כי אם דוקא בימים ההם ובזמן זה ... כי הימים הללו נזכרים ונעשים זכר לדבר האלקי רשב"י ז"ל שאמר לתלמידיו כששאלו לו וכי משוא פנים יש בדבר א"ל הם לא עשו אלא לפנים אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהן אלא לפנים דומה בדומה ללבישת הפרצופים שמשנים צורות פניהם לצורות משונות ויתנכרו איש אל רעהו מכח אותו פרצוף אמנם לובשי הפרצופין עצמן מכירין זה את זה וכל אחד יודע מה שבלב חברו המלוה עמו ונמצא שאותו שינוי אינו אלא לפנים כי כל אחד כדקאי קאי דומה בדומה למה שאירע לאבותינו בהשהחיותם לצלם שהם לא עשו אלא לפנים מיראה ולבם היה לשמים ואף הקב"ה בשר להם בתורתו ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני דומה ללבישת הפרצוף שמסתיר פניו מחבירו אמנם לב שניהם שווה ומכירין זה את זה.

*In my humble opinion, the reason we only wear costumes during this time (i.e. Purim) is because these days commemorate the words of the holy R. Shimon bar Yochai, whose students asked (Megillah 12a): was there favoritism shown to the Jews of Shushan [who according to R. Shimon received their decree because they worshipped idols]? R. Shimon answered that because they only worshipped idols in appearance (not out of belief), Hashem only decreed against them in appearance (He really didn't intend to destroy them). This idea can be compared to people wearing costumes — the costume-wearers may not be recognizable to others, but they themselves know who they are underneath as well as their friends accompanying them (i.e. those who friends who have disclosed which costumes they are wearing). The costumes are only a change in appearance, not of essence. This is similar to what happened to our ancestors when they worshipped the idols — they only did so out of fear, but their hearts were toward the heavens. The Holy One Blessed be He even said in the Torah, "And I will hide My face," which can also be compared to a costumed masquerader hiding his face, while his inner thoughts remain the same.*

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