



ROYALLY INSECURE

Ahashverosh had quite a lot. He held dominion over many lands and amassed tremendous wealth and many treasures, some of which he displayed to his banquet guests. He took council with many sages and once his orders were written and sealed, they became law. An outsider could have clearly observed that Ahashverosh had all that he desired. Upon close examination, however, it becomes apparent that despite his tremendous wealth, Ahashverosh was not the grand king he presented himself to be; he lacked self-confidence and moral integrity and was easily manipulated into permitting terrible evils to be committed under his authority. The



Megilla presents Ahashverosh as an example of the failure a person can become when status and outward appearance are cultivated at the expense of moral character and principles.

Why does Ahashverosh throw two banquets at the start of the Megilla? What purpose do they serve? First, the king likes to drink and indulge. He is interested in the pleasures of this world. He has a beautiful home, beautiful things, a gorgeous wife. Second, he is interested in what other people think. I can only imagine that people would have left the parties he threw moved by what their eyes beheld and grateful for their magnificent king. It seems, though, that his grandeur does not move beyond his physical possessions. The author of the Megilla hints at the king's insecurity. Ahashverosh needs the recognition of others. Perhaps he lacks confidence in himself and his

Maharal of Prague on Achashverosh's Anger

ויקצף המלך מאד וחמתו בערה בו. לפי הלשון לא הוה ליה למימר מאוד שהרי אחר כך אמר וחמתו בערה בו ... אבל בא לומר כי המלך קצף מאוד ואחר כך אמר וחמתו בערה בו כלומר כי מן השמים בא להבעיר חמתו ודומה כמו גחלים שמונחים לפניו ואין מעלין להב עד שיבא רוח ממקום אחר ונופח עד שמעלה להב וכן אחשוורוש קצף מאוד וגזירת השם יתברך היה מוציא הלהב אל הפעלה... שכבר בארנו כי דבר זה היה התחלת הצלת ישראל ולכך דבר זה בא מלמעלה מן השם יתברך.

[The verse states] *"The king was greatly angered and his rage burned within him."* The way the verse is phrased, there was no need to say "me'od" (greatly) since it says afterward "his rage burned within him." Rather, this comes to teach that the king was greatly angered and only afterward did his rage burn within him, meaning that there was Divine intervention that caused his rage. This can be compared to coals that are spread out and don't produce a flame until a wind comes and blows on them to produce a flame. Similarly, Achashverosh was greatly angered and it was the decree from Hashem to produce the flame ... Because we have already explained that this was the beginning of the salvation of the Jewish people, and therefore this incident came from above, from Hashem.

Ohr Chadash 1:16

own kingship and therefore needs to show off to ensure that the residents of his kingdom do not rebel.

The king also seeks to show off his beautiful wife. On the seventh day of

the second banquet, when the king is "merry with wine," he requests that Vashti be brought before him in her crown (and perhaps nothing else as Hazal point out), "to display her beauty to the peoples and officials" (1:11) as if displaying a trophy. Vashti refuses to come. Consequently, the king "was greatly incensed and his fury burned within" (1:12). Instead of talking to his wife, he turns to his advisors and is convinced by the council of Memukhan to replace Vashti. Letters are immediately sent out to all the provinces in his kingdom noting that men wield authority in their homes and proclaiming that each household should speak the language of the man of the home.

The Gemara in *Masekhet Eruvin* 65b notes the following:

א"ר אילעאי בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר בכוסו ובכיסו ובכעסו.

Rabbi Elai said: In three matters a person's true character is ascertained; in his cup (i.e. his behavior when he drinks); in his pocket, (i.e. his conduct in his financial dealings with other people), and in his anger.

Ahashverosh is not impressive in any of the elements discussed by Rabbi Elai. Ahashverosh uses his wealth to throw lavish banquets in which he drinks too much, makes rash decisions, and acts upon his anger. Memukhan speaks and Ahashverosh follows without thinking.

At the start of Chapter Two, we learn that when the "king's anger subsided, he thought of Vashti and that which he decreed against her" (2:1). He regrets the decision he made in anger. Things quickly change after Ahashverosh determines that Esther will replace Vashti. He throws a banquet that at this point should not surprise readers. As the

narrative proceeds, the king promotes Haman, who becomes angered after Mordechai refuses to bow to him. Haman requests permission to obliterate this scattered and dispersed people, promising to pay a large sum of money to the royal treasury. In reaction to Haman's request, the king simply removes his ring and gives it to Haman, granting him permission to do whatever he pleases. The king once again is presented as an easily manipulated ignoramus who lacks any sense of morality. In fact, after the letters are sent out, the reader learns that, "The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was dumfounded" (3:15). Haman speaks and the king acts, and again no thinking involved.

Once informed of Haman's plans Esther decides to act. Interestingly, she does not request that the king kill Haman and annul his decree. Instead, she requests that the king and Haman come to a banquet that she makes for them. At that banquet, Esther asks that the two men come to another banquet she will make the next day. At first glance, we might question Esther's plan of action; why does she invite Haman to the banquets? Why were two banquets necessary? However, Esther understood Ahashverosh, and knew exactly what she was doing. The Gemara in *Masekhet Megilla* 15b, proposes many answers to why Esther invited Haman to the banquet, but only two answers are particularly relevant for us. The Gemara states:

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר אסביר לו פנים כדי שיהרג הוא והיא ... ר' אליעזר המודעי אומר קנאתו במלך קנאתו בשרים.
"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha says: She said to herself: I will act kindly toward him and thereby bring the king to suspect

that we are having an affair; she did so in order that both he and she would be killed. Additionally, Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i says: She made the king jealous of him and she made the other ministers jealous of him [and in this way she brought about his downfall]."

Both explanations point to the fact that Esther understood that Ahashverosh could be easily swayed into thinking the worst. She wanted to cause suspicion and unrest. In such a state Ahashverosh could easily be stirred to punish Haman and even herself. As evident throughout the Megilla, Ahashverosh could be easily manipulated.

The author of the Megilla portrays how the kingship in the land of Persia operated. The king was insecure and fickle. Nothing could be trusted. Although Ahashverosh lived in a beautiful palace and possessed beautiful objects, his magnificence was limited to his possessions. If so, it should be no surprise that God's name does not appear in the Megilla. Why would God want to be associated with such a location? The author of

the Megilla wants us to consider our own lives. Is there more than meets the eye? Is there anything beneath the surface? What are our values and beliefs? Do our actions reflect our values?

Abraham serves as the prime antithesis to Ahashverosh. After rescuing Lot from Sedom and acquiring the booty of war, Melekh Sedom proposes that Abraham take the booty and he take the people; but interestingly, Abraham refuses to gain any personal benefit from the war. We are left wondering why Abraham turned down possessions that he rightfully acquired? Unlike Ahashverosh, who would have most likely accepted Melekh Sedom's proposal, Abraham was true to his values. He went to battle to save Lot, his nephew, not to acquire wealth. He had full faith that God would meet his needs. Additionally, Abraham wanted no connection or relationship with the evil king of Sedom and therefore rejected any affiliation with the evil he represented. Abraham was treading new ground. He had values

and principles that helped guide his decisions and his life. He did what was just and right, acting to save his family while placing belief in God at the forefront of his mind.

Before deciding to destroy Sedom, God says that He must inform Abraham about what He plans to do because He knows that Abraham will instruct His children to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right (*v'shamru derekh Hashem la'asot tzedakah umishpat*, Bereshit 18:19). Unlike Ahashverosh, God wants to connect Himself to Abraham and his offspring. As Abraham's descendants, when we have a clear set of values and a clear sense of self, we do not need to build walls and facades like Ahashverosh nor do we desire to flaunt our possessions or abilities. We will celebrate with equal joy our own achievements and those of others, motivating a society of retrospection and self-growth. Let us learn from the weakness of Ahashverosh to improve our own character traits and thereby contribute to the betterment of the world, one person at a time.



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