

## Megillat Esther – A Timeless Story

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The Gemara<sup>1</sup> in the discussions surrounding the canonization of Megillat Esther brings what seems to be the consensus view that the Megillah was written with divine inspiration (רוח הקודש). The Tanaim and Amoraim offer evidence to support that assertion by pointing to verses in the Megillah that provide insight, information and make statements that presuppose divine knowledge. In this week's shiur, we will take a deeper look at the significance of the Megillah being divinely inspired.

Megillat Esther is a very simple and straight forward story that everyone is familiar with. For the sake of review, let us briefly summarize the story. After partying and drinking for quite some time (180 days), King Achashverosh throws an additional party for those present in the capital city Shushan for seven days. On the seventh day, when the king is well plied with wine, he asks his advisors to bring Queen Vashti in her royal finery before him so he can parade her before all those gathered to show off her tremendous beauty. Vashti rebuffs the king's request. At the behest of his advisors, Achashverosh then makes Vashti into a public example of what happens to a woman who defies her husband and Vashti is then summarily deposed for her refusal to acquiesce to King Achashverosh's request. After the king's anger at Vashti for defying him subsides, he remembers her fondly. His advisors, seemingly in response to his new found loneliness, make a suggestion that he run a pageant to find an appropriate replacement for Vashti. Of all the women that participate in the auditions to fill the royal vacancy, Esther captures the eye of the king and is chosen to be the wife and the queen of Achashverosh. At the same time, Haman, a rising star minister in Achashverosh's inner circle, is appointed to the position of prime minister within the kingdom of Achashverosh. With his newly found stature, Haman takes affront to the fact that Mordechai, the Jew, refuses to bow down to him and afford him the respect he believes he deserves. In order to eliminate the troublesome Mordechai, whose defiance gravely irks him, Haman comes up with his diabolic plan to annihilate all the Jews in Achashverosh's kingdom on the thirteenth of Adar. With the help of a bribe, he convinces the king to accede to his planned genocide of the Jews. Something Haman did not count on was that unbeknownst to him the Jews had a plant high up in the royal palace. The only problem is that in order to save the Jewish nation, the palace insider, Esther, must forfeit her immunity from Haman's plan by disclosing to Achashverosh that she is Jewish. Mordechai convinces Esther that she is the right woman in the right place at the right time and that she must put the plight of her nation before her personal interests. Esther accepts Mordechai's plea and valiantly decides to risk her personal comfort and standing in order to save her nation. She successfully engineers and executes on a plan to drive a wedge between Achashverosh and Haman. This causes Achashverosh to dispose of Haman and replace him with Mordechai. With their new found ascendancy in the eyes of the king, this also empowers the Jews of the kingdom to go from being victims to assailants. Mordechai and Esther encourage the Jews to celebrate the sudden turnaround in their fortunes with the holiday of Purim and record the whole story for posterity in Megillat Esther.

The story line and the plot are simple and the message is straight forward. God does not forsake the Jews even when they are in exile. With the destruction of the Temple, God's manifest presence receded and the Jews felt abandoned to the forces of history. They concluded that God was no longer with them and possibly they were no longer His chosen people. The story of Megillat Esther comes to dispel that misconception by demonstrating that God is still orchestrating the events behind the scenes to provide for His nation. God's relationship with the Jewish people has not been altered, it is just the mechanism for God's salvation that has changed. It is the hidden hand of God,<sup>2</sup> that produces covert rather than overt miracles, that now helps navigate His people through the tempest of history. God's presence is now manifest in the tapestry of the mundane and He is still nostalgically awaiting our return to once again dwell amongst us like in times of yore. The dramatic realization by the Jews of the Megillah that our special relationship with God was still intact was and still is a reason to celebrate on Purim. It is as if we renewed our "wedding" vows with God. Chazal acknowledge this in the Gemara Shabbat<sup>3</sup> where they interpret the Pasuk in Megillat Esther, "Kimu v'Kiblu haYehudim..."<sup>4</sup> as being a reenactment and a renewal of Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. The miracle of Purim is a reaffirmation that then and today, just like back at Har Sinai, He is still our God and we are still His chosen and treasured people.

If we were to take the summary of the story of the Megillah that was provided above and try to estimate the duration over which the events of the Megillah transpired, we would probably come to the conclusion that it spanned three to four years. Let us do the quick calculation here together. There is the party in the beginning of the Megillah that lasts for roughly half a year. The removal of Vashti and the request for candidates to become the new Queen probably lasted another six months. Choosing a queen probably took a year or two since all the women underwent twelve months of preparation before being presented to the king. Once Esther ascends the throne, Haman enters the picture. Haman's plan called for the annihilation of the Jews close to a year after the time he sought permission from Achashverosh to carry out the genocide. His plan is foiled within the next three months and the Jews are

<sup>1</sup> מגילה ז.

<sup>2</sup> The name אסתר is connected by the גמרא חולין קלט: ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פניו וגמרא חולין קלט: and the absence of God's name in the מגילה is seen as corroborating this contention

<sup>3</sup> אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר (שבת פח:)

<sup>4</sup> The Jews affirmed and committed... קימו וקבלו היהודים... (אסתר ט, כז)

granted the right to defend themselves on the original date chosen for their destruction. That comes to a total of three to four years. One could add another year to the calculation if you count the year after Purim, where at the end of the Megillah Mordechai and Esther enjoin the people to celebrate Purim again in the year subsequent to their salvation, which would bring you to a total of four to five years elapsed in the story of the Megillah. One could argue here or there on the assumptions, but net-net it would be reasonable to conclude, given the flow of the story, that the Megillah spanned three to five years.

To confirm our hypothesis, let us look at the dates provided to us in the Pesukim of the Megillah. The Megillah opens in the third year of Achashverosh's reign where he throws a party for 180 days and a subsequent party for seven days.<sup>5</sup> We estimated the duration of this at roughly six months and gave another six months before the actual queen tryouts began. The next time frame provided by the Megillah is the preparations the women undergo before being ready to see the king, "...six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and other ointments of women."<sup>6</sup> We estimated the process of the choosing of the queen to have lasted a year or two which would have put Esther's coronation in the fifth to sixth year of Achashverosh's reign. Instead, we find in the second chapter of the Megillah that Esther is taken to meet Achashverosh late in the seventh year of his reign and is crowned as queen sometime shortly after. That means that Esther only replaces Vashti four to five years after Vashti was deposed! In the third chapter of the Megillah, Haman rises to power and hatches his plan on Rosh Chodesh Nisan<sup>7</sup> to annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar nearly twelve months later. Shortly after, he gains Achashverosh's approval for his plan and sends out the messengers on the thirteenth of Nisan to inform the remainder of the empire of his plan.<sup>8</sup> Though, much to our surprise, these events take place in the twelfth year of Achashverosh's reign,<sup>6</sup> four to five years after Esther's coronation and nine years after Vashti being deposed. The next date we are given is that on the twenty-third of Sivan that same year, Mordechai and Esther send out messengers to rescind Haman's decree. The story continues with the Jews defending themselves on the thirteenth and fourteenth of Adar at the tail end of that same year and Mordechai and Esther instructing the Jews to celebrate Purim in the subsequent year<sup>9</sup> which would turn out to be the thirteenth to fourteenth year of Achashverosh's reign. So in reality the story of the Megillah spans ten to eleven years as opposed to our estimate of three to five years. How did we go so wrong?

The flow of the story in the Megillah is so smooth and compelling that one is lulled into the misconception that the Megillah is a compilation of quick and successive cause and effect stories. Vashti defies Achashverosh at the party which leads to Esther becoming queen. Esther being queen brings Mordechai to the forefront and into Haman's crosshairs. Mordechai's not bowing to Haman and the Jews attending Achashverosh's party<sup>10</sup> leads to Haman's genocidal decree. Queen Esther had ascended the throne just in time to intercede and save the Jews from Haman's plan.

That is the story of the Megillah, but if one looks more carefully, it is really constructed by collating three disparate events<sup>11</sup> and linking them together to create a single story. The narrative begins with the account of the party at the beginning of Achashverosh's reign which results in Vashti being removed as the queen. Detached from that, there is the account of Esther being chosen as the queen and then independently there is the story of Haman and his attempt to annihilate the Jews. The Megillah finesses these stories together by using the ambiguous transitional phrase, "Achar HaDevarim HaEleh" (אחר הדברים האלה).<sup>12</sup> If one lived at the time of the Megillah, they would not necessarily have thought to connect these independent events. Like so many experiences in our lives, they would have seemed to be discrete episodes. Without divine guidance, we lack perspective on the events we are experiencing and that leaves us devoid of a sense of the big picture. We are unable to see the pattern of cause and effect or to weave together events that span over years. Sometimes in retrospect, we are able to make some sense of things, but, in general, we are left grasping at straws because we lack the prism through which we can properly discern events. The Megillah is written with divine inspiration (רוח הקודש) and that is precisely why it can decipher the manifestation of the divine in the mundane. It can see a party nine years earlier as being both the cause for the Jews difficult predicament under Haman<sup>9</sup> as well as precipitating the solution to their problem. The Megillah is written so well that it creates a unified story that moves naturally through all the events without consideration as to their timing. It weaves a tapestry from strands of events that convince the reader of the fluidity of the story. The Megillah is so amazing and memorable because it is timeless, both in its story and its message.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach

<sup>5</sup> אסתר א, ב-ד

<sup>6</sup> אסתר ב, יב

<sup>7</sup> אסתר ג, ז

<sup>8</sup> אסתר ג, יב

<sup>9</sup> אסתר ט, כט-לא

<sup>10</sup> מגילה יב.

<sup>11</sup> That take place in the third, seventh and twelfth years of Achashverosh's reign

<sup>12</sup> אסתר ב, א, ו, א