



MORDECHAI AND HAMAN: A MATCH THAT MAKES SCENTS

The Purim story is one of the greatest enigmas of our Tanach. It is simple yet highly complex, natural yet undeniably miraculous, straightforward yet glaringly cryptic. In a holiday that celebrates the beauty of things turned “upside down,” a closer look at the intricate arrangement of the Purim salvation reveals that the matchup between Mordechai and Haman is anything but a historically convenient, contemporaneous pairing. Rather, Torah literature is replete with explanations — mostly ideological in nature — as to why Mordechai specifically was destined to squelch the colossal evil of Haman. Mordechai’s eventual victory over Haman is the last in a long line of historical battles between their



ancestors. Why are these two families poised as eternal rivals? What is it about Mordechai that makes him a unique candidate to handle Haman’s pernicious nature? Put another way, why was Mordechai so confident in this duel against such a powerful, influential enemy?

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 73:7) explains that there was a well-known tradition that the descendants of Eisav, including Amalek, were destined to fall at the hands of the children of Rachel. Many have

debated the advantage of Yosef and Binyamin over the other shevatim in this regard. According to Chazal, Eisav’s saving grace was his sterling fulfillment of the mitzvah of honoring his father, which fell short only when he attempted to kill his brother Yaakov without considering the pain it would cause his father. The ten sons of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah maintained a similar standing since they, too, tried to kill their brother without much consideration for their father’s resulting agony. Bnei Rachel, however, did not participate in the sale of Yosef, and therefore never fell in their observance of this mitzvah, paving their way to an advantage over Eisav’s descendants (*Yismach Moshe*, Vayeshev 3).

In a similar vein, when Yaakov and Eisav met up in one of the most highly anticipated, yet tremendously anticlimactic confrontations in biblical history, Yaakov's entire family — including wives and children — bowed to Eisav. During this pivotal moment between the two rivals, Yaakov's family members subjugated themselves to Eisav, symbolically accepting his dominance over them. However, this act of servitude was only practiced by those in attendance. Since Binyamin was not yet born, he was never in a position to lower himself before Eisav. Perhaps this influenced Mordechai's confidence, as if to uphold the tradition that Binyamin and his descendants have never, and will never, bow to Eisav and his children (*Aish Tamid on Purim* pp. 121-122).

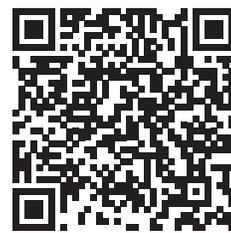
R' Yonatan Eybeschutz (*Yaarot Devash*, Part 2) posits that this tradition was not only well-known among the Jews, it was acknowledged globally as an inevitable truth that weighed heavily on the shoulders of Eisav's descendants. The practical implications of this theory are astonishing. If this was the case, why did Haman campaign against Mordechai with such hubris? Wouldn't he be so clever as to avoid someone from Rachel's line in his crusade for power? The answer is in Mordechai's shrewd decision to make himself known primarily as a *Yehudi*, a descendant of Yehuda, while concealing his identity as a *Yemini*, a member of the tribe of Binyamin. This was all part of a deliberate ploy to boost Haman's confidence and exploit his vulnerability, since Haman surely would *not* have entered himself into a duel against someone from Shevet Binyamin! Only once Haman started to fall to Mordechai does his

wife actually urge him to consider the possibility (his worst nightmare) that Mordechai descended from “those” Jews — those whom his DNA dictates he cannot defeat — the children of Rachel (Esther 6:13.)

There is another angle through which to explore the pairing of Mordechai and Haman. The Gemara (*Chullin* 139b) asks curiously, “*Haman min haTorah minayin?*,” where can we find an allusion to Haman's character in the Torah? The Gemara answers: “*HaMin ha'etz...*” — a reference to the aftermath of Adam eating from the tree in Gan Eden, when Hashem asks rhetorically, “*did you eat from the tree...?*” Surely there exists an underlying connection — beyond the obvious wordplay and the centrality of trees — between the episode of Adam and Chava eating from the infamous Tree of Knowledge and the emergence of Haman.

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Both Adam and Haman are compelled to acquire the one thing placed out of their reach. Both are dissatisfied with the range of opportunities available to them; they cannot restrain themselves from needing absolute access to whatever is limited to them in some way.



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thing placed out of their reach. Both are dissatisfied with the range of opportunities available to them; they cannot restrain themselves from needing absolute access to whatever is limited to them in some way. Further, R' Immanuel Bernstein (*Purim: Removing the Mask*, pp. 137-138) explains, based on the Arizal, that Adam thought that by eating from the tree, he would actually be able to achieve a higher level of *avodat Hashem*. If eating from the tree would make it *harder* for him to fulfill God's word, but he succeeded nonetheless, Adam reasoned that this level of service would be even more worthwhile than had he not sinned in the first place. Using this paradoxical, disillusioned reasoning, Adam categorically defied the explicit command of his Creator. R' Akiva Tatz adds, based on the Zohar, that the result of this flawed rationale — that man's logic could in some way outsmart God — unleashed a mass of chaos and confusion into the world. It was not the force of evil, but rather a dangerous *mixture* of good and evil, that permeated the world as a result of this grave miscalculation. This



essence is characterized by the name of the tree — the tree of knowledge of good and evil — knowledge *not* of good and evil as distinct entities, but as indistinguishable ingredients of a lethal combination.

This symbolism of doubt and uncertainty is indeed the essence of Amalek, Haman’s national orientation. Amalek’s predecessors, Eisav and Elifaz, also personified this doomed combination of good and evil, having both been influenced by the righteousness of Yitzchak in addition to their own evil compulsions. These competing values combined in their psyches to produce distorted logic that was used to justify perverse courses of action. The numerical value of *Amalek* is equal to *safek*, the Hebrew word for doubt. The very hint to Haman in the Torah, symbolized by the tree and the pollution of turmoil it unleashed into the world, is a reference to the ideological, national character of Amalek. They are the nation who infamously attacked us after the wonders of our exodus from Egypt because they sought to perpetuate uncertainty, to neutralize the global reaction to God’s omnipotence, and to wedge themselves between us and our Creator by trying to replace our faith in God with human rationalization.

The Gemara continues by questioning Mordechai’s origin in the Torah, “*Mordechai min haTorah minayin? Mor D’ror...*” One of the fragrant spices used in the holy recipe for the anointing oil — which was used to consecrate items in the Beit HaMikdash, bears a resemblance to Mordechai’s name. This connection, too, begs further exploration.

R’ Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (*Bnei Yissaschar*, Adar 1:8-9) explains that the month of Adar is represented by the nose and the accompanying sense of smell. It is thus fitting that the names of both the hero and heroine of the story, Mordechai, the pungent *mor d’ror*, and Esther, *hi hadassah*, the aromatic myrtle plant, represent distinct scents. Fascinatingly, the Bnei Yissaschar explains that the sin of Adam and Chava involved the faculties of touch, sight, taste, and hearing, and the only sense that maintained its innocence was the pure and untarnished sense of smell, which played no role in man’s first failing. Mordechai and Esther, and their aromatic namesakes, are thus a fitting match for Haman’s camp, symbolizing the consequential chaos of the sin in Gan Eden.

The power of *besamim*, sweet fragrances, seems to be the only weapon to dice through the confusion

perpetuated by Amalek. Indeed, it is the only sense that provides pleasure directly to the soul, bypassing the physical body. The *besamim* of Havdalah are “*hamadvil*,” they are differentiators. They clear the fog. They provide spiritual lucidity. They negate the debilitating psychological effects of Amalek.

May we merit to perceive God’s hand in our lives with unadulterated clarity, to dissolve the clouds of doubt promoted by the ideology of Amalek, and to inhale the sublime fragrances of the avodah of the Beit HaMikdash, speedily in our days.



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