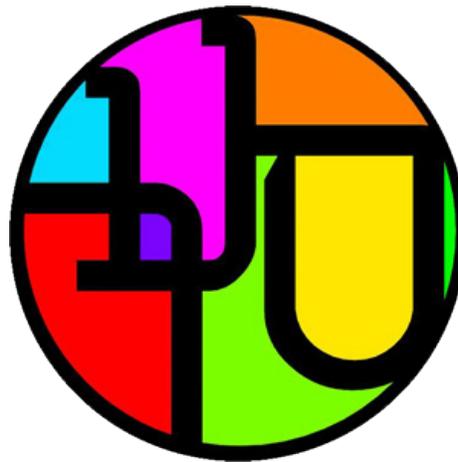




OVERLOOKING EZRA: REACCEPTING THE TORAH IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

The notion that the Jewish people went through a second, *superior* acceptance of the Torah, hundreds of years after the public revelation at Sinai is, in and of itself, astonishing. And yet, this is in fact what the *amora* Rava claims in *b. Shabbat* 88a. Citing from Esther 9:27, he argues that although the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai was coerced, the Jewish people reaccepted it during the time of Ahashverosh.

הדור קבלוהּ בימי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ דְּכַתִּיב "קִיְמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים" קִיְמוּ מִה שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ כְּבָר.
 Furthermore, they accepted it in the time of Ahashverosh, as it is written, "The Jews ordained, and took upon themselves" [meaning that] they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.



The idea that in the aftermath of rejection, as demonstrated by exile and the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, the Jewish people would be able to recommit themselves to the Torah and to the covenant with God, is inspirational. Somewhat shocking,

however, is the choice of the Purim story as the locus of this reacceptance of the Torah. The explicit context of Esther 9:27 is the acceptance of the observance of Purim, yet Rava recontextualizes it to refer to the Torah itself. While this is an interesting exegetical move, it is quite puzzling that Rava overlooked a more obvious source.

In the midst of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as described in the book of Nehemiah, the Jews who had returned to Judea after the Babylonian exile gathered together in Jerusalem. There, Ezra read aloud from the Torah and the people rededicated themselves to the observance of its laws. This is all described in vivid detail in Nehemiah 8. Why would Rava have ignored

this episode in Nehemiah in favor of Esther?

The question becomes a bit sharper when we take into account the following:

- 1) The account in Nehemiah is a formal acceptance of the Torah, as opposed to Rava's source, which seemingly takes the *pasuk* in Esther out of context.
- 2) Reference to God is conspicuously absent from the book of Esther, while God is invoked throughout the Nehemiah narrative.
- 3) Both stories occur in a similar time period. Regardless of the historical dating of both stories, Hazal themselves associate Mordechai and Esther with the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹
- 4) The language describing Jewish unity in Nehemiah 8 mirrors Hazal's language used to describe *mattan Torah*. In Nehemiah 8:1, the people come "*ke-ish ehad*" to hear the Torah read by Ezra, which is very similar to the comments found in *Mekhilta deRabi Yishmael* 19:2 referring to the revelation at Sinai: *kan hishvu kulam lev ehad*. This is more widely known from Rashi's reformulation, *ke-ish ehad be-lev ehad*.
- 5) The celebration of Purim, as described in the Megillah, carries with it seemingly unique elements that seem to foster unity, and extend the celebration to those less fortunate. Esther 9:22 describes Purim as *ימי משתה ושמחה ומשלה מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאבנינים* "days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor." Yet Nehemiah 8 has those as well. At the end of the ceremony, Ezra (or Nehemiah) tells

the people gathered, "אכלו משמנים ושתו, ממתיקים ושלחו מנות לאין גבון, Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared." Both celebrations include **feasting, gift giving, and concern for the poor.**

The account in Nehemiah 8 seems to be the obvious choice, so why did Rava ignore it?

We could argue that from a purely ideological perspective, the Bavli may have preferred to set the recommitment to the Torah in Persia, its center of Jewish life, as opposed to associating it with an individual (Ezra) who *left* the diaspora to move to Israel. Yet, the Bavli on many occasions praises Ezra, arguing that Ezra was worthy of having received the Torah if not for the fact that Moshe preceded him,² and crediting Ezra for the restoration of the Torah.³ If so, that only strengthens the question — why did Rava ignore the recommitment to the Torah during the time of Ezra, a figure who according to Hazal was on the same level as Moshe, instead choosing to stretch the meaning of a *pasuk* in the Megillah, in order to associate it with the Purim story?

I would argue that it is precisely the *differences* between the stories that make the Megillah a more attractive setting for the reacceptance of the Torah. The points of *contact* between Nehemiah 8 and Esther 9 allow us to read the stories together, and in fact, see the stark points of *contrast*.

- 1) While it is true that both Nehemiah 8 and Esther 9 describe the Jews celebrating in similar ways, their emotional state is strikingly different. In Esther, the Megillah goes out of its way to highlight the happiness of the Jews in the aftermath

of their salvation. It is the move from *yagon*, grief, to *simhah*, happiness, as described in Esther 9:22 that leads to their acceptance of Purim and the observance of its laws (and by extension, according to Rava, the Torah as a whole). Whereas, in Nehemiah 9:22 the immediate reaction of the people to hearing the words of the Torah is the opposite. *כי בוכים כל־העם כְּשִׁמְעוּם אֶת־דְּבַר־יְהוָה*, "for all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Torah." They had recognized that they had fallen so far from what they had been charged with, and reacted with sadness. It is only after Ezra, Nehemiah and all of the gathered Levites encourage the people to celebrate, that they do. Thus, the Esther story emphasizes the happiness of the Jews' acceptance, which contrasts sharply with the sadness of the Nehemiah story, and the *fear* (and coercion) that accompanied *mattan Torah*.

- 2) The recommitment to the Torah in Nehemiah 8 was somewhat short lived. Only a few years later, as described in Nehemiah 13, the people



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had started to backslide, transgressing precisely those commandments they had previously sworn to uphold. While a flashy and symbolic expression of commitment can be impressive, it is not always sustainable. The Megillah, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on continual observance. As Esther 9:27, precisely the *pasuk* that Rava cites, states, קִיְמוּ וְקַבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַל־זֶרְעָם וְעַל כָּל־הַנְּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוּר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכִזְמָנָם בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה “the Jews undertook and **irrevocably** obligated themselves **and their descendants**, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time **each year.**” The very next *pasuk* emphasizes this as well, highlighting the observance in every generation. The sustainability of this commitment, which came *without* pomp and circumstance, is what is remarkable.

3) Though Nehemiah 8 describes the people present at the ceremony as כל העם — the *entire* nation — they were, in reality, a much smaller group. The fact that the book of Nehemiah provides lists of the many returnees to Judea belies the fact that a majority of the Jewish people were, in fact, not present at this rededication, or in Judea at all. Contrast that to the Megillah where the events of the story affected Jewry worldwide. Not only that, but while the Nehemiah story emphasizes separation from others,⁴ the Esther story emphasizes coming together. The Megillah goes out of its way to emphasize the commitment not just of current Jews, but of *al kol ha-nilvim aleihem*, “all those who might join them.”⁵ Thus, as opposed to Nehemiah, which presents a limited group committing themselves to the Torah, those presented in the Megillah

span the globe, including Jews not yet born and those who have not yet chosen to join the Jewish people.

4) Finally, there was an active effort in the Megillah to reach out to Jewry worldwide. Not only did Mordechai and Esther send letters to Jewish communities in the first year after their salvation (Esther 9:10), but they sent them *again* the second year (Esther 9:29). This, again, stands in contrast with Nehemiah. While it certainly is admirable that the people themselves gathered on their own in Jerusalem, and asked Ezra to read from the Torah, there was no attempt to reach out to other communities to join in this reaffirmation.⁶

How do we *improve* upon mattan Torah? The question itself may seem ridiculous, if not presumptuous. Yet that is precisely what Rava attempted to address. But instead of pointing to another instance of a formal acceptance of the Torah, Rava opted to focus on a less intuitive event. Emulating previous commitments is not enough. It is precisely the Purim story, with its emphasis on *simhah*, sustainability, unity and outreach, that elevates its version of a recommitment to the Torah. It is not merely about recognizing our shortcomings or seeking out God, even when He is not *explicitly* mentioned. It is about actively making a sustained effort, reaching out to others, and doing it *besimhah*.⁷ Rava’s reading of the *pesukim* may not be the most obvious, but it presents a clear way for us to rededicate ourselves to Torah.

Endnotes

1. See *b. Meg.* 16b, which understands the Mordechai mentioned in Ezra 2:2 as the Mordechai of the book of Esther, *y. Meg.* 1:5, *b. BB* 15a, and Rashi loc. cit. Rambam

in his introduction to his *Mishneh Torah* describes the *knesset hagedolah* as the *beit din* of Ezra, and lists Mordechai as a member. The Ramban and the Ran, in their commentaries on *b. Shabbat* 88a, both argue that Rava was in fact referencing the ceremony in Nehemiah 8. However, that raises a similar question, as to why Rava would not explicitly note that, opting instead to focus on a *pasuk* from Esther.

2. *b. San.* 21b, *t. San.* 4:5. ראוי היה עזרא שתינתן תורה על ידו אלמלא קדמו משה.

3. *b. Suk.* 20a. כשנשתכחה תורה מישראל. — עלה עזרא מבבל ויסדה.

4. See Nehemiah 10 and 13. While this separation is in accordance with the Torah, nevertheless, the emphasis here is on disunion.

5. This, again, is precisely in the *pasuk* which Rava cites. These are most likely converts, as per most traditional commentaries, for example, ibn Ezra. This is not the first time the Megillah notes other groups associating themselves with Jews. See Esther 8:17.

6. This also stands in contrast with the attempt of Hizkiyahu, to rededicate the people to the Torah. Though the king of Judah, he sends messengers, with letters (אגרות), similar to those sent in the *megillah*) to the remnants of the northern tribes, inviting them to Jerusalem for *Pesah* and to rededicate themselves to God, and were received with laughter and jeering. He did not make a second attempt.

7. That isn’t to say that a formal dedication isn’t important. Rava’s comments are about a rededication. In order to rededicate oneself to something, the underlying first commitment, however flawed, must be present.