



INSIGHTS INTO THE PERSONALITIES OF THE MEGILLAH

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Vashti: Clearing the Stage for Esther's Performance

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At first glance, it's easy to view Vashti's role in Megillat Esther as a placeholder, since we know that her impending demise will clear the stage for Esther's grand entrance. Yet perhaps her role is ultimately critical to frame the course of events that follow.

The Megillah tells us in perek aleph that like Achashveirosh, Vashti had a party of her own. This pasuk refers to her as Vashti HaMalka instead of HaMalka Vashti, which Malbim uses to further prove Achashveirosh's intention to reduce Vashti's royal blood status to just the wife of the king.

But perhaps there is more to Vashti

than what meets the eye. After all, she is the first person to defy the king, something that Achashveirosh was terrified of. The text tells us (Esther 1:12), *vatima'ein hamalka Vashti*, she refused to be brought to the king. Vashti's refusal could be explained in two different ways.

1. Her refusal to be brought before the king was due to the way the king sent for her, i.e. with the king's officers and against her will (Malbim 1:10). Her act of defiance was a way for her to show that she was equally as powerful, haughty and deserving of honor as Achashveirosh was.
2. Her refusal was due to what was requested of her, i.e., out of embarrassment of being objectified before the king. Her refusal was more passive, she didn't mean to defy the king,

yet it was the only way for her to maintain some semblance of dignity and modesty.

Regardless, Achashveirosh now needed to affirm his superiority over her and use her as an example. This means that the rest of the Megillah will be viewed through the lens of Vashti's death and is a warning of what was in store for anyone who might disobey the king.

Vashti's refusal to come to Achashveirosh's party foreshadows the opposite story, in which Esther comes before the king on her own volition, when the king did *not* call her. The intensity grows as the reader knows what the king has done to someone who didn't come before him, and we can only imagine what will he do to someone who *does* come before him without permission. Through Vashti, we are now able to understand what

was so extraordinary about Esther when she risked her life to defy the king.

Why Hegai is Actually Pretty Great

Jordy Gross

Just as Esther is taken to the king's palace, forbidden from ever returning home, she encounters Hegai: the eunuch entrusted with Achashverosh's harem. While Esther's situation begins to feel hopeless, Chazal commonly perceive Hegai as a source of comfort or familiarity.¹ How did Hegai earn his favorable reputation?

Hegai is described as “*seris ha-melech shomer ha-nashim*.”² The term “*seris*,” generally translated as chamberlain or eunuch, appears sparsely throughout Tanach. There are only three *sarisim* in Tanach who are mentioned by name outside of Megillat Esther: Potiphar,³ Eved-Melech,⁴ and Ashpenaz.⁵ As with Esther, these *sarisim* appear at turning points for three other Biblical heroes: Yosef, Yirmiyahu, and Daniel. To better understand Hegai's character, let us briefly examine the significance of these *sarisim*.

Potiphar buys Yosef from the Yishmaelites, ultimately resulting in Yosef becoming second to the king and saving his family from famine. Eved-Melech rescues Yirmiyahu from a trench, enabling him to resume his efforts at saving Bnei Yisrael from the fate of exile. Ashpenaz favors Daniel — a grieving exile — giving him the opportunity to make a *kiddush Hashem* as an attendant of the king.

Each of these *sarisim* appears at a moment of transition between despair and hope. Rav Hirsch⁶ notes that the word “*saris*” comes from the

word “*sarsur*,” or agent, someone who manages and promotes the affairs of others. The *sarisim*⁷ of Megillat Esther are no exception. As Esther apprehensively faces an unknown future, she is greeted by Hegai, someone who she innately feels she can trust.⁸ He provides her with a sense of reassurance and sustenance and Esther becomes queen after following Hegai's advice.⁹ As in the rest of Tanach, the *saris* has a part in catapulting our hero from hopelessness to royalty, ultimately enabling her to save her people.

Endnotes

1. See discussion in *Megillah* 13a, regarding the special accommodations provided by Hegai for Esther as well as the *Yafeh Anaf* on *Esther Rabbah* 5:3.
2. Esther 2:3.
3. See Bereishit 37:36.
4. See Yirmiyahu 38:7.
5. See Daniel 1:3.
6. See Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bereishit 37:36.
7. Although this piece focuses on the role of Hegai, other *sarisim* who appear in Megillat Esther include Charvonah, Bigtan, and Teresh, all of whom also play active roles in the salvation of Mordechai, Esther, and the Jewish people.
8. This can be gleaned from the text of the *Megillah* itself (Esther 2:15) and is described more explicitly by *Da'at Mikra* on Esther 2:15.
9. See Esther 2:15.

Haman

Neti Linzer

We tend to view Haman as the quintessential villain, and throughout the *Megillah* itself, his character is hardly developed beyond this stock portrayal. But a more vivid picture of his personality emerges from

Midrashim. I would like to focus on one such Midrash — a single line in the Gemara at the end of Chullin¹ — which I think exposes the psychological root of Haman's sin.

The Gemara asks: “*Haman min ha-Torah minayin?*,” where in the Pentateuch is there a reference to Haman? Leaving aside the valuable question of why the Gemara assumes that there *would* be such a reference, let us review the *pasuk* quoted in response: “*Ha-min ha-etz asher tziviticha? L'bitli achal memenu achalta?*”² The superficial relationship between the *pasuk* and the person is clear — a wordplay on “*hamin*” and “*haman*” — but the substantive connection is entirely opaque. Chazal do not just draw willy-nilly comparisons when they see two words with the same letters. What, then, are we meant to learn about Haman's character?

Let us examine the *pasuk* in context. After Adam and Chava eat from the *Etz Ha-Da'at*, they are confronted by God, who asks them, “have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you not to eat?” Some commentators are sensitive to the fact that God does not refer to the tree as the *Etz Ha-Da'at* but simply as *ha-Etz asher tziviticha* — the tree about which I commanded you. Among them is the Netziv,³ who explains that God did not prohibit the tree because there was something metaphysically harmful about it, but rather, because He wanted to give the first humans a prohibition in order to teach them that a higher power governed their desires. The tree's significance therefore lay solely in its being *ha-etz asher tziviticha*, and it was only once Adam and Chava were punished with that *da'at tov v'rah*⁴ that it acquired its distinctive name. Viewed in this light, Adam and Chava

didn't desire the tree per se, but rather, they wished to live without any limits on their desires.

By connecting Haman to this *pasuk*, Chazal signal that he was motivated by the same drive, and this is borne out by his own words in the Megillah. Haman's most personally revealing remarks come when he confides in his wife and his loved ones: Haman complains that despite his riches, prominent sons,⁵ and high position, “*Kol zeh einenu shoveh li b'chol et asher ani ro'eh et Mordechai Ha-Yehudi yoshev b'sha'ar hamelech.*,” all of this is worthless to me, as long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting in the gateway of the palace. The behavior of a single individual — the fact that Mordechai refuses to bow to him — renders all the good in Haman's life worthless to him. Adam and Chava rebelled against divine limits on their desires, Haman adopts this attitude in the extreme, claiming that everything loses its meaning when a single thing is missing. Haman's hatred of Mordechai is therefore more than just an interpersonal sin — it is also a theological sin, a rebellion against the existence of a God Who sets limits on man. It is no wonder, then, that the Midrash tells us that when Adam sinned, God initially wanted to hang him on a tree, but He ultimately decided to save this tree for Haman.⁶

Our celebration of Purim represents an utter rejection of Haman's attitude. The Gemara tells us that one reason we do not recite Hallel on Purim is “*acati avdei Achashverosh anan,*”⁷ i.e., the salvation on Purim was incomplete. And yet, we rejoice on Purim nonetheless, recognizing the value of what we *did* gain, thanking the One who made our salvation possible, and refusing to adopt the all-

or-nothing attitude of “*kol zeh enenu shoveh li*” embodied by Haman.

Endnotes

1. *Chullin* 139b.
2. Bereishit 3:11.
3. *Ha'amek Davar*, Bereishit 3:11.
4. This approach appears to be difficult given that Hashem does call it the *Etz Ha-Da'at* in His original command to Adam. The Rosh, who shares the Netziv's view, explains that it was only called the *Etz Ha-Da'at* then based on what would happen in the future: “*v'hai d'matzinu Etz Ha-Da'at kodem achila katvu baTorah al shem ha-atid*” (Commentary of the Rosh, Bereishit 3:11).
5. While some commentaries interpret “*rov banav*” as a reference to his many sons, Ibn Ezra quotes the “*midakdikim*” who argue that there would be no reason for Haman to tell his wife how many sons the two of them have. “*Rov*” therefore must not be a reference to the number of children that Haman has, but to their prominence: “*gidulat banav.*” But Ibn Ezra argues that it also makes sense for Haman to speak about how many sons he has — not because he needs to inform his wife about the quantity — but because he is simply describing his good fortune in order to dramatize the point he is about to make.
6. This Midrash is quoted in the *Da'at Zekeinim of Ba'alei Tosafot* Bereishit 3:11.
7. *Megillah* 14a.

Achashverosh: Indifference, Loyalty, and Action

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While Esther emerges as the savior of Purim, Achashverosh is portrayed as completely wicked, as the Gemara tells us, “*hu b'risho metchilato v'ad sofo,*” he was wicked from beginning to end (*Megillah* 11a). However, neither seem to be acting on their own accord, so why do we hold them responsible for their actions? Esther consistently follows Mordechai's commands not

to reveal her nationality (Esther 2:10, 2:20), and to enter the king's chamber to petition for her people (Esther 4:14). Achashverosh similarly does what Haman tells him. Haman instructs Achashverosh to get rid of Vashti (Esther 1:19), to destroy the Jewish people (Esther 3:9), and to ride Mordechai on the king's horse (Esther 6:8). What, then, distinguishes Achashverosh from Esther? Why do we view Achashverosh in a negative light?

The difference becomes clear when we contrast their responses to key moments in leadership. Achashverosh hands over his signet ring twice in the Megillah, which is symbolic of his relinquishment of decision-making to others. At one of the most defining moments in his kingship, when he has the choice to save or destroy the Jewish people, he simply defers to others. Haman requests to destroy the Jewish people, and Achashverosh hands over his signet ring (Esther 3:10). Esther asks to save the Jewish people and Achashverosh hands over his signet ring, yet again (Esther 8:8). Achashverosh has no loyalties, and he consistently heeds what he is told by others.

Esther, on the other hand, rises above her passivity to save her nation. The most pivotal moment in the Megillah is when the Jews are faced with a decree of annihilation, and Mordechai tells Esther that she must enter the king's chamber and petition to save the Jews. Mordechai tells her, “For, if you remain silent at this time, relief and salvation will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if for a time such as this you attained royalty?” (Esther 4:14). When faced with the decision to risk her life to

save her people, Esther rises to the occasion.

Why does Esther emerge as our savior, while Achashverosh remains in our eyes as wicked? Rav Aharon Lichtenstein explains that when our care runs deep enough, it propels us to act. Esther is able to overcome her passive nature because of her deep concern for her people (*By His Light*, pg.154-158). Achashverosh, on the other hand, remains totally indifferent. As the Gemara tells us, he was a rasha “*metchilato v’ad sofo*” (*Megillah* 11a). From the beginning to the end of his kingship, Achashverosh never has a moment like Esther’s. Without a deep sense of care for his kingdom, nothing pushes him to take responsibility.

At those pivotal moments in our own lives, we must ask ourselves: when will we remain indifferent, and when will our care run so deeply that it brings us to action?

The point that distinguishes Esther from Achashverosh is the response to leadership: when faced with great power, who will assume the great responsibility that comes with it? When we are faced with pivotal moments in life, will we remain silent like Achashverosh, or rise to the occasion like Esther?

Mordechai: A Man Who Warrants Introduction

Sara Schatz

In his famous sonnet, William Shakespeare writes, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”¹ While Shakespeare argues that names are meaningless, Judaism subscribes to the opposite approach. We find in Parshat Lech-Lecha that

the very first Jew, Avraham Avinu, had his name changed by G-d in order to reorient his life’s mission: “but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.”²

Oddly enough, however, Mordechai, one of the main protagonists of *Megillat Esther*, has a name with bizarre origins. In the *Da’at Mikra* commentary on Esther, famed Bible scholar Amos Hakham argues that the name Mordechai comes from the Babylonian god “Marduk.” Deported Jews of that generation had been forced to change their names to assimilated ones, in order to blur their Jewish identities.³ Yet despite Mordechai’s secular name, Chazal surprisingly attempt to search for its holy connotations. In *Mesechet Chullin*, Rav Mattana was asked the question, “*Mordechai min ha-Torah minayin?*,” “where is [the name] Mordechai [hinted] in the Torah?” Rav Mattana responds with a verse describing a spice from the anointing oil in the Mishkan, “*mar dror*,” “myrrh.”^{4,5} If Mordechai’s name historically comes from an assimilated background, why do Chazal try to infuse holiness within it? Shouldn’t we leave his name as is?

Perhaps we can answer this through a different mysterious identification of Mordechai. Interestingly, Mordechai is not introduced until the second chapter of Esther, *after* Achashverosh’s party. Addressing this delayed introduction, the midrash in *Esther Rabbah* compares Mordechai to Moshe, Shaul, and David HaMelech.⁶ All four of these leaders are introduced in the Torah as “redeemers” following a specific narrative: Moshe after description of Bnei Yisrael in slavery; Shaul following

attacks from outside nations; David after Goliath’s threat; and Mordechai after Achashverosh’s quest to find a new wife.⁷ However, there is a major difference between the first three leaders and Mordechai. While they are appointed through prophecy directly by G-d, Mordechai has no prophecy. Rather, Mordechai is anointed in the most inconspicuous way: his niece, Esther, wins Achashverosh’s heart, providing them an in within the royal palace, which would ultimately help them save the entire Jewish people from Haman’s wrath.

Perhaps this is where Chazal was coming from when comparing Mordechai’s name to the myrrh within the anointing oil. Mordechai, the Diasporic “*ish yehudi*” with a pagan name, single-handedly transforms his own identity by acting on behalf of his nation. Chazal thus fittingly compare him to “myrrh,” an ingredient in the anointing oil, because he was able to anoint himself to save the Jewish people. Through this, he turns into an example for all Diasporic generations to come, thereby securing Jewish continuity.

Endnotes

1. *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii (47-48).
2. Bereshit 17:5.
3. See *Da’at Mikra*, *Megillat Esther* 2:6. A similar occurrence takes place in Daniel 1:7, where we witness King Belshazzar changing the names of Daniel, Chaniah, Mishael, and Azariah to names of Babylonian gods in order to further assimilate them into Babylonian society.
4. 139b.
5. Shemot 30:23.
6. 5:4.
7. See Shemot 3:7, Shmuel I 9:16, and Shmuel I 16:7-12.