

Geulas Yisrael #142

Purim: The Shushan Horror Show

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It came from without any prior warning. Suddenly, Haman was promoted, and he quickly convinced Achashverosh to launch an all-out genocide against our people. Our people committed no major crime which would warrant heavenly punishment. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Jewish destiny was thrown into question.

The pace of Megillat Esther is frenetic. Within 24 hours of the homicidal scheming between Achashverosh and Haman, letters announcing the massacre of Jews had already circulated in Shushan, while riders were swiftly in flight to the rest of the global Persian kingdom. The frantic pace reflects how unprepared everyone was for this rude awakening. We hadn't committed any grave sin, things in Shushan seemed to be humming along, yet suddenly, we faced total extinction. We knew *how* it happened, we just didn't know *why* it happened.

Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Megillah 12a) was asked this very question by his students. Rebbi Shimon deferred to his students who, in turn, pointed to Jewish participation in the parties of Achashverosh as the root of the sin. Evidently, these two parties weren't just festive celebrations but were morally, historically, and culturally decayed, and participation in them was criminal. Hashem sent Haman as a rude wake-up call, which our people barely answered in time.

Moral Degeneracy

The two parties in Shushan were both lengthy and luxurious. The rooms were decked out with silver posts, alabaster chutes, gold sofas, resplendent tapestries, marble floors and upholstered walls. Having finalized the consolidation of the empires of Persia and Media, and having gradually extended the empire across 127 provinces, Achashverosh invited his nobleman to a 180-day celebration followed by an 8-day gala for the locals of Shushan. Everything about these parties was lavish, "over the top", and designed to display wealth, power, and glory: **בהראותו את עשר כבוד מלכותו ואת יקר תפארת גדולתו.**

Not only were the parties opulent, but they were also voyeuristic. 180 days of wine gorging and food gluttony in public display, in the palace courtyards and in the royal gardens. Absolutely no shame and certainly no privacy or human dignity. The wine flowed abundantly, and the food supply never diminished. No holds were barred for a party meant to display opulence and authority.

Of course, any party of unbridled voyeurism quickly disintegrates into the objectification of women and into vulgar pornography. Vashti was “kindly requested” to come and prance before the drunkards, so they could gawk and hoot at her. Chazal suggest a more nauseating plan for Vashti, meant not just to present her beauty but to completely dehumanize and humiliate her. It is no wonder that she declined this despicable request, even at the cost of her own life. Life without dignity is not worth living, and her husband and his band of merry brutes threatened to take that from her.

This carnival of ostentation and exhibitionism is the last place you would expect to find a Jew. Without question, the food, at least according to Chazal, was strictly kosher. The pasuk describes that the food choices at the party were completely voluntary since the menu wasn't enforced: **והשתייה כדת אין אונס**. Additionally, Chazal infer from this pasuk that the food was kosher or was prepared **כדת של תורה** .

Additionally, Chazal remark that the Jewish partiers were vigilant about not drinking wine which had been touched by a non-Jew or "setam yeinam". The food was mehadrin.

The sin of partying with the drunks of Shushan had nothing to do with the kashrut of the food but rather, with the spirit of the party. This celebration of debauchery is toxic to moral spirit and to personal sanctity. Those who entered the royal party emerged, 180 days later, without moral conscience and without their souls. Our people were punished for plunging themselves into a party which encouraged carnal pleasure and exhibitionism.

We cannot simply apply the “kosher food” test to decide which events we participate in. We must also apply the “kedusha gauge” to check whether an environment fosters sanctity, dignity, and respect for other

people. No one should have been caught dead at those Shushan parties, kosher food or not.

### Struggle in Yerushalayim, Revelry in Shushan

Beyond the immorality of the party, the festivities should have been historically offensive to Jews. According to Chazal's timeline, a few years before the party, Koresh, the first monarch of the Persian empire, authorized a Jewish return to Yerushalayim. Though this plan initially generated enthusiasm the project was ultimately grounded in the face of stiff local opposition to Jewish settlement in Israel. The opposition ultimately turned violent and the small groups of Jews who had emigrated to Yerushalayim were forced to guard their tiny settlement against aggression. The situation in Yerushalayim was bleak and frustrating and the Beit Hamikdash still stood empty, with only its basic foundations laid.

While a small group of Jews were battling for Jewish history in Yerushalayim, the cosmopolitan Shushanite Jews were living it up. If the parties weren't odious enough, the ballroom atmosphere felt eerily familiar. The banquet halls and royal dining areas were decorated in the style of the Mikdash, even being adorned with similar materials to the Mikdash such as gold, silver, techelet and argaman. According to Chazal, Achashverosh guzzled his wine from the chalices of the Mikdash and cavorted in the elegant clothing of the Cohen Gadol. Didn't it dawn on any of the Jews that this ugly mockery ridiculed the destroyed and desolate Mikdash? How could any Jew yearning for a return to Yerushalayim have tolerated such burlesque. Shouldn't they have stormed out of the party in protest, registering their distaste for this boorish charade and displaying their support for their countrymen back in Yerushalayim. The party wasn't just a moral disaster but was also historical treachery. Burials of heroes in Yerushalayim, endless parties in Shushan. How could they?

### Achashverosh's Campaign

There was, actually, a third criminal element to this party, and it surrounded the larger political role of the festival. Achashverosh's kingdom stretched from יהודו or India, until כוש, which most associate

with central Africa or with Ethiopia. The epicenter of the Persian empire was located to northwest of Israel in modern day Iraq and Iran. Effectively, the Persian empire dominated the entire Middle East and stretched as far south as Africa to the west, and to India in the east.

Despite this global hegemony there was one region and one people which still defied Persian rule. The Greek islands and Greek polis states had resisted several Persian invasions, finally defeating the troops of Darius the Great in 490 BCE, effectively ending the first Persian invasion. When Achashverosh- typically assumed to be Xerxes- ascended the throne around the year 486 BCE, the Greek Islands stood as the only barrier against complete Persian world domination. Indeed, Achashverosh or Xerxes ruled from יהודו or India until כוש or Africa, but not the Greek islands to the north. Achashverosh's struggles with Greece continues even after the Purim story, as the final perek in Megillat Esther describes him levying heavy taxes upon "the islands" hoping to extend his authority. Presumably these islands were the Greek islands.

Seeking to retaliate against Greece after their triumph over Darius in 490 BCE, Achashverosh or Xerxes prepared for war *for three years* amassing the largest army the ancient world had ever seen, as reported by the Greek historian Herodotus. Three years into his reign is *exactly where Megillat Esther* "picks up" when describing the lavish parties.

Obviously, these parties, in the third year of Achashverosh's reign were somehow related to the war campaign. Either they were held in preparation for the presumed victory or perhaps (depending upon the murky timelines) were held to honor the retuning victorious Persian troops. The military nature of these parties is evidenced by the attendance of military officers and attaches or חיל פרס מדי.

By attending these politically motivated parties, the Jews of Shushan were throwing their full support behind a Persian demigod who sought world domination. Evidently, the Jews felt too comfortable with their presumed political influence with Achashverosh. After all, hadn't the navi Daniel been honored by every Babylonian king from Nevuchadnezzar to Belshatzar? Hadn't he also been revered by Darius the first Median king. Daniel's successor Zerubavel had convinced Koresh to authorize the rebuilding of the Mikdash. Shushan itself was largely a Jewish city (see Ibn Ezra, Esther 1:1) and ultimately, once Esther was queened, it was

obvious that the Jews of Shushan could completely rely on this tyrant for support.

By joining the party, the Jews deluded themselves into believing that they had enough political clout to live comfortably in Shushan. Maybe they should have been a little more circumspect before so eagerly supporting Achashverosh's plans for world domination. Maybe they should have realized how fickle the political winds are and how quickly the political situation can turn.

Have we learned that lesson as well?