

# The Upside-Down World of Megillat Esther

By Rav Yoel Bin-Nun

## I.

At first glance, it would seem that Megillat Esther should never have been canonized as part of the Tanakh. This book appears to be purely secular, while the rest of Scripture details the history of God's communication with man. The Megilla is devoid of any sacred material, and in several places in the Megilla this void jumps out at the reader in a most obvious and startling manner.

First and foremost, God's Name appears nowhere in the Megilla, even when it is to be expected: "If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another source" (Esther 4:14). Rather than attributing the Jews' potential salvation directly to God, Mordekhai merely refers ambiguously to a "different source." Furthermore, when ordering the public fast upon her Jewish subjects, Esther omits any reference to prayer: "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days. I and my maidens will observe the same fast" (4:16). Furthermore, the queen makes no mention of the unusual timing of the three-day fast, in the middle of the festival of Pesach.

Additionally, despite its obvious relevance, the doctrine of reward of punishment, so predominant a theme throughout Tanakh, finds no allusion whatsoever in the Megilla. The text provides no clear indication as to the theological reason behind the decree of annihilation, nor does it suggest any divine intervention throughout the story. The entire process occurs through the means of a lottery, totally by chance and coincidentally.

The turn of events in the Jews' favor, too, raises difficulties from a Jewish, Biblical perspective. Esther's entry into the royal chambers in such a vulgar manner as described in the Megilla constitutes an outright desecration of her honor as a Jewish girl. One would expect that Esther's abduction by the king's officials and her coerced participation in the contest of beauty and sexual appeal would be described as a tragedy and a horrifying nightmare. Instead, the Megilla provides a detailed and enthusiastic illustration of the process: "Six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfume and women's cosmetics" (2:12).

Significantly, the Megilla provides no information regarding the religious observance, or lack thereof, of the Jews of the time. We know nothing about them, other than their identity as "Yehudim," Jews. The Megilla does not even explain why Mordekhai risks his life by refusing to prostrate himself before Haman, other than the fact that "he told them that he was a Jew." Such an explanation is in order, given the ample precedent for the permissibility of bowing down before another person (the prophet Natan bows down before King David - Melakhim I 1:23) and the ruling of the Rambam (Hilkhot Melakhim

2:8) that one may bow down before a king. Although Chazal offer various halakhic reasons for Mordekhai's refusal, the Megilla does not enlighten us on this issue.

In a similar vein, we are given no explanation of Haman's decree, other than the nationality of the people involved - "for they told him Mordekhai's nationality" (3:6). One would have expected to find that he hated the Jews for the same reason most antisemites did in the ancient world: he found their faith objectionable, since the Jews arouse the anger of the gods by worshipping a deity with no body or form. None of this finds even the most obscure allusion in the Megilla, except for Haman's generic accusation, "... Their laws are different from those of any other people and they do not obey the king's laws" (3:8). They are Jews - they are different. This is the only reason given for the decree.

Correspondingly, this also serves as the sole explanation offered to the people's rescue. Haman's wife and advisors remark, "If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin" (6:13). The Jews comprise a unique phenomenon; this is all we know. The Megilla offers no philosophical or spiritual basis for this enigma.

## II.

The Megilla also ignores Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel is not mentioned at all, and although there appears one reference to Jerusalem, the capital city emerges as merely an entity of the past: "... who had been exiled from Jerusalem, in the group that was carried into exile along with King Yechania, the King of Judah" (2:6).

Another strange phenomenon is that the Megilla seems deliberately indifferent to world events of the time. Except for two brief references in the beginning and end of the Megilla, Achashverosh emerges as a king bereft of color and grace. In fact, the author of the Megilla seems to have done anything he could to paint the king as a mockery and disgrace, as a leader whose life revolves around physical indulgence and sexual pleasure. Historical sources, however, present events of paramount importance that transpired during this time period. At the beginning of his reign, Achashverosh stabilized his kingdom and suppressed several threatening rebellions. As he prepared for war against Greece during his third year, his country developed canals and bridges, which were used for the transport of a huge army from Asia to Europe. Although he began the war by conquering Athens and setting it ablaze, the tides gradually turned against him, and he lost the war. Perhaps it was when the devastating news arrived in Shushan that the people resorted to lives of sheer vanity to deal with the international crisis.

Although the Megilla records events of the third, seventh and twelfth years of the king's reign, it does not at all relate to the aforementioned historical events. All we know of Achashverosh's reign from the Megilla is that he "reigned from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces" (1:1) - a very large empire indeed. This fact is

reinforced at the very end of the book: "King Achashverosh imposed tribute on the mainland and the islands. All his mighty and powerful acts, and a full account of the greatness to which the king advanced Mordekhai, are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia" (10:1-2). Sandwiched in between these two brief illustrations of royalty is a work of bitter satire, which deliberately overlooks significant historical events.

### III.

For what purpose does the Megilla omit all this? Why does it present the events in such a secular manner, bereft of even the slightest dimension of sanctity? The entire Tanakh is, after all, nothing more nor less than a record of God's relationship with mankind in general, and with Benei Yisrael specifically. The Torah tells us nothing of the middle thirty-eight years of the nation's journey through the wilderness, during which God did not speak with the people. Similarly, two centuries of slavery are summarized in just a couple of verses at the beginning of Sefer Shemot. Clearly, the Tanakh does not simply record ancient history. It selects only that which is relevant for all time.

In this sense, Megillat Esther stands in direct opposition to the rest of Tanakh. As opposed to the depiction of the Almighty's reign and His Providence over mankind, the Megilla illustrates, in a deliberately exaggerated way, a kingdom which constitutes the antithesis of the Divine Kingdom, a kingdom devoid of any sacred quality and of anything associated with the Name of God.

This topsy-turvy kingdom is described as focused entirely on the physical; it is the product of an exclusively secular environment. All the values and religious concepts found throughout the Scriptures find no place in the Megilla. Similarly, the condition of the Jews of Shushan is also presented as far less than ideal. The Megilla describes an assimilated Jewish community, a group fully entrenched in the decadent culture of Shushan, participating wholeheartedly in the vanity and moral corruption of the royal feast.

The names "Mordekhai" and "Esther" most likely derived from the common Persian names, "Morodokh" and "Ishtar." Although Mordekhai and Esther most likely used more "Jewish" names, the Megilla specifically opts to call them by these gentile names in order to underscore the Jews' submergence in the foreign culture.

The absence of Providence in the Megilla is further reinforced by the peculiar prominence therein of the "pur," the lottery. The two most critical elements of the Megilla - the initial decree of destruction and the eventual decree of celebration - are established based upon the drawing of lots. The text gives no indication that the lottery was mistaken. Based on what we know about the culture of the time, it is quite reasonable to assume that Haman arranged a meeting with his advisors and astrologers to determine an appropriate date for the systematic killing of the Jews. Their decision was never proven wrong: the fourteenth of Adar was, in fact, an appropriate day for killing, only it

was the Jews who destroyed their enemies, rather than the other way around. The day chosen was a correct one. The astrologer made but one critical mistake – he confused the victors with those who were defeated.

#### IV.

Thus, the inclusion of Megillat Esther as part of the canon serves to raise the fundamental question: who rules in an upside-down world?

In other words, were the Megilla to have been omitted from the Tanakh, we would have recognized the Almighty only under circumstances when His Name may be uttered, within a reality where spirituality can legitimately be maintained. Megillat Esther is thus indispensable, as it demonstrates God's existence even in places where His Name may not be introduced, even in situations where one may not pray, study Torah or be engaged in anything sacred. The Megilla shows us the reality of Divine Providence in the topsy-turvy world of Shushan, where everything appears to happen by chance, through a random lottery, with no spiritual dimension whatsoever.

In this sense, the Megilla raises a critical point of contention between Jewish and Persian theology. The Persians believed in two distinct deities, good and evil, which constantly fought with each other. By its purely secular content, the Megilla teaches us that God "forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates evil; I, Hashem, do all these things" (Yeshayahu 45:7). Underneath all the layers of secularity lies the Hand of God that governs and controls. As the gemara (Chullin 139b) says, "Where is there an allusion to Esther in the Torah? 'And I will surely conceal My face on that day' (Devarim 31:18)." Esther shows us the continuous manifestation of Divine Providence even when it cannot be seen on the surface.

This approach can be further substantiated by an intriguing parallel between Achashverosh's palace, which features both an inner and an outer chamber, and the Beit Ha-mikdash, which is described in similar terms by the prophet Yechezkel (chapter 40). No one may enter the inner chambers of God's Temple without a formal invitation by the Almighty, a privilege granted only to the High Priest on Yom Kippur. The upside-down world of the Megilla presents a portrait of a king who assumes the self-proclaimed status as ruler of the world, and thus, only one to whom the king extends the golden scepter may enter the "holy of holies," Achashverosh's inner chamber.

As a satirical metaphor, Queen Esther enters Achashevrosch's palace just as the High Priest gingerly and reverently steps into the Kodesh Ha-kodashim to atone for the Jewish people. Whereas the Kohen Gadol wears simple, modest clothing upon his reverent penetration into the Kodesh Ha-kodashim, the queen wears lavish, seductive attire in her attempt to appease the gluttonous king. The Kohen Gadol enters twice, first to produce the thick cloud of the incense to cover the Ark, and thereafter to actually perform the service of sprinkling the blood to attain atonement. Correspondingly, Esther first enters

the royal chamber to invite the king to her feast, the purpose of which is to confuse and blur the king's perception. Thereafter, after Haman is hung, she enters once again to plead with the king to annul the threatening decree.

Thus, Megillat Esther completes the essence of the Tanakh. It is written in a purely secular manner, so as to teach us that Divine Providence can be found even in places and situations hopelessly detached from sanctity, and that the Hand of God governs even those areas that seem ever so distant from His watchful eye.

(Translated by Rav David Silverberg)

[An expanded version of this article appears in the book, "Hadassa Hi Esther," a collection of Hebrew articles on Megillat Esther (in memory of Dassi Rabinovitch of Efrat), edited by Rav Amnon Bazak and published by Herzog Teachers' College. Copies of the book may be ordered by writing to [office@etzion.org.il](mailto:office@etzion.org.il).]