

What was Achashverosh Thinking?!

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“They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.” This depressingly funny phrase, so characteristic of Jewish humor, has often been quoted as a slapstick summary of many Jewish holidays. In many ways, Purim exemplifies this motif with our festive meal in commemoration of our victory over Haman and our enemies. Naturally, as we retell this story every year, our attention is primarily drawn to the central decree in the story – Haman’s decree, written and sealed by Achashverosh, “to kill and exterminate all Jews, young and old, children and women on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (Esther 3:13).” However, there is another decree, the first decree recorded in the story of the Megillah, to which we often pay little attention. At the end of the first chapter, Achashverosh signs another decree suggested by Haman:

This suggestion pleased the King and the officials, and the King acted according to the word of Memuchan²⁹. And he sent letters to all the king’s domains, to each domain in its own script and each people in its own language, [stating] that every man should be master over his house and speak the language of his own people.

Esther 1:21-22

ווייטב הדבר בעיני המלך והשרים
ויעש המלך כדבר ממוכן. וישלה
ספרים אל כל מדינות המלך אל מדינה
ומדינה ככתבה ואל עם ועם כלשונו
להיות כל איש שרר בביתו ומדבר
כלשון עמו.

אסתר פרק א:כא-כב

This decree is problematic on two levels. From the point of view of the narrative, it is tangential to the overall story of the Megillah. Whether or not the men of Persia were masters of their houses should not impact on Haman’s hatred of the Jews, or on the ability of the Persians to carry out the later decree to exterminate us. More importantly, from a legalistic point of view, this decree is completely and utterly absurd. How can even the most powerful of monarchs expect to govern what goes on behind closed doors? As Rav Soloveitchik remarks

In this matter, it all depends on the character of the husband and the wife. If the male is a strong-willed, master personality, he will be lord in his house even without legal support. However, if the woman is domineering, if she is the strong personality, commanding and masterful, she will dominate her husband, regardless of the royal decree that forbade the subordination of the male to the female”

Days of Deliverance, p. 57

²⁹ The gemara in Megillah 12b tells us that Memuchan is another name for Haman.

Furthermore, even if a man could be made in control of his house by the king's order, could he truly be called master of his house?!

Chazal's View

The rabbis of the Talmud not only take note of this strange decree, but even go so far as to say that it plays a critical role in the Purim story.

*Rava said: If not for the first letters, there would not have been even a single remnant or survivor of the Jewish people*³⁰

Megillah 12b

אמר רבא: אלמלא אגרות הראשונות לא
נשתייר משונאיהן של ישראל שריד ופליט.
מסכת מגילה דף יב:

Can it be that *Chazal* are really talking about the same absurd decree mentioned above?! How can this irrational decree have resulted in anything significant, let alone be a source of salvation in the Purim story? *Rashi* on the gemara explains that the non-Jews' hatred of the Jews was so great that they certainly would not wait to start massacring their Jewish neighbors. As soon as they saw that Achashverosh had issued a decree to kill all the Jews, they would disregard the exact date that the decree was supposed to take effect, and immediately start killing Jews. Had they done so, God forbid, there would not have been any time for Mordechai and Esther to devise and execute their plan to reverse the edict.

And yet somehow the king's chauvinistic command at the end of the first chapter of the managed to prevent this pogrom. How so? The gemara continues:

For the people [of Persia] said to each other: What is the meaning of the king's command that each man should be master of his house. This goes without saying! Even a lowly weaver is the lord is his own home!

אמרי: מאי האי דשדיר לן להיות כל
איש שרר בביתו? פשיטא! אפילו
קרחה בביתה פרדשכא ליהוי!

Thus, according to the gemara, even the people of Persia at that time found Achashverosh's decree absurd. In their view, even a man without much power, such as a simple weaver, did not need the king's encouragement to be the master of his own home. Such an idea was laughable and certainly not worthy of being issued as a royal edict. If the king did issue such a decree, they reasoned, it must have been issued in error or under the influence of wine. As such, they could not be sure whether to take *any* of the king's decrees seriously. If the king could send out such a ridiculous command, perhaps even more reasonable requests were also errors and likely to be reversed. It was in this frame of mind that the men of Persia later read the edict to slaughter all their Jewish neighbors. Wisely, they chose not to act on that command at least until the day listed on the decree. This would provide ample time to wait and see if the decree was in fact real or just another error sent out by a drunken king.³¹

³⁰ Literally "of the enemies of the Jewish people," a common euphemism used by the gemara when discussing a harmful statement regarding the Jewish people.

³¹ A similar explanation can also be found in the *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez* on Esther 1:22.

In this way, Chazal's view is that the decree to be master of one's house was so absurd that it was not only ineffective but also counterproductive. The act of issuing a ridiculous decree served to undermine the authority of the crown to the point that even later decrees were not taken seriously. This mistrust of the king later played a crucial role in the Purim story, keeping the Persians at bay until Esther had time to save the Jewish people.

Achashverosh's Perspective

The previous gemara demonstrates how the ostensibly tangential edict in the beginning of the Megillah serves an essential role in the Purim story. However, it presupposes that the people of Persia were correct in their characterization of the king – that such a decree could not make sense and must have been forged, sent in error, or in a drunken state of mind. While this reasoning is well grounded, as readers of the Megillah, we know that the edict was neither a forgery nor an error. Thus, we are left with two possibilities. Either it was just the alcohol talking (or issuing decrees), or we must explore the possibility that there *is* some logical way to explain Achashverosh's decree.

Certainly, one can make an easy argument that alcohol influenced Achashverosh's behavior that fateful evening. According to the *Targum Sheni*³² on Esther 2:1, Achashverosh himself admits that his wine influenced his decisions and the next day "he sent and summoned all his advisors and servants and said to them: I am not mad at Vashti. Rather I am angry with you, for I was merely speaking under the influence of wine, but you incited me to kill her!" But the king's advisors were not only at fault for leading him to kill Vashti. They were equally aware that his decree commanding the men to be masters of their homes was ill conceived and would only bring disgrace to the crown. *Ibn Ezra* (1:22) even explains that the tangential line of "וּמַלְכֵךְ" "כלשון עמל" was added at the end of the decree, presumably by a more scrupulous advisor, to protect the king from shame by distracting people's attention from the comical decree by adding in a more substantive clause at the end.

The *Megillat Setarim*, written by Rabbi Yaakov of Lissa (better known for his work the *Chavas Da'at*) puts an entirely different perspective on Achashverosh decree that all men are to be masters of their households. In his commentary on Esther 1:22, the *Megillat Setarim* explains how the king's edict was far from a drunken whim, and in fact the decree was quite clever and calculated. Achashverosh, realizing that Vashti descended from mighty kings, was concerned that her royal relatives might try to take revenge when they found out that she was murdered. If so, they would likely try to organize the men of the empire into an army and cause a rebellion against this tyrannical king. In order to prevent such a rebellion, Achashverosh issued a decree that every man should be master over his house – *but only over his own house*. The intent of the decree was actually to diminish a single man's authority and to prevent the organization of brigades which might be used against the monarchy. Although the decree seems to be increasing a man's power in his home, it also sneakily forbids any authority outside the home. Every man in the empire was to be

³² Targum Sheni is more of a homitelical work than a true "targum" or translation and probably dates to the 7th or 8th century, though the exact date and author is unknown.

master over his wife and children, but not over any other man. In this way, Achashverosh was actually trying to save himself and his monarchy through this seemingly ridiculous decree.

Haman's Perspective

As one attempts to analyze the motives of Achashverosh's decree, one must also recognize that although the king signed and sealed this absurd decree, the idea for the decree itself ultimately belonged to Haman. What was Haman's motivation for suggesting such a strange decree? Certainly, if Haman wanted to kill all the Jews, and to influence the king to his favor, he would want to help strengthen the monarchy, not undermine it. Obviously, this is not a difficulty according to the *Megillat Setarim* – in fact perhaps it demonstrates just how clever an advisor Haman was. However, according to the more mainstream understandings of the decree, one must still wonder how such a shrewd advisor could have suggested the very ruling that the gemara tells us undermined all later decrees. The *Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez*, based on the writings of *Iyyun Yaakov*, suggests a motive for Haman. Similar to Pharaoh's knowledge that his downfall could come at the hands of a baby boy, Haman's astrologers warned him that the king's wife would rescue the Jews and cause his own downfall. This explains why Haman was so quick to suggest that Achashverosh kill Vashti and this is also why he had an interest in ensuring that all women were subjugated to the will of their husbands. Haman realized that the king would ultimately remarry, but he wanted to make certain that the king's new wife would have as little power and influence as possible.

A Psychological Approach

There is another, perhaps even simpler, way to explain Achashverosh's absurd decree, based upon the language of the Megillah itself and some commonsense psychoanalysis. While Achashverosh was certainly intoxicated when he agreed to kill Vashti and declare all men masters of their households, he was influenced that night by something more powerful as well – anger. This is clearly seen from the words of the Megillah at the beginning of the very next chapter.

After these things, when the anger of the King Achashverosh subsided, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.

Esther 2:1

אחר הדברים האלה כשך חמת המלך
אחשוורוש זכר את ושתי ואת אשר עשתה
ואת אשר נגזר עליה.
אסתר ב:א

The Megillah could very easily have said, 'when the king became sober' if alcohol was the biggest player in explaining the king's actions. Instead, we are told that only once his *anger* went away was he truly able to revisit his actions from the previous night. When Achashverosh decided to kill Vashti, he did so in the height of his rage, out of his sense of scorn and hurt. As much as we may feel that the king's request of Vashti was inappropriate, he was still publicly rebuffed and shamed by her in front of the most powerful men and women in all of the empire. Sadly, many people are blinded by rage, and Achashverosh may still have wanted to kill Vashti even if he was completely sober. This same sense of hurt and betrayal was also likely to influence his decision to decree that all men should be rulers over their homes. Feeling betrayed by his own wife and contradicted in his own home, Achashverosh felt that by "protecting" other men from similar

insult he was somehow recovering from his offense. In a strange form of transference, he was essentially transferring his own feelings of hurt to all men of the empire. Rashi points out that Haman played upon these emotions of Achashverosh.

for the matter of the queen will become known to all the women

Esther 1:17

if [the queen] could embarrass the king, then all women will come to embarrass their husbands!

Rashi ibid

כי יצא דבר המלכה על כל הנשים
אסתר א"יז
זה שביזתה את המלך על כל הנשים להבזות
אף הן את בעליהם
רש"י שם

This was the context, the state of mind, during which Achashverosh issues his inane edict that all men must be masters of their homes. While the decree may seem absurd in hindsight, it maintains an element of logic when we take into account the emotional state of Achashverosh at that time.

Achashverosh's Fatal Flaw and the Message of Purim

Assuming that Achashverosh's emotional state can be used to explain his strange edict, the question still remains of why the Megillah found it necessary to record this episode. Is there something greater to learn from Achashverosh's emotions and absurd decree? Perhaps the Megillah is subtly revealing to us Achashverosh's fatal flaw.

Everyone gets angry at times, and we may even behave improperly or make ill-conceived decisions under the influence of our anger. What hopefully sets us apart from Achashverosh is the ability to admit when we are wrong and when our anger is misplaced. While it is only human for Achashverosh to be insulted and angered by the queen's public disobedience of his wishes, not for one second did he entertain the thought that *his* actions, that *his* request, may have been inappropriate. Achashverosh viewed his interaction with Vashti as a normal request by a husband followed by unnecessary disobedience on the part of his wife. Since the problem was simply a lack of obedience or respect, all the king had to do was make an example of Vashti and legislate that no women should follow her lead. This is why he believed that he was doing some great service for the men of Persia by legislating that their wives must also obey them. If he had considered that his request was horribly inappropriate for any woman, let alone the queen, such legislation should never have been necessary. But Achashverosh was not capable of this introspection. Rather, he was completely incapable or unwilling to admit that he was wrong.

This narcissistic sense of infallibility was not an isolated event for Achashverosh. Rather, his entire system of government was built around the notion that he could not and would not ever make a mistake. This is most clearly seen at the end of the Megillah when Esther has convinced Achashverosh not to follow through with his decree to kill the Jews. Rather than simply revoking the decree, and allowing peace to reign in the empire, the king issued a new decree stating that the Jews are allowed to defend and avenge their enemies. Why is such a convoluted solution necessary?

... Because an edict written in the King's name

ואתם כתבו על היהודים כטוב בעיניכם בשם המלך

*and sealed with the royal signet may not be
revoked*

Esther 8:8

וּחְתָּמוּ בְּטַבְעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי כָתוּב אֲשֶׁר נִכְתַּב בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ
וּנְחַתּוּם בְּטַבְעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין לְהַשִּׁיב
אֶסְתֵּר פָּרָק ח:ח

Most governments realize that at times, there is a need to revise or revoke laws and orders. A call from the governor can save a criminal from death, even after he has already been sentenced in a court of law. Under Achashverosh, however, built into the legislative system was the notion that the king would never change his mind and revoke his decrees. The idea that a previous decree could be ill conceived or improper was not even an option, just as Achashverosh viewed his personal actions with regard to Vashti. This is Achashverosh's fatal flaw. Luckily, he is not the hero of our story. He is a straw man from whom the Megillah may teach us lessons each and every Purim.

One of the messages of Purim is the idea of teshuva, repentance. On Purim, we celebrate not only our victory over our enemies, but over ourselves as well. Unlike Achashverosh, we recognize that not only are we capable of making mistakes, but that we wish to change ourselves and our ways. The kabbalistic sages such as the Zohar and Rav Tzadok teach us that it is not mere coincidence that Yom Kippurim and Purim share almost the same name. The two holidays are conceptually and mystically connected, despite their disparate moods and celebrations. On Yom Kippur, we solemnly recognize the actions of our past and ask Hashem for forgiveness. On Purim, we dress up in costume; we dance, sing, and laugh to make light of ourselves. At least for one day a year, we practice not taking ourselves so seriously. We are not infallible. We are not perfect. We make mistakes and we recognize that fact. It is only through this knowledge that we can constantly hope to be able to change for the better. May Hashem recognize our celebration as such.