

MEMUCHAN IS HAMAN: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Each chag can be considered from its historical, moral or theological perspective, and Purim is no exception. The Megilla can be taken as a work of theology that instructs us about the hidden hand of God. Alternatively, it can be understood as the historical record of the redemption of the Jewish people during a major persecution or as the historical setting of the rabbinic enactment to celebrate each month of Adar. We, however, would like to focus on a different facet of the book of Esther: its function as a cautionary tale based on its surprising choice of main character: Haman.

While God is working in the background of the story, the character who moves the plot along is Haman. By focusing on this point, we will learn the moral of the story: that the actions of a megalomaniac lead to

his undoing. In order to demonstrate how this is so, we will first need to ask and answer another question: Why do Chazal assume that Memuchan is Haman?



At first glance, there is little evidence that Memuchan, advisor to Achashverosh in the first chapter, is Haman. After Vashti refuses to appear at her husband's party, Memuchan suggests to Achashverosh that he should understand her offense not only as an attack against him personally, but as a crime against all officers in the kingdom:

...לא על המלך לבדו עוֹתָהּ וְשֵׁתִי הַמְּלָכָה
כִּי עַל כָּל הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל כָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל
מְדִינֹת הַמְּלָךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ.

Not only against the king has Queen Vashti sinned, but against all of the officers and against all of the nations in the king's provinces.

Esther 1:16

Jumping the line ahead of Achashverosh's other, more senior advisors (*Megilla* 12b), he proposes a radical solution: The king should not

wait to punish Vashti, and he should not use the courts.

At this point, Memuchan seems to be no more than a character in the prologue who sets up the story for Vashti's downfall and the eventual ascent of Esther. But if we take careful note of his actions, we see political maneuverings that identify Memuchan as none other than the main antagonist of the Megilla, Haman.

First, Memuchan and Haman seem to share assumptions regarding the well-being of the king and the well-being of the empire. When Vashti, by refusing to attend her husband's party, personally offends Achashverosh, Memuchan suggests that this is a national problem, as we noted above:

וַיֹּאמֶר מְמוּחָן לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים לֹא עַל
הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ עָוְתָה וְשָׂתִי הַמַּלְכָּה כִּי עַל כָּל
הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל כָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל מְדִינֹת
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֶרוֹשׁ.

Thereupon Memuchan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: "Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus."

Esther 1:16

Haman soon relies on the same

assumption — that the king's well-being is the same as the well-being of the empire — when he wants Achashverosh to authorize a genocide against the Jewish people:

וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לְמֶלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֶרוֹשׁ יִשְׁנֹנוּ עִם אֶחָד
מִפְּזָר וּמִפֶּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלְכוּתְךָ
וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל עַם וְאֵת דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם
עוֹשִׂים וְלִמְלֶכְךָ אֵין שׂוּהָ לְהַנִּיחֵם:

*Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in **Your Majesty's interest** to tolerate them."*

Esther 3:8

At this point, Haman need not even make the point explicitly; it is simply obvious that if it is not in the king's interest to tolerate the Jews, then it is in nobody's interest to tolerate them.


Additionally, the Gra notes that Memuchan's seemingly minor suggestion that the king issue a personal decree (1:19) that Vashti be replaced for crossing him contains a legal tidal wave, which radically alters the relationship between the king and his advisors. Under traditional Persian law, the king may not simply rule on matters pertaining to the king; by example, Darius is unable to

protect Daniel from the machinations of his other advisors and has a difficult time marshalling the right to execute his accusers (Daniel chap. 6). Similarly here, Achashverosh is unable to punish Vashti without turning to his court: "then the king consulted the sages ... for matters of the king were subject to experts in law and adjudication" (1:14, see Biur HaGra). With Memuchan's innovation, however, this limitation of the king's power is removed. As the Gra notes, "Everyone will hear that the king can rule for himself on any matter in his kingdom, even what pertains to him personally. And this rule was significant because this would increase their awe of the king." Or, more succinctly in the Malbim's words, "from this point on, the king's sovereignty was absolute" (1:19). Memuchan's additional rule, which was unnecessary for and irrelevant to the execution of Vashti, changed the rules of the game and permanently endangered the lives of the king's advisors. From this point on, Achashverosh seems to have no advisors until Harvona's comments in chapter 7. In the meantime, Achashverosh is advised by one man, outside of his "young servants" (6:3): Haman, the only beneficiary of Persia's terrifying new policy. It seems


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likely, therefore, that Memuchan did not create this power vacuum in order for someone else to occupy it; rather, he established himself as the last man standing, and he was simply known by another name from this point forward:

וַיְסַפֵּר לָהֶם הַמֶּן אֶת...כֹּל אֲשֶׁר גִּדְּלוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ
וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוּ עַל הַשָּׂרִים וְעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ.
*and Haman told them ... all about
how the king had promoted him and
advanced him above the officials and the
king's courtiers.*

Esther 5:11

Last, we do not know much about Memuchan, the seemingly reckless advisor who endangered himself with this new rule. Why would he suggest something so dangerously irrational? What was his motivation?

We can resolve this question by pointing to the megalomaniac who occupies the rest of the story: Haman. After receiving the slight of one man who refused to bow to him, Haman “looked contemptuously upon

punishing Mordechai alone,” feeling it beneath him to do any less than to kill all Jews (3:5-6). Only a genocide could constitute sufficient salve for his insult.

After receiving the honor of an invitation to Esther’s party, Haman obsesses over the fact that Mordechai still refuses to show him honor. He has great wealth, many sons, the top political position in the empire:

וְכֹל זֶה אֵינְנִי שׂוֹהֵה לִי בְּכֹל עֵת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי רֹאֶה
אֶת מֹרְדֵכַי הַיְּהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ.
*Yet all this means nothing to me every
time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the
palace gate.*

Esther 5:13

Haman heard the words, “what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?” and immediately assumed the king must be talking about him before suggesting that Achashverosh effectively make him look like king for the day (6:6-9).

In short, Haman was a first-rate megalomaniac: he was obsessed with

the pursuit of power and pursued it in an absolute manner. Indeed, nothing else mattered to him.

The assumption that Memuchan is Haman is what establishes this Megilla as a cautionary tale. As the Gra says, “It was caused by Heaven that he should prepare the salvation by his own hand.” (1:19) Or, *venahafoch hu*, we can reverse this sentiment and understand that it was the will of the Almighty that Haman be the one to orchestrate his own destruction. Haman’s political destruction comes as a result of his request to be led through the streets of Shushan on the king’s horse. Haman’s life is taken by the gallows that he sets up to kill Mordechai. He might have been saved by the old Persian system to protect advisors from the whims and wishes of the king, but he was the one who dismantled it. If the antagonist of this cautionary tale teaches us one thing, it is that each malevolent maneuver to grab power will lead to self-destruction.

