



POINTING A FINGER AT ACHASHVEIROSH

The Gemara (*Megillah* 16a) makes an astonishing comment about Esther's relationship with Achashveirosh:

ותאמר אסתר איש צר ואויב המן הרע הזה
אמר ר' אלעזר מלמד שהיתה מחווה כלפי
אחשורוש ובא מלאך וסטר ידה כלפי המן.

“And Esther said: The adversary and the enemy is this wicked Haman”
(*Esther* 7:6). *Rabi Elazar said: This teaches us that she was pointing toward Achashveirosh, and an angel came and moved her hand toward Haman.*

This statement is nothing less than astonishing. Why would Esther even think of pointing to Achashveirosh? After all, Haman is the one who was plotting against the Jews! How could Esther become distracted from the



goal of her properly prepared plan to eliminate Haman, especially at such a critical moment? This short passage in the Gemara is laden with meaning and hints to some major themes of *Megillat Esther*.

Esther's Plan

It is possible that Esther indeed thought that the root of the entire tragedy was Achashveirosh. While it is certainly possible to view Achashveirosh as a fool who is manipulated by Haman, the Gemara (*Megillah* 12a) presents an opinion that Achashveirosh shrewdly manipulated Haman. The Gemara (*Megillah* 14a) expresses the idea as follows:

משל דאחשורוש והמן למה הדבר דומה לשני בני אדם לאחד היה לו תל בתוך שדהו ולאחד היה לו חריץ בתוך שדהו בעל חריץ אמר מי יתן לי תל זה בדמים בעל התל אמר מי יתן לי חריץ זה בדמים לימים נזדווגו זה אצל זה אמר לו בעל חריץ לבעל התל מכור לי תילך אמר לו טול אותה בחנם והלואי.

Achashveirosh and Haman may be compared to two people — one had a large ditch in his field, and the other had a huge mound of dirt in his field. The one with the ditch wondered how he could purchase the mound, and the mound owner wanted to purchase the ditch. Eventually, the two met, and the ditch owner offered the mound owner to purchase the mound, and the mound owner replied, “If only you would take the mound for free!”

Achashveirosh, in this parable, is the mound owner, Haman is the ditch owner, and the Jews are regarded by both Haman and Achashveirosh as dirt. Achashveirosh wanted to rid himself of the Jews but was unwilling to do so because he feared the consequences should his efforts fail. Thus, he needed someone to dispose of the Jews for him. Haman lacked the authority to eliminate the Jews and thus coveted the power to execute his evil plan. Once Achashveirosh discovered that Haman was willing to dispose of the Jews, Achashveirosh was thrilled to permit Haman to eliminate the Jewish People without payment (see Esther 3:11). Achashveirosh reasoned that if Haman’s plan encountered problems, he would simply place all the blame on Haman and Haman would fall.

Accordingly, Esther viewed Achashveirosh as the source of the problem. Thus, she considered that even if she eliminated Haman,

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Achashveirosh would remain in power and the threat to the Jews would not be completely eliminated. Recall that the Gemara (*Megillah* 14a) states that Hallel is not recited on Purim because Achashveirosh remains in power, and the threat to our People is not entirely eliminated (unlike Pesach when Paroh is thoroughly disempowered at Keriyat Yam Suf).

The desire to eliminate Achashveirosh becomes even more understandable if we consider the history of Persian kings. Sefer Ezra-Nechemia (especially Perek 4 of Ezra) records that the Persian kings were very positively disposed toward the Jewish People. Koresh (Cyrus) granted the Jews the right to return to Yerushalayim and to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. Daryavesh (Darius) permitted the Jews to complete the construction of the Beit HaMikdash and even financed the completion of the project. Artachshasta (Artaxerxes) permitted Nechemiah to reconstruct the walls of Yerushalayim.

Achashveirosh is the only Persian emperor in Sefer Ezra-Nechemia to stand in the way of the Jews progressing in Yerushalayim (Ezra 4:6 and see Ezra 6:14 in which Achashveirosh is excluded from the list of Persian emperors who contributed toward the completion of the Beit HaMikdash). Thus, Esther believed that if she eliminated Achashveirosh, she would thereby

pave the way for a new emperor who would reinstate the traditional positive Persian policy toward Am Yisrael and Yerushalayim.

Esther even thinks she can succeed in her plan to accuse Achashveirosh and eliminate him. Achashveirosh is an enormously unpopular ruler. We see that his servants plot against him (Esther 2:21-23) and that Achashveirosh is fearful of others plotting against him (Esther 4:11, 6:1 and 7:8). If we subscribe to the theory that Achashveirosh is Xerxes (see *Da’at Mikra’s* introduction to *Megillat Esther*), then Achashveirosh’s vulnerability is very understandable. Xerxes, early in his reign, had led the Persians into a ruinous war against the Greeks during which the Persian army was nearly eliminated and the royal treasury was nearly depleted.

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Hashem’s Plan

While Esther certainly has devised a brilliant plan to completely save our people, Hashem does not approve of the plan. In fact, Hashem sends an angel to modify Esther’s plan, perhaps because the plan is overly ambitious and risky. Esther assumes that after she points to Achashveirosh as the true source of evil in the empire, she will rally the servants and royal advisors at the party to support her cause and join her in outright rebellion. However, as is evident from *Megillat Esther*, Achashveirosh’s servants are fickle and opportunistic

individuals who are merely looking at ways to advance themselves and not to improve the wellbeing of the empire.

Thus, Hashem forces Esther to adopt the far less ambitious plan of simply eliminating Haman. This is a lesson for Jews in *Galut* (exile) and even today in Eretz Yisrael. We often seek overly ambitious plans that will solve our problems completely. Instead, Hashem wants us to follow the example of Raban Yochanan ben Zakai (*Gittin* 56a and 56b) who aspired simply to “*hatzala purta*,” a partial redemption. Instead of asking the Roman emperor to spare the Beit HaMikdash, he asked for Yavneh and its Yeshivah. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai feared that if he asked for the protection of the Beit HaMikdash, his request would be rebuffed. Thus, he believed that he stood a far better chance when requesting the far less ambitious proposal of maintaining Yavneh and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel.

For example, some activists advocate the adoption of unwieldy and overly ambitious plans to overcome the problems of *igun* (withholding of a *get*), such as conditional marriages or conditional *gittin* issued at the time of marriage, which are fraught with halachic and practical problems. A more reasonable approach is to adopt the Rabbinical Council of America’s prenuptial agreement. While the RCA prenup is less ambitious and narrower in scope than the other approaches,

it is nonetheless dramatically more effective (and halachically acceptable). Similarly, I have seen communities that seek to implement very stringent practices in regard to their *eiruv*, which later become so unwieldy that they are not maintained at even a basic level of kashrut. Prudent pro-Israel advocacy groups adopt an analogous approach to lobbying Congress. It is pointless to promote overly ambitious legislation that has no chance of passing Congress (such as those in 2005 who quixotically lobbied Congress to oppose the Israeli government’s plan to withdraw from Gaza). When looking for a spouse, one should similarly not be overly ambitious but rather maintain reasonable expectations. There are countless examples in all areas of life.

A baseball analogy clarifies the message of our Gemara. A batter who aims to hit a home run may hit a home run, but he also runs a higher risk of striking out. Babe Ruth was for a very long time the all-time leading home run hitter, but he was also a leader in strikeouts. When a batter aims simply to hit a single, his chance of striking out is far less than if he were to aim to hit a home run.

The Lesson of Purim

Rav Tzadok HaKohein of Lublin (*Divrei Soferim* 32) notes that Pesach and Purim represent two different paradigms of redemption. The *Geulah* from Mitzrayim celebrated on Pesach was a complete redemption. Once

the Egyptian army was eliminated at the Yam Suf, we were completely liberated from Paroh. We were transformed, as we will soon state at the Seder, “*mei’afeilah le’orah*,” from darkness to light. Purim, on the other hand, represents survival in darkness. It teaches us that we can survive in darkness (i.e. *Galut*) even when complete redemption is not forthcoming in the near future.

Conclusion

We welcome Adar with joy, Rashi (*Ta’anit* 29a s.v. *Mi’shenichnas Adar*) explains, as it ushers in the season we celebrate the holidays of our redemption, Purim and Pesach. We begin our celebratory season thanking Hashem for the partial redemption of Purim and proceed to thank Hashem for the complete redemption of Pesach. In our times, Hashem has bestowed upon our people a partial redemption, as in the days of Purim, in the form of Medinat Yisrael. We anxiously await for Hashem to speedily bring forth a full redemption, similar to Pesach, with the arrival of the Mashiach.



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