

# **The Steinsaltz Megillot**

*Megillot Translation and Commentary*

## **Megillat Esther**

Commentary by

**Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz**



**Steinsaltz Center**



**KOREN**

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The Steinsaltz Megillot  
Esther

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# MEGILLAT ESTHER

is distributed in loving memory of his father

*Joseph "Erez" Tenenbaum*

יוסף ערז בן טוביה זיסמן

נפטר בשמחת תורה תשע"ח

and his grandfather

*Josef Meisels*

יוסף בן חיים זכריה הלוי

נפטר בשושן פורים תשכ"ח

שניהם מלאים שמחת חיים

*by Zisman Tuviah*



ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר  
...there was joy and gladness for the Jews...

# Introduction to The Steinsaltz Megillot

Scholars and lay readers alike are aware that writing a new commentary on the Bible requires assistance and blessings from Above, as well as substantial effort from below. Two fundamental challenges stand before one who seeks to write a commentary on the Bible: First, the aspiration to relate to the loftiest and holiest text and to explain it faithfully risks hubris. Second, a huge number of commentaries on the Bible have been composed over the course of the past three thousand years by the greatest people in our history. Who has the audacity to attempt to join this holy assembly or even grasp its coattails?

Sanction for undertaking this daunting task can be found in Rashi's statement to his grandson Rashbam, himself the author of an important commentary on the Torah. Rashbam reports Rashi to have said that if he had had the strength, he would have written another commentary in accordance with the "plain meanings that are renewed every day" (Rashbam, Genesis 37:2).

In every generation and on each passing day, fresh light can be shed on the verses of the Bible and new perspectives can be found. Not only are new answers offered to old questions, but in every era additional questions are raised by students of the Bible, due to both the diversity of the personalities, and the differing interests and perspectives, of each era. Throughout the ages, the great commentaries have discussed a wide range of different issues. To this day, thank God, there are many scholars and students of the Bible raising unique questions and challenges that require attention, analysis, and investigation. All these illuminate the eternal words of the Torah through a range of viewpoints and give rise to "plain meanings that are renewed every day."

This commentary seeks to offer the reader the plain meaning of the text, the *peshat*. Ostensibly, this is the simplest level of interpretation, but the elucidation of the plain meaning is actually the most difficult type of interpretation. Other kinds of interpretation, based on allusion [*remez*], midrashic hermeneutics [*derash*], or esoteric, mystical traditions [*sod*], are free to forge links between the text and the sources from which they draw and are not constrained by the language and concepts of the Bible. In contrast, discovering the plain meaning of the text requires the interpreter to adhere closely to the literal meaning of the words while paying attention to syntax and context.

Although this commentary includes references to many other commentaries, it is not an anthology. It was not intended to provide a comprehensive array of interpretations from across the generations. The aim of the references is to show that a suggested interpretation is based on earlier sources or discusses a similar question. Moreover, this work does not aspire to be revolutionary or novel. Rather, it aims to present what might be called a "transparent" commentary, one whose explanations should go almost unnoticed and serve only to give the reader and student the sense that there is no barrier between him or her and the text. The aim is to let the Torah speak for itself, to allow the prophets to prophesy and the wise men to impart their wisdom. In order to enable the "voice" of the verses to be heard, the annotations are brief, serving as a thin, barely perceptible screen rather than a heavy, concealing coat of armor.

At Mount Sinai, the entire Jewish people heard "a great voice" (Deuteronomy 5:18), which the Sages interpret to mean a voice that has never ceased (*Targum Onkelos*; *Sanhedrin* 17a). It is my hope that this project will help people hear the voice of the Torah even in our busy, noisy world.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

# Introduction by the Hebrew Editors

The purpose of this commentary is to assist the contemporary reader by bridging the gaps in language, outlook, and culture between us and the world of the Bible. As far as possible, it seeks to clarify ambiguities, elucidate problematic passages, and remove obstacles to understanding while dealing with both explicit and implicit difficulties.

The commentary consists of several parts, which complement but are independent of one another. The literal translation of the verses appears in boldface. Woven into the biblical text in non-bold typeface are brief explanatory comments and elaborations. Below the text are notes that offer more elaborate discussion of topics that appear in the verses as well as insights into the general context and scientific and historical realia that surround the biblical text.

The biblical text is divided into units based on subject matter, which do not always accord with the standard division into chapters. Each unit is prefaced by a heading and a short introduction. This structure should not be viewed as a definitive partition of the biblical text but as a suggestion, part of the commentary, for the reader's convenience and orientation.

The commentary seeks to concisely clarify the language and context at the most basic level so as not to encumber the reader. Consequently, it is not committed to a particular exegetical method and does not systematically defer to any particular commentator. In cases where there are differing explanations of a passage, alternative explanations may be cited. In cases where the halakhic tradition expounds a verse in a manner not consistent with the plain meaning, this will be noted and explained briefly in the annotations themselves or by means of a reference, allowing the plain meaning of the text to be preserved while not disregarding the interpretation of the Oral Law.

It must be stated that even when written without qualification, the interpretations offered are not meant to be seen as authoritative. They are no more than suggestions, occasionally novel ones, which are compatible with the simple meaning of the text and which speak to the average reader. There are no systematic exegetical considerations behind the decision to adopt any particular interpretation.

Much thought and labor have been invested to ensure that the design of this work is as aesthetically pleasing and convenient for the user as possible. This design is the fruit of an ongoing collaboration between the team at the Institute for Talmudic Publications and Koren Publishers. Our thanks to Rabbi Meir Hanegbi, whose wisdom, conviviality, and efficiency contributed greatly to the success of the project. Rabbi Hanokh Ben Arza, may his memory be for a blessing, was the father of the two editors in chief of the Hebrew edition; his spirit and respect for the written word inspired them in their work.

The Editors

# Introduction by the Translators

## ON THE TRANSLATION OF THE MEGILLOT

The English translation of *The Steinsaltz Megillot* includes a completely new translation of the Bible based on Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz's Hebrew commentary. Translation is necessarily an act of interpretation. In general, we have done our best, at Rabbi Steinsaltz's behest, to stay as close as possible to the original Hebrew verses so that the English reader will encounter the complexities of the text directly. In the course of translating, we have consulted other English translations, as well as relying heavily upon Onkelos' Aramaic translation and the classic medieval Jewish commentaries of the Torah: Rav Se'adya Gaon, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Rashbam. Our goal throughout has been to produce a translation that is true to the original Hebrew text and commentary, yet at the same time is readable and accessible to a broad range of readers, from those who are familiar with Hebrew and seek to deepen their understanding of the Torah to those who will gain access to the text only by reading it in English. The commentary and notes are written in modern American English. In the spirit of the Hebrew edition, we have tried to preserve the lofty register of the biblical text while providing a commentary that is relevant and inspiring to our own generation. We hope that the Author of the Torah has aided us in achieving this goal.

## THE LAYOUT OF THIS EDITION

On the left-hand side of each set of facing pages is the Hebrew text of the Bible with the traditional cantillation marks, meticulously edited over decades by the team at Koren Publishers, Jerusalem. On the facing page, the Steinsaltz translation of the Bible appears in boldface with the commentary interspersed between the words of the text in non-bold typeface. This enables the reader to easily follow either the direct translation alone or the translation augmented by the elucidated text.

The notes at the foot of the page are divided into two categories. Discussion notes provide background material, internal biblical parallels, alternative explanations, and a wealth of midrashic and philosophical ideas from Jewish commentaries over the generations. Background notes provide linguistic, historical, archaeological, and scientific information that is relevant to places, nations, flora and fauna, and other realia mentioned in the verses. Integrated into both the commentary and the notes are pictures, maps, and other graphics to aid the reader in grasping the biblical text.

References and sources for the commentary appear as endnotes, while the references and sources for the notes are interspersed throughout the notes themselves in parentheses. These references and sources, compiled by the Hebrew editors, include citations of other verses in the Bible, commentary elsewhere in the Bible, insights of the rabbinic Sages in the Talmud and *midrashim*, interpretations of the classical biblical commentaries, and citations of philosophical works and responsa by the early authorities [*rishonim*].

The translation of the verses of the Megillot was undertaken by Rabbi Joshua Schreier and reviewed meticulously by Rabbi Dr. Joshua Amaru. Many talented editors and translators participated in the translation of the commentary and notes as listed in the credits. We thank Matthew Miller, Avishai Magence, and the devoted and gifted team at Koren Publishers. We are grateful to Rabbi Meni Even-Israel, Executive Director of the Steinsaltz Center, whose wisdom and guidance have made this publication possible. We also thank Rabbi Dr. Natan Slifkin of the Biblical Museum of Natural History in Beit Shemesh for his help in identifying some animals and providing suitable images.

## TRANSLITERATION

In general, we have tried to keep transliteration to a minimum and have relied upon it only for proper nouns and in places where a point of commentary relates to a Hebrew term. In the case of proper nouns, we have sought a middle ground between a rigorous adherence to Hebrew phonology and the use of anglicized versions of names taken from earlier translations of the Bible. For familiar names of both places and people, where encountering a transliteration would be jarring to many readers, we have used the well-known anglicized versions, such as Canaan, Egypt, Abraham, and Moses. Otherwise, proper nouns are transliterated according to the rules listed below. These transliterations offer the English reader an experience that is closer to that of the Hebrew reader.

Of course, determining which names count as familiar and which are not is not an exact science; the policy has been to use the anglicized names of familiar figures such as the names of prophets and books of the Bible, and some other well-known characters and place-names. The transliteration scheme generally follows modern Israeli Hebrew pronunciation, but note the following points:

- For proper nouns no special characters are used to designate sounds that do not exist in English. For example, the name אֶחְיָזֶר will not be rendered Aẖiezer (with a diacritic for the letter *het* that is used for the transliteration of Hebrew terms that are not proper nouns) but rather Ahiezer. Consequently, the letter ח is rendered as *h* (like the letter ה).
- The letter *h*, representing the Hebrew letter ח, has been omitted at the end of a word unless its omission could lead to mispronunciation. For example, שְׁלָה is written Shela, while נִנְוֶה is written Nineveh.
- The soft letter כ is rendered as *kh*.
- No distinction has been made between a letter containing a *dagesh hazak* (elsewhere represented by a double consonant) and one without. For example, it is Hukat as opposed to Hukkat.
- Apostrophes indicating glottal stops are employed only where a name could be mispronounced without them. For example, it is Se'ir as opposed to Seir.
- We have maintained a more technical transliteration scheme for citations, including the diacritic *h* and consonant doubling for cases of a *dagesh*. For example, in the citation *Tanḥuma*, *Korah 5*, *Tanḥuma* retains the diacritic *h*, whereas *Korah* does not.

On behalf of the team of inspired and dedicated translators, editors, and copy editors with whom it has been a great privilege to work, I express my hope that the decisions we have made have produced a translation that is faithful to the Hebrew, readable, accessible, and useful to the reader.

Jason Rappoport  
Editor in Chief



## Cantillation Marks (*Trop*)

שמות הטעמים וסימניהם

מִדְּכָא טַפְחָא מִנַּח אֶתְנַחְתָּא מִדְּכָא טַפְחָא סוּף־פָּסוּק  
מִדְּפַךְ פִּשְׁטָא מִנַּח זָקֶף־קֶטֶן זָקֶף־גָּדוֹל מִנַּח | מִנַּח רְבִיעַ  
קִדְמָא דְרָגָא תַּבְרִי מִנַּח זֶרְקָא מִנַּח סְגוּלָּא תְּלִישָׁא־גְדוּלָּה  
תְּלִישָׁא־קֶטְנָה קִדְמָא־זֶלָּא אֶזְלָא־גְרִישׁ גְּרִישׁ פֶּזֶר  
יְתִיב שְׁלֵשֶׁלֶת גִּלְגֹּל קִרְי־פָּרָה מִדְּכָא־פְּפוּלָה  
לְגִרְמָה | סוּף־פָּסוּק:

אשכנזים:

זֶרְקָא מִקַּף־שׁוּפְר־הוֹלֵךְ סְגוּלָּתָא פֶּזֶר־גָּדוֹל  
תְּלִישָׁא תְּלִישָׁא אֶזְלָא־גְרִישׁ פָּסוּק | רְבִיעַ שְׁנֵי־גְרִישִׁין  
דְרָגָא תַּבְרִי מֵאֲרִיךְ טַחָא אֶתְנַח שׁוּפְר־מִדְּפַךְ  
קִדְמָא תְּרִי־קִדְמִין זָקֶף־קֶטֶן זָקֶף־גָּדוֹל שְׁלֵשֶׁלֶת  
גִּלְגֹּל קִרְי־פָּרָה תְּרִי־טַעֲמִי יְתִיב סוּף־פָּסוּק:

ספרדים:

## סדר קריאת המגילה בפורים

Before the reading of מגילת אסתר, the קהל stands  
and the קורא says the following three blessings:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל מִקְרָא מְגִלָּה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנָהּ הַזֶּה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנָהּ הַזֶּה.

The מגילה is read (page 12). When the reading is completed, the scroll is rolled up  
and, if a מנין is present, the קורא continues:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
הָרֵב אֶת רִיבֵנוּ, וְהִדֵּן אֶת דֵּינֵנוּ, וְהַנּוֹקֵם אֶת נַקְמָתֵנוּ  
וְהַמְשַׁלֵּם גָּמוֹל לְכָל אוֹיְבֵי נַפְשֵׁנוּ, וְהַנִּפְרָע לָנוּ מִצָּרֵינוּ.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה  
הַנִּפְרָע לַעֲמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל צָרֵיהֶם, הָאֵל הַמוֹשִׁיעַ.

The following is said after the night reading of the מגילה:

אֲשֶׁר הֵנִיא עֲצַת גּוֹיִם, וַיִּפֹּר מַחֲשָׁבוֹת עָרוֹמִים.  
בָּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם רָשָׁע, נָצַר זֶדֶן מִזֶּרַע עַמְּלִיק.  
גָּאָה בַּעֲשׂוֹר וְכָרָה לוֹ בּוֹר, וּגְדָלְתוֹ יִקְשֶׁה לוֹ לָכֶד.  
דָּמָה בַּנֶּפֶשׁ לְלָכֶד וְנִלְכַּד, בָּקֵשׁ לְהַשְׁמִיד וְנִשְׁמַד מִהֲרָה.  
הָמֵן הוֹדִיעַ אֵיבָת אֲבוֹתָיו, וְעוֹזֵר שְׁנֵאת אֲחִים לְבָנִים.  
וְלֹא זָכַר רַחֲמֵי שְׂאוֹל, כִּי בַחֲמֻלָּתוֹ עַל אֶגְג נוֹלֵד אוֹיֵב.  
זָמַם רָשָׁע לְהַכְרִית צְדִיק, וְנִלְכַּד טָמֵא בְיָדֵי טָהוֹר.  
חֲסֹד גָּבַר עַל שִׁגְגַּת אָב, וְרָשָׁע הוֹסִיף חֲטָא עַל חֲטָאָיו.  
טָמֵן בְּלָבוֹ מַחֲשָׁבוֹת עָרוֹמִיו, וַיִּתְּמַכֵּר לַעֲשׂוֹת רָעָה.

יְדוּ שְׁלַח בְּקִדּוּשֵׁי אֵל, כִּסְפוֹ נָתַן לַהֲכָרִית זָכָרָם.  
 בְּרֹאוֹת מְרֻדֵּי כִי יֵצֵא קֶצֶף, וְדַתִּי הֶמֶן נָתַנּוּ בְּשׁוּשָׁן.  
 לְבֶשׂ שֶׁקֶ וְקִשֹּׁר מִסְפָּד וְגֹזֵר צוּם וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל הָאֶפֶר.  
 מִי זֶה יַעֲמֹד לִכְפֹּר שְׂגָגָה, וְלִמְחֹל חֲטָאת עֹון אֲבוֹתֵינוּ.  
 נֶץ פָּרַח מְלוּלָב, הֵן הִדְסָה עֲמֻדָה לְעֹזֵר יֹשִׁינִים.  
 סְרִיסָיָה הִבְהִילוּ לַהֲמֵן, לַהֲשִׁקוֹתוֹ יַיִן חֲמַת תְּנִינִים.  
 עֲמִד בְּעִשְׂרוֹ וְנִפְל בְּרִשְׁעוֹ, עָשָׂה לוֹ עֵץ וְנִתְּלָה עָלָיו.  
 פִּיהֶם פִּתְחוּ כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תִבְלִי, כִּי פֹר הֶמֶן נִהַפֵּךְ לְפִוְרָנוּ.  
 צְדִיק נִחְלָץ מִיַּד רָשָׁע, אוֹיֵב נָתַן תַּחַת נַפְשׁוֹ.  
 קִיְּמוּ עֲלֵיהֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת פְּוִרִים וְלִשְׂמֹחַ בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה.  
 רֹאֲיִת אֶת תְּפִלַּת מְרֻדֵּי וְאַסְתֵּר, הֶמֶן וּבְנָיו עַל הָעֵץ תִּלִּית.

מגילה: The following is said after both night and morning readings of the

שׁוֹשַׁנַּת יַעֲקֹב צִהָלָה וְשִׂמְחָה בְּרֹאוֹתָם יַחַד תִּבְלַת מְרֻדֵּי.  
 תְּשׁוּעָתָם הֵייתָ לְנֶצַח, וְתִקְוָתָם בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר.  
 לַהֲדוּיָע שְׁכָל קוֹיֵךְ לֹא יִבָּשׁוּ, וְלֹא יִכָּלְמוּ לְנֶצַח כָּל הַחוֹסִים בָּךְ.  
 אֲרוֹר הֶמֶן אֲשֶׁר בִּקֵּשׁ לְאַבְדִּי, בְּרוּךְ מְרֻדֵּי הַיְּהוּדִי.  
 אֲרוּרָה זֹרֶשׁ אִשֶּׁת מִפְּחִידִי, בְּרוּכָה אֶסְתֵּר בַּעֲדִי.  
 אֲרוּרִים כָּל הָרָשָׁעִים, בְּרוּכִים כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְגַם חֲרִבּוֹנָה זְכוּר לְטוֹב.

**Esther**

# Esther

## INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

The book of Esther relates an attempt to destroy the entire Jewish people, and its failure due to the interference of Queen Esther. Haman's motivation for his evil plan seems to be a combination of his contempt for Jewish separateness and the Jews' unique lifestyle and religion (3:8) with his personal rivalry with and hatred of Mordekhai and, by extension, of his people (3:4–5). However the motivation is understood, the Jewish people are treated as a single entity with a single fate, despite their exiled state, in which they are “scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces” (3:8). It is therefore fitting that their salvation is celebrated with a national holiday, Purim, as described at the end of the book (9:20–28). The Sages instituted that the book of Esther be read on Purim in the evening and in the morning.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Esther states that it was written by Mordekhai and Esther as an epistle to the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that it was composed with the assistance of various sages and advisors as a semi-official document of the Persian Empire.<sup>3</sup> This status accounts for the book's gentle treatment of King Ahashverosh despite his role as one of the central figures in the attempted annihilation of the Jews. Although it is possible to detect unflattering undercurrents with regard to the king, there is not one word of direct criticism of Ahashverosh explicitly stated in the text.

The absence of any direct reference to God is perhaps also a reflection of the book of Esther's status as a Persian imperial document, to be read by all Persia's subjects.<sup>4</sup> Although the Septuagint and the Aramaic translations insert a passage depicting Esther praying to God, it does not appear in the original. In fact, God's name does not appear in the book at all. Nevertheless, there are not-very-subtle allusions to the hidden hand of Divine Providence that pulls the strings in the story: The sequence of events, described so fully and dramatically, contains no peripheral incidents. Each detail is linked to another aspect of the plot, until the complex chain of events directed from on High reaches its inevitable conclusion and is revealed to all. Faith in God is undoubtedly at the heart of the book.

## Chronology of Events in the Book of Esther according to the Sages<sup>5</sup>

Kings	Year BCE	Major events	Prophets of the era
Nebuchadnezzar	422	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
Cyrus the Great and Darius the Mede	370	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede Founding of the Persian Empire	
Cyrus the Great (3 years)	370	Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubabel (Sheshbazzar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10)	
Ahashverosh son of Darius the Mede (14 years)	367	Death of Cyrus Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to political interference by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4)	
	363	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	354	Haman's plot and downfall	
Darius the Persian (Artahshasta, 36 years)	353	Suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon	Haggai, Zechariah
	348	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
	347	Return of Ezra to the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	Malachi
	334	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
	318	Conquests of Alexander the Great	

Chronology of Events in the Book of Esther according to the Standard Chronology

Kings	Year BCE	Major events	Prophets of the era
Nebuchadnezzar	586	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
Cyrus the Great	550	Founding of the Persian Empire	
	539	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus	
	538	Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubabel (Sheshbatar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel	
	537	Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10) Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to interference by Judah's enemies (Ezra 4)	
Cambyses	530	Succession as emperor after Cyrus	
	525	Conquest of Egypt	
Darius the Great	522	Beginning of reign with the suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon and in Persia	
	520	Resumption of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 4:24–6:14)	Haggai, Zechariah
	516	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
Xerxes (Ahashverosh)	486	Accusations against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6)	Malachi
	483	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	474	Haman's plot and downfall	
Artaxerxes (Artahshasta)	458	Arrival of Ezra in the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	
	445	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
Alexander the Great	331	Conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander	

# Esther

## The Feasts and the End of Vashti's Reign

ESTHER 1:1–22

queen refuses to obey the king, thereby undermining the self-image of a ruler who was accustomed to being obeyed without question.

As a backdrop to the main story, this prelude vividly represents the hedonistic culture that was prevalent in the kingdom of Persia and Media by detailing a series of ostentatious banquets held for the masses, featuring an abundance of wine and extravagant displays of wealth. However, affairs take a turn for the worse when the

- 1** **1** It was in the days of Ahashverosh,<sup>d</sup> that Ahashverosh who reigned from India to Kush,<sup>b</sup> southern Egypt. The Persian kingdom, which was at its zenith at the time, was divided into **one hundred and twenty-seven provinces**.<sup>b</sup> The empire was divided into large regions that were under the control of governors, called satraps, while a subordinate governor was appointed over each state or province.



Xerxes I, identified as Ahashverosh, stone relief, 560–331 BCE



Map of the Persian Empire

- 2** It happened that in those days, when King Ahashverosh sat on the royal throne that was in the Shushan citadel [*habira*].<sup>b</sup> Shushan, also known as Susa, was a city in Elam, whose ruins are still extant.<sup>6</sup> Inside the city was a royal fortress, or citadel [*bira*], where both the central government and Ahashverosh's palace were located.<sup>7</sup>
- 3** In the third year of his reign, after he had crushed all those who stood in his way,<sup>8</sup> he made a large public banquet for all his princes and his servants. He did not hold his coronation celebrations immediately upon ascending the throne, possibly because he was preoccupied with settling internal disputes.<sup>9</sup> Once he had firmly established his reign, he invited the elite of



King of Persia on his throne receiving a royal audience, stone relief, Persepolis, 560–331 BCE

Persia and Media,<sup>b</sup> two separate states that were partly unified; the nobles<sup>b</sup> and princes who were appointed to be in charge of the provinces before him,

- 4** with his showing the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honor of his splendid majesty, for many days. The feast, which was designed to publicly display the king's riches and might, lasted **one hundred and eighty days**.



Persian soldiers in flat hats, and Medes in rounded hats, relief, Persepolis, sixth century BCE

- 5** Upon the completion of those days, during which a banquet was held for people who came from afar, the king made a



## אסתר

א וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הָיָא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהַדּוֹ וְעַד-כּוֹשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים  
ב וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נִשְׁבְּתָה הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עַל פֶּסַח מַלְכוּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר  
ג בְּשׁוֹשַׁן הַבִּירָה: בַּשָּׁנָה שְׁלוֹשׁ לַמֶּלֶךְ עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֵּה לְכָל-שָׂרָיו וְעַבְדָּיו חֵיל  
ד פָּרָס וּמְדֵי הַפָּרְתִּימִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינּוֹת לִפְנֵיו: בַּהֲרָאתוֹ אֶת-עֶשֶׂר כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ  
ה וְאֶת-יָקָר תַּפְאֶרֶת גְּדוּלַּתוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים שְׁמוֹנִים וּמֵאָה יוֹם: וּבְמָלֹאֶת הַיּוֹם הַיּוֹמִים

## BACKGROUND

1:1 | **From India to Kush:** The conquests of Darius, the first king of Persia, also known as Darius the Great (550–486 BCE), stretched from the banks of the Indus in the east, to the kingdom of Ethiopia-Nubia in the south. He also conquered parts of Greece and the Balkans.

**One hundred and twenty-seven provinces:** The Persian Empire was divided into provinces, each headed by a satrap [*ahashdarpan*]. In Old Persian, the word *ahashdarpan* means shield of the kingdom (see 3:12). External sources indicate that the number of provinces established by the Persian government was far fewer than one hundred and twenty-seven, but such provinces were often divided into smaller units ruled by subordinate governors. Taking this into account, one may arrive at 127 provinces.

1:2 | **The Shushan citadel:** In Old Persian this city was called Susa, Susa in Greek and Latin, and Shush in modern Persian. It was the oldest and most important city of the Proto-Elamite kingdom in southwest Persia, in the vicinity of the Karkheh River, at the foot of the Zagros Mountains. Cambyses II (died 521 BCE), the son of Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, established Shushan as his capital,

and during the reign of Darius I, Shushan was the political and administrative capital of Persia and one of its four capital cities, together with Persepolis, Ecbatana, and Babylon. The city lost its prominence after the Alexandrian conquests at the end of the fourth century BCE.

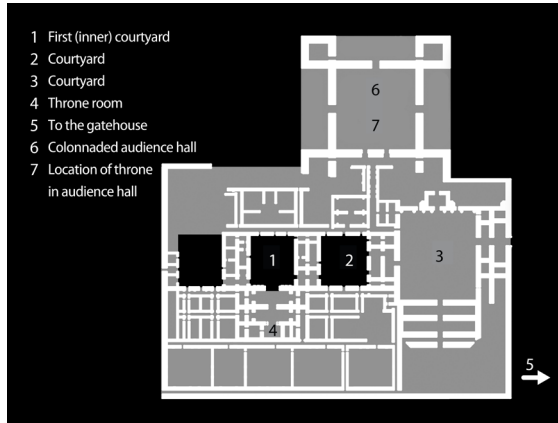
1:3 | **Persia and Media:** Media was an ancient kingdom in the northeast of Persia, south of the Caspian Sea. From the ninth century BCE it was involved in unrelenting conflict with Assyria. After Media entered into a pact with Babylon toward the end of the seventh century, the two nations defeated Assyria. In 550 BCE, Cyrus the Great conquered Media and unified it with Persia. Some attribute the difference in the order of the two names, “Persia and Media” or “Media and Persia” (e.g., 10:2; Daniel 5:28, 6:9), to the change of kings from Persian to Median, and vice versa. Others claim that the interchangeability of the order reflects the equality of the two states in the unified kingdom.

**The nobles [*partemim*]:** From the Old Persian *partema*, meaning the first, those that are closest to the king.

## DISCUSSION

1:1 | **Ahashverosh:** Since the Persian name of the king was not Ahashverosh, it is difficult to identify this figure. It is most likely that he is the king known in Greek literature as Xerxes I, or Khshayarsha in Persian. Much of the information about Xerxes I comes from Greek historians, who documented the wars the Greeks fought against the Persians. Their accounts indicate that Xerxes I ascended the throne after the Persian kingdom had suffered civil wars, conspiracies, and betrayals. This may explain why some of Ahashverosh’s behavior as related in the book makes him appear paranoid. Even when the king was sitting “on the royal throne” (verse 2), nothing could be taken for granted.

**banquet for all the people who were present in the Shushan citadel, from great to small, seven days.** He may have treated them to this feast in an attempt to win the trust of the citadel's residents, many of whom were government officials.<sup>10</sup> This banquet took place **in the court of the garden of the king's audience hall,**<sup>B</sup> a courtyard with a garden or orchard, adjacent to the audience hall.



Plan of the ancient palace, Shushan

- 6 The place was decorated with expensive fabrics: **White linen,**<sup>B</sup> **green cotton** [*karpas*],<sup>B</sup> and **sky-blue wool,** all bound with



Remains of pillars from the palace of the kings of Persia, Persepolis, fifth century BCE

**cords of fine linen<sup>B</sup> and purple<sup>B</sup> wool.** All these fabrics and cords were hung **on silver rods<sup>B</sup> and marble pillars,<sup>B</sup>** and there were **couches of gold and silver on a floor of alabaster, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stone.<sup>B</sup>**

- 7 **Serving drink in vessels of gold,** as befitted a royal feast, **and vessels of diverse kinds;** the guests were offered vessels of various shapes and colors, in accordance with their status and needs. **And abundant royal wine** was provided at the king's expense, **in accordance with the king's bounty,** offered freely and without concern for the cost.



Excavated vessels, Shushan

- 8 **The drinking was as customary,** following the accepted rules of etiquette, and **without constraint.** Since the king wanted the people to feel part of the royal feast, they were free to drink as they pleased. **For so did the king establish, command,<sup>11</sup> for all the officials of his palace, to act in accordance with the wishes of each and every man.** The Persian policy was not to try to impose conformity within the multicultural empire, but to grant each nation the freedom to preserve their identity, language, and customs.
- 9 **Also Vashti<sup>D</sup> the queen made a banquet for the women,** in parallel to the great feast for the men, **in another wing of the royal palace of King Ahashverosh.** The feast for the women was held separately from that of the men to avoid the undesirable consequences of mixed festivities.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the king's wild feast, the women's banquet was a more dignified affair.
- 10 **On the seventh day of the feast, when the king was merry with wine;** he was in good spirits after much drinking. It is hard to tell whether he was actually drunk, partly due to the rather formal tone of the description here. In any case, **he, Ahashverosh, said to Mehuman, Bizeta, Harbona, Bigta, Avagta, Zetar, and Karkas, the seven special chamberlains** [*sarisim*]<sup>B</sup> **who attended to King Ahashverosh,** and who were closest to him. The word *sarisim* can also mean eunuchs and it can be assumed that these were actual eunuchs, as their job required them to pass between the men and the women.<sup>13</sup> In the raucous atmosphere of debauchery at the party, the king

## DISCUSSION

1:9 | **Vashti:** This sounds like a Persian name (see Ibn Ezra, second commentary), and in a collection of Zoroastrian texts from the tenth century BCE there are two words that are possibly the source of the name: *vashita*, the best, and *ushiti*, the beloved. However, there is no certainty that

Vashti was Persian. It is clear from the story that she was more than merely one of the king's many wives and concubines, and that she was well aware of her superior status. According to a tradition of the Sages, Vashti was originally a Babylonian princess (see, e.g., *Megilla* 10b). There

are other instances in the Bible where a foreigner who was brought into a royal house was given a new name upon entering the royal household (see Genesis 41:45; Daniel 1:7).

הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ לְכָל־הָעַם הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּירָה לְמַגְדּוֹל וְעַד־קֶטָן  
מִשְׁתֵּה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים בַּחֲצֹר גֶּנֶת בֵּיתֵן הַמֶּלֶךְ: חִוּר וּפְרָפֶס וְתִזְלַת אָחוּז בַּחֲבִלֵי־  
בוץ וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל־גִּלְיִי כֶסֶף וְעִמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִטּוֹת וְזָהָב וְכֶסֶף עַל רִצְפַת בַּהֲטָוִשׁ  
וְדָר וְסֹחֶרֶת: וְהַשְׁקוֹת בְּכִלֵי זָהָב וְכִלִּים מְכֻלִּים שׁוֹנִים וְיִין מַלְכוּת רַב כִּיד הַמֶּלֶךְ:  
וְהַשְׁתִּיָּה כִדַּת אֵין אֵנֶס כִּי־כֵן וְיֶסֶד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל פֶּלֶא־רַב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּרָצוֹן  
אִישׁ־וְאִישׁ: גַּם וְשְׁתֵּי הַמִּלָּכָה עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתֵּה נָשִׁים בֵּית הַמַּלְכוּת  
אֲשֶׁר לַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ: בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוּב לֵב־הַמֶּלֶךְ בֵּינָם אָמַר לְמַהוּמָן  
בְּזֹתָא חֲדַבּוּנָא בְּגִתָּא וְאַבְגִּתָּא יֵתֵר וְכַרְפֶּס שְׁבַעַת הַסְרִיסִים הַמְשַׁרְתִּים אֶת־

## BACKGROUND

1:5 | **The court of the garden of the king's audience hall [bitan]:** The royal palace in Shushan, which has been unearthed in archaeological excavations, was built in the Syrian-western style. It included four inner garden courtyards, while its northern section contained the *bitan*, the audience hall. The word *bitan* is from the Akkadian *bitanu*, meaning an inner part or inner structure of a palace or temple. It has been surmised that this term developed from the Persian word *apadana*, an audience hall with columns. Sometimes tents or canopies were erected for guests in this hall or in an adjoining courtyard. During the excavations of the palace at Shushan, a tablet with cuneiform script was discovered. The text on this tablet describes the glories of the palace, specifically the cost and rarity of the building materials, and the expertise of its builders.

1:6 | **White linen [hur]:** A brilliant-white woven linen fabric, from *hivir*, meaning pale. Alternatively, this is a perforated [*meḥurar*] woven material, similar to netting (see Genesis 40:16; Isaiah 19:9).

**Green cotton [karpas]:** Apparently a woven cotton fabric, which was brought to the region from India in the time of Sennacherib. It is called *karpasa* in Sanskrit and *kirpas* in Persian.

**Sky-blue [tekhelet] wool...purple [argaman] wool:** These are wool fabrics colored with dyes extracted from snails that live in the Mediterranean Sea. *Tekhelet* is a shade of deep blue, extracted from the banded dye-murex,

*Murex trunculus*, while *argaman* is the general name for a dark reddish-purple or deep purple dye produced from the spiny dye-murex, *Murex brandaris*. The liquid used for preparing these dyes was extracted from a protective secretion of the snails found in minute quantities in their hypobranchial glands. Many thousands of snails were required in order to dye a fabric or item of clothing and therefore these dyes were very expensive and the fabric dyed with them was used mainly by nobles and kings.

These two dyes were used for coloring the cloth tent-coverings of the Tabernacle (Exodus 26, 36–38) and the cloths with which the vessels of the Tabernacle were covered during journeys (Exodus 39), as well as the vestments of the High Priest (Exodus 28, 39). *Tekhelet* was also the dye used in ritual fringes (Numbers 15:38–39). In the affluent Persian kingdom, the king would have curtains and clothes that were made entirely of *tekhelet*-dyed wool.

**Bound with cords of linen [butz]:** Linen is made from flax, *Linum usitatissimum*, in Akkadian, *busu* (see Onkelos, Leviticus 16). The Sages likewise called the linen of the vestments of the High Priest *butz* (Mishna *Yoma* 3:4). These cords were used to spread the fabrics above the garden of the king's palace, where the feast was held, and to tie them to the silver and marble pillars. Linen cords are particularly strong and therefore well suited for this purpose. It seems that the cords of the Tent of Meeting were also made of linen.

**Silver rods:** These were poles of silver or a shiny white metal that supported the curtains which were hung to provide shade and decoration in the garden courtyard of the palace.

**Marble pillars [shesh]:** In ancient times, palace courtyards were often surrounded by a colonnade of pillars. These pillars often supported roofs, providing the courtyard with a shaded area. *Shesh* is white marble, which was preferred for monolithic, cylindrical pillars because it can be smoothed or engraved. Possibly, some of the pillars mentioned here did not have a roof over them and instead curtains were hung over them.

**A floor of alabaster [bahat], marble, mother-of-pearl [dar], and precious stone [soharet]:** The palaces and royal gardens of the kings of Persia and Media were paved with ceramic tiles or colorful flagstones, which were both decorative and durable. *Bahat* may not be alabaster, but rather *purfir*, a hard, red stone. *Dar* is mother-of-pearl, a substance produced by mollusks as an inner shell layer. Alternatively, *dar* may mean gold, from the Old Persian *darniya*. *Soharet* is probably a light-bluish precious stone, *sikhru* in Akkadian and *saharet* in ancient Egyptian. The Persians were experts in the production of ceramic tiles, in many different colors, including gold with a metallic sheen. It is possible that this list refers to different kinds of tiles in a colorful array.

1:10 | **Chamberlains [sarisim]:** While not all chamberlains would have been eunuchs, eunuchs did hold positions of authority in the royal courts of Assyria and Babylon, as well as in the

bragged about his power, wealth, wisdom, and success. He also boasted of his beautiful wife.

- 11 The king, not satisfied with mere boasts, commanded his officials **to bring Queen Vashti before the king with the royal crown**, in order **to display her beauty to all the peoples and the princes,**<sup>9</sup> **as she was of fair appearance.**
- 12 **Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's word,**<sup>8</sup> **delivered by means of the chamberlains.** Her refusal to obey the command of the king, whose authority was absolutely unlimited, is indicative of her high status. She was unwilling to humiliate herself by parading her body before an audience. **The king was very angry, and his fury burned within him.** His rage was provoked by his wife's audacity in rejecting his demand, which was not issued privately but by an official delegation. His sensitivity to any slight to his honor was undoubtedly heightened by his inebriated state. Under the circumstances, he had anticipated that his request would be obeyed immediately and in full. Perhaps Vashti also alluded to his drunkenness, or mocked him, further enflaming his anger.<sup>14</sup> This is possibly the meaning of the phrase in verse 17, "for the matter [*devar*] of the queen," which can also mean the statement of the queen.
- 13 **The king communicated with the wise men, knowledgeable of the portents,** the astrologers, or his advisors in charge of managing the affairs of the kingdom,<sup>15</sup> **for so was the practice of the king before those learned in custom and law,**<sup>10</sup> to present his problems before his legal counselors.<sup>16</sup>
- 14 The verse notes that **those advisors who were close to him,** the king, **were Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memukhan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who viewed the king's face,** who would meet with him. The king did not ordinarily appear in public and only his closest courtiers would regularly encounter him face-to-face.<sup>17</sup> It was these advisors **who were seated first in the kingdom,** as the chief ministers of his government.
- 15 The legal question under discussion was as follows: **As to the policy: What to do to Queen Vashti, in that she did not follow the order of King Ahashverosh by means of the**

**chamberlains?** What is to be done in light of the queen's public refusal to obey the king's command, which was delivered to her by an official delegation?

- 16 **Memukhan said before the king and the princes** that the queen's sin was even worse than might have been thought: **It is not the king alone that Queen Vashti has wronged,** by failing to obey his instruction; **rather, it is all the princes, and all the peoples, who are in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh.** Since she publicly rebelled against the king, her decision will have ramifications that will spread throughout the entire Persian Empire.
- 17 **For the matter of the queen will get out to all the women, rendering their husbands contemptible in their eyes.** Although the queen did not issue an explicit declaration to this effect, and did not preach this type of conduct, her personal example here is likely to become the norm, **in their saying,** by women who seek to copy her: **King Ahashverosh said to bring Queen Vashti before him, but she did not come.** The queen has created a dangerous precedent.
- 18 From **this day onward, the princesses of Persia and Media,** the wives of the officials and nobles, **who have heard of the matter of the queen, will recount it to all the king's princes,** they will issue similar statements, and perhaps the wives of commoners will follow suit as well. Vashti's refusal will embolden these women when they quarrel with their husbands, **and through this incident there will be no end of contempt and wrath,** or contempt that should arouse our anger. This is not merely a personal slight, which the king could potentially overlook; rather, the broader consequences of the queen's refusal will be severe, as her scandalous behavior, even if not repeated, is likely to serve as a model that will be imitated throughout the kingdom.
- 19 Therefore, **if it pleases the king, let the royal edict be issued before him.** The decision should be published as a formal decree, **and furthermore, let it be written in the book of the decrees of Persia and Media,**<sup>8</sup> **not to be repealed,** as despite the king's power and position, he is considered to be

## BACKGROUND

Persian court, and were always used in positions which involved the women of the royal court, and the royal harem. In Persia, such officials could achieve the status of senior advisors to the king, or be awarded other governmental posts, including that of generals who commanded military campaigns. The Persian kings relied on eunuchs for the most sensitive roles, such as the king's personal bodyguard, or his cupbearer.

1:12 | **Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's word:** The principal wife of the king of

Persia enjoyed a lofty status in the court. She was typically an educated woman in control of her own daily routine who could even be involved in religious matters. Ahashverosh's request that Vashti be summoned in the middle of a feast was in defiance of the accepted practice, whereby only women from the harem were present at drinking parties; the queen would depart at the conclusion of the official meal. In fact, the queen had the right to choose whether or not to be seen by the king. Despite Zoroastrian beliefs

according the king significant religious status as the agent of Ahura Mazda, even the king was not permitted to diverge from these ancient rules of the court unless they were changed by consent.

1:13 | **For so was the practice of the king before those learned in custom and law:** Since the rights of the Persian queen were based on ancient law, the discussion about her refusal required the presence of legal scholars.

יא פָּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: לְהֵבִיא אֶת־וְשֹׁתֵי הַמַּלְכָּה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת  
 יב לְהִרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת־יָפִיהָ כִּי־טוֹבַת מַרְאֵה הִיא: וְתַמְאֵן הַמַּלְכָּה  
 וְשֹׁתֵי לְבֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בִּיד הַסָּרִיסִים וּקְצָף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמַתּוּ בַּעֲרָה  
 יג בּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַחֲכָמִים יָדְעִי הָעֵתִים כִּי־כֵן דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ לִפְנֵי  
 יד כָּל־יָדְעֵי דָת וְדִין: וְהִקְרַב אֵלָיו כְּרִשְׁנָא שֶׁתֵּר אֲדַמְתָּא תְּרִישִׁישׁ מֶרֶס מְרִסְנָא  
 טו מְמוֹכֵן שְׁבַעַת שָׂרֵי פָּרֶס וּמְדֵי רֹאִי פָּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַיֹּשְׁבִים רֵאשֻׁנָּה בַּמַּלְכוּת: בְּדַת  
 טז מִה־לַּעֲשׂוֹת בַּמַּלְכָּה וְשֹׁתֵי עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָשְׂתָה אֶת־מֵאֲמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ  
 וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹמְכֵן לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים לֹא עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ מְמוֹכֵן  
 ז' לְבַדּוֹ עֲוֹתָהּ וְשֹׁתֵי הַמַּלְכָּה כִּי עַל־כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל־כָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־  
 ח' מְדִינוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: כִּי־יֵצֵא דְבַר־הַמַּלְכָּה עַל־כָּל־הַנָּשִׁים לְהַבְּזוֹת  
 ט' בַּעֲלֵיהֶן בְּעִינֵיהֶן בְּאִמְרוֹם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֲמַר לְהֵבִיא אֶת־וְשֹׁתֵי הַמַּלְכָּה  
 י' לִפְנֵינוּ וְלֹא־בָאָה: וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תֵּאֲמַרְנָה שְׂרוֹת פָּרֶס־וּמְדֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבַר  
 י"א הַמַּלְכָּה לְכָל שָׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּכְדִי בְּזִיוֹן וְקִצָּף: אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יֵצֵא דְבַר־  
 מַלְכוּת מִלִּפְנֵינוּ וַיִּפְתַּב בְּדַתִּי פָּרֶס־וּמְדֵי וְלֹא יַעֲבוֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תָבֹא וְשֹׁתֵי

# DISCUSSION

1:11 | **To display her beauty to the peoples and the princes:** Although the book of Esther does not offer any explicit criticism of this command, the Persian king's demand to display the queen was clearly in poor taste. The Sages suggest that the order was in even worse taste than is obvious here, and that when Ahashverosh ordered Vashti to appear with the royal crown, he was actually commanding that she wear nothing *but* the crown, expecting her to display her nakedness before all (see *Megilla* 12b).

1:13 | **The practice of the king before those learned in custom and law:** There is a measure of irony here: Later in the story, the king alone, and apparently without any hesitation, makes decisions that will have dramatic moral and political ramifications. In this situation, by contrast, when he is drunk and angry, he

assembles an entire legal team in order to discuss the fate of his wife. His behavior is similar to that of various dictators over the course of history who sought to preserve the image of a law-abiding ruler, and who were careful that everything be documented and performed in a very formal manner.

It should be noted that Ahashverosh's consultation with his ministers is nothing more than a matter of etiquette through which he expresses his respect for the legal establishment; in practice, they are at his mercy: He appointed them, and he can remove them from their posts and have them executed. Therefore, his legal advisors were naturally careful to tailor their comments to fit what they assumed the king would want to hear, as ultimately the law depended upon his whim.

# BACKGROUND

1:19 | **And let it be written in the decrees of [datei] Persia and Media:** *Data* is the Old Persian word for law. The Persians were committed to preserving their legal records. Persian legal codes were written in cuneiform on clay tablets, as well as on parchment. Their archives were placed in the most fortified sections of the palace walls, as has been discovered by archaeologists at Persepolis.



bound by the laws and proclamations of the kingdom, at least technically (see 8:8), **that Vashti will not come before King Ahashverosh**. Memukhan did not specify her fate; whether she was to be killed, permanently exiled, or simply deposed from her position as queen. **And it should also be decreed that the king will give her queenship**, her official status as queen, **to her counterpart who is worthier than she**. The king should dispense with her and choose a more suitable woman to replace her.

- 20 The king's edict<sup>b</sup> that he will enact will be heard throughout his entire kingdom, although it, the kingdom, is vast, and all the wives**, following the dissemination of the royal precedent, **will confer honor on their husbands**, and will not disobey their commands, **from great to small**.
- 21 The matter was pleasing in the eyes of the king and the princes**. Memukhan's appraisal of the fundamental problem, with its potentially serious consequences, was greeted with approval. In his speech, Memukhan presented his solution not as a royal whim, but rather as an important precedent in the management of the country. The angry, drunken king was delighted at the opportunity to inflate the incident into an event of imperial importance. **And therefore the king acted in accordance with the word of Memukhan**. As noted in the introduction, the book of Esther, with its formal style, does not criticize the king overtly. However, reading between the lines, Ahashverosh emerges as a ridiculous, easily manipulated figure.
- 22 He, Ahashverosh, sent scrolls** containing the official order to

**all the provinces of the king, to each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language: Every man shall be ruler in his house**. The king did not mention Vashti by name, but simply declared that each man should be in charge of his house, **and that he should speak the language of his people**. People of different nationalities in his kingdom had intermarried, thereby mixing their languages.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the king took this opportunity to issue a decree that from this point forward the language of the husband should be the one spoken by all members of his household.<sup>19</sup>



"To each and every province in its script." Trilingual inscription of Xerxes I, Van Fortress, Turkey, 485–465 BCE

## Esther Is Crowned Queen

ESTHER 2:1–20

This section starts by relating the consequences of the incident described in the previous section, as a search is undertaken to find a queen to replace Vashti. Esther is then introduced, and these two narrative strands intertwine into a single plotline.

- 2 1 After these matters, when the fury of king Ahashverosh had abated, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her**. Since it is not explicitly stated that she was executed, and imposition of the death penalty for the nobility was rare, except for the most serious crimes, it can be assumed that she was not put to death. Perhaps Vashti had been exiled, and Ahashverosh missed her.<sup>20</sup>
- 2 The king's ministers did not merely carry out his commands; they also paid attention to his moods and tried to anticipate his wishes. The king's lads, his attendants, said:** We can find a replacement for Vashti. **Let there be sought for the king virgin young women who are of fair appearance**, as befits the honor of a king.
- 3 In keeping with the king's status, this was to be a large and organized project, ensuring that only suitable candidates would be sent: Have the king appoint officials in all the provinces of his kingdom** to perform an initial selection, **and they will**

**gather every virgin young woman of fair appearance to the Shushan citadel, to the harem, to the custody of Hegai, the king's chamberlain, guardian of the women in the palace; and to complement and enhance their natural beauty, their perfumes and cosmetics will be provided.**

- 4 The young woman who will be pleasing in the eyes of the king at the end of this process will be crowned queen in place of Vashti. The proposal was pleasing in the eyes of the king and he did so.**
- 5 There was a Judean [Yehudi] man,<sup>8</sup> from the land of Judah,<sup>21</sup> the small independent province which the Persians called Yehud, who was in the Shushan citadel**. It is not clear whether he actually lived there or simply worked there as a court official. **And his name was Mordekhai, son of Ya'ir, son of Shimi, son of Kish, a Benjamite,<sup>d</sup> from the tribe of Benjamin**. Although he came from the land of Judah, he was from the tribe of Benjamin. This was Mordekhai,

ב לַפְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁדָּוֶשׁ וּמַלְכוּתָהּ יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ לְרַעוּתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה: וְנִשְׁמַע  
 פִּתְגָם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה בְּכָל־מַלְכוּתוֹ כִּי רַבָּה הִיא וְכָל־הַנָּשִׁים יִתְּנוּ יָקָר  
 לְבַעְלֵיהֶן לְמַגְדּוֹל וְעַד־קָטָן: וַיִּיטֹב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים וַיַּעַשׂ  
 כַּב הַמֶּלֶךְ כַּדְּבָר מִמוּכָן: וַיִּשְׁלַח סִפְרִים אֶל־כָּל־מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־מְדִינָהּ וּמְדִינָהּ  
 כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְאֶל־עַם וְעַם כָּל־שׁוֹנוֹ לִהְיוֹת כָּל־אִישׁ שֹׁדֵר בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמַדְבֵּר כָּל־שׁוֹן  
 אַחֵר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּשֹׁךְ חֲמַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁדָּוֶשׁ זָכַר אֶת־  
 ב א וְשֵׁתִי וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָהּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁרָתָיו  
 ג יִבְקְשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נַעֲרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מֵרָאֵה: וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת  
 מַלְכוּתוֹ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נַעֲרַת־בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מֵרָאֵה אֶל־שׁוֹשֶׁן הַבִּירָה אֶל־  
 ד בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים אֶל־יַד הִגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים וְנָתַן תַּמְרָקִיָּהֵן: וְהַנַּעֲרָה  
 אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵּב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּתֵּן וְשֵׁתִי וַיִּיטֹב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ  
 ה כֵּן: אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוֹשֶׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מָרְדֳּכָי בֶּן יֹאִיר בֶּן־שֹׁמַעִי ב

#### BACKGROUND

1:20 | **Edict [pitgama]:** In Old Persian, *pratigama* denotes something which goes out to meet something else. In this instance, this is a message from the king to the people. This is the source for the Aramaic term *pitgama*, meaning a publicized command or decree.

2:5 | **A Judean man:** This refers to one who came from the land of Judah, or the Persian province of Yehud. Judah became a Persian province when Cyrus defeated Babylon and took over its empire. He subsequently issued an edict authorizing and encouraging the Judean exiles to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple (see Ezra 1:1–4). The province of Yehud was a sub-province of Avar Nahara, literally “beyond the

river,” which was the area of the Persian Empire west of the Euphrates River. It was semi-independent, as is clear from the unsuccessful attempts of its governor to suppress rebuilding of the Temple and the successful appeals to the Persian kings made by the leaders of Judah (see Ezra 4–6). The province of Yehud was governed by a satrap appointed from the ranks of the returning exiles. It was divided into administrative areas, centered around five cities: Jerusalem; Beit HaKerem, possibly modern-day Bethlehem; Mitzpa, in the region of Benjamin; Beit Tzur, in modern-day Gush Etzion; and Ke’ila, near modern-day Beit Guvrin (see Nehemiah 3).

#### DISCUSSION

2:5 | **A Judean man...a Benjamite:** The tribes of Judah and Benjamin inhabited adjacent areas of the Land of Israel. They were both exiled to Babylon, and members of both tribes later returned to the Land of Israel (see Nehemiah 11:7, 25–36). Mordekhai’s lineage, specified in this verse, indicates that he was descended from the royal line of King Saul (see *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 48; *Megilla* 16a).



Province of Yehud

- 6 who had been exiled from Jerusalem in his youth, together with the first exile, that was exiled with Yekhonya king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon exiled.
- 7 He was rearing Hadassa as her guardian, she was Esther.<sup>B</sup> Hadassa was her Hebrew name, while Esther was her Persian or Babylonian name. She was his uncle's daughter and was much younger than he. Mordekhai had become her guardian as she had no father or mother. The young woman was of fine form and fair appearance, and with the death of her father and her mother, Mordekhai had adopted her as his own daughter.
- 8 It was when the edict of the king and his new decree was heard, and when there was the gathering of many young women to the Shushan citadel, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken against her will<sup>22</sup> to the king's palace, to the custody of Hegai, guardian of the women. Presumably, most of the young women were delighted to come from their lands to the capital city and excited at the opportunity the search for the queen provided. The young woman who was chosen would become the queen of the empire. Esther, in contrast, was taken against her will.
- 9 The young woman was pleasing in his eyes. Hegai, who was in charge of the women of the royal household, and was familiar with the king's tastes, considered Esther a serious candidate for the role of queen.<sup>23</sup> She exhibited grace before him. In addition to her beauty, he was charmed by her, and therefore he took special care of her needs: He hastened to provide her with a supply of cosmetics, and her portions of food to which she was entitled, and the seven young women it was requisite

to provide her from the king's palace. It was unbecoming for a candidate for queen of Persia to venture forth by herself, and therefore she was given seven maidservants. And he elevated her status, as he promoted her and her young women to the best place of the harem.

- 10 Throughout this entire period Esther did not disclose her people or her birthplace. She had hidden her ethnic origin and her place of birth, because Mordekhai had commanded her that she should not disclose it,<sup>D</sup> her identity. Even after she left his house, and when she later rose to a position of greatness, she remained obedient to Mordekhai.
- 11 On each and every day, Mordekhai would walk before the courtyard of the harem, to know Esther's well-being, and what would be done with her. As her guardian, Mordekhai had both personal affection for Esther and was responsible for her welfare.
- 12 The young women's preparation for their encounters with the king followed a clearly defined process: When each and every maiden's turn arrived to come to King Ahashverosh, at the end of her having twelve months, according to the custom of the women, when she had been readied for the king by completing the standard beauty regimen as instructed, a process lasting twelve months, for so were prescribed the days for their treatment: Six months she was anointed with myrrh oil, which, among other things, was a depilatory,<sup>24</sup> and six months with various perfumes, and with women's cosmetics,
- 13 and with that the young woman would come to the king, after she had completed all of the treatments. One of the rules of her arrival was that whatever she would say, or request, in order to enhance her beauty would be given to her, to come with her from the harem to the king's palace. She was entitled to ask for a special ornament, or escort, or even an entire retinue, and her every wish would be granted.
- 14 She would come in the evening to the king and stay the night, and return in the morning to the second harem,<sup>D</sup> to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, guardian of the concubines.<sup>25</sup> She would not go back to the compound where



Ivory perfume bottle, Persepolis, 560–331 BCE



בֶּן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יִמִּינִי: אֲשֶׁר הִגִּלָּה מִירוּשָׁלַם עַם־הַגִּלָּה אֲשֶׁר הִגִּלָּתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה  
מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגִּלָּה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל: וַיְהִי אִמֹּן אֶת־הַדֹּפָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר  
פֶּת־דָּדָהּ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעֵרָה יִפְתָּת־אֵר וְטוֹבַת מַרְאֶה וּבְמוֹת אֲבִיהָ  
וְאִמָּהּ לָקַחָהּ מֶרְדֳּכָי לֹא לְבַת: וַיְהִי בַּהֲשָׁמַע דְּבַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ וּבְהַקְבֵּץ נַעֲרוֹת  
רַבּוֹת אֶל־שׁוֹשֵׁן הַבֵּיטָה אֶל־יַד הַגִּי וְתִלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־יַד הַגִּי  
שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים: וַתִּיטֹב הַנְּעֵרָה בְּעֵינָיו וַתֵּשֶׂא חֶסֶד לִפְנָיו וַיְבַהֵל אֶת־תַּמְרוּקִיָּה  
וְאֶת־מְנוּתָה לְתֵת לָהּ וְאֵת שֶׁבַע הַנְּעֵרוֹת הָרֵאיוֹת לְתֵת־לָהּ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ  
וַיִּשְׁנָה וְאֶת־נַעֲרוֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים: לֹא־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־עַמָּהּ וְאֶת־  
מּוֹלְדֹתָהּ כִּי מֶרְדֳּכָי צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגִּיד: וּבְכָל־יוֹם וָיוֹם מֶרְדֳּכָי מֵתִהְלֵךְ  
לִפְנֵי חֹצֵר בֵּית־הַנָּשִׁים לְדַעַת אֶת־שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמַה־יַּעֲשֶׂה בָּהּ: וּבְהִגֵּיעַ תֹּר  
נַעֲרָה וְנַעֲרָה לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרוֹשׁ מִקֵּץ הַיּוֹת לָהּ בְּדַת הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנַיִם  
עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ כִּי כֵן יִמְלֹאוּ יָמֵי מְרוּקִיָּהן שִׁשָּׁה חֳדָשִׁים בְּשֶׁמֶן הַמֹּר וְשִׁשָּׁה חֳדָשִׁים  
בְּבִשְׁמִים וּבִתְמָרוּקֵי הַנָּשִׁים: וּבֹזֶה הַנְּעֵרָה בָּאָה אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר  
יִנָּתֵן לָהּ לָבוֹא עִמָּהּ מִבֵּית הַנָּשִׁים עַד־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ: בָּעֶרֶב הִיא בָּאָה וּבִבְקָר  
הִיא שָׁבָה אֶל־בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנֵי אֶל־יַד שֶׁעֲשָׂנוּ סִדִּים הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַפִּילִגְשִׁים

## BACKGROUND

2:7 | **Esther:** Esther is a Persian name, from *astra*, which means a star in Indo-European languages (see *Megilla* 13a), perhaps referring to the planet Venus (see *Targum*, 10:13), whereas her Hebrew name was Hadassa, from *hadas*, meaning myrtle. It should be noted that the flowers of the myrtle, with their many stamens, resemble ancient drawings of stars. Some suggest that the name Esther is derived from that of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, while the name Mordekhai is based on the Babylonian god Marduk. In this context, it is interesting to note that documents from ancient Shushan dating back to the reign of Xerxes I, who died in 465 BCE and whom some identify with Ahashverosh, mention a royal treasurer called Marduka.

## DISCUSSION

2:10 | **Because Mordekhai had commanded her that she should not disclose it:** The text does not explain Mordekhai's motives, but presumably he thought that Esther could potentially be a secret agent. It can be safely assumed that Mordekhai would have preferred her to marry a Judean man, but that when she was forcibly taken to the house of the king, he quickly adapted to the new situation (see Rashi; Rav Yosef Kara). As one who held a position in the royal court (see 2:19), Mordekhai wanted to keep Esther's identity secret in case he should need to reveal it at an opportune moment, although of course he did not know how necessary that would ultimately be. He realized that it was in his interests to have a sleeper agent in the palace, who would be ready to act in a time of need.

2:14 | **To the second harem:** After a woman had spent the night with the king, she was considered his property, and she was therefore transferred to a special residence for his concubines. It would be disrespectful to the monarch if she were given to another man (Ibn Ezra). An example of this from elsewhere in the Bible is the case of Avishag the Shunamite, King David's companion. After David's death, his son Adoniyahu requested Avishag from King Solomon as a wife for himself, and it can be inferred from Solomon's incensed reaction that a woman who had shared the king's bed was forbidden to any other man, including a member of the royal family (I Kings 1:1–4, 2:13–25; see commentary on II Samuel 20:3).

the candidates were being groomed, but rather to the harem of the concubines, where all the young women went after they had been with the king.<sup>26</sup> **She would not come to the king anymore, unless the king desired her, and she was called by name.** If the king remembered her, he would instruct his minister to call her again, and if not, she would remain with the other concubines in the harem.

- 15 With the arrival of the turn of Esther, daughter of Avihayil, who had been the uncle of Mordekhai, who had taken her as a daughter for him, to come to the king, she did not request anything except that which Hegai, the king's chamberlain, guardian of the women, said.** The other young women made an effort to impress the king, whereas Esther refrained from taking such measures on her own initiative and merely accepted the recommendations of the expert, Hegai. **And Esther found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her.**
- 16 Esther was taken to King Ahashverosh to his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign.** This was four years after Ahashverosh had dismissed Vashti. During this period the young women had been gathered and had undergone meticulous preparation before presentation to the king.
- 17 The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she found favor and grace in his eyes more than all the other virgins. He placed the royal crown on her head, and he crowned her queen in place of Vashti.** It is surprising that in Persia and Media a woman who was not of royal blood would be selected as queen. As stated above,<sup>27</sup> it seems likely that although Esther concealed her origins, she was believed to come from a noble family.
- 18 The king made a great banquet for all his princes and his servants, the banquet of Esther.** A private celebration to mark the appointment of the new queen did not suffice; rather, he issued an announcement to all the nations. Since everyone had heard about the removal of Vashti, the king decided to declare publicly that her replacement had been found. **He awarded an**

**abatement for the provinces;** he lowered the taxes so his subjects would participate in his joy. **And furthermore, he gave gifts in accordance with the king's bounty,** in order to improve the general welfare of his subjects and encourage their devotion.

- 19 With the gathering of the virgins a second time;** it seems that some of the candidates who had been gathered had not yet had been presented to the king, and therefore the process continued in some form even after Esther had been chosen,<sup>28</sup> **Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate,**<sup>29</sup> that is, he held a position in the royal court, from which he was able to follow the events at the palace.<sup>29</sup>



Gates of the palace of the kings of Persia, Persepolis, fifth century BCE

- 20** It had been some time since she had entered the house of the king, and still **Esther did not disclose her birthplace or her people, as Mordekhai had commanded her; Esther would perform the directive of Mordekhai, as it was when she was reared by him,** in her childhood.

#### BACKGROUND

2:19| **The king's gate:** There was a special structure for the king's gate in the palace in Shushan (see image below 1:5). Those who sought the king or his counselors were permitted to approach no further than the gatehouse, where they would wait to be received, or to hear an answer to their request.

2:23| **And the two of them were hanged on a gibbet:** Researchers maintain that the practice of public hanging as a method of execution originated in ancient Persia. This manner of

killing is a simple procedure that does not require an expert hangman and does not involve the actual shedding of blood. However, some claim that the hanging referred to in the book of Esther is actually impalement, in which a sharp wood pole is inserted into the chest or between the legs of the condemned until it emerges on the other side of the body. The Persians inherited this method of execution from the Assyrians and Babylonians.

#### DISCUSSION

2:19| **Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate:** The name Mordekhai appears in the list of those who initially immigrated to the Land of Israel from Babylonia (see Ezra 2:2; *Megilla* 16b). It is possible that after he arrived in the Land of Israel, Mordekhai was sent back to Shushan to serve in a kind of diplomatic role, representing the interests of the province of Judah in the king's court.

טו לֹא־תָבוֹא עוֹד אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי אִם־חֲפֹץ בָּהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִקְרָאָהּ בִּשְׁם: וּבִהְגִּיעַ הַגֶּדֶר  
אֶסְתֵּר בַּת־אֲבִיחַיִל וְדָד מֶרְדֳּכָי אֲשֶׁר לָקַח־לוֹ לְבַת לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא בִקְשָׁה  
דְּבָר כִּי אִם אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הִגִּי סֵרִיס־הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים וְתִהְיֶינָה אֶסְתֵּר נִשְׂאֵת  
טז חֵן בְּעֵינֵי כָל־דְּאִיָּה: וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֶל־בֵּית מַלְכוּתוֹ  
יז בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ טֵבֶת בִּשְׁנַת־שִׁבְעָה לְמַלְכוּתוֹ: וַיֶּאֱהָב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־  
אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל־הַנָּשִׁים וַתִּשָּׂא־חֵן וַחֲסֵד לִפְנֵי מִכָּל־הַבְּתוּלוֹת וַיֵּשֶׁם כְּתֹר־מַלְכוּת  
יח בְּרָאשָׁה וַיִּמְלִיכָהּ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי: וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁתֵּה גָדוֹל לְכָל־שָׂרָיו וְעַבְדָּיו  
יט אֶת מִשְׁתֵּה אֶסְתֵּר וַהֲנַחָה לַמְּדִינּוֹת עָשָׂה וַיִּתֵּן מִשָּׂאת כֶּיֶד הַמֶּלֶךְ: וּבִהְקִבֹּץ  
כ בַּתּוּלוֹת שְׁנֵית וּמֶרְדֳּכָי יוֹשֵׁב בִּשְׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ: אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מִגִּדַּת מוֹלַדְתָּהּ וְאֶת־  
עַמָּה כֹּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מֶרְדֳּכָי וְאֶת־מֵאֲמַר מֶרְדֳּכָי אֶסְתֵּר עָשָׂה כֹּאֲשֶׁר הִיתָה  
כא בְּאִמְנָה אֹתוֹ: בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וּמֶרְדֳּכָי יוֹשֵׁב בִּשְׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ קִצָּף  
בְּגִתָּן וְתֶרֶשׁ שְׁנֵי־סֵרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁמֵרֵי הַפֶּתַח וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ:  
כב וַיּוֹדַע הַדְּבָר לְמֶרְדֳּכָי וַיֵּגֵד לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לַמֶּלֶךְ בִּשְׁם מֶרְדֳּכָי:  
כג וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַדְּבָר וַיִּמָּצֵא וַיִּתְּלוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם עַל־עֵץ וַיִּכְתֹּב בְּסֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לִפְנֵי

## Discovery of an Assassination Plot against the King

ESTHER 2:21–23

At this stage, an apparently random incident of marginal importance is presented. However, it later becomes clear that this incident is a pivotal link in the chain of events.

- 21** In those days, as Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigtan and Teresh, among the guardians of the threshold, became angry and sought to do violence to King Ahashverosh, to assassinate him. The royal court in Persia was rife with intrigue, plots, and conspiracies at that time. In some cases it is hard to know whether a particular Persian king took the throne by virtue of his lineage, or essentially successfully performed a coup d'état.
- 22** The matter, the plot that was being hatched, became known to Mordekhai. One suggestion is that Mordekhai discovered the plot because the men conversed in a language they thought no one knew, but which Mordekhai could understand.<sup>30</sup> And he, Mordekhai, told Queen Esther about it, in order that she

pass the message on to Ahashverosh, since Mordekhai himself did not have direct contact with the king, as he was a mere official or representative of the Judeans in the royal court. And Esther reported the plot to the king in the name of Mordekhai, with whom the king was unfamiliar.

- 23** The matter was investigated, and it was revealed that Bigtan and Teresh were indeed involved in the plot, and the two of them were hanged on a gibbet.<sup>8</sup> It seems that hanging was the preferred method of execution by the Persian monarchy, as it served to display publicly the offenders' dishonorable end. It, the two men's attempt to assassinate King Ahashverosh on that date, as well as how he was saved, was recorded in the book of the chronicles before the king.

## Haman and the Plot to Destroy the Jews

ESTHER 3:1–15

In this section Mordekhai refuses to accept the authority of Haman, who has become the most distinguished minister in Persia. Haman, affronted at this personal slight, convinces the king to permit the systematic annihilation of all of Mordekhai's nation, the Jews, in his empire. The word for the members of Mordekhai's nation, *Yehudim*, can be translated as either Judeans or Jews. Elsewhere in the Bible this translation has used Judeans, but in this context it makes use of the term Jews. It is in the book of Esther that the Jewish people's identity is first conceived as not

necessarily a function of their origins in Judah. Most of Haman's potential victims did not live in Judah, and their families had not lived there for several generations. They nevertheless maintained a unique religious, ethnic, and cultural identity wherever they were found in the vast Persian Empire.

- 3 **1** After these matters, the appointment of Esther and the foiled plot of Bigtan and Teresh, **King Ahashverosh promoted** from among his ministers **Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite,<sup>BD</sup> and he elevated him,** raised his status, and he placed his seat above all the princes who were with him. Advancing one particular minister to the status of a close confidant of the king was not unheard of, as attested in other documents of the period.<sup>31</sup>
- 2 **All the king's servants,** his ministers and attendants, **who were at the king's gate, were bowing and prostrating themselves to Haman,** for so had the king commanded concerning him; but Mordekhai would not bow and would not prostrate himself,<sup>D</sup> for an undetermined reason.<sup>32</sup>
- 3 **The king's servants, who were at the king's gate, said to Mordekhai:** Why are you violating the king's commandment that all must bow before Haman?
- 4 **It was, when they spoke to him day after day, and he did not listen to them, that they told this to Haman.** Perhaps Haman had not noticed Mordekhai's refusal up to that point, as a large crowd would pass before him, all bowing,<sup>33</sup> but those present, seeking to stir up trouble, informed Haman of the situation in order to see whether Mordekhai's words would prevail, whether he would remain firm in his decision not to bow to Haman, for he had told them that he was a Jew and perhaps for that reason he would not prostrate himself to Haman.<sup>34</sup>
- 5 **Haman saw that Mordekhai was not bowing and not prostrating himself to him, and Haman was filled with fury** over what he considered a public insult.
- 6 Haman could have punished Mordekhai for his behavior, or tried to do away with him, but **he disdained to do violence to Mordekhai alone;** merely harming Mordekhai himself was not enough for him, **for he had been told of Mordekhai's people.**

This indicates that in those times there was no external sign that made it easy to differentiate between Jews and gentiles. **Haman sought to destroy all the Jews<sup>D</sup> in the entire kingdom of Ahashverosh, the people of Mordekhai.** Despite Haman's many duties as senior minister of a massive empire, he developed an obsession with the Jews, because they were Mordekhai's nation, and he sought a way to eliminate them all.

- 7 Haman was determined to destroy all the Jews, and he plotted how to bring this idea to fruition. **In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, during the twelfth year of King Ahashverosh, he had cast a pur,** a Persian word,<sup>35</sup> **which is the lot [*goral*] in Hebrew.** This was a means of divination through which one would determine the best course of action to take, and the ideal time to take it.<sup>36</sup> The lot was cast **before Haman.** Haman wanted to find the right date, and to that end cast lots **for each day and for each month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.** He came to the conclusion that the best time to bring about the downfall of the Jews was the month of Adar, presumably in the upcoming year.
- 8 Since Haman had no independent authority, he needed to incite Ahashverosh to approve his initiative. **Haman said to King Ahashverosh: There is one people<sup>D</sup> that is scattered and**



Lot of Yahalu, illustration based on stone die, Assyria, ninth century BCE

### BACKGROUND

3:1 | **Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite:** It is possible that the name Haman is derived from the name of the Elamite sky god, Humban or Humman. Alternatively, it relates to a sacred bird in Persian mythology, *homa* or *huma*, whose

supposed characteristics were similar to those of the phoenix, specifically long life and resistance to fire. There is also mention in Persian manuscripts of a Persian officer called Humadat, which is similar to Hamedata. The Sages understood

Agagite to refer to the fact that Haman was a descendant of Agag king of Amalek (see I Samuel 15:8–9), but the name Agaga also exists in the Elamite language.

הַמֶּלֶךְ: אַחֵר ׀ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה גָּדַל הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ אֶת־הַמֶּנֶּן  
 בֶּן־הַמִּדְּתָא הָאֲגָגִי וַיִּנְשְׂאֵהוּ וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת־כִּסְאוֹ מֵעַל כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אָתּוֹ:  
 וְכָל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ פָּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתָּחִוִּים לְהַמֶּנֶּן כִּי־כֵן צִוָּה־  
 לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמִרְדֳּכָי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה: וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ לְמִרְדֳּכָי מִדּוּעַ אַתָּה עוֹבֵר אֶת מִצְוַת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיְהִי בִּאמְרָם אֵלָיו יוֹם וַיֹּם  
 וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלֵיהֶם וַיֵּגִידוּ לְהַמֶּנֶּן לְדָאוֹת הַיַּעֲמֹדוֹ דְּבָרֵי מִרְדֳּכָי כִּי־הֵגִיד לָהֶם  
 אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יְהוּדִי: וַיֵּדָא הַמֶּנֶּן כִּי־אֵין מִרְדֳּכָי כֹּרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לוֹ וַיִּמְלֹא הַמֶּנֶּן חֲמָה:  
 וַיְבֹז בְּעֵינָיו לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמִרְדֳּכָי לְבַדּוֹ כִּי־הֵגִידוּ לוֹ אֶת־עַם מִרְדֳּכָי וּבִקֵּשׁ הַמֶּנֶּן  
 לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מַלְכוּת אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ עִם מִרְדֳּכָי: בַּחֲדָשׁ  
 הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא־חֲדָשׁ נִסָּן בִּשְׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרִיה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ הַפִּיל פּוֹר  
 הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הַמֶּנֶּן מִיּוֹם ׀ לַיּוֹם וּמִחֲדָשׁ לְחֲדָשׁ שְׁנַיִם־עֶשֶׂר הוּא־חֲדָשׁ  
 אָדָר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּנֶּן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ יִשְׁנֹו עַם־אֶחָד מִפּוֹר וּמִפּוֹרֵד  
 בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹות מַלְכוּתְךָ וְדַתִּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל־עַם וְאֶת־דַּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ

## DISCUSSION

3:1 | **The Agagite:** This probably means that he was a descendant of Agag the Amalekite king (see the Aramaic translations of the Bible; *Masekhet Soferim* 13; *Aggadot Esther* 3). The Agag mentioned in the Bible lived during the period of Saul (see I Samuel 15:8–9). It is possible, however, that Agag was the standard royal name for all kings of the Amalekites (see Rashbam, and Ramban, Numbers 24:7; see also Jerusalem Talmud, *Yevamot* 2:6). Haman might have changed his original Amalekite name to one that sounded more Persian.

3:2 | **But Mordekhai would not bow and would not prostrate himself:** It would seem that Mordekhai's refusal to bow before Haman was not motivated by religious concerns. After all, it is related about other righteous figures that they bowed down and prostrated themselves before ministers and kings, and this was not considered a sin (see Genesis 42:6; Exodus 18:7; I Samuel 24:8; I Kings 1:23). Perhaps Mordekhai, who was from Judean nobility, considered

the idea of bowing down to Haman an act of humiliation for all Jews (see also *Yalkut Shimoni* 954). It is also possible that his refusal to lower himself before Haman was due to the personal enmity between the men. According to tradition, they had a prior acquaintance, and Mordekhai despised Haman personally (see *Megillat Setarim*; *Megilla* 15a–16a). Some say that he refused to bow down because Haman presented himself as a god, or because he hung an idol from his clothing (see Ibn Ezra; Ralbag; *Megilla* 10b, 19a; *Sanhedrin* 61b).

3:6 | **Haman sought to destroy all the Jews:** This phenomenon of a personal hatred that expands into hatred of an entire people is unusual and puzzling. The background of this enmity is related to Haman's Amalekite roots. Although not a large nation, Amalek hated the nation of Israel from the beginning of its history as a people (see Exodus 17:8–16). Haman's confrontation with Mordekhai was not the only reason for his extreme reaction; it awakened a primeval

enmity that he and his people had nurtured against Israel from time immemorial.

3:8 | **There is one people:** The fact that Haman had to tell Ahashverosh about the Jews indicates that the king knew very little about them. Although the Jews were his subjects, and they even had a small state of their own in the area surrounding Jerusalem, it is doubtful whether Ahashverosh had ever thought about this tiny nation. The 127 provinces over which he reigned, some of which were very large and important, contained many peoples and tribes. Even if Ahashverosh had been a conscientious and organized ruler, he would not have been intimately familiar with the Jewish people. However, it is known that he received a letter from Samaritans libeling the exiles who had returned to the Land of Israel (see Ezra 4:6), and therefore it is likely that Haman's comments evoked his existing negative associations, making him receptive to the idea of their destruction.



dispersed<sup>b</sup> among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; they are not concentrated in one country;<sup>37</sup> and their laws, their practices, their ways of life, are different from every people's. A significant proportion of the commandments of the Torah serve to keep Jews apart from gentiles and prevent them from engaging in idolatry. And while the Jews observe their own laws, they do not follow the king's laws, and therefore it is not worthwhile for the king to tolerate them. They are a small nation of no importance, and an annoyance that disrupts the harmony of your kingdom.

9 If it pleases the king to accept my proposal, let it be written as an official order to eliminate them,<sup>d</sup> and I will weigh ten thousand talents of silver<sup>d</sup> into the hands of the king's craftsmen. I volunteer to give ten thousand silver talents of my own to those who can turn it into silver bullion, to bring to the king's treasuries.<sup>b</sup> The donation to the king's treasuries would compensate Ahashverosh for any possible financial costs incurred by the course of action suggested by Haman, as the king might fear the loss of so many taxpayers.

10 Apathetic as he was to the fate of the Jews, Ahashverosh was apparently enthused by the generous gift of his chief minister. Therefore, the king removed his ring with the royal seal from his hand,<sup>d</sup> and he gave it to Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews. This was not merely a verbal agreement; by giving him his seal, Ahashverosh granted Haman practical permission and authority to sign in the king's name.<sup>38</sup>



Ring seal, Shushan, third century BCE

11 The king said to Haman: The silver that you offered to donate is given to you; it shall remain in your possession, as the kingdom will bear the cost, and the people are also given to you, to

do with them as it is pleasing in your eyes, in accordance with your wishes.

12 Haman acted with great haste. He cast the lots at the beginning of Nisan, and by the thirteenth of the month everything was ready for the next stage of his plan:

The king's scribes were summoned in the first month, on the thirteenth day of it, and it was written in accordance with everything that Haman commanded to the king's satraps,<sup>b</sup> who presided over the larger regions, and to the governors<sup>b</sup> who were over each and every province, the smaller areas, and to the princes of each and



Assyrian scribes, illustration based on stone relief, Nimrud, Iraq, eighth century BCE

every people, to each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language.<sup>b</sup> In the name of King Ahashverosh, it, the missive with the decree, was written, and it was sealed with the king's ring.

13 The scrolls were sent in the hand of the couriers to all the king's provinces, in which it was written that the king permitted his subjects to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate all the Jews, from lad to elder, children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their spoils, their property. The instructions were sent almost a year in advance, perhaps in order to establish the facts on the ground as soon as possible, and so that the missives would reach the farthest corners of the empire in time. Due to Haman's trust in his divination, he was resolute in keeping the determined date, at which point the Jews would be deemed legitimate targets. There does not seem to have been any need to enforce this decree. It simply stated that on such and such a date the Jews would no longer enjoy the protection of the law. Haman assumed that that was sufficient, and that the members of the various nations of the empire would take the opportunity to annihilate the Jews.

## DISCUSSION

3:9 | **Let it be written to eliminate them:** Haman's proposal and his conduct toward Mordechai is the first case of anti-Semitism in the sense of Jew-hatred. In previous generations various nations had fought against the kingdoms of Israel, but those were not anti-Semitic wars that sought to exterminate the nation, but struggles for power due to conflicts of interest. Similarly, the Israelites suffered in Egypt because they were strangers, and perhaps because the ruling

authorities felt threatened by their presence. Most of these wars were not etched in the collective national memory. The attack recorded here is of a different kind entirely. Haman's speech is an ancient model for anti-Semitic propaganda, which has been used, with minor variations, by many anti-Semites in subsequent generations. It is possible to see signs of anti-Semitism in the struggle against the exiles returning to Judah on the part of Sanbalat the Horonite, the leader

of the Samaritans, which occurred at roughly the same time as the events described in this book. He and his men sought to sabotage the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple through mockery, the weakening of the Jews' resolve, and scaremongering and informing on them to the authorities, as well general abuse and threats of destruction (see Nehemiah 2–6).

ט  
 וְעִשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִים כֶּבֶד-כֶּסֶף אֶשְׁקוֹל עַל-יְדֵי עֲשֵׂי הַמֶּלֶכָה לְהָבִיא אֶל-גִּנְזֵי  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֶּנָּה לְהֵמָּן בֶּן-הַמִּדְיָן הָאֲגָגִי צֹרֵר  
 י  
 הַיְּהוּדִים: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהֵמָּן הַכֶּסֶף נָתַן לְךָ וְהָעַם לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כַּטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ:  
 יא  
 וַיִּקְרָא סָפְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם בּוֹ וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּל-אִשֶּׁר-  
 יב  
 צִוָּה הֵמָּן אֶל אַחֲשֵׁדְרִפְנֵי-הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֶל-הַפָּחֹת אֲשֶׁר ׀ עַל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וְאֶל-  
 שָׂרֵי עַם וְעַם מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְעַם וְעַם כָּלשׁוֹנוֹ בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרֶשׁ  
 נִכְתָּב וְנִחְתָּם בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְנִשְׁלַח סָפְרִים בְּיַד הָרָצִים אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת  
 ג  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת-כָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים מִנְּעֹר וְעַד-זָקֵן טָף וְנָשִׁים  
 בְּיוֹם אֶחָד בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנֵים-עָשָׂר הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר וּשְׁלָלָם לְבוֹז:

## BACKGROUND

3:8 | **Scattered and dispersed:** The Assyrian kings first exiled the ten tribes of Israel to northwest Mesopotamia, after which Nebuchadnezzar exiled the leading Judeans to central and southern Mesopotamia. In some cases, these exiles achieved high social and political status, and they also dealt in international trade. In this manner they spread across the Persian Empire, from Afghanistan and India to Libya, southern Egypt, and western Anatolia. Judeans apparently served on Phoenician ships and conducted business with Sidonian merchants, and they may have even reached distant trading stations in northern Africa and Spain.

3:9 | **The king's treasures** [*ginzei*]: In Old Persian, *ganzaka* is a small treasure chamber. This word is also the source of the Hebrew terms *ganzakh*, archive, and *gizbar*, treasurer.

3:10 | **The king removed his ring from his hand:** Royal commands were generally etched in cuneiform script on clay tablets which were authorized with the impression of a seal. Some seals were attached to a ring, while others were hung on a chain around the neck. It is

possible that the king did not need to be literate, as all his orders were written by scribes, who would read out the texts to him when necessary (see 6:1).

3:12 | **The king's satraps** [*aḥashdarpenei*]: The Persian word originally denoted a shield of the kingdom, but this meaning was broadened to include the rulers of administrative units of the Persian Empire.

**The governors** [*hapaḥot*]: *Peḥa*, or *pihatu* in Akkadian, was an official of a lower status than a satrap. A *pahavva*, which was ruled by a *peḥa*, was part of a larger unit.

**To each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language:** According to the standard procedure of the Persian monarchy, the king would dictate his order in Persian, while the Aramean scribes would write it in Aramaic. The missives were sent to the local scribes of each province, who would read the Aramaic and translate it into the local language while reading them aloud. In this instance the missives were sent in different languages due to the importance of their content.

## DISCUSSION

**Ten thousand talents of silver:** If this is referring to sacred talents mentioned in the book of Exodus, then a silver talent weighed roughly 30 kg. According to this calculation, Haman proposed to give the king some 300 metric tons of silver. It is unusual for such a large sum to be in the possession of a private individual. Haman was clearly an immensely wealthy man with the powerful position of the chief minister of the empire (see 5:11; *Bemidbar Rabba* 22:6).

**14** A copy<sup>39</sup> of the document<sup>B</sup> went out to issue the decree in each and every province, publicizing it to all the peoples: To be ready for that day. Although it is unlikely that Jews were to be found in every remote corner of the Persian Empire, for bureaucratic reasons the announcement was sent to each province; a general decree of the king had to reach the entire kingdom.

## Mordekhai and Esther React to the Decree

ESTHER 4:1–17

believe that their fervent supplications and their fasting will influence the unfolding events.

Mordekhai's refusal to bow before Haman is the pretext for the decree to destroy the Jews. When the decree is publicized, he reacts without delay, calling upon Esther, his secret representative in the king's palace, to thwart it. The conversation between Mordekhai and Esther reveals both their profound concerns about the king's decree, and their faith and trust in God. At the start of this section, Mordekhai cries out in distress, and at its conclusion, Esther asks for all the Jews to gather together and fast. Even if they are uncertain as to whether their prayers will be accepted, they both

**15** The couriers went out urgently by the word of the king, and the decree was issued in the Shushan citadel. The king and Haman sat to drink and toast the success of their plan. Ahashverosh and Haman were so delighted that the plan had been put into motion that they held a small feast; and meanwhile the city of Shushan, mainly its Jewish community, of which Mordekhai<sup>40</sup> was a prominent member, was confounded by the sudden harsh decree.

- 4 1** Mordekhai, who was a court official, **knew everything that was done**, as he was presumably one of the first to read a copy of the decree that had been distributed throughout the kingdom. He understood the severity of the situation and its implications for the future of the Jews, even before the rest of the Jews living in Shushan knew what had transpired. He was deeply concerned by the likely effectiveness of Haman's propaganda, as well as Haman's growing influence in the royal court. **And consequently, Mordekhai rent his garments and donned sackcloth, and placed ashes upon his head**, all signs of mourning. **He went out in the midst of the city and cried a loud and bitter cry**, a cry of prayer and entreaty to God,<sup>41</sup> and a cry of protest against the authorities.
- 2** He came up to before the king's gate; although he was generally authorized to enter, he did not approach further, **as in accordance with the royal dress code,<sup>42</sup> one may not come to the king's gate in a sackcloth garment.**
- 3** And in each and every province, any place where the word of the king and his decree reached, **there was great mourning among the Jews, fasting, weeping, and keening; sackcloth and ashes were draped by the multitudes**; alternatively, sackcloth and ashes were laid out in the streets for public use.
- 4** Esther's young women and her chamberlains came and told her of Mordekhai's actions. Those who were close to Esther knew about her relationship with him, as Mordekhai would inquire about her welfare every day, and it was she who had passed on Mordekhai's warning about the plot on the king's life

(2:11, 22). **And the queen was greatly shocked**, as she had not heard anything about what was going on. The king's decree had not been disclosed to the women, as they were presumed to not be interested in political matters. **And** as Esther wanted to hear from Mordekhai what was happening, and since she knew that he could not enter while wearing sackcloth, **she sent garments to clothe Mordekhai and to remove from upon him his sackcloth, but he would not accept them**, refusing to take off his sackcloth.

- 5** Esther called Hatakh, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had set before her. Hatakh was no ordinary servant; he had been granted explicit authority to help the queen with whatever she might need. **And she commanded him concerning Mordekhai, in order to know what this is, and why this is.** She wanted to know the reason for his behavior, and what he wanted.<sup>43</sup>
- 6** Hatakh went out to Mordekhai, to the city square that was before the king's gate. Since Mordekhai did not approach the king's gate, Hatakh came out to the square outside it, where he asked Mordekhai to explain his conduct.
- 7** Mordekhai told him everything that had happened to him. This did not necessarily include his refusal to bow down to Haman, as Mordekhai might have considered Haman's decree no more than his manifestation of a tradition of hatred for Jews he had inherited from his ancestors, the tribe of Amalek. **And he informed Hatakh of the matter of the silver that Haman had said to weigh out for the king's treasuries concerning the Jews, in order to destroy them.** In addition to the decree

## BACKGROUND

3:14 | **A copy [patshegen] of the document:** In Old Persian, this means a faithful copy of the source of the law, signed with the seal of the king's ring.



פִּתְּשָׁן הַכְּתָב לְהַנְתֵּן דָּת בְּכָל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה גְלוֹי לְכָל־הָעַמִּים לִהְיוֹת עֲתִידִים  
 לַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: הָרָצִים יֵצְאוּ דְחוּפִים בְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַדָּת נִתְּנָה בְּשׁוֹשַׁן הַבִּירָה  
 וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן יֵשְׁבוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת וְהָעִיר שׁוֹשֶׁן נְבוֹכָה: וּמִרְדֳּכָי יָדַע אֶת־  
 כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה וַיִּקְרַע מִרְדֳּכָי אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ שָׂק וְאַפֵּר וַיֵּצֵא בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר  
 וַיִּזְעַק וַעֲקָה גְדוּלָּה וּמְרָה: וַיָּבֹא עַד לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי אֵין לָבֹא אֶל־שַׁעַר  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלָבוּשׁ שָׂק: וּבְכָל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וּדְתוּ מִגֵּיעַ  
 אֲבָל גְּדוּלַּת לִיְהוּדִים וְצוֹם וּבְכִי וּמִסְפַּד שָׂק וְאַפֵּר יֵצֵעַ לָרַבִּים: וְתָבוֹאִינָה נַעֲרוֹת  
 אֶסְתֵּר וְסָרִיסֶיהָ וַיִּגִּדּוּ לָהּ וַתִּתְחַלְחַל הַמֶּלֶכָּה מְאֹד וַתִּשְׁלַח בְּגָדִים לְהַלְבִּישׁ  
 אֶת־מִרְדֳּכָי וּלְהַסִּיר שָׂקוֹ מֵעָלָיו וְלֹא קִבַּל: וַתִּקְרָא אֶסְתֵּר לְהַתֵּךְ מִסָּרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 אֲשֶׁר הָעַמִּיד לִפְנֶיהָ וַתִּצְוֶהוּ עַל־מִרְדֳּכָי לֵדַעַת מַה־זֶּה וְעַל־מַה־זֶּה: וַיֵּצֵא  
 הַתֵּךְ אֶל־מִרְדֳּכָי אֶל־דְּחוּב הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיִּגְדֵּלֻּם מִרְדֳּכָי אֶת  
 כָּל־אֲשֶׁר קָרְהוּ וְאֵת ׀ פְּרֶשֶׁת הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר אָמַר הָמֶן לְשִׁקּוֹל עַל־גִּנּוֹי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 בִּיהוּדִים לֹא־אֲבָדִם: וְאֶת־פִּתְּשָׁן כְּתָב־הַדָּת אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן בְּשׁוֹשַׁן לְהַשְׁמִידֵם נָתַן  
 לוֹ לְהִרְאוֹת אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר וּלְהַגִּיד לָהּ וּלְצִוּוֹת עָלֶיהָ לָבֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַתְחַנֵּן־לוֹ  
 וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי עַל־עַמָּה: וַיָּבֹא הַתֵּךְ וַיִּגְדֵּל לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת דְּבָרֵי מִרְדֳּכָי: וַתֹּאמֶר  
 אֶסְתֵּר לְהַתֵּךְ וַתִּצְוֶהוּ אֶל־מִרְדֳּכָי: כָּל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יָדְעִים

itself, word had spread of the enormous sum that Haman had proposed to give to the king in his determination to annihilate the Jews.

- 8 He also gave him, Hatakh, a copy of the written decree to destroy them, the Jews, that was issued in Shushan in order to show it, the decree, to Esther, to inform her of the situation, and furthermore to command her in his name to go to the king, to plead with him, and to request before him on behalf of her people. Only she could stop Haman, who enjoyed such privileged status in the kingdom. Mordechai himself was not close to the king, whereas Esther lived in the palace and was beloved by Ahashverosh. Since the decree was essentially

motivated by emotion, Mordechai hoped that she had the power to annul it through her entreaties.

- 9 Hatakh came and told Esther the words of Mordechai.  
 10 Esther said to Hatakh, and commanded him to take back the following message for Mordechai:  
 11 The rules of entering to see the king are well known: All the king's servants in the court, and the people of the king's provinces, know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner courtyard who has not been summoned and has not been granted permission, there is but one rule for him: To be put to death. It was forbidden to enter without special invitation, as the king had quasi-divine status.

Esther continued: This fate is the rule, **except for one to whom the king will extend the golden scepter,<sup>8</sup> who lives.** If the king does not want a person who has entered without permission to be executed, he stretches forth his golden scepter to the person. Esther concludes: And **I have not been summoned to come to the king these thirty days.** Although I am the king's beloved queen, he has thousands of wives and concubines. I do not know his current mood, but the fact that he has not invited me for a month does not bode well. If I simply march in to see him, I will be endangering my life.

**12 They told Mordekhai Esther's words.**

**13 Mordekhai said to respond to Esther:** You feel protected in the palace, and you suppose that you will be spared any harm from Haman's order. However, you are wrong; **do not imagine escaping** because you are **in the king's palace**, that **out of all the Jews** you will be safe.

**14 For if you are silent** and do nothing **at this time**, I trust that **relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place.** The decree does not go into effect for another eleven months, and I have faith in God that He will deliver us before then, **but I am sure that you and your father's house will perish,** as you did not act at the opportune time to save the Jews.

## Esther Risks Her Life

ESTHER 5:1–14

increases, and all the main characters are placed under stress: Ahashverosh does not understand why Esther risked her life in approaching him, nor why she keeps inviting him and Haman to parties; Haman enjoys the great honor granted to him by the queen and concurrently suffers humiliation in his dealings with Mordekhai; Esther does not know whether her plans and efforts will help her save her brethren, or whether they will bring disaster upon her; meanwhile, a death sentence hovers over Mordekhai's head.

In dramatic contrast to Vashti, who violated the law by refusing to appear before Ahashverosh when he called her, Esther dares to transgress the law by approaching the king without having been called, thereby putting her life at risk. The feast for the public described at the beginning of the book likewise stands in contrast to the intimate feasts orchestrated by Esther for the king and Haman. As the story continues, the pace of events

Destruction will be visited upon you and your family, including myself.<sup>44</sup> **Who knows whether you have attained royalty for a time like this?** You came to a position of power without planning to do so, and now you find yourself in a situation where you can act to change the course of events and thereby save your people. Don't you think that this apparent coincidence is significant? Can't you see that it is a sign from Heaven?

**15** Esther, as usual, accepted Mordekhai's instructions. **Esther said to respond to Mordekhai:**

**16** Go, assemble all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and pray<sup>45</sup> and fast on my behalf; do not eat and do not drink for three days, night and day, an unusually severe fast. **Also I and my young women will fast in this manner,** as we must all pray for my success; **and then I will go to the king, against the rule, and if I perish, I perish.** Perhaps the day when I approach the king will be the last of my life.

**17 Mordekhai went on** his way, **and acted in accordance with everything that Esther had commanded him.** He gathered together all the Jews, informed them of the evil decree and of Esther's situation, and instructed them to pray and fast. The Jews' high regard for Mordekhai inspired them to rally behind him and follow his instructions.

**5 1** It was on the third day;<sup>D</sup> Esther donned royalty,<sup>46</sup> royal apparel, and stood in the inner courtyard of the king's palace, facing the king's palace; the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal palace, facing the entrance of the palace,<sup>8</sup> where he could see who was present in the court.<sup>47</sup>

**2** It was as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard that she found favor in his eyes; the affection that he had initially



Darius seated on throne, holding his scepter, Persepolis, fifth century BCE

felt toward her when he chose her was rekindled, **and consequently the king extended the golden scepter that was in his hand to Esther,** thereby granting her official permission to enter. **Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter,** which was apparently the accepted ceremonial response to receiving royal permission to approach.

**3** The king said to her: **What is it with you, Queen Esther, and what is your request?** You clearly want something. In my love for you I will grant it, **up to half of the kingdom, and it will be granted to you.**<sup>8</sup> The king expresses in exaggerated terms his willingness to act for her sake.

**4** Esther said, in the same formal manner: **If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman,** the most important man in the kingdom and the one closest to the king, **come<sup>D</sup> today to the banquet that I have prepared for him,** the king.

אֲשֶׁר כָּל-אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר-יָבֹוא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-הַחֲצֵר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִקְרָא אַחַת דָּתוֹ לַהֲמִית לְבָד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט-לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-שִׁרְבִיט הַזֶּהב וְחִיָּה וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לָבֹוא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם: וַיְגִידוּ לְמַרְדֳּכָי אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֶסְתֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר מַרְדֳּכָי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל-אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-תְּדַמִּי בְנִפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים: כִּי אִם-הִחָרַשׁ תַּחֲדִישִׁי בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצִּלָּה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית-אֲבִיךָ תֹאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לָעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לַמְּלָכוֹת: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהָשִׁיב אֶל-מַרְדֳּכָי: לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לֵילָה וַיּוֹם גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרָתִי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבִכָּן אָבֹוא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כָדַת וּכְאֲשֶׁר אֲבִדְתִּי אֲבִדְתִּי: וַיַּעֲבֹר מַרְדֳּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָה עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר: וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׂ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצֵר בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ בְּבֵית הַמְּלָכוֹת נֹכַח פֶּתַח הַבַּיִת: וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עֹמֶדֶת בַּחֲצֵר נִשְׂאָה חֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשֶׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת-שִׁרְבִיט הַזֶּהב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשִּׁרְבִיט: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִה-לָּךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וּמִה-בִּקְשָׁתְךָ עַד-חֲצִי הַמְּלָכוֹת וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יָבֹוא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן הַיּוֹם

## BACKGROUND

4:11 | **Scepter [sharvit]:** The Akkadian source of *sharvit* is *sabbitu*, a rod, branch, or staff that symbolizes the authority of the bearer. The parallel Hebrew term, *shevet*, is a metonym, as the physical staff represents the monarchy (see Genesis 49:10; II Samuel 7:7; Rashi, I Chronicles 18:5). Throughout history, various kings developed a custom of holding a gold or gold-plated ceremonial scepter, and this is practiced to this day by the monarchs of Britain and Scandinavia.

5:1 | **His royal throne in the royal palace, facing the entrance of the palace:** According to the map of the palace (see

image alongside 1:5), the throne room was open, and from there the king could see who was standing in the inner courtyard.

5:3 | **Up to half of the kingdom, and it will be granted to you:** The queen of Persia, the foremost wife of the king, enjoyed a privileged status and great authority. This is supported by the account of Herodotus, who portrayed Atossa, Darius' wife and the mother of Xerxes I, in such terms. She ensured that her son would become king despite the fact that he was not the heir apparent (*The Histories* VII:2).

## DISCUSSION

5:1 | **On the third day:** That is, the third day of the fast the Jews had taken upon themselves. This may also have been the third day since Haman's decree had been issued, which was the first day of the festival of Passover, or one or two days later (see Rav Yeshaya of Trani; *Seder Olam Rabba* 29; *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 49; *Esther Rabba* 8; see also the *piyyut*: "Your Mighty Strength You Displayed on Passover," from the Passover Haggadah; *Targum*; Rashi, Esther 4:17; *Megilla* 15a).

5:4 | **Let the king and Haman come:** It seems that Esther's plan was to display personal affection for, and bestow particular honor upon, Haman, in order to sow discord and engender the king's suspicion

- 5 **The king said: Hasten Haman to do Esther's bidding.** The tone of this order is somewhat dismissive of Haman, as the king is treating him like a servant who must instantly obey any desire of the queen.<sup>48</sup> **The king and Haman**, who was very pleased at this honor, **came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.**
- 6 Ahashverosh understood that this feast was not a celebration for its own sake, but rather was designed to create a favorable opportunity for the queen to state her request. Therefore **the king said to Esther at the wine banquet: What is your wish? It will be granted to you. What is your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it will be done.**
- 7 **Esther answered and she said: My wish and my request is as follows:**
- 8 **If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my wish and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I will again prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do the king's bidding.** Despite the expressions of affection that she had heard from Ahashverosh, Esther still hesitated; she was not yet ready to present her request. She was unsure of her ability to take a drastic step immediately, and she knew that were she to fail, she would also place herself in danger.
- 9 Ahashverosh left the feast in a state of intense curiosity. Esther had approached him the previous day, against the rules. In light of her repeated deferrals, he realized that she was preparing herself to request something important. In contrast, **Haman emerged on that day joyful and glad of heart.** He felt that he had reached the pinnacle of his success, as he was now not only a confidant of the king, but the queen had also shown him special favor, and he considered this a clear sign of his exalted status. **But upon Haman's seeing Mordekhai at the king's gate**, where Mordekhai had returned in his usual apparel after the end of the fast, **and he did not stand, and he did not move on his account**, but ignored Haman completely, Haman's

mood changed for the worse; **Haman became filled with fury against Mordekhai.** The loftier his position in the kingdom, the more uncontrollable his anger over this act of disrespect.

- 10 Nevertheless **Haman restrained himself**, as he could do nothing at that time,<sup>49</sup> **and he entered his house and brought, gathered, his supporters, and Zeresh, his influential wife.**
- 11 **Haman** arranged a celebratory gathering of his supporters in order to tell them that he had been invited to the queen's feast, and he **related to them the honor of his wealth, and the multitude of his children, and all the ways that the king had promoted him, and that he had elevated him over the princes and servants of the king.** It is mentioned later (9:7–10) that ten sons of Haman were hanged, and he might have had even more children from other wives.<sup>50</sup>
- 12 **Haman said: Indeed, Queen Esther did not bring anyone but me with the king to the banquet that she prepared; tomorrow too, I am invited to her with the king.** This is the crowning glory. Not only am I the chief minister of the kingdom, but I have become the favorite in the royal household.
- 13 **But all this is not worthwhile for me<sup>d</sup> whenever I see Mordekhai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.** Yes, I have honor, wealth, and a bright future, but Mordekhai treats me with disrespect.
- 14 **Zeresh his wife and all his supporters said to him**, all in agreement with each other: **Let a gibbet be prepared, fifty cubits high; in the morning say to the king that they should hang Mordekhai upon it.** Do not wait until the feast. Go to the king in the morning and tell him that there is someone who aggravates you and refuses to accept your authority. Request that that person be hanged even before the rest of the Jews are killed. **And then, in the evening, you can come joyfully, with the king to the banquet. The matter, this idea, was pleasing to Haman, and he prepared the gibbet.** He gave an order that a gibbet of this kind be built in preparation for Mordekhai's hanging, paving the way for Haman's ultimate triumph.

## DISCUSSION

that perhaps his chief minister was becoming too powerful. Furthermore, in light of Haman's prominent position, his deviousness, and his influence over the king, it is reasonable to assume that he had enemies in the royal court. Esther's maids and officials would certainly have informed the queen of the goings-on in the court, and she likely assumed that if Haman were to receive preferential treatment from his queen as well, it would inspire suspicion and mistrust in the court. This course of action was a gamble, as the success of Esther's plan depended on the

reaction of Ahashverosh, who was not the most stable of men.

There were constant intrigues, conspiracies, and plots at work in the Persian court, and Ahashverosh, who apparently had seized the throne in a not entirely legal manner (see *Yalkut Shimoni* 954; *Megilla* 14a), was well aware of this state of affairs. Upon seeing Esther showing such favoritism to Haman, he might well have thought that a plot of some sort was being hatched against him, and that the queen was signaling to the protagonist her willingness to assist him. Even if an idea of this kind had not

entered Haman's mind, Esther hoped to play on the king's fears, so that he would come to view Haman as someone who had gained too much power and who posed a threat to his reign (see *Megilla* 15b).

5:13 | **But all this is not worthwhile for me:** According to some commentaries, Mordekhai and Haman had known each other even before Haman rose to greatness (see *Megilla* 16a). For Haman, the encounter with someone who remembered him from when he was a lowly commoner, and who refused to honor him, would have been especially galling.

ה אֶל־הַמֶּשֶׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי לוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהֲרוּ אֶת־הַמֶּן לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־דְּבַר  
ו אֶסְתֵּר וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן אֶל־הַמֶּשֶׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה אֶסְתֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ  
לְאֶסְתֵּר בְּמִשְׁתֶּה הַיַּיִן מַה־שָּׁאֲלָתְךָ וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ וּמִה־בִּקְשָׁתְךָ עַד־חֲצִי הַמַּלְכוּת  
ח וְתַעֲשֵׂ: וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁאֲלָתִי וּבִקְשָׁתִי: אִם־מַצְאָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
ט וְאִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב לָתֵת אֶת־שְׁאֲלָתִי וְלַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־בִּקְשָׁתִי יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן  
אֶל־הַמֶּשֶׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לָּהֶם וּמֵאֵחָר אֶעֱשֶׂה כְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֵּצֵא הַמֶּן בַּיּוֹם  
י הַהוּא שִׁמְח וְטוֹב לֵב וְכִרְאוֹת הַמֶּן אֶת־מִרְדֳּכָי בִּשְׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וּלְאַקָּס וְלֹא־  
יא זַע מִמֶּנּוּ וַיִּמְלֹא הַמֶּן עַל־מִרְדֳּכָי חֲמָה: וַיִּתְּאֲפֶק הַמֶּן וַיָּבוֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח  
יב וַיָּבֹא אֶת־אֲהֲבָיו וְאֶת־זֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ: וַיִּסְפֹּר לָהֶם הַמֶּן אֶת־כְּבוֹד עֲשׂוֹר וְרֹב בָּנָיו  
יג וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַל עַל־הַשָּׂרִים וְעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר  
יד הַמֶּן אֵף לֹא־הִבִּיֵּאָה אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמֶּשֶׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה  
יז כִּי אִם־אוֹתִי וְגַם־לְמֵחָר אֲנִי קָרוֹא לָהּ עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְכֹל־זֶה אֵינְנוּ שׂוֹה לִי בְּכָל־  
יח עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת־מִרְדֳּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בִּשְׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ זֶרֶשׁ  
אִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל־אֲהֲבָיו יַעֲשׂוּ־עֵץ גְּבוֹה חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה וּבִבְקָר ׀ אָמַר לַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּתְּלוּ  
אֶת־מִרְדֳּכָי עָלָיו וּבָא עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמֶּשֶׁתֶּה שִׁמְח וַיִּיטֵב הַדְּבַר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּן  
א וַיַּעַשׂ הָעֵץ: בְּלַיְלָה הַהוּא נִדְּדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר לְהָבִיא  
ב אֶת־סֵפֶר הַזְכָּרֹנוֹת דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים וַיְהִיו נִקְרְאִים לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיִּמָּצֵא כָּתוּב אֲשֶׁר

## The Night between the Two Feasts

ESTHER 6:1–14

The previous section ended at the lowest ebb of the story. Haman, who has been called for the second time to join the queen and king, is overjoyed; Mordekhai is to be hanged; and the decree of destruction still hovers over the Jews. There appears to be no hope on the horizon. However, in this next section the power relations between Mordekhai and Haman

begin to reverse themselves. Haman arrives at the king's courtyard in order to request that Mordekhai be hanged on the gibbet that he has prepared at the precise moment when the king is inquiring as to how he can repay Mordekhai for his good deed. Haman is betrayed by his own lust for honor.

**6 1** On that night, after Esther's feast, the king's sleep was disturbed, for no evident reason; and he said to bring the book of records, the chronicles, the book of royal history, and they, sections of the book, would be read before the king, in order to divert his mind with memories of past events.

**2** It was found written, among the various events that had transpired in the kingdom, that Mordekhai had reported of Bigtana, Bigtan, and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, among the guardians of the threshold, who were very close to the king, who had sought to do violence to King



**Ahashverosh.** Their assassination attempt, the disclosure of the plot, and the fact that they had been hanged, were all recorded in the book.

- 3 **The king said: What honor or greatness has been bestowed upon Mordekhai<sup>D</sup> for this?** Perhaps he had received some form of reward, but as the details did not involve the king, they were not recorded in the book. **The king's lads, his servants, said to him: Nothing was done with him** to reward him.
- 4 **The king said: Who is in the courtyard?** These events likely occurred in the wee hours of the morning, and the king sought someone with whom he could converse and receive counsel about the matters that were disturbing his rest.<sup>51</sup> Now just at that moment **Haman had come to the outer courtyard of the king's palace,<sup>8</sup> to say to the king** his request **to hang Mordekhai on the gibbet that he had prepared for him**, in accordance with the advice he had received from his wife and friends. Although Mordekhai and the Jewish people were associated in his mind, since it was Mordekhai's presence that bothered Haman on a daily basis, he wished to dispose of him without delay.
- 5 **The king's lads said to him: Behold, Haman is standing in the courtyard. The king said: Let him enter.**
- 6 **Haman came, and the king said to him: What is to be done to the man whose honoring the king desires**, whom he wishes to honor in public? **Haman said in his heart: Upon whom would the king desire to bestow honor more than I?** Under the circumstances, Haman interpreted the king's question as though it were directed to him personally: How would you wish to be honored?
- 7 **Haman said to the king: My advice is, for the man whose honoring the king desires,**
- 8 **let them bring royal garments that the king himself has worn, and a horse upon which the king has ridden<sup>6</sup> while a royal crown was set on his, the king's, head**, while he rode the

horse.<sup>52</sup> Alternatively, a royal crown was set upon the horse's head, demonstrating that it was the king's horse.



King of Persia riding his horse, relief, Naqsh-e Rostam, near Persepolis, third century BCE



Persian royal crown, relief

- 9 **And once all these have been assembled, have them put the garments and the horse in the hand of one of the king's princes, of the nobles**, a senior minister rather than a lowly servant; **they will dress the man whose honoring the king desires, and they will lead him riding on the horse in the city square, and they**, the nobles who lead him, **will proclaim before him: So shall be done to the man whose honoring the king desires.** Haman had no difficulty imagining himself riding on the horse, wearing royal clothing, after selecting one of the other ministers who would run before him.
- 10 **The king said to Haman: This is indeed a good idea. Hurry, quickly take the garments and the horse, as you have spoken, and do so to Mordekhai the Jew,<sup>D</sup> who sits at the king's gate.** Perhaps the king was not greatly familiar with Mordekhai, but he was not an anonymous figure either. His status and position in the royal court were well known. **Do not omit anything<sup>D</sup> from all that you have spoken.**
- 11 The king's order left Haman no choice. **Haman took the garments and the horse, dressed Mordekhai, led him riding through the city square, and proclaimed before him: So shall be done to the man whose honoring the king desires.**

## BACKGROUND

6:4 | **Haman had come to the outer courtyard of the king's palace:** Even important ministers might soon find themselves on the gibbet if they entered from the outer courtyard without invitation or permission (see commentary on 5:1). However, it is clear from the next verse that when the king sought an advisor at night and was told that Haman was in the outer courtyard, he gave him explicit permission to enter unharmed.

6:8 | **And a horse upon which the king has ridden:** According to Herodotus, horses were highly esteemed creatures in Persia and were even considered sacred. Only kings and nobles were permitted what was considered the best breed, called by Herodotus the Nisean, due to its origins in the plains of Nisa in Media. Riding the king's horse was therefore a great honor. The horses' heads were sometimes adorned with a

sort of crown. In Old Persian, the word for horse was *aspa*, or *asp*, a word that appears in names of people at the time of the book of Esther, e.g., Aspata, one of Haman's sons (9:7), as well as in contemporary Persian names (see also Song of Songs 1:9, and commentary ad loc.).

הַגִּיד מֶרְדֵּכַי עַל־בִּגְתָּנָא וְתָרַשׁ שְׁנֵי סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁמַרְי הַסֵּף אֲשֶׁר בִּקְשׁוּ  
 לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מִה־נַּעֲשֶׂה יָקָר וגדולה לְמֶרְדֵּכַי  
 עַל־זֶה וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁדָּתוֹ לֹא־נַעֲשֶׂה עִמּוֹ דָּבָר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מִי  
 בַּחֲצֵר וְהֵמֶן כָּאֵל לַחֲצֵר בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַחִיצוֹנָה לֵאמֹר לַמֶּלֶךְ לְתִלּוֹת אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי  
 עַל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־הֵכִין לוֹ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵלָיו הִנֵּה הֵמֶן עֹמֵד בַּחֲצֵר וַיֹּאמֶר  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ יָבוֹא: וַיָּבוֹא הֵמֶן וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִה־לַּעֲשׂוֹת בְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר הֵמֶן בְּלִבּוֹ לִמִּי יַחֲפֹץ הַמֶּלֶךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת יָקָר יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנִּי:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר הֵמֶן אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ: יָבִיאוּ לְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת  
 אֲשֶׁר לְבִשְׁבוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְסוּס אֲשֶׁר רָכַב עָלָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֲשֶׁר נָתַן כְּתֹר מַלְכוּת  
 בְּדָאֲשׁוֹ: וְנָתַן הַלְּבוּשׁ וְהַסּוּס עַל־יַד־אִישׁ מִשְׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּרָתִמִּים וְהַלְּבָשׁוּ  
 אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ וְהִרְפִּיבֵהוּ עַל־הַסּוּס בְּרָחוֹב הָעִיר וְקִרְאוּ  
 לִפְנֵיו כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהֵמֶן  
 מִהֵרָ קַח אֶת־הַלְּבוּשׁ וְאֶת־הַסּוּס כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ וַעֲשֵׂה־כֵן לְמֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי  
 הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־תִּפְּל דָּבָר מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ: וַיִּקַּח הֵמֶן אֶת־הַלְּבוּשׁ  
 וְאֶת־הַסּוּס וַיִּלְבֹּשׁ אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי וַיִּרְפִּיבֵהוּ בְּרָחוֹב הָעִיר וַיִּקְרָא לִפְנֵיו כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה

## DISCUSSION

6:3 | **What honor or greatness has been bestowed upon Mordechai:** It can be assumed that when the king was reminded of this earlier effort to assassinate him, he began to wonder: Since there are people in the kingdom who oppose me to such an extent that they will attempt to assassinate me, have I properly rewarded those who protect me? Esther's mysterious invitation to another feast, to which once again the chief minister had been invited, further aroused his suspicions. The king might have reasoned that if he failed to repay those who saved his life, it was no wonder that people concealed their plans from him (Rashi, verse 1; *Megilla* 15b).

6:10 | **And do so to Mordechai the Jew:** In addition to the great honor that the king sought to bestow upon Mordechai by having him led by his chief minister, there is no doubt that he also wanted to humiliate Haman. It can be presumed that word of the animosity between Mordechai and Haman had spread beyond mere servants' gossip to the royal court itself. Although the king had no special connection to Mordechai, now that he had been reminded of how Mordechai had helped him, Ahashverosh took advantage of this opportunity to reinforce in his subjects the awareness that all power and status are derived from the crown. From the fact that Haman wished to be displayed in the city

square in the manner of the king on the day of his coronation, Ahashverosh came to the conclusion that his chief minister had been granted too much power, and that his megalomaniacal ambitions might undermine the king's own regime. By insisting that Haman be the one to lead Mordechai, the king thereby publicized his own authority over Haman (see *Malbim* 10).

**Do not omit anything:** Some infer from here that Haman tried to persuade the king to exchange this parade for a monetary gift or some other type of honor. Therefore, the king gave him explicit instructions to carry out his suggestion to the letter, without any changes (*Megilla* 16a).

- 12 Mordekhai returned to the king's gate.** Even if Mordekhai was pleased at Haman's humiliation, this did not ease the terror in his heart over the fate of the Jews.<sup>53</sup> **And Haman hastened to his house, mourning and with covered head,** as he was humiliated and wanted to hide his shame.
- 13 Haman related to Zeresh his wife and to all his supporters everything that had befallen him.** He told them that he had followed their advice, but that he had arrived at the king's courtyard at the wrong moment and had suffered a terrible humiliation. **His wise men** who, perhaps significantly, are no longer described as his supporters, **and Zeresh his wife, said to him** dispassionately: **If Mordekhai, before whom you have**

**begun to fall, is of the progeny of the Jews, you will not prevail against him; rather, you will fall before him.** There is no middle ground in our relations with the Jews. One who fights against them will either crush them or be utterly defeated by them.

- 14** These comments certainly did not improve Haman's mood. **They were still talking with him, and the king's chamberlains arrived, and they hastened to bring Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared,** despite the fact that feasts were generally held in the evening hours. As part of the royal formalities, officials were sent to Haman informing him that his presence was requested at the feast immediately.

## Haman's Downfall and Mordekhai's Rise to Power

ESTHER 7:1–8:2

Although the humiliation Haman has suffered does not necessarily cause him to change his plans, it can be assumed that he comes to Esther's second party dispirited and discouraged. This second party is also an intimate affair. Esther wants only Ahashverosh, Haman, and herself to be present, so that Haman will suddenly discover that both the king and the queen are against him, and that there is no one to defend him.

Subsequently, Esther lobbies the king to promote Mordekhai in Haman's place, and so the turnabout is complete. Haman is hanged on the gibbet that he had prepared for Mordekhai, and Mordekhai, who had refused to bend his knee to Haman, takes his place.

- 7 1 The king and Haman came to attend the banquet with Queen Esther.**
- 2 The king said to Esther also on the second day at the wine banquet: What is your wish, Queen Esther, and it will be granted to you. What is your request? Up to half the kingdom and it will be done.** The king repeated his earlier question because he knew that Esther wanted something, which she was to reveal at this second feast.
- 3 Queen Esther answered with the customary etiquette and said: If I have found favor in your eyes, the king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me with my wish, and my people with my request.** You have agreed, in principle, to grant me half the kingdom, but all I want is that my life and my people be spared. This dramatic opening statement was designed to have maximum effect upon the king.
- 4** The queen clarifies her meaning: **For we have been sold, my people and I, for our enemies to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate us. If we had only been sold as slaves and as maidservants, I would have been silent** and would not ask for anything, **as in that case the trouble,** such an unfortunate event, **would not have been worth the distress to the king.** It would not be worth upsetting the king if we were only to be enslaved.<sup>54</sup>
- 5 King Ahashverosh,** who was caught by surprise, as Esther had not told him that she was a Jew, **said, he said to Queen Esther:**<sup>D</sup> **Who is he, and where is he, who was so presumptuous to do so?** What kind of person would dare seek to destroy you and your people?
- 6 Esther said: A man who is an adversary and an enemy, this evil Haman.** Haman advised you to destroy us because he is an enemy of the Jews. Moreover, he is an evil man, and his intentions are far from pure; you should not trust him. Although Haman had been discouraged by his experience with Mordekhai, he was still under the impression that Esther had invited him because she held him in high regard and was entirely unprepared for the queen's accusation. Therefore, **Haman was terrified in the presence of the king and the queen.**
- 7 The king rose in his fury<sup>D</sup> from the wine banquet and went to the garden of the house.** He had forgotten his own involvement in the decree, and the fact that he had granted permission for Haman's plan. At this point, all he could see was Haman trying to destroy Esther and her people. In order to calm himself, he got up and went to take some air in the garden. **And Haman remained to plead for his life from Queen Esther.** Although by now Haman realized that she did not seek his favor, he hoped that she might have mercy upon him, as he had not yet harmed her in any way. He might also have sought to arouse her innate feminine compassion,<sup>55</sup> **for he saw that harm was resolved against him by the king.**
- 8 The king returned from the garden of the house to the chamber of the wine banquet, and he saw that Haman was falling upon the couch on which Esther was lying.** According to Persian and Greek custom, wealthy and noble individuals would not sit on chairs during a feast; rather, they would recline on couches.<sup>56</sup> Haman was bending over Esther's couch in supplication but the king interpreted it in the worst way possible. **The king said: Is it also part of your plan to conquer**



לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקָרוֹ: וַיֵּשֶׁב מִרְדֳּכָי אֶל־שַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן נִדְחָף  
 אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ אֲבָל וַחֲפוּי רֹאשׁ: וַיִּסְפֹּר הָמָן לְזֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ וּלְכָל־אֲהָבָיו אֶת כָּל־  
 אֲשֶׁר קָרְהוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ חֲכָמָיו וְזֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ אִם מִזֶּרַע הַיְּהוּדִים מִרְדֳּכָי אֲשֶׁר  
 הִחְלֹוֹת לִנְפֹל לְפָנָיו לֹא־תֻכַּל לוֹ כִּי־נָפֹל תִּפּוֹל לְפָנָיו: עוֹדִם מְדַבְּרִים עָמּוּ  
 וְסָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הִגִּיעוּ וַיִּבְהִלוּ לְהַבִּיאַת אֶת־הָמָן אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה  
 אֶסְתֵּר: וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן לִשְׁתֹּת עִם־אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר  
 גַּם בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן מִה־שְּׂאֲלָתְךָ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְתִנָּתֵן לָךְ וּמִה־  
 בִּקְשֶׁתְךָ עַד־חֲצֵי הַמַּלְכוּת וְתַעֲשֶׂה: וְתַעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וּתְאֹמַר אֶם־מְצָאתִי  
 חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֶם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב תִּנָּתֵן־לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשִׂאלָתִי וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִּי:  
 כִּי נִמְכַּרְנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרְגוֹ וּלְאַבְּדוֹ וְלֹא־לְעַבְדִּים וּלְשִׁפְחוֹת נִמְכַּרְנוּ  
 הַחֲרָשְׁתִּי כִּי אֵין הָצָר שׁוֹה בְּנֶזֶק הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ  
 וַיֹּאמֶר לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה מִי הוּא זֶה וַאֲיִזָּה הוּא אֲשֶׁר־מָלְאוּ לְבֹו לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן:  
 וְתֹאמַר אֶסְתֵּר אִישׁ צָר וְאוֹיֵב הָמָן הָרַע הַזֶּה וְהָמָן נִבְעֵת מִלְּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמַּלְכָּה:  
 וְהַמֶּלֶךְ קָם בַּחֲמָתוֹ מִמִּשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן אֶל־גִּנַּת הַבַּיִת וְהָמָן עָמַד לְבִקֵּשׁ עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ  
 מֵאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה כִּי רָאָה כִּי־כָלְתָה אֵלָיו הָרָעָה מֵאֵת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁב מִגִּנַּת  
 הַבַּיִת אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ הַיַּיִן וְהָמָן נָפַל עַל־הַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ וַיֹּאמֶר

## DISCUSSION

7:5] **He said to Queen Esther:** As long as Esther kept her origins secret, her personal status was suspect. It would naturally be assumed that a woman who refused to reveal her ethnicity and background was in fact a maidservant of indeterminate birth, perhaps the daughter of a slave. Even among slaves and maidservants, a slave born to a slave lacked any social standing, and was considered inferior to a freeman who was captured in war. Ahashverosh had no particular familiarity with, or affection for, the Jewish people, but the Sages explain that Esther revealed at this point that she was descended

from a royal line. She was no maidservant whom the king had raised up from misery, but a woman of noble descent (*Megilla* 16a).

7:7] **The king rose in his fury:** The conversation between Ahashverosh and Haman the previous night had changed the image of Haman in the king's eyes. He realized that Haman was power hungry and would attempt to advance his status in the kingdom at any price. This impression that Haman had left upon the king the night before was reinforced by Esther's accusations. The king was therefore filled with great rage.

It should be noted that in royal courts of this kind, the chief minister is accorded great honor, but is also highly exposed. The king will always be wary of the person filling this role becoming too powerful. It is no coincidence that neither Haman nor Mordekhai, the two men whom Ahashverosh appointed to this position, came from the Persian nobility, and in fact were both foreigners. Such individuals could be removed from their posts with relative ease when the need arose. This might well have been one of Pharaoh's motivations for appointing Joseph (*Genesis* 41:39–44).

the queen with me in the house, to rape the queen in my own presence? **The words emerged from the king's mouth, and Haman's face fell.** He turned pale as he realized that he was facing his demise. Apologizing was futile, as in these circumstances nothing he could say would save him.

- 9 The feast was served by waiters who were not considered to be attendees. However, when the king revealed his opinion about Haman, one of them dared to interject in support of that sentiment. **Harvona, who was one of the chamberlains who was before the king, said: Indeed, behold, the gibbet that Haman prepared for Mordekhai, who is someone who spoke beneficially for the king.** This is the true nature of Haman; he is a man who prepares a gibbet for one who helps the king. The gibbet is **standing in the house of Haman, and is fifty cubits high.** Perhaps Harvona disliked Haman for reasons of his own, and he now saw the chance to retaliate. **The king said: Hang him on it.** If the gibbet is already prepared, Haman's sentence can be carried out without delay.

- 10 **They hanged Haman on the gibbet that he had prepared for Mordekhai, and the king's fury abated.**

- 8 1 Once Haman had been hanged, the king decided to bestow further favors upon Esther. **On that day, King Ahashverosh gave the house of Haman, adversary of the Jews, to Queen Esther.** This gift included the enormous amount of wealth that Haman had accumulated.<sup>57</sup> **And Mordekhai came** for a personal audience **before the king, as Esther had related what he was to her.** She presented him as her cousin, who had adopted, raised, and educated her. Ahashverosh was in good spirits now that Haman was gone, and for her part Esther treated him with affection and gratitude. Furthermore, if Ahashverosh was not yet personally familiar with Mordekhai, he was now given the opportunity to meet this loyal subject who had been instrumental in uncovering the assassination plot against him.
- 2 **The king removed his ring that he had taken from Haman, and he gave it to Mordekhai,** as a sign of trust. **Esther appointed Mordekhai over the house of Haman.** She appointed him to be in charge of Haman's estate.

## The Order against Haman's Decree

ESTHER 8:3–17

Although the problem of Haman himself had been resolved, the decree permitting the annihilation of the Jews still stood. Esther seeks to take advantage of her favor with the king and annul the evil decree that threatens her people.

- 3 **Esther spoke again before the king, fell before his feet, cried, and besought him to repeal the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plot that he had devised against the Jews.**
- 4 **The king extended to Esther the golden scepter,** to signal to the queen, who was lying on the floor at his feet, that she was permitted to rise and speak her mind. **And Esther rose and stood before the king.**
- 5 **She said,** choosing her words carefully in order to arouse all the king's love and affection for her: **If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to return the scrolls that were sent as part of the plot of Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite that he wrote, to eliminate the Jews who are in all the king's provinces, and to annul the decree they contain;**
- 6 **for how can I bear and see the harm that will find my people;<sup>d</sup> and how can I bear and see the elimination of my birthplace?** By this stage, Esther no longer had any concerns for herself. She knew that she would be left untouched, but she implored the king not to let her people be harmed as a result of the decree.

- 7 **King Ahashverosh said to Queen Esther and to Mordekhai the Jew, who was present: Behold, I gave the house of Haman to Esther,** as a gesture of goodwill, **and they hanged him on the gibbet because he sought to do violence to the Jews.** Once again the king places the blame entirely on Haman while conveniently disregarding his own involvement in the plot against the Jews.
- 8 **As for you, write concerning the Jews a different missive as is pleasing in your eyes, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring,** so that the two orders cancel each other out; **for a document that is written in the name of the king, and sealed with the ring of the king, may not be revoked.** According to the laws of the kingdom, not even the king could nullify his own orders, as once written they were considered to be absolute, divine commands. Consequently, another royal communiqué, formulated in such a manner that it bypasses the previous command and limits its significance, must be written.
- 9 **Indeed, the king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day of it,<sup>b</sup>** roughly three months after Haman was hanged; **it was written according to everything that Mordekhai commanded concerning the Jews.** The missives

הַמֶּלֶךְ הָגַם לִכְבוֹשׁ אֶת־הַמְּלָכָה עִמִּי בַּבַּיִת הַדָּבָר יֵצֵא מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּפְנֵי הַמֶּן  
חָפוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר חֲרִבּוֹנָה אֶחָד מִן־הַסֵּרִיסִים לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ גַּם הִנֵּה־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה ט  
הַמֶּן לְמִרְדָּכִי אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר־טוֹב עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ עִמָּד בַּבַּיִת הַמֶּן גְּבוּהַ חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה  
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּלְהוּ עֲלָיו: וַיָּתְלוּ אֶת־הַמֶּן עַל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־הָכִין לְמִרְדָּכִי וַחֲמַת י  
הַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁכְכָה: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נָתַן הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ לְאַסְתֵּר הַמְּלָכָה ח א  
אֶת־בֵּית הַמֶּן צִדֵּר הַיְּהוּדִים וּמִרְדָּכִי בָּא לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר מַה  
הוּא־לָהּ: וַיֹּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵבִיר מֵהַמֶּן וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְמִרְדָּכִי וַתִּשֶׂם ב  
אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־מִרְדָּכִי עַל־בֵּית הַמֶּן: וַתּוֹסֶף אֶסְתֵּר וַתְּדַבֵּר לִפְנֵי ג  
הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתִּפֹּל לִפְנֵי רַגְלָיו וַתִּתְחַנֵּן לּוֹ לְהָעֵבִיר אֶת־דַּעַת הַמֶּן הָאֲגָגִי וְאֵת  
מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁב עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים: וַיּוֹשֶׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר אֶת שִׁדְּבַט הַזָּהָב ד  
וַתִּקֶּם אֶסְתֵּר וַתַּעֲמִד לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם־מִצָּאִי ה  
חַן לִפְנָיו וְכִשֶּׁר הַדָּבָר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְטוֹבָה אֲנִי בְּעֵינָיו יִכְתֹּב לְהָשִׁיב אֶת־הַסְּפָרִים  
מִחֲשַׁבַּת הַמֶּן בֶּן־הַמֶּדְתָּא הָאֲגָגִי אֲשֶׁר כָּתַב לְאַבְדֹּת אֶת־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־  
מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ: כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכַל וְרָאִיתִי בָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמְצָא אֶת־עַמִּי וְאֵיכָכָה ו  
אוֹכַל וְרָאִיתִי בְּאַבְדֵּן מוֹלַדְתִּי: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ לְאַסְתֵּר  
הַמְּלָכָה וּלְמִרְדָּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי הִנֵּה בֵּית־הַמֶּן נִתְּתִי לְאַסְתֵּר וְאֵתוֹ תִּלְוּ עַל־הָעֵץ ח  
עַל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח יָדוֹ בַּיְּהוּדִים: וְאַתֶּם כָּתְבוּ עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיכֶם בְּשֵׁם ט  
הַמֶּלֶךְ וַחֲתֹמוּ בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־כָתַב אֲשֶׁר־נִכְתַּב בְּשֵׁם־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִחַתְמוּ  
בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין לְהָשִׁיב: וַיִּקְרְאוּ סְפָר־הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּעֲתֵּהָ הָיָא בַּחֲדָשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי

#### DISCUSSION

8:6 | **For how can I bear and see the harm that will find my people:** A person's concern for his people or family, even when it does not accord with the interests of the kingdom, would not be considered a betrayal, but rather a respectable, appropriate reaction. This is also seen in the response of King Artahshasta to Nehemiah's misery (Nehemiah 2:1–9).

#### BACKGROUND

8:9 | **In the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day of it:** One explanation for the long delay between the hanging of Haman and the sending of the mis-sives negating his decree is that they

waited for the original messengers to return in order to send them back again, as the return of the very same messengers would reinforce the credibility of the new command (see Vilna Gaon, *Seder Olam Rabba* 29).

were sent to the satraps, the governors, and princes of the provinces, which are from India to Kush, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, each and every province according to its script, and each and every people according to its language, and on this occasion even to the Jews according to their script, and according to their language. Since this time Jews were not merely the passive targets of the order but active participants in its implementation, they too received the missives.<sup>58</sup>

- 10** He, Mordekhai, wrote in the name of King Ahashverosh, and he sealed the missives with the ring of the king that he had received. He sent scrolls in the hand of the couriers on horses, riders on the finest steeds owned by the king,<sup>59</sup> the mules born to mares.<sup>6</sup>



Horseman, stone relief, Nineveh, 645–635 BCE

- 11** The missives stated that the king had authorized the Jews who were in each and every city to assemble and to defend themselves. Whereas the previous order allowed all those who wished to do so to attack the Jews, under the assumption that the Jews were forbidden to retaliate, here the king permitted them to defend themselves, and even to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate the forces of people and provinces that are

hostile to them, children and women, and to plunder their spoils. The Jews were granted royal consent to wage total war against any enemy.

- 12** This order would come into effect on one day, in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, the same date that was previously fixed for their destruction.
- 13** A copy of the document went out to issue the decree in each and every province, publicizing it to all the peoples: For the Jews to be ready for that day, to avenge themselves on their enemies. The same day that had been designated for their destruction would be the day of their salvation.
- 14** The couriers, riders on the finest steeds, went out again urgently and hastily, by edict of the king, in order to disseminate the new order as quickly as possible throughout the kingdom, and the decree was also issued in the Shushan citadel itself.
- 15** Mordekhai, who had recently been appointed the chief minister, came out from before the king dressed in royal garments made of sky-blue and white woven material, with a great golden crown upon his head, and wrapped in a cloak<sup>60</sup> of fine linen and purple wool,<sup>8</sup> and the Jewish population of the city of Shushan reveled and rejoiced upon seeing that their representative had become the most influential man in the kingdom.
- 16** For the Jews there was light, and joy, and gladness, and honor, as instead of the bloody pogrom that had been planned, in which they were not meant to have any right to self-defense whatsoever, they were now legally permitted to protect themselves and fight their enemies.
- 17** In each and every province and in each and every city, any place where the king's edict and his decree reached, there was joy and gladness for the Jews, a banquet and a holiday, and many from the peoples of the land pretended to be Jews,<sup>61</sup> or professed to favor the Jews but without internal conviction, as the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. The missives alone produced such a great impression that even before the decree was put into practice, the Jews began rejoicing and others became fearful.

## The Jews' Victory and Its Commemoration

ESTHER 9:1–32

the initially spontaneous days of rejoicing over the salvation and the victory are established as permanent dates of feasting and joy for the nation, throughout the generations. Second, Esther and Mordekhai write a record of the events, which is this book.

- 9 1** In the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of it, the date that Haman had set for the destruction of the Jews, when the time arrived for the king's edict and his decree to be implemented, on the day that the

enemies of the Jews had hoped to rule over them, it was in fact reversed, so that it was the Jews who ruled over those who hated them.

הוא־חדש סיון בשלושה ועשרים בו ויכתב בכל־אשר־צוה מרדכי אל־  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנים והפחות ושרי המדינות אשר מהדו ועד־כוש  
שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ועם ועם כל־שנו ואל־  
היהודים ככתבם וכל־שונם: ויכתב בשם המלך אחשורוש ויחתם בטבעת  
המלך וישלח ספרים ביד הרצים בפוסים רכבי הרקש האחשתרנים בני  
הרמכים: אשר נתן המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר ועיר להקהל ולעמד  
על־נפשם להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד את־כל־חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אתם טף  
ונשים ושללם לבוז: ביום אחד בכל־מדינות המלך אחשורוש בשלושה עשר  
לחדש שנים־עשר הוא־חדש אדר: פתשגן הכתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה  
ומדינה גלוי לכל־העמים ולהיות היהודיים עתודים ליום הזה להנקם מאיביהם:  
הרצים רכבי הרקש האחשתרנים יצאו מבהלים ודחופים בדבר המלך והדת  
נתנה בשושן הבירה: ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות  
תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך בוץ וארגמן והעיר שושן צהלה  
ושמחה: ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר: ובכל־מדינה ומדינה  
ובכל־עיר ועיר מקום אשר דבר־המלך ודתו מגיע שמחה וששון ליהודים  
משתה ויום טוב ורבים מעמי הארץ מתיהדים כי־נפל פחד־היהודים עליהם:  
ובשנים עשר חודש הוא־חדש אדר בשלושה עשר יום בו אשר הגיע דבר־  
המלך ודתו להעשות ביום אשר שברו איבי היהודים לשלוט בהם ונהפוך

היהודים  
עתידיים

## BACKGROUND

8:10 | **The couriers on horses, riders on the finest steeds [rekhesht], the mules born to mares:** These royal messengers were part of a remarkable system of communication and road networks created by Darius I. In order to increase their speed across the flat terrain of Mesopotamia, the king's messengers would change their horses at waystations. *Rekhesht* is the name for a famously swift breed of horse.

The last part of the verse is probably referring to riders of fast mules, the offspring of a select breed of mares, as these could ride through the mountainous regions of central and northern Persia, as well as Anatolia. Perhaps the three different types of messengers specified in this verse, those on "horses," "riders on the finest steeds," and on "mules born to mares," performed different missions, for short, medium, and long

distances. Only those messengers sent to the far corners of the kingdom required mules that could cope with mountainous terrain.

8:15 | **In royal garments of sky blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a cloak of fine linen and purple wool:** See commentary on 1:6; see also the image of the king with his second-in-command standing behind him, dressed in similar attire, above 1:4.



- 2** The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh where there were Jewish communities, to do violence to those who sought their harm, and no man could withstand them, as fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples.
- 3** All the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and the king's administrators elevated or honored the Jews, because the fear of Mordekhai had fallen upon them. When the first missives were sent, Haman was chief minister to Ahashverosh. By this point, however, Mordekhai was the foremost of the king's ministers, and therefore everyone granted the Jews the freedom of action they required.
- 4** For Mordekhai was great in status in the king's palace, and his renown had spread in all the provinces, for the man Mordekhai was growing more and more powerful.
- 5** The Jews smote all their enemies a blow of the sword, killing, and destruction, and they did to their enemies as they willed. Presumably this also took place in the province of Judah, which is not explicitly mentioned here, but whose Jewish residents were experiencing harassment during this time.<sup>62</sup>



Sword, Persepolis, 560–331 BCE

- 6** In the Shushan citadel the Jews killed and eliminated five hundred men, their enemies who had planned to attack the Jews on that day, and who had perhaps taunted the Jews earlier and boasted of their heinous plans.
- 7** And Parshandata, Dalfon, Aspata,
- 8** Porata, Adalya, Aridata,
- 9** Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vayzata,
- 10** the ten sons of Haman the son of Hamedata, the adversary of the Jews, they killed; but they did not extend their hands to the spoils. The Jews did not consider this conflict a war, but an act of self-defense, and since they wished to avoid provoking hatred against themselves they did not touch their enemies' property, despite the fact that in his missive the king had granted the Jews permission to loot their enemies' possessions.<sup>63</sup>
- 11** On that day, the number of those killed in the Shushan citadel came before the king, through his extensive intelligence network.

- 12** The king said to Queen Esther: The Jews have killed and eliminated five hundred men in the Shushan citadel, along with the ten sons of Haman; in the rest of the king's provinces they presumably have done likewise. It can be assumed that the results are comparable in the other provinces, even though the numbers are not yet known. Your people have avenged themselves upon their enemies, as you wished. **What is your wish and it will be granted to you. What else do you request? It will be done.**
- 13** Esther said, realizing that the king wanted to make her happy and to fulfill her every desire: **If it pleases the king, let tomorrow, too, be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do in accordance with today's decree.** Although this was not written in the original missives, I would like you to issue a verbal instruction permitting the Jews in Shushan, which was likely the center of Haman's support,<sup>64</sup> to complete the task, **and have them hang Haman's ten sons**, who have already been killed,<sup>65</sup> **upon the gibbet**, as a public display that the king and the authorities support the action that has been taken, and that they consider these men criminals, rather than random victims of indiscriminate rioting.
- 14** The king said to do so, and a decree was issued permitting another day of vengeance in Shushan, and they hanged Haman's ten sons.
- 15** The Jews who were in Shushan assembled on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as well, and killed another three hundred men in Shushan, but also in this instance they did not extend their hand to the spoils.
- 16** The rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces assembled and defended themselves, and rested from their enemies. By the end of the day, they had killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them, throughout the kingdom, but they did not extend their hand to the spoils.
- 17** It, all this, was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and the rest after the fighting was on the fourteenth of it, and it was made a day of banqueting and joy, in honor of the victory.
- 18** But the Jews who were in Shushan assembled together to avenge themselves upon their enemies on the thirteenth of it and on the fourteenth of it, and rested after the fighting on the fifteenth of it, and it was made a day of banqueting and joy. They celebrated the victory one day later than the rest of the empire.

ב הוא אשר ישלטו היהודים המה בשנאיהם: נקהלו היהודים בעריהם בכל-  
 מדינות המלך אחשוורוש לשלח יד במבקשי רעתם ואיש לא-עמד לפניהם  
 ג כי-נפל פחדם על-כל-העמים: וכל-שרי המדינות והאחשדרפנים והפחות  
 ועשי המלאכה אשר למלך מנשאים את-היהודים כי-נפל פחד-מרדכי עליהם:  
 ד כי-גדול מרדכי בבית המלך ושמעו הולך בכל-המדינות כי-האיש מרדכי  
 ה הולך וגדול: ויפו היהודים בכל-איביהם מפת-חרב והרג ואבדון ויעשו  
 ו בשנאיהם פרצונם: ובשושן הבירה הרגו היהודים ואבד חמש מאות

איש:	ואת	פרשנדתא	ואת
דלפון	ואת	אספתא:	ואת
פורתא	ואת	אדליא	ואת
ארידתא:	ואת	פרמשתא	ואת
אריסי	ואת	ארידי	ואת
וייתא:	עשרת	בני המן בן-המדתא צור היהודים	

ו הרגו ובבזה לא שלחו את-ידם: ביום ההוא בא מספר ההרוגים בשושן הבירה  
 ז לפני המלך: ויאמר המלך לאסתר המלכה בשושן הבירה הרגו היהודים  
 ח ואבד חמש מאות איש ואת עשרת בני-המן בשאר מדינות המלך מה עשו  
 ט ומה-שאלתך וינתן לך ומה-בקשתך עוד ותעש: ותאמר אסתר אם-על-  
 י המלך טוב ינתן גם-מחר ליהודים אשר בשושן לעשות כדת היום ואת עשרת  
 יד בני-המן יתלו על-העץ: ויאמר המלך להעשות כן ותנתן דת בשושן ואת  
 טו עשרת בני-המן תלו: ויקהלו היהודיים אשר בשושן גם ביום ארבעה עשר  
 טז לחדש אדר ויהרגו בשושן שלש מאות איש ובבזה לא שלחו את-ידם: ושאר  
 ז היהודים אשר במדינות המלך נקהלו וועמד על-נפשם ונזח מאיביהם והרגו  
 ח בשנאיהם חמשה ושבעים אלף ובבזה לא שלחו את-ידם: ביום-שלושה עשר  
 יח לחדש אדר ונזח בארבעה עשר בן ועשה אתו יום משתה ושמחה: והיהודיים

היהודים

והיהודים

- 19 Therefore, the unwallled Jews,** that is, those who live in the unwallled cities,<sup>6</sup> whose residents were exposed to great danger, **observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day of joy, banqueting, and a holiday, and furthermore, a day of sending portions of food one to another,** in order to increase joy and publicly express happiness. The date on which they spontaneously celebrated at that time was established as a day of rejoicing in the following years.<sup>66</sup>
- 20** It was Mordekhai who established the conversion of the spontaneous celebration into a permanent holiday: **Mordekhai wrote these matters,** the events that occurred, **and he sent scrolls to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh, near and far,** instructing them
- 21 to establish for themselves to observe** the victory celebrations of **the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of it, in each and every year,** as permanent days of merriment and feasting:
- 22 In accordance with the dates of the days that the Jews** of that generation had **rested from their enemies, and the month that was transformed for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday, to observe them as days of banquet and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the indigent,** so that the poor should also participate in the festivities.
- 23 The Jews** as a people **undertook,**<sup>67</sup> or committed to continuing, **that which they had begun to practice** at the time, **and that which Mordekhai wrote to them.**
- 24** Mordekhai's brief summary of the events, as he wrote to the Jews, went as follows: **Because Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite, adversary of all the Jews,** not only the enemy of Mordekhai alone,<sup>68</sup> **had plotted against the Jews to eliminate them, and he cast the pur, that is the lot, in order to determine a date on which to crush them, and eliminate them.**
- 25 But when she,** Esther,<sup>69</sup> **came before the king;** alternatively, when it, Haman's intention, came before the king, **he said: By means of the scroll, may his evil plot that he had devised against the Jews return upon his head. When he summarized what happened, Mordekhai was careful not to mention that Ahashverosh had initially signed Haman's decree. Rather,**
- he described the events in such a manner that it seemed that when the missives appeared, the king was surprised to discover that his minister had used his authority for reprehensible ends, and as a result he commanded that Haman be punished.<sup>70</sup> **Subsequently, they hanged him and his sons on the gibbet.**
- 26 Therefore, they called these days Purim, after the lot [pur]** cast by Haman. **Therefore, for all the matters of this epistle of Mordekhai's, and what they saw about that matter,** that is, what led them to establish these days: Haman's **pur, and what befell them,** how they ultimately achieved victory and rest,
- 27 the Jews established and accepted upon themselves, and upon their descendants, and as these days of Purim were established for the entire people throughout the generations, they were also accepted upon everyone associated with them, converts,**<sup>71</sup> despite the fact that their biological ancestors were not affected. **And it was agreed that it will not be neglected, to observe these two days as they are written, and on their dates, each and every year.**
- 28 These days are remembered and observed in each and every generation, each and every family, each and every province, and each and every city.** Celebration of the holiday spread through all Jewish communities. Therefore, **these days of Purim will not pass from among the Jews, and their memory will not perish from their descendants;** they will be commemorated forever. Often, national days of celebration are temporary, and forgotten over the passage of time. By contrast, because this episode involved a plot to destroy the entire nation, it must be commemorated by the entire people through all its generations.
- 29 Queen Esther daughter of Avihayil, and Mordekhai the Jew, wrote of all the significant events,**<sup>72</sup> alternatively, they wrote with all their authority, **confirming this second letter of Purim.** The first one, which contained a summary of the events, was sent by Mordekhai. Later they together wrote a revised epistle, signed by the queen.<sup>73</sup>
- 30 He, Mordekhai, sent scrolls to all the Jews, to one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahashverosh, matters of peace and truth.** These epistles were not binding orders, but inspirational instruction from the spiritual leader of the Jews.

#### BACKGROUND

9:19 | **The unwallled [haperazim] Jews, who live in the unwallled cities:** The authors of the book of Esther may have felt it was necessary to elaborate and precisely define the term *perazim* because of the similar Persian word

*perazona*, which means people from diverse origins, similar to the Hebrew term *pezura*, diaspora. It is therefore emphasized that this term denotes specifically Jews who lived outside the fortified capital or other fortified cities,

which were protected by soldiers of the Persian kingdom (Tamar Eilam Gindin, *The Book of Esther Unmasked*. Zeresh Publications, 2016 [Hebrew], pp. 144–145).



הַפְּרָזִים

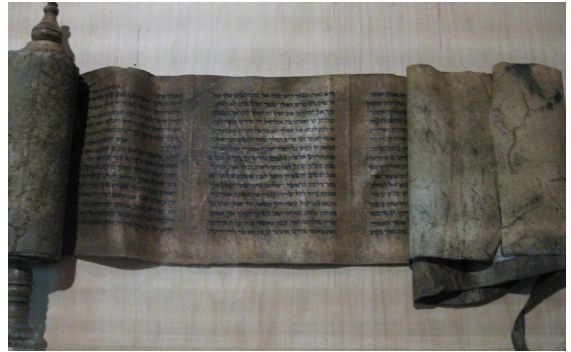
יט אֲשֶׁר־בְּשׁוּשָׁן נִקְהְלוּ בְּשִׁלּוּשֵׁה עֶשֶׂר בּוֹ וּבְאַרְבַּעַה עֶשֶׂר בּוֹ וְנוּחַ בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עֶשֶׂר  
 בּוֹ וַעֲשֵׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׁמְחָה: עַל־כֵּן הֵיהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי  
 כ הַפְּרוּזוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבַּעַה עֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר שִׁמְחָה וּמְשֻׁתָּה וַיּוֹם טוֹב  
 וּמְשַׁלַּח מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּכְתֹּב מְרַדְּכִי אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים  
 כא אֶל־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרוּשׁ הַקְּרוֹבִים וְהַרְחוֹקִים:  
 כב לְקִיָּם עֲלֵיהֶם לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבַּעַה עֶשֶׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וְאֵת יוֹם־חֲמִשָּׁה  
 עֶשֶׂר בּוֹ בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: כִּימִים אֲשֶׁר־נָחוּ בָהֶם הֵיהוּדִים מֵאִיבֵיהֶם וְהַחֹדֶשׁ  
 כג אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׁמְחָה וּמֵאֵבֶל לַיּוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה  
 כד וְשִׁמְחָה וּמְשַׁלַּח מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְּנוֹת לְאֲבִינֵים: וְקִבַּל הֵיהוּדִים אֶת  
 כה אֲשֶׁר־הִחֲלוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־כָּתַב מְרַדְּכִי אֲלֵיהֶם: כִּי הָמָן בֶּן־הַמֶּדְתָּא  
 הָאֲגָגִי צִוָּר כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים חֹשֵׁב עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים לְאַבְדֵם וְהַפֵּל פּוֹר הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל  
 כו לְהֵמָּס וּלְאַבְדֵם: וּבִבְאֵה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אָמַר עַם־הַסֵּפֶר יָשׁוּב מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ הִרְעָה  
 לו אֲשֶׁר־חֹשֵׁב עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים עַל־דֹּאשׁוֹ וְתָלוּ אוֹתוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו עַל־הָעֵץ: עַל־כֵּן קָרָאוּ  
 לו לַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה פּוּרִים עַל־שֵׁם הַפּוּר עַל־כֵּן עַל־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הָאֲגֵרָה הַזֹּאת וּמָה־  
 לו רָאוּ עַל־כָּכָה וּמָה הִגִּיעַ אֲלֵיהֶם: קִימוּ וְקִבַּל הַיְּהוּדִים ׀ עֲלֵיהֶם ׀ וְעַל־זֶדְעָם  
 כז וְעַל כָּל־הַנְּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם  
 כח וּכְזִמְנָם בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: וְהַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר מְשַׁפְּחָה  
 כט וּמְשַׁפְּחָה מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וְעִיר וְעִיר וַיָּמִי הַפּוּרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ מִתּוֹךְ  
 לו הַיְּהוּדִים וְזָכְרָם לֹא־יִסּוּף מִזֵּרֵעַם:  
 אֲבִיתָיִל וּמְרַדְּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי אֶת־כָּל־תַּקְּוָה לְקִיָּם אֶת אֲגֵרַת הַפָּרִים הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁמִית:  
 לו וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֶל־שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה מַלְכוּת

- 31** The epistle was sent **to establish these days of Purim on their dates, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them, and as they established the matters of the fasts and their lamentations<sup>D</sup> for themselves and for their descendants.** Just as all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahashverosh had taken part in the communal fast and prayers when the evil decree was issued, it was fitting that the entire people likewise share in the commemoration of the events.
- 32** **The edict of Esther established these matters of Purim, and it was written in the scroll.** As queen, Esther's affirmation of the holiday by writing and signing the account of these events, i.e., this book, gave great force to the establishment of the holiday.<sup>74</sup>

### The Greatness of Ahashverosh and Mordekhai

ESTHER 10:1–3

This short section, which concludes the book of Esther, parallels its opening verses. The book began with a description of the kingdom of Ahashverosh and his lavish feasts; it ends here with a historical record of his reign, conveyed in a formal style.



Scroll of Esther, Fez, Morocco, thirteenth to fourteenth century CE

- 10 1** **King Ahashverosh imposed a tax on the land, and on the lands of the sea,<sup>B</sup>** as under his rule the kingdom of Persia reached the pinnacle of its greatness and power.
- 2** **All the details of the acts of his, Ahashverosh's, authority, and his might, and the episode of the greatness of Mordekhai, that the king promoted him to the chief minister of the kingdom; are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?** These historical matters are not relevant to this book; further descriptions may be found in the chronicles of the kings of Persia and Media. Similar statements directing the reader to the royal chronicles appear elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>75</sup>
- 3** The book concludes by returning to the matter at hand: **For Mordekhai the Jew** had achieved the high status of a man who **was viceroy to King Ahashverosh, and** as such, he was also **prominent as a great leader among the Jews, and accepted by most of his brethren.<sup>D</sup>** Mordekhai was a constant **seeker of good for his people,** as he tried to help the Jewish population



Alleged tomb of Mordekhai and Esther, Hamadan, western Iran

with all the means at his disposal, **and an unwavering spokesman of peace for all his descendants.** All his children and grandchildren benefited from his position of greatness.

אֶחָשׁוּרֹשׁ דְּבָרֵי שָׁלוֹם וְאַמֶּת: לְקַיֵּם אֶת־יְמֵי הַפָּרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּזִמְנֵיהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר  
 קָיָם עֲלֵיהֶם מֶרְדֵּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי וְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְכַאֲשֶׁר קִיָּמוּ עַל־נַפְשָׁם וְעַל־זֶרְעָם  
 דְּבָרֵי הַצּוּמֹת וְזִיעָקָתָם: וּמֵאֲמַר אֶסְתֵּר קָיָם דְּבָרֵי הַפָּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְתָּב  
 בַּסֵּפֶר: וַיֵּשֶׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֶׁרֶשׁ ׀ מִסַּעַר־הָאָרֶץ וְאֵיִי הַיָּם: וְכָל־  
 מַעֲשֵׂה תִקְפוֹ וְגִבּוֹרָתוֹ וּפְרָשֶׁת גְּדֻלַּת מֶרְדֵּכָי אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ הִלּוּאֵיהֶם  
 בְּתוֹבִים עַל־סֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי מְדֵי וּפְרָס: כִּי ׀ מֶרְדֵּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי מִשְׁנֶה  
 לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֶׁרֶשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיְּהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרֹב אַחֲיוֹ דִּרְשׁ טוֹב לַעֲמּוֹ וְדִבֵּר שָׁלוֹם  
 לְכָל־זֶרְעוֹ:

אֶחָשׁוּרֹשׁ

## DISCUSSION

9:31 | **The matters of the fasts and their lamentations:** Some explain that this is the Fast of Esther, which the Jews accepted upon themselves as a day of prayer and supplication forever (Ra'avad). Many other commentaries disagree, maintaining that the verse is referring to the fast days observed in memory of the destruction of the Temple, which are mentioned in Zechariah 8:19 (see Malbim; Ran, *Ta'anit* 18b).

10:3 | **Accepted by most of his brethren:** The Sages expound that Mordechai was accepted by most, but not

all, of his brethren, as some members of the Sanhedrin parted ways with him, perhaps because he had taken on such a senior position of authority (see Rashi; *Megilla* 16b). Alternatively, there were some who objected to him because the building of Jerusalem and the Temple were not renewed during his tenure. On the other hand, this period of calm may have been a contributing factor that allowed the Jews to later petition the king of Persia and request that the Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt.

## BACKGROUND

10:1 | **The lands of the sea:** At its height, the Persian Empire controlled the Anatolian coast and many of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, as well as the island of Cyprus. This was achieved thanks to the powerful Persian navy, which was manned by Phoenician mercenaries.

# Notes

1. *Megilla* 20a.
2. 9:26,29. There seem to have been two epistles out of which the book was assembled.
3. See *Megilla* 7a.
4. See Ibn Ezra's introduction to the book of Esther and his commentary on 5:13, citing Rav Se'adya Gaon.
5. *Seder Olam Rabba*.
6. See Daniel 8:2.
7. Ibn Ezra; Rav Yeshaya of Trani; Vilna Gaon.
8. See, e.g., Rashi; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra.
9. See Ibn Ezra, second commentary.
10. See *Megilla* 12a.
11. Rashi.
12. Based on Rashbam; Bekhor Shor; Ralbag; see also Daniel 5:10.
13. See Ralbag.
14. See *Megilla* 12b.
15. See Ibn Ezra, second commentary; Rav Yosef Kara; Rav Yeshaya of Trani; Ralbag.
16. *Esther Rabba* 1:15; Rashi.
17. Ibn Ezra.
18. See Nehemiah 13:23–24.
19. See, e.g., Rashi.
20. See Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; Rav Yosef Kara; Rav Yeshaya of Trani.
21. Rav Yosef Naḥmias.
22. See *Megilla* 15a; *Targum*; Ibn Ezra.
23. See Malbim.
24. *Targum*; *Megilla* 13a; see Ramban, Exodus 30:23.
25. See Ibn Ezra; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra, second commentary.
26. See, e.g., Rashbam.
27. See discussion on verse 5.
28. See *Megilla* 13a.
29. Ibn Ezra, second commentary; Malbim; see Ruth 4:1; Daniel 2:49.
30. *Megilla* 13a; see *Menahot* 65a.
31. See II Kings 25:28; Daniel 5:29.
32. See Rav Yosef Caspi; *Megillat Setarim*.
33. Rav Yosef Kara, verse 5.
34. See the Aramaic translations of the Bible; *Sanhedrin* 61b; *Megilla* 13a.
35. Ibn Ezra.
36. See Ibn Ezra; Ralbag. See also Ezekiel 21:26–27; commentary on Isaiah 36:10.
37. See *Megilla* 13b.
38. See Rashi.
39. Rashbam and Ralbag, 4:8; Ibn Ezra, second commentary, 8:13.
40. See Rashi; Ibn Ezra; Ibn Ezra, 1:2.
41. *Targum*.
42. See Malbim.
43. See Nehemiah 2:4.
44. Ibn Ezra.
45. *Targum*; Ralbag.
46. See Rashi; Ibn Ezra.
47. Ibn Ezra.
48. See Malbim.
49. See Rashi.
50. See *Megilla* 15b.
51. See Rashbam; Rav Yosef Kara.
52. See Malbim.
53. See *Targum*; *Megilla* 16a.
54. See Ibn Ezra; Rav Yosef Kara.
55. Ibn Ezra.
56. See 1:6; Ezekiel 23:41, and Radak ad loc.
57. See *Targum*.
58. See also 3:12.
59. Ibn Ezra.
60. Ibn Ezra.
61. See Ibn Ezra; Rav Yeshaya of Trani.
62. See Ezra 4:6.
63. See Rav Yosef Kara; Esther 8:11.
64. See Ralbag.
65. Rashi; Rashbam.
66. Rambam, *Megilla* 2a, Ibn Ezra.
67. See *Targum*.
68. Malbim.
69. *Targum*; Rashi; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; see *Megilla* 16b.
70. See Ibn Ezra, 8:8.
71. Rashi.
72. See Rashi.
73. See Ibn Ezra, second commentary.
74. *Targum*; Rashi; Malbim.
75. I Kings 14:29, 15:23; II Kings 14:15; II Chronicles 25:26.

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