

Haman in the Beit Midrash

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A funny thing happened when Haman went looking for Mordecai in order to dress him up and parade him around town honoring him for his allegiance and loyalty to the King. You remember that part of the megillah, in Chapter 6, when it occurs to King Ahashveirosh that he hadn't done anything yet to thank the hero who foiled the assassination plot against him! He wonders out-loud what should be done to honor someone "*asher ha'melech chafeitz bikaro*" who the king desires to honor. Haman, the ultimate narcissist, imagines that the king wants to honor him. So he answers, an honoree of the king should be dressed in levush malchut, royal garb, seated on a royal steed, and wear a royal crown, and be led through the streets while the words "This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor" are proclaimed loudly and publicly. The king thinks that's a splendid idea, and he says to Haman, "Great, do all that for Mordecai! Everything you described, al tapel davar mikol asher dibarta, don't omit even a single detail of what you described. And so Haman is forced to lead his nemesis Mordecai through the streets of Shushan, as he is lauded and celebrated by everyone. This was undoubtedly the second worst day of Haman's life.

But first, Haman had to find Mordecai in order to clean him up and dress him in the king's robes. The midrash, recorded in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah page 16a, describes Haman's mad search for Mordecai. Remember the king instructed Haman to get right on this, to hurry-up and waste no time honoring Mordecai who saved his life. So you can imagine Haman searching frantically for Mordecai. I don't imagine that Haman spent a lot of time in the Jewish section of Shushan, and he was looking everywhere for Mordecai...until he happened upon a synagogue or perhaps a study hall, where, according to the Talmud, Mordecai was giving a shiur, a class. What was Mordecai teaching about on that particular day? Why it was the very material found in this week's Torah portion! He was giving a parasha class to the learned Jews of his community.

Now try to imagine this...The Talmud says that Haman, the archenemy of the Jewish people, the genocidal villain of the Purim story *ata...v'yativ lei kamayhu* entered into the study hall and

sat down among the Jews, as Mordecai was teaching. Amar le'hu, Haman says to Mordecai's students, *bemai askitu*, say, what subject matter are you all learning. They tell Haman that Mordecai was discussing the laws of *Kemitzah*, found in Leviticus 2:2. As part of the mincha offering, the priest would take a small handful of flour, oil, and frankincense, which was then burned on the altar as an offering. Now there's a specific way to do this....the Kohen would place his open hand into a vessel containing the grains, then bend his three middle fingers forward over his palm, lift his hand out of the vessel, extend his thumb and pinky finger, while pinching the grain in his palm with his middle three fingers, and that would be the amount presented as an offering. Haman could not believe what he was hearing! Such minute details! Such explicit instructions...His head was spinning. Exasperated, Haman shouts: Your fistful of flour has come and pushed aside my then thousand silver talents, which I was willing to pay the king to destroy the Jews!

What does he mean by that? How could a little bit of flour and oil overpower the 10,000 talents of silver, which the JPS volume on the Book of Esther says was equal to 302 metric tons of silver, "almost equivalent to the total sum of the annual tribute of the entire Persian empire!" Yet at that moment, sitting in Mordecai's *beit midrash*, Haman realizes that his plans would fail. Any people who would devote that much attention, that much energy, that much significance to a fistful of crumbs could never be defeated! He's sitting there listening to a lecture about flour, for God's sake, and he's thinking to himself 'these people pay attention to everything!' 'These people care about details that are meaningless to others. I'll never be able to outsmart them, to outwit them, to outmaneuver them!' The midrash gets even more adventurous because it imagines that Mordecai, who was dressed in sackcloth and ash, had to be cleaned up and given a haircut before he could wear the king's robes and crown. Who takes him to the bathhouse and gives him a trim...none other than Haman! This is really rich material.

Haman knows deep down that a people that pay attention to every detail, who invest meaning in a clump of grain will never be easy to defeat. It's interesting, on Netflix, there are so many shows and movies about the Mossad, Israel's intelligence service. Because I watched *Fauda*, Netflix tells me that I would also like *Mossad 101*, or *When Heroes Fly*, or *The Angel*, or *Hostages*, or *Seven Days in Entebbe*, or *Operation Finale*... Everyone is fascinated by the Mossad...how it so deftly operates all over the world, how it surgically removes former Nazis

from far away countries, or unravels terrorist plots before they happen. I don't know any other country that has had so many major motion pictures or television shows made about its intelligence services than Israel! And when you consider how young the country is, I have to wonder if the secret to its dramatic effectiveness is the same yiddisher cup that Haman observes about the Jews of Persia. This people pays attention to everything.

If you think about it, we focus on how to place the mezuzah on just such an angle, or precisely where our tefillin should rest on our head; we think about the hours of the day when we can recite certain prayers, light candles, and usher in, or out, Sabbaths and holidays; we take care to clean out every speck of chametz before Pesach, and know exactly what ratio of an accidentally added, non-kosher ingredient renders the whole mixture to be traif. We are trained to build a sukkah according to specific criteria, and how to examine and select a perfect etrog. Our biblical ancestors could look at a stack of produce and know how to extract various tithes and set aside prescribed offerings. Our entire way of looking at the world is through such a precise awareness. Now, you might think this culturally conditioned obsessive compulsive disorder, but for our tradition it is a constant reminder that all those intricacies focus our attention on the significance of things that most other people overlook. Haman immediately knew that this unique Jewish perspective would serve as a tremendous survival skill.

But there's more to it than that. Heschel wrote: "Jewish law is, in a sense, a science of deeds. Its main concern is not only how to worship [God] at certain times but how to live with [God] at all times." That is precisely what attracted me so many years ago to living a religious lifestyle. Think of that word that we use to describe piety and religiosity: We refer to it as *observance*, and to the person as being *observant*. I think that's the perfect description! To be religious is to be an observer of everything. To be observant of the world around us and its numerous opportunities for elevating the meaning and significance of our existence. When I was first becoming religiously observant, I was actively searching for more opportunities on a daily basis, and hourly basis, a minute-by-minute basis to sense and experience spirituality and Jewish wisdom. Religious life has trained me to see the world as brimming with those opportunities.

The Hassidic masters understood that the word Purim, could not only mean lots, which is what most of us were taught, but that it can also derive from the Hebrew word *peirurim*. Peirurim means crumbs. Perhaps this reminds us of Haman's realization...What may seem like crumbs,

like dust in the wind to others, is of eternal importance to Jews. Don't be so quick to ignore the all the precise and elaborate details of Jewish life...they may be the very secret of our survival!