

## To bow or not to bow?

In the story of Purim, did Mordechai act properly by refusing to bow before Haman, thereby endangering all the Jews?

You may have been told: Jews bow only to God. This is false. Bowing to people as a gesture of respect, honor, love, fear is allowed:

-Abraham bowed to his guests:

And he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, three men were standing beside him, and he saw and he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground. [Genesis 18:2].

-Abraham bowed to the people from whom he was buying a burial plot for Sarah:

And Abraham stood up, and bowed to the people of the land, to the Hittites. [Genesis 23:7]

-Jacob bowed to his brother Esau seven times:

And [Jacob] bowed to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother... Then the maidservants came with their children, and they bowed down. Then Leah came with her children came and they bowed down. Then Joseph came with Rachel and they bowed down. [Gen. 33:3-7]

-Joseph's brothers bowed to him:

Now Joseph was the ruler over the land and Joseph's brothers came and prostrated themselves to him, with their faces to the ground. [Genesis 42:6].

-Moses bowed to his father-in-law:

So Moses went out toward Jethro, prostrated himself and kissed him. [Exodus 18:7]

- The prophet Nathan bowed to King David:

And they told the king: Behold: Nathan the prophet. And when he came before the king, he bowed before the king with his face to the ground. [1Kings 1:23]

However, a Jew may not bow before an idol. Halacha forbids engaging in idolatry even to save a life.

Now, the Talmud tells us:

The wicked Haman put himself up as an object of worship. [Meg. 10b, 19a]

The Midrash explains:

[Mordechai] declared the uniqueness of the name of the Holy One in the face of all the inhabitants of the world. Thus, it is written:

But Mordechai did not bow down and would not prostrate himself before [Haman]. [Est. 3:2].

Now, was Mordechai a troublemaker, that he should [gratuitously] disobey the king's command? [No.] The fact is that when Ahashverosh ordered that all should bow down to Haman, Haman engraved an idol over his breast, to make everybody bow down to an idol. When Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to it, he was filled with wrath. Mordechai said to him: "There is a Master who is exalted above all who are exalted. How can I abandon Him and bow down to an idol?" [Esther R. 6:2]

That is why Mordechai refused to bow to Haman.

The Midrash adds that Haman believed he himself was a god, and discussed the matter with Mordechai:

What did Mordechai say to those who asked him why [he would transgress the king's order to bow before Haman]? Rabbi Levi said: He said to them: "Our master Moses admonished us in the Torah saying:

Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image. [Deut. 27:15]

and this wretch sets himself up as a deity!..."

Haman [responded]...: "Did his ancestor [Jacob] not prostrate himself before my ancestor [Esau]?" (\*)

Mordechai replied: "Benjamin [my ancestor] was not yet born." [Esther R. 7:8]

(\*) Haman is a descendant of King Agag of Amalek (the Megilla refers to Haman as an "Agagite") and Amalek is the grandson of Esau.

On the other hand, some argue that flexibility is sometimes best.

Talmud:

Abaye said... [The Torah] taught us:

[You shall not make for you any engraved image...] You shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them. [Ex. 20:4-5]

You may not bow down to THEM, but you may bow down to a human being like yourself. One might think that this applies even to [a human being] who is worshipped, like Haman... Rava, however, explains it as follows: like Haman, but not altogether so. [To bow down to one] like Haman [is forbidden], since he set himself up as a divinity; but not altogether so, for Haman was worshipped through fear, while the prohibition [in the Torah] applies only to a voluntary action.

[Sanhedrin 61b]

Sforno: If the Zealots defending the Second Temple against the Romans had swallowed their pride and followed the example of Jacob, the Temple would not have been destroyed\*. [Sforno on Gen. 33:4]

\*Talmud:

The rabbis said to [the Zealots]: "Let us go out and make peace with [the Romans]." They would not let them, but on the contrary said: "Let us go out and fight them." The rabbis said: "You will not succeed." [Gittin 56a]

Another opinion has Mordechai showing deep insight into God's ways. Haman tries to convince the king to allow him to kill all the Jews. The king is skeptical because the Jews are protected by God. Midrash:

Resh Lakish said: When the wicked Haman said to Ahashverosh: "Come, let us exterminate Israel", Ahashverosh replied: "You cannot prevail against them, since their God will not entirely forsake them. See what he did to the kings who preceded us and who laid hands upon them and who were much mightier and more powerful than we are. Whoever comes against them to destroy them and whoever schemes against them is wiped out... How much more so then we, who are not equal to those others. Let me hear no more of this..." [Est. R. 7:13]

So Haman reasons: If I can get Israel to sin, God will abandon them and I can then kill them with impunity:

Haman said to Ahashverosh: "The God of these men hates lewdness. Make a feast for them and set harlots before them, and order them that they should all come and eat and drink and do as they please... When Mordechai saw this, he rose and issued a proclamation saying, "Do not go to partake of the feast of Ahashverosh, since he has invited you only in order to [set the stage] to lodge a complaint against you, so that the Attribute of Justice should have an excuse for accusing you before the Holy One, blessed be He. But they did not listen to Mordechai and they all went to the feast. Rabbi Ishmael said: 18,500 [Jews] went to the banquet and ate and drank and became drunk and misbehaved. [Est. R. 7:13]

Mordechai concludes that God *will* allow the extermination as punishment, unless the Jews repent sincerely. He precipitates events by refusing to bow down to Haman, and the king signs the decree to have the Jews killed, which he would have done anyway. The Jews respond with despair and repentance:

And in every province... there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. [Esther 4:3]

This was Mordechai's plan and this is what saved the Jews!