

Servant Of The People

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Pekudei 5782

In the Ukrainian comedy series *Sluha Narodu*, or “Servant Of The People,” a high school history teacher named Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko goes on a frustrated rant about rampant corruption in the Ukraine. The rant goes viral, and before he knows it, he is elected President. By now, you know the name of the actor who played him- Volodymir Zelensky. If you aren’t familiar with him from there, perhaps you are familiar with his work on the Ukrainian version of *Dancing With The Stars*, or as the voice of *Paddington* in the Ukrainian dubbed version. But all those pale in comparison to his greatest role to date, as the *actual* President of Ukraine. His fearless leadership, his calls to the world to display moral courage and his refusal to abandon his countrymen have earned him nearly universal acclaim. It is said that life imitates art- but it is true as well that life imitates Torah.

In thinking of the events as they unfold in Ukraine, parallels to the Megillah abound. A population is sentenced to annihilation because of the imperialist designs of a madman, who ascends to power through brute force and the ruthless neutralizing of his enemies. A Jew who is not particularly affiliated is placed in high office and, through fearless action, saves their people. Of course, the parallels to Achashverosh, Haman and Esther abound, but I think there is another character who is relevant to our story- one who appears in the

Megillah exactly twice. At the beginning of the Megillah, we are introduced to the inner circle surrounding Achashverosh- the ones who “see his face.”

בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כְּטוֹב לִב־הַמֶּלֶךְ בִּגְנוֹ אָמַר לְמַהוּמָן בִּזְתָּא חַרְבוֹנָא בְּגַתָּא וְאַבְגָּתָא זֵתָר וְכַרְפָּס שְׁבַעַת הַסְּרִיסִים הַמְּשָׁרְתִים
אֶת־פְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ:

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus,

We never hear from any of these characters again, save for one: Charvona. It happens after the reversal of fortune, the pivotal moment in which Haman is identified by Esther as the genocidal maniac who wants to exterminate her people. The man who signed the decree of annihilation is now groveling pathetically before the king and queen, begging for his own life. Achashverosh is beyond livid, and completely at a loss for what to do next. Enter Charvona:

וַיֹּאמֶר חַרְבוֹנָה אֶחָד מִן־הַסְּרִיסִים לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ גַּם הִנֵּה־הֵעִז אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה הַמֶּן לְמַרְדֵּכַי אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר־טוֹב עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ עַמְּלֵ בְּבֵית
הַמֶּן גָּבַהּ חֲמֵשִׁים אַמָּה וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּלְהוּ עָלָיו:

Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs in attendance, said, “What is more, a stake is standing at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai—the man whose words saved the king.” “Impale him on it!” the king ordered.

Who is this Charvona? One view is that he was actually one of the advisors who was intimately involved with the original genocidal decree. If he wasn’t the one who *suggested* it, he certainly wasn’t *opposed* to it. This is a view advanced in the midrashic work Yalkut

Shimoni¹. Yet, the Talmud Yerushalmi² debates what we are supposed to say at the conclusion of the Megillah:

רב אמר צריך לאמר ארור המן ארורים בניו אמ' ר' פינחס צריך לומר חרבונא זכור לטוב

Rav says we must say “Cursed is Haman and cursed are his sons. Rabbi Pinchas says we must say ‘Chavrona is remembered for the good.’”

Indeed, we follow both these views in the poem *Shoshanat Yaakov*, which concludes with the words וגם חרבונא זכור לטוב, Charvona is also remembered positively. If Charvona was originally a supporter of the decree against the Jews, then now he is nothing more than a fair weather friend, supporting whoever is on the ascent. In the setting of *Shoshanat Yaakov* composed by Rav Shaul Yedidya Eliezer Taub of Modzitz (1886-1947) that is sung often in yeshivos, the phrase

וגם חרבונא זכור לטוב

is repeated no fewer than nine cantorial times! Why is he remembered for the good, with such fanfare? He was acting entirely out of self-interest!

I think the answer is that we need to view Charvona more charitably. Yes, he was certainly taking advantage of shifting political winds, but he had also changed his mind- and seized the moment. In suggesting that the punishment be visited on Haman that he had hoped to perpetrate on the Jews, he was doing exactly the right thing, at the right place and at the right time. No wonder there is another opinion that describes Charvona as a manifestation of

¹ Esther 10:59

² Megillah 3:7:4

Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet. This is traditionally what Eliyahu does- appearing in various guises to provide salvation exactly when and for whom it is needed.

If there is one message I think we can all learn from Charvona, and from what is happening in Ukraine, it is this- encapsulated in a statement of Ben Azzai in Pirkei Avot³

הוא הִיהָ אֹמֵר, אֵל תְּהִי בָּז לְכָל אָדָם, וְאֵל תְּהִי מִפְּלִיג לְכָל דְּבָר, שְׂאִין לָךְ אָדָם שְׂאִין לוֹ שְׂעָה וְאִין לָךְ דְּבָר שְׂאִין לוֹ
מְקוֹם:

He used to say: do not despise any man, and do not discriminate against anything, for there is no man that has not his hour, and there is no thing that has not its place.

Given the right set of circumstances, everyone has the potential to rise to the occasion, to be the hero needed at exactly then and there. It doesn't matter what we have done in the past, and whether our story perhaps positions us as an anti-hero. Of course, the past history of vicious Ukrainian anti-Semitism against the Jews should not be consigned to obscurity. Indeed, that's the basic theme of next Shabbos, Shabbos Zachor- committing ourselves that the names of our enemies are never forgotten. But what matters is what is happening now- both in terms of the Jewish resurgence I wrote about last week that was happening until this war, and because it is now Jews who are being *saved from* danger by other Ukrainians, and not being *brought to it*. This is the moment for the Ukrainians, whose fighting spirit- the kind they used for so long to terrorize Jews- is now being used valiantly in the service of democracy, of human rights and of the triumph of good over naked, unbridled evil. And it is

³ 4:3

the moment for Volodymyr Zelensky as well. When he ascended to office, he was a comedian, ridiculed on the international stage as a frivolous individual with no experience in statecraft, running a corrupt nation known for producing wheat and potatoes; essentially, it was one of the primary producers of Cholent ingredients on the planet. But in an instant, all that changed; when it was needed, he has modeled courage and principle, and has rallied his nation- indeed, the world- behind him. Germany, traditionally adopting an approach toward Russia that focused on their own economic interests and on “understanding,” has pledged aid and support to Ukraine. Sweden- known more for IKEA than ICBM, has broken its historically neutral stance and is sending 5,000 anti-tank weapons to Ukraine. Switzerland- Switzerland!- has abandoned its historical neutrality and joined in the formal condemnation of Russia. Heck, even Democrats and Republicans are mostly unified in their support of Ukraine.

How appropriate that Charvona was a bureaucrat who stepped up at exactly the right moment and saved the Jews, because they are often the ones who do the most damage- with a stamp of a signet ring, or the stroke of a pen, they can sign into law the most horrifying decrees. But they are also the ones who are often best able to help. During the Holocaust, it was midlevel administrators like Aristides De Souza Mendes of Portugal, Jan Zwartendijk of the Netherlands and Chiune Sugihara of Japan- each of which deserves to be spoken about at length and each of which each used their governmental positions to secure visas for thousands of Jews. They were animated by a sense of mission, of urgency, and of purpose and they did it all from behind a desk. It’s easy for us to think that we are nobodies, that we have no ability to make a difference, no inherent heroism- not in this situation nor in so many

others. It is so far away, we can do little else but send money, thoughts and prayers- but that is not nothing. You never know when you will have the ability to effectuate enormous change- with the page of a siddur or the click on a donate button. Whenever we think that there is no room for us, that we can do nothing, let us tap into our inner Charvona- and may the way we conduct ourselves in this hour always be remembered for the good.