**The Hidden Background of *Megillat Esther***

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Translated by Kaeren Fish

When do the events of *Megillat Esther* take place? *Megillat Esther* opens by answering this very question: "It was in the days of Achashverosh – he was Achashverosh who ruled from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces" (1:1). This opening statement is meant to influence our understanding of the subsequent events and their significance.

Interestingly, the introductory verse focuses the reader's attention on the Persian regime, rather than the corresponding state of the Jewish nation (for instance, "It was during the seventh year of the exile of Judea," or the suchlike). In this respect, the narrator plays innocent and conveys the sense that he is about to tell a story of the Persian Empire. This is one of the motifs interwoven throughout the *megilla*: the disparity between the Persian exterior of the narrative and the Jewish perspective within it.

Any discussion of the historical setting of the *megilla* must mention the well-known debate as to the identity of King Achashverosh. Clearly, he was one of the Persian kings of the Achaemenid dynasty (539-330 B.C.E.). This dynasty, comprising ten generations of kings, began with Cyrus, who defeated the Babylonians (539 B.C.E.), and ended with the death of Darius III (330 B.C.E.), approximately three years after the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, ushering in the Hellenistic period.

But which of the Achaemenid kings was Achasheverosh? Among contemporary scholars, opinions are divided into two main schools of thought:

A. Giving the narrative a later date tends to identify Achashverosh with Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.E.). This view is supported by the Septuagint (where the king's name appears as "Artaxerxes") and by Josephus (Antiquities XI 6,1).

B. An earlier – and more widely accepted – date identifies Achashverosh as Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.E.).

This latter view rests upon four major proofs:

1. The king's Persian name – חשיארש – is very similar to the name in Hebrew – אחשורוש, especially when attention is paid to the way in which the name is written in 10:1, without the *vav*.

2. The Greek historian Herodotus, who describes the Achaemenid Persian dynasty in vivid colors, speaks of Xerxes as a king overcome with lust for women and wine (echoing the description of Achashverosh in *Esther*), as having a magnificent palace in Shushan, and as reigning from India to Ethiopia.

3. In the Babylonian city of Sifar, an administrative record was discovered noting that during the period of this king there was a senior official from the city of Shushan who served as the royal treasurer by the name of Mardukâ. This name is highly reminiscent of Mordekhai the Jew.

4. Finally, the only other biblical reference (outside of *Esther*) to Haman's decree, in *Ezra*, would seem to identify Achashverosh as Xerxes: "The people of the land would weaken the hands of the people of Judea, and frightened them off from building. They hired advisors against them, to frustrate their planning, throughout the time of Cyrus, King of Persia, and until the reign of Darius, King of Persia. And during the reign of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote accusations against the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem. And during the days of Artaxerxes they wrote…" (*Ezra* 4:4-7). If, indeed, Achashverosh is Xerxes, then we have an orderly account of the beginning of the dynasty: Cyrus – Darius – Xerxes (Achashverosh) – Artaxerxes.

As noted, this is the most widely accepted identification among the scholars of that period, and – as we shall discover – this information is of great importance in revealing the hidden meanings of the narrative.

If Achashverosh is indeed Xerxes, then the narrative transpires about one hundred years after the destruction of the First Temple and – more importantly – about thirty years after the dedication of the altar of the Second Temple.

Thus, it becomes immediately apparent that the people of Shushan – including Mordekhai and Esther – were not among those Jews who returned to the Land of Israel, who responded positively to Cyrus's proclamation of freedom to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. While the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel is struggling to exist, to survive, to build the Temple – the Jews of Shushan are sitting comfortably, enjoying the sumptuous feast organized by the Persian king for all the inhabitants of his capital.

The situation of those Jews who had returned to the Land of Israel from the Babylonian exile was dire. This was true both in the politico-religious realm (since the other nations living in the land opposed the rebuilding of the Temple) and especially in the economic sphere, to the point where some were forced to sell their children into indentured servitude so as to be able to pay the heavy taxes imposed upon them (*Nechemia* 5:1-4). Towards the end of Nechemia's leadership, the priestly tithes and other gifts were no longer given, for lack of financial ability (*Nechemia* 13:10).

Yet, while this battle for survival was going on in their homeland, the Jews of Shushan flourished and enjoyed an abundance of material comforts. At the beginning of *Esther* we discern no hint of any discrimination against the Jews of Shushan. On the contrary, some of them attain senior positions in the Persian kingdom, and some of their children even marry into Persian royalty. As noted previously, the introductory words, "It was in the days of Achashverosh," serve to focus our attention away from what was going on in the Land of Israel and towards the events in Persia. Is this an innocent declaration, implying that the story has nothing to do with the Jewish history going on in the Land of Israel, or is it a pretense of innocence? According to the latter option, the narrative indeed appears to be disconnected from the goings-on in the Land of Israel, while in fact it points to the author's discomfort at focusing on the Jews of Shushan while ignoring their brethren who are struggling desperately in the Land of Israel.

In this context, it is interesting to go back to the description of Haman's decrees as recorded in *Ezra* – a description that reflects the perspective of those who had returned to Zion: "During the reign of Achashverosh, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem" (*Ezra* 4:6). If the accusation recorded in this verse refers to Haman's decree, then it is described in a most surprising manner. Was Haman's decree really only written concerning "the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem"? From the description of the decrees in *Esther*, we know that they applied throughout "all of the king's provinces" – i.e., all 127 provinces!

This is a rare instance in which we discern a dual attitude towards the same event, from the two real, historical perspectives of the authors of two different works. *Esther*, narrated from the Shushanite perspective, expresses the danger hovering over the continued existence of the entire Jewish nation, and the great salvation that comes to the Jews thanks to the actions of Mordekhai and Esther. In *Ezra*, by contrast – written from the perspective of the Land of Israel – the focus of the decrees is the danger that they pose towards the Jewish settlement in the land. *Ezra's* focus on the Jews' attempt to renew their national existence in their land places the events of that period under a "Land of Israel" magnifying glass, and it is from this perspective that Haman's decrees are conveyed.

The difference in perspective between these two books hints at an ideological-moral debate. The two Jewish centers of the time were at odds, and the historian seeking to record the story of Jewish history is forced to choose where his focus will be: the Land of Israel, where the Jewish settlement is struggling for its survival and trying to build the Second Temple, or the majority of the Jewish nation, which is still in the Babylonian-Persian exile.

The Babylonian Talmud (especially in Tractate *Megilla*) offers literary readings of *Esther* that reveal its hidden strata. The tension between the inhabitants of Shushan and the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, busy building the Second Temple, surfaces in several teachings. Thus, for example, Achashverosh is described as counting seventy years from the time when Israel was led into exile, and when he saw that after seventy years (according to his count) they had not been redeemed, he assumed that they would never be. At that point, he brought out the Temple vessels and used them at the feast that he held for the inhabitants of Shushan (*Megilla* 11a; see also 19a). Since Achashverosh believed the Temple was not going to be rebuilt, the vessels could serve the Persian king at his feasts.

Can we find any hint of this tension within the text itself? Does the *megilla* hint in any way to the Jewish center in the Land of Israel and to the Temple being built there? It would seem that the answer is yes. There are hints throughout the narrative, but for now let us concentrate on the description of the royal palace, and the description of the feasts in chapter 1.

The *megilla*’s description of the royal palace is reminiscent of the structure of the Temple – especially as recorded in the vision of Yechezkel. The comparison is striking in the arrangement of the royal palace in two halls, "the inner court of the king's house" (5:1) and "the outer court" (6:4). This connection may find further support in the author's use of the title "capital" (*bira*) for the palace precinct in Shushan. It is clear that this was an accepted name for this region of Persia. Daniel, too, refers to it in his vision: "I saw in a vision, and it was when I saw, that I was in Shushan the capital (*bira*), which is in the province of Elam" (*Daniel* 8:2). Still, it may be no coincidence that the other place in the Bible that is referred to as "*bira*"is Jerusalem (and the Temple within it), as, for example, in David's prayer: "And to Shelomo, my son, grant a whole heart to observe Your commandments, testimonies and statutes, and to perform all of it, and to build the capital (*bira*) which I have prepared" (I *Divrei* *Ha*-*yamim* 29:19). By using this term, the author may be raising a subtle question: which is the "*bira*"? Which is the royal city – the city of Achashverosh's kingdom, or the city in which the Temple is located?

Similarly, in the description of the feast that is held in the royal palace, it seems that the author of *Esther* seeks to bring the Temple to the reader’s mind. Attention should be paid to the materials listed in the description of the feast: "Hangings of white, of fine cotton, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple" (1:6). A quick comparison shows that the associations aroused by these materials are clearly related to the Temple:

**-** "Blue" (*tekhelet*) is mentioned in *Tanakh* forty-nine times. Out of these, forty-two appearances are connected to the Sanctuary and the Temple.

**-** The "cords of fine linen" likewise are reminiscent of the Temple. "Fine linen" (*butz*) is mentioned in *Tanakh* seven times. It appears twice in *Esther*, and once in Yechezkel's prophecy concerning Tyre (27:17). The other four appearances are connected to the Temple and the Ark of God's Covenant (I *Divrei* *Ha*-*yamim* 15:26; II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:13; 3:14; 5:12).

**-** “Purple” makes thirty-eight appearances in *Tanakh*, twenty-nine of them related to the creation of the Sanctuary and the building of the Temple.

**-** It is possible that the use of the unusual verb *y-s-d*, with reference to the establishment of law and custom ("For so the king had instructed all the officers of his house, to do according to the wishes of each person" – 1:8), may be meant to arouse associations of the verb *y-s-d* in *Tanakh* – which concern the establishment of God's city and God's House (I *Melakhim* 6:37; *Yishayahu* 14:32; 28:16; *Chaggai* 2:18; *Zekharya* 8:9). Against this background, the reader learns of the "establishment" of a special law by the king – that anyone who attends the feast is entitled to drink as much as he chooses to, and whichever type of wine he prefers.

Clearly, then, by invoking these materials and colors, the author seeks to arouse associations of a different place with a different atmosphere. The unlimited drinking and exaggerated self-aggrandizement with wealth and riches serve as a pointed contrast to the Temple. Attention to the Temple associations turns the narrative upside down: the atmosphere of gaiety that characterizes the descriptions of the king's feasting, turns, in the mind of the reader (the target reader, to whom the narrative is addressed), into an atmosphere of anguish and destruction. The vivid colors of the feast that – on the level of the plain reading – add majesty to the narrative, suddenly turn into symbols of destruction for the Jewish people, a commemoration of the Temple and a condemnation of the Jews of Shushan, luxuriating in the lavish royal feast rather than helping their brethren who had returned to their land.

(This is an abridged version of lecture #2 from Rav Grossman’s VBM series on *Megillat* *Esther*. The unabridged version can be found here:

<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-timeframe-and-chronology-chapter-1>.)