

Sources & Resources

Esther and the Spies: A Bible-Based Symbolic Meaning of Walled Cities From the Time of Joshua

As is well known throughout the Jewish world, Jerusalem celebrates Purim one day later than practically everywhere else. This halakhic rule seems perplexing and difficult to explain. The general reason that Purim has varying dates is not itself difficult to understand. The dictum arises from the different dates that Jews of different cities succeeded in defeating their enemies during the original Purim story. The Jews of most cities defeated their enemies on the thirteenth of Adar and celebrated on the fourteenth. The Jews of the capital city of Shushan, on the other hand, required an extra day of Jewish resistance,¹ and the victory only arrived on the fourteenth, with the celebration occurring on the fifteenth (Esther 9:13–19). As a result, the halakha states that any city that was fortified with a wall at the time of Joshua, such as Jerusalem, celebrates on the later date, like Shushan (Mishna *Megilla* 1:1).

But why is that the criterion? We would understand it if Jews in the city of Shushan itself would celebrate a different date, but why Jerusalem? More specifically, why are the days of Joshua the determining period for walled cities? If, in recognition that Jews would not always be in Shushan, the Sages aimed to eternalize the uniqueness of Shushan by extending its special status to any and all walled cities, why not define that category by cities that currently have walls? Or that had walls in the time of Mordecai

¹ This seems the most likely reason for Esther's request of the King to mark an additional day to fight in Shushan, since Haman and his sons lived there and would likely have had large circles of influence in the city. See the commentary of Ralbag on Esther 9:13.

and Esther? Or in the time of Moses? Why specifically Joshua?² The Talmud offers us a source for this rule but not a reason. The source comes in the form of an extrapolation from the appearance of the same word in two places in the Bible, which is a technical method of deriving halakha from biblical verses known as a *gezeira shava*. The word is *perazi*, meaning an un-walled city, which appears in the book of Esther (9:19) to teach that such a place celebrates on the fourteenth. The same word also appears in what seems to be an unrelated context where Moses describes the cities the Israelites captured from Og, King of the Bashan: “All those towns were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars—apart from a great number of un-walled towns” (Deuteronomy 3:5). The Talmud, employing *gezeira shava*, concludes, “Just as there [in Deuteronomy, the reference is to a city] that was surrounded by a wall from the days of Joshua son of Nun, so too here [in Esther, it is referring to a city] that was surrounded by a wall from the days of Joshua son of Nun” (*Megilla* 2b).

This source might satisfy our technical, halakhic curiosity, but it fails to satisfy our philosophical sense, our desire for halakhic meaningfulness. To that end, many have pointed to the Talmud Yerushalmi that suggests that the Sages chose the times of Joshua in order to honor the Land of Israel (*Yerushalmi Megilla* 1:1). Since at the time of Ahasuerus many cities in *Eretz Yisrael* remained in a state of ruin since the destruction of the first Temple, it would be less denigrating and more of an honor to treat cities that formerly had walls in Joshua’s time, when the Israelites initially conquered the land, as if those walls still stood.³ Some have also noted that Joshua was the first to fight Amalek, Haman’s progenitor and ideological ancestor.⁴

Neither of these reasons integrate easily with the *gezeira shava* cited as the source of the rule. The verse in Deuteronomy about the walled and un-walled cities the Israelites took from King Og seems to play only

2 Indeed, the Talmud notes that one Tannaitic Sage asserts that the criterion for celebrating Purim on the fifteenth is living in a city with walls from the time of Ahasuerus, as one might reason (*Megilla* 2b).

3 See Rambam, *Hilkhot Megilla* 1:5; *Beit Yosef*, O.H. 688:1. See the Ritva’s commentary on *Megilla* 2a for an alternative interpretation of the Yerushalmi that connects the law of walled cities on Purim to other areas of halakha that involve walled cities, such as the laws of redeeming sold houses in walled cities in the Land of Israel, where the halakha also defines walled cities based on the times of Joshua. For an interesting suggestion as to the desire to treat destroyed Israeli city walls as if they were still there, see Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, “Cities Surrounded by a Wall from the Time of Joshua Son of Nun” as a Rabbinic Response to the Roman Pomerium,” *JQR* 106:1 (2016), 1–120. For an exposition of a thematic connection between Purim and the city of Jerusalem and its Temple, see Yehuda Zoldan, *Mo’adei Yehuda ve-Yisrael* (Or Etzion, 2004), 309–322.

4 Meiri, *Beit ha-Behira*, *Megilla* 2a, s.v. “ve-ha-mishna ha-rishona”; Bartenura on *Megilla* 1:1; *Torah Temima*, Deuteronomy 3:5.

a technical, and not a philosophically or thematically meaningful role as the source of this halakha. In general, scholars debate whether a *gezeira shava* involves two logically and thematically connected sections of the Bible or the halakha, or rather involves a merely formal bridge between two unrelated areas.⁵ Even if a common *gezeira shava* is only formal, however, some have noted that this particular *gezeira shava* of *perazi-perazi* is uncommon, due to the Talmudic rule that we do not allow a *gezeira shava* between the divinely authored five books of Moses and the divinely inspired but humanly-authored other books of the Bible.⁶ Although the Talmud applies this rule in one direction, disqualifying the application of an exegetical principle that extrapolates from later books of the Bible to the five books of Moses, Ramban and Ritva assume the rule applies in the other direction as well. As such, they conclude that the extrapolation from Deuteronomy to Esther of *perazi-perazi* cannot constitute an authentic *gezeira shava* to derive a halakha, but merely indicates the definition of the word *perazi*.⁷

The wider context of the verse in Deuteronomy suggests a new direction of thinking about this *gezeira shava*. Instead of viewing the extrapolation as formal, it may be pointing to a thematic connection that the Sages noticed between two different but also similar stories, a connection that persists even if the word *perazi* would not have appeared in both stories. The repetition of the word only helps to point to this thematic connection, one that presents a united, fundamental, religious message that the Sages preserved through granting special halakhic status on Purim to cities with walls from the times of Joshua due to their special, symbolic meaning.

To uncover this unified theme we must examine the larger narrative context in which we find the verse in Deuteronomy about the conquering of walled and un-walled cities of Og. In fact, this verse appears in a narrative in which Moses deliberately develops a symbolic meaning carried by walled cities specifically at the end of his life, as he passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua, a symbolism that sharply contrasts a different symbolic meaning carried by walled cities in the time of the previous generation, during the era of Moses' leadership. Understanding these contrasting symbolic meanings requires an examination of an earlier section of the Torah, the story of the spies in the book of Numbers. As we will show, this symbolism points to a religious message that stands central to the story of Esther as well, suggesting a new reason that the Sages define walled cities for the laws of Purim as having walls in the time of Joshua.

5 Yitzhak Gilat, *Perakim be-Hishtalshlut ha-Halakha* (Bar-Ilan University, 1992), 365–373; Yerahmiel Bergman, “What is a Gezeira Shava?” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 71 (1972), 132–139.

6 *Nidda* 23a; *Bava Kamma* 2b.

7 Ramban, *Megilla* 2a; Ritva, *Megilla* 2b, s.v. “ve-tanna didan.”

The Symbolic Meaning of Walled Cities for Two Different Generations

In the second year of the Exodus from Egypt, after the Israelites received the Torah and built the Tabernacle, they were instructed to begin the process of conquering the land of Canaan by first sending scouts, or spies, to report on the status of the land. The result was a disaster, as the spies dissuaded the people from continuing the trek to Canaan. One of the experiences that scared the spies away from the challenge of conquering the land was their encounter with well-fortified, seemingly unbreachable walled cities. In their words, “The people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large” (Numbers 13:28). Another obstacle was the spies’ discovery that the people of Canaan were men of great size and power: “We also saw giants there” (Ibid.). Caleb tried to counter his colleagues’ report, arguing that the walled cities and the giants should not deter the Israelites: “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of [the land], for we are surely capable of [conquering] it” (Numbers 13:30). What was Caleb’s basis for his lack of concern about the walled cities and the powerful people? As he continues, and this time he is joined by his fellow spy Joshua, “If God is satisfied with us, He will bring us into that land and give it to us” (Numbers 14:8). Joshua’s and Caleb’s dispute with the spies is not a matter of strategic, military assessment, but of religious faith. The two argue that the walled cities and giants are of no consequence, since God promised to help the Israelites conquer the land. The same God who took the Israelites out of Egypt with great miracles that ultimately destroyed the Egyptian army would surely have no problem breaching the walls of the fortified cities and defeating giants. To fear the walled cities constitutes a lack of faith. Joshua and Caleb warn the people, “do not to rebel against God” by retreating due to fear of the walled cities and the giants, for “God is with us; have no fear of them [the Canaanites]” (Numbers 14:9). But Joshua and Caleb fail to persuade the people, who begin a rebellion that is quelled by the death of the spies in a plague and by the decree that this generation be doomed to wander the desert for 38 more years until the entire generation dies out.

Walled cities in the time of Moses emerge in this narrative as a symbol of fear, a fear that undermines the Israelites’ trust in God and corrodes their faith that He would protect them and secure their victory against a strong and fortified opponent.⁸

8 Although my presentation treats fear as undermining faith, one could just as well view the cause-effect chain in the reverse order, as beginning with a lack of faith that results in fear, or that fear and loss of faith may occur simultaneously. The order is not substantial for the current analysis.

Thirty-eight years later, with the passing of that generation, Moses, before he passes the mantle of leadership to Joshua, reminds the new generation of this catastrophic failure. In his recounting of the story of the spies, he emphasizes their fear of the walls. "Yet you," referring to the previous generation, "refused to go up" to the land "and defied the command of God your Lord," saying that "our brothers," the spies, "have taken the heart out of us, by saying, 'We saw there a people stronger and taller than we, large cities with walls sky-high, and even the children of giants'" (Deuteronomy 1:26, 28). Moses further recounts how he connected this failure of heart to a lack of faith, telling the people that "in this you show a lack of faith in God your Lord" (v. 32).

Why does Moses deem it necessary to recount the story of the spies, and in particular the fear of walled cities and giants, before he dies? What purpose does reviewing such details serve? Clearly, his intention is to prevent a repeat performance by the Joshua generation. Joshua stands ready to lead the people into the Promised Land, but this new generation will once again encounter the same walled cities and the same giants. Will they follow in the footsteps of their parents and cower in fear? Will they also lack faith in God's ability and in His promise to lead them to victory? Moses, in his last days, wants to fill the people with faith and trust in God and banish their fear. To that end, he reminds them of the disaster that resulted from their parents' lack of faith.

Moses not only presents the negative message of the failure of the previous generation, but, a few chapters later, he also presents the positive version of this message in the successes of the current generation. He reminds the younger cohort of its recent accomplishments, encouraging the people by showing that they have already demonstrated the appropriate faith and courage which had been found lacking in their parents. Some months before Joshua takes over to lead the people across the Jordan, the nation had already begun to conquer walled cities and giants on the river's eastern bank. Moses recounts the way in which the two kings, Sihon and Og, attacked the Israelites, who handily fought back and defeated them. Moses goes into extraordinary detail regarding the success of these battles, presumably with the purpose of encouraging the people by demonstrating that this generation has already begun to express its capability to overcome the fear and doubt that had previously resulted in calamity. How else can one explain Moses' concern with such mundane details as the size of king Og's bed? "His bedstead, an iron bedstead, is now in Rabbah of the Ammonites; it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide, by the standard cubit" (Deuteronomy 3:11). The message Moses aims to convey here is that giants are nothing to fear when God has

assured the nation's victory. The Israelites utterly defeated Og despite his renowned size and enormous power.⁹

In this context, Moses refers again to walled cities, only now they carry a new symbolic meaning. Pointing to the Israelites' stunning victory in which they conquered 60 cities in Og's kingdom, Moses reminds them that "all those cities were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars—apart from a great number of un-walled towns" (Deuteronomy 3:5). In this verse Moses intends to transform the associations the new generation attaches to the walled cities of Canaan. Recall that this is the very same verse from which the Talmud allocates the *gezeira shava* that walled cities from the times of Joshua celebrate Purim on the fifteenth. Before we discuss the Purim connection, however, let us consider the remarkable transformation of the symbolism of walled cities from the time of the spies, during Moses' generation, to the time of the new generation, just before Joshua assumes leadership. Like Og's empty bed, the recently conquered walled cities now stand as a symbol of God's power to conquer the strong and of faith that God will protect His people and grant them victory in their battles. These same walls that once seemed insurmountable now appear thin and brittle. Moses assures the Israelites that they can enter the land with Joshua as their leader and expect that the towering walls whose imposing shadows had once drained the blood from the faces of the spies will come tumbling down. The subsequent downfall of the walls of Jericho in Joshua's first battle (Joshua 6) should be understood not only as a miracle of strategic purpose, allowing the Israelite army to sack the city, but also as a symbolic toppling of the fear and doubt that the previous generation had associated with those walls.

This new attitude towards the walled cities of Canaan as a false and fragile source of security for Israel's enemies in the face of God's providence and might accompanies the Israelites of Joshua's generation throughout their campaign to conquer the land of Canaan. In a word, these walls now symbolize faith in God's protection which morphs fear into courage.¹⁰ Walled cities in Joshua's time signify the metamorphosis of attitudes between the two generations, from fear to courage and from doubt to faith. With this symbolic meaning of walled cities in the times of Joshua in mind, we return to the story of Esther.

9 My analysis of the significance of various details in Moses' speech is informed by lectures I heard from R. Mordechai Sabato in Yeshivat Har Etzion in the early 1990s.

10 For an exposition on how "faith dispels one's fear and gives one courage," see Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, *Hazon Ish: Emuna u-Vittahon* (Jerusalem, 1954), 17ff.

How Esther Avoids the Error of the Spies

When the Sages employed the *gezeira shava* of *perazi-perazi* to grant a special status on Purim to cities with walls from the time of Joshua, they invited us to notice a thematic connection between the two stories where those words appear: Moses' recounting the victory over Og and the Esther narrative. This halakhic norm, therefore, embodies a particular philosophy regarding trust and faith in God. To explore this connection, let us focus on one of the most tension-filled moments in the book of Esther, the moment where the Queen is forced to make a decision that would put her own life at great risk, yet could potentially alter the fate of the entire Jewish people. When Mordecai insists that Esther must convince King Ahasuerus to rescind the decree that gives license to Haman and his sympathizers to annihilate the Jews in the kingdom, she is initially reluctant. She pushes back against Mordecai's instructions out of fear for her own life.

If we compare this moment in the story to the account of the spies we notice certain parallels. Esther's fear is well justified, as she explains, "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one decree for him—that he be put to death" (Esther 4:11). True, she adds, the king will sometimes make an exception to this decree, but she has no indication that he will do so. In this argument, Esther's fear parallels that of the spies and the generation who listened to them. Both Esther and the spies were given a mission to fulfill the destiny of the Jewish people, and both tried to evade their missions due to obstacles perceived as threats to their lives (although Esther ultimately rallies). For the spies and their generation the obstacles are giants and walled cities; for Esther the obstacle is the king's decree. For Esther the threat of execution imposed on those who flaunt the royal decree is as terrifying as the city walls were for the spies.

At this moment Mordecai interjects, playing the role that Caleb and Joshua attempted to play for the spies. He aims to redirect Esther's thinking and transform her attitude, not through a strategical tactic to circumvent the decree, but by appealing to her faith in God:

Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a moment (Esther 4:8–9).

Although Mordecai does not specifically mention God (whose name is absent from the entire book), his certainty that “relief and deliverance will come to the Jews” has no plausible source other than God’s eternal covenant with the Jewish people. Unlike Caleb and Joshua, Mordecai’s plea succeeds. Esther proceeds with a plan to approach the king, but not until after committing all the Jewish people of Shushan to a three-day fast as a sign of service and devotion to God. In Esther’s turnabout towards faith and trust in God, she narrowly avoids the pitfall into which the spies and their followers fell. She changes her attitude about King Ahasuerus’s decree, no longer allowing her fear of it to deter her from bringing the Jewish people towards its destiny. Her faith transforms her fear into courage. And indeed, when she approaches Ahasuerus, the decree that she had previously viewed as insurmountable evaporates like smoke. Ahasuerus extends his scepter and grants Esther an audience, exempting her from the decree.¹¹

Both stories, that of Esther’s turnabout and of the Israelites conquest of walled cities in the times of Joshua, present us with examples of faith in the face of danger. This is no mere static faith, but one marked by dynamism, involving repentance from what had once been paralyzing fear that undermined trust in God, into resolve to remain courageous in the face of adversity through faith and trust in His commitment to His promises. When the Sages decided to highlight the special role played by walled cities in the story of Purim by giving such locales their own date, they purposely defined such walled cities according to the period of Joshua because of the special significance those cities hold, symbolizing the evolution of the faith of the Jewish people.

This halakhic rule thereby highlights a particular attitude towards faith as possessing a transformative power, prodding all Jews who celebrate Purim to convert their own fears and doubts into faith and courage.

The message of faith and providence contained in the inconsequential walls and the waived decree should not be misunderstood to mean

11 This theme of the evaporation of the terror initially inspired by the King’s decrees, as they reveal themselves to be paper tigers, infuses the story of the Megilla throughout. The first three chapters recount three decrees, *dat* in the Hebrew singular, that establish the King as an irrepressible, draconian power. In chapter one his decree deposes his own queen. In chapter two he decrees the kidnapping and gathering of all the young maidens of the kingdom to his palace for his own pleasure. In chapter three he decrees the genocide of all the Jewish people of his kingdom. Against this background we understand Esther’s terror of violating the King’s decree to visit uninvited. Nevertheless, the ensuing chapters reveal the King’s decrees to be no match for God’s Providence over the Jewish people who, through the faith of Mordecai and Esther, manage to waive or circumvent both the decree against visiting the King uninvited, and the decree removing the Jews’ protection from those seeking their genocide.

that, if we have faith, we will always be successful in all we do. We are not blind to the fact that at times even Jews with faith fail, and in Jewish history we have certainly encountered many setbacks. Even the Israelites in the times of Joshua had their failures, such as when they lost the first battle with the city of Ai due to their failure to listen to God's instructions. Mordecai knew that Esther's mission could have failed. The message of the book of Esther is not that we can never fail, but that we must ultimately succeed. No one, specific mission is guaranteed, but the general and ultimate success of the Jewish people remains certain. Faith in God, as learned from the book of Esther, does not mean certainty in one's own success, but it does mean that whatever efforts one contributes to the betterment of the Jewish people belong to a general effort whose success is guaranteed.¹² Esther teaches us that even this variety of faith and knowledge should be sufficient to convince us to take risks for the sake of the Jewish people, knowing that God works behind the veil to make sure that such efforts will ultimately succeed.

12 Similarly, Hazon Ish argues that trust in God does not guarantee success, but nevertheless it has the power to banish fear through a belief that all events constitute an unfolding of God's plan. See *Emuna u-Vittahon*, 16–18. A different approach considers proper *bittahon* to be an assurance of success. For examples of this latter view see Daniel Stein, "The Limits of Religious Optimism: The *Hazon Ish* and the Alter of Novardok on *Bittahon*" *TRADITION* 43:2 (2010), 31–48. According to this approach the failure of the war against Ai would be interpreted as resulting from a lack of faith.