YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat kI tISA – pURIM**

**SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN *SHLIT"A***

***Megillat Esther* and Our Educational Dilemma**

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One might ask, by what merit did Esther have the *Megilla* named after her? Seemingly, it would have been more appropriate for it to be called "*Megillat Mordekhai*,” since it is he who is the main character: he overhears the plot concocted by Bigtan and Teresh, and reports it to Esther; the struggle between him and Haman is the main conflict of the *Megilla*; and it is he who tells Esther what to do – both with regard to concealing her ethnic origins, and with regard to entering the king's inner courtyard in order to save the Jewish People.

The answer is quite simple, and is condensed in a single verse in the *Megilla*: "Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote, with Mordekhai the Jew, with all emphasis, to confirm this second letter of Purim" (9:29). According to the text, it is Esther who initiates the institutionalization of the festival for all generations, as *Chazal* confirm: "Esther sent a message to the Sages: 'Write me [i.e., the story of what happened to me] for all generations!'" (*Megilla* 7a).

However, this simply shifts the question we posed at the outset from its focus on the title of the *Megilla* to a focus on its plot: how does this turnaround come about, whereby Esther is transformed from a passive character who takes orders from others, to an active party who takes the initiative?

The answer to this question is somewhat longer. Let us try to characterize the *Megilla* and define the uniqueness of Esther and her actions.

Beyond the political-military dilemma that appears in the *Megilla*, the story brings to the surface a question on a completely different level: not the political level of Israel vs. the nations, but rather the level of intra-Jewish relations, among the Jews themselves.

So far, the arena where the events of the *Tanakh* were played out has been Eretz Yisrael. Even the prophet Yechezkel, prophesying in Babylonia, speaks about events going on in the land: when the Destruction will take place, what the significance of the Destruction is, and the anticipation of the future redemption. There are some books whose narratives are not historical records; they take place nowhere, or everywhere. Under this category we might include the Book of *Mishlei*, and some of the chapters of *Tehillim*, as well as the Book of *Iyov* – which, according to one of the opinions among *Chazal*, "never happened; it was a parable" (*Bava* *Batra* 15a). These books are not historical, but rather describe the relationship between man and God. For this reason they are true in every place, at every time, and in every situation.

*Megillat Esther*, from this perspective, represents a turning point, an anomaly. It describes Jewish existence in exile: the trials and tribulations of an exiled community trying to maintain its identity, while dealing with the theological, political, and social upheavals that exile entails. I say this despite the Ramban's opinion, appearing at the beginning of his *Chiddushim* on *Massekhet Megilla*, which ties the problems and solutions arising in the *Megilla* with the settlement of Eretz Yisrael. As I understand it, the *Megilla* says nothing at all about Jewish settlement of the land; rather, it addresses Jewish existence in exile.

The *Megilla* is a Persian chronicle: it opens with the words, "It came to pass in the days of Achashverosh" (1:1), and concludes with the taxes that Achashverosh imposes on his kingdom and a most "exilic" ending: "And all the acts of his power and of his might (Achashverosh!), and the story of the greatness of Mordekhai (just a minor item amidst the power and might of the king) to which the king advanced him – are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Madai and Persia" (10:2).

There are two types of existence in exile. One is characterized by persecution and hatred. There is no shortage of periods in Jewish history when we experienced this sort of existence. A different sort of exilic existence involves dealing with openness and friendliness on the part of the non-Jewish environment.

In a certain sense, the *Megilla* touches on both types of existence. The first section depicts Achashverosh as an open, cosmopolitan monarch: he has no preference for any particular population over any other; he is open to everything, and rules over an "empire of all its citizens." This starts with the banquet he holds: "And the drinking was according to the law, no one compelled, for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house – to do according to every man's pleasure" (1:8). On the expression "no one compelled,” Rabbi Elazar commented: "This teaches that each individual was treated to the wine of his own province" (*Megilla* 12a). The same theme underlies the fact that a Jewish girl "reaches stardom" and becomes his wife. Admittedly, "Esther did not make known her kindred or her people" (2:20), but Achashverosh was certainly aware that she was not a member of the Persian aristocracy. The competition to find him a queen is open to all nations; everyone is afforded equal opportunity – as evidenced by the ultimate selection of Esther.

There is a distinct group of "Jews in Shushan"; in principle, no one has any problem with them. A recurring motif in the *Megilla* is the dissemination of the royal edicts "to all the provinces of the king – to each province according to its writing, and to every people according to its language" (1:22; see also 3:12). Today we know what sort of cultural wars are waged over the matter of language: every conquering nation tries to suppress the language of the vanquished people, thereby subjecting it to its own supposedly superior culture and values. Achashverosh does not adopt this strategy. All he wants is that his authority is accepted; his subjects need not change their way of life for his sake.

This presents the Jews with a tremendous spiritual dilemma. How are they to relate to the surrounding society? Should they mix and become part of the popular culture, or seclude themselves as a closed, nostalgic, insular enclave? Achashverosh's banquet is very inviting, but it symbolizes a culture that is morally corrupt, appealing to the lowest common denominator.

*Chazal* criticize the Jews of that generation, declaring that they were punished "because they partook of the banquet of that wicked one" (*Megilla* 12a). The claim is not that they ate food that was not kosher; the problem is not a religious issue of "*sorer u-moreh*" (a rejection of religious precepts), but rather one of "*zolel ve-sovei*" (unrestrained over-indulgence in sensory pleasures). What sort of culture, what sort of values, guide Jewish society? Am Yisrael are faced with a dilemma and a decision as to their identity, and they make a bad choice. They continue observing the commandments, but these are shown to be merely technical behaviors, lacking the spirit that should guide and inspire Jewish life. They submit to Achashverosh's secular culture.

Moreover, Jewish society, prior to the Destruction of the Temple, had been uniformly convinced that "God is with us,” and that the Destruction "will never happen." The prophets of the First Temple had waged a mighty struggle against this prevailing view, and tried to convince the people that such a terrible option did, in fact, exist: "Do not put your trust in lying words, saying, The Temple of God, the Temple of God, the Temple of God are these… But go now to My place that is in Shilo, where I first caused My Name to dwell, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of My people, Israel" (*Yirmiyahu* 7:4,12). Every coin has two sides, and now that the nation has become painfully aware that the Destruction of the Temple was indeed a possibility, and did in fact happen, the approach switches from one of "God is with us (and so it will never happen)" to one of "(it has happened and therefore) God has abandoned the land." They believe there is no more contact between the people – even the sterling individuals among them – and God. *Chazal* paraphrase the people’s belief: "If a master sells his slave, or a husband divorces his wife, does the former retain any claim over the latter?!" (*Sanhedrin* 105a).

If Am Yisrael had been exiled to some remote village in the mountains, perhaps the laws of the Torah would still have appeared relevant to them. But they find themselves at the center of the Persian Empire, the capital of cultural progress, and the temptation to cast off all their "parochial" values and rules is exceedingly powerful. Am Yisrael has grappled with this problem throughout the entire period of our long exile, with Christianity echoing the same message: 'The fact that you are in exile proves that God is not with you,' heaven forefend. The dilemma, then, is a most difficult one.

This struggle, waged by the nation as a whole, is also undertaken, in miniature, by Mordekhai and Esther themselves. "There was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital" (2:5) – Mordekhai is the keeper of the tradition, he acknowledges his Jewish identity; "and his name was Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish – a man of Binyamin" – he has a family pedigree, a lineage. His spiritual horizon does not run horizontally, encompassing the society around him, but rather vertically, encompassing his ancient heritage. He is the scion of a defined tribe, and he nurtures his historic memory and nostalgia: "who had been exiled from Jerusalem amongst the captivity that had been carried away with Yekhonia, king of Yehuda" (2:6).

Mordekhai tries to exert an educational influence on Esther, too: "And he brought up Hadassa – that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother" (2:7). The assertion of her orphanhood is meant not just in the technical sense – that she has no parents, but also in the figurative sense: she has no tradition, no foundations to come back to in times of trouble. "And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who looked upon her" (2:15) – everyone loves Esther. She watches all their popular television shows, she admires all their leading rock stars; she is familiar with and involved in their culture, and knows their slang. She doesn't speak Yiddish, but rather can conduct a conversation with anyone. Indeed, Achashverosh is smitten with her and takes her as his wife.

And then there arises the wicked Haman, who forces the Jews to make a clear-cut choice between the two alternatives. He brings the dilemma to the surface, and Am Yisrael must decide for once and for all: will they remain "a certain nation that is dispersed and divided,” or will they assimilate among the nations?

Mordekhai rends the dignified garments that he usually wears at the king's gate. He identifies completely with the plight of Am Yisrael, and chooses to look different. Esther is sickened by the very report of this, and her first reaction is to send him clothes, so he can look as well-groomed as usual. She is not willing to relinquish cultural assimilation. She wants to have her cake and eat it, too. Why rend one's garments? Why bring division and dissent?

What is the basis for Esther's response to Mordekhai at the critical moment – "All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, know that any man or woman who comes to the king, into the inner court, who is not called – he is summarily put to death" (4:11)? "Everyone knows…." Esther's behavior is dictated more by social norms than by the critical need to save Am Yisrael! "That's how everyone behaves…" – she is unable to go against the politically-correct social norms, even at the price of standing by while negative forces seek "to annihilate, to kill and to put an end to all the Jews."

Mordekhai's response is direct and eye-opening: "Do not imagine in your heart that you can escape in the king's house, any more than all the other Jews" (4:13). Do not think that you can avoid making a decision, and just continue as usual. Not deciding is itself a decision – a negative one: "For if you remain silent at this time, then relief and deliverance shall arise for the Jews from elsewhere, but you and your father's house shall perish" (4:14). Know, Esther, that there is such a concept as "your father's house." There is a tradition; there are values that come with your heritage. But they will continue to exist only if you make that choice. If you follow the accepted norms and ignore these values, then you, together with your father's house, will perish. You will assimilate and become like any other idolaters. "They have dealt treacherously with God, for they have begotten foreign children" (*Hoshea* 5:7).

Following Mordekhai's rebuke, Esther does indeed arise and take action. She undergoes a transformation, and initiates a move that will save the entire nation of Israel, prompted by an awareness of her values and home culture: "And Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote, with Mordekhai the Jew, with all emphasis…" – she recognizes her lineage and its significance, and in the name of that heritage she sends letters asking that a festival be established for all generations to commemorate this redemption.

All of this is good and well, but it only serves to support the argument that the *Megilla* should in fact have been named after Mordekhai. He is the main actor; without him, nothing would have happened. Why, then, is it called *Megillat* *Esther*?

Esther's initiative involves the entire nation: "Go, gather all the Jews…" 4:16). According to the midrash, Mordekhai's reaction to the news had also been to arrange a gathering: he had turned his attention to the children, with the hope that they would represent some remnant for the nation even after the terrible annihilation planned by Haman. "Immediately, the *Megilla* reads that 'Mordekhai rent his garments.' What did he do? He gathered all the small children, and withheld food and water from them; he dressed them in sackcloth, and they cried out in weeping and wailing" (Sifrei de-Aggadeta al Esther, Midrash Abba Gurion parasha 4). But Mordekhai's influence is limited; it affects just a small group amongst the Jews of Shushan – those who had already made the same decision as he had, in the past, and were now insulated from the influences of the surrounding society. He does not have the power to "gather all the Jews."

In order to appeal to a broader public, there is a need for someone who connects with them naturally, who can speak in their language and who understands their culture and their way of thinking. Only through Esther's agency can Mordekhai “gather all the Jews.” Mordekhai is the spiritual leader, but Esther is the leader of the masses. Were it not for her activity, it is doubtful that Mordekhai could have succeeded in bringing about the deliverance that actually happened. He might have saved his group of loyalists, but Am Yisrael would not have been saved. It is specifically the simple girl with her popular appeal who is able to gather the Jews and persuade them to fast and to pray, to renew their covenant with God, and their direct connection with Him, and to return to His Torah and His values.

It is for this reason that the *Megilla* is named after Esther. Mordekhai plays an indispensable role: he is the stable anchor who maintains tradition. But in order for the influence of this anchor to be felt all around, in order for the entire ship to rest upon it, there is a need for Esther, who is culturally integrated, while her foundations and roots go deep in fertile ground.

The same messages apply today. The dilemma exists in every society in which we find ourselves: whether in Israel or abroad, the surrounding culture is not a religiously observant one. There is a group that is not prepared to involve itself in the dominant society and its culture – even if this culture is perceived to contain certain positive elements. The heavy price that such involvement demands, and the tremendous risk that comes with it, appear too threatening, and this group prefers to remain secluded and separate. A different group is ready to become cautiously involved, with a view to extracting that which is precious and worthy.

I shall not elaborate here on the choice itself. The fact that this *shiur* is being offered within the framework of Yeshivat Har Etzion is sufficient to show which path I have decided to follow. I shall also not address another question, no less important – the question of the relationship between these two groups, which must be one of cooperation and mutual discussion, not one of insularity and alienation. What is important to me to emphasize is that, having chosen the path of involvement and connection, the path of openness and acceptance, we must accept upon ourselves Esther's mission. Wherever we are able to establish contact with our secular brethren – whether within the realms of the educational establishment, in the army, or at work – we must recognize the critical need to try to lead society, each person in accordance with his ability, towards the service of God.

We must recognize the great responsibility that we bear. It is important to remember that the Jewish People is a family. Each yeshiva student who will one day be the head of a family must remember that the role of the head of the family is first and foremost to relinquish, to let go. If your child, or some other member of the family, doesn't follow in your path, you don't yell at him and you don't cut off contact with him. You open up to him and hope that one day in the future you will be able to guide him on the proper path. This idea finds expression in many different areas, whether in the form of more lenient halakhic rulings that take into account prevailing lifestyle choices, or whether in the creation of a cultural, philosophical, moral common language. We must find the way to the secular public, and arouse them to a connection with God, with His commandments, and with Jewish values.

(This *sicha* was delivered at *seuda shelishit* on *Shabbat* *parashat Tetzaveh-Zakhor* 5772 [2012].)