**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Mordekhai the Jew of Shushan**

**By Rav Asher Meir**

 The antagonist of the Purim story, the wicked Haman, is often conceived as a kind of stock villain, an archetypal hate-for-hate's-sake antisemite whose main role in the story is to serve as a foil for the ultimate victory of Mordekhai and Esther. It is true that Haman's character is minimally developed in the megilla itself, but viewed in the light of various midrashim Haman emerges as a three-dimensional figure whose resentment towards Mordekhai and the Jewish people is convincingly rooted in the complex relationships which prevailed between them both at personal and national levels.

 There are two kinds of resentment which are particularly powerful: One is the resentment by the deserving of the undeserving; the inherent feeling of unfairness in the relationship combined with the frustration that things are not being done as they should. This can bring about destructive sentiments. In addition, there is the feeling that one's talents, or efforts, are unrecognized or even have been employed in vain.

 Another powerful source of resentment is, paradoxically, that of the less deserving victor who recognizes that his associate is in fact the better man. Unable to acknowledge his feelings of inferiority, feeling deprived of the right to work with someone shoe can truly appreciate his qualities instead of snidely deriding them, he is liable to view both himself and his colleague as despicable figures.

 An explosive situation is likely to occur if both of these sources of resentment converge. We see this in the character of Iago, in Shakespeare's "Othello, the Moor of Venice." The ensign Iago is resentful of his subservience to the commander Othello, a black man who symbolizes to him an inferior race and culture. Yet, he is simultaneously shamed by the true nobility displayed by the Moor, which contrasts with his own baseness to undermine these very feelings of racial and cultural superiority. The result is an irrational and destructive, even self-destructive, hatred.

 This explosive combination also characterized the relationship between Haman and Mordekhai. Our Sages indicate that Haman came from a working-class background; who can describe how much effort, intrigue, and danger he endured before his crowning success in being promoted to the position of viceroy of the Persian Empire. Imagine his sense of injustice in seeing similar honors handed on a silver platter to Mordekhai, no doubt because of his noble lineage greatly prized by the Persians. All of the honor which Haman sweated for a lifetime to achieve was freely bestowed on a member of a slave nation.

 On the other hand, Haman must have keenly felt Mordekhai's superiority - cultural, intellectual and spiritual. This can only have made matters worse, since Haman could not console himself with the knowledge that, after all, he was the better man.

 Haman's situation in some sense mirrored that of the entire ruling class in Persia. It has been said that the Romans did not so much conquer the Greeks, as the Greeks tamed the Romans. The Roman military victory sealed in effect the cultural victory of the Greeks, whose customs were aped by the newly ascendant barbarians, who had no idea how to employ the wealth and power they had acquired, and looked to Greek culture for a model in every area of society - arts, law, religion. Likewise, the infant Persian empire encompassed many kingdoms from whom the Persians had quite a bit to learn - including the kingdom of Israel.

 This relationship is seen in the megilla in the story of queen Vashti. According to our sages, Vashti was from ancient non-Persian royal stock, and considered it shameful to be the wife of the barbarian Ahasverus. It is no wonder that even at the risk of death this princess refused to take part in the upstart king's drunken brawl. The ministers' concern that such insolence would spread is also easily understood - the Persian empire had hundreds of Vashtis, local noblewomen married off to Persian conquerors in the dual hope that these matches would help give them the prestige of the pre-existing local ruling class, and that some high-class culture might be absorbed by the rude conquerors.

 We see this also in the story of Daniel, another Jew brought straight from captivity to the royal palace. The Persians were very anxious to find outstanding nobles from among the captives, and were almost exaggeratedly in awe of their erudition. (This is hardly surprising. Imagine a society where even the king himself was most likely not literate, encountering one of almost universal literacy!)

 This conflict was exaggerated in the case of Haman and Mordekhai. Haman did not only come from the "inferior" culture, he came from the lower social rungs of that society itself. On the other hand, Mordekhai was truly the flower of Jewish culture - a member of the Sanhedrin, a polyglot, a noble descended from a line of kings (evidently he is from the family of King Saul).

 The national element in this complex was exacerbated by a purely personal resentment. A Midrash, amplifying a story mentioned in the Talmud, tells us that Haman and Mordekhai once set out on a joint mission on behalf of the kingdom. Haman frittered away his budget but - employing the talent common to all ambitious social climbers - managed to find someone to bail him out, namely Mordekhai. But Mordekhai was not satisfied to let Haman climb over his back; he demanded that Haman sell himself as a slave! Haman managed to swallow his pride, resenting the fact that he was not only indebted but enslaved to Mordekhai. Whether the servitude referred to was formal or merely emotional, there can be no doubt that the memory of this event festered in Haman's consciousness.

 This resentment must have turned into an obsession as Haman found Mordekhai besting him at his own specialty - court intrigue. The megilla relates that at the moment when Haman wanted to incite Ahasverus against Mordekhai, a page reminded the king of Mordekhai's outstanding, and unrewarded, loyalty. Haman, shocked by this apparent coincidence, must have been convinced that Mordekhai had infiltrated the king's inner court.

 The victory of Mordekhai and Esther in the arena of court intrigue was ultimately complete, sealed indeed by an Iago-like provocation of Ahashverus's jealousy against the scheming viceroy. Still, we should not let Haman's astonishing wickedness, nor his final defeat, blind us to his remarkable talents and the depths of the emotional turmoil which he acted out in his impassioned pursuit of Mordekhai and his people.