Feasting and Fasting in Megillat Esther

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

Translated by Kaeren Fish

a. "He Brought Me to the House of Wine"

Ten different feasts are mentioned in the Megilla, each characterizing a significant stage in the development of the plot and in the message that the Megilla tries to convey.

Let us review briefly these ten feasts and – based on them – the development of the Megilla:

1. (1:3-4) The first thing that the reader encounters as he reviews the Megilla is Achashverosh's feast. This encounter is a lengthy one – a full six months ("a hundred and eighty days") of drinking wine and admiring "the riches of the glorious kingdom" of the king and "the honor of his grandeur and majesty." The reason for this occasion of drinking is Achashverosh's coronation (which became established, it appears, only after three years). This feast is organized "for all his ministers and servants" from all his provinces.

At this feast we meet "the king," around whom the events of the Megilla will be woven.

2. (1:5-8) No sooner does the reader recover from this long feast than he is dragged headlong into the next one, whose motivation – once again – is the coronation of King Achashverosh. This time the feast is meant for the people of Shushan only ("from great to small"), and this feast lasts only "seven days." While reading about this feast the (Ashkenazi) listener hears the mournful melody of Megillat Eikha ("and vessels of different types"). This is indeed appropriate, for some of the Sages regard the Jewish participation in this feast as the spiritual reason for their subsequent "sentence of death."

Parallel to this feast, "Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women" in the "royal house belonging to King Achashverosh" (1:9). Apparently, the division of men and women at the feast was not based upon any great spiritual level or modest custom prevalent in the royal house, but rather – on the contrary – to give the men some peace from their wives and to allow them to engage in boisterous self-indulgence without limit.

At this feast the listener comes to learn of Vashti's refusal to come "before the king wearing the royal crown" (11). This causes her demotion and disappearance, and paves the way for Esther, who is destined to succeed her.

3. (2:18) The third feast is arranged in honor of Esther's coronation. This time it is a "great feast" with economic ramifications – "he made a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts, in accordance with the king's bounty." Achashverosh obviously had many other wives and concubines, and it is therefore important for the Megilla to stress that Esther was more than just another regular woman in the royal house; she was coronated with great pomp and ceremony, and she was awarded the status of the king's "first wife." Despite this, the king is sufficiently jaded that he makes no inquiries as to the racial or national descent of his wife, the queen.

This feast obviously represents an important link in the salvation of the Jews, since Esther will act on their behalf in the royal court.

4. (3:15) Following Achashverosh's agreement to Haman's request concerning the destruction of the Jews in all the provinces of his kingdom, we hear of another feast, small and intimate – "And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was dismayed." Here the text draws a clear and sharp contrast between the king's drinking and his actions; the king and Haman vs. the anxious people of Shushan. Achashverosh has just passed the death sentence upon an entire population, and while the books of life and death are open before him, he is celebrating over wine. The party here highlights the cruelty of Achashverosh, as expressed in his complete apathy in the face of human loss.

This feast is related to the central theme of the plot – Haman's decree.

5-6. The next two parties are arranged by Esther to honor the king and Haman (5:5-8; 7:1-10). Here we witness Haman's fall and his hanging upon "the tree that he had prepared for Mordekhai."

7. (8:16-17) The feast of the Jews when "the decree was given in Shushan, the capital." This feast obviously expresses the possibility of salvation that has just become available to them, and their thanks to God: "I shall lift up a cup of salvation and call in God's Name" (Tehillim 116:13).

8-9. Two separate feasts, at different times and in different places, are arranged by the Jews on the occasion of their salvation: the Jews of all the provinces hold a feast on the 14th of Adar, while the Jews of Shushan arrange theirs on the 15th of that month (9:17-18). Just as, at the beginning of the story, Achashverosh held one feast for all his provinces and another, special one for the people of Shushan, so here – following the great salvation – two separate feasts are held for the two different populations.

10. (9:21-25) The final feast is narrated with complete sobriety, with a view to the future of the nation and consolidation of its culture: "To make them days of feasting and joy… every year."

In comparing these feasts with each other, a sharp difference arises between the feasts of the Jews and all the feasts held in the palace of the gentile king: in addition to "feasting," the Jewish feasts are also characterized by "joy." These terms are always juxtaposed: "Joy and celebration for the Jews, feasting and holiday" (8:17); "And rested on the fourteenth day thereof, and made it a day of feasting and joy" (9:17); "and rested on the fifteenth day thereof, and made it a day of feasting and joy" (9:18); "they make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of joy and feasting and holiday" (9:19); "to make them days of feasting and joy and sending portions to one another and gifts to the poor" (9:22).

In contrast, in all the previous feasts in which Achashverosh participates, joy is absent. This discrepancy emphasizes Achashverosh's consumption of wine, aimed simply at inebriation; it is in no way an expression of joy, related to an elevated inner psychological experience. While Achashverosh's feasts lead to drunken revelry, the Jewish feasts lead to the mutual sending of food portions and gifts to the poor.

Close inspection of the various feasts reveals that the Megilla attempts to create a fixed pattern of pairs. Sometimes the pairs are obvious and clearly visible; at other times the connection between them is only hinted at.

Let us examine these pairs, starting with the obvious ones:

(1) The most easily recognizable pair of parties are those that Esther arranges for the King and for Haman (numbers 5 and 6). Why two parties? At Esther's first party we read (5:5), "And the King and Haman came to the party that Esther had made." Concerning the second party, we are told (7:1), "And the King and Haman came to drink with Esther the Queen." We note the progress that has been made between these two events: at first the King and Haman merely come to "the party that Esther had made," while afterwards they come "to drink with Esther." This discrepancy may hint at the significance of having these two parties with the same apparent purpose: at the first party Esther feels that she is not yet at the stage of drinking together with her guests, and they, for their part, also still treat her as the mistress of the house, the hostess of the party. She is like a waitress, pouring drinks for the guests who have come for that purpose. At the second party, in contrast, Esther joins in the drinking together with the King and Haman. Now they drink as a group; she no longer faces a coalition of male drinkers. This, then, is the opportune time to plead for herself and her nation.

(2) Another pair is the parties arranged by the Jews after their lives are saved and they avenge themselves on their enemies ("…making it a day of feasting and joy" – numbers 8 and 9). These occur on the 14th of Adar, celebrated by the Jews of all the provinces, and the 15th, celebrated by the Jews of Shushan.

(3) A further pair of parties is held in the wake of the dispatch of the royal decrees: first there is the party of Haman and Achashverosh following the first decree, concerning the annihilation of the Jews, where we read: "And the King and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was dismayed" (3:15). Parallel to this is the party of the Jews when the second decree is publicized, permitting the Jews to band together and defend themselves. There we are told, "And Mordekhai came out from before the King… and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad" (8:15).

This parallel is obvious, and expresses better than anything else the turn of events described in the Megilla: after the first decree the King sits with Haman while Mordekhai "went out into the city," crying a great and bitter cry; after this decree is cancelled "Mordekhai came out from before the King." After the first decree Mordekhai tears his clothes and wears sackcloth and ashes; after its cancellation he emerges "in royal garb – blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a cape of fine linen and purple." After the decree the city of Shushan is left in dismay; after its cancellation the city rejoices.

(4) In addition to the above, there is another pair of parties that the Megilla connects with one another, both linguistically and thematically: the party celebrating the coronation of Achashverosh, and that celebrating the coronation of Esther.

Feast celebrating the coronation of Achashverosh (1:1-4):

"While King Achashverosh sat upon his royal throne,

In the third year of his reign, he made a feast for all his ministers and servants;

The army of Paras and Maday, the nobles and princes of the provinces before him;

When he displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom…."

Feast celebrating the coronation of Esther (2:17-18):

"And he placed the royal crown on her head and coronated her instead of Vashti;

And the King made a great feast for all his ministers and servants;

And he granted a remission of taxes to the provinces;

…In accordance with the King's bounty."

These are the only two feasts arranged by Achashverosh whose effect is felt by all the provinces under his reign, and at both a certain economic aspect is emphasized.

(5) We are left with two final parties, which seem to lack any connection. These are the party held by Achashverosh for the people of Shushan after his coronation, and the establishment of the days of feasting and joy by Mordekhai and Esther for all future generations of Jews.

As mentioned above, there is an opinion among Chazal that Achashverosh's party for the residents of Shushan was the spiritual cause of the destruction that almost came about:

"The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: Why were the Jews of that generation doomed to destruction? He answered them: Say for yourselves. They said: Because they enjoyed the banquet of that evil one." (Megilla 12a)

According to this opinion, the Jews of Shushan took part in this feast enthusiastically, despite the wanton behavior that characterizes such events, and despite the desecration of the vessels of the Temple.

Which, then, is the party that parallels this very significant one, with which the whole Megilla opens? (It is significant even if we do not accept the view quoted above, for it still remains the grand event that introduces the Megilla, and serves as the occasion for Vashti's banishment, facilitating Esther's appearance and the rest of the plot.)

Amongst all the alcoholic parties we find – like something from another world, from a different narrative – a fast. The fast occurs at Haman's moment of glory and at the lowest point for Israel; it represents the turning point in the story. From now onwards the wheel of fortune begins to turn, until the cup of salvation pours down on the inebriated party-goers of the Megilla.

The fast is composed of two parts:

i. The fast of Mordekhai and the other Jews who hear of the decree:

"And Mordekhai tore his clothes and wore sackcloth and ashes, and he went out into the city and cried a great and bitter cry… And in each province, everywhere that that King's word and his decree had reached, there was great mourning for the Jews, and fasting and weeping and wailing; and many donned sackcloth and ashes." (4:1-3)

ii. The fast that Esther decrees for herself and all of her kinsmen, as preparation for her approach to Achashverosh:

"Go, gather all the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days – night and day. I shall likewise fast, with my maidens, and thus I shall come to the King – not according to the usual custom. And if I die, then I die." (4:16)

Both aspects of this fast are read with the melody of Tish'a B'Av, as was the feast of Achashverosh in Shushan.

Closer reading reveals then, most surprisingly, that it is not a feast that parallels the celebration of Achashverosh's coronation in Shushan, but rather a fast. Achashverosh sends the eunuchs to bring Vashti (and to remove her clothing, according to Chazal); Esther sends eunuchs to dress Mordekhai in respectable clothing. Vashti refuses to appear at the King's command, and Mordekhai refuses to wear the clothes that the Queen has sent for him. Later on, Mordekhai and Esther exchange roles, and the parallel becomes even stronger: Mordekhai sends, via a messenger, his request that Esther approach King Achashverosh. Now it is she who refuses – echoing Vashti's refusal of Achashverosh's request. Esther must surely remember the events surrounding the disgrace of her predecessor, who did not appear when commanded to and was severely punished. If she is to appear without being summoned, a similar fate may await her.

 Beyond the similar situation created by these two events, there are also linguistic hints at their correlation:

Coronation feast for people of Shushan (1:5-20):

"The king made a feast for all the people in Shushan,

from great to small,

in the courtyard of the garden of the king's palace…

over all the princes

and over all the people

that are in all the countries of King Achashverosh...

And the drinking was as customary; no one forced them…"

Fast of Mordekhai and Esther (4:9-17):

"Gather all the Jews who are in Shushan,

Also I and my maidens;

…who shall approach the king, to the inner courtyard…

All the servants of the king

and the people

of the countries of the king

I shall come to the king – not according to the custom."

The fast, then, which awakens the Jews of Shushan from their inebriation at Achashverosh's feasts, is indeed related to the first Shushan feast where annihilation is decreed for the Shushan assimilationists, who had gone so far as even to change their names.

(6) A similar connection exists concerning the last feast – the one that addresses the continued existence and fortified culture of the nation, demanding that days of feasting and rejoicing be officially established. The author of the Megilla, seeking to emphasize that the days of Purim must be accepted by the Israelite nation, expresses himself as follows:

"To observe these days of Purim at their proper time, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther observed them, and as they had accepted upon themselves and upon their descendants - the matters of fasting and crying out. And Esther's decree confirmed these characteristics of Purim, and they were written in the book." (9:31-32)

Many explanations have been offered concerning "the matters of fasting and crying out." Some interpret this as referring to the four fasts that Am Yisrael accepted upon themselves relating to the Destruction of the Temple. But this raises a most serious difficulty: why would the author of the Megilla want to compare the days of Purim, characterized by joy and celebration, with such matters of fasting and mourning? For this reason, the alternative explanation seems more plausible – that the author of the Megilla is comparing the validity of the days of Purim to that of the fasts mentioned previously – the fast of Mordekhai and Esther in Shushan. But again, the comparison of the feasting, characterized by great happiness, specifically with fasting requires some explanation.

This question starts to become clarified if it was indeed the fasts declared and observed by Mordekhai and Esther in Shushan that changed the course of events. Among all the lengthy feasts, in between all the wine that is consumed, there is a fast, appearing as a stark antithesis to the Shushan lifestyle, to the culture of inebriation. It is specifically this fast that stands as the hidden key among the drunkards, exposing the innermost secret of the Megilla. In the consciousness of the author of the Megilla, the fast stands at the pinnacle of the story of salvation, and it is upon this foundation that the festivity declared for all future generation of Jews rests. As a hint to this, the author compares the validity of the festivity to the validity of the fast. Just as the nation accepted upon itself to fast, so – and because of this – it is appropriate that the nation come to celebrate these days of Purim.

Indeed, the "fasts and their crying out" mentioned at the end of the Megilla, and its comparison with the feasting that is to be practiced on Purim for all future generations, also have a linguistic connection:

"TO MAKE THEM OBSERVE performance of the fourteenth day of the month of Adar… days of feasting and joy." (9:21-22)

"TO OBSERVE these days of Purim… and as they accepted upon themselves and upon their descendants the matters of fasting and their crying out." (9:31)

The fast, then, is a key point in this festivity-laden Megilla. It stands in contrast with the first feast – as a result of which the generation was given the death penalty, and in contrast with the last feast – the one at which wine will continue to flow for all future Jewish generations.

To define more sharply the place of the fast in the Megilla and to examine its significance as the antithesis of all the wine drinking, we shall now address another subject of the Megilla.

b. "Named After the Lot"

The name of a festival indicates its essence and theme. The central mitzva related to the festival of Sukkot is sitting in a sukka; "chag ha-pesach" is characterized by the "korban pesach," Yom Kippur concerns "kappara" – atonement. Likewise, Purim – at least in the consciousness of the author of the Megilla – concerns the lot cast by Haman (9:26).

Within the context of the story as a whole this detail seems relatively insignificant. But, as mentioned, the name given to the day in the Megilla shouts out lest we forget Haman's lot, which became our lot.

"In the first month, which is the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of King Achashverosh, a 'pur' – that is, a lot – was cast before Haman." (3:7)

Haman casts lots in the first month. This, it seems, is no coincidence: In Babylon, and the Sumerian area in general, it was customary to celebrate the first ten days of the year – starting in the month of Nissan – with festivities in honor of the new year. This was the most important festival, and the festivities included everyone – not only the elitist religious priests in the temples. A document exists describing the celebrations of worship to the god Marduk. For our purposes, two motifs in this text are of particular significance:

i. The king himself played an active and central role in the New Year's celebrations, climaxing in the king's entry into the temple of the god Marduk (on the 6th of Nissan). Here the priest would remove the king's symbols of royalty (the scepter, ring and crown), and the king – bowing down – would have to declare that he had not sinned, that he had not been neglectful in fulfilling his obligations towards "your great godliness." On the 9th of Nissan an image of Marduk was taken out of the temple, in an impressive public ceremony, and the crowds would drink and dance. The next day, on the 10th of Nissan, the image would be returned to its place.

ii. The New Year was perceived as the time when all fates for the entire year were sealed, and after the image of Marduk was returned to its place the priests would cast various lots to find out what they could expect to happen during the entire year.

It is reasonable to assume that the lots cast by Haman in the first month were directly related to these lots. We are even told that the lot "was cast before Haman": apparently it was a priest who cast the lot for him, before him, at his order.

It should be emphasized that the casting of lots does not indicate an approach that views the events and phenomena in the world as coincidental. On the contrary – the basic assumption of this approach is that there are certain days that are fixed (or chosen by the gods) from the beginning of the year for success or for failure. When Haman's lot lands on the 13th of Adar, he believes that this day is fated for the unleashing of his evil plan. (In fact, this day is indeed a day for punishment, but in the opposite sense – the suffering is unleashed on the enemies of Israel.)

Haman's battle is addressed mostly against Mordekhai, who refuses to bow down before him. Concerning Mordekhai's origins, the Megilla tells us:

"There was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital, named Mordekhai son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish – of the tribe of Binyamin" (2:5).

The world of magical powers, fortune-telling and fate cleaves to Rachel and her children, whether they like it or not:

 Rachel herself steals her father's "terafim" (Bereishit 31:19-36). To Ibn Ezra's view, with the help of these "terafim" Lavan would reveal mysteries, and the purpose of the theft was to prevent him from finding out where Ya'akov and his family were. Lavan, as we remember, himself testifies to making use of the world of magic: "I divined, and God blessed me because of you" (30:27).

 Yosef, Rachel's elder son, experiences dreams (not prophecies!) and is able to interpret them. He is so proficient at this that it becomes the name by which he is known: the "master of dreams" (Bereishit 37:19).

 The goblet by which Yosef, in his Egyptian garb, "divines" (Bereishit 44:5) is found in the sack of Binyamin, Rachel's younger son.

 Yonatan, son of Shaul (of the tribe of Binyamin), during the war against the Philistines in Mikhmash, ascends the enemy fortification with his servant, and divines: "If they say to us, "Stand still until we reach you," then we shall stand where we are and not proceed to go up to them. But if they say, "Come up to us," then we shall ascend, for God has given them into our hand, and that will be our sign." (Shemuel I 14:9-12). Chazal view this as the classic model of divining.

 Mikhal, Shaul's daughter, hides in David's bed "the terafim… and the goats' hair pillow" (Shemuel I 19:13). These apparently were used for divining, and Mikhal may have taken them from her father's house, rather than from the private dwelling of David.

 Shaul himself goes to consult the medium prior to the war against the Philistines (Shemuel I 28).

It seems that we may add to this list Mordekhai "of the tribe of Binyamin." But Mordekhai stands on the other side of the fence – he stands opposite the world of lots and fate. It is not he himself who casts the lots, but rather through his fasting he seeks to overturn its prediction.

Prior to Shaul's journey to consult the medium, the text emphasizes that Shaul "asked of God but God did not answer him, neither in a dream nor through the 'urim' or through the prophets" (Shemuel I 28:6). This verse would seem to present an accurate characterization of the world of magic: it is an attempt to bypass the necessity of dealing directly with the Holy One, using the spiritual powers that exist in the world to foretell the future. This world of magic assumes even greater importance and relevance at a time when the Shekhina is hidden, when prophecy has ceased. Yosef, ruler of Egypt at the beginning of the Israelite exile, understands dreams but is not blessed with the gift of prophecy. It is no coincidence that the central theme of the book that precedes the period of the Megilla only slightly – the Book of Daniel – is that of dreaming. When Yonatan ascends the fortification of the Philistines, the text emphasizes that "Achiya ben Achituv… was the kohen to God in Shilo, bearing the 'efod,' and the nation did not know that Yonatan had gone" (Shemuel I 14:3). The "efod" remains in Shilo with Achiya, and Yonatan must rely on divinations. Likewise, as we have mentioned, Shaul seeks help from a medium with magical powers when prophecy has ceased from him.

Megillat Esther is the Megilla of exile; as such, it is no surprise to discover this dimension of casting lots in it. But Mordekhai stands in complete contrast to both his forefathers and his environment. It is specifically Mordekhai, a descendant of Rachel and of Binyamin, who pits himself against Haman's lot and calls for a fast.

Haman and his associates wallow in divination and fate. It is not only the planned destruction of the Jewish nation that is related to the casting of lots, but also his own downfall. After Haman leads Mordekhai upon the royal horse, calling out before him as he is required to do, he enters his own home "mourning, with his head covered." There, after convening his special circle of advisors, he heards from "his wise men and Zeresh, his wife: If Mordekhai - before whom you have begun to fall - is of Jewish seed, you will not prevail over him; you will fall before him." (6:13). Who are these "wise men" who suddenly remember and make mention of Mordekhai's Jewish identity? And would it not be wiser to encourage and support Haman at this difficult time?

It would seem that these wise men may be compared to the wise men of Pharaoh, when he wanted to understand the meaning of his dreams and called "all the magicians of Egypt and all of her wise men" (Bereishit 41:8). They are also like the wise men of Nevukhadnezzar, who were unable to explain to the king what he had dreamed and what it meant, and so the furious king sentences them to death: "He commanded that all the wise men of Bavel be put to death. And the decree went forth that the wise men should be destroyed…" (Daniel 2:12-13). The "wise men," then, are people who understand the meaning of dreams, know how to divine, and are astrologers, as the Megilla itself hints: "the wise men who knew the times" (1:13). These people are employed by Haman to reveal to him those hidden forces that are active in the world and that influence success or failure. Indeed, their contribution is not so much the information about Mordekhai's Jewish identity, but rather the second part of their advice – if you have already begun to fall before him, you are going to continue in your fall. That is how fate works. Just one day previously, when Haman felt that he was on top of the world (Queen Esther had even invited him to an intimate party with the king), the same wise men had advised him to quickly put up a gallows, and to hang Mordekhai immediately the next morning. Although the construction of a gallows fifty amot high is not a simple matter, Haman quickly enlisted his builders and completed the construction - all because the wise men had predicted that the one who had begun to rise would continue to do so, while the one who was falling would continue to fall.

Again, Haman's wise men are correct, and they predict accurately. But Haman himself reads reality backwards. It is not honor that awaits him at Esther's party with the king, but rather one defeat after the next. Indeed, the one who has begun to fall will continue to do so, and the one who has begun to rise will rise higher – so high that Haman's own household will be given into his hands.

As mentioned, it is against this magical, deterministic world that Mordekhai – of the seed of Rachel – pits himself, with his God, Who can turn reality upside down if that is what morality requires.

c. "The Lot is Cast ... but All Its Decision is from God"

As mentioned, Haman's lot is cast amidst the New Year's celebrations – apparently, on the 10th (or 11th) of Nissan. "A hundred and eighty days" (six months) prior to this, on the 10th of Tishrei, as the Jews began their new year, they cast their own lots. On Yom Kippur, the day when the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies, dressed in his special white garments, and declares, "I have sinned," he casts lots in the Temple:

"And Aharon shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for God, and the other for Azazel." (Vayikra 16:8)

I once heard from Rav Yoel Bin-Nun that the entire Megilla is constructed as a mirror-image of Yom Kippur. The royal palace with its inner courtyards is reminiscent of the Beit HaMikdash, and entry is prohibited to both unless one is specifically called upon by the King. Even then one must wear "royal clothing" and wait for the King to extend his scepter, for otherwise the person who enters may be placing himself in mortal danger.

But a more important similarity concerns the casting of lots.

Before examining the lots themselves, it is interesting to compare the two New Year festivals – the Babylonian and the Israelite:

Babylonian New Year:

- In Nissan

- The king enters the Holy of Holies

- The king removes his symbols of royalty (scepter, ring, crown etc.)

- The king declares: "I have not sinned, O master of the lands; I have not been negligent in fulfilling the obligations of your great godliness; I have not destroyed Babylon, nor have I overseen its ruin; I have not harmed Esagila, I have not forgotten your worship, I have not struck the cheek of any one of her sons, with holy rights, nor have I humiliated them."

- Casting of lots to find out what the new year holds.

Israelite New Year:

- In Tishrei

- The Kohen enters the Holy of Holies

- The Kohen removes his priestly garments and enters with white garments

- The Kohen declares: "Please, God! I have sinned, I have transgressed, I have committed iniquity before You – I and my household. Please, God – forgive the sins and the transgressions and the iniquities that I have performed and sinned and transgressed before You, I and my household…"

- Thereafter, he declares: "Please, God – Your nation Israel has transgressed and sinned and committed iniquity before You."

- Casting of lots upon the goats.

Two New Years with two entries into the Holy of Holies; two New Years and two confessions; two New Years and two lots: one Babylonian and one Israelite. How great the difference is between them!

The Babylonian New Year is characterized by the renewed coronation of the king. As such, the king stands before his divinity, declaring that he is free of sin, and receives divine approval for another year of his reign. In honor of this occasion, the mortals are permitted to view the secrets of the future and to discover which times are appropriate for each kind of event, to reveal the characteristics of time that will not be able to be changed.

On the Israelite New Year, the King of Kings is coronated (1st of Tishrei). As part of the commemoration of the beginning of the year, His Sanctuary and all His subjects make atonement. Here, the Kohen confesses all his sins and misdeeds, in order that these may be forgiven. It is in accordance with the religious and moral deeds of the Jew that his sentence will be determined – but even this is not final; the possibility of repentance always remains open.

Against the deterministic New Year, the Jewish nation posits a moral New Year. We have already seen that among the many wine parties of the Megilla, the Jewish fast stands out and changes the course of events. This contrast – between partying and fasting – exceeds the bounds of the Megilla and finds expression in the casting of the various lots. The lot of Haman is surrounded by partying - both at the New Year celebrations, as were customary in Babylon, and at the results of the specific lot cast in our Megilla – "And the king and Haman sat down to drink." In complete contrast, the Jewish lot is cast on a fast day, on a day of "afflicting the soul."

Haman's lot, on the 10th of Nissan, is cast amidst much drinking of wine, with faith in complete determinism that takes no account of the level of a person's morality. Man has the power to use the forces at work in the world, to enlist them for his own purposes. Once he is successful in discovering the fixed laws according to which the world operates, he is free to become drunk and act as he pleases.

The lot of the Kohen Gadol on the 10th of Tishrei is cast in the midst of his fast, with confession and repentance. His fasting is, of course, related to his stance before a God Who requires that a person act morally. Casting the lot means leaving the decision to the One Who created the world, with the faith that He will intervene and guide events in accordance with the moral and religious endeavors of His adherents.

Within Haman's deterministic world ruled by fixed laws and times that cannot be changed, the Holy One intervened and turned that clear, absolute world into a world full of overturning, a world in which the sinner ends up losing.

We encounter another command concerning the casting of lots in the division of Eretz Yisrael into inheritances for the tribes:

"To these the land shall be distributed as an inheritance, by the number of names – the more numerous shall receive a greater inheritance, while the fewer shall receive a smaller inheritance; each person will be given an inheritance in accordance with his number. But the land shall be divided by lots, they shall inherit it by the names of their fathers' tribes; in accordance with lots shall the portion of each be divided, among the more numerous and the fewer." (Bemidbar 26:53-56).

Each tribe receives its portion in Eretz Yisrael in accordance with the lots, while the intra-tribal division by families is carried out according to social criteria – by the size of the family.

The significance of the casting of lots is, apparently, the introduction of an absolute dimension into the process of dividing the land. It is not human discretion that awards one portion of the land to a certain person and a different portion to someone else, but rather a Supreme Power that has determined the division. This is the message that arises from the story of the daughters of Tzelafchad. After it is decided that they will inherit the portion of their father (since he has left no sons to inherit), the heads of their family and their tribe come to complain of the injustice that will be caused to them if the daughters of Tzelafchad end up marrying husbands from other tribes:

"And the heads of clans of the family of Gil'ad ben Makhir ben Menashe, from the family of the children of Yosef, approach and spoke before Moshe and before the princes, the heads of clans of Bnei Yisrael. And they said, God has commanded my lord to give the land for an inheritance by lot to Bnei Yisrael, and my lord was commanded by God to give the portion of Tzelafchad our brother to his daughters. But if they shall marry members of another tribe from among Bnei Yisrael, then their portion will be removed from the inheritance of our forefathers, and will be added to the portion of the tribe that they shall join, and thus the lot of our inheritance will be diminished." (Bemidbar 36:1-4)

Indeed, out of concern that a portion of land will be transferred from one tribe to another, the Torah stipulates that a daughter who inherits a portion is obligated to marry someone from her own tribe, so that the portion will remain within that tribe.

The claim by Tzelafchad's family has an emphasis that requires explanation: "My lord was commanded to give the land for an inheritance by lot…." This would seem to have no bearing on the legal issue at hand: even if the portions of land had been divided up according to some human system, the same problem would occur if the daughters were to marry husbands from other tribes. It would seem that this simply represents the religious basis for the claim by the children of Gil'ad of the tribe of Menashe. It is specifically because the portions were divided by lot that extra care should be taken to preserve the tribal boundaries. As we mentioned, the fact that the division was carried out by lot introduces an absolute dimension into the process, and no change should be made under any circumstances.

At first glance this looks like Haman's lot dressed up in Israelite garb: the casting of a lot that cannot be tampered with; spiritual worlds that determine absolute outcomes.

To clarify the matter, let us turn to the casting of lots that is performed in Sefer Yehoshua:

"And Yehoshua commanded the hikers to mark out the land, saying: Go and walk about in the land, and mark it out, and return to me; here I shall cast the lot for you before God in Shilo. And the men went and passed through the land… and the came to Yehoshua at the camp in Shilo. And Yehoshua cast the lot for them in Shilo, before God, and Yehoshua divided the land there for Bnei Yisrael by their divisions." (Yehoshua 18:8-9)

The text emphasizes several times that the lots are cast in Shilo, before God. We find the same phenomenon in the summary of the inheritance:

"These are the portions divided by Elazar the Kohen and Yehoshua Bin-Nun and the chiefs of the fathers of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael by lot in Shilo, before God, at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed." (Yehoshua 19:51)

This emphasis brings us back to the second Israelite lot, discussed above (the lot performed on Yom Kippur), where we find a similar emphasis:

"And he shall take the two goats and stand them before God at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed. And Aharon shall place lots upon the two goats… and the goat that receives the lot 'for Azazel' shall stand alive before God, to atone for him." (Vayikra 16:7-10)

Again we encounter the place where the lot is cast – "before God." In these verses the text describes this as an action in its own right: first Aharon takes the goats and places them before God, and only thereafter does he cast the lots. Placing the goats "before God" represents a vital preparation for the casting of the lots.

The lots for the division of the land, then, were cast before God in Shilo, at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed. The lots for the goats are cast on Yom Kippur, likewise before God at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed.

This expression ("before God") is a clear and sharp antithesis to the lot of Haman that we encounter in the Megilla. Concerning the latter, we are told: "The 'pur' – that is, the lot – was cast before Haman" (3:7).

This lot is cast "before Haman." The location hints at the fundamental approach of the one who casts the lot. The basic assumption underlying the casting of Haman's lot is a fixed and absolute determinism, with no room for argument. The lots of Am Yisrael express a belief in Providence. One lot is cast "before Haman," while the other is cast "before God." This difference leads to either a party or a fast; to inebriation and immorality or to teshuva and atonement. Haman sees himself as ruling the natural forces that act upon and influence the characteristics of time. The magician who casts his lot does so "before Haman." In contrast, the Kohen Gadol and Yehoshua stand and cast lots before God – the One Who will determine the absolute and eternal decision.

Two lots and two world views. Two absolute worlds that place man before an absolute truth that forces itself on him. But one is forced by blind natural laws, that have no interest in who it is that stands before them. The other is forced by the King of Kings, who decides the outcome of the lot according to a moral yardstick, according to the person who stands before Him.

Although a cursory reading of the Megilla would seem to give the impression of a "profane" story, it turns out that the events of the Megilla hint at a cultural war. It is a battle between the culture of wine parties (from which, as we noted, all joy is absent), and a culture of fasting and teshuva; between a culture in which man reveals his fate and thereby rules over the future, and a culture that believes in a God Who hears the cry of the downtrodden and Who evaluates His creations in accordance with their deeds.

The Megilla is brimming with wine; it is full of drunkards. But within it we discover the illumination of Mordekhai and Esther. From amidst the darkness of exile, the fast breaks forth, shattering the bottles of wine that the evil Haman grasps in his hands, and contrasting two lots – the deterministic lot of Haman, and the moral lot of Am Yisrael.

(The unabridged Hebrew version of this article appears in the collection Hadassa Hi Esther, ed. R. Amnon Bazak, Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 5759.)