

ESTHER THE PSYCHOLOGIST

HOW A YOUNG JEWISH WOMAN BROUGHT DOWN
THE TWO MOST POWERFUL MEN ON EARTH

Rabbi Steven Weil
Orthodox Union
rabbiweil@ou.org

it be half the kingdom ... it shall be fulfilled."^[31] וְחַיִּי...
 'הַמְלָכוֹת - Achashverosh offered Esther half the kingdom,
 וְלֹא כָּל הַמְלָכוֹת - but not the entire kingdom. וְחַיִּי שְׂחוּץ -
 neither the thing which divides^[32] [i.e. is located in the
 middle of] the kingdom. וּמַאי נִיהוּ - And what was that a
 reference to? בְּנוֹן בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ - The building of the Temple.^[33]

The following verse states:

"וְיָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּמְצָא... אֶל-הַמִּשְׁתֶּה" - Esther answered
 Achashverosh: Let the king and Haman come today to the
 banquet which I have prepared for him.^[34] תַּנּוּ רַבָּנָן - The
 Rabbis taught in a Baraisa: שְׂוִימְתָה אֵת הַמֶּן -
 WHAT WAS ESTHER'S REASON FOR INVITING HAMAN to the ban-
 quet?^[35]

The Baraisa records several reasons:

וְרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר אוֹמֵר פְּחִים שְׂמָנָה לוֹ - R' ELIEZER SAYS: SHE SET A TRAP
 FOR HIM. וְהִיא שְׂוִימְתָה לָהֶם לְפָנֵיהֶם לְקָדוֹ - AS IT IS SAID: MAY
 THEIR TABLE BECOME A TRAP FOR THEM.^[36] ר' יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אוֹמֵר מִבֵּית
 אָבִיהָ לְמַדָּה - R' YEHOSHUA SAYS: SHE LEARNED to do so FROM HER
 FATHER'S HOUSE,^[37] אִם-רַעַב שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: - AS IT IS SAID: אֲכִילְהוּ לֶחֶם וְגוֹ'
 IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, GIVE HIM BREAD TO
 EAT ETC.^[38] ר' מֵיר אוֹמֵר אוֹמֵר כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִטּוֹל עֵצָה וְיִמְרֹד - R' MEIR
 SAYS: She invited Haman SO THAT HE WOULD NOT TAKE COUNSEL
 AND REBEL against the king.^[39] ר' יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר - R' YEHUDAH
 SAYS: She invited Haman SO THAT SHE IS A JEW.^[40] ר' נְחֵמְיָהוּ
 אוֹמֵר - R' NECHEMYAH SAYS: כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יֵאמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל - She
 invited Haman SO THAT THE JEWS WOULD NOT SAY: אַחַת יֵשׁ לָנוּ
 בְּבֵית הַמֶּלֶךְ - WE HAVE A SISTER IN THE ROYAL PALACE [who will
 entreat the king on our behalf], וְיִשְׁחֲזוּ רַעְיוֹנֵי מִן הַרְחָמִים - AND
 NEGLECT praying for Divine MERCY. ר' יוֹסֵי אוֹמֵר כְּדֵי שֶׁהָאֵל מְצוּי

לָהּ בְּכָל עַת - R' YOSE SAYS: She invited Haman SO THAT HE WOULD
 BE AVAILABLE TO HER THE WHOLE TIME and perhaps the opportu-
 nity would arise for her to cause him to make some blunder in the
 king's presence. ר' שִׁמּוֹן בֶּן מִנְיָוִי אוֹמֵר - R' SHIMON BEN
 MENASYA SAYS: אוֹיֵל יִרְגֵּשׁ הַמָּקוֹם - Esther reckoned: PERHAPS
 THE OMNIPRESENT WILL BE AROUSED, וְיַעֲשֶׂה לָנוּ נִס - AND WILL
 PERFORM A MIRACLE FOR US.^[41] ר' יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן קֶרְחָה אוֹמֵר - R'
 YEHOSHUA BEN KORCHAH SAYS: אֲכִיבִיר לוֹ פָּנִים כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּהְיֶה רָחוּב הוּא וְהֵיא
 - Esther planned: I WILL SMILE AT [HAMAN] SO THAT the king will
 suspect us of being intimately involved and HAVE US BOTH
 EXECUTED.^[42] ר' רַבָּן גַּמְלִיֵּל אוֹמֵר - RABBAN GAMLIEL SAYS: מֶלֶךְ
 הָיָה - Esther knew that [ACHASHVEIROSH] WAS A FICKLE-
 MINDED KING who might go back on his word. She therefore sought
 that Haman be present, so that if she is successful in convincing
 Achashverosh to execute Haman, he would be able to do so right
 away before changing his mind again. אָמַר רַבָּן גַּמְלִיֵּל עֲדוּיָן -
 RABBAN GAMLIEL SAID: Even after taking all these reasons into account
 WE STILL NEED the reason given by R' Eliezer THE MODEAN.^[43] דְּתַנָּי -
 For it was taught in a Baraisa: ר' אֱלִיעֶזֶר הַמּוֹדְעֵי אוֹמֵר - R' ELIEZER THE
 MODEAN SAID: קָנְאוּ בְּמֶלֶךְ קְנֵאוֹתוֹ בְּשָׂרִים - By inviting Haman, SHE MADE
 THE KING JEALOUS OF HIM, AND SHE MADE THE other NOBLES
 JEALOUS OF HIM.^[44]

The Gemara records two more reasons why Esther invited
 Haman to her banquet:

רַבָּה אוֹמֵר - Rabbah said: Her reasoning was based on the
 following verse: לְפָנֵי-שֶׁבֶר גָּאוֹן - Pride comes before
 destruction.^[45] אַבְיָה וְרַבָּא דְאִמְרֵי תַרְנַוְהוּ - Abaye and Rava
 both say: Her reasoning was based on this verse: בְּחַמּוֹם אֵשִׁית,,
 אֶת-מִשְׁתֵּיהֶם וְגוֹ' - When they are hot I will prepare their feasts
 etc.^[46]

NOTES

31. This is actually a combination of two different verses: Chapter 5, verse 3 reads: וְחַיִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִה לֶךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלִכָה וְמִה בְּקִשְׁתָּךְ עַרְחֵי הַמְּלָכוֹת - And the king said to her, "What do you want, Queen Esther, and what is your petition? Even if it be half the kingdom, it shall be granted you." Verse 6 reads: וְחַיִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן... וְחַיִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְחַיִּי הַמְּלָכוֹת וְחַיִּי הַמִּשְׁתֶּה - And the king said to Esther at the party of wine, "... and what is your petition? Even if it be half the kingdom it shall be fulfilled."

32. A play on words: In specifying the word חַיִּי, half, the verse excludes the similar word חוּץ, divides.

33. Since Achashverosh ruled the entire world, the Temple, which stood in the middle of the world (see Yoma 54b), was situated in the middle of his kingdom (Rashi with Maharsha).

Alternatively, Maharsha explains the Gemara as follows: וְלֹא דָבָר שְׂחוּץ, neither the thing which will cause division in the kingdom. Achashverosh refused to permit the rebuilding of the Temple, lest it cause the Jews to rise up and rebel against his rule (see Maharal, Or Chadash).

34. Esther 5:4.

35. Literally: What did Esther see that she invited Haman?

Ostensibly the purpose of the banquet was to afford Esther an opportunity to plead with the king to abrogate Haman's evil decree. What purpose was served by Haman's presence at the banquet?

36. Psalms 69:28. The message of this verse is as follows: At the time when a person feels comfortable and believes that all is well with him, he is particularly susceptible to a downfall (see Maharal, Or Chadash).

37. She heard it from the little children (Rashi). [Esther could not have heard it from her parents, for her father had died before she was born and her mother when she was born (above 13a). Rather, she overheard the verse from the young children who recite the verses that they study in school.]

38. Proverbs 25:22. The following verse continues: כִּי יִטְלֵם אָתָּה חֹמֶה - For you are heaping coals on his head, and HASHEM shall reward you.

39. Haman was enjoying good fortune at that time (Rashi) and Esther

was concerned that if Haman were to rebel against the king he would be successful.

40. Esther was afraid that if Haman would find out that she is a Jew, he might set an earlier date for the annihilation of the Jews to prevent her from persuading the king to change his mind in the interim (Chiddushei Geonim).

41. The fact that even I make overtures to the enemy of Israel will highlight the utter desperateness of the situation and perhaps move God to perform a miracle on our behalf (Rashi's first explanation with Maharsha).

Perhaps God will be incensed when He sees how I have to demean myself by flattering this evil man.

42. Literally: so that he will be killed, he and her.

The Gemara (Taanis 29a) teaches that even after a decree is promulgated, if one of its protagonists die, the decree dies with him (alternative text in Rashi). Thus, Haman's death would bring about the nullification of the decree calling for the annihilation of the Jews.

43. The previous reasons merely explain why Esther invited Haman, as opposed to giving Achashverosh a private audience.

R' Eliezer the Modean explains not only why Haman was invited, but also why he was invited alone, and not together with any of his colleagues as was the usual practice (Maharsha).

44. By inviting Haman to a royal banquet at which the only other guest is the king himself, Esther makes him equal to the king. She thereby aroused jealousy in the king and also in the other nobles (Maharsha).

45. Proverbs 16:18. Esther invited Haman to make him proud; and this, she hoped, would lead to his destruction.

46. Jeremiah 51:39. The entire verse reads: בְּחַמּוֹם אֵשִׁית אֶת-מִשְׁתֵּיהֶם - When they are hot I will prepare their feasts and I will make them drunk so that they will be merry and sleep a perpetual sleep and not awake, says HASHEM. This verse refers to Belshazzar and his cohort as they returned victorious from the battlefield. Feeling hot and tired, they drank wine to the point of intoxication. Belshazzar was slain that very night (see Daniel 5:1-30). Esther saw that the feasts of the wicked lead to their retribution. She