

Shiur #04: The King's Judgment: Responsible or Ridiculous Rule?

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It is reasonable that Achashverosh was enraged by the refusal of his wife, the queen, to appear when so commanded. Less apparent is why the king invited the ministers of the kingdom to consult on what to do with Queen Vashti. Seemingly, tensions between a couple should be sorted out between themselves; even if a person might wish to share his predicament with his close friends, he would not summon an urgent meeting of government ministers! It is interesting to note that the group of legislators who are close to the king are also involved in astrology: "The king said to the wise men who knew the times, for so the king would speak with all those who knew law and judgment" (1:13).[1] The modern reader is liable to experience some confusion: did the king gather the "wise men who knew the times" (i.e., astrologers), as the first part of the verse suggests, or did he assemble "those who knew law and judgment" (i.e., legislators and legal experts), as the latter part implies? But in the Persian kingdom, law is intricately bound up with astrology, and law with magic. We shall return to this theme when we reach the lot (pur) cast by Haman, giving the festival of Purim its name. As to our present discussion, we may conclude that the group summoned by the king is accustomed to participating in state discussions, and it is reasonable to assume that the king would consult them before waging war or imposing a new tax – so as to ratify the new law.

However, on this occasion the king gathers them because he is angry: "The king was exceedingly angry, and his fury burned within him" (1:12). This is most surprising: what exactly does the king expect of his ministers? How are they meant to solve the marital problems between the king and his wife?

The irony is especially striking in light of the attention paid to the names of the ministers and to their official position – all of which seems unnecessarily detailed. The emphasis is highlighted through the structure of the sentence. First there is a prelude to direct speech: "The king said to the wise men who knew the times" – and the reader expects to hear what the king said. Instead, there follows a lengthy description of the status of these wise men, along with their names: "The closest to him were Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, Memukhan – the seven princes of Persia and Mede, who beheld the king's face and who sat first in the kingdom." The reader can almost imagine the trumpets blaring as these ministers enter: "The listing of the names of the seven princes and their respected titles expresses the great importance that the king and his ministers attached to this matter" (Chakham, p. 9). However, the reader once again asks himself (as the ministers probably do, too) why does the king urgently summon them? With obvious cynicism, the narrative formulates the point of the gathering in the following way: "For the law of what to do with the queen, Vashti, for not having performed the bidding of the king, Achashverosh, via the chamberlains" (1:15). The addendum, "Via the chamberlains," at the end of the sentence appears to be meant as a mockery of the king, who urgently gathers all of his ministers but who has not spoken with his wife; he invites

all the legislators of the kingdom for a consultation, but fails to ask his wife to explain her refusal.

The ministers find themselves in a most difficult quandary. On one hand, they cannot do that which, seemingly, they would most want to do in this situation: to gently bring the king to his senses, encourage him to drink some coffee, and wait for him to sober up. Any minister daring to offer such a proposal will obviously be regarded as showing contempt for the crown. On the other hand, it is difficult to think of any law that may be legislated with a view to solving the king's problem with his wife. The law, by nature, is a general sphere that applies to the entire kingdom, while in the instance at hand the problem pertains exclusively to the royal couple. Moreover, the ministers must bear in mind that within a few days the king is likely to sober up, and then they will have to give a logical accounting for the special law that they passed!

The most brilliant of the ministers, as quickly becomes apparent, is Memukhan. An examination of his response to the king shows how he resolves the ministers' quandary:

"Memukhan said, before the king and the ministers: Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king, but also ALL the ministers and ALL the peoples in ALL the provinces of King Achashverosh. For word of the queen will become known to ALL the women, making their husbands contemptible in their eyes, as they shall say: 'King Achashverosh commanded that Queen Vashti be brought before him – and she did not appear!' And the princesses of Persia and Mede, who will have heard of what the queen did, shall tell of it to ALL the king's princes, and there shall be great contempt and wrath. If it please the king, let a royal edict proceed from him, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Mede and not be altered – that Vashti shall not come before King Achashverosh, and the king shall give her royal estate to another, who is better than her. And when the king's decree which he shall proclaim shall be heard in ALL of his kingdom, which is extensive, then ALL the women will give honor to their husbands, both great and lowly" (1:16-20.)

Memukhan starts with the central idea that he will develop in the course of his monologue: "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king." This idea is emphasized through the use of the word "all" which is repeated over and over, a total of seven times, in his speech. This word sums up the point that Memukhan is making: the problem is not the king's personal problem, but rather an issue that affects ALL of the kingdom and ALL of the couples living within it.[2] We can almost hear Memukhan telling the king (if only through hints): "How fortunate that my lord the king has invited your important ministers. Indeed, a general problem confronts us and it must be addressed by means of a general, thought-out law. The issue at stake is not, as some people might think, a matter of a private problem between the king and his wife. No! The entire kingdom faces a problem; every couple now confronts inestimable strife." The sophisticated reader imagines Memukhan winking at the other ministers as he holds forth. This is hinted at in the introduction to his words: "Memukhan said, before the king AND THE MINISTERS." They, too, await breathlessly the solution to the dilemma in which they have unwillingly been placed. And Memukhan supplies the goods, by pretending to side with the king's approach, only exaggerating it even further.[3]

The king is happy with Memukhan's suggestion, as are the other ministers: "The thing was good in the eyes of the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memukhan had said" (1:21). (We may assume that the king was happy with the "good advice" that he had

received, while the ministers were glad that Memukhan's quick thinking had removed them from their predicament.) Immediately the king puts the advice into practice: "He sent letters to all of the king's provinces, to each province according to its writing and to every people in accordance with its language, that every man might rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of the people" (1:22). We can imagine the reaction of the Persians as they gathered in the town squares to hear the new law that had just been promulgated, and their surprise upon hearing that from now onwards, if a husband asked his wife for a cup of coffee, it was forbidden for her to refuse...[4]

The concluding phrase of the law that is now publicized throughout Achashverosh's kingdom is extremely difficult to decipher. What does "speaking according to the language of the people" have to do with the law in question?[5] Some scholars have proposed that this expression is a repetition of the beginning of the description of the letters being dispatched – i.e., it is yet another expression meant to emphasize that each household was notified of the new law in the appropriate language.[6] Another explanation offered for the language of the law is that if the husband and wife did not speak the same language, the husband was entitled (perhaps even obligated) to force his wife to speak his language.[7] Thus, in the very first chapter, the motif of language is already brought to the fore – a motif that will assume its full significance later on (8:9), and we shall have occasion to discuss it.

We cannot put aside the image of the king's ministers gathered around before noting that it repeats itself, in identical form, in another two places in the narrative: in the selection of Esther, and in the banishment of Haman. Let us compare the three situations:

Banishment of Vashti (1:12-21)

"The king was exceedingly angry, and his fury burned in him"

"Memukhan said before the king"

"The thing was good in the eyes of the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memukhan had said"

Selection of Esther (2:1-4)

When the fury of King Achashverosh was appeased"

"The king's young men who ministered to him said"

"The thing was good in the eyes of the king, and he did so"

Banishment of Haman (7:7-10)

"The king, in his fury, got up from the banquet of wine"

"Charvona, one of the chamberlains, said"

"The king said: Hang him upon it... and the king's fury was appeased"

The most interesting aspect of this parallel is, of course, the second element in each situation – i.e., the "advisor du jour" who steps forward and offers suggestions to the king. Attention should be paid to the fact that in each situation the advisor is not a complete secondary character with whom we are familiar: Memukhan henceforth disappears and is not mentioned again; the "king's young men who ministered to the king" are altogether marginal figures who, quite unexpectedly, are invited to advance the plot; and Charvona, while having appeared at the beginning of the story (as one of the chamberlains who went to summon Vashti) is a character who is otherwise insignificant.[8] Yet, to our surprise, at these major junctures in the narrative (the banishing of the queen from the palace, the

selection of a new queen, the hanging of the most senior advisor in the kingdom), is it specifically these unknown personalities who influence the decisions of the king who, we are told, is overcome with his "fury" and seeks some calm.

This model serves to expose Achashverosh's kingdom in all of its fickleness. How are matters decided? Does order really prevail in this world power? The reader who enters the experience of the king's momentary caprices that establish new laws in the kingdom, is aware of one of the most important devices that advance the plot, but also senses the narrator's biting regard for the norms and procedures of Achashverosh's rule and – as I shall propose later on – for the institution of royalty altogether. Here, too, we discern the disparity between the revealed and concealed levels. On the revealed level, the king is described as someone who consults his ministers before legislating a new law. Even for the purpose of deciding "what should be done with Queen Vashti" he appeals to the appropriate hierarchy, and the law is accepted through the accepted channels. At the same time, on the concealed level, the reader senses the cynicism that pervades this scene. Contrary to the impression that the literal text conveys, if an entire legal process is required in order for the king to decide what to do with his wife, then the entire legal system and the legislative procedure are being presented with a healthy dose of derision.[9]

Clines summarizes the point well: "The tone of ch. 1 is satirical – of that there can be no doubt. The point at which it ends, with royal letters being sent to all the royal provinces... giving command that every man should be master in his own house, is the point of unmistakable glee at Persian foolishness to which the whole chapter has been moving." [10]

To conclude our discussion of Memukhan's advice, we must mention two other biblical sources that maintain a literary connection with this unit and deepen the hidden reading of this scene. One source is from further on in Esther; the other is from Shemuel.

The language used to describe the dispatch of the king's letters is repeated later on, in the description of the dispatch of letters by Haman:

Letters sent in the wake of Memukhan's advice (1:22:)

- a. "He sent letters to all of the king's provinces"
- b. "to each province in accordance with its writing"
- c. "and to every people in accordance with its language"
- d. "that every man might rule in his own house"

Haman's letters (3:12-13:)

- a. "Letters were sent by couriers to all of the king's provinces"
- b. "each province in accordance with its writing"
- c. "and every people in accordance with its language"
- d. "to annihilate, to kill and to destroy all the Jews"

It may be that the parallel is not intended, but rather reflects a formal style of writing expressing the establishment of a new law and its dissemination throughout the Persian kingdom. However, the possibility certainly exists that the narrator indeed wants the reader to place the two dispatches side by side, such that the scorn that he feels upon

reading the king's decree that every man should rule in his own home should be projected onto Haman's decree, too, in which all of the Gentiles are given license to prevail over all of the Jews. This connection hints at a profound structure of the narrative, according to which there are two populations groups that may be referred to as "other" or "foreign": women and Jews. And in keeping with the manner of this narrative, in which the plain text is simply a covering for the hidden reading, the same applies in our context. At the beginning of the story it seems that, in Achashverosh's kingdom, husbands control their wives and wives must "give honor to their husbands" – just as at the beginning it seems that the enemies of the Jews control the Jews, in Achashverosh's kingdom. However, just as at the end "it was reversed, such that the Jews dominated their enemies" (9:1), so it turns out, in fact, that it is the women who set the special tone of this narrative, and it is they (or at least Esther, the wife of the king) who are the major driving force behind the plot and the salvation of the Jews.[11] Timothy Beal devotes his study to the connection between these two population groups. As he writes in the introduction to his book:

"There are many convergences between projections of the other woman and the other Jew, as well as between the two subjects who project these two others and mark them for oblivion as such." [12]

In this sense, the issue of the status of the women is raised and treated as one of the themes of the narrative. It must be emphasized that one does not need to adopt a feminist reading in order to raise this issue in Esther. The king's first set of letters accomplish this, forcing the reader to note the matter of the relationship between a woman and her husband as a theme. One clear fact in this context, which also contributes to the ironic reading of this episode, is that we may recognize at least one man in the kingdom that does not obey this law. We refer here to the king himself, who is led by his wife, the queen, to where she wants him to be – even if she does so in the guise of a wife "giving honor" to her husband.

The second biblical source to which the narrative points us is the transfer of the kingdom from Shaul to David. When the reader considers Memukhan's suggestion – "...The king shall give her royal estate to another, who is better than her" (1:19) – he is reminded to Shemuel's words to Shaul, following the latter's sin in the war against Amalek: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to your fellow who is better than you" (I Shemuel 15:28). This allusion is unmistakable, and the Midrash makes note of it: "With the same language used to strip her ancestor of his kingship – as Shemuel said to him, 'And has given it to your fellow who is better than you,' with that same language the kingship was restored to him. As it is written, '[The king] shall give her royal estate to another, who is better than her.'" (Esther Rabba, parasha 4,9).[13]

What is the significance of the parallel between stripping Vashti of her royal position and stripping Shaul of his kingdom? Apparently, by means of this allusion, the reader is asked to discern the paving of the way for the repair of Shaul's sin. He lost his kingdom because he did not wage war in the proper manner against Amalek and Agag. Now, Esther is restored to royal status so as to complete this deficiency; it is she who will bring about the downfall of "Haman, the Agagite".

While the plain reading mires the reader in the personal fights between the Persian king and his wife, which take place within the palace in Shushan, the "hidden reading" carries him back in time, to ancient Jewish history, hinting to him that the Esther narrative should also be interpreted as a broad historical reaction to the failures of the first Israelite king.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Fox maintains a different view: "Those who know the 'time' are probably all-around experts rather than astrologers" (Fox, 21); compare Chakham, 8.

[2]As noted by W. Dommershausen, Ester, Stuttgart 1980.

[3]As Amos Chakham concludes: "For this reason Memukhan compounds and amplifies Vashti's crime in the king's eyes, turning the insignificant matter of a dispute at a drunken feast into a matter concerning all the citizens of the kingdom" (Chakham, 11 .)

[4]Chazal hint to this in the following Midrash: "He sent letters to all of the king's provinces' – Rav Huna taught: Achashverosh had a corrupt mind. According to the way of the world, if a man wants to eat lentils but his wife wants to eat peas, can he force her? No! She does what she wants. Rav Pinchas taught: As a result of this, he became the object of scorn." (Esther Rabba, parasha 4,12). Attention should be paid to the fact that there is no mention whatsoever of Vashti in the text of the law; this is hinted at in Memukhan's original advice: "And when the king's decree which he shall proclaim shall be heard in ALL of his kingdom... then ALL the women will give honor to their husbands, both great and lowly"(1:20). The banishing of Vashti is "written in the laws of Persia and Mede," but "the king's decree which he shall proclaim" publicly speaks of all wives and their husbands.

[5]Indeed, the Greek translations of Esther omit this phrase.

[6]Thus, for example, Berlin p. 76.

[7]Rashi offers this explanation, ad loc.

[8]We shall look at Charvona in more detail later on, when we come to analyze the hanging of Haman (chapter 7.)

[9]Similarly: T. H. Gaster, "Esther 1:22", JBL 69 (1950), p. 381

[10]Clines 1984, pp. 31-32. See also Fox (24), who notes that every man in the kingdom is being asked to do that which the king himself is not capable of: to rule in his own house!

[11]Further on, we shall note a deeper structure that is shared between Vashti (who disobeys the king's order and refuses to present herself) and Mordekhai (who disobeys the king's order and refuses to prostrate himself before Haman). This, too, serves to reinforce the position of the "women" in Esther as parallel to the position of the "Jews." The representatives of both of these sectors do not accept the royal laws upon themselves, and are depicted as "other" in the Persian kingdom. Beal, whom we shall mention in note 12, treats this theme extensively.

[12]T. K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*, London – New York 1997, p. 13. With regard to the connection discussed above, see pp. 54-49 .

[13] Cf. Chakham, 10; W. McKane, "Note on Esther 9 and I Samuel 15," *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (1961), pp. 260-261; Berg, p. 67 and p. 86, n. 37.