

Shiur #21: "Nothing Failed of Every Good Thing..." (Yehoshua 21:43)

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

Chapter 8 concludes with a description of the reaction on the part of the "peoples of the land" to Mordekhai's letters: "And many of the peoples of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them" (8:17). Three expressions in this verse demand explanation:

a. The phrase "the peoples of the land – amei ha-aretz" in this context, is obviously unrelated to its meaning in the rabbinical idiom (as a contrast to the "chaver" [pious "friend"], who observes a level of purity even when dealing with unconsecrated foods, or the "bur" [ignoramus], who has not studied]. Rather, it means – quite literally – the peoples living in the land. This sounds almost like a realization of God's promise to the Israelites on the plains of Moav: "All the peoples of the land will see that the Name of God is bestowed upon you, and they will fear you" (Devarim 28:10.)

b. The verb "became Jews" (mityahadim) appears to indicate a mass conversion (as the ancient translations suggest), although we cannot altogether discount the reading proposed by Ehrlich, according to which the phenomenon consisted of merely a pretense of being Jewish. This does sometimes represent the meaning of a verb in the reflexive case, and some scholars have even integrated this interpretation in their translation of the text. Moore, for example, writes: "'Moreover, many of the pagans professed themselves Jews.'"[1]

In any event, it makes no difference to our narrative since the statement comes not to highlight the actual conversion, but rather to convey and illustrate the great fear that fell upon many of the peoples of the land.[2]

c. The expression "fear fell" occurs three times in close succession:

" -And many of the peoples of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them" (8:17.)

" -No-one stood upon to them, for the fear of them fell upon all of the peoples" (9:2)

" -And all the rulers of the provinces, and the satraps and the governors and the royal functionaries supported (or elevated) the Jews, for the fear of Mordekhai had fallen upon them. For Mordekhai was great in the king's house, and his fame extended throughout the provinces, for the man Mordekhai grew greater and greater" (9:3.)

This repetition creates a ripple effect, an impression of a fear that gradually spreads as time goes on and the fateful day nears – the 13th of Adar. At first it is "many of the peoples of the land" who are fearful; thereafter fear falls upon "all of the peoples." Finally, fear takes hold of even the rulers, with a detailed description of their hierarchy along with the word "all" ("All of the rulers of the provinces" etc.)

The listing of the levels of power that "elevate" or "support" the Jews out of fear also creates a sense of spreading from another direction. A similar list has already appeared twice before in our narrative. The first instance concerned the recipients of Haman's letters: "It was written according to all that Haman commanded to the king's satraps and to the governors of each province, and to the rulers of each nation" (3:12). Later, these same authorities are listed among the addressees for Mordekhai's letters: "And it was written according to all that Mordekhai commanded, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the rulers of the provinces" (8:9). However, while the latter two lists include only three positions in the Persian hierarchy (rulers of provinces; satraps; governors), the description of the fear that seizes the peoples of the land in our chapter involves a fourth level – "the royal functionaries." The narrator thereby underlines the fact that Mordekhai's letters have had an even greater impact than intended; even those officials who did not officially receive Haman's decrees or Mordekhai's letters were drawn into the developing frenzy, and they, too, began promoting and elevating the Jews.[3]

The obvious question is, why all the fear? The new letters admittedly permit the Jews "to gather and to defend their lives" (8:11), but they do not cancel Haman's letters, which give license to the Jews' enemies to wage war against them and plunder them. Why, then, are "many of the peoples of the land" so fearful? Can they possibly imagine that the Jews' military might exceeds that of their enemies?

The key to answering this question appears to lie in a reading of the first two verses above against the background of the third. In other words, the description of the fear in the third statement holds a profound reason for the previous two statements. At first the fear is of "the Jews," and this is indeed surprising. However, in the third statement the fear is of Mordekhai, for "Mordekhai was great in the king's house, and his fame extended throughout the provinces, for the man Mordekhai grew greater and greater." [4] In the broader context of the narrative this piece of information is of great significance. Mordekhai has just been appointed as the new minister in place of Haman. Haman's bureau was responsible for the plans for annihilation, the assistants and supporters in each and every city, the locations of the stockpiles of weapons, and – most importantly – the command of the king's army, which could intercede on behalf of either side. The rumors of Mordekhai's greatness "in the king's house" gradually spreads "throughout all the provinces," and everyone understands the significance of his position.

It is possible that by selecting the expression, "Fear of them fell upon all of the peoples," the narrator may be hinting at two other biblical sources. The one, which I find questionable as being deliberate, is Tehillim 105. This chapter is one of the "historical psalms" that describe Israelite history. Inter alia, we read there: "The Egyptians were glad at their departure, for fear of them had fallen upon them" (verse 38). This depiction of the Egyptians as rejoicing over the Jews' departure because of their fear of them is strikingly similar to the description in our chapter: "And no-one stood up to [the Jews], for fear of them had fallen upon them" (9:2). [5] This allusion makes a dual contribution. Firstly, since chapter 105 of Tehillim is an historical psalm, describing the consolidation of Israel into a nation and God's protection of them, the narrator appears to be seeking to include his story, too, within this historical continuum. He is telling us, as it were, that God's graciousness towards His nation, so tangibly felt in the Israelites' history, did not end with the nation's entry into the land (the point at which psalm 105 concludes), but continues.

At the same time, this allusion may conceal a veiled criticism of the Jews of Shushan. The reference to the Exodus directs the reader's attention to the joy of the Egyptians when the Israelites left their land. In light of this reminder, the reader is left thinking about what should have happened in Shushan, in the wake of the fear that fell upon all of the peoples. In other words, would we not expect that the Jews of Shushan would likewise leave Persia and wander back to their homeland, just as the Israelites left Egypt and began their long journey towards their land? Against the backdrop of this reading, the reader cannot but sense the criticism underlying this comparison, criticism of the Jews of Shushan who remained in Persia and did not follow the example of their forefathers who, following their salvation from Egypt, made their way to the Land of Canaan and conquered it.

In addition to psalm 105, the expression also refers the reader to the end of the biblical description of the Israelites' settlement in the land of Canaan: "The Lord gave Israel all of the land which He had promised to give to their forefathers, and they inherited it and dwelled in it. And the Lord gave them rest all around, just as He had promised to their forefathers, and no-one stood up to them from all of their enemies; God gave all of their enemies into their hands. Nothing failed (lo nafal davar) of every good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel; it all came to pass" (Yehoshua 21:41-43). It seems to me that the description in Esther, "No-one stood up to them for the fear of them fell (nafal) upon all of the peoples," hints to the verse in Yehoshua. This allusion, too, may be interpreted in two contradictory ways. Some will say that the narrator wants to turn the salvation of Israel in Shushan, too, into part of the same overall pattern, perceiving it, too, as the continuation of the "good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel." At the same time, I am inclined towards the alternative possibility, according to which the narrator uses this allusion to convey quiet criticism. The reader, rejoicing at the salvation of Israel and the fact that all of their enemies are now fearful of them, is reminded of another time when "no-one stood up to them" – the period of the conquest and settlement of the land. Against the backdrop of that earlier salvation, the reader – while continuing to rejoice over the Jews' salvation in Shushan – senses the barb hidden beneath the surface, especially in light of the continuation of that verse in Yehoshua, which is absent in Esther: "Nothing failed of every good thing which the Lord had spoken to the house of Israel; it all came to pass".

Can it really be asserted that "it all came to pass" while the Jews dwelled in their Persian exile, with the possibility at every moment of a new ruler, as cruel and evil as Haman, arising?

We shall return to these readings in our concluding discussions of the narrative and its messages.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Moore, p. 76. His argument (p. 82) that had there really been a mass conversion, we would expect to find some evidence of it in Persian or Greek writings, is not convincing. Part of the narrator's "poetic license" in writing the story is his freedom to exaggerate his descriptions in order to highlight his ideas and his message, and for the sake of his literary intention. It is possible, on one hand, that there was a real conversion; on the other hand, historically speaking, there is no evidence of a mass conversion. (In truth, even the

narrator's description – "Many of the peoples of the land" – is vague, making no pretense at conveying a precise number{.

[2]In contrast to the views of Clines and Dommershuizen, who maintain that the conversion was the result of a religious recognition of the powers of the God of Israel. See Fox, pp. 105-106.

[3]It is interesting that these "functionaries" are mentioned early on, when Haman promises the king a large sum of money in return for destroying the Jews: "And I will weigh out ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of the functionaries, to be brought to the king's treasuries" (3:9). This represents an inverse closing of a cycle: not only do the "functionaries" not bring the spoils of the Jews to the king's treasury, but they themselves end up "elevating the Jews!"

[4]This may be compared to the description of Moshe in Sefer Shemot, representing one of the reasons for the Egyptians agreeing to give some of their property to the Israelites: "God gave the nation favor in the eyes of the Egyptians; the man Moshe was also very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the people" (Shemot 11:3.(

[5] It should be noted that the expression "their fear fell - nafal pachdam..." in this form does not appear anywhere else in Tanakh.