

Shiur #03: The Feast of Achashverosh and the Feast of Vashti (chapter 1)

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

The Kingdom of Achashverosh

“And it was in the days of Achashverosh – he was Achashverosh who reigned from India to Ethiopia; 127 provinces” (1:1)

The introduction – “And it was in the days of Achashverosh” – is familiar to any reader of biblical narratives: several other stories begin in the same way (see, for example, Bereishit 14:1; Ruth 1:1). This introduction serves to focus the reader’s attention upon Achashverosh and his era. The unusual formulation – “He was Achashverosh who reigned...” – serves two purposes. Firstly, the narrator hereby hints to his readers that he is telling the story from the perspective of a certain distance from the events. It seems that in the narrator’s time, Achashverosh was no longer reigning “from India to Ethiopia,” and he therefore notes this character’s title and his extensive sphere of influence. Secondly, the phrase conveys the sense of a famous king, of universal renown. This feeling is strengthened as the description continues: this king reigns over the entire region stretching from India to Ethiopia, a territory that is immediately defined in practical terms: “127 provinces.”^[1] Thus, our narrative opens by glorifying the kingdom of Achashverosh. However, when the reader brings to mind the biblical associations aroused by this opening verse, he finds their significance to be the exact opposite. The number 127, mentioned several times over the course of the narrative as the number of provinces under Achashverosh’s rule (8:9; 9:30), is unusual; it is not a number that occurs frequently in biblical literature. In fact, it is found only in one other place – in the description of Sara’s death: “Sara’s life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years” (Bereishit 23:1). Rabbi Akiva, in his Midrash, is the first to address this connection: “Rabbi Akiva was sitting and expounding, and his audience was falling asleep. Seeking to rouse them, he said: For what reason did Esther rule over 127 provinces? It was appropriate that Esther, a descendant of Sara – who lived 127 years – would rule over 127 provinces” (Bereishit Rabba, parasha 58,3). It is not clear whether Rabbi Akiva was serious about this connection or whether it was merely a device to awaken his sleepy audience. Either way, he interprets this literary connection as shedding a complimentary light on Esther and granting some validity to her reign, representing as it does a continuation of the blessings of the patriarchs and matriarchs from Sefer Bereishit. It is certainly possible that this connotation plays a role in the description of Achashverosh, but I am not convinced that it is meant in praise of his kingship. It seems more likely that the reader is being asked to juxtapose the reign of Achashverosh with the death of Sara and her burial in Ma’arat ha-Makhpela. In other words, a note of death and burial suddenly appear within the picture of this grandiose kingdom with its expansive feasts and all of its glory and magnificence.

This duality in the presentation of Achashverosh’s kingdom is even more pronounced in the description of the feasts that he arranges.

Achashverosh's Feasts: a Generous King, or an Arrogant King?

A plain reading of the description of Achashverosh's feast suggests that the author of the story is giving honor to the king. The motif of "kingship" pervades the first part of the narrative ("He was Achashverosh who reigned from India to Ethiopia... When King Achashverosh sat upon his royal throne... in the third year of his reign... the riches of his glorious kingdom... the king made... in the court of the garden of the king's palace... and royal wine in abundance, in accordance with the king's bounty... for so the king had instructed"), instilling in the reader a sense of wonder at this wealthy and generous kingdom where the king arranges a feast "for all the people who were in Shushan, the capital; from great to small,"[2] and distributes wine in great abundance.

It is at this feast that the reader first hears of a law established by the king; once again, comfortingly, the law turns out to concern the drinking of wine: "The drinking was in accordance with the law, no-one compelled it, for so the king had instructed to all the officers of his house, to do according to the wishes of each person" (1:8). Could we imagine a more magnanimous king than one who actually legislates a law that no-one should compel any citizen to drink, and that the personnel in charge of his household should do "according to the wishes of each person!?"

Indeed, several scholars are drawn to this conclusion, and view the king at this feast as an exceptionally tolerant figure:

"The description of the second banquet in Esther pictures a liberal king lavishly entertaining his citizenry... His resources are not only a 'feast for the eyes' to be viewed but also a feast for the stomach to be shared".[3]

However, a careful reading warns us not to be carried away by this impression; the description of the king's feast in chapter 1 turns into scorn for the king and his generosity. Let us address the main points:

.1The transition from the first feast held by the king (for the princes, lasting 180 days) and the second (for the inhabitants of Shushan, lasting a week) is effected in the text by means of the expression, "When these days were fulfilled..." (1:5). It seems that the additional week of feasting took place not after the conclusion of the first feast, but rather parallel to it, during the final week of the first feast. This we deduce from the fact that further on, Achashverosh seeks to invite Vashti to the feast, "To show the people and the princes her beauty" (1:11). Since the verse mentions both "the people" (ha-amim) – i.e., the local people who were invited to the second feast, and "the princes" who were invited to the first one, it seems that on the seventh day of the second feast, the princes who had attended the first one were still present. It is possible, of course, that the princes remained another week so as to drink and celebrate together with the inhabitants of Shushan, but it seems more likely that they are still there by official invitation, and that the Shushanites joined them during the final week of their feast. In any event, the very fact that the text describes two successive feasts invites a comparison between them – especially if they are held simultaneously.

The comparison deserves extensive discussion in its own right, but for the purposes of the present discussion we note just one striking fact: at both feasts the king seeks to "show"

something to his many guests. At the first feast we read: “When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty” (verse 4). At the second feast, as the seven days come to an end, the king wants to “show” his wife: “To bring Vashti the queen before the king, with the royal crown, to show the people and the princes her beauty, for she was of fair appearance” (11). As part of the king’s exhibitionism, he wants to show off his wife. The queen is merely an item in the king’s collection of “riches” and “majesty” which he must show to the “people and to the princes.”[4] It comes as no surprise that there is no direct dialogue between Achashverosh and Vashti throughout this exchange: the king’s request, Vashti’s refusal, and her removal from the royal palace all take place through the agency of royal messengers. The text takes pains to name each of the “seven chamberlains” (10) and each of the king’s “wise men who knew the times” (14); this highlights their intensive involvement in this scene which, as pointed out, replaces any direct dialogue between the king and queen. The king speaks with the princes of the provinces and with his servants, but not with his wife. Berg notes, in this regard, that the queen’s name – “Vashti” – echoes the word “ve-hashetiya” (“and the drinking”) in verse 8. This play on sounds is highly ironic, for in the case of the drinking “no-one compels,” while in the case of Vashti there is certainly compulsion. Thus, the author hints to us that what Vashti wants is less important to Achashverosh than the desires of those drinking wine at the feast.[5]

.2In fact, as Fox notes (17), the formulation of the law permitting the drinking of wine is itself strange, and also contains a hint of scorn towards the king. From the wording of the verse we understand that the drinking is in accordance with the law – “no-one compelled it” – for the king had instructed the head of his servants to perform the wish of each person. But what is the meaning of a law stating that people should not be forced to drink? A kingdom that does not wish to coerce its subjects to do something should simply ignore that activity in its law books; that way, every person will do as he pleases. What does it mean when the law says that people should not be forced to drink wine? A sensitive reader will understand that in Achashverosh’s kingdom such people are rare, and there is a need for a special law to allow them not to drink.[6]

.3The author provides a hint of a jab at the king’s exhibitionism by raising the association of King Shelomo. Achashverosh holds his first feast for “all of his princes and servants,” in the third year of his reign. King Shelomo likewise held a feast for his servants in the third year of his reign. At the end of chapter 2 of I Melakhim we read: “The kingdom was established in the hand of Shelomo,” following the killing of Shim’i, when the last threat to Shelomo’s throne has been removed. This happens “after three years” (I Melakhim 2:39) of Shelomo’s reign. Immediately thereafter the text describes the dream in Giv’on, in which God promises Shelomo “a wise and understanding heart,” as well as other worthy blessings. Following this dream, Shelomo ascends to Jerusalem and there “he offered up burnt offerings and made peace offerings, and he made a feast for all of his servants” (I Melakhim 3:15.)

If the connection between the feast that Achashverosh holds for his servants and the one that Shelomo holds for his consisted solely of a common timing (following three years of reign), and the identical expression, “Made a feast for all his [princes and] servants,” it would be difficult to argue for any deliberate literary connection, or any especially significant connection at all. However, both stories also make use of the word pair “osher ve-kavod” (riches and glory), and in both cases this is a central motif. Achashverosh, it will be remembered, holds his feast with a view to showing all of the princes “the riches of

his glorious kingdom” – while this is exactly what Shelomo foregoes when God asks him what he would request. Shelomo prefers “a discerning heart,” so that he can judge the people. Ultimately, God’s abundant blessing to Shelomo includes this, too: “And also that which you have not requested, I have given you – both riches and honor, such that there will be none like you among the kings all of your days” (verse 12.)

Thus, the servants of these two kings were invited to two altogether different feasts: the invitation that Achashverosh sent to all of his princes and servants asked them to come and celebrate “the riches of his glorious kingdom,” while Shelomo’s invitation noted the “discerning heart” with which the king had been blessed by God. The hint at an alternative reign lurking in the background of the description of Achashverosh’s feast may perhaps hint at what the protagonist of the story, the Persian king, lacks: a “discerning heart”.

This literary connection may also be hinted at already in the Midrash: “Rabbi Kohen taught in the name of Rabbi Azaria: ‘Upon his royal throne’ – but ‘malkhuto’ is written without the vav![7] [This implies that] he [Achashverosh] came to sit upon Shelomo’s throne, but he was not permitted to. They told him: Any king who is not ruler over the whole world does not sit upon it [that throne]. So he decided to make himself a throne of his own, in its image” (Esther Rabba, parasha 1).[8] From this perspective, Achashverosh tries to “imitate” the kingship of Shelomo, by emphasizing the riches and glory that he has attained – like Shelomo. However, as noted, this is an imitation only of the most superficial aspect of the kingdom, devoid of its inner value, devoid of the “discerning heart”.

.4Another place where the author appears to hint at the lack of proportion between the facade of the feast and what is actually going on inside is in the description of the location of the feast – in the “court of the garden of the king’s palace”: “[Hangings of] white, of fine cotton, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on rods of silver and pillars of marble; divans of gold and silver upon a floor of alabaster, marble, pearl and precious stones” (verse 6). As Laniak points out, this description is written without any predicate. The text does not read, “In the court of the garden of the king’s palace there were hangings of white...” or “The king showed all the people hangings of white...” or any similar formulation. The reader is meant to understand that the opulence depicted here describes the garden of the palace at the time of the feast, but this understanding rests upon the context rather than the syntactical presentation[9]. As Driver puts it, “These words hang in the air.”[10]

I believe that this clumsy style is deliberate. As some commentators have pointed out, it contributes to sense of wonder and astonishment, as though the description ends with an exclamation point.[11] At the same time, more than it conveys the admiration of the guests, the verse reflects the cynicism of the author. The way in which it is written hints to the reader that the opulence reflected in the various materials mentioned as decorating the garden of the palace are, in fact, the whole point: the king’s self-worth is the entire purpose of the feast. The guests stand open-mouthed in wonder at the display of wealth; the author needs to do nothing more than to list, in great detail, the materials that adorned the pillars and from which the divans were fashioned. There is no need for any further explanation: this is Achashverosh’s exhibitionism at its best.

.5We may also cautiously question whether the texture of the words chosen to describe the feast is not perhaps meant to hint at another narrative that the reader is asked to recall

as background to this scene. We refer here particularly to the order in which the range of invitees to the feast is presented: “From the greatest to the least.” In Tanakh the usual formulation is, “From the least to the greatest,”[12] while here the author inverts the order and mentions “the greatest” prior to “the least.”[13] Another place where “the greatest” precedes “the least” is Yona, in the description of the repentance of the people of Ninveh:

“The people of Ninveh believed in God, and they called a fast and wore sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. And [word of] the matter reached the King of Ninveh, who got up from his throne and removed his robe from upon him and covered himself in sackcloth, and he sat in ashes. And he had it publicized and proclaimed in Ninveh by word of the king and his nobles, saying: Let neither man nor beast, cattle or herds, taste anything, let them not feed nor drink water” (Yona 3:5-7.)

At first glance, the two narratives do share something in common: in both cases the king is directly involved, and the text describes his position vis-à-vis his subjects and his special instructions to them.[14] However, a vast difference separates the instructions of the Persian king from the orders given by the King of Ninveh: the King of Ninveh “gets up from his throne,” removes his royal garb, and asks his subjects to hold a fast, even “let them not... drink water.” Achashverosh, in contrast, “sat upon his royal throne” (2) and holds an enormous banquet: “And the drinking was by law, none compelled” (8). Thus, both narratives contain a “dialogue” with the world of fabric and clothing, but in striking contrast to one another: the King of Ninveh foregoes his royal garments, while the Persian king prides himself on his garb and the materials that adorn the court of the garden of his royal palace. It is possible, of course, that the discrepancy here is a function of the different plots: the King of Ninveh reacts to Yona’s prophecy as to the imminent destruction of the city, while Achashverosh receives no such message. Still, it is specifically for this reason that the reader (who is reminded of this association by the words, “From the greatest to the least”) wonders why the author chooses to introduce into this image of joy and feasting a hint to the King of Ninveh rending his clothes and immersed in repentance. We are forced to question whether the hinted comparison is not meant as a criticism of the king’s feasting and excessive exhibitionism. It is as though the author whispers quietly that Achashverosh would do well to hearken to the same prophecy that reached the ears of the King of Ninveh: “Another forty days and Shushan shall be overturned”....

Beneath the surface, then, there is scorn for this magnanimous king who invites all the inhabitants of Shushan in order to show off his opulence, in contrast to King Shelomo with his “discerning heart,” and in contrast to the King of Ninveh, who proclaims a fast for all of his subjects, so that they will mend their ways.

“Queen Vashti Also Made a Feast for the Women”

The second part of the description of the feast focuses on Vashti, and this, in fact, is the dominant element of the plot: the process by which Vashti is removed from the palace, paving the way for Esther.[15] Why does Vashti hold a separate feast for the women? We might suggest that in Achashverosh’s kingdom special care is taken in matters of modesty, but a simpler explanation for this phenomenon lies in the licentiousness that characterized Persian banquets. It was specifically because of the many concubines who were regularly invited to the king’s feasts that Achashverosh decided to give his male guests a “break” and separate them from their wives. This would allow for an uninhibited orgy, free of the

critical eye of the spouses. The background to this separation between men and women at Persian parties may be deduced from a work by the Greek historian Plutarch (c. 100 B.C.E.), "Advice to a Bride and Groom". Inter alia, he writes:

"The lawful wives of the kings of Persia sit by their side at the meal and eat with them. But when the kings want to make merry and to become drunk, they send their wives outside and invite the dancing girls and the concubines. They act properly in this regard, since they do not allow their lawful wives to take any part in their licentiousness and debauchery." [16]

This interpretation is hinted at in the Babylonian Talmud. The statement, "Both had sinful intentions," is immediately followed by a popular idiom indicating the lust-driven agreement between husbands and wives at that feast: "People said: He [entertains himself] with gourds, and she – with cucumbers" (Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 12a-b.)

This information is of great importance for our understanding of Vashti's refusal to present herself. The king sends his seven chamberlains to call for Vashti "on the seventh day," when his heart is merry with wine. Since the feast lasts only seven days, Achashverosh is calling upon her on the last day. The fact that this important event, which leads to the next stage of the plot, takes place at the last minute, serves to create the sense that "coincidentally," at the very last minute, Vashti is removed and the way is paved for Esther. It is interesting that the king sends for his wife through the agency of his seven chamberlains, suggesting the sort of official atmosphere appropriate to state procedure (Fox, 20). The tension between the presentation of Achashverosh and Vashti as a romantic couple and the presentation of the dialogue between them as an impersonal state matter reaches its climax in the next scene, where the king consults with his advisors, and we shall discuss this further in that context.

To the reader's surprise, Vashti refuses to appear at the men's feast to show off her beauty. It is especially surprising since, considering the way in which the king is presented at the beginning of the narrative it is logical to assume that this king will not take kindly to being refused by his wife. In his drunken state he will certainly not demonstrate patience when his wife's refusal is made public - in the presence of "all of his princes and servants," and "all of the people who were in Shushan, from the greatest to the least"! How is it, then, that Vashti refuses? What is her reason? [17]

This question is so perplexing that the Midrash resorts to explaining Vashti's behavior by proposing either a bout of leprosy - "Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina taught that she broke out in leprosy" - or the sudden growth of a tail - "[The angel] Gavriel came and made her a tail." [18] In fact, the simplest understanding of Vashti's refusal relates to what we noted above, concerning the licentiousness that characterized such feasts. Achashverosh wanted to bring Vashti before the drunken men at the feast, to show them all her beauty. It is reasonable to assume that Vashti was well aware that "showing her beauty" would not be the end of the matter. Chazal's teaching, mentioned in ancient translations of the Megilla, that Achashverosh wanted Vashti to be brought naked, touches profoundly on the atmosphere that pervaded such feasts. [19]

In light of the above it would seem that Vashti acted wisely. As Goitein puts it: "We all feel that Vashti is right in not prostituting herself before the drunks on the seventh day of the feast, when the wine has aroused them powerfully." [20] Indeed, Vashti's good

judgment is hinted at in the analogy created in the text between her refusal to come before the king and Yosef's refusal to the proposition of Potifar's wife:

Vashti:

"For she was of handsome appearance" (and therefore the king seeks to bring her)
"But Queen Vashti refused" (and therefore she is banished from the palace.)

Yosef:

"Yosef was of handsome form and beautiful appearance" (and therefore Potifar's wife seeks to seduce him)
"But he refused" - and therefore he is banished from Potifar's house.

Since the story of Esther makes several allusions to the story of Yosef in Egypt, it is reasonable to posit that this, too, is a deliberate allusion, contributing to the moral judgment of the characters. Just as it is clear to the reader that the proposal of Potifar's wife is uttered in a sexual context, so this association should inform our understanding of Achashverosh's invitation – even if it is not stated explicitly[21]. And just as it is clear to the reader that Yosef's refusal of the proposal by Potifar's wife is a worthy decision (even though it resulted in his imprisonment), so, hints the author, we should view Vashti's refusal in a positive light, even though later she would suffer the consequences.[22]

Thus, even though the narrator follows the king's reaction, from his perspective, and identifies, as it were, with the terrible affront to the king when Vashti refuses to fulfill her husband's wishes, he is actually hinting to the reader that it is Vashti who earns his respect here and not the protagonist of the narrative, the king.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

" [1]If we rely on the historical accuracy of the count, we must make the book's vocabulary conform with that number and understand 'province' as a district within a satrapy, and we must also take the terms 'princes of the provinces' and 'satraps' to refer to officials of a lower order" (Fox, 15.)

[2]Moore translates: "For both the important and the unimportant alike" (1971, p. 1). This interpretation is certainly credible, especially in light of the mention of the "officers of the provinces" who attend the previous feast. At the same time, in other places in Tanakh the expression "from great to small" hints more literally at a range of ages, and there is no reason not to adopt that interpretation in this case, too (as indeed various translators do: "From the greatest to the least.")

[3]Laniak, p. 45

" [4]The king is a vain man, delighted to be able to show off 'the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days (1:4), but taken aback when his queen will not submit to being shown off in the same way as another piece of his property" (Clines, p. 32.)

[5]Berg, pp. 35-36

[6]Fox himself adopts a different approach (17.)

[7]The Midrash bases this teaching on the word "malkhuto" being written in deficient form, without the vav; the version that we have today presents the word in plene form. It is

interesting to note that specifically with regard to Shelomo, the text recounts: “Shelomo sat upon the throne of David, his father, and his kingdom [again written in deficient form] was well established” (I Melakhim 2:12.)

[8]Compare also the next Midrash: “‘And pillars of marble’ – Rabbi Levi taught: This quarry was revealed to no-one but to this wicked kingdom. Is this so, is it not written, ‘Was every type of stone precious, while marble was common?’ Shelomo put a pearl on one side and a pearl on the other side, and marble in the middle, while it was easier for Achashverosh to make himself pillars of silver and of gold than to bring pillars of marble” (Esther Rabba, parasha 2,8). Aside from this, the description of the vessels for drink at the feast, which were made of gold – “And they gave them to drink in vessels of gold” (1:7) – may also be hinting at the kingdom of Shelomo, which is described in similar language: “All of the drinking vessels of King Shelomo were [of] gold” (I Melakhim 10:21) [See: Esther Rabba, parasha 2, 11 and Megilla 11b.]

[9]Laniak p. 47

[10]G. R. Driver, "Problems and Solutions", VT 4 (1954), p. 235

[11]Striedl, "Untersuchung zur Syntax und Stilistik des hebräischen Buches Esther", ZAW 14 (1937), p. 86; W. Dommershausen, Die Estherrolle: Stil und Ziel einer alttestamentlicher Schrift, [SBM 6], Stuttgart 1968, p. 22.

[12]Out of sixteen appearances of this expression, “the least” precedes “the greatest” in twelve cases: Bereishit 19:11; I Shmuel 5:9; I Shmuel 30:2,19; II Melakhim 25:26; Yirmiyahu 6:13; 8:10; 31:33; 42:1; 42:8; 44:12; Divrei Ha-yamim 15:13. One of the places where the order is reversed is at the end of our chapter (“And all the women would give honor to their husbands, from the greatest to the least” – 1:20). As to the other three instances, see below.

[13]Avi Horwitz argues that the inversion of the order in this expression testifies to a later writing: A. Horwitz, “Diachronic Chiasma in Biblical Hebrew” in B. Oppenheimer (ed.), The Bible and the History of Israel, Tel Aviv 5732 [Hebrew], pp. 248-255 (and particularly 251-253.)

[14]Berg argues for a thematic connection between the two narratives: “the fact that the Book of Jonah concerns a Jew in a foreign land again suggests a variation of a common type of post-exilic tale” (Berg, p. 148)

[15]Moore’s title for this entire chapter is: “Queen Vashti is Deposed” (Moore, p. 1)

[16]Moralia, 140 B 16, quoted by Berlin, p. 67

[17]Ruth Walfish raises an interesting suggestion: “Vashti understood that such an order could only be issued in a drunken state; perhaps she believed that after the king sobered up he would understand the tastelessness of his command, or forget about it altogether” (R. Walfish, “The Role of the Secondary Characters in the Book of Esther” in Hadassa Hi Esther [Heb.], p. 141.)

[18]Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 12b. A different view describes Vashti’s refusal as arising from her personal honor that she sought to maintain. For instance, “She sent to him [saying]: O foolish one, you have lost your mind in your drunkenness. Know that I am the granddaughter of Nevukhadnetzar, before whom kings and rulers bowed down” (Midrash Abba Gurion, parasha 1.)

[19]Compare the story recounted by Plutarch (Artaxerxes 26) concerning a concubine named Aspia who refused to take part in the king’s wanton recreation; mentioned by Berlin pp. 68-69.

[20]S.D. Goitein, Studies in the Bible [Heb], Tel Aviv 1957, p. 61

[21]Surprisingly enough, the same language used by Chazal to describe the motives of Achashverosh and Vashti in holding separate feasts (“Both had sinful intentions”) is

echoed by R. Yochanan to describe the intentions of Yosef and the wife of Potifar, when Yosef entered Potifar's house: "Rabbi Yochanan taught: This teaches that both had sinful intentions" (Sota 36b.)

[22] Achitov points to a difference between the two narratives: "Yosef was rewarded with kingship by virtue of his refusal, while Vashti lost her status as a result of the same act" R. Achitov, "The Book of Vashti", Beit Mikra 44 (1999), p. 254 [Heb.] However, Yosef, practically speaking, also lost his status in Potifar's household because of this "refusal," like Vashti. It was only later that he emerged from jail and reached his elevated position.