

Shiut #13: Esther's Plan

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Chapter 5 opens with a focus on time: "And it was on the third day..." (5:1). This serves, of course, to connect this scene to the previous one, in which Esther declared a three-day fast for herself and her maidens, and – at the same time – for Mordekhai and all the Jews. Thus, the reader is asked to view Esther's entry to the king against the background of what is going on outside the palace walls.[1] This perspective becomes even more striking in the continuation of the verse, which goes on to describe Esther wearing her special royal robes and going in to the king: "And it was on the third day that Esther donned royal garb (malkhut) and stood in the inner courtyard of the king's house, facing the king's house, while the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal palace, facing the entrance to the house" (5:1). The awe of kingship is tangible in this verse, owing to the repetition (6 times) of the root "m-l-kh" in various forms. Aside from the narrator's obvious desire to emphasize the threatening "kingship" before which Esther presents herself in this scene, we must consider the statement, "Esther wore royal apparel"? Seemingly, these are the garments that she usually wears in the palace – certainly when going in to the king. What, then, does this piece of information add to our understanding of the story? The Midrash addresses the unusual formulation, "va-tilbash Esther malkhut" (literally, "Esther donned royalty") rather than "bigdei malkhut" ("royal robes"), and comments as follows: "'And it was on the third day that Esther donned royalty' – she already wore royal robes; what the text hints to here is that she was garbed in the Divine spirit. Here it is written, 'va-tilbash' (she donned), while elsewhere it is written, 'a spirit enveloped (lavsha et) Amasai...'"[2] According to this Midrash, the narrator is hinting to his readers that "the Kingship" – to which all mortal kings are subservient – accompanies Esther into Achashverosh's quarters. The message of this Midrash is an important one; indeed, one of the aims of the hidden writing in the Esther narrative is to hint at the presence of God's Kingship even when it is concealed. At the same time, on the level of the plain text it would seem that the emphasis on Esther wearing royal garb as she goes in to the king is meant to contrast her with Mordekhai, who is unable to come to the king's gate. At the beginning of the previous chapter we read that Mordekhai tore his garments; he is therefore deprived of access to the king's gate. Now, we read that Esther dons her garments and goes in to the king. This comparison is not meant to create a distance between the two characters, but rather to have one complement the other. Mordekhai is busy outside of the palace; without the uniform reflecting his Persian status, he is gathering assemblies, declaring a fast, and spearheading a general movement towards repentance. Esther, for her part, is active within the palace. She must wear royal garments; she must play the Persian queen at her best – organizing a party for the king, and ensuring his enjoyment. Thus the two characters work together to overturn the decree of annihilation: Mordekhai – with no garments and with no masks, and Esther – with her royal robes, playing the role that is demanded of her. Mordekhai previously asked Esther, "Who knows if for such a time you achieved royal status" (4:14), and now Esther responds to her and takes up her destiny: "And Esther wore royalty..."[3]

In fact, Esther's entry to the king should be viewed not only against the backdrop of Mordekhai rending his clothes, but also against that of the banquet scene with which the narrative began. There, Vashti was commanded to present herself before the king; she broke the law and did not arrive. Here, a different royal wife breaks the law by coming to the king in a manner that is against the law. In light of the Midrash above, the comparison is even more sharply focused, since the king wanted Vashti to appear without her clothing (Esther Rabba parasha 3,13), while Esther wears special royal robes for her entry to the king.[4]

This connection has three-fold significance. First, the reader's recollection of Vashti, when he finds Esther violating the king's command, serves to amplify the tension in anticipation of her encounter with the king; the reader now has in his mind a real-life example of a wife of the king who went against a law of his reign and lost her royal status. The threat is not hypothetical, and the reader wonders whether Esther's end will be like that of Vashti.

Secondly, Esther's deed sheds an ironic light on the law that was promulgated in the kingdom following Vashti's refusal of the king's orders. The idea of the law was that "each man should rule in his house" (1:22); the patriarchal authority was established as an all-encompassing law that must not be violated. We cannot know whether there was indeed a change amongst the Persian nation and the peoples subject to its authority, but we may assert with certainty that there is at least one man who does not adhere to the new law, and that is King Achashverosh himself. There is no other biblical narrative that displays so prominently a woman's initiative, with mockery of the man at her side. It is specifically the Book of Esther, which starts off with a declaration as to the special status of the man of the family, that ends up raising the banner of a woman's actions in leading her husband, the king – without his knowledge or agreement – towards the end that she desires. This wife of the king, the lawmaker, performs "the word of Mordekhai"! Obviously, by presenting Esther's violation of the law (presenting herself before the king) against the background of the law stipulating women's subservience to their husbands (as a result of Vashti not presenting herself before the king), the text points a mocking finger at the law.[5]

Thirdly, we have already made mention of "disobedience" or "violation of orders" as a central motif of the narrative.[6] The entire plot rests upon people who violate the law, starting with Vashti who refuses to present herself before the king, via Mordekhai who refuses to bow and prostrate himself, and finally Esther, who goes in to the king "which is against the law." We may almost say that the only person in the story who is faithful to the laws of the Persian kingdom is Haman, but he is hanged on the basis of a different law enacted by the king. In this sense, the salvation that begins to take shape with Esther's entry to the king, parallels the beginning of the narrative, making the violation of the king's laws an internal engine that drives the plot.

When Esther enters the inner court of the king's house, she "finds favor" in the eyes of Achashverosh. Here the king "chooses" Esther all over again, as he did in chapter 2, when he selected her to be his queen: "She found favor and grace with him" (2:17). Just as the king held a banquet there, in honor of Esther's selection ("Esther's party" – 2:18), so Esther now makes a party and invites the king and his closest advisor: "Let the king and Haman come today to the party which I have prepared for him." [7] For what reason does Esther make a party? Why does she not present her request immediately after the king generously offers her "up to half the kingdom"? [8] Apparently, the answer has to do with Persian culture and the norms of the regime. Herodotus, the Greek historian, reveals that at a Persian banquet, "it is impossible to refuse any person's request." [9] In other words, this is more than a matter of the king's heart being merry at the banquet, such that it is reasonable to assume that he will accede to various requests. It was actually part of the etiquette of that period, such that it was expected that a king would accede to the quest of whoever had prepared a banquet for him.

The invitation of Haman to Esther's party, however, is a double surprise – both for the king and for the reader. For the king, the very invitation of a third person (especially another man) to an intimate party prepared for him by his wife, is discomfiting. What is Esther's connection with Haman, the king asks himself; how is Haman – with his political or security-related function – connected with a party that his wife arranges for him? Attention should be paid to the fact that Esther invites the king to a party "which I have prepared for him" – for the king – but Haman is invited too. As we shall see, Esther deliberately seeks to arouse these questions in the king's mind, and therefore the king's surprise should be viewed as a fundamental element of her objective.

But the reader, too, is surprised. Esther is about to ask for Haman's decree to be annulled; seemingly, this would be more easily achieved if Haman were not in the same room! His presence at the party may lead to an airing of his own view as to the decree, and then the king will be put in the position of having to decide between them. [10] The Gemara addresses this question and poses several possible explanations (Megilla 15b:(

Our Rabbis taught: For what reason did Esther invite Haman?

-Rabbi Eliezer taught: She laid a trap for him, as it is written, "May their table be a trap before them".

-Rabbi Yehoshua taught: She learned this from her father's house, as it is written, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread" etc.

-Rabbi Meir taught: In order that he would not take counsel and rebel (Rashi: "Against the king, for he was at the pinnacle of success").

-Rabbi Yehuda taught: In order that it would not be recognizable that she was Jewish.

-Rabbi Nechemya taught: In order that the Jews would not say, "We have a sister in the king's house" – and [rely on that, and] not plead for Divine mercy.

-Rabbi Yossi taught: In order that he would be within her sights all the time (Rashi: "Perhaps she would be able to cause him to stumble in some matter before the king(".

-Rabbi Shimon ben Mensaya taught: Perhaps God would take note of this and perform a miracle (Rashi: "That even I am trying to endear Israel's enemies" [Rashi also provides another explanation(

-Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha taught: I shall smile at him in order that he will kill both parties [Rashi: "That (the king) will suspect him on my account, and kill both of us!"]

-Rabban Gamliel taught: He is a fickle king. Rabban Gamliel said: We are still in need of the Moda'i, as we learn, "Rabbi Eliezer the Moda'i taught: She made the king jealous of him, she made the ministers jealous of him".

Further on in our discussion we shall come back to several of the explanations proposed in this Gemara.[11] It should be pointed out that at this stage the reader is not aware of Esther's intentions; he can only shelve his question for the meantime and continue reading.

The king and Haman attend the party that Esther had already prepared (as Esther makes clear in her request, "To a party which I have prepared for him"), and there Esther utters her request. A reader who is not familiar with the story is confounded: The king is allowing her to ask for anything that she desires, and instead of begging him to cancel the decree, Esther invites the king and Haman to yet another party! Now we can no longer invoke Persian manners: Esther is already at the party, and she is able to ask for Haman's decree to be rescinded. The question is made even more perplexing in light of the timeline that Esther makes clear. In her invitation to the party, she says, "Let the king and Haman come today to the party" – giving the king (as well as the reader) a sense of haste. "Today" Esther has to discuss something with the king. But at the party she says, "Tomorrow I shall do as the king has said!"

This question is the subject of extensive debate. Among modern scholars, the postponement of the request is regarded as a purely literary device, facilitating the scene of the horse:

"The true reason for Esther's delay is purely literary; the author needs time for the humiliation of Haman and the exaltation of Mordecai before the final blow falls." [12]

But this explanation is unsatisfactory. As Fox points out, the narrator could have humiliated Haman in a simpler way.[13] Also, were this the sole reason for the postponement, we are

left with some unsolved questions – such as why Haman was invited to the party along with the king, and others.

Among the early commentators there are various approaches; we shall focus on two major views, both of which are related to the development of the plot.

Ibn Ezra says: "To my view, Esther postponed talking on the first day at the party because she saw no sign from God in response to the Jews' fasting. On the second day, she was emboldened by the honor given to Mordekhai." According to this explanation, according to Esther's original plan the request to cancel the decree was to have been presented at the first party. However, since Esther sensed no special Divine aid – "She saw no sign from God" – she decided to postpone her request until the next day, and to make another party. This explanation rests upon the next stage of the plot, as Ibn Ezra himself implies: "On the second day, she was emboldened by the honor given to Mordekhai." Since this new situation is created before the second party – at which Esther finally utters her request – it is reasonable to posit that this is what she felt was missing at the first party. However, this is precisely the weakness of this explanation: Esther of course had no idea at the first party as to what was going to happen; hence one has the feeling that this explanation projects from the subsequent events onto the preceding stages. In other words, Esther had no idea whether Divine Providence would provide any hint in the real situation as to His acceptance of the Jews' prayers, and it seems unlikely to propose that Esther was waiting for a Divine sign before she would take action.

At the same time, the suggestion that the second party was not planned in advance has some support. This is our impression from the molding of Esther's request of the king:

"Esther answered and she said: My petition and my request. If I have found favor in the king's eyes, and if it please the king, to grant my petition and to perform my request – let the king and Haman come to the party which I shall prepare for them, and tomorrow I shall do as the king has said" (5:7-8.)

Esther's wind-up is exceptionally long-winded (compare, for example, her opening words at the second party, when she requests the annulment of the decree – 7:3). The wordiness stands out in the seemingly unnecessary repetition, "My petition and my request." Esther starts off her request with these words ("Esther answered and she said: My petition and my request..."), such that she could immediately go on to present her request. However, this is not what she does: she starts off with some polite formulas which apparently characterize Persian manners of the time: "If I have found favor in the eyes of the king." Even now, Esther does not get to the point; rather, she adds, "And if it please the king." Thus far, there is long-windedness, but we may put it down to manners and the norms of the time. But even

at this stage Esther refrains from giving voice to her plea; instead, she seems to be starting all over again: "To grant my petition and to perform my request." This clumsiness gives rise to a sense that she is unable to bring herself to say what it is that she seeks. Apparently, Esther is trying to say what is in her heart, but she is not succeeding; for this reason she procrastinates and prevaricates. In this sense, it may be that Ibn Ezra is correct in the general idea that Esther sought already at this point to plead for her nation, but was not able to;[14] she senses, as it were, that right now she is not receiving any Divine assistance, and that she must wait for a different opportunity.[15]

Moreover, in comparing the descriptions of Esther's two parties there is a noticeable difference in the depiction of the relations between the characters who are partaking of the drink. In the context of the first party, we read: "The king came, and Haman, to the party which Esther had prepared" (5:5), while in the second we are told: "The king came, and Haman, to drink with Queen Esther" (7:1). The first party seems to be dominated by a strong male coalition (the king and Haman), with Esther standing by and serving drinks. At the second party, in contrast, Esther appears to be counted among the drinkers, along with the king and Haman ("with Esther"). This discrepancy may hint at Esther's feelings and the reason for the postponement of her request until the second party. She senses, at the first party, that the king feels close to Haman, and that he will not act to cancel his decrees. According to this reading, once again, Esther's original intention had been to present her request at the first party, but because of the atmosphere of the party she felt that it would be better to put it off.

However, we may of course propose that Esther's stammering and beating around the bush is deliberate, and that both parties – along with the clumsy introduction to her request – are part of a plan drawn up in advance. Rashi's interpretation gives rise to such a reading, when he poses the question discussed above – why Esther invited Haman, too, to the parties. Rashi bases his explanation upon the words of R. Elazar Ha-Moda'i, which we quoted previously: "Our Sages proposed many different reason for why Esther invited Haman – [for instance,] to make the king jealous of him and to make the ministers jealous of him, since the king would think that he desired [Esther], and would kill him. There are also many other reasons that are proposed" (Rashi on 5:4). While Rashi notes that the Gemara brings several possible explanations, he seemingly innocently integrates the reason that apparently appeals most to his logic: "She made the king jealous of him, she made the ministers jealous of him." In other words, Ester wants the king to suspect that his closest advisor and his wife are cooking up a joint conspiracy. In accordance with this reading we imagine that during the party Esther took care to sit near Haman, frequently offering him foods or a refill of his goblet – too frequently for the king's liking – and generally flirting with Haman throughout the meal. Haman, for his part, is only too happy to receive all of this attention: "Haman emerged on that day happy and with a joyous heart" (5:9). But the king had noticed that which he was supposed to notice, and sensed the (supposed) conspiracy that was being woven against him by his trusted advisor, responsible for his personal security, together with his wife, the queen. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Esther also changes the language of the invitation. Before the first party, Esther said: "Let the king and Haman come today to the party which I have prepared for him" (5:4), while in the second invitation Haman is treated as equal to the king: "Let the king and Haman come to the party which I shall prepare for them" (5:8).[16]

What would have been Esther's fate, had her plan not worked out? Did she plan in advance to sever herself from Haman at the second party (as ultimately happened), or perhaps was her original plan as suggested by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha, in the debate recorded above: "I shall smile at him so that [the king] will kill both partners" – i.e., Esther meant to give up her life together with Haman. Not only would she not deny the partnership; she would "admit" to the conspiracy that the king suspected – and who would believe Haman after his "partner" exposed him? It is difficult to decide which of these two possibilities is what she was actually thinking, even though the second holds special appeal. Esther's self-sacrifice exceeds all expectations. Not only has she endangered her life by going in to the king uninvited; now it seems that her intention is to give up her life, literally, and to die despised, as a traitor, together with Haman – the enemy of the Jews. As she puts it herself: "If I perish, then I perish"....

In reality, after the episode of the horse, Esther understands that it is the king's anger towards Haman that exceeds her expectations, and there is no need for her to pursue a plan that requires her to fake a partnership with Haman. It will suffice to expose the decree explicitly. But we are anticipating that which is yet to come.

This reading of Rashi rests upon what happens to the king in between the two parties. During the night following the first party, the king is unable to sleep. What disturbs him? We may deduce the answer from his actions on that night: his disquiet leads him to request the Book of Chronicles; the king looks up the entry "rebellions," and sees that he has a loyal subject – Mordechai – who has not yet been rewarded. We shall discuss this scene in detail later on; for now suffice it to suggest that what concerned the king that night was related to treason. Esther had succeeded in her objective: while Haman is "happy and of joyous heart," the king's suspicion of him is growing more tangible. Needless to say, when Haman comes in to talk to the king and asks for the horse (for himself), he knocks the final nail into his own coffin, for this is final confirmation of the king's worst suspicions. But once again we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The idea that the king's inability to sleep is due to his fear of imminent rebellion is proposed by Rabba in the Gemara:

"He had a thought. He said, Why is it that Esther invited Haman? Perhaps they are planning to kill me? Then he thought: If that is so, then would someone who was loyal to me not inform me? He thought some more and said: Perhaps there is someone who once performed a favor for me and I did not reward him, and for that reason people are holding back and not informing me? At that moment, 'He commanded that the Book of Chronicles, the records, be brought' (Megilla 15b.)

To my mind, the king's sleeplessness, in this context, seems to support strongly Rashi's reading and to clarify the point of Esther preparing two parties, each time inviting Haman along with the king.[17]

[1]Beal, p. 69-70. The earliest translation of the Megilla adds, "And it was on the third day of Pesach..." This is quite possible, for Haman dispatched his decree (setting the date for the annihilation of the Jews as a year later) on the 13th of Nissan, but there is no mention in the text of this part of the plot taking place over Pesach. In any event, the translation creates a surprising analogy: Esther goes in to the gentile king on the third day of Pesach, while during the Exodus from Egypt, on the third day Pharaoh left his palace and began to pursue the Israelites who had been freed from slavery. In both cases, the third day represents the transition to the next stage of the plot.

[2]Megilla 14b. The expression "ruach lavsha" is mentioned in three places, from which we may deduce that the Divine spirit is the "royalty" with which Esther garbed herself: "God's spirit enveloped Gidon" (Shoftim 6:34); "A spirit enveloped Amasai" (I Divrei Ha-yamim 12:19 – the source upon which the Midrash establishes its interpretation); "God's spirit enveloped Zekharya, son of Yehoyada the Kohen" (II Divrei Ha-yamim 24:20). It is possible that the Talmud selects the proof from Amasai because of the context, which is reminiscent of Esther's situation: Amasai is standing before a king (David), with the king about to decide whether to accept him into his ranks or have him executed.

[3]Cf. Berg, p. 70; Fox, p. 68.

[4]Clines senses this connection even earlier, in Mordekhai's words to Esther in chapter 4: "Do not imagine in your heart that you will escape in the king's house, any more than all the other Jews" (4:13). To his view, this is ironic since "Vashti had indeed already encountered in her own way. One queen stays out when bidden, the other will enter when unbidden" (Clines, p. 35)

[5]Regarding the narrative's cynical attitude towards "the law," see Y. Rosenson's admirable work, "Massekhet Megillot," Jerusalem 5762, pp. 184-185.

[6]Berg devotes an entire, excellent chapter to it in her book (Berg, pp. 67-82.)

[7]The words, "Let the king and Haman come today" in Hebrew – "yavo ha-melekh ve-haman hayom" – form an acrostic that spells God's Name. It is difficult to determine whether this is a clever device by the narrator to hint at the Divine Presence that looms behind human endeavors.

[8]The expression, "Up to half the kingdom," appears, at first glance, to be a lyrical, literary expression adopted by the king to express his willingness to give Esther anything that she wants. However, it appears to have been a formal expression in the Persian kingdom, indicating that the person standing before the king is being given permission to present his request (Moore, p. 55.)

[9]Herodotus, IX, 109-111. Quoted by Berlin, pp. 110-111.

[10]Fox has the opposite impression: to his view, Esther's objective in inviting Haman is that she will be able to respond to his self-justification in real time, and to act quickly to bring

about his downfall. Otherwise, he may convince the king, exploiting the special intimacy that exists between the king and his closest advisor (Fox, p. 71-72.)

[11] Since the party had already been prepared, we cannot accept the approach maintaining that when Esther stood before the king she was seized with fear, and decided on the spot to prepare a party (as proposed by Chakham, p. 37). However, this explanation may suffice for the postponement of her request even at the party (Clines, p. 37.)

[12] Paton, p. 234 (and likewise: Dommershausen, Bardtke, Moore, and others .)

[13] Fox, p. 71

[14] A similar idea (although from a different perspective) is proposed by H. Gunkel, *Esther, Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher II*, Tübingen 1916, p. 28.

[15] Compare with Rosenson's thesis: "The solution to the riddle of the postponement of the request until the second party, more than reflecting sophisticated planning, points to a helplessness bordering on despair... If Esther had a plan – and this involves more than a small paradox – then the plan was not to make plans with relation to the king" (Rosenson, *ibid.* pp. 187-188.)

[16] Benny Yeduton pointed out to me that from a purely syntactical point of view, there is ambiguity in the language of the first invitation: "Let the king come, and Haman, to the party which I have prepared for him": the "him" may refer to the king or to Haman (since both have been mentioned in the sentence already). Clearly, at the time of the invitation being extended to him, the king understands it as being directed to him, and this is obviously Esther's intention. But it is possible that during the course of the party, the king wonders to himself who the main invitee to Esther's party really is. Who is the "him" for whom Esther really prepared the party...?

[17] This reading in no way detracts from Amos Chakham's interesting hypothesis: "It seems that... Esther intended to mislead Achashverosh into thinking that the queen was bitter over not having been called to the king for thirty days, and that she wanted the king to appease her and to show her honor by coming to the party that she had prepared for him – he and the most important minister in the kingdom. At the party, the king asks her again, 'What is your petition?' From here we deduce that the king understands that Esther did not take her life in her hands solely in order to invite him to a party; rather she has some request" (Chakham, p. 37). In the beginning, the king assumes that Esther has arranged a party for him for the sake of romance, but during the course of the party he feels that Esther's romantic gaze is turned towards his advisor, and not towards himself!