

Shiur #16: Haman's Advisors: Fate vs. Divine Providence

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Haman Returns Home (6:12)

Following the scene of the horse, the narrator describes Haman as "hastening (nidchaf) to his house, mourning, and with his head covered" (6:12). The root d-ch-f appears four times in all of the Tanakh, meaning "hurriedly," "in haste." [1] One instance of this root occurs in Divrei Ha-yamim, in the description of Uziyahu's leprosy; it appears there in the same form as in our chapter (passive case): "Azaryahu, the head priest, and all the priests, turned to him and behold – he was leprous on his forehead, and they hurriedly removed him from there, and he too hastened to leave, for God had stricken him" (26:20). The other three appearances are all from Esther: there is the description of Haman in our chapter; there are the couriers who "depart in haste (dechufim)" to publicize Haman's decrees in the beginning (3:15), and again to disseminate Mordechai's decrees at the end (8:14). Since this is such an unusual expression, being featured here demands some comment. [2] Indeed, the connection between the various instances of "hastening" in Esther is clear: Haman, who urged the couriers to leave the palace and publicize his decree, ended up hastening himself to return home, in great shame. And later on, the same couriers once again emerge "hurrying and hastening," this time to cancel Haman's decree.

The question is: should the narrator's use of this specific verb be viewed as a deliberate reference to the story of Uziyahu? [3] Are we meant to compare the scene in which Haman "hastens to his house" with the one in which Uziyahu is struck with leprosy, and therefore "hastens to leave" God's House? I have my doubts in this regard, but it is interesting to note that there are two more parallels between the two narratives. Firstly, the verb "b-h-l" (hurry) is also mentioned in both of them: Uziyahu is "hurried" out of the Temple by the priests ("They hurriedly removed him from there"); likewise, after Haman returns home, the king's servants come and "hurry him" from his house to the party that Esther has prepared ("They hurriedly brought Haman" – 6:14). This verb, too – in its context in both narratives – denotes haste and rushing, [4] and hence is related to the "haste" discussed above.

Secondly, in both scenes, the downfall of a person who "hastens" and "is hurried" finds symbolic expression on his head. In the story of Uziyahu's leprosy, the disease manifests itself "on his forehead." This is an important piece of information, since the text contrasts the status of Uziyahu – who seeks to offer incense – with that of the priests, by highlighting this very part of the body: "Azaryahu, the head priest, turned to him." This unusual expression ("kohen ha-rosh" instead of "rosh ha-kohanim") seeks to emphasize the "head": the head of the priests, on one hand, and the leprous head of Uziyahu, on the other. Apparently, the head is selected specifically as the site of Uziyahu's leprosy so as to show that the confrontation in the story is one of leadership, of who will be "at the head." Obviously, Haman, too, hastens as he is "mourning and with his head covered." In

Haman's case, too, this image is important, since Haman had suggested to the king that the man whom the king sought to honor (as Haman understood it, this meant himself) should be led upon the horse with the royal crown "upon his head" (6:8). Now, instead of bearing the royal crown, Haman's head is covered in shame, as a sign of mourning. We may conjecture that perhaps Uziyahu, too, covers his leprous head as he is hurried out of God's House, just like Haman, and since there is no mourning more severe than that of a leper (see the relevant laws in Vayikra 13:45, which are the laws of mourning), therefore Uziyahu, too, was mourning...

The similarity between Uziyahu and Haman continues in the results of these two scenes: Uziyahu is forced to vacate his royal throne in favor of a replacement because of his leprosy ("He dwelled in the house of separation, being leprous, for he had been cut off from the House of God, and Yotam, his son, was over the king's house, judging the people of the land" – II Divrei Ha-yamim 26:21). Haman is likewise about to vacate his position in the king's house, while his replacement – Mordekhai – is about to inherit him.

As noted above, it is difficult to know whether the author is deliberately hinting at this connection, but if it is indeed intentional, and hinted at in the unusual term "nidchaf," then our text is in fact hinting that Haman's shame is not the result of the actions of King Achashverosh, but rather caused by the King of kings: "For God had stricken him"! And just as "a leper is comparable to one who is dead," so Haman is already doomed...

But the significance of the connection between the two narratives goes deeper. To illuminate its depth I will refer to yet another narrative that may be hinted at here. As stated, the narrator describes the manifestation of Haman's mourning (over his public humiliation) in the covering of his head. This custom is also hinted at in Yirmiyahu's prophecy "concerning the droughts": "Yehuda mourns, and its gates are gloomy... they are ashamed and confounded, and they cover their heads. Because of the ground which is cracked, for there has been no rain on the land, the farmers are ashamed; they cover their heads" (Yirmiyahu 14:2-4). The "covered head" is mentioned in one other biblical narrative, which is clearly connected to our discussion. In the description of David, who is forced to leave Jerusalem during Avshalom's rebellion, we read: "David went up at the ascent of the Mount of Olives, going up and weeping, and he had his head covered, and he went barefoot, and the people who were with him covered each man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went" (II Shemuel 15:30). Although the connection between Haman and David comes as some surprise, we cannot ignore the parallel between the two scenes: during a competition between two rivals, the party who has lost the "battle" covers his head. Moreover, in both scenes the concept of rebellion against the king has special weight. It is, after all, the central theme in the story of Avshalom's rebellion, and as we recall, Haman comes to the king with the intention of claiming that Mordekhai is a rebel and a traitor – but the king has begun to suspect that it is his closest advisor who entertains plans of this nature.[5]

It appears that the connection between these images – also characterizing the story of Uziyahu – lies in what we may refer to as "making way"; i.e., someone who holds a respected position vacates it for his rival. Haman is forced out of his very senior role in the kingdom, and Mordekhai is about to step into his shoes. Similarly, Avshalom seeks to rule in place of David, just as Uziyahu seeks to minister to God in place of the priests. Alongside the "covering of the head" on the part of Haman and David, and alongside the leprosy that breaks out on the head of Uziyahu, there is a movement on the part of the

hero: David leaves Jerusalem ("vacating" it for Avshalom); Haman hastens home – "vacating" the street of the city and the courtyard of the palace for Mordekhai, who returns to sit "at the king's gate" (!)[6]; Uziyahu leaves the Temple – "vacating" it for those who are worthy of serving there, and to Azaryahu, the High Priest. The covering of the head (with a garment, or with leprosy), then, becomes a symbol of the covering of one character for the purpose of introducing or advancing a different character on stage. The covering of the head is a sign of self-abnegation, a vacating of one's place.

If this is so, then attention must be paid to the difference between the ending of David's story and that of the two other narratives: David is destined to return to Jerusalem and regain his place as king, while Uziyahu vacates his throne forever, and Haman has another "covering of the head" waiting for him ("They covered Haman's face" – 7:8), and a hanging on the gallows. Is this different ending hinted at already in the image that we discussed above? It would seem that the answer is in the affirmative, and is related to the word pair that serves as a sort of leitvort throughout the narrative: a-l-h (or k-u-m) – arising, and n-f-l (or y-r-d) – descending, falling. When David leaves Jerusalem, along with the description of the covering of his head, the text emphasizes the ascent: "David went up at the ascent of the Mount of Olives, going up and weeping... and the people who were with him covered each man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up" (II Shemuel 15:30). In contrast, when Haman enters his house, he hears from his advisors the opposite verb: "If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is from the seed of the Jews, then you shall not prevail against him; you shall surely fall before him" (6:13).[7] As we shall see below, the verb n-f-l will reappear in the next scene and, as noted, it should be regarded as a key verb in the fall of Haman.[8] For our purposes suffice it to note that while David takes leave of Jerusalem, apparently vacating his place for his rebellious son, a future "ascent" awaits him. Haman, in contrast, takes leave of the king's gate, but is destined to "fall".

Haman at Home with his Advisors (6:13)

The reaction of Haman's close advisors in view of his humiliation is most surprising. Haman tells them "all that happened to him,"[9] and we would expect them to encourage him and raise his spirits. Not only do they not encourage him; they exacerbate his despair by foretelling his imminent downfall. What has happened to Zeresh and to Haman's friends, who only yesterday proposed that Haman prepare a tall gallows and hang Mordekhai upon it? What has caused them to suddenly change their tune, declaring that Haman is doomed to failure?

The actual wording of their reaction only compounds our perplexity: "His wise men, and Zeresh, his wife, said to him: If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is from the seed of the Jews, then you shall surely fall before him" (6:13). Were they then unaware until now that Mordekhai was a Jew? Was Haman's decree of annihilation for the whole Jewish nation not related to the refusal by Mordekhai, as a Jew, to bow before him?[10] Moreover, what is the meaning of the expression, "Before whom you have begun to fall"? How does the humiliation that Haman has experienced this day influence his future? Why do they not suggest that Haman shelve his plan to hang Mordekhai (since it has become apparent that the king seeks to honor him), but continue with the plan to annihilate all the Jews? What is it about the scene of the horse that has brought about such a radical change in their forecast for the future?

Chazal propose an interpretation that sheds new light on the title "Jew" in the context of the verse, thereby explaining the reaction of Haman's cronies:

"If Mordechai is of the seed of the Jews (Yehudim)... Concerning Yehuda it is written, 'Your hand is upon the neck of your enemies'; the others (other tribes) for it is written, 'Before Ephraim and Menasheh arouse your might'" (Megilla 16a)

According to this reading, the title "Jew" (Yehudi) in the verse hints at certain tribes (the children of Rachel) against whom Haman cannot hope to prevail. As Rashi comments (ad loc.), "There is some seed among the Jews that if he is descended from them – you will not prevail over him." This reading seeks to emphasize the national battle between Israel and Amalek, stretching back over the generations, that is symbolized through the private confrontation between Mordechai and Haman. "Amalek" cannot prevail over the children of Rachel! Indeed, Haman's advisors give special prominence to Mordechai's national identity in this scene, where it is connected to their perception that Haman has no hope of succeeding in this battle.[11] However, it is possible that the emphasis in their reaction is not on the fact that Mordechai is "a Jew," but rather on the beginning of Haman's downfall, which will now be impossible to halt.

On the level of the literal text, the answer to this riddle may lie in the specific characterization of Haman's group of advisors. In the description of Haman's words to Zeresh and his other companions, we are told: "Haman told Zeresh, his wife, and all his close friends (ohavav – literally, those who loved him) all that had happened to him." In their reaction, however, the text refers to them in a different way: "His advisors (chakhamav – literally, his wise men) and Zeresh, his wife" (6:13). There are two obvious differences. First, Haman, expecting to receive moral support, addresses himself principally to Zeresh; only afterwards is mention made of "his close friends." In their response, the other members of the group are mentioned before Zeresh. Seemingly, this group does not fulfill Haman's expectations; the associates do not respond in their capacity as Haman's personal friends, but rather in a different capacity, such that Zeresh occupies a secondary position – as we shall soon explain. Secondly, Haman addresses himself to "his close friends," but is answered by "his wise men." It is clear that these are the same people, but the change in title demands some explanation.[12] Who are these "advisors," these "wise men"? They seem to recall the wise men of Pharaoh, when that king sought to understand the meaning of his dreams and he called "all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men" (Bereishit 41:8); they seem to recall the wise men of Nevukhadnetzar, who were unable to tell the king what it was that he had dreamed and what it meant, and were therefore put to death – "...He commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. And the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain..." (Daniyel 2:12-13). "Wise men," then, are those who know how to interpret dreams, those who are familiar with divination and soothsaying, astrologers and – as hinted at the very start of Esther – "Wise men who knew the times" (1:13).[13] It is reasonable to posit that these wise men are hired by Haman to advise him as to the hidden powers that are active in the world, influencing success and failure, prosperity and downfall.[14] Indeed, the crux of their message concerns not the fact of Mordechai's Jewish identity, but rather what follows: if you have already begun to fall before him, the continuation of your descent is assured.[15] That is how fate works. Just one day previously, when Haman felt himself on top of the world (after all, Esther had even invited him to a party together with the king), the same wise men/close friends had advised him to quickly build a gallows, and that the very next morning Haman should be hanged upon it ("And in the morning, speak to the king, and let

Mordekhai be hanged upon it"). The construction of a gallows fifty cubits high is not a simple task, but Haman got hold of the builders and had the gallows completed right away. All of this was because his wise men had seen, through their divinations, that the one who had begun to rise would continue to rise, while the one who had begun to fall would continue to fall.[16]

In fact, Haman's wise men were right; they read the situation correctly. Haman, on the other hand, read it backwards. Esther's invitation of Haman to the party together with the king was not a sign of any special honor; rather, it laid the foundation for his downfall. Truly, then, the one who had begun to fall (Haman) would now continue to fall, while the one who had begun to rise would continue to rise – to the extent that even Haman's house would be given to him.

As mentioned previously, the key word employed by Haman's group of advisors – "falling" – continues to serve as a leitvort in the next scene, too, when Haman "was fallen upon the divan upon which Esther lay" (7:8). Later on in the narrative, too, special use is made of this verb: "Many of the peoples of the land became Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen upon them" (8:17); "No-one could withstand them, for the fear of them fell upon all the peoples. And all the rulers of the provinces, and the satraps, and the governors, and the royal officials, supported the Jews, for the fear of Mordekhai had fallen upon them" (9:2-3). All of these "fallings" reinforce the forecast of Haman's advisors that Haman and his followers, who had started to fall before Mordekhai, were destined to continue their descent.

The theme that is hinted at here, then, is part of one of the deeper messages of the narrative: the attitude towards the lot and the world of divination. Haman plans his actions in accordance with a close, ongoing reading of the fluctuations of time and their meanings. At the very start of the narrative the reader encounters Achashverosh, who likewise makes no move without first consulting with "the wise men who knew the times." Haman casts the lot in order to choose the right day to attack the Jews, even before going to the king to propose his idea (3:7). The narrator, in his usual fashion, refrains from any explicit statement of his disapproval of these views, but in his quiet, veiled way he scorns them. Ultimately, the 13th of Adar does turn out to be a day destined for bloodshed – as the person who casts the lot before Haman asserts. And, indeed, the one who has begun to fall, continues to fall – as Haman's wise men assure him.

The message underlying the narrative, then, is that reality can be turned upside down. After the Jews called for fasting, the wheel of salvation began to turn and to overcome even the supposedly inherent qualities of the times. The most important motif of the narrative – "it was reversed" – assumes theological significance, in this context, disdaining the pagan perception that relies upon fate and divinations, unaware that God's will can turn the whole of reality upside down, such that Haman's "lot" (pur) becomes the Jews' very own "Purim".

The literary role of Haman's wise men, then, is to represent the pagan view of history as being tied to fate and divination. From within this atmosphere, which surrounds Haman, the king's chamberlains come and rush him off to the party prepared by Esther. Perhaps Haman is calmed by the sound of the chamberlains approaching: a party is a good opportunity for reconciliation with the king, and in any case – some good wine will certainly wash away his own frustration...

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[1]BDB, p. 191

[2]It is reasonable to posit that this verb was adopted in the Hebrew language only at a later stage, and that it is for this reason that it appears specifically in these books. It should be noted that its meaning appears to be connected to its original meaning in the words of Chazal: "pushing away." A person who is rushing (chipazon) looks as though others are pushing (hodfim) him.

[3]This question is connected to a preceding one: which of the two texts (Esther or Divrei Ha-yamim) was written before the other, and was the author of the second text aware of the existence of the first? As part of the intertextual manner of reading that is flourishing in our times, the question has little relevance, so long as the reader senses some connection between the two works.

[4]BDB, p. 96.

[5]It is interesting that Chazal introduce the matter of the relations between the father and his children into Haman's story (as in the story of Avshalom's rebellion) by describing Haman's daughter casting the bedpan over Haman's head, mistakenly assuming that the man leading the horse must be Mordekhai. When she discovers her error, she throws herself from the balcony and dies (Megilla 16a). The daughter of the one whose head is covered, then, insults him and ultimately dies – an exact parallel to the story of Avshalom's rebellion.

[6]Beal correctly points out that there is a striking contrast between Mordekhai, who sits "at the king's gate," and Haman, who hastens "to his house" (p. 85). As I see it, this gives the reader a clear sense of Mordekhai's victory; he is the one who remains at the house of the king.

[7]The alliteration that appears twice in succession in the verse, with the words "nafal" and "lefanav," leads the reader to view the verb "nafal" (fall) as an important one in this scene. Likewise the epiphora concluding the two successive statements, "If Mordekhai is of the seed of the Jews, that you have begun to fall before him, You shall not prevail over him, for you shall surely fall before him".

[8]As Walfish comments, Haman's career began with, "And elevated him" (3:1); it ends with him "falling" (A. Walfish, "Divrei Shalom ve-Emet," in Hadassa Hi Esther, p. 145.)

[9]This expression unquestionably seeks to sharpen the contrast between Haman and Mordekhai, who had previously told Esther "all that had happened to him" (4:7.)

[10]It should be noted that even Achashverosh is aware of Mordekhai's nationality, as we know from his order to Haman: "Quick – take the robes and the horse and do so to Mordekhai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate." Apparently, Mordekhai did not hide his Jewish identity.

[11]Paton, p. 256 and Moore, p. 66, point out that through the advisors' words and their assurances of Haman's downfall the narrator is conveying his own view more than that of the advisors themselves.

[12]In the previous gathering of this group, too, when they foretold Haman's success and advised him to build a tall gallows, they were referred to as "his close friends" (5:10,14). Perhaps Haman addresses himself to them specifically as such – as "his close friends"; as though he seeks to continue the atmosphere of the previous night. But his friends no longer respond to this title; they have turned into "his wise men"! Goldman suggests that

the narrator is conveying his scorn for them: after the fact they have become wise. (S. Goldman, *The Five Megilloth*, (The Soncino Books of the Bible), London 1952, p. 226)

[13]Contrary to the view of Paton, p. 255. Cf. also: "Pharaoh, too, called the wise men and the soothsayers, and they did so, too – the magicians of Egypt – likewise with their magic" (Shemot 7:11); "Frustrating the omens of imposters, and making diviners mad; turning wise men backward and making their knowledge foolish" (Yishayahu 44:25.)

[14]Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisre'elit*, Tel Aviv 5732, vol. IV, p. 446.

[15]Fox, p. 79

[16]See M. Margalio, "The Hinted Battle Between the God of Israel and Haman." *Beit Mikra* 23 (5738), pp. 292-300.