

Shiur #17: Esther's Second Party

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

We concluded the previous shiur with the words of Haman's "wise men," who predict his downfall (6:13). Creating a break at that point is certainly not ideal, since the narrative progresses here at a lively pace, and there is a momentum that builds up between the prediction by Haman's advisors and Esther's second party. The pace is given special emphasis in the verse, "As they were still talking with him, the king's chamberlains came and hurried to bring Haman to the party that Esther had made" (6:14). This seems to be meant not only as a neutral description of time, but also to create a substantial connection: Haman's wise men predicted that "you shall surely fall before him"; sure enough, the king's chamberlains arrive, and Haman's downfall is about to happen. The quick succession of these scenes also finds expression in the special verbs that are used here in the narrative. At the beginning of the scene Haman "hastens" to his house; now, he leaves the house again, and once again the king's chamberlains are "hurrying" him. The pace of these images is important for the general effect of the narrative: things are now out of Haman's control. From the moment he entered the king's chamber to ask that Mordekhai be hanged on the gallows, the horse's reigns, as it were, have been taken from his hands; he is no longer able to determine his own fate or future. From that moment, one scene is chased by the next; one downfall follows the next, until Haman finds himself on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordekhai. The verb *b-h-l* (hurry), used to describe Haman being taken to the king, has already appeared previously in the narrative, in the description of Esther's preparations to go in to the king: "Esther was taken to the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. And the girl pleased him, and he regarded her kindly, and he hurried to give her ointments and her appointed rations..." (2:8-9).[1] In both scenes, the king's servants "hurry" someone else, and in both cases the person who is being hurried is on his/her way to the king. The difference is that Esther finds favor in the eyes of Hegai, and therefore he hastens to give her the ointments to which she is entitled, while Haman has just been thoroughly humiliated by the king. The king is about to fall in love with Esther and coronate her as queen instead of Vashti; Haman, on the other hand, becomes the focus of the king's ire, and is destined to be hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordekhai.

Aside from the use of the verb *b-h-l*, our verse also invokes the biblical narrator's fixed formula for a description of punishment that comes blow-by-blow: "This one was still speaking when the next came" (Iyov 1:16-18). The connection between the two narratives is clear: Haman, too, is about to be struck with a new calamity, one that is even more devastating than the one he suffered in having to lead Mordekhai on horseback through the street of the city.

The second party starts off in a similar way to the first one: the king asks Esther what it is that she seeks. The similarity between the two parties and their continuity is emphasized in the narrator's description: "The king said to Esther on the second day, too, at the wine party" (7:2.)

Let us review the two parties and the similarities between them:

Invitation of Haman:

First party: "The king said: Hasten Haman to fulfill Esther's word"

Second party: "They were still talking to him when the king's chamberlains arrived, and they hurried to bring Haman to the party that Esther had made"

Description of the invitees:

First party: "The king came, and Haman, to the party that Esther had made"

Second party: "The king came, and Haman, to drink with Queen Esther"

King's opening to Esther:

First party: "The king said to Esther, at the wine party: What is your wish, that it may be granted to you, and what is your request? [Even if it is] up to half of the kingdom, it shall be done"

Second party: "The king said to Esther on the second day, too, at the wine party: What is your wish, Queen Esther, that it may be granted to you, and what is your request? [Even if it is] up to half of the kingdom, it shall be done"

Esther's reply:

First party: "Esther answered and she said: My wish and my request; if I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and to perform my request"

Second party: "Queen Esther answered and she said: If I have found favor in your eyes, o king, and if it please the king, then may my life be granted to me as my wish, and my nation as my request".

A quick comparison reveals that there are no dramatic differences in the descriptions of the two parties. At first glance it seems that the same rules of etiquette are respected on both occasions: the king addresses Esther with great magnanimity ("Up to half of the kingdom, it shall be done"), and she, too, addresses him with the respect due to a king ("If I have found favor... and if it please the king"). It should further be noted that Haman is asked to come "speedily" to both parties. As previously noted, this haste contributes to the narrative in that it highlights the way in which Haman's actions are being guided by a hidden hand; he is no longer in control of what is happening to him.[2] At the same time, there are small differences that reflect the change that has taken place in the psychological disposition of each of the characters in between the two parties. The narrator's formulation in describing those who attend the party undergoes a subtle but important change (as noted in a previous shiur): in the first party, the king and Haman are presented as a united front facing Esther, who has prepared the party for them. At the second party, the men are not described as coming "to the party that Esther prepared," but rather as coming "to drink with Esther." This hints at a break in the relations of power that had been maintained until this point. The king is no longer as close to Haman as he had been at the first party, and Esther feels more at ease as a one of the three drinkers. However, there is another interesting difference, which might be considered insignificant were it not for the fact that it is repeated again twice, in the next two stages of the scene, in the same manner. Esther's royal title is mentioned in the description of those who come to drink at the second party (instead of, "To the party which Esther had prepared," we read, "To drink with Queen Esther"). This title is retained and mentioned again at the second party, in the king's words to her ("What is your wish, Queen Esther"), although it was absent at that stage in the first party. Likewise in the third stage, when Esther presents her request, this discrepancy is manifest once again. At the first party, Esther appears at this stage with no title at all: "Esther answered and she said"; at the second party, in contrast, we read: "Queen Esther answered and she said." As noted, this difference might be dismissed as having little significance, but since it is strongly present throughout this scene, it cannot be ignored.[3] It seems that the royal title is meant to reflect the improvement in Esther's status from the point of view of the king. Following the party that was held the previous evening, the king has had occasion to be reminded of Mordekhai's loyalty. He probably recalled Esther's role in protecting him from the rebels (even if he did not remember it himself, it must have been recorded in the Book of Chronicles). Hence, the king who comes to drink "with" Esther views her as his "queen." Esther, for her part, exploits this feeling, and while still addressing the king in the third person, as she had done at the first party ("If I have found favor in the eyes of the king"), she now also slips in a plea addressed to the second person ("If I have found favor in your eyes, o king").[4] This expresses a feeling of greater closeness.

A final comment on the comparison between the two parties. The formula, "My wish and my request," which is also uttered on both occasions, likewise undergoes an interesting development. At the first party it seems that this expression is to be understood

as one of the courtesies that characterizes the dialogue between the king and the queen. Esther introduces her monologue with the declaration, "My wish and my request," and goes on to say that if she has found favor in the eyes of the king and if it please the king to grant "my wish and to perform my request..." Since all of this is read as a single unit, the reader – like the king himself – is inclined to understand her introductory words as a standard courtesy, albeit a lengthy and somewhat clumsy one. In contrast, these words assume new meaning when, at the second party, Esther says, "Let my life be granted to me as my wish, and my nation as my request." Here, the official formula already serves as part of the request itself, and owing to the adding of Esther's "life" and her "nation" it becomes quite clear that this is not a standard, official formula. In other words, the second party is presented as a setting in which the king and his queen encounter one another. He regards her as the "queen," not just as the waitress serving drinks at a party that she has arranged in his honor. She, for her part, addresses him in the second person (somewhat reservedly, it should be noted), and her words convey less convention and more substance.

What happens in the next scene, where Esther tells the king about the decrees, and the respective reactions of the king and Haman, has been addressed previously in our discussion of Haman's decrees; we shall not repeat it here. But let us examine the literary molding of this scene.

Esther introduces her dramatic monologue with the verb, "nimkarnu" ("we have been sold"). Laniak concludes from this that, "Although we cannot be sure what kind of monetary transaction actually took place, this reference in chapter 7 implies that the king had accepted the money offered by Haman." [5]

Contrary to his view, we may posit that Esther uses this verb not because the king agreed to accept payment, but rather because of the dual meaning of this verb, with each meaning playing a role in Esther's rhetoric. In most cases, the verb m-kh-r is used in Tanakh in the economic sense, but sometimes it is a metaphor for defeat in battle (the soldiers are "sold" into the hands of the enemy). For example: "God's anger burned against Israel and He gave them into the hand of spoilers that plundered them, and He sold them (va-yimkerem) into the hand of their enemies round about, and they could not longer stand before their enemies" (Shoftim 2:14). Devora tells Barak, "For the Lord will give (yimkor – sell) Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9). There are several other instances of this expression. [6]

Esther uses this verb twice, at the beginning of her monologue and again at the end. In the first instance, it denotes being handed over for annihilation (not in the economic sense): "We have been given over (sold), I and my nation, to be annihilated and killed and destroyed." At the end, when the word appears for the second time, it is indeed meant in the economic sense: "Had we been sold as servants and maidservants, I would have kept silent." This play on words hints to the king (and to the reader) the fundamental

distinction between the decrees to which the king agreed (slavery; "being sold" in the economic sense) and those that Haman actually legislated and proclaimed (annihilation; "being sold" in the sense of military defeat). Esther emphasizes the personal aspect of her request; it is this that she mentions first: "Let my life be granted to me as my wish"; only afterwards does she add, "And my nation as my request" (7:3). Further on she once again emphasizes her own place within the scope of the decree: "For we have been sold, I and my nation" (4). Apparently, Esther believes that the emphasis on the personal aspect – the intended harm to the queen (in accordance with the introduction to her words, "Queen Esther answered..."), will influence the king to annul the decree.

It is interesting that at no point in her speech does Esther mention which nation it is that has "been sold to be annihilated, killed and destroyed." Since Esther's national identity is not known, the expression "I and my people" does not denote any specific identity. No less surprising is that the king does not inquire, at any point during the party, which nation it is that she is talking about. The lack of explicit mention of the nation's identity reaches its ironic climax in the closing scene of the party, when Charvona mentions to the king that Haman had sought to hang Mordekhai. Even at this stage of the plot, the king is still unaware of the connection between Mordekhai and Esther, and from our point of view this scene is a combination of two different narratives: a) Haman had planned to harm the queen and her nation; and b) Haman had sought to hang Mordekhai, the king's loyal subject. (Only afterwards, in 8:1, does Esther reveal her connection with Mordekhai to the king.) The concealment of Esther's national identity even at this stage is important for two reasons. Firstly, it lends added emphasis to the personal space that Esther herself occupies in her request to the king: it is as though the nation in question has no name at this party; what is important is that it is "my nation" (mentioned twice!), and on this basis Esther asks that they be saved. Secondly, the concealment of the nation's identity appears to be meant to heap further scorn on the king. In his rage he orders that Haman be hanged on the gallows - before taking the trouble to investigate even the most elementary facts. Just as at the time of the promulgation of the decrees the king did not know the identity of the nation in question (since Haman hid it from him), now, when he has Haman – the initiator of the decree – hanged, the king is still ignorant of it![7]

In this scene, like its predecessor, there is emphasis on the pace of events, as reflected in the climax of Esther's outcry – a series of short syllables: "ish / tzar / ve-oyev / Haman / ha-ra / ha-zeh,"[8] ("An adversary and enemy – this wicked Haman"). It is perhaps for the sake of the pace of reading that the narrator omits Esther's title, noting merely that "Esther said" (rather than "Queen Esther said," as in the previous verse.)

The pace of this scene is also molded by the narrator by jumping from one character to another, from a focus on the king to a focus on Haman, with the subject preceding the object (a relatively unusual style in the Hebrew text:(

"Esther said: 'An adversary and enemy, this wicked Haman'!

Haman was struck with terror before the king and the queen.

The king, rising in his anger from the wine party, went into the palace garden,

And Haman stood up to plead for his life to Queen Esther, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king.

The king returned from the palace garden, to the place of the wine party

And Haman was fallen upon the divan upon which Esther lay.

Then said the king, 'Do you then mean even to assault the queen while I am present in the house'!?

As the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face".

This technique of alternation serves to speed up the pace and add to the tension. The narrator has no time, as it were, to fill in a full description of each character and his or her actions and feelings, because the next character is already (speedily!) doing or saying something. The reader may point to the concentric structure of these verses: they begin with a description of Haman (who is "struck with terror before the king and queen"), and also end with him ("fallen upon the divan..."); the inner limbs describe King Achashverosh – first his exit to the palace garden, and then his return from there.[9] At the center, as the central axis of this scene – and also its longest sentence – is the description of Haman standing aghast before Esther. If this structure is intentional, the image of Haman standing before Esther makes an even stronger impression. Is this image appropriate as the central axis for the scene? The answer would appear to be in the affirmative. As we have noted, the verb "fall" (n-f-l) is a leitmotif in the description of Haman's downfall. A moment before he is taken to Esther's party, his friends/advisors tell him, "If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you shall not prevail over him; you shall surely fall before him." This is indeed what happens at the end of our scene: "Haman was fallen upon the divan upon which Esther lay"; and, as we know, there is no hope of him rising up again.[10] However, this verb is emphasized specifically through the narrator's use of its opposite – standing: "Haman stood up to plead for his life from Queen Esther." Haman tries to "stand," to escape his imminent "fall," but to no avail.[11] In this sense, the central axis of the scene where Haman falls is actually the place where Haman "stands": it is the moment where Haman, as it were, clutches at his status with the last of his strength, desperate to reverse the evil decree that already hovers in the air. Haman's pathetic position and his reversal of fortune are especially prominent here. Just a moment ago it was Esther who was pleading for her life ("Let my life be granted to me as my wish, and my nation as my request (bakashati)" – 7:3), and now everything is turned around: Haman pleads with Esther for his own life ("Haman stood to plead (le-vakesh) for his life to Queen Esther" – 7:7). Haman, adversary of the Jews, pleads with the Jewish Esther for mercy; he "falls" before her – or, as one may choose to view it, "bows and prostrates himself" before her...

As noted several times, since the author of Esther writes in a concealed way, his characters also act without full awareness of what is going on. This applies particularly to the king and Haman, and in this scene it is particularly striking. Esther has succeeded in creating the impression that Haman, in writing the decree of annihilation, was rebelling against the king, and the king finds proof for this idea in the fact that Haman has fallen onto the divan upon which Esther lies; i.e., he seeks to take the queen for himself, as is the custom of such rebels. Does the king really believe that Haman means to assault Esther? Does he not understand that Haman is pleading for his life? It is quite possible that this is indeed the case: the king is presented here as lacking understanding, as someone who, in his inebriation, cannot distinguish the intentions of the people around him. However, it is also possible – as Chakham and Berlin, for example, posit – that the king understands full well that Haman has not fallen upon the divan with the intention of assaulting the queen, but it suits his purposes to present the situation in this way.[12] The king wants to be rid of Haman, and so he invests Haman's actions with new meaning – even if it runs counter to Haman's own intentions. According to this reading, the plays on concealment in this scene abound, with the king taking an active role: he does not reveal the true reason why Haman is being hanged. It seems that until his death, Haman never did quite understand what had happened at that strange party!

A final comment: there are several wordplays in this scene. Firstly, in the king's astonished words, "Do you then mean even to assault (likhvosh) the queen while I am present in the house?!", we hear an echo of the word "to lie" (shekhiva) (a rearrangement of the letters, with a sexual connotation), and the reader is thus made aware of both criminal aspects of Haman's behavior: seduction of the king's wife, with a view to taking her for himself – i.e., rebellion. Beyond this, it is possible that the unusual expression, "As the word emerged from the king's mouth" is meant to remind the reader of the only other place in Tanakh where "a word emerged" from someone: I refer here to the words of Lavan and Betuel to Avraham's servant: "Lavan answered, and Betuel, and they said: 'The matter (word) has emerged from the Lord; we can speak neither well nor ill to you'" (Bereishit 24:50). If this allusion is indeed intentional, the author of Esther is hinting that this episode, too, in which Haman is led to his execution, has in reality not only emerged "from the king's mouth"; "the matter has emerged from the Lord," too, and He is to be viewed as the motivating force behind the king's actions.

The most interesting question concerning the wordplays in this scene, centers on Esther's words to the king: "Had we been sold as servants and maidservants, I would have kept silent, for the affliction would not have equaled the damage to the king" (7:4). This verse is quite opaque, and several different interpretations have been proposed for it.[13] One of the issues that complicates the reading of the verse is the meaning of the expression, "the affliction" (ha-tzar). This word has two meanings: a) distress, trouble;[14] and b) enemy.[15]

Both of these meanings are appropriate to the context of Esther's speech, but it would seem that the first meaning above (distress, trouble) is better suited to the context.[16] Accordingly, Esther claims that if she and her people had been sold into servitude she would have kept silent, for this suffering would not have been severe enough to justify causing "damage" to the king (whether the reference here is to financial loss[17] or to causing him anguish and bother[18]). This reading is reinforced by Esther's contrasting of two types of "distress": "We have been sold, I and my people, to be annihilated, killed and destroyed; / had we been sold as servants and maidservants, I would have kept silent" (7:4). Since she contrasts two catastrophes – one which is actually happening, the other theoretical – it seems logical that the word *tzar* is meant in the sense that suits the subject of her speech – i.e., distress.

But as Esther begins to answer the king's question, "Who is he..." (verse 5), the word appears again, this time in the second sense: "An adversary (*ish tzar*) and enemy, this wicked Haman!" (6) Since this word has appeared before in such close proximity, some opinions have proposed that Esther's first use of it is meant in the same way: "The '*tzar*' (adversary, enemy) is not worth the damage that he is about to cause the king in annihilating an entire nation." [19] The narrative encourages the reader in yet another way to view Haman as the referent of the word "*ha-tzar*." Esther's words, "The adversary is not worth the damage to the king" recall Haman's urging of the king to agree to the destruction of the Jews: "It is not worth it for (or, of no benefit to) the king to tolerate them" (3:8).[20] The recalling of Haman through Esther's words contributes to the presentation of Haman as the referent of Esther's words. Esther is speaking not only of the trouble itself, but also of its source – Haman. She is saying, as it were: The adversary who speaks to the king about benefit ("worth") is himself of no benefit (no "worth.")

It seems that both readings are correct, and that this represents a deliberate ambiguity in the text.[21] Both proposed readings of the word "*tzar*" ("adversary" and "distress") have a place in the literary molding of the unit in question. The one reading arises, as noted, owing to the context of Esther's monologue ("*tzar*" meaning "distress," "trouble), while the other reading manifests itself further on in Esther's words, where Esther uses the same word again, this time in the alternative sense ("*tzar*" meaning "adversary" – i.e., Haman).[22]

This play on words contributes, first and foremost, to the absolute identification of Haman – the source of the distress – with his decrees of annihilation – the distress itself. There is no room for distress other than in the consciousness of its creator, and through the victory over the adversary comes salvation from the distress. Beyond this, however, the ambiguity of the word "*tzar*" also implies scorn for the king who, in complete contrast to the reader, is unaware of what is going on in his own kingdom. The reader, fully aware that "*ha-tzar*" also refers to Haman, who is sitting right in front of the king, is amazed at the king's own amazement and at his question: "Who is he, and where is he..." (5.)



Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]The same root will appear again later in the narrative, in the description of the couriers leaving to publicize Mordekhai's letters: "The couriers who rode on horseback, riding on the fastest royal horses, went out, hurried and hastened by the king's command" (8:14.)

[2]It is possible that the expression "they hurried (va-yavhilu) to bring Haman" is meant to create a more powerful emotional impression than "hasten (maharu) Haman," and that it is meant to convey negative associations. If this is so, then there is also a development in the description of the speed with which events are pulling Haman along.

[3]Chakham suggests that this difference comes "to hint that this day (i.e., at the second party) she spoke assertively, like a queen" (Chakham, p. 44.)

[4]Moore, p. 70

[5]Laniak, p. 112

[6]BDB, p 569

[7]In light of the omission of Esther's national identity, the stage of her speech where Haman realizes that it is he who is responsible for the decrees that Esther is talking about, is debatable. (Indeed, some scholars maintain that at first Haman is unaware; see Beal, pp. 89-90). It should be noted that Haman is "struck with terror (niv'at) before the king and the queen" only after Esther identifies him and points to him (verse 6), and not after her preceding description of the decrees of annihilation.

" [8]Against the background of her flowery preamble and meek apology, Esther's denunciation of Haman cracks out in angry staccato" (Fox, 86.)

[9]First we read that the king arises "from the wine party," but he returns to "the house (place) of the wine party." This addition appears to be meant to prepare the ground for what the king is about to say: "Do you then mean even... while I am present in the house"!?

[10]Ruth Walfish notes that this verb is used right at the outset, in the casting of the lot, referred to in Hebrew as "hipil pur" (3:7) (literally, "causing the lot to fall"), as well as in the king's words to Haman: "Let nothing fall (al tipol) of all that you have spoken" (6:10). The opposite verb, in Esther, is n-s-a (to elevate), which is used in connection with the promotion of Haman as well as the promotion of Mordekhai. See R. Walfish, "The Role of the Secondary Characters in the Book of Esther," in *Hadassa Hi Esther*, p. 145.

[11]It is interesting that with reference to the king, the text states that "he arose" from the wine party in his anger, while when it comes to Haman we read that he "stood" to plead for his life. Chakham notes (p. 45, in his second explanation) that the verb a-m-d also connotes a plea of supplication (as, for example, in Yirmiyahu 15:1), and therefore this verb is most appropriate here in connection with Haman. Attention should be paid to the process of inversion experienced by both men in this scene: the king "arises" and "returns" (related, in Hebrew, to the word "sit") [in relation to the garden], while Haman "stands" and "falls" [in relation to Esther.]

[12]Chakham, p. 47; Berlin, p. 124: "The irony is that now both Esther and Achashverosh are accusing Haman of high treason, of seeking to overthrow the king and assume his place".

[13]Some have even suggested amending the verse to read, for example, "The deliverance would not have equaled..." For a review and discussion of the various amendments, see: R. Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative", JBL 95 (1976), pp. 55-56.

[14]This is in addition to the problem of explaining the word "ba-nezek –(with/of) the damage," which appears nowhere else in all of Tanakh.

[15]Concerning this meaning of the word tzar, see: Shoftim 11:7; I Shemuel 13:6; Yishayahu 63:9; Tehillim 119:143; II Divrei Ha-yamim 28:22 (BDB, p. 865.)

[16]This represents the reading suggested, for example, by Moore (p. 68) and Gordis (see above.)

[17]As suggested, for example, by Fox, p. 282.

[18]An interpretation preferred, for example, by Bush, p. 422.

[19]C. C. Torrey, "The Older Book of Esther", Harvard Theological Review 37 (1944), p. 36. Fox maintains that for the purposes of clarifying the meaning of "distress" the vowelizing of the traditional text should be changed here from a "kamatz" to a "patach" (Fox, p. 282), but Bush asserts that the change in vowelizing is not sufficient to distinguish definitively between the two meanings (Bush, p. 427.)

[20]And again in Haman's words, at 5:13

[21]As Berlin suggests: "Perhaps it is better to interpret this as an ambiguous expression (!) that combines both meanings within itself" (A. Berlin, Esther, Mikra le-Yisrael, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5761, p. 126.)

[22]To these two aspects it should be added that the word pair "oyev" and "tzar" ("enemy" and "adversary") are common companions in Tanakh and in Ugaric writings (as demonstrated by M.D. Cassuto, Sifrut Mikrait ve-Sifrut Kena'anit, vol. I., Jerusalem 5732, p. 45), such that the reader's consciousness is ready for the encounter with the "enemy" when he sees the word "tzar".