

Esther – Shiur # 19
Mordekhai in Haman’s House, and Esther Before the King Again
By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

Immediately after Haman is hanged “upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai,” the narrator goes on to describe how Haman’s house is given to Esther, with Mordekhai put in charge of it (8:1-2). This represents a complete turnaround: the gallows which were meant for Mordekhai now hold Haman’s corpse, while Mordekhai sits in Haman’s house. The connection between these two images is carried through into the dimension of time, too: “On that day King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the house of Haman” (8:1). Obviously, the emphasis on the fact that this was done “on that day” serves to link the episode being described to what took place previously on the same day (the hanging of Haman). In this scene the centrality of Esther as the literary main character stands out with special force: Mordekhai “came before the king” thanks to Esther, and it is she who places him in charge of Haman’s house.

Attention should be paid to the verb used to describe Esther’s act: “For Esther told [the king] what he [Mordekhai] was to her” (8:1). This is a striking contrast to the description in chapter 2, where “Esther did not tell of her nationality and her origins” (2:10). Now, as Esther makes mention of her membership in her nation and their shared fate (“For we have been sold, I and my people”), she also “tells” of her origins – i.e., she reveals her family bonds.[1]

These two verses, describing how Mordekhai comes to stand before the king, assume special significance in the context of the literary structure of the units currently under discussion. On one hand, the description of Mordekhai coming before the king represents the introduction to the literary framework of chapter 8 as a whole. At the beginning of the chapter we read: “Mordekhai came before the king... and the king removed his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordekhai” (8:2). At the end of the chapter, we are told: “Mordekhai went out from before the king in royal garb of blue and white, and a great crown of gold, and a wrap of fine linen and purple” (8:15). The literary framework of the chapter is a sort of geographical account of Mordekhai’s actions: he comes before the king, and he goes out from before the king. In both descriptions he is adorned with the symbols of royalty: at first he receives the king’s ring, and in the end he receives royal robes.[2] This framework (Mordekhai’s royal status) is indeed important for an understanding of the events in the chapter – the dispatch of Mordekhai’s letters, as we shall explain later.

However, it would seem that the first two verses of the chapter also serve as a literary conclusion to the preceding unit. Seemingly, the lengthy unit that began at the beginning of chapter 6 now closes with Mordekhai standing before the king and having Haman’s house transferred to him (8:1-2). This unit as a whole bears a concentric structure:[3]

- A. “On that night sleep eluded the king” – the king’s desire to reward Mordekhai (6:1-3)
- B. Haman comes to the king to ask that Mordekhai be hanged “upon the gallows which he had prepared for him” (6:4-5)

- C. King's consultation with Haman as to "what should be done with a man whom the king wishes to honor" (6:6-9)
- D. Haman leads Mordekhai upon the horse and returns home "mourning and with his head covered" (6:10-12)
- E. Haman's advisors and Zeresh foretell that he is destined to "fall" before Mordekhai (6:13-14)
- F. Esther's speech: exposure of the man who is an adversary and enemy, threatening to annihilate Esther's people (7:1-6)
 - E1. Haman "falls upon the bed on which Esther lies", pleading for mercy (7:7-8a)
 - D1. Haman is accused of "assaulting" the queen, "and they covered Haman's face" (7:8b)
 - C1. Charvona reveals to the king that Haman "has made" a gallows for Mordekhai "who spoke well for the king" (7:9)
 - B1. Haman is hanged "upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai"
 - A1. "on that day the king gave..." – the king rewards Mordekhai.

We have discussed the connections between the various parts of the narrative at the relevant stages. For example, we addressed the king's order to hang Haman upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai (B1) concluding the image in which Haman comes to the king asking that Mordekhai be hanged on that same gallows (B). We also addressed Haman's head (or face) being covered in both images where his plans are thwarted (D-D1), as well as the "falling" of Haman upon the bed where Esther lies (E1) as the fulfillment of his advisors' prediction that he is bound to "fall" before Mordekhai (E).

To understand the contribution of the structure, let us recall the inverse relationship between the king's inquiry of Haman – "What shall be done (la'asot) with a man whom the king wishes to honor?" with the king referring to Mordekhai (C), and Charvona's words at the end of the party, revealing to the king "Behold also the gallows which Haman made (asa) for Mordekhai, who spoke well for the king" (C1). This makes it clear to the king that the same person whom the king seeks to honor is sought by Haman for harm.

The purpose of the concentric structure in this literary unit is clear: it emphasizes the overturning of Haman's plans and his downfall. However, in the context of our discussion, I would like to address the framework of the unit as a whole. It opens with the king's desire to reward Mordekhai for saving his life (A), and ends with actual reward and the transfer of his ring to him (A1). The link between the scenes also finds expression in Esther's connection to each of them. We recall that when Mordekhai saved the king from the chamberlains who plotted to kill him, he did so through the agency of Esther, who carried his message to the king. Now, too, the king's reward of Mordekhai is carried out through the agency of Esther: Mordekhai comes before the king "for Esther had told [the king] what he was to her"; the king then gives Haman's house to Esther and it is she who places Mordekhai in charge of it. All of this shows us that the giving of Haman's house to Mordekhai, and the transfer of the ring, should also be viewed as the realization of the reward that is due to Mordekhai for having saved the king's life. Thus, the narrative hints at yet another reversal: at the beginning of the story, Mordekhai saved the king from chamberlains who sought to assassinate him; now, by hanging Haman upon the gallows, the king saves Mordekhai from a senior minister who sought to kill him. Indeed, an appropriate reward!

Confiscation of Haman's House

We must still ask why the king confiscates Haman's house and transfers it to Esther. To answer this question, we must first clarify whether the house in question is Haman's own private home, bearing no special connection to his position in the royal court, or whether the text refers to the royal bureau for which Haman is responsible, the "ministry," as it were. The intuitive reading obviously suggests the second alternative, since if the "house" in question is Haman's ministerial office it is clear why, following his hanging, he must be replaced with someone else. It seems logical that, as recompense to Esther and as proof that the king had not been involved in the plot to annihilate her people, he gives her responsibility for the portfolio that had previously belonged to Haman. Now, she must place someone whom she trusts in that position. At the same time, we cannot rule out the other possibility – that the text may be referring to Haman's private home.[4] This possibility arises from the formulation of the royal decree promulgated in Ezra (6:11): "I have made it a law that anyone who changes this [the preceding decree] – let a beam be removed from his house, and let him be lifted up and hanged upon it, and let his house be a dung heap for this." In other words, anyone who violates the king's word will be hanged, and his house destroyed. Apparently this represents a sort of collective punishment whereby not only the rebel himself is punished, but also his family and his children. In any event, the connection between this law, mentioned in Ezra in connection with the license bestowed by the Persian king to rebuild the Temple, and our narrative, is clear. In our case, too, Haman is hanged upon a gallows (as a rebel against the king!) and now his house, too, is taken from him.[5] If the king's words in Ezra indeed reflect an accepted law in Persia, then this may be the background to the situation in our chapter of Esther.[6] According to this reading, Achashverosh chooses to give Haman's house to Esther instead of destroying it.

In any event, as noted above, it seems more probable that the property in question was a large estate where Haman may actually have lived, but which should be regarded as part of the royal grounds; it was from this estate that Haman operated with his assistants.[7]

The giving of Haman's house to Esther (and the placing of Mordekhai in charge of it) has a clear literary significance: it highlights the reversal. Haman hangs from the gallows that he prepared for Mordekhai, while Mordekhai sits in Haman's estate, assuming his royal position; even the king's ring is transferred from Haman's hand to the hand of Mordekhai.[8] In this context it is clear why Haman is mentioned in these verses three times, despite having already been hanged:

"On that day King Achashverosh gave Haman's estate to Queen Esther" (King vis-à-vis Esther)

"The king removed his ring which he had taken from Haman and gave it to Mordekhai" [King vis-à-vis Mordekhai]

"Esther placed Mordekhai over Haman's estate" (Esther vis-à-vis Mordekhai.)

However, the giving of Haman's estate to Esther and Mordekhai deviates from the purely literary-esthetic boundaries, and appears to assume a real role in the development of the plot. If indeed the estate that is involved is more than just Haman's private property, then when Mordekhai is placed in charge of his estate/bureau, Mordekhai is exposed to Haman's plans for the annihilation of Israel in all of their detail. He has access to the most secretive vaults where Haman has stored various lists of collaborators, his plan for the annihilation of the Jews who are scattered throughout all the provinces, maps of the stores of ammunition that will be used against them, an overview of the mechanism of

destruction, and lists of specific people who are meant to fulfill important roles on the 13th of Adar, in Haman's war against the Jews. All of this constitutes very valuable information, and indeed it would seem, from the continuation of the narrative, that Mordekhai makes good use of it.

Esther's Plea Before the King

Immediately following the reversal discussed above, Esther asks the king to cancel Haman's decrees. Here the reader encounters the verb, "She entreated him to avert the evil of Haman, the Agagite." This, finally, is the fulfillment of Mordekhai's request of her earlier on: "To come before the king to entreat him and beseech him for her people" (4:8).[9]

Esther presents her case as two separate requests, although in terms of content she seems to be asking the same thing. At first we read, "Esther spoke further before the king, and she fell at his feet and she wept and entreated him to avert the evil of Haman, the Agagite, and the scheme that he had devised against the Jews" (8:3). To this request the king responds by extending his scepter: "The king held out the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose and stood before the king" (8:4). Esther then immediately repeats her request: "And she said: if it please the king, and I have found favor before him, and if it seem right to the king, and if I be pleasing in his eyes, let [an order] be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite, [in] which he wrote to annihilate the Jews in all of the king's provinces. For how can I bear to witness the evil that will befall my people, and how can I bear to witness the destruction of my kindred?" (8:5). What is the meaning of this repetition? A quick comparison shows that, indeed, there is no great difference between the content of the first request and that of the second (with the possible exception of the words, "To avert the evil of Haman, the Agagite," which are changed to, "To revoke the letters," but at first glance even these seem to be saying the same thing).[10] Still, there is a great difference in the atmosphere surrounding each of the requests, and their manner of formulation. The first seems like a burst of emotion that even Esther herself cannot control: she falls at the king's feet; she weeps and entreats.[11] Seemingly, the Persian king is taken aback by the burst of emotion which was apparently not the norm according to royal etiquette. He, as the king attempting to restore law and royal order, reacts with polite impatience, extending his scepter to Esther to indicate that she should speak up and present her request. Esther understands the king's hints perfectly well. She immediately "arises and stands before the king." The physical difference that this makes (Esther at the king's feet, as opposed to standing before him) is simply a reflection of the psychological space in which the king and queen are conversing. Now, as she stands before him, Esther repeats her request – but this time in accordance with the rules of Persian courtesy which we have encountered several times in the narrative: "If it please the king, and if I have found favor before him, and if the thing seem right to the king, and if I am pleasing in his eyes...." This is the longest opening flourish in all of Esther, and it is difficult to suppress the feeling that this verbosity conceals within itself a measure of scorn for the king's insistence on the rules of etiquette on the part of his wife, the queen, in her moment of distress.

The difference between Esther's two requests also finds expression in the slight changes in style:

•In the first request, Haman is referred to as "Haman the Agagite," while in the second Esther pronounces his full name: "Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite" – as formally required when speaking before the king.

·As mentioned above, Esther first asks “to avert the evil of Haman, the Agagite,” while in her second request she asks: “Let [an order] be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman....” The general verb, “to avert,” is replaced by the more formal, legal “be written,” and the judgmental estimation that bursts from Esther’s heart in her first request, “the evil of Haman....,” is replaced by the legal and more objective “letters devised by Haman”.

This is the type of talk that the king understands, and he answers the second request with magnanimity and generosity – or, more accurately, with an emphasis on his own magnanimity and generosity: “Behold, I have given Haman’s estate to Esther” (8:7.)

However, in this context, the closing words of Esther’s second request are of great significance. After all the appropriate legal wording and formal flourishes, and following the request itself, Esther adds: “For how can I bear to witness the evil that will befall my people, and how can I bear to witness the destruction of my kindred?” (8:6) Needless to say, these words deviate from the polite, formal norm. While Esther makes herself the focus of her request (and the king surely understands whom she represents), the formulation gives us a clear sense of her feelings. It seems that she is overcome with frustration at the formal mode of expression; knowing what is at stake, she once again releases a burst of tears. The sense that Esther utters this sentence from the depths of her heart arises primarily from the word that opens each of its two clauses – “eikhakha” (how). Obviously, this word is related to “eikha,”^[12] which characterizes psalms of lamentation, and especially national mourning. Thus, for example, the words of Yishayahu: “How (eikha) the faithful city has become a harlot” (1:21), and obviously the opening words of the chapters in the Book of Lamentations (Eikha): “How the city sits alone; she that was full of people has become like a widow” (1:1); “How God, in His wrath, has covered the daughter of Tzion with a cloud” (2:1); “How the gold is dim; how the most fine gold has changed” (4:1). By inserting a word with such strong connotations of mourning and lamentation, the author hints at the psychological place where Esther finds herself, mourning for her people and her kindred.

However, the exact expression that Esther uses is “eikhakha.” This word appears in only one other place in all of Tanakh; there too it is uttered by a woman, and in a similar manner. The beloved woman, in Shir Ha-shirim, laments: “I have removed my garment, how (eikhakha) shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how (eikhakha) shall I soil them?” (5:3).^[13] Is this association intentional? Is the author of Esther seeking to invoke the beloved in Shir Ha-shirim? It is difficult to decide, but the connection does add an important dimension to our narrative. The woman’s words are uttered as a response to the request of her beloved: “Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my unblemished one; for my head is filled with dew; my locks with the drops of the night” [5:2]). The woman, who has already retired to bed, languidly declines to get up. She has already removed her garment and has washed her feet; in order to open the door she will have to put her garment back on and to soil her feet by walking across the floor once again. Her response is most surprising and disappointing (even if this is only a dream – “I am asleep, but my heart is awake”). The disappointment is highlighted by the choice of words, with the echoing “eikhakha,” for at the outset the woman had asked, “Tell me, he whom my soul loves – where [eikha] do you feed (your flocks); where [eikha] do you lead [your flocks] to rest at noon?” (1:7). The words admittedly mean different things (“eikhakha” – how; “eikha” – where), but the similarity of their sound and the repetition of the letters hints at the tragedy of the situation: when her beloved was unavailable, while he led his flocks in

the wide open spaces, her soul went out to him; now that he is so close by, has come to her house, she suddenly withdraws. Chapter 5 of Shir Ha-shirim characterizes the great missed opportunity, the woman's inattention to the call of her beloved – a call seeking the closeness and intimacy of the woman's presence. From this perspective, Esther represents an inverse image: this is a woman who did indeed acquiesce to the "invitation" of her uncle (in Hebrew – dod, the same word used for "beloved" in Shir Ha-shirim) Mordekhai. With great self-sacrifice she has forced herself to "arise and open the door," when she went to the king to plead on behalf of her nation. In other words, Esther is "almost" another story of a missed opportunity where, out of laziness or fear for personal safety, the opening of the door was avoided and the salvation of the Jews was missed. Ultimately, however, Esther is the model of a narrative of opening the door. Not "I have washed my feet; how (eikhakha) can I soil them," but rather, "how (eikhakha) can I bear to witness the evil that will befall my people".

The words that Esther utters as she stands before Achashverosh ("For how can I bear to witness the evil that will befall my people") direct the reader not only to the woman in Shir Ha-shirim, but also to the words of Yehuda as he stands before Yosef, disguised as the Egyptian viceroy: "For how can I go up to my father when the boy is not with me, lest I witness the evil that will befall my father" (Bereishit 44:34).[14] Beyond the linguistic similarity, it must be remembered that both speakers are standing before the ruler (Yosef, Achashverosh) and they are trying to attain clemency for someone (Binyamin, or the Jewish people).[15] This link unquestionably plays a role in the broader connection between the Esther narrative and the story of Yosef in Egypt, but there is room to posit that it also makes a specific contribution at the place where it is mentioned.

Firstly, we must note the inversion of the role of the tribes in these two narratives. In the story of Yosef, Yehuda stands before the viceroy, seeking to protect Binyamin. In Esther, the descendants of Binyamin repay the favor: now Esther and Mordekhai stand before the king, seeking to protect the Jews. Beyond this, however, it seems that the veiled hint at Yehuda's words lend something that we may refer to as "literary balance." By this I mean that the reader may be led to believe that the narrative has reached its happy ending: Mordekhai stands before the king and is awarded Haman's position; Esther has revealed her Hebrew identity and is universally accepted, and all that remains is to take care of Haman's decrees and then hold a great banquet. It is difficult to challenge this happy atmosphere, and the reader certainly has good grounds for feeling this way. At the same time, though, the narrator reminds the reader of the personal price that Esther has had to pay for her requests. Through the hint to the story of Yehuda standing before Yosef, the reader recalls that Yehuda offered himself as a slave in place of Binyamin: "Now, let your servant remain instead of the boy as a slave to my master, and let the boy go up with his brothers" (Bereishit 44:33). This is the very idea that the reader is being asked to apply to Esther: she falls and grasps Achashverosh's feet, entreating and beseeching on behalf of her nation, but she will remain as a wife/concubine in the king's house, and will be forced to continue holding banquets for him. Esther "redeems" her nation by means of great obsequiousness before the king. The narrator wants this sacrifice to be remembered and to come to the reader's mind. Esther remains imprisoned in the palace of the gentile king, forced to cater to his every whim.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]For “moledet” in the sense of “family” (rather than country of origin) cf., for example, Vayikra 18:9: “The nakedness of your sister – daughter of your father or daughter of your mother, born of your house (moledet bayit) or born outside of your home; you shall not uncover their nakedness.” For extensive discussion of the relationship between the two concepts, see: R. L. Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago 1980, # 867.

[2]The literary framework stands out prominently in a comparison between the description of Mordekhai and the parallel description of Yosef standing before Paro. There, the ring and the royal robes feature together: “Paro removed his ring from upon his hand and placed it upon Yosef’s hand, and he had him dressed in garments of fine linen, and he placed a gold chain around his neck” (Bereishit 41:42.)

[3]Concentric structure is used extensively in Esther; we recall that the narrative as a whole is also concentric. I imagine that this is related to the theme of reversal which is so prevalent.

...” [4]includes all his property, that is, his real estate and other holdings” (Moore, 771; also Beal, p. 97; Berlin, p. 132.

[5]This connection is hinted at in the Aramaic translation of Esther, where Charvona notes explicitly (in verse 7:9) the law that is mentioned in Ezra.

[6]Both Herodotus (III 128-129) and Josephus (*Antiquities*, II.17) testify to confiscation of property by the ruler, as noted by Clines, p. 314.

[7]For this reason several translators prefer to replace the literally more accurate “Haman’s house” with “Haman’s property”.

[8]As Charvona notes, the gallows which Haman had prepared for Mordekhai stands “at Haman’s estate” (7:9); now, Mordekhai receives “Haman’s estate,” in the courtyard of which stands the gallows which Haman had prepared for him!

[9]Fox, p. 92; Berlin, p. 132

[10]As Fox notes, Esther presents Haman (in both of her monologues) as being responsible for the decrees; she exempts the king from any complicity (Fox, p. 93). Similarly, Clines p. 315. At the same time, as we have commented in the past, the king seems truly not to have been aware of the specific content of the decree, and thus Esther is able to present the situation accordingly.

[11]Bush emphasizes (as does Clines, p. 313) that the “falling at the king’s feet” should not be imagined as a sweeping bow (since other verbs are used to indicate such an action – e.g., hishtachaveh (to bow down) or kara (to bend the knees), but rather as a presentation of entreaty and supplication (Bush, p. 444). Clines aptly comments: “In 7:8 it had been Haman's turn to 'fall' at her feet; but she begs not for her own life but only for her people's” (pp. 314-315.)

[12]See, for example: Allan Harman, “Particles,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, # 379.

[13]Berlin notes this connection, p. 133.

[14]Clines notes this connection (p. 315), but unfortunately fails to clarify its significance. It is also worth noting that there is a hidden connection between “my father” (“avi” in the words of Yehuda) and “my people” (“ami” in the words of Esther), as arises from the names of the two sons born to Lot’s daughters (Moav – Amon.)

[15] In addition it should be remembered that the Egyptian viceroy sought to keep Binyamin as a slave; Achashverosh, too, believed that the plan was to sell all the Jews as slaves.