

Shiur #22: Indiscriminate Slaughter?

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

Chapter 9 of Esther has disturbed many modern scholars of this text, with a first reading giving the impression of a complete massacre perpetrated by the Jews on the surrounding gentiles. In Shushan the Jews killed five hundred men, and in all of the provinces – seventy-five thousand! As if this was not enough, Esther requests the king's permission to continue the killing in Shushan for another day ("For this horrible request no justification can be found"[1]), and after he agrees, the Jews kill another three hundred people. Following the war, the Jews sit down and declare a day of feasting and joy – an act spurring further criticism among some modern scholars. Paton, for example, writes in the Introduction to his commentary on Esther:

"There is not one noble character in this book... Esther... conceals her origin, is relentless toward a fallen enemy, secures not merely that the Jews escape from danger, but that they fall upon their enemies, slay their wives and children, and plunder their property. Not satisfied with this slaughter, she asks that Haman's ten sons may be hanged, and that the Jews may be allowed another day for killing their enemies in Susa." [2]

Luther adopts an extreme manner of expression:

"I am so hostile to this book and to Esther that I wish they simply did not exist, for they Judaize too much, and have (and reveal) much pagan bad behavior." [3]

It is not difficult to detect the anti-Semitic tone underlying such views, and at least some of their proponents seem to regard their commentaries on Esther as an opportunity to attack the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion in general. [4]

In any event, from an exegetical point of view we must clarify whether the truth lies with these readings, which claim that the Jews exploited their new status and happily massacred their gentile neighbors. Naturally, our attention centers mainly on the expression used in Mordekhai's letters: "To annihilate and to kill and to destroy the army of any people or province that might attack them, [with their] children and women, and to plunder their

spoils" (8:11). Is it conceivable that in order to save the Jews it is necessary to kill even children and women? Moore calls this "a shocking phrase." [5]

Several alternative interpretations have been proposed; let us gain at least a general idea of some of them:

Haupt suggests that the license to kill "children and women" pertains only to those children or women who would actually attack the Jews. [6]

Hoschander asserts that the expression "children and women" is a later addition that was incorporated into the text by mistake, [7] but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis.

Anderson explains that the significance of the mention of killing "children and women" is to emphasize the principle of measure-for-measure. Since this expression is mentioned in Haman's decree, the same license is given to the Jews. [8]

Like Anderson, Moore also proposes that these words be regarded more as a theological expression than as an historical assertion; i.e., Mordechai's letters are formulated in such a way as to illustrate the reversal that has taken place from Haman's decree until Mordechai's letters. [9]

Gordis raises the revolutionary possibility that the phrase "children and women" is not meant to refer to the gentiles at all, but rather is a continuation of the description of the gentile desire to harm the Jews, including their children and women. To his view, the verse should be read as follows: "The king gave permission to the Jews who were in every city to kill all those who attacked them, all those who sought to harm their children and women." [10] This is a truly revolutionary approach to the verse, but one which raises considerable linguistic difficulty. [11] Still, it is certainly possible that the narrator sought to leave room for this reading, too, in order to balance, in some way, the license given to the Jews to kill the children and wives of their enemies.

A different sort of explanation is proposed by Berlin: "The events of chapter 9 should be viewed as part of the carnival about-turn that takes place in the narrative as a whole, and which defines its character. Scenes of noisy tumult and of mock violent destruction are typical of such turn-arounds and of carnival-type creations. In fact, they are their

trademark. Chapter 9 is the climax of the carnival, the height of disorder. Exaggeration and irrationality reach new heights. But it is all in jest; nothing is real. It is emotional release in its most untamed form." [12]

Berlin identifies with the sense of discomfort in the face of the mass murder of the Jews' enemies, but to her view it should be viewed as one of the identifying marks of this literary work. To help create the sense of "carnival" which, according to Berlin, pervades the entire narrative, it concludes with a great killing spree, which is meant to release the tension of the reader and of those who now celebrate.

I find it difficult to accept this view, mainly because of its fundamental assumption and definition of this text as a carnival comedy: "The Megilla (Esther) is a comedy; a book whose aim is to amuse and to provoke laughter." [13] As I see it, this definition is far from the truth. Unquestionably, there are comic elements in the story, but even these are interwoven with moral and theological themes and messages. The point of the story is not laughter in and of itself, but rather the laughter within the narrative, just as derision of Haman or the king serves the broader message. [14] In any event, we cannot suffice with the literary assertion that it is appropriate to conclude a carnival reversal with a mass killing spree and with noisy celebration.

It seems to me that the fundamental assumption underlying the modern moral rankling, and lurking in the various explanations that have been proposed, is not actually grounded in the text. A sensitive reading of the narrative shows that the narrator hints, in different ways, that the war of the 13th and 14th of Adar should not be viewed as a mass murder that is perpetrated indiscriminately. Certainly, no harm is done to "children and women." This conclusion arises from various aspects of the narrative; we shall examine them in order of their appearance.

At the very start of our chapter we note that the narrator does not pit the Jews against "gentiles," "non-Jews" or "the peoples of the land." The definitions are most precise: "That the Jews prevailed over those who hated them... to lay hands on those who sought their harm... the Jews smote all of their enemies... and did as they pleased to those who hated them" (9:1-5). The war is waged between the Jews and "their enemies-those who hated them-their enemies." While this in itself cannot suffice as a response to the claim of mass murder, it already provides an important general perspective to the rest of our reading of the war scene. The Jews smite "those who seek their harm," not anyone who happens to be in their path. [15]

The next piece of important information comes at the end of the battles, in the form of the fixed formula, "And they did not lay hands on the spoils." This is repeated three times, at

the end of each battle (the battle of the first day in Shushan – 9:10; the battle of the second day in Shushan – 9:15; the battle throughout the provinces of the king – 9:16). This repetition reflects the great importance of the phenomenon in the eyes of the narrator, and indeed it is of enormous significance with regard to our discussion. We recall that Mordechai's letters are presented as a literary parallel to Haman's decree. Therefore, Mordechai's letters, too, permit the Jews to plunder those "who might attack them" (8:11; in light of 3:13). However, despite the license to plunder, the Jewish fighters "did not lay their hands" on the spoils! This cannot be a coincidence, nor does it make any sense in a "carnival" description or a comic reversal narrative. It can only be meant to emphasize that the Jews' attack on their enemies is not purely out of revenge, nor is there enjoyment of the killing itself. The shunning of the spoils indicates that the Jewish fighters perceived their battle as a "holy war"; a war in which spoils may not be taken, like the war against Jericho at the time of Joshua's conquest of the land. Clearly, the refraining from taking the spoils is emphasized in our narrative specifically in light of the permission granted to do so in Mordechai's letters. Thus, the scholars who view the wording of Mordechai's letters as proof of the Jews' revenge and their glee at going to war do a grave injustice to the Jews of Shushan.[16]

Furthermore, there is a statement that appears, at first glance, to be entirely redundant, adding nothing to our understanding of the events: "On that day the number of those killed in Shushan, the capital, came before the king" (9:11). What is the meaning of this fact? Why should the reader of the story care whether the king is aware of the number of casualties or not? Based on our familiarity with Achashverosh, some or other number is not going to affect his position - or, to put it more accurately, his mood – in any way. For what reason does the narrator include this superfluous piece of information, and how does it contribute to the development of the plot? It would seem that here again, the narrator seeks to provide a counter-balance to the atmosphere of indiscriminate massacre: those who are killed have a number! The general statement of "the number of those killed" that comes before the king is immediately set down and recorded openly in detail: every reader knows how many were killed on the first day of the battle in Shushan (five hundred), how many on the second day (three hundred), and how many throughout the king's provinces (seventy-five thousand). I believe that a more faithful depiction of the events would invoke the idea of targeted elimination – albeit on a broad scale. Since Mordechai has access to the lists prepared in advance by Haman, and since he knows where Haman's men are hiding, the general expression "those who sought their harm" has a specific reference. The Jewish fighters (and probably the part of the Persian army that is now under Mordechai's command) receive precise instructions, and it is quite possible that they seek specific people who aided Haman in his plans for annihilation. It is also clear why Esther requests permission to continue the campaign of searching and targeted elimination in Shushan for another day. According to the information at Mordechai's disposal, there are still "enemies of the Jews" who have not been located and are still at large. It is reasonable to assume that within Shushan Haman had many supporters (other than his ten sons), and it makes sense that they are now in hiding. It is they whom Esther seeks to locate during this opportunity given to the Jews, and indeed, three hundred enemies in hiding are found and killed on the second day of the battles.

Aside from the very definition of those killed as "those who sought to harm" the Jews, aside from the shunning of the spoils, and aside from the number, hinting that the Jews are killing according to prepared lists, there is another fact that serves to emphasize that what is being played out here is not simply blood-lust. The day of celebration in commemoration of the salvation is fixed for all generations not on the actual day of battle, but rather on the day of rest that follows. In all of the provinces where the battle takes place on the 13th of Adar, the celebration is held on the 14th; in Shushan, where the fighting lasts two days, the celebration is held on the 15th (9:17-19). In the year when the narrative takes place, it is obvious why the Jews celebrate on the following day, since on the day of the battle they are busy fighting. But how are we to understand why, for all future generations, Jews are required to commemorate the celebration in the wake of their salvation (the day after the battle) rather than the salvation itself (the day of the battle)? Here again, the narrator hints that it was not the battle itself that the Jews longed for, but rather the rest that came in its wake. It is not the bloodshed that the Hebrew nation celebrates, but rather the salvation from their enemies.

In addition to all of the above, it is appropriate to add that the numbers themselves are not exceptional in the context of biblical battles. On the contrary, had the narrator wished to apply some exaggeration in this regard he would have had to pick a number much higher than 75,000. Thus, for example, Aviya, King of Israel, killed "five hundred thousand chosen men of Israel" (II Divrei Ha-yamim 13:17). In this context, Goytein comments most aptly that "the numbers in Esther are actually modest; they testify that it was merely a matter of defense, as emphasized repeatedly [in the fact] that they did not take of the plunder; in other words, this was not a war of aggression at all. It is the professors of the nation that spilled so much blood who have given Esther a bad name, and we should not adopt that injustice." [17]

The license given to the Jews to kill "children and women," too, is meant to create a literary connection between Mordekhai's letters and Haman's decrees, thereby underlying the motif of reversal, a theme that underlies the narrative as a whole. Just as the Jews did not take of the spoils, so they did not harm anyone who was not among "those who sought their harm." [18]

Still, there remains something disturbing about this chapter. Along with Esther's request of the king that an additional day be granted for the battle in Shushan, [19] she also asks that the sons of Haman be hanged: "And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged upon the gallows" (9:13). We recall that the sons of Haman were killed on the first day of battle, such that at the time of Esther's request of the king they are already dead. What she wants, therefore, is that their corpses be hanged. [20] For what reason does Esther ask this? Is this really nothing more than a quest for revenge? [21]

Apparently, in Achashverosh's kingdom, hanging on the gallows is not the accepted method of execution for any crime. As we have suggested in previous shiurim, it is possible that in Persia this punishment is reserved specifically for the crime of rebellion against the crown, or treason. This seems likely at least from the beginning of the story, where Bigtan and Teresh are hanged in the wake of their attempt at assassination. It is important to Esther that it be clear to all the inhabitants of Shushan that all those who subscribed to the plan to "annihilate, to kill and to destroy" all the Jews are considered rebels and traitors. The sons of Haman receive the same verdict as Bigtan and Teresh. Those who sought to lay their hand upon the Jews are judged as though they had sought to lay their hand on the king himself. Esther joins this request together with the permission she seeks to fight for another day in Shushan, with the hope of discovering those who had managed to hide from the Jews on the first day.[22]

It is reasonable to assume that among the inhabitants of Shushan there were some who knew where the enemies of the Jews were hiding themselves, and where the stockpiles of ammunition that Esther and Mordechai had not yet discovered were concealed. By hanging the sons of Haman, which would broadcast in the clearest possible way the regime's view of their attempt to harm the Jews, Esther hoped to encourage cooperation on the part of the "peoples of the land," and thereby to expose those who had remained loyal to Haman and to his legacy.

And who knows – perhaps Esther thought in broader terms. Perhaps she hoped that by hanging the sons of Haman and thereby having them defined as rebels, there would arise no ideologies or plans similar to those of Haman and his sons – at least for the near future.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Paton, p. 287

[2]Paton, p. 96

[3]Tischrede in Luther's Werke, Weimar 1914, Vol. 3, p. 3391. The reader will find a discussion of Luther's view in Paton, p. 96 (translated slightly differently from the above), as well as in R. Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther – A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," JBL 100 (1981), p. 361 (representing the source of the translation quoted by Paton.)

[4]It should be noted that, in contrast, to the classic German interpretation of the text, with its heavy antagonism towards the moral philosophy that is supposedly revealed in it, in recent years some different voices are being heard, even among German scholars. Thus, for example, Meinhold addresses the evil of the Jews' enemies in the narrative: "The

injustice is a plot and can be reproduced world-wide; it teaches and finds cover under the cloak of justice" (A. Meinhold, *Das Buch Esther*, ZK, Zurich 1983, p. 102.)

[5]Moore, p. 80

[6]P. Haupt, "Critical notes on Esther,' *AJSL* 24, pp. 97-196 (reprinted in: *Studies in the Book of Esther*, New York 1982, pp. 1-90.)

[7]J. Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History*, Philadelphia 1923, p. 240.

[8]B. W. Anderson, "The Book of Esther,' *Interpreter's Bible*, New York – Nashville 1952, 2, p. 866.

[9]Moore, p. 83

[10]R. Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative,' *JBL* 95 (1976), pp. 43-58.

[11]As Fox notes, pp. 284-285.

[12]Berlin, pp. 141-142

[13]Berlin, p. 5. The same idea is presented by H.L. Ginsberg, "Introductions,' in: *The Five Megilloth and Jonah*, Philadelphia 1969, pp. 82-88.

[14]We shall return to Berlin's approach, which also has other proponents, at a later stage.

[15]Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emuna ha-Yisre'elit*, vol. VIII, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv 5720, p. 444.

[16]It seems that the shunning of the spoils represents a repair for the sin of Shaul and the people following the war against Amalek (see W. McKane, "A Note on Esther IX and 1 Samuel XV,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (1961), pp. 260-261. For criticism of this reading see Clines, p. 200, note 35.) It is interesting that the (first) Aramaic translation of Esther adds, after the number of casualties throughout the provinces of the king: "Seventy-five thousand of the House of Amalek, and they did not lay their hands on the plunder".

[17]S.D. Goytein, "Omanut ha-Sippur ba-Mikra," *Tel Aviv* 5747, p. 81. He refers, of course, to the German biblical scholars who were outspoken in their extreme criticism of the values of Esther and the bloodthirsty image that it projects.

[18]Along the lines of the argument of Anderson and Moore, quoted above. In fact, a similar claim appears already in Bonart, as quoted by Paton, p. 274.

[19]Esther does not ask that the king "grant permission" (active voice), but rather that "it be granted tomorrow, too" (passive voice). The narrator makes extensive use of the passive voice (as especially noticeable at the beginning of chapter 6), as if to say that the plot just goes on happening, whether the characters like it nor not. This view is certainly applicable to the Persian king, too!

[20]At this point it should be noted that various illustrations that appear in some editions of Esther, showing Haman hanging on the tall gallows with his sons alongside him, are misleading. Haman was hanged after Esther's second party (as far as we are able to ascertain – in Nissan), while his sons were hanged in Adar. In other words, almost a year passed between the hanging of the father and the hanging of the sons.

[21]As Paton expresses it, p. 287. Moore compares Esther, in making this request, to Yael (*Judges* 4); he calls both of them "deceitful and bloodthirsty women" (p. 88.)

[22] Fox suggests that on the first day (13th of Adar) the enemies of the Jews could have waged war on the basis of the first letters, publicizing Haman's decree. On the second day (14th of Adar), they were no longer able to fight, since Haman's letters had specified only the 13th (Fox, p. 112). I believe that in this context, Fox treats the wording of the letters and the king's laws with undue seriousness. I imagine that the enemies of the Jews fought to defend themselves on the second day of the battle, too, even though no explicit official decree gave them the right to do so.