

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
Megillat Esther  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #25: The Greatness of the King, and the Greatness of Mordekhai (chapter 10)

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

"Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him as befitting His manifold greatness"

The brief final chapter of Esther (three verses in all) brings the "double writing" of the narrative to a decisive and pointed conclusion. Here, too, the reader should not be misled by the plain message, exalting the characters. Rather, attention should be paid to the hints that lie beneath the words, inviting a hidden reading that stands in stark contrast to the plain reading.

Before examining this assertion more closely, it should be noted that the verses of chapter 10 represents a microcosm – in terms of linguistic texture – of the previous chapter (9), in which Esther's letters are dispatched:

Letters sent by Esther (9:29-32):

"Queen Esther... wrote... with all vigor"

"Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote"...

"And he sent letters to all of the Jews... words of peace and truth"

"and the decree of Esther confirmed"...

Greatness of the King and Greatness of Mordekhai (10:1-3)

"And all the acts of his vigor and of his might"...

"Are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles"...

"And great among the Jews, and accepted by the majority of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all of his descendants"

"For Mordekhai the Jew was second-in-command to King Achashverosh"

This parallel serves to present both leaders of the Jewish nation – "Queen Esther" and "Mordekhai the Jew, second-in-command to King Achashverosh" – with their faces towards the nation: Esther uses her authority to establish the days of the festival, while Mordekhai uses his position to "seek the good of his nation." As noted in the past, at the beginning of the story Mordekhai is depicted as the hero, while Esther simply performs his bidding. Later on, Esther takes the reigns and Mordekhai does "all that Esther commanded him" (4:17). The story ends with Esther and Mordekhai acting jointly, as two main characters of equal importance.

As mentioned above, the reader should not be misled by the plain reading of the text; rather, he should examine the verses closely for the hints that they contain. In verse 1 of chapter 10 we learn that "King Achashverosh placed a tax upon the land and upon the isles of the sea." This is a rather strange piece of information, and many scholars have questioned its function in and contribution to the narrative. Of what interest is it to the reader that the king institutes a new tax law that applies "to the land and the isles of the sea"?[1]

An interesting possibility is raised by Daube, who suggests that Mordekhai initiates this tax in response to the financial loss caused to the king as a result of Haman's plan not being realized. The kingdom never did receive the "ten thousand talents of silver" that Haman had promised in return for license to annihilate the Jews (3:9).[2]

The problem with this hypothesis is that the plain text would suggest that the king had already foregone this income,[3] and it seems unlikely that, following the upheavals that had visited the throne, the king would remember specifically the failure of this financial plan to be realized.

Fox suggests that the mention of the tax imposed on the land serves to create another connection with the narratives about Yosef, the Hebrew lad who, after rising to greatness, creates an economic revolution in Egypt (Bereishit 47). The narrator of Esther ends his story in a similar way: here, too, Mordekhai becomes second-in-command to the king, and once again there is the imposition of a tax on the citizenry.[4]

I propose a simpler reading: by conveying this piece of information, the narrator seeks to give expression to the kingship of Achashverosh and its validity. The imposition of a tax represents a prime expression of rule over a certain area (Yehoshua 16:10; 17:13; I Melakhim 9:20). The reader comes to understand that the king rules over "the land and the

isles of the sea." [5] This intention would seem to be supported by the following verse: "And all of the acts of his power and his might... are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia" (2). The continuity between these two verses renders the tax one example of "the acts of his power and his might," and the next verse opens with the inclusive "and all of the acts..." as if to say, "Other than the imposition of the tax, the rest of the king's acts of power may be read about in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia." Thus, the story ends with a final look at the kingdom of Achashverosh, as though it is the king who is the hero of the story and his acts that must be summarized. This is significant: the narrative opens with a presentation of Achashverosh and of his great and impressive empire ("the wealth of his glorious kingdom"), and now it ends with a similar image. We recall, too, that the general literary structure of Esther (a concentric structure) likewise serves to bring the end of the narrative back to its beginning, thereby highlighting the king as the hero of the story.

Needless to say, the depiction of the king as the protagonist of the story and as a character upon whose word everything depends is an illusion. In truth, the king is closer to the accepted definition of an "anti-hero" than that of a hero who really influences the course of events. Aside from this, the illustration of the grandeur of Achashverosh's kingdom by noting the tax that he imposes on the land represents the literary conclusion of a narrative that contains no small measure of scorn and derision. At the outset, the king is described as being magnanimous in the extreme: he holds a banquet for "many days" for all the princes of the provinces (1:4), then another week for the inhabitants of Shushan (1:5), and then grants a "remission" of taxes for the provinces in the wake of Esther's coronation (2:18). Now, at the end of the story, the reader discovers the source of funding behind the king's generosity: he imposes taxes on the citizenry. In other words, the king may show generosity towards his citizens, but they are destined to pay.

Following the description of the tax, the text invokes a formula that is familiar to us from the Books of King and Chronicles: "And all the acts of his power and his might, and the account of the greatness of Mordekhai, to which the king advanced him – are they not recorded in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia" (10:2). This linguistic formula is used repeatedly at the end of the description of every king in Melakhim and Divrei Ha-yamim, as for example: "And the rest of the acts of Basha, and what he did, and his might – are they not recorded in the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" (I Melakhim 16:5), or: "And the rest of the acts of Yehoshafat, and his might which he performed and how he fought – are they not recorded in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" (I Melakhim 22:46.)

For what reason does the narrator choose to end his story with an expression so firmly identified with the kings of Israel and of Judah? Here too, beneath the auspicious atmosphere and the words of praise, the narrator hints at a hidden reading full of scorn, and perhaps also criticism. On one hand, the reader attains the hoped-for calm at the end of the story, and nothing could be more appropriate than this concluding formula with its momentary "cut" to the broader history (of the king!). However, the reader who recalls the

kings of Israel and of Judah, in light of this expression, cannot but dwell on the chasm separating the kingdom of Achashverosh from the kingdom of Israel in its own land; the chasm separating the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia" and the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel/Judah." In other words, the whole story narrated in Esther is the story of the Persians; it is the story of Achashverosh and his kingdom! This expression is, to a large extent, a biting one specifically because of its inclusion at the end of the story. The narrator is telling his readers, as it were: "When all is said and done, the exile is still the same exile; the king is the same king, and the Jews of Shushan remain where they are. This is not really a story about the Jews. Even if they played an important role in the plot, all in all this was nothing but an episode in the story of the Persians, the 'kings of Mede and Persia'".

In this context, Gordis raises the interesting hypothesis that Esther is actually a part of the chronicles of the Persian kingdom, and is therefore written in accordance with the norms of Persian historical documentation.[6] Indeed, this impression does arise from several of the details in the story, and especially from this conclusion.[7] But is the intention of the narrator really to recount the Persian chronicles, for the sake of Persian history? It would seem that this is simply another mask worn by the hidden writing in the text. Whose story is being told here? The Persian ruler may be presented as the main focus, such that his power and the events of his rule must be recounted, but in fact the Persian rule neither gains nor loses anything over the course of the plot. The king undergoes no significant process in the narrative, and the same can be said for his kingdom.

Segal adopts, to my mind, the correct approach. He notes the manner of writing as being reminiscent of the documentation of Persian history, but regards this as an intentional device:

"All of the actions in the story are undertaken naturally, and by human beings; not by God. However, this secularity is external and artificial. It belongs to the narrator's art of garbing his creation in story form, as though taken from the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia (2:23; 7:1; 10:2)."[8]

In other words, this is indeed the story of the Jewish nation, but it is hidden behind the formal veneer of a Persian chronicle! The Jewish story is hinted at through the Persian political history, since the Jews are in Persian exile, and during exile the story of the Jews can at most be glimpsed through the stories of others.

Against this background it is difficult to treat seriously the concluding verse of the entire Megilla: "For Mordekhai the Jew was second-in-command to King Achashverosh, and

great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brethren; seeking the good of his nation and speaking peace to all of his descendants" (10:3.)

Indeed, Mordechai achieves an impressive position in the Persian regime, and uses it for the purpose of "seeking the good of his nation" – a description so familiar from other periods in Jewish history. And truly, at first glance, the narrator appears to "enthuse" over Mordechai's greatness; the word "great" (gadol) appears three times, in relation to Mordechai, in these closing verses: "The account of Mordechai's greatness (gedulat Mordechai) to which the king promoted him (gidelo ha-melekh)... and great (gadol) among his brethren," and the greatness of Mordechai would appear to be the happy conclusion to the story. But is this auspicious status what occupies the reader?

The expression "great among the Jews" occurs only twice in all the Bible, both times in Esther. The first appearance was in the description of the Jews when they heard of Haman's decree: "And in every province and place where the king's word and decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews (evel gadol la-Yehudim), and fasting, and weeping, and lamentation; sackcloth and ashes were spread for the multitude (la-rabim)" (4:3). There, we recall, Mordechai was not able to approach the king's palace owing to his garb: "For none might enter the king's gate dressed in sackcloth" (4:2). The second appearance of the expression is in the final chapter: "For Mordechai the Jew was second-in-command to King Achashverosh and great among the Jews (gadol la-Yehudim) and accepted by the multitude (le-rov) of his brethren." [9] If this connection is intended – an admittedly doubtful possibility - then we must consider its contribution to the conclusion of the story. We may, of course, regard it benignly as yet another expression of the reversal that takes place in the narrative: at first there was great mourning for many Jews, and at the end of the story Mordechai is great among many Jews. However, my impression is that by means of this link the narrator seeks to express disdain for Mordechai's greatness, so long as it is conferred upon him by the king. This greatness is not essentially different from the "mourning" in which he was immersed in the first part of the story. It makes no great difference, in Achashverosh's whimsical kingdom, whether "sackcloth and ashes are spread for the multitudes," or the second-in-command to the king is "accepted by the multitude of his brethren." The position of the regime may change in an instant – as the Esther narrative so clearly proves. This fickleness is hinted at by means of a further comparison, too. The description of Mordechai's greatness recalls Haman's bragging to his cronies about his own elevated status:

Haman (5:11:)

"Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all of how the king had promoted him"...

Mordechai (10:2-3:)

... "And great among the Jews and accepted among the multitude of his brethren... and the account of Mordekhai's greatness to which the king had promoted him"...

The expression, "To which the king had promoted him," appears nowhere else in all the Bible, and it seems that the narrator seeks to create a link in the reader's mind between the two appearances in our text. Once again, the connection may be meant merely to highlight the reversal in the fate of the king's two ministers, as a continuation of the description in chapter 8. However, it seems to me that had the purpose of this connection been merely to mold the principle of the reversal, it would have been integrated at an earlier stage of the narrative (perhaps alongside the description of Mordekhai's greatness in chapter 8), rather than in the very last verse of the entire narrative. It seems that here, the intention of the parallel is to indicate the narrator's reservations with regard to Mordekhai's greatness: indeed, Mordekhai attained greatness – but it is the same greatness that was enjoyed by Haman! And just as Haman lost his status in an instant, the same may happen to Mordekhai.

In light of this we may wonder whether the expression, "Accepted amongst the multitude of his brethren," likewise conveys a certain degree of ambiguity. The simple meaning of the word "rov" is "many," as we read concerning Haman, in the corresponding verse cited above - "The glory of his riches and the multitude of his children" (5:11) – as well as in many other places. In other words – Mordekhai was accepted by his many brethren. However, the Sages adopt an alternative reading of this expression, as a relative term indicating "a majority" rather than "all": "'Most of his brethren,' but not 'all of his brethren'; this tells us that some members of the Sanhedrin (High Court) disagreed with him" (Megilla 16b; cited also by Rashi ad loc.) The commentator Ibn Ezra, of the peshat school, likewise leans towards this reading (in his commentary ad loc.): "'Accepted by most of his brethren' – since a person is not able to please everyone, because of fraternal jealousy." It is difficult to accept this as the only possible reading of the verse, since the usual meaning of the word "rov" in the Bible is "many." However, it is possible (and this may be what the Sages were hinting at) that by selecting this expression, the narrator means to allow for the alternative reading. On the surface, Mordekhai is accepted by the multitude of his brethren; the veiled hint is that he is accepted by most of them, but not by all.

Here again, then, at the conclusion of the story, we discern a discrepancy between the plain reading of the text and the message that lurks beneath the surface. On the plain level, the "greatness" and success of Mordekhai stand out prominently. Covertly, the reader senses the narrator's disappointment at Mordekhai's integration into the Persian regime and the continued existence of the Jews in Persia.

The Yosef Narratives and Megillat Esther

To my mind, the above message represents the essence of the extensive parallels between the story of Esther and the stories of Yosef. The connection itself (both linguistically and in terms of substance) is widely acknowledged and much has been written about it, but its significance has been interpreted in different ways.[10]

At the outset it must be emphasized that both Mordekhai and Esther are compared to Yosef. Thus, for example, the description of Mordekhai's greatness - "The king removed his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordekhai... and Mordekhai emerged from before the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown" (Esther 8:2,15) – echoes the description of Yosef's greatness in Egypt: "Pharaoh removed his ring from upon his hand and placed it upon Yosef's hand, and he had him clothed in garments of fine linen, and he placed the golden chain around his neck" (Bereishit 41:42). At the same time, the description of the selection of Esther – "Let the king place officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, and let them gather together all the fair virgins to Shushan, the capital, to the house of the women, to the custody of Hege, the king's chamberlain, guardian of the women, and let their ointments be given to them... and the thing was good in the eyes of the king, and he did so" (2:3-4), parallels Yosef's words to Pharaoh: "Let Pharaoh act and let him appoint officers over the land, and take a fifth of the land of Egypt during the years of plenty. And let them gather together all of the food of those good years that are to come... and the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all of his servants" (Bereishit 41:34-37). The exchanging of the character who is compared to Yosef corresponds, apparently, to the change in the main character of the narrative,[11] as well as the broad literary model of the "changing analogy," which we shall address below.

What is the significance of this broad connection, which no reader could fail to register?

There are several approaches in this regard. Some opinions have regarded the entire system of parallels to the story of Yosef as nothing more than an artistic device. In other words, Esther assumes a special esthetic value when the reader feels that he is encountering expressions that are familiar to him from Bereishit, and this in itself contributes towards the enjoyment of his reading experience. A different version of the same idea contends that the narrator seeks to lend Esther the feeling of an ancient biblical book, and therefore borrows expressions from Bereishit.[12] However, it is difficult to accept that such a broad and consistent connection, sustained throughout the story, is not intended to make any significant contribution to the story or to the message that it is meant to convey.

Cohen proposes the following: "It is possible that the author of the Megilla seeks to highlight the fact that the story recounted in the Megilla is not a one-time event, but rather

a narrative of a super-historical nature. Jewish history repeats itself, as it were, with the hand of Divine Providence continually guiding it." [13]

Expanding on this idea we may add that the narrator of Esther hints to his readers that they should extrapolate from that which is explicit in the story of Yosef to that which is absent, at least superficially, from Megillat Esther – the hand of Providence. The rise of a Hebrew youth to the position of second-in-command to the king is understood, in the story of Yosef, as testimony to the hand of God. As Yosef tells his brothers, "It was to preserve life that God sent me before you" (Bereishit 45:5). Thus, the story of Yosef becomes the classic literary model for the "dual causality" argument: an event has two causes – (revealed) human activity, and (hidden) Divine activity.

No such assertion appears explicitly in Esther, but it is hinted at in various ways, and it is possible that through the comparison to the story of Yosef, the narrator seeks to hint at the same perception in Esther, too. [14]

Aside from this, I believe that the link is also of significance as criticism. The story of Esther describes the salvation of Mordekhai and Esther in a foreign land – just like the deliverance of Yosef in Egypt. The reader, however, familiar with the continuation of Yosef's story, knows that his success was a temporary period of grace for the Israelites, while the beginning of the book of Shemot already paints a different reality: "A new king arose over Egypt who had not known Yosef. And he said to his people, Behold, the nation of the children of Israel is greater and mightier than we. Let us deal wisely with them... therefore they set taskmasters (sarei missim) over them, to afflict them with their burdens" (1:8-11). Yosef's fame passed away, and the children of Israel – now well settled in Egypt – enter a long period of suffering and subjugation. Esther ends on the same note as the book of Bereishit: the gentile regime includes a Jewish representative who seeks the good of his people (as Fox notes – at the expense of the other citizens of the country, who suffer his economic decrees). However, the reader who is familiar with the continuation of the story of Israel in Egypt, as recounted in Shemot, sees a premonition of what may happen to the Jews of Shushan. The hint at this reading lies in the detail mentioned in chapter 10, which we have discussed above: "King Achashverosh laid a tax upon the land and the isles of the sea." A king who imposes a tax on his citizens appears in several other biblical narratives. However, the expression "to place a tax" or "placing a tribute" appears only in Esther and at the beginning of Shemot: "They set taskmasters over them" ("va-yasimu alav sarei missim") (1:11) [15]. The reader is thereby referred to the continuation of the story (even though it lies outside the scope of the Megilla), which may turn out in the same way as the continuation of Yosef's story, as recounted at the beginning of Shemot.

Thus, while on the surface the Megilla concludes on a joyful note and with a "happy ending," beneath the surface there is an "end" that comes later, after the end of the story.

This hidden conclusion hints at the changes and reversals that may happen at any moment, and which cloud the joy of the end of the book.

With this we conclude our chronological study of the verses. In the final two shiurim we shall trace some of the central motifs of the story, and try to clarify the lesson that arises from it.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Elsewhere in the Bible, the term "mas" means forced labor (BDB, p. 587). As Ehrlich notes, since Esther is a book that was composed quite late (relative to the other books of the Bible), it is more probable that the term is used here in the sense familiar to us from the Tannaitic period, meaning a tax or tribute paid to the ruler. However, even if the term refers to the taking of man-servants and maidservants for the royal house, this statement is interesting in that it creates a link to Israel's subjugation in Egypt. According to this interpretation, the book concludes as a contrast to the beginning of Shemot: here Mordekhai seeks the good of his nation, while the king subjugates the rest of his subjects (for a discussion of the connection to the story of Yosef, in this context, see Fox's view, below). It should be remembered that in Esther's words at the second wine party, too, we encounter the idea of the sale of the Jews as "slaves and maid-servants" (7:4). In any event, the plain reading speaks of a law regulating the payment of a tax to the king.

[2]D. Daube, "The Last Chapter of Esther," *JQR* 37 (1946-47), pp. 139-147

[3]Daube is conscious of this difficulty and he tries to prove that the king was, in fact, interested in the money. Commenting on the king's words, "The money is given to you," implying that he had foregone the sum, Daube writes: "'I believe that the phrase used by the king... ought to be taken as meaning exactly the opposite of what it appears, to us, to mean" (p. 142). He compares this to the dialogue between Avraham and Efron concerning the sale of the Cave of Makhpela: although Efron states at the outset that he is willing to forego the payment, it is clear that he seeks remuneration – and, ultimately, he receives full payment for the field and the cave in it (Gen. 23). To my mind, the king's words, too, should be viewed as a polite refusal that actually means the opposite. This interpretation is also adopted by G.H. Cohen, "Iyunim be-Chamesh ha-Megillot," the Jewish Agency, Jerusalem 2006, p. 297, note 4.

[4]Fox, pp. 129-130

[5]It is interesting that following Esther's coronation, we read that the king granted "a remission of taxes to the provinces," while now, following the appointment of Mordekhai as second-in-command, the opposite happens: he imposes a new tax.

[6]R. Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther – A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *JBL* 100 (1981).

[7]Attention should be paid to the fact that the person who stands at the king's side, in the closing verses, is Mordekhai rather than Esther – as befitting a text in the style of a royal chronicle. The form of writing here has led some scholars to assert that "some other

document has made its way into Esther" (Levenson, p. 132, and similarly Clines, p. 57). However, this is unnecessary. The focus on the king serves a literary purpose.

[8]M. Z. Segal, *Mevo ha-Mikra*, part III, Jerusalem, 1955, p. 721

[9]The expression "the account of Mordekhai's greatness" (10:2) may also recall to the reader the words of Mordekhai himself, mentioned immediately after the parallel scene of mourning: "And the account of the money which Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries" (4:7). These are, I believe, the only instances in the Bible of the term "parasha" (account, episode). The term indicates a precise incident, or an "exact statement" (BDB, p. 831). It is difficult to ignore the sense of cynicism that arises from the conclusion of the story: the danger of annihilation facing the Jews indeed requires precision in conveying the details of the story and making them explicit and clear, but is Mordekhai's status also that important?

[10]The reader is invited to review the Introduction to *Megillat Esther* by G.H. Cohen in his commentary that was published as part of the *Da'at Mikra* series (Jerusalem 5733, pp. 12-14) as well as in his book mentioned above – *Iyyunim be-Chamesh ha-Megillot*, and there to discover the many connections. The link is noted by the Sages; see *Esther Rabba*, parsha 7.

Among modern scholars I believe that Rosenthal was the pioneer in this approach (Ludwig A. Rosenthal, "Die Yosefsgeschichte mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel verglichen," *ZAW* 15 (1895), pp. 278-284); many others followed. Moshe Gan adds further points of comparison in his work "Megillat Esther be-Aspaklariat Korot Yosef be-Mitzrayim," *Tarbitz* 31 (5722); pp. 144-149. For an extensive discussion of the comparison see Berg, pp. 123-152; she develops this connection and also addresses the books of *Daniyel*, *Ruth* and *Judith*.

[11]At the same time, it is interesting that specifically in the first part, where Mordekhai is the main character, it is Esther who is compared to Yosef (except for one instance, in the description of the king's servants vis-à-vis Mordekhai: "And it was, when they spoke to him daily and he did not hearken to them" (3:4); this recalls Potiphar's wife vis-à-vis Yosef: "And it was, when she spoke to Yosef daily and he did not hearken to her" (39:10), while in the second part of the story – where Esther takes the reigns and becomes the main character – it is Mordekhai who is compared to Yosef.

[12]See, for example, Y. Avishur, *Megillot*, *Olam ha-Tanakh*, Tel Aviv 1994, pp. 222-223.

[13]G.H. Cohen, Introduction to *Esther*, *Da'at Mikra*, Jerusalem 5733, p. 14

[14]This is in contrast to the view of Meinhold, who argues that, on the contrary, *Megillat Esther* seeks to present an alternative to the perception that arises from the stories of Yosef, where it is Divine Providence that protects Yosef (Meinhold, "Die Gattung der Yosefsgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle, II," pp. 92-93.)

[15] A similar formulation appears in *Shoftim* 1:28 – "They put the Canaanites to tribute," but the linguistic formulation is slightly different from the way it appears in our case. For a discussion of the parallels between our text and the story of the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 1-12) see: G. Gerleman, *Esther*, *BKAT*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1970, p. 11. He notes principally the following connections: a Jewish man is introduced into the palace of the non-Jewish king; the existential danger to the nation of Israel; Israel's victory over their enemies; a festival for all generations that is established in the wake of the victory. Still, we may wonder whether these connections indicate an intentional parallel which the author of *Esther* had in mind.