

Megillat Esther

Mordechai: Difference, Defiance and Deference

The Megilla, despite its familiarity, always seems to raise contemporary thoughts and dilemmas. The topic that I would like to dwell upon this year is central to the plot of the Megilla, and is amplified by several *midrashim*. The question is: To what degree should we as Jews assert our Jewishness in a foreign culture, or is it preferable that the Jewish Community take a low profile? When do we compromise our Jewish lifestyle to partake in the life of the majority culture and when do we stand our ground? And at what cost?

SHOULD MORDECHAI BOW TO HAMAN?

The focal point of this dilemma may be found in the scene in which Mordechai refuses to bow to Haman.

"Some time afterwards, King Ahashverosh promoted Haman son of Hamdata the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials. All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordechai would not kneel or bow low. The King's courtiers who were in the palace gate said to Mordechai: Why do you disobey the King's edict? They spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them. They told Haman, in order to see whether Mordechai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordechai would not kneel or bow down low to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordechai alone, having been told who Mordechai's people were. Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordechai people, throughout the kingdom of Ahashverosh." (3:1-6)

A royal edict states that any government figure should kneel in the presence of Haman. Mordechai refuses. Furthermore, he stubbornly ignores the royal pronouncement on an ongoing daily basis, drawing attention to his unauthorised behaviour. Mordechai is challenged and questioned by the palace officials, but he remains intransigent, refusing to follow the accepted palace etiquette. And, seemingly as a result of Mordechai's irritating insistence on ignoring simple rules, Haman's attention is turned to the Jews and the rest is History.

Why does Mordechai refuse? The effects of his action are dire. What is this stubborn incomprehensible insistence on standing his ground?

I would like to discuss two answers.

AVODA ZARA

The Ibn Ezra brings a view that is suggested by the Midrash (Esther Rabba 7,6):

Mordechai would not bow - The opinion of our Rabbis is well known and correct, that **Haman had an image of idolatry** on his clothes or his hat.

(4) *He told them that he was a Jew* – and that **this was forbidden to him**. We should ask the question, why did Mordechai put himself and the Jewish people into such danger? Could he have not spoken to Esther to get transferred away from the "Gate of the King" so that he wouldn't agitate Haman especially as he saw that Haman had particular good fortune at this time? The answer is that he couldn't move from the Gate by a Royal order at pain of death.¹

...To what degree should we as Jews assert our Jewishness in a foreign culture, or is it preferable that the Jewish Community take a low profile?

In other words what was at stake here was the question of Avoda Zara; classic idolatry². Mordechai's perplexing obstinacy is an expression of the severity of the sin that he is facing. The point at stake is not whether Mordechai will bow to Haman but rather whether he will bow to the image emblazoned upon Haman's clothing. (We can also surmise that probably the bowing to Haman was instigated with a religious motive in mind; the edict to bow to Haman was a ploy to have everyone worship the idol or deity.)

JEWISH PRIDE

But a second approach views Mordechai's refusal as unrelated to the narrow prohibition of idol worship. Instead it frames the problem as a wider issue of identity and national pride. The Midrash imagines the conversation that takes place when Mordechai was presented with the question: 'Why do you defy the Royal Edict?' What might Mordechai have answered?

Rabbi Levi said – He told them: Moshe Rabbeinu warned us in the Torah: 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol or molten image.' And this *rasha* (evildoer) has made himself into a source of worship! Has Isaiah not warned us: 'Refrain from

¹ ראב"ע לאסתר פרק ג

(ב) יכרע וישתחוה - ידועים ונכונים מה שדרשו רז"ל כי צורת צלם וע"ז היו בבגדיו או על מצנפתו:

(ד) כי הגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי - כי הוא אסור לו, והנה יש לשאול למה הכניס מדרכי עצמו בסכנה גם הכניס כל ישראל היה ראוי שידבר לאסתר ותסירנו משער המלך ולא יכעיס את המן אחר שראה שהשעה משחקת לו, והתשובה כי לא יוכל לסור משער המלך כי אם יסור בלא מצות המלך דמו בראשו.

² The phrase "*Korim Umishtachavim*" only appears in Tanakh in reference to God worship or (lehavdil) idolatry. Maybe that is why the image of the people "*korim umishtachavim*" to Haman is interpreted as related to idol worship.

(the honour of) the breathing man, for what is he worth?'

Furthermore, I am the noble representative of the Almighty seeing that all the Tribes were born outside Israel, whereas my ancestor (Binyamin) was born in Eretz Yisrael³.

...Haman sent a message back to him: But did your father (Yaakov) not bow to my father (Esav⁴)? (as is states in Bereshit ch.33:3)

He (Mordechai) responded: But (at that point when Yaakov bowed down to Esav) Binyamin was not yet born! (Esther Rabba 7:8)⁵

According to this fascinating text, why does Mordechai not bow to Haman? It is very simple! It is not to an icon or idol that Mordechai refuses to bow; the problem is that Haman has turned himself into an object of worship. Mordechai repudiates Haman's self-worship and refuses to bow to Haman in disdain of his self-centred arrogance.

The Midrash, however, casts this upon a deeper, historic precedent; upon the backdrop of the family history. This rivalry is not new, but merely an increment of an ancient rivalry. The confrontation between Mordechai and Haman is merely a resurgence of the ancient friction between Jacob-Esau. Haman asserts that Mordechai should be able to bow down to him seeing that Jacob bowed to Esav. Mordechai – from the tribe of Binyamin - responds that his father – Binyamin – did not cower to Esau. Binyamin was born in Eretz Yisrael; he is different to his "Goyim-Jew" brothers who were born in Haran. Benjamin is a "Sabra." And the Midrash seems to be suggesting that in Mordechai's mind, Yaakov's bowing is a reflection of the influence of his sojourn in Galut, his Diaspora life, in which he must adopt a subservient to the non-Jew. But Binyamin, Mordechai's ancestor, is born in his land, free and proud. He will not be controlled by another person. He is fiercely independent. He refuses to view himself as a subject of the Persian Empire and prefers to see himself as an heir to the royal tradition of his forebears. He really views himself as still "God's nobleman" in Eretz Yisrael.⁶

EVALUATING MORDECHAI

Traditionally we view Mordechai as correct in his actions in the Megilla. From a young age, we have been trained to perceive Haman as evil and dangerous and Mordechai as acting correctly. (It is certainly difficult to deny that Haman is the aggressor, and the Jews, the victim) But I do wonder how people today would view Mordechai's persistent refusal to

³ Mordechai was a descendent of the Tribe of Binyamin. all the tribes were born in Haran except for Binyamin who was born "on the road" in Beit-Lechem – where Rachel was buried.

⁴ Amalek is a grandson of Esav – see Bereshit 36:12, and according to tradition, Haman was an Amalekite descended from King Agag.

אסתר רבה פרשה ז⁵

ח מה אמר להם מרדכי למי שאומר לו מדוע אתה עובר את מצות המלך, ר' לוי אמר אמר להם מרדכי משה רבינו הזהיר לנו בתורה (דברים כ"ז) ארור האיש אשר יעשה פסל ומסכה, ורשע זה עושה עצמו עבודת כוכבים, וישעיהו הנביא הזהירנו (ישעיהו ב') חדלו לכם מן האדם אשר נשמה באפו כי במה נחשב הוא, ולא עוד אלא שאני איסגנטרין של הקדוש ברוך הוא שכל השבטים נולדו בחוצה לארץ וזקני נולד בארץ ישראל, אמרון ליה ונימר ליה, מיד ויגידו להמן וגו' אמר לון המן, אמרון ליה זקנו הלא השתחוה לזקני, הדא ה"ד (בראשית ל"ג) ותגשן השפחות וגו' ואחר נגש יוסף ורחל וישתחוו, היתב ועדין לא נולד בנימין, אמרון ליה ה"ד ויגידו להמן.

Rashi also adopts this approach.

⁶ Of course, one can come up with other options here. The Yalkut Shimoni presents a fascinating personal rivalry between Haman and Mordechai. Yoram Hazony in his book, the Dawn suggests that this was a political dispute in which Mordechai rejected the totalitarian rule that Haman represented as opposed to the 7 advisors of ch.1!) see pgs 48-51; 67-68.

honour Haman. After all, his actions lead directly to Haman's scheme of annihilating the Jews!

I believe that Mordechai would find himself open to criticism according to either of the motives that we articulated above.

On the option of idolatry, we are talking about an image emblazoned upon Haman's clothing. According to other Midrashim, an idolatrous icon was suspended around his neck. Whichever of the options one follows, Mordechai could have asserted that he was not honouring the idol but was in fact bowing to the Prime Minister regardless of his religious labelling. Might Mordechai not have relied on a "heter" (a legal leniency) in this situation? Was the sole option at Mordechai's disposal that of acting in so provocatively a manner towards Haman.

According to our second Midrash, the issues are further sharpened. Mordechai wages a battle of status, of egos, with Haman. But, once again, are any of the issues so weighty as to endanger the fate of the Jewish people? I can almost hear our contemporary critics weighing in against Mordechai, attacking his religious intransigence, his irrational extremism, his political short-sightedness, his generating anti-Semitism in the corridors and halls of government.

The Talmud itself in an incredible passage⁷ attributed to the Amora, Rava, suggests that it would have been better had neither Mordechai nor Haman ever been born. The Talmud equates the two as if they were BOTH the agitators!

If Mordechai was correct in his actions, could we imagine ourselves as acting that way?

ACHASHVEROSH'S FEAST

"Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's students asked him: Why did the Jews of that era deserve this decree of annihilation?

He replied – Why don't you try to suggest an answer!

They responded: It was because they enjoyed Achashverosh's feast.

But, (responded Rabbi Shimon) then the Jews of Shushan should have been punished, what about the rest of world Jewry?

They replied: Why don't you try to suggest an answer!

He said: Because they bowed down to the idol (of Nevukhadnezzar)"

(Megilla 12a)

Again, this discussion suggests two alternatives as to the sin that prompted Haman's decree. One answer is more amorphous, the other based on the more concrete issue of Avoda Zara! What is problematic about the feast, the party thrown by Achashverosh? Is it the non-kosher wine, the inappropriate entertainment? Some suggest that the party constituted a celebration by Achashverosh to mark the Jews' loss of their Temple and independence. In that case, was the problem that the Jews were essentially attending an event that was anti-Semitic in nature? Stupidity perhaps; but hardly a sin!

Now, of course there ARE considerable problems with attending a party of this sort. Our Shulkhan Arukh has many laws to restrict socializing and mixing with non-Jews. The prohibitions against wine, bread, cooking by a Gentile are all aimed to restrict mingling thereby reducing the possibility of

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ב עמוד ז⁷

רבא אמר: כנסת ישראל אמרה לאידך גיסא: ראו מה עשה לי יהודי ומה שילם לי ימיני, מה עשה לי יהודי - דלא קטליה דוד לשמעאי, דאיתיליד מיניה מרדכי, דמיקני ביה המן. ומה שילם לי ימיני - דלא קטליה שאול לאגג, דאיתיליד מיניה המן, דמצער לישראל.

intermarriage. But the Jews of Shushan are faced with a dilemma. If they do not attend, they snub the king. If they do attend, they compromise their own integrity. Is the Gemara being absolutely precise when it accuses the Jews of Shushan not of attending the party but rather of enjoying it? I don't know. But again, I ask myself, if representatives of the Jewish community were invited to the White House, Windsor Castle, the Élysée Palace, would they not go? Sure they would attend!

According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the problem is that the Jews bowed to Nevukhadnezzar's image (see Daniel ch.3). In that story, the entire Babylonian Empire were instructed to bow before an image and three stubborn Jews refused, and were saved by a miracle. It sounds quite a lot like Purim. But, says Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the rest of the Jews should not have bowed. Indeed, this is idolatry, pure and simple. And yet, I do wonder how so many Jews justified their participation. Did they simply not care, or did they recite Shema Yisrael under their breaths?

QUESTIONS OF DIFFERENCE, DEFIANCE AND DEFERENCE

From a contemporary perspective, we frequently have to face situations in which we feel compelled to compromise this detail or that to fit in with the general culture. Jews outside Israel excel in this sort of accommodation⁸. We try to compromise on form rather than substance and we frequently have to make choices as to what aspects of our tradition are open to bargain and which elements are not up for discussion. We too face questions as to when and where we should emphasise our Jewish identity and stake our claim, or alternatively to keep our heads down and weather the storm and the unpleasantness.

So these interpretations certainly give me food for thought. If we ever found ourselves in Mordechai's situation how would we act? Would we bow or would we refuse to bend? Would we make the choices that Mordechai made? Would we stand up for our independence, our integrity or would we compromise?

On the other hand, Mordechai seems to recognise that sometimes one cannot simply refuse to cooperate. After all, Esther is taken to the palace. She could have committed suicide rather than face the king. Or refuse to go. Mordechai supports her. So what game is Mordechai playing there? Might we suggest that there are missing pieces of the puzzle that obscure our full understanding as to why Mordechai was so defiant in confrontation with Haman?

It is interesting that the section of the Gemara that dissects the Purim story (Megilla daf 10-16) concludes with a discussion of an interesting proverb:

"Bow to the fox when he is in his period of good fortune." (Megilla 16b)

This proverb is applied to Joseph's brothers bowing to him, or alternatively, Yaakov himself bowing to his son. Of course the situation is very different. But it is fascinating that the Talmudic passage ends with a statement that suggests that when a man has his period of governance, it would be prudent or even appropriate to bow to him, to recognise him as such.

IN FAVOUR OF MORDECHAI

⁸ The Ibn Ezra's comment mentioned above is informative and poignant in this regard. "Could he have not spoken to Esther to get transferred away from the "Gate of the King" so that he wouldn't agitate Haman especially as he saw that Haman had particular good fortune at this time? The answer is that he couldn't move from the Gate by a Royal order at pain of death." - It expresses the reality of being under the control of another country, unable to set our own priorities or agenda.

And yet, I am unsatisfied with what we have suggested here.

Mordechai was not irresponsible or egotistical. Clearly, he understood things about the situation that are not evident from the pure text. Was Haman a fanatical Jew-hater, or a religious fundamentalist insisting that everyone adopt a national religion? In either case, nothing Mordechai might have done would have placated Haman.

Alternatively, the issue is not with Haman but with the Jewish people. There are those who wish to suggest that Mordechai and Esther were both somewhat assimilated; their names reflecting Persian deities.⁹ Possibly, Mordechai understood that at the bottom line, however assimilated a person was, Jews were unable (for whatever reason – see Midrashim above–) to bow to Haman. This was a "wake-up-call" to the entire Jewish community of Shushan that enabled them to reconnect with their Jewish identity rather than hide from it. Sometimes, there are fundamental things that are worth fighting for, even at the cost of the calm and safety of the community.

Interestingly, when the Gemara describes a time in which God needs to induce Israel to return, to repent and to embark upon a path of redemption they talk about "a king whose decrees are as bad as Haman." (Sanhedrin 97b) This crisis generated a rediscovery of Jewish identity and commitment!

Much to think about!
Purim Sameach!

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⁹ Most recently, see Rav Beni Lau:
<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4039814,00.html>