

"FATEFUL DAYS"

It is ironical that in Israel greater emphasis seems to be laid on Purim than on Hanukkah. Whereas Hanukkah is amply celebrated, there is even greater festivity on Purim, with its colorful parades and famous adeloyada carnival. In the Diaspora, however, because of the coincidence of a certain non-Jewish holiday, Hanukkah is emphasized out of all proportions to its real value, whereas Purim suffers from relative neglect.

I say it is "ironical" because Hanukkah is really more appropriate to a free and independent Jewish State, while Purim is more appropriate to those Jewish communities living in galut, amongst other peoples who form the majority and whose cultural patterns predominate. Hanukkah was an occasion of open rebellion, on the soil of the Holy Land, for independence. It successfully achieved the renaissance of Jewish freedom. There was no diplomacy, no apologetics; there was out-right war. Purim, contrariwise, is a Diaspora holiday. It is a story about a Persian king who remains a king. It tells of a Jew who rises high - in non-Jewish circles. It is a great Jewish story where, however, the uniquely Jewish element is toned down lest it give offense to the state-religion of the Persian empire.

This fact, usually ignored, explains not only the essence of the Purim holiday, but also clears up for us certain difficulties in the understanding of Megillat Esther. I beg your leave to give you the gist of a study of the Megillah that appeared two years ago in the Israeli Army Journal Machanayim. I trust that it will prove a new and fascinating insight into one of the most beloved books of the Bible.

Whos is the real hero of the Megillah? Of course, if we refer the question to the folk-consciousness of our people, there is no doubt that the answer is either Esther or Mordecai. Remarkably, however, if we refer to the Book of the Megillah

itself, we discover that the name mentioned most frequently throughout the entire book is that of King Ahaseurus. One nineteenth century Jewish scholar went to the trouble of counting the number of times that the term melekh, King, appears in this little book. His study showed that the name appears no less than 187 times! King Ahaseurus is a central figure, the axis of the whole plot. All revolves about him, nothing occurs without him. At almost every point we are apprised of the feelings and emotions of Ahaseurus: the king is happy, the king is angry; the king is restless, the king is upset; the king is fuming, the king is drunk; the king commands, the king consents. Even the greatness of Mordecai is tied to the king. At the very end of the book, we read that "for Mordecai the Jew was next unto King Ahaseurus..."

Yet, despite the fact that nothing seems to happen in this book without the ubiquitous king, he appears as a man who is feeble, spineless, unimaginative, and powerless. In the ten chapters of Megillat Esther, not one single act of importance is initiated by Ahaseurus - except, of course, his merry-making at parties and his romantic adventures. Even in these he shows no originality! He is angry at Vashti - but it is Memukhan who suggests that she be punished. He looks for a new queen - but only after the young men of his court have recommended it. He makes the decision to commit genocide against the Jewish people - only because Haman has proposed it. Soon he gives his royal ring to Haman, thus making him, for all practical purposes, the ruler of the realm. Later he will give the same ring to Mordecai - thus gearing the whole apparatus of government to a new policy. And when he is fuming against Haman, he hangs him - only because the idea is planted in his mind by one of his ministers.

So that the Book of Esther shows this remarkable paradox: on the one hand, the king is an essential figure; on the other hand, he is a mere follower, a weakling, a king who reigns but does not rule. He is, in the words of our Rabbinic tradition, a melekh tipesh - a foolish and ineffectual sovereign. He is a royal puppet; others hold the strings.

How does one account for this paradox? If Ahaseurus is really a non-entity, why does everything seem to revolve about him?

The answer is that the Megillah as a document promulgated by Mordecai and Esther was, of necessity, addressed to two separate audiences. Primarily, it was written to and for their fellow Jews both of that age and all ages. But secondarily, it was a document which had to satisfy, or at least not offend, Ahaseurus, his royal court, and especially the official religion of the empire. The Jews of Persia triumphed, they were victorious, but they could not afford to assert their independence as openly as were the Maccabees able to do in a later era. They were still in galut. Hence, the tale must be subdued. It must be written on two levels: revealed and concealed, open and hidden, an outer and an inner story. And hence, in the words of Mordecai himself, the Megillah was sent to the Jewish communities of 127 provinces as divrei shalom va'emet - words of "peace" and "truth." To the Jews the story of the Megillah was emet - truth, the real story which they had to discover by a patient and careful perusal of the text. But the apparent story of the Megillah was not the same as the inner, true story - for purposes of shalom, peacefullness, and a desire not to offend the ruling circles and established religion. In other words, the Megillah is an unusually splendid example of a diplomatic document which tries to accomodate the competing demands of shalom and emet. Let us try to analyze both levels, both stories.

Look at the Megillah superficially, and you will notice that the royal court of Ahaseurus, and the king himself, are glorified, while the distinctively Jewish religious elements - which might be offensive to Persian paganism - are subdued and only hinted at vaguely. Ahaseurus was probably proud of the praise of the melekh in the Megillah. He probably regarded it as a public relations coup, as a propaganda victory, as a worthy chronicle for the sovereign of 127 lands from India to Ethiopia.

Of the 34 times that the word mishteh (party or banquet) appears in all of Scripture, 17 of them are in this Book of Esther. There is good reason for the elaborate

description in the Megillah of the king's court and his lavish banquets. The royal party was evidently a status symbol for Persian Kings. The bigger the king, the bigger and the better his parties. The one described at the beginning of Megillat Esther lasted for no less than 180 days! Vashti's downfall occurred - at a Mishteh. Esther herself plans the destruction of Haman and the frustration of the pogrom - at a mishteh. And when Mordecai and Esther declare for all generations the holiday of Purim - it consists, primarily, of a mishteh! These constant references to lavish parties, to the riches of Ahaseurus, to the extent of his reign, and attributing all actions to him, these are part of the attempt to appease the absolute monarch of this ancient empire. These are the words of shalom.

For the same reason, whatever there is of Judaism and Jewish religion in the Megillah is only in disguise. Thus, we are told that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. Our Tradition tells us the reason - it was because Haman wore, around his necks, the statue of an idol. The Megillah itself, however, makes no mention of these religious scruples of Mordecai. A three-day fast assembly is declared by Esther and Mordecai. The Megillah mentions nothing about prayer, and certainly nothing about Him to Whom the prayers are directed. At the end we are told of the declaration of Purim as a holiday - but, aside from more parties, gifts, and charity, is there no thanksgiving? The Megillah tell us nothing of this, or of Him to Whom thanks are given. There is only the vaguest hint: li'heyot osim et shnei ha-yamin ha-elah - to do the two days of Purim: those who know Jewish tradition will recognize that this refers to certain religious practices. But it is only a hint. It is certainly not explicit.

In the same manner, Haman's accusations against the Jews were no doubt far more elaborate than they appear in the Megillah. The Megillah has toned them down, and recorded that Haman accused us only of being dispersed and "different." In all probability, Haman told Ahaseurus that these Jews were dispersed and disunited -

and that they were united only on their stiff-necked opposition to Persian paganism. Yet the Megillah does not mention this.

Finally, the clearest indication that we have here a "diplomatic" document with an inner story that is only hinted at, comes in the verses which describe Mordecai's message to Esther when he discovers the nefarious plans of Haman's pogrom. Mordecai tells Esther that she must appear before the king to request *his assistance, or else "relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from* another place (makom acher)... and who knows (u-mi yode'a) whether thou art not come to royal estate for such a time as this." These expressions - "another place" and "who knows" - are euphemisms for G-d. The Name of God does not appear at all in this book - strange for a biblical book, is it not? So that G-d and Judaism are hinted, but nowhere are they spelled out clearly.

So, insofar as the apparent story of the Megillah is concerned, Ahaseurus is at the center, whereas Judaism is deemphasized. It is an apologetic document calculated to satisfy any third-rate Persian super-patriot. Still, the Jews knew the real meaning of the Megillah. They saw the emet despite the attempt at shalom. They did not need an interpreter for it. For the real story of the Megillah is the one that is concealed, not the superficial tale. And here there is no need to mention the Name of G-d, for the whole story is G-d~~ly~~, providential, and holy. And the real story, the emet of the story of the Megillat Esther, is - as in all of the Torah especially the story of Joseph - that every individual lives and acts on two levels. On the lower, conscious, human level, he makes his free will decisions for which he is fully responsible. But they appear out of context, it seems as if man is the true sovereign of the universe and there is no G-d Who has larger designs. Yet on a higher level, all these free, single, individual decisions and acts fall into an overall pattern determined and predestined by G-d Himself. Here man acts out the role already written by G-d. The true story, therefore, is that man is both puppet and puppeteer, master and servant of ~~this~~ fate, moulder and moulded by his destiny.



This is the inner, real story of the Megillah. It tells us to look at the grandiose figure cut by Ahaseurus, the Persian potentate. In reality he is a weakling, a despicably ineffectual piece of putty in both the hands of ~~the~~ his underlings and especially the hands of his Creator. He thinks he directs the current of events; in fact he is swept along the mighty tides and swift streams of history like driftwood on raging rivers.

Take each individual event of the Megillah's story - and it may appear insignificant. But put them together, and you have the marvelous unfolding of the will of the Hashgachah - divine providence. No individual detail seems to make too much sense in and of itself. But when you finish the reading of the story, they all fit into their places and assume meaning that surpasses what the individual actors could possibly have known at the time they were performing their normal deeds. And throughout the story, the King who might otherwise - insofar as shalom is concerned - appear as the Great Man, appears to us, in emet, as a pawn and a puppet. He plays only a minor role in which there are greater actors, and in which the director and the producer are - the Almighty.

No wonder that the Book of Esther is part of kitvei Kodesh, the Holy Scripture, and no wonder that the Rabbis, asking: Remez l'Esther min ha-Torah Minayin? (where do we find a hint or reference to Esther in the Bible?), answer: v'anokhi haster astir panai, the verse "and I shall hide my face on that day." The name of Esther is etymologically related to the word Hastir, to hide or conceal. The story of Esther is a story that is concealed within the book. Behind the veil of mundane events, in which man arrogantly assumes that he is the sole master of his own destiny and that all that counts is power and might, G-d smilingly, but hidingly, guides His universe and directs the flow of history. The Book of Esther is, indeed, the story of hastir.

Megillat Esther, the document of divrei shalom re'emet, words of peace and truth, is most appropriate to our own day. For we, not only one day a year, but throughout the twelve months, live a life of Purim. You will recall that the derivation of the word "Purim" is from the pur, the lots that Haman threw. Purim therefore means "fateful days." And in these fateful days, with the imminent threat of cosmic catastrophe, all human beings, but especially Jews, must learn the two lessons of the Book of Esther. They are, first, that we must seek to accommodate the principles of shalom and emet; that is possible for them to co-exist, to maintain the integrity of emet or truth, and at the same time live a life of shalom or peacefulness.

But even more important is the story of emet as such, the real, inner, concealed story of the Megillah. It is that, despite all appearances, nothing we do is insignificant or inconsequential in the eyes of G-d. Despite occasional feelings of inferiority and flashes of meaninglessness, we are all actors in a great, divine drama. Not all is as it appears to be. What sometimes appears as great might and overwhelming power is often only a mirage in the desert of life. And in that desert, the real oasis is the will of G-d, and the human aspiration to reach out for the Almighty and follow His ways.

This is what Mordecai and Esther have taught us. And that is why, in the words of the Megillah, ve'zikhru lo yasuf mi-zaram - "and their memories shall not vanish from their children" - nor from our children or children's children unto the end of time.