

*Megillat Esther* is one of the sacred writings as part of the *Tanakh*, the biblical canon.

Revered by Jews the world over, it is the only book other than the Sefer Torah that must be read from a parchment scroll. It tells the enduring story of the Jewish struggle against persecution and anti-Semitism. Yet, remarkably, at least one contemporary rabbi described it as "a seemingly unrelated series of events," but, as we shall see, this is far from being the case. Some scholars have also doubted the authenticity of the story, despite significant archeological and linguistic confirmation of details (such as the laws, the runners, the Harem, and the structure of the palace) in the Megillah. These scholars see the Megillah as unreal, no more than a fairy tale.

The classical commentators such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim, who do offer, valuable insights into the text, have not always been well understood.

*Megillat Esther* is, in fact, a fascinating historical, political, and national tale rightly cherished by the Rabbis and the Jewish people -- a story with logic, coherence, and compelling credibility. There is enormous importance ascribed to the Megillah by the rabbis of the Talmud. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) teaches that the Torah was accepted twice -- once at Sinai and again in the time of Esther. At Sinai, the People of Israel were compelled to accept the Torah, whereas at the time of Esther they accepted it willingly. The Jerusalem Talmud (11:5) goes even further and declares that "the book of Esther and the Torah will never be abolished" even after the advent of the Messiah (and the Rambam accepts this as well.) For a book to have had such an impact as a guide to the Jews in exile, the Rabbis knew that this was an important and real story that could serve as a guide for the Jewish people.

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Why, then, have events in the Megillah been subjected to such significant doubt? A major stumbling block to a proper understanding of the text of the Megillah is the concept of the powerless Jew, drawn from much of our history. It is this prejudice that makes much of the story of Mordecai almost incomprehensible.

Who was Mordecai? What was his actual position in the Persia of Achashverosh? A proper analysis of the text leads us to <sup>was</sup> a sophisticated political and military understanding that is a key to many of the events recounted in the Megillah. That the text is not more explicit should not surprise us. After all, it was undoubtedly subject to royal Persian chronicles and historical sensitivity plus a desire to avoid a reaction to any perceived Jewish hubris or triumphalism. This may be one reason that the name of God is not mentioned in the text (although pagan idols are also not accompanied by text.) One of the first things that strikes us in the story is the description of Mordecai sitting in the king's gate: *Umordecai yoshev <sup>be</sup> ve'shar hamelekh*. Our first impression is that of an outsider not allowed into the king's palace: An image of Mordecai coming to the door of the palace, day after day, and being turned away from the palace... The Jew is presented to the reader as an outsider, a loser. We might conclude, that Mordecai is a simple, powerless Jew who has no influence independent of his relationship to Esther. What is he doing in the palace grounds?

A key to unravel this mistake is the correct understanding of the word "*Shaar*" In Hebrew, *Shaar* has two meanings: one is gate, and the other meaning is a court of justice or of a council of leaders or ministers. There are many such references in Tanakh. Example: in the Book of Ruth, in order to marry Ruth, Boaz convenes a court at the gate of the city. The gate is

the court. Therefore, the correct understanding of the Megillah text is that Mordecai has an important official position -- his place is at the gate, where he sits as a judge or minister to the king -- "The king's servants who are at the king's gate" and who bow down to Haman. The king himself says, "Mordecai the Jew who sits in the king's gate," making it clear that this is an official position. It is here and not in a side street, that Mordecai learns of a plot to assassinate the king. The term used *Va'yivada* (2:22) -- "it became known" -- to Mordecai, refers to the intelligence network that Mordecai employs several times in the Megillah. Now we ask: How Mordecai had such a sophisticated *yāshāṽ be'shār ha-melekh*? How come Mordecai ~~has~~ such an intelligence network? Also, the Targum translates *yoshev be'shaar ha-melekh* <sup>sits in the king's</sup> gate" (Esther 2:19) to be *netiv b'Sanhedrin* as in the Sanhedrin, the Court.

There is a fascinating Midrash cited by Louis Ginsberg in his *The Legends of the Jews from Joshua to Esther* Vol. IV, p. 397, J.P.S. 1913.

"The hatred of Mordecai cherished by Haman was due to more than the hereditary enmity between the descendants of (king) Saul and Agag (of Amalek)...

"It once happened that a city in India rebelled against Achasheverosh. In great haste troops were dispatched there under the command of Mordecai and Haman." By the end of the first three years, Haman squandered his provisions and needed Mordecai to bail him out. Finally, Haman sold himself to Mordecai and a contract was written. Later, because of Mordecai's hold over him, <sup>he</sup> ~~he~~ was enraged against Mordecai and the Jews and resolved to extirpate the Jewish people" (p. 399).



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This Midrash tells us three things: 1. Mordecai and Haman were both generals at an earlier time. 2. They were equals at one time, and 3. There was competition and enmity between them.

With this key we can understand how Mordecai might keep and develop an intelligence network; why he would sit at the king's gate of ministers, <sup>3:3</sup> and why did he not think it necessary to bow down to his rival? 3:2-4 There was also tribal rivalry: Mordecai as head of the Jewish tribes, and Haman of the Amalekites, ancient enemies of Israel. Mordecai would also have allies in the palace and informants in the Harem. When Mordecai went each day to the Harem of the women he knew he could get the latest information on the fate of Esther and her status.

The Malbim points out that there were two books of records: the official chronicles that Haman controlled, and the personal book of remembrance of the kings, <sup>Be me</sup> his autobiography that told of Mordecai's saving the king's life. Esther is able to credit Mordecai, through his intelligence network that had saved the king's life. Haman is able to wipe out the official record of Mordecai's saving the king -- but not the kings private records. Haman probably took credit for saving the king and is elevated above all other ministers right after that. When, overcome by his sleeplessness, <sup>he</sup> <sup>he</sup> had his people ready to him from his personal biography, Achashverosh became ware of Haman's duplicity, <sup>he</sup> he made Haman personally glorify Mordecai.

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