

מגילת אסתר
Megillah

THE KOL MENACHEM MEGILLAH

THE SLAGER EDITION

מגילת אסתר
Megillah

THE KOL MENACHEM MEGILLAH

*With commentary and insights
anthologized from
Classic Rabbinic Texts and
the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe*

*Compiled and Adapted by
Rabbi Chaim Miller*

THE GUTNICK LIBRARY OF JEWISH CLASSICS



THE KOL MENACHEM MEGILLAH

with commentary from classic Rabbinic texts,
and the Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

ISBN-13: 978-1-934152-24-9 ISBN-10: 1-934152-24-2

© Copyright 2010 by Chaim Miller

Published and Distributed by:

Kol Menachem
827 Montgomery Street,
Brooklyn, NY 11213
1-888-580-1900
1-718-951-6328
1-718-953-3346 (Fax)
www.kolmenachem.com
info@kolmenachem.com

First Edition — December 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced
in any manner whatsoever without written permission from
the copyright holder, except in the case of brief quotations in
reviews for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper or broadcast.

Kol Menachem is a not-for-profit organization. Proceeds
from the sales of books are allocated to future projects.

בהזמנות לפנות:

”חיש” – הפצת המעיינות, כפר חב”ד

טל': 03-9600770 פאקס: 03-9606761

chish770@gmail.com www.chish.co.il

היכל מנחם, ירושלים, רחוב ישעיהו 22

טל': 02-5384928, פאקס 02-5385015, ת.ד. 5955

hmj@neto.bezeqint.net

ENGLAND & EUROPE: MENDEL GORMAN info@jerusalemthegolden.com

AUSTRALIA: GOLD'S: 95278775 OR SHAUL ENGEL: 0438260055

SOUTH AFRICA: chabadbooks@mweb.co.za • 0117861561



Dedication of the

KOL MENACHEM MEGILLAH

*The Kol Menachem Megillah
is dedicated to
our dear friends*

DAVID & LARA SLAGER

and their children

Hannah and Sara Malka

NEW YORK / LONDON

*May the merit of
spreading words of Torah
illuminated by the teachings of Chasidus
to thousands across the globe
be a source of blessing
for them and their family
for generations to come.*





Contents

Foreword	xiii
Blessings Before Reading the Megillah	2
“This took place in the days of Ahasuerus...” <i>An interesting parallel between the Megillah’s preoccupation with detail and the trivialities that dominate our daily lives. (PG)</i>	4
“In the days of Ahasuerus” <i>G-d is absent throughout the Megillah. Or is He? (MI)</i>	5
“From Hodu to Cush” <i>What is the significance of these place names? (TH)</i>	5
“A banquet for seven days, for all the people found in Shushan” <i>How a cheerful banquet gave birth to the threat of genocide. (TH-PG)</i>	6
“To comply with each man’s will” <i>How should Jews perceive their host culture in exile? (PG)</i>	7
“On the seventh day, when the king’s heart was merry with wine” <i>A lesson in Jewish feasting. (TH-JL)</i>	9
“What ought to be done... with Queen Vashti?” <i>What was Ahasuerus’ dilemma? (TH)</i>	11
“Mordechai the son of Ya’ir the son of Shimei the son of Kish” <i>The complex character of Mordechai. (MI)</i>	14
“Hadassah—that is, Esther” <i>Two names of your soul. (MI)</i>	17
“When the turn of Esther came... she requested nothing” <i>The soul’s ascent to G-d—without ego. (MI)</i>	18
“Mordechai was sitting at the king’s gate” <i>Reading the messages of your life. (TH-PG)</i>	20

“Esther observed Mordechai’s orders” <i>Esther’s superiority over Mordechai. (TH)</i>	21
“Esther told it to the king in Mordechai’s name” <i>Maintaining honesty in the face of danger. (TH)</i>	23
“Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite” <i>The typology of Haman and Amalek. (PG)</i>	24
“But Mordechai would not kneel or bow down” <i>Uncompromising commitment to Judaism. (PG)</i>	25
“Haman became filled with rage” <i>Exploring the impossibility of Haman’s ego. (PG)</i>	26
“They had told him Mordechai’s nationality” <i>What motivated Mordechai’s obstinacy? (TH-MI)</i>	27
“Haman sought to destroy all the Jews” <i>Assimilation and the power of Jewish identity. (TH-MI)</i>	28
“A <i>pur</i> —that is, a lot—was cast, for every day and every month, before Haman” <i>Sense and order in the lotteries. (TH)</i>	28
“A <i>pur</i> —that is, a lot—was cast” <i>A mystical insight into the lots of Haman. (MI)</i>	29
“There is one nation spread and scattered among the nations” <i>The causes of Jewish survival throughout history. (TH-PG)</i>	30
“Ten thousand silver talents” <i>Exploring the symbolism of the Tabernacle donation that preempted Haman’s monetary bribe. (MI)</i>	31
“You may keep the silver” <i>Did the king’s rejection damage Haman’s plan? (TH)</i>	32
“To destroy, kill, and exterminate all the Jews” <i>The Midrash’s analogy of a bird trying to drain the sea. (MI)</i>	33
“Young and old, little children and women” <i>Purim as an egalitarian festival. (JL)</i>	35

“Their possessions are to be plundered” <i>Haman’s plan and Hitler’s.</i> (TH)	35
“Now Mordechai knew everything that had happened” <i>What sin led G-d to consent to the Jews’ destruction?</i> (TH)	36
“Mordechai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out through the city, crying a loud and bitter cry” <i>Schoolchildren prophesied Haman’s downfall to Mordechai, causing him extreme joy. Why the bitter lament?</i> (TH-MI)	37
“Mordechai told over everything that had happened to him” <i>A lesson in mutual responsibility.</i> (TH-PG)	38
“For the elimination of the Jews” <i>Mordechai reached out to all, regardless of religious affiliation.</i> (MI-PG)	39
“And who knows—perhaps the monarchy came your way precisely for this moment?” <i>An analysis of the debate between Mordechai and Esther.</i> (TH-MI)	40
“Go and assemble all the Jews” <i>Torah education—our nation’s weapon of survival.</i> (MI-PG)	42
“All the Jews” <i>Inclusion or exclusion? Two conflicting approaches to Jews who have strayed from the fold.</i> (TH-MI)	42
“I and my girls will also fast... Then I will go to the king” <i>How did Esther perceive the power of her beauty?</i> (MI)	43
“Then, on the third day” <i>A discrepancy between the Midrash and Talmud.</i> (TH)	44
“The king extended to Esther the golden scepter” <i>A pivotal moment in the Megillah viewed through a spiritual lens.</i> (MI)	45
“Let the king and Haman come today” <i>The mystery of Esther’s two dinner parties.</i> (TH)	45
“During the wine party” <i>A mystical message behind the Megillah’s emphasis on wine.</i> (MI-PG)	47

“Have a gallows made, fifty cubits high”	49
<i>Haman’s gallows and Avraham’s tree—a midrashic connection. (MI)</i>	
“That night....”	50
<i>When G-d raises His voice.... (MI-PG)</i>	
“The king’s sleep was disturbed”	51
<i>What sends G-d “to sleep”? And how does He “wake up”? (MI)</i>	
“The clothing and the horse”	53
<i>These clothing items mask a mystical secret of creation. (MI)</i>	
“Then Mordechai returned to the king’s gate”	55
<i>A lesson in faith and priorities. (MI-PG)</i>	
“Queen Esther said in reply”	56
<i>Why it’s better that there are no overt miracles in the Megillah. (MI)</i>	
“If I have found favor in your eyes, O king”	56
<i>Esther as a role model for Jewish women throughout the ages. (PG)</i>	
“My people”	57
<i>How did Esther win over Ahasuerus without a counterargument to Haman’s slander? (TH-PG)</i>	
“Would he actually assault the queen while I am in the room?”	59
<i>What made Ahasuerus jump to this odd conclusion? (TH)</i>	
“Fifty cubits high”	60
<i>Why fifty? Exploring the mystical secret of the Hebrew letter Nun. (MI)</i>	
“King Ahasuerus gave the estate of Haman to Queen Esther”	62
<i>Are we not commanded to eradicate all association with Amalek? Why was Esther permitted to benefit from Haman’s estate? (JL)</i>	
“An order that has been already written with the king’s name and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked”	64
<i>Ahasuerus’ reluctant participation in the Jews’ salvation. (TH-MI)</i>	
“The text of the document”	66
<i>The relationship between the Jews and other nations. (TH-PG)</i>	

“Wearing blue and white royal attire, a large golden crown, and a purple linen cloak”	69
<i>Purim, the Persian royal wardrobe, and the Oral Law. (MI)</i>	
“Light, happiness, joy and honor”	70
<i>Four rungs on the ladder of worship. (PG-MI)</i>	
“The Jews gathered in their cities”	72
<i>Why is this day known as “The Fast of Esther”? (TH)</i>	
“But they did not take the plunder”	75
<i>Why not? An insight into the mood of devotion. (MI)</i>	
“Let tomorrow too be granted to the Jews to do the same as today’s decree”	77
<i>Understanding Esther’s audacity. (TH-JL)</i>	
“They had relief on the fourteenth, making it a day of feasting”	78
<i>The contrast between Purim and Chanukah. (JL-MI)</i>	
“The fourteenth of the month of Adar a day of celebration and feasting, a holiday”	79
<i>If intoxication is a vice, how can it become a mode of worship? (JL-MI)</i>	
“To make them days of feasting and joy”	80
<i>“Cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordechai.” (MI)</i>	
“To make them days of feasting and joy”	81
<i>Two halachic constructs of joy. (JL)</i>	
“Therefore, they named these days Purim, after the <i>pur</i> ”	82
<i>How Purim reaches where Yom Kippur cannot. (MI)</i>	
“The Jews confirmed and irrevocably accepted on themselves”	83
<i>The Jews reconfirmed their commitment at Sinai. (MI)</i>	
“These days will be remembered and observed”	84
<i>Applying the lesson of Purim to education. (MI-PG)</i>	
“These days of Purim will never cease among the Jews”	85
<i>How Purim will outlive all other festivals in the Messianic Era. (JL-MI)</i>	

<p>“Upon Esther’s request, this account of Purim was ratified, and it was canonized in the scriptures.”</p> <p><i>The eternity of the Megillah as a sacred written text, similar to the Five Books of Moses. (JL)</i></p>	86
<p>“King Ahasuerus imposed a tax”</p> <p><i>Why does the drama of the Purim story end anticlimactically with the legislation of a tax law? (PG)</i></p>	88
<p>Blessings After Reading the Megillah</p>	90
<p><i>Shoshanas Ya’akov / “The Rose of Jacob”</i></p>	92
<p>Some Laws and Customs of Purim</p>	95
<p>Bibliography</p>	99



Foreword

THE *Book of Esther* stands out as exceptional in the Biblical Canon for a number of reasons. Firstly, because of the richness of its narrative and artistic plot. We get a glimpse into a topsy-turvy world of excesses and frivolity, climaxes and anticlimaxes, tension and humor, expectation and frustration. The clarity and vividness of the characters make them accessible to children, but they remain real and meaningful to adults.

A second remarkable quality is the “secular” nature of the book. The story has little overt religious content. On the surface, there is no stress on piety or commitment to Jewish values, which has challenged centuries of Rabbinic thinkers to derive a religious message from the text. And the lack of G-d’s obvious presence in the *Megillah*—He is not mentioned even once¹—lends this book a very different character to other Biblical works.

The *Book of Esther* also rings home because it is the Diaspora story. The Jews who attend the feast of Ahasuerus want to hide their identity and assimilate into the majority population; they only identify as Jews when faced with a threat. And while it is the result of circumstances beyond her control, Esther, the heroine of our story, is actually married to a non-Jew. Modern, secular Jews like the book because, to some extent, they see themselves in it.

From the *Megillah* we learn how to perceive G-d in a world devoid of revelation and miracles and we are sensitized to the notion of Divine providence and individualized purpose. The *Megillah* seems to address those questions which bother us perennially: How can the Jewish community survive and thrive in the Diaspora? How should we react to communal crisis? What is the relationship between the Jewish community in exile and its host culture? And where do we see G-d in contemporary life? You cannot listen to the *Megillah* and not start to ponder the deeper questions of humanity, Jews and history.

1. The name of G-d was omitted from the *Megillah* out of a fear that when the text would be copied by the Persians into their own chronicles they might substitute G-d’s name with the names of their own gods (*Ibn Ezra to Esther* 8:6).

A further factor in the book's success—though perhaps it is a symptom of it—is the disproportionate amount of Rabbinic commentary it has attracted. There is more *Targum*² and *Midrash*³ on Esther than any other part of the Jewish Bible. The book was also extremely popular among Medieval exegetes⁴, and has inspired countless subsequent commentaries. But while these classic works are both authoritative and sacred in the Jewish tradition, they do not close the text to further exegesis or insist on one monolithic, definitive reading. The gates of interpretation always remain open, as this volume, and so many others, demonstrate.

Synopsis of the Book of Esther

The *Megillah* (Scroll) of *Esther* really has one purpose: to encourage all Jews to celebrate the festival of Purim. But while this may be the *goal* of the text, it is not its main *theme*.

The book begins with a tale of gross indulgence. Ahasuerus (*Achashverosh*), King of Persia and Media, throws two extraordinarily lavish banquets, one for his immediate circle, and another for the men of the capital, Shushan (1:1-8). His wife, Queen Vashti, hosts a third banquet for her circle of friends and staff (v. 9).

Details of the sheer opulence of these feasts are not spared, preparing us for the first of many reversals and anticlimaxes, which fill the *Megillah*: The most powerful and wealthy man in the world, who rules over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, cannot get his wife to listen to him. Thoroughly intoxicated, Ahasuerus

2. A *Targum* (pl. *Targumim*) is an interpretive Aramaic translation. The two *Targumim* to *Esther* incorporate extensive *Midrashic* commentary.
3. The *Midrashim* are Rabbinic, exegetical commentaries that expand on the text with fabulous episodes and dialogues that paint the story in sharper relief. *Midrashim* on *Esther* include: *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ascribed to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (9th century); *Esther Rabbah* (11th-12th century); *Midrash Lekach Tov* (12th century); *Midrash Megillas Esther* (13th century); *Midrash Panim Acherim* (13th century) and *Yalkut Shimoni* (13th century?). A full *Midrashic* commentary is also found in the *Babylonian Talmud* (tractate *Megillah* 10b-17a).
4. Important Medieval commentators include: *Rashi* (11th century); Joseph Kara (11th century); *Rashbam* (12th century); Yehudah *ha-Chasid* (12th-13th century); *Ibn Ezra* (12th century); *Bachaye ben Asher* (13th century); Gersonides (14th century); *Ramah* (14th-15th century); Yitzchak Arama (15th century). See Bibliography for a full list of commentaries cited in this work.

sends an escort of no less than seven chamberlains, summoning Vashti to the men's banquet, to display her beauty. She refuses. The king, rendered weak and ineffectual in the midst of a banquet which is supposed to display his power, is thrown into an uncontrollable rage (v. 12).

But despite Vashti's public insubordination, which would ordinarily spell an instant death-sentence, Ahasuerus does not order her execution right away. We get the impression that he wishes to hold on to his beautiful wife, as he consults with seven trusted advisors, hoping for some way out of this mess. The king, however, is trumped by Persian bureaucracy. If the queen will be spared, his advisors argue, the patriarchal subordination of women will be undermined. It is crucial that the king seizes this opportunity to punish Vashti, and that it is publicized to the entire nation by royal edict, to preserve the androcentric *status quo* of Persian society. The king quickly consents, and the documents are issued.

It is not long, of course, before Ahasuerus is seeking another woman. Once again, the king's inner sense of powerlessness seems to be compensated for by excessive behavior. He orders a selection process to include *every* beautiful young maiden throughout his vast empire (2:1-4).

Among these young women is a Jewish girl called Hadassah (though, for the rest of the story she will be referred to by her Gentile name, Esther). She is an orphan, adopted by her cousin Mordechai, an immigrant who has enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence in Ahasuerus' court (v. 5-7). Disguising her ethnicity, Esther is drawn into the contest and—astonishingly—wins (v. 8-17). Her coronation is cause for yet another banquet (v. 18), the fourth of ten feasts that we read of in this short book.⁵ As many have noted, G-d is not mentioned explicitly in the *Megillah*, but Esther's appointment, before the rise of Haman, is the first clear evidence of His presence.

The following passage seems unrelated but proves crucial to the story. Mordechai learns of an assassination plot against the king, and, through Esther, informs the monarch, saving his life (v. 21-

5. We will also read of Feast 5: Haman and Ahasuerus' banquet (3:15); Feasts 6-7: Two banquets with Esther, the king and Haman (5:1-8; 7:1-9); Feast 8: The Jews' initial celebratory feast (8:17); and, Feast 9-10: Two Purim celebrations (9:17-19; and *ibid.* 18).

23). But when the plot is confirmed and the perpetrators executed, for some undeclared reason Mordechai is not rewarded right away. Later, this unpaid royal favor will be instrumental in the story.

Just as the Jews are enjoying unprecedented political safety and national integration, Haman—a descendant of Biblical Amalek, the nemesis of Israel—rises to power. Rapidly, he plots to exterminate the Jews, fuelled by Mordechai's consistent refusal to bow to him (3:1-6). Aware that the Jews are notoriously difficult to dispose of, he casts a lot to determine an "auspicious" day for his planned genocide. With some brief anti-Semitic rhetoric (and the offer of a large bribe), the king is soon convinced (v. 7-11). When the decree is published—to destroy all the Jews, including women and children—pandemonium erupts. In the midst of all this, the king and Haman sit down to celebrate with a feast (v. 12-15).

Mordechai, along with many other Jews, initiate public displays of repentance, fasting and mourning (4:1-4). Then, in a thrilling exchange (facilitated by a messenger), Queen Esther and Mordechai clash over the best course of action. In Mordechai's only recorded speech in the Megillah, he requests Esther to intercede and speak to the king; but she declines, arguing that such a move would be suicidal. Esther is fully aware that her predecessor was eliminated due to insubordination and she is highly reluctant to appear before the king unannounced, an act punishable in Persia by death (v. 5-11). Eventually, Mordechai's rhetoric is effective, and Esther consents to chance upon the king, provided that the Jews—all the Jews—first make the appropriate spiritual preparations by conducting a three-day fast (v. 12-16).

When Esther dares to enter the king's inner court uninvited, he is not at all disturbed by her breach of protocol. Effusing adoration for Esther, Ahasuerus offers her as much as half the kingdom. But she asks only for a banquet with the king and Haman (5:1-5). When they gather, the king repeats his offer, but Esther only sharpens the suspense as she repeats her request for yet another dinner party with the king and Prime Minister (v. 6-8).

Haman's delight at all this attention soon evaporates when Mordechai once again refuses to bow to him. When Haman shares his mixed emotions with Zeresh, his wife, she suggests eliminating Mordechai immediately on a giant gallows. Haman loves the idea, and has a gallows built (v. 9-14).

At this point, a series of reversals begins which will characterize the rest of the Megillah. The king, who is suffering from insomnia, has the royal annals read out to him. Remarkably, at this very moment when Haman seeks Mordechai's life, the king is reading a passage recounting the assassination attempt that Mordechai had exposed and for which he had never received any glory or recompense.

Haman is spotted lurking around the king's court, waiting for an opportunity to ask the king to execute Mordechai. Instead, the king asks him for a suggestion how to *honor* Mordechai! The hilarity of the moment is all the more sharpened by Haman's initial misunderstanding that the king wishes to favor him.

Haman's chosen honor for himself—donning of royal garb and riding the king's horse—is bestowed on Mordechai. Haman's shame is compounded when the king orders him to escort Mordechai personally (6:1-10).

After following the king's wishes, parading Mordechai around the city on the king's horse, Haman is utterly humiliated. In a brief scene at home, Haman's wife now reveals that she is pessimistic about his future, but without time for any discussion, Haman is rushed to the palace (v. 11-14).

At the climactic second banquet, Esther finally makes an appeal for her people to be saved. The king, apparently still oblivious to Esther's Jewish identity, demands to know who had dared to concoct this evil plot. Esther points to Haman, and it is all too much for the king, who exits in a rage (7:1-7).

Haman, seeing his end near, approaches Esther's couch in a last plea for his life. In yet another hilarious scene, the king returns just as Haman is falling all over Esther. When the king accuses Haman of making an advance against his wife, the chamberlain in attendance realizes that Haman must be immediately removed. Upon the chamberlain's suggestion, Haman is hanged on the very same gallows that he had built to eliminate Mordechai. Only then is the king calmed (7:8-10).

Just as we imagine the story is over, a further complication arises. Even as Haman's estate is handed over victoriously to Esther, the king refuses to annul Haman's genocidal decree against the Jews, claiming that once a law is passed, it cannot be revoked. He nevertheless grants Esther and Mordechai permission to *modify* the

decree in the Jews' favor (8:1-8). This turns out to be even better than a legal nullification, as now the edict is "modified" to say that instead of Persians killing Jews, Jews will be allowed to kill Persians. As soon as the new document is dispatched and Mordechai emerges from the palace, the Jews rejoice ecstatically. Now, in an ultimate reversal of the plot, the *Persians* are terrified of what the *Jews* might do to them (v. 9-17).

The Jews take advantage of the new edict to eliminate their enemies. Haman's ten sons are killed, along with five-hundred men in Shushan alone, but they do not take any spoils.

The king is disturbed by the violence but, surprisingly, he asks Esther of his own accord if she has any further requests. In an audacious but necessary move, the queen pleads for yet another day of sanctioned violence so that the Jews can finish off many enemies that still remain. This results in a total of seventy-five thousand enemies being eliminated. The day on which the Jews were finally safe, the fourteenth of *Adar*, is enacted by Mordechai and Esther (both individually and jointly) as a public holiday, to be observed through joyous banqueting, giving of food gifts to each other and charity to the poor (9:1-32).

A brief epilogue informs us that, in the aftermath of the story, Mordechai remained a powerful figure in Persia who pursued the welfare of his people but remained under the rule of Ahasuerus (10:1-3).

The *Kol Menachem Megillas Esther*

Like the previous works in the *Kol Menachem* series⁶, this volume is predominately based on the scholarly output of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), the much loved seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. Most of the Rebbe's teachings were initially delivered at regular public gatherings (*farbrengens*) attended mainly by his own followers and disciples;⁷ they were

6. *Kol Menachem Chumash* (6 vols., 2002-6); *Kol Menachem Haggadah* (2008); *Kol Menachem Rambam: Thirteen Principles of Faith* (2 vols. 2007-9).

7. For outside impressions of the *farbrengen* see: Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 3-15; Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 48-50; Bonnie J. Morris, *Lubavitcher Women in America: Identity and Activism in the Postwar Era* (SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 58-60; Lis Harris, *Holy*

later published, often under the Rebbe's own editorial guidance.⁸ At the *farbrengen* he would typically deliver a *Ma'amar* (a dense and highly esoteric Chasidic discourse), and a number of *Sichos* (sermons), which were sometimes very scholarly in their content and at other times more inspirational and instructional. One single *farbrengen* could last as long as eight or nine hours, during which time he would deliver a staggering amount of information. Auto-biographical or personal comments were extremely rare; most of the attention was directed at Torah exegesis or at issues facing the Jewish community.

The Purim *farbrengen* was a highlight of the year. It was one of the best attended gatherings, longest in length, and very high-spirited, considering that most of the crowd had already fulfilled the Rabbinic injunction to become intoxicated on this festival.⁹ On these occasions, the Rebbe was more intimate than usual, and more humorous—Chasidim would look forward to this annual event when they would experience special moments of “disclosure” from their master. In later years, the Purim *farbrengen* was televised live on cable networks, with simultaneous translation from the Rebbe's spoken Yiddish, which naturally affected the tone and content of the gathering.

From his ascent to leadership in 1951, the Rebbe conducted a Purim *farbrengen* every single year.¹⁰ Generally speaking, it would commence around 8:30–9pm, so as to give the local community an opportunity to celebrate the traditional Purim feast with their families beforehand; the gathering would continue until close to daybreak.¹¹ Even on Purim, however, the Rebbe strongly discour-

days: The World of a Hasidic Family (Touchstone, 1985), pp. 121-5; Edward Hoffman, *Despite All Odds: The Story of Lubavitch* (Simon & Schuster 1991), pp. 29-36.

8. For details, see *Kol Menachem Chumash*, pp. xvii-xix.

9. See below, pp. 79-80.

10. Until 1987, after which all weekday *farbrengens* were discontinued. From this point on, the Rebbe gave brief addresses after the prayer services, or saved his comments for the Sabbath *farbrengen*.

Audio archives of the weekday *farbrengens* can be found online at: http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/sichoskodesh_cdo/jewish/Sichos-Kodesh.htm

11. Rabbi Yehoshua Mondshine, *Otzar Minhagei Chabad, Chodesh Adar* (Heichal Menachem 2002) p. 288. From 1978 onwards, the *farbrengen* would begin a little later, at 9.30pm. (ibid.).

aged excessive alcoholism¹², issuing specific limits on consumption; and this was often an occasion that he chose to address serious issues or indulge in intricate scholarship.

a.) *How the commentaries in this book were prepared.*

It has not been an easy task to compile a running commentary on the Megillah—*Toras Menachem*—based on the Rebbe’s sermons and discourses. When you are reading these insights, please bear the following points in mind.

1.) As with all books in the *Kol Menachem* series, the commentaries are not direct translations of the Rebbe’s original delivery. While I have not introduced any of my own ideas, the insights are nevertheless rendered in my voice. This leap of adaptation has been necessary to bridge the considerable gap between the original audience, a Chasidic brotherhood with an advanced knowledge of Judaic texts, and the intended audience of this series: the modern, westernized, individualistic reader with no presumed Judaic knowledge. Considerable adaptation is also necessary due to the fact that these insights were originally delivered as lengthy, discursive sermons whereas I am attempting to render them into a concise, exegetical commentary.

2.) The commentary has been compiled from various different sources: transcripts of sermons in Yiddish and Hebrew; audio recordings of the sermons; Chasidic discourses; letters, both pastoral and private; and, of course, the scholarly essays which the Rebbe himself rigorously edited for publication with extensive footnotes (*Likutei Sichos*).¹³

Subsequent to the Rebbe’s passing, various attempts were made to present his insights on the Megillah (and Purim) systematically, and these works have eased my labor. They are:

i.) Rabbi Yehoshua Gross ed., *Megillas Esther im Shaarei Megillah* (Jerusalem: *Heichal Menachem*, 2002).

ii.) Rabbis Yosef Yitzchak Havlin and Yekusiel Farkash eds., *Sha’arei Mo’adim: Chag ha-Purim* (Jerusalem: *Heichal Menachem* 1994).

12. *ibid.* pp. 289-91.

13. For more details of these different source texts, see *Foreword to Kol Menachem Chumash*. They can all be viewed at www.hebrewbooks.org.

iii.) Rabbi Avraham Baruch Pevsner ed., *Megillas Esther ve-Birkas ha-Mazon im Likutei Biurim ve-Minhagim mi-Kevod Kedushas Admor mi-Lubavitch* (New York: Empire Press, 2003).

iv.) Rabbi Avraham Baruch Pevsner ed., *Likutei Sichos, Mo'adim: Purim*, 2 vols. (New York: Va'ad L'Hafotzas Sichos, 2008).

Most useful, however, was the *Otzar ha-Chochmah*, a huge digitized, searchable library of Judaic books in Hebrew, which contains a very large selection of Chabad books, including all of the Rebbe's published works.¹⁴

3.) Obviously, from the thousands of pages of the Rebbe's teachings on Purim from which I drew, only a fraction is presented here. Inevitably, he had his favorite themes and ideas which were often repeated from year to year—though always with a different twist or insight—while other areas were glossed over or ignored. A concept which he spoke about hundreds of times might be mentioned here just once, alongside another idea which he only spoke of briefly. So while the reader gains a free flowing commentary, he or she loses the contours of a Purim *sichah* and *farbrengen*.

b) Key Themes of the Purim Talks

To partially compensate for this drawback, I will present here, very briefly, some central concepts which reappeared perennially at the Purim *farbrengen* so that you can get a sense of what key ideas informed the Rebbe's exegesis.¹⁵

As I mentioned earlier, religious commentary on the Megillah poses quite a challenge because at the surface level of the text there is little outright indication of pious behavior. Drawing from general Rabbinic wisdom and Chabad Chasidic thought, the Rebbe picked the following as his “main ideas” to learn from the story.

1.) Religious Devotion (mesiras nefesh).

Beyond a bit of fasting, we do not see in the Megillah any special religious devotion on the part of the Jewish people. In a foundational discourse, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the

14. I was also assisted by an unpublished index of Purim *farbrengens* which Rabbi Michael Seligson kindly shared with me.

15. See also *Chag ha-Purim al pi Sichosav shel Kevod Kedushas Admor ziya in Pardes Chabad* (Rabbi Tuvya Blau and Rabbi Aryeh Leib Kaplan), issue 1, p. 16ff.

Chabad movement, notes that the decree of genocide was only directed to “Yehudim,” which, he suggests, is a religious definition and not an ethnic one. If any Jew would have converted to another religion, he or she would have been spared from Haman’s plan.¹⁶ This insight renders the Book of Esther into an astonishing story of religious devotion, because it implies that for an entire year between the edict condemning the Jews to death and its date of implementation, each individual had to choose what meant more to him: his Judaism or his life. All Jews, argues Rabbi Schneur Zalman, withstood this test, rendering it the most impressive display of devotion to Judaism in history, especially when we consider that it was largely a secularized community.

And the paradigm of *mesiras nefesh* was Mordechai, who clearly risked his life for his religion by refusing to bow to Haman.¹⁷

2.) Divine Providence.

How can the Megillah be used to inspire an awareness of G-d, when G-d is absent from the text?

The Rebbe invoked three core arguments. First, while Mordechai and Esther never speak of G-d, their *actions* suggest a profound belief in Divine providence. Esther will only beseech the king, after all the Jews have fasted for three days, because she believes that national repentance is the *real* solution to their predicament and not diplomatic pressure. And this is despite the fact that a three day fast will compromise her beauty which, if you take G-d out of the picture, was the Jews’ only hope of salvation.¹⁸ Similarly, even after Mordechai is paraded on the king’s horse, indicating a swing of fortunes in his favor, he still returns to “sackcloth and fasting” until the decree is annulled.¹⁹

The second indication of G-d is, ironically, His absence. When G-d makes His presence palpable through an overt miracle, there is a drawback: it seems as if He has been “forced,” so to speak, to violate the laws of nature so as to achieve the desired result. An infinite G-d, however, must be able to do something which is physically (and metaphysically) impossible without breaking any

16. *Torah Ohr*, 120d.

17. See pp. 25-26.

18. See p. 43.

19. See p. 55.

existing rules. A miracle is, in a sense, a shortcoming, the use of a metaphysical “emergency brake.” When a *veiled* miracle (*nes melubash ba-teva*) takes place, like in the *Megillah*, a more profound Divine influence is at play, one which does not make a mess of our earthly order. We connect to the essence (*etzem*) of G-d, which is not bound by any incompatibility problems, and not merely His manifestations (*giluyim*), which may clash fatally with Newton’s laws.²⁰

The third “sign” of G-d in the *Megillah* is the most taxing to the rational mind. According to an obscure Kabbalistic *Midrash*, King Ahasuerus alludes, exegetically, to “the King of the Universe,” G-d Himself! This is not, as you might first imagine, some sort of Purim joke. Yes, Ahasuerus was a very wicked man who, along with Haman, is the arch-enemy of our story. But, ultimately, Ahasuerus was an *agent* of G-d, who consented to the elimination of Haman and the reversal of his decree. In fact, Ahasuerus only consented to the decree of genocide because, in the heavens, G-d was angry with the Jews for sins of idol-worship. So if you are looking for signs of the heavenly King in the *Megillah* you need look no further than the earthly king mentioned in the story.²¹

3.) *Jewish errancy and choseneness*

A cornerstone of Chabad ideology in the Twentieth Century has been the notion that however far a Jew may stray from G-d, there remains an essential bond, by virtue of the Sinaitic covenant, which can never be broken. This single idea has motivated an outreach effort which now boasts thousands of centers all over the world.

The Rebbe perceived this theme in the *Megillah* within the concept of Haman’s lots (*pur*), after which the festival is named. The explanation, though, is rather esoteric. Haman reasoned that, since G-d is in essence a *singular* abstractness, the dichotomy of good and evil must pale away somewhere along the chain of emanation between us and G-d. Using the meta-rational vehicle of a lottery, Haman tried to invoke this morally neutral realm to his advantage. There is a primordial point where G-d doesn’t care about good and evil, and, over there, reasoned Haman, He doesn’t care about Jews either.

20. See p. 56. See also *Likutei Sichos, Mo’adam: Purim* vol. 2, pp. 273-352.

21. See p. 51. See also pp. 53-4 for another hint to G-d’s presence.

But Haman was mistaken. A genuine choice goes to the core, so when G-d chose the Jews, that choice penetrated the entire meta-physical chain, right up to the singular, abstract, primordial zone.²²

4.) *Amalek.*

Haman was descended from Biblical Amalek. According to Chasidic thought, Amalek represents a *typology*, a certain manifestation of evil to which we can all relate, one that is especially corrosive to the Jewish, religious spirit.

Amalek is characterized by an intolerance of pure, simple faith and a “cooling” of religious enthusiasm through cynicism and doubt.²³

5.) *Role of Women.*

The Rebbe rejected the notion that Esther’s only virtue was her beauty and that Mordechai provided all the brains. The Megillah, after all, is named after Esther and not Mordechai, pointing to an outright superiority on her part. (It could have been named after both of them.) In the Rebbe’s exegesis, Ahasuerus was in love not only with Esther’s beauty, but also her character. When she revealed to him that she was a Jewess, Ahasuerus rescinded the decree of annihilation because Jewish culture had clearly produced the finest example of humanity that he had ever encountered in a woman.²⁴

Even in the 1950’s, before the rise of feminism, the Rebbe spoke repeatedly about the powerful message that the Megillah conveys to all women, and he developed a feminine-sensitive exegesis of the Megillah.²⁵

6.) *Other topics.*

Other favorite topics at the *farbrengen* would include:

Jewish education—since, according to the *Midrash*, Mordechai reacted to the decree by gathering thousands of children.²⁶

22. See pp. 29-30. See also: Rabbi Leibel Altein, *Purim al shem ha-Pur be-Mishnas Chabad (Be-or ha-Chasidus, year 6, issue 5, p. 6ff).*

23. See pp. 24-5.

24. See pp. 21-2; 57-9.

25. See pp. 35; 42-3; 45-7; 56-7; 77-8. See *Likutei Sichos, Mo’adim: Purim* vol. 1, pp. 262-293.

26. See pp. 42; 84. See also *Sha’arei Mo’adim: Chag ha-Purim* pp. 81-103;

Transcending psychological and cognitive barriers—based on the Rabbinic requirement to reach a heightened state on Purim where a person does not know the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordechai.”²⁷

The laws and customs of Purim—which he would analyze with great skill, employing Talmudic and conceptual reasoning.²⁸

Rashi’s commentary on the Megillah—which he would expound upon in a similar style to the *Rashi Sich*a on the Torah.²⁹

Purim outreach (mivtzoin)—he would always stress the importance of arranging public *Megillah* readings and campaigned for his followers to encourage as many Jews as possible to observe the *mitzvos* of Purim.³⁰

c.) *Notable events at the Purim Farbrengens*

While the Purim *farbrengen* would generally follow its course of sermons, singing and discourse, certain events of note stand out from the Rebbe’s thirty-six years of Purim gatherings, which deserve a brief mention.³¹

1951—Only a month after he had accepted leadership of the movement, the Rebbe publicly expressed feelings of inadequacy for the position. At one point he said, “Presumably you have no other choice, and I have no other choice.”

1953—Relating a story about the demise of the Russian Czar, the Rebbe encouraged the crowd to chant repeatedly *hu ra* (which in Hebrew means “he is evil”). Three days later, Stalin died.

Likutei Sichos, Mo’adim, *ibid.* pp. 295-352.

27. See p. 35; pp. 79-80. See also Rabbi Yoel Kahan, *Shiurim be-Toras Chabad (Mayanosecha, 2006)*, pp. 44-62.

28. See *Likutei Sichos, Mo’adim: Purim* vol. 1, pp. 3-101; *ibid.* pp. 175-205.

29. See pp. 11-3; 62-3. For a full index of *Rashi Sichos* on the Megillah see: Rabbi Alter Eliyahu Friedman (ed.), *Burim le-Perush Rashi al ha-Torah* (New York: Vaad L’Hafotzas Sichos 1997), vol. 5 (*Devarim*), p. 279; *ibid.* pp. 342-3. For more on the *Rashi Sich*a see *Kol Menachem Chumash*, pp. xiii-xv.

30. See *Likutei Sichos* *ibid.* pp. 239-260; Rabbi Shmuel Bistritsky, *ha-Mivztoim ki-Hilchasam* (Kfar Chabad: 2009), pp. 102-129.

31. For details of some of these events and many more unusual occurrences at the Purim *farbrengen* see: *Kovetz le-Chizuk ha-Hiskashrus: Chag ha-Purim (Va’ad Talmidei Ha-Temimim 770)*, 2010. pp. 13-36. See also *Purim with the Rebbe (Kfar Chabad Magazine, issue 943, p. 26ff)*.

1955—In an auspicious moment, the Rebbe asked all those who wished to accept upon themselves the religious challenge of being blessed with great wealth to raise their right hand. He was disappointed at the lack of responsiveness!

1958—This was the most spirited of all the Purim *farbrengens*, lasting some nine hours.

1960—Zalman Shazar, later to become President of Israel attended the Purim *farbrengen*. He also attended in 1963 and in 1971, when he was President.

1961—Spoke about the use of broadcast radio for Torah classes. (At that time, the use of modern technology was shunned in orthodox circles.) He also spoke about President Kennedy's peace corps as a model for spreading Judaism.

1963—The Rebbe burst into tears, expressing discontent that his followers were not taking his message of "outreach" seriously.

1973—Spoke of the heroic acts of his predecessor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn on Purim 1927, who gave a public speech about defying the Russian authorities, with the full knowledge that K.G.B. agents were present.

1977—Spoke passionately about maintaining the territorial integrity of the Land of Israel. After the *farbrengen*, he requested that his message be conveyed to Menachem Begin.

1979—Spoke critically of the Camp David accords.

1983—Gave an impassioned speech about the plight of Soviet Jewry.

1985—Reflected on the 850th anniversary of the birth of Maimonides (*Rambam*).

1987—The Rebbe's last Purim *farbrengen*. He spoke candidly about his views on Messianism, Jewish Universalism, and the transmission of responsibility from himself to the community.

Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the following people for their assistance in preparing this work. My colleagues in the *Kol Menachem* office: Rabbi Itzick Yarmush, Rabbi Mendy Angyalfi, Rabbi Yaakov Paley, Rabbi Menachem Kirschenbaum and Chani Telsner. I am also grateful to Rabbi Shmuel Rabin, for preparing the

Hebrew texts, and to my dear friend Eli Shear for rigorously checking and editing the manuscript. I am also indebted to Rebbetzin Sarah Nechama Yarmush for assistance with proofreading.

It is once again my pleasure and honor to dedicate this volume in the Kol Menachem series to **David and Lara Slager**. The Slager family have set a fine example to the Jewish community, both in their personal lives and with their outstanding philanthropic efforts towards an impressive array of causes across the globe. We are proud to have them as members of the Kol Menachem family, and wish David, Lara, and their precious children Hannah and Sara Malka, all the abundant blessings that they deserve.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt wishes to the backbone of our organization, **Rabbi Meyer Gutnick**, who had the courage to invest in an unknown author, and since then has been an unfailing source of material support and moral encouragement. Motivated by a great love for the Rebbe, and recognizing the urgency of spreading his Torah teachings, Rabbi Gutnick has chosen to invest his own natural talent at “getting things done” into a very worthy cause. In the merit of this, and all his many other impressive philanthropic efforts, may G-d bless him, together with his dear wife Shaindy, and all their wonderful children and grandchildren, with *chasidische nachas* and only revealed and open goodness.

May we soon merit the true and complete redemption, when all the Jewish people will be totally free to observe G-d's commands and study His Torah.

Rabbi Chaim Miller
5th Teves 5771



מגילת אסתר
Megillah
THE KOL MENACHEM MEGILLAH

ברכות לפני המגילה

- ON PURIM NIGHT, THE MEGILLAH MAY ONLY BE READ AFTER NIGHTFALL.
- FOLLOW THE MEGILLAH CAREFULLY AS IT IS CRUCIAL TO HEAR EVERY WORD IN ORDER TO FULFILL YOUR OBLIGATION.
- BEFORE THE BLESSINGS ARE MADE THE MEGILLAH IS FOLDED INTO THREE SECTIONS.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל מִקְרָא מְגִלָּה:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ
בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמַּן הַזֶּה:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ
וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמַּן הַזֶּה:



Blessings before the Megillah



- ▶ ON PURIM NIGHT, THE MEGILLAH MAY ONLY BE READ AFTER NIGHTFALL.
- ▶ FOLLOW THE MEGILLAH CAREFULLY AS IT IS CRUCIAL TO HEAR EVERY WORD IN ORDER TO FULFILL YOUR OBLIGATION.
- ▶ BEFORE THE BLESSINGS ARE MADE THE MEGILLAH IS FOLDED INTO THREE SECTIONS.

Blessed are You, God our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us about reading the Megillah.

Blessed are You, God our God, King of the universe, who enacted miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this time.

Blessed are You, God, our God, King of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

א
 וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהֵדוּ וְעַד-כּוֹשׁ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְעֲשָׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה: ב בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם כְּשֶׁבֶת | הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עַל פֶּסַח מַלְכוּתוֹ אָשַׁר בְּשׁוֹשָׁן הַבִּירָה: ג בַּשָּׁנָה שְׁלוֹשׁ לְמָלְכוֹ עָשָׂה מְשׁוֹרְתָהּ לְכָל-שָׂרָיו וְעַבְדָּיו חֵיל | פָּרָס וּמְדֵי הַפָּרָתָמִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת לְפָנָיו: ד בְּרֹחַרְאֲתוֹ

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● Why does the Megillah open by describing the greatness of Ahasuerus (v. 1)?

ALSHICH: This brings to light the greatness of the miracle. King Ahasuerus was so powerful that he was not subject to external political pressure.

● Why did he make a feast only in the third year of his rule (v. 3)?

IBN EZRA: For the first two years he was dealing with rebellious provinces. Alternatively, this was his celebratory wedding feast for his marriage to Vashti.

TORAS MENACHEM

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ — *This took place in the days of Ahasuerus...*

The abundance of seemingly irrelevant detail here is striking. If the Megillah’s purpose is to recount Haman’s attempted genocide of the Jewish people and its miraculous subversion, then this lengthy description of Ahasuerus’ political influence and his social excesses appears to be of little or no relevance. Why do we need to know that Ahasuerus ruled over exactly one hundred and twenty seven provinces, and of their precise geographical boundaries? Why do we need to be informed that he made a banquet for his ministers, with a detailed guest list, and yet another banquet for all the inhabitants of Shushan?

Of course from this introductory passage we do get a rich sense of the historical setting, but the scriptures never offer gratuitous historical narrative that is devoid of any ethical or spiritual content. What, then, is the Megillah teaching us here?

Has it ever bothered you that most of your life feels like a waste of time? As pleasurable as eating, sleeping and recreation may be, they are not *meaningful* experiences that satisfy the hunger for purpose in life. And yet it is these activities that consume most of your time. If you were to count

the hours of your life when you actually have the opportunity to be *homo sapiens*, utilizing your higher faculties of intelligence for the benefit of yourself and others, you would find that they are disturbingly low, especially when you consider that many years of immaturity are wasted in childhood. Have you ever pondered why this is the case?

Think about it rationally. Life is far too sophisticated to have simply come into being by chance. Such wonders as the staggering complexity of human physiology and the intricacy of the subatomic world point clearly to the existence of a higher coordinating power. But that same higher power which has ordained us with a formidable intellect and a hunger for meaning, has denied us, for most of our lives, the opportunity to use it!

To address this very issue—of existential confusion and pain—the Megillah begins with a treatment of some seemingly irrelevant details about the internal affairs of Ahasuerus’ kingdom (and it also ends with some apparently trivial details of Ahasuerus’ tax laws—10:1). The message here is that in the “Megillah” of life, a lot of things will inevitably seem pointless, *but that does not mean that they are futile*. Just as the text would be incomplete without these passages, your life would be lacking without those moments which, to you, seem devoid of meaning.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FEAST OF AHASUERUS

1 This took place in the days of Ahasuerus—that Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from Hodu to Cush. **2** In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital, **3** in the third year of his reign, he made a banquet for all his ministers and servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the provincial ministers being present, **4** when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the

TORAS MENACHEM

The antidote, therefore, to existential pain is intellectual humility: to realize that the same G-d who fashioned this wondrous universe simply must have a plan for every single detail, even if we cannot always fathom it.

(Based on *Sichas Purim* 5744, par. 8-11)

🕎 **בִּימֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ** — *In the days of Ahasuerus...*

Why does the Megillah, whose primary focus is Esther, Mordechai and the Jews, open with the chronicles of Ahasuerus, the non-Jewish king of Persia?

While G-d's name is not mentioned explicitly in the Megillah, a Kabbalistic *Midrash* finds it alluded to in the name Ahasuerus (*Achashverosh*): “*the beginning (acharis) and the end (rashis) are His*” (*Midrash* cited in *Me'orei Ohr* 1:182).

Extending the analogy further, if Ahasuerus alludes to the Divine, then “*the days of Ahasuerus*” could be understood as hinting to a *disclosure* of the Divine, daytime being associated with light and revelation.

This, however, seems uncomfortably distant from the literal meaning of the words. How are we to reconcile the fact that at the exoteric level, scripture speaks of the chronicles of a Persian king, while esoterically it speaks of a disclosure of sublime Divinity?

But is that not, after all, the wonder of Purim, that an awesome miracle occurred within the norms of nature; that the providential care of the-One-to-whom-the-beginning-and-end-belong was evident *even through the actions of the lowly King Ahasuerus?*

So the Megillah opens with Ahasuerus because he was the ultimately *target* of the revelation, the “location” of the miracle.

(Based on *Sichas Motzoie Purim* 5750, par. 4)

🕎 **מְהוּדוּ וְעַד-כּוּשׁ** — *From Hodu to Cush*

Chasidic discourses perceive here a hint, not only to the vast geography of Ahasuerus' kingdom, but also to the variety of their temperaments. Hodu is a derivative of the Hebrew word *hod*, “glory,” suggesting illumination; Cush, on the other hand, means “dark,” suggesting an impoverishment of light. So in Ahasuerus' one hundred and twenty-seven provinces we had both enlightened communities, as well as those who were ignorant and uncouth. This would later prove troublesome for the Jews as it would mean that Ahasuerus' decree against them would be well accepted in a wide range of social circles due to his broad, cross-communal popularity.

(Based on *Sichah* of Purim 5744, par. 13)

אֶת-עֶשֶׂר כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ וְאֶת-יָקָר תְּפָאֶרֶת גְּדוּלָּתוֹ
 יָמִים רַבִּים שְׂמוֹנִים וּמֵאָת יוֹם: הַ וּבְמִלְאוֹת* | הַיָּמִים
 הָאֵלֶּה עָשְׂרָה הַמְּלָךְ לְכָל-רֹהֲעִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן
 הַבִּירָה לְמַגְדוֹל וְעַד-קֶטָן מִשָּׁתָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּחֶצֶר
 גִּנַּת בֵּיתוֹ הַמְּלָךְ: וְ חֵזֶר | כְּרַפֵּס וּתְכֵלֶת אָחוּזוֹ בְּחִבְלֵי-
 בּוּץ וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל-גְּלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְעַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִטּוֹת | זָהָב
 וְכֶסֶף עַל רְצֻפַת בַּהֲטָוֶשׁ וְדָר וְסַחֲרָת: זְ וְהַשְּׁקוֹת
 בְּכֵלֵי זָהָב וְכֵלִים מְכֵלִים שׁוֹנִים וְיִין מְלָכוֹת רַב כֶּיֶד
 הַמְּלָךְ: הַ וְהַשְּׁתִיָּה כֹּדֶת אֵין אֲנִס כִּי-כֵן | יֶסֶד הַמְּלָךְ
 עַל כָּל-רַב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּרָצוֹן אִישׁ-וְאִישׁ: ט גַּם וְשָׁתֵי י

*ובמלואת כ'

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● Why are we told the details of the lavish fixtures (v. 6)?

MAHARAL: Ahasuerus made the setting of this feast a replica of the Tabernacle, complete with hangings, columns and marble “sockets.”

● What was the “drinking rule” (v. 7)?

RASHI: There are banquets where the attendants are coerced to drink from a large cup, and some people can drink it only with difficulty. But here, no one was coerced.

TORAS MENACHEM

לְכָל הָעָם הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן ... מִשָּׁתָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים — A banquet for seven days for all the people found in Shushan.

In grappling to understand why the Jews of Persia might have incurred such Divine wrath as to have faced annihilation, the Talmudic sages pointed to various possible explanations. One of their more alarming suggestions, which has invited much commentary over the generations, is that these Jews deserved to be destroyed because “they enjoyed the banquet of that wicked man” (*Megillah* 12a).

What was the terrible sin here? One view, espoused by the *Midrash*, is that the Jews acted inappropriately at the banquet by eating food cooked by non-Jews (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabah* 7:8), but clearly this is not a sin for which a person would deserve to die, G-d forbid.

Regardless of whether or not they had arranged kosher food, the Jews’ grave error here, in the *Talmud’s* understanding, was that they *enjoyed* the banquet. They considered it a privilege that Jews had been invited and they took tremendous pleasure in the fact that they had gained acceptance and security in the host culture. This was misguided because in doing so they were effectively placing their trust in “that wicked man,” rather than in G-d; they were turning to other forms of security.

Of course, it is always necessary to respect the local culture and prevailing authorities (so long as they do not demand that we violate Torah law or custom), but we should never mistake their goodwill as a substitute for G-d’s providence.

G-d’s supernatural protection is provided for us only when we trust and rely on it. Failure to do so

splendor of his majesty—for many days, one hundred and eighty days.

5 And when these days were complete, the king made a banquet for seven days, for all the people found in Shushan, the capital, great and small alike, in the courtyard of the king's palace garden, 6 with white, green and blue hangings, embroidered with cords of linen and purple wool, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a floor of alabaster and marble in rows and circles. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, each of the vessels differing from all the other vessels, and royal wine was in abundance, according to the king's means. 8 But the drinking rule was not enforced, for this is what the king had established with all the many staff of his house: to comply with each man's will.

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● **With whose will did the king wish to comply (v. 8)?**

TALMUD: With the will of both Mordechai and Haman (*Megillah* 12a).

MIDRASH: G-d said, "I do not depart from the rules of My creation and yet you wish to comply with

each man's will? According to the way of the world, if two men wish to marry the same woman, may they do so?

If when two ships leave the harbor, one ship requires a northerly wind and the other a southerly wind, can one wind satisfy them both? It must be either one or the other (*Esther Rabah* 2:14).

TORAS MENACHEM

means that we leave ourselves open to natural political dangers and threats. As "one sheep among seventy wolves" (*Esther Rabah* 10:11), Jewish survival has always depended on countless acts of miraculous intervention from Above to save us from hostile neighbors.

This was the error of the Jews of Shushan: they attributed too much importance (they "enjoyed") the high status accorded to them by Ahasuerus. By hanging their sense of security on a "wicked man," someone who openly violated the will of G-d, they forfeited G-d's supernatural providence which was crucial to their survival.

(Based on *Likutei Sichos* vol. 31, p. 170ff)

לְעִשׂוֹת כְּרָצוֹן אִישׁ וְאִישׁ — *To comply with each man's will.*

The *Midrash* rejected Ahasuerus' desire to comply with the wishes of both Mordechai and Haman as a kind of naive pacifism: "If two men wish to marry the same woman, does the world allow them to do so?"

In the *Talmud*, however, the idea of placating both Haman and Mordechai's wishes is presented plausibly, and it is not refuted. So we can presume that, contrary to the *Midrash*, the *Talmud* maintained that it is possible to somehow comply with the competing viewpoints.

How do we please both Haman and Mordechai, and why is it at all desirable?

הַמִּלְכָּה עָשְׂרָה מִשְׁתָּה נְשִׁים בִּירַת הַמְּלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר
 לַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרוּשׁ: **י** בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לִב־הַמֶּלֶךְ
 בֵּינָן אֲמַר לְמַהוֹמָן בְּזֹתָא חֲרַבּוֹנָא בְּגִתָּא וְאַבְגָּתָא זֹתָר
 וְכַרְפָּס שְׁבַעַת הַסְּרִיסִים הַמְּשַׁרְתִּים אֶת־פְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
 אַחֲשֹׁרוּשׁ: **יא** לְהֵבִיא אֶת־וְשֹׁתֵי הַמִּלְכָּה לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
 בְּקֶתֶר מְלָכוֹת לְהִרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת־יְפֹתָהּ כִּי־
 טוֹבַת מְרֵאָה הִיא: **יב** וְתִמְאַן הַמִּלְכָּה וְשֹׁתֵי לְבוֹא בְּדָבָר
 הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיַד הַסְּרִיסִים וַיִּקְצָף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמָתוֹ
 בַּעֲרָה בּוֹ: **יג** וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְחַכְמָיִם יְדַעֵי הָעֵתִים כִּי־

TORAS MENACHEM

In Judaism, *halachah* (Jewish law) is normative. A violation of the *halachah* is considered unacceptable, and, conversely, observance of the *halachah* is a non-negotiable area of the Jewish religion.

Beyond the area of *halachic* observance, Judaism also has a number of pietistic goals. These are largely aimed at fostering an intimate awareness of G-d even at those times of the day when *halachah* does not provide any formal mode of worship. For example, we are encouraged to reach a level of awareness where, “All your actions are for the sake of heaven” (*Avos* 2:12), and, “In all your ways know Him” (*Proverbs* 3:6). Thus while the normative *halachic* Jew may have certain defined periods throughout the day when his attention is fully devoted to God, the pietist will aim to achieve a virtually constant awareness that, “I was created to serve my Master” (end of *Kidushin*).

Mordechai was an exemplar of the pietist model. He was awarded the appellation “Yehudi” (Jew) for rejecting idol-worship (*Megillah* 13a), which he renounced well beyond the basic, *halachic* minimum of forbidden worship. Mordechai was celebrated as a “Yehudi” because of his utter abhorrence for anything that stood outside the scope of Jewish worship.

One hallmark of the pietist position, which was clearly evident in the case of Mordechai, is a rejection of secular values and culture. If every part of life is a form of Jewish worship—“in all your ways know Him”—then there simply can be no room for anything that is not based on Judaism. Thus, even when “bowing down to Haman” was technically permissible, Mordechai refused to do so, as it could in no way be construed as an act of *Divine* worship.

On the other hand, our normative, *halachic* Jew, who has not yet ventured into the pietistic path, has plenty of opportunity to be involved with secular matters, so long as they are not in conflict with *halachah*. This Jew will “bow down to Haman,” because Jewish law says he is entitled to do so, if no *halachic* violation is involved: “The law of the land is binding” (*Gittin* 10b).

The practical conflict, therefore, between “Mordechai” (pietistic worship) and “Haman” (normative worship) is essentially the question of acculturation. To the pietist, secular culture is a corruptive force which serves as a detraction from the constant demands of worship. To the normative Jew, some level of cultural immersion is acceptable, so long as *halachic* observance is not compromised. After all, were not all forms of secular law and culture ultimately fashioned by G-d Himself?

VASHTI'S REBELLION AND JUDGMENT

9 Vashti, the queen, also made a banquet for the women, in the royal house of King Ahasuerus.

10 On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas—the seven chamberlains in attendance on King Ahasuerus—11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing the royal crown, to display her beauty to the people and the ministers, for she was attractive in appearance. 12 But when Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's order, conveyed by the chamberlains, the king became extremely angry, his temper burning within him.

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● Was the king not at all “merry with wine” until the seventh day? (v. 10)

TALMUD: Rava said: The seventh day was the Sabbath. When Jewish people eat and drink, they begin with words of Torah and with words of praise. But the idolaters, when they eat and drink, only begin with words of indecency.

This is what transpired at the feast of that wicked man. Some people said, “Median women are the most beautiful,” and others said, “Persian women are the most beautiful.”

Ahasuerus said to them, “The vessel that I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see her?” (*Megillah* 12b).

TORAS MENACHEM

Can the pietist and normative Jew ever resolve their conflict? Is it theoretically or practically possible to become an “acculturated pietist”?

The *Talmud* was convinced that such a feat is possible—that we can “comply with each man’s will.” Through remaining conscious that G-d transcends the constraints of the world and that He empowers us to do the same, we too have the ability to fuse these two opposites: we actively engage in the culture—the “exile”—and yet we do not “kneel or bow down” (above 3:2), remaining intrinsically aloof from it.

(Based on *Sichas Shabbos Parshas Vayigash* 5752)

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ בֵּינָן — On the seventh day, when the king’s heart was merry with wine.

The *Talmud*’s insight, that the “seventh day” here refers not only to the seventh day of the banquet but

also to the Jewish Sabbath, is difficult to fathom. Of what relevance would the Jewish Sabbath have been to Ahasuerus? Surely, idolaters will “begin with words of indecency” when they eat and drink on *any* day of the week? It seems absurd that the discussion of Median, Persian and Chaldean women was in any way connected to the Jewish day of rest.

However, the *Talmud*’s words here need to be understood in context of its prior comment to v. 8: “The drinking rule was not enforced, for this is what the king had established... to comply with each man’s will,” on which the *Talmud* explains: “with the will of both Mordechai and Haman” (*Megillah* 12a).

Now we can safely presume that Mordechai, who was the epitome of Jewish piety, would have had no interest in socializing at Ahasuerus’ party and, being that drinking was not enforced, he would not have partaken of any alcohol at all.

כו דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ לִפְנֵי כָּל-יַדְעֵי דַת וְדִין: **יז** וְהִקְרַב אֵלָיו
 כַּרְשֻנָּא שֶׁתֵּר אֲדַמְתָּא תַרְשִׁישׁ מָרְס מְרֻסְנָא מְמוּכָן
 שְׁבַעַת שְׁרֵי | פָּרְס וּמְדֵי רֵאִל פְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַיִּשְׁבִּימ
 רֵאשְׁנָה בַּמְּלָכוֹת: **טו** כְּדַת מָה-לְעֲשׂוֹת בַּמְּלָכָה וְשִׁתִּי
 עַל | אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָשְׂתָה אֶת-מֵאֲמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ
 בְּיַד הַסָּרִיסִים: **טז** וַיֹּאמֶר מְמוּכָן* לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשְּׂרִים
 לֹא עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ עֲוֹתָה וְשִׁתִּי הַמְּלָכָה כִּי עַל-כָּל-
 הַשְּׂרִים וְעַל-כָּל-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל-מְדִינֹת הַמְּלָכָה
 אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ: **יז** כִּי-יֵצֵא דְבַר-הַמְּלָכָה עַל-כָּל-הַנְּשִׁים
 לְהַבְּזוֹת בְּעֲלֵיהֶן בְּעִינֵיהֶן בְּאֶמְרָם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ
 אָמַר לְהַבִּיֵא אֶת-וְשִׁתִּי הַמְּלָכָה לִפְנֵינוּ וְלֹא-בָּאָה:
יח וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תִּאֲמַרְנָה | שְׁרֹוֹת פָּרְס-וּמְדֵי אֲשֶׁר
 שָׁמְעוּ אֶת-דְּבַר הַמְּלָכָה לְכָל שְׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּכְדֵי בְּזִיוֹן

*מומכן ב'

TORAS MENACHEM

That is, until the Sabbath. Because, on the Sabbath, Jewish law *requires* a person to enjoy wine (*Rambam, Laws of Sabbath* 30:10), to which Mordechai would obviously have had no objection. Thus, it was only on the seventh day that the king became exceptionally merry, as then his intention “to comply with the will of both Mordechai and Haman,” and have them both drink willingly together at the same feast, had been realized.

Why did the *Talmud* add, “When Jewish people eat and drink, they begin with words of Torah and with words of praise”?

This entire section of the Megillah comes to explain how G-d “placed the cure before the sickness” (see *Rashi* to 3:1), positioning Esther as queen in place of Vashti before Haman’s offensive against the Jewish

people was launched. The reader might therefore be troubled: If the Jews behaved inappropriately at this moment, just like the other Persians, then in what merit did they deserve such wondrous acts of Divine intervention?

The *Talmud*, therefore, is quick to inform us that the Jews were not G-d forbid, acting inappropriately. On the contrary, “When Jewish people eat and drink, they begin with words of Torah and with words of praise.” We can therefore understand in what merit the king would soon be advised to “give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she” (v. 19).

How important it is to always “begin with words of Torah and with words of praise” whenever Jewish people eat and drink!

(Based on *Sichas Purim* 5730, par. 4)

13 The king consulted sages versed with the times—for it was the royal practice to consult experts in law and judgment.

14 The closest to him were: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven ministers of Persia and Media, who had direct contact with the king, and who ranked highest in the kingdom.

15 “*What ought to be done, according to the law, with Queen Vashti, for failing to comply with the order of the King Ahasuerus, conveyed by the chamberlains?*”

16 Then Memucan declared before the king and the ministers, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti caused offense, but to all the ministers and all the peoples that are in all King Ahasuerus’ provinces. **17** For the queen’s behavior will proliferate to all the women, causing them to despise their husbands in their eyes, when they say, ‘King Ahasuerus ordered to bring Queen Vashti before him, but she did not come.’ **18** And this very day, the ladies of Persia and Media

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● **What was the doubt regarding Vashti? Surely anyone disobeying the king is executed (v. 15)?**

RISHON LE-TZIYON: Ahasuerus knew that disobeying the king’s order carried the punishment of execution but he was hoping that some exception might be found in the case of the queen.

The king’s advisors sensed his eagerness to vindicate Vashti, but they argued that even if they could

find an exemption it would have disastrous consequences on a national level.

● **Why did the king ask the law (v. 15)?**

TORAS LEVI YITZCHAK: The word *ke-das* (“according to the law”) has the numerical value of 424, hinting to the 424 supernal courts of law (see *Zohar* III 129a; 136b), which must judge and prosecute “Vashti” who is symbolic of *kelipah*, the demonic realm (p. 17).

TORAS MENACHEM

כָּדַת מִה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּמִלְכָּה וּשְׂתֵי — *What ought to be done, according to the law, with Queen Vashti?*

Rishon le-Tziyon is one of many commentators that address the startlingly obvious question why Vashti’s punishment required a legal investigation at

all. All monarchical systems work on a simple rule that violating an order of the king is an unpardonable crime, punishable by execution (see below 4:11, that this would apply even to the queen). Why was there any doubt “*what ought to be done, according to the law, with Queen Vashti?*”

וְקֶצֶף: **יט** אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יֵצֵא דְבַר-מַלְכוּת מִלְּפָנָיו
 וַיִּכְתֹּב בְּדַתִּי פָרֶס-וּמְדֵי וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תָבוֹא
 וְשִׁתִּי לְפָנַי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ וּמַלְכוּתָהּ! יִהְיֶה הַמֶּלֶךְ
 לְרַעוּתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמָּנָה: **כ** וַנִּשְׁמַע פְּתֻגָם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר-
 יַעֲשֶׂה בְּכָל-מַלְכוּתוֹ כִּי רַבָּה הִיא וְכָל-הַנָּשִׁים יִתְּנוּ
 יָקָר לְבַעֲלֵיהֶן לְמַגְדוֹל וְעַד-קֶטָן: **כא** וַיִּיטֹב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי
 הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ כַּדְּבַר מְמוּכָן: **כב** וַיִּשְׁלַח
 סָפְרִים אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה
 כַּכְתָּבָה וְאֶל-עַם וְעַם כָּלְשׁוֹנוֹ לְהִזָּוֶת כָּל-אִישׁ שֵׁרָר
 בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר כָּלְשׁוֹן עַמּוֹ:

 TORAS MENACHEM

Remarkably, Memucan's lengthy reply (v. 16-20) fails to address the core issue of Vashti's culpability. He mentions only the tertiary effects that pardoning her acts might have on Persian culture, but no mention is made that she flagrantly disobeyed a written order of the king!

The commentators each offer their own various solutions to this problem, but what is troubling here is why *Rashi*, whose attention is always directed towards questions that arise at the literal level, fails to address the point.

Perhaps we could argue that *Rashi* did not deal with the issue directly as it has already been addressed by one of his previous comments. Verse 8, above, informs us of an important distinction between this seven day feast which Ahasuerus made for the general public, and the previous one hundred and eighty day feast he had made for his own private circle: "But the drinking rule was not enforced, for this is what the king had established with all the many staff of his house: to comply with each man's will."

Who, exactly, were the "staff of his house"? *Rashi* explains: "all the staff of the banquet: the chief baker, the chief butcher, and the chief butler."

Clearly, *Rashi* understood that the non-coercive nature of this feast was not limited to the drinking. The entire staff of the banquet was instructed to comply with every wish of the attendees.

How did *Rashi* come to this conclusion?

One important key here is the verse's unusual term "this is what the king had established" (*yisad*, rather than "instructed," *tzivah*), which suggested to *Rashi* that we are speaking here of a central feature of this banquet that extended to many of its details. In contrast to Ahasuerus' first banquet where the "splendor of his majesty" was demonstrated by his ability to coerce and control others (we can presume that the "drinking rule" was followed there), this was a banquet which was "established" on the principle of non-coerciveness and honor to the people.

So when Vashti failed to obey the king's order to be present at the banquet, the question arose: Since this entire affair was established on the principle of

who heard of the queen's behavior will repeat it to all the king's nobles, and there will be such scorn and anger!

19 “If it pleases the king, let a royal order be issued by him, and let it be inscribed in the laws of Persia and Media, and let it not be revoked, that Vashti shall never again come before King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. **20** And let the decision of the king be heard throughout his entire kingdom, although it is large, and then all the women will give honor to their husbands, both great and small.”

21 The proposal was favorable to the king and the ministers, and the king followed the suggestion of Memucan. **22** Letters were sent to all the king's provinces—to every province according to its script, and to every nationality according to its language—that every man be the master in his household and speak the language of his own people.

CLASSIC QUESTIONS

● **Why did Memucan request a royal order, *Devar Malchus* (v. 19)?**

MEGILLAS SETARIM: He suggested that from this point onwards Ahasuerus' kingdom should become a dictatorship that would not be answerable to any external legal body. This would later prove crucial to the miracle, as it would be instrumental in Haman's execution.

TORAS MENACHEM

non-coerciveness, perhaps she could be excused in this instance?

It could, after all, be argued that she had not rebelled against the king, but rather, fulfilled his instruction “to comply with each man's will.”

Or, perhaps: 1. Vashti's requested appearance was unrelated to the non-coercive clause of the banquet. 2. The king's specific order to Vashti possibly trumped his earlier instruction to “comply with each man's will.” 3. The instruction to “comply with

each man's will” was intended, perhaps, only for the general public, whom the feast was to honor, and not the queen.

It was due to these uncertainties that Ahasuerus found it necessary to consult his advisors. They, likewise, could not find Vashti culpable beyond reasonable doubt for disobeying the king, and it was only due to the tertiary concerns (v. 16-18) that they proposed her removal.

(Based on *Likutei Sichos* vol. 36, p. 161ff.)