Esther: Peshat and Derash in Megillat Esther

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ESTHER

PESHAT AND *DERASH* IN MEGILLAT ESTHER[1]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

INTRODUCTION

> Elisha ben Avuyah said: one who learns as a child, to what is he compared? To ink written upon a new writing sheet; and one who learns [when] old, to what is he compared? To ink written upon an erased writing sheet. (*Avot* 4:20)

Megillat Esther is among the most difficult biblical books to study anew, precisely because it is so familiar. Many assumptions accompany us through our study of the Megillah, occasionally clouding our perceptions of what is in the text and what is not.

Any serious study of the *peshat* messages of the Megillah must begin with a clear sense of what is explicitly in the text, what can be inferred legitimately from

the text, and what belongs primarily in a thematic exposition, using the text as a springboard for important religious concepts. This chapter will consider some pertinent examples from Megillat Esther.

PESHAT CONSIDERATIONS IN THE MEGILLAH

A. THE SAUL–AGAG REMATCH

On five occasions in the Megillah, Haman is called an "Agagite."[2] Several early traditions consider this appellation a reference to Haman's descent from King Agag of Amalek, whom Saul defeated (I Sam. 15).[3]

Similarly, several midrashic traditions identify the Kish of Mordecai's pedigree (2:5) with Saul's father (I Sam. 9:1).[4] From this vantage point, Mordecai's recorded pedigree spans some five centuries in order to connect him and Esther to Saul. If indeed Haman is of royal Amalekite stock, and Mordecai and Esther descend from King Saul, then the Purim story may be viewed as a dramatic rematch of the battle between Saul and Agag.

However, neither assumption is rooted in the text of the Megillah. The etymology of "Agagite" is uncertain; while it could mean "from King Agag of Amalek," it may be a Persian or Elamite name.[5] Had the author wanted to associate Haman with Amalek, he could have dubbed him "the Amalekite." The same holds true for Mordecai and Esther's descent from King Saul. If the Megillah wished to link them it could have named Saul instead of "Kish" (Ibn Ezra). It is possible that the Kish mentioned in the Megillah is Mordecai's great-grandfather rather than a distant ancestor.[6]

Regardless of the historical factuality of the aforementioned identifications, a strong argument can be made for a *thematic* rematch between the forces of good and evil which runs parallel to Saul's inadequate efforts to eradicate Amalek. In this case, the association can be inferred from the text of the Megillah itself.[7] The conflict between Mordecai and Haman as symbolic of a greater battle between Israel and Amalek is well taken conceptually, but it is tenuous to contend that the biological connections are manifest in the text. However, if the midrashim had received oral traditions regarding these historical links, we accept them—*ve-im kabbalah hi, nekabbel*.

B. ASSIMILATION

It is sometimes argued that the turning point in the Megillah is when the Jews fast (4:1–3, 16–17; 9:31), thereby repenting from earlier assimilationist tendencies demonstrated by their sinful participation in Ahasuerus' party. According to this reading, Haman's decree was direct retribution for their communal sin. However, the text contains no theological explanation of why the Jews "deserved" genocide; on the contrary, the sole textual motivation behind Haman's decree is Mordecai's refusal to show obeisance to Haman (3:2–8). By staunchly standing out, Mordecai jeopardizes his own life and the lives of his people.[8]

Moreover, there is no indication in the Megillah that the Jews ever did anything wrong. On the contrary, the references to the Jews acting as a community display them mourning and fasting,[9] first spontaneously, and then at Mordecai's directive (4:1–3, 16–17; 9:31). They celebrate their victory by sending gifts to each other and giving charity to the poor (9:16–28).

Consider also Haman's formulation of his request to exterminate the Jews: "Their laws are different from every nation" (3:8). Several midrashim find in Haman's accusation testimony that the Jews observed the commandments and stood distinctly apart from their pagan counterparts.[10]

Curiously, the only overt indications of foreign influence on the Jews in the Megillah are the names Mordecai and Esther, which likely derive from the pagan deities Marduk[11] and Ishtar.[12] However, the use of pagan names need not indicate assimilation of Mordecai and Esther, nor of the community at large.[13]

Not only is there no textual evidence of Jewish assimilation—on the contrary, the Megillah consistently portrays Jews positively—but there is no rabbinic consensus on this matter either. The oft-quoted Gemara used to prove assimilation states:

R. Shimon b. Yohai was asked by his disciples, Why were the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for the Jews] in that generation deserving of extermination? He said to them: Answer the question. They said: Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one. [He said to them]: If so, those in Shushan should have been killed, but not those in other provinces! They then said, answer the question. He said to them: It was because they bowed down to the image. They said to him, then why did God forgive them [i.e., they really deserved to be destroyed]? He replied: They only pretended to worship, and He also only pretended to exterminate them;

and so it is written, “For he afflicted not from his heart.” (*Megillah* 12a)

R. Shimon b. Yohai’s students suggested that the Jews deserved to be destroyed because of their willing participation in Ahasuerus’ party, but they did not state what was wrong with this participation. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 7:8 posits that the Jews sinned at the party by eating nonkosher food. Alternatively, *Esther Rabbah* 7:13 considers lewdness the primary sin at the party.[14]

A contrary midrashic opinion is found in *Midrash Panim Aherim* 2, which relates that the Jews specifically *avoided* the party. Related sources describe that the Jews cried and mourned over Ahasuerus’ festivities.[15]

Within the aforementioned rabbinic opinions, we find controversy over what was wrong with the party and the extent of the Jews’ participation (if any). But this entire discussion becomes moot when we consider that R. Shimon b. Yohai *rejects* his students’ hypothesis on the grounds that only Shushan’s Jewry participated; the Jews in other provinces never attended either of Ahasuerus’ parties.[16]

R. Shimon b. Yohai then submits his own opinion: the Jews bowed to “the image.” Rashi avers that the image refers to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar erected and worshipped generations earlier (see Daniel chapter 3), while Meiri (*Sanhedrin* 74b) quotes an alternative reading of our Gemara, which indicates that the “image” was an idol that Haman wore as people bowed to him.[17]

Both possibilities present difficulties: According to Rashi, the Jews were to be punished for the transgression of their ancestors, though there is no evidence that they perpetuated this sinful conduct. According to Meiri’s alternative reading, the question of R. Shimon b. Yohai to his students simply becomes more acute: only the members of the king’s court in Shushan bowed to Haman. Most Jews of Shushan, and all Jews from the outer provinces, never prostrated before Haman.

In any case, the Gemara concludes that the Jews bowed without conviction. God “externally” threatened the Jews in return, that is, the threat was perceived, not real. The Gemara never resolves the theological question of why the Jews deserved such a harsh decree. The text of the Megillah consistently portrays the Jews in a favorable light, and the Gemara’s ambivalence over the theological cause of the Purim story only supports this positive assessment. In light of these factors, we must relegate discussions of assimilation to the realm of *derekh ha-*

derash, that is, assimilation is something to be criticized, but the Megillah is not engaged in this condemnation—rather, it is concerned with other religious purposes.

C. RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The Megillah makes no mention of the distinctly commandment?related behavior of the heroes, nor of the nation. Other than the term *Yehudi(m)*, there is nothing distinctly Jewish in the Megillah. Most prominent is the absence of God's Name. Also missing are any references to the Torah or specific commandments. In this light, the holiday of Purim could be viewed as a nationalistic celebration of victory. The only sign of religious ritual is fasting; but even that conspicuously is not accompanied by prayer. The omission of God's name and prayer is even more striking when we contrast the Masoretic Text with the Septuagint additions to the Megillah—where the Jews pray to God and God intervenes on several occasions. In the Septuagint version, God's Name appears over *fifty* times.[18] It appears unmistakable that the author of the Megillah intended to stifle references to God and Jewish religious practice. The second section of this chapter will address the question of why this is so.

D. MORDECAI'S DISOBEDIENCE

Mordecai's rationale for not prostrating himself involves his Jewishness (3:4), but the Megillah does not explain how. Many biblical figures bow to kings and nobles as a sign of respect, not worship; notably Esther bows to Ahasuerus in 8:3.[19] The text suggests that Mordecai did not want to honor the *king* and his command (see 3:2–4), but this explanation seems puzzling. Would Mordecai endanger his own life and the lives of all Jews[20] for this reason? *Esther Rabbah* 6:2 finds it unlikely:

> But Mordecai did not bow down nor prostrate himself before him (3:2). Was Mordecai then looking for quarrels or being disobedient to the king's command? The fact is that when Ahasuerus ordered that all should bow down to Haman, the latter fixed an idolatrous image on his breast for the purpose of making all bow down to an idol.[21]

Other rabbinic sources contend that rather than wearing an idol, Haman considered himself a deity.[22]

Nevertheless, the text never alludes to idolatry in regard to Haman, nor anywhere else in the Megillah.[23] It appears that technical idolatry did not figure into Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. In the second section of this chapter, we will consider alternative responses to this question.

To conclude, certain midrashic assumptions are without clear support in the biblical text, and there often is disagreement in rabbinic sources. Both Mordecai and Esther's biological connection to Saul and Haman's descent from Agag of Amalek are debatable. There is no evidence of Jewish assimilation, nor is there testimony to overtly Jewish religiosity. Finally, it is unclear why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, which is surprising given the centrality this episode has in the narrative.

Although these ambiguities make an understanding of the Megillah more complicated, they also free the interpreter to look beyond the original boundaries of explanation and to reconsider the text and its messages anew.

THE CENTRAL MESSAGES OF THE MEGILLAH

A. AHASUERUS AS THE MAIN CHARACTER

In determining the literary framework of the Megillah, Rabbi David Henshke notes that, viewed superficially, chapter 1 only contributes Vashti's removal, making way for Esther. However, the text elaborately describes the king's wealth and far-reaching power. This lengthy description highlights the fact that there is a different plot. The king's power is described in detail because it is central to the message of the Megillah. Moreover the Megillah does not end with the Jews' celebration. It concludes with a description of Ahasuerus' wealth and power, just as it begins. The bookends of the story point to the fact that the Purim story is played out on Ahasuerus' stage.[24]

The other major characters—Esther, Mordecai, and Haman—are completely dependent on the good will of the king. For example, the political influence of Esther and Mordecai ostensibly contributed significantly to the salvation of the Jews. However, their authority was subject to the king's moods. Esther knew that Vashti had been deposed in an instant. The king even held a second beauty contest immediately after choosing Esther as queen (2:19). When the moment to use her

influence arrived, Esther was terrified to confront the king to plead on behalf of her people. The fact that she had not been summoned for thirty days reminded her of her precarious position (4:11).

Mordecai, who rose to power at the end of the Megillah, likewise must have recognized the king's fickleness. Just as the previous vizier was hanged, Mordecai never could feel secure in his new position.

Rabbi Henshke points out that after Haman parades Mordecai around Shushan (a tremendous moral victory for Mordecai over his archenemy), Mordecai midrashically returns to his sackcloth and ashes (see *Megillah* 16a). After Haman is hanged, which should have ended the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, only *the king* is relieved, because the threat to his own wife is eliminated (7:10). Even after Ahasuerus turns Haman's post over to Mordecai, Esther still must grovel before the king (8:1–6). The Jews remain in mortal fear because of the *king's decree* , irrespective of Haman.

B. GOD AND AHASUERUS

Most of the main characters of the Megillah have counterparts: Mordecai opposes Haman; Esther is contrasted to Vashti (and later Zeresh). On the surface, only Ahasuerus does not have a match—but behind the scenes, he does: it is God. [25] While God's Name never appears in the Megillah, "the king" appears approximately 200 times. It would appear that Ahasuerus' absolute power is meant to occupy the role normally assigned to God elsewhere in Tanakh.[26]

Everyone must prostrate before the king's vizier—how much more respect is therefore required for the one who appointed him! And one who enters the throne room without the king's permission risks his or her life—reminiscent of the Jewish law of the gravity of entering the Holy of Holies, God's "throne room." Even the lavish parties at the beginning of the Megillah fit this theme. Instead of all the nations of the world coming to the Temple in Jerusalem to serve God (Isa. 2:2–4), all the nations of the world come to the palace in Shushan to see Ahasuerus' wealth and to get drunk.

C. THE MEGILLAH AS SATIRE[27]

Along with Ahasuerus' authority and absolute power comes a person riddled with caprice and foolishness. Ahasuerus rules the world, but his own wife does not

listen to him. He makes decisions while drunk and accepts everyone's advice. Rabbi Henshke convincingly argues that the primary point of the Megillah is to display the ostensible power of a human king while satirizing his weaknesses.

The patterns established in chapter 1 continue throughout the Megillah. Haman is promoted simply because the king wants to promote him. This promotion occurs right after Mordecai saves the king's life and is not rewarded at all. Despite the constant emphasis on the king's laws, Ahasuerus readily sells an innocent nation for destruction and drinks to that decision (3:11–15). Later he still has the audacity to exclaim, "*mi hu zeh ve-ei zeh hu*!" (who is he and where is he, 7:5). Despite the king's indignant proclamation, the answer to his question is that it is the king himself who is the enemy of the Jews![28]

The striking parallel between Haman's decree (3:11–15) and Mordecai's (8:7–14) further illustrates the king's inconstancy: both edicts follow the identical legal procedure and employ virtually the same language, yet one allows the Jews to be exterminated while the other permits the Jews to defend themselves. The decree of self-defense rather than a repeal of Haman's decree of extermination demonstrates that Ahasuerus is subservient to his own decrees to the point where he cannot even retract them himself (1:19; 8:8, cf. Dan. 6:9, 13, 15-16). Finally, the Bigtan and Teresh incident (2:21–23) serves as a reminder that the king's power was precarious and that his downfall could arise suddenly from within his Empire.[29]

D. MORDECAI'S DISOBEDIENCE

We may identify two layers of motivation for Mordecai's not bowing to Haman: Rabbi Yaakov Medan asserts that Mordecai does not bow because he needs to send a strong message to Israel: passivity in the face of evil can cause even more harm in the future.[30]

In light of Rabbi Henshke's analysis, another answer emerges: Mordecai wishes to oppose the king's command (3:2, 4). Once the king promotes Haman (especially right after Mordecai had saved the king's life yet received no reward), Mordecai recognizes the fickle character of the king. Even further, Mordecai perceives that Ahasuerus had "replaced" God as the major visible power in Shushan. Thus Mordecai finds himself battling on two fronts. While superficially he opposes Haman, his defiance actually is also a spiritual rebellion against Ahasuerus.

Therefore the text stresses that Mordecai was violating the king's decree by refusing to prostrate before Haman.

The Gemara lends conceptual support for this dual battle of Mordecai. After Mordecai learns of the decree of annihilation, he begins to mourn:

"And Mordecai knew all that had been done" (4:1)—what did he say? Rav says: Haman has triumphed over Ahasuerus. Samuel says: the higher king has triumphed over the lower king (Rashi: a euphemism for "Ahasuerus has triumphed over God"). (*Megillah* 15a)

According to Rav, Haman was the primary threat to Mordecai and the Jews. Mordecai bewails Haman's manipulation of the weaker Ahasuerus. According to Samuel, Mordecai perceives that Ahasuerus was too powerful. That Ahasuerus allowed such a wicked individual to rise to power weakened the very manifestation of God in this world. Rav's response addresses the surface plot, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai. Samuel reaches to the struggle behind the scenes—God's conflict with Ahasuerus.

E. AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE WORLD OF AHASUERUS

Instead of stopping at its satire of the king, the Megillah offers an alternative lifestyle to the world of Ahasuerus. As was mentioned earlier, the Megillah consistently portrays the Jews' character in a positive light. In 3:8, Haman contrasts the laws of the Jews with the laws of the king. Thus Jewish laws and practices are an admirable alternative to the decrepit values represented by Ahasuerus' personality and society.

Ahasuerus is a *melekh hafakhpakh*, a whimsical ruler. His counterpart, God, works behind the scenes to influence the Purim story through the process of *ve-nahafokh hu* (9:1).[31] In the world of the *hafakhpakh* everything is arbitrary, self-serving, and immoral. There is no justice: a Haman can be promoted, as can a Mordecai. In contrast, God's world of *ve-nahafokh hu* is purposeful and just.[32] Although the reader is left wondering why the Jews were threatened in the first place, God had justice prevail in the end.

Even in their victory, however, the Jews remain entirely under the power of Ahasuerus. As a result, Purim is crippled as opposed to most other holidays:

[Why do we not say Hallel on Purim?]...Rava said: There is a good reason in that case [of the exodus] because it says [in the Hallel], “O servants of the Lord, give praise”— who are no longer servants of Pharaoh — But can we say in this case, O servants of the Lord, give praise—and not servants of Ahasuerus? We are still servants of Ahasuerus! (*Megillah* 14a)

CONCLUSION

The showdown between Haman and Mordecai is central to the surface plot, whereas the more cosmic battle that pits God and Mordecai against the world of Ahasuerus permeates the frame of the Megillah from beginning to end.

The reader is left helpless in the face of the question of why the Jews deserved this decree. The Jews appear completely righteous, and it specifically is the heroic integrity of Mordecai which endangers them in the first place. Yet the reader is led to confront God honestly, confident by the end that there is justice in the world, even when it is not always apparent to the human eye. This piercingly honest religiosity has been a source of spiritual inspiration throughout the Jewish world since the writing of the Megillah. The Megillah challenges us and brings us ever closer to God—who is concealed right beneath the surface.

[1] This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, “*Peshat* and *Derash* in Megillat Esther,” *Purim Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2009), pp. 59-76; reprinted in Angel, *Creating Space between Peshat and Derash: A Collection of Studies on Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2011), pp. 186-201.

[2] See 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24.

[3] Mishnah *Megillah* 3:4 requires that *Parashat Zakhor* (Deut. 25:17–19) be read the Shabbat preceding Purim. Mishnah 3:6 mandates that the narrative of Amalek’s attack on the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 17:9–17) be read as the Torah portion of Purim. Josephus (*Antiquities* XI:209) asserts that Haman was an Amalekite.

[4] See, for example, *Megillah* 13b.

[5] Yaakov Klein, Mikhael Heltzer, and Yitzhak Avishur et al. (*Olam HaTanakh: Megillot* [Tel Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1996, p. 217]) write that the names Haman, Hamedata, and Agag all have Elamite and Persian roots.

[6] Cf. Amos Hakham's comments to 2:5 in *Da'at Mikra: Esther*, in *Five Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973); Aaron Koller, "The Exile of Kish," *JSOT* 37:1 (2012), pp. 45-56.

[7] Hakham suggests that "Agagite" may be a typological name, intended to associate Haman conceptually with "Amalek," i.e., he acts as one from Amalek (the same way many contemporary Jews refer to anti-Semites as "Amalek" regardless of their genetic origins). Jon D. Levenson (*Old Testament Library: Esther* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997], pp. 56–57) adds that Saul lost his kingdom to David as a result of not killing Agag; now Mordecai will reclaim some of Saul's glory by defeating Haman the Agagite—although the Davidic kingdom stopped ten years after Jeconiah was exiled (2:6).

[8] See discussion in R. Haim David Halevi, *Mekor Hayyim ha-Shalem* (Hebrew), vol. 4, pp. 347–351.

[9] Although the Jews' mourning and fasting may indicate that they were repenting from sins, the text avoids any reference to what these sins might have been. These religious acts just as easily could indicate a petition to God in times of distress.

[10] See *Esther Rabbah* 7:12; cf. *Megillah* 13b; *Abba Gorion* 26; *2 Panim Aherim* 68; *Aggadat Esther* 30–31; *Esther Rabbah* and *Targum Esther* 3:8. Carey Moore (*Anchor Bible 7B: Esther* [New York: Doubleday, 1971], p. 39) translates *mefuzzar u?meforad* as "scattered, yet unassimilated." Hakham (on 3:8) suggests this possibility as well.

[11] Mordecai is a variant of "Merodakh" (= Marduk). See Jer. 50:2; cf. II Kings 25:27 (~Jer. 52:31); Isa. 39:1. See *Megillah* 12b; *Esther Rabbah* 6:3; *2 Panim Aherim* 62; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 50; 1 and 2 Targum Esther 2:5, for midrashic explications of Mordecai's name.

[12] See *Megillah* 13a (several alternative midrashic etymologies of the name Esther are given there as well). Yaakov Klein, Mikhael Heltzer, and Yitzhak Avishur et al. (*Olam HaTanakh: Megillot* [pp. 238–239]) maintain that the name Esther derives from the Persian word "star" (meaning "star" in English as well). They reject the derivation from Ishtar, since a *shin* in a Babylonian word (I*sh*tar) would not be transformed into a *samekh* in the Hebrew (Esther).

[13] Even if pagan names suggest assimilation, it is possible that their host rulers gave them these names, as with Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:7). Cf. *Megillah* 13a: "The *nations of the world* called Esther this after Ishtar." At any rate, it is clear that Esther needed to conceal her Jewish identity, so her using the name Hadassah would have been unreasonable.

[14] Cf. *Esther Rabbah* 2:11; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 48. Other midrashim look to other eras for theological causes of the Purim decree. *Esther Rabbah* 1:10 turns to the Jews' violation of Shabbat in the time of Nehemiah. *Esther Rabbah* 7:25 considers the threat in the Purim story retribution for the brothers' sale of Joseph. *Esther Rabbah* 8:1 blames Jacob's deception of Isaac.

[15] See midrashim cited in *Torah Shelemah* I:52, 60, 61.

[16] *Song of Songs Rabbah* 7:8 concludes that even if only a few Jews participated in the party, all of Israel still could be held responsible because of the principle of *arevut*, corporate national responsibility.

[17] See, e.g., *Esther Rabbah* 6:2.

[18] For further discussion of the Septuagint additions, see Carey Moore, *Anchor Bible 44: Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 3-16; 153-262.

[19] See Gen. 23:7; 27:29; 33:3; 42:6; I Sam. 24:8; II Sam. 14:4; I Kings 1:23. Amos Hakham notes that the terms *keri'ah* and *hishtahavayah* (in Est. 3:2, 5) are collocated exclusively in regard to God, or to pagan deities.

[20] Mordecai is a hero, but it is less evident whether his actions always should be considered exemplary (majority opinion), or whether he should be considered a hero for reacting properly to a problem that he had created in the first place. See Rava's opinion in *Megillah* 12b–13a; *Panim Aherim* 2:3. One also could argue that Mordecai was willing to assume personal risk but did not anticipate a decree of genocide against his people.

[21] See also *Esther Rabbah* 7:5; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 50; *Abba Gorion* 22; *Panim Aherim* 46; *Esther Rabbah* 2:5, 3:1–2; *Targum* 3:2; Josephus, *Antiquities*, XI, 6.5 and 8; Ibn Ezra; Tosafot *Sanhedrin* 61b, s.v. Rava.

[22] *Megillah* 10b, 19a; *Esther Rabbah* 7:8. Cf. *Sanhedrin* 61b, with Tosafot ad loc., s.v. Rava.

[23] R. Yitzhak Arama was perhaps the first to argue that the reasoning of idolatry is *derekh ha-derash*. See Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 69. The closest implicit reference to pagan practices in the text is Haman's lottery.

[24] R. David Henshke, "Megillat Esther: Literary Disguise" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther* (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1999), pp. 93–106.

[25] Cf. *Esther Rabbah* 3:10: "Everywhere in the Megillah where it says, 'King Ahasuerus,' the text refers to Ahasuerus; every instance of 'the king' has a dual holy-secular meaning" (i.e., it refers both to God and to Ahasuerus).

[26] Earlier commentators also address the issue of why God's Name is not mentioned in the Megillah. Ibn Ezra opines that the Megillah would be translated for distribution throughout the Persian Empire; since pagan translators may substitute the name of a pagan deity for God's Name, the author of the Megillah deliberately avoided referring to God. Rama (*Yoreh De'ah* 276) suggests that there was doubt whether the Megillah would be canonized (cf. *Megillah* 7a); therefore, they omitted God's Name anticipating the possibility of rejection, which would lead to the mistreatment of the scrolls. For a more complete survey of medieval responses to this issue, see Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, pp. 76–79.

[27] For a thorough analysis of the use of irony in the Megillah, see Moshe D. Simon, "'Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man...': Irony and Theology in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 31:4 (Summer 1997), pp. 5–27.

[28] *Megillah* 16a: "And Esther said, 'the adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman' (7:6)—R. Eliezer says: this teaches that Esther began to face Ahasuerus, and an angel came and forced her hand to point to Haman."

One should not overlook Esther's remark to the king (7:4): were she and her people to be sold into slavery, she wouldn't have protested, indicating that the king and his interests are too important to trouble for anything short of genocide! Cf. 8:1–4, where Ahasuerus turns Haman's wealth over to Mordecai and Esther but does nothing to address his diabolical decree. The king's priorities are depicted as incredibly perverse in these episodes. Compare *Megillah* 11a: "'He was Ahasuerus' (1:1)—he was wicked from beginning until his end." This Gemara penetrates beneath the king's ostensible benevolence toward the Jews at the end of the Megillah, remarking that he was no better than before.

[29] Although Bigtan and Teresh failed in their efforts, King Xerxes—who often is understood by scholars to be Ahasuerus—was assassinated by other court officials within ten years of the Purim story (465). See Moore (*Esther*), p. 32. For analysis of the biblical and extra-biblical evidence to identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes and Esther with his wife Amestris, see Mitchell First, "Achashverosh and Esther: Their Identities Unmasked," in ***??????***.

[30] R. Yaakov Medan, "Mordecai Would Not Kneel or Bow Low—Why?" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther*, pp. 151–170.

[31] R. Yonatan Grossman demonstrates how the entire Megillah is structured chiastically around the principle of *ve-nahafokh hu* (Yeshivat Har Etzion, Virtual Bet Midrash 2007 [http://vbm-torah.org/archive/ester/01ester.htm]).

[32] See R. Avraham Walfish, "An Ordinance of Equity and Honesty" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah Hi Esther*, pp. 107–140.