BS"D

Mordechai's Audacity

Standing Up for God

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A Wolf was drinking from a river when he happened to raise his head from the stream. Lower down he spied a Lamb lapping up a little water.

"Oho!" said the Wolf to himself. "There's my supper! All I need is a good excuse to get it. Then I will have both my food and my drink together."

"You there!" he growled. "What do you mean by muddying my water!"

"I'm sorry," said the lamb. "But I can't be muddying the water. If your water is muddy it's not my fault. See, I'm using only the tip of my tongue. Besides, I'm drinking downstream from you, and I couldn't possibly disturb the water further up where you are."

"Don't argue with me!" snarled the Wolf. "I know all about you! You've been going around for over six months saying nasty things about me."

"That can't be," the Lamb bleated. "I was born only three months ago."

"Well," snapped the Wolf, "if it wasn't you, it was your father. That's just as bad."

And before the Lamb could say another word, the Wolf sprang on the poor creature and ate her up.

A bad excuse is good enough for a bully.

Aesop's Fable[1]

Israel among the nations is a Lamb among seventy Wolves.

Pesikta Rabbati (9)[2]

Introduction

The story recorded in the book of Esther tells of the salvation of the Jews after being threatened with outright genocide. The threat comes about as a direct result of the audacious behavior of Mordechai in his refusal to pay homage to the Viceroy Haman as the text states explicitly: "When Haman himself saw that Mordechai did not bow down and prostrate himself before him, then Haman was filled with rage. However it seemed

[1] Aesop's Fables, Selected and Adapted by Louis Untermeyer, Golden Press, NY, 1966.

[2] Esther Rabba 10:12. Midrash Tanchuma Toldot 5.

contemptible to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had made known to him the people of Mordechai; so Haman sought to destroy all the Jews – the people of Mordechai – who were throughout the entire kingdom of Achashverosh." (Esther 3:5-6). Being that the entire Jewish people were threatened with extermination following this display of disrespect, many a heated discussion has revolves around the propriety of this act.[3]

The text explains that: "All the king's servants at the king's gate would bow down and prostrate themselves before Haman, for this is what the king had commanded concerning him; but Mordechai would not bow or prostrate himself" (Esther 3:2). Now given that merely bowing to a foreign ruler as a simple sign of respect would not be forbidden, the rabbis justify Mordechai's insolence in that the bowing involved idol worship.[4] And indeed one is required to forfeit one's life if forced to idol worship.[5]

However, it must be borne in mind that Mordechai's righteous disobedience was not merely an act of personal piety, but carried with it repercussions on a national scale. The Midrash (Esther Rabba 7:8) elaborates a discussion between Mordechai and Haman implying that since Mordechai's refusal to bow was based on the religion of the Jews[6], culpability rested not only with Mordechai but rather on the Jews as a whole.[7]

Though the rabbis do hang the onus for Mordechai's actions on the negative precept forbidding idolatry, this is not evident in the text itself.[8] Furthermore, one might question the prudence of not violating this one command when the survival of the entire nation was at stake. Did not Esther herself violate, in some way, the cardinal sin of forbidden sexual relations in order to save the nation?[9] In addition, the Alshich[10]

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[3] Meg. 13a. Indeed Yoram Hazony states that the question of the propriety of Mordechai's not bowing is so pivotal that "the meaning of the book of Esther turns on there being a compelling answer to this question" (The Dawn, Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2000, p.46).

[4] The Gemara (Megilla 10b, Megilla 19a, Sanhedrin 61b; Esther Rabba [7:8]) explains that Haman had made himself into a god. The Midrash (Esther Rabba [7:5]) explains that Haman had an idol attached to his clothing.

[5] Sanhedrin 74a. Rambam (Hil. Yesodei HaTorah 5:2). Hidushei HaRashash 1 on Esther Rabba (7:8).

[6] Rashi on Esther 3:4.

[7] Similarly explains Akeidat Yitzhak on Esther 3:6.

[8] The point here is not that the rabbis didn't have a valid reason for suggesting this motive (of idolatry), but rather that since it is not evident in the text, the motive is more philosophical than necessarily literal – as will be explained (see conclusion).

[9] Note that she went of her own will to seek the king and ask his mercy; this, coupled with the fact the Gemara (Megilla 13b) holds that she was actively married to Mordechai implicates her in some violation of

explains that even when Haman removed the idol from his clothing – ostensibly the source of Mordechai's disrespect – Mordechai still did not bow. Mordechai's refusal to bow even when no idolatry was involved emphasizes that he saw something far more heinous in Haman than banal religious coercion.

The Existential Battle

Mordechai and Haman were both playing for much higher stakes than what seems on the surface of the story to be the case. Haman was – from the outset – aiming to destroy the nation of Israel. Mordechai was – from the outset – aiming to awaken the Jews from their slumber to the baleful reality they were living.

Haman just hates the Jews

Given that bowing was a customary sign of respect due to governing officials, the Sefat Emet[11] explains that the redundant order to bow – "for this is what the king had commanded concerning him" - was part of Haman's plot against Mordechai. Haman knew that Mordechai would not bow to him and persuaded the king to promulgate the law so that when it was violated it would be an offense against the throne itself. This, reasoned Haman, would suffice to effect his plan to destroy the Jews. From this explanation it is clear that Haman's hatred was intrinsic and his action premeditated – not the reaction to any offense. This idea is further borne out in the analysis of Menashe Lehman in his essay *Understanding the Background to Purim*[12]. He explains that Haman was living in the region of Yehuda and came back to Persia with the explicit intent of derailing any efforts by Mordechai and the Jews to rebuild the Temple.

Mordechai's need to awaken the Jews

Jewish Law. Indeed the Gemara (Megilla 15b) explains Esther's lament, "If I am lost, I am lost", being that she told Mordechai that she was now going to the king and would be forever forbidden to him due to her consenting adultery. Even discounting the midrashic marriage of Esther to Mordechai, there can be no doubt that her scruples were willingly compromised when she sought the favor of the king to save the Jews.

[10] on Esther 3:5.

[11] on Esther 3:4.

[12] in Masot U'Masaot, Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, 1982, pp.46-52.

Referring back to the beginning of the story we find the king throwing outrageously lavish parties and indulging himself with the very vessels once used in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.[13] The Gemara (Megilla 11b) explains that he did this as an affront to the prophecy[14] that the Jews would return to build their Temple after seventy years of Babylonian exile. This sacrilege took place with the Jews not only in attendance, but as reveling participants.[15] It is precisely this participation which is provided by the rabbis as the reason that the decree of destruction was sealed against the Jews.[16] Though this indeed may be true, it is only the symptom of their ailment.

At the root of their ailing condition - for which participation in the party was merely the symptom - lied their tacit consent that life was fine, perhaps even fat, and the trampling of Kodshei Yisrael was something which could be overlooked. The disregard over the abuse of the Temple vessels by foreigners was simply the next step after their own abuse of the opportunity to rebuild the Temple itself.[17] For the desecration carried out by Achashverosh (in 3395) was the necessary and logical outcome of the Jews' apathy several years prior when Cyrus/Koresh (in 3390) had allowed them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple – yet only a tiny fraction actually took up the cause.[18] In consonance, R. Yehuda HaLevi writes (Kuzari 2:24):

> "It is the sin which kept the divine promise with regard to the Second Temple … from being fulfilled. Divine providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at first, if they had willingly consented to return. But only a part was ready to do so, while the majority and the aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their houses and their affairs."

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[13] Megilla 11b.

[14] Yirmiyahu 29:10. Daniel 9:2.

[15] Megilla 12a. See also Pirchei Levanon (on Esther 1:7). In an attempt to soften the sin, the Meam Loez (on Esther 1:4) explains that the Jews refused to partake in the party when they saw the holy vessels, whereupon Achashverosh made a separate party for them. However, even according to this explanation, the Jews' remonstration over the sacrilege was hollow, for participation - under any conditions - implies tacit consent.

[16] Siftei HaChamim (8) on Rashi (Esther 4:1).

[17] This, even if Cyrus' offer was rather limited in terms of land and sovereignty – the history of the Modern state of Israel is witness to the fact that one must accept whatever limited rule one can attain and leave the greater calculations up to God. For indeed, though Ben Gurion accepted the tiny sliver of land offered by the United Nations (which was only a shadow of the biblical mandate), subsequent events enabled the nation of Israel to acquire far more significant swathes of territory (notwithstanding the weak hand of the Jews themselves).

[18] 42,000 returnees (counts Ezra [2:64]) out of millions exiled.

Mordechai's Move

Mordechai, as the leader of the nation,[19] had to make a stand. To understand Mordechai's imperative one must realize that the context of the Jewish people in Babylon was one of a powerless exiled people. The powers that be were not entirely friendly to the Jews – indeed it was this very nation that had wrought the destruction of Jerusalem only a short time prior (in 3338).

Compounding the Jewish predicament was the installation of Haman with absolute power second only to the king himself. Prior to this appointment, no less than fourteen advisors were heard from.[20] Yoram Hazony, in his book on the politics of Esther, notes that "By positioning Haman above all else, Achashverosh seeks to terminate the politics of the court, rendering all his servants silent and harmless by making them answerable to a single enforcer whose capacity to terrorize will be unquestioned."[21] Thus politicians and lobbyists such as Mordechai were effectively shut out from any recourse to the sphere of influence.

Mordechai knew that complying with the dictates of the despot today would only buy his people a small allotment of time until the terrorist would come tomorrow. Yoram Hazony emphasizes that "Mordechai understands that with Esther in the clutches of Achashverosh, and himself and the entire Jewish people similarly powerless before the king, to follow his every order in passive submission is to simply wait for the fall of the axe that must come sooner or later."[22] And by then, perhaps the people would be even weaker to hear the vital message of national repentance.[23] If the people did not take note now, they would totally assimilate out of existence.[24]

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[19] Mordechai in his generation was like Moshe in his (Esther Rabba 6:2). He was a distinguished member of Sanhedrin (Megilla 13b).

[20] Seven in Esther 1:10, Seven in Esther 1:14; also named as part of the royal court are 2 security men in Esther 2:21, and 2 matchmakers in Esther (1:3, 2:15).

[21] Y. Hazony, The Dawn, Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2000, p.51.

[22] Y. Hazony, The Dawn, Shalem Press, Jerusalem, 2000, p.31.

[23] Meam Loez (on Esther 4:1) explains that the only recourse to avert the decree of Haman was repentance and prayer. The Gemara (Megilla 13b) makes clear that the Jews would not merit Divine protection due to their not performing mitzvot. And indeed, as the narrative bears out, their primary recourse to annul the evil decree was to fast and repent (outside of Ester's lobbying, which was also accompanied by fasting and repenting). The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) testifies that the repentance was so sincere that it was considered as if they had actually accepted the Torah anew.

[24] Our own generation is a testament to the phenomenon that as religious observance wanes – as the trampling of Kodshei Yisrael is overlooked – the more people assimilate.

Conclusion

To impugn Mordechai as the irresponsible leader who jeopardized the entire nation is to fail to see the awesome threat looming against the Jews. The nation was spiritually bankrupt[25] on the verge of assimilation.[26] With the rise to power of a leader who sought to execute the final solution for the Jews, there can be no doubt that drastic measures needed to be taken.

The sin of idolatry – supplied by the rabbis as the impetus of Mordechai's refusal to bow – is merely indicative of the nature of the greater Jewish condition. The Jews were in a sense guilty of "idol worship" themselves in that they had forsaken God, His Torah and His Temple – as such their very lifestyles were idolatrous. The Gemara (Megilla 12a) goes so far as to implicate them explicitly of idol worship. Mordechai, as their leader, was then forced to idol worship; or by not doing so, bring the message to the people that idol worship – explicit or implicit – would not, could not be tolerated in Israel.

Mordechai, for his part, brought home the message that abandonment of God by the people would bring about an abandonment of the people by God. Nevertheless, the ruthlessness of Haman was born solely of unadulterated hatred. He needed only the flimsiest of pretexts to become the willing executioner in the wake of God's *hester panim*.

Through all the convolution of Megillat Esther one message stands out clear and simple: When the wicked come to slaughter the Jews, indeed they do it only under the veil of just cause – but make no mistake in thinking that reason and appeasement will be the answer. When the Wolf comes for the Lamb, there can be no appeasement – for their "reason" is only "a bad excuse for a bully".

[25] The Gemara (Megilla 11a) calls the Jews 'the poor people' – poor in mitzvot - under the 'bear' – Haman. The Gemara (Megilla 13b) makes clear that the Jews were not performing mitzvot as it explains that Haman informed the king that due to this fact the Jews would not merit Divine protection.

[26] Participating in the parties, especially drinking their wine, is seen as a precursor to assimilation (Yoreh Deah 123). Furthermore the Gemara (Megilla 12a) implicates the Jews of the time with worshipping idols – of which their can be no greater example of assimilation.