

Ksharim



Lesson 28:

Megilat Esther, Exile, and Zionism

1. Outline

Reading Megilat Esther through Zionist glasses
Purim in Israel today

2. Introduction

Purim is generally viewed as a particularly happy holiday, characterized by a number of customs designed to make us laugh, to make us “push the envelope” of what is permitted and what is acceptable, in the direction of wild celebration. The story behind the holiday, contained in Megilat Esther, is an entertaining drama, with suspense, irony, sexual innuendo, cartoon violence, and a happy ending. So we read the scroll, but parts we drown out with noise; and we sing, and clown, and masquerade, and party – and move on to the more serious joy of Pesach. This picture is true in the Diaspora as well as in Israel, and part of this unit will look at Purim observance in Israel.

However, it is possible to see in the Esther narrative a darker view of the events, which all the merriment, perhaps, comes to cover up. Perhaps the Purim story can be seen as a dark satire on the Diaspora, as a “Zionist” tract, emphasizing the vulnerability of the Jews when they are not in their own land. Thus, it can give us some insight into the meaning of Exile and the necessity of national sovereignty.

3. Lesson goals

- a. Awareness of the “Zionistic” reading of Megilat Esther and its implications for our self-understanding as Diaspora Jews
- b. Knowledge of Purim observance in Israel

4. Expanded outline

- a. Reading Esther: a few suggestions for interpretation of particular passages

Chapter 1: the setting: a world of hedonism and perverted values. This is the culture in which we are a minority, in which we need a degree of acceptance in order to survive.

Chapter 2: a queen is chosen

Vss. 5-6: we are dealing with the descendants of the exiles from the Babylonian conquest – 3 generations after the exile – presumably thus after Cyrus’ proclamation allowing the Jews to return: these are the Jews who chose to remain in the Diaspora.

10-11: Esther is sent by her cousin/foster father Mordecai to enter the harem competition, with instructions to keep her Jewish identity secret.

14-16: Esther spends the night with the king, wins the competition, and is crowned queen.

What is clear so far is that this is not a beauty contest, as we like to teach it. It is, if we think about it in terms of our values, a terrible story, about a foster father who prostitutes his charge (what for? To gain power and favor for himself at the court?), sending her into the harem of a king who is not only not Jewish, but is a disgusting caricature of a Levantine despot. Of this we are supposed to be proud? And yet, as Diaspora Jews, it is just such perverse victories that often make us proud (so the book seems to be saying). We love Jewish celebrities – even gangsters.

21-23: a secondary plot, showing us that Mordecai is indeed a court insider, and uses Esther's connection to ingratiate himself with the king.

Chapter 3: the plot thickens

Vss. 1-6: Mordecai refuses to bow to his competing courtier, Haman; he doesn't say this is because he only bows to God; that is our interpretation. Perhaps he, as a descendant of Saul, refuses to bow to a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite (see Ex. 17:14-16, Deut. 25:17-19, and I Sam. 15). In any case, he says he won't bow because he is a Jew – so Haman decides to get rid of the Jews.

8-11: Haman brings the classic anti-Semitic claim: a people "whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws." And that plus a bribe of 10,000 talents of silver is enough to seal the fate of the Jews. A power struggle between two courtiers – and the Jews are sentenced, gratuitously and meaninglessly, to death. Life in the Diaspora.

Chapter 4: Mordecai has an ace (actually a queen) up his sleeve

Vss. 1-9: Mordecai seeks to exploit Esther's position to save the Jews.

10-11: But Esther has paid a high price for her position, and it is still precarious; she is unwilling to risk it.

12-14: Mordecai brings her down to earth: "you may think you have 'made it,' but you're really just one of us. If we go down, you go down with us."

15-16: Esther's moment of truth, of heroism. She could just walk away, but she fulfills our Diaspora fantasy, and accepts her identity, takes the risk.

Chapters 5-6: The tension builds, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai sharpens.

Chapter 7: sex trumps money. Haman and his plan are crushed by Esther's personal appeal to the king.

Chapter 8: Mordecai replaces Haman

The Jews go from powerless to powerful, from slated for annihilation to wielders of the sword against their helpless enemies.

Vs. 17 "...and many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen upon them."

Chapter 9: consolidation of the victory

Vs. 4: "For Mordecai was now powerful in the royal palace, and his fame was spreading through all the provinces; the man Mordecai was growing ever more powerful."

Chapter 10:

We might say that Mordecai is the first "court Jew," ranking "next to the king" and using his rank "for the welfare of all of his kindred" – except that we have seen that Joseph was already in a similar position, centuries earlier.

Chapter 11:

It is interesting to make up a next chapter of the Megila. What happens when Esther falls out of favor like Vashti? Or when after further palace intrigue, a new Haman arises and displaces Mordecai? Or the king dies?

It is in thinking about what comes next that we realize the darkness of this happy story. The Jews in the Diaspora are as secure as their current protector – and s/he is never very secure. Not only that, but even to gain that protection we have to make horrendous compromises, to prostitute ourselves, to live by the values of a culture that we find repulsive. We are, in short, powerless in a world that is run by power. We can have the illusion of power for a moment

or a lifetime, but in the end, we are vulnerable to the whim of every king and to the machinations of every petty court conniver.

Could it be that the laughter of Purim is the laughter of the author of the Megila – laughing at us for thinking it can ever be otherwise? Or is it our own nervous laughter, as we think about the next chapter is it happened time and again in Jewish history.

Except, of course, when we are sovereign in our own land.

b. Purim in Israel

- a. Endless holiday. From a minor one day holiday, Purim in Israel has been transformed into nearly a week of festivity:
 - i. There is of course no school on Purim, so Purim parties in school must be held the day before.
 - ii. But the day before is Ta'anit Esther, when it is customary to fast, in identification with Esther's order to the Jews to fast before she goes to the king (4:15-16); that is not an appropriate day for parties.
 - iii. So school parties are moved back to two days before Purim.
 - iv. But according to custom cities that are believed to have been walled since the time of Joshua observe Purim a day later ("Shushan Purim" 9:17-19 see <http://www.ou.org/chagim/purim/when.htm>); today this includes only Jerusalem; but since there can't be different days off in different cities in a proper modern state, Purim is a two-day vacation from school.
 - v. Thus, we end up with a least a four day sequence, not to mention various private parties, festivals, etc., before and after.
- b. Public holiday: Purim in modern Israel is reminiscent of Carnival or Mardi Gras in Christian countries: a public festival of masquerade, wild partying, drinking. For years the central event was a huge parade and fair in Tel Aviv, called the Adloyada (from the traditional term for a Purim celebration based on the Talmudic statement that one is obligated to drink enough on Purim so as not to know [ad d'lo yada] to differentiate between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordecai."). Today the Tel Aviv Adloyada is not always held, but there are others. See http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Israel/Tel_Aviv_District/Tel_Aviv_Yafo-1708077/Local_Customs-Tel_Aviv_Yafo-Purim_holiday-BR-1.html and <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3063333,00.html> and here are some weird pictures: <http://www.hatzolah.org.il/gallery/61/>
- c. Of course, in synagogues, the Megilah is read evening and morning (often with cap pistols in place of *graggers*). But for most Israelis, Purim is a secular celebration, primarily for children. The buying and making of costumes is a big deal, and the range of possibilities is endless, from pop culture figures to traditional costumes.

You know you're in the Jewish state when you meet all these characters on the bus and on the street during Purim week.

- d. Hamantaschen ("Haman pockets" in German; apparently based on "*mohntaschen*" – poppyseed pockets) are called *Oznei Haman* in Israel (Haman's ears).
- e. A number of recent Purims in Israel have been associated with historical events that seemed to have a connection to the content of the holiday:
 - 1. The end of the first Gulf war in 1991
 - 2. Baruch Goldstein's massacre in Hebron, 1994
 - 3. A brutal terror attack at Dizengoff center in Tel Aviv, 1996