



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

RABBI SHMUEL GOLDIN

FACULTY, OU ISRAEL

RABBI EMERITUS, CONGREGATION AHAVATH TORAH, ENGLEWOOD NJ

# An Encounter With a King

With the Purim Festival soon upon us, I would invite you to reconsider Achashverosh.

Of all the colorful figures populating the Purim story, Achashverosh is, I believe, the least understood. The subject of a Talmudic dispute as to whether he is a foolish or con-ning king; Achashverosh actually emerges from the Megilla as a paradigm of evil. The malevolence modeled by this king, however, is easy to miss if you don't read the Megilla carefully.

We begin our exploration at the point in the story when Haman and Achashverosh hatch their plot against the Jews. At that point, the text paints a stark picture:

“The couriers went out posthaste on the royal mission, and the decree was proclaimed

in the Shushan the capital, *and the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was dumfounded.*”

Note that the text *does not say* that the Jews of Shushan were dumfounded. Apparently, the entire populace of the city was bewildered.

And for good reason...

Imagine that you are a non-Jewish citizen in a city affected by the king's decree. You have just been told that you are invited-on a particular day, in a particular month, many months hence- to attack and kill the members of a specific group in your neighborhood. All their possessions will be yours for the taking, as you pillage their homes with impunity.

How are you supposed to act tomorrow? How will you interact with your neighbors over the next few months, while you and they know that you will soon be murdering them and their families? Do you knock on their door to borrow some salt for cooking? Do you talk about the weather? How can daily life continue under such circumstances?

Haman and Achashverosh have effectively lobbed a figurative grenade into the streets of Shushan, creating great consternation among the city's entire population. The two architects of the impending horror, however, remain removed and unaffected by the turmoil in the streets. While Shushan is in an uproar, its king is busy drinking.

**In loving memory of  
our beloved Father, Grandfather  
& Great-Grandfather**

**Saba Sababa**

**Irving Maisel ז"ל**

**ר' ישראל בן פסח ז"ל**

**on his 15<sup>th</sup> Yahrtzeit**

**May the Torah learned  
from this TT be in his merit**

**The Maisel, Bodenheim  
and Gottlieb Families**

**Efrat, Bet Shemesh and Kiryat Sefer**

*As long as the tumult stays outside the palace walls; Achashveirosh couldn't care less.*

The tale continues as Mordechai hears of the King's decree and descends into a state of mourning. Donning sackcloth, he walks through the streets of the city, "crying a bitter cry." He stops abruptly, however, upon reaching the palace gates. For good reason. *The law prohibits anyone from entering the king's gates wearing clothes of mourning.*

Once again, we confront a king who insists upon keeping pain or difficulty outside of the palace. There have been kings throughout history who have resonated to the concerns of their subjects. Not Achashverosh! His world is designed to be light and carefree. Anything that might threaten that world must be kept at bay.

Standing at the palace gates, Mordechai beseeches Esther to intercede on behalf of her people. Esther's initial response is telling: "All throughout the Kingdom know that anyone approaching the king without being summoned, is summarily executed; spared only if the king extends his scepter.

And I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days."

Esther is frightened. Even she, despite her lofty position, will take her life into her hands if she approaches the king without invitation. Any unexpected visitor, even the queen, is barred from entry into the presence of the king. Struggling desperately to control his palace life; Achashverosh insists upon seeing only whom he wants to see. Safely sequestered, he, and he alone, will control the parameters of his world.

The attempt to maintain such a world requires ever increasing effort and breeds mounting paranoia. At all costs, the unbidden

and the unexpected must be kept at bay. Even a small crack in the palace walls cannot be countenanced. Such a crack would threaten Achashverosh's carefully created world.

No wonder, then, as the story continues, that the king has trouble sleeping...

Fitfully awake in the darkness of the night, Achashverosh summons a servant to read to him from the kingdom's records. Perhaps such a reading will return the king to his comfortable world and lull him to sleep once again.

The true depth of Achashverosh's evil, however, only becomes apparent during the climactic moments of the Purim story. As the king and Haman dine at the second of two banquets arranged by Esther, she turns and identifies Haman as a villain threatening her people with destruction. Achashverosh and Haman are aghast. Suddenly revealed as a Jewess, Esther is among the individuals to be targeted by the king's own evil decree.

Achashverosh's initial reaction to Esther's pleas is abundantly strange. He runs away, out of the party room into the Palace Garden. Why this reaction? Because Achashverosh cannot face the disaster that has struck. His worst fears have been realized. The outside world has come pouring into the palace. The tumultuous devastation that he, himself, ordained is now invading his own personal space.

The king then returns to the banquet hall, only to find Haman prostrating himself, in supplication, on the couch upon which Esther is lying.

"Have you come" Achashverosh exclaims, "to ravish the queen in my very own palace?"

Does the king really believe, at this point, that all Haman has on his mind is the seduction of Esther? Of course not! Haman knows

that he is one step away from the hangman's noose. Instead, the king is redefining the challenges he faces. Ignoring the substance of Esther's supplications, Achashverosh creates a narrative in which Haman is the whole problem. Haman is seducing the queen.

This redefinition allows the king to arrive at a simple solution to the issues before him. 'If the problem is Haman,' then I must destroy Haman...'

And so he does, hanging the villain upon the very tree that Haman had prepared for Mordechai's execution.

And the king can now breathe a sigh of relief. After all, with Haman's death, the challenges have been met, the problems solved. The palace can now go back to its natural state of blissful unawareness, as all problems remain outside of its walls.

Esther recognizes, however, that the danger is far from over. The king has returned into his shell and it will be difficult to pry him out. That is why, as the Megilla testifies, she must "speak again to the king, fall at his feet, weep, and beseech him to avert the crisis facing her people."

And Achashverosh responds to Esther's entreaties. His response, however, finally

uncovers the full extent of his malevolence. He declares that an edict issued by the king cannot be revoked. After all, such a revocation would reveal the king as fallible, a perception that cannot be countenanced. Instead, Achashverosh decides to issue a second edict: *The Jews can defend themselves.*

In one fell swoop, Achashverosh mandates civil war within his kingdom. Non-Jews are allowed to attack and Jews are allowed to defend themselves. The streets of Shushan will run with blood, while the king sits safely in his palace.

*"As long as it doesn't touch me, Achashverosh effectively says, I really don't care.."*

Achashverosh thus emerges as the paradigm of a true despot, of a monarch totally divorced from the state of his subjects. This Purim King, however, reminds us of much more. Throughout our history we have dealt with the perpetrators of evil. But we have also encountered many bystanders, individuals who witnessed evil, could have helped the victims, but deliberately stayed out of the fray.

A Haman cannot exist without an Achashverosh. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."



Oded  
Lewensohn,  
Adv. & Notary

לבינסון רז ושות' Lewensohn Raz & Co.  
משרד עורכי דין ונוטריון Law Offices & Notary

Estates, Probate,  
and Inheritances\*

Real Estate  
Transactions

Tama 38 and Renovation  
Construction Projects

\* Durable Powers of Attorney for Health and Financial Matters



Moshe Raz,  
Adv. & Notary

27 Keren Ha'Yesod St., Jerusalem | 02-6731000 | 054-6380149 | office@lawlr.co.il | www.lawlr.co.il