

DELVING INTO THE MEGILA

by Rabbi Yehudah Steinberg

1. It happened in the days of Achashverosh - he is [the same] Achashverosh who ruled over a hundred and twenty-seven countries from Hodu to Kush.

IT HAPPENED IN THE DAYS OF ACHASHVEROSH - HE IS [THE SAME] ACHASHVEROSH. The verse is seemingly repetitive. Isn't obvious that Achashverosh is Achashverosh? Rashi answers that the verse is telling us that Achashverosh remained the same wicked Achashverosh from the beginning of this story until the end.¹ Therefore, the verse says, "It is the same Achashverosh from beginning to end." These few words contain one of the most important keys to understanding the story of the Megillah.

While reading the Megillah, we seem to see two completely different Achashveroshes. The first Achashverosh agrees - without even the smallest justification or provocation - to have the entire Klal Yisrael annihilated. He even refuses remuneration for this because he is overjoyed with the proposition. Toward the end of the Megillah, however, a second kind of Achashverosh surfaces. This one sends official letters to help save Klal Yisrael and gives them permission to retaliate against their enemies. He appoints Mordechai his deputy and has Haman and his sons hung. One may mistakenly conclude that Achashverosh really changed and that it was as if there were two Achashveroshes - that is, he started out as an evil king and later repented and became righteous. Even though it is very rare that such a wicked king would repent, it is not impossible. Would this idea of "two" kings be true, it would actually minimize the marvel of the miracle, for then the entire story hinges upon the repentance of one wicked king. The Megillah therefore tells us - in the very first verse - that Achashverosh is the same Achashverosh from beginning to the end - an evil king and Jew-hater he started out, and so he remained. The channel for Klal Yisrael's salvation was far more complicated and far more wondrous. A chain of what originally seemed random events, but later became clear as the hand of HaShem, forced this extremely powerful and evil king into becoming a protector of a nation he truly hated. This is both the depth and beauty of this miracle. It must be clear that since the Megillah was written during Achashverosh's reign, while he was pretending to love Klal Yisrael, his wickedness could not be stated clearly. Chazal, who came much later and were able to tell us the unvarnished truth about Achashverosh, relate that he hated Klal Yisrael as much as Haman did and was just as happy to annihilate them. The Megillah's subtle wording made the facts accessible to Klal Yisrael without Achashverosh realizing.

Achashverosh's own name bespeaks his wickedness, explain Chazal. Achashverosh (אחשוורוש)

means "the brother of the one referred to as rosh,"² i.e., Nevuchadnetzar. Both were equally wicked.³ Nevuchadnetzar destroyed the Beis HaMikdash and Achashverosh stopped the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash (as explained later on this verse); Nevuchadnetzar killed a large part of Klal Yisrael and Achashverosh wished to exterminate the entire nation. Chazal, who knew the truth, saw that Achashverosh was as evil and wicked as the evil Nevuchadnetzar.

Rabbi Shlomo Brevda zt"l explains, based on the Vilna Gaon's commentary, that this is the meaning of the verse,⁴ "Atzas HaShem hi sokum - The scheme of HaShem will prevail." When HaShem synchronizes events so that a person - of his own volition - should act against his own will without even realizing what he is doing, this is the greatness of HaShem's plan. Indeed, only HaShem's plans prevail, while all human beings' plans are constantly undergoing changes - due to their own actions - and they remain utterly unaware of their part in the changes.⁵

Sources:

1. Based on the Gemara in Megillah 11a.

The Mishkanos Yaakov explains that Achashverosh first invites the Jewish nation to a banquet and then orders their annihilation. As explained later (1:5), the purpose of the banquet was to cause the Jewish nation to sin. The verse teaches us that he remained as wicked from the beginning until the end. Meaning, we should view his initial friendliness, his invitation to the banquet — which was his way of prompting us to sin — with the same horror and shock as we view his desire to annihilate us. The danger of those who cause us to sin should be no less horrifying than the threat of those who desire our annihilation. The two are equally terrible evils.

2. The word Achashverosh (אחשׁוורושׁ) can be read אַח [of], brother [of], ראשׁ, head. In Nevuchadnetzar's famous dream, he saw an idol being smashed into pieces. (See Daniel, Chapter 2.) Daniel explained to him that the idol represented many nations that Klal Yisrael would ultimately conquer. The idol's head represented Nevuchadnetzar's kingdom of Bavel. This is why Nevuchadnetzar is referred to as ראשׁ, the head.

3. Megillah 11a.

4. Yeshayahu 5:19.

5. An interesting example of this happened in recent history. About 70 years ago, the notorious Stalin ym"sh was the evil ruler of the Soviet Union. He despised the Jewish people and sent many of them to Siberia at the beginning of World War II. Had these Jews been "spared" the Siberian exile, they would have likely been killed by the Nazis ym"sh. The Germans' methodical extermination of our Jewish brethren killed many more than those who perished in the Siberian camps. And so, many of the Jews that Stalin sent to Siberia at the beginning of World War II were saved from the Nazis through his evil schemes. An example of this salvation can be found in the wonderful book Behind

the Ice Curtain by Dina Gabel. It is interesting that HaShem effected a salvation for some Jews even through the actions of such a wicked person.
