

# WHAT MONEY CAN NOT BUY

*by Rabbi Yehudah Steinberg*

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9. "If it pleases the king, let a decree be written to annihilate them, and I will pay ten thousand kikar of silver to those in charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries."

TEN THOUSAND KIKAR OF SILVER. It is interesting to calculate how much money in today's currency Haman was willing to pay to destroy Klal Yisrael. The weight of ten thousand kikar of silver can be calculated as follows: A shekel of silver weighs 15.35 gram (.54 oz), <sup>1</sup> A kikar is comprised of three thousand shekels. <sup>2</sup> So ten thousand kikar is 10,000 times 3000 times 15.35 gram. This is approximately 460 ton of silver. Though the value of silver keeps changing, today one kilogram of silver is worth approximately one thousand dollars, therefore one ton is worth about one million. This would mean that Haman was ready to pay about half a billion dollars. However, it is clear that since the time of the Purim story, the buying power of silver has changed dramatically. In those days, a person could meet all his basic needs for a whole year with just fifty shekel, <sup>3</sup> which is approximately \$750 in today's value. Obviously today, one needs at least ten times as much to pay for all of one's expenses for a year. <sup>4</sup> Accordingly, in today's value, Haman was willing to pay about five billion dollars — an astronomical sum by any account — to have Klal Yisrael killed. Haman was the wealthiest non-Jew in history, <sup>5</sup> and he was able to pay such a huge sum for the purpose of killing Klal Yisrael. Even though wicked people have a tremendous desire for money, his hatred for Klal Yisrael was so great that he was able to overcome his greed in exchange for the opportunity to destroy them. Haman offered Achashverosh such an exorbitant sum because he was asking to kill out a whole nation. He knew that just the profit from taxes from a whole nation in the course of one generation can be expected to reach, at the very minimum, billions of dollars. Therefore, to compensate Achashverosh, he offered to pay for the potential losses. <sup>6</sup>

The knowledge of how wealthy Haman was and how much he was willing to spend for his diabolical plot strengthens the wonder of the miracle. Even though wealth is power and with money one can do many things, and even though Achasheverosh the powerful king agreed with the plot; nevertheless, through natural events — all Divinely ordained — the plot fails.

Achashverosh, who was no less greedy than Haman, refused to accept this astronomical sum of

money. Since he too was a Jew-hater, he was concerned that if Haman would part with so much money, this might dampen his enthusiasm for destroying Klal Yisrael, and Achashverosh didn't want this to happen. This can be compared, l'havdil, to a speaker who is offered a huge sum of money to deliver a lecture to a crowd of irreligious Jews who are interested in learning more about Torah and mitzvahs. The speaker may offer to speak for free because he is so happy to take part in the kiruv organization's blessed activities. If he would charge a large sum, then the burden of running that important project may become too heavy and the organizers may lose interest in keeping it going. Similarly, in the worse manner possible, Achashverosh felt that this project, i.e., killing out Klal Yisrael, was so wonderful that he wished to do it for free, so that Haman would not be hesitant about carrying it out. When we learn how wicked they were and how much they wished to carry out this evil decree, we have a better understanding of how great the miracle was.

Later on, when Achashverosh became suspicious of Haman, as will be explained later, he had nothing to lose by falling out with him. Had Achashverosh accepted the money, then even when his feeling toward Haman became negative, his desire to hold on to the money would not have allowed him to cut ties with him completely. If he decided to overturn the decree, he may have even been obligated to return the money something that no one ever wants to do. Furthermore, we know that once one has been bought by even much smaller favors, it is extremely difficult for him to find fault with the one who has given him the gift. <sup>7</sup> Achashverosh's enthusiasm at the beginning which caused him not to take the money, was part of the very undoing at the end. Once he became angry with Haman, he had no ulterior or financial motive to keep the plot going. Again, we see the miraculous ways of HaShem even in Achashverosh's enthusiasm for sinning. <sup>8</sup>

י. וַיִּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ, וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְהָמָן בֶּן הַמִּדְיָא הָאֲגָגִי צֶרֶר הַיְּהוּדִים.

10. The king then removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the son of Hamdasa the Agagi, the oppressor of the Jews.

THE KING THEN REMOVED HIS SIGNET RING. Giving the signet ring was giving over all the powers of the kingdom. With the ring, one could sign any new law into existence and Achashverosh gave over all that power to Haman. Achashverosh could have insisted that Haman formulate the decree and bring it to him for inspection and confirmation, after which Achashverosh could have signed it into law — without giving Haman all that power. Instead, Achashverosh, in his desire to kill Klal Yisrael, and in his desire to have the job completed quickly and efficiently, gives Haman absolute control and power. Achashverosh even let Haman keep the ring for further use, so that he would be able to create any decree which would help facilitate the destruction of the Jewish nation. <sup>9</sup> If one considers how reluctant people are generally to give away even small amounts of power, even to those whom they trust (to how many people does one give away his credit card or the keys to his safe?), one can appreciate the unlimited enthusiasm Achashverosh had for Haman's plot. Haman

was probably thrilled beyond belief. He had reckoned on having to pay huge sums of money just for Achashverosh's agreement, and not only didn't he have to pay, but he also obtained Achashverosh's total power.

Even Klal Yisrael were greatly shocked by the giving over of the ring, and they began to repent. The Gemara makes an unprecedented comment regarding this action, saying that the giving over of the ring had a greater effect on Klal Yisrael than did the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who exhorted Klal Yisrael to repent, yet were unable to bring Klal Yisrael to complete repentance. Klal Yisrael were utterly shocked and scared when they heard that Achashverosh, to whom they had tried to be loyal and had attended his banquet, had given over all his power to Haman their archenemy, so they turned to HaShem for salvation and repented.

This episode is another indication of HaShem's Master plan in the great overturning of the Purim story. Whatever Haman and his cohorts hoped to be a source of disaster and ruin for Klal Yisrael ultimately became part of their great salvation. Even giving over the ring was eventually good for Klal Yisrael. Since Haman had written and signed the letters, it was easy for Achashverosh to relinquish his role in the plot and pretend that it had all been Haman's idea. This meant that once Haman was killed and Achashverosh remembered Mordechai's loyalty to him and knew that Esther was Jewish, it was easy for him to overturn the decree and place all the blame for the decree on Haman. He then managed to convince everyone that he really loved Klal Yisrael, and as we will see, this helped greatly in the battle. Had he signed the letters as Haman had asked for, it would have been much harder for him to change sides and pretend that he had nothing to do with it. Furthermore, it would have been clear to everyone that Achashverosh did not really like the Jews and would not be unhappy to see them die. When the battle would have occurred, many of the king's soldiers would have joined Klal Yisrael's enemies, knowing that their king would be happy that they are being killed.

HaShem also arranged that these letters were signed by the highest authority possible -the king's ring. This way it was impossible — or at least not Achashverosh's preferred plan of action — to have them cancelled. Had Haman signed these letters, it would have been easier for Achashverosh just to annul the decree - and then no battle would have occurred. However, since the letters could not be cancelled, a second letter was dispatched, giving Klal Yisrael carte blanche to fight back. During the ensuing battle, thousands of those who hated Klal Yisrael were killed.

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#### Sources:

1. Shiurei Mitzvos (by Rabbi Dovid Feldman zt"l), in the concluding notes.
2. This is the opinion of the Panim Meiros and the Gilyan Maharsha (Megillah 16a) and others. The Hagahas HaBach (ad loc.), however, says that Haman used a kikar made of 1500 shekel. Accordingly, all the calculations should be halved.

3. See Mishnah, Pe'ah 8:8.
  4. There are other proofs that the buying power of silver has changed based on how much a worker would get paid for a day's work (see Bava Metzia 76a); and the amount Chazal instituted to be paid for a kesubah (see Mishnah, Pe'ah 8:8). The reason for this change was that before the development of all the metals that we have today (especially stainless steel), a person used either earthenware or an expensive metal (copper, silver or gold) for all his household needs. Although nowadays silver is merely used for ornamental purposes, in the past, silver was a necessary commodity. A poor person used the inferior quality of earthenware vessels, but a wealthy person used copper, silver or gold. As in all instances of supply and demand, as much as the demand rises, the items value rises.
  5. Midrash Rabbah Esther 7:5.
  6. The commentators explain at length why Haman chose this particular sum to "buy" the Jewish nation. There was a tremendous amount of evil plotting in calculating the sum he would pay to have the Jewish nation destroyed (see Megillah 16a, Hagahas HaBach ad loc., Pnei Yehoshua ad loc., and Binyan Tzion Chapter 144).
  7. This is the whole concept of the danger of bribery.
  8. As a side note, I have heard that Rav Elazar Menachem Shach zt"l would advise people starting a worthy project not be too quick to turn down payment of any kind. This is because of this very danger if problems crop up (as they tend to do), then if one has absolutely no personal gain, he will give up on the project much more quickly, regardless of his initial positive enthusiasm. If someone is deriving personal benefit from it, however, then the worthy project has a greater chance of lasting longer.
  9. Only when Haman is hanged is the ring removed from him and given to Mordechai (see 8:2).
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