

# PURIM'S COMING! YAY! LET'S ALL BE HUMBLE!

*by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman*

Haman was a self-made man. His background isn't enunciated in the Megillah nor what catapulted him to his high position. He just seemed destined for greatness (or meanness, as we come to learn) from the start, and he was thus out of the experience of most of us. But at one point he seemed very much like us: when he allowed himself to boast to his wife and close friends about how well things were going for him -- ironically, though, right before his downfall.

"You know," he said, though in other words, "I'm a very wealthy man with a large family who's become a great success in my field" (see Esther 5:11- 12). "And now on top of all that Queen Esther has invited me, and me alone, to join her and the king at a private banquet" (v. 12). "Can you imagine?" he must have said.

And who among us but the greatest hasn't come home and shared much the same with his or her spouse about personal and professional successes and peaks. "I was promoted!" we might say, " ... I can't believe how far I've come, considering where I started out ....", etc.

Now, would anyone blame us for allowing ourselves a little credit with our loved ones or for glowing just a bit in the face of great good fortune? Why, we'd undoubtedly inject a number of humble recitations of "boruch Hashem" (thank G d) as well as an appropriate "blee ayin harah" (I hope nothing ruins it for us) here and there. Would anyone really accuse us of arrogance? I doubt it.

And yet we scorn Haman for his remarks, and even pat ourselves on the back for not making the mistake he subsequently made when he said that, despite all his good fortune, he was depressed and enraged because one guy -- and a Jew no less, Mordechai -- refused to bow down to him (see Esther 5:9,13).

"What a blowhard he was!", we'd say self-righteously, "and what a fool, since he was just about to lose it all" -- as if our \*own\* pride wouldn't be smashed if someone in the office kept sticking his tongue out at us and refused to pat us on the back despite our promotion or the like.

Notice Esther's diffidence on the other hand, though. Three separate times she was offered the greatest career-move imaginable -- control of half of the civilized world (see Esther 5:3,6 and 7:2)! -- and she never once mentioned it to anyone. So what is it that separates Esther and others like her from the rest of us?

First off, we need to know that according to some, Mordechai could have been accused of

arrogance when he refused to bow down to Haman! (After all, halachically he probably didn't need to refuse, since Haman wasn't an idol in fact [see Rashi to Esther 3:2]). His detractors claim he only refused to bow down to Haman because Mordechai had once saved Haman's life and Haman had become his slave in return for that as a result, and Mordechai wouldn't deign to bow down to him out of rank pride (see Yalkut Shimoni 956)!

It seems to be that what set Esther apart was the fact that she truly internalized a lesson Mordechai himself taught her at a crucial point in the Megillah (for, you see, while Mordechai might have exhibited hubris, he apparently came to do teshuvah for that error, as we all can, by reflecting upon the idea we'll soon expand on).

There came a point in the Megillah where the crisis was coming to a head -- the Jews were about to be annihilated (G-d forbid!) -- and something dire had to be done. Mordechai suggested that Esther was in a unique position to appeal to King Achashveirosh to end the decree against the Jews, but she was afraid to speak out. And that's when Mordechai offered the insight he himself had apparently come to that had lead to his own humility.

He said to her, You know, "if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place" since it was inevitable. "But you and your father's house will be destroyed" (Esther 4:14), because you'll have done nothing to help the process along.

For indeed, no one but G-d Himself is indispensable (see Derech Hashem 1:3- 4 and Hilchot Yesodai Torah 1:1-3). Everything and everyone else is support staff at best and stage props at worst.

In fact, the halachic procedures involved in Purim make that point in a way as well. The Shulchan Aruch (Halachic Codes) points out that If the Megillah-reader, who plays such a vital role in the day, stops reciting the Megillah for one reason or another, that in fact someone else can quite simply step up in his place and continue on from where the first reader left off without a hitch (see O. C. 6:92:2). The point is that the all-important Megillah reading will always go on one way or another.

Apparently that was the lesson Mordechai himself came to learn and to pass on to Esther; and that seems to be what gave her the inner fortitude needed not to brag about her own accomplishments.

One thing does stand out, however. Even though Esther didn't publicize her good fortune, the facts are there for all to read; it's all recorded in the Book of Esther. We all know that she could have been in charge of half the world despite her not having enunciated it. And that underscores another point, that what must come to be known always will.

In fact, that allows us new insight into the Mishna in Pirke Avot that reads, "Contemplate three things and you'll never come to sin: know what's above you -- an eye that sees, an ear that hears; and that \*all your deeds being are inscribed in a book\*" (2:1).

That's to say that the only way to avoid the cardinal sin of arrogance is to know deep in your bones that G-d's "eyes" and "ears" know full-well what has to be done in the world, and what \*will\* be done

in the end. And that the lesson for us is that if we assume the roles allotted us in the great drama without arrogance or an untoward degree of self-consciousness, that our part will be "inscribed" in a book, just as Esther's was. And that we will have mattered indeed -- without our having to assert that.

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