

# MEGILLAT ESTHER: SHE'ASAH NISSIM LA'AVOTEINU

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

## I

### WHERE IS GOD IN THE MEGILLAH?

Every year on Purim, Jews all over the world fulfill the Mitzvah of **K'riat haMegillah** - reading the complete Book of Esther from a proper scroll. Before beginning, the reader/leader recites three B'rakhot - the middle of which is Birkat haNes (the blessing recited at the commemoration of a miracle): **Barukh...she'Asah Nissim la'Avoteinu baYamim haHeim baZ'man haZeh** (Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time [of year]). Considering that, unlike the Exodus (and all other Biblical miracles), God's hand is nowhere to be found in the text of the story of Esther and Mordechai, we have to wonder which miracle is the focus of this thanksgiving to God? For which Nes are we praising God? (Parenthetically, the same question could be asked in reference to Hanukkah, where the most central "miracle" we celebrate is a military victory which did not, from the accounts we have, include any miraculous intervention in the conventional understanding of the word. To whatever extent this shiur answers the question vis-a-vis Purim, that answer should carry the same validity for the Hanukkah question. Significantly, Purim and Hanukkah are the two occasions when this B'rakhah is recited.)

A second question, certainly related to the first, focuses on one of the unique features of the Megillah. As is well known, Esther is the only book in T'nakh with absolutely no mention of God (by any Name). Much as the Midrash interprets some occurrences of "the king" in Esther (e.g. 6:1) as a reference to God, this is certainly not p'shat. Why is this story even included in the Biblical canon?

Before moving on, it is prudent to note that some approaches within Rabbinic literature see "hidden Nissim (miracles)" throughout our story; these are, however, not evident from the p'shat. In keeping with the general approach of this shiur, we will try to identify the Nes/Nissim within the text of the Megillah.

In order to provide satisfactory answers to these two questions, we will have to address two issues - the nature of a Nes and a new understanding of the story line in Megillat Esther.

---

## II

## NES L'HITNOSES

The root of **Nes** is N-S-S - which means "banner". See, for instance, the verse in T'hilim (60:6): "You have given those who fear You a **Nes l'hitNoses** - (a raised banner), to rally to it out of bowshot."

A miracle (i.e. deliberate suspension of the laws of physics in order to save the righteous individual or people) is a raising of the banner of God's Name in the world - hence the word Nes. (See also B'resheet 22:1 and see if this approach explains Avraham's "trial" - see also Midrash Rabbah ad loc.)

There is more than one way in which God's Name becomes glorified in this world. Besides an overt intervention, it is possible for human beings to make His Name manifest by demonstrating the most noble of traits. Keep in mind that we are all created in God's "Image" (whatever that may mean...conscience, free will etc.). When we demonstrate the most noble side of human existence and utilize those traits in the most productive manner possible, this is another (certainly more subtle) demonstration of God's power and glory. It is possible for a Nes to take place within the realm of human valor; although it should be stated that unless the people in question take the next step and utilize this experience to enhance their direct relationship with God, it may be that the whole enterprise would be considered a vain effort.

I would like to suggest that the two most noble human traits, each of which is a reflection of the **Tzelem Elokim** (Image of God) which sparks all of us, are Wisdom and Courage. I am not talking about wisdom or courage in the usual sense; rather about a special kind of wisdom, a unique type of courage and a special synthesis of the two. We will explore these two characteristics throughout the story and clarify how each was utilized in the most productive and positive manner to bring about the successful salvation of the Jews.

Instead of focusing on one or two passages in the Megillah, we're going to read through the whole story and point out the key "Nes-points" along the way. You'll need a copy of the text - all citations, unless otherwise noted, refer to chapters and verses within the Book of Esther.

As we read through, I will point out several other "layers" of the story - or, alternately, several other ways to read the story and the various messages embedded in the text. As usual, we will be reading the text alone; I will point out various Rabbinic interpolations and interpretations as needed for support and illustration.

---

### III

#### CHAPTER 1

---

##### A) THE PARTY (1:1-1:8)

One other "layer" of the story is satiric; especially when viewed within the context of the rest of T'nakh (as will be explained later), the text is a clear parody. Of what...we will see.

As the story opens, we meet our first player: Achashverosh. Although he is described as a powerful king, ruling over 127 provinces from Hodu (India?) to Kush (Ethiopia?) - we soon find that his power is more illusion than reality.

First of all, the party about which we read in the first chapter (1:3-8) seems to be his inauguration ball (see v. 2); yet it only takes place in the third year of his rule. This seems to indicate that the transfer of power into his hands was not so smooth. We will soon see that plots abound in and around his court and that his control over the realm is not very secure.

The description of the party brings three issues to the fore:

1. *The many allusions to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) / Mikdash (Temple). Keep in mind that the Ba'al haMegillah (author) expects every reader to be familiar with T'nakh and will pick up any word-associations made here. Among the materials described here are several which are prominent in the Mishkan: T'khelet (royal blue), Argaman (purple), Kesef (silver) and Shesh (marble). Indeed, the Midrash posits that the vessels which Achashverosh used at this party were the vessels of the Mikdash - this interpretation was probably motivated by the many Mikdash-associations in the description of the party.  
(Rav Menachem Liebttag has a fascinating shiur on exactly this point - with many more illustrations. You can find it at his [Tanach Study Center Website](#): it comes highly recommended!)*
2. *Achashverosh seems to be very insecure - both personally and politically. He spares no expense to show off his wealth - and specifically invites the governors, ministers and soldiers of the Persian and Medean armies. It seems that he is trying to consolidate his power and bring the military into his good graces. At the end of his six-month party (!), he invites all the citizenry of Shushan to his gala bash. This insecurity will increase and become a prominent feature in the events of the Megillah.*
3. *The image of Achashverosh's kingdom, a monarchy governed by protocol. Note how often the word **Dat** - a Persian word meaning "custom" or "protocol" - shows up in the Megillah: 20 times! (Save for one verse in Daniel, it doesn't appear in any other books of the T'nakh). This would seem to indicate that everything in Achashverosh's realm was done "properly" and that the system was orderly and just. We soon find that this kingdom of **Dat** is just as illusory as his power.*

---

## B) VASHTI (1:9-22)

Vashti is not, properly speaking, a "player" in this narrative. She is much more of a foil, presented as the set-up for the story to unfold. Even after she is gone (dead? exiled?), her shadow hangs over the palace - but more on that later.

The first indication that Achashverosh's power is a lot of fluff is when he decides to show off his beautiful queen (presumably to outshine the beauty of their wives) - and she refuses to come out! This great king, protector of the realm, defender of the empire, ruler of Persia, etc. etc. controls nothing! His own queen refuses him and is not obeisant to his wishes. (Although in modern times this would seem to prove nothing about his political power - in Persia of 2500 years ago, this "failing" was quite telling - as we see from the tone of the letters sent out at the end of the first chapter).

We soon learn something else about the king. For all of his power - he never makes any decisions (is he passive-aggressive?). As a matter of fact, he doesn't ever say "no" to any of his advisors! A strange king - a classic "yes-man" sitting on the throne.

We get some insight into how his advisors have learned to "play him". Memuchan (who the Gemara identifies as Haman) knows that if he advises the king to kill (or banish) Vashti on account of her defiance of the king - the drunk monarch may wake up on the morn and feel foolish and humiliated that he had to exile the queen for his own honor - and take out his anger on Memuchan. In order to get the king to "get rid" of Vashti, Memuchan appeals to Achashverosh's sense of justice. He is the defender of men's rights throughout the kingdom and must act decisively on behalf of all the poor princes and governors throughout the Empire whose wives will surely rebel, following Vashti's (unpunished) lead. By appealing to Achashverosh's sense of nobility, the wise advisor allows the king to do what he wants without feeling a sense of humiliation.

Two more notes about the first chapter. First of all, as the Gemara points out, this first set of letters (v. 22) seems to be quite foolish. The king sends out letters to every province, announcing that every man rules in his own house!!???! (According to the Gemara, this caused the second letters - announcing the "loosing" of Jewish blood - to be taken less seriously by the citizenry who already case a jaundiced eye on this king's pronouncements).

Second, as R. David Hentschke points out (Megadim vol. 23), the kings has to send these letters to each province in their own language (v. 22 - this phrasing shows up several times in the Megillah). As powerful as the king may be, he hasn't been successful in establishing Persian as the language of the realm; perhaps his rule is not so ironclad as it might seem (reminds us a bit of the USSR???)

---

## IV

### CHAPTER 2

---

#### A) A NEW QUEEN (2:1-4)

We are quickly reminded of Achashverosh's inability to decide anything for himself. It takes his servants to suggest finding a new queen by gathering all of the maidens to Shushan for a "tryout" with the king.

As any student of T'nakh remembers, such a call went out once before - when David was old and near death. As we read in the beginning of Melakhim (Kings), they searched for a young maiden throughout Yisra'el - and found Avishag haShunamit. Note the contrast - whereas the one girl was found (although many undoubtedly would have wanted to be chosen); here, all the girls have to be forcibly brought to Shushan (note the wording in v. 3). And why not...who would want follow Vashti?

There is another interesting allusion in v. 3: The phrase **v'Yafked haMelekh P'kidim v'Yik'b'tzu** reminds us of a nearly similar phrase used in the first "Jew in the foreign court" story. When Yosef successfully interprets Pharaoh's dreams, he advises that Pharaoh appoint officers to collect the wheat of the seven plentiful years - **Ya'aseh Pharaoh v'Yafked P'kidim...v'Yik'b'tzu...** (B'resheet 41:34-35). This allusion is not for naught; the Ba'al haMegillah is showing us how Achashverosh and his servants viewed these young girls - just like wheat to be collected and brought to the palace.

---

## B) MORDECHAI AND ESTHER (2:5-20)

We are immediately introduced to our two heroes - Mordechai and Esther. It is critical to note that both of these names are not only Persian (and not Hebrew) - they are both pagan names related to various gods of the pantheon! The Esther-Ishtar-Astarte connection is well-documented (besides the fact that the Megillah explicitly gives her "real" name - Hadassah); our heroine is named for the goddess of fertility. The Gemara (BT Menahot 65) gives Mordechai a more "Jewish" name - Petah'ya - and, again, the Mordechai-Marduk (god of creation in many mythologies throughout the Near East) connection has been extensively written up.

Why do these two righteous people, through whom God saves His people, have such names?

[note: Jews taking - or being given - non-Jewish "alternate" names when in the foreign court is the norm in T'nakh. Note Yoseph, who is named "Tzoph'nat Pa'a'ne'ach" by Pharaoh; Daniel, who is named "Belt-Shatzar" by N'vuchadnetzar, as well as Daniel's three companions. Note that Jews were occasionally given names which were associated with pagan gods - compare Daniel 1:7 with 4:5. Mordechai and Esther seem to be two examples of the same phenomenon. Note that according to the Gemara (BT Megillah 13a), the name "Esther" was given to her by the non-Jews, in response to her beauty.]

Even more curious is Mordechai's insistence that Esther not reveal her identity (as a Jewess) while in the palace (v10, 20). As we shall soon see, even Mordechai's identity was not obvious; he was not distinguished in any external way from any other citizen.

There are a couple of verses which are telling within the scope of Esther's successful entrance into the palace.

*(v. 16) - Esther was finally chosen in the seventh year of Achashverosh's reign - in other words, the selection of a queen took four years. (One very tired king! - See 2:12; even in his hedonistic behavior, he followed **Dat**!).*

*(v. 17-19) Compare the royal feast in honor of his queen (ironically - "in place of Vashti" - the dead (or exiled) queen's shadow hangs over the palace and Esther is likely aware that her fate may be no better than her predecessor's) with v. 19. As much as the king loves Esther - his servants are bringing more virgins into the palace! Insecure is the best description of anyone with a position of power in this court.*

---

### C) THE PLOT (2:21-23)

As we all know, this little paragraph is critical to the later success of our heroes. Note, however, that it is Achashverosh's own guards - who are charged with defending him - who are plotting against him. This kingdom is, indeed, unstable and always ready for a shake-up.

---

## V

### CHAPTER 3

---

#### A) ENTER HAMAN (3:1-7)

Suddenly - and very much out of the blue - Haman is elevated to a position of importance in the kingdom. This again demonstrates - despite the appearance of **Dat** - the helter-skelter way in which power and impotence, success and failure - even life and death - are handled most capriciously in the palace.

As much as we know about Achashverosh's terrible insecurity - we quickly learn about Haman's personal devil - his ego. Imagine that the king of the greatest empire on earth has just appointed a relative nobody (as it seems Haman was beforehand) to be grand vizier and that all citizens should pay him homage. Wouldn't he be too enthralled with the sudden attention and respect to care about one or two people who don't bow down? Not Haman - his ego just takes him right past all the knee-benders and focuses his attention on the one person who refuses to bow - Mordechai. As much as we would expect him to be happy with the new position - he is merely enraged (and seemingly obsessed with that rage) at Mordechai.

Note that it isn't obvious to Haman that Mordechai is Jewish - Haman has to find that out from someone else in order to figure out which nation to destroy (as he wants to annihilate all of Mordechai's people. By the way, this paints Haman as much less of an ideological anti-Semite than we are used to thinking - but that belongs to another shiur.) Evidently, Mordechai's behavior - or, at least his dress and external demeanor - did not mark him as a Jew. Just like his niece, he seems to have been quite assimilated (see the Book of Ezra for more background on this phenomenon).

Now - Haman, the grand vizier of the kingdom of **Dat**, decides to wipe out an entire nation due to the slight to his ego. How does he decide when to do it? By lottery (**Pur**)! What a joke this **Dat** proves to be!

---

## B) ACHASHVEROSH AND HAMAN (3:8-15)

There isn't a whole lot to say here; the dialogue between these two speaks for itself. Although everything is done properly, the reader instinctively feels that a king who is willing to condemn a people without even finding out who they are (read 3:8-11 carefully) is not doing a good job of running his empire.

In order to keep an eye on the story, let's put together the chronology of events. The king's party (Vashti's farewell bash) took place in the third year of his reign. Esther was crowned - and Mordechai saved the king's life - in the seventh year. Haman had the letters (allowing the anti-Semites to kill the Jews) sent out on Nissan 13 in the twelfth year of the king's reign. In other words, Esther has been queen for a bit more than four years by this time - and her identity was still a total secret.

---

# VI

## CHAPTER 4

---

### A) ESTHER AND MORDECHAI (4:1-17)

Mordechai finds out about this plot - and begins to demonstrate signs of "Teshuvah" (repentance). (Compare 4:1,3 with Yonah 3:5,6,8) He does not, however, do this in front of the palace gate, where he seems to retain his composure. He does, however, get the message in to Esther as to what is going on and he pleads with her to go to the king and have Haman's order overturned.

We are immediately reminded of how capricious this king really is. The beloved queen hasn't seen the king in thirty days (v. 11) (and probably wonders in whose arms he sleeps tonight) - and even she is subject to death if she comes to him unbeckoned unless he agrees to see her (shades of Vashti again)!

At this point, Mordechai sends the message which turns Esther around - and she begins to demonstrate not only her tremendous commitment and courage to her nation; but also an amazing type of wisdom - those very characteristics which reflect her Tzelem Elokim in the most powerful way.

*For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this. (4:14)*

Mordechai told her about the B'rit (covenant) between God and the B'nei Yisra'el. We are promised that we will outlive all of the Hamans - but that B'rit only applies to the nation as a whole, not to individuals or families. Esther - you may make it through this next upheaval - and you may not. In any case, the Jews will be saved, as God always has His ways of keeping the B'rit.

Esther realizes the wisdom and truth of this argument and acquiesces to Mordechai's plea. Now, she plans her strategy...let's take a peek behind the scenes. First, a few words about this remarkable type of wisdom.

It is natural to see everything in life through the eyes of our experience. This is why honest people often find it difficult to disbelieve others or question their motivations; they cannot recognize the lie in the other person's words because they have no such possibility inside of their own hearts. In the same way, kind people often ascribe positive motives to questionable behavior of others - because they could never recognize mean thoughts in others as they have no such thoughts in their own persona.

It takes a tremendous type of wisdom to separate yourself from what you instinctively feel and how you usually view the world and to see it from the other person's perspective. While this may be easy in a sympathetic conversation (although not nearly as easy as it seems); it is most difficult when deciding how to fight an enemy. The trick is to learn how to think like the enemy - without becoming the enemy.

This was perhaps the greatest miracle of Hanukkah - that the Maccabees were able to think like Greeks (it certainly took great strategy to outfox that mighty army with a small band) - without becoming Greeks (well, not for a couple of generations at least).

In the same way, we will see how Esther manipulates Achashverosh and Haman into a fateful (and, for Haman, fatal) collision course - simply by playing them according to their own personalities and weaknesses.

---

## VII



## CHAPTER 5

---

### A) ESTHER AND ACHASHVEROSH (5:1-5)

Let's keep in mind that Esther is risking her life to come into Achashverosh's throne room - and she knows that the king knows this. In other words, she is aware that Achashverosh will consider her request to be very important - important enough to risk her life. We would think that when the king favors her and agrees to grant nearly any request - "even until half the kingdom" - that she would seize this opportunity and ask for salvation and for Haman's orders to be rescinded.

Instead, she invites Achashverosh and Haman to a special party she has prepared for that very evening. Why didn't she ask for salvation at this point?

Esther understood a great deal about politics. Remember - she hasn't seen the king for thirty days. Even if she is still his favorite - she is still not on the "inside" right now. Haman, on the other hand, has just had a drinking party with the king (3 days earlier), celebrating their letters sent out to kill the Jews. If she were to accuse Haman, the king might not believe her and the whole effort would be lost.

She invites the two of them to a party. As disgusting as the prospect sounds, it is the first step in a brilliant plan of psychological warfare.

Let's consider how each of them would react to this invitation:

- 4. *Haman, as the consummate egotist, has his ego blown up even bigger than before (as we will soon see). He alone is invited to sup with the king and queen!*
- 5. *Achashverosh, on the other hand, must be suspicious. There has already been (at least) one plot on his life - now, Esther risked her life just to invite him and Haman to a party? Is something going on between the two of them (more on this later)? Are they plotting against me?*

---

### B) THE FIRST PARTY (5:6-8)

At this party, the king expects to find out what Esther really has on her mind - maybe his suspicions were for naught? Instead, she surprises him by asking him to return - with Haman - for another party the next night!

Following the psychological makeup of our two party guests - each of the states of mind described above became exacerbated.

Esther knew that Haman's ego would continue to grow - and she also knew that he would leave the palace via the gate - and see Mordechai sitting there. Just feed his ego - and he will self-destruct.

---

### C) HAMAN AT HOME (9-14)

Indeed, Haman becomes so enraged when he sees Mordechai that, after a short bragging session with his family, he runs back to the palace to ask Achashverosh to allow him to hang Mordechai immediately. He cannot wait eleven months to kill his arch-nemesis - he needs satisfaction right away (ah, the impetuous egotist.)

---

## VIII

### CHAPTER 6

---

#### A) HAMAN AND ACHASHVEROSH (6:1-10)

Why couldn't the king sleep? The Gemara provides the obvious answer - he had thoughts of plot and coup on his worried mind. Why did he call for his chronicles to be read? It seems that this powerful king, ruler over 127 provinces - had no friends. There was no one he could trust or turn to. Esther had planted a terrible bug in his mind - two parties in a row with Haman - what are the two of them planning to do? Indeed - what have they already done?

Just as the king discovers that he owes Mordechai a favor from over four years ago - and decides that the way to gain the allegiance of the citizenry is to publicly demonstrate the rewards of loyalty to the crown - Haman turns up in the outer courtyard of the palace. The king had to wonder what Haman was doing there so late at night (!?!). The king summoned Haman for some advice - and for a chance to take him down a peg or two. Now, the king demonstrates some acumen of his own.

In 6:6, the king asks Haman what to do for someone he really favors. Haman, that old egotist, is so caught up in his own power, that he describes a truly regal parade which he assumes will feature him as the honoree. How very surprised he is when the king orders him to take the self-same Mordechai and lead him on the king's horse.

(Note that the phrase to be called out while leading this honoree: **Kakhah ye'Aseh la'Ish Asher...** shows up in one other place in T'nakh. This is the beginning of the formula of Halitza - the refusal of Levirate marriage, which accompanies the woman's disdainful spit. [D'varim 25:9] Draw your own conclusions about the satiric effect accomplished by the Ba'al haMegillah).

---

#### B) HAMAN AND MORDECHAI (6:11-14)

Haman returns to his house "in mourning". The Rabbis have a lot to say about the events of this morning - but, even on a p'shat level, it is clear that Haman's fortunes have taken a significant turn for the worse. He is quickly rushed to the second party - and, in his case, his own farewell.

---

## IX

### CHAPTER 7

---

#### A) THE SECOND PARTY (7:1-9)

This is the denouement of the story as far as we are concerned. Haman still doesn't know who Esther is - but he is clearly shattered and his ego is as fragile as ever. Achashverosh is equally disturbed and must be getting more confused by Esther's repeated parties without asking for what she really wants (it is clear that the king knows she wants something more - which is why he keeps asking her).

Now, she pulls out all the cards. The king thinks that she and Haman are hatching a plot against him (and have been having an affair?) - and suddenly Haman is revealed as the villain who is plotting against her. Haman thinks that he is still on the road to satisfaction in the matter of the Jews; he'll just need to wait until Adar. He has no idea that Esther is one of "them".

Esther points to Haman and all is lost. The confusion and anger of the king, the confusion and fear of Haman - create an emotional jumble which ultimately leads to the king's explosion when he finds Haman lying on Esther's divan, begging for mercy. Haman is erased and (here we go again) Mordechai takes his place (compare 8:2 with 3:10). The capricious king has (for the meantime) elevated the Jews and they are saved. We all know, however, that the happy ending of the story isn't permanent and that the rocky shores of existence in exile (which is probably one of the sub-messages of the Megillah) are not safe for Jews.

---

## X

### POSTSCRIPT

We have taken a cursory look at some of the events as described in the Megillah and found that Esther displayed extraordinary wisdom and courage in her successful effort to save her people. We are very right to regard this as a Nes as it is a reflection of God's Image as found within our heroine. God's Name is not found - because, unlike Pesach, this is not a story about the suspension of the laws of nature. It is, rather, a story about human strength and nobility used in the most positive and productive effort imaginable - the salvation of Am Yisra'el. (That and a really great satire of the

Persian Kingdom)

*Text Copyright © 1998 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom.*

*The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles*