

A JEW AND PROUD OF IT!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

There is an interesting passage in Megillas Esther regarding Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman. We read (Esther 3:2-4):

All the King's servants at the King's gate would bow down and prostrate themselves before Haman, for this is what the King had commanded concerning him. But Mordechai would not bow down, nor prostrate himself. The King's servants at the King's gate said to Mordechai, "Why do you disobey the King's command?" After saying this to him day after day - and he did not heed them - they told Haman; to see whether Mordechai's words would avail, for he had told them that he was a Jew.

>From the first pasuk (verse), it appears that Mordechai's "crime" was his refusal to bow down to Haman. When Haman, however, became aware of this, it seems that his rage was aroused not simply because, "Mordechai would not bow nor prostrate himself," but rather because, "he told them that he was a Jew."

Perhaps, what we have here is a classical example of anti-semitism. Had someone else - of a different nationality or religion - refused to bow down, nothing much would be made of it. But Mordechai was a Jew. And the Haman's of the world relish nothing more than to catch a Jew doing something wrong.

If, for example, a Roman Catholic man were arrested and charged with, say, tax evasion, it is highly unlikely that the media would even note his religion. In fact, unless he was some sort of celebrity or public figure, it is doubtful that such a ho-hum case would even be covered by the media at all. But if, G-d forbid, an "ultra-orthodox Jew" (to use their terminology) is charged with a crime, it suddenly becomes front-page material, with his religiosity taking centre-stage. His wrongs will not be overlooked - because he is a Jew.

[Mind you on reflection, I feel that perhaps we should be proud of this. The fact that we are perceived by "the street" as deeply-religious individuals, who should rightly be the bearers of a higher moral and ethical standard, "an example for the nations," is in many ways a compliment - and a responsibility. It is only deplorable to the extent that it leads to unwarranted anti-semitism and hate-mongering.]

Some mefarshim (commentators) explain that the phrase, "for he told him that he was a Jew," means that Mordechai was telling people that Haman was **himself** a Jew.

In the year 3393 (368 b.c.e) [the second year of Achashveirosh's reign], an Indian province rebelled against the Persian Empire, and the King sent twelve-thousand troops to quell the rebellion. The two generals leading the troops were Mordechai and Haman. Each lead six-thousand troops, and was given provisions for three years. Mordechai lead his troops in attack from the east, while Haman attacked from the west.

Haman squandered his provisions, and at the end of the first year he had already ran out of supplies. He appealed to Mordechai for help. Mordechai agreed, but on one condition: Haman would have to serve as his slave one day a week. Without any other choice, Haman was forced to agree. [Me'am Lo'ez]

The non-Jewish slave of a Jew must undergo a conversion process, including milah (circumcision) and tevilah (ritual immersion), at which point he becomes obligated in many Torah laws, including all (applicable) negative commandments, and some positive ones. According to this Midrash, Mordechai could rightly have told people that Haman's seething hatred of the Jews was ridiculous, as fate would have it that he too was a Jew.

The holy Berditchover Rebbe, in his sefer (book) Kedushas Levi, explains this passage as follows. Mordechai himself was of extremely high social status. Aside from the fact that, according to the Midrash, he had been a general in the King's army, we read that he had the privilege of "sitting at the King's gate," (2:21). Because of his position, Mordechai had been given an exemption from the King's commandment to bow before Haman. The passage can be read as follows, "All the King's servants at the King's gate would bow down and prostrate themselves before Haman, for this is what the King had commanded concerning him, but Mordechai would not [was not commanded to] bow down, nor prostrate himself." [Indeed, the wording of the Megillah points to this interpretation, in that the words "he would not bow down, nor prostrate himself" are written in future- tense, "he *will not* bow down nor prostrate himself," instead of the obviously more appropriate past-tense, "he **did not** bow down..."]

If, in fact, Mordechai's non-prostration was ordained by none other than the King, what was it that so incensed Haman? Not everyone knew of Mordechai's exemption. People would ask him why he refused to bow down before Haman. Instead of telling them that he was exempt from the decree, he would answer them simply, "I am a Jew. I bow down to the One and Only G-d."

In Mordechai's mind, this was the only true reason for not bowing before Haman. He knew that even if he had been included in the decree, he would still have refused to bow. So, instead of taking the easy way out, and answering those who inquired that he had indeed been excluded, his "Jewish pride" swelled within, and he used this as an opportunity to proclaim his faith and devotion to the One and Only G-d. It was not Mordechai's refusal to bow that caused Haman's rage to seethe, explains the Kedushas Levi, but rather the explanation that he insisted on giving people; "for he had told them that he was a Jew."

A Jew should never be ashamed of his religion, even when relating to non-Jews. To the contrary, it should be our source of pride. As it is written (Devarim/Deuteronomy 4:6), "You shall safeguard and perform them, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the nations, who shall hear all these decrees, and who shall say, 'Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!'"

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