

LOTS MORE TO THE STORY

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"In the third year of his reign, he made a feast for all his officials..." (1:3)

According to Achashveirosh's calculation, the seventieth year of the Jewish exile had passed without consequence, thus laying to rest the prophetic claims of a Jewish deliverance. Achashveirosh celebrated this occasion with a lavish feast, displaying the sacred vessels plundered from the Holy Temple by the armies of Nevuchadnezzar. The verse describing the royal finery featured at the feast contains an accentuated letter, "ches", which has the numeric value of eight. This, explains the Manos Halevi, alludes to the Talmudic statement that Achashveirosh celebrated by donning the eight Priestly garments of the "Kohein Gadol" - "High Priest".¹ Almost a decade earlier, Belshazzar the Casdean had also celebrated what he had erroneously calculated to be the passing of the seventieth year of the exile. Although he displayed the sacred vessels, there is no mention of him donning the Priestly vestments.² What was Achashveirosh's motivation in donning the priestly vestments? Immediately following the failed plot of Bigson and Seresh, Achashveirosh elevated Haman's position to second most powerful person in his kingdom.³ Why was this Achashveirosh's reaction to the botched assassination attempt? Haman, in his new position, paraded around the city requiring every person to prostrate themselves before him.⁴ This action could have been viewed as an attempt to usurp the power of the king. Why did Achashveirosh allow Haman to deify himself?

The turning point of the Megillah narrative occurs at the beginning of the sixth chapter. When Achashveirosh, suffering from insomnia, requested that the king's annals be recited before him, he discovered that Mordechai was never rewarded for his involvement in foiling the assassination attempt upon the king. Achashveirosh asked Haman what should be done to the man whom the king especially wishes to honor, and Haman, thinking that he was the subject of the king's beneficence, suggested that this person should be allowed to don the king's crown and robe, ride the king's steer and be led by one of the king's most noble officers. Achashveirosh conferred this honor upon Mordechai and required Haman to parade him through the city.⁵

According to the Talmud, Haman was also required to groom and bathe Mordechai.⁶ Why did Achashveirosh subject Haman to complete and utter humiliation at the hands of Mordechai, his sworn nemesis? The Talmud states that a parent should not favor one child over another; as a result of two silver coins, the cost of the tunic given to Yoseif by Yaakov, Bnei Yisroel were forced to

descend to Egypt.¹ How could Yaakov, who was able to outwit Eisav and Lavan, not have realized that giving his son this additional garment would fuel the fires of jealousy and resentment between Yoseif and his brothers? The Torah refers to Yoseif as Yaakov's "ben zekunim".⁸

The Targum translates this as "bar chakim"⁹. Rashi explains that "zaken" in the verse refers to wisdom; Yaakov taught Yoseif all of the Torah he learned during the fourteen years that he studied in the academy of Shem and Ever.¹⁰ Why did this not incite the brothers against Yoseif? After Binyamin was reunited with Yoseif, Yoseif presented his brothers with gifts, offering them each a new garment. The Torah records that he gave more lavishly to Binyamin, presenting him with five outfits and three hundred silver pieces.¹¹ The Talmud questions how Yoseif, who himself was a victim of the jealousy caused by favoritism, could fall prey to the same miscalculation.

The Talmud answers that Yoseif's actions alluded to a future event in Jewish history when Mordechai, a descendent of Binyamin, would be lavishly garbed in regal raiment.¹² How does this answer address the difficulty posed by the Talmud? In most societies there is one position which represents the political power of the state and another which represents its religion. In the case of Bnei Yisroel, these would be the positions of king and Kohein Gadol. Achashveirosh's donning of the High Priest's vestments reflects his attempt to consolidate the political and religious positions. After an attempt upon his life, Achashveirosh searched for an ally who would offer him security.

He accomplished this by giving Haman the position of religious leader. Therefore, Achashveirosh was not threatened by Haman deifying himself and forcing others to bow before him. When Haman thought that Achashveirosh wanted to bestow upon him an additional honor, he requested to be king for a day, for this would allow him political prestige aside from the religious. When Yaakov transmitted to Yoseif the Torah he received in the academy of Shem and Ever, the brothers were not threatened because this only represented favoritism of Yoseif in religious matters, but not usurping the sovereignty of Yehuda, who the brothers understood would be king, power which he already possessed. The investment of a political position is usually performed by a religious official; for example, the prophet anoints the king and the president's invocation is performed by the clergy. Achashveirosh requested that Haman invest Mordechai for his day as sovereign because the religious leader must perform this duty. In Achashveirosh's eyes, this was not a denigration of Haman, rather a show of respect for his position. Just as Aharon bathed and shaved the Levites when they entered the Service, Haman was expected to do the same for Mordechai.

However, Yaakov giving Yoseif the additional raiment which, as the Seforno explains, symbolized aspirations of leadership,¹³ was viewed as a threat to the political sovereignty of Bnei Yisroel and therefore was met with resistance.

When Yoseif gave Binyamin additional garments, he explained to the brothers that this portended to

the raiment that would be worn by Mordechai. Mordechai was given Haman's wealth and position by Achashveirosh and Esther.¹⁴

This meant that it was a religious appointment, not a political one, and therefore it posed no threat to Bnei Yisroel.

1. *Manos Halevi* 1:6

2. *Megilla* 11b

3. 3:1

4. 3:2

5. 6:1-11

6. *Megillah* 16a

8. *Bereishis* 37:3

9. *Ibid* 10. *Rashi* *ibid*

11. *Bereishis* 45:22

12. *Megillah* 16a

13. *Beishis* 37:3

14. *Megillas Esther* 11:1-2

The Key To Success

"You shall offer the one sheep in the morning, and the second sheep shall you offer in the afternoon" (29:39)

There is a Midrash which discusses the a priori axiom of the Torah. Rabbi Akiva states that the a priori axiom is "ve'ahavta l'arayacha kamocha" - "love your friend as you do yourself".¹ Ben Azai cites the verse "Zeh sefer toldos adam, beyom bero Elokim adam bidmus Elokim asah oso" - "This is the account of man's origin: On the day that Hashem created man, He made him in his likeness."^{2,3} A variant Midrash, recorded by the author of the Ein Yaakov, offers a third opinion. Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi states "Es hakeves ha'echad ta'aseh baboker, ve'es hakeves ha'sheini ta'aseh bein ha'arbayim" - "You shall offer one sheep in the morning and a second sheep shall you offer in the afternoon" as the a priori axiom.⁴ What is the issue being disputed by these three opinions?

There are three basic relationships which each individual is expected to perfectly exist in this world. These relationships are "bein adam le'atzmo" - "man's relationship to himself", "bein adam l'achaveiro" - "man's relationship to his fellow man", and "bein adam la'makom" - "man's relationship to Hashem". The three relationships are interdependent to the extent that if there is a deficiency within one of them, all three are lacking.

Fundamental to man's ability to accomplish and succeed in any endeavor in life is his degree of self-esteem. A person with low self-esteem is not motivated to accomplish. What should a person focus on so that he may develop a positive definition of himself? Rabbi Akiva maintains that by performing acts of kindness and exhibiting love toward his fellow man, a person will build up a positive perception of himself. By learning to love others, a person comes to love himself.

Ben Azai disagrees. He maintains that a person with a low self-image, who does not love himself, cannot love others. How then does a person come to appreciate himself? The Torah teaches that man is created in Hashem's image. The most heinous of transgressors, the blasphemer is required to be buried before nightfall of the day he is executed. Rashi explains that it is deprecating to Hashem, in whose image the blasphemer was created, for his corpse to remain exposed overnight. Even the corpse of this sinner retains the stamp of G-d's likeness. Therefore, the knowledge that man is a G-dly being is sufficient to give man a positive definition of himself, thereby enabling him to perfect his other relationships.

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi does not find Ben Azai's solution satisfactory, for the knowledge that man is created in Hashem's image is only indicative of man's potential. The awareness of this potential cannot be the source of man's self-esteem. On the contrary, a person's self-esteem can be extremely damaged by the knowledge that he has tremendous potential, but he is not actually achieving to potential. Therefore, Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi offers an alternative solution. Hashem requires man to serve Him by bringing offerings twice daily. This means that although Hashem is omnipotent, He has created a relationship with Bnei Yisroel by which we can offer Him something. We can cater to His "needs". The knowledge that a person is needed in a relationship is an enormous self-esteem builder. The ultimate boost in self-esteem comes when a person recognizes that the One who needs him is Hashem. The understanding that we have a relationship with Hashem and He desires that we serve Him, gives man self-esteem and is also the vehicle through which man can actualize his potential. The system that Hashem has designed for us to follow is the path which we must take to ultimately be fulfilled.

For man to actualize his potential, he must first develop his self-esteem. According to Rabbi Akiva, this can be achieved by focusing upon his relationships with his fellow men. Ben Azai argues that man's relationship with himself is the key to a positive self-definition, while Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi maintains that man's awareness of his relationship with Hashem is the building block to success in all relationships.

1.Vayikra 19:18

2.Bereishis 5:1

3.Bereishis Rabbah 24:8