



## **Megillat Esther: Drama and Intrigue**

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### **A Note Regarding Historical Authenticity**

The rabbis stoutly maintain that Esther and Mordechai truly lived in Shushan the Capitol, tracing the ethnic tolerance of King Darius II to the influence of a non-Persian mother. The historians and literary critics, on the other hand, point out the many historical inaccuracies present in the Megillah, naming the wife of Ahasuerus/Xerxes as Princess Amastris and finding no records of anyone named Vashti or Esther. “Esther: Drama and Intrigue” would prefer not to take sides. Perhaps the Megillah is historically factual: it then behooves the reader to peruse carefully its language and compare its details to known facets of ancient Near Eastern life, especially those particulars given in contemporary Biblical works. Perhaps the Megillah is a much-loved myth: it then behooves the reader conscientiously to peruse its text and fit its contents into the known framework of biblical tradition. Whether or not the story of Esther is mythological, it comes down to us with a rich rabbinical tradition that places the story in an important context.

According to those who acknowledge the book as a historical document, the canonized Hebrew Megillah was compiled by the Men of the Great Assembly during the first few decades following the events chronicled (approximately 500 B.C.E.), based on letters sent by Queen Esther and Grand Vizier Mordechai of Shushan to the Assembled in Jerusalem. The document was designed to be distributed to Jews all over the Persian empire, and thus was under royal supervision and censorship. For this reason, Mordechai and Esther tactfully glossed over parts of the story in which the King was seen to misbehave. Also necessarily omitted were certain personal details such as Mordechai’s dream of the Persian empire’s fall and Esther’s prayer, which revealed her contempt for the hedonistic King. Private records of the period, however, include Mordechai’s dream and Esther’s prayer, as well as the full text of Mordechai’s edict permitting the Jews to defend themselves; two of these records survive in the present as the *Targum Rishon* and the *Targum Sheini* and are incorporated into the Septuagint. Although these Aramaic renderings are not considered part of the Hebrew canon, most ancient rabbis agree that their contents are authentic and include them in the Megillah’s rich historical context.

According to those who characterize the Megillah as a myth, the book itself is cohesive enough to warrant the supposition of a single author or collaboration of authors. The story of Queen Esther, with its elements of farce, comedy, and tragedy, was transmitted orally and in writing until it was canonized in an official form and added to the Hebrew Bible. It may have been written during the Persian period, but more likely emerged during the Greek period, when the corrupt Persian court was a thing of the past. As a holy book, its main caretakers would then have been the rabbis and the Great Assembly, who provide us with an accompanying myth of authorship as described above, as well as a rich body of extra-textual commentary, anecdotes, and legends. Whether or not Mordechai and Esther in fact lived is besides the point. We study their story as if they did.

### **A Note Regarding the Translation**

This translation adheres to the Hebrew text as much as possible without making the resulting document hopelessly unreadable. In the interests of readability and attractiveness, I have sacrificed the poetic enhancements of the King James style and rendered the translation in modern English. Like most interpreters, I have made free with synonyms in order to avoid the choppy “he said and she said and he said” often present in the original text. As I translated phrase by phrase, I also chose to add conjunctions in certain places so that the English might flow more smoothly; around these few additions I have put brackets so that the reader need not seek their corresponding terms in the Hebrew. However, when not dealing with nebulous verbs such as “said,” “got,” “had,” or the like, I made an effort to translate consistently, using the same English word when the same Hebrew word was used in two places.

In the interests of linguistic accuracy, I have transliterated all names to match the modern Hebrew pronunciation. Readers will note that while the names of Mordechai and Esther are unchanged, Ahasuerus/Xerxes has been transliterated more accurately as Achashverosh. Although such transliteration hinders name recognition, it takes a great step towards historical accuracy, attempting to match the pronunciation which the Megillah’s original authors intended for its names. In the interest of general comprehension, however, I have left unchanged all names of places well-known by their English names, such as Persia, India, and Jerusalem.

Good speed and happy Purim!

**1** <sup>1</sup> It happened in the days of Achashverosh-- that is to say, the Achashverosh who reigned<sup>1</sup> from India to Ethiopia (one hundred and twenty seven provinces)-  
- <sup>2</sup> in the days when King Achashverosh was settling himself on his royal throne<sup>2</sup> in Shushan the Capitol.<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup> In the third year of his reign, he made a banquet for all his ministers and servants, the military of Persia and Media, the patricians and the regional governors before him, <sup>4</sup> during which he displayed the wealth of his glorious kingdom and the worth of his splendid greatness for many days-- for one hundred and eighty days!<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> And at the conclusion of these days, the king made for all the people to be found in Shushan the Capitol-- from the greatest to the least<sup>5</sup> -- a seven day banquet in the courtyard of the palace garden, <sup>6</sup> among lace, green, and blue tapestries, with fine linen and scarlet cords, held by silver rods and marble pillars, and couches of gold and silver upon a pavement of alabaster, marble, iridescent shell, and onyx. <sup>7</sup> And the drinks [too] came in vessels of gold, no vessel being identical to another,<sup>6</sup> with royal wine abundant as the King's power.<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> (All the drinking was lawful, without coercion,<sup>8</sup> for thus had the king commanded the great ones of his house, to do the will of every man.) <sup>9</sup> The queen Vashti now also made a banquet for the women in the royal house of King Achashverosh.

<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when the King's heart was jovial with wine, he told Mehuman, Bizta, Charvona, Bigta and Avagta, Zetar and Karkas (the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Achashverosh) <sup>11</sup> to bring out Vashti the queen<sup>9</sup> in a royal crown,<sup>10</sup> that he might show the masses and nobles her beauty, for she was very handsome in appearance. <sup>12</sup> [However,] Queen Vashti<sup>11</sup> utterly refused to come at the king's command by the hand of the eunuchs, whereupon the king flew into a rage and his wrath burnt in him.

<sup>13</sup> [So] the king spoke to the wise men who knew the times<sup>12</sup> (for thus was the King's practice in questions of law and justice, <sup>14</sup> those close to him being Karsh'na, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Mars'na, and Memuchan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who worked with the King personally and sat first in the kingdom) <sup>15</sup> regarding what to do to Queen Vashti,<sup>13</sup> that she had not performed the King's command by the hand of the eunuchs. <sup>16</sup> Up spoke Memuchan before the King and nobles, "Not against the King alone has Vashti the Queen transgressed, but against all the nobles and all the peoples in all the provinces of King Achashverosh! <sup>17</sup> For the words of the Queen will go forth to all women, to make their husbands petty in their opinions, as they say, 'King Achashverosh commanded Vashti the Queen to be brought before him, but she did not come!' <sup>18</sup> This very day, all the great ladies of Persia and Media who have heard the Queen's words will speak up against the King's nobles, and there will necessarily be much scorn and rage!<sup>14</sup> <sup>19</sup> Now if it pleases the King,

let a royal decree go forth from him: let it be written irrevocably in the laws of Persia and Media that Vashti come no more before the King Achashverosh, and that the King shall give her queendom to her comrade who is more worthy than she.<sup>15</sup> <sup>20</sup> And when this edict that the King shall make will be heard throughout his most extensive kingdom, all women will give esteem to their husbands, from the greatest to the least.” <sup>21</sup> This idea pleased the King, and he did as Memuchan said: <sup>22</sup> he sent scrolls to all the King’s provinces, each province according to its script and each nation according to its language, “that each man should be ruler in his own house-- and speak in his people’s language.”<sup>16</sup>

**2** <sup>1</sup> After these things when the King’s wrath had subsided, he remembered Vashti<sup>17</sup> and what she had done<sup>18</sup> and what was decreed upon her.<sup>19</sup> <sup>2</sup> Then said the King’s attendants<sup>20</sup> who ministered to him,<sup>21</sup> “Let there be sought for the King beautiful maidens; <sup>3</sup> let the King appoint clerks in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather every beautiful maiden to the harem of Shushan the Capital, under the care of Heige’<sup>22</sup> the King’s Eunuch, custodian of the women, and let their cosmetics be given to them. <sup>4</sup> And let the girl who pleases the King reign instead of Vashti.” This recommendation pleased the King, and he did accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> *There was an important Jewish man* <sup>23</sup> *in Shushan the Capital named Mordechai ben Yair, a son of Shim’i, a son of Kish (an important Binyaminite),* <sup>24</sup> <sup>6</sup> who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the refugees who had been taken captive along with Yechoniyah King of Judah,<sup>25</sup> those whom Nebuchadnetzar King of Babylon had exiled. <sup>7</sup> [And] he was the legal guardian of Hadassah—that is, his cousin Esther<sup>26</sup>—because she had neither father nor mother; the girl was very beautiful of form and appearance, and when her mother and father died, Mordechai took her to himself as a daughter.<sup>27</sup> <sup>8</sup> It happened when the King’s words and decree were heard and many girls were gathered to Shushan the Capital under Hegai’s care, Esther was taken<sup>28</sup> to the King’s house under the charge of Hegai, custodian of the women. <sup>9</sup> [Now] the girl pleased him and obtained kindness from him,<sup>29</sup> and he hurried to give her her cosmetics and portions,<sup>30</sup> as well as the seven maids warranted to be given her from the King’s house; he advanced her and her maids to the best quarters in the harem. <sup>10</sup> Esther, [however], did not divulge either her people or her heritage, for Mordechai had commanded her not to tell.<sup>31</sup> <sup>11</sup> And every day, Mordechai walked about before the courtyard of the harem, seeking to know how Esther was faring and what would be done with her.

<sup>12</sup> Now when each girl's turn arrived to come to King Achashverosh, after she had gone through the twelvemonth prescription of women—for thus their days of beautification were completed, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and other feminine cosmetics—<sup>13</sup> this is how the girl would come to the King: everything she bid would be given her to take from the harem to the King's house. <sup>14</sup> In the evening she would come in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, under the care of Sha'ashgaz the King's eunuch, custodian of the concubines. She would not come to the King any more unless the King had particular delight in her and she was summoned by name.

<sup>15</sup> And when it came the turn of Esther bat Avichayil Mordechai's uncle whom [Mordechai] had taken as a daughter to come to the King, she requested nothing except what Hegai the King's Eunuch, custodian of the women, instructed her;<sup>32</sup> [subsequently]<sup>33</sup> Esther was deemed graceful in the sight of everyone who beheld her. <sup>16</sup> (Esther was taken to King Achashverosh in his royal house in the tenth month—that is, Tevet—of the seventh year of his reign.) <sup>17</sup> The King loved Esther<sup>34</sup> more than all of the women,<sup>35</sup> and she obtained more kindness and grace from him than any of the maidens,<sup>36</sup> [so] the King placed the royal crown on her head and coronated her in Vashti's place. <sup>18</sup> The King proceeded to make a huge feast for all his ministers and servants, namely “The Feast of Esther”; he eased taxes on all the provinces, and gave donations as were in the King's power.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>19</sup> At the ensuing gathering of maidens,<sup>38</sup> as Mordechai was seated at the Chancellery,<sup>39</sup> <sup>20</sup> Esther continued to withhold her people's identity and her descent, just as Mordechai had commanded her, for Esther still took the direction of Mordechai exactly as she did when she was his ward.<sup>40</sup> <sup>21</sup> In those days while Mordechai sat at the Chancellery, Bigtan and Teresh, two of the King's officers among the doorwards, exploded in anger and sought to lay hands on King Achashverosh. <sup>22</sup> The thing became known to Mordechai, who told Esther the Queen,<sup>41</sup> and Esther told it to the King in Mordechai's name. <sup>23</sup> [Consequently], the thing was investigated and found out; both of them were hanged on the gallows and the incident was written up in the court annals before the King.

**3** <sup>1</sup> After these things, King Achashverosh promoted Haman ben Hammdata the Agagite and empowered him, setting his seat above all the nobles with

him.<sup>42</sup> <sup>2</sup> And all the King's servants in the Chancellery bowed and prostrated themselves before Haman (for thus had the King commanded)<sup>43</sup>, while Mordechai neither bowed nor prostrated himself.<sup>44</sup> <sup>3</sup> Said the King's servants to Mordechai, "Why do you transgress the King's command?" <sup>4</sup> Thus it happened as they addressed him daily and he did not listen to them, that they went and told Haman<sup>45</sup> to see if Mordechai's position would stand, for he had told them he was a Jew.<sup>46</sup> <sup>5</sup> [Consequently], Haman noticed that Mordechai neither bowed nor prostrated to him, and he became filled with wrath. <sup>6</sup> [But] it seemed petty to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, since they had told him of Mordechai's people: Haman campaigned to destroy all the Jews in the entire kingdom of Achashverosh, the nation of Mordechai. <sup>7</sup> In the first month (that is, the month of Nissan) of the twelfth year of King Achashverosh's reign, he cast Pur (that is, a lottery)<sup>47</sup> before Haman, from day to day and from month to month<sup>48</sup>, to the twelfth month (which is the month of Adar).

<sup>8</sup> [Then] Haman addressed the King, "There is a certain people, scattered and disbanded among the other nations in all the provinces of your kingdom: their laws are different from all peoples'<sup>49</sup>, and they do not keep the King's laws<sup>50</sup>, and the King has not weighed the value of tolerating them. <sup>9</sup> If it pleases the King, let it be written to destroy them, and I will weigh out ten thousand silver kikars to those who do the business, to enrich the King's treasury." <sup>10</sup> The King took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews; <sup>11</sup> the King said to Haman, "The silver is given to you as well as the people, to do with as you see fit."<sup>51</sup> <sup>12</sup> The King's scribes were called on the thirteenth day of the first month<sup>52</sup>, to have written all that Haman commanded to the King's deputies and the lesser officials who were over every province, as well as the nobles of each people (each province according to its script and each nation according to its language), written in the name of King Achashverosh and sealed with the King's ring.<sup>53</sup> <sup>13</sup> Scrolls were sent by couriers to all the King's provinces, to destroy, kill, and utterly annihilate all the Jews, old and young, children and women on one day: the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions: <sup>14</sup> the content of the writ was to announce the edict in every province, publicized to all the people, to make themselves ready for that day.<sup>54</sup> <sup>15</sup> The couriers were urgently dispatched on the King's command; the edict was announced in Shushan the Capitol; the King and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was bewildered.<sup>55</sup>

**4** <sup>1</sup> [Now] Mordechai realized all of what had happened,<sup>56</sup> and he rent his clothes, dressed himself in sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city,

wailing with loud and bitter cry.<sup>57</sup> <sup>2</sup> He came as far as the Chancellery, for none could enter the Chancellery dressed in sackcloth. <sup>3</sup> And in every province where the King's law and his "edict"<sup>58</sup> arrived, there was a great mourning among the Jews, fasting, weeping, and lamentation; sackcloth and ashes were ensconced for many. <sup>4</sup> [Eventually] Esther's maids came and told her, distressing the Queen very much; she dispatched clothes to dress Mordechai, but he would not accept them.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [So] Esther summoned Hatach, one of the King's eunuchs whom he had assigned to her, and commanded him regarding Mordechai, to investigate the nature and cause of this. <sup>6</sup> Out went Hatach to Mordechai, to the city street in front of the Chancellery entrance. <sup>7</sup> [There] Mordechai explained to him all that had happened to him, as well as [mentioning] the sum of money which Haman had arranged to weigh out to the King's treasury for the Jews and their annihilation. <sup>8</sup> He also gave [Hatach] the immediate command of the writ-edict which had been distributed in Shushan to destroy them, [that Hatach might] show Esther and inform her-- and direct her to approach the King, appeal to him, and petition before him regarding her people. <sup>9</sup> Hatach came and told Esther what Mordechai had said; <sup>10</sup> Esther addressed Hatach, instructing him regarding Mordechai, <sup>11</sup> "All the King's servants and subjects know that any man or woman who approaches the King in the inner court without having been summoned has but one sentence— death!<sup>60</sup> —except the one on whose behalf the King extends the golden scepter for his life. But I have not been summoned to the King these thirty days!"<sup>61</sup> <sup>12</sup> They told Mordechai Esther's words, <sup>13</sup> [whereupon] Mordechai addressed Esther an answer. "Do not imagine in your soul that you will survive in the King's house from among all the Jews, <sup>14</sup> for if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and rescue will come from another corner while you and your father's house pass away! And who knows, perhaps you attained your queendom for a time such as this!"

<sup>15</sup> Esther spoke to return an answer to Mordechai, <sup>16</sup> "Go gather all the Jews in Shushan and fast for me: neither eat nor drink for three days. I and my maids will also fast. And thus I will approach the King—and if I am lost, I am lost."<sup>62</sup> <sup>10</sup> [So] Mordechai went about<sup>63</sup> and did all that Esther commanded him.

**5** <sup>1</sup> On the third day, Esther donned royalty<sup>64</sup> and stood herself opposite the entrance in the inner palace court as the King was sitting on his throne in the royal palace. <sup>2</sup> When the King saw Esther standing in the court, she pleased him,<sup>65</sup> and he extended to her the golden scepter in his hand. Esther came close

to him and touched the tip of the scepter.<sup>66</sup> <sup>3</sup>The King inquired of her, “What ails you, Queen Esther? What is your petition—up to half the kingdom and he<sup>67</sup> will be given to you!” <sup>4</sup>Esther answered saying, “If the idea seems good to the King, let the King and Haman come today to the feast which I have prepared for him.”<sup>68</sup> <sup>5</sup>The King exclaimed, “Hasten Haman to fulfill Esther’s wish!”; the King and Haman came to the feast which Esther had prepared. <sup>6</sup>At the wine-feast, the King probed, “What is your request? (He shall be given to you!)<sup>69</sup> What is your [real] petition-- up to half the kingdom and it shall be done!” <sup>7</sup> Esther replied to him saying, “My request and my petition? <sup>8</sup>If I have pleased the King and if the idea seems good to the King to fulfill my request and grant my petition... let the King and Haman come tomorrow to the feast which I have prepared for them, and tomorrow I will do the King’s behest.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Haman left that day quite joyous and merry in his heart, but when Haman saw Mordechai at the Chancellery neither rising from his place nor indeed stirring at all, he became filled with wrath. <sup>10</sup>[Nevertheless] Haman restrained himself and went home, where he sent for and brought in all of his friends and Zeresh his wife. <sup>11</sup>To them Haman recounted the glory of his wealth and the greatness of his sons and how King Achashverosh had empowered him and promoted him above all the nobles and the King’s servants.<sup>71</sup> <sup>12</sup>Haman remarked, “No one but me did Queen Esther bring with the King to the feast she had made, and tomorrow too I am called to her with the King.<sup>72</sup> <sup>13</sup>But all of this is worth nothing to me at any time when I happen to see Mordechai the Jew sitting at the Chancellery!” <sup>14</sup>His wife Zeresh and all of his friends advised him, “Let them make a gallows fifty cubits high; in the morning tell<sup>73</sup> the King to hang Mordechai on it, then go with the King to the feast happily!” The idea pleased Haman, and he made the gallows.

**6** <sup>1</sup> On that night the King’s sleep was unsettled,<sup>74</sup> and he called for the book of remembrance (the court annals) to be brought<sup>75</sup> and for them to be read in the King’s presence. <sup>2</sup> And it was found written that Mordechai had told about Bigtana and Teresh, two of the King’s officers among the doorwardens, who had sought to lay hands on King Achashverosh. <sup>3</sup> Probed the King, “What was done for Mordechai in the way of excellence and grandeur on this account?”<sup>76</sup> and the King’s ministering attendants replied, “Nothing has been done for him.”

<sup>4</sup> The King inquired, “Who is in the court?”<sup>77</sup> -- and Haman had just come into the outer palace court to tell the King to hang Mordechai on the gallows which



he had prepared for him!<sup>78</sup> <sup>5</sup> The King's attendants indicated, "See here, Haman is standing in the court," and the King responded, "Let him enter!" <sup>6</sup> [So] Haman entered, and the King asked of him, "What should be done with the man in whose excellence the King is delighted?"; thought Haman to himself, "In whose excellence should the King be delighted in but mine?" <sup>7</sup> Haman responded to the King, "A man in whose excellence the King is delighted... <sup>8</sup> Let them bring royal robes which the King has worn, and a horse on which the King has ridden and that is given a royal crown on its head.<sup>79</sup> <sup>9</sup> And let these robes and this horse be given to the charge of one of the King's ministers-- a patrician!-- that they may dress the man in whose excellence the King is delighted and parade him through the streets of the city and call out before him, 'Thus shall be done for the man in whose excellence the King delights!' " <sup>10</sup> [Whereupon] the King exclaimed, "Make haste! Take the robes and the horse as you have said and do exactly that to Mordechai the Jew who sits in the Chancellery—do not leave out one detail of all you have enumerated!"

<sup>11</sup> Haman took the robes and the horse and dressed Mordechai<sup>80</sup> and paraded him through the streets of the city, calling out before him, "Thus shall be done for the man in whose excellence the King delights!" <sup>12</sup> Mordechai returned to the Chancellery,<sup>81</sup> but Haman hustled himself home, mourning and with covered head.<sup>82</sup> <sup>13</sup> [There] Haman explained to Zeresh his wife and all his friends all that had happened. His wise men<sup>83</sup> and Zeresh his wife counseled him, "If Mordechai—before whom you have already begun to fall—is of Jewish descent, you cannot succeed against him, but will surely fall before him.<sup>84</sup> " <sup>14</sup> [And] they were still speaking with him<sup>85</sup> when the King's eunuchs arrived to hurry Haman off to the party which Esther had prepared.

**7** <sup>1</sup> The King and Haman came to drink with Esther the Queen. <sup>2</sup> Also on this second day of the feast, the King probed Esther, "What is your request, Queen Esther? It<sup>86</sup> shall be given to you! What is your petition—it shall be done!" <sup>3</sup> And Queen Esther answered him, saying, "If I have pleased the King and if the idea seems good to the King, let my life be given to me at my request and my people at my petition! <sup>4</sup> For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, killed, and utterly annihilated—if we had only been sold as slaves I would have kept silent, for the adversary has not weighed the value of the damage that will be the King's.<sup>87</sup> " <sup>5</sup> The King opened his mouth to answer<sup>88</sup> — he said to Queen Esther, "Who is this and which is he who secretly has plotted to do this?<sup>89</sup> " <sup>6</sup> Esther replied, "A powerful adversary and enemy... this wicked Haman!" and Haman was dumbfounded before the King and Queen. <sup>7</sup> The King

jumped up in his passion from the wine-feast,<sup>90</sup> going out to the palace garden, but Haman remained behind to beg for his life from Queen Esther,<sup>91</sup> for he had seen that the King's ill-will towards him had already begun.<sup>8</sup> And as the King returned from the palace garden to the house where the feast was, Haman was falling onto the couch on which Esther was<sup>92</sup>; the King thundered, "And will he also assault the Queen with me in the house?!?" The words had no sooner left the King's mouth when they covered Haman's face.<sup>93</sup><sup>9</sup> Up spoke Charvona,<sup>94</sup> one of the King's eunuchs, "Also, there is the matter of the gallows which Haman made for Mordechai, who spoke well for the King, standing in Haman's house-- fifty cubits high!" Roared the King, "Hang him on it!"<sup>10</sup> [So] they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordechai, and the King's wrath was assuaged.

**8**<sup>1</sup> On that day, King Achashverosh gave to Queen Esther the estate of Haman, adversary of the Jews, and Mordechai came before the King, since Esther had told [Achashverosh] what he was to her.<sup>95</sup><sup>2</sup> The King took his signet ring which he had taken back from Haman and gave it to Mordechai, and Esther appointed Mordechai over the estate of Haman.<sup>3</sup> And Esther continued to speak before the King; she fell at his feet and wept<sup>96</sup> and appealed to him to take back the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plot which he had thought to have executed on the Jews.<sup>4</sup> The King extended his golden scepter,<sup>97</sup> [so] Esther arose to stand before the King.<sup>5</sup> She asserted, "If it pleases the King, and if I have found favor before him, and if the thing seems valid before the King, and he finds me to be acceptable, let it be written to take back the scrolls: the plot of Haman ben Hammdata the Agagite which *he* wrote<sup>98</sup> to utterly annihilate the Jews in all provinces of the King.<sup>6</sup> For how could I look upon the evil which will fall upon my people-- how could I look upon the destruction of my heritage?"<sup>7</sup> And King Achashverosh replied to Queen Esther and Mordechai the Jew, "See here, I have given Haman's estate to Queen Esther and he himself was hung from the gallows because he laid his hands on the Jews!<sup>99</sup><sup>8</sup> And as for you, write for yourselves about the Jews whatever you find appropriate,<sup>100</sup> in the name of the King and sealed with the King's ring. For any writ that is composed in the King's name and sealed with the King's ring may not be taken back."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The King's scribes were called at that time, on the twenty third day of the third month (that is, the month of Sivan), to have written all that Mordechai commanded to the Jews, to King's deputies and the lesser officials, as well as the nobles of every province from India to Ethiopia: one hundred twenty seven provinces, each province according to its script and each nation according to its

language—and to the Jews according to their scripts and languages.<sup>102</sup> <sup>10</sup> [Mordechai] wrote in the name of King Achashverosh, sealing it with the King's ring, and he sent scrolls by couriers on horseback, mounted on swift horses retained for royal service, bred of prize mares,<sup>103</sup> <sup>11</sup> saying that the King had permitted the Jews in each and every city to band together and defend themselves,<sup>104</sup> to destroy, kill, and utterly annihilate every armed force of people or administration who threatened them and their families [and threatened] to plunder their possessions<sup>105</sup> <sup>12</sup> on that one [aforementioned] day in all provinces of King Achashverosh; [that is, all this activity was to take place on] on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (the month of Adar). <sup>13</sup> The content of the writ was to announce the edict in every province, made available to all the people, that the Jews<sup>106</sup> should make themselves ready on that day to be avenged on their enemies. <sup>14</sup> The mounted couriers on swift horses were urgently dispatched with great hurry<sup>107</sup> on the King's command, and the edict was announced in Shushan the Capitol.

<sup>15</sup> *Mordechai left the King's presence in imperial garb of royal blue and lace, as well as a splendid gold coronet and a cloak of fine linen with royal purple, and the city of Shushan celebrated and rejoiced.*<sup>108</sup> <sup>16</sup> *The Jews had light, joy, happiness, and honor!* <sup>17</sup> And in every province and every city where the King's [new] law and his edict arrived, there was great rejoicing among the Jews, a feast and a holiday; many of the neighboring peoples became Judeophiles,<sup>109</sup> for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

**9** <sup>1</sup> And on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, the month of Adar), when the King's law and edict came into effect, the day when the Jews' enemies had expected to prevail over them was quite turned about: the Jews prevailed over their enemies! <sup>2</sup> The Jews banded together<sup>110</sup> in their cities in all of the provinces of King Achashverosh, to lay hands on those who sought their harm, and not a man stood up to them, for fear of them had fallen on all the nations. <sup>3</sup> And all the nobles of the provinces, as well as the deputies, the lesser officials, and those who did the King's business, empowered the Jews [to do so], because the fear of Mordechai had fallen upon them.<sup>111</sup> <sup>4</sup> For Mordechai was preeminent in the royal palace and his fame was spreading in all the provinces, as Mordechai became greater and greater.

<sup>5</sup> The Jews struck all their enemies with a plague of death and destruction, doing with those who hated them as they pleased.<sup>112</sup> <sup>6</sup> And in Shushan the Capitol, the Jews killed and annihilated five hundred men, as well as <sup>7</sup>

Parshandata, Dalphon, Asapta, <sup>8</sup>Porata, Adalya, Aridata, <sup>9</sup> Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizata, <sup>10</sup> the ten sons of Haman ben Hammdata, adversary of the Jews, but they did not lay a finger upon the potential plunder.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>11</sup> That day, the number of casualties in Shushan the Capitol came to the King's attention. <sup>12</sup> The King said to Queen Esther, "In Shushan the Capitol, the Jews have killed and annihilated five hundred men as well as the ten sons of Haman: what must they have done in the rest of the King's provinces? [Now] what is your request—it shall be given to you! What else can you petition—it shall be done!"<sup>114</sup> <sup>13</sup> Esther replied, "If it pleases the King, let tomorrow also be given to the Jews of Shushan the Capitol to act according to the laws of today<sup>115</sup>-- and let the ten sons of Haman be hung from the gallows."<sup>116</sup> <sup>14</sup> [So] the King ordered this to be done, and they hanged Haman's ten sons.

<sup>15</sup> The Jews of Shushan banded together also on the fourteenth of the month of Adar, killing three hundred men, and they did not lay a finger on the potential plunder. <sup>16</sup> The rest of the Jews in the King's provinces had banded together and defended their lives, gaining relief from their enemies and killing seventy five thousand of those who hated them while not laying a finger on the potential plunder <sup>17</sup> on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar and finding relief on the fourteenth, making it a day of feasting and rejoicing. <sup>18</sup> But the Jews of Shushan banded together both on the thirteenth and the fourteenth, gaining relief on the fifteenth and making it a day of feasting and rejoicing. <sup>19</sup> For this reason, rural Jews who live in unwalled towns<sup>117</sup> make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of rejoicing, feasting, and holiday, sending presents to each other.

<sup>20</sup> Mordechai wrote up all of these things and sent scrolls to all the Jews in all the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far <sup>21</sup> to establish for them the yearly observance of the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth thereof <sup>22</sup> as the days when the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and the [the month of Adar as the] month which was turned about for them from grief to rejoicing, from mourning to holiday-- making them days for feasting and rejoicing, for sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor.<sup>118</sup> <sup>23</sup> The Jews accepted what they had begun to observe and what Mordechai wrote up for them. <sup>24</sup> For Haman ben Hammdata the Agagite, enemy of the Jews, thought to have annihilated the Jews and cast Pur (that is, a lottery) to confound and annihilate them. <sup>25</sup> But when [this thought]<sup>119</sup> came before the King, He said, "With that scroll, his wicked vision which he thought to have executed on the Jews will return upon his own head!" and [indeed,] they hanged him and his sons on the gallows! <sup>26</sup> For this reason, these days are called "Purim" from the word "Pur," on account of the things in this letter:<sup>120</sup> what they saw and what

came to them, <sup>27</sup> the Jews irrevocably established and accepted for themselves and for all their descendants and all who might associate themselves with them, the observance of these two days according to their writ and time in each and every year. <sup>28</sup> And these days are remembered and observed in every generation, each and every family, province, and city; these days of Purim shall not lapse among the Jews and their remembrance shall not disappear from [the minds of] their descendants.

<sup>29</sup> Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew wrote with all authority to establish this second letter of Purim. <sup>30</sup> Scrolls were sent to all one hundred and twenty seven provinces of the kingdom of Achashverosh, words of peace and truth <sup>31</sup> to establish these days of Purim in their proper times as Mordechai the Jew and Queen Esther confirmed for them, and as they had established them for themselves and their descendants, [and also to establish] the matter of fasting and wailing.<sup>121</sup> <sup>32</sup> And Esther's ordinance confirmed these days of Purim, and [the matter] was recorded in the Book.<sup>122</sup>

**10** <sup>1</sup> King Achashverosh placed a tax on the mainland and the islands.<sup>123</sup> <sup>2</sup> And all the deeds of authority and valor and the full portion of Mordechai's greatness which the King invested in him, are they not recorded in the court annals of the kings of Persia and Media? <sup>3</sup> *For Mordechai the Jew<sup>124</sup> was second to King Achashverosh, a great man for the Jews and and popular among the majority of his brothers, seeking good for his people and counseling peace to all posterity.*

***Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who judges our causes and fights our quarrels, who takes vengeance on our behalf and gives us relief from our troubles, who repays the enemies of our soul! Blessed are You, Lord, who relieves His people Israel from all their troubles, the redeeming God.***

<sup>1</sup> Although Achashverosh reigned over this vast region, the text strangely refuses to title him as king until the following verse. The rabbis of the Talmud deduce that Achashverosh's kingly role was not his by birth, but earned: Achashverosh was a general whose rise to power culminated in a marriage to a princess (*Megillah* 11a). The Greek translation of the *Megillah* supports this conjecture by translating Achashverosh as Xerxes, the same name as a particularly famous Persian general. This interpretation makes Vashti the true heir to the throne, superior to her husband by virtue of her royal blood.

<sup>2</sup> Not "as he sat," but "as he was settling," a verb in the progressive past tense. The King then was settling in to his new role and discovering the limits of his power (Shkop).

<sup>3</sup> The city of Shushan, archaeological records tell us, straddled the Choapses River. On one bank stood the main city, on the other stood the royal palace and houses of state. This area was called "The Capitol" (sometimes translated as "the Fortress" or "the Imperial City"), and it was restricted to government officials and their families.

<sup>4</sup> Here begins Achashverosh's master plan. Having settled himself into his kingship and grown dissatisfied at his secondary role, Achashverosh plotted to upstage the Queen in a long, slow coup. His first step was to gain the support of all the important figures in the empire: he entertained all the political and military figures listed with all the splendor he could muster. For half a year he wined them and dined them and impressed them with his splendid wealth and power. During this time, many hands were suitably shaken, many palms were amply greased, and the new King made as many important connections as his strength allowed (Shkop).

<sup>5</sup> Achashverosh's second step was to gain the good will of every government employee, to ensure no dissent within the ranks. The people found in Shushan the Capitol were not common laborers, but ministers, clerks, and their families; their support the King now courted.

<sup>6</sup> The rabbis wondered at this informal word "vessel" used by an author who knew the technical terms for four different types of royal paving marble. Why "vessel," they asked, instead of "goblet" or "chalice"? Dr. Shkop takes the tradition from the Talmud and the midrash that the author has become tight-lipped upon reaching a subject which gives him pain: these hastily glossed "vessels" included splendid gold cups looted from the Holy Temple by the previous rulers of the empire.

<sup>7</sup> Doubtless the impression the King intended to project by his generosity.

<sup>8</sup> No one was forced to accept a drink that was not according to his taste; wines and liquors from every part of the empire had been imported so that every guest might drink a beverage that pleased him (*Megillah* 12a). Moreover, the atmosphere was open and friendly; no one was pressured to toast the king's health more often than he felt moved to.

<sup>9</sup> Why does it take seven men to deliver one short summons? Twentieth-century American scholar Adele Berlin compares the seven eunuchs to the seven dwarfs; their sevenfold image, impeccably dressed in funny hats, marching in step through the palace, adds an element of comedy to Achashverosh's stately court. On a more scholarly note, she contextualizes this image with that of the Persian court in the literature of Xerxes' Greek contemporaries. According to Achashverosh's Hellenistic nemeses, the Persian court was mired in bureaucracy and crippled with endless requirements of protocol. This view is certainly borne out by the events of the *Megillah*, where the word *dat*—law or better, procedure—appears several dozen times. If the Greek satires contain even a small grain of truth, it is quite possible that the Queen of Persia could be summoned by no less than seven men, suitably emasculated, and dressed in a style appropriate to the solemnity of their office.

<sup>910a</sup> Having gained the support of the entire ruling class as well as the local populace, the drunken Achashverosh decided that the time was right to show his wife who was in charge. He refers to her as "Vashti the Queen," putting her title second, like an afterthought (Shkop and *ArtScroll*).

Achashverosh's summons is an extraordinary breach of Persian etiquette, according to Adele Berlin. As maintained by Greek records of that period, Persian men drank separately from their spouses, so that their lady wives might not be exposed to the debauchery and drunken revelry that invariably accompanied such an activity. Note above that since Achashverosh's gathering was a *mishteh*, a drinking party, Vashti had already planned to entertain the women separately in another part of the palace. For Achashverosh to summon his wedded wife to a men's drinking establishment was to treat her as a serving wench or a dancing girl, as the only women in such a room were present to pleasure the male guests.

<sup>10b</sup> Is not a crown included in a royal ensemble? If Achashverosh had wanted to see Vashti dressed in style, should he not have mentioned the rest of her outfit? Asking these questions, the rabbi conclude that since Achashverosh mentioned no clothes, he expected none: Vashti was to present herself to him and his drunken friends wearing a royal crown and nothing else (*Megillah* 12b). As far as Berlin is concerned, a Persian or Chaldean princess of the blood royal, being called to appear at a man's drinking party before a crowd of licentious hooligans, might as well have been naked for the terrible insult her presence would have sustained upon her.

<sup>11</sup> Vashti places her royal title first, sharply reminding her husband the Prince Consort that she, not he, sits on the throne of Persia. As his superior, she is not subject to his drunken whims, and doubtless conveys that message with suitable contempt (Shkop). This may not even have been a political statement on her part, as no Persian noblewoman in her right mind would have debased herself by associating with her husband's drinking companions (Berlin).

<sup>12</sup> These were the astronomers and astrologers, who knew the calendar and were held in high esteem as wise men (*Megillah* 12b). Alternatively, they were the lawyers most familiar with case histories and precedents, since this was hardly a matter for stargazing (Paton). Shkop takes a third approach, calling these "knowers of the times" spin doctors, the King's publicists who knew "what would play in Peoria" and could advise the King as to what quasi-legal solutions the kingdom was likely to accept. In any case, it appears that the King cannot or will not address the Queen's disobedience as an absolute monarch would, but must first consult with the sevenfold bureaucracy and examine the *dat*, the law or the procedure that he can then twist to fit his objective. Achashverosh is more than willing to submit to the protocol, for reasons which will soon be clear.

<sup>13</sup> "What to do with Queen Vashti" is a euphemism for the purpose at hand. In the King's drunken rage, he has determined exactly what he wants to do with Queen Vashti: get rid of her! His learned counselors are quite aware of the King's purpose in summoning them; their task is to find a suitably legal way to depose the ruling Queen (Shkop). The rabbis of the Talmud, in full agreement, maintain that no self-respecting adviser could have ethically dealt the King in such an intoxicated rage—had he brought such a question to the Jewish scholars, they would have invented any possible excuse (e.g. "since our Temple is gone, we have lost the ability to advise in capital cases") in order to avoid getting entangled in this ominous question (*Megillah* 12a).

<sup>14</sup> Memuchan paints Vashti as a feminist agitator whose nefarious purpose is to start a movement of social unrest among the noblewomen of Persia; her prompt disposal, he says, is necessary to prevent national turmoil and a complete breakdown of society. Memuchan's "spin" on the evening's events paints the authoritative and dignified Queen Vashti as an Amazon, intent on defying the natural rule of the male, or worse, as a Lysistrata who will inspire all women to refuse their husbands' summons to their conjugal duty. These accusations are, as made clear hitherto, a complete fabrication (Shkop and Berlin).

<sup>15a</sup> Berlin seizes upon the words "let it be written irrevocably" as a fatal political error on Memuchan's part. Greek satirists claim that whole cabinets of Persian rulers would habitually make decisions while drunk at night, then look over the resulting legislation in the morning when they were sober (an image entirely consistent with the story of the *Megillah*). Memuchan knows that the King has been planning this coup for one hundred and eighty days, and seeks Achashverosh's kingly favor as the man who struck the final blow to Vashti's government. Aware of Achashverosh's vacillating character and the monarch's current state of inebriation, Memuchan does not want his clever spin to be reconsidered and cast away by the morning

light. He suggests that the King sign the following proposal immediately, without giving anyone—Vashti and her supporters, no doubt—time to consider its final implications. However, this strategy will backfire in Chapter Two when the King's rage does abate after all, and the King tries to remember whose clever scheming removed his dear wife from his side.

<sup>15b</sup> In other words, Achashverosh is to seize control of both the government and the military, then depose his wife in the name of social order and family values. Having done so, he may then give Vashti's title and estate to a woman more subservient and less threatening than the current Queen.

<sup>16</sup> Memuchan's decree was carefully worded so as to mask its paramount importance. A decree to uphold patriarchy in highly patriarchal ancient Persia would have been so ridiculous as to arouse suspicion (*Megillah* 12b). Memuchan phrases his new law not with a focus on patriarchy, but with a spotlight on ethnic pride. "Every man should be ruler in his own house"—this is put as an overture to the more relevant half of the law: citizens of the empire now have the right to speak in all the glory of their own languages. In short, Persian has been abolished as a national tongue. This affirmation of ethnic expression would doubtless please Achashverosh's subjects, who would not bother to examine the first half of the new law, and hopefully would not notice that this law had removed their Queen from her throne (Shkop).

<sup>a</sup> Once the King's rage and his drunkenness abated, he remembered Vashti, not as the political figure whose disposal assured him of absolute power, but as his wife and companion. With his plans come to fruition and the throne entirely his, Achashverosh misses Vashti's companionship and regrets having eliminated her (Shkop). If the hostile literature of his rivals can be believed, morning-after regrets were common features of palace life in Persia, and this is not the first time Achashverosh has reconsidered decisions made in rage or drink (Berlin).

<sup>b</sup> What had she done? She had upheld her dignity and modesty in the face of an order no self-respecting noblewoman could have obeyed. In his own mind, the lonely husband conceded that Vashti's refusal of his outrageous request was quite justified (*Esther Rabbah* 5:2).

<sup>c</sup> What exactly was decreed upon Vashti? The details of her fate are strikingly absent from the Scripture. In chapter one, we hear Memuchan suggest that Vashti "come no more before King Achashverosh," a peculiarly ambiguous phrase popularly interpreted to mean banishment (1:19). However, most of the Sages agree that Vashti was quietly taken out and beheaded, an interpretation supported by the etymological similarities between the particular Hebrew form of "decreed" and the Hebrew word for "cut off" (Shkop). This theory is supported by the peculiar silence of the text; as seen elsewhere in the Bible, ancients viewed regicide as taboo, a monumental crime against society, an invitation to anarchy and a threat to the hallowed status of the kingship. In all the chronicled wars of the Bible, defeated rulers are exiled and imprisoned, but never executed (see Samuel I 15, Kings II 23-26). Any document which overtly accused the King of regicide would have immediately been suppressed. Therefore, if Achashverosh had executed Vashti, the only reports which Mordechai and Esther would have been allowed to publish would have been phrased precisely in the ambiguous manner described above.

The phrase "was decreed upon her" is also notable for its use of the passive voice, a grammatical construction which distances the King from the deed done. In the King's mind, *he* did not decree Vashti's death, her fate merely "was decreed," a position whose implications become clearer in the next sentence (Shkop).

<sup>d</sup> These were the King's personal assistants. The Hebrew word "na'ar" is very difficult to translate, having two distinct connotations. Literally meaning "young man," it also refers to an assistant or servant. In biblical times, many older chieftains had young servants, lads to whom both meanings of the word applied. However, there are certain cases in which an attendant is described as a "na'ar" although he is not youthful: in the book of Numbers, Yehoshua, as Moshe's personal assistant, is still called a "na'ar" at the ripe old age of fifty-five (*ArtScroll*). Hence, these servants who are advising Achashverosh are not stripling pageboys, but personal assistants of a more influential status.



<sup>e</sup>Here we find Achashverosh being advised again, not by the seven cabinet ministers to whom the King was wont to turn in question of intelligence and law (1:13), but by his attendants. Indeed, from this point forward Achashverosh confers only with his vizier or with his attendants—the entire establishment of the cabinet is never referred to again! Apparently, the King has found a suitable scapegoat for the death of his wife: the seven cabinet ministers who gave him bad advice in defiance of standard protocol. Memuchan and all his colleagues are purged from the court and replacements for their ill-fated posts are not appointed (Berlin).

Herein, according to Dr. Shkop, lies the secret of Achashverosh's political success: his infinite supply of lower officials whom he can blame for any political fallout. The ambitious general has cultivated his friends well, seeking advice at every turn and staffing his royal cabinet with learned men. When a much-debated decision turns out well, King Achashverosh can publicize his kingly wisdom (see 8:7 for an example). Any negative repercussions, however, can be blamed on the bad advice of the King's advisors, who have been currying his favor all along and now are terrified to find themselves "holding the bag" for the blame instead of the credit!

<sup>17</sup> A scribal error or variant spelling of the name Hegai.

<sup>g</sup>The Hebrew phrase in question is "ish Yehudi," literally "a Jewish man." "Jewish man" seems at first glance redundant: the two words could easily be condensed into the one "Jew." However, grammatical evidence from other parts of the Scriptures indicates that when the word "man" (Heb. "ish") appears in a text superfluously (see Genesis 5:9, Exodus 2:13, Kings I 11:28, etc.), it imparts that the person in question was a Man, a figure of importance (Shkop and *Rashi* on Exodus 2:13). In this case then, although the Hebrew reads "ish Yehudi," the meaning it conveys is "an important Jewish man."

According to Talmudic and Midrashic opinions, Mordechai's importance was due to his position as a leader of the Jewish community. Another interpretation states that Mordechai's position as a government minister heightened his importance. Neither assessment, however, reveals anything about Mordechai not discussed later in the text, as verse 19 below implies that Mordechai worked in the Chancellery and Esther 4:15-17 indicates that Mordechai possessed authority among the Jews of Shushan.

<sup>h</sup> One could conclude from the text that Shim'i and Kish were the immediate ancestors of Mordechai. However, although more than one individual named Kish could have lived in Biblical times, examination of Samuel I identifies Kish the important Binyaminite as Kish ben Aviel the mighty man of arms, a leader of the tribe of Binyamin and father to King Shaul. Kish ben Aviel, however, lived centuries before Mordechai's time, leading to the Talmudic conclusion that Kish and Shim'i (identified in Samuel II as Shim'i ben Geira) were Mordechai's remote ancestors and not his grandparents (*Megillah*, 12b). The inclusion of Kish ben Aviel in Mordechai's lineage also provides a corollary to one story in Samuel I, that of the great failure of King Shaul. When ordered by God to annihilate the hostile tribe of Amalek and show no mercy, Shaul complied; however, he was unable to force himself to violate the regicide taboo and execute King Agag of Amalek. This unpleasant task was later performed by the prophet Shmuel, who harshly rebuked Shaul for his disobedience and predicted a swift end to Shaul's dynasty (Samuel I 15). Now in *Megillat Esther*, we see that Shaul's delay allowed Agag to sire a child, beginning a line which would culminate in Haman ben Hamdata the Agagite, one of the greatest threats ever to terrorize the Jewish nation. And when Haman rises to power, the responsibility of stopping him falls to the last of Shaul's family, Mordechai ben Yair and Esther bat Avichayil.

The recognition of Mordechai as a descendant of Shim'i ben Geira also throws light upon one of the conundrums of Samuel II, namely the puzzling reaction of King David towards the outrage of Shim'i ben Geira. A malcontent from among King Shaul's kin, Shim'i dared curse the new king to his face; although David's generals begged to be allowed to behead the agitator on the spot, David counseled humility and forbearance (15:5-13). David upheld this philosophy when Shim'i came to beg pardon, chivalrously swearing that Shim'i would not die for his crime (19:24). However, when the time came for David to die, the old monarch instructed his son Shlomo to seek out Shim'i and execute him for having cursed the Lord's anointed king (Kings I 1:9). Tradition holds that God himself moved David to withhold Shim'i's just punishment for several decades in order that Shim'i might have time to raise a family, continuing the line which would eventually culminate in Mordechai and his cousin Esther.

This verse, as indicated by the italics, is one of the four verses of the Megillah read aloud by the listeners in the synagogue. The reader will pause at this point, and continue with the chanting once the audience has concluded their part.

<sup>1</sup> Straightforwardly, this verse seems to state that either Kish (not Kish ben Aviel, but Mordechai's grandfather of the same name) or Mordechai himself came over from Yehudah with King Yechoniyah in one of the earlier forced emigrations dictated by the Babylonian conqueror. Assuming that Mordechai was quite young at the time of his emigration, being among the captive children mentioned in Lamentations 1:5, this would make him reasonably elderly at the time of Megillah's action.

Those who definitively identify Kish as Kish ben Aviel yet take issue with the possibility of an older man having a single young first cousin support a more esoteric interpretation. According to *Tiferes Shlomo*, Mordechai was in fact born in captivity, but unlike many of the other Jews of his time, who thought of Babylon as their home, Mordechai yearned unceasingly for the Land of Israel and reminded himself constantly that he and his people were expatriates in a land not their own (*Tiferes Shlomo*, as via *ArtScroll*). Thus he was more worthy of the representation "an exile from Yehudah" than were many members of the older generation. Although this exegesis takes some liberties with the text, it is supported by the etymology of Mordechai's name, which is not Hebrew in origin, but Babylonian (from the god "Marduk"), suggesting that he may have been born to parents who were eager to assimilate into the Babylonian community. For these reasons, Mordechai might have been closer in age to his young cousin Esther.

<sup>j</sup> Rabbi Nechemiah notes that while "Hadassah" is a Hebrew name, "Esther" is derived from the Babylonian goddess "Ishtar," and was presumably a common regional name. We can therefore deduce that Hadassah was the girl's given name, but when she was conscripted into the harem, she gave the heretofore non-Jewish name of Esther in an attempt to conceal her national origins (*Megillah* 13a).

<sup>k</sup> At first glance, this phrase seems redundant, for we have already been told that Mordechai was Esther's guardian. The Sages scrutinize the phrase "took to himself" and correctly note that elsewhere in the Bible, the phrase is only used when referring to a marriage (see Genesis 4:19, 21:21, etc.). This observation is the source of the common opinion that Mordechai and Esther were not actually guardian and ward, but husband and wife (*Megillah* 13a).

However, this interpretation raises enormous cultural problems. Firstly, virginity at marriage was of tremendous value in all Semitic cultures at that time, a norm developed from concerns of disease and confirmation of paternity. Sexually experienced women were considered damaged goods; Esther could have immediately exempted herself from the maidens' draft with the proof that she was already married. Secondly, if Esther was indeed betrothed to Mordechai when the King's decree was announced, whether or not she remained a virgin, Jewish law would have forced her to prefer death to an adulterous liaison, even a marriage to the King.

Admittedly, the expression does have a decidedly matrimonial nature; moreover, the existence of romantic attraction between Esther and Mordechai would explain why the text here mentions Esther's extraordinary good looks as it describes her entry into Mordechai's household. Perhaps Mordechai did indeed take Esther to himself as a daughter when his uncle and aunt died, yet as he raised her, he entertained hopes that when his lovely cousin came of age, they could be married. Esther, as Chapter Eight suggests, was not averse to the idea, nevertheless they were not yet betrothed when Esther was conscripted.

<sup>l</sup> The passive voice indicates that she did not go willingly, but was taken against her will (*Targum Sheini*).

<sup>m</sup> Because Esther despised the hedonistic Achashverosh and everything he stood for, she refused to indulge herself in the luxuries around her. Her modesty and unselfishness as well as her beauty attracted the attention of the head eunuch, who found the young woman to be a very pleasant and deserving person. An alternate opinion holds that Hegai, who knew the King and his tastes, immediately recognized Esther as the most promising candidate for the queendom; during her stay with him, he pampered her lavishly in hopes that the new queen would later show him favor when she came to power (Paton).

<sup>18</sup> A peculiarly ambiguous Hebrew word, often interpreted as “rations” or “portions of delicacies from the King’s table.” Esther, unlike Daniel and his three companions, does not have recorded adventures trying to keep kosher in a foreign court. She may have decided to be lax on the dietary restrictions in order better to conceal her identity, but nearly all Jewish commentators seize on this verse to point out that Hegai fetched her special food from the King’s pantry, as he noticed his favorite candidate not eating the meat sent to the harem for the rest of the girls. Hegai hurried to give Esther adequate cosmetics because she did not seize upon them herself, and he hurried to fetch her vegetarian delicacies, lest she waste away and ruin her looks.

<sup>o</sup> Commentators offer a multitude of reasons for Mordechai’s recommendation, with the most compelling being one of fear. As chapter nine points out, the Persian capital was rife with anti-Semites, and if Esther advertised that she was Jewish, the custodians of the harem might go out of their way to prevent her from observing her faith properly (*Ibn Ezra*). Also, Mordechai feared that palace officials would completely cut off access to his ward if it became known the King’s harem-girl had nearly been betrothed to him.

<sup>p</sup> Many early sources insist that Esther, as a statement of protest, refused to enrich herself at the King’s expense and planned to take nothing from the harem; they speculate that the wise Hegai counseled her to at least bring necessities (Shkop). Others deny this recalcitrance on Esther’s part, supposing that she decided to make the best of an unwelcome opportunity and submitted herself for grooming to Hegai, who, as head of the harem, was the most accomplished beautician available (Paton). The silence of the text allows for both possibilities.

<sup>q</sup> Dressed by the master-hand of Hegai,” her appearance was extraordinary even among all the celebrated beauties of the kingdom (Paton). Esther’s grace and simplicity of dress were especially striking because many of her greedy predecessors had raided the royal treasury like jackdaws, coming from the harem extravagantly bedecked in jewels.

<sup>r</sup> Esther’s prayer, which does not appear in the Hebrew text but is nonetheless considered authentic by Jewish scholars, establishes quite clearly that the young woman detested King Achashverosh and abhorred presenting herself at his bedchamber. Such an attitude was presumably quite rare among the King’s harem-girls, most of whom would rather have become queen than live the rest of their lives in the seclusion of the concubine’s harem.

Achashverosh was used to nightly concubines who slavishly gratified his every whim, plying him with flattery, desperate to ingratiate themselves to him. Then Esther appeared at his door. Neither adulating nor seductive, she combined maidenly acquiescence with an unusual coolness, almost as if she did not care whether she pleased the King or not. Moreover, her entire presence was shrouded with an air of mystery, for she would not reveal her parentage or national origin. Achashverosh was intrigued. He found Esther’s appearance exactly to his taste, her lack of desperation surprisingly refreshing, and her verbal games a welcome challenge. After years of ingratiating sycophants, here was one playing hard-to-get! Here was a woman who could hold his attention for more than a single night! Delighting in this marvelous new challenge, Achashverosh declared the beautiful mystery woman his queen.

<sup>s</sup> The concubines he already had.

<sup>t</sup> The virgins still awaiting their turns. Achashverosh declared that he need not sample any more before making his final choice.

<sup>u</sup> Feeling sportive, Achashverosh plied his enigmatic new wife with elegance and festivities, with popular goodwill, and with lavish presents. But despite his best efforts to tease the secret out of her, Esther remained silent (Shkop).

<sup>v</sup> After some time, Achashverosh began to tire of the game; aggravation replaced fascination. In order to intimidate Esther and convey to her the precarious nature of her newfound royalty, he ordered a second conscription of beautiful girls to the harem. Yet still Esther remained silent (Shkop).

<sup>w</sup> (Taken from the Paton.) The Hebrew phrase is “sha’ar ha-melech,” literally “the King’s gate.” In ancient Israel, the quadrangle in front of the city gate was the meeting place for the elders of the city, and consequently the site of all legal and judicial action (see Deuteronomy 22, Samuel II 19, and Ruth 4). The expression “the King’s gate” is used biblically to refer to the national site of legislature and justice, even in later periods when the houses of state were not actually located at the city gates.

Since Mordechai sat at the Chancellery, he was evidently a government minister (Shkop).

<sup>x</sup> Esther was not found in the street, but was taken to the palace from Mordechai’s house; the harem officers knew her to be an orphan whom Mordechai had reared. Although his status as Esther’s kinsman and hoped spouse was kept secret, all acknowledged Mordechai as the Queen’s former guardian: consequently, Mordechai was permitted access to Esther through eunuchs and other royal messengers.

<sup>y</sup> Mordechai realized how much political honor he would merit for saving the King’s life. Nevertheless, he was also keenly aware that maidens were again being drafted to the harem and that his cousin the Queen was in danger of being quietly deposed as her predecessor had been. Though Mordechai would have rejoiced to have his beloved cousin free and remarriageable, he observed that only divine providence had placed her on the throne; pragmatically, he understood that Esther would someday use her authority to aid her people. Selflessly, he gave the message to Esther in hopes that her royal position might thus be assured. Esther, however, gave Mordechai his fair share of the credit when she warned the King (Shkop).

Dreadfully frightened by the discovery of a plot among his most important guards, Achashverosh quickly took measures to number his friends and to safeguard his person. And although his Queen’s refusal to name her people still irritated him, he realized that she was one of the very few people he could trust with his life. As Mordechai had hoped, the conscription of maidens was quietly halted and no further challenges were ever made to Esther’s crown (Shkop).

Amidst the political reorganization which accompanied the King’s distress, Mordechai’s reward was neglected, but his heroism was dutifully inscribed in the court annals, a detail which provides the dramatic climax of Chapter Six.

<sup>19</sup> The assassination attempt badly alarmed King Achashverosh, and he decided it would be best if he retired a bit from the public eye. He created a new cabinet post, that of Grand Vizier and Chief Advisor: one immensely powerful man whose job it was to make all the potentially controversial decisions, to flaunt himself in the public eye, and by any means draw attention away from the King. In exchange for power and glory, the Grand Vizier would act as assassination fodder; anyone with any complaint against government policy would now target the policymaker.

Haman ben Hammdata eagerly volunteered for the job. He was a proud and excessively vain man (see 6: 6, “In whose excellence should the King be delighted but mine?”), and moreover, he fantasized about being famous, powerful, and even kingly (see 6: 8-9). Haman did not mind being assassination fodder as long as he was reasonably compensated for it. Perhaps he even entertained notions about further empowerment by the discreet removal of his superior at an appropriate time (Shkop).

Berlin takes the conjecture one step further. No evidence was ever given that Bigtan and Teresh acted alone in their attempt to remove Achashverosh from the throne. They may have been Vashti’s kinsmen, as the Sages speculate, or they may have been agents for another would-be king. Berlin suggests that *Haman himself* was involved in the ill-fated conspiracy, and his own skill at covering his tracks led to his subsequent promotion in the wake of his colleagues’ failure. For this reason, Berlin conjectures, Haman will retaliate Mordechai’s disobedience with disproportionate violence—not from rage, but from fear. Haman knows that it was Mordechai ben Yair who turned his colleagues in to the authorities, and is petrified that Mordechai’s supposed religious objections are merely a smokescreen for his true motive: the man knows or suspects Haman’s involvement and will not bow down to an attempted regicide. Herein lies the true reason for Haman’s resorting to genocide, Berlin suggests, not racism alone, but a terrible misgiving that Mordechai may have shared his suspicions with some of his kinsmen.

<sup>20</sup> As part of Haman’s compensation, the King agreed to let the Vizier demand whatever degree of respect he thought proper; Achashverosh was happy to let Haman indulge himself in displays of abject obeisance, as it directed attention towards the Vizier and away from the monarch (Shkop).

<sup>21</sup> Since Haman demanded a degree of obeisance reserved for deities, Mordechai felt it would be idolatrous to revere him in that fashion. (*Rashi* adds that Haman had legally elevated himself to the status of a demigod, giving Mordechai an even clearer reason to avoid bowing to him.)

<sup>22</sup> How much damage is done by gossip and tale-telling! Here we see that Haman *did not notice Mordechai's offense until other officials told him of it*. Had these malicious office talebearers contented themselves to let Mordechai be, the entire near-catastrophe might never have occurred!

Since Haman did not notice Mordechai until he was pointed out, one can guess that Mordechai made his personal dissent as inconspicuous as possible, avoiding Haman rather than defying him to his face with religious self-righteousness.

<sup>23</sup> A subtle point about Mordechai's character: his colleagues did not know he was Jewish until he told them. From this we can infer that Mordechai dressed, spoke, and carried himself like a Persian, contrary to the prevalent artistic tradition that paints him as a long-bearded rabbinical type. He was the Persian equivalent of what we would call "a Federation Jew" (Shkop).

<sup>24</sup> Haman was an intensely superstitious man who consulted his astrologers on all important matters (6:13). He placed great worth in concepts of fate, luck, and serendipity. In planning an act of genocide, his first concern was to find a suitably auspicious date, not by astrology, but by a lottery (Shkop).

The grammatical structure of this sentence is confusing at best, even in the original Hebrew. It is unclear whether Haman cast the lots himself or had them cast before him.

<sup>25</sup> Either Haman cast a binary lot, "yea" or "nay for each day until the 13th of Adar came up "yea," or he cast dice or other numeric lots to determine a month and a day in that month.

<sup>26</sup> Haman called the Jews dangerously isolationist and noted their refusal to intermarry and to eat non-kosher food at Persian tables (*Megillah* 13b).

<sup>27</sup> Haman accused the Jews of using their many holidays to put off paying their taxes (*Megillah* 13b). Alternatively, this could be the usual complaint about non-observance of Persian religious festivals (Esther Rabbah). We can be sure that Haman did not mention Mordechai's offense specifically, since Achashverosh seems unaware in chapters six and eight that Mordechai was anything other than a model citizen.

<sup>28</sup> "It is beneath the King's dignity to take a bribe for doing something that will promote public welfare"; alternatively, Haman could take his money back again as a reward for denouncing lawbreakers (Paton). No amount of rationalizing can excuse Achashverosh from this terrible moral failure. To authorize genocide especially on such superficial grounds is no less than outrageous. The rabbis have nothing but bitterness towards the Persian King; Rabbi Abba compared him to a farmer whose field was disfigured by a great mound and whose neighbor's field was disfigured by a tremendous pit. Said the one, "Sir, sell me your mound." Replied the other, "By no means! Take it and welcome!" Treating the Jews like a blight on the landscape, the King rejoiced at their removal so much that he would accept no money for the deed—indeed, had the circumstance not presented itself, he might even have been willing to spend money to remove them. That Achashverosh agreed so eagerly and so cheaply to Haman's plan indicates unprobed depths of anti-Semitism in his character (14a).

Giving Achashverosh the benefit of the doubt, one could say that he left his kingdom's welfare entirely in Haman's hands; he assumed his Grand Vizier had sound basis for calling these people a menace and had equally sound ideas for how to repair the empire of the evils they had wrought. This idea is supported in part by Achashverosh's strange forgetfulness in Chapter Seven when he seems unaware that someone in his kingdom has doomed an entire people to destruction. However, the possibility that Achashverosh was willing to casually slaughter several million of his subjects on the word of one man—the possibility that after doing so he forgot the affair entirely—makes him no less reprehensible of a character than an overt and malicious schemer. Alas for poor Esther who had to be his wife!

<sup>29</sup> This is the eve of Passover.

<sup>30</sup> The document appeared to have been dictated by Achashverosh himself with all royal concern; no trace of Haman's involvement was visible. For this reason, the edict was irrevocable.

<sup>31</sup> How many announcements were there? Most commentators agree that only one warrant existed, one to kill, destroy, and annihilate all Jews, etc.; this was distributed to all citizens in order to prepare them for the coming action. Dr. Shkop, however, maintains that there were two announcements: a writ sent to the deputies, lesser officials, and nobles (3:12); and a proclamation made to the common folk (3:14). The officers' writ instructed them to distribute information urging the public to make ready for a domestic action on the thirteenth day of Adar, giving no other information. The target group was not to be specified, nor was the extent of the damage. Only the governors and their associates were to know who was destined for slaughter, and thus premature riots and looting were to be prevented.

<sup>32</sup> As the citizens closest to the Capitol, the commoners of Shushan no doubt heard many rumors regarding classified affairs of state. News of an impending massacre was no exception; while the King and Haman sat at ease with their goblets, their subjects stood murmuring in doorways, confused and distressed.

<sup>33</sup> As a government employee, Mordechai had access to the both versions of Achashverosh's law, the public announcement and the full official statement (3:14). The horrified minister immediately realized what Haman had done, and recognized the decree as the Grand Vizier's act of vengeance against him.

<sup>34</sup> The usual Eastern sign of severe penitence and deep mourning.

<sup>35</sup> According to Dr. Shkop, the neutrally phrased royal proclamation and the ensuing rumors from Shushan that the Jews were the group scheduled for slaughter.

<sup>36</sup> With these clothes, Mordechai could enter the palace and converse with Esther's trusted servants. Mordechai, however, did not approve of this plan. In imperial Persia, nobility who had a grievance with the King's justice—such as the arrest or threatened execution of a relative—would weep and wail in front of the palace gates in protest; in rare cases, the King might take pity on a grieving mother and commute the sentence. Mordechai is engaging in just such a protest: he has made his person into a symbol of national injustice, and for him to suddenly leave off protesting in front of the palace gates and present himself at his office in ordinary clothes would imply to the watching city that his grievance has been redressed (Berlin).

<sup>37</sup> This particularly harsh law was doubtless a consequence of the assassination attempt, after which any person who approached the King's person without a summons was suspect.

<sup>38</sup> Esther's point is twofold as she indicates out that Achashverosh has obviously grown bored with her and lost whatever love he once held for her. First, under the circumstances, she is not likely to be an effective supplicant. Second, she has very little chance of being called to the King in time to do any good.

<sup>e</sup> As Esther was carried off to the palace against her will and escorted to the heathen King's bedchamber under compulsion of law, the rabbis heretofore counted her as a victim rather than a wanton. However, if Esther were now to play the seductress and voluntarily initiate relations with the scoundrel who seized her from her family, she would then be engaged in sin. Her right to take a Jewish husband after a divorce would be forfeit, and in death her soul would be lost forever. Esther realized that in order to get the King's attention she might very well have to display sexual interest in him. She resigned herself to that possibility with the lament, "If I am lost, I am lost," (*Megillah* 15a).

<sup>h</sup> The Hebrew word "va-ya'avur" literally means "crossed." This verb is particularly appropriate here, for in going about his business, Mordechai crossed the river separating Shushan the Capitol from Shushan proper; this theory is supported by the geography of Shushan. According to the Rabbis, Mordechai also crossed the

law by requesting that the Jews fast during the Passover festival (see commentary to 3:12). Those who hold by this interpretation agree that Esther's request was perfectly justified under the circumstances (*Megillah* 15a).

<sup>39</sup> This ambiguous phrase probably refers to clothing: Esther donned her most splendid royal garments and made her best appearance. However, many traditional sources pick up on the ambiguity and imagine that Esther assumed an atmosphere of Majesty itself. The Talmud suggests that the Divine Presence rested its glory on her, giving her an aura of grandeur beyond all mortal conception (*Megillah* 15a).

Contrast the description of Esther's appearance here with the extensive toilet of Judith, whose story is considered apocryphal by the Hebrew Bible. Judith, a Jewish heroine nominally fighting the Greeks, spends several verses in their entirety bathing, dressing, and adorning herself with jewelry. As per Greek theories of gender identity, her character is defined by her appearance, and the gussying-up of her beauty is the most important part of her plan. Esther, though her beauty is equally outstanding, dresses her body in three words: *Esther donned royalty*. Her preparation is as much spiritual as it is physical, and it is her self-image, her air of royalty, that shines through her more than any other attribute.

<sup>40</sup> Aura or no, Esther's appearance on the threshold of the throne room must have been extraordinary. Dressed to kill, the Queen had enhanced every aspect of her beauty that had once charmed her husband. And yet despite her breathtaking appearance, her face surely betrayed the terrible anxiety in her heart and the knowledge that these next few steps might be her last.

What Achashverosh was thinking as he repealed his wife's death sentence is unclear. Both Paton and the *Targum Sheini* maintain that Esther's extraordinary beauty and overwhelming terror moved him to pity, and he extended the scepter to comfort his trembling wife. Dr. Shkop takes the tradition from the *Vilna Gaon* that the King understood Esther's sudden appearance and terrified face to point to a serious crisis; the Queen obviously had some message or suit so weighty that she might imperil her life to deliver it. Given Achashverosh's general paranoia and his gratitude to Esther for saving his life in Chapter Two, it is not unlikely that her unheralded and fearful advance might signal in the King's mind another threat to the his person. Third, Achashverosh could have been immensely flattered to be approached by his neglected wife at the risk of her life—how virile must the husband be who deserves such desperate lust after a thirty day absence! Although all of these factors undoubtedly played a role in Achashverosh's decision, the King's subsequent questions to Esther will emphasize one of them in particular.

<sup>41</sup> An unambiguous sexual advance, meant to flatter the King's masculinity and dispose him to listen to her (Shkop).

<sup>42</sup> The sexual innuendoes in this scene would be easy to dismiss if it were not for this one troublesome word. The Hebrew "it" is either masculine or feminine, never neutral. This "it" cannot refer either to "request" or "petition," since both of those nouns take the feminine case. Hence the only possible way to translate it correctly is as "he." Achashverosh's grammatical error is a perfect Freudian slip: though he means to say "it shall be given you," he lapses and says "he shall be given you," revealing just what is going through his mind—why he thinks Esther has come (Shkop)!

<sup>43</sup> Esther's plan is complex and requires careful pacing. She obviously succeeded in arousing the King's interest, and when Achashverosh jumps to conclusions about the purpose of her visit, Esther decides to play upon this fancy. She invites him to grace her with his presence that very day... but not in the romantic tete-a-tete that he so clearly expects. Haman's conspicuous presence was designed to remind the King that Esther's request was not necessarily a personal one; moreover, his inclusion in a romantic gathering might well incite the King to jealousy. The Queen had also noticed a vain streak in the Vizier that might, with proper attention, induce him to take liberties with her. If Haman were to act as though he were entitled to queenly favors, Achashverosh would certainly flare up at him, and the time would be ripe for his denouncement (Shkop).

<sup>44</sup> Esther's tense mood does not evaporate during the course of the party; her husband understands that she had not yet spoken her mind. Achashverosh's grammar reveals that he still thinks Esther is interested in his

company. He is puzzled by Haman's presence and wonders when the chaperone will go home, so that his wife can throw herself at him and beg for satisfaction.

<sup>45</sup> Esther's drawn-out, overly polite phrasing and procrastinating content are all designed to inflame the King's curiosity, making him impatient and jealous.

<sup>46</sup> Haman massages his aching ego before getting to the matter at hand; even at a council of war, he is always ready to wax rhapsodic on the topic of his greatness.

<sup>47</sup> The Queen's kindness in inviting the Vizier to a private royal affair amazed Haman. The fact that she had mentioned his name twice in the face of his master's sexual innuendoes suggested to the egomaniac that Esther favored him in other ways as well.

<sup>48</sup> Haman later goes to the palace to "tell the King to hang Mordechai": to tell, not to ask (6:5). His audacity in doing so boggles the mind, and it is notable that the words "tell the King" are first used here by Zeresh.

<sup>49</sup> This phrase is often read with the cantillation style of the "coronation passage" used to honor God on the High Holidays: the melody associates "the King" with "the King on High" and supports the notion that the King of Kings was also not "asleep" on this fateful night. While this association is supported by the *Targum Rishon* and many other ancient sources, it does not serve very well to illuminate the simple meaning of the text.

The notion that God's holy sleep was unsettled and that he busied himself with rousing Achashverosh's conscience implies that the King's insomnia was unnatural, an idea highly incongruous with the day Achashverosh had just had. A sudden appearance of his neglected wife had aroused his sexual and intellectual interest; that interest was rebuffed as his Queen silkily put off his questions for another day. If Esther had come to his court to throw herself at him, why had Haman been invited to their wine-feast? If she had not come to throw herself at him, why all the sexual games? Had she come to divulge a secret, then suddenly changed her mind? Did she see someone in the court whose presence had stricken her dumb? Had she been waiting for a sign that had been withheld? *Did all of these mysterious doings point to another assassination attempt?* The King's mind buzzed with these questions, and his inability to sleep is the most natural occurrence in the world (Shkop, *Megillah* 15b).

<sup>50</sup> Popular humor makes light of Achashverosh's request for the annals. Paton scoffs that the harem might have provided the King with livelier entertainment; several well-known children's books explain that those tedious documents were considered an infallible cure for insomnia. But again, Achashverosh's obsession with the court histories and his subsequent discovery of Mordechai's name are not coincidental. Vexed and frightened by Esther's behavior, Achashverosh demanded to hear the full details of the last assassination attempt. He hoped to discover how he had protected his royal self the last time and whether he had left any stones unturned in his attempts to smoke out the assassins. How had Esther come by news of the plot? Had Bigtan and Teresh left resentful friends or kinsmen who might now be threatening her (Shkop)?

<sup>51</sup> Mordechai's name has not come up in the King's presence since the Bigtan and Teresh affair, and the King is anxious to determine whether this honest gentleman has remained in the ranks of Achashverosh's trusted servants. Has he been sufficiently compensated for his loyalty and courage? If conspirators were again afoot, was he likely to assist the King a second time? Had he—perish the thought—been neglected all this time and given cause to be angry and bitter about Achashverosh's unkingly ingratitude (Shkop)?

<sup>52</sup> King Achashverosh was not in the habit of making any important decisions unadvised; though some chalk this up to indecision and weakness on his part, the Rabbis highlight it as one of the monarch's most exemplary qualities. Though Achashverosh was by no means a model king, in this way he and the rest of the bureaucracy excelled: a Persian king always broadened his outlook with multiple perspectives before deciding on a course of action.



<sup>53</sup> Haman was so impatient to see Mordechai hanged that he did not wait until morning, but came to the palace as soon as the gallows was completed. Though he could not approach the King without a summons, he waited patiently in the outer courtyard in hopes that news of his presence would eventually reach the King (Paton). How ironic that this haste enabled him to be appointed Mordechai's attendant!

<sup>54</sup> Haman's legendary vanity becomes most apparent here, as the Vizier describes his personal fantasy of reward. Haman wants nothing less than to be paraded through the streets in the habiliments of the King, basking in the glory reserved usually for a monarch. The modern reader can visualize the extent of Haman's dreams by comparing the royal stallion with today's presidential retinue. Haman wants to ride through the streets of the capital in the presidential limousine, wearing the very same suit and tie worn by the President on inauguration day, decorated with all the flags and seals of the highest office in the land—that is, the royal crown (Berlin).

Haman has the audacity to mention a royal crown in his list of rewards—not for himself, but for his kingly steed. The pronoun “its” in the phrase “a royal crown on its head” is a masculine one, so one might easily mishear the sentence as a poorly arranged request for a royal crown on the *man's* head. This ambiguity of subjects throws even more light on Haman's true motives. The man wants the crown, and his limitless belief in Achashverosh's favor makes his desire all the more obvious.

Apparently, Haman's Freudian slip was not unknown in the ancient world; an honored Greek official who also requested a parade wearing a crown was mocked out of the court by the king's kinsmen. “Grasp the thunderbolt if you dare, but that will not make you Zeus!” jeered a royal peer, and the official who had been redeeming his royal boon soon found himself under suspicion of treason (Berlin).

Unsurprisingly, Haman does not mention the crown in the list of rewards he reiterates in the next sentence. *Rashi* voices the universal opinion that Achashverosh's face darkened upon mention of a crown and Haman deemed it wise to drop the issue without another word.

<sup>55</sup> The rabbis are mightily amused with the idea of the Grand Vizier of Persia having to valet such an unassuming underling as Mordechai. Moreover, they note that Mordechai had been in a state of deep mourning since the day Haman's first decree was published, and thus had neither shaven nor bathed for a significant period of time; it is quite likely that in order properly to attire and parade him, the mortified Haman not only had to dress Mordechai, but wash and shave him (*Esther Rabbah* 10:4)!

<sup>56</sup> In all likelihood, Mordechai took this unexpected commendation as a sign from above that his prayers had been answered and returned to his office. However, since the phrase “at the Chancellery” is used in 5.9 to describe Mordechai mourning in front of the Chancellery gates, it is not certain that Mordechai resumed life as usual. Both the Talmud and the Midrash maintain that Mordechai returned to his mourning state after the parade concluded, seeing no reason to discontinue his prayers.

<sup>57</sup> The superstitious Haman was bitterly aware of the irony in this turn of events, and began to foresee his own downfall.

<sup>58</sup> The prophetic style of advice they will give suggests that these “wise men” were Haman's astrologers. However, the *Sfas Emes* takes tradition from the Talmud that these wise men were the “friends” mentioned in the previous verse; with the news of Haman's humiliation, they ceased to be his friends!

<sup>59</sup> It is now common knowledge that Mordechai is Jewish: the “if” seems superfluous except in context of a horoscope. Upon encountering daunting misfortune, Haman immediately sought the advice of his astrologers: was he destined to succeed in his plot to destroy Mordechai, or had fate doomed him to failure? The astrologers then cast Haman's horoscope and discovered the ancient enmity between Haman's family and Mordechai's family: the feud between the Agagites of Amalek and Benjaminites of the Jews (see 2:5). Seeing this trend, the astrologers then counseled Haman, “If Mordechai is truly descended from the Jews of old, and not a convert or an alien, then he carries in his blood the power of this ancient feud. And as the Jews triumphed over the Amalekites in those days, so too will he triumph over you if you persist in this course,” (*Vilna Gaon* and *Yosef Lekach* via *ArtScroll*).

<sup>60</sup> Having counseled Haman not to pursue vengeance against Mordechai, the astrologers then added their own opinions, “If you are wise, you will fall before Mordechai of your own accord—prostrate yourself before him and gain his good will!” This idea was completely unacceptable to Haman, so they continued, “In any event, you must immediately dismantle the gallows you have built; the King is obviously well pleased with Mordechai, and if he hears that you have plotted to take that man’s life, you will fall from his favor.” Yet all this talk had dragged on throughout the afternoon, and before Haman had had time to take their advice and dismantle the gallows, the King’s servants arrived with the news that he was awaited at the palace. Here one may see the finger of God even more clearly than in 6:1, for if Haman had better managed his time, the gallows would have been destroyed before Esther’s feast and Haman might have stood a chance in the face of Esther’s denunciation (*Vilna Gaon* and Shkop).

<sup>61</sup> Achashverosh’s grammar indicates his heightened awareness of the situation. He is now quite sure that Esther approached him regarding some political matter of dire importance, and he has ceased making sexual advances to her (Shkop).

<sup>62</sup> Knowing her husband’s motivations, Esther phrases her plea not in humanitarian terms, but in terms of the King’s best interests; genocide would erode the King’s tax base and cause severe loss of revenue. Esther accuses the decree’s author not of conspiring against her, but of plotting against the King. A faithful servant, she states, would have sold the troublesome nation into slavery and given the profits to the national treasury, but this ordinance was obviously written in order to weaken and impoverish the King. Esther is certainly not suggesting that her people should be sold into slavery, but merely trying to expose Haman’s selfish villainy in a manner that her thoughtless and cruel husband will recognize (*Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Yosef Lekach* via *ArtScroll*).

<sup>63</sup> Literally, “King Achashverosh said—he said to Esther the Queen...” The repeated Hebrew verb indicates that the King stuttered (Shkop).

<sup>64</sup> Literally, “whose heart is full to do this”.

Achashverosh’s question can be read in two ways. The King might have forgotten completely about giving Haman a license to commit genocide; this fits well with the interpretation of 3:11 that Achashverosh did not wish to concern himself with major political decisions. Alternatively, if Achashverosh’s malicious anti-semitism was as virulent as Haman’s, his question here can be read as a hasty concealment of guilt. “Who—who would do such a thing?” squeaks the King as his fierce-looking wife towers over him. As if he didn’t know! Achashverosh fears the onset of an ugly scene and is terribly relieved when Esther blames Haman entirely and does not mention his royal role in the matter (Shkop).

<sup>65</sup> Panic settled upon the King. Haman, the man whom he had entrusted with the running of his kingdom and his life, the man to whom he had given his very seal of authority, had been plotting to kill his Queen! (Esther’s charge of genocide goes in one ear and out the other, as the beginning of Chapter Eight makes clear, but the threat to the Queen’s life was a very serious matter.) How had this treacherous snake enlisted Achashverosh’s aid in a plot to take the Queen’s life? What state secrets was Haman planning to use against the royal family? Once the loyal and virtuous Queen was out of the way, what was Haman planning to do to him? Dismayed by the presence of the greatest and most dangerous traitor in his kingdom—and half-paralyzed by rage and humiliation that he himself had agreed to Haman’s requests—Achashverosh’s instinct was to storm from the room to strategize and compose himself alone.

<sup>66</sup> Even now Haman still trusts in his indomitable self to win over anyone. Though the King was obviously in one of his characteristic rages, Queen Esther had behaved very invitingly to him. It has not yet sunk into Haman’s mind that Esther has been leading him on in order to expose his villainy.

<sup>67</sup> Nearly all commentators agree that Haman approached Esther’s couch only to plead with her. Eastern supplicants generally fell at the feet of their benefactors, as seen in 8:3; ancient Assyrian inscriptions describe supplicants actually grasping the feet (Paton). Chairs were unknown in the ancient world, so for Haman to approach Esther’s couch was perfectly understandable in the circumstances. Why, though, was

he found lying upon it in such a suspicious manner?

Many Jewish commentators assume that in Haman's haste and dismay, he tripped and fell into a compromising position. Uncomfortable with this happenstance, the midrash suggests that a well-timed kick by the angel Michael caused Haman's accident (*Esther Rabbah* 10:9). Dr. Shkop, however, maintains that Haman did not necessarily need any nudging from anyone to overstep the bounds of modesty as he pleaded with a beautiful woman who had already shown him favor. By her interpretation, Achashverosh's fortuitous entrance at this point is no accident, but rather a consequence of Esther's scream upon finding Haman's hands where they ought not to be.

Paton attributes Achashverosh's charge of rape to an unwarranted overreaction, and strongly castigates the supposedly virtuous Queen for letting her fallen enemy be carried off to his death on a false charge. However, Berlin takes a much more cynical view. As of yet, Achashverosh has no proof of Esther's charge—that will be supplied by Charvona in the next verse. He does not want his own kingly role in the edict to be discussed and puzzled over by the legal advisers as they examine Haman's supposed crimes and explore the *dat* for his removal. Achashverosh has determined to eliminate this deadly and dangerous rival quickly and quietly, and he re-enters the banquet hall in search of a suitable pretext. His charge of attempted rape is a complete fabrication, just as those against Vashti were, but with Haman on Esther's couch grasping her body, it is a capital crime for which the scheming vizier can be immediately executed without any more thought for bureaucracy or protocol.

<sup>68</sup> In ancient Persia, the sign of a man condemned to death. "They" who covered Haman's face are presumably royal servants who had come running into room, either when Esther screamed or when Achashverosh's roar of rage echoed throughout the hall.

<sup>1</sup> Gratitude towards this helpful minister is not universal. Rabbi El'azar wonders just how Charvona knew of the gallows' existence when Haman had not yet mentioned it in court: he implicates the eunuch as one of Haman's co-conspirators and castigates him for betraying Haman as soon as his fortunes turned (*Megillah* 16a). However, many others see no reason to view Charvona as anything other than a faithful King's man. Rashi suggests that Charvona was one of the eunuchs in 6:14 who had escorted Haman from his home that afternoon; the entire party presumably saw the gallows towering over Haman's house as they approached. The good wishes towards Charvona expressed in the Purim hymn "Shoshannat Ya'akov" strongly support the second view.

<sup>69</sup> Why "what he was to her" instead of the plainer "his kinship to her" or "that he was her cousin"? The rabbis pick up on this ambiguity and assume that Esther explained the full extent of her relationship to Mordechai: that they were first cousins, and that they had once been romantically involved (Shkop). With Mordechai now high in royal favor, Esther presumed it was safe to tell the King that Mordechai had once planned to marry her; her humble and loyal cousin had already earned the designation "least likely to assassinate or seek to replace the King." Achashverosh, as the Queen hoped, responded to Mordechai generously and kindly, without jealousy or suspicion.

<sup>70</sup> Any benefit of the doubt that Achashverosh may have earned throughout this story disappears here. In the midst of all his rage and jealousy and desire for vengeance, Achashverosh has left Haman's edict untouched. After the traitorous minister was suitably punished, Achashverosh's outrage dissipated completely. His Queen's desperate plea for the lives of her people went completely unheeded! "I've saved you," the King seemed to be thinking, "I've saved your friend Mordechai. What more needs to be done?" In the face of her husband's callous neglect, Esther must approach the King a second time (Shkop).

<sup>71</sup> The extension of the scepter is the same gesture of pardon used in chapter five. Many commentaries, *Esther Rabbah* among them, infer that Esther illegally entered the throne room a second time in order to plead with the King. The majority, however, assume that the scepter was a symbol of clemency, and the King extended it to Esther to remind her that her life was safe and she might stand and speak without tears (*ArtScroll*).

<sup>72</sup> Esther reminds the King that since Haman had dictated the decree, it ought not to be subject to the doctrine of royal infallibility (see 8:8).

<sup>73</sup> Achashverosh reminds the two that he had already proved himself ill-disposed towards Esther's enemies and assured them that he would continue in the precedent he had set (*Rashi*). Interestingly enough, despite Achashverosh's reluctance to avert Haman's massacre, his version of the story says that Haman was hung for threatening the Jews, not for high treason.

<sup>74</sup> Despite all of his encouraging words, Achashverosh falls back into his usual habit of letting the Grand Vizier make all the important decisions.

<sup>75</sup> The kingdom of Persia apparently had a doctrine of royal infallibility, and for that reason, Achashverosh could not permit his new minister to repeal the laws which Haman had signed in the King's name. However, the King assures Mordechai that the King's signet ring grants him as much power to do good as Haman had to do ill.

<sup>76</sup> The language here closely parallels that of chapter three, with the addition of "and to the Jews, according to their scripts and languages." Despite the occasional choppiness of the language, the Megillah remains a beautifully crafted work of ancient literature: everything done by Haman is undone by Mordechai with delightful literary symmetry.

<sup>77</sup> Two thousand years' worth of translators have despaired of properly identifying these animals, here rendered as "swift horses" from the Persian and "prize mares" from the Hebrew. *Rashi* suggests that the animals in question were young camels; the *Ibn Ezra* disagrees and says they were particular breeds of mules (*ArtScroll*). However, many others study the context of the Hebrew word "ramakh" in Kings I 5:8 and Micah 1:13 and decide that it is some sort of superior royal horse. Paton cites linguists who find the root "kingly" in the Persian *akhashtran* and agrees that the beasts in question were the best royal coursers, bred by the King's stables for speed and endurance.

<sup>78</sup> Haman's edict remained in effect: on the thirteenth day of Adar, the anti-Semites of Persia and Media would be permitted to attack the Jews, to slaughter their families and loot their houses without threat of arrest or government reprisal. However, Mordechai's edict guaranteed the Jews equal rights under the law to decimate the rioters: no Jew of any station would be penalized for murder if he killed an anti-Semite on the thirteenth day of Adar—moreover, the government would consider him a freedom-fighter and a hero. The thirteenth of Adar would still be a day of violence and bloodshed, but the threat of unrestrained genocide was averted.

<sup>79</sup> This phrase is often disastrously mistranslated as giving the Jews permission to plunder their enemies' possessions. The Hebrew phrasing makes it quite clear that "threaten them and their families" and "plunder their possessions" were the actions against which the Jews were permitted to defend themselves. Chapter 9 points out that the Jews carried out their struggle with exemplary discipline and never touched the property of their slain enemies.

<sup>80</sup> Unlike Haman's original writ, Mordechai's text was clear and specific. All citizens had a right to know who was to be the target of the violence and what rights they had to defend themselves.

<sup>81</sup> As it has throughout this episode, the language closely parallels that of chapter three. Here, however, the couriers are not merely "urgently dispatched" but "urgently dispatched with great hurry," indicating Mordechai's zeal in dissipating the national terror.

<sup>n</sup> Not just the Jews, but the entire city of Shushan rejoiced to see Mordechai dressed in the sumptuous robes of a Grand Vizier. Haman's notorious arrogance and his sacrilegious demands for abject obeisance had made him extremely unpopular with the common folk, and they cheered with Mordechai's countrymen to see him raised to Haman's old position. Those who translated "the city of Shushan" as a euphemism for "the Jews of Shushan" delude themselves: the Jews' reaction is specified in the next two verses.

° This word is often atrociously mistranslated as “became Jews” or “converted to Judaism.” The Hebrew verb for “converted” is “mit-gairim,” “to become a proselyte.” This word “mit-yahadim” has no relation to proselytes or converts, but comes from the root “yehudi,” or “Jew.” These Persian citizens did not convert to Judaism, they professed a passion for it. Sentiments such as, “Me? I’d never hurt a Jew. I love the Chosen People. Some of my best friends are Jewish!” suddenly became very fashionable. Jewish star pendants (or the ancient equivalent), worn by all people of all ethnic groups, became as popular as Egyptian ankhs were in this country several years ago. Like the waves of conversos and converso descendants that seem to be advertising themselves all over Spain today, hordes of ordinary-looking Persians suddenly began touting their Jewish roots and talking about their long-bearded grandsires who “might have been Jewish.” Being a Judeophile was suddenly in vogue-- moreover, it was *safe!*

The Judeophiles who sprung up overnight from India to Ethiopia were not fueled by the purest of motives. Most of them feared the Jews and hoped to live out the thirteenth day of Adar unharmed; many had good cause to fear them and hoped to assuage their guilt by commending the group they had once despised. However, they were not false converts and they did not take the Lord’s name in vain in order to protect themselves. Those translators who claim that these people actually converted to Judaism often lambaste the Jews for accepting such patently false conversions, but neither the Jews nor the Judeophiles were at fault.

<sup>82</sup> Cynical students of Jewish history note that this in itself was a miracle: the Jews actually banded together in a unified, cohesive group!

<sup>83</sup> Even the anti-Semites in the Persian offices knew very well whose will they would do best to follow, king’s decree or no. It was well-known to all that Mordechai and his people were under the King’s protection: while no one supporting the anti-Semites on the thirteenth day of Adar would be punished for his actions, the governors predicted a fall from royal favor and an end to the political career of anyone who did so.

<sup>84</sup> Besides the wondrous reversal of fortune, the second miracle of Purim was a military one. The thirteenth day of Adar might have been a Jewish bloodbath regardless of their permission to defend themselves, yet God put fear of them into all their enemies and they prevailed, even in the thickest of the fighting.

<sup>85</sup> The Jews’ struggle to defend themselves was carried out with sobriety and discipline. Had any of them begun to loot the possessions of their dead foes, the operation would have turned from one of defense to one of profit; the Jews would have become no better than their enemies. All combatants agreed to act as a credit to their people and leave the potential plunder untouched.

Interestingly enough, in the great battle between Mordechai’s ancestor King Shaul and Haman’s ancestor King Agag, Shaul lost control of his troops and allowed them to loot their enemy’s camp against God’s express orders (Samuel I 15). Now the Jews of Shushan atoned for their ancestors’ sin by acting with self-control (*Nachal Eshkol*).

<sup>86</sup> Commentators differ vastly on their interpretations of Achashverosh’s words. The Talmud reads this question as spoken in anger and scorn, as the King lamented the deaths of his subjects and regretted giving Esther power over them; the rabbis decide that an angel must have then struck his mouth and made his next speech more charitable (*Megillah* 16a). However, most other sources recall Achashverosh’s distaste for politics and give him the benefit of the doubt: any monarch willing to condone genocide for ostensibly political reasons would not have grieved over the deaths of several hundred rowdy hooligans who had precipitated their own doom by attacking the Jews. They read Achashverosh’s question as spoken applaudingly, praising Esther’s kinsmen for their valor and his own royal magnanimity in allowing them to triumph over their enemies. The glorious King has carried out his wife’s request on an immense scale and now is gleefully anticipating her overwhelming show of gratitude and favor. To highlight his graciousness, he urges her to request even more, to give him another opportunity to demonstrate his great-heartedness.

<sup>87</sup> Given the opening, Esther decided to take advantage of her husband’s gracious mood and aid her people further. It can be deduced from the nature of her request as well as the numbers brought in during the previous verse that the fighting in the imperial city of Shushan had been especially fierce and had failed to

die down even as the thirteenth day of Adar came to a close. Esther feared that Jews who continued to fight on the fourteenth day of Adar would be subject to arrest, and she begged the King to extend Mordechai's decree for one day more and grant clemency to those who still found themselves pressed by anti-Semites.

<sup>88</sup> Many Eastern societies were accustomed to displaying the bodies of dead traitors and rebels as a warning to all that might be tempted to follow their example (Samuel I 31). Haman's ten sons, who had presumably been responsible for much of the savage aggression in their home district, had been killed in the day's fighting; in an attempt to discourage the remaining rioters in the Capitol, Esther requested that their bodies be displayed on a gallows in the manner of defeated rebels.

<sup>89</sup> The Megillah's author explains which fighting took place on what day as background for the extra holiday of Shushan Purim, a celebration on the fifteenth day of Adar observed by urban Jews born in walled cities. The rabbis of the Talmud go into a great deal of discussion as to what constitutes a walled city, concluding that a legally acceptable walled city had to be built, fortified, and walled in the time of the Megillah's action. Today, only Jerusalem fulfills these qualifications, and accordingly, the citizens of Jerusalem take a holiday on the fifteenth of Adar, masquerading and reading the Megillah as they do on the fourteenth.

<sup>90</sup> The customs of "mishloach manot" (sending presents to each other, specifically fine baskets of food and drink) and "matanot la-ev'yonim" (gifts to the poor) continue to this very day.

<sup>91</sup> The pronouns in the Hebrew are strangely ambiguous. At face value, the text reads "when she came before the King,"; "she" can either refer to Esther, who has not been mentioned recently, or Haman's thought, which takes a feminine pronoun. In any case, the word "King" is the clearest double entendre in the Megillah, clearly referring to the King On High just as much as—if not more than—King Achashverosh. When Haman's thought came before the King On High, this far more powerful King doomed him to fall victim to his own vicious scheme, and brought his own plan to pass with divine certitude.

<sup>92</sup> A traditional Megillah reader will pick up the scroll and shake it at this time, dramatizing the phrase "*this* letter." As mentioned in the introduction, Jewish tradition holds that Megillat Esther was in fact the royal letter sent by Esther and Mordechai to the Jews of the Empire.

<sup>93</sup> Once the Jews of the Empire had universally established the holiday of Purim, Esther wrote to them again, informing every community that the entire nation had accepted this new custom. More importantly, Esther wrote to clear up some issues which had emerged regarding the new holiday. As a day of celebration and feasting, Purim had tremendous potential to spin out of control and become a meaningless orgy of wine, and the Queen reminded her countrymen that Purim commemorated the very serious aversion of a near-holocaust. She urged the Jews to establish for their descendants also the matter of fasting and wailing, the "Fast of Esther" commemorating Esther's three days of fasting and prayer that many communities had already begun to observe on the thirteenth of Adar before beginning their merrymaking. The Fast of Esther was soon standardized and is still observed on the day before Purim with a daylight-hours fast and special penitential liturgy.

<sup>94</sup> It is unclear whether the Book in question is a genuine one or a metaphorical one. The Jews certainly wrote up the events of Purim and recorded them in literary perpetuity, but the authors may have a specific volume in mind. *Rashi* suggests that Esther immediately wrote to the Men of the Great Assembly in Jerusalem and requested that they canonize her story among the books of the Hebrew Bible; if so, this sentence is a later addition to the Megillah, inserted by some helpful chronicler after the Book of Esther became part of the canonized Bible (ArtScroll). While this theory certainly explains the text, no ancient scroll heretofore discovered omits this verse or appears to predate it in any way.

<sup>95</sup> Chapter Ten is superfluous. The Jews were threatened, the Jews were saved, the holiday of Purim was established, and nothing more needs to be said. However, the authors of the Megillah decided to add these

three sentences more as a brief reminder of royal power—the Megillah was a royally published and royally reviewed document, after all. “We pause now for a word from our sponsor, our gracious and most puissant sovereign Achashverosh, without whose grace none of these marvelous events would have transpired. Please take a moment to reflect on the majesty and glory of our great King whose power is currently at work raising revenue for our glorious empire.”

The Lubavitch tradition takes a darker view of the imperial sponsorship. Having mitigated the decree of absolute slaughter, the Persian king then raised taxes to compensate himself for the lost plunder. The Jews, while alive, remained as much in his power as they were on the day he doomed them to destruction, still exiles in a land not their own, subject to the whims, taxes, and humiliations that their oppressor saw fit to levy upon them.

<sup>96</sup> Imperial sponsorship or no, it would be both incongruous and offensive for the Megillah to end singing the praises of such a moral cripple. Accordingly, the authors shift the focus to Mordechai, the great minister whom their glorious and wise King saw fit to promote. The Megillah assures the reader that its hero Mordechai (not Mordechai the Jew just yet, but plain Mordechai of the Persian Empire) went on to perform deeds of authority and valor on behalf of the kingdom. Mordechai’s imperial significance, however, is slyly undercut when these deeds are not listed, and the curious reader is redirected to a political chronicle.

The true heroism in the story, the Book insists, was not that of the militant politicians. For Mordechai the Jew, a Hebrew in exile, reached a high office and yet retained his Jewish identity—to the last, he remained Mordechai the Jew. Despite the catastrophe which had almost come upon him for being true to his beliefs, he never compromised his identity. When granted power, he did not forget his heritage, but wielded his authority with wisdom and peace, serving his people and all posterity.

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