



# ESTHER

## INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

The book of Esther relates the first attempt to destroy the entire Jewish people. It is unclear whether the decree described here was due to religious motivations, or nationalist or racist ones. On the one hand, the enemies of the Jews specifically criticize their customs and lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the subsequent edict to destroy them applies to all Jews, regardless of their mores, and gives them no recourse to change or convert.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the Jewish people are treated as a unified entity, and therefore it is fitting that their salvation is celebrated with an eternal national holiday, as described at the end of the book.<sup>3</sup>

The book of Esther states that it was written by Mordekhai and Esther, perhaps with the assistance of various sages and advisors. It was designed not merely as a testimony for the Jewish people, but as a semi-official document of the Persian Empire.<sup>4</sup> This accounts for the book's civil attitude toward King Ahashverosh. It is hard to discern one word of direct criticism of Ahashverosh, despite the fact that he is one of the central figures in the attempted annihilation of the Jews. It is possible to read this book and detect undercurrents unflattering to the king, but these are not explicitly stated in the text.

The fact that the book of Esther was also written as a Persian document, to be read by all its subjects,<sup>5</sup> may also explain the absence of any mention of God. Belief in God is undoubtedly at the heart of the book, and yet it is one of the very few books in the Bible that does not mention the divine name. Although the Septuagint and the Aramaic translations add a section of Esther's prayer to God, this does not appear in the original version of the book. And yet, despite the absence of God's name, the hidden hand of Divine Providence pulls all the strings in the story: The sequence of events, described so fully and dramatically in this breathtaking narrative, contains no peripheral incidents. Rather, each detail is linked to another aspect of the plot until the complex chain of events directed from on high reaches its inevitable conclusion and is revealed to all.

## Chronology of Events in the Book of Esther – According to the Sages (Seder Olam)

King	Year BCE	Main events	Prophets of the era
Nebuchadnezzar	422	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
Cyrus the Great (3 years)	370	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede Founding of the Persian Empire Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubavel (Sheshbatar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10)	
Ahashverosh son of Darius the Mede (14 years)	367	Death of Cyrus Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to political interference by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4)	
	363	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	354	Haman's plot and downfall	
Darius (Artahshasta, 36 years)	353	Suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon	Haggai, Zechariah
	348	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
	347	Return of Ezra to the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	Malachi
	334	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the Covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
	318	Conquests of Alexander the Great	

King	Year BCE	Main events	Prophets of the era
Nebuchadnezzar	586	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
Cyrus the Great	550	Founding of the Persian Empire	
	539	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus	
	538	Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubavel (Sheshbatar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel	
	537	Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10) Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to interference by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4)	
Cambyses	530	Succeeded Cyrus as Emperor	
	525	Conquest of Egypt	
Darius the Great	522	Beginning of reign with the suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon and in Persia	Haggai, Zechariah
	520	Resumption of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 4:24–6:14)	
	516	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
Xerxes (Ahashverosh)	486	Accusations against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6)	Malachi
	483	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	474	Haman's plot and downfall	
Artaxerxes (Artahshasta)	458	Arrival of Ezra in the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	
	445	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the Covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
Alexander the Great	331	Conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander	

# Megillat ESTHER

## The Feasts and the End of Vashti's Reign

ESTHER 1:1–22

- 1** **1** It was in the days of Ahashverosh,<sup>d</sup> that Ahashverosh who reigned from India to Kush,<sup>b</sup> southern Egypt. The Persian kingdom, which was at its zenith at the time. It was divided into **one hundred and twenty-seven provinces.**<sup>b</sup> The large regions were under the control of governors, called satraps, while a subordinate governor was appointed over each state or province.



Khashayarsha I who is considered to be Ahashverosh, stone relief



King of Persia on his throne, based on stone relief, Persepolis



Map of the Persian Empire



Palace, Shushan

- 2** It happened that **in those days, when King Ahashverosh sat on the royal throne that was in Shushan the capital [habira].**<sup>b</sup> Shushan, also known as Susa, was a city in Elam, whose ruins are still extant.<sup>6</sup> Inside the city was a royal fortress, or a castle [*bira*], where both the central government and Ahashverosh's palace were located.<sup>7</sup>

- 3** **In the third year of his reign,** after he had crushed all those who stood in his way,<sup>8</sup> **he made a large public banquet for all his princes and his servants.** He did not hold his coronation celebrations immediately upon ascending the throne, possibly because he was preoccupied with settling internal disputes.<sup>9</sup> Once he had firmly established his reign, he invited **the elite of Persia and Media,**<sup>b</sup> two separate states that were partly unified, **the nobles<sup>b</sup> and princes** of the king who were appointed to be in charge **of the provinces before him,**
- 4** **with his showing the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honor of his splendid majesty for many days.** The feast,

א וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הָיָא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהַדּוֹ וְעַד-כּוֹשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים א  
ב וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא בְּשַׁבָּת וְהַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עַל כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר  
ג בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה: בְּשָׁנָה שְׁלוֹשׁ לְמַלְכוֹ עָשָׂה מִשְׁתָּה לְכָל-שָׂדֵי וְעַבְדָּיו חֵיל ו  
ד פָּרֶס וּמְדֵי הַפָּרְתִּימִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינּוֹת לִפְנָיו: בָּהֲרָאתוֹ אֶת-עֶשֶׂר כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ

## BACKGROUND

1:1 | **From India to Kush:** The conquests of Darius, the first king of Persia, also known as Darius the Great (550–486 BCE), stretched from the banks of the Indus in the east to the kingdom of Ethiopia-Nubia in the south, and Aswan in Egypt. He even conquered parts of Greece and the Balkans.

**One hundred and twenty-seven provinces:** The Persian Empire was divided into provinces, each headed by a satrap [*ahashdarpan*]. In old Persian the word *ahashdarpan* means a shield of the kingdom (see 3:12). External sources indicate that the number of provinces established by the Persian government were fewer than stated here, but such provinces were occasionally split into smaller states ruled by subordinate governors. When the internal division into smaller units is taken into account, they might indeed add up to 127 provinces. The central government

was not heavy-handed and, although loyalty and the payment of taxes were enforced, the king did not seek to oppress the many nations that were subjugated to his rule.

1:2 | **Shushan the capital:** In old Persian this city was called Susa; Susa in Greek and Latin, and Sush in modern Persian. It was the oldest and most important city of the Proto-Elamite kingdom in southwest Persia, located on the banks of the Shavur River, at the foot of the Zagros Mountains. During the reign of Darius I, Shushan was the political and administrative capital of Persia, and one of its four capital cities, together with Persepolis, Ecbatana, and Babylon. Cambyses II (died 521 BCE), the son of Cyrus II who is also known as Cyrus the Great, established Shushan as his capital. However the city lost its prominence after the Alexandrian conquests at the end of the fourth century BCE.

1:3 | **Persia and Media:** Media was an ancient kingdom in the northeast of Persia, south of the Caspian Sea. From the ninth century BCE it was involved in unrelenting conflicts with Assyria. It was only after enacting a pact with Babylon, toward the end of the seventh century, that the combined might of the two nations defeated Assyria. In 550 BCE, Cyrus the Great conquered Media and unified it with Persia. Some attribute the difference in the order of the two names, “Persia and Media” or “Media and Persia” (e.g., 10:2; Daniel 5:28, 6:9), to the change of kings from Persian to Median, and vice versa, while others claim that these differences reflect the balance of power between the two states.

**The nobles [*partemim*]:** From the Old Persian *partema*, meaning the first, those that are closest to the king.

## DISCUSSION

1:1 | **Ahashverosh:** Since the Persian name of the king was not Ahashverosh, it is difficult to identify this figure. However, it is likely that he is the king known in Greek literature as Xerxes I, or *Khshyarsha* in Persian. Much of the information about Xerxes I comes from Greek historians,

who documented the wars their people fought against the Persians. Their accounts indicate that Xerxes I ascended the throne after the Persian kingdom had suffered from civil wars, conspiracies, and betrayals. This may explain why Ahashverosh undertook actions related in

this book that could be interpreted as paranoid. Even when the king was sitting “on the throne of his kingdom” (verse 2), nothing could be taken for granted.

which was designed to publicly display the king's riches and might, lasted **one hundred and eighty days**.



Persian soldiers (in straight hats) and Medes (in rounded hats) relief, Persepolis, sixth century BCE

- 5 **Upon the completion of those days**, during which a banquet was held for people who came from afar, **the king made a banquet for all the people who were present in Shushan the capital, from great to small, seven days**. He may have treated them to this feast in an attempt to win the trust of the city's residents, many of whom were government officials.<sup>10</sup> This banquet took place **in the court of the garden of the king's house**,<sup>b</sup> a courtyard near a garden or orchard, alongside a palace. This was probably not the king's main palace but a smaller royal estate that belonged to him.<sup>11</sup>



Plan of the ancient palace, Shushan

- 6 The place was decorated with expensive fabrics: **White**,<sup>b</sup> **green** [*karpas*],<sup>b</sup> types of fabrics or colors, **and sky-blue fabrics**, colored with an expensive dye; all **bound with cords of fine white linen**<sup>b</sup> and **purple wool**.<sup>b</sup> All these fabrics and cords were spread **on silver rods**<sup>b</sup> and **marble pillars**;<sup>b</sup> and the **couches** were of **gold and silver**, on a **floor of alabaster, marble, mother-of-pearl, and onyx**,<sup>b</sup> rare and expensive precious stones.<sup>12</sup>



Decorated tile, palace of the kings of Persia, Persepolis, fifth century BCE



Mother-of-pearl

- 7 **Serving drink in vessels of gold**, as befitted a royal feast, **and vessels of diverse kinds**; the guests were offered vessels of various shapes and colors, in accordance with their status and needs. **And abundant royal wine**, which was provided at the king's expense, was **in accordance with the king's bounty**, freely and without concern for the cost.



Excavated vessels, Shushan

- 8 **The drinking was as customary**, following the accepted rules of etiquette, and **without constraint**. Since the king wanted the people to feel part of the royal feast, they were free to drink as they pleased. **For so did the king establish, command**,<sup>13</sup> **with all the palace officials, to act in accordance with the wishes**

וְאֶת־יָקָר תִּפְאֶרֶת גְּדוֹלָתוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים שְׁמוֹנִים וּמֵאָת יוֹם: וּבִמְלוֹאֹת הַיָּמִים  
הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ לְכָל־הָעַם הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשַׁן הַבִּירָה לְמַגְדוֹל וְעַד־קֶטָן  
מִשֶּׁתֶּה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים בַּחֲצָר גֶּנֶת בֵּיתֵן הַמֶּלֶךְ: חֹדֶר וּפְרָפֶס וּתְזִלָּת אָחוֹז בַּחֲבִלֵי־  
בוֹץ וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל־גִּלְלֵי כֶסֶף וְעִמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִטּוֹת וְזָהָב וְכֶסֶף עַל רִצְפַת בַּהֲטָוֶשֶׁשׁ  
וְדָר וְסֹחָרֶת: וְהַשְׁקוֹת בַּבִּלִּי זָהָב וְכֶלִים מַפִּלִּים שׁוֹנִים וְיִין מַלְכוּת רַב פִּיד הַמֶּלֶךְ:  
וְהַשְׁתִּיָּה כִדָּת אֵין אֵינֶם פִּי־כֵן וְיֶסֶד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל פֶּלֶא־רַב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּרָצוֹן

## BACKGROUND

1:5| **The court of the garden of the king's house [bitan]:** The royal palace in Shushan, which has been unearthed in archaeological excavations, was built in the western Syrian style. It included four inner garden courtyards, while its northern section contained the palace, *bitan*, a special building where invitees were greeted. The word *bitan* is from the Akkadian *bitanu*, meaning an inner part or inner structure of a palace or temple. It has been surmised that this term developed from the Persian word *apa-dana*, which denotes an entrance hall of stone construction with columns, designed for receiving an audience. Sometimes tents or canopies were erected for guests in the hall or courtyard. Between the main gate and the building there was also an outer courtyard. During the excavations of the palace at Shushan, a tablet with cuneiform script was discovered. The text on this tablet describes the glories of the palace, specifically the cost and rarity of the building materials and the expertise of its builders.

1:6| **White [hur]:** A brilliant-white woven linen fabric, from *hiver*, meaning pale. Alternatively, this is a perforated [*mehurar*] woven material, similar to netting (see Isaiah 19:9; Genesis 40:15).

**Green [karpas]:** Apparently a woven cotton fabric, which was brought to the region from India in the time of Sennacherib. It is called *karpasa* in Sanskrit and *kirpas* in Persian.

**Sky-blue [tekhelet]...purple [argaman]:** These are dyes extracted from snails that live in the Mediterranean Sea. *Tekhelet* is a shade of deep blue, extracted from the banded dye-murex,

*Murex trunculus*, while *argaman* is the general name for a dark reddish-purple or deep purple dye produced from the spiny dye-murex, *Murex brandaris*. The liquid used for preparing these dyes was extracted from a protective secretion of the snails found in minute quantities in their hypobranchial glands. Many thousands of snails were required in order to dye a fabric or item of clothing. Consequently, it was used mainly by nobles and kings.

These two dyes were used for coloring the curtains in the Tabernacle (Exodus 26, 36–38), the fabrics with which the vessels of the Tabernacle were covered during journeys (Exodus 39), as well as the garments of the High Priest (Exodus 28, 39). *Tekhelet* was also the dye used for one thread of the ritual fringes (Numbers 15:38–39). In the affluent Persian kingdom, the king would have curtains and clothes that were made entirely of *tekhelet*.

**Bound with cords of linen [butz]:** *Butz* is flax, *Linum usitatissimum*, *busu* in Akkadian (see *Targum Onkelos*, Leviticus 16). The Sages likewise called the flax of the vestments of the High Priest *butz* (Mishna *Yoma* 3:4). These cords were used to spread the fabrics above the garden of the king's palace, where the feast was held, and to tie them to the silver and marble pillars. Linen cords are particularly strong and therefore well suited for this purpose. It seems that the cords of the Tent of Meeting were also made of linen.

**Silver rods:** These are poles of silver or a shiny white metal that supported the fabric curtains, which were spread out to provide shade and decoration in the garden courtyard of the

king's palace. Similar poles are used nowadays to spread and secure curtains in tent-shaped buildings and other such structures.

**Marble pillars [shesh]:** In ancient times palace courtyards were often surrounded by pillars. These pillars needed to bear heavy loads, as they supported a ceiling or whole sections of a building, under which was a shaded area. There were various forms of such constructions: the Greek peristyles, the Roman colonnades and arcade, and the Judean exedras and porticos. *Shesh* is white marble, which was preferred for monolithic, cylindrical pillars because it can be smoothed or engraved. It is possible that some of the pillars in Shushan were not covered with a ceiling; instead fabric curtains were spread and tied over them.

**A floor of alabaster [bahat], marble, mother-of-pearl [dar], and onyx [soharet]:** The palaces and royal gardens of the kings of Persia and Media were paved with ceramic tiles or colorful stones, because these were hard and erosion-resistant. *Bahat* is probably *purfir*, a hard red stone. *Dar* is mother-of-pearl, a substance produced by mollusks as an inner shell layer and formed by the hardening of secretions, e.g., the conch pearl. Alternatively, *dar* may mean gold, from the Old Persian *darniya*. *Soharet* is probably a light-bluish precious stone, *sikhru* in Akkadian and *saharet* in ancient Egyptian. The Persians were experts in the production of colorfully coated ceramic tiles. Their floors were laid with a colorful array of white, red, blue, and black tiles, which were often finished with a metallic gold sheen.



of each and every man, rather than forcing them to conform to the norms of the king. The king chose not to invest great effort in trying to enforce conformity in his multicultural kingdom; instead, he granted its various nations the freedom to preserve their unique identity, language, and customs.

- 9 **Also Vashti<sup>d</sup> the queen made a banquet for the women**, in parallel with the great feast for the men, **in another wing of the royal palace of King Ahashverosh**. The feast for the women was held separately from that of the men to avoid the undesirable consequences of mixed festivities.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the king's wild feast, the women's banquet was a more dignified affair.
- 10 **On the seventh day of the feast, when the king was merry with wine**, he was in good spirits after much drinking. It is hard to tell whether he was actually drunk, partly due to the rather formal tone of the description here. In any case, **he, Ahashverosh, said to Mehuman, Bizzeta, Harbona, Bigta, and Avagta, Zetar, and Karkas, the seven special officials [sarisim]<sup>b</sup> who attended to King Ahashverosh**, and who were closest to him. It can be assumed that these were actual eunuchs [*sarisim*], not merely servants, as their job required them to pass between the men and the women.<sup>15</sup> In the raucous atmosphere of debauchery at the party, the king bragged about his power, wealth, wisdom, and success. He also boasted of his beautiful wife.
- 11 The king, not satisfied with mere boasts, commanded his officials **to bring Queen Vashti before the king with the royal crown**, in order **to display her beauty to all the peoples and the princes<sup>d</sup>**, as she was of fair appearance.
- 12 **Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's word<sup>b</sup>**, delivered **at the hand of the officials**. Her refusal to obey the command of the supreme leader, whose authority was absolutely unlimited, is indicative of her high status. She was unwilling to humiliate herself by parading her body before an audience. **The king**
- was very angry, and his fury burned within him**. His rage was provoked by his wife's audacity in her rejection of his demand, which was not issued privately but by an official delegation. His sensitivity to any slight to his honor was undoubtedly heightened by his inebriated state. Under the circumstances, he anticipated that his request would be obeyed immediately and in full. Perhaps Vashti also delivered messages that alluded to his drunkenness or that mocked him, further enflaming his anger.<sup>16</sup> This is possibly the meaning of the phrase in verse 17 "for the matter [*devar*] of the queen," which literally denotes a saying or message.
- 13 **The king communicated with the wise men, knowledgeable of the portents**, the astrologists, or his advisors in charge of managing the affairs of the kingdom, who knew what to do in every situation that might arise,<sup>17</sup> **for so was the practice of the king before those learned in custom and law<sup>bd</sup>** to present his problems before his legal counselors.<sup>18</sup>
- 14 The verse notes that **those advisors who were close to him**, the king, **were Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memukhan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who viewed the king's face**, who would meet with him. The king was usually secluded within his palace, and it was rare to encounter him face-to-face.<sup>19</sup> It was these advisors **who were seated first in the kingdom** as the chief ministers of his government.
- 15 The legal question under discussion was as follows: **As to the policy: What to do to Queen Vashti, in that she did not follow the utterance of King Ahashverosh at the hand of the officials?** What is to be done in light of the queen's public refusal to obey the king's command, which was delivered to her by an official delegation?
- 16 **Memukhan said before the king and the princes** that the queen's sin was even worse than might have been thought:

## BACKGROUND

1:10 | **Officials [sarisim]**: These men held positions of authority in the royal courts of Assyria and Babylon, and later in the court of the king of Persia as well. Since they came into contact with the women of the royal court, and some of them were in charge of the harem, they were castrated. Castration was also assumed to curb the ambition of courtiers, since one who has no heirs is unlikely to aspire to rule himself. In Persia, such officials could achieve the status of advisors to the king or other senior governmental posts, and they also served in military roles and as bodyguards who were personally loyal to the king. The Persian kings relied on these officials for the most sensitive roles, both to provide

personal services, such as bearing the royal goblet of wine, as well as to help restore them to the throne in the wake of a conspiracy. Most of the names of the officials recorded here are of Persian origin.

1:12 | **Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's word**: The principal queen enjoyed a lofty status in the palace of the Persian kings. She was in control of her daily routine, she was typically educated, and she was even involved in religious matters. Ahashverosh's request that Vashti be summoned in the middle of a feast was counter to common practice. In the Persian palaces only women from the harem or concubines were invited to participate in drinking parties,

whereas the queen would depart at the conclusion of the official meal. The queen had the right to choose whether or not to be seen by the king. Zoroastrian beliefs accorded the king significant religious status and he was considered the messenger of god. This is attested to in the Behistun Inscription in its description of Darius. The king was not permitted to violate these ancient enactments unless they were changed by consent.

1:13 | **For so was the practice of the king before those learned in custom and law**: Since the rights of the Persian queen were based on ancient law, the discussion about her refusal required the presence of legal scholars.



ט אִישׁ-וְאִישׁ: גַּם וְשָׂתִי הַמַּלְכָּה עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתֶּה נָשִׁים בֵּית הַמַּלְכוּת  
 י אֲשֶׁר לַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ: בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לִב־הַמֶּלֶךְ בֵּינָן אָמַר לְמַהוּמָן  
 בִּזְתָּא חֲדַבְוֹנָא בְּגָתָא וְאַבְגָּתָא וְתֵר וְכִרְפָּס שְׂבַעַת הַסְּרִיסִים הַמְּשֻׁרְתִּים אֶת־  
 יא פָּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ: לְהָבִיא אֶת־וְשָׂתִי הַמַּלְכָּה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת  
 יב לְהִרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת־יָפִיָּהּ כִּי־טוֹבַת מַרְאֵה הִיא: וְתִמְאֵן הַמַּלְכָּה  
 וְשָׂתִי לָבוֹא בְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בֵּיד הַסְּרִיסִים וּיקְצֹף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמָתוֹ בַּעֲרָה  
 יג בּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַחֲכָמִים יִדְעִי הָעֵתִים כִּי־כֵן דִּבֶּר הַמֶּלֶךְ לִפְנֵי כָל־  
 יד יִדְעִי דַת וָדִין: וְהַקֵּרֵב אֵלָיו כְּרִשְׁנָא שֶׁתֵּר אֲדַמְתָּא תְּרִישִׁישׁ מֶרֶס מְרִסְנָא מְמוּכָן  
 טו שְׂבַעַת שָׂרִי וּפָרַס וּמְדִי רָאִי פָּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַיֹּשְׁבִים רֵאשֻׁנָּה בַּמַּלְכוּת: כְּדַת מָה־  
 לַעֲשׂוֹת בַּמַּלְכָּה וְשָׂתִי עַל וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָשְׂתָה אֶת־מֵאֲמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ בֵּיד  
 טז הַסְּרִיסִים: וַיֹּאמֶר מוֹמְכָן לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים לֹא עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ

מְמוּכָן

## DISCUSSION

1:9| **Vashti:** This sounds like a Persian name (see Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*); indeed, in a collection of texts of the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism from the tenth century BCE, there are two words that are possibly the source of the name: *Vashita*, the best, and *ushiti*, the beloved. However, there is no certainty that Vashti herself was Persian. It is clear from the story that she was more than merely one of the king's many wives and concubines, and that she was well aware of her superior status. According to a tradition of the Sages, Vashti was originally a Babylonian princess (see, e.g., *Megilla* 10b). There are other instances in the Bible where a foreigner who was brought into a royal house was given a new name in the language of the kingdom (see Genesis 41:45; Daniel 1:7).

1:11| **To display her beauty to the peoples and the princes:** Although the book of Esther does not explicitly criticize this order of the lofty Persian king, who was considered a demi-god at the time, his demand to show off the queen was clearly in poor taste. All the more so if he indeed commanded, as the Sages suggest, that she enter with only the crown upon her head, but no other item of clothing, in order to expose her beauty before all (see *Megilla* 12b).

1:13| **The practice of the king before those learned in custom and law:** There is a measure of irony here: Later in the story the king alone, and apparently without any hesitation, makes decisions that will have dramatic moral and political ramifications. In this situation, by contrast, when he is drunk and angry, he assembles an

entire legal team in order to discuss the fate of his wife. His behavior is similar to that of various dictators over the course of history who sought to preserve the image of a law-abiding ruler, and who were careful that everything be documented and performed in a very formal manner.

It should be noted that Ahashverosh's consultation with his ministers is nothing more than a matter of etiquette, through which he expresses his respect for the legal establishment, as in practice, they are at his mercy: He appointed them, and he can remove them from their posts and have them executed. Therefore, his legal advisors were naturally careful to tailor their comments to fit what they assumed the king would want to hear, as ultimately the law depended upon his whim and mood at the time.

**It is not the king alone that Queen Vashti the queen has wronged**, by failing to obey his instruction; **rather, it is all the princes, and all the peoples, who are in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh**. Since she publicly rebelled against the king, her decision will have ramifications that will spread throughout the entire Persian kingdom.

- 17 For the matter of the queen will get out to all the women, rendering their husbands contemptible in their eyes.** Although the queen did not issue an explicit declaration to this effect and did not preach this type of conduct, her personal example is likely to become the norm, **in their saying**, by women who seek to copy her: **King Ahashverosh said to bring Queen Vashti before him, but she did not come**. The queen has created a dangerous precedent.
- 18 From this day onward, the princesses, the wives of the officials and nobles, of Persia and Media who have heard of the matter of the queen will recount it**, they will issue similar statements, **to all the king's princes**, and perhaps the wives of commoners will follow suit as well. Vashti's refusal will embolden these women when they quarrel with their husbands, **and through this incident there will be ample contempt and wrath**, or contempt that should arouse our anger. This is not merely a personal slight, which the king could potentially overlook; rather, the broader consequences of the queen's refusal will be severe, as her scandalous behavior, even if not repeated, is likely to serve as a model that will be imitated throughout the kingdom.
- 19 Therefore, if it pleases the king, let the royal edict be issued before him.** The decision should be formally publicized, not merely as a temporary decree; **and furthermore, let it be written in the book of the directives of Persia and Media,<sup>8</sup> not to be repealed**, as despite the king's power and position, he is considered to be bound by the laws and proclamations of the kingdom, at least technically,<sup>20</sup> **that Vashti will not come before King Ahashverosh**. Memukhan did not specify her fate; whether she is to be killed, permanently exiled, or simply deposed from her position of grace and favor before the king, and removed from any position of influence. **And it should also be decreed that the king will give her queenship**, her official status as queen, **to her counterpart who is worthier than she**. The king should dispense with her and choose a more suitable woman to replace her.
- 20 The king's edict<sup>8</sup> that he will enact will be heard throughout his entire kingdom, although it, the kingdom, is vast,**

**and therefore all the wives**, following the dissemination of the royal precedent, **will confer honor on their husbands**, and will not disobey their commands, **from great to small**.

- 21 The matter was pleasing in the eyes of the king and the princes.** Memukhan's appraisal of the fundamental problem and its potentially serious consequences was greeted with approval. In his speech Memukhan presented his solution not as a royal whim, but rather as an important precedent in the management of the country. The angry, drunken king was delighted at the opportunity to inflate the incident into an event of national importance. **And therefore the king acted in accordance with the word of Memukhan**. As noted in the introduction, the book of Esther, with its formal style, does not overtly criticize the king. However, in reading between the lines, Ahashverosh emerges as a ridiculous, easily manipulated figure.
- 22 He, Ahashverosh, sent scrolls** containing the official order **to all the provinces of the king, to each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language: Every man shall be ruler in his house**. The king did not mention Vashti by name, but simply declared that each man should be in charge of his house, **and that he should speak the language of his people**. People of different nationalities in his kingdom had intermarried, thereby mixing their languages.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the king took this opportunity to issue a decree that from this point forward the language of the husband should be the one spoken by all members of his household.<sup>22</sup>



"To each and every province in its script."

Trilingual inscription of Xerxes I, Van Fortress, Turkey, 485–465 BCE

עֹתָהּ וּשְׁתֵּי הַמְּלָכָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עָלִי הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל־כָּל־הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשִׁירֹשׁ: כִּי־יֵצֵא דְבַר־הַמְּלָכָה עַל־כָּל־הַנָּשִׁים לְהַבְזֹת בְּעֲלֵיהֶן  
 בְּעִינֵיהֶן בְּאִמְרוֹם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשִׁירֹשׁ אֲמַר לְהַבִּיא אֶת־וּשְׁתֵּי הַמְּלָכָה לִפְנֵי  
 וְלֹא־בָאָה: וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תִּאֲמַרְנָה ׀ שָׂרוֹת פָּרֶס־וּמְדֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבַר  
 הַמְּלָכָה לְכָל־שָׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְכָדִי בִּזְיוֹן וְקָצֶר: אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יֵצֵא דְבַר־  
 מַלְכוּת מִלִּפְנֵי וַיִּפְתַּח בְּדַתִּי פָּרֶס־וּמְדֵי וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תָבֹא וּשְׁתֵּי  
 לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשִׁירֹשׁ וּמַלְכוּתָהּ יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ לְרַעְיוֹתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה: וְנִשְׁמַע  
 פֶּתַח הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה בְּכָל־מַלְכוּתוֹ כִּי רַבָּה הִיא וְכָל־הַנָּשִׁים יִתְּנוּ יָקָר  
 לְבַעֲלֵיהֶן לְמַגְדֹּל וְעַד־קֶטֶן: וַיֵּטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים וַיַּעַשׂ  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ כַּדְּבַר מִמּוֹכֵן: וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־מְדִינָהּ וּמְדִינָהּ  
 כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְאֶל־עַם וְעַם כָּל־שׁוֹנוֹ לְהִיזֹת כָּל־אִישׁ שִׁדְרָה בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמִדְּבַר כָּל־שׁוֹן

## BACKGROUND

1:19 | **And let it be written in the directives of [datei] Persia and Media:** Ancient Persian law was called *data*. The Persians carefully preserved their books of laws, including the occasional addition. These laws were written in cuneiform on tablets of clay and silt, as well as on parchment. Archives have been discovered in the most fortified sections of the palace walls in Persepolis. The phenomenon of preserving

a nation's laws in the structure of a building is related in the book of Kings as well, which recounts that in the days of King Yoshiyahu, a Torah scroll was found during repairs to the Temple (II Kings 22:8–23:4). This discovery of a forgotten body of law had a profound practical effect on the society that found it generations after it had been put away, as it led to far-reaching religious reform throughout the country. A

comparable discovery during the reign of Darius is recounted in the book of Ezra (5:17–6:5).

1:20 | **Edict [pitgam]:** In Old Persian, *pratigama* denotes something which goes out to meet something else. In this instance, this is a message from the king to the people. This is the source for the Aramaic term *pitgama*, meaning a publicized command or decree.

## Esther Is Crowned Queen

ESTHER 2:1–20

This section starts by relating the consequences of the incident described in the previous section, as a search is undertaken to find a queen to replace Vashti. The character of Esther is then introduced, and these two narrative strands intertwine into a single plotline.

- 2 **1 After these matters, when the fury of king Ahashverosh had abated and he had calmed down, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.** Since it is not explicitly stated that she was executed, and imposition of the death penalty for a wife of the nobility was rare, except for the most serious crimes, it can be assumed that she was not put to death. Instead, it is likely that Vashti had been exiled, and Ahashverosh missed her.<sup>23</sup>
- 2 The king's ministers did not merely carry out his commands; they also paid attention to his moods and tried to anticipate his wishes. **The king's lads, his attendants, said:** We can find a replacement for Vashti. **Let there be sought for the king virgin young women of fair appearance,** as befitting the honor of a king.
- 3 And in keeping with the exalted status of the king, this was to be a large, organized, and respectable project, ensuring that only suitable candidates would be sent: **Have the king appoint officials in all the provinces of his kingdom** to perform an initial selection, **and they will gather every virgin young woman to Shushan the capital, to the harem, to the custody of Hegai, the king's official, guardian of the women** in the palace; **and to complement and enhance their natural beauty, their perfumes and cosmetics will be provided.**
- 4 **The young woman who will be pleasing in the eyes of the king** at the end of this process **will be crowned queen in place of Vashti. The proposal was pleasing in the eyes of the king and he did so.**
- 5 **There was a Jewish [yehudi] man,**<sup>8</sup> from the land of Judah,<sup>24</sup> the small, independent province which the Persians called Yehud, who lived in Shushan the capital, and his name was Mordekhai, son of Ya'ir, son of Shimi, son of Kish, a Benjamite,<sup>d</sup> from the tribe of Benjamin. Although he came from the land of Judah, he was from the tribe of Benjamin,
- 6 **who had been exiled from Jerusalem** in his youth, together with the first exile that was exiled with Yekhonya king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon exiled.
- 7 **He was rearing Hadasa as her guardian, she was Esther.**<sup>8</sup> Hadasa was her Hebrew name, while Esther was her Persian or Babylonian name. She was **his uncle's daughter** and was much younger than him. He had become her guardian **as she had no father or mother. The young woman was of fine form and fair appearance, and with the death of her father and her mother, Mordekhai had adopted her as his own daughter.**
- 8 **It was when the edict of the king and his new directive was heard, and when there was the gathering of many young women to Shushan the capital, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace, to the custody of Hegai, guardian of the women.** Most of the young women were presumably delighted to come from their lands to the capital city



Yehud

### DISCUSSION

2:5 | **A Jewish man...a Benjamite:** The tribes of Judah and Benjamin inhabited adjacent areas of the Land of Israel. They were both exiled to Babylon, and later returned to the Land of Israel together (see Nehemiah 11:7, 25–36). Mordekhai's lineage, specified in this verse,

indicates that he was descended from the royal line of King Saul (see *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 48; *Megilla* 16a). This is a significant detail, as in the culture of Persia and Media it was extremely rare to appoint a commoner as queen, as the fifth century Greek historian Herodotus explains (see

*The Histories* II:84). Consequently, it appears that all the candidates, even if they were not Persian, were required to have some sort of social status. Esther had the reputation of being a woman of noble lineage even though her precise origin remained secret.

ב א עֲמֹ: אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כִּשְׁךָ חֶמֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֹׁרוּשׁ זָכַר אֶת־  
 ב וּשְׁתִּי וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָהּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁדָּתָיו  
 ג יִבְקְשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נַעֲרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מְדָאָה: וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת  
 מַלְכוּתוֹ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נַעֲרֵה־בְּתוּלָה טוֹבֹת מְדָאָה אֶל־שׁוֹשֶׁן הַבֵּירָה אֶל־  
 ד בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים אֶל־יַד הַגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים וְנֹתֵן תַּמְדָּקִיָּהֶן: וְהַנַּעֲרָה  
 אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ תַּחַת וּשְׁתִּי וַיִּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ  
 ה כֵּן: אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוֹשֶׁן הַבֵּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מַרְדֳּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי ב  
 ו בֶּן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי: אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עַם־הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה  
 ז מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל: וַיְהִי אֲמֵן אֶת־הַדָּפָה הַיָּא אֶסְתֵּר  
 בִּתְדֻדּוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנַּעֲרָה יָפֹת־תֵּאֵר וְטוֹבֹת מְדָאָה וּבְמֹת אֲבִיהָ  
 ח וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחָהּ מַרְדֳּכָי לֹא לְבַת: וַיְהִי בַּהֲשָׁמַע דְּבַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וּדְתוֹ וּבַהֲקַבֵּץ נַעֲרוֹת  
 רְבוֹת אֶל־שׁוֹשֶׁן הַבֵּירָה אֶל־יַד הַגָּי וּתְלַקַּח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־יַד הַגָּי

#### BACKGROUND

2:5 | **A Jewish man:** This refers to one who came from the land of Judah, or Persian province of Yehud. The province of Yehud was established at the end of the fifth century BCE, after Cyrus the Great's famous edict allowing the Jewish exiles in Babylonia to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. This was the smallest of all the provinces in the Persian Empire, covering an area of only 1600 sq km. It was headed by a satrap, appointed from the ranks of the returning exiles. The province was divided into

administrative areas, centered around five cities: Jerusalem; Beit HaKerem, possibly present-day Bethlehem; Mitzpa, in the region of Benjamin; Beit Zur, in present-day Gush Etzion; and Ke'ila, near present-day Beit Guvrin (see Nehemiah 3).

2:7 | **Esther:** Esther is a Persian name, from *astra*, which means a star in Indo-European languages (see *Megilla* 13a), perhaps referring to the planet Venus (see *Targum*, 10:13), whereas her Hebrew name was Hadasa, from *hadas* meaning myrtle. It should be noted that the

flowers of the myrtle, with their many stamens, resemble ancient drawings of stars. Some suggest that the name Esther is derived from that of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, while the name Mordekhai is based on the Babylonian god Marduk. In this context, it is interesting to note that documents from ancient Shushan, dating back to the reign of Xerxes I, who died in 465 BCE and whom some identify with Ahashverosh, mention a royal treasurer called Marduka.



and meet the king. They were eager to be selected by him, as they knew that the chosen woman would become the queen of the empire. Esther, however, was taken against her will.<sup>25</sup>

- 9 **The young woman was pleasing in his eyes.** Hegai, who was in charge of the women of the royal household, and was familiar with the king's tastes, considered Esther a serious candidate for the role of queen.<sup>26</sup> **She exhibited grace before him.** In addition to her beauty, he became aware of her unique personal charms and her endearing personality, **and** therefore he took special care of her needs: **He hastened to provide her** with a supply of **cosmetics, and her portions** of food to which she was entitled, **and the seven young women it was requisite to provide her from the king's palace.** It was unbecoming for a candidate for queen of Persia to venture forth by herself, and therefore she was given seven maidservants. **And** he elevated her status, as **he promoted her and her young women to the best place of the harem.**
- 10 Throughout this entire period **Esther did not disclose her people or her birthplace.** She had hidden her ethnic origin and her place of birth, **because Mordekhai commanded her that she should not disclose it,**<sup>d</sup> her identity. Even after she left his house, and when she later rose to a position of greatness, she remained obedient to Mordekhai.
- 11 **On each and every day, Mordekhai would walk before the courtyard of the harem, to know Esther's well-being, and what would be done with her.** As her guardian, Mordekhai had a personal affection for Esther and was concerned for her welfare. Therefore he frequently made inquiries as to her well-being.
- 12 The young women's preparation for their encounter with the king followed a clearly defined process: **When each and every maiden's turn arrived to come to King Ahashverosh, at the end of her having twelve months according to the custom of the women,** when she had been readied for the king by completing the standard beauty regimen as instructed, a process lasting twelve months, **for so were prescribed the days for their treatment: Six months** she was anointed **with myrrh oil,** which was designed, among other purposes, to remove hair



Ivory perfume bottle,  
Persepolis

- from her body,<sup>27</sup> **and six months with various perfumes, and with women's cosmetics;**
- 13 **and with that the young woman would come to the king,** after she had completed all of the treatments. One of the rules of her arrival was that **whatever she would say** or request in order to enhance her beauty **would be given to her to come with her from the harem to the king's palace.** She was entitled to ask for a special ornament, or escort, or even an entire retinue, and her every wish would be granted.
- 14 **She would come in the evening** to the king and stay the night, **and return in the morning to the second harem,<sup>d</sup> to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's official, guardian of the concubines.**<sup>28</sup> She would not go back to the compound where the candidates were being groomed, but rather to the harem of the concubines, where all the young women went after they had been with the king.<sup>29</sup> **She would not come to the king anymore, unless the king desired her, and she was called by name.** If the king remembered her, he would instruct his minister to call her again, and if not, she would remain with the other concubines in the harem.
- 15 **With the arrival of the turn of Esther, daughter of Avihayil, who had been the uncle of Mordekhai, who had taken her as a daughter for him, to come to the king, she did not request anything except that which Hegai, the king's official, guardian of the women, said.** The other young women made an effort to impress the king, whereas Esther refrained from taking such measures on her own initiative and merely accepted the recommendations of the expert, Hegai. **And Esther found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her.**
- 16 **Esther was taken to King Ahashverosh to his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign.** This was four years after Ahashverosh had dismissed Vashti. During this period the young women had been gathered and had undergone meticulous preparation before presentation to the king.
- 17 **The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and grace in his eyes more than all the virgins. He placed the royal crown on her head, and he crowned her queen in place of Vashti.** It is surprising that in Persia and Media a woman who was not of royal blood would be selected as queen. As stated above,<sup>30</sup> it seems likely that although Esther concealed her origins, she was believed to come from a noble family.
- 18 **The king made a great banquet for all his princes and his servants, the banquet of Esther.** He did not suffice with a private celebration to mark the appointment of the new queen, but rather he issued an announcement to all the nations. Since

ט שִׁמְרֵם הַנָּשִׁים: וְהִיטֵב הַנֶּעֱרָה בְּעֵינָיו וַתֵּשֶׂא חֶסֶד לִפְנֵי וַיְבַהֵל אֶת־מְרוּקִיָּה  
וְאֶת־מְנוּתָה לַתֵּת לָהּ וְאֵת שִׁבְעַת הַנְּעוּרוֹת הָרְאיוֹת לַתֵּת־לָהּ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ  
י וַיִּשְׁנָה וְאֶת־נְעוּרוֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים: לֹא־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־עַמָּהּ וְאֶת־  
יא מוֹלַדְתָּהּ כִּי מְרֹדְכָי צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגִּיד: וּבְכָל־יוֹם וַיּוֹם מְרֹדְכָי מִתְּהַלֵּךְ  
יב לִפְנֵי חֲצַר בֵּית־הַנָּשִׁים לְדַעַת אֶת־שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה בָּהּ: וּבְהִגִּיעַ תֹּרֶם  
נֶעֱרָה וְנִעְרָה לָבוֹא | אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוּשׁ מִקֵּץ הַיּוֹת לָהּ בְּדַת הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנַיִם  
עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ כִּי בָן יִמְלֹא וַיְמִי מְרוּקִיָּהן שָׁשָׂה חֳדָשִׁים בְּשֶׁמֶן הַמֹּר וְשִׁשָּׁה חֳדָשִׁים  
יג בְּבִשְׂמִים וּבִתְמָרוּקֵי הַנָּשִׁים: וּבָזָה הַנֶּעֱרָה בָּאָה אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר  
יד יִנָּתֵן לָהּ לָבוֹא עִמָּהּ מִבֵּית הַנָּשִׁים עַד־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ: בָּעֶרְב | הִיא בָּאָה וּבִבְקָר  
הִיא שָׁבָה אֶל־בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנֵי אֶל־יָד שֶׁעָשְׂגוּ סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שִׁמְרֵם הַפִּילָגְשִׁים  
טו לֹא־תָבוֹא עוֹד אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי אִם־חֶפְצָן בָּהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִקְרָאָה בְּשֵׁם: וּבְהִגִּיעַ תֹּרֶם  
אֶסְתֵּר בִּתְּאֻבִּיתָיִל | דָּד מְרֹדְכָי אֲשֶׁר לָקַח־לּוּ לְבַת לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא בִקְשָׁה  
דָּבָר כִּי אִם אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הִגִּי סָרִיס־הַמֶּלֶךְ שִׁמְרֵם הַנָּשִׁים וְתִהְיֶי אֶסְתֵּר נִשְׂאֵת  
טז חֲזַן בְּעֵינָי כָּל־רְאִיָּה: וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוּשׁ אֶל־בֵּית מַלְכוּתוֹ  
יז בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ טֵבֶת בְּשַׁנַּת־שִׁבְעַת לְמַלְכוּתוֹ: וַיֶּאֱהָב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־  
אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל־הַנָּשִׁים וַתֵּשֶׂא־חֵן וַחֶסֶד לִפְנֵי מִכָּל־הַבְּתוּלוֹת וַיִּשֶׂם כְּתֹר־מַלְכוּת  
יח בְּרֹאשָׁהּ וַיְמַלִּכָהּ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי: וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁתֵּה גָדוֹל לְכָל־שָׂרָיו וְעַבְדָּיו

## DISCUSSION

2:10 | **Because Mordekhai commanded her that she should not disclose it:** The text does not explain Mordekhai's motives, but presumably he thought that Esther could potentially be a secret agent. It can be safely assumed that Mordekhai initially preferred her to marry an upstanding Jewish man, but when she was forcibly taken to the house of the king, he quickly adapted to the new situation (see Rashi; Rav Yosef Kara). As one who held a position in the royal court, Mordekhai wanted to keep Esther's

identity secret for an opportune moment, although of course he did not know how necessary it would be to do so. He realized that it was in his interests to have a sleeper agent in the palace, who would be ready to act at a time of need.

2:14 | **To the second harem:** After a woman has spent the night with the king, she is considered his property, and she is therefore transferred to a special residence for his concubines. It would

be disrespectful to the monarch if she were to be given to another man (Ibn Ezra). An example of this in the Bible concerns Avishag the Shunamite, King David's companion, whom his son Adoniyahu requested from King Solomon as a wife for himself after David's death. It can be inferred from Solomon's incensed reaction that a woman who has shared the king's bed was forbidden to any other man, including a member of the royal family (I Kings 1:1–4, 2:13–25; see commentary on II Samuel 20:3).



everyone had heard about the removal of Vashti, the king decided to declare publicly that her replacement had been found. **He awarded an abatement for the provinces;** he lowered the taxes so that his subjects would be satisfied and participate in his joy. **And furthermore, he gave gifts in accordance with the king's bounty,** in order to improve the general welfare of his subjects and encourage their devotion.

- 19 With the gathering of the virgins a second time;** it seems that some of the candidates who had been garnered had not yet had been presented to the king, and therefore the process continued in some form even after Esther had been chosen;<sup>31</sup> **Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate,**<sup>32</sup> that is, he held a respectable position in the royal court, from which he was able to follow the events at the palace.<sup>32</sup>
- 20** It had been some time since she had entered the house of the king, and still **Esther did not disclose her birthplace or her**

**people as Mordekhai had commanded her; Esther would perform the directive of Mordekhai, as it was when she was reared by him,** in her childhood.



Gates of the palace of the kings of Persia, Persepolis, fifth century BCE

## Discovery of an Assassination Plot against the King

ESTHER 2:21–23

At this stage, an apparently random incident of marginal importance is presented. However, it later becomes clear how this event is a pivotal link in the chain of events.

- 21 In those days, as Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate, two of the king's officials, Bigtan and Teresh, among the doorkeepers, became angry, and sought to do violence to King Ahashverosh,** to assassinate him. The royal court in Persia was rife with intrigue, plots, and conspiracies at that time. Various individuals laid claim to the throne. It is hard to know which of the Persian kings ruled legally, by virtue of their lineage, and which ascended to power by means of the military forces with which they surrounded themselves.
- 22 The matter,** the plot that was being hatched, **became known to Mordekhai.** One suggestion is that Mordekhai discovered the plot because the men conversed in a language they thought no one knew, but which Mordekhai could understand.<sup>33</sup> **And he,** Mordekhai, **told Queen Esther** about it, for her to pass the

message on to Ahashverosh, since Mordekhai himself did not have direct contact with the king, as he was a mere official or representative of the Jews in the royal court. **And Esther reported the rebellion to the king in the name of Mordekhai,** with whom the king was unfamiliar.

- 23 The matter was investigated, and it was revealed** that Bigtan and Teresh were indeed involved in the plot, **and the two of them were hanged on a gibbet.**<sup>34</sup> It seems that hanging was the preferred method of execution by the Persian monarchy, as it served to display publicly the offenders' dishonorable end. **It,** the two men's attempt to assassinate King Ahashverosh on that date, as well as how he was saved, **was recorded in the book of the chronicles before the king.**

## DISCUSSION

2:19 | **Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate:** The name Mordekhai appears in the list of those who initially immigrated to the Land of

Israel from Babylonia (see Ezra 2:2; *Megilla* 16b). It is possible that after he arrived in the Land of Israel, Mordekhai was sent back to Shushan to

serve in a kind of diplomatic role, representing the interests of the province of Judah in the king's court.

יט אֶת־מִשְׁתֵּה אֶסְתֵּר וְהִנֵּחָהּ לַמְּדִינוֹת עֲשֵׂה וַיִּתֵּן מִשָּׂאת כִּיד הַמֶּלֶךְ: וּבִהְקֵבֵן  
 כ פְּתוּלוֹת שְׁנֵית וּמַרְדֳּכָי יֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ: אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מַגֵּדַת מוֹלְדֶתָהּ וְאֶת־  
 עַמָּהּ כֹּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מַרְדֳּכָי וְאֶת־מֵאֲמַר מַרְדֳּכָי אֶסְתֵּר עֲשֵׂה כֹאֲשֶׁר הִיתָה  
 כא בְּאִמְנָה אֹתוֹ: בְּיָמִים הָהֵם וּמַרְדֳּכָי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ קִצֹּף  
 בְּגִתָּן וְתָרַשׁ שְׁנֵי־סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁמֵרֵי הַפֶּחַ וּבִקְשׁוּ לִשְׁלַח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּר־שׁ:  
 כב וַיִּוֹדַע הַדָּבָר לְמַרְדֳּכָי וַיֵּגֵד לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְהִיא־אָמַר אֶסְתֵּר לַמֶּלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם מַרְדֳּכָי:  
 כג וּבִקֵּשׁ הַדָּבָר וַיִּמָּצֵא וַיִּתְּלוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם עַל־עֵץ וַיִּפְתָּב בְּסֶפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לִפְנֵי

## BACKGROUND

2:19 | **The king's gate:** A special structure for the king's gate appears in the floor plans of the palace in Shushan, which have been preserved (see image alongside 1:5). Those who sought the king or his counselors were permitted to approach no further than the gatehouse, where they would wait to be received or to hear an answer to their request.

2:23 | **And the two of them were hanged on a gibbet:** Researchers maintain that the practice of public hanging as a method of execution originated in ancient Persia. This manner of killing is a simple procedure that does not require an expert hangman and does not involve the actual shedding of blood. However, some claim that the hanging referred to in the book of

Esther is actually impalement, in which a sharp wood pole is inserted into the chest or between the legs of the condemned until it emerges on the other side of the body. The Persians inherited this method of execution from the Assyrians and Babylonians.

## Haman and the Plot to Destroy the Jews

ESTHER 3:1–15

In this section Mordekhai refuses to accept the authority of Haman, the most distinguished minister in Persia. Haman, affronted at this personal slight, convinces the king to permit the systematic annihilation of all of Mordekhai's nation, the Jews, in his empire.

- 3** **1** After these matters, the appointment of Esther and the foiled plot of Bigtan and Teresh, **King Ahashverosh promoted** from among his ministers **Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite**,<sup>BD</sup> **and he elevated him**, raised his status, **and he placed his seat above all the princes who were with him**. Advancing one particular minister to the status of a close confidant of the king was not unheard of, as attested in other documents of the period.<sup>34</sup>
- 2** **All the king's servants**, his ministers and attendants, **who were at the king's gate, were bowing and prostrating themselves to Haman**, for so had the king commanded concerning him; **but Mordekhai would not bow and would not prostrate himself**,<sup>D</sup> for an undetermined reason.<sup>35</sup>
- 3** **The king's servants, who were at the king's gate, said to Mordekhai: Why are you violating the king's commandment** that all must bow before Haman?
- 4** **It was, when they spoke to him day after day, and he did not listen to them, that they told this to Haman**. Perhaps Haman had not noticed Mordekhai's refusal up to that point, as a large crowd would pass before him, all bowing,<sup>36</sup> but those present, seeking to stir up trouble, informed Haman in order to **see whether Mordekhai's words would prevail**, whether he would remain firm in his decision not to bow to Haman, **for he had told them that he was a Jew** and therefore he would not prostrate himself to Haman.<sup>37</sup>
- 5** **Haman too saw that Mordekhai was not bowing and not prostrating himself to him, and Haman was filled with fury** over what he considered a public insult.
- 6** **Haman could have punished Mordekhai for his behavior, or tried to do away with him, but he disdained to do violence to Mordekhai alone**; merely harming Mordekhai himself was not enough for him, **for he had been told of Mordekhai's people**. This indicates that in those times there was no external sign that made it easy to differentiate between Jews and non-Jews.

**Haman sought to destroy all the Jews<sup>D</sup> in the entire kingdom of Ahashverosh, the people of Mordekhai**. Despite Haman's many duties, as he was a senior minister of a massive empire, he developed an obsession with the Jews, because they were Mordekhai's nation, and he sought a way to eliminate them all.

- 7** **Haman was determined to destroy all the Jews, and he plotted how to bring this idea to fruition. In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, during the twelfth year of King Ahashverosh, he had cast a pur**, a Persian word,<sup>38</sup> **which is the lot [goral]** in Hebrew. This was a means of divination or amusement, through which one would determine the best course of action to take and the ideal time to take it.<sup>39</sup> The lot was cast **before Haman**. Kings in ancient times often sought signs of future events, for good or evil.<sup>40</sup> Haman wanted to find the right date, and to that end he made calculations and cast lots **for each day and for each month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar**. He came to the conclusion that the best time to bring about the downfall of the Jews was the month of Adar, presumably in the upcoming year.
- 8** **Since Haman had no independent authority, he needed to incite Ahashverosh to approve his initiative. Haman said to King Ahashverosh: There is one people<sup>D</sup> that is scattered and dispersed<sup>B</sup> among the peoples in all the provinces of your**



The lot of Yahalu, who was the administrator of the royal household of Shalmaneser III, Assyria, ninth century BCE

### BACKGROUND

3:1 | **Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite**: It is possible that the name Haman is derived from the name of the chief Elamite God, Humman. Both Haman's name and that of his father start with the same letters, and these initial sounds could be related to *haoma*, the Persian name for consecrated food and drink. *Datha*, the second

part of Haman's father's name, means giving or serving in Persian. Persian mythology also describes a sacred bird called *homa* or *huma*, whose supposed characteristics were similar to those of the phoenix, specifically long life and resistance to fire. A child might be called by this name as a form of a blessing. There is also

mention in Persian manuscripts of a Persian officer called Humadat, while the name Aggaga exists in the Elamite language. Haman's family may have taken on Elamite names in order to hide their foreign roots.

ג א הַמֶּלֶךְ: אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה גָּדַל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשֶׁוֹרֶשׁ אֶת־הַמֶּן  
בֶּן־הַמִּדְּתָא הָאֲגָגִי וַיִּנְשְׂאֵהוּ וַיֵּשֶׁם אֶת־כִּסְאוֹ מֵעַל כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אָתּוֹ:  
ב וְכָל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ כָּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהַמֶּן כִּי־כֵן צִוָּה־  
ג לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמִרְדֵּכָי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה: וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר  
ד הַמֶּלֶךְ לְמִרְדֵּכָי מִדּוֹעַ אֲתָה עוֹבֵר אֶת מִצְוַת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיְהִי בֹאמְרָם אֵלָיו יוֹם וַיּוֹם  
וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵיהֶם וַיֵּגִידוּ לְהַמֶּן לְרָאוֹת הֵיעַמְדוּ דְּבָרֵי מִרְדֵּכָי כִּי־הֵגִיד לָהֶם  
ה אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יְהוּדִי: וַיֵּדָא הַמֶּן כִּי־אֵין מִרְדֵּכָי כָּרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא הַמֶּן חֲמָה:  
ו וַיְבֹז בְּעֵינָיו לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמִרְדֵּכָי לְבַדּוֹ כִּי־הֵגִידוּ לוֹ אֶת־עַם מִרְדֵּכָי וּבִקֵּשׁ הַמֶּן  
ז לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְלָכוֹת אֶחָשֶׁוֹרֶשׁ עִם מִרְדֵּכָי: בַּחֲדָשׁ  
ח הָרֵאשׁוֹן הוּא־חֲדָשׁ נִסָּן בִּשְׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרִיה לְמֶלֶךְ אֶחָשֶׁוֹרֶשׁ הָפִיל פּוֹר  
הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הַמֶּן מִיּוֹם וּלְיוֹם וּמִחֲדָשׁ לְחֲדָשׁ שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר הוּא־חֲדָשׁ  
אָדָר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן לְמֶלֶךְ אֶחָשֶׁוֹרֶשׁ יֵשֶׁנּוּ עַם־אֶחָד מִפּוֹר וּמִפּוֹרֵד ג

## DISCUSSION

3:1 | **The Agagite:** This probably means that he was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king (see the Aramaic targumim; *Masekhet Soferim* 13; *Aggadat Esther* 3). The Agag mentioned in the Bible lived during the period of Saul (see I Samuel 15:8–9). It is possible, however, that Agag was the standard royal name for all kings of the Amalekites (see Rashbam, and Ramban, Numbers 24:7; see also Jerusalem Talmud, *Yevamot* 2:6). Haman might have changed his original Amalekite name to one that sounded more Persian.

3:2 | **But Mordechai would not bow and would not prostrate himself:** It would seem that Mordechai's refusal to bow before Haman was not motivated by religious concerns. After all, it is related about other righteous figures that they bowed down and prostrated themselves before ministers and kings, and this was not considered a sin (see Genesis 42:6; Exodus 18:7; I Samuel 24:8; I Kings 1:23). Perhaps Mordechai, who was from Judean nobility, considered the idea of

bowing down to Haman an act of humiliation for all Jews (see also *Yalkut Shimoni* 954). It is also possible that his refusal to lower himself before Haman was due to the personal enmity between the men. According to tradition, they had a prior acquaintance, and Mordechai despised Haman personally (see *Megillat Setarim*; *Megilla* 15a–16a). Some say that he refused to bow down because Haman presented himself as a god, or because he hung an idol from his clothing (see Ibn Ezra; Ralbag; *Megilla* 10b, 19a; *Sanhedrin* 61b).

3:6 | **Haman sought to destroy all the Jews:** This phenomenon of a personal hatred that swells until it is directed at an entire people is unusual and puzzling. The background of this enmity is related to Haman's Amalekite roots. Although not a large nation, Amalek hated the nation of Israel from the beginning of its history as a people (see Exodus 17:8–16). Consequently, Haman's confrontation with Mordechai was not the only reason for his extreme reaction;

it awakened a primal enmity that he and his people had nurtured against Israel from time immemorial.

3:8 | **There is one people:** The fact that Haman had to inform Ahashverosh about the Jews indicates that the king knew very little about them. Although the Jews were his subjects, and they even had a small state of their own in the area surrounding Jerusalem, it is doubtful whether Ahashverosh had ever thought about this tiny nation. The 127 provinces over which he reigned, some of which were perhaps large and strong, contained many peoples and tribes. Even if Ahashverosh had been a conscientious and organized ruler, he would not have been intimately familiar with the Jewish people. However, it is known that he accepted letters of accusation in which the Samaritans libeled the Jews (see Ezra 4:6), and therefore it is likely that Haman's comments evoked his existing negative associations, making him receptive to the idea of their destruction.

kingdom, as they do not even fill an entire country;<sup>41</sup> and their laws, their practices, their ways of life, are different from every people's. A significant proportion of the commandments of the Torah serve to keep Jews apart from gentiles and prevent them from engaging in idolatry. And while the Jews observe their own laws, they do not follow the king's laws; and therefore it is not worthwhile for the king to tolerate them. They are a small nation of no importance, and an annoyance that disrupts the harmony of your kingdom. Therefore, it is not in your interest to tolerate them.

- 9 If it pleases the king to accept my proposal, let it be written as an official order to eliminate them<sup>d</sup> and I will weigh ten thousand talents of silver<sup>bd</sup> into the hands of the king's craftsmen. I volunteer to give ten thousand silver talents of my own to those who can turn the silver into coins or silver bullion, to bring to the king's treasuries.<sup>b</sup> The donation to the king's treasuries would compensate Ahashverosh for any possible financial costs incurred by the course of action suggested by Haman, as the king might fear the loss of so many taxpayers.

- 10 Apathetic as he was to the fate of the Jews, Ahashverosh was apparently enthused by the generous gift of his chief minister. Therefore, the king removed his ring with the royal seal from his hand,<sup>d</sup> and he gave it to Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite, the adversary of the Jews. This was not merely a verbal agreement, as Ahashverosh granted Haman practical permission and authority to sign in the king's name.<sup>42</sup>



Ring seal, Shushan, third century BCE

- 11 The king said to Haman: The silver that you offered to donate is given to you; it shall remain in your possession, as the kingdom will accept the loss; and the people are also given to you, to do with them as it is pleasing in your eyes, in accordance with your wishes.
- 12 Haman acted with great haste. He began taking practical steps at the beginning of Nisan, and by the thirteenth of the month everything was ready for the next stage of his plan: The king's scribes were summoned in the first month, on the thirteenth day of it, and it was written in accordance with everything that Haman commanded to the king's satraps,<sup>b</sup> who presided over the larger regions, and to the governors<sup>b</sup> who were over each and every province, the smaller areas, and to the princes of each and every people, to each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language.<sup>b</sup>



Illustration of Assyrian scribes, based on stone relief, Nimrod, Iraq, eighth century BCE

- In the name of King Ahashverosh it, the missive with the decree, was written, and it was sealed with the king's ring.
- 13 The scrolls were sent in the hand of the couriers to all the king's provinces, in which it was written that the king permits his subjects to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate all the Jews, from lad to elder, children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. The instructions were sent almost a year in advance, perhaps in order to establish the facts on the ground as soon

## DISCUSSION

3:9| **Let it be written to eliminate them:** Haman's proposal and his conduct toward Mordekhai is the first documented case of actual anti-Semitism. In previous generations various nations had fought against the kingdom of Israel, but those were not anti-Semitic wars. The Israelites suffered in Egypt because they were strangers, and perhaps because the ruling authorities felt threatened by their presence. Likewise, different nations clashed with the Israelites during the period of the judges and the First Temple, and yet these battles were due to conflicts of interest. Consequently, most of those wars were not etched in the collective

national memory. The attack recorded here is of a different kind entirely. Haman's speech is an ancient model for anti-Semitic propaganda, which has been used, with minor variations, by many anti-Semites in subsequent generations. Parenthetically, it may be noted that one can also see signs of anti-Semitism in the struggle against the immigrants from Babylonia on the part of Sanbalat the Horonite, the leader of the Samaritans, which occurred at roughly the same time as the events described in this book. He and his men sought to sabotage the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple through mockery, the weakening of the Jews' resolve,

scaremongering and informing on them to the authorities, as well general abuse and threats of destruction (see Nehemiah 2–6).

**Ten thousand talents of silver:** If this is referring to sacred talents mentioned in the book of Exodus, then a silver talent weighed roughly 30 kg. According to this calculation, Haman proposed to give the king some 300 metric tons of silver. It is unusual for such a large sum to be in the possession of a private individual. Haman was clearly an immensely wealthy man who also boasted a stable position in the government, as the chief minister of an empire (see 5:11; *Bemidbar Rabba* 22:6).

בֵּין הָעַמִּים כָּל מְדִינֹת מְלָכֹתָּךְ וְדַתִּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל־עַם וְאֶת־דַּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 אֵינִם עֹשִׂים וְלַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין־שׁוֹה לְהַנִּיחָם: אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם  
 וְעֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפִים כֶּסֶף אֶשְׁקוֹל עַל־יְדֵי עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה לְהָבִיא אֶל־גִּנְזֵי  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֶּנָּה לְהֵמָּן בֶּן־הַמַּדְתָּא הָאֲגָגִי עֶזְרָה  
 הַיְּהוּדִים: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהֵמָּן הַכֶּסֶף נָתַן לָךְ וְהָעַם לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ:  
 וַיִּקְרָא סִפְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּחֲדָשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם בּוֹ וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־  
 צִוָּה הֵמָּן אֶל אַחַד־שַׂרְפִּנֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֶל־הַפָּחוֹת אֲשֶׁר וְעַל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וְאֶל־  
 שָׂרֵי עָם וְעַם מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְעַם וְעַם כְּלָשׁוֹנוֹ בִּשְׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַד־שׁוֹרֵשׁ  
 נִכְתָּב וְנִחְתָּם בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְנִשְׁלַח סִפְרִים בְּיַד הָרָצִים אֶל־כָּל־מְדִינֹת  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים מִנְּעָר וְעַד־זָקֵן טָף וְנָשִׁים  
 בְּיוֹם אֶחָד בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנֵים־עָשָׂר הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר וּשְׁלָלָם לְבוֹז:

## BACKGROUND

3:8| **Scattered and dispersed:** The Assyrian kings first exiled the ten tribes of Israel to northwest Mesopotamia, after which Nebuchadnezzar exiled Judah to central and southern Mesopotamia. In both cases, Israelites often achieved high social and political status, and they also dealt in international trade. In this manner they spread across the Persian Empire, from Afghanistan and India to Libya, southern Egypt, and western Anatolia. Jews apparently served on Phoenician ships and conducted business with Sidonian merchants, and they may have even reached the distant trading stations in northern Africa and Spain.

3:9| **Ten thousand talents of silver:** In accordance with the estimated weight of 28.8 kg for one sacred talent, Haman proposed to transfer to the king approximately 288 metric tons of silver. The ruling authorities of the Persian Empire collected taxes from the residents of all the territory under their control, even the distant islands (see 10:1), and thereby amassed a legendary fortune. After a period of growth during the reigns of Cyrus the Great and Darius I, the

kings and those close to them began focusing on filling their own private coffers. It is known that Alexander the Great looted more than 3000 metric tons of silver and gold from the treasuries of the king of Persia.

**The king's treasures [ginze]:** In Persian, *gan-zaka* is a small treasure chamber. This word is also the source of the Hebrew terms *ganzakh*, archive, and *gizbar*, treasurer. The basic meaning of this word is minister of finance, as the suffix *bar* means minister.

3:10| **The king removed his ring from his hand:** Royal commands were generally etched in cuneiform script on tablets of clay or silt, which were authorized with the stamp of a seal that left a sunken impression. Some seals were fashioned as part of a ring, while others were hung on a chain around the neck. It is possible that the king did not need to be literate, as all his orders were written by scribes, who would read out the texts to him when necessary (see 6:1). Later this enabled Mordekhai to insinuate that the king did not know exactly what was written

on the missive that Haman had signed with his seal (see commentary on 9:25).

3:12| **The king's satraps [ahashdarpenei]:** The Persian word is *xsaça-pā-vana*, which originally denoted a shield of the kingdom, but this meaning was broadened to include the rulers of administrative units of the Persian Empire.

**The governors [hapaḥot]:** *Peḥa*, or *pihatu* in Akkadain, is an official of a lower status than a satrap. A *paḥavva*, which is a province ruled by a *peḥa*, was part of the larger kingdom.

**To each and every province in its script, and to each and every people in its language:** According to the standard procedure of the Persian monarchy, the king would dictate his order in Persian, while the Aramean scribes would write in Aramaic. The missives were sent to the local scribes of each province, who would read the Aramaic and verbally translate it into the local language. In this instance the missives were sent in different languages due to the importance of their content, amplified by their price: The ten thousand talents of silver that was being provided.



as possible, and so that the missives would reach the farthest corners of the empire in time. Due to Haman's strong belief in adhering to the lots that were cast, he was resolute in keeping the determined date, at which point the Jews would be deemed legitimate targets, **and to plunder their spoils**, their property. The king did not put this decision into effect through the strength of his army. He simply stated that on such-and-such a date the Jews would no longer enjoy the protection of the law, assuming that the various nations would take the opportunity to put Haman's plan into practice.

- 14 **The text<sup>43</sup> of the document,<sup>b</sup> the pronouncement, was to issue a directive in each and every province, publicized for all the peoples, to be ready for that day.** Although it is likely that

Jews were not to be found in every remote corner of the Persian Empire, for bureaucratic reasons the announcement was sent to each province, as a general directive of the king had to reach the entire kingdom.

- 15 **The couriers, the runners with the decree in hand, went out urgently by the word of the king, and the directive was issued in Shushan the capital. The king and Haman sat to drink and toast the success of their plot.** Ahashverosh and Haman were so delighted that the plan had been put into motion that they held a small feast; **and** meanwhile **the city of Shushan**, mainly its Jewish community, which was based around Mordekhai,<sup>44</sup> **was confounded** by the sudden harsh decree.

## Mordekhai and Esther React to the Decree

ESTHER 4:1–17

Even if they are uncertain whether their prayers will be accepted, they both believe that their fervent supplications and their fasting will influence the unfolding events.

It was Mordekhai's refusal to bow before Haman that was the pretext for the decree to destroy the Jews. When the decree is publicized he reacts without delay, calling upon Esther, his secret representative in the king's palace, to thwart it. The conversation between Mordekhai and Esther reveals both their profound concerns about the king's directive, as well as their faith and trust in God. At the start of this section, Mordekhai cries out in distress, and at its conclusion, Esther asks for all the Jews to gather together and fast.

- 4 1 **Mordekhai**, who was an official stationed near the palace, **knew everything that was done**, as he was presumably one of the first to read a copy of the decree that had been distributed throughout the kingdom. He understood the severity of the situation and its implications for the future of the Jews, even before the rest of the Jews living in Shushan knew what had transpired. He was seriously concerned by the likely effectiveness of Haman's propaganda, as well as his control over events in the royal court. **And** consequently, **Mordekhai rent his garments**, as a sign of mourning, **and donned sackcloth and placed ashes upon his head. He went out in the midst of the city and cried a loud and bitter cry**, both a cry of prayer and entreaty to God<sup>45</sup> as well as a cry of protest against the authorities.
- 2 **He came up to before the king's gate**; but although he was generally authorized to enter, he did not approach further, **as in accordance with the royal dress code,<sup>46</sup> one may not come to the king's gate in a sackcloth garment.**
- 3 **And in each and every province, any place where the word of the king and his directive reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, fasting, weeping, and keening; sackcloth and ashes were draped by the multitudes;** alternatively, sackcloth and ashes were laid out in the streets for public use.
- 4 **Esther's young women and her officials came and told her of Mordekhai's actions.** Those who were close to Esther knew about her relationship with him, as Mordekhai would inquire about her welfare every day, and it was she who had passed on Mordekhai's warning about the plot on the king's life.<sup>47</sup> **And the queen was greatly shocked**, as she had not heard anything about what was going on. The king's order had not been disclosed to the women,

as they were not considered to have any interests in governmental matters. **And** as Esther wanted to hear from Mordekhai what was happening, and since she knew that he could not enter while wearing sackcloth, **she sent garments to clothe Mordekhai and to remove his sackcloth, but he would not accept them**, refusing to take off his sackcloth.

- 5 **Esther called Hatakh, who was from among the king's officials, whom he had set before her.** Hatakh was no ordinary servant, as he had been granted explicit authority to help the queen with whatever she might need. **And she commanded him concerning Mordekhai, in order to know what this is, and why this is.** What is the reason for his behavior, and what is his request?<sup>48</sup>
- 6 **Hatakh went out to Mordekhai to the city square that was before the king's gate.** Since Mordekhai did not approach the king's gate, Hatakh came out to the square outside it, where he asked Mordekhai to explain his conduct.
- 7 **Mordekhai told him everything that had happened to him.** This is not necessarily referring to his refusal to bow down to Haman, as he might have considered Haman's decree no more than his manifestation of a tradition of hatred for Jews he had inherited from his ancestors, the tribe of Amalek. **And** he informed Hatakh of **the matter of the money that Haman had said to weigh for the king's treasuries concerning the Jews, in order to destroy them.** In addition to the decree of annihilation itself, word had spread of the enormous sum that Haman had proposed to the king in his determination to destroy all the Jews.
- 8 **He also gave him, Hatakh, the text of the legal document that was issued in Shushan in order to destroy them, the Jews; to**



יד	פֶּתֶשֶׁגֶן הַפֶּתַח לְהַנִּיתָן דָּת בְּכָל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה גְלוֹי לְכָל־הָעַמִּים לִהְיוֹת עֲתִידִים
טו	לְיוֹם הַזֶּה: הָרָצִים יֵצְאוּ דְחוּפִים בְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָדָת נִתְּנָה בְּשׁוֹשָׁן הַבִּירָה
ד א	וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן יֵשְׁבוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת וְהָעִיר שׁוֹשָׁן נְבוֹכָה: וּמִרְדֵּכִי יָדַע אֶת־
ב	כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה וַיִּקְרַע מִרְדֵּכִי אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וַיִּלְבַּשׁ שָׁק וְאַפֵּר וַיֵּצֵא בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר
ג	וַיִּזְעַק וַעֲקָה גְדוּלָּה וּמָרָה: וַיָּבֹא עַד לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי אֵין לָבֹא אֶל־שַׁעַר
ד	הַמֶּלֶךְ בִּלְבוּשׁ שָׁק: וּבְכָל־מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וּדְתוֹ מַגִּיעַ
ה	אֶבֶל גְּדוֹל לִיהוּדִים וְצוֹם וּבְכִי וּמִסְפַּד שָׁק וְאַפֵּר יֵצַע לְרַבִּים: וְתַבּוֹאִינָה נַעֲרוֹת
ו	אֶסְתֵּר וְסָרִיסָיָהּ וַיַּגִּידוּ לָהּ וְתַתְּחַלְחַל הַמַּלְכָּה מְאֹד וְתִשְׁלַח בְּגָדִים לְהַלְבִּישׁ
ז	אֶת־מִרְדֵּכִי וּלְהַסִּיר שָׁקוֹ מֵעַלָּיו וְלֹא קָבַל: וְתִקְרָא אֶסְתֵּר לְהַתֵּךְ מִסָּרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
ח	אֲשֶׁר הָעַמִּיד לִפְנֶיהָ וְתַצוּהוּ עַל־מִרְדֵּכִי לְדַעַת מַה־זֶּה וְעַל־מַה־זֶּה: וַיֵּצֵא
ט	הַתֵּךְ אֶל־מִרְדֵּכִי אֶל־דְּחוּב הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי שַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיַּגִּדֵּל מִרְדֵּכִי אֶת
י	כָּל־אֲשֶׁר קָרְהוּ וְאֵת ׀ פֶּרֶשֶׁת הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר אָמַר הַמֶּן לְשָׁקוֹל עַל־גִּזּוֹי הַמֶּלֶךְ
יא	בִּיהוּדִים לְאַבְדָּם: וְאֶת־פֶּתֶשֶׁגֶן כְּתָב־הָדָת אֲשֶׁר־נִתָּן בְּשׁוֹשָׁן לְהַשְׁמִידֵם נָתַן

וְתַבּוֹאִינָה

בִּיהוּדִים

# BACKGROUND

3:14 | **The text [patshegen] of the document:** In old Persian, this means a faithful copy of the source of the law signed with the seal of the king's ring.

**show it**, the decree, **to Esther**, **to inform her** of the situation, and furthermore **to command her** in his name **to go to the king**, **to plead with him**, and **to request before him on behalf of her people**. Only she could stop Haman, who enjoyed such privileged status in the kingdom. Mordekhai himself was not close to the king, whereas Esther lived in the palace and was beloved by Ahashverosh. Since the decree was essentially motivated by emotion, Mordekhai assumed that she had the power to annul it through her entreaties.

- 9 **Hatakh** the messenger **came and told Esther the words of Mordekhai**.
- 10 **Esther said to Hatakh**, and **commanded him** to take back the following message **for Mordekhai**:
- 11 The rules of entering to see the king are well-known: **All the king's servants** in the court, **and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman, who comes to the king to the inner courtyard**, if he has not been summoned and has not been granted permission, **there is but one rule for him: To be put to death**. It was forbidden to enter without special invitation, as the king had quasi-divine status. Esther continued: This fate is the rule, **except for one to whom the king will extend the golden scepter,<sup>8</sup> who lives**. If the king does not want a person who has entered without permission to be executed, he allows him to approach by stretching forth his golden scepter to him. Esther concluded: **And I have not been summoned to come to the king these thirty days**. Although I am the king's beloved queen, he has thousands of wives and concubines. I do not know his current mood, but the fact that he has not invited me for a month does not bode well. If I simply march in to see him, I will be endangering my life.
- 12 **They told Mordekhai Esther's words**.
- 13 **Mordekhai said to respond to Esther**: You feel protected in the palace, and you suppose that you will be spared any harm

from Haman's order. However, **do not imagine escaping** because you are **in the king's palace**, that **out of all the Jews** you will be safe.

- 14 **For if you are silent** and do nothing **at this time**, I trust that **relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place**. The decree does not go into effect for another eleven months, and we have faith in God that He will deliver us before then, **but I am sure that you and your father's house will perish**, as you did not act at the opportune time. Destruction will be visited upon you and your family, including myself;<sup>49</sup> and **who knows whether you have attained royalty for a time like this?** You came to a position of power without planning to do so, and now you find yourself at a time and place where you are the only one who can act to change the course of events and thereby save your people. Don't you think that this apparent coincidence is significant? Can't you see that it is a sign from Heaven?
- 15 Esther, as usual, accepted Mordekhai's instructions. **Esther said to respond to Mordekhai**:
- 16 **Go, assemble all the Jews who are present in Shushan** for prayer;<sup>50</sup> **and fast on my behalf**, for my sake; **do not eat and do not drink for three days, night and day**, an unusually severe fast that will last three straight days. **Also I and my young women will fast in this manner**, as we must all pray for my success; **and then I will go to the king against the rule and if I perish, I perish**. Perhaps the day when I approach the king will be the last of my life.
- 17 **Mordekhai went on his way, and acted in accordance with everything that Esther had commanded him**. He gathered together all the Jews, informed them of the evil decree and of Esther's situation, and instructed them to fast. The Jews' high regard for Mordekhai inspired them to rally behind him and follow his directives.

## BACKGROUND

4:11 | **Golden scepter [sharvit]**: The Akkadian source of *sharvit* is *sabbitu*, a rod, branch, or staff that symbolizes the authority of the bearer. The parallel Hebrew term *shevet* is a metonym, as

the physical staff represents the monarchy (see Genesis 49:10; II Samuel 7:7; Rashi, I Chronicles 18:5). Throughout history, various kings developed a custom of holding a gold or gold-plated

ceremonial scepter, and this is practiced to this day by the monarchs of Britain and Scandinavia.

לו לְהִרְאוֹת אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר וּלְהַגִּיד לָהּ וּלְצַוֹת עָלֶיהָ לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהִתְחַנֵּן־לוֹ  
 וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלְּפָנָיו עַל־עַמָּהּ: וַיָּבֹא הַתֵּךְ וַיַּגִּד לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת דְּבָרֵי מָרְדֳּכָי: וַתֹּאמֶר ט  
 אֶסְתֵּר לְהִתֵּךְ וּתְצַוֶּהוּ אֶל־מָרְדֳּכָי: כָּל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יָדְעִים יא  
 אֲשֶׁר כָּל־אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־יָבֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַחֹצֵר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא־  
 יִקְרָא אַחַת דָּתוֹ לְהִמָּית לְבָד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט־לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־שַׁדְבֵּיט הַזֶּהב  
 וְחִיָּה וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם: וַיִּגִּדוּ לְמָרְדֳּכָי אֶת יב  
 דְּבָרֵי אֶסְתֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר מָרְדֳּכָי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־תְּדַמִּי בְּנִפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט יג  
 בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים: כִּי אִם־הִחָרַשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצִּלָּה יד  
 יַעֲמֹד לַיְּהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעֵת  
 כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לַמַּלְכוּת: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־מָרְדֳּכָי: לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת־כָּל־ טו  
 הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצֻמוּ עָלַי וְאֶל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל־תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים טז  
 לִילָה וַיּוֹם גַּם־אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצֻם כֵּן וּבִכֵּן אָבֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כָדַת  
 וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבִדְתִּי אֲבִדְתִּי: וַיַּעֲבֹר מָרְדֳּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוְּתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר: יז

## Esther Risks Her Life

ESTHER 5:1–14

appearance before King Ahashverosh. As this section progresses, the pace of events increases, together with the tension that grips all the characters: Ahashverosh does not understand why Esther risked her life, nor why she keeps inviting him and Haman to parties; Haman concurrently enjoys the great honor granted to him by the queen and suffers from humiliation in his dealings with Mordechai; Esther does not know whether her plans and efforts will help her save her brethren, or whether they will bring disaster upon her, while a death sentence hovers over Mordechai's head.

- 5 1 It was on the third day;<sup>d</sup> Esther donned royalty,<sup>51</sup> royal apparel, and stood in the inner courtyard of the king's palace, facing the king's palace; the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal palace, facing the entrance of the palace,<sup>b</sup> where he could see who was present in the court.<sup>52</sup>**



Ashurbanipal's queen dressed in royal apparel, based on relief, seventh century BCE



Darius seated on throne holding a scepter, Behistun, seventh century BCE

- 2 It was as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard that she found favor in his eyes,** as the affection that he had initially felt toward her when he chose her was rekindled; **and consequently the king extended the golden scepter that was in his hand to Esther,** thereby granting her official permission to enter. **Esther approached and touched the top of the**

**scepter,** which was apparently the accepted ceremonial response to receiving royal permission to approach.

- 3 The king said to her: What is it with you, Queen Esther, and what is your request?** You clearly want something. In my love for you I will grant it, **up to half of the kingdom, and it will be granted to you.<sup>8</sup>** The king expressed in exaggerated terms his willingness to act for her sake.
- 4 Esther said,** in the same formal manner: **If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman, the most important man in the kingdom and the one closest to the king, come<sup>d</sup> today to the banquet that I have prepared for him,** the king.
- 5 The king said: Hasten Haman to do Esther's bidding.** The tone of this order is somewhat dismissive of Haman, as the king is treating him like a servant who must instantly obey any desire of the queen.<sup>53</sup> **The king and Haman, who was very pleased at this honor, came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.**
- 6 Ahashverosh understood that this feast was not a celebration for its own sake, but rather it was designed to create a favorable opportunity for the queen to issue her request. Therefore the king said to Esther at the wine banquet: What is your wish and it will be granted and what is your request? Up to half of the kingdom, and it will be done.**
- 7 Esther answered and she said: My wish and my request** is as follows: Despite the expressions of affection that she had heard from Ahashverosh, Esther still hesitated. She was unsure of her ability to take a drastic step immediately, and she knew that were she to fail, she would place herself in danger.
- 8 If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my wish and to do my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I will again prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do the king's bidding,** as I am not yet emotionally ready to present my request. It is perhaps

### BACKGROUND

**5:1 | His royal throne in the royal palace, facing the entrance of the palace:** According to the map of the palace (see image alongside 1:5), the throne room was open, and from there the king could see who was standing in the inner courtyard.

**5:3 | Up to half of the kingdom, and it will be granted to you:** The queen of Persia, the foremost wife of the king, enjoyed a privileged status and great authority. This is supported by the account of Herodotus, who portrayed Atossa, Darius's wife and the mother of Xerxes I, in such

terms. She ensured that her son would become king despite the fact that he was not the heir apparent (*The Histories* VII:2). She could also bring about important appointments and even command the army to set out to war (see 8:1).

וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מְלָכוּת וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצַד בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית  
נֹכַח בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא מְלָכוּתוֹ בְּבֵית הַמְּלָכוּת נֹכַח פֶּתַח  
הַבַּיִת: וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלָכָה עֹמֶדֶת בַּחֲצַד נִשְׂאָה חֵן בְּעֵינָיו  
וַיִּשָּׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת־שֹׁרְבֵיט הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ  
הַשֹּׁרְבֵיט: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ מַה־לָּךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלָכָה וּמַה־בִּקְשָׁתְךָ עַד־חֲצִי  
הַמְּלָכוּת וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אֶס־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמֶן הַיּוֹם  
אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשִׂיתִי לוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מַה־רוּ אֶת־הָמֶן לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־דְּבַר  
אֶסְתֵּר וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמֶן אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה אֶסְתֵּר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ  
לְאֶסְתֵּר בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן מַה־שְּׂאֵלָתְךָ וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ וּמַה־בִּקְשָׁתְךָ עַד־חֲצִי הַמְּלָכוּת  
וַתַּעַשׂ: וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר וַתֹּאמֶר שְׂאֵלָתִי וּבִקְשָׁתִי: אֶס־מְצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
וְאֶס־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב לָתֵת אֶת־שְׂאֵלָתִי וְלַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־בִּקְשָׁתִי יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמֶן  
אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה לָהֶם וּמֵחֵר אֶעֱשֶׂה כְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֵּצֵא הָמֶן בַּיּוֹם

## DISCUSSION

5:1 | **On the third day:** That is, the third day of the fast of the Jews. This may have been the third day after Haman's order had been given, which was the first day of the festival of Passover, or one or two days later (see Rav Yeshaya of Trani; *Seder Olam* 29; *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 49; *Esther Rabba* 8; see also the liturgical song: "A mighty strength You displayed on Passover," from the Passover Haggadah; *Targum*; Rashi, *Esther* 4:17; *Megilla* 15a).

5:4 | **Let the king and Haman come:** It seems that Esther's plan was to display personal affection for, and bestow particular honor upon, Haman in order to sow discord and engender the king's suspicion that perhaps his

chief minister was becoming too powerful. Furthermore, in light of Haman's prominent position, his obsequious personality, and his tremendous gift of persuasion, it is reasonable to assume that he had enemies in the royal courtyard. Esther's maids and officials would certainly have informed the queen of the goings-on in the court, and she likely assumed that if Haman were to receive preferential treatment from his queen as well, the king would become even more suspicious, and this in turn would enflame the concealed hatred and mistrust on the part of the king's other ministers. This course of action was a gamble, as the success of Esther's plan depended on the reaction of Ahashverosh, who was not the most stable of men.

There were constant intrigues, conspiracies, and plots at work in the Persian court, and Ahashverosh, who apparently had seized the throne in a not entirely legal manner (see *Yalkut Shimoni* 954; *Megilla* 14a), was well aware of these affairs. Upon seeing Esther showing such favoritism to Haman, he might well have thought that a plot of some sort was being hatched against him, and that the queen was signaling to the protagonist her willingness to assist him. Even if an idea of this kind had not entered Haman's mind, Esther hoped to play on the king's fears, so that he would come to view Haman as someone who had gained too much power and who posed a threat to his reign (see *Megilla* 15b).

due to her lack of confidence that the queen delayed her request, and that her reply was somewhat longwinded.

- 9 Ahashverosh left the feast in a state of intense curiosity. From the fact that Esther had approached him the previous day against the rules, and in light of her repeated deferrals, he realized that she was preparing herself to issue a major request. In contrast, Haman was happy. **Haman emerged on that day joyful and glad of heart.** He felt that he had reached the pinnacle of his success, as he was now not only a confidant of the king, but the queen had also drawn him especially close, and he considered this a clear sign of his exalted status. **But** as he walked, his mood changed for the worse, for **upon Haman's seeing Mordekhai at the king's gate**, where Mordekhai had returned in his usual apparel after the end of the fast, **and he did not stand, and he did not move on his account**, but ignored Haman completely, **Haman became filled with fury against Mordekhai.** The loftier his position in the kingdom, the more uncontrollable his anger over this act of disrespect.
- 10 Nevertheless **Haman restrained himself**, as he could do nothing at present,<sup>54</sup> **and entered his house and brought his supporters and Zeresh his influential wife.**
- 11 Haman arranged a kind of party in order to tell his friends that he had been invited to the queen's feast, and he **related to them the honor of his wealth, and the multitude of his children,**

**and all the ways that the king had promoted him, and that he had elevated him over the princes and servants of the king.** It is mentioned later<sup>55</sup> that ten sons of Haman were hanged, and he might have had even more children from other wives.<sup>56</sup>

- 12 **Haman said: Indeed, Queen Esther did not bring anyone but me with the king to the banquet that she prepared; tomorrow too, I am invited to her with the king.** This is the crowning glory. Not only am I the chief minister of the kingdom, but I have become the favorite in the royal household.
- 13 **But all this is not worthwhile for me<sup>D</sup> whenever I see Mordekhai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.** Yes, I have honor, wealth, and a bright future, but Mordekhai belittles me.
- 14 **Zeresh his wife and all his supporters**, who agreed to the proposal, **said to him: Let a gibbet be prepared, fifty cubits high; in the morning say to the king that they should hang Mordekhai upon it.** Do not wait until the feast. Go to the king in the morning and tell him that there is someone who aggravates you and refuses to accept your authority. Request for that person to be hanged even before the rest of the Jews are killed. **And** then, in the evening, you can **come in** a relaxed state and **joyfully with the king to the banquet.** The matter, this idea, **was pleasing to Haman and he prepared the gibbet.** He gave an order that a gibbet of this kind be built in preparation for Mordekhai's hanging, paving the way for Haman's ultimate triumph.

## The Night between the Two Feasts

ESTHER 6:1–14

The previous section ended at the lowest ebb of the story. Haman, who has been called for the second time to join the queen and king, is overjoyed; Mordekhai is to be hanged that day; and the decree of destruction still hovers over the Jews. There appears to be no hope on the horizon. However, here the power relations between Mordekhai and Haman

begin to reverse themselves. Haman arrives at the king's courtyard in order to request that Mordekhai be hanged on the gibbet that he has prepared, at the precise moment when the king is inquiring as to how he can repay Mordekhai for his good deed. Haman is betrayed by his own lust for honor.

- 6 1 **On that night**, after Esther's feast, **the king's sleep was disrupted** for no evident reason; **and he said to bring the book of records, the chronicles**, the book of royal history, **and they**, sections of the book, **would be read before the king**, in order to divert his mind with memories of past events.
- 2 **It was found written** among the events that had transpired that **Mordekhai had reported of Bigtana, Bigtan, and Teresh, two of the king's officials, among the doorkeepers**, who were very close to the king, **who sought to do violence to King Ahashverosh.** Their assassination attempt, the disclosure of the plot, and the fact that they had been hanged, were all recorded in the book.
- 3 **The king said: What honor or greatness has been bestowed upon Mordekhai<sup>D</sup> for this?** Perhaps he received some form of recompense, but as the details did not involve the king they were not recorded in the book. **The king's lads, his servants, said to him: Nothing was done with him** in return. He fulfilled his civic duty by handing over the rebels, and yet he was not rewarded for his good deed.
- 4 **The king said: Who is in the courtyard?** These events likely occurred in the wee hours of the morning, and the king sought someone with whom he could converse and receive council about the matters that were disturbing his rest.<sup>57</sup> Now just at that moment **Haman had come to the outer courtyard of the king's palace,<sup>B</sup> to say to the king his request to hang**

## BACKGROUND

6:4 | **Haman had come to the outer courtyard of the king's palace:** Even important ministers might soon find themselves on the gibbet if they

enter from the outer courtyard without invitation or permission (see commentary on 5:1). However, it is clear from the next verse that when the king

sought an advisor at night and was told that Haman was in the outer courtyard, he gave him explicit permission to enter unharmed.

הָהוּא שָׁמַח וְטוֹב לֵב וְכִרְאוֹת הַמֶּן אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְלֹא־קָם וְלֹא־  
 זָע מִמֶּנּוּ וַיִּמְלֵא הַמֶּן עַל־מֶרְדֵּכַי חֲמָה: וַיִּתְאַפֵּק הַמֶּן וַיָּבֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח  
 וַיָּבֵא אֶת־אֲהֲבָיו וְאֶת־זֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ: וַיִּסְפֹּר לָהֶם הַמֶּן אֶת־כְּבוֹד עֲשָׂרוֹ וְרֹב פָּנָיו  
 וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ עַל־הַשָּׂרִים וְעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר  
 הַמֶּן אֵף לֹא־הִבִּיֵּאָה אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה  
 כִּי אִסְּאוֹתִי וְגַם־לְמַחֲרִי אֲנִי קָרוֹא־לָהּ עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְכֹל־זֶה אֵינְנִי שׂוֹהֶה לִּי בְּכֹל־  
 עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ זֶרֶשׁ  
 אִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל־אֲהֲבָיו יַעֲשׂוּ־עֵץ גְּבוֹה חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה וּבִבְּקָר וַיִּתְּלוּ  
 אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי עָלָיו וּבָא עִם־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתֶּה שָׁמַח וַיִּיטֵב הַדְּבָר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּן  
 וַיַּעַשׂ הָעֵץ: בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא נִדְּדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר לְהִבִּיֵּא  
 אֶת־סֵפֶר הַזְכָּרֹנוֹת דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים וַיְהִיו נִקְרָאִים לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיִּמְצֵא כָּתוּב אֲשֶׁר  
 הִגִּיד מֶרְדֵּכַי עַל־בְּגָתָנָא וְתָרַשׁ שְׁנֵי סָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁמָרֵי הַסֵּף אֲשֶׁר בִּקְשׁוּ  
 לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשׁוּרוֹשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מַה־נַּעֲשֶׂה יָקָר וְגִדּוּלָה לְמֶרְדֵּכַי  
 עַל־זֶה וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁרָתָיו לֹא־נַעֲשֶׂה עִמּוֹ דָּבָר: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ מִי  
 בַּחֲצֵר וְהַמֶּן פָּא לַחֲצֵר בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַחֵיצוֹנָה לֵאמֹר לְמַלְךְ לְתִלּוֹת אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי

## DISCUSSION

5:13 | **But all this is not worthwhile for me:** According to some commentaries, Mordekhai and Haman had known each other even before Haman rose to greatness (see *Megilla* 16a). For Haman, the encounter with someone who remembered him from when he was a lowly commoner and who refused to honor him would have been especially scathing.

6:3 | **What honor or greatness has been bestowed upon Mordekhai:** It can be assumed that when the king was reminded of this earlier effort to assassinate him, he began to wonder: If there are people in the kingdom who oppose me to such an extent that they will attempt to take my life, have I properly rewarded those who support me? Furthermore, Esther's mysterious

invitation to another feast, to which once again the chief minister had been invited, further aroused his suspicions. The king might have reasoned that if he failed to repay those who saved his life, it is no wonder that people conceal their plans from him (Rashi, verse 1; *Megilla* 15b).



**Mordekhai on the gibbet that he had prepared for him**, in accordance with the advice he had received from his wife and friends. Although Mordekhai and the Jewish people were associated in his mind, since it was Mordekhai's presence that bothered him on a daily basis, he wished to dispose of him without delay.

- 5 **The king's lads said to him: Behold, Haman is standing in the courtyard. The king said: Let him enter.**
- 6 **Haman came and the king said to him: What is to be done to the man whose honoring the king desires, whom he wishes to honor in public? Haman said in his heart: Upon whom would the king desire to bestow honor more than I?** Under the circumstances, Haman interpreted the king's question as though it were directed to him personally: How would you wish to be honored?
- 7 **Haman said to the king: My advice is, for the man whose honoring the king desires,**
- 8 **let them bring royal garments that the king himself has worn, and a horse upon which the king has ridden,<sup>8</sup> while a royal crown was set on his, the king's, head** WHEN HE RODE THE horse,<sup>58</sup>
- 9 **and put the garments and the horse in the hand of one of the king's princes, of the nobles, a senior minister rather than a lowly servant, they will dress the man whose honoring the king desires, and they will lead him riding on the horse in the city square, and they, the nobles who lead him, will proclaim before him: So shall be done to the man whose honoring the king desires.** Haman had no difficulty imagining himself riding on the horse, wearing royal clothing, and easily selecting one of the other ministers who would run before him.
- 10 **The king said to Haman: This is indeed a good idea. Hurry, quickly take the garments and the horse as you have spoken, and do so to Mordekhai the Jew,<sup>9</sup> who sits at the king's**



Persian royal crown

**gate.** Perhaps the king was not greatly familiar with Mordekhai, but he was not an anonymous figure either. His status and position in the royal court were well-known. **Do not omit any matter<sup>10</sup> from all that you have spoken.**

- 11 **The king's order left Haman with no choice. Haman took the garments and the horse, dressed Mordekhai, led him riding through the city square, and proclaimed before him: So shall be done to the man whose honoring the king desires.**
- 12 **Mordekhai returned to the king's gate.** Even if Mordekhai was pleased at Haman's humiliation, this did not ease the terror in his heart over the fate of the Jews.<sup>59</sup> **And Haman hastened to his house, mourning and with covered head,** as he was humiliated.
- 13 **Haman related to Zeresh his wife and to all his supporters everything that had befallen him.** He told them that he had followed their advice, but that he had arrived at the king's courtyard at the wrong moment and had suffered a terrible humiliation. **His wise men,** who, perhaps significantly, are no longer described as his friends, **and Zeresh his wife said to him** dispassionately: **If Mordekhai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the progeny of the Jews, you will not prevail against him; rather, you will fall before him.** There is no middle ground in our relations with the Jews. One who fights against them will either crush them or discover that they have utterly defeated him.
- 14 These comments certainly did not improve Haman's mood. **They were still talking with him, and the king's officials arrived, and they hastened to bring Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared,** despite the fact that feasts were generally held in the evening hours. As part of the royal formalities, officials were sent to Haman informing him that his presence was requested at the feast immediately. The prediction of Haman's wife and advisors was indeed about to come to pass. Soon Esther will suggest that Mordekhai be promoted to take Haman's place, and thus their reversal will be complete. Haman will be hanged on the gibbet that he prepared for Mordekhai, and Mordekhai, who refused to bow down to Haman, will inherit his position.

## BACKGROUND

6:8 | **And a horse upon which the king has ridden:** According to Herodotus, horses were highly esteemed creatures in Persia and were even considered sacred. Particular horses were only for the exclusive use of kings and nobles, with the king's horse being set aside for the

king alone. The horses' heads were sometimes adorned with a sort of crown. The king's two-wheeled chariot was harnessed to carefully selected and crowned horses of a special breed, called Nisean, which is now extinct. In ancient Persia, the horse was called *aspa*, or *asp*, a word

that appears in names of people at the time of the book of Esther, e.g., Aspata, one of Haman's sons (9:7), as well as in contemporary Persian names (see Song of Songs 1:9, and commentary ad loc.).

ה על־הַעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־הָכִין לוֹ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵלָיו הִנֵּה הַמֶּן עֹמֵד בַּחֲצַר וַיֹּאמֶר  
ו המֶלֶךְ יָבוֹא: וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּן וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ מַה־לַּעֲשׂוֹת בְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ  
ח חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן בְּלִפְנֵי לְמִי יִחַפֵּץ הַמֶּלֶךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת יָקָר יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנִּי:  
ז וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ: יָבִיאוּ לְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת  
אֲשֶׁר לְבָשׁוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְסוּס אֲשֶׁר רָכַב עָלָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֲשֶׁר נָתַן כְּתֹר מַלְכוּת  
ט בְּרֵאשׁוֹ: וְנָתַן הַלְבוּשׁ וְהַסּוּס עַל־יַד־אִישׁ מִשְׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּרָתִמִּים וְהַלְבִּשׁוּ  
י אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ וְהִרְכִּיבֵהוּ עַל־הַסּוּס בִּרְחוֹב הָעִיר וְקִרְאוּ  
יֵלְפָנוּ כִּכָּה יַעֲשֶׂה לָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַמֶּן  
יֵמָּהֹר קַח אֶת־הַלְבוּשׁ וְאֶת־הַסּוּס בְּאֲשֶׁר דְּבָרָתָ וַעֲשֶׂה־כֵן לְמַרְדֳּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי  
יא הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־תִּפְּל דְּבַר מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר דְּבָרָתָ: וַיִּקַּח הַמֶּן אֶת־הַלְבוּשׁ  
וְאֶת־הַסּוּס וַיִּלְבֹּשׁ אֶת־מַרְדֳּכָי וַיִּרְכִּיבֵהוּ בִּרְחוֹב הָעִיר וַיִּקְרָא לְפָנָיו כִּכָּה יַעֲשֶׂה  
יב לָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ: וַיָּשָׁב מַרְדֳּכָי אֶל־שַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן נִדְּחָף  
יג אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ אָבֵל וְחַפּוּי רֹאשׁ: וַיְסַפֵּר הַמֶּן לְזֹרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ וּלְכָל־אֲהָבָיו אֵת כָּל־  
אֲשֶׁר קָרָהוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ חֲכָמָיו וְזֹרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ אִם מִזֶּרַע הַיְּהוּדִים מַרְדֳּכָי אֲשֶׁר  
יד הַחֲלוּת לִנְפֹל לְפָנָיו לֹא־תוּכַל לוֹ כִּי־נִפּוֹל תִּפּוֹל לְפָנָיו: עוֹדִם מְדַבְּרִים עָמּוּ  
וְסָרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ הִגִּיעוּ וַיִּבְהִלּוּ לְהַבִּיֵּא אֶת־הַמֶּן אֶל־הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָה

## DISCUSSION

6:10 | **And do so to Mordekhai the Jew:** In addition to the great honor that the king sought to bestow upon Mordekhai by having him led by his chief minister, there is no doubt that he also wanted to humiliate Haman. It can be presumed that word of the animosity between Mordekhai and Haman had spread beyond mere servants' gossip to the royal court itself. Although the king had no special connection to Mordekhai, now that he had been reminded of the favor the Jew had performed for him, he took advantage

of this opportunity to reinforce in his subjects the awareness that no one in the empire enjoyed an independent status other than himself. From the fact that he evidently wished to be displayed in the city square in the manner of the king on the day of his coronation, Ahashverosh came to the conclusion that his chief minister had been granted too much power, and that his megalomaniacal ambitions might undermine the king's own regime. By insisting that Haman be the one to lead Mordekhai, the king thereby

publicized his own authority and the subjugation of Haman to his control (see Malbim 10).

**Do not omit any matter:** Some infer from here that Haman tried to persuade the king to exchange this parade for a monetary gift or some other type of honor. Therefore, the king gave him explicit instructions to carry out his suggestion to the letter, without any changes (*Megilla* 16a).

## Haman's Downfall and Mordekhai's Rise to Power

ESTHER 7:1–8:2

Although the humiliation Haman has suffered does not necessarily cause him to change his plans, it can be assumed that he comes to Esther's second party crestfallen and dispirited. This second party is also an intimate affair. Esther wants only Ahashverosh, Haman, and herself to be present, so that Haman will suddenly discover that both the king and the queen are against him, and that there is no one else to defend him.

- 7 1 The king and Haman came to participate in the banquet with Queen Esther.**



"At the wine banquet"

- 2 The king said to Esther also on the second day at the wine banquet: What is your wish, Queen Esther, and it will be granted to you and what is your request? Up to half the kingdom, it will be done.** The king repeated his earlier question because he knew that Esther wanted something, which she was to reveal at this second feast.
- 3 Queen Esther answered** with the customary etiquette **and she said: If I have found favor in your eyes, the king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me with my wish, and my people with my request.** You agree in principle to grant me half the kingdom, but all I want is that my life and my people be spared. This dramatic opening statement was designed to have maximum effect upon the king.
- 4 The queen clarifies her meaning: For we have been sold, my people and I, for our enemies to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate us. If we had only been sold as slaves and as maid-servants, I would be silent** and would not ask for anything, as in that case **the trouble, the unfortunate event, would not be worth the distress to the king.** It would not be worth upsetting the king.<sup>60</sup>
- 5 King Ahashverosh, who was caught by surprise, as she had not told him that she was Jewish, said, he said to Queen Esther:**<sup>D</sup> **Who is he, and where is he, who was so presumptuous to do so?** What kind of person would dare seek to destroy you and your people?
- 6 Esther said: A man who is an adversary and an enemy, this wicked Haman.** Haman advised you to destroy us because he is an enemy of the Jews. Moreover, he is an evil man, and his intentions are far from pure. Consequently, you should not trust him. Although Haman was not in the best of moods, he had still been under the impression that Esther had invited him because

she held him in high regard. Consequently, he was entirely unprepared for the accusation the queen flung against him in the king's presence. Therefore **Haman flinched before the king and the queen.**

- 7 The king rose in his fury from the wine banquet and went to the garden of the house.** He had forgotten his own involvement in the decree and the fact that he himself had signed the documents. At this point, all he could see was Haman trying to destroy Esther and her people. In order to calm his rage against his minister, he got up and went to take some air in the garden. **And Haman remained to plead for his life from Queen Esther.** Although by now Haman realized that she did not seek his favor, he hoped that she might have mercy upon him, as he had not yet harmed her in any way. He might also have sought to arouse her innate feminine compassion;<sup>61</sup> **for he saw that harm was resolved against him by the king.**<sup>D</sup>
- 8 The king returned from the garden of the house to the chamber of the wine banquet and he saw that Haman was falling upon the couch on which Esther was lying.** According to Persian and Greek custom, wealthy and noble individuals would not sit on chairs during a feast; rather, they would recline on beds.<sup>62</sup> **The king said: Is it also part of Haman's plan to conquer the queen with me in the house, to rape the queen in my own presence? The words emerged from the king's mouth, and Haman's face fell** and he turned pale, as he realized his fall from power and demise. He was aware that apologizing was futile, as in these circumstances nothing he could say would save him.
- 9 The feast was served by waiters who were not considered to be attendees.** However, when the king revealed his opinion about Haman, one of them dared to interject in support of that sentiment. **Harvona, who was one of the officials who was before the king said: Indeed, behold the gibbet that Haman prepared for Mordekhai, who is someone who spoke beneficially for the king.** This is the true nature of Haman; he is a man who prepares a gibbet for one who helped the king. The gibbet **is standing in the house of Haman** and is **fifty cubits high.** Perhaps Harvona disliked Haman for reasons of his own, and he now saw the chance to retaliate. **The king said: Hang him on it.** If the gibbet is already prepared, Haman's sentence can be carried out without delay.
- 10 They hanged Haman on the gibbet that he had prepared for Mordekhai, and the king's fury abated.**

אָסְתֵּר: וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן לְשִׁתּוֹת עִם־אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר  
גַּם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁנִי בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן מִה־שְּׁאֵלֶתְךָ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְתִנָּתֵן לְךָ וּמִה־  
בִּקְשֶׁתְּךָ עַד־חֲצֵי הַמַּלְכוּת וְתַעֲשֶׂ: וְתֵעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְתֹאמֹר אֶס־מְצֵאתִי  
חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֶס־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב תִּנָּתֵן־לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשִׁאלָתִי וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִי:  
כִּי נִמְכַּרְנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד וְאֵלּוּ לַעֲבָדִים וּלְשִׁפְחוֹת נִמְכַּרְנוּ  
הַחֲרָשְׁתִּי כִּי אֵין הָעַר שׁוֹה בְּנוֹק הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ  
וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה מִי הוּא זֶה וְאִי־זֶה הוּא אֲשֶׁר־מָלְאוּ לְבָבוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן:  
וְתֹאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אִישׁ עַר וְאוֹיֵב הָמֵן הָרַע הַזֶּה וְהַמֶּן נִבְעֵת מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמַּלְכָּה:  
וְהַמֶּלֶךְ קָם בַּחֲמָתוֹ מִמִּשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן אֶל־גִּנַּת הַבַּיִת וְהַמֶּן עָמַד לְבַקֵּשׁ עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ  
מֵאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה כִּי רָאָה כִּי־כָלְתָה אֵלָיו הָרַעָה מֵאֵת הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁב מִגִּנַּת  
הַבַּיִת אֶל־בֵּית מִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן וְהַמֶּן נָפַל עַל־הַמַּטָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ וַיֹּאמֶר  
הַמֶּלֶךְ הֲגַם לִכְבוֹשׁ אֶת־הַמַּלְכָּה עַמִּי בַּבַּיִת הַדָּבָר יֵצֵא מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּפְנֵי הָמֵן  
חָפוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר חֲדַבּוּנָה אֶחָד מִן־הַסֵּרִיסִים לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ גַּם הִנֵּה־הָעַן אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה  
הָמֵן לְמַרְדֵּכָי אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר־טוֹב עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ עָמַד בַּבַּיִת הָמֵן גְּבוּהַ חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה  
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ תֵּלְהוּ עָלָיו: וַיִּתְּלוּ אֶת־הָמֵן עַל־הָעַן אֲשֶׁר־הִכִּין לְמַרְדֵּכָי וַחֲמַת

## DISCUSSION

7:5 | **He said to Queen Esther:** As long as Esther kept her origins secret, her personal status was suspect. It would naturally be assumed that a woman who refused to reveal her ethnicity and background was in fact a maidservant of indeterminate birth, perhaps the daughter of a slave. Even among slaves and maidservants, a slave born to a slave lacked any social standing, and was considered inferior to a freeman who was captured in war. Ahashverosh had no particular familiarity with, or affection for, the Jewish people, who lived on the fringes of his empire, but the Sages explain that Esther at this point revealed that she was descended from a royal

line. She was no maidservant whom the king had raised up from misery, but a woman of noble descent (*Megilla* 16a).

7:7 | **That harm was resolved against him by the king:** The conversation between Ahashverosh and Haman the previous night had changed the image of Haman in the king's eyes. He realized that Haman was power-hungry and would attempt to advance his status in the kingdom at any price. This impression that Haman had left upon the king the night before was reinforced by Esther's accusations. The king was therefore filled with great rage.

It should be noted that in royal courts of this kind, the status of the chief minister is indeed a great honor, but it is also highly dangerous. Naturally, the king would not want such a role filled by someone who was too powerful. It is no coincidence that neither of the two men whom Ahashverosh appointed to this position, Haman and Mordekhai, came from Persian nobility, and in fact both were foreigners. Such individuals could be removed from their posts with relative ease when the need arose. This might well have been one of Pharaoh's motivations for appointing Joseph (*Genesis* 41:39–44).

- 8** <sup>1</sup> Once Haman had been hanged, the king's mood improved, and he wanted to bestow further favors upon Esther. **On that day, King Ahashverosh gave the house of Haman, adversary of the Jews, to Queen Esther.** This gift included the enormous amount of wealth that Haman had accumulated.<sup>63</sup> **And Mordekhai came** for a personal audience **before the king, as Esther had related what he was to her.** She presented him as her cousin, who had adopted, raised, and educated her. Ahashverosh was in good spirits now that Haman was gone,

and for her part Esther treated him with affection and gratitude. Furthermore, if Ahashverosh was not yet personally familiar with Mordekhai, he was now given the opportunity to meet this loyal subject of the king, who had been instrumental in uncovering the assassination plot against him.

- 2** **The king removed his ring that he had taken from Haman, and he gave it to Mordekhai,** as a sign of trust. **Esther appointed Mordekhai over the house of Haman.** She appointed him in charge of Haman's estate.

## The Order against Haman's Decree

ESTHER 8:3–17

Although the problem of Haman himself has been resolved, the decree permitting the annihilation of the Jews still stands. Esther seeks to take advantage of the favorable hour and annul the evil decree that threatens her people.

- 3** **Esther spoke again before the king, fell before his feet, cried and besought him to repeal the evil of Haman the Agagite, and his plot that he had devised against the Jews.**
- 4** **The king extended to Esther the golden scepter,** to signal to the queen, who was lying on the floor at his feet, that she was permitted to arise and speak her mind. **And Esther rose and stood before the king.**
- 5** **She said,** choosing her words carefully in order arouse all the king's love and affection for her: **If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to return the scrolls** that were sent as part of the plot of Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite **that he wrote to eliminate the Jews who are in all the king's provinces,** and to cancel their validity;
- 6** **for how can I bear and see the harm that will find my people;<sup>d</sup> and how can I bear and see the elimination of my birthplace?** By this stage, Esther no longer had any concerns for herself. She knew that she would be left untouched, but she implored the king not to let her people be harmed as a result of the missives that had been sent in his name.
- 7** **King Ahashverosh said to Queen Esther and to Mordekhai the Jew,** who was present: **Behold, I gave the house of Haman to Esther,** as a gesture of goodwill, **and they hanged him on the gibbet because he sought to do violence to the Jews.** Once again the king places the blame entirely on Haman

while conveniently disregarding his own involvement in the plot against the Jews.

- 8** **As for you, write concerning the Jews a different missive, as is pleasing in your eyes in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring,** so that the two orders cancel each other out; **for a text that is written in the name of the king and sealed with the ring of the king, may not be revoked.** According to the laws of the kingdom, not even the king can nullify his own orders, as once written they are considered to be absolute, divine commands. Consequently, another royal communiqué, formulated in such a manner that it will bypass the previous command and limit its significance, must be written.
- 9** **Indeed the king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day of it,<sup>8</sup>** roughly three months after Haman was hanged; **it was written according to everything that Mordekhai commanded concerning the Jews.** The missives were sent to the satraps, the governors, and princes of the provinces, which are from India to Kush, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, each and every province according to its script, and each and every people according to its language, and on this occasion even to the Jews according to their script, and according to their language. Since this time Jews were not merely the passive targets of the order but active participants in its implementation, they too received the missives.<sup>64</sup>
- 10** **He, Mordekhai, wrote in the name of King Ahashverosh and he sealed with the ring of the king** that he had received.

## DISCUSSION

8:6| **For how can I bear and see the harm that will find my people:** A person's concern for his people or family, even when this does

not accord with the interests of the kingdom, would not be considered a betrayal but rather a respectable, appropriate reaction. This is also

seen in the response of King Artahshasta to Nehemiah's misery (Nehemiah 2:1–9).



ח א המֶלֶךְ שָׁכַבָּה: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נָתַן הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשׁוּרִשׁ לְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה  
את־בֵּית הַמֶּן צָרָר הַיְּהוּדִים וּמִרְדֵּכִי בָּא לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר מֶה  
ב הוא־לָהּ: וַיֹּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵבִיר מִהֶמֶן וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְמִרְדֵּכִי וּתְשֵׁם  
ג אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־מִרְדֵּכִי עַל־בֵּית הַמֶּן:  
וּתּוֹסֵף אֶסְתֵּר וּתְדַבֵּר לִפְנֵי  
הַמֶּלֶךְ וּתַפֵּל לִפְנֵי רַגְלָיו וּתִתְחַנֵּן־לוֹ לְהָעֵבִיר אֶת־דַּעַת הַמֶּן הָאֲגָגִי וְאֵת  
ד מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁב עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים: וַיּוֹשֶׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר אֵת שַׁדְּבַט הַזָּהָב  
ה וּתִקֶּם אֶסְתֵּר וּתַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְתֹאמַר אֶס־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאֶס־מִצָּאתִי  
חֵן לִפְנָיו וְכִשֶּׁר הַדְּבָר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְטוֹבָה אֲנִי בְּעֵינָיו יִכְתֹּב לְהָשִׁיב אֶת־הַסְּפָרִים  
מַחֲשַׁבַת הַמֶּן בֶּן־הַמְּדִתָּא הָאֲגָגִי אֲשֶׁר כָּתַב לְאַבְדֹּת אֶת־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־  
ו מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ: כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכַל וְרֹאֲיָתִי בָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמְצָא אֶת־עַמִּי וְאֵיכָכָה  
ז אוֹכַל וְרֹאֲיָתִי בְּאַבְדֵּן מוֹלַדְתִּי:  
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשׁוּרִשׁ לְאַסְתֵּר  
הַמַּלְכָּה וּלְמִרְדֵּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי הִנֵּה בֵּית־הַמֶּן נָתַתִּי לְאַסְתֵּר וְאֹתוֹ תָּלוּ עַל־הָעֵץ  
ח עַל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח יָדוֹ בַּיְּהוּדִים: וְאַתָּם כָּתְבוּ עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיכֶם  
ט בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ וְחַתְמוּ בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־כָתַב אֲשֶׁר־נִכְתַּב בְּשֵׁם־הַמֶּלֶךְ  
וּנְחַתּוֹם בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין לְהָשִׁיב: וַיִּקְרְאוּ סְפָר־הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּעֲתֵּהּ־הַהִיא  
בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ סִינָן בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה וָעֶשְׂרִים בּוֹ וַיִּכְתַּב כָּכָאֲשֶׁר־  
צוּה מִרְדֵּכִי אֶל־הַיְּהוּדִים וְאֵל הָאֲחַשְׁדָּרְפָּנִים וְהַפָּחוֹת וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת אֲשֶׁר  
מֵהָדוּ וְעַד־כּוֹשׁ שָׁבַע וָעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְעַם  
י וְעַם כָּל־שָׁנָה וְאֵל־הַיְּהוּדִים כְּכַתְּבָם וְכָל־שָׁנָם: וַיִּכְתֹּב בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשׁוּרִשׁ

#### BACKGROUND

8:9] In the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day of it: One explanation for the long delay between the hanging of Haman and the sending of the

missives negating his decree is that they waited for the original messengers to return in order to send them back again, as the return of the very same messengers would reinforce the credibility

of the new command (see Vilna Gaon, *Seder Olam Rabba* 29).



He sent scrolls in the hand of the couriers on horses, riders on the finest steeds owned by the king,<sup>65</sup> the mules born to mares.<sup>6</sup>



Horseman, stone relief, Nineveh, 645–635 BCE

- 11 The missives stated **that the king had authorized the Jews who were in each and every city to assemble and to defend themselves.** Whereas the previous order allowed all those who wished to do so to attack the Jews, under the assumption that the Jews were forbidden to retaliate, here the king permitted them to defend themselves, and even **to destroy, to kill, and to eliminate the armies of people and provinces that are hostile to them, children and women, and to plunder their spoils.** The Jews were granted royal consent to wage total war against any enemy.
- 12 This order would come into effect **on one day in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar,** the same date that was previously fixed for their destruction.

## The Jews' Victory and Its Commemoration

ESTHER 9:1–32

are spared from the threat. He establishes them as permanent dates of feasting and joy that will be commemorated by the nation throughout its generations. Second, Esther and Mordekhai write a record of the events, which is this book.

- 9 1 **In the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of it,** the date that Haman fixed for the destruction of the Jews, **when the time arrived for the king's edict and his directive to be implemented,** as both orders were in force, it was therefore **on the day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to rule over them, it was in fact reversed that it was the Jews who ruled over their enemies.**
- 2 **The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh** where there were Jewish communities, **to extend their hand against those who sought their harm and no man could withstand them, as fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples.**
- 3 **All the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and the king's administrators,** the officials and government

- 13 **The text of the document, the royal decree, was to issue a directive in each and every province, to be disclosed to all the peoples, publicized to everyone, for the Jews to be ready for that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.** The same day that was designated for their destruction would be the day of their salvation.
- 14 **The couriers, riders on the finest steeds went out again urgently and hastily by edict of the king,** in order to disseminate the new order as quickly as possible throughout the kingdom, **and the directive was also issued in Shushan the capital itself.**
- 15 **Mordekhai, who had just received his new appointment, came out from before the king dressed in royal garments made of sky-blue and white woven material, with a great golden crown upon his head, and wrapped with a cloak<sup>66</sup> of fine linen and purple wool;<sup>6</sup> and the Jewish population of the city of Shushan reveled and rejoiced,** upon seeing that their representative had risen to a position of power and had become the most influential man in the kingdom.
- 16 **For the Jews there was light, and joy, and gladness, and honor,** as instead of the bloody pogrom that had been planned, in which they were not meant to have any right to self-defense whatsoever, they were now legally permitted to protect themselves and fight their enemies.
- 17 **In each and every province and in each and every city, any place where the king's edict and his directive reached, there was joy and gladness for the Jews, a banquet and a holiday, and many from the peoples of the land pretended to be Jews,<sup>67</sup> or professed to favor the Jews but without internal conviction, as the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.** The missives alone produced such a great impression that even before their directive was put into practice, the Jews began rejoicing and others became fearful.

הַיְּהוּדִים  
עֲתִידִים

וַיַּחֲתֶם בַּטְּבַעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁלַח סַפְרִים בְּיַד הָרָצִים בַּסּוּסִים רַכְבֵּי הָרָכֶשׁ  
 יא הָאֲחֻשְׁתָּרָנִים בְּנֵי הָרַמְכִּים: אֲשֶׁר נָתַן הַמֶּלֶךְ לַיהוּדִים וְאֲשֶׁר וּבְכָל-עִיר  
 וְעִיר לְהַקְהֵל וּלְעֲמֹד עַל-נַפְשָׁם לְהַשְׁמִיד וּלְהַרְגַּ וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת-כָּל-חַיִּל עַם  
 יב וּמְדִינָה הַצָּרִים אֹתָם טָף וְנָשִׁים וְשָׁלָל לְבוֹז: בַּיּוֹם אֶחָד בְּכָל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 יג אֶחָד שׁוּרוֹשׁ בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר: פֶּתַשְׁגָּן  
 הַכֶּתֵּב לְהַנְתֵּן דָּת בְּכָל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה גָלוּי לְכָל-הָעַמִּים וּלְהִיּוֹת הַיְּהוּדִים  
 יד עֲתוּדִים לַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהִנָּקֵם מֵאִיְבֵיהֶם: הָרָצִים רַכְבֵּי הָרָכֶשׁ הָאֲחֻשְׁתָּרָנִים יֵצְאוּ  
 טו מִבְּהֵלִים וּדְחוּפִים בְּדִבְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַדָּת נִתְּנָה בְּשׁוֹשֶׁן הַבִּירָה: וּמִרְדָּכִי  
 יז יֵצֵא וּמִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלָבוֹשׁ מַלְכוּת תִּכְלֶלֶת וְחֹזֶר וְעֹטָת זָהָב גְּדוּלָּה וְתַכְרִיךְ  
 טז בּוֹץ וְאַרְגָּמָן וְהָעִיר שׁוֹשֶׁן צָהֳלָה וְשִׁמְחָה: לַיהוּדִים הֵיטָה אוֹרָה וְשִׁמְחָה וְשׁוֹשֶׁן  
 יז וִיקָר: וּבְכָל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל-עִיר וְעִיר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ מִגִּיעַ  
 ט פָּחַד-הַיְּהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם: וּבְשָׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם  
 בּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הִגִּיעַ דְּבַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ לְהַעֲשׂוֹת בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרוּ אִיְבֵי הַיְּהוּדִים  
 ב לְשָׁלוֹט בָּהֶם וְנִהְפּוּךְ הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְטוּ הַיְּהוּדִים הַמָּה בְּשִׁנְאֵיהֶם: נִקְהִלוּ  
 הַיְּהוּדִים בְּעָרֵיהֶם בְּכָל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָד שׁוּרוֹשׁ לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמִּבְקָשִׁי רַעְתָם

## BACKGROUND

8:10 | **The couriers on horses, riders on the finest steeds [rekhesh] the mules born to mares:** The royal horseback messengers were part of a remarkable system of communication and road networks created by Darius I. In order to increase their speed on the flat terrain of Mesopotamia, the king's messengers would change their horses at waystations. *Rekhes* is the name for a legendarily light, swift horse. The

last part of the verse is probably referring to riders of fast mules, the offspring of a select breed of mares, as these could gallop along the mountainous regions of central and northern Persia, as well as Anatolia. Perhaps the three different types of messengers specified in this verse, those on "horses," "riders on the finest steeds," and on "mules born to mares," performed different missions, for short, medium, and long

distances. Only those messengers sent to the far corners of the kingdom required mules that could cope with hilly terrain.

8:15 | **In royal garments of sky blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a cloak of linen and purple wool:** (See commentary on 1:6; see also the image of the king with his second-in-command standing behind him, dressed in similar attire).

representatives, **elevated** or honored **the Jews, because the fear of Mordekhai had fallen upon them.** When the first missives were sent, Haman was the chief minister. Now, however, Mordekhai is the foremost of the king's ministers, and therefore everyone granted the Jews the freedom of action they required.

- 4 **For Mordekhai was great in status in the king's palace, and his renown spread in all the provinces, for the man Mordekhai was growing greater.**
- 5 **The Jews smote all their enemies a blow of the sword, killing, and destruction, and they did to their enemies as they willed.**



Sword, Persepolis, 560–331 BCE

- 6 **In Shushan the capital the Jews killed and eliminated five hundred men,** their enemies who had planned to attack the Jews on that day, and who had perhaps taunted the Jews earlier and boasted of their heinous plans.
- 7 **And Parshandata, Dalfon, Aspata,**
- 8 **Porata, Adalya, Aridata,**
- 9 **Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vayzata,**
- 10 **the ten sons of Haman the son of Hamedata, the adversary of the Jews, they killed; but they did not extend their hands to the spoils.** The Jews did not consider this conflict a war but an act of defense, and furthermore, they wished to avoid

provoking hatred against themselves. Therefore, they made do with killing their enemies, but they did not touch their property, despite the fact that in his communiqué the king had granted the Jews permission to loot their enemies' possessions.<sup>68</sup>

- 11 **On that day, the number of those killed in Shushan the capital came before the king,** through his extensive intelligence network.
- 12 **The king said to Queen Esther: The Jews have killed and eliminated five hundred men in Shushan the capital, along with the ten sons of Haman; if so, in the rest of the king's provinces I imagine they have done likewise.** It can be assumed that the results are comparable in the other provinces, even though the numbers are not yet known. Your people have avenged themselves upon their enemies as you wished. **What is your wish and it will be granted you? What else do you request and it will be done?**
- 13 **Esther said,** realizing that the king wanted to make her happy and to fulfill her every desire: **If it pleases the king, let tomorrow, too, be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do in accordance with today's directive.** Although this was not written in the original missives, I would like you to issue a verbal instruction permitting the Jews in Shushan, which was likely where the core supporters of Haman were based,<sup>69</sup> to complete the task. **And have them hang Haman's ten sons,** who have already been killed,<sup>70</sup> **upon the gibbet,** as a public display that the king and the authorities support the action that has been taken, and that they consider these men criminals rather than random victims of indiscriminate rioting.
- 14 **The king said to do so, and a directive was issued** permitting another day of vengeance **in Shushan, and they hanged Haman's ten sons.**

ג ואִישׁ לֹא־עָמַד לִפְנֵיהֶם כִּי־נָפַל פָּחַדָם עַל־כָּל־הָעַמִּים: וְכָל־שָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת  
 וְהָאֲחֻשְׁדָּרָפָנִים וְהַפָּחוֹת וְעִשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר לַמֶּלֶךְ מְנַשְּׂאִים אֶת־הַיְּהוּדִים  
 ד כִּי־נָפַל פָּחַד־מַרְדֳּכִי עֲלֵיהֶם: כִּי־גָדוֹל מַרְדֳּכִי בְּבֵית הַמֶּלֶךְ וְשָׁמְעוּ הוֹלֵךְ בְּכָל־  
 ה הַמְּדִינֹת כִּי־הָאִישׁ מַרְדֳּכִי הוֹלֵךְ וְגָדוֹל: וַיָּבוּ הַיְּהוּדִים בְּכָל־אַיְבֵיהֶם מִכַּת־חֶרֶב  
 ו הָרֶג וְאִבְדָן וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְשֵׁנָאֵיהֶם כְּרִצּוֹנָם: וּבְשׁוֹשָׁן הַבִּירָה הָרָגוּ הַיְּהוּדִים וְאִבְדָּ  
 ז חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ: וְאֵת |  
 פְּרִשְׁנֵדְתָּא | וְאֵת |  
 דִּלְפּוֹן | וְאֵת |  
 ח אֶסְפֶּתָּא: | וְאֵת |  
 פּוֹרְתָא | וְאֵת |  
 אֲדִלְיָא | וְאֵת |  
 ט אֲרִידְתָּא: | וְאֵת |  
 פַּרְמִשְׁתָּא | וְאֵת |  
 אֲרִיסִי | וְאֵת |  
 אֲרִידִי | וְאֵת |  
 י וַיִּזְתָּא: | עֶשְׂרֵת  
 יא כִּנֵּי הַמֶּן בֶּן־הַמֶּדְתָּא עֶרְרַת הַיְּהוּדִים הָרָגוּ וּבִבְרָה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם: בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא  
 יב בָּא מִסְפֵּר הַהֲרוּגִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן הַבִּירָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה  
 בְּשׁוֹשָׁן הַבִּירָה הָרָגוּ הַיְּהוּדִים וְאִבְדָּ חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וְאֵת עֶשְׂרֵת בְּנֵי־הַמֶּן  
 בְּשָׂאֵר מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ מָה עָשׂוּ וּמָה־שְּׂאֵלָתָךְ וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ וּמָה־בִּקְשָׁתְךָ עוֹד  
 יג וַתַּעֲשׂ: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אֶס־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִנָּתֶן גַּם־מֵחֵר לַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוֹשָׁן  
 יד לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדַת הַיּוֹם וְאֵת עֶשְׂרֵת בְּנֵי־הַמֶּן יִתְּלוּ עַל־הָעֵץ: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַהֲעֲשׂוֹת  
 טו כֵּן וַתִּנָּתֶן דָּת בְּשׁוֹשָׁן וְאֵת עֶשְׂרֵת בְּנֵי־הַמֶּן תָּלָו: וַיִּקְהָלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר־בְּשׁוֹשָׁן

הַיְּהוּדִים

- 15** The Jews who were in Shushan assembled on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as well, and killed another three hundred men in Shushan, but also in this instance they did not extend their hand to the spoils.
- 16** The rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces, perhaps including the province of Judah, which is not explicitly mentioned here, but whose Jewish residents were experiencing harassment during this time,<sup>71</sup> assembled and defended themselves. And in doing so they rested from the attacks of their enemies. Then they went on the offensive and killed seventy-five thousand of their enemies, throughout the kingdom, but again, did not extend their hand to the spoils.
- 17** It, all this, was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and the rest from fighting was on the fourteenth of it, and it was made a day of banqueting and joy, in honor of the victory.
- 18** But the Jews who were in Shushan assembled together to avenge themselves upon their enemies on the thirteenth of it, and on the fourteenth of it; and rested from battle on the fifteenth of it, and it was made a day of banqueting and joy. They celebrated the victory one day later than the rest of the empire.
- 19** Therefore, the unvalled Jews, that is, those who live in the unvalled cities,<sup>8</sup> whose residents were exposed to great danger, observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day of joy, banqueting, and a holiday, each in their own home, and furthermore, a day of sending portions of food one to another, which involves leaving the house. All this was performed in order to increase the joy and publicly express their happiness. The date on which they spontaneously celebrated at that time became a day of rejoicing in the following years.<sup>72</sup>
- 20** Mordekhai institutionalized these spontaneous festivities by instituting a new observance:<sup>73</sup> Mordekhai wrote these matters, the events that occurred, and he sent these directions in the form of scrolls to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh, near and far,
- 21** to establish for them to observe the victory celebrations of the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of it, in each and every year, as permanent days of merriment and feasting:
- 22** In accordance with the dates of the days that the Jews of that generation rested from their enemies, and the month that was transformed for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday, to observe them as days of banquet and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the indigent, so that the poor should also participate in the festivities.
- 23** The Jews as a people undertook;<sup>74</sup> alternatively, each individual Jew accepted to continue that which they had begun to practice at the time, and that which Mordekhai wrote to them.
- 24** Mordekhai's brief summary of the events, as he wrote to the Jews, went as follows: Because Haman son of Hamedata the Agagite, adversary of all the Jews, not only the enemy of Mordekhai alone,<sup>75</sup> had plotted against the Jews to eliminate them, and he cast the pur, that is in Hebrew the lot [*goral*], in order to determine a date on which to crush them, and eliminate them.
- 25** But when she, Esther,<sup>76</sup> came before the king; alternatively, when it, Haman's intention, came before the king, he said: By means of the scroll may his wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews return upon his head. When he summarized what happened, Mordekhai was careful not to mention that Ahashverosh had initially signed Haman's decree. Rather, he described the events in such a manner that it seemed that when the missives appeared the king was surprised to discover that his minister had used his authority for reprehensible ends, and as a result he commanded that Haman be punished.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, they hanged him and his sons on the gibbet.
- 26** Therefore, they called these days Purim, after the pur cast by Haman. Therefore, for all the matters of this missive of Mordekhai, and this communiqué included an account of what they saw about that matter, that is, what led them to establish these days: Haman's pur, which caused such worry, heartache, and days of mourning; and what befell them, how they ultimately achieved victory and rest,
- 27** the Jews established and undertook for themselves, and for their descendants, and as these days of Purim were established for the entire people throughout the generations, they were also undertaken for everyone who accompanied them, converts,<sup>78</sup> despite the fact that their biological ancestors were not affected. And it was determined that it will not be neglected, to observe these two days as they are written, and on their dates, each and every year.

#### BACKGROUND

9:19 | **The unvalled [*haperazim*] Jews, who live in the unvalled cities:** The authors of the book of Esther may have felt it was necessary to elaborate and precisely define the term *perazim*, because of the similar Persian word

*perazona*, which means people from diverse origins, similar to the Hebrew term *pezura*, diaspora. It is therefore emphasized that this term denotes specifically Jews who lived outside the fortified capital, or other fortified cities, which

were protected by soldiers of the Persian kingdom (Tamar Eilam Gindin, *The Book of Esther Unmasked*. Zeresh Publications, 2016 [Hebrew], pp. 144–145).

והיהודים

הפרזים

גם ביום ארבעה עשר לחדש אדר ויהרגו בשושן שלש מאות איש ובבזיה לא  
טז שלחו את ידם: ושאר היהודים אשר במדינות המלך נקהלו וועמד על נפשם  
ונזח מאיביהם והרוג בשנאייהם חמשה ושבעים אלף ובבזיה לא שלחו את  
יז ידם: ביום שלושה עשר לחדש אדר ונזח בארבעה עשר בו ועשה אותו יום  
יח משתה ושמחה: והיהודים אשר בשושן נקהלו בשלושה עשר בו ובארבעה  
יט עשר בו ונזח בחמשה עשר בו ועשה אותו יום משתה ושמחה: על כן היהודים  
הפרזים הישבים בערי הפרזות עשים את יום ארבעה עשר לחדש אדר  
כ שמחה ומשתה ויום טוב ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו: וכתב מרדכי את  
הדברים האלה וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך  
כא אחשוורוש הקרובים והרחוקים: לקיים עליהם להיות עשים את יום ארבעה  
כב עשר לחדש אדר ואת יום חמשה עשר בו בכל שנה ושנה: כימים אשר נחו  
בהם היהודים מאיביהם והחדש אשר נהפך להם מגזון לשמחה ומאבל ליום  
טוב לעשות אותם ימי משתה ושמחה ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות  
כג לאבינים: וקבל היהודים את אשר החלו לעשות ואת אשר כתב מרדכי  
כד אליהם: כי המן בן המדתא האגגי ציר כל היהודים חשב על היהודים  
כה לאבדם והפל פור הוא הגורל להמם ולאבדם: ובבאה לפני המלך אמר עס  
הספר ישוב מחשבתו הרעה אשר חשב על היהודים על דאשו ותלו אותו  
כו ואת בניו על העץ: על כן קראו לימים האלה פורים על שם הפור על  
כז כן על כל דברי האגרת הזאת ומה דאו על ככה ומה הגיע אליהם: קימו  
וקבל היהודים ויעל זרעם ועל כל הנלוים עליהם ולא יעבור להיות  
כח עשים את שני הימים האלה ככתבם וכזמנם בכל שנה ושנה: והימים



- 28** These days are remembered and observed in each and every generation, each and every family, each and every province, and each and every city. Celebration of the festival spread through all Jewish communities. Therefore, **these days of Purim will not pass from among the Jews, and their memory will not perish from their descendants**; they will be commemorated forever. Often national days of celebration are temporary and forgotten over the passage of time. By contrast, because this episode involved a plot to destroy the entire nation, it was therefore a victory that affected the entire people through all its generations.
- 29** **Queen Esther, daughter of Avihayil, and Mordekhai the Jew, wrote with all authority**, with all the power they had at their disposal; alternatively, they wrote about the significance of the miraculous events in<sup>79</sup> **this second missive of Purim**. The first one which contained a summary, was sent by Mordekhai. Later the pair wrote a revised communiqué signed by the queen.<sup>80</sup>

### The Greatness of Ahashverosh and Mordekhai

ESTHER 10:1–3

This short section, which concludes the book of Esther, forms a bookend parallel to its opening verses. While the book began with a description of the kingdom of Ahashverosh and his lavish feasts, it ends here with a historical record of his reign, conveyed in a formal style.

- 30** He, Mordekhai, sent scrolls to all the Jews, to one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahashverosh, **matters of peace and truth**. These communiqués were not written in the form of binding orders, but as an inspirational set of guidelines from the spiritual leader of the Jews.
- 31** The missive was sent **to establish these days of Purim on their dates, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther established for them, and as they established the matters of the fasts and their lamentations<sup>D</sup> for themselves and for their descendants**. Just as all the Jews throughout the kingdom of Ahashverosh had taken part in the communal fast and prayers when the decree was issued, it was certainly fitting that the entire people likewise share in the commemoration of the events.
- 32** **The edict of Esther established these matters of Purim, and it was written in the scroll**. Since Mordekhai was not a royalty, his power was limited. Esther reinforced the commemorative days by recording them, with her signature, in a book, which is the book of Esther.<sup>81</sup>

- 10 1** **King Ahashverosh imposed a tax on the land, and on the lands of the sea,<sup>B</sup>** as under his rule the kingdom of Persia reached the pinnacle of its greatness and power.
- 2** **Aren't all the details of the acts of his, Ahashverosh's, authority and his might, and the episode of the greatness of Mordekhai that the king promoted him** to the chief minister of the kingdom, **written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?** These historical matters are beyond the scope of elaboration here; further descriptions may be found in the chronicles of the kings of Persia and Media. Similar brief summaries, which direct the reader to the royal chronicles, also appear elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>82</sup>
- 3** The book concludes by returning to the matter at hand: **For Mordekhai the Jew** had achieved the high status of a man who was **viceroy to King Ahashverosh**, and as such, he was also **prominent** as a great leader **among the Jews**, and **accepted by most<sup>D</sup> of his brethren**.<sup>83</sup> Mordekhai was a constant **seeker of**

**good for his people**, as he tried to help the Jewish population with the means at his disposal, **and an unwavering spokesman of peace for all his descendants**. All his children and grandchildren benefited from his position of greatness.



Suppos tomb of Mordekhai and Esther, Hamadan, western Iran

### BACKGROUND

**10:1 | The lands of the sea:** At its height, the kingdom of Persia controlled the isles of the Aegean Sea, as well as the island of Cyprus. This was achieved thanks to the powerful Persian navy, which was manned by Phoenician mercenaries.

הָאֱלֹהִים נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר מִשְׁפָּחָהּ וּמִשְׁפָּחָהּ מְדִינָהּ וּמְדִינָהּ  
וְעִיר וְעִיר וַיְמִי הַפּוֹרִים הָאֱלֹהִים לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַיְּהוּדִים וְזָכְרָם לֹא־יִסּוּף  
מִזֶּרַע־ם: כט  
וְתִכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בִּתְּאֲבִיחַיִל וּמִרְדֵּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי  
אֶת־כָּל־הַתִּקְוָה לְקַיֵּם אֶת אֲגֶרֶת הַפָּרִים הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁנִית: וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־  
הַיְּהוּדִים אֶל־שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה מַלְכוּת אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ דְּבַר־י שְׁלוֹם וְאַמֶּת:  
לְקַיֵּם אֶת־יְמֵי הַפָּרִים הָאֱלֹהִים בְּזִמְנֵיהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר קִיָּם עֲלֵיהֶם מִרְדֵּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי לא  
וְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְכַאֲשֶׁר קִיָּמוּ עַל־נַפְשָׁם וְעַל־זֶרַע־ם דְּבַר־י הַצּוֹמּוֹת וְזַעֲקָתָם:  
וּמֵאֲמַר אֶסְתֵּר קִיָּם דְּבַר־י הַפָּרִים הָאֱלֹהִים וְנִכְתָּב בַּסֵּפֶר: וַיִּשְׁם לב ,  
הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרֶשׁ מִסָּעֵל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֵיִי הֵם: וְכָל־מַעֲשֵׂה תִקְפוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ וּפְרָשָׁתוֹ ב  
גְּדֻלַּת מִרְדֵּכִי אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ הִלּוּא־הֶם כְּתוּבִים עַל־סֵפֶר דְּבַר־י הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכִּי  
מְדִי וּפָרָס: כִּי מִרְדֵּכִי הַיְּהוּדִי מִשְׁנָה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיְּהוּדִים וְרָצוּ ג  
לְרֹב אַחֲיוֹ דָּרָשׁ טוֹב לַעֲמּוֹ וְדָבָר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל־זֶרַעוֹ:

אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ

## DISCUSSION

9:31 | **The matters of the fasts and their lamentations:** Some explain that this is the Fast of Esther, which the Jews accepted upon themselves as a day of prayer and supplication forever (Ra'avad). Many other commentaries disagree, maintaining that the verse is referring to the fasts days observed in memory of the destruction of the Temple, which are

mentioned in Zechariah 8:19 (see Malbim; Ran, *Ta'anit* 18b).

10:3 | **Accepted by most of his brethren:** The Sages expound that Mordekhai was accepted by most, but not all, of his brethren, as some members of the Sanhedrin parted from him. This was perhaps because he had taken on such a senior

position of authority (see Rashi; *Megilla* 16b). Alternatively, he was not universally liked because the building of Jerusalem and the Temple were not renewed during his tenure. On the other hand, this period of calm may have been a contributing factor that allowed the Jews to later petition the king of Persia and request that the Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt.

1. 3:8.
2. 3:13.
3. 9:20–28.
4. See *Megilla* 7a.
5. See Ibn Ezra's introduction to the book of Esther and his commentary on 5:13, citing Rav Se'adya Gaon.
6. See Daniel 8:2.
7. Ibn Ezra; Rav Yeshaya of Trani; Vilna Gaon.
8. See, e.g., Rashi; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra.
9. See Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*.
10. See *Megilla* 12a.
11. See Rabbi Ya'akov of Lisa, *Megillat Setarim*.
12. Rashi; Ibn Ezra.
13. Rashi.
14. Based on Rashbam; *Bekhor Shor*; Ralbag; see also Daniel 5:10.
15. See Ralbag.
16. See *Megilla* 12b.
17. See Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*; Rav Yosef Kara; Rav Yeshaya of Trani; Ralbag.
18. *Esther Rabba* 1:15; Rashi.
19. Ibn Ezra.
20. See 8:8.
21. See Nehemiah 13:23–24.
22. See, e.g., Rashi.
23. See Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; Rav Yosef Kara; Rav Yeshaya of Trani.
24. Rabbi Yosef Naḥmias.
25. See *Megilla* 15a; *Targum*; Ibn Ezra
26. See *Malbim*.
27. *Targum*; *Megilla* 13a; see Ramban, Exodus 30:23.
28. See Ibn Ezra; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*.
29. See, e.g., Rashbam.
30. See discussion on verse 5.
31. See *Megilla* 13a.
32. Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*; Malbim; see Ruth 4:1; Daniel 2:42.
33. *Megilla* 13a; see *Menahot* 65a.
34. See II Kings 25:28; Daniel 5:29.
35. See Rav Yosef Caspi; *Megillat Setarim*.
36. Rav Yosef Kara, verse 5.
37. See *Targumim*; *Sanhedrin* 61b; *Megilla* 13a.
38. Ibn Ezra.
39. See Ibn Ezra; Ralbag.
40. See Ezekiel 21:26–27; commentary on Isaiah 36:10.
41. See *Megilla* 13b.
42. See Rashi.
43. Rashbam, and Ralbag, 4:8; Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*, 8:13.
44. See Rashi; Ibn Ezra; Ibn Ezra, 1:2.
45. *Targum*.
46. See Malbim.
47. 2:11, 21.
48. See Nehemiah 2:4.
49. Ibn Ezra.
50. *Targum*; Ralbag.
51. See Rashi; Ibn Ezra.
52. Ibn Ezra.
53. See Malbim.
54. See Rashi.
55. 9:7–10.
56. See *Megilla* 15b.
57. See Rashbam; Rav Yosef Kara.
58. See Malbim.
59. See *Targum*; *Megilla* 16a.
60. See Ibn Ezra; Rav Yosef Kara.
61. Ibn Ezra.
62. See 1:6; Ezekiel 23:41, and Radak ad loc.
63. See *Targum*.
64. See also Esther 3:12.
65. Ibn Ezra.
66. Ibn Ezra.
67. See Ibn Ezra; Rav Yeshaya of Trani.
68. See Rav Yosef Kara; Esther 8:11.
69. See Ralbag.
70. Rashi; Rashbam.
71. See Ezra 4:6.
72. Rambam, *Megilla* 2a.
73. Ibn Ezra, verse 20.
74. See *Targum*.
75. Malbim.
76. *Targum*; Rashi; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; see *Megilla* 16b.
77. See Ibn Ezra, 8:8.
78. Rashi.
79. See Rashi.
80. See Ibn Ezra, *Second Commentary*.
81. *Targum*; Rashi; Malbim.
82. I Kings 14:29, 15:23; II Kings 14:15; II Chronicles 25:26.
83. See 5:11.