

Megillat Esther, Lesson 2:

פרק א – King and law (דת) in Persia

Objectives

Students will understand how an opening episode in a narrative can frame the narrative, and how the first פרק of Esther frames the entire מגילה.

Framing question for פרק א: What does this contribute to the book? The story could just as well have opened with a notice that the king needed a queen, with or without any explanation given, and begun with פרק ב. So what does this chapter contribute to the themes of the book?

Overarching claims:

1. It introduces us to the character of the king, who personifies the kingdom of Persia.
2. It teaches us what life in the Persian Empire is like.
3. Less centrally, it paints a portrait of Vashti, whom Esther will have to differ from if she wants to succeed in the palace, unlike her predecessor.

A key word in this פרק is דת, which is a Persian word (borrowed into Hebrew and Aramaic) for “law.” Students should be asked to find each of the three occurrences (1:8, 1:13-15, and 1:18-22), and analyze what kind of “law” exactly is being referred to.

1. The first appearance of *dāt* deals with the party thrown by Xerxes: “He let everyone drink from vessels of gold, each vessel different from the others, and there was much royal wine, as much as the beneficence of the king; the drinking was according to the law (*ka-dāt*): no one coerced.” It is difficult to see how the drinking could be “according to the law” if no one coerced; is it really a law at all? The simplest way to make sense of it seems to be that the law was that everyone could drink as much, or as little, as he wanted. But then why bother making a law? This seems to be just the point: this was a law devoid of purpose, which points to an infatuation with law for its own sake, as opposed to law for the sake of creating a functioning society.
2. The second occurrence of *dāt* in the chapter is in response to Vashti’s “crime.” Vashti is apparently not willing to be debased by coming to the men’s party just to show off her great beauty. (For Vashti’s noble and principled rationale, see the twelfth century French commentator Joseph Qara on 1:12, quoted in the commentary of the French Sages, in תורת חיים: מגילת אסתר, 33-34.) Xerxes was mad, and called his advisors to ask what to do. This was, the book assures us, what he always did when faced with a problem:

Then the king said to the wise men, who knew the times – for this was the king’s way, before all who knew law (*dāt*) and judgment. ... what should be done, according to the law, to Queen Vashti because she did not obey the word of the king, brought by the eunuchs (1:13-15).

Wise advisors may have helped Xerxes see that this was a personal matter that would be best worked out between husband and wife. They may have pointed out that he was drunk, and this was no time to be making important decisions, and that perhaps in the morning he would see things in a different light. (The commentary of the French Sages in **תורת חיים: מגילת אסתר** 41: “Usually, if a queen angers a king, just between the two of them – since no damage results for the world at large, it is appropriate that the anger should subside and the wrath pass.”) But Xerxes’s advisors agreed that this was not merely personal, but was a matter for which the imperial law was appropriate.

3. In the third instance of **דת** in the **פרק**, Xerxes’ advisor Memucan validated the king’s intuition that his personal problem was in fact an imperial issue:

Vashti did not only wrong the king, but all the officers and all the peoples in all the king’s provinces! For this matter of the queen will spread among the women, who will then disparage their husbands, saying, “Xerxes said to bring Queen Vashti to him, and *she* didn’t come!” So this day, the wives of the officers of Persia and Media, who have heard about the matter of the queen, will speak to the officers, with sufficient contempt and wrath. So if it pleases the king, let a royal proclamation be issued, and let it be written in the laws (*dāt*) of Persia and Media, and let it never be abrogated, that Vashti would not come to King Xerxes, and so the king was to give her queenship to another better than herself. And let the order of the king, which he shall make, be heard in his whole kingdom – though it be very large! – and all the women will honor their husbands, great and small (1:17-20).

Not surprisingly, Xerxes’s ego is massaged by this reassurance. The fact that his wife did not obey him was not a problem in their relationship, or, worse, in his ability to wield power and dominance in his household; indeed, this was the leading edge of a potential insurrection on an imperial scale. Fortunately, he and his advisors knew just what to do: make a law! And thus the husband who was not obeyed by his wife made a law that all husbands were to be obeyed by their wives.

The chapter concludes with a note of absurdity regarding the details of this new law: “he sent letters into all the kings provinces...that every man should rule in his own house, and speak the language of his people” (1:22). Is the king prepared to enforce this rule? The midrash (Esther Rabbah 4:12) points out the absurdity: If a man complains to the imperial court that his wife insists on speaking *her* native tongue, and won’t serve what *he* wants for dinner, will the courts really step in? R. Pinhas, as quoted in the midrash (Esther Rabbah 4:12), went further: “because of this decree Xerxes became a laughingstock in the world.”

The import of the **דת**

If the **דת** is seen to be absurd in **פרק א**, its silliness is clinched in the following **פרקים**. In 3:8, Haman accused the Jews of being a people who “did not obey the *dāt* of the king,” which is grounds for the annihilation of this people. (The reader knows that there has been no evidence of such disobedience, however.) In the following **פרק**, Queen Esther the Jew does indeed flout the **דת** of the king: she says she will enter the king’s throne-room “against the law (**דת**).” As the reader knows (or is

soon to find out), this one open betrayal of the דת, far from condemning the Jews to destruction, begins the process of their salvation. Again, the דת is a terrifying behemoth which, once inspected, shows itself to have no real consequences.

Minor point 1: The advisors

Ahashverosh accepts his advisors' advice without any discussion. This is true throughout the Megillah: whenever anyone tells him that there is a problem and how to handle it, the suggestion is accepted. This is what happens with Haman and the Jews, and later Haman and Mordecai's reward. The only exception is when Esther tells Ahashverosh about the problem of Haman – but she does not suggest a particular course of action in פרק ז. When faced with a problem and not a solution, Ahashverosh is at a loss, and he gets up to go for a walk.

There are parallels between the way Memuchan handles the problem in פרק א and the way Haman advises the king in פרק ג. In both, there is an individual who offends the power of the king – Vashti and Mordecai (even if the offense is not serious in one, or both, of the cases). Rather than dealing with the individual, both Memuchan and Haman say that the individual represents an entire class of people, and that the actions are a potential threat to the entire empire – women, in the case of Vashti, and Jews in the case of Mordecai. It is no wonder that Hazal say that Haman is Memuchan!

Minor point 2: The Jews

Strikingly, the Jews are absent from פרק א, as Jews. No mention is made of the Jews at all. Does this suggest that they are just like everyone else? Is that positive or negative? These are open questions. Haman, of course, will later claim that the Jews are both “scattered” and “separated,” but it is hard to say whether פרק א supports this or not.

The midrash does see a lot of Jewish content in פרק א, including the famous claim that the “vessels of various sorts” are the Temple vessels.

The character of the king

Within פרק א, the purpose of introducing the דת in this way seems to be to call the entire empire into question. The king is all-powerful, since his mere word can legislate the dominion of half of the population of his empire over the other. But with all his power, we see him as a puppet, controlled by his advisors, more pomposity and swagger than substance. Hiding behind the elaborate system of laws, advisors, consultations, and decrees, is nothing at all, and certainly no moral rectitude or ethical standards. (The image of the Wizard of Oz comes to mind in this context. The power exists entirely because people believe that it does; there is no substance behind the loud voice. The author of Esther is playing the role of Dorothy, pulling back the curtain to reveal the pathetic individual whose bombast so intimidates his subjects.) The king and his advisors at times seem to inhabit a web of mere words and wills, in which they discuss with the utmost seriousness the fine points of law while the rest of the world continues operating as always, in blissful oblivion of these pseudo-scholastics.

What prevents this from being a true comedy is that despite the farcical nature of the law, the king's words *may* have real consequences. By the end of the chapter (although it is not explicitly

stated), Vashti really is no longer queen. Her fate was sealed by words spoken between the king and his advisors, patently ridiculous but entirely effective. This is the essential paradox of the story: as readers we must be terrified of Xerxes and of the Persian Empire, even while laughing at them. We know them to be ludicrous and we know their speeches to be hollow, but their decrees can have deadly consequences. What makes Xerxes terrifying is not that he is evil – he is not – but that there is such life-and-death power in the hands of such a buffoon.

For advanced students: a comparison to the aging King David

As the story goes on, it emerges that there is one figure from Israel’s past to whom Xerxes is in particular being compared. When Xerxes, at the beginning of chapter 2, finds himself alone, deprived (by his own hand) of his queen, his “lads” have quite a brilliant suggestion (Esther 2:2-4): “The lads of the king, his attendants, said, ‘Let them seek (*yevaqsu la-melekh*) beautiful virgin girls (*ne’arot betulot*) for the king...and the girl whom the king is most enamored of shall reign in place of Vashti’.” Perhaps we should not give these unnamed lads too much credit for their suggestion, however, since they seem to have lifted some of the phraseology directly from an earlier passage, regarding a senile King David. In that context, we read (1 Kings 1:2), “His servants said to him, ‘Let them seek (*yevaqsu ladoni ha-melekh*) a virgin girl (*na’ara betula*), that she may service the king and be a nurse for him and lie in his lap, and my lord the king shall be warm.”

To confirm that Xerxes is being compared to David in his senility, there is another scene later in the story which again evokes the same image. In chapter 4 of Esther, Mordecai orders Esther to go into the king and advocate on behalf of her kin, the Jewish people. This is reminiscent of the next scene in the last act of David’s life. After Adonijah declared himself king, the court divides. Some who had been among David’s most loyal supporters were allied with Adonijah, but others, including the prophet Nathan, opposed Adonijah’s attempt to reign. Nathan approached Bathsheba, David’s wife, and gave her instructions on approaching the king, to make a desperate plea on behalf of her own kin – her son Solomon. In other words, the stories have the following characters in parallel:

Nathan	Mordecai
Bathsheba	Esther
Solomon	Jewish people
David	Xerxes

Table 1: Esther compared with 1 Kings 1

The point appears to be that Xerxes, *even in his prime*, is akin to David in his teetering old age. David, in the last chapter of his life, is a pawn in the hands of shrewder operators around him. Adonijah, Bathsheba, and Nathan are all angling for power as David’s life comes to an end. At this point in his reign, everyone acknowledge that his word is law – but also that he is incompetent to actually make decisions, so the game becomes one of manipulation. The one who can best manipulate the king will emerge the victor in this game. This, according to Esther, is *always* the reality

in Susa. It will be Haman who at first plays this game most successfully, but he will later be bested at his own game by Mordecai and Esther.

The two queens

It is possible that one contribution Chapter 1 makes to understanding the book is that Vashti serves as a foil for what Esther will have to be.

This depends in part on understanding Vashti. Leaving midrashim aside, a drunk Ahashverosh, on his one-hundred eighty-seventh consecutive day of feasting, sent his advisors to call Vashti into the men's party to show off her great beauty. Vashti, knowing both her husband's state of mind and the audience (this was the feast not limited to nobles, but for all the people of the fortress of Shushan), was not willing to be so debased, and, insisting on her honor (and perhaps the honor of the monarchy as a whole) refused to come. (This rationale is explained well by R. Joseph Qara, in his comments on 1:12, quoted in the commentary of the French Sages, in *תורת חיים: מגילת אסתר*, 33-34.)

But this tactic, admirable though it may be principle, backfires when used to take a stand against the king. The king calls upon his advisors who know "the law" (see above), and they banish Vashti from the palace (*אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תָבוֹא וְשָׂתִי לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ*). (Of course this is ironic: the punishment for refusing to come see the king is that she may never again see the king.)

So we know that if anyone wants to be successful in convincing the king to change his mind, standing up to him is *not* the way to do it. Esther learns this lesson well. At the beginning of her reign as queen, she has no need to stand up to the king, and is thoroughly malleable (see next lesson). But even when she does decide she needs to challenge her husband, she does not do it by standing up to him.

One last point relevant to this: although in Chapter 4, Esther shows that she learned the lesson of Vashti very well, and does not even then stand up to the king directly, Mordecai at that point *does* think that challenging him is the proper course of action. In this regard, Mordecai is somewhat like Vashti: when it comes to a matter of principle, he (like she) insists on taking a principled stand. There are a few parallels between Mordecai and Vashti:

	Mordecai	Vashti
Principled stand	Against the genocide of the Jews	Against the debasement of her stature
Refusal to obey	Does not bow down when the king commands	Does not come in when the king commands
Royal official's reaction	Haman claims that Mordecai's refusal to bow down shows that all Jews are threats	Memucan claims that Vashti's refusal to come in shows that all women are threats

Finally, Esther shows a reversal from Vashti in one last way: Vashti refused to enter when bidden, and thus lost her crown; Esther enters when not bidden – risking her crown but in the end securing it. Thus without the story of Vashti, we would not fully appreciate Esther as tactician.