

## Megillat Esther, Lesson 8:

### פרק ו: What is a coincidence, and where is God in the Megilla?

The reversals in the story revolve around פרק ו. This can be neatly seen by contrasting the responses Haman gets from his circle of family and friends right before this episode, and right after it:

5:14: ותאמר לו זרש אשתו וכל-אֶהָבָיו יְעִשׂוּ-עִץ גְּבֵה חֲמִשִּׁים אַמָּה וּבִבְקָר אָמַר לְמֶלֶךְ וַיִּתְּלוּ אֶת-מֶרְדֵּכָי עָלָיו וּבֵא-עַם-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-הַמִּשְׁתָּה שְׂמַח וַיֵּיטֵב הַדָּבָר לְפָנָי הֵמָּן וַיַּעַשׂ הָעֵץ.

6:13: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ חֲכָמָיו וְזָרֵשׁ אֶשְׁתּוֹ אִם מִזְרַע הַיְהוּדִים מֶרְדֵּכָי אֲשֶׁר הַחֲלוּת לְנַפֵּל לְפָנָיו לֹא-תוּכַל לוֹ כִּי- נָפֹל תַּפּוּל לְפָנָיו.

It is clear to the characters in the story – as it is clear to us – that with the events of chapter 6, everything has begun to go the Jews' way. In one sense, chapter 6 is just the latest in a series of reversals of Mordecai and Haman (see Unit 5 above). In another sense, however, it is clear that it is something more.

This is important to emphasize, because in terms of the logic of the story, this is not true. The fact that Mordecai is still alive, and Haman temporarily humiliated, has nothing to do with the real threat to the Jews, which is the genocide looming in 11 months. Even were Haman to die now, that danger would not be technically abated. It is a tribute to the structure of the book, however, that the seemingly trivial events of chapter 6 are made to change the tide of the entire story, literarily.

So what happened in chapter 6 to change the story? There are two broad ways of reading it, and these are encapsulated in different understandings of the opening line.

We read at the beginning of chapter 6: “On that night, the king’s sleep drifted.” According to many readers of Esther, this seeming coincidence is the epitome of the hidden hand of God in the book: that on just this night the king could not sleep, and he happened to have the chronicles read to him, and he happened to hear the story of Mordecai – this level of coincidence can only be divine. This is certainly the more common view, and it is summarized succinctly by Rashi: “It was a miracle.”

There is, however, another way of thinking about this scene. Rabbi Joseph Naḥmias<sup>1</sup>, following the fourth-century Babylonian sage Rava (quoted in B. Megillah 15b) suggests that Xerxes returned from the first banquet suspicious of Esther and Haman, whom he

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph b. Joseph Naḥmias was a fourteenth-century scholar, a member of the circle of R. Asher b. Yehiel (the Rosh). Extant commentaries written by him include works on the biblical books of Proverbs, Esther, and Jeremiah, and on Mishnah Avot and the Avodah of the Day of Atonement. These were mostly published by Moses Leib Bamberger in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and were reprinted in 1982 in a single volume: פירושי רבי יוסף בן נחמיה על משלי, מגילת אסתר, ירמיהו, פרקי אבות וסדר עבודת יום הכפורים (Tel Aviv, 1982). Gad Freudenthal, “Distinguishing Two R. Joseph b. Joseph Nahmias: The Commentator and the Astrologer,” in his *Science in the Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Traditions* (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), chapter 8. (The paper was first published in *Qiryat Sefer* 62 [1988-1989], 917-919, and in the English volume there is no pagination throughout the volume.)

thought may be plotting regicide. He calmed himself with the thought that surely one of his court would remain loyal to him and inform him of such a plot, should one exist. He then second-guessed that reassurance with the thought that he may have failed to adequately reward someone who had once helped him, and therefore perhaps it is true that there is no loyalty in the court at all. So he went searching through his annals for cases of people who had helped him, to ensure that they had been adequately rewarded. When he came to Mordecai, he was of course quite concerned about the lack of reward, and aimed to rectify the oversight immediately.

With this reconstruction, there is no coincidence in what transpired at all. Xerxes reasonably called for his chronicles, and instructed his servants to search for episodes in which a member of the royal court had rendered assistance beyond the call of duty. They found, naturally, the story of Mordecai, and foremost on the king's mind, then, was to the need to rectify his earlier failure to reward him.

An even more specific interpretation was offered by the sixteenth-century exegete Elijah b. Elijah Ashkenazi the Physician (16<sup>th</sup> century Egypt, Cyprus, and eventually Italy), in his commentary on Esther entitled *Yosef Leqaḥ*. Elijah suggests that Xerxes must have realized that Esther put her life on the line to approach him in the throne room unbidden, and that she must, therefore, have something very important to ask. At the banquet, she promised to request something on the morrow, only strengthening the impression that her request would be momentous. The king tried to anticipate the request, but she was, of course, already the queen, and her husband could think of nothing more that Esther could request for herself. So he reasoned that her request may be on behalf another. After further thought, Xerxes remembered that Esther had warned him of the plot of Bigtan and Teresh "in the name of Mordecai," so this suggested one person on whose behalf she might approach him. This inspired the king to order that the files regarding the Bigtan and Teresh episode be examined, to determine if indeed Mordecai merited any reward.

Again, on Elijah's reading, there is no coincidence whatsoever. Not only the choice of book, but the very page that the attendants read was not a coincidence. Indeed, according to his reconstruction of Xerxes' thought, what occurred was the only natural course of events!

This raises a central question in interpreting the book: when there are apparent coincidences, how are they to be understood? God pulling the strings, good luck, or some combination of the two? Or, when put in terms of chapter 6, is it that the hand of God has become clear, or that there is some mysterious force that seems to work on behalf of the Jews in times of need? The closest we get to a theological comment comes from Zeresh, at the end of the chapter, and of course she does not mention God (אם מִזְרַע הַיְהוּדִים מְרַדְּכֵי אֲשֶׁר (הַחֲלוֹת לְנַפְל לְפָנָיו לֹא-תוּכַל לוּ כִּי-נִפְּוֹל תִּפְּוֹל לְפָנָיו)). What *is* the force that saves the Jews in the story of Esther? Is it God, or is it destiny? Or are these the same?

### **The use of Yosef, again**

As we have already discussed, the author of the Megillah alludes quite often to the story of Joseph in Bereshit 37-50. This is relevant to the question of "coincidences," as well. Bereshit 37 – the story of the sale of Yosef – is crucial here: there is a string of coincidences,

God is not mentioned at all in the chapter (for the first time in all of the Torah!), and then there is a denouement later on that reveals God's hand in the story:

- Yaakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers.
- The brothers have moved, coincidentally, from Shechem (in the center of the country) to Dotan (near the Jezreel Valley).
- Caravans from Arabia pass through the Jezreel Valley (but not anywhere near Shechem) on their way to Egypt.
- Yosef meets an anonymous man (איש) who happens to know where the brothers are. [This is so convenient that the midrash, cited by Rashi, says it was the angel Gabriel.]
- The caravan happens to pass by while Yosef is in the pit and Yosef winds up in Egypt, in position to save his family and bring them to Egypt later on.

At the end of the story, Yosef tells his brothers (and the readers) that this was divine action throughout, and not a coincidence after all:

- 45:4-9 (e.g., לא-אתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי האלהים)
- 50:20 (ואתם חשבתי עלי רעה אלהים חשבה לטובה למען עשה כיום הזה להחית עם-רב).

In Esther, however, there is no such character. No one ever says "this was all the plan of God." According to Nahmias, perhaps this is because the author is less certain that it was divine; for most readers, the author is relying on us remembering the story of Yosef and the revelation at the end of that story to understand that when there is a string of coincidences and things work out well with the Jew in the foreign court, that this is all יה'.