

Megillat Esther, Lesson 9:

The end of the Megilla (פרקים ז-י)

Part 1: The aftermath of the climax

One of the interesting things about the way the story of the Megilla is told is that after Chapter 6, the Jews are still technically in mortal danger, but it is clear to the reader that there will be a happy ending. This is worth probing in some depth.

There are really two stories of conflict in the Megilla: Haman vs. Mordecai and Haman (and his allies) vs. the Jews. Once Haman's decree is promulgated in פרק ג, these two conflicts are logically separate. Even if Haman dies, the decree has already gone out and the Jews will be massacred.

However, the story is told in a way that ties these conflicts together. For the reader, therefore, after פרק ו, when Haman is beaten by Mordecai, much of the suspense of the book dissipates. This is captured (as discussed in Lesson 7) by Zeresh's advice in 6:13: "If Mordecai is from the offspring of the Jews, and you have started to lose to him, you will not be able to defeat him, and you will certainly lose to him." Zeresh, and everyone else watching the events unfold, knows that Haman has begun to lose.

Esther's plan in פרק ז

This is true even though Esther's plan, upon closer inspection, does not actually work all that well. She reveals Haman to the king as the man who is plotting to massacre her people, but the king does not know what to do with this information – so he goes to take a walk. When he returns, it is only through the intervention of Harbona that a solution presents itself, and Haman is hanged.

This makes the king feel much better about everything, especially when he follows this up by giving Haman's house to Esther and the royal ring to Mordecai. All of this is gratifying, but it does not solve the essence of the problem: there is a genocidal decree that was publicized, allowing the Jews to be killed on 13 Adar. Now, the events of the banquets unfold on Pesach (15 or 16 Nisan), so there is time to worry about this. But the king is not actually interested in solving this difficult problem; he took quick impulsive action and thinks he is done: וַיִּתְּלוּ אֶת-הָמָן עַל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-הָכִין לְמֹרְדֵּכַי וְחַמַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁכְבָה: (7:10).

Esther's plea in פרק ח

Interestingly, this leads to Esther approaching the king again in 8:3: וַתֹּסֶף אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּדְבָר לְפָנָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתַּפֵּל לְפָנָיו רַגְלָיו וַתִּבְךְ וַתִּתְחַנֵּן-לוֹ לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת-רֵעֵת הָמָן הָאֹגֵי וְאֶת מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁב עַל-הַיְּהוּדִים לָבוֹא אֵלָיו- (4:8). Here Esther winds up doing much of what Mordecai had asked of her way back: הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהִתְחַנֵּן-לוֹ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלְּפָנָיו עַל-עֲמָה (4:8). Although much happened in the interim, it seems like Mordecai's plan was not such a bad idea after all.

The king does not really know what to do to solve the problem; he recites some of the nice things he did already for Esther and Mordecai (8:7) and then tells them to solve the problem themselves (8:8). For reasons that are not clear to me, they wait another two months, until 23 Sivan, to do so (8:9). The solution they come up with closely mirrors the problem, even in its language: Haman had decreed that everyone could massacre the Jews, and now Mordecai and Esther decree that the Jews can massacre their enemies:

אסתר ח, י-יא	אסתר ג, יב-יג
י ויכתב בשם המלך אחשורש ויחתם בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרים ביד הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרקש האחשתרנים בני הרמכים. יא אשר נתן המלך ליהודים אשר בכל-עיר-ועיר להקהל ולעמד על-נפשם	יב...ויכתב...בשם המלך אחשורש נכתב ויחתם בטבעת המלך. יג וישלח ספרים ביד הרצים אל-כל-מדינות המלך
להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד את-כל-חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אתם טף ונשים ושללם לבוז.	להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד את-כל-היהודים מנער ועד-זקן טף ונשים ביום אחד... ושללם לבוז.

Logically, this should be a tension-filled time, nine months of waiting for a battle to the death between the Jews and their enemies. But the narrator makes it clear that there is no tension at this point; the Jews will obviously win and have already begun their victory celebration, personified by Mordecai and extending to everyone: ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך בוש וארגמן והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה. ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר. ובכל-מדינה ומדינה ובכל-עיר ועיר מקום אשר דבר-המלך ודתו מגיע שמחה וששון ליהודים (8:15-17). משתה ויום טוב ורבים מעמי הארץ מתיהדים כי-נפל פחד-היהודים עליהם

Chapter 9

פרק ט is probably the hardest פרק to teach in the Megilla, because there are difficult passages, it is morally problematic, and other than the institution of a holiday, it does not add very much to the plot.

The moral problem is the most difficult. Here we seem to have not only a celebration of the killing of enemies, but gratuitous violence when Esther requests another day to kill more enemies. Historian Elliott S. Horowitz, in his book *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), argues that one of the legacies of Purim is that it inspires Jews to carry out acts of violence against others. He points, for instance, to Baruch Goldstein's horrific massacre in מערת המכפלה on Purim of 1994. Others argue, however, that while this and other examples are terrible, the number of Jewish acts of violence against enemies is vanishingly small.

It is very important to emphasize, however, that the Jews did not do all that they were licensed to do.¹ We are told explicitly that they did not take any of the spoils (9:15: ובבזה לא (שלחו את-יגדם), and it is possible that they did not kill any non-combatants (women and children), either.

The institution of Purim

When "Queen Esther daughter of Avihayil and Mordecai the Jew wrote with full authority, to confirm this second Purim letter," they wrote "words of peace and truth, to establish

¹ For discussion, see Yonatan Grossman, "Indiscriminate Slaughter?" <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/ester/22ester.htm>.

these days of Purim in their times, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them to do, and as they have obligated themselves and their descendants to observe the fasts and lamentations.”

The “fasts and lamentations” (דְּבָרֵי הַצּוּמוֹת וְזַעֲקָתָם) which they had earlier obligated themselves to observe are a reference to Zechariah 8:19, where “the fast of the fourth (month),” “the fast of the fifth (month),” “the fast of the seventh (month),” and “the fast of the tenth (month)” are mentioned. (This was pointed out by Ibn Ezra.)

In fact, Zechariah had specifically prophesied: צוֹם הָרְבִיעִי וְצוֹם הַחֲמִישִׁי וְצוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְצוֹם הָעֲשִׂירִי “the fast of the fourth (month) and the fast of the fifth (month) and the fast of the seventh (month) and the fast of the tenth (month) will become joy and happiness for the house of Judah, good festivals; but you must love truth and peace.” Mordecai and Esther seem to be asserting that Zechariah’s prophecy was now coming true; their words are called דְּבָרֵי שְׁלוֹם וְאַמֶּת, while Zechariah had said that the people must “love” אֱמֶת וְשָׁלוֹם. Mordecai and Esther do not claim that the fasts are to be abolished, but that just as people observe the fasts commemorating the destruction of the Temple, they ought to celebrate the feasts commemorating the salvation in exile. If history is meaningful – and clearly people who observe the four fasts each year think it is – then Purim, too, should be on their calendar.

The institution of the holiday of Purim also presents problems, but of a different sort. It is not clear why there are two dates, and why one is for all walled cities and not just Shushan (compare 9:18 with 9:19).

The conclusion: פֶּרֶק י'

The conclusion to the book is very prosaic, almost anti-climactic, mentioning the taxes imposed by the king on his territory. While there have been attempts at reading this as more dramatic than it seems, I think the point is the regularity of life resuming: in diaspora, “גְּאוּלָּה” can only mean survival, triumph over evil, and the chance to go on. The mundane – the taxes imposed over the empire – are the witness to that redemption.