

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, March 16, 2016

### **INTRODUCTION: Purim and the Scroll of Esther**

The holiday of Purim (meaning “lots” or “dice”), which begins in the evening one week from today, is on the surface the happiest day on the Jewish calendar. It is traditional to dress in costumes and hold carnivals for the children, have a feast on the day itself, and eat hamantaschen (literally, Haman’s pockets), a triangular cookie filled with sweet fillings such as prune or *mun* (poppyseed), or more modern chocolate pieces and fruit jams, and to give gifts of food to family and friends and charity to the poor. The celebrations can border on the silly, and even some extra imbibing is often seen. I’ve always marveled at Purim’s proximity to St. Patrick’s Day, with its tradition of drinking as well - could it be that both are on their respective calendars to provide a little excess merrymaking before periods of restraint?

The central religious observances are 1) To *hear* the reading of Megillat Esther, the Scroll of Esther - the actual (rabbinic - not Pentateuchal) commandment is for all Jews to hear it. The tie-in between the scroll and the holiday is obvious - the story in the scroll is why the holiday exists! 2) To celebrate the deliverance with a festive meal (including drinking), 3) Giving of gifts of food to friends (mishloach manot), and 4) Giving charity to the poor.

In 10 chapters, the story unfolds of a Jewish community outside of the Land of Israel, in Persia, one that seems to not be threatened until the wicked Haman rises to power. The story reads like a spoof or even a farce in places, but it has some very serious, quite dark aspects that can be easily missed but which illuminate the reasons for including this book in the canon. (It was one of the books that almost did not make it into the canon of Hebrew Scriptures for many reasons, not the least of which is that there is no explicit mention of G-d.)

While traditionalists place these events in history in the time between the two temples, scholars suspect that the events depicted in the story did not happen and that the scroll is essentially a fable, much like Jonah or Job. It probably was written in the Maccabean era, perhaps as a veiled critique of the Syrian Greek overlords or as a farce by the Jews within Israel about the Jews living outside of the land. Nevertheless, since it depicts a Diaspora Jewish community that not only survives an attempt to destroy it but ultimately triumphs, Megillat Esther became and remains a beloved part of the Tanach (the Hebrew Bible). It is found not in the Torah scrolls used in synagogues (those contain only the Five Books of Moses) but is written in hand-written scrolls that unroll from one end, much like a letter of old.

There is an important custom that makes the reading of the book interactive and fun: every time Haman’s name is read, all those who hear make noise to blot out his name right after it is read. Noisemakers such as this *gragger* and many other kinds as well are used. We blot out his name because we are told in Exodus 17:14 that **G-d** will “utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven,” and in Deuteronomy 25:19, that **we** are to do so, and to not forget.

### **Deuteronomy 25:17-19**

יִזְכֹּר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לָךְ עַמְלֵק בְּדָרְךָ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם: יִי אֲשֶׁר קָרָךְ בְּדָרְךָ וַיִּזְנֵב בְּךָ כְּלֵי-הַנְּחֹשֶׁלִים אֲחֵרֶיךָ וְאֵתָהּ עֵינֶיךָ וַיִּגָּע וְלֹא נָרָא אֱלֹהִים: יִי וְהָיָה בְּהִנָּחֵם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ | לָךְ מִכָּל-אֵיבֶיךָ מִסָּבִיב בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ נַחְלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת-זִכְרֵ עַמְלֵק מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

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- 17 You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt,  
18 how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God.  
19 [Therefore,] it will be, when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies around [you] in the land which the Lord, your God, gives to you as an inheritance to possess, that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!

So what does this have to do with Haman, Achashveirosh's evil vizier? He is introduced in the beginning of Chapter 3 of Esther as "the son of Hamdata, the Agagite." What is an Agagite? A descendant of Agag, who in Chapter 15 of First Samuel is the chief of the Amalekites, whom King Solomon had hesitated to kill but who was then killed by Samuel - during that period of Solomon's clemency, which was, by the way, completely against G-d's command, Agag escaped long enough to father the next generation, which is how we later ended up with Haman. The rabbis, of course, knew their Bible, and instituted the reading of Deuteronomy 25:17-19 in a second scroll on the Sabbath preceding Purim and First Samuel, Chapter 15 as the haftarah, the reading from the Prophets. That Sabbath is called Shabbat Zachor, "zachor" being the first word in the extra Torah reading and meaning "Remember."

Now let's take a look at some excerpts from the first three chapters of the Scroll of Esther.

### Chapter 1:1-9

### פּרָק א

א וַיְהִי בִימֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הוּא אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהוּדוּ וְעַד-כּוּשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה: ב בְּיָמָיו הָיָה כְּשֶׁבַת | הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עַל כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיָרָה: ג בְּשָׁנַת שְׁלוֹשׁ לְמַלְכוּתוֹ עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֵּה לְכָל-שָׂרָיו וְעַבְדָּיו חֵיל | פָּרָס וּמְדֵי הַפְּרָתָמִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינֹת לִפְנָיו: ד בְּהִרְאֹתוֹ אֶת-עַשְׂרׁ כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ וְאֶת-יָקָר תִּפְאָרַת גְּדוּלְתוֹ יָמָיו רַבִּים שְׂמוֹנִים וּמֵאָת יוֹם: ה וּבְמִלּוּאֹת | הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה הַמֶּלֶךְ לְכָל-הָעָם הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיָרָה לְמַגְדוֹל וְעַד-קֶטֶן מִשְׁתֵּה שְׁבַעַת יָמִים בְּחָצֵר גִּנַּת בֵּיתוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ: ו חוּר | כִּרְפֵס וּתְכֵלֶת אַחֲוָה בְּחַבְלֵי-כֹזֵב וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל-גְּלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְעַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מִטּוֹת | זָהָב וְכֶסֶף עַל רִצְפַת בַּהֲטוֹשׁשׁ וְדָר וְסַחֲרָת: ז וְהַשְׁקוֹת בְּכֶלֶי זָהָב וְכֵלִים מְכֻלִּים שׁוֹנִים וְיָוֵן מַלְכוּת רַב כְּנֶד הַמֶּלֶךְ: ח וְהַשְׁתִּיָּה כִדָּת אֵין אִנֹּס כִּי-כֵן | יסד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל כְּלִיב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּרָצוֹן אִישׁ-יָאִישׁ: ט גַּם וְשָׁתִי הַמֶּלֶךְ עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֵּה נָשִׁים בֵּית הַמַּלְכוּת אֲשֶׁר לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: י בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לִבְהַמְלֶכֶת בְּיָוֵן אָמַר לְמַהוֹמֵן בְּזֵאת חֲרַבְנָא בְּגֵתָא וְאַבְגָּתָא זֹתָר וְכִרְפֵס שְׁבַעַת הַסְּרִיסִים הַמְּשֻׁרְתִּים אֶת-פְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: יא לְהַבִּיא אֶת-יְשׁוּתֵי הַמֶּלֶכָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכַתֵּר מַלְכוּת לְהִרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת-זְפִלָּה כִּי-טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא: יב וְתַמְאֵן הַמֶּלֶכָה וְשָׁתִי לְבּוֹא בְּדָבָר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיַד הַסְּרִיסִים וְיִקְצֹף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וְחָמְתוֹ בְּעֵרָה בּוֹ:

### Translation:

1 And it came to pass in the days of Achashverosh, the same Achashverosh who ruled from Hodu to Cush, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces. 2 In those days, when King Achashverosh sat on his royal throne, which was in Shushan the capital, 3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast for all his ministers and servants; the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and all the ministers of the provinces in his service. 4 For many days, one hundred and eighty days, he displayed the glorious wealth of his kingdom and the splendid beauty of his majesty. 5 And when these days came to an end, the king made a seven-day feast in the courtyard of the king's palace garden, for all the people in Shushan the capital, nobleman and commoner alike. 6 There were hangings of white, green and blue, held by cords of linen and purple wool to silver rods and marble pillars. There were divans of gold and silver on a floor of alabaster and marble [arranged in patterns of] rows and circles. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of assorted design, and the royal wine was in abundance as befitting the king. 8 The drinking was by the law, without force, for so had the king ordered all the stewards of his household, to

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comply with each man's wish. **9** Queen Vashti, too, made a feast for the women in the royal palace of King Achashverosh. **10** On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzeta, Charvona, Bigta, Avagta, Zeitar and Charkas, the seven chamberlains who attended King Achashverosh, **11** to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing the royal crown, to show her beauty to the nations and ministers, for she was indeed beautiful. **12** But Queen Vashti refused to appear by the king's order brought by the chamberlains, and the king grew furious and his wrath seethed within him.

### Questions:

1. What have we learned so far about the locale of this story and when it is placed?
2. What happened to Queen Vashti after her refusal to appear in (only, perhaps) her crown?
3. What kind of a society does this portray? How were women regarded?
4. The Talmud says that among the golden cups mentioned in verse 7 were some stolen from the First Temple in Jerusalem when it had been destroyed and ransacked by the Babylonians (who were later defeated by the Persians). What would therefore have been the problem with the Jews joining into the king's big drinking party along with everyone else?

In the rest of Chapter 1, the king's advisor Memuchan advised that the queen be removed due to her insolence - if *she* can get away with acting that way, just think how all the women in the kingdom will act if she isn't dealt with harshly! The king heeds his advisor, Vashti is deposed (perhaps fatally), and by royal decree, it is declared that all women will respect their husbands, who will be "master in their homes" and "speak their own languages" (presumably no longer feeling they have to speak their wife's language, which might be different). In the beginning of Chapter 2, the king's attendants suggested that all the beautiful young virgins be brought before the king in a kind of beauty pageant so that he might select a new queen. Thus enter the heroes of the story, the beautiful Esther (whose Hebrew name was Hadassah) and her uncle/cousin/protector but also foster parent (and perhaps even future husband?), Mordechai.

### Chapter 2:5-7

ה אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבְּיָרָה וְשֵׁמוֹ מְרַדְּכָי בֶן יָאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי בֶּן־קַיִשׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי וְאֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם־הַגְּלוּת אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָהּ עִם יְכִינֹחַ מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאֱצַר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל: ז וַיְהִי אִמּוֹן אֶת־הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בַּת־דָּוִד כִּי אִין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעֻרָה יָפֵת־תֵּאֵר וְטוֹבַת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחָהּ מְרַדְּכָי לֹו לְבַת:

### Translation:

**5** There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordechai, son of Yair, son of Shim'iy, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, **6** who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the exiles that had been exiled along with Jechoniah, King of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had sent into exile. **7** He had raised his cousin Hadassah, also called Esther, for she had neither father nor mother. The girl was shapely and beautiful, and when her father and mother died, Mordechai adopted her as his daughter.

### Questions:

1. Verse 5 is bolded because the congregation reads this verse along with the reader - but what is the significance that Mordechai was a Benjaminite? (Think back to I Samuel 15 - King Saul was also a Benjaminite.) Also note that Mordechai is called a Jew (*ish Yehudi* - not a Judahite here, however); it is the first time in Scripture that the term is used as such. It now meant someone who had come from Judea.

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2. Mordechai is not given another Hebrew name in text, but both of Esther's are given - why do you think that is so?
3. Note the similarities of the names Mordechai and Esther to Marduk and Ishtar, the Babylonian gods of creation and fertility, fitting for an early spring holiday. Does this strike you as intentional or as coincidental? In Hebrew, the name Esther connotes "hiding" - note how the themes of hiding and revealing figure prominently in this story.

Esther becomes the favorite of those in power and is eventually chosen as queen, though she keeps her identity as a Jew hidden. Mordechai overhears a plot to assassinate the king by two of his close guards, reports it to Esther, who reports it to the king while crediting Mordechai with the information, and the plot is foiled (this becomes an important plot element later). Mordechai was not rewarded, but the incident was recorded in the annals of the king. In Chapter 3, Haman is introduced - he is the quintessential villain: an insufferable egotist and a Jew-hater as well! Some commentators say he was the aforementioned Memuchan who has now received a promotion and name change for his efforts. Haman quickly adopts kingly status and powers but is miffed that Mordechai the Jew will not bow down to him. (Why wouldn't Mordechai do so? Bowing is a sign of simple respect, not necessarily worship, but the rabbis point out that Haman deemed himself a god, or wore an idol around his neck, so if Mordechai bowed to him, he'd be bowing before an idol, a clearly forbidden act.) Haman decides to kill not only Mordechai but all of his people - the Jews - as well. He cast lots ("*purim*" in Hebrew) to determine the most auspicious day to have them massacred. A day in Adar (nearly a year away) was thus chosen. He then seeks to get royal backing for his plan, telling Achashveirosh:

### **Chapter 3:8-11**

**8** Haman said to King Achashverosh, "There is one nation scattered and dispersed among the nations throughout the provinces of your kingdom, whose laws are unlike those of any other nation and who do not obey the laws of the King. It is not in the King's interest to tolerate them. **9** If it please the King, let [an edict] be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand silver talents to the functionaries, to be deposited in the King's treasuries." **10** The king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, son of Hamdata, the Agagite, persecutor of the Jews. **11** The king said to Haman, "The money is yours to keep, and the nation is yours to do with as you please."

### **Questions:**

1. It is interesting to note that Haman says the Jews are at this point, according to the author, dispersed in all of Achashveirosh's 27 provinces! Note how Haman describes the Jews: they have different laws, do not obey the king's laws, and should not be tolerated. (Only Mordechai did not obey the one law of bowing down to Haman.) Why did Haman generalize that disobedience? This has been one tool of antisemites across the ages, sadly.
2. The edict to destroy the Jews on the 13th of Adar was published throughout the kingdom to all its leaders and people (it would hardly be a sneak attack!) It was also published in the capital, Shushan, leaving the city in turmoil, while the king and Haman sat down to drink. What do you think the general effect this edict had on the whole population?
3. How does the story end (after another seven chapters)? Go and study! And write to ask me questions (rabbsauloresky@gmail.com) if you wish.