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Rabbinic Interpretations of the Characters
and Plot of the Book of Esther
(as Reflected in Midrash Esther Rabbah)


Jerald M. Brown

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of the requirements for ordination

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Referee: Prof. Eugene Mihaly



PREFACE

I first became interested in the book of Esther while studying the five Megillot with Dr. Stanley Gevirtz at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. That such a secular melodrama should find its way into the Bible intrigued me. When I examined the Targum Sheni to Est.1:1, I was startled to find, not the literal translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic, as I had anticipated, but a full blown midrash, dealing with the character of Ahashuerus in a manner only slightly related to the portrayal of the king found in the biblical account. I found this midrashic exposition fascinating, and determined to undertake a more exhaustive study of the rabbinic characterizations of the figures found in the book of Esther.

My work began with a careful reading of the book of Esther itself, and a survey of modern scholarly opinion regarding the work and its principal characters. The midrash Esther Rabbah was my primary rabbinic text, and I originally considered limiting my investigations to this work alone. But as I examined rabbinic texts which parallel the accounts found in Esther Rabbah, I discovered an overwhelming amount of material dealing with the characters in Esther. I soon widened the scope of my investigations to include the exegetical midrashic material found in the Babylonian Talmud tractate Megillah 10a-17a, and the Targum Sheni, which had originally sparked my interest in this subject. A reading of relevant sections of Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews revealed a wealth of new material, and led me to examine the Midrash to Psalms, Ch.22, and Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer Ch.49-50, as well as selected passages from Midrash Abba Gorion,

Megillat Esther, and Midrash Panim Aherim. Thus the scope of this work widened considerably.

In this paper I have focused upon the material which I have examined most exhaustively: the Targum Sheni, Babylonian Talmud, Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, and especially Esther Rabbah. These works provided me with the overall picture of the rabbinic characterizations, attitudes and concerns which I hope to convey in this work. I have used selected passages from the other midrashim in completing this picture, to provide valuable material not found in the primary references, and to add necessary elaboration and detail.

I would like to express my deepest thanks to Dr. Lewis Barth, whose encouragement and guidance helped me conceptualize and begin my work, and to Dr. Eugene Mihaly, whose invaluable guidance in matters of organization, rabbinic and critical sources, and midrashic technique gave form and direction to my investigations, and whose personal concern sustained me throughout my work.

DIGEST

The book of Esther is a strange and fascinating book. It contains absolutely no mention of God, no reference to prayer, and totally ignores Jewish law. In short, the only thing that seems Jewish about the book of Esther is the fact that its hero and heroine, Mordechai and Esther, happen to be Jewish.

The presence of such a book in the Bible obviously posed religious and theological problems for the ancient rabbis. They attempted to resolve these problems by supplying the religious elements so conspicuously absent in the biblical account. In the midrash, God's hand is evident in every detail of the story; indeed, the entire narrative represents the working out of God's master plan for the salvation of His chosen people.

God's all-pervasive role becomes clear as the rabbis describe the way in which He deals with each of the major characters in the narrative. He saves Israel, for example, only because of the prayers (!) of Mordechai and Esther on behalf of their people. The rabbis go to great lengths to establish these two as righteous Jews who scrupulously adhere to Jewish law in every detail. Mordechai is described as a great rabbi, a leading member of the Sanhedrin (an institution which did not even exist in the period in which the book of Esther is set), and Esther's marriage to the uncircumcised Ahashuerus and willingness to live in his palace, without benefit of kosher food or proper rabbinical guidance in matters of ritual purity, are explained away in a variety of different ways in the midrash.

By contrast, all of the non-Jewish characters in the book are portrayed

as evil Jew-haters, who are punished by God in one way or another. Ahashuerus is said to have blocked the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and is described as hating the Jews even more than the wicked Haman. Haman is portrayed as the archetypal Jew-hater, whose animosity stems from an ancient feud between his ancestors and the Israelites. Even Vashti is regarded as an evil woman who has only hatred for the Jews. In the midrash each of these characters is punished by God for their sins against God and His chosen people.

Thus, through midrashic interpretation, the rabbis radically change the personalities of the characters found in the book of Esther, and transform an almost wholly secular narrative into a tale in which Judaism and its laws are of paramount importance, and in which all of the action is totally controlled by God.

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INTRODUCTION

To the modern reader the book of Esther appears to be little more than a simple, old fashioned melodrama, in which the hero and heroine, Mordechai and Esther, defeat the villanous Haman and save themselves and their people from certain destruction. All of the characters in this drama are little more than stick figures. They are completely one-dimensional, without any depth of character. But the most curious feature of the book of Esther is that it is the only book of the Bible which contains no mention of God at all. It appears that Mordechai and Esther are responsible for the salvation of the Jews, not God. Moreover, there seems to be a complete disregard for ritual law in the book. Esther, for example, marries the uncircumcised Ahashuerus without so much as a second thought, and Mordechai, her foster-father, raises absolutely no objection to this marriage (Est.2:17). In short, the only link to Judaism in the book of Esther appears to be the fact that its hero and heroine happen to be Jewish.

For the ancient rabbis of the midrash, God's hand was to be seen in every phase of human endeavor. The fact that God is not specifically mentioned in the book of Esther does not mean that He had no part in the events which are described therein. Hence, one of the primary purposes of the rabbis in the midrash is to explicitly delineate God's role in the story by means of midrashic exposition upon the text of Esther. The rabbis are particularly concerned by the seeming lack of regard for ritual law, as they knew it, in the book, and go to great lengths to supply this missing component to the action, for it seems inconceivable

to them that Mordechai and Esther, who served their people so faithfully in attempting to save them from Haman, would not also be faithful in observing the mitzvot.

The superficial manner in which the characters are portrayed in Esther affords the rabbis the opportunity to more fully characterize each figure in the drama midrashically. These characterizations reveal a great deal about the world view which the rabbis embraced. Aside from the all-pervasive role of God in history which is apparent in the midrash, we also find a tremendous concern for the temple and its sacred objects, and a deep seated distrust of and disdain for non-Jews, which transforms even such seemingly innocuous characters as Ahashuerus and Vashti into virulent Jew-haters in the midrash. These and other rabbinic attitudes will emerge as we examine the portraits of Ahashuerus, Vashti, Esther, Mordechai and Haman which the rabbis paint in the midrash to the book of Esther.

AHASHUERUS

There are four major players in the drama which is the book of Esther. Three are easily classified: Haman is the archetypal enemy of the Jews, the undisputed villain of the work, while Esther and Mordechai are the champions of their people. But the fourth major character in Esther is less easily classified. Only King Ahashuerus seems to defy any attempt to label him as either hero or villain. Is he really an evil despot, who authorizes his prime minister to destroy the entire Jewish people without so much as a second thought? Or is his true character better reflected in his kind treatment of Esther, and in his later decree which brings salvation to her people? Modern scholars differ in their evaluations of the king's character. For Bickerman, "Ahashuerus...is like a modern general who gives routine approval to the reasoned opinion of his chief of staff"¹ when he approves Haman's request (Est.3:10-11), and certainly cannot be faulted on this account. For other scholars Ahashuerus is, "...capricious and impressionable, and weak despite his show of power",² "a weak and pliable king, dominated and manipulated by his prime minister...and by Esther later",³ "...a mere puppet worked by those who successively gain his ear...; helplessly weak".⁴ But Robert Gordis cannot conceive of the king in such terms as these. For Gordis, "Ahashuerus is not merely weak, but fundamentally callous to human concerns, interested only in feasting and carousing",⁵ and while it is the wicked Haman who actively plans the destruction of the Jews, "Ahashuerus is scarcely less involved, being guilty of the sin of permission".⁶

The rabbis, too, can see little good in the character of king Ahashuerus. The portrait which emerges from the midrash is one of an almost totally evil king, often given to lewdness and drunkenness, whose wickedness is equalled only by his foolishness and stupidity. While it is true that the rabbis regard Ahashuerus as an enemy of the Jews, his evil is not manifest solely in his dealings with Israel. The rabbis find proof of his malevolence in almost everything that the king says or does in the book of Esther.

The very opening word of the biblical narrative, "וְהָיָה", is interpreted as a sign of the trouble which takes place "in the days of Ahashuerus".⁷ The rabbis read the word as "וְהָיָה" - "there was woe", and, while some identify the "trouble" as Haman,⁸ for others the trouble is Ahashuerus himself⁹ (this based upon the fact that Est.1:1 specifically states that the "woe" takes place "בְּיָמֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ", "in the days of Ahashuerus, not "in the days of Haman").

The rabbinic view of Ahashuerus' true character is well illustrated in the midrashic accounts of the incident with queen Vashti (Est.1:10-12). According to the midrash, Ahashuerus first becomes drunk at his banquet (this based upon Est.1:10- "כִּשְׂכָּר וְהָיָה לִבּוֹ מְשֻׁבֵּר", "when the king's heart was merry with wine"), and then orders Vashti to appear before him naked.¹⁰ Such lewdness, we are told, is typical of heathen kings who indulge in wine, while Israel praises God when they drink.¹¹ In any event, Vashti refuses to appear, and reveals that Ahashuerus habitually engaged in such bouts of drunkenness and licentiousness even before he became king.¹² Enraged by her response, the king consults with his counsellors and, upon Memuchan's advise, orders that the queen be executed, even though she had acted properly in refusing his request.¹³ After the effects of the wine wear off, Ahashuerus

regrets having ordered Vashti's death, and has the seven advisors who counselled that she be killed executed as well.¹⁴ Later, in seeking a new queen to take the place of the slain Vashti, the king orders that both virgins and married women be forcibly taken from their fathers or husband's.¹⁵

The king is a man who trusts no one. His sleep is troubled (Est.6:1) by dreams in which Haman, his most trusted advisor, attempts to kill him. When Ahashuerus consults Haman as to what honor is to be done Mordechai, Haman thinks that the king intends to honor him (Est.6:6). Ahashuerus recognizes this, and when he hears Haman mention not only the royal robes, but the royal crown, symbol of the king's authority, as well (Est.6:8), he is convinced that his dream was true, and that Haman is, in fact, planning to kill him and take his crown.¹⁶ Ahashuerus regards the fact that Haman plans to kill Mordechai, the man who saved the king's life, as further proof of his treachery.¹⁷

In the rabbis eyes Ahashuerus is not only evil, but a foolish ruler as well,¹⁸ and Vashti labels him as such when she hears of his ridiculous command to her.¹⁹ Est.1:8 provides further evidence of Ahashuerus' foolishness, since the rabbis consider it impossible that every man's desire should be satisfied by the king, for in satisfying the desire of one man he must often deny that of another.²⁰ And who but a complete fool would issue such a ridiculous decree as that found in Est.1:22?²¹

While such midrashic exposition makes it clear that the rabbis find Ahashuerus to be an utterly contemptible character, it does not reflect the most important concern which influences the rabbis' judgment of all of the characters and events in the book of Esther. The primary concern of the rabbis, throughout the midrash, is the welfare of Israel,

and so the most serious charge which they bring against Ahashuerus is that he is an enemy of Israel. Moreover, by setting himself against God's chosen people, Ahashuerus has also set himself up as an enemy of God Himself. It is important to note that, though God seems to be completely absent in the biblical book of Esther, He is in complete control of everything that takes place in the midrashic accounts of the story. Throughout the literature, God's hand is seen in the action, either rewarding the righteous and saving his people, or punishing the wicked. Thus all of Israel's troubles in Esther are seen as divine punishment for their sins, for the midrash states that it is only when Israel provokes God, by failing to obey His laws, that He places an arbitrary, tyrannical king (Ahashuerus) over them.²²

Aside from his acquiescence to Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, the most important factor which clearly establishes Ahashuerus as an enemy of Israel, and therefore of God, is related to his historical identification by the rabbis. While most modern scholars agree that Ahashuerus is to be identified with Xerxes I,²³ the rabbis do not share this view. In the midrash he is almost always identified with Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7²⁴ who ordered that the rebuilding of the temple be stopped (Ezra 4:21). The importance of the temple to the ancient rabbis is well illustrated by the role which it plays in the midrashim to Esther. According to one interpretation, it is not Haman and the threat of destruction which he represents, but the stoppage of the work on the temple which caused the cry of "woe!" in Ahashuerus' time.²⁵

Using Prov.18:9 as a proof-text, R. Tahlifa bar bar Hana equates Ahashuerus with the nefarious Nebuchadnezzar, for, while Nebuchadnezzar actually destroyed the temple, Ahashuerus was responsible for the fact

that it remained in ruins, and hence the two are regarded as "brothers" in destruction.²⁶

The reason that Ahashuerus makes his banquet "in the third year of his reign" (Est.1:3) is that he respects the prophecy of Jer.29:10 (and Dan.9:2), and so he calculates that the 70 years mentioned there had ended in his second year, without any return of Israel to Jerusalem, and the prophecy had thus been proven false.²⁷ Believing that he was now safe from divine punishment, in the third year of his reign Ahashuerus orders that the temple vessels be brought, and defiles them in his drinking bouts,²⁸ and dresses himself in the priestly robes as well.²⁹ Belshazzar, king of Babylon, had made similar calculations, but had erred.³⁰ The error proved fatal, for his use of the holy vessels (Dan.5:3) incurred God's wrath and resulted in his death (Dan.5:30). The rabbis maintain that Ahashuerus also erred in his calculations,³¹ for had his calculations been correct, Jeremiah's prophecy in fact would have been proven false, and, from the rabbis point of view, this was an impossibility. Yet Ahashuerus is not only allowed to live, but continues his feasting and drinking.

Why does God fail to mete out the punishment which Ahashuerus so richly deserves? The answer is that Ahashuerus' continued reign is itself the divine punishment for the sinful Israel. God says, "I will measure 'days' against 'days', for it is written, 'In those days I saw in Judah men treading wine presses on the sabbath' (Neh.13:15)".³² This desecration of the sabbath by Israel took place in the time of Artaxerxes (see Neh.2:1), and so God's punishment is an example of

מִדָּה בְּמִדָּה (measure for measure), for, just as Israel transgressed

the sabbath laws " וְהַשְׁבִּיעַ אֶת הָעָם (Neh.13:15), so they are punished " וְהַשְׁבִּיעַ אֶת הָעָם (Est.1:2).³³ Thus Ahashuerus' banquet, and his use of the temple vessels, are the beginning of God's punishment of Israel for their unfaithfulness.

But Ahashuerus does not escape God's wrath completely. His punishment is the loss of his queen, for it is God who causes the king to order Vashti to appear naked before him, for in His omniscience, He knows that she will refuse, and ultimately be put to death as a result. God did this because Mordechai prayed that God punish Ahashuerus for desecrating the temple vessels.³⁴ In ordering Vashti's execution Ahashuerus was himself the instrument of God's punishment against him.³⁵

Since there were Jews among Ahashuerus' subjects, the rabbis naturally assumed that there were Jews present at his banquet, especially since Est.1:5 says that the banquet was for "all the people" (" וְכָל הָעָם "). So the question arises: did the Jews themselves join in the desecration of the temple vessels? Some sources relate that the Jews became distressed upon seeing the holy vessels and refused to stay, so Ahashuerus set a separate banquet for them.³⁶ According to R. Eliezer, Ahashuerus even provided kosher food for the Jews.³⁷ But other sources indicate that the Jews remained at the king's banquet, despite the presence of the holy vessels of the temple.³⁸

The first chapter of the book of Esther lavishly describes the great wealth of king Ahashuerus. Yet, according to the midrash, this wealth was not properly his, but was really the riches of the temple, which he wrongly boasted were his.³⁹ Thus Ahashuerus had, in effect, stolen God's own treasures.

Owing to the emphasis placed on the vastness of his kingdom in Est.1:1 (where two different expressions are used to indicate its enormity- " עוֹלָם וָעוֹלָם " and " מִלְּפָנֵי הַיָּם וְעַד לְפָנֵי הַיָּם "), many of the midrashim count Ahashuerus as one of the few kings in history who ruled over the entire world.⁴⁰ The rabbis believed that there were 252 provinces in the world.⁴¹ This being the case, it would appear that Ahashuerus actually ruled over only half the world. If Ahashuerus was the presumed ruler of the entire world, why is his kingdom limited to only half the world in Est.1:1? According to the midrash, this is divine punishment, again by the principle of מִלְּפָנֵי הַיָּם וְעַד לְפָנֵי הַיָּם, for, just as Ahashuerus spoke as if God were limited only to Jerusalem (in Ezra 1:3), so God limited Ahashuerus' kingdom to only half the world.⁴² Another interpretation explains that, in rebuilding the temple, Ahashuerus halved its height (to 30 cubits in Ezra 6:3, instead of the original 120 cubits found in 2Chr.3:4), so God punished him by halving his kingdom.⁴³

The problem with both of these interpretations is that, in both Ezra1:3 and 6:3, it is Cyrus who is the speaker, not Artaxerxes. These interpretations may simply reflect some confusion among the rabbis concerning the identity of the Ahashuerus of the book of Esther,⁴⁴ or they may be related to a rather curious interpretation found in Est. Rab.1:1. In Est. Rab.1:1 R. Nehemiah comments upon the expression " מִלְּפָנֵי הַיָּם וְעַד לְפָנֵי הַיָּם " (Est. 1:1), which seems to be a מִלְּפָנֵי הַיָּם וְעַד לְפָנֵי הַיָּם, a superfluous phrase, to be expounded midrashically. He understands this phrase as indicating two totally opposite actions taken by Ahashuerus, namely that "this Ahashuerus", who ordered that the rebuilding of the temple be stopped, he is the very same Ahashuerus (" מִלְּפָנֵי הַיָּם וְעַד לְפָנֵי הַיָּם ") who later ordered

that it be rebuilt.⁴⁵ And yet it is Cyrus who actually ordered the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:3), not Artaxerxes. The rabbis, however, say that Artaxerxes had actually intended to rebuild the temple at a later time, for, in issuing the order to stop work, he stipulated that this was to remain in effect only "until a decree shall be made by me" (Ezra 4:21), thus indicating that he did intend to allow the work to be completed at some later time. So, while it was Cyrus who gave the initial order that the temple be rebuilt, Artaxerxes (Ahashuerus) was actually responsible for executing these orders.⁴⁶ Thus he is regarded as being directly responsible for the diminished height of the temple, and it is he who is punished by having his kingdom halved.

Ahashuerus stands clearly as an enemy of God. He refuses to allow His house to be rebuilt, defiles the sacred vessels which he stole from that holy place, and seeks to destroy God's chosen people, Israel, as well.

The rabbis maintain that a man's name is the very essence of his soul. In the midrash Ahashuerus' very name literally means trouble for Israel.⁴⁷ The rabbis offer a number of pseudo-etymologies for the name Ahashuerus. He was called Ahashuerus because he "made Israel's head ache" (וַיַּחֲזִיק בְּרֹאשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל),⁴⁸ so that every man cried "woe for my head" (אֵיךְ רֹאשִׁי).⁴⁹ Many of the interpretations of the king's name bear only slight resemblance to "Ahashuerus", but the message is the same in all. Thus he is called Ahashuerus because he "blackened their (Israel's) faces" (וַיַּחֲזִיק בְּפָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל)⁵⁰ and "made them drink gall and wormwood" (וַיַּחֲזִיק בְּאֵימָתָם וּבְרַגְלָם וּבְזֵרְעָם).⁵¹

Ahashuerus' hatred of Israel is demonstrated most vividly by his willingness to sell them into Haman's hand (Est. 3:11). For this reason he is called the "chief of all sellers",⁵² Ahashuerus' refusal to accept

the money which Haman offers him (Est.3:11) is proof positive that he hates the Jews every bit as much as does Haman.⁵³ In fact, Ahashuerus actually hates Israel more than does Haman, for, not only does he refuse the money which Haman offers, he himself gives Haman his ring (Est.3:10), as if in payment to Haman for doing Ahashuerus the great service of destroying the Jews.⁵⁴ It is small wonder, then, that the rabbis interpret the phrase "לְיוֹשֵׁר הָיָה" as indicating that the king was completely wicked from beginning to end.⁵⁵

Yet surely there must be a little good even in the most despicable of men. After all, Ahashuerus did make a great feast in Esther's honor, and remitted taxes and distributed gifts (Est.2:18). But according to the midrash he did these things, not out of generosity, but in an attempt to gain Esther's confidence and favor, so that he might persuade her to tell him of her background.⁵⁶ And yet even the rabbis grudgingly admit that Ahashuerus did have some (albeit few) positive points about him. R. Samuel b. Ami lists three things which reflect the more positive side of this otherwise evil character: he waited three years before ascending the throne and assuming the crown,⁵⁷ he waited four years before selecting a proper wife (Esther, for Vashti was not considered proper),⁵⁸ and he never did anything without first taking counsel.⁵⁹ R. Pinchas adds that Ahashuerus always recorded any good turn which was done for him in writing⁶⁰ (so that he might reward the person responsible). Est.2:14 also reflects favorably upon Ahashuerus, for R. Yochanon says that this verse indicates that he refrained from sexual intercourse during the day⁶¹ (since the maidens were with him only during the night).

But these few positive statements in no way mitigate the overwhelmingly negative portrait which the midrash paints of king Ahashuerus. To the

rabbi he was an evil despot, given to drunkenness, lewdness and violence, suspicious even of his closest and most trusted advisors, ruling his kingdom in a most foolish and arbitrary manner. But above all the Ahashuerus of the midrash is the enemy of the Jews, who conspires with Haman to annihilate Israel, and who provokes God's wrath and punishment by his ill-treatment of Israel and lack of respect for the temple and its holy vessels. In the book of Esther Haman alone is clearly the villain. In the midrash he must share the title of *רשע גדול* with Ahashuerus.

NOTES

¹Bickerman, Four Strange Books of the Bible, pg. 188-189.

²Anderson, Interpreter's Bible: Esther, pg. 862.

³Moore, Anchor Bible: Esther, pg. 43.

⁴Streane, The Book of Esther (Cambridge Bible), pg. xxi.

⁵Gordis, Megillat Esther, pg. 48.

⁶ibid., pg. 53.

⁷Modern scholars agree that this word merely represents the standard opening of a historical biblical narrative, and is used here in order to lend historicity to the book (see Moore, pg. 3, Anderson, pg. 825, Paton, International Critical Commentary: Esther, pg. 121).

⁸See below, pg. 58 .

⁹Est. Rab. P: 8.9; Meg. 11a; Est. Rab. P: 6, which contains the most direct statement: "וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע אֲשָׁשׁוּוּרִים '11", "Woe that Ahashuerus is king!".

¹⁰Est. Rab. 3:13; 1Targ. 1:11; 2Targ. 1:11; Meg. 12b. This interpretation is based upon the words "כִּכְתָּר מֶלֶךְ כּוֹת" (Est. 1:11). The rabbis apparently understand this as indicating that the crown was all that Vashti was to

wear. That Ahashuerus' order to Vashti is a result of his drunkenness is made clear in Meg.12b and Est. Rab.5:1.

¹¹Est. Rab.3:13; Meg.12b. The kiddush is Israel's praise of God when indulging in wine.

¹²Est. Rab.3:14.

¹³Est. Rab.3:15, 4:1,9,11; 2Targ.1:21; Meg.12b.

¹⁴Est. Rab.4:1; 2Targ.2:1; Abba Gorion pg.17-18, where the execution of the advisors is really ordered by God (the heavenly King) as punishment, for, according to the midrash, these seven had previously counselled against the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

¹⁵Est.. Rab.6:11; Panim Aherim pg.65. This interpretation is based upon Est.2:17, where both the words " בָּתוּלוֹת " (virgins) and " נָשִׁים " (women) understood to mean married women, since virgins are specifically mentioned in the verse as well) appear. See Also Meg.13a, where Esther herself is said to be married (to Mordechai).

¹⁶PRE Ch.50; 2Targ.6:8.

¹⁷Est. Rab.10:1. In inviting not only the king, but Haman as well, to her banquet, Esther plays upon Ahashuerus' suspicions, and makes him even more distrustful of Haman.

¹⁸So Samuel in Meg.12a, who says, " וְאִשָּׁה עֲדִיבָה רָשָׁה ", "he (Ahashuerus) was a foolish king".

¹⁹Est. Rab.3:13; 2Targ.1:12. See also Est Rab., introduction to Ch. 2, where Prov.29:11 is applied to Ahashuerus (he is identified with the " עֲדִיבָה ", the fool, while God, the heavenly King, is the " רָשָׁה ", the wise one).

²⁰Est. Rab.2:14. Several examples of the impossibility of satisfying two opposite desires are cited, the most pertinent of which is the choice which Ahashuerus will have to make between the causes of Haman and Mordechai.

²¹Est. Rab.4:12; Meg.12b. It is interesting that, while both of these sources consider Ahashuerus' decree to be ridiculous, they give completely opposite reasons for this opinion. According to Est. Rab., the decree indicates Ahashuerus' stupidity (" הָיָה לוֹ דִּמְיוֹן "), for even as it is impossible to satisfy every man's desire (see above), so several examples are cited here which demonstrate that it is equally impossible for a man to be the absolute ruler in his house. Meg.12b, on the other hand, regards the decree as ridiculous for precisely the opposite reason- the fact that a man should be the absolute ruler of his own house is so obviously true that it is both ridiculous and unnecessary to issue a royal edict to this effect.

²²Est. Rab.P:9. See also Est. Rab.1:13 and Meg. 11a, where Israel in the time of Ahashuerus is identified as the "poor people" in Prov.28:15,

for they are " *ת/3חן מן פ'דג* ", "poor in precepts", i.e., they don't observe the *ת/3חן* as they should.

²³Paton, pg.53-54; Moore, pg.xxxv; Gordis, pg.5; Anderson, pg.835; Oxford Annotated Bible, pg.603.

²⁴This is explicitly stated in Est. Rab.1:3, and is assumed throughout the midrash.

²⁵Est. Rab.P:5,8, again interpreting " *'ג' /* " as " *'ג' /* ' *'* ".

²⁶Est. Rab.1:1. This interpretation is based upon a hypothesized etymology of the name Ahashuerus, as " *ע/כר דב'ח/כ* ", "brother of the head", the "head" being Nebuchadnezzar, as in Dan.2:38.

²⁷Est. Rab.1:15; Meg.11b. Ahashuerus not only respects Israel's prophets, but, according to Est. Rab.7:13 and Meg.13b, fears their God as well.

²⁸Meg.11b-12a; Est. Rab.2:11; PRE Ch.49. This interpretation is based upon Est.1:7, " *פ'ו/כ פ'דגח פ'דג' /* ". The "different" vessels (which changed- *ל'ג'תח* - the glittering appearance of all the other vessels to lead by comparison to them) are the temple vessels. Also, the precedent set by Belshazzar in Daniel might well have suggested this interpretation.

²⁹Est. Rab.1:4; Meg.12a. This is based upon the word " *ת/כר/כ* ", used here (Est.1:4) in describing Ahashuerus' riches, and in Ex.28:2

to describe the priestly robes.

³⁰Meg.11b.

³¹ibid.

³²Est. Rab.1:10.

³³The same expression being found in both instances.

³⁴Meg.11b; 1Targ.1:10.

³⁵That this was, in fact, a punishment is reflected by Est.2:1, which, in Est. Rab.5:2, is interpreted as indicating that Ahashuerus felt remorse over Vashti's death.

³⁶2Targ.1:4; Abba Gorion pg.8-9; Panim Aherim pg.58.

³⁷PRE Ch49. This interpretation is R. Eliezer's understanding of Est.1:8, "that they should do according to every man's pleasure", since the Jews would certainly have desired kosher food.

³⁸Est. Rab.2:5; Meg.12a. In Meg.12a the question of why Israel was not punished for this sin is raised. The rather tenuous answer given is that Israel only pretended (to eat at the banquet), and so god only pretended to destroy them (by allowing Haman to formulate his plot, but preventing

him from carrying it out). In Est. Rab.7:13, however, the fact that Israel took part in the feast very nearly convinces God to allow Haman to destroy them (see below, pg.60-61).

³⁹Est Rab.2:1; 2Targ.1:4; Panim Aherim 58. In Meg.11a Ahashuerus is regarded as having no legitimate claim to the throne (this based upon the use of the word "מֶלֶךְ" rather than מֶלֶךְ, implying that, though he reigned, he wasn't really royalty), but used his fabulous wealth to attain his position. This interpretation implies that Ahashuerus was very wealthy in his own right, since he could not have taken possession of the temple treasures until he actually became king.

⁴⁰Est. Rab.1:4; Meg.11a; 2Targ.1:1.

⁴¹Est. Rab.1:5.

⁴²ibid.

⁴³ibid.

⁴⁴This is the explanation proposed in the 15777 00 .

⁴⁵In Est. Rab.1:1 R. Judah also understands this phrase as indicating two opposite actions, but he states that Ahashuerus "killed his wife (Vashti) on account of his friend"(Memuchan- see below, pg.23), and later "killed his friend (Haman) on account of his wife (Esther)".

⁴⁶Though Darius actually resumes construction (Ezra 6:12), he is merely carrying out his father's (Ahashuerus') wishes, according to the midrash.

⁴⁷See above, pg.4 .

⁴⁸Est. Rab.1:1. In Est. Rab.1:3 the rabbis make the same point, but use a different etymology (" *יעקב נאם עוה* ")..

⁴⁹Meg.11a.

⁵⁰Est. Rab.1:1; Meg.11a.

⁵¹Est. Rab.1:1.

⁵²Est. Rab.P:10. Haman, who offers to "buy" Israel from Ahashuerus, is, of course, the chief of buyers.

⁵³Meg.14a, where the point is conveyed through a parable.

⁵⁴Est. Rab.7:20; 2Targ.3:10. In Est. Rab. the ring is regarded as collateral for a loan. The fact that the lender (Ahashuerus) gives the debtor (Haman) such collateral, rather than receiving it, as is the usual case, indicates that Ahashuerus exceeded even Haman in his hatred of the Jews.

⁵⁵Est. Rab.1:2; Meg.11a; Panim Aherim pg.45. The principle is that the word *ל* before a man's name in scripture indicates that he was either

completely good or completely evil. A list of six men who fall into each category appears in both Est. Rab. and Meg. Ahashuerus, of course, finds his place in the list of the wicked, joining such distinguished *P' 807* as Esau, Dathan and Aviram (who took part in Korach's revolt-Num.26:9), and Ahaz.

⁵⁶Meg.13a. Here the rabbis understand the king's gift as having been given to Esther. The passage continues by stating that Ahashuerus' purpose in gathering the virgins a second time (Est.2:19) is to rouse Esther's jealousy, so that he might learn of her background (otherwise the second gathering would seem to have no purpose at all). These interpretations grow out of the fact that the next line (Est.2:20) again emphasizes Esther's refusal to disclose her national origin.

⁵⁷Reading "וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-הַמִּלִּינִי וְיִשְׁמַע אֶת-הַמִּלִּינִי" (Est.1:2-3) as if the two lines were conjunctive. According to *פ' 807*, he waited three years out of modesty (Est. Rab.1:15).

⁵⁸ibid. This is based on Est.2:12, where we learn that all the virgins remained in the harem for one year. Hence four years passed between the time that Ahashuerus began to rule and the time that he took a "proper" wife.

⁵⁹ibid., based upon Est.1:13&ff.

⁶⁰ibid, based upon Est.6:2.

⁶¹Meg.13a.

VASHTI

Queen Vashti can hardly be considered to play a significant role in the book of Esther. She never even speaks directly in the biblical narrative, and the sum of her actions is contained in a mere four verses (Est.1:9-12). In the midrash, however, we find a substantial amount of material which focuses upon her. The very fact that we are told so little about Vashti in the Bible may well have prompted the rabbis to supply the details which were not included in the biblical account.

The very fact that Vashti is queen as the book of Esther opens requires some explanation in itself. How did she reach this high estate? According to the midrash the queen was herself of royal blood, for she was the daughter of Belshazzar, king of Babylonia.¹ She had become queen of the Persian, which had supplanted her father's kingdom, only by God's will. The Bible describes God as "...the Helper of the fatherless" (Ps.10:14), and it was in this role that He made Vashti queen "...over a kingdom that was not hers", for she was an orphan, since Belshazzar, her father, had been killed (Dan.5:30).²

Vashti's feast (Est.1:9) is regarded as part of God's punishment of Israel for their past sins. Not only are the Jews exiled and forced to endure a "godless king",³ but a mere woman rules over them, and even engages in revelry while the temple lies in ruins.⁴ In making her feast, Vashti showed the same contempt for the temple treasures as did Ahashuerus at his feast, opening six treasuries (including those containing the holy temple vessels) and dressing herself in the robes of the high priest.⁵

Although Vashti's feast was the ultimate disgrace for Israel, it

is nonetheless mentioned in the book of Esther, for it indicates the great wealth which Esther would possess when she became queen, for R. Meir says, "If God gives such to those who provoke Him (i.e., Vashti). how much more to those who do His will (i.e., Esther)!"⁶ Raba regards the fact that the banquet was held in the royal palace ("בית המלך"- Est.1:9) as an indication of Vashti's immoral character.⁷ The feast should have been held in the women's quarters, but Vashti purposely moved it to the royal palace, where the men were engaging in their drinking bouts, in order to promote licentious behavior.

It is Vashti's refusal to obey Ahashuerus' command and come before the king (Est.1:12) which the rabbis find most puzzling, and concerning which they comment at some length. Why would the queen refuse such a seemingly simple request, when she must have known that to do so meant risking her royal position, and perhaps even her life? The rabbis provide a number of answers to this question. First, the king's request was not as innocently simple as it appears to be in the book of Esther. In the midrash we find that Ahashuerus ordered Vashti to appear before his guests naked.⁸ This was clearly an improper request, but if Vashti was interested in promoting licentiousness, as previously stated, this was certainly the perfect opportunity. According to the Talmud, Vashti refused to come, not because of any moral scruples, but because, at God's command, Gabriel caused her to become leprous.⁹ But some of the rabbis did assume that modesty motivated Vashti to refuse, and so we also find that Vashti tries to persuade the king to allow her to wear some small garment, but to no avail.¹⁰ She argues that the king's guests will kill him for her if they find that she is as beautiful as he says she is, and that he will be embarrassed if they find her to be ordinary, so in either

case her appearance would be disastrous for Ahashuerus.¹¹ Finally, she chastizes Ahashuerus as only the daughter of a king can, reminding him of his lewdness when he "...was a stableboy in my father's house",¹² mocking his inability to hold his liquor (a problem which she is quick to point out, her father never had),¹³ and calling him a fool.¹⁴ This reply infuriates the king, who asks his ministers to devise a fitting punishment for the queen. Memuchan says, "Let the king give the command, and I'll put her head on a platter!",¹⁵ a suggestion which meets with the king's approval, and so Vashti is executed.¹⁶

In the midrash Vashti's death is clearly part of God's overall plan to punish the wicked and save His people. It is God who brings a rage over Ahashuerus when he learns of the queen's refusal,¹⁷ and who caused his advisors to recommend the death penalty.¹⁸ According to one tradition, Memuchan was really Daniel, who carried out God's decree by advising that Vashti be put to death.¹⁹ While it is clear that Vashti must die so that Esther can become queen, and so be in a position to save her people, her death is also regarded as divine punishment.²⁰ Vashti's father, Belshazzar, had defiled the temple vessels, and for this sin God punished not only the father (Dan. 5:30), but the daughter as well.²¹ Vashti's death also meant the end of the descendants of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who, according to rabbinic tradition, was her grandfather.²² Another interpretation explains that God brought about Vashti's death because she had urged Ahashuerus not to rebuild the temple, saying, "Would you seek to build that which my ancestors destroyed?!"²³ Still another interpretation views Vashti's punishment as an example of *מִנְּסָה כְּנִסָּה* (measure for measure). According to the midrash, Vashti stripped Jewish girls naked and forced them to work on the

sabbath, and so she was killed naked on the sabbath.²⁴ In all of these interpretations it is clear that Vashti's punishment by Ahashuerus for refusing to obey his command was completely undeserved, because she had acted properly in refusing to appear naked.²⁵ But as divine retribution, both for her own sins and those of her father, her punishment is easily justified by the rabbis.

And so we find that the rabbis' view of queen Vashti is overwhelmingly negative. She is given over to lewdness, and has a complete lack of respect for the temple and its treasures, traits which she shares with her husband, Ahashuerus. While even the rabbis must admit that Vashti was one of the most beautiful women in the world,²⁶ their true feelings about her are clearer when they refer to her as "וַשְׁתִּי הַרְעָלָה" - "the wicked Vashti"²⁷ and "זֶה חֲזָקָה" - "this swine".²⁸ But above all, Vashti is the direct descendant of the most despised of all rulers, Nebuchadnezzar, who had been responsible for the destruction of the temple and the exile of Israel. Vashti's haughty bearing and opposition to the rebuilding of the temple well attest to her spiritual kinship to Nebuchadnezzar as well. It is this physical and spiritual kinship to the arch-enemy of Israel, more than any other factor, which engenders the rabbis' hatred and disdain for Vashti, and which moves them to transform the innocuous, insignificant Vashti of the book of Esther into the iniquitous, detestable Vashti who is eventually put to death in the midrash.

NOTES

¹Est. Rab.P:12, 3:5,8, 4:8; Meg.10b; 2Targ.1:12; PRE Ch.49. Vashti is assumed to have been the offspring of Babylonian royalty throughout the midrash.

²Est. Rab.3:5,8. The latter contains the statement quoted above.

³See above, pg.6.

⁴Est. Rab.3:2,3,4.

⁵Est. Rab.3:9. This interpretation is arrived at by the principle of 'לד', specifically, the word *לד* in Est.1:9 is understood to indicate an amplification of the text to include something more than is indicated by the plain meaning. Here *לד* is understood to indicate that the description of Ahashuerus' feast applied to Vashti's feast as well. R. Berechiah's statement, "Vashti was like a raven, adorning herself with the riches of others", is an exact quotation of R. Helbo's comment about Ahashuerus in Est. Rab.2:1. For the parallels between Vashti's actions and those of her husband, see Est. Rab.2:1, and pg.8, above.

⁶Est. Rab.3:9. Vashti's ancestors had provoked God by destroying the temple and defiling its holy objects, and Vashti continues the provocation at her feast.

⁷Meg.12a. Both Ahashuerus and Vashti are said to carry on in the same immoral manner, "he with large pumpkins, she with small pumpkins".

⁸Est. Rab.3:13; 1Targ.1:11; 2Targ.1:11; Meg.12b. Also, see pg. 4, above.

⁹Meg.12b.

¹⁰Est. Rab.3:13.

¹¹Est. Rab.3:14; 2Targ.1:12.

¹²Est. Rab.3:14.

¹³Meg.12b; 2Targ.1:12. It is Ahashuerus' drunkenness which prompts him to give this ridiculous command.

¹⁴2Targ.1:12.

¹⁵Est. Rab.4:9.

¹⁶Est. Rab.4:11. Vashti's execution is also referred to in Est. Rab.P:9, 1:1, 3:9, 3:15, 4:8, Meg.11b, 2Targ.1:12, 2:1, and is assumed throughout the midrash. While Bickerman (pg.186) says that Est.1:19 indicates that Vashti was degraded to the status of concubine, for the rabbis the line indicates the maximum penalty: death. (See also PRE Ch.49).

¹⁷Est. Rab.3:15.

¹⁸Est. Rab.4:2. Though not explicitly stated, this is clearly the point of the passage.

¹⁹Targ.1:16; PRE Ch.49. Another tradition maintains that Memuchan held a grudge against Vashti. According to Est. Rab.4:6, Vashti once hit Memuchan in the face with her shoe (thus he says, "It is not only the king whom queen Vashti has wronged" in Est. 1:11), and refused to invite Memuchan's wife to her feast (and so he says, "...to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes" in Est. 1:17, for his wife held him responsible for this royal snub). Finally, Memuchan hoped that his own daughter would marry Ahashuerus and succeed Vashti as queen. By "...one better than she" in Est.1:19, Memuchan meant his own daughter.

²⁰This is divine punishment for Ahashuerus as well as Vashti. See pg. 8 , above.

²¹Est. Rab.4:8. Here God is " ...פוקדון חטות אבות על בנים",
 "He who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" (Ex. 20:5).

²²Targ.2:1.

²³Est. Rab.5:2

²⁴Meg.12b; PRE Ch.49. She was apparently executed on the same day that she was called, "on the seventh day" (Est.1:10), which the rabbis understood as indicating the sabbath.

²⁵Est. Rab.5:2.

²⁶Meg.14b.

²⁷Meg.10b.

²⁸Est. Rab.4:5.

ESTHER

Esther, as we find her in the Bible, is a simple Jewish orphan girl who becomes queen of persia in true Cinderella fashion. She is a beautiful, unassuming girl, obedient to her beloved cousin, Mordechai, who had raised her as his own, who ultimately risks her life to save her people from destruction. In the midrash the rabbis elaborate upon these fine qualities, portraying Esther as a true paragon of virtue. But they find that several aspects of her rags to riches story raise some unsettling questions about her faithfulness to the demands which her religion makes upon her as a woman. As we shall see, the rabbis go to great lengths to defend Esther's reputation as a properly chaste and righteous Jewess.

As we have already noted,¹ the rabbis believed that one's name indicated the essence of one's character. Esther really has two names, for she is also called Hadassah (Est.2:7), and in the midrash both names are subject to interpretation. She was called Esther because she was like the planet Venus, which is called Astara in Greek,² for just as Venus shines brightly just before the dawn, so Esther cast light forward into Israel's future from its darkest hour.³ R. Judah says that she was called Esther because she concealed (*סתר*) the facts of her national origin, as Mordechai commanded her to do (Est.2:20).⁴ The name Hadassah literally means "Myrtle", and she is so called because of her righteousness, for, in scripture, the righteous are likened to the myrtle.⁵ Just as a myrtle spreads fragrance in the world, so Esther spread good works.⁶ Esther resembled the myrtle in other ways as well, for just as the myrtle smells sweet, but tastes

bitter, so Esther was sweet to Mordechai, but bitter to Haman.⁷ Even her physical appearance was like that of a myrtle, for she was neither too tall nor too short, but of medium height, like the myrtle, and even had a slightly greenish complexion, like a myrtle leaf, though this did not detract from her unequalled charm.⁸

Esther was, of course, very beautiful (Est.2:7). In fact, she was one of the four most beautiful women in history.⁹ Mordechai attempted to hide her from the king's messengers, but Esther's beauty was so famous that they realized that she was not among the virgins. It was only after the king ordered the execution of any maiden kept in hiding that Mordechai brought Esther forward.¹⁰ When she was brought to the king, an auction was held to determine who should accompany her, for everyone wanted this honor for himself.¹¹ Though she was fully seventy-five years of age when she became queen, Esther was still captivatingly beautiful.¹² While Esther is certainly beautiful in her own right, it is God who invests her with a special grace and causes her to "...win the favor of all who see her" (Est.2:15).¹³

But the fact that Esther does become the wife of the heathen king Ahashuerus creates many problems for the rabbis. In the midrash, Mordechai asks the question which most troubles the rabbis: "How could this righteous girl marry an uncircumcized man?".¹⁴ The only possible answer for the rabbis is that this marriage is a part of God's plan, and so Mordechai reasons that "...some great disaster is going to befall Israel, and they will be delivered through her."¹⁵ The rabbis further explain that Ahashuerus didn't have sexual relations with any other women after Esther became his queen.¹⁶ Esther is portrayed as unwillingly submitting to Ahashuerus' advances. Abaye says that she was "...like

a clod of earth", remaining completely passive during intercourse with the heathen king.¹⁷ According to one interpretation, Esther is not only guilty of having sexual relations with a non-Jew, but of adultery as well. In the Talmud we are told that Esther was actually married to Mordechai, and so, when she arose from the bed of Ahashuerus, she had to bathe to purify herself before going to the bed of Mordechai, who was her proper husband.¹⁸

From the rabbis' perspective, living in the palace of a non-Jewish king created other problems as well, problems which the rabbis feel compelled to resolve in the midrash. Thus we find that the reason that Mordechai visits the women's quarters daily (Est.2:11) is to see if Esther has become menstrually impure (נק'י).¹⁹ Esther names the handmaiden who waits upon her on the sabbath Rego'ita, "Rest", so that she will be reminded not to transgress the prohibition against working on the sabbath.²⁰ She refuses to eat the forbidden food which is served in the palace,²¹ so Hegai supplies her with Jewish food to eat.²²

It is apparent from these statements that the rabbis were deeply troubled by the apparent lack of regard for ritual law which attends Esther's entry into the palace. As we have seen, they go to great lengths to defend Esther's honor, and to explain away her apparent transgressions. But despite all of these elaborate explanations, it is clear that Esther's actions are justified chiefly because she is playing a key role in God's plan for the salvation of His people.²³ Esther becomes very agitated upon hearing of Haman's terrible plan (Est.4:4), so much so that she becomes menstruous.²⁴ She sends Hathach to Mordechai to find out why the decree was made (Est.4:5), but she already suspects the real reason that this woe has befallen her people,

for she says, "Perhaps Israel had transgressed the Torah!"²⁵ Now the reason God caused Esther to become queen becomes clear. She is to go to the king, and plead for her people (Est.4:8). Yet Esther is hesitant to carry out her lofty mission (Est.4:11). According to the rabbis, she reminds Mordechai of his previous admonitions that she not reveal her national origin to the king,²⁶ and tells him of how she had prayed that Ahashuerus would not call her that month.²⁷ Finally, she reminds Mordechai that he himself had said that any Jewess who willingly has sexual relations with a non-Jew has no part among the tribes of Israel.²⁸

Eventually Esther is persuaded to risk her life by going before the king to plead for her people.²⁹ But before she undertakes this perilous mission she bids Mordechai to declare a three day period of fasting (Est.4:16), even though this means fasting on the first day of Pesach and failing to observe the commandment to eat unleavened bread on that day.³⁰ Finally Esther prays to God to come to her aid and to save her and her people. In her prayer, she reminds God that she is but a poor orphan, and appeals to "the Father of orphans", to hearken to her prayer.³¹ She reminds God of the merit of the fathers (אבות), particularly of the sacrifice of Isaac, and of His covenant with Israel. She acknowledges the sins which brought this great trouble upon Israel, but bids God to remember the fasting and prayer which they have done in penance for those sins.³²

After her prayer, Esther arises, and, as she prepares herself to go to Ahashuerus, the Holy Spirit comes over her.³³ When Ahashuerus sees Esther approaching he becomes furious. "She comes like a common prostitute!", he storms. Esther is terrified by his words, and prays, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Ps.22:1).³⁴ God hears

her prayer, and favors "this orphan" by causing her to find favor in the eyes of the king.³⁵ He sends three angels to her aid, one to hold her head erect, another to put a thread of grace about her, and a third to stretch forth the king's scepter, so that her life will be spared.³⁶ Only by this divine help does Esther win the king's favor.

But having won the king's favor, Esther makes no plea for her people, but instead invites the king and Haman to a feast (Est.5:4)! Why, the rabbis ask, would the righteous Esther invite Haman, the enemy of her people, to dine with her? By inviting Haman, Esther would have him near, so he couldn't start a rebellion while Ahashuerus was with her, or persuade Ahashuersu to change his mind about things after he left her.³⁷ Her invitation also serves to encourage Haman, so that he will step further into the trap which she is setting for him,³⁸ and will rouse Ahashuerus jealousy as well, and so make him suspicious of Haman.³⁹ By dining with this enemy of the Jews, Esther could be sure that she wouldn't be identified as a Jew, so Israel would not be tempted to rely upon her, but would continue to pray to God for help.⁴⁰ Finally, Esther hopes that God will take note of the depths to which she is forced to sink, and will work a miracle for Israel.⁴¹ Thus the rabbis go to great lengths to make it clear that Esther wishes to dine with Haman only in order to destroy him.

Esther's plan works to perfection, and at the second banquet she pleads for her own life and that of her people (Est.7:3). According to the rabbis her plea is directed, not to king Ahashuerus, but to God, the heavenly King.⁴² When she accuses Haman (Est.7:6) she actually points her finger at Ahashuerus, but disaster is averted, for an angel quickly pushes her accusing finger toward Haman.⁴³ Thus divine providence once again delivers Esther from near calamity.

And so Esther succeeds in rescuing her people from almost certain disaster. But the rabbis emphasize two crucial points throughout the midrash. It is only by reliance upon God's help that Esther is able to accomplish her task. It is God who delivers Israel and destroys Haman, and Esther is little more than a tool in His master plan. But the rabbis are equally concerned with the apparent lack of regard for ritual law which Esther displays in becoming queen. They take great pains to justify her actions, and to explain what, in their eyes, is a pattern of behavior which ill-befits a righteous Jewess who is destined to be the instrument of her people's salvation.

NOTES

¹See above, pg.10 .

²Meg.13a; 2Targ.2:7. What personality trait this reflects is not stated, but it is probably a reference to Esther's beauty, since the planet Venus is itself named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty,

³Yoma 29a. Esther is regarded as the latest book of the Bible historically, and so its story of salvation in time of persecution casts light and hope forward into post biblical history.

⁴Meg.13a. According to this passage Ahashuerus' gifts and remission of taxes (Est.2:18) and the second gathering of the virgins (Est.2:19) were both attempts to make Esther reveal her background (the one through "Bribery", the other by rousing her jealousy). Est. Rab.6:12 makes it clear that her refusal to tell Ahashuerus is most praiseworthy, for, in taking her oath of silence, she was in the tradition of "all the greatest of her ancestors", including Rachel, Benjamin, and Saul.

⁵Meg.13a; 2Targ.2:7. The reference is to Zech.1:8, where the myrtles are understood as representing the righteous. In 2Targ.2:7 and Meg.10b, Is.55:13 is also interpreted as referring to Esther, who is the myrtle which supplants the brier (Vashti).

⁶2Targ.2:7.

⁷Est. Rab.6:5.

⁸Meg.13a.

⁹Meg.15a. The other three are Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail. As we have seen, some thought that Est had a greenish complexion. They therefore exclude her from this list, and include Vashti in her stead (see above, pg.24.)

¹⁰Targ.2:7.

¹¹Est. Rab. 6:10. This interpretation is based on the use of the passive ($\text{הָיָה$) in Esther2:8, which does not specify just who took Esther into the palace.

¹²Gen. Rab.39:13. The rabbis calculation of Esther's age is based upon the fact that Mordechai, her cousin, is said to have been among the exiles deported with King Jeconiah by Nebuchadnezzar (Est.2:6). This exile took place in 597 B.C.E. and, as Moore points out (pg.26), Mordechai would have been at least 120 years of age by the time Esther became queen. Though Esther was considerably younger than her cousin, she also would have been well into old age by this time. The number seventy-five years is chosen by the rabbis because it connects Esther, the deliverer of Israel, with Abraham, the father of all Israel, who left his father's house at the age of seventy-five.

¹³P.R.E. Ch.49.

¹⁴Est. Rab.6:6.

¹⁵ibid.

¹⁶Est. Rab.1:3. This is one of the interpretations of " *וירגלה לה* " (see above, pg.9).

¹⁷Sanh.74b. It should be noted, however, that in Meg.13a Esther is said to satisfy Ahashuerus' every desire. No matter whether he wanted a virgin or a married woman, Esther satisfied his desire. This is Rav's interpretation of Est.2:13, in which both "women" (*פ'ול*) and "virgins" (*נדה*) are mentioned.

¹⁸Meg.13a,b. The rabbis read Est.2:7 as " *והיא חתמה עליו* ", Mordechai took her for himself as a house", that is, as a wife, for the wife is in charge of the household. According to the rabbis, Ahashuerus took married women as well as virgins (see above, pg. 5).

¹⁹Est. Rab.6:8. Meg.13b contains a similar interpretation as well.

²⁰¹Targ.2:9.

²¹²Targ.2:9; P.R.E. Ch.50.

²²Meg.13a. This is Rav's interpretation of Est.2:9. Samuel, however, says that Hegai gave her pork.

²³See above, pg. 23 .

²⁴Meg.15a; Est.Rab.8:3. In the Esther Rabbah passage we also find the opinions that she suffered a miscarriage and never bore children again, and that she had intercourse with gauze, so that she would be unable to

conceive with Ahashuerus. All of these interpretations, and those dealing with נצ') mentioned above, demonstrate the rabbis' emphasis upon the fact that Esther is a woman, a fact which, to the rabbis' way of thinking, creates all sorts of special problems throughout the midrash.

²⁵Est. Rab.8:4; Meg.15a. For the rabbis sin was always the ultimate cause of any trouble which befell Israel (see above, pg.7).

²⁶Aggadat Esther 43.

²⁷Targ.4:11. This interpretation is based on Est.4:11, which demonstrates that Esther's prayer was answered.

²⁸ibid. The rabbis assumed that Mordechai had ordered Esther to sleep with the king, so that he would grant her petition. This assumption is also apparent in Esther's statement to Mordechai in Meg.15a: "As I am lost to my father's house (i.e., she is an orphan), so shall I be lost to you!". By willingly cohabiting with Ahashuerus Esther becomes forbidden to her true husband, Mordechai.

³⁰Est. Rab.8:6. Unless Israel is saved, Passover will never be celebrated again.

³¹Est. Rab.8:6. On God as the Helper of the orphan, see above, pg.21 .

³²Targ.4:16-5:1. In her prayer, Esther calls upon all of the merit which

Israel has stored up in the past, in an effort to avert the impending disaster which Israel's sins have brought upon them.

³³Meg.14b-15a. This is the rabbinic understanding of "וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים" (Est.5:1). According to Meg.15b, the Spirit left Esther when she passed through the room in which the idols were kept on her way to the throne room.

³⁴Midrash Tehillim 22. The rabbis regard this psalm as Esther's plea to God for deliverance.

³⁵Est. Rab.9:1.

³⁶Meg.15b.

³⁷Meg.15b.

³⁸ibid.

³⁹Meg.15b; 2Targ.5:4. On Ahashuerus' suspicions of Haman, see pg. 5 , above.

⁴⁰ibid. Again the midrash emphasizes that salvation comes only from God.

⁴¹Meg.15b

⁴²1Targ.7:3.

43Meg.16a.. Rashi comments that Esther actually intended to point at
Ahashuerus (who was considered no less an enemy of the Jews than Haman-
see above, pg.11 .).

MORDECHAI

While it is Esther who actually appeals to the king on behalf of her people (Est.7:3-6), her cousin Mordechai seems to be the moving force behind Esther's actions. It is Mordechai who keeps Esther informed of the events taking place outside of the palace (Est.4:7), and tells her to go to Ahashuerus and try to save her people (Est.4:8). In the midrash Mordechai is clearly the most righteous man of his time,¹ and the man most responsible for bringing about Israel's salvation.

The rabbinic interpretations of the name Mordechai reflect both his excellent character and his pre-eminent role as redeemer of Israel. According to the rabbis his name means "pure myrrh" ('צִי מֵרַח), for just as myrrh is the best of all spices,² so Mordechai was the best of the righteous of his generation.³ Mordechai's geneology (est.2:5) is interpreted as a series of names for him. Thus he is called "מֵרַח" because he enlightened (מֵרַח) Israel's eyes with his prayer, " 'שָׁמַע לְךָ " because God hearkened (שָׁמַע) to his prayer, and " 'פָּתַח לְךָ " because he knocked (פָּתַח) at the gates of mercy, and they opened for him.⁴ That Mordechai is described as both " 'יְהוּדִי מֵרַח " and " 'בִּנְיָמִי מֵרַח " seems contradictory to the rabbis, for they translate " 'יְהוּדִי מֵרַח " as "Judean", rather than "Jew". How could Mordechai be both a Judean and a Benjaminite? According to R. Johanan, Mordechai was actually a Benjaminite, and was called " 'יְהוּדִי מֵרַח " because he repudiated idolatry.⁵ R. Joshua b. Levi explains that Mordechai's father was from the tribe of Benjamin, while his mother was from Judah.⁶ Thus he traced his lineage to both tribes. The rabbis tell us that Mordechai was a Benjaminite, but owed his existence to

the tribe of Judah as well, for king David (a Judean) did not kill Mordechai's ancestor, Shimei (2Sam.16:5&ff.).⁷ Shimei had deserved death because he had cursed the king, but David had seen prophetically that the righteous Mordechai would descend from him, and therefore spared his life.⁸ Finally, the fact that Kish is included in Mordechai's geneology means that he is of royal blood, for he counts king Saul among his ancestors as well.⁹

Mordechai's outstanding character is evident in his treatment of his orphaned cousin, Esther. He raised her as his own daughter (Est.2:7), choosing to go with her into exile and educate her, rather than remaining in the land of Israel.¹⁰ Mordechai hides Esther from the king's messengers for four years in an effort to prevent them from taking her with the other virgins.¹¹ When she is finally taken, he seeks to protect her by commanding her not to reveal that she is Jewish, (Est.2:10),¹² and helps her to observe Jewish law by visiting the women's quarters daily (Est.2:11) to inquire of her menstrual purity, as well as to prevent the other girls from practicing witchcraft against her.¹³ When Esther becomes queen, his faith in God immediately leads Mordechai to see that this is a hint from God that calamity will soon come upon Israel, and that Esther is to be the instrument of their salvation.¹⁴ The concern which Mordechai shows for Esther is seen by the rabbis as an indication of the concern which he will later show for all of Israel.¹⁵

According to the rabbis, Mordechai himself occupied an official post within the government of king Ahashuerus.¹⁶ At Ahashuerus' banquet the guests are instructed to obey the wishes of Mordechai and Haman, who were apparently in charge of the proceedings.¹⁷ While at court, Mordechai learned of the plot against the king which Bigthan and Teresh

had devised (Est.2:21-22). The two became angry because they had originally held the position at the king's gate, but had been dismissed and replaced by Mordechai.¹⁸ Actually, God had caused Bigthan and Teresh to become angry with the king in order that Mordechai might save the king's life and later be rewarded.¹⁹ According to some sources Mordechai learned of the plot through a prophetic vision.²⁰ But the Talmud tells us that Mordechai overheard the two plotting together. They were from Tarsus, and so spoke in Tarsian to prevent others from understanding them, but Mordechai understood seventy languages, for he was a member of the great Sanhedrin.²¹

That the rabbis suppose Mordechai to be a member of the Sanhedrin is really not as surprising as it may seem. While it is true that the Sanhedrin was not even in existence during the period in which the book of Esther is set, the rabbis often apply conditions which exist in their own time to the historical situations which they discuss in the midrash. Since the rabbis consider Mordechai to be a man of outstanding character and virtue, it is only natural that they should assume that he was one of the sages of his time. Thus we hear that

Mordechai is a highly respected rabbi,²² with his own circle of disciples.²³ The expression "the people of Mordechai" (Est.3:6) refers to his fellow rabbis, who were also members of the Sanhedrin.²⁴

While Mordechai is obviously a truly saintly man, he is also the man who brings trouble upon Israel by refusing to bow to Haman (Est.3:2). The question asked by the king's servants in Est.3:3 must have troubled the rabbis as well. In a time when it was common custom to bow before men of high rank, why did Mordechai refuse to bow to Haman? The midrash supplies a simple answer to this question. Haman had affixed a graven image to his tunic, so that when one bowed to Haman he bowed to the idol as well, and would thus be guilty of idolatry.²⁵ Upon seeing this,

Mordechai declares that Haman has set himself up as a god.²⁶ He makes it clear that he would have bowed to Haman willingly, had he not worn the idol, but, as a faithful follower of the one God, he could not bow to the image which Haman wore.²⁷ The king's servants (Est.3:2) remind Mordechai that his ancestor, Jacob, had bowed before Haman's ancestor, Esau (Gen.33:3), but Mordechai replies that he is a Benjaminite, and his ancestor, Benjamin, had not yet been born when Jacob prostrated himself before Esau.²⁸ Moreover, Benjamin was the only one of Jacob's sons worthy to be born in the land of Israel.²⁹ He never bowed to any man, and was rewarded for this by having the temple built in his territory.³⁰ Thus Mordechai is both observing the precepts of his faith and following in the footsteps of his honored ancestor in refusing to bow to Haman.

Though Mordechai undoubtedly acted properly in refusing to bow to Haman, he nonetheless seems to have brought disaster upon his people by this refusal. For the rabbis, however, the cause of Israel's troubles is not Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman, but their own sins. Despite Mordechai's warnings, the Jews had attended Ahashuerus' feast, and had become drunk and lewd there. Upon seeing this, God decrees their destruction, but, in the heavenly court, Moses pleads with God to let Mordechai stand in the breach for Israel, as he himself had once done (Ps.106:23).³¹

Upon hearing of Haman's decree of doom the righteous Mordechai immediately does step into the breach, and sets himself about the task of rescuing Israel. He instructs Esther to go to the king to plead for her people (Est.4:8), but finds that she is fearful and reluctant to do his command.³² Mordechai reminds Esther that all Jews are threatened by Haman's decree, and so it is useless for her to try to save herself.³³ Besides, he continues, it was Esther's ancestor, Saul, who brought this

evil upon Israel by sparing the life of Agag (1Sam.15), from whose seed the evil Haman eventually sprung.³⁴ Mordechai bids Esther to atone for her ancestor's sin by praying to God on behalf of the Jewish people.³⁵ Moreover, Esther must go to the king for her own sake as well, says Mordechai, for in the world to come she will be judged according to her actions here.³⁶ She must realize that God will save Israel even without her,³⁷ just as He has saved Israel in every generation, for Haman is no stronger than any other tyrant who has risen against the Jews.³⁸ Finally, Mordechai reassures Esther by reminding her of a symbolic dream which he once had, in which trouble befell Israel and they were saved.³⁹

Having convinced Esther to fulfill her proper role, Mordechai now sets about the task of leading the rest of the Jews in fasting and prayer. As an honored rabbi he addresses his people, and tells them that Israel has no earthly king or prophet upon whom they can rely, and no land to which they can flee.⁴⁰ Only by making supplication to God can Israel hope to be saved from Haman. Mordechai bids the Jews to follow the example of the people of Nineveh, who averted the disaster which Jonah had prophesied against them (Jonah 3:5-9) by fasting and covering themselves with sackcloth and ashes.⁴¹ Upon hearing his words, the people take out the Torah and cover it with sackcloth and ashed.⁴² Though Mordechai is troubled by the fact that the fast would mean failing to eat unleavened bread on the first day of Passover,⁴³ he nonetheless orders the Jews to fast, that they might make atonement to God for their sins.⁴⁴

When Esther hears that Mordechai has rent his clothing and covered himself with sackcloth and ashes, she sends him fresh clothing, but he refuses to wear it, and continues to pray to God for deliverance.⁴⁵ In his prayer, Mordechai reminds God of His oath to "make Israel as many as the stars", which He made to the patriarchs,⁴⁶ and of His promise not

to reject Israel and destroy them (Lev.26:44).⁴⁷ Mordechai tells God that it was only out of faithfulness to Him that he had refused to bow to Haman, and pleads with Him to save Israel.⁴⁸ Finally, Mordechai forces the children to fast and wear sackcloth and ashes, and their cries of distress reach God's throne in heaven, causing Him to take pity upon Israel and to change the decree of destruction which he had made against them.⁴⁹

Even as God is breaking the heavenly decree against Israel, on earth Haman rejoices upon receiving the decree of doom from Ahashuerus. At this same moment Mordechai happens by, finds three children returning from school, and asks them what they have been studying. He learns that each of the three had been studying a biblical passage which deals with God's help to Israel in time of trouble. Upon hearing this, Mordechai rejoices, for he realizes that this is a sign from God that He will once again come to Israel's aid.⁵⁰ Just as God had given Mordechai a hint of the trouble which would come upon Israel, so now He reassures him by giving him a hint of their ultimate salvation.

God's plan to destroy Haman and save the Jews becomes even more apparent when Ahashuerus orders Haman to honor his hated enemy, Mordechai (Est.6:10). The order is apparently the result of the account which king Ahashuerus finds in his record book (Est.6:2), but actually it is the result of the record in God's book,⁵¹ for, as we have seen, God caused the entire incident involving the plot on Ahashuerus' life in the first place.⁵² When Mordechai sees Haman approaching him, he becomes frightened. He bids his students and fellow rabbis to leave, that Haman might not kill them as well, but they refuse, and together they pray to God for deliverance.⁵³ When he hears that he is to be honored by Haman,

Mordechai seizes the opportunity to demean his enemy even further. Because he has been covered with sackcloth and ashes for so long, he tells Haman, he must bathe and have his hair trimmed before wearing the royal robe.⁵⁴ But Esther had closed all of the barbershops and bath-houses on that day,⁵⁵ and so Haman is forced to perform these menial tasks for his enemy, Mordechai.⁵⁶ Mordechai complains that his fast has left him too weak to mount the horse, and so Haman must kneel and allow Mordechai to step on his back in mounting.⁵⁷ Mordechai adds insult to injury by kicking Haman after he has mounted his horse.⁵⁸ Thus the evil Haman is forced to serve as barber, bathman, orderly, and herald (as in Est.6:11) for his arch-enemy, the righteous Mordechai.⁵⁹ Mordechai and his fellow Jews realize that it is really God who has caused Mordechai to be so honored. As he is led through the streets, Mordechai sings praises to God,⁶⁰ and while Haman proclaims, "Thus shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor" (Est.6:11),⁶¹ the Jews proclaim, "Thus shall be done to the man whom the King who created heaven and earth delights to honor!"⁶² After this moment of honor, Mordechai returns to his sackcloth and fasting,⁶³ for, as R. Helbo states, one who wears sackcloth should do so until his prayer is answered.⁶⁴

Mordechai does not have to wait long for his prayer to be answered, for Haman is soon exposed by Esther (Est.7:6), and hung by the king (Est.7:10).⁶⁵ The rabbis note that Mordechai is elevated by the king (Est.10:2-3), wears a crown and royal garments (Est.8:15), and is feared throughout the land (Est.9:3), and conclude that he has become king of the Jews.⁶⁶ According to R. Phinchas, Mordechai even had coins minted which bore both his image and that of Esther.⁶⁷ All of this honor comes to Mordechai because he is a "perfect man" and a "Man of peace" (Ps.37:37),

who "seeks the good of his people" (Est.10:3).⁶⁸

This, then, is the story of Mordechai as told in the midrash. He is a pious man, a renowned rabbi in his time, who, through fasting, prayer, and unfailing faith in the God of Israel, brings salvation to his people. Because of his perfect faith and unequalled righteousness, God rewards him by elevating him to a place of high esteem in the court of king Ahashuerus. There is, however, one unfortunate footnote to this story. The book of Esther informs us that Mordechai was "popular among the multitude of his kinsman" (Est.10:3). The rabbis of the Talmud note that the word אֲרָב , which is generally translated as "multitude", actually means "majority", and they conclude that some of the members of the Sanhedrin separated from Mordechai at this time.⁶⁹ Rashi comments that the rabbis of the Sanhedrin did this because Mordechai neglected the study of Torah after rising to his position of power. R. Joseph contends that the study of Torah is more important even than the saving of a life. Mordechai illustrates this, for he is mentioned fifth in Ezra 2:2, but is relegated to sixth position in Neh.7:7, which was written after Mordechai was raised to his high position at court.⁷⁰ The rabbis view this as scriptural proof of his loss of stature upon acquiring his new position, caused by his neglect of the Torah. Thus the Talmud concludes the story of Mordechai by showing us that even this pious Jew, who was the most righteous man of his entire generation, was eventually corrupted by too much wealth and power.

NOTES

¹In Est. Rab.6:2 Mordechai is described as "...Moses in his generation".

²Est. Rab.6:3; Meg.10b; 2Targ.2:5.

³Est. Rab.6:3.

⁴Meg.12b. P.R.E. Ch.50 says that Mordechai enlightened their faces (i.e., the faces of the scholars) in halachah. On Mordechai as a learned rabbi, see above, pg.43.

⁵Est. Rab.6:2; Meg.13a. This interpretation seems closest to the p'shat meaning of the text, since R. Johanan in effect says that " 'יְהוּדִי' ב'ר' " simply indicates that Mordechai was a Jew, not a Judean.

⁶Meg.12b.

⁷Meg.12b-13a; 2Targ.2:5.

⁸2Targ.2:5.

⁹P.R.E. ch.50. Mordechai's descent from Saul is significant because Haman is a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite, who's life Saul spared (1Sam.15). The age-old conflict between Benjamin and Amalek is thus an important undercurrent in the book of Esther, as Mordechai the Benjaminite and Haman the Amalekite do battle. As Gordis puts it, "By challenging and ultimately overthrowing Haman, Mordechai atones for Saul's weakness toward Haman's ancestor centuries earlier" (Gordis, pg.27). See also pg.44,45,57.

¹⁰Meg. 13a; 2Targ.2:5. This interpretation is probably based on the use of the word "with" in Est. 2:6, implying that he had accompanied the exiles, but had not actually been exiled himself.

¹¹2Targ.2:8. By contrast, Est. Rab.5:4 states that Mordechai was actually in charge of finding the virgins for the king. The general principle stated in the Est. Rab. passage is that whenever a man's name is found immediately after a situation, this indicates that he is in charge of that situation. In our case, the king's order to find a replacement for Vashti (Est.2:4) is immediately followed by the first mention of Mordechai in the book of Esther (Est. 2:5).

¹²Gordis (pg.28) concludes that Mordechai's command to Esther was intended to protect her from anti-Jewish forces which would undoubtedly attempt to block her ascent to the throne.

¹³Est.Rab.6:8. According to Meg.13b, he commanded her to show her menstrual blood to the sages. See above, pg. 31, 42.

¹⁴Est. Rab.6:6. According to this passage Mordechai was one of four men who were given such a hint of future events by God; Moses, Jacob, and David were the others. Of these four, only David and Mordechai grasped the full significance of the "hint" which they received.

¹⁵Est. Rab.6:8.

¹⁶Gordis (pg.30-31) agrees with this interpretation, and regards the expression "Mordechai was sitting in the king's gate" (Est.2:19) as

indicative of his official position. Paton, (pg.188), however, sees no necessity for interpreting the line in this manner.

¹⁷Meg.12a. This interpretation is based on the expression "וְכִי לִי מֵדֵי" (Est.1:8). Both Haman and Mordechai are referred to as "לִי" in the book of Esther (Mordechai in Est.2:5, Haman in Est.7:6), and so "וְכִי לִי" is understood as referring to Mordechai and Haman. Rashi comments that Mordechai and Haman were butlers at Ahashuerus' feast.

¹⁸Est.Rab.6:13. Bigthan and Teresh show their resentment of Mordechai by referring to him as "this barbarian".

¹⁹Est. Rab.6:13; Meg.13b.

²⁰Targ.2:21.

²¹Meg.13b. P.R.E. Ch. 50 contains a similar account.

²²Targ.4:1.

²³Est. Rab.7:13,10:4; Meg.16a.

²⁴Meg.13b. Also, see above, pg.48, and Meg.16b, where reference is again made to Mordechai's colleagues in the Sanhedrin.

²⁵Est. Rab.6:2, 7:5, 7:6, 7:8, 8:6; P.R.E. Ch.50.

²⁶Est. Rab.7:8.

²⁷Est. Rab.8:6.

²⁸Est. Rab.7:8; 2Targ.3:4.

²⁹Est. Rab.7:8. By pointing out the merit of his ancestor, Benjamin, the rabbis also add to Mordechai's status.

³⁰2Targ.3:4.

³¹Est. Rab.7:13.

³²See above, pg.32 .

³³2Targ.4:14.

³⁴ibid. Since Mordechai and Esther are first cousins, they both trace their lineage back to Saul.

³⁵ibid. Note that, in the midrash, it is prayer which saves Israel, not Esther's intercession with the king.

³⁶Est. Rab.8:6.

³⁷ibid. This is the rabbis' understanding of the expression " אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד " in Est. 4:14. It is important to note that they do not regard this phrase as a reference to God Himself, but to the person who will become His instrument should Esther refuse to go to the king.

³⁸2Targ.4:14.

³⁹Est. Rab.8:5.

⁴⁰2Targ.4:1.

⁴¹ibid.

⁴²ibid.

⁴³Est. Rab.8:6; P.R.E. Ch.50. This interpretation is based on the words " 'וַיִּזְכֹּר מֶלֶךְ' " in Est.4:17, which the rabbis translate as "and Mordechai transgressed", indicating that he transgressed the commandment to eat unleavened bread by fasting on the first day of Passover. See above, pg.2.

⁴⁴2Targ.4:1.

⁴⁵ibid.

⁴⁶P.R.E. Ch. 50.

⁴⁷Est. Rab.8:6.

⁴⁸ibid.

⁴⁹Est. Rab.8:6; 2Targ.6:1. According to Est. Rab.7:13, the decree of doom had been sealed with clay, and so could be broken. Had the decree been

sealed with blood, it could not have been revoked, even by God Himself.

⁵⁰Est. Rab.7:13. The verses which the children quote are Prov.3:25, Is.8:10, and Is.46:4.

⁵¹Est. Rab.6:14.

⁵²See above, pg.43 .

⁵³Est. Rab.10:3; Meg.16a.

⁵⁴Est.. Rab.10:4; Meg.16a; P.R.E. Ch. 50; 2Targ.6:11.

⁵⁵Meg.16a.

⁵⁶Est. Rab.10:4; Meg.16a; 2Targ.6:11; P.R.E. Ch. 50. According to Meg.16a, Haman had once been a barber in K'far Karzum, and Mordechai further humiliates him by reminding him of this fact from his past.

⁵⁷Est. Rab.10:4; Meg.16a. According to P.R.E. Ch. 50, Mordechai actually stepped on Haman's neck. All three sources state that this action is the literal fulfillment of the biblical statement, "And you shall tread upon their high places" (Deut.33:29).

⁵⁸Meg.16a.

⁵⁹Est. Rab.10:7; 2Targ.6:12.

⁶⁰Est. Rab.10:5. Mordechai sings Ps.30:2-4, which praises God for deliverance from the hands of the enemy.

⁶¹According to 2Targ.6:11, 27,000 young men from the palace also went before Mordechai to make this proclamation.

⁶²2Targ.6:11.

⁶³Est. Rab.10:6; Meg.16a.

⁶⁴Est. Rab.10:6.

⁶⁵According to 2Targ.7:10, Mordechai actually hanged Haman himself.

⁶⁶Est. Rab.10:12; P.R.E. Ch.50.

⁶⁷ibid. This interpretation is based upon Est.9:4. R. Pinchas says that Mordechai's fame was spread by means of these coins, which spread throughout the land.

⁶⁸ibid.

⁶⁹Meg.16b.

⁷⁰ibid. These are lists of the leading men who returned to the land of

Israel with Zerubabel. The fact that Mordechai is mentioned sixth in Nehemiah (instead of fifth, as in Ezra) indicates a loss of stature and esteem to the rabbis.

HAMAN

Haman is, of course, the arch-enemy of the Jews, totally without redeeming qualities, who attempts to completely destroy Israel. According to the book of Esther, Haman's intense hatred for Israel is brought on by Mordechai's refusal to bow to him (Est. 3:5), but Haman's reaction to this insult certainly seems to be completely out of proportion to the offense itself. Why should he seek to exterminate an entire people because of a single man's actions? The answer to this question lies in the fact that Haman is a descendant of Agag, who was the king of the Amalekites (1Sam. 15:8). It was Amalek who had attacked the "faint and weary" at the rear of Israel's company as they came out of Egypt (Deut. 25:17), and it is Amalek whom the Torah commands Israel to completely destroy (Deut. 25:19). Thus Haman is the descendant of "...the most ancient foe of Israel",¹ an enemy "...that was characterized by an ancient and unquenchable hatred of Israel",² and so Haman was an "enemy of the Jews" (Est. 3:10) even before the incident with Mordechai. Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman in effect rekindles "a traditional blood feud—the most ancient and bitter in Israel's history".³ Haman's descent from Amalek not only explains his hatred for Israel, but also gives the knowledgeable reader the assurance that Mordechai ultimately will triumph over Haman, for "the reader knows in advance that Amalek cannot destroy Israel".⁴

Anderson states that "...the book of Esther may be regarded as the inexorable working out of the divine curse against Amalek".⁵ This is precisely the way in which the rabbis view the book.⁶ R. Judah b. R. Simon, commenting upon Est. 1:20, states that the "decree of the king"

(*פסחא דמחש*) is actually the decree of the King of kings concerning the destruction of Amalek in Ex.17:14, which is about to be carried out.⁷ In the midrash we are constantly reminded of Haman's descent from the accursed enemy of Israel. In his letter decreeing the destruction of the Jews Haman is described as being of royal descent, for he is of the house of Amalek, and he makes special mention of the harsh manner in which Israel dealt with his ancestors, Amalek and Agag.⁸ Haman describes Mordechai to Ahashuerus as "my enemy and the enemy of my fathers",⁹ and later, he pleads with Mordechai not to remember the hatred of Agag and Amalek.¹⁰ When Mordechai sends word to Esther of Haman's plot against the Jews, he simply says, " *קרח* has come", again referring to Amalek, who "came upon" Israel (*קרח*) during the march out of Egypt.¹¹ This cryptic reference to Haman's accursed ancestor is enough to make the situation clear to Esther.

The rabbis apply a multitude of scriptural passages to the wicked Haman in describing the enormous evil which he represents. He is the "wicked ruler" of Prov.28:15,¹² the "sinner" whom God punishes in Eccles.2:26,¹³ the "utterly contemptible" man of Song of Songs 8:7,¹⁴ the "thorn bush" of Is.55:13.¹⁵ He is the "man (who) rose against us" in Ps.124:2,¹⁶ and who "shall perish forever, like his own dung" (Job 20:7), for he is as repulsive as dung.¹⁷ Because of Haman's great evil, God swore, "I will destroy princes and kings" (Jer.49:38), for the princes are none other than Haman and his ten sons.¹⁸ The very fact of Haman's existence brings woe to Israel,¹⁹ for it is the advice of "this wicked one" that nearly results in the destruction of the Jews.²⁰ Haman and his sons had shown themselves to be enemies of the Jews from the very first, for they had advised Ahashuerus not to rebuild the temple

in Jerusalem.²¹ In fact, Haman had taken the treasures of the kings of Judah as plunder, and by doing so became one of the two most wealthy men in all of history.²² When Ahashuerus promotes Haman (Est.3:1), he does so, not on the basis of any merit that Haman possesses, but because of this great wealth which he had acquired.²³

Once having reached a position of great power, Haman immediately sets out to destroy his hated enemies, the Jews. He first affixes an idol to his tunic,²⁴ and then orders everyone to bow to him, knowing full well that the Jews cannot obey his order so long as he wears the idol. He seizes upon the pretext of Mordechai's refusal to bow to order the extermination of all Israel. Haman knew of the past persecutions of Israel, and of how the enemies of the Jews had been defeated time and time again, so he takes great care in working out his evil plan. "Pharaoh's mistake", he reasons, "was that he killed only the males; I will kill all the Jews", and so avoid the error which brought woe to Pharaoh.²⁵ Because the destruction which Haman plots is so complete, the rabbis regard him as the most vicious, most dangerous of all of Israel's persecutors. They describe Israel as the vineyard of the Lord, which His enemies are constantly trying to destroy. Pharaoh had plucked the loose grapes (i.e., the infants- Ex.1:22), Nebuchadnezzar had plucked the clusters of grapes (the craftsmen and scholars- 2Kings 24:16), and now Haman outdoes both of these accursed men by attempting to uproot the vines (all of Israel) completely!²⁶

Haman uses his great wealth to buy the right to destroy Israel from Ahashuerus,²⁷ and willingly pays the top price of 50 shekels for each Jew.²⁸ Though he gains the permission of the king to carry out his terrible plan against the Jews, Haman is still apprehensive, for he

fears that the God of Israel will rescue His people. In order to avoid this, Haman casts lots in an effort to find an auspicious time for executing his plan. First he casts lots to determine which day of the week he should pick, but, much to his dismay, he finds that Israel has some merit before God connected with each day, and he fears that this merit will be sufficient to cause God to save them. Next Haman casts lots for the month in which to destroy Israel, and again he finds that Israel has some merit connected with each month, with the exception of the month of Adar. Encouraged by this, Haman casts lots for the sign of the zodiac which would be most favorable, and finds that every sign holds some merit for Israel except the sign of Pisces. Upon seeing this, Haman rejoices, for Pisces is the sign of the month of Adar. In addition, Haman knows that Moses died in the month of Adar, and so he is positive that Adar holds no merit for Israel, and that God will therefore not intervene on their behalf. What Haman did not know was that Moses was also born in the month of Adar, and so Israel did have merit connected with that month as well.²⁹

Haman takes similar precautions in selecting the method by which Mordechai should be killed. His wife, Zeresh, warns him that fire, the sword, drowning, even a den of lions, all have been ineffective against Jews in the past. She advises him to hang Mordechai upon a gallows, for no Jew has yet been delivered from such a punishment.³⁰ Haman heeds her advice, and builds the gallows (Est. 5:14).

It is because Haman realizes that only God can save Israel that he causes a most serious accusation to be brought against them before God. It is Haman who advises Ahashuerus to make his banquet, with all its drunkenness and lewdness, and to order Israel to attend, for he

realizes that, by taking part in such a feast, Israel would incur God's wrath, and He would then refuse to save them. This ploy very nearly works, and only the intercession of Moses and the rest of the heavenly court, and the good works of Mordechai on earth cause God to turn from His anger and save His people.³¹

Haman seems to have things well under control. He has selected the most favorable time for his attack upon Israel and has caused their God to become angry with them. When he sees Hatach carrying messages between Esther and his enemy, Mordechai (Est. 4:5&ff.), he kills him, and thus prevents Mordechai from enlisting the queen's aid against him.³²

He has been promoted by the king (Est. 3:1), and has even been invited to dine with the king and queen in the queen's private chambers (Est. 5:4).

All the signs seem to point toward Haman's ultimate triumph over Israel.

But God's enemies are elevated only to make their fall greater, and so Haman becomes great only for his own hurt.³³ The fact is that God will

not forsake His people (1Sam. 12:22) whether they are guilty or not, for the world cannot exist without Israel³⁴ and Israel's Torah.³⁵ Haman

is foolish for attempting to destroy Israel, for God Himself could not destroy them.³⁶ In the end God brings all of the evil which Haman had

planned for Israel down upon his own head. When he cast his lots, the

lot actually fell upon himself, for God declared, "Your lot is to be

hung!"³⁷ The money which Haman pays to Ahashuerus for the right to

kill the Jews is itself a hint of his ultimate fate, for the word "סוף" ("the end")

has the same numerical value in geomatria as

"ג' י" - the gallows for which Haman is destined.³⁸ Similarly, the

rabbis understand Est. 6:4 to indicate that Haman actually prepared the

gallows for himself.³⁹ Haman's fate was sealed from the very beginning

of time, for the rabbis find a reference to him in the creation story of Genesis. In Gen.3:2 they read the words " $\text{וְהָאֵץ$ / וְהָאֵץ " as " $\text{וְהָאֵץ} \text{ / } \text{וְהָאֵץ}$ ", and conclude that the tree (i.e., the gallows) was made ready for Haman from the time of creation itself.⁴⁰ Thus Haman, whose words were evil and spoken haughtily, is destined to be broken by God. In the words of the midrash, he will be "boiled in his own pot".⁴¹

The king's command to elevate Mordechai is the beginning of the end for Haman, and he knows it. Upon hearing the king's command (Est.6:10), Haman feigns ignorance, and pretends that he doesn't know the Mordechai of whom the king is speaking.⁴² When it becomes clear that it is his hated enemy whom he is to honor, Haman pleads with the king to change his mind. He tells Ahashuerus that he would gladly pay 10,000 talents of silver (the same amount which he had paid for the right to destroy Mordechai and his people) to Mordechai, and would let his ten sons do Mordechai this honor, if only he did not have to bear the shame of personally exalting this man whose death he had so carefully planned.⁴³ But all of his arguments are to no avail, and Haman now realizes that his plan is doomed to failure. When he comes to honor Mordechai, he finds him studying the laws of the handful (the meal offering- Lev.2:2), and says, "Your handful has conquered my 10,000 talents of silver".⁴⁴ "I was erecting a gallows for him", he mourns, "but God prepares a crown for him!"⁴⁵

Now Haman begins to feel the punishment which God has prepared for him. He is totally degraded by Mordechai, whom he must serve as barber, bathman, orderly and herald.⁴⁶ While he is leading Mordechai through the streets of the city, Haman's daughter looks down from her balcony and sees the procession. She naturally assumes that it is her father who

is riding, and Mordechai who is leading him, and dumps a chamberpot upon her father's head.⁴⁷ When she discovers the truth, she is overcome with shame, and leaps to her death.⁴⁸ Thus, when Haman returns to his house, he covers his head (Est.6:12) both out of shame and as a sign of mourning for his daughter.⁴⁹ According to another interpretation, Haman became leprous as well, and this was the reason that he covered his head.⁵⁰

The final disaster befalls Haman at Esther's second banquet. Esther exposes the true nature of his plot to Ahashuerus (Est.7:6) and the heavenly host all join in bringing about Haman's destruction. When the king storms out into the garden (Est.7:7), he is further enraged by the sight of the angel Michael busily destroying the garden.⁵¹ As soon as Ahashuerus comes back into the palace, Michael pushes Haman onto Esther, and seals his doom.⁵² Harbona, who was also present (Est.7:9), had actually conspired with Haman to hang Mordechai, but, upon seeing that Haman is doomed, he tells the king that Haman had plotted against the king as well, and also shows him the gallows which Haman had constructed.⁵³ R. Eleazar agrees that Harbona was involved in Haman's plot, but says that he fled when he saw that the plan was doomed to failure.⁵⁴ In contrast to these interpretations, another interpretation contends that Harbona was really Elijah, who joined Michael in bringing about the destruction of Haman.⁵⁵

In any event, Haman is hung on the very gallows which he had intended for Mordechai (Est.7:10), and the Jews are saved. As always, the rabbis make it clear that it is God who brings Haman to account and who delivers His people. But the destruction of Haman represents more than the death of an individual enemy of Israel, for Haman is an Amalekite. For the rabbis, Haman represents the eternal Amalek, who rises up against the Jews

in every generation. Though God is never mentioned in the biblical book, the story of Esther serves to reaffirm the Jew's faith in His God in time of trouble, for the destruction of Haman and the salvation of the Jewish people represents nothing less than the ultimate triumph of God and Israel over all of their enemies. This is the great message of the midrash to the book of Esther.

HAMAN

¹paton, pg. 194.

²ibid.

³Anderson, pg.847.

⁴Bickerman, pg.197.

⁵Anderson, pg.847.

⁶For Mordechai's role in this ancient feud, see above, pg. 42, 49.

⁷Est. Rab.4:10.

⁸Est. Rab.7:13.

⁹2Targ.6:10. This is part of Haman's attempt to evade Ahashuerus' order to honor Mordechai (see above, pg. 62).

¹⁰2Targ.7:9. This is part of Haman's plea to Mordechai for mercy, when his plans have come undone.

¹¹Est. Rab.8:5.

¹²Meg.11a.

¹³Meg.10b.

¹⁴Est. Rab.7:12.

¹⁵Meg.10b. Ironically, Haman is eventually hung upon a gallows made out of the thorn bush (Est..Rab.9:2; 2Targ.7:10). Thus the "thorn" in Israel's side is punished by being hung on the thorn tree.

¹⁶Meg.11a. The rabbis emphasize that the psalm mentions a man, and not a king; they conclude that Haman is this man, and not Nebuchadnezzar or any of the other kings who attacked Israel.

¹⁷Est. Rab.7:3.

¹⁸Meg.10b.

¹⁹Est. Rab.P:7,P:11; Meg.10b.

²⁰Est. Rab.4:2.

²¹Est. Rab.P:5,7:2; PRE Ch.50. In Est. Rab.P:5 the Shimshai of Ezra 4:9, who argued against rebuilding the temple, is identified as one of Haman's sons.

²²Est. Rab.7:5; PRE Ch.50. Korah is the other wealthy man.

²³ibid.

²⁴See above, pg.43 .

²⁵Est. Rab.7:23.

²⁶Est. Rab.P:11.

²⁷Est. Rab.P:10. Haman is described as the foremost of buyers, because he used his wealth to buy the right to destroy Israel.

²⁸Est. Rab.7:19. Fifty shekels is the maximum valuation of an individual in Lev.27:3. Haman is unsure of the number of Jews in the kingdom, and so he agrees to pay fifty shekels for each of the 600,000 who came out of Egypt (Num.2:32).

²⁹Est. Rab.7:11. Meg.13b also contains a reference to Adar as the month in which Moses was born and died. On Adar as the month of Moses' birth, see Kid.38a.

³⁰Est. Rab.9:2; 2Targ.5:14. According to Est. Rab., Zeresh was the most highly respected of all Haman's advisors. She is considered to be one of Haman's advisors because she appears to speak as one of them in Est.6:13.

³¹Est. Rab.7:13. Also, see above, pg.44 .

³²2Targ.4:11

³³Est. Rab.7:1,2. The rabbis quote Ps.92:8 and Ps.37:20 as proof of this principle.

³⁴Est. Rab.7:12.

³⁵Est. Rab.7:13.

³⁶Est. Rab.7:10. This interpretation is based upon Ps.106:23, which describes how Moses caused God to leave His vow to destroy Israel unfulfilled.

³⁷Est. Rab.7:11. In this passage Haman is called "אסר" and "אסר פאסר", again a reference to his hated ancestors.

³⁸Est. Rab.7:21. Both "סכא" and "אסר" have the numerical value 165 in geomatria.

³⁹Est. Rab.10:2; Meg.16a. This is the rabbinic understanding of the expression "אסר אסר" (Est.6:4).

⁴⁰Est. Rab.9:2. This comment might also be taken to be an indication that the rabbis regarded Haman as the same eternal evil which caused the original sin of Adam and Eve. It is true that Haman did tempt Israel by having Ahashuerus invite them to his banquet (see above, pg60-61), and in Est. Rab.P:5 he is identified with the serpent in Amos 5:19. But the interpretation of "אסר אסר" immediately follows the comment that the gallows were prepared for Haman from creation, and so the intent would seem to be to link Haman to the tree (i.e., the gallows) which the rabbis say appears in the creation story itself, and to thereby prove that God had anticipated Haman's coming and had prepared his punishment at the time of creation. As for the designation of Haman as the serpent, one might

well ask why the rabbis choose to quote Amos 5:19 if they intended to identify Haman with the primordial evil of the serpent or the creation. Had this been their intent they undoubtedly would have quoted Gen.3:1 or Gen.3:14, and so make the identification at least somewhat clearer.

⁴¹Est. Rab.7:22. This is a general principle, which the rabbis apply to pharaoh as well. Because pharaoh ordered the slaying of the first born of Israel, his own first born dies, Thus he is punished according to his own words-"boiled in his own pot".

⁴²2Targ.6:10; PRE Ch.50. This interpretation is based upon the fact that Ahashuerus specifies Mordechai as "the Jew", and further as the one "who sits at the king's gate" (Est.6:10). For the rabbis these phrases constitute the king's answers to Haman's nervous question, "Which Mordechai?".

⁴³2Targ.6:10.

⁴⁴Est. Rab.10:4; Meg.16a. 2Targ.6:11 contains a slightly different version of this story, in which Mordechai's sackcloth and ashes are said to have won out over Haman's silver.

⁴⁵Est. Rab.10:5.

⁴⁶See above, pg.47.

⁴⁷Meg.16a.

⁴⁸Est. Rab.10:5; Meg.16a.

⁴⁹Est. Rab.10:7; Meg.16a.

⁵⁰2Targ.6:12.

⁵¹Est. Rab.10:9; Meg.16a; PRE Ch.50.

⁵²ibid.

⁵³2Targ.7:9. The rabbis regard the fact that Harbona knows the exact dimensions of the gallows (Est.7:9) as proof of his complicity.

⁵⁴Meg.16a.

⁵⁵Est. Rab.10:9; PRE Ch.50.

ABBREVIATIONS

Est. Rab.	Midrash Esther Rabbah
Gen. Rab.	Midrash Genesis Rabbah
Kid.	Babylonián Talmud Tractate Kiddushin
Meg.	Babylonian Talmud Tractate Megillah
P:	Petichta (opening chapter) of Esther Rabbah
PRE	Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer
Sanh.	Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin
1Targ.	Targum Rishon to the Book of <u>Esther</u>
2Targ.	Targum Sheni to the Book of <u>Esther</u>

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