

INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES AND PRIZE ESSAYS

**AUTHOR** Elaine Rose Glickman

TITLE "Son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the  
Enemy of the Jews"  
Haman in Rabbinic Literature

TYPE OF THESIS: Ph.D. ☐ D.H.L. ☐ Rabbinic ☒

Master's [ ] Prize Essay [ ]

1. May circulate [✓] ) Not necessary  
2. Is restricted [ ] for years. ) for Ph.D. thesis.

**Note:** The Library shall respect restrictions placed on these or prize essays for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis.                  ☒
- yes                  no

1/29/98  
Date 2 Shevat 5758

Clare Rose Suckman  
Signature of Author

Library  
Record

Microfilmed 23 September 1998  
Date

Allan D. Sater  
Signature of Library Staff Member

"Son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Enemy of the Jews"  
Haman in Rabbinic Literature

Elaine Rose Glickman

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for Ordination  
Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion  
1998 - 5758

Referee: Professor Edward Goldman

**Digest**

In the Book of Esther, the figure of Haman emerges clearly and fiercely: Here is the descendant of the Agagites, a sworn enemy of the Jews, plotting the first genocide against the people Israel. He is the first to utter the words we have heard so many times in our history: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are different...it is of no benefit to the king to tolerate them" (Esther 3:8). He is also the first to see himself destroyed by the people whom he hoped to destroy, the first to learn "*dabru davar velo yakum, ki imanu El.*"

Although his plot was foiled over two thousand years ago, Haman has not been - and will not be - forgotten. We say his name aloud only to drown it out with groggers and the pounding of shoes; yet we keep saying his name, keep reciting the story of what he sought to do, keep reminding ourselves that Haman is not the only one of his kind. In the figure of Haman we have come to see not only Haman, a single person, but a paradigm: Haman as would-be destroyer, Haman as evil schemer, Haman as merciless enemy.

Yet we are not the first to see the figure of Haman through the prism of our own lives and experiences. Before us came our sages, who, amid persecution, harassment and all-too-trying political and social circumstances, read Megillat Esther as well. This thesis will examine how our

ancestors saw Haman; how the challenges of their own time influenced their views of Haman; and how Haman functioned in the drama of oppression and redemption which our rabbis relate so often in the *midrash*.

This thesis will also explore how our rabbis' work can influence our own conceptions both of Haman and the evil he embodies. What can rabbinic literature teach us - who have witnessed not only the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem but also the near-annihilation of European Jewry and the gas chambers of Auschwitz - about the Hamans of our time? How can the wisdom of our sages enable us to battle an enemy who was hanged over two thousand years ago but who still refuses to die?

Chapter One of this thesis provides a general introduction to the worldview of our sages and an explanation of how their convictions influenced their reading of the Book of Esther. This chapter also discusses the biblical Haman. In Chapter Two, we begin examining the Haman of rabbinic literature, particularly his odious lineage and the roots of his hatred for the Jews. Chapter Three details our sages' accounts of Haman's schemes against Israel and his ultimate plot to destroy the Jewish people. Chapter Four explores our rabbis' chilling, recurring notion that Haman actually served as God's agent, as a vehicle for divinely punishing Israel for a myriad of sins. In Chapter Five, we study our sages' elaborate descriptions of Haman's downfall; and in Chapter Six, we conclude by applying the



teachings of our sages to our own modern struggles against enemies and evil. An appendix provides information about the collections of rabbinic literature utilized in this thesis.

Our sages taught that as Haman arrayed Mordechai and paraded him through the streets of Shushan, triumphant Jews sang Psalm 30: "Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me...You have loosened my sackcloth and girded me with gladness." May our voices mingle with theirs - *bimhera, biyamenu*.

B"H

## Table of Contents

Chapter One:.....	1
God in the Book of Esther	
Chapter Two:.....	20
Haman's Hatred for the Jews	
Chapter Three:.....	49
Haman Schemes	
Chapter Four:.....	76
Haman as Divine Punishment	
Chapter Five:.....	93
Haman's Fall	
Chapter Six:.....	133
A Final Victory?	
Bibliography.....	146
Appendix:.....	151
A Guide to Rabbinic Sources Utilized	

B"H

## Chapter One: God in the Book of Esther

Never mind that the biblical Book of Esther reads more like a secular melodrama than a sacred religious text. Never mind that its characters - the lusty king, the beautiful queen, the devious villain and the courageous hero - lack the complexity of a David, an Abigail, a Delilah, a Moses. Never mind that its lessons appear to vaunt craftiness and subterfuge over simple piety and prayer. Never mind that it never speaks directly of God, offering only one cryptic reference to "*Makom*" that, in context, seems to mean only "place."<sup>1</sup> Most of all, never mind that this tale of ancient machinations in the Persian royal court seems far removed from our sages' lives, seems to provide no special messages for rabbis living under despised Roman rule and eagerly awaiting redemption at the hand of God.

Never mind all of these considerations, because for our rabbis, the Book of Esther stood as much more than a melodrama, much more than a breathtaking story of disaster averted, much more than the chronicle of an isolated, long-ago incident. In the Book of Esther, our rabbis found an abundance of material with which to craft new

---

<sup>1</sup> This reference comes in Esther 4:14, where Mordechai warns Esther that if she fails to help her people, assistance will come from "*makom acher*." Although "*Makom*" is a rabbinic name for God, the clear translation of the biblical phrase is simply "another place."

interpretations, new *agadot*, that offered instruction and inspiration in their own day.

The drama of the Book of Esther, after all, hinged on circumstances all too familiar to our sages. Centuries, even millennia, later, the pain of the Babylonian Exile in 587 B.C.E. and the sense of devastation at Jerusalem's fall to Rome in 70 C.E. lingered in their hearts. The humiliation and even brutality of ensuing Roman rule only deepened their senses of, alternately, despair and messianic hope; they looked with increasing fervor to Scripture for assurances that God had not forgotten them and clues to how He might be appeased, for explanations of their distress and messages of consolation. It is hardly surprising, then, that our rabbis overlooked the "trappings" - the apparently secular surface - of the Book of Esther and embraced its underlying theme: the triumph of the exiled Jew over his oppressor and would-be destroyer.

While the persecution and eventual victory of the Jews of Shushan sounded a familiar - if hopeful - note, the manner in which this victory was achieved in the Book of Esther did not ring as true to our rabbis. To our sages, everything that befell them happened only by the will of God. God, they believed, acted constantly in their individual lives as well as the life of collective Israel. God brought their trials, which stemmed from their sins and

served as either punishment or a means of atonement.<sup>2</sup> They cried out to God, and they felt that God heard and responded. And most importantly, God would provide Israel's redemption from her enemies.

For all of its resonance, then, the Book of Esther still possessed a serious shortcoming: In all of the Book's terrifying action, its dramatic deliverance, where was God?

Our sages proved successful in their search. Living according to a totally God-centered worldview, our sages simply could not conceive - or perhaps, simply refused to conceive - of a situation, no matter how banal, not guided by God's hand. How much more so, then, could they never accept a story of apparently miraculous redemption in which God was not active - indeed, in which He was not even present! As they did so often when a simple reading of Scripture proved problematic, our rabbis delved between the words and beneath the surface in order to find a reading more in keeping with their own convictions. Using a variety of rhetorical devices and hermeneutical techniques, our rabbis found God at the heart of the story. Indeed, for our rabbis, the court of Ahasuerus became God's arena, the twists of plot and fortune the fulfillment of His will and a testament to His power.

---

<sup>2</sup> This idea is stated beautifully and succinctly in Schechter, page 304.

Our rabbis found ample pegs on which to hang their readings. Most appealing was what they saw as an obvious - if veiled - reference to God: the presence of a king in the Book of Esther. As the Sovereign of Sovereigns, God rather than Ahasuerus merited the title "King;" and our rabbis explained that when the text did not mention King Ahasuerus by name, readers should understand the word "king" as obliquely speaking of God:

Rabbi Yodan and Rabbi Levi taught in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: In every place where Megillat Esther speaks of King Ahasuerus, the name Ahasuerus is specifically mentioned. But in every place where Scripture mentions only "king," Scripture speaks of the King of Kings.<sup>3</sup>

Brilliant in its simplicity, this method of reading "king" allowed our rabbis to see God controlling the action from the beginning. It is God - not Ahasuerus - who orchestrates Vashti's downfall; God who thus paves the way for the Jewish Esther to ascend the throne of Shushan and save her people; God who arranges for Mordechai to foil the murderous schemes of Bigtan and Teresh; and God who witnesses Mordechai's heroism recorded in King Ahasuerus' chronicle.

God first arranges for Vashti to fall in order that Esther may become queen:

"But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains; therefore the king was very wrathful, and his anger burned

---

<sup>3</sup> Abba Gorion 1. Esther Rabbah 3:10 also notes that a reference to "the king" sometimes speaks of God.



within him" (Esther 1:12). Rabbi Yochanan said: At that moment God said to the angel in charge of wrath: "Go down and blow up a spark in his belly and fan his ashes and throw sulfur into his oven." Rabbi Yochanan said: All the years Vashti was killed until Esther became queen, the wrath of Ahasuerus was not assuaged.<sup>4</sup>

God next incites Bigtan and Teresh against Ahasuerus, ensuring that Mordechai will expose their plot and gain the favor of the king:

Rabbi Berekiah said in the name of Rabbi Levi: It is written: "Come, behold the works of the Lord, Who has made desolations in the earth" (Psalms 46:9). He made servants angry with their master in order to confer greatness on the righteous, as it is said: "In those days, while Mordechai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigtan and Teresh, of those who kept the door, became disaffected and sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus" (Esther 2:21) - to bestow greatness on Mordechai.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, God makes certain that Mordechai knows every detail of the plot:

And Mordechai heard of the matter [the scheme of Bigtan and Teresh], as it is said: "And the thing became known to Mordechai, who told it to Esther the queen; and Esther reported it to the king in Mordechai's name" (Esther 2:22). And some say the matter was told to him by the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Esther Rabbah 3:15. Here we see God incite the anger of Ahasuerus, presumably refraining from assuaging it until Ahasuerus has fulfilled the divine plan by wedding Esther. Similar themes appear in Esther Rabbah 3:9; Targum Rishon 1:1; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Rabbah 6:13. Calling Bigtan and Teresh "the King's chamberlains" rather than "King Ahasuerus' chamberlains" implies that they were, in this instance, merely servants of God, playing out their divinely appointed roles so that Mordechai would win the gratitude of Ahasuerus. Parallels are found in Bavli Megillah 13b and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

<sup>6</sup> Panim Acherim B 2.



Our rabbis, however, saw God acting not only to save His people from the enemy soon to arise. While their interpretations of God's deeds certainly reinforced His central role in Israel's deliverance, they also related to another issue foremost in the sages' consciousness: the fate of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Time had not healed the anguish our sages felt over the destruction of both Temples; the pain and humiliation still echoed within them, making itself known in their rhetoric and teaching. The setting of the Book of Esther strongly reminded the rabbis of the tumultuous days in which Persia appeared ready to permit the rebuilding of the Temple - that is, the building of the Second Temple - before abruptly halting the venture.<sup>7</sup> They projected the centrality of the Temple in their own lives back into the Esther story, giving this theme a prominent place in their interpretations. Identifying King Ahasuerus with King Artaxerxes, our rabbis ascribe to Ahasuerus an intense desire not to see the Temple rebuilt, and to God an intense interest in punishing those

---

<sup>7</sup> The rabbis appear especially struck by Ezra chapter 4, which recounts King Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes' decree to stop work on the Temple. This incident - and the rabbis' interpretations of what lay behind it - seems to be the justification for the important role the Temple plays in their understanding of the Book of Esther. In fact, our sages often specifically identify King Ahasuerus with King Artaxerxes; the only exceptions are the Targums to Esther, which call Ahasuerus Xerxes. Modern scholarship - Anderson, page 608; Bright, page 377; Gordis, pages 5-6; LaCocque, page 208; Moore, page 34; and Paton, page 194, for example - also tends to favor an identification with King Xerxes.

who would deny Him His holy sanctuary - an interest our sages felt as well. Defending the Temple thus becomes as much a motivating force for God's actions as defending His people; and our sages taught passionately of both.<sup>8</sup>

"After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her" (Esther 2:1)... "He remembered Vashti:" to wit, the order he had given her to come before him naked and how she refused and he had been wrathful with her and put her to death. After he killed her, he began to feel remorse, because he realized that she had acted properly. "And what was decreed against her:" contrary to what was right. Why did she suffer this fate? Because she would not allow Ahasuerus to give permission for the building of the Temple, and she used to say to him: "Do you seek to build what my ancestors destroyed?"<sup>9</sup>

Not only Vashti, but also Ahasuerus' advisors, are punished for such counsel:

"After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her" (Esther 2:1). When he had been relieved of his drunkenness, King Ahasuerus sought Vashti. They [his advisors] said to him: "You killed her." He said to them: "And who gave me that advice to

---

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that our rabbis devote tremendous attention to Haman's role in stopping work on the Temple as well. This aspect of Haman's character is discussed incidentally in Chapter Two and fully in Chapter Three. For the moment, however, the theme of God's providence rather than Haman's schemes is the focus of study.

<sup>9</sup> Esther Rabbah 5:2. The "ancestors" to whom she refers are Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar, her father and grandfather according to rabbinic literature. Parallels to the theme of God's punishing Vashti and the advisors of Ahasuerus who counseled against rebuilding the Temple are found in Esther Rabbah Proem 12, 1:9, 3:3, 4:8; Panim Acherim B 1; Abba Gorion 1, 2; Lekach Tov 2:1; Targum Rishon 1:1; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

kill her?" They said to him: "The seven princes of Paras and Media."<sup>10</sup> There are some who say he banished [a euphemism for killed] them, for you find that Scripture does not mention them again; rather, Scripture speaks of "servants of the king who ministered to him" (Esther 2:2). And there are those who say that these advisors had counseled him to stop the rebuilding of the Temple; thus death was decreed upon them [by God] and they were killed.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that our rabbis projected their own preoccupation with the Temple not only onto God, but onto the Jewish populace of the Book of Esther. Indeed, some passages assert, Jewish mourning at the halting of work on the Temple outweighed even their despair upon learning of Haman's murderous scheme:

Another explanation of "The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness" (Ecclesiastes 10:13a). This refers to Ahasuerus, of whom we read: "And in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote to him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem" (Ezra 4:6). "And the end of his talk is grievous madness" (Ecclesiastes 10:13b): Because he rose and put a stop to the building of the Temple. When all saw this, they began to cry: "ווי", "Woe!" As it is said: "ווי", "And there was woe in the days of Ahasuerus" (Esther 1:1).<sup>12</sup>

As the tension mounts, our rabbis did not despair that God had abandoned His people. Rather, they saw Him at work even more dramatically. As we will see more clearly in the following chapters, our rabbis see "the King" - that is, God

---

<sup>10</sup> Esther 1:14ff.

<sup>11</sup> Panim Acherim B 2.

<sup>12</sup> Esther Rabbah Proem 8. Our rabbis read "ווי", "And it came to pass," as "ווי ווי", "And there was woe." A parallel is found in Esther Rabbah Proem 5.

- as the one who exalts Haman to high rank, who fashions and ultimately rescinds the decree to destroy the Jews. For all of Haman's power, our rabbis suggest, even he remains subordinate to and - according to many texts - manipulated by God.

Our rabbis are indeed eager to portray God as working to advance their own beloved goals of redemption from the enemy and rebuilding the Temple. However, they do not come to this understanding of God's actions in a vacuum. Rather than reading the Book of Esther as a single, random - if ultimately fortunate - incident, our sages saw the story as a paradigm of reward and punishment, persecution and deliverance. Just as Haman threatened the Jews of Ahasuerus' kingdom, so did hated Rome oppress the Jews of antiquity. Just as the specific sins Israel had committed to deserve such danger went unmentioned in the biblical story, so did our rabbis ponder the iniquities for which they were being punished and how to atone. And just as the Book of Esther told of Jewish triumph, so our rabbis looked forward to their own day of victory and vindication. Thus the Book of Esther serves as a demonstration of God's providence, of how He manipulates history ultimately to exalt the suffering righteous - that is, Israel - and bring low the proud tormentor. God's concern with the Temple in the Book of Esther, as amplified by the rabbis, thus stands as but one example of His acting according to the worldview our sages ascribed to Him.

The Book of Esther, however, provided even more than an inspiring paradigm of how God metes out reward and punishment. In their interpretations of the text, our rabbis sought to learn how they, too, could merit the rewards earned by Esther and Mordechai, how they might secure a redemption in their own time. Yet here the rabbis faced another problem when confronting the plain meaning of the text: Except for the fast declared by Esther, a fast not specifically dedicated to God, Esther and Mordechai appear to succeed by clever schemes conceived and enacted by humans, not by the performance of *mitzvot* or the heaven-directed prayer and penitence our sages advocated. Esther, in particular, seems almost totally uninterested in her religious obligations, wedding a non-Jewish king and planning banquets that certainly could not be considered kosher. It was impossible for the rabbis to imagine a non-observant Jew winning the favor of God - much less meriting the dramatic salvation recounted in the Book of Esther. How could the non-practicing Esther and the self-reliant Mordechai possibly have earned the reward of deliverance - a reward the rabbis asserted came not from human ingenuity but from divine grace - without following these traditional avenues?

Once again our rabbis dipped beneath the surface reading to resolve such a dilemma; and once again, their hermeneutics reveal a solution. A vast selection of teachings demonstrates that underneath Esther and



Mordechai's brilliant plans lie piety and practice. Thus, our rabbis explain, Esther helps save her people not by her courage and quick thinking, but by her modesty and singular religious devotion.<sup>13</sup> It is these latter qualities which God favors, and which - according to various texts - influence His intervention on the Jews' behalf.

[When Esther went in to King Ahasuerus' chambers, facing death for approaching him without invitation,] Esther lifted up her eyes and saw the king's face, and behold his eyes were flashing like fire with the wrath which was in his heart. And when the queen perceived how angry the king was, she was overcome and her heart sank and she placed her head on the maiden who was supporting her right hand. But our God saw and had mercy on His people, and He took note of the distress of the orphan who trusted in Him, and He gave her grace in the eyes of the king and invested her with new beauty and new charm. Then the king rose in haste from his throne and ran to Esther and embraced her and kissed her and flung his arm around her neck and said to her: "Esther, my queen, why do you tremble? For this law which we have laid down does not apply to you, since you are my beloved and my companion."<sup>14</sup>

Our rabbis thus transform Esther from a uniquely lovely and resourceful queen into the Jewess par excellence, a Jewess whose piety merits divine reward and her people's redemption. Having made clear the connection between

---

<sup>13</sup> Our rabbis describe the merits by which not only Esther, but also Mordechai, induced God to save the Jews. Their teachings on Mordechai, however, relate much more directly to the literature on Haman and his defeat; thus, a full examination of these passages will be undertaken in Chapters Three and Five.

<sup>14</sup> Esther Rabbah 9:1. Parallel themes are found in Bavli Megillah 15b; Lekach Tov 5:1; Agadat Esther 5:2; and Targum Sheni 5:2.

Esther's goodness and her reward, the rabbis then turn to detailing her specific acts of devoutness:

"And the seven maids chosen to be given her" (Esther 2:9). Rava said: For Esther would count the days of the week through them [to keep track of which day was the Sabbath. Her seven maids worked in rotation, each one assigned a specific day of the week. Thus, when the "Sabbath" maid arrived, Esther knew it was the Sabbath].<sup>15</sup>

Targum Rishon glowingly describes Esther's efforts to keep various precepts, including Jewish dietary law:

"And Esther carried out the bidding of Mordechai, just as when she was brought up with him" (Esther 2:20). Sabbaths and festivals she would observe; during the days of separation she watched herself; cooked dishes and the wine of the nations she did not taste, and all the religious precepts which the women of the House of Israel were commanded, she observed by order of Mordechai.<sup>16</sup>

Esther was totally scrupulous in matters of ritual purity:

"For Esther carried out the bidding of Mordechai" (Esther 2:20). Rabbi Jeremiah teaches: She used to show menstrual blood to the sages [to determine if she was *niddah*].<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Bavli Megillah 13a; a parallel appears in Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

<sup>16</sup> Targum Rishon 2:20. Esther's keeping kosher is also related in Bavli Megillah 13a, where Rav teaches that Hegai, the keeper of the women, favored her and brought her kosher food; Targum Sheni 2:9, where she refuses wine offered by gentiles; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Midrash Ecclesiastes Zuta 8:4 relates that as queen, she even observed the *mitzvah* of *biyur hametz*.

<sup>17</sup> Bavli Megillah 13b. Esther Rabbah 6:8 and Targum Rishon 2:20 also discuss Esther's maintaining ritual purity.



Why did our rabbis spend so much time enumerating Esther's deeds? Why did they recount her practice so painstakingly? In doing so, our rabbis made Esther not only a paradigm, but also a model, of piety. Even under incredibly difficult circumstances - forced to conceal her religion, living in a pagan palace, married to a powerful heathen king - Esther manages to keep faith with God and fulfill her religious duties. The parallels to our rabbis' own situation were obvious: They too lived under oppressive conditions; they too were subjugated to potent gentile authority, they too had resorted to secrecy and silence in order to keep God's *mitzvot*. And just as our rabbis saw Esther as winning God's favor by upholding her religion, so they hoped that their own efforts would merit similar rewards - and a similar redemption.

We conclude by acknowledging that our sages' Book of Esther resembles only fleetingly the biblical narrative. By placing God in the middle of the action, our rabbis made it possible to read the entire story as an example of God's providence, of God's making known His will and His ways, of God's first trying and finally rewarding His beloved people and first exalting and finally destroying their enemies. These themes echoed deeply in the rabbis' own lives; knowing too well the pain of oppression and exile, they interpreted the Book of Esther as a promise of future triumph. Nor were they content simply to absorb this hopeful message; rather, they understood the heroes of the Book of Esther as models

for becoming worthy of their own redemption, and sought to emulate the piety they ascribed to Esther and Mordechai. With these interpretations, our rabbis lent the Book of Esther cosmic significance for the Jewish people; as Elias Bickerman explains: "[T]he deliverance of the Jews of Susa and Persia...became a part of the universal pattern of history."<sup>18</sup>

Understanding the way in which our rabbis interpreted the biblical story of Esther, we see the contrast between what the Bible most plainly says and what our sages taught it truly says. A similar contrast exists between the biblical and the rabbinic portrayals of the story's villain Haman. Understanding the larger contrast provides us with a context in which to explore the development of the rabbis' Haman from the Haman of the Bible. We now turn to examining the way biblical scholars have interpreted the biblical Haman, using our gleanings as a basis for studying the Haman who emerges in rabbinic literature.

Bible scholars differ widely on their characterizations of Haman, just as widely as - as we will see in the proceeding chapters - did our sages. Most Biblicists are quick to pick up on the competing ancestries of Mordechai "the son of Kish, a Benjaminite"<sup>19</sup> and Haman "son of

---

<sup>18</sup> Bickerman, page 198.

<sup>19</sup> Esther 2:5.

Hammedatha the Agagite,"<sup>20</sup> linking their feud and its terrible consequences to the ancient hatred between Mordechai's forefather King Saul and Haman's predecessor King Agag - and, writ large, between Israel and Amalek. To Bickerman, in fact, this theme stands as so obviously central to the story that "the author did not need to labor the point"<sup>21</sup> - that is, he needed only to mention briefly Kish and Agag in order to clarify the entire nature of the Book of Esther. As Chapter Two will demonstrate, the identification of Mordechai with King Saul and Israel, and of Haman with King Agag and Amalek, intrigued our sages deeply; much of the rabbinic literature we will examine portrays Haman as Israel's eternal enemy and another incarnation of Amalek's evil.

Not all of the biblical scholarship, however, fits so neatly into the rabbis' model of Haman. Most clearly challenging to the rabbis' view of the Book of Esther - and the promise of redemption they saw in Haman's downfall - is the assertion of most modern scholars that the biblical account is not reliable; that while Haman may in fact be linked with a still-unknown historical figure, his enmity for Mordechai and his wicked plot are probably a tale invented in conjunction with an already-existing Purim feast or even a pagan story of feuding Babylonian or Persian

---

<sup>20</sup> Esther 3:1.

<sup>21</sup> Bickerman, pages 196-97.

gods.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, asserts Jacob Hoschander, the Book of Esther's original Hebrew text did not even call Haman an Agagite; the distinction was added later for purely homiletical reasons.<sup>23</sup>

Another difference in interpretation centers around the nature of Haman's hatred for Mordechai and the means of Haman's defeat. As we will see in Chapter Two, our rabbis generally ascribe this enmity to the aforementioned malice of Amalek for Israel. However, some Bible scholars do not reach so far back into Israel's history to understand the conflict; they find its primary root in Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman.<sup>24</sup> Bickerman gives voice to this contingent of scholars: "[T]here is no 'Jewish problem' in the Scroll of Esther...In our organized society, we rarely encounter fits of rage and 'seeing red'...[but] Haman wanted to kill Mordechai and his whole tribe 'the people of Mordechai' (3:6), be they Jews or, say, Kurds, to wash out in a sea of blood the stain of a public insult."<sup>25</sup> While our rabbis, too, were well aware of Haman's rage and humiliation when Mordechai repudiates his claim to divinity, they understood this rage as stemming largely from Haman's already-existing

---

<sup>22</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, volume 7, page 1222, and Buttrick, page 516.

<sup>23</sup> Hoschander, pages 22-23.

<sup>24</sup> Esther 3:2ff.

<sup>25</sup> Bickerman, page 188. While elsewhere he acknowledges that the Israel-Amalek enmity is indeed a part of the Esther story, he sees that theme as subordinate to this explanation of the conflict.

feud with the Jews. That Mordechai's action alone drove Haman to plot Jewish genocide flies in the face of their understanding of the nature of Haman's hatred.

Similarly, some Bible scholars describe Haman's downfall by giving credit to humanity rather than to divinity - the same phenomenon revealed by a plain reading of the Book of Esther that proved so troubling to the rabbis. Several scholars would dispute our sages' characterization of Haman as a nearly-invincible enemy whom only God can bring low. Rather, they see related in the Bible Haman's weaknesses, which are likely to help him foil his own plans even without outside human - let alone divine - opposition. Haman is described as nervous and excitable, relying on an irrational plot to bring down his enemies. Even more damning, perhaps, is his "low origin,"<sup>26</sup> revealed by the fact that Ahasuerus himself had to order the people to show Haman respect.<sup>27</sup> Haman was, George Arthur Buttrick continues, "an upstart before whom those of the established aristocracy were loath to bow."<sup>28</sup> While some sages teach that the people of Shushan indeed despised Haman, they see such loathing as a function of Haman's pitiless cruelty and tremendous power, not as an indication of anything lacking in Haman's pedigree. Indeed, as Chapter Three will reveal,

---

<sup>26</sup> Buttrick, page 848.

<sup>27</sup> Esther 3:2, as interpreted by Buttrick, page 848, and Moore, page 36.

<sup>28</sup> Buttrick, page 848.



our sages saw Haman's lineage as a source of status in the king's court rather than a source of embarrassment.

Some scholarship also echoes the plain meaning of the Book of Esther in crediting Esther and Mordechai with the defeat of Haman. Indeed, according to some scholars, Haman is not a powerful enemy whose downfall requires divine help, but a hapless buffoon manipulated from the start by Esther and Mordechai. The scholars' reasoning is strong; why did Mordechai tell Esther to hide her Jewishness from Ahasuerus, when her revelation would have precluded the schemes she undertook to save her people? Why is Esther portrayed as a potential victim of Haman's when a single mention of her Jewishness will foil his plan and when she in fact works to trap him?<sup>29</sup> No matter how compelling these questions may appear today, to our rabbis they were simply moot. To them, every action was undertaken by God's guidance and according to God's will; any apparently strange deeds or motives only seem so because of our inability to fathom God's ways and plan. If Esther and Mordechai appear to outwit Haman from the start, it is only because God is working through them; if Haman appears helpless in the face of their machinations, it is only because God is indeed bringing him low.

---

<sup>29</sup> These important questions are raised by Bickerman, pages 182-83; LaCocque, pages 210ff; and Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss in Rosenberg, pages 77ff.

Having explored the biblical Book of Esther and its rabbinic interpretations, as well as the biblical Haman, we turn to our study of the rabbinic Haman. Just as our rabbis retold the Book of Esther according to their own circumstances and worldview, so will we see new images and aspects of Haman emerge as we turn from the biblical to the rabbinic literature. In this literature, our rabbis continued to give voice to their beliefs and their ideals, to the convictions they had inherited from ancient times and the desperate hopes they nurtured under their current oppressive conditions. Into the figure of Haman they poured their anger, their rage, their bewilderment, their disappointment, their fear, their dreams, their repentance, and - most of all - their faith. In the Jews of Shushan they saw themselves reflected; and in Haman they saw their eternal enemy rise against them once again, inspiring every terror and every dread, until - *bimhera, biyamenu* - he would fall once more before the might of God and the piety of His children.



## Chapter Two: Haman's Hatred for the Jews

According to rabbinic literature, Haman's terrible campaign against the Jews emerged from a deep-seated hatred for God's people - indeed, some texts relate, a hatred for God as well. Our sages describe the origins of this loathing as many and varied; they cite a bizarre story recounting Haman's selling himself into slavery to Mordechai; Haman's desire, frustrated by Mordechai, to be worshipped as a deity; Haman's failed bid to have his daughter succeed Vashti as queen. While these incidents indeed help to explain Haman's enmity for the Jews, the most important theme in our sages' interpretations of Haman's hatred is much more complex. In virtually every rabbinic source, our sages remind us that as a descendant of Esau, Amalek and King Agag, Haman bears an ancestral hatred for the nation of Jacob, Israel and King Saul. Haman's heritage thus plays an essential role in accounting for the brutal way he treats the Jewish people.<sup>30</sup>

As we trace the roots of Haman's hatred, we examine the ancient conflicts between Jew and Edomite, Jew and

---

<sup>30</sup>Segal, volume 3, page 250, categorizes the reasons for Haman's animosity as follows: personal animosity (stemming from his daughter's rejection as queen); ancestral animosity (arising from the Esau/Amalek-Jacob/Israel conflict); and religious animosity (fueled by his desire to be worshipped as a deity and his hatred for the Temple in Jerusalem). While helpful, these categories are not complete; as we will see, several incidents inciting Haman's hatred fall into more than one category.

Amalekite. We see how the deeds of Jacob and Esau, Israel and Amalek, Saul and Agag return to haunt later generations; how the patterns of assault and vengeance are played out again and again. We find also that in recounting Haman's hatred for the Jews of Persia, our rabbis revealed how they understood their own persecution at the hands of Rome, what they saw as the qualities that made the Jews of their own time so abhorrent to the nations that oppressed them.

"[T]he son of Hammedatha the Agagite,"<sup>31</sup> Haman comes from odious roots. He traces his lineage from Isaac's older son Esau, who looms in rabbinic literature as a virtual embodiment of evil and Jew-hatred; through Amalek, an enemy so detested that God Himself vows to make war with him throughout the generations;<sup>32</sup> and to Agag, the Amalekite king who escapes Saul's sword only to be hewn in pieces by Samuel.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, our rabbis take pains to clarify Haman's ancestry, frequently referring to him as an Amalekite rather than merely an Agagite, or even following a reference to Haman with his entire genealogy:

After these events, King [Ahasuerus] promoted Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, son of Kido, son of Koza, son of Elipilot, son of Deyos, son of Deyosis, son of Puros, son of Ma'adan, son of Bil'aqan, son of 'Antimiros, son of Hadros, son of Segar, son of Nagar, son of Parmasta, son of

---

<sup>31</sup> Esther 3:1.

<sup>32</sup> Exodus 17:16.

<sup>33</sup> I Samuel chapter 15.

Wayezata, son of Amalek, son of the concubine of Eliphaz, the first-born of Esau.<sup>34</sup>

The roots of Haman's plot, our sages relate, extend all the way back to the Book of Genesis.

Even the Bible well attests to the enmity Esau harbored for his twin Jacob. After Jacob wrests their father Isaac's blessing from Esau, Esau pledges to kill his brother: "And Esau said in his heart, 'When the days of mourning for my father are at hand, then will I slay my brother Jacob.'"<sup>35</sup> This vow - and the hatred it implies - take on monstrous proportions in rabbinic literature. Here Esau becomes Edom, or Rome, the symbol of everything impure and wicked, the persecutor par excellence of Jacob's descendants.

Although the Bible charges Esau with neglecting his heritage - he "scorned the birthright,"<sup>36</sup> trading it for a serving of porridge, and married Canaanite women<sup>37</sup> - it does not portray him as altogether unrepentant and wicked. Rabbinic literature, however, ascribes to Esau a multitude of other sins, turning Jacob's brother into a virtually irredeemable criminal:

---

<sup>34</sup> Targum Sheni 3:1. This is but an example; Haman's roots are noted throughout rabbinic literature. In Targum Rishon 4:10, Esther even counsels Mordechai that Haman is "nurturing within himself the enmity between the descendants of Jacob and Esau."

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 27:41.

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 25:34.

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 26:34-35. In Esau's defense, however, Genesis 28:8-9 suggests that when Esau learned his choice of wives displeased Isaac, Esau sought to make amends - in however misguided a fashion - by wedding a daughter of Ishmael.

Another comment on "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). "Fool" refers to the wicked Esau. Why was he called fool [navall]? Rabbi Judah explained in the name of Rabbi Samuel: Because he filled the whole earth with obscenity [navelut]. Everywhere he set up thrones for gods who are no more than thorns, refuges for deities who are mere refuse, ribald theaters, and bloody circuses.<sup>38</sup>

Rabbi Phineas and Rabbi Hilkiah taught in the name of Rabbi Simon...Like the boar which displays its cloven hoof, as if to say: "I am clean," so wicked Esau displays himself so openly on the seats of justice that the legal tricks whereby he robs, steals, and plunders appear to be just proceedings.<sup>39</sup>

"Isaac called Esau, his eldest son, and said to him, 'My son,' and Esau said, 'Here I am'" (Genesis 27:1). The Holy Spirit also proclaims: "'When [Esau] speaks fair, do not believe him; for there are seven abominations in his heart' (Proverbs 26:25). Seven sanctuaries are going to be destroyed [by him]: the Tent of Meeting, Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, the First Temple, and the Second Temple - for 'there are seven abominations in his heart.' Another interpretation: He will slay the ten tribes and the kings of Israel: here are two. He will slay the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to make four. He will slay the priests, the Levites and the dynasty of the House of David for a total of seven."<sup>40</sup>

Our rabbis, obviously seeing in the sins they assigned to Esau a reflection of Rome's own sins against the Jews, also assigned to Esau the ruin they prayed would befall Rome. Just as the wholly wicked Rome was destined to perish one day at God's hand, so Esau could not escape God's wrath when his own day of reckoning arrived.

<sup>38</sup> Midrash Psalms 14:3.

<sup>39</sup> Midrash Psalms 80:6.

<sup>40</sup> Tanchuma Buber Toledot 8.

When [the Children of Israel] came to the Cave of Machpelah [to bury Jacob], Esau came against them from Mount Horeb to stir up strife, saying: "The Cave of Machpelah is mine." What did Joseph do? He sent Naphtali...to go down to Egypt to bring up the perpetual deed which was between them...Chusim, the son of Dan, had defective hearing and speech, and he said to them: "Why are we sitting here [and not proceeding with Jacob's burial]?" He was pointing [to Esau] with his finger. They said to him: "Because this man will not let us bury our father Jacob." He drew his sword and cut off Esau's head with the sword, and took the head into the Cave of Machpelah. And they sent his body to the land of his possession, to Mount Seir. What did Isaac do? He grasped the head of Esau and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: "Sovereign of all the Universe! Let mercy be shown to this wicked one!"...The Holy Spirit answered him, saying: "As I live! He shall not see the majesty of God!"<sup>41</sup>

Yet Esau's hatred did not die with him. Although the later biblical chapters of the Jacob-Esau story depict a conciliatory Esau, who eventually overcomes his resentment toward Jacob, our sages envisioned no such transformation. Their Esau, rather, feeds his fury until the day he dies, passing on to his descendants his loathing for Jacob and his burning desire to see God's people destroyed. Unable to eradicate Jacob, Esau charges his grandchild Amalek to undertake this task.

Rabbi Elazar said: Why did Esau [take his wives and children and servants and animals and substance and] go [to Seir]?<sup>42</sup> He went only to hide himself in Seir until Israel would be enslaved in Egypt [so that he himself would not go into slavery, and so that he could attack Israel

---

<sup>41</sup> Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer chapter 39.

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 36:6.



after they were freed] - and afterwards Amalek came upon Israel, as it is said: "Then came Amalek" (Exodus 17:8) - and Amalek was Esau's grandson, as it is said: "And Timna bore to Eliphaz Amalek" (Genesis 36:12). Rabbi Aha taught: Why did Esau command Amalek his grandson and not command Eliphaz his son? Only because Eliphaz had grown up in the bosom of Isaac and would not heed [Esau's command] to kill Israel and make war upon them. Thus Esau commanded Amalek. What did Amalek do? When Israel came out of Egypt immediately he came upon them, as it is said: "Then came Amalek" (Exodus 17:8).<sup>43</sup>

The mantle is passed to another generation; the characters change, but the theme remains the same. The enemy - once Esau, now Amalek - still pursues God's beloved - once only Jacob, now the collective people Israel. Israel still suffers, still calls out to God for defense and relief, still awaits deliverance from a foe with a new name but an ancient intent.

For our rabbis, this phenomenon echoed all too familiar in their own lives. They, too, saw their people as the perpetual victims of an ever-changing cast of characters; Sennacherib fell and Nebuchadnezzar rose, the tyranny of Titus gave way to the horrible edicts of Hadrian. While our sages believed that God had brought low Israel's past enemies - and would eventually defeat them all - still they despaired that every time one oppressor fell, another seemed to rise just as quickly.

---

<sup>43</sup> Midrash Hagadol Vayishlach, Genesis 36:6. This theme is also discussed in Numbers Rabbah 16:18; Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:20; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 44; and Yalkut Shimoni Chukat.

In this context our rabbis envisioned the transition between Esau and Amalek. Despite Esau's death, there was to be no respite from his wicked schemes. Indeed, according to our rabbis, Amalek's evil exceeded even that of his grandfather.

Before turning to a brief examination of Amalek in rabbinic literature, we must note that he is a figure with many faces. On one hand, he is Esau's grandson, mentioned only briefly in the Book of Genesis;<sup>44</sup> he is also, however, the warrior who attacks Israel at Rephidim, soon after the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>45</sup> Finally, he stands as much more than a person. In the Bible and especially in rabbinic literature, Amalek is both individual and nation; although one Amalek (for example, the Amalek of Genesis, born half a millennium before the Amalek of Exodus assails Israel at Rephidim) might disappear, a new incarnation bearing the same name and the same hatred immediately rises in his place. Nor is the name Amalek reserved for an individual; rather, the entire nation he leads bears his terrible name.

Sharing his grandfather's hatred for the Jews, Amalek surpasses even Esau in brutality and cruelty; fearing neither God nor His people, he schemes constantly to destroy Israel. Incredibly, Amalek even exploits his ancestors

---

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 36:12, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Exodus 17:8ff.



Abraham and Isaac by daring to invoke zechut avot, the merit of the patriarchs, in his battles against Israel.

Whence came Amalek? Rabbi Cruspedai said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan that he came from the wicked Balaam. For Amalek had gone to seek advice from him, saying: "I know that you are a wise counselor and a master of evil designs, and that whoever seeks counsel from you does not come to grief...What do you advise me to do?" Balaam replied: "Go and make war on [Israel]; for if you make war on them you will prevail against them, for they depend on the merit of their ancestor Abraham, and you also being the descendant of Abraham can participate in the merit of Abraham." Immediately he made war on Israel.<sup>46</sup>

To our rabbis, then, Israel is still caught in a tide of seemingly endless persecution; the enemy may uphold a different name, but his objective remains the same. The name Amalek, however, strikes a particular fear and dread into the hearts of our sages. If Esau represents official Rome - which, for all of its wickedness, maintains at least a facade of civilization - Amalek is the brutality that lies just beneath that facade, the Rome that burned the Temple and filled its courtyard with the blood of Jewish infants.

To our sages, the depraved Amalek reveals himself as a true ancestor of Haman:<sup>47</sup>

"And the king took the ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:10)...From time immemorial they are our enemies...Amalek came and

---

<sup>46</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. This theme also appears in Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, LaCocque, page 219, states that the Esther story begins with the birth of Amalek!

made war with Israel, and here came Haman the son of Hammedatha.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, our sages relate, when Mordechai wishes to warn Esther of the terrible edict issued against the Jews, and to let her know that Haman is behind it, he sends a message of "*kol asher karahu*," "all that has happened to him."<sup>49</sup> The verb *karah* is also used in connection with Amalek, where in Deuteronomy 25:17-18 Moses reminds the Israelites how Amalek "*karacha baderech*," "met you by the way" and attacked; employing the hermeneutical technique *gezerah shava*, our rabbis conclude that Mordechai deliberately employed this root *karah* to let Esther know a descendant of Amalek had risen once more against the Jews:

"And Mordechai told [Esther's messenger Hatach] of all that had happened to him [*karahu*]" (Esther 4:7). He said to Hatach: "Go and say to [Esther], 'The descendant of *karahu* has come upon you,' " as it is said, "*asher karaha baderech*," "how he met you by the way" (Deuteronomy 25:18).<sup>50</sup>

Our sages even more expressly link Amalek and Haman by closely relating the Book of Esther to Amalek's attack on Israel in the Book of Exodus. In Megillat Esther itself our sages recognize the "book" in which God commands Moses to record His vow to blot out the remembrance of Amalek;<sup>51</sup> and

---

<sup>48</sup> Lekach Tov 3:10.

<sup>49</sup> Esther 4:7.

<sup>50</sup> Esther Rabbah 8:5. Panim Acherim B 4; Abba Gorion 4; Agadat Esther 4:7; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther also comment on this theme. Zlotowitz, page 98, also notes the use of *karah* with respect to Amalek and Haman.

<sup>51</sup> Exodus 17:14. This identification is made in Bavli Megillah 7a and Midrash Hagadol Beshallah, Exodus 17:8.

in Haman they recognize the "zecher Amalek," "the remembrance of Amalek" whom God has sworn to blot out.<sup>52</sup> Thus the Book of Esther is specifically regarded as a chronicle of God's ongoing war with Amalek.<sup>53</sup> Nor is the connection between Haman and Amalek limited to the rabbinic literature; indeed, the holiday of Purim, celebrating Haman's downfall, is immediately preceded by Shabbat Zachor, where we read the Torah's account of Amalek's attacking Israel in the wilderness.<sup>54</sup>

By linking Amalek and Haman, our rabbis demonstrate that like Amalek, Haman was a tremendously powerful paradigm of evil. Unlike Amalek, however, Haman is soundly defeated both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature. Our rabbis have the joy of building up Haman's might and wickedness until his stature approaches that of the feared Amalek, then recounting in glorious detail how God brings him low. The defeat of Haman thus foreshadows God's eventual triumph over Amalek - a triumph that will bring messianic deliverance and the World to Come.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> In Exodus 17:14. This identification is made in Esther Rabbah 10:13; Panim Acherim B 6; Targum Sheni 9:25; Mechilta Amalek 2:138; Lamentations Rabbah 3:64-65/9; Tanchuma Beshallach 28; and Midrash Hagadol Beshallach, Exodus 17:8.

<sup>53</sup> Our rabbis expressly make this point in Pesikta Rabbati 13:7, as well as Esther Rabbah 4:10 and 7:11, where Haman's defeat is linked to God's "blot[ting] out the remembrance of Amalek" (Exodus 17:14).

<sup>54</sup> This custom is noted in Yerushalmi Megillah 3:4.

<sup>55</sup> This sentiment is found in Esther Rabbah 10:13; Mechilta Amalek 2:156, 171; Exodus Rabbah 23:6; Lamentations Rabbah 3:64-65/9; Pesikta deRav Kahana 3:15, 16; Pesikta Rabbati 12:9, 13:8; Midrash Psalms 1:10; and Midrash Hagadol

Although his influence on Haman is not nearly as pronounced as Amalek's, Haman's ancestor King Agag occupies an essential place in Haman's lineage. Agag rules the Amalekites against whom King Saul wages war; while Saul lays waste the Amalekite city, he spares the best of the livestock as well as Agag's life.<sup>56</sup> It is this act of misplaced mercy that ensures the Amalekites will endure.

Rabbi Levi opened with the text: "But if you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, it shall come to pass that those whom you allow to remain of them shall be as thorns in your eyes, and stings in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein you dwell" (Numbers 33:55). This may be applied to Saul, at the time when Samuel said to him: "Now go and smite Amalek" (I Samuel 15:3). Samuel said to Saul upon Saul's return: "You went forth virtuous and have brought back a sinner and spared him, as it says: 'But Saul and the people had pity on Agag' (I Samuel 15:9). Lo, a scion shall spring forth from him who shall inflict on you hardships like thorns in your eyes and stings in your sides. Who will this be? Haman, who decreed to destroy, to kill and to annihilate."<sup>57</sup>

---

Beshallach, Exodus 17:8. It is also beautifully expressed in Kadushin, page 19.

<sup>56</sup> I Samuel 15:2ff.

<sup>57</sup> Esther Rabbah Proem 7. Parallel themes are found in Bavli Megillah 11a, 13a; Bavli Yoma 22b; Bavli Shabbat 56b; Agadat Esther 2:5; Targum Sheni 4:12; Numbers Rabbah 1:12; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:1; Pesikta Rabbati 13:8; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapters 33, 44, 49; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

At Gilgal the Israelites eventually sacrifice the spared animals to God, and Samuel hews Agag in pieces.<sup>58</sup> But it is already too late. The single extra night of life that Saul granted Agag will bring misery to Saul's descendants.

Mordechai responded to Esther saying:  
"...[R]emember that you come from the descendants of King Saul of Israel; and it was told to the king of Israel to destroy the memory of the dynasty of Amalek from beneath the heavens. But he had pity on Agag, their king, and kept him by his side. That very night a woman became pregnant from him, and Haman arose from his descendants, who has been seeking to buy all of the Jews and to uproot them completely. As a consequence of your ancestor having had pity on their king Agag, he became a stumbling block for [Israel]."<sup>59</sup>

Both the biblical and the rabbinic literature describing this confrontation between Israel and Amalek depict Israel as merciless, bloodthirsty attackers. Yet the sages' tone is neither joyful nor vindictive; rather, it suggests an Israel who has grown resigned to what she believes must do to defend herself against Amalek, an Israel who suspects that concession and compromise are of no avail in her struggles. And the tone turns even more sorrowful as Israel realizes that in spite of her fiercest efforts, the enemy survives still. In this episode our rabbis reveal their own torment: They know that only with violence might they overcome hated Rome, yet they have learned well the lessons of the Great Revolt and the Bar Kochba Revolt. They

---

<sup>58</sup> I Samuel 15:15 and 15:33, respectively.

<sup>59</sup> Targum Sheni 4:13.



acknowledge that without God's aid, even a ferocious human army will be unable to destroy the enemy completely. The alternative - to uphold Judaism despite Roman oppression, to pray fervently and wait untiringly for God's deliverance - appeared infinitely more appealing than Saul's bloody debacle, infinitely more promising than another battle with Rome.

From the vast literature describing the wickedness of Haman's ancestors, one especially striking theme emerges. The issue of *milah*, ritual circumcision, plays a central role in our sages' discussions of each figure: Esau, Amalek, Agag and Haman. The most tangible sign of the Jew's covenant with God, circumcision was a sacred ritual fervently honored and guarded by our sages, a ritual disdained and sometimes even outlawed by the rulers under whom our sages lived. Our rabbis rightly saw in their oppressors' aversion to circumcision a powerful aversion to God and His *mitzvot*. It is no wonder, then, that our rabbis imagined Israel's enemies Esau, Amalek, Agag and Haman shared this aversion; indeed, rabbinic literature tells that these evil figures demonstrated particular scorn for the custom of *milah*.

As soon as Isaac died, our rabbis assert, Esau stopped keeping the commandment of *milah*; indeed, he even treated the ritual with contempt:

True, as long as Isaac was alive, [Esau] kept up the practice of circumcision of the flesh. But as

soon as Isaac died the seed of Esau brought to an end the practice of circumcision of the flesh. The consequence of their disregarding the commands is alluded to in the verse "The Lord will pluck up the house of the proud" (Proverbs 15:25)...By what parable may this matter be illustrated? By the parable of a mortal king who gave his crown to his favorite son, saying to him: "May it rest on your head and the heads of your descendants forever!" The king's favorite wore the crown on his head until the king entered his eternal home. After he entered his eternal home, the king said: "I will go and see whether the crown rests on the head of my favorite son." The king went and found the crown lying on a dung heap, whereupon he turned and went back to his palace in great indignation. Likewise, when the Holy One came to Edom and saw circumcision given up, He turned in great indignation and went back, as it is said: "Lord, when You did go out of Seir, when You did march out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped; the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before the Lord, that Sinai before the Lord God of Israel" (Judges 5:4-5).<sup>60</sup>

Our rabbis accomplish two purposes with their description of Esau's spurning circumcision. First, his repudiation of such an essential and sacred commandment demonstrates his complete disregard for his heritage and his total disrespect for God. Second, the fact that Esau neglected to perpetuate *milah* among his descendants - that is, Edom, or Rome according to the rabbis - assures our sages that Israel's enemies have no means by which to obtain God's favor; uncircumcised and impure, they have forfeited any claim to their righteous ancestors Abraham and Isaac.

---

<sup>60</sup> Eliyahu Rabbah page 125. This theme is also discussed in Eliyahu Rabbah page 126; Ruth Rabbah Proem 3; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 29; and Yalkut Shimoni Beshallah. Tanchuma Buber Toledot 4 states that Esau actually "stretched his foreskin [to undo his own circumcision]."

Indeed, as the Book of Judges makes clear, God has "[gone] out of Seir" - that is, He has turned his favor away from Esau. Thus the dichotomy between pure, beloved Israel and tainted, condemned Edom stands firm, despite Esau's own exalted lineage.

Amalek inherits Esau's disdain for *milah* and carries this disdain to the horrific extreme. He persecutes circumcised Israel both figuratively and literally, even daring to taunt God with these deeds.

Another comment: "Remember what Amalek did to you" (Deuteronomy 25:17). Rabbi Tanchuma Berabbi began his discourse by quoting the verse: "Render to our neighbors sevenfold in their bosom their insult, wherewith they have insulted You, O Lord" (Psalms 79:12)...Rabbi Hanina ben Shallum and Rabbi Joshua of Siknin said in the name of Rabbi Josuha ben Levi: The expression "into their bosom" informs us that Amalek would sever from Israelites' bodies the circumcised organ set in a man's middle - in his bosom, so to speak - and would fling it toward heaven, hurling reproaches and blasphemies toward Him above, saying: "Is this what You desire? Behold it thrown aloft to You, in Your very face!"<sup>61</sup>

Here again Amalek becomes the uninhibited version of Esau: a figure of pure hatred and evil unencumbered by any vestige of morality. While our rabbis were indeed troubled by the hatred for God that Amalek's acts implied, the horribly detailed stories recounted by our sages suggest that this theme affected them even more deeply as people, as

---

<sup>61</sup> Pesikta Rabbati 12:10. This theme is also discussed in Pesikta Rabbati 7:3, 13:1, 8; Numbers Rabbah 13:3; Lamentations Rabbah 3:64-65/9; Pesikta deRav Kahana 3:6, 11; and Yalkut Shimoni Beshallah.

would-be victims. That our rabbis could even create these terrible images, could even fathom such a totally malicious character, speaks volumes about the vulnerability and anguish inspired in them by their own persecutors. While Rome had never mounted such a vicious campaign, our sages clearly felt emasculated and terrorized by the oppression they had already known at her hands. Contemplating the vastness of the loathing directed at them, our sages could only hope for God to be moved by Rome's brutality and bring deliverance; the image of Amalek's taunting God with the mutilated penises of his victims is surely a plea for God's intervention.

Some sense of justice, however incomplete, is imparted in our sages' interpretations of Agag and the issue of *milah*. While Agag's imitation of Amalek's horrific acts is not expressly recounted, our rabbis make clear that as an Amalekite, Agag likely committed and surely stands guilty of these sins. Indeed, our rabbis see reflected in Samuel's final words to Agag an acknowledgment of Amalek's crimes:

"[Remember] how [Amalek] smote the hindmost of you" (Deuteronomy 25:18). What is meant by the words "smote the hindmost of you?" It is a euphemism for mutilation by cutting off the male parts, as you may learn from the Book of Samuel: "And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces" (I Samuel 15:33). This verse, according to Rabbi Isaac, means that Samuel castrated Agag, saying to him: "'As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women' (I Samuel 15:33). When you castrated an Israelite, you caused his wife to be bound to a dry stick. As you

did to Israel in the wilderness, so I have done to you."<sup>62</sup>

Just as Agag and the Amalekites hacked off husbands' penises to render their wives childless, so does Samuel mutilate Agag in order to leave Agag's own mother without progeny. It is not difficult to see here a bit of wishful thinking on the rabbis' part, a desire for "measure for measure" punishment to be similarly visited on their Roman oppressors.

Finally, Haman arises, bearing not only his ancestors' hatred but also their scorn for ritual circumcision. In their interpretation of "And the Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor,"<sup>63</sup> our rabbis envision Haman's actually banning circumcision:

"And the Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor" (Esther 8:16). Rabbi Judah taught: "Light" - this is Torah, as it is said: "For the commandment is a lamp, and Torah a light" (Proverbs 6:23). "Gladness" - this is the gladness of the festivals, as it is said: "And you shall rejoice in your festival" (Deuteronomy 16:14). And "joy" - this is *milah*, as it is said: "I rejoice at Your word, like one who finds great spoil"

---

<sup>62</sup> Pesikta Rabbati 12:13. This passage is Braude's translation of the Prague edition with the Parma 1240 and Casanata manuscripts; the Hebrew of the Vilna edition cited in the bibliography is in a slightly different order and accuses Agag of making Israelite wives "like *agunot*." Interestingly, where Braude renders "As you did to Israel in the wilderness," this edition states, "As you did to Israel in Egypt" - perhaps an error, perhaps a veiled reference to the midrashic tradition that Amalek served as an advisor to Pharaoh in Egypt. For more information on the sources for Braude's translation, please see Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, pages 30ff. This theme is also discussed in *Pesikta Rabbati* 13:8; *Lamentations Rabbah* 3:64-65/9; and *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 3:6.

<sup>63</sup> Esther 8:16.



(Psalms 119:162). And "honor" - these are *tfillin*, and thus Scripture says: "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of you" (Deuteronomy 28:10). And Rabbi Eliezer the Great said: These are the *tfillin* worn upon the head. "And honor" - in the eyes of the nations.<sup>64</sup>

In his commentary on the Esther material in Bavli Megillah, Eliezer Segal notes that according to Rashi, Rabbi Judah's teaching suggests that these practices - Torah study, observance of festivals, *milah* and *tfillin* - had been prohibited by Haman and were restored only after Haman's downfall. Segal underscores Rashi's understanding with a reminder that "prohibitions against these observances are widely associated with the Hadrianic persecutions,"<sup>65</sup> persecutions whose influences are often seen in our sages' descriptions of Israel's enemies and the tactics they employ. Segal also suggests that Rashi based his interpretation of this talmudic passage on another passage from Targum Rishon, which even more strongly alludes to a prohibition of certain observances:

[After the defeat of Haman] the Jews, moreover, had permission to occupy themselves with [the study of] the Law, to observe the Sabbaths and festivals, to circumcise the foreskins of their

---

<sup>64</sup> Bavli Megillah 16b. Parallels are found in Lekach Tov 8:16; Midrash Yerushalmi al Megillat Esther; and Otsar Midrashim Esther. Parallels in Agadat Esther 8:16 and Batei Hamidrashot, volume 2, 43:6 note that *sason* in the biblical text lacks the *vav*, indicating that "no joy is complete until the coming of the Messiah."

<sup>65</sup> All of Segal's insights recounted here are found in Segal, volume 3, page 146.

sons, and to put on the phylacteries upon their hands and their heads.<sup>66</sup>

With the defeat of Haman and the re-establishment of circumcision, our rabbis dare to look toward their own deliverance: to the day that, like Haman, Rome would fall; and to the day that their relationship with God - symbolized by circumcision - would be fully restored. On that day, our sages imagined, Israel's repentance would be accepted, her enemies punished, her people taken back in God's mercy and God's love. Haman's downfall, again, served as a sign of glorious things to come.

Yet one troubling issue remained. Our long-suffering rabbis could not always be comforted by looking ahead to the day of redemption. After all, they lived under a seemingly endless parade of oppression and humiliation that showed no signs of weakening. Naturally attributing the strength and longevity of Israel's enemies to God, our rabbis could not help but ponder by what merit their oppressors earned God's sustaining assistance. Certainly Rome, for example, served God's purpose of punishing Israel for her sins and bringing her to full, redemptive repentance;<sup>67</sup> but did God really have to give Rome so much power, so much glory? Revealing the insecurity inspired by their difficult circumstances,

---

<sup>66</sup> Targum Rishon 8:16.

<sup>67</sup> This compelling issue of Israel's enemies - particularly Haman - serving to mete out divine punishment is discussed fully in Chapter Four.

our rabbis wondered: What exactly was God's relationship with their tormentors? Was it possible that God felt for the nations of the world anything but wrath and rage; possible that, perhaps, they flourished because He cared for them as well?

From their deepest insecurities, our rabbis find the strength to attest to a God whose mercy is truly universal. While this aspect of God's compassion and love for all His children undoubtedly frightened them, they bravely expound it in beautiful teachings. Indeed, they craft several moving stories in which God shows mercy even to Israel's most hated enemies.

Rabbi Elazar taught: Esau shed three tears [when he learned Isaac had given the blessing of the firstborn to Jacob], one from the right eye, one from the left eye, and a third hung in his eye, for it is said: "You have fed them with the bread of tears" (Psalms 80:6)... Rabbi Abin taught - some say in the name of Rabbi Simlai - that the congregation of Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the Universe! Because of three tears which Esau shed, You have made him ruler from one end of the earth to the other and given him prosperity in this world!"<sup>68</sup>

God's compassion for the wicked Esau is so vast that He will entrust to him not only earthly riches, but even His treasured people Israel. Indeed, God will even respond to the misery of Israel's enemies by ensuring their line does

---

<sup>68</sup> Midrash Psalms 80:4. Esther Rabbah 3:5; Eliyahu Rabbah pages 65, 114-15, 125, 155; Eliyahu Zuta page 174; Tanchuma Buber Toledot 24; and Yalkut Shimoni Beshallah also discuss God's mercy on Esau.

not die out, by raising up from them a new generation of foes:

The Holy One brought Haman into the world and put up with him only as a reward for Agag, who wept and sighed when he was confined in prison, saying: "Woe is me! It may be that my seed shall now perish forever."<sup>69</sup>

Even as they expounded God's apparently boundless mercy, however, our rabbis acknowledged that this level of compassion does not apply to Israel. Israel is punished quickly for her sins, "chastised...even more severely than other nations for theirs."<sup>70</sup> In expressing this dichotomy, our rabbis make another courageous declaration of faith. They assert that in bearing the full measure of God's punishment rather than accepting the disproportionate measure of mercy He shows the gentiles, Israel truly reveals herself as God's chosen one. Our sages cling to God's affirmation to the prophet Amos: "You [Israel] alone have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."<sup>71</sup> Part of being in a close relationship with God is receiving punishment measure for measure; and despite the enormous suffering and insecurity this punishment brings, our rabbis ultimately

---

<sup>69</sup> Eliyahu Rabbah page 115. Parallel themes appear in Eliyahu Rabbah page 125 and Yalkut Shimoni Beshallah.

<sup>70</sup> This sentiment, which permeates rabbinic literature, is articulated by Schechter, page 52.

<sup>71</sup> Amos 3:2.

embrace God's chastisement over the easy mercy He grants the nations.

Having examined the major role Haman's lineage plays in his hatred of the Jews, we turn briefly to several incidents that also incited his enmity. First we consider our rabbis' story of a confrontation between Mordechai and Haman, a confrontation that occurs before the biblical Book of Esther even begins and at which the Bible barely hints:

It once happened that a city in India rebelled against Ahasuerus. In great haste troops were dispatched thither under the command of Mordechai and Haman. It was estimated that the campaign would take three years, and all preparations were made accordingly. By the end of the first year Haman had squandered the provisions laid in to supply the part of the army commanded by him for the whole term of the campaign. Greatly embarrassed, he requested Mordechai to give him aid. Mordechai, however, refused him succor; they had both been granted the same amount of provisions for an equal number of men. Haman then offered to borrow from Mordechai and pay him interest. This, too, Mordechai refused to do, and for two reasons. If Mordechai had supplied Haman's men with provisions, his own would have had to suffer; and as for interest, the law prohibits it, saying: "Unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury,"<sup>72</sup> and Jacob and Esau, the respective ancestors of Mordechai and Haman, had been brothers.

When starvation stared them in the face, the troops commanded by Haman threatened him with death unless he gave them their rations. Haman again resorted to Mordechai... [Mordechai] professed himself willing to help him out of his embarrassment on one condition, that Haman sell himself to Mordechai as his slave. Driven into a corner, he acquiesced, and the contract was

---

<sup>72</sup> Leviticus 25:36ff and Deuteronomy 23:20ff.



written upon Mordechai's knee-cap, because there was no paper to be found in the camp... Later, when Haman attained to high rank in the state, Mordechai, whenever he met him, was in the habit of stretching out his knee toward him, so that he might see the bill of sale. This so enraged him against Mordechai and against the Jews that he resolved to extirpate the Jewish people.<sup>73</sup>

Embarrassed and dishonored, Haman vows vengeance on the people of Mordechai.

Other rabbinic texts also attribute Haman's hatred for the Jews to his humiliation at the hands of Mordechai. Seeking greeting from Mordechai, Haman - despite his best efforts - receives only scorn:

"Then Haman was filled with wrath" (Esther 3:5). They said: What did Haman do when Mordechai passed by but did not stand in his place and inquire after Haman's peace? Haman went to Mordechai's other side and acted as if Mordechai had asked after his peace, and said to Mordechai: "Peace upon you, my master." But Mordechai responded to Haman: "'There will be no peace, says my God, for the wicked'" (Isaiah 57:21). Immediately "Haman was filled with wrath" (Esther 3:5).<sup>74</sup>

Why Haman might desire Mordechai's approbation remains unclear. Certainly our rabbis do not imply that Haman has in any way earned such regard; they do not fault Mordechai for refusing merely to inquire after Haman's peace. Most likely

---

<sup>73</sup> This is Ginzberg's version, by far the most complete, culled from volume 4, pages 397-99. Haman's enslavement is discussed briefly in Bavli Megillah 15b; Targum Rishon 5:9; and Agadat Esther 5:9, which states that Haman sold himself into slavery on the way from Jerusalem to Shushan, where he and Mordechai were to debate before Ahasuerus whether the Temple should be rebuilt. (Haman's role in the Temple rebuilding controversy will be discussed fully in Chapter Three.)

<sup>74</sup> Abba Gorion 3. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim B 3; Lekach Tov 3:5; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

this episode simply appealed to our rabbis; their vivid description of Haman's pathetic ploy to claim Mordechai's greeting, and Mordechai's scathing refusal, suggest that they deeply enjoyed the idea of a once-proud gentile humiliated at a Jew's hands.<sup>75</sup>

Mordechai's slights, however, have terrible consequences. When Mordechai not only refuses to speak civilly to Haman, but also refuses Ahasuerus' command to pay him obeisance,<sup>76</sup> Haman reacts with rage, vowing to wipe out not only his detractor but all of Mordechai's people.<sup>77</sup>

Because Jewish law actually permitted Mordechai to bow down to Haman,<sup>78</sup> our rabbis find other reasons for Mordechai's denying Haman homage.<sup>79</sup> One explanation harkens back to Haman's enslavement; Mordechai simply will not bow to his slave:

Mordechai, however, would not...prostrate himself to Haman, because Haman was his working slave who was sold to him for a loaf of bread.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Panim Acherim A takes this enjoyment even farther with a brief, unconvincing statement that Haman was actually jealous of Mordechai.

<sup>76</sup> Esther 3:2.

<sup>77</sup> Esther 3:5-6.

<sup>78</sup> As long as Haman was being served only out of fear. Bavli Sanhedrin 61b. This principle is also noted in Moore, page 145; and Weinbach, pages 94-95.

<sup>79</sup> An additional reason - that Haman had sewn an idolatrous image onto his clothing so that Jews bowing to him would also be engaging in idolatry - is taken up in Chapter Three.

<sup>80</sup> Targum Rishon 3:2. This reason is also given in Otsar Midrashim Esther. It is interesting to note that like his ancestor Esau, who sold his birthright and the privileges of the firstborn to Jacob in exchange for a hasty meal, Haman has sold his very freedom to Jacob's descendant Mordechai -

In addition to Haman's enslavement, our sages explain, Mordechai was obligated by his own ancestry not to bow to Haman. Invoking Haman's descent from Esau and his own from Benjamin,<sup>81</sup> Mordechai recalls that it is not the way of his line to bow to Haman's:

[King Ahasuerus' attendants said to Mordechai]: "But we find that your ancestors bowed down before the ancestors of Haman." To which Mordechai replied, saying to them: "Who was it that bowed down before the ancestors of Haman?" Said they to him: "Did not your ancestor Jacob bow down before Esau his brother, who was Haman's ancestor?" Said Mordechai to them: "I am descendant from Benjamin, and when Jacob bowed down before Esau, Benjamin was not yet born, and he did not bow before a human all his days, as a result of which the Eternal One of the World guarded him in his mother's womb, until the time that they will go up to the Land of Israel, and the Temple will be in its land, and His Shechinah will dwell in his border, and all of the House of Israel will rejoice there, while the nations will kneel and bow down in his land. As for me, I shall not kneel or bow down before Haman, this enemy."<sup>82</sup>

Again our rabbis see similar themes playing out across the generations: The conflict between Esau and Jacob is fought anew between Haman and Mordechai.<sup>83</sup> Knowing that his

---

also in return for immediate sustenance. Each of these acts will serve to spark anew the enmity between Esau/Amalek and Jacob/Israel.

<sup>81</sup> Esther 2:5. The unique nature of the relationship between Edomite/Amalekite and Benjaminite will be explored fully in Chapter Four.

<sup>82</sup> Targum Sheni 3:3. Parallel themes are found in Esther Rabbah 7:8; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:4; Agadat Esther 3:3; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

<sup>83</sup> Another fascinating aspect of this conflict is discussed in Chapter Four.

ancestry compels him to refuse Haman's demand for homage, Mordechai cannot help but incur Haman's wrath and thus endanger his people.

And endanger his people he does. Our rabbis expound the devastating consequences of Mordechai's repudiation of Haman:

When Haman saw that Mordechai would not bow down to...him, Haman became filled with anger against Mordechai. However, it was derisive to him to stretch out a hand to kill just Mordechai alone, for they had told him that Mordechai was a descendant from Jacob, who took away the birthright and the blessing from Esau, his paternal grandfather, and the Jews [were] the people of Mordechai; and so Haman sought to wipe out all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of [Ahasuerus].<sup>84</sup>

Our rabbis undoubtedly saw themselves reflected in Mordechai. They, too, had frustrated proud rulers who wanted to be regarded as more than human; they too had refused to pay obeisance to undeserving enemies. Just as Mordechai incited Haman's hatred by repudiating Haman's divinity, so our sages had provoked their own Roman rulers by upholding the laws of God and Judaism over the ways of the gentiles. Just as the Jews of Shushan would suffer Haman's wrath and wicked schemes, so our rabbis had borne the rage of Rome, incurred by their own daring actions.

---

<sup>84</sup> Targum Rishon 3:5-6. Another fascinating exposition of Haman's vow to kill all of Mordechai's people occurs in Agadat Esther 3:5, where Haman swears to wipe out the Jews, "who have hated my ancestors forever."

A final incident that sparked Haman's resentment occurs before Ahasuerus promotes him to high office.<sup>85</sup> Determined to wield power in Persia, Haman proved ruthless in his quest for glory. Our sages explain, in fact, that it was Haman who persuaded Ahasuerus to order Vashti banished - a euphemism for killed - at the start of the Book of Esther, in hopes of having his own daughter take Vashti's place as queen. While the Book of Esther specifically identifies the advisor who counseled this course of action as Memucan,<sup>86</sup> our rabbis employ clever wordplays to prove that Memucan is but another name for Haman.<sup>87</sup>

"Then Memucan said" (Esther 1:16). It was taught: Memucan - this is Haman. And why was he called Memucan? Because punishments were prepared (*memucan*) for him.<sup>88</sup>

Rabbi Yochanan reported different opinions of three Amoraim. One said [that Memucan hated Vashti] because...he had a daughter whom he wanted to marry into the royal house...The one who holds that it was because he had a daughter whom he desired to marry into the royal house bases his opinion on the words, "and let the king give her royal estate to another who is better than she" (Esther 1:19).<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Esther 3:1.

<sup>86</sup> Esther 1:19ff.

<sup>87</sup> Other sources - *Panim Acherim B*, *Targum Sheni*, and *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* - identify Memucan as Daniel rather than Haman. *Midrashim* identifying Memucan with Haman include *Bavli Megillah* 12b; *Agadat Esther*; *Targum Rishon* 1:16; *Otsar Midrashim Esther*; and *Yalkut Shimoni Esther*.

<sup>88</sup> *Agadat Esther* 1:16. Parallel texts are found in *Bavli Megillah* 12b; *Otsar Midrashim Esther*; and *Yalkut Shimoni Esther*.

<sup>89</sup> *Esther Rabbah* 4:6. Parallel themes are found in *Abba Gorion* 1 and *Lekach Tov* 1:19.



Plotting to put his own daughter on the throne, Haman is certain to enjoy high regard in Persia. However, God rather than Haman is in control of Persia's affairs; and He has no intention of letting Haman's daughter become queen. Indeed, God foils Haman's plot by visiting humiliating afflictions upon the girl as she comes before the royal court for consideration:

When [Haman] gave advice to the king to have [Vashti] killed, he wanted [Ahasuerus] to marry his daughter; thus when the maidens were assembled into the custody of Hegai, Haman's daughter was there, and then it was determined from heaven that each day she became defiled with excrement and with urine; and her mouth also smelled exceedingly offensive, whereupon they hurried her out. For this reason it fell upon [Esther] to be married to [Ahasuerus].<sup>90</sup>

There is to be no queen but Esther; and according to one rabbinic text, Haman was aware of Esther's Jewish origin.<sup>91</sup> His careful plot ruined by the new Jewish queen Esther, Haman focuses his rage on the nation whose daughter has defeated his own, ascending the throne of Persia in her stead.

As we have seen, our rabbis' explanations of Haman's hatred are vast and varied; and each explanation lends

---

<sup>90</sup> Targum Rishon 5:1.

<sup>91</sup> The biblical Book of Esther clearly assumes Haman knows nothing of Esther's Judaism. However, Midrash Psalms 22:26 hints that Haman's sons, suspecting her lineage, attempted to use sorcery to make Esther repulsive before King Ahasuerus.

insight into our sages' own historical circumstances and worldviews. Having investigated the origins and nature of Haman's loathing - inspired both by his ancestry and by incidents involving him personally - we prepare to examine the manifestations of this hatred. How did Haman express his resentment for the Jews? What schemes did he devise to destroy his enemy Israel? Our sages embellish the plot detailed in the biblical Esther story, exploring nuances in the biblical text and bringing forth a fascinating and elaborate account of Haman's machinations against the Jews. Reading this account, we delve more deeply not only into the biblical story and the character of Haman, but also into the enemy designs that plagued our sages centuries later.

### Chapter Three: Haman Schemes

Having examined the terrible intensity and strength of Haman's ancestral and personal hatred for the Jews, we should not be surprised to learn of the myriad of devious plots Haman undertakes against Israel. Indeed, our sages read Haman's very name as a warning that he will scheme to destroy the Jews:

"Whereupon Esther said: 'The [wicked] man and the enemy is this wicked Haman'" (Esther 7:6); and why was he called Haman by name? *Ha'ma'an* - "the one who" wanted to stretch out his hand against the nation of the Jews, who are called the children of the Lord of all, and he sought to kill them.<sup>92</sup>

While the name Haman itself contains only the words "*Ha*," translated as "the one," and "*ma'an*," translated as "who," our sages still find reflected in Haman's name a description of his wicked scheming. Haman, then, is aptly named. Robbery, slander, exploitation, idolatry, murder, and even - most offensive to our sages - denial of God and God's law serve as tools by which Haman hopes first to humiliate and finally to destroy the Jewish people. While Haman's schemes prove many and varied, each scheme furthers these essential goals. As we explore Haman's machinations against the Jews, we not only learn more about the action that lies beneath the surface of the all-too-succinct biblical Book of Esther; we also gain further insight into the schemes

---

<sup>92</sup> Targum Sheni 7:6.

employed against the Jews by our sages' ancient enemies and see once more how our rabbis interpreted the biblical story of Esther to fit their own convictions and worldview.

Haman's schemes begin, our sages tell us, years before we encounter him in the Book of Esther. According to rabbinic literature, Haman took part in the most horrific event in Israel's history: Babylonia's destruction of the Temple and defeat of Jerusalem.<sup>93</sup> Not content merely to witness the bloodshed and devastation, Haman exploited the situation for his own gain, managing to steal for himself the treasuries of the kings of Judah.

Rabbi Pinchas taught: Two rich men arose in the world, one from Israel and one from the nations of the world. Korach arose from Israel...and from the nations of the world arose Haman, who found [his wealth by plundering] the treasuries of the kings of Judah.<sup>94</sup>

It is, then, no small irony that this terrible act leads in part to Haman's promotion at the hand of Ahasuerus:

---

<sup>93</sup> It is certainly unclear how someone who assisted the Babylonians in a military campaign might rise to high office in the Persian court. Our sages, however, do not appear troubled by this illogical course of events. Rather, it seemed only right to them that Israel's eternal enemy Amalek - here in the form of Haman - would take part in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as part of his enduring and merciless campaign against the Jews. Lamentations Rabbah 5:1; Pesikta deRav Kahana 3:6, 15; and Pesikta Rabbati 12:9-10, in fact, specifically assert that Amalek was present at the *Hurban*.

<sup>94</sup> Panim Acherim A. A parallel is found in Esther Rabbah 7:5. This theme is also found in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50. Agadat Esther 3:1 states that Haman amassed his wealth by stealing "all the treasuries of the kings of Judah and the treasuries of the Temple."

The king saw that Haman was wealthy, and that his sons were mighty, so he promoted and exalted Haman over all his princes and servants, and commanded that all should bow and worship before Haman.<sup>95</sup>

Dazzled by Haman's wealth, ignorant of - or unconcerned by - its source, Ahasuerus hopes to share in the riches by raising Haman to a position of honor. Thus Haman's first scheme has paid off threefold: He has the joy of plundering the defeated Judean rulers; he increases his own wealth and status; and - most importantly - he acquires the power needed to undertake his campaign of destroying the Jewish people. In short, Haman has stolen from the Jews and caused their wealth to work against them.

With this interpretation our rabbis gave voice to their own anguish at living under Rome's brutal occupation. Like the Jews of Shushan, our sages knew the pain of being ruled by one who had devastated their beloved Temple; and they, too, bore the terrible burden of helping to support their own oppressors. Just as Haman robbed the royal treasuries of Judah to further his own schemes against Israel, so our sages paid heavy taxes to the rulers who had treated - and who continued to treat - them so hatefully.

Merely profiting from the destruction of the Temple, however, does not satisfy Haman. He is determined that the Temple shall not stand again; and when rebuilding begins, he

---

<sup>95</sup> Panim Acherim A. Parallels are found in Esther Rabbah 7:5 and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50.



battles to halt it. Indeed, some rabbinic texts assert that his campaign against the rebuilding takes him all the way to Jerusalem:

"After these things" (Esther 3:1), the attribute of justice entered before the Master of the World, and thus it said: "Did not the wicked Haman descend and go up from Susa to Jerusalem to abolish the rebuilding of the Temple?"<sup>96</sup>

The parallels to our sages' own situation appear obvious. In the Persians' stoppage of the Temple rebuilding (as recounted in the Book of Ezra<sup>97</sup>), our rabbis saw reflected their own failed attempt to re-establish the Temple and the sacrificial cult;<sup>98</sup> and in Haman, our sages recognized the Roman enemies who so vehemently opposed a resurgence not only of Jewish worship, but of Jewish living. These parallels enabled our sages to relate more deeply to the plight of Shushan's Jews as well as granted them assurance and hope: Just as the biblical Haman - like all

---

<sup>96</sup> Targum Rishon 3:1. Esther Rabbah 7:2; Panim Acherim B 1; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:1; Agadat Esther 1:1; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther also record Haman's opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple.

<sup>97</sup> Two rabbinic texts - Panim Acherim B 1 and Agadat Esther 1:1 - go so far as to identify Haman with Shimshai, the scribe who advises against the rebuilding of the Temple. However, Esther Rabbah Proem 5 views Shimshai as Haman's son. These identifications will be explored further on in the chapter.

<sup>98</sup> Ironically, hopes for this re-establishment were kindled under Hadrian, who at the start of his reign vowed to rebuild devastated cities - among them Jerusalem - and permit reconstruction of the Temple. As Jews gathered in Jerusalem and planned for this triumphant event, Hadrian abruptly rescinded his promise and sought to turn Jerusalem into a pagan center. This event would partly inspire the Bar Kochba Revolt nearly twenty years later.

those who dared to oppose the rebuilding of the Temple - received his just punishment at the end of the Book of Esther, so our sages looked forward to Rome's similar debasement.<sup>99</sup>

Before the Book of Esther even opens, our sages thus inform us, Haman has already begun his schemes against Israel. As the biblical action unfolds, these plots only multiply and intensify. Indeed, some rabbinic sources teach that while Haman is not specifically mentioned by name until the third chapter of the Book of Esther, his machinations against the Jews are already revealed in the account of Ahasuerus' great feast.<sup>100</sup>

Rabbi Isaac Nappaha said: The wicked Haman found a very serious accusation to bring against Israel, for so it says: "And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast for all the people that were present in Shushan the capital, both for great and small" (Esther 1:5). "People" here means only Israel, as in the verse: "Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like to you, a people saved by the Lord" (Deuteronomy 33:29). Said Haman to Ahasuerus: "The God of these men hates lewdness. Make a feast for them and set harlots before them, and order them that they should all come and eat and drink and do as they please," as it says: "They should do according to every man's pleasure" (Esther 1:8).<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>99</sup> For more on this theme, please refer to Chapter One.

<sup>100</sup> Esther 1:3ff.

<sup>101</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. Parallels appear in Abba Gorion 4; Lekach Tov 4:1; Agadat Esther 4:1; and Otsar Midrashim Esther. Bavli Megillah 12a and Agadat Esther 1:8 also allude to Haman's role in planning the feast.

This interpretation underscores just how dangerous an enemy Haman truly is. He matches his hatred for the Jews with keen insight into their practices, their faith, and even their God. Suspecting that God will defend His beloved children even against Haman's most sophisticated schemes, Haman brilliantly sets out to destroy Israel's defenses by alienating them from God. He rightly settles upon lewdness as one of the sins most likely to turn God away from Israel, sparing no effort in inciting the Jews of Shushan to such behavior. By the time Mordechai refuses to bow to Haman<sup>102</sup> and Haman, in response, multiplies his schemes against the Jews,<sup>103</sup> Haman has virtually ensured that God will not hearken to Israel's plight.

For our rabbis, who constantly warned against Jewish participation in the seductive enjoyments of Roman life - notably the gymnasiums, theaters and circuses - the image of an enemy's luring would-be pious Jews into abhorrent behavior resounded all too familiar. No doubt our sages saw themselves in Mordechai, whom they portrayed as vainly warning his people not to anger God by falling into Haman's trap:

When Mordechai saw this, he rose and issued a proclamation, saying: "Do not go to partake of the feast of Ahasuerus, since he has invited you only to be able to lodge a complaint against you, so that the Attribute of Justice should have an

---

<sup>102</sup> Esther 3:2.

<sup>103</sup> Esther 3:5-6.

excuse for accusing you before the Holy One, blessed be He." But they did not listen to Mordechai and they all went to the feast. Rabbi Ishmael said: Eighteen thousand and five hundred went to the banquet and ate and drank and became drunk and misconducted themselves... Forthwith God said to the Accuser: "Bring Me a scroll and I will write on it the doom of extermination."<sup>104</sup>

With the enthronement of Esther,<sup>105</sup> Haman focuses his schemes on the human as well as the divine realm. Indeed, he ponders how he can turn her arrival to his advantage; incredibly, he hopes to win Esther's favor even if she turns out to be a member of the people he has marked for destruction:

Another explanation of "After these things did King Ahasuerus promote" (Esther 3:1): Some pondering of things took place. Who pondered? Rabbi Judah said: Haman pondered. He thought to himself: If Esther is a Jewess, she is my kinswoman from my ancestor Esau, as it is said: "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" (Malachi 1:2) And if she is a gentile, all gentiles are akin to one another.<sup>106</sup>

As Haman continues his schemes, however, he encounters a strong opponent in Mordechai. In another attempt to induce Shushan's Jews to defy and enrage God, our sages relate, Haman sews an idolatrous image to his shirt:

---

<sup>104</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. A parallel appears in Abba Gorion 4. Bavli Megillah 12a; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 1, 4, 6; Lekach Tov 4:1; Agadat Esther 4:1; Targum Rishon 1:5; Tanchuma Behar 4; Tanchuma Buber Behar 9; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther also indict Israel for participating in this feast, while Abba Gorion 3 maintains that the Jews were forced to attend against their will.

<sup>105</sup> Esther 2:17.

<sup>106</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:4. Parallels are found in Abba Gorion 3 and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

The fact is that when Ahasuerus ordered that all should bow down to Haman, the latter fixed an idolatrous image on his breast for the purpose of making all bow down to an idol. When Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to it, he was filled with wrath. Said Mordechai to him: "There is a Lord who is exalted above all the exalted; how can I abandon Him and bow down to an idol?"<sup>107</sup>

Thus Haman ensures that when Jews passing by the king's gate bow to him,<sup>108</sup> they also commit idolatry. Once again our rabbis credit Haman with an uncanny grasp of Jewish law; while a Jew is permitted to pay obeisance to a man out of fear,<sup>109</sup> the public idol-worship in which Haman forces Shushan's Jews to participate is not excusable. Indeed, such worship appears certain to spark anew God's anger with His people:

Mordechai answered and said to the House of Israel: "The garment which the wicked Haman was wearing, upon it were embroidered two images, one in the front and one in the back; and if you would stand up and bow down to him, it would result in your actually worshipping idols, and you know that whoever worships idols will perish in this world and be banished in the World to Come." Whereupon all the House of Israel fell silent before him.<sup>110</sup>

In the end, however, Mordechai alone resists Haman's efforts to force Israel into idolatry;<sup>111</sup> and Haman's wrath

---

<sup>107</sup> Esther Rabbah 6:2. Other mentions of this image are found in Esther Rabbah 7:5; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 3:6; Agadat Esther 3:2; Targum Rishon 3:2, 4, 4:7, 5:9; Targum Sheni 6:1; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

<sup>108</sup> Esther 3:2.

<sup>109</sup> Bavli Sanhedrin 61b. This principle is also noted in Moore, page 145; and Weinbach, pages 94-95.

<sup>110</sup> Targum Sheni 6:1.

<sup>111</sup> Esther 3:2. In rabbinic literature, Mordechai's refusal



at Mordechai's refusal to bow fuels Haman's hateful schemes. Determined to avenge his humiliation at Mordechai's hands, Haman designs elaborate slanders against Israel and seeks to enlist King Ahasuerus in the plot to destroy the Jewish people.

At this point in the biblical story - Haman's denigration of the Jews before Ahasuerus<sup>112</sup> - our sages compose some of their most intricate and passionate teachings on the Book of Esther. Virtually every rabbinic commentary on Esther contains a lengthy, fascinating exposition of the slander by which Haman convinces Ahasuerus to help destroy Israel.<sup>113</sup> Scholars have remarked extensively on these expositions, noting that in them stand revealed details about the antisemitism our sages themselves endured.

Let us first examine one of our rabbis' earliest versions of Haman's slanders:<sup>114</sup>

---

to how is detailed in Lekach Tov 3:6; Agadat Esther 3:2; Targum Rishon 3:2, 4, 4:7, 5:9; Targum Sheni 6:1; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

<sup>112</sup> Esther 3:8ff.

<sup>113</sup> To wit, Esther Rabbah 7:12; Panim Acherim A; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:8; Agadat Esther 3:8; Targum Rishon 3:8; Otsar Midrashim Esther; Batei Midrashot, volume 2, 51:7; Yalkut Shimoni Esther; and those explored below.

<sup>114</sup> Berman, page 185, sees this account as "the earliest formulation of this motif," dating the passage from the first half of the fourth century. His article also assisted me immeasurably in the examination of Haman's slanders. Drawing on his own research as well as that of M.D. Herr, Berman points out the unique themes of Haman's slander according to the Babylonian Talmud; Targum Sheni; Panim Acherim; and Abba Gorion. He also links these themes with the antisemitica that likely prevailed in the days of our

"And their laws are different from those of all people" (Esther 3:8). They do not eat of our food, nor do they marry our women nor give us theirs in marriage. "Nor do they keep the king's laws" (Esther 3:8): since they evade taxes the whole year by their loitering and sauntering. "Therefore it is of no benefit to the king to tolerate them" (Esther 3:8): because they eat and drink and despise the throne. For if a fly falls into the cup of one of them, he throws it out and drinks the wine; but if my lord the king were to touch his cup, he would dash it on the ground and not drink from it.<sup>115</sup>

Haman's charges of idleness, economic isolationism, hateful customs, general hostility towards gentiles and special hatred for gentile rulers, certainly reflect the antisemitic charges our sages themselves faced. Indeed, scholars M.D. Herr and Joshua Berman note that Haman's words echo the classical antisemitica of Cicero and Juvenal!<sup>116</sup> Other formulations of Haman's slander - even more highly developed - grant insight into other anti-Jewish accusations our rabbis endured:

"Then Haman said to King [Ahasuerus]: 'There is a certain people'" (Esther 3:8) - that of the Jews, scattered and exiled among the nations in every province of your kingdom, proud and haughty. They gather [for themselves] the warm waters during

---

sages. Segal, volume 2, pages 114ff, also explores the links between the Talmud's version of Haman's slander and classical antisemitism. Segal also comments on the similarities between Haman's accusations against Israel (according to Bavli Megillah 13a) and the charges brought against the Jews by Shimshai in Ezra 4:7-16; this is an especially striking observation in light of our sages' identifying Shimshai as Haman's son, or even as Haman himself!

<sup>115</sup> Bavli Megillah 13b.

<sup>116</sup> Berman, pages 189-90.

Tevet and relax in the cold baths during Tammuz. Their deeds are different from those of any other nation and their laws from those of all provinces. They do not follow our laws, nor do they desire [to adopt] our deeds, and do not carry out the service of the king. When they see us, they spit on the ground and consider us as something defiled. When we go out to make proclamations and announcements in the service of the king, some of them go up in walls, break down fences and go into rooms, coming out arrogant. When we run to catch them, they turn around, standing [with] their eyes sparkling, grinding their teeth, their feet kicking and frightening them, so that we are unable to grab them. They did not give us their daughters, and they do not take our daughters in marriage. Now, whoever of them is taken to engage in the service of the king, he passes the year in idleness. The day they want to buy from us they say is a lawful day, but the day we want to buy from them they close the markets on us and say it is an unlawful day. The first hour they say: "We must recite the Shema;" the second [hour] they say: "We must offer prayers;" the third [hour] they say: "We must eat our bread;" the fourth [hour] they say: "We must bless the God of Heaven who gave us bread and water;" the fifth [hour] they go out; the sixth [hour] they return; and in the seventh hour their wives go out toward them and say: "We have brought you a dish of beans, as you are in distress from the service of the wicked king." They enter their synagogues, recite from their books and interpret from [the words of] their prophets; they curse our king and refute our rulers, saying: "This is the day in which the great God rested." Their menstrual period is [for] seven days, and their wives go out in the middle of the night and defile the water. On the eighth day they circumcise the foreskin of their sons, not having any pity on them, but saying: "So that we may be different from the [other] nations." Thirty days they call a month, proclaiming one [month] incomplete and one complete. During the month of Nisan, they observe eight days of festivity on which they kindle lights, have thorough housecleaning, remove the leaven in favor of unleavened bread, and say: "This is the day that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt." They call it the Day of Passover; they enter their synagogues, recite from their books, interpret [the words of] their prophets and say: "Just as the leaven is removed in favor of the unleavened bread, so may the wicked kingdom be removed from among us, and thus may deliverance be accomplished

for us from this foolish king." During the month of Sivan they observe two days of festivity. On it they enter the synagogues, recite the recitation of the Shema, and pray. They recite from the Law and interpret [the words of] their prophets; they curse our king and refute our ruler; they call it the Day of Convocation. Then they ascend to the roof of the house of their God and throw down apples, then gather them and say: "Just as we gather [the apples], so may their sons [be gathered] from among us." Then they say: "This is the Law that was given to our ancestors on Mount Sinai." Annually, the beginning of the year is what they call the first of Tishrei. They enter their synagogues, recite from their books, and interpret [the words of] their prophets; they curse our king and refute our rulers; they blow the trumpets and say: "On this day that our ancestors' memory [enters] before our Father in Heaven, may our remembrance be entered for good, whereas the remembrance of our enemies be entered for evil and bitterness." On its ninth [day] they slaughter animals and geese, then eat and drink; and they, their wives, their sons, and their daughters delight themselves. They call its tenth [day] the Great Fast, and they, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, as well as their grandsons, fast, and they cause themselves distress without having pity on themselves, saying: "[On] this day our sins are atoned, our sins are collected and added to the sins of our enemies." They enter their synagogues, they recite from their books, and interpret [the words of] their prophets; they curse our king and refute our rulers, saying: "Thus should this kingdom be obliterated from the world." Then they pray and plead that the king should die and his power be crushed. On its fifteenth [day] they set up booths on the roofs of their houses, then they go out to the orchards and cut down our palm branches, pluck down our citrons, strip off our willows, and lay waste our orchards; they uproot our fences without regard. Then they make hosannas, saying: "Just as the king does in battle, so do we;" they enter the synagogue and pray, they rejoice. Then they go around with hosannas, singing and dancing like goats; we do not know if they indeed curse us or bless us. They call it the Feast of Booths and do not perform the service of the king; they say to us: "Today it is forbidden." Thus they spend their year in idleness, in not performing in it the service of the king. Fifty years they call a Jubilee; seven years they call a Sabbatical; twelve months they call a year; thirty days they



call a month and make it into a feast day; and seven days they call a Sabbath, making it the day on which the Lord of the Universe rested.<sup>117</sup>

Here we see Haman's objection not only to everyday Jewish practices but also to allegedly hateful liturgy. While Berman is unable to locate a historical basis for Haman's recurrent attack on "Torah reading as a tool for vilification [of the king and officers]," he asserts that this theme "is foremost in the author's mind and, in all likelihood, is rooted in...fact."<sup>118</sup>

Noting, however, that many of the prayers to which Haman here objects do not actually exist, Berman concludes that our sages intended at least some of Targum Sheni's commentary to serve as "comic relief," accompanying as it would the irreverent reading of the Megillah on Purim.<sup>119</sup> Other rabbinic texts, however, offer a glimpse into a very serious antisemitic charge against Jewish liturgy: Christianity's hostility towards *Birkat Minim*.

One of the intermediate benedictions of the Amidah, *Birkat Minim* calls for the destruction of slanderers and humbling of sinners. Scholars still differ on precisely to whom these epithets refer; proposed identifications range from Jewish sectarians and early Jewish Christians to gentile Christians. In any case, the prayer came under special attack in the early fifth century by the church

---

<sup>117</sup> Targum Sheni 3:8.

<sup>118</sup> Berman, page 195.

<sup>119</sup> Berman, page 188.



father Jerome, who understood the liturgy's damning reference to *notzrim* as a curse upon Christians; according to Berman, Jerome's accusations are reflected in another, later version of Haman's slander, where Haman makes a clear reference to *Birkat Minim*:<sup>120</sup>

"And their laws are different from those of all people" (Esther 3:8). Haman said to Ahasuerus: "Come and see how they are different...from all the nations. Once every seven days they...call it Shabbat, and they open their synagogues, and read words which are impossible to hear, and they say, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!' and afterwards they stand and pray. And they say in their prayer, 'Subjugate the wicked' - and they say that we are the wicked!"<sup>121</sup>

Examining the antisemitic slanders our rabbis placed in Haman's mouth, we gain a clearer understanding of the charges our sages faced in their own day. Challenges to Jewish industriousness, respect for gentiles, regard for rulers, religious practice, and liturgical innovations plagued our sages of antiquity; by projecting these accusations back into the days of Esther, our rabbis made more relevant and immediate the antisemitism depicted in the biblical tale, as well as emphasized the seemingly eternal quality of Jew-hatred. While our sages certainly did not craft their teachings with one eye on the antisemitic works of antiquity, they could not help but be profoundly

---

<sup>120</sup> Berman, pages 192ff.

<sup>121</sup> *Panim Acherim* B 3. While *Birkat Minim* is actually offered only on weekdays, Haman's reference is obvious.

influenced by the always-present, always-developing antisemitism that surrounded them.

Haman's slander is not only directed at the Jews, however. It extends to God Himself. Even the first word Haman utters to Ahasuerus regarding the Jews becomes, for our sages, an example of the contempt with which Haman treats God. According to some rabbinic texts, Ahasuerus did not immediately acquiesce to Haman's desire to destroy the Jewish people. Rather, Ahasuerus reacted with fear, reminding Haman of the mighty acts of redemption God had performed when His beloved Israel was threatened:

"If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed" (Esther 3:9). Resh Lakish said: When the wicked Haman said to Ahasuerus: "Come, let us exterminate Israel," Ahasuerus replied: "You cannot prevail against them, since their God will not entirely forsake them. See what He did to the kings who preceded us and who laid hands upon them and who were much mightier and more powerful than we are. Whoever comes against them to destroy them and whoever schemes against them is wiped out and becomes a byword to all mankind. How much more so then we, who are not equal to those others. Let me hear no more of this." In spite of this the wicked Haman pressed this upon Ahasuerus on every occasion, and tried to persuade him to oppress Israel. At length Ahasuerus said to him: "Since you are so insistent, let us consult the wise men and the magicians." He thereupon convened all the wise men of the nations. When they were all assembled before him, he said to them: "Is it your desire that we destroy this nation?" They all replied with one voice: "...[I]f a man seeks to lay hands upon the relatives and children of the Holy One, blessed be He, how shall he escape, since He rules over those above and those below, and the soul of all living is in His hand to raise up or to cast down, to kill or to bring to life? Take a lesson from the previous kings who transgressed by laying

hands on Israel; see what happened to them, as for instance to Pharaoh and Sennacherib."<sup>122</sup>

Haman, however, is armed with a quick response, which our sages found hidden beneath the surface of his biblical address to Ahasuerus.<sup>123</sup> Reading Haman's opening word "yeshno," literally meaning "there is," as related to the root "yashan," meaning "asleep," and employing a *gezerah shava* to equate the word "echad" in Esther 3:8 with a reference to God in Deuteronomy 6:4, our sages assert that Haman dared to call the God of Israel "asleep" - that is, uninterested in His children and too weak to intervene on their behalf:

"And Haman said to King Ahasuerus: 'There is [yeshno] a certain [echad] people'" (Esther 3:8). He of Whom it is said, "The Lord is One [echad]" (Deuteronomy 6:4) is asleep [yashan] to His people...The God who drowned Pharaoh in the sea and performed for Israel the wonders and mighty deeds of which you have heard is now old and cannot do anything, since Nebuchadnezzar has ere this gone up and destroyed His house and burnt His Temple and taken Israel captive and scattered them

---

<sup>122</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:9 (where, incredibly, Ahasuerus reminds Haman of God's strength by saying that God killed Amalek!); Agadat Esther 3:9; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

<sup>123</sup> Esther 3:8. Haman will in the end pay dearly for his slander of both God and Israel; this aspect of his fall is discussed in Chapter Five. Even as Haman appears at the peak of his power and cleverness, he is committing acts that will arouse God's wrath and eventually lead to his own defeat; perhaps the most striking example is found in Agadat Esther 3:9, where Haman assures Ahasuerus that "'Israel has no redeemer.' The Holy Spirit cried out and said: 'Their Redeemer is strong; the Lord of Hosts is His name' (Jeremiah 50:34)." Such assurances echoed powerfully with our sages, who saw in Rome's oppression and brutality the deeds that would finally induce God to overthrow her and exalt Israel.

among the nations. Where is His strength and might, seeing that He is now old, as it says: "The Lord shall not see, nor shall the God of Jacob regard it" (Psalms 94:7). When [Haman] spoke to [Ahasuerus and the advisors] in this fashion, they came round to his opinion and agreed to destroy Israel.<sup>124</sup>

It is fascinating to note that in one version of Haman's slander of God,<sup>125</sup> Haman assures Ahasuerus that God is too old and weak to "*limchot*" - to "wipe [someone or something] out" - on Israel's behalf. The word "*limchot*" comes from the same root God used in the Book of Exodus when He vowed to "*macho emache et zecher Amalek*," that is, "utterly [to] blot out the remembrance of Amalek."<sup>126</sup> By stating that God can no longer "*limchot*," then, Haman asserts that God lacks the strength to fulfill His promise to Israel and blot out "*zecher Amalek*," Amalek's memory. As the "*zecher Amalek*" - not only the descendant but also the very remembrance of Amalek - Haman smugly imagines himself to be beyond the reach of God's power. According to this rabbinic text, Haman dares to believe that he and his ancestor Amalek have already triumphed over God and Israel.

While Haman's wickedness and pride will ultimately doom his designs to destruction, for now his slander proves

---

<sup>124</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:12-13. Parallels appear in Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:9; Agadat Esther 3:9; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Panim Acherim A and Panim Acherim B 3 also state that Haman charged God with being "asleep" to His people's needs.

<sup>125</sup> Agadat Esther 3:9.

<sup>126</sup> Exodus 17:14.

successful. Winning over Ahasuerus, Haman turns his attention to perfecting his schemes against Israel.

Here again Haman's remarkable grasp of Jewish practice and history - helpfully ascribed to him by our sages - enables him to craft a virtually foolproof plot against Israel. That the rabbinic Haman possesses such understanding again speaks to our sages' image of their own oppressors: Like the Romans, who knew enough about Judaism to legislate against its dearest and most central practices, Haman too was an erudite enemy, also using his knowledge about Judaism against the Jews.

Even the immense compensation Haman offers Ahasuerus for the Jews is carefully chosen in accordance with Jewish law, our sages explain. While rabbinic texts differ on how Haman arrived at the sum of "ten thousand talents of silver,"<sup>127</sup> each source links the payment with the price assigned by the Torah to a Jew's life and, in some cases, even to the number of Jews who participated in the Exodus from Egypt:

[Haman said to Ahasuerus]: "If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed" (Esther 3:9); and I shall give you for each and every one of them one hundred zuz. The sum total of their ancestors when they went out of Egypt was six hundred thousand (men and the sum total of six hundred thousand) zuz is ten thousand silver talents.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Esther 3:9.

<sup>128</sup> Targum Rishon 3:9. Weinbach, pages 101-102, also notes Haman's calculations. Simon, page 99, notes that Leviticus



Had Ahasuerus accepted Haman's ten thousand talents, our sages explain, Israel would have had no legal hope of deliverance. However, Haman's greed gets the best of him; and by pressuring Ahasuerus to return the proffered silver, Haman renders the sale invalid:

[After Haman had convinced Ahasuerus and the wise men to issue the decree calling for Israel's destruction], Ahasuerus said to [Haman]: "Let us cast lots. If the lot falls one way, the money will be given into my hand and the people into yours; then the people will be entrusted to you. If it falls the other way, the people will come into my hand and the money into yours; then they will not be entrusted to you." Immediately they cast the lots...and it fell that the people would come into Haman's hand [and the money into Ahasuerus' hand]. Immediately Haman was greatly saddened over the loss of the money. When Ahasuerus saw this, he gave Haman back the money.<sup>129</sup>

For all of Haman's strict attention to Jewish law, he ultimately shrinks from its demands. Choosing avarice over adherence, he fails to legitimize his purchase of the Jews and thus offers Israel a chance at legally escaping from his schemes.

Yet Haman's knowledge of Judaism continues to menace Israel. Once again, only a minor blunder mars his strategy of using Jewish lore to destroy the Jews. In casting lots to

---

27:3 fixes one hundred zuz as the maximum value of a human life. Other calculations are found in Esther Rabbah 7:19; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; and Targum Sheni 3:9.  
<sup>129</sup> Abba Gorion 3. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim B 3; Yalkut Shimoni Esther; and Agadat Esther 3:9 (which, as Rosenberg, page 19, points out, "remarks that, had Ahasuerus not returned the silver to Haman, the Jews would have had no chance of deliverance from their strait").

determine the date for Israel's slaughter,<sup>130</sup> our sages relate, Haman carefully considers Jewish holidays and history, finally selecting Adar as the month in which his scheme has the best chance of succeeding:

"In the first month, that is the month Nisan" (Esther 3:7). It was taught: When the wicked Haman determined to destroy Israel, he said: "How shall I prevail over them? The best way is to cast lots." The Holy Spirit thereupon cried out: "And they have cast lots for My people" (Joel 4:3). Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "Villain son of a villain, your lot is drawn to be hanged..." First he cast lots for the day of the week, as it says: "From day to day" (Esther 3:7)...[But] when that miscreant saw that the lot would not help him to the right day, he tried months. He began with Nisan, and the merit of Passover appeared in it. In Iyar appeared the merit of the lesser Passover and of the *manna* which was given to Israel on the fifteenth of this month. In Sivan there was the merit of the Torah; in Tammuz the merit of the land. Another reason why the lot did not fall on Tammuz or Av was because these months said before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the Universe, sufficient calamities have already happened in us to Your sons, five in Tammuz and five in Av." With Elul came the merit of the completion of the wall in Jerusalem [by Nehemiah], which took place in that month...and also the merit of the tithe of cattle, as we have learned that on the first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of cattle. With Tishrei came the merit of the *shofar* and the Day of Atonement and the Festival [of Tabernacles]. With Marchesvan came up the merit of Sarah our mother who died in that month. With Kislev came the merit of Chanukah, with Tevet the merit of Ezra...With Shevat came up the merit of the Men of the Great Synagogue; for on the twenty-third of that month all Israel gathered together to take counsel about the concubine of Gibeah and the graven image of Micah. When Adar came up, Haman found no merit in it and he began to rejoice...saying: "Adar has no merit and its

---

<sup>130</sup> Esther 3:7.

[zodiac] sign [Pisces, or fish] has no merit, and what is more, in Adar Moses their master died." He, however, did not know that on the first of Adar Moses died and on the first of Adar he was born. Haman said: "Just as fishes swallow one another, so I will swallow them." Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "Wretch! Fishes sometimes swallow and sometimes are swallowed, and now it is you who will be swallowed." <sup>131</sup>

In the end, our rabbis explain, every month testifies to Israel's merit; no month will possibly permit her destruction. For all of the consolation this assertion provides, however, the text does portray Haman as coming frighteningly close to finding a day in which his schemes against Israel could succeed. Despite its triumphant ending, this teaching still warns of Israel's vulnerability to Haman, and of the terrible danger his knowledge poses.

Haman also puts this knowledge to use in publicizing the royal decree against the Jews. Even the Bible attests to Israel's acceptance by the gentiles of Persia; that "the city of Shushan was in consternation" upon learning that the Jews had been marked for destruction<sup>132</sup> implies that they

---

<sup>131</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:11. Parallels are found in Bavli Megillah 13b (a very abbreviated commentary); Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:7; Agadat Esther 3:7; Targum Rishon 3:7 (where Haman's error is not realizing that "the descendants of Joseph are compared to the fish of the sea," Pisces being the zodiac sign associated with Adar); Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. In many texts, the months, days and zodiac signs remind God that Israel is needed for the world to endure, and God's anger is kindled by Haman's outrageous plan; thus Haman's fall is already foreshadowed. This foreshadowing of doom when Haman appears so powerful was an important assurance for our sages. This aspect of Haman's fall is discussed fully in Chapter Five.

<sup>132</sup> Esther 3:15.

enjoyed some measure of popularity. Rabbinic literature expounds upon Shushan's grief:

Then the Holy One, blessed be He, brought weeping and mourning upon Shushan. A woman would go to spread out fruit [to dry in the sun] but fall from the roof and die; a man would go to draw water from the well but fall in and die. Thus Scripture says, "The city of Shushan was in consternation" [Esther 3:15].<sup>133</sup>

Clearly much of Persia would not share Haman's desire to see Israel destroyed. According to rabbinic literature, however, Haman was eager to persuade. Perhaps sensing the ambivalence Ahasuerus' decree would inspire, Haman uses his knowledge of Jewish history to compose a horrifyingly brilliant piece of propaganda; retelling the history of Israel from his wicked perspective, Haman paints a picture of a demonic people richly deserving of punishment. Our sages teach that Haman's all-too-persuasive description of Israel accompanied the royal decree of destruction:

And this was what they wrote in the letters:  
"Peace to you without end. Be it known to you that there is a certain man among us who is not of our place, but he is of royal descent, from the seed of Amalek, and he is one of the most eminent men of our day, and his name is Haman. He has made to us a very slight request concerning a certain people that there is among us, which though the most contemptible of peoples is exceedingly haughty; they desire our evil and are forever cursing the king...and they are ungrateful to their benefactors. You may judge from the way they

---

<sup>133</sup> Panim Acherim B 3. This theme also appears in Lekach Tov 3:15 and Agadat Esther 3:15. However, Targum Rishon 3:15 holds that the gentiles were pleased by the decree of destruction.



treated that hapless Pharaoh. When they went down to Egypt he received them with all kindness and settled them in the best part of the land, and supported them in the years of famine and fed them with the fat of the land. When he had some palaces to build they built for him. With all this he was not able to make them loyal; nay more, they made a crafty pretext to him, saying: "Let us go...three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to our God" (Exodus 5:3), and after that we will return. If you are willing, lend us vessels of silver and vessels of gold and garments.'

...[T]hey despoiled the Egyptians...then they ran away. When Pharaoh heard that they were running away, he went after them to recover his money. What did they do to him? There was with them a certain man named Moses son of Amram who by means of his magic arts took a certain staff and uttered incantations over it and smote the sea with it so that it became dry...When Pharaoh saw this he went in after them to recover his money, and in some strange way he was thrust into the midst of the sea, and he and all his host were drowned in the sea. They gave no thought to all the kindness he had showed them, so that you see how ungrateful they were. And then how they treated Amalek, my original ancestor, at the time when he came to fight against them...What did that leader of theirs, Moses, do? He had a disciple named Joshua son of Nun who was very cruel and pitiless. Said that Moses to him: 'Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek' (Exodus 17:9). I don't know if those men whom he chose were sorcerers or great warriors, but what did that Moses do? He took a staff in his hand, and did something or other with it, and when Amalek attacked them he uttered some incantation or other against them, and they became powerless and fell before them...The first king they had was named Saul, and he went and fought against the land of my ancestor Amalek and slew a hundred thousand horsemen of them on one day, and had no pity on man or woman, on babe or suckling, but killed them all...After this they had a king named David son of Jesse, who destroyed and exterminated all other peoples without pity...After him came his son Solomon, who erected for Israel a certain building called the temple. They had certain things in it, and when they made war they used to go into it and do some magic there and when they came out they used to slay and lay waste without end...Now, therefore, when these letters reach you, keep yourselves in readiness for that day to destroy all the Jews among you, both young and old, children and women on one day,



and not to leave of them a remnant or fugitive."<sup>134</sup>

Like Rome, Haman has again used Jewish lore against the Jews.<sup>135</sup> According to his twisted account of Israelite history, Israel's heroes are truly devious sorcerers; her redemption an episode of mindless brutality; her holiest place of worship a center of pagan magic. For all of their falsity, the accusations Haman levels against Israel still resonate powerfully; his profoundly untrue yet somehow believable charges surely speak to our sages' sense of helplessness as they, too, faced unfair hatred they were powerless to combat.

His plan firmly in place, Haman determines that nothing will impede its successful execution. He seems particularly concerned that Esther might interfere with his schemes - an unsurprising worry considering that, according to rabbinic literature, Haman at least suspected Esther's Jewish origin.<sup>136</sup> Haman thus turns his energies to isolating Esther at any cost. Noticing that Esther's servant Hatach (whom our

---

<sup>134</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. Other versions of this letter are found in Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:12; Agadat Esther 3:14; Targum Sheni 4:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

<sup>135</sup> Still another example of Haman's deviously using his knowledge of Judaica occurs later in the Book of Esther, as he plots to hang Mordechai (Esther 5:14). Abba Gorion 5; Abba Gorion 6; Lekach Tov 5:14; Agadat Esther 4:17; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther relate that Haman hoped to kill Mordechai early in the morning, before Mordechai would have a chance to recite the Shema and perhaps be saved through that prayer's merit.

<sup>136</sup> Please see Chapter Two for a discussion of the pertinent teaching.

sages identify with Daniel<sup>137</sup>) disappears from the biblical text after being charged with delivering a message from Esther to Mordechai,<sup>138</sup> our sages even accuse Haman of murdering Hatach in order to stop communication between Mordechai and Esther:

"And Hatach came" (Esther 4:9). When Haman realized that Hatach was entering and going out [to carry messages between Esther and Mordechai], Haman beat him and killed him. Therefore Hatach is not mentioned again [in Scripture].<sup>139</sup>

Not only has Haman committed the heartless act of slaying an innocent manservant, he has also - albeit unwittingly - killed the most revered prophet of the generation. Our sages clearly saw no end to Haman's wickedness.

Unfortunately, no end is yet apparent to his power either. Commenting on the law that no one may approach King Ahasuerus without a formal invitation,<sup>140</sup> our sages notice that the biblical text does not name the person from whom such an invitation must be issued. In fact, they teach, Haman himself suggested that rule, and Haman himself was the

---

<sup>137</sup> This identification is made in Esther Rabbah 8:4; Bavli Megillah 15a (which adds that "all affairs of state were 'nechtakim,' decided, by his voice"); Agadat Esther 4:5 (because Daniel had been "hatkuhu," cut down, from his high position and had become a common messenger); Targum Rishon 4:5; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

<sup>138</sup> Esther 4:10ff.

<sup>139</sup> Abba Gorion 4. This theme is also found in Panim Acherim B 4; Lekach Tov 4:10; Agadat Esther 4:13; Targum Rishon 4:12; Targum Sheni 4:11, 5:8; and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50.

<sup>140</sup> Esther 4:11.

arbiter of who could come before the king. It is not difficult to imagine that Haman instituted this law specifically to keep Esther from privately appealing to her husband on Israel's behalf:

So Esther put [the following] words into the mouth of Hatach, and she said to him: "Thus shall you tell Mordechai: 'Did not the wicked Haman decree by order of [Ahasuerus for anyone] not to enter to the king's inner courtyard without permission; and now, all the king's servants and people who dwell in the king's provinces are aware that there is one final judgment for every man and woman who enters the king's inner courtyard without having been summoned on Haman's order - the decree of his sentence is but one - [he is] to be put to death.'" <sup>141</sup>

Haman now finds himself at the pinnacle of his power and influence. King Ahasuerus has promoted him to high office, accepted his suggestions for cruel and self-serving royal decrees, and enabled him to spread his grotesque anti-Jewish slander all over Persia. Haman has employed tactics ranging from exploitation to murder in order to consolidate his power and bring Israel ever-nearer to destruction. He has insulted God and the Jews with apparent impunity. He stands on the threshold of fulfilling his deepest yearning both as a descendant of Esau and as a Jew-hater in his own right: to have Israel blotted out from under heaven. Haman's careful schemes appear to have succeeded perfectly.

---

<sup>141</sup> Targum Rishon 4:11. According to Targum Sheni 5:2, Haman tried to kill Esther at the moment she approached Ahasuerus; the king immediately extended his scepter toward Esther in order to stop Haman.

Like our sages in their own time, the Jews of Persia have, according to rabbinic literature, fallen prey to a deadly enemy, whose craftiness and brutality stand virtually unmatched. Like our sages in their own time, the Jews of Persia have yet to receive explicit assurance that God will soon intervene to deliver them. And like our sages in their own time, the Jews of Persia must turn fervently to prayer, to repentance, and to *mitzvot* in hopes of being redeemed from the hateful schemes of the enemy.

**Chapter Four: Haman as Divine Punishment**

Haman stands at the brink of success, ready to avenge his ancestors' hatred - and his own loathing - for the Jewish people by seeing every man, woman, and child of Israel slaughtered in a single day. He has slandered God and God's beloved with apparent impunity; rendered God's agents Esther and Mordechai powerless to interfere; and arranged for Amalek's incontrovertible victory over God and Israel. As our sages pondered Haman's terrible accomplishments, one essential question loomed: How could Israel's all-mighty God have permitted things to go this far? Among all of the possible answers our rabbis posed,<sup>142</sup> one recurs frequently and powerfully: Haman was serving as God's agent, as a divine punishment for the sins of Israel.

This solution proved both terrifying and comforting. That God would engage in such horrific machinations to punish His children spoke to a harsh and exacting God, and to appalling sins on the part of Israel; yet that God was chastising rather than simply abandoning the Jews implied that one day He would deem their suffering sufficient and take them back in love. Indeed, our sages interpreted Haman's fall and the triumph of Persia's Jews as a sign that when God finishes disciplining Israel, He is prepared to glorify her once more.

---

<sup>142</sup> Other interpretations will be discussed in Chapter Five.



Our sages applied this understanding not only to the situation of the Jews of Shushan but also to their own precarious circumstances. Living in anguish under Roman occupation, they envisioned themselves, too, as enduring God's punishment for their generation's own sins. The Roman oppressors worked as God's agents, ruling over Israel only according to His will. Our rabbis fervently hoped that just as God had accepted the suffering of Persia's Jews and redeemed them from Haman, so too would He embrace our sages' own misery and forgive their generation's transgressions. Once Israel's repentance was complete, our sages believed, God would bring low His agents for their punishment; Rome would fall as completely and painfully as had Haman.

Reviewing the history of Israel in light of the biblical Esther story, our sages found no shortage of sins with which to charge Persia's Jews. According to our rabbis' interpretations of the Book of Esther, the Jews of Shushan deserved chastisement for lewdness, drunkenness, idolatry, and a persistent refusal to turn in repentance. However, the Jews who suffered under Haman bore not only their own transgressions but those of their ancestors as well. The sins of Jacob and Jacob's sons had at last returned to haunt Israel, and the Jews of Persia would pay dearly. God intended to use Haman to exact divine punishment for old and

new sins, and to draw Israel to a repentance so complete it would be as if she had accepted the Torah anew.<sup>143</sup>

Living in close proximity to the luxurious debauchery of Ahasuerus' court, Shushan's Jews abandoned their religious obligations - indeed, their very morality - and participated in royal excesses. Only Mordechai, our sages assert, remained steadfast in his loyalty to God.<sup>144</sup> Perhaps Israel's most glaring transgression was joining in the feast called by Ahasuerus,<sup>145</sup> a banquet at which wine, forbidden foods, and especially lascivious behavior flowed freely.<sup>146</sup> Shamefully, the Jews in attendance remained to enjoy the feast even after being served on the sacred Temple vessels Ahasuerus had plundered:

When the days of the drinking party were finished, the king made for the entire people of the House of Israel, who were found guilty, in the fortress of Susa, who were counted among the uncircumcised inhabitants of the land, both great and small, a drinking party for seven days...He then ordered that they be given to drink in the golden vessels of the Temple which Nebuchadnezzar the evil one brought from Jerusalem. Other vessels which belonged to King [Ahasuerus] that were in there changed their appearance to the likeness of lead

---

<sup>143</sup> This theme is expressed in Bavli Shabbat 88a.

<sup>144</sup> Mordechai's abstaining from the indulgences of the royal court, including Ahasuerus' feast, is recounted in Chapter Three.

<sup>145</sup> Esther 1:3ff. Our sages read Esther 1:5, where Ahasuerus makes a feast for "ha'am," "the people," as referring specifically to a banquet attended by Israel, whom the Bible frequently designates "ha'am."

<sup>146</sup> The lewd nature of this feast, and Israel's participation in it, are detailed fully in Chapter Three.

in the presence of the Temple vessels. They drank new wine fit for a king to drink, which had a strong aroma and sweet taste.<sup>147</sup>

Such lewdness and disrespect would not go unpunished. After witnessing Israel's shocking behavior at Ahasuerus' banquet, God inscribes the Jews for destruction, refusing to rescind His decree even as the Torah and the angels plead on Israel's behalf:

[Upon seeing Israel's behavior at the feast of Ahasuerus] God did indeed consent to wipe out Israel and said at that moment: "Why do I want this nation for whose sake I have wrought so many signs and wonders to save them from all that rose up to harm them? 'I will make the remembrance of them cease from among men'" (Deuteronomy 32:26). Forthwith God said to the Accuser: "Bring Me a scroll and I will write on it the doom of extermination." The Satan thereupon went and brought God a scroll on which He wrote the doom. Straightaway the Torah went forth in garments of widowhood and lifted up her voice in weeping before the Holy One, blessed be He, and the ministering angels cried aloud at the sound of her weeping and said before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the Universe, if Israel disappears from the world, what is the use of us in the world?" as it says: "Behold, the mighty ones shall cry outside; ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly" (Isaiah 33:7). When the sun and the moon heard this, they gathered in their light, as it says: "I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering" (Isaiah 50:3). At that moment Elijah of blessed memory ran with all haste to the patriarchs and to Moses son of Amram and said to them: "How long, fathers of the world, will you be sunk in sleep and not behold the distress in which your descendants are plunged, for the ministering angels and the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations and heaven and earth and the hosts above are weeping bitterly, and you stand aloof and take no notice!"

---

<sup>147</sup> Targum Rishon 1:5, 7. Panim Acherim A also indicts Israel for feasting while Ahasuerus showed off the stolen vessels.

They said to him: "Why is this?" He replied: "Because Israel partook of the feast of Ahasuerus, and for this a decree has been issued to destroy them from the world and to wipe out their memory." Abraham, Isaac and Jacob then said to him: "If they have transgressed the law of the Holy One, blessed be He, and their doom is sealed, what can we do?" Elijah then betook himself to Moses and said to him: "O you faithful shepherd, how many times have you stood in the breach for Israel and quashed their doom so that they should not be destroyed, as it says: 'Had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath lest He should destroy them' (Psalms 106:23). How will you respond to this trouble, 'for the children are come to the breaking point?'" (Isaiah 37:3) Moses said to him: "Is there a virtuous man in that generation?" "There is," Elijah answered, "and his name is Mordechai." Moses thereupon said to him: "Go and tell him, so that he may stand and pray there and I here, and we may together seek mercy for them from the Holy One, blessed be He." He said to him: "Faithful shepherd, a doom of extermination has already been made out for Israel." Moses replied: "If it is sealed with clay, our prayer may be heard; but if it is sealed with blood, what must be must be." He said to him: "It is sealed with clay." Said Moses our master to Elijah: "Go and tell Mordechai."<sup>148</sup>

In issuing his own decree calling for Israel's slaughter, Haman is hardly original. Rather, he simply acts as God's agent, echoing on earth the proclamation already

---

<sup>148</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:13. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim A (where the sin cited is Israel's idolatry before Nebuchadnezzar); Abba Gorion 4; Lekach Tov 4:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. According to another parallel in Agadat Esther 4:1, a furious God determines to "*limchot et shamam min ha'aretz*," "to blot out Israel's name from the earth." The root of "*limchot*" is the same one that God uses in Exodus 17:14, when He vows to "*macho emche*," "to blot out" the remembrance of Amalek. In His wrath, God now plans to visit upon Israel the same divine punishment destined for Amalek! Bavli Megillah 12a; Targum Rishon 1:5, 7, 4:1; Song of Songs Rabbah 7:8; Tanchuma Behar 4; and Tanchuma Buber Behar 9 also attribute God's decree of destruction to Israel's behavior at Ahasuerus' banquet.

sealed in heaven. Incredibly, God - not Haman - is the true Author of Israel's destruction, demanding punishment for Israel's wretched conduct.

One tiny hope remains: that Mordechai will somehow galvanize Israel into a repentance complete enough to shatter the seal of the decree of destruction. Only by this repentance can Israel induce God to abandon Haman as His agent, to annul Haman's plans and cause Israel to triumph instead. Our sages maintain that even as He uses Haman to punish Israel, God truly yearns not for Israel's downfall but for her atonement. Indeed, by exalting Haman, God provides a powerful incentive for repentance, more powerful than any that has come before:

"And the king took the signet-ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:10). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana taught: Greater was the removal of this signet-ring than forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses, that even forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses could not cause Israel to turn to goodness, but the removal of the signet-ring would cause Israel to return to goodness.<sup>149</sup>

Our sages could easily apply the sins of Shushan's Jews - and the consequences - to their own time. Laxity in religious practice, insufficient reverence for God and God's law, and yielding to the temptation of foreign indulgences - whether a Persian royal banquet or a Roman gymnasium - were

---

<sup>149</sup> Agadat Esther 3:10. This theme also appears in Bavli Megillah 14a; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.



transgressions all too familiar to our rabbis. Our sages feared that through their Roman oppressors, God might decide to exact punishment as severe as that which had threatened the Jews of Shushan; and they simultaneously hoped to achieve repentance complete enough to merit the deliverance granted Israel in the days of Haman.

But was it too late for the Jews of Persia? Recounting another iniquity for which Haman served as the vehicle for divine punishment, our sages examine an additional consequence of Israel's transgressions. Recalling that Jews had been among those who paid homage to the idol set up by Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>150</sup> our rabbis assert that God was using Haman to punish Israel for this recent display of idolatry:

"When Mordechai knew all that was done" (Esther 4:1). What is meant by "He knew all that was done?" Mordechai said: "I know that destruction has been decreed upon us because of the day that we bowed to the image of Nebuchadnezzar, as it is said: 'He who sacrifices to any god, save to the Lord only, shall be utterly destroyed'" (Exodus 22:19). Thus it is said: "Mordechai knew."<sup>151</sup>

In this case, however, the pattern of sin, followed by divine punishment, repentance and finally redemption, does not unfold so neatly. Indeed, our rabbis find that Israel's idolatry before Nebuchadnezzar has had a dreadful impact not

---

<sup>150</sup> Daniel 3:1ff.

<sup>151</sup> Panim Acherim B 4. Bavli Megillah 12a; Panim Acherim A; the prologue of Lekach Tov; Agadat Esther 4:1; Lamentations Rabbah 3:33; Song of Songs Rabbah 7:8; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther also state that Israel was being punished for bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idol.

only on the fortunes of Persia's Jews but also on God Himself:

"On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1). Rabbi Yochanan taught: The sleep of the King of the World was disturbed, and He called to the patriarchs and said to them: "Your children are to be destroyed." They said before Him: "Master of the World, on account of what?" He said to them: "Because they did not sanctify My name in the days of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, and they have made Me as one who lacks the power to save."<sup>152</sup>

This interpretation reveals another aspect of our rabbis' views on sin: The consequences of Israel's transgressions fall upon God as well as His people. Although our sages refrained from expressly stating that lowly human beings could possibly augment or diminish God's power, passages such as this one make clear that our rabbis saw cosmic repercussions to Israel's actions on earth. When Israel exalted God, God grew - as it were - more exalted; when Israel denied God, one might say, God's power weakened.<sup>153</sup> Ironically, then, the Jews of Persia must plead with God for relief from the wicked Haman; yet the very sins that brought Haman's persecutions upon them are the same sins that render God less able to respond to their cries.

---

<sup>152</sup> Panim Acherim A. Agadat Esther 6:1 states that because Israel did not sanctify God's name in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, God lacked the strength to save His people in Persia. Bavli Megillah 11a tells that the Jews of Persia rendered God feeble by neglecting the study of Torah.

<sup>153</sup> Schechter, pages 237ff, explores this theme in detail.

Still, all is not lost. Indeed, God's show of powerlessness is merely another trial for Israel to endure. Protesting that they did not truly bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol - rather, they only pretended to do so - Israel receives a shocking response from God: Just as you only pretended to engage in idolatry, so too I only pretended to decree your destruction:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why were the enemies of Israel [a euphemism for Israel] in [Esther's] generation deserving of punishment?...He said to them: It was because they bowed down to [Nebuchadnezzar's] image. They said to him: Did God then show them favoritism [by sparing them from death, when they had committed the capital punishment of idolatry]? He replied: They only pretended to worship, and He also only pretended to exterminate them.<sup>154</sup>

According to our sages, the lewd, drunken, irreverent and idolatrous Jews of Persia had truly brought divine punishment - in the form of Haman - upon themselves. Yet through Haman, God also set out to exact punishment for sins perpetuated by Israel countless generations before. The weight of not only iniquities they themselves had committed, but also those committed by their exalted ancestors, fell upon the Jews of Persia:

Rabbi Hanin said: If a man says that the All-Merciful foregoes what is due to Him, may his entrails be loosened! The truth is that He is long-suffering but in the end collects His due.<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Bavli Megillah 12a.

<sup>155</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:25. A parallel is found in Esther Rabbah 8:1.

According to our sages, God has suffered the sins of Jacob and Jacob's sons long enough. Centuries later, He prepares to collect His due from the Jews of Persia. It may seem only fitting that God employ the scion of Israel's ancestral enemy Amalek to punish Israel's ancestral sins;<sup>156</sup> but the connection between Jacob and the Jews suffering under Haman still appears tenuous. Our rabbis, however, are quick to strengthen it. Once again they examine the origins of the conflict between Haman and the Jews, interpreting the struggle in light of the hostility between Esau and Jacob. For all of Esau's terrible sins, our rabbis still acknowledge Jacob's own transgression: that he brought his twin brother to grief by stealing Isaac's blessing for himself.<sup>157</sup> Just as Haman must bear the wickedness of his forbear Esau, so too must the Jews of Persia take Jacob's sin upon themselves:

Of Mordechai we read: "Mordechai put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry" (Esther 4:1). For what was he being repaid?... Jacob caused Esau to utter one cry, as it says: "When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a loud and bitter cry" (Genesis 27:34).<sup>158, 159</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Indeed, rabbinic literature frequently portrays Amalek himself as a punishment for Israel's sins.

<sup>157</sup> Genesis 27:1ff.

<sup>158</sup> When Isaac informs Esau that Jacob has stolen the blessing of the firstborn. The Bible describes the cries of both Esau and Mordechai as "gedolah u'marah," "loud and bitter."

<sup>159</sup> Esther Rabbah 8:1. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim A; Agadat Esther 4:1; Genesis Rabbah 67:4; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

Despite Esau's wickedness, God has not forsaken him; indeed, He has empowered his heir Haman to punish his brother's descendants. Facing imminent slaughter, the Jews of Persia experience the same despair Esau knew so long ago; Esau's anguish echoes centuries later in Mordechai's cry. Long-suffering, God has indeed collected His due.

According to our rabbis, God even selected a fitting date to exact His punishment. Our sages cite the fourteenth of Nisan as the day Jacob wrested Isaac's blessing from Esau, the day Jacob caused Esau to utter a despondent cry:

The nightfall of the festival day of Passover [the fourteenth of Nisan] came, and Isaac called unto Esau his elder son and said: "O my son! Tonight the heavenly ones utter songs; on this night the treasuries of dew are opened; on this day the blessing of the dews [is bestowed]. Make me savory meat while I am still alive, and I will bless you"...Rabbi Yehudah said: [That night] Isaac blessed Jacob [instead, causing Esau to cry out].<sup>160</sup>

Eliezer Segal, expounding Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Megillah, states that Mordechai uttered his own cry on the fourteenth of Nisan as well, for on that day he learned of the decree against Israel. Utilizing Rashi's teachings, Segal constructs a timetable for events in the Book of Esther, beginning with Haman's decree and ending with his hanging. The resulting chronology, which Segal presents as "perhaps the only one possible in light of the information contained in the

---

<sup>160</sup> Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 32.



Babylonian Esther-Midrash," dates Mordechai's loud and bitter cry and the beginning of his fast to the fourteenth of Nisan.<sup>161</sup> As Segal notes: "Haman's edicts were issued on the thirteenth of Nisan (Esther 3:12), and the fast began immediately forthwith"<sup>162</sup> - that is, Mordechai cried out and called for fasting (as recounted in Esther 4:1-3) the very next day. Thus Mordechai's cry erupted on the same day that Esau's had so many years before.

This parallelism is purposeful and chilling. Our sages speak of a God who forgets nothing, who waits hundreds of years to demand accountings and punish sins, who metes out strict justice across the generations. Indeed, the Jews of Persia will suffer not only for the sin of Jacob, but for those of Jacob's sons as well:

God said to the sons of Jacob: "You sold your brother after eating and drinking;<sup>163</sup> so I will do to you." And so it is written: "And the king and Haman sat down to drink" (Esther 3:15)...Rabbi Issachar of Kfar Mandi said: Joseph was forgiving and said: "So now it was not you that sent me here but God" (Genesis 45:8), and yet see how far that offense cast its shadow, for until the days of Mordechai the penalty for the sale of Joseph was still due!<sup>164</sup>

"When Mordechai knew all that was done, Mordechai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes" (Esther 4:1). Rabbi Aibu said: Once Jacob had

---

<sup>161</sup> Segal, volume 2, page 262.

<sup>162</sup> Segal, volume 2, pages 260-61.

<sup>163</sup> A reference to the sale of Joseph, recounted in Genesis 37:25ff.

<sup>164</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:25. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Agadat Esther 3:15; and Targum Sheni 3:14.

taken to sackcloth, as it says: "And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins" (Genesis 37:34),<sup>165</sup> it never again departed from his descendants.<sup>166</sup>

With these interpretations, our sages stress the controversial concepts of delayed and corporate punishment. While the Torah states that children will be punished for the sins of their forbears,<sup>167</sup> the prophet Ezekiel's assertion that "the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father"<sup>168</sup> is generally acknowledged as superseding that view. For our sages, however, the nature of sin and punishment was not so easily resolved. Facing oppression and brutality that often seemed out of proportion to their own sins, they sought various explanations for Israel's suffering. While they held that a human being should not hold descendants responsible for sins committed by ancestors, they also acknowledged that God might indeed demand atonement from one generation for a previous

---

<sup>165</sup> After Jacob's sons presented Joseph's bloody coat and said that Joseph had been devoured by a beast.

<sup>166</sup> Esther Rabbah 8:1. Parallels are found in Panim Acherim A; Agadat Esther 4:1; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. So great was this sin of Jacob's sons, our rabbis teach, that none of their descendants would possess the merit needed to defeat Amalek. In every case where Israel struggles against Amalek, therefore, Israel's chief warrior must be a descendant of Rachel - for only her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, remained untainted by this crime. As Benjaminites, Esther and Mordechai will be fit to battle Amalek's descendant Haman. This theme is discussed in Bavli Megillah 16a; Panim Acherim B 6; Agadat Esther 6:13; Targum Sheni 3:14; and Pesikta Rabbati 12:5, 13:1.

<sup>167</sup> Exodus 34:7.

<sup>168</sup> Ezekiel 18:20. This theme is pervasive throughout Ezekiel chapter 18.

generation's deeds.<sup>169</sup> Thus our sages came to understand their own hardships as the price to be paid for the iniquity of earlier generations as well as for their own sins. Only when Israel had fully repented could her fortunes be restored; and our sages well understood that many generations of suffering might be required before such repentance could take place.

Indeed, the lesson our sages derived from the Book of Esther - *kol Yisrael aravim ze ba'ze*, Every Jew is responsible for one another - applied across the generations. Israel's history became truly, immediately, and sometimes terribly relevant; just as our ancestors' greatness might sustain us in times of need,<sup>170</sup> so too their sins might bring us to grief. By linking the suffering of Persia's Jews to the sins of Israel's earlier generations, our rabbis demonstrate that Israel's deeds possess a virtually unimaginable magnitude; across the generations we indeed are exalted by and suffer from what our ancestors

---

<sup>169</sup> Our sages engaged in complex reasoning to allow for corporate punishment without denying Ezekiel's view. They held that while God would not directly punish a righteous person for his predecessors' sins, He would hasten punishment upon a sinner whose parents had also committed sins. Because our sages understood their own generation as well as previous generations to be sinful, they could easily see a version of delayed and corporate punishment at work in their own time.

<sup>170</sup> This concept of *zechut avot*, the merits of the ancestors, is the essential corollary to the concept of corporate and delayed punishment. Chapter Two also alludes to *zechut avot*. A brief but comprehensive explanation of *zechut avot* is found in Schechter, chapter 12.

have done. While this concept of delayed and corporate punishment is not among the most widespread or defining aspects of rabbinic theology, we have seen that it played an essential role in our rabbis' worldview and in their understanding of God's providence.

Thus our sages explore the many aspects of Haman as divine punishment, linking the persecution of Persia's Jews to Israel's transgressions and chastisements throughout the ages. Our rabbis transform Haman from an autonomous, all-powerful enemy to God's unknowing agent, working feverishly to accomplish not his own will but God's. Haman enjoys power and success not despite, but rather because of, God; even Haman's most vengeful schemes and most horrendous slander of God and His people serve only to render divine punishment upon the Jews. Our rabbis thus create a powerful paradigm of human oppressor as God's tool, enabling themselves - and us - to acknowledge persecution without denying God's power, and to acknowledge God's wrath without concluding that He has abandoned us forever. Once God's purposes have been realized, our sages maintain, the power wielded by Israel's oppressors will be turned upon their own heads; God will then turn to punishing His agents as He has punished Israel. With the early glorification and eventual humiliation of God's tool Haman, our rabbis saw this chain of events played out in the Book of Esther; and just as Haman fell once God had completed His punishment of Israel, so too our sages

prayed for their own chastisements under Roman rule to end soon and triumphantly. A striking *nechemta* asserts that once humbled, Israel can look forward to speedy deliverance:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Come and see how great are the humble in spirit! At the time the Temple stood, a man brought an *olah* and received the reward of the *olah*. He brought a *minchah* sacrifice and received the reward of the *minchah*. But now, one who knows humility is counted as if he brought all the sacrifices in the world, as it is said: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalms 51:19), and also "The Lord is near to them who are of a broken heart, and He saves such as are of a contrite spirit" (Psalms 34:19).<sup>171</sup>

Another interpretation of Haman's fall gives voice to our sages' dearest messianic hopes:

Just as God raised up Haman in order to cause Israel to return to goodness, so will God raise up [another] ruler who will decree upon Israel evil, as Haman did, and cause them to return to goodness before the coming of the Messiah son of David.<sup>172</sup>

Indeed, Haman's downfall is not far off. His end will come not only because God has finished using him to chastise Israel, but also because of his own odious deeds. Although Haman's wickedness furthered God's plans, he will still be held accountable for his slander of God and persecution of Israel. Indeed, our sages assert that even as God

---

<sup>171</sup> Abba Gorion 7.

<sup>172</sup> Prologue to *Lekach Tov*. *Yerushalmi Taanit* 1:1; *Tanchuma Bechukotai* 3; *Tanchuma Buber Bechukotai* 5; and *Otsar Midrashim Esther* express similar sentiments.



manipulates Haman into acting as His agent, He still grows enraged by Haman's deeds:

To what can the wicked Haman be compared? To a bird which made its nest on the edge of the sea, and the sea swept away its nest, whereupon it said: "I will not move from here till I turn the dry land into sea and the sea into dry land." What did it then do? It took water from the sea in its mouth and poured it on the dry land, and it took dust from the dry land and cast it into the sea. Its companion came and stood by it and said: "Luckless unfortunate! With all your labor, what will you effect?" So God said to the wicked Haman: "Stupid fool! I said that I would destroy them, and even I, one might almost say, was not able" - as it is said: "Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath lest He should destroy them" (Psalms 106:23) - "and you want 'to destroy, to kill and to annihilate' (Esther 3:13)? By your life, your head will be taken off instead of theirs, since they are to be saved and you are to be hanged."<sup>173</sup>

Having served God's purposes, Haman is soon to collect his due.

---

<sup>173</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:10. Divine foreshadowing of Haman's fall occurs throughout our sages' commentaries on the Book of Esther.

## Chapter Five: Haman's Fall

At the peak of his power and on the verge of realizing his terrible schemes, Haman appears invincible. He stands poised to fulfill the mission of Esau and Amalek, to destroy the ancestral enemy he himself has grown to loathe. Israel, seemingly devoid both of merit and of God's mercy, stands doomed to slaughter. Only the most dramatic changes of fortune can bring about the downfall of Haman and the exultation of Israel.

These changes, of course, are soon to come. While the biblical story focuses on Esther and Mordechai's successful efforts to overcome Haman, rabbinic literature amplifies every aspect of Haman's ruin. Succinctly recounted in the Book of Esther, Haman's transformation from fearsome plotter to pathetic buffoon to conquered foe takes on new dimensions in our sages' teachings. In story after story, our rabbis ponder who - or what - led to Haman's fall; they discuss the nature of Haman's vicissitudes; and they gleefully describe the often hilarious details of Haman's humiliations. Most importantly, however, our sages seek the consolations and promises implied in the ignoble defeat of one of Israel's greatest enemies, finding in Haman's fall lessons and assurances to guide them through their own dark times.

Our sages first explore the question of why Haman's defeat occurs when it does, after he has heaped not only

great suffering upon Israel but also great insult upon God. Why is Haman allowed to flourish as long as he does? And what event finally causes his fortunes to shift? Alongside the important rabbinic understanding of Haman as divine punishment, three views emerge to account for Haman's rise and fall. Some sages propose that God orchestrated Haman's ruin for His own reasons; others state that the righteous deeds of Israel aroused God's saving power; and still others explain that Haman singlehandedly brought destruction upon his own head. While these schools of thought are not mutually exclusive - indeed, some teachings fall into more than one of these categories - this construction does provide a framework for examining in detail our sages' explanations of Haman's downfall.

Attributing Haman's ascent and rapid decline primarily to God's will holds understandable attraction for our sages, who saw every event - big or small, joyous or tragic - as a manifestation of the divine plan. At God's command, Haman had been exalted, and at God's command he would be brought low. Similarly, our sages reasoned, God had decreed their own oppression under Roman rule, and would - they prayed - one day decree their redemption as well. Seeing God's hand in every historical occurrence and in every moment of their own lives, our sages refused to regard the sufferings of Israel - whether in the days of Haman or in the days of Hadrian - as random or meaningless. Rather, as part of God's plan, every instant was invested with sacred significance;

every moment was a necessary step in a divinely ordained journey to messianic deliverance.

While our rabbis realized that the divine plan lay beyond human comprehension, they still sought to understand God's ways as much as possible. They explored, therefore, not only why God might have caused Haman's fall but also why God chose to act when He did.

Perhaps the simplest explanation tells that Haman's actions enraged God, moving Him to exact punishment from this enemy of Israel. Rabbinic literature teaches that Haman's outrageous plot, his slander of the Jews, and his dismissal of God as "asleep" to the needs of Israel<sup>174</sup> all aroused God's wrath against Haman:

"And Haman said to King Ahasuerus: 'There is [yeshno] a certain [echad] people'" (Esther 3:8). He of Whom it is said "The Lord is one [echad]" (Deuteronomy 6:4) is asleep [yashan] to His people. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "There is no sleep for Me, as Scripture states: 'Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps' (Psalms 121: 4), and you say that sleep affects Me! As you live, I will awaken from [this appearance of] sleep against you and destroy you from the world." So it is written: "Then the Lord awoke as one out of sleep...and He smote His enemies backward; He put upon them a perpetual reproach" (Psalms 78:65-66).<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>174</sup> This slander against God, as well as Haman's slanders against Israel, is recounted fully in Chapter Three.

<sup>175</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:12. This theme also appears in Esther Rabbah 7:10, 11; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 3; Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:6, 8; Agadat Esther 3:9, 12; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

Almost simplistic on the surface, this formula of sin and vowed punishment holds a special message for our sages. Haman commits each of these sins while he still possesses great strength and prestige, while he still seems to hold the key to Israel's slaughter. Yet even as Haman enjoys his power, God decrees his destruction. Although the Jews of Shushan know only that Haman appears to scheme against Israel and to slander God and God's beloved with impunity, in truth God has already marked Haman for punishment. Even in Israel's darkest hour, she could trust in God's saving power.

This theme echoed powerfully with our sages, who saw Rome flourish even as she oppressed Israel mightily. Like the Jews of Persia, our sages had received no clear sign that their enemy would soon fall. Yet they took heart in this rabbinic understanding of Haman's defeat. Like Haman, perhaps Rome had already aroused God's anger through her treatment of the Jews; perhaps she, unbeknownst to our sages, had already been inscribed for divine punishment. Perhaps, our rabbis prayed, the deliverance God had brought to the Jews of Shushan would be made manifest in their own day.

While this understanding enjoyed some regard among our sages, another view of God's role in Haman's fall appears far more frequently in rabbinic literature. According to this understanding, God had orchestrated Haman's ascent to



power from the beginning, deliberately granting him tremendous power before bringing him low:

"After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:1). This account bears out what Scripture says: "For the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of sheep [kikar karim]" (Psalms 37:20). These sheep are fattened not for their own benefit but for slaughter. So the wicked Haman was raised to greatness only to make his fall greater. It was like the case of a man who had a sow, a she-ass, and a filly. He let the sow eat as much as it wanted, but he strictly rationed the she-ass and the filly. Said the filly to the she-ass: "What is this lunatic doing? To us, who do the work of the master, he gives food by measure; but to the sow, which does nothing, he gives as much as she wants." The she-ass answered: "The hour will come when you will see her downfall, for they are feeding her up not out of respect for her but for her own hurt." When the [feast day of] Calends came round, they took the sow and killed it. When afterwards they set barley before the filly, it began sniffing at it instead of eating. The mother then said to it: "My daughter, it is not the eating which leads to slaughter but the idleness." So, because Scripture says: "And set his seat above all the princes that were with him" (Esther 3:1), later it says: "They hanged Haman" (Esther 7:10).<sup>176</sup>

God does not, however, humble Haman only in response to Haman's sins. Rather, God seeks to make an example of Haman, to demonstrate by his downfall what happens to those who dare to oppose Israel:

Another explanation of "After these things" (Esther 3:1). Rabbi Levi said: All this bears out what Scripture says: "When the wicked spring like

---

<sup>176</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:1. This theme also appears in Panim Acherim B 3, 6; Abba Gorion 3; Agadat Esther 3:1; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

grass, when all the workers of iniquity flourish" (Psalms 92:8a). How does that verse end? "It is that they shall be destroyed forever" (Psalms 92:8b). Haman became great only for his own hurt. Why was he made great? His case was like that of a common soldier who cursed the king's son. Said the king: "If I put him to death, everyone will say: 'The king has executed a common soldier.'" So he made him an officer and afterwards a commander, and then he cut off his head. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Should Haman be slain when he goes down and advises Ahasuerus to stop the building of the Temple, no one will know who he was. Let him therefore become great and afterwards be hanged." Therefore he "set his seat above all the princes" (Esther 3:1), and afterwards, "They hanged Haman" (Esther 7:10). This shows how the enemies of the Holy One, blessed be He, become great only in preparation for their fall, as it is written: "He makes nations great and destroys them" (Job 12:23).<sup>177</sup>

Thus, our rabbis explain, Haman has been exalted only to his own detriment. Ironically, his schemes against Israel and his slander of God turn out to have been part of God's plan all along! So far-reaching is this divine plan, rabbinic literature relates, that the Book of Esther foreshadows Haman's end before he has even appeared in the text:

"After these things" (Esther 3:1). After what things? Rava said: After God had created a healing for the affliction [that was about to befall Israel]. For Resh Lakish has said: The Holy One, blessed be He, does not afflict Israel unless He has created a healing for them beforehand, as Scripture says: "When I healed Israel" (a non-contextual reading of Hosea 7:1). Not so, however, with the other nations: He afflicts them first and

---

<sup>177</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:2. Targum Rishon 3:1 also teaches that God will not punish Haman for opposing the rebuilding of the Temple until his name has become known among the nations. This theme is also found in Panim Acherim B 3, 6; Abba Gorion 3; and Lekach Tov 3:1, 2.

then creates a healing, as Scripture says: "And the Lord shall smite Egypt; He shall smite and heal" (Isaiah 19:22).<sup>178</sup>

This passage explains why Mordechai's foiling the conspiracy of Bigtan and Teresh<sup>179</sup> immediately precedes Haman's promotion: God ensured that Haman would rise to power only after He had prepared the means for Haman's fall. Mordechai's heroism, when read before King Ahasuerus, would lead the king to exalt Mordechai and humiliate Haman, an episode that would mark the beginning of Haman's decline.<sup>180</sup> Thus, even before bringing Haman into the midst of Persia's Jews, God has already guaranteed that his schemes will come to naught. This assurance echoes through rabbinic literature wherever it appears that Haman is making real progress in his campaign against Israel. For example, at the very moment Ahasuerus turns the Jews over to Haman,<sup>181</sup> we are reminded that Haman has already been doomed to fall:

---

<sup>178</sup> Bavli Megillah 13b. Parallels appear in Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 3:1; Agadat Esther 3:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Various passages in rabbinic literature - Esther Rabbah 9:2, 10:13; Bavli Megillah 10b, 11a; Bavli Hullin 139b; Panim Acherim B 5; Agadat Esther 1:1, 5:11, 14, 7:9, 10; Targum Sheni 2:7; Genesis Rabbah 65:13; Leviticus Rabbah 28:4; Numbers Rabbah 10:2; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:26/1, 10:7/1; Tanchuma Shmot 17, Behar 4; Tanchuma Buber Behar 9; Pesikta deRav Kahana 5:18, 8:2, 19:5; Pesikta Rabbati 15:25, 18:3; Midrash Psalms 22:2, 21; and Midrash Proverbs 10, 11 - offer interpretations of various biblical texts to demonstrate that Haman's rise and fall had already been foretold in earlier books of the Bible.

<sup>179</sup> Esther 2:21ff.

<sup>180</sup> Esther 6:1ff.

<sup>181</sup> Esther 3:11.

"And the king said to Haman: 'The silver [*hakesef*] is given to you'" (Esther 3:11). The numerical value of *hakesef* [the silver] is 165 - the same as that of *ha'etz* [the tree]. The total of one is the same as that of the other.<sup>182</sup>

According to this interpretation, Ahasuerus seems to tell Haman that "the tree [that is, the gallows] is given to you." We might also apply the teaching of Abba Gorion 1,<sup>183</sup> which instructs us to read the word "king" in the Book of Esther as a reference not to King Ahasuerus but to the King of Kings; thus Esther 3:11 appears to recount God Himself telling Haman that he is destined for the gallows.

Lest we doubt this promise as Haman continues to plot - apparently successfully - against Israel, our sages craft a similar reminder in their account of Haman's constructing the gallows for Mordechai:<sup>184</sup>

Haman, son of Hammedatha, did not sleep nor did he rest until he proceeded to bring carpenters and smiths, the carpenters to make the gallows and the smiths to forge iron, while Haman's sons exalted and rejoiced with his wife Zeresh playing on lyres. [Then] the wicked Haman declared, saying: "I will remit the wages to the carpenters, and for the smiths I will prepare a meal for this gallows." At that moment Haman arose to try the gallows with his own stature. Thereupon a heavenly voice emanated from the highest heavens and said to him: "It fits you, wicked Haman, and it is good for you, son of Hammedatha."...Haman made a gallows for himself.<sup>185</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:21. This theme appears in Abba Gorion 3; Lekach Tov 3:11; and Agadat Esther 3:11.

<sup>183</sup> This text is provided in Chapter One.

<sup>184</sup> Esther 5:14.

<sup>185</sup> Targum Sheni 5:14. This theme is also found in Esther Rabbah 9:2, 10:2; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 5; Abba Gorion 5; Lekach Tov 5:14; Agadat Esther 6:1; and Otsar

Although Haman remains oblivious to his fate, even the trees realize that Haman - not Mordechai - is destined to be hanged. Believing himself to be selecting wood for Mordechai's gallows, Haman is actually following God's plan and building the instrument for his and his sons' deaths:

Of what kind of tree was the gallows made? Our sages said: When He came to make it ready, God called all the trees of creation and said: "Which will offer itself for this man [Haman] to be hanged on?" The fig tree said: "I will offer myself, for from me Israel brings first-fruits, and what is more, Israel is also compared to a first-ripe fruit, as Scripture says: 'I saw your fathers as the first-ripe fruit in the fig tree at her first season'" (Hosea 9:10). The vine said: "I offer myself, since Israel is compared to me, as Scripture says: 'You brought a vine out of Egypt'" (Psalms 80:9). The pomegranate said: "I offer myself, since Israel are compared to me, as Scripture says: 'Your cheek is like a piece of pomegranate between your locks'" (Song of Songs 4:3)...The acacia trees and fir trees said: "We offer ourselves, because from us the Tabernacle was made and the Temple was built." The cedar and the palm tree said: "We offer ourselves, because we are likened to the righteous, as Scripture says: 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon'" (Psalms 92:13)...Thereupon the thorn said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Sovereign of the universe, I who have no claim to make offer myself, that this unclean one may be hanged on me, because my name is thorn and he is a pricking thorn, and it is fitting that a thorn should be hanged on a thorn." So they found one of these and they made the gallows.<sup>186</sup>

---

Midrashim Esther.

<sup>186</sup> Esther Rabbah 9:2. Further commentary on the choosing of the trees and the construction of the gallows appear in Bavli Megillah 16a; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 5, 7; Lekach Tov 5:14, 7:20; Agadat Esther 5:14, 6:1, 7:9; Targum Sheni 6:1, 7:9; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:2/1; Pesikta Rabbati 12:11; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. According to rabbinic literature,



According to this view of our sages, each and every aspect of Haman's rise and fall has been carefully considered and manipulated by God. Haman's actions, each decreed by God, are central to the plot; however, Israel's actions - even the righteous deeds of Esther and Mordechai - merit virtually no attention. God's plan stands steadfast and complete; neither it nor God will be swayed by human action. Rather, everything has already been ordained.

This understanding reveals one rabbinic attitude about the nature of God and humanity: that human beings cannot possibly influence God, that not only our lives but the entirety of human history operate solely according to divine plan. Yet this declaration of God's uniqueness and power is generally tempered by the idea that human action does matter, that we live according to at least some measure of free will and face the repercussions of our deeds. As they grappled with their own sufferings and attempted to make sense of their own lives, our sages asserted both views: They trusted that God controlled the world according to a

---

the wood for the gallows was taken from Haman's home (Panim Acherim A; Abba Gorion 5, 7; Lekach Tov 5:14; Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Some sources state that Haman actually destroyed his home in order to extract from it the beam of wood upon which Mordechai would hang); Noah's Ark (acquired by his son, who was a governor in the province where the Ark has landed, according to Abba Gorion 5; Lekach Tov 5:14; and Agadat Esther 7:9); or the Holy of Holies (Agadat Esther 7:9; Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer chapter 50). According to Panim Acherim B 6; Agadat Esther 5:14, 6:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther, the gallows had actually been prepared for Haman since the six days of creation.

divine plan, and they also believed that their own actions, freely chosen and freely performed, carried consequences for themselves and for all of Israel.

More expressive of this latter view is the second category of explanations for Haman's fall. Often recounted alongside the interpretation of Haman as divine punishment, these teachings stress that the repentance, prayer and righteous acts of Israel aroused God's mercy and persuaded Him to bring Haman low. Although this view also asserts that God is directly responsible for Haman's defeat, here Israel's deeds play an essential role in her enemy's downfall.

Most passages suggest that while not all of Persia's Jews were worthy of redemption, a few outstanding representatives merited deliverance for the entire community. The ability of a few to atone for the many is a familiar theme in rabbinic literature; in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, Solomon Schechter describes at length how the merit of a "pious contemporary not only turns the scales to the side of zechut [merit] but even maintains the world..."<sup>187</sup> Seeing the universe as constantly balanced between good and evil, our sages taught that "the fate of the world may be determined by a single action added to the scale which outbalances the other, and so may the fate of

---

<sup>187</sup> Schechter, page 190. This theme is discussed at length in pages 189ff.

the whole world depend on it."<sup>188</sup> Whether in biblical Shushan or in their own lives, our rabbis believed that even a single righteous act, or a single righteous person, could tip the scales toward goodness and merit redemption for the community of Israel.

Our sages find no shortage of righteous deeds or righteous people to account for the deliverance of Persia's Jews. Among the most often praised are Esther and Mordechai, whose prayers and virtue are said to redeem their entire generation:

"There was a man, a Jew, in Shushan the capital" (Esther 2:5). The word "man" here tells us that Mordechai in his generation was equal to Moses in his; for of Moses it is written: "Now the man Moses was very humble" (Numbers 12:3). Just as Moses stood in the breach - as it is written: "Therefore [God] said that He would destroy [Israel], had not Moses His chosen one stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath lest He should destroy them" (Psalms 106:23) - so did Mordechai, as it is written: "Seeking the good of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed" (Esther 10:3). Just as Moses taught Israel Torah - as it is written: "Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments" (Deuteronomy 4:5) - so did Mordechai, as it is written: "And he sent letters to all the Jews...in words of peace and truth" (Esther 9:30, equating truth, *emet*, with Torah)...Some say he was equal to Abraham in his generation. Just as Abraham allowed himself to be cast into the fiery furnace and converted his fellows and made them acknowledge the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He - as Scripture says: "And the souls which they had acquired [converted] in Haran" (Genesis 12:5) - so in the days of Mordechai people acknowledged the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He - as Scripture says: "And many people of the land became Jews" (Esther 8:17)

---

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, page 189.

- and he proclaimed the unity of God's name and sanctified it.<sup>189</sup>

Hadassah was her name [because she was] like a myrtle whose fragrance is pleasant throughout the world; so, too, Esther did good deeds throughout the world...[S]he was called Hadassah, a name for righteous ones...[S]he stayed the same Esther in her youth and old age, and never ceased [from doing] good deeds...This Esther was modest in youth; and when she ascended to royalty, she ascended in modesty.<sup>190</sup>

Not content to save Israel merely by their own merits, Esther and Mordechai strive to bring their contemporaries back to God in prayer and repentance. Indeed, our sages relate, Esther invites Haman to her royal banquet<sup>191</sup> in order to move her people to more fervent prayers:

Esther thought: The eyes of all the House of Israel are directed toward me that I petition King [Ahasuerus] that he should execute Haman. I will therefore invite him to the meal in order that the heart of the Israelites will be changed [from depending on me for assistance], and they would direct themselves toward their Father in Heaven and pray for mercy from before Him.<sup>192</sup>

---

<sup>189</sup> Esther Rabbah 6:2.

<sup>190</sup> Targum Sheni 2:7, 20. Rabbinic literature extols other merits of Mordechai and Esther. Esther Rabbah 8:6; Bavli Pesachim 117a; Panim Acherim B 2; Lekach Tov 2:5; Targum Rishon 2:5, 4:1, 5:1; and Targum Sheni 5:1 recount the remarkable prayers of Esther and Mordechai and commend them for leading Israel in prayer. Bavli Megillah 14b; Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 2:5; Agadat Esther 2:7; Tanchuma Behar 4; Tanchuma Buber Behar 9; Midrash Psalms 22:3; and Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50 relate how Esther and Mordechai's other virtues - from prophecy to enlightenment - led to Israel's deliverance from Haman.

<sup>191</sup> Esther 5:4ff.

<sup>192</sup> Targum Sheni 5:8. Esther's efforts to cause Israel to return to God are discussed in Bavli Megillah 15b; Lekach Tov 5:4; Agadat Esther 5:4; Targum Rishon 4:16; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

Another dramatic passage recounts how Mordechai, notified that Israel has been inscribed for destruction, organizes mass prayer and repentance among the Jews of Shushan:

Now when the righteous Mordechai saw the decree that was issued and the letter that was sealed, he destroyed the garments from his front and his back, covered himself with a sackcloth, and rolled himself in ashes. He then raised his voice and said: "Woe! How great is the decree that the king and Haman issued against us. He did not issue the decree upon half [of us] and spare half, nor upon a fourth [of us], but rather upon our entire body did he issue the decree to uproot and to destroy us from our roots." Now when the people of the House of Israel saw the righteous Mordechai, who was considered great and important to all of them, they assembled and came to him until they became an extremely large delegation, great in number...Mordechai rose to his feet in the midst of the assembly...and said: "People of the House of Israel, beloved and respected ones, let us proceed to look at the people of Nineveh, when the prophet Jonah son of Ammitai was sent to it, to overturn the city of Nineveh. So when the word reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his precious throne and removed the crown from himself, covered himself in sackcloth, rolled himself in ashes, and issued a proclamation in Nineveh which said: 'It is the decree of the king and his princes as follows: No man or beast, herd or flock, should go out to pasture or drink any water. They should repent from their evil ways and from the violence that in their hands.' Then He retracted through His *memra* the evil which He planned to do unto them and did not do [it]. Let us also do as they [did], and let us decree fast days and proclaim fasts."...[M]ourning intensified for the Jews - fasting, weeping, wailing, sackcloth and ashes.<sup>193</sup>

What did Mordechai do? He collected the schoolchildren and kept them without bread and water and put sackcloth on them and made them sit

---

<sup>193</sup> Targum Sheni 4:1, 3.



among the ashes, and they went on crying and weeping and studying the Torah.<sup>194</sup>

Esther, too, commands Israel to join her in mourning and repentance:

Esther said in reply to Mordechai: "'Proceed and assemble the Jews who are in the fortress of Shushan and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days and three nights. Also I and my maidens will fast like you' (Esther 4:15-16). ..Let the bridegroom emerge from his bedroom dressed in sackcloth, and the bride from the nuptial chamber, head strewn with ashes. Let men, beasts, cattle and sheep not taste anything at all; and separate the babies from the breasts of their mothers." At that point in time they inspected the community and discovered twelve thousand young priests, so they made them hold horns in their right hand and the Torah in their left hand. Thus they wept and addressed the Supreme One, the God of Israel: "Here is the Torah which You have given to us; here Your beloved people is about to cease from the world. Who will rise and read from it and mention Your name? The sun and the moon will eclipse their light and not illuminate, for they were only created for the sake of Your people." Whereupon they fell on their faces, saying: "Answer us, O our Father, answer us! Answer us, O our King, answer us!" Then they blew the horns that [they had] with them, in answer to which the people responded, until the heavenly hosts wept and the ancestors moved in their graves.<sup>195</sup>

Yet Esther and Mordechai are not the only Jews to arouse God's compassion. In a moving interpretation, our sages credit pious and suffering Jewish children with meriting Israel's deliverance from Haman:

---

<sup>194</sup> Esther Rabbah 8:6. A parallel appears in Lekach Tov 4:1. Mordechai's efforts are also detailed in Panim Acherim B 4, 6; Abba Gorion 4; and Agadat Esther 4:1, 17.

<sup>195</sup> Targum Sheni 4:15-16.

Having made the gallows, [Haman] went to Mordechai, whom he found in the house of study with the schoolchildren sitting before him with sackcloth on their loins, studying the Torah and crying and weeping. He counted them and found there twenty-two thousand children. He put chains of iron on them and set guards over them, saying: "Tomorrow I will kill these children first, and then I will hang Mordechai." Their mothers brought them bread and water and said to them: "Children, eat and drink before you die tomorrow, and do not die of starvation." Straightaway they put their hands on their books and swore by the life of Mordechai their teacher, saying: "We will neither eat nor drink, but will die while still fasting." They all wept piteously until the sound of their crying ascended to heaven; and the Holy One, blessed be He, heard the sound of their weeping at about the second hour of the night. At that moment the compassion of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He arose from the Throne of Judgment and sat on the Throne of Mercy, and said: "What is this loud noise I hear as the bleating of kids and lambs?" Moses our teacher thereupon stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: "Sovereign of the Universe, they are neither kids nor lambs, but the little ones of Your people who have been keeping a fast now for three days and for three nights, and tomorrow the enemy means to slaughter them like kids and lambs." At that moment the Holy One, blessed be He, took the letters containing their doom which were signed with a seal of clay and tore them.<sup>196</sup>

Whether by the pathetic cries of chained and starving youngsters, or by the impassioned piety of the righteous, God will at last awaken - as it were - to the plight of his chosen. Indeed, reading Esther 6:1's reference to "*shenat hamelech*," "the king's sleep," as an allusion to the King of Kings' apparent disinterest in Israel's sufferings, our sages teach that God was soon to make manifest His might:

---

<sup>196</sup> Esther Rabbah 9:4. Haman's plot and the divine mercy it inspires are also related in Abba Gorion 5; Lekach Tov 3:11, 5:14; Agadat Esther 4:1, 17; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

"On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1). The heavens, the throne of the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, were disturbed when He saw Israel in such distress. Is God then subject to sleep? Is it not said: "Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps?" (Psalms 121:4) It can happen, however, when Israel are in distress and the other nations are at ease [that God appears to sleep]; therefore Scripture says: "Awake! Why do You sleep, O Lord?" (Psalms 44:24)<sup>197</sup>

Now resolved to save His people from Haman, God will tolerate no inaction on the part of those humans able to assist in Israel's deliverance. Waking Ahasuerus, God ensures that the king will learn that very night of Mordechai's heroism; thus God deliberately sets into motion the chain of events that will ultimately end with Mordechai's glorification and Haman's defeat. The humorous tone of this passage - who can imagine a monarch thrown out of bed nearly four hundred times in a single night? - in reality only underscores God's determination to help Israel, no matter how difficult or even ridiculous the means:

"On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1). At that same hour [the angel] Gabriel descended to Ahasuerus and shook the sleep from his eyes, and threw him from his bed three hundred and sixty-six times.<sup>198</sup>

---

<sup>197</sup> Esther Rabbah 10:1. This theme also appears in Bayli Megillah 15b; Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 5; Agadat Esther 6:1; Targum Rishon 6:1; Targum Sheni 6:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.  
<sup>198</sup> Abba Gorion 6. Parallels appear in Panim Acherim A; Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 6:1 (which expressly quotes Abba Gorion 6); Agadat Esther 6:1; Targum Rishon 6:1; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

Another aspect of this view points not to the outstanding piety of the few, but the continued piety of the many. Ironically, it is Haman who gives eloquent voice to this teaching, observing the power of those who uphold the *mitzvot*. Frequently recurring in the rabbinic literature on the Book of Esther, this passage relates the exchange that ensues between Haman and the disciples of Mordechai when a chagrined Haman arrives to array their teacher and parade him through the streets of Shushan:

"Then Haman took the apparel and the horse" (Esther 6:11). Haman went to find Mordechai, who when told that Haman was coming was greatly frightened. He was sitting with his disciples before him, and he said to them: "Run away from here so that you do not come to harm through me, for the wicked Haman is coming to kill me." They said to him: "If you are killed, we will die with you." He then said to them: "If so, let us stand up and pray, so that we may die praying." They finished their prayer and sat down and discussed the laws of the precept of the *omer*, that day being the sixteenth of Nisan, on which the *omer* used to be brought when the Temple was standing. Haman came up to them and said: "What are you discussing?" They replied: "The precept of the *omer*, as Scripture says: 'And if you offer a meal-offering of your first-fruits to the Lord'" (Leviticus 2:14). In Babylon they say that they showed him the laws of the handful (Leviticus 2:2) and in particular how they took a handful from the *omer*. He said to them: "What was this *omer*? Was it of gold or silver?" They replied: "It was not of gold nor of silver nor of wheat, but of barley." He said to them: "How much was it worth? Ten *kantars*?" They replied: "Ten *manehs* was ample." He thereupon said to them: "Rise, for your ten *manehs* have conquered my ten thousand talents of silver."<sup>199</sup>

---

<sup>199</sup> Esther Rabbah 10:4. Parallels appear in Bavli Megillah 16a (where the *minchah* offering of flour, rather than the

Since the destruction of the Temple, our sages taught, one who studies the sacrifices is accounted as one who actually brought an offering. This passage demonstrates that Mordechai's disciples, through their study, share in the merit of the *omer* sacrifice. Simply by studying the day's Torah precept, Mordechai's disciples have come to wield authority over the mighty Haman. Through their piety and devotion, these students and their teacher have earned divine favor; God has responded to their devoutness by protecting them from and even exalting them over their enemy. Thus Israel's simple *omer* offering - as learned and recited by students of Torah - does come to outweigh Haman's immense offering of silver. Indeed, how can the material wealth and the earthly power of Israel's enemy possibly stand before the simple obedience and humble service Israel displays before God?

Such a lesson resonated with our sages. Unable to match hated Rome's vast riches and far-reaching rule, our rabbis emphasized the importance of spiritual rather than physical power. They held that by observing the *mitzvot* and maintaining faith in God, no matter how difficult the circumstances, Israel would ultimately win out over her enemies. Her piety and fidelity would merit God's favor and

---

*omer*, is being discussed); Abba Gorion 6; Lekach Tov 6:10; Agadat Esther 6:11; Leviticus Rabbah 28:6; Pesikta deRav Kahana 8:4; Pesikta Rabbati 18:6; Otsar Midrashim Esther (where the *kemitzah*, taking a handful of the meal-offering, is discussed); and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.



cause Him to strengthen her hand against her oppressors. Just as the Jews of Shushan brought Haman low by continuing to study Torah, so would the Jews of rabbinic times one day find their own religious devotion leading to Rome's downfall. Certainly such a charge was difficult to accept; yet our sages understood this duty to be absolutely essential. Perhaps our rabbis place this observation in the mouth of Haman to stress its importance; after all, if even the wicked Haman apprehended the power of the *mitzvot*, how much more so should Israel!

Still another rabbinic school of thought, however, blames Haman's fall on no one but Haman himself. While our sages indeed held that God was involved in every occurrence in human history, He plays at best an indirect role in these teachings. Neither, according to these passages, were Israel's actions expressly required to defeat Haman. Rather, through his own misguided actions, Haman brought ruin squarely upon his own head.

Betraying their own ambivalence about women, our sages attribute Haman's defeat to the fact that he actually heeded his wife's opinions:

Rabbi Levi said: Two men great in wealth were in the world, one in Israel and one among the nations: Korach in Israel and Haman among the nations of the world. And the two of them listened to their wives and fell... From where do we know that Haman listened to the advice of his wife and fell? As Scripture says: "Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him: 'Let a gallows be made fifty cubits high, and tomorrow speak to the king that Mordechai may be hanged on it. Then go

cheerfully with the king to the banquet.' And this thing pleased Haman, and he caused the gallows to be made" (Esther 5:14).<sup>200</sup>

While Zeresh is obviously not a sympathetic character, our sages do not follow up this teaching by suggesting that a husband accede to a pious wife's notions. Indeed, the intent of this passage appears to be less about exploring Haman's fall than about warning men to beware their wives' counsel! Although this opinion does not appear often in the rabbinic literature on Esther, it does provide a different view on Haman's ruin as well as an unfortunate glimpse into the mindset of some of our sages.

According to another interpretation, Haman caused his own downfall by relying too heavily upon his wealth. Most versions of this teaching compare Haman to Korach, whom the rabbis similarly denounce as overly impressed with his fortune and who also meets a devastating end.<sup>201</sup> This interpretation makes clear not only our sages' distaste for Haman and Korach, but also for those whose quest for material riches stands unmatched by a thirst for spiritual wealth:

"And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches" (Esther 5:11). This is what Scripture says: "He who trusts in his riches shall fall, but the righteous shall flourish like foliage" (Proverbs 11:28). "He who trusts in his riches

---

<sup>200</sup> Midrash Proverbs 11. Parallels appear in Midrash Proverbs 10, 14; and Agadat Esther 5:11. Agadat Esther 5:14 scorns Zeresh as "one whose advice did not assist."

<sup>201</sup> Numbers 16 chronicles Korach's rebellion and terrible death.

shall fall" - this is the wicked Haman; "but the righteous shall flourish like foliage" - these are Mordechai and Esther..."And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches" (Esther 5:11). From this the sages said: There is wealth that does wickedness to its master, and there is wealth that does good to its master...Wealth that does wickedness to its master: This is Haman, as Scripture says: "And Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches" (Esther 5:11). What is written afterwards? "So they hanged Haman" (Esther 7:10).<sup>202</sup>

Perhaps the most fascinating teaching in this category, however, charges that Haman destroyed himself by acting against God's plan. Interestingly, this interpretation does not relate God's direct involvement in Haman's downfall; God is present in these passages simply as the One Who has ordered the world according to His will. When Haman violates this divine plan, God does not seem to react at all, let alone expressly punish Haman. Rather, simply by opposing God's will, Haman brings the apparently quite natural consequence of ruin upon himself:

"Then the king's scribes were called...and it was written according to all that Haman had commanded" (Esther 3:12). It is also written in Scripture: "And Pharaoh commanded" (Exodus 1:22). Pharaoh commanded what the Holy One, blessed be He, did not command. Pharaoh commanded: "Every [Israelite] son that is born you shall cast into the river" (Exodus 1:22); but the Holy One, blessed be He, did not so command. Haman commanded "to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all Jews" (Esther 3:13); but God did not so command. What do you find? That

---

<sup>202</sup> Agadat Esther 5:11. This theme is also discussed in Esther Rabbah 7:5; Lekach Tov 5:9; Agadat Esther 3:1; Genesis Rabbah 50:11; Exodus Rabbah 31:3; Numbers Rabbah 22:7; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:18/1, 5:1; Tanchuma Mishpatim 8, Matot 5; Tanchuma Buber Matot 8; Midrash Proverbs 10; and Midrash Samuel 7.

one who commands what God did not command has his plans turned back upon himself, to his own undoing. And thus happened to Haman: He and his sons were hanged upon the gallows [he had made for Mordechai].<sup>203</sup>

In "command[ing] what God did not," Haman refuses to recognize his place in the world; he should be subordinate to, and ideally obedient to, the God of Israel. It is his task not to destroy but to venerate God's people, to respect rather than slander Israel's God. When Haman resists his place and his task, he violates the order according to which God has organized the world; and there are, as Haman soon learns, harrowing repercussions for such rebellion. According to this interpretation, however, God need not directly intervene to punish Haman, for punishment is the natural consequence of Haman's acts. Indeed, God has ordered the universe in such a way that Haman's sins naturally lead to his downfall.

The conviction that even a powerful enemy of Israel could never accomplish what God had not commanded heartened our sages. That God had commanded the brutal oppression they suffered at the hands of Rome was far less frightening than the possibility that God Himself had been overcome by the enemy. Our sages sought the courage to bear the indignities and humiliations of Roman rule, reminding themselves that even this suffering must be according to God's will and must

---

<sup>203</sup> Panim Acherim A. Parallels appear in Esther Rabbah 7:22 (although here God plays an active role); Bavli Sota 9a-9b; Tosefta Sota 4:19; Tanchuma Toledot 5; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.

assist in God's purpose. Finally, this understanding offered an essential assurance whenever their circumstances appeared to worsen: No matter how mighty Rome might seem, she would never defeat Israel entirely; God simply would not stand for it. Indeed, in aiming to destroy God's people, Rome would one day bring devastation upon her own head; for she, like Haman, "commanded what God did not."

Having determined the reasons for Haman's fall, our rabbis turn to describing the events leading to his final defeat. Almost gleefully, our sages tell how Haman, mistakenly assuming that Ahasuerus intends to honor him, suggests how the king might exalt Mordechai; how Haman must painstakingly attend to his hated enemy; and how Haman is finally exposed and condemned at Esther's banquet. Crafting elaborate accounts of these events, our sages detail Haman's decline from feared persecutor to ridiculous buffoon. The Haman revealed by these passages is slowly stripped of prestige and might; no longer in control of the action, he vainly struggles to maintain first his dignity, then his life. God's hand is clearly present in some of the actions that lead to Haman's defeat; in others, Esther and Mordechai appear to manipulate Haman's ruin. Every teaching, however, credits God with directly or indirectly controlling these events; for the time has indeed arrived for the long-suffering God to collect His due from Haman. Whether expressly authored by God, Israel or Haman's own actions,



Haman's downfall has come; and our sages joyfully relate the humiliating fashion in which Haman's due is collected.

According both to the biblical Book of Esther and rabbinic literature, the tide begins to turn against Haman at the beginning of Chapter Six. Expounding on Ahasuerus' inability to sleep,<sup>204</sup> our sages tell that he was awakened by a troubling dream sent by God; Ahasuerus had envisioned Haman standing over him with a sword:

"On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1)...King Ahasuerus' sleep was also disturbed, because he saw in a dream Haman seizing a sword to kill him, and he awoke in terror from his sleep.<sup>205</sup>

Terrified by this dream, Ahasuerus considers drastic action against Haman and any others who might be plotting the king's ruin:

"On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1). And thus our sages of blessed memory say in the Talmud, and the rabbis say: The upper beings were disturbed, and the lower beings were disturbed. The angels disturbed Ahasuerus [with the dream about Haman's plan to kill him]. Immediately Ahasuerus decreed that the bakers, the chefs and the cupbearers be killed. He said to them: "You have given me a deadly poison to destroy me from the world!" They said to him: "Our

---

<sup>204</sup> Esther 6:1.

<sup>205</sup> Esther Rabbah 10:1. Ahasuerus' disturbing dream is also recounted in Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 6:1, 5; Agadat Esther 6:1; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:2/1; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. In the latter two sources, the Haman in Ahasuerus' dream wears the royal crown. Targum Sheni 6:1 teaches that while Ahasuerus was asleep, the angel Michael whispered to the king that Haman was preparing to murder him.

lord the king, what Esther and Haman ate, you ate and drank...Now the princes will go to see if Esther and Haman are sick or dead. If not, why should we be slain?" They went and found Esther and Haman untroubled. Immediately the king commanded that the book of records be brought before him.<sup>206</sup>

Seeking reassurance, Ahasuerus requests to hear about those who have sought his welfare rather than his murder. According to rabbinic literature, however, the scribe whom he orders to read from the book of records is none other than Haman's son. Rather than relate how Mordechai foiled Bigtan and Teresh's scheme to kill Ahasuerus, Haman's son attempts to skip over this particular incident. If Mordechai's heroism is not read, however, the exaltation of Mordechai over Haman and the beginning of Haman's end will not come to pass. God, therefore, thwarts the scribe's manipulation of the records and causes the account of Mordechai's deed miraculously to read itself:

The sleep of the king became unrestful, and he rose in the morning troubled in appearance. So he ordered Shimshai to bring the book of the chronicles before him. When Shimshai, the scribe, perceived that which Mordechai related concerning Bigtan and Teresh, he turned over the pages of the book and did not wish to read; but on account of the desire from before the Lord of the Universe, the pages unfolded before the king.<sup>207</sup>

---

<sup>206</sup> Lekach Tov 6:1. Parallels appear in Abba Gorion 6 and Agadat Esther 6:1.

<sup>207</sup> Targum Rishon 6:1. Parallels appear in Bavli Megillah 15b, 16a; Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 6; Lekach Tov 6:2; Agadat Esther 6:1, 2; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Panim Acherim B 6 and Yalkut Shimoni Esther record the teaching of some sages that as the scribe attempted to "erase" the account of Mordechai's heroism, Elijah "rewrote" it.

Ostensibly this teaching explains why Esther 6:1 does not tell who read the book of records before Ahasuerus; the text states only "*vayihyu nikraim lifnei hamelech*," "[the chronicles] were read before the king." This cryptic phrase allows our rabbis to explore the notion that the chronicles were miraculously read not only *lifnei hamelech* - before Ahasuerus - but also *lifnei haMelech* - according to the command of the King of Kings. While the biblical text does not mention God, our sages again find Him hidden beneath the narrative's surface meaning.

Barely mollified, Ahasuerus is wrought up anew when he sees Haman in the courtyard. Might the king's dream be true; might Haman indeed be stalking him? When Ahasuerus asks Haman how to honor a special citizen in the kingdom, Haman's response only renews the king's anxiety. Our sages note that Haman proposes the honoree be permitted to wear the royal crown; however, when Mordechai is actually exalted, there is no mention of his donning the crown. Explaining this omission, our sages state that by suggesting another wear the royal crown, Haman fueled Ahasuerus' fear that Haman intended to wrest the kingdom away:

"And Haman answered the king: 'For the man whom the king delights to honor, let the royal apparel be brought which the king has worn, and the horse that the king rides upon and on the head of which a royal crown is placed'" (Esther 6:7-8). Haman said to Ahasuerus: "My lord the king, have brought the garments which the king wore on the day that he was crowned, and the horse upon which the king rode on the day that he was crowned, and the crown that was placed upon the head of the king on the

day that he was crowned." When Haman mentioned the crown, the king's face was changed [with anger]. The king said [to himself]: "This is what I saw in my dream; he does wish to slay me!" When Haman saw that mentioning the crown had upset the king, he took back his words and did not mention the crown again. Rather, [he continued by saying only]: "And let this apparel and horse be delivered" (Esther 6:9).<sup>208</sup>

Having lost the trust of his patron, Haman will no longer enjoy the king's unquestioning regard. Indeed, Haman finds himself singled out for a particularly humiliating errand. Despite his fervent pleas for Ahasuerus to reconsider, Haman is charged with honoring the man he most despises:

So the king said to Haman: "Haman! Haman! Hurry and go into the king's treasury and take one of the fine purple coverings; then take from there the garment of fine Frankish silk adorned with precious stones and pearls, from whose four corners hang golden bells and pomegranates on each side; and take from there the great crown of Macedonia, which they brought me from the cities on the first day that I ascended to the kingdom; then take from there my sword and good coat of mail, which they brought from the country of Cush, as well as the two veils, for these garments are royal garments [embroidered] with pearls which they brought from the country of Africa. Then go out to the king's stable and take from there the horse standing at the entrance of the stable - Shefargaz, upon whom I rode the first day that I ascended to the kingdom. Now with all these means of honor and distinction concerning which I spoke to you, go and do to Mordechai." [Then] Haman replied to the king: "There are many Jews in the fortress of Shushan whose name is Mordechai; to which one should I go?" Said [Ahasuerus] to him: "To the Jew Mordechai who sits at my gate." When

---

<sup>208</sup> Agadat Esther 6:7. Parallels appear in Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 6; Lekach Tov 6:8; Targum Sheni 6:9; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:2/1; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther.



Haman heard this statement he felt very bad and his appearance changed, his eyesight dimmed, his mouth became distorted, his thoughts were confused, the joints of his loins were loosened, and his knees knocked against each other. Haman continued and said to the king: "My lord king, there are many Mordechais in the world, and I do not know of which Mordechai you spoke." The king continued and said to Haman: "Did I not tell you only the Mordechai who sits at my gate?" Haman continued and said to the king: "The gates of the king are many, and I do not know of which gate you have spoken to me." The king continued and said: "Did I not tell you only the gate from which one passes from the harem to the palace?" Haman continued and said to the king: "That man is my enemy and the enemy of my ancestors. May ten thousand talents of silver rather be given to him, but this honor must not be accorded to him." Whereupon the king continued and said to Haman: "May ten thousand talents of silver be given to him, and the king is making him ruler over all of your house, and this honor shall not be withheld from him." Haman continued and said to the king: "Let my ten sons run in front of him, but let not this honor be accorded to him." The king continued and said to Haman: "You, your sons and your wife should become slaves of Mordechai, and this honor should not be withheld from him." Haman continued and said to the king: "He is a [mere] common man; appoint him over a single province or a single district, but do not accord honor to him." The king continued and said to Haman: "I am making him ruler over provinces and districts, and all the rulers of land and sea will obey him, and this honor should not be withheld from him." Haman continued and said to the king: "Let his fame and your fame spread among every nation and every province, but this honor should not be accorded to him." The king continued and said to Haman: "The man who spoke good of the king and saved the king's head from death, may my fame and his fame spread throughout the whole world, and let not this honor be withheld from him." Haman continued and said to the king: "Ordinances and letters have [already] been dispatched throughout every province of the king to destroy the people of Mordechai, so how can this honor be accorded to him?" The king answered, saying to Haman: "The letters and the ordinances which I dispatched, I invalidate them, and this honor should not be withheld." The king [then] angrily rebuked him a second time and said to him: "Haman! Haman! Hurry!



Do not neglect a thing of all that I  
commanded."<sup>209</sup>

The scenario of Haman's attending to Mordechai inspires perhaps the most elaborate and humorous rabbinic teachings on the Book of Esther. There is virtually no end to our sages' imaginations as they contemplate this terrible episode in Haman's life. Different stories center on different aspects of the event: Some passages focus on Mordechai's delight in adding to his enemy's misery; some emphasize Esther's role in seeing Haman humiliated as much as possible; and others stress how Israel renewed her faith in God upon witnessing this change of fortunes. Indeed, one recurring passage even credits the Jews of Shushan - and, incredibly, Haman - with reciting Psalm 30 as this episode unfolds:

[Haman followed the king's instructions in preparing Mordechai's raiment and horse, then] proceeded toward the righteous Mordechai. Haman addressed him and said: "Arise, you righteous Mordechai, son of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...arise

---

<sup>209</sup> Targum Sheni 6:10. Haman's vain attempts to shirk this task are related in Bavli Megillah 16a; Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 6; Lekach Tov 6:10; Agadat Esther 6:10; Targum Rishon 6:10; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Otsar Midrashim Esther. Abba Gorion 6 and Agadat Esther 6:10 expressly interpret Ahasuerus' admonition that Haman "leave nothing out of which you have spoken" (Esther 6:10) as implying that Haman might not honor Mordechai fully; therefore, Ahasuerus appointed servants to watch Haman and make certain that he did as commanded. Segal, volume 3, page 63, also points out this implied meaning of "leave nothing out." Commenting on Ahasuerus' assigning to Haman this embarrassing task, Hoschander, page 214, rightly states that this humiliation foretells Haman's downfall; Ahasuerus must already suspect Haman's disloyalty in order to treat him in such a horrendous fashion!

from your sackcloth and your ashes and put on the royal garment and ride on the royal horse!"...Whereupon Mordechai responded and said to Haman: "One who was in a state of fasting for three days and for three [nights], how can he ride on the royal horse?" When Haman heard this statement, he entered the treasury of the king and brought out all kinds of spices from there as well as fine ointments. Then he anointed him and bathed him [and] dressed him in the royal garment [and] thoroughly adorned him with all the royal adornments, then fed him from the meal that Queen Esther had sent to him.<sup>210</sup>

[When Haman instructed Mordechai to don the royal garments] Mordechai began to say to him: "It is not proper conduct [*derech eretz*] to wear royal garments without washing." Haman went and sought a bather, but he did not find one, for Esther the queen had forbidden all the bath-attendants and barbers [to work that day], so that Haman would have to do this work himself.<sup>211</sup>

[Haman] went into his house and brought scissors and made Mordechai sit down and trimmed his hair. As he was doing so he began to groan. "Why are you groaning?" said Mordechai. He replied: "Alas for the father of this man! He who was head of the palace and master of the world has become a bath-attendant and barber." Mordechai said to him: "That is why I asked you. Do I not know that your father was a bath-attendant and barber in Kfar Karyanus, and you have found his barber's tools?"<sup>212</sup> Haman then said to Mordechai: "Arise and ride on this horse." Mordechai replied: "I have not the strength, being an old man." Haman said to him: "Am I not also an old man?" Mordechai replied: "Have you not brought this on yourself?" Haman then said to him: "Get up; I will bend my back and you can step on it and mount and ride." This was to fulfill what is written: "And you shall tread upon their high places" (Deuteronomy 33:29)...As Mordechai was riding, he began to extol God, saying: "I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up, and have not made my foes to rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried to You

<sup>210</sup> Targum Sheni 6:11.

<sup>211</sup> Lekach Tov 6:10.

<sup>212</sup> This comment on the occupation of Haman's father recurs in rabbinic literature, but no further elaboration is offered.

and You healed me. O Lord, You have brought up my soul from Sheol; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit" (Psalms 30:2-4). What did his disciples say? "Sing to the Lord, O His pious ones, and give thanks to His holy name. For His anger endures but a moment; in His favor is life" (Psalms 30:5-6). What did Haman say? "And in my prosperity I said, 'I shall never be moved.' Lord, by Your favor You had made my mountain to stand strong; You hid Your face, and I was afraid" (Psalms 30:7-8). What did Esther say? "I cried to You, O Lord, and to the Lord I made supplication. What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall dust praise You? Shall it declare Your truth?" (Psalms 30:9-10) What did the congregation of Israel say? "Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me; Lord, be my Helper. You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosened my sackcloth and girded me with gladness" (Psalms 30:11-12). And what did the Holy Spirit say? "To the end that My glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You for ever" (Psalms 30:12-13).<sup>213</sup>

Clearly the humiliation of Israel's enemy inspired our sages' most vivid storytelling. At last the feared foe of Israel had been revealed as a pitiable fool, helpless in the approaching face of Israel's Redeemer. In reducing Haman to a pathetic figure, our rabbis took heart that underneath their proud posturing, all of Israel's enemies - including Rome - were similarly wretched characters; one day they too

---

<sup>213</sup> Esther Rabbah 10:4-5. Further accounts of Haman's tending to Mordechai appear in Bavli Megillah 16a; Panim Acherim B 6; Abba Gorion 6; Agadat Esther 6:11; Leviticus Rabbah 28:6; Pesikta deRav Kahana 8:4; Pesikta Rabbati 18:6; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Bavli Megillah 16a and Agadat Esther 6:11 humorously recount that as Mordechai mounted extra humiliations upon Haman, Haman reminded him not to transgress Proverbs 24:17-18 by rejoicing in an enemy's fall!

would know the humiliation of Haman. In the meantime, our sages consoled themselves, how delightful to imagine the misery that had fallen upon - and would again fall upon - the oppressors of Israel! And - perhaps - how delightful to complement the annual reading of Megillat Esther with these outrageous teachings!<sup>214</sup>

Noting that, according to the Bible, Haman returns home "in mourning, with his head covered,"<sup>215</sup> our sages relate that honoring Mordechai was not the only tragedy Haman suffered that day:

As [Mordechai and Haman] were walking opposite the house of the wicked Haman, Shlakhtevah, his daughter, looked down from the roof, and it appeared that the man walking on the road was Mordechai, while the man riding on the horse was her father. So she took a pot of excrement and flung it upon his head. Haman raised his head and said to her: "You, too, my daughter, you embarrass me." Whereupon, immediately, she fell from the roof and died from the balcony chamber.<sup>216</sup>

Having lost not only his royal protector and his pride but also his beloved daughter, Haman continues his rapid decline. Blinded by mounting humiliation and grief, Haman is

---

<sup>214</sup> Segal, volume 3, page 250, notes that "[t]his type of portrayal [of Haman as an embarrassed buffoon], which surely must have held much appeal and emotional satisfaction...is found most prominently in the midrashic retelling of Esther 6:5-12."

<sup>215</sup> Esther 6:12. Indeed, Segal, volume 3, pages 89-90, explains that the death of Haman's daughter (or any death in the family) was needed in order to account for Haman's returning home in this fashion.

<sup>216</sup> Targum Rishon 6:11. The death of Haman's daughter is also recorded in Esther Rabbah 10:5, 7; Bavli Megillah 16a; Panim Acherim B 6; Lekach Tov 6:11, 12; Agadat Esther 6:11; Targum Rishon 6:12; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.



still beset by confusion as Ahasuerus' attendants escort him to Esther's banquet:

"And while they were yet talking with him, the king's chamberlains came and brought Haman hurriedly [vayavhilu] to the banquet that Esther had prepared" (Esther 6:14). Vayavhilu [from the root *bahal*, which also means "to confuse"] - this is to teach that they brought him in a state of confusion to the feast that Esther had made. <sup>217</sup>

This banquet seals Haman's doom. Indeed, our sages relate, Esther had carefully considered how her invitation to Haman might lead directly to his downfall:

"And Esther answered: '...Let the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for him'" (Esther 6:4). Our rabbis taught: What was Esther's reason for inviting Haman? Rabbi Eleazer said: "She set a trap for him, as Scripture says: 'Let their table become a snare before them'" (Psalms 69:23). Rabbi Joshua said: "She learned to do it from her father's house, as Scripture says: 'If your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty give him water to drink; for you shall heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward you'" (Proverbs 25:21-22). Rabbi Meir said: "So that he should not form a conspiracy and rebel." Rabbi Judah said: "So that they should not discover that she was a Jewess." Rabbi Nehemiah said: "So that Israel should not say, 'We have a sister in the palace,' and so should neglect [to pray for] mercy." Rabbi Jose said: "So that he should always be at hand for her." Rabbi Simeon ben Menassiah said: "[She said,] 'Perhaps the Omnipresent will notice and do a miracle for us.'" Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah said: "[She said,] 'I will encourage him that he may be killed [because Ahasuerus will become jealous of my attentions to Haman], both he and I [if necessary, I will give up my own life as well].'" Rabban Gamliel said: "[She said,] 'Ahasuerus is a changeable king.'" Said Rabbi

---

<sup>217</sup> Agadat Esther 6:14. A parallel appears in Bavli Megillah 16a.



Gamliel: "We still require the Modean, as it has been taught: Rabbi Eliezer of Modin says: 'She made the king jealous of him and she made the princes jealous of him.'" Rabbah said: "[She said,] 'Pride goes before destruction'" (Proverbs 16:18). Abaye and Rava gave the same reason, saying: "[She said,] 'I will make feasts for them, and I will make them...sleep a perpetual sleep, and not awake'" (Jeremiah 51:39). Rabbah ben Abbahu encountered Elijah and said to him: "Which of these reasons prompted Esther to act as she did?" He replied: "[All] the reasons given by all the Tannaim and all the Amoraim."<sup>218</sup>

Yet even the most carefully crafted human schemes might go awry. When Ahasuerus reacts to Esther's revelation that Haman is her people's enemy by retreating to the palace garden, Haman spies his chance for escaping royal condemnation. However, God and the angels make certain that Ahasuerus judges Haman with the appropriate harshness:

"And the king, arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath, went into the palace garden" (Esther 7:7)...Just as the arising was in wrath, so the returning was in wrath. For he went and found ministering angels in the form of men who were uprooting trees from the garden. He said to them: "What are you doing?" They replied: "Haman has ordered us."<sup>219</sup>

<sup>218</sup> Bavli Megillah 15b. Esther's reasoning is also related in Panim Acherim B 5; Lekach Tov 5:4; Agadat Esther 5:4, 5, 8, 6:14; Targum Sheni 5:8; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Hoschander, pages 203-4, comments that by inviting Haman to her feast, Esther gave him the impression that she had no interest in Mordechai's people or their fate; after all, she was dining with their executioner!

<sup>219</sup> Bavli Megillah 16a. Parallels appear in Esther Rabbah 10:9; Lekach Tov 7:7; Targum Rishon 7:7; Targum Sheni 7:7; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; Otsar Midrashim Esther; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther. Segal, volume 3, pages 105-6, notes that without these divinely-sent tree-cutters, Ahasuerus might have assuaged his anger outside and caused Esther's plan to fail. Fishbane, pages 249ff, also comments that Ahasuerus' anger plays the essential role in "seal[ing]"

Already further angered as he returns to the banquet room, Ahasuerus is greeted by a terrible sight: Haman has fallen not only upon Esther's couch, but upon the queen herself:

Ahasuerus returned to the place of the banquet when Haman had risen to make request for his life. What did [the angel] Michael do? He pushed Haman on to Esther, who cried out: "My lord, the king, behold he is violating me in your presence!" Then the king said: "Will he even assault the queen in my own presence in the house?" (Esther 7:8) When Haman heard this, his face fell.<sup>220</sup>

Completely broken, Haman turns in desperation to the Jews he loathes and pleads for mercy. Perhaps aware of the compassion the God of Israel showed his ancestors Esau and Agag,<sup>221</sup> Haman hopes for deliverance. Yet his impassioned cries - indeed, even his belated acknowledgment of Israel's greatness - fall on deaf ears:

[After Ahasuerus had ordered Mordechai to escort Haman to the gallows where Haman would be hanged]

---

Haman's doom."

<sup>220</sup> Esther Rabbah 10:9. Parallels appear in Bavli Megillah 16a; Lekach Tov 7:8; Agadat Esther 7:8; Targum Rishon 7:8; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Otsar Midrashim Esther. Esther Rabbah 10:9; Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50; and Yalkut Shimoni Esther state that upon seeing Ahasuerus' anger, Elijah - in the guise of Harbonah - informed the king that Haman had already prepared a gallows for Mordechai. Hoschander, pages 226-27, points out that with this revelation, Harbonah made it possible for Haman to be executed immediately. Harbonah's accusation constituted a second crime, high treason, for Haman; and according to this period's Persian law, only one charged with a double crime was liable to be put to death immediately. In light of Harbonah's action, Hoschander argues that the attendant must have been a Jewish eunuch.

<sup>221</sup> Please see Chapter Two.

the wicked Haman responded, saying to the righteous Mordechai: "...I tremble from [before] you, O righteous Mordechai, that you do not do to me as I schemed to do to you. Have pity on my honor and do not kill me or destroy me like my ancestor Agag. You are good, Mordechai; do according to your kindness rather than take a life. Do not kill me, as there are no killers among you. Do not call against me the hatred of Agag nor the vengeance of Amalek. Do not take vengeance against me, with enmity in your heart, nor nurture a grudge against me, as my father Esau nurtured a grudge and vengeance. Great wonders have been accomplished for you, as they were accomplished for your ancestors when they crossed the sea. My eyes are too dim to see you, nor am I able to open up my mouth before you, in that I should take counsel concerning you from my friends and from my wife Zeresh. I beg of you, spare my life, O my righteous lord Mordechai; do not summarily blot out my name like that of my ancestor Amalek, and do not hang my gray head upon the gallows. But if you are determined to kill me, remove my head with the king's sword, with which all the nobles of the province are killed." [Then] Haman began to cry out and weep, but Mordechai paid no attention to him.<sup>222</sup>

The combination of Esther's clever planning, God's dramatic assistance and Haman's exposed wickedness has coalesced at last. Carrying out the sentence already decreed by God, Ahasuerus orders Haman hanged upon the gallows constructed for Mordechai.<sup>223</sup> Also condemned to die are Haman's sons, who join their father upon the gallows,<sup>224</sup> and

<sup>222</sup> Targum Sheni 7:9.

<sup>223</sup> Esther 8:9-10.

<sup>224</sup> Esther 9:14. Rabbinic sources differ on exactly how many sons Haman had and how they all perished. Agadat Esther 5:11 records 30 (10 of whom died; 10 of whom were hanged; 10 of whom returned home) or perhaps 90 (of whom 70 returned home). Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 50 and Agadat Esther 9:12 hold that he had 40 sons (10 of whom were royal scribes and 30 of whom served as governors over the king's provinces). Midrash Psalms 22:2 records 100 sons, while Targum Rishon 9 suggests 189. Reading "verov banav," "the multitude of [Haman's] sons" whom Haman extols in Esther

every enemy of Israel to be found in Persia.<sup>225</sup> However, perhaps disturbed even then by the bloodthirsty tone of Esther's penultimate chapter, our sages affirm that all the foes slaughtered by the Jews were truly Amalekites.<sup>226</sup>

Having served his purpose, Haman has been defeated at last. While rabbinic literature acknowledges Esther and Mordechai's role in Haman's fall, it emphasizes God's saving power over even the most courageous acts of human beings. Despite the terror and oppression Haman brought upon Persia's Jews, God did not permit any of Haman's wicked plots to come to pass. Indeed, He gave Israel the faith to say - as we do at every Purim season - "*Dabru davar velo yakum, ki imanu El*," "Make your plans, but they will not come to pass, for God is with us."

The lesson that emerges from our sages' teachings on the Book of Esther is as clear as it is passionate: Trust in God, and God will redeem. Whether through beloved agents

---

5:11, and noting that the numerical value of "*verov*" is 208, *Lekach Tov* 5:11, *Targum Rishon* 5:11, *Otsar Midrashim Esther*, and *Batei Midrashot Esther* state that Haman had 208 children. *Bavli Megillah* 15b records opinions that Haman had 30, 70, 208 or 214 children, but also supports the figure of 208. While the biblical text holds that all of Haman's sons were killed, a cryptic passage in *Bavli Sanhedrin* 96b tells that his descendants taught Torah at *Bnai Brak*. Segal, volume 3, page 40, notes that interpreters who hold that Haman had 208 sons may not have meant that every one of those sons was executed; rather, those who did not commit crimes may have been spared.

<sup>225</sup> *Esther* 9:5ff.

<sup>226</sup> *Targum Rishon* 9:6, 16-18. Loewe, page 100, also offers a rather weak excuse for the carnage by stressing that the Jews were only acting according to "the right of self-defense" Esther had requested.



such as Esther and Mordechai, or by direct intervention in human history, God ultimately protects and upholds His people Israel. Though the Jews of Shushan suffered long nights of persecution and dread, they finally saw their tormentor humiliated and hanged. Our rabbis saw in this episode a paradigm for their own condition: One day they - and if not they, then their descendants - would celebrate the end of their own oppression, and the defeat of despised Rome. According to our sages, all that stood - and all that stands still - between Israel and redemption were faith, piety and righteous acts.

Our sages found in Haman's undoing the courage to affirm this belief, a belief often sorely tested by terrible suffering and almost unbearable circumstances. Yet they prayed that their own redemption would have implications even more vast. Rabbinic literature often associates deliverance from Rome with messianic deliverance, with an end to any oppression, pain and fear. Yet we who live today know that Rome's fall was not marked by such far-reaching salvation, that our world has not yet been granted the Messiah. Once Haman died, new enemies arose to take his place and continue his murderous plots against Israel. Once Rome fell, new nations ascended to take her place and continue her cruel work against God's people.

What, then, of Haman's fall? What is its significance, what its legacy? How fully can we celebrate the end of one Haman, knowing that others were not far behind?



Most importantly, what does God and Israel's triumph over this Haman come to teach us about what our sages asserted will one day be their final, their messianic, victory?

### Chapter Six: A Final Victory?

Haman hangs with his sons from the gallows, and the Jews of Persia rejoice in God's miraculous deliverance. Victory has been snatched from those who would slay Israel; God has once again exalted His children over their enemies.

Even as our sages recalled and elaborated upon this redemption, however, they suffered a new evil under a new oppressor. Even as we celebrate our deliverance in Persia and joyfully read our sages' accounts of Haman's downfall, we still live in the shadow of Auschwitz; we know that not every Haman died upon the gallows in Shushan. We know, as our sages knew, that God and Israel's exalted victory over Haman was not to be the final triumph over cruelty and oppression.<sup>227</sup>

Indeed, our sages taught that Haman's defeat served as a necessary but not sufficient step toward redemption. Chronicling the enemies of Israel and their ever-more devious schemes to destroy God's people, our rabbis saw Haman as only the penultimate foe the Jews would face before the dawn of complete - that is, messianic - victory:

Rabbi Levi said: Accursed are the wicked, who all devise evil against Israel, each one devising

---

<sup>227</sup> Indeed, as we noted in Chapter Two, Agadat Esther 8:16 and Batei Hamidrashot, volume 2, 43:6, state that the word "sason," used in Esther 8:16 to describe the Jews' joy at Haman's fall, lacks a vav because complete joy cannot occur before the Messianic Age.

according to his own idea and saying: "My device is better than yours." Esau said: "Cain was a fool for killing his brother in the lifetime of his father, not knowing that his father would still have children. I will not do so, 'but when the days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will slay my brother Jacob'" (Genesis 27:41). Pharaoh said: "Esau was a fool. Did he not know that his brother would have children in the lifetime of his father? I will not make such a mistake, but while they are tiny and scarce out of their mothers' wombs I will strangle them:" and so Scripture says: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river" (Exodus 1:22). Haman said: "Pharaoh was a fool for saying: 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river' (Exodus 1:22); did he not know that the daughters would marry and have children? I will not make such a mistake but will decree 'to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all Jews both young and old, little children and women'" (Esther 3:13). And so Gog and Magog in the time to come will say: "Our predecessors were fools for laying their plans, they and their kings together against Israel, not knowing that they have a Protector in heaven. I will not do so, but I will first attack their Protector and then I will attack them;" and so Scripture says: "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed" (Psalms 2:2). Says the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "Wretch, do you come to try conclusions with Me? How many hosts are in My service, how many lightnings, how many thunders" - as Scripture says: "The Lord thundered with a great thunder" (I Samuel 7:10) - "how many seraphim and how many angels! But My might shall go forth and fight with you," as Scripture says: "Then shall the Lord go out and fight against those nations, as when He fought in the day of battle" (Zechariah 14:3), and it is also written: "The Lord shall go forth as a mighty man; He shall stir up ardor like a man of war" (Isaiah 42:13). And what is written in the previous context? "And the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name shall be One" (Zechariah 14:9).<sup>228</sup>

---

<sup>228</sup> Esther Rabbah 7:23. Parallels appear in Panim Acherim A; Leviticus Rabbah 27:11; Tanchuma Emor 13; Tanchuma Buber Emor 18; Pesikta deRav Kahana 9:11; Midrash Psalms 2:4; and Otsar Midrashim Esther.

Yet the delay of Israel's final victory does not render each triumph meaningless. For our sages, God and Israel's defeats of Cain, Esau, Pharaoh and Haman stood not only as foreshadowings but also as paradigms of the eventual and ultimate deliverance from Gog and Magog - that is, from all evil. Each defeat also served an essential practical purpose: Recalling how God intervened to vanquish Israel's past foes renewed our rabbis' faith and hope as they faced the enemy Rome, who seemed to embody the wickedness symbolized by Gog and Magog. As powerful and ruthless as this adversary appeared, our sages consoled their people, she too had already been destined for defeat at the hands of God and His beloved Israel.

As rabbinic literature attests, the ascension and downfall of Haman reinforced our sages' faith in Israel's ultimate messianic victory and illuminated the path toward this final deliverance. While these lessons comforted our ancient rabbis and bolstered their own convictions, can the same passages speak across centuries and resonate with Israel today? Can our sages bring comfort and faith to we who have seen the final victory of God and Israel delayed another two thousand years, who have learned not only of the Ten Martyrs but also of infants hurled alive into crematoria?

To these questions we answer a qualified yes. Indeed, our sages' insights possess a timeless wisdom that can enlighten and strengthen today's Jews in our own battles

with enemies and evil. Examined in the light of modernity, our rabbis' teachings about Haman also prove relevant and inspiring meditations on the nature of evil and how to best it. However, our sages' acceptance of Haman as God's agent and their quickness to blame Israel for her own suffering under Haman may rankle with us modern Jews who live less than a generation after Auschwitz.

Our sages' descriptions of Haman's wickedness prove disturbingly applicable to the evil we confront today. As we discussed in Chapter Two, rabbinic literature reveals that Haman's hatred for Israel derived from both familial enmity and personal encounters. After Mordechai's fateful refusal to bow before Haman,<sup>229</sup> the centuries-old antagonism between the sons of Esau and the sons of Jacob flared up anew in Haman; driven by ancestral hatred as well as a now-personal vendetta, Haman came to see the entirety of Israel as punishable for Mordechai's deed.<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>229</sup> Esther 3:2. As we saw in Chapter Two, rabbinic literature offers other reasons for the renewal of this hatred, including Haman's enslavement to Mordechai and Mordechai's refusal to return Haman's greeting.

<sup>230</sup> "But it was disdainful in [Haman's] eyes to strike out against Mordechai alone, for [Ahasuerus' servants] had told him the people of Mordechai. And so Haman sought to destroy all of the Jews who were in the entire kingdom of Ahasuerus, the people of Mordechai" (Esther 3:6). Bavli Megillah 13b and Segal, volume 2, pages 110-11, comment on Haman's holding all of Mordechai's people punishable for Mordechai's refusal to bow.



How often have we seen this phenomenon recur, in both historical and modern episodes. Perhaps the most striking example comes from medieval times, when whole Jewish communities suffered banishment or martyrdom after a small group had been falsely accused of ritual murder or host desecration.<sup>231</sup> Surely even those Christians who believed such a charge were not driven to lusty bloodshed based on that allegation alone. Rather, one single incident caused an ancient enmity for Israel - nurtured across the generations by the Church, by families and by society - to explode against the accused ritual killers or desecrators of the host. Nor were the alleged perpetrators the only Jews punished; rather, every Jew in that community was liable to be expelled or slaughtered.

While the result is not as physically devastating, even the privileged Jews of modern America still suffer from the paradigm of hatred demonstrated by Haman. After the death sentence of Atlantan Leo Frank - convicted of murdering fourteen-year-old Mary Phagan in 1913 - was commuted in June 1915, the Jews of nearby Canton and Marietta were threatened with violence unless they left town. Behind this threat lay not only outrage at perceived injustice for Mary Phagan, but also Georgians' deep-seated hatred and fear of Jews, as well as their conviction that every Jew in Georgia was somehow

---

<sup>231</sup> For comprehensive listings and accounts of these expulsions and massacres, please see Roth, chapters 18 and 20.

punishable for Frank's action. Hatemongers from Charles Coughlin to Louis Farrakhan have also recognized the power of Haman's paradigm of hatred, leveling accusations against Jews that touch on old anti-Jewish prejudices - for example, those associating Jews with money-lust and with hatred for the gentile - and stir up ancient loathing anew. These enemies also hold all Jews responsible for the outrageous deeds - from slave-trading to poisoning black infants with the human immunodeficiency virus - allegedly committed by a few.

While our rabbis' insights into Haman's hatred help explain *how* anti-Jewish deeds have been - and are still - enacted, their explanations of *why* such enemies arise at all may prove less satisfying in our modern era. Throughout rabbinic literature, our sages make abundantly clear that God - not human beings - controls every moment in human history; even when an enemy appears impossibly mighty, he actually flourishes only because of God's will and can be defeated - if God wishes - in an instant. Even in the Esther story, our sages maintain, Haman is nothing more than God's pawn. While this conviction forced our rabbis to accept Haman's persecution of Israel as God's will, we found in Chapter Four that this understanding proved far more palatable than the alternative scenarios - that God had abandoned Israel, for example, or that Haman had overpowered God. We further discussed in Chapter Four that the dominant

view among our sages regarded Haman as an agent for divine punishment.

While this theme proves illuminating and even inspiring in the rabbinic teachings on Haman, it does so primarily because the Esther story has a "happy ending." Before the destruction of Israel can begin, God decrees that Israel has suffered enough and brings her tormentor low. Had Haman actually succeeded in his schemes - had he, for example, slaughtered one-third of Persian Jewry before God ended his rampage - this paradigm of Haman as divine punishment might not read so easily.

Of course, our sages who spoke of Haman as divine punishment were no strangers to suffering; they well knew that God did not always rein in Israel's enemies before they had begun to do their worst. Perhaps, then, it is unfair to dismiss their understanding of Haman as incompatible with our post-Auschwitz age. And yet perhaps our sages would concur with this unwillingness to label every enemy of Israel - from Haman to Hitler - a doer of God's will and an agent of God's punishment. Indeed, as our sages grappled with the horrors of the Temple's destruction and the bloody fall of Jerusalem, they did not merely counsel passive acceptance, patient prayer, and fervent performance of mitzvot. Rather, they also questioned God's justice,

employing metaphors that portrayed a weak or cruel deity, and cried out passionately against Israel's sufferings.<sup>232</sup>

For us, as for our sages, the understanding of Haman as divine punishment may not be applicable to every enemy of Israel. Yet such a universal application is probably not what our sages intended. They were fully aware of the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in living and finding meaning in life as a Jew; they knew that one explanation, one paradigm, could not suffice for every trial Israel faced. The rise and fall of Haman as God's agent for punishment was intended to serve as a paradigm for redemption, not for destruction. We are left - as our sages were left - to grapple with and wrest our own meaning from Jewish teachings when our enemies do succeed in their terrible schemes against Israel.

While they may not account for the origin of evil against Israel, our sages' teachings about Haman do offer important insights into how to cope with and work against that evil. When faced with Haman's threats, Esther and Mordechai fought back; as rabbinic literature explains, they engaged in acts of prayer and piety as well as deeds of strategy and wit. Even though Esther and Mordechai hoped that God would heed their supplications and reward their

---

<sup>232</sup> Perhaps the finest example of these striking *midrashim* is the collection *Lamentations Rabbah*, which expresses our sages' own anger, bewilderment and anguish as a commentary on the Book of Lamentations. Please see the appendix for more information about *Lamentations Rabbah*.

performance of mitzvot, they also recognized the need to plan actively against Haman. We saw in Chapter Five that Esther carefully considered how inviting Haman to her banquet would incite Ahasuerus' jealousy and help turn the king against his prime minister;<sup>233</sup> and that Esther and Mordechai deliberately added to Haman's humiliations as Haman paraded Mordechai through the streets of Shushan, perhaps to demonstrate to Haman's supporters that his downfall was near.

Esther and Mordechai's deeds mirror some of the tactics employed against Israel's enemies today. While Jews for many years were largely unable to fight effectively against anti-Jewish prejudice and actions, most Western Jews today can wage at least moderate campaigns against antisemitism. While the means for fighting Jew-hatred today focus more on public relations and community outreach than palace intrigue and horse-riding, Esther and Mordechai still provide an encouraging example of religious faith combined with strategic activity. Even as we trust God to shield us from modern foes - from David Duke to Louis Farrakhan - still we diligently work against them on a practical level as well.

---

<sup>233</sup> While Esther's reasoning is recounted in Chapter Five, Agadat Esther 5:5 discusses how Esther further manipulated Ahasuerus and Haman once the banquet began, arranging the seats and tending to Haman in order to arouse the king's envy.



Despite our work so far, however, we have certainly not accomplished the final, messianic victory over evil. Why not? Here our sages' teachings on Haman echo most powerfully in our generation:

*"Ki macho, emche et zecher Amalek mitachad hashamayim," "Blot out, [then] I will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (a variant reading of Exodus 17:14). "[You] blot out" in this world; "I will blot out" in the World to Come.<sup>234</sup>*

While God will blot out Amalek in the World to Come - that is, while God will ultimately blot out all trace of evil and bring the Messianic Age - He will do so only after we have blotted out Amalek in this world. It is all too clear that we have not done our part; for blotting out Amalek is about much more than fighting antisemitism. Blotting out Amalek is about blotting out all that Amalek represents: scorn for the old and weak;<sup>235</sup> contempt for God and religious practice;<sup>236</sup> disdain for the "other;"<sup>237</sup> and

---

<sup>234</sup> Mechilta Amalek 2:138. Parallels appear in Tanchuma Beshallah 28; Pesikta Rabbati 13:1, 8; and Midrash Hagadol Beshallah, Exodus 17:14.

<sup>235</sup> "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt; how he met you on the way and smote all your feeble ones in the rear, when you were faint and weary" (Deuteronomy 25:17-18).

<sup>236</sup> In part, this charge applies to Israel; for Amalek - like his descendant Haman - is often depicted in rabbinic literature as an agent for divine punishment whom Israel brings on herself by disobeying God. However, many sources also chronicle Amalek's own hatred for God and for Jewish practice. Deuteronomy 25:18 charges that Amalek "did not fear God." Lamentations Rabbah 5:1 teaches: "R. Berekiah said: Israel spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Lord of the Universe, did You not write for us in Your Torah: "Remember what Amalek did to you" (Deuteronomy 25:17)? Did

the bearing of grudges across generations.<sup>238</sup> Only when we end these evils can we truly say that Israel has fulfilled God's command to blot out Amalek in this world; and only then can we expect God to blot him out fully and bring the World to Come.

Surely D.J.A. Clines exaggerates when he states that because evil outlives Haman, Haman's fall "has solved nothing, relieved nothing."<sup>239</sup> Yet the victory over Haman finally matters only insofar as it renews our faith in God and the mission with which God has charged us. It is a

---

he do it [only] to me and not to You? Did he not destroy Your sanctuary?" According to Pesikta Rabbati 13:8: "David said: 'Master of the Universe, [the Amalekites] did all they could against us - they made a mockery of the mark of circumcision, the mark which shows that You chose us, [and] they burned Your House and Your Torah.'" Schochet, page 72, states that all of Amalek's attacks are truly attacks on God. Chapter Two further relates Amalek's disdain for *milah* and his general hatred for God and God's chosen.

<sup>237</sup> With respect to this charge, our sages hint that we bear tremendous guilt; Amalek represents Israel's as much as Amalek's hatred for the other. Bavli Sanhedrin 99b tells: "Timna [a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz, according to Genesis 36:12] was a royal princess...Desiring to become a proselyte, she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esau, saying: 'I would rather be a servant to this people than a mistress of another nation.' From her was descended Amalek, who afflicted Israel. Why so? Because [the patriarchs] should not have despised her."

<sup>238</sup> Numbers Rabbah 16:18 relates: "What reason did Amalek see for stationing himself on the boundary in the way of Israel's entry into the land? His grandfather Esau told him to do so, namely, to forestall them on the road." Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer chapter 44 teaches: "Rabbi Azariah said: Amalek was a descendant of Esau, and because of his ancestor's enmity he came against [Israel] to punish them." Other rabbinic stories linking Amalek's hatred for Israel to the grudge passed down by Esau are cited in Chapter Two.

<sup>239</sup> Quoted by LaCocque, page 220.

terrible mistake to think that the death of Haman, the end of Amalek's physical descendants, means that no new Hamans, none of Amalek's spiritual descendants, can arise. Rather, ours is an age of many Hamans, many who wish evil not only upon Jews but upon all who are somehow "different." It is an age that calls for many Esthers and Mordechais, for many whose passion for strategy and tactics to fight antisemitism is matched by a passion for God and the welfare of all God's children.

Our sages taught that before he was hanged on the gallows, Haman pleaded with Mordechai not to blot out his name.<sup>240</sup> Unfortunately, Haman's final wish came to pass; he and his evil still endure.

Yet we, like our sages, must take heart that Haman was defeated at all. We must find in this paradigm new devotion in God and new dedication to what God requires of us. Although we know that we have not yet seen the final victory of God and Israel, we must work to blot out Amalek and Haman and achieve that final messianic triumph.

We who hunger for redemption echo the song of praise uttered by the Jews of Shushan as Mordechai was paraded through the streets: "Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me; Lord, be my Helper."<sup>241</sup> And we work and we wait for the Holy

---

<sup>240</sup> Targum Sheni 7:9.

<sup>241</sup> Psalms 30:11.

Spirit to answer as on that triumphant day: "To the end that  
My glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent. O Lord  
my God, I will give thanks to You for ever."<sup>242</sup>

---

<sup>242</sup> Psalms 30:12-13. This passage is culled from Esther  
Rabbah 10:5; the *midrash* is fully quoted and explained in  
Chapter Five.

## Bibliography

### Aids:

Alcalay, R. *The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*. Israel: Massada, 1990.

Bialik, H.N. and Y.H. Ravnitzky, editors. *Sefer Ha'agadah*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1950.

Braude, William G., translator. *The Book of Legends*, edited by H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Ravnitzky. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.

Freedman, H. and Maurice Simon, editors. *The Midrash Rabbah: Index Volume*. New Compact Edition. London: The Soncino Press, 1977.

Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942.

Jastrow, Marcus. *Dictionary of the Talmud*. Jerusalem: Horeb, 1903.

*Judaic Classics Library: Deluxe Edition*. Davka Software.

Montefiore, C.G. and H. Loewe, editors. *A Rabbinic Anthology*. USA: Greenwich Editions, 1960.

Slotki, Judah J., compiler. *The Babylonian Talmud: Index Volume*. London: The Soncino Press, 1952.

Strack, H.L. and G. Stemberger. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, translated by Marcus Bockmuehl. Scotland: T&T Clark, 1991.

### Biblical and Rabbinic Literature:

Aberbach, Moses and Bernard Grossfeld. *Targum Onkelos to Genesis*. New York: Ktav, 1982.

Braude, William G., translator. *The Midrash on Psalms*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

Braude, William G., translator. *Pesikta Rabbati*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

Braude, William G. and Israel J. Kapstein, translators. *Pesikta deRav Kahana*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975.



- Braude, William G., translator. *Tanna debe Eliyahu*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980.
- Buber, Solomon, editor. *Agadat Esther*. Israel, 1964.
- Buber, Solomon, editor. *Midrash Tanchuma*. New York: Sefer, 1946.
- Buber, Solomon, editor. *Midrash Zuta*. Tel Aviv, 1963-64.
- Buber, Solomon, editor. *Sifrei deAgadeta al Megillat Esther*. Includes *Panim Acherim*, *Abba Gorion* and *Lekach Tov*. Jerusalem: 1963-64.
- Cohen, Rev. Dr. Abraham, editor and translator. *The Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud*. London: The Soncino Press, 1984.
- Eisenstein, J.D., editor. *Otsar Midrashim*. New York: E. Grossman, 1956.
- Epstein, I., editor. *The Babylonian Talmud*. London: The Soncino Press, 1960.
- Fisch, Harold, English translator. *The Jerusalem Bible*. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 1992.
- Freedman, H. and Maurice Simon, editors. *The Midrash Rabbah*. London: The Soncino Press, 1977.
- Friedlander, Gerald, translator. *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*. New York: Hermon Press, 1970.
- Goldwurm, Rabbi Hersh, general editor. *Talmud Bavli: The Schottenstein Edition*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Limited, 1990.
- Grossfeld, Bernard. *The Two Targums of Esther*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987.
- Joseph, Chaim. *Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronography*. Yale University thesis, 1981.
- Lauterbach, Jacob Z., English translator. *Mechilta deRabbi Ishmael*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976.
- Margulies, Mordechai. *Midrash Hagadol*. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1947, 1956.
- Midrash Rabbah*. Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 1954.

*Midrash Shocher Tov*. Contains *Midrash Tehilim*, *Midrash Shmuel* and *Midrash Mishlei*. Jerusalem: Midrash, 1967.

*Midrash Tanchuma*. Jerusalem: Levin-Epstein, 1964.

Neusner, Jacob, translator. *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

Neusner, Jacob, general editor. *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Neusner, Jacob, translator. *The Tosefta*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977.

*Pesikta deRav Kahana*. Newark: Beit Midrash Larabbanim ShebeAmerica, 1987.

*Pesikta Rabbati*. Vilna Edition. Tel Aviv, 1880.

*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*. Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1973.

Sperber, Alexander. *Targum Onkelos to Exodus*. Hoboken: Ktav, 1990.

*Talmud Yerushalmi*. Jerusalem, 1948.

*Tanna debe Eliyahu*. Vilna, 1904.

Townsend, John, translator. *Midrash Tanchuma*. Hoboken: Ktav, 1989.

Wertheimer, Solomon Aaron, editor. *Batei Midrashot*. Jerusalem: Ktav Vesefer, 1968.

*Yalkut Shimoni*. Germany, 1925.

#### **Additional Sources:**

Achtemeier, Paul J. *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.

Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1986.

Baruch, Robert K. *Amalek in Early Rabbinic Literature*. Hebrew Union College thesis, 1971.

Ben-Sasson, H.H. *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Berman, Joshua. "Agadah and anti-Semitism: The Midrashim to Esther 3:8." *Judaism* 38, no. 2 (1989): 185-96.

- Bickerman, Elias. *Four Strange Books of the Bible*. New York: Schocken Books, 1967.
- Bright, John. *A History of Israel*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.
- Brown, Jerald M. *Rabbinic Interpretations of the Characters and Plot of the Book of Esther as Reflected in Midrash Esther Rabbah*. Hebrew Union College thesis, 1976.
- Buttrick, George Arthur, editor. *Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954.
- Buttrick, George Arthur, editor. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962.
- Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971.
- Fishbane, Michael, editor. *The Midrashic Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Gordis, Robert. *Megillat Esther*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1974.
- Hoschander, Jacob. *The Book of Esther in the Light of History*. Philadelphia: The Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1923.
- The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901.
- Kadushin, Max. *The Rabbinic Mind*. New York: Blaisdell, 1965.
- LaCocque, Andre. "Haman in the Book of Esther." *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1988): 207-22.
- Mays, James L., general editor. *Harper's Bible Commentary*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
- Moore, Carey A. *The Anchor Bible*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964.
- Moore, Carey A., editor. *Studies in the Book of Esther*. New York: Ktav, 1982.
- Neusner, Jacob. *The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical and Topical Program. Volume Two: Esther Rabbah I*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

- Paton, Lewis Bayles. *International Critical Commentary*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908.
- Rosenberg, Rabbi A.J. "The Midrashic Approach to the Book of Esther." *Megillath Esther*, edited by Rev. Dr. A. Cohen. London: The Soncino Press, 1984.
- Roth, Cecil. *A History of the Jews: Revised Edition*. New York: Schocken Books, 1970.
- Schachter, Joseph. *Amalek: A Study of the Rabbinic Model of Ultimate Criminality*. Jerusalem, 1977.
- Schechter, Solomon. *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1993.
- Schochet, Elijah Judah. *Amalek: The Enemy Within*. Los Angeles: Mimietav Press, 1991.
- Segal, Eliezer. *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary. Volumes Two and Three*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.
- Segal, Eliezer. "Human Anger and Divine Intervention in Esther." *Prooftexts* 9, no. 3 (September 1989): 247-256.
- Stern, David. *Parables in Midrash*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Weinbach, Mendel. *One Hundred and Twenty-Seven Insights into Megillas Esther*. Jerusalem: Targum Press, 1990.
- Wigoder, Geoffrey, editor. *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*. Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Publishing House, 1989.
- Zlotowitz, Rabbi Meir, translator and compiler. *The Megillah*. New York: ArtScroll Press, 1976.

## **Appendix: A Guide to Rabbinic Sources Utilized**

### Abba Gorion

Please see Esther Zuta.

### Agadat Esther

Edited by Solomon Buber, Agadat Esther is a minor collection of diverse teachings on the Book of Esther. While Buber himself acknowledges in his introduction to the text that "the name of the redactor and the time and place in which this *midrash* was redacted are difficult to clarify," he notes that the redactor has made use of - most notably - the Babylonian Talmud's Tractate Megillah, Panim Acherim, and Genesis Rabbah. Other scholars credit David ben Amram, who lived in the thirteenth century and has been identified as the author of Midrash Hagadol, with Agadat Esther and cite parallels to the Targums to Esther.

### Deuteronomy Rabbah

A collection of homilies beginning with halachic exhortations, Deuteronomy Rabbah is an exegetical *midrash* categorized with the Tanchuma group. Two editions of Deuteronomy Rabbah have probably existed, with the lost doubtless having influenced the one extant today. Deuteronomy Rabbah draws from Genesis, Leviticus and Lamentations Rabbah, as well as the Palestinian (and perhaps the Babylonian) Talmud. Scholars differ on the dating of the text, proposing dates ranging from 450 to after the ninth century, but agree upon Palestine as the place of origin.

### Ecclesiastes Rabbah

Also known as Midrash Kohelet, Ecclesiastes Rabbah allegorically expounds the Book of Ecclesiastes. The text repeats a number of proems from Genesis, Lamentations, Leviticus and Song of Songs Rabbah that interpret passages from Ecclesiastes, and also relies upon the Palestinian Talmud and minor tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. The time and place of Ecclesiastes Rabbah's origin are uncertain, but the text was probably redacted between the seventh and ninth centuries.

### Ecclesiastes Zuta

Little is known about Ecclesiastes Zuta; while smaller than Ecclesiastes Rabbah, it may actually pre-date the more extensive text. Ecclesiastes Zuta contains much of the same material as Ecclesiastes Rabbah, although some unique additions do exist in Zuta.

### Esther Rabbah

Esther Rabbah contains two separate works, although both draw from tannaitic and early amoraic teachings,



quoting mostly rabbis of fourth-century Palestine. The latest material, found in Esther Rabbah II, speaks specifically to anti-Jewish activity in the late Roman Empire. Esther Rabbah I dates from the sixth century, Esther Rabbah II from the eleventh. The two *midrashim* were combined and finally redacted in the eleventh or twelfth century.

#### Esther Zuta

Also called *Sifrei deAgadata al Megillat Esther*, Solomon Buber's edition of Esther Zuta comprises three *midrashim*: *Panim Acherim*, *Abba Gorion* and *Lekach Tov*. These texts date from the eleventh or twelfth century, and may also be related to the Second Targum to Esther, or Targum Sheni.

#### Exodus Rabbah

Exodus Rabbah comprises two distinct works, one a homiletical *midrash* that ends where *Mechilta deRabbi Ishmael* begins, the other an exposition of Exodus chapters 12 through 40 that belongs to the Tanchuma-Yelamdenu school. Both sections follow the Palestinian Torah reading cycle, with the second containing many allusions to the messianic future. Exodus Rabbah II is dated to the ninth century, and the redaction of both works into a single collection probably took place in the eleventh century.

#### Genesis Rabbah

A masterful agadic *midrash* on the Book of Genesis, Genesis Rabbah appears to be structured according to the cycle of Torah reading in Palestine. The use of proems and messianic, comforting conclusions (*nechemta*) suggests that these *midrashim* were actually delivered by the rabbis as sermons. Because the redactor of Genesis Rabbah demonstrates familiarity with tannaitic literature - including the halachic *midrashim* and Targums, as well as the content if not the final version of the Palestinian Talmud - the text's redaction is dated to 400-450 in Palestine.

#### Lamentations Rabbah

An exegetical *midrash* on the Book of Lamentations, Lamentations Rabbah well reflects the tradition of reading Lamentations publicly on Tisha B'Av. In addition to exposition of the actual Lamentations text, Lamentations Rabbah also contains accounts of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and subsequent Roman persecutions. An extensive collection of proems begins the text. Lamentations Rabbah appears to have a common source with the halachic *midrashim*, and is generally dated to 400-450 in Palestine.

#### Lekach Tov

Please see Esther Zuta.

#### Leviticus Rabbah

A homiletical *midrash* on the Book of Leviticus, Leviticus Rabbah bears striking similarities to Genesis Rabbah as well as Pesikta deRav Kahana. Scholars differ on whether Leviticus Rabbah depended on Genesis Rabbah or whether the texts simply used a common source, and on whether Leviticus Rabbah borrowed from Pesikta deRav Kahana or vice-versa. There is agreement, however, that the *midrash* can be dated to the fifth century in Palestine.

#### Mechilta deRabbi Ishmael

A halachic *midrash* on the Book of Exodus, Mechilta likely originated with the school of the great tannaitic Rabbi Ishmael. The text went through various revisions and redactions, however, and comprises teachings from the school of Rabbi Akiva as well. Mechilta's final redaction is generally dated to 250-300.

#### Midrash Hagadol

Aptly named, Midrash Hagadol is the largest body of *midrash*. Arranged according to the Torah reading cycle, Midrash Hagadol begins its exposition of every Torah portion with a unique rhyming proem. Although the author of Midrash Hagadol, likely David ben Amram, demonstrates familiarity with earlier midrashic texts, he revises and glosses them so that their influence is often difficult to detect. Ben Amram, also credited with Agadat Esther, probably lived in the thirteenth century.

#### Midrash Proverbs

A commentary on the Book of Proverbs, Midrash Proverbs draws from earlier midrashic collections as well as at least one - the Babylonian - Talmud. The extant texts may not be complete; several Proverbs are not expounded. Anti-Karaite sentiments have led some scholars to propose a later dating for Midrash Proverbs, but it appears to come from seventh or eighth century Palestine. The *midrash* is printed in Midrash Shocher Tov with Midrash Samuel and Midrash Psalms.

#### Midrash Psalms

Midrash Psalms has two parts: a compilation of different materials from different sources on Psalms One through 118, and an exposition of Psalms 119 through 150 that draws heavily from Yalkut Shimoni. Although most of the teachings in Midrash Psalms I derive from the amoraic period, the text underwent a great deal of revision and various redactions well into medieval times. Midrash Psalms II, a full manuscript of which does not exist, is generally dated to the thirteenth century. The *midrash* appears in Midrash Shocher Tov with Midrash Proverbs and Midrash Samuel.

#### Midrash Samuel

Also called Agadat Shmuel, Midrash Samuel comprises various expositions on the Book of Samuel. Although the text

underwent later revisions and editings, its core contains material from the Mishnah, Tosefta and early halachic *midrashim*. Midrash Samuel's final redaction, however, is placed in eleventh century Palestine. The text can be found in Midrash Shocher Tov with Midrash Proverbs and Midrash Psalms.

#### Numbers Rabbah

Numbers Rabbah contains two distinct parts. Making up nearly two-thirds of the entire *midrash*, Numbers Rabbah I is an agadic text that expounds only the first two Torah portions in Numbers, Bemidbar and Naso. Numbers Rabbah II treats the remaining portions much more briefly and shares numerous parallels with Tanchuma-Yelamdenu. While dating each section has proved difficult, scholars agree that the entire text was combined and redacted in the thirteenth century.

#### Panim Acherim

Please see Esther Zuta.

#### Pesikta deRav Kahana

A collection of sermons for holidays and special Sabbaths, Pesikta deRav Kahana challenges scholars to characterize it conclusively. A dynamic *midrash*, frequently revised according to the needs of preacher and congregation, Pesikta deRav Kahana was not fully redacted until its first printing! Further, its origin and the date of its core material preclude its attribution to any known teacher actually named Rav Kahana. Pesikta deRav Kahana also shares five chapters with Leviticus Rabbah, although the original source of these common texts is unclear. Pesikta deRav Kahana's core probably dates to fifth-century Palestine.

#### Pesikta Rabbati

Comprising sermons for festival Torah readings - including Chanukah, Shabbat Hagadol and Tisha B'Av, but excluding Sukkot - Pesikta Rabbati is of uncertain beginnings. Its content ranges from five sections shared with Pesikta deRav Kahana to apocalyptic material influenced by *hechalot* literature! Pesikta Rabbati underwent many processes of editing, which structured the text into fixed sermons and were probably completed in 500-600. Although some scholars have argued that Pesikta Rabbati originated in Greece or Italy, most evidence points to Palestine as the place of origin.

#### Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer

Although Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer is classified as a *midrash*, it actually dramatically retells rather than simply expounds upon the narratives of the Torah. Among the subjects taken up in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer are Creation, the generations from Adam to Noah, the Tower of Babel, the patriarchs, Moses and the Golden Calf, the descendants of

Amalek, and the messianic redemption. However, the extant text is probably incomplete, not recounting, for example, the death of Moses. Referring frequently to Arab rule and even the Dome of the Rock, Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer originated in eighth or ninth century Palestine.

#### Ruth Rabbah

Beginning with a series of proems, Ruth Rabbah is a homiletical *midrash* previously known as Midrash Ruth. In expounding the biblical book, the text stresses heavily the theme of reward and punishment. Ruth Rabbah draws from the Palestinian Talmud and Genesis, Leviticus and Lamentations Rabbah, and is dated to the beginning of the fourth century.

#### Seder Olam

Also called Seder Olam Rabbah, Seder Olam provides a chronology of biblical history from the creation of the world to the closing of the Persian era. Traditionally ascribed to Rabbi Yose, the text was probably edited during the talmudic period but later revised.

#### Song of Songs Rabbah

An exegetical *midrash*, Song of Songs Rabbah offers a highly allegorical interpretation of the biblical book. Song of Songs Rabbah draws heavily from the Palestinian Talmud, Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah, and Pesikta deRav Kahana. While some scholars propose a later date, the text probably comes from the mid-sixth century.

#### Tanchuma

A homiletical *midrash* expounding each book of the Torah, Tanchuma exists in two editions. The first - Tanchuma Yelamdenu - derives its name from the many proems attributed to Rabbi Tanchuma and their halachic exhortations, "Yelamdenu Rabbenu," "Our master will teach us." The second, Tanchuma Buber, is named for Solomon Buber, who first edited and published the manuscript. Both editions follow the Palestinian triennial cycle of Torah readings, although scholars believe only some of the teachings were actually intended for public exposition. Tanchuma's core is dated to fourth century Palestine.

#### Tanna debe Eliyahu

Also called Seder Eliyahu, Tanna debe Eliyahu comprises Seder Eliyahu Rabbah and Seder Eliyahu Zuta. Traditionally attributed to Rav's student Rav Anan, who was taught these lessons by Elijah himself, Tanna debe Eliyahu is an ethical *midrash* that stresses proper behavior and Torah study. The text probably originated sometime before the ninth century; the place of origin - previously considered Babylonia - is now uncertain.

#### The Targums to Esther



Translations and expositions of the Book of Esther in Aramaic, the two Targums originated in ancient Palestine. The shorter, more straightforward Targum Rishon - which influenced Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer - is dated to the late sixth or early seventh century; the longer, highly embellished Targum Sheni has been dated from the early fourth to the eleventh century! There is some consensus, however, on Leopold Zunz's proposed dating of the text to the seventh century.

#### Yalkut Shimoni

A tremendous anthology comprising *midrashim* - some of which would be otherwise lost - on every book of the Bible, Yalkut Shimoni is attributed to Shimon HaDarshan. Who Shimon HaDarshan was and where he lived, however, is a matter of considerable dispute. Scholars have placed him from eleventh century Frankfurt to fourteenth century Spain; while his home is still unknown, his text - also known simply as Yalkut - probably dates from the thirteenth century.