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## **Accounting for Tradition: Calculations in the Commentary of R. Eleazar of Worms to Esther**

There is a wealth of rabbinic traditions surrounding *Megillat Esther* that provide added insight and background into the story and its characters, not found in the text itself. A unique approach to the rabbinic teachings on the Book of Esther is taken by R. Eleazar of Worms (c.1160-c.1230)<sup>1</sup>. Rather than viewing the rabbinic traditions as separate from the literal reading of the text, R. Eleazar seeks to demonstrate that the rabbinic teachings are hidden within the text itself and are perceptible using an esoteric system of hermeneutical tools known as the 50 *Sha'arei Binah*. By linking talmudic teachings to the text, these tools demonstrate the magnificent complexity of the Written Torah to encompass the Oral Torah, revealing there is more concealed in the text of the *Megillah* than meets the eye.

R. Eleazar of Worms, also known as Rokeah, was one of the pillars of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*<sup>2</sup> movement and the preeminent student of the movement's leader, R. Judah

- 1 The exact years of R. Eleazar's life are unknown. The approximation of his birth year is based on the known year of the attack on his family, which R. Eleazar reports occurred in November of 1196 (תתקמ"ו). At the time of the attack his eldest daughter was 13. To have a daughter that age it is assumed R. Eleazar was in his early 30's at the time of the attack. If R. Eleazar got married at 18 for example, he would have been around 32 at the time of the attack. Based on this reasoning, Y. Kamelhar places R. Eleazar's birth year between 1160-65, which assumes he was married between the ages of 18-23. See Yisrael Kamelhar, *Rabbenu Eleazar ben Yehudah mi-Germaiza ha-Rokeah* (Rzeszow: Ateret, 1930), p. 9 n. 3. Of course, R. Eleazar could have been married earlier or later. Ephraim Urbach writes that the year of R. Eleazar's birth cannot be known, but estimates that he was around the same age as Rabiah (R. Eliezer b. Joel ha-Levi), as they both studied with R. Ephraim of Metz and R. Judah the Pious. See Ephraim Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings, and Methods* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1980), 388. R. Eleazar's year of death has been listed by scholars as 1238, however, Urbach has evidence that R. Eleazar likely passed away by 1232 and certainly by 1234. See Urbach, *The Tosaphists*, p. 411. See also, Ephraim Urbach, "Sefer Arugat ha-Bosem le-R. Abraham b. Azriel" in *Tarbiz* 10 (1939), p. 35.
- 2 *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, also known as the German Pietists, were active in the Rhineland in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries where they studied and elaborated on earlier Jewish esoteric writings and adopted a religious lifestyle of stringencies and unusual practices in an effort to fulfill God's will to the maximum. For more information on this movement see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish*

the Pious (d.1217). As a prolific and multi-disciplinary writer, R. Eleazar of Worms is credited with compiling and proliferating many of his teacher's previously oral teachings. Among the most distinctive features of R. Eleazar's writings is his careful attention to the Hebrew letters that comprise a scriptural verse, a prayer, or even the names of angels.<sup>3</sup> For example in his scriptural commentaries, R. Eleazar dissects biblical verses, analyzing their individual words, reconfiguring their letters and tallying and calculating their numeric value using *gematria* and other hermeneutical tools. While the extensive use of *gematria* employed by *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* has been noted by scholars, the function of the many letter exercises and number calculations R. Eleazar engages in has remained an open question.<sup>4</sup> In order to understand the function of R. Eleazar's letter and number studies we will examine selections of his commentary to the Book of Esther, *Sha'arei Binah*,<sup>5</sup> which, in addition to general

*Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954); Joseph Dan, *Torat ha-Sod shel Ḥasidut Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1968); Haym Soloveitchik, "Three Themes in Sefer Hasidim," *AJS Review* 1 (1976): pp. 311-357; Ivan Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1981). While there seem to have been several schools of Jewish mystics in this area, R. Eleazar of Worms belonged to the Kalonymide school founded by R. Samuel the Pious and his son R. Judah the Pious.

- 3 Joseph Dan, "Language of the Mystics" in *Medieval Germany in Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism: International Symposium held in Frankfurt a.M., 1991*, edited by Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan. (Berlin; New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1995), pp. 6-27.
- 4 Most studies have focused on R. Eleazar's commentary to the liturgy. See for example: Scholem, *Major Trends*, 100-101; Ephraim Urbach, "Perushei ha-Tefillah ve-ha-Piyyut shel Ḥasidei Ashkenaz," in *Arugat ha-Bosem* vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1939-1953); Israel Ta-Shma, *Ha-Tefillah ha-Ashkenazit haKedumah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), pp. 47-51. For a summary and explication of the scholarly positions regarding the numeric approach of *Ḥasidei Ashkenaz* to prayer see Chaya S. Koenigsberg. "Prayer as a Prism: The Interconnectivity between the Written and Oral Torah in the Thought of R. Eleazar of Worms." (PhD Diss., Yeshiva University, 2019), pp. 1-25.
- 5 See R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms, *Perush Megillat Esther: Sha'arei Binah*. (New York: Keren Menasheh ve-Sarah Lehmann, 1980). While the manuscript used for the printed commentary does not explicitly cite R. Eleazar as the author and instead is titled *Perush Megillat Esther me-Hakhmei Ashkenaz*, the publisher cites a number of proofs that the material was personally authored by R. Eleazar. Firstly, there is parallel material present in R. Eleazar's *Sefer Rokeah* in the section on the Laws of Purim; see R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms, *Sefer haRokeah [ha-Gadol]* (Jerusalem: Zichron Aharon, 2014). Additional parallel material is found in two other manuscripts with similar commentary material to Esther; MS Oxford 268, which is the Ashkenazic commentary to the Torah most likely authored by a student of R. Eleazar, and MS Oxford 1576. The material from those two manuscripts, plus additional material, is found in a third manuscript used by the publisher to print *Sha'arei Binah*. The publisher believes the additional two manuscripts are abridged versions, from R. Eleazar's 'bet

contextual explanations of the verses, includes a significant amount of *gematria* and other letter and number studies.

At the very start of the commentary, R. Eleazar applies the tool of *gematria* and explains that the numeric value of the opening Hebrew phrase, "בְּיָמֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הָיָה אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ" – "In the days of Ahasuerus, he was Ahasuerus" – equals the numeric value of the phrase found in Talmud Megillah 11a, "הוא ברשעו מתחילתו ועד סופו" – "He [Ahasuerus] was wicked from beginning to end" – the value of each equaling 1,716.<sup>6</sup> Why has R. Eleazar conveyed the talmudic teaching as a *gematria*?

The next *gematria* employed by R. Eleazar relates to the talmudic teaching that Ahasuerus held his grand banquet to celebrate the completion of the seventy years of the Jewish exile about which Jeremiah prophesied and how, having not been redeemed, the Jews would remain his subjects. The Talmud Megillah 11b develops a detailed calculation of the seventy years to show how Ahasuerus calculated the third year of his reign to be the 70th year of the Jewish exile. The talmudic discussion stems from a textual difficulty. The second verse of Esther states that the story took place, "When the king [Ahasuerus] sat on his throne," which implies the beginning of the king's reign. However, the following verse, which describes the banquet, states that the events occurred in the third year of the reign of Ahasuerus. The Talmud solves this difficulty by noting that the root "שב" can mean both to sit and to rest. Thus, the first verse does not mean to imply that the story is taking place immediately when Ahasuerus first assumed his throne, but at a time when he was able to rest his mind from worrying that the Jews would be redeemed from their exile and no longer under his dominion. R. Eleazar's explanation of these verses is based on the Talmud's calculation of the 70 years but again he curiously begins his explanation of the words, "When the king sat" with a *gematria* noting that the words "כְּשֶׁבַת הַמֶּלֶךְ" is equivalent to "משבעים שנה" – "from seventy years," both equaling 817, conveying the talmudic teaching through *gematria*.

*midrash*' and students, while the third manuscript, which he used for his printed edition, originated from R. Eleazar himself. However, it should be noted that the style of this *Sha'arei Binah* commentary is generally more simplistic and straightforward than R. Eleazar's other commentaries. Specifically, it has many *peshat* explanations and basic *gematriot*. In contrast, the *Sefer Rokeah*, contains more complex calculations and explanations in the section on Purim. We cannot know whether it was authored by R. Eleazar's own hand, but nonetheless, like the Ashkenazic commentary to the Torah, MS Oxford 268, this commentary certainly follows R. Eleazar's approach and teachings as evidenced by parallel material in the *Sefer Rokeah*.

6 R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1.

In another study of the letters of the *Megillah*, R. Eleazar explains that the word "חור" – decorations<sup>7</sup> – which is traditionally written with an enlarged letter *Het*, has the numeric value of eight. R. Eleazar notes that this letter hints to the eight garments of the High Priest that Ahasuerus wore to his banquet, a rabbinic tradition found in *Megillah* 12a. In addition to wearing the clothing of the High Priest, the Sages also teach that Ahasuerus used vessels from the Temple at his banquet. R. Eleazar again references this tradition by pointing out that the numeric value of – "וְהַשְּׁקוֹת בְּכֵלֵי זָהָב" – "and the drinks were in golden goblets" is equal to the numeric value of the phrase "אל בית המקדש" – "to the Temple," explaining that Ahasuerus commanded his officers to bring vessels – from the Temple for the banquet.<sup>8</sup>

The Talmud continues its discussion of the wine that was served and comments on the phrase "וְהַשְּׁתִיָּה כְּדַת" – "the drinking was according to the law" – refers to Torah law.<sup>9</sup> The Talmud explains that Torah Law prescribes that one eat more than he drinks and there was a greater quantity of food than drink at the banquet of Ahasuerus. In his commentary, without directly referencing the Talmud, R. Eleazar again employs *gematria* and notes that the numeric value of the phrase "וְהַשְּׁתִיָּה כְּדַת" equals the numeric value of "זה מנהג כדת התורה" – "This custom accords with Torah law," following the explanation of the Talmud, with both phrases equaling 1,150.

The use of *gematria* continues as we reach a dramatic moment early in the *Megillah* when Queen Vashti refuses the King's command to show off her beauty to the participants of his banquet. This refusal sets into motion the search for a new queen and the ultimate appointment of Esther, the heroine of the Book of Esther. The text of the *Megillah* provides no further information about Vashti, but the Talmud provides background to both the character and actions of Vashti that are not dealt with explicitly in the text. The Sages explain that Vashti was a wicked queen who mistreated her Jewish maidservants, forcing them to work on the Sabbath and degrading them by requiring them to do their work naked. The Sages teach that Vashti's punishment fit her crime because she was called to appear naked at Ahasuerus' party on the Sabbath.<sup>10</sup> R. Eleazar cites the backstory to Vashti's punishment as explained in the Talmud and

7 Esther 1:6.

8 In this case the two phrases are not exactly equal. The first phrase equals 893, while the second equals 892. There are many cases in the Commentary to Esther where the calculations of the rabbinic statements are one number different in value from the value in the verse. These two calculations are still considered equivalent according to R. Eleazar, so long as they are only one number off, and remain examples of the extreme accuracy of the Rabbis' formulation.

9 *Megillah* 12a.

10 *Megillah* 12b.

adds that the phrase at the beginning of the second chapter of the *Megillah*, "אֶשֶׁר נִגְזַר" – "what had been decreed [on Vashti]" is equivalent to the value of "בְּיוֹם שַׁבָּת" – "on the Sabbath".<sup>11</sup> There are many more examples of talmudic teachings taught through *gematria* in this commentary to Esther and their pervasive presence begs the question of what exegetical function they serve.

Because R. Eleazar draws heavily from rabbinic traditions throughout the commentary his ingenuity has been overlooked in scholarship. For example, Barry Walfish, writes regarding R. Eleazar's commentary to Esther, *Sha 'arei Binah*:

The commentaries of the German Pietists draw heavily upon rabbinic sources, both midrashim and targumim, and many could be called with some justification mere compilations of midrashic material. A brief survey of the notes in Lehmann's edition of the commentary of Eleazar of Worms would readily confirm this statement.<sup>12</sup>

While Walfish is correct that there are many rabbinic statements referenced by R. Eleazar, the Talmud does not base its explanations on *gematria*, or other textual calculations. To illustrate, in the first example we cited above, the Talmud bases its explanation on the repetitious language, "it was in the days of Ahasuerus, he was Ahasuerus", which it explains repeats to signify that Ahasuerus was wicked from the beginning to the end of the story. If R. Eleazar was truly employing no innovation one would expect R. Eleazar to simply cite the Talmud. Instead, R. Eleazar cites the Talmud, but adds his own substantiation, a *gematria*. What is the function of this *gematria*?

I believe the answer can be found in a short mystical work R. Eleazar titled *Sodei Razei Semukhim*,<sup>13</sup> in which he delineates the hermeneutical tools he employs in explaining Scripture and I believe, more importantly, outlines his overarching hermeneutical project.

Prior scholarly analysis of R. Eleazar of Worms' methodology of reading Scripture has traditionally focused on *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, considered R. Eleazar's first work and one in which he outlines his hermeneutical principles of interpreting

11 The phrases equal 761 and 760 respectively.

12 Barry Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), p. 31.

13 SRS is found in MSS Oxford Opp. 111 (Neubauer 1566) and Oxford Opp. 540 (Neubauer 1567) and was published by David Siegel along with an extensive comparative study between SRS and *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*. See David Siegel, *Sefer Sodei Razei Semukhim* (Jerusalem: Kolel Sha'arei Kedushah uTefillah she-'al Yad 'Amuttat Arba' Me'ot Shekel Kesef, 2001).

Scripture.<sup>14</sup> However, the authenticity of *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* has been called into question by David Siegel who argues that *Sefer haHokhmah* is a misrepresentation and reworking of R. Eleazar's authentic work titled *Sodei Razei Semukhim*. The significant variations between *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* and *Sodei Razei Semukhim* have repercussions for scholarship and require a reevaluation of many accepted suppositions regarding R. Eleazar of Worms' exegetical methodology and the motivation and timing of its compilation that to this point have been primarily based on *Sefer ha-Hokhmah*, but are beyond the scope of this article.<sup>15</sup>

In his introduction to his *Sodei Razei Semukhim* R. Eleazar writes:

ראיתי בלבי כי מעייני התורה רבו וחכמת התלמוד אין למעלה הימנה מפ"ו  
 דע"ת ותבונה כמו תלמו"ד מפ"י עשות ספרים הרבה אין קץ כי תוצאות התלמוד  
 יותר מאלף ספרים, תורה שבעל פה פילפולי ודקדוקי המצות דינין איסור והיתר  
 והכל יוצא מתורה שבכתב מי איכא מידי דלא רמזא משה כי על כל קוץ וקוץ  
 ותג תילי תילים של הלכות כלשכן אות עצמה ותיבה עצמה ופסוק עצמה אך  
 לבות בני אדם לא יוכל הכל מפני הצרות והגלות וחסרון מזונות לבד מחמישים  
 שערי בינה ועל כל בינה ובינה ארבעים ותשעה זהו וכמ"ט מונים תחפשנה  
 והיה לי לכתוב ספר על כל בינה ובינה כמו שקבלנו השערים אך אין לי השגת  
 יד לכתוב מפני לימוד התלמוד ולא זכיתי לבני יחיד אשר קבלם והלך בחצי  
 ימיו נאמן הדיין יתברך שמו ויתעלה זכרו ולא זכיתי ללמד השערים לאחרים  
 כי פסקו אנשי מעשה ונתמעטו הללכות. וכל התלמוד יוצא מן ה' חומשי תורה  
 באר היטב אכתוב שמות השערים ואגלה טיפי טל מן הים ואכתוב סמוכים  
 במקוצר כמלקט שיבולים ונקרא ספר סודי רזי סמוכים אתוה סימני הקבלה  
 על פי השערים.<sup>16</sup>

And I have seen (understood) in my heart that the springs of the Torah multiplied, and there is no greater wisdom than that of the Talmud, 'from his mouth is knowledge and understanding' just as (is numerically equivalent

14 See Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 98; Dan, *Torat ha-Sod*, pp. 62, 68-71, 118-128; Joseph Dan, "Sefer ha-Hokhmah le-R. Eleazar mi-Worms Umashma'uto le-Toledot Torata ve-Safruta shel Hasidei Ashkenaz" in *Iyyunim be-Safrut Hasidei Ashkenaz* (Ramat Gan: Masada, 1975), pp. 44-57; Ivan Marcus, "Exegesis For the Few and For the Many," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8 (1989), pp. 1-24; Daniel Abrams, "The Literary Emergence of Esotericism in the German Pietism," *Shofar*, 12 (1994), pp. 67-85.

15 See Koenigsberg, "Prayer as a Prism," pp. 26-59.

16 Siegel, *Sodei Razei Semukhim*, pp. 9-10.

to) 'Talmud from my mouth' creates many books with no limit, for the outgrowths of the Talmud number more than 1000 books, [including] the Oral Torah, studies of the commandments and their minutia, and the laws, and that which is allowed and forbidden. And it all emerges from the Written Torah. What is there that Moses did not hint at? For on every tiny point and every crown [of the letters] hang (are derived) a myriad of laws. How much more so a [whole] letter itself, and a [complete] word and a [whole] verse itself. Alas, the hearts of men are not able to [grasp] it all due to the troubles, and the exile, and lack of sustenance, only the 50 "Gates of Understanding." And on every [Gate of] Understanding there are 49 [ways to understand], thus [the verse, "and like treasures you seek it" means] 49 times you should seek it.<sup>17</sup> And it would be incumbent upon me to write a book on each Gate of Understanding just as we received the "Gates," but I do not have the reach (ability) to write [it all] due to the study of Talmud. And I did not merit for my only son who received [the Gates of Understanding] (to pass them on because he) died with his life cut in half – loyal is the Judge whose name should be blessed and memory exalted. And I did not merit teaching the Gates to others, for men of merit ceased and the hearts have diminished. And all of the Talmud emerges from the five books of the Torah, explain it well. I will write the names of the "Gates" and will reveal droplets of dew from the sea and I will write the juxtapositions in short like one who gathers stalks. And I will call the book *Secrets of the Secrets of Juxtapositions* – the tradition according to the "Gates."

This passage holds the key to the motivation behind R. Eleazar's hermeneutical system. In this introduction, R. Eleazar conceptualizes the link between the Written Torah, the Pentateuch,<sup>18</sup> and the Oral Torah, the plethora of material found in the Talmud. In contrast to a conception whereby two separate independent bodies of tradition were received at Sinai and transmitted separately, R. Eleazar reveals that he is privy to a tradition that demonstrates that the Oral and Written Torah are inextricably linked. Indeed, R. Eleazar contends that the totality of the Oral Law, which he states numbers more than a thousand books of explanations of verses and laws, *all emerge* from the Written Torah. Moreover, the Oral Traditions found in the Talmud can be shown to be *embedded* in the Written Torah's very letters and are perceptible using the 50 *Sha'arei Binah* or 50 "Gates of Understanding," a hermeneutical tradition of

17 The word וכמטמונים (and like treasures) can be split into two - וכמ"ט מונים - (and 49 times).

18 In practice R. Eleazar applies the "Gates" to all of *Tanakh*, not just the Pentateuch.

semantic and numeric manipulations of a verse to reveal the talmudic teachings buried within the scriptural text. What follows in *Sodei Razei Semukhim* is a list of the names of these hermeneutical tools, "Gates of Understanding," and explanations of the first three verses of Genesis employing a selection of the "Gates."

The 50 "Gates of Understanding" are a complex system that requires not only an understanding of the hermeneutic principles and the traditions of when they are applied, but also the breadth of fluency with all of Scripture and Talmud. Passing along this tradition proved to be difficult. In the heartbreaking account quoted above, R. Eleazar writes that he had already transmitted the tradition to his son, who subsequently predeceased him and R. Eleazar found no other able to absorb the totality of the system. Fearing he would be the end of the line for these traditions, R. Eleazar laid out his methodology for revealing the link between the Written Torah and the Oral Traditions albeit briefly and incompletely. In doing so, R. Eleazar can be seen as drawing on earlier examples in Jewish history where traditions that were transmitted orally were committed to writing to prevent their total loss.<sup>19</sup>

This principle of interconnectivity is the great secret that R. Eleazar felt he must protect and transmit and which I believe underlies his exegetical system that he extends to all of Tanakh. Certainly, many medieval commentators cited rabbinic traditions alongside more literal readings, such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides. What makes R. Eleazar's commentary unique is that in addition to citing rabbinic traditions he attempts to demonstrate how those traditions are not superimposed, but embedded within the language of the text. Unearthing the embedded message is accomplished using the tools outlined in *Sodei Razei Semukhim*.

Returning to Esther we can view this approach in action. A careful look at the commentary reveals the plethora of examples of R. Eleazar's "Gates of Understanding"<sup>20</sup> employed in the commentary including the "Gates" of: *Gematria*,<sup>21</sup> *Yater ve-Haser*,<sup>22</sup>

19 See Gittin, 60a. The principle of הפרו תורתך – עת לעשות לה' – is that oral material is permitted to be written under circumstances where it will otherwise be lost.

20 For a full list of the "Gates of Understanding" see Siegel, *Sodei Razei Semukhim*, p. 10.

21 For examples of *Gematria*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:1, 1:2, 1:7, 1:8, 1:12 (with n. 103), 1:13, 1:16, 2:1, 2:7, 2:9, 2:10, 2:11, 2:15, 2:16, 2:17, 2:19; 2:20, 2:22, 2:23, 3:4, 3:7, 3:9, 3:10, 3:11, 4:1, 4:4, 4:5, 4:14 4:7, 4:11, 4:12, 4:16, 5:1, 5:3, 5:5, 5:11, 5:13, 6:1, 6:2, 6:4, 6:12, 6:13, 7:5, 7:8, 7:10, 8:10, 9:10, 9:14, 9:24, 9:26, 9:28, 9:29, 9:31, 10:3.

22 For examples of *Yater ve-Haser*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:4, 1:5, 1:14, 1:19, 2:2, 2:6, 4:8, 4:14, 5:12, 6:9, 6:13, 6:14, 8:1, 8:3, 8:4, 8:16, 9:14, 9:18, 9:19, 9:20, 9:22.

*Otiyyot Gedolot*,<sup>23</sup> *Mispar*,<sup>24</sup> *Ne'elam*,<sup>25</sup> *Semukhim*,<sup>26</sup> *Krei u-Ketiv*,<sup>27</sup> *Roshei ve-Sofei Tevot*,<sup>28</sup> *Targum*,<sup>29</sup> *At Bash*,<sup>30</sup> *Te'amim/haMesorah*,<sup>31</sup> *Hilluk*,<sup>32</sup> *Ribbuy*,<sup>33</sup> *Sof-Rosh*,<sup>34</sup> *Meshulash*,<sup>35</sup> *Pasek*,<sup>36</sup> and *Hipukh*.<sup>37</sup>

More than a "mere compilation of midrashic material," R. Eleazar's commentary is innovative in its attempts to demonstrate that the text and the rabbinic teachings are interwoven. More than a loose connection, R. Eleazar's approach assumes the precision of the Rabbis' chosen words recorded in the Talmud. Their explanations are not to be viewed as haphazard musings, but authoritative explanations rooted in the text, demonstratively accurate to the letter (!) and numerically equivalent to the wording of the text.

Beyond calculating text, some of R. Eleazar's hermeneutical tools rearrange letters to expose hidden meaning. A noteworthy example of a rabbinic teaching that R. Eleazar anchors to the exact letters of the text involves the "Gate of *Roshei and Sofei Tevot*." This "Gate" applies when the first letter of each word in a sequence of words, or the final letter of each can be shown to spell something meaningful. At times, the isolated letters can also be read backwards or non-sequentially. R. Eleazar employs this tool when connecting to the text itself the talmudic tradition that every detail of the story of the book of Esther was orchestrated by the Hand of God. The Talmud teaches that even events that seemed unrelated to the Jewish people, like the proclamation sent out to Ahasuerus' kingdom following the incident with Vashti, served to benefit

23 For examples of *Otiyyot Gedolot*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:6, 9:28.

24 For examples of *Mispar*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:6, 1:16, 5:5, 7:10, 9:10, 9:17, 9:28, 10:3.

25 For an example of *Ne'elam*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:6.

26 For examples of *Semukhim*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:9, 6:13.

27 For examples of *Krei u-Ketiv*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:16, 3:4, 4:4, 9:26.

28 For examples of *Roshei ve-Sofei Tevot*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 1:20, 3:8, 3:9, 4:15, 5:4, 5:14, 6:1, 7:10, 9:10, 10:1.

29 For examples of *Targum*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 2:1, 2:9, 3:9, 4:5, 5:5, 5:11, 7:3, 9:6.

30 For an example of *At Bash*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 2:8.

31 For examples of *Te'amim/ha-Mesorah*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 2:21, 3:1, 3:2, 3:6, 4:3, 4:16, 5:8, 5:12, 6:13, 7:6, 7:7, 7:8, 8:15, 9:29, 9:31.

32 For examples of *Hilluk*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 5:6, 7:6, 8:15, 8:16.

33 For examples of *Ribbuy*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 5:11, 7:10.

34 For an example of *Sof-Rosh*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 6:5.

35 For an example of *Meshulash*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 6:13.

36 For an example of *Pasek*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 9:27.

37 For an example of *Hipukh*, see R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 9:29.

the Jewish people later on. In the case of the royal proclamations, when the first proclamation was sent out declaring every man to be the ruler of his household, Ahasuerus' subjects considered him so foolish that they did not pay attention to his subsequent letter, which decreed that all Jews were to be killed on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar.<sup>38</sup> The Talmud's message is that each detail of the story was carefully orchestrated by God to provide salvation for the Jewish people. While the Talmud's explanation may seem like a nice homiletic idea with no direct source in the text, R. Eleazar employs the "Gate of *Roshei and Sofei Tevot*" and notes that within the verse that describes the widespread dissemination of the king's proclamation and the behavior of the wives that would follow, the words "הִיא וְכָל הַנְּשִׂיִם יִתְּנוּ" contain the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the lesson that the Sages of the Talmud gleaned from this incident is in fact hidden in the actual wording of the proclamation itself. God's name is literally embedded in the wording, further demonstrating that if one approaches the text with the proper eye, its secrets will be revealed.

It is perhaps surprising that R. Eleazar's application of the "Gates of Understanding" is also a recognizable feature of his legal work, *Sefer Rokeah*. I say surprising, only because this sort of methodology would seemingly relate to a midrashic approach, which is often distinct from legal works. Still, the reader of *Sefer Rokeah* will find word and number exercises throughout most sections of the work. Indeed, R. Eleazar begins his discussion of the Laws of Purim, with an entire section devoted to letter and word exercises, all supporting rabbinic traditions regarding the Book of Esther and the holiday of Purim as was seen in his commentary to Esther.<sup>40</sup>

R. Eleazar begins the section on the Laws of Purim addressing an unspoken, but basic issue discussed in the Talmud regarding the Book of Esther. That is, the dispute over whether the Book of Esther should be included in the scriptural canon. The same proof-text from Exodus<sup>41</sup> is cited in the Talmud both for and against inclusion and the reasoning surrounds a verse in Proverbs. R. Eleazar cites the rabbinic proof-text, but adds an entirely different reasoning based on the "Gates of Understanding." The verse from Exodus states:

38 Megillah 12b.

39 R. Eleazar, *Perush Megillat Esther*, 12.

40 For corresponding material from *Hilkhot Rokeah*, Section 235 and the *Perush Megillat Esther*, see Lehmann note 1.

41 17:14.

”כְּתַב זֹאת זְכוּרֹן בְּסֵפֶר וְשִׁים בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כִּי מַחֵה אֶמְחָה אֶת זְכוּר עַמְלֶק מִתַּחַת  
הַשָּׁמַיִם.”<sup>42</sup>

Write this as remembrance in the book and place it in the ears of Joshua for I will surely erase the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens.

R. Eleazar employs the "Gate of *Mesorah*" and explains that the Rabbis relied on the aforementioned verse because the Book of Deuteronomy contains the root word "*Ketov*" – to write – 23 times, which corresponds to 23 books of *Tanakh*. This additional verse from Exodus that contains the word "*Ketov*," serves as the basis for incorporating Esther as the 24<sup>th</sup> Book of *Tanakh*. Additionally, R. Eleazar reinforces the authority of the verse from Exodus by employing the "Gate of *Otiyyot Gedolot*." There are six letters that are traditionally written larger or smaller than the others in the *Megillah*. The first is the "*Het*" mentioned above, which R. Eleazar notes signifies the clothing of the High Priest. The remaining five, include the letters שתזו"ת which equal 1,113. This is equivalent to the numerical value of the words of the prooftext, "כְּתַב זֹאת זְכוּרֹן" (1,113). R. Eleazar further calculates<sup>43</sup> that from the time God spoke the biblical proof to Moses to the time Esther was taken to Ahasuerus' palace was 954 years. 954 is the numerical value of the continuation of the prooftext verse, "וְשִׁים בְּאָזְנֵי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כִּי מַחֵה אֶמְחָה".

Not satisfied with these two substantiations, R. Eleazar further notes that the numerical value of "כְּתַב זֹאת זְכוּרֹן בְּסֵפֶר וְשִׁים" (1,811) nearly equals that of the words from the *Megillah*, "וְיִתְּכַתֵּב אֶסְתֵּר... וּמִרְדֵּכַי הִיְהוּדִי"<sup>44</sup> (1,809), but equals two more because the first verse hints at the two individuals who would fulfill the command, Esther and Mordecai. Finally, "מַחֵה אֶמְחָה" (107) equals the value of "זֶה הַמֶּן" (107).

This whole passage, replete with textual hints and *gematria*, is a quintessential example of R. Eleazar's approach to the Rabbis' choice of words and prooftexts. R. Eleazar accepts the Rabbis' explanation and choice of prooftexts as so legitimate and true that it is possible to seek the hidden textual support for their views. Uncovering these textual hints of the Sages' explanations further substantiates their teachings and reinforces their authority. Our survey of examples of R. Eleazar's exegetical approach above also exemplifies his view that no textual element is random and there is a lesson to be learned from each letter. Again, it is worth noting that his complex web of numerical calculations is being presented unabashedly in the context

42 Exodus 17:14.

43 See R. Eleazar, *Sefer ha-Rokeah*, Section 235 for the full calculation.

44 Esther 9:29.

of a serious legal work. Indeed, R. Eleazar proceeds to find additional hints at rabbinic teachings regarding Esther in his legal work.

The Talmud draws a connection between a phrase from Genesis and the *Megillah*. The Talmud<sup>45</sup> asks, "Where is Haman found in the Torah?" and the answer given is the phrase "הַמֵּן הָעֵץ" found in Genesis 3:11. In this case, the letters of "from the tree" with different punctuation can be read as "Haman – the Tree" alluding to Haman's demise and death by hanging. R. Eleazar takes this hint of Haman further and strings a web of connections between the story of Adam, Eve, and the Snake in Genesis to the story of Haman. As we will see, the first parallel revolves around the number 70 and R. Eleazar then relates other items numbering 70 to Haman. What follows is found both in the *Sefer Rokeah*, Laws of Purim, as well as in the *Sha'arei Binah* commentary to Esther. This is not surprising, assuming he authored the *Sha'arei Binah* commentary to Esther, as R. Eleazar was known to borrow his own material and incorporate it into his other writings.<sup>46</sup>

A further list of numerically connected verses is expounded by R. Eleazar based on the verse highlighted by the Talmud, "הַמֵּן הָעֵץ". R. Eleazar points out that there are 70 verses from the beginning of Genesis until the curse of the snake, "וְאֵיבָה אָשִׁית" – "And I [God] will place hatred" (between Man and snakes). Likewise, there are 70 verses from the hanging of Bigtan and Teresh and the hanging of Haman. Both Haman's and the snake's doom were brought about by a tree. Through its actions, the snake brought death to the world and its 70 nations as mentioned by the Rabbis, and likewise the Rabbis say Haman brought death to the 70 nations. Furthermore, the commandment to destroy Amalek is the 70<sup>th</sup> commandment counted from the beginning of the portion *שוֹפְטִים וְשׁוֹטְרִים* (Deut. 16:18). Wine makes recurring appearances in the Purim story and י"ן is numerically equivalent to 70. Moreover, from the time Haman sent out his royal proclamation to destroy the Jews to the time that Mordecai's counter proclamation went out was 70 days. Haman was hanged during the 'Omer period and there are 70 verses from the beginning of *Parshat Emor* until the verses regarding the 'Omer. Within those verses there is a further hint at Haman, employing the "Gate of Ending Letters." "תְּהִינָה", "מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם", "הֵהָיוּ", the last letters of three consecutive verses,<sup>47</sup> read backwards spells *הַמֵּן*. R. Eleazar notes that like Haman, who was punished during the 'Omer period, the city of Sodom was also destroyed during the

45 Hulin 139b.

46 See Simcha Emanuel, "Serid mi-Perusho shel R. Eleazar mi-Vermaiza le-Sefer Tehillim," in *Kovez 'al Yad* 22 (2013), p. 118.

47 Leviticus 23:13-15.

'Omer. This leads R. Eleazar to examine the verses related to Sodom and to note that there too Haman is hinted at in the reverse ending letters of "גַּם הַלְיָהּ":<sup>48</sup>

R. Eleazar further explains that Haman is hinted at in the story of the fraught meeting between Esau and Jacob. In Genesis 32:12, Jacob fears that Esau will kill Jacob's family, including women and children, a foreshadowing of the murderous decree of Haman. Haman's downfall begins on the third night of the Jews' fasting. This is hinted at by three occurrences of the word "night" in Genesis, chapter 32, verses 14, 22, and 23. Furthermore, Haman is hinted at in the verse, "וַיִּלֶן שָׁם בַּלַּיְלָהּ", with the reverse ending letters spelling Haman. Finally, Jacob attempts to assuage Esau's anger with presents, as the verse states, "וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ" (Gen. 32:14), and this hints at a rabbinic teaching mentioned in the Talmud that Haman found Mordecai studying the laws of the *Minḥah* sacrifice.<sup>49</sup> R. Eleazar continues for four more paragraphs in his legal work demonstrating further hints at Haman found in Scripture through the application of various "Gates," but these examples suffice for our purpose of demonstrating the extensive application of the "Gates" to connect rabbinic traditions and related scriptural texts.

To conclude, we have demonstrated that the use of *gematria* and other letter and number studies in the commentary of R. Eleazar of Worms to the Book of Esther function to link talmudic teachings to the text of the *Megillah*. This methodology was part of R. Eleazar's broader project to preserve and perpetuate the tradition of how it is that the talmudic teachings are embedded in and emerge from the written text of Torah using a hermeneutical system known as the *Sha'arei Binah*, or 50 "Gates of Understanding." R. Eleazar's approach allows the reader to view the explanations of the Rabbis not as extra-textual, but intra-textual, drawn from a hyper-close reading of the text and intrinsic to the text itself. Rather than embroidery, talmudic teachings are part of the threads that make up the tapestry of the Written Torah. While the Written and Oral Laws would have survived separately, R. Eleazar feared the link between them would be lost had he not committed the methodology to writing.

Much has been discussed regarding the transition from oral transmission to written texts in mystical circles. R. Eleazar uses the phrase *received* in describing the way the material was passed to him and how he passed it on to his own son, but with no one to *receive* the secrets they had to be *written*. It is interesting that while the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* had many "secrets," related to topics such as anthropomorphic references to God, the *Merkavah*, angels, and the soul, all documented in R. Eleazar's other

48 Genesis 19:34.

49 Megillah 16a.

writings, when R. Eleazar decries the plight of those too occupied with simple survival to have the peace of mind to absorb the totality of his teachings, he is not referring to the secrets of the *Merkavah* or angelology, but to the intricate system that links the text of the Torah with the Talmud. It is this intricate hermeneutical system, which links the text of the Written Torah with the Oral Torah, that R. Eleazar considered primary and which he feared would be lost, and with it the secret of the unity of the Torah.