

ימי עיון בתנ"ך תשפ"ד

Anti-Semitism in Megillat Esther: When Ancient Stories and Modern Realities Collide

Dr. Yosefa (Fogel) Wruble

yosefa.fogel@gmail.com

(1) מלבי"ם אסתר ג'ו'

ויבקש להשמיד את כל היהודים מצד שהם עם מרדכי ומשתתפים בדתו, ורצה להכחיד כלל הדת ההיא באבדן השומרים אותו.

(2) ר' יוסף קרא פירוש ב אסתר ג'ו'

ויבז בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי – פתרונו: אם הגידו שמרדכי מעם אחר ולא מן היהודים, לא בז בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו, כי היה אומר אם אבקש להשמיד כל עם מרדכי, אין המלך שומע לי בכך, כי כן יאמר לי המלך: אם אדם אחד חטא, כל העם מה חטאו, ולא ישמע לי לעקור אומה שלימה על חנם. אבל כשהגידו לו את עם מרדכי שהם יהודים, חשב בדעתו לאבד כל עם מרדכי, כמו שמפרש: ויבז בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי.

(3) ר' י"ש ריגיון אסתר ג'ו'

תחלה צריך להתבונן כי סבת שנאת המן נגד היהודים לא היתה רק בעבור כי מרדכי מאן לכרוע לפניו, אבל גם זולת זה, ואף קודם לכן נשרשה בלבו נגדם איבה גדולה אשר ירש אותה מאבותיו האגגים שהיו מזרע עמלק. וידוע איך צר עמלק את העם היוצא ממצרים וזנב בו את הנחשלים אחריו, והכתוב העיד שם על רשעת עמלק במאמר ולא ירא אלהים (דברים כ"ה:י"ח). ואפשר עוד שהגיע לאזניו מאמר האל מלחמה לה' בעמלק מדור דור {שמות י"ז:ט"ז} והצווי לישראל תמחה את זכר עמלק {דברים כ"ה:י"ט}, כמו שזכר בלי ספק המלחמה הקשה אשר נלחם שאל עם אבותיו והריגת אגג על ידי שמואל, ובזה נתחזקה שנאת המן ובני ביתו נגד היהודים. ועתה כותב המגלה ביאר לנו זאת באמרו: ויבז בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי ויבקש המן וכו', הרי שאם היה מרדכי מעם אחר היה די לו ליקח נקמתו מן האיש ההוא בלבד. אבל כאשר שמע כי הוא יהודי, נתעוררה בו השנאה הקדומה נגד כל העם ההוא, וחשב שיהיה נגד כבודו לשלוח יד באיש אחד לבד מן הזרע ההוא המתועב בעיניו, ולכן בקש להשמיד את כולם.

Chapter 9

(4) ר' מאיר עראמה אסתר ט'ו'

ומה – שלא שלחו בבזה את ידם המותרות להם להראות כי אין כוונתם רק להציל את נפשם כאמור למעלה אשר מותר מחויב לכל בעל נפש לברוח מן המזיק ולהציל את נפשו אפילו בנפשו של רודף אמנם מה שיותר להם בכתב מרדכי היה כדי להשוות אלה הספרים אל הראשונים מכל וכל להראות העמים והשרים כי הדבר הזה שוה למלך דכל דאלים גבר ותלו דעת וכוונת המלך להסיר השנאה והקטטה ממלכותו כי רבה ולהסיר איבה ואפשר שעשו כן מפני כי מלחמה לה' בעמלק היא והוא יתברך צוה והמת מאיש ועד אישה וגו' ובו נכשל אבי המלכות שאל המלך הראשון כי הנה הוא חמל על מיטב הצאן ועליו אמר החפץ לה' בעולות וזבחים (שמואל א ט"ו). ועל כן לא התירו זקני עיר ועיר לשלוט ידם בשלל פן יחטאו גם הם במצות שמואל אשר היא פירוש תמחה זכר עמלק בלי ספק ומה שאמר מרדכי אליהם ושללם לבוז בשם המלך כתבו ומפני הסבה האמורה שנאמר ויכתבם בשם המלך ויקראו ספרי המלך ויכתב ככל אשר צוה או סמך על חכמי ישראל.

(5) מלבי"ם אסתר ט'י"ג

ותאמר אסתר – עפ"ז מצאה אסתר מקום לבקש מהמלך, והיתה עצתה שיהרגו בשושן גם מחר, כי בזה תפול אימה ופחד על צוררי היהודים, אם יראו שעדיין יד המלך נטויה עליהם אמנם לפי דעתי היה בקשתה על שושן העיר לא שושן הבירה, כי שושן נחלקת לשני חלקים, מקום הבירה ששם ישב המלך והשרים, והיא היתה נקראת שושן הבירה, והעיר בפ"ע היתה נקראת שושן סתם, וביום י"ג הרגו בשושן הבירה, ובקשה

ימי עיון בתנ"ך תשפ"ד

אסתר שיתן רשות להרוג ביום י"ד האויבים שנשארו בשושן העיר, גם לתלות עשרת בני המן להפיל אימה ופחד, כדי שלא יוסיפו להזיד על ישראל.

6) Adele Berlin, JPS Esther Commentary, p. 81

Chapter 9 portrays scenes of violence and revenge on a massive scale in the form of the massacre by the Jews of over 75,000 non-Jews. To make matters worse, the massacre replayed a second time. This then becomes an occasion for celebration and merrymaking for all Jews everywhere. It is no wonder that this chapter did not resonate well with later readers, especially Christians, and many Jews, too, are uncomfortable with what they see as a heartless and bloodthirsty Jewish revenge. That the massacre is not an act of revenge but is an act of self-defense taken by Jews against their enemies, explicitly stated in 9:1, does not lay their discomfort to rest...

A better way to relate to the events of chapter 9 is to see them as part of the carnivalesque farce that permeates the whole book and defines its genre. Scenes of tumultuous [?] and violent mock-destruction are completely at home in farcical and carnivalesque works; in fact, they are their hallmarks. Chapter 9 is the climax of the carnivalesque, the peak of disorder. Exaggeration and irrationality reach new heights, even for this book. But it is all in fun; nothing here is real. It is emotional release at its wildest.

Our reaction to the carnivalesque is a learned reaction. Children are often afraid of clowns and masquerades until they learn to laugh at them. There is, indeed, something dark and scary about the carnivalesque, just barely masked by the fun that surrounds it. The actions of carnival are playfully grotesque acts that would never be condoned in real life. It is in this context of carnivalesque violence that we should understand chapter 9...The function of "farcical" fantasies, in dreams or in plays, is not as provocation but as compensation. The violent release is comparable to the sudden relieving hiss of steam through a safety valve...The make-believe victory is the safety valve for Diaspora Jewry that permits the continuation of the belief in the security of their lives and their community. To put the world right, as the Book of Esther does, requires the removal of evil, of the enemy.

7) M. Fox, Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther, 297-300

Esther's requests, Mordecai's decree, and the people's conduct of the war have been condemned for displaying aggressiveness, brutality, and vindictiveness. Schalom Ben-Chorin (1939:9) described the Jewish action as a pogrom protected by the regime.... Haman's edict had proscribed the Jews, making it legal for any one to kill and rob them. The proscription could not be rescinded but only countered. The Jews' enemies were by no means neutralized by Mordecai's edict, which did not even assure the Jews of official aid. To imagine the foe as "defenseless" (Pfeiffer 1952:741) is a perverse misdirection of pity....There can be no vengeance without an unpunished offense. In this case, the revenge is directed against actively hostile, armed enemies. It is not a mere vendetta, vengeance of past wrong, upon a currently pacific

Esther, for her part, had not sought hostilities or vengeance prior to 13 Adar. She had not asked that her enemies be punished, but only that Haman's edict be returned, that is,

ימי עיון בתנ"ך תשפ"ד

rescinded (8:5) This bloodless solution failed only because the rigidity of the gentile state proved unable to protect the lives of its Jewish subjects...

The Jews are of necessity fighting defensively. The phrase "to make a stand for their lives" (8:11) shows that their lives were in danger. They are not fighting against gentiles as such, but only against the deliberate persecutors of the Jews, "the forces of every people and province who afflict them" (8:11), in other words, armed bands ("forces") of assailants...

The Jews' struggle is not, however, without moral blemish.

Mordecai's edict is tainted by the permission to kill the enemies' children... Like the saturation bombing of Nuremburg and Dresden, this killing of noncombatants is part of an overall defensive strategy, and, like it, unnecessary and excessive.

The permission to kill the enemies' wives and children is not reported to have been carried into effect. Its importance is to exist in the edict as a counterpart of the same clause in Haman's decree. The clause need not be carried out in order to "work" in this way. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women and children in the scope of the authorization respects literary values the neatness of the tit-for-tat schema-at the expense of an ethical value: the exclusion of noncombatants from hostilities...

The principle of excluding noncombatants from hostilities was not, it must be noted, generally recognized in the ancient world... While the Jews had no choice but to fight on 13 Adar, their moral ground becomes shakier on the 14th, when the danger no longer existed. Haman's edict allowed the Jews' enemies to attack only on 13 Adar, and the entire drama rests on the presumption that the enemies would not, or could not, resort to force without such permission, just as the Jews themselves needed special permission to fight on a second day. The king's agreement to Haman's scheme and the rigidity of Persian law necessitated a war whose shock waves were to harm the perpetrators of the hostility; but that harm was not sought as an end in itself.

8) Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn*, pp. 214-230

(i) The needs and urges of one's body and spirit have always been seen as demanding that man pull away from ideas and truths to occupy himself with eating, digestion and excretion, infatuations and sex, clothing and shelter, natural and chemical intoxications, sleep, discomfort and illness of the various kinds, honor and anger, phobias, depressions and other impairments of the spirit, and death. They are a bottomless pit, into which all life's energies and abilities easily disappear without a trace. After a lifetime preoccupied with the pursuit of them, man finds that he has nothing to show for his efforts other than having worn out a body which had started its career fresh. It has therefore been considered a virtue to minimize one's concern for the needs and urges of the body and of the spirit to whatever degree possible in order to free the mind for its confrontation with higher things. **This virtue, when found in men, has been called purity or holiness the Hebrew word for holiness being kedusha, meaning "separation," from the body, from the concerns of men and from the world...**

ימי עיון בתנ"ך תשפ"ד

(ii) The needs of the world, on the other hand-the protection of innocent life, the dissemination of truth and the establishment of justice, the alleviation of suffering, the development of productive talents and capacities, the facilitation of happiness and the attainment of peace-all these have been held to be the noblest of efforts, and the pursuit of them has been held to be a virtue. Yet if they are to be pursued to any worthy effect, they demand the greatest possible concentration of the individual's worldly resources, the maximal use of his body and his spirit to attain high levels of experience and skill, reputation, respect and wealth, allies and power, in order to have a hope of achieving that perfection of the world which can possibly be achieved. **And this virtue has been called morality or justice...**

The crux of the contradiction between the two ideals is man's relationship to power. **Purity requires that man renounce power; but morality requires that man have power in order to pursue right.** This is true on the individual level, in which one can only give to others if one has what to give. But it is even more true when one considers moralities of scale, which require vast amounts of political power, economic power, military power. Without power, there is no police force capable of defending the innocent, no court capable of doing justice, no army capable of wresting peace from the aggressor, no surplus capable of feeding and clothing the poor, nor of paying to teach truth to the young. Morality requires power, and morality on a vast scale requires power on a vast scale...

Mordechai's war is a war of morality, a war fought in the world and by its rules because any other choice in his time and place would have been folly. Thus if one were to ask why so many men had to die on the day of the fighting, if the results were by then practically assured, the answer is that this is the way of politics. Without decisive action against his enemy, Mordechai would have guaranteed himself a reputation of hesitancy and mildness a reputation which would have breathed new life into the anti-Semitism of the empire and left the king doubting the Jewish vizier's abilities. And if one were to ask why Haman's ten sons had to die, it is wishful thinking to argue that every one of them was active as a leader in the camp of the anti-Semites. Rather, their deaths are sought, as was accepted in the course of warfare and politics in antiquity, to prevent Haman's enmity from leaving heirs, as well as to degrade his memory and emphasize the enormity of his defeat...

The fine distinction between just war and murder is today referred to as the "purity of arms," and this is what is at issue, too, in Esther, where Mordechai's war against the Persian anti-Semites is told as a replay of the Amalekite war in Samuel. Here, the emphasis on not touching the property of the anti-Semites is intended to indicate the purity of the cause. Men are killed because they had been planning to murder the Jews, and as a pre-emption against future threats. The fact that this is understood by the Jews to be the sole motive raises their warfare to a level of purity far higher than that of Haman, and higher too than that which had been practiced by their ancestors. It is for this reason that the tradition refers to Mordechai as "the righteous": Because in raising the Jews to impressive purity amid the fearsome acts of politics and war required in his place and time, he provided precisely the kind of political leadership for which the Jews should hope in every generation.