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WHAT IF THE MEGILLAH HAS NOTHING TO TEACH US? A MOSTLY SERIOUS DVAR TORAH

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Most years, we Jews use texts to teach ourselves about reality. For example, hundreds of edifying articles come out each Adar with titles like "Leadership Secrets of Haman the Agagite," or "How to Win Husbands and Influence Emperors." This year, I think everything should be turned upside down. We should use reality to teach ourselves about the megillah. In fact, we may need to assimilate what we've been taught by reality before we can learn from the megillah again.

Let's start where most such essays begin, with a discussion of whether Achashverosh was a wise or rather a foolish king. This argument often becomes a sort of latke-hamantaschen debate. Before the first drink, one side will point out the ridiculousness of legislating male domestic dominance, while the other will note the wisdom of cutting taxes; after the second or third drink, positions reverse, and so forth.

This year's reality taught me that there is no need to argue. The same ruler can be perceived both ways, on the basis of the same evidence, by different political factions and social groups.

This is not obvious. While presidents and their policies are often controversial, generally the disputes are about whether their decisions are principled or pandering, or about whether they are following the opinions of the correct group of experts. For the same ruler to be perceived simultaneously as either brilliant or mindless, calculating or random, happens less often (although it was also true of Reagan).

What if Megillat Esther was deliberately written to allow for both narratives? What if, by withdrawing His presence from the explicit narration, G-d turned Scripture into the ultimate work of impartial media, so that all political sides could trust His reporters?

This might mean that the Jews of the Persian Empire were also deeply split about whether Achashverosh was really on their side. Which makes Mordekhai and Esther's feat of arranging a bipartisan fast even more remarkable.

You may ask: How could the Jews of Shushan think that Achashverosh was on their side, when he had signed a decree authorizing genocide against them? The answer is that they knew all along that the initial genocide decree was a trick to get the anti-Semites (many of whom were also pedophiles) to reveal themselves, so they could be absolutely crushed.

Mordekhai and Esther found a way to argue for the fast *mimah nafshakh*: If the threat of genocide was real,then of course a fast was necessary; and if it was a trick, then it was essential not to tip the enemy off by acting relaxed.

Another possibility is that many Jews believed that Achasheverosh was unaware of the planned genocide against them, and would stop it if he knew. So they supported the fast as a nonviolent public demonstration intended to get the king's attention.

This view of Achashverosh is in fact the position of Rabbi Yitzhak Shmuel Reggio, a student of ShaDaL (Rabbi S. D. Luzzatto), whose highly original commentary is now available on AlHatorah.org. He notes that Haman never mentions the name of his target nation in his pitch to Achashverosh, and that the genocidal decree is written in accordance with "everything that Haman commanded," likely with Achashverosh out of the room.

So the fast was on one level an impressive display of unity, and on another an impressive job of designing a political action that people could enthusiastically participate in together while strongly disagreeing with each other about why.

The Talmudic discussion (Megillah 12a) of Achashverosh's acumen focuses on a different detail. Chapter 1 tells us that Achashverosh first made a feast for his entire kingdom, and only afterward for the people in Shushan.

רב ושמואל;
חד אמר: מלך פיקח היה;
וחד אמר: מלך טיפש היה.
מאן דאמר מלך פיקח היה - שפיר עבד דקריב רחיקא ברישא,
דבני מאתיה, כל אימת דבעי - מפייס להו;
ומאן דאמר טפש היה - דאיבעי ליה לקרובי בני מאתיה ברישא,
דאי מרדו ביה הנך - הני הוו קיימי בהדיה.
Rav and Shmuel (disagreed):
One said: He was a clever king;
One said: He was a foolish king.
The one who said he was a clever king – he did well to first attract those further away,

as the people of his city he could appease whenever he wanted;
The one who said he was a foolish king – he should have first brought the people of his city close,
so that if the others revolted against him, they wouldstand with him.

The first side argues that to rule a genuinely multicultural empire, you need to build coalitions with ethnic groups aside from your own. Massive government feasts are a good start, but Achashverosh – being clever - realized that he also needed to make explicit gestures toward cultural autonomy, even if that meant entrenching misogyny. Hence "So that every man would reign in his house, and speak his ethnic tongue." In an identity-based body politic, the base's loyalty is deep, stubborn, and easily renewable.

The other side argued that the one must always first secure the base. It's true they won't turn against you regardless, but in key moments, turnout is crucial – you need the base to be hyper-enthusiastic, not sullenly loyal.

Eisenstein's Otzar HaMidrashim cites a darker and more authoritarian formulation of the dispute:

יש מי שאומר: שחכם היה
שעשה משתה בראשונה לכל אנשי המדינות הרחוקות
מפני שאנשי עירו לא יוכלו למרוד בו,
מפני שהיה מצוי עמהם תמיד והם ברשותו,
לכן הקדים אנשי המדינות הרחוקות;
ויש מי שאמר: מלך טפש היה
לפי שהיה צריך לכבד אנשי עירו בתחלה,
ובהם יוכל לכוף אנשי המדינות האחרות,
ולא עשה כהוגן

One says: He was wise
in that he made the banquet first for all the people of the distant provinces
because the people of his city would not be able torebel against him,
because he is constantly among them and they are in his direct authority.
That's why he prioritized the men of distant provinces.
But one says: He was a foolish king
because he needed to honor the people of his cityfirst,
and with them he could subdue all the men of the otherprovinces,
so his policy was incorrect.

In this version, the loyalty of the base is grounded in fear of retaliation, not shared identity, and the empire is conquered in the first place by a small band of loyalists.

Yalkut Shimoni (2 Kings 237) records Rav and Shmuel disputing the wisdom of a different emperor's policies. In 2 Kings 18:31-2, the besieging Sancheriv tells the defenders of Yerushalayim not to be seduced by Chizkiyahu's promise of victory; instead, they should surrender, and he will exile them to "a land like your land; a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey." Rav and Shmuel dispute whether Sancheriv was clever or foolish in promising an equal rather than a better land. One says that he was clever, as the Jews would not have believed a bigger promise; the other says that he was foolish, because this way the Jews could simply shrug off the offer by saying they had nothing to gain.

All these disputes exist and are seen worthy of preserving **even though we know the outcome of the relevant policies**. Sancheriv does not succeed in getting Jews to open the gates for him, and then his army is destroyed by plague. So on what basis do we call him wise? Achashverosh successfully holds onto all 127 provinces without notable rebellions near or far. So on what basis do we call him foolish?

The best answer is that Rav and Shmuel were not learning policy from the texts – they were using their political experiences to prevent us from misreading the texts. Sancheriv was not successful, but we **shouldn't learn from that** that overpromising is the only route to success, because reality shows us otherwise; Achashverosh was successful in preventing rebellion, but we **shouldn't learn from that** that taking one's base for granted is the only route to success, because reality shows us otherwise.

Once we know political cause-and-effect in the real world with absolute certainty, we can of course derive lessons with confidence from the text on that basis. For example, based on my analysis above, we can learn that the best way to Jewish unity in an environment rife with conspiracy theories is to call for a public fast whose purpose can be understood in very different ways.

Or maybe, just maybe, we should recognize that we can never know political cause-and-effect with certainty in the real world, and we should therefore be deeply suspicious of any claims that texts can dictate political strategy.

That doesn't mean that texts have no role in shaping our thinking. But this year, I suggest that we err on the side of humility.