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PURIM, ANTI-ANTISEMITISM, AND MODERN ORTHODOXY

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

I had the pleasure of listening as Rabbi David Silber taught Megillat Esther to one of my tenth grade classes at Gann Academy in 2013, and thought that several of his ideas deserved to be passed on. So this dvar Torah is admittedly derivative, although of course I take full responsibility for any errors. I have asterisked the points I recall specifically from Rabbi Silber. The Dvar Torah in this form was originally published in 2013 and then again in 2014.

Megillat Esther opens with a massive all-male drinking party at King Achashverosh's palace, then cuts to an all-female drinking party at the queen's palace. Disaster strikes when the king demands that Queen Vashti switch parties* while "wearing the crown of royalty, so as to show the nations and the officers her beauty". The midrashic suggestion that she was ordered to come wearing *only* the crown captures the atmosphere of the verse perfectly, although the specific facts necessary to create that atmosphere may well be culturally dependent.

Vashti refuses, and the king (at least) banishes her and removes her queenship. It's not clear whether we are supposed to sympathize with her (in which case her role in the story is to help establish Achashverosh's character and explain Esther's handling of him), ignore her, or celebrate her downfall (thus the midrashim which suggest that Achashverosh was essentially imitating her humiliation of Jewish women).

A key question is whether Achashverosh's demand of Vashti is a breach of Persian morals or not. If it is, it generates a whole social breakdown, as all the virgins in Persia are now put on display for the king, and all the women are put on notice that they may not refuse any of their husbands' requests. Ironically, it is precisely this breakdown that enables the reversal of fortune at the megillah's end - Esther invites the king and Haman to drinking parties, and Haman's fate is sealed when the king reasonably suspects that such drinking parties lead to debauchery.

Now how do the Jews relate to all this? The midrash reasonably assumes that they participate in the party (the midrash also notes that no reason is given for the party, and suggests that it was about the failure of the promised Jewish redemption to arrive - thus the use of כלים מכלים שונים in 1:7, which the midrash identifies with the Temple vessels), and there is no hint in the text that they object to the chauvinist decree or the taking of the virgins. To all accounts they participate כדת*, in accordance with the law - a term which appears in 1:8 (describing the drinking), in 1:15 (regarding Vashti's fate), and in 2:8 and 2:12 (regarding the collection and preparation of the virgins, described as "in accordance with the דת of women").

But Haman does not see it that way. The Jews, he declares in 3:8, have different דתs than any other nation (ודתיהם שונות מכל עם - note that the word שונות recalls וכלים מכלים שונים, and is likely a basis for identifying those with the Temple vessels), and they do not follow the דתs of the king. Is Haman correct? Or is this an anti-Semitic projection?* Regardless, in 3:15 the king's דת becomes that the Jews are to be exterminated.

The truth is that one Jew - Mordekhai - refuses to obey one order (which is, interestingly, never called a דת, but rather a צווי) of the king - bowing down to Haman. I suggest that Mordekhai sees Haman as ambitious and a threat to the king, whose life Mordechai has already

saved. ונהפוך הוא - it is Mordekhai's loyalty that exposes him to the charge of being a Vashti. At the same time, we learn that Haman may be somewhat hen-pecked, despite the king's banishment of Vashti.

In 4:16, the plot turns when Esther agrees to approach Achashverosh אשר לא כדת, after protesting that all the people of all the nations know better. In other words, she makes Haman's charge true - her דת is not the king's, and different from those of all other nations. In 8:13 the king overwrites his דת of extermination, and in 9:13 we learn that the new Jewish דת involves hanging the ten sons of Haman.

Is that all there is to Persian Judaism - does ונהפוך הוא (see 9:1) change only who's on top and who on bottom, but not the nature of society?

As of 8:17, that seems to be the case - the Jewish reaction to victory is - a drinking party!* In which they are apparently joined by many nonJews, who are now afraid of them. In other words, they have become Achashverosh.

But in 9:19, a new feature (mitzvah - דת?) is added to the day - now in addition to the drinking, there must also be mishloach manot, reflecting some recognition of community, and in 9:22, a radically new דת - מתנות לאביונים, gifts to the poor.*

Until 9:22, the Megillah is a court farce, and one might be forgiven for thinking that the entire plot relates only to the wealthy elite -perhaps the extermination plan seemed total to them because they simply didn't consider the poor. But over time, the Jews - perhaps prodded by Mordekhai and Esther - recognize that this episode should cause them to question the whole moral structure of Persian society, and so their דתות in fact become different than those of other nations.* . (If I were a dyed in the wool liberal I would connect this to Mordekhai raising taxes as well, but I'm not.)

Most specifically, the Jews become the antithesis of Amalek, which attacks specifically the weak.* We reject the evolutionary imperative and preserve those who cannot protect themselves.

The challenge of this reading is that it makes anti=Semitism the spur of Jewish morality. We are blessed to live in a society in which caring for the less fortunate or less able is an almost universally agreed upon דת, although we disagree strongly about how best to accomplish that. But there are other areas in which there is profound pressure to fall into step with the immoral moral expectations - the דתות - of the society that surrounds us.

This is especially true of Modern Orthodoxy. I confess that the first chapter of the Megillah always puts me in mind of a group of male Orthodox college students I once knew who would drink themselves into oblivion each Friday night, but tried hard to send the female students home (to their own parties?) before they completely lost control over their behavior.

Nonetheless, I don't think that self-ghettoization is effective, and it has its own corruptions. The yetzer hora (evil inclination) finds its way through cracks in the walls, and is all the more effective when unrecognized.

But openness to influence must be balanced with a firm sense of identity and moral self-confidence - we must be willing to be out of step, even if that causes us to pay a heavy social price - even if we are no longer invited to the parties, or lose influence in political parties. "Everyone thinks that" is no more an excuse for us than it was for Esther.