

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## JEWISH POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY in the LIGHT of MEGILLAT ESTHER

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Reading Megillat Esther without midrashim frees one from (some) external biases. The result is not an objective reading, but rather one that reflects internal biases. This is not bad; we each have unique contributions to make to the understanding of Torah based *davka* on our unique experiences, on our subjectivity. But recognizing that the goal is to relate our full selves to the text can make reengagement with midrashim liberating rather than constricting. This essay tries to model such an experience.

I have always been puzzled by 1:13-14, immediately following Vashti's refusal of the king's summons.

The king said to the sages, knowers of the times  
because that is the royal responsibility before all those who  
know custom and law  
and those closest to him

Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena,  
Memukhan

the seven officers of Persia and Medea  
those with direct access to the king  
who sit in the front row of the government.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַחֲכָמִים יִדְעֵי הָעֵתִים  
כִּי־כֵן דָּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַפְּנֵי פְּלִי־יָדָעֵי גַת וְגִדּוֹ:  
וְהִקְרָב אֵלָיו

כַּרְשֵׁנָּה שֶׁתָּר אַדְמַתָּא תַרְשִׁישׁ מֶרֶס מַרְסָנָּה מְמוּחָן  
שְׁבַע־עֶשְׂרֵת שָׂרֵיו פָּרְס וּמְדַי  
רְאֵי פְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
הַיֹּשְׁבִים רְאוּשָׁנָה בְּמַלְכוּת:

Traditional readers know that Memukhan is Haman, and that this is the moment that justifies his aggrandizement at the outset of Chapter 3. Whether one accepts this identification or not, Memukhan's advice must somehow lead to Haman's rise, or else why is it in the story?

The other six officers are stick figures – they exist only to emphasize that Memukhan is the only one bold enough to speak. In other words: all seven understand that Achashverosh does not really wish to consult them, and Memukhan is not seeking to offer advice. The goal is to say something that the king already agrees with. Memukhan is the only one willing to gamble that he properly understands the king's desired outcome. (This is the gamble Haman loses when the king asks him how to reward an anonymous someone. He says exactly what the king wants to hear, but misses the context.)

Another midrash sees Vashti as a daughter of the previous dynasty. Achashverosh had so far overthrown her family but not the structure they created; Memukhan understands that

this confrontation was his way of taking the revolution one step further.

It seems clear that the seven named figures held the seven offices that formally guaranteed direct access to the king and front-bench seats in Parliament. But were they the same as the “sages, knowers of the times”, and the “knowers of custom and law”?

Megillah 12b says they were not.

*“The king said to the sages”* – Who were the sages? The rabbis;

*“knowers of the times”* – who know when to make leap years and establish months (= the Sanhedrin).

He said to them:

Judge (Vashti) for me!

They said (to themselves):

How shall we act?

If we say to him: “Kill her!” – tomorrow, his wine will wear off and he will demand (revenge for) her from us!

If we say to him: “Let her be!” – we’ll be (accused of) disrespecting the monarchy!

They said to him:

From the day that the Temple was destroyed and we were exiled from our land – the capacity for wise policy has been taken from us, and we cannot deal with capital cases. Go ask

Amon and Moav . . .

Immediately *“the ones closest to him: Karshena etc.”*

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לַחֲכָמִים - מאן חכמים? רבנן;  
יִדְעֵי הָעֵתִים - שְׂוִיעֵינָא לְעַבְרָא שְׁנִים וְלַקְבוּעַ חֲדָשִׁים.

אמר להו:

דייבנה לי!

אמרו:

היכי נעביד?

נימא ליה: 'קטלה' - למחר פסיק ליה חמריה ובעי לה מינן!

נימא ליה: 'שבקה' - קא מזלזלה במלכותא!

אמרו לו:

מיום שחרב בית המקדש וגלינו מארצנו - ניטלה עצה ממנו, ואין אנו יודעין לדון דיני נפשות. זיל לגבי עמון ומואב . . .

מיד - והקרבו אליו כרשנא שתר אדמתא תרשיש.

Achashverosh turned first to the Sanhedrin to ask what to do about Vashti. When they abdicate, he turns to the Seven; six of them are silent, and Memukhan seizes his chance.

The fundamental claim underlying Memukhan = Haman and *knowers of the times* ≠ the Seven is that the Megillah tells the story of a constitutional monarchy devolving into an arbitrary autocracy. The sages and the Seven never appear again in the story. Achashverosh moves on to make genocidal decisions

without consulting them, or anyone. No one gets direct access to the king, and there are no front benches, only a king sitting in a throne room with the unchallenged power to kill anyone who dares approach him without advance permission. (In other words, Achashverosh's throne room becomes the Holy of Holies.)

Yet what should the rabbis have done? Their analysis was reasonable – it was entirely possible that Achashverosh would blame them either way, or even that he was deliberately setting them up to be blamed.

Maybe we should praise them for recognizing that they had no role. In fact, the Sanhedrin did the same thing in Israel toward the end of the Second Temple – they moved out of their Temple office (the Chamber of Hewed Stones) in order to give up jurisdiction over capital cases, so as to avoid being forced to decide between the pro- and anti-Roman factions of their constituency, or perhaps to avoid being directly pressured by the Romans to execute Jewish rebels.

But I think it is much more likely that the Talmud is blaming the Sanhedrin for the rise of Haman.

Granted, the genocide doesn't actually happen, and there is room for someone to argue that the Sanhedrin's failure was a necessary part of G-d's subtle plan leading to Redemption. Yes but – the moral of the story then has to be that our job is to do what's right, and not to try to anticipate His plan. Can you imagine the Sanhedrin thinking: "Let's bring on an attempted genocide, so that we can be saved by a Jewish queen, so that in the next generation or so we'll get permission to rebuild a Jewish state"? We believe that all paths, given infinite duration, will lead to Redemption; it makes little sense to say that Redemption could not have happened without X just because X happened first, even if you can construct a causal chain.

What should the Sanhedrin have done? I suggest that the problem was that they asked the wrong question. They asked: What answer can we give that will protect us? The right question to ask was: What is the ethical and moral answer? That might lead to secondary questions such as: Must we tell the king that answer, even if he might kill us for it immediately or eventually? Is there a safe way to tell him? But they skipped the ethical deliberation stage and went straight to pragmatic political considerations.

(Another midrashic tradition asserts that Vashti was guilty of horrific and antisemitic sexual crimes against Jewish women. She got what she deserved. The problem was that the king wanted her punished for the entirely different "crime" of resisting the king's demand that she exhibit herself publicly as a sexual object. Condemning her on the king's terms ironically entailed condoning her actual evil deeds.)

As with Memukhan = Haman, accepting the point of the Midrash does not require accepting its historical claim literally. The Jews were a politically influential constituency whether or not the king specifically asked the Sanhedrin. They were also a desperately vulnerable constituency (perhaps because they were stateless, or perhaps their vulnerability would have been accentuated had their state also been vulnerable). When public

questions of justice came up, they had to choose whether to focus on their responsibility or rather their vulnerability. They chose their vulnerability, and that became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Let me be clear. Achashverosh was not a democratic leader. But at the outset of the Megillah, he functioned within a rules-based order to which he was in some way accountable. By the middle of the Megillah, he permits genocide for the sake of a bribe; by the end, he permits anticipatory mass killing out of sexual jealousy; and there is no hint that anything or anyone can constrain his choices.

The Jews by themselves could not have prevented this. They were in a Prisoner's Dilemma; only a collective insistence by all the kingdom's constituencies on following the rules could constrain Achashverosh. But some, perhaps many, perhaps all of the kingdom's other constituencies were antisemitic and might cheerfully risk freeing the king from all constraints for the sake of killing the Jews. Or they might fall into the grip of fantasies in which the king was already giving the Jews unjust and undeserved influence. That is to say, they might take our midrash literally and believe that the king submitted all crucial policy decisions to the Elders of Zion, who in turn advised him solely in terms of their own interests.

All this argued for saying nothing and keeping our heads down except on matters that affected our interests directly. But the outcome was that we were not consulted, even or especially, on matters that affected our survival.

Some recent books have read Megillat Esther as a political handbook for surviving in the Diaspora, and maybe even taken Mordekhai and Esther as role models for a Jewish state seeking to survive in an international jungle. That may well be true. What I've tried to show is that these midrashim offer a plausible reading of the story in which the preferred strategy – with no guaranteed result – is to take on responsibility for maintaining the rules and norms necessary for a society to be capable of restraining the arbitrary exercise of power.

This is an almost unapologetically midrashic reading. That is to say, I make no apologies for using midrash, but I try quite hard to argue that the midrashim are exposing genuine aspects of the text.

My interpretation of those aspects is of course heavily influenced by my internal biases; your application of my interpretation to contemporary life will of course be influenced by your own biases. I ask two things: First, that you consider the idea that I raised at the outset that midrash, and all traditional interpretation, can be experienced as liberating rather than constraining. Second, that you evaluate my interpretation first as interpretation, to the best of your ability, and then afterward – if and only if you think it has some claim to truth – consider how it might influence your sense of your own religious responsibilities in our world.

*Shabbat shalom!*