

Megillath Esther

The Book of Esther

Introduction

After the Jewish people rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, they were exiled to Babylon. Seventy years later, a coalition of Median forces under King Darius and Persian forces under King Cyrus conquered Babylon and absorbed it into the newly-formed Persian-Median Empire. Darius served as the first emperor, followed by Cyrus. Achashverosh succeeded Cyrus.

Achashverosh ascended to the throne as a usurper, having no royal blood in his veins. His only tenuous claim to power was through his marriage to Vashti, who was descended from the defeated and conquered Babylonian dynasty.

Of course, not all kings ascend to the throne through dynastic succession. The founders of dynasties are usually warriors that succeed on the battlefield and then crown themselves. Having shown themselves to be the strongest leaders, they have a legitimate claim to the crown for themselves and their descendants; they would not be considered usurpers. Those not in the line of royal succession, however, who wrest power through palace intrigue and duplicity are usurpers and less than legitimate kings. Achashverosh was a usurper.

As Persian emperor, he ruled over a vast empire that spanned most of Western Asia. The kingdom of Media had risen in the area of Hodu (Hindu) and Kush, two adjoining provinces in the mountainous Hindu Kush region of eastern Afghanistan. After the merger of Media and Persia, the Persian Empire expanded until it encompassed one hundred and twenty-seven far-flung provinces. The emperors controlled their vast and disparate empire with an iron grip no less than their grip on the sister provinces of Hodu and Kush.

Chapter 1

Queen Vashti is removed from the throne of Persia.

1. It happened in the days of Achashverosh,
he was the same Achashverosh
who ruled from Hodu to Kush,
over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces.¹
2. In those days, when King Achashverosh
was sitting on his royal throne
in Shushan, the capital city,²
3. in the third year of his reign, he made a feast
for all his ministers and his servants,
the generals of the Persian and Median military
and the provincial ministers were before him,
4. when he flaunted the wealth
of his glorious kingdom and the splendor
of his magnificent greatness,
for many days, one hundred and eighty days.³
5. And when these days were completed,
the King prepared for all the commonfolk
to be found in Shushan, the capital city,

¹ The description of Achashverosh as the same Achashverosh indicates that, from the beginning to the end, he was unwavering in his malevolence, always ruthless and self-absorbed, never growing and improving as a human being.

² Achashverosh did not immediately orchestrate a gala celebration of his ascent to power. He waited until he had consolidated power in his hands. Rashi points out that the Talmud has an alternate interpretation of this verse, but as he explains in his comments to 2:3, he chose not to mention those that do not conform with the simple meaning of the text.

³ The special feast for the imperial dignitaries lasted one hundred and eighty days, during which he periodically displayed his vast wealth.

from the greatest to the smallest,
a feast to last seven days in the courtyard
of the gardens of the King's orchard.⁴

6. Draperies of white, emerald and azure,
embroidered with flaxen and purple threads,
upon silver rods and marble columns,
couches of gold and silver on a terrace
of alabaster, marble, mother-of-pearl and onyx.⁵

7. Drinks were served in golden vessels,
each vessel of distinctive design,
and the royal wine was plentiful,
as befits the bounty of the King.⁶

8. And drinking was expected but not forced,
for the King had ordered all his palace staff,
to fulfill the wishes of each and every man.⁷

9. Queen Vashti also made a feast for women
in the royal palace of King Achashverosh.⁸

⁴ It seems that the greater feast took place within the imperial palace, which undoubtedly had spacious ballrooms to accommodate the dignitaries; they were "before him" (v. 3). The feast for all the commonfolk in the capital, however, needed to accommodate many thousands of people, and therefore, it took place in the more spacious outdoor grounds of the palace.

⁵ Each guest reclined on a gold and silver couch over a floor with a mosaic stonework pattern. At each end of the couch stood a marble pillar with a silver rod stretching from pillar to pillar. Colorful sheets draped across the rods provided privacy and protection from the elements.

⁶ Regarding the diversity of the vessels, Rashi points out that the Talmud has an alternate interpretation of this verse, but he chooses not to mention it. Rashi also points out that the Talmud interpret the plentitude of the wine as each guest being served wine older than he was.

⁷ At some celebrations, the host presses his guests to drink and eat more and more, even if it is difficult for them to do so. Light or moderate enjoyment of the refreshment might be viewed as lack of enthusiasm for the good fortune of the host. In this case, however, Achashverosh instructed the servers to allow each guest to choose freely among the wines, meats and breads in the amount that suited them.

⁸ Sometimes, a prominent host may insist that his guests drink large cups of wine to show their

10. On the seventh day,
when the mood of the King was mellowed by wine,
he commanded Mehuman, Bizesa, Charbona,
Bigsa and Avagsa, Zeisar and Charkas,
the seven courtiers serving King Achashverosh
11. to bring Queen Vashti before the King,
bedecked in her royal crown,
to show her beauty to the people and the ministers,
for she was of a pleasing appearance.⁹
12. But Queen Vashti refused to come
at the King's summons borne by the courtiers,
and the King was greatly angered,
his rage smoldered within him.¹⁰

eager participation in the festivities, even though it may be difficult for some of them, but in this case, every guest was allowed to consume as much wine and food as he wanted.

Instructions to this effect was issued to the entire staff, bakers, caterers and wine stewards.

⁹ The seventh day indicates that it was the Sabbath. Vashti looked down at Achashverosh as a lowborn upstart. She did not love him, and she did not respect him. Achashverosh's demand that Vashti should appear before his guests to display her physical beauty, as a war trophy, was highly inappropriate, something no loving husband would demand of his wife. To make such a demand of queen was doubly inappropriate. But theirs was a loveless marriage. Vashti scorned Achashverosh, and he wanted to demean this haughty princess who considered herself his superior.

¹⁰ Vashti was undoubtedly reluctant to comply with Achashverosh's humiliating command, especially as he had instructed her to appear unclad in front of his guests. Nonetheless, she might have yielded to the pressure and done his bidding. But just then, she miraculously developed unsightly lesions on her body, and she could not come in that state. This was divine retribution for her habit of ordering her Jewish attendants to disrobe and perform forbidden work on the Sabbath. Therefore, by divine providence, measure for measure, Achashverosh commanded her to appear unclad, and her sudden outbreak of lesions prevented her from complying, leading to her downfall and execution on the Sabbath.

Had Vashti simply declined to comply with Achashverosh's request that she parade her charms in front of his guests, he would not have been so enraged. It was perfectly understandable that she would not want to subject herself to such public humiliation. Not

13. And the King said to the wise men,
the ones familiar with the times,
for it was the practice of the King
to confer with experts of custom and law,¹¹
14. the closest to him being Karshena,
Sheissar, Admassa, Sarshish,
Meress, Marssena, Memuchan,
the seven ministers of Persia and Media,
the ones who had access to the King,
who held the highest stations in the realm,¹²
15. “What, by law, should be done
to Queen Vashti for disobeying
the word of King Achashverosh,
as borne by the courtiers?”
16. And Memuchan said to the King and the ministers,
“Not only did Queen Vashti offend the King,
but also, all the ministers and all the commonfolk
in all the provinces of King Achashverosh.
17. For the reports of the Queen’s conduct
will encourage all the women,
to look with contempt upon their husbands,
for they will tell each other,¹³

content, however, with a simple refusal, Vashti retaliated with a scornful response disdaining the vulgarity of his demand. She humiliated Achashverosh in front of his guests. This was more than he could tolerate, and he was consumed with rage.

¹¹ Achashverosh would not issue a command unless it could be justified according to the code of law. He did want the people to think he was a despotic autocrat who ruled by whim without any legal justification, thereby jeopardizing the stability of his regime. Therefore, he needed his legal experts to construct a case in support of his decisions.

¹² These were the legal advisors he habitually consulted on such occasions.

¹³ The legal experts concluded that Vashti refusal to comply with Achashverosh’s demand, in and of itself, did not justify severe punishment. Rather, it was the scornful nature of the

‘Indeed, even King Achashverosh
summoned the Queen, but she would not come.’

18. And this day will be mentioned
by all the noblewomen of Persia and Media
hearing the reports of the Queen’s conduct
to all the King’s noblemen,
causing humiliation and resentment.

19. If it pleases the King,
let him issue a royal decree,
and let it be written irrevocably
into the laws of Persia and Media,
that Queen Vashti never again come
into the presence of King Achashverosh,
and let the King give her royal position
to another who is better than she.¹⁴

20. And the decree the King will issue
shall be heard throughout the realm,
for it is a great thing,
and all the women
shall show respect to their husbands,
from the greatest to the smallest.”

21. These words pleased the King
and the ministers, and the King acted
on the advice of Memuchan.

message that accompanied her refusal. This would set an example for the women of the realm
that they need not treat their husbands with respect.

¹⁴ They advised him that, based on their interpretation of the existing laws, what Vashti had
done was a capital offense and that she should be executed. Furthermore, they recommended
that their legal opinion should be codified in the laws with specific language so that in the
future there would be no need for legal arguments and interpretations, because the law would
be specific.

22. He sent scrolls to all the King's provinces,
to every province in its own writing,
to every people in its own language,
that each man be master of his own home
and speak in the language of own people.¹⁵

¹⁵ Every married woman would be forced to learn the language of her husband even if it was not her native language. Although her husband was conversant in her native language and could thereby communicate with her. Out of respect for her husband, she was obligated to learn his language. This was legally enforceable.

Chapter 2

The Jewish girl Esther becomes the Queen of Persia.

1. After these things, when the wrath of King Achashverosh subsided, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.¹⁶
2. And the King's youths, his attendants, said, "Let there be sought out for the King beautiful virgin maidens.
3. And let the King appoint officials in all the provinces of his kingdom, and they shall bring together all the beautiful virgin maidens into Shushan, the capital city, to the harem, into the charge of Haigeh, courtier of the King, guardian of the women, and let them be given their cosmetics.¹⁷
4. And the maiden who pleases the King shall reign in Vashti's stead."
This thing pleased the King, and he did it.
5. There was a Judahite man in Shushan,

¹⁶ Achashverosh's relationship with Vashti had not been a loving one. She considered him a lowborn upstart and treated him with disdain rather than with love and respect. Nonetheless, he was proud of her extraordinary beauty, that having no royal blood flowing in his veins he could still possess such a beautiful princess, and now she was gone. It was a loss, and it depressed him.

¹⁷ The task of assembling the beautiful virgins was assigned to provincial officials who were familiar with the local maidens and could identify those Achashverosh sought. The maidens were then brought to the royal harem in the capital, and they were provided with fragrant oils and an assortment of beauty products that would make their skin glow with health.

the capital city, his name was Mordechai,
son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish,
of the tribe of Binyamin.¹⁸

6. He had been exiled from Jerusalem,
among the exiles who had been exiled
with Jechoniah, King of Judah,
whom Nevuchadnezzar, King of Babylon,
had sent into exile.

7. He had raised Hadassah, the one known
as Esther, his uncle's daughter,
for she had no father or mother,
and the maiden had beautiful features,
and a pleasant appearance,
and when her father and mother had died,
Mordechai had adopted her as a daughter.¹⁹

¹⁸ Although Mordechai was descended from the tribe of Benjamin, he was identified as a Judahite, which seemed to indicate that he was of the tribe of Judah. This was because he was among the first wave of exiles who accompanied King Jeconiah, King of Judah, to Babylon.

¹⁹ Not only did he adopt her, but he also married her, although he was much older than she was. The word used here is *levath*, as a daughter, but Rashi provides an alternate reading, based on the Talmud, as *levayith*, as a home, which means a wife who would be his homemaker. Rashi bases this interpretation on the Talmud, even though it diverges from the simple meaning of the text. In general, as he explains in this comments to 2:3, Rashi provides the simple meaning of the text. The Talmud and the Midrash often use parables and metaphors to convey important concepts, even though their readings may not always be strictly factual. In this case, however, Rashi clearly considers this interpretation factual rather than metaphorical.

It is possible that he based this view on a passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74b) that discusses the obligation to allow oneself to be martyred rather than violate the cardinal sins, idolatry, bloodshed and adultery, and the desecration of the Name. The Talmud wants to know why Esther was not required to allow herself to be martyred, and the Talmud responds that her violation was only passive. Based on this, the Talmud establishes the rule that passive violation does not call for martyrdom. A legal rule could not be based on parable. Therefore, Rashi understood that the Talmudic statement that Mordechai married Esther was factual and

8. And when the King's words
and his decree became known,
and when many maidens were brought together
into Shushan, the capital city,
Esther was taken to the King's palace,
into the charge of Haigeh,
guardian of the women.
9. The maiden pleased him and won his favor,
he rushed to provide her cosmetics and gifts
and the seven maids from the King's palace
to whom she was entitled, and he moved her
and her maid to the best part of the harem.²⁰
10. Esther did not reveal her people or birthright,

that the verse is stating that, as far as the public perception was concerned, Mordechai adopted her as his daughter. The alternate reading reveals that he actually married her.

The marriage of Mordechai and Esther was clearly a deep secret, because had it been known to anyone, the royal officials would never have taken her to Achashverosh's harem in the assembly of virgins. Furthermore, her very identity was kept secret. He even gave her the Persian name Esther and concealed her Jewish name Hadassah. As Mordechai was a very prominent man, the head of the Sanhedrin, he lived in a large house with a number of attendants and servants, but no one, not his household staff nor the general Jewish population, knew she was his relative or even that she was Jewish. Had anyone known, the information would undoubtedly have somehow been disclosed when she eventually became queen. All anyone knew was that she was an orphan of mysterious origins whom Mordechai had kindly brought into his home. Perhaps they thought that Mordechai owed a debt of gratitude to her unknown deceased parents, the circumstances of which Mordechai refused to divulge. It probably did not occur to anyone that she was actually his relative or even that she was Jewish, because if so, why the need for such mysterious secrecy?

Mordechai was a prophet, as Rashi states in his commentary to the Talmud (Megillah 14a), and Hashem had instructed him to keep Esther's identity secret. Ultimately, this secret led to her becoming Achashverosh's new queen, the critical factor in the delivery of the Jewish people from destruction. It is quite possible that Mordechai himself did not know the reason at the time, but he obeyed without question.

²⁰ He gave Esther precedence over the other maidens.

- for Mordechai had commanded her not to tell.²¹
11. Each and every day, Mordechai would walk
near the harem courtyard to find out about
Esther's welfare and what was happening to her.
12. And when the appointed time arrived
for each and every maiden
to come to King Achashverosh
after having received for twelve months
what was customary for women,
for thus did they complete
their days of anointment,
six months with oil of myrrh,
six months with perfumes and feminine salves.
13. And so the maiden would come to the King,
she would be given all she requested
to accompany her from the harem
to the palace of the King.²²
14. She would come in the evening,
and in the morning she would return
to the second harem, to the charge of

²¹ Although it was known that Esther has some connection with Mordechai, the nature of that connection was unknown. Esther was taken from Mordechai's house where she has been brought up as a mysterious orphan, but no one knew about her familial relationship with him. Later, we find that Achashverosh elevates Mordechai to a ministerial position in order to find favor with her (2:19). When Mordechai overhears Bigsan and Seresh conspiring to assassinate Achashverosh, Esther reports the plot to Achashverosh having received the information from Mordechai (2:22). Clearly, there was a relationship between them, but what was the nature of that relationship? It was not known.

²² When each maiden was called to spend the evening with Achashverosh, she was given the choice of the entertainment. She was allowed to select the performance to be presented, the actors who would perform, the songs that would be sung, the singers that would sing and the instruments that would accompany them.

Shashgaz, the King's courtier,
guardian of the concubines,
and no longer return to the King,
unless the King desired her
and she was summoned by name.

15. And when it came to be the turn
of Esther, daughter of Avichail,
the uncle of Mordechai,
who had adopted her as a daughter,
to come to the King,
she did not ask for anything,
other than that suggested by Haigeh,
the King's courtier, guardian of the women,
and Esther found favor
in the eyes of all who saw her.²³

16. Esther was taken to King Achashverosh,
to his royal palace, in the tenth month,
the month of Teves,
in the seventh year of his reign.²⁴

17. The King loved Esther above all the women,
and she won his grace and his favor
beyond all the other virgins,
he placed the royal crown upon her head,
and anointed her in Vashti's stead.²⁵

²³ Unlike the other maidens, Esther did not express any preferences for the evening's entertainment. The other maidens chose programs that would increase their chances of being chosen as the new queen, but Esther was there under duress. She did not want to be chosen, and she declined to make any selections. Nonetheless, she did not object to the program Haigeh selected for her, and her reticence and grace endeared her to all who saw her.

²⁴ By divine providence, Esther was called to Achashverosh during the cold winter month of Teveth, when Achashverosh would be most desirous of a warm embrace.

²⁵ The phrase that he loved "above all the women" indicates that he did limit his assembly of

18. And the King made a great feast
for all his ministers and his servants,
it was called the Feast of Esther,
and he granted amnesty to the provinces
and distributed gifts in royal style.²⁶

19. And when the virgins were gathered anew,
and Mordechai sat at the King's gate,²⁷

20. Esther still would not reveal
her birthright or her people,
as Mordechai had commanded her,
and Esther did as Mordechai said,
just as when she was raised by him.²⁸

candidates to virgins alone.

²⁶ Achashverosh wanted to win Esther's love. Vashti had not given him the love he needed. She had looked down at him as a lowborn upstart, leaving him starved for the love of a wife. Having replaced Vashti, he hoped that Esther, his new queen, would give him the genuine love he so craved. Although he was desperate to penetrate the mystery of her background, he did not want to pressure her or Mordechai to tell him. He feared that by doing so he might cause her to turn against him, and then he would once again find himself in a loveless marriage. Instead, he tried different stratagems to persuade her to reveal her secret. He made a great feast in her honor and called it the Feast of Esther. He also reduced the taxes on all the provinces and distributed gifts to the people in her honor, all in the hope that by showing her such honor she would reveal her nationality.

²⁷ He also gathered many new virgins whom he might consider for Esther's replacement. He hoped that Esther would see that her position as queen was not secure and that she would reconsider her mysterious silence in order to remain queen. In the back of his mind, he also thought he might find a maiden without mysterious origins whom he would like even better than Esther. The love he felt for Esther was very strong, however, and he found that the new virgins did not interest him. He also elevated Mordechai to a ministerial position to find favor with Esther. This act, in fact, had the opposite effect. Mordechai took the opportunity of his frequent presence in the royal palace to encourage Esther to remain steadfast in guarding the secret of her identity.

²⁸ And so, Esther maintained her silence despite Achashverosh's concerted efforts to persuade her to reveal her secrets.

21. In those days, while Mordechai
was sitting at the King's gate,
Bigshan and Seresh, two courtiers of the King,
the guardians of the threshold,
became enraged and schemed
to do harm to King Achashverosh.²⁹
22. Mordechai discovered the plot
and reported it to Queen Esther,
and Esther relayed it to the King
in Mordechai's name.³⁰
23. The matter was investigated
and found to be true,
they were both hanged on the gallows,
and it was recorded in the chronicles,
in the presence of the King.³¹

²⁹ They intended to poison his food.

³⁰ Bigshan and Seresh had discussed their plot within earshot of Mordechai. They were from Tarsus, a distant province of the Persian Empire, and they were speaking Tarsi, a language not spoken in Shushan. They were, therefore, confident that their secret was safe. They did not realize that Mordechai, as part of the Sanhedrin, was required to be familiar with foreign languages relevant to his court without having to rely on interpreters (Sanhedrin 17a). Since litigants from the province of Tarsus might appear before him, he was required to understand their language.

³¹ Bigshan and Seresh were interrogated intensely, and they admitted their guilt. Not only was the aborted plot recorded in the royal chronicles, Mordechai's role in its discovery was also recorded.

Chapter 3

Haman rises to power and schemes against the Jews.

1. After these events, King Achashverosh promoted Haman, son of Hamedasa, the Agagite, to high office and placed his chair above all the ministers serving with him.³²
2. And all the King's servants that were at the King's gate would bow and genuflect to Haman, for thus did the King command for him, but Mordechai would not bow or genuflect.³³
3. And the King's servants that were at the King's gate said to Mordechai, "Why do you disobey the King's command?"
4. And having spoken to him day after day without his paying heed to them, then they told Haman to see if Mordechai's arguments would stand, for he had told them he was a Jew.³⁴

³² Haman rose to power only after the conspiracy to assassinate Achashverosh was discovered, since Hashem always prepares the remedy before the calamity occurs. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the discovery of the plot would prove instrumental in the delivery of the Jewish people.

³³ Haman declared himself a god and demanded that all bow down to him. He also persuaded Achashverosh to support his demands with a royal edict. By declaring himself a god, Haman did not necessarily present himself as superior to the mortal King. On the contrary, he convinced Achashverosh that he should be flattered that even minor gods were subservient to him. Mordechai, however, did not comply, because as a Jew, he was forbidden to bow to idols.

³⁴ Mordechai did not occupy a place in the first rank of ministers, and therefore, Haman did not

5. And Haman saw that Mordechai
would not bow or genuflect to him,
and Haman was filled with rage.
6. But it was not enough for him
to harm Mordechai alone,
for they had told him Mordechai's nationality,
and Haman sought to destroy all the Jews
in the realm of Achashverosh,
the people of Mordechai.³⁵
7. In the first month, the month of Nissan,
in the twelfth year of King Achashverosh,
the Pur, which is the lot, was cast before Haman,
day by day and month by month,
until the twelfth month, that is the month of Adar.³⁶
8. And Haman said to King Achashverosh,
"There is one people,
scattered and dispersed among the peoples
in all the provinces of your realm,
their customs differ from all other people's,
nor do they practice the customs of the King,
and it is not worthwhile for the King

immediately notice that he was not bowing down. The others, however, did notice, and they demanded to know why he was disobeying the royal command. Mordechai explained that his religion forbade him to do so. The others were intrigued by the situation that brought Mordechai's personal beliefs into conflict with the royal command. In order to find out how such conflicts would be resolved, they told Haman about Mordechai's disobedience and his justification for it.

³⁵ Haman was incensed, and he sought vengeance. He was not content, however, to destroy Mordechai alone. He saw all the Jewish people as a threat to his authority, because all of them face the same conflict with their religion.

³⁶ The lots were cast to determine which month was auspicious for a decree against the Jewish people and which day of the month was most auspicious.

to endure them.³⁷

9. If it pleases the King, let it be inscribed
that they be destroyed, and I shall deliver
ten thousand talents of silver
into the hands of the officers on duty
to be brought to the treasuries of the King.”³⁸

10. The King removed his ring from his hand,
and he gave it to Haman,
the son of Hamedasa, the Agagite,
persecutor of the Jews.³⁹

11. And the King said to Haman,
“The money is returned to you,
and the people as well,
to do with them as you see fit.”⁴⁰

12. The scribes of the King were summoned
on the thirteenth day of the first month,
and it was inscribed, just as Haman
had commanded the knights of the King
and the consuls of every province
and the ministers of every people,
to each province in its own writing,
to each people in its own language,
inscribed in the name of King Achashverosh
and sealed with the ring of the King.

³⁷ Haman accused the Jewish people of falling to pay their taxes, and therefore, he would suffer no loss by destroying them.

³⁸ He asked that the decree be inscribed in royal dispatches to the officials of the provinces instructing them to carry out the decree of destruction.

³⁹ According to Persian custom, the conveyance of the royal signet ring was the symbol of full royal authorization.

⁴⁰ Since the Jewish people were not paying taxes, they were of no value to Achashverosh, and there was no reason that he should take payment for turning them over to Haman.

13. And scrolls were sent off with couriers
to all the provinces of the King
to destroy, to kill, to wipe out
all the Jews, young and old,
infants and women, in a single day,
on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month,
that is the month of Adar,
and to discard their possessions.⁴¹

14. Copies of the proclamation
were to be enacted as a publicized law
in each and every province
and made known to all the peoples
to await this day.

15. The couriers rushed off by the King's order,
the law was enacted in Shushan, the capital,
and the King and Haman sat down to drink,
but the city of Shushan was distraught.⁴²

⁴¹ Haman first cast lots to determine which day of any month was most auspicious for his evil designs, and he arrived at the number thirteenth. Then he cast lots again to determine which month was most auspicious, and he arrived at Adar, the twelfth month.

⁴² Although the law applied to the entire empire, it was disseminated first in Shushan, the royal capital, and therefore, at this time, only the Jewish people living in Shushan were distraught.

Chapter 4

Mordechai pleads with Esther to appeal to King Achashverosh.

1. Mordechai knew all that had been done,
and Mordechai ripped his garments,
he put on sackcloth and ashes,
and went out into the center of the city,
and he cried out a great and bitter cry.⁴³
2. He came until the front of the King's gate,
for it was forbidden to enter the King's gate
clothed in garments of sackcloth.⁴⁴
3. And in each and every province,
wherever the King's word and law reached,
there was great mourning for the Jews,
fasting, weeping and lament,
sackcloth and ashes were the bedding of many.⁴⁵

⁴³ Mordechai was told prophetically that the looming calamity was a divine decree. The Jewish people had bowed down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, and now in Shushan, they had participated willingly in Achashverosh's feast. By his calculations, he mistakenly concluded that the prophesied end of the Jewish exile, which he had awaited with dread, had come and passed. He was now convinced that his dominion over the Jewish people would continue uninterrupted, and the feast was in celebration thereof. The willing participation of the Jewish people in this feast was the last straw.

As soon as he received his prophecy, Mordechai put on sackcloth and ashes, the ritualistic expressions of remorse. Although he had not personally transgressed, he felt that, as leader of the generation, he should spearhead the collective repentance.

⁴⁴ Mordechai walked screaming into the center of the city in order to arouse the people to repentance. He also approached the vicinity of the palace gates to bring the crisis to Esther's attention. He did not, however, enter the palace itself, as it would have been highly disrespectful to enter the palace with sackcloth and ashes.

⁴⁵ Following Mordechai's example, the Jewish communities in all the provinces of the empire were in a state of bereavement. They fasted, wept and lamented, and many of them put on

4. Esther's maids came, as did her courtiers,
they told her, and the Queen trembled mightily,
she sent garments to clothe Mordechai,
and to replace the sackcloth he was wearing,
but he would not accept them.⁴⁶

5. Esther called Hasach, a courtier of the King,
whom he had stationed with her,
she dispatched him to Mordechai,
to learn what this was all about
and how it had come to be.⁴⁷

6. Hasach went out to Mordechai,
to the main avenue of the city,
which was in front of the King's gate.

7. Mordechai told him all he had gone through,
and the payment of money Haman sought
to deposit in the King's treasuries
in exchange for the Jews, to wipe them out.⁴⁸

8. And the copy of the proclamation
that was enacted in Shushan to destroy them

sackcloth and ashes.

⁴⁶ Esther was very disturbed by the news that Mordechai was circulating in the city in sackcloth and ashes. She needed to speak with Mordechai, but he could not visit her in the palace while dressed in sackcloth. Esther sent him a set of clean clothes and begged him to change into them and come to her, but he refused. The state of repentance could not be interrupted.

⁴⁷ Esther had a small group of trusted royal courtiers with whom she had shared her secret identity. One of them was Hasach, whom the Talmud identifies as Daniel, Hasach being his palace name. Unable to communicate with Mordechai directly, she had no choice but to communicate through proxies. She sent Hasach to ask Mordechai about the calamity that had led him to dress this way and about the cause of this calamity.

⁴⁸ Mordechai told Hasach about Achashverosh's evil decree and about Haman's offer to pay a large sum of money to have the Jewish people delivered into his murderous hands.

he gave him to show Esther,
to inform her and compel her
to come to the King to appeal to him,
to plead with him for her people.

9. And Hasach came, and he reported
the words of Mordechai to Esther.

10. And Esther spoke to Hasach,
commanding him to tell it to Mordechai,

11. “All the servants of the King
and the people of the provinces of the King
know that any man or woman who comes
to the King, to the inner courtyard,
without having been summoned
is invariably condemned to death,
except for the one to whom
the King extends the golden scepter,
only he shall remain alive,
and I have not been summoned to come
to the King these past thirty days.”⁴⁹

12. And they told Mordechai
the words of Esther.⁵⁰

13. And Mordechai said in reply to Esther,
“Do not suppose that you yourself
will be rescued by the royal palace

⁴⁹ The rule in the palace was that no one could enter the presence of the king unless he had first been permission to approach. This was a strict rule, and anyone who violated it was to be executed. Esther herself was ordinarily not at risk for coming unannounced, but thirty days had already passed since the Achashverosh had invited her to his apartment. She had lost favor with him, she thought, and he would order her executed. It was too risky.

⁵⁰ Not willing to be the bearer of bad news, Hasach declined the mission to Mordechai. Esther, therefore, sent a group of her other trusted courtiers to deliver the message to Mordechai.

from among all the Jews.⁵¹

14. “For if you remain silent at this time,
relief and deliverance will come to the Jews
from another place, but you
and your father’s house shall be wiped out;
and who can know if for a time like this
you attained the royal position?”⁵²

15. And Esther sent a reply to Mordechai,

16. “Go, assemble all the Jews
to be found in Shushan, fast for my sake,
and do not eat, and do not drink
for three days, night and day,
also, I and my maids shall fast this way,
and thus shall I come to the King,
although it is not permitted,
and if I am lost, I am lost.”⁵³

17. Mordechai departed, and he did
everything Esther had instructed him.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Mordechai warned Esther that she was living with a false sense of security if she refused to take even a relatively small risk. Although she was the queen, she would escape the slaughter if it ever came to pass. She was as much at risk as all the other Jewish people.

⁵² Mordechai told her further that she had reached her royal station in order to save her people. She should not think, however, that with the designated day of destruction was still nearly a year away she had time to approach the king the next time he invited her to his apartment. How could she be sure she would still be in his favor in the future? The decree had been issued, and she was in the palace. The time to act was now.

⁵³ Esther lamented her loss of her role as Mordechai’s wife if she did what he asked of her. Before, her illicit extramarital relations with Achashverosh had been under duress; if he called for her demanded that she submit to him, she had no choice but to submit. Nonetheless, she could still have hope that someday she might be Mordechai’s wife, since a woman who submits to extramarital relations under duress is not forbidden to her husband. Now, however she would be going voluntarily, and therefore, she could never again be Mordechai’s wife.

⁵⁴ The word *vayaavor*, he departed, can also be translated as he transgressed. The edict had

Chapter 5

Esther invites King Achashverosh and Haman to a feast.

1. It was on the third day that Esther dressed in royal style and stood in the inner courtyard of the King's palace, facing the King's palace, and the King was sitting on his royal throne in the chamber of the throne, facing the entrance to the palace.⁵⁵
2. And it happened that when the King saw

been issued on the thirteenth of Nissan, the first month of the year (3:12). Following Esther's instructions, he began his three-day fast on the following day, fasting on the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth days of Nissan, the last two of which were the first days of Passover. Having no choice, Mordechai transgressed the prohibition against fasting during the festivals⁵⁵ The simple reading of the verse is that she dressed in her royal garments. The Sages also find an allusion in this verse to her being enveloped in *ruach hakodesh*, divine inspiration. It would appear, therefore, that this moment was the first time that she experienced divine inspiration. Her instructions to Mordechai to tell the people to fast and pray for three days were not divinely inspired.

Why did she acquire divine inspiration at this particular point? It is quite possible that God gave her this gift as she approached Achashverosh so that she would know exactly what to say to him. Perhaps we suggest an additional explanation.

Divine inspiration is not prophecy. It is the unencumbered vision of the soul. A human being is a hybrid of body and soul. The purely spiritual soul has perfect clarity of vision with no need for physical eyes; it has the ability to see "from one end of the world to the other" (Bab. Tal., Niddah 30b). When it becomes enmeshed with the corporeal body, however, its vision becomes obscured. Some righteous people rise to the level at which their souls become completely dominant over their bodies, and thereby, they achieve divine inspiration both in the perception of the physical world and in their ability to discern good courses of action. The greater the dominance of the soul over the body, the higher the level of divine inspiration.

When Esther decided to disregard her own safety for the greater good of her people, the spiritual need of her soul in effect gained dominance over the physical needs of her body, and she was thereby rewarded with divine inspiration.

Queen Esther standing in the courtyard
that she won his grace,
and the King extended to Esther
the golden scepter that was in his hand,
Esther approached and touched the scepter's tip.

3. And the King said to her,
‘What do you desire, Queen Esther,
what is your entreaty? Up to half the kingdom,
and it shall be given to you.’⁵⁶

4. And Esther said, “If it pleases the King,
let the King and Haman come today
to the feast I have prepared for him.”⁵⁷

5. And the King said,
“Have Haman hurry to do Esther's bidding.”
And the King and Haman came to the feast

⁵⁶ In the simple sense of the verse, this was an expression of magnanimity. It was meant only in the figurative sense, because if she had asked for half the kingdom, he would certainly not have given it to her. According to the Talmud (Megillah 15b), this phrase also alluded to the Holy Temple, which sits at the center of the world. Koresh, the first Persian emperor, had ordered the reconstruction of the Temple, but before the work was completed, he had rescinded his order. Achashverosh, his successor, had maintained the suspension of the reconstruction project. When Esther arrived in his inner courtyard unbidden, he understood that she had come with a significant request. He knew that Esther, although supposedly not Jewish, had grown up in Mordechai's home, and in gratitude to her mentor, she might have come to ask for the resumption of the reconstruction of the Temple. By saying to her, “Up to half the kingdom, and it shall be given to you,” Achashverosh was hinting to her that she could request anything up to but not including the reconstruction of the Temple.

⁵⁷ Why did Esther invite Haman to her feast? The Sages offer many explanation (Megillah 15b). According to one of the explanations, she wanted to make Achashverosh and the other ministers of the impartial government jealous of the excessive honors accorded to him. Furthermore, she wanted Achashverosh to think that she and Haman enjoyed a clandestine personal relationship, and in a fit of jealous rage, he would have Haman executed. If he executed her as well, she was willing to sacrifice her life if it would lead to Haman's downfall.

that Esther had prepared.

6. And the King said to Esther,

“What is your request?

it shall be given to you,

what is your entreaty?

up to half the kingdom, it shall be done.”

7. And Esther replied, saying,

“This is my request and my entreaty.

8. If I have found favor with the King,

if it pleases the King to grant my request

and to fulfill my entreaty,

let the King and Haman come

to the feast I shall prepare for them,

tomorrow I shall do the bidding of the King.”⁵⁸

9. And Haman went forth on that day,

joyful and in good spirits,

but when Haman saw Mordechai

at the King’s gate, who he did not rise

or tremble before him, then Haman was filled

with wrath against Mordechai.

⁵⁸ Achashverosh did not particularly enjoy introducing Haman into his personal life by bringing him as a third wheel to an intimate soiree with his wife, especially because the inappropriateness of the request aroused his jealousy. Nonetheless, he had granted her request and brought Haman with him. He had kept his word, and his obligation was fulfilled. Esther understood that he would balk if she asked him to bring Haman again the following night; enough was enough. She needed to find a way to motivate him to bring Haman again.

Achashverosh had asked her many times to divulge to him her secret identity and nationality, but she had consistently demurred. Unwilling to alienate her affections by pressing her too hard, he had tried many stratagems to persuade her to, but to no avail (2:18). He was consumed by curiosity more than by a real need to know. Now, Esther promised that on the following night she would at long last tell him what he wanted to know, as long as he brought Haman with him. This was “the King’s bidding” that she promised to do.

10. But Haman controlled himself
and he came to his house,
he summoned and convened his friends
and his wife Zeresh.⁵⁹
11. And Haman told them of his glorious wealth
his many children, all the King had done
to raise him high, how he had elevated him
above the ministers and servants of the King.
12. Haman said, “Queen Esther did not even bring,
along with the King, to the feast she had prepared
anyone other than myself, and tomorrow too
I am invited by her along with the King.
13. Yet all this is worthless to me,
every time I see Mordechai the Jew
sitting at the King’s gate.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Haman was filled with rage, but he controlled himself. He would have wanted to execute Mordechai immediately for his insubordination and disrespect, but he was hesitant to take the step on his own authority. Mordechai was a minister in the imperial government, and if he executed him without obtaining prior permission, he might incur Achashverosh’s wrath. There were some limits to his power. He would have to persuade Achashverosh somehow to allow him to execute Mordechai.

⁶⁰ Haman complained that he could not enjoy his extraordinary honors as Mordechai continues to defy him with impunity. The Sages added an additional irritant (Megillah 15a). Mordechai and Haman had both been officers in the imperial army. During one of the military campaigns, Haman had lost all his provisions and was starving. He asked Mordechai for food, but Mordechai refused to feed him unless he agreed to become his slave. Desperate with hunger, Haman acquiesced. They drew up a contract, and Haman signed it. And now, Mordechai continually waved this contract at him, reminding him that he was Mordechai’s slave.

Mordechai could not bring about Haman’s downfall by claiming him as his slave. Having been executed under duress, the contract was not enforceable in an imperial court. Mordechai would have gained nothing by making it public. Moreover, it would actually have reflected poorly on him for having taken advantage of a starving fellow officer.

Why did Mordechai ask for an unenforceable contract that could only bring him shame?

14. And his wife Zeresh said to him,
as did all his friends,
“Let gallows be prepared, fifty cubits high,
and in the morning speak to the King
that they hang Mordechai upon it,
then you can come joyfully,
along with the King, to the feast.”
The matter pleased Haman,
and he prepared the gallows.⁶¹

Furthermore, why did he taunt Haman by waving it in his face all the time? Didn't he realize he was only enraging Haman even further?

Mordechai undoubtedly was acting on God's instructions, either through prophecy or divine inspiration. The contract of slavery would only come into play during this time of crisis. Its purpose was to enrage Haman and disturb his equilibrium so that he would react to developments emotionally and make fatal mistakes.

⁶¹ Zeresh advised Haman that his only solution was to execute Mordechai publicly so that no one else would dare defy him in the future, but of course, he needed Achashverosh's permission to do so. Therefore, he should prepare a high gallows, and then he should ask Achashverosh's permission when they went together to Esther's feast. With the gallows already prepared, and if Achashverosh granted permission, Haman would execute Mordechai before Achashverosh might have second thoughts.

Chapter 6

Mordechai begins to prevail over Haman.

1. That night the King had trouble sleeping,
and he called for the Book
of Records and Chronicles,
and they were read before the King.⁶²
2. And it was found written that Mordechai
had reported Bigsan and Seeresh,
two of the King's courtiers,
guardians of the threshold,
that they had schemed to do harm
to King Achashverosh.
3. And the King said,
“What honor and great thing
have been done to Mordechai for this?”
And the King's youths, his attendants, said,
“Nothing was done for him.”
4. The King said, “Who is in the courtyard?”

⁶² When a king cannot fall asleep, he customarily asks an attendant to read to him from the Book of Records and Chronicles until he drifts off to sleep. Achashverosh, however, was not an insomniac. His wakefulness on this momentous night could be understood as a supernatural occurrence. It can also be attributed to the suspicions aroused by the presence of Haman at Esther's feast. Could Esther and Haman have entered into an illicit relationship? Could they be plotting to assassinate him?

If they are indeed plotting against me, he thought, surely some person would have caught wind of their conspiracy, and if there is such a person, surely he would be loyal and tell me about it. Why would he not tell me? After all, I am his king. Is it possible that I have alienated him by ingratitude? Is it possible that this person has done me a favor and that I have not rewarded him? Let me look into the Book of Records and Chronicles. Perhaps I have overlooked someone whom I should have rewarded.

Haman had come to the outer courtyard
of the King's palace to speak with the King
about hanging Mordechai
on the gallows he had prepared for him.

5. The King's youths said to him,
"Behold, Haman stands in the courtyard."
And the King said, "Let him enter."

6. Haman entered, and the King said to him,
"What should be done with the man
whom the King wishes to honor?"
And Haman thought in his heart,
"Whom would the King want to honor
more than me?"

7. And Haman said to the King,
"The man the King wishes to honor

8. Let them bring a royal robe
that the King himself has worn,
and a horse upon which the King has ridden,
let the royal crown be placed upon his head.⁶³

⁶³ This entire suggestion was highly inappropriate. Why would someone suggest as a reward that he be allowed, even for a single morning, to wear the royal garments while sitting astride the royal steed with the royal crown perched on his head? Surely such a person has secret aspiration for the royal throne.

As soon as these words escaped Haman's mouth, he saw a flash of anger on Achashverosh's face, and he realized he had made a grave error. It is quite possible that the rage aroused by Mordechai's insubordination and his persistent taunting had caused him to act against his better judgment. He had needed reassurance that he was not Mordechai's slave but rather the highest minister in the empire, and what better reassurance could there be than the royal crown upon his head? In retrospect. It was a foolish suggestion that had provoked Achashverosh.

Haman immediately tried to do damage control. As if he had not said anything before, he repeated the request, but this time there was no mention of the royal crown. Perhaps Achashverosh would think his mention of the royal crown had been an inadvertent slip of the tongue, but even if it was inadvertent, it spoke to Haman's inner thoughts. The damage was

9. Let the robe and the horse be entrusted
to one of the King's exalted ministers,
let them clothe the man the King would honor,
let them parade him on the horse
through the main avenue of the city,
and let them call out before him,
'So shall be done for the man
whom the King wishes to honor.'"

10. And the King said to Haman,
"Hurry, take the robe and the horse,
just as you have spoken,
and do this for Mordechai the Jew,
who is sitting at the King's gate,
do not omit one thing
from all you have spoken."

11. Haman took the robe and the horse,
he clothed Mordechai and paraded him
in the main avenue of the city,
and he called out before him,
"So shall be done for the man
whom the King wishes to honor."

12. Then Mordechai returned to the King's gate,
and Haman hastened to his house,
mournful and with covered head.⁶⁴

13. Haman told his wife Zeresh
and all his friends all he had encountered;
his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him,
"If he is from Jewish seed, this Mordechai

done. Haman's relationship with Achashverosh was crumbling.

⁶⁴ After Mordechai removed the royal garments, he once again dressed in sackcloth and resumed his prayer and fasting.

before whom you have begun to fall,
you shall not prevail against him,
for surely shall you fall before him.”⁶⁵

14. They were still speaking with him,
when the courtiers of the King arrived,
and they rushed to bring Haman
to the feast Esther had prepared.

⁶⁵ The Jewish people, she was saying, are compared to dust and to stars. When their fortunes are in decline, they descend all the way to the dust on the ground, but when their fortunes are on the rise, they reach the very stars. The trajectory of their fortunes has apparently changed; they are no longer on the decline but rather in the ascent.

Essentially, she was telling him that he was doomed. What was her point? Was she just telling him that his downfall was inevitable? Perhaps, she was warning him to change his approach to Mordechai and the Jewish people, because the path he was on could only lead to disaster. If he relinquished his enmity, however, he might survive and perhaps even salvage some of his wealth and privileges.

She was being practical, but it was probably too late. Even as they spoke, the royal courtiers arrived and rushed him to Esther’s feast. His fate was sealed.

Chapter 7

Haman is disgraced at Queen Esther's feast.

1. The King and Haman came
to drink with Queen Esther.
2. And the King said to Esther
again on the second day
at the feast of the wine:
“What is your request, Queen Esther?
and it shall be given to you,
what is your entreaty?
until half the kingdom, it shall be done.”
3. And Queen Esther replied, saying:
“If I have found favor with you, O King,
and if it pleases the King,
let my life be given to me for my request,
and my people for my entreaty.⁶⁶
4. For we have been sold, I and my people,

⁶⁶ Esther pleaded for her life and the survival of her people, but at this point, Achashverosh still did not know that she was Jewish. Although there was a decree of extermination against the Jewish people, Achashverosh thought she must be speaking about a different people who were also under threat of annihilation. He was still convinced that she was not Jewish, because as explained earlier (2:7), why conceal her nationality if she was Jewish and was raised among the Jewish people?

When she asked for her life, it was a request, but when she asked for her people, it was an entreaty. Asking for her life was a legitimate request, almost a demand. She was the Queen, and she should not have to perish during the extermination of her people. Asking for her people, however, was not necessarily a legitimate request. After all, she was long removed from them. She grew up in Mordechai's home, and now she lived in the palace. Whoever her people were, she had no personal connection to them. But she could plead for them, because as she would say later (8:6), “How can I endure seeing the destruction of my people?” The Queen's anguish was a legitimate basis for a plea.

to be destroyed, to be killed, wiped out,
had we been sold for slaves and bondwomen
I would have remained silent,
but the antagonist does not value
the damage to the King.”⁶⁷

5. King Achashverosh spoke,
and he said to Queen Esther,
“Who is this, and where is he,
that dared do such a thing?”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Esther told Achashverosh that the enemy of her yet unidentified people has no regard for the damage his plot will cause the imperial government. Achashverosh could have ordered her people to be sold as slaves, which would bring treasure into the imperial coffers. He could have taken them as slaves of the crown, which would also have brought great financial benefit to him. But this enemy just wants to kill all her people. The potential taxes would be lost, and there would be no compensation by enslaving them.

This argument might also have led Achashverosh to believe she was not referring to the Jewish people. Haman had earlier accused the Jewish people of not paying taxes. This was his bases for advocating for a decree of annihilation against them, and Achashverosh had believed him. Furthermore, Esther could not be referring to the Jewish people, Achashverosh may have thought, because they were not good candidates for slavery. They were independent, spirited, always yearning to return to Zion and rebuild their Holy Temple. They would not be loyal, subservient slaves. No, it had to be one of the many other peoples in the empire. But which one? Esther had promised to tell him tonight. He was about to find out.

⁶⁸ Later we are told that Esther had revealed to Achashverosh that she was Mordechai’s niece (8:1), but we are not told exactly when she told it to him. She may have told it to him at this point. The statement that Achashverosh “spoke and he said to Esther” indicates a change in their relationship (Megillah 15b). As long as Achashverosh thought that Esther was a commoner, he did not converse with her directly in public, only through an intermediary, but now that he knew she was descended from royalty, he allowed himself to address her directly. Accordingly, this was the point when she revealed her identity to him.

If so, Achashverosh already knew the answers to his subsequent questions, since he was complicit in the attack on the Jewish people; in fact, it was his signature that sealed the decree. His questions must, therefore, have been mere bluster and posturing. If the wonderful Esther was one the Jewish people, Haman’s accusations must have been nothing more than slander. Who is the person that would dare do such a thing? Who would try to destroy a loyal, hard-

6. And Esther said, “It is an antagonist
and a foe, this villainous Haman.”
And Haman recoiled in terror,
before the King and Queen.
7. The King arose in anger from the wine feast
to go out to the gardens of the King’s orchard
and Haman rose to plead with Queen Esther
for his life, for he saw that his ill fate
had been decided by the King.⁶⁹
8. The King returned from
the gardens of the King’s orchard
to the chamber of the wine feast,
and Haman had fallen on the couch
upon which Esther was lying,
the King said, “Would you also overpower
the Queen with me here in the palace?”
As these words were spoken by the King,
Haman’s face crumpled.⁷⁰

working, tax-paying people? Who would have such cavalier disregard for the damage to the empire? And Esther responded by stating the obvious. Haman was the evil antagonist who was attempting to murder her and all the Jewish people in the empire.

⁶⁹ As soon as Achashverosh went out into the garden, Haman tried to throw himself on the mercy of the Queen. He knelt before her and pleaded for his life. An angel came and pushed him onto the bed, so that when Achashverosh returned it seemed as if he was making advances on the Queen. It is possible that the angel pushed Haman by planting the nonsensical thought in Haman’s mind that it would be better to climb onto Esther’s bed than to kneel before it. According to the Rambam in *A Guide for the Perplexed* Part I, Chapter 49, angels plant thoughts in people’s minds. See also Part II, Chapter 41.

⁷⁰ It would appear that Achashverosh accused Haman of attempting to rape Esther right then and there, but it is inconceivable that he would suspect Haman of attempting such a thing, with the king just outside into the garden for a brief respite, at a moment of great peril when he was pleading for his very life. Rather, we may suggest that Achashverosh, seeing that Haman had inappropriately invaded Esther’s personal space in order to impose his will on her, considered

9. Then said Charbonah, one of the courtiers of the King, “Indeed, behold the gallows that Haman constructed for Mordechai, whose words brought benefit to the King, still stands in the house of Haman, at a height of fifty cubits.”

The King said, “Hang him from it!”⁷¹

10. They hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordechai, and the wrath of the King subsided.

this tantamount to a sexual assault.

⁷¹ Charbonah did not mention the gallows in order to suggest that Achashverosh hang Haman from it, but rather to add to the litany of Haman’s sins. Not only did he try to destroy an entire nation, not only did he attempt to force himself on Esther, but he also built gallows from which to hang Mordechai, the loyal friend who had saved Achashverosh from the plot to poison him. Achashverosh decided right then and there that it would be poetic justice to hang Haman from the very gallows he erected for Mordechai.

Chapter 8

Haman's decree against the Jews is rescinded.

1. That day, King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the estates of Haman, persecutor of the Jews, and Mordechai appeared before the King, for Esther had revealed what he was to her.⁷²
2. And the King removed his ring, that he had taken away from Haman, and he gave it to Mordechai, and Esther appointed Mordechai to oversee the estates of Haman.
3. Esther spoke again before the King, she fell before his feet, she wept, she appealed to him to rescind the evil of Haman the Agagite, and the schemes he had schemed against the Jews.⁷³
4. The King extended the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose, she stood before the King.
5. She said, "If it pleases the King, and if I have found favor with him, and the thing seems proper to the King,

⁷² She had revealed her identity at the feast to which she had invited Achashverosh and Haman, as she had promised (7:5).

⁷³ Although Achashverosh acknowledged that the decree had been issued in error, it was unseemly to rescind an imperial decree (8:8). Nonetheless, Esther wept and pleaded with him to make an exception just this time to ensure the survival of the Jewish people. Achashverosh did not want to undermine the perception of unequivocal legitimacy that imperial decrees enjoyed among the populace, but he had an alternate plan.

and I am pleasing in his eyes,
let it be written to revoke the scrolls
of the scheme of Haman,
son of Hamedasa, the Agagite,
that he had written to wipe out the Jews
in all the provinces of the King.

6. For how can I bear to see
the evil that will befall my people?
how can I bear to see
the destruction of my birthright?"

7. King Achashverosh said to Queen Esther
and to Mordechai the Jew,
"Behold, I've given Haman's estates to Esther,
and they have hanged him on the gallows,
because he laid hands upon the Jews.

8. Write of the Jews as you please in the name
of the King and seal it with the King's ring,
for a proclamation issued in the name
of the King and sealed with the King's ring
cannot be rescinded."⁷⁴

9. The King's scribes were summoned

⁷⁴ According to Achashverosh's plan, it would not be necessary to rescind his earlier imperial decree. He granted Esther and Mordechai the household of Haman and all the wealth it contained. This was a clear public demonstration that Esther and Mordechai were completely in Achashverosh's good graces and that Haman and his family were utterly disgraced. Esther and Mordechai could henceforth issue proclamations and directives in Achashverosh's name, and they would be accepted with full legitimacy. All they then had to do was issue new proclamations that superseded the earlier decree without actually having to recall it as having been sent in error.

Achashverosh could have issued the new proclamations himself, but he probably wanted some degree of separation from the de facto cancelation of an imperial decree. Perhaps he also wanted to demonstrate his magnanimity to Esther and thereby curry favor with her.

at that time, in the third month,
the month of Sivan, on its twenty-third day,
it was written down as Mordechai commanded
to the Jews, the knights, the consuls
and the ministers of the provinces
that reached from Hodu to Kush,
one hundred and twenty-seven provinces,
to each and every province in its own script,
to each and every people in its own language,
to the Jews in their own script and language.

10. He wrote it in the name of the King,
sealed it with the King's ring,
he sent scrolls with messengers on horseback,
mounted riders of dromedaries and young steeds.⁷⁵

11. That the King had permitted the Jews
in each and every city
to rally and defend themselves,
to destroy, to kill, to wipe out
all the armies of any people or province
that continue to oppress them,
even infants and women,
and to discard their possessions,⁷⁶

⁷⁵ The words used here are *achashtheranim bnei haramachim*. These are unfamiliar Persian words. The Talmud uses these words as an example of saying foreign words whose definitions are not known (Megillah 18a). Rashi defines *achashtheranim* as swift camels. Dromedaries are the swiftest camels. They are used for camel racing in the Arab world. The Talmud mentions a flying camel (Bab. Tal., Makkos 18a), which probably refers to a dromedary.

⁷⁶ The Jewish fighters did not plunder the possessions of their enemies, but rather, they left them discarded for anyone to take. They wanted to demonstrate that this was a war of survival and not for the acquisition of booty.

Why did the Jewish people need permission to defend themselves? Had Achashverosh not allowed them to defend themselves would they have stood passively and allowed themselves

12. on a single day, in all the provinces
of King Achashverosh,
on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month,
that is the month of Adar.
13. Copies of the proclamation
were to be enacted as law
in each and every province,
made known to all the peoples,
and for the Jews to await this day
to take revenge upon their foes.
14. The runners, riders mounted on mules,
frenzied and rushed, went forth
by the King's order, and the law
was enacted in Shushan, the capital.
15. And Mordechai left the King attired
in royal robes of indigo wool and white linen
a large golden coronet, a flaxen purple mantle,
the city of Shushan was exultant and joyful.
16. For the Jews there was light,
joy, merriment and honor.
17. In each and every province,
and in each and every city,
wherever the King's word and his law did reach,
there was joy and merriment for the Jews,
a feast and a holiday, and many of the people

to be slaughtered? Perhaps we can suggest that the permission "to rally" was in fact permission to mobilize a defensive militia. During the months leading up to the fateful dates in Adar, the Jewish people organized themselves in a military command hierarchy, armed themselves and trained for battle. They could not have done this without permission, because the imperial army would not have allowed it. When the time arrived, the imperial army stood aside and allowed the Jewish militias to fight against their enemies.

of the land tried to become Jewish converts,
for the dread of the Jews had fallen upon them.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ After seeing the great favor the Jewish people enjoyed with God and in the imperial palace, they tried asked to be converted, but according to the Talmud (Bab. Tal., Yevamos 24a), they were rejected as insincere applicants.

Chapter 9

Mordechai and Esther establish the festival of Purim.

1. In the twelfth month, the month of Adar,
on its thirteenth day, when the time came
for the King's word and law to be fulfilled,
on the same day that the foes of the Jews
had planned to overcome them,
but it was turned about,
that the Jews should overcome,
they upon their enemies.
2. The Jews rallied in their cities
in all the provinces of King Achashverosh
to lay hand upon those who wished them ill,
not a man stood against them, for the dread
of the Jews had fallen on all the peoples.
3. And all the ministers of the provinces,
the King's knights, consuls, officers on duty
elevated the Jews, for the dread
of Mordechai had fallen upon them.
4. For Mordechai had risen to greatness
in the palace of the King,
his fame spread through all the provinces,
that the man Mordechai grows ever greater.
5. The Jews struck at their foes
with sword blows, death and elimination,
they did with their enemies as they wished.
6. In Shushan, the capital city, the Jews
killed and eliminated five hundred men.
7. Parshandasa, Dalphon, Aspasa,

8. Porasa, Adalia, Aridasa,
9. Parmash'sa, Arisai, Aridai and Vayezasa,
10. the ten sons of Haman, the son of Hamedasa,
persecutor of the Jews, these they killed,
but they did not lay their hands on the spoils.⁷⁸
11. That day, an account of the dead
in Shushan, the capital city,
came to the attention of the King.
12. The King said to Queen Esther,
“In Shushan, the capital, the Jews
killed and eliminated five hundred men
and the ten sons of Haman, what did they do
in the King's other provinces?
what is your request? it shall be given to you,
what else is your entreaty? it shall be done.”
13. Esther said, “If it pleases the King,
let tomorrow also be given to the Jews
in Shushan, to do as was this day decreed,
let them hang Haman's ten sons on gallows.”⁷⁹
14. The King ordered this to be done,
the decree was issued in Shushan,
and they hanged Haman's ten sons.

⁷⁸ During his reign as Persian emperor, Koresh granted the Jewish people permission to rebuild the Holy Temple, but the obstruction of the Kuthites interfered with the progress of the project. When Achashverosh succeeded Koresh to the imperial throne, an accusation was written against the Jewish inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6), and the imperial permission for the reconstruction was withdrawn. Haman's sons were the authors of that accusation.

⁷⁹ It is indeed true, Esther was saying, that Achashverosh's command was carried out and that the Jews killed many of their enemies in Shushan. Nonetheless, they felt restricted by his presence in the capital, and they could not complete the task. Therefore, she requested an additional day of retribution. Moreover, she asked that the corpses of Haman's sons be hanged high as a warning to any that contemplated harm against the Jewish people.

15. The Jews rallied in Shushan again
on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar,
they killed three hundred men in Shushan,
but they did not lay their hands on the spoils.⁸⁰

16. The rest of the Jews in the King's provinces
rallied and defended themselves,
and they were relieved from their foes,
the dead among their enemies
numbered seventy-five thousand,
but they did not lay their hands on the spoils.

17. It was on the thirteenth day,
of the month of Adar, and they were relieved
on its fourteenth day, and they made it
a day of feasting and joy.

18. And the Jews in Shushan rallied
on its thirteenth day and its fourteenth day,
and they were relieved on its fifteenth day,
and they made it a day of feasting and joy.

19. So the rural Jews living in unwalled towns
make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar
one of joy, feasting and celebration,
and sending portions to each other.⁸¹

20. Mordechai inscribed these things
and sent scrolls to all the Jews
that were in all the provinces

⁸⁰ Although the concept of the spoils belonging to the victors was an established custom in the ancient world, the Jewish people did not want Achashverosh to have even the slightest cause to look askance at their taking Persian money.

⁸¹ The Jewish people who lived in cities whose walls date back to the time of Joshua, as specified in the Talmud (Bab. Tal., Megillah 2:4), celebrated on the fifteenth of Adar, according to the custom of Shushan.

of King Achashverosh, near and far.⁸²

21. To take upon themselves to make
the fourteenth day of the month of Adar,
and its fifteenth day, each and every year,
22. as the days on which the Jews
were relieved from their foes,
this month was turned about for them
from sorrow to joy, mourning to celebration,
to establish them as days of feasting and joy,
of sending portions to one another
and gifts to the poor.
23. The Jews obligated themselves
to all they had already begun to do,
and what Mordechai had written to them.
24. For Haman, son of Hamedasa, the Agagite,
persecutor of all the Jews,
schemed against the Jews to wipe them out,
he cast the Pur, which is the lot,
to confound and eliminate them.
25. And when she came before the King
he issued a scroll that his evil scheme,
that he had schemed against the Jews,
be visited upon his own head,
they hanged him and his sons on gallows.⁸³
- 26 For this, they called these days Purim,
in the name of the Pur,
for this, for all the events in this letter,
what they had seen of it,

⁸² These scrolls contained the entire Book of Esther as we have it.

⁸³ When Esther pleaded with Achashverosh, he commanded that Haman's evil designs be turned against him.

and what had happened to them.⁸⁴

27. The Jews obligated themselves,
their offspring and all their adherents,
that it be inviolate to keep these two days
as was prescribed and in their proper time
in each and every year.⁸⁵

28. These days are remembered
and celebrated in every generation,
in every family, every province, every city,
these days of Purim will never pass away
from among the Jews, and their remembrance
shall not cease from their offspring.⁸⁶

29. Queen Esther, the daughter of Avichail,
and Mordechai the Jew
wrote all the compelling details

⁸⁴ The scrolls clarified what the protagonists attempted to do and the consequences that resulted. Achashverosh chose to use the captured utensils of Holy Temple, and as a result, Satan initiated a chain of events that led to the death of Vashti, his queen. Haman was incensed when Mordechai refused to bow down to him, and as a result, he and his sons were hanged. It also explained why indeed Mordechai refused to bow to Haman and why Esther invited Haman to join Achashverosh and her at a private feast.

⁸⁵ Their adherents, as distinct from their offspring, refers to future converts. The celebration of Purim is a rabbinic commandments, and all converts are obligated to fulfill all rabbinic commandments. Why then did future converts need to be specifically included in the obligation to celebrate Purim?

It would seem that Mordechai and Esther wanted to ensure that Purim was viewed as a celebration incumbent on the Jewish people as a collective whole; therefore, all future converts who assimilate into the collective share the obligation. Otherwise, the people might have thought that celebration of Purim was an individual obligation for those who had been saved themselves or whose ancestors had been saved, and in that case, future converts who did not experience personal or ancestral deliverance were not included in the celebration.

⁸⁶ The remembrance is through the reading the Bok of Esther, and the celebration is through joyous feasts enjoyed by extended families and through sharing presents and giving charity.

to endorse this second letter of the Purim.⁸⁷

30. He sent scrolls to all the Jews,
to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces
of the realm of Achashverosh,
words of peace and truth.

31. To keep these days of Purim
in their proper time,
as Mordechai the Jew and Queen Esther
took it upon themselves,
and as they had taken upon themselves
and upon their offspring
the matters of the fast days and the outcries.

32. Esther's order endorsed these matters
of the Purim, and it was inscribed in the book.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ An account of the miraculous events that transpired with Achashverosh, Haman, Mordechai and Esther was sent again the following year.

⁸⁸ Being that the Book of Esther was written with divine inspiration, Esther asked the Sages of the generation to include it in the canon of the holy Writings of the Torah. They agreed.

Chapter 10

Mordechai is remembered as a great leader of the Jews.

1. King Achashverosh levied a tax
on the land and the isles of the sea.
2. And all his strong and mighty deeds,
and the account of the greatness of Mordechai,
whom the King had elevated,
are indeed inscribed in the chronicles
of the kings of Media and Persia.
3. For Mordechai the Jew was viceroy
to King Achashverosh, and a great leader
among the Jews, accepted by the multitude
of his brothers, he sought the good of his people,
and spoke of peace to all their offspring.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ The implication of the phrase “the multitude of his brothers” is that his acceptance among the Sages of the generation was not universal. A minority of them disapproved of his involvement with the imperial government at the expense of Torah study.