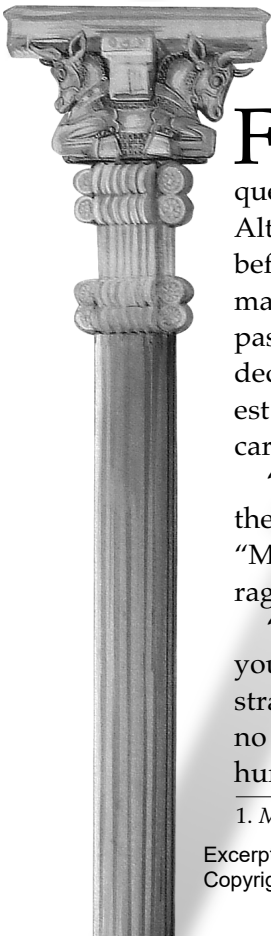


# The Throne Room

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Four men approached the Great Palace of Shushan in the early morning light. A glowering guard questioned them briefly and then let them pass. Although they had seen the palace many times before, they stopped for a moment to marvel at the massive, flower-shaped structure.<sup>1</sup> Then they walked past the main entrance, with its immense brass-studded, elaborately carved portals, and came to a modest service door around the side of the building. A caretaker showed them in.

"We've come to work on the throne," said one of the men, an older fellow with a tangled gray beard. "My men will need buckets of soapy water, clean rags and plenty of fragrant oils."

"I know," said the caretaker. "They are waiting for you in the throne room. You know the way, so go straight through. I must be running along. There is no end of work to do." Without another word, he hurried off.

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1. *Menos HaLevi*.

The gray-bearded man beckoned to his men and set off at a brisk pace. They walked through endless rooms and corridors adorned with colorful paintings and tapestries. Everywhere, servants were removing golden vessels and precious jewels from royal treasure chests and arranging them for public display.

Finally, they reached a small, unobtrusive door. "Here we are," the gray-bearded man said. "The throne room."

"This simple door?" asked one of the men, an apple-cheeked youngster.

"That's right, young fellow," replied another of the men, an extremely thin fellow with a serious look on his face. "The main door is for guests. This one is for Jews like us who come to polish the throne."

"One day, I'll come in through the front door like everyone else," grumbled the fourth man, a rotund redhead. "Just because I'm a Jew doesn't mean I can't get some respect."<sup>2</sup>

"Enough," said the gray-bearded foreman. "Let's get to work."

He opened the door and led them into a dim hallway. One door stood slightly ajar, sunlight streaming through the opening. The youngster reached for the doorknob.

"Wrong door," said the foreman. "Come this way."

"But what's in here?" asked the youngster. He flung open the door and immediately cried out. The others rushed to his side.

For a long moment, they all stood gaping in astonishment.

"I don't believe it," the rotund redhead said at last. "What is this thing?"

The foreman stepped forward for a closer look. "I believe it's Shlomo *Hamelech's* throne," he said reverently. "He supposedly received it as a gift from his father-in-law Sheishak, the Egyptian Pharaoh. Look at this thing! It can't be anything else. Let's get out of here. We have work to do."

"What's the hurry, uncle?" said the thin man with the serious face. "It's early. We have plenty of time. I want to get a good look at this thing. I've never seen anything like it, and I will never again. It is huge!"

The throne indeed towered above them, a structure of majestic beauty decorated with innumerable jewels, pearls and gold inlay. Tall, slender potted date palms on both sides cast soft shadows on

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2. See *Megillah* 12a, according to both views. See *Tosafos* and *Ben Yehoyada* there; *Einei HaEidah*.

the royal seat. Six steps led up to the throne. On the first, a golden ox and a golden lion crouched menacingly; on the second, a bear and a sheep; on the third, a leopard and a camel; on the fourth, an eagle and a peacock; on the fifth, a cat and a chicken; and on the sixth a young falcon and a dove. Seventy-two golden lions and eagles surrounded the throne.

The rotund redhead edged toward the throne with a surreptitious glance over his shoulder. He started up the steps to the royal seat.

"Where are you going?" snapped the foreman.

"Nobody's looking," he replied. "I'm going to sit down in that seat for a moment. Hey, won't that be something to tell my grandchildren? Imagine, I sat on Shlomo *Hamelech's* throne. I'll only be a minute. You can take turns after me." He continued up the steps.

"Stop!" shouted the thin man. "Stop before you get hurt!"

The redhead froze. "W-w-what do you mean?" he stammered.

"Don't you know about this throne?" said the thin man. "Why do you think Achashverosh built himself a new throne when he has this one? About four hundred years ago, after Shlomo passed away, his son Rechavam inherited this throne. Sheishak, the Egyptian Pharaoh, invaded and stripped his treasury bare. He also took back this throne, but when he sat on it, one of the lions bit him in the leg and crippled him. He never fully recovered, and from then on, he was known as Pharaoh Necho, the Lame. Eventually, the throne passed into the hands of Nevuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. He also tried to sit on it, and he was also bitten by a lion and crippled. Only the great Cyrus, the second Emperor of the Persian-Medean Empire, the one who ordered the reconstruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*, was able to sit on the throne without coming to harm. Achashverosh has the throne now, but he does not intend to sit on it. He doesn't want to become lame. So, my redheaded friend, do you want to take a chance and sit on it?" He shrugged. "Maybe it only bites kings and emperors. Maybe it won't bother with you. As for me, I'm not taking any chances."

"Neither am I," said the redhead. He spun around and headed down the steps. The man scrambled to his feet and scurried away.

The thin man laughed mirthlessly. "Don't be afraid," he said. "It's not alive. Shlomo *HaMelech* had all these animals and birds set up. When he judged cases, he would have the animals and birds jump

up and scream and roar. The litigants and the witnesses were so intimidated that they didn't dare say anything but the truth."<sup>3</sup>

"Amazing," said the youngster. "It's —"

A loud shout interrupted him. "What's going on here?" It was the caretaker. His face was livid. "What are you Jews doing in here? This room is off limits. Get out!"

"We're sorry, sir," said the foreman. "We just took a wrong turn."

"Well, take another turn and get right to work or I'll throw all of you into the dungeon."

The men slipped out silently and went down the dim hallway until they reached the throne room. Achashverosh's new throne stood in the center. It was also incredibly beautiful, but it paled in comparison to Shlomo's throne. Achashverosh had brought the finest artisans in Alexandria and elsewhere and commissioned them to duplicate Shlomo's throne, but try as they might, they could not achieve the same level of beauty and perfection. Still, the new throne was a spectacle to behold in its own right.

As the caretaker had promised, pails of soapy water, rags and oils awaited them. They set to work scrubbing the newly completed throne one section at a time. They wiped away every speck of dust and grime until it gleamed, and then they rubbed in rich oils to give it an opulent luster.

"This is going to be some party," said the youngster. "I wonder what King Achashverosh will be thinking, sitting on this magnificent throne and receiving the delegates from the one hundred and twenty-seven lands of his empire.<sup>4</sup> All these treasures will surely make them feel like ants in front of the mighty king."<sup>5</sup>

"One hundred and twenty-seven lands is not bad," said the thin man, "but it's only half of what he used to have in the beginning of his reign."

"That's right," said the foreman. "Achashverosh began his reign with only seven lands under his control. To these he added twenty more lands and, eventually, another hundred lands until he had one

3. *Targum Sheini*; *Esther Rabbah* 1:12, *Yefei Anaf*; *Midrash Lekach Tov*; *Midrash HaGadol*; *Midrash Panim Acheirim*; *Midrash Abba Gorion*; *Aggadas Esther*; *R' Yosef ibn Nachmiash*. See *Maharal*, who says that Achashverosh wanted the Egyptian magicians to produce a throne like King Solomon's, but was unsuccessful.

4. Eshter became queen over 127 lands in the merit of her ancestor the Matriarch Sarah, who lived 127 years (*Esther Rabbah* 1:8; *Midrash HaGadol* 23:1).

5. See pg. 6.

hundred and twenty-seven lands; some people say that the twenty-seven are actually island nations. Each of these three stages was as difficult as either of the others. By ruling over these nations he also gained control over the lands that adjoined each of them, for a total of two hundred and fifty-two lands. He ruled the world.<sup>6</sup> The saying goes that he rules over one hundred and twenty-seven lands from India to Ethiopia. That means both ways: from India directly to Ethiopia, and also around the circumference of the earth all the way to Ethiopia, thus covering the entire world.”<sup>7</sup>

“And he did all this from right here in Shushan?” asked the youngster.

“No, he didn’t,” said the foreman. “The capital used to be in Babylon, the original capital of the Babylonian Empire. After he lost half his kingdom, Achashverosh moved the seat of the imperial government to Shushan, renaming it Shushan *HaBirah*, Shushan the Capital.”<sup>8</sup>

“But why did he make the switch?” asked the youngster.

“It’s really quite simple,” said the foreman. “Achashverosh wanted all the glory for himself. He did not want to rule in the shadow of the illustrious Babylonian Empire. By moving the capital to Shushan, he felt he had severed the connection in the public perception. He felt he would be recognized and admired for his own achievements. This was very important to him, especially after he lost half his empire.”<sup>9</sup>

“Tell us, uncle,” said the youngster, “what do the rabbis say? Why did he lose half his kingdom?”<sup>10</sup>

The foreman stroked his gray beard. “Do you know Achashverosh’s background, young fellow? Do you know that he stopped the reconstruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*?”

6. There are many approaches to reconciling the *gemara* with the *midrash*; it would seem that if Achashverosh was king over the entire world, then he did not rule over only 127 countries. Furthermore, many ask when the 127 were conquered – before or after his loss of half the world? Perhaps the 127 countries *were* the entire world at the time. For clarity’s sake, one interpretation has been followed; however, the reader may wish to consider other opinions.

7. *Megillah* 11; see *Menos HaLevi*; *R’ Yosef ibn Nachmiash*; *Sefer Aruch*, letter 20. *Esther Rabbah* 1:5; *Rokeach* to *Esther* 1:1; *Taanis* 10a, and *Pirkei d’Rav Eliezer* 11. See *Midrash HaGadol*; *Me’am Loez*. See also how *Yad HaMelech* explains the *gemara*’s argument. Some suggest that there were two places called Hodu and two called Kush (*Tzuf Devash*). *R’ Yaakov Emden* relates that he knows of a place that Arabs call Kush that is near Hodu.

8. *Me’am Loez*; see *Rabbeinu Bachai* to *Esther* 2:5.

9. *Malbim* to *Esther* 1:2. As will be discussed in later chapters, this was an issue of contention that disturbed Vashti greatly. This would eventually lead to her insolence towards Achashverosh and ultimately her downfall (see *Maharal*).

10. *Megillas Sesarim* 1:2; *Esther Rabbah* 1:5; *Menos HaLevi*.

The youngster fidgeted. "I didn't really pay so much attention when my father told me about it. I was too busy with my friends and games. But here in the palace of the king everything seems so important. Who knows? We may even see the king today. Would you tell us about him?"

"The story really begins fifty-five years ago, in the year 3338 from the creation of the world, when Nevuchadnezzar destroyed the *Beis HaMikdash* and drove the Jewish people into exile in Babylon. Twenty-six years later, in 3364, Nevuchadnezzar died and was succeeded by his son Eeveel Merodach. Twenty-three years later, in 3387, Eeveel Merodach was succeeded by his son Belshazzar. Two years later, in 3389, Belshazzar lost his life and his empire on the same night."<sup>11</sup>

"Really?" said the youngster. "What happened?"

"Let's backtrack a few years. While the kings ruled their empire in Babylon, two new powers were rising in the east. One was Persia, the great land in which we live, the other was Medea. What I'm about to tell you is not corroborated by eyewitness reports. Some people claim it is only legend. But it is interesting in any case. There was once a Persian king named Astyages. He had a daughter named Mandane who befriended one of the king's courtiers. The furious king killed the courtier and threw his daughter into prison, where she gave birth to a son.

"The king wanted the child to die, but he couldn't bring himself to do it directly. Instead, he gave the order that the child should be left exposed on a mountaintop where it would die in a matter of hours. Miraculously, a dog found the baby and suckled him. The child survived on the mountaintop and grew into a powerful warrior. As he grew older, he drew other warriors to his side until he had his own army. Since he had been raised by a dog, they called him Koresh, which is, as you know, Persian for dog. The Greeks called him Cyrus."

"Hey, isn't he the king who sat on Shlomo *HaMelech's* throne?" asked the youngster. "How did he get to be king?"

"Not bad, young fellow," said the thin man sarcastically. "That's right," said the foreman. "It is one and the same Cyrus. When Astyages, his grandfather, heard he was alive, he sent soldiers to kill him. Cyrus routed the king's soldiers, marched on the capital, killed his grandfather and assumed the throne of Persia. The neighboring kingdom of Medea

11. See *Megillah* 11b; *Seder Olam* 25, 28; see *Radak* in *Melachim* II 24:1, 12, 15, and 25:8; see *Daniel* 5:25-30; *Me'am Loez*.

was ruled by King Darius. Cyrus and Darius forged an alliance that was sealed when Cyrus married Darius' daughter. Together, they invaded Babylon in 3389 and conquered it, killing Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon. That was the end of the Babylonian Empire and the beginning of the Persian-Medean.<sup>12</sup> Darius and Cyrus agreed to share power by taking turns; when one held the throne, the other was governor, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Darius was the first king. When he died in 3390, Cyrus took the crown. One of the first things he did as emperor was authorize the reconstruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*."

"As Yeshayahu had prophesied," said the thin man.

"Indeed," agreed the foreman as he stroked his gray beard. "Indeed. And he prophesied it a century before it happened. I know the words by heart. 'So said God to His anointed one, to Cyrus whose right hand I held . . . I lifted him up with righteousness, I will straighten all his ways. He shall build My city and free My exiles.' My mother had me memorize these words as a young boy so that I would not despair of ever seeing the rebuilt *Beis HaMikdash*. We had never even heard of Cyrus then."

"So what happened with Cyrus?" asked the youngster. "Why isn't the *Beis HaMikdash* built yet?"

"Good question," said the foreman. "Things started out well. A small group led by Daniel and Mordechai went to *Yerushalayim* first. Zerubavel, a scion of the Davidic dynasty, and Yehoshua ben Yehotzadak followed soon afterward, and construction began. Cyrus himself traveled to the construction site to return the holy vessels Nevuchadnezzar had stolen from the *Beis HaMikdash*."

"How about Ezra?" asked the youngster. "Did he go, too?"

"No, he didn't," said the foreman. "He was afraid his Torah learning would suffer if he left his teacher, Baruch ben Neriah. Many others were also reluctant to make the journey, discouraged by the poverty and desolation that characterized *Eretz Yisrael* at the time and by fear of the hostile peoples who had moved into their vacated homes and towns. They saw the first stirrings of reconstruction as a sign of heavenly favor but not of imminent redemption."

"So what stopped the reconstruction?" asked the youngster.

"Intrigue, lies, intimidation. The Samaritans, or the Kuthim if you please, sent a delegation to Cyrus accusing the Jews of plotting to

12. See *Sefer Yuchsin*; *Seder HaDoros*; *Shalshelas HaKabbalah* and *Me'am Loez*.

13. *Megillah* 12a.

rebel and of not paying their fair share of taxes. At the same time, they threatened the Jews with physical violence. Cyrus gave in to the pressure. He allowed the Jews who had gone up to *Yerushalayim* to stay there, but he called a halt to further emigration. This was a serious blow to the reconstruction. There simply were not enough people to complete it. In 3393, one year later, he died and was succeeded by his son — our very own beloved King Achashverosh.”<sup>14</sup>

3315	Yehoyakim becomes king of Yehudah.
3319	Nevuchadnezzar assumes the throne of Babylon. He subjugates the Kingdom of Yehudah, makes it into a vassal state and exiles its king and the elite.
3327	Yechanyah becomes the Jewish king. Nebuchadnezzar exiles him.
3338	Nevuchadnezzar destroys the <i>Beis HaMikdash</i> . King Tzidkiah and the Jewish nation are exiled.
3364	Nevuchadnezzar dies and is succeeded by his son Evil Merodach.
3387	Belshazzar becomes King of Babylon.
3389	Belshazzar dates the “seventy years” of Yirmiah’s prophecy from the beginning of the Babylonian Empire. He is, therefore, elated that they have passed without incident. On his night of celebration, Darius I attacks, kills Belshazzar and conquers Babylon. Vashti, Belshazzar’s daughter, is twelve years old.
3390	Darius dies. Cyrus becomes King of Persia-Medea. Cyrus orders the reconstruction of the <i>Beis HaMikdash</i> seventy years after Nevuchadnezzar’s conquest of King Yehoyakim and Yehudah.
3393	Achashverosh becomes king and halts the reconstruction.
3395	Achashverosh makes the great feast; the Jews are not redeemed from exile.
3399	Esther becomes queen.
3400	Darius II is born to Esther and Achashverosh.
3406	Achashverosh dies and is succeeded by Darius II.
3408	Darius II orders the reconstruction of the Second <i>Beis HaMikdash</i> ; seventy years from the destruction of the first <i>Beis HaMikdash</i> .

14. See *Maharsha* to *Yoma* 9b; *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:4, 8:9; *Maharsha* to *Megillah* 12a and 16a; *Rashi* to *Pesachim* 87a.

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The rotund redhead scratched his head. "Why do you say he is beloved? We don't love him. In my neighborhood, they make a pun of his name and say '*Ach larosh*, woe to my head.' The taxes he imposed on us are driving everyone into the poorhouse. On top of that, he stopped the reconstruction."<sup>15</sup>

"Yes, he did," said the foreman. "The rabbis also used those words as a pun, '*Ach larosh*,' but they translated them as 'brother to the head.' Nevuchadnezzar was the head of the kings, a killer who destroyed the *Beis HaMikdash*. Achashverosh is his brother in evil; he also seeks to kill Jews and destroy the *Beis HaMikdash*.<sup>16</sup> It started from the very beginning, when Achashverosh ascended to the throne. The Samaritans and that rascal Haman, the fellow with a whole bunch of sons, wrote Achashverosh a clever letter accusing the Jews of disloyalty. Haman's son Shimshai is a clever scribe, and he made it seem as if he was interested in promoting peace and harmony in the empire. Achashverosh liked what he heard, but he still wasn't too sure about what to do."

"So why did he decide to stop the reconstruction?" asked the youngster.

"Queen Vashti, his eighteen-year-old bride, persuaded him to do it. She is the daughter of Belshazzar, the Babylonian king who died on the night Babylon fell, the great-granddaughter of Nevuchadnezzar, the one who destroyed the *Beis HaMikdash*. 'Why are you building up,' she asked, 'what my ancestors tore down?' With the support of the haughty queen, Achashverosh issued the decree that put an end to the reconstruction."

"Tell me, uncle," said the thin man, "what do the rabbis say? Why wasn't the *Beis HaMikdash* rebuilt? Didn't the prophet say Cyrus would rebuild it?"

"The rabbis were upset with Cyrus for sending others but not taking part in the reconstruction himself. They were also upset with the Jews who failed to unite for the difficult task of reconstruction. In the opinion of the rabbis, a golden opportunity for redemption was missed."<sup>17</sup>

15. See *Maharsha to Megillah 11a; Me'am Loez 1:1*.

Some suggest that Achashverosh was actually a good king. He was good-hearted by nature and a man of good intentions, but his foolish and gullible character allowed him to be manipulated by others. This influence led to the references to Achashverosh as a wicked Jew-hater, based on his actions towards them (*Eshkol HaKofer, Tzuf Devash*).

16. *Maharsha to Megillah 11a; Me'am Loez 1:1*; see *Midrash HaGadol to Esther 1:1*.

17. *Seder Olam ch. 29; Yalkut Shimoni 1049; Eliyahu Rabbah 20; Yeshayahu ch. 45; Daniel ch. 9; Ezra ch. 2, 4 and Ralbag's commentary*. For further discussion of this matter, see

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"How do you know so much?" asked the redhead.

The foreman was about to answer, but he suddenly stood still. He put his finger to his lips to signal the others to be absolutely silent. Then he stepped to the door and listened intently.

"Quick!" he said. "Everyone back to work. I hear footsteps approaching – many of them."

The men grabbed their oil-soaked rags and went back to shining the already gleaming throne. Moments later, a dozen helmeted palace guards marched into the throne room. With a disdainful glance at the four Jewish laborers, they ran a thorough inspection, then they left the room and assumed positions on either side of the door.

In the silence that followed, the four men heard the stamping of heavy feet accompanied by the clank of armor and the rich rustle of silk and satin. Then he appeared, the mighty King Achashverosh himself, a hulking bear-like figure of a man, with bushy eyebrows and a glowering scowl.<sup>18</sup> Two fawning courtiers ran alongside him, holding up the hems of his robe, bowing incessantly and offering to bring him food, drink or anything else his hungry royal heart might desire.

Walking past the Jewish laborers as if they did not exist, the king strode to the throne and ran his hands lovingly over the opulent carvings.

"It looks just about ready," he growled to his courtiers.

"Oh, yes, your majesty, yes," they replied in unison. "It is truly perfect."

"Come, we have to go to the kitchen to check on the preparations for the great feast. I want all my subjects to know that I am giving my personal attention to every detail. It is very important."

"Oh, yes, your majesty, yes," they replied in unison. "It is truly very important."

He glared at the two courtiers, and the blood drained from their faces. He turned to go, and the courtiers snatched up the hems of his robe just as he stamped out of the room.

"Well," said the thin man as soon as they were alone again, "I suppose we should consider ourselves fortunate. Not everyone is privileged to be in the same room with our glorious king."<sup>19</sup>

18. See *Megillah* 11a; *Daniel* 7:5; *Krovetz L'Purim*.

19. See *Esther Rabbah* 1:15, 16, 19, 20; *Radal*; *Yefai Anaf*; *Megillah* 12a; *Midrash Megillas Esther*; *Rokeach*; *Rambam to Esther*; *Rishon LeTzion*; *Midrash Panim Acheirim*; *Yalkut Shimoni* 1048; *Yad HaMelech*.

"He doesn't look like a king to me," said the youngster. "He looks more like a bear or a horse trader."<sup>20</sup>

"Interesting that you should say that," said the foreman. "No one is really sure who exactly Achashverosh is. Most believe he is the son of Cyrus, as I told you before. Others think he is the son of Darius.<sup>21</sup> Still others think he is not of the royal blood. You see, Nevuchadnezzar loaded all his treasures onto ships, took them out to sea and had them scuttled. For many years, his treasure sat at some unknown spot on the bottom of the sea. But then Achashverosh managed to find the treasure, and through well-placed bribes, he catapulted himself to the throne."

"I also heard that he is a commoner," said the redhead, "but nothing about Nevuchadnezzar's treasures. Just that he was chosen king because he is more qualified for the position than anyone else.<sup>22</sup> Others say he was chosen because he is a great warrior."<sup>23</sup>

Said the thin man. "If anyone could overhear us, we'd be in trouble for more than half the things we said here today. Having said that, let me add my own little rumor. I heard his father was one of Belshazzar's stable attendants. Can you imagine? A stable boy becomes king?"<sup>24</sup>

"I heard Achashverosh is a fool," said the youngster.

"A fool who can have you killed at any time," said the thin man. "Don't underestimate his abilities and power."

"All right, all right," said the foreman. "Let's bring this thing to a close. Most people would agree that Achashverosh is an ambitious fool. Most people, whether they live close to Shushan or far away, would also agree that he wields tremendous power, and that he strikes equal fear in all their hearts."<sup>25</sup>

20. See *Rokeach*; *R' Yosef ibn Yachia*. See *Rinas Yitzchak* for his view.

21. *Yalkut Shimoni* 1049; *Me'am Loez*. It is a matter of debate whether Nevuchadnezzar was Vashti's grandfather or great-grandfather. See *Megillah* 10b, which states the view that she was his granddaughter. See also *Midrash Abba Gorion*; *Esther Rabbah* and *Midrash Panim Acheirim*. *Targum Sheni* and *Seder Olam* suggest that Belshazzar was the son of Eveel Merodach, who was the son of Nevuchadnezzar. Since Vashti was Belshazzar's daughter, according to this she was Nevuchadnezzar's great-granddaughter. Some reconcile the differences of opinion regarding Vashti's background by explaining that referring to Vashti as Nevuchadnezzar's granddaughter merely means that she was a descendant of his, but she was in fact his great-granddaughter.

22. *Megillah* 11a; *Rashi* to *Esther* 1:1; *Midrash Megillas Esther*; *Esther Rabbah* 2:1; *Matnos Kehunah*. Others suggest that Cyrus found the vast treasure of 680 copper vessels full of gold and precious gems which Nevuchadnezzar had hidden, and this wealth was inherited by Achashverosh. Cyrus merited this treasure for attempting to rebuild the *Beis HaMikdash* (see *Targum Rishon* 1:4).

23. *Yad HaMelech*; *Eshkol HaKofer*.

24. *Esther* 1:1, *Rokeach*; *R' Yosef ibn Yachia*.

25. *Ma'amar Mordechai*; *Shemen HaMaor*.