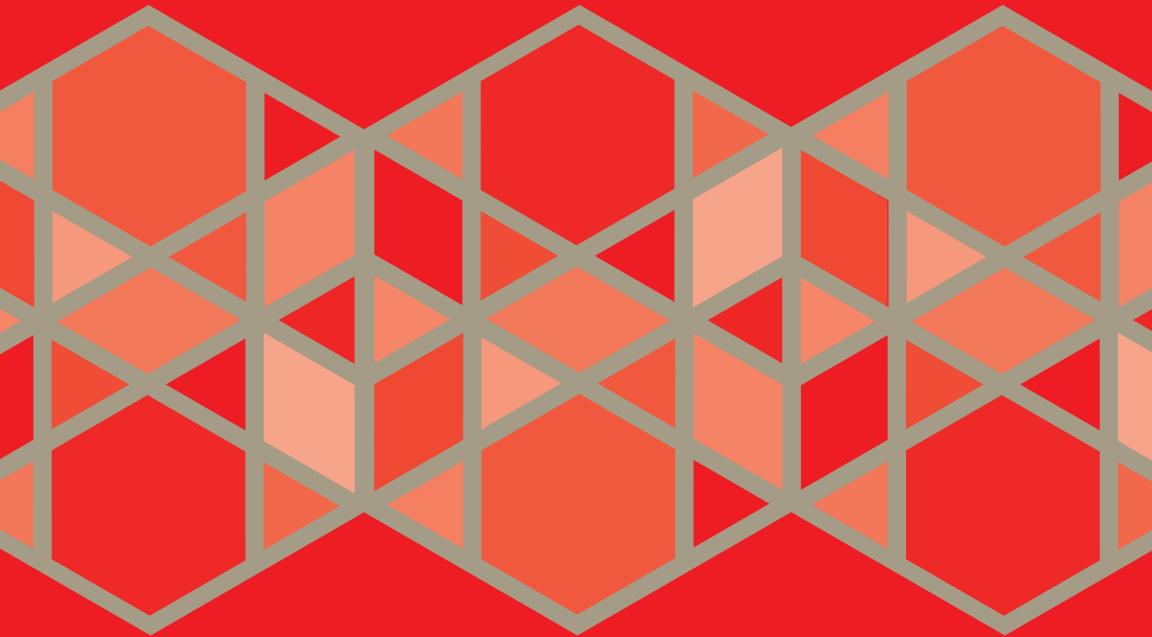




# The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary

Volume 3: Esther Chapter 5 to End



ELIEZER L. SEGAL

# The Babylonian Esther Midrash

Program in Judaic Studies  
Brown University  
BROWN JUDAIC STUDIES

Edited by  
Ernest S. Frerichs  
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Number 293  
The Babylonian Esther Midrash  
*A Critical Commentary*  
(*Volume 3: Esther Chapter 5 to End*)

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Scholars Press  
Atlanta, Georgia

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019953423

Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/  
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This Volume is Dedicated to  
**Mark and Gail Richler Stolovitsky**  
and their family



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## Publishers' Preface

Brown Judaic Studies has been publishing scholarly books in all areas of Judaic studies for forty years. Our books, many of which contain groundbreaking scholarship, were typically printed in small runs and are not easily accessible outside of major research libraries. We are delighted that with the support of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program, we are now able to make available, in digital, open-access, format, fifty titles from our backlist.

While the classical rabbis from Babylonia produced no free-standing biblical commentaries, they did write an extended commentary on the Book of Esther that is now part of the Babylonian Talmud. In *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (1994), which spans three volumes, Eliezer Segal offers a careful and astute commentary of this composition.

Volume 1 contains corrections of the original text. Volumes 2 and 3 are unchanged from the original text.

Michael L. Satlow  
Managing Editor  
October, 2019



## **Acknowledgments**

This final section of my commentary on the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, like the previous one, was researched and written during the 1992-93 academic year, which I was very fortunate to spend in Jerusalem. Once again I extend my deeply felt thanks to the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, the Jewish National and University Library, and especially to the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts and the administrative and academic arms of the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University. I am indebted to the many persons who were so generous with their time, advice and wisdom and without whose assistance this project could not have been accomplished.

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## The Commentary<sup>1</sup>

As in the previous volume, this segment of my commentary on the Babylonian Esther-Midrash will include the following components:

### 1. Presentation of text in translation:

The translation, given in indented paragraphs, will consist of a literal rendering with full punctuation. Though existing translations have been consulted,<sup>2</sup> the present one is my own. The text is based on the Yemenite manuscript Columbia University X893 T141 (designated as “MS Y”), which generally preserves the most faithful readings of any of the complete witnesses to the tractate.<sup>3</sup>

The following conventions will be adopted in the presentation of the text:

•All biblical verses are printed in italics. Since it is well-known that scriptural citations in midrashic texts are often abbreviated, I usually opt for the fullest citation that is preserved among the available witnesses, whether or not the verse is actually found in this way in MS Columbia.<sup>4</sup> The translations, where appropriate, follow the King James (Authorized Revised) version, which usually preserves faithfully the Hebrew word order and produces an impression of archaism that is analogous to the effect created when biblical Hebrew passages are quoted in rabbinic texts. All chapter and verse references to the Bible are given in full and without abbreviation. Except for those few instances where they affect the understanding of the text, I did not record variant readings of biblical verses.

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<sup>1</sup> The following section is copied with only minor changes from the introduction to Volume 1.

<sup>2</sup> Principally that of M. Simon, ed., *The Tractate Megillah*, Mo‘ed:4, The Soncino Talmud (London: Soncino Press, 1948).

<sup>3</sup> See E. Segal, “The Textual Traditions of Ms. Columbia University to TB Megillah,” *Tarbiz* 53 (1 1983), 41-69.

<sup>4</sup> Though it should be noted that MS Y does normally give full citations of biblical passages.



## *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*

•In those instances where the differences between textual traditions are too great to be conveyed as “variant readings” in the footnotes, the traditions are recorded in parallel columns. The witness which forms the basis of the main text will be identified at the beginning of the column, and the distribution of the other witnesses will be indicated in the notes.

•In those instances where it is clear that MS Columbia has absorbed extraneous material that is not part of the Talmudic text (usually from Midrash *Panim aḥerim* B), the addition will be indicated with a vertical line to its left.

•Square brackets indicate additions and emendations that are found in the textual witness. Parentheses indicate a deletion in the text. Braces ({} ) normally designate explanatory phrases added in the translation.

•Following a useful convention employed in the Soncino translations of the Babylonian Talmud, answers to questions or objections are usually preceded by a dash (—).

•The Hebrew הקדוש ברוך הוא , which should literally be translated as the cumbersome “the Holy One Blessed Be He,” will be rendered simply as “the Holy One,” more in keeping with the naturalness of the phrase in Hebrew or Aramaic.

•Proper names which appear in the Bible are usually given in their standard English forms, except where a more precise transliteration is required for word-plays etc.

•The title “Rabbi” is normally abbreviated as “R.” in those places where the equivalent abbreviation (ר) is employed in MS Columbia.

•In a departure from the conventions adopted in most translations of rabbinic texts, the word אמר, used to introduce rabbinic dicta, is treated as an Aramaic participle rather than a Hebrew perfect, and

## *Introductory Remarks*

translated accordingly as a present-tense verb (“says”), following the prevailing norms of the Mishnah and other Tannaitic works.<sup>5</sup>

### **2. Variant readings:**

The variant readings accompanying the text are not intended to constitute a proper critical edition, which would at any rate be an absurdity in a translated text. They are expected to provide an idea of the variety that exists in the textual witnesses, insofar as this variety can be reflected in English translation. The listings do not record all the textual information. For example, one cannot know from this apparatus whether the omission of a witness from the listing of variants indicates that its reading agrees with MS Columbia or that there is a gap in the manuscript.<sup>6</sup>

The following conventions are adopted for the presentation of the variant readings.

•Variants are listed in footnotes. As a rule, I have tried never to mix textual variants and other information in the same paragraph, and usually not in the same footnote. The information in the footnote relates to the text preceding the footnote reference (in the case of variants) as defined in the lemma, or (in the case of additions) to the place where the footnote reference is inserted.

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<sup>5</sup> That this is the proper translation was proven by Hyman Klein, “Gemara and Sebara” *JQR* 38 (1 1947), 87 [reprinted in Abraham Goldberg, ed. *Collected Talmudic Scientific Writings of Hyman Klein* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1979), 84], who notes how it appears in parallel with בעי, which is unquestionably a participle. Shamma Friedman, [“A Critical Study of *Yevamot X* with a Methodological Introduction,” in *Texts and Studies, Analecta Judaica*, ed. H. Z. Dimitrovsky, 275-442 (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), 37, n. 110] notes further that the plural in these contexts is usually “אמר.”

<sup>6</sup> I have generally tried to minimize the size of the listings. Thus if only one or two witnesses preserve a certain reading, it will be recorded as “Thus only in X and Y; all other witnesses read: ‘...’,” without identifying all the witnesses which support the majority reading.

## *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*

•The textual information is provided in complete English sentences, rather than in technical notation.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, both the lemma and the variant reading are placed in quotation-marks, separated by a dash (—). The variant readings are understood to replace everything in the lemma.

•Variants to a single lemma are separated by semi-colons (;). Separate lemmas are separated by periods (.).

•In cases where lemmas are abbreviated (with a "..."), I have tried to remove any ambiguity about the extent of the citation. Where the opening word or phrase of the abbreviated lemma appears more than once in the passage, the reference may be presumed to be to the last occurrence.

•The tilde (~) indicates that the content of the lemma is missing in the designated witness or witnesses.

•I have not identified the Genizah fragments, which are referred to generically in the apparatus; nor can it be assumed that two reference to Genizah fragments in the same passage refer to the same fragment.<sup>8</sup> (Hence, the words "Genizah fragment" do not appear in bold typeface like the rest of the sigla.)

The listing of sigla normally follows the following order:

1. Variants themselves are listed according to what I felt to be a logical order.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As such there is some flexibility in the syntax. E.g., the sigla may appear before the readings (followed by a colon) or after them (preceded by a dash or the word "in" etc.).

<sup>8</sup> For a description of the Genizah fragments to *TB Megillah* see Eliezer Segal, "The Textual Traditions of Tractate Megillah in the Babylonian Talmud," Ph. D., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1981, 254-69.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., if there were two primary traditions the order would be: (1) tradition #1 (that most similar to MS Columbia), (2) tradition #2, (3) confections of the two traditions and, lastly, (4) witnesses which omit the text in question. For reasons of space, I have not usually commented on the significance or history of each reading, though the

Continued on next page...

## *Introductory Remarks*

2. The witnesses to each reading are listed according to the following order: (1) complete manuscripts; (2) partial texts (including aggadic compendia in manuscript and print); (3) printings; (4) fragments.<sup>10</sup>

3. Within each of these classes the witnesses are listed according to textual type: Oriental, Spanish, Ashkenazi. Where possible the readings are grouped into “families” (see below).

### **3. Transliteration:**

The transliteration system used here for Hebrew and Aramaic is, for the most part, standard. The following idiosyncrasies should be noted, most of which reflect my use of “Sepharadic” pronunciation:

א is normally rendered *v* (not *w*), as is undotted ב.

Left-dotted פ is not distinguished from פ, both of which are rendered *s*.

No distinctions were made between long, short or “half” (*ḥataf*) vowels. Similarly, *sheva mobile* (*na*<sup>◌</sup>) is indicated simply by an *e*.

No distinctions were made between dotted and undotted ג, ד, or ט, which are rendered indiscriminately as *g*, *d* and *t* respectively.

Right-dotted פ is represented as *sh*, and undotted פ as *kh*. Where the transliteration is referring to two separate consonants, they are separated by a hyphen (*s-h*, *k-h*).

Following current bibliographical conventions, a less precise transliteration system is employed for modern Hebrew (mostly in titles of books and articles). In such references, the definite article is rendered as “*ha-*” with hyphen and no doubling of the following

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interested reader will be able to draw conclusions from the manner in which I record the material.

<sup>10</sup> Only actual manuscripts are designated as such (“MS” or “MSS”) in the apparatus.

## *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*

consonant; and **ז** is transliterated as *tz* rather than *z* as in classical texts. **ס** at the beginning of a word is not indicated.

Where a European-language translation is provided in a Hebrew book or article (in an alternative title-page or table of contents, etc.), I refer to it by that title rather than by a transliteration.

### **4. The Textual witnesses and their sigla:**

The following witnesses to the text of the Esther-Midrash are cited in the apparatus:<sup>11</sup>

#### **Oriental types:**

##### **Manuscripts:**

**Y** MS Columbia University X893 T141

##### **Partial texts and fragments:**

**N** MS New York (JTS.ENA) 84

**AgE** *Aggadat esther* (ed. S. Buber)

**MhG** *Midrash haggadol* to the Pentateuch, cited according to the Mossad Harav Kook editions (no page references are supplied)

Genizah fragment [see above]

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<sup>11</sup> Fuller descriptions may be found in “The Textual Traditions of Tractate Megillah in the Babylonian Talmud.”

## *Introductory Remarks*

### **Spanish types:**

#### **Manuscripts:**

- O** MS Oxford Bodlean 366 (Oppenheim fol. 23)  
**G** MS Göttingen 13  
**B** MS Munich 140

#### **Partial texts:**

- EY** R. Jacob Ibn Ḥabīb's *‘Ein ya‘aqov*, cited from *editio princeps*, Salonika 1516-22  
**HgT** *Haggadot hattalmud*. The following two versions were consulted. Where no superscript is supplied their readings may be presumed to be identical:  
**HgT<sup>1</sup>** MS Parma 3010  
**HgT<sup>2</sup>** Constantinople 1511 printing  
**P** MS Parma 427

### **Ashkenazic types:**

#### **Manuscripts:**

- L** MS London (British Library) 400 (Harl. 5508)  
**M** MS Munich 95  
**R** MS Vatican 134

#### **Partial texts:**

- V** MS Vatican 49/2  
**W** MS Warsaw (Jewish Historical Institute) 260  
**Mf** MS London Montefiore 88

*The Babylonian Esther Midrash*

**YS** *Yalqut shim'oni*, cited according to MS Oxford (Neubauer 2637) and *editio princeps*. Passages from Genesis and Exodus were compared as well to the Mossad Harav Kook editions]. Precise references are not provided.

**Printed editions:**

**Printings** Pesaro (c. 1510) and Venice (Bomberg, 1521) printings of the Babylonian Talmud.

In those few places where variants exist between these two texts, they are indicated in the apparatus; otherwise they may be presumed to be identical.

In order to simplify the presentation of the textual data, readings common to certain groups were recorded as “families” according to the following criteria:

•“**Yemenite family**”: Where there was agreement between MS **Y**, **AgE** and **MhG** (or MS **G**, which has close affinities with this family).

•“**Spanish family**”: The special readings of this tradition are very distinctive, consisting largely of explanatory glosses and expansions. The grouping was used to designate agreement among any three of the following witnesses: **O**, [**B**], **EY**, **HgT**, **P**.

•“**Ashkenazic family**”: This tradition is less consistent. I grouped the readings as a family only when there was agreement among all three complete manuscripts: **L**, **M** and **R**.

Square brackets ([ ]) around either a reading or a siglum indicate that the reading in question is found in an emendation or gloss to that witness.

## Chapter 12

### The Tide Turns

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#### *‘Esther Stood’*

[15b] “*And stood in the inner court of the king’s house*” (Esther 5:1).

MS Y and AgE	All other witnesses
She stood to pray, and she said: “ <i>Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog</i> ” (Psalms 22:21).	

Says R. Levi:<sup>1</sup> When she arrived at the house of the images<sup>2</sup> the *Shekhinah* departed from her and<sup>3</sup> she said<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me, Art thou far from my help at the words of my cry?*” (Psalms 22:2).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Says R. Levi”— ~ in MS R.

<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge the expression “house of the images” (*beit haššelamim*) does not occur elsewhere in the Bible or in rabbinic literature.

<sup>3</sup> “and”— ~ in MSS B, O, R, W, Mf, EY, HgT, **Printings**, AgE, Genizah fragment.

<sup>4</sup> “and she said”— ~ in MS P.

<sup>5</sup> MS R adds: “Immediately.”

<sup>6</sup> MSS B, Mf add: “She said before him: Master of the universe”; MS R adds: [“*The words of my shiggaion*” [cf. Psalms 7:1] it ought to have said! —For she said before him: Master of the Universe”].

The allusion to Psalm 7 is most curious. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact (reported in *Masekhet soferim* 18:2/3 [ed. Michael Higger (New York: Deverabbanan, 1937), 313] that this Psalm was the “daily Psalm” for Purim, probably owing to its heading “concerning Cush a Benjaminite.” See Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, third revised ed., Schriften herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums

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R. Levi is responding to two interrelated textual stimuli; the first is in Esther, whereas the other is an intertextual association from the book of Psalms. As regards the circumstances in Esther, the plot now approaches its climax, and the fate of the Jews hinges entirely on the success of the heroine's intrusion upon Ahasuerus. This dramatic moment is the culmination of everything that has happened up until this point, and for the midrashic homilist who is determined to discern the divine hand controlling the events, there is no more appropriate place for Esther, in her existential solitude, to pour her heart out in prayer before her creator. The wording of Esther 5:1 also lends itself to such a narrative addition, in its terse mention of Esther's stopping<sup>7</sup> in the palace courtyard on her way to her meeting with the king. The conclusion that she stopped in order to pray for divine assistance<sup>8</sup> is one

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(Frankfurt a/M: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1931), 131; Joel Müller, *Masechet Soferim: Der talmudische Tractat der Schreiber* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1878), 251.

<sup>7</sup> All commentators are in agreement that this is the meaning of the word here. See, Solomon Alkabetz, *Manot hallevi*, reprint ed. (Jerusalem: 1983); Maharsha; F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Lafayette: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., 1980) [=BDB], 764; L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964), 230; Carey A. Moore, ed., *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 54-5.

<sup>8</sup> The insertion of a prayer at this point in the story reflects an ancient tradition, attested as early as the Septuagint additions [see Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*, The Anchor Bible (Apocrypha), ed. J. Greenfield *et al.*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1977), 209, 212], as well as in both Aramaic Targums to Esther 5:1 [Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, Vol. 18, The Aramaic Bible: The Targums, ed. Martin McNamara *et al.* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 62-3, 159-63 (and n. 2)]. Grossfeld discerns here a midrashic response to the phrase "over against the king's house," in accordance with the tradition that mentions of the "king" (as distinct from "king Ahasuerus") are to be ascribed to God; hence the exposition that Esther was addressing her words to the sanctuary in Jerusalem (as spelled out in the First Targum; see Alkabetz and Grossfeld, 63, n. 4). For rabbinic sources on Esther's prayer see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, translated by H. Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-39), 4:424-7; 6:472, nn. 143-4.

that naturally suggests itself to the Jewish exegete.<sup>9</sup> In line with what was probably a venerable Jewish hermeneutical tradition, the text of Psalm 22 had come to be associated with the events of Esther, and especially with the prayers that she was believed to have uttered at this most crucial and suspenseful moment in the story, immediately before she risked her life by approaching, unsummoned, Ahasuerus' presence.<sup>10</sup> These words of the Psalm were then read in the light of these

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<sup>9</sup> It is possible as well that the verse's redundant-looking distinction between the *beit hammelekh* (the term normally employed to designate Ahasuerus' palace) and the more unusual expression *beit hammalkhut*, denoting "the house of royalty" which it faced, led the midrashic exegete to the inference that the latter term referred to a repository or temple for idolatrous images. See Moore, *ibid.*; Maharsha. The usage of *melekh* in such a sense would be analogous to that of "Molech" in the Bible; see Geza Vermes, "Leviticus 18:21 in Ancient Jewish Bible Exegesis," in *Studies in Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. Jakob J. Petuchowski and Ezra Fleischer, 108-24 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Hebrew Union College Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> This psalm, which includes both an urgent prayer for deliverance and a thanksgiving for the rescue, carries the heading "*For the Leader; upon Aijelet ha-Shahar.*" In *TB Yoma 29a* we read:

Says R. Zera: Why was Esther likened to an *ayalah*, hind? —Just as the hind has a narrow womb and is beloved to its mate at all times just as at the first time, even so was Esther beloved of Ahasuerus at all times just as at the first time.

Says R. Asi: Why was Esther compared to the morning-star [*shahar*]? —Just as the morning-star marks the termination of the night, so was Esther the end of miracles...

It would appear more probable that the identification grew out of the association between Esther and *Istahar*, the morning-star (see Chapter Eight above, to *Megillah* 13a). Some echoes of the psalm's phraseology are already perceptible in the Septuagint Addition of Esther's prayer (e.g., compare verse 22 of the psalm with verse 14 of Esther's prayer: "Give me the apt word to say when I enter the lion's den"). Insofar as I have been able to discern, the link between Psalm 22 and the Esther story does not figure prominently in rabbinic literature other than in *TB* and *Midrash on Psalms*. Thus, above 4a R. Joshua ben Levi learned from Psalms 22:3 that the *Megillah* should be read both at night and during the day (see Rashi there). Maharsha (to 4a and to our current pericope) observes that verses 4-7 allude to Mordecai's prayer, verse 25 ("Neither hath he hid [histir] his face from us, etc.") evokes associations with Esther (see *TB Hullin* 139b), verse 11 ("Upon thee I have been cast from my birth, etc.") recalls Esther 2:7, etc. Many other such parallels are adduced in *Midrash on Psalms*, and still more could be added. See the discussions in D.

considerations as expressions of her anguished feeling of being abandoned by God,<sup>11</sup> expressed in rabbinic terminology as the “departure of the *Shekhinah*,”<sup>12</sup> God’s perceptible presence.<sup>13</sup>

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Simonsen, “Le Psaume XXII et la Passion de Jésus,” *REJ* (o.s.) 22 (1891): 283-5; Ginzberg, Louis, *Legends*, 6:472-3, n. 145; Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 63-4, n. 5; 159, n. 2.

Some medieval sources speak of a custom of reciting Psalm 22, or at least verse 4, as part of the liturgy of Purim or the Fast of Esther [Cf. Simonsen, *op. cit.*, who speculates that in earlier times the fast might have been observed on the fourteenth of Nisan, a fact which might account for its centrality in the Christian Passion tradition], though there is no evidence that the practice was in force during talmudic times. As we have noted above, the most important record we possess of early Palestinian liturgical practice, *Masekhet soferim*, designates Psalm 7 for recitation on Purim. See *Tosafot Megillah* 4a (and gloss of R. Isaiah Berlin); Aaron Hakkothen of Lunel (?), *Sefer kol bo* (Fiorda: Isaac ben David, 1782), 35c; Aaron Hakkothen of Lunel, *Sefer orhot hayyim* (Jerusalem: Stiglitz, 1956), 1:268 (*Hilkhot megillah ufurim* #33); David Abudraham, *Abudraham hash-shalem: perush habberakhot vehattefillot* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1963), 208; R. Jacob ben Asher, *Tur, Oraḥ hayyim*, 133; Yonah Y. Dissen, ed., *Minhagim (Customs) of Rabbi Abraham Klausner*, Mifal Torah Chachmey Ashkenaz (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1978), 76 and n. 8 (62:2); glosses of the *Ga'on* of Vilna to *Shulḥan 'arukh, Oraḥ hayyim*, 693:1; Jacob Gliss, *Minhagei erez-yisra'el* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968), 211; I. Jacobson, *Netiv Binah* (Tel-Aviv: Sinai, 1968), 3:399, 400, 423.

<sup>11</sup> Alkabetz raises the question of how Esther became aware of God’s departure from her.

<sup>12</sup> Several commentators emphasize R. Ḥanina’s interpretation of the beginning of the verse, according to which Esther had at that moment clothed herself in the Holy Spirit.

That the divine presence withdraws itself from the world in response to human sins, and can be brought closer through acts of righteousness, is a recurrent motif in rabbinic literature. See *Avot derabbi natan* A, 34 [Solomon Schechter, ed., *Aboth de Rabi Nathan*, newly corrected ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1967), 102; transl. Judah Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Yale Judaica Series, ed. J. Obermann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 141-2]; *TB Soṭah* 3b [Abraham Liss, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings: Tractate Soṭah* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1983-4), 1:21]; 47b; [2:313] *Genesis rabbah*, 19:7 [J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrasch Bereschit Rabbah* (Berlin: 1903-36), 176-7]; 50:2 [517]; *Exodus rabbah*, 2:2 [Avigdor Shinan, ed., *Midrash Shemot Rabbah Chapters I-XIV* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1984), 104]; *Numbers rabbah*, 12:6; 13:2; *Song of Songs rabbah*, 5:1 [S. Dunsky, ed., *Midrash shir ha-shirim: midrash ḥazita* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1980), 126-7]; *Tanḥuma, Terumah*, 11; *Song of Songs zuṛa*, 5:3-4 [in: S. Buber, ed., *Midrash Zuṛa*,

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[15b] Perhaps you judge the unintentional like the deliberate and what was done under compulsion like that which was done intentionally!

At this point in the midrashic telling of the story, Esther remains sufficiently confident of her righteousness<sup>14</sup> that she is unable to identify any sin which would justify her present consciousness of God's absence from her. If the cause was not an intentional transgression, she concludes, following the conceptual vocabulary of halakhic reasoning, then God must be condemning her for inadvertent actions.<sup>15</sup> Rashi understands this as a reference to her marriage to Ahasuerus, though other commentators have explained the matter differently.<sup>16</sup>

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(Berlin: 1894), 31-2]; *Pesiqta rabbati*, 5:7 [M. Friedmann, ed., *Pesikta rabbati* (Vienna: 1880), 18b-19b; transl. W. G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 1:104-7]; 10:2 [35a/1:172]. Cf. *TB Ta'anit* 21b [Henry Malter, ed., *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, Publications of the American Academy for Jewish Research Vol. 1. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1930), 87-8]; etc. See also Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1912), 77-149; E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, translated by I. Abrahams (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1987), 54-5; Gershom Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated by J. Ben-Shelomo (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1976), 259-74.

<sup>13</sup> The Talmud here seems to be attributing the withdrawal of the *Shekhinah* to Esther's presence in the "house of images." On the other hand, Esther's words below imply that she thought the cause was something she had done "under compulsion." See below on the exegetical issues.

<sup>14</sup> See Alkabetz. *Midrash on Psalms*, 22:16 [S. Buber, ed., *Midrash tehillim* (Vilna: 1891), 188; transl. W. G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, 3rd ed., Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 1:311] has Esther assure God that her religious observance has been irrefragable. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:427; 6:472, n. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Alkabetz attempts to find specific references that would conform to the halakhic categories of *shogeg*, *mezid*, *ones* and *raṣon*. On the legal distinctions between the terms see: *Mishnah Bava qamma* 2:6.

<sup>16</sup> Maharsha and Pinto (in keeping with the Talmud's interpretation of Esther 4:16 [above, 15a]) point to Esther's own admission that at this point her relationship can no longer be classified halakhically as "under compulsion," and argue that our pericope should be understood throughout as referring to her traversing a place of idolatry. Cf. Alkabetz. *Eṣ yosef* offers a very different (but unconvincing) explanation of the inadvertent transgression (namely, foiling the conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh!). We

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[15b] Or perhaps<sup>17</sup> it is because I called him a dog, as it says<sup>18</sup> “*Deliver my soul from the sword; Mine only one from the power of the dog*” (Psalms 22:21).<sup>19</sup>

Instead she called him a lion, as it says<sup>20</sup> “*Save me from the lion’s mouth; Yea, from the horns of the wild-oxen do thou answer me*” (Psalms 22:22).

The midrash takes its cue from the juxtaposition of the “dog”<sup>21</sup> and “lion”<sup>22</sup> in the adjacent verses,<sup>23</sup> with the implied question of why

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might also suggest that Esther is here referring not to a personal transgression, but to the Jews’ participation in Ahasuerus’ feast, or to their bowing to Nebuchadnezzar’s idol, which the midrashic tradition views as a major reason for their tribulations. It is at any rate possible to understand that although the departure of the *Shekhinah* from Esther was really a result of her proximity to the house of idols, Esther *mistakenly* ascribed it to her own failings.

In support of the view that Esther’s marriage to Ahasuerus was the issue of concern we might cite *Midrash on Psalms*, 22:16 (ed. Buber, 188; transl. Braude, 1:311), where Esther alludes in her prayer to the fate of the Matriarch Sarah, for whom God worked miracles to rescue her when she was abducted by Pharaoh in Genesis 12. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:427; 6:472, n. 146.

<sup>17</sup> “perhaps”— ~ in MS R.

<sup>18</sup> “says”—MSS L, M, W, HgT<sup>1</sup>, Genizah fragment: “is written.”

<sup>19</sup> “As it says ‘...one...’”— ~ in MS Mf.

<sup>20</sup> “says”—MSS G, L, M, W, HgT, one Genizah fragment: “is written”; ~ in YS, other Genizah fragment.

<sup>21</sup> On dogs in ancient Jewish sources see L. Lewysohn, *Die Zoologie des Talmuds* (Frankfurt am Main: by author, 1858), 82-6; Yehuda Feliks, *Mixed Sowing Breeding and Grafting: Kil’ayim I-II, Mishna, Tosephta and Jerusalem Talmud, a Study of the Halachic Topics and Their Botanical-Agricultural Background*, Bar-Ilan University Series of Research Monographs in Memory of...Pinkhos Churgin (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1967), 118-21; *Idem.*, *Ha-ḥai ba-mishnah* (Jerusalem: Institute for Mishna Research, 1972), 80-1.

<sup>22</sup> See Lewysohn, *op. cit.*, 68-70; Feliks, *Ha-ḥai ba-mishnah*, 20-1.

<sup>23</sup> The two animals were apparently mentioned among several examples of savage beasts symbolizing fearsome enemies, like the bulls of verse 12 and the “wild oxen” of 22. Allusions to threatening lions and dogs have previously appeared in verses 14 and 17. Mitchell Dahood [*Psalms I: 1-50*, The Anchor Bible, ed. W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 137, 141-2] finds the Masoretic text to produce “such a curious and unexampled parallel to... ‘from the sword’” that he prefers a farfetched translation of “blade of the ax.”

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Esther, who was presumably referring in both instances to Ahasuerus,<sup>24</sup> changed her choice of imagery, as it were, in mid-prayer. The solution expresses an intriguing reverence for legitimate authority, a sentiment which we have encountered previously in some of the admiring midrashic comments about the grandeur of Ahasuerus' banquet in Esther Chapter One.<sup>25</sup>

### Three Ministering Angels

[15b] “*And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter*” (Esther 5:2).

Says R. Johanan: Three<sup>26</sup> ministering angels were appointed for Esther at that moment:

One who lifted up his neck.<sup>27</sup>

One who drew<sup>28</sup> upon her a thread of grace.<sup>29</sup>

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Alkabetz finds it awkward that the midrash should jump from verse 2 to verse 21 (an awkwardness which he claims was felt by Rashi as well).

<sup>24</sup> A different homily would have resulted if the midrash had approached the text differently; e.g., that “dog” referred to Haman and “lion” to Ahasuerus. Such an interpretation is in fact suggested by Maharsha who argues that Esther’s initial instinct was to blame only Haman for all the troubles, and subsequently acknowledged Ahasuerus’ decisive role, also recognizing that it would be a more impressive demonstration of God’s power to deliver his people from a lion than from a dog. The explanation, which comes complete with an acrostic allusion to Haman in the Hebrew wording of the verse, is not convincing. *Midrash on Psalms* identifies the “bulls” with the hosts of Ahasuerus (22:25; ed. Buber, 193; transl. Braude, 1:319), the lion with Ahasuerus (*ibid.*: “Esther said: As a lion crouches upon its prey and tears it apart, so Ahasuerus crouches upon me and ravishes me”), the dogs as Haman’s sons (22:26; 194/1:320).

<sup>25</sup> For halakhic expressions of this phenomenon see Shmuel Shilo, *Dina de-Malkhuta Dina: The Law of the State is Law* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> “Three”— ~ in MS R (and filled in in R\*).

<sup>27</sup> “his neck”—thus only in MS Y, HgT<sup>1</sup>, Genizah fragment; MS R: “the neck of that evil man”; all other witnesses: “her neck.”

<sup>28</sup> “drew”—MS M: “stretched.”

<sup>29</sup> “One who lifted...thread of grace”—AgE: “One who drew upon her a thread of grace and one who lifted his neck.”

And one who stretched out his<sup>30</sup> scepter.

Just as it was inconceivable to the rabbis that Esther would not have prayed to God at this dramatic moment, so was it impossible for them to imagine that the success of her mission could have been accomplished without divine intervention. The laconic biblical narration, in which over the space of two verses Esther approaches the throne and is immediately given a gracious welcome by Ahasuerus, without any overt indication of God's role in the process, seemed too facile for the momentousness of the occasion. The midrashic accounts overcame this inadequacy by means of two kinds of embellishments: Firstly, they heaped up obstructions in Esther's way,<sup>31</sup> whether by detailing the physical path she had to walk or by telling of Ahasuerus' initial hostile reaction to her intrusion.<sup>32</sup> And secondly, after having described the situation in such adverse colors, the midrash goes on to elaborate lovingly on the magnitude of the wonders that had to be performed by God at each stage in order to ensure that, contrary to all mortal expectations, the outcome would be successful. Following the conventional pattern with which we are by now familiar, the divine assistance is described in terms of the activity of angels.<sup>33</sup> The more

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<sup>30</sup> "his"—**Spanish family**: "Ahasuerus'."

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:427-8 (mention of seven courts).

<sup>32</sup> The tradition that Ahasuerus' reaction to Esther's was initially one of rage, and had to be altered by God, is found already in the apocryphal version of Esther (Addition D), which is incorporated into Josephus' account of the story, *Antiquities*, 11:9 (236-7) [Ralph Marcus, ed., *Josephus with an English Translation*, Vol. 6. The Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge [Mass.]: William Heineman and Harvard University Press, 1966), 6:428-9, and n. c] and derivative Hebrew works.

<sup>33</sup> E. E. Hallevy, *'Erkhei ha-'aggadah ve'ha-halakhah*, Vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1980), 158, notes that the roles played by angels in stories like the present one bear a remarkable similarity to those of the gods and goddesses in Greek mythological narrative. He cites as an example the appearances made by Athena in order to assist the protagonists of Homer's *Odyssey*. See e.g., Murray, A. T., transl., *Homer, the Odyssey*, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Warmington, ed. (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons and William Heineman, 1919), 1:258-9 (8:18), 2:156-7 (17:61), 2:210 (18:190), 2:385 (23:156). Hallevy, *ibid.*, 157 observes that these details serve to heighten the dramatic tension in the story.

obstacles that have to be overcome, the greater is the number of the angels who most participate,<sup>34</sup> and hence more wondrous is the resultant deliverance which must be viewed as a manifestation of God's power and his unrelenting compassion for his people.

Accordingly, R. Johanan's explanation assumes that, contrary to the impression given by the unexpounded text of the biblical story, Ahasuerus had to be forced against his will to receive Esther hospitably. The king's head had to be raised up reluctantly in welcome,<sup>35</sup> Esther was made to look more gracious than she was in reality, and the scepter—whose extension constituted the visual representation of her favorable acceptance—<sup>36</sup> had to be forcibly stretched out towards her.<sup>37</sup>

It appears that the determining of which actions were performed by the angelic helpers is based more on the requirements of the

<sup>34</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:472, n. 144 observes that the number of angels is the same as that of the attendants who accompanied Esther to the presence of the king according to Addition D (verse 2) to the Greek Esther. However the passage in question speaks only of *two* attendants. This is true as well of derivative traditions such as *Yosippon* [David Flusser, ed., *The Josippon [Josephus Gorionides]* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), 1:52] and *Jerahmeel* [M. Gaster, ed., *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel: Or, the Hebrew Bible Historiae* (New York: Ktav, 1971), 80:4 (240)]. The only source of which I am familiar that speaks of three attendants is *Leqah tov*, 103 (citing *Yosippon*).

<sup>35</sup> Or according to the reading in the majority of texts, Esther's own neck had to be raised so that she would make a good appearance, though weakened by her three days of fasting and prayer. The reading "his neck" is supported by *Panim aherim* B, 71 [in: Salomon Buber, ed., *Sifre de-aggadeta al megillat ester* (Vilna: Romm, 1886)]: "When the king saw Esther, he turned away his face so that he would not see her. And the ministering angels lifted up his face against his will, and he began to cry 'vay.'" [The last comment is based on a word-play from "And it was," in Hebrew: *vayhi*.]

<sup>36</sup> On the passage see Samuel Tobias Lachs, "Sexual Imagery in Three Rabbinic Passages," *JSJ* 23:2 (1992), 245-6. I find his interpretation that stretching of the "scepter" is a euphemism for Ahasuerus' sexual arousal to be unconvincing. See also his interpretation there (46-7) of *Megillah* 12a-b (to Esther 1:9) which, as he acknowledges in n. 9, was already suggested by some of the traditional commentators.

<sup>37</sup> In *Panim aherim* B the problem is that Esther did not have the strength to touch the scepter. Therefore Michael had to pull *her*.



narrative than on the exegesis of specific words in the verses. Nevertheless, most of the traditional commentators have tried to find exegetical bases for each of R. Joḥanan's statements.<sup>38</sup>

[15b] And how much did he stretch it<sup>39 40</sup> out?<sup>41 42</sup>

—Says R. Jeremiah:<sup>43</sup> It<sup>44</sup> was two cubits and he brought<sup>45</sup> it to twelve.<sup>46 47</sup> And there are those who say: to sixteen cubits.<sup>48 49</sup>

R. Joshua ben Levi<sup>50</sup> says:<sup>51</sup> twenty-four. And there are those who say:<sup>52</sup> twenty-eight.

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<sup>38</sup> R. Elijah ben Solomon, the *Ga'on* of Vilna [Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, *Ḥamesh megillot 'im perush ha-gr" a* (Jerusalem: 1987)] explains that the Talmud was focusing on the word *kir'ot* which translates more literally as “as [if] he saw” than as “when he saw,” thereby signifying that the sight was a supernaturally evoked illusion. [A similar interpretation is found in *Panim aḥerim* B, 71, where the angels struck Ahasuerus blind until he set his eyes upon Esther. See also *Midrash on Psalms*, 22:27 (ed. Buber, 194; transl. Braude, 321): “It does not say ‘when the king saw [*bir'ot*],’ but rather ‘as the king saw [*kir'ot*].’—Against his will and in defiance of his intentions did she bear favor in his eyes.”] Similarly the unusual *nose't hen*, ““carrying favor” instead of the standard *mošet hen*, “finding favor,” was taken as implying that grace had been miraculously bestowed upon her. The superfluous phraseology of “*the golden scepter* that was in his hand” (Where else would it be?!) suggested that originally it was small enough to be held in Ahasuerus' hand, but afterwards was enlarged.

<sup>39</sup> “it”— ~ in MSS G, W, Mf, Ashkenazic family, Genizah fragment.

<sup>40</sup> “did...it”—MS B: “does he stretch [it].”

<sup>41</sup> “did he stretch it out?”— ~ in Printings, AgE, MhG.

<sup>42</sup> MS B adds: “Two cubits.”

<sup>43</sup> All witnesses except MSS M, R, Printings, Yemenite family add: “bar Abba.”

<sup>44</sup> “It”—MS B: “The scepter.”

<sup>45</sup> “brought”—MS B: “stretched;” MS R: “brings.”

<sup>46</sup> “twelve”—MS M: “thirteen.”

<sup>47</sup> MS M, AgE, MhG add: “cubits.”

<sup>48</sup> “cubits”—thus only in Yemenite family; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>49</sup> “And there are...cubits”— ~ in MSS M, R.

<sup>50</sup> “ben Levi”— ~ in MS R, YS.

<sup>51</sup> “R. Joshua...says”—Printings: “And there are those who say: to.”

<sup>52</sup> “twenty-four...who say”— ~ in MS B, EY (and filled in in B\*).

Rav<sup>53</sup> Hisda<sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> says: Said Rabban Gamaliel:<sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup> sixty.<sup>58</sup>

Had this discussion taken place among contemporaries, we might have imagined them sitting around a table, each one striving to outdo the previous suggestion by proposing a larger number, and thereby magnifying the dimensions of the miracle that God had wrought in obtaining for Esther a sympathetic reception before Ahasuerus.<sup>59</sup> The fact that our pericope claims to assemble a *pot pourri* of sources from different geographical and chronological provenances makes such a picture difficult to justify. Although we cannot but assume that there are exegetical rationales for each of the suggested numbers, they have not been preserved, and the commentators have not succeeded in persuasively reconstructing them.<sup>60</sup>

[15b] And thus do you find with the arm of Pharaoh's daughter.

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<sup>53</sup> "Rav"—MS B, **Spanish family**: "And Rav."

<sup>54</sup> "Hisda"—~ in MS M.

<sup>55</sup> MS O adds: "bar Abimi."

<sup>56</sup> "Said Rabban Gamaliel"—thus only in MS L and **Yemenite family**; MSS B, R, Mf: "Says Abimi"; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>57</sup> "Rav Hisda...Gamaliel"—**Printings**: "In a *baraita* it was taught."

<sup>58</sup> On the possible significance of the number sixty see Maharsha (brought above).

<sup>59</sup> The analogy that most readily springs to mind is the dispute among the Yavnean rabbis in the Passover *Haggadah* over how many wonders were really contained in the ten Egyptian plagues and at the Red Sea.

<sup>60</sup> Most of the attempts involve farfetched and anachronistic considerations (e.g., Kabbalah) whose inappropriateness is readily evident. The most likely suggestion which I have encountered is that of Maharsha, who argues that the lengths were calculated by counting the numbers of words or letters in the biblical texts. Thus, there are twelve words from the beginning of Esther 5:2 until the word *vayyoshet* ("held out"), and twelve more from there to the end of the verse; there are sixteen words from the beginning of verse 2 until "*the golden scepter*"; twenty-four words in all in verse 2; and sixty *letters* until the word "*scepter*." Employing a similar method he counts sixty letters from the beginning of Exodus 2:5 until the word "*she sent*." Cf. Alkabetz.

The allusion here is to the following *baraita* and discussion thereof, brought in *TB Soṭah* 12b:<sup>61</sup>

R. Judah and R. Nehemiah: One says: Her arm, and the other says: her handmaid.<sup>62</sup>

The one who says “her arm”—because it is written אַמְטָה.<sup>63</sup>

And the one who says “her handmaiden”—because it does not say יָדָהּ.

...And according to the one who says “her arm,” let it write יָדָהּ!  
—This teaches us that it became lengthened, as the Master said: “And thus do you find with the arm of Pharaoh’s daughter, and thus do you find with the teeth of the wicked, as it is written...”<sup>64</sup>

The Talmud finds yet another references to the divine stretching of limbs, in a different context.

[15b] And thus [do you find]<sup>65 66</sup> with the teeth of the wicked, as it is written “*thou hast broken the teeth of the wicked*”<sup>67</sup> (Psalms 3:8).

<sup>61</sup> Ed. Liss, 1:178-80. It is found in substantially identical form in *Exodus rabbah*, 1:23 (ed. Shinan, 75-6). See Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 8:64, #43.

<sup>62</sup> On the distribution of the legend about the stretching of Pharaoh’s daughter’s forearm see Geza Vermes, “Bible and Midrash. Early Old Testament Exegesis,” in: *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds. Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970), 230-1; Avigdor Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum: The Aggadah in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch* Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 142-3 and n. 217.

<sup>63</sup> The consonantal spellings of the Hebrew words for “cubit” and “handmaid” are identical, although the vocalizations are different. In the present instance the Masoretic vocalization clearly indicates that the intention was to “maid”; however for purposes of midrashic exposition the vowels can be ignored.

<sup>64</sup> Note the unusual redactional development: The redactor of *Megillah* was citing the basic components of *Soṭah*, whereas the later stratum of *Soṭah* quoted in turn the editorial comment in *Megillah*.

<sup>65</sup> “with the arm...you find”— ~ in MS **B** (and filled in in **B\***).

<sup>66</sup> “do you find”— found in all witnesses.

<sup>67</sup> “as it is written ‘...wicked’”—MSS **O, P, E Y**: “*thou hast broken*” (homoioteleuton).

Says<sup>68</sup> R. Simeon ben<sup>69</sup> Laqish:<sup>70</sup> Do not read “*shibbarta*” [broken], but rather “*shirbaḥta*” [drawn out].<sup>71</sup>

R. Simeon ben Laqish expounded that one of the torments through which God punishes the wicked involves the continual stretching of their teeth.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> “Says”—MSS G, O, HgT, Printings, Genizah fragment: “And says.”

<sup>69</sup> “R. Simeon ben”—MSS O, L, EY, Printings, MhG, AgE: “Resh.”

<sup>70</sup> “Says...Laqish”— ~ in MSS M, R, W, P, Mf, YS.

<sup>71</sup> “*shirbaḥta*”—MSS G, L, R, Genizah fragment: ““*sheribbaḥta*” {that you caused to grow (?)}.

Rashi correctly rejects the reading שריבבה, as do the *Tosafot* brought in the EY. Strashun, Pinto and others observe that while there may not be anything inherently unacceptable in the reading שריבבה, understood as consisting of the relative ש and the *pi'el* of the root *RBB*, it is nevertheless stylistically awkward. The root *ShRBB* is not attested in the Bible. It does however appear in the Babylonian Talmud and the Targums, though not (apparently) in Palestinian Aramaic [there is no entry in Sokoloff's *Dictionary*], nor in Payne-Smith's *Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 597 [but see 555]. See J. Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), 4:608; *Idem.*, *neuhebräisches und caldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim und Midrashim* (Leipzig:1876-89), 2:516; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of Talmud and Midrash*, 1627; Alexander Kohut, *Aruch Completum* (Vienna-New York: 1878-92), 8:162. Indeed there need not be any semantic difference between *ShRBB* and *RBB*. The *shin* is at any rate required for the pun. Some indication of the tenacity of the שריבבה reading is provided by the fact that it succeeded in penetrating even into the manuscripts (Munich 216 and JTS Rab. 382) of Rashi's commentary to *Megillah*. On the common occurrence of such misplaced *yods* in the textual tradition of the Talmud, and the practice of Yemenite scholars to ignore them, see Shelomo Morag, “Ktiv (text) and Kri (pronunciation) in post-Biblical literature in the traditions of various communities,” in: *Bo'i Teman (Come Thou South): Studies and Documents Concerning the Culture of the Yemenite Jews*, Jehuda Ratzaby, ed. (Tel-Aviv: Afikim, 1967), 26-45; *Idem.*, “Some Notes on the Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic as Reflected in the Geniza Manuscripts,” *Tarbiz* 42 (1973), 60-80; *Idem.*, *Babylonian Aramaic: The Yemenite Tradition*, Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1988), 63-71.

<sup>72</sup> R. Simeon ben Laqish's dictum is apparently being cited from *TB Berakhot* 54b, where it is appended to the anonymous story about Og king of Bashan who had his lengthened teeth wedged into a rock. Rashi and all subsequent commentators have therefore assumed that the allusion in our pericope is also to the Og legend. Such an

Rava<sup>73</sup> bar Afdon<sup>74</sup> says<sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup> in the name of R. Eleazar,<sup>77</sup> who heard it from his master, and his master from his master:<sup>78</sup> two hundred.<sup>79</sup>

...Continued from previous page

interpretation is however unwarranted here, where Og is not mentioned. In *Berakhot* as well R. Simeon's dictum is cited only as an illustrative analogy, and not in order to imply that R. Simeon had the Og legend in mind. Thus in *Midrash ketappuah be'asei ya'ar*, 18 [in: Shlomoh Aaron Wertheimer and Avraham Joseph, eds., *Batei Midrashot*, second edition enlarged and amended (*sic*) (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Cook, 1950), 1:282] we encounter the following instructive passage:

...And he beheld and saw the teeth of the wicked encased from their navels upwards in clay, while angels of destruction stand over them and strike them with stones of fire and they break their teeth from morning until evening-time. And in the evening they stretched their teeth, and then in the daytime they break them, as it says "*thou hast broken the teeth of the wicked.*" Do not read etc.

As the editor noted correctly (in n. 12) this text confirms that its author did not understand R. Simeon ben Laqish's dictum in *Berakhot* as referring to the story of Og.

<sup>73</sup> "Rava"—thus only in MSS **Y, B, YS, MhG**; **AgE**: "R. Abba"; in all other witnesses: "Rabbah."

<sup>74</sup> "Afdon"—Thus only in MS **Y**, **AgE**; **MhG**: "Afron," "Afdon" or "Afdan"; MS **R**: "Ifton"; **Printings**: "Ophran"; **YS**: "Afiton"; in all other witnesses: "Ephron."

<sup>75</sup> "says"—~ in MSS **G**.

<sup>76</sup> "Rava...says"—MS **M**: "Says Rabbah bar Ephron."

<sup>77</sup> "R. Eleazar"—MSS **G, O, L, P, Mf, EY, AgE, MhG**, Genizah fragments: "R. Eliezer"; **HgT**: "his master"; MS **R**: "R. Simeon"; **YS**: "Eleazar ben Shamua'."

<sup>78</sup> MS **L** adds: "a halakhah to Moses from Sinai"; MS **M** adds: "up to."

<sup>79</sup> MS **G** adds: "cubits."

MS Y	All other witnesses
Says R. Tahlifa: We have found that the scepter was extended thirty-two cubits. And the latter miracle was greater than the former, since as she would enter the scepter would jump; i.e., it would become shorter. <sup>80</sup>	

**“Half of the Kingdom”**

[15b] “Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther?”

MS Y (with variants from AgE)	All other witnesses
He <sup>81</sup> said to her: I see that your request is a great one.	

*and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom”* (Esther 5:3).

Says Rava:<sup>82</sup> “To the<sup>83</sup> half of the kingdom”

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<sup>80</sup> This addition is found in *Midrash on Psalms*, 22:27 (ed. Buber, 194-5; transl. Braude, 1:321). The passage there leads into a messianic peroration based on Micah 7:14.

<sup>81</sup> “He”—AgE: “The king.”

<sup>82</sup> “Says Rava”—MSS L, W: “Says Rabbah”; MS M: “Says Rav”; ~ in **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>83</sup> “to the”— ~ in MSS B, O, W, Mf, **Ashkenazic family**, **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

MSS Y, B, Mf, Printings, AgE)	All other witnesses
And not all of the kingdom.	

The explanation captures the simple sense of the verse: Although presenting himself as gracious and generous, Ahasuerus is not entirely foolhardy and sets some reasonable limits to the selflessness of his gesture.

[15b] And not something which creates an obstruction in the<sup>84</sup> kingdom.<sup>85</sup>

And what is this? —This is<sup>86</sup> the<sup>87</sup> Temple.

This simple comment, exegetically responding to the unusual phraseology employed by Ahasuerus, is taken by our anonymous exegete as an allusion to a theme which has occupied a prominent place throughout the midrash, namely the hostility of Ahasuerus to the

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<sup>84</sup> “the”—MS W: “my”; MS M: “his.”

<sup>85</sup> The commentators are in disagreement as to the significance of the expression *hoses* as used here. Rashi sees in it an allusion to the tradition that Jerusalem stands at the center of the world. Presumably the expression, according to this reading, should be taken as an identifying clause rather than a motive for Ahasuerus’ refusal. Maharsha’s view (which I have followed here) is that the building of the Temple will create a divisive obstruction in Ahasuerus’ pagan domain. On Jerusalem as the center or navel of the earth see the material assembled by Zev Vilnai, *Legends of Jerusalem* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), Volume 1: “The Sacred Land”: 3-16, 315-6; Z. and Ch. Safrai, “The Sanctity of Eretz Israel and Jerusalem,” in: *Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud Period: Studies in Honor of Shmuel Safrai*, I. Gafni et al., eds. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1993), 344-71 (especially 349) which brings sources from Apocryphal works (Jubilees, Sibylline Oracles) as well as rabbinic texts which speak of Jerusalem as sitting at the “navel of the world.”

<sup>86</sup> “This is”— ~ in MSS G, B, O, W, Mf, HgT, Ashkenazic family, Printings, Genizah fragments.

<sup>87</sup> Spanish family, MS W, Printings add: “building of the.”

rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Even in a moment when he wishes to express his graciousness and generosity, and while he is still unaware that Esther is Jewish, he cannot divest himself of his obsessive opposition to the Jewish religious center and all that it represents.<sup>88</sup>

**Esther's Motives**

MS Y	All other witnesses
[15b] Help (עזר), Salvation (ישועה), Meir, Judah, Consoles (נוחם) Yosé, Simeon, Qorḥa, Camel (גמל), Great Declaration ( מודעא רבא ) of Abaye: A mnemonic. <sup>89</sup>	.

[15b] *“And Esther answered: If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him. Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste etc.”* (Esther 5:4-5).

<sup>88</sup> An expanded version of the Talmud’s explanation is incorporated into the Targum to Esther (Grossfeld, 65 and n. 14):

Even if you should ask for half of my kingdom, I would give it to you, except for building the Temple which stands within the area of half my kingdom. I will not give it to you, for thus have I sworn by oath to Geshem the Arab and Samballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite slave [see Nehemiah 2:19; 6:1,2] that I would not allow it to be built, because I am afraid of the Jews lest they rebel against me. This request I shall not grant you. Any other thing which you ask of me I shall decree and it shall be done promptly, and your will shall be done.

<sup>89</sup> The mnemonic is for the names of the rabbis who participate in the following pericope: (1) *‘Ezer*: R. Eliezer; (2) *Yeshu‘ah*: R. Osh‘aiah or Joshua; (3) R. Meir; (4) R. Judah; (5) *Noḥem*: R. Nehemiah; (6) R. Yosé; (7) R. Simeon [ben Manasia]; (8) [R. Joshua ben] Qorḥah; (9) *gamal*: Rabban Gamaliel; (10) *moda‘a*: [R. Eleazar the] Moda‘ite; (11) *rabba*: Rabbah; (12) Abaye.



Our rabbis taught:<sup>90</sup> What did Esther see that she invited Haman?<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Our rabbis taught”— ~ in MS **Mf** (and filled in), **HgT**<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>91</sup> MS **R\***, **HgT**<sup>2</sup> add : “to the banquet.”

Most witnesses	MS G (with variants from MS Mf, AgE and Genizah fragments)
	Help (עזרה), <sup>92</sup> Salvation (ישועה), <sup>93</sup> Meir, <sup>94</sup> Judah, <sup>95</sup> Con- soled (ניחם) <sup>96</sup> Yosé, <sup>97</sup> Simeon, <sup>98</sup> Qorḥah, <sup>99</sup> Camel (גמל), <sup>100</sup> Great De- claration ( מודעא רבא ) <sup>101</sup> of Abaye and Rava: <sup>102</sup> A mnemonic. <sup>103</sup>

92 “Help (עזרה)”—AgE: “עזר”; MS Mf, Genizah fragment: “Ezra (עזרא)”; Genizah fragment: “R. Eliezer.”

93 “Salvation (ישועה)”—Genizah fragment: “Joshua”; Genizah fragment: “and R. Joshua.”

94 “Meir”—Genizah fragment: “and R. Meir.”

95 “Judah”—Genizah fragment: “and R. Judah.”

96 “Consoled (ניחם)”—AgE: “Consoles (נוחם)”; Genizah fragment: “Nahum”; Genizah fragment: “and R. Nehemiah.”

97 “Yosé”—AgE: “Joseph”; Genizah fragment: “and R. Yosé.”

98 “Simeon”—MS Mf: “heard (שמע)”; AgE: “and Simeon”; Genizah fragment: “and R. Simeon.”

99 “Qorḥah”— ~ in Genizah fragment.

100 “Camel (גמל)”—Genizah fragment: “Gamaliel”; Genizah fragment: “and Rabban Gamaliel.”

101 “Great Declaration ( מודעא רבא )”—Genizah fragment: “R. Eleazar the Moda’ite.”

102 “Abaye and Rava”—Genizah fragment: AgE: “and Abaye and Rav Abba”; “Abaye, Rabbah”; ~ in Genizah fragment.

103 “A mnemonic”—Genizah fragment: “Each one stated a dictum.”

The question which forms the basis of the present pericope is one which has aroused the curiosity of virtually every commentator to Esther from antiquity until the present: Given the urgency of Esther's petition to the king, why did she not take immediate advantage of an apparent moment of royal grace and beg, at this earliest promising opportunity, for Ahasuerus to repeal Haman's anti-Jewish decree? Why instead did she draw out the process by inviting the king and Haman to two banquets, before she deemed it proper to formulate her principal demand?<sup>104</sup>

The pericope devoted to this issue consists primarily of a single *baraita*, to which are appended two additional contributions from Babylonian *Amora'im*. Unlike most of the modern commentators to Esther, whose concerns are mainly for the psychological motivations that guided Esther's behavior<sup>105</sup> or with the literary considerations that

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<sup>104</sup> The Second Targum (ed. Grossfeld, 164) asks the same question and offers a different selection of solutions: (1) "Because Esther knew that Haman had seen and killed Hathach for serving as a messenger between Esther and Mordecai. So she said: I shall invite Haman to the feast" [presumably, to keep him under observation]; (2) Because she hoped to uproot the hatred from Haman's heart. Grossfeld [165, n. 21, following Sigmund Gelbhaus, *Das Targum Scheni zum Buch Esther*, Die Targum-literatur, Heft 1 (Frankfurt am Mein, 1893), 59] claims that reason #1 actually consists of two separate reasons. Additional reasons will be cited below. See also *Panim aherim* B, 71.

<sup>105</sup> E.g., Paul Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 24 (1907-8): 140 [=C. A. Moore, ed. *Studies in the Book of Esther*, The Library of Biblical Studies (New York: Ktav, 1982), 44] argued that Esther was procrastinating: "Esther stands to tell the king what her petition and request is. She begins: My petition and request—then she hesitates and decides to wait another day..." Similar approaches are adopted by: Charles C. Torrey, "The Older Book of Esther," *HTR* 37 (1944), 13 [=Moore, *Studies*, 460]; Robert Gordis, *Megillat Esther* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1972), 42; A. W. Streane, *The Book of Esther*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907); Hermann Gunkel, *Esther* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1916); Sandra Beth Berg [*The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structures*, SBL Dissertation Series, Howard C. Kee and Douglas A. Knight, eds. (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 78] interprets Esther's conduct as a display of disobedience.

governed the fashioning of the narrative,<sup>106</sup> the talmudic opinions all relate to the strategic wisdom of Esther's actions.<sup>107</sup>

The names of the *Tanna'im* who appear in the *baraita* have been preserved with considerable stability, thanks in large measure to the accompanying mnemonic *siman*. The *baraita* does not follow a strictly chronological order. Though its principal stratum is Yavnean (with the Patriarch Rabban Gamaliel presiding over his contemporaries Rabbis Eliezer and Joshua), a secondary component of later rabbis<sup>108</sup> was

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<sup>106</sup> Among the commentators who approach the verse from the literary perspective of the narrator we may count the following: Hans Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, Kommentar zum alten Testament (E. Dellin, ed.), 17/5 (Götersloh: Götersloher Verlag, Gerd Mohn, 1963); Wesley J. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the NEB (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 67; Werner Dommerhausen, *Die Estherrolle*, Stuttgarter biblische Monographien (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968); Gillis Gerelman, *Esther*, Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen-Verlag, 1970-73), 108-9; Paton, 234 [who decides that the reasons for Esther's delay are "purely literary," comparing her request to Moses' threefold demands on Pharaoh in Exodus 7-10]; D. N. Freedman (cited in Moore's commentary, 58). Cf. David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 37; Jonathan Magonet, "The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited," *Judaism* 28 (1985), 173 [Maginot's thesis, which resembles the talmudic view that Esther wished to arouse Ahasuerus' jealousy, is rejected by Clines, *op. cit.*, 179, n. 6].

<sup>107</sup> Most modern commentators concentrate their discussions on the issue of why there was need for two separate feasts, whereas the Talmud is mostly concerned with the problem of why Haman's presence was considered necessary. In reality, the solution to the latter question presupposes an answer to the former. See however the *ʿIyyun yaʿaqov* who expresses some discomfort at the Talmud's failure to relate to the "two banquets" question. For a variety of approaches to the question see: J. J. Rivlin, transl., *Perush megillat ester lannasher haggadol rabbenu haramba"m* (Jerusalem: Ben Zion Krynfiess, 1912), p. 49. Maharsha and Alkabetz both object that several of the Talmud's proposed explanations seem to overlap, and devise a series of fine distinctions between them.

<sup>108</sup> These include the Ushans Meir, Judah, Nehemiah, Yosé; as well as Simeon ben Manasia and Joshua ben Qorhah from the last tannaitic generation.

subsequently grafted on to it.<sup>109</sup> Rabban Gamaliel's words were left at the end of the *baraita* in order to preserve its literary framework.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> The structure of the *baraita* was astutely noted by Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, Vol. 1 (Strasbourg: Trübner, 1903), 90, n. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Similarly structured *baraitot*, which undoubtedly teach us something of the nature of aggadic midrashic studies in the Yavneh academy, are scattered through various rabbinic compendia. Among these are: *TB Shabbat* 55b, in which R. Eliezer, R. Joshua and Rabban Gamaliel offer their respective interpretations of Genesis 49:4, and Rabban Gamaliel invokes the need for R. Eleazar the Moda'ite in identical language. [See also *Genesis rabbah*, 98:4 (1253) where the dispute is between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, to which is appended a comment by R. Eliezer b. Jacob, after which "they said: We are still ( ער עכשיו ) in need of the Moda'ite etc. R. Eleazar the Moda'ite came and expounded...". Cf. *Tanḥuma, Vayyehi*, 9 (ed. Buber, 12 [1:218]); *Genesis rabbah*, 97:1 (1205); *TB Bava batra* 10b [Shraga Abramson, *Masekhet bava batra*, Talmud bavli 'im targum 'ivri uferush ḥadash, ed. J. N. Epstein (Jerusalem: Dvir and Massada, 1958), 17, where it is Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai who poses the question (about the interpretation of Proverbs 14:24), which is then answered by Rabbis Eliezer, Joshua and Gamaliel, the latter again declaring their need for the Moda'ite. See M. Margalioth, ed., *Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature*, Vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv: J. Chechick, 1970), 147-8; *TB Hullin* 92a [to Genesis 40:10]; *Midrash on Psalms*, 106:3 (ed. Buber, 454; transl. Braude, 2:190) [= *Esther rabbah*, 2:5 (a discussion which took place in "R. Ṭarfon's garret" about the meaning of Psalm 106:3). See also *TB Ketubbot* 50a [Moshe Hershtler, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings...Tractate Ketuboth*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1977), 1:371]; *Mishnah Avot* 2:9].

For biographical information concerning R. Eleazar Hammoda'i see Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, 1:187-8; Isaak Heinemann, "Altjüdische Allegoristik," in: *Bericht des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars (Fränkelsche Stiftung) Hochschule für jüdische Theologie* (1936), 35, n. 31; Jacob Neusner, *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 2:396. Much recent discussion has focused on his role in the Bar Kokhva uprising; e.g.: A. Oppenheimer, "Meshihyyuto shel bar kokhva," in: *Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre, the Historical Society of Israel, 1983), 158-60; Joshua Efron, "Bar-Kokhva in the Light of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudic Traditions," in: A. Oppenheimer and U. Rappoport, eds., *The Bar-Kokhva Revolt: A New Approach* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1984), 59-62; A. Oppenheimer, "The Keeping of Sabbath during the Bar Kokhva Uprising," in: *Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud Period: Studies in Honor of Shmuel Safrai*, ed. Isaiah Gafni et al. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1993), 228, n. 12; 229, n. 16. On the occasions on which the questions were posed see Bacher, *op. cit.*, 1:90 (Bacher finds it significant that R. Eleazar was the youngest of the company).

## 1) R. Eliezer

[15b] R. Eliezer says: She laid snares for him to entrap him,<sup>111</sup> as it says: “*Let their table become a snare before them: and that which should have been for their welfare, let it become a trap*” (Psalms 69:23).

The apparent meaning of R. Eliezer’s dictum is that Esther derived from the verse<sup>112</sup> that a meal or banquet would be an ideal occasion on (and through) which to lay a snare for an evil foe. The derivation is based on more than literalistic or mechanical exegesis. Within the context of the verse the feast serves as precisely the occasion in which is exhibited in the most damning light the arrogant and malicious self-confidence of the enemy whose undoing is being prayed for. Hence it would make a most fitting occasion for his punishment.<sup>113</sup>

Psalm 69 is on the whole an extremely appropriate text to ascribe to Esther. In addition to the conventional outcry for deliverance from overpowering enemies that is generic to much of the Psalter, this particular chapter contains a number of phrases and passages that have special relevance to Esther’s situation, whether in its biblical or midrashic garb.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> “to entrap him”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>112</sup> Verse 22 reads: “*They gave me gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*” Cf. Esther 3:15 where, immediately after issuing the decree against the Jews “*the king and Haman sat down to drink.*”

<sup>113</sup> Alkabetz speaks of God’s being moved by the contrast that would be created between the arrogant feasting of Haman and the contrition and fasting of the Jews.

<sup>114</sup> E.g.: Verse 7: “*Let not those who hope in thee be put to shame through me*”; 8: “*Because it is for thy sake that I have borne reproach*’...”; 9: “*I am become a stranger to my brethren, and an alien to my mother’s children*”; 10: “*Because zeal for thy house hath eaten me up...*”; 11: “*And I wept with my soul fasting...*”; 12: “*I made sackcloth also my garment...*”; 13: “*They that sit in the gate talk of me...*”; 18: “*And hide not [ve’al taster] thy face from thy servant.*”

## 2) R. Joshua

[15b] Said R. (Osh‘ayah)<sup>115</sup> {Joshua}: From her father’s house she learned,<sup>116</sup> as it says:<sup>117</sup> “*If thine enemy be hungry give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee*” (Proverbs, 25:21-2).

The straightforward application of Proverbs 25:21-2 to the present situation—understood as if it were saying that Haman will be exasperated at being feasted by a mortal foe, whereas Esther will be credited (in spite of her hostile motives) with having performed a praiseworthy and noble deed—is appropriate to the context only if we assume that Haman was aware at this point in time that Esther was his

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<sup>115</sup> “Said R. Osh‘ayah”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “R. Joshua says.”

<sup>116</sup> The meaning of this expression is quite puzzling. Rashi writes that Esther had heard the children reciting the passage while she was in her father’s house, an interpretation which is hardly less obscure than the passage that it claims to be clarifying, especially when we recall the midrashic tradition that Esther’s father died immediately after her conception. The difficulties were acutely felt by the later commentators. See for example the scathing words of Rabbi Jonathan Eibeschütz [*Megillat ester ‘im perushei rabbenu yehonatan* (Jerusalem: Mif‘al torat rabbenu yehonatan, 1991)] who accuses Rashi of imposing a forced interpretation onto the text; although Eibeschütz’ own proposal (based on an association with 1 Samuel 20:27-30) is no more convincing. Much of the exegetical treatment of the passage has focused on Rashi’s hypothesis. See e.g. ‘Eṣ yosef who suggests that Rashi wished to sidestep the halakhic prohibition against instructing women in Torah. The paraphrase in YS substitutes “from the house of David and Solomon,” presumably referring to Solomon’s authorship of the Book of Proverbs. Alkabetz also objects to Rashi’s explanation that a verse from Proverbs could only have been learned by listening to the recitations of schoolchildren, and proposes that Rashi’s intention was to correct the mistaken impression that Esther was acting solely on her own initiative (!), by assuring us that she was in reality basing herself on a verse that she had learned while in the house of Mordecai, her adoptive father. In fact (Alkabetz adds), the practice of determining one’s actions on the basis of the biblical texts quoted by young pupils is a custom that was derived from Mordecai’s custom, as depicted in several places in the midrash. In spite of the pains taken by Alkabetz to justify Rashi’s interpretation, in the end he rejects that approach in favor of a different one, according to which the source for Esther’s plan was Mordecai, alluding to the account of how he had purchased Haman “for a loaf of bread.”

<sup>117</sup> “As it says”—MS M: “It is written”; ~ in MS Mf, HgT<sup>1</sup>, AgE, Genizah fragment.

enemy (i.e., that she was Jewish). This assumption does not seem to have been widely held among the midrashic authorities. Alternatively, the verse might have been understood in a spirit similar to the Psalms verse adduced by R. Eliezer: that if she invites him to her feast God<sup>118</sup> will reward her<sup>119</sup> by heaping coals upon Haman's head!

[15b] Do not read “*shall reward thee*” [yeshalle<sup>m</sup> lakh], but rather “shall cause him to make peace with thee” [yashlimennu lakh].<sup>120</sup>

The suggestion that Esther was actually pondering the possibility of appeasing or coming to terms<sup>121</sup> with the arch-villain raises many difficulties,<sup>122</sup> and in the end we are given no indication that she ever actually tried to implement this tactic. Her revelation of her Jewish origins comes simultaneously with her denunciation of Haman. In addition, the notion of Haman changing his mind so radically goes against the usual assumptions of midrashic characterization in which the wicked are irrevocably so—especially in the case of Haman who personifies the archetypal and quasi-metaphysical evil of the Amalek.

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<sup>118</sup> Alkabetz understands that the reference is to *Ahasuerus*' enraged jealousy at seeing Esther heaping favors upon Haman. This does not seem likely.

<sup>119</sup> Whether for the generosity and selflessness of the invitation, or for Esther's general merits.

<sup>120</sup> “Do not...thee”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>121</sup> In the face of the difficulties, I hesitantly suggest an alternative and somewhat unconventional rendering of the word *yashlimennu* as “and he will deliver him to you” (a meaning that is common in Arabic; see also Jastrow, 1586). This translation would disagree however with the Targum.

<sup>122</sup> Alkabetz is upset by the fact that if Esther had succeeded in making peace with Haman, then the villain—who would in effect have become a penitent—would have been exempted thereby from his deserved punishment. He therefore understands Esther's strategy in a different way: She would be putting Haman in a morally questionable (and accountable) position of failing to acknowledge his gratitude to the king.



**3) R. Meir**

[15b] R. Meir says: So that he would not<sup>123</sup> take<sup>124</sup> counsel and rebel.<sup>125</sup>

The idea expressed here is that Haman must be kept occupied<sup>126</sup> and under vigilant watch<sup>127</sup> until he is finally eliminated. Since Esther has pinned her hopes on Ahasuerus' readiness to undo Haman's plot, she must not furnish Haman with any motive or opportunity<sup>128</sup> to remove himself from the king's control or authority.<sup>129</sup>

**4) R. Judah**

[15b] R. Judah says: So that they would not recognize that she was<sup>130</sup> Jewish.

Esther realizes that she must be allowed sufficient time to curry Ahasuerus' favorable disposition and to allay Haman's suspicions before she can reveal her petition to the king.<sup>131</sup> Only then will it also become

<sup>123</sup> "that he would not"—MS R: "he would."

<sup>124</sup> "take"—MS L, YS: "give."

<sup>125</sup> HgT adds: "against the king."

<sup>126</sup> Thus Alkabetz.

<sup>127</sup> The *Eṣ yosef* comments that Haman's presence at the feast would serve simultaneously (1) to isolate him from fellow conspirators, as well as (2) to remove any suspicions against Esther that might have instigated a rebellion.

<sup>128</sup> Rashi remarks that Haman was now enjoying an opportune moment. It is not entirely clear whether this observation is intended to explain why Haman might be induced to rebel against the king, or why Esther feared that such a *coup* might succeed. The latter view is supported by Alkabetz. See A. Schreiber and Shlomo Sofer, eds., *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia (Glossaries by Anglo Jewish Scholars) on Tractates Betzah, Megilah, Kidushin* (Jerusalem: 1970). Cf. Jacob Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History* (Philadelphia: The Dropsie College, 1923), 201.

<sup>129</sup> Among recent commentators, this approach has been championed in particular by Hoschander, *op. cit.*, 201-4, who speaks of Esther's desire to disarm Haman's suspicions, as well as her fear of "the king's weak and vacillating nature."

<sup>130</sup> "recognize that she was"—AgE: "say: His wife is."

<sup>131</sup> As noted by Alkabetz, her concealment of her nationality was only a temporary measure. In the end she divulged it to the king.

necessary to reveal the fact that she is Jewish. Her participation in a feast, in violation of Jewish law,<sup>132</sup> will effectively allay any suspicion that she is Jewish.

### 5) R. Nehemiah

[15b] R. Nehemiah says: So that Israel<sup>133</sup> should not say: We have a sister in the king's household, and then turn their minds<sup>134</sup> away from mercy.

As noted by the commentators,<sup>135</sup> the assumption here is that by participating with Haman in a feast after successfully approaching the

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<sup>132</sup> Haman has shown above that he is well aware of the Jews' reluctance to drink and dine with heathens. Thus, the fact that she joins him at the same table, as well as her partaking in the food and drink, would make it unimaginable that she is Jewish. We might add that, according to the midrashic chronology, Esther would be violating not only the normal Jewish dietary restrictions, but also the additional stringencies of the Passover!

<sup>133</sup> "Israel"—MS B: "the Jews"; MS P: "they."

<sup>134</sup> "their minds"—HgT<sup>1</sup>: "themselves."

<sup>135</sup> Alkabetz' analysis of R. Nehemiah's interpretation is so perceptive that it is worth quoting at length:

...She lowered the spirits of the Jews when they beheld her promoting the welfare of their foe and seeking his friendship. Would their spirit hold up... upon seeing that the one in whose shelter they had expected to dwell had in a single moment turned her face away from them and become transformed into an enemy? What would this unfortunate folk now do?

To this R. Nehemiah replied that, quite the contrary, her actions were intended to lower their spirits, so that they would not distract their minds from the need to seek divine compassion, as they had previously commenced to do when they covered themselves in sackcloth and wallowed in ashes, weeping and petitioning. However, when they heard about Esther's approaching the king, and that the king had demonstrated his affection for her, they said: "We have a sister in the palace"; that is to say, she has already succeeded in gaining entry to the royal palace, and no one disparaged or berated her. Henceforth the king will deny her nothing. Therefore they removed their sackcloth and shook off the ashes from their heads, and turned their minds from the need for prayer. This increased their sinfulness immensely. For this reason she requested that the king and

king, instead of concerning herself at once with the repeal of the decree, Esther would cause her fellow Jews to believe that she had defected.<sup>136</sup>

### 6) R. Yosé

[15b] R. Yosé says: So that he would be found with her at all times.<sup>137</sup>

R. Yosé's proposal, which bears similarities to (or is presupposed by) some of the others,<sup>138</sup> is that Esther wanted to keep Haman under observation in order to prevent him from perpetrating further evils.<sup>139</sup>

...Continued from previous page

Haman attend, so that they would lessen the people's confidence in her and turn to their father in Heaven.

A variation on this idea is contained in the Second Targum (transl. Grossfeld, 164-5), according to which Esther, realizing how dependent the Jews had become on the success of her petition to Ahasuerus, purposely invited Haman to her banquet in order to shake their confidence and encourage them to beseech God's help in delivering them.

<sup>136</sup> R. Moses Alsheikh, in his commentary to Esther, expresses a preference for R. Nehemiah's position (which he interprets in a manner very similar to Alkabetz), and observes that the Jews would have been especially upset upon beholding how "*Haman went forth that day joyful and glad of heart*" (5:9).

<sup>137</sup> "at all times"— ~ in AgE.

<sup>138</sup> Alkabetz notes in particular that it seems to repeat R. Meir's explanation. He therefore concludes that R. Yosé is referring to their need for the *second* banquet. Indeed, the Talmud seems to presume that Esther had other reasons for convening the two banquets, and is concerned here exclusively with the question of why these banquets had to take place in Haman's presence.

R. Yosé's explanation was also adopted by David Clines [*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. R. E. Clement (Grand Rapids and London: Eerdmans and Morgan and Scott, 1984), 304] who explains that "...it is safest if Esther can witness with her own eyes the king's response to her plea and Haman's reaction."

<sup>139</sup> Rashi understands Esther's scheme somewhat differently. According to him, Esther wanted Haman's actions to be witnessed by Ahasuerus in the hope that he would do something that would incriminate himself. This explanation is not suggested in the text. Possibly Rashi was dissatisfied with the plain meaning of R. Yosé's words because they failed to explain why Esther did not simply accuse Haman on the spot, without waiting for the two feasts. Cf. Alkabetz.

## 7) R. Simeon ben Manasia

[15b] R. Simeon ben Manasia says: Perhaps the Almighty<sup>140</sup> will pay attention and perform a miracle.<sup>141</sup>

This explanation is similar to the one proposed by R. Nehemiah, except that it is approached from the vantage-point of God<sup>142</sup> rather than that of the Jews. Instead of striving to *improve* the situation,<sup>143</sup> Esther will intentionally strengthen the hand of the enemy, producing a situation so hopeless that the only way out will be through direct divine intervention.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “the Almighty” (lit.: the Place [*Hammaqom*])—MS G: “the Holy One”; MS O: “he.”

<sup>141</sup> MSS G, B, L, R, W, Printings, YS add: “for us.”

<sup>142</sup> Alkabetz observes that the initial letters of the verse’s opening words spell out the Tetragrammaton, a fact which might have exerted some influence on the interpretation.

<sup>143</sup> The *‘Iyyun ya‘aqov* sees this as a last-ditch scenario: If Esther fails to convince the king, then she will try to save herself, and thereby evoke God’s compassion for the Jews.

<sup>144</sup> Rashi gives two explanations: (1) “That I am bringing the enemy close”; (2) That Esther is humiliating herself before Haman. According to the former possibility, God’s help would be invoked by the appearance that Esther had betrayed her mission, and according to the latter, out of sympathy for her desperate situation. Alkabetz understands the first explanation in the sense that God would become enraged at Esther and strike her down, which would serve as an atonement for the Jews (!). It is more probable that R. Yosé is focusing not on Esther’s incurring guilt, but on the objectively difficult—and heart-rending—predicament in which the Jews would thereby be placed. See also Maharsha.

The issue here does not seem to be one of “fooling God” (an impression which emerges from several of the traditional commentators), so much as of forcing his hand, since the desperate situation that Esther will be bringing about will be a *real* one, not merely a threat.

**8) R. Joshua ben Qorḥah**

[15b] R. Joshua<sup>145</sup> ben Qorḥah says:<sup>146</sup> She treated<sup>147</sup> him graciously in order that<sup>148</sup> he and she<sup>149</sup> would be killed.

Here we ascribe to Esther an elaborate and desperate strategy<sup>150</sup> designed to ensure Haman's death even if Esther must herself perish in the process by making the king suspect<sup>151</sup> an illicit romantic liaison or conspiracy.<sup>152</sup> She has after all put her life on the line previously through her readiness to intrude on the king. R. Joshua's interpretation overlaps some of the others.

**9) Rabban Gamaliel**

[15b] Rabban Gamaliel says:<sup>153</sup> The king was unstable.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> "Joshua"—MSS G, O: "Simeon."

<sup>146</sup> MS B, YS add: "She said." MS P, HgT add: "that."

<sup>147</sup> MSS G, B, W, L, R, P, Printings, YS, AgE: "I shall treat"; MS N, Genizah fragment: "She treats."

<sup>148</sup> "in order that"—MS G: "and."

<sup>149</sup> "he and she"—MSS B, R, AgE, Genizah fragment: "she and he"; Genizah fragment: he [Ahasuerus] and she."

<sup>150</sup> Paton (234) acknowledges that Ahasuerus' suspicions would be provoked by Esther's actions, but envisions a different result: "Such an invitation would only arouse suspicion, and his presence might counteract all of Esther's influence."

<sup>151</sup> See Alkabetz. The same idea appears in an important genizah fragment of a Palestinian midrash on Esther published by Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, *Ginzé midrash*, (Tel-Aviv: Chaim Rosenberg School for Jewish Studies, Tel-Aviv University, 1976), 160, as a comment to Esther 7:8 (see my discussion of 16b below).

<sup>152</sup> Rashi alludes to an idea found in *TB Ta'anit* 29a (ed. Malter, 137-8) to the effect that the death of one of a decree's authors annuls the decree. The allusion is an interesting one, since in the *Ta'anit* pericope the suicide of a Roman officer is said to bring about the abolition of a decree against the Patriarch Rabban Gamaliel. The rule there (cited as a received tradition, "*gemire!*") is evidently being presented as a Roman one, just as here it is a Persian one.

<sup>153</sup> "Rabban Gamaliel says"—**Spanish family**: "Said Rabban Gamaliel."

<sup>154</sup> "The king was unstable"—MSS G, B, P, **Ashkenazic family**, W, Mf, EY, HgT<sup>1</sup>, **Printings**, AgE, two Genizah fragments: "He was an unstable king"; MS O: "Ahasuerus was unstable"; HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS: "Ahasuerus was an unstable king."

Like the authors of the previous explanations, Rabban Gamaliel is trying to account for why Esther thought that Haman had to be present when she denounced him to Ahasuerus. Here however the focus is on Ahasuerus rather than on Haman or Esther. The king is so prone to vacillation<sup>155</sup> that he must not be furnished with an opportunity for changing his mind or being persuaded by Haman before executing his decision.<sup>156</sup>

### 10) R. Eleazar the Moda'ite

[15b] Said<sup>157</sup> Rabban<sup>158</sup> Gamaliel:<sup>159</sup> We are still in need of the Moda'ite:<sup>160</sup>

R. Eleazar<sup>161</sup> the Moda'ite<sup>162</sup> says:<sup>163</sup> She provoked against him the jealousy of the king, and<sup>164</sup> she provoked against him the jealousy of<sup>165</sup> the princes.

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<sup>155</sup> The Hebrew word *hafakhfakh* (or *hafakhfekhan*) is not a very common one in the rabbinic lexicon, and usually appears in connection with word-plays on similar-sounding words in the Bible. See *Sifré Deuteronomy*, 320 (ed. Finkelstein, 366; transl. R. Hammer [*Sifre: The Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 329]: expounding *tahapukhot* ("fickle, perfidious") in Deuteronomy 32:20); *Ruth rabbah*, Proems 3 and 4 [expounding *hafakhfakh* ("froward") in Proverbs 21:8]; etc.

<sup>156</sup> My explanation here follows Rashi. See also Hoschander, *op. cit.*, 201. Moore (57) uses this consideration as a reason for Esther *not* to put off the matter until a second feast.

<sup>157</sup> "Said"—**Spanish family**: "And said."

<sup>158</sup> MS B adds: "Simeon ben."

<sup>159</sup> "Said Rabban Gamaliel"—MS W, YS: "Rabban Gamaliel says."

<sup>160</sup> **Spanish family**, MS W, **Printings** add: "for it was taught {in a *baraita* }."

<sup>161</sup> "Eleazar"—MS M, HgT, AgE: "Eliezer."

<sup>162</sup> "the Moda'ite"—~ in MS M.

<sup>163</sup> "R. ...says"—MSS L, M: "for R. ...used to say."

<sup>164</sup> "and"—~ in MSS G, B, W, L, R, Mf, **Spanish family**, **Printings**, YS, two Genizah fragments.

<sup>165</sup> "She provoked against him the jealousy of the king and she provoked against him the jealousy of"—AgE: "She called him to incite jealousy in."

The fanfare with which this dictum is introduced suggests that R. Eleazar's opinion was in some way superior to the others,<sup>166</sup> and the traditional commentators have tried to suggest ways in which this evaluation might be true. Maharsha perceptively observes that of all the opinions in the pericope, R. Eleazar's is the only one which not only succeeds in resolving the immediate query about why Haman was invited to the banquets, but also accounts for both the need to hold banquets in the first place, and the absence of other dignitaries at the banquets.<sup>167</sup>

### 11) Rabbah

[15b] {Rabbah}<sup>168</sup> says: "*Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18).

Unlike the Tannaitic views cited above, Rabbah does not seem to be reading a strategic purpose into Esther's thoughts or actions,<sup>169</sup> so much as an exegetical and esthetic assessment of the narrative itself.<sup>170</sup> Guided by the spirit of the verse, she wishes to help raise Haman up as high as possible (by honoring him with an invitation to the exclusive feast) so that the miracle of his plummeting to defeat will appear even more wonderful.<sup>171</sup> This result is in fact achieved.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> This opinion is given special emphasis in Rashi's biblical commentary to the verse in Esther. Through Rashi, presumably, it entered the Latin commentary of Nicholas de Lyra (cited by Paton, 234).

<sup>167</sup> See also Alkabetz.

<sup>168</sup> "{Rabbah}"—changed according to majority of witnesses, normal orthographic conventions, and context; MS Y: "Rava (ראבא)"; AgE: "R. Abba"; MS B, YS: "Rava"; all other witnesses: "Rabbah."

<sup>169</sup> Although it might be argued that what Rabbah meant to say is that Esther was trying to feed Haman's pride in order to put him off his guard.

<sup>170</sup> Compare Paton, 234: "Here again the motive is purely literary. The *author* wishes to heap honors upon Haman in order to heighten the contrast with his impending fall."

<sup>171</sup> Thus according to the *Iyyei hayyam* (cited in 'Es yosef), who notes that God would not be glorified through the defeat of a nonentity. In a similar vein, Alkabetz argues that had God's purpose been merely to thwart Haman, then he could have killed him off at the beginning of the story. Clines (in his New Century commentary, 304)

## 12) Abaye and Rava

[15b] Abaye and Rava<sup>173</sup> who both say: “*In their heat I will prepare their feast, and I will make them drunken, that they may rejoice, and sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake etc.*” (Jeremiah 51:39).

This verse is similar in its content to Psalms 69:22 cited by R. Eliezer above. It speaks of God choosing a feast—an occasion where the wicked can be expected to indulge themselves in dissolute pleasures and the moment when their sinfulness is most visible—as an ideal time to exact punishment from them. Rashi and other commentators take note of the specific historical context of Jeremiah Chapter 51, which is an oracle against Babylonia foretelling its overthrow at the hands of the Medes. These prophecies came to literal fulfillment in the feast of Belshazzar in Daniel 5. We have already seen above how central was the motif of that famous feast in determining the thematic context for the midrashic interpretation of Ahasuerus’ feast in the opening chapter of Esther. Here we encounter an extension of that idea: Esther sees fit to arrange matters in such a way that Haman’s fall, like Belshazzar’s before him, will take place at a festive banquet.<sup>174</sup>

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notes that the intention was to achieve the *public* humiliation of the enemy. The idea that Haman was allowed to rise to a high station in order to magnify the extremes of his downfall is found in several midrashic expositions of Esther 3:1. See *Esther rabbah*, 7:2; *Abba gorion*, 20-1; *Panim aherim* B, 66; etc.

<sup>172</sup> Maharsha observes that, like R. Eleazar the Moda‘ite’s explanation, Rabbah’s succeeds in accounting for all the problems posed by the narrative: Why a feast? Why invite Haman? and: Why invite *only* Haman?

<sup>173</sup> “Abaye and Rava”—AgE: “Rava and Abaye.”

<sup>174</sup> Rashi seems to suggest not only that feasts are inherently ill-omened for the wicked, but also that the physical weariness caused by the feasting will make it easier to overcome Haman, as it was for Cyrus and Darius to attack Belshazzar. Maharsha assumes that Esther intended to cause Ahasuerus’ downfall as well.



## Meeting Elijah

[15b] Rava<sup>175</sup> bar Avun<sup>176</sup> encountered Elijah.<sup>177</sup> He said to him:<sup>178</sup>  
With whom did Esther<sup>179</sup> agree<sup>180</sup> in her actions?<sup>181</sup>

—He said to him: In accordance with all the *Tanna'im* and in accordance with<sup>182</sup> all the *Amora'im*.<sup>183</sup>

The notion that Elijah the prophet<sup>184</sup> continued to pay visits to the earthly world and to communicate with the Jewish sages is one that occurs frequently in rabbinic literature.<sup>185</sup> In keeping with the talmudic

175 “Rava”—thus in MSS Y (אבא), B, YS; AgE: “R. Abba”; all other witnesses: “Rabbah.”

176 “Avun”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; MS R: “bar Shela”; YS: “Shela”; all other witnesses: “Abuha.”

177 Genizah fragment adds: “let him be remembered for good.”

178 “He said to him”—MS O: “She said” (!); MS M: “He said”; ~ in MS Mf.

179 “Esther”—~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

180 “agree”—AgE, YS: “act.”

181 “in her actions” (literally: “that she acted”)—thus only in MSS Y, Mf; YS: “and she invited Haman”; ~ in MSS M, P, HgT<sup>1</sup>; in all other witnesses: “and she acted.” MSS L, M\*, Mf, HgT<sup>2</sup>, Printings add: “thus.”

182 “in accordance with”—~ in MS M, Genizah fragment.

183 “*Tanna'im*.. *Amora'im*”—MS G: “*Amora'im* and *Tanna'im*.”

184 Who according to the biblical account did not die but was transported in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11).

185 Some instances in the Babylonian Talmud include: *TB Hagigah* 15b; *Yevamot* 63a; *Giṭṭin* 6b; *Bava meṣi'a* 114a; *Sanhedrin* 98a. For secondary literature on the topic see: M. Friedmann, Introduction to his edition of *Seder Eliahu Rabba and Seder Eliahu Zuta (Tanna d' be Eliahu)* (Vienna: Achiasaf, 1902); 27-38 (He tries to assemble all appearances of Elijah in rabbinic literature); Israel Lévi, “Apocalypses dans le Talmud,” *REJ* 1 (1880), 108-14; M. W. Levinsohn, *Der Prophet Elia nach den Talmudim und Midraschimquellen* (New York, Up-to-date Printing Co., 1929); Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:202-26 (esp. 217-23; our pericope appears on 218); Robert Zion, *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Legende des Propheten Elia* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard Verlag, 1931), 39 ff.; Eliezer Margalit, *Eliahu ha-navi besifrut yisra'el etc.* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1960), especially 74-8; Moshe Beer, “Ma-shehu 'al rav yehudah aḥuah derav sala ḥasida,” *Sinai* 24:48 (1961), 299-301; Aharon Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study*, The Littman Library of

convention, Elijah is evoked when the rabbis desire access to information that cannot be gotten by natural means, including reports on developments in the “Heavenly Academy.” In the present instance, which is a kind of aggadic equivalent of a decision between conflicting halakhic opinions, Rabbah bar Avun [or: Abuha]<sup>186</sup> is understandably curious about which of the *baraita*’s many suggestions actually succeeded in accurately describing the motives which guided Esther’s actions at that critical moment. Elijah’s reply, that all the rabbis were equally correct, serves to remind us that the suggestions were not mutually exclusive or contradictory and that Esther could have had in mind several different motives and strategies. Elijah’s answer also implies that the rabbis ascribed to Esther remarkable intellectual or—more likely—prophetic gifts which enabled her to think of all the considerations and possibilities.

**“And the Multitude of His Children”**

[15b] “*And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children*” (Esther 5:11).

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Jewish Civilization, eds. D. Goldstein *et al.* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 248 ff. (especially: 53-8, 206-7); E. E. Urbach, *The Sages*, 298-9, 300, 680, 820, (n. 50), 1002-3 (n. 14); Jonah Fraenkel, “The Image of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi in the Stories of the Babylonian Talmud,” in: *Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem*, edited by Avigdor Shinan, World Union of Jewish Studies, 1981, 403-17; *Idem.*, *Darkhei ha-aggadah voha-midrash*, Yad Ha-Talmud, ed. E. E. Urbach (Givatayim: Massadah, 1991), 255-6 (dealing with *Sanhedrin* 98a).

<sup>186</sup>We assume that in spite of the Talmud’s mention of the Amoraic opinions as well as those in the *baraita*, Rabbah bar Abuha was referring only to the views cited in the *baraita*, not to those of Rabbah, Abaye and Rava, since Rabbah bar Abuha lived earlier than any of those *Amora’im*, being a disciple of Rav; see Hyman, *Toledot tanna’im ve’amora’im*, 3:1070-1; I. H. Weiss. *Dor dor vedoreshev [Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Tradition]* (Vienna-Presssburg, 1871-91), 46, n. 2; Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 2nd edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965-70), 3:58-61; Felix Lazarus, “Die Häupter der Vertriebenen,” in: *Jahrbücher für jüdische Geschichte und Literatur* 10 (1890), 90-1 (n. 1); 1-181; S. Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien, 200-500* (Berlin: M. Poppel, 1902), 1:110.

And<sup>187</sup> how many are “*and*<sup>188</sup> *the multitude*”?<sup>189</sup> —Says Rav Hisda:<sup>190</sup> <sup>191</sup> Thirty:

Ten died.

Ten<sup>192</sup> were hanged.<sup>193</sup>

Ten<sup>194</sup> <sup>195</sup> go<sup>196</sup> around at doors.

And<sup>197</sup> the rabbis say: The ones who go<sup>198</sup> around at the doors were seventy, as it says:<sup>199</sup> “*They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased...*” (1 Samuel 2:5).

Do not read “*full*”<sup>200</sup> [*seve'im*], but rather “*seventy*” [*shiv'im*].

Both the exegetical basis and the homiletical purpose of this passage<sup>201</sup> are somewhat obscure. With regard to the latter point, we should probably include it among several midrashic expansions whose purpose is to whimsically magnify the proportions of Haman’s downfall

<sup>187</sup> “And”— ~ in MS L, YS, Genizah fragment.

<sup>188</sup> “*and*”— ~ in MSS G, B, L, R, Mf, Venice Printing, YS, AgE, Genizah fragment.

<sup>189</sup> “And how many are ‘*and the multitude*’?”— ~ in Spanish family (except HgT<sup>2</sup>), MSS M, W.

<sup>190</sup> “Says Rav Hisda”—Spanish family: “Rav Hisda says”; Printings: “Says Rav”; MS P: “Rav [Hisda] says.”

<sup>191</sup> MS M adds: “he had”; HgT adds: “there were.”

<sup>192</sup> “Ten”—thus in MSS Y, P, Printings, YS, AgE; in other witnesses: “And ten.”

<sup>193</sup> “were hanged”—YS: “were saved” [(!) נחלו → נצלו]; MS P: “inherited” [(!) נחלו → נחלו].

<sup>194</sup> “Ten”—thus in MSS Y, Mf, YS, AgE; in all other witnesses: “And ten.”

<sup>195</sup> MSS G, B, L, Spanish family, add: “who.”

<sup>196</sup> “go”—MS M, Genizah fragment: “went.”

<sup>197</sup> “And”— ~ in MSS G, P, EY, HgT<sup>2</sup>, AgE, Genizah fragment.

<sup>198</sup> “go”—MS M: “went.”

<sup>199</sup> “says”—Printings: “is written.”

<sup>200</sup> “Do not read ‘*full*’”— ~ in MS P.

<sup>201</sup> See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:445; 6:480, n. 187. He cites no sources other than our current pericope.

and the utter humiliation which it brought him. Such elaborations would satisfy the audience's desire to see the villain get a dessert that is at least proportional to the terrible immensity of his intended crime. By the same stroke, of course, witness is being borne to the greatness of God's power and justice. In the present case the hanging of Haman's ten sons as spelled out in the biblical story is understood to reflect only a relatively small portion of the total defeat to which the fiend was ultimately subjected.<sup>202</sup>

As regards its exegesis, the midrash is of course based on the expression "*the multitude of his children.*" Ten children, even ten sons, do not qualify as a "multitude" in Rav H̄isda's opinion. Hence it becomes midrashically clear that there were in actuality more than that. Aesthetically, it follows naturally that the real total should be a multiple of the ten who are explicitly identified by the biblical author.<sup>203</sup> How the number thirty was arrived at,<sup>204</sup> and how it was concluded that one group became beggars,<sup>205</sup> require further elucidation.

That two separate groups were killed and hanged was evidently derived from a reading of Esther 9:10-14.<sup>206</sup> However I see no obvious

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<sup>202</sup> A similar exegetical stimulus underlies the Targum's elaboration that Haman had 208 sons plus ten more who were provincial governors and Shimshai the scribe. On the Shimshai traditions see our discussion below, as well as Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 54, n. 13; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 463, n. 95; B. Ratner, ed. *Midrash seder olam*, S. K. Mirsky, ed. (New York: Moznaim, 1988), Chapter 29, pp. 132-3, n. 20. *Midrash on Psalms*, 22:2 (ed. Buber, 181; transl. Braude, 1:298) speaks of a total of one hundred sons, of whom ten were killed, ten were hanged, ten were cut up and thrown to the dogs, and seventy went begging for twelve months after which they were killed. There can be little doubt that this passage is based on the numbers supplied by the Esther-Midrash, with a further group of ten added in order to round the total to a hundred.

<sup>203</sup> My interpretation here follows that of Maharsha who studiously adduces scriptural precedent for larger broods of offspring.

<sup>204</sup> Thirty is the lowest multiple that would turn the original ten into a minority.

<sup>205</sup> Several talmudic passages equate poverty with death. See e.g.: *TB Mo'ed qatan* 17b; *Nedarim* 7b, 64b.

<sup>206</sup> In this passage four separate references are made to the killing and hanging of Haman's ten sons, as each action is first executed and afterwards reported. While most

way in which the tradition about the beggars could have been derived through exegesis of Esther. The most likely possibility is that Rav Ḥisda was basing himself on the targumic tradition of 1 Samuel 2 which is cited immediately afterwards, and which will be discussed below.

The tradition that Hannah was referring in her prayer to Haman's sons is found in Targum Jonathan to the verse:<sup>207</sup>

Concerning the sons of Haman she prophesied and said: Those who were filled up on bread and growing in wealth and abounding in money have become poor; they have reverted to working as laborers for bread, the food of their mouth. Mordecai and Esther who were needy became rich and forgot their poverty; they reverted to being free persons. So Jerusalem...

The context of this verse within the larger discourse in Targum Jonathan suggests that the homilist was not speaking of the actual ten sons of Haman whose deaths are described in the Book of Esther, but rather of the archetypal followers of the ways of the Amalek, which in

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commentators understand that the hangings refer to the impaling of the selfsame ten victims who were previously killed, it is likely that the rabbis discerned here allusions to two distinct sets, ten of whom were killed (by the sword) and ten others who were hanged or crucified. See the similar proposal by Strashun.

<sup>207</sup> Transl. Harrington, 105-6. On the provenance of Targum Jonathan to Samuel see: Komlosh, *Ha-miqra le'or ha-targum*, 309; P. Churgin, *Targum Jonathan to the Prophets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), (our passage is discussed on p. 130); A. Tal, *The Targum of the Former Prophets and its Position within the Aramaic Dialects*, Texts and Studies in the Hebrew Language and Related Subjects (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1975).

The targumic passage presupposes the homiletical tradition which regards Haman's wickedness as stemming fundamentally [as in the parallel case of Korah] from his misuse of wealth. See also *Midrash on Proverbs* [Burton L. Visotzky, ed., *Midrash Mishle* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990)], 11 (97-100); *Esther rabbah*, 7:5; *Numbers rabbah*, 22:7 *Tanḥuma*, *Ma'ot*, 5 (ed. Buber, 8); *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 [Gerald Friedlander, ed., *Pirke de rabbi eliezer*. 4th ed. (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 398 and n. 4]; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:462, n. 93 (to 4:393). This tradition would tie in with the mention in Esther of Haman's ten thousand talents (3:9) and "the glory of his riches" (5:11) etc. While it is natural to develop this idea into a homiletical contrast between Haman's wealth and Mordecai's poverty, there is no obvious biblical support for the premise that Mordecai was poor, nor do the midrashic traditions attach any prominence to such an assumption.

this case is equated with the wicked Roman empire.<sup>208</sup> It would consequently appear that the identification of the “sons of Haman” in the Targum with the specific ten sons in Esther, rather than with Haman’s spiritual followers, is a secondary and later development. Nevertheless, once having determined that 1 Samuel 2:5 is speaking of Haman’s sons and that it depicts their fall from wealth to poverty, it is a simple matter for the Babylonian Talmud to begin speaking of them as mendicants. For homiletical purposes, it is convenient to speak of these sons as *additional* to the ones who were killed and impaled. That there were *ten* sons who were reduced to beggary could be assumed, according to Rav Hisda, by analogy to the other two groups.<sup>209</sup>

The unvocalized Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 2:5 suggests a different solution to the Talmud’s question of how many sons were reduced to begging, since the same consonants that spell out “*they that were full*” can also be read as the number “seventy,” implying that this was the total number of sons who became impoverished.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> The Targum interprets Hannah’s prayer as a series of predictions of future events: (1) Israel’s revenge against the Philistines; (2) the destruction of Sennacherib; (3) Nebuchadnezzar; (4) Greece; (5) the sons of Haman and Rome. As is readily apparent, the mention of Haman’s sons violates the historical order. It therefore seems probable that the “sons of Haman” is in reality an allusion to the Amalekites who are identified with Rome.

<sup>209</sup> It is likely that the tradition about Haman’s selling himself for a loaf of bread also originated with reference to the targumic interpretation of 1 Samuel 2:5.

<sup>210</sup> Maharsha observes with excessive literalness that once they have “*hired themselves out for bread*” then it follows necessarily that they cannot be portrayed as “*full*,” and hence the word must be expounded in a different sense. On exegesis of the model “*al-tiqri*” (of which several examples have appeared in the current chapter and in the Esther-Midrash in general) see Adolf Rosenzweig, “Die Al-tikri Deutungen,” in: M. Brann and J. Elbogen, eds., *Festschrift zu Israel Lewy’s Siebzigsten Geburtstag* (reprint: Jerusalem: Makor, 1972), 204-53. Our pericope is discussed on 247; see also 230, 230.

**208 Sons**

[15b] Rami<sup>211</sup> bar Abba<sup>212</sup> says:<sup>213</sup> They<sup>214</sup> were two hundred and eight, as it says:<sup>215</sup> “*And the multitude* [ורב] *of his children.*”<sup>216 217</sup>

The Talmud’s final suggestion presents a straightforward approach to the question of how many sons Haman had. Since the question originated (as we saw above) in an attempt to interpret the word “*multitude*” in the verse, it makes midrashic sense to simply calculate the *gimatria*, the numerological value of the Hebrew letters. Thus, in ורב=6, ר=200 and ב=2, bringing us to the total of 208.

In contrast to the previous explanations, here it is not clear how this number is to be harmonized with the ten (or twenty) sons whom Scripture states explicitly to have been executed.<sup>218</sup> It is therefore possible that the author of this interpretation is concerned only with defining the “*multitude*” of Haman’s sons in 5:11, and is not suggesting that all of them were put to death.<sup>219</sup>

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211 “Rami”—**Spanish family**: “And Rami.”

212 “Abba”—**Spanish family** and Genizah fragment: “Ḥama.”

213 **AgE** adds: “And.”

214 All witnesses except MS Y add: “all.”

215 “says”—MSS **G, B, O, L, W, Mf, HgT<sup>1</sup>**, Genizah fragment: “is written.”

216 “as it says... ‘...children’”— ~ in MS **M**.

217 MS **G** adds: “But there is an additional *vav*, as it is written ‘ורב!’”

218 Maharsha says that the ten were included among the 208.

219 This would be consistent with those midrashic traditions which assign the ten sons an active role in obstructing the construction of the Temple, or in the plot to massacre the Jews. Only those who have been involved in the crimes deserve punishment. See Sarah Kamin (-Rozik), “‘Double Causality’ in Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Esther,” in: *Isac Leo Seeligman Volume, Essays on the Bible and the Ancient World*, Alexander Rofé and Yair Zakovitch, eds. (Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1983), 552 [=Sarah Kamin, *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 6].

[15b] וְרוּב<sup>220</sup> 221 equals<sup>222</sup> two hundred and fourteen!

Says<sup>223</sup> Rav Naḥman bar Isaac:<sup>224</sup> It is written וְרוּב.

The objection based on the *plene* spelling, which by adding a *vav* would increase the numerological total to 214, is puzzling. *Gimatrias* are invariably based on the consonantal texts, not on the unwritten vowels. Is it possible that the talmudic editor was familiar with a textual variant which contained an extra *vav*?<sup>225</sup>

It is also unusual for a named *Amora* to answer a question posed anonymously. This might imply that Rav Naḥman bar Isaac is functioning here as the redactor of a pericope which already contained anonymous material.<sup>226</sup> More simply, this might just be the Talmud's way of stating that R. Naḥman posed and resolved his own query.<sup>227</sup>

<sup>220</sup> “וְרוּב” — ~ in YS. MS P, HgT<sup>1</sup> and Genizah fragment add: “of his children” (Genizah fragment deletes it).

<sup>221</sup> MSS G, L, R, W, Mf, Spanish family (except HgT<sup>1</sup>), Printings add: “in *gimatria*.”

<sup>222</sup> “equals”—MSS R, P, EY add: “are thus? They are.”

<sup>223</sup> “Says”—MS O, HgT<sup>1</sup>: “Rather, says.”

<sup>224</sup> “bar Isaac”—~ in MS P.

<sup>225</sup> No variants to the accepted reading (without the *vav*) are recorded in R. Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica*, 3rd edition (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt) or in Norzi's *Minḥat shai*.

<sup>226</sup> Rav Naḥman bar Isaac served as the *Resh kallah* in Rava's academy at Pumbedita-Maḥoza; see *TB Bava batra* 22a. Hyman, *Toledot* 3:943-4, Margalioth, *Encyclopedia*, 2:674-5, and Ch. Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud, Babli and Yerushalmi* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1969), 371-2 cite ample evidence of his involvement in activities that we would normally classify as “redactional” (cf. *TB Pesahim* 105b); e.g., the determining of the accuracy of dicta, pericopes and attributions, and affixing mnemonic *simanim* to pericopes. See also J. N. Epstein, *Mavo' lenosah ha-mishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1948), 432-7; I. H. Weiss, *Dor dor vedoreshev*, 3:179-80; Halleve, *Dorot ha-rishonim*, 2:499-502; Funk, *Die Juden in Babylonien*, 2:86-8; Abraham Shaul Amir, *Institutions and Titles in the Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), 170-1; R. Akiva Eiger, *Gilyon hash-sha*’s to *Yoma* 38b. On the redactional functions of the “*kallah*” see J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to Amoraitic Literature*, ed. E. Z. Melamed (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Dvir and Magnes Press, 1962), 137; David Rosenthal, “Lishna de-kallah,” *Tarbiz* 52:2 (1983), 273-308. On R. Naḥman's



### Concluding Remarks

This chapter contains the interpretations of the Esther-Midrash to Esther Chapter Five. In fact, the entire section covers only four verses, with the greatest amount of attention being concentrated upon verses 2-4. As we have observed in the course of our analysis, these verses confront the reader with the following distinctive exegetical problem: Although there can be little doubt that the author of Esther saw in these verses the suspense-filled climax and turning-point of the plot, as Esther risked her life to approach the king and intercede on behalf of her people, the terse biblical narrative is not forthcoming in its description of what thoughts and emotions occupied Esther's mind during those fateful moments, or what was the point of her peculiar strategy of convening two banquets and insisting on Haman's presence.<sup>228</sup> Most of the comments in the present chapter related in some way to these questions. Although we encountered here a

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particular interest in masoretic issues see B. M. Lewin, "Matkonet ha-masorah umesoret rav nahman bar yish'haq," *Tahkemoni* 2 (1911), 19-30 (especially 24-7) [I am grateful to Prof. Jordan Penkower of Bar-Ilan University for drawing my attention to this important article]. Similarly structured pericopes, in which R. Nahman bar Isaac responds to anonymous attempts to expound a non-masoretic spelling or defends a proof based on the *ketib* rather than the *qeré*, are found in *Shabbat* 28b (dealing with Psalms 69:32); 55b (1 Samuel 2:22, referring to a non-Masoretic reading); *Yoma* 38b (1 Samuel 2:9); 75b (Exodus 16:14; the pericope is structured exactly like ours); *Sukkah* 9b (Leviticus 23:42); *Mo'ed qatan* 28b (Job 29:25); *Yevamot* 65b (Genesis 1:28); *Avodah zarah* 24b (1 Samuel 7:9); *Horayot* 4a (Leviticus 4:13). Cf. *Sanhedrin* 8a where he objects on the basis of Deuteronomy 1:17. In several of these cases we are dealing with discrepancies between the *ketib* and the *qeré* (not just *lene* or *plene* spellings, as in our pericope), and R. Nahman's position throughout (as recognized by Lewin) is that the vocalized reading must never be allowed to threaten the integrity of the written consonantal text. Many of these passages can be interpreted such that Rav Nahman himself is raising rhetorical objections in order to make his point.

<sup>227</sup> It is widely accepted that brief anonymous questions preceding Amoraic dicta should be treated as parts of those dicta.

<sup>228</sup> The question of Esther's strategy is listed below 19a among the four major topics which must be elucidated in the reading of the Megillah. See S. Kamin, "'Double Causality' in Rashi's Commentary on the Book of Esther," 548-50/2-4. Note that all but one of the Talmud's four topics relate to issues that are not found in the biblical story itself, but only in its midrashic expansions.

representative sampling of rabbis<sup>229</sup> who dealt with several of the familiar midrashic concerns—e.g., the interference by supernatural helpers,<sup>230</sup> enhancing the dimensions of the Jewish victory,<sup>231</sup> the introduction of conventional religious values and institutions,<sup>232</sup> and the concern for the fate of the Temple<sup>233</sup>—the most interesting comments in this chapter were the attempts to deal with issues that are intrinsic to the biblical story. At the center of the chapter stood a remarkable instance of an exegetical question whose discussion spanned the generations from the end of the first century (at Yavneh) through to the mid-fourth century among the Babylonian *Amora'im*,<sup>234</sup> as each of the quoted rabbis tried his hand at reconstructing the reasons for Esther's actions. This passage provides us with a rare and valuable example of a concerted rabbinic endeavor into the field of non-homiletic midrashic exegesis.

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<sup>229</sup> *Tanna'im* who appeared in the passage were: Rabban Gamaliel, R. Joshua, R. Eliezer (ben Hyrkanos), R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, R. Yosé, R. Simeon ben Manasia, R. Joshua ben Qorhah, R. Eleazar the Moda'ite. Palestinian *Amora'im* were: R. Levi, R. Jeremiah, R. Joshua ben Levi, R. Eleazar. Babylonian *Amora'im* included: Rav Hisda, Rava bar Afdon, Rava, Abaye, Rabbah bar Abuha, Rav Nahman bar Isaac and Rami bar Hama.

<sup>230</sup> E.g., the angels who manipulate Ahasuerus and stretch out his scepter.

<sup>231</sup> E.g., by exaggerating the total number of Haman's sons. See the following chapter where much midrashic energy is directed towards enhancing the magnitude of Haman's downfall.

<sup>232</sup> E.g., Esther's concern about possible halakhic transgressions, and the attempts to identify the prayers that she recited before approaching the throne, etc.

<sup>233</sup> As in the comment to Esther 5:3.

<sup>234</sup> On the chronological difficulties raised by Rabbah bar Abuha's presence see our remarks above. The relationship between the Babylonian and Palestinian components of the pericope is reminiscent of the Proems series appearing on 10b-11a above.



## Chapter Thirteen

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### The Sleepless Night

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[15b] “*On that night the king’s sleep wandered*” (Esther 6:1).

The timing of the events depicted in Esther Chapter 6—during the interval that separates Esther’s successful approach to Ahasuerus from the feasts at which Haman will meet his defeat—is so fortuitous that it invites some explanation.<sup>1</sup> In the present pericope we read of three attempts to explain how it came about that precisely at this critical juncture in the narrative Ahasuerus was troubled by his unpaid debt to Mordecai .

#### The Sleep of the King of the Universe

[15b] Says R. Tanḥum:<sup>2</sup> The sleep of<sup>3</sup> the King of the Universe wandered.

R. Tanḥum<sup>4</sup> presents the predictable religious response, that God was taking an active role in coordinating the events. Hence the “king” in

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the commentators, traditional as well as modern, were sensitive to this fact. The Greek and Latin versions all state quite explicitly that “God took away his sleep.” Similarly in Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11:10 (246-7) [ed. R. Marcus, Loeb Classical Library, 6:432-3]: “But God mocked Haman’s wicked hopes, and knowing what was to happen, rejoiced at the event. For that night he deprived the king of sleep.” [See G. R. Driver, “Problems and Solutions,” *VT* 4 (1954), 238.] Moore, 63, writes: “...the author of Esther leaves the cause of the insomnia to the reader’s imagination”; cf. Maharsha: “In all other instances of wandering sleep in the Bible a reason is provided for the sleeplessness; e.g.... in the case of Jacob [Genesis 31:40].”

<sup>2</sup> “Tanḥum”—YS: “Tanḥuma.”

<sup>3</sup> “The sleep of”—~ in MS O.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently the third-generation Palestinian *Amora*. See Albeck, *Introduction to Talmud*, 270-1.

verse 1 is God<sup>5</sup> who—as expressed in a bold anthropomorphism<sup>6</sup>—was unable to slumber while his people remained in grave peril.<sup>7</sup> The terse dictum does not inform us how R. Tanḥum read the rest of the verse,<sup>8</sup> though there can be little doubt that he too would have acknowledged that it was the *earthly* king, Ahasuerus, who called for a reading of the royal chronicles. Of course we ought not demand rigorous exegetical consistency in an interpretation whose point is more poetic than exegetical.

### The Upper Ones Wandered and the Lower Ones Wandered

[15b] And<sup>9</sup> the rabbis say: The upper ones wandered<sup>10</sup> and the lower ones wandered.

If we accept that R. Tanḥum's interpretation was meant to augment the simple sense of the verse and not to replace it, and that both God and Ahasuerus maintained their respective vigils on that night, then it becomes difficult to distinguish between R. Tanḥum's comment and the current one which is formally presented as a conflicting view

<sup>5</sup> We have previously encountered the Palestinian hermeneutical tradition that ascribes references to "the king" (as distinct from "the king Ahasuerus") to God. See references in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:475, n. 161. It is also possible that the interpretation was inspired by the apparent longwindedness of the verse which reads "*and [the king] commanded...and they were read before the king.*"

<sup>6</sup> Rashi makes a point of citing scriptural expressions which speak of God's "awakening"; e.g., Psalms 7:7; 44:24; 59:5; 78:65; etc. Cf. Psalms 121:5; *Esther rabbah*, 10:1; Second Targum 6:1 (Grossfeld, 168); *Panim aherim* B, 74; Alkabetz. On a related phenomenon see Michael Fishbane, "The Holy One Sits and Roars: Mythopoesis and the Midrashic Imagination," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 1 (1993), 1-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 402) states explicitly that God was unable to sleep because of Israel's distress. *Iyyun ya'aqov* understands R. Tanḥuma's dictum otherwise, as a metaphor for God's *indifference* to the fate of the Jews.

<sup>8</sup> It is hard to imagine that anyone would have denied that Ahasuerus (also) suffered insomnia that night. Thus in *Iyyun ya'aqov*: "The simple sense of the verse is not being rejected."

<sup>9</sup> "And"— ~ in MSS G, L, W.

<sup>10</sup> "wandered"— ~ in MSS G, B, W, Spanish family.

and not as an explanation of the previous one.<sup>11</sup> It is probably for this reason that most commentators have striven to explain the allusion to celestial insomnia in such a way that it refers not to God's wakefulness, but to other heavenly forces, whether cosmic or angelic.<sup>12</sup>

The impression that emerges after reflection upon both of the interpretations in our pericope is that they are so vague and laconic that it is virtually impossible to flesh them out without having recourse to guesswork and comparisons with external sources. This situation contrasts starkly with the evidence of virtually every other known midrashic or targumic compilation on Esther, all of which contain elaborate and dramatic expansions of verse 6:1 in which the wakefulness of king Ahasuerus is set against a background of cosmic and supernatural tension.<sup>13</sup> It therefore appears that what has been preserved

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<sup>11</sup> *'Iyyun ya'aqov* suggests that this explanation is based on the Hebrew form *nadedah* which retains the reduplication of the *d*. It is normal for such forms to be expounded midrashically as "dual" verbs [On this type of exegesis see the literature cited in our discussion of 17b (to Esther 7:10) below]; i.e., in the present instance, as having two subjects, God and Ahasuerus.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi offers two possible interpretations. The first, cited in the name of his teacher, consists of a citation of *Abba gorton*, 38-9; *Panim aherim* A, 48; and *Panim aherim* B, 74; in which angels repeatedly trouble Ahasuerus' slumber and accuse him of ingratitude. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:433; 6:475, n. 164. Rashi's second explanation (introduced as "and some explain") has it that the celestial powers intentionally withdrew themselves in order to force the Jews to intensify their prayers and supplications. This interpretation might reflect the spirit of midrashic passages such as the Targum to Esther 6:1 (Grossfeld, 69) in which the pitiful state of the Jewish women and children brings about the intercession of the patriarchs and of Moses (or of the angels) [Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:432-3; 6:475, nn. 161-2; Grossfeld, 69, n. 1; see Maharsha; Rimon Kasher and Michael L. Klein, "New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah," *HUCA* 61 (1992) 93-5/103-5]. *'Iyyun ya'aqov* also proposes that the *'elyonim* here refer to the prospering Haman and the *tahtonim* to the downtrodden Jews (cf. *Panim aherim* B, *ibid.*).

<sup>13</sup> The principal themes that appear in the major midrashic collections (aside from the ones which we have already mentioned above in connection with the explanations of Rashi and other commentators) include: How the outcry of the innocent Jewish schoolchildren and women etc. touched the heavenly throne [Targum to Esther 6:1 (Grossfeld, 69-70); Second Targum (167)]; the intercession by, or sleeplessness of, the angels [Targum, *Panim aherim* A, 47-8; *Panim aherim*, B, 74]; God disturbs

by the Babylonian Esther-Midrash here, as in several other places, is no more than a truncated remnant of what were once extended literary homilies of the kind that can still be read in the Palestinian *midrashim*. As usual, the talmudic redactors were interested only in the narrowly exegetical component of the original discourses and did not deem it worth recording the poignant and vivid midrashic narratives.<sup>14</sup>

### Ahasuerus' Fears

[15b] Rava says:<sup>15</sup> The sleep of<sup>16</sup> Ahasuerus, literally.<sup>17</sup>

A worry<sup>18</sup> fell into his heart.<sup>19</sup>

He said: What is special<sup>20</sup> that<sup>21</sup> Esther invited Haman?<sup>22 23</sup>

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Ahasuerus' sleep [*Panim aherim* B, 73]; Angels disturb Ahasuerus' sleep [Targum, Second Targum (Grossfeld, 169); *Abba gorion*, 38; *Panim aherim* A, 48; *Panim aherim* B, 74; *Pesiqta hadeta* (in Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash* (reprint, Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1967), 6:567)]; the intercession of the patriarchs, Moses, etc. [*Panim aherim* A, 47; *Panim aherim* B, 74]; that Mordecai and Esther and/or other "tahtonim" were also unable to sleep [Second Targum; *Panim aherim* B, 74]; Haman was unable to sleep [Second Targum, *Panim aherim* B, 74]. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:431-2; 6:476, n. 169. On Ahasuerus' sleeplessness see next section.

<sup>14</sup> This approach is also discernible in the commentary of Alkabetz who identifies the thematic allusions in the Esther-Midrash with more extensive homilies known to him from YS.

<sup>15</sup> "Rava says"—EY: "Says Rabbah"; MS R, HgT<sup>2</sup>: "Rabbah says"; MSS W, Mf: "And Rava says"; AgE: "R. Abba says."

<sup>16</sup> MSS G, L, R, W, Mf, Spanish family, Printings, Genizah fragment add: "the king"; MS B adds: "(the King of the Universe) the king."

<sup>17</sup> MSS B, L, R, W, Spanish family, YS add: "wandered."

<sup>18</sup> "worry"—thus only in MS Y, AgE; in all other witnesses: "matter."

<sup>19</sup> "heart"—thus only in MS Y, AgE; in all other witnesses: "mind."

<sup>20</sup> "special"—MS O: "it that she is saying"; EY, Printings: "before us"; HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS, AgE: "this"; ~ in MSS G, B, M, W.

The Aramaic expressions מַאי דְקָמֵן , מַאי דְקָמֵן or מַאי דְקָמֵן appear in several places in the Babylonian Talmud; e.g., *Pesahim* 3b [see Baruch Naeh, ed., *Gemara shelemah massekhet pesahim*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mif'al Gemara Shelemah, 1960), to l. 52]; *Mo'ed qatan* 17a; *Ketubbot* 67b (ed. Hershler, 2:124); *Sotah* 2b (ed. Liss, 1:12); *Horayot* 13b [and cf. *Bava batra* 140b (ed. Abramson, 165)]. Rashi in all instances derives it from the root QDM, "before," in the sense of "what is {this nov-

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They are conspiring<sup>24</sup> against “that man”<sup>25</sup> to murder him.

He went on and said: If it<sup>26</sup> is<sup>27</sup> so, there is<sup>28</sup> not a single<sup>29</sup> person<sup>30</sup> who is friendly,<sup>31</sup> who<sup>32</sup> will come and tell<sup>33</sup> me.

He went on and said:<sup>34</sup> Is there a person<sup>35</sup> who has done<sup>36</sup> a favor for me and I have not rewarded him?<sup>37</sup>

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elty} before us?,” an interpretation which is accepted by Benjamin Mussafia in his notes to the *Arukh* (ed. Kohut, 7:118). The *Arukh* itself prefers to read it as a present participle from the root ‘MR / ‘M’, meaning “what he says,” an opinion which is shared by J. N. Epstein, *A Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Magnes and Dvir, 1960), 66, an explanation which does not seem to fit all the cases, nor the assorted object suffixes which attach themselves to the word. The vocalization of MS Y makes it clear that whoever inserted it understood the word as the preposition meaning “before.”

21 “He said...that”—MS L: “Since”; MS R, Genizah fragment: “He said: Since”; MS P: “He who says that” (?).

22 MSS G, M, W, Genizah fragment add: “with him”; MSS B, L, R, **Spanish family**, YS: “with me”; MS Mf: “with her.”

23 MSS G, B, M, R, W, **Spanish family**, **Printings** add: “Perhaps”; MS L adds: “He said.”

24 “conspiring”—MS L, EY, **Printings**: “taking counsel.”

25 “man”— ~ in **Pesaro printing**.

26 “it”—MS B: “the calumny.”

27 “it is”— ~ in MS G, **Ashkenazic family**, **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

28 “there is”—MS R: “is there.”

29 “single”— ~ in all witnesses except MS Y and AgE.

30 “person”—Genizah fragment: “one”; **Printings**: “man.”

31 MS O adds: “to her”; all other witnesses add: “to me.”

32 “who”—**Spanish family**, MS R, YS: “and”; ~ in MS L.

33 “come and tell”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; in all other witnesses: “inform.”

34 “He went on and said”—MS B, **Spanish family**, Genizah fragment: “or perhaps”; MS M: “And perhaps”; MSS G, R: “Perhaps”; YS: “He said: Perhaps”; ~ in MS G. MS W, **Printings**, AgE add: “perhaps.”

35 “a person”— ~ in MSS G, O, Mf, HgT.

36 “has done”—MS R: “knows of.”

37 MS L and **Printings** add: “[“And”—MS L] For this reason people will refrain and not divulge to me.”



At once he ordered<sup>38</sup> “*the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read*” (Esther 6:1).

Seen from the perspective of normal midrashic conventions, Rava’s proposal constitutes an unusual attempt to account for Ahasuerus’ opportune insomnia—and in particular the fact that he found this an appropriate occasion for reviewing the royal chronicles—purely on the basis of its narrative logic, without any overt appeal to supernatural interference.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the comment should be viewed as an extension of those rabbinic opinions cited above which ascribed to Esther a stratagem of inciting Ahasuerus’ jealousy and paranoia against

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<sup>38</sup> “He ordered”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses (including MS Y\*): “*and he commanded.*”

<sup>39</sup> A different naturalistic explanation is found in Josephus’ *Antiquities*, 11:10 (248 [transl. R. Marcus, 6:432-3]). Its purpose is to account not for Ahasuerus’ sleeplessness, but for his decision to review the royal chronicles on this occasion.

Haman.<sup>40</sup> Seen from this perspective, the king's disturbed sleep is in actuality the successful outcome of that plan.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Rashi in his biblical commentary on this verse distinguishes between two different approaches. The first ascribes Ahasuerus' sleeplessness to a "miracle," while the other does not. S. Kamin, "'Double Causality' in Rashi's Commentary on the Book of Esther," 553-4/7-8 (see also 555/9, n. 34) makes a connection between Rava's explanation here and R. Eleazar the Moda'ite's explanation of Esther's strategy on 15a above. In *Abba gorion*, 38-9 and *Panim aherim* B, 74, the king's suspicions that he had been poisoned at the first banquet were aroused only after he was manhandled by the angels and (according to *Abba gorion*) the fact that neither Haman nor Esther appear to be any the worse for their participation there leads him to suspect their complicity in a conspiracy against him. That tradition is one of the few which succeeds in effectively justifying the necessity for two separate banquets.

According to the Second Targum (transl. Grossfeld, 169-70), *Esther rabbah*, 10:1, *Panim aherim* B, 75, *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 402), *Bet ha-Midrash*, 6:57 and YS Esther, #1057, Ahasuerus dreamed, apparently under supernatural provocation, that Haman was preparing to assassinate him, a vision which found ostensible corroboration when Haman showed up in the courtyard. Hallevy, '*Erkhei ha'aggadah vaha-midrash*, 2:158 calls our attention to the similar story that was told by Herodotus (3:30) about Cambyses and Smerdis. See A. D. Godley, transl., *Herodotus*, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Warmington, ed. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1971), 2:38-41.

<sup>41</sup> The reactions which the midrash ascribes to Ahasuerus recall the interpretation given by Dio Cassio, 15:14-22 [Earnest Cary, *Dio's Roman History*, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Worthington, ed. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1986), 6:426-53] of how the all-powerful Augustus Caesar, following the counsel of his wife, took the trouble to act in a forgiving and conciliatory manner towards rebellious subjects, and to maintain the formalities of republican institutions, for fear of provoking the assassin's dagger. Gibbon's reconstruction of Augustus' considerations [Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury, fifth edition (London: Methuen), 1:71] bears an uncanny resemblance to the midrashic explanation of Ahasuerus' motives.

Such considerations would have been familiar in antiquity (even as they have been in more recent epochs) in any political system where power was routinely transferred by means of assassinations and *coups d'état*, as was the case in Imperial Rome.

## They Were Read by Themselves

Most witnesses	MS W (with variants from EY and Printings)
	<p>[15b] “<i>And they were read before the king</i>” (Esther 6:1).</p> <p>It teaches<sup>42</sup> {in a <i>baraita</i>): This teaches that they were read by themselves.<sup>43</sup></p>

For the midrashic exegete, the use of the passive form in this verse is regarded as an unacceptably longwinded circumlocution, since the verse could have used a more straightforward active verb in order to convey the same information. In the absence of a grammatical subject for the clause, it is understandable that the rabbis would have jumped at the occasion to discover yet another miraculous event concealed beneath the naturalistic surface of the scriptural narrative. In other midrashic collections this tradition is incorporated more clearly into the one about how God or his angelic agents foiled Shimshai’s attempt to conceal Mordecai’s deeds from Ahasuerus. Thus, in *Abbagorion*, 39 we read:

Says R. Johanan: Shimshai Haman’s son was reading, and when he reached the account of Mordecai’s exploit he rolled it and the columns would roll themselves back.

And some say: The letters cried out saying “*that Mordecai had told of Bighan and Teresh*,” as it says: “*and they were read before the king*.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> “*And...the king’...teaches*”— ~ in other witnesses.

<sup>43</sup> This segment, which is missing from most of the textual traditions, seems to emanate from *Panim aherim* B, 75 where we find the following: “It does not state ‘and they read,’ but rather ‘*and they were read*’—The writing was read by itself.”

<sup>44</sup> A variation on this story is included in *Panim aherim* B, 74-5 which adds an alternative tradition in which it is Elijah who reads the chronicle.

**“And It Was Found Written”**

[15b] “*And it was found written* etc.” (Esther 6:2).<sup>45</sup>

“Wrote” it should have {said}!

—Says R. Isaac<sup>46</sup> Nappaḥa:<sup>47</sup> [16a] This teaches that<sup>48</sup> Shimshai is erasing and Gabriel is writing.

The grammatical justification for R. Isaac’s comment is far less persuasive than that of the preceding interpretation. The passive participle employed in the verse expresses the sense of something that has been written previously, and the existing verse is worded much more naturally than the hypothetical alternative proposed by R. Isaac.<sup>49</sup> It is clear that the exegesis here is nothing more than a contrived means of leading to a desired narrative conclusion.<sup>50</sup> Like much of the midrashic retelling of Esther, and especially of Chapters 5-7, our rabbinic expositors do not want the favorable developments to occur with too much facility or naturalness, since to do so would detract from the miraculous dimension of the Jews’ deliverance. Consistent with this tendency, the midrash here introduces an attempt to obstruct the reading of the royal chronicle, an obstacle that could not have been overcome without active divine assistance. The reader of the scroll, whom the biblical narrator has concealed behind the anonymity of a passive verb, is identified by the midrashic tradition as Shimshai. This Shimshai appears in

<sup>45</sup> MSS G, R, HgT add: “*Written*?”

<sup>46</sup> “Says R. Isaac”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>47</sup> “Nappaḥa”— ~ in MSS L, M, W, **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>48</sup> “This teaches that”— ~ in AgE.

<sup>49</sup> It is perhaps the inadequacy of this unconvincing exegesis that caused medieval students to insert the preceding comment on “*they were read*” which, though apparently not original to the Talmud, expresses a similar conclusion based on more palatable exegesis.

<sup>50</sup> Compare *Panim aḥerim* B, 75:

...For it is written “*And it was found written.*” The expression “*it was found*” is only employed with reference to something that has been lost, and since it was lost and they would mention Mordecai before him, sleep would overpower him...

the Bible<sup>51</sup> as the secretary of Rehum the governor of Samaria who “wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king” persuading him to halt the construction of the Jewish Temple. As we have witnessed on many previous occasions, the complicity of Ahasuerus, Haman and Vashti in the struggle against the Temple’s reconstruction became one of the most pronounced motifs in the rabbinic retelling of Esther,<sup>52</sup> and it is not at all surprising to find that Shimshai, the hostile scribe in Ezra, was equated with the unnamed contemporary scribe of Esther 6:2.<sup>53</sup> This midrash thus creates a vivid and graphic<sup>54</sup> scene in which the revisionist Shimshai tries to obliterate from the records the account of Mordecai’s exposing Bigthan’s and Teresh’s plot, as the angel Gabriel undoes the erasure.<sup>55</sup> The homiletic point is evident:

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<sup>51</sup> Ezra 4:8-9, 17, 23. Ezra 4:15 also speaks of a search through the royal chronicles, only there the purpose is to discover *unfavorable* reports about the Jews.

<sup>52</sup> *Seder ‘olam*, Chapter 29 [ed. Ratner, 132-3; Chaim Milikowsky, “Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronology,” Ph. D., Yale University, 1981, 431-2, 542] also records that Haman’s sons were hanged because “they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem” (Ezra 4:6); also cited by Rashi to Esther 9:10. This tradition distinguishes between Shimshai and the anonymous accusers of Ezra 4:6; but cf. Ratner, n. 20.

<sup>53</sup> The Babylonian tradition (in common with *Abba gorion*, 39) has it that Shimshai the scribe was a son of Haman. This appears to be a secondary conflation of what were originally two separate traditions, one of which (like the Targum) spoke of Shimshai, and the other (like *Panim aherim* B, 74 and *Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 [Friedlander, 402]) of one of Haman’s sons. In fact, unless we accept the rabbinic legends which add to the original ten sons enumerated in the Bible, it becomes awkward to introduce an additional name to the ten who are explicitly named by Scripture.

<sup>54</sup> And, it should not be ignored, entertaining.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. the version in *Abba gorion*, 39, cited above. Similar elements are included in the Targum (Grossfeld, 70); *Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 402), etc. Neither *Abba gorion* nor the Targum speak of Gabriel or any other angels in this connection, but rather of God himself manipulating the chronicles. This is true as well of *Panim aherim* B, 74-5 which cites an alternative tradition [“and there are some who say”] which assigns the role to Elijah. Shimshai is not mentioned in the Second Targum. Cf. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:476, n. 168; Friedlander’s notes to *Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer*, 402, n. 9. As Alkabetz observes, Gabriel has by this point found steady employment in the rabbinic retelling of Esther.

Without constant providential care, the merely human stratagems of Mordecai and Esther could not have succeeded.

### The Earthly Writing and the Celestial Writing

[16a] Says<sup>56</sup> R. Asi:<sup>57</sup> R. Shela<sup>58</sup> of Kefar Tamarta<sup>59</sup> expounded: And<sup>60</sup> just as the lower writing which is in Israel's favor {or: merit<sup>61</sup> of Israel}<sup>62</sup> is not erased, the celestial writing<sup>63</sup> all the more so!

It is not clear whether R. Shela<sup>64</sup> is alluding to the aggadic traditions found in the Talmud and midrash according to which the record of Mordecai's deeds was miraculously preserved in spite of the deter-

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In Josephus' retelling of the episode in *Antiquities*, 11:10 (249-51) [ed. Marcus, 6:434-5] we encounter a different attempt to show how the reward that was due to Mordecai might easily have been passed over in the reading of the scroll (there is a vague suggestion that the scribe was intentionally glossing over the episode), had not Ahasuerus taken special measures to clarify the matter:

As the scribe merely said so much and was passing on to another incident, the king stopped him and inquired whether he did not find it written down that a reward had been given to this man. The scribe said that there was nothing, whereupon the king told him to stop, and inquired of those who were charged with this duty what hour of the night it was...

<sup>56</sup> "Says"—EY: "And says."

<sup>57</sup> "Asi"—Spanish family: "Ḥanina [MS P and EY add: "bar Pappa"]"; MS M, YS, Genizah fragment: "Yosé"; MS R: "Isi"; MS W: "Ami."

<sup>58</sup> "Shela"—MS R, YS: "Simlai."

<sup>59</sup> "of Kefar Tamarta"—~ in YS.

<sup>60</sup> "And"—~ in MS W.

<sup>61</sup> "lower...merit"—YS, Genizah fragment: "lower merit."

<sup>62</sup> "of Israel"—~ in MS Mf, YS, AgE.

<sup>63</sup> MSS L, M, Genizah fragment add: "of their merit."

<sup>64</sup> R. Shela was a Palestinian disciple of R. Johanan. On him and his place or residence see A. Neubauer, *La Géographie du Talmud* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1888), 280; Hyman, *Toledot*, 3:1113; Klein, Samuel, ed., *Sefer ha-yishuv*, reprint ed., Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak ben Zevi, 1977), 98; Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmuds*, 190; Gottfried Reeg, *Die Ortsnamen Israels nach der rabbinischen Literatur*, Beiheften zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, var. ed., Heinz Gaube, Wolfgang Röllig, 375-6.

mined efforts of his enemies to obliterate it,<sup>65</sup> or to the plain facts of the unembellished biblical narrative which tell of how the royal chronicles were kept intact until they came to be read before Ahasuerus.<sup>66</sup> In either case the *qal vahomer* reasoning is straightforward: If a human record—subject to corruption, malice and faulty memories—can faithfully preserve the meritorious deeds of a single Jew, then we should entertain no doubts that the Omniscient One will accurately recall the collective merits of the Jewish people.<sup>67</sup>

### Not Because They Love Mordecai

[16a] “*And the king said, What honor and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king’s servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him*” (Esther 6:3).

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<sup>65</sup> Thus according to Maharsha, *‘Iyyun ya‘aqov*, etc. R. Shela’s dictum is also brought in *Esther rabbah* 6:14 and in Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, *Ginzé midrash*, 168, in connection with Esther 2:23 (when the events were recorded) without any reference to the miracles and angelic assistance that are mentioned in our pericope. Unlike the laconic comment in the Esther-Midrash, the *Esther rabbah* version leads into a consoling messianic peroration culminating with Malachi 3:16: “*And the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord etc.*” This midrash was obviously inspired by the common use of the phrase “book of remembrance” in Esther and Malachi. The Esther-Midrash, true to form, has left out the homiletical structure and preserved only those elements that bear directly on the exegesis of Esther.

<sup>66</sup> The conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh presumably took place soon after the selection of Esther as queen in the seventh year of Ahasuerus’ reign (Esther 2:16), and the current events would have followed directly upon the casting of Haman’s lot in the twelfth year (3:7), creating an interval of five years. See *Seder ‘olam*, Ch. 29 (Ratner, 132 and n. 15).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Panim aherim* B, 75. *‘Iyyun ya‘aqov* argues that the dictum was intended to preclude the possibility that the record of merits will be erased on account of the demerits that have accrued. This concern must have been a very real one for Jews in the post-Destruction world, and was likely exacerbated by Christian polemics. On rabbinic ideas of individual and collective merit see Urbach, *The Sages*, 496-511; A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinic Literature* (London, 1920).

{A *baraita*} teaches:<sup>68</sup> Not because they love Mordecai, but rather because they despise Haman.

When Ahasuerus asks his servants whether Mordecai was ever rewarded for saving his life, they are quick to respond with the truth, that the king's benefactor has not been suitably recompensed for his service. The author of this anonymous comment appears to be uneasy with the premise that gentiles would be so fair, or even sympathetic, with respect to the interests of a Jew—an uneasiness which we must suppose reflects his own experiences with contemporary pagans.<sup>69</sup> Surely there must have been a different motive for their ostensible benevolence towards Mordecai! The conclusion is that, indeed, the servants were moved by a hostility towards Haman, not by sympathy towards Mordecai or his coreligionists.<sup>70</sup> I have not found any midrashic tradition that attempts to identify what grounds might have existed for non-Jewish antipathy towards Haman.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “[A *baraita*] teaches”—MS B: “Our rabbis taught: {*Abaraita*} teaches”; **Printings:** “Says Rava”; ~ in EY.

<sup>69</sup> See Alkabetz: “It is the normal practice of the righteous to judge the wicked unfavorably, and *vice versa* (?)” On the aggadic contrast between Israel and the nations see Isaac Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-'aggadah* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Magnes and Masadah), 47-9.

<sup>70</sup> E. E. Hallevy, ‘*Erkhei ha-'aggadah veba-halakhah*, 2:160-1, cites several instances of this sentiment (usually as a justification for the formation of pragmatic political and military alliances with dubious friends) from such authors as Polybius, Dio Cassio and Josephus.

<sup>71</sup> As I have explained the passage, the comment appears to be a response to the logic of the narrative and an expression of its author's own world-view, and is not based on any particular textual feature or word-play. Most of the traditional commentators have tried in unconvincing ways to attach the interpretation to some redundancy or peculiarity in the wording of the biblical text. Thus, Maharsha notes that the response omits the mention of “*honor and dignity*” that was found in the question, a supposed indication that the servants did not want Mordecai to be awarded honors or dignities. Rabbi Hayim Joseph David Azulai (*Petaḥ 'einayim*, Livorno: 1790), citing R. Zvi Ashkenazi, derives the conclusion from the speaker's failure to mention Mordecai's name, which is behavior indicative of hatred and hostility. The *Iyyun ya'aqov*, on the other hand, argues that the comment involves a change of the vowels of the word “*na'asah*” which transforms it from “*hath been done*” to “we shall [not] do.” *Eṣ yosef* (citing *Iyyei*



### “For Himself”

[16a] “And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king’s house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him” (Esther 6:4).

{A *baraita*}<sup>72</sup> teaches: “For him”<sup>73</sup> he had prepared it—for himself.<sup>74</sup>

The longwinded<sup>75</sup> reference to “the gallows that he had prepared for him,” when it is by now (see 5:14) obvious that Haman has prepared a tree on which to hang Mordecai, is read by the midrashic exegetes as an ironic *double entendre*: Haman of course believes that the phrase “for him” alludes to Mordecai, but the author of the story, who knows that in the end it is Haman who will be hanged from that very pole (7:10), can identify Haman as the antecedent of “him.” Thus Haman is industriously fashioning the means for his own destruction.<sup>76</sup>

### Haman Honors Mordecai

As was the case with several of the expansions of Esther Chapters 5-6, the midrash here is trying to draw out the dramatic potential of the most crucial episodes in the story. In the present instance, where the biblical narrative offers a most satisfying exaltation of Mordecai at the expense of Haman’s utter humiliation, we get the feeling that the

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*hayyam*) notes a shift in perspective between the question (“to Mordecai”) and the answer (“with him”) which should be read as an exclusion, as if to say: Nothing has been done with Mordecai, but there is something that has been done with Haman.” None of these ingenious explanations is at all convincing.

<sup>72</sup> See also E. Z. Melamed, *Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud*, second revised edition (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 519.

<sup>73</sup> “For him”—MS P: “For Haman.”

<sup>74</sup> “For himself”—thus only in MS Y; AgE: “for himself he had prepared it”; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>75</sup> See Maharsha, *‘Iyyun ya‘aqov*, Arieḥ ben Asher, *Turei even* (Vilna: 1836), *‘Eṣ yosef*.

<sup>76</sup> See Rashi. A similar idea is expressed in the fragments published by Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 93/103.

homilist is savoring the exquisite pleasure of the scene by slowing the pace of the events. Each honor that is heaped upon Mordecai is initially resisted by Haman, a circumstance which makes his ultimate capitulation all the more complete.

The exegetical method employed here is a common one. The midrash begins from the fact that Ahasuerus' instructions in 6:10 are unnecessarily detailed in identifying the designated recipient of the royal honors. The midrash therefore reads each identifying expression as a response to an unwritten attempt by Haman to squirm out of his obligation by means of the legalistic argument that the identification had left some room for ambiguity.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> On the aggadic method of reading verses as if they were dialogues see Hallevy, *'Erkhei ha-'aggadah ve'ha-halakhah*, 2:158 ("Here the Aggadah has transformed the monologue into a dialogue in order to increase the tension and in order to emphasize Haman's terror which was becoming progressively stronger with each question and answer. This is a well-known dramatic device in Greek tragedy, which Sophocles utilized to such good advantage in *Oedipus Rex*..."); Jonah Fraenkel, *Darkhei ha-'aggadah ve'ha-midrash*, Yad Ha-Talmud, ed. E. E. Urbach (Givatayim: Massadah, 1991), 139; and literature cited in 601, n. 3. The roots of this kind of reading lie in halakhic midrash, where it is common for the rabbis to justify apparent redundancies in the phraseology of scriptural laws on the grounds that they were designed to deflect hypothetical suggestions of alternative interpretations. A classic instance of this type of aggadic exposition may be found in *TB Sanhedrin* 89b, *Genesis rabbah*, 55:7 (590) and parallels [see Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-'aggadah*, 131-3] where the detailed identification of Isaac in Genesis 22:2 is construed as a response to Abraham's attempts to challenge on technical grounds the order to offer up his son. In *Genesis rabbah* the midrash concludes that Abraham earned a reward for each word of affection which he overcame in obedience to God's commands. Here it is similarly implied that Haman's disgrace and frustration were increased in proportion to each word of ineffectual protestation.

Hallevy, *ibid.*, compares this story with that of Demeratus the Spartan who was about to be honored in a similar manner by the Persian monarch, but was pushed aside by the king's cousin. See Bernadotte Perrin, transl., *Plutarch's Lives*, Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Warmington, ed. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1968), 2:78-81 ("Themistocles" 29:5).

*Abba gorion*, 39-40 regards the last clause, "*Let nothing fail etc.*," as a response to Haman's protest that the king's command would contradict the earlier edict to annihilate the Jews. A Hebrew dialogue very like the one in our pericope is found in *Panim aherim* B, 75, and an elaborate Aramaic one in the Second Targum (Grossfeld,

[16a] “And the king’s servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court, And the king said, Let him come in. So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king... And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honor, Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes... Then the king said to Haman, Make haste and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew (Esther 6:5-10).

He<sup>78</sup> said to him: Which<sup>79</sup> Mordecai?<sup>80</sup>

—He said to him:<sup>81</sup> “*The Jew.*”

According to the midrashic reading Ahasuerus had to specify that the individual to be honored was Mordecai *the Jew* because Haman had tried to argue that there were many Mordecais.<sup>82</sup>

[16a] He said to him:<sup>83</sup> There are many<sup>84</sup> “Mordecai the Jew”’s<sup>85</sup> in the marketplace.<sup>86 87</sup>

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171-2 and n. 19 [The Targum appears to have conflated two separate versions]; *Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 403-4; Higger, 244); Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 95-6/105-6. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:436-7; 6:476, n. 169.

78 “He”—MS L: “And he.”

79 “Which”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “Who is.”

80 MS B adds: “There are many Mordecais among the Jews.”

81 “He said to him”—~ in MSS G, R, Mf, Genizah fragment.

82 See variations on this idea in Second Targum (Grossfeld, 171); *Panim aherim* B, 75; *Pirqei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (403-4; 244); *Bet ha-midrash*, 6:57.

83 “He said to him”—~ in MSS G, N, P, R, Mf, EY, Genizah fragment.

84 “many” (in Hebrew)—thus only in MS Y and AgE; in all other witnesses: in Aramaic.

85 “‘Mordecai the Jew’s’”—MSS G, N, L, M, Mf, HgT, Printings, Genizah fragment: “‘Mordecai’s’”; MS B: “Jews”; ~ in MSS P, R, W, EY, YS.

86 “in the marketplace”—thus only in MS Y; MSS G, W, Mf, Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS: “among the Jews”; MS N: “today”; ~ in all other witnesses.

87 “many ‘Mordecai...’...marketplace” (in Aramaic)—AgE: “Many Jews have the name Mordecai. Which one of them?” (in Hebrew).

—He said to him:<sup>88</sup> “*That sitteth at the king’s gate.*”

To Haman’s charge that the expression “Mordecai the Jew” is still ambiguous, Ahasuerus must answer that he was referring to the individual of that name and nationality who was sitting at the king’s gate. This, for the Talmud, leaves no further doubts as to the identity of the person intended.<sup>89</sup>

[16a] He said to him: My Lord the king,<sup>90</sup> One county<sup>91</sup> or<sup>92</sup> one canal<sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup> would suffice for him.

—He said to him:<sup>95</sup> This also give to him.<sup>96</sup> “*Let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.*”<sup>97</sup>

After having failed in his attempt to challenge the identification of the intended recipient of the royal honors, Haman now proceeds to another tactic, to try to persuade Ahasuerus that, although Mordecai

<sup>88</sup> “He said to him”— ~ in MSS **G, M, R, W** (and filled in in **W\***).

<sup>89</sup> A similar exchange appears in *Panim aherim* B, 75 (accepting Buber’s filling-in of a probable homoioteleuton); *Pirquei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (404/244); *Bet ha-Midrash*, 6:57. The Second Targum contains a much more detailed and elaborate version in which Haman’s physical discomfort and verbose appeals are detailed at great length. In that version Haman is not satisfied with Ahasuerus’ saying that Mordecai sat at the gate, and must have it spelled out precisely which gate is being referred to.

<sup>90</sup> “My Lord, the king”—thus only in MS **Y**; MSS **G, N, B, W**, **Spanish family**: “That one”; MSS **L, M, YS**, Genizah fragment: “he”; MS **Mf**: “He said to the fortune [(?) למזלי] of that man: That man”; ~ in MS **M**, **Printings**.

<sup>91</sup> “county”—MSS **L, M**, “canal.”

<sup>92</sup> “or”—thus only in MSS **Y, L, M, Mf**; in all other witnesses: “or alternately.”

<sup>93</sup> “canal”—MSS **L, M**: “county.”

<sup>94</sup> “county or one canal”—MS **N**: “canal; or alternately: one county; or alternately: one province.”

<sup>95</sup> “He said to him”— ~ in **Ashkenazic family**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>96</sup> “This also give to him”—thus only in MS **Y** and **Printings**; MS **G**: “This also go give to him”; MS **N**: “This give to him”; MS **B**: “(This learn and give to him)”; MS **Mf**: “This and give, give to him (?)”; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>97</sup> MSS **B\***, **O, P, EY** add: “learn [(?) גמר] and give to him”; **HgT** adds: “This too give to him”; MS **W** adds: “And this too give to him.”

might deserve some token of the king's gratitude, the favors being proposed are too great for a man of his station.<sup>98</sup> As before, the content of

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<sup>98</sup> It is curious that the midrash should presume that a one-day celebration ranks higher than a permanent political appointment. The passage presumably reflects the rigidly stratified hierarchy of an ancient absolutist state, in which direct contact with the unapproachable king, brief though it might be, could be considered more desirable than a "mere" ascent to a higher rung in the administrative ladder. Perhaps this is precisely the point of the passage, to persuade the reader how exalted was the honor that was being bestowed upon Mordecai and how complete was the consequent anger which inflamed Haman. *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia* understand the issue differently: "...He retracted his earlier suggestion that Mordecai should be dressed in the royal apparel and that they should proclaim before him. He now said that it would suffice that man to go out in the royal apparel on one bridge and not through all the streets of the city." I find this interpretation, that the dispute was over the length of the parade route, unlikely.

E. E. Hallevy, '*Erkhei ha-'aggadah vaha-halakhah*, 2:158 notes that classical authors relate that Persian kings would frequently turn over the revenues of entire cities to their favorites; e.g., Thucydides (60:1:134) reports how Artaxerxes (Ahasuerus) assigned to Themistocles the profits of the city of Magnesia in Asia Minor; see C. Foster Smith, transl., *Thucydides*, Loeb Classical Library, E. Capps *et al.*, eds. (London and New York: William Heineman and G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), 1:236-7. Similar gifts are ascribed to Cyrus, Darius II and Alexander.

On the word *disqarta* see our commentary to 13b (Esther 3:8) above. In addition to the works mentioned there see: Bernhard Geiger, "Mittel persische Wörter und Sachen," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlands*, 42 (1935), 114-28. On the *nahara* as an administrative unit see Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1974), 24 (and n. 17); D. Sperber, "Bab Nahara," *Irana Antiqua*, 8 (1968), 73, n. 3; *TB Sanhedrin* 25b-26a, which speaks of a *resh nahara* in charge of tax collection. On the passage see M. Beer., *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Arsacid and Sassanian Periods*, Bar-Ilan University Series of Research Monographs in Memory of...Pinchas Churgin (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1970), 215-6. Hallevy's argument (*ibid.*) that the *nahara* refers to fishing rights on the rivers is most unlikely in light of the many sources (not confined to the Talmud) which speak of it as a Babylonian administrative and fiscal unit.

Although equivalent passages are found in works other than the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, and hence need not necessarily reflect the reality of Persian governmental structures, the parallels are all in late works which show unmistakable traces of Babylonian influence or dependence on *TB*. Thus, in the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 172) Haman argues: "He is a mere commoner. Appoint him over a single province (*medinta*) or over a single marketplace [*ristaqa*], only let him not be given the honor!" The word "*ristaqa*" seems to be exclusive to Babylonian Aramaic. See Alexander Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, 7:287; Geiger in S. Krauss, ed., *Additamenta ad Librum*

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Haman's supposed request is deduced from the words used by the king: "*let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken,*" which implies that Haman had tried to get away with giving Mordecai *less* than the what had been commanded by Ahasuerus.<sup>99</sup>

### A Handful of Barley Flour

[16a] "*Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed, etc.*" (Esther 6:11).

He went<sup>100</sup> and found

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*Aruch Completum*, reprint (Jerusalem: Makor, 1969), 386; "Mittelpersischer Wörter" (see above), 124; J. Perles, *Etymologische Studien* (Breslau: 1871), 84. Geiger identifies the word as Middle Persian. On the horse "Shifregaz," evidently also of Persian provenance, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:476, n. 169. The Targum to this section uses several other Persian words as well.

Similarly, *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 404) reads "I thought you were thinking of someone greater than him. But to this one give fields and vineyards and that will suffice!" The paragraph is however missing from Friedlander's manuscript; see his n. 2. *Panim aherim* B, 75 has only "He is not worthy of the honor."

In the Second Targum Haman offers a long and detailed series of alternative rewards for Mordecai (including ten thousand silver talents, having Haman's ten sons running before Mordecai, international fame, etc.) rather than letting him go through with the original plan. Ahasuerus accepts each of Haman's new suggestions—in an expanded form—in addition to the original proposal. The idea that Haman is being commanded to give Mordecai all the alternatives that he has proposed *plus* the original royal honors is the point of the reading "this and this give to him" found (with assorted variants) in several texts of our pericope. Maharsha too incorporates this interpretation into the Esther-Midrash, as implied in the words "*of all that thou hast spoken.*" It is possible that the author of the Targum's version was trying to avoid the impression that being led through the town is considered less of an honor than a governorship. [The Second Targum also goes to great lengths to exaggerate the magnificence of the king's horse and robes.]

<sup>99</sup> Cf. Maharsha: "This passage is superfluous since it is already written above (6:10) '*Make haste and take etc.*'"

<sup>100</sup> MS N adds: "to the house of study."

MS Y (with variants from most witnesses)	HgT
<p>him as the rabbis<sup>101</sup> were sitting before him<sup>102</sup> and were occupied in the precept of the 'omer,<sup>103</sup></p>	<p>those schoolchildren who were coming out of the house of study.</p> <p>He said to them: What is your verse?<sup>104</sup> One of them said: "<i>Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought</i>" (Isaiah 8:10), and one said: "<i>Israel shall be saved in the Lord</i>" (Isaiah 45:17).</p> <p>There was one child who was stammering in his speech.<sup>105</sup> Haman said to him: "<i>of the tree</i>" [<i>hamin ha'eş</i> (Genesis 3:11)], and he thought that he was saying "Haman, the tree" (<i>haman ha'eş</i>).</p>

<sup>101</sup> "the rabbis"—MS N (apparently): "they."

<sup>102</sup> "him"—EY: "Mordecai."

<sup>103</sup> "and were occupied... 'omer"—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>104</sup> On the "What is your verse?" motif see *Abba gorion*, 32; *Esther rabbah*, 7:13.

<sup>105</sup> With respect to the incident of the stammering child, I know of no source form which this passage would have been copied, though it is based on *TB Hullin* 139b. Cf. the sources cited by Menahem Kasher, *Torah shelemah* (Jerusalem: Torah Shelemah Institute, 1927-81), 2:263-4, nn. 63-4.

He said: Woe to “that man”! He went and found that the rabbis were sitting before him

and he was showing the rules of taking the handful (*qemiṣah*) to them.<sup>106</sup>

<p>Most witnesses</p>	<p>MS W* (with variants from <b>Printings</b>)</p>
	<p>When Mordecai saw that he was coming out towards him and a horse was held in his hand he became frightened.<sup>107</sup></p> <p>He said to the rabbis: Thus does it appear to me, that<sup>108</sup> this wicked man is coming in order to kill me. Instead, get up and flee<sup>109</sup> lest you be burned by my coal.<sup>110</sup></p>

<sup>106</sup> “them”—**Printings**: “the rabbis.”

<sup>107</sup> See Alkabetz who correctly notes that Mordecai is at this juncture still unaware of Haman’s mission and therefore has good reason to dread seeing his mortal enemy approaching with a horse. Similarly Josephus [*Antiquities*, 11:11 (257; ed. Marcus, 6:236-7)] writes that Mordecai, “not knowing the true state of things and thinking that he was being mocked, said ‘O basest of all men, is this the way you make sport of our misfortunes?’” See also Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 96/107.

<sup>108</sup> “Thus does it appear to me, that”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>109</sup> “Instead...flee”—**Printings**: “Go away from before him.”

<sup>110</sup> In other sources which speak figuratively of being burned by someone’s coal the understanding is that the person is himself dangerous, not that he is the object or victim of a threat, as is the case here. The best-known instance of this usage is Mishnah *Avot* 2:9, where R. Eliezer speaks of warming one’s self in the fire of the sages, but not being burned by their coals. See also *Avot derabbi natan A*, 15 [*Aboth de Rabi Nathan* [ed. Solomon Schechter, newly corrected ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1967), 62; Judah Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, Yale Judaica Series, ed. J.





He said to them: In what are you occupied?

They said to him:<sup>116</sup> When the Temple existed<sup>117</sup>

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(Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 487]. For other instances where the robe is donned in prayer see *Avot derabbi natan* A, 6 (ed. Schechter, 32; transl. Goldin, 45); *TB Rosh hash-shanah* 17b; *Ta'anit* 20a; *Pesiqta rabbati*, 22:5 (Friedmann, 111b; Braude, 1:458-9); *Seder eliahu zuṭa*, 6 [Friedmann, M., ed., *Seder eliahu rabba und seder eliahu zuta (Tanna d'be eliahu)* (Vienna: Achiasaf, 1902), 183]; *Midrash on Samuel*, 13 [S. Buber, ed., *Midrasch Samuel* (Cracow: Josef Fischer, 1893), 83]. For a more general discussion of the question see S. Krauss, *Qadmoniyot ha-talmud* (Berlin, Vienna, Tel-Aviv: 1924-45), 2:2:174.

113 "stood"—**Printings**: "sat."

114 "them"—**Printings**: "the rabbis."

115 This episode is found in *Leviticus rabbah*, 28:6; *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 8:3; *Abbagorion*, 40; *Esther rabbah*, 10:4 (in different formulation).

116 MS P, EY add: "that"; MS Mf, **Printings** add: "At the time."

117 "existed"—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: "was standing."

MS Y	MS G (with variants from all other witnesses)
we used to give offerings in this manner.	the All-merciful <sup>118</sup> said: <sup>119</sup> Whoever volunteers <sup>120</sup> a meal-offering, let him bring a handful of <sup>121</sup> flour <sup>122</sup> <sup>123</sup> and burn it <sup>124</sup> upon the altar. <sup>125</sup> <sup>126</sup> <sup>127</sup>

<sup>118</sup> "All-merciful"—MS **Mf**: "Holy One."

<sup>119</sup> MSS **B\***, **P** add: "to Israel."

<sup>120</sup> "volunteers"—HgT<sup>1</sup>: "offers."

<sup>121</sup> MS **R**, **Printings** add: "fine."

<sup>122</sup> "flour"—**Spanish family**: "it"; MS **Mf**: "flour from it."

<sup>123</sup> "of flour"—~ in MS **P**.

<sup>124</sup> "and burn it"—MS **R**: "which is sacrificed."

<sup>125</sup> "upon the altar"—~ in MS **W**.

<sup>126</sup> MS **O** adds: "וּלְיִבְסָר (?)" ; MSS **N** (apparently), **B**, **R**, **Mf**, **Spanish family**, **Printings** add: "and he shall be atoned."

<sup>127</sup> MS **B** adds: "He said to him: Of wheat or of barley?"

He said to them:<sup>128</sup> <sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> Let your handful of barley<sup>131</sup> flour<sup>132</sup> come<sup>133</sup> and let it overcome<sup>134</sup> ten thousand talents<sup>135</sup> of that man's<sup>136</sup> silver.

The preceding dialogue, which adds yet further to the humiliation of Haman, is based on a contrast between the religious merit contained in the ostensibly humble meal-offering and the ultimate impotence of the great wealth that Haman invested in his malevolent scheme. Whereas the ten thousand silver talents were mentioned in 3:9 above, there is no obvious contextual basis for the midrashic association with the meal-offering.<sup>137</sup> The unique reading of MS Columbia (Y) reflects

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<sup>128</sup> “to them”—MSS M, Mf: “Woe to the fortunes of that man!”

<sup>129</sup> “He said to them”— ~ in HgT.

<sup>130</sup> MS O adds: “a handful” (?). MS L adds: “And.”

<sup>131</sup> “barley”—thus only in MSS Y (in a syntactically impossible construction), B\*; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>132</sup> “of...flour”— ~ in MS W.

<sup>133</sup> “Let...come”—MSS N, B, **Printings**: “Your handful of flour has come”; MS M: “For your handful of barley comes.”

<sup>134</sup> “let it overcome”—MSS N, B: “has overcome”; **Printings**: “overcomes.”

<sup>135</sup> “talents”— ~ in MS O.

<sup>136</sup> On the euphemistic use of *hahu' gavra* see E. Z. Melammed, “Euphemism and Scribal Circumlocutions in Talmudic Literature,” in: *Benjamin De Vries Memorial Volume*, ed. E. Z. Melammed (Jerusalem: Tel Aviv University, 1968), 131-5 [= *Idem, Essays in Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 275-9].

<sup>137</sup> On the question of the scriptural foundations of this midrashic interpretation see the thorough critical discussion in Maharsha's commentary. He rejects Rashi's imposition of the 'omer context onto TB in spite of his acknowledgment that it is found in other rabbinic works. It should be noted that one of Maharsha's principal arguments against Rashi is based on the Talmud's mention of “fine [wheat] meal” (*solet*), which he argues could not apply to the 'omer, which is taken from barley [but cf. *BDB*, 701]. The word *solet* is at any rate found only in MS R and the **Printings**. A more serious objection arises from the characterization of the offering as a *freewill* offering (*nedavah*), which definitely does not describe the 'omer. Maharsha therefore concludes that the Esther-Midrash chose to speak of the freewill meal offering because it is the poorest and cheapest variety of sacrifice, and consequently furnishes an effective contrast to Haman's ten thousand talents. In the end, Maharsha acknowledges that according to his interpretation “I can find no allusion to the story in the text of the Bible. They must

the opinion of Rashi that the midrash is alluding to the fact that the events of Chapter 6, according to rabbinic chronology, took place on the sixteenth of Nisan when the 'omer would have been offered up.<sup>138</sup>

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have possessed a tradition to that effect." The only acceptable explanation, in my view, is that the current Babylonian version evolved out of an earlier one that had centered around the 'omer rituals. Cf. the *Ḥesheq shelomoh* commentary to the Talmud.

That the *minḥah* was regarded as a poor man's offering is emphasized in many rabbinic sources, which usually point out that, when offered sincerely, it is as acceptable before God as more extravagant and expensive sacrifices. See, e.g., *Mishnah Menahot* 13:11; *TB Menahot* 104b; Jacob Milgrom [*Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible, W.F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, eds. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 195-2] assembles an astounding wealth of evidence, including rabbinic citations, in support of this view. Cf. *Leviticus rabbah*, 3:13 (59 and notes); 3:3 (63 and notes) and parallels; *contra* Joseph Heinemann, "The Art of Composition in *Leviticus Rabba*," *Hasifrut* 2 (1969-71), 813-4. Margulies proposes a forced explanation of the *Leviticus rabbah* passage in order to maintain that the freewill offering is not perceived as an atonement. Note that the phraseology in our passage is based on *Leviticus* 2:2: "...and he shall take thereout his handful of the flour thereof...and the priest shall burn...upon the altar."

On the whole, the connection drawn here between the freewill offering and the achievement of atonement finds little biblical support and seems awkward. The meaning of the passage is probably that the freewill meal offering is being used to represent the sacrificial cult as a whole, a religious structure which was designed in large measure to produce atonement. See however *Leviticus* 1:4 in which the freewill 'olah is designated an atonement offering [My thanks to Prof. Avigdor Hurowitz for this reference.]

<sup>138</sup> In the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 173-4) the idea is expressed more simply: "Your sackcloth and ashes have overcome the ten thousand silver talents etc.": In *Panim aherim* B, 76: "Your shekels have overcome my ten thousand talents." The redactors of this section of *Esther rabbah* (10:4) were aware of the existence of two distinct traditions concerning this matter, one of which (apparently Palestinian) spoke of the 'omer, and a Babylonian one (*tamman*) which spoke of *qemiṣah*. It is spelled out there that "they were sitting occupied in the study of the laws relating to the precept of the 'omer since it was the sixteenth of Nisan and on that day they used to offer up the 'omer at the time when the Temple was standing... *There they say*: He showed them the laws of *qemiṣah*." The first of the two traditions is that of *Leviticus rabbah*, 26:6 (662-7); *Pesiḳta derav kahana*, 8:3 [Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 143-5; W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein, transl., *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 167]; *Pesiḳta rabbati*, 18:6 [ed. M. Friedmann (Vienna: 1880), 93a; transl. W. G. Braude, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven and

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There is however no convincing evidence in the talmudic text for such an interpretation. Nonetheless, this episode serves as an effective vehicle for tying together several familiar midrashic themes, including the connection between Esther and the fate of the Temple; the ubiquity of rabbinic Torah-study; the portrayal of Mordecai as a rabbinic scholar; and the homiletical idea that even the most trivial-looking offering is capable of overcoming the most forbidding of human threats.

As we have observed, the contrast which forms the foundation of our midrash appears to be between a deceptively worthless quantity of grain and an immense sum of money; with God's help, the grain is capable of overcoming the power of wealth.<sup>139</sup> From a literary perspective, it is particularly effective to portray the depressed and defeated

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London: Yale University Press, 1968), 1:389-91], of which a similar version is found in *Abba gorton*, 40. In all of these traditions it is obvious that Mordecai and his colleagues or disciples are learning about the 'omer, by virtue of its relevance to the date.

<sup>139</sup> Accepting Rashi's premise that our passage refers to the 'omer, not to a freewill offering, the *Tosafot* try to discern a numerical relationship between the 'omer and the ten thousand talents. See our discussion on 13b above (in connection with Esther 3:9); 'Anaf yosef. In the Palestinian versions of the story the contrast is spelled out with greater clarity when Haman first asks the pupils whether this 'omer is made of gold or silver, or even of wheat, and is finally told that it is of mere barley, the lowliest of grain products (used normally as animal fodder). Haman also asks about its monetary value and is surprised to learn that it is hardly worth ten pennies, let alone ten thousand silver talents! His admission there is "Your ten pennies have overpowered my ten thousand silver sestertiae." See also Mark 12:41-4; Luke 21:1-4; Saul Liebermann, ed., *Midrash Debarim Rabbah*, third ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1974), 126, n. 2; his additional notes to Margulies' edition of *Leviticus rabbah*, 879; A. Segre, "Maneh-Obolos," *JQR* 34 (1943-4), 481-2; Daniel Sperber, "Mark xii 42 and Its Metrological Background: A Study in Ancient Syriac Versions," *NT* 9 (1967), 178-90; *Idem.*, "The Value of 'Maneh'," *Talpiot* 9:3-4 (1970), 591-612; *Idem.*, *Roman Palestine, 200-400: Money and Prices*, Bar-Ilan Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Culture (Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 1975), 35-7, 195. On the *centenarius* see Sperber, *Money and Prices*, 166; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash and Targum (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), 491.

Haman as the one who himself formulates this lesson about the power of pious religious observance over mortal arrogance.<sup>140</sup>

[16a] They<sup>141</sup> said<sup>142</sup> to him:<sup>143</sup> A slave who purchases property<sup>144</sup>—Whose is the slave and whose is the property?

MS Y (with variants from MS N)	All other witnesses
Like Rav Ḥisda;, for Rav Ḥisda says: This one comes with a <sup>145</sup> <i>prosbolé</i> and this one comes with a <sup>146</sup> <i>presbuté</i>	

Mordecai's retort appears to be directed against the importance which Haman attached to his material wealth in expecting that ten thousand talents could counteract the divine will. To this Mordecai replies: Your money is not your own because, as a mortal human, you are a slave of the Almighty. Hence all the possessions in which you vainly glory really belong to your master, God.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>140</sup> In the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 174) it is not the *'omer* or *minḥah*, but the sackcloth and ashes of the fast which are credited with overcoming the power of Haman's wealth (cf. *Pesiqta rabbati*, 18:3). So too in Kasher and Klein, "New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah," 97/107.

<sup>141</sup> "They"—thus only in MSS Y and O; in all other witnesses: "He."

<sup>142</sup> "said"—MS O: "say."

<sup>143</sup> HgT<sup>2</sup> adds: "Wicked one!"

<sup>144</sup> "A slave...property" (in Hebrew)—thus only in MS Y and **Printings**; in all other witnesses: in Aramaic.

<sup>145</sup> "a"—MS N: "his."

<sup>146</sup> "a"—MS N: "his."

<sup>147</sup> I am aware that my interpretation of this passage contradicts those of the traditional commentators, all of whom understand the dictum in light of the Talmud's use of it on 15a-b above, in connection with the tradition about Haman's selling himself to Mordecai "for a loaf of bread." As we noted in our discussion of that pericope, the citation there was evidently not part of the original talmudic text, but a marginal addition by a medieval copyist which is missing from several textual witnesses. [The citation

### Haman Attends Mordecai

In keeping with the spirit of the previous pericopes, the roots of this delightful expansion of the biblical story lie in the *darshan's* desire to elaborate on the magnitude of Haman's frustration and disgrace as he was forced to heap honors upon his greatest enemy. Thus, in addition to the acts of dressing Mordecai and leading him on the king's horse through the streets of Shushan, as described in Scripture, the midrash assures us that Haman was also compelled to perform an assortment of more demeaning services, like bathing Mordecai and cutting his hair.

The exegetical basis of the pericope is not very clear,<sup>148</sup> but it becomes more evident when we compare the Babylonian version with the many Palestinian versions of the tradition.<sup>149</sup> The starting points of

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here of Rav H̄isda's dictum is likewise found only in two manuscripts.] Taken on its own merits and in its current context, my explanation seems to be the only possible one. Cf. Buber's note (29) to **AgE**, 63: "And I have not the faintest idea how Rav H̄isda's dictum connects to this pericope." M. Simon, *The Tractate Megillah*, The Soncino Talmud, I. Epstein, ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1948) understands Mordecai to be saying that the money was in reality the property of Ahasuerus.

The legal principle is adduced in two other places in the Babylonian Talmud, both of them aggadic in character. In the first it is cited by Geviha ben Pesisa in his disputation before Alexander the Great, in order to refute the Canaanite claim to the land of Israel [*Sanhedrin* 91a; cf. *Genesis rabbah*, 61:6 (666-7)]. On the passage and its historical background see Johanan Hans Levy, "Merivah 'al qarqa'ah shel erez-yisra'el ba'et ha-'atiqah," in: *Studies in Jewish Hellenism*, ed. J. Amir, 60-78, 2nd edition (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1969). In the second instance, the principle is used to demonstrate that when Israel were sold into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, who was also God's slave (according to Jeremiah 43:10) they thereby remained under God's control. See also *Genesis rabbah*, 67:5 (759, and see Theodor's notes) where the wording is: *'avda umah dilleh lemareh*.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. the cryptic passage in *Panim aherim* B, 76: "Says R. Levi: Are these things possible? [?] Every sage who expounds in an improper manner is considered like a prophet who prophesies falsely etc."

<sup>149</sup> Parallel accounts of this episode are contained in the following works: *Leviticus rabbah*, 26:6 (664-6); *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 8:3 (ed. Mandelbaum, 144-5; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 162-4) [See also: Nehemiah Allony and A. Diez-Machos, "Pesiqta derav kahana beniqqud erez-yisra'eli," *Leshonenu* 23 (1959), 70-1]; *Abba gorion*, 40; *Panim aherim* B, 76; *Esther rabbah*, 10:4; *Pesiqta rabbati*, 18 (ed. Friedmann, 93a-b); *Pirqei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 404-5); Second

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the midrashic expansion were the three honors which Ahasuerus or-

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Targum to 6:11 (Grossfeld, 174-5). On the redactional artistry that went into the fashioning of the component sources of *Leviticus rabbah* see J. Heinemann, "The Art of Composition in *Leviticus Rabbah*." To the best of my knowledge Heinemann does not deal with the use of recurring "refrains," which I shall be discussing below.

Although I plan to enumerate specific variants in connections with the respective segments in the pericope below, it is useful at this point to turn our attention to some more general phenomena which characterize the relationships between the various rabbinic documents. To put it briefly: The earlier the collection and the nearer it remains to the realities of oral homiletical delivery in the synagogue sermon (e.g., *Pesiqta derav kahana, Leviticus rabbah*), the greater is the attention that is paid to matters of literary form and structural symmetry. As we move along to later works that are concerned more with exegesis and expanding the narrative (e.g., the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, *Panim aherim B, Pirqei derabbi eli'ezer*, Second Targum), the formal structures tend to be discarded, even though the exegetical dimension might be enhanced.

In order to illustrate the above generalization we note for example that, whereas the threefold structure of the pericope is maintained in most of its versions, the redactors of *Leviticus rabbah* took special pains to emphasize this fact by adding an elaborate "refrain" which recurs at the beginning of each of the three segments, as Haman reminds Mordecai that "...Your ten-penny 'omer has overcome my ten thousand talents of silver," to which Mordecai retorts "Isn't that man foolish? Don't you see that..." Interestingly, *Pesiqta derav kahana* (which evidently served as the source for *Esther rabbah* and *Pesiqta rabbati*) introduces a different refrain: "He said to him: What, would you disgrace the throne? Does a person do...?" which it does not attach to the third segment, where it does not fit very naturally. [Thus also in *Abba gorion* where the second instance is also truncated.] Similarly, a repeated "What did he do?" is employed as a kind of refrain in *Pesiqta rabbati, Abba gorion* and *Esther rabbah*, but it is not applied to the third segment in any of these versions.

By contrast, we note that the redactors of the later collections have abandoned any interest in the upholding of consistent literary patterns. Their concern is exclusively with the contents and exegesis of Esther. In the case of the Esther-Midrash this involves the preservation of most of the subject-matter found in the Palestinian traditions, but in an unstructured narrative that ultimately serves to obscure the hermeneutical rationale behind the expansions of the biblical story. *Panim aherim B* alters the order of the bathing and haircutting episodes, and seriously truncates the latter. *Pirqei derabbi eli'ezer* omits the haircut scene altogether, whereas the Second Targum, which seems to have been familiar with the narrative contents of the earlier sources, enumerates several additional services that were rendered by Haman to Mordecai (anointing, bathing, dressing, adorning and feeding), all of which serve as preconditions for the ride on the royal steed, but without any separate mention of the donning of the crown (including the requisite haircut) or the mounting of the horse.

dered Haman to confer upon Mordecai: (1) dressing him in royal apparel; (2) setting upon his head the king's crown; and (3) leading him on horseback through the streets of the capital. For each of these honors, the homilist devised an appropriately demeaning preparatory act which Haman had to perform for Mordecai. These were, respectively: (1) bathing him; (2) cutting his hair; and (3) mounting him onto the steed. The midrashic imagination framed each unit in such a manner as to enhance the circumstances of Haman's humiliation and discomfort.

[16a] He said to him:<sup>150</sup> Arise and don these garments and ride on this horse, because the king wants to honor<sup>151</sup> you.

He said to him: I am not able<sup>152</sup> until I go<sup>153</sup> and cut my hair and bathe, because it is not proper to show disrespect for<sup>154</sup> the garments of the kingdom<sup>155</sup> in this way.<sup>156 157</sup>

Although the textual evidence is rather confused, we can see nevertheless that in none of the traditions of the Esther-Midrash is it stated explicitly that the bathing was required as a precondition for the wearing of royal apparel<sup>158</sup> and the haircut for donning the crown. The exegetical rationale for the pericope has thereby been lost.

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<sup>150</sup> "He said to him"—~ in EY.

<sup>151</sup> "to honor"—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>152</sup> "I am not able"—MS B: "I will not do it"; MSS R, EY: "not"; HgT: "I will not go"; ~ in MSS O, L, M.

<sup>153</sup> "go"—MS G: "go to the bath-house"; MSS B, P, W, Mf, Ashkenazic family, Printings: "enter the bath-house":

<sup>154</sup> "show disrespect for"—thus only in MS Y; MS N: "to wear"; MS L: "to make use of to show disrespect for (!)"; in all other witnesses: "to make use of."

<sup>155</sup> "kingdom"—Printings: "king."

<sup>156</sup> "in this way"—~ in MS N, HgT<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>157</sup> MS N adds: "Rather."

<sup>158</sup> *Leviticus rabbah* and *Pirqei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 404; Higger, 244; the expression is not found in the printed editions) specify that the garment was of royal purple. On royal purple in rabbinic literature see I. Ziegler, *Die Königsgleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserheit* (Breslau: Schlesische Verlags, 1903), 1-2; Samuel Krauss, *Paras veromi batalmud uvamidrashim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1948).

[16a] In the meantime,<sup>159</sup> Esther concealed<sup>160</sup> all the baths and all the barbers.

As the story is related here, the Talmud gives the impression that Esther was aware of what was happening to Mordecai and Haman,<sup>161</sup> and that she removed the bath attendants<sup>162</sup> and barbers<sup>163</sup> with the explicit intention of forcing Haman to fulfill those lowly occupations.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> “In the meantime”—MS N: “until I enter the bath-house and have {}.” ~ in MSS **G, M, R, Mf, Printings**.

<sup>160</sup> “concealed”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “closed.”

<sup>161</sup> This makes some sense, since the point of rewarding Mordecai was to give *public* recognition to a royal benefactor. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that the population would have been notified of the procession.

<sup>162</sup> The Esther-Midrash does not provide a reason at this point as to why Mordecai should have been in particular need of a bath or haircut, and we might have understood that he was maliciously contriving excuses in order to play cruelly with Haman. In *Leviticus rabbah*, *Panim aherim* B and *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer* Mordecai reminds Haman that he has been fasting with sackcloth and ashes for three days.

<sup>163</sup> Maharsha notes correctly that the talmudic passage is inconsistent in the Aramaic terms it employs in order to designate the barbers and the bath-house attendants. See also *'Es yosef*.

<sup>164</sup> This detail is absent from most of the Palestinian versions of the story, which state simply that a bath attendant could not be found, but do not suggest that this situation had been brought about through any stratagem or intention. In *Leviticus rabbah* Esther is said to have issued the order that all the bath-houses be closed (but not that the attendants be hidden away) as a mark of sorrow because she expected Mordecai to be hanged on that day. Esther's involvement in the matter is not mentioned in Friedlander's edition of *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, but it is found in Higger's edition (244) and in the printed editions, although her motives are not spelled out. The midrash adds that Esther issued the command saying that “if Haman should order the bath-house operators to heat them up, then they should not comply.” In that version Haman's main responsibility is to stoke baths, not to bathe Mordecai.

It is likely that the earliest versions of the tradition did not credit Esther with Haman's inability to find bath attendants or barbers, but that that situation was tacitly attributed to fortuitous circumstances or divine guidance. At a later stage a more concrete reason was sought, and the notion that Esther had exploited her rank in order to engineer the desired situation provided a convenient and satisfying solution. *'Es yosef* raises the interesting question of why Haman could not have delegated these jobs to his own servants.

[16a] He himself brought him in to his<sup>165</sup> bath-house and

MS Y (with variants from AgE)	MS G (with variants from remaining witnesses)
loosened his apron. <sup>166</sup> 167	and he bathed him. <sup>168</sup>

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*Esther rabbah*, 10:7; *Abba gorion*, 41; *Panim aḥerim* B, 76; and the Second Targum to the verse (Grossfeld, 176) emphasize that on that day Haman had to perform four different menial jobs. Cf. Grossfeld, *ibid.*, n. 39; Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 97/108; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:477, n. 174. Note also the unique addition found in the Palestinian midrash to Esther published by Z. M. Rabinovitz, *Ginzé midrash*, 157:

R. Levi in the name of R. Ḥama bar Ḥaninah: And is it conceivable that one who had been a *magister palatii* [see below] should now be turned into a bath-house attendant and a barber?! —Rather, it was because he had turned himself into an object of idolatry. For this reason is it written “*Thou shalt utterly detest if, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a cursed thing*” (Deuteronomy 7:26).

<sup>165</sup> “his”—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>166</sup> AgE adds: “and he bathed him.”

It is very likely that a haplography occurred here between the visually similar forms אסר and אסחיה. It is possible that the unique reading of MS Y should be emended according to AgE.

The reading *asar zuziteh* is a curious one. Most of the Palestinian versions of the story contain some variant of the words “*asar ḥarṣeh*”; “*asar vasteh*” “*asar zoniteh/ zonital/ zonasteh*.” “*Ḥarṣeh*” is a common Aramaic term for loins (see the standard dictionaries. The wording of Daniel 5:6, “*so the joints of his loins (ḥarṣeh) were loosed, and his knees smote one against another*” is employed in the Targumic accounts; see Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 96/106) and is most probably a scribal gloss for the more unusual Greek word which underlies it: *zunita* or *zenosta* represent ζώνη, “belt or girdle”; see Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon; Kohut, 3:307; Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Hildesheim: Georg Olm, 1967), 1:173, 614; *Idem.*, *Qadmoniyot ha-talmud* 2:2:219-20, n. 44; *Idem.*, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin, 1899), 2:244; Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic*, 174; *Leviticus rabbah*, 13:1 (274-5 and note) and parallels; Buber’s discussion in his notes to *Pesiḳta derav kahana* (72a, n. 67) and AgE (64, n. 34). The tying of a girdle is an important image in the Palestinian tradition, evidently as a recognized symbol of a menial laborer. While it might conceivably be argued that the expression is authentic to *TB* but was deleted by copyists who could not understand it, at least as strong a case can be made for the view that AgE is citing it not from *TB*, but from one of the other

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MS Y (with variants from all other witnesses)	MS L (with variants from MS M)
He sent <sup>169</sup> <sup>170</sup> to fetch a pair of scissors <sup>171</sup> from his house and he gave him a haircut. <sup>172</sup>	He said to him: Cut my hair. And <sup>173</sup> he said to him: I do not have my scissors. And <sup>174</sup> Elijah came and threw to him a pair of scissors.

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midrashic versions, as is its custom, and as is found in several other places in the current pericope, such that it was through the channel of AgE that the expression entered the Talmud text of MS Y. On this phenomenon see Eliezer Segal, "The Textual Traditions of Ms. Columbia University to TB Megillah," *Tarbiz* 54 (2:1985), 45-6.

The narrative detail is missing from Margulies' text of *Leviticus rabbah*, though it is attested in several of the manuscripts there (see the critical apparatus). That tradition emphasizes the fact that Haman had to stoke up the bath-house furnace. See Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:228; 682, nn. 177-9. *Panim aherim* B relates that Haman had to wash out the bath-house. Interestingly, that is the only version which employs the term *parakhutes*, "bathing-master" (παραχύτης); see *Lehnwörter*, 2:489; Sokoloff, 447; etc.; and other dictionaries. [The original reading there might be "privata;" see: *Talmudische Archeology*, 1:224; *Lehnwörter*, 2:488-9; 678, n. 135; Julius Fürst, *Glossarium Graeco-Hebraeum...* (Strasbourg: Trübner, 1890), 185; J. N. Epstein, ed., *The Gaonic Commentary on the Order Toharot Attributed to Rav Hay Gaon* (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Dvir and Magnes Press, 1982), 150.

<sup>167</sup> MS N adds: "and he dressed him. He said to him: [reading doubtful] I wish to lighten my h{ }."

<sup>168</sup> "and he bathed him"— ~ in MS M.

<sup>169</sup> "He sent"—thus only in MS Y, AgE; in all other witnesses: "he went."

<sup>170</sup> MS Y adds: "he went" which I have deleted according to AgE; MS Y's text is apparently a conflation, which I am unable to justify.

<sup>171</sup> The Aramaic form *zava* which appears in MS Y seems to be a uniquely Eastern (Babylonian) form; see Jastrow, 384; cf. Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 173. The form is also attested in Mandaic [E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 157] and Arabic [Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1893), 3:1266; see also Siegmund Fraenkel, *Die aramaische Fremdwörter im Aramischen* (Hildesheim: Georg Olm, 1962), 106-7].

<sup>172</sup> On the Aramaic expression שקיל מויה see Daniel Boyarin, "Towards the Talmudic Lexicon," *Te'udah* 3, *Studies in Talmudic Literature*, in *Post-Biblical*

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The point of this episode is that the exalted Haman was forced to accompany Mordecai to the bath-house, to cut his hair<sup>175</sup> and to bathe him like a common bath attendant.<sup>176</sup>

[16a] As he was cutting<sup>177</sup> <sup>178</sup> he sighed and moaned.

He said to him: Why are you sighing?

He said to him: A man<sup>179</sup> who was<sup>180</sup> more important to the king than all his<sup>181</sup> nobles<sup>182</sup> has been<sup>183</sup> made into a bath-attendant and a barber.<sup>184</sup>

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Hebrew, and in Biblical Exegesis, ed. M. A. Friedman *et al.* (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Publishing Projects, 1983), 119.

173 “And”— ~ in MS M.

174 “And”— ~ in MS M.

175 ‘*Anaf yosef*, Chajes and others raise the halakhic problem of how Mordecai could have allowed himself a haircut on the second day of Passover.

176 On baths and bath attendants in the classical and Hellenistic eras see: Georg Wissowa, ed., *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen alterumswissenschaft*, neue Bearbeitung (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1896), 2:4:2743-58; Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:208-28; John Edwin Dandys, *A Companion to Latin Studies*, third edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943); Epstein, *The Gaonic Commentary*, 17. In rabbinic sources bath-attendants were classified among the professions whose morals came under suspicion because their work brought them into regular contact with women. See *TB Qiddushin* 82a; Meir Ayali, *Po‘alim ve’om-nanim: melakhtam uma’amadam*, *Yad ha-talmud*, ed. E. E. Urbach *et al.* (Givatayim: Massadah, 1987), 95, 129-30.

177 “As he was cutting”—**Spanish family**: “After he had cut.”

178 MS L adds: “his hair.”

179 A man”—**YS**: “Woe to that man.”

180 “was”—**Spanish family**, MSS M, Mf, AgE: “is.”

181 “his”—MS M: “the king’s.”

182 All witnesses except MS Y and AgE add: “now.”

183 “has been”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “will be.”

184 For information on barbers and their social standing in antiquity see: William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: Taylor and Walter, 1842), 128-9; Frank W. Nicolson, “Greek and Roman Barbers,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 2 (1891), 41-56 [My thanks to Pinhas (Paul) Mandel for the reference]; Pauly-Wissowa, 2:5:3-4; Dandys, *op. cit.*, 197. On the whole, practitioners of the tonsorial arts were relatively affluent, and were not looked upon with particular

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disrespect in the Roman world, though they did acquire a reputation as gossips. It is possible that the *Leviticus rabbah* version was intentionally seeking to depict the profession in a more demeaning light when it added that Haman's father had taken part in the unpleasant and degrading business of removing body hair (סמורכות), presumably from women. E. E. Hallevy ('*Erkhei ha-aggadah veba-halakhah*, 2:159-60) cites several classical authors who express more negative views about the standing of barbers. See e.g. J. E. King, transl., *Tusculan Disputations*, Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page *et al.*, eds. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1966), 484-5, which tells about how Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse "...went so far as to have his daughters taught the use of a razor...; accordingly the young princess, reduced to the mean employment of drudges [*artificium sordidum atque anullare*], shaved their father's hair and beard like mere barberettes..." Similarly, Diodorus [C. Bradford Welles, transl., *Diodorus of Sicily*, Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page, ed., (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1968), 8:388-9] relates that Alexander the Great was informed that "the king [Angrammes] of Gandaridae [in India] was an utterly common and undistinguished character, and was supposed to be the son of a barber." The implications of this fact are spelled out more clearly by Quintus Curtius, 9:2:6 [John C. Rolff, transl., Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page, ed., (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1946), 2:366-7]: "...the ruler was not only of humble, but of the lowest condition; in fact his father, a barber whose daily profit barely kept him from starving, because he was not bad looking had been beloved by the queen." For Dio Chrysostom, 64:19 [H. Lamar Crosby, transl., Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page, ed., (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1964), 5:62-3] this story has become proverbial: "Who would ever have expected that a barber would become ruler of the Indians...!"

Mishnah *Qiddushin* 4:14 counts barbers among those individuals whose professions are likened to banditry. See the *baraita* cited in *TB Qiddushin* 82a. As noted by Lieberman, *Tosefta kifshutah*, *Nashim*, 981-2, barbers are not enumerated in the list of professionals who are suspected of excessive familiarity with women. In accurate texts of the Talmud text they are mentioned in a separate *baraita* which deals only with disqualification for the offices of king and High Priest. [The word "*tana*" introducing the second *baraita* was mistakenly omitted in the printed editions of the Talmud]. See *Tosefta Qiddushin* 5:14 (ed. Lieberman, 297); Ayali, *op. cit.*, 99, 109, 199, 134 (204).

He said to him: Wicked one!<sup>185</sup> Were<sup>186</sup> you not the barber of<sup>187</sup> Kefar Qurianos!<sup>188 189</sup>

It teaches {in a *baraita*}:<sup>190</sup> Haman was the barber of<sup>191</sup> Kefar Qurianos<sup>192</sup> for twenty-two<sup>193</sup> years.

<sup>185</sup> “Wicked one!”— ~ in MS **Mf, EY**.

<sup>186</sup> “Were”—MSS **B, O, P, M, R, W, HgT, Printings, AgE**: “And were.”

<sup>187</sup> “of”—MS **R, YS**: “in.”

<sup>188</sup> “Qurianos”—**Printings**: “Qarṣum.”

<sup>189</sup> **YS** adds: “and these are your barber’s implements.”

<sup>190</sup> See E. Z. Melamed, *Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud*, 519.

<sup>191</sup> “the barber of”—MS **Mf**: “a barber in.”

<sup>192</sup> Talmudic sources identify Kefar Qurianos as a village that lies in close proximity to Bet-Shean which for halakhic purposes (i.e., exemption from tithing and sabbatical year obligations) is considered to be part of the larger center [*TP Demai* 2:1 (22c)]. As has been confirmed by the Rehov inscription [see Yaacov Sussman, “A Halakhic Inscription from the Beth-Shean Valley,” *Tarbiz* 43 (1-4: 1981), 115-7, especially n. 164], the village must have been situated to the north of Bet-Shean. Jewish legend has designated a site of the same name as the home of Job. Eusebius, who adduces this tradition in his *Onomastikon* [Erich Klostermann, ed., *Eusebius, Das Onomastikon der biblischen Ortsnamen* (Hildesheim: Georg Olm, 1966), 112-3; E. Z. Melamed, *The Onomastikon of Eusebius* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1946) [= *Tarbiz* 19], 21] speaks of a “Karnaim” (identified with the Ashtaroth Carnaim of Genesis 14:15) which was held by tradition to contain the house of Job. In *Leviticus rabbah*, 17:4 (379) R. Abba bar Kahana speaks of Job’s children fleeing from Kefar Qurianos past Abela to Migdal seva’aya. Although some scholars have tried to locate these places to the east of the Jordan, it is virtually certain that the Kefar Qurianos of the midrash is also to be sought in the vicinity of Bet-Shean. See Neubauer, *Géographie*, 258-60, 276; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:385-6, n. 21. S. Klein, *Sefer ha-yishuv*, 96-7, has separate entries for Job’s birthplace and the village near Bet-Shean. He notes that the medieval “Traveler of Bordeaux” places Job’s house in Kefar Asher which is close to Bet-Shean, a phenomenon which Klein ascribes to a confusion between two homonymous sites. Ultimately, however, it is Eusebius who emerges as the odd man out. Furthermore, as noted, the location that he is discussing is Karnaim, not Kefar Qurianos which is the village mentioned in virtually all the relevant talmudic texts. In addition to the texts cited already see *Ruth rabbah*, 2:10 [Myron Bialik Lerner, “The Book of Ruth in Aggadic Literature and Midrash Ruth Rabba,” Ph.D., The Hebrew University, 1971, 2:62-3; and note on 3:19]; Wertheimer, *Batei midrashot*, 2:169 (#5); *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 7:10 (ed. Mandelbaum, 130; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 149 and n. 37). The textual evidence is meticulously sifted by Sussman. Additional litera-



As has been true of several other segments in the midrashic retelling of this episode,<sup>194</sup> the rabbis here have considerably diminished the fearsome elements of Haman's character and transformed him

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ture on Kefar Qurianus includes: Heinrich Graetz, "Notizen zur Topographie Palästina's," *MGWJ* 29 (1880), 492-3; Bacher, *palästinensischen Amoräer*, 2:359, n. 4; S. Klein, *Beiträge zur Geographie und Geschichte Galileas* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1909), 81, n. 4; *Idem.*, "Zur Topographie des alten Palästina," *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Verein* 33 (1910), 35; *Idem.*, "Eretz ha-kutiyyim bizman ha-talmud," *Jerusalem* (ed. Luncz), 10 (1913), 157-8, n. z; *Idem.*, "Ma'amarim qetzarim lehaqirat ha-topographiah ha-eretz-yisre'elit," in his: *Ma'amarim shonim lehaqirat eretz-yisra'el, Mehqarim eretz-yisre'eliyyim*, ed. S. Klein (Vienna: Menorah, 1924), 42; Israel R. Horowitz, *Palestine and Adjacent Countries* (Vienna: Aaron Teitelband, 1923), 1; Paul Romanoff, "Onomasticon of Palestine," *PAAJR* 7 (1935-6), 204-15 (Romanoff explicitly rejects the identification of Qurianos with Karnaim); A. Goldschmidt, "The Village of Karnaim in the Plain of Beisan," *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society*, 19 (1955), 237 [on the Job tradition]; Gottfried Reeg, *Die Ortsnamen Israels nach der rabbinischen Literatur*, 370-1.

Surprisingly, all of the above studies relate to the name as a Hebrew one. In my view it has a decidedly non-Hebrew ring to it, and it may derive from a Roman family (Curianus, Quirianus?) that colonized it.

<sup>193</sup> The number twenty-two has been recognized as one of several standard "round number" employed in rabbinic texts in order to indicate large quantities (perhaps by association with the total number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet). This fact was pointed out by Meshullam Fishel Ber, *Divrei meshullam*, which has in turn been cited by several more recent studies including: S. Abramson, "Missihatam shel benei eretz-yisra'el," *Sinai* 63 (1968), 20; Saul Lieberman, *Siphre Zutta (The Midrash of Lydda)*, *The Talmud of Caesarea II* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1968), 147, n. 25; Urbach, *The Sages*, 800, n. 43. On round numbers in rabbinic literature in general see: Y. Z. Stern, *Ma'amar tahlukhot ha-'aggadot* (Warsaw, 1902), 44; Juda Bergmann, "Die runden und hyperbolischen Zahlen in der Agada," *MGWJ* 82 (1938), 361-76; Reuven Margalio, *Mehqarim bedarkhei ha-talmud vehiddotav* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1967), 51-61; Gideon Leibson, "Determining Factors in Herem and Nidui (Ban and Excommunication) During the Tannaitic and Amoraic Periods," *Shenaton Ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri* 2(1975), 296-7, n. 19. On the frequency of lectional units of twenty-two verses see Marvin Luban, "The Triennial Cycle," Ph. D. dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1973, 60-2 [cited in Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei yisra'el: meqorot vetoledot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), 88-91, 156].

<sup>194</sup> Similar versions of the segment are found in *Leviticus rabbah*, *Pesiqta derav kavana*, *Abba gorion*, *Esther rabbah*, *Pesiqta rabbati* and Rabinovitz's *Ginzé midrash*, 156-7 (with slight variations). It is missing entirely from *Panim aherim B*, *Pirquei der-abbi eli'ezer* and the Second Targum.

instead into a pathetic and broken figure who openly admits his defeat to his arch-foe Mordecai. The last vestige of self-worth that has been left to him, the fact of his aristocratic lineage,<sup>195</sup> is now denied him as Mordecai divulges that he was once no more than a lowly barber in a rural village.

### Mordecai Mounts the Horse

[16a] After he had cut his hair, he dressed him.<sup>196</sup> He said to him: Arise<sup>197</sup> and ride.<sup>198</sup>

He said to him: I am not able because my strength<sup>199</sup> has been diminished from the<sup>200</sup> fast.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> See Esther 3:1. The Palestinian sources supply specific titles from the world of the Roman imperial administration. See A. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986), 1:104, 284, 602. There is some disagreement, as well as textual corruption, in the manuscript traditions, but the principal titles which appear in the midrashic texts appear to be: *Comes curator* [see Krauss, *Lehnwörter*, 2:545; Pauly-Wissowa, 7:641-2; Sokoloff, *op. cit.*, 482] and κόμησ πάντων [“officer in charge of everything”; see Sokoloff, 482]. See also *Lehnwörter*, 2:322 and Sokoloff, 290; W. Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer* (Strasbourg: 1892-99), 2:358-9, n. 4 (he prefers the reading *Comes Palatii*, which is attested as well in the fragment found in *Ginzé midrash*, 157).

In the Esther-Midrash the discussion is made to relate to the status of Haman himself. In the Palestinian sources, on the other hand, it is Haman’s father who is claimed by Haman as an aristocrat, and by Mordecai as a commoner. The inheriting of one’s father’s profession was generally looked upon as a desirable practice among the ancients; see Hallevy, *‘Erkhei ha-’aggadah ve’ha-midrash*, Vol. 4 (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1982), 160.

<sup>196</sup> **Printings** add: “in his garments.”

<sup>197</sup> “Arise”—MSS N, L, M, Mf: “stand up.”

<sup>198</sup> MS L adds: “this horse.”

<sup>199</sup> “strength”—MSS R, W: “heart.”

<sup>200</sup> **Pesaro printing** adds: “the days of” (!); **Venice printing** adds: “from the days of.”

<sup>201</sup> MS L adds: “Bend down for me.” MS R adds: “He came and.”

He bent down for him<sup>202</sup> and<sup>203</sup> he mounted<sup>204</sup> to ride.<sup>205</sup> 206 As he was mounting<sup>207</sup> he kicked him.<sup>208</sup>

The Esther-Midrash continues here with its depiction of how Haman led Mordecai on horseback through the streets of Shushan, adding narrative details whose purpose is to subject Haman to the most extreme degrees of humiliation.<sup>209</sup> As Mordecai makes ready to mount

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202 “for him”— ~ in **Printings**.

203 “and”— ~ in **MS G**.

204 “he mounted”— ~ in **MSS B, L, EY**.

205 “to ride”— ~ in **MS Mf, Printings**.

206 **MS P** and **EY** add: “And.”

207 **MS W** adds: “while he was riding.”

208 **MS R\*** adds: “[and he fell backwards].”

209 As we shall observe below, the midrash claims to be inspired by the intertextual association with Deuteronomy 33:29. Nonetheless there appear to be other factors at play here in shaping the narrative tradition. A possible clue to the origins of the story is discernible in its Palestinian parallels where the scene is described in greater detail. There Haman allows Mordecai to tread on his neck on his way to mounting the horse. The picture painted there bears an uncanny resemblance to the story related by Lactantius and other ancient Christian writers in describing the tragic fate of the Roman emperor Valerian who, after being taken prisoner by the Sassanian emperor Shapur I in 260, was reported to have had his neck used as a footstool whenever Shapur wished to mount his horse [A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Works of Lactantius*, Wm. Fletcher, transl., Ante-Nicene Christian Library, Vol. 22 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 2:167-8 (=Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died, Ch. 5)].

Most historians have treated the story about Valerian as a pious Christian fabrication. Thus, Theodor Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire, from Caesar to Diocletian*, transl. William P. Dickson (London: MacMillan, 1909), 2:101 and n. 1: “The better accounts simply know the fact that Valerian died in Persian captivity. That Sapor used him as a footstool in mounting his horse... is a Christian invention—a requital for the persecution of the Christians by Valerian”; Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1:272-3: “The Pagan writers lament, the Christians insult, the misfortune of Valerian”; Arthur Christensen, “Sasanid Persia,” in: *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), 137: “The statement of Christian sources... must be accepted with great reserve”; A. T. Olmstead, “The Mid-Third Century of the Christian Era. II,” *Classical Philology* 37 (1942), 412, n. 148 [which provides an ample listing of primary sources on Valerian’s imprisonment]; Saul Lieberman, “Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries,” *JQR* 37 (1946), 35 [= *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 158], n. 324 (He cites the talmudic story alongside an exhaustive review of the historical literature, concluding that the tradition about Shapur and Valerian is an unhistorical legend). See also G. Hermann, “The Art

the royal steed, he climbs over his foe and pauses on his way to kick him for good measure.

[16a] He said to him:<sup>210</sup> Is it not written for you<sup>211</sup> “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he

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of the Sasanians,” in: *The Arts of Persia*, R. W. Ferrier, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 67; André Godard, *L’Art de l’Iran* (Paris: Arthaud, 1962), plate 101.

If we accept at face value the ascription of the entire midrashic discourse on the role of the ‘omer in the Purim story to Levi, the disciple of R. Johanan (as found in *Leviticus rabbah*, *Pesiqta derav kahana* etc.; see Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 2:358-9), then this tradition would be virtually contemporaneous to the event (Lactantius, who I believe was the earliest Roman writer to report the tradition, wrote some fifty years later). The comparison of the two traditions warrants serious consideration of whether the midrashic homilist was making an oblique allusion to a well-known contemporary event, whether the Christian and Jewish sources were borrowing the motif one from the other, or whether the midrash can be adduced as evidence for the veracity of the tradition about Shapur’s stepping on Valerian’s back.

A somewhat different account of prisoners allowing themselves to be disgraced in this manner by their oriental captors is told by Athenaeus, 6:256d [Charles Burton Gulick, transl., *Athenaeus, the Deipnosophists*, Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page et al., eds. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1957), 3:154-5]:

There have also been in our part of the world, in the days of Glus the Carian, women called Kolakides [“flatterers”], subject to female despots. A remnant of these crossed over to the mainland, being summoned to come to the wives of Artabazus and of Mentor, and had their names changed to “Ladder-lasses” from the following practice: in their desire to please the women who summoned them, they made ladders of themselves so that the women riding in carts could mount or dismount on their backs. To that pitch of luxury, not to call it abjectness, did they by their devices bring these very stupid women.

See also Frank Cole Babbitt, transl., *Plutarch’s Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Warmington, ed. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1969), 1:272-3 [*De Adul.*, 50E]. These sources (but not the ones about Valerian and Shapur) were mentioned in connection with the Haman *midrashim* by E. E. Hallevy, ‘*Erkhei ha-’aggadah vaha-halakhah*, 2:160.

On the socio-religious implications of horse riding see Moshe Beer, “The Attitude of the Sages towards Riding Horses,” *Cathedra* 60 (1991), 17-35. I am grateful to Prof. Beer for the reference to Lieberman’s article cited above.

<sup>210</sup> MSS B, P, R, EY, YS add: “And.”

<sup>211</sup> “for you”—MS Mf: “for them” (!); ~ in MSS G, P, EY, HgT, YS.

*stumbleth: Lest the Lord see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him*" (Proverbs 24:17-8)?

He said to him:<sup>212</sup> Wicked one!<sup>213</sup> These words apply to<sup>214</sup> Israel. But concerning the<sup>215</sup> nations of the world<sup>216</sup> it is written<sup>217</sup> "*And thou shalt tread upon their high places*" (Deuteronomy 33:29).

Haman's objection, which cuts to the heart of the characteristic emotions that are elicited by the book of Esther and the celebration of Purim,<sup>218</sup> is not found (to the best of my knowledge) outside the domain of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash.<sup>219</sup> Mordecai's retort, that a distinction should be drawn between Jews and heathens, might satisfy the requirements of the aggadic narrative, but it is not supported by the biblical proof-text that he is adducing in support of his position.<sup>220</sup> It is possible that this fact is being alluded to in Mordecai's response, which can be taken to mean that his treatment of Haman is not a mere manifestation of vengeful rejoicing, but a fulfillment of the "obligation" to trample Haman's "high places."<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> "He said to him"— ~ in MS R.

<sup>213</sup> "Wicked one!"— ~ in MSS G, B (and filled in in B\*), Mf, Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS.

<sup>214</sup> MS M adds: "the enemies of."

<sup>215</sup> MS M adds: "the enemies of."

<sup>216</sup> "the nations of the world"—**Printings**: "you."

<sup>217</sup> "it is written"— ~ in EY, YS.

<sup>218</sup> This characterization is a valid one, at least according to the midrashic versions where Haman's defeat is related with an almost sadistic glee, and the rejoicing is not only for the deliverance of the Jews, but unabashedly for the defeat of their foes.

<sup>219</sup> Its inclusion in the printed editions of *Pirquei derabbi eliezer* is not original to that work; see Friedlander, 405, n. 1.

<sup>220</sup> I.e., Deuteronomy 29:33 does not deal with rejoicing.

<sup>221</sup> See also *Seder eliahu rabbah*, 18 (ed. Friedmann, 109) where a similar distinction is suggested.

*TB Berakhot 55b and Nedarim 40a* [M. Hershler, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings... Tractate Nedarim* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1985), 1:346-7] relate that Rava wanted his enemies to rejoice over his illness because the conclusion of Proverbs 24:17-8 reads "*Lest the Lord see it and it*

That the Hebrew בָּמָה refers to a topographical “high place” and not to a neck is not open to question,<sup>222</sup> and therefore we must presume that the verse is being cited as a playful metaphor.<sup>223</sup> A citation of this verse is also found in the Palestinian versions of the midrash, though in these<sup>224</sup> it is Haman himself who points out that he is fulfilling the Deuteronomic blessing.

Bacher<sup>225</sup> draws our attention to *Sifré on Deuteronomy*, 356<sup>226</sup> in which the verse is explicated by means of an allusion ( כַּעֲנִיז שְׁנֹאֲמָר ) to Joshua 10:24 where Joshua had his officers put their feet upon the necks of the five vanquished kings as a demonstration of their complete subjugation.

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displease him and he turn away his wrath from him.” In several other rabbinic texts the verse is given a literal application; e.g.: in *Mekhilta Pisha*, 13 [H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, eds., *Mekhilta d'rabbi ismael*, 2nd ed., (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970), 43; Jacob Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-rabbi ishmael*, Jewish Classics (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1970), 1:98] the Egyptians are condemned for rejoicing over the Israelites' troubles; in a “Supplement” to *Pesiqta derav kahana* (2:8; included in ed. Mandelbaum, 458; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 472) where the reason for not reciting *Hallel* on the last day of Passover is ascribed to the deaths of the Egyptians; *Midrash on Psalms*, 7:3 (ed. Buber, 64; transl. Braude, 1:104) where David is criticized for exulting in Saul's defeat. Cf. *Mishnah Avot* 4:19.

<sup>222</sup> See *BDB*, 119

<sup>223</sup> Maharsha argues that the scriptural phrase “and thy enemies יִכְחָשׁוּ [ARV: *shall be found liars*] was midrashically read in its other sense of “weakened,” suggesting an association with Mordecai's fast.

<sup>224</sup> As observed by Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 2:359. The single exception is *Panim aherim* B, 76, which states: “...and Haman's mouth touched the earth. Mordecai said: The Holy One assured us that when we fulfill his will it is written ‘Happy art thou, O Israel...and thou shalt tread upon their high places.’” The ability of ancient pagans to eruditely cite scripture (even from books which have yet to be written) is a well-known midrashic convention. See I. Heinemann, *Darkhei ha'aggadah*, 40-1.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 1.

<sup>226</sup> Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Siphre ad Deuteronomium*, Corpus Tannaiticum (Berlin: Abteilung Verlag, 1939), 424-5; transl. R. Hammer, *Sifre: The Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Yale Judaica Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 358.

## Haman's Daughter

[16a] *"And he proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor"* (Esther 6:11).

MS Y	MS G (with variants from all other witnesses)
When they arrived in the streets <sup>227</sup> of Haman's house his daughter climbed up to the roof.	While he was leading him in the street of Haman's house <sup>228</sup> his daughter, who was standing on the roof, <sup>229</sup> saw him.

She thought:<sup>230</sup> this<sup>231</sup> one who was riding<sup>232</sup> is Haman<sup>233</sup> her<sup>234</sup> father,<sup>235</sup> and this one who was walking before him was Mordecai. She took the chamber-pot. She hurled it upon his<sup>236</sup> head. He lifted up his eyes and she beheld him. As<sup>237</sup> soon as she saw that it was her father she fell from the roof<sup>238</sup> to the ground<sup>239</sup> and died.

And<sup>240</sup> this is what is written: *"And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hastened to his house mourning, and having his head covered"* (Esther 6:12).

227 "streets"—thus only in MSS Y, L; in all other witnesses: "street."

228 "of Haman's house"—Spanish family (except HgT<sup>2</sup>): "of the town."

229 "on the roof"— ~ in HgT<sup>1</sup>.

230 HgT<sup>1</sup> adds: "that."

231 "this"—MS P: "the."

232 "was riding"—MS Mf: (incomprehensible).

233 "Haman"—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

234 "her"— ~ in MSS B, L, R, W, Mf, YS.

235 HgT<sup>1</sup> adds: "because he was greater" (? text unclear).

236 "his"—Printings: "her father's."

237 "As"—MS Mf: "And as."

238 "from the roof"— ~ in MS W, HgT<sup>2</sup>.

239 "to the ground"— ~ in MSS O, M, EY.

240 "And"— ~ in MSS L, R, Mf, YS.

This expansion of Esther 6:11-12 is exegetically linked to the scriptural report that “*Haman hasted to his house mourning.*” For this to make sense, the midrashic plot requires that a death should have occurred in Haman’s family<sup>241</sup> while Haman was conducting Mordecai through the streets of Shushan, since at the end of Chapter 5 Haman was still in a merry spirit, and since the start of Chapter 6 all his actions have been accounted for and there has been no occasion for him to learn about any death. Thus the midrashic story in which Haman’s daughter fell from the rooftop<sup>242</sup> during the procession, and as a result of it, satisfies the needs of the aggadic logic.<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, the event is engineered in such a way that she has brought her disaster upon herself by means of her malice towards Mordecai.<sup>244</sup> The detail of the

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<sup>241</sup> The biblical root אבל usually, but not invariably, refers to mourning for the deceased. See *BDB*, 5; cf. Moore, 63, who renders it as “despondent.” In rabbinic usage it became a technical term for the halakhically defined mourning practices prescribed for designated family relations. For details see *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, second revised edition (Jerusalem: Yad Harav Herzog, 1978), 1:55-60. In our pericope the Jewish structures are of course being applied to Haman. See R. Moses Alsheikh’s commentary to the verse; ‘*Eṣ yosef.*”

<sup>242</sup> The phraseology used here to describe the fall from the roof seems to be influenced by passages like *TB Bava batra* 3b (ed. Abramson, 4) and *Qiddushin* 70b, which tell of the death of the last Hasmonean princesses.

<sup>243</sup> The tradition about Haman’s daughter is found in similar form in several other compilations. In Targum 6:11, 12 (Grossfeld, 72) we are informed that the daughter’s name was Shelakhtevat or Shachtenat, and that her fatal fall was prompted by her father’s explicit accusation that she had joined the ranks of those who were seeking to disgrace him. On the other hand, *Panim aherim* B, 76, and *Esther rabbah*, 10:5, do not include the chamber-pot episode, and her death is ascribed there to her distress at Haman’s plight. [In *Esther rabbah* she was eager to see Mordecai hanged.] In both these versions the daughter is said to have been watching from a window, not the roof. For further references to rabbinic parallels see Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 97-8/108; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:440; 6:477, n. 173, to which can now be added *Ginze midrash*, 157 (the text there appears to be incomplete).

<sup>244</sup> The Targum to 5:1 (Grossfeld, 63) tells that Haman’s daughter had been one of the contenders for the office of queen, but that God had afflicted her with diarrhea and



chamber-pot<sup>245</sup> was evidently stimulated by the reference to Haman's having "his head covered,"<sup>246</sup> and it subjects the villain to a finishing touch of complete and utter mortification.<sup>247</sup>

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unpleasant breath. 'Eš yosef discerns a connection between that tradition and the fact that she "opportunistically" happened to be carrying a full chamber-pot at the time.

<sup>245</sup> The Hebrew-Aramaic term employed is 'ašiš. On different types of latrines mentioned in rabbinic literature see Krauss, *Qadmoniyot ha-talmud*, 1:2:406-10; *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:48; 1:386, n. 76 (contains a list of terms for chamber-pots, including a reference to our pericope). See also Yehoshua Brand, *Klei haheres besifrut hatalmud (Ceramics in Talmudic Literature)* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1953), 403-11.

<sup>246</sup> On the original significance of "covering the head" see Paton, 255; Moore's commentary, 66; Amos Hakham, "Esther," in *Hamesh megillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973). It is possible that for the midrashic homilist the expression suggested the association with *hafifat rosh*, the normal rabbinic phrase denoting washing or shampooing the hair.

<sup>247</sup> One could hardly imagine a more humiliating experience than having the contents of a chamber-pot spilled on one's person. Predictably, E. E. Hallevy ('*Erkhei ha-aggadah veba-halakhah*, 2:160) furnishes us with a list of passages from classical authors in which that deed elicits an analogous reaction. Thus, in a fragment from Aeschylus' lost tragedy *Ostolopoi* ("Bone-Gatherers"), Odysseus laments that one of Penelope's suitors poured slops on his head [Herbert Weir Smyth, transl., *Aeschylus*, Loeb Classical Library, G. P. Goold, ed. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1983), 2:441; Fragments, 95 (180)]. Contemptuously pouring chamber-pots on the heads of political opponents is depicted in Plutarch's "Pompei," 48:1 (transl. Perrin, 5:238-9: against the consul Bibulus); Strabo, 8:6:23 [Horace Leonard Jones, transl., *The Geography of Strabo*, Loeb Classical Library, E. H. Warmington, ed. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1968), 4:198-9, where the Corinthians pour slops onto the Roman ambassadors]. Of course it could also be a demonstration of abusive rowdiness by private individuals, as in the case prosecuted by Demosthenes, "Against Canon" [54] 4 [A. T. Murray, transl., *Demosthenes*, Loeb Classical Library, T. E. Page et al., eds. (Cambridge [Mass.] and London: Harvard University Press and William Heineman, 1964), 6:128-9].

## To His Sackcloth and Fasting

[16a] Says Rav:<sup>248</sup> “*And Mordecai came again*”<sup>249</sup> (Esther 6:12)—to his sackcloth and to his fasting.<sup>250</sup>

Rav<sup>251</sup> reads a double meaning into the Bible’s report that Mordecai “*came again*.” It indicates not only that he had returned to his previous *place*, the king’s gate, but also that he had reverted to his original *state* of contrite fasting.<sup>252</sup> The point being made is apparently that the pious Mordecai’s moment of personal glory did not distract him from the dangers threatening his people, and therefore he contin-

<sup>248</sup> MSS G, Spanish family, YS add: “Sheshet” (see below).

<sup>249</sup> “*And Mordecai came again*”—thus only in MS Y; ~ in MS P, YS; all other witnesses: “that he came again.”

<sup>250</sup> “Says Rav...fasting”—~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

<sup>251</sup> The variant reading “Rav Sheshet” is found primarily in Spanish texts, and undoubtedly owes its origins to a confusion between שׁב ( “that he returned”) and the proper name “שׁשׁת.”

<sup>252</sup> Maharsha explains that if the purpose of the clause were confined to its literal sense, then it would have been superfluous. Alsheikh (see also ‘*Eṣ yosef*’) argues that, on the contrary, Mordecai had hitherto refrained from approaching the king’s gate (see Esther 4:1-2), hence our verse *cannot* be interpreted literally. Alkabetz uses the same premises to reach a more reasonable explanation: Since it was forbidden to wear sackcloth at the king’s gate, had it not been for Rav’s comment we might otherwise have deduced from the fact that Mordecai returned thither that he had now resumed his fast without the appropriate clothing.

This detail is also found in the Targum (Grossfeld, 73) which adds that Mordecai was returning to sit with the *sanhedrin*. *Esther rabbah*, 10:6, *Abba gorion*, 41 and *Panim aherim* B, 76, append a dictum by R. Ḥalabo [in *Panim aherim*: R. Levi] to the effect that one does not remove sack-cloth and ashes until after one’s prayers have been fulfilled. Cf. Second Targum, which might suggest a conflicting explanation. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:440. A unique tradition (whose meaning is not altogether clear) is preserved in *Ginzé midrash*, 158:

The rabbis of here [Palestine] say: He came back and donned white and wrapped himself in white.

And the rabbis of there [Babylonia] say: He came back to his sack-cloth and his fasting.

ued his vigil of prayer and abstinence.<sup>253</sup> Of course this interpretation elicits a homiletical message that is valid for all generations.<sup>254</sup>

### Haman's Mourning

[16a] "*But Haman hastened to his house mourning*" (Esther 6:12)—because of his daughter.<sup>255</sup>

"*And having his head covered*"—from another<sup>256</sup> thing which had befallen him.

The allusion to the "(other) thing" is not clear. It might refer to Haman's having to do honor to Mordecai (following the simple sense of the biblical story without its midrashic elaborations); or, euphemistically, to the chamber-pot incident.<sup>257</sup>

### Wise Men

[16a] "*And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him etc.*" (Esther 6:13).

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<sup>253</sup> Rashi (see also *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia*) deduces from this comment that the three-day fast had not yet elapsed, a deduction which serves as the basis for his chronology of the story. See our discussion above in connection with the midrashic interpretation of Esther 4:17.

<sup>254</sup> The obligation of each individual to participate actively in the suffering of the larger community is emphasized in talmudic literature. See e.g., *TB Ta'anit* 11a [Henry Malter, ed. *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, Publications of the American Academy for Jewish Research (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1930, 36-7)].

<sup>255</sup> "because of his daughter"—~ in MSS P, W.

<sup>256</sup> "another"—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: "the."

<sup>257</sup> Thus in Steinsaltz's commentary. See our remarks above. On the multifarious uses of the Hebrew expression "*davar aher*" see Melammed, "Euphemism and Scribal Circumlocutions in Talmudic Literature" (in *De Vries Memorial Volume*, 286; also included in *Essays in Talmudic Literature*, 142). The tradition appears in substantially identical form in *Ginzé midrash*, 158.

It<sup>258</sup> calls them<sup>259</sup> “*his friends*”<sup>260</sup> and<sup>261</sup> it calls them<sup>262</sup> “*his wise men*”!<sup>263</sup>

—R. Johanan says:<sup>264</sup> <sup>265</sup> Everyone who says a word of wisdom,<sup>266</sup> even from<sup>267</sup> the nations of the world, is called “wise.”

The inconsistency in terminology between the beginning of the verse and its conclusion<sup>268</sup> readily invites explanation.<sup>269</sup> Several commentators<sup>270</sup> remark that the term “*friends*” was used in 5:14 above when this same group advised Haman to erect the fifty-cubit gallows on which to hang Mordecai. Seen in this light, R. Johanan’s observation can be understood more pointedly: Even though we are dealing with a group of people with a proven record for offering wicked and ill-ad-

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258 “It”—MS O, HgT: “What is the difference here that it”; MS P, EY: “What is the difference there that it.”

259 “them”—MS P, Printings: “him” (!).

260 “*friends*”—MSS B, P, L, W, Mf: “*wise men*.”

261 MS O, HgT add: “what is the difference there that”; MS P, EY add: “what is the difference here that.”

262 “them”—MS P, Printings: “him” (!).

263 “*wise men*”—MSS B, P, L, W, Mf: “*friends*.”

264 “R. Johanan says”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “Says R. Johanan.”

265 MSS O, P, HgT add: “because”; EY adds: “This teaches that.”

266 MS O, HgT add: “and.”

267 “from”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “among.”

268 Strashun observes that ostensibly R. Johanan’s deduction could have been derived solely on the basis of the expression “*wise men*” without reference to the terminological discrepancy. He adduces several instances in the Bible where gentiles are called “wise” and concludes that the point of R. Johanan’s observation is that even a unique example of intelligent advice is sufficient to classify its author as wise.

269 See Moore’s commentary to Esther, 66; S. Goldman’s commentary to Esther in: *The Five Scrolls*, The Soncino Books of the Bible (London: The Soncino Press, 1975), 226. The terminology employed to designate Ahasuerus’ advisors in Chapters 1 and 2 was equally inconsistent, a factor which was also exploited by the rabbis of the midrash in expounding those passages.

270 See Maharsha; *Panim aherim* B, 76.

vised counsel, the biblical author nevertheless acknowledges when their advice<sup>271</sup> is truly wise.<sup>272</sup>

Benjamin, Ephraim or Manasseh	
Most witnesses	Spanish family, Printings
	[16a] “If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews etc.” (Esther 6:13).

They said to him: If he comes<sup>273</sup> from the other tribes,<sup>274</sup> you can prevail against him. But<sup>275</sup> if he comes<sup>276</sup> from<sup>277</sup> <sup>278</sup> Benjamin, Ephraim or Manasseh,<sup>279</sup> then you cannot prevail against him.

<sup>271</sup> The contents of the “wisdom” are spelled out in the verse. Most traditional commentators (e.g., Maharsha, Pinto [= *Ahavat etan*]) understand that it refers to the midrashic elaboration of the verse (see below). *Pirquei derabbi eli’ezer* identifies the counselors as “astrologers,” perhaps suggesting that that was the source of their sage advice.

<sup>272</sup> Underlying this dictum is the assumption that, under normal circumstances, there exists only one source of true wisdom, namely the Torah., so that the acknowledgment of any other claimant requires special justification. Cf. *Lamentations rabbah*, 2:13 [(S. Buber, ed., *Midrasch Echa Rabbati* (Vilna: Romm, 1899), 114]: “If a person should say to you ‘There is wisdom among the nations,’ believe it... ‘There is Torah among the nations,’ do not believe it...”; *TB Qiddushin* 33a. The phenomenon is discussed by E. E. Hallevy, *Aggadot ha-’amora’im* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1977), 64, who also brings sources which deal with the attitudes of Greek and Roman writers towards the wise men and philosophers of other peoples.

<sup>273</sup> “comes”—MS **Mf**: “is.”

<sup>274</sup> **EY** adds: “of Israel.”

<sup>275</sup> “But” (lit.: “and”)— ~ in MSS **G, O, M, W**.

<sup>276</sup> “he comes”— ~ in MS **Mf, Printings**.

<sup>277</sup> All witnesses except MS **Y** and **AgE** add: “the tribe of Judah.”

<sup>278</sup> MSS **G, B, O, P, L, R, W, Mf, Printings, HgT, YS**, add: “or.”

<sup>279</sup> “Benjamin, Ephraim or Manasseh”—**Printings, AgE**: “Benjamin or Ephraim or Manasseh”; MSS **G, O, P, R, W, HgT**: “Ephraim or Benjamin or Manasseh”; MS **L**: “Ephraim or Benjamin [or Manasseh]”; MS **M**: “Ephraim, Benjamin or Manasseh”; **EY**: “Manasseh or Ephraim or Benjamin”; **YS**: “Ephraim or Manasseh or Benjamin;” MS **Mf**: “Benjamin or Manasseh.”

MS Y and AgE	MS G (with variants from all other witnesses)
	<p>Judah—as it is written<sup>280</sup> “<i>Thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies</i>” (Genesis 49:8).</p> <p>The<sup>281</sup> tribe of Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh—<sup>282 283</sup></p>

as<sup>284</sup> it is written:<sup>285</sup> “*Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh stir up thy strength, and come and save us*” (Psalms 80:4-5).

The deduction here appears to be based on the delimiting “of the seed of the Jews” which is employed in the verse instead of the simpler “a Jew.”<sup>286</sup> The statement is therefore taken to refer to only certain

<sup>280</sup> “Judah—as it is written”—HgT<sup>1</sup>: “As it is written concerning Judah.”

<sup>281</sup> “The”—MS M: “If from the.”

<sup>282</sup> “Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh”—MS M: “Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh”; MS B: “Ephraim and Manasseh and Benjamin”; MS R: “and Ephraim and Manasseh” (!).

<sup>283</sup> “The tribe...Manasseh”—Printings: “[Venice printing adds: “And”] the rest.”

<sup>284</sup> “as”—~ in MS Mf.

<sup>285</sup> “is written”—MS W: “says.”

<sup>286</sup> Other rabbinic collections also expound the phrase “of the seed of the Jews” as references to specific historical precedents. The Targum (Grossfeld, 73) applies it to the righteous of Israel (the patriarchs, Moses and Aaron who vanquished their opponents); the Second Targum (176) and *Panim aherim* B, 76, apply it to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. See also Kasher and Klein, “New Fragments of Targum to Esther from the Cairo Genizah,” 98/109 and 100/110; *Pirquet derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 405 and n. 8; ed. Higger, 245).

tribes, not all of them.<sup>287</sup> Approaching the passage from a broader thematic perspective, we may discern here an additional instance of a recurrent motif in the midrashic retelling of Esther, which sees the conflict between Mordecai and Haman as the final episode in a long archetypal struggle between the children of Rachel and the heir of the Amalekites. Mordecai has of course been identified above (2:5) as being descended from both Judah and Benjamin.<sup>288</sup> Clearly the choice of the tribes mentioned in this pericope was not derived originally from the quoted prooftexts, since equally appropriate verses could have been adduced to include several other tribes among those who are assured that they will prevail over their enemies.<sup>289</sup>

### Two Fallings

[16a] *“But thou shalt surely fall [literally: “falling thou shalt fall”] before him”* (Esther 6:13).

Said<sup>290</sup> R. Judah the son of R. Il’ai: For what purpose are those<sup>291</sup> two fallings?<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> This is the view of Rashi, as explained by Maharsha. Other commentators have suggested different interpretations. Maharsha himself raises the possibility that “Jew” was understood in the narrow sense of “Judean”; i.e., a member of the tribe of Judah, but he notes that this would not account for the midrash’s inclusion of the other tribes. R. Josiah Pinto solves this problem by proposing a *gezerah shavah* based on the instances of the word “before” (*lifnei*) in our verse: “...surely fall before him” and in Psalms 53:3 (“Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh”).

<sup>288</sup> Pinto notes how the midrash is built on a trans-historical perception of the Bible in which the tribes are assumed to function as archetypes. The *Ahavat etan* commentary to EY observes that Judah does not really play a role in the confrontation which was associated in the past with the figures of Joshua (from Ephraim) and Saul (from Benjamin).

<sup>289</sup> Thus, the Songs of Jacob and Moses make similar promises concerning Gad, Dan and Naphtali.

<sup>290</sup> “Said”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “Expounded.”

<sup>291</sup> “those”—MSS O, P\*, EY, HgT<sup>2</sup>: “these.”

<sup>292</sup> MS P adds: “This teaches”; EY adds: “This teaches that.”

—They said to him: This<sup>293</sup> people has been compared to dust;<sup>294</sup> it has been compared to<sup>295</sup> the stars.<sup>296</sup> When they descend they descend as far as the dust, and<sup>297</sup> when they ascend they ascend as far as the stars.<sup>298</sup>

R. Judah's comment<sup>299</sup> is derived by means of the exegetical method usually associated with his teacher R. Akiva, of expounding the infinitive construct forms of biblical Hebrew as "*leshonot kefulim*"—intended to refer to two "units" of teaching.<sup>300</sup> Nevertheless, the exegetical basis for the connection between the double falling and the analogies to dust and stars is not explained clearly.<sup>301</sup> Apparently the point

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293 "This"— ~ in MS P.

294 All witnesses except MSS Y, P add: "and."

295 "it has been compared to"— ~ in AgE.

296 "dust... stars"—MS R, YS: "stars and it has been compared to the dust."

297 "and"— ~ in MSS O, P, HgT.

298 "stars"—Spanish family: "firmament" (or: "sky").

299 Although not introduced by any of the normal terminological formulas, the source should evidently be treated as a *baraita*. See E. Z. Melamed, *Halakhic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud*, 519.

300 On the divergence between the Schools of Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael on this issue see Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie der Jüdischen Traditionsliteratur* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905), 1:98; J. N. Epstein, *Prolegomenon ad Litteras Tannaiticas* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Magnes and Dvir, 1957), 522. On the extension of this dispute to the domains of aggadah and theology see A. J. Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism* (London and New York: Soncino, 1962), 1:3-4.

301 The traditional commentators are disappointingly reticent on this question. The explanation proposed here is a modification of Maharsha's; however he ties the comment in with the tradition about Haman's enslavement to Mordecai and Mordecai's subsequent appointment to the position of vice-regent. R. Josiah Pinto takes a different approach, according to which both clauses of R. Judah's dictum take on significance, as Israel's fall—which will be followed immediately by the nation's exaltation to great heights—presages the decline of its enemies. Pinto expounds *three* falls, since he relates also to the expression "*thou hast begun to fall*" which appears earlier in the verse. Compare the tradition in *Panim aherim* B, 76: "...Once they have begin to rise, you cannot stand in their way." A much more expansive explanation is contained in *Ginzé midrash*, 158:

Says R. Yosé bar Haninah: He said: The God of this people does not elevate them either to an intermediate height or to an intermediate



relates only to the statement about the Jews' potential for soaring to the stars, which is understood to imply that Haman will in the end plummet that much farther to his defeat.

It is unlikely that R. Judah's statement was formulated originally in connection with Esther. It fits more naturally with one of the verses which promise that Abraham's seed will be as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars in the heavens.<sup>302</sup>

### In Haste

[16a] *"And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet etc."* (Esther 6:14).

This teaches<sup>303</sup> that they brought him in haste.

The point of this anonymous comment is obscure since it employs the same root as the biblical verse, and does not seem to add anything meaningful to what is stated there explicitly. The intention is probably to say that Haman was brought to the banquet in a state of confused

...Continued from previous page

depth. Rather, he either elevates them to the highest height or lowers them to the lowest depth. If he begins to elevate them, he elevates them. And if he begins to lower them, then he lowers them...

<sup>302</sup> See Genesis 13:16; 15:15; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14; Deuteronomy 28:13. For additional allegorical interpretations of the dust and stars imagery see *Genesis rabbah*, 40:9 (395-7); 69:5 (794-5); Interpretations that are substantially identical to the current one, but without any connection to Esther, are found in *Midrash aggadah* to Genesis 28:14 [ed. Buber (Vienna: A. Panto, 1894), 74]; *Aggadat bereshit*, 39 [ed. Buber, Cracow: Joseph Fischer, 1902), 78]:

...And thus did the Holy One assure Abraham. At first *"Look now towards heaven etc."* (Genesis 15:5); whereas elsewhere he says *"And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth"* (Genesis 28:14). If *"stars,"* then why *"earth"*?—Rather he said to him: When your children do my will, just as the stars are higher than the whole world, so shall your children be the highest of all. But when they do not do my will, just as the dust is at the bottom and everyone tramples upon it, so shall you be...

See M. M. Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 3:1:589, #81; 637, #55. See also *TP Sheqalim* 1:1 (45d).

<sup>303</sup> "This teaches"—~ in AgE.

panic (according to the normal signification of *BHL* in rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic), not merely with speed, as the biblical Hebrew word might otherwise be understood.<sup>304</sup>

### Not Worth the King's Damage

[16a] “So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine etc. Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favor in thy sight etc. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish etc. although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage” (Esther 7:1-4).

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<sup>304</sup> Thus according to Maharsha who observes that the root *BHL* appears elsewhere in Esther in the neutral sense of “speedily” (e.g., 2:9). The Talmud is therefore emphasizing that in the present instance it has the more vivid connotation of “in confusion” or “panic.” This interpretation, argues Maharsha, is supported by the fact that when Ahasuerus issued his original command that Haman attend Esther's feast (5:5), he used the word *maharu* (“cause Haman to make haste”), implying that there is significance to the fact that a different lexical root is employed here when the text comes to describe the execution of that command. A similar explanation is brought in the *‘Eṣ yosef*, citing R. Joseph Edel's *Iyyei hayyam* commentary. Rashi connects the comment to the chamber-pot incident above, explaining that Haman was given no opportunity to wash off the filth (see Pinto). Pinto takes a different approach, suggesting that the order of the words teaches that it was the royal chamberlains, and not Haman, who were in haste owing to the urgency of Ahasuerus' orders.

On the semantic range of *BHL* see *BDB*, 96 (which lists the meanings “disturbed, dismayed, terrified” as well as “haste, hurry”). It would appear that in rabbinic usage, especially in the Aramaic dialects (except for the Targums, when rendering the cognate biblical root), the root was used only in the senses of confusion, agitation, fright, etc., and not in the biblical sense of “haste.” See the examples in Jastrow, 142; Kohut, 2:23; Sokoloff, 86; etc. *Panim aherim* B, 76 paraphrases: “...while his heart was still agitated (מטורר)”; cf. *Esther rabbah*, 10:8. In *Abbagorion*, 41 and *Panim aherim* B, 76, it is related that Esther had Haman rushed to the feast in order to prevent him and his influential sons from staging a last minute *coup*. That it was Esther's servants who summoned Haman (contrary to the explicit statement of verse 6:14 that it was “the king's chamberlains”) is also the view of *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (transl. Friedlander, 405-6; ed. Higger, 245). See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:441; 6:477-8, n. 176.

{She}<sup>305</sup> said to him: This adversary<sup>306</sup> is not<sup>307</sup> worth the king's damage. For<sup>308</sup> he killed Vash<sup>ti</sup><sup>309</sup> and now turns to "that woman"<sup>310</sup> to kill her.<sup>311</sup>

The meaning of the biblical clause is obscure.<sup>312</sup> It appears that Esther is trying to persuade Ahasuerus that Haman's counsel to murder the Jews will ultimately cause the king loss and damage rather than producing profitable or beneficial results. The precise nature of the damage is not specified in the verse,<sup>313</sup> and the Talmud fills in this omission on the basis of the events of the story as expanded by the midrash.<sup>314</sup> Thus Haman—identified above with the royal counselor

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305 "She"—emended according to all other witnesses; MS Y: "They."

306 MS O adds: "and enemy."

307 "not"—~ in MS Mf (!).

308 "For"—thus only in MS Y and AgE; ~ in all other witnesses.

309 "killed Vash<sup>ti</sup>"—**Printings**: "became jealous of Vashti and killed her."

310 "turns to 'that woman'"—thus only in MS Y, AgE; MSS G, **Ashkenazic family**, W, Mf, YS: "has become jealous of 'her'"; MS B: "seeks 'her' out"; MS O, HgT: "he also has become jealous of me and wishes"; MS P, EY: "he has become jealous of me wanting"; **Printings**: "he has become jealous of me and wishes."

311 "her"—MS O: "him" (!); MS P, EY, HgT, **Printings**: "me."

312 Paton, 258: "This... clause is one of the most difficult in the book. No satisfactory rendering has yet been proposed." See also 261-2 where he presents a rich variety of suggested interpretations, and he concludes "There is an ancient corruption of the text at this point for which no satisfactory emendation has yet been proposed." Similar assessments are given by Moore, 70-1; Haupt, 147. Among the commentators who refrain from emending against the Masoretic text (e.g., Goldman, 227; Hakham, 44-5) the argument is understood as: By conceding to Haman's wishes, more damage than benefit will result for the king.

313 From the context, the intention is almost certainly fiscal; i.e., the treasury will lose a tax source without even benefiting from the Jews' value as slaves (or the ten thousand silver talents). Thus in *Leqah tov*, [in: S. Buber, ed., *Sifre de-aggadeta al megillat ester* (Vilna: Romm, 1886)], 108; Alkabetz; etc.

314 Rashi renders: "The adversary is not *concerned* for [i.e., he does not value, estimate (?)] the damage to the king—since if he were, then he would have had the Jews sold as slaves. See his commentary to the verse in Esther, and Alkabetz's attempt to explain Rashi's semantic reasoning.

Memucan (1:16)— was responsible for the execution of Vashti,<sup>315</sup> an act which was carried out promptly before Ahasuerus could be given a chance to sober up and reconsider. Esther has just now revealed her Jewish origins, and in so doing has rendered herself subject to Haman's decree of annihilation, so that Haman will now be depriving the king of his second queen.<sup>316</sup>

### “Said” and “Said”

[16a] “Then the king Ahasuerus said<sup>317</sup> and he said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?” (Esther 7:5).

What is<sup>318</sup> “said” “said”?

—Says R. Abbahu:<sup>319</sup> This teaches that<sup>320</sup> at first there was an interpreter stationed for her between them.<sup>321</sup> When she told him:

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<sup>315</sup> The unique reading of the **Printings** ascribes the death of Vashti to Haman's jealousy. See the unconvincing attempt to justify this reading in *Iyyun ya'aqov. Abbagorion*, 17, and *Esther rabbah*, 4:6, state that Memucan was upset with Vashti either because she had not invited him (or his wife) to the feast, because she used to slap his face with a slipper, or because he aspired that his own daughter should become queen. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:394; 6:463, n. 97. The last-mentioned reason would account for Haman's jealousy towards Esther as well, but I am aware of no midrashic source that draws that explicit conclusion. Cf. Ginzberg, *ibid.*, and n. 98.

<sup>316</sup> See Maharsha. He suggests that the author of the midrash was assuming that the loss of one's wife is the most crushing loss a man can suffer since one's wife is like one's own body [See *TB Berakhot* 24a; *Yevamot*, 62b; *Sanhedrin* 76b; *Bekhorot* 35b; etc.; *Talmudic Encyclopedia* 2:300-1]. He notes convincingly that the phraseology of 7:4 was probably intended to counterbalance Haman's words in 3:8.

<sup>317</sup> ARV: “answered.”

<sup>318</sup> “What is”—thus only in MS Y, AgE; in all other witnesses: “Why do I need.”

<sup>319</sup> “Abbahu”—**Spanish family**: “Eleazar”; ~ in MS P.

<sup>320</sup> “This teaches that”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>321</sup> “there was...between them”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; in all other witnesses: “by means of an interpreter.”

<b>MS Y</b> (=Printings, AgE)	<b>MS G</b> (with variants from MSS B, W, <b>Mf, Spanish family,</b> <b>Ashkenazic family)</b>
	I am the daughter of kings <sup>322</sup> and <sup>323</sup>

I am descended from King<sup>324</sup> Saul,<sup>325</sup> he spoke with her<sup>326</sup> directly;<sup>327</sup> as it says:<sup>328</sup> “and he said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?”

The repetition of the word *amar* (“said”) in the verse is indeed awkward,<sup>329</sup> inviting some kind of midrashic explanation, whether by supplying content for the first instance of the verb or, as here, by proposing a difference between each of the king’s two utterances. R. Abbahu’s solution, that once Esther had revealed her royal descent Ahasuerus ceased addressing her through the intermediary of an inter-

<sup>322</sup> “kings”—MS R: “a king.”

<sup>323</sup> “and”—~ in MSS L, W, Mf.

<sup>324</sup> “King”—MS W: “the seed of”; **Printings**: “the house of”; ~ in MS G, B (and filled in in B\*), P, Mf, **Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS,**

<sup>325</sup> MSS G, B, P, L, M, R\*, W, Mf, HgT, **Printings** add: “immediately.”

<sup>326</sup> **EY** adds: “immediately.”

<sup>327</sup> MS O adds: “immediately.”

<sup>328</sup> “as it says”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>329</sup> *Leviticus rabbah*, 26:8 (608-11): “R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon ben Yohai: Everywhere where it says ‘and he said,’ ‘and he said’ twice must be expounded...” Paton, 258: “The verse has two beginnings, due doubtless to a combination of alternate readings. The Versions omit the second clause wholly or in part.” Moore, 71, also posits a dittography, and cites Ehrlich and Ringgren who emend the first instance to *vayyemaher* (“and he hurried”). See also Hakham, 45; David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series, D. Clines and P. R. Davies, eds. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 113-4; Alkabetz; David Rosenthal, “The Sages’ Methodological Approach to Textual Variants within the Hebrew Bible,” in: *Isac Leo Seeligman Volume, Essays on the Bible and the Ancient World*, Alexander Rofé and Yair Zakovitch, eds. (Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1983), 397-8.

preter, raises some grave exegetical difficulties. Most notably, it is hard to understand of what use an interpreter could be if nobody knew what Esther's mother tongue was!<sup>330</sup>

**“This Wicked Haman”**

[16a] “And Esther said: An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman” (Esther 7:6).

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<sup>330</sup> This issue is not dealt with by most commentators. See e.g. *‘Eš yosef* (citing *Iyyei hayyam*):

Initially, while he was ignorant of Esther's nationality, he thought that she could not understand the king's distinctive language, and he was therefore obliged to address her through an interpreter; but now that he had been informed that she was of royal descent and she told him that she had been raised by Mordecai who knew seventy languages, he spoke directly to her without employing an interpreter...

Alkabetz, on the other, hand writes: “We learn that the matter of having a translator (*melis*) between the king and the people is not for functional reasons, but merely an indication of his exalted station, so that people should not converse with him as with their friends...” Alkabetz goes on to describe a functionary whose job is to improve the aesthetic presentation of the king's words, not to translate them from one language to another. This understanding is also reflected in Ginzberg's paraphrase in *Legends*, 4:441 (“He had not been quite satisfied that she was worthy enough...”).

*Leviticus rabbah* (*ibid.*, 610-11) [=Midrash on *Samuel*, 24:8 (ed. Buber, 121-2); *Lamentations rabbah*, 1:43 (missing in Buber's edition)], in a tradition ascribed to Rabbi in the name of R. Eleazar (cf. textual variants in our talmudic pericope) has the order reversed: “As long as he was unaware that she was Jewish he spoke to her directly, but once he became aware that she was Jewish he spoke to her through a translator...” This midrash reads the two verbs in the verse as referring respectively to the king's words through the translator and to the translator's subsequent repeating of them to Esther. *Tanḥuma Emor*, 3 [ed. Buber, 5 (3:84)] follows the order of the Babylonian Talmud. The *Leviticus rabbah* version is also incorporated into the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 178) which has Ahasuerus speaking through a translator in verse 5 [Cf. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:478, n. 178]. These two traditions should probably be viewed as respective Babylonian and Palestinian versions. It is worth investigating whether the difference reflects the actuality of the Persian vs. Roman monarchs; or the differing functions of the *turgemans* in the rabbinic academies of the respective lands. Prof. Isaiah Gafni has suggested to me (in a private conversation) that the Babylonian tradition, in which the *turgeman* has a ceremonial function, might reflect the widespread tendency of the Babylonian rabbis to regard themselves as royalty and the *yeshivot* like regal courts. On the functions of the *turgeman* in the talmudic academies see A. Amir, *Institutions and Titles in the Talmudic Literature*, 76-106.

Says R. Eleazar:<sup>331</sup> This teaches<sup>332</sup> that she<sup>333</sup> would point<sup>334</sup> in the direction of Ahasuerus, and<sup>335</sup> an angel came and slapped her hand in the direction of Haman.<sup>336</sup>

R. Eleazar's comment was exegetically stimulated by two features in the biblical text:

1) The longwindedness of Esther's accusation,<sup>337</sup> in which she goes through three unspecified epithets before finally identifying her enemy by name.<sup>338</sup>

2) The midrashic convention of reading demonstrative pronouns as if they were physically pointing at their objects. In the current context it is again significant that the "finger" does not zero in on Haman until the end of the verse.<sup>339</sup>

These phenomena are accounted for by the premise that before Esther finally indicted Haman, she had intended to direct her accusation against someone else: Ahasuerus himself.

When reading midrashic exegesis we cannot necessarily assume that the author was trying to create a credible reconstruction of the biblical episode. If we keep this premise in mind, then we might regard

<sup>331</sup> "Says R. Eleazar"— YS: "Says R. Eliezer"; ~ in EY.

<sup>332</sup> "This teaches"— ~ in MSS R\*, Mf (and filled in in Mf\*).

<sup>333</sup> "she"—MS P: "he" (!).

<sup>334</sup> "point"— ~ in MS P.

<sup>335</sup> "and"— ~ in MSS R\*, Mf, YS.

<sup>336</sup> Spanish family adds: "And she said: *This* [MS P adds: "*wicked Haman*"]."

<sup>337</sup> The need to justify the wordiness of the verse forms the basis of the explanation in *Exodus rabbah*, 38:4: "'An adversary' above and 'an enemy' below. 'An adversary' to the father and 'an enemy' to the sons. 'An adversary' to me and 'an enemy' to you." See also *Panim aherim* B, 76.

<sup>338</sup> Thus Rashi, *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia*.

<sup>339</sup> Thus Maharsha, who observes that once Haman has been named there is no longer any reason for Esther to point to him. See also Pinto who explains that "*this*" refers to Ahasuerus. 'Iyyun ya'aqov understands that she originally wished to accuse both Ahasuerus and Haman. 'Eš yosef (citing *Aguddat ezov*) tries unconvincingly to base R. Eleazar's interpretation on the order of the words in the verse.

Esther's stifled indictment of Ahasuerus as more a reflection of the rabbis' assessment of the king than of Esther's. However, if R. Eleazar was aiming at a psychologically convincing expansion of the narrative, then he probably thought that the excitement of the moment caused her to speak her mind too openly; or that she was temporarily overcome by a desperate fear that Ahasuerus was a committed enemy before whom her supplications would be ineffectual.<sup>340</sup>

### Arising and Returning

[16a] "*And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden etc.*" (Esther 7:7).

And it is written:<sup>341</sup> "*And the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine*" (Esther 7:8).

It compares the returning to the arising. Just as the rising was in a state of wrath, so was the returning in a state of wrath.

The verse describes how Ahasuerus, upon hearing Esther's accusation against Haman, stalked out of the banquet hall into the palace garden and subsequently returned to find Haman in a compromising position on Esther's couch. The king's intention in his departure was presumably to calm his rage and get a grip on himself so that he would not react rashly or irrationally.<sup>342</sup> Had he succeeded in his purpose, Esther's stratagem might yet have been undone even at this advanced stage in its unfolding. Therefore the midrash assures us that the fact

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<sup>340</sup> *Eṣ yosef* and Alkabetz raise the question of how inappropriate this behavior appears at this point in the plot, when Esther's concern should be to enlist Ahasuerus' aid against Haman, not to arouse his wrath. The *Eṣ yosef*'s solution, that Esther had intended only to state that Haman was also seeking to harm the king, is unconvincing. It appears more likely that Esther momentarily let her emotions (or her despair—see Alkabetz) overcome her reason, and that supernatural assistance was required to prevent her from doing irreparable damage to her cause.

<sup>341</sup> "And it is written"—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>342</sup> See Alkabetz; Paton, 263, and other standard commentators to the biblical passage. Rabinovitz's *Ginzé midrash*, 160 has the following unique addition: "It is the custom of the oriental kings when they become enraged to go out to their orchards and cut down cedars before them until their rage subsides."



that Ahasuerus' anger did not abate too early should also be seen as a manifestation of providential guidance.<sup>343</sup> The midrash discerns an allusion to this fact in the wording of the biblical text,<sup>344</sup> since the identical syntactical structure is employed to describe the king's standing from the feast and his return to it.<sup>345</sup> This was regarded by the rabbis as a sort of *gezerah shavah* indicating that Ahasuerus' disposition was the same at both points,<sup>346</sup> and not only because of Haman's apparent assault on Esther.<sup>347</sup>

### Angels in the Garden

The story which follows shows how a supernatural vision was staged for Ahasuerus' benefit in order to magnify his rage while in the garden.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> This interpretation is argued cogently in the *'Eṣ yosef* commentary. Alkabetz also writes that "the rabbis' sole purpose is to magnify the miracle."

<sup>344</sup> Maharsha and *'Eṣ yosef* understand that the comment is based on the redundancy of verse 8 which need not have spelled out the king's route, since it should have been obvious from the context. The explanation is not convincing.

<sup>345</sup> This is correctly noted by Pinto.

<sup>346</sup> The Second Targum (Grossfeld, 178) also states this explicitly: "The king...arose in anger...so that his anger should abate from him, but it did not abate." In the First Targum (76-7) Ahasuerus sees the angels while he is still sitting at the feast, and he then goes out in order to investigate.

<sup>347</sup> See *'Eṣ yosef*.

<sup>348</sup> Most witnesses link the exegetical segment to the story of the angels by means of the relative "*d<sup>e</sup>*," and all the commentators interpret accordingly. It does nevertheless remain possible, following those texts which do not include this syntactical link, to read the former section as a coherent and self-contained exegetical unit that does not presuppose the "angels in the garden" episode.

[16a] He<sup>349</sup> went and<sup>350</sup> found the Ministering Angels who<sup>351</sup> were impersonating for him<sup>352</sup> men who were standing and<sup>353</sup> uprooting trees.<sup>354</sup> They threw them (?) in the garden.<sup>355</sup>

He said to them:<sup>356</sup> What is this?<sup>357</sup>

They said to him:<sup>358</sup> As for us, Haman has commanded us.<sup>359</sup>

As noted above, this story functions here as an explanation of the preceding exegetical comment, that Ahasuerus' anger was increased during what ought to have been a cooling-off period in the palace garden.<sup>360</sup> The midrash supplies no exegetical reason for why this particu-

349 "He"—MSS G, Spanish family, Printings: "For he"; MS M: "And he."

350 "He went and"—YS: "Before he had gone he."

351 "He went...who"—AgE: "The Ministering Angels came. They."

352 "for him"—~ in YS.

353 "standing and"—~ in MS Mf, Ashkenazic family, Printings, AgE.

354 "trees"—MS N: "from the trees of the palace garden"; MS P, EY: "trees of the garden"; ~ in all other witnesses.

355 "They threw them in the garden"—thus only in MS Y and AgE; Spanish family: "and threw."

356 MS B adds: "And."

357 "is this"—thus only in MS Y and AgE; MS N: "are you doing?"; all other witnesses: "are your deeds?"

358 "They said to him"—MS W: "He (!) said to him"; ~ in MS P.

359 "As for...commanded us"—thus only in MS Y and AgE; MSS G, B, L, M, Spanish family, Printings, YS: "Because Haman ["Haman"—MS P: "there" (! המן → ההם)] commanded us"; MS N: "Thus did Haman command us"; MSS R\*, W: "Haman commanded us."

360 *Eṣ yosef* observes that the wording of verse 8, "Will he also [hagam] force the queen etc." alludes to a previous episode which the midrash was obliged to fill in. However there is no reason not to take the "also" in its contextual sense as alluding to Esther's earlier denunciation of Haman's plot to massacre the Jews. If we accept that the authentic form of the story was the one in which the angels disguised themselves as Haman's sons (as is found in several parallel versions), then it is possible that it was originally devised in order to explain why Ahasuerus' rage was also directed against Haman's sons who had not been implicated in the plot and had not visibly offended the king in any way.

lar scene was chosen to be staged for the king's benefit.<sup>361</sup> Perhaps it was assumed that trees were the most likely sight to have been encountered in a palace *bustan*, and from this it followed naturally that the incriminating<sup>362</sup> episode should involve the felling of trees. <sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> The image of "cutting down the trees" recalls the well-known imagery that is applied to Elisha ben Avuiah's apostasy in the story of the "four who entered the orchard." On the passage see E. E. Urbach, "The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period," 12-15 (and n. 57) [= *The World of the Sages*, 497, 500]. It is unlikely however that there is any intentional allusion to that episode. The wording of the expression varies among the parallel versions. It is conceivable that the image is a metaphor for the uprooting of the Jewish people, or a reference to the preparation of the tree on which Haman was planning to hang Mordecai. As such, the passage bears an interesting resemblance to Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:11 (260-2; ed. Marcus, 6:438-9), which introduces an episode wherein the eunuch Sabuchadas [=Harbona] asks one of Haman's servants about the cross that he sees ready in the yard.

<sup>362</sup> R. Elijah ben Solomon, the *Ga'on* of Vilna (also brought in *ʿEš yosef*) notes the ethical problems raised by the midrash, as Haman (and his sons) are in the end condemned by Ahasuerus for something that they have not really done. The *Ga'on* resolves the difficulty with the premise that, since they are known by God to be deserving of capital punishment (the sons' complicity is spelled out by other midrashic traditions), then this involves no moral difficulties. Quite the contrary, argues R. Elijah, this is fitting and poetic punishment for those whose crime was basically one of slander! A similar idea is suggested in an addition contained in the printed editions of *Leviticus rabbah*, 26:8 (see Margulies' apparatus to 610, l. 8), where Ahasuerus in his rage advises Esther to accuse Haman even of fictitious offenses. Paton (263) also suggests that Ahasuerus would certainly have recognized that Haman's was really falling as a supplicant at Esther's feet. A similar observation is voiced by Alkabetz, who finds it inconceivable that Haman would have chosen this moment—with an interpreter present in the room!—to assault Esther. See Grossfeld, 78, n. 25. In *Ginzé midrash, ibid.*, we read as follows:

The rabbis of there [Babylonia] say: An angel caused him to fall. R. Berakhiah in the name of R. Hiyah his father: Esther was extremely powerful and she caused him to fall upon her, and said: Let us be killed, both I and he, and the nation shall be saved!

This is of course an application of the stratagem which was ascribed to Esther by R. Joshua ben Qorḥah on 15b above.

<sup>363</sup> The story of the angels appears in most of the *midrashim* to Esther, with some significant variations in the details.

a) In the Second Targum there is no accusation of Haman's complicity in the chopping of the trees. The mere fact of their destruction serves to put Ahasuerus in a bad mood. It should be noted however that if no allusion was intended to Haman's

### Falling upon the Bed

[16a] He entered<sup>364</sup> his house.<sup>365</sup>

“*And Haman is falling*<sup>366</sup> *upon the bed whereon Esther was*” (Esther 7:8).<sup>367</sup>

It should have said “fell”!<sup>368</sup>

Says R. Eleazar: This teaches<sup>369</sup> that<sup>370</sup> an angel came<sup>371</sup> and caused him to fall upon her.

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sons, then it is hard to account for the number ten. Indeed *Esther rabbah*, 10:9 speaks of only one angel, Michael, who is seen chopping down the plants, and there is no attempt to cast the blame on anyone. This is also true of *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 in Friedlander's edition (406). However the printed editions, as well as Higger's (245) contain an addition in which Michael tells Ahasuerus that he is one of Haman's sons acting on his father's orders. See also the “short midrash” cited by R. Judah Ibn Shushan (brought in Alkabetz) which speaks of “angels of destruction” who claim to be Haman's sons who were commanded by their father to transplant the fruit trees to a different place.

The text of *Ginzé midrash* is apparently corrupt, since it states both that the angel was disguised *as* Haman and that it claimed to have been sent *by* Haman. It has an intriguing continuation, which I have not found elsewhere: “He said to him: Because he let that Jew ride upon the horse”!

<sup>364</sup> “entered”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “came to.”

<sup>365</sup> HgT adds: “and he found that Haman was falling upon the bed, as it says:..”

<sup>366</sup> ARV: “*was fallen.*”

<sup>367</sup> All witnesses except MSS Y and Mf add: “‘*Falling*’?”

<sup>368</sup> “It...*fell*”— ~ in MS Mf.

<sup>369</sup> “This teaches”— ~ in MSS B (and filled in in B\*), P, M, Mf.

<sup>370</sup> “that”— ~ in MS P.

<sup>371</sup> MS R\* adds: “and slapped him on his mouth”; AgE: “and slapped him.”

MS Y and AgE	MS G (with variants from all other witnesses)
	He said: Woe from the country, <sup>372</sup> woe from the city! <sup>373</sup>

The supposed exegetical difficulty which furnishes the formal justification for R. Eleazar's comment is a contrived one.<sup>374</sup> The use of a present participle to indicate dramatic or continuing action in the past is normal in biblical Hebrew, though rarer in rabbinic usage.<sup>375</sup> The

<sup>372</sup> "the country"—MSS O, L, M, R\*, Mf: "outside"; **Printings, YS**: "inside the house."

<sup>373</sup> "the city"—MSS O, L, M, R\*, Mf: "inside the house"; **Printings, YS**: "outside."

<sup>374</sup> Rashi was extremely dissatisfied with the grammatical foundation of R. Eleazar's interpretation, and therefore explained that the participle is alluding to *repeated* action; i.e., every time Haman tried to stand up the angel would strike him down. The wording of the dictum does not support Rashi's reading.

A more substantial hermeneutical justification for R. Eleazar's dictum might be found in the lexical meaning of the root *NPL* which in the Bible can refer equally to voluntary or accidental actions (see *BDB*, 657), whereas in talmudic usage it usually denotes involuntary acts (but cf. Mishnah *Pe'ah* 4:3), and the voluntary sense is normally expressed by הפיל עצמו. See E. Ben-Yehudah, *Thesaurus Totius Hebraicae et Veteris et Recentioris*, Complete International Centennial ed. (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 8:3722-303, and talmudic dictionaries.

<sup>375</sup> See E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, second English ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 313-4: "...actions, events, or states which are regarded by the speaker at any moment as still continuing, or in process of accomplishment, or even as just taking place"; G. R. Driver, *A Treatise on The Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, third revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 35-6; Paton, 266. Abba Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1971), 2:545, considers it a standard variation between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew that in the former "the present participle appears as a present tense, but is in reality a kind of 'dramatic' or 'historic' present, referring to a past action or state; whereas mishnaic Hebrew actually adds the auxiliary *hayah*

syntactic observation serves as a vehicle for discerning yet another instance of providential interference in the events,<sup>376</sup> and for magnifying the humiliation to which Haman was subjected.<sup>377</sup>

**“Will He Force the Queen?”**

[16a] “Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house?” (Esther 7:8).

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(was)...” Our current instance should, then, be regarded as a case of the rabbis reading the scriptural text according to the grammatical norms current in their own dialect.

<sup>376</sup> See S. Kamin, “‘Double Causality’ in Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Esther,” 555/9. Maharsha and ‘Eṣ yosef find an allusion to the idea in the word *hagam* (“will he also”). This strikes me as a more convincing midrash, but it is not the one used by the Talmud. Cf. *Pirquei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 406-7): “The king exclaimed: As for this villain, he is not satisfied with having purchased the people of Esther to destroy...but he must needs come upon her!” Note also ‘*Iyyun ya’aqov* to the following verse, where he deduces from the word “also” in Harbona’s denunciation that there had been a previous incrimination of Haman, namely the episode of the tree-felling.

<sup>377</sup> That Haman was pushed by an angel is reported in several rabbinic traditions. E.g., Targum (Gabriel); *Esther rabbah*, 10:10 (Michael); *Panim aherim* B, 77 (unnamed angel). In *Pirquei derabbi eli’ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 406): “What did the angel Michael do? He lifted up Haman from Esther [Printings: as though he had wished to come to her].” None of these sources base the comment on the use of “falling” rather than “fell.” See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:442; 6:478, n. 181; Grossfeld, 77, n. 22.

Alkabetz observes astutely that by now, according to the premises of the midrash, the king has been given ample reason to suspect Haman’s intentions, whether to murder Esther (as he had done to Vashti) or to assault her sexually—a suspicion which, as suggested by the Talmud above, Esther had intentionally instilled in Ahasuerus’ mind by inviting Haman to the banquet in the first place.

MS Y (with variants from MS N and AgE)	All other witnesses
<sup>378</sup> This is what people say: Woe in the house! <sup>379</sup> Woe out- side! <sup>380</sup>	

This comment was apparently derived from a pun on the word *vayyomer*:<sup>381</sup> “Said [*the king: Will he even force etc.*],” which is midrashically rendered “*Vay!* (‘Woe!’) he says.”<sup>382</sup> The king thereby expresses his distress at having found signs of Haman’s treachery, as it were, both outside (where he had ordered the cutting down of the royal trees) and inside<sup>383</sup> the banquet hall (where Haman was making an attempt on Esther’s virtue).

<sup>378</sup> MS N adds: “Says Rava.”

<sup>379</sup> “in the house”—MS N, AgE: “from outside.”

<sup>380</sup> “outside”—MS N, AgE: “in town.”

<sup>381</sup> This type of exegesis was discussed at length in Chapter Two above, in connection with the midrashic expositions of the opening word of Esther.

<sup>382</sup> I can see no particular exegetical reason (other than the actual context within the narrative) why the midrash should have provided *two* interpretations of the single *vay* in the verse.

<sup>383</sup> The reading *mata* (“town”), common to all representatives of the Spanish textual family, appears to be the correct reading here, in spite of the fact that there is no obvious relevance to the mention of town and country in the present context. The alternative reading almost certainly originated in an emendation or misreading based on the graphic similarity between a Hebrew מ and נ. The contrast between *mata* and *devara* occurs frequently in Babylonian Aramaic; see e.g. *TB Shabbat* 155b, *Megillah* 32a, *Bava qamma* 10a, *Bekhorot* 8b, etc. The two opposites also appear together standardly in Mandaic; see E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, 106 and 256 which notes the expressions “bdibra ubmata” and “mn dibra lmata.” What we have in our pericope is therefore a fixed proverbial expression meaning that Ahasuerus was troubled both from local and foreign sources.

## The Wicked Harbona

[16a] “As the word went out of the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face” (Esther 7:8).<sup>384</sup>

“And Harbona, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon” (Esther 7:9).

Says R. Ḥama bar Ḥanina:<sup>385</sup> The wicked<sup>386</sup> Harbona was also<sup>387</sup> in that plot. As soon as he saw that his plot was not being fulfilled, he immediately withdrew,<sup>388</sup> as it says:<sup>389</sup> “And he cast upon him and did not pity, from his hand he surely fleeth” (Job 27:22).<sup>390</sup>

There is little in the unadorned Esther narrative that would readily give rise to the idea that Harbona’s incrimination of Haman was the result of a last-minute change of heart or failure of nerve.<sup>391</sup> While it is possible to regard R. Ḥama’s comment as reflecting the widespread rabbinic skepticism regarding the possibility of righteousness among

<sup>384</sup> MS G adds: “It teaches [in a *baraita*]: that they covered it with sacks.”

<sup>385</sup> “Says R. Ḥama bar Ḥanina”—MS L: “Says R. Ḥiyya bar Ḥanina”; MS M: “Says R. Ḥanina”; **Printings**: “Says R. Eleazar”; ~ in MS P.

<sup>386</sup> “The wicked”—~ in HgT<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>387</sup> “also”—~ in MS L.

<sup>388</sup> “withdrew”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “fled.”

<sup>389</sup> “as it says”—thus only in MS Y, Genizah fragment; MS R: “and it is written”; YS: “thus is it written”; in all other witnesses: “and thus is it written.”

<sup>390</sup> MS R adds: “Mnemonic.”

<sup>391</sup> Harbona was mentioned above (1:10) among “*the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king*” who were commanded to bring Vashti to the great feast. According to Maharsha, R. Ḥama’s comment is based, at least in part, on the fact that here Harbona is no longer being identified as one of the king’s servants, implying that he has transferred his allegiance to Haman. In a similar vein Pinto argues that the fact that here Harbona was “*before the king*” implies that these were the *only* words he had spoken before Ahasuerus. Alkabetz discerns an allusion to Harbona’s change of heart in the fact that his name was previously spelled with an *alef* at its end, but here with a *he*, one of the letters of the divine name.



pagans,<sup>392</sup> a more substantial reconstruction of the exegetical reasoning would be as follows: .

1) Harbona's intimate familiarity with the precise measurements of the gallows that had been erected on Haman's private property implied that Harbona had been made privy to the confidential details of the conspiracy.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> The rabbinic traditions are divided as to whether Harbona's role in the story is a favorable or negative one. Second Targum (Grossfeld, 178) is for the most part in agreement with the assessment of the Esther-Midrash, though some of the manuscript traditions there (*ibid.*, n. k) add that his defection from Haman was "of his own accord," apparently with a view to presenting him in a more sympathetic light. The Second Targum also has Harbona accusing Haman of plotting against the king's life. *Panim aherim* B, 77 bears a closer resemblance to the Esther-Midrash's evaluation; i.e., that Harbona's repentance was motivated by pure opportunism once he realized that Haman's defeat was inevitable. It adds that in addition to supporting Haman, Harbona had actively despised Mordecai. In *Esther rabbah*, 10:9 and *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 50 (Friedlander, 407; Higger, 245) it was not Harbona at all who spoke, but Elijah impersonating him (see Alkabetz). See also Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:443; 6:478, n. 182; 4:202; 6:325, nn. 44-5. His theory about the evolution of the Elijah tradition here strikes me as unnecessary and unconvincing.

Several Palestinian sources cite a halakhic dictum of R. Phineas which states that (following the reading of the Megillah?) "one must say: Harbona of blessed memory." See *TP Megillah* 3:7 (74b [B. Ratner, *Ahavath Zion WeJeruscholaim, Traktat Megillah* (Vilna: F. Garber, 1912), 77]; *Genesis rabbah*, 49:1 (497); *Midrash on Samuel*, 1:2 (ed. Buber, 43); *Massekhet soferim* 14:3 (ed. Higger, 255; see 254, n. 15 for references to medievals). It is not clear whether R. Phineas' remark was originally intended to supplement Rav's dictum about a mandatory formula of blessings and curses that was to be recited following the public reading of the Megillah, or if he is saying that in general the words "of blessed memory" should be appended to all mentions of Harbona's name. In *Esther rabbah* R. Phineas' dictum is inappropriately juxtaposed to the tradition about Elijah's impersonating Harbona! See also J. N. Epstein, "Collectanea from ספר המפוח of Rabbenu Nissim (ms. Jemen)," *Tarbiz* 2:1 (1930), 10; S. Asaf, "Sefer megillat setarim lerav nissim," *Tarbiz* 11 (1931), 254; Shraga Abramson, *R. Nissim Gaon: Libelli Quinque* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1965), 279 (and n. 223); I. Jacobson, *Netiv binah*, 3:436; Yitzhak Raphael, ed., *Sefer Hamanhig: Rulings and Customs [by] R. Abraham ben Nathan of Lunel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978), 1:242.

<sup>393</sup> Thus in Maharsha, who assumes that Harbona was among Haman's 'friends' mentioned in 5:14 who had originally suggested the height of the gallows.

2) The fact that Harbona had not volunteered this information, or voiced any protest, until after Esther had succeeded in turning Ahasuerus against Haman supports the reading of his motives as opportunistic.

The quotation from Job provides an analogy to our interpretation of Harbona's behavior, but should not be seen as the exegetical source of that interpretation. As read by the midrash, it says: When God hurls his unrelenting punishment against the wicked, the evil man or his supporter<sup>394</sup> tries to flee from the danger.<sup>395</sup>

### Two Pacifications

[16a] “*So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified [shakhakhah]*” (Esther 7:10).

Why these two pacifications?

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<sup>394</sup> The verse in Job refers to the wicked man himself, not to his companions, but this does not present an insurmountable obstacle for a midrashic exegete. See Rashi, Maharsha.

<sup>395</sup> Job 27:7-23 speaks of the divine punishment which will eventually overtake the wicked in spite of their apparent success and prosperity at present. Commentators to Job have been troubled by the question of how the doctrine seems to contradict Job's own conviction that people do not necessarily get their just deserts in this world. See Victor E. Reichert, ed., *Job*, The Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino Press, 1946), 137; R. Driver and B. Gray, eds., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job*, ICC (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1921), 225-7; Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible, W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, eds. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 172; A. Hakham, *Sefer iyov*, Da'at miqra (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1970), 205, n. 11. At any rate, there are a number of features in Job's depiction of the wicked man that apply with remarkable precision to the image of Haman, especially as he is portrayed in the midrashic versions of Esther (Most of these are discussed by Alkabetz). E.g., he is a hypocrite (verse 8) who amassed wealth (8, 16) which will in the end be enjoyed by the innocent (17, 19). See Esther 8:1-2. The wording evokes echoes of Ecclesiastes 2:26 which was expounded in this connection. See our discussion of *Megillah* 10b, above). Ultimately he will become an object of contempt and derision (23). He has many children, but they shall perish (14, 15, as noted by Alkabetz) and “*shall not be satisfied with bread*” (echoing 1 Samuel 2:5 which the rabbis [Targum and *Megillah* 15b] applied to Haman's children).

In Hebrew lexical roots where the same consonant appears as both the second and third letter of the word, it is common for the two identical letters to be combined and for the intervening vowel to be discarded.<sup>396</sup> When this does not occur and the consonant is repeated, the midrashic exegete will frequently treat this as a sort of redundancy, as if the word in question had been written twice, and hence is open to a twofold exposition.<sup>397</sup> Our current verse is in fact the sole instance in the Bible where the root appears with the *kaf* repeated.<sup>398</sup> Hence the Talmud's conclusion that, in addition to the surface meaning that Ahasuerus' anger against Haman was finally pacified, there was an additional wrath that was also assuaged through Haman's execution.

[16a] —One for the king of the universe, and one of<sup>399</sup> Ahasuerus.

This interpretation<sup>400</sup> parallels the one given above to Esther 6:1 which spoke of God's sleep being disturbed, as it were, alongside that of Ahasuerus because of the dangers threatening Esther and her people. It is based on the same midrashic principle that allows unnamed mentions of "*the king*" in Esther to be applied to the supreme king. Thus, in a boldly anthropopathic image the Talmud depicts God as having been (like Ahasuerus) in a state of rage that was not assuaged until Haman finally met his doom.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> See Gesenius-Kautsch, 71, 175-9.

<sup>397</sup> An extensive list of such midrashic interpretations was assembled by E. Z. Melamed, *Kefel otot kisod lidrashot haza"l*, "Leshonenu 21 (1959), 49-55 [=Essays in Talmudic Literature, 253-62]. Our current passage is discussed there on 127 [257].

<sup>398</sup> This was noted by Maharsha; see also Melamed, *op. cit.* The other instances of the root are Genesis 8:1; Numbers 17:20; Jeremiah 5:26 and Esther 2:1.

<sup>399</sup> MSS G, N, R\*, Genizah fragment add: "the king."

<sup>400</sup> The same explanation occurs in the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 183). In *Panim aherim* B, 77: "...the wrath of the king of kings of kings. And it goes without saying that the *king's* wrath was [also] assuaged."

<sup>401</sup> See E. Segal, "Human Anger and Divine Intervention in Esther," *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), 247-56. Maharsha understands that the allusions here are to God's anger at the Jews for having bowed down to Nebuchadnezzar's image, as described above in the midrash, and to Ahasuerus' decree to annihilate the Jews. It is not clear to me why either of these instances of wrath would have been pacified through Haman's execution.

[16a] There<sup>402</sup> are some who say:<sup>403</sup> One of Vashti, and one of Esther.<sup>404</sup>

This alternative explanation accepts the plain sense of the verse as referring to Ahasuerus' wrath.<sup>405</sup> The king had two reasons for being angry at Haman. The first of course was that he had threatened Esther.<sup>406</sup> The second grounds for rage was because Haman, identified by the midrash with Memucan, had been responsible for hastily ordering Vashti's execution, a decision which the sobered-up monarch came to regret.

### Concluding Remarks

The present chapter has dealt with an extensive series of midrashic materials, covering the whole of Chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Esther. As with the other chapters, we find represented here the full range of rabbinic source-types, including *Tanna'im*<sup>407</sup> as well as

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402 "There"—MSS M, R\*, W, Genizah fragment: "And there."

403 "There are some who say"—Printings: "And some say it."

404 "Vashti, and one of Esther"—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: "Esther, and one of Vashti."

405 This interpretation alludes to the midrashic tradition formulated by R. Johanan that "Throughout these seven years—from the time when Vashti was put to death until Haman was crucified—his wrath continued to burn within him" (*Esther rabbah*, 3:15; *Abba gorion*, 16). R. Johanan argues there that, contrary to the apparent meaning of 2:1, Ahasuerus' anger over Vashti's death never really abated until Haman's execution.

406 See Rashi and Alkabetz. From Ahasuerus' perspective the danger to Esther's people was only of subordinate concern.

407 Most of the tannaitic material is introduced by the formula "*tana*." We have noted in previous chapters that Albeck considers the authenticity of such passages to be suspect. See the pericopes on Esther 6:3, 6:4. A pericope to 6:13 is ascribed to R. Judah bar 'Ilai, though not formally designated as a *baraita*; most witnesses introduce it with the word *darash*, "expounded."

*Amora'im* from both Babylonia<sup>408</sup> and the Land of Israel,<sup>409</sup> with the Palestinian component being much more prominent.

Regarding our text from a source-critical perspective, we cannot help but be struck by the remarkable concentration in this section of anonymous materials.<sup>410</sup> According to the views prevailing in talmudic scholarship, we should expect such passages to conform to the usual taxonomy of the “*setama di-gemara*”: Aramaic passages which contain no new source-material, but rather discuss and develop the attributed tannaitic and amoraic traditions. This characterization does not fit most of the instances that were encountered in this chapter. The long and dramatic midrashic retelling of how Haman was commanded by Ahasuerus to lead Mordecai in an honorary procession through the streets of Shushan, how the original orders were augmented with additional orders to bathe his enemy and cut his hair, and how his daughter came to pour the contents of a chamber-pot on his head and then plummet to her death, can by no stretch of the imagination be viewed as mere editorial expansion.<sup>411</sup> It would appear, rather, that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash were drawing these anonymous materials from an existing source which had already formulated these narratives as a continuous account without identifying their authors. There are two principal candidates for such a source: Much of the same material is found, albeit with significant variations, in the classical Palestinian

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<sup>408</sup> Babylonian *Amora'im* include: Rava (or Rabbah) (commenting on Esther 6:1 and 7:8); Rav (on 6:12).

<sup>409</sup> Palestinian *Amora'im* include: R. Tanḥum (commenting on Esther 6:1); R. Isaac Nappaḥa (to 6:2); R. Shela of Kefar Tamarta (to 6:2); R. Joḥanan (on 6:13); R. Abbahu (on 7:5); R. Eleazar (on 7:6 and 7:8); R. Ḥama bar Ḥanina.

<sup>410</sup> The pertinent passages are attached to the following verses of Esther: 6:10; 6:11; 6:12; 6:13; 6:14 (this last comment is in Hebrew and might be a *baraita*); 7:4; 7:7-8 (the beginning of this passage is in Hebrew, but this is probably the consequence of its use of formal hermeneutical terminology); 7:10 (in Hebrew).

<sup>411</sup> The possibility of the anonymous comments stemming from late editorial activity is greater in the case of shorter comments. Thus, the explanation of Esther 6:12 is really just a repetition of material that was brought originally (though anonymously!) in connection with 6:11.

midrashic collections, including *Leviticus rabbah*, *Pesiqta derav kahana* and others. The aggadic embellishments to the story are also incorporated into the known Aramaic Targums. While it is generally held that the extant Targums to Esther are both later than the Babylonian Talmud, of which they make frequent use, it is nevertheless possible that the formulators of the Esther-Midrash were drawing upon a targumic tradition which was current in their time, a possibility which would easily account for both the anonymity of the text and its Aramaic language. In the present circumstances, I tend to favor the possibility that the material originated in Palestinian midrashic works.<sup>412</sup>

As regards the ideas and narrative motifs which were encountered in this segment of the Esther-Midrash, the variation was rather limited.<sup>413</sup> Several of the exegetical concerns which found expression here were continuations from the earlier sections. Thus, we again witness the homilists' desire to discern divine or supernatural (usually angelic) activity behind the developments in the story, and to emphasize that the forces ranged against Mordecai and Esther were so formidable that they could not have been overcome by mortal stratagems.<sup>414</sup> The

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<sup>412</sup> I acknowledge the fact that not all the passages in question are found in the classical *midrashim*; the two stories which are attested there are the account of the encounter between Haman and Mordecai's students about the efficacy of the *'omer* or meal-offering; and the episode about Haman's acting as Mordecai's bath-attendant, barber and stirrup. Missing are the dialogue between Haman and Ahasuerus about which Mordecai was intended, and the story of Haman's daughter and the chamber-pot. All these passages are found in the Targums, and most of them also occur in later aggadic works like *Panim aherim B* and *Pirqei derabbi eli'ezer*.

<sup>413</sup> There is but a single allusion to messianic themes (apparently) in R. Shela of Kefar Tamarta's comment on Esther 6:2. The issue of the fate of the Temple, which was so central to earlier segments of the Esther-Midrash, receives only minor mention here; e.g., in the discussion about the meal-offering and (obliquely, to be sure) in the allusion to Shimshai the scribe in connection with Esther 6:2. The treatment of characters as timeless archetypes is implied by Zeresh's characterizations of the various Israelite tribes in the pericope on 6:13.

<sup>414</sup> This is true of the comments to Esther 6:1; 6:2; 7:6; 7:7; 7:8; 7:10.

midrash also continues to invoke halakhic concepts and institutions.<sup>415</sup> Especially prominent here were the dualistic typology of Jewish-Pagan relations,<sup>416</sup> and the utter glee with which Haman's downfall was continually magnified.<sup>417</sup> The satisfaction of the Jewish congregation demanded more than the summary execution and impalement that are depicted in the biblical tale, so the homilists exploited every possible opportunity to read into the story details which would slow the pace of the Jewish victory and heap upon the villain all manner of humiliations, discomforts and tribulations. By the end of the chapter Haman is not just defeated and hanged, but he has been utterly broken and degraded.

We should also acknowledge that several of the comments contained in this chapter did not seem to have any overt homiletical purpose, but rather were rooted in the rabbis' desire to explain and clarify the words and events of the biblical story.<sup>418</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> The most obvious example is the conversation between Haman and Mordecai's disciples about the efficacy of the meal offering.

<sup>416</sup> See the pericopes to Esther 6:2; 6:3; 6:11 (the use of Deuteronomy 33:29); 6:13; 7:9 (vilifying Harbona). A more favorable assessment of Gentiles is suggested in R. Johanan's comment to 6:13.

<sup>417</sup> This tendency is most strongly pronounced in the passages expounding Esther 6:10–11; see also to 7:7–8.

<sup>418</sup> This would appear to be true of Rava's psychological explanation of Ahasuerus' insomnia (in Esther 6:1) and why it culminated in his ordering the reading of the royal chronicles; the discerning of an ironic *double entendre* in 6:4; Rav's explanation of 6:12; see also to 6:14; 7:4; 7:5; 7:7; 7:8 (Rava).

## Chapter Fourteen

### Joseph and His Brothers

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Our next pericope consists of a collection of seven interpretations by R. Benjamin bar Japheth<sup>1</sup> in the name of R. Eleazar. All of them deal with the story of Joseph and his brothers, and several focus specifically on the figure of Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> The collection is brought here because the first dictum in the series cites Esther 8:15.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> He was a third-generation Palestinian *Amora*, a student and tradent of R. Johanan. See Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 231.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that R. Eleazar's comments have been assembled from discourses for the appropriate lections in Genesis. See our discussion above concerning the compendium by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Hanina (15a-b). If R. Benjamin b. Japhet was responsible for the selection of the dicta, then it is conceivable that he was showing a personal interest in traditions dealing with his biblical namesake. On the connection between the names of (possibly pseudepigraphic) sages and the subject-matter of their attributed traditions see Reuben Margaliot, *Leheqer shemot vekhinnuyim ba-talmud*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), 5.

<sup>3</sup> The order of the comments does not follow the order of the verses in Genesis. Rather it is as follows: 45:22; 45:15; 45:14; 45:12; 45:23; 50:18 [or: 47:31]; 50:21. As regards the location of the first tradition, it is understandable that it was moved to the head of the collection because, by creating the connection to Esther, it provided the justification for the presence of the entire series in the Esther-Midrash. It is not clear however why the second dictum does not follow the two comments on 45:12. Note that the Genizah fragment Antonin 247 reverses the order of the last two items.

As we shall have occasion to remark below, the Palestinian parallels to the last of the units (to Genesis 50:21) are contained within homiletical proems, mostly to Isaiah 40:1. It is not unlikely that the collection as a whole originated in such a proem, though no such text (expounding more than that one verse) is extant.



<b>MSS Y, N, B, Mf, Spanish family, Printings, YS, AgE, Genizah fragment</b>	<b>MS G</b> (with variants from MSS L, M, <b>R*, W</b> )
	4[1] To all of them; [2] he fell; <sup>5</sup> [3-4 (?)] <sup>6</sup> he saw; [5] his father; [6] he went; <sup>7</sup> [7] and he comforted <sup>8</sup> —a mnemonic <sup>9</sup>

### 1. Five Royal Garments

[16a] “*And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue etc.*” (Esther 8:15).

It is written:<sup>10</sup> “*To all of them he gave each man changes of raiment; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of raiment*” (Genesis 45:22).

Is it possible that the thing in which that righteous man<sup>11</sup> stumbled,<sup>12</sup> [16b] his seed<sup>13</sup> should stumble!

<sup>4</sup> MSS M, R\*, W add: “A mnemonic.”

<sup>5</sup> “he fell”—MS W: “he falls”; ~ in MS M.

<sup>6</sup> None of the witnesses record a separate mnemonic for dictum #4. Rabbinowicz (*Diqduqé Soferim*, n. \*) attributes this to the fact that units #3 and #4 are based on the same biblical verse. The explanation is not entirely satisfying, and we might be dealing with a textual error in the common prototype of all the witnesses.

<sup>7</sup> “he went”—~ in MS M.

<sup>8</sup> “saw...consoled”—~ in MS L.

<sup>9</sup> “a mnemonic”—~ in MSS M, R\*, W.

<sup>10</sup> “It is written”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>11</sup> “righteous man”—~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

<sup>12</sup> “stumbled”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; in all other witnesses: “was troubled.”

<sup>13</sup> “his seed”—MSS G, M, R, Mf, Printings, YS: “he.”

For<sup>14</sup> R. Ḥama bar Ḥaninah<sup>15</sup> says:<sup>16</sup> R. Ḥama bar Gorias says {in the name of} Rav:<sup>17</sup>

<p>MSS <b>Y, B, O, P, EY, HgT<sup>1</sup>, Printings, AgE</b></p>	<p><b>MS G</b> (with variants from MSS <b>N, W, Mf, Ashkenazic family, HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS</b>)</p>
	<p>A person should not ever<sup>18</sup> treat his son<sup>19</sup> differently from among<sup>20</sup> his sons, for</p>

because of two *sela's*<sup>21</sup> weight of fine wool which Jacob<sup>22</sup> added<sup>23</sup> for Joseph,<sup>24</sup> his brothers became jealous of him and the matter developed<sup>25</sup> and they<sup>26</sup> went down into Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> “For”— ~ in MSS **M, R**.

<sup>15</sup> “Ḥama bar Ḥaninah”—thus only in MS **Y** and **AgE**; MS **M**: “Rabbah bar Jeremiah”; in all other witnesses: “Rabbah [or: “Rava”] bar Maḥasia.”

<sup>16</sup> “R. Ḥama bar Ḥaninah says”— ~ in MS **L**..

<sup>17</sup> “R. Ḥama bar Gorias...Rav”— ~ in MS **P**.

<sup>18</sup> “ever”— ~ in **HgT<sup>2</sup>**.

<sup>19</sup> “his son”— ~ in MS **M** (and filled in in **M\***).

<sup>20</sup> “among”—MSS **L, R, HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS**: “the rest of”; **YS**: “the custom of the rest of.”

<sup>21</sup> “*sela's*”— ~ in MS **B** (and filled in in **B\***).

<sup>22</sup> MSS **O, W** add: “our father.”

<sup>23</sup> “added”—**MhG**: “made”; **AgE**: “returned” (?).

<sup>24</sup> MSS **G, N, B, L, W, Mf, Spanish family** add: “over the rest of his sons”; **Printings** add: “over the rest of his brothers.”

<sup>25</sup> “his brothers became jealous...developed”—MS **B**: “the matter developed and his brothers became jealous of him.”

<sup>26</sup> “they”—thus only in **Yemenite family**.

And he is<sup>27</sup> acting towards<sup>28</sup> Benjamin in such a manner that his brothers will become jealous of him?!<sup>29</sup>

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth;<sup>30</sup> Says R. Eleazar;<sup>31</sup> A hint<sup>32</sup> did he suggest to him<sup>33</sup> <sup>34</sup> that there was destined to proceed from him<sup>35</sup> a descendant<sup>36</sup> who would go out in<sup>37</sup> five royal garments. <sup>38</sup>

And who is he?<sup>39</sup>—Mordecai.<sup>40</sup> As it says:<sup>41</sup> “*And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.*”

The objection, which is phrased in the Hebrew that characterizes formal Amoraic dicta, was probably posed by R. Benjamin bar Japheth.<sup>42</sup> However the statement of R. Ḥama bar Gorio<sup>43</sup> was undoubtedly added by the redactor from a separate source. It originates in

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<sup>27</sup> **Spanish family** adds: “again.”

<sup>28</sup> “acting towards”—thus only in MS Y and AgE; MS P: “doing an additional thing to”; in all other witnesses: “doing a thing to.”

<sup>29</sup> **Spanish family, YS** add: “Rather.”

<sup>30</sup> “Says...Japheth”—Genizah fragment: “Says R. Benjamin”; ~ in YS.

<sup>31</sup> “Says R. Eleazar”—~ in **Printings, YS**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>32</sup> “A hint”—~ in MSS O, P, MhG.

<sup>33</sup> “to him”—~ in MS R.

<sup>34</sup> **AgE** adds: “He said to him.”

<sup>35</sup> “to proceed from him”—~ in Genizah fragment (and filled in in margin).

<sup>36</sup> “a descendant”—**MhG**: “Mordecai”; Genizah fragment: “one.”

<sup>37</sup> “go out in”—**Printings**: “go out from the presence of the king”; **MhG**: “wear.”

<sup>38</sup> “garments”—**MhG**: “decorations.”

<sup>39</sup> “And who is he?”—~ in **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>40</sup> “Mordecai”—**AgE**: “This is Mordecai.”

<sup>41</sup> “says”—MSS G, N, B, W, Mf, **Spanish family, Ashkenazic family, YS**: “is written.”

<sup>42</sup> See Shamma Friedman, “A Critical Study of *Yevamot X* with a Methodological Introduction,” *Texts and Studies: Analecta Judaica* 1 (1977), 301-2, 310.

<sup>43</sup> See Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 2:86.

a collection of sayings by R. Ḥama in the name of Rav<sup>44</sup> that is found in *TB Shabbat* 10b.<sup>45</sup>

R. Eleazar's explanation is that, since it is inconceivable that Joseph should have acted so stupidly in terms of the psychological and moral rationales for his behavior towards Benjamin, we must therefore seek another, different significance for the fact that he had not learned the lesson of Jacob's mistakes,<sup>46</sup> and insisted on preferring Benjamin

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<sup>44</sup> A dictum that is virtually identical to Rav's is ascribed to R. Simeon b. Laqish in the name of R. Eleazar ben Azariah in *Genesis rabbah*, 84:8 (1010), except that there the consequence that is mentioned is limited to the fact that Joseph's brothers came to despise him. It is possible that Rav's innovation here was to expand the historical implications of what appears on the face of it to be a purely domestic dispute. A version that bears a closer resemblance to Rav's is contained in *Tanhuma, Vayyeshev*, 4 as part of a discourse whose main body seems to be attributed to R. Joshua ben Qorḥah [cf. Buber's n. 13 to *Aggadat bereshit*, 61:3 (p. 123)]: "For the sake of the 'coat of many colors' he caused all the tribes to descend into Egypt."

<sup>45</sup> *Shabbat* 10b-11a contains ten dicta on assorted topics by Rava b. Maḥasia in the name of R. Ḥama bar Goria in the named of Rav. The conclusion of that pericope is constructed in such a way that the criticism voiced against Jacob's preferential treatment of Joseph is made to stand, whereas Joseph's apparent favoring of Benjamin is reinterpreted.

Kasher [*Torah shelema*, 7 (8):1659-60, #79] cites several medieval discussions which focus on the problem that veiled hints about the destinies of generations yet unborn do not adequately refute the immediate charges of Jacob's favoritism. The framers of such objections are missing the point of midrashic exposition, where archetypal relationships do unite distant generations, and not only because of the presumed prophetic gifts that were vouchsafed the ancients.

<sup>46</sup> There is an operative assumption that no such justification is required for Jacob's favoring Joseph in the first place, an action that continues to stand condemned and criticized by the Talmud. This might simply reflect the literary fact that the homilist was uninterested in that aspect of the story or had no serviceable solution at hand. Nevertheless, the reasoning here is internally consistent as it implies that Joseph's conduct was more unforgivable precisely because he had had the opportunity to learn—and suffer—from his father's ill-advised behavior towards him. Jacob, on the other hand, had to make his own mistakes.

Of course had the midrash required it, the argument could have been reversed, as noted by several biblical commentators: Joseph had much more reason to treat Benjamin with affection because the two had the same mother, and because Benjamin had not been involved in his sale to the Egyptians. See Maharsha and Kasher (to *Vayyigash*). Many of the commentators are equally sensitive to the midrash's selec-

over his other siblings.<sup>47</sup> According to R. Eleazar this was not a display of discriminatory treatment, but rather a sort of prophetic signal<sup>48</sup> of the fate that would befall one of Benjamin's most illustrious descendants, Mordecai, when he would be celebrated by the Persian emperor and honored with royal robes.<sup>49</sup>

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tiveness in ignoring Joseph's other gift to Benjamin, the three hundred pieces of silver—a sum for which no explanation, symbolic or otherwise, is provided. Similarly prophetic explanations of Joseph's coat are supplied by later commentators; e.g., Jacob Gellis, ed., *Sefer tosafot hashalem: Commentary on the Bible* (Jerusalem: "Mifal Tosafot Hashalem" Publishing, 1982-), 4:15-6; 221-3; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 2:114; 5:355, n. 288.

<sup>47</sup> See the variant readings to the Talmud text. Rashi insisted that the correct reading must be as follows: "Is it possible that a matter in which that righteous man stumbled, he himself would stumble?" This is explained as follows in *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia*: "For the subject is not his descendants." I.e., Rashi understood that the subject of both clauses had to be Joseph, who had suffered from Jacob's favoritism and was now treating Benjamin similarly. It is at least as likely, however, that the subject of the first clause is Jacob, and that the comparison is being drawn between Jacob's treatment of his children and Joseph's of his brothers. Admittedly Rashi's reading produces a more pointed accusation, in the way that it focuses on Joseph's apparent failure to learn from his own experiences. See Kasher, *Torah shelemah* 7 (8):1659–60 and sources cited there. In the manuscript of *Moshav zeqenim* brought there it reads "And this is (according to what people say) [probable reading: what it says]: Is it possible [אינשי ← אפשר]: 'That in the very matter in which that righteous man stumbled'—by inciting envy—'his children should also stumble!'—i.e., Joseph."

<sup>48</sup> There is no indication that Benjamin actually understood the allusion. Conceivably the meaning of Joseph's gesture was only meant to become apparent once Mordecai had been elevated to greatness (see reference to Kasher, above). It is probably unfair to straightjacket the midrash into linear historical perceptions that are alien to its essential nature.

<sup>49</sup> On the significance of the measurement "two *sela*'s of fine wool" see Rashi to *Shabbat* 10b, Maharsha, Kasher, *op. cit.*, 6(7):1397, #43. *Genesis rabbah* attaches the blame to the "coat of many colors," whereas both *Tanhuma* and *Aggadat bereshit* refer to an additional "strip of purple" (cf. Mishnah *Bava meši'a* 2:1) which distinguished Joseph's robe, evidently an allusion to his royal position. On the significance of purple in rabbinic and classical literature see Ignaz Ziegler, *Die Königsleichnisse des Midrasch beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit*, 1-2; Samuel Krauss, *Paras veromi ba-talmud uva-midrashim*, 43-4. The allusion to purple would of course fit naturally with the mention of *argaman* as part of Mordecai's regal apparel in Esther 8:15.

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## 2. Benjamin's Necks

[16b] “*And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck [literally: necks], and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck[s]*” (Genesis 45:14).

How<sup>50</sup> many necks did<sup>51</sup> Benjamin have?<sup>52</sup> 53 54

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On “fine wool” (מִילָה) see A. S. Hershberg, “Ha-šemer veba-pishtah bimei ha-mishnah veba-talmud,” *Ha-qedem* 2 (1911), 61; S. Krauss, *Qadmoniyyot ha-talmud*, 2:2:39-40; *Idem.*, *Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum*, 2:335-6; *Idem.*, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:137; 530-1, n. 92; L. Lewysohn, *Die Zoologie des Talmuds*, 154-5.

The identification of the five garments which are being mentioned in the verse is not obvious, and does not seem to have been of great concern to the commentators. The verse itself divides the wardrobe into three syntactical units: (1) “*royal apparel of blue and white*”; (2) “*a great crown of gold*”; and (3) “*a robe of fine linen and purple*.” There are several items which the midrash might have treated as separate units in order to reach the desired total of five, but the most likely solution is that “*royal apparel*” is being treated as a general heading, so that the five garments are: (1) blue; (2) white; (3) crown of gold; (4) robe of fine linen; and (6) purple. Cf. the “Anonymous Commentary” quoted by Alkabetz, who (for homiletical purposes) divides them into: (1) royal apparel; (2) blue; (3) white; (4) crown of gold; (5) robe of fine linen and purple.

<sup>50</sup> “How”—MSS N, Mf, HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS: “And how.”

<sup>51</sup> “did”—Genizah fragment: “does.”

<sup>52</sup> “How many...have”—YS: “Did Benjamin have two necks?”; ~ in MSS M, R.

<sup>53</sup> The question is worded in Aramaic in most, but not all, of the witnesses, indicating that it is not original to the talmudic pericope. The exceptions are: MSS N, L, YS, MhG. In some versions the difference between the languages is barely discernible, based on the variation between א ו and א ך.

<sup>54</sup> Printings, YS, MhG add: “Rather.”

—Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth:<sup>55</sup> Says R. Eleazar:<sup>56</sup> 57 Joseph<sup>58</sup> wept over the two Temples<sup>59</sup> that<sup>60</sup> were destined to be<sup>61</sup> in the portion of Benjamin<sup>62</sup> and were destined to be destroyed.<sup>63</sup>

*“And Benjamin wept upon his necks”*<sup>64</sup> 65—over the Tabernacle<sup>66</sup> of Shiloh, which was destined to be<sup>67</sup> in the portion of Joseph and was destined to be destroyed.<sup>68</sup>

The Hebrew word for neck, *šavvar*, can be treated as a morphologically plural form even when it denotes a semantically singular limb. For the midrashic homilist, the choice between singular or plural is, like everything else in a divinely authored text, not considered to be accidental.<sup>69</sup> As in the previous dictum, R. Eleazar’s explanation of the textual difficulty is based on the midrashic approach which views bibli-

55 “Says...Japheth”— ~ in MSS G, R, **Printings**, **MhG**, Genizah fragment.

56 “Says R. Eleazar”— ~ in **MhG**, Genizah fragment.

57 MS P, **EY** add: “This teaches that.”

58 “Joseph”—Genizah fragment: “Benjamin”; MS **Mf**: “he.”

59 “two Temples”—MS P, **EY**, **MhG**: “the First Temple and [MS P adds: “over”] the Second Temple.”

60 “over...that”—**YS**: “that two Temples.”

61 “were destined to be”—**MhG**: “are.”

62 “the portion of Benjamin”—**EY**: “his portion.”

63 “and were destined to be destroyed”—**MhG**: “as it is written: ‘*and he shall dwell between his shoulders*’ (Deuteronomy 33:12).”

64 “*upon his necks*”— ~ in MSS G, L, R, **HgT2**.

65 **YS** adds: “It is written.” MS O, **EY**, **Printings** add: “He wept.”

66 “Tabernacle”—MS N: “Temple.”

67 “over the...to be”—**YS**: “He saw that the Tabernacle of Shiloh was destined to be built.”

68 “Joseph wept...destined to be destroyed”—Genizah fragment: “Benjamin weeps over the Tabernacle of Shiloh which was destined to be in the portion of Joseph and was destined to be destroyed. Joseph is weeping over the two Temples that were destined to be in the portion of Benjamin and were destined to be destroyed.”

69 On the exegetical issues arising from this passage see Eliezer Segal, “The Exegetical Craft of the *Zohar*: Towards an Appreciation,” *AJS Review* 17 (1:1992), 33-5, where much of the current discussion is duplicated.

cal protagonists as trans-historical archetypes who embody eternally recurring themes and values. He also ascribes to Joseph and Benjamin a degree of prophetic inspiration that enables them to discern future events in their present experiences. Here the midrash is alluding to some fundamental facts of Jewish religious history: The two Temples in Jerusalem were housed within the tribal territory of Benjamin,<sup>70</sup> whereas the sanctuary at Shiloh was situated in the region belonging to Joseph's son Ephraim.<sup>71</sup> Bearing these facts in mind, it is not difficult to understand how R. Eleazar, responding to the plural usage of Joseph's weeping on [or, as the Hebrew permits: "over"] Benjamin's "necks,"<sup>72</sup> was able to discern in the episode a prophetic insight into the

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<sup>70</sup> Jerusalem was situated on the border between Judah and Benjamin; see Joshua 15:8, 63. However it is enumerated among the cities that were apportioned to Benjamin (Joshua 18:28; Judges 1:21). But cf. Judges 1:8, which poses a contradiction which occupied the rabbis.

<sup>71</sup> See Joshua 16:1-10; Judges 21:19.

<sup>72</sup> Similar exegesis is found in *Genesis rabbah*, 93:7 (1161) and 93:12 (1170) [see Albeck's comments to 1170]; Targum "Jonathan" to Genesis 45:14. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 2:13; 5:355.

The hermeneutical observation makes fine sense as applied to the first part of the verse, which tells of Joseph's lamenting over the two necks [or Temples] of Benjamin. The second part, where Benjamin is said to be weeping over a single destroyed sanctuary, is however problematic. The midrashic deduction would fit neatly if the word for "neck" appeared in the singular form. Unfortunately though, it does not, and the symmetry of the homily and its exegetical logic are thereby marred. The traditional commentators have proposed several solutions to the problem. Some have drawn the conclusion that underlying the midrashic interpretations was a biblical text which did actually switch from the plural to the singular form, thereby furnishing the basis for the homily. Regrettably, the existence of such a text is not attested. On the question see the exhaustive discussion in Albeck's note to *Genesis rabbah*. As remarked there, the second clause, about Shiloh, is missing in most of the witnesses to the first passage. Albeck observes that several authorities make reference to a singular form in the second part of the verse, which would obviate the need for the Talmud's problematic question. He also refers to C. D. Ginsburg's edition of the Masorah [*The Massorah Compiled from Manuscripts* (London, 1880)], which records the singular form in the name of "other versions," though no one else seems able to locate an actual manuscript that contains that reading. Cf. the remarks of R. Yedidiah Norzi in his *Minḥat shai*, who also questioned the existence of such a reading, on the basis of the known Masoretic traditions.



future destinies of the two sanctuaries,<sup>73</sup> which was, more than any personal emotions that might have overcome them on the occasion,<sup>74</sup> the real cause of their tears.

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On the basis of the above exegetical difficulties Rashi proposed to emend the Talmud's text here, insisting that the question "How many necks did Benjamin have?" be deleted since the use of the plural of "neck" is the rule rather than an exception. Ignoring for the moment the fact that the objectionable question is attested in all known manuscripts except for those Ashkenazic witnesses which consistently incorporate Rashi's emendations [see E. L. Segal, "'The Goat of the Slaughterhouse...'" —On the Evolution of a Variant Reading in the Babylonian Talmud," *Tarbiz* 49 (1979-80):50], it is clear (as several commentators have observed) that in solving the one difficulty, Rashi has created another: i.e., without emphasis on the singulars and plurals there is no longer any visible textual foundation for the homily. On this point see, e.g., the objection of R. Josiah Pinto regarding the dubious coherence of the connection once the question has been deleted. Several of the supercommentaries to Rashi on the Pentateuch make their own attempts to justify the talmudic reading by positing finer grammatical distinctions. E.g.: Admittedly the plural is used in both clauses; in one however it is normal (in a construct form), while in the other it is unusual (as a possessive), and hence subject to midrashic exposition. Alternatively: *šavvarei* is always plural, and *šavvaro* is always singular; however *šavvarav* can be either, so that it can be expounded in both senses. See R. Elijah Mizrahi and *Gur arieh* to the Pentateuch, and Maharsha to our pericope. All of this strikes us as too subtle and elaborate to have been presupposed by our pericope or its parallels.

We may note in passing that the plural construct form of *šavvar* does occur, if extremely rarely, in rabbinic Hebrew, though the matter should be reexamined according to reliable manuscripts. See e.g. Mishnah *Kelim* 14:4 where the reading is supported by the Kaufmann, Parma and Cambridge (Lowe) manuscripts.

As noted by the author of the *Zohar* (*Vayyigash*, 209b) the midrashic association between necks and the Sanctuaries most likely suggested itself because of biblical passages like Song of Songs 4:4 "Thy neck is like a tower of David builded with turrets." See also the reading of **MhG** recorded above, which evokes Deuteronomy 33:12, a passage whose reference to God's dwelling "between his shoulders" has traditionally been applied to the Temple. See the sources indicated in the notes to Solomon Fisch, *Midrash Haggadol on the Pentateuch: Deuteronomy* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1975), 766-9. See in detail Segal, "The Exegetical Craft of the *Zohar*," cited above.

<sup>73</sup> On the destruction of Shiloh see Jeremiah 7:12, 14; 21:6, 9.

<sup>74</sup> If we opt to accept Rashi's emendation, then we should probably understand that R. Eleazar's comment is based merely on the facts of the narrative: i.e., what was it that moved Joseph and Benjamin to shed tears on what ought to be a happy occasion [and excluding the possibility that weeping can be an expression of pure joy]? Such an in-

### 3. "It Is My Mouth That Speaketh Unto You"

[16b] "And behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you" (Genesis 45:12).

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth:<sup>75</sup> Says R. Eleazar:<sup>76</sup> He said to them:<sup>77</sup> Just as I have<sup>78</sup> nothing in my heart against Benjamin<sup>79</sup> who was not involved in my sale, so do I have nothing in my heart against you who were involved in my sale.<sup>80</sup>

R. Eleazar is sensitive to the peculiar formulation of Joseph's address to his brothers,<sup>81</sup> in which he singles out Benjamin in spite of the fact that his words should be directed to all of them equally.<sup>82</sup> R. Eleazar explains, not unreasonably, that by means of this nuance Joseph was implying a comparison between his present feelings towards Benjamin and towards the other brothers.<sup>83</sup> Just as he never had reason to entertain any animosity towards Benjamin, so has he (at least at the

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terpretation could not attach exegetical significance to the numbers (one Tabernacle vs. two Temples).

<sup>75</sup> "Says...Japheth"— ~ in **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>76</sup> "Says R. Eleazar"— ~ in Genizah fragment.

<sup>77</sup> "He said to them"—MSS N, B, Genizah fragment: "Said Joseph to his brothers"; ~ in MSS P, R\*.

<sup>78</sup> "have"—Genizah fragment: "had."

<sup>79</sup> All witnesses except MS Y add: "my brother."

<sup>80</sup> "who were involved in my sale"— ~ in MS P, **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>81</sup> Maharsha connects this verse with Joseph's pledge in verse 6 above that he will maintain them all through the remaining years of famine.

<sup>82</sup> Maharsha: "For Benjamin was [already] included in 'your eyes see.'" For some different attempts to explain this phenomenon see Zev Gotlieb and Abraham Darom, eds., *Be'ur 'al hattorah lerabbi 'ovadiah sforno* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1980), 109; Ch. D. Chavell, ed., *Hizquni: Perushei hattorah lerabbenu hizqiah b"r manoah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981), 160.

<sup>83</sup> Pinto objects that the verse cannot really prove anything to the brothers since it can be read just as easily as a *contrast* between the innocent Benjamin and the other guilty brothers, and therefore it does not increase the credibility of Joseph's assurances to his brothers.

moment) no resentment left in his heart against his other brothers for selling him.<sup>84</sup>

#### 4. Mouth and Heart

[16b] "...*That it is my mouth [ki fi] that speaketh unto you*" (Genesis 45:12).

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth:<sup>85</sup> Says R. Eleazar:<sup>86</sup> Like my mouth [*kefi*] such is my heart.

This comment is based on a word play:<sup>87</sup> The Hebrew "*ki fi*," "*that my mouth*," is virtually identical to "*kefi*,"<sup>88</sup> "like my mouth," which suggests R. Eleazar's interpretation that this phrase also can be read as a profession of Joseph's sincerity, indicating a correspondence between Joseph's verbal utterances and his true convictions.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>84</sup> As stated in verse 8 above, Joseph regards the brothers as unwitting agents of a divine plan.

On the passage in general see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 2:112-3; 5:355, n. 284; Kasher, *Torah shelemah* 7 (8):1653, # 52. Neither lists any parallels to this dictum.

<sup>85</sup> "bar Japheth"— ~ in MS R.

<sup>86</sup> "Says R. Benjamin...Eleazar"— ~ in **Printings, YS**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>87</sup> The same words which are most conveniently rendered as in the ARV translation employed here, can also (and perhaps, more naturally) be read as "because *my mouth which speaketh unto you*," thereby creating an incomplete sentence that lacks a predicate. It is possible that R. Eleazar's interpretation involves an attempt to respond to that problem by filling in the missing clause.

<sup>88</sup> The comparative *ke* appears in Babylonian Aramaic as a separate word "*ki*"; see , J. N. Epstein *A Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic*, 138.

<sup>89</sup> See Ch. D. Chavell, ed., *Rabbenu bahya: be'ur 'al hattorah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1966), 1:355:

And in the midrash [The reference is to our pericope—E. S.]:  
 "...Like my mouth, such is my heart." The heart is not mentioned in the verse. However the sages expounded it as follows: Since he could have just said "That it is *I* who speaketh unto you," the fact that it said instead "*my mouth*" was because that which is placed in my mouth is a vessel for the heart through which it expresses its contents. On this basis they interpreted "Like my mouth, such is my heart."

Although it would not be difficult to imagine a variety of homiletical contexts in which the comment might have been used,<sup>90</sup> it nevertheless appears to have been inspired primarily by exegetical considerations.

### 5. “*The Good Things of Egypt*”

[16b] “*And to his father he sent after this manner, ten asses laden with the good things of Egypt*” (Genesis 45:23).

What is “*with the good things of Egypt*”?<sup>91</sup>

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth:<sup>92</sup> Says R.<sup>93</sup> Eleazar:<sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> He sent to him<sup>96</sup> wine which was acceptable to the elders.<sup>97</sup>

The midrash is concerned here with furnishing a specific referent to the undefined expression “*the good things of Egypt*” which Joseph sent to his father.<sup>98</sup> It is not clear why wine was singled out, though it

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As is common in such midrashic readings, it is not quite clear whether R. Eleazar is claiming that the Bible is giving us an abbreviated version of Joseph’s actual words or (and this seems more probable) if it is presuming that the biblical protagonists were capable of understanding the subtle allusion and nuances that were embedded in each other’s words.

<sup>90</sup> See our analysis of the last of R. Benjamin bar Japheth’s traditions (to Genesis 50:21) below.

<sup>91</sup> “What... ‘...*Egypt*’”— Genizah fragment: “What did he send to him?”; ~ in MSS N, B, Spanish family (except HgT<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>92</sup> “bar Japheth”— ~ in MS R.

<sup>93</sup> “Says R.”— ~ in MS M (and filled in in M\*).

<sup>94</sup> “Says R. Benjamin...Eleazar”— Genizah fragment: “Says R. Isaac Nappaḥa”; ~ in YS.

<sup>95</sup> MSS N, L, M, Mf, YS, Genizah fragment add: “This teaches that.”

<sup>96</sup> MS W, EY, HgT<sup>1</sup> add: “old.” Genizah fragment adds: “‘*And he comforted them, and spake unto their heart*’ (Genesis 50:21)—Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth: Says R. Eleazar: Joseph spoke to his brothers words which are acceptable to the heart. He said to them: Just as ten lamps cannot extinguish a single lamp, how shall a single lamp be able to extinguish ten lamps!”

<sup>97</sup> Spanish family (except HgT) add: “And this is ‘*the good things of Egypt*.’”

<sup>98</sup> It is evident that the question “What are the ‘*good things of Egypt*’” is not original to the Amoraic pericope, as is indicated by the facts that it is formulated in Aramaic, it is

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probably owes largely to the fact that “*corn and bread and meat*” were already enumerated separately. R. Eliezer thus tried to identify a food item<sup>99</sup> that would be pleasing to a man of Jacob's advanced age.<sup>100</sup>

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missing in some texts, it is transferred to the end of the unit in the Spanish tradition, and there are textual variations in its wording. In theory this could open the possibility that the comment was *not* made originally with reference to this particular scriptural expression. However it appears most likely that R. Eleazar's statement originated as an explanation of the words “*the good things.*”

<sup>99</sup> The word “wine” is also supplied here by Targum “Jonathan” [Michael Maher, transl., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible: The Targums, M. McNamara *et al.*, eds. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 148 (and n. 21); M. Ginsburger, ed., *Pseudo-Jonathan (Thargum Jonathan ben Uziel zum Pentateuch)* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1903), 85 (and n. 6); David Ridder, ed., *Targum yonatan ben 'uzzi' el 'al ha-torah* (Jerusalem: 1974), 1:90 (and n. 12); M. Kasher, *Torah shelemah* 7 (8):1661, #82].

Maharsha remarks that wine was included in the list of products for which the Land of Israel was renowned (Deuteronomy 8:8)—though this would hardly serve as proof for the excellence of Egyptian wine. He adds that the large quantity which Joseph sent could only have been required by an old man who needed the beverage in order to keep warm.

Virtually all the commentators understood the allusion as being to the *quality* of the wine and its appropriateness to the needs of the aged. Such an interpretation is also supported by the textual traditions which specify that it was “old” wine. I nevertheless propose, with much hesitation, as an alternative interpretation, that the comment might refer to the wine's *halakhic* fitness; i.e., Joseph was able to send to his father a shipment of wine which, in spite of its being produced in the infamous heathen environment of Egypt, was nevertheless free of the contamination that would result from contact with idolaters and hence it satisfied the halakhic demands of the “elders”; i.e., the Jewish religious sages. This explanation would add a homiletical dimension in that it extols Joseph for maintaining his religious integrity in pagan surroundings—a theme which the preacher could easily apply to the situation of his own community.

On wine and its production in the talmudic world see Immanuel Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (Hildesheim: Georg Olm, 1967), 1:48-107 (on “old wine” see 1:60); S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 2:235-43; 611-7 (see especially 617, nn. 734-5); Jehuda Feliks, *Plant World of the Bible*, 3rd edition (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1976), 17-24. On its medical benefits see Fred Rosner, transl., *Julius Preuss' Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1978), 570.

<sup>100</sup> See Rashi.

## 6. When the Fox Has His Day

[16b] “*And his brethren also went and fell down before his face [and they said, Behold, we be thy servants]*” (Genesis 50:18).

Says Rabbi Benjamin bar Japheth:<sup>101</sup> Says R. Eleazar: This is what people say: When the fox has his day bow down to it.

The midrash<sup>102</sup> is amazed that Jacob’s proud sons could have been reduced to such a state of fawning servility before Joseph. In the

<sup>101</sup> “bar Japheth”— ~ in MS B ( and filled in in B\*).

<sup>102</sup> See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 2:168; Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 7(8):1879-80, #61. Cf. *Aggadat bereshit*, 94-6] [= *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *Vayyese*, 5; John T. Townsend, transl., *Midrash Tanḥuma: Vol. 1: Genesis* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1989), 179-80]: “Joseph abandoned himself to his fate when they were selling him... And now, his fortune turned and put him at an advantage, as it says ‘*And his brothers*, etc.’” The wording in these texts makes it amply clear that the point of the comment is that one should not waste one’s energies in resisting a person who is currently being favored by fate, since it is wiser to sit back and wait until the situation changes, as it inevitably will. As illustrations of this advice the midrash reminds us of Naboth’s futile resistance of Ahab, which is contrasted with the behavior of other biblical protagonists who preferred a policy of temporary strategic retreat (Abraham from Nimrod, Isaac from the Philistines, Jacob from Esau, Joseph from his brothers, Moses from Pharaoh, David from Naioth, Saul and Absalom), all of whom fled or appeased their enemies, waiting until the constellations could reverse themselves and they, like Joseph, could achieve ascendancy.

In an important chapter of his book *‘Olamah shel ha-’aggadah* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1972), 256-62, E. E. Hallevy correctly notes that the vocabulary employed by these rabbinic sources and others when speaking of the decisive importance of opportune timing makes it evident that the terminology and the philosophical patterns were borrowed from Greek thought, where the force of *kairos* (“the hour”; i.e., fate) is absolute. Hallevy adduces other rabbinic texts (e.g., *Mishnah Avot* 4:3; *TB Berakhot* 64a; *Mekhilta derabbi shim’on ben yoḥai*, 142) that praise the prudence of not resisting those who are currently chosen by fate; to which he matches an abundance of quotations from Greco-Roman sources. On 259-60 Hallevy discusses the corollary that “all people honor the one who is favored by Fate” (*Tanḥuma*, *Vayyese*, 3, applied to Jacob’s asking Joseph, and not any of the other brothers, to arrange his burial). Here too Hallevy is able to bring to bear many instructive parallels from the words and deeds of Greek and Latin writers and historical figures. It is against this ideological background that we should understand the midrash’s reference to Joseph at last enjoying his “hour” after previously submitting without resistance to his fate at the hands of his brothers.

end R. Eleazar does nothing to erase or interpret away this impression, but simply acknowledges, with a discernible measure of cynicism, that such is the way of the world,<sup>103</sup> and that prudence often instructs us to swallow our pride in the face of those who exercise power over us.

[16b] Is he<sup>104</sup> a “fox”?<sup>105</sup> And<sup>106</sup> in what lies his inferiority with respect to them?<sup>107 108</sup>

—Rather, says R. Isaac:<sup>109</sup> Thus was it said:

“*And Israel bowed himself upon the bed’s head*” (Genesis 47:31).

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth: Says R. Eleazar: This is as people say,<sup>110</sup> etc.<sup>111</sup>

As frequently occurs, especially in Babylonian aggadic discourse, the talmudic rabbis have approached R. Eleazar’s proverb<sup>112</sup> with a

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<sup>103</sup> On the syntax of the cited proverb see Zvi Talmon, “Linguistic Aspects of the Aramaic Proverb,” Ph. D. thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1984, 1:128. Variant readings are enumerated in the Appendix, # 197.

<sup>104</sup> “Is he”—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>105</sup> “Is he a ‘fox’?”—HgT<sup>1</sup>: “What is a ‘fox’? If you should say: Joseph”; ~ in MSS N, B, L\*, R, YS.

<sup>106</sup> “And”—thus only in MSS Y, B, EY; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>107</sup> “them”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “his brothers.”

<sup>108</sup> “Is he...to them”—Genizah fragment: “A fox? {With respect to} his brothers he was a king!”

<sup>109</sup> “says R. Isaac”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “If it was said.”

<sup>110</sup> “This is as people say”— ~ in MSS G (and filled in in G\*) L, R., W, Mf, HgT, Printings, MhG.

<sup>111</sup> “etc.”—thus only in MS Y; MS G: “[when a fox] has his day”; in all other witnesses: “When a fox has his day [“has his day”—Genizah fragment: (incomprehensible)] bow down to it.”

<sup>112</sup> On the exegetical function of the rabbinic *mashal* and its ambivalent relationships to its literary and hermeneutical contexts see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), especially 17-9, 37-45, 51-3.

narrow literalism.<sup>113</sup> No doubt the original point of the saying was that *even a fox*<sup>114</sup> enjoys its day in the sun.<sup>115</sup> The anonymous objector insists that the image be employed with full precision as implying that Joseph was regarded by his brothers as essentially inferior to themselves. Although we need not accept that Joseph was fully superior to them—in spite of the fact that his present success had placed him in a position of exalted power in the Egyptian court—what right did his siblings have to rate themselves as his betters?<sup>116</sup>

For this reason an alternative context is proposed for R. Eleazar's proverb: Genesis 47:31 which relates how Jacob, after obtaining Joseph's pledge to bury him in his ancestral tomb, " *bowed himself upon the bed's head.*" Since no one but Jacob and Joseph was known to be present in the room at the time, it is possible to understand that Jacob was prostrating himself before his son.<sup>117</sup> In this instance the hi-

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<sup>113</sup>On this phenomenon see Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development*, Sifriyyat Keter: 'Am yisra'el vetarbuto, 4: Hagut vehalakhah, J. Dan, ed. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 165-70.

<sup>114</sup> On foxes in rabbinic lore see L. Lewysohn, *Die Zoologie des Talmuds*, 77-81. I was unable to locate his article in *Jüdische Volksblatt* 1, 136, which apparently discusses this proverb in detail. From the sources adduced by Lewysohn it is evident that the fox was thought of proverbially as a lowly creature often contrasted with the majesty of the lion. See e.g., Mishnah *Avot* 4:15; *TP Shevi'it* 9:4 (39a) [Yehuda Feliks, *Talmud Yerushalmi: Tractate Shevi'it Critically Edited*, Part Two (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1986), 263]; *TB Bava qamma* 117a; E. E. Hallevy, *Aggadot ha'amora'im* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1977), 40.

<sup>115</sup> The English reader will undoubtedly feel more comfortable with Shakespeare's formulation (*Hamlet* 5:1:313) about how the "dog will have his day."

<sup>116</sup> Pinto analyzes the midrash's possible criteria for ranking superiority and inferiority. He argues that the brothers could not be belittling Joseph because of his youth, since Benjamin was even younger. Several of the brothers could be considered of lower status because their mothers were Jacob's concubines.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. J. Skinner *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary to Genesis*, International Critical Commentary, S. Driver, ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 503: "An act of worship, expressing gratitude to God for the fulfillment of his last wish..." Several of the classical Jewish commentators take special care to explain that Jacob was bowing in gratitude to God, and not before Joseph. See Aaron Greenbaum, ed., *The Biblical Commentary of Rav Samuel ben Hofni Gaon According to Geniza Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Harav Kook Institute, 1978), 316-7 and nn. 33-4; Hizquni



erarchical relationship between parent and child is a clear one, and hence the proverbial designation of Joseph as a “fox” in comparison with Jacob makes sense.

## 7. Speaking to the Heart

[16b] “*And he comforted them, and spake unto their heart*”<sup>118</sup>  
(Genesis 50:21).

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(ed. Chavell, 167); R. Joseph Bekhor-Shor [*Perush lehamish-shah humshei torah me'et r. yosef bekhore shor* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1968), 1:76]; Qimhi (ed. Kamleh, 201); Sforno (ed. Chavell, 114); Abraham Maimonides [Ephraim Judah Wisenberg, ed., *Perush rabbenu avraham ben haramba"m z"l 'al bereshit ushemot* (London: S. D. Sasoon, 1958), 186]. Cf. literalists such as Ibn Ezra (ed. Weiser, 1:124; according to one of his explanations) and Rashbam (ed. Bromberg, 64) who insist nonetheless that Jacob was bowing out of respect for Joseph. The material collected in *Tosafot Hashalem* (ed. Gellis, 5:9-10) reflects both approaches. See also Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:363, n. 348.

E. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman, eds. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 356-7, cites the Septuagint reading as τῆς ῥάβδου, reflecting the Hebrew *maṭṭeh* (staff), as symptomatic of the exegetical difficulty inherent in the verse. See Alan England Brooke and Norman McLean, eds., *The Old Testament in Greek* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 1:143. The reading also underlies the Syriac rendering *huṭra*; see Ch. Heller, ed., *Peshitta* (Berlin, 1927), 62 and n. 20; Arthur Vööbus, *The Pentateuch in the Version of the Syro-Hexapla*, Corpus Scriptorum Orientalium (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1975), 166; The Peshitta Institute, *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 1:1:56; Rud. Kittel, ed., *Biblia Hebraica* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1937), 74. The Septuagint reading was well-known to Jewish commentators in the Middle Ages as a “Christian” text (though it is not found in the Vulgate) which was understood by Christians to be an allusion to the cross, thereby transforming the exegetical question into a polemical issue. See Greenbaum, *Samuel ben Hofni*, *ibid.*; *Tosafot Hashalem*, 5:9; Isaac Samson Lange, ed., *Perush hattorah ler. hayyim palṭi'el* (Jerusalem: 1980), 152; *Sefer niṣṣaḥon* [in J. D. Eisenstein, ed., *Ozar Wikuḥim: A Collection of Polemics and Disputations* (Jerusalem: 1969), 240]; David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 59, 248 (English); 20 (Hebrew). See also Maharsha; Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 7 (8): 1737, #137.

<sup>118</sup> ARV: “*spake kindly unto them.*”

Says R. Benjamin bar Japheth: Says R. Eleazar:<sup>119</sup> <sup>120</sup> That he<sup>121</sup> spoke to them<sup>122</sup> words which are acceptable<sup>123</sup> to the heart:<sup>124</sup>

Just as ten lamps could not extinguish a single lamp, how shall a single lamp<sup>125</sup> be able to extinguish ten lamps!<sup>126</sup>

The biblical text suggests that after the consoling words which Joseph addressed to his brothers and which were reported in verses 19–21, Joseph persisted in his efforts to persuade them with additional words and arguments<sup>127</sup> which the narrator did not see fit to record.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> “Says R. Benjamin...Eleazar”— ~ in MS L, YS.

<sup>120</sup> **Spanish family, Ashkenazic family, MS Mf, Printings, YS** add: “This teaches.”

<sup>121</sup> “he”—MS N: “Joseph.”

<sup>122</sup> “them”—MS N: “his brothers.”

<sup>123</sup> “acceptable”—MSS P, Mf (before emendation): “compatible.”

<sup>124</sup> MSS N, B, W add: “He said to them”; MS R adds: “The words which he said to them.”

<sup>125</sup> “a single lamp”—MSS B, O, L, R, HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS: “it.”

<sup>126</sup> “*And he comforted...ten lamps*”— ~ in Genizah fragment (see above).

<sup>127</sup> *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 16:5 (ed. Mandelbaum, 271-2; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 293-4) and *Genesis rabbah*, 100:9 (1293-4) enumerate a series of different arguments by means of which Joseph strove to prove that he posed no threat to his brothers [I summarize them here according to their order in *Pesiqta derav kahana*; *Genesis rabbah* has a somewhat different arrangement]:

1) R. Simlai reasons that a head would never contemplate destroying the limbs of its own body. [See also Efraim Urbach, ed., *Sefer Arugat Habosem Auctore R. Abraham b. R. Azriel* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1939-63), 302.]

2) The tribes have been likened by Scripture to such imperishable things as the dust of the earth, the sand on the sea-shore [or according to *Genesis rabbah*: the beasts of the field], and the stars of the heavens.

3) Joseph would never try to counteract his father’s will.

4) Nor would he venture to oppose the divine purpose.

5) The existence of twelve tribes is an unalterable “law of nature” corresponding to the number of hours in the day and night, the months of the year and the constellations.

We have already seen that the midrashic exegetes<sup>129</sup> were unable to resist such an inviting challenge to reconstruct an appropriate

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6) The brothers constitute proof before the Egyptians that Joseph stems from freeborn stock and is not a mere slave. Joseph would not cause suspicion to be cast upon these claims.

7) Killing the brothers would destroy Joseph's moral reputation and credibility among the Egyptians. [#6 and #7 appear as one unit in *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, see below.] Hallevy (see below) cites an interesting parallel to this argument in the advice ascribed to Cyrus by Xenophon.

*Genesis rabbah* adds a further argument in elaboration of #2 and #5: "Ten stars wanted to destroy one star and did not succeed. With respect to the twelve tribes, then, how could I ever expect to alter the order of the universe, etc.?" This passage, which of course evokes Joseph's dream from Genesis 37:9, is substantially identical with the lamp analogy in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash. It should be noted that the parallel segment in *Tanhuma* (ed. Buber), *Shemot*, 2 (2:2), mentions neither lamps nor stars, but merely the numerical improbability of one overcoming ten. *Pesiqta rabbati*, 29-30B (29:6-9; ed. Friedmann, 138a; transl. Braude, 2:582-3) appears to agree with the Esther-Midrash's image of the ten lamps, but the passage in question is part of a reconstruction by Friedmann based on the Talmud (following the emendation of the traditional commentators. See Braude, n. 3).

Hallevy, '*Olamah shel ha-'aggadah*, 210-11 observes that for the ancient rhetor, as for the rabbis who expounded Joseph's behavior in the current episode, it was not considered sufficient to offer an insecure or distrustful person promises that they would not be hurt. Far better was a logical demonstration that it was improbable or undesirable for the speaker to inflict any harm on the threatened party.

<sup>128</sup> This seems to be the implication of the biblical text, though I do not know of any commentators who have discussed the matter.

See Buber's note to his edition of *Tanhuma*, *Shemot*, 2 (2:2, n. 15) according to which two manuscripts of *Tanhuma* read as follows: "The scriptural text is not lacking anything! What is '*unto their heart*'? —Words which are close [*semukhin*] to the heart" [Perhaps this should be emended to: Words which sustain (*somexhin*) the heart].

<sup>129</sup> Unlike the Esther-Midrash which, as usual, restricts itself to an exegetical analysis of the biblical text at hand, *Pesiqta derav kahana* and *Genesis rabbah* incorporate the commentary into a homiletical discourse, a proem for "*Shabbat nahamu*" (the Sabbath following the Ninth of Av). This is achieved by appending the concluding formula:

And is this not a *qal vahomer* argument: Just as Joseph, who addressed gentle words to the hearts of the tribes, was able thereby to console them—even so, when the Holy One will come to console Jerusalem, will he not do so all the more! This is what is written:

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continuation of Joseph's conversation with his brothers.<sup>130</sup> R. Eleazar also takes his exegetical cue from the verse's graphic image of speaking to a person's heart, which he explains as a figure of speech employed in order to indicate comfort and consolation.<sup>131</sup>

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"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem" (Isaiah 40:1-2).

See also *Pesiqta rabbati*, 29-30B; 30:4 (ed. Friedmann, 142a; transl. Braude, 2:596); 12:5 (496/1:230); *Song of Songs rabbah*, 8:1 [S. Dunsky, *Midrash rabbah: Shir ha-shirim, midrash hazita* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1980), 167]; *Exodus rabbah*, 5:10 [Avigdor Shinan, ed., *Midrash shemot rabbah: Chapters I-XIV* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1984), 152-3]. As noted astutely by Shinan, "the proper place of the unit, which extends to 5:1(3), should be after *Exodus rabbah*, 5:9 [pp. 158-62]... where it constitutes a remnant of a poem to Exodus 4:27." See the full discussion and references there.

Similarly, in *Tanḥuma* (ed. Buber), *Shemot*, 2, the interpretations of Genesis 50:21 function as part of a poem to Exodus 1:1.

<sup>130</sup> E. E. Hallevy, *Sha'arei ha-'aggadah*, revised edition (Tel-Aviv: Niv, 1982), 67: "Although the Torah has remained reticent and not informed us of the content of this conversation, no qualified student of rhetoric in the Hellenistic world would have any difficulty in supplying Joseph with a speech 'that should have been stated by him in accordance with the circumstances.'" The last allusion is to the famous words of Thucydides [1:22; transl. Foster (Loeb), 1:38-9], which typify the attitude of ancient historians to such phenomena.

<sup>131</sup> In *Genesis rabbah*, *ibid.*, the question is posed explicitly: "Do you ever find a man who speaks [literally] to the heart? —Rather, this refers to words which console the heart." As noted by Albeck, the same question is posed above in *Genesis rabbah* 80:7 (959) in connection with Genesis 34:3 where Shechem "spake unto the heart of the damsel"—to which the same reply is given: "Rather: Words which console the heart..."; the midrash there proceeds to supply Shechem with an appropriate argument.

The rendering "consolation" is given to "spake unto their heart" in most of the Aramaic Targums to the verse. Thus in Onkelos [Abraham Berliner, ed., *Targum Onkelos* (Berlin etc.: Gorzrlancyk, 1884), 59; Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic*, Volume 1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 88; Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*, *The Aramaic Bible: The Targums*, M. McNamara et al., eds (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 175 and n. 9]; "Jonathan" [ed. Ginsburger, 97 and n. 1; transl. Maher, 166]; "Jerusalem [fragmentary] Targum" [Moses Ginsburger, ed., *Das Fragmententargum Thargum jeruschalmi zum Pentateuch* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1899), 27]. Cf. the Neofiti Targum [Alejandro Díez Macho, ed., *Neophyti 1, Targum Palestinense, MS de la Biblioteca Vaticana: 1: Genesis*, *Textos y Estudios consajo de Redaccione*, J. M. M. Villicrosa

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As regards the content of Joseph's words, there does not seem to be any particular clue in the wording of the scriptural passage that would suggest an association with lamps. The analogy alludes to the physical characteristics of fire: Although capable of consuming many materials, it cannot consume other flames, but only serves to amplify them.<sup>132</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The seven dicta which make up this section all deal with questions related to the story of Joseph and his brothers in the second half of the

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and A. Díez Macho, eds. (Madrid and Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968), 245, 494, 641], which renders "words of peace" [*millin dishlam*].

See also *Tanhuma* (ed. Buber), *Shemot*, 2:2; *Pesiqta rabbati*, 12:5 (49b/1:230), etc.

Pinto suggests that the comment was stimulated by the repetition of the phrase "fear not" in verses 19 and 21. Accordingly, the first occurrence was a mere verbal assurance while the latter involved a more conclusively persuasive argument.

On the vast variety of figurative possibilities that are encompassed within the semantic range of the biblical Hebrew *lev* (heart) see *BDB*, 523-5 (especially 525); Ben-Yehuda, 5:2587-96.

<sup>132</sup> Thus according to Maharsha who concludes: "...and so it was in my [i.e., Joseph's] case that by virtue of being sold I rose to greatness, and as Scripture states 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me: but God meant it unto good' (Genesis 50:20) [the verse is also cited in this context by Pinto]. The significance of the image was not understood properly by the *Tosafot* commentaries to the verse [See *Sefer Tosafot Hashalem*, 5:92; Kasher, *Torah shelemah* 7(8):1882-3, #74], as can be deduced from the objections which they raise:

...This is difficult. Where do we find that a lamp can extinguish other lamps? —We may answer that the ten lamps allude to the merits [*zekhuyyot*], and that the extinguishing mentioned here refers to the hiding of the light, since it is the nature of a large light to obscure a smaller one. Hence he said to them: You who have many merits failed to obscure my merit, so how can my individual merit ever eclipse your merits...?

In another commentary cited there we read:

I.e., the *smoke* of ten lamps will not be able to extinguish one lamp. The plain sense is unacceptable here because lamps do not extinguish one another. However smoke is capable of extinguishing a lamp.

book of Genesis.<sup>133</sup> Although the inclusion of the collection is justified, as noted above, by the quote from Esther 8:15 in the first unit, it is possible that the redactors also wished thereby to give some acknowledgment of the close literary affinity that binds Esther to the Joseph cycle, a phenomenon which is well known to Esther scholarship.<sup>134</sup> In their present context all the comments appear to be responding to legitimate exegetical questions, whether by resolving difficulties in the text or by attempting to reconstruct the thoughts and motivations of the biblical protagonists. However it is not difficult to imagine how most of the comments could be incorporated into homiletical contexts without major alterations. Only the first two dicta involve departures from the simple sense of the scriptural texts, treating the events described there as archetypal or prophetic allusions to future events.

Only two of the dicta have equivalents in *Genesis rabbah*.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> For an overview see the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>134</sup> See *Esther rabbah*, 7:7. Some basic studies of the phenomenon are cited in Eliezer Segal, "Human Anger and Divine Intervention in Esther," *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), 250-1; see references on 254, n. 20.

<sup>135</sup> #2, in *Genesis rabbah*, 93:12 (1170), and #7, *ibid.*, 100:9 (1293-4) and parallels. It should be noted that *Genesis rabbah*, 84:8 (1010) contains a parallel to the dictum that was cited as an objection to #1, but not to R. Benjamin bar Japheth's statement itself. See also *Aggadat bereshit*, 47:1 (ed. Buber, 94-6), and parallels (to #6).



## Chapter 15

### Purim

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#### *“Light and Gladness”*

[16b] *“The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor”* (Esther 8:16).

Says Rav<sup>1</sup> Judah:<sup>2</sup> *“Light”* is Torah. And thus does it say: *“For the commandment is a lamp; and the Torah<sup>3</sup> is light”* (Proverbs 6:23).

The verse presents us with a series of synonyms describing the feelings of elation and relief felt by the Jews following their deliverance from Haman’s threat of annihilation. For the midrashic interpreters, as we have already found on many occasions, generalized expressions of that sort must necessarily be given specific content.<sup>4</sup> In the present verse, two of the items (light<sup>5</sup> and honor<sup>6</sup>) are not only

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<sup>1</sup> “Rav”—MSS N, O, P, HgT: “R.”

<sup>2</sup> “Says Rav Judah”— ~ in MS R, Genizah fragment.

<sup>3</sup> ARV: “law.”

<sup>4</sup> The argument is put forth in Alkabetz’s commentary that the very fact that the author restricted himself to only four words, when he could easily have added so many more, shows that these four are meaningful and were included in order to be expounded.

<sup>5</sup> Paton (280-1) and Moore (81) both explain that light functions here as a symbol of prosperity; the latter citing Psalms 27:1; 36:10. Moore suggests as well that it refers to “well-being,” according to the usage in Psalms 97:11; 139:12; Job 22:28; 30:26. Hakham, 54, on the other hand, writes that it represents “...relief, salvation; since trouble is equated with darkness, so that one who is delivered from trouble is as if he had emerged from darkness to light” (an explanation which is virtually identical to one brought by Alkabetz). As an alternate possibility he proposes that it refers to the actual lighting up of the homes and streets, as a demonstration of the Jews’ elation over their deliverance.

<sup>6</sup> Paton, 81, explains that the honor here refers to the newly found respect that was shown to the Jews now that they had entered the king’s good graces. A similar idea is found in the *Leqah tov* [in S. Buber, *Sifre de-’aggadeta ‘al megillat ester*, 109].

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vague but puzzling;<sup>7</sup> and the remaining two appear to be unnecessarily repetitious.

The meanings which Rav Judah attaches to the terms are intended not only to specify their content, but also to make Esther conform better to the value concepts of rabbinic Judaism. Thus they all relate to the Torah and its precepts, matters which are glaringly absent from the original biblical story. Moreover, most of the items are identified with visible public expressions of Judaism, implying that until their victory the Jews of Shushan had tried to conceal—or at least avoid drawing attention to—their national and religious identity.<sup>8</sup>

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Hakham points out that this was in contrast to their standing before the undoing of Haman's decree, when they were objects of shame and derision.

The word "*honor*" is not translated in the Greek Esther or its derivatives; see Paton, 281.

<sup>7</sup> Maharsha claims that the exegesis is based on the choice of the form *orah* rather than the more common *or*, for light. This does not appear likely. Another consideration that might have prompted the midrashic explanations is the fact that a similar expression appears in the following verse. *Iyyun ya'aqov* notes that in the midrashic version of the story, where God is said to have brought the threat upon the Jews on account of their religious shortcomings, even their rescue would not have been an occasion for complete gladness unless it were a joy that was related to the observance of the laws of the Torah.

<sup>8</sup> Rashi writes that according to Rav Judah Haman's decree had actually included prohibitions against the study of Torah, circumcision and the wearing of phylacteries. Maharsha accepts this premise, adding that the triad of Sabbath [=festival days], circumcision and phylacteries have the special distinction of being designated "signs" (*ot*) of the covenant between God and Israel [Sabbath: Exodus 31:13, 17; phylacteries: Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18; circumcision: Genesis 17:11]. Whether or not Rashi's comment is true with respect to our talmudic passage, prohibitions against these observances are widely associated with the Hadrianic persecutions. See Saul Lieberman, "The Martyrs of Caesarea," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 7 (1939-44), 395-422; "On Persecution of the Jewish Religion," in: S. Lieberman and A. Hyman, eds., *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974), 213-45 [= *Studies in Palestinian Talmudic Literature*, D. Rosenthal, ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991), 348-80]; Moshe David Herr, "Persecution and Martyrdom in Hadrian's Days," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 23 (1972), 85-125.

The Targum (Grossfeld, 82) also suggests a similar assumption when it writes that "the Jews had permission [*reshuta*] to occupy themselves with the Torah, to ob-

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The identification of Torah with light occurs with great frequency in rabbinic literature.<sup>9</sup>

[16b] “Gladness”<sup>10</sup>—this is a festival. And<sup>11</sup> thus does it say:<sup>12</sup> 13  
“And thou shalt be glad in thy feast” (Deuteronomy 16:14).

*Simḥah* (“gladness”) is a halakhic concept that is associated primarily with the religious festivals, when Jews are commanded to rejoice according to norms defined by the halakhah.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore

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serve the Sabbath and festivals, to circumcise the foreskins of their sons, and to put on phylacteries upon their arms and their heads.” Although the Targum probably exerted an influence on Rashi’s interpretation, it can probably be understood in conformity with my proposal above, that the Jews had previously tried to refrain from ostentatious displays of their Judaism.

Alkabetz and ‘*Anaf yosef* discern evidence of a coercive persecution in the frequent use of the word “*lehashmid*” [destroy], which they associate with the concept of *shemad*, denoting forced apostasy or decrees against religious observance. See Esther 3:6, 13; 4:8; 7:4; 8:11. In Alkabetz’ case we may be justified in discerning in his comments influences of the contemporary plight of Iberian Jews.

<sup>9</sup> Many of these occurrences contain citations of Proverbs 6:23 as well. Some randomly chosen examples include: *TP Mo’ed qatan* 3:7 (83b) and *Horaïot* 3:7 (48b; about one who “lit up our eyes with his mishnah”); *TB Berakhot* 17a (“Let your eyes shine with the light of Torah”); *Shabbat* 23b (a correlation between lighting sabbath lamps and being blessed with scholarly offspring); *Shabbat* 147b (“...lit up the sages’ eyes in halakhah”); *Ketubbot* 111b (Hershler, Moshe, ed., 2:550; about being sustained by the light of the Torah); *Soṭah* 21a (ed. Liss, 1:293-4: “Scripture likened the commandment to a lamp and the Torah to light”); *Bava batra* 4a (Herod is instructed to repent by occupying himself with the “light of the world”); *Numbers rabbah*, 11:6; *Deuteronomy rabbah*, 4:4 (“the soul and the Torah were compared to a lamp”); etc.

The association between Torah and light was further suggested by the similarities of their Hebrew and Aramaic roots. In Hebrew, “*hora’ah*” or “*ora’ah*,” and most notably in the Aramaic “*oria*” or “*oraita*.” This point was mentioned by Paton, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> “Gladness”—MS O, HgT: “And gladness.”

<sup>11</sup> “And”—~ in Genizah fragment.

<sup>12</sup> “And thus does it say”—MS W: “As it says”; AgE: “As it is written”; ~ in MS M.

<sup>13</sup> “For the commandment...’... does it say”—~ in MS Mf (homoioteleuton).

<sup>14</sup> The legal term “*simḥat yom tov*” appears frequently, usually as a halakhic control which prevents other legal considerations from infringing upon the pleasure of the festival. See *TB Pesahim* 109b; *Mo’ed qatan* 14b and other instances listed in the concordance [Chaim Joshua and Biniamin Kasowski, *Thesaurus Talmudis: Concordantiae Verborum Quae in Talmude Babylonicæ Reperiuntur* (Jerusalem: Israel Ministry of

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quite natural that holidays should have been evoked by the occurrence of the word in Esther 8:16.

[16b] “Joy”<sup>15</sup>—this is circumcision. And<sup>16</sup> thus does it say:<sup>17</sup> “*I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil*” (Psalms 119:162).

Although the verse in Psalms employs the same Hebrew root as the one in Esther in order to denote rejoicing, it is not clear what connection the word shares with circumcision.<sup>18</sup> None of the imaginative efforts of the traditional commentators succeed in justifying the Talmud’s exegesis,<sup>19</sup> and we are left with a strong

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Education and Culture and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954-89)], 15:64.

<sup>15</sup> “Joy”—Spanish family: “*And joy*”; EY adds: “Says R. Eleazar.”

<sup>16</sup> “And”—~ in Genizah fragment.

<sup>17</sup> “And thus does it say”—MSS L, R: “As it says.”

<sup>18</sup> The same association is contained in a *baraita* cited in *TB Shabbat* 130a: “R. Simeon ben Gamaliel [or: Eleazar; see *Diqduqé Soferim*] says: Every precept which they accepted joyfully—like circumcision, as it is written ‘*I rejoice, etc.*’—they continue still to observe it joyfully...” The basis for the connection is just as obscure there, and it is probable in any case that the Psalms citation was interpolated by a later redactor from *Megillah*. None of the versions of the *baraita* which appear in the halakhic *midrashim* or the Palestinian Talmud include the verse. See *Sifré Deuteronomy*, 76 [Louis Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 141; Reuven Hammer, transl., *Sifre: A Tannaïtic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Yale Judaica Series, L. Nemoy, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 130, 426-7, n. 4]; *Mekhilta, Shabbata*, 1 [H. S. Horowitz and J. A. Rabin, eds., *Mekhilta d’rabbi Ismael* (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1960), 343; Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Schiff Library of Jewish Classics (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 3:204-5]; *Midrash tanna'im* [D. Hoffmann, ed., *Midrasch Tannaïm zum Deuteronomium* (Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1909)], 53 : *TP Shevi'it* 1:7 (33b) [J. Feliks, ed., *Talmud yerushalmi massekhet shevi'it* (Jerusalem: Tzur-ot, 1980), 1:68.

But cf. *Mekhilta, Haḥodesh*, 9 [ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 236; ed. Lauterbach, 2:270]: “...And ‘*spoil*’ means nothing other than Torah, as it says ‘*I rejoice etc.*’” There the connection based on the expression ‘*thy word*’ is much more straightforward and acceptable.

<sup>19</sup> The simplest and least objectionable of these proposals is cited in the name of R. Sherira *Ga'on* in the *Or zarua'* [Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or zarua'* (Zhitomir, 1862), 2:96 (2:50), cited in B. M. Lewin, *Otzar ha-Gaonim*, Vol. 2: Tractate Shabbat (Haifa: N. Warhaftig, 1930), 120 (Responsa)], according to whom it was derived

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impression that the citation of proof-texts is a secondary, after-the-fact development, and that the inclusion of circumcision among the precepts which were celebrated openly owes more to conceptual than to hermeneutical considerations.<sup>20</sup>

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through a *gezerah shavah* from Deuteronomy 33:9: "For they have observed thy word (אמרתך) and kept thy covenant," where "covenant" was equated with *berit milah*, circumcision. Nevertheless, had the Talmud intended this derivation, it ought to have quoted the Deuteronomy verse explicitly.

Rashi to *Shabbat* 130a explains that the expression "thy word" was expounded as if it meant "the unique word," in the sense that it was the first of the commandments, having been ordained to Abraham in Genesis 17:4. He also alludes to the *baraita* in *TB Menahot* 43b where David praises the qualitative uniqueness of circumcision as lying in the fact that it is the only precept in the Torah that accompanies a man even when he is naked and solitary. The passage there is based on Psalms 119:164, but it appears unlikely that the exegesis in our midrash is based upon the proximity between the two verses. [The *baraita* in *Menahot* was very well known and is found with minor variations in several Palestinian sources. See *Tosefta, Berakhot*, 6:25 (ed. Lieberman, 1:40); *Sifre Deuteronomy*, 36 (ed. Finkelstein, 67-8; transl. Hammer, 69, 406); *TP Berakhot* 9:5 (14b); *Massekhet tefillin* 5:21; *Midrash on Psalms*, 6:1 (ed. Buber, 58; transl. Braude, 1:93-4). See also Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-fshutah, Zera'im*, 1:125.] In his commentary to *Megillah* Rashi adds a further proof, that the command to Abraham in Genesis 17:9 is introduced only with the word ויאמר [from the same root as אמרתך ("thy word") in the Psalms verse], as distinct from almost all other laws of the Torah where the root דבר is also employed.

R. Jacob Tam, cited in the *Tosafot* to the *Shabbat* pericope, takes a somewhat different approach, arguing that the association of circumcision with the Psalms verse alludes to several midrashic and talmudic passages which find scriptural support for the practice of accompanying a circumcision with joyful festivities [see *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, 29 (transl. Friedlander, 208 and n. 1); *TB Menahot* *ibid.*]. However the association is not strong enough to justify Rav Judah's midrash. Assorted selections from the above explanations by Rashi and R. Tam appear in subsequent medieval commentaries. See Moses Goldstein, ed., *Hiddushei ha-ritb" a 'al ha-sha" s: Shabbat* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), 849-50; Isaac Samson Lange, ed., *Tosefta ha-ro" sh 'al massekhet shabbat*, 2nd expanded edition (Jerusalem, 1977), 375 and nn. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Some midrashic traditions relate that the Amalek had demonstrated a cruel disdain for circumcision. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:57; 6:24, n. 141 (Ginzberg draws an analogy with the Hadrianic decrees). In some versions of Haman's diatribe against Judaism he attacks this barbarous practice of mutilation; see *ibid.*, 4:403-4; 6:465-6, n. 112. None of the sources suggest that Haman had prohibited the ritual.

[16b] “*And honor*:—these are<sup>21</sup> phylacteries.<sup>22</sup> And thus does it say. “*And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord; and they shall be afraid of thee*” (Deuteronomy 28:10).

And<sup>23</sup> it was taught {in a *baraita*}:<sup>24</sup> R. Eliezer the Great<sup>25</sup> says:<sup>26</sup> These are the phylacteries of the head.

That Deuteronomy 28:10 could be construed as an allusion to phylacteries is easily understandable. The verse, if we read it with midrashic precision and literalness, speaks of people beholding God’s name inscribed, as it were, upon the people of Israel. The precept of phylacteries as defined by the halakhah achieves precisely that effect: In addition to the sacred texts that are contained inside the compartments, the letters of the divine name Shaddai are also marked on the outside of the containers and in the prescribed manner of binding the straps.<sup>27</sup> Far less obvious is the question of how the connection was established between the Deuteronomy verse and Esther. The most likely explanation is that it was suggested by the narrative context of the following verse, 8:17: “*And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them,*” a passage which bears a striking similarity to the concluding words of the Deuteronomy verse.<sup>28</sup> Even so, we have not established a verbal link to the word “*honor*” (*yeqar*) in our verse, although we do now possess a tangible description of how the honor found practical expression as the Persians became terrified at the sight of the Jews in their *tefillin*. As was the case with

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<sup>21</sup> “these are”—MSS B, O, L, AgE: “This is.”

<sup>22</sup> MS R adds: “of the head.”

<sup>23</sup> “And”— ~ in MS M, Genizah fragment.

<sup>24</sup> See E. Z. Melamed, *Halachic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud*, 457; W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, 1:113.

<sup>25</sup> “the Great”— ~ in MS P, EY, HgT.

<sup>26</sup> “And it was...says”—MS M: “Said R. Eliezer the Great.”

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. *TB Shabbat* 62a; *Menahot* 35a-b; *Hullin* 9a; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot tefillin* 1:3; 3:13 and commentators thereto.

<sup>28</sup> Thus in Maharsha and ‘*Eṣ yosef*. The similarity of the wording has been remarked by biblical commentators; e.g., Paton, 282; Moore, 81.

regard to circumcision, it appears that the homilist was moved principally by the conceptual appropriateness of introducing phylacteries here, and not by any technical exegetical derivation.<sup>29</sup>

R. Eliezer's<sup>30</sup> comment accomplishes a hermeneutical transformation of the Deuteronomy verse that is indeed analogous to the one that Rav Judah (Rav) has implemented with respect to our verse in Esther: In both cases the respective blessings of national success are not understood only as being gifts which God bestows upon the Jews, but primarily as opportunities for the Jews to openly observe the laws of the Torah.

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<sup>29</sup> R. Eliezer's *baraita* is cited in several different contexts in the Babylonian Talmud: *Berakhot* 6a and 57a; *Soṭah* 17a [ed. Liss, 1:253-4]; *Menahot* 35b; *Hullin* 89a. In most of these passages, as in ours, the *baraita* is used without any recognizable midrashic wordplay in order to create exegetical connections between the topic of phylacteries and other scriptural verses.

<sup>30</sup> I have not been able to find a fully consistent pattern for the addition of the epithet "the Great" after R. Eliezer's name. As far as I can tell, it never occurs at all in the Tannaitic *midrashim* for which concordances are available [see Biniamin Kosowsky, *Otzar Leshon Hatanna'im...Sifra* (Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 4:Proper Names:7-8; "...*Sifrei* (1974), 5:Proper Names:6-7] or in the Palestinian Talmud [Moshe Kosovsky, *Concordance to the Talmud Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud): Onomasticon: Thesaurus of Proper Names* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1985), 1:100-108]. Although it does seem to occur in one place in the Mishnah (*Soṭah* 9:15), the text in question is not an original part of the Mishnah, but a late addition based on an assortment of *baraitot*, and is missing in reliable manuscripts. See the full discussion in J. N. Epstein, *Mavo lenosah ha-mishnah*, 976-7. On the other hand, there are many occurrences in the Babylonian Talmud [see Biniamin Kosowsky, *Thesaurus Nominum quae in Talmude Babylónico reperiuntur* (Jerusalem: Israel Ministry of Education and Culture and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1976), 1:169-92] and in the various collections of aggadic midrash. As far as I have been able to discern, all the instances are in contexts of aggadic midrash. A unique, but significant, exception to the above pattern is the *Tosefta* 'Orlah 1:7 (ed. Lieberman, 1:285) where the epithet accompanies a *halakhic* tradition with an elaborate chain of transmission. On the passage see J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature* (Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem: Magnes and Dvir, 1957), 69-70.

## In a Single Breath

[16b] “*And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha, and Poratha and Adalia, and Aridatha, and Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai and Vaiezatha, the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews*” (Esther 9:7-10).

Says Rav<sup>31</sup> Ada<sup>32</sup> of Jaffo: <sup>33</sup> The ten sons of Haman<sup>34</sup> and<sup>35</sup> “*the ten*”<sup>36</sup> must be spoken<sup>37</sup> in a single breath.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “Rav”—MSS G, B, R\*, W, Mf, Spanish family, AgE: “R.”

<sup>32</sup> “Ada”—EY: “Ḥiyya”; HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS: “Aḥa.”

<sup>33</sup> Our information about this rabbi is scanty, and the name (assuming that the references are all to the same individual) is subject to textual variations (Aḥa, Abba, etc.). In spite of the persistence of the reading “Rav,” which implies that he was a Babylonian, he is identified by his Judean town. The only other place where he is mentioned is in *TB Ta’anit* 16b (ed. Malter, 62) which also provides us with no data that would help locate him chronologically. A “R. Ḥiyya the son of R. Ada of Jaffo” is mentioned in several places in the Palestinian rabbinic sources [See Theodor’s apparatus and notes to *Genesis rabbah*, 38:14 (361); *Leviticus rabbah*, 33:6 (764); *Song of Songs rabbah*, 8:14 (ed. Dunsky, 178)], but the only passage which furnishes us with any additional biographical particulars is the parallel to our current dictum in *TP Megillah* 3:7 (74b; see below) where R. Ḥiyya the son of R. Ada of Jaffo cites our dictum in the name of R. Jeremiah, a sage of the third and fourth Amoraic generations (see Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 340-2). On the basis of this information R. Ada has been identified as a third-generation Palestinian teacher; see Albeck, *op. cit.*, 220; Bacher, *Die Agada der palästinensischen Amoräer*, 3:86-7; G. Reeg, *Die Ortsnamen Israels nach den rabbinischen Literatur*, 308.

<sup>34</sup> “of Haman”— ~ in Genizah fragment (and filled in).

<sup>35</sup> “and”— ~ in Genizah fragment.

<sup>36</sup> MS G and Genizah fragment add: “all of them.”

<sup>37</sup> “must be spoken”—in Aramaic; in MSS G, N, B, W, Mf, HgT<sup>1</sup>, Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS: in Hebrew.

<sup>38</sup> R. Jonathan of Lunel [Samuel K. Mirsky, ed., *Commentary of R. Jonathan of Lunel on Mishnah and Alfasi Tractates Megila and Moed Katan* (Jerusalem and New York: Sura Institute and Yeshiva University, 1956), 50; El Ha-meqorot-Pardes Israel Talmud edition (Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem: 1962): “I.e., he should not pause even to catch his breath.” This explanation was evidently copied by R. Joseph Ibn Ḥabiba [M. Y. Blau, *Nimmukei Yossef on the Tractates P’sachim, Meguilla and Ketuboth* etc. (New York:1960), 22].

What is the reason? —<sup>39</sup> Their spirits departed from them<sup>40</sup> simultaneously.

R. Ada's comment is not merely explanatory; from its exegetical premises it actually derives a normative practice.<sup>41</sup> There does not seem

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<sup>39</sup> MS P, EY add: "because."

<sup>40</sup> MS M adds: "in a single breath."

<sup>41</sup> The same dictum is found in *TP Megillah* 3:7 (74b) as follows:

R. Hiyyah the son of R. Ada of Jaffo: R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Ze'orah: He must pronounce them [the previous discussion refers to the manner of writing the names of Haman's sons, as found below in our *TB* pericope] in a single breath [*nefihah*, rather than the synonymous *neshimah* used in our pericope], and "the ten sons of Haman" with them.

R. Jacob ben Asher in *Tur Oraḥ ḥayyim* 690 juxtaposes the Babylonian and Palestinian versions of the tradition, implying that only the latter states explicitly that the words "the ten sons" must be included in the single breath. R. Joel Sirkes in his *Bayit ḥadash* commentary to the *Tur* concludes from this that R. Jacob's text of *TB* must have been different from ours, omitting the words in question. As can be seen from my textual notes, no such reading is attested in the direct witnesses. Cf. R. Joshua Boaz, *Shiltei gibborim* to Alfasi's code. These sources were all referred to by Ratner, *Ahavath Zion WeJeruscholaim, Traktat Megillah*, 10:1:76. See also *Mishneh torah leharamba"m* (Jerusalem: Shabse Frankel, 1975), 2:783. It should however be remarked that according to A. Samet's edition of the *Tur* ("Ha-shalem," Jerusalem: Makhon yerushalayim, 1990), the quote from the Palestinian Talmud is missing from some early printed editions). The reading in the current versions of the *Tur* (without "and 'the ten'") is nonetheless attested in several important medieval works, including: Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder rav 'amram ga'on* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), 103; I. Davidson *et al.*, eds., *Siddur R. Saadja Gaon* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1941), 256; R. Ḥananel; and the Geonic responsum cited in S. Hurwitz, ed., *Machsor Vitry nach der Handschrift im British Museum* (Nürnberg: J. Bulka, 1923), #246 (p. 212). However what is apparently the same responsum (of Rav Naṭronai *Ga'on*) appears in other versions with "and 'the ten'"; e.g., Louis Ginzberg, ed., *Genizah Studies in Memory of Doctor Solomon Schechter* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1929), 2:107; Joel Müller, ed., *Kurze geonäische Entscheidungen (Halakhot pesuqot min hagge'onim)* (Cracow: Joseph Fischer, 1893), #187 (p. 89). Cf. *Orḥot ḥayyim (Hilkhoh megillah ufurim* #18): "And some interpret that he must say it with... 'the ten' in one breath."

Viktor Aptowitz [Sefer raviaḥ, reprint (Jerusalem: Harry Fischel Institute, 1964), 2:285 (to #564)] argues that there exists a halakhic difference between the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds on this point, in that the former includes the words "sons of Haman" in the ruling whereas the latter stops at "the ten."



to be any obvious connection to particular words of the biblical text.<sup>42</sup> Rather, the conclusion should probably be understood in the light of the many other midrashic narrative elaborations whose aim is to magnify the greatness of the miracle. In the present case, this aim was achieved by showing that the fall of the Jews' enemies was effected instantaneously.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Maharsha who argues that the comment was actually derived from verse 13 below: "...and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the tree" (in the singular), which was taken to imply that they all perished simultaneously (The Targums deal at length with the physical arrangement of the sons on one gallows). By uttering all the names in one uninterrupted breath, the reader avoids the possibility of misinterpreting verses 7-9 as if they meant that the sons were executed individually. See also the comment of R. Judah ben Susan, brought in Alkabetz.

In another commentary cited by Alkabetz the objection is raised that the biblical story seems to indicate that the execution of Haman's sons was carried out over several stages, beginning in Esther 9:7-10 and then continuing through verses 13-14. The objection becomes more pointed if the passage is read in the light of the midrashic traditions which apply the verses to separate groups of sons. See our discussion of *Megillah* 15b (to Esther 5:11) above. Note also the formulation in Maimonides' *Hilkhot megillah* 2:12: "...in order to make it known to all the people that they were all hanged and killed as one" [Thus also in *Orhot hayyim*, *Megillah ufurim* #18]. Cf. the wording in M. Y. Blau, ed., *Sefer Ham'oroth composed by Rabbenu Meir of Narbonne on the tractates Erubin*, etc. (New York: 1967), 321-2: "Since they were killed on the thirteenth, but were not hanged until the fourteenth"; Moshe Hershler, ed., *Beit habbehirah lerabbenu menahem b"r shelomoh hamme'iri 'al massekhtot megillah ve-mo'ed qatan* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1962), 43: "...In order to teach that they were all hanged at the same time and with a single rope."

<sup>43</sup> Both Targums to Esther 9:14 (Grossfeld, 85; 189-90) contain meticulous architectural descriptions of the spatial arrangements that allowed Haman and the ten sons to be hanged or impaled on the same structure. *Leqah tov*, 110, juxtaposes the sources in such a way that the Targumic addition becomes an explanation of R. Ada's dictum. See also *Abba gorton*, 37; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:444; 6:479, n. 185.

E. E. Hallevy, '*Erkhei ha-'aggadah vaha-halakhah*, 2:243 proposes a very different explanation of the origin and significance of the practice of speaking the names of the ten sons in one breath. He notes that the justification, "their spirits departed from them simultaneously" is not found in the Palestinian Talmud, which suggests that there might have been another reason for the custom. He finds this reason in the institution of the πνίγος [μακρόν], "choker" [Liddell and Scott: "a bit of patter, delivered at full speed"], a part of the παραβάσις of classical Greek comedy, in which

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## Like a Pole

[16b] Says R. Jonah:<sup>44</sup> Says R. Zera:<sup>45</sup> The<sup>46</sup> *vav* of Vaiezatha must be<sup>47</sup> drawn out<sup>48</sup> like<sup>49</sup> a pole.<sup>50</sup>

What is the reason?<sup>51</sup> —They<sup>52</sup> were all<sup>53</sup> hanged on a single pole.<sup>54</sup>

R. Zera rules here that the way in which the megillah is written ought to reflect the contents of the narrative. The initial *vav* in the name of Haman's last-born son (the Hebrew letter consists of a simple vertical line) is to be physically stretched out like the fifty-cubit tree upon which—according to aggadic tradition—the villain and all his sons were impaled together.<sup>55</sup>

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the chorus would conclude its address to the audience in the name of the poet by humorously singing several verses in a single breath. "It is possible," argues Hallevy, "that this was the reason for reading the names of Haman's sons in one breath." On the *πνίγος* see H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Literature from Homer to the Age of Lucian* (London: Methuen, 1934), 218. I find Hallevy's proposal very persuasive.

44 "R. Jonah"—MS M: "R. Ḥiyya"; MS R\*: "R. Abba"; Pesaro Printing: "R. Jonathan"; Venice Printing: "R. Joḥanan"; Genizah fragment: "R. Yannai."

45 "Says R. Zera"—HgT<sup>2</sup>: "Says R. Ezra"; Genizah fragment: "Says R. Ze'iri"; ~ in MSS R\*, N, Printings.

46 "The"—MS L, Genizah fragment: "This."

47 MS L adds: "straightened."

48 "drawn out"—Genizah fragment: "straightened."

49 "like"—HgT<sup>2</sup>, YS: "in."

50 "like a pole"—~ in MS L.

51 "What is the reason"—~ in HgT<sup>2</sup>.

52 "They"—MS P, EY, HgT, Genizah fragment: "Because they."

53 "all"—~ in MS Mf.

54 "on a single pole"—MS Mf: "at once."

55 That the Talmud is referring to the graphic representation of the letter seems quite clear from the wording. Nevertheless there has developed a long and venerable exegetical tradition which has rejected that interpretation in favor of a different reading, according to which R. Zera is speaking of the manner in which the letter is to be pronounced. The earliest instance of this approach is probably the *Leqah tov*, 110, which treats the two possibilities as mutually complementary:

...The reader of the megillah must speak them in one breath and pronounce the *vav* of Vaiezatha in an extended manner (*bizqifah*). For

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this reason the *vav* of Vaiezatha is long, as it says “*and being set up* (uzeqif), *let him be hanged thereon*” (Ezra 6:11).

In contrast to this explanation, several medieval authorities took an exclusivist approach to the issue, explicitly rejecting the possibility that the Talmud could be referring to writing a *vav* that was longer than usual. Among the most influential arguments was that of R. Aaron Hallevy of Barcelona, as cited in *Orhot hayyim, Megillah ufurim*, #18:

And R. Aaron Hallevy...explained that he must straighten its bent head... This is the principal interpretation. And anyone who lengthens it is making a mistake because we do not find that the *vav* is counted among the large letters.

And there are those who explain: “to draw it out” means that he should lengthen the pronunciation of the *vav*.

R. Aaron’s interpretation—that the Talmud was referring to the shape of the *vav* and not to its length—was brought with minor variations by later authorities, such as R. Nissim Gerondi (in his commentary to Alfasi’s code, without naming his source) and R. Yom-tov Ishbili [Elijah Lichtenstein, ed., *Hiddushei hariṭv”a ‘al ha-sha”s: Megillah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976), 111, in the name of “my teacher, may God preserve him”]. See also Alkabetz.

The view that the Talmud is prescribing the way in which the *vav* should be pronounced, a view which we have encountered already in the *Leqaḥ tov* and in the words of R. Aaron of Barcelona, was associated by the medievals with the name of R. Jacob Tam, whose words were preserved in the *Mahzor Vitry* (213): “R. Tam...explained that it should be drawn out in reading and not in writing.” [This view is quoted and discussed in *Sefer hammanhig*, ed. Raphael, 1:250-1].

Other commentators expanded upon these opinions in various ways. Thus, R. Jonathan of Lunel explained that “drawing out” the pronunciation referred to chanting it in a musical tone, and taking care not to abbreviate it. Similar explanations are brought in Asheri’s code and *Hiddushei hara”n* [Jacob Yaverov, ed., *Hiddushei hara”n ‘al masseket megillah lerabbenu nissim* (Jerusalem: Harry Fischel Institute, 1966), 24]. *Tosefot harosh* says that “...he must raise his voice straight up (*bizqifah* [?])” [see the editor’s glosses in S. Willman’s edition, New York, 1971].

Subsequent authors usually juxtapose two of these positions, in most cases the ones which speak of graphic lengthening and the one which speaks of lengthened pronunciation; one of them being presented as the basic interpretation and the other as an alternative (“there are some who explain” etc.). See e.g., Me’iri, *Nimmuqei yosef*, etc. R. Isaiah Ditrani the Younger [A. Wertheimer *et al.*, *Piskei harid: The Rulings of Rabbi Isaiah the Elder* etc. (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1971), 3:240-1] speaks only of drawing out its pronunciation, whereas the position of R. Isaiah the Elder (Riaz, *op. cit.*, 128) is not clear from his paraphrase.

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In several of the commentaries [*Mahzor vitry*, *Manhig*, Abudraham], objections are directed against the view of Rabbenu Tam based on the wording in the parallel passage in *Soferim* 13:4 (ed. Higger, 241): “Said R. Hanina: Said R. Zera [Higger’s textual apparatus cites many variants to the attribution]: The *vav* of Vaiezatha must be straightened like the oar of Labrut.” The medievals, who understood the latter expression to refer to the oar of a ship, argued that the image cannot be understood as anything other than an indication of how straight and long the *vav* is to be written. A cautious and erudite study of the expression is found in Daniel Sperber, *Nautica Talmudica*, Bar-Ilan Studies in Near-Eastern Languages and Literatures (Ramat-Gan and Leiden: Bar-Ilan University Press and E. J. Brill, 1986), 53-6. In his discussion Sperber reviews the textual evidence in our pericope and in the parallel passages in *TB Bava meši’a* 87a (apparently a dictum of Rav’s) and *Soferim*. He acknowledges the confused state of the evidence and hesitantly offers the speculation that the reference is to a “liburnian steering oar” (emending לברניה לברניה), one of two such oars that were normally used in antiquity to guide a ship. In his notes Sperber cites a wealth of archeological and lexicographical literature on the subject. Unfortunately his surmise, which is based on a reading which is not supported in any of the witnesses to the parallels, is less than satisfying. [A number of incidental corrections should also be made with regard to Sperber’s use of the textual evidence in his discussion: (1) He cites from *Otzar ha-Gaonim*, 19 (the heading to #54; not #53 as listed there) a text which contains two separate dicta, one by R. Jonah in the name of R. Zera, and a second by R. Phineas (containing the “oars of Labrut” allusion). In actuality, this reading does not exist in *any* text, ancient or medieval, but was invented by Lewin for purposes of his lemma. The second alleged dictum is taken from Abudraham who ascribes it to the “Yerushalmi.” Hence Sperber’s reconstruction of the development of the textual tradition there must be rejected entirely. (2) I do not understand on what basis he determines that the YS (which, like AgE mentioned in the same comment, is obviously just citing our pericope) is “a text presumably of Palestinian origin.” Apparently he is referring to the names of the tradents, not to the YS itself. (3) His statement (56, n. 2) that MS Y is missing several folios towards the end of *Megillah* Chapter 1 is simply incorrect. He was evidently misled by Julius J. Price, *The Yemenite Ms. of Megilla (in the Library of Columbia University)*, (Jerusalem: Makor, 1970). It cannot be emphasized too strongly how unreliable Prices’s work is in both its readings and its omissions; it cannot be trusted at all as an indication of the text of MS Y.]

It appears quite evident at any rate that the comment about the “liburnian oars” is not native to our pericope, but was interpolated from *Soferim* [Its status in *Bava meši’a* deserves additional investigation].

S. Hurvitz in his notes to *Mahzor vitry* argues that the exegetical dispute had its origins in the divergent textual traditions of the Talmud, depending on whether one included the mention of “oars” (in which case one applied the dictum to the writing of the letter) or omitted it (and hence interpreted it with reference to its pronunciation). I.

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Raphael in his notes to the *Manhig* adopts this argument. Nevertheless it seems to me to be quite untenable. Although the inclusion of the phrase can perhaps be said to apply only to the physical shape of the *vav* (and even this point is open to challenge), it can by no means be argued that its exclusion would necessitate the position that the dictum is referring to the manner of its oral pronunciation. Ultimately the phrase in question is not attested in any of the versions of the Talmud other than the printings; nor was it cited, or even known, by any of the medieval commentators who discuss the pericope.

As we saw above in the words of R. Aaron of Barcelona and other authorities, the strongest objection against the view that this *vav* should be physically lengthened beyond its usual length was founded on the fact that there seemed to be no Masoretic basis for this convention among the known lists of "large letters" in the Bible. Clearly it was this premise itself that was in dispute. Thus, on the very same page of the *Orhot hayyim* on which R. Aaron was quoted, we were provided with a list of scribal conventions ("according to the practice of the scribes who have received it by tradition") which states explicitly that "there are the large and small letters in it: ...the *vav* of Vaiezatha is large..." So too in the same *Maḥzor vitry* which was our primary source for the position of R. Tam are found (213 and 683) two separate lists of "large letters" in which the *vav* of Vaiezatha is included. The medievals are quite outspoken about the fact that the issue is ultimately one of Masoretic precedent; i.e., whether R. Zera's statement introduces an unauthorized change into the accepted scribal practices for writing works of Scripture. With reference to this question there existed divergent traditions. Whereas R. Aaron of Barcelona, R. Nissim, Ishbili and other members of that camp state explicitly that the *vav* is absent from the official glossary of Large Letters, R. Jonathan of Lunel (= *Nimmukei yosef*, both introducing it as "some say"), *Maḥzor vitry*, *Orhot hayyim*, Abudraham, Asheri, *Hiddushei hara"n*, etc. all cite explicit Masoretic lists of Large Letters in which the *vav* of Vaiezatha is counted.

And in truth this discrepancy does reflect the situation in the standard compendia of Masorah. On the respective lists of Large Letters see Ginsburg, Christian D., ed., *The Massoreth Ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita*, The Library of Biblical Studies, Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., reprint (New York: Ktav, 1968), 230, n. 138. Ginsburg notes that an alphabetical list of large *vavs* which includes Vaiezatha

...is given in the Massorah marginalis on Gen. 1:1; in the Massorah marginalis on 1 Chron. 1:1, however, where the list is repeated, the following alterations are made: גזון (Levit. 11:42) is substituted for

אח"י ...

The same substitution, with its omission of Vaiezatha's name, occurs also in two such lists in the early Masoretic compendium *Okhlah ve'okhlah* [S. Frensdorff, *Das Buch Ochlah W'ochlah (Massora)* (Hannover: Hahnoversche Hofbuchhandlung, 1864), 88]. In his *The Massorah* (London: 1880), 4:39-40 Ginsburg collated ten alphabetical lists of "majiscular letters." The *vav* of Vaiezatha appears in only four of those lists. See also *ibid.*, 1:36; S. Frensdorff, ed., *Die Massora Magna*, reprint,

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### Brick on Top of Brick

[16b] Says<sup>56</sup> R. Ḥanana<sup>57</sup> bar Pappa: {R. Shela} of Kefar Timarta<sup>58</sup> {expounded}:<sup>59</sup> All the songs are written<sup>60</sup> a half-brick on top of a brick and<sup>61</sup> a brick on top of a half-brick.<sup>62</sup> The ten sons of Haman<sup>63</sup>

**MSS Y, B, EY, Printings, AgE**

All other witnesses

and the kings of Canaan

are written<sup>64</sup> a half-brick on top of a half-brick and<sup>65</sup> a brick on top of a brick.

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Library of Biblical Studies, H. M. Orlinsky, ed. (New York: Ktav, 1968), 384. For a concise overview of the halakhic sources dealing with the enlarged letters see the *Talmudic Encyclopedia* 1:404-12 (and nn. 70, 71).

<sup>56</sup> “Says”—MS B: “And says.”

<sup>57</sup> “Ḥanana (חננא)” —thus only in MS Y; in MS Mf and two genizah fragments: “Ḥanena” (חננא); all other witnesses: “Ḥanina.”

<sup>58</sup> “Timarta” (תמרטא) —thus only in MS Y; AgE: “Tamarti”; in all other witnesses: “Tamarta.”

<sup>59</sup> “{R. Shela...expounded}” —emendation according to all other witnesses.

<sup>60</sup> “are written” —thus only in MS Y and Printings; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>61</sup> “and” — ~ in MS R\* and Genizah fragment.

<sup>62</sup> AgE adds: “and”; MS N adds: “(a brick. What is the reason?)”

<sup>63</sup> “The ten sons of Haman” —thus only in MS Y and AgE; MSS G, P: “except for this ten”; Genizah fragment: “except for this”; in all other witnesses: “except for this song.”

<sup>64</sup> “are written” —thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “which is”; ~ in MS M, AgE.

<sup>65</sup> “and” — ~ in MS R\* and Genizah fragment.

What is the reason?<sup>66</sup> —Says R. Abbahu:<sup>67</sup> In order that<sup>68</sup> there should be no restoration to their downfall.<sup>69</sup>

The standard method for writing down lines of song or poetry in the Bible<sup>70</sup> is to have series of words alternate with blank spaces in each sequence of lines, creating an appearance something like interleaved blocks. This convention is represented in R. Shela's dictum as a course of bricks in which each full-sized brick (*levenah*) is sandwiched

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<sup>66</sup> EY adds: "for all of them."

<sup>67</sup> "Says R. Abbahu"—HgT<sup>2</sup>: "Says Rabbi"; ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>68</sup> "In order that"—MS B, **Printings**: "that."

<sup>69</sup> "their downfall"—MSS B, W, EY, HgT<sup>2</sup>, **Ashkenazic family**, YS: "the downfall of the wicked."

<sup>70</sup> The term *shirah* is being used in our pericope in a loose sense to denote any biblical text whose lines are written in a graphically distinctive manner, whether or not the content is strictly speaking poetic. See Mordechai Breuer, *The Aleppo Codex and the Accepted Text of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976) 149-89 [English synopsis: XXXVII-XLI], who argues that what we have here is really a sort of optical illusion by which songs and numerical lists, two unrelated forms of text, were equated because they are both written in short lines, and hence scribal practice tended to arrange both in columnar structures. As Breuer describes the developments (p. 173):

...The poetic character of the text is expressed by means of the *setumot*. The spaces were not inserted there in order to construct around them the bricks and half-bricks. Rather, at first there existed groups of words separated by spaces. The scribal practice was to arrange these groups in poetic structures. Had they been groups of two words each, they could have ordered them as writing opposite space and space opposite writing in order to create the normal columns of poetry. However the groups contained three or more words, making it impossible to arrange them in columns, because the width of the columns at the two sides of the page were not equal. For this reason they chose a different method: They arranged the writing in each line opposite the writing of a nearby line in an alternating pattern...

See also James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 119-27. I am grateful to Dr. J. Penkower for referring me to these works. See also S. Frensdorff, ed., *Die Massora Magna*, 385 and n. 1; Shlomo Zalman Havlin, "The Torah Scroll that Rabbi Nissim of Gerona wrote for himself," *Alei Sefer* 12 (1989), 1-38.

between half-bricks (*ariaḥ*),<sup>71</sup> creating a firm and solid structure.<sup>72</sup> This, as noted, is the manner of writing poetic passages like the Song at

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<sup>71</sup> The standard measurements of the brick and half-brick are described elsewhere in the Talmud [e.g., *TB Bava batra* 3a; see Mishnah *Bava batra* 1:1; see also R. Jonathan of Lunel (ed. Mirsky, 50); Menasse Grosberg, ed., *Michtam zu Tractat Megilla von Rabbi David b. Lewi* (Lemberg: by Author, 1904), 6]. A unique dissenter from the scholarly consensus is S. Krauss in his *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:310-2; 3:166 [= *Qadmoniyot ha-talmud* 1:2:291-4] who insists that the *ariaḥ*, from a word which elsewhere denotes a beam or board, could not possibly be a half-brick, but here also refers to an extended beam. The resultant interpretation, as well as Krauss' insistence that we maintain the distinction between the acts of writing (which is done from top to bottom) and building (which proceeds from the foundations to the roof) virtually reverse the terminology of the standard interpretations. Krauss claims that the imagery argues for a Babylonian origin to the saying, since bricks were not commonly used as a building material in Palestine.

<sup>72</sup> Since we are dealing with scribal practices which were part of day-to-day observance, there seems to be a broad agreement regarding the way in which the "poetic" passages mentioned here are to be written. However the commentators are in some confusion about how these rules correspond to the imagery of bricks and half-bricks. Rashi explains that, when applied to the other songs, the "half-bricks" represent the words of text and the "full bricks" refer to the spaces which are twice the length of the written sections. Imagining the unwritten segments as part of the metaphorical "wall" does indeed convey an image of much greater solidity and permanence than any picture which treats them as empty space. Rashi does not clearly explain the second part of R. Shela's dictum, the one which speaks of the "ten sons" passage, so that we do not know exactly how he would have visualized it. To be consistent, he would presumably have had to treat both the words and the spaces between them as parallel columns of bricks which, because they are not interlocked, are architecturally flimsy and poorly supported. What Rashi actually says however is that such a construction "will not leave sufficient room to broaden their steps underneath." The image is obscure, but suggests that the reason for the fragility lies in the narrowness of the base (perhaps because the space separating the two columns is also regarded as solid; see *TB Bava batra* 3a-b). Rashi's view is copied verbatim by several subsequent authorities; e.g., R. Isaiah Ditrani the Younger (*Pisqei ri" d*); Ishbili, R. Nissim (in his commentary to the Alfasi), *Nimmuqei yosef, Hiddushei hara" n, Tosefot harosh, Mordecai (Megillah #790), Hagahot maimoniyot* (to *Hilkhot megillah* Ch. 2, n. v); cf. Responsa of R. Solomon Ibn Adret (Rashba), 1:435; Me'iri paraphrases it with respect to the other songs, but when explaining the clause about the ten sons he switches to a different approach based principally on that of the *Halakhot gedolot* (see below).

R. Simeon Qayyara's *Halakhot gedolot* [Abraham Simeon Traub, ed., *Sefer halakhot gedolot* (Warsaw: 1875), *Hilkhot soferim* (141c); J. Hildesheimer, ed., *Die*



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*Vaticanicische Handschrift der Halachoth Gedoloth*, Publications of M'kize Nirdamim (Berlin: H. Itzkovski, 1890) [=“Spanish recension”], 507; Ezriel and Naftalis Zevi Hildesheimer, eds., *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1988), 3:100] offers the following interpretation of the “ten sons” clause (basing itself on the version in *Soferim*; see below): “What is a half-brick? —*Ve’et, ve’et, ve’et*. And what is the brick? —*Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha*.” The meaning is that the three-letter accusative particles which precede each one of the names will all form one narrower column of “half-bricks,” and the names themselves, which are somewhat longer, will make up a broader column of “full bricks.” The explanation is brought by many subsequent commentators, including R. Moses of Coucy’s *Sefer mišvot gadol* (*Megillah*, p. 250b); *Hagahot maimoniyot to Hilkhhot megillah* Ch. #2, [brought with annotations in I. Z. Cahana, ed., *Rabbi Meir Ben Barukh (Maharam) of Rottenberg: Responsa, Rulings and Customs* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1957), 1:322-3, #618]; *Mikhtam, ibid.*; Shalom and Chanokh Albeck, eds., *Sefer ha’eshkol* (Jerusalem: Wagschal, 1984), 1:167]. There can be no doubt that according to the *Halakhot gedolot* both the brick and the half-brick represent units of written text. If this is true with respect to the “ten sons” clause, then we can presume that it is equally applicable to the first clause dealing with “other songs,” *contra* Rashi’s position that the “bricks” represent blank spaces. The disagreement between *Halakhot gedolot* and Rashi was remarked by R. Jacob Tam in a responsum addressed to R. Yom-Tov son of R. Judah b. Nathan, which is preserved in *Sefer raviah* (ed. Aptowitz, 2:253). [To be precise, the discussion about how to write Haman’s sons appears in *Sefer raviah* in a section that follows the closing signature of the responsum, and the text immediately preceding our passage quotes R. Tam several times in the third-person. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the medievals universally ascribe the opinion to Rabbenu Tam (see e.g., *Hiddushei hara”n, Aguddah*, etc.), there is no basis in *Sefer raviah* itself for that attribution. The responsum was copied from *Sefer raviah* in R. Moses of Vienna’s *Or zarua’* 2:373 (Zhitomir, 1862, p. 156)]. R. Tam’s view was summarized by R. Nissim Gerondi in his commentary to Alfasi’s code:

Just as this half-brick is of written text, so too does the full brick refer to written text. And this is the explanation: ...It refers to a longer line as a brick and a short one as a half-brick. The “*ve’et*”s which are shorter words are stacked one on top of the other, and it terms the names “bricks” because they are longer, and they are also stacked one on top of the other.

[The argumentation is formulated somewhat differently by other authors. Thus, according to *Tosefot harosh*, since both bricks and half bricks are parts of the structure, they both must represent the same thing, namely writing. The *Mordecai* objects that a brick is an inappropriate metaphor for an empty space.]

A detailed description of the graphic structure of the poetic passages is given by R. Jonathan of Lunel:

One writes on the topmost line, at the beginning of the line, two or three words. Then he skips, leaving the middle space blank, and then

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writes two or three words at the end of the line. Then on the second line he does not commence at the beginning of the line, but indents for the space of one or two words and begins writing next to one of the words that he wrote on the line above this, writing also parallel to the space which he left blank on the upper line, as well as under one of the words that are in the topmost line. However he does not complete the entire line. And in the third line he repeats the order of the first line, and the fourth he writes as he did in the second line. And so on, until he completes the song.

The notation described by R. Jonathan, if we understand it correctly, would produce a text in which words appear either in the middle of the line or at its two extremes, but not both, as in the following diagram:

ובני ישראל	או ישיר משה
את השירה הזאת ליי	
אשירה ליי	ויאמרו לאמר

This would conform with the arrangement given in the *editio princeps* of *Miqra'ot gedolot*, though it is found in very few other traditions. Breuer (169-9) surmises that this symmetrical structure was probably the earliest form of the song, but was subsequently rejected in order to conform to the halakhic regulations governing “closed” and “open” sections. [Breuer’s thesis is summarized by Kugel, *op cit.*, 122, n. 62.]

The resulting structure is that found in almost all current biblical texts:

סוס	גאה גאה	ליי כי	אשירה	לאמר
	יה ויהי לי	עזי וזמרת	ביום	ורוכבו רמה
א-להי		ואנוהו	זה א-לי	לישועה

[A similar development occurred with respect to the Song of Deborah, a phenomenon which Breuer considers analogous to our case.]

Rabbenu Tam [in his *Hilkhot sefer torah*, found in *Maḥzor vitry*, 622, and copied without naming the source in *Hiddushei hara”n*] finds midrashic support (I was unable to identify the allusion) for the requirement that all the lines in the Song of Moses be closed at each end with writing, in order to symbolize how God had trapped the Egyptians. See also A. Auerbach, ed., *Sefer ha’eshkol* (Halberstadt: 1868), 2:52. The interpretation is brought in Azulai’s *Petaḥ ‘einayim* in the name of Naḥmanides (cited from R. Bezalel Ashkenazi), though the passage is not contained in our abbreviated versions of Naḥmanides’ commentary to *Megillah*. Cf. Ishbili: “And in all the lines, even though they have been written ‘brick on top of half-brick and half-brick on top of brick,’ it is necessary that the ends of the lines be ‘closed’ (*setumot*) at both

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the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-19), of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31) and of David (2 Samuel 2:1-51).<sup>73</sup> By contrast, the list of Haman's sons is

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edges and not open, as some scribes are accustomed to write. We have received this tradition from the *Ge'onim* of blessed memory."

<sup>73</sup> The list is given in the commentaries of R. Jonathan of Lunel, *Nimnuqei yosef*, etc. The other songs are distinguished, according to the *Mikhtam*, by the fact that they consist of praise to God. Breuer, *ibid.*, points out that according to the traditions of *Soferim* (see below) we must posit the existence of an alternative procedure of listing Haman's sons in three columns as follows:

ו א ת	פ ר ש נ ד ח ת א	ו א ת	א י ש
ו א ת	א ס פ ת א	ו א ת	ד ל פ ו ן
ו א ת	א ד ל י א	ו א ת	פ ו ר ת א

etc. Breuer (162) in fact speculates that (following the analogy of the "kings of Canaan" passage in Joshua) the Talmud had in mind a structure like the following:

ד ל פ ו ן	ו א ת	פ ר ש נ ד ח ת א	ו א ת
פ ו ר ת א	ו א ת	א ס פ ת א	ו א ת

though it should be kept in mind that he bases his conclusion on the printed versions, whereas most texts of the Talmud do not contain the reference to Joshua. See also: Simeon ben Zemach, *Sefer tashbeş* (Amsterdam: 1741), #3:273 (54c-d); *Iṭṭur*, 3:113c; *Manhig*, (ed. Raphael, 1:250); *Tur*, *Orah ḥayyim* 691 and commentators.

In *TP Megillah* 3:7 (74a) we find the following dictum: "Says R. Yosé be R. Bun: It is necessary that **א י ש** be at the head of the column and **ו א ת** at its end because thus does he choke and fall from the pole (?)." The last clause is obscure, and its text is uncertain. The word which I have translated as "choke"—**שניץ**—is found in the Venice printing of the Yerushalmi, but its source is an emendation to MS Leiden whose original reading was **סליק**, "went up." [See Epstein, *Introduction to Amoraitic Literature*. 547.] The emended text is rejected by Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, 560-1, because it "does not seem to fit." In fact, while there is no denying the difficulties of translating the sentence, the word **שניץ** does seem appropriate to the context, conjuring up a picture of Haman's sons being lifted into the hangman's noose [On this usage see Sokoloff's entry, especially the reference to *TP Berakhot* 2:7 (5c)] and then dropped again, as graphically represented by the two vertical columns of text. The medieval citations all appear to support the emended text of the printed versions. See Ratner, *Ahavath Zion WeJeruscholaim, Traktat Megillah*, 10:1:76-7; *Shibbolei halleqet*, #197 [ed. S. Buber, (Vilna: Romm, 1886), 154]; *Hiddushei haran*, etc.

written in two parallel vertical columns, one containing the Hebrew accusative particle “וְאֵת” which precedes each name, and the other the names themselves. According to R. Abbahu the visual format<sup>74</sup> of these passages carries a moral symbolism:<sup>75</sup> The interlocking blocks of the other poetic sections create a solid structure, whereas the unattached vertical stacks<sup>76</sup> can have no permanence.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> As reconstructed by Breuer, the visual formats employed for biblical poetry were a secondary development. Originally, the spaces which separate the textual units reflected pauses in oral recitation, perhaps for purposes of congregational response. Once it became usual to mix the written texts with blank spaces, scribes would strive to give aesthetic form to the patterns of text and spaces.

<sup>75</sup> For parallels to the sentiment expressed here see *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 5:5 (ed. Mandelbaum, 1:86; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 97); *Pesiqta rabbati*, 15:5 (transl. Braude, 1:311-2), etc.; Hallevy, *Aggadot ha-'amora'im*, 111.

<sup>76</sup> Several commentators noted that the *Ha'azinu* song (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) is arranged in parallel vertical stacks though it is no less a song than those of Moses or Deborah. Some (see Ishbili, R. Nissim, *Hiddushei hara"n*, *Hagahot mordechai*, etc.) justify this fact on the grounds that the song also speaks of the downfall of the wicked (as in verses 41-3). Me'iri makes the comment that when speaking of “songs” R. Shela had in mind songs “over miracles”; or in Ishbili’s formulation, only songs of praise. Rabbenu Tam [as cited in *Tosefot harosh*; a similar idea is brought in *Hiddushei hara"n* and *Hagahot mordechai* (who also brings it in the name of R. Isaac [of Dampierre])] argues that R. Shela was referring only to passages which contain both long and short units, but not to the *Ha'azinu* in which *all* the lines are “bricks.” Breuer, 180-3 explains the phenomenon on purely structural grounds, an approach which does not however help clarify the talmudic sources. His explanation (183) of why only the songs of Moses and of Deborah might have been considered true songs is not very convincing. R. Isaiah Ditrani, in both *Pisqei ri" d* and *Tosefot ri" d* objects that the song of David does not follow the rules as formulated in our pericope, and suggests that the widespread practice might actually be improper.

These difficulties do not attach to the parallel versions in Palestinian works: *TP Megillah* 3:7 (74b) [see references in Ratner, 10:1:75-6] and *Soferim* 12:9 (ed. Higger, 234) and 13:2 (237-8):

R. Ze'orah: R. Jeremiah in the name of Rav: The Song at the Sea and the Song of Deborah are written half-brick on top of brick and brick on top of half-brick. The ten sons of Haman and the kings of Canaan are written half-brick on top of half-brick and brick on top of brick, because any structure of this sort does not stand.

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### A Slap on the Mouth

[16b] “And the king said unto Esther the queen, *The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king’s provinces? now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done*” (Esther 9:12).

Says<sup>78</sup> R. Eleazar:<sup>79</sup> This teaches that an angel came and slapped him<sup>80</sup> on the mouth.

The logical connection between the opening section of the verse, in which Ahasuerus comments about the great numbers of enemies slain by the Jews in Shushan and the provinces, and its conclusion in which he expresses his willingness to accede to yet more of Esther’s demands, was viewed by R. Eleazar as a *non sequitur*.<sup>81</sup> He understood Ahasuerus’ first words to have been uttered in anger, and hence something must have occurred to change his attitude between the two

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Since this formulation does not speak in terms of a general rule and its exceptions, but merely mentions specific cases, it cannot be challenged on the basis of other instances which it includes or excludes.

<sup>77</sup> The underlying architectural considerations are described in interesting ways by the different commentators. E.g.: R. Jonathan of Lunel: “...If a structure of large stones or beams were constructed according to that model, it could not fall because it has much support, since the fourth row is supported by the row above it and even if it should fall, the third row would support it from the other side. But in the names of Haman’s ten sons...if either of them were to fall on one side, then all the others would immediately collapse because it has nothing supporting it on the right side...” *Mikhtam*: “They are like a ramshackle building, and will soon topple just as [Haman and his sons] fell speedily and there was no restoration after their downfall.” A very different approach is taken by R. Nissim: “When a wall is completely level at both ends and has no projections it is impossible to add to it or to strengthen it, as they would have been able to do if there were projections or teeth in the wall...” [So too in Azulai’s *Petaḥ ‘einayim*, citing R. Bezalel Ashkenazi.]

<sup>78</sup> “Says”—MS L: “And says.”

<sup>79</sup> “Says R. Eleazar”—**Printings**: “Says R. Abbahu”; ~ in MS P.

<sup>80</sup> “slapped him”—Genizah fragment: “ונצחר־ה” (?).

<sup>81</sup> Thus according to Rashi and Maharsha. While the laconic dictum might tolerate a different interpretation, I cannot think of one that is more reasonable. See also the paraphrase in *Leqah tov*, 110: “...Nevertheless, ‘now what is thy petition?’”

contradictory segments of the verse.<sup>82</sup> As on previous occasions, the midrash has recourse to the ubiquitous hosts of angels who continually hover over the stage of the action in order to help steer the events towards their proper course.<sup>83</sup> And as in the other instances, the exegesis here serves to magnify the scope of the providential miracle, since without this angelic interference it would have been impossible to

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<sup>82</sup> Most biblical commentators do not view Ahasuerus' remarks as critical towards the Jews. [Maharsha: "The matter is not entirely unambiguous."] See e.g. the observations of R. Joseph Gacon (cited by Alkabetz) who states that the king was complaining about the weakness and halfheartedness of the Jewish response so far: If in Shushan they had killed only five hundred souls, then imagine how few were killed in the periphery! Since the king had now made the Jewish cause his own, such negligence in executing the royal commands smacked of disloyalty. Gacon acknowledges that if we regard Ahasuerus' comment as a complaint about the magnitude of the massacres, then the conclusion of the verse would make no sense. R. Moses Alsheikh also understood that Ahasuerus was prudently encouraging Esther to complete the job in order to prevent any subsequent threat from surviving pockets of resistance. Paton, 286, is of a similar opinion, rejecting the Talmud's explanation for which there is, of course, no foundation in the biblical story: "Xerxes tries to please Esther by showing her how precisely her desire has been carried out, and then proceeds to inquire what more she wants." So too, Moore (88) writes that "he is concerned only with pleasing Esther who, he detects, is still not entirely satisfied." Cf. Hakham (57) who seems to regard Ahasuerus' closing questions as rhetorical, in the sense of "aren't you satisfied by now!"

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. above 15b (to Esther 5:2) where the angel had to force Ahasuerus to receive Esther. On 16a (to 7:5) Esther had to be slapped in order to prevent her from accusing the king to his face. The association of angels with slapping (*STR*) is surprisingly frequent. See e.g. *TP Shabbat* 6:9 (8d), *Song of Songs rabbah*, 7:14 (ed. Dunsky, 163), where Michael slaps Nebuchadnezzar for speaking of a "son of God" (according to Daniel 3:25) [On the passage see Saul Liebermann, *Hayerushalmi Kipshuto* (Jerusalem: Darom, 1934), 117-8]; *TB Sanhedrin* 92b, where an angel slaps Nebuchadnezzar's face in order to prevent him from outdoing David's eloquence in praising God; in *TB Niddah* 30b, R. Simlai's makes mention in a discourse of the angel who slaps the mouth of a newborn infant in order to make it forget the Torah that was learned before birth. As noted by E. E. Hallevy, *'Erkhei ha-'aggadah vehahalakhah*, Vol. 4 (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1982), 22, the tradition about slapping the infant's mouth appears only in the *TB* version of the tradition and not in the Palestinian sources such as *Tosefta Niddah* 4:10 [M. S. Zuckerman, ed., *Tosefta Based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1963), 644-5; see also Saul Liebermann, *Tosepheth Rishonim* (Jerusalem: Bamberger and Wahrman, 1939), 3:266-7]; *Leviticus rabbah*, 14:8 (312-4).

realize the assertion of divine justice that was embodied in the Jews' complete victory over their persecutors.<sup>84</sup>

**“With Letters”**

[16b] *“But when she came before the king he commanded [literally: said] with letters that his wicked device...should return...”* (Esther 9:25).

*“He commanded”*?<sup>85</sup> “She commanded” it should have said!

—Says Rav Nahman:<sup>86</sup> She said to him:<sup>87</sup> I beg of you,<sup>88</sup> let there be<sup>89</sup> commanded [literally: said] orally what is written in the letter {literally: book}.<sup>90</sup>

MS Y	All other witnesses
That it should not be like the first letters.	

By all standards Esther 9:25 is a difficult verse to understand, and many different explanations and emendations have been proposed in order to elucidate its meaning.<sup>91</sup> The Talmud understood that Esther

<sup>84</sup> The interpretation also serves incidentally to avoid an overly favorable portrayal of Ahasuerus. Even when the scriptural account is depicting him as an enthusiastic supporter of the Jewish cause, R. Eleazar assumes that his support is only lukewarm.

<sup>85</sup> *“He commanded”*— ~ in MSS B, P, YS.

<sup>86</sup> “Nahman”—MS P, **Printings**: “Johanan.”

<sup>87</sup> “She said to him”—MS B: “She said [to him]”; ~ in MSS M, R\*, W, P, Mf, EY, YS.

<sup>88</sup> “I beg of you”—thus only in MSS Y, W, AgE; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>89</sup> “Let there be commanded”—MSS G, W, Mf, **Spanish family, Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS**: “Let him command”; MS N: “And let him command”; MS B: “And he commanded” (?); MS P, AgE: “He said.”

<sup>90</sup> “letter”—HgT<sup>2</sup>: “letters.”

<sup>91</sup> For example, A. Hakham writes that “The verse is extremely difficult to fathom,” and proceeds to offer five different alternative interpretations. See also Alkabetz (citing R. Judah Ibn Shushan); Haupt, 170-1/74-5; Paton, 296-9; G. R. Driver, “Abbreviations in the Massoretic Text,” *Textus* 1 (1960), 128; Moore, 92, 94; W. Dommerhausen, *Die Esterrolle*, 126; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 53, 182 (n. 14); Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 87, n. 29.

had come before the king,<sup>92</sup> following which the latter issued an edict reversing his previous decree. The midrash was troubled by the awkwardness of the transition between the two events. Since the verse took the trouble to mention Esther's approach, we should naturally expect it to go on and relate what it was that she said or did. Instead we are told of Ahasuerus' commands, while Esther's role is never explained. Rav Naḥman resolves this difficulty by inserting an intermediary clause in which Esther submits a request. Thus, when Ahasuerus does publish his command we are to understand that it was at Esther's urging.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly we should understand that Esther asked

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<sup>92</sup> Much of the exegetical debate over this verse (see above) is reflected already in the ancient versions, and revolves around the question of who or what it was that came before the king, whether it was Esther (who has not been mentioned for the last thirteen verses), the report of Haman's "device," or other possibilities.

<sup>93</sup> The interpretation proposed here is not found in precisely this formulation in any of the standard commentators, although something very similar is suggested in the words of the *Tosafot*: "Since it says 'When she came before the king...he commanded,' it therefore follows that we must relate what it was that she said." Rashi deletes the words "she commanded [said] to him," attaching Rav Naḥman's dictum directly to the verse. By doing so, Rav Naḥman is no longer understood to be offering a reconstruction of Esther's words, but rather a separate halakhic ruling: namely, that all the events recounted in verses 23-5, which constitute a summary of the previous chapters of Esther, are to be formally recited each year from the text of a scroll. [See *Tosafot Hachmei Anglia*: "I.e., the reader of the megillah should say...Since it does not refer to Esther, but to the person reading the megillah."] Rashi's emendation was adopted primarily in Ashkenazic witnesses and others that are routinely guided by his textual decisions. It is not clear from Rashi's words whether he included the Talmud's objection in his text. (The question is, we should recall, formulated anonymously and in Aramaic, demonstrating the standard symptoms of late glosses). I cannot see how his interpretation of the pericope would have allowed him to leave it in; notwithstanding the fact that, in the absence of specific directives to that effect, and since the question was dealt with by the *Tosafot*, it remained in all the manuscript traditions. Nor does Rashi explain what objection he had against the standard reading. It is of course possible that he thought that Rav Naḥman's words sound more like a halakhic ruling than like a narrative embellishment, or that he was unable to furnish a satisfactory explanation according to the dominant reading; but in the present instance these suggestions do not seem to provide strong enough grounds for such a radical emendation. [Ishbili protests that Rashi's explanation "is forced. Furthermore, the end of the verse does not connect with this subject."] In my view it seems highly probable that Rashi was troubled by the fact that Rav Naḥman seemed to be tampering with the biblical text, making



Ahasuerus to go beyond the mere publication of decrees,<sup>94</sup> and explicitly declare his verbal support for the edicts that he had previously issued in the form of written letters.<sup>95</sup>

**“Words of Peace and Truth”**

[16b] “Words of peace <sup>96</sup>and truth” (Esther 9:30).

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Esther, rather than Ahasuerus, into the subject of the verb “*commanded*.” My explanation, according to which Esther’s words are inserted *before* Ahasuerus’ and not *instead* of them, would avoid that objection and would conform to the accepted conventions of midrashic hermeneutics. Note however that the Second Targum (Grossfeld, 192-3, and n. 11) explicitly makes Esther into the subject of the verb:

...she said what is written in the book ‘*thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven*’ (Deuteronomy 25:19). Then there arose Haman from the lineage of the house of Amalek and devised evil schemes against the house of Israel...

<sup>94</sup> It appears that the exegetical foundation of Rav Naḥman’s comment is that the word **עו** is being expounded as if it were an **עו**, in accordance with the hermeneutic modes introduced by Nahum of Gimzu and popularized by Rabbi Akiva and his school. Such particles in the biblical text were regarded as *ribbuyim*, extenders, which served to add something to the scope of the words they modified. Thus in our case, the letters were accompanied by something additional, namely an oral declaration. See *TP Berakhot* 9:5 (14b); *TB Pesahim* 22b, *Ḥagigah* 12a, *Soṭah* 17a (ed, Liss, 1:249-50), *Menahot* 11b, etc.; E. Z. Melammed, *An Introduction to Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem: 1973), 174-5; Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 39; Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942), 18.

<sup>95</sup> The reason why such additional confirmation should have been necessary is not spelled out in the Talmud. One reasonable possibility is suggested in the unique gloss found in MS Y: Esther was afraid that just as the first edict, ordering the massacre of the Jews, had been rescinded, so too could the present one in favor of the Jews, unless it were given some additional strengthening. Cf. 12b above (to Esther 1:22) where Rava comments about the loss of royal credibility that had been caused by the first letters (following the Vashti episode). In a similar vein, according to *Leqaḥ tov*, 111, Esther was asking the king not to rely merely on Mordecai’s letters (see Esther 9:20), but to issue a separate edict in his own name. See also Ishbili:

Perhaps she was asking him for permission to establish a memorial for future generations, so that he would not regard it as an act of disrespect. Or, she might have been requesting that it be announced by heralds, as was the custom, since {otherwise} those who heard it would object...

<sup>96</sup> MS N adds: “That they should recite them each year.”

Says R. Tanḥum: Says R. Asi:<sup>97 98</sup>

{And some say it: Says R. Ḥiyya bar Abba:<sup>99</sup> Says R. Asi<sup>100 101</sup>}:<sup>102</sup> This teaches that it requires ruled lines like the “truth”<sup>103</sup> of the Torah.

The meaning of the expression “the truth of the Torah” is not immediately obvious.<sup>104</sup> The simplest explanation is the one proposed by Rashi,<sup>105</sup> that it refers to the regulations for writing a ritually

<sup>97</sup> “Says R. Asi”— ~ in MS W, **Printings**.

<sup>98</sup> “Says R. Tanḥum: Says R. Asi”—AgE: “Says R. Ḥaninah; and some say it: R. Asi.”

<sup>99</sup> “Says R. Ḥiyya bar Abba”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>100</sup> “Says R. Asi”— ~ in AgE.

<sup>101</sup> “Asi”—MS Mf: “Ami.”

<sup>102</sup> Bracketed section ~ in MSS Y, M; emended according to all other witnesses.

<sup>103</sup> “truth”—AgE: “faith” (כאמורה → כאמתה).

<sup>104</sup> Biblical commentators have proposed many explanations of the expression “truth” and its appropriateness to its current context. See the text of the Latin Vulgate; Paton, 301; Moore, 96; Hakham, 63-4.

<sup>105</sup> Rashi’s interpretation finds support in *TP Megillah* 1:1 (70a) where we read:

R. Ḥalabo: R. Yasa in the name of R. Leazar: It states here “words of peace and truth”; and it states elsewhere “Buy the truth, and sell it not” (Proverbs 32:23). Behold, it is like the truth of the Torah. Just as this one requires ruled lines, so does this one require ruled lines. Just as this may be expounded [midrashically], so may this one be expounded.

The context, especially the juxtaposition with the rule concerning midrashic interpretation, leaves no room for reasonable doubt that the comparison is with the Pentateuch, the most sacred of the Hebrew scriptures. [See Ratner, *Ahwath Zion We-Jeruscholaim*, 3.]

Rashi’s explanation is further confirmed by the comments of the Babylonian *Ge’onim* [assembled in Lewin’s *Otzar ha-Gaonim, Megillah*, 20]. Thus we find in the manuscript published in Louis Ginzberg, *Geonica* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1909), 2:342 (and see 316): “‘The truth of the Torah’ is like the essence of the Torah, like its truth, like the commandments, statutes and judgments” [The passage is cited in R. Isaac Ditrani’s *Sefer hammakhria’* (Munkacs: Kohn and Klein, 1900), #85, in the name of Rav Amram *Ga’on*.] See also the responsum ascribed to R. Hai in *Sha’arei teshuvah* [Wolf Leiter, ed., *Shaare Teshubah: Responsa of*

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the *Geonim* (New York: Feldheim, 1946), #204; also found in *Eshkol*, ed. Auerbach, 2:40], where we find the following addition:

“...Who is the ‘truth of the Torah’? —Eleazar and Moses, the princes and the congregation are equivalent to the words of the daughters of Zelophehad, concerning whom it is written (Numbers 27:1-2) “...And they stood before Moses and before Eleazar the priest and before the princes and all the congregation.” In spite of the fact that they are the words of women they have to be ruled. So it is with respect to the scroll of Esther: Even though it is made up of the words of women like Vashti and Esther, it requires ruling.

On this passage see Robert (Yerachmiel) Brodie, “Sifrut ha-ge’onim vеха-teqst ha-talmudi,” in: *Mehqerei Talmud: Talmudic Studies*, Vol. 1, Y. Sussman and D. Rosenthal, eds., 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 238. Brodie (who notes correctly that I had excluded the passage from the corpus of ge’onic readings in my dissertation) argues that Rav Hai (and his correspondent) possessed a talmudic text which included the segment “Who is the truth of Torah etc.” and which the *Ga’on* himself is explicating. In actuality, the phenomenon was already noted by M. Hershler in the notes to his edition of the Me’iri’s *Beit habbehirah* to our pericope (see below). While this is undoubtedly the impression created by the wording of the responsum, we should recall that there is no attestation of this reading in any known Talmud manuscript or medieval *testimonia*, or even in other ge’onic quotations. Furthermore, the responsa collection *Sha’arei teshuvah* consists largely of material copied second-hand out of earlier compendia, which makes it at least as likely that in the text at hand the supposed talmudic explanation is in reality that of R. Hai. If this is so, then the commentary which Brodie ascribes to R. Hai is more likely that of R. Judah Barceloni or some other medieval anthologist from which the editor of *Sha’arei teshuvah* copied it. [The *Eshkol* is an abridgment of Barceloni’s *Sefer ha’ittim*, as is much of the material in *Sha’arei teshuvah*.] The only other medieval authority who shows any familiarity with Rav Hai’s interpretation is the Me’iri who paraphrases the addition and ascribes it to the *Yerushalmi*! [It is not found there, nor in any other known rabbinic work.] This constitutes strong evidence that R. Hai’s responsum and his “Talmud text” were not known beyond the frontiers of Provence (home to R. Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, author of the *Eshkol*, and the Me’iri), whereas they were completely unknown in such important centers as North Africa, Ashkenaz or Spain; for if Rav Hai’s discussion was recognized as an existing reading of the talmudic text, then it is inconceivable that not a single participant in the voluminous debate over the meaning of “truth of Torah”—including such central figures as R. Hananel (whose writings normally benefit from an intimate familiarity with the teachings of R. Hai and other *ge’onim*), Rashi, Nahmanides or others—would have cited it as evidence of the correctness of Rashi’s opinion, and as an explicit refutation of Rabbenu Tam’s. [On the collection *Sha’arei teshuvah* and its use of earlier sources see: Esriel Hildesheimer, “Die Komposition der Sammlungen von Responsa der Gaonen,” in: *Jüdisch Studien Joseph Wahlgemat...gewidmet* (Frankfurt am Main: 1928); Joseph Tavori, “Sources of the

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Geonic Responsa collection 'Sha'arei Teshuvah,'" *Alei Sefer* 3 (1976), 5-19; *Idem.*, "Responsa by Geonim and Rishonim, ms. Vivante, pt. 1," *Alei Sefer* 8 (1980), 32-50; Neil Danzig, "Geonic Responsa Sha'arei Teshuvah and She'elot U-Teshuvot Min Ha-Shamayim," *Tarbiz* 58 (1: 1982), 21-48.]

Additional Ge'onic texts brought by Lewin are in agreement that the expression refers to the Torah.

Further support for the assertion that a Torah scroll must be ruled is found in *TB Giṭṭin* 6b and its parallel in *TP Megillah* 3:2 (74a) [see Ratner *ibid.*, 68], where it is stated that even incidental quotations from the Bible, if they exceed two words, must be written on ruled lines. So too, in *Soferim* 1:1 (ed. Higger, 96-7) it is explicitly prohibited to write a Torah without ruling (*sirgel*). This was laid down as *halakhah* by Maimonides (*Hilkhot sefer torah* 1:12) and other Sephardic codifiers.

Although the evidence appears to be quite straightforward about the fact that R. Asi derived his dictum by analogy from the rules governing the writing of a Torah scroll, the medieval rabbinic exegetical and legal writings know of a conflicting explanation of the dictum, according to which the comparison was not with the Torah but with a *mezuzah*. It follows from this approach that there is no absolute requirement that a Torah scroll be ruled, although such a requirement does apply to the writing of a *mezuzah*. The expression "the truth of the Torah" is understood to refer to the paragraphs from the *Shema'* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:3-21) which are contained in a *mezuzah* and which constitute a quintessential credo of basic Jewish belief. Detailed discussions of this position are scattered through much of medieval halakhic literature, the bulk of which is listed in Aptowitz's notes to *Sefer raviah*, 2:250, n. 2; Higger's notes to *Soferim*, 37 (Introduction) and 96-7; I. Raphael's notes to his edition of *Sefer hammanhig*, 1:237; M. Hershler's edition of the Me'iri *Megillah*, 43, n. 391; E. Lichtenstein's edition of Ishbili's commentary, 112, nn. 10-11; the Jerusalem 1971 edition of *Pisqei ri" d*, 241, n. 211; David Abraham, ed., *Sefer kolbo* (Jerusalem: 1990-), 2:312, n. 84. The position is most widely identified with R. Jacob Tam [the most pristine version of whose arguments is probably the one in S. Schlesinger, ed., *Sepher Hayashar by Rabbenu Tam* (Jerusalem: Kiriat Sefer, 1959), 73-4 (#104); cf. "Hilekhot sefer torah lerabbenu tam," in: Abraham Joseph Wertheimer, ed., *The Genizah Fragments 'Ginzei Jerusalem'* (Jerusalem: Ketav Yad V'sefer and Rubin Mass, 1981), 101-2], but it appears to have also been held previously by R. Ḥananel of Kairowan. [Several later authors cite it in his name though no such statement is found in his commentary to our pericope. R. Nathan ben Jehiel's '*Arukh*' (ed. Kohut, 1:130) explains R. Asi's dictum in accordance with this view, and R. Ḥananel is the source for virtually all of the '*Arukh*'s interpretations of *TB Megillah*.]

Among the talmudic sources marshaled by R. Tam and his defenders are the following:

•*TB Menahot* 32a-b:

A Torah scroll which has become worn or phylacteries which have become worn may not be turned into a *mezuzah*, because it is forbid-

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acceptable scroll of the Pentateuch. Because the verse employs the word “*truth*” in order to designate the edict that was distributed by Mordecai establishing the annual Purim festival—understood to refer to the Book of Esther itself—the rabbis derived that the megillah is subject to the laws which apply to a Torah scroll. In the present instance, this means that the lines must be ruled.<sup>106</sup>

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den to lower something from a stricter degree of sanctity to a lesser degree of sanctity.

...{From this it follows that} if it were permissible to lower it, then it could be done! However {a *mezuzah*} requires ruled lines...{several sources are cited to that effect}!

—This issue is in dispute among the *Tanna'im*.

The pericope seems to imply that the Torah scroll and phylacteries, as distinct from the *mezuzah*, do not require ruled lines. It is however possible that the Talmud is directing its objection only at the phylacteries. [R. Tam at any rate deduces from here that not only was it not mandatory to rule the lines, but it was not even common or desirable, since otherwise the Talmud could have applied the law to a case where the texts *happened* to be ruled.]

•In *TB Megillah* 19a the law that a megillah must be written in ink and on parchment is derived by means of a *gezerah shavah* from the respective uses of the word *sefer* (book) in Esther and in Jeremiah 36:18: “*and I wrote them with ink in the book.*” Rabbenu Tam argues: If it were true that Esther 9:30 serves as a justification for analogies between the rules for writing scrolls of Esther and of the Torah, then the proof-text from Jeremiah would be superfluous! Why not state simply that these rules apply to a scroll of Esther because they apply to a Torah scroll? Hence we must conclude that the Talmud does not in actuality posit such an equation.

To this we might counter that there is no need to harmonize two independent midrashic interpretations by different rabbis.

As to the aforementioned passages which seem to speak explicitly about the need to rule the lines of a Torah scroll, R. Tam claims that they refer at best to the marking of the outer borders of the column, but not to individual lines. Even so, this is not a formal requirement which would determine the legal fitness of the scroll, but merely a functional aid to enhance the aesthetics of the document by ensuring that the writing is straight, in accordance with Exodus 15:2 which was expounded by the rabbis as a basis for beautifying the precepts of the Torah (see *Mekhilta, Shirata*, 3 [ed. Horovitz and Rabin, 127; ed. Lauterbach, 3:25] etc.) If a scribe was capable of writing straight lines of text without such assistance, then he could forego it.

<sup>106</sup> On the techniques employed for ruling Hebrew manuscripts see Malachi Beit-Arié, *Hebrew Codicology* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1981),

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### Fasting and Crying

[16b] “*And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book*” (Esther 9:13).

“*And the decree of Esther*”<sup>107</sup>—Yes.<sup>108</sup>

“*The matters of the fastings and their cry*”<sup>109</sup> (9:31)—No!<sup>110</sup>

Says R. Isaac<sup>111</sup> of the House of<sup>112</sup> R. Ami:<sup>113</sup> Thus does it say:<sup>114</sup>  
 “The decree of Esther, and the matter of the fastings and their cry,<sup>115</sup>  
 confirmed those matters of Purim.”<sup>116</sup> <sup>117</sup>

R. Isaac’s comment is considerably more lucid than the objection to which it is ostensibly responding. Taken by itself, it can be viewed as a straightforward explanation of the syntactical connection between verses 31 and 32. The awkward phrasing of the verses does make for

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72-86; Mordechai Glatzer, “The Aleppo Codex: Codicological and Paleographical Aspects,” *Sefunot* 19 [new series: 4] (1989), 210-5.

<sup>107</sup> **HgT<sup>2</sup>** adds: “*confirmed*.”

<sup>108</sup> “Yes”—Genizah fragment: “and not.”

<sup>109</sup> “*and their cry*”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>110</sup> MS **O** and Genizah fragment add: “Rather.”

<sup>111</sup> “Says R. Isaac”—MS **G**: “They say”; **Printings**: “Says R. Johanan”; MS **P**: “Says.”

<sup>112</sup> “of the house of”—MS **O**: “Says”; **EY**: “bar”; **HgT<sup>2</sup>**: “A *tanna* of the house of.”

<sup>113</sup> “of the house of R. Ami”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>114</sup> “Thus does it say”— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>115</sup> “The decree...and their cry”—thus in MS **Y**; in all other witnesses: “*The matters of the fastings and their cry and the decree of Esther confirmed those matters of Purim*.”

<sup>116</sup> MS **L** adds: “And upon this support did our rabbis rely that we fast on the thirteenth prior to the fourteenth. And they established it as a statute, that if these had not been confirmed (?). And this is the meaning of the verse: ‘*The matters of the fastings*’—These are (?). And ‘*the decree of Esther*’—This is the reading of the megillah. ‘*Confirmed those matters of Purim*.’”

<sup>117</sup> Genizah fragment adds: “‘*Words of truth and peace*.’ Says Rabbi Tanḥum: Says Rav Asi: And there are some who say: Says Rabbah bar Maḥasiah: Says Rav: This teaches that it requires ruling like the ‘truth’ of the Torah” [The segment is missing above, where it appears in the other witnesses].

serious confusion, and it is unclear how the words “*the matters of the fastings and their cry*” fit into the flow of the presentation.<sup>118</sup> R. Isaac therefore informs us that the “*fastings*” and “*cry*” of verse 31 were included among the events whose commemoration, as part of the festival of Purim, was confirmed by Esther’s decree in verse 32.<sup>119</sup>

The anonymous objection which introduces R. Isaac’s dictum is more difficult to understand. It begins from the hypothetical assumption that, in the absence of midrashic exegesis to the contrary, the biblical author would have intentionally excluded the fasting and crying from among the reasons for the establishment of the Purim holiday.<sup>120</sup> It is hard to imagine why it would have entered anyone’s mind to disregard the fasts.<sup>121</sup> It appears therefore that the objection was a secondary development in the pericope, and was introduced in conformity with the midrashic axiom that exegetical comments must be construed as reactions to difficulties, contradictions and objections in the biblical text. In the present instance, as I have argued, the difficulty confronted by R. Isaac was of a more general character, a lack of clarity in the syntactic structure of the biblical text. The author of the objection sought a more specific problem, which he reconstructed by working backward from the dictum, reasoning as follows: If R. Isaac

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<sup>118</sup> See the variegated approaches described by Ibn Ezra, Paton (301), Moore (96-7), Hakham (64 and n. 14), etc.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. the Targum’s rendering of 9:31 (Grossfeld, 89): “...that they remember the decrees [or: matters] of the fasting and their prayers.”

<sup>120</sup> See the explanation in the notes to R. N. N. Rabbinowicz, *Diqduqé Soferim, Variæ Lectiones in Misnam et in Talmud Babylonicum* (New York: M. P. Press, reprint: 1976). An entirely different interpretation (based primarily on Maharsha) is given by A. Hilewitz, “Ta’anit ester,” *Sinai* 64 (1969), 234: “...Was it only the decree of Esther that confirmed the matters of Purim, without the help of the fastings and their crying? ...And the answer of R. Johanan [according to the reading in the **Printings**] is: ...The matters of the fastings also helped...” Cf. *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia*: “...She asked, through her words to the Sages, to confirm the days of Purim.” See our discussion below on the halakhic implications of the pericope.

<sup>121</sup> Conceivably, the Talmud was making the homiletical point that in times of rejoicing we should always be careful not to forget the tribulations from which we have been delivered.

was taking the trouble to assert that the fasts were included in the commemoration, then the scriptural text *without* R. Isaac's explanation must have implied the opposite.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> The end product seems to single out the fasts for special commemoration, not simply as one among many episodes recorded in the megillah. As we can see in the addition to MS L, this passage was regarded by some medievals as a source for the institution of the "Fast of Esther" on the thirteenth of Adar, a fast which has no explicit support in the Talmud, though it is attested in the earliest post-talmudic writings [e.g., the *siddurim* of R Saadiah (pp. 257-8) and R. Amram (ed. Goldschmidt, 101), the *She'iltot* and (reflecting a very different Palestinian practice) *Soferim*]. For discussions of the history of *Ta'anit esther* see: Adolf Schwarz, "Taanit Esther," in: *Festschrift...Professor David Simonsens 70-aarige Fødseldag* (Copenhagen: Hertz's Bogtrykkeri, 1923), 188-205 (especially 196-7); Hilewitz, *op. cit.*; Samuel K. Mirsky, ed., *Sheeltot de Rab Ahai Gaon* (Jerusalem: Sura Research and Publication Foundation, 1963), 3:222-3 (#79); Rabbi Naftali Z. J. Berlin in his *Ha'ameq she'elah* commentary to the *She'iltot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1948), 1:438-9 (#67). It goes beyond the scope of the present study to trace the full development of the Fast of Esther, but it is important to note the extent to which our pericope was viewed as a normative source for the observance of that fast.

The first fact which must be observed in this connection is that Esther 9:31 and the interpretation given in our current pericope are quoted on surprisingly few occasions in the extensive rabbinic discussions about the Fast of Esther. This owes in large measure to the fact that the framework for the discussion was set very early in the *She'iltot*, whose author discerned an allusion to a fast on the thirteenth of Adar in the words of Esther 9:18 ("*But the Jews...assembled together on the thirteenth day*"), while many others [this position is often associated in the literature with R. Jacob Tam] denied that there existed any literary source, biblical or talmudic, for the institution of the fast. Notwithstanding, there are some interesting exceptions where rabbis did invoke Esther 9:31 as a halakhic basis for the observance of the fast. Thus, e.g., the author of the ge'onic *Sefer miqso'ot* (ed. S. Assaf, Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1947), 6-7 [the citation is taken from the *Or zarua'*, #367 (p. 2:439)], copies out verbatim the passage from *She'iltot*, but adds the conclusion "As it says: '*the matters of the fastings and their cry.*'" This formulation may have served as the basis for Maimonides' ruling in *Hilkhot ta'anuyot* 5:5:

And all Israel are accustomed in these days to fast on the thirteenth of Adar in commemoration of the fast which was observed in the days of Haman, as it is written "*the matters of the fasting etc.*"

Unlike the *miqso'ot*, Maimonides, does not state explicitly that the Jews had fasted on the thirteenth of Adar. Nor does the scriptural support justify classifying the fast as more than a custom (as distinct from actual binding law). R. Abraham ben David, the Ravad of Posquieres [cited by R. Nissim in his commentary to Alfasi, *Ta'anit* Ch. 2 (6b in the Vilna Talmud)] argues that the scriptural proof-text from Esther

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### Concluding Remarks

The material discussed in the present chapter consists of a heterogeneous assembly of aggadic and halakhic traditions from a variety of sources,<sup>123</sup> reflecting the shift in the biblical text itself from the telling

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9:31 lends to the Fast of Esther a higher degree of legal authority than the rabbinically ordained fasts of the Jewish calendar, "...because we have support for it in Scripture, where it states '*and as they had decreed for themselves...the matters of the fastings*'—implying that just as they accepted upon themselves the obligation to observe the festival, so did they accept upon themselves '*the matters of the fastings and their cry*'; namely, to observe the fast annually." [See Hilewitz's discussion, 121-2, of the possible differences between Ravad's and Maimonides' positions.]

A different perspective on the question is provided in a responsum of Rashi which was cited widely in European halakhic compendia [See Israel Elfenbein, ed., *Responsa Rashi* (New York: Shulsinger, 1943), 155 (#128); H. L. Ehrenreich, ed., *Sepher Ha-Pardes* (Budapest; by Author, 1924), 252-3; J. Freimann, ed., *Siddur Raschi* (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1911), 168 (#345); *Mahzor vitry*, 210; S. Buber, ed., *Sefer shibbolei halleqet ha-shalem* (Vilna: Romm, 1886), #194; *Orhot hayyim*, ed. Jerusalem 1956, 1:267; *Kol-bo*, 324-5; cf. *Manhig*, ed. Raphael, 1:244. I was unable to find citations of the verse in some of the references mentioned by Hilewitz, including *Kol-bo*, *Tashbes*, *Aguddah*]:

...And I have found written in the name of our Rabbi Solomon of blessed memory...and the Rabbi stated: This fast is not of Pentateuchal origin, nor of rabbinic origin. Rather, it is a mere custom... And if a person should try to argue from the fact that it is written "*the matters of the fastings and their crying*," this does not refer to the acceptance of the fast as an obligation for future generations. For if that were so, then when it says "*and their crying*" also—What crying are we supposed to observe in subsequent generations, God forbid! Rather, this is not the meaning of the verse. The correct interpretation is as follows: Because of the matters of the fastings and their crying which they had undergone in the days of Haman, they now took upon themselves the days of Purim in memory of the miracle, for all generations...

[Cf. Ibn Ezra's commentary to the verse.]

<sup>123</sup> The rabbis who appear include the Babylonian *Amora'im* Rav Judah, Rav Nahman and Rav Isaac of the House of R. Ami. As regards the last-mentioned, Hyman (*Toldoth Tannaim Ve' Amora'im*, 2:789-90) and Albeck (*Introduction to the Talmud*, 366 and n. 357) equate him with R. Isaac bar Ami, a fourth-generation Babylonian *Amora*, disciple of Rav Hisda. Margolioth (*Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature*, 2:591-2) mentions an opinion (whose source I have been unable to identify) that identifies him with the fourth-generation Palestinian *Amora* R. Isaac bar Redifa.

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of the story of the victory over Haman to the celebration of that victory in the feast of Purim. For purposes of this summary I shall deal firstly with the aggadah, and afterwards with the halakhic portions.

The aggadah comments on no more than ten of the verses between Esther 8:16 and 9:32.<sup>124</sup> This sparse distribution stands in marked contrast to the early sections of the midrash which dwelled at exhaustive length on each verse, and sometimes each word. The situation however is typical of the rabbinic aggadic compilations, and reflects the patterns of synagogue discourses, most of which took the form of proems, concentrating normally on the opening verses of lectionary units.<sup>125</sup>

In several instances the dicta were worded so laconically as to raise serious doubts about the authors' intent. The homiletical themes that found expression in the section (aside from the clarification of actual exegetical difficulties) continue those encountered previously, including the imposing of formal rabbinic and halakhic structures on the text of Esther<sup>126</sup> and the further involvement of angels to assist Esther from behind the scenes.<sup>127</sup>

This segment of the Esther-Midrash also contains three halakhic dicta which express a common principle, that the methods of writing

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The Palestinian *Amora* R. Eleazar (ben Pedat) also appears in this section of the Esther-Midrash. See also Abraham Weiss, *Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim*, 289-90.

<sup>124</sup> The verses are Esther 8:16; 9:7-10; 9:12; 9:25; 9:30-2.

<sup>125</sup> The state of other *midrashim* to Esther is very similar in this respect. The older stratum of *Esther rabbah* (to Ch. 7) extends only as far as Esther Ch. 3. Even the later compilation at the end of the midrash has almost no material expounding Chs. 8 or 9. [On the different sources that make up *Esther rabbah* see Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträgen Juden Historisch Entwickelt*, revised Hebrew translation by Ch. Albeck (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1947), 128-30, 402-6.] *Abba gorion* also concludes at the end of Esther Ch. 7; *Panim aherim* A expounds only verse 16 in Esther Ch. 8, and *Panim aherim* B concludes at 7:9 (see Zunz-Albeck, *op. cit.*, 242-3, n. 7).

<sup>126</sup> See the comment to Esther 8:16.

<sup>127</sup> To 8:25.

and reciting certain passages in Esther ought to reflect their contents. The dicta are ascribed to Palestinian *Amora'im*<sup>128</sup> and are all found in *TP Megillah*.<sup>129</sup> It appears that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash were drawing from a Palestinian talmudic compendium similar to the existing *TP Megillah*.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> It should be noted that the Genizah fragment (Antonin 247) preserves a very different textual traditions which is most conspicuous in its rendering of the names of the respective rabbis. Thus we find there "Rav Idi of Hifi" instead of "Rav Ada of Jaffo"; Rabbi Yannai (יני): says Ze'ori" instead of "R. Jonah says: R. Zera etc." A reproduction of the manuscript is included in Abraham Katsh, *Ginze Talmud Babli* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1975 -9), 1:130-1; see also: *Idem.*, "Unpublished Geniza Talmudic Fragments in the Antonin Collection in Leningrad," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973) [*The Gaster Festschrift*], 221-2.

<sup>129</sup> The passages in *TP Megillah* are: (1) 1:1 (70a) on the requirement to rule the lines of the megillah, attributed there to "R. Ḥalabo: R. Yasa in the name of R. Eleazar; (2) 3:8 (74b) on the writing of Haman's sons and the Song of Moses, ascribed to "R. Ze'orah: R. Jeremiah in the name of Rav"; (3) *ibid.* (74b-c) on reading the ten sons in one breath, ascribed to "R. Ḥiyyah b. R. Ada of Jaffo: R. Jeremiah in the name of R. Ze'orah."

<sup>130</sup> I am not familiar with any Palestinian aggadic collections which cite these halakhic dicta.

## Chapter Sixteen

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### Great is the Study of Torah

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#### Most of His Brethren

[16b] “*For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews; and accepted of the multitude [rov] of his brethren*” (Esther 10:3).

Rav Joseph teaches<sup>1</sup> {in a *baraita*):<sup>2</sup> “*of the majority [rov] of his brethren*”<sup>3</sup>—and not of<sup>4</sup> all of his brethren.<sup>5</sup> This teaches that part of the Sanhedrin<sup>6</sup> withdrew from him.

The noun *rov* in biblical Hebrew carries the meanings “multitude, abundance, greatness,”<sup>7</sup> but not that of “majority” or “the greater part.” It is precisely in these latter senses that the word is used in the overwhelming majority of occurrences in rabbinic literature.<sup>8</sup> As frequently happens, the midrash read the biblical expression in the light of its contemporary usage,<sup>9</sup> leading to an ironic observation about the price of Mordecai’s success. As long as Mordecai had existed as an individual pursuing the life of a pious Jewish scholar, he could enjoy the support and admiration of *all* his colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Now that he has

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<sup>1</sup> “Rav Joseph teaches”— ~ in MS P, **Printings**, Genizah fragment.

<sup>2</sup> See Melamed, *Halachic Midrashim of the Tannaim in the Babylonian Talmud*, 519.

<sup>3</sup> “*of...brethren*”— ~ in MS P.

<sup>4</sup> “*of*”— ~ in MSS P, L, HgT<sup>2</sup>, Genizah fragment.

<sup>5</sup> “and not...brethren”— ~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

<sup>6</sup> “Sanhedrin”—Genizah fragment: “*Shekhinah*.”

<sup>7</sup> *BDB*, 913-4; Ben-Yehuda, 14:6348-50.

<sup>8</sup> See Ben-Yehuda, 14:6350-2.

<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon is described by I. Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-'aggadah*, 112-7.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly and characteristically, the *baraita* is concerned only with the approval of the members of the “Sanhedrin,” the rabbinic sages, and not with the general Jewish

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turned his energies to other directions,<sup>11</sup> and come to occupy positions of leadership in the royal court<sup>12</sup> and in the Jewish community, he has inevitably alienated some of the rabbis.

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population, in spite of the verse's mention of "*his brethren*." See Maharsha, who takes the trouble to explain that Mordecai's spiritual "brothers" were the rabbis (according to the midrash, these were the "Men of the Great Assembly," by whose authority the Book of Esther was accepted into the biblical canon). The identification of Mordecai as a member of the Sanhedrin is by now a familiar motif in the midrashic retelling of Esther, which we have discussed on previous occasions.

<sup>11</sup> Rashi attributes the hostility of the Sanhedrin to the fact that Mordecai's political appointment has led to a proportionate neglect of Torah study, an explanation which was accepted by all subsequent commentators. Although the connection to Mordecai's rise to power is indeed suggested by the context of the verse, I find no explicit indication in the biblical or talmudic texts that the issue at stake in the *baraita* was the diminishing of his scholarly achievement. Presumably Rashi arrived at this conclusion by equating the present *baraita* with Rav Joseph's dictum below, which defines the conflict as one between "study of Torah" and "saving of lives." Although such an understanding is perfectly reasonable, it is not necessarily true. A number of alternative interpretations are possible. For one thing, it is not obvious that Mordecai is actually being criticized. The *baraita* might merely be expressing its ironic resignation to the inevitable spiritual costs of communal power. On the other hand, the purpose of the midrash might be to castigate Mordecai for accepting an appointment in a non-Jewish administration. Rashi's allusion to this factor is ambiguous since he refers to Mordecai's entering the *serarah*, a Hebrew term which can apply equally to leadership within the Jewish community or an appointment at the royal court. That the objection is to collaboration with the government is suggested more strongly by R. Samuel Masnouth I. S. Lange and S. Schwartz, eds., *Midraḥ Daniel et Midraḥ Ezra Auctore R. Samuel b. R. Nissim Masnouth* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1968), 148], who speaks of Mordecai becoming "close to the throne" (*qarov lammalkhut*). If we consider Rav Joseph's dictum (immediately below) to be integrally connected to his *baraita*, then the issue is spelled out clearly to be one of "saving of lives," and it is hardly likely that Mordecai is being taken to task for saving the Jews from Haman's plot!

In support of Rashi's reading, we may observe that the conflicting claims of academic religious scholarship and the duties of communal leadership were often characterized as an inescapable accompaniment of rabbinic leadership. The phenomenon is related to the separation of powers between the Patriarchate or Exilarchate and the *beit hamidrash*, and might have roots as far back as the Pharisaic avoidance of political involvement during the Hasmonean and Herodian eras. Rabbinic literature relates that the rabbis did nonetheless have to fulfill various administrative functions for the "secular" authorities. For an overview of the issues and an attempt to set it in a historical and social context see Urbach, *The Sages*, 604-12 (On 611-2 he discusses our pericope according to Rashi's understanding of it). See also his "Ma'amad

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## Greater Than the Saving of Lives

[16b] Says<sup>13</sup> Rav Joseph:<sup>14</sup> Great is the study of<sup>15</sup> Torah<sup>16</sup> more than the saving of lives.

Whence do we learn this? —From Mordecai.<sup>17</sup> For<sup>18</sup> initially it counts<sup>19</sup> him<sup>20</sup> after four, and in the end it counts him<sup>21</sup> after five.

Initially it is written<sup>22</sup> “Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai Bilshan, Mizpor, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The numbers of the men of the people of Israel” (Ezra 2:2).

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vehanhagah be‘olamam shel ḥakhmei erez-yisra’el,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1969), 31-54 [= *World of the Sages*, 306-29]; Gedalyahu Alon, “Those Appointed for Money,” in his *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), 374-435; Moshe Beer, “Torah and Derekh Eretz,” *Bar-Ilan Annual* 2 (1964), 134-62; *Idem.*, “Issachar and Zebulun,” *Bar-Ilan Annual* 6 (1968), 167-80). Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ban-Zvi and Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1985), especially 43-7. E. E. Hallevy, “*Aggadat ha’amora’im* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1977), 30-2, presents a number of different attitudes towards this question that are ascribed to assorted rabbis. Thus we find those who eschew fulfilling communal obligations (e.g., *Ecclesiastes rabbah*, 7:7:1), those who regret *not* having served the public (*Tanḥuma*, *Mishpatim*, 2), and those who equate the importance of the two realms [*TP Berakhot* 5:1 (8d)]. He cites many interesting parallels among classical authors (Epicurus, Plato, the Stoics, Cicero, Plutarch) who voiced similar hesitations about the conflicts between their academic or philosophical pursuits, and their involvement in public affairs.

<sup>12</sup> See Esther 8:15; 9:4, etc.

<sup>13</sup> “Says”—MSS G, B, L, M, Mf, Spanish family: “And says.”

<sup>14</sup> “Rav Joseph”—Genizah fragment: “R. Yosé bar Rabbi Ḥanina.”

<sup>15</sup> “the study of”— ~ in MS O.

<sup>16</sup> “Torah”— ~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

<sup>17</sup> “Whence...Mordecai”— thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>18</sup> “For”— ~ in MS W. Spanish family adds: “whereas.”

<sup>19</sup> “it counts”—Genizah fragment: “they count.”

<sup>20</sup> “him”—thus only in MS Y and Genizah fragment; in all other witnesses: “Mordecai.”

<sup>21</sup> “it counts him”—Genizah fragment: “they count him”; MS R: “it counts”; ~ in MS P, EY, Printings, YS.

<sup>22</sup> “and in the end...written”— ~ in AgE (homoioteleuton).

But in the end<sup>23</sup> it is written “*Who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel*” (Nehemiah 7:7).

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<sup>23</sup> “but in the end”—MS M: “for.”

Rav Joseph's dictum appears to be based on the conclusions of the *baraita* which he brought above,<sup>24</sup> which claimed that Mordecai had compromised his vocation as a Torah scholar when he involved himself in the "political" activities that were necessary for foiling Haman's plans.<sup>25</sup> Rav Joseph finds corroboration for his observation in the comparison of two verses outside the book of Esther in which Mordecai<sup>26</sup> was mentioned. The former verse is part of a list of the Jewish exiles who went up to Jerusalem following Cyrus' proclamation, under the leadership of Zerubbabel. An almost identical list appears in connection with the completion of the construction of the walls of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah.<sup>27</sup> Both lists include the name Mordecai.<sup>28</sup> The only major difference between the two lists, aside from some variations in orthography, is that in the second one an additional name is added just before Mordecai's. Rav Joseph regards this fact as an intentional indication that the authors of the book of Ezra [-Nehemiah]<sup>29</sup> wanted to show us that in the period intervening between

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<sup>24</sup> But cf. Pinto who observes that if the *baraita* and the dictum were really making the same point then the dictum would be unacceptably redundant! He resolves this difficulty by arguing that in the *baraita* all that we are given is the human opinion of Mordecai's colleagues on the Sanhedrin who could be expected to attach undue importance to the precept of *talmud torah*. Rav Joseph's dictum, on the other hand, expresses the "objective" evaluation of the biblical author.

<sup>25</sup> See my discussion in the notes to the previous section. However we may choose to understand the *baraita*, it is clear that the dictum relates to Mordecai's activities *prior* to Haman's defeat, not to whatever role he might have played afterwards.

<sup>26</sup> According to the rabbinic belief which equated these two homonymous figures.

<sup>27</sup> Maharsha notes that both lists must be recording the same event since it is inconceivable that all the exiles who are enumerated there should have gone back to Babylonia and then returned. Therefore the addition of the name to the second verse must have been done with a view to its midrashic exposition.

<sup>28</sup> Presumably (though this fact does not affect the understanding of the current pericope) the author read "Mordecai Bilshan" as a single person in accordance with the midrashic traditions which viewed the latter as an epithet for the former ["master of (seventy) languages (*lashon*), a proverbial prerequisite for acceptance into the Great Sanhedrin].

<sup>29</sup> According to *TB Bava batra* 15a the "Men of the Great Assembly" composed the Book of Esther, and Ezra himself authored the book bearing his name (including the



the two events—the period during which the events of Esther, including Mordecai's rise to worldly greatness, took place—Mordecai's status had been reduced correspondingly.<sup>30</sup> The reason for this, says Rav Joseph, must have been connected with his neglect of his scholarly activities in order to battle against the perils threatening his people.<sup>31</sup>

### Greater Than the Construction of the Temple

[16b] Says<sup>32</sup> Rav;<sup>33</sup> and if you should say: Says<sup>34</sup> Rav Isaac bar<sup>35</sup> Samuel bar<sup>36</sup> Marta;<sup>37</sup> Great is the study of Torah, more than the

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section which we currently call "Nehemiah"), as well as the Book of Chronicles, insofar as they deal with events which took place before his death (They were subsequently completed by Nehemiah). However according to *TB Sanhedrin* 93b the whole of Ezra was composed by Nehemiah, but on account of his moral failings the authorship was not ascribed to him. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:352; 6:439, n. 439.

<sup>30</sup> See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:445: "Previously he had ranked sixth [!] among the eminent scholars of Israel, he now dropped to the seventh [!] place among them"; 6:480, n. 190. The Talmud does not state explicitly that the ranking in the verses was in order of scholarly erudition.

<sup>31</sup> The dictum is undoubtedly an aggadic exaggeration, since it is unimaginable that Rav Joseph is suggesting that Mordecai ought to have kept to his studies in such circumstances. See the commentary of R. Josiah Pinto who tries unconvincingly to formulate a halakhic rationale that would give communal Torah study a higher priority than the saving of human life. Urbach, *The Sages*, 611-2, explains this passage in the light of Rav Joseph's comment in *TB Soṭah* 21a (ed. Liss, 1:296) that

A commandment protects and saves life at the time that a person is occupied in its performance; but when one is not occupied in its performance it protects but does not save life. However the Torah both protects and saves life whether or not the person is occupied in it.

<sup>32</sup> "Says"—~ in MS L.

<sup>33</sup> "Rav"—MSS O, L: "Rava."

<sup>34</sup> "Says"—thus only in MSS Y, B; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>35</sup> "Isaac bar"—~ in **Printings**.

<sup>36</sup> "Samuel bar"—~ in MSS R, Mf.

<sup>37</sup> "bar Marta"—~ in MSS P, W. MS L adds: "in the name of Rav"; MS M adds: "in the name of Rav Gidal."

construction of the Temple.<sup>38</sup> For all the time that Baruch the son of<sup>39</sup> Neriah<sup>40</sup> was alive,<sup>41</sup> Ezra did not abandon him and<sup>42</sup> go up.

The tradition about Ezra's alleged studies with Jeremiah's *protégé* Baruch the son of Neriah<sup>43</sup> is an attempt to grapple with a

<sup>38</sup> "construction of the Temple"—MS R: "offering of the daily sacrifices (*temidim*)."

<sup>39</sup> "the son of"—HgT<sup>2</sup>: "and."

<sup>40</sup> "Neriah"—MS P: "Hilkiah."

<sup>41</sup> MS P adds: "and."

<sup>42</sup> "and"—AgE: "to."

<sup>43</sup> The biblical records do not speak of Baruch being exiled to Babylonia. On the contrary, Jeremiah 43:6-7 counts him among those who accompanied Jeremiah to Egypt in the wake of the assassination of Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, and we hear nothing of him afterwards. However post-biblical Jewish sources know of several traditions that trace the fates of Baruch and Jeremiah, whether to Egypt, to Babylonia or to the Land of Israel. See the discussion in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:311-2; 6:399-403, n. 42.. Among the sources that should be mentioned in this connection are: The apocryphal Book of Baruch which claims (1:1) to have been composed in Babylonia. In the "Apocalypse of Baruch" 11:2, 3 and 33:2 [see "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch," transl. A. F. J. Klijn, in: James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 623, 631]; so too in "4 Baruch," 4:6-7 [transl. S. E. Robinson, in: Charlesworth, 419] Baruch remained in the Holy Land while only Jeremiah went to Babylonia. *Seder 'olam*, Ch. 26 (ed. Ratner, 120; ed. Milikowsky, 412, 533) relates:

"In the seven and twentieth year" (Ezekiel 29:17) of Nebuchadnezzar [God] gave Egypt into his hand. "He took her multitude, and took her spoil, and took her prey" (*ibid.*, 29:19). And he exiled Jeremiah and Baruch to Babylonia in the twenty-fifth year of our captivity.

However Rashi in his commentary to Jeremiah 44:14 cites *Seder 'olam* as speaking of a return to the *Land of Israel* (see the discussion in Ratner's notes). No such text is recorded in Milikowsky's critical apparatus. *Pesiqta rabbati* 26:6-7 (ed. Friedmann, 131a-132a; transl. Braude, 517-8) describes Jeremiah's exile to Babylonia and (apparently) a subsequent return to Jerusalem (cf. *Tosafot* Bava batra 15a). Jerome, *Commentarius in Isaiaae*, 30:6:7, cites a "Hebrew" tradition that both Jeremiah and Baruch ended their lives in Egypt [in: J. Martian ed., *S. Eusebii Hieronymi...Opera Omnia*, Patrologia Latina, P. L. Migne, ed. (Petit-Montrouge: [by editor], 1845), 4:341-2]. Josephus, *Antiquities* 10:9:7 (182-3; ed. Marcus, 6:258-9) relates that Nebuchadnezzar took all the Egyptian exiles to Babylonia, though he does not make specific mention of Jeremiah or Baruch. Ginzberg argues that the references in *TP Sanhedrin* 1:2 (19a and parallels) to Jeremiah and Baruch intercalating years abroad

puzzle of Jewish historiography: Why did the righteous Ezra not seize the earliest possible opportunity and go up with the first group of returning exiles under the leadership of Zerubbabel?<sup>44</sup> Instead “*he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king [Artaxerxes].*”<sup>45</sup>

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(mentioned alongside Ezekiel and Hanania the nephew of R. Joshua) must be speaking of Babylonia.

There does not appear to be any positive reason why the rabbis should have chosen Baruch to be Ezra’s teacher rather than any other distinguished figure or prophet of the time. It is likely that the selection was arrived at by default, since of the figures who could have been active during that generation, Baruch is the only one who is not known to have returned to Zion at an earlier date [as did, e.g., Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (see Ezra 5:1)].

Rashi’s statement that the source for the connection between Baruch and Ezra is an “aggadic midrash” does not necessarily refer to a specific text; it might simply be an acknowledgment that the tradition is not found in the Bible. However he might be alluding to the passage from *Song of Songs rabbah* cited in the notes below. Cf. Sarah Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization In Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash*, Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), 139, n. 99.

<sup>44</sup> The problem really arises only if we adhere to the traditional Jewish chronology according to which Ezra’s departure for Jerusalem was a mere seven years after Zerubbabel’s. Critical historians posit an interval of fifty-seven years between the completion of the Second Temple (in 515 B.C.E.) and Ezra’s migration (452 B.C.E.). If that is the case, then Ezra would have been an infant, or not yet born, at the time of the earlier wave. On the complex questions involved in the chronology of the era see: H. H. Rowley, “The Chronological Order of Ezra and Nehemiah,” in: *Ignace Goldziher Memorial Volume*, eds. S. Löwinger and J. Somagyi (Budapest: by Editors, 1948), 117-49; N. H. Snaith, “The Date of Ezra’s Arrival in Jerusalem,” *ZAW* 63 (1951), 53-66; J. Liver, “The Return from Babylonia: Its Time and Scope,” *Eretz Israel* 5 (1958), 114-9; John Bright, “The Date of Ezra’s Mission to Jerusalem,” *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1960), 70-87; J. Meyers, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Anchor Bible), xxxvi-xxxvii; 59; Mordecai Zer-Kavod, *‘Ezra unehemia*, Da’at miqra (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1980), 46, n. 1. The principal sources for the traditional Jewish reckoning of that era are: *Seder ‘olam* Ch. 29 (ed. Ratner, 133-4; ed. Milikowsky, 429-35, 541-4); *TB ‘Arakhin* 12b-13a.

<sup>45</sup> See Rashi. Maharsha takes the problem a step further by asking why Baruch himself failed to go back to Palestine during that time. The *‘Eṣ yosef* resolves this difficulty by citing *Song of Songs rabbah*, 5:4 (ed. Dunsky, 129-30):

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It is probable that, in addition to these exegetical considerations, the dictum was also employed for homiletical purposes. It would have served as effective propaganda for the Babylonian talmudic academies in discourses designed to discourage students from immigrating to the Holy Land.<sup>46</sup>

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...Daniel and his following and his company went up at the same time... Ezra and his following and his company did not go up at that time.

And why did Ezra not go up at that time?

—Because he had to refine his learning before Baruch the son of Neriah.

And let Baruch the son of Neriah go up!

—Rather, they say: Baruch the son of Neriah was an old man advanced in years, and was incapable even of being carried in a litter. Says Resh Laqish: It was in accordance with the will of the Holy One that Ezra did not go up at that time. For if Ezra had gone up at that time, then Satan might have spoken a denunciation saying: It would be preferable if Ezra served in the High Priesthood instead of Joshua son of Jehozadak...

<sup>46</sup> Similar sentiments may be found in *TB Ketubbot* 111a (ed. Hershler, 2:536-9); *Gittin* 6a (which gives us a glimpse into the undesirable social consequences that could result when students forsook their families in order to fulfill their religious ideal of migration to the Holy Land—a concern which is clearly not the central concern of our present pericope); etc.; see S. W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982-), 2:207-8; 405, n. 40; Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, 3:220 (and n. 1). Urbach, *The Sages*, 612 writes that “The dictum... may possibly be regarded as an apologia for the continued residence of the Sages in Babylonia, but this certainly does not apply to the saying of the same Amora ‘Study of the Torah transcends honoring father and mother.’” See our discussion below. The issue is discussed in depth by Joshua Schwartz, “*Aliya* from Babylonia during the Amoraic Period,” *Cathedra* 21 (1981), 23-30. Among the possible grounds for opposition to ‘*aliyah*’ on behalf of Babylonia rabbis, Schwartz (25) mentions the worry that the local *yeshivot* might be drained of talented students.

On the question of the order of priorities between family obligations and national or patriotic duties (see below) see *TP Berakhot* 3:1 (6a); and the rabbinic and classical sources adduced by E. E. Hallevy, *Aggadot ha-'amora'im*, 40-1.

### Greater than Honoring One's Father and Mother

[16b] Says Rava<sup>47</sup> bar bar Ḥana:<sup>48</sup> Says Rav Isaac bar Samuel bar<sup>49</sup> Marta<sup>50</sup> in the name of Rav:<sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup> Great is the study of Torah, more than honoring one's father and mother; for during all those years that Jacob our father<sup>53</sup> was in the house of Shem and Eber he was not<sup>54</sup> punished on their account.<sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup>

This comment, like the previous one, is intended to exalt and extol the importance of religious study. It is not unlikely that Rav had in mind specific cases where a potential student had to choose between conflicting claims of pursuing his education and supporting or obeying his parents.<sup>57</sup>

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47 "Rava"—thus only in MSS Y, B; in all other witnesses: "Rabbah."

48 "bar bar Ḥana"— ~ in **Printings**.

49 "Samuel bar"— ~ in **HgT<sup>1</sup>**.

50 "Rav Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta"—MS P: "Rav Isaac"; MS R: "R. Joḥanan."

51 "in the name of Rav"— ~ in MS **Mf**, **Printings**.

52 MS **M** adds: "Gidal."

53 "our father"— ~ in MSS **N, B, M, Mf, YS, AgE**.

54 "not"— ~ in MS **R** (and filled in in **R\***).

55 "on their account"— ~ in **Printings**.

56 MS **N** adds: "And whence do we know that he was not punished?"

57 See Ithamar Warhaftig, "Gadol talmud torah yoter mikkibbud av ve'em," *Sinai* 100 (Jubilee Volume; 1987), 1:412-28, who observes that this is the only one of the three comments in our pericope in praise of Torah study which was treated by the medieval codifiers as a full-fledged legal ruling. The sort of real-life issue which Rav might have had in mind is astutely described by the author of the *She'iltot, Toledot*, 19 (ed. Mirsky, 1:128-9):

A person who has a father and mother, and is obligated to serve them, to provide them with food and drink, to bring them in and out, to clothe and cover them, as we have learned [*TB Qiddushin* 31b]... but he wishes to go to his master in order to study, or to a place of Torah so that he will not have to study in isolation, as we have learned [*Mishnah Avot* 4:4]...— Which of them takes precedence? ...Do we say that the study of Torah takes precedence as it does over all actions? Or perhaps honoring one's father and mother takes precedence because their honor has been equated with honoring God...?

The computation that fourteen years of Jacob's life<sup>58</sup> remained unaccounted for in the biblical story of his life is of course not stated explicitly in the Bible, and was deduced on the basis of the calculations set out below whose source, as we shall note, is in *Seder 'olam*, Chapter 2. Talmudic tradition deduced from this "fact" (as will be spelled out at the conclusion of the pericope) that Jacob had spent those years studying Torah at the *yeshivah* of Shem and Eber<sup>59</sup> prior to departing

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The *She'iltot* decides the issue in favor of study on the basis of our present pericope. See additional sources cited by Warhaftig; G. Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics*, The Library of Jewish Law and Ethics, ed. Norman Lamm (New York: Ktav, 1975), 110-2.

<sup>58</sup> Other allusions to this period in Jacob's life are found in *Genesis rabbah*, 68:5 (773; a dictum of Hezekiah); 68:11 (784; R. Judah); 84:8 (1010; R. Nehemiah).

<sup>59</sup> To the best of my awareness, the traditions about the existence of a "talmudic academy" during the Patriarchal age have not yet been subjected to extensive scholarly analysis. For the present see Urbach, *The Sages*, 335-6. He discusses the phenomenon in connection with the view, widespread among the talmudic rabbis, that the Patriarchs had observed the laws of the Torah even before its public revelation at Mount Sinai. Urbach contrasts the position expressed in our pericope and others like it, which claim that the contents of the Torah had been transmitted from primordial times from teacher to disciple, with a more prevalent view that the Patriarchs' observance of the commandments was the outcome of direct revelation. The discussion is incorporated into a broader treatment of the degree to which the Jewish sages posited an "autonomous" human role in the fulfillment of the laws of the Torah, an issue which was debated to a surprising extent in nineteenth-century Jewish theology and *Wissenschaft*, but which appears to have little bearing on the actual thought-patterns of the talmudic rabbis.

Prof. Chaim Milikowsky informs me (in a personal conversation) that in his view the origins of these traditions go back to the Second Temple era and derive from the characterization of Shem and Eber as prophetic figures, and the additional support supplied by the rabbinic exegetes (see below) was a secondary *post facto* development. The prophetic status of Shem is related to his identification with Melchizedek. [See references in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:233; 5:225-6, n. 102; 192, n. 63 (also concerning Eber, see below), 287, n. 118.] That Eber was a prophet is proven by Genesis 10:25 where he named his son Peleg on account of the division of the earth which would take place in his days [See *Seder 'olam*, 1 (Ratner, 2-3); *Genesis rabbah*, 37:7 (349); V. Aptowitz, "Malkizedek. Zu den Sagen der Agada," *MGWJ* 70 (1926), 93-113; Ephraim E. Urbach, "Homilies of the Rabbis on the Prophets of the Nations and the Balaam Stories," *Tarbiz* 25 (1956), 274 [=World of the Sages, 538], n. 8.]

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Although the above reconstructions (as well as Urbach's suggestion that Shem and Eber might have served as a counterpart to the apocalyptic Enoch-traditions) might have validity, we should keep in mind that the traditions about an "academy of Shem and Eber" are easily explainable from within the conventional hermeneutical and conceptual worlds of the midrash. For example, the tendency of the rabbis to anachronistically paint the biblical world in the colors of their contemporary values and institutions is one of the most fundamental and familiar features of midrashic homiletics, and is an inevitable by-product of the desire to attach contemporary relevance to the study of the sacred scriptures. Assigning a "halakhic" status to Shem is also in keeping with the development of the concept of "Noachide commandments" which were incumbent upon humankind prior to the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. [See also Ch. Albeck, "Das Buch der Jubiläen und die Halacha," *Bericht der Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin*, 47 (1930), 4-7, 38-40.] The notion that it was Shem and Eber who, among all the possible representatives of the pre-Abrahamic generations, should have been the ones responsible for the transmission of the primordial "Torah" was undoubtedly inspired by the longevity of these two figures. Shem, if we presume that he was the oldest of Noah's sons, was born in year 1558 after creation (Genesis 5:32) and went on to live a total of six hundred years (Gen. 11:10-11), putting the year of his death in 2158. His great-grandson Eber was born in 1723 and lived 464 years until his death in 2187 (Gen. 11:15-7). This means that both of these personalities outlived Abraham (who died in 2123; see Gen. 11:26; 25:7; *Seder 'olam*, Ch. 1 [ed. Ratner, 7; ed. Milikowsky, 214, 451]: "Jacob 'served' Abraham fifteen years and Shem fifty years..."). Eber's life-span overlapped that of Isaac (who died in 2228; see Gen. 21:5; 35:28), and he did not die until Jacob was seventy-nine years old (Gen. 25:26; see below in our pericope). A useful chronological table is included in Moses Y. Weinstock, ed., *Seder Olam Raba* (Jerusalem: Mesivta "Torath Chesed," 1956), 1:7. Genesis 10:21 posits a special connection between Shem and Eber.

Unlike the situation in rabbinic sources, Shem and Eber do not figure prominently in Apocryphal and Apocalyptic writings. See however Testament of Simeon 6:5 [transl. C. H. Kee, "Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs," in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:87]. Shem appears as the transmitter of a book of healing in Jubilees 10:10-4 [transl. O. S. Wintermute, in Charlesworth, 2:76]. A similar role is ascribed to him with respect to magical lore by *Sefer Ha-Razim* [ed. Mordecai Margalioth (Jerusalem: Yediot Achronot, 1966), xiii, 18 (n. 3)]. Shem functions in the Bible as well as in rabbinic literature as a prototype for the nation of Israel. By contrast, the figure of Eber is barely mentioned in the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha.

The midrashic association between Shem and the talmudic *yeshivah* was probably suggested by the occurrence of the expression "*tents of Shem*" in Noah's blessing (Genesis 9:27), which was read in the light of the rabbinic association between "tents" and academies of Torah [as in Genesis 25:27 which supplies the ty-

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for Haran. By tarrying Jacob was disobeying Isaac's charge<sup>60</sup> to proceed to Padan-aram to find a wife. As the talmudic passage will conclude, Jacob was punished for remaining too long with Laban, but not for the period of his studies. From this we will learn that the obligation to study the Torah takes precedence over filial duties.<sup>61</sup>

### The Years of Ishmael

[16b] For says R. Ḥiyya bar Abba: Says<sup>62</sup> R. (Jonathan) [Johanan].<sup>63</sup> [17a] Why were the years of Ishmael enumerated? —In order to trace<sup>64</sup> the years of Jacob our father.<sup>65</sup>

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pology of Jacob as a "plain man, dwelling in tents"; see also Genesis 25:22 where the verb *darash* ["inquire"] prompted the rabbis to expound that Rebecca had recourse to a "beit midrash". The expression appeared initially as the "academy [or: court (*beit din*)] of Shem [sometimes: Shem the Great]," as it is found in some sources. The co-opting of Eber was a secondary step, needed to account for the continuity of the tradition in the years following Shem's death (though the rabbis, in proper midrashic manner, were able to find an allusion to it in the plural "tents of Shem"). There is likely some significance to be attached to the fact that Abraham and his descendants were designated "Hebrews," a term which can mean "children of Eber." [See *Genesis rabbah*, 41:8 (414), etc.]

For references to the Academy of Shem and/or Eber see: Targum pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 24:62 (trans. Maher, 87); 25:22 (90); 25:27 (90); Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, *Fragments of Lost Targumim, Part Two*, Bar-Ilan Institute for the History of Jewish Biblical Research Sources and Studies (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1989), 41; *Genesis rabbah*, 63:6 (684); 63:10 (693); 85:12 (1045); *Song of Songs rabbah*, 6:8 (ed. Dunsky, 142); *Ecclesiastes rabbah*, 5:18; 10:19; *Midrash on Psalms*, 72:2 (ed. Buber, 325; transl. Braude, 1:559); *TB Makkot* 23b; *Midrash aggadah, Toledot* (ed. Buber, 62); *Aggadot bereshit*, 73:1 (ed. Buber, 118).

See additional references in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:192, n. 63; 5:263-4, n. 303; 5:274, n. 29; Maher, *ibid.*, 46, n. 23; A. Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum*, 188, n. 81.

<sup>60</sup> Genesis 28:2.

<sup>61</sup> See Rashi.

<sup>62</sup> "Says"—**MhG**: "in the name of."

<sup>63</sup> "Jonathan"—thus only in MS **Y**; emended according to all other witnesses. R. Ḥiyya bar Abba was a disciple of R. Johanan, who frequently transmits sayings in his name. **MhG** adds: "says."

<sup>64</sup> All witnesses except MSS **Y** and **R** add: "through them."

<sup>65</sup> "our father"—thus only in MS **Y**; ~ in all other witnesses.



In general, the Torah provides only such historical and genealogical information as is necessary for tracing the development of the people of Israel. In light of this premise, it was inconceivable to the rabbinical mind that God should waste precious words on biographical data that does not further this purpose and relates only to the subsidiary branches of the Patriarchal line.<sup>66</sup>

R. Joḥanan's observation is not crucial for demonstrating Jacob's lost years, nor does it relate to Rav's dictum about the priority of study over parental honor.<sup>67</sup> Both these assertions are founded upon chronological calculations which had been formulated prior to R. Joḥanan.<sup>68</sup> The redactor of our pericope seems to have had at hand a source in which the chronology of Jacob's years was attached to R. Joḥanan's dictum; i.e., as an exegetical comment to Genesis 25:17.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Rashi understands that the objection is based on the fact that Ishmael was wicked. Maharsha and the *Turei even* counter that a rabbinic tradition holds that Ishmael repented before his death (see references in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 5:267, n. 317). We might add that the Bible is meticulous in detailing the lives of the wicked monarchs of Judah and Israel. Rashi might have been basing his formulation on midrashic passages such as *Genesis rabbah*, 62:5 (676-7) which ask "Why did Scripture see fit to outline the genealogies of the descendants of the *wicked one*?" etc.

<sup>67</sup> R. Joḥanan was concerned with the exegetical problem posed by the apparent redundancy of Genesis 25:17, as is stated explicitly in our pericope. An example of the sort of hermeneutical context in which R. Joḥanan's interpretation might have been formulated can be seen in *Genesis rabbah*, 62:5 (676-7):

"Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son..." An anecdote: R. Ḥama bar 'Uqba and the rabbis were sitting and raising an objection: Why did Scripture see fit here to detail the genealogy of a wicked man? R. Levi passed by. They said: Behold, here comes an erudite scholar, let us ask him. R. Levi came [citing] in the name of R. Ḥama bar Ḥanina: —In order to teach you at what age your ancestor was blessed.

<sup>68</sup> They undoubtedly presuppose the chronology of *Seder 'olam*; see below.

<sup>69</sup> Note the analogous context of *TB Yevamot* 64a (ed. Liss, 2:434) where the full set of calculations is presupposed, though not detailed there (Rashi refers the student to *Megillah*). The Talmud there is dealing with events in the life of Isaac (Genesis 25:20, 26) which do not touch directly upon Ishmael at all.

[17a] As it is written: “*And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, an hundred and thirty and seven years*” (Genesis 25:17).<sup>70</sup>

And it is written:<sup>71</sup> “*And Abram was fourscore and six years old when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram*”<sup>72</sup> (Genesis 16:16).

And it is written: “*And Abraham was an hundred years old when his son was born unto him*” (Genesis 25:5).

By comparing Abraham’s ages when Ishmael and Isaac were born we easily establish that the difference between the ages of his sons was fourteen years.<sup>73</sup>

[17a] And it is written: “*Isaac was threescore years old when she bare them*” (Genesis 25:26).

How old was Ishmael when Jacob was born?<sup>74</sup> —Seventy-four years old.

How many remain from his years? —Sixty-three.

And it was taught {in a *baraita*}: How many years old was Jacob our father when he was blessed by his father?<sup>75</sup> —Sixty-three years old.

At<sup>76</sup> that same point in time Ishmael died, as it is written “*When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob...*” (Genesis 28:6);

<sup>70</sup> MSS N, R, **Printings** add: “How much older was Ishmael than Isaac? Fourteen years.” MS N adds: “As it is written: ‘*And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh etc.*’ (Genesis 17:25), ‘*And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old etc.*’ (Genesis 17:26).”

<sup>71</sup> “And it is written”— ~ in MS B.

<sup>72</sup> “And it is written... ‘*..Abram*’”— ~ in YS, MhG.

<sup>73</sup> This calculation is found in *Seder ‘olam*, 1 (ed. Ratner, 6; ed. Milikowsky, 211-2, 450) with the conclusion “It thus works out...that Ishmael was older than Isaac by fourteen years.” According to *Seder ‘olam*’s chronology from the Creation, Ishmael was born in the year 2034 and Isaac in 2048.

<sup>74</sup> “When Jacob was born” (in Hebrew)— ~ in MSS N, B, O, P, L, M, R, Mf, HgT<sup>1</sup> (it is introduced there as an explanatory gloss), MhG; MSS G, R\*, **Printings**: in Aramaic.

<sup>75</sup> “How many...father?”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “Jacob our father at the time that he was blessed by his father was.”

<sup>76</sup> “At”—MSS G, N, M, EY, **Printings**: “And at.”

“And Jacob obeyed his father and his mother...” (7);

“And Esau seeing that the daughters of Canaan pleased not...” (8);

“Then went Esau unto Ishmael and took unto the wives which he had Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth, to be his wife” (9).

The Bible does not divulge how old Isaac, Jacob and Esau were at the time that Jacob received his father’s blessing, nor does it furnish us with explicit information that could enable us to deduce these ages. At this juncture the Talmud, citing *Seder ‘olam*, Chapter 2,<sup>77</sup> resorts to more creative midrashic methods in order to determine the missing date. The exegesis bases itself on a number of hermeneutical assumptions:

- The wording of Genesis 28:6-9, when read literally (“*When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob etc.*”), is taken to mean that Esau’s marriage to Mahalath took place *immediately* following the blessing.<sup>78</sup>

- Ishmael died at precisely the time that Esau was arranging to marry his daughter. The proof of this latter premise requires more imaginative midrashic exposition as we read presently:

[17a] By inference from that which is written<sup>79</sup> “*The daughter of Ishmael*” do I not know that she is “*the sister of Nebaioth*”?

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<sup>77</sup> The content of *Seder ‘olam* (ed. Ratner, 9; ed. Milikowsky, 215-6; 451-2) is identical, though the order of the presentation is different. It begins with the declaration that “Our father Jacob was sixty-three years old when he was blessed. At that very time when he was blessed Ishmael died.” After this the text goes on to prove its claim by citing Genesis 28:6-9, and then asks “Why does Scripture say ‘*the sister of Nebaiot*’? —This teaches that Ishmael betrothed her etc.” The Esther-Midrash, possibly because it has elected to introduce the passage from the perspective of R. Johanan’s dictum, begins by citing the biblical proof-texts (as part of the Aramaic talmudic pericope, not from the *baraita*), and only afterwards brings the beginning of the *Seder ‘olam baraita*.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Skinner’s ICC commentary to Genesis, 375; Speiser, 215-6.

<sup>79</sup> “that which is written”— ~ in MS N.

—Rather,<sup>80</sup> this teaches that Ishmael<sup>81</sup> betrothed her and died, and Nebaioth<sup>82</sup> gave her in marriage.

That Nebaioth was Ishmael's son has already been related in Genesis 25:13. Therefore the rabbinic aversion to scriptural redundancy demands some justification for the repetition of that fact in 28:9.<sup>83</sup> The *baraita* resolves this difficulty by assigning Nebaioth a role in the marriage arrangements: True, it was Ishmael whom Esau had approached at first seeking the hand of his daughter,<sup>84</sup> but in the end it fell to Nebaioth to conclude the marriage. The most likely reason for such a development is that Ishmael had expired in the interval.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "Rather"— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>81</sup> All witnesses except MSS Y, R, **Printings** and YS add: "her father."

<sup>82</sup> All witnesses except MS Y add: "her brother."

<sup>83</sup> Many biblical commentators propose reasons for the mention of Nebaioth here. Most of them ascribe the fact to his being the eldest of the brothers, or because he held some special importance or social standing; see e.g. Ibn Ezra [Asher Weiser, ed., *Ibn 'ezra perush lattorah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976), 1:86]; he also suggests that the intention might have been to distinguish Mahalath and Nebaioth from the offspring of Esau's other wives; Hizquni (ed. Chavell, 109). Rashbam [A. I. Bromberg, *Perush ha-torah la-rashba*]<sup>m</sup> (Jerusalem: by Author, 1969), 32] and Qimḥi [Moses Kamlehr, *Perushei rabbi david qimḥi (rada" q) 'al ha-torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982), 148] deal with the general phenomenon of identifying women by their brothers (as in Genesis 25:20; 36:22; Exodus 15:20; etc.).

<sup>84</sup> As the verse states explicitly: "Then went Esau to Ishmael." See Maharsha.

<sup>85</sup> Our talmudic pericope, like the *Seder 'olam* passage upon which it is based, is satisfied with merely establishing the fact of Ishmael's death, which is sufficient for its chronological calculations. Neither do the classical talmudic and midrashic compendia try to utilize Ishmael's death for more elaborate aggadic or homiletical purposes. However in several medieval Yemenite anthologies and biblical commentaries we do encounter a tradition which traces a homiletical link between the rivalry of Esau and Jacob and the death of Ishmael. According to this account Esau had proposed to Ishmael that each of them should do away with their respective brothers, after which Esau would pretend to "avenge" his uncle's blood and claim the complete inheritance. God put Ishmael to death in order to protect Isaac and Jacob. See Mordecai Margulies, ed., *Midrash Haggadol on the Pentateuch: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1975), 490-1; Joseph Kafih, ed., *Sefer ma'or ha'afelah [nur al-zalam] lerabbenu netan'el ben yesha'yah* (Jerusalem: Ha-aguddah Lehatzalat Ginzei Teiman, 1957), 133; M. Havatzelet, ed., *Midrash haḥefes 'al ḥamish-shah ḥumshei torah ḥibbero rabbi zekhariah ben shelomoh harofeh: bereshit-shemot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook,

Thanks to Genesis 16:16 and 25:17, which inform us respectively when Ishmael was born and how long he lived, we are now able to attach a date to the episode of Jacob's receiving Isaac's blessing, a date which would otherwise have remained unknown.<sup>86</sup> This, then, was the

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1990), 187-8; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:344-5; 5:287, nn. 118-9; Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 4(5):1116-7, #27.

<sup>86</sup> As R. Johanan suggests, the assertion that Jacob was sixty-three years old when he left Beersheba is not supported by the unexpounded scriptural verses, and requires that we accept the midrashic assumption that Ishmael died at that time, a claim which demands in turn that we add fourteen undocumented years before his arrival at Laban's house. Without the midrashic embellishment, we would have to assume that Jacob was seventy-seven years old when he fled [i.e., we count fourteen years until Joseph's birth, and thirty-nine years (30+7+2) from then until Jacob tells Pharaoh that he is 130 years of age; see in detail below]. It is therefore most remarkable to observe that the fixing of Jacob's age at sixty-three is attested in early Jewish writings which do not stem from the rabbinic corpus. See e.g. Jubilees 25:4 [R. H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis* (reprint, Jerusalem: Makor, 1972), 157; transl. Wintermute, in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:105]: "And thus spake Jacob to Rebecca, his mother, and said unto her: Behold, Mother, I am nine weeks of years old, and I neither know nor have touched any woman..." I do not know on what basis Ratner writes that the same tradition is recorded by the early Hellenistic author Demetrius the Chronographer. In Demetrius' discussion of the chronology of Jacob's life, preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 9:19:4 [*Eusebii Pamphili...Opera Omnia Quae Exstant*, J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* Vol. 21 (Petit-Moutrouge: 1857), 3:713-22] we read: "Demetrius says that Jacob was (75) [77] years old when he fled to Haran." [The translation, including the emendation, are taken from J. Hansen, "Demetrius the Chronograph," in Charlesworth, 2:843-54 (the present passage is on 848)]. As we shall have occasion to observe below, there are other more substantial instances of agreement between the Alexandrian historian and the rabbinic reckonings. On Demetrius and his *oeuvre* see J. Freudenthal, "Hellenistische Studien. I," *Jahresbericht des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars "Fraenkel'sche Stiftung,"* 2:39-40 (including a discussion of our passage); M. Gaster, "Demetrius und Seder Olam: Ein Problem der hellenistischen Literatur," *Festkrift in auladnung...David Simonsens*, 243-52 (especially 249-50); Yehoshua Gutman, *The Beginnings of Jewish-Hellenistic Literature* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958), 132-9; E. J. Bickerman, "The Jewish Historian Demetrios," in: Jacob Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 3:72-84; B. Z. Wacholder, *Eupolemus: A Study of Judaeo-Greek Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974), 98-104; Carl R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors*, SBL Texts and Translations, Pseudepigrapha Series

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point of R. Johanan's remark that the biographical statistics about Ishmael, while of no intrinsic interest for the purposes of the scriptural narration, provide valuable information concerning the life of Jacob.

### The Fourteen Lost Years

[17a] And<sup>87</sup> the fourteen<sup>88</sup> that he was in<sup>89</sup> the house of Laban,<sup>90</sup> until Joseph was<sup>91</sup> born—That makes seventy-seven.<sup>92</sup>

According to Genesis 29:18-20 Jacob served Laban for seven years prior to his marriages to Leah (22-5), and then Rachel (28). He then had to serve an additional seven years for Rachel's sake (30). Genesis 30:25 relates that "...it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country..." The Talmud therefore concludes that if Jacob had gone to Aram-naharaim immediately after leaving his parents' house, then he should have been seventy-seven (63 + 14) years old at the time of Joseph's birth and their return to Canaan.

[17a] And it is written:<sup>93</sup> "And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Genesis 41:46).<sup>94</sup>

We calculated above that Jacob ought to have been seventy-seven years of age when Joseph was born. According to Genesis 41:46 Joseph was thirty years old when he was summoned to interpret Pharaoh's

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Vol.1: Historians (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), 51-91; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C.–A.D. 135): New English Version*, ed. Geza Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 3:1:513-6.

<sup>87</sup> "And"—MS N and Printings: "Sixty-three, and."

<sup>88</sup> MS O adds: "years."

<sup>89</sup> "that he was in"—MSS N, P: "of."

<sup>90</sup> "that he was in the house of Laban"— ~ in MSS B (and filled in in B\*), M, Printings, YS.

<sup>91</sup> "was"—MSS G, L, M, Printings: "is."

<sup>92</sup> MS B adds: "And from when Joseph was born until he stood before Pharaoh thirty;" MS P adds: "And thirty of Joseph."

<sup>93</sup> "And it is written"—MS P: "as it says."

<sup>94</sup> MSS G, N, Mf, Spanish family, Ashkenazic family, Printings, YS add: "That makes one hundred."

dreams foretelling the succession of the years of plenty and of famine. Therefore, if no interval followed Jacob's departure from his father's house, he should have been (77 + 30 =) 107 years old at that time.

[17a] And the seven<sup>95</sup> of plenty and two of famine—That makes one hundred and sixteen.<sup>96</sup>

Genesis 41:32 tells us that the cycle of plenty and famine was to commence immediately after its revelation to Pharaoh. The seven years of plenty passed (Genesis 42:47-53), following which the period of famine began. At the time that Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers he remarked (Genesis 45:6) that "*For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet these are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest.*" In keeping with our computations thus far, Jacob should now have been (107 + 7+2 =) 116 years old.<sup>97</sup>

[17a] And it is written: "*And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou? And Jacob<sup>98</sup> said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years.*"<sup>99</sup>

It may be assumed that Jacob was conveyed to Egypt immediately following Joseph's revelation.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>95</sup> MSS N, M add: "years." MS M adds: "and seven years" (?).

<sup>96</sup> Phrases from this passage are used in *TB Berakhot* 55b in order to provide support for R. Levi's dictum that "a person should wait twenty-two years for the fulfillment of a favorable dream."

<sup>97</sup> Although the pericope is clearly Amoraic, couched in the Aramaic dialect of the Talmud, it is evident that its authors were alluding to the cognate material contained in the Tannaitic *Seder 'olam*, Ch. 2 (ed. Ratner, 11-2; ed. Milikowsky, 219-20, 453). There we read as follows, all in Hebrew:

...In his thirtieth year he went out from prison— "*Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh*".

...Seven years of plenty and two years of famine.

It turns out that Joseph was thirty-nine years old and Levi forty-four when Israel went down to Egypt...

<sup>98</sup> "*And it is written... And Jacob*"—MS P: "And he said"; YS: "And Jacob said."

<sup>99</sup> MS G adds: "One hundred and thirty?!"

<sup>100</sup> See Genesis 45:13: "*and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither.*"

[17a] But behold,<sup>101</sup> they are one hundred and sixteen!

Rather, learn from this<sup>102</sup> that<sup>103</sup> the fourteen<sup>104</sup> that<sup>105</sup> he served<sup>106</sup>  
in the house of Shem and Eber, and<sup>107</sup> it does not count them. <sup>108</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> “behold”— ~ in MSS G, N, Mf, Printings.

<sup>102</sup> “learn from this”— ~ in HgT<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>103</sup> “that”—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>104</sup> MSS N, B, P, M, Mf, R, HgT, Printings add: “years.”

<sup>105</sup> “that”— ~ in MS B.

<sup>106</sup> “served”—MSS G, B: “was serving”; in all other witnesses: “was.”

The verb “שָׁמַע” in MSS Y, B and G is apparently being used in a technical sense to indicate the “extra-curricular” forms of service rendered by student to master which provided the student with an opportunity to observe and emulate his master’s behavior in day-to-day life. This institution of *shimmush talmidei hakhamim* constituted an important component of discipleship in the world of the rabbinic sages. See Moshe Aberbach, “The Relationship Between Master and Disciple in the Talmudic Age,” in: *Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie*, ed. H. J. Zimmels *et al.*, Jews’ College Publications New Series (London: Soncino, 1967), 1-24; David Goodblatt, *Rabbinic Instruction in Sasanian Babylonia*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 207-8, 272-80; A. Amir, *Institutions and Titles in the Talmudic Literature*, 129-32; Robert Kirschner, “The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984), 105-24 (especially 117-9); *Idem.*, “Imitatio Rabbinii,” *JSJ* 17 (1:1986), 70-79; H. C. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, transl. by Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 14-6.

<sup>107</sup> “and”—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>108</sup> “and it does not count them”— ~ in MS G.

MS G’s omission of the sentence “And it does not count them” is in accordance with Rashi’s directive: “And we do not read ‘and it does not count them’ here until later on. [A similar emendation is contained in *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia*; according to the editor’s emendation, 55, n. 184.] Rashi was apparently disturbed by the fact that it is still premature for the Talmud to insert its conclusion at this point since it has not yet demonstrated that Jacob was not punished for his actions—a premise which must be established before the story can serve as a precedent for R. Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta’s dictum about the superiority of study over parental honor. The statement about the fourteen years not being counted is found again below, where it is not merely expressing the fact of the omission of the time-period from the biblical narrative, but it also attests to the moral propriety of Jacob’s separating himself from his parents during the course of his studies. Rashi concludes with some justification that the identical expression, if used in our current sentence, must carry the same



The only way to resolve this apparent contradiction between our calculation of Jacob's age and Jacob's words to Pharaoh is to assume that our previous calculations were incomplete, and that we must supply information that is not stated explicitly in Scripture. The Talmud therefore inserts a period of fourteen years in the only available slot, between Jacob's departure from his parent's home and his arrival at Laban's household. The biblical story does not really supply us with meaningful clues about where Jacob was and what he was doing during this period, but the Talmud relates that he was occupied throughout in the study of Torah. During the patriarchal era, according to the premises of the aggadah, the proper venue for such studies would have been in the "Yeshivah of Shem," which was conducted after its founder's death by his successor, Eber.<sup>109</sup>

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implications, and yet the exegetical basis for such a conclusion has not yet been furnished! At any rate, the words in question do make an acceptable conclusion to one important stage in the argumentation, in that they prove that fourteen years of Jacob's life are not accounted for in the narrative. For this reason probably, Rashi's emendation was not adopted in most of the manuscript traditions, even those like MSS **M** and **R** which normally incorporate his textual pronouncements. See also Rashi's paraphrase of our pericope in his commentary to Genesis 28:9 [Current editions contain a lengthy addition from an "Old Rashi" that was not included in the *editio princeps*. see H. D. Chavell, ed., *Perushei rash"i 'al ha-torah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982), 102-3]. See also to 35:29 (Chavell, 129).

See also Strashun's comment: "Rashi deleted the last three words. It would appear that according to this it should read: 'Rather, learn from this that for fourteen years he was in the house of Eber.' And it is borne out by Rashi's words that such was the text before him, since he states 'And it does not count'..." Put simply, what Strashun is arguing is that if we simply apply Rashi's deletion to the existing Talmud texts, then the remaining sentence will contain only a subordinate clause ("that he served / was") without any corresponding principal clause. We must therefore conclude that Rashi's manuscripts did not contain the relative prefix (וְ) (or at least that his emendation also includes a deletion of that prefix). We may observe that the syntactic awkwardness is perceptible in MSS **Y** (reflected in my English translation) and **B**—in the former case because of the "and" in the main clause, and in the latter because of the absence of either a relative particle or a conjunction.

<sup>109</sup> Within the framework of our pericope this exegesis is of course necessary in order to prove its point about the priority of Torah study over filial obligations. However even outside that context (as in the *Seder 'olam baraita* discussed below) the

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After the Talmud has reached its chronological conclusions on the basis of the biblical and midrashic evidence which has been adduced so far, it quotes a *baraita* which presents an identical chronological framework. Unlike the talmudic pericope in which the statement about Jacob's "service" in the academy of Eber was proposed as a solution to the discrepancy between its calculations of the patriarch's age and Jacob's own statement on the matter, the *baraita* only teaches that such a fourteen-year period preceded Jacob's arrival in Aram-naharaim, but does not take the trouble to demonstrate on what basis the claim was derived. What the Talmud has done here, of course, is to show us the unstated exegetical considerations and computations which underlie the *baraita*'s chronology and to prove that they follow logically from its hermeneutical premises.

[17a] It<sup>110</sup> was taught also {in a *baraita*} thus:<sup>111</sup> <sup>112</sup> Jacob our father<sup>113</sup>

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conclusion is an inevitable one for the midrashic mind, for whom the study of Torah usually embodies the supreme religious value. Hence this would be the most natural destination for any young Jewish man leaving home for the first time, and all the more so when we are dealing with Jacob who is commonly depicted by the midrash as an archetypal scholar. The homilist may well have been guided by a verbal association between the references to "*the tents of Shem*" in Genesis 9:27 and Jacob's "*dwelling in tents*" in 25:27. *Genesis rabbah*, 63:9 (693) expounds the latter verse as: "...Two tents—i.e., the *bet midrash* of Shem and the *bet midrash* of Eber."

<sup>110</sup> "It"—MSS B, R, HgT<sup>2</sup>: "And it"; **Printings**: "for it."

<sup>111</sup> "also thus"— ~ in HgT<sup>2</sup>, **Printings**.

<sup>112</sup> HgT<sup>2</sup> adds: "Fourteen years."

<sup>113</sup> "our father"— ~ in **Printings**.

MS Y (with variants from MS O, EY, HgT <sup>1</sup> , Printings)	MS G (with variants from remaining witnesses)
was <sup>114</sup> serving Eber <sup>115</sup> for fourteen years.	116for fourteen years <sup>117</sup> was concealed <sup>118</sup> and serving <sup>119</sup> Eber.

<sup>114</sup> MS O, HgT<sup>1</sup> add: “concealed and”; EY adds: “concealed in the house of Eber and”; Printings add: “in the house of Eber.”

<sup>115</sup> “Eber”— ~ in EY.

<sup>116</sup> MS N adds: “in the Land of Israel.”

<sup>117</sup> “for fourteen years”— HgT<sup>2</sup>: “in the house of Eber.”

<sup>118</sup> MS B adds: “in the house of Eber;” MS L adds; “in the land (or: “earth”) and standing.”

Jacob’s main reason for leaving home was to escape Esau’s vengeance. Now that he chose to remain in the Land of Israel, it was necessary to do so in secrecy. The Hebrew root *TMN* in rabbinic parlance can have a broad spectrum of meanings. Though it often refers to the actual physical interring of an object under the ground etc. (e.g., Mishnah *Shabbat* 2:7), it can also denote the simple maintaining of secrecy or avoiding other people (see *Exodus rabbah*, 21:13). It seems quite clear that the original allusion in *Seder ‘olam* (see below) was to concealment. Nevertheless *Genesis rabbah*, 68:5 (733) and 68:11 (784) evidently took the expression to mean “buried in the earth” (though the passages can with some awkwardness be rendered “concealed in the land [i.e., of Israel]”). The reading in MS L is undoubtedly a paraphrase of the latter passage in *Genesis rabbah* which teaches as follows:

“And he lay down in that place to sleep” (Genesis 28:11)— R. Judah says: Here he lay down. During the fourteen years when he was buried in the earth (see above) and serving Shem and Eber he did not lie down.

A similar reading was also contained in the text of *Tosfoth Hachmei Anglia* which explains “‘hidden in the earth’—i.e., because of Esau.” See the editor’s remarks in n. 195. An almost identical phraseology is employed in *Seder ‘olam*, Ch. 29 (ed. Ratner, 132; ed. Milikowsky 431-2, 542-3) where it is related that Esther was concealed (מסומנה) for four years in Shushan until the day that she was taken before the king. Ratner (n. 13) claims that the interpretation there was derived from the exegesis of the word *omen* (“brought up”) in Esther 2:7 (see references cited there).

<sup>119</sup> “and serving”—MS M: “in the house of.”

<sup>120</sup>Eber died<sup>121</sup> two<sup>122</sup> years after Jacob our father<sup>123</sup> 124 went to<sup>125</sup> Aram-naharaim.<sup>126</sup>

It is likely that the *baraita* chose to mention this fact here not merely for its intrinsic historical interest, but principally on account of its relevance to the development of the midrashic expansions to Jacob's biography.<sup>127</sup> It furnishes an indirect explanation of why Eber was singled out by the rabbis as the ideal candidate to head a *yeshivah* during the patriarchal period,<sup>128</sup> as well as showing that Eber was alive during (but not long after) the fourteen years that have been assigned to Jacob's studies.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> MS N adds: "And."

<sup>121</sup> "Eber died"—EY: "And."

<sup>122</sup> "two"— ~ in MS R (and filled in in R\*).

<sup>123</sup> "Jacob our father's"—EY: Jacob's."

<sup>124</sup> "after...father"—MS M: "He."

<sup>125</sup> "father went to"—thus only in MS Y; **Printings**: "father went down"; in all other witnesses: "father's descent to"

<sup>126</sup> EY adds: "What did he do?"

<sup>127</sup> A different explanation of the phenomenon is proposed by R. Josiah Pinto.

<sup>128</sup> See our previous discussion on the origins of the rabbinic Shem and Eber traditions.

<sup>129</sup> Eber lived a total of 464 years, 430 of them after the birth of Peleg (Genesis 11:16-7). These years subdivide as follows: From the birth of Peleg until the birth of Reu—30 years (Gen. 11:18); from the birth of Reu until the birth of Serug—32 years (11:20); until the birth of Nahor—30 years (11:22); until the birth of Terah—29 years (11:24); until the birth of Abraham—70 years (11:26); until the birth of Isaac—100 years (21:5); from the birth of Isaac until the birth of Jacob—60 years (25:26). These add up to a total of 351. When subtracted from Eber's 430 that leaves seventy-nine years during which Eber's life overlapped that of Jacob.

As was observed by Maharsha, the interposing of a sojourn with Eber at this point in Jacob's life raises an additional exegetical complication: Genesis 28:10 implies that Jacob's journey to Haran set out directly from Beersheba (the difficulty is intrinsic to the story and does not presuppose the aggadic expansion in *TB Hullin* 91b). We are forced then to assume that Eber's academy was also situated in Beersheba and that Jacob had spent the full fourteen years in dangerous proximity to his family. This assumption would at any rate account effectively for the emphasis on his being "concealed" (or buried!) throughout the period (see above).

[17a] {He went out from there and came to Aram-naharaim<sup>130</sup>}.<sup>131</sup>

Thus it turns out that when he<sup>132</sup> stood<sup>133</sup> at the well he was seventy seven years<sup>134</sup> old.

The *baraita* that was brought by the Talmud is without question from *Seder 'olam*, Chapter 2, where the passage appears in almost identical formulation.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “naharaim”— ~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

<sup>131</sup> Bracketed section missing only in MS Y, presumably on account of a homoioteleuton; filled in (according to wording in MS G) on the basis of all the other witnesses.

<sup>132</sup> “he”—MS G: “Jacob.”

<sup>133</sup> “when he stood”—**Pesaro printing:** “he is standing”; **Venice printing:** “when he is standing.”

<sup>134</sup> “years”— ~ in MS B.

<sup>135</sup> Ed. Ratner, 9; ed. Milikowsky, 216-7, 451-2).

<b>From Ishmael's Birth</b>	<b>From Isaac's Birth</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Source (in Genesis)</b>
		Birth of Ishmael	16:16
14		Birth of Isaac	21:15
74		Birth of Jacob	25:26
137	63	Jacob receives blessing, Ishmael dies	25:17; 28:9
	77	Jacob completes his studies with Eber	
	79	Eber dies	11:16-7
	91	Joseph is born	30:25
	97	Jacob leaves Laban's home	
	98½	Jacob at Succoth	33:17
	99	Jacob at Beth- el	35:1-7
	121	Joseph before Pharaoh, seven years of plenty begin	41:46-7
	128	Famine begins	41:54
	130	Jacob tells his age to Pharaoh	45:6; 47:9

### Jacob Was Not Punished

There were two stages in the process of the Talmud's validation of its claim that Torah study overrides the obligations of parental honor. First it had to be proved that Jacob remained apart from his parents in order to pursue his studies. This has been satisfactorily established. It now remains to be demonstrated that the patriarch was not punished for his absence. This the Talmud sets out to do now.

[17a] And<sup>136</sup> whence do we know that he<sup>137</sup> was not punished?

Because it was taught {in a *baraita*}: It turns out that<sup>138</sup> Joseph, (when he)<sup>139</sup> separated from his father, that he did not see him<sup>140</sup> for twenty-two years,<sup>141</sup> just as Jacob our father<sup>142</sup> was separated from Isaac<sup>143</sup> his father for twenty-two years.<sup>144</sup>

The *baraita* that is being cited here by the Talmud also originates in *Seder 'olam*, Chapter 2.<sup>145</sup> In *Seder 'olam* it comes at the conclusion of a detailed enumeration of the events of Joseph's life:<sup>146</sup>

<sup>136</sup> "And"— ~ in MS N.

<sup>137</sup> "he"—**Spanish family** (except HgT<sup>2</sup>): "Jacob our father."

<sup>138</sup> "It turns out that"— ~ in EY.

<sup>139</sup> "(when he)"—deleted in MS Y; found in MS M; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>140</sup> "that he did not see him"— ~ in **Printings**.

<sup>141</sup> "It turns out...twenty-two years"—MS R: "[It turns out that Joseph from his father twenty-two years that he did not see Jacob (!)]."

<sup>142</sup> "our father"— ~ in MSS G, N, B, O, M, R.

<sup>143</sup> "Isaac"—thus only in MS Y; ~ in all other witnesses.

<sup>144</sup> "It turns out...twenty-two years"—MS L: "Just as Jacob was separated from his father for twenty-two years that he did not see him, thus was Joseph concealed from his father for twenty-two years"; YS: "Just as Jacob was separated from Isaac for twenty-two years, thus was Joseph separated from Jacob for twenty-two years."

<sup>145</sup> Ed. Ratner, 11-2; ed. Milikowsky, 219-20, 452-3.

<sup>146</sup> For purposes of our current calculations it is sufficient to know that Joseph was seventeen at the time that he was sold to Egypt and thirty-nine when he was reunited with his father [i.e., thirty when called before Pharaoh, plus the seven years of plenty and the two of famine].

“*These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph being seventeen years old etc.*” (Genesis 37:2). At that point Leah died.

He descended to Egypt and spent twelve months at the house of Potiphar. “*... And the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field*” (Genesis 39:5).

“*In the house*”—because of the sun.

“*And in the field*”—because of the cold.

He spent twelve years in prison...

In his thirtieth year he went out of prison— “*Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh*” (Genesis 41:46).

At this point Isaac died. Seven years of plenty and two years of famine.

It turns out that Joseph was thirty-nine years old and Levi forty-four when Israel went down to Egypt.

It turns out that Joseph separated from his father for twenty-two years just as Jacob had separated from his father for twenty-two years.<sup>147</sup>

*Seder 'olam* does not spell out that Joseph’s separation from Jacob was a punishment for Jacob’s analogous treatment of his own father, but it is difficult to imagine what other reason the author could have had for pointing out the parallel.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> We have noted above in connection with the tradition about Haman’s alleged term as a barber in Kefar Qurianos (to *Megillah* 16a) that twenty-two appears frequently in rabbinic works as a prototypical number. Here of course the usage is specific, not merely as a round number. Cf. the twenty-two years which are assigned to Rabbi Akivah’s apprenticeship (*meshammesh*) of Nahum of Gimzu in *Genesis rabbah*, 1:14 (12) and parallels. See also Jubilees 25:8 (Charles, 157-8; Wintermute, 2:105): “...these two and twenty years my brother [Esau] has striven with me” (see Charles’ note).

<sup>148</sup> It is significant that MS Antonin which was chosen by Milikowsky as his principal text lacks most of the expressions [e.g., “that he did not serve him” (or: “see him”); “in return for (*keneged*) the twenty-two years”; etc.] that are used in other manuscripts in order to point unambiguously to Joseph’s absence as a measure-for-measure punishment for Jacob’s neglect of filial duties. This situation serves as a further indication that the Antonin manuscript has not absorbed the exegetical traditions of the



## Jacob in Succoth and Beth-el

[17a] Those of Jacob are thirty-six!<sup>149</sup> 150

—The fourteen<sup>151</sup> of the<sup>152</sup> house of Eber it does not count.

We at last approach the real proof that Jacob was not punished for the time that he spent studying with Eber. From *Seder 'olam's* juxtaposition of the respective absences of Jacob and Joseph the Talmud deduces that the latter was Jacob's punishment for the former—i.e., that in accordance with the midrashic theological principle of “measure for measure” Jacob was being made to suffer the same pain that he had inflicted upon his own father. However the numbers do not quite fit. By *Seder 'olam's* own reckoning, Jacob's absence extended over thirty-six years, since we should include among them the fourteen years spent

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Babylonian Talmud. The complete omission from the printed editions of the comparison with Jacob's absence is most probably the result of a homoioteleuton. Cf. *Aggadat bereshit*, 71:3 (ed. Buber, 139): “I have considered (expounding Psalms 77:6) twenty two years to Jacob against (*keneged*) the twenty-two years which Joseph spent away [from his father], and after the twenty-two years he made himself known to him...” *Seder eliahu rabbah*, 6:2 (ed. Friedmann, 29-30) is reluctant to direct criticism against the patriarch, and therefore deals with the data in a very different manner. Though it compares the two twenty-two year periods, there is no suggestion that Jacob was being held accountable for any of his actions. Quite the contrary, he was rewarded for his diligence in study by being given a taste of the World to Come, a life of tranquillity and freedom from temptation. The midrash denies that Jacob was mourning the loss of Joseph, asserting instead that he was merely expressing his trepidations that he might have been guilty of some sin. In the end God was overcome with compassion for him and granted him seventeen years of tranquillity at the end of his life.

149 “Those of Jacob are thirty-six”—thus in MS Y, HgT, Printings, AgE; MS G: “twenty-two? They are thirty-six!”; MS N: “These are twenty-two? They are thirty-six! There are thirty-six! (!)”; MS B: “Jacob was thirty-six!”; MSS O, L, R, EY: “Jacob is thirty-six!”; MS M: “It is thirty-six!”; YS: “But behold, Jacob separated himself for (thirty-four) [It should say: thirty-seven] (!)”; MS Mf: “But there are more!”

150 MSS B\*, O, Printings, YS add: “Rather”; EY, HgT add: “Rather, learn from this”; MSS L, R, Mf add: “Rather, should you not learn from this.”

151 “fourteen”— ~ in MS B (and filled in in B\*).

152 “of the”—MSS G, L, R, Printings: “that he was in the”; YS: “that he was serving in the.”

with Eber! Does this not prove that when God chose to penalize Jacob for being remiss in honoring Isaac, he did not hold him accountable for the years spent at the *yeshivah* studying the Torah? Similarly, we may draw the homiletical conclusion that students in subsequent generations should not feel constrained in such cases by the conflicting demands of familial and religious obligations, since the Bible has shown us that Torah study takes precedence.

[17a] Those<sup>153</sup> of the house of Laban are twenty years!<sup>154 155 156</sup>

For two years he tarried on the way;<sup>157</sup>

as it was taught {in a *baraita*}: He went out of Aram-naharaim and came to Succoth, and<sup>158</sup> there he spent<sup>159</sup> eighteen<sup>160</sup> months; as it says:<sup>161</sup> “*And Jacob journeyed to Succoth and built him a house,<sup>162</sup> and made booths for his cattle*” (Genesis 33:17).<sup>163</sup>

<sup>153</sup> “Those”—**Printings**: “After all, those”; **MS Mf**: “If so, there are too few. Those.”

<sup>154</sup> **HgT** adds: “As it is written: ‘*This twenty years have I been with thee*’ (Genesis 32:38).”

<sup>155</sup> See the reading in **HgT** above. Demetrius the Chronographer also writes that “when Jacob wanted to return to his father in Canaan, at Laban’s request he stayed six more years, so that in all he stayed for twenty years with Laban in Haran” (transl. Hanson, in Charlesworth, 2:849). See literature on Demetrius cited above.

<sup>156</sup> **MS N** adds: “Rather”; **Printings** add: “Rather, because.”

<sup>157</sup> “For two years he tarried on the way”—**MSS G,N, EY, HgT**: “He tarried for two years on the way”; **MSS B, Mf, Ashkenazic family, Printings, AgE**: “He tarried on the way for two years”; **MS O**: “He was found (אִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה → אִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) for two years on the road.”

<sup>158</sup> “and”— ~ in **MS M**.

<sup>159</sup> “spent”—**MSS G, R**: “tarried.”

<sup>160</sup> “eighteen”—**HgT<sup>2</sup>**: “twelve.”

<sup>161</sup> “says”—**Ashkenazic family, MS Mf**: “is written.”

<sup>162</sup> **EY, HgT** add: “in the days of winter.”

<sup>163</sup> **EY, HgT** add: “summer.”

This *baraita*, which is also being cited from *Seder 'olam*,<sup>164</sup> does not explain how it arrived at the time-span of eighteen months which is not mentioned explicitly in the verse. The most likely explanation is that of Rashi who states that the plural form *succoth* (“booths”) indicates two summer periods in which it is common to dwell in the fields in such temporary shelters,<sup>165</sup> whereas the (singular) “house” denotes the permanent quarters that would have to be constructed for the (one) winter. Two summers and the intervening winter add up to eighteen months.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Chapter 2; ed. Ratner, 10; ed. Milikowsky, 217, 452. The text is almost identical. Note that in Milikowsky’s text there is no introductory formula (“as it says/is written”) before the verse. This seems to be typical of *Seder 'olam*’s distinctive style.

<sup>165</sup> On the uses and construction of the *sukkah* see Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 1:4-7; *Qadmoniyot ha-talmud*, 1:2:224-35.

<sup>166</sup> Rashi’s interpretation was interpolated into the Talmud texts of the Spanish aggadic compendia. In his commentary to Genesis 33:17 Rashi offers a slightly different version of the explanation, basing it on the two mentions of the word *succoth[ah]* in the verse. The version in the talmudic commentary seems more convincing (thus also according to Maharsha, Ratner and others), with the first instance of *succothah* being read, according to its plain sense, as a place name. The explanation in the Pentateuch commentary appears to be supported by *Genesis rabbah*, 78:16 (936): “How many years did our father spend in Beth-el? —R. Abba bar Kahana says: Eighteen months: *Succoth*, and “house,” and “*succoth*.” See *Leqah tov* (ed. Buber, 1:173), *Tosafot hashalem* to Genesis 33:17 (ed. Gliss, 3:241), and commentators. On *Genesis rabbah*’s apparent confusion between Succoth and Beth-el see Albeck’s notes; Kasher, *Torah shelemah*, 5:1312, #54; and my discussion below.

Cf. Targum “Jonathan” to the verse (ed. Ridder, 1:7 and n. 14; ed. Ginsburger, 63 and n. 1; transl. Maher, 116 and nn. 14-5): “Jacob journeyed to Succoth and tarried there for a period of twelve months. He built himself a *bet midrash* and for his livestock he made booths...” Note that the reading “twelve” also appears in **HgT<sup>2</sup>** (though it cannot be justified in the context of our pericope). Most scholars lean towards emending the text of the Targum to make it conform with the *Seder 'olam* chronology. See Menachem Brayer, “Aggadic Literature and Esoteric Explanations in the Aramaic Translation of the Torah Ascribed to Jonathan ben Uziel,” in: M. Carmilly and Hayim Lear, eds., *Samuel Belkin Memorial Volume* (New York: Erna Michael College of Hebraic Studies, Yeshiva University, 1981), 77 (Note particularly his reference to *TB Pesahim* 88a); Shinan, *The Embroidered Targum*, 189 and n. 82; Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:394; 5:312-3, n. 277.

[17a] In<sup>167</sup> Beth-el he spent<sup>168</sup> six months offering<sup>169</sup> sacrifices;<sup>170</sup>

MS Y	All other witnesses
<p>as it says: “<i>And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Beth-el, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, etc.</i>” (Genesis 35:3)</p>	

The duration of Jacob’s sojourn in Beth-el is not specified in the Bible, and it is most probable that the author of the *baraita* was merely filling in the interval required to reach the desired total of twenty-two.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>167</sup> “In”—thus only in MS Y; in all other witnesses: “And in.”

<sup>168</sup> “spent”—MS G: “tarried for.”

<sup>169</sup> “offering”—MS G: “and offered upon it”; MSS N, B, R, Spanish family, Printings: “and he offered”; MS Mf: “and he made.”

<sup>170</sup> MS L adds: “and burnt offerings”; MS M adds: “and peace-offerings. The fourteen of the house of Eber it does not count”; MS B\* adds: “to the God of Beth-el (his father)”; MS O adds: “to the God of Beth-el”; EY adds: “to the God of his father Isaac.”

<sup>171</sup> See the Vilna *Ga'on*’s gloss to *Seder ‘olam*. The pericope pays no attention to Jacob’s encampment in Shechem, the scene of the incident of Dinah and Hamor which occupies all of Genesis 34, or to his sojourn at the tower of Eder (35:21) until his final reuniting with Isaac in Hebron (35:27). Although the extent of his sojourns there are not specified, there is no obvious reason to suppose that they would have been shorter than the time he spent in Beth-el, and the six months must necessarily have included these periods as well. It is possible that *Seder ‘olam* gave priority to the Beth-el period because it is described as “dwelling” (שב) in Genesis 35:1, as distinct from Shechem and the tower of Eder where Jacob merely “pitched his tent” (34:19; 35:21). This explanation was apparently intended by the author of *Leqah tov* who wrote (ed. Buber, 1:177) that “‘dwelling’ denotes nothing other than delaying; since he tarried there for six months offering sacrifices.” Maharsha, who discusses the omission of Jacob’s other stations, proposes that the Talmud might be emphasizing a homiletical point; namely, that even though Jacob spent his time at Beth-el in fulfillment of his religious obligations, it was still held against him that he thereby delayed his reunion with his father.

### Concluding Remarks

The material discussed in the current chapter consists primarily of a series of sources on a related topic,<sup>172</sup> the religious primacy of Torah study.<sup>173</sup> The sources were assembled here because the first of them connects to verses in Esther. After making allowance for the confusion that attaches to several of the attributions, we may summarize the passage as follows:<sup>174</sup>

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According to Jubilees 31:3 ff. (Charles, 185-96; Wintermute, 1:114) Jacob originally invited his parents to join him in sacrificing at Beth-el, but instead had to visit Isaac's deathbed. This tradition is alluded to in the Testament of Levi, 9:1 [M. De Jonge, ed., *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text*, Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece, ed. A. M. Denis and M. De Jonge (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 35; see Hollander, H. W., and De Jonge, M., *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary*, Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece, ed. A. M. Denis and M. De Jonge (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 155-7]. According to Jubilees the period of Jacob's sacrificing at Beth-el lasted from the first day of the seventh month (31:3) until the twenty-third (32:27), thereby observing what would later become the Hebrew New Year, Tabernacles and the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly. The association with Tabernacles was undoubtedly inspired by the juxtaposition with *Succoth* (see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:412-3; 5:317, n. 299). Similar exegesis might underlie the passage in *Genesis rabbah*, 78:15 (936) discussed above, which appears to equate Succoth and Beth-el (see Ratner to *Seder 'olam*, 10, n. 17).

<sup>172</sup> The very first item in the series, Rav Joseph's *baraita*, may not have originally been alluding to *talmud torah*; though Rav Joseph himself might have understood it as such (as reflected in his subsequent dictum); see our discussion above. At any rate, the redactor treated the *baraita* and the dictum as a single literary unit.

<sup>173</sup> *Talmud torah* has a strong claim to the status of the most important rabbinic value-concept. See e.g. Mishnah *Pe' ah* 1:1. Several dicta in rabbinic literature are formulated according to the type "great is the study of Torah" or "Great is Torah"; e.g., the *baraita* on the "Acquisition of the Torah" appended to Mishnah *Avot* 6:5; 6:7; *Kallah*, 8:6-7 [Michael Higger, ed., *Masekhtot kallah* (New York: Deve rabbanan, 1936), 292-6]; *Seder eliahu zuta*, 17 (ed. Friedmann, 18); *TB 'Erubin* 63b (= *Megillah* 3b, *Sanhedrin* 44b), *Qiddushin* 40b, *Nedarim* 32a (ed. Hershler, 1:272-3); *Midrash on Psalms*, 17:8 (ed. Buber, 132; transl. Braude, 1:214); etc. For overviews of the subject see George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1906), 2:239-47; Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909), 116-69; Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1952), by index; Urbach, *The Sages*, 606-16.

<sup>174</sup> See also Abraham Weiss, *Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim*, 290.

- 1) Rav Joseph's *baraita*, based on Esther 10:3.
- 2) Rav Joseph's dictum: Study is greater than the saving of lives, derived from Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7.
- 3) Rav, or Rav Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta:<sup>175</sup> Study is greater than the building of the Temple.
- 4) Rabbah bar bar Ḥana<sup>176</sup> in the name of R. Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta: Study is greater than the honoring of parents, as derived from the life of Jacob.

It was with reference to the last source that the Talmud compiled a detailed pericope devoted to a meticulous analysis of the traditional (*Seder 'olam*) chronology of the events in the life of the patriarch Jacob. In its current form it is unimaginable that such a pericope, with its reliance on complex mathematical calculations and the bringing together of events from the whole book of Genesis, could have been preached to a lay congregation as part of a normal sabbath sermon. It is however conceivable that the main ideas might have been originally conveyed in a more simplified form,<sup>177</sup> accepting as a received tradition the fact of Jacob's fourteen years at Eber's academy.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> He was a second-generation Babylonian *Amora* who appears principally as a transmitter of the teachings of his teacher, Rav. He frequently cites traditions in the name of R. Isaac bar Samuel bar Marta. See Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 202-3.

<sup>176</sup> Originally a Palestinian, he is known chiefly as a transmitter of traditions by R. Johanan and his circle. See Albeck, *op. cit.*, 305.

<sup>177</sup> In this respect our pericope differs significantly from the long passage above (11b-12a) which dealt with the assorted ways of calculating the seventy years of desolation prophesied by Jeremiah. In that case, the mathematics were so crucial to the argument that their deletion would have rendered the passage meaningless.

The use of the dating of biblical events as the basis for aggadic homilies is not unique to the Babylonian Talmud. Many such interpretations are found in *Seder 'olam*. Moreover, several passages in *Genesis rabbah* make homiletical use of the chronological framework for Jacob's life that is established by *Seder 'olam*, in particular the tradition about Jacob's studies in the *bet midrash* of Shem and Eber. None of these passages however presents a detailed mathematical demonstration of the kind that we encounter in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash. Thus, in *Genesis rabbah*, 68:5 (773-4) Hezekiah calculates that Jacob did not marry until the age of eighty-four, as

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distinct from Esau who found a wife at forty. He concludes from this that “the Holy One advances the wicked and delays the righteous.” In 65:9 (731) a comparison is drawn between the respective ages when Isaac and Jacob were blessed by their fathers; on 68:11 (784), which relates how Jacob denied himself sleep throughout his apprenticeship with Eber, see above. 84:8 (1010) speaks of Jacob transmitting to Joseph the *halakhot* he had received from Shem and Eber. See also *Pirquei derabbi eli’ezer*, 35 (transl. Friedlander, 263).

<sup>178</sup> The other calculations required for the proof are of the respective twenty-two-year periods of Joseph’s separation from Jacob and Jacob’s from Isaac. Both of these numbers can be derived through relatively straightforward computations which should not exceed the intelligence or attention-span that can be expected from an average congregation.

## Chapter Seventeen

### The Babylonian Esther Midrash: An Overview

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#### Literary Structure

The primary objective of this study has been to explain the contents of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash in a manner that would approximate the understanding, literary appreciation and emotional impact that it would have had for its original audiences during the talmudic era. In order to achieve this aim it was necessary to maintain distinctions between the individual comments and dicta of the rabbis, and the broader literary contexts into which they were subsequently embedded by the redactors of the Talmud. The Esther-Midrash, like almost all rabbinic documents, presents itself to us as a collage of materials that were assembled and rearranged in accordance with the concerns and requirements of the broader literary contexts into which they were incorporated. The task of the modern critical commentator is therefore a twofold one: to clarify the meaning of the final product as it was perceived by the redactor, as well as to reconstruct the original intentions of the dictum's author. Both of these objectives demand that we pay careful attention to minutiae of philological research, including the linguistic usages, literary standards and editorial conventions to which the authors and editors were trying to conform, as well as whatever other information, assumptions and realia might contribute to a fuller appreciation of the text. The above objectives had to be based on the accumulation and evaluation of the textual evidence, and assisted by the efforts of previous traditional and modern commentators.

The main body of this commentary is made up of my interpretations of the individual pericopes of the Esther-Midrash. I have endeavored in each case to propose the most reasonable and straightforward explanations that can account for the evidence at hand. Much of this evidence was problematic and susceptible to multiple possibilities of interpretation, and it is inevitable that the reader will find occasions to



disagree with my own judgment. I have attempted throughout to be as comprehensive as possible in presenting the data and the considerations that guided my decisions.

Each one of my exegetical efforts in this monograph relates to a specific passage and must be studied in its unique context. It is however natural that a study of this sort will shed light on some comprehensive and seminal issues related to the nature of rabbinic Judaism, midrashic exegesis, the redaction of the Talmud, and other broader questions. The mutual relationships between generalizations and specific interpretations raise sensitive procedural difficulties, since the methodological theories must serve at one and the same time as the assumptions upon which the individual comments are built, and as the conclusions that are deduced or suggested by the totality of those individual comments. There is no escaping the scholarly obligation to constantly subject our working assumptions and hypotheses to critical scrutiny at each stage of the commentary in order to determine as honestly as possible how successfully they are able to account for the specific textual data.

The literary and philological questions that had to be dealt with in my study included:

- The social settings of aggadic midrash—did it originate in the preaching of the synagogue (as I had initially assumed), in the academic studies of the *yeshivah*, or in some other context? In the former case, how are we to imagine the actual make-up of the congregation? Were the rabbis preaching to their own colleagues whose learnedness would allow for very sophisticated levels of complexity and erudition, or did they have to tailor their words to the limited comprehension of less knowledgeable congregants?

- To what extent was aggadic midrash viewed by its creators as legitimate exegesis, and to what extent did it serve as a literary device, one of several such devices that were used to ornament well-crafted literary homilies?

- Does the evidence of the Esther-Midrash support the widely held view that the “*setama di-gemara*” constitutes the latest, redactional or “Savoraitic” stratum of the Talmud, and is not of Amoraic origin?

- Are there unique features which distinguish the Babylonian midrash from its Palestinian counterparts. If so, do they reflect reli-

gious and ideological differences, divergent literary sensibilities, or some other underlying reason?

### General Structure

The location of the Esther-Midrash within the Tractate *Megillah* in itself raises some intriguing questions. As I noted at the beginning of Chapter One of this study,<sup>1</sup> a formal connection to the final halakhic pericope in the opening chapter of *TB Megillah* was probably suggested by the resemblance between the wording of the introductory formula of R. Levi's dictum concerning the use of the biblical "vayhi"—"this matter is a tradition in our hands from the Men of the Great Assembly..."—and a similar expression that appeared in the preceding talmudic section. R. Levi's dictum is included in a brief sequence of three dicta whose grouping is justified by purely formal parallels. There is no denying that loose associative affinities often determine the grouping of disparate literary units in the Babylonian Talmud. It is nevertheless difficult to accept that this sort of redactional pattern would have furnished powerful enough grounds for the inclusion of a text of the magnitude of the Esther-Midrash. Moreover it strikes me as too great a coincidence that the midrash should have *happened* to find itself in the only tractate in the Talmud that is devoted to the laws of Purim and the reading of the Megillah. A more likely scenario is that the redactors, in their determination to find a place for the Esther-Midrash within the suitable talmudic tractate, felt that the appropriateness of the subject-matter did not furnish a sufficient reason for its inclusion, and therefore sought an additional formal connection, contrived as it may appear to us. Analogous instances, in which technical and formalized literary connections are regarded as subordinated to

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the sources cited in my commentary to *Megillah* 10b see now Shamma Friedman, "La-'aggadah ha-historit ba-talmud ha-bavli," in *Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume*, ed. Shamma Friedman, 119-64 (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 120, n. 2.

more meaningful contextual ones for the insertion of extraneous literary sources, will be adduced below. If I am correct in my reconstruction of the editorial process, then it might provide us with useful insights that can be applied to analogous phenomena elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud and talmudic literature in general.

In the Babylonian Esther Midrash the three dicta of R. Levi (Jonathan) were followed by a separate series of proems. Assuming the normal modes of organizing talmudic materials, we are expected to understand that the inclusion of the proem-series was inspired by the citation of Esther 1:1 in R. Levi's first dictum and at the commencement of the proem-sequence. This would imply that the two literary units were originally distinct and independent, and that their juxtaposition was effected by the Talmud's redactors. This impression finds support in the equivalent passages at the beginning of *Esther rabbah* where much of the same or similar material is also found. In *Esther rabbah* however the proem-section is structured in such a manner that the individual proems are all embedded into symmetrical units based on the midrashic tradition "'Vayhi"—it was 'vay' (woe!) in the days of Ahasuerus." The precise character of the relationship between the two works—and it seems futile to deny that some relationship did exist—is difficult to reconstruct with certainty. Initially it would appear that the *Esther rabbah* version presents us with a better-integrated and more finely crafted literary product, and hence reflects a later stage in the evolution of the pericope. However with respect to the Esther-Midrash we must take into account its powerful opposite tendency to distill the exegetical content out of more expansive literary homilies. This aspect of Babylonian *aggadah* is one that we shall be discussing at length below, and could open up some alternative ways of accounting for the evidence.

Although the Esther-Midrash expounds a greater proportion of the Book of Esther than any of the other midrash collections with which I am familiar, it is possible to discern a particular concentration around verses that marked the beginnings of lectionary units in the Masoretic division of the Bible. This is of course true of Esther 1:1, in which almost every word is expounded in minute detail, in addition to the long series of proems that would normally have served as introductions to it. It is also true of Esther 2:5 and 3:8 which open further

Masoretic divisions. This situation undoubtedly reflects the Palestinian sources of the Esther-Midrash where these divisions defined units for the public reading of the Megillah (though we remain uncertain how these divisions reflected actual synagogue practice).

The attributed materials that are cited in the Esther-Midrash cover the full range of source-types that are normally found in the Babylonian Talmud, including *baraitot* and dicta by a representative sampling of Palestinian and Babylonian *Amora'im*. Although corresponding versions of several of the traditions can be found in other talmudic collections, the attributions there are usually to different rabbis. There is a special relationship to *Seder 'olam* which will be discussed in a separate section below. The Esther-Midrash contains many citations of, and allusions to, passages from other tractates in the Babylonian Talmud; most of these references seem to have been incorporated here during the more advanced stages of the redaction. (On this phenomenon see below.) As several scholars have noted, the imprint of the fourth-century Babylonian *Amora* Rava is very noticeable throughout, and it is probable that the initial redaction of the Esther-Midrash took place in his academy at Maḥoza. Several traditions by Rav and Samuel, particularly disputes that follow the model “one said... the other said...” are found in the early sections of the midrash.

### Digressions

Like many rabbinic works, the Esther-Midrash departs on several occasions from its principal role as a commentary and introduces digressions of varying lengths. Thus a reference to the virtues of adopting orphans that was inspired by Esther 2:5 led to the presentation of a Palestinian pericope based on R. Simon ben Pazi's homiletical exposition 1 Chronicles 4:18 (13a) which makes reference to Pharaoh's daughter and Moses. A long pericope (14a-15a) about the total number of biblical prophets, and especially the seven prophetesses, is inserted in connection with R. Abba bar Kahana's mention of forty-eight male prophets and seven prophetesses in his comment to Esther 3:10. A sequence of seven dicta by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Ḥanina is found on 15a-b, ignited by an allusion to Esther 5:1 in the first item. Seven dicta by R. Benjamin ben Japheth, all of which comment on the conclusion of the Joseph story in the latter chapters of Genesis, are incorpo-

rated into *Megillah* 16a-b by virtue of a comparison that is drawn with Esther 8:15 in one of the comments. A reference to the competing religious demands that were made on Mordecai leads the Talmud (16b-17a) to introduce a series of dicta dealing with the priorities between different halakhic obligations, which leads in turn to a complex chronological pericope about Jacob's sojourn in the *yeshivah* of Shem and Eber.

As is readily apparent from the above examples, most of these digressions conform to a familiar organizational pattern in the Talmud, of inserting lists of traditions, often composed of seven items, into the local pericope by virtue of one item in the list that bears a direct relevance or similarity to the present context.<sup>2</sup> In the Esther-Midrash the link is often created when a biblical verse from outside the Book of Esther is quoted.

Further reflection suggests that in deciding to inject extensive foreign bodies into the Esther-Midrash the redactors were guided by something other than mere formal principles of associative juxtaposition. Thus, a long pericope about the female prophets of the Bible naturally suits an exposition of Esther, inasmuch as she was herself counted among the prophetesses, even though the formal connection to the pericope does not actually hinge on that particular point of thematic affinity. The same might be argued for the incorporation of a sequence of comments to the stories of Joseph and Benjamin, seeing that the Midrash repeatedly posits an archetypal continuity that extends from them through to Mordecai.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The connecting item is standardly placed at the head of the list even when it is clear that it was not originally the first item (e.g., where it involves altering the sequence of biblical verses).

<sup>3</sup> The passage also makes mention of the fate of the Temple, a topic that is central to the midrashic retelling of Esther.

Ultimately this characterization holds true for the very inclusion of the Esther-Midrash in the talmudic tractate *Megillah*. As we have noted above, its presence can be justified on far stronger thematic grounds than the feeble formulary similarities that make up the technical occasion for its incorporation. It therefore appears possible that the technical and formal connections between the passages were adduced only after the fact, as a kind of literary ornament, but that thematic appropriateness was the primary consideration that impelled the talmudic editors to place these sources where they are. In light of these phenomena we might with profit rethink some of our cherished notions about the nature of “associative principles of arrangement” throughout the Babylonian Talmud.

Another topic that might merit re-evaluation in the wake of our examination of the Esther-Midrash is the status of “lists of dicta” as a genre of talmudic source-material. It has been customary to regard these collections as being linked by purely formal criteria, particularly the identities of their authors and tradents. Our analysis of the series by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Yosé bar Ḥanina, augmented by the testimony of new discoveries from the Cairo Genizah, suggested that there existed a more substantial connection between the units, and that they might have all originated as part of a single homily, now lost, to the Book of Esther. This model for reconstructing the genesis of “lists of dicta” pericopes might easily hold true for the Joseph and Benjamin traditions, and for kindred collections elsewhere in the Talmud.

### **The Esther-Midrash as Literature: Hermeneutics and Homiletics**

In keeping with the above observations our analysis of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash has focused on two central dimensions, which may be termed the Hermeneutic and the Homiletic.

•By the “Hermeneutical” element I am referring to the mechanics of how the rabbinic comments relate to their scriptural texts. Most of the “interpretations” preserved in midrashic literature involve some departure from the surface or contextual meaning of the verses.<sup>4</sup> The conventions of midrashic rhetoric provide the *darshan* with a variegated choice of tropes that can be applied to a given scriptural unit in order to generate a connection between the text and the homily, whether the trope belongs to one of the formally enumerated catalogues of “*middot* for interpretation of the Torah”<sup>5</sup> or to other accepted hermeneutical modes.<sup>6</sup> It is a common feature of the Esther-Midrash and other aggadic collections that many of these exegetical links tend to be obscured in their final formulation, and we often found ourselves speculating (usually with the astute assistance of the traditional commentators) about how the *darshan* had derived his comments from the verse.

•Following from our hypothesis that the rabbis did not always indulge in aggadic exegesis for its own sake, but used their textual observations for some further purpose, usually in the context of a *homiletical* discourse, we tried to confront each unit of midrashic exe-

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<sup>4</sup> The virtual absence of “*peshat*” interpretations from rabbinic literature may appear more pronounced than it actually was in the original dicta and homilies of the talmudic rabbis. It is natural that the tradition should have taken particular care to transmit and anthologize novel and unusual interpretations, rather than simple and contextual ones that hardly count as interpretations at all. Cf. Raphael Loewe, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” in *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies, London*, ed. J. G. Weiss, 140-185, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964); S. Rosenblatt, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Mishnah* (Baltimore: 1935).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., H. G. Enelow, ed., *The Mishnah of R. Eliezer; or the Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutical Rules* (New York: Bloch, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> The indispensable guide to these is of course I. Heinemann's *Darkhei ha-'aggadah*. For an excellent characterization of where the hermeneutical “rules” fit into the larger enterprise of midrash see Gerald L. Bruns, “The Hermeneutics of Midrash,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz, 189-213 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 189-90, and 210, n. 5.

gesis with such question as: What point is being made here? or: How would this comment be employed in a sermon?<sup>7</sup> In many instances it turned out that there was room for more than one plausible explanation, and these explanations would not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Thus, while focusing upon the literary structures of the homily, we could ask whether a given interpretation might have originally functioned as part of a proem or a messianic peroration. Alternatively, with an eye to ideological concerns, we would ask about how this midrash addressed a theological or eschatological topic. Alternatively we could consider how it might have fit into the social or political life of the congregation, perhaps as part of a diatribe aimed at eradicating perceived religious and moral shortcomings in the community. All such questions were posed hypothetically, and should not be treated as factual assertions or demonstrations that a given comment originated in a homiletical context. Nevertheless, in several of the instances the primacy of the homiletical factors did seem very likely.

The *darshan* was thus regarded as occupying a position midway between the biblical text and his congregation. While some of my preceding assertions might appear to suggest a model according to which the preachers were routinely forcing their biblical texts to conform to pre-selected sermon topics, this crude understanding of how exegesis functions in a homily is of course not the way things are likely to have happened. In general, the distinction between the homiletical and exegetical stimuli operates better as a theoretical model than as a psychological one, since—recognizing what Heinemann and Kadushin have termed their “organic” relationship to divine words—the homilists would normally be unaware that they were imposing any ulterior meaning upon the biblical text.<sup>8</sup> The nature of the extant evidence cer-

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<sup>7</sup> We of course allowed for the possibility of negative answers to such questions; i.e., that a given rabbinic interpretation arose out of a desire to account for some redundancy or contradiction in the verse, rather than from homiletical needs.

<sup>8</sup> See Bruns, “The Hermeneutics of Midrash,” 195.



tainly makes it futile, in most cases, to try to determine a consistent or precise sequence of the thought processes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Disregard for Literary Forms**

A striking phenomenon that was encountered repeatedly in the course of my comparisons between the Babylonian and Palestinian versions of otherwise similar material was the fact that the Babylonian traditions tended to omit features that enhanced the rhetorical and literary structures of the respective pericopes, but which did not advance in any obvious manner the exegesis of the biblical texts. The Palestinian literary sermons often used exegesis in a playful manner as one of several elements that could be drawn upon in the artistic fashioning of a proper *derashah*. The authors and redactors of the Esther-Midrash often treated such comments as they found in received midrashic traditions, no matter how farfetched and hyperbolic they might strike us, as if they were earnest attempts at eliciting the literal meaning of the biblical text. An interesting example of this phenomenon emerged from my analysis of the pericope on folio 11a, where an *ad hoc* rule of “pseudo-exegesis” that was probably invented in connection with a homily about Solomon (originally attached to 1 Kings 4:24) was afterwards applied to Esther 1:1 as if it were an actual principle governing biblical Hebrew syntax.

To focus on a different aspect of this phenomenon: When we compared the Babylonian pericope (11a-b) about the kings who “ruled in the vault” with the scattered discussions in Palestinian sources about the “cosmocrators” of history, we observed that every single one of those passages utilized the historical observation as part of a homiletical or theological argument (e.g., the inevitable fall that will follow great-

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<sup>9</sup> For an interesting study of how the homiletical structures interrelate with the exegesis see David Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis: A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, 105–24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

ness, how all mortal rulers are merely serving as temporary agents for the original and final king of the universe, or how people's deeds contain the seeds of their own punishments, etc.). The unique exception to this characterization was the Esther-Midrash which restricted itself to an examination of the factual and historical accuracy of the claims.

These marked differences between the Babylonian and Palestinian attitudes to aggadic exegesis can be explained in a number of different ways. We could just resign ourselves to the acknowledgment that the communities evolved diverse cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. Nevertheless, taking all the factors into account, it seems clear that the differing approaches to midrashic activity were influenced, at least in part, by the institutional venues in which they were created and studied. No one familiar with the poetics and rhetorical structures of classic Palestinian aggadah can fail to appreciate that the *derashot* were consciously crafted as literary creations, designed to be delivered orally at a synagogue service of which formal readings from the Bible were a central part. Successfully composed homilies are therefore aesthetically attractive, entertaining and religiously edifying. These objectives do not seem to have been crucial to the authors of the Esther-Midrash, whether we are examining the native Babylonian dicta or the transmission and interpretation of originally Palestinian traditions. The focus is almost exclusively on content, especially on the interpretation of the biblical texts, and if any elements in the received source do not contribute towards that end then they are likely to be omitted. Conversely, patently rhetorical and whimsical comments, if they make use of biblical verses, are scrutinized with the utmost seriousness and treated as contributions to the correct understanding of sacred scriptures, and subjected to the rigid standards of logic and consistency that would be applied to halakhic dicta.

To put it succinctly, the homilist *makes use* of Scripture, whereas the scholarly exegete *interprets* it. Although the two tasks will frequently overlap, the difference is generally unmistakable. The Babylonian Esther-Midrash appears to have blurred the distinction.

### **Complexity and Calculations**

The academic scholarly provenance of much of the material in the Esther-Midrash finds further confirmation in the sheer complexity

of several of the discussions. The most conspicuous examples of this phenomenon are probably the chronological discussions on 11b-12a (about Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the "seventy years" that would precede the restoration of Jerusalem), and 16b-17a (proving that Jacob spent fourteen years studying Torah prior to his departure for Aram-naharaim) whose difficult arithmetic computations would have sorely taxed the comprehension of a casual audience of synagogue-goers. The intellectual demands posed by this kind of material are not dissimilar to those confronted in many of the halakhic passages in the Talmud, and would be appropriate to the setting of a rabbinic academy. Significantly, there are no real equivalents to these pericopes in any of the Palestinian midrashic collections, which generally draw upon material that originated in synagogue preaching and was probably addressed to a more general audience.

Several other aggadic passages in the Esther-Midrash (see, e.g., the pericope on 14b dealing with Joshua's descendants) are stamped with the imprint of halakhic argumentation, including the posing of objections and refutations, solutions, proof-texts, etc.

## **Proems**

My analysis (above, Chapter Two) of the "Proems" section (10b-11a) pointed out how the Babylonian redactors of the passage, in revising an original Palestinian collection of homiletical *petih̄tot*, proved unable or unwilling to preserve their original literary function as introductions to the scriptural lection, and satisfied themselves in most instances with the mere citation and exposition of the verses from outside the Book of Esther, rather than striving to create a tangible connection between them and the opening words of the biblical reading. In my discussion of that passage I suggested that this situation might owe, at least in part, to the fact that the *petih̄ta* structure (as distinct from structures such as the "halakhic proem" that forms the basis of the *She'iltot*) was not commonly employed in the sermons that were delivered in Babylonian synagogues. This circumstance could have been dictated in turn by a possible preference for scheduling the sermon after the scriptural lection, rather than before it. As Joseph Heinemann has ar-

gued persuasively, the classic Palestinian *petihta* served ideally as a preamble to the biblical reading of the day.

As happens commonly in the critical study of midrashic traditions, virtually every passage which makes use of “external” verses, especially from books like Psalms, Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes, can give rise to a suspicion that the passage in question originated as a proem. A possibility of this sort existed, for example, with regard to the pericope to Esther 1:15 on 12b, or the use of Job 36:7 in connection with Esther 2:22-3 on 13b. Likewise, Rav’s exposition on 12b linking Proverbs 13:16 to 1 Kings 1:2 and Esther 2:3 was evidently a proem. When a pericope did not attach directly to Esther, as in the presentation of Rabbi Simon ben Pazi’s discourse on 1 Chronicles 4:18, then it often proved difficult or impossible to reconstruct the original occasion for the proem.

Viewed from a broader perspective, the treatment of proems in the Esther-Midrash would seem to converge with other phenomena discussed in this section, all of which attest to the aforementioned disregard for those structural features of the midrashic *oeuvre* that do not enrich our comprehension of the content or exegesis of the biblical text. Whatever literary forms and tropes might have been in use among the Babylonian preachers, they are not in evidence in the Esther-Midrash, and what confronts us there shows all the indications of being a product of the *yeshivah*, not the synagogue.

### “Messianic Perorations”

Another salient example of this recurrent pattern is the treatment of “messianic perorations” or “happy endings.” As is well known, it was the frequent practice of Palestinian preachers to conclude their discourses on an optimistic note, usually by quoting a prophetic verse that confirms God’s assurances of consolation and redemption for the suffering people of Israel. In several instances in the Esther-Midrash we had occasion to note how the inspiring conclusions that appeared at the culmination of the Palestinian midrashic parallels were missing from their Babylonian counterparts.

Thus, to mention a few typical examples of this trend, the Palestinian pericope that parallels *TB Megillah* 10b, dealing with the

various implications of “*vayhi*” verses,<sup>10</sup> is carefully crafted so as to culminate in words that would have held out profound hope to Jews living under the weight of a foreign yoke:

...For R. Samuel bar Nahman says: Israel received a complete pardon for their sins on the day when the Temple was destroyed. This is what is written: “*The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; he will no more carry thee away into captivity*” (Lamentations 4:22).

In another instance, when we compare the discussion about the extents of Ahasuerus’ and Solomon’s dominions that is contained in the midrashic pericope on Esther 1:1 (*Megillah* 11a) with the parallel passage in *Esther rabbah*, 1:4, we observe immediately how the latter—but not the former—was constructed so as to lead to an inspiring conclusion (citing Psalms 68:30, 72:11, 72:19) about the splendor of the restored Jerusalem and the tributes that will one day be brought to the Messiah.

Likewise, *Esther rabbah*, 1:14, which contains material analogous to the exposition of Esther 1:8 in *Megillah* 12a, concludes with a citation of Isaiah 43:6 and a discourse about the ingathering of the Jewish exiles in the messianic future, an element that is absent from its Babylonian counterpart. Palestinian homilies about the proliferation of prophets and prophetesses in biblical Israel, which parallel the passage on that topic in *TB Megillah* 14a, are constructed so as to end with the consoling conclusion

...But in the future times the Holy One will publicly reveal their prophecy. That is what is written: “*And the Lord my God shall come, and all the holy ones with thee*” (Zechariah 14:15).

The Babylonian pericope focuses on the authority and precise numbers of the Hebrew prophets and prophetesses, but does not incorporate them into a homiletical peroration.

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<sup>10</sup> *Genesis rabbah*, 41 (42):3 (399-407); *Leviticus rabbah*, 9:1 (228-37); *Ruth rabbah*, Proems: 1; *Esther rabbah*, Proems: 11; etc.

## Redactional Omissions and Misunderstandings

On several occasions it appeared that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash misunderstood the intent of the earlier sources that they were utilizing, especially material that originated in Palestinian midrashic traditions. One of the most flagrant examples was the treatment of the proems, discussed above, where the situation should probably be ascribed to Babylonian unfamiliarity with, or disinterest in, Palestinian literary conventions.

A likely instance of this tendency is the Esther-Midrash's presentation of the dictum of R. Samuel bar Naḥman in the name of R. Jonathan imagining God's words to the Ministering Angels at the Red Sea: "The work of my hands are drowning in the sea and you are reciting song before me!" (Proem #3 on 10b). Our analysis of the complex pericope provided strong support for the view that in the original version of the Babylonian pericope, as in its many Palestinian parallels, God was expressing distress about the endangered Israelites, not the perishing Egyptians. There are a number of possible ways to explain how the existing Babylonian pericope came to apply the statement to the imperiled Hebrews, but it is most likely that the change, which was evidently introduced only in the latest redactional stages and takes the form of an assumption that is never stated explicitly, resulted from a simple misunderstanding of the source material.

Similarly, comparison of *Megillah* 12a with an otherwise similar passage in *Esther rabbah* suggested that the Talmud's interpretation of Esther 1:8, according to which the measures of food and drink served at Ahasuerus' banquet were in conformity with the prescriptions of the Torah, had not originally been intended as praise for the king's behavior, but as a contrast between the dissolute behavior of the Persians and the restraint that would characterize Jews in analogous circumstances. A similar conclusion suggested itself with regard to the Talmud's observation that Ahasuerus' feast succeeded in satisfying the opposing desires of Mordecai and Haman. In *Esther rabbah*, 2:14 and other Palestinian parallels this claim is presented as a vain boast by the proud king, to which God retorts that he alone, and not any mortal, is capable of satisfying conflicting and mutually antagonistic wishes. Here too there exists a strong probability that the Palestinian tradition accurately

preserves the original intent of the passage, which was subsequently garbled in the course of its Babylonian redaction. With reference to Esther 1:14, for example, the midrash juxtaposes interpretations that follow contradictory ways of reading the passage: One tradition treats the names of Ahasuerus' counselors as a series of allegorical references to the Temple service, whereas another one regards the names as those of actual persons, including Haman. The redactors make no effort either to resolve the inconsistency or to indicate that the sources express different approaches.

In some cases the Esther-Midrash fails to mention facts or premises which appear to be crucial for a coherent understanding of a dictum. Frequently this phenomenon takes the form of omitting the biblical allusions that underlie a comment. Thus the Talmud's exegesis of Esther 1:13 (12b), identifying the verse's "*wise men*" with the Jewish rabbis, presupposes the similar phraseology that is applied to the tribe of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, yet the pericope is rendered incoherent by the omission of the Chronicles quote. The verse is cited in all the Palestinian versions of the midrash. A similar omission of a scriptural citation (to Joshua 10:24, as expounded in *Sifré on Deuteronomy*, 356) obscures the meaning of the midrashic exposition of Esther 16:11 (16a). The references to the meal-offering on 16a have no clear relevance to the context. It is only when we note that the original tradition spoke of the *omer* offering, which would have been brought on that day, and which is mentioned in the Palestinian versions of the midrash, that the passage makes sense. This is also true of the Esther-Midrash's portrayal of the demeaning acts which Haman must perform in honoring Mordecai. The choice of actions seems arbitrary and lacking an exegetical justification because they are not attached to the biblical verses from which they were derived.

In some cases the inadequacies of the redaction do not find expression in any specific difficulty, so much as in a general lack of clarity. Only with the assiduous assistance of the traditional commentators can we obtain some idea of what the authors had in mind—and at times even they do not succeed in satisfactorily elucidating the text.

## References to Current Issues

My views about the non-homiletical character of the Esther-Midrash also find support in some other features, such as the failure to apply biblical precedents to issues that would have been of relevance to the local congregation. Thus, in the Palestinian pericope that expounds the “*vayhi*” verses in the Bible, various scriptural stories are interpreted so as to relate to questions like the conflict with a pagan environment, the need to support Jewish religious schools, the proper honor due to judges, etc. None of these features are included in the equivalent Babylonian pericope on *TB Megillah* 10b.

Although the question demands further investigation based on a more representative textual sampling, my initial impression is that the range of “current” topics that find their way into the Esther-Midrash, especially in its Babylonian component, is narrower than in the Palestinian Talmud and midrashic collections. If this impression is a correct one, then it should probably be understood as an additional indication that the Esther-Midrash was the product of the rabbinic academy, gravitating naturally towards issues that are of concern to rabbis as a vocation, such as the study of the Torah and its dissemination among the Jewish populace, potential competition between its demands and those of other religious imperatives (e.g., the passage on 16b which declares that the study of Torah takes precedence over immigration to the Land of Israel, citing in evidence Ezra’s conduct), issues related to the rabbi’s functions as judge and communal leader, etc.<sup>11</sup> All this might conceivably evince a sociological reality, namely

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<sup>11</sup> As an instructive example of the rabbis’ tendency to read the Bible in terms of their contemporary concerns, I will note the frequent allusions to matters related to taxation and customs duties. Most of the instances do not have any overt religious or moral significance, though they might plausibly have held particular relevance to the rabbis, whose office might have entitled them to some sort of exemptions.



that the Babylonian rabbis as a group were less involved in the day-to-day concerns of their constituencies than were their Palestinian colleagues.<sup>12</sup> There is however a greater likelihood that the phenomenon is merely another consequence of the midrash's having been created and compiled within the "four ells" of the talmudic *yeshivah*.

## Comparative Perspectives

### Other Midrashim on Esther

The limited scope of the evidence forces us to confine our discussion of this important topic to a small number of specific questions. Ultimately, all we can hope to do is to try to sort out the relationships between the Esther-Midrash and comparable rabbinic collections that have survived from the same period. The inquiry must encompass the several midrashic collections dedicated to the Book of Esther—including *Esther rabbah*, *Abba gorion*, *Panim aherim* A and B, Chapters 49 and 50 of *Pirquei derabbi eli'ezer*, and the two Targums<sup>13</sup>—in addition to other volumes from the midrashic corpus, especially *Genesis rabbah*, *Leviticus rabbah*, *Pesiqta derav kahana* and *Ruth rabbah*, etc. All of the works in question are of composite and collective authorship and probably underwent protracted processes of oral embellishment and/or editorial reworking. Several of them are of uncertain provenance. It will therefore be impossible to suggest more than some general patterns. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the following impressions

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<sup>12</sup> Similar observations were made, in connection with a different subject, by David Levine, "The Talmudic Traditions on Public Fasts: Palestinian and Babylonian Contexts," a lecture delivered at the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, June 1993 (Section #C/6; see p. 59 of the Program).

<sup>13</sup> It is generally acknowledged that both Targums were composed later than the Esther-Midrash, and both drew upon material contained in it. There are enough Persian elements in them to strongly support the claim that they were composed in Babylonia, and at a fairly early date.

are the result of a careful study of the Esther-Midrash and exhaustive comparison with all the available parallel materials.

In anticipation of potential misunderstandings of my aims in conducting these comparisons, I wish to state categorically that I am not assuming thereby that these works ought to be treated as a unified or consistent corpus in which any passage can be interpreted on the basis of every other—though there were undeniably many instances in which the study of parallel versions did help appreciably to clarify terse and cryptic comments in the Esther-Midrash. Quite the contrary, my chief concern has been to try to delineate differences between traditions that might help define the distinctiveness of the Esther-Midrash *vis à vis* other contemporary documents. At times this task required meticulous analysis of the other versions to a degree that appeared disproportionate to the immediate needs of a commentary. I regarded such investigations as crucial to the stated purposes of this project, which encompassed the evolution of exegetical traditions and the comparison of the Esther-Midrash with other rabbinic compendia.

The comparison of talmudic parallel texts is subject to well-known methodological hazards. A similarity between texts A and B can, in theory, be accounted for on several different grounds. A might have copied from B, B from A or both from a common source. In the latter case, both versions might have undergone substantial alteration in the course of their subsequent transmission. A consideration that carries especial weight in talmudic and midrashic texts is that similar or virtually identical conclusions could have been arrived at independently by two expositors who were applying the same conceptual and hermeneutical approaches to a common scriptural text.

While all the above possibilities, as well as some other hypothetical constructions, might be theoretically arguable, the individual circumstances of each case make some of them more probable than others. In many instances it was much easier to account for how A might have evolved into B than *vice versa*. One powerful impression that emerged from the study of the many specific examples was that it was usually far easier to explain how the Babylonian version of a tradition had evolved out of one preserved in a Palestinian collection than the reverse. I recognize however that these conclusions are founded upon many delicate

variables and debatable methodological assumptions, and are therefore open to legitimate disagreement.

It seems evident that there exists a substantial affinity between the Esther-Midrash and the literature of “classical Palestinian midrash” (notably *Genesis*, *Leviticus Esther* and *Ruth rabbah*, and to a lesser extent *Pesiqta derav kahana*, *Song of Songs rabbah* and *Midrash on Samuel*). The structural framework of proems and “*vayhi*” verses was certainly based upon Palestinian originals, a claim which requires no stronger verification than a reminder of the extent to which the proems were unfamiliar to the Babylonian sages. In several instances it seemed reasonable to suppose that the editors of the Esther-Midrash had before them versions of the Palestinian pericopes that were virtually identical to those which have been preserved in the existing midrashic collections. These sources were of course reworked and adapted in accordance with the exegetical and literary concerns of the Babylonian rabbis. In other cases it appeared that what was preserved in the Palestinian compendia was not the original text that was known to the *Bavli*, but that the Palestinian material had also undergone subsequent modification through the course of its oral transmission.

By way of contrast, once we have made allowances for the anticipated similarities that arise from their being attached to the same biblical book and their inevitable familiarity with the same pool of earlier rabbinic traditions, there seemed to be relatively few literary parallels to the later Palestinian *midrashim* on Esther. A number of narrative themes that were central to these later compilations—such as the elaborate legends about King Solomon’s throne and the intricate processes that were involved in selecting the date for the execution of Haman’s plot or choosing the tree upon which the villain would be impaled—are either totally absent from the Esther-Midrash, or only vaguely and cryptically hinted at.

### **The Centrality of *Seder ‘Olam***

Some of the unique qualities of the Esther-Midrash derive from the central role it assigned to the tannaitic chronological midrash *Seder ‘Olam*. This singular work of talmudic literature does not fit naturally into the standard classifications of halakhah, aggadah, midrash and mishnah and, as is the case with respect to just about all of early rab-

binic literature except for the Mishnah, we know very little about the place that it occupied in the curricula of the Amoraic academies, whether in Babylonia or in the Land of Israel. It is therefore of particular interest to observe just how pivotal and ubiquitous is *Seder ʿolam* to the Esther-Midrash. This importance is not restricted to incidental citations. It actually influences the fundamental redactional structure of the midrash, particularly with respect to those lengthy passages that interrupt the running commentary to the Book of Esther. I am unable to offer a satisfactory theoretical explanation for this fact, and limit myself to the bare observation that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash perceived an integral connection between the chronological calculations of *Seder ʿolam*—not restricted to the historical periods that directly surrounded the events of Esther—and their own hermeneutical concerns in expounding the Purim story.

Thus, the second of the three “ancestral” traditions cited by R. Levi [or: R. Jonathan] which furnish the formal framework for the “prologue” to the midrash—“Amoz and Amaziah were brothers”—originates in *Seder ʿolam* Chapter 20.

Of crucial significance in determining the thematic content of the Esther-Midrash was the pericope on 11b-12a which interpreted Ahasuerus’ banquet in terms of his computation of the seventy-year period that was to elapse from the fall of Jerusalem until its restoration. The chronology that underlay that discussion was based in its entirety on conclusions that had been established by *Seder ʿolam*. The Talmud makes explicit references to *baraitot* which originate in *Seder ʿolam* Chapters 24-5 and 27-8, for which it provides a precise analysis that includes the identification and resolution of apparent discrepancies. That chronological scheme, which differs greatly from that of secular historians, had been arrived at by means of a selective and creative synthesis of the biblical evidence, placing a heavy emphasis on the sometimes problematic historical framework of the Book of Daniel. It was this chronology that formed the basis for Rava’s understanding of the roles of Ahasuerus and his feast, and which was presupposed in many other interpretations in the Esther-Midrash.

The long and complex pericope (14a-15a) that commences with a discussion about the number of biblical prophets and then goes on to focus on a list of seven female prophets is based entirely upon traditions

that originated in *Seder 'olam*. A comparison between the original Tannaitic text and its treatment in the Esther-Midrash brings to light some significant and instructive differences, which were dealt with at length in my commentary. Two points that are worth noting are:

(a) The numbers forty-eight (male prophets) and seven (female prophets) which are central to the Babylonian pericope are not found in the original *Seder 'olam* version. An early post-talmudic Babylonian tradition provides a precise enumeration of the forty-eight, based on information contained in *Seder 'olam*, though the count is not provided in the Talmud itself. As regards the seven prophetesses, it is clear that the author of *Seder 'olam*, as well as a number of Palestinian midrashic sources that make use of it, could not have regarded this as the total number, since the proof-text adduced for Sarah should apply equally to all the Matriarchs.

(b) The verses cited as proof-texts in order to identify the respective women as prophetesses are not always the same in *Seder 'olam* and in the Talmud. There are a number of reasons that might account for the divergences, however a clear and recurring difference lies in the fact that the two works held different views about what constitutes prophecy. For *Seder 'olam* any form of divinely revealed utterance qualifies as prophecy, whereas the Esther-Midrash makes an effort to find verses which (usually with the help of aggadic expansions) make predictions about future events.

These significant dissimilarities between the *baraitas* of the Esther-Midrash and the original text of *Seder 'olam* resemble the kind of creative exegesis to which the rabbis often subjected earlier documents, and can be taken as evidence for a similarly long and concerted process of study and interpretation of *Seder 'olam* in the Babylonian academies prior to its incorporation into the talmudic midrash.

A *baraita* from *Seder 'olam* (Ch. 20) is also adduced on 15a to refute the claim that Mordecai and Malachi were not the same person.

A long pericope on 16b-17a strives to demonstrate that Torah study takes priority even over the obligation to honor one's parents, basing itself on the precedent of the patriarch Jacob who was not penalized for tarrying fourteen years in the academy of Shem and Eber. The chronological framework for this exposition, key elements of which

cannot be proven from the unexpounded testimony of the scriptural texts, was based entirely on material contained in *Seder 'olam* Chapter 2, which is quoted extensively in the pericope.

### **Intra-Talmudic Citation: The Role of the Anonymous Talmud**

Whatever special features might distinguish the Esther-Midrash from other rabbinic texts, it is after all a section of the Babylonian Talmud. As such, we should attempt to establish whether the scholarly methodologies that have been applied to the study of the halakhic portions of the Talmud are also valid with respect to the aggadic sections of which the Esther-Midrash is the most complete representative. Of pivotal interest is the issue of the “anonymous Talmud”: Does the evidence of the Esther-Midrash bear out the widely held theory that the unattributed Aramaic comments and discussions constitute the latest stratum of the Babylonian Talmud, the redactional or post-redactional stages which did not produce original teachings, but rather were devoted to organizing, comparing and harmonizing the teachings of the earlier *Tanna'im* and *Amora'im* into the complex literary dialectic that typifies the Talmud as we know it?

In almost all cases, the data supplied by the Esther-Midrash proved to be consistent with the above theories. The imprint of the anonymous redactors was not discernible in the fashioning of long and complex pericopes or in the radical altering of the original meanings of talmudic dicta, as is often the case in halakhic passages. For the most part their activity made itself felt in the adding of simple connectives and in the insertion of kindred materials from other locations in the Talmud, usually on the basis of a simple associative affinity such as the citation of the same verse or rabbinic dictum. In some cases the redactional activity took the form of pointing out contradictions and proposing ways in which they might be resolved and harmonized. In at least one instance—and it was, significantly, a passage that dealt largely with halakhic topics—the pericope proved to be interwoven from two separate discussions that had originated in different tractates (i.e., the passage about the recitation of Hallel on 14a, which was combined from material native to *Megillah* and from *Arakhin* 10b).

We did however encounter a number of instances in which anonymous passages did not merely serve the standard connective func-

tions, but actually contained new and original narrative materials. Several such passages appeared in the latter sections of the Esther-Midrash (especially on 16a; see the expositions attached to Esther 6:10-4, 7:4 and 7:8).<sup>14</sup> It appears that the pericopes in question were copied from an earlier source, though it is impossible at this stage to determine with confidence what precisely that source was. The most likely possibilities were that the compilers were making use of a Palestinian midrash, or that the material was taken from an Aramaic Targum that contained extensive midrashic elaborations. Both alternatives are plausible.

### Narrative and Exegetical Themes

Although the Esther-Midrash, like most works of rabbinic literature, consists of a collection of diverse comments ascribed to different sages, and does not necessarily express a systematic exegetical approach, there are elements which recur with some consistency throughout the midrash and which contain readings of Esther that were widespread among the midrashic commentators and homilists. These elements indicate that there existed early narrative traditions that accompanied and embellished the retelling of Esther in synagogue sermons and as it was expounded in the talmudic schools. It is especially intriguing to try to determine whether any of these traditions set the Babylonian Esther-Midrash apart from the contemporary Palestinian aggadic compendia on Esther.

As might have been anticipated, the events and personalities of the Book of Esther emerge from the midrashic retelling in a strikingly different light from that of the original biblical text. In many instances, this situation can be easily accounted for on the basis of the standard hermeneutical assumptions of midrash; e.g., the tendencies to superim-

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<sup>14</sup> There is likely some significance to the fact that these are sections of Esther which would not normally have been expounded in homiletical *derashot* to Esther, whose usual focus would be on the beginning of the book or the other lectionary divisions.

pose the values of rabbinic Judaism, especially the study and observance of the Torah, upon the biblical personalities; the homiletical predilection towards depicting individuals as instances of historical or theological archetypes, and of portraying them as absolutely righteous or evil; the need to discern God's control over the outcome of all the events, etc.

On the other hand, several of the important features that were added by the rabbinic narration were specific to the facts of the Esther story. Taken by itself the Book of Esther is a story of political intrigues without much religious content. Haman's irrational hatred of Mordecai drives him to plot the murder of all the Jews of the Persian empire. The plot is fended off through a combination of agile maneuvering on the part of the Jewish protagonists and a chain of opportune coincidences. Even if we allow that the author is assuming a divine guidance behind those coincidences, there remains little in the story that relates to the central religious ideals of biblical or rabbinic Judaism, such as Torah, religious observance, uncompromising monotheism, the Temple or Messianism.

### **Ahasuerus, Vashti and the Fate of the Temple**

There are two notable and closely interconnected themes that appear repeatedly throughout the midrashic versions of Esther: (1) a chronological determination of the time-frame of the story, and (2) a thematic understanding of the religious issues that are at stake.

As regards the chronological determination, the author of Esther supplies us with only those facts that are absolutely essential for the narration of a plot that is largely self-contained. We are informed that the story takes place during the time of Ahasuerus, a monarch whose dates and genealogy are not spelled out and are not particularly relevant to the story-line. Just as the biblical author does not demonstrate any concern for placing his story within the context of Persian history, so is his interest in the broader currents of Jewish history limited to the fact that the episode occurred sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Jeconiah (Esther 2:6). In most respects the story of Esther can be understood without reference to anything outside itself.



The rabbinic sages made every effort to identify Ahasuerus and to locate his reign within a precise historical sequence. The systematic work of constructing a Jewish chronology based entirely on the biblical evidence, was accomplished in the Tannaitic *Seder 'olam*. Although the Babylonian Esther-Midrash appears to be the only midrashic work on Esther to include a detailed analysis of *Seder 'olam*'s computations, the basic historical scheme seems to have been shared by all the Palestinian aggadic compendia and the Aramaic versions.

A number of considerations converged to determine that the foremost religious issue to be confronted in Esther should be the fate of the Temple, rather than any of the more obvious alternatives. Chief among these was undoubtedly the association with Ezra 4:7-24 in which Ahasuerus (identified in Jewish historiography with "Artaxerxes") king of Persia receives a petition from the adversaries of Zerubbabel and the returning Judean exiles, urging him to put a halt to the construction of the Second Temple. The result was that

*Then sent the king an answer...: Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded... Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia (Ezra 3:17-24).*

Thus, however ambivalently he might be portrayed in Esther, in Ezra Ahasuerus is shown to be an enemy of Jewish religious worship,<sup>15</sup> and responsible for a long delay in the construction of the Temple. Once it has been established that this was the guiding motive for the king's policies, it is ingeniously read into his actions in Esther as well.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In both Ezra and Esther the king functions more as a passive pawn whose power is easily influenced by malevolent advisers and interested parties. The midrash generally prefers to see him as actively sympathetic to the Jews' enemies.

<sup>16</sup> The midrash contains other allusions to the Ezra episode. For example, Shimshai the secretary of the Samaritan governor Rehum, who participated in the protest against

The stylistic parallels between the descriptions of the respective feasts of Ahasuerus and Belshazzar (as described in Daniel Chapter 5) at which the priestly vessels were profaned,<sup>17</sup> strengthened the conviction that the two events had a similar purpose.<sup>18</sup> The chronology was given a solid exegetical foundation in the pericope on 11b-12a in which Rava provided meticulous calculations for the dating of the final years of the Judean kingdom, and of the sequence of Babylonian, Median and Persian kings who reigned from then until the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, even at the moment of grace when Ahasuerus (in 5:3) is receiving Esther and offering to extend favors “*to the half of the kingdom,*” the rabbis discern here (15b) a stubborn insistence that the rebuilding of the Temple be explicitly excluded from the scope of his magnanimity.

As might be expected, the historical determination was for the rabbis not of mere antiquarian interest (for the rabbis were never concerned with historical fact for its own sake), but was crucial for setting the Esther story within a religious thematic context.

An important outgrowth of this redefinition of the thematic content of Esther is that the center of moral gravity is thereby shifted away from the stories of the heroes Mordecai and Esther and the villain

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the building of the Temple, is the person who reads the royal records before the wakeful Ahasuerus, attempting to expurgate the mention of Mordecai (15b, to Esther 6:2).

<sup>17</sup> See especially Daniel 5:23.

<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that no verses from Daniel are employed in our midrash as “proem verses,” the frequency of citations from Daniel is so great as to create the impression that it was read as a sort of thematic “countertext,” to be used for elucidating Esther, in a manner analogous to the use of Song of Songs as a key to the exposition of the Pentateuch [see Daniel Boyarin, “The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash,” in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz, 214–30 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990)],

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Haman, towards the personalities of Ahasuerus and Vashti, whose moral positions were not clearly defined in the biblical narrative. In all this we may discern a tacit message to the Jews of the post-Destruction era that their own historical situation was identical to the “days of Ahasuerus.” They too were living through a temporary and anomalous period between the Second and Third Temples. Although the redemption seems to be indefinitely delayed and the supremacy of the Temple’s destroyers appears unchallenged, was this not precisely how matters would have appeared to the contemporaries of Esther and Mordecai? And yet just as Jeremiah’s prophecy about the imminent rebuilding of the Temple<sup>19</sup> would inevitably find fulfillment in spite of the scoffing of the heathens and the despair of the Jews, so too would the current exile be ended and the Wicked Empire meet its ultimate punishment according to the equally inexorable workings of the divine historical plan.

In spite of the rabbis’ generally negative estimation of Ahasuerus, who is often referred to simply as *oto rasha*ᶜ, “that wicked one,” we do encounter a surprising number of passages in which the potentate is represented in more favorable terms. Thus, the rabbis do not begrudge him praise for his sexual restraint (13a, commenting on Esther 2:14), and Esther is said to regret speaking of him in disparaging terms (15b, to Esther 5:1). A recurrent debate between Rav and Samuel hinges on the question of whether he was a wise or foolish ruler, and other pericopes discuss the geographical extent of his dominion, etc. To be sure, the disputes in question do not relate to his moral rectitude so much as

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or Job Chapter 24 as an exposition of the wicked generations of the Deluge and the Tower of Babel, etc.

<sup>19</sup> What defines the redemption for the midrashic rabbis is the actual construction of the Temple, not the return from exile. The Purim story takes place after Cyrus’ proclamation, after Jews have returned to the Holy Land—even as in the rabbis’ own

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to his cleverness and political wiles. One issue which crops up in a number of guises is the question of the legitimacy of Ahasuerus' succession. Several passages in the Esther-Midrash emphasize that he did not inherit the throne, but that he rose from a humble station (e.g., as a royal stable-keeper [12b]) and acquired his dominion through nepotism, bribery, gradual conquests or other means, a detail that can be interpreted to his credit or his detriment. This ambivalence might well reflect his enigmatic portrayal in the biblical story, where he acts both as Haman's accomplice and as the faithful executor of Esther's wishes. There might also be a measure of local-patriotism at play as the Babylonian sages reveal something of their attitudes towards their current Persian monarchs. On the other hand it is possible that at least some of the favorable representations of Ahasuerus originated in Palestinian sources, where the Persians empire was frequently idealized as a foil to the oppressive and despised Roman regime.

Similar considerations might have governed the descriptions of Ahasuerus' feast as related in Esther 1:5-8 and expounded in *Megillah* 12a. Most of the rabbinic dicta that deal with this event assume that not only were its physical trappings of unequalled grandeur and splendor, but that the protocol and organization of the banquet were also devised with exemplary wisdom and justice in order to produce fair and harmonious relations among the different classes of participants. It is difficult to accommodate this attitude with the generally negative appraisals of Ahasuerus's moral and intellectual stature, and the impression was created that the authors of these expositions had become caught up in the spirit of the biblical descriptions which emphasized the magnificence of the proceedings without subjecting them to moral or religious judgments.<sup>20</sup>

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times there existed, under foreign oppression, a Jewish community in the Land of

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The biblical Vashti is an “unknown quantity” about whom the narrator only supplies minimal scraps of information. Accordingly we are told nothing about her nationality or ancestry, her motive for refusing the royal command or her subsequent fate. The midrashic rabbis entertain no doubt that Vashti’s fate is not merely her own, but constitutes God’s final judgment upon the wicked Babylonian dynasty that was responsible for the destruction of the first Temple. Although there is no particular fact in the biblical story that would warrant this identification, it does serve the broader thematic and homiletic “subtext” of the midrash, reinforcing the centrality of the Temple and its fate as the major religious issues of Esther. Once the destiny of the Temple had been chosen as a theme for midrashic discourses, then all suitable scriptural details were reinterpreted in accordance with that idea. (A similar train of developments implicated Haman and his sons in the postponement of the Temple’s construction.)

The identification of Vashti as the last survivor of the royal house of Babylon most likely was the result of two unrelated processes: (a) the need to assert divine justice by demonstrating the completeness of the retribution that was inflicted on Nebuchadnezzar in fulfillment of prophetic oracles (e.g., Isaiah 14:22, Jeremiah 49:38) that there would remain no surviving remnant of Babylon; (b) the assumption that Vashti would not have been made to suffer unless she had done something to deserve her fate. While each of these exegetical questions could have been—and was—resolved separately, the tradition about Vashti’s being executed for the crimes of her infamous ancestor provided a con-

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Israel.

<sup>20</sup> On one occasion, on the basis of a comparison with a parallel passage in a Palestinian collection, I suggested that the adulatory tone was originally intended as a description of Ahasuerus’ hubris-driven thoughts, and not as the author’s own assessment of the situation.

venient solution to both problems at once. Ancestral guilt does not however free the rabbinic homilists from finding individual sins that would justify her punishment at the hands of Ahasuerus. The Esther-Midrash records several such charges, including her licentious sexual behavior (12b), her abuse of her Jewish maidservants (*ibid.*), and others.

In all these respects the Babylonian Esther-Midrash does not seem to be essentially different from its contemporary Palestinian "cousins." The assumptions that Vashti was descended from Nebuchadnezzar and that Ahasuerus was determined to halt the restoration of the Temple are common to all these works.<sup>21</sup>

The concern for the Temple and the sacrificial worship that took place within its precincts is ingeniously introduced at several unexpected points (e.g., in *Megillah* 12b where the names of the royal advisors who were consulted in Esther 1:14 were taken as symbolic allusions to the sacrificial offerings that should be credited to the Jews' favor).

### **Mordecai**

In most respects the rabbinic depiction of Mordecai does not differ greatly from those of many other biblical protagonists. He is of course portrayed as a virtuous man whose righteousness expresses itself in a devotion to the study and observance of the Torah. Like Moses, David and others Mordecai is transformed by the midrash into an idealized rabbi who fulfills the same educational, religious and administrative duties that were performed by the sages of the talmudic era (e.g., he appears on 16a as a schoolteacher expounding the laws of the *omer* or meal offering). The rabbis did not ignore Mordecai's biblical office

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<sup>21</sup> See Jacob Neusner, *The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical and Topical Program*, Vol. 2, Brown Judaic Studies, ed. J. Neusner et al. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989):136-42.

as a royal courtier and invented new occasions for him to appear as an advisor to the king (e.g., 13a). It is nonetheless emphasized (see 16a, to Esther 6:12) that his personal victories and successes did not distract him from his duty to his people.

There appears to be a disproportionate emphasis on Mordecai's functioning as a member of the Sanhedrin. There are several exegetical factors which might have given rise to this tradition, such as the identification with "Mordecai Bilshan" (i.e., "the polyglot") which evoked associations with the linguistic erudition that was considered a qualification for members of the Jewish High Court (see 13b). To my mind it appears more likely that the rabbis were sensitive to the special place of Mordecai's generation in the evolution of the halakhic tradition, standing as it did at the transitional period between Prophetic and Rabbinic authority. Purim, unlike every other biblical festival, derived its authority not from the revelation at Mount Sinai, but from a decree of the Jewish spiritual leadership at the time of the events. According to rabbinic historiographic conceptions, the legislative authority that operated at that time was the "Great Assembly," and the talmudic expositors seem to have taken a particular interest in these earliest manifestations of the institutions to which they themselves were the successors. The rabbis' reading of Esther 9:12 to imply that Mordecai forfeited the support of some of his colleagues on the Sanhedrin when he attained a political office probably echoes the rabbis' hesitations about their own conflicting priorities.

In addition, the Esther-Midrash treats Mordecai the Benjaminite as the final link in an ancient struggle between Israel and Amalek, a struggle in which the mantle of Hebrew leadership had usually fallen upon the shoulders of figures from the tribes descended from Rachel (Joshua, Saul, etc.). Several passages in the Esther-Midrash and elsewhere identify Mordecai's special strength as lying in his gift for prayer. Some of the comments about Mordecai are surprisingly critical or equivocal, such as the assertion on 12b that he was inferior to the *Amora Rava* bar Rav Huna.

## **Esther**

The personality of Esther is not delineated very clearly in the biblical story. Through the early sections her role is largely a passive

one. It is at Mordecai's bidding that she enters the competition to be chosen queen of Persia, and she continues to obey his instructions with regard to concealing her nationality and interceding before the king. Once she has overcome her reluctance to take that frightening risk, she takes control of the events and by the end of the story her leadership seems to be at least as assertive as Mordecai's. The Esther-Midrash displays little concern for these developments, and for the most part depicts the heroine in the garb of generic rabbinic virtue and piety, submissive to the authority of the sages. Following the assertion of *Seder 'olam*, Esther (14b) is designated a prophetess, a characterization that is not found explicitly in the biblical text and which has an important bearing on the halakhic status of Purim. Most of the details that are added by the midrash are introduced in order to further other exegetical concerns; e.g., the halakhic issues that arise from her living in a pagan palace, the insistence that she was perceived as beautiful in spite of her actual plainness, etc. These traditions are discussed in the appropriate sections elsewhere in this chapter.

A very problematic exegetical tradition is the one which identifies Esther as Mordecai's wife. This detail is not attested, to the best of my knowledge, in any other rabbinic work, though the Esther-Midrash cites it in the name of the *Tanna* R. Meir and allusions to it might appear in the Greek Esther as well. It is difficult to understand what homiletical, theological or halakhic end is being served by the introduction of this detail which makes it only harder to justify her concurrent marriage to Ahasuerus.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In the commentary I suggest that this tradition, like the one that identifies Sarah with Abraham's niece Iscah, originated in the Pharisees' determination to find biblical precedents for the practice of niece-marriage. This does not fully explain why the Babylonian *Amora'im* should have elected to emphasize this tradition in the face of the halakhic difficulties that it poses. I am almost tempted to speculate that the rabbis were attracted by the challenge of justifying such an outrageous tradition.



In contrast to the approach of the biblical narrator who compresses the story of Esther's uninvited intrusion on Ahasuerus at the beginning of Chapter 5 to a few terse verses, the authors of the Esther-Midrash (15b) made every possible effort to stretch out that pivotal moment, surely the most suspenseful in the book. Predictably, she is described as uttering prayers on that occasion, as well as expressing doubts about her own worthiness.

## **Haman**

The reasons underlying Haman's animosity towards Mordecai and the Jews are not spelled out clearly in the scriptural narrative, nor is Mordecai's motive in not showing the usual honors to the king's chief minister. The midrashic exegetes stepped in by suggesting a tantalizing variety of possible explanations involving personal animosities (e.g., Haman's daughter had failed in her bid to be elected queen; Haman had sold himself as a slave to Mordecai), an archetypal ancestral antagonism (a continuation of the ancient struggle between the sons of Rachel and the Amalek) or religious issues (Haman insisted upon being worshipped; he opposed the rebuilding of the Temple; etc.). In the Babylonian Esther-Midrash preference is generally given to explanations of the third type which depict the events of the Purim story as a struggle over religious principles. Several of the classic anti-Jewish accusations uttered by Haman in Esther 3:8 were still current in the talmudic era, and the rabbis (16a) found allusions to other familiar charges hiding between the words and lines of Haman's diatribe.

The midrashic depiction of Haman seems to focus more on his downfall than on the horror of his scheme or the villainy of his character. The rabbis missed no opportunity to emphasize the humiliation of Haman's defeat, so much so that he frequently comes across more as a comical buffoon than as a terrifying arch-foe. This type of portrayal, which must surely have held much appeal and emotional satisfaction for popular audiences, is found most prominently in the midrashic retelling of Esther 6:5-12 (16a) in which Haman, to his shock, is commanded to confer honors upon Mordecai. Although the main outline of this episode in the original biblical story is similar to that in the midrash, the rabbis introduce many novel elements into that account. We can vividly imagine Haman squirming as he pretends not to understand who

is to be the recipient of the royal largess and what will be included in the honors. The story adds many new insults to the injuries set down in the biblical story, including embarrassing references to Haman's plebeian origins as a barber or barber's son, his having to personally attend to Mordecai's haircut and bath, and helplessly allowing Mordecai to kick him in the course of mounting the horse. The midrashic narrative takes on dimensions which hover between slapstick and sadistic cruelty when Haman's daughter spills the contents of a chamber-pot on his head and then hurls herself to her death before his eyes. In a way that is not spelled out in the biblical story, the humbled and broken Haman is made to acknowledge his ruin before Mordecai.

### **The Jews**

By focusing on the intrigues of a small number of individuals, the Book of Esther fails to furnish us with a clear picture of how the masses of the Jews in the Persian empire were affected by the events. Invariably they appear in passive roles, whether as innocent victims of Haman's rage, or as obedient followers of Mordecai and Esther's commands. A number of midrashic passages attempt to assign them a more substantial role in the developments that overtake them. Most notable are the sources that apportion blame to the Jews for the dangers to which they were subjected. This conception contrasts with the plain sense of the biblical account which offers no suggestion whatsoever that the Jews had done anything to provoke Haman's wrath.

The charges that the rabbis level against Esther's contemporaries relate to halakhic violations involving varying degrees of gravity: the worship (under duress) of Nebuchadnezzar's idol, participation in the feasts of Belshazzar and Ahasuerus (whether this is perceived as a ritual or ideological transgression), or a general negligence in the study of Torah or fulfillment of religious obligations (Haman accuses them of "slumbering from the commandments" according to 13b, derived from Esther 3:8). Although the basic determination to interpret adversity as a punishment for sin is a standard premise of Jewish exegesis, and some of the specific accusations can find support in the events of the biblical chronicles, it nonetheless appears likely that the exegetical traditions evolved from homiletical contexts, as preachers drew upon the events

of the Purim story in order to chastise their own communities for sundry religious shortcomings, such as excessive fraternizing with heathen neighbors and inadequate devotion to the ideals of Torah.

As is common in aggadic literature, the Esther-Midrash exaggerates the differences between Jews and Gentiles beyond what is warranted in the biblical story. If pagans seem to be helpful or favorably disposed to Jews and their cause, there is usually another explanation for the fact; e.g., they are being compelled by God or angels, "Not because they love Mordecai, but rather because they despise Haman" (16a, to Esther 6:3), etc. This tendency is aptly exemplified in the curious treatment of Harbona whose apparent sympathies with the Jewish cause are dismissed by our midrash as a self-serving last-minute defection motivated by nothing more virtuous than an opportunistic realization of which side now held the upper hand (16a, to Esther 7:9).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Ahasuerus' support for Esther in 9:12 (16b) is ascribed to supernatural coercion.

### **Halakhah in Aggadah**

The piety of rabbinic Judaism was largely defined by its adherence to the carefully defined regulations of Jewish law, the halakhah. The task of translating Scriptural texts into the conceptual vocabulary of the talmudic era inevitably involved a reinterpretation of the ancient sources to accord with the halakhic norms and institutions with which they were familiar. This aspect of midrashic activity is common to all aggadic biblical interpretation, though it is probably more prominent in connection with Esther because this book is outwardly so removed from the familiar categories of Jewish law and often in apparent conflict with them.

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<sup>23</sup> This is in acute contrast to the prevailing view of the Palestinian Talmud, refuting Joseph Heinemann's thesis that the Babylonian rabbis, living amidst a gentile majority, were more universalistic in their attitudes.

The Esther-Midrash misses few opportunities to read into the narrative references to Jewish law. Thus, the mention in Esther 1:10 of the seventh day of Ahasuerus' feast is taken by the rabbis (12b) as an allusion to the sabbath, justifying the introduction of an account of how Vashti compelled the daughters of Israel to labor on their day of rest. A similar approach to the story guides the midrash (13a) in asserting that the maidservants who were assigned to Esther's entourage served as a sort of human calendar to remind her which day was the sabbath. The Midrash also raises the question of how Esther could have observed the Jewish dietary regulations without disclosing the secret of her Jewishness. She also took care to approach the sages with questions related to the laws of menstrual impurity (13b, to 2:20) and partook of purifying immersions before resuming relations with Mordecai. The unusual names of Ahasuerus' counselors in Esther 1:14 are treated by the midrash (12b) as references to aspects of the sacrificial regulations that were invoked before God by the Jews' angelic sponsors. An anachronistic thematic relationship is posited between the events of the Purim story and the bringing of the "*sheqalim*" contribution to the Temple and the biblical lection that commemorates it according to the rabbinic calendar (13b). Similarly, although the biblical author pays no attention to the fact that much of the story takes place during the season of Passover and the bringing of the *omer*, these details, their halakhic implications (e.g., with respect to the permissibility of fasting) and symbolisms (e.g., the superiority of a handful of barley over ten thousand silver talents, 16a) are spelled out in the midrash to great homiletic advantage. Esther's prayers for success as she approached the king (5:1) are equated (15b) with the words of Psalm 22, which appears to have been a prescribed liturgical reading for Purim. The synonyms for joy used to express the Jews' deliverance in Esther 8:16 are equated with specific religious precepts (16b). The supremacy of Torah study over all competing religious obligations is proclaimed in the pericope on 16b-17a, in which support is adduced from the behavior of biblical personalities including Jacob, Ezra and Mordecai.

Most conspicuous are the repeated allusions to "the rabbis" as participants in the story. Thus, when Ahasuerus (Esther 1:13) is said to consult "*wise men which knew the times*" (12b), the midrash conveniently seizes the opportunity to find here a reference to the Jewish

sages, renowned for their expertise in the intricacies of the Hebrew calendar. The midrash (13b, to Esther 3:16) assumes that Haman had explicitly targeted “Mordecai’s people,” i.e., the rabbis as part of his plot, and that he was uneasy lest their merits overturn his plans even if the rest of the people should prove undeserving of redemption.

Because the Book of Esther also includes sections that are of halakhic significance, or which were perceived as such by the rabbis, the Esther-Midrash contains a number of pericopes which are devoted to halakhic rulings or discussions. This is particularly true of the verses in Esther chapters 8 and 9 (see *Megillah* 16b) which furnished the basis for the religious obligations of Purim, such as the reading of the Megillah, the feast, and the exchange of gifts. As was remarked in the *Ein ya‘aqov*, the talmudic pericope that is now located on folio 7a-b as a commentary to the Mishnah (1:4) dealing with the obligations of *mishloah manot* and *mattanot la’evionim*, was probably once a portion of the Esther-Midrash expounding Esther 9:22.<sup>24</sup> Another complex halakhic pericope, which draws partly upon material that originated in *TB Arakhin* 10b, is incorporated into a discussion about the authority of prophets to institute new laws (*Megillah* 14a).

### **The Hand of God**

In the traditional Jewish world-view there is nothing that happens in nature or in history that is not subject to God’s active scrutiny and guidance. This holds especially true for the saga of ancient Israel as recorded in the pages of the sacred scriptures. Even in normal biblical chronicles, where the relationships between human moral behavior and divine response are plainly spelled out, the midrashic homilists are likely to introduce more tangible expressions of God’s involvement in the outcome of the events. This kind of exegesis might appear more surprising when applied to the Book of Esther, the only biblical work

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<sup>24</sup> That pericope was not included in the present study.

in which God's name is never mentioned and one whose outcome can easily be ascribed to a combination of moral virtue, tactical acumen and coincidence. To the rabbis, of course, such naturalistic or secular explanations of the events would be unimaginable or downright blasphemous. Even conventional exegesis of Esther would legitimately allow for subtle and invisible modes of divine interference, particularly by means of the opportune timing of otherwise unrelated episodes like Vashti's rebellion and dismissal, Esther's selection as queen, Mordecai's uncovering of Bigthan and Teresh's conspiracy, Ahasuerus' being reminded of his debt during his bout of insomnia and Haman's intrusion in the courtyard at that precise moment. Ultimately, however, all this was achieved by natural means without spectacular miracles or obvious supernatural interference.

For the authors of the Esther-Midrash the hand of God was discernible throughout the story in the form of manifest miracles, which they take every opportunity to magnify and exaggerate (as in the debates on 15b over how far the angels stretched Ahasuerus' scepter, or how many of Haman's sons perished with him). As we have seen, the peril that threatened the Jews of the Persian empire was not only the result of Haman's nefarious plot, but reflected also (or even: primarily) a celestial desire to frighten the Jews into repentance for various sins of commission and omission. If Ahasuerus had trouble sleeping, this was surely a result of Heavenly prodding or a reflection of the discomfort that was disturbing the peace of the heavenly hosts (15b).

God's vigorous manipulation of the events is often portrayed as the activity of angelic agents, especially Gabriel. It is he who subjects Vashti to the disfigurement that prevents her, against her own inclination, from exhibiting her naked charms before Ahasuerus' guests, creating the vacuum that will allow Esther to enter the royal court. Three angels assure Esther a favorable reception by the king, against his own inclinations at the time (15b, to Esther 5:2). The Ministering Angels also serve as Israel's defenders before the heavenly tribunal. When Esther herself came close to upsetting the Jewish triumph by rashly accusing Ahasuerus, an angelic slap was needed to point the finger at Haman (16a, to 7:6). A troupe of angels impersonating Haman's agents further kindle the king's rage by pretending to fell trees in the royal garden. It is angels as well who are said to push Haman

onto Esther's bed (16a, to 7:8), and to slap Ahasuerus' mouth in order to secure his support for the Jewish cause (16b, interpreting Esther 9:12).

That the successful outcome of the story could not have been achieved without supernatural assistance is underscored by the otherwise surprising claim that Esther, in spite of the apparent impression created in the scriptural narrative, was not a beauty. Rather she was "greenish" (13a) and would not have found favor in the eyes of the king had God not manipulated the perceptions of her observers. Similar miracles allowed her to appear as either a virgin or a married woman, or as a countrywoman of each guest, in accordance with the preferences of her observers (to 2:14). It worked out opportunely that the date for Esther's selection fell in a cold winter month when the king was especially desirous of warm female companionship. As the royal chronicles were being read before Ahasuerus, Shimshai would have obliterated the mention of Mordecai's service to the king had not Gabriel magically rewritten it (15b). All this comes to show that the Jews could not have been delivered solely by means of mortal stratagems.

### **Localizing the Story: Babylonian vs. Palestinian Elements**

A familiar feature of homiletical exegesis is that the preacher makes every effort to translate the scriptural text into terms that are vividly and immediately understandable to the audience. This will inevitably entail conscious or unconscious anachronisms as the homilist draws comparisons to current realia and mores.

In the Esther-Midrash this process is often less perceptible than it would otherwise have been, because the setting of the original story—in Achaemenid Persia and Media—was geographically and culturally close to that of the Babylonian rabbis who lived in Mesopotamia under the dominion of Sasanian Persian monarchs. Thus we are not always conscious when the midrash is depicting the layout of the palace of Shushan or the administrative position occupied by Haman in terms drawn from the contemporary royal courts. In several instances we are made aware of the process only when we compare the Babylonian pericope with its Palestinian equivalent, in which the background and

vocabulary reflect the life of the Roman Emperor and his entourage, rather than that of Sasanian Babylonia.<sup>25</sup> Thus on 12b (interpreting Esther 1:12) Vashti defiantly reminds Ahasuerus that he was formerly her father Belshazzar's *ahuriar*, his stable-keeper; while in the Palestinian versions of the story he is referred to by the Roman title of κόμης στόβλου, and when similar statements are made about the menial services which Haman must perform for Mordecai (see 16a) the Palestinian versions make use of terminology taken from the Hellenistic and Roman environments (e.g., the bath-house), most of which is omitted in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash. In several of these cases it appears that the Palestinian version was the earlier one, and that the Babylonian one should be regarded as a subsequent adaptation.

It was not very difficult to discern the incidental differences that result from the need to tailor the material to the understanding of a local audience. It proved considerably more challenging to try to identify significant divergences in religious attitudes or exegetical approach between the Babylonian Esther-Midrash and its Palestinian counterparts. In this area I was repeatedly surprised at how much the authors of all the works in question demonstrated a basic consensus as regards their world-views, value-concepts and hermeneutical methods. There were nevertheless a few differences which deserve mention.

From the most ancient times, Jewish tradition has equated the celebration of Purim with the Torah's command to blot out the name of Israel's primeval adversary, Amalek (see Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-9).<sup>26</sup> Haman is designated an "Agagite," a descen-

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<sup>25</sup> Note however the interesting example on 16a, where the Palestinian sources depict Mordecai stepping on Haman's neck to climb onto the royal horse in a manner reminiscent of the (historically questionable) story of the emperor Valerian's humiliation at the hands of Shapur. The Babylonian version of this episode does not evoke the same associations.

<sup>26</sup> In recognition of this connection, the Mishnah (*Megillah* 3:4, 6) designates these passages as the mandatory lections for Purim and the preceding Sabbath.



dant of the Amalekite royal line, and the Jewish triumph over his machinations is construed as the culmination of an age-old struggle. Now, by the Talmudic era there was no longer any recognizable nationality that could be identified with the biblical Amalek, so that Amalek functions largely as a symbolic or historical concept, to be likened to Israel's current foes and oppressors. Accordingly, in Palestinian texts there is an assumption, often tacit, that the "evil empire" of Rome, which has destroyed God's sanctuary and continues to oppress his people, is the true successor of the treacherous Amalekites. This tradition is not merely typological, but is justified on exegetical grounds, since Genesis 36:12 explicitly states that Amalek was the grandson of Esau/Edom, who was universally regarded as the prototype and ancestor of the Romans.<sup>27</sup> This theme is developed on a number of occasions in Palestinian aggadic collections, and it is fully consistent with the midrashic propensity for staging the Purim story in a Roman-like setting.

In the Babylonian Esther-Midrash we find almost no traces of this motif. In fact it is quite astonishing to discover that Haman's "Agagite" descent plays almost no part in the midrashic version of the story in spite of the fact that it is so crucial in defining the halakhic status of Purim. The redactors preferred to link the events of Esther to a different biblical antagonist, namely the Babylonians whose king Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for the destruction of the first Temple. For purposes of this exegetical motif the decisive link is established through Vashti, whom the midrash identifies as a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, rather than through Haman. There are a number of different factors which might have brought about this shift in emphasis, including the simple fact that the Vashti episode dominates the first chapter of Esther and therefore attracts a disproportionate amount of expository attention. We should not however disregard the geographi-

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<sup>27</sup> See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 5:272, n. 19; 6:24.

cal circumstances: A Jew living in Babylonia would have a natural affinity towards matters involving an ancient Babylonian monarch.

### Literary and Exegetical Methods

The Esther-Midrash is typical in its use of a wide variety of midrashic and homiletical techniques for the crafting of its *derashot*. We have noted on several occasions that the goals which the compilers set before themselves were not overtly literary. They appear to have been concerned primarily with the content, with transmitting the traditions that had reached them from different sources, and especially with recording those rabbinic dicta which contained novel interpretations of the biblical texts. Nowhere was this more glaringly conspicuous than in the treatment of the proems. The Babylonian redactors had presumably inherited a collection of proems from their Palestinian source. When they incorporated them into the talmudic pericope they did not attempt to preserve their structural function as introductions to the opening verse of the lection, but rather satisfied themselves with recording the scriptural verses and whatever exegetical comments were attached to them. To the extent that the link between the verses was felt to shed new light upon the interpretation of opening words of Esther, the tendency in some instances was for the proem to be turned on its head and transformed into an explanatory comment on Esther.

Even in the absence of strictly defined proems, the Esther-Midrash did make good use of some of the characteristic exegetical patterns of that genre, such as the assignment of specific referents to the vague generalities of Wisdom or Prophetic "*petihta*-verses."

The Esther-Midrash contains a rich collection of name-etymologies for several of the main characters, including Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Esther, the royal counselors and others, in which the given names are interpreted as epithets describing their characters or deeds, or even as allegorical allusions to Jewish religious concepts and institutions (e.g., the interpretation of Esther 1:14 on 12b). There is no uniqueness in this fact, and comparable word-plays are found in several of the other midrashic collections. The unusual-looking concentration of such explanations here was probably stimulated by the disproportionate number of exotic-sounding Persian names. Similar considerations guided the rabbis' treatment of the many figures who are mentioned only once

in the book. Following standard midrashic procedure, the names are interpreted symbolically and identified with better-known biblical personalities.

Some of the standard modes of midrashic hermeneutics that are attested in the Esther-Midrash include: imaginative use of the *gezerah shavah* (interpreting an expression on the basis of its use elsewhere in the Bible); *notarikon* (the reading of words as abbreviations of longer expressions) and other forms of puns and word-plays; *gimatria* (calculating the numerological values of letters and words, as in 15b, to 5:11); creating novel conclusions by resolving contradictions, real or manufactured, between biblical or rabbinic texts; basing interpretations on changes that have taken place in word-usage and syntactical conventions between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew dialects; the assumption that everybody, including heathen arch-villains, possessed an intimate familiarity with all the words of the Hebrew Scriptures (thus in the pericope on 11b-12a Belshazzar and Ahasuerus take care to check the accuracy of the prophecies concerning the length of the Jewish exile in Jeremiah 29:10, even as Haman on 13b knew that Adar was the month in which Moses had died, as calculated in *Seder 'olam*, and on 16a cites Proverbs 24:17-8); taking bold liberties with the punctuation and syntax of biblical verses (e.g., the rewriting of Isaiah 4:1 on 12a), and the transforming of verses into dialogues by dividing them up and assigning the portions to two or more speakers (see 12a, to Esther 1:6); reading verses as answers to unstated questions (16a, to 3:8-9); illustrating ideas with the help of popular proverbs (“as people say”)<sup>28</sup> and parables (e.g., that of the ditch and the mound, on 13b). As we have noted already, there are rare forays into the realm of allegorical and symbolic interpretation, such as when the names of Ahasuerus’ counselors were read as allusions to the sacrificial service.

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<sup>28</sup> E.g., 12b (to Esther 1:10), to exemplify the equally lewd motives of Ahasuerus and Vashti; 16b (to illustrate Joseph’s power over his brothers and father).

Some of the rabbinic comments might fairly be regarded as sincere philological activity, endeavoring to explain difficult expressions without any notable moral or religious bias. Several examples of this kind of exegesis can be found in the brief pericopes attached to Esther 1:5-8 (12a) where the biblical text contains an unusual concentration of difficult words related to the furnishings of Ahasuerus' feast. This would also appear to be true of R. Nehemiah's identification (13a) of Esther's name with the Istahar, an approach that is accepted by many modern commentators. The authors of the midrashic commentaries to Esther were sensitive to the complex thematic connections between Esther and the Joseph saga in Genesis, which are now widely acknowledged by critical literary scholarship. Thus the rabbis call our attention (13b, to 2:21) to the parallel narrative functions of Bigthan and Teresh's plot against Ahasuerus and Pharaoh's anger at his butler and baker. In their speculations about the psychological and strategic factors that impelled Esther to invite Haman to the two banquets, or what prompted the sleepless king to check his chronicles for unrewarded favors (15b), the rabbis anticipated the theories of a number of modern commentators.

### **Images of Women in the Esther-Midrash**

Because the Book of Esther is one of the few in the Jewish canon that places a woman at the center of its concerns it is reasonable to expect that midrashic compilations based on Esther could assist us in the challenging and important task of piecing together a coherent picture of how women figure within the intricate web of laws, interpretations, opinions and practices that we designate loosely as "rabbinic Judaism." The framing of methodological questions on this topic is itself fraught with difficulties, and it is difficult to progress beyond the individual historical and literary details towards a coherent general picture.

Whatever abstractions and generalizations will appear in the present section will be carefully delimited by the observable data of history and text. The analysis will accept certain general assumptions regarding historical methodology; e.g., Jews did not live in isolation from the rest of the world, and hence their views and practices can only be appreciated when set in the appropriate social context. In pre-technological societies the traditional gender-role divisions between home and field

were determined more by the uncompromising facts of biology and economics than by religion or ideology. Nor can these roles be presumed, until proven otherwise, to exist in relationships of domination and inferiority.<sup>29</sup>

When applied to midrashic exegesis, responsible historical method demands, among other things, that we remain conscious at all times of the delicate interrelationship between text and commentary. Does an attitude expressed in a dictum tell us about the views of the biblical author or of the commentator? At times the answer will be “both” (and we must not underestimate the importance of tracing patterns of continuity as well as innovations and revolutions), while at times the answer might even be “neither” (e.g., when the exegesis is mistaken but not observably biased). Since my commentary is not conceived as a study of the biblical Book of Esther itself, such instances will be of limited value to the framing of my conclusions. Of more substantive interest are those cases where the midrashic exegete, through the act of reading things into scripture that are plainly not there, signals to us his discomfort with the values contained in the plain sense of that scripture. It is on these occasions that we are likely to find ourselves on the track of useful and significant data. Yet even here the collective character of rabbinic literature poses additional difficulties, since it presents us with a selection of dicta that extend over a considerable geographic and chronological range without usually distinguishing between those that are idiosyncratic to particular individuals, those which expressly widely held views of the respective Jewish communities, and those which are to be regarded as “official” pronouncements of “Judaism.”

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<sup>29</sup> Esther of course does not fulfill any of the normal domestic roles of wife and mother that are presumed in halakhic discourse, a fact which does not seem to upset the rabbis of the Esther-Midrash to any discernible degree. Neither, apparently, did they regard it as an unnatural violation of Mordecai’s gender-role that he raised her by himself.

Keeping in mind all the above reservations, the overwhelming impression that emerges from the study of the Esther-Midrash is that the participating rabbis seem to have had very little interest in women as a distinct topic. Perhaps it is a consequence of their use of a fixed (though flexible) body of hermeneutical methods that the ways in which they apply the modes of midrashic interpretation to female personalities from the Bible do not differ perceptibly from their treatment of male figures. Just as midrash tends to obscure the individualities of biblical figures, preferring to regard them as instances of unchanging religious types, so apparently does it regard gender differences as irrelevant to its hermeneutic interests. Unlike the conventions that prevail in legal discourse, the Esther-Midrash, though undeniably a creation that was authored, compiled and redacted by males, does not dwell on women as "others," as a class that is inherently outside the bounds of human "normalcy."<sup>30</sup> It might be argued that the uniformity created by the adoption of standardized techniques for midrashic interpretation served as a defense against the intrusion of personal prejudices in the rabbinic retelling of the Bible, even as the objective methods of halakhic discourse helped neutralize many of the biases that might have otherwise penetrated into normative Jewish law.

Thus, in most respects there is little in the midrashic depiction of Vashti that hinges directly upon her being a woman. Far more crucial is the tradition of her descent from Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and the cruelty that she shares, in the rabbinic view, with most heathens and which constitutes the logical precondition for her eventual punishment. If she is guilty of lewdness then it is not as a woman, for she is portrayed as no more and no less than the moral equal of her husband.

It is against this exegetical background that we ought to appreciate Rava's amazed reaction to the royal decree that followed Vashti's

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<sup>30</sup> By giving the name "Women" (Nashim) to one order, the Mishnah is declaring that its normal concerns are limited to men.

disobedience: “*that every man should bear rule in his own house*” (Esther 1:22)—“This is obvious! Even a bald man in his own home is like a captain!” (*Megillah* 12b). The Babylonian sage clearly has no doubts about how power is assigned whether in hovel or palace. It remains unclear whether there is anything distinctive in the remark or, for that matter, whether a different attitude would have been imaginable under the circumstances.

We have already dealt above with several aspects of the midrashic rendering of Esther’s personality, noting that she does not come across as a recognizable personality as much as she is an embodiment of standard talmudic ideals of piety. Indeed the rabbinic commentators do not wonder at her passive submission to Mordecai’s command that she enter the royal harem, which might well have struck her at the time as inexplicably arbitrary; but neither do they express any amazement later in the story when she aggressively asserts her royal authority to rescue her coreligionists, avenge their enemies and proclaim Purim as an official Jewish religious celebration. The rabbinic imagination had no visible difficulty when describing (on 7a, not discussed in my commentary) how Esther persuaded her contemporary sages, whether by argument or compulsion, to overcome their own reluctance to accept the Book of Esther into the body of sacred scripture, and the festival of Purim into the Jewish calendar. So too, sages of the Tannaitic and Amoraic eras spoke admiringly of the brilliant, if inscrutable, strategy that Esther adopted by inviting Haman to two banquets before exposing his evil to the king (15b). The Babylonian conclusion of that pericope has no less a figure than the prophet Elijah confirm that in her choice of action Esther had adroitly accomplished a large number of simultaneous objectives. Even when Ahasuerus is advised that Esther’s reticence about her nationality might be overcome by igniting her jealousy against another woman’s “thigh” we are not entirely certain (though it does seem quite probable) that this reflects the author’s own cynical stereotype of the envy that accompanies female romance. After all, the stratagem does ultimately fail, and the midrash is liberal in discerning jealousy in male figures as well (e.g., Haman). Apart from those factors which were dictated by the details of the biblical story, it is hard to imagine that the midrash would have portrayed Esther much differently if she had been a man.

And yet all of the above serves to set in more glaring contrast the truly shocking aspect of Esther's role in the story, that aspect which is the direct result of her being a woman. For what Mordecai has demanded of her is to sacrifice her chastity for a higher good. Esther's situation might have seemed less objectionable if it were understood in the context of biblical attitudes. The author of Esther does not seem to object strongly to intermarriage *per se*, so the union might have been regarded as a mutually advantageous "political alliance" (and after all, Ahasuerus was evidently sincere in his devotion to his queen). It is precisely when read in accordance with the values of rabbinic Judaism, where even the saving of lives cannot justify violations of sexual modesty, that Esther's situation becomes morally intolerable. Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud the rabbis try to justify the situation on halakhic grounds, though the justification—that Esther did not incur guilt because she was merely a passive victim throughout<sup>31</sup>—can hardly satisfy our sensitivity to her psychological plight. Other midrashic collections proposed different solutions to the problem, but the Esther-Midrash exhibits little discomfort regarding the question. On the contrary, it exacerbates matters by stating that Esther was married at that time to Mordecai. However noble the motives, it is hard not to be disturbed by the image of the pious Mordecai delivering his own wife's body to an impure heathen, or by the rabbis themselves who fail to look at the events from Esther's perspective.

The rabbis' views of women can also be gauged from the pericope devoted to the seven female prophets of the Bible. What might be the most impressive feature of this passage is that the midrash does not appear to be at all surprised or troubled by the existence of prophetesses, and does not treat them much differently than it would their male counterparts. Some problems that we might have anticipated

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<sup>31</sup> This view is implied in the comment that the midrash attributes to Esther on folio 15b (to Esther 5:1): "Perhaps you judge the unintentional like the deliberate and what was done under compulsion like that which was done intentionally."



do not arise. For example, Deborah's roles as judge and warrior would have been unimaginable by talmudic standards, and yet the midrash does not seem to take the trouble to justify the fact (though other rabbinic traditions do so). The midrash wonders why Huldah should have been approached instead of Jeremiah, but it is not clear that the objection stems from the fact that she is a woman. One of the solutions, that Huldah, *as a woman*, was expected to be more compassionate, might be stereotypical, but it is at least complimentary.

It would thus appear that the authors and redactors of the Esther-Midrash, insofar as their attitudes find expression in their exegetical comments to the Book of Esther and other biblical texts, are typified by what we might anachronistically designate a relatively egalitarian approach in which there is little significant difference between what is expected from men and women in the moral and religious spheres that are of primary interest to the midrash.

Notable exceptions to the preceding characterization are contained in a series of dicta that express decidedly negative assessments of the personalities and social position of women. A certain ambivalence might have been read into Rav Naḥman's cynical assessment of Abigail's self-serving opportunism in securing David's admiration while still married to Nabal. We could theoretically have regarded the criticism as directed towards Abigail as a person, and not as a cautionary example of the perfidy that taints even the most gifted of her sex. This same Rav Naḥman—spouse of the high-born and outspoken Yalta—is however the author of the dictum (14b) "Pride is not becoming for women." His perspective is thus clear, though we cannot easily ascertain to what extent it was shared by his colleagues.

Also of relevance to the topic at hand are the pericopes on folio 15a based on two *baraitot* containing lists of biblical women who were (in the first *baraita*) distinguished for their beauty, and (in the second) able to arouse sexual desire. The fact that the sources single out these particular qualities in the women undoubtedly tells us something about their male authors' views of women. It should however be recalled that both *baraitot* are exegetical by their nature, of the sort that assembles lists of related phenomena and phraseology from different places in the Bible. It was the biblical authors who had originally focused on the "goodly forms" of the various women. As regards their sexual attrac-

tion, this theme is not entirely surprising or inappropriate for a text that originated as a comment about Rahab the harlot (referring to Joshua 2:1), where the observations had probably been incorporated into a homily about the magnitude of her repentance. To be fair, it should be recalled that the rabbis were also accustomed to acknowledging the physical and sexual charms of men as well, in terms that might strike us as indelicate (see, e.g., *TB Bava meṣi'a* 84a-b).

We must of course exercise due caution in our use of the talmudic material and the conclusions that were derived from it. As interesting and instructive as the Esther-Midrash may be, it is only a small corner in the vast terrain of rabbinic literature and must be evaluated in comparison with detailed and cautious studies of the other texts in the corpus.



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