

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter LVIII: Esther

Essay 3. The “justification” of Haman

פְּסוּק "לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּרִצּוֹן אִישׁ-וְאִישׁ", פְּרוּשׁ [הַרִי"ף] כְּרִצּוֹן הֶמֶן וּמְרַדְכֵי, שֶׁהֶמֶן לֹא הָיָה רוֹצֵחַ שֶׁיֵּאָנְסוּ אוֹתָם לְשִׁתּוֹת יַיִן, כְּדֵי שֶׁיְהִיוּ נֶעְנָשִׁים, וְאִם יִשְׁתּוּ בְּאוֹנֵס הֵיוּ פְטוּרִים מִן הָעוֹנֵשׁ עַכ"ל. קִשָּׁה דָּאָם כֵּן אֵיךְ הָיָה רוֹצֵחַ הֶמֶן לְאֹנְסָם שֶׁיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לוֹ שֶׁהִיוּ לוֹ צְלָמִים עַל לְבוֹ וְהָיָה מְכוּוֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲצָמוֹ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, וְהֵלֵא אִם יַעֲשׂוּ בְּאוֹנֵס לֹא יִהְיוּ נֶעְנָשִׁים.

There is a verse: “And the rule for the drinking was, ‘No restrictions!’ For the king had given orders to every palace steward **to comply with each man’s wishes.**”¹ **The Rif**^{2,3} explains this as “**to comply with the wish of Haman and Mordechai,**” for Haman did not want [the Jews] to be compelled to drink their nonkosher wine, in order that would drink of their own free will and then they would be punished by G-d. **If they would drink by compulsion, they would be exempt from punishment.**

A question is, if so, that he didn’t want to compel them to drink wine, **why did Haman want them to be compelled to bow down to him, for he had idols over his heart, e.g., pinned to his shirt, and he intended to make himself an object of idolatry,**⁴ and if they would be forced to do so, they wouldn’t be punished.⁵

וְגַם לוֹמַר דְּלֹאֲחֵר שֶׁנִּהְגּוּ מִן הַסְּעוּדָה שֶׁל אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ וְשִׁתּוֹ הֵינּוּ שֶׁלֹּא בְּאוֹנֵס לֹא הָיָה מְקַפֵּיד עוֹד לְאוֹנְסָם, שֶׁטַעַנְתָּ אוֹנֵס אֵינָהּ מוֹעֲלֵת לָהֶם עוֹד, הוֹאִיל שֶׁכִּבְרַ עֲבָרוּ שֶׁלֹּא בְּאוֹנֵס.

It can be said that after enjoying Ahasuerus’s feast and drinking the nonkosher wine without compulsion, that [Haman] was no longer strict regarding their compulsion, that he felt that he could compel them to bow down to him, for the claim of compulsion that they could

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¹ Esther 1:8.

² The first edition incorrectly referenced Rashi.

³ This is not the earlier and more famous “Rif” [Rabbi Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103)], but rather Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), Syrian rabbi and preacher, a disciple of Rabbi Chaim Vital. He wrote Me’or Enayim (Venice, 1643), a commentary on Rabbi Jacob ibn Habib’s “Ein Yaakov.”

⁴ Esther Rabbah 7:4 and 7:9.

⁵ A Jew must refuse to engage in idolatry, even if it means sacrificing his life. Nevertheless, if he fails to give up his life and pretends to worship the idol under compulsion, he is not punished with the death penalty that would be meted out to one who willfully worshipped an idol.

make in their defense **would not be effective for them anymore, since they had already transgressed without compulsion** by drinking the nonkosher wine.

ועוד יש לדקדק על פסוק "ויגידו להמן לראות הנעמדו דברי מרדכי כיהגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי", שגוראה שאמר דבר שאפשר שלא יעמוד. נהלא הוא לא אמר אלא שהוא יהודי ונהו האמת ואין צורך לראות אם יעמוד, ומהו "ויבז בעיניו לשלח יד במרדכי לבדו", מהו זה הביטוי ומה תרה אפו עליהם אם הם היו משתחוים לו.

Furthermore, it's worth investigating the verse regarding Mordechai's continued refusal to kneel and bow before Haman, "When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, **they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordechai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew.**"⁶ It's worth investigating this, **because it appears that [Mordechai] resolved something that possibly wouldn't prevail. For didn't he merely say that he was a Jew, and that was the truth, and there's no need to see if he would stand by those words. Also, what is the meaning of, "But he disdained to lay hands on Mordechai alone; having been told who Mordechai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordechai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus." What is this disdain, and why was he enraged at them, if they had bowed down to him, other than Mordechai?**

ויש לומר שהמן לא היה עבודה זרה ממש ולא היו מחוייבים למסור עצמם כדאמרינו בסנהדרין (דף ס"א). ואף במרדכי היה לו להשתחוות אי לאו שעשה כן מפני קדוש השם כמו שתירצו התוספות התם, וזו היתה פוננת מרדכי, אף על פי שהוא אינו עבודה זרה ומן הדין מותר, אני רוצה להיות יהודי שלם ואיני רוצה להשתחוות לו כלל ועקר, כדאמרינו בפרק קמא דמגילה למה נקרא שמו יהודי שפפר בעבודה זרה. וקשה דהלא כד חזקתו, אלא נדאי מפני שלא היה עבודה זרה ממש, אלא שעשה לפנים משורת הדין משום קדוש השם, משום הכי משתבח ביה קרא וקרי ליה יהודי.

It can be said that Haman was not really an object of idolatry, and they were not obliged to deliver themselves to be killed, as is said in tractate Sanhedrin (page 61b). Even for Mordechai, he could have bowed down, but he did not do so because he wanted to sanctify the Name of G-d, as the Tosafot explained there. This was Mordechai's intention: "Even though [Haman] is not an object of idol worship and according to the law it would be permissible to bow down to him out of fear, I want to be a complete Jew, and I don't want to bow down to him at all." This is as it is said in the first chapter of tractate Megillah, "Why is his name called 'Jew'?⁷ Because he repudiated idol worship."⁸ A question is, wasn't this his obligation, as a Jew, to avoid idol worship? **Rather, it's certainly because [Haman] was not a real object of idol worship, rather [Mordechai] went beyond the letter of the law in order to sanctify the Name of G-d, because of this Scripture praises him and calls him "a Jew."**

⁶ Esther 3:4.

⁷ Esther 2:5, "In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordechai . . ."

⁸ Megillah 13a.

וּכְשֶׁשָׁמְעוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אָמְרוּ לְהִמָּן "לְרֹאשׁוֹת הַנִּעְמְדוֹ דְּבָרֵי מְרַדְּכַי", כְּלוֹמַר לְרֹאשׁוֹת אִם מְרַדְּכַי יִמְסוֹר עֲצָמוֹ לְמִיתָה בְּדָבָר שֶׁהוּא מוֹתֵר מִן הַדֵּין, אוֹ אִם יִתְזַוֵּר בּוֹ כְּשִׁירָאָה עֲצָמוֹ בְּצָרָה, וּמִתְחַמֵּת זֶה הֵיכָה לֹא בִּינְיוֹן לְהִמָּן לְהַרְוֵג מְרַדְּכַי, שֶׁהָרִי הֵיכָה לֹא טְעָנָה לוֹמֵר אוֹ יְהוּדֵי יְהוּדֵי. אָבָל עַל עִם מְרַדְּכַי הֵיכָה לֹא קֶצֶף יוֹתֵר שְׂאֵינָם לֹא יְהוּדִים וְלֹא אֲרָמָאִים, וְזֶהוּ שְׂאֵמֵר "כִּי־הִגִּידוּ לֹא אֶת־עַם מְרַדְּכַי", כְּלוֹמֵר שְׂנֵאָרַיִם יְהוּדִים וְאִינָם.

When they heard these words, they said to Haman, “in order to see whether Mordechai’s resolve would prevail,” as if to say, to see if Mordechai would deliver himself to death for a matter that was permitted according to the law, or if he would go back on his word, when he saw himself in distress. Because of this, [Haman] had disdain for the idea to kill only Mordechai, for [Haman] had the claim to say, “Either one is a Jewish Jew or an Aramean Aramean.” But he was angrier with Mordechai’s people, for in his eyes, they were not Jews and they were not Arameans, and this is what he meant when [Scripture] said, “having been told who Mordechai’s people were,” as if to say that in his eyes, they appeared to be Jewish but they were not. I.e., he would be embarrassed to kill a Jew who was properly living a Jewish life, who would not bow down to him out of his beliefs and values. But regarding more assimilated Jews, who were not strict in following the beliefs of their faith, he felt justified in killing them, as he could tell others that those Jews had been hypocrites.

דוּמְיָא לְמֵאֵי דְאֲמַרְיָנָן בִּירוּשְׁלַמֵי רַבֵּי אֲבָא בַר זְמִינָא אֵינְתִי לִיהַ סַד אֲרָמָאִי בִשְׁוֹר דְנַבְלָה, אָמַר לוֹ אֲכֹל נְאִי לֹא קִטְלִנָא לָךְ. אָמַר לוֹ אֵי בְעִית לְמִיקְטֵל קְטוּל, הָאֲנָא לִינָא מִיכַל בִּשְׁוֹר דְנַבְלָה, אָמַר לוֹ מִן מוֹדַע לָךְ דְאֵילוּ אֲכַלְתָּ הַגִּינָא קְטִיל לָךְ. אוֹ יְהוּדֵי יְהוּדֵי אוֹ אֲרָמָאִי אֲרָמָאִי עַכ"ל. וְעֵינֵי עוֹד לְקַמֵּן עַל פְּסוּק "וַיֹּאמֶר הִמָּן", וְעוֹד עַל פְּסוּק "וַיִּמְהַרְאוּ עַל־פְּכָה" וְכוּ וְעֵינֵי"ש.

This is similar to what was said in the Jerusalem Talmud:

An Aramean brought nonkosher meat to Rabbi Abba bar Zemina, and told him: “Eat, and if not, I will kill you.” [The rabbi] said to him, “If you wish to kill me, kill me! For I shall not eat nonkosher meat.” [The Aramean] said to him, “Who told you that I would have killed you, had you eaten? Either one is a Jewish Jew or an Aramean Aramean.”⁹

Rabbi Mana said, if Rabbi Abba bar Zemina had understood the words of the rabbis, he would have been gone.

- Yerushalmi Shevi’it 4:2¹⁰

That is, the rabbis said that if someone orders a Jew to privately transgress any commandment of the Torah except those concerning idolatry, incest and adultery, and murder, the Jew should transgress and save his life. But if he orders the Jew to transgress even a minor commandment in public, i.e., in front of ten or more Jews, the Jew should refuse, even if it means his death.¹¹ Thus, if Rabbi Abba bar Zemina had followed the rabbis, he would have eaten the nonkosher meat, and then the Aramean would have killed him. That’s not to say that the rabbis

⁹ Sanhedrin 74a; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 3:5.

¹⁰ See also Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 3:5.

¹¹ Sanhedrin 74a; Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 3:5.

were wrong! They were teaching in accordance with Jewish law. It's just that this Aramean, like Haman, was an evil man who wanted to kill Jews, but wanted to be able to "justify" his actions by saying they were not correctly following their own precepts.

See further below (essay 6) on the verse, "Haman then said to King Ahasuerus,"¹² and further on the verse, "For that reason these days were named Purim, from the word 'pur,' in view, then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them"¹³ (essay 19), and see there.

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¹² Esther 3:8.

¹³ Esther 9:26.