

לדרוש בשבת

Purim 5781

February 26, 2021

This week's Lidrosh B'Shabbat is based on *Megillat Esther, Purposeful Ambiguity* by Rabbi David Silber

One goal of Torah study is to understand what is written — the text itself — but what I try to do as an educator is show how we arrive at our conclusions — a mode of reading. Every book is its own person, has its own soul. With the Torah, every book has a *neshama*. With this in mind, let's take a look at Megillat Esther.

There is a dispute in the Gemara between Rav and Shmuel about King Achashveirosh — was he a *tipesh*, a fool, or a *rasha*, wicked? The thrust of our tradition leans towards the second. He may also be a *tipesh*, but he is certainly a *rasha*.

This question of who Achashveirosh is, whether a *tipesh* or a *rasha*, is related to how to read the Megillah.

Over 50 years ago I raised this question of "purposeful ambiguity." Sometimes when you read a text, you don't know how to interpret it — not because you don't understand it, but rather because the text doesn't lend itself to a particular interpretation. The text is ambiguous.

I believe that each case of this needs to be studied separately. But the one book that is ambiguous from beginning to end is the Megillah.

Let's say you walk down the street and you find the Megillah, having never read it before. It sounds like a court drama, or a fairy tale. So the question is, when you read the Megillah, do you view it as a series of random occurrences and coincidences? When the king can't fall asleep and is being read from his Book of Chronicles about Mordechai, Haman walks in. Is that just a coincidence? Reading the megillah this way is the "*melech tipesh*" reading. It's just a series of coinciding events. It's certainly possible to read it this way.

The alternative reading is that these events don't just happen by accident, but everything makes sense on some level. And Achashveirosh is not a fool — the "*melech rasha*" approach. Everything can be explained logically in the Megillah from beginning to end. It's a book that lends itself to two readings, and they're equally plausible.

Let's go through one example, although there are many:

In the Megillah we are told that a decree is written against the Jews. Between when the decree is written and when the act of annihilation would be carried out, Esther intercedes and convinces the king to kill his friend Haman. With the man behind the decree now dead, Esther asks Achashveirosh to "*lehashiv et hasefarim*." She wants to call off the war. This is a very important point — Esther does not want a war. But Achashveirosh says that he can't annul the decree, because whatever the king says can't be retracted. So he suggests that she write a decree that contradicts the first one.

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As the reader, you say to yourself: what is going on here? If he's a *melech tipesh*, then you understand it. What is the difference in effect between cancelling the first decree and writing a second one that contradicts it? If, however, he's not a *tipesh*, but a *rasha* — a clever character, then how do you understand this?

When you think about it, it makes perfect sense. Let's say you're Achashveirosh. You are convinced that Haman was after your crown, and Haman has hired soldiers (100,000), many of whom are in your capital city. Let me ask you a question - do you want these soldiers milling about your city? Of course not! You want to get rid of them! On the other hand, you're a good Persian and you believe you're a peacemaker. How do you get rid of 100,000 soldiers without being responsible?

It's simple — let the marginalized people do your dirty work for you. Then you can blame them — that's exactly the point. "I can't call it off, but the Jews can fight, I support the Jews 100%." That's exactly what happens. There's a war, and after one day of fighting the king says to Esther, "How many did the Jews kill?" The king then says, "You know what I'm going to let you do? Fight in Shushan a second day," because Shushan is his city. Therefore, he has used the Jews to eliminate his enemy. The same way Pharaoh uses Joseph to enslave the Egyptian people: "Go to Joseph, whatever he says to do you should do" — which is the way the king operates throughout the Megillah.

So what is he? Is he a fool or a very clever person?

The fact of the matter is that at every step of the Megillah you can plausibly read it both ways.

What hangs over the Megillah, more than any other book, is a sense of uncertainty. We don't actually know what the motivation is. This idea of uncertainty is central to the Megillah. When Mordechai tells Esther at the end of chapter 4 to go to the king, he says, "Who knows, maybe this is why you were made queen." The "who knows," the *mi yodea*.

Rebbe Nachman said that the deepest level of knowing is to not know. Maybe the essence of life is — what do we actually know? We ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and the deepest knowledge, as Rebbe Nachman said, is to understand that we don't really know. Anything is possible. We do the best we can with what we try to know, but we also understand that much will always remain unknown.