



HIDE AND SEEK

Anyone singing *Az Yashir* (Shemot 15:1–18) or reciting the *Hallel* (Tehillim 114) declares publicly and explicitly that G-d receives the credit for the miracles of the Exodus. In contrast, an audience listening to Megillat Esther has no idea if G-d is behind our salvation, for His Name is never mentioned, not even once!

Nonetheless, the Talmud (Megillah 14a) considers the public reading of the Megillah equivalent to our recitation of *Hallel* and the Song of the Sea!

Chazal seemingly understood the absence of G-d's Name from the Megillah was not only intentional, but also its key message! The deliberate obfuscation of G-d's Name begs the reader to find G-d "hiding" behind the dramatic narrative. This style of composition may reflect an eternal religious message, that throughout our history, we must constantly search for G-d, even though He appears to be hidden. (It may also explain the peculiar name change of Hadassah to Esther.¹)

If our assumption is correct, then possibly another key Biblical theme may also be intentionally 'missing' in the Megillah, i.e. the Land of Israel. Could the author of the Megillah want the reader to ask not only where is G-d, but also – where is His Land?

If so, we would expect the Megillah to leave us with at least a few clues.

The first clue may be "hiding" in its opening verse, as it highlights that Achashverosh is a Persian king. Considering that Cyrus (Koresh) is known to be the first Persian king, hence the story in Megillat Esther takes place after the Jews had an opportunity to

return to Jerusalem, just as the prophet Yirmiyahu had predicted (see Ezra 1:1–7). Could the fact that *Am Yisrael* remained scattered among the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire (see 3:8), even though they could/should have returned a generation or two earlier, not relate to the prophetic message of the Megillah?

A second clue can be discerned from the opening words of Haman to Achashverosh: "There is a certain nation scattered among the nations whose laws are different than any other nation, but the laws of the King they do not keep, and it is not worthwhile for the King to leave them be..." (3:8).

Chazal raise the possibility that at times "the King" in Megillat Esther may be "holy," i.e. it may be alluding to G-d Himself, and not only to Achashverosh. If correct, this verse may be a subtle allusion to G-d's disappointment with the fact *Am Yisrael* had not returned to their Land. After all, in Yirmiyahu's prophecy of future redemption (29:10-14), he promised not only the opportunity of return from Exile, but also stated G-d's expectation that *Am Yisrael* would be eager to return and re-establish themselves as His nation in the Land of Israel.

Furthermore, the Cyrus Declaration had provided the Jews not only with the "right of return" but also the opportunity to rebuild their Temple. There may be a subtle allusion to this in the Megillah's extravagant detail of the vessels at Achashverosh's party in Shushan and in its description of his palace.² Had the Jews chosen Shushan over Jerusalem?

Finally, when we consider the prophecies of Zechariah, the very verse that

introduces Mordechai (2:5) may be the most ironic line in the entire Megillah!

Note that the phrase *ish Yehudi* is mentioned only one other time in the entire Tanach – in Zechariah 8:23. There, the *ish Yehudi* describes a devout Jew in Jerusalem – leading a group of non-Jewish pilgrims who have come to the Temple in search of G-d. Furthermore, the word *haBira*, up until this time, had been used exclusively to describe the Temple (see Divrei HaYamim 29:1 & 29:19). Now it describes Shushan! Finally, the name Mordechai is most provocative for it stems from the name of the chief Babylonian deity – Marduk (see II Kings 25:27 & Yeshayahu 39:1).

Might we conclude that the Jewish people had replaced their G-d with Achashverosh, and their Temple with Achashverosh's palace? Had the *bira* in Yerushalayim become Shushan *haBira*?

The Megillah's primary message is surely for the reader to perceive the hidden hand of G-d behind our salvation. Yet its more subtle message may be that this entire crisis could have been averted had we only answered G-d's earlier call to begin our redemption.

A more detailed version of this essay can be found at tanach.org/purim.htm.

1 *Lehastir* = to hide. See Esther 2:7 and Chullin 139b.

2 See 1:7 & 5:1. Note also Megillah 12a.

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