



THE RIGHT OF SELF-DEFENSE

Many readers breathe a sigh of relief when they reach this chapter – Haman and his sons have been hanged and it seems the story of the Megillah has reached its conclusion.

This is not a correct reading of the Megillah though. In our chapter we see that even though Haman is no longer in the picture, the decree to wipe out the Jews still stands. If nothing is done, the verdict will still be valid, and the future of the Jews is at risk. This stems from the laws of the Persian kingdom:

“...for an edict that has been written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet may not be revoked.”

Indeed, in our chapter we read about the actions Esther takes, with great courage, to try to annul the decree:

“Esther spoke to the king again, falling at his feet and weeping, and beseeching him to avert the evil plotted by Haman the Agagite against the Jews.”

True, Haman was the catalyst, but from the moment Achashverosh agreed, he became part of the hostility toward the Jews. Moreover, the first letters were still in place, due to a formal excuse. Achashverosh doesn’t care about justice or morality; he does as he wishes, even to Vashti, not to mention the actual decree to kill the Jews. Many times, the wanton hide behind the letter of the law, while their true motivation is not officialdom but the desire to wipe out the Jews entirely.

To overcome this formal problem, and to force Achashverosh to give up the entire project, the following political solution is found: the law will not be

annulled. The decree is in place. In another few months, it will be permitted to kill the Jews. But according to the new letters sent out, the Jews will be permitted to congregate and defend themselves:

“To this effect: The king has permitted the Jews of every city to assemble and fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force together with women and children, and plunder their possessions... So the king’s scribes were summoned at that time, on the twenty-third day of the third month, that is, the month of Sivan; and letters were written, at Mordechai’s dictation, to the Jews and to the satraps, the governors and the officials of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia.”

Thus, before us are nine months of drawn-out suspense – what will happen when the month of Adar comes? Will the enemies of the Jews succeed in executing their plot, or will the Jews succeed in overcoming their enemies? Slowly, it became apparent that the victory would be at the hands of the Jews:

“And in every province and in every city, when the king’s command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.”

What can we learn from our chapter?

The ability to defend oneself is a great privilege. It is not self-evident. In Megilat Esther, the Jews lacked this ability until the new letters were issued, so

their reality was threatening and truly terrifying, bringing about fasting and mourning, and the trials and tribulations of this harsh decree (but also the great bravery of Esther). This has been true throughout Jewish history – lacking independence, dependent on the goodwill of foreign rulers, we found ourselves locked between discriminatory formality and outright hatred and hostility that didn’t even need to hide behind the hypocritical mask of regulation.

Through G-d’s grace, in Megilat Esther we were privileged to come together and protect ourselves, to fight for our lives, and to be free to defend ourselves from harm. An essential part of reading Megilat Esther is to look at the reality in which we are privileged to live today: we are a nation which does not expect another country to save us from trouble, but which stands on its own two feet, with G-d’s grace. May we merit to realize the heroism, courage, confidence and bravery hidden within it, and to defend ourselves – united as a people – from our enemies.

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