

Esther, Chapter Ten

– מגילת אסתר, פרק י –

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THE UNTOLD STORY

A study of chapter 10 raises the question of its importance and inclusion in the Megillah. It contains only three verses:

“King Achashverosh imposed tax on the mainland and the islands. All his mighty and powerful acts, and a full account of the greatness to which the king advanced Mordechai, are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia. For Mordechai the Jew ranked next to King Achashverosh and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular among the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his seed.”

Despite its brevity, this chapter reveals something critical about the entire story of Megillat Esther. Maybe this is the ‘untold story’ of the relationship between the Jews in Persia and their brethren in Israel, who, during these very years, were trying to establish and strengthen the status of the second *Beit HaMikdash* in Yerushalayim. The events described in the Megillah happened during the reign of Achashverosh (Xerxes I, who ruled between 485-465 BCE). Mordechai’s family was exiled to Babylon in the same exile as the prophet Yechezkel. His great-grandfather was exiled from Yerushalayim “in the group carried into exile along with King Yechohya of Yehuda” (Esther 2:5-6), over 100 years before the events of Megillat Esther occurred.

It seems the Megillah has something to teach us about the historical reality in which, on the one hand, these Jews in Persia had no connection with the people and the *Mikdash* in Israel,

while on the other were very involved in the Persian court.

How can we explain the fact that the Jews in Persia and throughout the kingdom, whose lives are in danger following Achashverosh’s decree, don’t see in the *Mikdash* and in the people living in *Eretz Yisrael* a natural and available solution? Wouldn’t we have expected a delegation of Persian Jews to travel to *Eretz Yisrael*, sacrifice *korbanot* in the *Mikdash*, and consult with the prophets and *kohanim* in Yerushalayim? Moreover, wouldn’t it have been obvious for Jews living throughout the Persian Empire to immigrate to Israel, unite, and see the *Mikdash* in Jerusalem as a center through which they could turn to G-d for a miracle and salvation?

This perhaps is precisely the purpose of these concluding verses of the Megillah. The norm of the Jewish Persian reality – which we saw in the banquets at the start of the Megillah – and the physical and spiritual distance from the *Mikdash* in Yerushalayim are accentuated. The author of the Megillah concludes that sadly, at the end of these dramatic events, nothing had changed. King Achashverosh continued to demand taxes from all his subjects, and this story, like many other events during his reign, was recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia. In other words, the Jews were – and still are – just another ethnic group the king had to deal with in the context of his kingship. Their Temple wasn’t special or different (to him or them) and their G-d made no particular impression upon him (or them).

And what about Mordechai? The Megillah’s concluding verse leaves us with conflicting emotions – Mordechai retains his Jewish identity (“Mordechai *HaYehudi*”), even as second to King Achashverosh, and “sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his seed.” But there was a group – and I suggest these were Jews who lived in Israel, far from Persia – who were not so enamored by his position. As the author emphasizes: “popular among the *multitude* of his brethren.”

Yes, despite the disconnect between the two centers of Judaism, in Persia and in Israel, it seems that in the years the second *Beit HaMikdash* was standing, there were Jews from the Persian Empire who continued to come to Israel, even if not many, and contribute to the strengthening of the Holy Land.

But Mordechai and what he represented disappointed those in Israel who hoped their brethren in the Diaspora would make *aliyah* – if not during normal times, at least during a crisis.

We can perhaps conclude that the ‘untold story’ of Chapter 10 of the Megillah is the story of the rise of the second *Beit HaMikdash*, and a reminder to us that prayers for a better future don’t necessarily end with the prayer for its rebuilding in Yerushalayim.

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