

## The Exchange of Letters at the End of Megillat Ester

Megillat Ester and the festival of Purim presented a major challenge for the Men of the Great Assembly. The debate over the Megilla and over the festival is documented, in part, at the end of the Megilla itself.

The story of the Megilla ends in chapter 9, verse 18. From verse 19 onwards the text records Purim customs and the acceptance and observance of the festival via an exchange of letters between Shushan and Eretz Yisrael (apparently), over a considerable period of time (one or two generations). My intention here is to describe this process, on the basis of my understanding of the closing verses of the Megilla.

1. The popular custom which apparently spread in Eretz Yisrael may also be part of the letter that was sent from Eretz Yisrael:

(9:19) “Therefore the outlying Jews (*ha-perazim*) who dwelled in the outlying towns observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar with joy and feasting and a holiday, and the sending of portions from one person to another”.

“(The) outlying Jews who dwelled in the outlying towns” is an unfamiliar expression that is in no way connected with the story of the Megilla. It would seem to originate in Eretz Yisrael, where this distinction between “outlying towns” and towns surrounded by walls had both halakhic significance (Mishna Arakhin, end of chapter 9, Bavli 32-34)<sup>1</sup> and implications pertaining to socio-economic life. Had this final unit been a natural continuation of the story in the Megilla, it would have referred instead to “the Jews who dwell throughout the provinces of King Ahashverosh...”.

We cannot interpret the term “*ha-perazim*” to mean “dwelling securely, following the victory”, since the term is immediately followed by its definition, to avoid any mistake: “who dwell in the outlying towns”.

The text here tells us nothing about the Jews who were living in walled cities. Perhaps the letter here was shortened. However, it is also possible that the Jews living in the walled cities had not sensed any particular danger; they had regarded themselves as suitably protected, and did not feel any need to celebrate at all.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Tosafot on Arakhin 89b, and Rambam’s contrasting view in his Laws of Shemitta and Yovel, chapter 12, halakha 15. In any event, it is clear from Hillel’s enactment that “outlying towns” and “walled cities” were part of the reality of life during the Second Temple Period (Mishna, *ibid.* 32a), while the reading of the Megilla was considered a controversial innovation.

<sup>2</sup> As suggested in Bavli, Megilla 2b. This distinction, and a generally similar analysis of the end of the Megilla is offered by Krochmal, *Moreh Nevukhei ha-Zeman*, chapter 11, siman 7. I discovered his discussion on this subject only after formulating my own analysis. According to the literal text, “the Jews accepted” – but “accepted” is written in the singular form. Therefore we may interpret this to mean, “the Jewish nation accepted”, or – as Ibn Ezra suggests – each and every individual accepted. The midrash teaches that God accepted, on High, that which the Jews had accepted, see Bavli, Megilla 7a.

2. Mordekhai's reaction to the popular custom: Mordekhai requests a two-day festival instead of a single day, adding emphases on “the month that was turned over” and on “gifts to the poor”:  
(9:20-22) “And Mordekhai wrote these things and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahashverosh, both near and far, to accept upon themselves to observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of it, each and every year, commemorating the days on which the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was overturned for them from anguish to joy and from mourning to a holiday, to observe them as days of feasting and joy and the sending of portions to one another, and gifts to the poor.”
  
3. The reaction of the Jewish world: acceptance of the popular custom together with Mordekhai's words may perhaps have come from Eretz Yisrael. It is formulated in the letter, which addresses Jews everywhere and explains briefly the background to the establishment of the festival and its name:  
(9:23-26) “And the Jews confirmed that which they had begun to do, and that which Mordekhai had written to them. For Haman, son of Hamedata the Agagite, adversary of all Jews, had schemed against the Jews to annihilate them, and he had cast a ‘*pur*’ – i.e., a lot – to confound them and to annihilate them. But when Ester came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the evil scheme that he had schemed against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and they hanged him and his sons on the gallows. Therefore these days were called “Purim”, commemorating the ‘*pur*’; hence all the words of this letter, and what they had seen in this regard, and what had happened to them.”

The abbreviated description is different from the account of the story recorded in the Megilla. In the story, the king claims that it is impossible to retract the letters that Haman sent; he merely permits the Jews to defend themselves by dispatching new letters. Likewise, in the Megilla, Haman is hanged because he is suspected of having assaulted Ester, and his sons are hanged eleven months later. In the abbreviated description in the letters, no mention is made of Mordekhai or Ester, the festival is not named after them, and the main message of the name “Purim”, given to the two days, is that it recalls the ‘*pur*’ (the lot) which was cast by Haman and which ultimately turned against him. Similarly, there is no mention of “*yom tov*” (a holiday) accepted by the Jews; there are only “these days”, which are called “Purim”. This represents clear evidence of the controversy between Shushan and Eretz Yisrael concerning the very idea of adding a new “*yom tov*”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As the ‘*sugya*’ proves (Bavli, Megilla 5b) from close scrutiny of these verses, according to Rava's view. At the same time, the discussion there provides no decisive conclusion as to whether they accepted the “*yom tov*” or not. Rabbi, in Eretz Yisrael, planted a sapling on Purim (demonstrating that he did not consider the day a “*yom tov*”), while Rav, in Babylon, cursed someone who planted flax on Purim (since there it was a “*yom tov*”), and the plant did not grow. The tension is carried through into halakha – see Rambam, Laws of Megilla, chapter 2, halakha 14. However, the main emphasis in the Mishna and the Gemara is placed on the reading of the Megilla, rather than on the festival, and the spreading of the reading over a total of five days (starting on the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar for villages) in Eretz Yisrael contributed greatly towards this.

into the calendar, since the festivals represent a fundamental body of laws in the Divinely-given Torah.

4. Acceptance of the days of Purim for future generations:

(9:27-28) “The Jews confirmed and accepted upon themselves and upon their descendants, and all those who were joined to them, that they would not cease to observe these two days, as written and at their appointed time, each and every year. And these days were remembered and observed in every generation, in every family, in every province, and in every city. And these days of Purim will not cease from among the Jews, nor will their memory leave their descendants.”

This letter speaks about future generations: it reinforces the status of the days of Purim and establishes them for all future generations, obligating the Jews of future generations, as well as future converts (“those who were joined to them”) by virtue of the “acceptance by the Jews” – forever (“would not cease”), and as a remembrance for all future generations (“nor will their memory leave their descendants”).

It is possible – even probable – that such a letter was written after the passage of some time; perhaps even a generation later. Here again, no mention is made of Mordekhai and Ester. The expression “as written and at their appointed time (or “at their time”) may be a first hint at different times, as discussed in the ‘*sugya*’ at the beginning of Masekhet Megilla.

Once again, no mention is made of “*yom tov*”; there is only a reference to “these days” – evidence of intensified opposition to the idea of adding a “*yom tov*” to the festivals listed by the Torah.

5. The second letter of Ester (and Mordekhai) seems to have been written by Ester, with Mordekhai’s authorization. The description “second” apparently means the second letter to be sent from Shushan, i.e. – subsequent to the dispatch of Mordekhai’s letter, recorded previously. The letters from Eretz Yisrael, or from elsewhere in the Jewish world, do not feature in the Shushan count.

This letter has a dual nature: it is directed externally, as an official royal document (dispatched by Queen Ester), and also internally, to the Jews. The internal content speaks of Mordekhai and Ester in the third person, and it may have been written by whoever succeeded Mordekhai in his position as “Minister of Jewish Affairs”. The letter testifies to continued controversy surrounding the festival (“words of peace and truth” are obviously meant to calm the opposition):

(9:29) “And Queen Ester, daughter of Avihayil, and (by authority of) Mordekhai the Jew, wrote with full authority to fulfill this second letter of Purim.”

(9:30-31) “And they sent letters to all of the Jews – to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahashverosh, (with) words of peace and truth, to fulfill these days of Purim at their appointed times, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Ester had established for them, and as they had accepted upon themselves and upon their descendants – the matter of the fasts and the crying out.”

(9:32) “And Ester’s word established these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book.”

Ester’s letter appears to have been written while she was still able to authorize, with a royal stamp of approval, an internal letter sent to the Jews, and to give royal validity to the days of Purim.

The internal letter (verses 30-31) makes mention of Mordekhai and Ester as figures of status, whose introduction of the festival is binding, and it also mentions the establishment of Purim that is binding on their descendants and on future generations. The “words of peace and truth” testify to opposition and controversy as recorded in rabbinical tradition (Yerushalmi, Megilla chapter 1, 3d; Bavli Megilla 14a, 7a). Here the parties in Shushan agree to define the festival as “these days of Purim”, acceding to the demands emanating from Eretz Yisrael, and finally relinquishing the campaign to define them as “*yom tov*”. “At their appointed times” hints at the possibility, perhaps born out of the controversy, that everyone would commemorate the festival at his time, while the time for some (those living in the outlying towns) would not be the same as the time for others (those living in walled cities), as reflected in the Midrash Hazal and in the Talmudic discussion in Megilla.<sup>4</sup>

This final letter also introduces a new element by establishing for future generations the “matters of the fasts and their crying out”, in memory of the mortal threat and the anguish, along with the salvation and the joy. This was formalized in halakha as the Fast of Ester, after the destruction of the Second Temple.<sup>5</sup>

6. Official reference: In the royal chronicles of the kings of Mede and Persia, mention is made of Mordekhai the Jew, in proximity to the description of the king’s “power and might”, and following on the verse, “King Ahashverosh placed a tax on the land and on the isles of the sea” (10:1). The brief, sole<sup>6</sup> mention of Mordekhai to appear in the royal chronicle is the final verse of the Megilla (recording the official recognition of his status and the validity of his decisions on behalf of the king):

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<sup>4</sup> Bavli and Yerushalmi, beginning of Massekhet Megilla

<sup>5</sup> After the annulment of the special status of dates listed in Megillat Ta’anit as days of celebration, when fasting and/or eulogies were forbidden. One such date was the Day of Nikanor, which fell on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar (such that the Fast of Ester could not have been established for that date). See Mishna Ta’anit, chapter 2; Yerushalmi Ta’anit chapter 2, halakha 13.

<sup>6</sup> This verse is crafted with great political caution: Mordekhai did not harm anyone, he did not endanger anyone, nor was he responsible for any intrigues. He simply “sought the welfare of his people” and worked for the benefit of the Jews. Therefore, he is suitable for inclusion in this royal book. It is difficult to accept the view of the commentators that such a provocative story – in its entirety or even in part – would have been recorded in some official chronicle; this would have been an even greater miracle than that of Purim!

(10:3) “For Mordekhai the Jew was second-in-command to King Ahashverosh, and great among the Jews, and accepted by his many brethren (*rov ehav*)<sup>7</sup>, seeking the welfare of his people and speaking peace to all of his descendants”. The citation of this verse from the Persian royal book of chronicles, at the end of the Megilla, is intended to lend added validity to the Megilla and to the days of Purim. Hence, it is an integral part of the exchange of letters at the end of the Megilla. Indeed, this is how the Sages of Eretz Yisrael understood the process, according to the Yerushalmi (Megilla chapter 1, law 5, 70d), and also in more general terms in the Bavli (Megilla 7a):

Yerushalmi Megilla	Bavli Megilla
Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (said): It is written, “To fulfill this (second) letter of Purim”; what do we learn from (the word) “second”?	... “As it is written: “To fulfill this second letter of Purim”. ... Rabbi Shemuel bar Yehuda said: At first they established it in Shushan, and then eventually throughout the world.
Rabbi Yirmiyah said in the name of Rabbi Shemuel bar Rav Yitzhak: What did Mordekhai and Ester do? They wrote a letter and sent it to the Sages, saying to them: Do you accept these two days upon yourselves every year? They said to them: Do we not have sufficient troubles of our own? You want to add further trouble, relating to Haman, for us, too?! They wrote them a second letter, concerning which it is written, “To fulfill this second letter of Purim”. What was written in it? They said to them: If you are fearful of doing this, behold – it is already written and recorded: “Are they not written in the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Mede and Persia”.	Rabbi Shemuel bar Yehuda said: Ester sent (messengers) to the Sages, (saying): Establish me (i.e., the festival) for all generations.  They sent to her: You are arousing the hatred of the nations against us.  She sent to them: I am already written in the chronicles of the kings of Mede and Persia.
Rabbi Shemuel bar Nahman said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: Eighty-five elders, among them more than thirty prophets, were anguished over this matter.	Ester sent to the Sages: Write me for future generations. They sent (back) to her: “Have I not written for you, ‘three’ (Mishlei 22:20) – ‘three’ and not ‘four’.” <sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “Rabbi Yohanan taught: [‘*Rov ehav*’ – meaning “most of his brethren”,] but not all of his brethren, since some members of the Sanhedrin distanced themselves from him.” Bavli, Megilla 16b

<sup>8</sup> Krochmal, in his *Moreh Nevukhei ha-Zeman*, chapter 11, interprets this expression in accordance with the decision of the Men of the Great Assembly that the Tanakh includes only three parts – Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and that there is no place for a fourth section including such texts as Megillat Ester, or perhaps even Kohelet (or Shir ha-Shirim); therefore, some textual support must be found for the Megilla in all three parts of the Tanakh.

<p>They said: It is written, “These are the commandments which God commanded Moshe” – these are the commandments that we were commanded by Moshe. Moshe told us: No other prophet in the future can come and tell you new things from now on. And yet Mordekhai and Ester seek to introduce something new for us?</p>	
<p>They did not move from there, continuing to argue the matter until the Holy One, blessed be He, illuminated their eyes and they found (allusions to) it written in the Torah and in the Prophets and in the Writings. As it is written, “God said to Moshe: Write this as a remembrance in a book... [for I shall surely wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens].” “This” – (hints to) Torah, as it is written, “And this is the Torah which Moshe placed before Bnei Yisrael”. “Remembrance” – (hints to) the Prophets (as it is written): “And a book of remembrance was written before him, for those who fear God...”. “In a book” – this hints to the Writings: “And Ester’s word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in a book”.</p>	<p>Until they found a textual allusion to it in the Torah: “Write it as a remembrance in a book”. “Write it” – that which is written here [concerning the war against Amalek, in Sefer Shemot] and in Sefer Devarim [parshat Zakhor]. “Remembrance” refers to that which is written in the Prophets. “In a book” – refers to that which is written in the Megilla.</p>

It is clear according to the Yerushalmi that the “second” letter is the second one to have been written and dispatched from Shushan, and therefore we must conclude that the end of the Megilla describes at least four letters. It is likewise clear that the end of the Megilla is the quotation from the “Chronicles of the kings of Mede and Persia”, and it is connected to the exchange of letters and the controversy over the acceptance of the festival. Clearly, too, the acceptance of the festival – “the Jews enjoined and accepted...” – came from Eretz Yisrael, and by the signatories of the Covenant (the 85 elders) in the generation of Ezra and Nehemia. It was they who willingly accepted the Torah of Moshe, in all situations and in all senses, with absolute commitment. We can therefore understand the assertion of the Midrash that the “enjoined and accepted” refers to the entire Torah,<sup>9</sup> and not just to the Megilla and Purim, as a literal reading of the verse would suggest. On the contrary – they first accepted upon themselves the Torah, with its renewed

<sup>9</sup> Bavli Shabbat 88a – “Rava said... the generation accepted it in the days of Ahashverosh...”.

endowment of sanctity, and thereafter argued over the Megilla, until it was accepted.

Finally, the Sages emphasize that the Holy One, blessed be He, agreed with the Sages of Eretz Yisrael,<sup>10</sup> and they express this in various ways (as reflected also in the above-mentioned parallels in the Yerushalmi) as, for example, in Midrash Rut Rabba, parsha 4:

“Three things were decreed by the earthly Beit Din, and the heavenly Beit Din agreed to them. They are: Asking after someone’s welfare using the Name of God, and Megillat Ester, and the tithes. The tithes – once they were exiled, they were exempt; but they assumed the obligation of their own initiative. What did the Men of the Great Assembly do? They wrote a book and placed it in the courtyard (of the Temple), and they found it signed in the morning, as it is written: “Nevertheless, we forge a Covenant and write, and signed... and those signed...”. In one place it says, “signed by” – in the singular, while afterwards it says, “signed by” – in the plural. The singular refers to the heavenly Beit Din, while the plural refers to the earthly Beit Din. (Rut Rabba, chapter 4,5, and parallels in Bereishit Raba parshat 96, Midrash Tehillim 57,2; Tehuman Bereishit Va-yehi siman 8; Bavli Makkot 23b).

We learn: Rabbi Eliezer said: Ester was given over through Divine inspiration...

Rabbi Akiva said: Ester was given over through Divine inspiration...

Rabbi Meir said: Ester was given over through Divine inspiration...

Rabbi Yossi, son of Dormaskit, said: Ester was given over through Divine inspiration...

Shemuel said: “... They confirmed and accepted” – they confirmed above that which had been accepted below” (Bavli, Megilla 7a).

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<sup>10</sup> Heavenly approval was especially necessary since this was at a time when prophecy had already been withdrawn, and the Tanakh was complete, so that everything depended on the willing earthly acceptance of the generation of the Covenant.