

## Understanding Haman

### אסתר פרק ג

(ה) וַיֵּרָא הָמָן כִּי־אֵין מֶרְדֵּכַי כָּרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לּוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא הָמָן חֲמָה  
(ו) וַיִּבֶז בְּעֵינָיו לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמֶרְדֵּכַי לְבַדּוֹ כִּי־הִגִּידוּ לּוֹ אֶת־עַם מֶרְדֵּכַי וַיִּבְקֹשׁ  
הָמָן לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ עִם מֶרְדֵּכַי  
(ז) בַּחֲדָשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן הוּא־חֲדָשׁ נִסָּן בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה לַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ  
הַפִּיל פּוֹר הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לְפָנָי הָמָן מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם וַיִּמְחַדֵּשׁ לְחֲדָשׁ שְׁנַיִם־עֶשְׂרֵה הוּא־חֲדָשׁ  
אָדָר: 0

### Excerpt of “The Casting of the Lot” By Rav Yonatan Grossman

As noted in the previous *shiur*, Haman extends his decree of annihilation to all of the Jews, not sufficing with removing Mordechai from his position or even putting him to death. This recalls the first violator of a royal command in the narrative – Vashti – since the decree promulgated in the wake of her refusal likewise applies to all women and not only to her personally...

To establish a date for all the Jews to be slaughtered, Haman casts a lot. Some scholars suggest that verse 7, describing the casting of the lot, is transposed and squeezed into an unnatural place; it would seem logical that only after Haman received the king's approval would he cast the lot. But actually this is not difficult to understand; on the contrary, the fact that Haman casts the lot even before receiving the king's permission to kill the Jews, presents him as someone altogether confident of his power to persuade the king to accede to his plan.

1. What may be reflected about Haman by the fact that he casts the lot before talking to the king?

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Seemingly, we could treat this fact as a trivial matter that plays no significant role in the development of the plot or the message of the narrative. However, for some reason it is specifically this mundane detail – the way in which the date of annihilation is chosen –

that became the focus of the festival, as reflected in its name (Purim = lots). The prevailing view among scholars is that Esther was written for the sole purpose of explaining the name of the festival – Purim. This claim rests principally upon the verses that are read towards the end of the Megilla: "Therefore they called these days Purim, on account of the lot (pur); therefore, because of all the words of this letter" (9:26). Even those who do not accept this view cannot ignore the fact that the name of the festival is related to the casting of the lot, and as such it imbues the act with special importance. As noted, within the narrative itself this detail appears quite unimportant, a sort of sprinkling of drama and tension. But we may assume that through the casting of the lot, the narrator hints at a principle to which he is giving voice, if only in a concealed way.

Moreover, after the casting of the lot, the narrator does not reveal what date was chosen! The exact date – the 13th of Adar – is mentioned only in the citation of Haman's letter, further on in the chapter (verse 13). Perhaps the narrator seeks thereby to draw the reader's attention to the month in which the lot falls – the twelfth month (a fact that is mentioned already at this stage), rather than the exact day. This causes the reader to note that the lot falls upon the most distant month possible: Haman casts the lot "in the first month, which is the month of Nissan." However, it is also possible that by ignoring the outcome of the lot, the narrator is focusing the reader on the actual process of casting the lot, rather than on the date thereby chosen for annihilation. What, then, is the significance of casting the lot?

2. What is a possible explanation of why the exact date of lot is not specified?

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"In the first month, which is the month of **Nissan**, in the twelfth month of the reign of Achashverosh, a pur – that is, a lot – was cast before Haman, from day to day and from month to month, to the twelfth month – the month of Adar." (3:7)

The date of Haman's casting of the lot ("In the first month – the month of Nissan") apparently holds some literary significance: it links Esther with the Exodus from Egypt. But the date also appears to be connected to the historical, real perspective of the story: in Babylon and in the Sumerian environment in general, it was customary to celebrate the first ten days of the year – starting in the month of Nissan – with feasts marking the New

Year. This was the most important festival, with huge parties and gatherings taking place, not only in the temples for elitist religious priests. An account detailing the celebrations worshipping the god Mardukh (whose name is connected to the name Mordekhai, as we have noted previously) has been preserved. For our purposes we shall emphasize two motifs found in these texts:



of Marduk

1. The king himself played a central and active role in the New Year celebrations, with the climax of the festival being the king's entry into the temple of the god Mardukh (on the 6th of Nissan). There, the priest would remove the king's royal regalia (scepter, ring, crown), and the king – bowing to the ground – would have to declare that he had not sinned nor been negligent in fulfilling his obligations towards "your great godliness." On the 9th of Nissan the idol of Mardukh was brought out of the temple in an impressive public ceremony, and the people would drink and dance. On the next day, the 10th of Nissan, the idol would return to its place.

2. The New Year was perceived by the ancient Babylonian as the time when fates were determined for the entire year. Once the idol Mardukh was returned to its place, the priests would cast various lots in order to ascertain what was expected to happen during the course of the year.

It is reasonable to assume that the lot cast by Haman, in the first month, is directly related to this ritual. Careful attention should be paid to the wording: "... which is the lot – before Haman"; apparently a priest cast the lot on his behalf, before him, by his invitation.

**It should be emphasized that the fundamental assumption underlying the pagan casting of lots is that there are days that are determined (or chosen by the gods) from the beginning of the year for success or for punishment.** When Haman's lot turned up the 13th of Adar, he believed that this day was one that was marked for punishment (as indeed it was – but "it was reversed," and the punishment was inflicted upon the enemies of Israel).

Beyond the historical, real context of the casting of lots, it would seem that from a literary perspective it is no coincidence that in the battle between Haman and Mordekhai use is made of the lot. We recall that already at the stage of presenting the characters it was emphasized that Mordekhai belonged to the Tribe of Binyamin: "There was a Jewish man

in Shushan, the capital, and his name was Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish – of the Tribe of Binyamin" (2:5).

The world of magic, sorcery, diviners etc. – clung to Rachel and her sons, whether by choice or against their will:

- a. Rachel herself stole her father's terafim (Bereishit 31:19-36). Apparently, the terafim – a sort of family god – were used in some way to reveal hidden things (cf. Yechezkel 21:26). We recall that Lavan says of himself that he uses the world of magic: "I divined, and God has blessed me because of you" (30:27).
- b. Yosef, Rachel's elder son, experiences dreams (not prophecies!) and knows how to interpret them. He is so proficient in this art that he is known by this title – "the dreamer" (Bereishit 37:19). The entire course of his life – his fall and revival in Egypt – is connected to dreams and their interpretation.
- c. It is in the hands of Binyamin, Yosef's blood brother born of Rachel, that Yosef's goblet is found; Yosef (as the viceroy of Egypt) uses this goblet for "divining" (Bereishit 44:5).
- d. Yonatan, the son of Shaul, engages in divining during the war against the Philistines in Mikhmash. As he ascends to the Philistine garrison with his attendant, he says: "If they say thus to us: Wait, until we come to you – then we will stand and not go up to them. But if they say: Come up to us, then we shall go up, for God will have given them into our hand, and that will be our sign" (I Shemuel 14:9-12). The Sages view this as the classic example of divining.
- e. Mikhal, the daughter of Shaul, hides in David's bed "the terafim... and the pillow of goats' hair" (I Shemuel 19:13). Apparently, these were used for divining, and it is possible that Mikhal had brought them from the house of her father, Shaul, and that they were not from David's own home.
- f. Shaul himself goes to consult with the medium prior to his battle against the Philistines (I Shemuel 28).

To this list we may add Mordekhai – "the son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish – of the Tribe of Binyamin." **But Mordekhai is on the other side; he must confront the world of lots and divinations. He does not cast the lot; on the contrary, through his fasting and penitence he seeks to overturn the fate that the lot has decreed...**

3. What is the fundamental assumption underlying pagan lots?

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4. In what way is that contrasted by the actions of Mordechai in the Megillah?

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## Two "New Years"

As noted, Haman's lot is cast as part of the New Year celebrations, apparently on the 10th (or perhaps the 11th) of Nissan. "A hundred and eighty days" (six months) prior to that would have been the 10th of Tishrei – Yom Kippur, an important part of the Israelite New Year commemoration, the nation of Israel likewise casts "lots". The narrator may be underlining this connotation and encouraging a comparison between the two lots. On the same day when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, dressed in his special white clothing, with his declaration "I have sinned", he also casts lots in the Temple: "Aharon shall place lots upon the two goats – one is destined for God, and the other is destined for Az'azel" (Vayikra 16:8). As we have already noted, some regard the story of Esther as a mirror-image of Yom Kippur. The king's palace, with its outer court and inner court, is reminiscent of the structure of the Temple; these two areas cannot be approached unless one is called upon by the king – and then one must wear "royal garments" and wait for the king to extend his scepter, for otherwise one's life is in danger. To all of the above we may add a most important similarity – the casting of lots. Before examining the different manner in which the lots are cast, it is interesting to compare the two New Years (Babylonian vs. Israelite):

### Babylonian New Year:

- a. In Nissan
- b. The king enters the Holy of Holies
- c. The king removes the symbols of royalty (scepter, ring, crown etc.)
- d. The king's declaration: "I have not sinned, O master of the lands; I have not been negligent in fulfilling obligations towards your godliness. I have not destroyed Babylon, nor have I commanded over its ruin; I have not harmed Esagila, I have not forgotten its worship, I have not struck the cheek of any one of her sons, with their sanctified rights; nor have I humiliated them."
- e. Casting of lots to determine what the New Year holds.

### Israelite New Year:

- a. In Tishrei
- b. The kohen enters the Holy of Holies
- c. The kohen removes his priestly garments (which are "royal garments" for him), and enters in white garments
- d. The kohen declares: "I pray You, Lord! I have transgressed, I have performed iniquity, I have sinned before You – both I and my household. I pray You, Lord – please grant atonement for the transgressions, iniquities and sins that I have transgressed, performed and sinned before You, I and my household...."  
Afterwards he would say: "I pray You, Lord – Your people, the house of Israel, have transgressed, performed iniquity and sinned before You."
- e. Casting of lots for the goats

Along with the interesting similarity between the two ceremonies, attention should also be paid to the fundamental differences between these two different approaches to the New Year. The Babylonian New Year is characterized by a renewed coronation of the king. As such the king presents himself before his god, declares that he has not – heaven forefend – committed any wrongdoing, and receives authority and approval for an additional year of reign. In honor of the occasion, people are permitted to view the secrets of the future and to discover which dates have been set for each and every event, to discover the qualities of time which will now not be able to be changed.

At the Israelite New Year, in contrast, it is the King of kings Who is coronated. As part of the rites commemorating the New Year, atonement is performed for God's Temple and for all of His subjects. Here, the kohen confesses his transgressions and sins in order that these may be forgiven. It is in accordance with the actions – religious and moral – of the Israelite that his fate for the year is determined, but even this is not final, and at any time he may return to God.

The determinist New Year of the Babylonians is confronted by the moral New Year of the Israelite. Haman's fate is drowning in drink – at the New Year celebrations, as were customary in Babylonian culture, as well as in the results of the specific lot that is cast in Esther – "The king and Haman sat down to drink." In complete contrast, the Israelite lot is

cast on a fast day, a day of affliction of the soul. This difference is not an insignificant one; it hints at the profound chasm separating the concept of fate as viewed in the two traditions. The casting of a lot can hint to two opposite and contradictory positions. One – the Persian view represented in the person of Haman – maintains that there are things (for our purposes, days or times) that are fixed and determined, and the request of the person who casts the lot can only succeed if it is aligned with those predetermined times. The other position – finding expression in the Israelite casting of the lot on Yom Kippur – is quite the opposite: nothing is fixed in advance; everything is in the hands of heaven. In casting the lot the supplicant brings his hands together, leaving the scene open to Divine action and intervention.

5. What is the fundamental difference between the lots used for the Babylonian New Year and the Jewish one?

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Haman's lot of the 10th of Nissan is carried out in the midst of drinking. The atmosphere is one of a pagan, deterministic view that has no regard for a person's moral standard. A person may exploit the forces that are active in the world and harness them – along with the gods themselves – for his ends, to fulfill his wishes. Once he has succeeded in uncovering the fixed laws of the world, he may become drunk and immerse himself in debauchery.

The casting of the lot by the High Priest on the 10th of Tishrei is carried out on a fast day, in the midst of confession and repentance. The challenge of the fast is connected, of course, to the challenge posed by Him Who demands of man to act according to certain standards of morality. The casting of the lot represents leaving the decision in the hands of "He Who spoke - and the world came into being"; He will watch over reality and intervene in light of the moral and religious behavior of those who believe in Him.

Haman's fate was overturned. His deterministic world, ruled by fixed rules and unchangeable times, was acted upon by the God of Israel, Who turned the events upside down. In this sense, one might almost say that this is the most important message of Esther: the God of Israel enjoys complete freedom to decide how to run His world, and as such He is able to prevail over lots and set fates.

6. According to Rav Grossman, why did Haman use a lot?

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Esther #9

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