



### Baruch Hashem

By Micah Cyrulnik ('24)

The Gemara in Masechet Sanhedrin (94a) quotes the following Pasuk from this week's Parashah, Parashat Yitro: "ויאמר יתרו ברוך ה' אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים ומיד פרעה" "Yitro said 'Blessed be Hashem who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Paroh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians'" (Shemot 18:10). The Gemara states that it is a גנאי, extreme embarrassment, for Bnei Yisrael, that they have yet to describe the miraculous ים סוף קריעת in last week's Parashah using the words ברוך ה', and it is so embarrassing Yitro comes around and does it first.

What could the Gemara possibly be thinking?! Was it absent for the entire fourth Aliyah in last week's Parashah? There is literally an *entire* שירה that we say every day in Shacharit dedicated to this incredible event! How could the Gemara render stanzas upon stanzas of gratitude expressed in Biblical poetry inferior to those two words Yitro used to sum it up—ברוך ה'?

If we take a second to appreciate who exactly Yitro was and what kind of life he lived up until this point, this whole debacle starts to clear up. Yitro was someone who had taken it upon himself to give a fair shot to all religions under the sun before finally landing on Judaism. He was someone who exhibited immense religious sensitivity and awareness. This idea is embodied in a Rashi just a few Pesukim earlier:

Rashi comments on the Pasuk describing Yitro's immediate reaction to the story Hashem's miraculous performance for Bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim: "ויחד יתרו על כל הטובה" "And Yitro experienced חדוה on all that he heard Hashem has performed for Bnei Yisrael in saving them from the hand of Mitzrayim" (ibid. 18:9). Rashi comments on the word ויחד, and quotes a Gemara from the very same Daf as ours (Sanhedrin, 94a)! Two opinions are brought down in the Gemara: Rav interprets the word to mean that Yitro was so overjoyed that he grew goose bumps on his skin! Shmuel argues and says exactly the opposite: as someone who had taken part in many other religions and lived with a wide range of nations, Yitro was grieving over the loss of countless Egyptian soldiers at sea.

So far, no opinion has provided adequate enough support in favor of Yitro to answer our question. The Malbim, however, takes a unique approach.

The Malbim uses a Pasuk in Nechemiah which contains the very same שורש to reconcile these two opposing views: "ואל" "תעצבו כי חדוה ה' היא מעוזכם" "don't cry, because the חדוה of Hashem is in you" (Nechemiah 8:10). Bnei Yisrael had just heard the Torah read out to them and they started crying uncontrollably. Nechemiah responded to them, saying that they should quit crying because Hashem's חדוה is within you. The Malbim defines חדוה as a happy medium between pure joy and deep sadness—חדוה is an overwhelming happiness that can only exist with a deep sadness inside. Yitro was sad for the death of the Egyptian soldiers, but simultaneously recognised that this gave rise to the birth of the entire Jewish nation.

With this approach in mind, we can now return to Yitro's original statement: ברוך ה'. This ברוך now takes a dual form— on the one hand, it functions as a sort of אמת, and laments the lost lives suffered by Mitzrayim. On the other, it praises Hashem for being able to let go of so many of his creatures to birth Am Yisrael. Yitro, in all his sensitivity, picked up on something that Bnei Yisrael completely missed: this wasn't easy for Hashem. As much as He loves Bnei Yisrael, He had to kill thousands of Mitzri soldiers in the process of saving His nation, and Bnei Yisrael simply failed to recognize that sacrifice at all. For all of אז ישיר, they speak of the glory of Hashem and the great downfall of the Egyptian people, but not once do Bnei Yisrael recognize what Hashem gave up there.

Yitro's profound sensitivity is something that we can learn a lot from. Oftentimes, we fail to recognize what toll our actions have on others, and what sacrifice they went through themselves to do things for us. Yitro's incredible thoughtfulness should inspire us to take everything into consideration.

### Shamor VeZachor BeDibur Echad

By Emmanuel Lubetski ('23) and Avishai Jutkowitz ('23)

One of the highlights of Parashat Yitro is the Aseret HaDibrot. The Aseret HaDibrot appear twice in the Torah: once in Yitro when Bnei Yisrael are at Har Sinai, and once in Va'Etchanan

when Bnei Yisrael are about to go into Eretz Yisrael. The two sets of Dibrot contain many differences.

One well-known difference regards Shabbat; in Yitro it says “Zachor;” “remember” (Shemot 20:8), and in Va'Etchanan the Torah states “Shamor;” “observe” (Devarim 5:12). Another famous difference is that the reason given to keep Shabbat is different. In Yitro, the reason is that Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh (Shemot 20:11). In Va'Etchanan, the reason is that we were slaves in Egypt and Hashem took us out (Devarim 5:15).

Besides these well-known differences, there are many other more subtle differences. First, additional phrases – such as “Lema’an Yanu’ach Avdecha” (ibid. 5:14) and “Lema’an Yitav Lach” (ibid. 5:16) – are found in Va'Etchanan. Second, there are word substitutions - such as “Eid Shakeir” (Shemot 20:13) in Yitro and “Eid Shav” (Devarim 5:17) in Va'Etchanan. Third, the order of the objects to not covet varies between the two versions. Fourth, there are single letter variations, like the letter Vav is added or removed.

All in all, there are more than twenty-five differences between the two versions. Although some are minor and may not seem very important, others affect both the content and the meaning, and leave us with some major questions. How are we to understand all these differences? Why are there two versions of the Dibrot at all? Did Hashem make the changes or was it Moshe Rabbeinu changing the wording?

There are several different approaches taken by the Mefarshim to account for these differences. On one extreme, including Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and others, say the differences are insignificant. When Moshe repeated the Aseret HaDibrot in Devarim, he preserved the original meaning. According to Ibn Ezra and Ramban, the set of Dibrot in Yitro was given by Hashem at Har Sinai and it was this wording that was written on both sets of the Luchot. The version in Va'Etchanan was modified by Moshe Rabbeinu forty years later before they entered the land of Israel. Why did Moshe make changes? Rabbi Shmuel David Luzatto explains that Moshe wanted to give specific messages to the new generation that was about to enter the land of Israel. According to the commentary Ho'il Moshe, the new version demanded more and was appropriate for the higher level that Bnei Yisrael was now on. On the other hand, others say that the second set was a downgrade, appropriate for the lower level of Bnei Yisrael after the Cheit Ha'Eigel.

At the other extreme the Talmud Bavli, Rashi, and others, maintain that both versions of the Aseret HaDibrot were transmitted simultaneously. As we say in Lechah Dodi: “Shamor V'Zachor BeDibur Echad,” “Observance and Remembrance were uttered simultaneously.” According to this approach, both versions are equally original and important, and both were said by Hashem at Har Sinai. According to this

approach, which is cited by Rav Saadia Gaon, each set of Luchot had both versions: the Yitro version on one side and the Va'Etchanan version on the other side.

A third approach is more moderate and falls somewhere in the middle of previously discussed ideas. Reish Lakish and Malbim say that Hashem made the changes to the Dibrot following the Cheit Ha'Eigel but prior to giving the second set of Luchot. According to this view, the Aseret HaDibrot in Yitro were written on the first set of Luchot and the Va'Etchanan version was written on the second set. Netziv maintained this as well and brought a proof from Bava Kama .גז, where the Gemara explains that the root .גט - meaning good – appears in the Dibrot of Va'Etchanan and not in the Dibrot of Yitro because the first set of Luchot was destined to break. The Gemara clearly connects the Va'Etchanan version with the second set of Luchot.

Regardless of the approach one takes, all are in agreement that it was at this time in our history that the Jewish people as a whole accepted upon themselves the Aseret HaDibrot, as well as all of the six-hundred thirteen Mitzvot, that will forever guide us as a nation.

## The Dangerously Ambiguous Achashveirosh

*By Rabbi Howard Jachter*

Most of us perceive Achashveirosh as a character who Haman manipulated. This, however, is only one approach to Achashveirosh. Chazal (Megillah 12a) argue as to whether Achashveirosh was shrewd or a fool. A major question facing readers of Megillat Esther is whether Haman was manipulating Achashveirosh or vice versa. Unlike Esther and Mordechai, who clearly are Tzadikim, and Haman is undoubtedly a Rasha, we are quite unsure regarding Achashveirosh.

### Rava's View

Chazal presents differing views on why Achashveirosh consented to Haman's “final solution.”

The Gemara (Megillah 13b) cites Rava, who states that “no one was as skilled at *Lashon HaRa* [slander] as was Haman,” meaning that Haman was a master manipulator. Rava interprets Haman's speech to Achashveirosh (Esther 3:8) as convincing him to view the Jews as a threat to his kingdom, which could be eliminated without threatening his rule.

Haman begins the conversation by saying, “Let's eliminate them [the Jews].” Achashveirosh responds, “I am afraid of their God.” Haman, in turn, says, “They neglect the Mitzvot,” and their God will not save them. Achashveirosh responds that their Rabbis, though, observe the mitzvot faithfully. Haman responds, “They are one nation,” and their rabbis will not save them. Haman then explains that since the

Jews are scattered throughout the empire, their elimination will not create a vacuum.

Haman continues that Achashveirosh should not be concerned that the empire benefits from the Jews because they are comparable to mules that do not produce any offspring. Haman then tells Achashveirosh not to be concerned about an entire area with a large concentration of Jews (who could resist an extermination plan) since they are spread throughout the kingdom.

Haman then tells Achashveirosh that the Jews do not eat with the Persians nor intermarry with them. Haman adds that the Jews do not honor the king's rules, as they always have some excuse for why that they cannot work, such as by claiming that "today is Shabbat" or "today is Pesach."

Haman concludes his speech by telling Achashveirosh that he should destroy the Jews because they disgrace the king. Haman explained, "If a fly falls into a Jew's wine, he removes the fly and drinks the remaining liquid. If, however, the king would touch the wine of a Jew, the Jew would stamp the goblet into the ground and not drink the wine."

Rava portrays Achashveirosh as a fool whom Haman convinces to annihilate the Jews. According to Rava, Achashveirosh is not a vicious anti-Semite who is eager to exterminate our people. While he does not harbor great love for the Jews, he fears "starting up" with us. On the other hand, Haman masterfully weaves together a series of half-truths to manipulate Achashveirosh, who, according to Rava, is not the "sharpest tool in the shed" to agree to the Jews' extermination.

According to this view, we are saved from elimination only due to Esther neutralizing Haman's machinations with Hashem's help. Achashveirosh is a flip-flop (as noted by Rabban Gamliel; Megillah 15b) who succumbs to Haman's manipulations, only later to fall in line with Esther's counter-manipulation.

### **Rabi Aba's View**

The Gemara (Megillah 14a) continues, citing Rabi Abba's alternative analysis of Achashveirosh. He presents a *Mashal* (analogy) that illuminates Achashveirosh's thinking and tactics. He tells a story of two field owners, one with a big mound of dirt in his field and one with a big ditch. The one who had the ditch admired the big mound of dirt and wished he could purchase the mound of dirt to fill his ditch. The one who had the mound of dirt wished to purchase the ditch in order to dispose of his dirt. One day the two field owners met, and the ditch owner asked if he could purchase the mound of dirt. The individual who owned the mound, in turn, enthusiastically urged the ditch owner to take the mound free of charge.

Haman is analogous to the ditch owner, and Achashveirosh can be compared to the individual who owned

the mound, as Haman was missing something, and Achashveirosh had something he wanted to dispose of. Haman wished to eliminate us but lacked the authority to do so. Achashveirosh, on the other hand, wanted to do away with the Jews but was unwilling to do so himself. He feared profoundly negative consequences if his plan backfired. When Haman offered to annihilate the Jews, Achashveirosh allowed him to execute his plan. If the plan backfired, Haman would take the blame, and Achashveirosh could emerge unscathed.

According to Rabi Abba, Achashveirosh is a vicious anti-Semite who brilliantly manipulated Haman. The only reason Achashveirosh eliminated Haman, rescinded the planned genocide, and promoted Mordechai was his realization that Haman was a threat to him and that the Jews' service his best interest. In the words of the Gemara (Megillah 16a) Achashveirosh acts "not out of love for Mordechai but due to hatred of Haman".

### **Peshat Perspectives**

A Peshat reading of Megillat Esther expresses the same ambiguity. Notice in Perek 3 where Haman does not mention the nation he wishes to exterminate. On the one hand, Achashveirosh may be seen as a fool who consented to a genocidal plan without even knowing to which nation Haman referred. On the other hand, Achashveirosh might be shrewdly avoiding mention of the nation to create a guise of "plausible deniability" in case the plan went awry.

In fact, in Perek 7 Pasuk 5, when Esther shocks Achashveirosh by confronting him about the planned extermination, Achashveirosh responds, "Mi Hu Zeh Ve'Eizeh Hu," "Who is the one who plans to do this?" Achashveirosh might be "playing dumb" to feign innocence and cleverly distance himself from Haman. On the other hand, Achashveirosh may not just be "playing the fool" but is a fool who genuinely is unaware of the plan to erase Esther's people<sup>1</sup>.

### **Lessons for Today**

Both approaches to Achashveirosh teach very sobering lessons for today's less-than-ideal circumstances (and will likely

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Achashveirosh waived the fee seems strong evidence to Rabi Aba's view. Rava, though, might view the waiver as a favor Achashveirosh extends to his (at that time) friend Haman in reward for eliminating a nation that Haman told him is a threat to his rule. In addition, it is not clear if Achashveirosh grasped the scope of the plan. Haman asked permission "Le'Abeid," to eliminate the unnamed nation (Esther 3:13). Achashveirosh, especially if he was a fool, might have understood that Haman only intended to financially devastate or exile this people. Haman also did not explicitly tell Achashveirosh that he intends to murder the Jewish women and children. Only in the orders he sent in Achashveirosh's name to all the provinces does he unambiguously clarify that he intends "LeHashmid, LaHarog U'Le'abeid", murder all Jews including women and children in one day. Either Haman duped Achashveirosh or Achashveirosh relished the deliberate ambiguity to create a façade of innocence to protect himself in case the plan backfired.

remain this way until the days of Mashiach). The opinion that he was a fool is quite frightening, as it teaches that, at times, foolish individuals assume positions of great responsibility. Such leaders can be easily manipulated by corrupt advisers who guide the leader solely intending to advance their own agendas.

On the other hand, the opinion that Achashveirosh was shrewd presents a sobering message. The Megillah ends with Achashveirosh still in power. Thus, a powerful individual who desires to destroy us remains on the throne of the Persian Empire. Moreover, it teaches that we need to be concerned not only for the Hamans of this world but for the Achashveiroshes as well. Unfortunately, there are many Achashveiroshes in the world who wish for the Jews to be eliminated but do not want to assume the risk entailed in doing so. They do not actively seek to harm us, but if another assumes the risk in doing so, they support him and might even cooperate with him if they feel it is safe.

Much to our chagrin, the ambiguity regarding the character of Achashveirosh is quite relevant today to individuals at all levels of society. For example, the same uncertainty applies to anti-Israel bias. It is unclear if anti-Israel spokespeople are fools duped by anti-Israel propaganda or if they harbor a deep-seated hatred of the Jewish nation and therefore lend support to our enemies.

The Gemara (Megillah 14a), after presenting the opinions of Rava and Rabi Abba, discusses why we do not recite Hallel on Purim like on other celebratory days, such as Chanukah. The Gemara's last answer is that "we remain slaves of Achashveirosh." We omit Hallel on Purim because the Purim story does not have a completely happy ending. Although Haman was removed from power, Achashveirosh was not. We Jews must exercise caution and not be naïve; we must beware of the Achashveiroshes of this world as well as the Hamans.

Sadly, the only difference between Achashveirosh and Haman is that Haman hates us more than he considers his own needs but Achashveirosh loves himself more than he hates us. It would be quite naïve to believe that the many nations that have aligned with Israel all do so out of a newfound love for Am Yisrael. Rather, for many, their concern for promoting their own interest exceeds their dislike of our people. By contrast, there are very regrettable groups who live in squalid conditions since they devote their energies and resources to harming us instead of improving their quality of life. Sobering thoughts indeed.

## Conclusion

Both explanations of Achashveirosh are equally plausible, and we are left by both the straightforward reading of Megillat Esther and Chazal's amplifications as genuinely unsure about

the dangerously ambiguous Achashveirosh. Achashveirosh, and the many people who are very much like him, pose a great challenge.

Since we do not know whether they are shrewd or foolish, we are quite uncertain about how to deal with them. Only with the help of Hashem, who is the only One who knows what truly lurks in the hearts of men, can we overcome such challenging figures.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (Reflections of the Rav, pages 181-182) emphasizes that while Purim is certainly a holiday of celebration, at the same time, it reminds the Jewish People of our vulnerability. The ambiguous presentation of Achashveirosh in Megillat Esther, further developed by Chazal, sharpens, broadens, and clarifies the many nuances of this vulnerability. May Hashem grant our people the wisdom and merit to successfully navigate and overcome both the Hamans and Achashveiroshes (and those in between) of the world. We look forward to the era of Mashiach when such figures will be a relic of a long-gone era.

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