

Megillat Esther

"Kirzon ish vaish"

The pluralist system of Ahashverosh's rule and its inherent contradiction

Chapter 1, Verse 1

"It was in the days of Ahashverosh – he is Ahashverosh who rules from India to Ethiopia seven and twenty and a hundred state".

Questions:

1. "It was" – What was in those days?
2. "Days of **Ahashverosh**" – In the Megilla he is referred to as "The king" or "King Ahashverosh". Why, here, does the Megilla say simply Ahashverosh?
3. "He is Ahashverosh" – Sounds redundant, does not it? Why does the Megilla put these words in?
4. "Who **rules**" – Why does the Megilla switch to present tense?
5. "Seven and twenty and a hundred" – Why is it important to specify the number of countries he ruled? And why does the word "medina" (state) appear in the singular if he ruled many countries?

Historical Background

After Hashem awakened the spirit of Koresh (King of Persia) to call upon the Jews to return to Israel and build the Second Temple; some "families of Judah and Benjamin arose together with some Priests and Levites to make Aliya and build the house of Hashem in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:5). Their leader was Zrubavel, a descendant of King David. This beginning of the redemption surely raised hopes in the heart of the nation to renew the Kingdom of Israel as it was before.

However, it didn't last long. In the midst of the Temple's construction, Jew-haters wrote a libelous letter against the Jews to the King, who then halted the construction. This king was Ahashverosh: "In the kingdom of Ahashverosh – in his early days – was written the libelous letter" (Ezra 4:6).

Our sages teach that Ahashverosh himself cancelled the construction of the Temple (Esther Raba Ptichta 8).

Ceasing construction of the Temple caused a spiritual decline among the Jews, and the acceptance of their existence in the diaspora. The story of the Megilla takes place in this spiritual atmosphere.

"He is Ahashverosh"

"It was in the days of Ahashverosh – he is Ahashverosh who rules from India to Ethiopia **seven and twenty and a hundred state**" – The Maharal explains that if the Megilla merely said that Ahashverosh ruled from India to Ethiopia, it would have been a quantitative description, explaining that his rule extended over a large area. But the added detail of a 127 state (singular) expresses his rule qualitatively; Ahashverosh controlled many states, each in a different style and independent importance. With that, he ruled them as if he was a king ruling a single country and he managed to consolidate all the different cultures in his kingdom.

From the Maharal we see that Ahashverosh had an exceptional talent to unite nations. His unique ruling style would not have succeeded if he had not had a phenomenally organized system in place. This system was completely devoted to fulfilling his 'pluralist' agenda.

According to the Malbim, the Megilla wrote "In the days of Ahashverosh" and not 'in the days of the **King** Ahashverosh' because at the beginning of the Megilla's story he was not yet king; he was still working on fighting wars and consolidating power to rule the world. The first verse of the Megilla describes this process of power-consolidation before Ahashverosh became king.

"He is Ahashverosh" – The Megilla does not describe what happened "in the days". Therefore, we understand that the words "He is Ahashverosh" are a hint to what happened; he wanted to be himself with no restraints. In other words, Ahashverosh wanted to express himself with maximum grandeur, to enhance and to spread his fame and 'greatness' throughout the world, so that everyone would agree that there was no one except him – no one greater, more talented, or stronger than he was. In the days of Ahashverosh a 'great' powerful way to rule was revealed, but it was egotistical at its core. The basis of his kingdom had no real agenda to benefit the people, but rather only to enhance his name.

It's true that on the outside, it seems like Ahashverosh is interested in doing "as the will of each person" but the goal of this 'generosity' was "He is Ahashverosh" – to buy glory. With all the beauty and splendor of his royal outlook, general and united – his kingship was rotten to the core. A monarchy based on such egotistical tendency is by definition an evil one, that can decide on impulse, and with no conscience, to "destroy, kill and annihilate" an entire nation. Therefore, Rashi says in the name of the Sages: "He is Ahashverosh – he is wicked from beginning to end".

In those days, as the king Ahashverosh sat on the throne of his kingdom that was in Shushan the capital.

In the third year of his rule (power consolidation), he made a party for his officers, servants, nobles of Persia and Media, the elites, and princes of the states before him.

With his showing the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his splendid majesty, for many days, 180 days.

Questions:

1. "In those days, **as the king Ahashverosh sat on the throne of his kingdom** that was in Shushan the capital. **In the third year of his rule**, he made a party" –
 - a. So, when was the party? At the beginning of his 'power grab' or after 3 years when he succeeded in being crowned king?
 - b. Why does it say 'keshevet hamelech' meaning '**as** the King was sitting' instead of '**beshevet**' – '**when** the King was sitting'?
2. "As the king Ahashverosh sat on the throne of his kingdom **that was** in Shushan the capital" – The words "that was" sound redundant don't they? Why does the Megilla put these words in?

3. "**In the third year of his rule**" – In chapter 2, verse 16 it says that Esther was taken to the King in the 7th year **of his reign**. So why does it say here 'of his rule' rather than 'his reign'?

4. "He made a party for his officers... and princes of the states **before him**" – What do the words "before him" mean?

5. What was the goal of the party? – Why show everyone all your riches and why make the party 180 days – that's a long time.

6. "For **many days**, 180 days" – Well, if a party lasts 180 days we know that's many. Why add these words?

7. "**With his showing** the riches of his glorious kingdom" – Since Ahashverosh made the party for his officers and servants, would it not make more sense for the Megilla to say 'to show **them**' rather than 'with his showing'?

8. What's the difference between "the riches of his glorious kingdom" and "the honor of his splendid majesty"?

"As the king Ahashverosh sat"

"In those days, as the king Ahashverosh sat on the throne of his kingdom **that was** in Shushan the capital" – The words "that was" imply that he had a throne elsewhere as well. What is the significance of this knowledge?

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (who lived in Rabbi Yosef Karo's generation) says in his interpretation "Yosef Lekach": "For all kings prior to this one had their royal seat in Babylon. Ahashverosh was the first to move his throne to Shushan".

Moving the throne to Shushan was a symbolic action. It announced an agenda change. He would not continue the tradition of his predecessors – and so, his throne too moved to a new site. Ahashverosh was not interested in forcing his religion and culture upon the nations he conquered, rather he had a new policy: "as the will of each and every person". He was interested in a 'perfect world' where there was room for each individual, and consideration for different types and styles. Ahashverosh was convinced that by granting national and cultural independence to each state under his rule, he would be able to rule easier, with less opposition and to the satisfaction of all.

The "Yosef Lekach" continues: "the letter 'k' – "**as** the king Ahashverosh sat" is a temporal unit indicating that as soon as the king located his throne in Shushan, he made this feast. This was in the third year; two years after he finished consolidating power. This explains why the Megilla uses different words for "his ruling" (meaning he was not 100% the king yet), and "his reign" (in chapter 2), when he was undisputedly king. At this point his official years of reign begin.

In order to mark the transfer of the throne, the king held this feast, the real purpose of which was for the rulers of the different states to get to know the new ruling style and become enamored of it.

"He made a party for his officers, servants, **nobles of Persia and Media**" – The Megilla mentions the "nobles of Persia and Media" because they were Ahashverosh's countrymen – those he ruled first. To them, he added "the elites, and princes" – jobs they held before being conquered. Ahashverosh didn't remove them from their positions, but rather accepted them 'with love'. That said, the order is significant. Ahashverosh invited the elites of the conquered nations in order to have them enjoy and become close to the king, but he made it clear that they came second place to his officers and servants from Persia and Media. Ahashverosh made the hierarchy clear from the beginning. The "Alshech Hakadosh" comments: "In order that love and fear would come together".

"With **his** showing" – The main theme of those parties was Ahashverosh himself ("He is Ahashverosh"), and those invited were merely a way for him to gain honor.

"The riches of his glorious kingdom" – Refers to the quantitative measure of his wealth.

"And the honor of his splendid majesty" is a reference to his 'generosity' and magnanimous gestures; he shared his wealth with everyone. Of course all of this 'kindness' was nothing but a show of his own grandeur.

The Midrash says (Shmot Raba 9:7) that the king displayed 6 storehouses full of riches during each day of the party, and each time the riches were more wonderful than the previous day. Afterwards, the king sent these riches out to the heads of each state.

So why "many days" and "180 days"?

"Many days" – a general description. "180 days" – specific. To show that although the party went on for many days, as each day brought a new surprise and the excitement of the participants never waned. The participants were astounded, each day anew, by the endless wealth of the kingdom.

And so our sages say (Esther Raba 2:3): "180 days – the last day as the first day".

Upon the completion of those days, the king made a party for all the people who were found in Shushan the capital from great to small, Seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's audience hall.

White linen, green cotton, and sky blue wool, bound with cords of linen and purple wool. On silver rods and marble pillars couches of gold and silver on a floor of alabaster, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stone.

Serving drinks in vessels of gold and vessels of different vessels. And abundant royal wine in accordance with the king's bounty.

The drinking was as was legally mandated without constraint. For so did the king establish for all the officials of his palace to do as the will of each and every person.

Questions:

1. 'Upon the completion of those days' – Why not say '**after** these days'?
2. 'The king made a party for all the people who were **found** in Shushan the capital' – What does the word 'found' add? If someone's not there, obviously they won't attend the party!
3. 'Serving drinks in vessels of gold and vessels of different **vessels**' – Why is the word 'vessels' mentioned twice?
4. 'For so did the king **establish** for all the officials' – This verb, 'to establish', is usually used in connection with building something. Why does it not say 'the king commanded'?
5. 'To do **as** the will of each and every person' –
 - a. Why not say 'to do everyone's will'?

b. Why does it say 'as the will'? What does the 'as' signify?

"Feast of Seven days"

"Upon the completion" hints that the days of the party were a complete success for Ahashverosh, in terms of his goals. His expectations were fully realized. The participants left the party full of joy and admiration for the amazing king, convinced there was no one like him in the world. Everyone loved the king, yet their fear of him remained.

In light of the success of the first party, the king made a second one for the general public, in order to show that everyone was equally important to him; poor and rich, great and small – the king cared about them all.

Because Shushan was the capital, a concentration of all varieties of people from throughout the kingdom could be found there. That's why the Megilla uses the word 'found'.

Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz explains: 'To all the people found' – The king made the second feast not only for the residents of Shushan but rather for all the people from surrounding states, in order to spread word of his greatness and goodness. This way, even those located far away who didn't participate in the feast still knew about Ahashverosh's endless 'kindness'.

And where did the king invite the common people? To the court of the king's garden! Where only important people were generally allowed. He wanted to demonstrate that the common man was no less important in his eyes than an officer.

There, in the garden, the king ensured that each participant enjoyed a thorough sensory experience that would remain a powerful emotional memory with positive overtones for the king.

How did he do this?

First, the location. The king's garden was a huge, majestic park – with trees, vegetables, flowers, fruits of all kinds. All this was expertly organized and designed, to impress and astound.

Next, food. For seven days, the servants served the people elaborate and delicious meals in gold and "vessels of different vessels". Not only were the dishes different from each other, in seemingly endless supply, but they were different from anything these people had ever seen. These were dishes beyond anyone's dreams.

All this the king did in order to prevent anyone from even thinking about trying to surpass him. It was important for the king to make himself supreme – to confirm that 'there is no one but him' in the eyes of the people.

Clearly, we see that Ahashverosh's worldview and behavior constitute a rebellion against Hashem. If there is no one above Ahashverosh that means Hashem does not exist. In other words, at the core of Ahashverosh's reign is a hidden war against Judaism and against the Jews who represent Hashem's existence.

As a result, when the detractors of Jews, who were building the Temple in Jerusalem, wrote a libelous letter to the king, he had no qualms about halting construction.

Hazal say that "in the third year" refers to 3 years after the Temple construction was cancelled. Following the cancellation, the king made the party to further his agenda.

The Maharal says (Or Hadash, p. 78) that if Israel has a kingdom, the nations of the world will not be able to rule it and vice versa. If the Jews yearn for redemption, it serves as a cancellation of the nations' rule over the world.

As a result, the Jewish kingdom was a major threat to Ahashverosh, who knew that as long as there was a Jewish kingdom his own throne wasn't secure.

Hazal teach that the purpose of the feasts was to prove that the king had conquered the Jewish kingdom which had no chance of rebirth – "she fell and will not rise again, the maiden of Israel" (Amos 5,2).

There is no mention of this purpose in the Megilla because the agenda was hidden and veiled within the image of showing love, kindness, equality, respect, etc.

Because the king's overall policy was pluralism and equality, he could not publicly flaunt his hatred of the Jews. But the 'cat was let out of the bag' when Ahashverosh readily befriended Haman and okayed his plan to destroy the Jews.

And abundant royal wine in accordance with the king's

bounty – The guests at the second feast were served special elegant wine found only in the king's cellars.

The expression "Keyad Hamelech" in the verse hints at additional understandings: the 'Yosef Lekach' interprets that there was a variety of wines served from throughout the kingdom.

This was done intentionally, in accordance with the king's agenda, so that the guests understood how far and how deep the king's power reached, and developed both a sense of awe and fear of him.

Another possibility that the 'Yosef Lekach' suggests is that the word 'yad' refers to a part mentioned in Shmuel B' (19,44). In other words, everyone who wanted to, drank as though he was the king. This was the monarch's way to show 'equality'

between himself and the people and to make them love and feel close to him. So we see that the choice of wines served cultivated both love and fear. Ahashverosh made sure that the expression of love didn't detract from the fear of him.

The drinking was as was legally mandated without constraint

– No one was coerced into drinking; no one was told what or how much to drink. Wine was served as each person wished. Moreover, Hazal comment that Ahashverosh made sure that kosher food was available for the Jews (Pirke Drabi Eliezer chapter 49).

For so did the king e s t a b l i s h for all the officials of his palace to do as the will of each and every person – This is what the King ordered, that there would be no coercion to drink.

Establish – If it said 'commanded' we could have thought that 'to do as the will of each and every person' only applied to serving wine. The use of the word 'establish' implies that 'to do as the will of each and every person' was a foundational law of Ahashverosh's kingdom – to grant individual freedoms and independence to all the nations and individuals.

Why do we learn about this ruling style specifically from the wine service policy?

The phrase 'as was legally mandated without constraint' also meant that there were security protocols in place that prevented violent behavior due to excessive drinking. Rav Shlomo Alkabetz (Manot Halevi, ח"סו"ט p. 69) explains that the king knew that it would be impossible to satisfy everyone's desires because they were often contradictory. He, therefore, provided limitless wine but maintained order.

For this reason the Megilla say "kirzon ish vaish" – **As** the will of each person – it was as close as possible to each person's will, because some people's fulfillment may cause them to harm others. Thus, the limitations on drinking wine were "kadat" – as was legally mandated.

Because the general goal was to ensure each person's freedom and liberty, a legal limit was placed on the drinking.

So, back to the question: Why do we learn about the ruling style of Ahashverosh through the example of wine drinking?

1. To show us that actually the entire Persian 'legal system' was based on physical drives, as exemplified by drinking wine.
2. To show the inherent contradiction between the will to fulfill each person's every desire and the need to maintain public order and ensure individual satisfaction.

Ahashverosh understood that there was a contradiction and still tried to 'hold both ends of the rope'. So why does the Megilla stress 'kirzon ish vaish' instead of simply using the word 'kulam' – everyone?

Because the king truly aimed to satisfy as many detailed desires as possible. This goal was full of hubris because the world is full of evil wills so of course it's never a good idea, or even possible, to fulfil everyone's will.

The Midrash addresses this foolish, egotistical ruling style:

“To do as every man desired – The Holy One blessed be He said: ‘I do not fulfill the wishes of all My creatures, and you seek 'to do as every man desired?' The way of the world is that if two men seek to marry one woman, can she marry them both? Rather, it is either to one, or to the other. Likewise, if two ships were waiting in harbor, one seeking a north wind and one seeking a south wind, can one wind propel both of them together? Rather, it is either for one or for the other. Tomorrow, two people will come before you for judgment, a Jewish man, and an adversary and enemy, can you satisfy both of them? Rather, you elevate one and hang the other”¹.

¹ Esther Raba 2: 14.

In addition to the fact that this method of reigning is hopeless and full of hubris, its main point is to remove the existence of absolute truth. If everyone's desires are legitimate no matter what their moral status, then there is no universal code of behavior for everyone, and no single agenda to which everyone is committed. And so, the main ideal is each person's will and desire.

As an aside, it is important to clarify that the existence of a universal truth, that the world was created to fulfill, **in no way** negates the huge variety of skills that exist. As a matter of fact, the truth can be revealed through this variety.

The more varieties that are encompassed in the truth, the more true it is.

In Chumash Shmot (34, 14) the Tora said: "Hashem Kana Shmo El Kana Hu" – Hashem will zealously prevent an untrue agenda from controlling the world. Idol worshippers, however, preach endless tolerance, acceptance of all views, etc. Why?

Because idol worship is individual – each part can exist by itself. For example, when the Philistines captured the Holy Ark they placed it in their god's granary because they had no problem putting a foreign god in their temple.

This 'tolerance' of every person's desires according to Rav Kook is a weak tolerance that weakens life because it comes from extreme individualism that allows no room for general good (Orot, Zeronim 6).

When there is no absolute truth, there seems to be no purpose to life. How can someone be loyal to a value if the opposite value is equally legitimate? The pluralism 'freezes' the mind, leading to shallow thinking. In other words, why invest thought and contemplation of the purpose of life if it does not really exist?

True heroic tolerance comes from an awareness of a single absolute truth: "Shema Israel Hashem Elohenu Hashem Echad". This verse is an expression of absolute truth that both encompasses everything and gives everything a place to belong².

Jewish tolerance is elevated – it's capable of seeing within the myriad of details a single ideal deep inside each one. Thus, the tolerance elevates each individual without missing anyone, enabling each person to express the ideal content. As we read the Megilla it becomes increasingly clear how Ahashverosh's worldview is imaginary and false. It's not compatible with the way the world works, and in the end the world 'spits' this worldview out. Right now, the world requires deep, far-

² See our article "Shema Israel Hashem Elohenu Hashem Echad".

reaching clarification regarding which are good desires and which are bad ones. There is, undoubtedly, a need to root out the evil and not make peace with it or give it autonomy.