Address to HGS Hashkamah Service on occasion of

my 2nd Barmitzvah 4th March 2023

"Insights into Megillat Esther"

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

This coming Monday night we shall be reading Megillat Esther, and I'd like to focus on two aspects of Haman's character. It's a story of one man's personal vendetta against the Jewish people. The canard he employed to turn the king against the Jews provided a paradigm for antisemites throughout the ages:
Yeshno am echad mefuzar um'forad bein ha'amim - "There is a people, scattered and dispersed among the nations of your kingdom*"* –
v'dateihem shonot mikkol am, "whose laws are different from those of all the rest of the peoples," –
ve'et datei hamelech einam osim, "and who do not keep the king's laws."

A wicked exaggeration, it goes without saying. Yet also a clever psychological ploy on Haman's part, employing 'the big lie,' painting the Jews as rebels against the king's law, which was a capital offence – that of sedition – not only in Persia, but in any other country at that time. The king had no choice, therefore, but to accede to Haman's call for their destruction. After all, Haman was only doing exactly what he was appointed to do: to be the custodian of the law of the land.

Haman knew how to use language to best advantage. He tellingly uses the identical word, *dat*, (*dateihem*..."their laws" and *datei hamelech*, "the king's laws") in order to present the law of the state and the Jews' religious law as two legal systems in collision. This verbal association was, of course a ploy, a travesty of the truth. For, although the Jews did possess their own *dat*, in the sense of a religious law and belief-system, this could never have constituted a

threat to state law. Judaism was sufficiently malleable, and its ethics and morals sufficiently demanding as to guarantee smooth co-existence.

Ironically, it was precisely in, and in relation to, the diaspora Jews of Haman's own country – that of neo-Persia/Babylonia –
that the great Talmudist, Shemuel (3rd cent. CE), formulated the principle of *dina d'malchuta dinah,* 'the Law of the land is our law,' to ensure harmonious coexistence between Jews and their host countries (see Tal. *Git*. 10b; *Ned*. 28a).

Haman's allegation was also a non-sequitor. For, simply because – *dateihem shonot* –
"they have their own religious code," it does not follow that – *v'et datei hamelech einam osim* – "they cannot be subject to the king's law." For, historically, there was no Persian law regulating the religious life of any of the vast number of the minority faiths to which the empire was host.

It's a supreme irony, therefore, that the Jews of modern-day Israel are so bitterly divided over how to accommodate *dateihem* –
Jewish religious practice – with *datei ha-melech*, state law, and that this is engendering such antipathy between the religious and non-religious.

If, in ancient Babylonia, halachah found a way to co-exist with state law, we may wonder why our Israeli rabbinate cannot follow the same enlightened direction, and demonstrate that the ways of Torah are truly *darchei no'am*, 'ways of pleasantness' ,compromise, peace, and concern for all citizens, and not only for the totally observant?

* * *

For my second insight into Haman I need to provide

short preface, and describe the institution of מילי דבדיחותא.This refers to a light-hearted prelude to the day's lecture, created by some of the great Talmudic masters, notably Rabba bar Nachmani, considered the master of the genre (see Tal. Shab. 30b). Its object was to put the students in a relaxed state before the mentally-taxing lecture and subsequent debate and deliberations of the Bet HaMidrash.

Now, the Talmud asks: *Haman min haTorah minayin* ('Where do we find a reference to Haman in the five books of the Torah?': Tal. *Hul.* 139b)). It is truly a strange question given that Haman lived almost 900 years after the giving of the Torah. The Talmud provides an equally enigmatic answer, quoting the verse from Genesis 3:11 wherein God demands an answer of Adam to the question, ***Hamin*** *ha'etz asher tziviticha l'vilti achol mimmenu achalta*? ("Is it that you've eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?"). The Talmud is highlighting here the fact that the word *hamin* – "Is it that from" – in that verse is spelled with the same letters as the name "Haman," and constitutes, therefore, a reference to Haman in the Torah.

What a strange suggestion, that, just because the word *hamin* and the name *Haman* share the same letters, we may assume that they are somehow interconnected! Is the Talmud really being serious?

Well, one answer might be that it isn't, and that its question and answer might have originated in what we referred to at the outset as a מילי דבדיחותא, 'a light-hearted prelude' to the day's main lecture. Or, of course, it may have

originated as some Purim Torah, still popular to this day. However, I prefer to view it as containing an important moral teaching which is more in character with the ancient Talmudists and their dearly-held view, as expressed in Pirkei Avot – הפך בה והפך בה דכולה בה- *'Turn the words of Torah over, and turn them over again, for everything can be found within it.'* So they ingeniously 'read into' the Torah text teachings that were inspired by even the most tenuous of textual associations.

So it is from this perspective that we must approach the Talmud's question and answer about Haman and Adam. For, if everything, including every human characteristic, has its roots in the Torah – and why not, given that just as history repeats itself, so do personality type, strength and frailties – then it is surely a valid question, 'Where do we find a Haman type in the Torah?'

So, what was Haman's mind-set? Well, he rose to power, as second in command of the most powerful empire of its day. He had wealth, fame and power. The whole country bowed down to him, with the exception of one Jew. And because that Jew wouldn't bow down, he goes home and tells his wife and family, *v'chol zeh aynenu shoveh li* - "None of this is worth anything to me, as long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting down (*yoshev*) in the king's gate."

Really? None of this is worth it? Everything is worthless just because one teeny bit of your ego has been bruised? All your fame and fortune is meaningless because of the slight to you by one individual in the entire 127 provinces you control!

Haman was the model of what psychologists refer to as 'the personality disorder of Excessive Power Strivings.' He couldn't enjoy the blessings he was endowed with, or how far he'd risen, or the thought that there was someone who could see through his basic shallowness and who wasn't in any way impressed by his wealth, power and position. Haman was obsessed by the need to have everyone and everything in thrall to him. Even one person independent of him, or one object denied to his service, was sufficient to shake his confidence and faith in himself. If I were a psychologist, I might dub this, 'the Putin syndrome'.

And this is how I believe the Talmud's question and answer should be understood: namely, as a query whether a biblical precedence for such a self-destructive obsession with what one is missing – to the extent that it cancels out entirely the enjoyment of what one has – might be found in the Torah

And the Talmud's answer is in the affirmative. It is to be found in the episode of Adam. He was placed in the most beautiful and idyllic garden, with every type of tree, plant, or fruit, his for the taking, whenever, and however much, he desired.

His life was one of perfect bliss. But, because he was denied the fruit of just one of the trees – that of the knowledge of good and evil – he was profoundly miserable. So miserable that he found no peace of mind until he yielded to Eve's importuning for him to eat of it. It doesn't seem to have been particularly tasty or special, but that didn't matter, for, the mere fact of it being prohibited to him gave him the sense of being deprived. That tree suddenly became, in his psyche, infinitely more alluring than all the rest combined. And in that way Adam foreshadowed the character flaw of Haman.

So, apart from the message of faith in God, and courage to confront evil, there is a powerful ethical teaching lurking beneath the narrative of the Megillat Esther story. It is that we should stop focusing on what we don't have, but, instead, celebrate the manifold blessings that we do.

* * *

The question is frequently asked why the name of God does not appear in the Megillah. The popular answer is that it was first written in the form of a secular royal missive, bearing the royal seal (Est. 8:10), dictated by Mordechai

to the king's scribes and circulated by them, in every language and dialect, to all the satraps of the empire, as well as to all the wider Jewish communities, as a record of the events leading up to the unmasking of Haman and the granting of the right of self-defence to the Jews (8:11-14). This was followed by a further letter, written by Mordechai following the Jewish victory, calling on the Jews to mark it as a festival, with feasting, rejoicing, *mishloach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim* (9:20-23), and then by a final letter (*iggeret ha-purim ha-zot ha-sheinit:* 9:29-31) sent by Esther to give her support to Mordechai's call for the Jews to regard Purim as an official festival. A copy of these documents was then preserved among the royal records, and hence Mordechai's unwillingness to have the holy name of God included among any secular state documents.

Mordechai might also have feared that, had he included prayers and thanksgiving to God, the royal scribes might well have replaced these with the names of the Persian deities, as was their practice. This would have had the very opposite effect of sowing confusion among the Jewish recipient communities, which might well have prompted them to reject outright both the Megillah account and the festival itself. Hence Mordechai's decision to omit the divine name.

Another explanation I suggest is that Mordechai's omission of the divine name may have been part of his policy of training the Jews of the diaspora to become resilient and self-reliant in order to be able to face any subsequent, Haman-like, anti-Jewish threats.

Hitherto, the typical Jewish response to danger had been to cry out to God for help or for a miracle. Mordechai was a pragmatist, however, who foresaw the manifold problems that lay ahead for an exiled, diaspora Jewry attempting to put down roots in countries with alien values, religions, and practices. King Achashverosh already provided him with a paradigm for situations wherein

the state would not feel able to protect its Jews but would leave them – להקהל ולעמוד על נפשם– to have 'to organise and defend themselves' (8:11).

So, Mordechai inculcated into his communities the principle – later enunciated in the Talmudic maxim אין סומכין על הנס- of non-reliance on miracles or heavenly intervention (Tal. *Ta'an*. 9a). He certainly also foresaw situations wherein Jews would be conscripted to give aid to host countries' armies, or, as in the case of Haman, to deal with internal anti-Jewish attacks. And hence, we suggest, Mordechai tailored his account of the Haman threat to emphasize that essential requisite of self-reliance, by avoiding any reference to appeals to God, prayers for help, or thanksgiving for victory.

He did not rule God totally out of the picture, however; and hence the subtle allusion to Him as underlying the call for the three days of fasting that Esther demanded of her community. Tellingly, however, while she refers to the need for fasting, she makes no mention of the prayers or petition to God that always accompany it. But, as ibn Ezra frequently observes, *v'hameivin yavin*, 'whoever is discerning, will recognise the allusion.'

Purim same'ach

Rabbi Jeffrey