

Shiur #08: "Mordekhai Did Not Bow, Nor Did He Prostrate Himself"

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"All of the king's servants at the king's gate bow and prostrate themselves before Haman, for so the king has commanded." Attention should be paid to the fact that the narrator emphasizes "the king's servants who were at the king's gate." Were the other citizens exempt from this order? Should we conclude from this that Haman did not travel about the country, and therefore the focus is on those who sat at the king's gate? Or is it perhaps meant as a preface to the instance of Mordekhai who, although being counted as one of those who sat at the king's gate, refused to bow? We cannot be certain. As suggested in the previous shiur, Haman's role is related to security and protecting the king; perhaps it is for this reason that the king's instruction concerning bowing to him is meant for those who frequent the royal court. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the king's command does apply to Mordekhai, who nevertheless refuses to bow and prostrate himself to Haman.

The question that bothers the reader, of course, is – why? Why does Mordekhai choose not to bow to the king's second-in-command, thereby violating a royal decree, knowing that he is thereby endangering his position and perhaps even his life?[1]

Just as the narrator gives no explanation for Esther's silence as to her identity, so he now provides no explanation – at least, not explicitly – for Mordekhai's refusal to bow to Haman. This comes as some surprise, for we are speaking of a most significant point in the narrative: it is this very situation, developing into the tension in the king's court, that generates the whole story! This omission – not the only instance, as we have pointed out – causes the reader to pay attention to the hidden levels of the narrative. He is forced to ask himself what the narrator is hiding from him, what the hidden motives of the various characters might be, and what messages the narrative is trying to convey.

At the outset it should be emphasized that because of the illustrations that accompany many Esther texts, one may be inclined to misunderstand Mordekhai's behavior in this episode. Various illustrations show all the king's servants bowing and prostrating themselves before Haman, with Mordekhai standing among them, glaring defiantly at Haman, not stirring from his place. Below is a typical example, from the website of the Israeli Ministry of Education, Southern Region ([www.edu-negev.gov.il](http://www.edu-negev.gov.il)), which features an illustrated version of Esther:

But the language of the text actually paints a very different picture. First we are told that Mordekhai "did not bow, nor did he prostrate himself" – and that Haman fails to notice this. It is only after the king's servants draw Haman's attention to the phenomenon ("They told Haman, to see whether Mordekhai's words would stand" – [4]), that we read: "Haman saw that Mordekhai did not bow or prostrate himself to him, and Haman was full of wrath"

(5). In other words, until the servants point it out, Haman is not conscious of the fact that Mordekhai is not bowing to him. It is possible that this information is meant to tell us something about Haman's personality, as Fox suggests (echoing Bardtke:(

"We are to picture him wafting through the crowd seeing only the adulation he is receiving, noticing no one individually, not even the one person who – as everyone else sees – remains unbowed and thus most conspicuous" (Fox, 45.(

We might argue, though, that it is not at all obvious that "everyone else sees." It is quite possible that the fact that Haman fails to notice is meant, rather, to say something about Mordekhai's behavior: he is not demonstrating brazen disrespect (at least, not at this stage of the narrative). The situation that is depicted is one in which whenever Haman approaches the scene, Mordekhai finds a reason to be "forced" to leave, to be facing the opposite direction, etc. Apparently, Mordekhai sought to evade situations in which he would have to show Haman that he was not bowing to him. After some days or weeks, the king's servants who spent time in Mordekhai's proximity noticed that he evaded the obligation of bowing, each time with a different pretext; only after Mordekhai told them "that he was a Jew" (4) did they understand that all of these evasions shared the same principled motive. And it was only after the phenomenon was pointed out to Haman that he paid attention to it. It would seem likely that Haman deliberately approached again and again, until Mordekhai was no longer able to avoid direct confrontation. Then Haman knew it for certain.

This clarification is important, of course, for an understanding of Mordekhai's motives: this was not open rebellion, but rather an attempt at evasion. Why, then, was Mordekhai refusing to bow down? This leads us to another question – how does the narrator judge Mordekhai's choice not to bow down? Is he praised for this, or is there criticism of his stance?

Let us address the second aspect – the text's implied evaluation of Mordekhai's behavior. Two opposing approaches are discernible all the way back to the most ancient Jewish exegesis on Esther. Some opinions take a positive view, emphasizing that in contrast to the Jews of that generation who bowed to Haman, Mordekhai remained true to his faith and his principles and did not bow. Thus, for example, the Midrash presents God's explanation for why He accompanies Israel in exile to wherever they go: "For as long as I am with them, they do not assume a bad name. In Egypt I was with them, and the nation was found to be whole (perfect), as it is written, 'An enclosed garden is my sister, my bride.' In Babylon I was with them and the nation was found to be whole, as it is written, 'For if so it must be, our God Whom we serve.' In Mede I was with them and the nation was found to be whole, as it is written: 'Mordekhai did not bow, nor did he prostrate himself.' In Greece, they did not write upon the horn of the ox that they have no portion in the God of Israel..." (Shemot Rabba, parasha 15,16). This is the generally accepted view among the early sages and the medieval commentators: Mordekhai represents the "wholeness" (as the Midrash puts it), the wholehearted faith of the nation of Israel.

At the same time, some of the sages express sharp criticism of Mordekhai's actions. In an attempt to solve the contradiction between the verse that introduces Mordekhai (2:5), first presenting him as a member of the Tribe of Yehuda ("a man of Yehuda" – ish yehudi) and then stating that he was from the Tribe of Binyamin ("ish yemini"), Rabba quotes the nation of Israel as declaring: "See what the 'yehudi' did, and how the 'yemini' has repaid

me. What the 'yehudi' did – that David did not kill Shim'i, from whom Mordekhai was descended, and it was he who aroused Haman's zealousness. And how the 'yemini' repaid me – that Shaul did not kill Agag, from whom Haman was descended, and he brought trouble upon Israel." (Megilla 12b-13a.)

The words that Rabba places in the mouth of the nation of Israel, as it were, express two-way criticism. There is criticism of Shaul, who did not kill Agag, thereby allowing one of Agag's descendants – Haman – to now be threatening Israel. But there is also criticism of David, who did not kill Shim'i; one of the descendants of Shim'i is Mordekhai, and it is because of Haman's fury towards him that catastrophe looms over Israel. It is difficult to imagine a more outspoken criticism of Mordekhai, the hero of Esther. Rabba (an Amora) draws a certain parallel between Shaul and David who, out of exaggerated mercifulness, facilitated the appearance of Mordekhai and Haman! It would be better, to Rabba's view, for Mordekhai never to have existed and not to have caused the evil decree by refusing to bow to Haman, thereby inviting his wrath.[2]

It would seem that the author's own attitude may be ascertained by means of a literary device that is common in Esther – allusion to a different biblical narrative. After the king's servants see that Mordekhai is not bowing or prostrating himself, we read: "And it was, when they spoke to him daily and he did not listen to them" (3:4). This expression serves to direct the reader to the story of Yosef and the wife of Potifar (Bereishit 39). There, Potifar's wife begs Yosef to sleep with her, but he refuses: "And it was, when she spoke to Yosef daily and he did not listen to her" (Bereishit 39:10). The similarity between the two verses is not coincidental, and even if its broader significance pertains to a wider parallel between the two narratives (which we shall address later on), this allusion also makes an individual contribution within the present, more limited context.[3]. It seems that the reason for its insertion here has something to do with the narrator's evaluation of Mordekhai's actions. Just as it is clear that the Torah judges favorably Yosef's refusal to sleep with his master's wife, so – hints the author – we should likewise evaluate Mordekhai's refusal to bow to Haman in a positive light. Just as Yosef deflected the continuous attempts by Potifar's wife to persuade him, so Mordekhai succeeded in deflecting the questioning by the king's servants, remaining true to his principles and not bowing to Haman.

We have thus solved our other question: the author hints at a positive evaluation of Mordekhai's behavior. But our more fundamental question remains: why does Mordekhai refuse to bow? It should be noted that elsewhere in Tanakh we do not encounter any problem with the idea of bowing before a person or a king. Thus, for example, Avraham prostrates himself before his three guests (Bereishit 18:2); he also prostrates himself before the Hittites (Bereishit 23:7,12). Yaakov, too, prostrates himself before Esav (Bereishit 33:3), and his sons follow his example when they bow before the "Egyptian ruler" who is giving them trouble (43:28). Moshe also prostrates himself before his father-in-law (Shemot 18:7). Mefiboshet, Yoav, Avshalom, Achima'atz, Aravna, the prophet Natan, and others bowed before David, and there are many other examples. It is difficult to propose that there is any formal religious prohibition against the actual act of bowing before a mortal king. Why, then, Mordekhai's stubborn refusal?

Personal Motive

Some opinions have viewed Mordekhai's refusal as the result of the sort of personal vendetta that is not uncommon in a royal court (or, indeed, in any political setting). It should be remembered that, prior to noting Haman's promotion, the text described how Mordekhai saved the king's life. Perhaps he felt that the great honor that was being lavished on Haman should rightfully have been his.[4] The roots of this approach are to be found in several midrashim of Chazal (even if it is not the prevailing approach), which describe the situation prior to the story of Esther, in which Haman was forced to sell himself as a slave to Mordekhai, and therefore Mordekhai refused to bow before him, for he was actually Mordekhai's servant.[5]

### Religious Motive

A different direction – more prevalent in the midrashei Chazal and among the medieval commentators – views Mordekhai's refusal as being related to idolatry. According to this approach, Haman "made himself into a god" (Rashi, ad loc.), or at least wore a small idol around his neck, so that anyone who bowed before him was actually also bowing to the idol: "When Achashverosh commanded [everyone] to bow to Haman, he [Haman] placed some idolatry upon his chest, with the intention of them bowing to idols" (Esther Rabba, parasha 6,2 - somewhat like the Christian priests who go about wearing crosses.) Brockington adopts this view.[6]

### Nationalistic Motive

Yet a different view maintains that Mordekhai refused to bow down to Haman because of the broader national struggle between the Jews and Haman, representing Amalek. Even if in terms of formal halakha there was nothing wrong with bowing to Haman, Mordekhai's identification with his Jewishness, along with the eternal battle between his nation and Amalek and all that he stood for, represented the basis for his refusal. The roots of this view, too, are to be found in midrashei Chazal, and there are some modern scholars who echo it – such as Bush:

"Both the way in which the narrator takes for granted that it relates to Mordecai's Jewishness and the absence of any other reasonable explanation gives great credence to the view that the narrator assumed his readers would recognize the tribal and racial enmity implied by the patronymics of the two men." [7]

In attempting to clarify this issue it should be noted that the first approach – according to which Mordekhai is motivated by personal ambitions related to power struggles within the royal court – is problematic; we might almost declare such a situation impossible. There are several proofs to support the idea that Mordekhai's refusal to bow is connected, rather, to his Jewish identity (whether its religious or national aspect, or both):

a. First, there is the sole explicit information provided in the text as to the reason for his refusal: "For he had told them that he was a Jew" (3:4). This statement may be understood in various ways, but what is common to every different possibility is, clearly, that the reason Mordekhai gives to the king's servants for his failure to bow is related to him being "a Jew".

b. The fact of Mordekhai's Jewish identity also stands at the center of Haman's decree against "all of the Jews throughout all the kingdom of Achashverosh" (3:6). Apparently, Haman too regarded Mordekhai's refusal to bow as connected to the fact that he was

Jewish, and therefore his anger and his decree extended to all of the Jews – Mordekhai's people.

c. The expression used by the narrator is not just "Prostrating himself," but rather "To bow and to prostrate himself." This language appears both in king's command, "And all of the king's servants who were at the king's gate would bow and prostrate themselves before Haman" (2), and in noting Mordekhai's refusal, "Mordekhai would not bow, nor would he prostrate himself" (5). The combination is important for our discussion because in other places in Tanakh it refers to religious prostration. There is no instance in which a person "bows and prostrates himself" before a mortal king – nor, for that matter, before anyone else. Here too, then, it is reasonable to assume that there was indeed a religious undertone to the obligation of bowing to Haman, as well as Mordekhai's refusal to do so.

d. Even after Haman's decree against all of the Jews, Mordekhai maintains his refusal to bow down (5:9). This image comes after Mordekhai has convinced Esther to endanger her own life by appearing before the king to plead for her people (chapter 4). Seemingly, the most obvious step would be for Mordekhai to apologize to Haman for not bowing to him, and to cease this behavior – but this does not happen. It is difficult to imagine that once Mordekhai is aware that his actions are endangering his entire nation, and after his impassioned plea to Esther that she endanger herself in order to save her people, he himself would still not perform so trifling an action as bowing before Haman. We must conclude that the action is not "trifling" in Mordekhai's eyes – in other words, it is not a matter of power struggles and court politics, but rather a most fundamental matter of principle.

e. There is a broad system of parallels between Esther and the Book of Daniel. Suffice it to mention that both narratives describe a gathering of young men or young virgins "of good appearance," among whom there are also some Jews in exile. It is specifically they who find favor in the eyes of the ruler, and they are ultimately chosen for positions in the royal court. Further on in both narratives there are Jews who refuse to bow down and prostrate themselves at the king's command, and as a result they are faced with genocidal decrees. Ultimately, those who sought to harm them are punished, and they are dealt the same fate that they had planned for the Jews (hanging on the gallows, burning). The parallel is extensive and of significance; we shall not explore it fully here.[8] However, this parallel, too, strengthens the reading of Mordekhai's refusal as having a religious or nationalist motive and not just a personal one, since in Daniel, Chananya, Mishael and Azarya refuse to bow before the golden idol established by Nevukhadnetzar because it represents idolatry. There, the bowing is of a religious nature, and the young men refuse to bow because they are Jews. Likewise – in light of the comparison – it seems that in our case, too, Mordekhai refuses because he is a Jew.[9]

Having rejected the possibility of personal conflict as the sole motive for Mordekhai's refusal to bow to Haman, our questions remains: does Mordekhai regard such an act as idolatry, and therefore he avoids it (or, as Amos Chakham states more gently: "Apparently, Mordekhai believed that bowing and prostrating oneself before a mortal was a hint (yesh ba mishum avak shel) of idolatry"[10]), or was the focus of his refusal the nationalist aspect: a Jew does not bow before Haman, the Agagite?

The two readings are similar in essence, and therefore we may leave this controversy unsolved. At the same time, it should be noted that religious signs are absent from the literal level of the text; the focus of the narrative is not a religious struggle, but rather a nationalist one. The main theme of the plot is "the Jews" versus "those who hate them" in their Persian exile. Our inclination, therefore, is to view Mordekhai's refusal against the

background of this theme: Mordekhai the Jew refuses to bow before Haman – who represents, in this story (if only by implication), Amalek. As Laniak correctly summarizes:

"The issue is not that as a Jew he will refuse to bow down to anyone. Rather, Mordecai, the Jew, will not bow down to Haman, the Agagite." [11]

Mordekhai as Vashti (and Haman as Achashverosh)

To conclude our discussion of Mordekhai's refusal to bow, let us recall that this is not the first image in Esther of someone from the royal court of Achashverosh refusing to obey the king's command. In chapter 1 it was Vashti who refused to come to the king after he had commanded that she "show her beauty to the people and the princes" (1:11). [12] Correspondingly, there are the two characters whose pride is thereby injured: in chapter 1 – Achashverosh; in chapter 3 – Haman. [13] A close reading reveals a clear connection between these two images, both in terms of the development of the plot and in the linguistic texture:

a. The result of both instances of violation of an order is that letters are dispatched "to all the provinces of the king" (1:22; 3:13). The initiator of this dispatch, in each case, is one of the king's officers. [14]

b. Although it is only one person who violates the order, the ensuing decree is broadened to include an entire population. [15] In both cases, the edict focuses on the specific sector represented by the violator of the law: the king's anger towards Vashti is broadened to all the women (1:17-18); Haman's anger towards Mordekhai is broadened to all the Jews (3:6.)

c. Following Vashti's refusal to come before the king we read, "When they would say: King Achashverosh commanded that Vashti the queen be brought before him and she did not come" (1:17). Similarly, following Mordekhai's refusal to bow, we read: "And it was that they would say to him daily, but he did not listen to them" (3:4). The Hebrew expression "be-omram" is rare; it appears in only one other place in all of Tanakh (Tehillim 42:11.)

d. Both cases of broadening of the decree to a wide population are accompanied by a similar expression of scorn. In generalizing the episode of Vashti, Memukhan declares: "...to make their husbands disdainful in their eyes... and much disdain and wrath" (1:17-18). In generalizing Mordekhai's act, Haman finds it "disdainful in his eyes to lay hands upon Mordekhai alone, for they had told him of Mordekhai's nationality" (3:6.)

Is there any significance to this rather surprising connection between the two violators of orders? It would seem to contribute on two different levels of reading. Firstly, as regards the literary molding of the narrative, when reading of Mordekhai's violation of the king's order one is reminded of Vashti's violation, creating an immediate escalation of tension. In other words, despite the lack of logic in Haman broadening his decree to include all of the Jews, and despite the fact that in an orderly regime such a move would never receive royal approval, when the reader recalls the episode of Vashti and the edict that was promulgated in its wake, he is prepared for the worst. Although it seems quite improbable and altogether illogical, this is how Achashverosh's kingdom operates – as the reader has already learned from the story of Vashti.

Beyond this, however, the connection also contributes to one of the most important messages of the narrative – even though it is concealed from the literal level. When the two episodes are read in close succession, the reader senses that violation of the king's

orders is one of the subjects that the narrative is exploring. We might formulate this idea differently: loyalty to the Persian king is one of the issues hinted at by the narrator. Should the Jews in exile bow their heads before the Persian king, or is their room for transgressing his orders? Vashti, in this sense, represents a model worthy of emulation: she is a woman who maintains her principles, not agreeing to debase herself by participating in a drunken orgy. Were Mordekhai to bow and prostrate himself, it would reflect badly upon him and as well as upon all the Jews of Shushan. By refusing to bow to Haman, on the other hand, he is presented as someone who has a sense of proportion with regard to the edicts of a transient, mortal king, in his obeisance towards a different King – who, while never being mentioned explicitly in the text, is sensed throughout the plot. In this sense, the allusion mentioned previously, to the story of Yosef and the wife of Potifar, assumes its full significance: a person's ability to refuse the order of his master (or his master's wife) testifies to a profound understanding of the identity of the true Master.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]It is reasonable to assume that at this stage, Mordekhai does not imagine that he is also endangering his entire nation, although – as we shall see further on – some of the Sages maintain that he should have taken this possibility into consideration.

[2]The polemic is clearly felt in this alternative Midrash: "David said, with Divine inspiration, A man will descend from him [Shim'i] and the Holy One will perform great salvation through him and by his merit, he will be called 'ish yemini' [Mordekhai]. The Holy One said to David: Since you spared Shim'i from death so that that righteous man could be born, I shall ascribe him to your tribe – as it is written: 'Ish yehudi...'" (Midrash Panim Acherim, second version, parasha 6.)

"" [3]And it was when they spoke to him daily' – the children of Rachel had experience of daily attempts at persuasion: concerning Yosef it is written, 'And it was, when she spoke to Yosef daily and he did not listen to her.'" (Midrash Panim Acherim, second version, parasha 3.)

[4]This idea is proposed, for example, by Paton, 187; E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, New York 1967.

[5]The Midrash is brought in *Yalkut Shimoni*, Esther, 1056.

[6]H. L. Brockington, *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament: The Readings Adopted by the Translators of the New English Bible*, Oxford 1973, p. 231.

[7]Bush, in his commentary *ad loc.* See also Moore, pp. 36-37; Rabbi Y. Medan, "Mordekhai Did not Bow, Not Did He Prostrate Himself – Why?", in *Hadassa Hi Esther*, Alon Shevut 5757, pp. 151-170, (esp. p. 167.)

[8]See, for example, the Introduction by G.Ch. Cohen to *Esther*, *Da'at Mikra*, Jerusalem 5733, pp. 14-16.

[9]Fox suggests that since Mordekhai is portrayed in *Esther* in such a positive manner, it is difficult to imagine that the narrator is hinting that his motives are personal. (Fox, p. 43). Still, it is possible that Mordekhai develops during the course of the narrative, and that even if he is ultimately portrayed in a positive light, there may still be veiled criticism of his actions at the beginning.

[10]Chakham, p. 22

[11]Laniak, p. 70, n. 7

[12]Levenson notes that Mordekhai's violation of the king's command is formulated more strongly than that of Vashti. Concerning Mordekhai we read, "Why do transgress the

king's command" (3:3), while in Vashti's case we are told that she "did not perform the king's word" (1:15). J. D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library, London - Louisville 1997.

[13]Laniak, pp. 71-72.

[14]According to the Midrash, Memukhan is Haman, such that the initiator in both cases is actually the same person.

[15] Indeed, the word "all" stands out prominently on both cases: "All the officers and all the people throughout all the provinces of King Achashverosh' (1:17); "All the Jews in all of Achashverosh's kingdom – Mordekhai's people" (3:6).