

Shiur #18: "Also Charvona Is Remembered for Good"

By Dr. JonatHan Grossman

Following Achashverosh's shock and outrage at finding Haman "fallen" upon the divan where Esther lies ("Do you then mean also to assault the queen while I am present in the house?!"), we read: "... u-fenei Haman chafu" ("They covered Haman's face") (7:8). This expression is difficult to interpret, in our context.[1] The word "chafu" appears to mean "covered"; in most cases it appears in the context of a head covering, as in: "David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went up, and his head was covered ("ve-rosh lo chafu'i"), and he went barefoot, and all the people who were with him – each covered his head ("chafu ish rosho"), and they went up, weeping as they went" (II Shemuel 15:30). Another example: "Because of the land, which is cracked - for there has been no rain on the land - the farmers are ashamed; they cover their heads ("chafu rosham") (Yirmiyahu 14:4). Ibn Ezra interprets the word "chafu" as a transitive verb, an action that others perform upon Haman: "They – i.e., the servants - covered his face... for such was the law of the kings of Persia: that if the king was angry with a person, the king's servants would cover that person's face so that the king would no longer see him; this is a known phenomenon in the books of Persia." [2] It must be remembered that in the Persian kingdom, servants of the king enjoy a special status; they are referred to as those who "behold the king's countenance." The covering of Haman's face, then, marks an unmistakable fall in the Persian hierarchy. Considering the very lofty status that he previously enjoyed ("The king promoted him and placed his seat above all of the ministers who were with him" – 3:1), this represents a terrible blow. The prevailing view among modern scholars is that the covering of the face was the sign of someone who was about to be executed.[3] According to this reading, the king's servants understood from his reaction that Haman's fate was sealed. But this seems difficult to accept: is it possible that without any explicit order from the king, the servants themselves decided what punishment would be meted out to Haman – the king's second-in-command, before whom all had to bow and prostrate themselves?

Whatever the exact significance of this act may be, it would seem also to play a literary role. The same word has already appeared in connection with Haman at the end of the previous scene, immediately after Mordechai is led upon the horse: "Haman hurried to his house, mourning, and with his head covered ("chafu'i rosh") (6:12). Thus, the text highlights the continuity in the fall of Haman. After the king commands him to lead Mordechai upon the horse, he "covers" his head; now, having been accused by the king of trying to assault Queen Esther, his face, too, is "covered." However, it is not purely for the sake of continuity that the narrator uses the same verb. Seemingly, the conclusion of each of these two scenes in the same manner – emphasizing the covering of Haman's face, his shame – encourages the reader to consider the connection between these two successive images. Both scenes show planning by Haman that goes awry and is turned upside down, and in a similar way. When he stands before the king, he is thinking about the honor that he believes to be due to himself ("Whom would the king seek to honor more than myself"), but ultimately the honor that he proposes is bestowed upon Mordechai. At

Esther's party, Charvona mentions another of Haman's plans – to hang Mordekhai upon the gallows that he has prepared for him, but in the end it is Haman himself who is hanged. In other words, Haman and Mordekhai "exchange places" in these two scenes: the honor that Haman sought for himself is bestowed upon Mordekhai, while the gallows that were prepared for Mordekhai are used for Haman.[4] The mention of Haman's face (or head) being covered in both cases hints at this very idea: the reality is hidden from him; he does not "see" what is going on in front of him.[5]

As noted, after Haman's face is covered, Charvona makes his appearance (as "one of the chamberlains") and starts to speak "before the king" (7:9). The very presence of Charvona is quite surprising. The general impression gleaned by the reader throughout the second party is that it is an intimate affair, with only the king, Haman, and Esther in attendance ("The king came, and Haman, to drink with Queen Esther" – 7:1). Now, suddenly, it seems that one of the king's chamberlains is also present, a chamberlain who hears the interchange between the participants, sees the king in his anger, and understands what is going on. This surprise, of course, highlights an even bigger surprise: the fact that Charvona speaks. With no special invitation, Charvona dares to open his mouth and tell the king about the gallows that Haman has prepared. It must be remembered that Haman never had the opportunity to request the king's permission to hang Mordekhai (since, as he was about to do so, the king asked him, "What should be done for a man whom the king seeks to honor?"), and hence this is the first that the king hears of the tall gallows at Haman's house. Why does Charvona speak up here as he does? How is he not afraid to interfere in the party that is going on, while the king is so angry?

Apparently, it was clear to everyone present which way the king's mood was inclined, and Charvona simply reflected this mood. If we accept Ibn Ezra's thesis that "the servants covered Haman's face," then we must conclude that the king revealed publicly his anger towards Haman, and it then becomes clear how Charvona knew that he could speak out against Haman with no fear of punishment. The literary molding of this scene in such a way as to portray Charvona as suddenly speaking up in the middle of an interchange, with no special invitation, conveys a sense of serendipity. From Haman's point of view, nothing could be more mortifying at this moment than the mention of his attempt to put one of the king's most loyal subjects to death. Yet, this fact is mentioned by Charvona, who – seemingly – has nothing at all to do with the plot.

Special gratitude and appreciation for Charvona's act is given expression in the recitation that follows the reading of Esther among Jews on Purim. Many prayer books present the liturgical poem "Asher Heni" – recited at the end of the reading on Purim eve – as a single unit, up until the line that reads, "You took note of the prayer of Mordekhai and Esther / You hanged Haman and his sons upon the gallows," followed by what appears to be a new poem: "The rose of Yaakov is joyful and happy." However, the first two lines of the latter poem are really the conclusion of the previous one. The "Asher Heni" is arranged in alphabetical order, with the last line beginning with the letter reish, while the two final letters (shin and tav) introduce the first two lines of "The Rose of Yaakov": "Shoshanat Yaakov... / Teshu'atam hayeta la-netzach...."[6] It is altogether reasonable that the closing lines ("To teach that all who wait for You will not be ashamed / nor will all who trust in You ever be confounded") is meant as the conclusion of the poem in its entirety.

Either way, the sentences that are recited thereafter ("Cursed is Haman...") are not an integral part of the poem. However, we are able to follow the process leading to their

being attached. The Yerushalmi (Megilla, 3:7) teaches: "Rav said: One should say, 'Cursed is Haman, cursed are his sons.' Rabbi Pinchas said: One should say, 'Charvona is remembered for good'".

This discussion is echoed, in expanded form, in Sofrim: "They also said that praise and thanks should be offered for the redemption and the salvation, ending with: 'Blessed are You, Lord, God of vengeance, Who punishes to the enemies and protects the righteous, and saves His people from those who hate them.' Thereafter one praises the righteous ones: 'Blessed is Mordekhai; blessed is Esther; blessed are all of Israel.' Rav said: One should say, 'Cursed is Haman; cursed are his sons.' Rabbi Pinchas said: One should say, 'Charvona is remembered for good'".

This is quoted by the Rosh (Tosafot ha-Rosh, on Megilla 7b), and is codified as law in the Tur (OC 690) and the Shulchan Arukh: "One must say: 'Cursed is Haman; blessed is Mordekhai; cursed is Zeresh; blessed is Esther, Cursed are all who worship idols; blessed are all who believe in God...' etc., and one must also say, 'Also Charvona is remembered for good.'" (Shulchan Arukh, OC 690:16)

The idea behind cursing Haman and his sons, and blessing the righteous characters in the story, is hinted at in the Midrash (Bereishit Rabba, 49,1): "Rav, upon arriving at 'Haman' on Purim would say, 'Cursed is Haman, cursed are his sons,' to fulfill what is says, 'The name of the wicked shall rot.' Rav Pinchas said, 'Charvona is remembered for good.'" If Rav, upon hearing the name of Haman, used to say, "Cursed is Haman" in order to fulfill the words, "The name of the wicked shall rot" (Mishlei 10:7), then it is reasonable to assume that Rabbi Pinchas's view that one should also mention Charvona as being "remembered for good" serves to fulfill the first part of that same verse: "The memory of the righteous is blessed." If this is indeed the case, then – at least according to the view of Rabbi Pinchas – Charvona is "upgraded" to the level of "the righteous".

Perhaps – and this is hinted at by the language in Bereishit Rabba – Rav's original intention was that the congregation should say, "The name of the wicked shall rot" during the reading of Megillat Esther, at the mention of Haman's name (this custom apparently being replaced, in the accepted modern custom, by the sounding of noisemakers). In any event, the general curse pronounced upon Haman at the end of the reading (as described in Shoftim) likewise gives voice to the congregation's feelings towards Haman and his company.

As noted, Rav's requirements are met by means of the verses that are recited at the end of the poem, "Asher Heni:"

"Cursed is Haman, who tried to destroy us / Blessed is Mordekhai the Jew.  
Cursed is Zeresh, the wife of my tormentor / Blessed is Esther, on my side.  
Cursed are all who are wicked / Blessed are all who are righteous.  
And also Charvona is remembered for good".

These verses contrast three sets of those who are "cursed" with those who are "blessed." First mentioned are the main characters of the narrative – both men (Haman vs. Mordekhai) and women (Zeresh vs. Esther). The focus then moves from these specific characters to a general statement, in the plural, contrasting "all who are wicked" with "all who are righteous," thereby hinting that the characters of the narrative should be regarded as prototypes of types of people who have existed throughout history. And then, after this

broad generalization, the recitation goes back to a specific character in the story, breaking the contrasting structure, to fulfill the requirement of Rabbi Pinchas, adding: "And also Charvona is remembered for good." [7] Attention should be paid to the fact that Charvona is not "blessed," like the previous characters to be mentioned in the prayer; rather, he is "remembered for good." The mention of Charvona after having already moved on from the main characters of the story, is suited to the pace of the narrative itself: in the narrative itself, Charvona's sudden appearance at the party, and his initiative in speaking up, come as a great surprise. Likewise, the closing words after reading the story: just as the reader feels that the list of those "cursed" and "blessed" has come to an end, he is taken by surprise with the appended mention of Charvona.

It is interesting that in the Tur, the Shulchan Arukh, and also the standard formula in the prayer books, Charvona is introduced with, "And also Charvona..." despite the fact that R. Pinchas requires only the words, "Charvona is remembered for good." Charvona himself starts his speech with the same word: "Also there is the tree which Haman prepared for Mordechai..." (7:9). Jewish congregations for all generations repay this favor...

The fact that Charvona begins his speech with this word is obviously related to his sense of putting into words the prevailing atmosphere at the second party, with a denigration of Haman. Charvona is saying, as it were: not only is Haman trying to assault the queen – he also sought to put Mordechai, the king's loyal subject, to death! Not only is Haman, as the king puts it, assaulting the queen "with me in the house," but a gallows stands at his house, ready to hang Mordechai. By means of this word, then, Charvona creates a connection between Haman's plans for Esther and his plans for Mordechai. This hints to the reader that there is a connection between Haman falling upon Esther's divan, and his desire to hang Mordechai for not having agreed to "fall" (prostrate himself) before him. Is the king aware, at this stage, of the connection between Esther and Mordechai? When Esther speaks she makes no mention of the fact that the decree of annihilation that she is speaking about concerns the Jews. Moreover, it is only after this scene that Mordechai comes before the king, "for Esther had told what he was to her" (8:1). Hence, it is possible that Charvona's interjection concerning the gallows – which, from the reader's perspective, is closely bound up with Haman's decree – is perceived by the king as a further perversion of justice, independent of the subject of Esther's outcry, that has taken place under his very nose. If this is so, the narrator is once again clearly taking pains to hide the simplest and most elementary facts of the plot from the characters that animate it. The king himself lacks a proper understanding of his own situation, and it is within this obscurity that he acts!

In fact, the word "also" has already appeared in this scene, and in a similar context. When the king discovers Haman lying on the divan occupied by Esther, he rages: "Do you then mean also to assault the queen while I am present in the house?!" (7:8). There, too, the use of this word is meant to contribute to the continuity and progression in the injustice that Haman is engaged in: it is not enough that he sought to annihilate the entire nation of Queen Esther; he now also seeks – apparently – to "conquer" the queen, in the king's own house!

The question remains, why does R. Pinchas insist that Charvona should be remembered for good? [8] Can we determine unequivocally, on the basis of Charvona's words alone, what his attitude was towards the various participants at the party? Is he taking sides in the

confrontation between Esther and Haman, or is he simply reporting, objectively, that Haman prepared a gallows, without revealing his personal views? It would seem that Charvona is indeed taking a stand, and that his intention is to exacerbate the king's anger towards Haman. This becomes apparent from his description of Mordekhai: "Charvona, one of the king's chamberlains, said: Also, behold, the gallows which Haman prepared for Mordekhai - who spoke well of the king - stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high" (7:9). The phrase depicting Mordekhai as having "spoken well of the king" is superfluous here. Apparently, Charvona adds it so as to impute to Haman's actions a dimension of treason. See, Charvona hints: not only is Haman planning to take Esther for himself (after "standing" to plead for his life); he is also trying to neutralize those who are loyal to the king (by hanging them on the gallows that "stands" at his house.)

Without a moment's hesitation the king passes judgment on his closest advisor: "The king said: Hang him upon it." And that is what happens - "They hanged Haman upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai." [9] Here, too, the narrative makes no effort to hide the scorn for Haman, with the clear emphasis that he is hanged "upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai." The whole situation is inverted. [10]

We cannot conclude our discussion of Charvona without a further comment relating to his other appearance in the narrative. We recall that Charvona first appeared on the scene at the very outset, when Achashverosh sent chamberlains to call for Vashti:

"On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine, he told Mehuman, Bizeta, Charvona, Bigta and Avagta, Zeitar and Kharkas - the seven chamberlains who ministered before King Achashverosh - to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown" (1:10-11.)

There, too, the context involved a party, such that it is reasonable to posit that Charvona belonged to a group of chamberlains who ministered to the king during the parties that he held. Interestingly, he too belongs to the privileged group who minister "before (penei) King Achashverosh" (i.e., they behold his countenance). As we recall, at Esther's party "they covered Haman's face (penei Haman)"; his status is diminished and he no longer beholds the king's countenance. Charvona, therefore, feels confident, in light of his status vis-à-vis that of Haman. Is there some special connection between the two scenes featuring Charvona?

Even at first glance there is a clear thematic connection between these two scenes: Charvona is active at both parties, and in both cases he advances the plot in a similar way: in the beginning (chapter 1) he goes to bring Vashti, who refuses to present herself and is therefore removed from her position in the palace (perhaps executed). Similarly, in the parallel scene (chapter 7), Charvona tells the king about the gallows that Haman has prepared, and in the wake of this Haman is removed from his position (executed). Moreover, at the conclusion of both scenes, following the removal of Vashti/Haman, we read that "the king's wrath subsided" (2:1, 7:9). After the king calms down, the two Jewish heroes of the story replace them: Esther is chosen to replace Vashti, and in chapter 8 we read how Mordekhai takes the place of Haman. [11]

We may say, in summary, that Charvona's role - in both instances where he is mentioned - is to fuel the king's anger towards someone who is close to him, such that that person's place is vacated for Esther/Mordekhai. Once the idea is formulated thus, it is easy to

understand why "Charvona is remembered for good": the future of the "blessed" characters, as the poem refers to them, is dependent on his actions. At the same time, Charvona represents the instability of Achashverosh's realm. The fact that a queen, or a king's second-in-command, can be removed from the palace on the basis of the words of "one of the chamberlains" is clear testimony to the capriciousness of this king who reigns from India to Ethiopia. We may almost say that Charvona holds a sword (*cherev*) in his hand – a "revolving sword" – that may, at any time, strike at one person and lift up another...

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Some scholars have proposed reading it as "chafru," implying shame (based on the Septuagint; see Felix Perles, *Analekten zur Textkritik des Alten Testaments*, Munich 1895, 32). The advantage of this reading (over the one that we shall propose below) is the focus of the action on Haman's face, in light of the accepted expression, "panim chafim" ("an innocent face") (as in, "They looked to Him, and are radiant, and their faces shall not be ashamed" – Tehillim 34:6). The disadvantage, obviously, is that it involves amending the traditional text as we have it. For further possibilities, see Fox, p. 283.

[2]See also Chakham, p. 46. Similarly, there is evidence among the Greeks and Romans of covering the face of a person who had angered the king, as described by Ibn Ezra. See Fox, p. 283.

[3]Paton, p. 264; Moore, p. 72

[4]Beal presents a similar view of the relationship between the two scenes; p. 94.

[5]Unlike his advisors, who – at least after the horse scene – understand what the future holds: "You will surely fall before him." As we have noted a number of times, since Esther is a work with much hidden writing, the reality is often concealed even from the characters who are living it. Unquestionably, this idea reaches a climax with regard to Haman.

[6]See at length in this regard in the article by Dr. Mikhael Rigler, published in the "Sofrim u-Sefarim" supplement to Ha-Tzofeh newspaper, Adar 5765 (9.3.06.)

[7]The different status of Charvona may be discerned already in the ruling of the Shulchan Arukh, with its two headings: "One must say, 'Cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordekhai'... and one must say, 'Also Charvona is remembered for the good'".

[8]The expression, "And also Charvona is remembered for good" recalls the title usually appended to the prophet Eliyahu, as in, "And the resurrection of the dead is brought about by Eliyahu, who is remembered for good" (Mishna, Sota, 9:15), and many other sources. Indeed, in Esther Rabba a connection is drawn between R. Pinchas's requirement and the identification of Charvona with Eliyahu: "What did Eliyahu do? He made himself look like Charvona, and said to him [Achashverosh]: My master, the king – also, behold, the gallows which Haman prepared for Mordekhai..." as R. Pinchas said: "One must say, 'Charvona is remembered for the good'" (Esther Rabba, 10,9.)

[9]The king's speedy verdict here is a contrast to what we have seen until now in the narrative, with every decision being taken in consultation with servants or ministers. Not only is the manner of the decision-making different here; the lack of focus on detail lends the scene a sense of speed and decisiveness: "In earlier episodes involving recommendations to the king, the advice given has been explicit with regard to the details of procedure. This time, however, the king does not need to have things spelled out of him" (Beal, p. 94.)

[10]The expressions, "Upon the gallows which he had prepared for Mordekhai" is obviously meant to recall Haman's intention when he approached the king, seeking "to hang Mordekhai upon the gallows which he had prepared for him" (6:4.)

[11]Similarly: Berlin, p. 129. Chakham posits the theory that Charvona was the king's messenger to bring whatever he desired, and so he "happened" to catch sight of the gallows at Haman's house: "It appears that he is the same one who was mentioned previously, in 1:10, among the chamberlains who were sent to bring Vashti; now, he is one of the chamberlains who was dispatched to bring Haman from his house to Esther's party. Charvona reaches Haman's house as the latter is consulting with his close friends about Mordekhai, and there he sees the gallows" (Chakham, p. 46). This is an interesting interpretation, but since there is no mention in the text that Charvona was among those who brought Haman from his house, the idea is somewhat doubtful.