

Overview

The history of the Jewish people in the close to three millennia since the destruction of the first *Beis Hamikdash* is divided into four phases. These are the *arba galuyos*—the four exiles—which, with only a brief respite in the days of the *Chashmonaim*, span all these years, to this very day.

In his prophetic dream, Yaakov Avinu saw a ladder with its base on the ground and its top in Heaven and angels going up and down its rungs. These angels are identified by the Midrash as the *sarei ha'umos*, the patron angels of the four kingdoms that would oppress Yaakov's descendants in their exile. Yaakov saw the *sar* of Babylon ascend seventy rungs—representing the number of years that nation held power over Jewry—and then descend. Next came the *sar* of Medea, whose ascent of fifty-two rungs symbolized the length of the Persian-Medean exile. Then came the *sar* of Greece, who got as high as 180 rungs—the number of years Jews suffered under the Hellenist yoke until their liberation on Chanukah. It was only the ever-ascending *sar* of Edom that led Yaakov to ask Hashem if this meant that the fourth exile would never end. He was reassured that even if Edom—Rome and its heirs—reached the stars, Hashem would bring it down.

This theme of the four kingdoms and the exiles they were to impose upon Jewry is not encountered for the first or last time in Yaakov's vision. There are at least half a dozen other references in Tanach.

Yaakov's dream is unique in pinpointing the length of each exile. But all the other symbols and visions are alike in offering an opportunity to analyze the nature of each kingdom. It is these concise yet profound insights into the personality of each nation that *Chazal* and Torah commentators throughout the generations have developed into a fascinating picture of Jewish history.

The events described in Megillas Esther transpired during the second of these four exiles, when Jews were ruled by the kingdom of the Persians and Medes, with a Persian on the throne. We shall therefore repeatedly refer to *Chazal's* descriptions of these two nations in order to better understand their behavior as reflected in the Megillah.

Daniel's nocturnal vision offers us a perspective on the king whose power is the focal point of our first section. The second animal that arises from the storm-tossed sea is similar to a bear.

With this background we approach our first section. Analyzing the power of Achashveirosh, a self-made monarch who succeeded Koresh as the second of the three Persian rulers of a mighty kingdom, is indispensable to understanding the Megillah. It was his absolute control over the entire inhabited world that made the threat of Haman's genocide so menacing.

The magnificent banquet that occupies the first part of the Megillah was motivated by a combination of factors. From a political point of view it was an effort to achieve reconciliation with those provinces whose rebellion had been crushed. The opulence of the affair expresses the great wealth of king and empire while the orgiastic indulgence reflects the appetites of the bear.

But perhaps most important, it represents the second kingdom's hopes of succeeding where the first one failed. Belshatzar prematurely celebrated the end of Jewish hopes for redemption and was punished with the premature end of his Babylonian kingdom. Achashveirosh follows his

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Insight #1:

Days of Anguish

“And it happened in the days of Achashveirosh...” (Verse 1:1).

“‘And it happened in the days (הַיָּמִים הַהֵם)’ is always an expression of anguish” (Gemara 10b).

The power of Achashveirosh was a source of anguish for his Jewish subjects. “And it happened in the days of Achashveirosh” suggests the he, rather than the general situation, was the catalyst for the painful events of his epoch.

This same expression is found in Tanach regarding four earlier periods. “It happened in the days of Amrafel” (Bereishis 14:1) introduces the anguish of history's first war. Its catalyst was the wicked Nimrod, who gained the name Amrafel because he said (אֲמַר) to cast (פָּרַח) Avraham into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship his idols. This Amrafel, who leads three other kings into battle against five kingdoms and then against Avraham, also represents the Babylonian empire, which ruled in the first exile. His three allies symbolize the three kingdoms that followed, Kedarlaomer signifying the Persian-Medean empire.

“It happened in the days of the judging of the judges” (Ruth 1:1) introduces the anguish of a famine in Eretz Yisrael, which was Heavenly retribution for the corruption of the judges who had grown vulnerable to the judgment of those whom they themselves were to judge.

“It happened in the days of Achaz” (Yeshayahu 7:1) introduces the anguish of an invasion of Yehudah by the armies of Aram and Yisrael, suggesting that the peace of the Jews in their Holy Land was endangered by the idolatrous ways of faithless kings. The climax of this anguish—*churban Beis Hamikdash* and *galus*—is signaled by “It happened in the days of Yehoyakim” (Yirmiyahu 1:3).

All the anguish of these earlier eras seems to be relived in the days of Achashveirosh. The word *vayehi*, which introduces all of them with a combination of two classic expressions of woe, *vay* and *hi*, was exceedingly appropriate to a period that was a composite of all its predecessors. The outcry of *vay* following invasion and *churban* in the days of Achaz and Yehoyakim is echoed in the *vay* the Jews cried when Achashveirosh halted the construction of the second *Beis Hamikdash* begun by Zerubavel under license from King Koresh. The *vay* of famine is heard once again in the three-day fast initiated by Esther, and the *vay* of war in the battle of the Jews against the enemies bent on their destruction.

Vay is an expression of pain but it is also a form of prayer. It is this prayer that ultimately puts an end to the anguish caused by the power of Achashveirosh.

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example at this banquet, bringing forth the vessels of the *Beis Hamikdash* to show that there is no longer any need to fear that the Jews will ever have a second one. This Persian dream of succeeding where others failed will recur at the great trial at the end of days, as described by our Sages (*Avodah Zarah 2b*).

In the hereafter all the nations of the world will be summoned before Hashem, who will point to the *sefer Torah* in His lap and ask all those who studied that Torah to come forward and claim their reward. The Romans, as the mightiest of empires, will be first in line. They will claim to have established many marketplaces, built many bathhouses, and amassed many great treasures of gold and silver for the sole purpose of enabling Jews to study Torah. But this contention will be rejected by the Divine Judge, who will point out their selfish motivation in all of these achievements.

As the crestfallen Romans depart, their place will be taken by the Persians, who—like them—will enjoy power until the Messianic era. The Persians will feel confident of succeeding where the Romans failed because it was one of their kings who granted permission to build the second *Beis Hamikdash*, whereas it was a Roman ruler who destroyed it. Their argument will be that they built many bridges, conquered many cities, and waged many wars only so Jews could study Torah. Once again, Hashem will shatter this defense by exposing its selfish and vainglorious nature.

It is difficult to imagine how nations standing before the omniscient Creator in the final hour of truth will dare to present such transparent claims of being motivated in all their worldly achievements only by the desire to promote Torah study among Jews!

The Brisker Rav, Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, z"l, offers an explanation based on Rambam's famous *marshal* in his introduction to his Mishnaic commentary. Why should a fool enjoy great wealth and order his servants to build him a luxurious palace and plant a lush vineyard nearby? Because one day a righteous man dying of hunger and exhaustion will find comfort in the shade of the palace walls and sustenance in the fruits of the vineyard. Although the owner of the palace and vineyard had no intention of rescuing any righteous traveler, it is this salvation that justified all of his wealth and efforts.

Similarly, there is no doubt that Jews have been able to study Torah with greater ease because of the commerce, transportation, and other advances of civilization wrought by Romans, Persians, and all the other nations of the world. But this is merely the way the Creator arranged His world to ensure that those who study and live by the Torah will have their needs provided for by others. Credit and guilt, however, depend on one's intention. Each nation is therefore discredited in that ultimate trial for having other reasons in mind.

In a broader sense this idea can be applied to all of Jewish history. The Romans provided us not only with marketplaces and money but with the soul-searing lesson of destruction and exile. Persia provided not only bridges and conquests but the catalyst of *teshuvah*, in the form of Haman's plot. Each nation that has plagued Israel has served as the rod of Divine anger, so mercifully applied to awaken us before we destroy ourselves with our sins. But Rome and Persia, like Babylon and Greece before them, will be punished for their intention to harm a people they hated without justification.

This is the true perspective of the Purim story. The royal ring transferred from the hand of Achashveirosh was a blessing in disguise for a Jewish nation in need of a shock. But it was also the instrument of a monstrous plan for a "final solution," which inevitably resulted in the downfall of the planner and the triumph of his intended victims.

Insight #127:

Blessed by Mordechai the Jew

"For Mordechai the Jew...[was] accepted by most of his brethren [as] a seeker of good for his people and a spokesman of peace for all his posterity" (Verse 10:3).

"By 'most of his brethren' but not 'by all' – this teaches that some members of the Sanhedrin distanced themselves from him" (Gemara 16a).

With all its opportunities for saving Jewish lives, Mordechai's rise to power was not without its drawbacks. His preoccupation with communal matters forced him to spend less time learning Torah. As a result, some of his colleagues in the Sanhedrin withdrew from him.

This would seem to indicate that these sages considered Torah study more important than saving lives. Indeed, in *Sefer Ezra* (2:2) Mordechai is mentioned after four other names while in *Sefer Nechemiah*, concerning events that took place twenty-four years later, his name appears after five others. This demotion is interpreted as Heavenly support for the sages' decision to abandon Mordechai after he neglected Torah for lifesaving communal work.

Yet the *poskim* (*Turei Zahav, Yoreh Deah 251:4*) state that one is obligated to put aside learning Torah in order to save lives. The same halachic principle obliges a community to take funds collected for the support of Torah study and utilize them for taxes if evasion could endanger Jewish lives. Mordechai therefore had no alternative but to assume the responsibility thrust upon him.

Nonetheless, if one Jew must sacrifice his learning in order to save lives while another can continue his learning undisturbed, the latter is greater.

This idea, interjected into the last words of the Megillah and in the midst of such elaborate praise for Mordechai, is the Megillah's way of reinforcing its readers' Torah perspective. Of course every Jew, like Mordechai, must be prepared to put aside every personal consideration—even the greatness he can achieve through learning Torah—if Heaven has put him in a position where he alone can save Jewish lives. But what is even greater than such heroism, and is the only guarantee that dangers such as Hamanic decrees will not threaten the Jewish people? The learning of Torah.

Those members of the Sanhedrin who distanced themselves from Mordechai after he took on his new responsibilities were demonstrating for their generation and all future generations that Jewish survival is guaranteed not by Jews like Mordechai in high places in the government, but by Jews who are deeply committed to uninterrupted Torah study. Mordechai, who unshirkingly accepted the lifesaving responsibility for which Heaven had singled him out, was certainly the first to appreciate the significance of their gesture. Nevertheless, he was capable of proudly continuing as "a seeker of good for his people and a spokesman of peace for all his posterity."

You can find the other 125 other *Insights* in Rav Weinbach's book *127 Insights into Megillas Esther*. Rav Weinbach is also the author of *Turnabout*, which is the Purim Megillah written in *novel* format. Both books are published by Targum/Feldheim.