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, Yakov 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’amos, the patron angels of the four kingdoms that would oppress Yakov’s descendants in their exile. Yakov saw the sar of Babylon ascend seventy rungs—representing the number of years that nation held power over Yerushalayim—and then descend. Next came the sar of Mideya, whose ascent of fifty-two rungs symbolized the length of the Persian-Mideyan 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 Yakov 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 Yerushalayim is not encountered for the first or last time in Yakov’s vision. There are at least half a dozen other references in Tanach.

Yakov’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 Mideya, 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 Megillas Esther.

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 Megillas Esther. It was his absolute control over the entire inhabited world that made the threat of Haman’s genocidal plans 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. A chashveirosh follows his.


days of Anguish

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

“And it happened in the days (in hev hu) 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 Amsarol” (Bereishis 14:1) introduces the anguish of history’s first war. Its catalyst was the wicked Nimrod, who gained the name Amsarol because he said (to cast) Avarah into the fiery furnace for refusing to worship his idols. This Amsarol, who leads three other kings into battle against five kingdoms and then against Avarah, also represents the Babylonian empire, which ruled in the first exile. His three allies symbolize the three kingdoms that followed, Kedarlaomer signifying the Persian-Mideyan 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 Acha’av” (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 yevahel, which introduces all of them with a combination of two classic expressions of woe, yevah and hu, was exceedingly appropriate to a period that was a composite of all its predecessors. The outcry of yav following invasion and churban in the days of Acha’av and Yehoyakim is echoed in the yav the Jews cried when Achashveirosh halted the construction of the second Beis Hamikdash begun by Zerubavel under license from King Koresh. The yav of famine is heard once again in the three-day fast initiated by Esther, and the yav 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.
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 Nehemiah, 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 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 Haman’s 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 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.