

A selection of texts and commentaries:

1. Thomas Bodley's Book of Esther with correction
2. Aggad'ta d'Megilta – Midrash Abba Gorion
 3. Rashi commentary on Esther
 4. Etz Chaim – Laws of Megillah
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 7. Abraham Saba and Isaac Arama



ESTHER WITH CORRECTION

MS. Bodley Or. 46, fol. 129a, 129b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Date: 1201 – 1225

Introduction

This manuscript copy of the book of Esther belongs to the collection of Thomas Bodley (1545-1630), who is the founder of the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. He studied Hebrew from French Herbaist Antoine Chevallier. His passion for Hebrew inspired the Bodleian Library's major interest in Hebrew manuscript and early printed works that continues until today. This manuscript of the book of Esther is titled Hester, which is the Latinized version of Esther and contains vowels that were

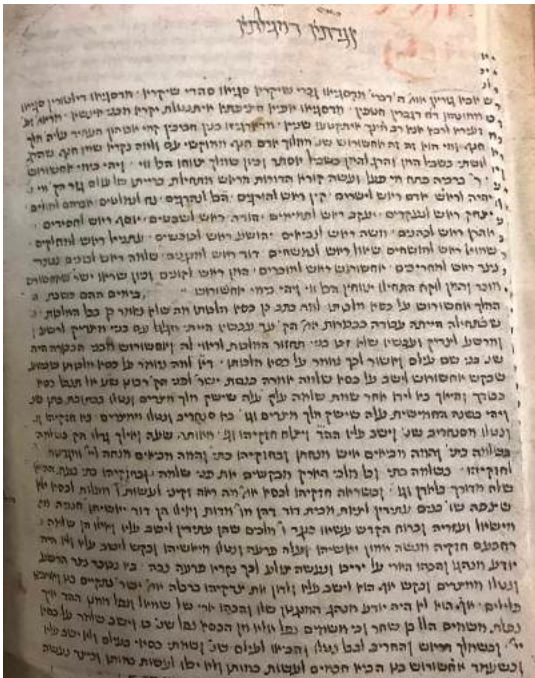
added by a later hand. There is also a correction of a verse that was originally placed in the wrong place, to be later corrected and added in the margin in its right place.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

Title: Hester¹

¹¹ The manuscript of Esther is titled with the word written in English: 'Hester', as opposed to the Hebrew Esther. The name Hester is the Latinized variation of Esther in medieval times and became adopted as an English name in the 17th century. The name of the Book of Esther is first referred to in the *Mishnah* as simply 'Megillah' (*Megillah* 1:1). In the Talmud, there is reference to the work as 'Esther' (*Megillah* 7a) in the following teachings: 'Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: Esther does not render one's hands impure. Shmuel said: Esther was composed with the Divine spirit. Rabbi Meir says: Esther does render one's hands impure.' The book of Esther itself was actually composed by Mordechai, as it states (*Esther* 9:20): 'And Mordechai inscribed these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far.' Rashi comments: this script is the Megillah in its entirety. Commentary on Esther *Glilei Kesef* (p. 38) by Joseph Abba Mari Ibn Caspi (1280-1345) also writes that the Megillah was written by Mordechai with great wisdom. The reason why it is called Esther seems to be because of the statement in the Talmud (*Megillah* 7a) that 'Esther wrote to the Sages: Write me for all generations,' to which they consented, as indicated in the verse (*Esther* 9:32): 'Now Esther's order confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was inscribed in the book.' It was due to Esther that it was canonized and also commemorated in its reading each year. While this explains the name of the book, the name Esther itself is subject to a number of Talmudic opinions (*Megillah* 13a): 'Rabbi Yehudah says: Her name was actually Hadassah (myrtle) and the verse calls her Esther (*Esther* 2:7) because she used to conceal facts about herself by not revealing she was Jewish, as it says (*Esther* 2:20): 'Esther told nothing of her people etc.' Rabbi Nechemiah says: She was called Esther because the nations of the world used to call her Istahar, meaning moon, as it to say she was as beautiful as the moon (Rashi). The first reason for the name Esther drawn from 'conceal' would be 'Hester' in Hebrew, as in Deuteronomy (31:18): 'And I will hide (הִסְתֵּר) My face on that day.' The Talmud (*Chulin* 139b) in fact derives the Biblical origin of the custom to read the *Megillah* from the above verse in Deuteronomy, further connecting Hester with the name Esther. According to this, Hester, is not only the medieval Latin variation of Esther, but also the Hebrew variation of the Persian name Esther.

1. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus -- he was the Ahasuerus who reigned from Hodu to Cush, one hundred twenty-seven provinces.
2. In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital.²
3. In the third year of his reign, he made a banquet for all his princes and his servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces [who were] before him.
4. When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the splendor of his excellent majesty, many days, yea one hundred and eighty days.
5. And when these days were over, the king made for all the people present in Shushan the capital, for [everyone] both great and small, a banquet for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's orchard.
6. [There were spreads of] white, fine cotton, and blue, embroidered with cords of linen and purple, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a pavement of green, white, shell, and onyx marble.
7. And they gave them to drink in golden vessels, and the vessels differed from one another, and royal wine was plentiful according to the bounty of the king.
8. And the drinking was according to the law [with] no one coercing, for so had the king ordained upon every steward of his house, to do according to every man's wish.
9. Also, Vashti the queen made a banquet for the women, in the royal house of King Ahasuerus.



AGAD'TA D'MEGILTA - MIDRASH BEN GORION (2ND CENTURY)

MS. Mich. 577

Date: 1470

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Introduction

This manuscript is one of a very few such manuscripts of *Aggad'ta d'Megilta*, known as *Midrash Abba Gorion*, that exists.³ The manuscript was written in 1470 and contains 139 folios in total. The first section of the manuscript is *Midrash tanchuma*. After the end of *Tanchuma*, on folio 116b is found *Midrash Abba Gurion*,

after which is found a third Midrash titled *Midrash Panim Acherot*. The title of the Midrash Abba Gurion in the Oxford manuscript is *Aggad'ta d'megilta*. It is however known as *Midrash Abba Gorion* in *Yalkut Shimoni* by Rabbi Shimon of Frankfurt (13th century), *Midrash Megillah* in the Hamburg manuscript and *Aggadat Megillat*

² In the manuscript verse 6 is inserted here: 'There were spreads of white, fine cotton, and blue, embroidered with cords of linen and purple, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a pavement of green, white, shell, and onyx marble.' The verse was however crossed out by a later hand and placed on the margin in its correct place on the second page.

³ The other five manuscripts can be found at the Vatican (470), British Library (15402), London Beth Din library, Cambridge, Casanatense Library (114) and Hamburg (37).

Esther in Rashi on I Kings (10:19) pertaining to being the source for the entire plan of the throne of Solomon. The reason why it would be called *Midrash Abba Gurion* is due to the opening of the Midrash that quotes five teachings by Abba Gurion of Sidon.⁴ In the *Yalkut Shimoni* the name is Urion. According to Solomon Buber, this is merely the way people in Jerusalem would say Gurion.⁵ There is no division of the work into chapters or sections headings, other than quotation of verses. *Midrash Abba Gurion* is a very early midrashic text used by the author of *Esther rabbah* and also another *midrash* on Esther, called *Midrash Megillat Esther*.⁶ The *midrash* provides explanation for 52 verses and concludes at the end of chapter six with a single homily on chapter seven. Aside from the brief explanations to various verses, the larger subjects covered in the Midrash include: the throne of Solomon; the casting of the lots; the absurdities of Jewish religious practices; dealings of Haman and Ahasuerus; the letters of Haman; Haman's evil plot, the heavenly decree and the events in heaven and on earth; Nebuchadnezzar, Mishael and Azariah; Haman and Zeresh; Haman confronts Mordechai and his disciples; Haman and Mordechai; the tree volunteer to serve as Haman's gallows. The Midrash closes with the theme of the Purim celebrations that just as the Al-mighty punished Haman and his sons for his wicked deeds and conspiracies, so will He thwart 'the evil plots of our enemies' and bring peace upon Israel. Forty-four commentaries from Midrash Abba Gurion may be found in *Esther Rabba*.⁷

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

1. Abba Gurion of Sidon reported five saying in the name of Rabban Gamliel. When corrupt judges multiplied, false witnesses multiplied. When informers multiplied, spoliation of property increased. When effrontery grows rife, people are robbed of their honour.⁸ When the lesser says to the greater, 'I am superior to you,' men's years are curtailed. When the favourite sons provoke their father in heaven with their actions, He sets over them a godless king, and punishes them. To whom does this apply? To Ahasuerus, as it says:⁹ 'That the godless (*chanaf*¹⁰) man reign not, that there be none to ensnare the people.' Why is he called godless (*chanaf*)? Because he slayed Vashti (his wife)¹¹ on account of Haman (his friend) and afterwards slaying

⁴ Other teachings of Abba Gurion in the Mishnah can be found in Talmud *Kiddushin* 82a; *Sofrim* 15:10; Jerusalemite Talmud *Kiddushin* ch. 4; *ibid* 4:11 writes 'Urion'.

⁵ *Sifrei D'agadta al Megillat Esther, Midrash Abba Gurion, Parsha 1*, footnote 1.

⁶ *Sifrei D'agadta al Megillat Esther*, introduction, 2. There is a dispute regarding the relationship between *Midrash Abba Gurion* and *Midrash Panim Acherot* that are both very similar. Leopold Zunz and Chanoch Albeck in *Haderashot beyisra'el Vehishtalshelutan Hahistorit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947, p. 425) claim that *Midrash Abba Gurion* is an earlier text, as seen from the text about Solomon's throne that is left out in *Panim Acherot*, due to it being already transcribed in (the earlier text) *Midrash Abba Gurion*. In *Literature of the Sages Part 2* (192-3) it claims that the section about Solomon's throne in *Panim Acherot* may have had an independent source. See *The Wandering Throne of Solomon: Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean Allegra* (p. 148, footnote 108).

⁷ *Sifrei d'agadta al Megillat Esther*, introduction, footnote 6.

⁸ In *Esther Rabbah* it adds dignity and respect, in addition to honor.

⁹ Job 34:30. This last section of the *Midrash Abba Gurion* text appears in *Esther Rabbah* immediately prior to the text. In *Midrash Abba Gurion* it is combined.

¹⁰ *Selichot* for Purim also uses the term *chaneif* in the passage: When a man rose up against us, we were seized by fear and trembling; when he allied himself with the hypocrite (*chaneif*) king we almost stumbled and fell.

¹¹ In *Esther Rabbah* it substitutes the names of Vashti, Haman and Esther with wife, friend, and second wife.

Haman (his friend) on account of Esther (his wife). When he reigned,¹² they began crying, Woe! Vayehi (there was woe) in the days of Ahasuerus!¹³

2. Rabbi Berechiah opened with the text:¹⁴ ‘Who has wrought and done it? He that called the generations from the beginning.’ From the beginning of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, appointed for each one the lot which was befitting him. He appointed Adam to be first of all creatures, Cain the first of the slayers, Abel the first of all slain, Noah the first of those saved from calamity, Abraham the first of all circumcised, Isaac the first of all bound for sacrifice, Jacob the first of the perfect,¹⁵ Judah the head of the tribes, Joseph the head of the saintly, Aaron the first of priests, Moses the first of prophets, Joshua the first of conquerors, Othniel the head of dividers,¹⁶ Samuel of anointers,¹⁷ Saul of anointed, David the foremost of singers, Solomon the foremost of builders, Nebuchadnezzar the foremost of ravagers, Ahasuerus chief of sellers, Haman chief of buyers.¹⁸ When they all saw this, they began to cry, Woe! Vayehi (there was woe) in the days of Ahasuerus!¹⁹

3. ‘In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom.’ Why does it say ‘on the throne of his kingdom’, which is not said by any other kingship?²⁰ Initially (Temple) service²¹ was conducted by the firstborns. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, until now I would make shift with my son from righteous to wicked and from wicked to righteous, but now my son does not merit, the kingdom will return to

¹² In *Esther Rabbah* it says: ‘When they all saw this.’

¹³ This text is found also in *Esther Rabbah Petichta* 9 in the name of Abba Orion of Sidon. The text in *Esther Rabbah* omits however the statement: ‘When the lesser says to the greater, ‘I am superior to you,’ men’s years are curtailed.’ It is found however in *Midrash Ben Gorion* and can be found also in Talmud *Kiddushin* 33. With this statement, there are indeed five sayings, as mentioned in the opening to the text.

¹⁴ Isaiah 41:4.

¹⁵ Genesis 25:27: ‘*Ish tam.*’

¹⁶ Rabbi Ze’ev Wolf Einhorn (d. 1862) comments on this text in *Esther Rabbah Petichta* 10 that it refers to the fact that he was the first of the judges.

¹⁷ I Samuel 10:1; I Samuel 16:13.

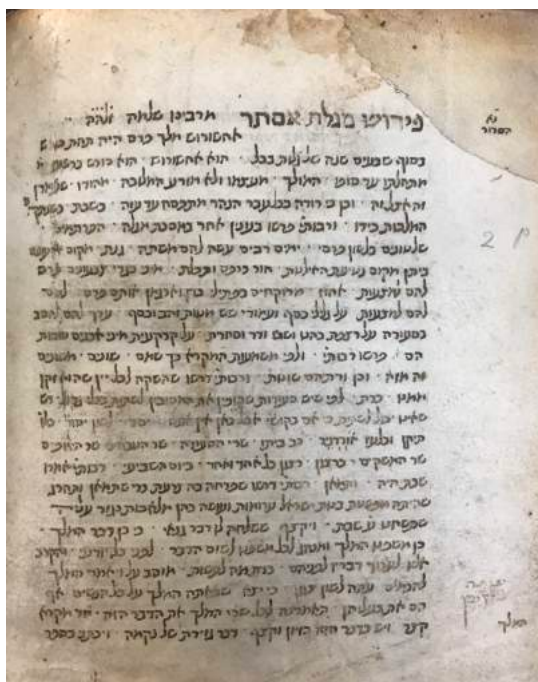
¹⁸ Esther 3:9: ‘If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them, and I will weigh out ten thousand silver talents into the hands of those who perform the work, to bring it into the king’s treasuries.’

¹⁹ This text is found also in *Esther Rabbah Petichta* 10.

²⁰ The standard form is, as it states (Daniel 2:1): ‘Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign.’

²¹ In *Yalkut Shimoni* (645) it has the teaching is greater length. It demonstrates how greatness, after Cain killed Abel, was passed to Seth, Enosh, Noah and Shem, and Shem who had eight children passed it on to Arpachshad who inherited greatness due to Abraham would descend from him. It was then passed from Abraham to Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Peretz, until Zedekiah. When Zedekiah was exiled Nebuchadnezzar took it from him. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: All the days when the kingship was in the hand of My son, I would make shift (*megalgel*) with them, this would raise a wicked, this one a righteous, this would borrow, this would repay. Now that the kingship has been removed from my son, the kingship will return to her father’s house, to Elam. Elam was the firstborn of Shem and because of the Jewish people, the kingship was given to Arpachshad, from whom Israel came, but now the kingship will return to Elam, as it states (Daniel 8:2): ‘In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital.’ Shushan is none other Elam, as it states: ‘I was in Shushan the capital, which is in the province of Elam.’ The difference between the Oxford manuscript of *Midrash Abba Gurion* and the text from the same *midrash* as found in *Yalkut Shimoni* is: 1. The Oxford text omits the chronology from Seth to Zedekiah. 2. The Oxford text seems to blame Israel for the loss of the kingship, thereby justifying its transference to Elam. In *Yalkut Shimoni* it appears that the kingship was first lost to Nebuchadnezzar, only after which G-d justifies returning it to the firstborn of Shem, Elam. 3. The Oxford text identifies Ahasuerus himself with Elam. *Yalkut Shimoni* identifies the province Elam where Shushan is located with the descendent of the firstborn of Shem.

the one that is befitting, and Ahasuerus is from the firstborn son, as it states:²² ‘The sons of Shem are Elam, Ashur, etc.’²³



COMMENTARY ON ESTHER - RABEINU SHLOMO, OBM (RASHI)

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105)

MS. Michael 289, folio 171b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Date: 1329

Introduction

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), known by his acronym Rashi, was born in Troyes in northern France, studied in Mainz in Germany, and is author of a comprehensive commentary on the Tanach and thirty tractates of the Talmud. This manuscript dated 1329 includes the text of the book of Esther with Rashi's commentary covering chapter 1:1-19. A

unique aspect of this manuscript is the name Cyrus as the identity of the king Ahasuerus.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

1. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus: He was the king of Persia who reigned instead of Cyrus at the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. **He was the Ahasuerus:** He was Cyrus²⁴ equally wicked from beginning to end. **Who reigned:** He reigned on his own, and was not of royal seed.

²² Genesis 10:22.

²³ This whole section appears in *Yalkut Shimoni* with the reference *Midrash Abba Gurion*, though with variations (see above footnote 10). It does not appear at all however in *Midrash Abba Gurion in Sifrei D'agadta al Megillat Esther*, by Solomon Buber (Vilna, 1886).

²⁴ In printed editions it omits: Cyrus. The source for this teaching that the superfluous statement 'That is Ahasuerus' indicates his total wickedness may be found in the Talmud *Megillah* (11a): 'That is Ahasuerus: He remained in his wicked ways from beginning to end.' The Talmud provides a similar interpretation to the terms 'That is Esau' in Genesis (36:43), 'That is Dasan and Aviram' in Numbers (26:9), and 'That is King Ahaz' in II Chronicles (28:22). The additional word 'Cyrus' in the manuscript is perplexing. The chronology of the kinds of Persia in rabbinic tradition is: Darius the Mede (Daniel 6:1), who defeated the Babylonian king Belshazzar; Cyrus the Great (Daniel 6:29), same as Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:23), who authorized the building of the Temple but then halted it; his son in law Ahasuerus who married Esther and revoked the authorization (Ezra 4:6); and their son Darius (353-318 BCE), who reauthorized the rebuilding of the Second Temple. According to this, Ahasuerus is not the same as Cyrus. There is a single opinion quoted in *Esther Rabbah* (1:3) that maintains however that Ahasuerus (518-465 BC) is the same as Artaxerxes, who would have been the one who authorized the rebuilding of the Temple but then halted it. The name Artaxerxes was in fact a name that was used for all the kings of Persia like Pharaoh for Egypt (Talmud *Rosh Hashana* 3b). Talmud identifies him specifically with Cyrus who finally saw the rebuilding of the Temple (ibid). It's plausible however that this text of the Midrash identifying Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes in Ezra (4:23) was the one who *halted* the building of the Temple, and may be the basis for the identity of Cyrus in the manuscript. In this context it makes sense the various midrashic teachings relating to the Hebrew name Ahasuerus, as his true name was in

2. **From Hodu to Cush, etc.:** He reigned over one hundred twenty-seven provinces as he reigned from Hodu to Cush,²⁵ which are situated alongside one another, and so [we explain] (I Kings 5:4): “For he had dominion over all [the inhabitants of] this side of the river, from Tiphshah even to Gaza,” meaning that he had dominion over all the inhabitants of this side of the river, just as he had dominion from Tiphshah to Gaza.²⁶
- When King Ahasuerus sat, etc.:** when the kingdom was firmly established in his hand. Our Sages, however, explained it differently in Tractate Megillah (11b).²⁷
3. **The nobles:** Heb. הַפְּרָתִימִים, governors in Persian.
4. **Many days:** He made a banquet for them.
5. **The garden:** a place where vegetables are sown. **Orchard:** where trees are planted.
6. **White, fine cotton, and blue:** He spread out various types of colored garments for them for spreads. **Embroidered with cords of linen and purple:** embroidered with threads of linen and purple; he spread these out for them on rods of silver and on columns of marble. **Couches of gold and silver:** he set [them] up to sit upon for the feast. **On a pavement of:** floors of green and white, etc. Our Sages identified them as kinds of precious stones, and according to the apparent meaning of the verse, these were their names.
7. **And they gave them to drink in golden vessels:** Heb., like וְלִהְשִׁקוֹת, and to give to drink.²⁸ **And the vessels differed from one another:** Heb. שְׁוֵיִם, different from each other, and likewise, (below 3:8) “and their laws differ (שְׁנוּת),” and our Sages expounded what they expounded. **And royal wine was plentiful:** It was abundant;²⁹ and our Sages said that he gave each one to drink wine that was older than he.
8. **According to the law:** Because there are feasts in which they coerce those seated to drink [the contents] of a large vessel, and some can drink it only with difficulty, but here, no one coerced [anyone]. **Ordained:** Heb. נָסַךְ, an expression referring to a foundation (נִסְכָּה); i.e., so he instituted and ordained. **Upon every steward of his house:** upon all the stewards of the feast: the chief baker, the chief butcher, and the chief butler. **To do according to every man’s wish:** each one his desire.
10. **On the seventh day:** Our Rabbis said that it was the Sabbath.
12. **But Queen Vashti refused:** Our Rabbis said (Meg. 12b): Because leprosy broke out on her, in order that she should refuse and be killed. Because she would force Jewish girls to undress, and work on the Sabbath, it was decreed that she should be

rabbinic tradition Cyrus or Artaxerxes. According to this, the statement that he ‘remained in his wicked ways from beginning to end’ refers to the fact that he did not authorize the rebuilding of the Temple before his assassination in 465 BCE. The problem with this explanation is that on a line before the insertion of Cyrus, Rashi comments: He was the king of Persia who reigned *instead of Cyrus* at the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. This text remains unexplained, justifying why Cyrus was left out in the printed editions. See also Ibn Ezra, *Sifsei Chachamim* regarding the identity of Ahasuerus.

²⁵ In the manuscript it omits: ‘He reigned over one hundred twenty-seven provinces as he reigned from Hodu to Cush.’

²⁶ In the manuscript it omits: meaning that he had dominion over all the inhabitants of this side of the river, just as he had dominion from Tiphshah to Gaza.

²⁷ Ibn Ezra brings three reasons for the feast: 1. He reckoned according to his calculation the Jews would no longer be redeemed. 2. He rested from battles. 3. He married his wife Vashti. Ibn Ezra concludes the third reason seems correct. Rashi seems to imply a third commentary: when the kingdom was firmly established in his hand. This commentary is also found in anonymous commentary on Esther in Bodleian Library (MS. Oppenheimer ADD, 4o 52, fol. 133a).

²⁸ In the manuscript this comment is omitted.

²⁹ The manuscript omits: ‘It was abundant.’

stripped naked on the Sabbath. **Became very wrath:** because she sent him shameful words.

13. **For so was the king's custom:** For it was the king's custom in every judgment to present the matter before all who knew law and judgment.

14. **And the nearest to him:** to present his words before them were the following: Carshena, Shethar, etc.³⁰

15. **According to the law what [is there] to do:** This refers back to “And the king said to the wise men.”

16. **Has... done wrong:** Heb. עָוֹןָהּ, an expression of iniquity (עָוֹן).

17. **For the word of the queen will spread to all the women:** that she disgraced the king- [this will cause] all the women to despise their husbands as well.

18. **The princesses of Persia and Media, etc. will say:** this word to all the princes; this is an ellipsis.

19. **And much contempt and wrath:** And in this matter, there is much contempt and wrath.



MACHZOR VITRY - LITURGY OF PURIM

Author: Rabbi Simcha of Vitry (d. 1105) with marginal annotations by Eleazar ben Judah Rokeach (c. 1176 – 1238)

MS. Oppenheimer 59, folio 81b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Prayers and *piyutim* for Purim

Introduction

This manuscript is a compendium of Jewish law and liturgy called Machzor Vitry, composed by Rabbi Simcha of Vitry, disciple of the great commentator of the Torah and the Talmud, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), known as Rashi. There are only three manuscripts of this

work extant and one is found in Oxford's Bodleian library, in addition to the British Library and Reggio. The text presented here is the prayers said on Purim during the *Amidah* prayer and a *piyut* in the form of an acrostic recited by Ashkenazic custom after the reading of the Megillah. According to Rabbi Simcha of Vitry, the Men of the Great Assembly composed this *piyut* during the Second Temple Period, making it a very early *piyut* in relation to the development of the *piyutim*.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

For Purim (in the *Amidah* prayer):

We thank Thee for the miracles, the redemption, and victories, and liberation, which

³⁰ The manuscript omits: ‘Were the following: Carshena, Shethar, etc.’

Thou hast performed for our fathers in days of old and³¹ at this time. In the Days of Mordechai and Esther, in Shushan, the capital, when Haman, the wicked, rose up against them and sought to destroy, to slay, and to exterminate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, on the same day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions; But You, in Your abundant mercy, nullified his counsel and frustrated his intention and caused his design to return upon his own head and they hanged him and his sons on the gallows. As you performed for them miracles and mighty deeds in those days and³² at this time, so do for with us Lord our G-d wonders and miracles like this time.

***Piyut*³³ for Purim after the reading of the Megillah:³⁴**

Who balked the counsel of the nations and annulled the designs of the cunning, when a wicked man stood up against us, a wantonly evil branch of Amalek's offspring. Haughty with his wealth he dug himself a grave, and his very greatness snared him in a trap.

Fancying a trap, he became entrapped; attempting to destroy, he was swiftly destroyed.

Haman showed his forebears' enmity, and aroused his brotherly hate [of Esau] on the children.

He would not remember Saul's compassion, that through his pity on Agag the foe was born.

The wicked one conspired to cut away the righteous, but the impure was trapped in the pure one's hands.

Kindness overcame their father's error, and the wicked one piled sin on sins.

In his heart he hid his cunning thoughts, and devoted himself to evil-doing.

He stretched out his hand against G-d's holy ones, he spent his silver to destroy their memory.

When Mordechai saw the wrath commence, and Haman's decrees be issued in Shushan,

He put on sackcloth and bound himself in mourning, decreed a fast and sat on ashes: "Who would arise to atone for error, to gain forgiveness for our ancestors' sins?"

A blossom blossomed from a lulav branch- behold! Hadassah stood up to arouse the sleeping.

Her servants hastened Haman, to serve him wine of serpents poison.

He stood tall through his wealth and toppled through his evil- he built gallows on which he was hung.

³¹ See footnote 10 for a discussion on the version of this text that includes 'and' ('u'): 'Thou hast performed for our fathers in days of old *and* at this time.'

³² See footnote 10 for a lengthy discussion about the version of this text that includes 'and' in this text.

³³ The *piyut* is an acrostic.

³⁴ *Machzor Vitry* (p. 214) writes that it was composed by the Men of the Great Assembly (*Anshe Kneset Hagdolah*) perhaps during the Second Temple period. In *Tanya Rabbati (Inyan Kriat Megillah)*, an abridged version of *Shebole Haleket*, attributed to 13th century Rabbi Jehiel ben Jekuthiel Anav, it states that he found in the name of Rashi that some places have the custom to say the *piyut Asher Heini* after the blessing recited after the Megillah. Zunz dates the *piyut* to the beginning of the period of the expansion of the prayer book and inclusion of *piyutim* around 550 CE. It is also not a regular stand alone *piyut* but was initially part of a blessing that had the standard opening 'Blessed are You..' and was utilized as an alternative to the blessing that is recoded in the Talmud 'who wages our battles' (*Harav es riveinu*). See *Hatefilah B'yisrael B'hispatchuta Hahistorit* by Isaac Moshe Elenbogen p. 418, footnote 12, and p. 210 for the history of the *piyut* regarding Zunz's dating of the *piyut* to the 6th century.

The earth's inhabitants opened their mouths, for Haman's lot became our Purim.
The righteous man was saved from the wicked's hand; the foe was substituted for him.

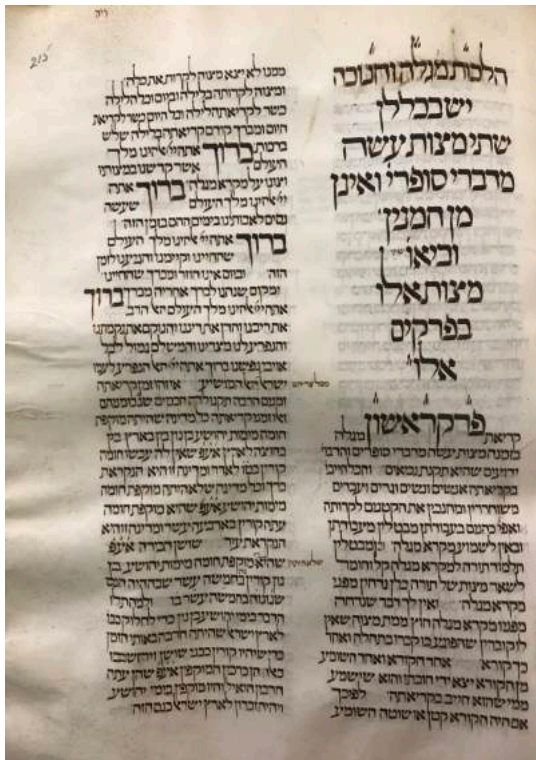
They undertook to establish Purim, to rejoice in every single year.

You noted the prayer of Mordechai and Esther; Haman and his sons You hung on the gallows.

The rose of Jacob was cheerful and glad, when they jointly saw Mordechai robed in royal blue.

You have been their eternal salvation, and their hope throughout generations.

To make known that all who hope in You will not be shamed; nor ever be humiliated those taking refuge in You.



MISHNEH TORAH – LAWS OF MEGILLAH

Maimonides - Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204)

1. MS. Oppenheimer 77, folio 163a
2. MS. Pococke 307, fol. 215a

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Date: 14th century

Introduction

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon was born in 1135 or 1138 in Cordoba. He was forced to flee when the Almohads conquered Spain in 1148, forcing Jews to flee or convert to Islam at the pain of death. For the next ten years Maimonides moved around Southern Spain before moving to Fez, Morocco, during which time he wrote his Commentary to the Mishnah. In 1165,

he moved to Israel and in 1166 to Alexandria before settling in Fustat (modern day Cairo), Egypt, where he was appointed head (*nagid*) of the community around 1171. He also served as the personal physician to the Sultan. His major legal work is the *Mishneh Torah* (repetition of the Torah), written between 1168 - 1178 and his philosophical work *Moreh Hanevuchim* (Guide for the Perplexed), written in Judeo Arabic between 1185-1190. He died in 1204 and is buried in Tiberius, Israel. The two 14th manuscripts of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* relate to the laws of the reading of the Megillah. A very slight discrepancy may be seen in the liturgy of the blessing: 'Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in previous days at this time.' In one text it states 'And at this time.' MS Oppenheimer manuscript includes the glosses of Rabbi Meir Hakohen of Rothenberg, pupil of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, subsequently published in 1509 as *Hagahot Maimoniyot*,

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

1 It is a positive mitzvah ordained by the Rabbis to read the Megillah at the appointed time. It is well-known that this was ordained by the Prophets. Everyone is obligated in this reading: men, women, converts, and freed slaves. Children should also be trained to read it. Even the priests should neglect their service in the Temple and come to hear the reading of the Megillah. Similarly, Torah study should be neglected to hear the reading of the Megillah. Surely, this applies to the other mitzvot of the Torah: the observance of all of them is superseded by the reading of the Megillah. There is nothing that takes priority over the reading of the Megillah except the burial of a *meit mitzvah* - a corpse that has no one to take care of it. A person who encounters such a corpse should bury it and then read the Megillah.

2 One can fulfill one's obligation by reading or by listening to another person's

reading, provided one listens to a person who is obligated to hear the reading. For this reason, if the reader was a minor or mentally incompetent, one who hears his reading does not fulfill his obligation.

3 It is a mitzvah to read the entire Megillah and to read it both at night and during the day. The entire night is an appropriate time for the night reading, and the entire day is appropriate for the day reading. Before the reading at night, one should recite three blessings. They are: Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to read the Megillah. Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in previous days at this time.³⁵ Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this

³⁵ There is a difference between MS Pococke 307 *Mishneh Torah* and MS Opp. 77 *Mishneh Torah*: In MS Pococke 307 the second blessing over the reading of the Megillah is: Blessed are You, Lord, our G-d, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time (*b'zman hazeh*). In MS Opp. 77 *Mishneh Torah* the blessing is: Blessed are You, Lord, our G-d, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, **and** at this time (*ub'zmn hazeh*). The difference is the word 'and' (u) before 'at this time.' This difference is notwithstanding the fact that MS Opp. 77 itself is contradictory, as in the laws of Chanukah (3:4) the blessing is without 'and' (u), whereas in the laws of Purim it is with 'and.' The Machzor Vitry by Rabbi Simcha of Vitry may have been a source for the version that states the blessing with 'and', as he writes in his liturgy for Purim recited during the Amidah: 'We thank Thee for the miracles, the redemption, and victories, and liberation, which Thou hast performed for our fathers in days of old *and* at this time.' Similarly, at the end of the section he writes: 'As you performed for them miracles and mighty deeds in those days *and* at this time, so do for with us Lord our G-d wonders and miracles like this time.' The same can be found in the *Al Hanisim* liturgy in the Ashkenazi manuscript Siddur found at the Bodleian Library, MS. Canonici Or. 110 (fol. 79b and 80b).

Great Ashkenazi legalist Rabbi Solomon Luria, known as the *Maharshah* (1510 - 1573), writes in his responsa (ch. 64) that the correct version is *without* 'and' (u) and the meaning of the blessing is that miracles were performed in the past at this time of year. Rabbi Chaim Benvenisti (1603-1673) initially writes in his work *Knesset Hagdolah* (Laws of Chanukah, Tur 676) that the liturgy is as MS. Opp. 77, with 'and' (u), but that after seeing the responsa of the *Maharshah* he says he changed his custom and began reciting the blessing without 'and', as in MS Pococke 307. Rabbi Chaim Benvenisti explains however that the meaning of the blessing also with 'and' is the same explanation that the *Maharshah* brings without 'and' (u). This is evident also from the Machzor Vitry who includes the ending: As you performed for them miracles and mighty deeds in those days *and* at this time, so do for with *us* Lord our G-d wonders and miracles like this time.

Rabbi Elijah Spira (1660–1712) also quotes the *Maharshah* in *Eliyahu Zuta*, a commentary on Rabbi Mordecai Yoffe's *Levush* (*Orach Chaim* 676), stating that the correct recitation of the blessing is as the version found in MS Pococke 307 without 'and.'

It's possible to justify the version as found in MS Opp. 77 and thereby also explain why there might be a difference between Chanukah and Purim in this regard. Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, known as the Chida (1724 - 1806), writes in his work *Lev David* (ch. 29) that the meaning of the liturgy of the blessing 'at this time' is not merely referring to a miracle in the past that occurred at a time corresponding to this time of year but is actually renewed and reoccurs at this time in the present also. Just as in the past, G-d showed mercy, performed miracles and salvation for our ancestors, by us commemorating the miracles of the past, we spiritually renew mercy and salvation at this time in the present also. He draws this concept from the 18th century Italian Kabbalist Rabbi Jacob ben David Pardo who explains thereby the verse in Esther (9:28): These days should be remembered and observed. When they are remembered in the world, they are observed (made) again in actuality in the higher world that flows into this world. The Chida argues that for this reason Jews living also in Africa and Spain, places that were not subject to the Persian Empire – and Jews in those places not threatened – should still celebrate the holiday of Purim. While the Chida is providing this interpretation to the blessing as found in MS Pococke 307 (without 'and'), the interpretation would be more relevant according to the version as found in MS Opp. 77 (with 'and'), that would read: 'who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days *and* at this time. As this concept is based on the verse in Esther (9:28), perhaps it was mentioned in MS. Opp. 77 *Mishneh Torah* particularly in relation to Purim.

occasion. During the day, one should not recite the final blessing. In places where it is customary to recite a blessing after the reading, the following blessing should be recited: Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, the Al-mighty, who wages our battles and executes judgment on our behalf, who avenges the vengeance wrought against us, who exacts retribution from our enemies on our behalf, and who acquits justly all our mortal enemies. Blessed are You, G-d, the Almighty, who exacts payment on behalf of His nation Israel from all their oppressors,³⁶ the G-d of salvation.³⁷

4 What is the appropriate time for the Megillah to be read? The Sages ordained many different times for its reading, as implied by Esther 9:31: "To confirm these days of Purim in their appointed times." The following are the days on which the Megillah is read: Every city, whether in *Eretz Yisrael* or in the diaspora, that was surrounded by a wall at the time of Joshua bin Nun should read the Megillah on the fifteenth of Adar. This applies even when a wall does not surround the city at present. Such a city is called a כרך. Every city that was not surrounded by a wall at the time of Joshua bin Nun should read the Megillah on the fourteenth of Adar. This applies even when there is a wall surrounding the city at present. Such a city is called an עיר.

5 In the capital of Shushan, the Megillah is read on the fifteenth of Adar although it was not surrounded by a wall at the time of Joshua bin Nun, because the miracle occurred within it and at that time, the Jews celebrated on that day, as Esther states,³⁸ "And they rested on the fifteenth." Why was the matter made dependent on the time of Joshua bin Nun? To give honor to the cities of *Eretz Yisrael* that were in ruin at the time of the Purim miracle. Although they are in ruin at present, this would allow them to read the Megillah on the fifteenth as do the inhabitants of Shushan, since they were surrounded by a wall at the time of Joshua. Thus the commemoration of the miracle would include a remembrance of *Eretz Yisrael*.

6 The Sages ordained that the inhabitants of the villages who gather in the synagogues only on Mondays and Thursdays could read the Megillah earlier, on the day when they gather in the synagogues. What is implied? If the fourteenth of Adar falls on either Monday or Thursday, the Megillah is read on that day. If it falls on a day other than Monday or Thursday, we read on an earlier date, on the Monday or Thursday that is closest to the fourteenth of Adar.

7 What is implied? If the fourteenth of Adar falls on Sunday, the Megillah is read on the previous Thursday, the eleventh of Adar. If the fourteenth falls on Tuesday, the Megillah is read earlier, on Monday, the thirteenth. If the fourteenth falls on

³⁶ In MS. Pococke 307, the words: 'from all their oppressors' is added in the margin.

³⁷ Talmud *Megillah* 21b. The Talmud offers two opinions how the blessing concludes: Rav Ashi would conclude with the words: Blessed are You, G-d, who exacts payment on behalf of Israel from all their oppressors. Rava says one should conclude: Blessed are You, G-d, the G-d of salvation. A third opinion, Rav Papa, states that both should be said combined: Blessed are You, G-d, who exacts payment on behalf of Israel from all their oppressors, the G-d of salvation. Maimonides adds to this two additions: Blessed are You, G-d, Al-mighty, who exacts payment on behalf of his people Israel from all their oppressors, the G-d of salvation. The word 'Al-mighty' is added as in the body of the blessing, and also the words 'His people.' Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy in *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* also adds 'Al-mighty.' Rabbeinu Chananel (990-1053) quotes the version as found in the Talmud without 'Al-mighty' or 'his people,' as does Rav Amram Gaon and the *Mordechai* (*Karban Nethanel* on *Rosh*, Megillah 3:2). Machzor Vitry adds 'Al-mighty' in the body of the text and in the conclusion. Shebole Haleket (ch. 6, laws of Megillah) adds 'Al-mighty' in the body of the blessing but omits it in the conclusion. He further comments that in the 'Mesivta' they would not include 'Al-mighty' in the beginning of the text because it already states 'our Lord' (Elokeinu). The Nussach Ari indeed omits both.

³⁸ 9:18.

Wednesday, the Megillah is read earlier, on Monday, the twelfth. Whenever license is granted to read the Megillah before the fourteenth, it should not be read unless ten are present.

8 In a village where the Jews do not gather together to read the Torah on Mondays and Thursdays, the Megillah should be read only on the fourteenth of Adar. When a city does not have ten people who have no other occupation but to attend the synagogue for communal purposes, it is considered to be a village, and the Megillah is read earlier, on the day when people gather in the synagogue. If a city lacks ten adult men, the very difficulty leads to its solution, and they are considered to be like the inhabitants of a large city and read the Megillah only on the fourteenth.

9 When does the above leniency - that it is possible to read the Megillah earlier, on the day people gather in the synagogue - apply? When Israel rules itself. In the present era, however, the Megillah is read only at its appropriate times, the fourteenth of Adar and the fifteenth. The inhabitants of villages and cities read on the fourteenth, and the inhabitants of walled cities read on the fifteenth.

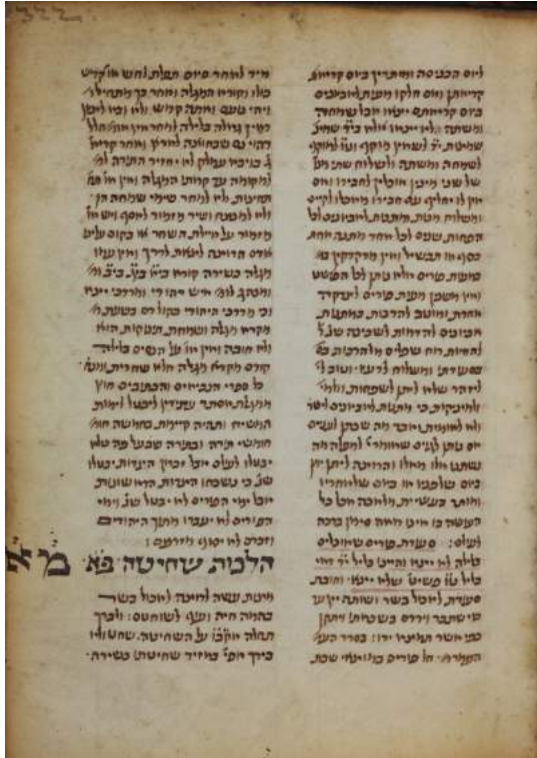
10 The following rules apply when an inhabitant of an unwalled city travels to a walled city, or an inhabitant of a walled city travels to an unwalled city: If his intent was to return home for the day of the Megillah reading, but he was prevented from returning, he should read the Megillah on the day when it is read in his home. If his intent was not to return home until after the day of the Megillah reading, he should read the Megillah together with the people in the place where he is visiting. The following rule applies to all those homes adjacent to a walled city which are seen together with it: If there are not more than two thousand cubits between them, they are considered to be part of the walled city, and their inhabitants should read the Megillah on the fifteenth.

11 When a doubt exists and it is unknown whether a city had been surrounded by a wall at the time of Joshua bin Nun or whether it was surrounded afterwards, its inhabitants should read the Megillah on the day and the night of both the fourteenth and the fifteenth of Adar. They should recite the blessing only when reading on the fourteenth, since this is the time when the Megillah is read in most places in the world.

12 When the Megillah was read in the first month of Adar and, afterwards, the court proclaimed a leap year, the Megillah should be read again in the second month of Adar at its appropriate time.

13 The Megillah should not be read on the Sabbath. This is a decree, enacted so that one should not take it in one's hands and bring it to a person who knows how to read it, thus carrying it four cubits in the public domain. Everyone is obligated to read the Megillah, but everyone is not capable of reading it. Thus, there is the possibility for such an error to occur. For this reason, if the appropriate time for the Megillah to be read falls on the Sabbath, we read it earlier, on the day prior to the Sabbath. We discuss the laws of Purim on that Sabbath to commemorate the fact that it is Purim.

14 What is implied? When the fourteenth of Adar falls on the Sabbath, the inhabitants of the unwalled cities should read the Megillah earlier, on Friday. The inhabitants of the walled cities should read it at their appropriate time, on Sunday. When the fifteenth falls on the Sabbath, the inhabitants of the walled cities read the Megillah earlier, on Friday the fourteenth. The inhabitants of the unwalled cities also read on that day, for this is the appropriate time for them to read. Thus in such an instance, everyone reads on the fourteenth.



ETZ CHAIM – LAWS OF MEGILLAH

English compendium of Jewish law –
Laws of Megillah

University of Liepzig Library

Rabbi Jacob ben Judah Chazan of London

Date: written in 1287

Display: Laws of Purim, underlined that
Purim feast may not be conducted at night
time.

Introduction

This manuscript is a compendium of Jewish Law, written by Jacob ben Judah Chazan of London before the expulsion of the Jews of England in 1290, reflecting the custom of the Jews of England. Written in two parts, containing 646 sections respectively, covering the full spectrum of Jewish law, it is based largely

on the laws of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, while incorporating also laws from contemporary French and English rabbis, including Moses of Oxford/London. The reason for the authorship of this compendium is due to the absence of many Gaonic legal opinions, as well as contemporary French and German legal opinions in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. As presented here, the text incorporates laws from Amram Gaon, not found in the work of Maimonides. In this manuscript there is a section underlined that refers to the law stating that one does not fulfill one's obligation of eating a meal on Purim if done at night time. It would seem this was a subject of considerable discussion in medieval times.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

They include two positive commandments that were ordained by the Rabbis which are not included [among the 613 mitzvot of the Torah]. The explanation of these mitzvot is contained in the following chapters.

1. Should the inhabitants of the villages read the Megillah earlier, on a Monday or a Thursday, and give monetary gifts to the poor on the day on which they read, they fulfill their obligation. They do not, however, fulfill their obligation of rejoicing and festivities of the Purim holiday, unless performed on the fourteenth, because the mitzvah of rejoicing and festivities is on the fourteenth for the cities that are not walled and the fifteenth for walled cities.³⁹
2. The mitzvah of giving gifts of food is to give two types of food to one person. If one does not have the means to send presents of food to a friend, one should

³⁹ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah* 2:14.

- exchange one's meal with him.⁴⁰
3. The giving of charity to the poor should be at the very least to give each of two poor people one present, be it money, cooked dishes. One should not be discriminate in selecting the recipients of these Purim gifts. Instead, one should give to whomever stretches out his hand. Money given to be distributed on Purim should not be used for other charitable purposes.⁴¹
 4. It is preferable for a person to be liberal with his donations to the poor⁴² to resemble the Divine Presence, which describes as having the tendency⁴³ "to revive the spirit of the lowly," more than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to his friends.
 5. It is preferable to be careful not to give his donation to one's servants and wet nurses⁴⁴ because the mitzvah of donations to the poor on Purim is for Jews and not non-Jews, for the angels will ask what is the difference between Jews and non Jews.⁴⁵ If one wants to give to non-Jews donation should give it the day before or after Purim.⁴⁶
 6. It is permitted to work (on these days). Whoever performs work, however, will never see a sign of blessing.⁴⁷
 7. A person who eats the Purim feast at night does not fulfill his obligation. This is referring to the eve of the fourteenth of Adar, because if it is referring to the eve of the fifteenth one obviously does not fulfill one's obligation.⁴⁸
 8. The obligation of the feast is to eat meat and drink wine until he becomes intoxicated and falls asleep in a stupor. He should prepare as attractive a feast as his means permit.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:15. Etz Chaim omits: 'Whoever sends portions to many friends is praiseworthy.'*

⁴¹ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:16.*

⁴² Maimonides adds: For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts.

⁴³ Isaiah 57:15. Maimonides adds the remainder of the verse: "and to revive those with broken hearts."

⁴⁴ Working in Jewish homes.

⁴⁵ See *Hagahot Maimoniyot al Hilchot Purim (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah v'Chanukah end of chapter 2).*

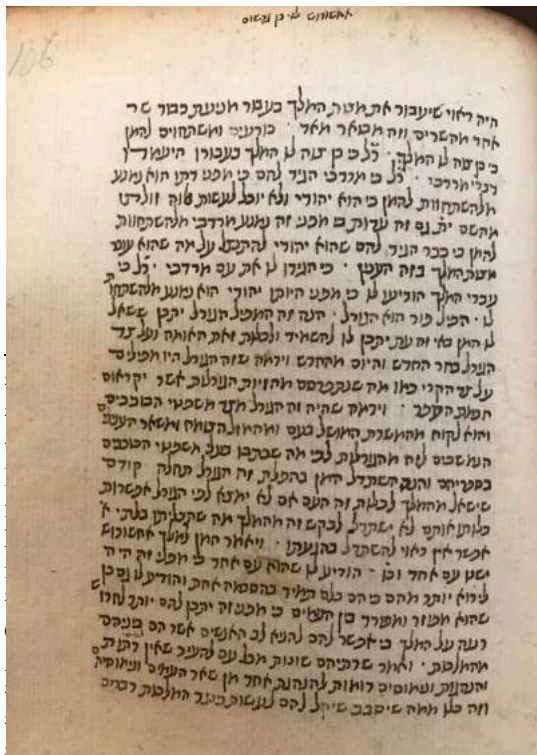
⁴⁶ Maimonides does not mention this clause at all. The source is from 12-13th century French exegete Rabbeinu Efraim ben Samson, mentioned in *Hagahot Maimoniyot al Hilchot Purim (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah v'Chanukah end of chapter 2).* In the *Shebole Haleket* (ch. 6, laws of Megillah) it is recorded in the name of Rabbi Kalonymos the Elder (d. 1126). Notably, *Etz Chaim* does not appear to say that one has not fulfilled one's obligation of giving gifts to the poor on Purim if it is given to a non-Jew. This reflects the opinion of Rabeinu Efraim and codified in the *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 294:3): 'In a place where the custom is to give to non Jews gifts to the poor on Purim, one may give.'* *Magen Avraham* comments: in the first instance this should not be the custom. The *Taz* comments that the reason why one may give to non-Jews, where it is customary to do so, is because of 'ways of peace' (*Darkei Shalom*). See Talmud tractate *Gittin* 61a.

⁴⁷ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:14.* In *Etz Chaim* this clause comes after the section about gifts to the poor, whereas in *Mishneh Torah* it comes in the middle of the section about reading the *Megillah* in the city and village.

⁴⁸ In the *Etz Chaim* this is underlined by an unknown hand. The principle text is found in *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:14.* Maimonides however writes only: 'A person who conducts the Purim feast at night does not fulfill his obligation,' similar to Talmud *Megillah 7b. Maggid Mishneh* on *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:14* writes the same as *Etz Chaim* with the additional reason: 'The night after the day of reading the *Megillah* obviously one does not fulfill one's obligation for Purim has already passed.'

⁴⁹ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v'Chanukah 2:15:* 'What is the nature of our obligation for this feast? A person should eat meat and prepare as attractive a feast as his means permit. He should drink wine until he becomes intoxicated and falls asleep in a stupor.' Talmud *Megillah 7b.*

9. In Seder Rav Amram it states:⁵⁰ if Purim falls out on *Motzoei Shabbat*, immediately after finishing the silent *Amidah*, one says *Kaddish* and reads the Megillah, and afterwards begins ‘*v’hi noam*’ and ‘*ata kadosh*’ but not ‘*uva l’tziyon*’ because there is no redemption at night.
10. The next day, one does not say *Hallel*, because the miracle took place outside Israel.
11. After calling up three people for the Torah reading of ‘*v’yavo Amalek*’ one should not return the Torah to its place until he has read the Megillah.
12. One does not say ‘*Tachanot*’ (supplication) and also not the next day because they are days of rejoicing. Also not ‘*lamnatzeach*’ and ‘*shir mizmor l’Asaf*’ and some people (say?) ‘*mizmor al ayelet hashachar*’ or ‘*b’kum aleinu adam*’.
13. A person who wants to depart on a journey and does not have a kosher Megillah may read the Megillah on the eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth of Adar.⁵¹
14. It is customary to recite the verses ‘*ish yehudi*’, ‘*u’Mordechai yatza*’ and ‘*ki Mordechai*’ out loud during the reading of the Megillah. It is for the rejoicing of the children and not obligatory.
15. One does not say ‘*Al hanisim*’ at the night before reading of the Megillah, but rather only in *shacharit* (morning prayers) and *mincha* (afternoon prayers).⁵²
16. All the books of the Prophets and all the Holy Writings, with the exception of the Book of Esther, will be nullified in the Messianic era. It will continue to exist, as will the five books of the Torah and the *halachot* of the Oral Law, which will never be nullified. But the memories of the difficulties endured by our people will be nullified, as it states:⁵³ “For the former difficulties will be forgotten,”⁵⁴ but the celebration of the days of Purim will not be nullified, as it states:⁵⁵ “And these days of Purim will not pass from among the Jews, nor will their remembrance cease from their seed.”⁵⁶



RABBI LEVI BEN GERSHON RALBAG

MS. Michael 289, folio 106b, 107a
 The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford
 Levi Ben Gershon, known as Gersonides (1288–1344)

‘*Chanukah 2:9*): ‘When does the above leniency - the day people gather in the synagogue - apply? When Megillah is read only at its appropriate times, the cke 307, fol. 215b the words: in the ‘present era, te times’ is omitted in the text and added in the

his view. This would indicate that Jacob ben Judah view in Jewish law in England following Seder Rav y of Rabbi Meir Hakohen of Rothenburg.

ey will be hidden from My eye.’

⁵⁶ *Mishneh Torah, Megillah v’Chanukah 2:18.*

Introduction

Levi ben Gershon (1288–1344), known as Gersonides or by his abbreviation of first letters as *RaLBaG*, was a medieval French Jewish philosopher, Talmudist, mathematician, physician and astronomer/astrologer. He was born at Bagnols in Languedoc, France. His family had been distinguished for piety and exegetical skill in Talmud, but though he was known in the Jewish community by commentaries on certain books of the Bible, he never seems to have accepted any rabbinical post. He is known to have been at Avignon and Orange during his life, and is believed to have died in 1344. Zacuto asserts that he died at Perpignan in 1370. His commentary on the Bible was criticized by prominent scholars, such as Abarbanel, Chisdai Crescas, Rivash, the latter accusing him of heresy and almost banning his works, though accepted widely as one of the most important commentaries on the Torah. The text of this 14th century manuscript differs slightly from the printed edition whereby a word that in the printed edition means prove (*yochiach*), in the manuscript is forced (*yuchrach*). Interestingly, Gersonides provides a political understanding to the decree against the Jewish people through what may be considered a six-stage process in genocide: 1. Perception of a people as a collective 2. Influential 3. Otherness 4. Not law abiding 5. Parasitic 6. Existential threat.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT

Title: Ahasuerus, Levi ben Gershon

3:2 **After these events, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite etc.** He thought that because of his elevated level before the king he commanded all the ministers to bow down to him and that they should make him a god, as we find with Nebuchadnezzar that when he heard the words from Daniel informing him of his dream and its interpretation he said that he should be made a god. For this reason they called him Balshetzar, the same name as his god, and told Daniel to worship him and bring him gifts and offerings. For this reason Mordechai fled from kneeling and prostrating himself to Haman because if not for this it would have been unbecoming to violate the king's command by withholding honour to one of the ministers. This is explained from the statement: 'would kneel and prostrate themselves before Haman, for so had the king commanded concerning him' - meaning to say: so had the king commanded himself.

3:4 **Whether Mordecai's words would stand up, for he had told them that he was a Jew.** This means to say that Mordechai told them that because of his religion he may not prostrate himself to Haman because he is a Jew and cannot make anything a god other than the Blessed Name. This is also proof that it is because of this Mordechai refrained to prostrate himself to him because he already told them that he is a Jew in order to be saved from the accusation that he is transgressing the command of the king in this matter.

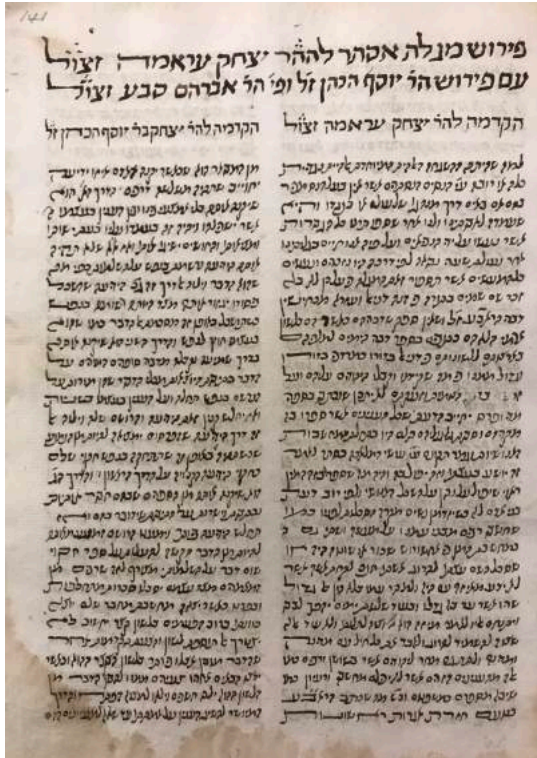
3:6 **For they had told him Mordecai's nationality.** This means to say that the servants of the king informed him that because he is a Jew he refrains from prostrating to him.

3:7 **One cast the pur-that is the lot-before Haman from day to day and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.** Behold the one who cast the lots may have been asked by Haman which time is most suitable to eliminate and destroy this nation and through the lot chose the month and day of the month. It is possible that this lot was cast based on chance as is well publicized from

illusions of destiny that they call ‘wisdom of the earth’ (*chachmat h’afar*). And it seems that this lot is based on the laws of the stars and taken from the power that rules a nation and from the *mazal* of vegetation and other matter that are connected with the system of lotteries, as the masters of star gazers write in their works. Haman attempted to cast lots before asking permission from the king to destroy the Jews because if they would be unable to determine the ability to destroy them from the lots they would not attempt to seek permission from the king because something that in any event is not achievable is not worth the effort.

3:8 And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples. He informed them that it is one nation because it is due to this that he should be more afraid of them as they are always together in consensus. He also informed him that they are scattered and separate among the peoples because due to this it is easy for them to instigate evil against the king because it is possible for them to persuade the opinion of the population among whom they reside in the kingdom. Also, **their laws differ from those of every people**, implying that their customs and manners are not similar to the customs and manners of any other nation and this is all with the intention to argue that it would be easy for them to perform despicable acts against the king because they do not have laws that will prevent them. What is despicable to any other nations would not be despicable to them, making it easier for them to rebel against the kingdom and against the nations among whom they live. In addition, he informed him that **they do not keep the king’s laws**, meaning to say they do not fulfill his decrees and in this regard it is as if they rebel against him. Furthermore, he informed them that **it is of no use for the king to let them be**, implying that the king has no benefit from them for which one may be forced⁵⁷ to leave them to their own affairs, because they have no benefit to the kingdom. Due to the matter as it is that letting them be has no benefit, and there is the possibility of much harm to the kingdom, and they are considered rebellious against the king, Haman tried to have them destroyed with the king’s consent and promised him to deliver to the king’s treasury a very great amount of benefit and thereby removing the harm that they cause the king. It appears that Haman informed them that because their laws are different from all other nations, according to their law they are commanded to kill other nations that do not subject themselves to the commandments of their religion, and this already known from what they attempted to destroy the Amalekites through Saul and others. With this also in mind Haman tried to have the Jews destroyed collectively. Because of this Ahasuerus was willing and consented to eliminate the Jewish people with no other benefit that will be afforded him. He thus, gave Haman his ring with which the king signs law into effect so that Haman can do as his eyes please. It seems that after this the ring was left in Haman’s hands so that he can sign by himself in the name of the king everything that he wished to sign. Because of this it later states that Ahasuerus gave his ring to Mordechai that he removed from Haman.

⁵⁷ In the manuscript the word is ‘*yuchrach*’ whereas in the printed edition the word is ‘*yochiach*’ - will prove.



COMMENTARY ON ESTHER BY ISAAC ARAMAH, ISAAC BEN JOSEPH HAKOHEN AND ABRAHAM SABEH

MS. Oppenheimer Add, 4o 106, folios 141a, 162b
The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford
Authors: Isaac Aramah, Isaac ben Joseph Hakohen and Abraham Saba
Date: 15-16th century

Introduction

The texts by Abraham Saba and Isaac Arama deal with the spiritual cause for the decree of genocide against the Jewish people during the reign of Ahasuerus. The Talmudic view is that the spiritual cause of the decree of genocide is due to the

laxity of the Jewish people in the keeping of the mitzvot. Abraham Saba argues that the spiritual cause for the decree of genocide is disunity and baseless hatred among the Jewish people. Drawing from numerous Biblical and midrashic texts Isaac Arama suggests that even more important than observing the mitzvot is Jewish unity. The following is a commentary of Abraham Saba on the above subject, followed by a commentary by Meir Arama pertaining to this subject, published in his work *Akeidah Yitzchak*.

AUTHORS

Abraham Saba

Abraham Saba (1440–1508) was a preacher in Castile who became a pupil of Isaac de Leon. At the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain he took refuge in Portugal, where he met with further misfortune; for scarcely had he settled in Oporto when King Manuel I of Portugal ordered all Jews to be expelled from Portugal, all Jewish children to become Christians, and all Hebrew books to be burned (December 24, 1496). Saba's two sons were forcibly taken from him, and he fled from Oporto, abandoning his entire library and succeeding only at the risk of his life in saving his own works in manuscript. He fled to Lisbon, but before reaching there was told of a new order of the king decreeing the death of any Jew with whom a Hebrew book or *tefillin* (phylacteries) were found. He hid his manuscripts and *tefillin* under an olive-tree and entered the city. Upon leaving Lisbon he attempted to recover his hidden treasure, but being discovered by the king's guards, he was thrown into prison, and after a six months' confinement was sent across the frontier. He went to Fez, Morocco, where he resided for ten years. Soon after his arrival he fell ill; his great privations and terrible sufferings having undermined his health. On his recovery he recommitted to paper from memory the following works, the original manuscripts of which had been lost in Portugal including *Eshkol ha-Kofer* (*A Cluster of Camphire*), a

commentary on the *Book of Ruth* and *Book of Esther*. According to Azulai ("Chida", *Shem ha-Gedolim*), who read the anecdote in a work entitled *Dibre Yosef*, Abraham in journeying from Fez to Verona became sick on the ship in mid-ocean during a great storm. The captain, unable to control the ship, had given up all hope, and implored Rabbi Abraham to pray for divine assistance. Abraham stipulated that in case of his death his body should be delivered to the Jewish community of Verona, and then prayed for the safety of the vessel. His prayer was heard, the storm abated, and the ship went safely on. Two days later Abraham died, and the captain, keeping his promise, brought the body to Verona, where it was buried with great honors.⁵⁸

Isaac ben Moses Arama

Isaac ben Moses Arama (c. 1420 – 1494) was a Spanish rabbi and author. He was at first principal of a rabbinical academy at Zamora (probably his birthplace); then he received a call as rabbi and preacher from the community at Tarragona, and later from that of Fraga in Aragon. He officiated finally in Calatayud as rabbi and head of the Talmudical academy. Upon the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, Arama settled in Naples, where he died in 1494. Arama is the author of *Akedat Yitzcaḥ* (*Binding of Isaac*), a lengthy philosophical commentary on the Pentateuch, homiletic in style. From this work he is frequently spoken of as the "*Ba'al 'Akedah*" (author of the *Akedah*). He also wrote a commentary upon the Five Scrolls, and a work called *Hazut Kashah* (*A Difficult Vision*), upon the relation of philosophy to theology; also *Yad Abshalom* (*The Hand of Absalom*), a commentary on Proverbs, written in memory of his son-in-law, Absalom, who died shortly after his marriage. It should be noted that the commentary on Esther, extant in all editions of *Akedat Yizḥak* since Venice, 1573, is actually the work of his son Meir Arama. Isaac's own commentary on Esther was published in Constantinople, 1518.

TEXT OF MANUSCRIPT BY ABRAHAM SABA

1. Haman (Edom) and Ahasuerus (Ishmael)

‘Haman said to Ahasuerus: "There is one nation, scattered and dispersed among the nations throughout the provinces of your kingdom, whose laws are unlike those of any other nation and who do not obey the laws of the King. It is not in the King's interest to tolerate them."⁵⁹ Even though Ahasuerus was wicked, his wickedness was not as the wickedness of Haman. He was however a gullible fool, confused and fickle and had no intelligence to understand the difference between good and bad and truth and falsehood to the degree that he consented on matters which were evil as if righteous, similar to the builders of the tower of Babel who approved falsehood, as the truth, as I have written elsewhere. The reason for this is due to the fact that Ahasuerus was from Persia and Media - an Ishmaelite, without wisdom and knowledge and without council and speech; a nation of impure lips. Haman, however was a cunning, wicked person from the family of Edom, master of wisdom and knowledge; Edom was cunning in all wisdom, as it states:⁶⁰ ‘Destroy wise men from Edom’. Just as Esau, father of Edom, who knew how to hunt and was cunning in his

⁵⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Saba.

⁵⁹ Esther 3:8.

⁶⁰ *Obdaiah* 1:8.

cheating - the opposite of Jacob, who was a simple man – similarly, Haman was a slanderer and knew how to structure his words correctly offering strong advice through smooth talk and malice. He inherited this also from Esau who spoke clearly with a smooth tongue to mislead his father and cheat him by asking how should one take tithe from straw and salt. For this reason he is called the Amorite, as it states:⁶¹ ‘he took from the Amorites,’ for he used to cheat his father with the speech of his mouth. Similarly, Haman cheated Ahasuerus and persuaded him with his argument and words, which were smoother than oil.⁶² He said to Ahasuerus, there is one people but did not inform him which people he was referring to because surely if the king would know that he was referring to the Jews Ahasuerus would not agree because they are a wise and clever people, as was known from the matter of Daniel and his colleagues, and Mordechai the Jew also was publicly known as a wise person and advisor who sat at the gates of the palace and who saved Ahasuerus from death. How would he agree to repay him and his people evil for good? Haman however misled him by saying there is one people, without informing him which people, who is evil and deserving of destruction.

2. Haman said the Jews are one people. With this he meant that although they appear to be one people in complete love, they are in fact scattered and their hearts are divided with baseless hatred towards each other despite being in exile among the nations.⁶³ Alternatively, he would say: “They are one people,” meaning they are all in unity with one language amongst each other, but among the nations they are scattered and dispersed ‘each one to his gain, every last one’⁶⁴ to exploit, rob and steal the nations approvingly in a manner that every people will be destroyed. If they would be in one place I would be silent because they would only destroy that place, but they are scattered and dispersed in all the countries of your kingdom. They will therefore destroy your whole kingdom. If you will say they have good laws as other people’s laws, this is not so, as their laws are in fact different from all people. If you will say, even though their laws are different, so what? As long as they obey the laws of the king! To this Haman said: “They do not keep the king’s laws.” If you will say, even though all this applies to them, we gain from them great benefit, for which purpose it is fitting to sustain them and honour them. To this Haman said: “It is not worth it for the king to leave them be,” as there is no benefit from them, therefore it should be

⁶¹ Genesis 48:2.

⁶² The text includes a section that suggests the distinction between Esau and Ishmael may be indicated in a verse in Psalms that may be interpreted as a conversation between two people who meet, each one talking about the distinct nature of the persecution of the Jews in their respective exiles: one of brute force, the other cunning deceit. Abraham Saba writes that both are reflected in Psalms (120): ‘A song of ascents. In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me. O Lord, save my soul from false lips, from a deceitful tongue. What can He give you, and what can He add to you, you deceitful tongue? Sharpened arrows of a mighty man with coals of brooms. Woe is to me for I have sojourned in Meshech; I dwelt among the tents of Kedar. For a long time, my soul dwelt with those who hate peace. I am at peace, but when I speak, they [come] to [wage] war.’

⁶³ The idea that senseless hatred and division amongst the Jews is a cause that can lead to destruction is consistent with what Abraham Saba writes, brought in the introduction to *Eshkol Ha-Kofer*, *Siach Elizer*, *Pesach Habayis*, that the cause for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 was desecration of Shabbat and argument and quarreling in the synagogues on the Shabbat and the festivals. This cause for destruction is also found in the Talmud (Yoma 9b) regarding a cause for the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Ralbag who did not live in Spain and not part of the expulsion in 1492 interprets the verse only in the positive that the Jews are one people living in harmony without dispute, although Haman utilizes this very fact as a reason for concern of rebellion.

⁶⁴ Isaiah 56:11. Rashi: They all behave in this manner.

written that they should be destroyed.⁶⁵

COMMENTARY BY MEIR ARAMA

1. Talmud interpretation

The Talmud states:⁶⁶ There is [*yeshno*] one. Rava said: There was none who knew how to slander like Haman, He said to Ahasuerus: Let us destroy them. Ahasuerus said to him: I am afraid of their G-d, lest He do to me as He did to those before me. Haman said to him: They have been asleep [*yashnu*] with respect to the mitzvot, Ahasuerus said to him: There are the Sages among them. Haman said to him: They are one people. Ahasuerus said to him: Perhaps you will say that I am making a bald spot in your kingdom. Haman responded, they are scattered among the peoples. Furthermore, perhaps you will say that there is benefit from them; but this nation is *meforad*, like this barren mule [*pereida*] that cannot bear offspring, and there is no benefit to be gained from them. And perhaps you will say that there is at least a province that is filled with them. Therefore the verse states that they are scattered “in all the provinces of your kingdom”⁶⁷. Haman continued: “And their laws are diverse from those of every people”⁶⁸, as they do not eat from our food, nor do they marry from our women, nor do they marry off their women to us. “Nor do they keep the king’s laws”⁶⁹ They spend the entire year saying: *Shehi pehi*, an acronym for: It is Shabbat today [*Shabbat hayom*]; it is Passover today [*Pesah hayom*]. The verse continues: “Therefore it does not profit the king to tolerate them,” as they eat and drink and scorn the throne. Even if a fly falls into the cup of one of them, he will throw the fly out and drink the wine it fell into, but if my master the king were to touch the glass of one of them, he would throw it to the ground, and would not drink it. Therefore, Haman concluded: “If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed, and I will weigh out ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king’s treasuries.”⁷⁰

2. Alternative interpretation - Three kinds of people: kind, wise and conformist

I say that this wicked person cheated by telling the worst possible lies and disgraceful words mixed with a bit of truth to sustain his falsehoods in order to realize his aims. There are three categories of good, upright people. One is a person with a good temperament who loves and is loved by other people and brings them close to him.⁷¹ This attribute of love leads to the virtue of kindness. A second category is a person, who according to his intellectual capability, delves with his mind into comprehending the depth of true wisdom as much as he is capable. A third is one who does not have any of the above two qualities but is tolerant and ready to accept instructions from a teacher. But someone who does not understand on his own and will also not listen to a

⁶⁵ This text is a translation of the text found in the manuscript but in a longer form in *Eshkol Ha-Kofer* (A Cluster of Camphire), a commentary on Ruth and Esther, p. 65.

⁶⁶ Megillah 13b.

⁶⁷ Esther 3:8.

⁶⁸ Esther 3:8.

⁶⁹ Esther 3:8.

⁷⁰ Esther 3:9.

⁷¹ Borrowed from Ethics of the Fathers 1:12.

teacher cannot be helped. His solution is his destruction.⁷² Regarding these three, Haman said: “There is one people scattered and dispersed among the nations,” who have the opposite of good disposition and loving nature towards each other, as found, due to our iniquities, today; the Jewish people are divided one from another through much baseless hatred. Also, intellectually, “their laws are different from all people.” Which laws are agreeable to other people’s laws and statutes? The prohibition of wearing mixed fibers (*Shatnez*), the ashes of the red heifer, prohibition against sowing mixed seeds (*kilayim*), and other similar laws? Nor do they keep the king’s laws⁷³ - i.e. the commands of the ministers. As proof, why do you violate the commands of the king? There is no solution for them.

3. Tributary

There is no reason to keep them other than for the money that is returned to you⁷⁴ each year through the work they perform, fulfilling the statement - they should be as a tributary.⁷⁵ Due to this they certainly lose utility, similar to a donkey owner who strikes it for the wages that it brings and for this reason alone “it is of no use for the king to let them be.” As for the loss, I will guarantee the repayment of this amount, thus Haman continued:⁷⁶ “If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them, and I will weigh out ten thousand silver talents into the hands of those who perform the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries." The workers who will undertake this evil work will be willing to bring you from the wealth of this people, which will be more fruitful than the tax, as it states:⁷⁷ ‘And their spoils to be taken as plunder.’

4. Jewish unity above all else

A number of the commentaries agree and it is worth knowing that this villain was a wise person and he knew that the merit for unity is the bonding with all the Jewish people, for they have one G-d, one Torah and one nation, and when this is the case, G-d protects them, as it states:⁷⁸ ‘Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone; their heart has parted; now they shall be desolate.’ The natural merit (*segulah*) is to be in a state of unity in matter and form, as it states: The Lord is one’,⁷⁹ ‘Abraham on one’,⁸⁰ and ‘Look tentatively unto Abraham, your father, he was only one man when I called

⁷² Borrowed from *Ta’anit* 17a: ‘Rebbe says: I say a Kohen should be forbidden to drink wine at all times but what I can do, inasmuch as the Kohen’s restoration (permission to drink wine) results from his disruption (from serving in the Temple since its destruction). See also *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 1:8: ‘If a city lacks ten adult men, the very difficulty leads to its solution, and they are considered to be like the inhabitants of a large city and read the *Megillah* only on the fourteenth.’

⁷³ Esther 3:8.

⁷⁴ Similar: Genesis 43:12.

⁷⁵ Deuteronomy 20:11.

⁷⁶ Esther 3:9.

⁷⁷ Esther 3:13.

⁷⁸ Hosea 4:17; 10:2.

⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁸⁰ Ezekiel 33:24. Rashi comments from *Tosefta Sotah* 6: 7: This is one of four things that Rabbi Akiva interpreted [in one way] and which his disciple, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, did not interpret as he did. Rabbi Shimon interpreted it in this manner: Abraham, who was commanded with only one commandment [namely circumcision], inherited the land. We, then, who have been commanded with many commandments, should surely have the land given to us for an inheritance. This is what the prophet answers them.

him.⁸¹ This is similar to the concept of what it states regarding Adam:⁸² 'The man will be like one of us'. The Targum translates 'one' as singular (*yachida*). This being the case, inevitably, the Jewish people, their offspring, should also be called 'one.' This is in fact what king David writes in Psalms:⁸³ 'And who is like Your people, like Israel, one nation in the world.' This imperative of unity amongst the Jewish people is such that the prophet says: "When Judah and Ephraim separate, they lose their form." This is also the meaning to what the prophet says in Malachi: "Have we not all one father? Has not one G-d created us? Why should we betray, each one his brother, to profane the covenant of our forefathers?" If so, why would brethren provoke each other, which reflects division and disunity thereby removing the covenant and merit? In the future, indeed, the Jewish people will be unified, as it states:⁸⁴ 'And they should be one in your hands.' This is reflected also in the statement of the brothers after Shechem violated their sister Dina, they offer the people of Shechem to perform circumcision and 'we will become one people.'⁸⁵ The wicked Haman was also aware that this merit is found with us and is what protects us. For this reason he said: "There is one people." One can see that now there is the opposite reflected in the verse:⁸⁶ 'Their heart has parted; now they shall be desolate.' It is 'a time to act for the Lord.'⁸⁷ This is indicated in the Midrash on Psalms on the verse:⁸⁸ For the conductor on the *Ayelet Hashachar*:⁸⁹ There weren't days as difficult for Israel and in darkness as in the days of Haman when he said to the king: there are one people scattered and dispersed among the nations etc. When Esther knew of this, she instructed Mordechai: gather all the Jews'. This is well explained.⁹⁰

⁸¹ Isaiah 51:2.

⁸² Genesis 3:22.

⁸³ II Samuel 7:23.

⁸⁴ Ezekiel 37:17. The full text reads (Ezekiel 37:15-19): And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: "And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write upon it, 'For Judah and for the children of Israel his companions'; and take one stick and write upon it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' And bring them close, one to the other into one stick, and they shall be one in your hand. And when the children of your people say to you, saying, 'Will you not tell us what these are to you?' Say to them, So says the Lord G-d: Behold I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Israel his companions, and I will place them with him with the stick of Judah, and I will make them into one stick, and they shall become one in My hand.

⁸⁵ Genesis 32:16.

⁸⁶ Hosea 4:17; 10:2.

⁸⁷ Psalms 119:126. The Talmudic Rabbis derived from this verse that we may transgress the words of the Torah in order to make a fence and a safeguard for Israel, e.g. Gideon and Elijah on Mount Carmel, who sacrificed on high places (Talmud *Berachot* 63a. Rashi on Psalms). With this interpretation, Isaac Arama argues that the importance of Jewish unity on the context of receiving Divine protection is more important than the mitzvot.

⁸⁸ Chapter 22.

⁸⁹ *Midrash Tehillim* 22:10 with variation: There was not a time that was as dark for Israel like the capital Shushan where it was decreed upon them 'to destroy, kill, and cause to perish all the Jews' (Esther 3:13).

⁹⁰ In *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 4, p. 1139, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneersohn explains through a text of Rabi Shhneur Zalman of Liadi (*Likkutei Torah Nitzavim*) three concepts in Jewish unity: 1. Common aim and purpose, 2. Interdependency, 3. Single body. He concludes that for these to be effective there needs to be an outer unity that reveals an inherent unity.