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Leadership Through Retreat: A New Perspective on the Book of Esther

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Introduction

We live in a world marked by ongoing crises, and the strategies celebrated for addressing them tend to emphasize overt action, dominance, and rapid response. [1] Approaches traditionally associated with women—what might be termed "female-coded" actions—are frequently overlooked, despite their potential to offer innovative and valuable methods for navigating challenges. For example, the essay collection *All We Can Save* highlights how women-led efforts in environmental stewardship—rooted in community, incremental progress, and emotional openness—have long been marginalized, even as these approaches prove crucial in times of crisis.[2]

I believe that many of us are often unaware that there is more than one way to deal with a crisis. We tend to fall back on the defaults we know. In the following reading, I aim to join the efforts to shift that tendency to overlook female-coded actions. I turn to the story of Esther as a source

[1] Special thanks to Noa Albaum for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier draft, and to the "Vatichtov" fellowship that supported the process of writing this piece.

[2] *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, eds. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katherine K. Wilkinson (One World, 2020).

which can equip us with much needed inspiration for times of crisis. Two assumptions direct my exploration: First, the distinction between male-coded and female-coded actions in crisis is important, yet both are necessary.[3] Male-coded actions often emphasize direct, overt, international, and aggressive forms of engagement, whereas female-coded actions might involve nurturing, collaborative, local, and indirect approaches. Providing access to both modalities for people of all genders enriches the toolkit available for mitigating crises.

Another key assumption is the symbolic reading of myths and stories, which has long served as a method for encoding and passing down wisdom across different traditions. Carl Jung is perhaps best known for this approach in recent times, but even before him, Hasidic masters, for example, interpreted stories from the traditional canon as symbolic narratives occurring within every individual.

The story of Esther can serve as a symbolic narrative that illustrates the power of integrating both male- and female-coded modes of action. The objective here is to avoid the common reading, which finds ways to show that Esther turned into an overt activist, and to instead appreciate and value her inward mode of influencing change. This mode of action, often undervalued, is a potent form of leadership and crisis management. Esther's story does not merely invite us to witness a transformation, but encourages us to recognize the strength in what is traditionally perceived as passivity. By reclaiming and valuing these female-coded methods, we not only broaden our understanding of what effective action looks like but also empower a more inclusive, effective approach to the challenges of contemporary life. In the following paragraphs, I seek to unpack these two modes of response to the world turning on us.

First Reading: Passive to Active

The book of Esther is read every year on Purim. It is a story of crisis, of a decree that "overnight" becomes a royal policy, which aims to destroy the Jewish people. Mordekhai and Esther, the heroes who eventually overturn the decree, are introduced in the second chapter of the book:

> In the fortress [of] Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordekhai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither

[3] Throughout this article, when I use the terms "feminine" and "masculine" or "female-coded" and "male-coded," I do not mean to say that feminine characteristics are essential to women only or vice versa; to the contrary. Every person has a feminine and masculine side, yet our society is often biased towards male-coded ways of interpreting reality and dealing with crises.

> father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordekhai adopted her as his own daughter. When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress [of] Shushan under the supervision of Heigai, Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Heigai, guardian of the women. The girl found favor in his eyes and received generosity from him, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem. Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordekhai had told her not to reveal it. (Esther 2:5-10)[4]

In this passage, the Hebrew verbs that describe Mordekhai are largely active (e.g., "adopted," "told"), while the verbs that describe Esther are all passive in form (e.g., "was taken," "did not reveal"). While Mordekhai is introduced with a full history and lineage, Esther is introduced as an orphan without lineage.[5] Esther is presented as an extension of Mordekhai, as his dependent, with very little agency over her life. When Esther is taken to the king's harem, she is still portrayed in relation to others, following the lead and directions of Heigai, her new "guardian." We also learn that she is concealing her identity, thereby obeying Mordekhai's order to not tell anyone about her Jewish origin.

Modern commentators emphasize Esther's introduction as a passive figure, and highlight the later 'shift' in her personality as the important takeaway for modern readers. In a lesson plan for middle school students in the Israeli education system, for example, Dr. Gili Zivan directs the students through art interpretation and text exercises to identify the passivity of Esther in the beginning of the story as a contrast to her active new self in the later part: "The Esther of the beginning of the book is a passive, obedient Esther, a marionette doll whose strings are pulled by men in various roles. 'Be beautiful and shut up' is the message she receives from the environment, and she internalizes it well. In the second part of the scroll we discover a completely different Esther: active, proactive, manipulative, and a leader."[6] Dr. Zivan defines a leader based on Esther's so-called latter characteristics, the active ones. She also suggests a direct application of how Esther's characterological change can inform our growth today as individuals. A similar theme of Esther's shift from passive to active appears in the

[4] All Tanakh translations are from JPS 1985, with minor modifications.

[5] Only later in the chapter, when Esther comes to the king, is her father's name mentioned.

[6] The lesson plan is available here.

929 Project, which serves as a major access point to biblical stories for contemporary readers.[7]

In more conservative discourse we find a similar thread: R. Aharon Lichtenstein utilizes the story of Esther's transformation to describe the inner shift every person needs to go through in order to choose a meaningful life. [8] According to Rav Lichtenstein, Esther appears first as a passive girl who, when asked to act for her people, is selfish and apathetic, looking out for only her own needs. When Mordekhai asks her bluntly—do you care or not?—she wakes up to be the active, caring leader she could be. In this reading, too, the story is brought to the individual level: "Each one of us is required to do what Esther did: stand before himself and before God, and find out: What can I do for the people of Israel?... The question he must ask himself is not just whether what he does is good, but whether he is the best." Both Dr. Zivan and Rav Lichtenstein bolster one norm of Jewish heroism, in which Esther shifts to become an active, commanding, and 'strong' leader who is actualizing her "best" self.

The interpretive readings of the Esther story that I have just outlined are very important. These *darshanim* are doing crucial work of meaning making: they tell a story of a woman being a leader for a world in which that reality should still not be taken for granted. They are teaching that people can shift from passive to active participation; that they can reach out, act, and change; and they are instructing us readers that we should, as individuals in society, do so. I honor and appreciate this work—which is still rare—and which empowers women and all individuals to learn from a heroine how to 'be' in life.

At the same time, these interpretations teach us that action, leadership, and constant work are the desirable norm. It is my impression that the book of Esther also holds another narrative for us , one that is equally pressing for our time: one that teaches us not to be afraid of so-called passivity, and to reclaim it. It teaches us to see that action and dominance are not the only ways to change the world. The actions described as passive are not 'not-doing,' but an active choice to wait, to not exacerbate a conflict, to work in the shadows where people don't see. These actions require very strong leaders. They are not as popular, they support evolution and not revolution, they cool down. The narrative that I will put forth is inspired by the work of Ester Gofer, a contemporary spiritual teacher in Israel who focuses on Jewish wisdom based in seasonality and the feminine body. My interpretation of the story of Esther focuses on *strength in passivity*, and sheds light on Esther's way of dealing with crisis as a parallel standard to the masculine 'default' approach.

Second Reading: Internally and Externally Focused Activism

Using the language of "passive" and "active" is problematic. There is an inherent judgment in

[7] The video is available on the 929 Project's YouTube channel.

[8] Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, "Selfishness and Leadership in the Persona of Esther" [Heb.], available on the Yeshivat Har Etzion website (Mar. 14, 1989).

how these words are interpreted in our society: active as positive and passive as negative. The alternative framing of "externally-focused activism" vs. "internally-focused activism" helps us to better unpack the story of Esther and her heroism. This language is also connected to the two types of bodies males and females inhabit; hence I use these interchangeably with "male-coded" (externally-focused activism) and "female-coded" (internally-focused activism). One of the emphases in the second wave feminist movement was attention to the female body and the experience of being in such a body. From a reproductive point of view, females 'can do less,' i.e., they can have a limited number of offspring, as their bodies invest a lot in the pregnancy of each offspring. The difference between the bodies is not just in the number of potential offsprings, but also in the ways they function. A male body is theoretically ready to act and achieve fertilization at any time. Unlike the male body, the female body functions in cycles. Over the course of a female body's monthly cycle, there is only a brief window of opportunity for reproduction. For the female body to be effectively fertile, much of the time should be dedicated to rest, nourishment, and balance towards these precious few days of fertility, rather than engagement in constant activity. The menstrual cycle also includes an inherent stage of loss of potential life as well as renewal. Such different bodily experiences require acknowledgement of different forms of productivity. Passivity can thus be reframed as cyclical, internally-focused activism, a crucial part of the productive process.

Revisiting the story of Esther with new language to describe different forms of action can help us to recast the shift that many contemporary interpreters focus on as the turning point in Esther's personality from passivity to activity. In chapter 4, Mordekhai exhibits externally-focused activism. He knows about the decree upon his people and engages in public mourning. He comes out to the palace and demands from Esther that she act. He is determined to create change through external action. When Esther, until now unaware of the crisis that has befallen her people, hesitates to act, Mordekhai famously tells her:

> Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary; if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows [if] perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis. (Esther 4:13-14)

Instead of acting right away, Esther resources herself with silence for just a bit longer in order to mobilize herself and create more power. In the most urgent moment, Esther chooses not to reach out with action, but rather to take three days to fast, gather the community, pray, and make space for her emotions, including being present with the possibility that she may perish. Esther creates a container for the intensity of her experience and

that of her people. In doing so, she demonstrates a different approach to action. Esther's heroism proves how internally-focused activism can be utilized to approach a crisis, making space for solutions to emerge and unfold.

Internally-focused activism is central to Esther's later choices as well. On the third day of her fast, Esther enters King Ahashveirosh's inner chambers uninvited—an action punishable by death. Esther is given the opportunity to ask for whatever she wants from the king, "up to half the kingdom" (Esther 5:3). It is striking then, that instead of asking for a reversal of the decree against her people, Esther invites the king to gather with her and Haman. At the first feast, Esther is again offered "up to half the kingdom" (ibid. 5:6), and again invites the king and Haman to another feast. Esther works on getting buy-in from the king, opening his heart to her ask and not forcing his hand. Esther is working within a system: waiting for the short window of opportunity when she can access that which she needs. Only at the second feast, when asked a third time for what she wishes, does Esther point to Haman, centering the suffering of her people.

Her mode of action Is characterized by attentiveness to instinct and to others, and by sensing and feeling the proper time for intervention. As opposed to externally-focused, linear activism, in which a goal is constantly pursued, Esther can be seen as working through a cycle, focused on the internal and the relational.

Conclusions

I wish to suggest this reading of the book of Esther as a key for facing a crisis. It is the story about a woman who didn't plan to be a hero, who was just a 'stay-at-home queen,' yet found herself at the heart of the crisis. Moreover, the book of Esther gives us two heroes, a man and a woman. We have here two models of leadership in crisis, a male-coded one and a female-coded one. I believe the male-coded model is the one we most often turn to in Western society when facing a crisis. This is Mordekhai who is strong, who doesn't submit to the villain, who takes to the streets and demands change. It is an important modality of being, but it is not the only one, and it is not enough. The book of Esther also gives us a second modality, a female-coded one, that is essential for working through crises.

Reading the story through the lens of internally-focused activism allows for us to shift the way we make meaning from Esther's story. The book of Esther teaches us that there are different ways to act effectively in the world through crisis: Yes, doubting your need and ability to lead is acceptable. Yes, deciding to not jump right away and rather stop and gather your people is a mode of action. Yes, to empty yourself, literally through fast but also emotionally, or, in other words—to make space—is a mode of action. Yes, hosting meals is a mode of action, and manipulating a leader into a good direction is no less a mode of action than taking to the streets and speaking truth to power. And ye, making space for grief, the

possibility of perishing, is important in leadership.

For the past 150 years, women have fought for—and in many cases have achieved—a voice in various societal sectors. But this process is still unfolding. The challenge isn't just about amplifying women's voices within existing structures but about integrating "feminine" or "internal" ways of leading—approaches rooted in relational thinking, cycles of retreat and return, and an ability to hold complexity without rushing to impose order. How do we center these ways of leading in times of crisis,alongside 'Mordekhai' struggle or resistance? What would it look like to bring these tools into the environmental crisis? Into the Israeli/Palestinian or Israeli/Diasporic Jewish crisis? There is no perfect model here. This is not a call for soft, easily palatable compassion, nor a rejection of external power. It is an invitation to expand our toolkit for survival and leadership in times that refuse to make sense.

Making choices in the face of a crisis is inevitable. Reading into our ancient stories of crisis gives us multiple ways of interpreting reality and, in them, the flexibility to choose rather than repeat the same default models. Demonstrating, demanding, and being strong, can only take us so far. We urgently need other forms of leadership as well. We need leaders who invite others in, with an awareness of timing, uncertainty, and the hidden. Leaders who are willing to work in the shadows, to cry, to pray. Leaders who in the face of a crisis might, counterintuitively, retreat or slow down.

But leadership is not just a matter for leaders with a big "L," the prime ministers and presidents. It is also the way we conduct ourselves and the way we envision those fitting to lead us. Norms and practices never exist in a vacuum; they are strongly impacted by, and embedded in, the stories we tell as a society. In this essay, I interpret a story that informs these practices and norms, and outline how this story reflects on our ideas about normative response to crises today. Stories are the fabric within which culture is created; they are also the way every individual can understand more deeply their own psyche.[9] In this way, stories conserve symbols that help us better understand ourselves and the world. These two different forms of understanding, the internal and the external, complement each other: in the face of crises, when everything that made sense seems to disappear, we are asked to recreate meaning—to tell our story, and Esther is there to help us do exactly that.

[9] See Haviva Pedaya, *Kabbalah and Psychoanalysis: An Inner Journey Following Jewish Mysticism* [Heb.], (Yediot, 2015), chapter 8.

When Should Mishloah Manot be given in Jerusalem when Shushan Purim is on Shabbat?

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Under our current calendar, Purim of the unwalled cities, celebrated on the 14th of Adar, can never coincide with Shabbat.[1] Even Purim of the walled cities, celebrated on the 15th of Adar in Jerusalem and a few other cities, falls on Shabbat very rarely.[2] On those rare occasions when Purim in Jerusalem does coincide with Shabbat, the conventionally one-day holiday is celebrated over multiple days. The Talmud rules that the Megillah is read a day early, on Friday the 14th of Adar (Megillah 4b),[3] and that the other practices of the day are observed on the correct day, Shabbat the 15th of Adar. Such a Purim is referred to in modern times as "*Purim Meshulash*," the Triple Purim, because some celebrate it over three days: Megillah and *matanot le-evyonim* (charity) on Friday;[4] Torah reading,[5] study about the holiday, and *Al Ha-Nissim* on Shabbat (Megillah 4a, Shulhan Arukh 688:6); and as we shall examine, in the view of many *mishloah manot* are delayed

[1] The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 20a) notes that Yom Kippur does not fall on Friday or Sunday and that Hoshanah Rabbah does not fall on Sunday in order to promote certain religious and human values (Sukkah 32b). This means Rosh Hashanah cannot fall on Sunday, Wednesday, or Friday as a result, as captured by the famous adage "*lo adu Rosh*." Working backwards, this means that the 14th of Adar in the preceding year cannot fall on Shabbat, because this would yield a Yom Kippur on Friday.

[2] Shushan Purim only falls on Shabbat approximately 12% of the time, because only one of the seven possible non-leap year calendar templates for Adar involves Shushan Purim on Shabbat. The calendar template where Shushan Purim is on Shabbat is also rarer than other templates. See this computation.

[3] Typically, this is understood as being the result of the Rabbinic decree of Rabbah, that the *megillah* is not read on Shabbat, lest one carry it in a public thoroughfare to be taught how to read it (Megillah 4b), in violation of Shabbat. Rav Yosef disagrees and does not believe that the concern is carrying the *megillah* scroll; rather, he feels that the *megillah* is read early to ensure that charity can be given on the day the *megillah* is read, so the *megillah* is not read on Shabbat when currency is *muktzah*.
The simple reading of the Talmud is that Rabbah's decree also applies to other Mitzvot, namely Shofar and Lulav. Regarding Shofar, the Bavli (Rosh Hashanah 29b, as a *hava aminah)* and the Yerushalmi (4:1, as a final conclusion) offer an alternative Scriptural reason why Shofar is not blown on Shabbat. Sukkah 43a similarly appears to offer scriptural evidence that Lulav is not shaken on Shabbat for Biblical reasons, not Rabbinic ones. Some argue that the performance of another prominent Mitzvah intrudes on the atmosphere of Shabbat, and for that reason they are not performed on Shabbat, having nothing to do with Rabbah's Rabbinic decree. Thus, though many assume the reason for advancing *megillah* one day is to prevent the desecration of Shabbat, the discussion of it and its parallels suggest that there may be other, more fundamental reasons for the rule.

[4] Charity is supposed to be given on the same day that the *megillah* is read (Megillah 4b and 6b).

[5] Normally, Torah reading on festivals emerges from the fact that the day is holy, *mikra kodesh*. On Purim, it seems to relate to proclaiming the miracle (Tosafot Megillah 4a s.v. Purim). This topic is explored in more detail in Rav Soloveitchik's Yahrzeit shiur on the topic, "*Kriyat Ha-Torah Be-Moadim*" (Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Shiurim Le-Zecheir Abba Mari z"l* (Jerusalem, Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2002), 153-175).

until Sunday.[6] There is a difference of opinion regarding when the festive meal of Purim is eaten in these years, as we shall see below.

Pushing off *mishloah manot* to Sunday is not clear-cut; there is some disagreement on the matter. Though the decision to move Megillah a day early is Mishnaic (Megillah 2a), and the decision to recite *Al Ha-Nissim* on Shabbat is Talmudic (Megillah 4a), the setting of the correct time for *mishloah manot* was determined at a much later date in Jewish history. As such, it would be well served by closer inspection. This essay will first examine why one might try to avoid giving *mishloah manot* on Shabbat, and whether there is reason to consider giving them on Shabbat.

Giving Gifts on Shabbat

One of the main arguments for pushing *mishoah manot* off to Sunday is that it is a form of gift giving, which may be forbidden on Shabbat.

Commerce is prohibited on Shabbat on account of a very ancient Rabbinic law, both because it undermines the atmosphere of Shabbat in post-agrarian economies (Nehemiah 13:15-22, Nahmanides, Leviticus 23:24), and because it might lead to further desecration of Shabbat through writing (Rashi, Beitzah 37a; Rambam, Shabbat 23:12). Gift giving is not commerce, however; it is not even barter, as goods go only in one direction. For this reason**,** gift giving is not included under the prohibition of commerce. The Talmud discusses gift giving on Shabbat and Yom Tov and permits it in both cases; the rule is the same on both types of days. Thus, gift giving which adds to the holiday is expressly permitted on Yom Tov (Beitzah 15a; Rambam, Yom Tov 5:6-8), and presumably gift giving which adds to Shabbat would be permitted then as well. Many Aharonim (Magen Avraham 306:15, Arukh HaShulhan 306:17, Elyah Rabbah 306:19) rule simply that gift giving is permitted when the gift is used on Shabbat, as in Talmudic law it is clearly permitted, although some later Aharonim are stringent (see Mishnah Berurah 306:33, 323:34).[7]

Any gift given and then used on Shabbat ultimately supports and magnifies the atmosphere of

[6] A representative sample of internet websites that support this view are OU, Hebcal, Chabad, Rav Rimon, Peninei Halacha, and Rabbi Kaganoff.

[7] Arukh HaShulhan gives a spirited and unequivocal defense of the practice of giving gifts of Shabbat, concluding that there is not even a hint of a prohibition in the practice, and that it is the custom of the Jewish people to permit gift giving. It is therefore surprising that Rabbi Dovid Ribiat's *The 39 Melochos* unquestioningly follows the Mishnah Berurah on pages 961 and 966 of the English section, ignoring both the Talmudic evidence that poses a challenge to the Mishnah Berurah and the opinions who offer a different view. This is in contrast to his presentation in footnote 95a on page 516 of the Hebrew section, where he also cites the alternative views. *Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchatah* (382) also centers the view of the Mishnah Berurah.
It is important to stress that even the Mishnah Berurah still permits gift giving that adds to the particular Shabbat or holiday, but he folds it within the context of a broad prohibition of gift-giving. It may be a question of semantics – most authorities agree a gift is permitted if it is for the sake of Shabbat. Arukh HaShulhan and others rule simply that "one may give gifts on Shabbat for the sake of Shabbat," while other rabbis present the same ruling begrudgingly: "Gift giving is prohibited, unless we permit gifts for the sake of Shabbat." For the purposes of this essay, the outcome is the same even though the presentations are different.

Shabbat. If the gift is given to aid in the performance of a Mitzvah, it also helps achieve the broader spiritual goals of Shabbat by using a Mitzvah to come closer to G-d (see Mordekhai, Beitzah, 676). It is for this reason that one can even engage in some acquisition on Yom Tov that will be paid for later, when it helps add to the meal of the holiday (Beitzah 29b, Shulhan Arukh 517); the same is even true on Shabbat (Shulhan Arukh 323).

To give a clear example of the permissibility of gift-giving, the Talmud rules that if one kneads dough on Yom Tov, one separates *terumat challah* and even gives it to a Kohen on Yom Tov (Beitzah 9a, Pesahim 46a, Shulhan Arukh 506:3). While the standard case of separating priestly gifts on a holiday is prohibited in situations where the gifts could have been separated before Yom Tov, in the case of *terumat challah*, these gifts may be separated and given on the holiday, since they could not have been given beforehand (Mishnah Berurah 506:17-20). Fundamentally, Mitzvah-related gifting is permitted on Shabbat and holidays; for this reason, a Lulav and Etrog can also be given as a gift to another Jew on Yom Tov (Mordekhai, ibid.).

Another Mitzvah involving gift giving that could even in theory be performed on Shabbat is *pidyon ha-ben*, a gift of monetary value[8] to the Kohen following the birth of a firstborn son.[9] Logically, giving this gift to the *kohen* should be permitted on Shabbat if the gift can be used on Shabbat, as it is a Mitzvah that could not have been done earlier[10] and is a gift which can be used by the recipient to add to their Shabbat. There is no requirement to give coins for *pidyon ha-ben*, and so giving a gift of a non-*muktzeh* object which carries the value of 96 grams of silver (five silver coins) should be permitted. The Talmud never indicates that *pidyon ha-ben* is not performed on Shabbat. Surprisingly, Terumat Hadeshen (269) nevertheless rules that it should not be performed on Shabbat. This ruling is followed by Shulhan Arukh (305:11), largely because there is limited counter-pressure to delay the *mitzvah* by one day. However, some say even this Mitzvah can be performed on Shabbat, based on the principles set in the Talmud.[11]

What does all of this mean for *mishloah manot*? Talmudically, it would seem that they can be given on Shabbat, as it is a performance of a Mitzvah that cannot be done earlier and is a gift whose

[8] Bekhorot, 51a; Yoreh Deah 305:3.

[9] Though some see Pidyon Haben as a purchasing of the baby back from the Kohein, it is clear from the Talmud that this is a misunderstanding of the Mitzvah. See Rosh, Bekhorot 7:8.

[10] Pidyon Haben may not be performed before the appropriate time, the 31st day of the baby's life (Shulhan Arukh 305:12) and following 29 days 12 hours and a fraction of life (Shakh 305:19). Thus, it is a *mitzvah* associated specifically with that day that could not have been done earlier.

[11] Responsa Beis Aharon, cited by Rabbi Hershel Schachter at approximately minute 35 at https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/826798/

contents can be used on Shabbat. Later authorities, ruling on similar issues, imply that some might be tentative about doing this Mitzvah on Shabbat. Examining what the counter-pressures might be is an important next step to determine what the *halakha* should be for *mishloah manot* on Shabbat. Is there a reason to prefer giving them on Shabbat instead of on Sunday? And is that reason sufficient to overcome whatever hesitations we might have?

The Proper Time for *Mishloah Manot*

Megillat Esther describes a Mitzvah to give gifts to friends on the day of Purim (Esther 9:19) without specifying why the Mitzvah exists and when during the day it should be performed. Understanding the nature of *mishloah manot* will help us better understand the correct timing for the Mitzvah.

Terumat Hadeshen (111) proposes a link between the gifts and the meal, in which case it would follow that *mishloah manot* should be given on the day of the meal, ideally before the meal is eaten. Rambam (Megillah 2:15) also seems to think the two mitzvot are intertwined. Shulhan Arukh codifies the laws of *mishloah manot* in the same section as the meal (695), and many Aharonim derive laws of the *mishloah manot* from that point of departure. For example, Hayyei Adam (155:31) rules that the gifts must be ready to eat so they can be used immediately for the meal without further preparation.

But when the 15th of Adar coincides with Shabbat, what is the correct timing of the festive meal, such that *mishloah manot* should be given on that day? The answer to this question has been debated as far back as the Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi. Rashi and Ritva understand the Bavli (Megillah 5a) as saying that the festive meal belongs on Shabbat, the actual day of Purim. Rif (Megillah 3a in Rif pages, as explained by Ran) understands the Yerushalmi as saying that the festive meal is eaten on Sunday, so as not to mix the meal of Shabbat with the meal of the holiday. Ran, Ra'ah, and Ba'al Ha-Maor challenge the view of Rif, although Shulhan Arukh does adopt the view of the Yerushalmi that the meal is eaten on Sunday (688:6). Magen Avraham (688:10) notes that there was a major debate among the early Acharonim when the meal should be. A small number of authorities even say it is eaten on Friday (Bartenura, Megillah 1:2)! While those who believe the meal is on Sunday would give *mishloah manot* on Sunday, for those who rule like the Bavli and argue that the meal of Purim is eaten on Shabbat, it follows that *mishloah manot* must be given on Shabbat as well, before the meal. And for those authorities who believe the meal is Friday, *mishloah manot* should be given on Friday.

A unique opinion by the Hazon Ish (155:1) connects *mishloah manot* to a different mitzvah of Purim. According to the Hazon Ish, *mishloah manot* are part of the Mitzvah of charity. As such, *mishloah manot* should be given on Friday, the same day as the charity.

In addition to *mishloah manot* being connected to Mitzvot that are performed before Sunday, there is an additional reason why Sunday may not be the correct day for *mishloah manot*. Typically, Mitzvot associated with a specific day must be performed on that day, and cannot be performed one day later (Chaggigah 9a, Berakhot 26a). *Mishloah manot* are specifically associated with the day of Purim, and even the night before is an improper time for them (Rama 695:4). Since Shabbat is the day of Shushan Purim itself, Sunday may be too late to give *mishloah manot*. Explicit evidence would be needed to authorize performing a Mitzvah on the incorrect day, and there is none in regard to *mishloah manot*.

It is important to note that Shabbat could thus be the correct day for one of two possible reasons – either because it is the day of the meal, or because, even if the meal is delayed, it is the true day of Purim, as is evidenced from the Torah readings and prayers. For Sunday to be the correct day, one must accept two arguments - that *mishloah manot* belong on the day of the meal, not the actual day of Purim, and that the meal is on Sunday. For Friday to be the correct day, one must accept the argument that *mishloah manot* must be on the day of a particular Mitzvah of Purim instead of the actual day of Purim itself, and must believe either that *mishloah manot* is connected to the meal and that the meal is on Friday, or that the Hazon Ish is correct to connect the mitzvah to charity.

Halakhic Rulings

There appears to be little reason given to specifically prefer giving *mishloah manot* on Sunday. Theoretically, two arguments can be given for delaying them: (a) that they cannot be performed on Shabbat as an extension of the prohibition of commerce, or (b) that they must be given on the day of the meal, which is Sunday. However, both of these assumptions can be challenged, as noted above. The counterargument to the first claim, that *mishloah manot* constitute a prohibited form of commerce, is that giving gifts of the day is permitted on Shabbat. The counterargument to the second claim, that *mishloah manot* must be given on Sunday, since that is the day of the meal, is that the Bavli believes the festive meal is on Shabbat. An additional counterargument is that even if the meal were on Sunday, there is no explicit evidence that moving the timing of the meal requires the *mishloah manot* to be given on the same day as the meal, as long as they are given sometime before the meal.

Given the arguments for both sides, how do we rule? Shulhan Arukh is silent on the question (688:6). Taz (688:8) and Bah (688) appear to conclude like the Maharlbach that *mishloah manot* should be given on Shabbat, the day of the festive meal. Magen Avraham (688:10) seems to prefer Sunday based on Radvaz (1:508), who argues that *mishloah manot* are given on Sunday

because that is the day of the meal according to the Yerushalmi. Pri Hadash (695:1) says they should be given on both days. Rabbi Yaakov Emden (Mor Uketziah end of 688) thinks they should be given on Shabbat, irrespective of the timing of the meal, because that is the true day of Purim.

Later decisors continue this debate. Arukh Ha-Shulhan follows the Magen Avraham (688:17). As mentioned above, Hazon Ish (155:1) argues that the *mishloah manot* should be given on Friday, the same day as the charity.[12] Piskei Teshuvot (688:17) cites a modern compromise view to give them on Friday, Shabbat, and Sunday, while Rav Ovadyah Yosef (Yalkut Yosef 688:6:12) says they are given on Sunday but it is praiseworthy to give them on Shabbat as well.

It can be challenging to determine which view is the 'majority' view on this question, given the silence of Shulchan Arukh or any other text of unrivaled authority. The two major early sixteenth century rabbis (Maharlbakh and Radvaz) disagree, as do the mid seventeenth century rabbis (Magen Avraham, Pri Hadash, Taz, and Bah). When one uses a very narrow prism, late nineteenth century Eastern European non-Hassidic authorities, Arukh Hashulhan and possibly Mishnah Berurah prefer Sunday, so the majority of that narrow set prefers Sunday, but many other authorities before and after them argue for Shabbat.

We noted above that most modern guidebooks and summaries of the laws of Purim Meshulash succinctly state that *mishloah manot* are given only on Sunday. This is despite the sizable, possibly even equivalent, number of authorities who believe they should be given on Friday or Shabbat instead. For those authorities, Purim is never "*meshulash*," divided over three days, and is only divided over two days, a Friday and a Shabbat. Many guidebooks refrain from an in-depth analysis of the question and defer to what they count as the slight majority of earlier rulings for *mishloah manot* to be given on Sunday, despite the original ruling being based on somewhat shaky grounds. When the early authorities are split so evenly on this question, one wonders why they do not suggest giving *mishloah manot* on both days to fulfill both opinions.

Conclusion

For most Jews, who live outside of Jerusalem and celebrate the full Purim on Friday, the question of when to give *mishloah manot* is a theoretical one that does not need to be absolutely resolved, and is merely an interesting way to consider the laws of the holiday and to connect to our brethren in Jerusalem. Perhaps it is relevant if they wish to send *mishloah manot* that will arrive in Jerusalem on Shushan Purim, to know which day the gifts should arrive.[13] For Jews who will be spending the day in a walled city in Israel, the question should

[12] He also cites a variety of other Rabbinic reasons not to give them on Shabbat, but none of these considerations are raised by the earlier authorities.

[13] Arukh HaShulkhan (695:17) writes that one who sends *mishloah manot* from a distant location must do so on the sender's Purim, and therefore the recipient's Purim appears to be an irrelevant factor. However, he also cites Be'er Heitev,

be referred to a competent halakhic decisor. This essay has demonstrated that refraining from giving *mishloah manot* on Shabbat appears problematic, and according to many, deprives the Jerusalamite Jew of the chance to perform the *mitzvah* entirely. Whether this means that residents of Jerusalem should give *mishloah manot* on multiple days, just on Shabbat, or just on Sunday despite the contrary evidence is a question for each individual's personal rabbi.

The Destruction of Babylonia, Detailed: R. Yonatan's Petihta to Megillat Esther

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In Tractate *Megillah*, the Sages offer a series of *petihtot*, or prologues, which serve to introduce their readings of the Book of Esther. A *petihta* is a classical midrashic strategy of introducing a biblical story or scene through the prism of a biblical verse from an unrelated context. By stepping outside of the immediate confines of the story, the *petihta* reframes it, offering a fresh perspective. Both the story being introduced and the verse used as *petihta* are transformed by the juxtaposition of these otherwise unrelated contexts, each illuminating the other in surprising ways.[1]

Yet, while *petihtot* are a common midrashic tool, they rarely serve to introduce whole biblical books. Indeed, Esther is the only book to be accompanied by a series of introductions. This perhaps reflects Esther's unique duality: Esther is an outlier to the canon, full of pomp and pageantry, with a dearth of overt religious content. (Indeed, the Midrash offers snippets of arguments over its preservation for posterity).[2] Yet concurrently, Esther is also the only biblical book to be read annually in a *Hakheil*-like ceremony attended by all. As such, its canonicity and centrality cannot be ignored or elided. Thus, the talmudic tractate that focuses on how and when the Megillah is read also offers multiple gateways to integrate the book into the wider biblical context. One after another, the Sages offer different *petihtot* to serve as interpretive prisms, each highlighting a different element — be it historic, thematic, or theological — of this central but troubling text.

R. Yonatan offers the first of these *petihtot* — one which seems straightforwardly historical, placing the Megillah within the sweep of biblical history:

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who quotes an opinion that the obligation is fulfilled if it reaches the recipient by the recipient's Purim. Thus, according to this opinion, a Jew anywhere in the world who sends *mishloah manot* only to a Jerusalemite Jew would need to know if they have fulfilled their obligation according to at least one authority if the gifts arrive on Sunday.

[1] For more on the midrashic genre of *petihta,* see Simi Peters, *Learning to Read Midrash* (Urim: 2005), 44-45.

[2] *Megillah* 9b.

> Rabbi Yonatan opened [the book of Esther] with the following *petihta*: "For I will rise up against them, [says the Lord of hosts] and cut off from Babylonia name and remnant, offspring and grandchild, says the Lord." (Isaiah 14:22)
> "*Name*" — refers to writing;
> "*Remnant*" — refers to language;
> "*Offspring*" — refers to sovereignty;
> "*Grandchild*" — refers to Vashti. (*Megillah* 10b)

For R. Yonatan, the fall of Babylonia is the unifying theme of the Megillah. This is surprising, as the Megillah is emphatically set in Shushan, capital of the Persian empire of the sixth century BCE, which benevolently ruled the vast stretches of the Near and Far East. Yet, for R. Yonatan, the seemingly joyous celebration of Ahasuerus' reign with which the Megillah opens actually obscures a prolonged and systematic attack on his Babylonian predecessor. Not simply a transfer of power, this was a total war aimed at eradicating the language, writing, and laws of Babylonia, along with the last surviving members of the Babylonian royal family. Destroying the Babylonian language and writing represents obliterating their ethos and culture, while overturning their sovereignty involves overhauling their methods of governance. The destruction was to be total.

This counter-intuitive *petihta* points to the profound impact of the Babylonian empire at this juncture in Jewish history. It is not enough, R. Yonatan implicitly argues, to acknowledge the Persian context of the Megillah. Rather, we must widen the lens, scoping back to Babylonia, destroyer of the Temple, ravager of Judea. Throughout the many years of exile, Israel's hope was kept alive by God's promise that "at the end of seventy years, I will make an accounting [p'k'd] with the king of Babylonia…and I will make it a desolation for all time" (Jeremiah 25:12). The redemption of Judea and the destruction of Babylonia were seen as linked, and set within a 70-year time frame. Jewish national hopes indeed seemed to be realized with the Persian conquest of Babylonia, when Cyrus the Great generously allowed all conquered peoples (including the Jewish people) to return to their indigenous homelands and rebuild their temples: "So says Cyrus, King of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord, God of Heaven, delivered to me. He has charged [p'k'd] me to build a temple for Him in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:2).

Yet, the early hopefulness that accompanied the rise of Persia was stymied, as "adversaries of Judah" tried to stall the work of the returned exiles:

> In the reign of Ahasuerus…[the adversaries] drew up an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem… They [the Persians]…used force of arms to constrain the Jews. So ended the work in the house of God which is in Jerusalem… (Ezra 4:23, 24)

The Megillah opens at this crucial moment, when Persia has shut down the rebuilding of the Temple.

It is a period of historic agony for Israel: seventy years of waiting seemed to have come to naught, and the great promise of redemption propelled by the Cyrus declaration has fizzled out. Babylonia might be gone, but its impact lingers — the Temple still destroyed, the Land of Israel in ruins. The Midrash reinforces this context by illustrating Vashti, the last vestige of Babylonian royalty,[3] working to actively conserve the Babylonian legacy:

> [Vashti] did not allow Ahasuerus to give permission to rebuild the Temple.
> She said: "You wish to rebuild what my ancestors destroyed?" (*Esther Rabbah* 5:2)

In this version, Cyrus's great revolution is being actively undermined from within the royal house, and the lavish party that opens the Book of Esther is a celebration of Vashti's victory over Jewish dreams — a recreation of the feast of her ancestor, King Belshazzar, in which he reveled in his dominance over God's Temple.[4]

R. Yonatan's *petihta* comes to address this despair. After all, there are many biblical passages (e.g., Jeremiah 25:12, quoted above, and Daniel 2:31-39) that speak of the fall of Babylonia — verses that are directly related to the historical context of the Megillah, and whose relevance is therefore immediately apparent. Yet, R. Yonatan makes the less obvious choice of the verse from Isaiah. The reason for this choice is the four distinct elements it details in the destruction of Babylonia: "name and remnant, offspring and grandchild." His choice of verse underlines that there are multiple elements of the Babylonian regime that must be destroyed, and that the end of Babylonia is not a one-time event that took place at the seventy-year-mark, but rather a process that began at that point, and continued to unravel. Thus, there is no reason to despair of redemption. While it is true that Israel has reached the days of Persia, and should have been redeemed, the overthrow of Babylonia is not yet complete. The final overthrow takes place over the course of Esther, which, in R. Yonatan's estimation, might be retitled: The Destruction of Babylonia, Detailed.

The significance of the four elements of Babylonia slated for destruction — writing, language, law, and royalty — become clearer when we look at the Babylonian's own self-concept. The Neo-Babylonian empire (626-539 BCE) saw itself as the rightful inheritor of ancient Babylonian culture. It consciously strove to revive the ethos and traditions of the first Babylonian kingdom, which preceded Neo-Babylonia by at least a thousand years. The infamous Nebuchadnezzar II, destroyer of the Temple, explicitly evoked the memory of early Mesopotamian kings such as Hammurabi (1810-1750 BCE). Nabonidus, who took the throne

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[3] *Megillah* 10b.

[4] Belshazzar's infamous feast is described in Daniel 5. *Megillah* 11b, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 49:9, and *Esther Rabbah* 22 all analyze Ahasuerus's feast as a celebration of the end of the Jewish dream of rebuilding the Temple.

six years after Nebu I'llchadnezzar, presented himself in a similar fashion. They were the guardians of a venerable Babylonian heritage: restoring ancient cultic practices, renewing the titles ("*name*") of Old Babylonian dynasties, aligning themselves with the traditions of Mesopotamian royalty. From their royal inscriptions to their architectural and religious renewal projects, these kings deliberately anchored themselves in Babylonia's storied past. Moreover, the Neo-Babylonians preserved the use of Akkadian cuneiform ("*writing*") for official inscriptions, religious texts, and scholarly works, thus extending a literary tradition that reached back more than a millennium.

This deliberate revival of ancient Babylonia did not escape the notice of the Sages, who note the linkage between ancient and Neo-Babylonian culture:

> Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked man, son of a wicked man — the disciple [or descendant] of Nimrod the wicked, who caused the entire world to rebel against Me during his reign. (*Pesahim* 94a-b)

In evoking Nimrod as Nebuchadnezzar's precursor, the Sages anchor Neo-Babylonia in the mythic dawn of history. Nimrod is a primordial biblical figure, representative of ancient Babylonia: "The first mighty figure on earth…a mighty hunter before God" (Genesis 10:8-9), he establishes the first human kingdom in "Babylonia…in the plains of Shinar" (10:10). This land of Shinar is a locus of defiance, site of the infamous Tower whose top was to reach the very heavens:

> It came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; […] And they said, "Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered. (Genesis 11:2-4)

Nimrod's kingdom is thus linked to the Tower of Babel, prompting the Sages to suggest that he orchestrated the entire enterprise, living up to the literal meaning of his name as "Rebel" or "Challenger."[5]

As the first king and the prime builder of monuments to human greatness, Nimrod, in midrashic tradition, becomes the archetypal strongman, the charismatic[6] tyrant who equates independence with revolt:[7]

[5] According to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 24, it was Nimrod who "said to his people, 'Let us build ourselves a large city.'"

[6] "He was a mighty hunter before God" (Genesis 10:9) — "he was a hunter with his mouth, ensnaring people with his rhetoric" (*Genesis Rabbah* 37:2).

[7] For more on Nimrod as archetypal tyrant, see Matis Weinberg, "The Rainbow and the Tower," *Frameworks: Genesis* (Jerusalem: Foundation for Jewish Publications, 1999), 32-43.

> As it says, "Nimrod — a mighty hunter before the face of God" (Genesis 10:9). It will be said of any man who has the temerity to know his Creator full well and yet willfully defy him: here's another Nimrod! (Rashi based on *Sifra,* Behokotai 2:2)

Nimrod's roots reach deep indeed, for he is first introduced at the closing of the Deluge saga: he appears as one of the descendants of Noah. This context is significant: the primary achievement of the sons of Noah is being "fruitful," and "scattering across the Earth" (Genesis 9:19), in order to fulfill God's central command to postdiluvian humanity to "fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). To forge a new world, Noah's offspring had to spread to every distant corner, allowing humanity to diversify in language, culture, and ethnicity, spreading into "islands of nations, in their lands, each with his own language, in accordance with their clans and their nationalities" (Genesis 10:10). Nimrod rebels against teeming diversity. He is the nemesis of variety and the champion of homogeneity, insisting upon "one language…identical opinions…one nation" (Genesis 11:1, 6). Nimrod builds a tower and fortified city "lest we scatter" (Genesis 11:4). He preaches uniformity, seeing any divergence as a threat to his regime. Like many dictators, his rigid survival depends on suppressing individual freedoms to ensure safety, stability, and a monolithic "*name*."

In linking Nebuchadnezzar with Nimrod, primal king of Babylon,[8] the Talmud succinctly sums up the mythological, backward-looking self-presentation of Nebuchadnezzar II's Neo-Babylonian empire, which modeled itself on a romanticized myth of a bygone era. Indeed, Neo-Babylonia replayed critical elements of the Babel story. Like Nimrod, Nebuchadnezzar demanded integration into the single "language and writings of the Chaldeans" (Daniel 1:4), exiling conquered peoples so they would assimilate, even stripping them of distinctive names.[9] And, like Nimrod, he required absolute conformity, crushing any hint of dissent:

> Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits…and set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then a herald cried aloud, "To you it is commanded, O people, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery,

[8] Additionally, rabbinic literature further suggests a link between Nebuchadnezzar and Nimrod by identifying Nebuchadnezzar's wife as "Shemiramit" (*Esther Rabbah* 3, *Vayikra Rabbah* 19). This was the legendary queen Semiramis, made famous by the first century BCE Greek historian Diodorus's account, and likely based on an actual historical figure, Shammu-Rammat, a queen regent of the Assyrian empire in the ninth century BCE who was credited with rebuilding Babylon. The rabbinic assignment of Semiramis to the Neo-Babylonian empire is another way to link that empire back to an earlier era. Incidentally, a fairly recent popular religious work by Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (Grapevine India, 2024) (first published in 1853) mistakenly identifies Semiramis as Nimrod's wife.

[9] Daniel 1:7.

> dulcimer, and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up: whoever does not fall down and worship shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." (Daniel 3:1-6)

Nebuchadnezzar's towering statue in the plain is an updated version of Nimrod's tower, rising from the plain. If in the Midrash, Nimrod casts Abraham into the furnace for refusing to bow to idolatry, Nebuchadnezzar here threatens to do the same.[10]

R. Yonatan's *petihta* highlights the sweeping shift in imperial ideologies that occurred when Nebuchadnezzar's Neo-Babylonian empire fell to the Achaemenids.[11] This approach is famously embodied in the Cyrus Cylinder (6th century BCE), where Cyrus the Great declares his policy of allowing exiled communities—including the Judeans—to return home and rebuild their shrines. Although it was hardly a universal "bill of rights," the text reveals Cyrus's intention to restore local cults and institutions, hinting at a broader stance of religious and cultural tolerance.[12]

The Achaemenids departed from the overtly oppressive model of Neo-Babylonian dominion, permitting local laws, customs, and religions to remain intact under the authority of Persian satraps who preserved imperial interests. Though they still demanded obedience, tribute, and military cooperation, the Achaemenid revolution controlled through pragmatism rather than through brute force. They maintained order by relying on local elites, allowing for a degree of autonomy and tolerating cultural differences. They were the first major imperial power in the ancient world to accommodate, rather than eradicate, local diversity.

In his *petihta*, R. Yonatan points us toward this subtext. On the surface, the Persian character of Megillat Esther is obvious — its setting in Shushan (Susa), and its many Persian loanwords ground the narrative in an Achaemenid milieu.[13] The Megillah concurrently points towards the revolutionary nature of the Achaemenid ideology via frequent references to the empire's manifold satrapies. The kingdom's diverse provinces are mentioned twenty-six times, underscoring the range of cultural and ethnic identities within Persian rule.[14]

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[10] *Genesis Rabbah* 38:13.

[11] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Eisenbrauns, 2002), 90-105, 173-187.

[12] For the biblical parallel, see Ezra 1:1-4.

[13] Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xv-xviii.

[14] The broad span of cultures represented in the Persian kingdom is introduced in the Megillah's opening verse: "Ahasuerus reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia" (Esther 1:1). For an historical discussion of Achaemenid provincial administration, the satrapal system, and the empire's pragmatic approach to local governance, touching on how (and why) Persians often preserved regional customs, local laws, and religious institutions, see Christopher Tulpin, "The Administration of the Achaemenid Empire," *Coinage and*

Additionally, the king and his advisers seem careful to honor their subjects' personal autonomy. The narrative specifies that "every man should wield authority in his home" (Esther 1:22), and at Ahasuerus's populist festival — open "to all the people, high and low alike" (Esther 1:5) — the wine flows "with no compulsion…complying with each man's wishes" (Esther 1:8).[15] Above all, the Megillah draws repeated attention to the preservation of multiple languages and scripts — a veritable recreation of the dispersal of the Tower by "confusing their language" (Genesis 11:9) in mythic Babylon:

> On the thirteenth day of the first month, the king's scribes were summoned and a decree was issued, as Haman directed, to the king's satraps, to the governors of every province, and to the officials of every people, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language. (Esther 3:12)

> Letters were written, at Mordecai's dictation, to the Jews and to the satraps, the governors and the officials of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Nubia: to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and to the Jews in their own script and language. (Esther 8:9)

R. Yonatan's *petihta* argues that these elements are not incidental, but rather central. The complete eradication of Neo-Babylonia's administrative hallmarks — its *writing* (standardized cuneiform script and royal inscriptions), *language* (Akkadian), *sovereignty* (centralized government), and *royal family* (Vashti) — defines the Megillah's principal theme. The Persian Empire, by consciously allowing multiple ethnicities, religions, and nationalities to flourish, created the conditions for Jewish renewal. While still without an autonomous homeland or Temple — "scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all of the provinces" (Esther 3:8) — the Jews could begin to reinvent themselves, insisting, for the first time, on "their own script and language." The Megillah opens at a moment of despair, to highlight the passage needed for redemption. Its political backdrop of transformed notions of rulership is integral to that story.

The *petihtot* offer rich and complex readings of the Megillah by weaving a subtle interplay between

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Administration in the Athenian and Persian Empires: The Ninth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History, edited by Ian Carradice, (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1987): 109-166. Additionally, some Greek authors like Herodotus and Xenophon depicted Persian imperial rule as relatively tolerant of local customs. For more on this, see Pierre Briant, "Herodotus and the Persian Empire," *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*, edited by E.J. Bakker, I.J.F. de Jong, and H. van Wees (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 503-518.

[15] The Sages consistently interpret the details of the party (Esther 1:6-8) as expressing Ahasuerus' populist agenda. For numerous examples, see *Megillah* 12a.

the world of Esther and the wider biblical story. R. Yonatan's *petihta* places the seemingly lighthearted opening of the Megillah within the darker context of Israel's national saga of exile and redemption. It also responds to the broader historical context of the era, noting how succession plays out in the text. Even as R. Yonatan highlights how the Achaemeneids deliberately deconstructed the Neo- Babylonian program, he places this political transformation within the context of Israel's failed salvation. The midrashic lens refracts and responds to Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid national narratives, while integrating them into the Jewish story. For R. Yonatan, redemption is not only the physical return to Zion, enabled by Cyrus, but the sublimation of the conqueror's story into the Jewish national odyssey.

Reading Hard Texts in Hard Times: Retribution and Self-Defense in Megillat Esther

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The problem is well known. Toward the end of Megillat Esther, the Jews are granted permission to destroy their enemies. Yet the ethical framework under which they do so is subject to extensive debate. The decree permits them "to assemble and defend their lives" (Esther 8:11). This language suggests a framework of self-defense. However, the Megillah also states that the decree was issued so the Jews might "take vengeance on their enemies" (Esther 8:13). This dual framing—self-defense and retribution—creates an interpretive challenge with potentially explosive implications for a Jewish ethics of war. Complicating matters further, the decree explicitly permits killing "women and children" and plundering the spoils (Esther 8:11). Does the Megillah endorse vengeance as a legitimate motivation for punishment?

Unsurprisingly, as we will see, numerous commentators tend to read the story through the lens of their own ideological priors. Some cite the Megillah as evidence that vengeance is a Jewish value, while others emphasize its self-defense language to present a more restrained interpretation.

Beyond the case of Megillat Esther, this tension raises a broader question: How can we approach emotionally charged biblical texts while striving to ground our interpretation in the text itself rather than in ideological reflexes? This question is crucial not only for giving the text a fair reading but also for fostering meaningful dialogue about its meaning. Jonathan Haidt has shown that moral intuitions are often shaped by cultural and personality-driven biases. As a result, he argues, even individuals approaching the same issue in

good faith may reach starkly different conclusions.[1] If we hope to engage constructively with those who hold different moral intuitions, we must first undertake a careful reading of the text before drawing ethical conclusions.

The challenge becomes particularly acute in times of crisis, like now. In such moments, debates over Jewish ethics and law—like all discussions—tend to become especially charged. Instead of being analyzed carefully, biblical and halakhic sources are often read polemically, reinforcing the lack of intellectual rigor so pervasive today. To engage with the Megillah rigorously, we must start with a fundamental question: What does the text actually say?

To give the text a fair reading, it is helpful to begin by outlining a set of methodological tools that can help us avoid common pitfalls. These principles are not novel—though some may dispute certain points—nor are they comprehensive. But they serve as an initial framework, a first draft of a checklist, to keep us grounded. Just as medical professionals use checklists to minimize errors under pressure, a structured approach to difficult texts in crisis ensures focused and constructive intellectual effort.

Methodological Principles

1. Lead with Humility

Humility not only enhances our search for truth but also enriches our discourse. Too often, discussions of difficult biblical texts devolve into ideological skirmishes. However, by acknowledging textual ambiguities, identifying where our interpretations rely on assumptions, and staying open to alternative perspectives, we foster a more honest and meaningful intellectual exchange—and can learn more in the process.

2. Resist the Impulse to Impose Contemporary Categories

This may seem obvious to some and wrong-headed or impossible to others, but I find it useful to begin by identifying my own ethical priors and resisting the impulse to impose my moral instincts onto the text. This does not mean that ethics are irrelevant to interpretation—on the contrary, as Moshe Halbertal argues, moral reasoning is deeply tied to how we interpret texts.[2] But if moral assumptions are introduced too early, they can obscure the text's actual meaning and interfere with our ability to meaningfully discuss the text with those who don't share our baselines. In this

[1] Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

[2] Moshe Halbertal, *Mahapekhot Parshaniyot Be-Hithavutan: Arakhim Ke-Shikulim Parshaniyim Be-Midreshei Halakhah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997).

case, my instinct is to recoil at pure vengeance. But I will try to set that aside—otherwise, I risk not giving the verses the attention they deserve.[3]

3. Acknowledge How Prior Knowledge Shapes Our Reading

Beyond ideological biases, our prior knowledge shapes how we approach the Megillah. For example, even as an adult, I still come to the text with an image of Mordekhai as a rabbinic scholar, molded by *midrashim* I learned early on—though also, paradoxically, as an assimilated Jew who finds his way back to Jewish identity alongside Esther. Neither of these images readily lends itself to viewing Mordekhai or Esther as aggressive or capable of authorizing large-scale violence—but that assumption is belied by the Megillah itself.

4. Define Terms

After making our best effort to recognize our ideological and knowledge-based assumptions, we must clearly define our terms—both the categories we are examining and the words that appear in the text.

Thus, returning to the Megillah, both the terms "self-defense" and "retribution" carry multiple meanings. Self-defense can take two distinct forms:

- Reactive self-defense: responding to an immediate threat.
- Proactive self-defense: taking preemptive action to neutralize a future threat.

Both are forms of self-defense, though they may operate under different ethical and legal frameworks. Without distinguishing between them up front, we risk conflating concepts that the biblical text may treat differently.

Similarly, the word vengeance can carry multiple meanings. It can refer to personal retaliation driven by emotion (revenge), retributive justice, or a broader concept of restoring moral balance.

A similar rule holds for defining key terms that appear in the text under discussion. Like "vengeance," the Hebrew "*nekama*" also requires careful definition. While often translated as vengeance, we have already noted that the term vengeance itself is multivalent. Thus, *nekama* can at times signify the enforcement of justice and the restoration of order, rather than an emotionally driven act of revenge—as in "God of vengeances, O Lord" (Tehillim 94:1).

5. Be Cautious with Emotionally Charged Language

Certain terms—particularly those associated with violence, vengeance, or destruction—evoke

[3] The relationship between text study and moral intuition is a central issue in hermeneutics, philosophy of interpretation, and moral reasoning. Scholars have long debated how preconceptions shape textual meaning. See, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* While these questions warrant deeper exploration, my aim here is not to resolve them but simply to suggest that temporarily bracketing prior assumptions can foster a more open engagement with the text.

strong reactions that can further color our interpretation. In our case, if we react instinctively to the term *nekama* without considering these nuances, we risk imposing a meaning that aligns with our emotions rather than with the text itself.

Additionally, concrete numbers tend to draw our attention. It is probably no coincidence that many discussions of this issue emphasize the killing of 75,000 Persians outside of Shushan—even as the exact number of deaths does not in itself necessarily carry moral weight. Large numbers can feel overwhelming or morally significant even when they may simply convey scale or historical fact. To be clear, this is not to say that scale is irrelevant. One might argue that large-scale destruction is qualitatively different from small-scale, that a high number suggests aggression rather than self-defense, or that a large, unrealistic, round number reflects typical biblical literary exaggeration. All of these are plausible and reasonable modes of analysis. But if we instinctively fixate on numbers, we risk distorting the text's message.

6. Distinguish Between Description and Prescription

Biblical texts often describe actions without necessarily endorsing them. A careful reading requires distinguishing between what the text reports and what it affirms. Some narratives depict events as they happened, while others present ideals. Failing to make this distinction can lead to misreadings. In our case, this distinction does not seem particularly relevant, as the overall thrust of the Megillah suggests that Mordekhai, Esther, and the Jewish people are to be celebrated for their actions at the end of the story. Still, it remains an important point to consider in interpreting biblical texts more broadly.

7. Recognize the Limits of a Single Text

Even after arriving at a fair reading of the text, it is important to remember that no single text serves as the definitive authority on complex dilemmas. The Megillah is often invoked in contemporary discussions about war ethics, including in relation to Israel. However, ancient Persia is not modern Israel, and the *mitzvot* governing warfare in the land of Israel do not necessarily apply to the events of the Megillah. Nor is it obvious that the text serves as a direct precedent for modern conflicts—though it undoubtedly has something valuable to teach. Rather than seeking a final resolution, we would do better to view each source as a data point within a broader framework. I will aim to approach my analysis in the same way.

8. Isolate Points that Emerge as Most Likely or Definite

Throughout the process—but especially at the end—it is useful to separate ambiguity from what is most likely or definite. This involves identifying the text's core claims, distinguishing between areas of scholarly consensus and uncertainty, and resisting the temptation to overstate conclusions where the text remains unclear. By anchoring our reading in the strongest textual evidence rather than conjecture, we ensure a more faithful and intellectually honest interpretation.

With these principles in mind, we return to our question of retribution and self-defense.

The Irrevocable Decree

By the final chapters of the Megillah, Haman has been exposed and executed, and his house has been handed over to Esther and Mordekhai. Yet Esther makes an additional request to King Ahashverosh: a new decree allowing the Jews to defeat their enemies:

> And she said: "If it pleases the king, and if I have found favor before him, and the matter is proper before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see the disaster that will befall my people? And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" (Esther 8:5–6)

Ahashverosh responds by reaffirming the irrevocability of royal decrees while granting Mordekhai and Esther the power to issue a counter-decree entirely of their choosing:

> And you may further write with regard to the Jews as you see fit, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet. For an edict that has been written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet may not be revoked. (Esther 8:8)

Here, we encounter our first questions: Why do the Jews require another decree to defend themselves, and what does the king mean by noting that his decrees are irrevocable? The commentators debate both questions. On the need for a decree, Ibn Ezra[4] and Malbim[5] argue that this was a legal necessity—Persian law forbade the revocation of a royal decree, so the only way to counteract it was to issue a new law permitting the Jews to defend themselves. Without this, their enemies would still have had royal sanction to attack with impunity.[6]

Rashbam[7] suggests that Mordekhai's approach was undertaken at the king's request: to avoid the appearance of undermining the king, Mordekhai

[4] 8:8, s.v. *veyesh lish'ol*.

[5] 8:11 s.v. Haman.

[6] This raises a deeper question: why did the Jews need permission to defend themselves at all? Should they have resigned themselves to destruction? While self-defense is a basic human right, the Persian legal system may have deemed any unauthorized use of force an act of rebellion. Without formal royal sanction, the Jews might have been punished if they fought back or even if they armed themselves. Mordekhai's decree, then, did more than grant self-defense—it legitimized Jewish resistance, transforming them from potential outlaws into agents of royal policy.

[7] 8:7 s.v. *ein lehashiv*. See too Immanuel of Rome, 8:8 s.v. *ve'attem*.

framed the second decree as a clarification rather than a reversal.

Maharal[8] takes a third tack, arguing that Mordekhai's decree was not only a practical necessity but also a fulfillment of the mitzvah to battle Amalek. He maintains that the enemies who sought to destroy the Jews—even after Haman's death—were Amalekites (though to me, this does not seem to be the simple reading of the text.) According to this view, even if the Jews could have survived without fighting, the battle was divinely mandated, and Mordekhai's decree ensured they would not forgo the opportunity to fulfill this religious obligation.

This brings us to the second question: What did the king mean? The issue of whether Persian law was violable or inviolable directly impacts our understanding of Ahashverosh's recommendation. Ibn Ezra[9] and R. Yosef Kara[10] argue that since Haman's initial decree could not be legally rescinded, the king was implying that a second decree was necessary to counterbalance the first. This new decree would allow the Jews to attack their enemies, just as their enemies were permitted to attack them. Without it, the Jews would have remained vulnerable, unable to defend themselves without violating Persian law. According to this view, Mordekhai's decree was conservative—it did not necessarily sanction proactive aggression but may have merely permitted self-defense.[11]

Rav Saadiah Gaon[12] and Ri of Trani,[13] however, interpret the verse differently. In their view, the initial decree was nullified as soon as Haman was deposed and Mordekhai elevated. Here, the king's statement suggests that the second decree would gain greater authority by carrying explicit royal endorsement. The issue was not the irrevocability of Persian law but the need to embolden the Jews and deter their enemies. According to this reading, Mordekhai's decree did more than respond to an existing threat—it actively sanctioned preemptive action, signaling that the

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[8] *Or Hadash* 8:11 s.v. *vekhol*. For another interesting reading suggesting that Mordekhai's decree was not merely reactive but a strategic move to strengthen Jewish resilience and deter future aggression, see R. Meir Arama, *Meir Esther* 8:11 s.v. *hamelekh*.

[9] 8:8, s.v. *veyesh*.

[10] 8:7 s.v. *vayomer*.

[11] In her *JPS Commentary to Esther* (p. 77), Adele Berlin takes this argument further, suggesting that Mordekhai's decree functioned primarily as a deterrent. Given that the Jews were unlikely to passively accept their fate, the edict was less about granting permission to fight and more about strategically leveraging royal authority to prevent violence. By signaling that any attack would be met with force, the decree may have minimized the actual need for conflict by discouraging potential aggressors.

[12] *Tafsir* to 8:8.

[13] Cited by Prof. David Frankel, https://www.thetorah.com/article/masking-revenge-as-self-defense-domesticating-the-book-of-esther

king's favor had shifted.[14]

Based on the evidence presented so far, it remains difficult to determine whether the king was allowing the Jews to override Haman's decree or merely issuing a parallel decree, even when considering historical evidence from Persian protocols. However, one textual point appears uncontroversial: Mordekhai and Esther's decree did not merely counteract Haman's—it inverted it entirely. A close reading of the Megillah reveals striking parallels between the two. Haman's decree empowered the Jews' enemies to "destroy, kill, and annihilate" them, while Mordekhai's decree granted the Jews the right to "gather and stand for their lives." Haman's decree permitted the plundering of Jewish property, whereas Mordekhai's decree allowed the Jews to loot their enemies. Haman's decree set a date for Jewish destruction, giving their enemies time to prepare, while Mordekhai's decree ensured that the Jews had ample time to arm themselves and rally support.[15]

This reversal marks a fundamental shift in power. Mordekhai and Esther's decree was *venahafokh hu* ("it was reversed," 9:2), transforming the Jews from threatened victims into a dominant force. Haman had empowered their enemies; now, the Jews were granted the authority to eliminate them. Rather than simply negating Haman's decree, Mordekhai's edict actively reshaped the political landscape.

Indeed, this theme permeates the final chapters of the Megillah. The emphasis on Haman's house being granted to Mordekhai can be understood as part of the broader theme of reversal, similar to Haman being hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordekhai. This motif is also reflected in the language surrounding the promulgation of the decree: the repeated mention of the date 13 Adar (Esther 3:13, 8:12), the phrase "and the law was given in the capital Shushan" (Esther 3:15, 8:14), the contrast between the Jews' newfound joy and their previous sorrow (Esther 4:3, 8:16), and the conversion of non-Jews (Esther 8:17).

These parallels suggest that the reversal of Haman's decree was not a mere legal authorization but an inversion. Rather than simply nullifying Haman's decree, Mordekhai's edict placed the Jews in control, turning their enemies into the ones on the defensive. The Jewish response was thus not only about survival but also about reshaping the empire's power dynamics, signaling that the Jewish people would no longer be passive targets of persecution.

Returning to the dispute among the commentators, this point seems to challenge Ibn

[14] One might see this legal predicament as an example of the Megillah's satirical tone, mocking the absurdity of a system where unjust laws cannot be revoked. However, even if the Megillah contains satire, the Jewish people's survival is treated with the utmost seriousness. The decree must be understood as a substantive political act, not part of the satire.

[15] Frankel, ibid., makes essentially the same point, though his reading of the narrative ultimately differs considerably from mine.

Ezra and Rashbam—or at least suggests that even if they are correct that the second edict was necessary as a Persian legal technicality, the way it is framed in the Megillah implies that the Jews were not merely permitted to defend themselves but had gained dominance over their enemies. *This suggests—though does not conclusively prove—that the decree allowed for more than just self-defense; it sanctioned some form of vengeance* that underscored the Jews' newfound authority over their adversaries.

Self-Defense and Retribution

While the circumstances surrounding the issuance of the decree inform the question of self-defense versus retribution, the text of the decree itself speaks to it even more directly. Having received royal authorization, Mordekhai and Esther issue a decree granting the Jews permission "to assemble and defend their lives" (Esther 8:11). As noted, this language emphasizes self-defense rather than unprovoked aggression. At the same time, the verse continues by stating that they may "take vengeance on their enemies" by killing "men, women, and children" and seizing their enemies' spoils (Esther 8:11, 8:13)—appearing to sanction retribution and even the killing of unarmed civilians alongside combatants.[16]

The question of whether the Jewish response was purely defensive or involved a more aggressive stance is explicitly taken up by numerous commentators and scholars, a number of whom cast it as a form of proactive self-defense.[17]

For example, Joseph ibn Kaspi[18] offers a textual justification for interpreting *nekama* as self-defense rather than revenge. He argues that the phrase "to avenge" (Esther 8:13) should be read in the sense of counterattack rather than retribution. He supports this by citing Yehoshua 8:20, where those fleeing a battle turn back on their pursuers, suggesting that *nekama* can refer to defensive

[16] Robert Gordis ("Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 95 (1976), 49—53) attempts to mitigate the decree's severity by arguing that the phrase "men, women, and children" does not describe those the Jews were permitted to attack but rather modifies the prior phrase, "who sought to destroy them." According to this reading, the Jews were authorized to kill only those who sought to destroy them and their families. If correct, this interpretation would significantly lessen the moral difficulty of the passage.
However, this reading seems implausible for several reasons. First, in biblical Hebrew, when a list follows a clause describing an action, the most natural reading is that the list describes the object of the action, not an expansion of the subject. Here, "children and women" appears as part of the list of those the Jews were permitted to attack rather than as a clarification of the previous clause. Second, to the best of my knowledge, nowhere else in Tanakh does a similar phrase function in this way. If the intent was to permit the Jews to kill only those attacking them along with their own families, we would expect clearer wording to avoid ambiguity. Finally, the decree closely mirrors the language of Haman's original edict, seemingly granting the Jews the same broad authority given to their enemies. There is no indication that Mordekhai's decree imposes a restriction significantly narrowing its scope. Given these difficulties, this alternative reading is unlikely and does not meaningfully resolve the moral tension in the text.

[17] It is exceedingly difficult to claim that the Jews were actually under attack when they defeated their enemies on the 13th and 14th of Adar.

[18] Cited by Meylekh (PV) Viswanath, https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-megillat-esther-massacre

action rather than unprovoked aggression. This reading reinforces the idea that Mordekhai's decree was fundamentally about self-preservation rather than punitive retaliation.

Maharal[19] offers another way to frame the Jews' actions as self-defense, arguing that their response was not about vengeance but about ensuring survival. Even after Haman's downfall, their enemies remained a threat, and the Jews, scattered and vulnerable, had to act decisively to prevent future attacks. By striking first, they were not seeking retribution but deterring those who still sought their destruction. This interpretation presents their actions as a necessary measure to secure their safety and assert their standing within the empire.

Much more recently, Fredric W. Bush argues that the term *nekama* in the edict must be understood within the broader context of self-defense emphasized in the Megillah. According to Bush, the Jews were permitted to carry out vengeance specifically against those who attacked them.[20]

Yet this interpretation is difficult to sustain. The term *nekama* appears 90 times in Tanakh, and in every instance where its meaning is clear—the majority of cases—it refers to some form of vengeance. There is little evidence to suggest that the term carries a different meaning here. Furthermore, as mentioned, the retributive nature of Mordekhai's decree is reinforced by its clear parallels to Haman's original edict noted previously (Esther 3:13, 8:11).

What, then, are we to make of the apparent tension between the goals of self-defense and retribution? In truth, the tension is not necessarily problematic. It is entirely plausible that the Jews were empowered to defend themselves through proactive self-defense and retribution, particularly as a form of poetic justice that inverted the relationship between them and their enemies. On the most straightforward reading, both motivations are presented as legitimate justifications for the decree.[21]

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[19] *Or Hadash* 8:11 s.v. *lehikkahel*, *veyesh*.

[20] Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth–Esther*, vol. 9 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 453.

[21] Meylekh Vizwanath (cited in footnote 17) argues that the sheer scale of the killings described in the Megillah suggests that the Jews likely killed women and children as well, comparing the 75,000 slain enemies to Roman census data. Estimates indicate that the total number of Roman citizens in the third century BCE ranged from 242,000 to 337,000. Even if these numbers were doubled, he reasons, the figure in the Megillah remains staggering, implying that the total likely included more than just combatants. He therefore concludes that while the text does not explicitly state that women and children were among the dead, the decree permitted their killing (Esther 8:11), leaving open the possibility that they were part of the final toll. In his view, this interpretation aligns with broader conventions of ancient warfare, in which total defeat often entailed the destruction of an entire population.Viswanath's argument, however, is unpersuasive, as it assumes the number 75,000 is a precise historical figure without clear justification. Ancient texts, including biblical and Near Eastern sources, often use large, rounded numbers symbolically rather than as exact tallies. The figure may be intended to convey total victory rather than serve as a literal casualty count. Just as the claim of *127 kingdoms* or the Persian Empire's expanse from India to Ethiopia is likely not meant to be taken literally,

At this stage, then, *the most straightforward reading suggests that the decree does not merely authorize self-defense but explicitly mandates some degree of retributive action*. The use of *nekama* indicates that the decree is not framed purely as a defensive measure but as a response to past aggression, mirroring Haman's original edict in both scope and tone.

The Surprising Turn

Here, however, the text takes a surprising turn. The Megillah records that "in the capital Shushan the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men" (Esther 9:6) and later, at Esther's request, that "they slew three hundred men in Shushan" (Esther 9:15). Outside the capital, they kill "seventy-five thousand of those who hated them" (Esther 9:16). Yet, despite the decree's explicit mention of "men, women, and children" (Esther 8:11), the Megillah never records that women or children were harmed. Certainly, it is plausible that women and children are included in the term "*ish*," which recurs in this section. But this seems odd given that women and children were mentioned explicitly in the formulation of the original decree. It is also possible to argue that the discrepancy arises because, as we previously suggested, the decree is specifically formulated to mirror and reverse the language of Haman's decree. Still, the term *ish* or *isha* in military contexts throughout the Bible typically refers to non-combatants. In the rare instance where it applies to an entirely civilian group (e.g., the burning of Shekhem's tower in *Shoftim* 9:49), *ish* is used exclusively for men, while *isha* is separately specified for women. This strengthens the reading that in our case, *ish* refers specifically to male combatants. At the very least, it is striking that the verse leaves this possibility open.

Moreover, the text repeatedly emphasizes that "they did not lay hands on the spoil" (Esther 9:10, 9:15, 9:16), even though the decree had explicitly permitted them to "plunder their property" (Esther 8:11). Here too, the stark contrast between what was authorized and what was carried out seems to suggest that whereas the Jews were granted broad authority, they exercised significant restraint. Finally—and perhaps most significant for our purposes—the text emphasizes their act of self-defense (Esther 9:16) without invoking the terminology of *nekama*.

Each of these discrepancies could, in theory, be resolved on its own. Regarding the women and children, one might simply suggest that they too were killed, but the text did not find it necessary to mention this detail explicitly. In terms of the use of the language of self-defense rather than retribution, the Megillah itself appears to treat the two concepts as nearly interchangeable earlier on, suggesting that it does not perceive a significant tension between them.

And as for the Jews' refusal to take spoils, the

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we should not draw firm conclusions from the reported number of slain enemies.

commentators offer a number of solutions. Rashi,[22] Rabbi Yosef Kara,[23] and Maharal[24] argue that this was a moral decision intended to demonstrate that the Jews were not motivated by material gain. By refraining from plundering, they made it clear that their actions were purely for self-defense, not greed. Immanuel of Rome[25] adds a political dimension, arguing that the Jews' refusal to take spoils demonstrated wisdom and moral clarity, proving their actions were driven by justice rather than personal gain and ensuring the wealth went to the royal treasury, thereby securing the king's favor. These interpretations are relatively "technical," as they provide explanations that downplay the broader significance of the Jews' refusal to take loot in the context of retribution versus self-defense.[26]

Yet, taken together, these three factors—the omission of women and children, the refusal to take loot, and the language of self-defense rather than vengeance—suggest a significant shift: while the decree granted the Jews license for greater aggression, they chose to exercise restraint. In effect, although they were given permission to exact retribution, they ultimately limited themselves to self-defense.

This, in turn, raises a further question: Why did the Jews act more moderately than the initial decree allowed? It is hard to say. Perhaps Mordekhai, having personally clashed with Haman and his supporters, was particularly enraged, whereas the broader Jewish community felt less animosity. Another possibility is that Mordekhai crafted a sweeping decree to provide maximum flexibility, allowing local Jewish communities to respond as needed—yet ultimately, the most extreme measures proved unnecessary. It may be that by the time Adar arrived, the security situation had improved, reducing the need for aggression. Most intriguingly, maybe Mordekhai never intended to exact retribution at all; instead, his decree may have been a strategic bluff—an effective deterrent, as Adele Berlin suggests[27]—meant to instill fear in the enemy.

While we cannot determine the exact motivation or nature of this shift, one thing seems clear: *the Jewish response was more restrained in practice than the decree had stipulated*. This suggests that they implemented their mandate narrowly, targeting only those who actively sought their destruction. While this does not necessarily prove that retribution—however defined—is immoral, it

[22] 9:10 s.v. *uvabizah*.

[23] 9:10 s.v. *aseret*.

[24] 9:10 s.v. *uvabizah*.

[25] 9:10 s.v. *uvabizah*.

[26] Even Immanuel of Rome, who contends that the Jews were asserting their moral high ground, does so by emphasizing their refusal to seek personal gain. However, this does not necessarily bear on whether their actions were motivated by self-defense or retribution.

[27] See footnote 11.

does suggest that the Megillah ends with restraint.

Some Tentative Conclusions

The indeterminacy of the text prevents us from drawing sweeping conclusions about vengeance, collective punishment, or the treatment of enemy populations. As noted, even if the text were clear-cut on these issues, its applicability to modern-day Israel would still warrant separate consideration.

However, a few key conclusions do emerge. First, the Megillah appears to affirm that proactive self-defense—even on a large scale—is certainly permissible. Second, the initial decree is most naturally understood as endorsing a form of retribution. Third, at the same time, the Jews' restraint in carrying out the decree suggests that even when retribution is permissible, it may be best to impose limits where possible.

The Megillah does not provide a definitive answer to the broader moral question of vengeance, nor can I claim that my reading is the only plausible one. Still, I hope to have shown that a careful reading offers an important data point with key insights that can help shape a Jewish ethic of war. Perhaps most importantly, I hope this serves as a model for how rigorous, methodical analysis can yield nuanced yet crucial insights—allowing us to approach even the most complex and emotionally charged issues with intellectual honesty, moral seriousness, and deeper understanding.