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TERUMAH

THIS MONTH'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS
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THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
JOSEPH & SHARON PENKOWER KAPLAN
IN MEMORY OF THEIR PARENTS
GERTRUDE & SIMON KAPLAN AND
RABBI MURRY S. & LILLIAN STAVISKY PENKOWER
WHO WOULD BE SO PROUD OF THEIR GRANDDAUGHTER
DANIELE KAPLAN COMPLETING DAF YOMI

**JOY AT LAST: REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF
ESTHER**

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When reading the Book of Esther, we tend to focus on the beginning, on the woe rather than the joy. We drink along with the guests at Ahasuerus' party and watch the king humiliate his wife. We observe with disgust the king's ministers jump to assert male dominance throughout the kingdom. We imagine the horrors of the King's grotesque beauty contest and feel the despair of the women not selected who are shunted away in a second harem. We mourn with Mordecai at the loss of his niece and then later when he thwarts an assassination plot against the king that goes unrecognized and unrewarded. We cower at Haman's evil and the injustice of his plan to exterminate the Jews. We walk with Mordecai on Shushan's streets in sackcloth and ashes to protest Haman's decree. We struggle with Esther as she musters the courage to confront Ahasuerus. The scroll invites us to travel with its characters and immerse ourselves in a range of negative sentiments. Jews know this emotional tableau all too well, so well that we often don't make room for happiness even when it arrives. And in the *Megillah*, it arrives.

Happiness is precipitated not when Mordecai is paraded in the public square. This was no reward for our hero, who preferred and returned to the king's gate, the liminal space most existentially suited for an exile. Riding on a horse with a crown (either on his head or the

horse's - depending on the commentary¹) when your life is in peril provided no solace, and may have brought even greater indignity. Even Jewish self-defense was no occasion to rejoice. Killing first rather than having no one be killed only provides a tense and uncertain reprieve.

Instead, the joy in the *Megillah* is textually linked to Mordecai's eventual political ascension and the optic it created in the eyes of his co-religionists. Many readers fail to notice the overt connection:

Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries. The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor. (Esther 8:15-17)

One short verse enables the reader to experience the relief felt by the Jews of Persia. Mordecai's garments of power meant that the Jews in the King's empire had an internal advocate. His luminescence was theirs.

Relief, in this sense, is its own type of temporal happiness that should never be mistaken for joy. It is significant. It neutralizes the difficulties of the past, but cannot, in and of itself, create the sensations of total bliss, safety, love, and serenity. And because Ahasuerus was so unpredictable, the happiness the Jews experienced at this moment could not sweep away all the heartache and terror of the past months. Happiness could not be achieved without security. After safety, Jewish happiness came through community-wide observance of a holiday, economic relief, and sharing food with

¹ See, for example, the comments of Abraham ibn Ezra and Gersonides to Esther 6:8.

others – because happiness shared is happiness doubled - but mostly, by having a faithful representative in the palace.

A group of Talmudic sages picked apart each expression of joy in these verses to yield a reading both playful and serious. Each of the four emotions in the verse was related to specific commandments: Torah study, Jewish holidays, circumcision, and phylacteries. To paraphrase: Rav Yehuda said: “Light” [*ohr*] refers to the Torah that they once again studied.² “Gladness” [*simha*] refers to the festivals that they once again observed. “Joy” [*sasson*] refers to circumcision, as they once again circumcised their sons. “Honor” [*yekar*] refers to phylacteries, which they once again donned.³ This is a far cry from a literal reading of the words, yet to these Talmudic sages, authentic joy was about spiritual happiness. Nowhere in the Scroll are we told that Jews were forbidden to practice their faith, but the ancient Rabbis had their own Hamans, and may have been relating the experience of the Jews of Persia to the Roman prohibitions they suffered. The autonomy to practice one’s faith unobstructed was above any other happiness.

The 15th-century Italian interpreter Joseph ibn Yahya, like the Sages of the Talmud, examines each of the four expressions of happiness in his comments on 8:16 for their distinct nuances: “*ohr*” is relief, “*simha*” removal of worry, “*sasson*” spiritual delight, and “*yekar*” material satisfaction. Readers sensitive to the linguistic parallels and repetitions of the text understand the potency of the word “*yekar*,” which appears four other times in the Scroll.⁴ This word is linked specifically to “the happiness that comes with the abundance of material wealth and honor that replaced their mourning over being sold as oxen to the slaughter.” Material joy, on this reading, contrasts with Esther’s plea not to sell the Jews into slavery. Jews were objectified. To reverse fortunes required that they suddenly *have* objects rather than *be* objects.

Not everyone reads this verse as joy experienced exclusively by the Jewish community either. For example, Moses Alshikh, a 16th-century exegete from Turkey, extends the joy that Shushan experienced beyond the Jews in Persia in his reading of 8:16. The joy for the gentile community was not about Mordecai’s ascension but about Haman’s hanging. Justice would finally return to the capital city, and a just world is a happier world. The French 14th-century scholar Gersonides considers both options – that it was the happiness of the Jews or the happiness of all – and concludes that “it is more correct” to read the verse as a statement of universal joy.

Because happiness is multi-valenced, Jon Levenson, in his commentary on Esther, describes the threshold of intensity expressed by the happiness in this verse. With each small victory, the Jews experienced an expression of validation from God; they were a people worthy of salvation. This added greater weight and volume to their joy:

The joy with which the city of Susa cries out in Est. 8:15 is the joy of salvation. It parallels the response of the worshipping community upon learning that their sacrifices have been accepted (cf. Lev. 9:24). The last clause of 8:15

² Michael Fox, in his book [Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001) suggests that light is another way to reference joy, as in Psalms 97:11 and 112:4, and Job 12:25.

³ *Megillah* 16b.

⁴ See Esther 1:4, 1:20, 6:3, 8:16.

reverses the last clause of 3:15 (‘the city of Susa cried out in joy’ versus ‘the city of Susa was thrown into confusion’).⁵

A city bursting with joy seems like a good place to stop our story; it’s the happy ending everyone wanted and needed. Professor David Clines goes as far as to suggest that this did, in fact, represent the end of the Book of Esther. Chapters nine and ten were, in his reading, subsequent additions.⁶ He also suggests, along with medieval commentators, that the four verbs that communicate joy and relief are a tonic for the four verbs used earlier to signal the destruction of the Jews: mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing (Esther 4:3).

Even though the narrative did not stop there, we hold on to one of these verses as the happy ending to every Shabbat in the call-and-response of *havdalah*. With the parting of Shabbat, Jews open a new week with the hope that the darkness that has brought Shabbat to a close will only be literal and not metaphorical for the week ahead, hearkening back to a dark time in Jewish history that resolved itself in abundant light. That this is the verse we take with us from the Book of Esther to recite every week is a necessary reminder that although Jewish history is pockmarked with tragedy, we are adjured to observe the joy, whenever it comes, and carry it with us.

THE ACCIDENTAL INIQUITY OF AMALEK

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Amongst the many nations in the Hebrew Bible that wage war against Israel, there is one that invites God’s wrath unlike any other. Following Amalek’s ruthless assault on the Israelites upon Israel’s departure from Egypt (see [Deuteronomy 25:17-19](#)), God commands Moses and Israel to “utterly erase Amalek’s memory from under the heavens” ([Exodus 17:14](#)).⁷ Furthermore, the Torah declares, “YHWH will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation” ([Ibid. 17:16](#)). There is simply no other nation amongst the enemies of Israel that earns God’s enmity as does Amalek.

So too, in the rabbinic tradition, Amalek is presented as the arch-rival of the Jewish people, actively and ceaselessly pursuing God’s chosen nation. Ramban, for example, states that while all the other nations feared Israel following the Israelites’ miraculous redemption from Egyptian slavery, Amalek traveled from afar with the specific intention to wage war with God and Israel ([Exodus 17:16](#)). The Midrash describes Amalek’s attack as aimed at bringing down the Israelites from their spiritual loftiness achieved through their defeat of Egypt, even at the cost of destroying itself in the process.⁸ Netziv

⁵ Jon D. Levenson, [Esther: A Commentary](#) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997): 116.

⁶ David Clines, [The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story](#) (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984): 26-30.

⁷ Special thanks goes to R. Rafi Eis, Szilvia Finta, Joseph Gindsburg *o.b.m.*, and Moshe Lakser for their feedback on earlier drafts of this essay. Translations are taken from [New JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh](#) with some modifications.

⁸ Midrash Tankhuma (9) offers the analogy of an individual jumping into a tub of boiling water that burns him yet, nevertheless, cools the temperature of the water. In other words, Amalek tempered Israel’s

argues that Amalek's war against Israel is motivated by a desire to remove God's divine authority on earth ([Ha-emek Davar on Exodus 17:16](#)), and Malbim presents Amalek's assault on the Israelites as the latest chapter in the battle between Esau and Jacob ([Ha-Torah v- HaMitzvah, Exodus 17:8](#)). While the commentators offer variations on the particulars, they all agree that Amalek's attack on the Israelites is deliberate and ruthless.

However, when considering the Torah's own recounting of the Amalekite attack on the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy, we find that one of the defining characteristics of Amalek's wickedness is, curiously, the very *happenstance* nature of its encounter with Israel:

Remember that which Amalek did to you on the way when you departed Egypt; that it *happened* upon you (*asher korkha*) on the way... ([Deuteronomy 25:17-18](#))⁹

Why does the Torah include the detail of *chance* in its indictment of Amalek?¹⁰ How can Amalek be held accountable for matters beyond its control?

Haman's Incidental Confrontation with Persian Jewry

In fact, the episode in Refidim is not the only place in the Hebrew Bible where we find a circumstantial confrontation between Amalek and Israel. Some 800 years after the episode with Amalek at Refidim, the Jews of Persia face the threat of annihilation at the hands of another Amalekite, on this occasion, the wicked Haman.¹¹ And once again, the enemy has no intention at the outset to harm the Jews:

And all the king's servants that were at the gate of the king would bow and prostrate themselves to Haman for so had the king commanded. But Mordecai would not bow or prostrate... And when Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow or prostrate before him, Haman became filled with anger. And it was scornful in his eyes to lay hands on Mordecai alone [for they had told him the nation of

spiritual fire by launching an attack, despite suffering a decisive defeat in the process (cited in [Rashi on Deuteronomy 25:18](#)).

⁹ See [Rashi](#), [Rashbam](#), and [Ibn Ezra](#) on Deuteronomy 25:18, who all interpret "*korkha*" as an incidental or chance occurrence. Abarbanel gleans from the disjointed language in describing Amalek's attack on Israel, "*va-yavo Amalek...va-yilahem im yisrael*" ([Exodus 17:8](#)), instead of the more fluid "*Vayavo Amalek l'ilahem im yisrael*," that Amalek did not, in fact, set out with the intention to attack the Israelites. Rather, it was on a journey to another destination when it chanced upon the floundering Israelite camp ([Perush Abarbanel, Exodus 17:8-16](#)). Also, in describing Balaam's prophecy, the Torah states "*vayikor Elohim el Bilam*." ([Numbers 23:4](#)) Rashi, Ramban, and Ibn Ezra each glean from the language "*vayikor*" that Balaam's prophecy was a *chance* occurrence.

¹⁰ The phrase "*asher korkha ba-derekh*" cannot be included as part of the introductory sentence, as if to say, *Remember what Amalek did to you when it encountered you on the way*, for, the opening verse already serves that function- "*Remember that which Amalek did to you on the way, upon your departure from Egypt.*" Rather, it qualifies the previous verse, as do the list of indictments that follow. In other words, *What was it that Amalek did to you after your departure from Egypt that is to be remembered? That it happened upon you on the way, and that it attacked from the rear etc...*

¹¹ Haman is introduced as a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king in the days of the prophet Samuel ([Esther 3:1](#)).

Mordecai]. And Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were in the entire kingdom of Ahasuerus, the nation of Mordecai. ([Esther 3:2, 5-6](#))

In this particular case, Amalek is brought into confrontation with the Jews due to Mordecai's stubborn refusal to give honor to Haman.

Israel as Provocateur of Amalek

In fact, in turning our attention to the details of the actual battle between Amalek and Israel as presented in the book of Exodus, we find that, here too, the Jews incite Amalek's fury. For directly preceding the battle, the Torah relates the following episode:

And the entire Israelite assembly journeyed from the Sin desert by the word of mouth of YHWH, *and they encamped in Refidim*. And the nation quarreled with Moses. And they said, "Give us water and we will drink." And Moses said, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test YHWH?" And there the nation thirsted for water, and the nation complained against Moses, and it said, "Why have you taken us up from Egypt to kill me, my children, and my livestock from thirst..." And he called the name of the place, Masah u-Merivah (literally, "testing and strife"), because of the quarrel of the Israelites and because of their testing of YHWH, saying, "Is God in our midst or not?" ([Exodus 17:1-3, 7](#))

And then:

And Amalek came, and it warred with Israel. ([17:8](#))

Rashi takes note of the juxtaposition of Israel's questioning of God's presence with Amalek's attack, offering up the following parable:

A man carries his son on his shoulders and departs on his journey. The son sees an object and says, "Father, pick up that object and give it to me." And he gives it to him. It happens a second and a third time. They encounter a man on the way. The son asks the man, "Have you seen my father?" His father says to him, "You don't know where I am?" He takes the son off his shoulders and the dog comes to bite him. (*Pesikta Rabbati* 13:6, as cited in [Rashi Exodus 17:8](#))

The lesson in the parable is clear. Despite having experienced God's protection throughout their travails in the wilderness, the Israelites are unconvinced of God's presence amongst them. The very moment they face a challenge from an inhospitable surrounding natural environment, they yearn for the "security" of slavery that they recall back in Egypt. In anger, God releases the dog (i.e., Amalek) to come and bite them.

And so, no less than Mordecai, the Israelites are responsible for Amalek's attack in the wilderness.

There is, of course, a seemingly obvious distinction between Mordecai's incitement of Amalek and that of the Israelites in the desert. As Rashi and other commentators state, Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman is an act of virtue in defiance of a wicked man who had proclaimed himself a deity.¹² For the Israelites in the

¹² See [Rashi](#), [Ibn Ezra](#), and B'ur ha-Gra on Esther 3:2

wilderness, however, the onus is clearly on them for their confrontation with Amalek.

Reconsidering Mordecai's Defiance of Haman

While not disputing the fact of Haman's wickedness, not all the rabbinic commentators view Mordecai's defiance of Haman in such a straightforward manner. Malbim ([Esther 3:4](#)) points out that any concerns of idolatry in bowing to Haman would be pertinent should Haman pass Mordecai from a distance, in which case Mordecai's act of insubordination would not be visible to Haman. However, should Mordecai be within the line of sight of Haman, Malbim asserts that bowing before the vizier would merely reflect a sign of respect for a dignitary of the king and that refusing to do so would, in fact, be a deliberate expression of personal hostility towards Haman and an act of rebellion against the king.

But for what reason would Mordecai harbor such feelings of animosity towards Haman or Ahasuerus? Certainly, with regard to Haman, there is no indication from the text of any history between them prior to this pivotal moment in the story.

In order to make sense of Mordecai's actions, we need to return to the beginning of the *megillah*, through which we can get a clearer understanding of Mordecai's motivations.

Persia: The Embodiment of a Naturalistic *Weltanschauung*

The story opens with an elaborate description of two festive banquets hosted by Persian king Ahasuerus, who heads a vast empire that incorporates 127 provinces extending from "Hodu to Cush" ([Esther 1:1](#)). The first of these gala events is reserved for the king's ministers and servants in the palace and continues for an interminable 180 days, the intent behind which is to "display the wealth and honor of his kingdom and the splendor of his greatness" ([1:4](#)).

Upon the conclusion of this half-year long feast, the king hosts a second party, this time a 'modest' seven day affair for all of the king's subjects across the land, an event no less ostentatious than the first one.

Then, on the last day of the festivities, while in a state of drunken frivolity, Ahasuerus calls for his most prized possession- Queen Vashti- to be brought before all the guests to display her stunning physical beauty before his subjects. But the Queen refuses to appear and be degraded by her husband in public and, as a result of her insubordination, is stripped of her crown. An edict soon follows which calls for all men across the kingdom to reinforce their dominance in their households, lest their wives become emboldened through the queen's example and rise up to challenge the authority of their husbands ([1:22](#)).

The tone established from the very outset is of a Godless society in which the acquisition of wealth, honor, and political power is the mark of success in life. There is little indication of a higher ethical code or of a recognition of a Divine Overseer who assigns moral accountability to man for his actions.

What about the Jewish community? Has it come to adopt the culture and worldview of its host country?

A Spiritual Exile

There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital named Mordecai the son of Ya'ir, the son of Shim'i, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite; who was **exiled** from Jerusalem with the

exile that was **exiled** with Yekhoniah the king of Judah that Nebuchadnezzar the king of Bavel had **exiled**. ([Esther 2:5-6](#))

With the first mention of a Jewish presence in Persia we find a distinct emphasis placed on the fact that Mordecai and his people are an exiled nation. One gets the sense that the text is not merely describing the geographical displacement of the Jewish people.

From what we know about how the Babylonians and Persians typically treated their subjects, it is fair to assume that life was, overall, quite comfortable for the Jews while living in exile. In the case of Persia, comfort translates into spiritual apathy. This is evident from Persian Jewry's lack of response to King Cyrus' edict granting the Jews the right to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple, where but a fraction of the Jewish population takes up the invitation.¹³

And as the narrative proceeds, we find a number of indications that suggest the Jews have very much assimilated into Persian culture. One such hint comes with the text's introduction of Esther and the Hebrew name she does not go by ([2:7](#)).

Then, after Esther is whisked away to the palace to participate in the pageantry for queen, the text reports- on two occasions- that Mordecai instructs Esther to keep her Jewish identity concealed from the palace officials and the king ([2:10](#)). Why is it so important to Mordecai that Esther's identity be kept a secret from the palace?

According to Ralbag ([Esther 2:10](#)), Mordecai's concern is that the king is unlikely to select Esther should he become aware of her inferior national pedigree.¹⁴ Maharal (R. Judah Loeb b. Bezalel, *Or Hadash*, Warsaw, 1874, pp. 54) argues that Mordecai's fears stem from the possibility of Esther being accused, once in power, of pushing for policies that favor the Jews over all the other subjects in the kingdom, thus leading the Gentiles to incite the king against her. In either case, the implications are that Mordecai assumes that the king and the broad Persian populace have a very low opinion of the Jews. Yet, the fact that the Jews enjoy a peaceful and prosperous existence in their host country suggests that they are not as despised as Mordecai might think, and that Mordecai's suspicions perhaps reveal more about *his own* feelings towards his faith.

Soon after Esther is crowned queen, Mordecai uncovers a plot by two palace officials to assassinate the king. He immediately reports this information to Esther to warn the king. Yet the rabbis are troubled by Mordecai's actions. Why would Mordecai, a Jew, have any interest in protecting the brutish Persian king?

Let us recall Maharal's comments, above, that Mordecai's instructions to Esther to conceal her faith from the king are rooted in his fears that Esther be accused of being partial towards the Jewish subjects in the kingdom. In truth, accusations of nepotism being leveled against Esther would not be unfounded. For, according to Maharal, Mordecai is in fact thinking of his own promotion to a

¹³ Only 42,360 people return with Ezra ([Ezra 2:64](#)).

¹⁴ The very fact that Mordecai and Esther are invested in having her become queen brings to question the importance Judaism plays in their lives. For one can only assume that Esther will be required to forfeit whatever semblance of a Jewish life she had once she enters the palace. In fact, [Rashi](#) and Bi'ur Ha-Gra ([Esther 2:10](#)) contend that Mordecai's intentions in concealing her identity from the king are specifically to get her disqualified from contention for the crown.

position of power and influence in the palace as he instructs Esther to keep her identity hidden from the king (*Or Hadash*, *ibid*). And with his discovery of the assassination plot, the conditions are ripe for that promotion.

Nevertheless, Mordecai's political maneuvering bears no fruit. Although his act of fealty is recorded in the king's chronicles, no reward or recognition comes his way. Immediately following this episode, the king instead elevates Haman above all the other ministers in the palace (3:1).

One can imagine the sense of betrayal Mordecai feels upon learning of the king's promotion of this political nonentity,¹⁵ specifically at the very moment that Mordecai is anticipating his own political advancement. Then, to add insult to injury, the king commands that all the servants in the palace are to prostrate themselves before the newly appointed vizier. For his part, Mordecai has no intention of following through on these orders. With this, Malbim's contention that Mordecai's defiance of Haman is of a personal nature appears to stand on firm ground.¹⁶

Each of these examples suggest that, similar to their ancestors in the wilderness, the Jews of Persia are caught up in what we might call a *naturalistic* worldview. For the recently freed Israelites, this had been instilled in them as a result of 200 years of bitter slavery, where day-to-day life consisted of a constant, predictable, and unmovable pattern enforced by the will of other men. They saw the perpetual reinforcement of the message that man is sovereign in this world, and lived a Darwinian existence where the strong endured while the weak were trampled upon. For Persian Jewry, the worldview is a result of the destruction of the Temple and the loss of political independence that accompanies their spiritual decline.

Mordecai and Esther are a product of a spiritual environment in which one's faith is beholden to political maneuvering and kings of flesh and blood, and where the measure of success is one's achievement of power and influence. Thus, it is due to Mordecai's own political ambitions, rooted in his naturalistic worldview, that he feels such anger and disdain towards the king and Haman. And just as with his Israelite forbearers, it is his adoption of a naturalistic *weltanschauung* that incites Amalek's assault.

Some Background: Israel's Place Amongst the Nations

While Mordecai arouses Haman's wrath, Haman's response, oddly, is not directed merely at his instigator. Rather, he determines to do away with all of Persian Jewry. Why such an extreme reaction?

To make sense of Haman's overexuberance, we need to first understand the nation of Israel's function in the world. Israel's origins go back to its patriarch, Abraham, whom God selects to become the progenitor of a nation that would bring blessing to "all the families of

¹⁵ The Talmud states that Haman had been previously employed as a barber (*Megillah 16a*).

¹⁶ The notion that Mordecai acts out of spite helps explain the genuine confusion on behalf of the other servants with regard to his stubbornness. As Malbim states, they take no joy in reporting Mordecai's behavior to Haman (see *Malbim on 3:4*). Day after day, they ask Mordecai why he continues to defy the king's orders and, yet, he is unable to come up with a reasonable response. It is only after they have exhausted their efforts that, with reluctance, they proceed to notify Haman of Mordecai's insubordination (see *3:3-4*).

the earth" (*Genesis 12:3*) due to his steadfast faith in God and his keeping of the ways of God, of righteousness and justice (see *Genesis 18:19*). In other words, Abraham and his progeny would become God's representatives on earth through whom all nations would come to recognize God's presence in the world. As such, the Jewish people serve as a sort of spiritual barometer for the nations. When Israel fulfills its role responsibly, it brings light to all of humanity. However, when it fails in this regard, it causes a spiritual darkness to descend upon the world.¹⁷

For most, a world devoid of God's presence is a thoroughly depressing thought. It suggests that all of human existence is but an accident of physics without greater meaning or purpose. It means that there is nowhere for one to turn for security in a world where, at any moment, his property, family, or very life could be taken from him.

However, for some, a world of randomness and disorder is the ideal. For those who lust to murder, steal, and rape, a Godless world gives license to their savagery. Without a higher moral authority, those 'crimes of humanity' they perpetuate become tolerable as but the natural way of the world in which man is nothing more than a sophisticated animal. And just as the lion is not culpable in its killing of the antelope, so too, war and bloodshed between nations is merely the acting out of human instinct.

Amalek is the essence of such a worldview. As such, it is the polar opposite of that represented by Israel. It is, thus, only *natural* that Amalek should *happen* upon God's Chosen People just as Israel's spiritual apathy reaches its nadir.

As the nation that is assigned responsibility for the spiritual welfare of all of humanity hopelessly abandons its mission, the people whose purpose is to negate God's presence on earth enters the scene to assert its dominance. With Amalek's incidental confrontation with Israel at Refidim, the very event through which God's supremacy on earth was most reflected is reduced to the mundane:

What was there to fear? That a people had gone forth from the land of Egypt? But had not other peoples gone forth from the midst of other nations? Who could prove that they had gone out by God? Had these not gone forth by their own power? Now they were wandering in the wilderness, weary and struggling. Why should they not be spoiled and smitten? This was the way of the world. In this manner the moment of awe at the mighty hand of God passed away and the atmosphere of astonishment at His miracles evaporated. The world returned to its former rut, to its idols of gold and silver, its faith in mortal power and brute force. (Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim*, World Zionist Organization, 1980, 256)

Responding to the cadence of humanity's spiritual trendsetter, Amalek *chances* upon a physically spent and vulnerable Israelite camp and wages war as any nation would under such opportune circumstances. And on this occasion, as Israel has just laid waste to an

¹⁷ With their election as God's chosen people, the Jews are not necessarily favored. As Moses reminds the Israelites in preparing for entry into the land of Canaan, God's selection of Israel is not a reflection of their righteousness but is, rather, the carrying through of a commitment He made to their ancestors due to their own piety (*Deuteronomy 9:5*).

entire Egyptian army without as much as raising a sword, Amalek's engagement with them in a physical battle that features the typical ebbs and flows of war, makes us rethink the quality of Israel's victory over Egypt. It is downsized from the miraculous to a natural, albeit impressive, military achievement attributed to greater desperation on behalf of the Israelites or, perhaps, overconfidence on the part of the Egyptians.

However, from the perspective of Amalek, this chance encounter offers it a rare opportunity. For if it can succeed in obliterating the nation upon whom humankind depends to bring meaning, purpose and hope to the world, then Amalek's mission to permanently establish a godless realm on earth will be realized. And so, taking full advantage of the fortuitous circumstances, Amalek launches a brutal and merciless assault at the rear of Israelite camp where the women and children tarry, aiming to utterly annihilate the Israelites.

Haman's chance encounter with Mordecai presents the Amalekites with that very same opportunity. Upon learning that Mordecai is a Jew and sensing Mordecai and his people's spiritually vulnerable state, Haman embarks on a mission to completely eradicate Persian Jewry- to "destroy, kill, and to be rid of all the Jews, from young to old, children and women."

Thus, while Israel is responsible for Amalek's accidental encounter with it, Amalek earns God's scorn for its brutal assault on Israel following that initial confrontation. But it is not only the attention of God that Amalek captures through its vicious assault; it also attracts the unwanted attention of the nations. This is not the way nations typically wage war; with its unrestrained force, Amalek advertises this battle as something much more than the impersonal rising up of nation against nation.¹⁸ It suggests a war of spiritual proportions in which good is pitted against evil, and light versus darkness.

For Moses' father-in-law, a Midianite priest and worshiper of every form of idolatry under the sun, the evident spiritual tenor to the battle is enough to inspire him to abandon his idolatrous ways and to accept YHWH as the one true God.¹⁹

So too, Haman's exaggerated response to Mordecai's disobedience earns the attention of Shushan's Gentile population- "And the city of Shushan was perplexed" (3:15).

The Wake-up Call

While the Gentile population in Shushan is puzzled at the intensity of Amalek's offensive, for Mordecai the Jew, the impact is overwhelming. The anguish he feels is not merely the grief that comes in response to the horrible fate that awaits his people. It is the shock that comes with the realization that his entire perspective of reality has been delusional. It suddenly dawns on Mordecai that by placing his faith in politics and in kings of flesh and blood, *he* has contributed to the naturalistic worldview that has infiltrated Persian

¹⁸ In discussing the ways in which Amalek's antics strayed from those of typical nations in battle, Malbim includes the fact that (i) Amalek was not looking to conquer new territory, (ii) it was not defending its own territory, (iii) it was not involved in a dispute with Israel, and (iv) it did not launch its attack with the purpose of demonstrating its strength to the nations (see Malbim, [Ha-Torah ve-HaMitzvah, Exodus 17:8](#)).

¹⁹ See [Talmud Zevahim 116a](#), where R. Yehoshua argues, based on the juxtaposition of the two episodes, that Jethro is inspired by Israel's victory over Amalek.

society.²⁰ He has forgotten the special task that he, as a Jew, has been assigned: to lead the nations towards recognition of God's sovereignty on earth. And now, it has become clear to him that this secular worldview that he and his people have adopted is, in fact, the source of their troubles.

Overcome with emotion and a profound sense of guilt, Mordecai tears his clothes, covers himself in sackcloth and ash, and makes his way through the main thoroughfare of the capital city crying a bitter cry in a spontaneous expression of religious mourning and repentance ([Esther 4:1-2](#)).

While Mordecai is experiencing a spiritual transformation, Esther, tucked away in the palace, is oblivious to the recent developments that have transpired back in civilian life. When the news of Mordecai's public spectacle reaches her, she is extremely disconcerted. This is not the way he had raised her to behave; religion was always to remain in the privacy of the home. Immediately, she arranges for a change of clothes to be sent to Mordecai.

But Mordecai will not waver.

Now, recognizing that something truly horrible must have happened, Esther sends a palace official to Mordecai to learn the details of what has transpired. Mordecai updates Esther and proceeds to demand that she go to the king at once to plead on behalf of her people and, by implication, to abandon his earlier instructions for her to conceal her identity from the king ([ibid. 5-8](#)).

Yet Esther is not so quick to discard the only *weltanschauung* she has ever known. She responds back to Mordecai, pointing out what a foolish political move it would be to seek an audience with the king at this juncture in time. She has not been summoned by the king for thirty days, and to approach the throne without being requisitioned is punishable by death ([ibid. 10-11](#)).

Mordecai's chilling counter-response back to Esther is a direct challenge to the naturalistic worldview that he, Esther, and the rest of Persian Jewry have become hypnotized by:

Don't imagine that you will escape the fate of all the Jews in the palace of the king. For if you remain silent at this time, deliverance will come for the Jews from elsewhere and you and the house of your father will perish. And who knows if it was for this specific moment that you arose to the kingdom. ([4:13-14](#))

Does Esther really believe that her rise to power is the product of her own charm and political maneuvering? Does she think that her position in the palace shields her from the fate of her people? On the contrary, Mordecai asserts, it may be that the entire purpose behind her elevation to the throne is in order for her to deliver her people at this very moment. And if she shirks that responsibility, she will be the one to pay the price while salvation for the Jews will arise from elsewhere. Despite the grave risk to her own life, Esther rises to the challenge and agrees to go to the king in a clear demonstration of choosing faith over nature.

²⁰ Rashi ([4:1](#)) cites the Midrash which attributes Mordecai's realization to the Jews' attendance at the king's banquet and their bowing before the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

The Persistence of Nature

In reflecting, again, on the progression of events that culminate with Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews, it is remarkable that, despite the clear correlation between the Jews' adoption of a naturalistic worldview and the hostile conditions for them that follow, all the developments transpire in a completely organic way based on logical and independent choices made by the players in the story.

For example, Ahasuerus' inattention to Mordecai's heroism following his foiling of the assassination plot is entirely reasonable when taking into consideration the character of the king. As we noted earlier, the king's display of his wealth and his attempt to humiliate Vashti are intended as a demonstration of his power and influence. But as is often the case with bullies and braggarts, those tactics of intimidation reveal deeper feelings of insecurity and weakness.

The king's feelings of self-doubt are reflected, for one, in the fact that he maintains such a large contingent of personal advisors to whom he turns. In fact, it is precisely those feelings of insecurity that leads him to try to humiliate the queen in the first place. By degrading her, he hopes to gain a measure of respect and legitimacy in his own eyes and the eyes of his subjects.²¹

Considering Ahasuerus' vulnerable state, it is not difficult to imagine the stress and anxiety he feels upon receiving word of the attempt against his life. The last thing on his mind at that moment is a reward for the man responsible for thwarting the plot. His sole concern at that juncture in time is the prevention of any future such attempts.

According to Yoram Hazony (*God and Politics in Esther*, Cambridge University Press, 2015), one of the king's first considerations is a reshuffling of his staff. For, as Hazony points out, it suddenly dawns on the king that his inner circle of confidantes may be much too broad. All it takes is one ambitious advisor who is privy to the most classified information in the palace to turn on the king and plan for his disposal. And so, the king is determined to reduce that inner circle. By consolidating power into the hands of one individual, Ahasuerus limits his concerns to the potential schemes of one man as opposed to those of a much larger contingent.

And to ensure that this man remains isolated from all his other advisors, Ahasuerus specifically selects a political outsider whom he elevates to a position high above all the other officials in the palace (ibid, 33-34). Finally, by ordering all of his servants to bow before the new vizier, he sends a clear message that this official is inaccessible to all other ministers in the palace; he cannot be manipulated or influenced.

Thus, at second glance, the king's lack of acknowledgement of Mordecai's bravery appears completely understandable, as does his promotion of Haman to the position that Mordecai happens to have his eyes set on.

While the natural progression of events brings suffering and anguish to the Jews while they uphold a naturalistic worldview, we discover the reverse effect upon their reaffirmation of a theistic *weltanschauung*. For Esther, this begins the moment she makes the difficult decision to approach the king and plead on her people's

²¹ Malbim attributes Ahasuerus' insecurities to his recognition that Vashti is of true royal ancestry (as a granddaughter of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar) while he is but a usurper of the throne (see Malbim on Esther [1:1](#), [9](#)).

behalf despite the enormous risks. And once again, upon closer investigation, we find that Ahasuerus' receiving of Esther is, in fact, entirely reasonable.

For Esther, who is unaware of the political intrigue in the palace over the last month, the fact that she has not been called upon by the king in the last thirty days is a clear sign of his lack of interest in her. And this is a reasonable assumption on her behalf. She knows all about the king's relationship (or lack-there-of) with the previous queen, how Vashti served as the king's trophy-wife through whom he could gain legitimacy to the throne. And Esther is smart enough to know that her best bet at longevity on the throne is to stay out of the king's way and to show her face only when summoned.²²

But the truth is that the king's inattention to her is solely due to all the drama surrounding the assassination attempt and restructuring of his administration which have been occupying his mind. Now that things have settled down and an extremely capable minister is in place to ensure the stability of the kingdom and the safety of the king, a visit from his beloved wife could not come at a better time.²³

Nevertheless, gaining an audience with the king is but the first of a number of challenges Esther must overcome. Next, she must try to arrange for a private gathering with the king and Haman where she will reveal her lowly Jewish status to Ahasuerus while proceeding to accuse the king's unsuspecting vizier of planning the annihilation of her people. This, all in the hope that the king will side with her over the man in whom he has essentially entrusted his entire kingdom.

However, once again, Esther has misjudged the king's sentiments. First, she hasn't considered the notion that, perhaps, the Jews are not as looked down upon by the king as she assumes. The fact that Haman neglects to explicitly name the people he plans to do away with when sharing his plan to exterminate the Jews may reflect his awareness that Ahasuerus would not take too kindly to the idea of annihilating his Jewish subjects. What is certain, however, is that Ahasuerus loves his wife, and if it happens to be that the nation identified for destruction is that of her own people and it would hurt her to see harm done to them, he will do what he can to help. As such, her revelation to the king of her Jewish faith will not be of as much consequence as she fears.

The second point brings us back to our discussion of the king's feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. While it is certainly true that Ahasuerus feels more secure having the extremely capable Haman as his lone advisor, he is also fully aware of how ruthless a man the new vizier is. Perhaps, it is precisely this quality in Haman that leads the king to select him for the position in the first place. Nevertheless, the king certainly has an eye on Haman, knowing that Haman's ability makes him equally dangerous as he is valuable. And so, while Esther is in a position where she will ultimately be forced to try to turn the

²² Esther tells Mordecai that all the "servants" of the king and "any man or woman" that appears before the king uninvited does so on pain of death ([4:11](#)). Clearly, she puts herself in the category of "servant" or "man or woman" and as such, assumes no privilege in her position as queen.

²³ Malbim states that the king never had considered Esther to be included in the decree forbidding any of his servants from entering the inner courtyard without being summoned ([5:2](#)). In fact, the text states explicitly that Ahasuerus loved Esther ([2:17](#)). Also, the fact that he hosts a feast in her name ([2:18](#)) further demonstrates his adoration of his new wife.

king against his right-hand man, she does not realize that Ahasuerus is already somewhat wary of his vizier.

By inviting the king and Haman to a private banquet, Esther succeeds in keeping Haman unsuspecting of anything shady in the works. For Haman, his requested attendance at a private dinner with the king and queen is only another boost to his already bursting ego.

Ahasuerus, on the other hand, is quite troubled by Esther's invitation to Haman to join them. He now begins to wonder if there is something going on between the ambitious vizier and the queen (see [Rashi 6:1](#)).

At dinner the next evening, Esther recoils under the pressure of the moment and is forced into the awkward position of asking the king and Haman to reconvene once more the following evening (see Bi'ur Ha-Gra on Esther 5:8). At this point, Ahasuerus is starting to develop a familiar sense of horror as he begins to realize that something is definitely amiss. Could it be that the very two individuals he has hand-selected and in whom he has found such much needed respite and comfort are, in fact, conspiring to depose him?

And so, Ahasuerus departs dinner that night in a state of panic. Unable to settle down to sleep, he calls for one of his servants to read to him from his Book of Chronicles to help ease his mind. It is then that the bravery of Mordecai is recalled and that the king realizes that the man responsible for saving his life has never received his proper due. Superstitiously, he wonders if this latest bit of bad fortune has come as a result of neglecting to reward his protector. And so, he is determined to correct this injustice as soon as possible, before the next dinner date with Esther and Haman.

Meanwhile, Haman departs dinner that night in the highest of spirits. However, his mood quickly sours as he passes Mordecai sitting at the gate of the palace. Upon arriving home, he laments to his family how the mere sight of Mordecai renders worthless all the honor and wealth he has accrued. His wife comes up with a quick solution to put Haman at ease and enable him to fully enjoy his meal the following evening; go to the king immediately and request permission to execute Mordecai at dawn.

Note that as the Amalekite becomes more and more fixated on his mission to destroy Israel, those mundane pursuits that motivate all men in a godless world begin to fall by the wayside. Now, entirely obsessed with Mordecai, those achievements of material wealth and honor become worthless to Haman. Mordecai, for his part, appears almost oblivious to Haman's presence ([5:11-13](#)).²⁴

Now, fully engaged in this spiritual battle, Haman no longer has the wherewithal to wait until lottery day- the date selected by *chance* - for the annihilation of Mordecai and his people. And yet, fate has it that Haman's trip to the palace to request Mordecai's immediate execution happens to come just at the moment that Ahasuerus is contemplating Mordecai's remuneration.

Informed of Haman's presence in the courtyard, the king sees an opportunity. He calls for Haman to be brought before him and slyly requests Haman's sage advice on "what should be done for a man

²⁴ See Bi'ur Ha-Gra on 5:9. Contrast Mordecai's behavior here with his deliberate refusal to bow before Haman back in the 3rd chapter, where it is Haman who is initially oblivious to Mordecai's open defiance.

whom the king would like to honor" ([6:6](#)), suspecting the egocentric vizier will assume that it is *he* whom the king has in mind. And if Ahasuerus' suspicions are accurate, Haman is certain to recommend a most grand tribute. As a result, the king will succeed in finding an appropriate reward for Mordecai while, simultaneously, gaining the pleasure of putting his ego-driven vizier in his place (see Hazony, pp. 109-110).

As Haman's anticipated moment of triumph is turned on its head with his assignment to parade Mordecai through the streets of the capital city, the writing on the wall is clear even to Haman's closest allies:

And his advisors and Zeresh his wife said, "If Mordecai is of Jewish seed, before whom you have begun to fall, you will not overcome him, but you will surely fall before him." ([6:13](#))

And yet, when Esther levels her accusations against Haman at dinner the next evening, the outcome is not quite yet sealed. For, while leery of his vizier, Ahasuerus remains highly dependent on him. And now the king is in a position where he is being forced to choose between the woman he loves and his closest confidante. Without anybody to turn to for guidance, he steps outside to gather his thoughts.

Haman, meanwhile, is in no less a state of shock, as he has just learned that the queen is a member of the very nation he has arranged to destroy. He is certain the king will side with his wife, and so, in an act of desperation, he falls before the reclined queen in a last gasp plea for mercy. Moments later, the king returns only to find Haman in a compromised position with Esther. Alas, his initial suspicions of Haman were right all along! He even has the *hutzpah* to attempt to conquer the queen with the king in the house!

A Synthesis of Divine Providence and Nature

This distinctly naturalistic tone to the storyline is recognized by the rabbis who point out the fact that God's name is conspicuously absent from the narrative. And yet, despite the fact that each twist and turn in the story evolves based on independent choices made by each of the players, it is evident that the trajectory of events from start to finish is being guided from above.²⁵

We pointed out above that the Jews ultimately dictate the spiritual tenor of their environment. However, in doing so they merely determine *how*, not *if*, the divine hand is manifested in the world. By adopting a naturalistic worldview, Israel mandates a natural setting through which God acts. God, in turn, manufactures the natural flow of events so that the Jews are faced with the prospect of destruction at the hands of an Amalekite enemy. This, in turn, stirs in the Jews a spiritual awakening that directs them to victory over Amalek within that very natural setting they created.

At Refidim, as well, the Israelites' naturalistic worldview brings Amalek into the vicinity of the Israelite camp through natural circumstances. Then, jolted from its spiritual slumber by Amalek's brutal assault, Israel overcomes Amalek in a *physical* battle guided by their faith in God (note in the description of the battle in [Exodus 17:11-13](#) that Israel's "faith" directs them to victory over Amalek by the "sword").

²⁵ As stated in [Avot \(3:15\)](#), "All is foreseen (by God), yet freedom of choice is given."

This is not to say, however, that victory is inevitable for the Jews. Once again, each of the players possess perfect freedom in the decisions they exercise. For Esther, this means she genuinely could have chosen *not* to heed Mordecai's instructions to approach the king and plead on behalf of her people. Had she refrained, things would not have turned out so well for Persian Jewry. The only certainties are the survival of God's chosen nation and that there would be future opportunities for the Jews to step up and reclaim their responsibility to humankind. However, the amount of Jewish blood that would have been spilled in the process is uncertain.

With this in mind, one cannot underestimate Esther's courage in choosing faith over the worldview instilled in her from her youth. After all, logic would seem to indicate that, contrary to Mordecai's prediction, she would have likely been spared from Haman's edict due to her position in the palace. But by choosing to approach the throne, she faces the prospect of certain death while the fate of her people still remains unsealed. Indeed, Esther appears perfectly aware of the odds she faces as she prepares herself for the task, instructing Mordecai to have the Jews fast on her behalf, and concluding with a solemn, "and if I die, I die" ([4:16](#)).²⁶

Just as Haman's family members recognize that Haman cannot defeat Mordecai and the Jews in a spiritually heightened atmosphere, so too, for the rest of the Persian population, the anticipation of victory for the Jews' over their enemies is apparent. Only for them, this renewed spiritual awareness is met with relief and joy - "And the city of Shushan rejoiced and was happy" ([8:15](#)).

As for the Jews, they experience an even more emphatic "light and happiness, and joy, and honor."²⁷

Similarly, Israel's weakening of Amalek at Refidim is celebrated by Jethro, who "rejoiced for all the good that YHWH did for Israel..." ([Exodus 18:9](#)). And it is specifically as a result of his newfound awareness of the existence of a higher being and a higher purpose to life that Jethro exults - "Now I know that YHWH is greater than all the Gods..." ([ibid, 11](#)).²⁸

For the Jews of Shushan, their restored spiritual focus is equally evident in the aftermath of the battle where, once again, countering the message that wars are waged as part of man's natural instincts for power and wealth, the victorious Jews leave the spoils from the battle untouched ([Esther 9:10](#)). And make no mistake, this self-imposed restriction is no accident. For we also find, with God's injunction to King Saul in the Book of Samuel to destroy Amalek, His firm instructions that the Israelites refrain from partaking of the spoils ([I Samuel 15:3](#)). And when Saul fails to heed God's command, thus, diminishing the conflict with Amalek into a mundane battle for wealth and territory, the punishment is severe ([ibid, 15:26](#)).

Conclusion

The Book of Esther, unlike any other in the Hebrew Bible, illustrates the synchronic relationship between freedom of choice and divine sovereignty, and at the most important juncture in human history. For the Book of Esther marks the closing of the biblical canon and, as such, provides the perfect segue from a world of miracles and prophecy to the post-biblical, organic world of today.

Indeed, the same challenges faced by Persian Jewry, of trying to find God in a world so entirely beholden to the dictates of natural law, are what impede the faith of so many in the world today. And yet the *megillah* offers a striking response to this dilemma; that God and nature are never in conflict but, rather, work in perfect harmony, that man acts in perfect freedom and yet the outcome of those independent decisions ultimately reveals the presence of higher being that orchestrates the unfolding of events from above.

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²⁶ Here, we get a vivid picture of the struggle involved in being a person of faith while living in a world bound by natural law.

²⁷ I would suggest that the "light" experienced by the Jews reflects their restored function as a spiritual light for the nations. The *simhah*, according to Bi'ur Ha-Gra (9:16), is the exultation that is felt in anticipation of victory in battle, while *sason* is the joy experienced upon successfully acquiring that which is sought after (*ibid*). In other words, the Jews not only anticipated victory, but experienced the unbounded joy that comes with actually having achieved victory. Finally, *viykar* is the value that comes with performing according to one's intended function. In this case, that function is to demonstrate to the nations God's presence in this world.

²⁸ See [Rashi on 18:1](#) where he states that Jethro is inspired both by Israel's miraculous defeat of the Egyptians and by Israel's victory in battle against Amalek.

