



Postmodern Politics: Between Purim and Pesah

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The 13th of Nisan, not the 13th of Adar, is the date that holds the key to understanding the *Megillah*. On the 13th of Nisan, Haman chose and announced the 13th of Adar as the date to exterminate the Jews of the Persian empire. The contrast with the Torah's first 13th of Nisan, in the year of the Exodus, could not be sharper or more bitter. That year, the 13th of Nisan brought the Israelites one day closer to the inevitable and overwhelming redemption God had been fashioning, that took place the very next day, on the 14th. In the *Megillah*, the Jews instead learn of their imminent destruction, to occur on a date chosen by chance, not God.

Rashi highlights the irony of this timing. In the next chapter of the *Megillah*, Esther ordains three days of fasting, which Rashi determines occurred on the 14th, 15th, and 16th of Nisan—the days of Pesah and the nights of the Seder. According to Exodus, these days are to be “perpetual observance” of sacrifice and feasting commemorating God's mighty redemptions past. Instead, Shushan's Jews fast in desperation, hoping to avert imminent death.

The alignment of these dates highlights one of the most remarkable aspects of the *Megillah*: it is, time and again, the opposite of Pesah. The Pesah story moves from its origins Egypt, culminating in the land of Israel; Purim's story is static, ending in Shushan where it begins.

In the Pesah story, God's mighty miracles are responsible for Israel's salvation; in the *Megillah* it is a combination of human political skill and something very close to luck.

Literarily, the victory of Pesah was assured at the outset, promised as it was to Avraham all the way back in Genesis. But at no point in the *Megillah* is the salvation of the Jews foretold; we don't know until the very end whether we're reading a second Exodus or a second Jeremiah, his book describing the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. And it is possible that the outcome is unknown, and even unknowable, before the events themselves. This uncertainty cuts deep, suggesting a future that is uncertain and precarious.

One of the subtlest and deepest oppositions between the *Megillah* and the Pesah story is in the *Megillah*'s final narrative moment: Ahashverosh's raising of taxes (10:1). This detail is hard to parse other than as a contrast to the conclusion of the Exodus. As the Israelites stand on the far side of the sea, Egypt's crops have been destroyed by hail and locusts (there is nothing left to tax) and its army has been crushed by the sea (there is no one to collect a tax). In contrast, the *Megillah* closes with a strengthened Persian state, one with wealth and the means to extract it.

The implication is clear and unnerving. The threat of Egyptian slavery was definitively ended with the decimation of Pharaoh's forces. But, as we learn through nine chapters of the *Megillah*, there are no real checks on the power of the Persian government. The stronger it becomes, the more formidable a threat it represents to its Jewish residents when (not if) Esther and Mordechai leave power.

All of this culminates in one of the most politically important moments in the Jewish tradition. The *Megillah* describes Mordechai at the apex of his political career as "popular with the multitude of his brethren" (10:3, NJPS). How could he not be? But read hyper-literally the phrase is "popular with most of his brethren." Rashi takes this opening and comments:

Most of his brethren—but not all of his brethren. This teaches that some members of the rabbinic court opposed Mordechai because he abandoned Torah study for politics.

Beyond offering a learned backstory for Mordechai, Rashi reveals an irreducible uncertainty that arises at the *Megillah*'s beginning and remains just as vexed at its conclusion. Two scenes are implied. The first is early on, with the Jewish community confronting an impending crisis. Without God's narration or intervention, diverse responses recommend themselves. Mordechai chooses one, seeing the moment's urgency as requiring him to divert his energies away from the sacred precincts of the *beit midrash* into the public sphere. His colleagues see the same crisis, and see it as a call to redoubled devotion to the piety of Torah and *tefillah* that carries with it the promise of salvation. Perhaps they observed the Pesah Seder that year in Shushan instead of fasting, convinced that devotion is all the more needed in crisis.

Mordechai's entrance into politics is the less fraught of the two scenes. Rashi suggests that the rift that opened with the onset of the crisis is not healed by that crisis' resolution. The members of the rabbinic court aren't arguing with Mordechai's success—they're arguing over whether the success was his or theirs. Mordechai can point to his resourceful and courageous efforts as the cause of the Jews' salvation, but his former colleagues on the rabbinic court can equally credit their own prayer and study as responsible for the providential "coincidences" of the *Megillah*: Who, after all, was responsible for Ahashverosh's insomnia, or for the reading of Mordechai's section of the court history on that fateful night, if not God? Sharing the same set of facts, Mordechai and his former colleagues are divided by irreconcilable interpretations, with no Divine revelation to decide between them.

In this sense the *Megillah* inaugurates our political reality. Its world is ours, a world in which uncertainty is not confined to the future, but fills the past as well, giving rise to irreconcilable worldviews. In one view—perhaps Mordechai's—Pesah is irrevocably past, its miracles no longer reliable or certain. But in another—that of his rabbinic colleagues—Pesah's saving

power endures, not just as possibility but as reality. A modernist narrative would have Purim supersede Pesah, inaugurating a disenchanted, uncertain world. But the *Megillah*, on Rashi's telling, is not modern but postmodern. The world can for the first time be interpreted as contingent and secularized, but this interpretation is not—and can never be—conclusive. It will always be challenged by those who succeed in interpreting the present as a faithful, though subtler, fulfillment of the promises of the Exodus. By beginning the year with Pesah and ending with Purim, we don't move in a linear way from providence to chance, but from certainty to possibility, from one interpretation to many. And in this way, Purim ushers in the world we recognize, one imbued with equal measures of promise and precarity.