

# **PURIM – CRAZY JEWS, CRAZY WORLD**

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## Introduction

Purim is in many ways the strangest of all the Hagim. For one thing: how can we explain the fact that the seemingly secular Purim story, as told in the Scroll of Esther, has elicited such extraordinary praise from the Sages of the Talmudic period and those who followed them? After all, alone of all the biblical books, the Megillah seemingly omits the mention of God in its text. Nevertheless, we hear for example, the following comment from Maimonides who follows the Jerusalem Talmud in Tractate Megillah.

*All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, apart from Megillat Esther. It will continue to be binding like the Five Books of Moses and the entire Oral Law which will never be invalidated. Even though all memory of our suffering will be erased...still the days of Purim will not be annulled.*

Rambam: M. Torah: Hilchot Megilla 2:18

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר הרי היא קיימת כחמשה חומשי תורה וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן בטלין לעולם, ואע"פ שכל זכרון הצרות יבטל שנאמר "כי נשכחו הצרות הראשונות וכי נסתרו מעיני" (ישעיהו ס"ה), ימי הפורים לא יבטלו שנאמר "וימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם" (אסתר ט).  
רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה פרק ב הלכה יח

And another thing: as if the theological vacuum in the text is not enough, the way that the holiday is celebrated also raises significant questions. At face value it is merely an example of simple popular rejoicing in a carnival like atmosphere where people are invited to let their hair down, leave the daily road of routine and celebrate wildly. As such, it seems an unlikely address to look for issues of deep significance. Even more surprising the usual sobriety of Jewish festivity is replaced with a rabbinic commandment calling for the total disappearance of that sobriety – even to the point of extreme drunkenness.

These two strange facts of rabbinic culture – the reverence for a book with a theological vacuum at its heart and the obligation to get so drunk as to lose the ability to make distinctions between good and evil – force us to look for hidden messages in the Rabbis' understanding of Purim. How can we explain the fact that this holiday is so unlike any of the other holidays? How can we explain the fact that the typical seriousness and restraint that tends to characterise the Jewish holidays, here completely disappears? Perhaps the only possible explanation is that we must suppose that, like the midrashic understanding

of the name of Esther – *hester*, hidden – there are some curious depths to the Holiday and its central text, that need to be examined carefully.

Perhaps a particular perspective on the question of Chagim in general can aid us here. The great modern Jewish thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught that the Jewish holidays and their texts and ceremonies come to answer some very big questions of crucial importance to us as humans and as Jews. However he believed that one of the problems that modern Jews have in dealing with holidays is that the questions themselves have been largely lost. This can lead to mindless and routine observance, based on a mere commemoration of historical facts, without an attempt to penetrate to the depths of what a specific holiday is actually asking. We will attempt to penetrate beneath the surface of Purim, its central text, the Megillah, and its strange customs and celebration, in order to get to some of the themes which seem to lie hidden at the centre.

## **The Educational Approach of t Study Guide**

The questions we ask and the issues that we raise in this booklet are generally of two kinds. There are **existential** questions that relate to the way that each of us sees the world. They are meant to help challenge – and ultimately shape – the way that the students understand the world around them. Then there are what might be termed **intellectual** questions, intriguing puzzles about the Jewish world of observance they may have taken for granted as a legacy from elementary school but have not reconsidered on the high school level. We believe both of these kinds of questions can be of interest and significance to these students as we try to show the students some of the fascination in an in-depth study of the holiday, its texts and its traditions. In each section of the booklet, the two sets of questions are mixed, so that at any one time, the mind of the student will be challenged in more than one way.

We attempt to penetrate underneath the surface of the text, to take the students to places where more conventional treatments of the holiday do not necessarily take them. The questions we ask are open ended. Ultimately, in all cases, whatever ideas we suggest, it is clear that the answers have to be given by the students themselves in order for the search for meaning to be authentic. We believe that the students must always be respected as they struggle to make up their mind as to how they see the world around them, as young people, as Jews and as human beings. Our task is to challenge them, to suggest ideas that we think need to be considered and to invite them into the world that we are presenting. Their task is to “take the baton and run”, to confront the questions and to try and decide where they stand within the great Jewish conversation into which we are inviting them.

We have divided the study guide up into three major sections.

Part one deals with the question of who or what, rules the world in which we live. What is behind the world? Is there objective meaning in our existence in the world? Are we part of some larger plan? Is this a random world, or a world directed by an “unseen hand”? We turn to the Megillah to see what it has to offer us on these issues.

Part two deals with the strange world of the Purim custom. How can we understand the strange atmosphere and rites that Purim has developed over the ages? How can we understand the command to get drunk at Purim? How do we understand the dressing up and the masks, the lack of seriousness in the whole anarchic world of Purim celebration? Is there a larger meaning underneath the surface of the traditions? What can we learn about the world in which we live and about the way that Judaism deals with that world, through an examination of Purim?

Part three deals with ethical dilemmas posed to people seeking to survive in vulnerable situations of dependence in our difficult and often violent world. The first set of questions relate to the figure of Esther. What strategies did Esther, an essentially powerless woman in a man's world, employ in order to survive and ultimately "conquer" in that world? How did she transform herself in so doing? The second set of questions relates to the situation of diaspora Jewry, also an essentially powerless group, throughout Jewish history including today. What can we learn about survival strategies of the Jews as a minority, especially in the diaspora, from our reading of the Megillah? Are there moral and historical lessons that the Megillah teaches us? What kind of character traits must we develop to live in this world of uncertainty?

In addition, we bring an appendix at the end, which focuses once again, on issues of diaspora survival and Jewish political power, through the art of the extraordinary Polish-American-Jewish artist, Arthur Szyk. Szyk's art raises certain questions that allow us to amplify the insights already contained from the third part of the booklet and to see them, literally, in another way, through the medium of art.

These, then, are the issues that we have chosen to focus on in this booklet.

It is important to emphasise that this booklet is modular in its approach. That is to say that you can find your way into it through any of the three (or four) subjects. Our assumption is that this is a booklet that invites a multi-year approach with one of the subjects being examined every year. We have made no attempt to be exhaustive but have restricted ourselves to a number of the central issues that we think ought to be examined at one point or another in the student's career in school.

Our first suggestion to you as teachers is to read through the booklet briefly and to decide which of the themes you are going to deal with. Then you should go back and read the particular section in detail. The introduction to each section, together with the introduction to the separate exercises, is there to indicate the questions that each part will deal with. Each section is divided into a number of different exercises - some six to eight in each of the three parts.

The exercises, on the whole build on each other. This does not mean that you need to do each exercise, but it does mean that we recommend that the exercises are dealt with in the general sequence that we have suggested. The exercises are usually long. We have deliberately built most exercises in a long series of connected steps. You must make each

of these exercises your own. Some exercises you might want to stretch out over a number of different lessons. Others you might want to compress into one session.

This, of course, is up to you. There are different ways of doing this. Each long exercise can be compressed. You might decide to take three of the offered exercises, to use one in full and to compress the other two. You know your class, you know the objective circumstances (how many lessons you can give, how long each lesson is and what is the physical space that you have at your disposal), and you also know your own skills, and what type of exercises you feel most comfortable with. In relation to some exercises you might like the theme but not the method, or you might wish to bring alternative supplementary texts and to introduce the ideas to your students in a different way. All of this, needless to say, is not only legitimate, it is necessary in order that the subject should be truly your own. Sometimes we ourselves give alternative exercises where it seems to us that you can raise the same questions and issues in more than one way.

We have brought a number of articles after each section. These articles relate directly to issues that are brought up in the body of the text. Sometimes the analysis that is offered by a particular article is necessary for a specific exercise. We will always mention this in our exercise. In other places we merely mention a specific article as something which might be helpful in order to help you, the teacher, to examine a particular theme in greater depth.

We add in at the end of the booklet, a number of pages that have been prepared for the direct use of the students. These relate to some of the exercises. You should always examine these pages and see where they are similar to and where they differ from the way that the subject is brought for the teacher in the main part of the booklet.

We hope that all of this is clear and will help you in your work with the booklet.

בהצלחה!

## **Part One: Who Controls Our Fate, What Controls Our World?**

**Introduction: Five Models - What Makes the World Go Round?**

**Exercise: אַנִּי נִתְּנָה לַיְהוָה**

**Text – *Unetaneh Tokef***

**Exercise: Understanding Society:**

**Part A: In the World of Shushan**

**Text – Esther 1-2**

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**Option One: Is Ahashverosh The Boss?**

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**Is There A Divine Director Behind The Scenes?**

**Texts – Yoel Bin Nun and Michael Fox**

**Exercise: Esther And Mordechai: Talking From Faith?**

**Text – Esther 4**

**Exercise: The Complexities Of Faith: Living With Uncertainty**

**Text – Rav J.B. Soloveitchik**

**Exercise: And If The Story Is Not True...?**

**Appendix: Exercise: The Personality of Ahashverosh**

**Texts – Midrashim (TB Megillah 15b);**

**Chaya Ben Natan and Zvi Zinger**

**Appendix: Articles by Michael Fox, Robert Gordis, and Irving Greenberg**

# Part One: Who Controls Our Fate, What Controls Our World?

## Introduction

The Megillah, as we have mentioned, is a strange anomaly among the books of the Tanakh. It is a seemingly secular work which purports to tell a particular historical story concerning the Jews in one specific part of the world. It does not mention God directly and it is difficult at first glance to see why it has been seen as having so central a place in the canon. In this first part of the booklet, we will try and penetrate below the surface to uncover some subtleties that might help us understand the reverential place that the book occupies in the Tanakh and in Rabbinic tradition.

The major theme that we will examine here concerns perhaps the deepest question that humans in all cultures and religions have attempted to answer: who controls our fate? Are there forces that guide the world in which we live? We will present five possible models and in certain ways the Megillah suggests them all.

## Five Models: What Makes The World Go Round?

1. Traditional Judaism suggests, through its monotheistic framework, one answer to the question. Its idea of God's supervision of a divinely created world provides a seemingly comprehensive answer to the question. According to this model, which might be called the "Rosh HaShanah model", the world runs on a moral axis according to the acts of the individuals inside the world. **Reward and punishment** are meted out according to the acts of the individual or according to the acts of the society. The world runs according to justice. People get what they deserve. In such a society the individual must learn God's will and try and behave accordingly. The character traits encouraged are moral responsibility, weighing our moral decisions seriously and faith that goodness will triumph. This idea of ethical reward and punishment is almost absent from the Purim Megillah – at least on the face of things – though, as we shall see, many traditional commentators strive to expose its hidden workings within the plot of the Megillah.

2. On the face of things, the world described in the Megillah seems more to represent a second model. It is a world of unpredictable twists and turns where the forces that control the fates of the various characters seem to be connected to coincidence and chance more than to anything else. Randomness rather than plan and reason seem to be the dominant factors in deciding the course of events here. People's fates are decided on a whim, according to the moods of those who exercise power and the chance advice that they happen to be given. The very name of "Purim," "lots", emphasises this. It is like calling a holiday "dice". There is little that any individual can do in such a **random** world. All one can do is hope for the best. The character traits encouraged are passivity and acceptance of fate.

3. A third model is based on the idea that things are **predestined** to a large extent and that it is possible to divine the nature of this predestination through an examination of signs and portents. This is the world of astrology and signs. You cannot control fate but you can work according to its dictates and understand the way to behave by penetrating into the secrets of the universe. We see this well in the Megillah. The king, the source of all power in the Persia of the story, makes his first decision, pertaining to the fate of Vashti, by turning to his advisors, יוֹדְעֵי הַעֲתִיּוֹת, a reference to councilors learned in the arts of astrology, and requesting their advice. Haman, in order to find the most auspicious date for disposing of the Jews, casts lots, seemingly in the form of stones, to reveal the predestined nature of each month and day and to decide on the most auspicious day for killing the Jews. Astrological lore was a central feature of Babylon and Persia in this period as of many other cultures of the time. Many people would be aided in even the smallest of decisions by reference to astrologers and their practices. The character traits encouraged are a certain resignation based on the acknowledgement of the limits of human control as well as a cautious pursuit of the secret knowledge of what is predestined.

4. Let us bring in a fourth possible source of authority: ordered decision-making, **law and tradition** - in other words, human action on the part of those who exercise power. Ahashverosh is an example of a ruler, who would be seen as the clear and central decision-maker in the Persia of this period. In such an absolutist society, where by tradition and customary law, the king has power over life and death, there would be a tradition of rule that had developed over the generations, in which certain codes of behaviour would be seen as central in determining personal fate. We hear for example that when the king turns to his wise men and asks for advice, (1:15), he phrases his request in terms of the customary law of the kingdom – כִּדְתַתּוּן לְעִשׂוֹת. We also hear that no person can go to the king without being summoned (4:11) and that a law cannot be rescinded (8:8). We hear of laws being proclaimed and sent out across the empire. These details point to an ordered life based on traditional law and royal authority. In this world, an individual who obeys the laws of the land, carrying out his civil obligations, expects to do well. The character traits encouraged are obedience to authority and deference to tradition.

5. There exists a fifth option, that power is wielded in the world according to the **machinations of individuals** who try to manipulate things all the time to their advantage. This is a world of “dog eat dog” where the winner is the person who uses everything that can be used in order that he (or she) controls the situation. It is at one and the same time, a Machiavellian and a Hobbesian world. It is not a world of morality but rather a world where people can try and bend others to their will both by persuasion and by force in order to gain advantage over those others. The character traits encouraged are the taking of initiative, ambition, vigilance and suspicion, long-term planning, opportunism, the accumulation of power and a ruthless persistence that recognizes that ends justify the means. Mastering these amoral means may be the only way to survive. Much of Haman’s activity clearly represents this line of thought.



We have thus at least five different ways of understanding the world of the Megillah and thus, by extension, our world. On the face of things, a simple reading of the text would suggest that the least likely of all of these in the mind of the author is the “Rosh Hashanah model”. All the others are clearly mentioned, and as we have already observed, the name of God and clear reference to a traditional Jewish faith and observance (kashrut, Shabbat, Pesach, prayer) structure are missing. A surface reading would suggest that the author believes in a world governed by one of the other four sets of “rules” or worldviews.

Let us now start to present the underlying issues to the students. Our intention here is to help the students examine this question reflectively, to use the Megillah as a tool to help them address the issue of which ethical and philosophical-theological reality, if any, lies behind the world in which they live. In so doing, we will soon proceed into the text to try and further examine the author’s outlook on this question.

### **EXERCISE: אֲנִי נֹאמֵר - I Believe**

The aim of this exercise is to start encouraging the students to define and express how they understand the world in which they live, in terms of the forces that move the world. Its Hebrew title is borrowed from Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith and that provides a model for this attempt to clarify our Jewish beliefs.

### **Posing the Problem**

We suggest two possible openings to this exercise:

- In the first opening, take the section of judgement from the **נִתְּנָה תּוֹקֵף** prayer from the liturgy of the **יְמֵימוֹ נִוְרָאִים** and ask them to identify the human issue at the core of the prayer (what will happen to me in the next year- will I rise or fall? Live or die?). Then notice that our “fate” is presented as “sentence,” a judgment issued by the heavenly court based on our moral behavior as individuals. Finally, this famous medieval poem offers us an “out,” a way to change our sentence through prayer, repentance and Tzedakah. In short, we have the **Rosh Hashanah Model**.
- Alternately, ask a few people in the class to describe **road accidents** that they have witnessed. Who or what was responsible for the outcome of the accident? Was it the driver? A pedestrian? Was it a technical problem, in which case the car (or its manufacturers or those who serviced it) are to blame? Was it perhaps the road surface? Or the weather? Or a stray animal? Were the traffic lights not working? Was it the result of a faulty or inadequate traffic law? Or poor driver education? Or perhaps none of these things? Is it possible that there are accidents where no-one is at fault? Then why do they happen? Is it fate? Is it divinely ordained? Or is it a natural result of a random universe where it is often senseless to look for reason?

## Developing A Worldview: What Makes The World Go Round?

- Following the opener, divide the students into five groups and sit the groups in different areas of the room. The first task for each group is to come up with the most persuasive set of arguments for what if anything governs our fate as human beings in our world as we experience it. The second task is to suggest a place where this particular way of seeing the world is expressed in the Megillah.
- A - Group one will present the view that there is a benevolent and just God behind the universe. This God made the world and continues to watch over it. The best thing that humans can do is to try and understand what God's moral expectations of us are and to live our lives according with that understanding. God will reward us or punish us according to our actions. They must give one example from their experience and one from the Megillah that best exemplify this way of explaining the world.
- B - Group two will present the group that our fate is governed by chance, luck and coincidence more than by anything else. It is possible to try and plan our lives but ultimately there is very little that we can do to gain control over our own future. Disease, violence and just **plain luck** (Mazal), bad or good, are more likely to affect our lives than anything else. They must give one example from their experience and one from the Megillah that best exemplify this way of explaining the world.
- C - Group three will present the view that **rational human planning** is the major force that affects our lives. Human beings must not be fatalistic and believe that they can do little or nothing to affect their fate. Humans have a very good chance of controlling the course of their lives by using human reason and attempting to build a society, in accordance with reason and logic, that will enable them as individuals and society as a whole, to plan a future and to get to that future. They must give one example from their experience and one from the Megillah that best exemplify this way of explaining the world.
- D - Group four will present the view that there are **astrological forces** that govern our fate. If the stars are against us, it is futile to try and "tempt fate". There are forces that govern the broad patterns of human life and we must try and understand these forces and uncover the patterns in the universe in order to plan our lives as well as possible, so as to maximise the potential of our lives. They must give one example from their experience and one from the Megillah that best exemplify this way of explaining the world.
- E - Group five will present the view that what governs our fate is the **machinations and manipulations of others**. We are all victims of a cynical world in which "dog eats dog" and the only way to survive is to outwit one's fellows. Anyone who does not

try to manipulate the situation to his or her advantage is a sucker, who deserves everything that he or she receives. The way forward in this world is to plan and manipulate better than the next person. Morality – secular or religious - has no place in human behaviour. It is, at best, a human invention that was intended to give the advantage to those in power, the moralists and religious leaders of the society. That was *their* way of manipulating things! They must give one example from their experience and one from the Megillah that best exemplify this way of explaining the world.

## Group Process and Presentation

- Each group has a few minutes to prepare the best set of arguments they can think of to persuade the members of the class that their group’s point of view is the most valid of all the viewpoints presented. Out of those arguments they should prepare a five-minute presentation which should also suggest where their approach expresses itself in the Megillah, and who, if anyone, in the story represents this point of view through their actions. They should explain the most successful way that persons can conduct themselves in such a universe. They should then choose one or two representatives to put forward their position.
- Each representative or representatives gets on a chair in turn and from different points in the room, puts over their position in the most persuasive – and serious – way. The participants from the other four groups are allowed to ask questions and to push the proponents of each position to explain and to defend their viewpoint, but this questioning should not be aggressive and it must remain respectful.

## Mapping the Positions

- We suggest that while this is going on, you, the teacher, draw up a table – perhaps on the board - based on the things that are being said. The table should include:
  1. The particular approach to the functioning of the world.
  2. The “correct” or appropriate human response to this world view.
  3. Examples from the Megillah.
- At the end of this process, each student should sit down and assess where they stand as an individual with respect to the five sets of arguments that have been put forward. They should attempt to map their positions according to the following table. They should map themselves out on all the axes. Minus ten means that they very much disagree with a position. Plus ten means that they very much agree with a position. They are allowed seeming contradictions.

-10

POSITION ONE: A JUST GOD

+10

-10	POSITION TWO: CHANCE	+10
-10	POSITION THREE: HUMAN REASON	+10
-10	POSITION FOUR: ASTROLOGY	+10
-10	POSITION FIVE: HUMAN MANIPULATION	+10

### **My Own Personal Belief Statement**

- The next stage is to take their map, which represents their general outlook on the question of what or who controls our fate and to explain their position in a “**statement of belief**”. How do they believe the world really works? Is it a random world in which we have no control over our fate? Is it a world in which there is some kind of objective “behind the scenes” meaning? If so, what *does* lie behind the scenes? Is it a world in which there is no objective meaning? When they have answered these questions and produced their own “statement of belief”, let them add a post-script. Given their own personal belief statement, what do they think is the best way to live their life in such a world? What is their recipe for their own human life?
- Finally, whoever is willing should present his or her personal position. This may be done in very small groups or, where the atmosphere is supportive, with the whole class. The rest of the class must listen carefully and respectfully and can ask questions in order to elicit more information on the speaker’s particular position. It is important to make clear to the students that this is a difficult and very personal exercise and each person must be made to feel that they are entitled to their own position, which the rest of the class will respect. In addition, they should know that it is absolutely legitimate to answer questions with an “I don’t know”. Positions are allowed to be internally inconsistent: seeming inconsistencies can be pointed out but no-one should be pushed into an either-or position if the group does uncover seeming inconsistencies.

Now that the students have started to define their own positions on the issue of what sort of a world we live in and what if anything lies behind the world, it is time to go over to the world of the Megillah to see how that world is presented.

## **EXERCISE: Understanding Society: Part A: In the World of Shushan.**

The aim of this exercise is to investigate by a closer text reading the world of Shushan (part A) and to compare it to familiar situations in the world of the students (part B).

We need to “visit” Shushan and the suggestion is to enter this world through a journalistic exercise which treats the whole class as a group of reporters sent to the Persia of Ahashverosh, 2500 years ago.

### **Pre-Reading Esther 1-2**

- The text for this exercise will be the first two chapters of the Megillah which will supply enough material for our investigation. The class should read the text of these two chapters at home before beginning the exercise. It is suggested that you, the teacher, should play the role of the chief editor of a major national paper that has heard of strange goings-on in the capital of the Persian Empire. The paper has decided to publish a whole supplement about the occurrences.

### **Preparing Tasks To Be Assigned**

- In advance of the class, prepare a list of tasks: here are some possible examples. (You absolutely do not have to use all of these. This is a maximalist suggestion that will allow different roles for all of the members of the class).
- The diplomatic correspondent is asked to give an overall view of the empire and the function of the opening banquet in the empire.
- The entertainment correspondent is asked to give an assessment of the banquet.
- The political correspondent is asked to give an overview of the machinery of government including an analysis of the decision making process.
- The correspondent for women’s affairs is asked to review “the Vashti file”.
- Another political correspondent is asked to comment on the same case.
- A correspondent for Jewish affairs is sent to speak to Mordechai and Esther prior to her entry into the palace.
- A special correspondent is asked to cover the story of the search for a new queen.

- A features reporter is asked to bring an inside report of the preparations inside the harem as the young women prepare for the final choice.
- A features reporter is asked to cover the royal wedding.
- A special investigative crime or diplomatic reporter is sent to examine the strange story of the plot against the king by Bigtan and Teresh.
- Special reporters are dispatched to bring back reports and assessments on the character of Ahashverosh and his rule. They should arrange to interview characters who can shed light on the man and his rule: these can include Memucan, Hegai, Vashti, Bigtan(a) and Teresh, guests from the banquet and anyone else who might be in a position to shed light on the question. These can include ordinary “Shushanites”.
- Top journalists should be sent to bring an interview with Ahashverosh himself. The interview should revolve around his perspective regarding his rule. Does he feel in control or does he feel that he, too, is controlled? Does he feel secure in his rule? In his world? Does he feel that there is order and purpose in the world, outside of what he, himself, and his administration provide?

### **The Journalist’s Assignment: Preparing the Paper**

- Divide the students into pairs or **small groups** and give each an assignment to return with an article. If there are students who are better at artwork than at writing, perhaps give them the task of illustrating some of the episodes in the Megillah. In addition, we suggest that you keep back a couple of students to be responsible for the lay-out of the newspaper.
- When the teams bring their work back they must present them to you as **editor** (or good and capable students whom you have chosen to substitute for you). The articles must be scrutinised and critiqued. Where necessary, they should be sent back for changes or revisions. When they are deemed ready, they can be given to the people responsible for lay-out. There must of course be a deadline for the material to be returned. When all the material is ready and the paper is ready to “go to press”, gather the class around and ask them to present or read their findings and stories.
- After this, gather the **whole class** together to prepare ideas for **the editorial** piece which will be on the subject of life in the court of Ahashverosh. What is it like to be there? Is it a royal court in which life is based on law and justice? Are people happy there? Do they feel safe and secure? Is there a good chance of people’s fate changing suddenly? Compile a list of recommendations to an aspiring courtier who wants to “make it” at the court of the king. What would be a good strategy of survival at a court like this? What advice would the group give them.

- Explain that you are looking for a **long-term correspondent** to go out and cover the court. The person will have to take their family and live in Shushan for a good few years, educating their children in the Shushan school system etc. How many of the group would like to apply for the post? Why? Why not? What is the attraction of living in a society like that? What are the things that might worry prospective residents?

### **Summing Up The Shushan World Using The Group's Comments**

- Remind the students of the five approaches from the last class. Ask the students which of the five approaches seems most in evidence in the Shushan of the Megillah.

We would suggest that, to an extent, all five models can be detected in the text. There are clearly people who believe in the astrological model and possibly Mordechai and Esther represent some kind of God-belief model. There is also a framework of traditional law and custom underneath the surface of the society. Yet our *prima facie* impression is that the society of Shushan as pictured in the Megillah largely as an arbitrary world, where decisions are often taken on a whim, despite the fact that in some cases, these are life and death issues – even for a whole people. Moreover, it is a random world, where power is sought by a mixture of scheming and sycophantic behaviour towards the ruler who is seen as the source of all authority. Climbing up the social ladder is the name of the game for many. Sheer survival in this unpredictable world must be the sole aim of others. Thus we suggest that the dominant picture presented in the Megillah is a mixture of an arbitrary and a grasping, immoral society.

## **EXERCISE: Understanding Society: Part B: Our Parallel World?**

We have started to examine the world of the Megillah according to the five models. Let us now examine our own societies and see if we recognise in them the world of Shushan. Now we who pretended to be journalists turn to the newspapers of our age to see what picture they present. What is similar and what is different beyond the fact that Shushan was an imperial capital and we live in a formally democratic regime?

### **Preparation At Home**

- In preparation for this exercise, ask each student to bring a newspaper from home (it does not matter from which day!)

### **Groups Explore the Newspapers**

- Together with the students, list on the board the various characteristics that were seen to be dominant in the world of Shushan.
- Give students some time to go through the newspaper and to bring examples of as many of the Shushanite characteristics as they can that appear in the newspaper. Are there many? Or only a few?

### **Class Discussion**

- In which ways does the society that we live in resemble Shushan ? In which ways does it not? Let us ask the same questions that we asked about Shushan? What is it like to live in this society? Is it a society in which life is based on law and justice? Are people happy there? Do they feel safe and secure? Is there a good chance of people's fate changing suddenly? What would be a good strategy of survival in a society like this?
- Raise the question of the society of the school. Here there are really two societies, the world of the official school and the informal world of the students at the school. Are there any Shushanite characteristics in either part of the school?

### **Summing Up**

- We might conclude that there are indeed aspects of the world of Shushan that can be found in every human society, even those that are seen as much less arbitrary than the society depicted in the Megillah. Law, order, organisation, the idea of individual rights and a faith in an ethical order backed by God – all these can be a barrier of sorts against the “Shushanisation” of society, but nevertheless, in certain ways, Shushan is everywhere. Therefore Purim raises perennial human questions that lead us from how the world works to what kind of faith can we develop and what kind of code of behavior should be expected of us.



## **EXERCISE: Who Is Calling The Shots In Shushan?**

### **Option One: Is Ahashverosh The Boss?**

The aim of this exercise is to continue to examine the text of the Megillah and to start ascertaining the author's perspective regarding the real forces at work in the world of Ahashverosh's Shushan.

#### **Posing the Problem**

In the previous exercises we started to take note of the seemingly random nature of politics in Shushan and then we suggested that Shushan should not be seen merely as a specific time and place but rather as a metaphor for many of the frameworks and societies in which we, as human beings, live. We now return to Shushan to ask the question: **Who, if anyone, is actually in control?**

Having previously studied more closely Megillat Esther 1-2 in order to identify the way Shushan functions, we now turn our focus to the later chapters of Megillat Esther to see whether Ahashverosh the king who is cited over 150 times is actually in charge. Then we will compare the opinions of two contemporary theologians who reflect on the hidden God's role in the Megillah.

**One may examine Ahashverosh in two ways. For those interested in a closer look at commentaries traditional and modern on the king see the appendix at the end of this section entitled, "The Personality of Ahashverosh". For those interested in a global view of the king and his role in the rise and fall of the many people about him, you may try this exercise. After understanding the king's explicit role we can look at God's implicit role.**

#### **Picking a Character and Following His or Her Career**

- Before moving to the text, do a brief introduction asking the class to think who rises or falls in the course of the Book of Esther. Let them suggest a character from the Megillah and ask them what happens to that character in the course of the story: what is the fate of that character in the story? Do they rise, fall or stay in the same place?
- List the characters on the board and next to each character draw an arrow representing their rise or fall in the story. N.B. There might be characters who do both in the course of the story (Haman?), and there might be characters (Ahashverosh?) who have not really moved up or down. After each arrow, in the case of a person who has moved up or down, try and make a list of all the factors that led to that change in position. In conclusion, note that it is largely a story of people whose position changes drastically during the course of the narrative.

## Group Assignments

- Divide the class into pairs or **small groups**. Let each group take one chapter from chapter three to chapter eight of the Megillah (those chapters that we have not yet encountered in which the movement up and down essentially takes place) and list any movement, up or down, of the characters that appear in that chapter. List in detail what caused the particular movement of the characters in question.
- Make a **list of all the factors** that the whole class found that led to the rise or fall (i.e. the change of fortune) of the group of characters portrayed in the story. Ask the class what conclusions they draw from the list of factors regarding the question of who is governing in the world of the story. Who or what is responsible for the changes in people's fortunes? To what extent is it Ahashverosh? He is clearly the central character in government and on the face of things it is clear that this mighty Emperor is in charge of life in Shushan-world. But does a close look really bear this out? Ahashverosh often seems to be a victim of events, or of coincidence. Note that he often seems to be almost passive, reacting to the advice that he is given rather than initiating action. Even when he takes the initiative and asks a question to initiate action as in his question to his advisors regarding Vashti, he asks for the law and gets a completely different answer from Memucan, which has no connection to the law. Nevertheless he accepts the advice, and forgets that his question was a very different one!

## Summing Up

- Suggest to the group that despite the fact that an enormous amount of things - and significant things at that - clearly happen in the course of the Megillah, it does not seem as if Ahashverosh is really the one who directly causes things to happen. If Ahashverosh is not in control of events, then it leaves the question open:- who or what is? Is anyone or anything directing the story or is the whole development just a question of a series of interlocking random events and co-incidences? This is the question that will be taken up in the next exercise.

## **EXERCISE: Who Is Calling The Shots In Shushan?**

### **Option Two: Is There A Divine Director Behind The Scenes?**

The aim of this exercise is to enter a little deeper into the question of theological ideas in the text of the Megillah. (We already assume that prior to this class, the students have read the whole of the text up to and including chapter eight which was part of the previous exercise).

#### **Posing the Problem**

The question may be posed as an *intellectual* one: to reflect on the surprising theological vacuum – the lack of any explicit mention of God in the Megillah which is canonized in the Tanakh and sanctified by the Rabbis with a bracha before being read.

It may also be posed as an *existential* one: Human society is seems very random. Despite the central presence of King Ahashverosh, our ironic reading of the Megillah so far suggests that we live in a world with little order or meaning. Is this the case? Is this what the Megillah really suggests? Are we really atoms floating in a meaningless universe? Let us press on in our examination to see why many interpreters have found both in the Megillah and in human life a trace of Divine involvement, though one often well-hidden

**If previous discussions in class have not already raised this issue, then begin the exercise by raising the following two questions, otherwise you may proceed directly to the theological texts which are in sophisticated language under the title: “Two Modern Thinkers: Why is God Hidden in the Megillah?”**

- Since Ahashverosh is seemingly a mere figurehead, is it possible that the author of the Megillah is suggesting that there is an “unseen hand” (i.e. God) working behind the scenes? Is there any evidence for such a reading? Make a list.
- Presumably one of the answers for an unseen guiding hand will be in the astonishing number of **coincidences** that characterise the story from the beginning to the end. If not, add it to the list! Make a list of all the coincidences that appear in the text from the beginning to the end and ask the students to turn it into a kind of inverted “**וַיִּיט** sequence”. If the king had not wanted to boast about his wife’s beauty and if Vashti had not refused to come to the king, and if the king’s personal attendants had not proposed a search for a new wife, and if Esther had not been so beautiful...the Jewish people would not have been saved! This should be done in pairs and each pair should count up how many coincidences needed to happen in order that the Jews should be saved.

## Coincidences Form a Pattern of Reward and Punishment

Let us develop the question of coincidences in a deeper fashion. The article “A Major Theme: Reversal” by Michael Fox (which appears below in the appendix) provides a major argument for seeing God’s hand, an ethical providence, functioning in an otherwise random world of chance or manipulation. Fox argues that the major theme of the Megillah is reversal. Things never turn out as they were planned and expected but rather achieve the opposite result. Situations which threaten disaster for the Jews and glory for their enemies turn into glory for the Jews and disaster for their enemies. Now so far, this does not say anything new. The theme of reversal is a clear theme that even a cursory read of the text will reveal.

The new element in this analysis is that Fox shows how the idea of **reversal** is achieved by a mirroring effect, that uses the same, or similar, phrases in two different contexts...He shows that if you take off the introductory and the concluding episodes at the beginning and the end of the book, and look at the central narrative that talks of the rise and fall of Haman and the (almost) fall and subsequent rise of Mordechai, the mirror image principle underlies the entire central section. The medium, in this context, conveys the message very well. Here, it seems, we transcend by far the level of seeming coincidence that we noted previously. Whether or not it is God working through history, it is clear that the author, in his report of the extraordinary goings-on in Persia is suggesting that there are strange but purposeful forces of reward and punishment that underlie the entire episode.

- We suggest that you take the students through the **mirror imaging** without prior explanation. According to Fox’s analysis, the first comparison should work forward from chapter 3:10 on the one hand and chapter 8:2 on the other. Either work forward from chapter 3 and ask the students to suggest similar patterns from chapter 8, or get two students to read out the similar parts under your direction.
- Whichever technique you use, when the parallel reading has finished, ask the students what is going on here in the text. What is the author trying to suggest through his telling the story in this way? What message is he trying to put across? Point out that if he has invested such care in order to tell the story in this particular way, it is clear that the author is trying to make a very definite point through this technique. Ask the students to give the author’s message in the form of a slogan! How does that relate to the question – Is there a Divine Director behind the scene?
- On the assumption, for the moment, that the story is a true historical story and that the events occurred as stated, ask the students how can we understand this extraordinary set of coincidences? Could such a set of coincidences be due to chance or is this a convincing argument for some force (God?) controlling events? Discuss the question and then ask everybody to spend a few minutes

writing down their own opinion. Go briefly round the class asking everybody to state their own opinion, without discussion.

- Those of the group who believed that the long list of coincidences supports a conclusion that God was working behind the scenes should now be asked the following question. If God was working behind the scenes, and if the writer (who described all the coincidences that led the students to that conclusion), seems to have suggested this, how can we explain the fact that that “fact” is never mentioned? How do the students explain the absence of God from what seems to be a theologically oriented text?

## Two Modern Thinkers: Why Is God Hidden In The Megillah?

We now bring two opinions of modern thinkers who have tried to answer this question. The texts are complex and the students might need help in understanding them.

*At first glance, the inclusion of Megillat Esther among the 24 books of the Tanakh, seems very strange. The Megillah seems like a secular book, in total contrast to all the rest of the biblical books. The Megillah completely ignores any aspect of holiness...Why does it give such a secular description of events? What is the goal of such a deliberate rejection of the holy?*

*All of the biblical books...are the story of God's word to mankind in general and the Jewish people specifically. They do not tell the history of the ancient world and not even the history of the Jewish people in the regular sense of the word. [That is to say that the reason for writing the Megillah cannot simply be to retell a historical event that happened to the Jews. Not all ancient Jewish history is retold in the Bible. That, in itself would not be sufficient reason for its inclusion in the Bible].*

*The scroll of Esther stands in opposition to the entire Tanakh. As opposed to the rest of the biblical books which describe the realm of God and God's supervision of the world, the Megillah portrays deliberately, in an exaggerated and very extreme way, the "realm of the reversals", (מלכות ההפך), the reversal of everything that holiness can connect with. [In the entire world of the Megillah, we seem to hear no mention of God and no mention of religious rituals of any kind. Indeed the world is a world where the conventional moral categories of God's world which appear in other biblical books, appear to be completely absent]...*

*The aim of the inclusion of the Book of Esther in the Tanakh is therefore to bring up for examination the question "who rules in the realm of the reversals". If we had in our possession the Tanakh without the Megillah, we would know God only in every place and situation where God can be directly named. The Megillah comes to complement this deficit and to teach us that God is found secretly also in those places where God cannot be named. Here we encounter a deep issue connected with the culture of Persia. The Persian belief system divides the world up into two realms, of good and of evil that eternally battle between them. The Megillah comes to teach us ...that God directs the world even when God hides...[God does not only direct the world of good, but also those parts of the world where evil seems to rule and where at face value, there is no sign of God's presence]. Esther teaches us that God supervises the world, even in a time when His face appears to be hidden [Esther from "Hester Panim"] from us, when we cannot discern God on the surface of things.*

*In this way, Megillat Esther completes the Tanakh. It was deliberately written in such a radically secular style to teach us that divine providence exists in places and situations far from the realm of holiness, and that God's hand directs the world even in places where God appears to be hidden.*

**Rabbi Yoel Ben Nun** (Israel, 1990's)

*God in Esther is indeed veiled, as the popular metaphor puts it...A veil suggests that there is something behind it and invites us to look through. But when we look through this one, we do not see the sturdy old faith that so many readers assume must be back there somewhere. We see a light but it shimmers. [In other words, instead of the clear mention of God and the way that God acts in the other biblical books – the “sturdy old faith” – we only see signs of a faint reflection of God’s presence, if we look very carefully – “a light that shimmers”].*

*This carefully crafted [ambivalence] is best explained as an attempt to convey uncertainty about God’s role in history. [There is a reason that the author of Esther has not made God a more prominent actor in the story and has drawn God, if at all, below the surface of the story, with just a hint of presence]. The author is not quite certain about God’s role in these events (are you?) and does not conceal that uncertainty. By refusing to exclude that possibility, [i.e. that God is indeed in control behind the scenes and is directing the action], the author conveys his belief that there can be no definitive knowledge of the workings of God’s hand in history. Not even a wonderful deliverance can prove that God was directing events: nor could threat and disaster prove His absence.*

*The story’s [ambivalence] conveys the message that the Jews should not lose faith if they too are uncertain about where God is in a crisis. [Since it is impossible to know for sure whether God is present, you should never discount the possibility even when things look very bleak, as they did for the Jews of Persia in the story]. Israel will survive - that is the author’s faith – but how this will happen he does not know. Events are ambiguous and God’s activity cannot be directly read out of them: yet they are not random...[The author might not be sure what to believe but he is sure that there is some kind of pattern in the world and that things such as the events of the Megillah have not happened for no reason at all].*

*When we [search carefully] the text of Esther for traces of God’s activity, we are doing what the author made us do. The author would have us probe the events that we witness in our lives in the same way. He is teaching a theology of possibility. [He wants us to be aware, all the time, of the possibility that behind the world there is indeed a benevolent God that works in mysterious ways].*

**Professor Michael Fox (USA, 1990s)**

Both of these modern Jewish thinkers believe that the book and its author have things to tell us about religious faith. However, their readings are very different. Where one finds certainty regarding God’s role in history and in the world, in the silence of the text, the other finds ambiguity and uncertainty. But they both believe that there is a deep theological message in the text’s silence and reject a secular reading of so apparently secular a text. We suggest bringing one or both of these suggestions to the class. Remember: the suggestions are exactly that. Two thinkers and careful textual analysts who are convinced that the text has to be read not just for what is on the surface but for what it reveals below the surface, for what it hides.

- Bring one or, hopefully, both of the texts to the class with the following questions:
  - What do you think the first writer is saying?
  - What is meant by the “world of the opposite”?
  - Why does Rabbi Ben Nun believe that the writer has hidden God just below the surface of the text?
  - What was the theological point that the writer was trying to make?
  - According to Rabbi Ben Nun, why would the authorities who decided to include the book in the Tanakh, have insisted on doing so?
  - What is the second writer saying?
  - What is meant by a “theology of possibility”?
  - Why does Professor Fox believe that the writer has hidden God just below the surface of the text?
  - What was the theological point that the writer was trying to make?
  - Compare the two points of view of Rabbi Ben Nun and Professor Fox. What are the main differences between the two?
  - Which, if any, of the two texts is more convincing to you? Why?
- If there are students who reject both texts, ask them to explain why. Do they reject them because they feel that the writers are reading in a God or belief in God that is not legitimately present in the text (if they do that, they will be in good company with plenty of other noted thinkers)? Or do they accept that God is in some way present in or underneath the text, but reject the specific explanations? Having heard these two explanations, can they suggest another idea?



## **EXERCISE: Esther And Mordechai: Talking From Faith?**

...ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת...

The aim of this exercise is to examine in detail the philosophical-theological world-view of the two key Jewish figures in the story of the Megillah and to see if there is relevance in their view-point for Jews today. <sup>1</sup>

### **Posing the Problem**

We have seen that a careful reading of the Megillah suggests a message that is different from the surface randomness of Shushan that we noted in the beginning. We have explored the suggestion that underneath the surface, the Megillah suggests a world of order where a divine hand guides events. Let us now move to the question of how the central characters of Esther and Mordechai understand the world. On an individual human level, do they accept the idea that the Megillah seems to be suggesting, of a divine guide underneath the surface of life in Shushan – and by extension, of life in the world?

One of the important aspects of any study of Jewish figures from the past is to examine the relevance of these figures as potential models for Jewish attitudes and behaviour today. It is doubtful to what extent a person of perfect faith like Abraham can provide an accessible model for young people (or perhaps, for anyone) today. The age of prophecy, of direct communication with God, has passed. Faith for us today is more difficult because it is more indirect. Despite the claim of many thinkers and philosophers over the centuries, most people are not completely persuaded by the suggested “proofs” of God’s existence. Religious belief in today’s world is more likely to be based on the so called **“leap” of faith**, a conscious decision that a person makes to accept the partial, circumstantial evidence that exists and to interpret it in a way that can underpin religious belief. From this point of view, it may be that the figures of Mordechai and Esther represent a more accessible model of belief in the midst of uncertainty, that can be very relevant to students examining their own issues of faith.

### **Writing Two Monologues**

- Ask the students to (re)-read chapter 4 of the Megillah. Divide the class into two groups. Ask all the students in one group, working individually, to take the two speeches of Mordechai (Esther 4: 7-8, 13-14) and to write a monologue of all the thoughts that are going through his mind while he says these things. They should look very carefully at the text and try and think of as many things

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<sup>1</sup> This treatment of the theme has been influenced by Steve Copeland’s analysis in his “Humour and Coincidence in Purim”(Institute for Pedagogy in the Diaspora, 1982).

as possible that he might be thinking while saying these words. At the same time, the other half of the class should do the same thing for the two speeches of Esther (verses 11, 16). What is going through Esther's mind as she says these things?

- Pair the students up so that we have one representing Esther's state of mind and one representing Mordechai's. Let them read the text and hear each other's inner voice. Thus two things are going on at the same time, the overt dialogue, as reported in the text, and the inner dialogue, interpreted by the two students. They can ask each other questions to try and clarify and deepen their understanding of the two characters, but must at this stage stick to asking questions of the other regarding their partner's two speeches. It should be noted that the exercise can be done in the first person, with both students playing the parts of Esther and Mordechai, or in the third person where they talk *about* their character.
- After this, each student is asked to react to the situation in the following way. Let the student representing Mordechai write down and then report his reactions to Esther's speech of verse 11. Let the student representing Esther do the same for Mordechai's speech of verses 13-14. They should relate how they feel about the other at that precise moment. How does Mordechai feel about Esther's concern for court protocol and for her own safety? How does Esther feel about the demand that is being made of her, and about the fact that her life is on the line? The students should now discuss the whole exchange between the two characters so that they feel that they have a good understanding of the state of mind of both characters.

### **Preparing a Statement of Faith for Mordechai and Esther**

- The class as a whole should revert to its two original sub-groups, with half representing Mordechai and half representing Esther. The next task is for the individuals in both groups to write a "statement of belief" for their character. What is the state of their religious faith at this moment? How much faith do they have that God is working behind the scenes and that the story will have a happy ending, for them and for the Jews in general? They should look very carefully at the text of verses 13-16 and anchor their analysis in the text as well as in their general psychological understanding of what is going on in their character's mind.

### **Class Discussion**

- Together with the class, try and draw up a picture of what the two characters actually believe. How confident do they feel in their faith? What strengthens their faith? What weakens it? What questions do they have? What doubts? Are the two characters "in the same place" religiously and spiritually? If you and the class think it justified, differentiate between the positions of Esther and

Mordechai. If you find differences, are there any suggestions why this might be?

- Perhaps you might want to refer to Michael Fox's statement in the previous exercise where he refers to a "theology of possibility" rather than a theology of certainty.
- Finally ask the members of the class whether there are aspects of the state of faith of either of the two figures with which they themselves identify, either on the level of the character's questions and doubts or on the level of the character's certainties?

We have suggested above that both Esther and Mordechai are people who have some sort of religious faith. They seem to accept, on some level, the "moral" of the story that there is divine guidance and purpose in their world. Mordechai is perhaps a person of stronger faith than Esther. Even for him, however, there are many questions and doubts in his faith. It is to these that we now turn.

## **EXERCISE: The Complexities of Faith – Living With Uncertainty**

The aim of this exercise is to suggest some of the complexities and questions of the religious mind and to indicate that religion and certainty are not necessarily synonymous.

### **Posing the Problem**

Let us at this point raise a specific issue connected to the “theology” of Mordechai. It might be that if the students have differentiated between the outlook of Esther and Mordechai, in the above exercise, much of the difference might be connected with the somewhat obscure phrase that Mordechai utters, that “relief and deliverance will arise from another place” (רַוּחַ וְהַצְלָה יֵעָמוּד לִיהוּדִים מִמְקוֹם אַחֵר. . .). It certainly seems that this phrase reflects some kind of a belief, which we do not hear echoed by Esther, to the effect that ultimately, in some way or other, God will intervene. Indeed the phrase is usually understood in that way as the strongest - indeed, perhaps the only - overt expression of some kind of religious sensibility exhibited by the entire Megillah.

On the assumption that this is indeed the correct reading of Mordechai’s (or the author’s) intention, this raises an enormous question that should be introduced here. If Mordechai is indeed certain that there will be some kind of ultimate salvation for the Jews which will come in one way or another from God, why does he push Esther into an action that could absolutely cost her life? It would be easier to understand this action if he had no hope of salvation from any other quarter, but how can we equate what appears to be (complete?) trust in God with the demand that Esther acts, at risk to her life? It seems indeed to suggest a contradiction in the mind of Mordechai or the writer who puts the words into his mouth.

One response might be to say that Mordechai here expresses a philosophy of “God helps those who help themselves”. Because, according to the Jewish conception, God grants freewill and waits to see what people do with their choices of action in any given situation, Mordechai believes that God is testing Esther. If she passes, things will be resolved in one direction (as long as Ahashverosh does not use his free will and refuse to receive her, in which case she might have passed her test but at the cost of her life). However the problem with this explanation is clear. Since Mordechai says that help will come from another place, if she makes no move to act, it is hard to believe that here he believes that God is waiting for Esther to make her move.

We suggest that despite different possible attempts to explain away the seeming contradiction, perhaps the best way to deal with it is to call it enigmatic. It might be the contradiction of a religious mind that is stretched to the limit, attempting to square traditional faith in God’s providence, with the uncertainties of the present situation, in which the stakes are very high and everything must be done “to avert the evil decree”.

Perhaps this is an opportunity to bring up the issue of the complexity of religious faith. Contrary to a popular conventional wisdom that tends to caricature the act of faith, many

deeply religious people find themselves in a constant struggle with seeming dilemmas and difficulties. True religious faith, it might be suggested, often possesses its own in-built tension.

Mordechai's seeming spiritual struggle is a useful trigger to bring up the issue of the complexity of religious faith in the modern world.

### **Examining a Phrase from the Megillah**

- Ask the students how they understand the phrase “*from another place*” and whether they have alternative explanations other than the idea that it is a synonym for God. Ask those students who believe that it is indeed a reference to divine salvation, to explain the issue of the seeming contradiction in Mordechai's position. Why does he want Esther to risk her life if he is convinced that there will be salvation “*from another place*” if she does not act?
- Bring up the idea that there can be difficulties and contradiction in faith, and that people of faith sometimes find themselves in inner struggles. Is this how the members of the class see people of faith?

### **Examining an Interpretation from Rav J.B. Soloveitchik**

- Bring the following piece from Rav Soloveitchik, who explores the difficulties and conflicts in the religious search for God's presence in the world.

*Mistaken...is the prevailing view...that the religious experience is most simple, that it doesn't know spiritual complexity...shock or pain...This popular view says that the religious experience is easy and clear, gentle and tender: that it is a stream of sweet grass for the embittered soul and restful waters for the difficult day. Actually, the religious consciousness is not so simple and easy, but is most complex, difficult and tortuous. Indeed, where you find its complexity, you find its greatness...It knows of spiritual crisis...of struggle between feeling God's distance and God's nearness...of the spirit's hesitations and doubts...and of contradictions. The mind of the [religious person] seethes with...problems and questions that will never find their solutions.*

#### **Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik**

- What is Rav Soloveitchik trying to tell us? What is the popular view that he opposes?
- What does he mean by “Where you find its complexity, you find its greatness”?

- What does he mean by the struggle between God's distance and God's nearness? Who is struggling? Why?
- What sort of spiritual crisis do you think he is alluding to?
- Do you accept this view of religious faith?
- We suggest asking one or two deeply religious people (maybe you, the teacher?) to come and discuss with the class their own faith and the conflicts and question marks with which they struggle. Perhaps explore the difficulties of the idea that God sometime seems to hide from humans who seek God, (הסתתר פניו) and the challenge to religious faith in a situation when God's presence is hard to locate.
- Lead this back to Mordechai's dilemma of a person of faith (if the traditional understanding of "another place" is correct) who is faced with a shocking situation that must stretch his faith to the utmost.

## EXERCISE: And If The Story Is Not True...?

The aim of this exercise is twofold:

- (1) to sum up the lasting messages or lessons (מוסר השכל) of the Megillah for our world.
- (2) to examine whether the religious and spiritual significance of the text of the Megillah is dependent on the “historical truth” of the text. Does the text have significance for us even if the story is not historically true?

### Posing the Problem

Up to now we have assumed that the Megillah was telling a real story in his own words, and that the text has historical validity. But what happens to our understanding of the text if we question the “truth” of the story? Does this threaten to undermine our understanding of everything that we have said up to now? It is to this important question that we now turn.

To clarify that question we introduce the distinction between two notions of truth – what happened and what happens, **historical truth and philosophical truth**. Both these conceptions assume that truth in words and beliefs must correspond to reality but the historian is usually interested in what actually happened in a particular past age whether or not events of that type that still occur today. The philosopher or anthropologist is concerned about general patterns of human behavior that repeat again and again. In this sense a novel may describe people and events whose type occur often while the particulars of the story – plot, names, incidents - never happened in exactly that way. This is fiction but it teaches us to look at truths of our world.

The question of the **historicity of the Megillah** has been argued back and forth over the last century or so. Archaeology, history, anthropology, cultural studies and literature are just the central disciplines that have contributed to the discussion. Every argument has brought forth a counter-argument, but recent years have found the traditionalists very much on the defensive in their attempts to save at least some of the historicity of the text. At the present time and with the present state of our knowledge, it seems as though the vast majority of scholars question the historical value of the majority of the text. They see it as a great literary creation which is at best built around some very vague historical episode that contributed the inspiration for the book.

Essentially there are three positions that have been - and continue to be - taken.

1. The book is **historically true**. It tells of an actual incident that happened in the life of the Jews of Persia around the fifth century B.C.E. It was written down fairly close to the events themselves and reflects the real experience of the Persian Jews and possibly of the author himself. The universality of the Purim festival means that it could not be merely a book of historical fiction as the “detractors” claim.

2. The book is a work of **fiction** that was written quite possibly to justify the celebration by Jews of a local Persian pagan festival, and to give the celebration a Jewish “spin”. There is no historical evidence to support the book and there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence that undermines the claims to historicity. Moreover, the story of the book is so fantastic, and so packed with exaggeration, hyperbole, comedy and coincidence that this is clearly a literary creation. Some of the themes of the book (the Cinderella type girl who rises from rags to riches, the wicked vizier etc.) are well known from popular literature and folklore. We do not know who the author is, but he clearly had great familiarity with the atmosphere of the Persian court, either through personal experience or through second-hand reports.
3. The book itself is a fictional creation, but there might well be a core of historical truth underneath the text. All sorts of central aspects of the story have been changed as have various “identifying” details. Therefore it can not be profitable to try and place the story in a specific historical context, but there is a “core story” that really happened in one way or other. Around this story an inspired author wove his fantastic tale, as a moral parable for Israel. It is a great **historical novel**.

An open-minded observer would have to arrive at the conclusion that positions number two and three are, at the very least, serious possibilities. We might therefore be left with the distinct possibility that the book of Esther is actually...a historical novel. Before we go any further we should remind ourselves that the term historical novel covers a number of different categories. There are many kinds of historical novel:

A- At one extreme we have works which are totally fictional whose characterisation and plot are based on nothing tangible but whose authors have done good historical research into the period to provide a convincing background for their stories.

B - In the centre, we have works like Shakespeare’s historical dramas (such as Henry the Fifth), which weave fictional plots around real historical figures, often basing themselves on genuine incidents from the past. In these cases, the speeches and much of the detail is the author’s own creation but there is some kind of historical truth in the story itself, not just in the background.

C - At the other extreme, we have some historical works which try and stay very close to a particular historical incident which the authors have researched very carefully. Here there is an attempt to keep as close as possible to the actual story that happened at a certain time and place. The author stays as close as possible to her or his original sources to bring alive the actual historical incident and figures. Imagination is used, primarily, to fill in the gaps between the historical sources.



Even if we accept that the Megillah might well be a historical novel, we have absolutely no way of knowing into which category or sub-genre it falls. As mentioned, we cannot be sure that it is a novel at all. Nevertheless, intellectual honesty should demand from us the recognition that the Purim story might never have happened – at least in the form that we now have it. The question that we now have to contend with, in the present context, is whether or not it matters.

So far, in this chapter, we have suggested that despite the surface secularity of the book, there are some deeply theological and philosophical ideas that the book raises up for us. We have talked about the idea that there is a basic pattern of events, a meaning to the seeming randomness and arbitrary nature on the surface of human life. We have suggested that there is a guiding hand behind the scenes. We have examined issues of religious faith in a seemingly God-less world. These are profound human themes which have been developed out of a close reading of the text itself. Do all of these become invalid if the story becomes a human invention rather than an accurate portrayal of real events? Can we find meaning in the text if the whole thing is a human creation? This is the issue that we wish to examine.

### **Identifying Lasting Lessons (Philosophical Truths)**

- With the help of the class, list as many as possible of the lasting lessons of the Megillah that have been brought out in our study of the text. Collect all the ideas on the board and ask three people to answer the question: In your opinion, name the most valuable insight offered by the Megillah for today.

**Or**

- In groups of three, the students must come up with three **slogans** that express, for them, the message of the Megillah. The messages must be catchy, and must not have more words than can comfortably fit on to a poster size piece of paper. They can certainly be amusing but they must have a serious intention.
- When they have prepared their slogans, each student should take one of the slogans and make a poster which expresses the idea artistically and emphasises the slogan itself. Then the posters should be put up on the walls and desks of the classroom, and when the room is ready, one by one they present their posters, explaining their slogan and showing the connection to the text of the Megillah.

### **Confronting Historical Doubts**

In both cases:-

- Now present to the group the above ideas about the possible fictional character of the book. Explain that we can believe what we want but objectively it is entirely possible that the work is a historical fiction. The question to be dealt with now is: if we were to know for sure that the book was not a record of a real historical event, would this invalidate all the value that people talked about

previously? Can the lessons of the book still be valid lessons if the book is a human invention?

## Preparing a Debate

- Divide the class into two parts and sub-divide each group into sub-groups. All the sub-groups on one side have to come up with reasons supporting the value of the Megillah as a source of ideas even if the text is fictional. The sub-groups on the other side have to come up with reasons why the validity of the text is dependent on its historical character. If the events never happened, we have no good reason to celebrate this holiday and to read the Megillah annually.
- After a few minutes in small groups, open the floor up to a debate on the subject. Have the two groups sitting at different sides of the room. They are only allowed to speak for the side that they represent (whether or not these are their real ideas). Let someone open up from one of the sides and let anyone who wants to speak raise their hands and go on to a name list. Try and ping-pong the debate from one side to the other.

## Class Discussion

- When the arguments are more or less exhausted, ask the students to take their chairs and sit on the side of the room that most represents their real opinion. People who are undecided should sit in the middle between the two positions of “certainty”. It is possible to sit nearer to one side than the other. Continue the discussion. If people change or develop their positions, they should take their chairs and move to a place which reflects their opinion.

## Summing Up

- Bring things to a close and sum the discussion up. It is very important in summing-up a debate such as this to reflect on what really happened in the discussion and to go over the various major arguments that were made. Having done this, we suggest that you make the following observation (to which the students will have a chance to respond in the next exercise). Suggest that whether or not the text is historically true, the text has moral and theological significance – (psychological truth, philosophical truth, theological truth – namely that the picture that it presents, indeed “rings” true for us). Of course, whether or not we believe the text to be historical, changes our perspective. If we believe the text to be historically true, we can see the Megillah as presenting an objectively true picture of how the world works both on, and underneath, the surface. If we see it as a human creation, the product of a subtle and creative mind, we are left with the author’s belief statement as to how the world *possibly* works.

## **EXERCISE: Keeping the Megillah**

The aim of this exercise is to sum up the work that has been done in this section regarding the philosophical and theological insights that we can gain from the Megillah.

- Open up by reminding the class of the statement with which you closed the previous class. There you suggested that the text has validity whether or not it reflects an objectively true story.
- Ask everybody to write down their reaction to that statement. It is a complex question and enough time must be given for the task. When this has been done invite the members of the class to share their reactions. Discuss the issue.
- At a certain point in the discussion, bring up the following question. Given everything that has been discussed regarding the messages of the Megillah, the philosophy of Ba'al HaMegillah and the things that have been said so far about the value of the text by the members of the class, do they think that the Megillah should have been included in the Tanakh among the most important and sacred texts of the Jewish People?
- Remind the class that the Megillah is very different to all the other biblical books. At first reading it might seem surprising that anyone would think that it should be included in the biblical canon. Having examined the text, perhaps it is easier to understand the reasons for seeing it, despite its strangeness, as having earned its place in the Tanakh.

## APPENDIX: EXERCISE: The Personality of Ahashverosh

Here are three different opinions of the Rabbis regarding the personality of Ahashverosh. (All three quotations are from B. Talmud. Tr. Megillah 15b).

1. *Rav and Shmuel: One said he was a smart [פיקח] king  
One said he was a stupid [טיפש] king .*

רב ושמואל: חד אמר: מלך פיקח היה, וחד אמר: מלך טיפש היה.  
(תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יב עמוד א)

2. *He was wicked from the beginning to the end.*

הוא אחשוורוש - הוא ברשעו מתחילתו ועד סופו.  
(תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף יא עמוד א)

3. *Rabban Gamliel said: He was a very changeable (i.e. fickle) [הפכפך] king.*

רבן גמליאל אומר: מלך הפכפכן היה.  
(תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף טו עמוד ב)

- Ask the students: Which of these opinions of the sages is most acceptable to you? Are there any of these opinions that are unacceptable to you? Respond with reference to specific events in the Megillah backing up your opinion from the text.
- Now read the following two modern opinions, both of which refer in different ways to the personality of Ahashverosh.

### The Not So Serious King

*The first figure to appear in the story is Ahashverosh. He loves two things – women and wine. And as far as governing is concerned, there is no one more expert than he in giving authority to others...At the height of the feast, he seeks to preen himself before everyone through his beautiful queen. Her refusal fills him with rage, but he does not decide her fate himself. This same ruler over a hundred and twenty seven different states seeks council with all the experts in law who sit at the helm of his kingdom. Together they decide to get rid of Vashti and in addition they decide on a new law, that each man should be a ruler in his own house. A private incident becomes a reason for a new law for all...*

*The next incidents in which Ahashverosh is involved supplies additional evidence regarding his character and the way that he rules. He is a king who gives maximum freedom to his advisers. Haman's suggestion is accepted immediately. The ring – the symbol of authority - is passed from hand to hand with no difficulty whatsoever...And with the same ease and "generosity" with which Haman's suggestion was accepted, Esther and Mordechai's suggestion was also accepted...Almost in the same words – a decree and its cancellation!*

*...It makes no difference to him who gets killed or destroyed: women or children, Jews or other citizens – it's all of absolutely no importance. Ahashverosh is concerned with other matters. Whether Queen Vashti will come when she is ordered to? Whether Haman angers Esther and most importantly whether he tries to "conquer" her in the king's house, in front of the king's very eyes? In both cases, these private incidents become the reason for universal laws spanning the width of a hundred and twenty seven states!*

**Chaya Ben Natan**

## **The Paradox of the All Powerful King**

*Who is the hero of the Megillah? Some nineteenth century scholar counted the number of times the word king appears in the Megillah – no less than 187 times! The king is conspicuous in the story not just as a statistic but in the centrality of his role in all parts of the story. He is the axis around which everything happens. He is mentioned in the first sentence and the last sentence, and there is no incident in the whole colourful and eventful Megillah that is not connected to the figure of King Ahashverosh...He is the thread with which the Megillah weaves its plot...The king is the chief hero of the Megillah! Everything and everyone revolves around him. Everyone does his bidding, tries to please him, to placate his anger and achieve his approval.*

*Despite all this, does he really direct the actions of all those surrounding him? In the ten chapters of the Megillah, we do not find a single act which happens because of the king's initiative – apart from his feasting and his love for women...The king does not initiate: he listens and agrees. He is the one who can decide but he never decides until others tell him what he has to do...We stand here before a real paradox. On the one hand, the king is all-powerful and without him no-one so much as raises his hand. On the other hand, he himself initiates nothing but is dragged after the plots and plans of those surrounding him. In short, if the king is so important, how come he is so unimportant to the developments in the story? This is the paradox of the Megillah.*

**Zvi Zinger**

- What is each of the two modern thinkers saying about the character of Ahashverosh? They say similar things but are their opinions identical?
- What do you think of their claims?
- Which of the sages' opinions brought above do the two modern thinkers most agree with?
- Which leaders in your country and in the world would you characterise as “smart”? Or “stupid”? Or evil? Or changeable?
- What is the best way of surviving and progressing in an institution that is directed by a stupid or a fickle director?
- What is the best way of surviving and progressing in an institution that is directed by a smart and wise director?

### **Articles Recommended**

- 1 “A Major Theme: Reversal” pp.158-163 and “Where is God” pp. 246-7 in *Esther* by Michael Fox on the mirroring technique and the apparent eclipse of God.
2. Ed Greenstein, in *A Jewish Reading of Esther* pp.227-228 and Robert Gordis 382-387 on the question of the historicity of the text
3. Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way*, pp.249-253 on Purim as a perfect post-Holocaust theological document.