

King Achashverosh: What We Should Remember

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It's fun to be king! We see that at Purim carnivals, when children and even adults enjoy strutting their royal stuff for a day. When we do, few among us think critically about the complicated roles of either queen, Esther or Vashti, or King Achashverosh, when we choose our costumes. After all, some even dress as the wicked Haman. All good for a Purim party.

This Shabbat immediately before Purim is known in our tradition as *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance. It takes its name from a brief Torah passage that congregations are enjoined to read in addition to the weekly portion. We are commanded to remember Amalek, a king who mercilessly attacked the Israelites at their weakest point near the conclusion of their desert wanderings.ⁱ Our tradition considers Haman to be a descendant of Amalek.ⁱⁱ Haman, of course, is the villain of the Purim Story, attempting genocide as he seeks to murder all Jews in the Book of Esther. The message of *Shabbat Zachor* is that only vigilant mindfulness of those who seek our destruction will prevent future catastrophe.

Tonight, though, with a presidential election upon us, I would ask that we consider not only the antisemite so evil and violent that he would murder us. Perhaps we should also evaluate the role of Haman's chief accomplice, King Achashverosh—Ahasuerus in the anglicized pronunciation. While the King ultimately plays a role in putting a stop to the genocide, he is also its co-perpetrator. The Book of Esther is rife with the wickedness—not only of Haman, but also of Achashverosh. The time has come to recount his evil, second only to Haman's. A king—or, for that matter, an autocratic ruler with a different title—can, and Achashverosh does, provide the power that enables even genocidal wickedness.

We first meet Achashverosh as a drunken sexist fool. And that's before he descends into his deepest evil. The big party he throws at the beginning of the Book of Esther is called in Hebrew a *mishteh*.ⁱⁱⁱ That word is usually translated as “feast” or “banquet.” Those English words conjure images of tables laden with food. The word *mishteh*, by contrast, is based on the root that means “drink” and is sometimes translated “banquet of wine.” Even that phrase is too elegant for me. I call it a “drunk-fest.” After all, the Book of Esther itself tells us, “The rule for the drinking was, ‘no restrictions!’”^{iv}

The king's actions at the *mishteh* are grotesque examples of misbehavior under the influence.^v He orders his wife, Queen Vashti, to dance in front of the assembled men, "wearing a royal diadem."^{vi} The Talmud understands the king's command to mean that the queen was to wear **only** her crown.^{vii} Vashti refuses.

Achashverosh asks his advisors what to do about his recalcitrant queen. They reply that Vashti's rejection of the King's command risks sending a bad example to women throughout the kingdom: They may all get the idea that they may disobey their husbands! The only remedy is to remove and replace the queen.^{viii}

As if drunkenness and sexism are not bad enough, we come to see Achashverosh's presumed antisemitism as he searches for his new consort. Esther is taken as a candidate, apparently without volunteering for the job.^{ix} Her parental guardian, Mordechai, advises Esther "not to reveal her people or her kindred"—that is, not to let on that she's Jewish.^x At the very least, Mordechai does not trust that Achashverosh will welcome a Jewish queen.

Haman, Prime Minister to Achashverosh, is the villain who hatches the plot to murder every Jew. Mordechai, unique among the King's courtesans, declines to bow down or kneel at Haman's approach. Haman suffers a narcissistic injury so deep that it can be assuaged only by collective punishment—mass murder of all Mordechai's people.^{xi}

Even the Prime Minister, though, lacks the power to execute such massive genocide, so he brings his plan before the King. After maligning the Jews with the spurious claim that they follow their own laws, not the King's,^{xii} Haman offers a huge bribe,^{xiii} and the King readily grants his royal authority to the genocidal decree, making it his own.^{xiv}

The Book of Esther is often parodied. Some argue that its beginning with a drunk-fest is meant to signal that the story is not to be taken too seriously. On Purim, we celebrate the victory—Esther's bravery, Mordechai's sagacity—and we wave graggers to blot out Haman's name. Achashverosh is merely a buffoon in this telling.

Upon reflection, Holocaust studies and our reflections on persecutions of our people and others down the centuries ought to have seriously impacted our Purim celebration generally and our evaluation of Achashverosh specifically.

Haman was not the last to be regarded as a descendant of the wicked Amalek. Columnist Jeffrey Goldberg has observed, "The rabbis teach that successive generations of Jews have been forced to confront the Amalekites:

Nebuchadnezzar, the Crusaders, Torquemada, Hitler and Stalin are all manifestations of Amalek's malevolent spirit."^{xv} In each case, one may focus on the hateful villain as the perpetrator of tremendous evil. Still, we know that neither Hitler nor Stalin, for example, could have slaughtered their millions without their minions and collaborators, all enabled by still more millions of silent, but knowing, bystanders.

Achashverosh is worse—not than Haman, Hitler, or Stalin, of course, but more complicit than bystanders and even collaborators—for he is in a position to know better and to do better. As the Persian King, he would know of Jews' legion positive contributions to Persia ever since Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. He could easily cite facts to refute Haman's claim that the Jews spurn Persian law in favor of their own. And with one simple word, "no," he could decline the bribe that would enable genocide.

Jews and other minorities are in danger when a nation's leader—be that person called "king," "president," or "prime minister"—does not speak up against bigotry wherever it arises, particularly from the leader's supporters. Jews and other minorities are in jeopardy when the nation's leader behaves like Achashverosh, loving his own power and/or wealth more than human life. Jews and other minorities are imperiled when a national leader does not stand up and cry "no," each time his own bigoted supporters threaten violence.

On this *Shabbat Zachor*, let us remember Amalek, yes—Torquemada, and Hitler, Stalin and every evil perpetrator of mass murder who has plagued our people. And let us remember the wickedness of Achashverosh, too, and let us never forget.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

ⁱⁱ Esther 3:1 indicates that Haman is an "Agagite." Agag is described as King of Amalek in I Samuel 15:8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ester 1:3, et al.

^{iv} Esther 1:8

^v Achashverosh is explicitly said to be drunk when this incident occurs. Esther 1:10.

^{vi} Esther 1:12.

^{vii} B.T. Megillah 12b.

^{viii} Esther 1:13-19.

^{ix} Esther 2:8.

^x Esther 2:10.

^{xi} Esther 3:6.

^{xii} Esther 3:8.

^{xiii} Esther 3:9.

^{xiv} Esther 3:10-15.

^{xv} Jeffrey Goldberg, "Israel's Fears, Amalek's Arsenal," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2009.