

Parsha Ponders

Purim | March 15, 2022 | 13 Adar II 5782

*The timeless Torah*¹

ותקרא אסתר להתך מסריסי המלך אשר העמיד לפניו ותצוהו על-מרדכי לדעת מה-זה ועל-מה-זה
Esther called to Hasach, one of the king's attendants who was assigned to assist her, and commanded him regarding Mordechai, to know what this was, and what this was about²

After Haman and Achashverosh's harsh decree to exterminate the Jews was made known, Mordechai tore his clothes in mourning³. He wore sackcloth and ash. His relative Esther, who was now the Queen of Persia, heard what Mordechai was doing. This distressed her very much. She sent an attendant to inquire Mordechai about what he was doing, for she was unaware of the recent decree. The *Megillah* uses an interesting expression to describe her inquiry. מה זה ועל מה זה. She asked what this was and what this was about.

Our Sages homiletically read⁴ these two מה's as two מזה's, and therefore connect it to the verse לכתבם כתבם, the tablets containing the Ten Commandments were engraved from both sides; they were engraved through and through⁵. Esther was alluding to another question she posed to Mordechai: Why are you doing this? Perhaps the Jews transgressed the five books of the Torah, of which it is written, "they were engraved through and through"?

Now, it requires clarification what her intent was in mentioning that the Torah is engraved "through and through". What does it add that the Ten Commandments, representing the Torah⁶, were engraved this way? What difference does it make? Furthermore, why did she stress "the five books of the Torah". Why not just ask if the Jews transgressed the Torah? One explanation can be suggested based on a discussion the *gemarra* has regarding the root cause of Haman's decree⁷.

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: why were the Jews sentenced to complete annihilation? He responded by asking his students to offer a suggestion. They said it was because they benefited from the feast of Achashverosh. He responded that that would explain why the Jews in Shushan should be sentenced to death, but why were the Jews in the rest of the world given the same sentence? He suggested that it was because they bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idol. His students asked how then could Hashem show them favoritism and spare them? He responded that although they outwardly bowed to the idol, it was only for show. They didn't mean it. Hashem as well, when he orchestrated the decree, it was only for show.

However, alternate versions of this dialogue show⁸ that it was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who suggested their sin was benefitting from Achashverosh's feast. Why then were the rest of the Jews sentenced to

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Esther 4:5, printed after *Sefer Shemos*

² Esther *loc. cit.*

³ Ibid v. 1

⁴ Megillah 15a

⁵ Exodus 32:15

⁶ See Rashi to Exodus 24:12, quoting Rav Saadiah Gaon, that all the 613 *mitzvos* are included in the Ten Commandments. Rav Saadiah Gaon in his Siddur actually categorized all the 613, indicating which of the ten they fall under. See also Ba'al HaTurim to v. 14, quoting Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16

⁷ Ibid 12a

⁸ Shir HaShirim Rabbah 7:13

death? Because all Jews are responsible for one another⁹. A third *Midrash* also states¹⁰ that the reason for the harsh decree was because they benefited from his feast. Mordechai warned the Jews not to go, but they didn't listen.

According to this opinion, the punishment seems harsher than the crime. Let's say that the food wasn't kosher¹¹; does that warrant the destruction of the Jewish people¹²? As well, we can ask on the Jews themselves. It would seem that they practiced eating kosher food in their home, otherwise the claim against them wouldn't be limited to the feast of Achashverosh. If so, why in fact did they ignore Mordechai's warnings? Why did they partake of Achashverosh's feast?

It's possible to suggest that the reason for the Jews' slight infringement of the Torah was due to a fundamental mistake. They thought that since they were in exile, living in a non-Jewish country, it was impossible to observe the Torah properly. Anything that may drive a wedge between themselves and their overlords should be avoided. If the Jews would keep the Torah fully, it may cause antisemitism¹³. Perhaps this was the reason why the exile has been so harsh. This explains why many Jews intermarried in the exile after the First Temple was destroyed¹⁴. If the Jews were offered the daughters of their non-Jewish neighbors, and they stated that their religion forbids this, this could create greater enmity. It will cause the Jews untold pain and suffering! This was their mistake throughout the exile.

They also erred with the feast of Achashverosh. All the Jews of the capital city of Shushan had a problem. The entire known world was attending this party. They wanted to keep kosher, but if they didn't attend Achashverosh's feast, they'd be the odd ones out. It would very likely create the libel against the Jews that they're traitors to the government. They aren't interested in joining in the king's celebration. That's why they didn't show up. The result would be many harsh decrees and persecutions against the Jews. This is why the Jews ignored Mordechai's warning and went to the feast. They felt that it was their only chance for a safe existence in exile. Even though they definitely kept kosher in their homes, they felt they had no choice but to attend Achashverosh's feast. They thought they couldn't fully keep the Torah in exile.

The root of their claim was the Torah was only given to be fully observed when the Jews are living in Israel in tranquility. But this is a terrible mistake. It's a terrible breach in the fundamentals of the Torah and the Jewish religion. To claim the Torah is dependant on a specific time and place? The Torah preceded the creation of the universe¹⁵! The Torah is in fact the blueprint of the universe¹⁶. The Torah doesn't change a single inch, any time, any place.

This could in fact be the reason why the two tablets of the Ten Commandments were engraved through and through. This is to teach us that the words of Torah are eternal, and apply in all times and in all ages.

⁹ See Toras Kohanim to Leviticus 26:37; Sanhedrin 27b

¹⁰ Esther Rabbah 7:14

¹¹ See Shir HaShirim Rabbah *loc. cit.*, which says they ate food cooked by a non-Jew, which is only a Rabbinic prohibition

¹² See the Be'er Yosef to Esther 1:4, who gives an alternate explanation than what is presented here

¹³ See Rashi to Lamentations 1:25, based on Eichah Rabbah 1:56

¹⁴ See the books of Ezra and Nehemiah which discuss this problem

¹⁵ See Psalms 105:8, Chagigah 13b and Zevachim 116a

¹⁶ Bereishis Rabbah 1:1; Midrash Tanchuma Bereishis § 1; Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 3; Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Chapter 31; Zohar II *parshas Terumah* p. 161b

Ink can be erased, and regular engravings can wear out with the course of time. The engraving on the tablets can never be erased or wear out, as they go all the way through. This is to testify that the Torah will never be changed.

More than that, certain letters only existed in a miraculous fashion. The ם and the ם had their centers floating in midair¹⁷. This was to teach that even though logically it shouldn't make sense that the Torah should apply in all situations, even when there's a danger of antisemitism, the words of Torah exist outside of nature. They're beyond human reasoning. They were also miraculously able to be read from either side, no matter how you looked at them¹⁸. This was to teach that the Torah applies in all places the exact same. No matter which direction the Jews may end up, the Torah will always apply.

This is what Esther was stressing when she asked if the Jews transgressed the five books of the Torah, of which it is written that they were engraved on the tablets through and through. Meaning, she knew that the Jews wouldn't transgress the Torah brazenly and wantonly. She saw herself that they were all totally observant. In their homes, they kept all the details of the *mitzvos* with precision. However, she asked that perhaps the Jews outwardly¹⁹ transgressed the Torah. Maybe they thought the Torah didn't apply in certain circumstances. They thought that they couldn't outwardly show observance in front of their non-Jewish neighbors. They could only be observant in their homes. She was expressing that if this is what they're doing, it's an obvious mistake, for the Torah isn't limited by space and time. Its words are engraved through and through.

She also stressed the five books of the Torah, instead of simply asking if they transgressed. Obviously, she didn't think they transgressed the *entire* Torah. The fact that the Jews are faulted for attending Achashverosh's feast proves that in general they were Torah observant. Rather, her intent was to ask if they *fully* observed the Torah, from beginning to end, in every facet of their lives. Did they think that the Torah was only meant to be fully observed in the land of Israel, but in exile exceptions could be made? It cannot be! The five books of the Torah, represented by the two stone tablets, were engraved through and through. The Torah, without exception, is timeless and applies in all situations. It's ours to fulfill, no matter what the circumstances are.

Have a *freilichen* Purim!

¹⁷ Shabbos 104a

¹⁸ *Ibid*, brought by Rashi to Exodus 32:15

¹⁹ The Be'er Yosef echoes the choice of language used by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: הם לא עשו אלא לפנים