ESTHER 1:5: Ahashverosh's dangerous vulnerability

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In the coming days we will concentrate on the King Ahashverosh, who was not a paragon of virtue, and see how important is to know his psychological profile 1. to better understand how the story of Megillat Esther unfolds and 2. for our own moral education.

The first chapter of the Megilla describes two major parties. A first celebration which lasted 180 days, and the second, which lasted seven days. In this second fest, the Persian emperor showed all his "kindness" handing out free and unlimited wine for a week, to all the people of Shushan. Giving free stuff to people was, and remains to this day, the favorite way demagogues and populist leaders use to increase their popularity.

But Ahashverosh had deeper personal and emotional needs, to act the way he acted.

To discover the psychological profile of Ahashverosh no better commentary than that of Rabbi Moshe Almosnino (1515-1580). Rabbi Almosnino wrote a wonderful book "Yede Moshe" where similarly to the way a psychoanalyst examines the profile of her patient from therapy sessions, Rabbi Almosnino examines the personality of Ahashverosh from a deep "psychoanalysis" of the the text of the Megilla (it is important to note that following a long tradition of Hakhamim Sephardim, Rabbi Almosnino was able to analyze the text, Peshat, also independently from the Midrash).

I will summarize his words:

King Ahashverosh was a great soldier, a great strategist and an eximious "Conquistador". But unlike Cyrus and Darius, who besides being great fighters were also admired rulers, King Ahashverosh did not have many virtues as monarch. And when he was not on the battlefield, sheathing a sword and mercilessly killing the enemy, he did not know how to act. The main ambition of this great "conqueror of lands" was to "conquer" his own people. And in this business, probably due to his lacking of social skills, he was not very successful. And that

is why outside the battlefield, the great Ahashverosh was a very insecure man.
Rabbi Almosnino says that “the king made a feast for all his subjects” because the King became a people pleaser. It was so much his desperation to be liked, loved and admired by all (in order to feel good about himself) that he who was willing to throw the biggest and most lavish parties to do so.
Why is it important for us to know this? Rabbi Almosnino asks. And he explains that the Megilla here anticipates to us that this insecure King was not going to make decisions that will necessarily be good for his Empire or his subjects. This Emperor’s decisions will be made based mainly on how those decisions would affect his need to be loved by his people, and especially by his closest advisers, those who most flattered him.
This psychological weakness of the King will be exploited to the maximum by his advisers. The machiavellian advisors of the King, always looking for their own benefit, knew that a king who does not enjoy a healthy dose of self-esteem, is an easy prey to their maneuvers. They just have to praise him enough for the King to become emotionally dependent on their approval. And the man who better exploited this vulnerability of the King was the evil Haman.
The Megilla tells us in detail how Haman presented to the King his plan to eliminate the Jews. For Haman, as we all know, it was a personal mega-vendetta against Mordekhai. But Haman described his plan to the King not in terms of his own interest but disguised as the interests and personal benefit of the King and his image. *“These people [the Jews] do not follow your orders … It is not in the interest of the King that these people would be left alive”*. Ahashverosh would do anything that would improve his image, and vice versa. That’s why the King did not ask Haman who this people are, what benefits or detriments this decision would bring for the empire, etc. Incredibly Ahashverosh accepts Haman’s request at face value without questioning him, just in order to please his favorite sycophant. On the other hand, Haman, very cleverly, did not reveal the name of the people he wanted to eliminate. Haman suggests the king to get rid of an anonymous “people”, “distant”, mostly unknown and, above all, disobedient. As if this decision was not going to hurt at all

to the image of Ahashverosh. Quite the opposite.
A King with infinite power over the lives of his subjects, who suffers from such deep psychological vulnerabilities, is a dangerous ticking bomb. And we, the Yehudim, were about to be the main victims of the King's tragic dysfunctions.
Tomorrow, BH, we will see how Ahashverosh 's insecurity unfolded into an extreme need of showing-off his wealth.