ESTHER 3:8. When All Jews Were Persian

The book of Esther (Megillat Esther) records one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the Jewish people. When Haman, the powerful prime minister of the Persian Empire of Ahashverosh (ca. 485 BCE), issued a royal decree to murder all the Jews of the Empire.

These events –what led Haman to plan the elimination of the Jewish people, the Providential way in which Queen Esther foiled his plans, and the happy ending of this story– are registered in Megillat Esther. Besides being a very accurate historical document, the Book of Esther could also be classified as a book of "musar" (= Jewish behavioral psychology) since it generously describes the mental and psychological profiles of its main characters, particularly the dysfunctional personality of the main villain of the Megilla, Haman.

But before discussing all these fascinating aspects of the Megilla we should have some idea of the historical background of the events of Purim.

After leaving Egypt, the Yehudim lived for about 800 years as a sovereign people in the land of Israel. In the year 586 BCE Nebukhadnezzar, the emperor of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem. Hundreds of thousands of Jews died of starvation, or diseases, or were killed. The Bet haMiqdash was destroyed and about 70,000 Jews were taken captives to Babylon.

In 539 BCE, Cyrus (in Hebrew "Koresh") defeated and conquered the Babylonian Empire and proclaimed himself as the first emperor of the Persian empire.

In 538 BCE, a great miracle happened: the Persian Emperor invited the Jewish people to return to Israel and rebuild the Bet haMiqdash. This great event is recorded in the last words of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. (See below)

Thousands of Jews returned to Jerusalem led by Zerubabel and in 516 BCE, 70 years after the exile, as Yirmiyahu had prophesied, the construction of the second Bet haMiqdash began.

Over time the Jewish population of Israel continued to grow, and in the days of Purim, about the first half of the V century BCE no less than 50,000 Jews lived in Israel.

But not all Jews resided in Israel. As unfortunately happens today, although all Jews *were able* to live in Israel, most Jews still lived outside Israel.

We will try to understand now how and why so many Yehudim lived in that voluntary exile.

The Persian Empire was the largest empire that existed in the history of mankind (some say that the Mongol empire, in the 25 years of Genghis Khan ruling, surpassed in extension the Persian) and that gave the Jews the opportunity to establish an international trade network which proved to be very successful.

There are documents and evidences that Jews were scattered in all corners of the Persian Empire, which reached what today is the border between India and China. In Persia, they were legal citizens, free to trade. They took advantage of the fact that the terrestrial trade routes were protected by order of the Persian emperor and set up a network dedicated to the exchange trade between Indochina and the West. Jews traded spices and also used the incipient “Silk Road”, also protected by imperial guards. They imported silk and gold from China and exported to China spices, dyes, jade, lapis-lazuli, and glass. There is a book, unfortunately unknown but fascinating, which describes in detail all the commercial enterprises Jews were engaged at the time of the Persian empire. It’s called “The Eighth Day”, by Samuel Kurinsky.

The fact that Jews were, as confirmed by Haman (M. Esther 3:8) “scattered among all the nations of the Persian empire”

greatly facilitated this type of international trade. And it also allowed the Yehudim to establish a new industry, in which they also excelled: the credit industry. A promissory note (probably written in Hebrew) by a Jew from Turkey, could be cashed in India, when presented to another Jew living there. There are important archaeological evidences about this, among them, the records of a Jewish family of “bankers” of that time, Murashu family (see here).

All this data is important to understand two things:

1. That the Jews lived scattered throughout the Persian Empire. And that actually ALL the Yehudim of the world, including those in Israel, lived within the Persian Empire.

2. Given the success of their businesses, the Yehudim did not think at that moment to return to Israel. Although it is important to clarify that Jews permanently supported financially the Jews in Israel, sending generous donations to the Bet haMiqdash and to the Yehudim who resided there.

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העוון הזה הוא אשר מנענו מהשלמת מה שיעדנו בו האלהים בבית שני, כמה שאמר: רני ושמחי בת ציון (זכריה, ב יד), כי כבר היה העניין האלהי מזומן לחול כאשר בתחלה אִלו היו מסכימים כלם לשוב בנפש חפצה. אבל שבו מקצתם ונשארו רובם וגדוליהם בבבל רוצים בגלות ובעבודה שלא יִפָּרדו ממשכנותיהם ועניניהם, ושמא על זה אמר שלמה: אני ישנה ולבי ער (שיר השירים, ה ב) – כינה הגלות בשינה והלב הער התמדת הנבואה ביניהם; קול דודי דופק (שם, שם) – קריאת האלהים לשוב; שראשי נמלא טל (שם, שם) – על השכינה שיצאה מצללי המקדש. ומה שאמר: פשטתי את כתנתי (שם, ג) – על עצלותם לשוב; דודי שלח ידו מן החור (שם, ד) – על עזרא שהיה פוצר בהם ונחמיה והנביאים עד שהודו קצתם לשוב הודאה בלתי גמורה