MEGILAT ESTHER UNPACKED: Chapter ONE

INTRODUCTION:

In 586 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, emperor of Babylon. The Jews were exiled and dispersed throughout the empire. In 539 BCE, two generations after the exile, the Persian Emperor Cyrus (Koresh) conquered the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus had a very positive attitude toward the Jews and did something remarkable. In the first year of his reign, 538 BCE, he issued a proclamation that encouraged the Jews to return to the land of Israel and rebuild the Bet HaMikdash, a project he would finance with royal treasures. Over time, some 50,000 Jews did just that, led by Zerubbabel. In 516 BCE, seventy years after the exile, the second Bet HaMikdash was inaugurated, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy (chapter 25:11-15). But even though the Bet HaMikdash was built and functioning, most Jews chose to remain in the Persian Empire. Why? According to Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, they were financially well off. According to Samuel Kurinsky, their businesses thrived: they engaged in international trade, exporting glass jewels to China and importing gold, silver, and silk. Persian Jews also developed a credit industry, as documented in the extensive records about the Jewish family of Nippur, Murashu (see here). The Persian Empire continued to grow. In 500 BCE, Darius the Great, grandson of Cyrus, extended the empire to include Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, stretching as far as India. Only one region remained for the Persian emperor to conquer and dominate the world: Greece. Darius attempted it but was unsuccessful, leaving the task to his son, Xerxes.

With this brief introduction, we can begin the story in the Book of Esther.

VERSES 1-4

In 486 BCE, after Darius' death, the empire passed into the hands of his son Xerxes, also known in Persian as Khashayarsha and in Hebrew as "Achashverosh." At that time, the Persian Empire included 127 states or provinces, stretching from India to Ethiopia—the largest empire humanity had ever known. It was up to Achashverosh to conquer Greece, which was the ultimate goal. First, he consolidated his rule, and in the third year of his reign, he began preparing for the invasion of Greece. It was the most numerous military expedition ever. According to Herodotus —the father of modern history— the Persian emperor assembled the most extensive army in military history: 5,283,220 men, including soldiers and auxiliaries.

The Megilla tells us that Achashverosh organized a *mishte*, often seen as a "feast" lasting 180 days. However, according to Herodotus, this *mishte* was more like a training time than a celebration. The Megillah indicates this by noting who the guests were: first mentioned are the armies of Persia and Media, the generals, and governors of the imperial provinces. These were in charge of recruiting, organizing, and training this enormous army to invade Greece. Achashverosh brought them to work but treated them well, impressing them with exotic banquets and showing that he had the means to support the army in the war with Greece. Why doesn't the Megillah explicitly mention that this *mishte* was preparation for the king's military campaign? The Megillah was written during Achashverosh's reign and had to pass imperial censorship. So, the text is cautious, maintaining political correctness and avoiding anything offensive toward the king. In this case, it was also sensitive because, despite his army's size, Achashverosh ultimately lost the war with the Greeks.

VERSES 5-12

After 180 days of preparation for the "mother of all battles," the king organized a real celebration lasting seven days for

all the people of Shushan, rich or poor. This feast aimed to boost morale among the people, celebrating in advance of the victory over the Greeks. This party, unlike the first one, is described in generous detail: the lavish decoration of the palace gardens, the utensils, luxurious tableware, and, notably, the wine from the king's cellar, which was served in unlimited quantities. Queen Vashti also hosted a feast, though not in the gardens but in the royal palace hall. Her celebration was exclusively for women: the ladies of Shushan and the wives of military officials and dignitaries who had come from afar. On the seventh and last day of the celebration, the king, who had too much wine, made a grave mistake. He invited the queen to attend the men's party. But instead of inviting her as a husband invites his wife, he summoned her via protocol, "ordering seven of his officials to bring her to the men's party, wearing (just?) the royal crown, to show off her beauty to the people and dignitaries." Queen Vashti refused. According to the Sages of Eretz Israel, this was not because she was unpresentable, as the Babylonian Sages explained, but out of modesty, to avoide public exposure and humiliation. When the king sobered up, he became furious with himself for his tremendous mistake (Rabbi Moshe Almosnino). Because by disregarding the king's order—no matter how trivial—Vashti now legally faced the full weight of the law: capital punishment (or exile).

VERSES 13-22

The king, desperate, consulted with his advisors (astrologers) and especially with his legal counselors for a way out of this constitutional crisis. Seven high-ranking officials, the king's legal advisors, are mentioned individually. Achashverosh wanted to save Vashti.

The legal advisors brought the king terrible news: Vashti's crime was an issue of implications that affected the whole empire. And, as everyone knew, once the king issued an order, it could not be revoked—not even by the king himself, not even

if it could be proven that the king was not fully conscious. Furthermore, as the advisors explained, Vashti's defiance had become public knowledge. Not punishing her would set a precedent, potentially affecting the empire's stability. The Vashti affair became a matter of national security.

The king's chief advisor, Memuchan (whom the Sages later identified as Haman), suggested that the king seize this crisis as an opportunity to win the favor of the empire's men and soldiers—something beneficial for the impending war. Memuchan advised the king to issue a decree to be sent to all corners of the empire, stating the following:

Article One: Queen Vashti would be removed from her position (this could be a euphemism, meaning she would be executed or exiled).

Article Two: King Achashverosh would, in due time, seek a better (i.e., more obedient) queen to replace Vashti.

Article Three: The kingdom's women must honor their husbands (i.e., obey them) regardless of their rank or status.

The decree was sent across the empire's 127 provinces, in the language spoken in each region, announcing that by royal order, men were to exercise leadership in their families and that when husband and wife speak different languages, which seemed to have been a common conflict in many of the empire's mixed families the language of the husband would be spoken in the household.

This concludes the first chapter of Megillat Esther. Rabbi Almosnino explains that this chapter, which contains no direct references to what happened with the Jews in the Perosan empire, is part of the Book of Esther for two reasons. First, it foreshadows the eventual arrival of Queen Esther, who would replace Vashti. But also—and perhaps primarily—this chapter shows that in the Persian Empire, the king's orders had to be obeyed, even if issued while he was intoxicated, and once

proclaimed, the decree could not be reversed, not even by the king himself, even if it meant “killing his own wife.” With this in mind, Rabbi Almosnino notes that when the reader sees that Haman “deceives” the king into signing a royal edict to annihilate the Jews, they understand, from Vashti’s case, that this mandate could not be undone! Thus, one can better appreciate the extraordinary Divine intervention that saved us from total annihilation (□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□□).