

How *Shoshanat Yaakov* Reveals the Meaning of Purim

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

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This chapter will uncover what is unique about Purim through a *Piyut*, a liturgical prayer-poem called *Shoshanat Yaakov*, that traditional Jews recite immediately upon the completion of the reading of the Book of Esther (called the Megillah) on the night of Purim and then again the following morning. The ideas contained in this poem will help convey the deeper meanings of the Megillah, as well as provide insight into the special customs of this holiday.

WHAT DID THE RESIDENTS OF SHUSHAN REALLY SEE AND HOW DID THEY SEE IT?

The verse in the Megillah tells us “Mordechai went out from the presence of the king in royal clothes of (*techelet*) blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.”¹ Although the text describes the many fine clothes, materials and colors that Mordechai wore (white, gold, fine linen, and purple), the composer of the *Piyut*-prayer selects only the material of *techelet*-blue, and writes that only *techelet*-blue was seen by the people of Shushan, as the *Piyut* reads: “The rose of Jacob was cheerful and joyous when together it saw Mordechai robed in *techelet*-blue.”² It is important to understand why the composer removed something from the verse (everything else that Mordechai wore) and then added something not found in the verse – that they saw it *yachad*-together. The questions, then, are: Why is it that when the Megillah describes the sight, it says that city’s residents see Mordechai with many clothes, called “*levush malchut*-royal garb,” but the composer selects only the *techelet*-blue clothing and then says that the residents saw Mordechai when they were “*yachad*-together.” The “*yachad*-together” could mean that everyone saw it at the same time, which would be very strange, since the entire large population of the city could not possibly see anything at the same moment. Or this phrase could mean that whatever they saw, they saw it in a unified manner. Then, the Jews of Shushan apparently saw the unity in the *techelet*-blue of Mordechai. What does it all mean and what is the composer trying to convey to us about Purim?

WHAT IS THE DEEPER MEANING OF SHOSHANAT YAAKOV?

Shoshanat Yaakov-The Rose of Jacob, the name and the first two words of the *Piyut*, is also a significant concept when discussing and analyzing Megillat Esther. The word *Shoshana*-rose is not merely a play on words for the city of Shushan, but it is also a metaphor for the entire Jewish people. For example, in King Solomon’s Song of Songs, the Jewish people are compared to “a (*Shoshana*) rose among thorns,”³ and the image appears in the Psalms as well: “To the Chief Musician, about the (*Shoshanim*) roses, A Psalm of David.”⁴ Just as the *Shoshana*-rose is caught between the thorns in everyday life, there is no better moment in Jewish history to call the people a *Shoshana*-rose than at this moment describing the Purim story. The Jews were truly caught between the thorns, as their lives and religion were threatened with destruction.

¹ Esther 8:15

² The first line in the paragraph of the *Piyut Shoshanat Yaakov*

³ Song of Songs 2:2

⁴ Psalm 69:1

Even the use of the name Jacob is appropriate for the Purim story, rather than Jacob's other name, Israel or Yisrael. Jacob is the name given to our forefather at birth, but it is not the name used in Scripture when it attempts to describe the Jewish people as a nation. That name is Yisrael, as the Jewish people are called in Scripture the Children of Israel, and not the Children of Jacob. But here, for some reason, it is the rose of Jacob that is referred to. It is a reference to the Jewish people, the children of Israel found in Shushan but called by their "first name," Jacob. Why? We can already see the tension between the two names of this great man in Genesis, when he is called both names by G-d in the same verse!⁵ These are not the verses that describe the battle with the angel (when his name was actually changed), but later on, before Jacob-Israel descends to Egypt.

The brothers come back from Egypt and tell their elderly father that Yosef is still alive in Egypt. He does not believe them, but then sees the wagons that Yosef sent to bring him to Egypt, and Jacob is "revived." He brings sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac, and then the following occurs: "And Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac. And G-d spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here I am."⁶ This is the first time, after a long respite, that Jacob is called Yisrael in the Torah. After Jacob's name was changed to Yisrael much earlier by the angel, after he believes Joseph, his son, has died, he returns to the name Jacob. His spirit is fallen and many years pass before reaching this moment of "Joseph is yet alive." When he is revived and begins to live again (as it says, "And when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived"⁷), he returns to become Yisrael once again.

THE MEANINGS & SYMBOLS OF THE NAMES JACOB AND YISRAEL

Jacob was called Yisrael because "For as a prince you have power with G-d and with men, and have prevailed."⁸ He was originally called Jacob because he grabs and restrains, as it says "And his hand took hold on Esau's heel; and his name was called Jacob."⁹ The image of Jacob grabbing at the heel of his brother Eisav is the depressed Jacob, while the description of Yisrael is dream-like, at night, when he engages the angel. He is then called Yisrael because he has successfully battled G-d and human beings. On his way down to Egypt, however, he is referred to as Jacob.

G-d comes to him "in the visions of the night." Why at night? This tries to teach us that a person must learn to see even during the "night" of life. This vision of G-d occurs right before Jacob must leave for Egypt, a "yerida-descending" that Jacob never thought he would again have to experience after returning to the Land of Israel. G-d then calls him "Jacob, Jacob." This is the first time that G-d turns to Yisrael and tells him only one thing: "Jacob, Jacob," – i.e., you will now be Jacob as you leave the Land of Israel. And Jacob, who wanted to live in peace in the Land and remain Yisrael¹⁰ understands that he must go down to Egypt while Joseph rules, and he will now fulfill the prophecy of being "A stranger in a strange land, and his children will be slaves for four hundred years."¹¹ It is very difficult for Jacob to accept and prepare for this. Just as G-d calls him Yisrael, and he returns to "himself" as Joseph is alive, Jacob must learn to "see in the night," and learn how to see G-d even in the Diaspora and during difficult times. G-d then calls him "Jacob, Jacob" and Jacob answers, "Here I

⁵ Genesis 45:25-46:1

⁶ Genesis 46:1-2

⁷ Genesis 45:27

⁸ Genesis 32:29

⁹ Genesis 25:26

¹⁰ see Genesis 37:1 with Rashi commentary there

¹¹ Genesis 15:13

am.” Thus, the Jacob who can see G-d even in the darkest night is the same Jacob who established *Tefillat Arvit*-the Evening Prayer. It is this Jacob who taught us that G-d is not only “(emet v’yatziv) true, established, enduring, etc.,” (the phrase recited in the morning prayers after the Shema), but that G-d is also “(emet ve-emunah) true, faithful, established, etc.,” as recited in the prayers of the evening following the Shema. As it says, “To declare your loving kindness in the morning, and your faithfulness every night,”¹² the morning is a time for praise and kindness as seen in the characteristic and prayer established by Abraham, while the evening is a time for faith, which is the characteristic and prayer established by Jacob. That is the lesson that Jacob taught the Jewish people.

THE QUESTION AND ANSWER IN “SHOSHANAT YAAKOV”

Returning to the *Piyut*-prayer, we can now understand that the *Shoshana*-rose of the Jewish people is called Jacob because Jacob is the name he is called when he is in the *Galut*-Diaspora. Nevertheless, Jacob is still cheerful and joyous. Thus in the *Piyut*, the composer is actually asking a question: How is it possible in this world of difficulty and despair to have cheer and joy as if the situation were different, in a “different world?” In very poetic terms, the composer is both asking and answering this question with beautiful and concise words: *Shoshanat Yaakov tzahala v’yisamaicha* — How can the rose of Jacob be so joyous and glad? What is the solution to this difficulty? How can the rose, when it is Jacob found in the darkness and amidst trouble, manage to be joyous? The solution is that this can happen only when the Jews can see at night the unity implied in that night-Diaspora, when Mordechai is dressed in *techelet*. Mordechai is actually dressed in many different clothes, but the *techelet Mordechai* is not merely the color of a garment that he wore. It is the mystical *techelet* that only someone who knows how to see the entire picture, the ultimate purpose (*tachlit*) of the world, and everything that *techelet* represents, even in the Galut-Diaspora.

HAVING THE LONG VIEW AND SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

On Purim, Jews read the long ten-chapter story of the Megillah (and some think it is too long), but they do not realize that it is not a story that takes place over a short time period. The Megillah story spans nine years, from the third year of Achashverosh’s reign until his twelfth year.¹³ It is a long story with many twists, turns and manipulations. Jews learn the story as children, and most cannot understand how the Jews in Persia joined with Achashverosh in his big, 180-day party (at the beginning of the Megillah). But what is so difficult to understand? He is the most powerful man on earth, the ruler of 127 provinces. All the people of the empire and residents of the city are invited to celebrate, and it is a good time for the Jewish citizens of Persia as well. How much character and moral fortitude it must have taken to be as different as Mordechai at that moment – at the beginning of the Megillah story – before all the difficulty occurs. Even then, Mordechai still does not bow down to Haman or yield to compromising circumstances.¹⁴ Mordechai has the long-range vision not to bow down and submit, even though the situation is now very favorable for the Jews. (Of course, during the difficult times when “Haman was full of wrath,”¹⁵ Mordechai still does not submit.)

What moral courage it must also have taken for Zeresh, Haman’s wife, to verbalize her conclusion to him in Megillat Esther: “If Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you shall not prevail against him, but you shall surely fall before him.”¹⁶ The Jews

¹² Psalms 92:3

¹³ Esther 1:3, 3:7

¹⁴ Esther 3:2

¹⁵ Esther 3:5

¹⁶ Esther 6:13

themselves would never dare to say something so radical. It is Zeresh and all her friends, the loved ones of Haman (who, together with Haman [including Charvonah], planned and built the large tree to hang Mordechai), who came to this conclusion. They understood that for the people of Mordechai, the Jews, there is a “different set of rules” and they conclude that they cannot defeat the Jews. Mordechai will not submit to all the pressure because he has that inner strength that comes from the *techelet*. Understanding the long view of history requires appreciating these ideas that are found in the *Piyut* of *Shoshanat Yaakov*. When Mordechai wears royal garb, it is not the actual clothing that he is technically wearing. Even before that moment, he wore an internal *techelet*, which due to a complete turnover of circumstances, now make Mordechai viceroy to the king. But Mordechai wore this internal *techelet* throughout the Megillah and will continue to wear this *techelet* when he is no longer viceroy, and even after he takes off his physical clothing. He continues to have his vision and understanding of Jewish history even when the next crisis strikes or a holocaust confronts the Jewish people. That is because this *techelet* is not based upon something external.

THE SECRET MESSAGE AND CONCEPT OF TECHELET

What is that internal and secret message of the *techelet*? The Talmud says, “Why is (*techelet*) blue specified from all the other colors [for the precept of tzitzit]? Because (*techelet*) blue resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of the Throne of Glory.”¹⁷ We will attempt to explain this very profound concept briefly. Since no one knows what *techelet* truly is, and, likewise, no one can know what the Throne of Glory truly is, our only recourse to try to understand *techelet* is to analyze the comparisons of this substance to the ocean and the sky. The ocean is indeed *techelet*-blue in color. But, when we try to take a “handful” of ocean into the palms of our hands, the color disappears and the water looks clear and colorless. Thus, *techelet*-blue does not exist in reality. Similarly, the sky is *techelet*-blue, but, as we know, like the ocean, the color is perceptible only from a distance. When one flies in a plane and tries to see that blue color, it does not exist. Thus, *techelet* is not actually a color, but rather a concept. *Techelet* can only be seen on the horizon. One who tries to actualize the *techelet*, to make it appear in the here and now, will only see something clear or transparent, like the sky and water, or something dirty, which is even worse. In either case, it will not be *techelet*. Only a person who knows how to see and understand the horizon can see *techelet*. That is the meaning of the composer who responded to the question, “How can the rose of Jacob be joyous?” The answer is: Because all the Jewish people saw together [and understood the idea of] the *techelet* of Mordechai. When you can see *techelet*, then even when you are like Jacob, a rose amid the thorns, you can still be joyous. One who also understands that he/she is part of the *techelet* of Mordechai can be joyous.

WHY AND HOW PURIM IS DIFFERENT FROM EVERY OTHER HOLIDAY

The *Piyut* continues: “*Tishu-atam hayita lanetzach*-You have been their eternal salvation.” Purim is the only holiday that mentions that the salvation is eternal. Where did the composer get this idea? It actually comes from the Megillah itself, as the Talmud explains it. This verse in the Megillah says that the holiday of Purim will never be forgotten or depart from the Jewish people.¹⁸ Based on this verse, the Midrash¹⁹ makes an outlandish statement: in Messianic times, all the other Jewish holidays will not be commemorated, but the holiday of Purim will never be forgotten and always commemorated. How could this be possible? We know that one of the tenets of Judaism is that anything written in the Torah can never be changed or forgotten, including the celebration and the

¹⁷ Menachot 43b

¹⁸ Esther 9:28

¹⁹ Midrash Mishlei 9

laws concerning all the holidays.²⁰ How then could the holidays, which are written about at length in the Torah, not be commemorated in the future? And why would Purim, of all holidays (it is not even mentioned in the Torah, but was established much later by the Rabbis) be retained over all the special days of Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot? What are the underlying concepts and values that make this holiday so special, unique and eternal?

In addition, the name of the holiday is undoubtedly the strangest of any Jewish holiday. With all the events that transpired in the Megillah, one seemingly unimportant detail gives the holiday its name. In order to determine on which day to kill all the Jews, Haman drew lots on the 13th day of the month of Adar. The word for “lots” in Hebrew (or Persian) is “Purim.” Why, then, did the Rabbis call this holiday Purim based on this lottery²¹ that seems to have nothing to do with the essence and importance of the story?

Finally, there is another oddity about Purim. We know from every other Jewish holiday that each is celebrated on one (or more) specific days of the Jewish calendar, based on some event that happened on that day. But Purim is celebrated in most places today on the 14th of the month of Adar. In Jerusalem it is celebrated on the 15th of the month, and the very first Mishna and the first Jewish law about Purim is that it was possible to read the Megillah, depending on one’s circumstances, on the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th or 15th of the month of Adar.²² In fact, this practice was enacted into Jewish law.²³ We know that in the 20th century some countries switched around their holiday celebrations for the purpose of creating longer weekends. But in Judaism, a holiday’s date and celebration is never changed (except for Purim and rabbinic fast days when it conflicts with Shabbat). Why is Purim so different from any other holiday’s celebration in this regard?

THE PURPOSE AND ETERNITY OF PURIM AND THE MEGILLAH STORY

The Purim story marks a departure in the way G-d relates to the world and the Jewish people. (See chapter about “Miracles” for an expansion on this theme). The Vilna Gaon²⁴ gives an analogy of a king who loved his only son very much, but this love engendered hate and jealousy from some of the king’s officers. When the son misbehaved, the king sent him to the forest, and the son thought that his father forgot about him and left him alone, to live on his own. The reality was that the king loved his son deeply and was afraid that the animals in the forest or some of the king’s officers might harm him. Therefore, the king asked some of his trusted officers to watch over his son and protect him, but without the son’s knowledge, since the purpose of his banishment to the forest was to make him realize his bad behavior and change his ways. When a bear threatened to kill the son, one of the king’s officers saved him, but was careful that the son saw nothing. The son thought his salvation was by happenstance. Then one officer who hated the son tried to kill him. Again, he was mysteriously saved. The son began to realize that his salvation, time after time, could not be coincidental, and it must be his father who was actually saving him. This inspired him to repent completely and love his father even more.

This analogy is applicable to the Jewish people’s relationship with G-d. When G-d sends them to the Diaspora (the forest), the Jews believe that G-d no longer loves them and is no longer with

²⁰ Principle #9 of the Thirteen Principles of Faith of Maimonides

²¹ Esther 9:24, 26

²² Mishna Megillah 1:1

²³ Maimonides, Hilchot Megillah 1:4, 7

²⁴ Gra commentary on Esther chapter 1

them. But they are saved time and time again, and unlike in the Land of Israel previously, the salvation occurs naturally, without seeing the Hand of G-d (the father). The Jews eventually realize that G-d is actually behind every one of their salvations, and eventually come to repent fully and love G-d even more. Mordechai and Esther understood all of this, and therefore, the Jewish people re-accepted the Torah in that generation in appreciation of what G-d had done for them.²⁵ Thus, Purim is the first time in history that G-d's Hand is behind the scenes and not clearly evident to the Jewish people. That is why G-d is not mentioned in the Megillah and the miracle of the story apparently occurs through completely natural means.

The Vilna Gaon goes on to say²⁶ this is why the name of the holiday is Purim, representing lots or chance. G-d, behind the scenes, changed all of the "aligned stars" and what should have happened naturally, i.e. Haman emerging victorious. Rather, behind the scenes, G-d arranges to save the Jewish people. Thus, what appears on the surface to be a lottery and pure chance, is actually G-d out of view, doing everything. The name Purim, therefore, represents G-d controlling events that seem to be completely natural or accidental. Malbim actually says²⁷ that Haman did a deep calculation and "knew" that the month of Adar (which has no Jewish holidays) and the 13th of the month was the most fortuitous for his victory. It was G-d who created the miracle and changed what should have been a "natural" calamity for the Jewish people into their "natural" salvation. Rabbi Meir HaKohen Shiff (1608-1644) agrees with this analysis and similarly explains the appropriateness of the name of the holiday Purim.²⁸

This understanding also explains the name of the heroine in the Purim story and the name of the book itself. The Rabbis²⁹ say that the name Esther is a Persian name, but when asked where the name of Esther is alluded to in the Torah, they reply that the name is derived from the verse "And I will surely hide (*Haster Astir*) My face in that day because of all the evils which they shall have done."³⁰ The name Esther thus means "that which is hidden." Although there are many books called Megillah, there is only one called THE Megillah -- the Book of Esther. The tractate Megillah primarily discusses Purim and not any other Megillah. The word Megillah signifies that which is revealed (from the root word *legalot*). Megillat Esther, therefore, translates as "reveals that which is hidden." The general goal of the Jewish people on Purim is to try to understand the Book of Esther and to reveal that which appears to be hidden.

Throughout the nine years of the story, all the events seem so natural, so political, and so coincidental. There are so many coincidences. For example, the king being unable to sleep, bringing the Book of Remembrance showing that Mordechai had not yet been rewarded, etc. The entire purpose of the Megillah is to be able to see that which is not there on the surface, to be able to see the *Techelet Mordechai*. When Jews are able to see this concept, then the entire story, controlled by G-d, makes sense. And the eternity of the Jewish people also makes sense.

What has this to do with the other holidays in the future not being celebrated, while the Purim holiday will continue? Maharal explains³¹ that all the other holidays in the Torah are tied to the

²⁵ Esther 9:27, Shavuot 39a

²⁶ Gra commentary on Esther chapter 9

²⁷ Malbim commentary on Esther 9:26

²⁸ *Derushim Nechmadim* of Maharal Shiff on Esther 3:27

²⁹ Chulin 139b

³⁰ Deuteronomy 31:18

³¹ Maharal, Ohr Chadash 48

Exodus from Egypt. But in the time of the Messiah, the glory and manifestation of G-d will be so open and so great that the miracles of the Exodus will trifle by comparison. That is why the former holidays will not be held in high esteem. They will be celebrated, but only as minor holidays. But the holiday of Purim, which has no connection to the Exodus, will still have the same glory as before. Rabbi Moses Sofer continues this idea by quoting Rabbi Alkabetz.³² He says that the open miracles of the Torah will be “swallowed up,” just like the taste of something in a minute portion that becomes irrelevant in a 1:60 ratio. Thus, the other holidays will still exist, but not have the same importance they had in pre-Messianic times. But the hidden miracle and salvation of Purim will continue to be celebrated in an age when G-d is no longer hidden.

It is for that same reason that the dates of Purim are not fixed. Purim is not celebrating only one specific historical event. It also celebrates events that have happened in many generations, on many days in Jewish history, when G-d seems totally hidden. It celebrates the fact that, despite the terrible situation in which Jews have often found themselves, many Jews, like Mordechai, have not bowed down or given in, even when there was only a small opposition group within the people. Yet somehow, with G-d behind the scenes, the Jews prevailed and the situation was saved.

This is the concept that Zeresh apparently understood about the Jews. G-d is always with them, manipulating the situation, even if He cannot be seen. This is why the Jewish nation remains eternal, and no machinations or intricate plans of destruction of this people can every truly succeed. The *Piyut*-prayer continues and says that “*Vitikvatam bechol dor vador* -- [that G-d is] their hope throughout generations (*dor vador*).” This phrase, “*dor vador*,” appears many times in the Torah. It says “This is my name forever (*le-olam*), and this is my memorial to all generations (*ledor dor*).”³³ G-d’s name is indeed forever, but the word “*le-olam*” is written without a *vav*, and can be read *le-alaim* (to be hidden).³⁴ Many times in history G-d’s name is hidden. G-d’s remembrance will exist in every generation, but Amalek and the Hamans of the world will fight the Jews about G-d’s name. This eternal battle continues in each era. Only when the name of G-d is ultimately victorious, and G-d does reign openly over the entire world, will all human beings say, “The Lord shall reign forever, your G-d, O Zion, to all generations (*dor vador*). Hallelujah!”³⁵ The idea passes through each generation, and Jews obtain part of this eternity when they can grasp the “togetherness of the *Techelet* of Mordechai.”

THE GREATNESS OF CHARVONAH AND HIS MESSAGE

The *Piyut* continues with its Halachik-Jewish law content: “Cursed be Haman who sought to destroy me, blessed be Mordechai the Jew, Cursed be Zeresh, the wife of my terrorizer, blessed be Esther who sacrificed for me.” Then it says, “And Charvonah, too, should be remembered for good.” This great Charvonah is also mentioned at the beginning of the Megillah³⁶ as a great manipulator, who is certainly not a hero. With all this, the Midrash still says³⁷ that Rav Pinchas used to stop right in the middle of reading the Megillah to say that, “Charvonah is remembered for good.” Why? What was so special about him? The Megillah tells us the answer later in its text: “And Charvonah, one of the eunuchs, said before the king, “Behold (*hinai*) also (*gam*), the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordechai, who had spoken good for the king, stands in the house of Haman.” Then the

³² Derashot Chatam Sofer, 7 Adar 5592

³³ Exodus 3:15

³⁴ Otzar Hamidrashim 3

³⁵ Psalms 146:10

³⁶ Esther 1:10

³⁷ Midrash, Esther Rabbah 10:9

king said, "Hang him on it."³⁸ It seems that all he was doing was making an economic suggestion to Achashverosh, saving the cost of another tree (by his suggestion to hang Haman on the tree he had already prepared for Mordechai to be hung). But this suggestion should be understood on a much deeper level.

Regarding Charvonah's great act, we know that he appeared at the very moment that Achashverosh was castigating Haman for his treachery. But the verse is strange. It says "Behold (*hinai*) also (*gam*), the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordechai..." What is the meaning of the words "*hinai-behold*" and "*gam-also*?" "*Hinai*" always suggests something right in front of us, but we know the tree was not there in the palace, but at Haman's house. And "*gam*" implies something in addition. What, then, do these extra words signify? Immediately after this verse, it says again, "So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai. Then was the king's wrath pacified."³⁹ We already know that the tree was the same one originally prepared for Mordechai. Why the repetition? Is it so important? YES! Charvonah came to say this one very important idea. He tells the king that he didn't really understand anything when he was the king's advisor earlier. Now he realizes the underlying idea of the Megillah: The tree that was to hang Haman was already prepared earlier to kill Haman, but we just didn't know it or comprehend it. These are the words, "*hinai-behold*" and "*gam-also*." Then it repeats that it was the actual tree that Haman prepared to kill Mordechai, and that is why the anger of the king was soothed. It was not soothed because Haman was hanged, but because the central idea of "*vinahafoch*-everything was turned around on its head, and the Jews suddenly had dominion over those who hated them and wanted to destroy them⁴⁰" became a reality and everything became understood. What the king now comprehended was that all the evil and what he thought was evil, were really much different when viewed in the "large picture." This is not a mere tree that hangs an evil person. This tree demonstrates that the greatest holocaust that was about to occur, is the very foundation upon which to build the salvation of the Jews. And Charvonah now sees this. No other tree was necessary because the tree is already prepared (without anyone having known the reason why).

ONE LETTER CHANGE CAN TEACH US EVERYTHING

If we are sensitive to each word and, in this case, to each letter in Scripture, the Torah and Megillah reveals much to us. When Charvonah is mentioned in the first chapter of the Megillah (chapter 1), all the names of advisors to the king are Aramaic names, ending with the letter *Aleph*, as does the name of Charvonah. When Charvonah is again mentioned (chapter 7), it is now spelled with a *Heh* at the end. It is the same name, but now with a totally different meaning. Charvonah (with a *Heh*) comes from two different words: *cherev*-sword and *boneh*-building. Charvonah with an *Aleph* is just another name. When Charvonah with an *Aleph* suddenly sees that tree, the tree that Haman erected for Mordechai, but realizes that it was meant from Haman himself, he knows how to reveal the hidden and read "*Megillat Esther*." From the sword of destruction, the *cherev*, he now sees *boneh*, building.

It is this Charvonah who is "remembered for good." Not because he is wise or righteous, as he was indeed called wicked by the Rabbis⁴¹ because he plotted with Haman to kill Mordechai. But this non-Jew finally understands that Zeresh's statement, "If Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the seed of the Jews, you shall not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him," is not

³⁸ Esther 7:9-10

³⁹ Esther 7:10

⁴⁰ Esther 9:1

⁴¹ Megillah 16a

just philosophy. He sees the tree and understands how everything is turned around. This teaches us the essential idea of Megillat Esther. For him, it is proper to stop in the middle of reading the Megillah and say “*zachur latov*--he is remembered for good.” It is also the message of drinking on Purim “until one cannot distinguish—*ad delo yada*—between blessed is Mordechai and cursed is Haman.”⁴² This is to realize that from the evil of Haman, comes a blessing -- sometimes. One cannot distinguish and know the difference. He who properly knows how to read history can see the blessing in the midst of most cursed times. To rise to that level in this world, one must indeed be drunk. A normal person can usually not see this when sober. Logically and cognitively, we set limits and boundaries, and cannot see the mixture of “Blessed be Mordechai and cursed be Haman.” A higher level, beyond knowledge, is a person’s realization that he does not really know anything. Only on Purim can a person reach this level, a level when all events are seen together (*yachad*), and *Techelet Mordechai* can be fully comprehended.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

⁴² Megillah 7b