

מגילת אסתר Antisemitism in

מגילת אסתר פרק ד' פסוקים ח'–י"א

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ יִשְׁנֶנּוּ עִם־אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֹד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלְכוּתְךָ וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל־עַם וְאֶת־דַּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלִמְלַךְ אֵין־שָׁוָה לְהַנִּיחָם:

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them.

אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם וְעִשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִים כֶּסֶף אֶשְׁקוּל עַל־יְדֵי עַשִׂי הַמְּלָאכָה לְהַבִּיא אֶל־גִּנְזֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ:
If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury."

וַיִּסַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְהַמָּן בֶּן־הַמְּדַתָּא הָאֲגָגִי צֶרֶר הַיְהוּדִים:
Thereupon the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews.

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַמָּן הֲנִסְףָּ נָתַן לְךָ וְהָעָם לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ:
And the king said, "The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit."

Why do you think הַמָּן describes the Jews the way he does when trying to convince אחשוורוש?
Why do you think אחשוורוש agreed to הַמָּן's request so easily?

"However, if we want to go back and understand antisemitism, then the answer lies within the verse with which I began, *yeshno am echad mefuzar umefurad bein ha'amim... vedateihem shonot mikol am*, "There is a certain people who are different from everyone else." That is why Jews are hated, because we are different. Antisemitism is the paradigm case of dislike of the unlike. And you will say, 'But everyone's different, every nation is different', and it's true, every nation is different, but only Jews throughout history consistently insisted on the right to be different, the duty to be different, the dignity of difference. They were the only people over the long haul of history who refused to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith."

"Haman: The First Antisemite," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, February 2014,
<https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/haman-the-first-antisemite/>

Why do you think people dislike those that are different from them?
Do you think antisemitism today still comes from a hatred of those different from them?

What made us different in the times of אסתר?

"It is easy to hate, but difficult publicly to justify hate. Throughout history, when people have sought to justify antisemitism, they have done so by recourse to the highest source of authority available within the culture. In the Middle Ages, it was religion. So we had religious anti-Judaism. In post-Enlightenment Europe it was science. So we had the twin foundations of Nazi ideology, Social Darwinism and the so-called Scientific Study of Race. Today the highest source of authority worldwide is human rights. That is why Israel—the only fully functioning democracy in the Middle East with a free press and independent judiciary—is regularly accused of the five cardinal sins against human rights: racism, apartheid, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and attempted genocide."

"The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism," Keynote Speech in the European Parliament (September 22, 2016)

Look back at Haman's proposition to Achashverosh. What was "the highest source of authority" that Haman was appealing to?

מגילת אסתר, פרק ג', פסוקים א'-ב'

אָחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשְׁוֵרֶשׁ אֶת־הָמָן בֶּן־הַמֵּדְיָה הָאֲגָגִי וַיִּנְשָׂאֵהוּ וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶת־כִּסְאוֹ מֵעַל כָּל־הַשָּׂרִים אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ:

Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials.

וְכָל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ כָּרְעִים וַיִּמְשַׁתְּחוּם לְהָמָן כִּי־כֵן צִוְּה־לּוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמֵרַדְכָּי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה:
All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low.

What was Mordecai's "mistake" that triggered Haman's hatred?
Should Mordecai have just bowed down?
Did he bring it upon himself?

"Now, you will say that everyone is different, and everyone *is* different. It's just that Jews were the only people consistently throughout history who insisted on the right to be different, even the duty to be different. And so they became the only nation in history not to assimilate to the dominant culture or convert to the dominant faith. And that is why antisemitism is the paradigm case of hatred in world history.

Is the solution then to try to be less different?

"And that is how we must fight antisemitism. Antisemitism begins with Jews, but it never ends with Jews. And the reason is because antisemitism is hatred of difference, but difference is what makes us human. Precisely because every one of us is different from every other one of us, each of us is unique, therefore irreplaceable, therefore sacred."

Rabbi Sacks on Antisemitism, March 2010,

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/videos/rabbi-sacks-on-antisemitism-jinsider/>

"Jews in Germany said, why are we hated? Because we are different. So let's stop being different. We're different, we eat different foods, let's abolish the dietary laws. We keep Shabbos on a different day. Let's move Shabbos to Sunday. We get married and divorced in a different way, let's abolish the whole of *Even HaEzer*. Let's just be like everyone else. And the result was, antisemitism was not diminished one millimetre and Jews lost their own inner strength to resist. So we must never, ever believe that Jews are the cause of antisemitism."

"Haman: The First Antisemite," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, February 2014,

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If the solution to being hated for being different is *not* to try to be less different, then what is the solution?

"In the late 1980s when the former Soviet Union was beginning to open up, it was the era of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, for the first time in 70 years Jews were free to be Jews. But it had a downside because antisemites, for the first time in 70 years, were free to be antisemites. And antisemitism began to reappear in Russia at the end of the 80s. And one of our Rabbanim from Manchester was out in Moscow helping to rebuild Jewish life. And while he was there, a young girl came to see him, in her late teens, and she was shaking, and she told the Rabbi, "All my life, I never spoke about being Jewish, nobody thought I was Jewish, we didn't discuss it, and nobody said anything. Now, because I'm Jewish, when I go in the street, people shout at me, *еврей, еврей*, "Jew". What shall I do?"

And the Rabbi had a big beard and a big black hat and a long *kapota*. He turned to the young lady and said, "The way I look, people probably don't mistake me for an Episcopalian."

"And yet," he said, "in all these months I've been here, no one ever shouted out *еврей, еврей*. [Jew! Jew!] Why do you think that is?"

And the young lady thought for a bit and gave this answer, and it is so true. She said, "Because they know if they shout out the word 'Jew' at me, I will take that as an insult. But if they shout out the word 'Jew' to you, they know you will take that as a compliment."

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Questions for Reflection:

Do you agree that חמאן's antisemitism stemmed from his hatred of מרדכי for being different? Do you think that is the source of antisemitism today?

Rabbi Sacks suggests that anti-Zionism is the modern form of antisemitism - do you agree? Why or why not?

Do you think that walking around as proud Jew can combat antisemitism?