

## Esther and commentary manuscripts at the Bodleian Library

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Yom Limmud, Oxford University Chabad Society

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### 1. ESTHER WITH ILLUMINATED FIRST WORD: ‘**VAYEHI**’

MS. Archive Selden A. sup. 106, folio 11b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Description: Hebrew Bible: Ecclesiastes, Esther (up to chapter 3) have both Masorahs and Haftorot

Date: 1301 – 1325

#### Illumination:

1. Serpent eating its tail – renewal of life, protection
2. Hare hunt - Yaknehaz
3. Spider web
4. Vayehi denotes tragedy (Talmud Megillah 11a)

### 2. ESTHER WITH CORRECTION

MS. Bodley Or. 46, fol. 129a, 129b

Date: 1201 – 1225

Title: **Hester**

1. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus -- he was the Ahasuerus who reigned from Hodu to Cush, one hundred twenty-seven provinces.
2. In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the capital.
3. In the third year of his reign, he made a banquet for all his princes and his servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces [who were] before him.
4. When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the splendor of his excellent majesty, many days, yea one hundred and eighty days.
5. And when these days were over, the king made for all the people present in Shushan the capital, for [everyone] both great and small, a banquet for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's orchard.
6. [There were spreads of] white, fine cotton, and blue, embroidered with cords of linen and purple, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a pavement of green, white, shell, and onyx marble.
7. And they gave them to drink in golden vessels, and the vessels differed from one another, and royal wine was plentiful according to the bounty of the king.
8. And the drinking was according to the law [with] no one coercing, for so had the king ordained upon every steward of his house, to do according to every man's wish.
9. Also, Vashti the queen made a banquet for the women, in the royal house of King Ahasuerus.

### 3. MIDRASH ABBA GURION

MS. Michael 577, folio 115b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Title: Agadeta d'Megilta.

Also known as Midrash Abba Gorion (Yalkut Shimoni by R. Shimon of Frankfurt, 13<sup>th</sup> century);  
Midrash Megilah (Hamburg MS) or Aggadat Megillat Esther (Rashi on I Kings 10:19).

Description: Ancient Midrash on Esther

Author: Abba Gorion of Sidon (2<sup>nd</sup> century)

3 texts

1. Abba Gurion of Sidon reported five sayings in the name of Rabban Gamliel. When corrupt judges multiplied, false witnesses multiplied. When informers multiplied, spoliation of property increased. When effrontery grows rife, people are robbed of their honour. When the lesser says to the greater, 'I am superior to you,' men's years are curtailed. When the favourite sons provoke their father in heaven with their actions, He sets over them a godless king, and punishes them. To whom does this apply? To Ahasuerus, as it says: 'That the godless (*chanaf*) man reign not, that there be none to ensnare the people.' Why is he called godless (*chanaf*)? Because he slayed Vashti (his wife) on account of Haman (his friend) and afterwards slaying Haman (his friend) on account of Esther (his wife). When he reigned, they began crying, Woe! Vayehi (there was woe) in the days of Ahasuerus!

2. Rabbi Berechiah opened with the text: 'Who has wrought and done it? He that called the generations from the beginning.' From the beginning of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, appointed for each one the lot which was befitting him. He appointed Adam to be first of all creatures, Cain the first of the slayers, Abel the first of all slain, Noah the first of those saved from calamity, Abraham the first of all circumcised, Isaac the first of all bound for sacrifice, Jacob the first of the perfect, Judah the head of the tribes, Joseph the head of the saintly, Aaron the first of priests, Moses the first of prophets, Joshua the first of conquerors, Othniel the head of dividers, Samuel of anointers, Saul of anointed, David the foremost of singers, Solomon the foremost of builders, Nebuchadnezzar the foremost of ravagers, Ahasuerus chief of sellers, Haman chief of buyers. When they all saw this, they began to cry, Woe! Vayehi (there was woe) in the days of Ahasuerus!

3. 'In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom.' Why does it say 'on the throne of his kingdom', which is not said by any other kingship? Initially (Temple) service was conducted by the firstborns. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, until now I would make shift with my son from righteous to wicked and from wicked to righteous, but now my son does not merit, the kingdom will return to the one that is befitting, and Ahasuerus is from the firstborn son, as it states: 'The sons of Shem are Elam, Ashur, etc.'

#### 4. RASHI

MS. Michael 289, folio 171b

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Author: Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki, Rashi (1040-1105)

Date: 1329

1. **Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus:** He was the king of Persia who reigned instead of Cyrus at the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian exile. **He was the Ahasuerus:** He was **Cyrus** equally wicked from beginning to end. **Who reigned:** He reigned on his own, and was not of royal seed.

#### 4. MACHZOR VITRY

MS. Oppenheimer 59, folio 81

The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

Author: Rabbi Simcha of Vitry (d. 1105) with marginal annotations by Eleazar ben Judah Rokeach

(c. 1176 – 1238)

Description: Compendium of Jewish law and liturgy

Display: Liturgy of Purim 'Al Hanisim' etc.

**For Purim (in the *Amidah* prayer):**

We thank Thee for the miracles, the redemption, and victories, and liberation, which Thou hast performed for our fathers in days of old and at this time. In the Days of Mordechai and Esther, in Shushan, the capital, when Haman, the wicked, rose up against them and sought to destroy, to slay, and to exterminate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, on the same day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions; But You, in Your abundant mercy, nullified his counsel and frustrated his intention and caused his design to return upon his own head and they hanged him and his sons on the gallows. As you performed for them miracles and mighty deeds in those days and at this time, so do for with us Lord our G-d wonders and miracles like this time.

***Piyut* for Purim after the reading of the Megillah:**

Who balked the counsel of the nations and annuled the designs of the cunning, when a wicked man stood up against us, a wantonly evil branch of Amalek's offspring.

Haughty with his wealth he dug himself a grave, and his very greatness snared him in a trap.

Fancying a trap, he became entrapped; attempting to destroy, he was swiftly destroyed.

Haman showed his forebears' enmity, and aroused his brotherly hate [of Esau] on the children.

He would not remember Saul's compassion, that through his pity on Agag the foe was born.

The wicked one conspired to cut away the righteous, but the impure was trapped in the pure one's hands.

Kindness overcame their father's error, and the wicked one piled sin on sins.

In his heart he hid his cunning thoughts, and devoted himself to evildoing.

He stretched out his hand against God's holy ones, he spent his silver to destroy their memory.

When Mordechai saw the wrath commence, and Haman's decrees be issued in Shushan,

He put on sackcloth and bound himself in mourning, decreed a fast and sat on ashes:

"Who would arise to atone for error, to gain forgiveness for our ancestors' sins?"

A blossom blossomed from a lulav branch- behold! Hadassah stood up to arouse the sleeping.

Her servants hastened Haman, to serve him wine of serpents poison.

He stood tall through his wealth and toppled through his evil- he built gallows on which he was hung.

The earth's inhabitants opened their mouths, for Haman's lot became our Purim.

The righteous man was saved from the wicked's hand; the foe was substituted for him.

They undertook to establish Purim, to rejoice in every single year.

You noted the prayer of Mordechai and Esther; Haman and his sons You hung on the gallows.

The rose of Jacob was cheerful and glad, when hey jointly saw Mordechai robed in royal blue.

You have been their eternal salvation, and their hope throughout generations.

To make known that all who hope in You will not be shamed; nor ever be humiliated those taking refuge in You.

**5. MAIMONIDES MISHNE TORAH – MS POCOCKE 307 AND MS. OPPENHEIMER 77**

1 It is a positive mitzvah ordained by the Rabbis to read the Megillah at the appointed time. It is well-known that this was ordained by the Prophets. Everyone is obligated in this reading: men, women, converts, and freed slaves. Children should also be trained to read it. Even the priests should neglect their service in the Temple and come to hear the reading of the Megillah. Similarly, Torah study should be neglected to hear the reading of the Megillah. Surely, this applies to the other mitzvot of the Torah: the observance of all of them is superseded by the reading of the Megillah.

There is nothing that takes priority over the reading of the Megillah except the burial of a *meit mitzvah* - a corpse that has no one to take care of it. A person who encounters such a corpse should bury it and then read the Megillah.

2 One can fulfill one's obligation by reading or by listening to another person's reading, provided one listens to a person who is obligated to hear the reading. For this reason, if the reader was a minor or mentally incompetent, one who hears his reading does not fulfill his obligation.

3 It is a mitzvah to read the entire Megillah and to read it both at night and during the day. The entire night is an appropriate time for the night reading, and the entire day is appropriate for the day reading. Before the reading at night, one should recite three blessings. They are: Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to read the Megillah. **Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in previous days and at this time.** Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion. During the day, one should not recite the final blessing. In places where it is customary to recite a blessing after the reading, the following blessing should be recited: Blessed are You, G-d, our Lord, King of the universe, the Al-mighty, who wages our battles and executes judgment on our behalf, who avenges the vengeance wrought against us, who exacts retribution from our enemies on our behalf, and who acquits justly all our mortal enemies. Blessed are You, G-d, the Almighty, who exacts payment on behalf of His nation Israel from all their oppressors, the G-d of salvation.

## 6. ETZ CHAIM

They include two positive commandments that were ordained by the Rabbis which are not included [among the 613 mitzvot of the Torah]. The explanation of these mitzvot is contained in the following chapters.

1. Should the inhabitants of the villages read the Megillah earlier, on a Monday or a Thursday, and give monetary gifts to the poor on the day on which they read, they fulfill their obligation. They do not, however, fulfill their obligation of rejoicing and festivities of the Purim holiday, unless performed on the fourteenth, because the mitzvah of rejoicing and festivities is on the fourteenth for the cities that are not walled and the fifteenth for walled cities.
2. The mitzvah of giving gifts of food is to give two types of food to one person. If one does not have the means to send presents of food to a friend, one should exchange one's meal with him.
3. The giving of charity to the poor should be at the very least to give each of two poor people one present, be it money, cooked dishes. One should not be discriminate in selecting the recipients of these Purim gifts. Instead, one should give to whomever stretches out his hand. Money given to be distributed on Purim should not be used for other charitable purposes.
4. It is preferable for a person to be liberal with his donations to the poor to resemble the Divine Presence, which describes as having the tendency "to revive the spirit of the lowly," more than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to his friends.
5. It is preferable to be careful not to give his donation to one's servants and wet nurses because the mitzvah of donations to the poor on Purim is for Jews and not non-Jews, for the angels will ask what is the difference between Jews and non Jews. If one wants to give to

non-Jews donation should give it the day before or after Purim.

6. It is permitted to work (on these days). Whoever performs work, however, will never see a sign of blessing.
7. A person who eats the Purim feast at night does not fulfill his obligation. This is referring to the eve of the fourteenth of Adar, because if it is referring to the eve of the fifteenth one obviously does not fulfill one's obligation.
8. The obligation of the feast is to eat meat and drink wine until he becomes intoxicated and falls asleep in a stupor. He should prepare as attractive a feast as his means permit.
9. **In Seder Rav Amram** it states: if Purim falls out on *Motzoei Shabbat*, immediately after finishing the silent *Amidah*, one says *Kaddish* and reads the Megillah, and afterwards begins 'v'hi noam' and 'ata kadosh' but not 'uva l'tziyon' because there is no redemption at night.
10. The next day, one does not say *Hallel*, because the miracle took place outside Israel.
11. After calling up three people for the Torah reading of 'v'yavo Amalek' one should not return the Torah to its place until he has read the Megillah.
12. One does not say '*Tachanot*' (supplication) and also not the next day because they are days of rejoicing. Also not '*lamnatzeach*' and '*shir mizmor l'Asaf*' and some people (say?) '*mizmor al ayelet hashachar*' or '*b'kum aleinu adam*'.
13. A person who wants to depart on a journey and does not have a kosher Megillah may read the Megillah on the eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth of Adar.
14. It is customary to recite the verses '*ish yehudi*', '*u'Mordechai yatza*' and '*ki Mordechai*' out loud during the reading of the Megillah. It is for the rejoicing of the children and not obligatory.
15. One does not say '*Al hanisim*' at the night before reading of the Megillah, but rather only in *shacharit* (morning prayers) and *mincha* (afternoon prayers).
16. All the books of the Prophets and all the Holy Writings, with the exception of the Book of Esther, will be nullified in the Messianic era. It will continue to exist, as will the five books of the Torah and the *halachot* of the Oral Law, which will never be nullified. But the memories of the difficulties endured by our people will be nullified, as it states: "For the former difficulties will be forgotten," but the celebration of the days of Purim will not be nullified, as it states: "And these days of Purim will not pass from among the Jews, nor will their remembrance cease from their seed."

## 7. RALBAG

3:8 **And Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples.** He informed them that it is one nation because it is due to this that he should be more afraid of them as they are always together in consensus. He also informed him that they are scattered and separate among the peoples because due to this it is easy for them to instigate evil against the king because it is possible for them to persuade the opinion of the population among whom they reside in the kingdom. Also, **their laws differ from those of every people**, implying that their customs and manners are not similar to the customs and manners of any other nation and

this is all with the intention to argue that it would be easy for them to perform despicable acts against the king because they do not have laws that will prevent them. What is despicable to any other nations would not be despicable to them, making it easier for them to rebel against the kingdom and against the nations among whom they live. In addition, he informed him that **they do not keep the king's laws**, meaning to say they do not fulfill his decrees and in this regard it is as if they rebel against him. Furthermore, he informed them that **it is of no use for the king to let them be**, implying that the king has no benefit from them for which one may be **forced** to leave them to their own affairs, because they have no benefit to the kingdom. Due to the matter as it is that letting them be has not benefit, and there is the possibility of much harm to the kingdom, and they are considered rebellious against the king, Haman tried to have them destroyed with the king's consent and promised him to deliver to the king's treasury a very great amount of benefit and thereby removing the harm that they cause the king. It appears that Haman informed them that because their laws are different from all other nations, according to their law they are commanded to kill other nations that do not subject themselves to the commandments of their religion, and this already known from what they attempted to destroy the Amalekites through Saul and others. With this also in mind Haman tried to have the Jews destroyed collectively. Because of this Ahasuerus was willing and consented to eliminate the Jewish people with no other benefit that will be afforded him. He thus, gave Haman his ring with which the king signs law into effect so that Haman can do as his eyes please. It seems that after this the ring was left in Haman's hands so that he can sign by himself in the name of the king everything that he wished to sign. Because of this it later states that Ahasuerus gave his ring to Mordechai that he removed from Haman.

### **Six stages in genocide:**

1. Collective
2. Influential
3. Otherness
4. Not law abiding
5. Parasitic
6. Existential threat