

Harvonah Memorial Lecture 5772 (2012)  
*Supported by the Harvonah Memorial Foundation*

All the world knows that Harvonah is "*zachur latov*," but few know why he is considered to be so much better than all of the other eunuchs in the Megillah. But don't despair! The Harvonah Memorial Foundation was founded precisely to fill this gap in the world's education, as you can see in the 72-page mission statement available on our website. This year for our Harvonah Memorial Lecture, we will examine one small eddy in the sea of Harvonah knowledge, focusing on Harvonah's big moment in the Megillah, Chapter 7, verse 9. Luckily, the Harvonah Memorial Foundation has found the original manuscripts of the relevant tractate of the Talmud, Masechet Masechet, and our lecture this year comes from the text and commentaries on page 23a:

"Rabbi Rishon said: How do we know that Harvonah was greater than King Ahashverosh himself? As it is written: *Harvonah ehad min hasarisim lifnei ha-melech* – Harvonah was first among the eunuchs, achieving a rank even above that of the King."

Rashi points out that *min* here means "type" – Harvonah was a unique type of eunuch, different from all of the others. In Old French, "tipus" (some manuscripts read "typhus" and recommend quarantine, but these are largely discredited).

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, take this statement in the Talmud one step further and argue that "king" here refers not to Ahashverosh but to the King of Kings. Harvonah thus had the same status as Abraham, to whom the Holy One says, "Walk before Me" (Genesis 17:1). Harvonah, they note, was different from Abraham in one crucial way: he complained less.

Modern commentators speculate that the verse and its interpretation might be implying that King Ahashverosh was in fact also a eunuch, which could actually explain a lot.

"Rabbi Tzemah said in the name of Rabbi Yarok who learned it from his father Rabbi Shoshon: Harvonah cared for the earth and revered every work of creation, as it is written: *Hinei ha-etz* – behold the tree which has sprung from the earth that the Blessed Holy One has made."

Rashi quotes the Midrash, which relates that when Haman, may his memory be erased, tried to cut down a tree to build a gallows – or perhaps a stake – for Mordechai, Harvonah chained himself to that tree and refused to move. Haman would have chopped off his head, but Harvonah's neck miraculously turned to sapphire, and he was saved because of his tree-loving ways. For this alone he should be remembered for good, at least on Tu BiShvat.

Tosafot, thrilled at the chance, disagree violently with Rashi and argue that Harvonah's so-called love of creation was really only a cheap publicity stunt. They quote 34 other places in the Talmud that really have nothing to do with this issue but do demonstrate that A) they certainly knew more about the Talmud than we do, and B) Jews really had a lot of time on their hands in the middle ages.

Some modern commentators interpret the Talmudic statement to mean that Harvonah was the originator of the blessing over the fruit of the tree, *borei pri ha-etz*, and the more halachically minded among them argue that he should

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be remembered particularly when eating mangoes. They then excuse themselves and head off in the direction of the kitchen, mumbling something about needing a coffee break.

“Rabbi Talui said: It’s obvious that Harvonah was greater than the King! So why does the megillah need to point that out? If it didn’t say that, we might mistakenly think that the King only relied on Harvonah occasionally. To teach us otherwise [that the King depended on Harvonah for every decision], it was necessary for it to be written explicitly, as it is written explicitly: *Vayomer ha-melech t’luhu ‘alav* – The King advised everyone to depend on Harvonah just as he did.”

Rashi interprets this figuratively, meaning that Harvonah gave the King all of the information needed to understand what the King needed to do, though usually in obscure, difficult, and outmoded language that frustrated the King no end. Sound like anyone we know??

Tosafot say that Harvonah was able to draw parallels between every situation the King faced and thousands of other, quite dissimilar situations that other rulers had faced, and while that didn’t help the king, it did confuse him greatly, which improved rather than detracted from his decision-making powers.

Modern commentators have given up by this point in the argument and are having a wonderful time playing tiddly-winks in the lobby.

This concludes the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. Please always remember and never forget to donate generously to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation to continue its support of this lecture series. Note that many halachic authorities (only 99% of whom are closely connected to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation) argue that this support constitutes *matanot la’evyonim* – the mitzvah of giving gifts to those in need that is mandated on Purim. You can find the Foundation and donate on the web at:

[www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubey.org](http://www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubey.org)

Hag Sameah!