

Harvonah is widely known to be the best and most memorable of all of the eunuchs in the Megillah, which is really saying something. Harvonah is the only one said to be "*zachur latov*," "remembered for good." But despite his wide acclaim, there are certain aspects of Harvonah knowledge that are hidden as deeply and as mysteriously as the presence of the Holy One is hidden in the Megillah, as deeply and as mysteriously as the identity of Esther, the "*nistar*," the "hidden one," is hidden from King Ahashverosh, as deeply and as mysteriously as the funders of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation are hidden from the IRS. You might think that such deep and mysterious – did I say deep? – knowledge would be out of reach for all but the most learned. Happily, and I say this with great joy, you would be wrong, for the Harvonah Memorial Foundation was founded to spread the knowledge of Harvonah far and wide, or at least as far and wide as its budget will allow after expenses. For details on the Foundation's operations and a current financial statement, you can refer to the clear statement hidden in plain view on its website, written in the most popular dialect of ancient Hittite in 4 point type.

This year for our Harvonah Memorial Lecture, we will examine just one of the many ways in which knowledge of Harvonah and, indeed, his very identity is hidden in the Megillah. We will focus here on Chapter 2 and the mysterious – did I say mysterious? – character of Hegai. I am pleased to report that after much research, mostly done at McMenamin's and the High Point Café, the Harvonah Memorial Foundation has found the original manuscripts of the relevant tractate of the Talmud, Masechet Nistarot, and our lecture this year comes from the text and commentaries on page 14b:

"Rabbi Ne'elam said: How do we know that the eunuch known as Hegai is actually Harvonah himself? It is written about Hegai: *Hegai, shomer ha-nashim* – Hegai, the guardian of women [Esther 2:8]. And who is the guardian of women? Is it not he who guards the most important of women, Esther herself? And who is her guardian? Harvonah. How do we know? Do not read his name as Harvonah but rather as Harvon-ah – her swordsman, i.e., Esther's guardian. Learn from this that Harvonah was the guardian not only of Esther but of all of the women in the palace."

Rashi explains that the Talmud is not saying that Esther is *actually* the most important of all women, because that would be ridiculous; how important could one woman be? Instead, the Talmud is making a *kal vachomer* argument, which means "a rock and mud." If there is a guardian of women, he must guard Esther. If he guards Esther, he must be the guardian of Esther. If he is the guardian of Esther, then *a fortiori* he must be the guardian of all women. If this seems circular to you, read it again backwards.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, take this statement in the Talmud one step further and argue that one can also identify all of the other eunuchs mentioned in the Megillah with Harvonah, including Sha'ashgaz, Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and the famous Memucan, who gets a great though somewhat misogynist speech in Chapter 1. Tosafot prove that this is so by using gematria to show that the numerical value of each of their names actually adds up to 613, and if you add those numbers, you get 10, and if you multiply those numbers, you get zero, which is a not-so-subtle reference to the extent of their reproductive powers.

Modern commentators speculate that Harvonah's name was itself a not-so-subtle euphemism for precisely what he lacked, and they question the Talmud's focus on such things when they could have been having so much more productive conversations about the proper method for slaughtering the sin offering if, by chance, the Temple suddenly reappeared.

"Rabbi Hefech said to Rabbi Ne'elam: Really?! But don't we already know that Hegai is Harvonah just from what Hegai does? As it is written: *Vay'vahel et tamrukeihah* – And he hurried to give her the fruit of the palm tree [Esther 2:9]. And who would be familiar with palm trees? Only Harvonah, who says: *Hinei etz* – here is a tree [Esther 7:9].

Rashi quotes the Midrash, which relates that the fruit of the palm tree has been known since the time of the Judges as the source of courage, as it is told of Deborah that she would sit under a palm tree and that she had greater courage than even her general [Judges 4:5]. The palm tree is associated with Esther because it is a symbol of righteousness, as it is written: *tzadik katamar yifrah* – the righteous will fruit like the palm tree [Psalm 92:13]. It is also the only tree that can bend down to the ground without breaking, which is what Esther has to do when she goes to prostrate herself before the king. This also explains why King Ahashverosh extends his scepter to her, since he knows that she always carries good things to eat with her, and he is perpetually hungry.

Tosafot provide references for 23 recipes for dishes using dates in the Talmud. They also report that eating dates was believed to produce male children, which may also explain King Ahashverosh's enthusiasm for them. And they lament the fact that, living in Europe in the middle ages, their opportunities for actually eating dates – or, indeed, for doing anything that they read about in the Talmud – are extraordinarily limited.

"Rabbi Ne'elam responded to Rabbi Hefech: Oh really?! Haven't you heard what Rabbi Eitza said in the name of Rav Amur M'Rosh? Or some say it was someone else entirely. Anyway, he said: Hegai is an advisor, and Harvonah is an advisor. Hegai is an advisor, as it is written: When the turn came for Esther...to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised [Esther 2:15]. Harvonah is an advisor, as it is written: Harvonah said, "A stake is standing"...and the king said, "Impale him on it!" [Esther 7:9]. Could the advisor of the king be different than the advisor of the queen?! Therefore Hegai and Harvonah are one and the same.

The Rif was puzzled by this passage, as was the Rosh, the Rife, the Roof, and the Resh. None of them could understand the concept of a king or queen actually taking the advice of one of their advisors without checking with a focus group and the latest polling data first. Rashi interprets this figuratively, meaning that although Harvonah was an advisor to the king and to the queen, they both routinely ignored his advice and later blamed him for all of their bad decisions. Ramban quotes Rashi and then proceeds to disagree violently with him, arguing that Harvonah represents the ministering angels who are always giving advice to the King of Kings and whose advice deserves to be ignored, since they mostly aren't so thrilled with the whole creating humanity decision in the first place.

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The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's example by grabbing a sword, eating a lot of dates, and giving reams of advice to the first person you can find who seems likely to ignore you. Thus will we merit the coming of Moshiach, may it come speedily in our days, Amen, Selah.

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 paid advisors for 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!