

We all know the hallowed hymn *Shoshanat Ya'akov*, which was named after Ya'akov Avinu's little-known daughter Shoshanah, who later changed her name to Lily, then Rose, and then finally Susie (see the commentary of the Riv Banot in his *Sefer Vikuchei ha-Shem*). In that lovely song, Harvonah is the only eunuch designated as "*zachur la-tov*," "remembered for good." From the depths of Instagram to the thickets of Tumblr, from the intricacies of Facebook to the philosophical musings of Twitter, we here at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation have been trying, and trying, and trying for years to spread far and wide our core message of the fame, importance, and all-around overwhelming goodness of Harvonah, the best and the greatest of all eunuchs in the Megilah. And what could be more important than the legacy of a eunuch? But still, people keep asking us – or at least, we wish they would ask us – why Harvonah is so crucial, why his memory should be kept alive, and why we insist on wearing these awful robes every day.

For this reason, among others (including a handsome tax break), we think it is appropriate for us to sponsor this Harvonah Memorial Lecture each year on that holiday of holidays, Purim, the holiest of holy times, even though no one gets the day off. And this year, we are going to focus on an area that has been so ignored, so impoverished, so overlooked – did I say ignored? – in all the years of the study of Harvonah lore, that it embarrasses us to even mention it. Well, not really. But anyway, this year we want to plumb the depths, uncover what should be covered, cover what should be uncovered, and generally poke around in the riveting subject of the connection between the holy Harvonah and the equally holy (though perhaps not as well publicized) Land of Israel.

What's that you say? You don't know of any connections between Harvonah and the Land of Israel? A-ha! That is precisely the reason that the Harvonah Memorial Foundation needs your support, your assistance, and your secret Swiss bank account numbers. Only we are willing to do the hard work necessary to reveal the hidden knowledge of generations, for a small and very reasonable fee. This year, we have sent our researchers to Israel itself to undertake this immensely important task. They have been the very embodiment of perseverance, whether suffering through hot springs and vodka in the Galilee, examining clues on the beach in Eilat, sifting through evidence at Yitzik's Bar in Tel Aviv, or forcing themselves to drink yet another *café hafuch* at Aroma Café in Jerusalem. And their perseverance has been rewarded! Well, not by us, but come on, we're only a small non-profit. No, their perseverance has been spiritually rewarded. Or at least that's what they seem to be saying when we can wake them up. But we have the incontrovertible evidence in our hands: the original manuscripts of a heretofore unknown and perhaps unknowable tractate of the Talmud known as *Masechet Saris ha-Aretz*, and our lecture this year comes from the text and commentaries on page 17b:

"Rabbi Tzion said: From where do we know that the Megilah of Esther is connected to the Land of Israel? Does not the whole story take place outside of the Land? Rabbi Dimyon answered: We know it from a *hekesh* [lit.: a completely unsupported analogy] with the presence of the Holy One. Just as the Holy One is intimately involved in the details of the plot of the Megilah even though the Holy Name is never mentioned explicitly, so too is the Holy Land intimately involved in the story of the Megilah, even though the Holy Name of the Holy Land is Wholly Absent from the text."

Rashi raises the objection that there are, in fact, vague references to the Land of Israel in the text, or at least to Jerusalem (see the sad part at the

beginning of Chapter 2). So if the Land is in fact mentioned in the Megilah, then it follows from Rabbi Dimyon's reasoning that the Megilah has no connection to the Land at all. Because, as we all know, the fastest way to signal your interest in something is not to mention it, whereas the best way to ignore an issue is to talk about it all the time. Rashi formulates a general rule that what is essential is invisible to the eye, and consequently that what is visible to the eye is not essential. He then uses this as an excuse to parade around in quite embarrassing costumes on Purim, countering all objections in what he claims is Medieval French but which others have argued is gibberish.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, really line up to take shots at Rashi this time in every way possible, insisting that the connections between the Megilah and Israel are obvious to any thinking person, unlike a certain someone they could name. They quote Talmudic recipes, medical advice, formulas for love potions, stories about rabid bears, and thousands of completely fanciful definitions of perfectly clear Hebrew in order to definitively show that none of the other tractates of the Talmud actually deal with their purported subjects either. If the tractates of the Talmud can avoid the subject at hand so assiduously, how much more so can the Bible itself! Like, duh, Rashi!

Modern commentators point out that very name of the book, Esther, shows that the intent was to make its true subject "hidden" (*nistar*), and besides, who would seriously write a whole book that was supposed to interest Jews without mentioning Israel even once?? They also speculate that Talmud itself may be an elaborate attempt to hide any useful knowledge inside seemingly irrelevant discussions of eggs rolling off of nests and other such fascinating topics, which would really explain a lot.

"Rabbi Sifrut said to Rabbi Sittut in the name of Rabbi Lo Yadu'a but maybe it was in the name of Rav Mi Yodea: Why would you think that Harvonah had any knowledge of the Holy Land at all?? (Some editions add: You idiot!) Rabbi Sittut replied: It's obvious! Wasn't Harvonah the one who said, '*Hinei 'etz'* ('Behold – a tree') [Esther 7:9]?? Clearly he was referring to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that grew in the Garden of Eden, which everyone who is anyone knows was really in the Land of Israel. Harvonah had travelled to Israel and seen the Tree itself, which is why he was so adamant about helping the Jews. Besides, he really loved apples. Or maybe it was mangoes. Rabbi Sifrut replied: Ah, but perhaps it was a pomegranate tree! They argued and argued until Ima Ulai Yavo Shalom B'Sof came to settle the matter for them. She said: Foolish men! Really! Harvonah was born in the Land of Israel, as we can see from his name. Do not read 'Harvonah' but '*Haruv vo nah'* – 'There is fresh carob there.' Harvonah carries the sweet atmosphere of the Land of Israel with him at every moment, and his acts carry with them the holiness of the Land, which is the holiness of the Blessed Holy One."

Rashi finds 31 other places in the Bible in which trees appear, but none of them appear to be relevant. Finally he looks at the Midrash, which compares apples to mangoes to pomegranates. What does the apple represent? One who devours Torah but spits out the parts they don't like so much. What does the mango represent? One who consumes Torah carefully but finds an intractable pit at the center and decides to go into technical writing instead. What does the pomegranate represent? One who moves to Israel, forgets about studying Torah, but gets to eat pomegranates every day for breakfast,

each of which has 613 seeds, or maybe 248, or maybe 365, or maybe just 52, it depends. Rashi pretty much ignores the comments of Ima Ulai Yavo Shalom B'Sof, which is just so typical, you know? Instead, he proposes that perhaps Harvonah was just a fruity kind of guy who was a lot of fun on Tu BiSh'vat.

Tosafot have a field day finding all of the other stories in the Talmud about trees. There turn out to be 7,436, and they all disagree with each other. Tosafot solve the problem with gematria, showing that the numerical value of Harvonah's name is... exactly 7,436! Ok, it's not really, but they didn't have calculators, so what did they know? They do, however, notice Ima Ulai Yavo Shalom B'Sof and her comments, and they are quick to note that carob is just really not that tasty raw, so she must be wrong.

"Rav Muvan from Rosh said: What kind of commitment did Harvonah really have to the Land of Israel? Wasn't he all talk and no action? Rabbi Neshek ha-Galili replied: You can see from his name that he was ready to defend the Land at any time, in any place, with any speech. Do not read 'Harvonah' but 'Herev 'onah' – 'Sword of the season.' Harvonah was ready to do battle at any time to defend the Holy Land and its people. From a distance, ideally."

The Rif was puzzled by this passage, as was the Ruf, the Raf, and his cousin, HaRav Rif-Raf. What use would a sword be to Harvonah in defending the Jews? Instead, he suggested looking more closely and finding that Harvonah's true weapons were his words, the same words that he used so skillfully to alter the course of events and to provide for the downfall of the wicked Haman, may his name be erased (hopefully it was written in pencil). As it is written, "The pen is mightier than the sword." Unless you are the one with the pen.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's example by talking opponents to death, taking all of the fruit when their backs are turned, and trying to keep your name out of the newspapers so that you'll be sure that everyone is talking about 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 have at one time or another been 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. As a friendly reminder, you can find the Foundation and donate on the web at: [www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubeg.org](http://www.withoutharvonahwherewouldyoubeg.org)

Hag Sameah!