

Friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation – and just to enlarge the pool a little, we'll include acquaintances, passers-by, virtual strangers, and even those who simply once said a word that sounded like "Harvonah" by accident – we welcome you to the Harvonah Memorial Lecture for this year. But despite the fact that Purim is supposed to be a happy holiday (see our new book, "They Attacked Us, We Survived, Let's Eat: A Postmodern Symposium"), we have to report to you that the sage scholars of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation have been, until recently, much less than thrilled. They have instead been, and it's hard for us to say this, depressed beyond reason, wallowing in misery, and exploring the darkest depths of profound despair. To put a point on it, they've been sad. "How could that be?" we hear you cry. "Aren't they engaged in the most wonderful study of the marvels of Harvonah day and night, as it is written, 'You shall engage in them day and night?'" Well might you ask. And well, we might answer. Our scholars (did we mention that they were sage?) have been facing an existential crisis because of a thought that occurred to one of them one fine day when they were trying to gain inspiration in the traditional way, by playing a rousing game of croquet on the lawn (Babylonian version). This scholar (we are not releasing his name to protect his yichus) blurted out the following heretical thought to all of the assembled sages, to wit: "Could it be that the depths of Harvonah knowledge have already been fully plumbed? Could our work possibly be at – heaven forbid – its end?!!!" Several sages fainted and had to be revived with strong spirits (mostly on the rocks). Others staggered painfully to their beds (which they had made earlier), while still others stood in shock for several days (but were very useful as coat hangers).

Luckily, G-d is always good to us (at least on alternate Thursdays). Whenever in our lives we hit a wall (preferably at low speed and with no-fault insurance), G-d opens the heavenly storehouse of knowledge and vouchsafes unto us a ray of sunshine passing through an open window (hopefully on the ground floor) and shining its light into the highly trained heads of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation (luckily they were empty to receive it). And so it was this time, heaven be praised. Just at the very moment of the deepest despair, a sage (or maybe rosemary) scholar found an unknown manuscript filed in plain sight in a locked file cabinet hidden in a sub-basement room with a sign on the door saying, "Beware of the leopard." And this manuscript held such amazing new thoughts about Harvonah and his importance to the Purim story that we felt compelled (since we couldn't come up with anything else) to share it with you this year.

This manuscript appears to be an otherwise unknown Talmudic tractate that is completely focused on explicating the hidden messages contained in the names of all of the people in the Tanach. Providentially (from our perspective at least) this text, known as *Masechet Shemot ha-Shem*, includes the subject closest to our hearts, the very name of names, our own Harvonah. And so we bring you for our lecture this year the text and commentaries found on page 340a:

"Rabbi Shemshem taught: Harvonah is the most important person in the Megilah because he contains the qualities of all of the other characters. And what is the sign of it? His name, of course [a margin note adds 'you dodos,' but its origin is unclear]. The first letter [*het*] stands for King Ahashverosh, teaching that Harvonah had great wisdom [*hochmah*] just as the King had wisdom. The second letter [*resh*] stands for Queen Esther, teaching that Harvonah's role in the Purim story was hidden [*nistar*] just as Esther hid her Jewish identity from the King. The third letter [*bet*] stands for Bigtan, teaching that Harvonah's work was revealed [*b'galui*] in the end [in Esther

7:7], just as Bigtan's plot to kill the King was revealed [to Mordechai in Esther 2:22]."

Rashi almost has apoplexy at the idea that the King had any wisdom. "Is it not well known that the King was a fool?! *Idiote* in Old French. Clearly the plain meaning of the text is here completely wrong." He then quotes a midrashic text completely unknown to everyone except Rashi in which Ha-Leitzan Ha-Ma'aravi argues that far from Harvonah being like the King, Harvonah was in fact the opposite: he had no interest in wives, eschewed drinking, and had a thought in his head other than "Doh!" Harvonah was the source of the King's wisdom, such as he possessed, not the other way around. Rashi then compares this passage about the King to every other passage about kings in the Tanach, finding that all kings are, to put it charitably, a bit faulty, and suggesting that maybe an autonomous socialist collective would really be an ideal form of government. He then takes a well-deserved break in the vineyard, muttering something about finding wisdom at the bottom of the cup.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, are fascinated – not by the actual meaning of this passage, but by the fact that it compares Harvonah to both a king and a queen. They catalog every other place in the Talmud where a person is compared to a king or a queen, postulate that they all actually refer to masculine and feminine aspects of G-d, suggest that this means that the Holy One is being represented on earth in human form, then abruptly realize that this is the wrong religion and trail off in a pool of ink. Coming to, they do what they do best, change the subject, and they calculate the gematria of Harvonah's name as 271, try to find another name with that value, fail, and spend the remainder of their time blaming each other for their theological shortcomings.

Modern commentators note that the first 3 letters of Harvonah's name spell "sword" [*herev*] and get so distracted by the fact that a eunuch would be identified with exactly what he lacks that they fall into an ecstasy of literary theory and have to be shaken out of it. When they refocus, they note that Bigtan has a pretty small role in the Purim story as we have it, but they theorize that he must have once loomed large – I mean, he is named Bigtan! – and reconstruct an apocryphal "Book of Bigtan" that really looks like it could be a big seller if they could ever find a publisher.

"Rabbi Hatzi continued: *Ta Sh'ma!* [literally, an Indian drum, but here meaning 'listen to me, not him!'] The fourth letter [of Harvonah's name, *vav*] stands for Queen Vashti, teaching that Harvonah refused to bend his will to another just as Queen Vashti refused to bend her will to the King's. The fifth letter [*nun*] stands for the wicked Haman, teaching that Harvonah carefully chose his day to act just as Haman carefully chose his day to act against the Jews. Rabbi Pliga objected: But was not the date for Purim chosen by lot [*hipill pur*] [Esther 3:7]? Rav B'hira responded: Don't read *hipill pur* ['the lot fell'] but *nafal p'ri* ['the fruit fell']. Haman chose the day on which the fruit of Israel [maybe a grapefruit?] would fall. Rabbi Hatzi continued: As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, the sixth letter [*heh*] stands for Mordechai Ha-Yehudi, teaching that Harvonah was the true hero of the story."

Rashi comes back to work just in time to comment that this entire passage would really make a lot more sense in Aramaic. He sighs heavily and then gets to work arguing that Vashti's strength of will is in fact a negative trait, that Mordechai is too the hero (don't listen to what Esther has to say about it) and that the word *pur* means neither "lot" nor "fruit" but something else that no one else agrees with but they have to accept it because Rashi says it's true and then starts rattling off Old French phrases until they give up. He then asserts that it makes no sense to say that the *heh* in Harvonah's name stands for Mordechai, so that proves that the name must have originally been Harvonam, and he proves this by marshalling 13 references to books of the Tanach that no one else has even heard of, let alone read.

Tosafot get really excited about Queen Vashti – they love Queen Vashti – and they spend a lot of time searching through the rest of the Talmud for anything related to her, which involves a lot of creative spelling and speculative leaps that make sense only to them. Unfazed, they begin to explain how they are like Vashti, how Rashi is like Esther, and how the Talmud is like a giant pot of stew poured into a lake, except in Aramaic. They then lapse into exchanging recipes and adjourn to make pastries in the shape of Vashti's crown.

Modern commentators notice that this passage parallels both the action of the Book of Esther and the celebration of Purim as it turns everything on its head, and they say *v'nahafoch hu* ["the opposite happened"] to themselves many times, nodding sagely. They then find scholarly texts that liken Purim to Carnival, April Fool's Day, and Sadie Hawkins and explain that this is why they never got to go to that dance in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Pulling it together, they stand on their heads for a while, claim that now everything is perfectly clear, but are unable to stand afterwards and have to crawl to the bar, where they raise a glass to erudite existentialism – many, many glasses.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's heroic example by accumulating as much wisdom as possible, biding your time, and then springing it on people when they least expect it, resulting in (we hope) a large (figurative) reward (but we'll take cash or check). Thus will we merit the time 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!