

Dear friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation, this has been for us, as we know it has for you, a trying year (at least we tried). We have been isolated from you (you never called, but we know you missed us). We have been isolated from each other (which was, frankly, a relief). And—in a mystical way that we can't understand even though we've spent years trying—we've been isolated from ourselves (really, we barely recognize ourselves in the mirror and have to shuffle uncomfortably by ourselves in the hall). We even, and we know this will come as a great shock to you (maybe you'd better sit down), we even have felt, at times, isolated from the *shefa*, the great flow of Harvonah knowledge that nourishes the world (hey, it puts bread on our tables). Suffice it to say that we have, in our own small way here at the only foundation in the world dedicated to the most important Biblical figure of all time, we have, as we were saying, in our own small way, suffered (mostly fools, and not particularly gladly). And we are thankful, grateful, nay overwhelmed with gratitude (did we mention we were lonely?) to have this opportunity to connect with you at Purim this year (wait, are we muted?).

Have we ever gone through such an experience before? Has such isolation ever been visited upon the world? Have we been wearing these same robes for the last six months? As we know, "there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9) (the moon is quite a different story), and although our current situation seems unprecedented (sorry, that word has now been retired), and we might despair of finding guidance about how to make it through from a certain holy eunuch of our acquaintance, fear not! (We know you were afraid; we certainly were!) Through enormous efforts, usually undertaken in the middle of the night (we can't sleep) by the light of a candle (we guess we should have paid the electric bill) fortified by faith (100 proof) and love for Harvonah (he really was one special eunuch), we have succeeded in plucking triumph from the jaws of defeat (which really could use a dentist), light from darkness (is our camera off?), happiness from depression (oy), joy from sorrow, honor from shame (does anyone want to make Havdalah?), and a slim chance of paying our bills from.... Well, anyway, the point is that we have found just the guidance we and everyone else (for a small fee) needs to get us through these difficult times, contained in a previously—sadly but understandably—neglected tractate known as Masechet Hitbodedut, and our study this year is found on page 137a:

"Rabbi Badad Boded taught: From where do we know that Harvonah demonstrated proper social distancing by going alone to inquire of Queen Vashti whether she would come before the King? As it is written, 'the word of the King was conveyed by the *yad* ['hand,' singular] of the eunuchs' [Esther 1:12]. Now, do the seven eunuchs have only one hand?! But Harvonah was called the *yad* of the eunuchs because he was the one who would cause the downfall of the wicked Haman, descendant of Amalek, as it is written, 'Hand [*yad*] upon the throne of the LORD! [The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages]' [Exodus 17:16]. *D'var aher* [literally, 'a different plague,' but here meaning 'I want to say something completely unrelated']:
The word of the king was conveyed by only one of the eunuchs, by Harvonah, because he was the least prone of the eunuchs to dissemble or to disregard the word of doctors on his own initiative, as his name indicates: [by rearranging its letters we get] *bahur na* ['raw youth'], as it is written with regard to Pesah, *al tochlu mimenu na* [literally, 'please don't touch my meal!' but here meaning 'do exactly what I say!']. Harvonah not only went alone to see the Queen, he was the only one who understood that her seclusion was a selfless act to protect the king and court from contagion. Queen Vashti knew the dangers of exposure well, and she would not take

that risk. Therefore she refused to come, as it is written, *va-t'ma-en* [literally, 'what am I sitting in?' but here meaning 'not on your life!']."

Rashi gets very exercised by the mention of the word *yad* ['hand'], which it turns out appears 140 times in the Tanach, including 8 times in the Megilah itself, and he catalogues all of its many and varied meanings, finding that if you read Harvonah into each instance, you get...well, you get a lot of nonsense, but this is just what you do; how else can you understand anything? He then gets distracted by the reference to the Pesah sacrifice and spends the rest of his time giving recipes for various different kinds of matzah sandwiches, none of which could be eaten raw [*croque monsieur plat* in Old French], on the strict advice of his doctor.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, are fascinated by the idea of seclusion, and they reference 42 other stories about seclusion in the Talmud, most of which involve men living in caves rather than queens living in palaces. They conclude that the "palace" in which Vashti is secluded must actually be a clever analogy for the heavens in which the Blessed Holy One is secluded, and they wax rhapsodic about the possibility of encountering the feminine aspect of G-d by, paradoxically, remaining alone for long periods of time, which pretty much convinces them to just keep doing what they're doing.

Modern commentators find that almost all of the instances of the word *yad* in the Megilah refer, in fact, to eunuchs! Ah-hah! Perhaps eunuchs are not as, uh, powerless one might suppose (think about it)! They feel that this must indicate a secret relationship between Harvonah and Vashti, and they speculate that this, and not the business with refusing to come to the party, was actually the source of the rift between Vashti and the king. They toss around the word "carnavalesque" for a while just for fun before gearing up for a pitched battle over the gender identity of eunuchs, finishing off the day with a round of croquet with mixed drinks and hors d'oeuvres, all served raw, just because.

"Rav Levad came from Babylonia and said: *Hachi ka amar Rav* [literally, 'hey, cool camera, dude!' but here meaning 'you have no idea what you're talking about!']. Queen Vashti's concern was not social distancing but masking, as it is written, *Vashti ha-Malkah 'as'tah mishtei nashim* ['Queen Vashti was made of two women,' i.e., two different parts of her were visible above and below her mask] [Esther 1:9]. Harvonah, too, was punctilious about wearing a mask, which is why he was the only one of the eunuchs to have been traveling safely out and about the city of Shushan and able to see the huge stake [other manuscripts read: gallows] that Haman had constructed in his yard, as it is written, [Harvonah said] 'a stake is standing at Haman's house, 50 cubits high' [Esther 7:9]. But Rabbi Ein Li Zug replied: *P'shita!* [literally, a mixed drink, but here meaning 'not so fast, bucko!']. Since the stake [or as some say, gallows] was so high, everyone could see it even from seclusion. Rather Harvonah's willingness to point out Haman's hubris was evidence of his great humility, which made him hesitate to impose his company on anyone, since he was more concerned with their safety than with his own. Queen Vashti, too, was more concerned with social distancing than anything else, which is why she left the kingdom to pursue a more solitary path, as it is said, 'Go for [or by] yourself!' [Genesis 12:1].

Rashi begins a long disquisition on tales of two women in the Tanach, including Lot's daughters, Rachel and Leah, and Pharaoh's daughter and Miriam. He finds ways to read into each text that they were actually one woman who appeared to be two, or maybe two women who appeared to be four, or perhaps 10 women who appeared to be 613 [*bêtises* in Old French]. He then switches to an otherwise unknown midrash, quotes Sifrei, Sifri, the Mekhilta, and his mother, before dismissing them all as insufficiently motivated by the plain sense of the text (especially his mother), but by then he's forgotten where he was headed and slips off to the vineyard for a much deserved...respite.

Tosafot debate how far away one could see a 50 cubit stake, but because they can't agree on how long a cubit is, whether it was a stake or a gallows, how big Shushan was, or what shape the earth is, they get nowhere pretty fast, but at great length (though not height). They note that Rav Levad, being from Babylon, may have been reflecting a Babylonian custom of masking, and they search through every mention of him in the Talmud to find evidence, only to discover that Rav Levad never appears with any other rabbi, leading them to think that maybe whatever he's trying to say isn't so important after all. Or is it more important than anything else? Well, one of those; there's so much Aramaic, it's anyone's guess.

Modern commentators jump to the conclusion that the Purim custom of masquerade may have stemmed from Vashti's penchant for masking, so that a seemingly "irrational" custom may have had a scientific basis after all, so take that you rationalist STEM types! Going further, because why not, they speculate that the Talmud is hinting at a custom of double masking, which they immediately adopt for themselves but find that dressing up as both Vashti and Harvonah is a lot harder than it seems. Depressed, they console themselves by calculating exactly how far a 50-150 foot stake could be seen given the curvature of the earth, deriving the precise dimensions of Shushan, and creating a scale model out of toothpicks that they present at several conferences before that unfortunate accident with the Irish setter. But at least they got the photo for the article, so that's what counts.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's heroic example by wearing as many masks as possible, staying at least 50 cubits from everyone, and hoping desperately that everything turns out all right, 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, hopefully by next Purim, 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

Hag Sameah!