

O friend of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation (there must be at least one), it has been a long, long, long, long time (from what we can tell; we're still working out which one is the hour hand). We know how you have lamented (at least so we thought), how you have cried (or maybe they were tears of joy?), how your hearts have been bereft (perhaps get your blood pressure checked?) in these long days, months and years when we have remained silent (except for the laughing) and have not provided to the world the wisdom (so-called), the wit (we thought it was funny), and the insight (we were getting our eyes checked) that you have come to expect, nay, to rely on from the Harvonah Memorial Foundation. We feel your pain (we step on each other's feet a lot), and we have come back to say never fear (at least not those who owe you money)! We are back (or butterfly, whichever), and we are ready to present to you (it's a gift) the learning we have gained (at great personal cost) to bring to those who are ready to receive it (ok, so maybe you do have to pay).

But what, you could reasonably ask (reason not being our strong suit), have the rabbis and sages (we don't know what they do but they smell nice) of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation been doing in their long (we look better in a slim), painful (at least to us) absence? The answer is: we have been taking the advice of the ancient teacher who said, "Everything you need to know, you learned in kindergarten" (ok, we may have done some interpretation). That clearly (to us, but our glasses are always dirty) teaches that to learn the true secrets of the Megillah, we must go back further than the words of the Megillah itself (so wordy). We must go back to the source (roll the tape!). We must go back to the beginning (if we can count back that far). We must do the unexpected (just as we thought). We must look in...the Torah itself!

We can hear you crying (maybe you're just tired), "How could the Torah hold wisdom about the Megillah?! Didn't the events of the Megillah happen hundreds of years after the events described in the Torah?" Well, as the ancient rabbis taught, "*Ein mukdam u'm'uchar ba'Torah*" (Pesachim 6b; literally, "a spring is a terrible place to keep a Torah scroll," but here meaning "the rabbis couldn't tell time"). The Torah in fact contains the whole story of the Megillah, albeit (we just really wanted to use that word) in coded form. How do we know? What do you think we've been doing all this time? Twiddling our thumbs? (It's actually more challenging than it sounds.). We have been searching the depths (about 10 meters) and breadth (uh, more than that) of all of rabbinic literature to find the hidden, secret, coded (did we say it was really hard to find?) messages that explain how we find the Megillah wrapped inside the very words of the Torah (kind of like a turducken). And you, dear friends of the Harvonah Memorial Foundation (see, now we think at least two might have shown up), have the good fortune (which we'd like just a little piece of), the privilege (which makes giving to foundations like ours so necessary), and the luck (just like the Jews! Just kidding) to be the first to hear the sacred, illuminating (someone turned on the light), and challenging words of the recently discovered (with the ink somehow still wet) Talmudic work, *Masechet Hochmah Reishit*, and we begin our study on page 13:146d.16 (no, we don't understand the reference numbers either):

"Rav Ganenet asked: Is it possible that King Achashverosh appears in the Torah? Rabbi Katan answered: *Hen!* [literally, 'a chicken,' but here meaning, 'duh!']. As it is written in the Book of Genesis: '*Ha-maloch timloch 'aleinu im mashol timshol banu*' [Genesis 37:8; literally, 'A king should set a good example,' but here meaning, 'a king will rule over us and control our every move']. Do not read '*ha-maloch*' ['will he rule'] but '*ha-melech*' ['the king']. And which king controls every move of the Jews

more than King Achashverosh, who holds the Jews of Shushan's very lives in his hand?! But Rav Ganenet struck back: *P'shita!* [literally, a type of nut, but here meaning, 'you are super dumb']. Maybe the King is there, but not Queen Vashti! Rabbi Katan said: You're making this too easy! Take a gander at the Book of Exodus: '*V'shati et g'vulcha*' [Exodus 23:31]. This is a clear reference to Vashti breaching the boundaries of the kingdom and then being placed outside of them when she heroically refuses to obey the king. He replied: Ok, but bet you can't find the evil Haman [Boo!] anywhere in the Torah! They said to her [no one can keep track of person or gender in the Talmud], '*Ini?!*' [literally, a ninny, but here meaning, 'you are really asking for it']. That's the easiest thing in the world. As it says in the Book of Numbers, '*Yered Ha-man 'alav*' [Numbers 11:9]. Do not read '*ha-man*' ['the manna'] but rather '*Haman*' ['big evil nasty guy, wears three-cornered hat, loves butter, hates Jews']. The clear meaning is 'Haman came down on them,' referring to the time when the evil Haman sought to destroy the Jewish people [Esther 3 and so on]."

Rashi, who just loves finding references to things in other things, quickly compiles a list of all of the characters in the Tanach and where they can be found outside of their own books, but he gets stumped by Zephaniah and gives up. Instead, he quotes an otherwise unknown midrashic source that explains away each of these Talmudic comparisons by using obscure grammatical rules only known to medieval scholars who own vineyards but never seem to work at them much. He then concludes that the plain sense of the text plainly contradicts the plain story of the Megillah, and goes off muttering with a nice bottle of Bordeaux and a very large glass.

Tosafot, the great medieval commentators, find ten other examples of each of these names in the Torah, and they have a wonderful time making midrashic hay out of what the implications might be for the meaning of the Megillah, but by the time they have married Haman off to Mordechai and installed Vashti as the true King, they get confused and lose interest. Instead, they decide to take a field trip to Grandpa Rashi's vineyard, where they find that all questions are really best resolved by looking at them through a glass, or many glasses.

Modern commentators are so excited because this proves without a doubt their latest theory that the Torah is actually the very last thing in the Tanach to be written, mostly by the important but under-studied source known as FU (for reasons that escape them). They each quickly write papers and submit them to all the best journals, but when none of them are accepted, they get grumpy and for some reason shout the name of their source at each other, which makes them feel a lot better, at least for a little while.

"Rav Riv came from Babylonia and interjected: We know that the names of those who oppose us can appear in the Torah, just as in the case of Balak [see Numbers 22 and so on and so on]. But where are the names of our heroes? Rabbi Robby responded: *Hachi kamar kra* [literally, an ancient martial art, but here meaning 'the Torah says whatever we say it says!']: As it is written in the book of Exodus: *Rosh mar-d'ror* [Exodus 30:23; literally, what we get after eating horseradish at the seder, but here a clear reference to Mordechai]. Who is the 'head who leads us from bitterness to freedom?' Only Mordechai, whose name itself means 'from bitterness to life.' Rav K'ev said: But you trip on your own almond tree [a metaphor that only makes sense in Aramaic]. For where oh where is the heroine of our story, the

mighty Queen Esther?! Her name is missing from the Torah entirely! But Rabbi T'shuvah answered: Of course her name is missing! [Some manuscripts add 'you freaking idiot.'] Does not her name itself mean 'hidden?' So too is her name hidden in the Torah! And how do we know all of this? Only through the wisdom of Harvonah, who had the ability to remember all the teaching he had ever heard, as it is said, '*Harvonah zachur la-tov*' – 'Harvonah had a great memory.'"

Rashi, who seems to have memorized the entire Tanach and almost all the Talmud, immediately identifies with Harvonah and catalogs all of the other places in Biblical and Talmudic literature where eunuchs reveal special talents that save the day [turns out there are more than you'd think]. He then moves on to note that what is hidden is always most important and gives a disquisition on the *halom haser* that puts everyone to sleep, including Rashi. When they all wake up, they've forgotten about the whole thing and disappear themselves from the house of study to the house of drinking in imitation of the action of the Megillah itself, their highest form of praise.

Tosafot amuse themselves by enumerating all of the places that a "hidden" word could really make a lot of difference, and they end up permitting everything that is forbidden and forbidding everything that is permitted, which makes them simultaneously the most sought after and the most reviled sages of their era. They wake up suddenly and resolve to never use that invisible ink trick again, and seal the deal with a fine glass of wine, and another, and ok, maybe just one more.

Modern commentators note that the hiddenness of Esther evokes the hiddenness of the Holy One in the whole Megillah, and they have a ball making Esther into the feminine aspect of the divine throughout the text, which does finally get them published, get them cushy academic jobs, and launch them on their next project of outlining the true ancient Hebrew religion, Esther-ism. That one, somehow, never really takes off.

The experts at the Harvonah Memorial Foundation recommend that all who want to view themselves as righteous should follow Harvonah's heroic example by listening very carefully, remembering everything, and waiting for just the right moment to spring it on people, 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!