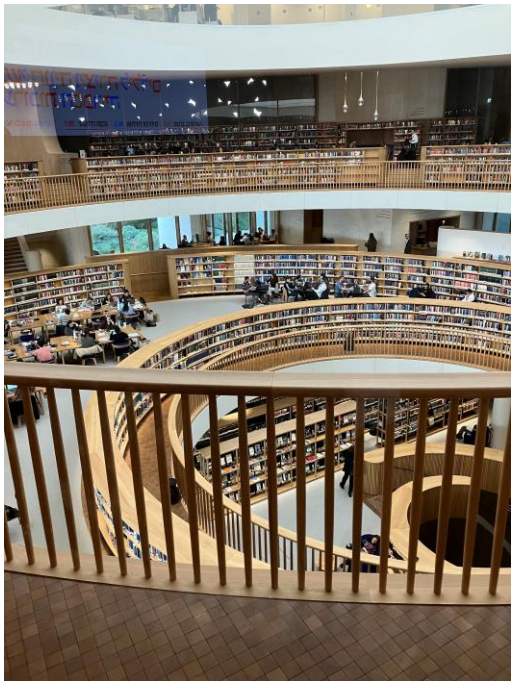
**Harvonah Memorial Lecture 5786: Esther 4:16 (by Student Rabbi Maria Pulzetti)**
*Sponsored by the Harvonah Memorial Foundation*

As I already shared with you, I recently had the wonderful experience of visiting the new National Library of Israel in Jerusalem. It's in a stunning building with a beautiful reading room:

I told you about the spiritual experience of visiting the library, but today is my first chance to share with you some research I did while I was there. My research was funded by the Harvonah Memorial Foundation, may Harvonah be remembered for good. Notably, it's the first time the Foundation has worked with a woman, but I fit right in!

On my trip, I was learning about Israeli approaches to food insecurity. When I decided to visit the library, I thought I could learn something about food insecurity and relate it to Purim. After all, the day before Purim is a fast day. What could make Jews feel more insecure about food than a fast day? Did you ever notice people want to know **exactly** when the fast ends; we can't say "dinnertime" or "dark;" people want to know that it ends at 6:34 PM!

I wanted to study the passage in the Megillah when Esther declares the fast. It's chapter four, verse 16: לך כנוס את
"Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"

A three-day fast seems like a whole lot of food insecurity. I had to take a closer look.

As we know, the book of Esther was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. – although I point you to an important article with a groundbreaking recent discovery about the Dead Sea Scrolls. TheTorah.com, which sounds like a bad joke about capitalism, but which is actually a

source of serious Biblical scholarship, published this discovery. Remarkably, TheTorah.com put out this article a couple of years ago *on Purim*! Imagine that timing! For your further study, the article is on our minyan bulletin board.

Anyway, I knew I wasn't going to find the Megillah in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But the National Library has one of the largest collections of manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza. What a blessing that I was able to study this fragment, which includes the verse I was looking for, Esther 4:16.[1]




[1] This manuscript, and the fragment on the third slide, both use a form of shorthand for Biblical texts that is common in Cairo Geniza manuscripts of the Psalms and Esther. It is called "lemma," and it involves writing the first few words of a verse as a reminder, and then skipping to the next verse like a cute skipping lemming. Scholars think it may indicate that these manuscripts were written as aids for memorization or pest control. For a study of this practice and its implications, please see "Abbreviated Bible Manuscripts in the Cairo Genizah: An Analysis of Form and Function," published in the journal TEXTUS.

The writing on this fragment is clear in a lot of places, although of course, it's a fragment, and a lot of things are missing. "Missing" means there are giant holes, and some letters are completely unreadable. But on the third line, in the middle, you can see לך כנוס את, the beginning of verse 4:16.

The words I am interested in come right after Esther says there's going to be a fast, no eating or drinking, and she says:

שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וְיוֹם

"Three days, night and day": a three-day fast.

It's not so easy to read those words in this manuscript. However, of course, scholars who spend their entire careers staring at fragments of parchment like this have been able to decode the words, and they discovered something remarkable:

We have been reading the letters wrong! Admit it, it's not easy to read these things, right? Rather than:

שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וְיוֹם

This manuscript says:

שלשון ים ימל[א]ה להיום

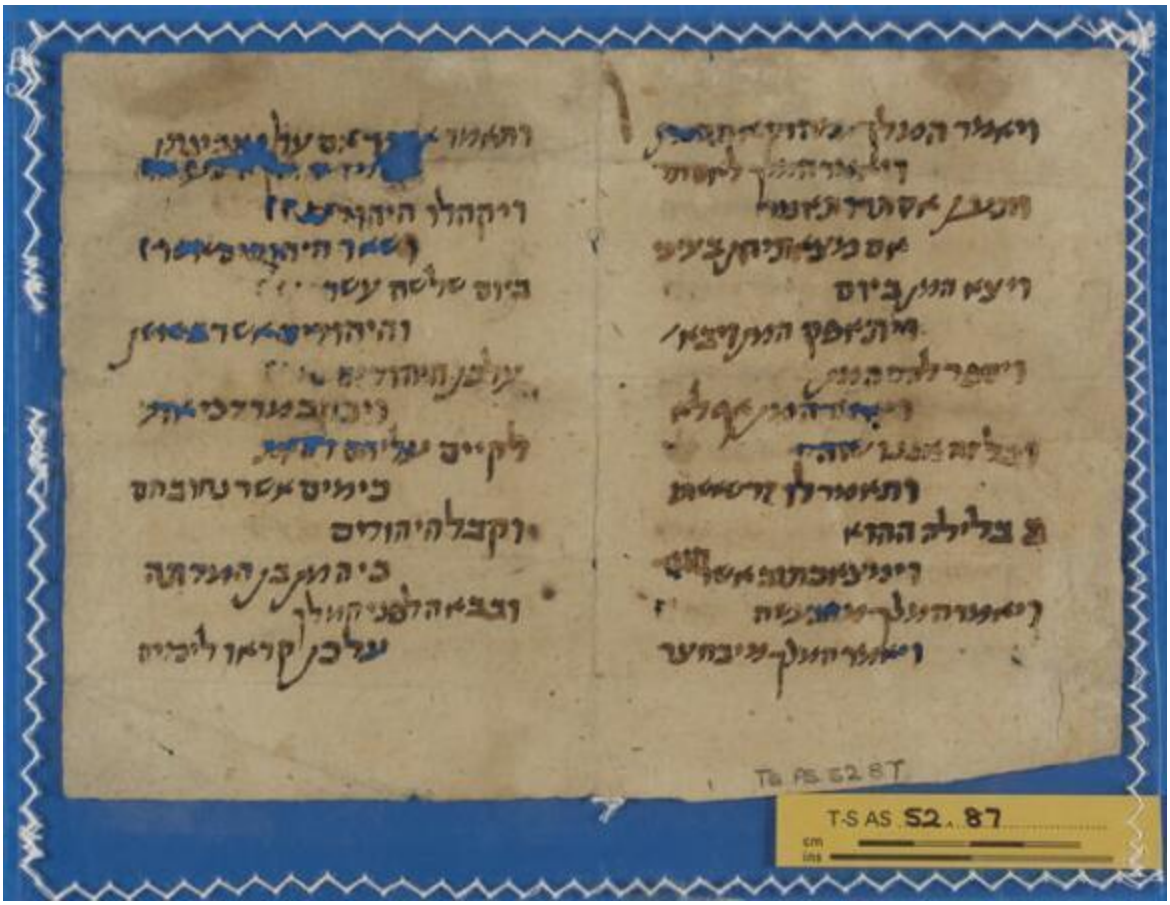
Which means: "Of the language of the Sea, he will fill her for today."

That might sound a little bit cryptic, or inappropriate, but don't worry, scholars have discerned that it is about scribal practice. Esther was saying okay, there's a fast, no drinking or eating, but she doesn't say it's three days, *shloshet yamim*. She says that it should be written like the Song of the Sea, a writing style she calls *Lashon Yam*, Language of the Sea. We'll forgive Esther for omitting the definite article. It probably should have been *lashon ha-yam*, but as we all know, Esther's formal education was rudely interrupted by being forced to live in the king's harem.

Despite the interruption in her education, Esther knew a lot about the Torah, and she knew that the Song of the Sea is written in a particular way in the Sefer Torah. She wants the rest of the Megillah (in this phrase, the Megillah is the "her", e.g. "*yimalehah*," "he will fill the Megillah") filled up by the scribe using the distinctive layout of the Song of the Sea, not the typical layout of double-justified columns.

This reading is consistent with our current practice of a one-day fast. That's pretty persuasive. I mean, have you ever seen anyone doing a three-day fast before Purim?

Friends, with my generous sponsor paying the way, I didn't stop there! I found another fragment of the Esther manuscript from the Cairo Geniza. This one shows some verses of chapters 5 and 6, and just as Esther called for, it is written like the Song of the Sea, in that distinctive layout:




It's not double-justified columns! It's like Shirat HaYam! This is another piece of little-known but highly persuasive evidence supporting the scholars' reading *she'lashon yam*, of the language of the Sea!

If you remember back to a couple of years ago, our siyyum for Ta'anit Bechorot (fasts are a theme!) was tractate Sofrim, the minor tractate of the Talmud that focuses on writing sacred texts. In Sofrim, we learned that the layout for Shirat HaYam, the Song of the Sea, is called a half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half brick. As the rabbis teach, that is a strong way to build. It endures.

Sofrim also teaches that the names of the sons of Haman in Chapter 9 of the Megillah should be written as a half brick over a half brick, and a full brick over a full brick. That's how their names are written in the Megillah. Think about making a tower of single bricks, versus an interlocking stack of bricks. The interlocking stack is going to be stronger and more stable, and the single stack is going to wobble. The ancient rabbis say in Sofrim: Haman's sons are written in that wobbly layout, because "Such a structure does not endure." As the story goes, Haman's sons certainly do not endure.

This is what I learned: in proposing a fast, a one-day fast *she-lashon yam*, of the language of the Sea, Esther was attempting to shift the entire rest of the Megillah toward a redemption that could be more enduring, toward a redemption like the crossing of the Sea. If

only, from that single day of the fast, the rest of the Megillah was full of enduring redemption, not unstable revenge fantasies.

Esther knew that stacking up the deaths of one's enemies, one after another after another, at a breathtaking pace, would not be a long-term resolution for the threats facing her people. Esther tried to warn us, but for generations, our tradition has not heeded her warning, and still today we read, incorrectly, "שלושת ימים לילה ויום."

* * *

Once again, I'd like to express my gratitude to the Harvonah Memorial Foundation for the generous funding for this research, and for investing in the Torah learning of a rabbinical student. Speedily and in our days may I no longer be a student, *Amen, selah*! Hag Purim Sameah!