

“Haman, Gaza, and Jewish Unity”

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

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The Book of Esther is an account of Haman’s personal vendetta against the Jewish people. The ruse he employed to win the king over has provided a paradigm for antisemites throughout the ages: “There is a people, scattered and dispersed among the nations in your kingdom, whose laws (*dateihem*) are different from those of all other people, and the king’s laws (*datei ha-melech*) they do not observe” (Est. 3:8).

A wicked canard. Yet also a clever psychological ploy on Haman’s part, to paint the Jews as subversive elements guilty of undermining the cohesion of the state. The king felt that he had no choice, therefore, but to accede to his chief minister’s call for their destruction.

Haman also knew how to use language to his advantage. He tellingly employed the identical word, *dat* – the same word in Persian and Hebrew – to convey the sense of two clashing legal systems. This notion of conflict was, of course, a falsification, for, although the Jews did possess their own *dat*, in the sense of a code of religious law and practice, this would never have constituted a threat to state law.

Indeed, Judaism’s ethical, moral, and behavioural, imperatives, were sufficient to guarantee smooth social integration on the part of its adherents, and its legal system was sufficiently malleable as to enable it to identify with the principles governing any other enlightened society. This characteristic was articulated by the great Talmudist, Shemuel (3rd cent. CE), in just three words which established forever the basis for harmonious diaspora living: *Dina d’malchuta dina* – ‘the (civil) law of the land is your law’ (Tal. *Gitt*.10b; *Ned*. 28a). Significantly, though his Talmudic colleagues expressed differing views on most other matters, Shemuel’s principle was never contested.

Haman’s allegation was also a non-sequitur. For, just because Jews might have possessed their own religious code, it did not follow that they could “not be subject to the king’s law.” This was because there was no Persian law restricting the religious life of minority religions. To the contrary: Although Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the empire from the 6th century BCE, Persia nevertheless welcomed and supported a host of other religions. Thus, the

mission of Ezra the Scribe to Judea (circa 457 BCE), to reorganize and galvanize religious life there following the Babylonian exile, was under the patronage of the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes 1, the same monarch (if the scholarly identification is correct) who elevated Mordechai to the position of Chief Minister. He and Nehemiah would hardly have been appointed to such positions had their coreligionists been under any suspicion of ‘not observing the king’s laws.’

The demands of Judaism’s religious code have never conflicted with those of any enlightened state system, a fact reinforced by the term ‘the Judeo-Christian tradition.’ Haman’s big lie was also exposed, ironically, by the fact that it was the later development of Talmudic law in Babylon – a diaspora community under neo-Persian rule – that became the basis for the codification of Jewish law, rather than the Talmud of Eretz Yisrael!

In ancient Babylon, Halachah made room for state law. In contemporary Israel, however, there is a powerful and uncompromising religious lobby committed to the insular view that it need take no account of secular reality, that the sensitivities of the irreligious may be disregarded, and religious practice imposed upon them without a thought for the consequences. It is a dangerous view because Israel’s secular society’s resentment of Judaism has largely morphed into what has been described as a hatred of those who adhere to it. This situation has been exacerbated by the younger generation of Russian immigrants who, though possessing Israeli citizenship, having served in the army, and having become fully integrated into Jewish society, have yet been denied recognition as Jews by the rabbinate.

For who is like Your people, Israel, a unified nation in the land (II Sam. 7:23). The situation we have described risks destroying that unity by compartmentalizing its citizens into those who are viewed as intrinsic members of *dateihem* – the Jewish fraternity – and those who are merely ‘Israeli’, and subject exclusively to *datei ha-melech*, state law.

It is time for this class division to be swept away, and for the Chief Rabbinate to give practical recognition to the immense sacrifice made by the latter toward the defence of the land, especially during the recent traumatic period of the war against Hamas. It is time to adopt the Hillelite approach of ‘welcoming under the wings of the Shechinah’ all who desire conversion. This can only be done by making the process as expeditious as possible and by compromising on some unnecessarily rigorous standards.

A further step toward achieving that unity is for national service to be made obligatory for all. In the words of the Talmud, 'Who says that your blood is redder than your fellow's. Perhaps his is redder than yours?' (*San. 74a*). Hence, one may not save one's own life at the expense of that of another. A brave step in that direction has been made by the Chabad movement as well as the Netzach Yehudah Charedi battalion of the army whose members did not avail themselves of the exemption from army service unwisely granted to the rest of their fraternity, including the impressive number of other Charedim who, following their example, enlisted for the Gaza war.

It is to be hoped that this will become a catalyst for a change of attitude and a coming together of all branches of Israeli society irrespective of religious or political affiliations. The future of both Israel and the Diaspora rests on that realization that the unity of our people must not be a mere slogan or ideal, but a practical philosophy, as enunciated by the ancient sages: *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh* - 'All Jews are obliged to cultivate a sense of responsibility, one for the other' (*San. 27b*).