

Fill Your Own Cup 5786

Winter Series – Session Two – Hegai, The Chief Eunuch of the Harem

1) Megillat Esther Chapter 2

- 1) Sometime afterward, when the anger of King Ahasuerus subsided, he thought of Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.
- 2) The king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty.
- 3) Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress
- 4) Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics.
- 5) And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti." The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it.
- ...
- 7) And he (Mordechai) adopted Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of **beautiful form and beautiful looks**; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her for his own daughter
- 8) So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was published, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the castle, **to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.**
- 9) And the maiden pleased him, and she **performed kindness before him**; and he speedily gave her ointments, with her portions, and the seven maidens, who were worthy to be given to her out of the king's house; and he advanced her and her maidens to the best place in the house of the women.
- ...
- 15) Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing **but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed.** And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.
- 16) So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign.
- 17) And the king loved Esther above all the women and she performed grace and favor in his eyes more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

מגילת אסתר פרק ב

אחר הדברים האלה פשע חמת המלך אחשוורוש זכר את ושתל ואת אשר עשתה ואת אשר נגזר עליה:
ויאמרו נערי המלך משרתיו ובקשו למלך נערות בתולות טובות מראה:
ויפקד המלך פקידים בכל מדינות מלכותו ויקבצו את כל נערה בתולה טובת מראה אל שושן הבירה אל בית הנשים אל יד הגא סריס המלך שמר הנשים ונתון תמרקיהו:
והנערה אשר תיטב בעיני המלך תמלך תחת ושתי וייטב הדבר בעיני המלך ויעש כן: {פ}

(ז) ויהי אמן את הדסה היא אסתר בת דדו כי אין לה אב ואם והנערה יפת תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת:
(ח) ויהי בהשמע דבר המלך ודתו ובהקבץ נערות רבות אל שושן הבירה אל יד הגי ותלקח אסתר אל בית המלך אל יד הגי שמר הנשים:
(ט) ותיטב הנערה בעיניו ותשא חסד לפניו ויבהל את תמרוקיה ואת מנותה לתת לה ואת שבע הנערות הראיות לתת לה מבית המלך וישנה ואת נערותיה לטוב בית הנשים:
...

(טו) ובהגיע תר אסתר בת אביחיל דד מרדכי אשר לקח לו לבת לבוא אל המלך לא בקשה דבר כי אם את אשר יאמר הגי סריס המלך שמר הנשים ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראייה:
(טז) ותלקח אסתר אל המלך אחשוורוש אל בית מלכותו בחדש העשירי הוא חדש טבת בשנת שבע למלכותו:
(יז) ויאהב המלך את אסתר מכל הנשים ותשא חן וחסד לפניו מכל הבתולות וישם כתר מלכות בראשה וימליכה תחת ושתי:

Hegai as Guard

2) Malbim Esther 2:3

Meir Leibush Weissner, Warsaw 19th C

Under the Supervision of Hegeh – They should not bring their cosmetics from their own homes, but rather their cosmetics should be given to them by the eunuchs. In this way, they will always be subservient to the eunuchs and will not become haughty in their hearts, unlike Vashti, for whom it was a disgrace that the king sent to her by the hand of the eunuchs.

מלבים, אסתר ב:ג

אל יד הגא, ושלא יביאו
התמרקים מביתם רק ונתון
תמרקיהו, ע"י הסריסים, ומצד
זה יכנעו תמיד אל הסריסים ולא
תגבהנה בלבבן כושתי שהיה לה
לחרפה מה ששלח לה המלך ביד
הסריסים:

Hegai as Expert

3) Steinsaltz Commentary on Esther 2:9

The young woman was pleasing in his eyes. *Hegai, who was in charge of the women of the royal household, and was familiar with the king's tastes, considered Esther a serious candidate for the role of queen. She exhibited grace before him. In addition to her beauty, he was charmed by her, and therefore he took special care of her needs: He hastened to provide her with a supply of cosmetics, and her portions of food to which she was entitled, and the seven young women it was requisite to provide her from the king's palace.* It was unbecoming for a candidate for queen of Persia to venture forth by herself, and therefore she was given seven maidservants. **And he elevated her status, as he promoted her and her young women to the best place of the harem.**

ביאור שטיינזלץ, אסתר ב:ט

וְתִיטֵב הַנְּעָרָה בְּעֵינָיו. הגי, שלא היה רק הממונה על הנשים, אלא גם המומחה המלכותי לנשים, ראה בה מועמדת רצינית למלכות לפי היכרותו את טעמו של המלך; ונוסף על יופיה – **וַתֵּשֶׂא חֶסֶד לְפָנָיו.** הוא נוכח בקסמה האישי המיוחד ובאישיותה החיננית, ולכן דאג לצרכיה באופן מיוחד – **וַיְבַהֵל, זִירָז אֶת אֲסַפְקַת תְּמָרוּקֶיהָ וְאֶת מְנוּחֶיהָ** המיוחדות שהיא זכאית לקבל **לְתֵת לָהּ, וְאֶת שְׁבַע הַנְּעָרוֹת הַרְאִיּוֹת לְתֵת לָהּ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ.** לא ראוי היה שהמועמדת להיות מלכת פרס תלך לבדה. לכן ניתנו לה שבע משרתות. **וַיִּשְׁנֶה וְאֶת נְעָרוֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב,** הוא היטיב את מעמדה **בְּבֵית הַנְּשִׁים.**

Hegai as Helper

4) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Megillah 13a

The verse states: **"And the seven maids** chosen to be given her out of the king's house" (Esther 2:9). **Rava said: She would have a separate maid attend her each day, and she would count the days of the week by them, so she was always aware when Shabbat was.**

"And he advanced her and her maids to the best place in the house of the women."

Rav said: The advancement in the verse signals **that he fed her food of Jews,** i.e., kosher food.

And Shmuel said an alternative understanding: The advancement was a well-intentioned act in **that he fed her pig hinds,** thinking she would view it as a delicacy, although in fact they were not kosher.

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: He gave her **vegetables,** which did not pose a problem with regard to the kosher laws.

And so it states with regard to the kindness done for Daniel and his associates: **"So the steward took away their food and the wine that they should drink; and gave them vegetables"** (Daniel 1:16).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה יג.

"וְאֶת שְׁבַע הַנְּעָרוֹת וְגו'". אָמַר רַבָּא: שְׁהִיְתָה מוֹנֶה בָּהֶן לְמִי שְׁפָת.

"וַיִּשְׁנֶה וְאֶת נְעָרוֹתֶיהָ וְגו'".

אָמַר רַב: שְׁהֶאֱכִלָה מֵאֶכֶל יְהוּדִי.

וְשִׁמוּאֵל אָמַר: שְׁהֶאֱכִלָה קִדְלֵי דחֲזִירֵי.

וְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן אָמַר: זְרַעוֹנִים, וְכֵן

הוּא אָמַר: "וַיְהִי הַמֶּלֶצֶר נוֹשֵׂא אֶת פֶּת בָּגָם וְנוֹתֵן לָהֶם זְרַעוֹנִים".

Hegai as Divine Presence

5) Dr. Erica Brown, Esther: Power, Fate and Fragility in Exile, pp. 235

One compelling explanation for the role of minor characters is theological. People who describe the book's central miracle as its reversal of fortune for the Jews of the Persian Empire build their case on dozens of unlikely scenarios with a lightning-fast sense of cause and effect, propagated by a staple of unlikely figures who make brief appearances and then disappear as quickly as they appeared, simply in order to facilitate the next event. Traveling back in time, one who observed the chain of events might bring with this narrative glue: has this not happened, that would not have happened, tracing it all back to the Prime Mover. God is, in this reading, the catalyst and coagulant who is represented by the string of minor characters. Humans take the foreground, God takes the background, but, of course, it is God who has made all the events happen along the way.