

DIVINE AND HUMAN ANGER AND GRACE: SCROLL OF ESTHER AND EXODUS 32-34

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Soon into reading the Scroll of Esther, one finds oneself thinking, "temper, temper!" It seems that, from the very first chapter, the Megillah delights in pointing out irascible behavior. The theme of anger and losing one's temper runs consistently throughout the book.

King Ahasuerus becomes incensed at his queen, Vashti, for refusing to attend his party. After all, his chamberlain Memucan warns him that if all wives decide to emulate Vashti and refuse to be summoned by their husbands, *there will arise a surfeit of contempt and anger* (1:18). There is no dearth in this narrative of wrathful incidents. The king's anger literally burns in him (*va-hamato ba'arah vo*, 1:12) until it abates on its own (2:1). Then the king becomes distracted by a beauty contest to select a new wife.

Just as Ahasuerus seems to calm down, others flare up in anger against him. Two chamberlains are furious (*katzaf*) enough to plot his assassination (2:21), but Mordecai overhears and foils their scheme. Later, Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman, the pompous bureaucrat whom the king has promoted to chief minister. Haman has a short fuse and erupts in a burning rage (*va-yimale Haman hemah*, 3:1-5). His anger is so intense that he decides to annihilate all of the kingdom's Jews, *the people of Mordecai*, because of what he regards as Mordecai's stubborn impertinence (3:6).

Later, Haman is filled with wrath (*va-yimale . . . hemah*) at the very sight of Mordecai (5:9). At the banquet she arranged, Esther identifies Haman as an enemy of her people, causing Ahasuerus to become furious once again and leave the chamber in his wrath (*kam ba-hamato*) – the same kind of anger that "filled" Haman (7:7). Stunned, the wicked Haman pleads with Esther for his life and falls on her divan just as the king returns. Ahasuerus, already enraged, sees this as a pass at the queen and orders Haman's face to be covered for execution (7:8). The king's anger (*hamat ha-melekh*) is only assuaged when Haman is hanged (7:10).

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Such are the Scroll's anger passages. They are striking in and of themselves, but they are often juxtaposed with verses about Esther finding favor or grace (*hen*) in the sight of the king. For the alert reader, this combination of anger and grace expressions cannot but stir associations with the golden calf episode in Exodus 32-34. Surprisingly, few modern scholars have commented on this parallel.¹ I would propose that while the Scroll of Esther is manifestly a satire on exile, assimilation and the challenges of Jewish life in the diaspora,² it is at its core a parody of Divine anger, a study in the distinction between Divine and human anger and forgiveness. The episodes of anger and grace presented in Esther stand in contrast to those in the central narrative of forgiveness, atonement, Divine anger and grace in the Torah: namely, the golden calf episode (Ex. 32-34).

Consider the biblical narrative regarding the golden calf. Moses has just received the tablets of the Decalogue. The people make a molten calf and a celebration to worship it. God declares His intent to unleash anger, literally, "fume [or "snort"] My nose" (*yihar appi*), against them and to make Moses the founder of a great nation – in other words, to substitute Moses for Abraham, not to mention the Israelites as a whole. Yet Moses implores God: Why fume against Your people whom You brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand? (Ex. 32:10-11).

Moses begs God to turn from His fierce wrath – literally, "the fuming ["snorting"] of Your nose" (*me-haron appekha*) – and relent from doing evil to the people (32:12). Just because they broke the covenant, God does not need to do so. Moses asks God to remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not nullify the Divine promises made regarding their descendants (32:13-14).

God then refuses to "go up" any longer in the midst of the people. He tells Moses to build a Tent of Meeting outside the camp (33:1, 7). The people look hopefully at the Tent, staring at it from their own tent doors, yearning again for continuous manifestation of the Divine presence. They are relieved when the pillar of cloud descends (33:8-10). Yet Moses does not want the traumatic cycle of Divine anger to be repeated. If he has truly found grace in God's sight, then God must show him how to assuage Divine anger, *to find grace in Your sight* (33:13, 16). Moses is finally assured that he has found grace in the eyes of God, who accepts his petitions in behalf of the Jewish people (Ex.

33:13, 17). However, God tells Moses that He decides whether or not to be gracious on a case-by-case basis (33:19) and that *no man can see Me and live* (33:20).

Moses has to do a great deal of begging, beseeching and bargaining to find favor in God's eyes. By contrast, Esther pleases Ahasuerus without even trying. After all, as a fair maiden she is "pleasing" or "goodly" in the king's sight (*asher titav be-einei ha-melekh*, Est. 2:4). Esther first pleases Hegai, who provides ointments and potions to make her even more attractive (2:9). Esther then easily pleases Ahasuerus and he shows her *hesed*, the affection brought to covenantal loyalty (2:17). Conversely, in order to have even a chance of Divine forgiveness, the people were instructed, through Moses, to remove from themselves ornaments of any kind (Ex. 33:5).

Esther does not have to work to *obtain favor* (or grace, *hen*) *in the sight of all who look upon her* (2:15). She simply elicits *hen* and *hesed*, grace and covenantal loyalty (two of the attributes of God's forgiveness in Exodus 34:6), with a natural, unflinching charm (2:17). Just one look was all it took for the king to cherish her (*va-ye'ehav*) with full covenantal love (2:17). Moses and the Israelites could not secure this from the Divine King.

The two rulers are contrasted by hint and by suggestion. Of course, the point of the Bible is that the King of kings is holy and worthy of worship and obedience because God is apart from the allurements of the world. Although we may protest against exile and punishments and declare them unfair or at best ironic,³ we need to be grateful even for God as the Divine Punisher. This God does not allow His head to be turned. There is a very real and legitimate Divine anger that is at once terrifying and reassuring. It is terrifying in its intensity and power, and reassuring in its pure righteousness, both indignant and just, and in the possibility of atonement bringing God's forgiveness.⁴

God's anger is the result of His indignation that Israel broke the sacred covenant. The anger of Ahasuerus strikes us as being childish, even comical; and that of Haman as simply a reaction to a perceived affront to his dignity. The *hen* and *hesed* in Esther and Exodus differ, although both lead to a redemption of Israel. Moses pleads three times *im na matzati hen* (Ex. 33:12-13, 16; 34:9) for Israel, which is granted only after the act of repentance, *teshuvah*. Esther, by contrast, finds *hen* three times (Est. 2:15, 17; 5:2) through sheer charm and beauty.

Note that the Scroll of Esther does not use the same vocabulary for anger as the golden calf narrative. This difference in terminology gives us some insight into the protocols of biblical parallelism and contrast. The use of the term for Divine grace (*hen*) is acceptable for use in reference to both the Divine king and human kings. Still, Ahasuerus (as human king) never bestows grace per se; Esther is always able to "find" it, but there is never a parody of the Divine bestowal of grace, which remains sacred. Regarding anger, there is a clear moratorium on the use of *af*, the "snorting, fuming, burning nostrils" term for Divine anger in the Book of Exodus, although the term is used for human anger in Proverbs (15:1, 18; 16:32; 19:11; 21:14; 27:4), not to mention the "fuming nostril" moments of Moses himself (Ex. 32:19, 22), which may have foreshadowed a rage that led to his being punished severely (Num. 20:10-13).

The preferred term for anger in the Scroll of Esther, *hemah* (from the root *yod-het-mem*), functions as a perfect substitute for the *af* of sacrosanct narrative in Exodus 32-34. *Hemah* is, after all, the anger-term used by the Torah in Moses' review of the events of the golden calf (Deut. 9:19). It also parallels the Hebrew Bible's use of the term *af*, whether in the Torah (Num. 25:3,11, Deut. 29:22), in the Prophets (Isa. 42:25, 63:3, 66:15, Ezek. 5:13, Micah 5:14, Nahum 1:6), or in the Writings (Ps. 6:2, 78:38, 90:7, Lam. 4:11, Dan. 9:16).

As a literary device, the term *hemah* is suited to describe the foibles of human anger generally, in that it is used to describe the "rage of a man" (*hamat-gever*) in Proverbs 6:34. It also echoes the term *af* which is used to describe cruel and overwhelming human anger in Proverbs 27:4. Indeed, the psalmist uses *hemah* and *af* as parallel terms when speaking of the human tendency to inappropriate anger (Ps. 37:8). It is out of deference to the Divine anger and forgiveness narrative in Exodus 32-34, and in keeping with its own vocabulary of parody, that the Scroll of Esther avoids the word *af* when describing the king's anger and also that of other characters, for whom the term *katzaf* is used instead (Esth. 2:21).

Furthermore, the terms *af* and *appo* (His *af*) are frequently used in *Eiklah*, the Book of Lamentations, to describe God's anger that leads to severe punishment and humiliating exile. These expressions are used once in the first chapter of Lamentations, five times in the second chapter, twice in the third

chapter, and once in the fourth. These etymological allusions to the Exodus 32-34 terminology for Divine anger, describing the defining sin in the wilderness that led to both forgiveness and threat of exile (second only to the "evil" report of the spies), are essential to the prophecies of Jeremiah (see, for example 2:35; 4:8; 17:4; 49:37; 52:3). Indeed, so common is the vocabulary of Jeremiah and Lamentations that tradition attributed the authorship of the latter book to Jeremiah (TB *Bava Batra* 15a). The term *af* or *appo* is the basic, feared, revered expression of Divine anger that leads to exile, even though variations of *hemah* are used in Lamentations (2:4, 4:11) and in Jeremiah (4:4; 23:19; 25:15; 30:23). But the term *hemah* is not used in any form in Exodus 33-34, thus making it suitable for use as the word describing the trivial, human anger in Esther.

Still, the Scroll of Esther prods us to keep, as it were, the *af* in mind, whether as a term frequently associated with *hemah* or in other clever and suggestive ways. After all, Ahasuerus rather sheepishly informs Esther and Mordecai that there is no way to reverse (*ein le-hashiv*) what is written and sealed in the king's name (8:8). We recognize immediately the reference to the familiar affirmation of the psalmist, found every day in the morning and evening services, that the merciful God *hirbah le-hashiv appo* – *many a time reverses* [revokes] *His anger* (Ps. 78:38).

There are other elements in the Scroll of Esther that direct us to make parallels between the references to King Ahasuerus and the Divine King. The word *mitzvah* is used to describe Ahasuerus's decree (Esth. 3:3). The palace decorations are reminiscent of the Tabernacle (Est. 1:6-7), as are the references to the *inner court* of the palace (See Ex. 26-27). Esther stands in the *inner court* (5:1) even though doing so can lead to death (4:11), as can entering the Tabernacle's precincts without the requisite authorization, preparation or vestments (Ex. 28:35, 43; 30:20-21; Lev. 10:16).

In mocking the temper tantrums of Ahasuerus, the earthly king with too much power, we at the same time find comfort and relief in the Divine capacity to relent without constraint or pretense. When the easily infuriated Ahasuerus demands to know (concerning the often angry Haman), *Mi hu zeh* – '*Who is he that dares presume in his heart*' to destroy Esther, her people and the king's reputation? (7:5), we immediately recall the familiar psalm, so frequent and prominent in the liturgy, which asks in regard to *the King*, *Mi hu zeh*

melekh ha-kavod – *Who is the King of glory? The Lord of hosts is the King of glory* (Ps. 24:10). God alone is the king who masters anger and is entitled to it, no matter how overwhelming and terrifying it may seem to us.

These associations were not lost on either rabbinic or folk traditions. The custom arose for readers of the Scroll of Esther to chant the word *melekh* (king) at certain points according to the liturgical melodies of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, thereby referencing the Divine King. The undercurrent of parody cannot be missed in these time-honored tropes of experienced *Megillah* readers. This custom may have derived from a liturgical tradition that links the word *u-ve-khen*, and therefore, in Esther 4:16, to the *And therefore* paragraphs of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy, with their theme of Divine Sovereignty.⁵

Most significantly, the masters of the Talmud and midrashic literature knowingly suggested millennia ago that, in at least some places, the Scroll of Esther invoked the Divine King when reference was seemingly made to Ahasuerus. Thus, reference to the king's disturbed sleep (Est. 6:1) was regarded by Rabbi Tanhūm as alluding to the "King of the Universe," even though his colleagues considered this interpretation somewhat radical and perhaps overly anthropomorphic.⁶ The Midrash associates this verse with the psalmist's observation that *the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps* (Ps. 121:4), and observes that the Holy One was shaken when he saw Israel in distress. (The Midrash goes on to say that Ahasuerus's sleep was also disturbed when he dreamed that Haman had taken a sword to kill him.) Some sages held that the assuaging of the king's wrath (Esth. 7:10) referred to the simultaneous assuaging of *both* the Divine anger *and* that of Ahasuerus.⁷ Additionally, the Midrash finds a parallel between Ahasuerus's soirée and that even greater banquet to which God will invite the righteous in time to come.⁸

In the Midrash, Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Levi are credited with a bold general principle of interpretation in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: "Wherever in this book [of Esther] we find the expression, 'to the King Ahasuerus', the text refers specifically to King Ahasuerus; wherever we simply find 'to the king', it may refer either to the profane ruler or to the Holy King."⁹ This midrash even suggests that, at one point, God dispatched an angel to prolong Ahasuerus's anger until the hanging of Haman, in order to ensure that this necessary punishment took place.¹⁰

Building upon rabbinic insights, the kabbalists were notably sensitive to biblical nuances and allusions. The reference to the king becoming angry and going out into the garden, which follows the question *Mi hu zeh*, 'Who is he?' (Esth. 7:5-7), is interpreted as indicating that God finds rest and renewal after communing each night with the souls of the righteous in the Garden of Eden, relieving, as it were, the Divine unrest and anger over the exile of the people Israel and of the Divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*, due to human evil. Esther is seen as speaking for her people and for the *Shekhinah* when she says, *For we are sold, I and my people* (7:4).¹¹ The king's extending his scepter to Queen Esther (4:11; 5:2) is, in the Zohar, symbolic of the Divine yearning for the *Shekhinah*.¹²

The Scroll of Esther concludes with a description of both an ideal and a prescription for society and interpersonal relations which can avert both human and Divine anger. Mordecai, accepted as a leader by the multitude of his brothers (*le-rov ehav*), even if not by all of them, becomes the *dover shalom*, the "speaker of peace," a quality and an enterprise akin to *seeking the good of his people* (*doresh tov le-ammo*, Esth. 10:3). It was, after all, the inability to speak peace to one's brother (*dabbero le-shalom*) that led to the treacherous, near murderous acts of Joseph's brothers (Gen. 37:4). Likewise, the Prophet Jeremiah warned that the nation would be destroyed by the hypocrisy of speaking peace to one's neighbor (*dibber be-fiv shalom*) while secretly lying in wait against him (Jer. 9:7).

It would follow from the Scroll's preoccupation with anger that *dover shalom* describes the person freed from anger, whether anger of the burning, seething or smoldering kinds. On many levels, *Megillat Ester* is a call for human anger management, and a statement of gratitude for a God Who cares enough to become angry and to control the Divine anger.

NOTES

1. Jon Levenson wisely notes the parallels with Exodus 33 in the pleadings of Moses and Esther. He observes that while Esther's words, *I and my people* (7:4) "may seem selfish," one must look to Moses' rhetorical strategy as the divinely favored one in Exodus 33:16. See Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 101-2. Eliezer Segal is aware of the importance of anger as a theme in Esther. Segal maintains that *Megillat Ester* teaches that the Deity utilizes human anger for providential purposes, and Segal seeks parallels in the Joseph narrative. See "Human Anger and Divine Intervention in Esther," *Proof-texts* 9 (1999), pp. 247-256.

2. For a fine Christian defense of humor and parody in the Book of Esther, see Bruce William Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* (April 1977) pp. 171-181. "Parody" is well defined as "a writing in which the language and style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule, often with certain peculiarities greatly heightened or exaggerated" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged with Seven Language Dictionary*, vol II, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1966, p. 1643).
3. See Stan Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990) pp. 15-31. The best bibliographical resource on *Megillat Ester* is *The Book of Esther: A Classified Bibliography*, ed. Edith Lubetski and Meir Lubetski (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd., 2008).
4. Divine anger would be more frightening were God to show no signs of anger, no chance of placation by Moses and the people, and simply issue horrible punishments against the nation. This is almost what happens after the incident with the spies who brought a discouraging report about the Land of Israel. There is no mention of Divine anger after the "evil report" of these men (Num. 13:32). To be sure, God is immediately displeased by the spies' negative words and by the people's wailing and rebelling in complaint, and threatens to obliterate them. Again, Moses begs for God to forgive them, paraphrasing the Divine attributes of forgiveness given by Divine grace after the golden calf incident (Ex. 34: 6-7; Num. 14:11-20). But none of the vocabulary of Divine anger and grace is used here. It is all rather cut and dry. The people are sentenced to forty years of wandering as punishment for complaining (14:26-37). The only echo of the *hammah* or Divine "heat" of anger is, perhaps, a reference to a place ironically called, of all things, *Vo-hamat*, which suggests an entrance or coming of heat (or anger?; Num. 13:21). This name does seem coincidental to the *hammah* terminology, but who can be sure? Although the spies narrative in Numbers is more foundational to the pitfalls of exile enumerated in the Scroll of Esther, there are no temper tantrums, human or Divine, to seize upon as a basis of forgiveness or to parody, as in the golden calf narrative.
5. I am grateful to Professor Reuven Kimelman for calling this source to my attention: *Siddur of R. Solomon ben Samson of Garmaise* [Worms] including the *Siddur of the Hasidei Ashkenaz* [Hebrew], ed. M. Hershler (Jerusalem: Hemed, 1971) p. 226. Kimelman cites this in note 22 of his article "Unetaneh Toqef as a Midrashic Poem," forthcoming in a Festschrift in honor of Dr. Menachem Schmelzer.
6. TB *Megillah* 15b.
7. TB *Megillah* 16a.
8. See *Esther Rabbah* 2:5.
9. *Esther Rabbah* 3:10. On medieval efforts to find "God's personal name" in some of the "king" references, see Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible Edition (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1971) p. 56, Note 4. Moore also notes the "ingenious but unconvincing" effort of Bible scholar Samuel Driver to find the Tetragrammaton in the reference to the king's sleeplessness (Esth. 6:1). See Moore's note on p. 63.
10. *Esther Rabbah*, 3:15.
11. *Zohar* II, 196a.
12. *Zohar* III, 45a-b.