

Selections from Esther Rabbah

I:3 AHASUERUS. R. Levi and the Rabbis differed on this. R. Levi said: Ahasuerus is the same as Artaxerxes; and why was he called Ahasuerus? Because no one could mention him without feeling a headache (hosesh et rosho). The Rabbis said: Artaxerxes was the same as Ahasuerus; and why was he called Artaxerxes? Because he used to fall into a passion and then be sorry (martiah vehash). ' AHASUERUS: THIS IS AHASUERUS. R. Isaac and the Rabbis explained differently. R. Isaac said: [He was the] AHASUERUS in whose days all trouble came, as it says, There was great mourning among the Jews (Est. IV, 3). THIS IS AHASUERUS: in whose days all blessings came, as it says, The Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a good day (ib. VIII, 17). The Rabbis say: AHASUERUS, before Esther went in unto him; THIS IS AHASUERUS; after Esther went in unto him he did not have intercourse with women in the period of separation.

III:13 TO BRING VASHTI THE QUEEN BEFORE THE KING WITH THE CROWN ROYAL (I, 11). R. Aibu said: What makes atonement for Israel is that when the Israelites eat and drink and make merry they bless and praise and extol the Holy One, blessed be He, whereas when the other nations eat and drink they turn to lewdness. So here, one said, ' The Median women are more beautiful,' and the other said, 'The Persian women are more beautiful.' Said that fool to them: 'The vessel which I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see it?' They replied, ' Yes, but she must be naked.' 'Very well,' he said to them, ' let her be naked.' R. Phinehas and R. Hama b. Guria in the name of Rab said: She asked permission to wear at least as much as a girdle, like a harlot, but they would not allow her. He said to her: 'It must be naked.' She said, 'I will come in without a crown.' [He said]: 'If so, they will say,' 'She is a maidservant.'" Then she [a maidservant] might put on royal garments and enter? R. Huna said: A subject must not put on royal garments.

III:14 BUT THE QUEEN VASHTI REFUSED (I, 12). She remonstrated with him very forcibly, saying: If they consider me beautiful, they will want to enjoy me themselves and kill you; and if they consider me plain, I shall bring disgrace on you.' But he was blind to her hints and insensible to her pricks. She then sent word to him: 'You used to be the stable-boy of my father's house, and you were used to bringing in before yourself naked harlots, and now that you have ascended the throne you have not abandoned your evil habits.' He was still blind to her hints and insensible to her pricks. She then sent word to him: 'Even those condemned by my father's house were not punished naked,' as it says, Then these men were bound in their cloaks (besarbolehon), their tunics, etc. (Dan. III, 21). (R. Judan said, the word 'sarbolehon' means their robes; R. Huna says, it means their state garments.) R. Simeon b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: God punishes the wicked in Gehinnom only naked, as we know from the verse, In nakedness Thou wilt despise their semblance (Ps. LXXIII, 20). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Where the brigand robs, there he is hung. R. Nathan said: The Egyptians, when they sank in the sea, were also punished naked, as it says, And with the blast of Thy nostrils they were stripped in the midst of the sea (Ex. XV, 8 – The waters were piled up). R. Samuel b. Nahman said in the name of R. Jonathan: The wicked man does not depart from the world before God shows him the net in which he is to be caught (as in the case of the Egyptians at the Red Sea).

III:15 THEREFORE WAS THE KING VERY WROTH, AND HIS ANGER BURNED IN HIM. R. Johanan said: At that moment God said to the angel in charge of wrath: 'Go down and blow up a spark in his belly and fan his ashes and throw sulphur into his oven.' R. Johanan said: All the years from the time when Vashti was killed till Esther became queen, the wrath of Ahasuerus was not assuaged. They cited in objection to this: When the wrath of king Ahasuerus was assuaged (Est. X). He replied: It is not written be-shok, but 'ke-shok'; it was assuaged and yet not assuaged. When was his wrath really assuaged? When Haman was hung, as it says, So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath assuaged (ib. VII, 10)- [this means also] the wrath of the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

IV:11 AND THE WORD PLEASED THE KING AND THE PRINCES (I, 21). He gave the order and they brought in her head on a platter.

V:2 AFTER (AHAR) THESE THINGS, WHEN THE WRATH OF KING AHASUERUS WAS ASSUAGED (II, 1). R. Aibu said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: Wherever we find the form 'ahar' (after), it means, very soon after; where we find ahare, it means, some time after. The Rabbis, however, report R. Jose b. Zimra as saying that wherever we find ahare it means soon after, but ahar means some time after. WHEN THE WRATH OF KING AHASUERUS WAS ASSUAGED. The word used here is not be-shok but KE - SHOK, implying that it was assuaged and yet not assuaged. HE REMEMBERED VASHTI: to wit, the order he had given her to come before him naked and how she refused and he had been wroth with her and put her to death. After he had killed her he began to feel remorse, because he realised that she had acted properly. AND WHAT WAS DECREED AGAINST HER: contrary to what was right. Why did she suffer this fate? Because she would not allow Ahasuerus to give permission for the building of the Temple, and she used to say to him, 'Do you seek to build what my ancestors destroyed? THEN SAID THE KING'S SERVANTS THAT MINISTERED UNTO HIM, etc. (ib. 2).

VI:5 AND HE BROUGHT UP HADASSAH (II, 7). Just as the myrtle (hadassah) has a sweet smell but a bitter taste, so Esther was sweet to Mordecai but bitter to Haman. FOR SHE HAD NEITHER FATHER NOR MOTHER. R. Phinehas and R. Hama b. Gurion said in the name of Rab: Was she a foundling then, that you should say, SHE HAD NEITHER FATHER NOR MOTHER? The truth is that when her mother became pregnant with her, her father died, and soon after her birth her mother also died.

VI:8 AND MORDECAI WALKED EVERY DAY BEFORE THE COURT OF THE WOMEN S HOUSE (II, 11): to inquire of her blood-stains and separation. TO KNOW HOW ESTHER DID [lit. THE WELFARE OF ESTHER]: to see that they should not practise witchcraft against her. R. Jacob b. Aha said: God said to him: 'You have inquired of the welfare of one person, TO KNOW HOW ESTHER DID; I swear that in the end you will seek the welfare of a whole nation'; and so it says, Seeking the good of his people and speaking peace all his seed (Est. X, 3).

VI:9 NOW WHEN THE TURN OF ESTHER... WAS COME... ESTHER OBTAINED FAVOUR IN THE SIGHT OF ALL THEM THAT LOOKED UPON HER). R. Judah said: She was like a statue

which a thousand persons look upon and all equally admire. R. Nehemiah said: They put Median women on one side of her and Persian women on the other, and she was more beautiful than all of them. The Rabbis, however, explain AND ESTHER OBTAINED FAVOUR IN THE SIGHT OF ALL THEM THAT LOOKED UPON HER to mean, in the sight of heavenly beings and in the sight of earthly beings, as we read, So shalt thou find grace and good favour in the sight of God and man (Prov. III, 4).

VI:10 SO ESTHER WAS TAKEN UNTO KING AHASUERUS (II, 16). She was put up to auction, as it were. One said, 'I will give a hundred denars to go in with her,' and another said, 'I will give two hundred to go in with her.'

VI:11 AND THE KING LOVED ESTHER ABOVE ALL THE WOMEN, AND SHE OBTAINED GRACE AND FAVOUR IN HIS SIGHT MORE THAN ALL THE VIRGINS (II, 17). R. Helbo said: This teaches that married women were also brought before him; that is why it says, ABOVE ALL THE WOMEN and also MORE THAN ALL THE VIRGINS. SO THAT HE SET THE ROYAL CROWN UPON HER HEAD, AND MADE HER QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI. Until Esther became queen, the portrait of Vashti remained in its place. When he married Esther and found her well born and of noble descent, he said, 'Let Vashti come down and Esther go up; that is why it says, AND MADE HER QUEEN INSTEAD OF VASHTI.'

VIII:2 AND IN EVERY PROVINCE, WHITHERSOEVER THE KING'S COMMANDMENT AND HIS DECREE CAME, THERE WAS GREAT MOURNING AMONG THE JEWS (IV, 3). Is some mourning great and some mourning small? The fact is that in the ordinary course of things the grief of mourning goes on diminishing for seven days. It is strongest on the first day, and grows weaker and weaker till after twelve months [it disappears]. But this mourning on account of Haman became stronger as time went on, because with every day that passed they said, 'This is another day gone from the time we have to live.' Another explanation: In ordinary cases when a man's son dies, people say to him, to comfort him, 'May your other son who is left you live'; and if he has no other son they say, 'We wish you long life'; but here all were doomed to death, to be destroyed and slain.

VIII:3 AND ESTHER'S MAIDENS AND HER CHAMBERLAINS CAME AND TOLD IT HER; AND THE QUEEN WAS EXCEEDINGLY PAINED (ib. 4). Our Rabbis there [in Babylon] say that she became menstruous, but our teachers here say that she had a miscarriage, and having had a miscarriage never bore again. R. Judan b. R. Simon said: She had intercourse with a piece of gauze. R. Judan b. R. Simon said: The last Darius was the son of Esther; he was pure from his mother's side and impure from his father's.