

# Purim as Pesach

By Dr Annette M. Boeckler

Words are sometimes heard acoustically, but not necessarily really listened to. I wonder, for example, if you are aware of the fact that Purim happened on Pesach.

We heard it four weeks ago in the Megillah: “In the first month, the month of Nisan(!), in the twelfth year of King Achashverosh”, they cast *pur* – that is, lots – to determine on which day the Jews in Shushan were to be murdered (Esther 3:7). These lots, drawn in the first month of the Jewish year, Nisan, set the date of the pogrom into the far future, at the very end of the year, in the very last month, Adar. But we know, of course, that this day never came to happen, because of the events in Nisan that the Megillah tells us about.

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The authors of the Midrashim must have listened more carefully to the Megillah, as they created a lot of links between Purim and Pesach.

First of all, the Midrash provides us with the exact dates of the events:

“Esther said to Mordechai: Go and congregate all the Jews in Shushan and proclaim a fast on my behalf, that you will not eat nor drink for three days’ [Esther 4:15] – these were the 13th, 14th, and 15th of Nisan. Mordechai said to her: ‘But among these days is the first day of Pesach!’ Esther said to him: ‘Sage of Israel, What is the point of Pesach (למה הוא פסח)?’ Mordechai heard it and acknowledged her words, as it is written: ‘And Mordechai went and did everything that

Esther had commanded him’ [Esther 4:17]” (Midrash Esther Rabbah 8:7). The Midrash then luckily records that Mordechai prayed to God, so no bad light is cast upon him.

On the third day of the fast, that is the first day of Pesach, the king extended his golden scepter to Esther and allowed her to enter the throne room. All the subsequent events that the Megillah recounts – Esther’s first feast; the king having trouble sleeping and being read the chronicles; the honouring of Mordechai; the second feast and Esther’s plea to the king; Charbonah informing the king that there is a gallows already built; and finally, Haman and his sons hanged, – all this happens on the 16th of Nisan, that is, the night of the second Seder and the second day of Pesach, the first day of the Omer period. When Mordechai is fetched to be dressed up as king and to be led on the king’s horse, the Midrash recounts that he was engaged in studying the laws of the Omer with his students (Esther Rabbah 10:4). The Midrash teaches that Charbonah, who pointed out the gallows, should be regarded as highly as Eliyahu haNavi, who plays a role in the Haggadah (Esther Rabba 10:9).

The Midrash reports extensively what Haman said to the king to persuade him to kill the Jews. You will be surprised, but while the Jews fast, Haman and Achashverosh discuss the Exodus. In response to Haman’s demand to kill the Jews, Achashverosh says: “But see what God did to the ancient kings, as for example Pharaoh.” The two then recount the events of the escape from slavery in Egypt. Haman reminds the king that the Israelites took all of Egypt’s silver and gold, and failed to acknowledge the benevolence Pharaoh had shown towards them. Haman also recounts for Achashverosh how the Jews ill-treated his forefathers Amalek and Agag. Haman concludes his Haggadah: “The Jews are an ungrateful people.” Haman and Achash-

verosh’s seder night can be found in Midrash Esther Rabbah 7:13.

The Midrash also knows about three children of Purim (the fourth is stum, of course, therefore not mentioned). These three children don’t ask questions, they give answers. The Midrash says: “And Mordechai saw three children who were coming from school. ... he requested of one of them: ‘Recite to me the verse you have learned today.’ The child replied: ‘Do not be afraid of sudden terror or of the darkness of the wicked when it will come’ (Proverbs 3:25). The second child responded: This is the last verse I learned today: ‘Take counsel and it will be foiled; speak a word and it will not succeed, for God is with us’ (Isaiah 8:10). The third boy quoted the verse: ‘Even until your seniority I remain unchanged, and even until your ripe old age, I will carry you; I made you and I will bear you, I will carry you and rescue you’ (Isaiah 46:4)” (Esther Rabbah 7:13).

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I wonder: which of these children is *chacham*, which is *rasha*, and which is *tam*? Why do answers belong to Purim while Pesach is all about questions? What does it mean that Purim took place on Pesach – which means Pesach is Purim? Pesach and Purim are both celebrations of the liberation of the Jewish people. Purim ends with us Jews being the oppressors: Mordechai moves into Haman’s house (Esther 8:1-3), and the Jews murder the Persians, not vice versa as planned. We know how the Purim story ends, but how do our Pesach stories end? ■●■