

HOW DO WE TELL A STORY?

Mishna, Tractate Megilla 2:3

From where must a person read the Megilla so as to fulfill their obligation? Rabbi Meir says, the whole of it; Rabbi Yehudah says, from “There was a Jew” (Esther 2:5); Rabbi Yossi says, from “After these things” (Esther 3:1).	מהיכן קורא אדם את המגילה, ויוצא בה ידי חובתו--רבי מאיר אומר, כולה; רבי יהודה אומר, מ"איש יהודי"; רבי יוסי אומר, מ"אחר הדברים האלה"
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Talmud, Tractate Megilla 19a

It has been taught: R. Simeon b. Yohai says, from “On that night” (Esther 6:1).	תניא רשב"י אומר מבלילה ההוא
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The Book of Esther, “Megillat Esther”

[Rabbi Meir would start his telling of the story here – right at the beginning.]

The story begins with Achashverosh (Ahasuerus in English), ruler of the Persian empire, holding a lavish banquet, initially for his court and dignitaries and afterwards for all inhabitants of the capital city, Shushan. On the seventh day, Achashverosh orders the queen, Vashti, to come and display her beauty before the guests by wearing only her crown. She refuses. Furious, Achashverosh has her removed from her position and makes arrangements to choose a new queen from a selection of beautiful young women from throughout the empire.

[Rabbi Yehuda would start the story here, from “There was a Jewish man.”]

One of these is the Jewish orphan, Esther. After the death of her parents, she was fostered by her cousin, Mordechai. She finds favor in the King's eyes, and is crowned his new queen. Shortly afterwards, Mordecai discovers a plot by two courtiers, Bigthan and Teresh, to assassinate Achashverosh. The conspirators are apprehended and hanged, and Mordecai's service to the King is duly recorded.

[Rabbi Yossi would start the story here, from “After these things.”]

Achashverosh appoints Haman as his viceroy. Mordechai, who sits at the palace gates, falls into Haman's disfavor, as he refuses to bow down to him. Having discovered that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman plans to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jews in the empire. He duly obtains Achashverosh's permission to execute this plan, against payment of ten thousand talents of silver, and casts lots to choose the date on which to do this—the 13th of the month of Adar.

When Mordechai finds out about the plan, he implores Esther to try and intercede with the King; but she is afraid to break the law and present herself to the King unsummoned, as this was punishable by death. She orders Mordechai to have all Jews fast for three days together with her, and on the third day she goes to Achashverosh, who stretches out his scepter to her to indicate that she is not to be punished. She invites him to a feast in the company of Haman. During the feast, she asks them to attend a further feast the next

evening. Meanwhile, Haman is again offended by Mordechai and, at his wife's suggestion, has a gallows built to hang him.

[Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai would start the story here, from “On that night”]

That night, King Achashverosh suffers insomnia, and when he orders the court records be read to him in order to help him sleep, he is reminded of the services rendered by Mordechai in the previous plot against his life. Achashverosh is informed that Mordechai never received any recognition for this.

Just then, Haman appears, to request the King's permission to hang Mordechai, but before he can make this request, King Achashverosh asks Haman what should be done for the man that the King wishes to honor. Assuming that the man that the King is referring to is himself, Haman suggests that the man be dressed in the King's royal robes and led around on the King's royal horse, while a herald calls: "See how the King honors a man he wishes to reward!" To his surprise and horror, the King instructs Haman to do so to Mordechai.

Immediately after, Achashverosh and Haman attend Esther's second banquet, at which she reveals that she is Jewish and that Haman is planning to exterminate her people, including her. Overcome by rage, Achashverosh leaves the room; meanwhile Haman stays behind and begs Esther for his life, falling upon her in desperation. The King returns in at this very moment and thinks Haman is assaulting the queen; this makes him angrier than before and he orders Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman had prepared for Mordechai.

Instead of annulling the decree, the King reverses it, permitting the Jews to attack their enemies. On the 13th of Adar, 500 men and Haman's ten sons are killed in Shushan. Upon hearing of this Ester requests it be repeated the next day, whereupon 300 more men are killed. In total, 75,000 Persians are slaughtered by the Jews, who take no plunder. Esther sends a letter instituting an annual commemoration of the Jewish people's redemption, in a holiday called Purim (lots). Achashverosh remains very powerful and continues reigning, with Mordechai assuming a prominent position in his court.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- Which approach described in the Mishnah and Talmud do you most agree with? Why?
- If you could choose where to start and end the story, what would you choose and why?

Sources

["Book of Esther"](#) in Wikipedia.

Animated [video of the story](#) of Purim.

Thanks to Rabba Yaffa Epstein for suggestions and advice.

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Share your thoughts and ideas with us – email Yesod at info@yesodeurope.eu