

The Purim Massacre

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In the victorious conclusion of *Megillat Esther*, we find that after Haman's decree against the Jewish People is revoked, and they are spared from destruction, they do not leave matters at that. Instead, having obtained royal permission to strike their enemies, including women and children, the Jews kill over seventy-five thousand people! Esther then further seeks permission for another day of massacre.

This episode provided excellent fodder for Christian antisemitic sentiments. The nineteenth-century German biblical scholar Friedrich Bleek concluded that "We may, therefore, with truth, maintain that a very narrow-minded and Jewish spirit of revenge and persecution prevails in the book, and that no other book of the Old Testament is so far removed as this is from the spirit of the Gospel."¹ Over in America, the leading church pastor Washington Gladden described it as "a fiendish outbreak of fanatical cruelty... The fact that the story was told, and that it gained great popularity among the Jews, and by some of those in later ages came to be regarded as one of the most sacred books of their canon is, however, a revelation to us of the extent to which the most baleful and horrible passions may be cherished in the name of religion... Let it remain as a dark background on which the Christian morality may stand forth resplendent; as a striking example of the kind of ideas which Christians ought not to entertain, and of the kind of feelings which they ought not to cherish."² Countless other such expressions of disgust by Christian scholars have been documented by Elliott Horowitz.³

However, if we carefully study the account in the Book of Esther and consider the situation, a very different picture emerges. Let us first examine the crucial verse in which the Jews are granted license for the massacre:

By these the king authorized the Jews who were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate, any armed force of any people or province that would attack them, little children and women, and to plunder their goods (Esther 8:11)

There are several significant points to be noted here. One is that they were being given permission to attack those that might attack them. Contrary to Bleek's description of the massacre being an act of revenge, it is presented instead as precautionary self-defense. Rabbi Mordechai Ventura notes that "these people that they killed in Shushan were haters of Israel, who would always tell the Jewish People that they were going to kill them and smite their young."⁴ In other words, while there was a reprieve from Haman's plan, there was no guarantee that such a danger would not arise again. There was an ever-present danger of antisemites gaining permission to engage in wanton slaughter of Jews.

¹ Bleek, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, vol. 1 p. 450.

² Gladden, *Who Wrote The Bible*, p. 164.

³ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*: pp. 23-45.

⁴ Ventura, *Patshegen HaKetav* to Esther 9:16.

Had Haman's decree not been rescinded, there is no doubt that these antisemites would have gladly taken the opportunity to slaughter all the Jews! Since the Jews were given a unique chance to attack their enemies, it was appropriate to take the opportunity to kill those people who would undoubtedly take the opportunity to kill *them* if such an opportunity would ever arise.

Furthermore, it may even be the case that this was the *only* way to actually rescind the decree – in 8:3 Achashverosh points that an edict sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked. Thus, Haman's decree could not be revoked, only circumvented – by authorizing the advance killing of those who would fulfill Haman's decree.

What about with regard to the women and children? There are several possibilities to be considered here. One is that we should not make the mistake of judging actions of millennia ago by the moral barometers of today. In times of old, women and children were always considered to be extensions of the husband. This was not some Jewish innovation; it was the standard model in the ancient world. And it was not only the perception of reality; it *was* reality, as women were far less independent. Killing your enemies did not mean the adult males; it always included their families. While this answer may not be emotionally satisfactory from a contemporary perspective, it cannot be ruled out. But there are alternatives.

Another approach is that this case may be considered not as a battle between two groups of individuals, but rather as one between two nations: Jews and Amalekites (using the term Amalekite not in the technical sense of someone genetically descended from the tribe of Amalek, but instead in the sense of someone fundamentally identifying with a certain worldview of Judeopathy (pathological hatred of Jews) which is Alan Dershowitz's preferred term for antisemitism.⁵) It is safe to assume that the families of these men who would have killed the Jews were themselves quite supportive of this ideology. And even those children too young to form an opinion, are part of the same social group. It is thus no different from the Torah's instruction to wipe out the nations of Amalek and the Seven Nations of Canaan. Maharal uses the notion of "war between nations" to justify Shimon and Levi's slaughter of the community of Shechem.⁶ That justification is disputed by many, since Shechem was a single individual. But in this case, where we are talking about the family members of a group united in a single cause, there is more justification for seeing it as a war between two peoples.

Paul Haupt argues that the permission to kill women and children was only applicable to those women and children that desired to attack the Jews.⁷ It does not seem especially likely, however, that children (the word probably describes very young children) could have posed a serious threat.

Robert Gordis presents an extraordinarily original interpretation of the verses, according to which the Jews did not take on the task of killing the women and children and were never instructed to do so. He explains the phrase "women and children" as referring to the *Jewish* women and children that the enemies of the Jews wished to kill,

⁵ Dershowitz, *Chutzpah*, p. 121.

⁶ Maharal, *Gur Aryeh* to Genesis 34:13.

⁷ Haupt, "Critical Notes on the Book of Esther," p. 63.

reading the verse as follows: “the king authorized the Jews... to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate, any armed force of any people or province that would attack them, their children and women, and that would plunder their goods.”⁸ Whether this is a linguistically sound interpretation is unclear.

Another proposal is that the license to kill women and children has to be considered in light of the fact that it mirrors the original edict by Haman:

And the letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. (Esther 3:13)

This is taken by some to mean that it was considered a legitimately symmetrical counter-response to the original decree, according to ancient norms;⁹ but it may instead mean that Mordechai, who composed the new decree, wished to publicize a strong deterrence for the Jews’ enemies and to highlight the measure-for-measure reversal that had transpired.¹⁰ Along these lines, it is pointed out by some that is that even though the killing of the women and children was authorized, it is by no means clear that it actually took place. Rabbi David Nativ argues that the only mention of it is in the decree that authorized this action. Yet in that same decree, it states that the Jews were permitted to plunder the spoils. Now, the Book of Esther attests that this did *not* happen:

For the Jews who were in Shushan also gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan; but they did not lay their hand on the plunder. But the other Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy five thousand, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. (Esther 9:15-16)

We thus see that the Jews did *not* take advantage of everything that Achashverosh authorized. There is thus no evidence that the Jews actually did kill the women and children; all that Scripture attests to is that they killed their enemies.

Furthermore, the fact that the Jews did not plunder the spoils indicates that they did not see this as an ordinary battle of survival. Instead, they apparently perceived it as strictly self-defense and that they should not exceed this mandate. Thus, there is a case to be made for saying that they did *not* kill the women and children.¹¹

⁸ Gordis, “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” p. 52.

⁹ Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, p. 110-111.

¹⁰ Moore, *Esther*, p. 83.

¹¹ Nativ, “The Historical Framework of Megillat Esther.” A similar explanation is provided by Rabbi Yonatan Grossman, “Indiscriminate Slaughter?” On the other hand, the fact that Scripture highlights the fact that they did not touch the spoils but makes no such mentioning of them not harming the women and children, may indicate that they did kill them.

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