



This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction.

— Esther 9:24



Haman: The Role of the Villian

Most of us are familiar with the book of Esther which recounts the events that took place in Persia (modern-day Iran) 2,300 years ago. During that time the Jewish people were threatened with annihilation, but were ultimately saved by a series of events that were serendipitously arranged by the hand of God.

Typically, studies of this book focus on Esther, the heroine, or Mordecai, the hero. However, in this month's *Limmud*, we will concentrate on Haman, the villain of the story. While the book of Esther is primarily the story of the Jewish people in exile and an important part of our history, the story of Haman is equally as important if we are to fully appreciate the experiences of the Jewish people then and now.

There is a Haman in every generation, whether it is Hitler or Ahmadinejad. As our Jewish sages teach, "In every generation someone tries to destroy the Jewish people and God rescues us."

Confronting Evil Then and Now

Why does God place us in such danger in the first place?

The study of Haman is a study of evil. To study Haman is to ask and probe the question of why God allows cruelty to exist in a world over which He is Master.

The book of Esther prescribes the holiday of *Purim* which celebrates our victory over evil. However, interestingly, the holiday's name, *Purim*, is Hebrew for the word "lots." The holiday gets its

name from verse 9:24, "For Haman... the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction."

Haman deliberately used a lottery system to determine the date of destruction for the Jews in order to underscore his evil philosophy — that everything in life is random and that there is no God running the show. Calling the holiday "lots" — when Haman's plans were foiled by our God who worked behind the scenes, yet clearly controlled everything that happened — emphasizes the fallacy of Haman's outlook and the validity of the truth that there is a God.

As our world faces many kinds of evil today, it is critical for us to understand that we are fighting an ancient battle, one that began before Haman and that continues even today. As we study Haman's character, philosophy, and ambitions, we will gain a better understanding of the evil in our own world. We will also gain insights into the purpose of the "Hamans" in our own lives and in the world at large.

Most importantly, we will learn how to combat evil and destroy the illusion that we are subject to it. We will come to understand how, in spite of the ugliness and threats facing us today, God continues to protect us and goodness will ultimately conquer evil.

Rabbi Eckstein



Engraving by Gustave Dore.

The Purpose of Adversity

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

— Esther 3:10

Tradition teaches that at the beginning of the *Purim* story, the Jewish people were in a state of spiritual decline. They attended the feasts hosted by King Xerxes even though their leaders discouraged it. The king offered these festivities, hoping to win the loyalty of the Jews. He wanted to create one nation out of the many he had conquered.

Yet, the Jewish people were not supposed to lose their identity. God had intended that their exile would last 70 years, after which the people would return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. Instead, they attended the party which, according to the Jewish sages, made use of the Holy Temple vessels stolen in battle. The message of the king was that this was now the home of the Jews and he was their high priest. God, however, had other plans.

The *Purim* story is famous for its theme of complete turnarounds. The Jews were supposed to be killed and

destroyed, but instead, the Jews emerged victorious. However, there is another, perhaps even more significant turnaround that happens in the *Purim* story. The spiritually sleeping Jewish nation reawakened to its biblical purpose as a people, returning to God in complete repentance. How did this turnaround come about?

God sent Haman.

When King Xerxes took off his ring and gave it to Haman, he granted him permission to destroy the Jews; in a way, it did more for the Jewish people than all God's prophets combined. What does this mean? No matter how often someone warns us about the consequences of turning from God, nothing is as effective as experiencing consequences. When the Jews felt endangered, they quickly turned back to God. Similarly, when we face adversity, it often gets us back on track with God.

think about it...

1. Who, or what, are the “villains” in your life? Who are the people or the circumstance that challenge you deeply? How might that situation or person teach you something or make you a better person?
2. Often it's easy for us to identify the “bad guys” in the world and point out what's wrong with how they think or what they stand for. However, it's often much harder to state what we stand for. What are the core values that you would sacrifice anything for? Make a list of those values and share it with a close friend or family member. Discuss why those values are important to you and how you can stand for them in tangible ways.
3. The story of *Purim* happened over the span of nearly a decade. Only in retrospect can we see how God was at work behind the scenes. Look back over the past decade or two in your life. Where do you see God's hand in your personal experiences?
4. One of Haman's major flaws was that he focused on what he lacked instead of all he had. Would you say you are more like Haman or more like Mordecai in how you view your life situation right now – in terms of relationships, finances, work, etc.? How might you focus more on the blessings in your life and look past the rest?
5. Think of a time when you experienced some extreme difficulties. In what ways did that experience deepen your relationship with God or make you a better person?
6. Who are the people in your life who seem difficult, but just maybe could be turned around with a little bit of love and care? What might you do for that person today to show him or her some kindness and love?



Engraving by Nicolas Fontaine. Courtesy of the Digital Image Archive, Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Learning from Our Enemies

“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.”

— Esther 5:13

The *Talmud* asks a strange question: “Where is Haman hinted at in the *Torah*?” The answer is in a verse from Genesis 3:11 where God confronted Adam and Eve after they had sinned: *“Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”* “Have you eaten” in Hebrew is transliterated as *hamin* and in Hebrew is spelled exactly like Haman. What are the Jewish sages trying to teach us by making this connection?

Adam and Eve were given every fruit of the garden to eat, yet they focused on the one tree which they couldn’t have. Similarly, Haman had everything in the world, except for one thing — Mordecai would not bow to him.

In Esther 5, Haman gathered his wife and friends to boast about all he had — his wealth, his children, his position as Prime Minister of Persia, and that he had been invited to an exclusive meal with the king and queen. Then he said, *“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.”* Haman had everything, but he let the one thing that didn’t go his way ruin it for him.

Stopping here would be a powerful lesson in gratitude. It’s not about how much or how little we have, but how much we should appreciate what we do have and overlook what we don’t. But there is a deeper lesson for us.

How does a lack of gratitude turn into evil? When we focus on what we don’t have, we can become consumed by desire and nothing is off-limits. After Haman made his complaint, his wife advised him to hang Mordecai on a gallows. With Mordecai about to be hung, Haman would have it all.

But not quite. In the next scene, Xerxes asked Haman how the king might honor someone he favored. Haman thought the king was talking about him and so he replied that the king’s clothing, horse, and crown should be given to such an individual. Haman now wanted to be king!

That’s the thing with desire. When it goes unchecked, it gets out of control, and that is the root of evil. Haman’s out-of-control ambitions ultimately led him to be hung on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Thankfully, we can learn from Haman’s mistakes so that we don’t repeat them. The way to combat desire is with gratitude.





Forging Our Identity

Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him — you will surely come to ruin!"

— Esther 6:12–13

When things began to turn bad for Haman in the *Purim* story, Haman's friends and his wife, Zeresh, said something unusual to him. They told him: "*Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him — you will surely come to ruin!*" (Esther 6:13)

What were Haman's friends and Zeresh talking about? Why did the fact that Mordecai was Jewish mean that once Haman's downfall began, it could not be reversed?

They knew the secret behind the *Purim* story — that the battle between Haman and the Jews was an ancient one with eternal ramifications. In Esther 3:1, Haman is called "*Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite.*" This seemingly irrelevant information is actually the key to the whole story. Haman was a descendant of Agag, the ancient king of Amalek, the nation God commanded Saul to obliterate. Saul erred by allowing Agag to live one night longer, thus preserving the posterity of the Agagites, the ancestors of Haman.

Now let's go back further in time. Amalek was the archenemy of Israel. The grandson of Esau who sought to kill Jacob for stealing his blessing as firstborn, Amalek also represented the antithesis of everything Israel stood

for. Amalek was the first nation to attack Israel after God had redeemed His people from Egypt and they were wandering in the desert. Amalek lost the battle, but the war waged on.

On the Sabbath before *Purim*, we read from the book of Deuteronomy: "*Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked . . .*" (25:17–18). Literally translated, the verse tells us that Amalek "happened upon" Israel. The Jewish sages explain that this strange wording reveals the essence of Amalek and Haman's personal philosophy — that everything in life is happenstance. Yet, in direct contrast, God's people are meant to demonstrate through their lives that God is Creator and Master over all.

Zeresh and Haman's advisers understood the "die had been cast"; only Amalek or Israel could prevail at any one time. If Mordecai the Jew was rising, then Haman, Amalek's heir, must fall. *Purim* is the victory of the battle between faith and doubt. In every generation we must combat the spiritual force of Amalek. By doing so, we forge our identity and build our character as people with unwavering faith and commitment to God.

apply it...

1. Change the way you see difficulties by viewing them as God-ordained opportunities. Make a list of the five biggest challenges you are facing right now — be it a person or a situation — and reflect on at least one way you might grow from that struggle.
2. Become a spiritual warrior. The war between Israel and Amalek began in biblical times, but rages on even today. Every time we choose faith over doubt, we are dealing a blow to the enemy and upholding God's authority. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.
3. Fight your enemies with kindness. On *Purim*, two commandments are to give charity and send gifts of food packages to neighbors.
4. Take action for what you believe. Just as the bad guys take evil actions to achieve their plans, we should take action in the name of goodness. This might mean treating others kindly, taking political action, or speaking out in your community. Action is the key.
5. Find the good in everything — and everyone. Just as Haman saw the worst in the best of situations, we must look for the good in even the most trying conditions and people.
6. Turn to God *before* the storm. Our study has taught us how difficulties can lead us closer to God and change us for the better. But why wait? Work on staying close to God each and every day.

We do this because when we are kind to each other, we are less vulnerable to evil.

Customs Observed Today



There are several *Purim* customs that relate directly to Haman. The first is making noise with special noisemakers called *gragers*, booing, or causing any other loud disruption whenever the reader of the scroll of Esther mentions Haman's name. Since Haman is a descendant of the nation Amalek, a major factor in the story of *Purim*, this is seen as fulfilling the biblical command to "*blot out the name of Amalek from under the heaven*" (Deuteronomy 25:19).

An additional *Purim* custom revolving around Haman is the making of *Hamentaschen*. These cookie-like treats are triangular-shaped and usually filled with jam, poppy seeds, or chocolate. The origins of these *Purim* delicacies have several

explanations. *Hamentaschen* means "Haman's pockets" and is a reference to the money that Haman offered King Xerxes for permission to exterminate the Jews.

However, in Hebrew, these cookies are called *Oznei Haman* which means "Haman's ears." According to Jewish tradition, Haman had strange, twisted ears, and these cookies remind us of our defeated enemy.

Another tradition is to cultivate a state of mind where the person cannot distinguish between the words "Blessed be Mordecai" and "Cursed be Haman." The deeper message here is to be able to see all events in our life as for the best. Even the villains and evil in our lives are part of God's greater plan to bring about a perfected world.

Finally, our custom on *Purim* is to dress up in costumes or wear masks. The symbolism behind this tradition goes to the very heart of the story — the hidden nature of God always working behind the scenes according to His plan. In fact, Esther's name stems from the same Hebrew root, *seter*, meaning "hiddenness."

By wearing costumes or disguises on *Purim*, we are underscoring, in direct contrast to the philosophy of Amalek, Haman's nation, that God is running the world even if it is hidden from us. The story of *Purim* spanned nearly a decade, but when we read it on *Purim* in the span of a half hour, God's providence is undeniable evident.



HAMENTASCHEN INGREDIENTS

1 jar of jam – or a variety of jam in order to make different flavored cookies.
½ cup water
½ cup margarine
1 cup sugar
1 large egg
1/3 cup orange juice
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
3 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
1 beaten egg white
Cinnamon-sugar mixture

PREPARATION

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
- Beat margarine at medium speed with an electric mixer until creamy; gradually add sugar, beating well.
- Add egg, orange juice, and vanilla.
- In another bowl, combine flour, baking powder, and salt.
- Add to margarine mixture; stir into a uniform dough.
- Shape dough into a flat disk. Cover in plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 15 minutes.
- Working with sections of the dough at a time, roll out the chilled dough on a lightly floured surface to 1/8-inch thickness. Cut circles, about three inches in diameter with either a cookie cutter or a glass cup.
- Place a 1/2 teaspoon of jam in the center of each circle.
- Shape into a triangle by folding two sides of the circle to the center and pinch the corner together. Fold remaining side toward the center and pinch the other two corners together. Some filling should be visible in the center.
- Place *Hamentaschen* on a greased baking sheet. Brush with egg white and sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar.
- Bake for 20 to 35 minutes.