

Haman and Mordecai: A True Story in Honor of Purim

“Every Jew has himself his lord.

Every lord has himself his Jew.” (A proverb)

In the afternoon of the Fast of Esther, in one of the Jewish cities of our old home, a stagecoach came to a halt in front of a Jewish hotel. A passenger wearing a hat with three corners, like a hamantasch, sprang out. He looked like a rich magnate, with an angry, severe glare. Just behind him, out crept a Jew with a long kaftan, a wide *tales-kotn*, a velveteen cap, a tousled beard, deep creases on his broad forehead, and the odd smile of a philosopher on his lips. He carried a very large bag and walked strangely, with long steps. His eyes never left the ill-tempered man in front of him.

“Do you have a room fit for my lord?” the Jew inquired of the hotel’s servant, an energetic young man with a dirty shirt and a yellow necktie. Once it had been the most antique of antiques—the necktie, that is—but over time it had lost its shine and form, and taken on the look of a braid of Purim challah sprinkled with poppy seeds.

The servant greeted the travelers with great pomp, doffed his cap with fanfare, and led them inside the hotel. He opened the door to the biggest, best, most beautiful room: number 1, a room divided into two smaller chambers, as our travelers wished. The smaller antechamber was for taking off boots and hanging up coats. The lord, of course, took the large chamber, and the Jew took the antechamber.

Laying his bag in a corner, the Jew ordered that a samovar be brought for his lord, and asked: “Have you got a bit of food for us?”

“All sorts! It’s the eve of Purim in our city, so we’ve got lots to eat! Fresh hamantaschen with poppy seeds, fruitcakes, almonds, and the usual Purim pastries with odds and ends. Heh!”

The servant said this with a rather coarse smile, revealing the healthy yellow of his teeth. Still, the Jew gave him a friendly pat of gratitude on the shoulder, and the servant went off to prepare a samovar and bring all the good things he had listed. The Jew, meanwhile, made himself quite comfortable: he took off his velvet cap (leaving his yarmulke on, of course), rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, and sat down on a stool by the door to his lord's room. Not wanting the time to go to waste, he untied his bag, took out one of the small holy books, and engrossed himself in it. He bowed his head, closed an eye, chewed the tip of his beard, and nodded with his entire body.

To the world, it all seemed contradictory. You couldn't have it both ways: if this was a court Jew,¹ how could he sit over a holy book? But what else could he be? If the two were complete strangers, why had he come with the lord? And what was he doing here on the Fast of Esther of all days?

The proprietress of the hotel racked her brains over these questions, as did the guests, and curious Jews from all over town. As the servant brought the samovar and an entire pan of Purim treats, he asked the Jew in passing, "Where does your lord come from?"

"Do you really need to know?" asked the Jew, and went back to his book.

"It's no concern of mine if I don't know," said the servant, "but my mistress told me to be sure to ask you where your lord is from."

"Tell the proprietress that he's from Persia and Medea."²

"Which city?"

"The fortress Susa."

"What do you mean, 'The fortress Susa'?"

"Tell your mistress to send someone smarter than you."

The servant stood for a while with open calf eyes, scratched himself under the collar, and left. Several minutes later came the proprietress herself, a heavy woman. Two or three women could've

1 A Jew who administered the estate or business of a European nobleman.

2 Phrases such as this come directly from the Book of Esther. English translations are from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1999).

been made from her. Since all the events described to us later were conversations in the antechamber, we'll divide things into several tableaux, and begin thus:

Scene 1

The Proprietress: (*Picks her nose.*) Good morning! I sent my servant up to you, but he's a dumb beast.

The Court Jew: He's a dumb beast? Then give him straw to chew on.

The Proprietress: No, I mean . . . he doesn't understand what people say to him. I wanted to know who your lord is and where he's from.

The Court Jew: (*Looking at his holy book.*) Where my lord's from? The fortress Susa.

The Proprietress: Where's that? Which province?

The Court Jew: (*Does not raise his eyes from his book.*) In Persia and Medea.

The Proprietress: (*Thinks a little.*) What is he? A count?

The Court Jew: A bit more than a count.

The Proprietress: A prince?

The Court Jew: A bit more than a prince, too.

The Proprietress: A general?

The Court Jew: A vizier.

The Proprietress: A what?

The Court Jew: A vizier of King Ahasuerus.

The Proprietress: (*Thinks a little.*) What's he doing here? Some kind of business?

The Court Jew: Certainly he's doing business.

The Proprietress: What's he buying? Estates? Forests? Or is he just lending money?

The Court Jew: He can buy and sell, and lend money, and do what he wants.

The Proprietress: So where are you from? From there, too?

The Court Jew: Indeed, from there, too.

The Proprietress leaves and shrugs her shoulders. "A strange guest!" she thinks to herself. "Someone has to meet the lord himself . . . but how? That Jew sits by the door like a dog, and won't let anyone in!" Luckily for her, God

sends a Broker, who had seen the carriage arrive and had come to figure out who this lord was and what he needed. Quickly, the Proprietress tells him what she heard from the Court Jew, that this is a rich lord doing business, and sends him in on the condition that if any deal is made, she will get half. The Broker enters the antechamber in three strides and stands before the Court Jew. And here occurs. . .

Scene 2

The Broker: *(Extends to the Court Jew a fat, hairy hand.)* Sholem-aleykhem! I heard you're here with your lord, come to do a bit of business. I'm a middleman, a broker . . . of money, you see. Here in our city, almost all the Jews deal mainly with money . . . there's no other business for us, you understand, besides money. Here, every Jew is either a shopkeeper or a moneylender. Anyway, who's your lord? Where's he from? What does he have? What does he need?

The Court Jew: I don't know if you'd know him. He's from far away: Persia and Medea.

The Broker: Persia and Medea? Which city?

The Court Jew: The fortress Susa.

The Broker: The fortress Susa? What's his name?

The Court Jew: His name is Haman.

The Broker: *(Takes a step back.)* Haman? Wh-wh-which Haman?

The Court Jew: The proper Haman, the real Haman: Haman son of Hammedatha . . .

The Broker: *(Interrupts.)* Nu, and who are you?

The Court Jew: . . . and I'm his Jew, Mordecai.

The Broker: M-mordecai? The one who . . . today . . . in the Megillah. . . ?

The Court Jew: *(Rises from his stool and stands face-to-face with the Broker.)* Yes, yes, yes! Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish! *(He shouts "Kish" in the Broker's ear.)*

The Broker: *(Reddens with anger.)* Apparently you have no one to make fun of!

The Broker runs out in a great rage, and a new traveler shows up. This young man has a trimmed little beard, a handsome mustache twisted smartly upward, and a pretty chain on his waistcoat that might be gold or

might not be. He is an agent of Singer's Sewing Machines, but from time to time, when there is news in town, he sends a letter to the newspaper under the name "The Trimmed Beard."

Scene 3

The Trimmed Beard: Good morning! Here, I saw, came a lord with a Jew. I wanted, if possible, to interview him.

The Court Jew: What do you mean, interview?

The Trimmed Beard: I mean I want to have a chat with him.

The Court Jew: That's it?

The Trimmed Beard: That's it.

The Court Jew: That's what's called "*devarim betelim*."³ Who are you?

The Trimmed Beard: I'm a part-time agent of sewing machines. But the rest of the time I'm a writer, a correspondent for a Jewish newspaper. Can I see your lord?

The Court Jew: No, you can't see him.

The Trimmed Beard: Why not?

The Court Jew: Because he's too great a lord.

The Trimmed Beard: Who is he? Where's he from? And what's his name?

The Court Jew: He's a magnate from the fortress Susa, and his name is Haman. Is that name known to you?

The Trimmed Beard: The name's familiar, but I've never heard of that city. Is it far?

The Court Jew: Persia and Medea, from India to Ethiopia. Ever heard of it?

The Trimmed Beard: (*Twirls his mustache.*) No, never! (*Takes out a notebook and pencil. Prepares to take notes.*) What did you say his name was?

The Court Jew: Haman.

The Trimmed Beard: The same man hamantaschen are named after? The ones we eat today?

The Court Jew: Yes, precisely! *Nu*, and have you ever heard the name Mordecai?

The Trimmed Beard: Yes, I heard something read about him and that Haman. . . (*Busies himself with his notebook.*)

³ "idle talk"

The Court Jew: You should know that my lord is *that* Haman himself, from the fortress Susa . . .

The Trimmed Beard: *(Interrupts. Hesitates. Does not know what to write.)* Wh-what do you mean? I don't understand. He's still alive, this Haman? I thought he was long dead!

The Court Jew: . . . and I'm his Jew: "*Mordekhay hayehudi yosheyv b'sha'ar hamelekh.*"⁴ *(He sings these last words to the melody of the Megillah.)* Never in his life has our agent been as annoyed as he is now at not knowing the holy books. At this moment he regrets very much that as a boy he did not want to look at any of the sacred Jewish texts. He puts the blame entirely on his father. Yes, his father is completely at fault. A father is obligated to teach his child.

The Trimmed Beard: Pardon my asking, but of all the Hamans, which one. . . ?

The Court Jew: *(Interrupts.)* Not "all the Hamans!" Haman himself, the real Haman! How many times do I have to drum it into your head?

The Trimmed Beard: *(Quickly takes out a handkerchief, wipes away sweat. The door opens, and a new fellow appears. He is a Jew with fiery red hair, fiery red eyebrows, and a considerable belly. He is dressed like a Hasid, but clean and neat, with a handsome kaftan. The Jew With Fiery Red Hair flies at the Court Jew like a hurricane.)*

The Court Jew: *(To the Trimmed Beard.)* What are you standing there speechless for?

The Trimmed Beard: I . . . I . . . I'll come back later. . . *(Edges out.)*

Scene 4

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: *(Shakes hands warmly with the Court Jew.)* *Sholem-aleykhem*, my dear man! I've already heard news of you. They say you're here with a lord, a magnate who buys and sells estates and forests. They didn't want to tell me his name, but I've guessed who he is. *(Rolls up his sleeves.)* He must be a count or a prince, right? I'm the greatest broker of estates and forests in all of Polesia.⁵ As sure as I'm standing here,

⁴ "that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate" (Esther 5:13).

⁵ A forested region, running along the border between present-day Ukraine and

you'll run into me everywhere, all over the world, popping out of every mousehole. I'm friends with every lord and count, and all the greatest magnates are crazy about me. They know I'm loyal to them, and that I won't mislead them. They know that what I say is holy. I won't go telling them some useless, cock-and-bull story, like the ones the brokers from Odessa and Yehupets⁶ rattle off. Charlatans with their rubbish! With me, everything's honest and frank. If I say it's a forest, it's a forest. If I say it's a steppe, it's a steppe. I won't go telling them they'll be successful—"A blow to a tree, a splash in the water"—and then have it come to nothing, no sir. And if I make an agreement with someone, we'll share the same fate. Stones may fall from the sky, but we'll split what's left: half for me and half for you.

The Court Jew: Get to the point. What is it you wanted to say?

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: Right, what I wanted to say: since I'm told a lord of some sort came with you to buy or sell estates, I made a point of coming to see this traveler who's come to our Volhynia⁷ and does business without me. You think you can make a move without me? If you'll believe it, I wrapped up a few deals and came here out of curiosity, to see this sight! I pulled off the impossible: brought India to Ethiopia, turned an awl into a sewing machine, took a golden estate from one fellow and slipped him a forest. He should be so lucky! You should see oak trees. Like cedars of Lebanon!⁸ The drawback is you can't chop them down. It's impossible. You have to leave them for thirty years, and sell them off then. But the estate has one advantage: the earth is pure mud, good for horseradish and potatoes, and nothing else! A railroad might go there one day. God willing, the Messiah will come, and maybe go. . . but probably not. But these two lords, you should've seen them! Each one wanted to wear the pants, and they wanted to convince me that I was trying to trick them, but they were just fooling themselves. A comedy, I'm telling you, pure comedy!

Belarus and into Russia.

⁶ Sholem Aleichem's name for Kiev.

⁷ A *gubernia* (province) of the Russian Empire, centered on what is now northwest Ukraine.

⁸ cf. 1 Kings 5:20, Psalms 29:5, Psalms 92:13

(Overcome with laughter.)

The Court Jew: Then what is it you wanted to say?

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: Nothing. I just wanted to get a feel for you, find out what you're involved in. Just tell me who your lord is, where he's from, what they call him, and I'll tell you what he needs. Just tell me his name. I know everyone, and everyone knows me.

The Court Jew: His name is Haman.

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: *(Starts.)* Eh? Haman? Which of the Hamans? Maybe the one from there? *(Indicates with his hands somewhere far away.)*

The Court Jew: "Which of the Hamans?" The real one! Haman himself! *(To the melody of the Megillah.)* Haman ben Hamdatha Ha'Agagi,⁹ vizier to King Ahasuerus. Do you know him now?

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: Wh-what are you saying?

The Court Jew: You heard me.

The Jew With Fiery Red Hair: Are you mixed up? Are you confused? Are you crazy? Are you insane?

The Court Jew: I'm not mixed up, or confused, or crazy, or insane. This is him, the real Haman himself, from the fortress Susa, and I'm Mordecai the Jew. *His Jew*, that is. As you've probably heard, he's a great and mighty magnate. And of course, I'm a poor Jew. That is, he's my lord, and I'm his Jew. Now, do you finally understand?

Listening to this terse explanation, the Jew With Fiery Red Hair grabs his sides with both hands and starts to laugh, as the Proprietress comes in with the Servant, several guests, and plain Jews. The door to the bigger chamber opens, and the lord himself looks out, throws an angry look at all the people, and engages his Jew in conversation in a strange language, some kind of gibberish that has never been heard in Volhynia Province. Every word ends with "-tha": "Parshandatha, Ashpatha, Poratha, Vayzatha . . ." ¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Court Jew stands before his lord in the manner a Jew ought to stand before his lord, and on goes the gibberish that could break a man's teeth. The onlookers could swear that here and there they catch the famous, difficult words of the Megillah: "part'mim," "akhashdarp'nim," "akhasht'ranim,"

⁹ "Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite" (Esther 3:1)

¹⁰ Four of the ten sons of Haman, all killed with their father (Esther 9:7).

“Sha’ashgaz,” and even “Kharvona.”¹¹ The whole crowd stands with open mouths, and they cannot understand what is happening to them. Haman and Mordecai from the Megillah? A new Haman and a new Mordecai? Is it all a dream? An evil, miserable dream in their heads?

A few words from the author to his readers:

And now, I happily break off the story. Believe me, every craftsman knows his work and every writer knows his business. I see you’re all wound up, and want to know the end of the story. That’s the main thing for you, isn’t it? Well, have a little patience until next Purim. That’s not much of a wait. No more than a year. What’s a year worth in eternity?

¹¹ Words and names from the Book of Esther.

part’mim: “nobles” (Esther 1:3)

akhashdarp’nim: “satraps” (Esther 3:12)

akhasht’ranim: “steeds used in the king’s service” (Esther 8:10)

Sha’ashgaz: Shaashgaz, a eunuch in the service of Ahasuerus, supervised his harem (Esther 2:14).

Kharvona: Harbona, another eunuch of Ahasuerus, informs the king that Haman has raised a fifty-cubit stake on which to impale Mordecai (Esther 7:9).