

Purim without Esther: The Story of a Disputed Casting of Lots

A Torah Purim Spiel/Commentary

By Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein

As part of the media effort to uncover the real story of what happened to the ballots cast during the 2000 Presidential election in Florida, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism has been asked to bring its expertise with ancient Jewish texts (and its record of never having a race for congregation president go to a recount) to help in this endeavor.

After an intensive study of new documents — some from ancient Shushan, some subpoenaed by congressional committee — we have been able to piece together the whole Megillah.

It all happened in the days of Achashverosh — that Achashverosh who reigned over fifty provinces from Indiana to New Mexico. In those days, in the eighth month of the eighth year of his reign, the King gave a banquet — actually a convention — in Los Angeles, for all his ministers and courtiers and all his donors, high and low alike. There were lavish parties, feasting and merrymaking, as the assembled multitudes celebrated the vast riches and prosperity of his kingdom, and the successes of the King.

There were hangings of white cotton and blue and red. And there was gavel-to-gavel coverage on TV — at least on cable.

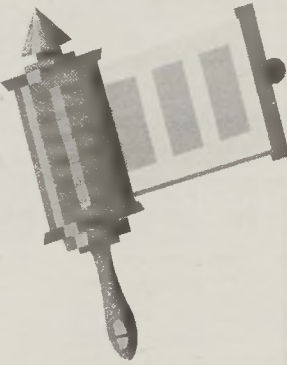
On the third day, the King summoned his queen, Vashti. But she refused to come at the king's command. The King was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him. For Vashti had greater plans for the far-flung province of New York, and she was tired of standing by her king. So, Achashverosh banished Vashti, and she became a heroine to women all over the world.

Now, the King decided to have a contest — not for another Queen, but for a replacement for himself. For he was forbidden to reign for more than eight years.

The King and his courtiers first

considered a scholar from Rhodes who distinguished himself in battles at the Garden. But in the end, they chose the King's closest adviser, Alger, to succeed him. This pleased the King, and he acted upon it.

Alger was grateful to be chosen; his whole life he aspired to be King. But he was embarrassed about Achashverosh's wild banquets and harems and concubines. So, in choosing his own partner, with whom he would seek to rule the kingdom, Alger chose Mordechai, from the men of Lieber, a Connecticutite, an upright man, and a pious person of Judah.



There was a great commotion when Mordechai was chosen. Never before had a Jew been selected for a position of such high honor. "Only in Shushan," Mordechai said.

Being a man of faith, Mordechai wanted to acknowledge God publicly with prayers of thanksgiving. But Abraham, from the men of Fox, reprimanded him, reminding Mordechai that God's name does not appear even once in Megillat Esther.

Although Achashverosh wanted Alger to succeed him, there existed a rival for the throne.

Haman, a son of Haman, was the ruler of one of the King's largest provinces (and of no relation to the evil Haman of Megillat Esther lore). He had called for a remission of taxes for the provinces, and advanced himself higher than any of his fellow officials. The King had defeated Haman's father once before, so to make it interesting, Achashverosh decreed that the next ruler would be chosen by the casting of lots, or purim.

The King's scribes were summoned and a decree was proclaimed to the King's satraps, to the governors of every province, and to the officials of every people, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language. The orders were issued in the name of King Achashverosh, and sealed with the King's signet.

A spirited contest ensued. Alger removed his royal apparel and donned special garb — earth tones, and wireless hand-held devices. Haman wore a smirk, and a special hat — a three-cornered Stetson. And they pled their case to every province, near and far. Mordechai visited so many provinces, he appeared as if he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes.

Meanwhile, confident Alger would win, Achashverosh ordered his men to put up a large platform, fifty cubits high, at the base of his Capitol, on which Alger and Mordechai would assume the throne and address the people of Shushan.

On the morning of the seventh day of the eleventh month, the people went to cast their lots, and the seers and the oracles predicted that the contest would be close. And it was.

That very day, messengers brought the news that the entire election came down to one province in the southern reach of the kingdom. At the beginning, Alger was slightly ahead. But Haman's brother, the governor of

the province, told Haman not to worry. Later, Haman was slightly ahead. Mordechai, too, assured Alger, telling him that the province had many of Mordechai's brethren in its land.

Mordechai, from the men of Lieber, called some of his brothers and sisters there to learn the why and wherefore of it all. But they sounded worn and tired. "What has befallen you, landsmen?" Mordechai inquired. "We are fatigued from the celebration of Purim," they told him. "We were merry with wine, and danced in condo clubhouses until dawn."

"No, no," he cried out loudly. For Mordechai knew what had happened. And he was crestfallen. You see, his kindred people mistook the day to cast purim, with the day to celebrate Purim.

They had imbibed in copious amounts of libations, and when they cast their lots, they could not tell the difference between Alger and Mordechai and Haman. These men and women of Judah never forgot who they were; they simply could not tell who Alger and Mordechai were.

And so it came to pass, that these events were recorded in the book of records — the Annals — that the great stage that was put up for Alger and Mordechai, was used instead by Haman, son of Haman, to assume the throne.

In view, then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them, the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to stop drinking on Purim — not when they can no longer tell the difference between Mordechai and Haman, but whenever they see a butterfly. ✪

Rabbi Jerome Epstein is Executive Vice President of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Purim, the festival, begins February 24.

Hamantaschen Recipe

From Out of Our Kitchen Closets (San Francisco Gay Jewish Cooking, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, San Francisco, 1987)

Prize-Winning Hamantaschen (This recipe won Sha'ar Zahav's 1985 Hamantaschen Bake-Off)

- Dough**
 1/4 lb. cream cheese
 1/4 lb. butter or margarine
 2-1/2 c. flour
 2 well-rounded t. baking powder
 1/2 c. sugar
 3 T. sour cream
 Juice and grated rind of one lemon
 2 eggs

Cream the butter and cream cheese together. Add the eggs and sugar and beat till smooth. Add the sour cream, lemon rind and juice. Mix together. Gradually add the flour and baking powder, stirring until you have a smooth dough. Refrigerate 3-4 hrs. or overnight

- Filling**
 1 can poppyseed pastry filling
 1 c. golden raisins
 1 heaping T. honey

Put the raisins in a saucepan and cover with water. Bring to a boil. Drain immediately and dry on paper towels. Mix with canned poppyseed paste and honey for the filling. Preheat oven to 350 degrees and roll out the dough on a well-floured pastry cloth or pastry board to 1/8" thick. Cut into 3" circles. Fill with one t. of the filling. Do not overfill. Bring up edges of dough on 3 sides so they form a triangle, or Haman's hat. Pinch the seams tightly together, starting at the bottom, or the dough will unfold and form a flat cookie. Leave the center open, however, to show a bit of the filling. Repeat until all are made, putting the hamantaschen on cookie sheets as they are finished. Brush the top with the egg glaze. Bake for 15-20 min. or till lightly golden in color. ✪

BUSINESS CARD DIRECTORY

To advertise in the Business Card Directory, call Rita Mond at 704-366-6632, Pam Grossman at 704-841-1544, or Debbie Dulberg at 704-846-8901.

Stanley Faust's
NORTH AMERICA
GEMOLOGICAL SERVICES
Specializing in Insurance & Estate Appraisals

Stanley A. Faust, Graduate Gemologist (GIA)
 Member of the National Association of Jewelry Appraisers

4400 Sharon Road
 Southpark Mall
 Charlotte, NC 28211
 Phone (704) 364-3368
 Fax (704) 364-8808
 Website: www.stanleyfaust.com
 Email: appraisals@stanleyfaust.com

Designing, Manufacturing and Installing
 Closet Systems, Entertainment Centers & Offices

Call For A FREE Consultation!

Hands-On
 WOODWORKING, INC.

704-892-7720
 www.handsonww.com

Jack Grossman

COMPUTER LESSONS AT HOME!

Whether you just bought your first computer, or are a more advanced user, enjoy personalized, affordable computer lessons in the comfort of your own home. Learn at your own pace, and learn only what you want to know.

— Also computer repair and upgrades —

Call Paul Moritz at 704-542-7387

Helping Seniors/ Others Live at Home

HOMEWATCH
 "AT HOME" Living Assistance

Bonded & Insured

Meals, Errands
 Housekeeping
 Transportation
 Laundry
 Personal Care
 New Mom Care

704-509-1923

Small Jobs Welcome
 Insured & Bonded

PEASLEY ELECTRIC
 25 Years Experience

"We pride ourselves in quality electric service"
 Our Workmanship Is Guaranteed

MARVIN L. PEASLEY
 704-442-2872
 Pager: 704-580-0954

• Senior Citizen Discount •

morningstar mini-storage

12 Charlotte Locations

For Information Call:
 704-552-8222