

The Hebrew Corner

One interesting common theme throughout the Tanach, is that when a king makes a decree, that it cannot be changed, even by the king that made the decree. Contrast that to most governmental systems in modern times, in that laws are frequently altered when the legislative body changes its membership. An example of this can be found in the following passage (Daniel 5:1-8):

“Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king's

wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.”

Here we have a decree made by a king of Babylon, concerning any person who could interpret the handwriting, and the reward they would receive. This passage from Daniel is in the Aramaic language. The phrase translated as third ruler is in Aramaic, taltee (תלתי, tahl-TEE), which simply means third, but from the context, third ruler is implied. The closest comparable Hebrew word is shaleesh (שליש, shah-LEESH), which means third officer or man.

The narrative continues with the queen informing Belshazzar that there was a man in the kingdom, Daniel, who was wise and could interpret sayings that were difficult to understand. Daniel was brought to the king to give the interpretation of the handwriting in the wall. Daniel gave him the interpretation, as a prophet of God, that the kingdom of Babylon would come to an end, and that it would be divided between the Medes and Persians. Although Daniel had told him that he did not need to give him any gifts, Belshazzar carried out the decree, and commanded that Daniel be clothed with scarlet, a chain of gold placed around his neck, and made him third ruler of the kingdom. He did not retain that title long, as the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon that very evening, and Belshazzar was killed.

In the following passage, also from the book of Daniel, we see that the decrees of a king of the Medes and Persians was also binding (Daniel 6:1-24):

“It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty

princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God. Then these presidents and princes assembled together to the king, and said thus unto him, King Darius, live for ever. All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. Wherefore king Darius signed the writing and the decree. Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God. Then they came near, and spake before the king concerning the king's decree; Hast thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing is true,

according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. Then answered they and said before the king, That Daniel, which is of the children of the captivity of Judah, regardeth not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou hast signed, but maketh his petition three times a day. Then the king, when he heard these words, was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he laboured till the going down of the sun to deliver him. Then these men assembled unto the king, and said unto the king, Know, O king, that the law of the Medes and Persians is, That no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed. Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. Now the king spake and said unto Daniel, Thy God whom thou servest continually, he will deliver thee. And a stone was brought, and laid upon the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet, and with the signet of his lords; that the purpose might not be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him. Then the king arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions. And when he came to the den, he cried with a lamentable voice unto Daniel: and the king spake and said to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions? Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt. Then was the king exceedingly glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in

his God. And the king commanded, and they brought those men which had accused Daniel, and they cast them into the den of lions, them, their children, and their wives; and the lions had the mastery of them, and brake all their bones in pieces or ever they came at the bottom of the den.”

King Darius made this decree unwisely. But God used this as an occasion to show the Medes and Persians that he was the true God. King Darius then made another decree that all people of his kingdom should fear the God of Daniel, and proclaimed him as the true and eternal God.

The various accounts of Daniel's encounters with the kings of Babylon, and then later of the king of the Medes and Persians, apparently was lost on a later Persian king, King Ahasuerus, who was the king during the life of Esther, as he also made a foolish decree concerning the Jews in his kingdom. Mordecai a Jew, and his cousin Esther, who he had raised as his daughter, had been carried away in one of the deportations of Jews from Judah to Babylon during the Babylonian conquest of Judah. Esther had been selected by Ahasuerus as the queen to replace Vashti, who had incurred the wrath of the king by refusing to come to his feast when he summoned her. The account then continues with the promotion of Haman (Esther 3:1-15):

“After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor

did him reverence. Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew. And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee. Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the

name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring. And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day. The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.”

Decree in Hebrew is dat (דַּת, DAHT). Mordecai convinced Esther to petition the king to come to the aid of the Jews that were going to be killed. God did not use this occasion to reveal himself to Ahasuerus, and in fact God is not mentioned at all in the book of Esther, but used a series of well-timed events to aid the Jews. Esther was summoned into the presence of the king by the golden scepter. Esther invited the king and Haman to a banquet that she had prepared. At the banquet, she asked the king to come to a second banquet the next day, and asked for Haman to be present, which he agreed to. That night, the king, being unable to sleep, started reading the annals of his kingdom, and found that Mordecai had saved his life by uncovering a plot to kill him by two of the king's officials. Ahasuerus then asked if anything had been done to honor Mordecai, When told that there had not, the king asked Haman what he should do to give honor to this man, not telling him his name. Haman assumed that the king was speaking of him, told the king, that he should be clothed in one of the king's robes, a crown placed on his head, and be paraded on the king's mule. Not knowing that it was Mordecai that was going to be honored, he

made a gallows to hang Mordecai at the advice of his wife and friends. The plot continues with Haman being forced to put the robe and crown on Mordecai and lead him around on the mule. Then at the banquet, Esther reveals the plot that Haman had devised against the Jews. One of the king's official then told the king that Haman had made a gallows to hang Mordecai. The king then ordered that Haman be hanged on the gallows. As we can see, all these events worked for the benefit of the Jews, as the king allowed Mordecai to make a decree to help the Jews, and give it his seal of approval. The decree that Mordecai made was that the Jews be allowed to gather and fight against their enemies. According to the rest of the passage, they were helped greatly because “the fear of Mordecai,” clearly the work of God, fell upon the rulers of the provinces who instructed the lower officials to help the Jews, presumably with trained men and equipment, and resulted in a resounding victory of the Jews over their enemies.

This encounter has continued to be commemorated by Jews over the years as the feast of Purim, being the plural of Pur (פור, POOR), which was the lot that Haman and his companions had cast to the twelfth month.

These accounts of the decrees of kings also remind us that God does not change his covenant or any of his promises to us, and we can trust and count on him to keep them. I wish you and your family many blessings from God and have a great month.