

Why Didn't Mordechai Bow?

How did Haman rise to power?

1. Esther 3:1

(א) אחר הדברים האלה גדל המלך אחשורוש את המן בן המדחא האגגי וינשאהו וישם את כסאו מעל כל השרים אשר אתו.
(1) After these events, King Achashverosh promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite and advanced him, and placed his seat above all the officials who were with him.

2. Talmud, Megillah 16a

תנא: המן, ספר של כפר קרצום היה עשירים ושתים שנה.

It was taught in a *baraisa*: Haman was the barber of the village of Kartzum for twenty-two years.

3. Talmud, Megillah 12b

"ויאמר ממוכן". תנא: ממוכן זה המן, ולמה נקרא שמו ממוכן? שמוכן לפורענות. אמר רב פהנא: מכאן שההדיוט קופץ בראש.
"And Memuchan said" (Esther 1:16). A Sage taught in a *baraisa*: Memuchan is Haman. And why is [Haman] referred to as Memuchan? Because he was prepared [*muchan*] to bring calamity [upon the Jewish people]. Rav Kahana said: From here we see that the common man jumps to the front.

4. Malbim to Esther 3:1

וגם כי אחר שנשכח ממנו מי היה המגלה מדבר בגתן ותרש, היה נקל להמן אשר שעתו הצליחה לו לפתות לב המלך שהוא היה המגיד דבר, ולכן העלהו לגדולה, ובאופן שהמן התלבש בטלית שאינו שלו, והכבוד הלז היה באמת מגיע למרדכי אך מאת ד' היתה נסבה שתחול על ראש הרשע לפי שעה עד בא העת להחזיר העטרה לבעליה: "גדל... וינשאהו" מנמוסי המלכים שלא לגדל איש הדיוט פתאום משפל המדרגה עד רום המעלות, רק יעלהו מדרגה אחר מדרגה...

Also, after [Achashverosh] forgot who exposed Bigthan and Teresh, it was easy for Haman, for whom the time was fortuitous, to introduce into the king's heart that he had been the one to tell it. Therefore he elevated him, such that Haman wore a garment that was not his own. This honor was truly due to Mordechai, but this was caused by G-d to fall upon the head of the wicked one temporarily, until the time would come to return the crown to its rightful owner. "He elevated... and he raised him" – It is the way of kings not to elevate a common person suddenly, from the lowest rank to the highest rank. Therefore, he elevated him rank by rank...

Why didn't Mordechai bow?

5. Esther 3:2-6

(ב) וכל עבדי המלך אשר בשער המלך פרעים ומשתתפים להמן פי כן צוה לו המלך ומרדכי לא יכרע ולא ישתחוה. (ג) ויאמרו עבדי המלך אשר בשער המלך למרדכי "מדוע אמה עובר את מצות המלך?" (ד) ויהי באמרם [כאמרם] אליו יום ויום ולא שמע אליהם ויגידו להמן לראות הניעמדו דברי מרדכי כי הגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי. (ה) וירא המן כי אין מרדכי פרע ומשתחוה לו וימלא המן חמה. (ו) ויבזו בעיניו לשלח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי ויבקש המן להשמיד את כל היהודים אשר בכל מלכות אחשורוש עם מרדכי.

(2) And all the king's servants who were in the king's gate would kneel and prostrate themselves before Haman, for so had the king commanded concerning him, but Mordechai would neither kneel nor prostrate himself. (3) Then the king's servants who were in the king's gate, said to Mordechai, "Why do you disobey the king's orders?" (4) Now it came to pass when they said [this] to him daily, and he did not heed them, that they told [this] to Haman, to see whether Mordechai's words would stand up, **for he had told them that he was a Jew.** (5) And when Haman saw that Mordechai would neither kneel nor prostrate himself before him, Haman became full of wrath. (6) But it seemed contemptible to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had told him Mordechai's nationality, and Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout Achashverosh's entire kingdom, Mordechai's people.

6. Talmud, Megillah 12b-13a

רַבָּא אָמַר: כְּנִסַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶמְרָה לְאַיְדֵי גִיסָא: רָאוּ מָה עָשָׂה לִי יְהוּדֵי וּמָה שִׁילַם לִי יְמִינִי. מָה עָשָׂה לִי יְהוּדֵי — דְּלֹא קִטְלִיה דְּדָוִד לְשִׁמְעִי, דְּאִתְּלִיד מִיְנֵיהּ מְרֻדְכַי דְּמִיְקֻנֵי בֵיהּ הֶמֶן. וּמָה שִׁילַם לִי יְמִינִי — דְּלֹא קִטְלִיה שְׂאוּל לְאַגָּג, דְּאִתְּלִיד מִיְנֵיהּ הֶמֶן דְּמִצְעַר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל.
Rava said: The Congregation of Israel at the time said this from the opposite perspective: See what a Judean has done to me and how a Benjamite has repaid me. What a Judean has done to me, as David did not kill Shimei, that Mordechai was born from him, and it was he against whom Haman was jealous. And how a Benjamite has repaid me [is referring to the fact] that Shaul [who was from the tribe of Benjamin], did not kill Agag, from whom Haman was born, and he caused suffering to the Jewish people.

7. Ibn Ezra to Esther 3

(ב) יכרע וישתחוה - ידועים ונכון מה שדרשו רז"ל **כי צורת צלם וע"ז היו בבגדיו** או על מצנפתו.
(ד) כי הגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי - כי הוא אסור לו, והנה יש לשאול למה הכניס מרדכי עצמו בסכנה גם הכניס כל ישראל היה ראוי שידבר לאסתר ותסירנו משער המלך ולא יכעיס את המן אחר שראה שהשעה משחקת לו, והתשובה כי לא יוכל לסור משער המלך כי אם יסור בלא מצות המלך דמו בראשו.

(2) Mordechai would not bow - The opinion of our Rabbis is well known and correct, that **Haman had an image of idolatry on his clothes** or his hat.

(4) He told them that he was a Jew – and that this was forbidden to him. We should ask the question, why did Mordechai put himself and the Jewish people into such danger? Could he have not spoken to Esther to get transferred away from the "Gate of the King" so that he wouldn't agitate Haman especially as he saw that Haman had particular good fortune at this time? The answer is that he couldn't move from the Gate by a Royal order at pain of death.

8. Talmud, Megillah 10b

— רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָנִי, פֶּתַח לֵה פִּתְחָא לְהָאֵי פְּרָשְׁתָּא מִהֶכָּא: "פֶּתַח הַנְּעֻצוּץ יַעֲלֶה כְּרוּשׁ וְתַחַת הַסְּרַפָּד יַעֲלֶה הַדָּס". "פֶּתַח הַנְּעֻצוּץ" — תַּחַת הֶמֶן הִרְשָׁע שֶׁעָשָׂה עֲצֻמוֹ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה...
Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani introduced this passage with an introduction from here: "Instead of the thorn shall the cypress come up, and instead of the nettle shall the myrtle come up." "Instead of the thorn"; [this means] instead of the wicked Haman. [He is referred to as a thorn] because **he turned himself into an object of idol worship**...

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9. Rashi, Sanhedrin 61b

שעשה עצמו עבודה זרה כדאמר במגילה (יט, א), דאי לאו הכי לא הוה מרדכי מתגרה בו והיה כורע ומשתחוה לו.
He made himself a foreign god, as Megillah (19a) says, for otherwise Mordechai would not have started with him, and would have bowed to him.

10. Talmud, Sanhedrin 61b

העובד עבודה זרה מאהבה ומיראה, אביי אמר חייב, רבא אמר פטור... אמר אביי מנא אמינא לה? דתניא "לא תשתחוה להם" - להם אי אתה משתחוה, אבל אתה משתחוה לאדם כמותך. יכול אפילו נעבד כהמן? תלמוד לומר "ולא תעבדם." והא המן מיראה הוה נעבד [ואעפ"כ אסור]! ורבא? כהמן ולא כהמן - המן דאיהו גופיה עבודה זרה, ולא כהמן דאילו המן מיראה והכא [האיסור] לאו מיראה.
One who serves a foreign god out of love or fear: Abaye says liable, Rava says exempt... Abaye said: What is my source? We have learned, "Do not bow to them" – Do not bow to them, but bow to people, who are like you. Even if the person is worshiped, like Haman? It says, "And do not worship them." Haman was only worshiped out of fear [and yet it was prohibited]! What would Rava say? The prohibition is only if it is like Haman, but not like Haman. Haman was himself worshiped as a foreign god; but not like Haman, in that Haman was worshiped out of fear, and the prohibition is only if it is not out of fear.

11. Tosafos, Sanhedrin 61b

וא"ת לרבא אמאי לא השתחוה מרדכי להמן? וי"ל כדאמר במדרש שהיו צלמים על לבו. אי נמי משום קידוש השם כדאמרין בירושלמי דשביעית (פ"ד) כגון פפוס ולוליינוס אחים שנתן להם מים בזכוכית צבועה ולא קיבלו.

According to Rava, why did Mordechai refuse to prostrate himself before Haman?

1. Because he had the image of an idol on his heart.
2. **In order to sanctify the name of Hashem**, like the Talmud Yerushami says in Sheviis (4:2), citing the case of Papus and Lulianus, who were offered water in a colored glass (in lieu of poison), but refused to accept it. [Papus and Lulianus were killed when they refused to drink from a cup which the emperor gave to them, upon which was inscribed the name of an idol.]

12. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 5:1

כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל מְצֻוִּין עַל קְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא כב לב) "וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל". וּמְזַהְרִין שְׁלֹא לְחַלְלוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא כב לב) "וְלֹא תַחֲלִלוּ אֶת שֵׁם קְדוֹשִׁי". פִּיצוּד? פְּשִׁיעֵמֶד עוֹבֵד פּוֹכְבִים וְיֵאָנֵס אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעֵבֵר עַל אַחַת מִכָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמִוּרוֹת בְּתוֹרָה אוֹ יִהְרָגוּ, יַעֲבֵר וְאֵל יִהְרַג שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר בְּמִצְוֹת (ויקרא יח ה) "אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם". וְחַי בָּהֶם וְלֹא שְׂיָמוּת בָּהֶם. וְאִם מֵת וְלֹא עָבֵר, הֲרִי זֶה מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ.

The entire house of Israel are commanded regarding the sanctification of [G-d's] great name, as [Vayikra 22:32] states: "And I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel." Also, they are warned against desecrating [His holy name], as [the above verse] states: "And they shall not desecrate My holy name." What is implied? Should a gentile arise and force a Jew to violate one of the Torah's commandments at the pain of death, he should violate the commandment rather than be killed, because [Vayikra 18:5] states concerning the mitzvos: "which a man will perform and live by them." [They were given so that] one may live by them and not die because of them. If a person dies rather than transgress, he is held accountable for his life.

13. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 5:3

וְכָל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה שֶׁלֹּא בִּשְׁעַת הַגְּזֵרָה. אֲבָל בְּשְׁעַת הַגְּזֵרָה, וְהוּא שִׁיעֵמֶד מֶלֶךְ רָשָׁע פְּנוּבִיכְדִנְצָר וְחִבְרִי וְיִגְזֵר גְּזֵרָה עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַטֵּל דָּתָם אוֹ מִצְוָה מִן הַמִּצְוֹת, יִהְרַג וְאֵל יַעֲבֵר, אֲפִלּוּ עַל אַחַת מִשְׁאֵר מִצְוֹת, בֵּין נֶאָנֵס בְּתוֹךְ עֲשָׂרָה בֵּין נֶאָנֵס בֵּינוֹ לְבֵין עוֹבְדֵי כּוֹכָבִים.

All the above [distinctions] apply [only in times] other than times of a decree. However, **in times of a decree** - i.e., when a wicked king like Nevuchadnezzar or his like will arise and issue a decree against the Jews to nullify their religion or one of the commandments - **one should sacrifice one's life rather than transgress any of the other commandments**, whether one is compelled [to transgress] amidst ten [Jews] or one is compelled [to transgress merely] amidst gentiles.

14. Nimukei Yosef, Sanhedrin 17b (בדפי הרי"ף)

אבל אם הוא אדם גדול וחסיד ירא שמים ורואה שהדור פרוץ בכך רשאי לקדש השם ולמסור עצמו אפילו על מצוה קלה כדי שיראו העם וילמדו ליראה את השם לאהבו בכל לבם והיינו דאמרין [פסחים דף נג ב] "מה ראו חנניה מישאל ועזריה שהפילו את עצמן לכבשן האש?"

פירוש: ולא השתחוו לצלם שהרי לאו ע"ז היתה אלא אנדרטי של מלכים לכבוד בעלמא אלא מתוך שהיו רובן טועין וסבורים שהיתה ע"ז היה קדוש השם במה שעשו.

If we are dealing with a great pious and G-d fearing person who sees that his generation has breached its way, in this circumstance he is permitted to give his life rather than transgress even a small commandment so the nation will see and learn to fear Hashem and love Him with all of their heart. This is what the Talmud [Pesachim 53b] says, "What did Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah see that led them to deliver themselves into the fiery furnace?"

Explanation: And why did they not bow to the image, for it was not an object of foreign worship, but was rather a statue made for the honor of kings in general? Rather, because most [of the Jews] erred and thought that this was an idol, therefore their act was a sanctification of G-d's name.

15. Midrash, Esther Rabbah 7:8

מה אמר להם מִרְדְּכַי לְמִי שָׂאוֹמֵר לוֹ: מִדּוּעַ אֲתָה עוֹבֵר אֶת מִצְוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ, רַבִּי לְוֵי אָמַר, אָמַר לְהֵם מִרְדְּכַי, מִשָּׁה רַבְּנוּ הִזְהִיר לָנוּ בַּתּוֹרָה (דברים כז, טו): אָרוּר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל וּמַסֵּכָה, וְרִשְׁעוֹ זֶה עוֹשֶׂה עֲצָמוֹ עֲבוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים. וַיִּשְׁעִיחוּ הַנְּבִיאִים הַזֵּהִירָנוּ (ישעיה ב, כב): חָדְלוּ לָכֶם מִן הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בְּאָפוֹ כִּי בְמָה נִחְשָׁב הוּא, וְלֹא עוֹד אֵלָּא שְׂאֵנִי אִיסָגְנִטִירִין שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁפֶל הַשִּׁבְטִים נוֹלְדוּ בַּחוּצָה לְאֶרֶץ, וְזִקְנֵי נוֹלַד בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל. אָמְרוּן לִיהּ וְנִימַר לִיהּ, מִיָּד, וַיִּגִּידוּ לְהֵמָּן וּגו'. אָמַר לֹאן הֵמָּן, אָמְרוּן לִיהּ זִקְנֵי הָאֵל הַשִּׁתְחַוָּה לְזִקְנֵי, הֲדָא הוּא דְכִתִּיב (בראשית לג, ו): וַתִּגְשֶׁן הַשִּׁפְחוֹת וּגו' וְאֶחָר נִגְשׁ יוֹסֵף וְרַחֵל וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ. הִיתִיב, וַעֲדִין לֹא נוֹלַד בְּנֵימִין. אָמְרוּן לִיהּ, הֲדָא הוּא דְכִתִּיב: וַיִּגִּידוּ לְהֵמָּן.

Rabbi Levi said – He told them: Moshe Rabbeinu warned us in the Torah: 'Cursed is the man who makes an idol or molten image.' And **this evildoer has made himself into a source of worship!** Has Yeshayahu not warned us: 'Refrain from (the honor of) the breathing man, for what is he worth?' Furthermore, **I am the noble representative of the Almighty seeing that all the Tribes were born outside Israel, whereas my ancestor (Binyamin) was born in Eretz Yisrael.** ...Haman sent a message back to him: But did your father (Yaakov) not bow to my father (Esav)? (as it states in Bereshit 33:3) He (Mordechai) responded: But (at that point when Yaakov bowed down to Esav) Binyamin was not yet born!

16. Prof. Yoram Hazony, The Dawn pp. 60-61, 67-68

Jews do not refuse to bow before kings or their viziers. Jews refuse to bow before *idols*. Are we then to understand that Mordechai believed the vizier somehow to be an idol, that he had made of himself a god?

When the rabbis retold the story of Mordechai's refusal, they understood that such was indeed the case... If we are to fully appreciate the Jews' war against the vizier, a war which opens with a man who will not bend, and closes with the deaths of a substantial part of the fighting power of Persia, we must understand the idolatry against which the war was fought...

So long as Ahashverosh took decisions through broad consultation with a range of advisers, there was every reason to hope that the laws and actions of the Persian state would tend towards at least the roughest approximation of a just settlement among the competing perspectives, interests and truths in the empire. Haman's installation, however, eliminating as it did the action of interests other than his own, in principle suppressed the search for a greater truth on the part of the state; henceforth it would become defined by the perspectives and desires of a single man, Haman... his elevation transformed him (and Ahashverosh, as well) into a usurping god, a pretender to knowledge and power he did not have, an idol...

17. Midrash, Shemos Rabbah 15:16

כָּל הַיָּמִים שְׂאֵנִי עִמָּהֶם אֵין נוֹטְלִין שֵׁם רַע... בְּכֹכֵל הַיִּיטִי עִמָּהֶם וְנִמְצָאת שְׁלֵמָה, שְׁנַאָמַר (דניאל ג, יז): הֵן אִימִי אֶל-הֵנָּא דִּי אֲנַחְנָא פְּלִחִין. בְּמִדֵּי הַיִּיטִי עִמָּהֶם וְנִמְצָאת שְׁלֵמָה, שְׁנַאָמַר (אסתר ג, ב): וּמִרְדְּכַי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוָה. בְּיָנוּ לֹא כְתָבוּ עַל קַרְנֵי הַשּׁוֹר שְׂאֵין לְהֵם חֵלֶק בְּאֶלְקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

[G-d] replied to them, "[For] all the days I am with them, they will not acquire a bad name... In Babylonia, I was with them and [the nation] was found to be steadfast," as it is stated, 'Behold, our G-d whom we worship [is able to save us]' (Daniel 3:17); In Media, I was with them and [the nation] was found to be steadfast, as it is stated, 'But Mordechai would not bow and would not prostrate himself' (Esther 3:2); In Greece, they would not write on the horn of an ox that they have no portion in the G-d of Israel..."

18. Midrash, Esther Rabbah 6:2

וּלְפִי שִׁיחַד שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא נִקְרָא "יְהוּדִי".
Because he attested to G-d's unity, he was called "Yehudi."