

Where Should We Begin the Story of Esther? Four Rabbinic Visions of Purim

Rabbi Uriel Romano - Broward Central Synagogue - 5786/2026

Where must we begin reading the Book of Esther in order to fulfill the mitzvah? Today, the question seems almost trivial. Halakhah is unequivocal: we read the Megillah in its entirety—from the very first verse to the very last. All ten chapters. All 167 verses. Both at night and again the following morning of Purim. And yet, this was not always a foregone conclusion.

In a famous Mishnah (m. Megillah 2:3), we encounter a striking debate: **From where must a person read the Megillah in order to fulfill his obligation?**

- (1) Rabbi Meir says: He must read all of it.
- (2) Rabbi Yehuda says: He need read only from “There was a certain Jew” (Esther 2:5).
- (3) Rabbi Yosei says: From “After these things” (Esther 3:1).

The *Tosefta* (Megillah 2:5) adds a fourth view:

- (4) Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: From “On that night...” (Esther 6:1, The Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 19a) cites this last opinion in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai).

In Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi culture, when someone refers to a long and overly detailed account, they call it “*a gantze Megillah*”—“the whole Megillah.” The expression reflects our halakhic practice of reading the entire scroll each Purim. But these early rabbinic sources from the second and third centuries suggest that this may not always have been self-evident. Perhaps it was once a genuine practical debate. Or perhaps it was a sophisticated intellectual exercise. We may never know.

What we do know is that by the fourth century, the Jerusalem Talmud (J. Megillah 2:4) rules decisively that the law follows Rabbi Meir: the Megillah must be read in full. From that point onward, there is no record of dissent. The entire narrative—every twist and reversal—must be heard. But this only deepens the question: Why did the other sages propose alternative starting points? Why not begin at Esther 1:1?

Who Holds the Power?

The Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 19a) addresses this question and offers a remarkable insight. Rabbi Yoḥanan explains that all four tannaim were interpreting the same verse:

“Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote about all the acts of power (*tokef*) to confirm this second letter of Purim” (Esther 9:29).

The debate hinges on the meaning of *tokef*—“acts of power.”

- The one who says the Megillah must be read in its entirety understands *tokef* as referring to the power of Ahasuerus.
- The one who begins at “There was a certain Jew” sees it as the power of Mordecai.
- The one who begins at “After these things” interprets it as the power of Haman.
- The one who begins at “On that night” understands it as the power of the miracle.

In other words, the debate about where to begin is really a debate about who—or what—controls the story. Who dominates history? Who pulls the strings? Who is the central actor? What is Purim truly about?

Rabbi Yehuda: The Power of Mordecai

Rabbi Yehuda, who proposes beginning at Esther 2:5—“There was a certain Jew in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordecai”—centers the story on Mordecai. According to the Talmud (Megillah 13b), Mordecai was no ordinary courtier. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, fluent in seventy languages, a figure of profound wisdom and political sophistication. He embodies the archetype of the Jew in exile who navigates the corridors of power with intelligence and courage. From this perspective, the message of Purim is about Jewish agency in the Diaspora. It is about participation in political life—not assimilation, but engagement. Survival does not come through isolation but through strategic presence. Mordecai teaches that Jews must know how to position themselves within the societies in which they live in order to protect their people. Purim, then, becomes a celebration of political responsibility and communal leadership.

Rabbi Yosei: The Power of Haman

Rabbi Yosei begins the story at Esther 3:1—“After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman...” Here, the focus shifts dramatically. The story becomes about Haman. The Talmud identifies Haman as a descendant of Amalek (Megillah 13a), the archetypal enemy of Israel first encountered in Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25. Amalek represents irrational hatred—violence without cause, hostility without provocation. Haman’s decree is a chilling example of what we now call antisemitism: distortion of reality, sweeping generalizations, fabricated accusations, and the pursuit of destruction without tangible gain. From this perspective, Purim is the festival that reminds us that Amalek never fully disappears. Hatred mutates. It changes language, symbols, ideologies. It dons new masks—but its core remains. The message here is sober and realistic: antisemitism may never be eradicated. It must be confronted, resisted, and outlived. Purim becomes a yearly act of memory and vigilance.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: The Power of the Hidden Miracle

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (or Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar) suggests beginning at Esther 6:1: “On that night, the king’s sleep fled.” This is the turning point. The king cannot sleep. The royal chronicles are read. Mordecai’s unrewarded loyalty is discovered. The reversal begins. The Talmud describes this approach as focusing on “the power of the miracle.” But what miracle?

God's name does not appear anywhere in the Book of Esther. Along with the Song of Songs, it is one of the only biblical books in which the Divine Name is entirely absent. There are no splitting seas, no plagues, no open supernatural interventions. The miracle of Purim is subtle. It lies in coincidence, timing, contingency. Being in the right place at the right moment. Acting decisively when opportunity appears. A sleepless night that changes history. The Hebrew phrase *venahafoch hu*—"it was turned upside down"—captures this dynamic reversal. From this vantage point, Purim teaches us to perceive hidden providence. To recognize that what appears random may be redemptive. That dramatic transformation often emerges from the quiet convergence of ordinary events. Purim becomes the festival of hidden miracles.

Rabbi Meir: The Power of Ahasuerus

And yet, we do not follow any of these partial readings. We follow Rabbi Meir: we read everything. The Talmud explains that Rabbi Meir's interpretation sees *tokef* as referring to the power of Ahasuerus. The Megillah opens with a sweeping description of his rule over 127 provinces—from India to Ethiopia—including Judea. The empire is vast. The king is capricious, impulsive, easily manipulated.

Why center the power of Ahasuerus? Perhaps the message is existential: Jews in exile live under foreign sovereignty. Our fate often lies in the hands of unpredictable rulers. Political structures matter. Royal whims can destroy—or save—entire communities. But perhaps there is something deeper. Ahasuerus appears powerful, yet he is strangely passive. He is swayed first by Memuchan, then by Haman, then by Esther. He signs decrees without scrutiny. His authority is real—but hollow. The true drama unfolds beneath the surface of imperial pomp.

Reading the entire Megillah reminds us that history cannot be reduced to a single protagonist. Political power, Jewish leadership, antisemitic hatred, hidden providence—all intertwine. No single frame captures the whole truth. Purim, according to Rabbi Meir, is about the totality of power—its illusions, its dangers, and its reversals.

Where Do We Begin?

Do we begin with Ahasuerus and the fragility of Jewish life in exile? With Mordecai and the necessity of Jewish engagement? With Haman and the persistence of antisemitism? Or with the sleepless night and the mystery of hidden miracles?

The Tosefta concludes: "All agree that its mitzvah is to complete it until the end" (Megillah 2:5).

Wherever one might mark the beginning, no one disputes the ending. The story must be completed. Perhaps that is the deepest lesson. The Mishnah's ancient question—"From where must we read the Megillah?"—is not merely technical. It is theological. It is philosophical. It asks: What is Purim really about? Where do we place the emphasis? How do we interpret history?

Each starting point offers a distinct vision:

- **The Power of Ahasuerus:** Purim as a meditation on political reality and Jewish vulnerability in exile.
- **The Power of Mordecai:** Purim as a call to leadership, engagement, and communal responsibility.
- **The Power of Haman:** Purim as vigilance against enduring hatred.
- **The Power of the Miracle:** Purim as faith in hidden providence and sudden reversal.

In the end, we read it all. Because Jewish history cannot be reduced to one theme. Because power is complex. Because miracles are often hidden. Because enemies reappear. Because leaders must rise. Because reversals are possible.

Purim demands that we hear the whole story—*a gantze Megillah*—so that we can wrestle, year after year, with the enduring question: Who truly holds the power in history?