

The Code of Esther: A Counter- Investigation

By: EMMANUEL BLOCH

Does the *Book of Esther* contain a hidden prophetic allusion to the Nuremberg trial? Might the execution of ten Nazi high dignitaries curiously echo the hanging of the ten sons of the villain Haman in *Megillat Esther*, despite the twenty-four centuries separating these two events?

Such has been the claim repeated for many years in some religious circles. To provide a brief overview: at the end of the *Book of Esther*, the queen makes a surprising request that the sons of Haman be hanged “tomorrow” (9:12); but they had already been killed in previous fights (9:7-10), so why this strange hanging of enemies already dead? The mystery thickens with another curiosity of the biblical text: letters of unusual size in the *Megillah*, three smaller (*shin*, *tav* and *ayin*) and a larger one (*vav*); what could they mean?

All would finally be enlightened by a numerical reading of the unusual letters. Small letters refer to the year 707 and the large *vav* refers to the sixth millennium, thus 5707 since the creation of the world, or 1946 according to the Christian calendar. In other words, the year of the Nuremberg trial. The parallels between Purim’s account and Nuremberg’s trial seem disturbing: in both cases, the number of executions was the same—ten. In both cases, the mode of execution was the same—hanging.

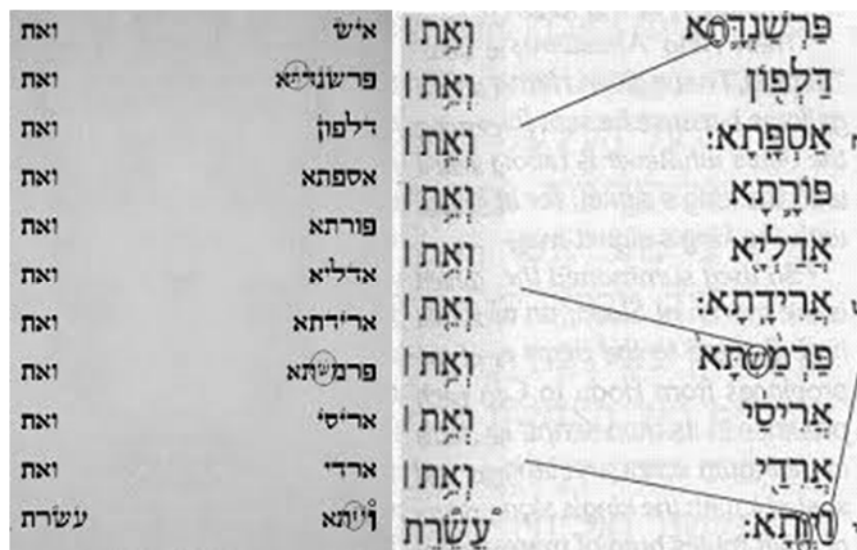
Moreover, the day of execution, October 16, 1946, fell on the day of Hoshanah Rabbah, identified by Jewish tradition as a day of judgment. Lastly, one of the ten Nazis, Julius Streicher, exclaimed as he rose to the scaffold “Purimfest 1946!”¹ Strange, right?

¹ For more elaborate (and sensationalist) presentations, see the videos accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzaJZ0bGe0s&t=23s> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMhqEiu1p4s>; those who prefer written text may consult https://ohr.edu/holidays/purim/deeper_insights/3440. Many other presentations along the same argument are easily accessible, in all languages, via a Google search.

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Esther's mysterious prophecy has recently been revived as a Jewish version of the *Da Vinci Code*, the worldwide bestseller by novelist Dan Brown. Thus, in 2012, the French book *Le Code d'Esther*,² presented as investigative journalism, reproduced the above argument and created a small event in the world of French publishing, with more than 26,000 copies sold in the first few weeks after publication.³

On this side of the Atlantic, in 2014, appeared *The Esther Code*,⁴ a thriller in which an FBI agent deciphers Queen Esther's mysterious prophecy with the help of a brilliant rabbi and finally arrests a serial murderer. The publishing house promised a disturbing investigation, based on a real phenomenon, and of which no skeptic, even the most hardened, could leave indifferent.



Unusually sized letters in Megillat Esther, chapter 9, verses 7-10

But is there really anything behind all the buzz? Is the “prophetic” phenomenon real or imaginary?

This article examines the code of Esther through the crucible of a critical and detailed analysis, a true counter-investigation in six separate acts. We will examine in succession the archeology of the biblical text, an ancient manner of punishing enemies, a little-known aspect of the anti-Jewish propaganda of the Nazi regime, and more.

² Bernard Benyamin and Yohan Perez, *Le Code d'Esther* (Paris, FIRST, 2012).

³ That's the figure posted in *Times of Israel*: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/french-best-seller-unravels-nazis-cryptic-last-words-about-purim/>.

⁴ Michael Danneman and Sarah Holst, *The Esther Code* (Married to a Yid, 2014).

Act 1: In search of the original text

The claim: In the list of names of the sons of Haman (Esther 9: 7-10), three letters have since time immemorial been written in a smaller script: *shin*, *tav* and *zayin*.

The reality: Ancient sources make no mention of these three smaller letters.

Is it possible to verify whether the forms of certain letters in the *Book of Esther* differed from the rest in ancient times?

Absolutely. Two main routes are open to the investigator: one may study the rabbinical sources that teach how to write the text of the *Megillah*; alternatively, one may examine the ancient manuscripts, which bear witness to the practice of previous generations. We will follow these two paths successively.

Rabbinic texts first. Two major sources depict how the Sages prescribe the *Megillah* be written.

Let's first examine the Talmud:⁵

ואת פרשנדתא וגו' עשרת בני המן אמר רב אדא דמן יפו עשרת בני המן ועשרת צריך לממריניהו בנשימה אחת מאי טעמא כולהו בהדי הדדי נפקו נשמתייהו אמר רבי יוחנן ויו דויזתא צריך למימתחה בזקיפא כמורדיא דלברות מאי טעמא כולהו בחד זקיפא אזדקיפו.

The verse says, "And Parshandata ... the ten sons of Haman (Esther 9: 6-10)." Rav Adda of Jaffa taught: when reading the *Megillah*, the names of Haman's ten sons and the word "ten" must be recited in one breath. Why? Because their souls all departed together. Rabbi Yoḥanan taught: the *vav* of the name Vayzata must be elongated as a pole, like the steering oar of a ship. Why? Because they were all hanged on one pole.

Thus, the Sages explicitly teach the proper way of writing and reading the ninth chapter of Esther: the letter *vav* must be elongated, and some nouns must be pronounced in a single breath. But anything about small letters? Absolute silence. They are not mentioned, because for the Talmud, these letters are no different from the others: *shin*, *tav* and *zayin* are to be written in a normal size.

⁵ *Bavli Megillah* 16b; see also the parallel passage in the *Yerushalmi Megillah* chapter 3, halakhah 7.

A second collection of the Sages' teachings is important for our research: Tractate *Soferim*, one of the minor tractates of the Talmud. This tractate was written in the eighth century with the purpose of teaching how to write, exactly and precisely, the various books of the Torah. The *Book of Esther* is discussed in detail, and the particularities already discussed within the Talmud are duly noted.⁶ But diminutive letters in chapter 9? Not a trace.

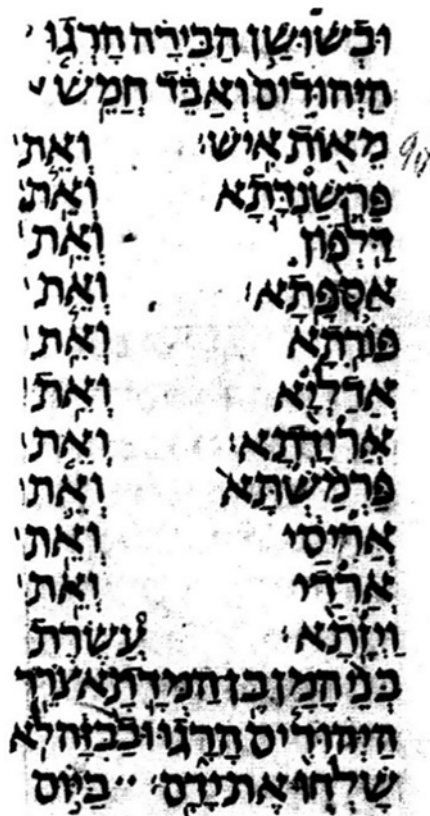
To recap: all authoritative rabbinical texts were totally mute regarding any tradition of writing the letters from *Megillat Esther* in a small size.

But how was *Megillat Esther* written in practice? We now consider some ancient manuscripts from the *Book of Esther*, preserved in the collections of prestigious university libraries, to examine the scribal traditions of the unfolding generations.

The oldest complete manuscript of Tanakh dates from the year 1008 and is considered particularly reliable; it belongs to the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg (EBP. I B 19a), from which it derives the name by which it is best known: the *Leningrad Codex*.⁷ Here is a screenshot of the verses in question (Esther 9:7-10) as they appear in the scanned version of the *Leningrad Codex* available online.

As can be seen, the *Leningrad Codex* coincides with the ancient rabbinical texts: it contains no small letters in the list of names of Haman's sons.

What about other manuscripts of the *Book of Esther*? As documented by Mordechai Breuer, the texts of two other ancient manuscripts, Add.



Leningrad Codex, screenshot

⁶ *Soferim* 13:4, and more broadly the whole beginning of chapter 13.

⁷ The *Aleppo Codex* (*Keter Aram Zova*) was several decades old by the time the *Leningrad Codex* was written. It is said that it is this manuscript that Maimonides consulted to verify the Masoretic text before codifying his laws of writing a *Sefer Torah*. Tragically, some parts of the *Aleppo Codex* have been lost, including the *Book of Esther* that interests us.

Ms. 5702 and Or. 2375, preserved at respectively Cambridge University and the British Museum, and perceived to be very reliable, are identical to the *Leningrad Codex*.⁸

Later manuscripts, too. Thanks to the efforts of the National Library of Israel to digitalize its collections of manuscripts, readers can now inspect this manuscript⁹ from the thirteenth to fourteenth century and held by the Biblioteca Palatina of Parma in Italy; or the one,¹⁰ which dates from 1494, from the collections of the National Library of France; or again, the fourteenth to fifteenth century manuscript Add. Ms 652,¹¹ preserved at Cambridge University. All these manuscripts follow the Talmudic tradition and contain no small letters in the *Book of Esther*.

Our conclusion seems clear as all the clues converge: for about 1,400 years, the *Megillat Esther* was written with no difference between the size of the letters *shin*, *tav* and *zayin* and the rest of the text.

Act 2: The canonization of confusion

The claim: The text of the Book of Esther has been transmitted identically, from generation to generation, from its original writing to the present day.

The reality: The small letters of The Code of Esther are the result of errors eventually canonized during the transmission process.

Is it possible to determine when the small form of letters first appeared? To a large degree, the answer is positive.

The very first occurrence I was able to detect lies in the *Midrash of Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef on small and large letters*. This ancient text deals with the particular form of certain biblical letters and may be consulted in two recent compilations of lost texts eventually rediscovered in medieval *genizot*.¹² Below follows the exact quote that concerns us:

⁸ מרדכי ברויאר, נוסח המקרא בכתר ירושלים ומקורותיו במסורה ובכתבי יד, הוצאת קרן המסורה, ירושלים 2003, עמ' 324.

⁹ https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/digitallibrary/pages/viewer.aspx?presentorid=manuscripts&docid=pnx_manuscripts000070341-1#|FL32364330.

¹⁰ https://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/Hebrew/digitallibrary/pages/viewer.aspx?presentorid=manuscripts&docid=pnx_manuscripts000128751-1#|FL51792278.

¹¹ <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-ADD-00652/607>.

¹² Judah David Eisenstein, *Ozar ha-Midrashim*, vol. 2 (NY: 1915), pp. 432-433; Shlomo Aaron Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot*, vol. 2 (Mossad ha-Rav Kook: 1955), pp. 478-488. Both versions agree on the text.

(ז) זי"ן, ויזתא ז' קטנה, לפי שהמן הלשין בשבעה דברים (...) רי"ש של פרשנדתא קטנה, שנתמעט ונתלה (...) שי"ן תי"ו של פרשנדתא קטנות, הסר פ' ור' וישאר שמתא.

The *ayin* of the name Vayzata is written small, because Haman slandered seven times the Jewish people (...). The *resh* of the name Parshandata is written small, because he was lowered and hanged (...). The *shin* and the *tav* of Parshandata are written small; remove the *peh* and the *resh*, and there remains the word “banishment.”¹³

This text is difficult to understand, and its end definitely seems corrupted.¹⁴ But finally we have the very first Jewish text indicating that *certain* letters of the *Megillah* must be written in smaller font: the *ayin* of Vayzata, as well as the *resh*, *shin* and *tav* of Parshandata. The list of small letters, however, does not correspond to that of *The Code of Esther*. Moreover, I did not find any subsequent rabbinic text quoting verbatim these teachings.¹⁵

Another important clue is offered by the Masorah, i.e., the system of notes devised by the scholar-scribes who worked between the sixth and the tenth centuries to preserve the textual integrity of the Torah. Thus, the Masoretic notes at the end of the *Leningrad Codex* (מסורה סופית) signal a small *shin* for Parshandata, a small *tav* for Parmashta, and no small letter for Vayzata.¹⁶

Not only does this not correspond to *The Code of Esther* either, but even more surprisingly, the Masorah on the *Leningrad Codex* does not reflect the actual text of the Codex itself! How can this discrepancy between manuscript and Masoretic notes be explained?

Menachem Cohen, in his superb introduction to the Keter edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot*,¹⁷ notes that the phenomenon is much wider than *The Code of Esther*: the small and large letters noted by the Masorah are *never* reflected in the texts of the oldest manuscripts. He concludes that

¹³ According to my dictionary, the translation of the word *shamta* is “desolation” or “banishment.” See also *Moed Katan* 17a, where Rav explains that the word is an indirect reference to death (*sham mita*).

¹⁴ See solutions proposed by Avraham Wertheimer in *Batei Midrasbot*, p. 482, note 39.

¹⁵ The idea of Haman’s slander against the Jewish people figures in *Barli Megillah* 13b in the name of the sage Rava, but without association with the letter *ayin* or a sevenfold occurrence.

¹⁶ מרדכי ברויאר, נוסח המקרא בכתר ירושלים ומקורותיו במסורה ובכתבי יד, הוצאת קרן המסורה, ירושלים 2003, עמ' 324.

¹⁷ This introduction is actually to be found at the end of the sixth volume of the series (Joshua -Judges); see more specifically his remarks on the small and large letters on pp. 47*-49*.

the first lists of unusual letters, which initially appeared toward the end of the Masorettes' period, were for an extended period considered unauthoritative. Conflicts between different lists abounded, no scribe would take them into account in his work, and it is only centuries later that the first manuscripts with unusually sized letters are documented. In the case of Esther, the first recorded instance dates, to my knowledge, from the year 1312.¹⁸

Next, we turn to the Jewish communities of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. A non-exhaustive review of the halakhic witnesses yielded no less than seven different versions of the small and large letters for the verses in question. All seven versions are mutually exclusive, and only one of them—the seventh and most recent—corresponds to the letters according to *The Code of Esther*. Summarized below are the seven versions, sorted in chronological order:

1. Maḥzor Vitry ¹⁹ :	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Small zayin and large vav for Vayzata</i>
2. Raavia (Version 1):	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Large alef for Parshandata and small alef for Parmashta</i>
3. Raavia (Version 2) ²⁰ :	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Large alef for Parmashta and small alef for Parshandata</i>
4. Sefer ha-Rokeaḥ ²¹ :	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Small shin and tav for Parmashta, small zayin and large vav for Vayzata</i>
5. Hagahot Maimoniot ²² :	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Small shin and tav, large alef for Parshandata; large vav and small zayin for Vayzata</i>

¹⁸ *Keter Shem Tov* by Shem Tov ben Abraham ibn Gaon, also known as *Sefer Tagey*, and formerly known as Ms. Sassoon 82 (small *shin* for Parshandata, small *shin* for Parmashta, small *zayin* for Vayzata).

¹⁹ *Maḥzor Vitry* (Simḥa ben Samuel, died in 1105, Vitry) *simanim* 247, 527, citing a tradition from R. Yehudai Gaon.

²⁰ Raavia (= R. Eliezer ben Joel haLevi, 1140-1225, Germany), *helek* 2, *Masekhet Megillah*, *siman* 548; see also *Ohr Zarua* (R. Isaac ben Moshe, 1200-1270 approx., Germany), *Hilkhot Megillah*, *siman* 373, who notes the same two alternatives.

²¹ *Sefer ha-Rokeaḥ* (R. Elazar ben Yehudah, 1160-1238, Germany), *Hilkhot Purim*, *siman* 235.

²² *Hagahot Maimoniot* (R. Meir ha-Cohen, late 13th century, Germany) on *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Megillah ve-Hanukah*, Chapter 2, Halakha 12, letter Ayin, which quotes the personal *Megillah* from Maharam of Rottenburg.

6. Sefer ha-Manhig ²³ :	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Small tav for Parshandata, small shin for Parmashta, large vav, large yud and small zayin for Vayzata</i>
7. Orhot Hayyim ²⁴ : (version used in <i>The Code of Esther</i>)	ואת פרשנדתא ... ואת פרמשתא ... ואת ויזתא <i>Small tav for Parshandata, small shin for Parmashta, small zayin and large vav for Vayzata</i>

I found no comparable scribal irregularities in the writings of the Spanish sages of the same period.²⁵ So why this particular profusion in the German writings followed by the Provencal writings?²⁶

Here we can only speculate. Prestigious researchers, including Haym Soloveitchik and Avraham Grossman, have long pointed out that the first communities in Northern Europe were the heirs of particular customs, probably stemming from ancient Babylonian traditions.²⁷ We may therefore suppose that these communities were the recipients of specific instructions regarding how to write the text of the *Megillah*; moreover, it is likely that they knew of the “Midrash of Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef”²⁸ and of the Masoretic notes examined above. The transmission, however, was clearly imperfect, and competing versions rapidly multiplied among German sages (versions 1-5). A few decades later, the Provencal sages, in contact with their colleagues in the Rhine valleys, inherited the tradition and added to the general confusion by “inventing” new possibilities (versions 6-7).

In all versions, a point of consensus remained constant: only the names of three sons of Haman (Parshandata, Parmashta and Vayzata)

²³ *Sefer ha-Manhig* (Abraham ben Nathan, 12th - 13th century, Provence), *Hilkhot Megillah* p. 250, quoting from “scribes.”

²⁴ *Orhot Hayyim* (Aaron ben Jacob ha-Cohen, early 14th century, Provence), *helek* 1, *Hilkhot Megillah u-Purim*, number 17.

²⁵ For example, see what Maimonides wrote in *Hilkhot Megillah* 2:12 (and in *Hilkhot Sefer Torah* 7:8). Not only are the small letters not mentioned, but even the large *vav* of Vayzata of Talmudic origin is not discussed. This last oversight surprised the commentators (*Magid Mishneh* and *Maasseh Rokeah*). See the *bidushim* of R. Velvel Soloveitchik who proposes an innovative interpretation. Abudraham remains silent on this whole affair, as does Rabbeinu Yeruham. So too, earlier, did the literature of the Geonim (Seder of Rav Amram Gaon, Behag, etc.).

²⁶ Some German books, however, remain curiously silent, as the *Siddur Rashi* (*siman* 341).

²⁷ See Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, pp. 150-201 (The Third Yeshiva of Bavel and the Cultural Origins of Ashkenaz).

²⁸ This is confirmed by Wertheimer’s introductory remarks, *Batei Midrasbot*, p. 467.

are spelled differently. It is within the precise details that various traditions arose.

In any case, the next question to consider is why the latest version, *Orhot Hayyim*, eventually prevailed over all its competitors. In my mind, the reason is almost certainly the invention of printing.

Following the invention of printing by Guttenberg in the mid-fifteenth century, the first Hebrew Bibles appeared fairly quickly. In Venice, on the press of Daniel Bomberg, the first edition of *Mikraot Gedolot* appeared in 1516-1517. But it was the second edition of *Mikraot Gedolot*, printed on the same press in the years 1524-1526, which had a colossal influence on the diffusion of the biblical text.

The publisher, Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah (1470-1538), devoted immense efforts to clarify the biblical text, based on the manuscripts in his possession, in order to make it available to his readers. The importance of the work provided was widely recognized by the scholarly world of the time, with the result that this second edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot* served as a model for many editions of the Tanakh, even up to our own time.²⁹

And what was the solution adopted by Jacob ben Hayyim? To be absolutely clear, I went to investigate:

Jacob ben Hayyim had to choose a solution. For whatever reason, it was the late version of *Orhot Hayyim* (version 7 above) that served as the basis for the *Mikraot Gedolot* text: a small *tav* for Parshandata, a small *shin* for Parmashta, a small *zayin* and a large *vav* for Vayzata. Jacob ben Hayyim was perfectly aware that several traditions existed for these verses; he pointed out their existence



Second printed edition of *Mikraot Gedolot*, Bomberg Printing, Venice 1525

²⁹ Ironically, even Jacob ben Hayyim's text was flawed. As Moshe Goshen-Gottstein notes in an introduction to the reprint of the *Mikraot Gedolot* (Venice 1525) published in 1972, residual errors were not uncommon. The reference scientific edition today is the *Mikraot Gedolot ha-Keter*, prepared under the supervision of Menachem Cohen (Bar-Ilan University) and based on the text of the *Leningrad Codex*.

It is surprising that Mordekhai Breuer used ben Hayyim's version, instead of the more reliable text of the *Leningrad Codex*, in his *Keter Yerushalayim*.

in the margins left and right of the main text with the aid of a critical apparatus (also reproduced in the image above).

But what happened when the later editions of the Hebrew Bible, based on the text superbly compiled by Jacob ben Ḥayim, omitted the critical apparatus (which, certainly, could only be deciphered by the learned philologists)? Nothing less than the canonization of one unique version, the text of *Orhot Ḥayyim*, now rid of all its rivals. And so, it comes full circle: the text of *Megillat Esther* becomes a detective story, the famous *Code of Esther*.

Three important remarks before concluding this part: first, the halakhic texts of the past 500 years absolutely do NOT reflect the printed, henceforth triumphant, version of the *Book of Esther*; in other words, Jacob ben Ḥayyim's work impacted only the scribes, not the rabbis. All legal works continue to faithfully perpetuate the Talmudic tradition: a large *vav*, no small letters.³⁰ Thus, there exists a discrepancy between the halakhic text and the printed text.

Secondly, other versions of the text continue to circulate, even if they are now in the minority.³¹ Thirdly, the harmonizing effect had by printing the biblical text is a general phenomenon that affected all the books of the Tanakh, including (and most especially) the Pentateuch; I invite interested readers to read the article.³²

To conclude: the average reader who opens his printed Bible to read *Megillat Esther* naturally assumes to have the “authentic” text. He has no awareness that this text has a long and tumultuous history. He does not realize that small and large letters are the result of the long historical process that we have just reconstructed. Can we really blame him? Certainly not. But the reality is that the little letters necessary to the claims made in *The Code of Esther* did not initially exist. They appear in our books only because of confusions and errors of transmission, finally canonized under the standardizing impetus of the printing of the Bible.

³⁰ See *Tur*, *Bet Yosef*, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, *Mishna Berura*, etc., all on *Orah Ḥayyim* 691. *Eliyab Rabba* 691:9 explicitly notes the discrepancy between the “printed text” of the *Megillah* and the “halakhic text.”

³¹ For example, the Soncino edition of the *Book of Esther* endorses a version halfway between versions 4 and 7 above, but I have never encountered such a version in any medieval work. I do not know if the editor worked from another version of the large and small letters, or if he deliberately chose to create a hybrid. The critical apparatus suggests that other traditions still existed (small *resh* for *Parmashta*).

³² <https://users.cccs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/codes/CohenArt/>.

Act 3: Which millennium exactly?

The claim: The large *vav* is a reference to the sixth millennium since the Creation.

The reality: Such a notation does not correspond to any Jewish dating system.

Throughout history, Jews have used many ways to note the passage of time. Thus, in the written Torah, an event in time was often located according to the accession to the throne of the king (“during the year *xyz* of the reign of King David...”).³³ During Talmudic times, the passage of time was generally noted using the system called “*Minyan Shtarot*.” This method, which was employed mainly to date commercial documents, used the year 311 BCE as its point of departure.³⁴ Another method was to count the number of years since the destruction of the 2nd Temple.³⁵

The dating system tracking the passage of time from Creation of the World did exist in Talmudic times.³⁶ But at that time, it was very seldom used. It is primarily since the tenth century that the calendar we know today began to take off, but the other dating systems remained in use for centuries (in Egypt, the calendar was kept according to the *Minyan Shtarot* until the sixteenth century, and in Yemen until into the nineteenth century).

These few facts are ample enough to demystify the “elongated” *vav* of the name Vayzata: first, according to certain rabbinical authorities, its size should be perfectly normal and not lengthened.³⁷ Second, a long *vav* has absolutely no meaning in the majority of dating systems used by Jews throughout history. Third, even when one counts the time since the moment of the Creation, the year 5,000 is systematically signified by a *heb* (whose numerical value is 5), and never by a *vav* (whose value is 6).

³³ See many examples in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

³⁴ For an example, see *Avoda Zara* 10a. And see Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Gerushin* 1:27.

³⁵ This is often the case with inscriptions on the oldest tombstones we know.

³⁶ See for example *Avoda Zara* 9b; the same dating system underpins the work *Seder Olam*.

³⁷ Some authorities think that it is necessary to prolong the reading of the *vav* by singing it more slowly, but without changing its writing (Rabbeinu Yehonathan of Lunel, also mentioned by Meiri, Rosh and Ran); others think that the head of the *vav*, which is normally curved, must here be drawn straight (Ritva). The ancient manuscripts discussed above show that the practice was not uniform here (the *Leningrad Codex* does not have a long *vav*, but other manuscripts do). Here, too, I think that printing has had a unifying effect.

Linked here are a few examples among many, from Torah courses,³⁸ official Israeli documents,³⁹ or even Wikipedia.⁴⁰ I do not know of a *single* counterexample in which a *vav* would represent the sixth millennium. It would be illogical for a prophecy to rely on a dating system that has, in fact, never been practiced by any Jewish community in the world.

Act 4: Shushan, the city where they hang cold corpses ...

The claim: Esther's request to hang Haman's sons (9:13) makes no sense, since they had already been killed by the sword (9:6-10).

The reality: There are many cases in the Torah in which the corpses of enemies are publicly exhibited.

If there is a true mystery in *The Code of Esther*, it is this: the attentive reader of the Torah encounters many situations in which an enemy is killed and his body publicly exhibited. How, then, have so many scholars accepted as "incomprehensible" the request from Esther to hang the slain bodies of her enemies?

Some illustrations: when Joshua won a decisive battle against five Canaanite armies, he killed their kings and hanged them on trees until evening;⁴¹ in another skirmish, he did the same to the city of Ai and its king.⁴² King David, meanwhile, sometimes cut the hands and feet of his already dead enemies before publicly hanging their bodies.⁴³

The Torah testifies that the other peoples of the time did the same: thus, when the Philistines found King Saul already dead, they cut off his head and tied his body on the wall of the city of Beth She'an.⁴⁴ Another community, the Gibeonites, was hardly more sympathetic to their enemies.⁴⁵ Beyond the Torah, the practice is also attested in other ancient codes of law.⁴⁶

³⁸ <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/2337>.

³⁹ https://www.gov.il/he/departments/general/electronic_signature_law2.

⁴⁰ <https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%94%27%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A1%22%D7%95>.

⁴¹ Joshua 10:26.

⁴² Ibid. 8:29.

⁴³ II Samuel 4:12.

⁴⁴ I Samuel 31:10.

⁴⁵ II Samuel 21:9.

⁴⁶ *Code of Hammurabi* paragraph 21.

The practice is apparent through a literal reading (*psbat*) of one of the most famous verses of the entire Pentateuch, Joseph's interpretation of the dream of the Egyptian chief baker:⁴⁷

בְּעוֹד שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים, יִשָּׂא פְּרֵעָה אֶת-רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעֵלְיךָ, וְתָלָה אוֹתְךָ, עַל-עֵץ; וְאָכַל
הָעוֹף אֶת-בְּשָׂרְךָ, מֵעֵלְיךָ.

In three days, Pharaoh will cut off your head and hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat the flesh of your body.

Moreover, a specific command of the Torah regulates the public display of corpses of those sentenced to death: it is only allowed until the evening, after which time the corpses must be buried.⁴⁸

וְכִי-יְהִי בְּאִישׁ, חָטָא מִשְׁפַּט-מוֹת--וְהוֹמַת: וְתָלִיתָ אוֹתוֹ, עַל-עֵץ. לֹא-תֵלִין נְבִלְתוֹ
עַל-הָעֵץ, כִּי-קָבוֹר תִּקְבְּרֶנּוּ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא--כִּי-קָלַלְתָּ אֱלֹהִים, תְּלוּי; וְלֹא תִטְמָא, אֶת-
אֲדָמָתְךָ, אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה.

When a man has committed a capital sin, he will have been put to death: you hang him on a tree; you will not leave his carcass on the tree, but you will bury him before the evening, because it is an offense against God to be suspended. And you shall not pollute the land which the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance.

The public display of corpses may seem odd to our modern eyes, but its reason is evident in the sociocultural context of the time. The bodies thus exhibited belonged to either enemies of the state or serious criminals. In both cases, society sought to prevent their emulation. The message of deterrence sent to observers was instantly understandable: “*See what happened to these enemies, to these criminals. Above all, do not do the same! Do not oppose us, do not commit these crimes.*”

Multiplying the examples brings to light another important point. The technique used to expose the body had little importance: to attach the body to a wall, to a tree, to impale it, or something else—whatever worked, so long as the objectives of publicity and deterrence were achieved. Further, this observation makes it possible to understand the internal logic of an argument from the New Testament: for Paul, the crucifixion of Jesus represents a “redemption” of the verses of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, that is to say, a way for Christians to no longer be

⁴⁷ *Bereshit* 40:19 (personal translation).

⁴⁸ *Devarim* 21:22-23 (personal translation). See the commentary of R. David Zvi Hoffmann, who insists that the “hanging” is not the cause of death, but its direct consequence; the verse in II Samuel 21:10 presents another more pragmatic reason—the fear of scavengers—to quickly bury the bodies.

bound by this commandment.⁴⁹ The body of Christ *on the cross* replaces the bodies *on the tree* of those sentenced to death.

Attention, therefore, to the errors of translation. It is quite possible, as some of the most authoritative English translations of the Bible suggest, that the sons of Haman were not really “hanged on a tree,” but “exposed on gallows.”⁵⁰

In conclusion, Esther’s request is not surprising in the context of her time, and there is no way to be certain that Haman’s sons were hanged, like the Nazis much later, rather than exposed to the public in some other way.

Act 5: Purim, Jewish festival of violence

The claim: Julius Streicher, just before dying, exclaimed: “Purimfest 1946!” This sentence would have been incomprehensible in the context of the moment.

The reality: The Jewish holiday of Purim was regularly quoted in the Nazi propaganda as an example of the violence exerted by the Jews against the nations who welcome them.

In the years before World War II, Nazi propaganda regularly featured Purim as the quintessential expression of Jewish domination, greed, and violent oppression of non-Jews. Julius Streicher, founder and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Der Stürmer*, was the great architect of the violent anti-Semitic propaganda of the Third Reich. He was perfectly familiar with the festival of Purim.

In March 1934, number 11 of *Der Stürmer* featured a lengthy report bearing the following title: “The Night of the Murder: The Secret of the Jewish Holiday of Purim is Unveiled” (“*die Mordnacht: Das Geheimnis des jüdischen Purimfestes ist enthüllt!*”). Those with a strong stomach can read the original text in its entirety.⁵¹

Purim according to Streicher was a festival dedicated to the hatred and murder of non-Jews. Reinforced by Talmudic and rabbinical texts, Streicher sought to demonstrate to his readers that Jews celebrated, through the drunkenness of Purim, the mass murder of 75,000 innocent

⁴⁹ *Epistle to the Galatians* 3:13. Targum Onkelos renders the verse of *Devarim* 21:22 “וְתִצְּלוּב יְהִיָּה עַל צְּלִיבָא” which I am hesitant to translate “crucify on a cross,” especially since Bernard Grossfeld prefers to translate it “Impaled on the stake” (see Grossfeld, *The Aramaic Bible, Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy*).

⁵⁰ See Carey Moore, *Anchor Bible*, p. 85, on Esther 9:14. This is probably also the meaning of Esther 2:23—the conspirators of the plot foiled by Mordekhai were *exposed publicly after having been executed*.

⁵¹ <http://www.humanist.de/kriminalmuseum/st-t3411.htm>.

Persians, and that this murderous impulse is a historical constant in the relationships between Jews and the innocent people who generously welcome them into their lands.

The festival of Purim appeared regularly in Nazi propaganda. On November 10, 1938, the day after the terrorizing events of Kristallnacht, Streicher gave a speech to more than 100,000 people assembled to listen to him in Nuremberg; he justified the violence against the Jews, saying that the Jews had murdered 75,000 Persians in one night, and that the Germans would have the same fate if the Jews had been able to accomplish their plan to institute a new murderous “Purim” in Germany.⁵²

In 1940, the best-known Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda film, *Der Ewige Jude* (“The Eternal Jew”), again took up the same theme. The whole movie can be viewed here,⁵³ with Purim appearing from minute 45:00.

In 1942, on Purim Day, the Nazis hanged ten Jews in the small Polish town of Zdunska Wola in order to “avenge” the murder of Haman’s ten sons. In another incident a year later, during Purim 1943, the Nazis executed ten Jews from the Piotrkow ghetto. Similar incidents also occurred in Czestochowa, Radom and Szydłowiec.⁵⁴

Adolf Hitler himself, in a speech on January 30, 1944, declared that if the Nazis were to be defeated by the allied forces, the Jews would celebrate “a second Purim.”⁵⁵

There can be no doubt on this point: Streicher was perfectly familiar with the Jewish holiday of Purim. His remarks on the scaffold are readily understandable: by doing violence to the Nazis, the Jews marked a new Purim in 1946.

In addition, the last words of Streicher—“*Purimfest 1946! [...] the Bolsheviks will hang you one day!*”—betray a certain fatalistic and mortiferous vision of history: the Jews now kill the Nazis who killed them before; the Russians will one day kill the American executioners who are triumphing for the moment. History is but an immense cycle of infinitely repeated violence, with death as the sole ultimate outcome.

⁵² Randall L. Bytwerk, *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism* (Texas: A&M University Press, 2008) p. 91.

⁵³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MBjvQY6wD8> at 47:10.

⁵⁴ Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: University Press 2006), p. 91.

⁵⁵ Philip Goodman, *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 4.

Act 6: Imaginary coincidences and real cognitive biases

The claim: There are surprising coincidences between Megillat Esther and the Nuremberg trial.

The reality: The human brain has a propensity to see connections even where they do not exist.

The human brain, the result of a slow evolution over millions of years in which survival was the main objective and decision speed an essential asset, is a poor tool for getting to grips with the truth. We are programmed to jump straight to conclusions without bothering to check whether or not the reasoning is sound.

But, at least partially, it is possible to overcome these shortcomings. An awareness of the distortions of thought induced by our cognitive biases is an important factor in the development of critical reasoning. For example, we give more credit to information that confirms our pre-established beliefs (confirmation bias), or we establish pseudo-links between vague propositions and our real lives (Barnum effect) or between different yet distinct events.

These cognitive biases play fully in the perception of the “coincidences” of *The Code of Esther*: points of comparison seem instinctively much more convincing than points of divergence.

So, do Haman’s ten sons correspond to the ten Nazi officials hanged in 1946? Not really, no. In reality, the number of defendants at the Nuremberg trial was twenty-four, more than double the ten sons of Haman. Not all of them were sentenced to death: eight were given prison sentences, and two Nazi dignitaries were even acquitted. The total number of death sentences was twelve: ten Nazis were executed, one committed suicide (Goering), and one had been tried *in absentia* (Bormann). None of these details of the Nuremberg trial have any parallel in the Purim account. Hitler, meanwhile, had committed suicide in his bunker more than a year earlier, unlike Haman, who was executed by hanging shortly before his sons (Esther 7:10).

Neither does the mode of execution of the Nuremberg trials match the Purim story. The sons of Haman died by the sword (Esther 9:5) before being publicly exposed on gallows; the Nazis, on the other hand, were killed by hanging, then immediately buried.

On the other hand, the day of Hoshanah Rabbah is indeed a day of judgment,⁵⁶ but only for those who are neither completely good nor

⁵⁶ At least, according to medieval sources (*Sefer ha-Manhig, Hilkehot Sukkot*, pp. 402-403, *Zohar* 1: 220a, 2: 242a-b and 3: 31b-32a). The Talmud was not yet

completely bad. The perfectly righteous (*zadikim*), as well as the thoroughly wicked (*reshaim*), are judged on Rosh Hashanah.⁵⁷ In what category should we place the worst criminals of one of the deadliest regimes of all time?

Finally, note that death by hanging was not unusual. In fact, this specific point was controversial in 1946, when the Nazis asked to be shot, given their military status. The court eventually chose to administer a death by hanging, after having duly deliberated that the crimes of the Nazis were considered as going beyond categorically military crimes. They were guilty of crimes against humanity that could not be treated as merely military.⁵⁸ Death by hanging was in fact the most common form of death penalty during that period.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the supposed prophecy of the book of Esther seems very ill-founded. Among its constituent elements, there is none that can long withstand a serious critical examination based on an in-depth study of facts and texts.

A humorous story claims that Adolf Hitler once went to consult a clairvoyant who would predict his future. “You will die on a Jewish holiday,” the clairvoyant told him. “Which?” asked the dictator. “No matter,” retorted the seer, “any day you die will be a holiday for the Jews.”

Purim is an extraordinary celebration, in which we celebrate life, humor, children, and the ultimate victory of good over evil. All of these we continue to celebrate seventy-five years after the fall of another deadly enemy of the Jewish people.

So no, there is absolutely no relationship between Haman’s sons and the Nazis convicted during the Nuremberg trial. *The Code of Esther* is more farce than prophecy, and the divine presence remains hidden behind the double screen of Nature and History. But, in the end, is it not precisely in this sober observation (and in a form of Jewish humor that—despite our frequent inability to perceive the Transcendent—reaffirms Life) that the true spirit of Purim resides? ❧

familiar with this idea. See *Halakhot Ketanot* 1:225 for an attempt at reconciliation.

⁵⁷ Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 16b.

⁵⁸ Telford Taylor, *The Anatomy of Nuremberg Trials: A Personal Memoir* (Skyhorse: 1992), pp. 601-607.