HA'ACHASHTRANIM BNEI HA'RAMACHIM: TRANSLATING ESTHER 8:10

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In Chapter 8 of the Book of Esther we read that the decree of King Ahasuerus, which stated that the Jews may defend themselves against their enemies, was delivered throughout the empire. In verse 10 the method of delivery is described: *He sent letters by couriers on horseback.* That verse ends with the words *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim*.

This phrase is mentioned in the talmudic tractate Megilla 18a, where it is asked how a person who does not understand Hebrew can possibly fulfill the obligation of hearing the Megilla when it is read in the Hebrew language. Ravina answers: "Do we ourselves understand *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim*?" Ravina teaches that understanding the text is not required, the proof being that even Hebrew-speakers do not understand the phrase *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim.* The Talmud does not offer an explanation of these words.

The idea that this phrase is untranslatable has further ramifications. In the compendium on Jewish law Mishna Berura (690:37) the rule is that the Megilla may in fact be read in any language to an audience that understands that language; however, since we do not know how to translate this particular phrase properly, in practice the Megilla should only be read in Hebrew for the purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah.[1]

Not everyone accepted the notion that this phrase defies understanding and translation. Rabbenu Chananel in his commentary to Megilla 18a seems to have a variant reading of the text in the Talmud, where it is only "women and unlearned men" who do not know the meaning of *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim,* implying that this phrase is translatable by learned people. This approach is also found in a responsum sent by Rabbenu Nissim to the Rivash. Although he does not have a variant text, he states that:

> . . . it was not their intent to say that the sages of the Talmud did not know this, rather to say that the general populace were not expert in it, even those of the general populace who are not of

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> the unlearned, since these words are strange and do not have cognates in the Bible.[2]

In fact, we do find many interpretations of these words in rabbinic literature. It may be that when Ravina stated that we do not understand this phrase, he did not mean that we have no idea what it is saying, but rather that we do not know which interpretation to choose.[3]

However this phrase is understood, the thrust of the verse is that the decree of King Ahasuerus was sent out as quickly as possible.[4] In this article we will examine the various rabbinic approaches to interpreting this phrase.

ACHASHTRANIM

The earliest and most popular approach is that of Saadia Gaon. In his translation of the Book of Esther into Arabic, he explains that *achashtranim* are mules and *ramachim* are horses, so that the animal described is a mule born of a mare.[5] Yosef Kimchi, in his *Sefer HaGalui*,[6] writes that he saw in the commentary of Saadia Gaon[7] that the word *achash* means "great." Therefore, the name *Achashverosh* [Ahasuerus] is made up of the words *achash* and *rosh* [head] meaning "a great leader." The term *achashdarpnei ha'melech* (Est. 3:12) is made up of the words *achash* and *dar pne* meaning "a great [*achash*] person who resides [*dar*] in the inner court and sees the face [*pnei*] of the king." The word *achashtranim* is made of the words *achash* and *trei*, meaning "a great [*achash*] animal that comes from two [*trei*] species." This approach is followed by Ibn Ezra, Radak,[8] Rid, and Rabbeinu Nissim.[9] Ibn Ezra adds that mules born of mares are stronger than mules born of a jenny, a female donkey, so the verse wants to specify that the superior type of mules were used, *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim*, mules born of mares. The importance of the animal was understood to be either its superior strength[10] or its loftier parentage.[11]

Shlomo Alkabetz in his commentary to Esther *Manot HaLevi* also explains that *achashtranim* are mules and that the word is a contraction. He writes that it is a contraction of "*chash* [quick]" and "*tar* [to explore]." Thus the word refers to mules "that go very quickly and circle the land."[12] There are other, more unusual, interpretations of *achashtranim*.[13]

RAMACHIM

The term *ramachim* is the less difficult word to translate, since it appears in the Mishna, Kilaim 8:5.[14] The Mishna classifies which animals are considered different species from one another, and so it is forbidden to breed them together. The Mishna explains that a *ramach* may breed with another *ramach* or with a horse. The *ramach* is explained by Ovadiah of Bartenura as being a mule born of a mare, a female horse.[15] He adds that in Arabic a mare is called a *ramach* and that this is similar to the term *bnei ha'ramachim* found in Esther. The Talmud dictionary, the Aruch, translates *ramach* as horse and also references the term *bnei ha'ramachim.* The word *ramach* seems to refer either to a horse or a mule born of a mare, which in the understanding of the Mishna is considered to be the same species as a horse. The phrase *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim* is understood to refer to the parentage of the *achashtranim*, that they were born of horses.

In the Talmud, Taanit 23a, we find the term *ramchei ramchei* used to describe the offspring of a donkey. Rashi and the Aruch both translate this term as meaning "herds." Elazar of Worms, known as the Rokeach, explains that this word means "donkeys" and explains that *ramachim* in Esther also means donkeys.[16]

Rashi, in his commentary to Esther 8:10, explains that *achashtranim* are a type of swift camel. This follows the translation of both the Targum Rishon and Targum Sheini to Esther.[17]

RIDERS

Midrash Lekach Tov, after explaining *ramachim* as young horses, gives a second interpretation. According to this understanding, the *ramachim* are the riders who "raise their hands and strike the horses to make them run."[18] This is one of the interpretations in the Daat Mikra commentary of Mossad Harav Kook, where it is noted that the vowels of *ramachim* can indicate that this word refers to the rider of a *ramach* rather than to the *ramach* itself.[19]

RUNNERS

Targum Rishon interprets *ramachim* as runners "who have had their spleen removed and the soles of their feet hollowed out." This is a reference to Rav's description of the runners used by King David's son Adoniah in I Kings 1:5. Rav Yehuda quoting Rav states that the 50 runners were all people "who

have had their spleen removed and the soles of their feet hollowed out."[20] Rashi explains that a drug was used to make their spleens disappear, since the spleen weighs down a person, and the flesh of the soles of their feet was removed so that they could run without harm over thorns and brambles.[21] This follows the idea found in ancient Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman writings that running ability is improved by reducing the size of the spleen. Particular potions were ingested or placed over the left flank to shrink the spleen.[22]

MODERN TRANSLATIONS

The modern understanding of the word *achashtranim* is that it is derived from the Persian *khshatra*, meaning "royal, governmental." The word *ramachim* is understood to mean horses, as in the approach of Saadia above.

The JPS Bible Commentary explains the phrase as meaning "bred of the royal stud." These were horses used by the government that were specifically bred for speed.[23] The Daat Mikra commentary of Mossad Harav Kook suggests that *achashtranim*, "royal," may be a description of the words before it in the verse, meaning that the horses described before, *ha'rechesh*, belonged to the king. The word *ramachim* can be interpreted as mules or the riders of mules. Based on this, the end of the verse is a listing of the various means used to deliver the message, *rochvei ha'rechesh ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim* means "riders of the king's horses, riders of mules." Another interpretation offered is that *ramachim* means "herds," as Rashi explained in Taanit 23a, so that the phrase is describing horses "from the royal herd."

The phrase *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim* is indeed difficult to translate, and many different interpretations have been offered, ranging from the mundane to the fanciful. Even modern scholars find these words difficult to understand, but the general meaning is clear; that the message that the Jews are granted royal permission to defend themselves against their enemies was disseminated using the fastest method available at that time.

NOTES

All commentaries without references refer to the commentary to Esther 8:10

1. This phrase is considered difficult to translate in modern works as well. For example, the Artscroll Tanach Series *Book of Esther* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1987) p. 112, notes that "The Sages do not know what these words mean." The JPS *Bible Commentary on Esther*

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001) p. 77, writes, "The technical terms in this verse are not well understood." So, too, in non-Jewish Bible commentaries. *The New Century Bible Commentary on Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984) p. 317, notes that these are "obscure words of Persian origin." *The International Critical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1904) p. 273, states, "The old ancient versions can make nothing out of it and leave it untranslated."

2. Sheilot ve'Teshuvot Rivash, number 390.

3. Yosef Daat on Megilla 18a.

4. Daat Mikra commentary to Esther 8:10 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990).

5. Saadia's Arabic translation was retranslated into Hebrew by Yosef Kapach and is included in the Torat Chayim edition of Esther (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2006).

6. *Sefer HaGalui*, page 70.

7. This probably refers to Saadia's "Long Commentary" to Esther, only parts of which have been rediscovered. We do not as yet have the section on Esther 8:10.

8. Sefer HaShorashim, end of the section on the letter Alef.

9. Rabbeinu Nissim in Sheilot ve'Teshuvot Rivash, number 390.

10. Ibn Ezra, Radak, Rid.

11. Rabbeinu Nissim in Sheilot ve'Teshuvot Rivash, number 390.

12. Manot HaLevi, Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, Esther 8:10. See also Midrash Lekach Tov, Esther 8:10.

13. Elazar of Worms explains that the *achashtranim* are a species of eight-legged animal. He notes in his commentary to Esther 8:10 that the gematria of the word *achashtranim* [אחשתרנים] is the same as the gematria of the phrase "of eight legs" [של שמונה רגלים]. In his commentary to Genesis 1:25, this animal is described as walking on four legs at a time, the other four would be raised and gathered with its body. When the walking legs would tire it would switch to its second set of four legs. For this reason it was able to get places quickly, as it would have twice the stamina of a normal animal. The idea of an eight-legged horse that does not tire is found in Euoropean folklore in the story of Sleipnir, the eight-legged horse of Odin.

Yaakov Emden, explains the phrase *ha'achashtranim bnei ha'ramachim* in his commentary to tractate Megilla, found in the back of the Vilna edition. There he writes that he found books which state that "a certain type of camel with two humps and eight legs that is very quick" is still found in Persia.

See also the commentary of Yehoshua Wodianer (note 14 below) where he explains that the *achashtranim* were creatures that Mordechai created just for that purpose using the Sefer Yetzira. See also Mechir Yayin, the allegorical commentary of Moshe Isserles, the Rema.

14. See the commentary of Yehoshua Wodianer (d. 1831) in his book Nachalat Yehoshua on tractate Megilla, page 397, where he states that the word רמכים was cetrtainly understood since it is mentioned in the Talmud in other contexts.

15. This is also the translation given in Jastrow's Dictionary of the Talmud.

16. Elazar of Worms in his book Shaarei Bina on Esther 8:10.

17. See also Sefer HaBrit by Pinchas Horowitz (d. 1821) part 1 Ketav Yosher, ma'amar 14, page 137, where he writes that the *ramach* is a type of camel that can run sixteen parasangs per day, and can go without eating or drinking for six days.

18. Midrash Lekach Tov, Esther 8:10.

19. Daat Mikra commentary to Esther 8:10 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990).
20. Sanhedrin 21b, Avoda Zara 44a.
21. Rashi, Sanhedrin 21b.
22. See for example, B. Wilkins, "The Spleen," *British Journal of Haematology*, vol 117:2 (May 2002) p. 265.
23. *JPS Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001) Esther 8:10, page 77. Similarly, the Anchor Bible translates *achashtranim* as "the royal coursers," swift horses used by the government, and *ramachim* as mares, so that the phrase means "the royal coursers bred from the mares." *The Anchor Bible Esther* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), Esther 8:10, pp. 76, 80.

QUIZ ME ON THE TORAH

1. **Which of the matriarchs was not buried in the cave of Machpelah and why?**
2. **Who changed Jacob's name, and what name was he given?**
3. **What is another name for Esau in the Torah?**
4. **Who are described in the Torah as entering in pairs and what did they enter?**
5. **Mention two people in the Book of Genesis whose names were changed by adding or changing one or two letters?**
6. **Who are the two brothers who are each known by another name in addition to their original name?**
7. **Several people in the Torah were given their names before they were born. Mention two of them from the Book of Genesis.**

RESPONSES ON PAGE 48