

HOW ARE YOU JEWING?

A study in Purim



A TWIST IN THE TALE

Esther 8:17ⁱ

וּבְכָל מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל עִיר וָעִיר מְקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ מִגִּיעַ שְׂמֵחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן
לְיִהוּדִים מִשָּׂתָה וַיּוֹם טוֹב וְרַבִּים מֵעַמִּי
הָאָרֶץ מִתְיַהֲדִים כִּי נָפַל פַּחַד הַיְהוּדִים
עֲלֵיהֶם:

And in every province and in every city, when the king's command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

Menachem Finkelsteinⁱⁱ

This is the only appearance in the Bible of this verb, *hit-ya-hed*, which denotes that a gentile has become a Jew. The verb *hit-ga-yer* ('he converted'), so common in Rabbinic Hebrew, does not appear in the Bible. We should note that, although the construction of the verb *hit-ya-hed* generally carries a reflexive meaning, so that *hit-ya-hed* would mean 'he made himself into a Jew' or 'he became a Jew', another of its usages is to indicate impersonation or pretence.

Professor Sidnie White Crawfordⁱⁱⁱ

In the provinces many gentiles *mit-ya-ha-dim* out of fear. This is enigmatic; the Hebrew word may indicate actual conversion (the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation, states that they were circumcised). But the meaning of conversion in the non-observant atmosphere of the story is uncertain. It is clear that some gentiles identified themselves with the Jews in some way, and that this was acceptable to the author.

ⁱ NJPS translation

ⁱⁱ Menachem Finkelstein, *Conversion: halakhah and practice*, trans Edward Levin (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994; repr 2006): 223 n 188.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther" in James D G Dunn and John W Rogerson (eds), *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B Eerdmans, 2003), 329-336: 335.

NEW JEWS?

Chut shel Chessed ad loc

בודאי, פחדו רק אלה שהיו שונאי ישראל או שהיו חשודים בשנאה, כי אוהבי ישראל או אלה שלא היה להם שיח ושיג ביהודים מעולם, לא היה להם ממה לירא, ומי שלא אכל שום אין ריחו נודף. ורק שונאי ישראל, הגלויים והנסתרים, שלא היה מצפונם נקי, הם שנפל פחד היהודים עליהם ונתיהדו ונתערבו בזרע ישראל (אכן עונש נורא לשונאי ישראל).

Obviously, the only ones who were afraid were those who hated Jews (or who were suspected of hating Jews). Those who were favourably disposed towards Jews – or simply had no particular feelings about Jews – had nothing to fear. One who has not eaten garlic does not stink! So only the haters of Jews – those who incited openly and those who kept their thoughts private – who did not have a clear conscience, had the fear of the Jews fall upon them. And only these professed themselves to be Jews and merged their bloodlines into that of Israel (a terrible punishment indeed for those who hate Jews!)

Manot ha-Levi ad loc

היו מראים עצמם כאלו הם יהודים והיו משנים מלבושיהם.

They made themselves look as if they were Jews: they changed their clothes.

Emmanuel of Rome ad loc

היו חפצים ברצונם או להיות יהודים מפחדם מהם ואין כוונת המאמ' שהיו שבים לתורת היהודים רק היו שבים באהבה אל תורת היהודים.

They honestly desired to be Jews, albeit motivated by fear. It was not their intention to adopt the Torah of the Jews, but to take on board its messages of love.

Bi'ur ha-Gra al derech p'shat ad loc

עשו עצמן יהודים, כי לא קיבלו אותם ... שלא היו גרים גמורים כי לא נתגיירו אלא מחמת פחד. ולכך כתיב „מתייהרים“. שעשו עצמו ביהודים, אבל באמת אינם יהודים גמורים.

They made themselves Jews, but the Jewish community did not accept them. Because they only converted out of fear, they were not valid converts, hence the unusual term *mit-ya-ha-dim*: they made themselves like Jews, but in reality, they were not complete Jews.

Or Chadash ad loc

רבים מעמי הארץ מתייהדים כאשר היה בטל כח המן.

Many of the locals became Jewish once Haman's power was nullified.

Rashi ad loc

מתייהדים – מתגיירים.

Professed to be Jews. That is, they converted.

Ralbag ad loc

הם מתגיירים ושבים לדת היהודים.

They atoned by adopting the Jewish religion.

M'chir Yayin to Esther 8:16

ואומר כי נפל פחד היהודים עליהם, רצה לומר שמתפחדים ממה שמפחדים היהודים והוא כי יראת שמים עליהם

When the text says that *the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them*, it means that they feared what the Jews feared: that is, they feared God.

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