

Fast - or feast

Until now, there has never been an edition of Megillat Ta'anit that is as meticulously annotated and beautifully printed as this one.

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"Megillat Ta'anit - Hanusakhim, Pishram Vetoldotayhem" ("Megillat Ta'anit - Versions, Interpretation, History"), Vered Noam, critical edition, Yad Ben-Zvi, 452 pages

The title "Megillat Ta'anit" ("Scroll of Fasting") is misleading. This manuscript, which has now appeared in a new critical edition, is not a list of fasts, but of days when fasting was forbidden, compiled by the sages at the end of the Second Temple period. The work cites 35 days on which joyous events and/or military victories took place in Jewish history. On these days, fasting was not permissible, and in some cases, eulogies were not delivered. The dates in question are scattered throughout the (Jewish calendar) year, from Nissan to Adar. Megillat Ta'anit discusses them one by one.

The historical events are also scattered broadly - not over the year, but over 500 years, from the days of Ezra and Nechemia, the builders of the walls of Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C.E., to the rescinding of the Roman emperor Caligula's edict shortly after the destruction of the Temple. As one might expect, most of these victories and achievements occurred during the Hasmonean period, with the eight-day festival of Hanukkah accounting for the longest block of time throughout the year that fasting and eulogies are forbidden.

The scroll also cites the two days of Purim as days of rejoicing. The account of the historical events that gave rise to Hanukkah and Purim is reminiscent of what we read in the Book of Maccabees, Megillat Esther, the writings of Josephus, Talmudic literature, etc. The festive character of these days has not changed much either since the days of the Second Temple, although it is not clear when lighting Hanukkah candles at home became such a central aspect of the holiday.

The 15th of Av (Tu B'av) is also mentioned in the scroll as a day when the dead are not eulogized; but the priestly, Temple-oriented character of this day is a far cry from the secular-romantic flavor of the festival as it is described in the Mishna. And perhaps we should point out that even the rabbis of the Mishna, with their descriptions of the white-garbed daughters of Israel dancing in the vineyards, were not exactly talking about a holiday of love as it is celebrated today in Zemach and other places in this country.

A Tannaitic tradition mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat,

13b) attributes the writing of Megillat Ta'anit to Hananiah ben Hezekiah and his school. From the Mishna and the Talmud, it appears that Hananiah was a rather prolific writer, author of a commentary on the Book of Ezekiel or parts of it, and responsible for saving this book from being withdrawn from the religious canon.

According to this Tannaitic source, Megillat Ta'anit was written several decades after the destruction of the Temple, but a Geonic tradition attributes it to the elders of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, during a visit to the ailing Hananiah. Others (such as Graetz) say the work was written by Hananiah's son Eliezer, one of the leaders of the revolt against the Romans, and had a nationalistic purpose. One way or another, it seems clear that the work was put into writing very soon after being compiled, which was unusual because from the middle of the first millennium C.E., compositions outside the religious canon were not transcribed. During the days of the Amoraim, the sages of the Gemara, the halakhic (Jewish legal) status of Megillat Ta'anit declined and eventually lost its authority altogether. Nevertheless, Hanukkah, Purim and Rosh Hodesh (the first day of the Hebrew month) have not changed in status, and Jews are prohibited from fasting on these dates until today.

The date cited in Megillat Ta'anit for the festival of Hanukkah is a matter of great interest, of course, but it is complicated and worthy of separate study. The text contains a brief and rather unexciting statement of fact that "eulogies are to be avoided on the 15th of the month [of Kislev]." But the description of the events leading up to the holiday in the scholium (rabbinic commentary appended to the text) is very different from the account in the Talmud. This scholium is a kind of gloss on the text, already extant in Talmudic times, that has been compared by scholars to the way the Gemara comments on the Mishna.

Particularly interesting are the halakhic metamorphoses of the third of Tishrei and the 13th of Adar - both of them classified as days of rejoicing in Megillat Ta'anit. About the third of Tishrei, it says: "Betlata betishrei antalat adrakhta min shtara." Attempts to decipher this cryptic statement in the scholium and Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18b), suggest that the third of Tishrei is the day that "shtara" - bills or contracts - were no longer considered religious documents. It may have been related to the custom at the time to invoke the name of God on IOUs, which led to sacrilege when the bill was paid and then ripped up. According to the scholium, bills contained phrases like "in the year of our Lord, such and such ..." But the Jewish historian Josephus denies that there was any mention of God in the dating of legal documents.

The joyous nature of this day thus continues to be puzzling. A host of other interpretations have been offered for why the 3rd of Tishrei was a holiday, but in the end, when the scroll was no longer accepted as a basis for halakha, it became an official fast day - the Fast of Gedalya - in keeping with a custom instituted after the destruction of the First Temple (see Zechariah 7:1-7, 8, 18-19).

"Yom Nikanor" (Nikanor Day) - the 13th of Adar - suffered a similar

fate. In 1 Maccabees (7:26-50) and 2 Maccabees (15:36), it is called "Yom Mordechai" (Mordechai Day). Prior to the Hasmonean victory over the army of Nicanor, the 13th of Adar was the celebration of the triumph of the Jews of Shushan, Persia, over their enemies (Esther 9) - i.e., it was the original Purim. But then stricter rabbis came along in the Geonic period and turned it into the Fast of Esther. Many of the historical events alluded to in Megillat Ta'anit are shrouded in mist. Some are enigmatic and indecipherable; others are the source of scholarly debate. Gaps in our historical knowledge, the use of Aramaic and the terse style - all these contribute to the mystery. Are there any great brains out there who can say for sure what is meant by "Barbisar besivan ahidat migdal tsor"? This translates as: "On the 14th of Sivan, Migdal Tsor was captured." But what is Migdal Tsor? Where was it? Who captured it and why was it an occasion so joyous that Jews were forbidden to fast on that day?

Once again, the scholium comes to our aid, identifying the empire of Bat Edom with the city of Caesarea. According to one version of the scholium, "Migdal Tsor is the kingdom of Bat Edom sitting in the dunes like a thorn in Israel's side since Hellenistic times, driven out at long last by the Hasmoneans and resettled by the people of Israel."

An almost identical statement appears in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 6a), attributed to the Talmudic sage Rabbi Abahu, who lived in Caesarea in the second half of the third century C.E. Rabbi Abahu was an acclaimed storyteller and known for his intellectual dialogue with the city's non-Jewish inhabitants. He interprets Zephaniah's prophecy "ve'Ekron te'aker" ("And Ekron shall be uprooted") using the very same words that the scholium uses in its discussion of the 14th of Sivan. To make things clearer, the Talmud adds the name of the city: Migdal Sor (or Shur).

Vered Noam writes that "this double identification of Migdal Sor with Caesarea is backed up both textually and extra-textually," by the reference to the city of Migdal Straton, where Herod eventually built Caesarea, in the Xenon papyri and a whole row of Hellenistic and Roman sources.

The event alluded to in Megillat Ta'anit is apparently the surrender of Migdal Straton to Alexander Jannaeus by Ptolemy Lathyros, governor of Cyprus and the son of the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, as part of a deal that involved Lathyros' betrayal of a former ally. Some scholars have challenged this theory, offering a variety of alternatives. One is that the city in question is Beit Tsur in Judea, conquered by Judah Maccabee. As she explores these different possibilities, Noam shows how facts are amazingly pushed aside to fit some early historical conception.

This brief discussion of one historical incident offers a glimpse of the historical and literary importance of Megillat Ta'anit, but only a very partial one considering that many of the interpretative endeavors in the book are far longer and more complex. Megillat Ta'anit has always been well-known in the Talmudic world. Many scholars of Talmudic literature and Jewish history have wrestled with it. Until

now, however, there has never been an edition of the book so meticulously annotated and beautifully printed as this one. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any volume of rabbinic literature that can compare, at least in terms of sheer magnificence.

In the book, Noam brings all the versions and variations of the text itself and the scholium. She discusses the work as a whole and the kind of research that has been done, especially efforts to untangle the mystery of the dates. All of this is solidly grounded in the relevant literature - rabbinic lore, writings from the Second Temple period and later, academic scholarship and more. For the attractive appearance of the book, credit goes to Yad Ben-Zvi, which has published it as the first volume of a series.

It is hard to say that Megillat Ta'anit has been rescued from oblivion: From the time it was written, people have known about it and studied it. But like other such works, parts of the text have become garbled over the centuries. There is no longer a clear line between the composition as it was originally handed down, and material added in the course of transcription. The goal, writes Noam, is "to unravel the knots in Megillat Ta'anit and elucidate each of its many versions and emendations." Those who sit down and give this stunning volume its due will see how successful she has been.

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