

Shushan

Uncover The City Of Splendor

For most Jews living in the Occident, the Purim festivities evoke our closest attachment to the exotic Orient. In particular, the city of Shushan serves as the setting for the Purim story and lies at the heart of the festive celebration. The history of the ancient Persians and their capital city—one of the oldest cities in the history of civilization—is fascinating.

Join Zman as we go back 2,500 years for a tour of the Persian Empire and its capital, Shushan. We will cover the history of its people, their way of life and archaeologists' discoveries of recent times in light of the *Megillah*.

By Dov Levy

After the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash*, the Jews were driven from their homeland by the conquering Babylonian army of Nevuchadnetzar. The survivors of the slaughter were forcibly relocated to Bavel (Babylon), in the center of modern-day Iraq.

Remarkably, once there, the Jews settled down to a fairly stable and satisfactory life. They built homes, established families, planted gardens, fields and orchards. Most significantly, 11 years before the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash*, some 10,000 of the elite

among the Jews had been exiled to Bavel (*Gittin* 88a). In so doing, the Babylonian conquerors had unwittingly set up the next 2,500 years of Jewish history. In little more than a decade, those 10,000 Jews—which included prophets and sages like Yechezkel, Daniel and Ezra, as well as the entire Sanhedrin—created the foundation of the Jewish future.

The *navi* Yechezkel established a yeshiva at the time that lasted continually until the year 1001 CE, a period of more than 1,600 consecutive years! To put that into perspective, the oldest running educational

institution in the Western world is Oxford University, which is about 900 years old.

In the coming decades the Jews witnessed three successive Babylonian monarchs. Eventually, the last Babylonian king, Belshatzar, was deposed while he was in a drunken stupor during a banquet that included desecration of the sacred vessels of the *Bais Hamikdash* (*Sefer Daniel*, Chapter 5). His capital and palace were sacked by the Persian king Koresh (Cyrus).

The political center of the world now shifted from Bavel to Persia, in modern-day northwestern Iran. Although most Jewish scholars stayed put, many Jews migrated to the new capital in Persia. There they found themselves in an unfamiliar setting among a people who enjoyed a completely foreign lifestyle.

The Persian Nation

The Persians began as a nomadic tribe from the Pars region (today Fars Province). In time they migrated and settled in the area of the modern-day Khuzestan Province in Iran. Here the fertile plains offered a bountiful supply of food and wealth. There were also vast mineral resources that could fuel an empire. To the ancient Persians the region was known as *Shush* (anglicized as Susiana). In *Tanach* it is referred to as Shushan.



Map of the ancient world. Note the locations of Jerusalem and Babylon, the older Persian capitals of Pasargadae and Persepolis, and the Persian-adopted Elamite capitals of Ecbatana and Susa (Shushan).

From a description in the Gemara (*Megillah* 11a) we learn that the Persians were a fearful sight: “They eat and drink like a bear, they are covered in flesh like a bear, they are hairy like a bear and they are restless like a bear.” Nevertheless, the Gemara (*Berachos* 8b) also praises them for maintaining a measure of modesty in their habits.

The Gemara sometimes refers to Persia by the name of its predecessor, Elam. This was an empire that dominated the region on and off for 2,000 years, beginning around 2700 BCE. The Elamites ruled primarily from the city of Anshan in Fars and from the city of Shush (*Shushan Habirah*, or Susa in modern English) in the Shush region. Both of those cities predated the Elamite Empire.

Elam constantly sparred with the rival empires of Akkadia (*Akkad* in *Chumash*), Sumer (*Shinar* in *Chumash*) and Babylonia. Much later, the last great leader of the Assyrian Empire (*Ashur* in *Tanach*, whose capital was in Nineveh), King Ashurbanipal, waged a war against Elam.

The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 24a) tells us that of 10 portions of arrogance that descended into the world, nine came to Elam by way of Bavel. Inscriptions remaining from the Persian kings contain all of the haughty titles, statements and alleged mighty deeds that were traditional among ancient rulers. The Gemara



Left: Ruins of Bavel (the ancient city of Babylon, capital of Babylonia) in 1932.



Right: Ruins of Bavel today, as seen from Saddam Hussein's former summer palace overlooking the site.

(*Pesachim* 87a) also mentions that in Elam the Jewish exiles merited studying Torah but not teaching it. This is a commentary on the fact that the leading scholars remained behind in Bavel.

Rise of the Persian Empire

Around the time of the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash*, important political events were taking place in far-off Media. The Median Empire resided in what is today northern Iran. Its capital was Ecbatana, the modern-day city of Hamadan. (Some historians say that it is the same as the city Achmasa mentioned in *Ezra* 6:2.)

Among the vassal states subservient to Median rule was nearby Persia in the Fars Province. At the time, Persia was ruled by Cyrus. Accounts of his background differ widely: Some say he was a peasant while a Greek historian recorded him as a grandson of a king. Cyrus, of course, claimed the latter.

He was not one prone to understating his opinion of himself. As was carved into the “Cyrus Cylinder,” a famous archaeological find discovered in Babylon in 1879:

I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king



Relief of Xerxes I (believed to be Achashverosh) from the doorway of his palace at Persepolis. Note the parasol above his head, an invention of the ancient Persians.