

Silence is a fence for wisdom

Written by
PROF. GEORGE NATHAN SCHLESINGER

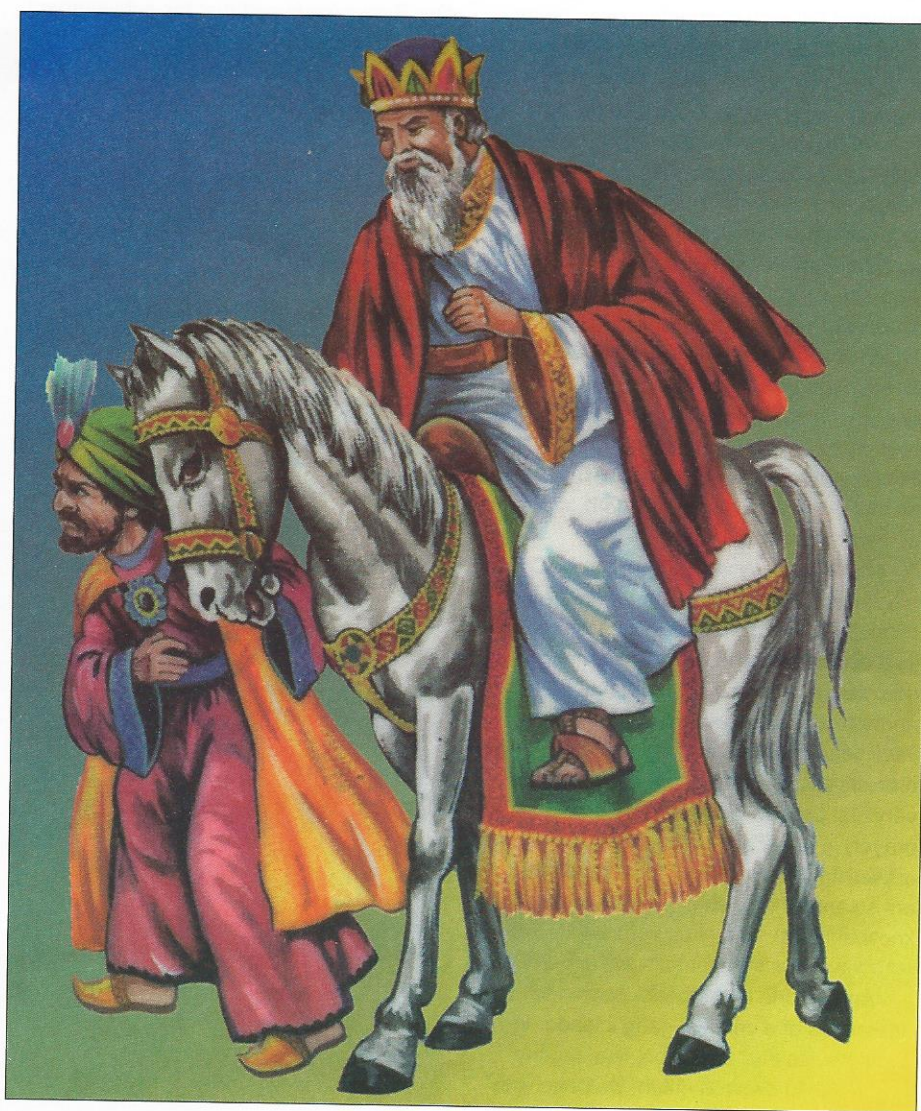
There are a great many lessons one can learn from *Megillah Esther*. One of these is the very useful rule that though you should always know what you are talking about, by no means need you talk about everything you know. Let me illustrate the point at some length involving a recently invented paradox by William Poundstone in his *Labyrinths of Reason*, (Doubleday, 1988 pp. 240-1). I shall paraphrase his argument.

Suppose Alf insulted Bill, in consequence of which the latter challenges Alf to a duel widely known in the 1950's as the dare-game of "chicken." Alf – not wishing to become an object of contempt among his peers – agrees to fight. The prescribed mode of combat is to be performed through the use of motorized vehicles. Thus at the referee's signal, each of the disputants jumps into his car and races at maximum speed toward his adversary along a narrow highway, on a collision course. The contest has the following possible outcomes:

1. When the cars come too close to each other, Alf swerves in order to avoid collision. This is the best conclusion of the duel from Bill's point of view. He then has publicly proven his mettle, and his honor has been vindicated.

2. A less satisfactory outcome for Bill is for both of them to pull away at the same moment. This means that no one is the victor; the game ends in a draw.

3. A truly bad result for Bill is to be the first to swerve. His act would bring down upon his head severe disgrace in the community they belong to, and for the next three months Bill is not allowed to appear in public without displaying the letter C, which of course, stands for the dreaded



word "chicken."

4. The outcome which is by far the worst for all concerned, is when both fail to pull away in time. That of course means an earsplitting explosion and the total annihilation of the motorists and their motors.

Now the particular event we are dealing with is a rather extraordinary one. For Alf happens to be an individual with an unparalleled I.Q. of 100,000, while Bill is merely of an average intelligence, that is, he has an I.Q. of 100. Clearly, everyone would

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take it for granted that Alf who is a thousand times smarter than Bill is bound to win the game even if he should keep one of his hands in his pocket. Surely, it should be absurd to suppose that such an incredible advantage in intelligence is not going to ensure victory in a game demanding utmost concentration and absolutely precise judgment.

Surprisingly enough Poundstone sets out to demonstrate that the relatively dimwitted Bill may completely relax (even close his eyes if he is so inclined) and rest assured in the certain knowledge that he is going to defeat our super genius. How so? We are to assume that Alf is resolved not to get himself killed. Bill is aware that his adversary's super brain is capable of determining with an accuracy of one millionth of a second when is it the very last moment at which it is still possible to avoid collision. Thus Bill can afford to drive on without the slightest concern, knowing that when that crucial moment arrives, Alf will swerve to preserve his life even at the cost of the disgrace of chickenhood. Poundstone concludes therefore that the mental giant "cannot negotiate his way out of the disadvantage."

The eminent author seems to have overlooked a crucial point. Alf is bound to lose not because he is so smart. His downfall is caused by the fact that Bill *knows* that he is so smart. To have intelligence, understanding and discernment (for which we pray for in the very first petition we make in the *Amidah* prayer) is never a disadvantage. But advertising it may lead to trouble. If you are so smart, you need not let everyone know about it.


Among one of the best known utterances of a criminal gang's leader in most movies and television, is along the lines, "Lou knows too much, we better get rid of him." Now if indeed fatal disaster should befall Lou, would that really be a direct consequence of his knowledge of some fatal secrets? Certainly not. Lou may know the most embarrassing truth about the gang he belongs to, but as long as he manages to keep the matter to

himself, he will come to no harm. If he does get into trouble, it will not be due to his knowledge but to his colleagues' knowledge of his knowledge.

After this "megillah," the reader may well ask what has this all to do with the story of Mordechai and Esther? The answer is very simple. One of the crucial events in their story was Mordechai's successful work at counterintelligence, revealing the plot to assassinate the King. Our Sages explained that his achievement was due to his vast knowledge of foreign languages. However, Mordechai was a wise individual and did not indulge in shouting from the rooftops to let all know what a linguistic prodigy he was. Bigtan and Teresh, the would-be regicides, discussed their plans in an esoteric language, neglecting to take precautions

that would prevent them to be overheard by Mordechai. They took it for granted that this elderly Jew does not understand a single word of their conversation. As soon as Mordechai learned of the conspiracy, he informed Esther who alerted the authorities to the threat on the King's life. Mordechai was eventually rewarded for preventing the treacherous act, in a way involving Haman's humiliation, an important turning point precipitating the latter's downfall. Thus Mordechai's tight-lippedness turned out to be a major factor in his People's deliverance.

Professor George Nathan Schlesinger is a professor of Science and Logic at the University of North Carolina, where he has taught for the last 26 years.



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