



Ruins of
ancient Susa
(Shushan),
Persia



The famous city of Achashverosh revealed.

By Prof. Lawrence H. Schiffman

It didn't take very long after the destruction of the First Temple for a few Jews in the service of the Babylonian government to reach the city of Shushan (Susa), located in present-day southwestern Iran. *Daniel* 8:2 identifies Shushan as the capital of Elam, whose king, Kedarla'omer, was involved in the War of the Kings back in the times of Avraham, as described in *Bereshis* 14. Indeed, archaeological evidence shows that by the time these few Jews reached Shushan after the *Churban* it had long been a commercial and administrative center. It was first conquered by Ashur (Assyria), after which it briefly regained its independence after the fall of Assyria to Babylonia. It was then swallowed up by the newly emerging Persian Empire of Koresh (Cyrus the Great), who overthrew the Babylonian Empire.

It was Koresh who allowed the Jews who were exiled to Bavel to return to Eretz Yehudah (see *Ezra* 1 and *Divrei Hayamim* II:36). From a cuneiform inscription

Seeking Sh



ushan

in the shape of a cylinder found in Mesopotamia we know that he made a similar declaration for all peoples who had been exiled by the Assyrians and Babylonians. In the inscription, the two individuals identifiable as Jews living in Shushan are witnesses in a loan document written in Akkadian, the language of Babylonia, not long after Babylonia was conquered by Persia. What this shows is that a Jewish community already existed in Shushan soon after the establishment of the Persian Empire. We can speculate that some Jews had moved there in the earlier Babylonian period, as Shushan was only a short journey eastward from the areas in which the Judean exiles were settled by the Babylonians after the *Churban*.

It wasn't long before Shushan was home to a substantial Jewish population whose existence would be threatened by the genocidal Haman and his supporters. It was only natural that Jews would be attracted to this city. Darius I (Daryavesh) had to quell a revolt in the aftermath of the death of Cambyses. (Cambyses is mentioned by Rashi in his comments on *Daniel* 11:2, citing Yosippon, the medieval Hebrew adaptation of Josephus. The correct reading there is Kambishah.) Darius I selected Shushan as his main capital. He



the fortified royal complex. Some scholars have suggested that the “Shushan *habirah*” in the *Megillah* refers to the fortified royal complex, while “Shushan” itself refers to the unfortified areas occupied by the general population. The two areas were separated by a canal, probably the Ulai canal or stream mentioned in *Daniel* 8:2 and 8:16. Little is known about the lower unfortified area, where the townspeople lived, as few archaeological remains survive. But this is not the case for the royal complex, the area where the Purim events would have taken place. Some of the construction of Shushan seems to have been completed by Darius’ son Xerxes, whom some, including Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Halevy in *Doros Harishonim*, identify as the Achashveirosh of *Megillas Esther*.

The royal complex, which has been



Glazed brick griffin (left) and sphinx (above) from the Apadna of Susa

are where much of the narrative of the *Megillah* must have played out. The royal palace was a magnificent building that was also the location of the treasury, mentioned

in *Esther* (3:9) as the place where Haman would have deposited the money to exterminate the Jews. Its monumental gate was most probably the *sha'ar hamelech* that is repeatedly mentioned. Inside the gate was an area of some 32 acres. The beauty and richness of the palace, as described in *Esther* 1:6-7, are memorialized by an inscription in which Darius enumerates the areas of his empire the various components came from: cedar and other woods, gold, lapis lazuli (a deep blue semi-precious stone), carnelian (a semi-precious brownish-red stone), turquoise, silver, ebony (a black wood) and ivory. The luxurious banquet of the *Megillah* (1:3) must have been like the one described by Herodotus as taking place in Xerxes’ tent: “Treasure there was in plenty...gold and silver furniture; couches overlaid with the same precious metals; bowls, goblets and cups, all made of gold; and wagons loaded with sacks full of gold and silver basins.”

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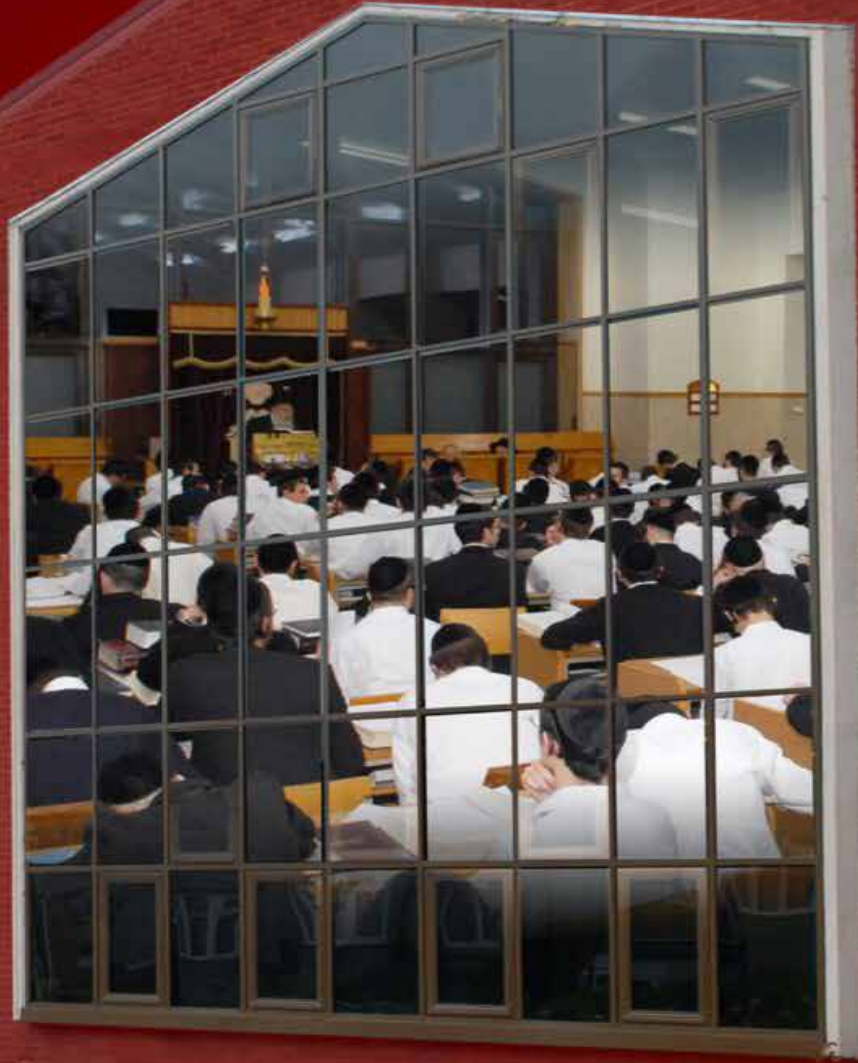
also had a capital at Persepolis, which has also left beautiful archaeological remains. But Shushan was a natural for his primary capital, as it was the center of an empire reaching *mei'Hodu v'ad Kush* (“from India to Ethiopia”; *Esther* 1:1). Furthermore the Greek historian Herodotus tells us that Darius built a royal road to facilitate travel and shipping all the way from Shushan to Sardis in Turkey. This led to extensive building projects, especially to

excavated thoroughly, was surrounded by a massive wall, and its buildings were about 50 feet higher than the lower city. Its main components were the actual fortified citadel, the palace (called the Apadna, a term also used in *Daniel* 11:45), and the attached residential area (the *beis hamelech*, *Esther* 5:1) that included the *beis hanashim* (harem) as described in the *Megillah*.

The Apadna and its adjoining gardens

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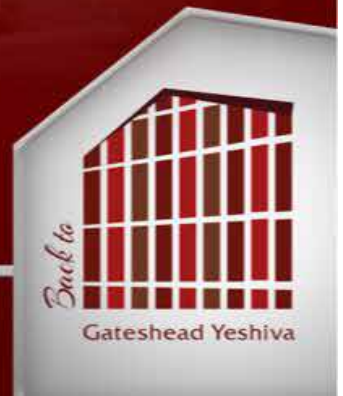


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Entrance to the palace was through a series of courtyards. The outer one is probably the *chatzar beis hamelech hachitzonah* (Esther 6:4). The innermost courtyard led to the residence itself and might be the *chatzer hapenimis* (Esther 4:11, 5:1). The northern part of the complex was the Apadna, the audience hall. The 350-square-foot roof, supported by imposing columns topped by magnificent capitals, was 65 feet high. Judging from the well-preserved ruins at Persepolis, the building would have been richly decorated with colored tiles. A platform still preserved was most likely the location of the throne.

It was in this city and its palace that the events of Purim and the miraculous redemption of the Jewish people played out. But we cannot leave ancient Shushan without calling attention to the fact that after what must have been a speedy return to normalcy it was the home of Nechemiah ben Chachalyah, who played a central role in the development of the Second Jewish Commonwealth in Eretz Yisrael and served as its official governor. Nechemiah was a government official whose official role was that of cupbearer,



Together with Ezra Hasofer he succeeded in bringing about a renewed commitment to Torah and *halachah* (Nechemiah 10), renewed Shabbos observance, and he also fought against intermarriage. Moreover, he was able to take aggressive steps to restore economic stability.

Although that was not the end of Shushan's role in Jewish history, the city entered a period of decline and insignificance after Alexander the Great conquered

lulation from the Muslim conquest up until the earlier Middle Ages. By this time the tomb of the Nabi Danyal, Arabic for the Prophet Daniel, was being venerated in Shushan. The Jewish traveler Binyamin of Tudela (c. 1162) reported that it had a Jewish population of about 7,000 and 14 synagogues. Only 15 years later, however, Petachiah of Regensburg reported that he found only two Jews. By the 19th century it was home to several thousand Jews, and the village was called Shush. But a recent list of synagogues in Iran contains no entry for Shushan, and it appears that its community is no longer in existence. Nonetheless, Iranian Jews continue to visit the Tomb of Daniel.

Let us hope that our increased understanding of the *Megillah* and the history it recounts will help to sustain us in the face of the challenges of the modern world, and that we will speedily see the defeat of the Hamans of today. ●



Reconstruction of Darius' palace and administrative complex

implicitly trusted to prevent the poisoning of the king, a serious danger in those days. In this role, he also served as a close advisor to Artachshaste, almost certainly identified with Artaxerxes, son of and successor to Xerxes. When the renewed Jewish community in Judea was on the verge of economic and religious decline, he was able to convince the king to allow him to organize a group of returnees to strengthen the flagging community.

the Near East. It reemerged sometime in the Talmudic period, perhaps as a result of the efforts of the Jewish queen, the wife of the Sasanian King Yazdegerd I (399-420) who ruled over Babylonia in the times of the Gemara. Some *Amoraim* came from the province of Khuzistan, of which Shushan was the capital. However, we know nothing about its Jewish popu-

Bibliographic note: Much more information on this topic is available in Yehuda Landy's *Purim and the Persian Empire: A Historical, Archaeological, and Geographical Perspective* (Feldheim, 1999).

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