The Queen You Thought You Knew

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THE QUEEN YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW

UNMASKING ESTHER'S HIDDEN STORY

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Acknowledgments

Every once in a while, one comes to a fork in the road of life and senses that the choice he makes at that moment will guide the direction he takes for years. One such moment took place for me two decades ago when, after a class I gave on Genesis at Johns Hopkins University, LeRoy Hoffberger and his wife, Rebecca, lingered for a fascinating extended discussion on the themes we had been talking about in class. In subsequent conversations on other evenings in a Johns Hopkins parking lot, and later in their home, we began to forge a bond that would flourish over the years. LeRoy and Rebecca cared deeply about the underlying meaning of biblical stories, and more generally, about how knowledge of Torah can and should inform one's life. In short order, LeRoy had created the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies, which has ardently supported my work since then. Teaching biblical themes had always been a passion of mine, but I never thought I'd be fortunate enough to devote my professional life to that dream. LeRoy

began to make that dream a reality for me. Through his efforts, a conversation in a parking lot has blossomed into countless classes – and now, several books. Along the way, he has become a close friend, a devoted student, a valued mentor, and an unfailing source of guidance. I am deeply privileged to call him a partner in my life's work.

In recent years, others have joined the effort to take the methodology and material that I've developed thus far and project it further into the world at large. These devoted souls have spearheaded the further development of LeRoy Hoffberger's vision, creating the newly-formed Hoffberger Institute for Text Study.

The mission of this institute is to help make biblical text come alive, to help enable students across the globe to build a living, vibrant relationship with these ancient, seemingly inaccessible texts. To this end, it supports the publication of books and curriculum materials, video presentations, and teacher development. I am grateful to the founding members of this institute who, in the process of helping to make this dream take shape, have also become my close friends: Jeffrey Haskell, Yoni Kahan, Josh Mallin, Glen and Ruth Miller, David Pollack, Robby Rothenberg, Joel Rothman, Kuty Shalev, Stephen Wagner, and Adrian Weller. Many participated in the process of bringing this book from the realm of vision into reality. Chief among them are Andrew and Terri Herenstein, who have graciously become patrons of this volume. Terri participated actively in a Monday morning class where I first formulated the thoughts that became the core of this book, and has been in on the development of these ideas from the very beginning. Terri and Andrew's enthusiasm, generous support, friendship, and wise counsel all mean a great deal to me.

I am grateful to Stephen and Tamara Wagner, whose efforts and generosity will place this book and others in the hands of scores of students. They have undertaken to launch the institute's School Enrichment Program – an ambitious effort that seeks to

place books we publish, free of charge, in the hands of students across the country. I am grateful for their vision and generosity. Since my arrival in Woodmere, Steve has been a close friend, a trusted advisor, and an insightful collaborator in the world of ideas. I value deeply all he does to nurture my efforts. I am grateful to Maggid Books for their professionalism in producing this edition of the book, as well as to OU Press and Aleph Beta, who published earlier editions.

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Recently, I've been privileged to serve as resident scholar at the Young Israel of Woodmere, and in that role I've been delivering a weekly lecture series at the Young Israel's Nusach Sefard Minyan. That lecture has been a proving ground for new ideas, and was an arena in which I pioneered many of the approaches

and themes for this book. I'd like to thank the attendees of those lectures for their vigorous participation, questions, and feedback; they have contributed substantially to the development of the pages that follow.

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Before an author writes a book, he needs to actually have something to say. In that spirit, I want to acknowledge those who, over the years, helped shape my way of thinking and guide my development as a student of Torah.

The person who perhaps most profoundly influenced my life and way of thinking was my late father, Moshe Fohrman, *zt"l*. He died before I became a bar mitzvah, but in those early years, he taught me much of what I know about what makes life worthwhile, and how to practice the art of living in a meaningful way. Despite the passage of years, he remains a vivid role model for me, and I hope that he would regard this book as a worthy expression of his legacy.

I spent many years studying at the Ner Israel Rabbinical College and feel honored to count the *rosh yeshiva* of that institution, the late Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, *zt"l*, as a mentor. Other faculty members at Ner Israel – including Rabbis Tzvi Berkowitz, Moshe Eisenmann, Nachum Lansky, and Ezra Neuberger – introduced new vistas of thinking to me. The late Rabbi Naftoli Neuberger, *zt"l*, was a defining figure in my life, in many and varied ways. He

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My wife is my biggest fan – and is also an incisive critic. When I asked her to go over parts of the work with me, her sharp instincts won out over her emotional allegiances – and for this I am grateful, for every part she touched was enriched thereby. More generally, on car rides and on walks, she parried the ideas in the book back and forth with me and helped me sharpen them. Her loving attention and belief in my work has given me the strength and emotional sustenance to go forward in life. I am privileged to have her as my life's partner, and hope and pray we shall celebrate many more milestones together.

Introduction

The Book of Esther can easily masquerade as a tale for children. There's a villain who is out to hang Mordecai and murder his countrymen, a king who enjoys drinking and seems a bit naïve, and a beautiful and noble queen. There are assassins, palace intrigue, and a climactic battle scene to boot. There's even a happy ending. What more could you ask for in a good children's story?

The holiday associated with the book can seem childish too. Purim is celebrated with costumes, carnivals, and abundant merriment. Our kids dress up as Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus. They wear plastic hats and carry cellophane scepters. Purim is the great holiday of make-believe.

All this make-believe, though, can have unintended consequences. Chief among them is the disheartening fact that we are likely to retain childlike views of Purim and the Book of Esther long after we've become adults. If you first learned about Esther and Haman when you were six years old, you may well still see them the same way now. Our view of Mordecai and Esther and their struggle can easily remain as flat as the face paint we use to impersonate these people in costume.

There is another Purim story out there, a richer, deeper narrative – more suited, perhaps, to the eyes of an adult than to those of a child. But in order to see that story, we need to let go mentally of everything we thought we knew about the Book of Esther and read her tale anew, as if for the first time. We need to allow ourselves to be surprised by it.

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH DISSONANCE

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see the surprises. You just have to read with open eyes. Remember that game you sometimes played when you were young, "What's Wrong with This Picture"? There would be a nice forest scene complete with flora, fauna, sky, sun, and clouds. At first, everything seemed normal. But if you looked closely, you would find that little things were askew. There was a toaster plugged into a tree. Or a shadow was out of alignment with the sun. One by one, you'd have to collect the problems until you were satisfied that you had found them all.

In this book, we are going to read the Book of Esther as if we were playing that game. Everything seems simple and straightforward. But then you start to notice the toasters plugged into the trees. There are irrelevant asides, useless digressions, and characters that seem to do the silliest things. The picture that seemed so simple, so innocent, and so childlike suddenly seems vaguely unnerving and out of kilter. The sun is out of alignment with the shadows.

These surprises are clues. They are guideposts that illuminate a deeper story, one that lies just beneath the surface of the text. If we piece together enough of these clues, we will end up glimpsing the hidden face of the Book of Esther, a three-dimensional story of stark emotional power and spiritual import, a story that begins in earnest just when most of us think the narrative is virtually over. This hidden narrative tells not just of Esther's battle against an external villain in the form of Haman, but of her simultaneous

struggle against an internal threat, a faceless, subtle menace that had haunted the Jewish people for centuries. It is a story with roots in the dawn of Jewish history, but it is equally fresh and relevant in our own time. It is a story that reveals itself gradually to the patient reader willing to ask questions and notice anomalies.

When we were young, we built with little colored blocks; as we matured, so did our ideas about architecture. When we were young, we counted with our fingers; as we matured, so did our ideas about mathematics. Well, when we were young, we also learned about the Bible. But did we ever allow our ideas to mature, or are we stuck with the same six-year-old view we had when we were playing with colored blocks and counting on our fingers?

Taking note of the toasters in the trees can be thrilling, if at times somewhat bewildering. But if we accept the challenge and read with open eyes, we may find ourselves enchanted anew by the drama of the queen we thought we knew. Indeed, we shall find her world resplendent with meaning, if only we are willing to enter it.

Part I

The Megilla's Forgotten Ending

Chapter One

Some Opening Questions

WHY DOES THE MEGILLA LAST SO LONG?

The crowd is restless. It is an hour and a half after sundown on Purim night. People have been fasting all day long. For the last thirty minutes or so, the crowd has been listening to the Megilla being read aloud. They have heard about how Ahasuerus, king of Persia, ruled the world; how Vashti, his first wife, met her demise; and about the beauty contest in which Esther, a secret Jew, was chosen queen. They have heard how Mordecai the Jew incited the rage of Haman, and how Haman plotted to eradicate the Jewish people in revenge. They've heard how, in the end, Esther foiled Haman's plot.

The story has reached its climax: Haman is dead. Mordecai and Esther are rewarded. The good guys have won; the bad guys have met with their sorry fate. It looks like the happy ending has arrived. You'd think the crowd would be getting ready to leave the synagogue and break their fast.

But they're not, because for some reason, the Megilla isn't over. There are still another three chapters to go.

Strangely, the Book of Esther seems to overstay its welcome; it seems to last fifteen minutes too long. Why are there three chapters left after the Jews have already been saved and Haman has been killed? What, really, is there left to say?

Look at what happens in these last three chapters: Mordecai issues some decrees. Horsemen run here; horsemen run there. The Jews successfully defend themselves on the day they were supposed to be destroyed. A long series of proclamations is issued in which the events are memorialized in a holiday to be called "Purim." Why do we need to hear about all of this in such detail? Why not summarize it in just a few sentences, something like: *And after Haman was hanged, the Jews killed their enemies; Mordecai and Esther proclaimed that the victory be memorialized forevermore as "Purim," and everyone lived happily ever after.*

There, that seems simple enough – and it's just three sentences long. Why does it take three chapters to say *that*? Doesn't such a long-winded ending detract from the dramatic power of the story?

In the pages that follow, we will try to answer this question and arrive at an understanding of the events that occur in the often-overlooked final three chapters of the Book of Esther. By the end, we will see that these chapters are vitally important to the story, that indeed, what appears to be the story's climax is not its climax, and in the apparently humdrum details of the last three chapters lies a riveting conclusion to a hidden story. Unearthing this hidden story and its various implications will be the central quest of this book.

A SEARCH FOR QUESTIONS

To discern the hidden face of the Megilla, we must first discover what is startling about its ordinary face, the story we have known and loved so well since childhood. Let's begin, then, by taking a step back and trying to ask the questions any intelligent adult

would ask were he or she reading the Megilla – or celebrating Purim, for that matter – for the very first time. Here are a few of those questions that have occurred to me over the years. I wonder if they've ever bothered you too.

TOKAREV DAY

One of the strangest aspects of the Book of Esther, or "the Megilla," as we shall sometimes call it, is the name that it gives to the holiday that will enshrine the events of which it tells. According to the Megilla, this holiday is to be named Purim – a name that persists to this day – after the lots (*pur*) that Haman cast to determine the day upon which he and his minions would murder all the Jews.

Now, imagine you were living at the time when the events of the Megilla took place. The Jews had managed to avoid what seemed like certain destruction, and a holiday was to be freshly minted to commemorate these miraculous events. All that remained was to come up with a name for it. You, as it happens, are one of the elders elected to the naming committee for the prospective holiday. You brainstorm with your colleagues and come up with a few possible names. Some people in the room have suggested "Esther Day" or "Mordecai Day." Others thought it might be called "Salvation Day" or even "Victory in Persia Day." But now imagine that some fellow in the back of the room comes up with a novel suggestion: "Why don't we call it Purim?" he says. Everyone turns around and looks. Finally, someone asks, "Why call it that?"

"Well," the fellow replies, "you know, when Haman was trying to kill us, he cast the *pur* (lots) to select a day on which he would kill us all. So let's call it after that whole 'lots' thing. Let's call the holiday Purim, for the 'lots.'" What would you think of this fellow's suggestion? Is this a really terrific name for the holiday? It doesn't take all that much reflection to raise some objections.

First, why would you name a holiday after the device your nemesis used to try to kill you? Why give the day to him? It seems bizarre, and perhaps the only reason we don't immediately realize just how bizarre it seems is that this is what we ourselves have called the holiday since we were children. But to escape that effect, imagine a similar phenomenon with respect to another holiday – say, Yom HaAtzma'ut, Israel's Day of Independence.

Imagine it is 1948; Israel has just proclaimed its statehood and managed to ward off several invading Arab armies. The question comes up; people will want to celebrate this moment year after year. What should we name the day? Someone in the back of the room raises his hand and says, "Let's call it Tokarev Day." "Why Tokarev Day?" everyone asks. "Well," he continues, "when the Arabs tried to kill us all, their weapon of choice was the Russian-made, self-loading Tokarev rifle. Thank God, we were saved. So let's call it Tokarev Day!" And everyone applauds and decides that this is a wonderful name for the new holiday. That's roughly what seems to have happened with Purim. Why name the day after the instrument of our enemy? It's not *his* holiday; it's ours!

CHANCE, FATE, AND PROVIDENCE

In truth, the question is even more bothersome than this. The lots are not only an instrument associated with our enemy; their symbolic meaning is profoundly disturbing. They seem to symbolize everything that traditional Judaism *doesn't* believe in.

Why? Well, lots are an instrument of chance. In casting lots to determine the day upon which the Jews would die, Haman was doing something rich with symbolic meaning: he was intentionally leaving the date of the Jews' demise up to chance. The Megilla even goes so far as to say that Haman cast lots not just to destroy us, but also to terrify us (Est. 9:24); the lots were an instrument of psychological warfare. It was as if Haman were

taunting the Jews with the thought that whether they would live or die was not up to a providential God, but in the hands of blind fate. They were the prisoners of cold, hard chance. Such a vision is indeed terrifying.

If Jews and Judaism have stood for something over the years, it is for the opposite vision. In our worldview, the Almighty may prefer to stay hidden much of the time, but that doesn't mean He's not around; it just means you have to work to find Him. God is present in the workings of history. He's just behind the scenes. The historical events of Purim seem, themselves, to suggest this theological message. A number of apparent coincidences just "happen" to converge to bring about the salvation of the Jews. But are these events really just the product of blind chance?

Haman plotted to kill the Jews. But somehow events unfolded in such a way as to entrap him and foil his plans. Esther, a hidden Jew, was chosen queen of Persia by King Ahasuerus. Mordecai, her cousin and mentor, just happened to be in the right place at the right time, managing to overhear – and foil – an assassination plot against the king. The king just happened not to reward him immediately, allowing for that reward to be parceled out later, when it counted most. Later, on the very evening that Haman chose to come and ask permission to hang Mordecai, the king just happened to be unable to sleep. And just before Haman knocked on the door, the king – in order to conquer his sleeplessness – had asked for the Book of Records to be read to him. The book just happened to open to the right page, the page that recorded Mordecai's heroic efforts to safeguard the king from the would-be assassins, and the king was reminded of Mordecai's loyalty just in the nick of time. And the list goes on.

If you are a believing Jew, as the framers of Purim surely were, these serendipitous events were not really coincidences. They were not the product of blind chance. On the contrary, they

were manifestations of God working in history, behind the scenes. If that's the case, the question we asked earlier is even more jarring: Why name the holiday after the very thing you *don't* believe in – coincidence and chance? The name of the holiday itself seems to be a bitter joke.

Aren't the royal robes beside the point?

Besides the strange name for the holiday, there are many other mysteries in the Megilla. For the time being, I'd like to focus on a couple of meta-questions, questions that don't quite concern the Megilla's story itself, but how the Megilla *tells* us its story. One such question has to do with Mordecai, or more precisely, with the Megilla's apparent preoccupation with Mordecai. If you listen to the Megilla being read in the synagogue on Purim night, you will notice that there are several verses that by long-standing tradition are read aloud by the entire congregation in unison before the chazzan reads them from the actual Megilla scroll. It's hard to escape the impression that these verses signify something unusually important. So, what are these special verses? What do they talk about? Let's take a look. The first verse introduces us to Mordecai. It reads:

> There was a Jewish man who was in Shushan, the capital; his name was Mordecai, son of Yair, son of Kish; he was from the tribe of Benjamin. (Est. 2:5)

The second passage appears just after Haman is killed. It tells us that Mordecai went out in the streets dressed in royal blue robes with a big golden crown on his head, and that the city of Shushan erupted in joy (Est. 8:15). And the final verse read aloud by the entire congregation – the very last verse in the Book of Esther, as it happens – recaps Mordecai's rise to dizzying political heights. It reads:

> For Mordecai the Jew was second in charge to King Ahasuerus; he was great among the Jews, and pleasing to most of his brethren. (Est. 10:3)

Now here's a question for you. If it were up to you to pick a few verses to highlight in the Megilla, some verses that really get to the core of what Purim is all about, would it have been these particular verses? Forgive me if this sounds somewhat uncouth: these verses all focus, more or less, on Mordecai. They introduce us to him and celebrate his grandeur. But isn't that all a little beside the point?

It's not that I don't like Mordecai, or think he isn't worthy of praise. But still, the fact that Mordecai got to dress in royal robes and go out through the streets of Shushan in parade, or the fact that, after the Jews won the war, Mordecai remained second in charge to the king and was popular among his brethren – are these really the main things I'm celebrating on Purim? I would venture to say they are not. These things are nice, and they make us feel warm and fuzzy if we are fans of Mordecai, but that's not the point of the Megilla. The point of the Megilla, the reason we celebrate Purim, is that on that day, the Jews were miraculously saved from genocide. It's not because a particular Jew managed to attain, and retain, the trappings of success in a gentile society. Why then do we focus on these verses as if, somehow, the whole story revolved around them?

THE KING'S MAJESTY

We can ask a similar question about the Megilla's treatment of Ahasuerus, the Persian king. If you read the first twelve verses or so of the Megilla, you will find that they are all about the glory and grandeur of King Ahasuerus. We hear that he was emperor of the world, sovereign over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia. We hear about the king's lavish 180-day-long party. We

hear about the riches everyone saw at those parties: the fine linens, the gold, the delicately fashioned utensils. If we were reading the royal archives of the Persian court, this would be understandable. But this is the Megilla we are reading – a Jewish book, not a Persian one. Why do I need to know all this? Why start a book in the Bible with such a banal, extended digression?

PLAYING "WHAT WOULD WE HAVE DONE?"

These are questions I've had about how the story is told: Why does the Megilla seem to last so needlessly long, and why does it seem to focus so inordinately on Mordecai's status and the king's grandeur? But let's leave these "meta-problems" aside for a moment. A slew of new difficulties awaits us within the text, concerning how and why major figures in the story acted the way they did.

In the next section of this book, we will begin to unearth these questions. But before we do, a quick word of caution: be aware that your familiarity with the Purim story will sometimes work against you. If you know the basic story line of the Megilla like the back of your hand, it can be hard for you to see the apparent strangeness in how the heroes and villains of the Purim story acted. When we know so well how Esther, Mordecai, the king, and Haman *actually* behaved, it is sometimes hard to imagine that they could have acted differently – but each of the Megilla's central figures surely could have.

In thinking about their actions, then, I would like to suggest that we do the following: Let's pause at strategic points in the Purim story, place ourselves in the shoes of any of the major figures in the narrative, and ask ourselves what we would do. When we arrive at an answer, we can then continue reading and compare what we would have done with what that person did in the real story. More often than not, I think we will be

surprised by the gulf between what we expected to happen, and what actually did.

Before turning the page, you might give this a try. If you feel adventurous, pick a spot in the Megilla, set the scene carefully, then freeze the action, close your eyes, and step into the world of the royal court in ancient Persia. Mentally impersonate a character, then compare what you would have done with what he or she did. When you're finished, turn the page, and we'll compare notes.

Chapter Two

Why Did They Do That?

So now it's time to play Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and the king. What is surprising about how these people act?

WHY WAIT?

Let's start with Esther. She acts boldly, heroically – but also oddly. There is at least one moment, a crucial moment, when her course of action seems entirely inexplicable. Here is the background to that moment: Haman has issued his decree, setting a date (the fourteenth of Adar) when all Jews in the Persian Empire will be destroyed.

The Jews are mourning, and all seems lost. Mordecai, however, has an ace in the hole, and he decides that this is the time to play it. Esther has until now succeeded in maintaining a secret. She has never told the king that she is Jewish. Mordecai now implores her to reveal her secret. She must go to the king and beseech him to save her people.

Esther initially demurs. The king has sequestered himself for a while now in his private chamber – an inconvenient turn of

events. According to the law of the realm, anyone who enters the king's chamber uninvited takes his life in his hands. Unless the king deigns to raise his scepter, allowing the visitor to enter, well, it's off with his head. Esther worries that this is not a propitious time to risk such a visit to the king; it's been a month now since he has called to see her, and she fears that she is no longer in his good graces. Perhaps Ahasuerus will use her unannounced appearance as an opportunity to do away with her. If so, her people's hopes will die along with her. Esther shares her concerns with Mordecai, but he won't take no for an answer. He insists that Esther go to the king, despite her misgivings.

So Esther gives in, and agrees to risk it all. She tells Mordecai that she and her ladies-in-waiting will undertake a prolonged, three-day fast, and then she will face the king, come what may. Three days come and go, and the moment of truth arrives.

Esther dresses in royal clothes and dares to enter the king's chamber. She catches the king's eye. He sees her, and – amazingly – he smiles and lifts his scepter, indicating permission to enter. As she approaches, he tells her that he will grant her request, no matter what it is. Up to half the kingdom and it's hers. "What do you need?" he asks.

OK; you play Esther. It's your move. What would you do? How would you reply to the king?

If I were Esther, this is the moment I would seize to make my request: *Well, you see, it's really very nice of you to offer half your kingdom, but actually, I just require a small favor. It seems that genocide has been decreed against my people. I don't know how it happened – some sort of palace mix-up, probably. But luckily, it's easy to reverse. If you wouldn't mind just signing right here, we can undo the decree right now – and I'd be ever so grateful.* That's what I would have said, at least. But it's not what Esther says. She doesn't use the moment to tell the king about the plight of the Jews, nor does she

request that he annul the decree. Instead, she asks the king to meet her and Haman at a banquet she will hold later on. The question begs to be asked: Why does she do this? The king has lifted his scepter and offered to give her half his kingdom. She would have done *anything* just the day before for such a reception from him. She has no reason to expect she'll get the same welcome tomorrow. Why does she squander the magic of the moment by postponing the reckoning for some later time?

How does she know she will ever be in a better position than she is right now?

THE LADY DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH

While we're talking about Esther, there's something else she does to confound our expectations. It has to do with her choice of time to cry.

There is a time when Esther actually throws herself at the feet of the king, cries, and literally begs him for mercy. Now, when does this happen? One would imagine it to take place at her most desperate hour, the time when things look darkest and most uncertain – perhaps when she first enters the king's chambers unannounced. Indeed, if there is any time her mission is most in danger, it is then. In a split second, the king will decide whether or not to raise his scepter, and the fate of both Esther and her people will be decided.

But that isn't when Esther cries. Neither does she cry later, when she rises dramatically at the banquet to indict Haman as the villain who would destroy her people. In neither of these moments, so fraught with danger, does Esther weep. When does Esther cry? Later, at a moment that appears far less dangerous, at a moment when, to all appearances, her battle has already been won.

The moment I am thinking of comes right after the death of Haman. It is a happy time, one would think. Not only has the king hanged his former vizier, he has also gifted Haman's house to

Mordecai as a reward for his loyalty. Things are certainly looking up for the Jews, wouldn't you say? Nevertheless, here is Esther throwing herself at the king's feet, weeping, pleading for mercy, begging the king to overturn Haman's genocidal decree. It all seems a little overwrought. The king has already gone so far as to kill Haman, formerly his most trusted advisor, and he has promoted Mordecai, leader of the Jews, to Haman's former office. He has even entrusted to Mordecai the royal signet ring, giving Mordecai, in effect, the final word on any legislation that would issue forth from the palace. The fortunes of the Jews have risen quite marvelously. But here is Esther, crying. What is she getting so teary-eyed about? Isn't the reversal of Haman's decree just a perfunctory administrative issue? In killing Haman, the king has clearly taken Esther's side. Why wouldn't he want to comply with Esther's very reasonable request to spare her people?

A COUNTERINTUITIVE ARGUMENT

It's time to talk about Mordecai. What does *he* do that confounds our expectations? Well, let's go back to a moment we've already examined from Esther's perspective, and review it this time from Mordecai's. We've talked about how Esther hesitated before going to the king. Let's discuss how, at that moment, Mordecai convinced her to take action. Here is what he told her:

> If you keep silent at this time, salvation will come to the Jews from somewhere else, and you and your father's house will be destroyed. And who knows if it was for this moment that you became queen? (Est. 4:14)

Mordecai makes a surprising argument here. Most of us, in his shoes, would have made an altogether different pitch. We would implore Esther to sacrifice herself, if necessary, for her people. After all, they *need* her; to whom else can they turn? But Mordecai

says virtually the opposite: *You think we need you, Esther? We don't need you all that much. If you don't rise to the occasion, someone else will; salvation will come from elsewhere. God has many tools through which to effect His purposes.*

Now why does Mordecai say this? Here he is, trying to convince Esther that she *must* act, that her continued silence in the face of Haman's threat is not an option. How does he serve his purpose by telling her that the Jews will be fine without her? This seems, if anything, to give Esther an escape route, a chance to bow out gracefully from the scene. If Mordecai is really so confident that the Jews will be fine without Esther, what's to stop her from politely taking a pass and letting someone else ride heroically to the rescue? Isn't that exactly what he's trying to prevent?

THE PRICE OF COWARDICE

The next part of Mordecai's speech to Esther is just as strange. After telling her that if she doesn't act, someone else will, Mordecai adds – astoundingly – that if she fails to act, she will be destroyed:

> If you keep silent at this time…you and your father's house will be destroyed.

Destroyed? But why? To elaborate, had Mordecai been saying that Esther's assistance was crucial, that without it, the Jews would be lost, one could perhaps argue that if Esther were to withhold this crucial assistance, she would be culpable in a grand way. But that's not what he's telling her. He says the opposite: Esther is not crucial after all; one way or the other, the Jews will be saved. Why, then, should Esther's recalcitrance doom her to destruction?

Here's another way of looking at it: Let's say Esther stuck by her refusal to go to the king. It was just too dangerous, and she wouldn't be persuaded to do it. What's the worst you could possibly say of her?

If you wanted to be harsh, the worst you could accuse her of would be cowardice. By not going to the king, Esther would be exhibiting a failure of nerve; she would be acting without courage.

Now, let's talk about this. Since when, exactly, does one deserve to die for being a coward? As it happens, the Torah displays a remarkable tolerance for cowards: before going out to war, a priest would address the soldiers leaving for battle and urge anyone who felt fearful to leave the front and go home (Deut. 20:8). No one killed them because they were scared. On what grounds, then, could Mordecai threaten Esther with destruction for the mere crime of acting to safeguard her own life? And it's all the more inexplicable, given Mordecai's contention that Esther's actions are not crucial, that even without her, salvation would come to the Jews from another place.

PLUNDER NOT TAKEN

There's another difficulty we can raise concerning Mordecai's behavior, one that may seem trivial, but is worth studying: Mordecai propounds a royal decree that gives the Jews the right to defend themselves. Before we look at this issue, though, we need a little background information.

Throughout the history of warfare, it was the practice of victorious armies to plunder the possessions of their enemies. As the saying goes, "To the victor go the spoils." As a matter of fact, even modern battle plans have relied upon looting an enemy's resources while one advances, in order to supply one's army with needed food and fuel. During Hitler's offensive in the Ardennes, for example, the Germans' war plan depended upon the capture of enemy fuel depots to supply their own troops. In our story, however, the Jews buck this trend. More than once, the Megilla goes out of its way to tell us that the Jews took no plunder during their battles with those who would have killed them (see, e.g., Est. 9:10).

Now why did the Jews eschew what was "rightfully" theirs – the possessions belonging to their vanquished enemies? For a very good reason, as it happens, a reason with its genesis in the dawn of Jewish history. Haman, according to the Megilla, was a descendant of Agag, a king of Amalek who lived in the time of Israel's first king, Saul. The Five Books of Moses speak of the Amalekite nation and declare that the Jewish people will do battle against Amalek from one generation to another (Ex. 17:16). The war of Purim, then, seen in its broadest historical context, was just the latest iteration of this age-old war. And if you pay attention to the biblical rules governing war against Amalek, you know that there's one cardinal principle: there is to be no taking of spoils.

That principle comes through loud and clear in the book of Samuel. Centuries before Purim, King Saul was instructed by God to wipe out Amalek completely and to kill its king, Agag. Even their sheep and cattle were to be destroyed (I Sam. 15). Saul, however, failed to follow God's command. He allowed the people to take property from Amalek, and he did not kill Agag. Because of his failure, Amalek lived to fight another day. Later in history, when the Jews were exiled from their native land and found themselves under the sway of the Persian Empire, a notorious descendant of King Agag threatened them. Haman rose to power, and the Jews once again had Amalek to contend with. It makes sense, then, that in this battle against the forces of Haman, the Jews would be punctilious, and avoid taking any spoils of war. Keenly aware of Saul's folly, they were not going to make the same mistake twice. So the Megilla tells us over and over again that when the Jews vanquished their enemies in the time of Purim, no one took any spoils of war.

Yet something happens in Shushan that seems to "spoil" all of this. If you look carefully at the end of the Megilla, you will find that when Mordecai signs the royal decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves, he specifically writes that the Jews are authorized, even encouraged, to plunder their enemies' possessions:

> And [Mordecai] wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's ring… that the king had given to the Jews who are in every city [the right] to assemble and to protect themselves… and to take their enemies' spoils for plunder. (Est. 8:10–11)

Why would Mordecai do this? He, more than anyone, should know that this is a war against Amalek, that in this war the Jews would go to any lengths to avoid taking their enemies' possessions. And in fact, the Jews ignore his authorization: they don't take any spoils at all. Why, then, does Mordecai go out of his way to authorize the very thing he knows the Jews won't do?

We've taken a look at Mordecai and Esther and found many of their words and deeds puzzling. But it's not just the good guys whose actions seem inexplicable. The bad guys are just as hard to figure out.

A CURIOUS CALUMNY

Let's start with Haman, the archvillain of the story. He has decided to wage a pogrom against the Jews unprecedented in size and scope. He aims to wipe them out once and for all on a single day. In order to do this, though, he needs the consent of the king. So he goes before Ahasuerus to make his request.

Now, before we look closely at what he says, let's just take a moment to contemplate what we might have said had we been in Haman's position. What calumny could you dredge up against the Jews, what charge could you level against them that would be the most likely to incite the king's wrath and allow you to proceed with your murderous plot?

I can think of a lot of things Haman could've said: the Jews poison the wells, they bake the blood of Persian children into their matzos on Passover – you name it. Haman certainly doesn't feel constrained by the truth. As it happens, Haman says three things,

but at least two of them seem entirely beside the point. Here are his complaints:

> The Jews are scattered throughout the Persian Empire.
> They observe their own laws, making them different from other nations.
> They don't keep the king's laws.

Now, why on earth does he bother with all this? If I were Haman, I would have dropped the first two points and mentioned only the third. It's the only one that seems likely to get the king's attention, the only one he's likely to care about.

Think about it: In his third complaint, Haman is basically arguing that the Jews are criminals, which is a logical approach; if the Jews are indeed criminals, if they don't keep the laws of the realm, then you could certainly argue that they deserve to be done away with. But who cares where, geographically, the Jews are? And who cares if the Jews observe a set of laws that distinguish them from other peoples in the kingdom? In all probability, the same could be said for every one of the king's 127 provinces. They *all* likely observed certain laws and customs that distinguished them from others. In all likelihood, the conquered people of India had different zoning laws than the people of Ethiopia – but is that grounds to do away with one or the other in a frenzied, state-sponsored bloodbath?[1]

1. One might make the argument that Haman was trying to depict the Jews as a kind of cancer on the body of Persia; in pointing out that they were scattered throughout the kingdom, then, he was raising the possibility that they were an insidious, constant presence that could somehow infect the entire realm with their lawlessness. The problem with this theory is that Haman's second charge – that the Jews "keep their own laws" – would seem to undercut his central argument. The Jews' observing their own laws, their insistence on being different, on maintaining their distinctiveness by allegiance to their own code, would tend to set them apart from everyone else and keep them separate. It would make the Jews less likely to insinuate themselves into

The more you think about it, the stranger Haman's choice seems: Why did he include those first two statements? They wouldn't seem to be the most potent, most damning things one could plausibly make up about these Jews. Presumably, though, Haman is not being foolish. He has a plan. He knows the king well, and the charges he is making are likely those that give him the greatest advantage. Our task is to figure out what he knew that we don't.

A QUEEN FOR ALL TO SEE

Finally, let's turn our gaze to King Ahasuerus. Many readers of the Megilla perceive Ahasuerus as a naïve, foolish ruler – and something of a boor, to boot. This perception arises, in part, from one of the very first scenes in the Megilla: the king seems to make an impetuous decision regarding his queen, Vashti. Ahasuerus, the Megilla tells us, has arranged for 180 of feasting and merrymaking in his capital city, Shushan, at the culmination of which he orders Vashti to be brought before the throngs and multitudes. According to the text, this is what he had in mind:

> He asked to have Vashti the queen brought before the king…to show off her beauty to the nations and princes – for indeed, she was very beautiful. (Est. 1:11)

Now what, exactly, was the king thinking? True, there's nothing surprising about a man taking pride in the beauty of his wife. And yes, a man at a party might delight in the stares his wife provokes from other men. But this is usually something that happens covertly, behind the scenes. Putting one's wife on display and inviting other

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host cultures or to spread their culture to other peoples. If Haman's argument was that the Jews would "infect" everyone else, then why bring up the fact that they kept to their own laws?

men to marvel at her is just plain gauche, embarrassing not just for the poor woman at the center of attention, but for all the men in attendance, too. It's not a very royal, refined thing to do.

So why did Ahasuerus do it? Maybe he wasn't a very refined person. Maybe he was drunk. That's certainly possible, but I'd like to suggest an alternative. Perhaps there was a method to his madness. Perhaps if we take the time to understand things from Ahasuerus's point of view, we may well find that the king's course of action was not all that irrational.

If we can unravel this little mystery concerning the king and Vashti, we will gain valuable insight into many of the other conundrums we've pondered. We will begin to understand why Esther waited so long to make her plea, why she threw herself at the king's feet exactly when she did, why Mordecai's grandeur is such an essential part of the story – and why the Megilla lasts so long.

Let's take a stab at it.