

Esther  
POWER, FATE, AND FRAGILITY IN EXILE





Erica Brown

ESTHER  
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AND FRAGILITY IN EXILE

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*Esther*  
*Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile*

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We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.*

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Jerusalem, Israel  
Cleveland, Ohio USA*



*To Manette and Louis Mayberg  
"The righteous guide their friends..."  
(Proverbs 12:26)*

*Thank you for your  
guidance and friendship.*



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## *Preface*

**T**he Book of Esther, and its millennia of commentary, invites us to consider Jewish life in the diaspora as a tug-of-war between power and powerlessness. It encourages readers, across the globe, even those living in the State of Israel, to consider the tensions between authority and autonomy while exploring key questions of Jewish identity and influence. As such, it has inspired important conversations that I have tried to capture, many as old as the Talmud itself. A key example of an ongoing conversation appears in an obscure tractate in the Talmud. The third-century scholar Rava was troubled that on Purim we do not recite Hallel, a series of psalms of joy normally said on holidays. He used the first verse from Hallel, Psalms 113:1, to offer his explanation: “Give praise, O servants of the Lord.” When the Jews left Egypt, they left slavery and were able to become God’s servants in earnest, Rava believed. This was not true, however, after Purim. “We are still the servants of Ahasuerus,” Rava observed of life in Babylonia, long after Ahasuerus died.<sup>1</sup>

Are those of us in the diaspora today, still, in some way, servants of Ahasuerus? This is the central question of this complex biblical book.

We may read the Book of Esther as an entertaining story, a theological challenge, a discussion of governance, leadership, and gender, or a social commentary on life in the diaspora. There were times when the

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1. Arakhin 10b.

world of commentary around Esther flourished for the simple reason that Esther is the only biblical book to describe an integrated diaspora community under the threat of mass persecution, making it an obvious framework for interpreters to analyze their own historical and political situation within. One scholar goes as far as to say that the holiday itself allows the community of celebrants to experience exile: “Since Judaism’s arena is the arena of history, and exile is an aspect of Jewish existence, Judaism must deal with it. Exile must be grasped existentially. Purim does that. It is the enacting of exile.”<sup>2</sup>

To consider the enormity of exile’s weight, we will approach the Book of Esther from many different perspectives. The Bible scholar David Clines observes that because the Hebrew Bible is such a rich text, those who write on it should favor biblical interpretation that is “poly-commentary, multi-voiced, indeterminate, divergent, suggestive and limitless.”<sup>3</sup> All interpretation relies on making the text central and foundational whether the commentary is spiritual, intellectual, philological, archaeological, or historical. To understand and celebrate a text, we must invite many different readers and readings, each offering us a way of viewing the same lines through completely different lenses. In the pages ahead, you will find a medley of ancient and medieval commentaries sitting side by side with modern scholarship, punctuated by snippets on culture and whimsy: the mention of a painting, a stanza of a poem, the observation of a novelist. Some see Esther as a search for God in an unlikely place, while others regard it as a comedic farce. It is a story about peoplehood, a leadership manual that continues to instruct, a text that challenges its readers to step into the unknown and change reality for the good. We will explore these polymorphic voices from a posture of curiosity.

The Book of Esther asks its celebrants to turn the world upside down because that is what can be expected in exile: the unpredictable, the surprise turn, the change in fate. If Purim is a holiday to examine

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2. Monford Harris, “Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order,” *Judaism* 26 (1977): 167.
  3. David J. A. Clines, “Esther and the Future of the Commentary,” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 21.

exile, then Esther is its textbook and our guide. The punctures of divine providence throughout its ten chapters make it a story of simplicity wrapped in layers of mystery, as the author Dennis Covington observed, “Mystery...is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend.”<sup>4</sup>

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4. Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 203–4.



# Introduction

*Esther: An Overview*

*Satire, Drama, Fiction, History, or Theology?*

*Esther as Social Commentary*



# Esther: An Overview

**T**he Book of Esther is much beloved in the biblical canon. It is a story of suspense and intrigue, royalty and beauty, great heroes and terrible villains. It has inspired countless plays, theatrical productions, and princess costumes. Beyond its cultural impact, the book ostensibly presents a radical proposition: Jews can be successful in the diaspora. In contrast to the prophet Jeremiah, who conceded that life outside the homeland must continue for the sake of survival and continuity, Esther represents the opportunity for Jewish strength and influence in exile. Jeremiah wanted his exiles to remain productive but hardly expected diasporic communities to thrive. He told those in his charge to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit.” He advised Jews to marry and seek the welfare of their host government (Jer. 29).

The Book of Esther, however, offers a vision of Jewish power in exile and a promise of more than just basic sustenance. Aaron Koller notes in *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* that when the events of the book took place, “not a person alive remembered a time when the Persians were not in control. As the reality became less traumatic and more ‘normal,’ the theological challenge it presented became more difficult.”<sup>1</sup> The normalization of an exilic state softened the theological blow. This

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1. Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.

## Introduction

new reality did not come without accompanying difficulties, spoken and unspoken, yet the Book of Esther presents an unapologetic narrative of Jewish pride in a land not their own. The Jews, like Esther herself, perceive themselves as a chosen people who find themselves in harm's way. They strategize for survival and, in so doing, create a platform for lasting impact. While this is the story the book tells, there is a deeper truth behind the carefully constructed façade of success; namely, success does not persist; sometimes it lasts for decades. Sometimes it lasts for centuries. It will not last forever. The fortunes of Jews living without true autonomy, independence, and self-governance can change instantly, as they so often have.

Adam Kirsch reminds us that the double bind of Esther has been true throughout history: “When the Jews are powerless, they are prey to the murderousness of their enemies, but if an individual Jew becomes powerful enough to defend his people, the fact of Jewish solidarity is another proof of dangerous Jewish difference.”<sup>2</sup> It seems that there is no winning strategy for diasporic success. Nevertheless, as the events of the book unfold, Esther and Mordecai act with the understanding that they are living in a momentous epoch, a time worthy of record.

### Who Wrote the Book of Esther?

“Mordecai recorded these events...” (Est. 9:20). Events are written down for a variety of reasons: to inform, to expose, to chastise, to record, to unify. When Mordecai recorded the dramatic events of the book, it seems most likely that some clarification was necessary following the unexpected victory in Shushan and beyond. The confusion of decrees and their reversals, and the fact that much took place in the royal palace away from the public eye, meant that Mordecai had to explain the decree against the Jews, its revocation, the role Haman played, and the battle and victory that ensued.

Mordecai knew he needed to record these events immediately; for those in Shushan, those across the empire, and those far beyond in both place and time. Rashi suggests that what Mordecai actually wrote

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2. Adam Kirsch, *The People and the Books* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 44.



was not a brief letter to be delivered to all in the kingdom, but the Book of Esther as we know it today.<sup>3</sup> The Jews had a story for themselves and for posterity, and needed to tell it in their own way (although as the Book of Esther ends, we learn that its central characters and events were also recorded in the annals of Media and Persia).

Yet, nine verses after being told Mordecai recorded the events, we are puzzled. The text reads: “Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew” (Est. 9:29). Ibn Ezra steps in to clarify: Mordecai wrote the story, and a year later Esther confirmed the observance of Purim for eternity. One told the tale, and the other cemented the celebration.

The Talmud credits the writing of the book to the Men of the Great Assembly, a kind of group project, likely written at a distance from the story’s actual time and place.<sup>4</sup> Modern Bible scholars are less sure who wrote Esther.<sup>5</sup> One of the difficulties of dating the book lies in identifying Ahasuerus in history. In the Septuagint version of Esther, Ahasuerus is referred to as Artaxerxes. Others believe he is the Persian king Xerxes, and the Hebraicized version of his name took us to Ahasuerus.<sup>6</sup> In the Talmud, we also have confusion around this central character: “Darius, Cyrus and Artaxerxes were all one: he was called Cyrus

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3. Rashi on Est. 9:20.

4. Bava Batra 15a.

5. Michael V. Fox, along with many other scholars, dates the book to the Hellenistic period without hazarding a guess at actual authorship. The Greek translation of the book was brought to Egypt in 73 BCE, and he notes, “There is nothing to allow a more precise dating” (*Esther: Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001], 139). For more on Esther’s historicity and the date of its composition, but not its likely author, see Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 23–27.

6. Leonard J. Greenspoon suggests in his curiously titled article, “From Maidens and Chamberlains to Harems and Hot Tubs: Five Hundred Years of Esther in English,” that the common use of Xerxes in Esther translations follows Herodotus’ labeling, despite its phonetic distance from a more simple transliteration: “Translations that use this name instead of one or another form of the Semitic are engaging in the process of substituting a more familiar name or term for the less well known” (in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, 227).

## Introduction

because he was a worthy king; Artaxerxes after his realm; while Darius was his own name.”<sup>7</sup> To minimize the confusion of names, the Talmud smooths out the problem by suggesting the names are descriptors, honorifics, or personal names. Tamar Gindin, a professor of ancient Persia and modern Iran at the Hebrew University, resolves the naming discrepancy: “In my opinion, the simplest solution for the discrepancy between the king’s names in the different versions is that the translators had different versions before them, and because they had no prior knowledge of Old Persian, Persian phonology and contact linguistics, the name Ahasuerus sounded to them more similar to *Artaxerxes* or *Ardeshir* than *Xerxes* or *Khashayar*.”<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of the book’s authorship and dating, we are sure that its writer had a keen sense of irony, humor, and literary skill. The author of Esther could create a mood, heighten suspense, and deliver profound messaging through a relatively simple tale. The Book of Esther reveals the hand of a deeply religious scribe with a keen understanding of realpolitik. The author wove a layered story of intrigue that mined the depths of what a diasporic culture could look like at its most fragile and its most commanding. Thus, it does not surprise us to find a talmudic discussion crediting Esther’s author with the divine inspiration to produce a master work to be read for centuries, if not millennia:

R. Eliezer says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, “And Haman said in his heart.” R. Akiva says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, “And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who looked upon her.” R. Meir says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, “And the thing became known to Mordecai.” R. Yose b. Durmaskit said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, “But on the spoil they laid not their hands.”<sup>9</sup>

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7. Rosh HaShana 3b.

8. Tamar E. Gindin, *The Book of Esther Unmasked* (Los Angeles: Zeresh Books, 2015), 29–30.

9. Megilla 7a.

In this fascinating discussion, each scholar agrees that divine inspiration created the book but disagrees about the verse that most evidently reveals that inspiration, connecting the source to comments about different characters. If “Haman said in his heart,” but not aloud, an author must have known what Haman was really thinking. If Esther had a sense of grace that could be understood as divine favor, then perhaps she was given the inspiration for the composition. As evident by Mordecai’s ability to stop the killing of the king, he clearly knew matters concealed from others; perhaps he authored the book. Or maybe God wrote it, endowing this book with the sacred properties generally reserved for the Pentateuch alone. After all, someone knew the enemy’s heart, the heroine’s grace, and the hero’s intuition.

Even though God’s name never appears in the book, and the accompanying holiday was a human, not biblical, construct, the Talmud gives Esther a rabbinic seal of approval, stating: “Reading the scroll of Esther is derived from a verse: ‘The Jews confirmed, and they took upon themselves’ (Est. 9:27). They confirmed above, and they took it upon themselves below.”<sup>10</sup> Jews looked above, in the direction of heaven, received divine confirmation that their unexpected political and military triumph should be marked for the ages, and observed Purim as a staple of the Jewish holiday calendar. The reading of the scroll became a ritual centerpiece. Yet the popularity of Esther far exceeds its annual festivities. It is so central to the biblical canon that Maimonides, basing himself on rabbinic dictum, codified in law that Esther will continue to be read in the messianic era, even when other biblical books will fade in significance.

All the books of the prophets and all the writings will no longer be valid in the days of the Messiah except for the scroll of Esther. It will remain together with the Pentateuch and the Oral Torah, which will never lose their validity. Even though all memory of troubles will be forgotten, as Isaiah states, “All former troubles will be forgotten; they will be hidden from my eyes” (65:16), the days of Purim will remain, as it is written in Esther: “These days of

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10. Makkot 23b.

## Introduction

Purim will not pass from the Jews, and their memory will never be forgotten by their descendants” (9:28).<sup>11</sup>

Certain texts are so fundamental to Jewish life that no matter the circumstance, they must be read. Out of all the prophetic works and later scriptures, only Esther will remain. Maimonides, living in Egypt at the time, and the sages in Babylonia before him, understood that Jews would always occupy a place outside the Land of Israel and would need the vision of hope the Book of Esther provided.

Maimonides points to a future for the scroll. He also offers a robust present when discussing how it is to be read annually. The text requires attentiveness, even a fierce vigilance when chanted. Almost nothing else matters when it is time to read the *Megilla*. Maimonides opens his legal discussion of Purim with this very thought:

It is a positive commandment ordained by the Sages to read the scroll at the appointed time. It is well known that this was ordained by the prophets. Everyone is obligated in this reading: men, women, converts, and freed servants. Children should also be trained to read it. Even the priests should pause in their service in the Temple and come to hear the reading of the scroll. Similarly, Torah study should be postponed to hear the reading of the scroll. This applies to all other commandments in the Torah: the observance of all of them is superseded by the reading of the

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11. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megilla VeHanukka* 2:18. Maimonides bases his view on a passage in the first chapter of the Y. Megilla: “R. Yoḥanan said the books of the prophets and the writings will be invalid in the future, but the five biblical books will remain as they are written forever, as it says: ‘A mighty sound that does not end’ (Deut. 5:19). Reish Lakish added that the scroll of Esther and the laws will also remain. ‘It is written here: “A mighty sound that does not end,” and there it is written: “These days of Purim will not pass from the Jews and their memory will never be forgotten by their descendants” (Est. 9:28).’” The Ravad, ad loc., vociferously objected to this statement: “These are the words of a non-scholar: no biblical text will be removed from the canon; every work has something to teach. What was said was that even if other writings would no longer be read publicly, the scroll of Esther will continue to be read in public.”

scroll. There is nothing that takes priority over the reading of the scroll except the burial of a corpse that has no one to attend to it. A person who encounters a corpse should bury it and then read the scroll.<sup>12</sup>

To demonstrate the priority that Esther is given, all commandments are put aside when the story is read liturgically except in one urgent case that demands human dignity: the burial of an unattended corpse. Otherwise, we must listen to the scroll with rapt attention. Individuals of every age and status – from priest to servant – even those engaged in the holy occupations of study or performing other commandments, must drop everything for Esther. Nothing else matters but this story. Its message transcends time and place and will do so for eternity.

This intense emphasis on the preservation of one biblical book above most others begs the question: Why Esther? What is it about this story that makes it supersede in urgency narratives of the conquest of the Land of Israel, the appointment of judges and kings, the diatribes of our greatest prophets, such that it demands the undivided attention of all possible listeners?

This question can be answered in one of two ways. First, we must read the Book of Esther because its happy ending foreshadows all future Jewish redemption. It signals hope in the face of the impossible, which has come to characterize Jewish history; our hope encompasses everything from the providential and enduring belief that “relief and deliverance” will always be forthcoming for the people of Israel to faith in the coming Messiah. In preventing disaster, Mordecai and Esther give their fellow Jews the agency, courage, and optimism to stand up for the values they hold dear, even if all fate is ultimately divinely construed. It holds this hope because the Book of Esther is a magical story of good versus evil, of ostentatious power and wealth versus immense national vulnerability. It contains action and suspense, even if you’ve read the

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12. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Megilla VeHanukka* 1:1. He may have based this reading on a passage in Arakhin 4a that states that even priests and Levites in the midst of active service must suspend their activities to hear the *Megilla*.

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story dozens of times. The drama lies not in the outcomes we already know, but in the knowledge that these outcomes are terribly unlikely to be repeated in the future. This reversal of fortune sings with an evergreen message of optimism. We read the Book of Esther not only because of its happy ending but because Jewish readers throughout history have always needed happy endings, waited for them, and often been denied them. Finding one at the end of this book allows readers to hope for their own happy ending. There is solace in these pages.

The book's ten chapters certainly impart these worthy messages, but Esther is not the only biblical book to do so. One might argue that Maimonides insists on the book's supremacy because it is the most dramatic showcase of divine and human miracle making, but with so many wondrous, incredulous events dotting biblical pages, this is not an easy or obvious case to make.

Our second answer suggests reading the *Megilla* for the very opposite reason. It is not the happy ending that should drive its readership, but rather the cautionary warning: believing in such happy endings is natural but may eventually prove disastrous. The glimpse of momentary victory in the scroll is not part of a continuous narrative of success in exile, a narrative which has long held false hope. The "victory" in Esther is a mere historical blip, no more than a lukewarm bath of self-importance in exile. One glamorous victory and two royal robes was not enough to secure Jewish status when the Jews remained politically and spiritually dependent on the good graces of others.

The Book of Esther presents the move from exile to diaspora, from the painful loss of homeland to the eventual adjustment of Jews to their foreign surroundings and a desire to be successful on terms not their own.

Timothy Beal reads Esther as

...a literature of identity crisis, brought about initially by exile and dispersion, and accentuated by an identity politics that frames this scattered people as the one problematic divergence, and then explores the possibilities of transformation produced by that crisis. Jewish identity in the diaspora is displaced, as Judah has

been carried away, ungrounded, dispersed, and to some degree alienated from a God who remains, at best, hidden.<sup>13</sup>

Solomon Goiten has argued that Esther is the only authentic book about Jews in exile, not because of the absence of God, but because there is no mention of, or interest in, the Land of Israel at all.<sup>14</sup> This feature, more than any other, makes this book distinctive in the biblical canon. While we have other Jewish courtiers who served or lived in foreign households – like Joseph, Moses, and Daniel – their positions were more temporal than the situation described in Esther. In that sense, the book offers us a guide for success when political autonomy and self-government are no longer options. “The author sees the Jews’ fate as depending on its leading individuals, whose lives both epitomize and entail the nations’ fortunes. Just as a danger to highly placed individuals imperils the people, so does the leaders’ personal success entail the people’s welfare.”<sup>15</sup> This assumes, of course, that a foreign potentate will identify a wise, heroic Jew who can curry favor with the powerful and secure positive outcomes for his or her people.

Esther is not alone in this objective. Sidnie White demonstrates that heroes of biblical diaspora stories understood how to live in two worlds and master each successfully.<sup>16</sup> Granted, this is no insurance policy, but a wise leader who can masterfully steer dual commitments as a representative in government is surely a help. Beauty cannot hurt either. While these points seem evident enough, they are not sufficient to describe what takes place on Esther’s pages.

Timothy Laniak puts forward a compelling argument in his overview of Esther. He contends that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple occasioned “an identity crisis of unprecedented proportions”

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13. Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 120.

14. Solomon Goitein, “Megillat Esther,” in *Iyunim BaMikra* (Tel Aviv, 1957), 59–72.

15. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 229.

16. Sidnie White, “Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 161–77.

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for those living in Judea. It deeply unsettled what Jewish life looked like, with its central institution in its most holy city gone. Whereas other biblical figures mourned their losses and continued to define themselves through these critical touchstones, Esther presented a viable, even attractive, alternative:

Esther seemingly moves away from the traditional paradigms in unexpected and even disturbing ways. In Esther, answers to fundamental concerns are not found at the traditional center but out of the precarious periphery. It represents a perspective that qualifies and reframes the hopes of a community in crisis. While others call for a return to Jerusalem, to temple and Torah, and to the lineages of Israel's ancient leaders, Esther moves away from them. Or, at the very least, so it seems. Hope in Esther is found in the Jewish community itself. Esther invites its readers to re-engage a fundamental understanding of the covenant that stands behind their traditions.<sup>17</sup>

In Esther, the Jewish homeland and the Temple altar are supplanted by the Jewish community, what might be called Jewish peoplehood. In the books of Daniel and Nehemiah, Daniel prayed in the direction of Jerusalem at great risk to himself (Dan. 6:9), while Nehemiah requested leave from a Persian court to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:3–5). The God of Ezekiel promises to accompany His people into exile, “though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have become a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone” (Ezek. 11:16). Yet God's presence in exile did not constitute a permanent condition of exile. Ezekiel's dry bones will only come back to life when they return to their homeland: “I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the Land of Israel” (Ezek. 37:12).

By contrast, Esther, Laniak notes, offers no such prayer, makes no such request. “Resolution takes place in Esther not through returning

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17. Timothy S. Laniak, “Esther's ‘Volkcentrism’ and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism,” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, 79.



to Palestine, but by remaining in Persia. Esther risks her life to save the Jews in Persia with no anticipation of anything better or safer at 'home.'<sup>18</sup> Laniak believes that the Book of Esther proposes a way not only to survive "on the edges of our world, at the center of our enemy's universe," but to live a legitimate, prosperous, and purposeful life. The book becomes an affirmation of Jewish existence outside a homeland, helping Jews and gentiles prosper. He goes as far as to suggest that Esther even seems "flagrantly anti-Torah" in that her behaviors reflect none of the religious norms or behaviors of others in the diaspora, and yet she achieves immense success.<sup>19</sup>

Koller compares the Books of Daniel and Esther to suggest a strong dissonance of diasporic orientation: "The book of Daniel takes exile to be a thoroughly lamentable and hopefully brief episode in the history of the Jews. In Esther, on the other hand, diaspora life is simply a reality to be navigated."<sup>20</sup> There is a danger to the longevity, durability, and stability of a people when exile becomes normative.

### **Success or Failure?**

But what if Laniak is profoundly mistaken, and this is not a story of Jewish success but of failure? The Book of Esther may be read as a didactic tale and a warning not to get too comfortable in the diaspora precisely because the miraculous turn of events is too unlikely to count on in the future. Accept it at risk. The Talmud, in a brief story, presents a complex understanding of the residual dangers of Shushan. Two rabbis, the legend goes, drank on Purim to the point of inebriation. In a ridiculous haze, one sage killed the other. Astonished and deeply remorseful, the sage begged God to spare his colleague and bring him back to life. God assented. When the next Purim approached, the once-violent sage once again asked his friend to drink with him on the holiday. But, by now, the

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18. Laniak, "Esther's 'Volkcentrism,'" 80. Levenson makes a similar point in "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976): 440–52.

19. Laniak, "Esther's 'Volkcentrism,'" 83.

20. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 85.

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other rabbi had wisened: “Miracles do not happen every day.”<sup>21</sup> He may have been spared once, but twice would be pushing his luck.

Alcohol in this talmudic passage and in the Book of Esther is symbolic of risk, an apt “sponsoring” beverage of this scroll and a metaphor to be explored in a later chapter. Like Esther’s central villains, alcohol is fluid; it is essentially liquid irrationality and predictable in its unpredictability. Against this fragility, God has a message for those who live under the rule of others: “I am hidden because I Myself cannot watch the dangers you are putting yourselves in. I will not appear every time to catch you when you fall because of your own regrettable decisions.” Instead of praying for her people to be saved in Shushan, where they might one day live peaceably but never with governmental control, Esther should have prayed for a return to Zion and the political self-determination that comes with redemption.

The randomness driving the plot of Esther is itself illustrative of the costs of exile. Exile first makes people deeply and distressingly conscious of their distinctiveness. With that knowledge comes the eventual desire to neutralize that distinctiveness through assimilation. Finally, what emerges are the strategies and mechanisms by which Jews change their identities and maneuver the polarities. This process is neither willful nor obvious. Jews in exile often believe they are protecting their allegiances while adapting in a survivalist mode to their surroundings, not realizing how extensively the contours of their Jewish identity have been reshaped. In his book *The Dawn*, Yoram Hazony explores the trials of an exile psyche that has not yet settled into the “comfort” and replacement mentality of diaspora living:

In exile, the Jews must live in dispersion, their institutions weak, their concerns wandering far from Jewish things, and their politics alienated from every obvious source of cohesiveness, direction and strength. It is clear at the outset that under such conditions there is no possibility of freely seeking and implementing any Jewish ideal.... Thus exile, while never precluding entirely the possibility of Jewish power, nevertheless established a formidable

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21. Megilla 7b.

presumption against it – a presumption which has ominous theological echoes in the fact that even the most devout come to feel that the way has been lost, and begin to speak as though in winter, of God having “hidden his face” from his people.<sup>22</sup>

With Esther emerges not only a new way of living but a new way of being. An exile never forgets where he or she calls home. Yet over time, the exile becomes a resident of the diaspora, adjusting to foreign surroundings until they are not foreign, exchanging dreams of Jewish autonomy and spiritual achievement for external measures of success that soon become normative. By the book’s end, Mordecai, the exile, exchanged his sackcloth and ashes for royal robes and a crown of honor, making it hard to imagine that even with the possibility of return, he would pack his belongings and opt for less ornate new frocks. Influence in the diaspora can make one forget that one is in exile, but the reader must remain wary of the momentous and sudden emergence of Jewish political power in the Book of Esther. Each year we must read its first five chapters and remember that its particularly happy ending was a highly improbable one.

Eliezer Berkovits understood exile as a force deeper than political dependence. He believed that exile and redemption – *galut* and *geula* – are inherent in the Jewish condition. Abraham was the very first exile; God asked him to leave his father’s home and his homeland, founding a place of redemption out of the experience of leaving his place of origin. “Even before there was a Jewish people, there was already Exile and the promise of Redemption.”<sup>23</sup> For Berkovits, national exile accompanies cosmic exile. The latter is derived from God’s plan that the world fulfills its divine purpose. Human beings, with their own desires for power, possession, and domination, deny their divine purpose, becoming at odds with their spiritual reason for existing:

As a result, God’s own purpose finds itself in Exile in the history of mankind. So long as the divine plan remains unrealized in his-

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22. Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings on the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 1995), 3–4.

23. Eliezer Berkovits, “Exile and Redemption,” *Tradition* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1974): 10.

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tory, the history of mankind tells of the story of – what tradition calls – *Galut ha-Shekhinah*, the Exile of the Divine Presence. God Himself is, as it were, a refugee from the world of men.<sup>24</sup>

Given Berkovits's understanding of both national and cosmic exile, we might argue that the Book of Esther offers us a story of national exile but not of cosmic exile; dispersed across Persia's mighty empire, the Jews were unable to fulfill a divine plan and never seem to try. We, therefore, conclude the book not with declarations of Jewish victory, but with two prosaic messages about the Jewish presence after the celebrations end. Taxation returns. Mordecai is well liked by *almost* all of his coreligionists. These are hardly expressions of divine calling. Maximally what can be achieved in exile is meaningful survival, government protection, usefulness to that government, and a measure of popularity for enabling these factors to remain stable. Jewish accomplishment under such conditions is measured by the success of the reigning non-Jewish powers, not by adherence to God's plan.<sup>25</sup>

### A Repeated Story of Identity Loss

This message of fragility does not begin with the Book of Esther. Abraham himself was unsure of his status in Canaan among the kings and ancient potentates he encountered. To protect his life, he hid his marital status on two different occasions, and did not trust the kindness of a powerful stranger when it came to burying his wife. Only after the death of Sarah, lacking a foothold in Canaan, did he utter the ringing words

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24. *Ibid.*, 11.

25. This reading of exile, while descriptive of the Jewish condition for millennia, is potentially symbolic of all the world's disenfranchised peoples. Susan Zaeske reads the Book of Esther as a "rhetoric of exile and empowerment that, for millennia, has notably shaped the discourse of marginalized peoples" including gender, race, and sexual orientation and claims that her reading will "contribute to efforts to move beyond a unitary, male-dominated history of rhetorical theory through the recovery and recognition of a work that does not announce itself as a rhetorical theory, but has operated as such" ("Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33, no. 3 [2000]: 194).

that suggest the vulnerability of being *in* a place but not *of* a place: “I am a resident-alien among you” (Gen. 23:4).

Continuing the theme of geopolitical fragility, Jacob was exploited time after time by Laban, who became, in the Haggada, the very epitome of Pharaoh, the precursor to a crippling power imbalance. When Jacob left his home for Padan-Aram, he found himself trapped in his father-in-law’s home, helpless and isolated. After twenty years of servitude, Jacob finally got the divine push to return to his homeland; he tried, subsequently, to obtain what he thought was rightfully his in a transparent financial arrangement with his father-in-law. But Jacob’s success only irked the man who kept him in invisible chains: “Jacob also saw that Laban’s manner toward him was not as it had been in the past” (Gen. 31:2). Jacob could enjoy his earnings only if they augmented the coffers of Laban but not his own. After leaving in the dark of night with his family and his goods, Jacob finally confronted the man who dogged him for so long, showcasing the fragility of a life consumed by tyranny:

Now Jacob became incensed and took up his grievance with Laban. Jacob spoke up and said to Laban, “What is my crime, what is my guilt that you should pursue me?... These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. Of the twenty years that I spent in your household, I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and again. Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God took notice of my plight and the toil of my hands, and He gave judgment last night.” (Gen. 31:36–42)

God was the only power greater than Laban, the only authority that could force Jacob to leave his terrible situation in exile. Reading Jacob’s cathartic confession, we are struck by his statement of personal integ-

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rity. Trust, too, is another cost of exile. It is only a matter of time before every Jacob faces every Laban, whose “manner toward him was not as it had been in the past.”

To this heartfelt plea for absolution and liberty, Laban is predictably Laban, the prototypical voice of authoritarian voracity against the stranger: “Then Laban spoke up and said to Jacob, ‘The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine’” (Gen. 31:43). Ultimately, outside of his own land and jurisdiction, everything Jacob ever did would only contribute to someone else’s prosperity. In exile, nothing ever truly belongs to the sojourner.

The story continues. Joseph’s powers seemed expansive and unchecked, but his task, like Jacob’s, was economic preservation and restoration of a people not his own. The text makes explicit that Joseph’s successes did not ultimately benefit him or his people, other than ensuring temporal safety. Like everyone else, the Israelites lived under his harsh financial reforms: “Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, as payment for the rations that were being procured, and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s palace” (Gen. 47:14). Joseph brought the money to Pharaoh. “So Joseph gained possession of all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh, every Egyptian having sold his field because the famine was too much for them; thus the land passed over to Pharaoh” (Gen. 47:20). He even brought the land acquisition – in an act that took advantage of starvation – into Pharaoh’s treasury. The ultimate slap in the face occurs only a few chapters later when a newly appointed pharaoh changes the fate of the Jews in Egypt: “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8).

With the passage of time, there will be a new monarch – a new source of power – who cares little for the Jews as a people, valuing them only for personal and national gain. If the Jews are lucky, this precarious state will operate in their favor for a limited time, but permanent security is an illusion. Exiles know this, but residents of a diaspora rarely do, believing themselves to be special and unique.

Esther and Mordecai do manage to secure power in a land not their own, and they must have felt a sense of incredible, unbelievable,

and undeniable achievement. Yet in the face of success, a passage of wisdom literature reminds us – to everything there is a time. “A time for weeping and a time for laughing, a time for wailing and a time for dancing” (Eccl. 3:4). What begins with tears, ends with laughter, and what ends in laughter reverts to tears. The exile moves from worry to wonder. Time passes, and wonder returns to worry.

The Book of Esther’s intricate web of plot twists takes us from the cry of outrage to the outpouring of gratitude, where we like our stories to end. Yet the Book of Esther continues. Mordecai understood this implicitly when he told Esther that she could be part of our master narrative or not. Either way, the story would continue because relief and deliverance were guaranteed to occur in the great cycle of events. What was not guaranteed was the human force that would be responsible for relief and deliverance: “If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Est. 4:14). The operative word here is almost forgettable: “this.” Esther may have been uniquely positioned to avert *this* crisis, but in the long history of Jewish exile, another crisis is always pending. Relief and deliverance will come. Who will partner with God in bringing them is important but ultimately less significant than the fact that they will come.

Living with the knowledge that we will experience redemption also means living with the knowledge that we will experience persecution. The twentieth-century German philosopher Leo Strauss once wrote, “The Jewish people and their fate are the living witness for the absence of redemption. This, one could say, is the meaning of the chosen people; the Jews are chosen to prove the absence of redemption.”<sup>26</sup> This sobering thought requires attention. We like our stories to prove that redemption happens, but so often they are better at proving that we are or were in desperate need of redemption. Esther is the biblical story that perhaps demonstrates this most because it takes place entirely in

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26. From Strauss’ essay, “Why We Remain Jews” (1962), reprinted in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 327.

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the diaspora, where our choices about self-governance were limited, and our ability to act was marked by Mordecai's request for Esther's silence. Yet it is the same Mordecai who tells Esther later that redemption comes through the opposite of silence. We are silent in spaces not our own. We speak, we laugh, and we shout with joy only in places where we feel a sense of ownership. We can be ourselves in a full-throated way. Exile makes us silent. Redemption lets us speak.<sup>27</sup>

### Sequencing the Story

The fragility of fate in exile may explain another law related to the reading of the *Megilla*: it must be read in proper sequence.

When a person reads the *Megilla* in improper sequence, he does not fulfill his obligation. If a person was reading, forgot a verse and read the following verse, went back and read the verse he forgot, and then read a third verse, he does not fulfill his obligation, because he read a verse in improper sequence. What should he do instead? He should begin from the second verse, the verse he forgot, and continue reading the *Megilla* in its proper order.<sup>28</sup>

Sequencing is critical in this story above others because the events are so unexpected. What turned out good could have turned out bad were we to shift verses or chapters only slightly. And unlike a completely happy outcome, what turns out positively for the Jews turns out terribly for those throughout Ahasuerus' enormous empire. The book records, including Haman and his sons, 75,811 deaths directly attributable to the decree against the Jews and its reversal. This toll of life may have provided temporary relief for the Jews but was likely to eventually backfire

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27. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes the relationship of redemption and language in his essay "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah" (*Tradition* 17, no. 2 [1978]), where he notes: "A history-making people is one that leads a speaking, story-telling, communing free existence, while a non-history-making, non-history-involved group leads a non-communing, and therefore a silent, unfree existence" (p. 55). This essay was originally presented at a faculty colloquium sponsored by B'nai Brith at the University of Pennsylvania in May 1973.

28. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Megilla VeHanukka* 2:1.



on the Jewish presence in Persia. Little demonstrates the fragility of the Jewish condition in exile more than this. Even “winning” is precarious.

The Book of Esther, with its uncertainty, chaos, and hope, does offer us the kind of magnificent story that both entertains and challenges while making its readers ponder at how one kind of life can become another. In the words of one Bible scholar,

As the annual reading of the Esther Scroll comes to an end, I breathe a sigh of relief, but this expresses a prayer more than a certitude, for the resolution of the crisis is less believable than its onset. Still, the dramatic intensity of the tale propels us forward from the danger to the deliverance with such momentum that we find ourselves accepting the truth of the latter as well.<sup>29</sup>

Marveling at the outcome, we, too, breathe a sigh of relief each year as the book races to a deliverance that could not come soon enough.

In some way, Esther becomes both embodiment and metaphor for all Jews in exile. Orphaned in a foreign land, Esther found herself achieving the unimaginable, earning the love of the very people from whom she stood apart. Assimilating into the host culture and hiding her own background caused a crisis moment that helped her redefine her purpose. She could save her people only once she embraced her true identity. This identity proved a source of her strength. But the book does not end with her. She is displaced by someone who will have more power: Mordecai. The book records the bringing back of taxation, the local force of government’s demands on its constituents. And then the story is over. As readers, we must ask, “What’s next? Will life in Persia stay this way?”

This commentary is called *The Book of Esther: Power, Fate, and Fragility* because each of these states is represented in every chapter. The holiday’s very name suggests the arbitrary nature of events in life and in the text. The powerful become vulnerable, the vulnerable become powerful. Vashti loses power, while Ahasuerus gains it, until he cedes authority to his ministers. Haman’s power stands in contrast to Morde-

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29. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 12.

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cai's vulnerability before Esther outmaneuvers him. Mordecai wields the power to save Ahasuerus from his plotting courtiers, but is powerless in the face of a decree to annihilate his people. All the characters' lives were impacted by a fate that seemed so random and accidental that we call the events of this book nothing short of miraculous. While God's name never appears explicitly, God's presence is stamped on virtually every word in the *Megilla*. Through a series of unfortunate and fortunate events, fate ensures that no character is absolved of the kind of life reversal that reminds us as readers of the fragility of the human condition. The tensile vulnerability suggests a world in constant flux, where one's ascent represents another's descent and vice versa. It is a world that can be naught but a fragile place.