
ESTHER AND MORDECHAI'S ROLE REVERSAL

Who is the Hero of Purim?



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INTRODUCTION

1. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

Is it the story of Esther alone? Surely it is the story of an entire nation, dispersed throughout Achashverosh's one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, faced with the threat of genocide. The story also involves other main characters, such as Mordechai. Nevertheless, throughout history this book has been known not as "Megillat Ha-Yehudim," nor even "Megillat Mordechai," but rather as "Megillat Esther."

MORDECHAI 1

2. אסתר פרק ב פסוקים ה-ז

(5) A Judean man was in Shushan the castle, and his name was Mordechai, the son of Yair, the son of Shimi, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite, (6) who had been exiled from Jerusalem, with the exiles that had been exiled with Yechonyah, king of Yehuda, whom Nevuchadnetzar, king of Babylonia, had exiled. (7) He raised Hadassah, who is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. And the young woman was shapely and beautiful, and with the death of her father and her mother, Mordechai took her to him as a daughter.

(ה) אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבְּיָרָה וְשֵׁמוֹ מְרַדְכַּי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּרֶשׁמַעֲי בֶן קִישׁ אִישׁ בְּנִימִינִי :
(ו) אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם־הַגְּלוּהָ אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכֹנְיָה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל :
(ז) וַיְהִי אִמּוֹן אֶת־הַדַּסָּה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בְּתֻדּוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעָרָה יִפְתִּי־תָאֵר וְטוֹבֵת מְרָאָה וּבְמוֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחְהָ מְרַדְכַּי לֹו לְבַת :

3. אסתר פרק ב פסוק כ

(20) Esther would not tell of her family and her people, as Mordechai had commanded her. And Esther did Mordechai's bidding as she had when she was raised with him.

(כ) אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מְגַדֶּת מוֹלְדוֹתֶיהָ וְאֶת־עַמָּהּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מְרַדְכַּי וְאֶת־מֵאֲמַר מְרַדְכַּי אֶסְתֵּר עֹשָׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר הִיָּתָה בְּאִמְנָה אִתּוֹ :

4. DAYS OF DELIVERANCE, RAV SOLOVEITCHIK, PAGES 79-80

Mordecai's task had been to watch over Esther and to inspire and influence her. He had been Esther's teacher for many years. He had raised her. Now he became once again a teacher, a prophet, the still, small voice (I Kings 19:12) that comes from within, exhorting, preaching, instructing, and inspiring... The voice of G-d addressed itself through Mordechai. He was bold, aggressive, and initiated action...

ESTHER 1

.5 אסתר פרק ב פסוק ח

(8) When the king's word and his law were heard, and when many young women were gathered to Shushan the castle, to the charge of Hegai, Esther was taken to the king's house, to the charge of Hegai, keeper of the woman.

(ח) וַיְהִי בְּהִשְׁמַע דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ וּבְהַקְבֵּץ נְעוּרוֹת רַבּוֹת אֲלֵשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה אֶלֶיֶד הֶגַי וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶלֶיֶד הֶגַי שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים:

6. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

Who is the Esther who appears on the scene in the second chapter? A beautiful young woman, but one who is powerless and completely lacking in independence of thought or action. She is under Mordechai's patronage; he treats her like a daughter. Even if we adopt the opinion that she was his wife, we are clearly dealing with a woman who lives completely under her husband's rule.

.7 אסתר פרק ב פסוקים טו-טז

(15) And when the turn of Esther, daughter of Avichayil, the uncle of Mordechai, whom he had taken to him as a daughter, came to come to the king, she did not request anything except that which Hegai the king's eunuch, keeper of the women, said. And Esther won favor in the eyes of all who saw her.
 (16) Esther was taken to King Achashverosh, to his royal house, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign.

(טו) וּבְהִגֵּיעַ תֵּרֶאֱסֹתָר בֵּת־אֲבִיחַיִל דָּד מְרֹדֶכַי אֲשֶׁר לָקַח לָוִי לְבָת לְבֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא בִקְשָׁה דָבָר כִּי אִם אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הֶגַי סְרִיס־הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים וַתְּהִי אֶסְתֵּר נִשְׂאֵת חֹן בְּעֵינֵי כָּל־רְאִיָּה:
 (טז) וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֶל־בֵּית מַלְכוּתוֹ בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָעֲשִׂירִי הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ טֵבֵת בְּשָׁנַת־שִׁבְעַ לְמַלְכוּתוֹ:

.8 אסתר פרק ב פסוק כ

(20) Esther would not tell of her family and her people, as Mordechai had commanded her. And Esther did Mordechai's bidding as she had when she was raised with him.

(כ) אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מְגַדֶּת מוֹלְדוֹתֶיהָ וְאֶת־עַמָּהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מְרֹדֶכַי וְאֶת־מִצְוַת מְרֹדֶכַי אֶסְתֵּר עָשָׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר הִיְתָה בְּאִמְנָה אִתּוֹ:

ESTHER 2

9. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

A glance further on reveals how this innocent maiden suddenly displays initiative that we never would have expected of her. She takes on Achashverosh and Haman at their own game; she

displays cunning, leading both of them by the nose. She leads Haman into a trap, simultaneously arousing the anger and desire of Achashverosh. Together with her personal initiative, her inner, spiritual, national and moral identities also come to full expression...

From here onwards, Esther not only displays initiative in the sphere of political manipulation, but, brimming with self-confidence, she faces up to Haman. Here Esther takes her place as a worthy member of the royalty, a leader. Her leadership is so outstanding towards the end of the *Megilla* that to some degree it overshadows that of Mordechai...

10. אסתר פרק ט פסוק יג

<p>(13) Esther said, "If it pleases the king, let it be permitted for the Judeans in Shushan to do also tomorrow according to the law of today, and let them hang the ten sons of Haman on the post.</p>	<p>(יג) וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אֶסְתֵּר אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִנְתֶּן גַּם־מָחָר לַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׂוֹשָׁן לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת עֲשָׂרֵת בְּנֵי־הָמָן יִתְלוּ עַל־הַעֲצֵץ:</p>
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11. אסתר פרק ט פסוק כט

<p>(29) Queen Esther, the daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Judean wrote with all their powers to establish this second epistle of Purim.</p>	<p>(כט) וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בְּתֹאבֵיחַיִל וּמֵרַדְכָּי הַיְהוּדִי אֶת־כָּל־תְּקוּף לְקַלֵּם אֶת אַגְרֵת הַפּוּרִים הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁנִיית:</p>
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12. אסתר פרק ט פסוק לב

<p>(32) And Esther's bidding established these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.</p>	<p>(לב) וּמֵאִמֶּר אֶסְתֵּר קִלְּם דְּבַרְי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְתָּב בַּסֵּפֶר:</p>
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13. תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ז עמוד א

אמר רב שמואל בר יהודה: שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: קבעוני לדורות...

14. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

Once upon a time, "whatever Mordechai said, Esther would do." He was the one pulling the strings. Suddenly, Mordechai's own achievements come only in the wake of Esther's initiative. How does Mordechai come to possess Haman's home? Through Esther. Who writes the *Megilla*? While Mordechai is still equivocating, "Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote" (9:29), and only afterwards did Mordechai join her.

Now it is Esther who is prepared not only to stand before Achashverosh, but also to send a letter to the Sages and demand, "Write me down! Remember me for all generations!" Is this really the same innocent maiden who "did what Mordechai told her," and "whatever she was told by Hegai, the king's officer, appointed over the women?"

ESTHER'S TRANSITION

15. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

...Esther, who indeed has the power to avert the evil decree, who lives in the royal palace, who can pull the necessary strings, does nothing. She thinks to herself, "The decree has been issued—what can I do? I'm a young and simple girl; I can't move mountains."

.16 אסתר פרק ד פסוק ד

(4) Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her; and the queen was very anguished. She sent garments to clothe Mordechai and to remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them.

(ד) ותבואינה ותבואנה נערות אסתר וסריסיה ויגידו לה ותתחלחל המלכה מאד ותשלח בגדים להלביש את מרדכי ולהסיר שקו מעליו ולא קבל:

17. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

What eventually drives her to act? Mordechai disturbs her complacency. The entire nation of Israel faces mortal danger, and this she is able to bear. But then she hears that her beloved adoptive father Mordechai has removed his regular clothing and is wearing sackcloth instead. ... Instead of trying to have the royal decree annulled, instead of expressing solidarity with her people, instead of joining Mordechai in protest and mourning, she begs him to stop this nonsense, to accept the decree as it is, and to put on some decent clothing. Despite everything, this still represents progress. She no longer is completely inactive...

.18 אסתר פרק ד פסוקים ז-ח

(7) Mordechai told him about all that had happened to him, and the account of the silver that Haman had said to weigh to the king's treasuries for the annihilation of the Judeans. (8) And he gave him the copy of the text of the law that was given in Shushan for their destruction, to show it to Esther and to tell her, and to command her to go to the king to implore him and to plead before him for her people.

(ז) ויגדלו מרדכי את כל אשר קרהו ואת פרשת הכסף אשר אמר המן לשקול על גנזי המלך ביהודיים ביהודים לאבדם: (ח) ואת פתשגן כתב־הדת אשר נתן בשושן להשמידם נתן לו להראות את אסתר ולהגיד לה ולצוות עליה לבוא אל המלך להתחנן־לו ולבקש מלפניו על־עמה:

.19 אסתר פרק ד פסוק יא

(11) "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that every man or woman who comes to the king, to the inner courtyard, who is not called, there is but one law for him, to be killed; only he to whom the king

(יא) כל־עבדי המלך ועם־מדינות המלך יודעים אשר כל־איש ואשה אשר יבוא אל־המלך אל־החצר הפנימית אשר לא יקרא אחת דתו להמית לבד מאשר

extends his golden scepter will live. And I have not been called to come to the king these thirty days."

יְשִׁיט־לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־שֵׁרְבִיט הַזָּהָב וְחָיָה
וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה
שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם :

20. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

Mordekhai persists in his appeal to her, telling her, in effect: The entire nation of Israel—young and old—is in danger. Everyone. This is the appointed date. Go and do something, in your position as wife in the royal palace: Shout! Appeal! Beg! Pray! All around, swords are being sharpened, ammunition is being stockpiled, but Esther remains unmoved. She tells Mordekhai that she cannot approach the king: it is against palace regulations.

Such was Esther's response even after "the queen was greatly distressed," even after Mordekhai had sent her a copy of the king's decree. Suddenly, Esther might be exposed to personal danger. The entire nation of Israel stands on one side of the scale, and she stands alone on the other. What decides the issue? Obviously, her own problems. If there is a personal interest and a public interest at stake, which is more likely to prevail?

.21 אסתר פרק ד פסוק יג

(13) Mordechai said to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine to yourself that you shall escape in the king's house more than all the Judeans.

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֳּכָי לְהֵשִׁיב אֶל־אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־תְּדַמֶּי
בְּנַפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בַּיַּת־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל־הַיְהוּדִים :

22. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

...He accuses Esther of refusing to go to the king not because she lacks courage, not out of weakness, but rather as a calculated choice: "Let the entire Jewish nation be destroyed. Let them all perish— young and old, men and women. I will remain secure in the royal palace." This is how Mordekhai interprets her response, and this is what he addresses: not weakness, not a lack of courage, but rather what he fears may lie behind everything. Behind the apparent timidity lies *apathy*. If you really cared, if you considered your own soul to be at stake, would you be able to say, "For a whole month I have not been called to the king"? Is this how someone talks when she believes that her nation is in danger? Is this the response of someone who cares... He understands that if one knows the situation, and if one is truly concerned, then no considerations are admissible and no rules are relevant. Rather, one must be prepared for self-sacrifice, taking care that not personal interests but rather national interests will dictate one's plans and actions. "Do not imagine that you will escape in the royal palace from all the Jews!"

23. אסתר פרק ד פסוק יד

<p>(14) For, if you will indeed remain silent at this time, relief and salvation will arise for the Judeans from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if for a time such as this you attained royalty?"</p>	<p>(יד) כִּי אִם־הִחַרְשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת הַנּוֹחַ וְהַצֹּלָה יֵעָמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתְּ וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תִּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעַת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעְתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת :</p>
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24. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

...Someone who avoids any responsibility, who doesn't care, who isn't prepared to risk herself, who sets her personal ambitions over the interests of the nation—is that the person you think will survive? Will she be the one to succeed?... Salvation will come. I don't know how or from where, but it will come! Those who pay heed to sundry considerations and circumstances, the doubters and cowards of many types, those who put themselves first—all of these will perish... Now is zero hour. This is the test.

This is also the turning point. Mordechai directs this terrible accusation at the doubtful, hesitating, fearful Esther, pushing her to the wall and demanding that she stop fabricating excuses and abandon her rationalizations. He demands that she look deep into her soul and see what lies behind her hesitation. She must not try to deceive either Mordechai, herself, or God. If she undertakes such an unflinching appraisal, she will see that what lies behind all her excuses is *apathy*. The excuses fall away; Mordechai rejects, one by one, all of her claims and considerations. Morally laid bare, Esther must make her fateful choice: *Do I care or don't I?*

25. אסתר פרק ד פסוקים טו-טז

<p>(15) Esther said to reply to Mordechai: (16) "Go and assemble all the Judeans who are present in Shushan and fast for me. Do not eat and do not drink for three days, night and day. I and my maids, too, will fast so. And thus I will go to the king, against the law. And if I perish, I perish."</p>	<p>(טו) וּתֹאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהַשִּׁיב אֶל־מַרְדֳּכָי : (טז) לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצְאִים בְּשׁוּשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עִלַי וְאַל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאַל־תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וְיוֹם גַּם־אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּיִם כְּךָ וּבְכֹן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־ כִדָּת וּכְאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי :</p>
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26. BY HIS LIGHT, RAV LICHTENSTEIN

...It is now that the young, passive, powerless Esther faces her moment of truth, and she prevails. She passes the test. It is now that she rises to her full stature and reveals herself—not just in title, but in essence—as a queen... This Esther understands that her fate and destiny are not a private, personal matter, but rather bound up with those of the nation as a whole. And when the danger and the mission are public, then the course of action, too, will of necessity be a public one: "Go and gather all the Jews" (4:16)...

MORDECHAI 2

27. אסתר פרק ד פסוק יז

(17) Mordechai passed, and he did all that Esther had commanded him.

(יז) וַיַּעֲבֵר מֶרְדֵּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר:

28. DAYS OF DELIVERANCE, RAV SOLOVEITCHIK, PAGE 80

...At this juncture, Esther takes over; she is the mistress, Mordecai the follower. She issues orders, gives instructions. Mordechai is the subordinate, submissive and obedient. He performs the errands for her. The very moment Esther said that she was ready to go to the king, ready to face torture and death, the spotlight shifted from him to her...

29. פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק נ

...אמרה לו לך בנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים [שם טז]. ואלו הן, שלשה עשר וארבעה עשר וחמשה עשר בניסן. אמר לה מרדכי והלא יום שלישי יום פסח הוא, אמרה לו אתה ראש לסנהדרין ואתה אומר דבר זה, ואם אין ישראל, למי הפסח. שמע מרדכי את דבריה ועשה כל אשר צויתהו, שנאמר [שם יז] ויעבר מרדכי, מלמד שעבר יום ראשון של פסח בלא אכילה...

30. DAYS OF DELIVERANCE, RAV SOLOVEITCHIK, PAGE 81

If we glance through the Megilah once again, we will notice that there was a disagreement between Mordecai and Esther concerning the proper course of action. Mordechai held the view that immediate, spontaneous action on the part of Esther is inevitable. Esther should appear before the king, taking the risk of being rejected and executed, and plead with him hysterically to spare her people. Esther did not concur with Mordecai. She went to the king. However, all that she did consisted in extending an invitation to the king to attend a banquet in his honor. Not a single word was spoken about the decree, not a single word was mentioned about the tragic fate of her people. Moreover, she ignored the whole issue even at the banquet. She was procrastinating...

31. אסתר פרק ח פסוקים א-ב

(1) On that day, King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the house of Haman, enemy of the Judeans. And Mordechai came before the king because Esther had told him what he was to her. (2) He took off his ring which he had removed from Haman and gave it to Mordechai, and Esther set Mordechai over the house of Haman.

(א) ביום ההוא נתן המלך אֶחָשְׁוֶרוֹשׁ לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה אֶת־בַּיִת הַמֶּן צֶהַר הַיְהוּדִים וּמְרֹדְכָי בָּא לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בִּיהִיגָדָה אֶסְתֵּר מֶה הוּא־לָהּ: (ב) וַיִּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵבִיר מֵהֶמֶן וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְמֶרְדֵּכָי וַתִּשֶׂם אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־מְרֹדְכָי עַל־בַּיִת הַמֶּן: