

Why Didn't Esther Pray?

Three Responses to the (Ir)Religiousness of Megilat Esther

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Fasting but No Praying

1. (אסתר ד:טז) לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתיי אצום כן ובכן אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי:

Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, “Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish”!

2. יונה פרק ג

(ד) ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר מהלך יום אחד ויקרא ויאמר עוד ארבעים יום ויניגה נהפכת:

(ה) ויאמינו אנשי ניגה באלהים ויקראו צום וילבשו שקים מגדולם ועד קטנם:

(ו) ויצע הדבר אל מלך ניגה ויקם מפקאו ויעבר אדרתו מעליו ויכס שק וישב על האפר:

(ז) ויזעק ויאמר בניגה מטעם המלך וגדליו לאמר האדם והבהמה הבקר והצאן אל יטעמו מאומה אל ירעו ומים אל ישתו:

(ח) ויתפסו שקים האדם והבהמה ויקראו אל אלהים בתזקה וישבו איש מדרכו הרעה ומן החמס אשר בכפיהם:

(ט) מי יודע לשוב ונתם האלהים ושב מחרון אפו ולא נאבד:

3. שמואל ב פרק יב פסוק טז

ויבקש דוד את האלהים בעד הנער ויצם דוד צום ויא ולן ושכב ארצה:

4. עזרא פרק ח פסוק כג

ונצומה ונבקשה מאלהינו על זאת ויעתר לנו:

5. נחמיה פרק א פסוק ד

ויהי כשמעי את הדברים האלה ישבתי ואבכה ואתאבלה ימים ואהי צם ומתפלל לפני אלהי השמים:

Where is God?

(אסרת ד:יד) כי אם הקרש תחרישי בעת הזאת רוח והצלה יצמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואת ובית אביה תאבדו ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות:

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.

Response #1: Reject the Megilah

6. Bavli Megilah 7a

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

שלחו לה: קנאה את מעוררת עלינו לבין האומות.

שלחה להם: כבר כתובה אני על דברי הימים למלכי מדי ופרס.

R. Samuel b. Judah said: Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, Commemorate me for future generations. They replied, You will incite the ill will of the nations against us.

She sent back reply: I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia.

רב ורב חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו... שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: כתבוני לדורות. שלחו לה: (משלי כב:כ) הלא כתבתי לך שלישים, שלישים ולא רבעים. עד שמצאו לו מקרא כתוב בתורה (שמות י"ז) כתב זאת זכרון בספר, כתב זאת - מה שכתוב כאן ובמשנה תורה, זכרון - מה שכתוב בנביאים, בספר - מה שכתוב במגילה.

כתנאי: כתב זאת - מה שכתוב כאן, זכרון - מה שכתוב במשנה תורה, בספר - מה שכתוב בנביאים, דברי רבי יהושע. רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: כתב זאת - מה שכתוב כאן ובמשנה תורה, זכרון - מה שכתוב בנביאים, בספר - מה שכתוב במגילה.

אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: אסתר אינה מטמאה את הידים. למימרא דסבר שמואל אסתר לאו ברוח הקודש נאמרה? והאמר שמואל: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה! נאמרה לקרות ולא נאמרה ליכתוב.

Judah said in the name of Samuel; [The scroll] of Esther does not make the hands unclean. Are Rab we to infer from this that Samuel was of opinion that Esther was not composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? How can this be, Seeing that Samuel has said that Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? It was composed to be recited [by heart], but not to be written.

7. Bavli Sanhedrin 100a

לוי בר שמואל ורב הונא בר חייא הוו קא מתקני מטפחות ספרי דבי רב יהודה, כי מטו מגילת אסתר אמרי: הא [מגילת אסתר] לא בעי מטפחת.

אמר להו: כי האי גוונא נמי מיחזי כי אפקירותא.

Levi b. Samuel and R. Huna b. Hiyya were repairing the mantles of the Scrolls of R. Judah's college. On coming to the Scroll of Esther, they remarked, 'O, this Scroll of Esther does not require a mantle.'

Thereupon he reproved them, 'This too savors of irreverence.'

Response #2: Add Prayers Into the Megilah

8. Esther 2:20 (NJPS): "But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had instructed her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai's bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage."

Esther 2:20 (LXX, NRSV): "Esther had not disclosed her country—such were the instructions of Mordecai; but she was to fear God and keep his laws, just as she had done when she was with him. Esther did not change her mode of life."

9. Esther 6:13 (NJPS): His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin."

Esther 6:13 (LXX, NRSV): His friends and his wife said to him, "If Mordecai is of the Jewish people, and you have begun to be humiliated before him, you will surely fall. You will not be able to defend yourself, because the living God is with him."

10. Esther 8:17 (NJPS): "And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them."

Esther 8:17 (LXX, NRSV): "And many of the Gentiles were circumcised and became Jews out of fear of the Jews."

Septuagint Additions

- Addition A: Mordechai's Dream and Discovery of Plol Against King
- Addition B: Haman's Royal Edict
- Addition C: Prayers of Mordechai and Esther
- Addition D: Esther Appears before the King
- Addition E: Mordechai's Royal Edict
- Addition F: Interpretation of Mordechai's Dream

Chiastic Structure of Megillat Esther

A. Introduction – Achashverosh's kingdom

B. Two private feasts – one for the princes of the provinces (180 days), and the other, a special feast for the inhabitants of Shushan (seven days)

C. Esther appears before the king and is chosen as queen

D. Description of Haman's stature: "...King Achashverosh promoted (*gidal*) Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite, and advanced him (*va-yenaseihu*)"

E. Casting of the lot: War on the 13th of Adar

F. Giving the ring to Haman; Haman's letters; Mordekhai rending his clothes; fasting of the Jews

G. Esther's first feast

H. Haman's consultation with his associates

I. THE KING CANNOT SLEEP; EPISODE OF THE HORSE

h. Haman's consultation with his associates

g. Esther's second feast

f. Giving the ring to Mordekhai; Mordekhai's letters; dressing of Mordekhai in royal garments; feast for the Jews

e. War on the 13th of Adar

d. Description of the stature of the Jews and of Mordekhai: "All the princes of the provinces... were favoring (*menase'im*) the Jews... for the man Mordekhai was becoming increasingly powerful (*gadol*)"

c. Esther comes before the king to request an additional day of battle in Shushan

b. Two feasts for the Jews: one for the Jews of all the provinces (14th of Adar), and the other, a special feast for the Jews of Shushan (15th of Adar)

a. Conclusion – Achashverosh's kingdom

11. Addition A: Mordechai's Dream

- 1 In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the Great, on the first day of Nisan, Mordecai ... had a dream. 4 Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake, tumult on the earth!
- 5 Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. 6 At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation.
- 7 It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth! 8 And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish.
- 9 Then **they cried out to God**; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; 10 light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor.
- 11 Mordecai saw in this dream what God had determined to do, and after he awoke he had it on his mind, seeking all day to understand it in every detail.

12. Addition C: Mordechai's Prayer

- 1 Then Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord. 2 He said, "O Lord, Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel..."
- 5 You know all things; you know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman; 6 for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel! 7 But I did this so that I might not set human

glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride...

- 10 Hear my prayer, and have mercy upon your inheritance; turn our mourning into feasting that we may live and sing praise to your name, O Lord; do not destroy the lips of those who praise you.”

13. Addition C: Esther’s Prayer

- 11 And all Israel cried out mightily, for their death was before their eyes.
- 12 Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. 13 She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. 14 She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: ...
- 16 Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised.
- 17 And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies 18 because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord! ...
- 26 You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. 27 You know my necessity—that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. 28 And your servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast or drunk the wine of libations. 29 Your servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord God of Abraham. 30 O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evildoers. And save me from my fear!”

14. Addition D: Esther Appears before the King

- 1 On the third day, when she ended her prayer, she took off the garments in which she had worshiped, and arrayed herself in splendid attire. 2 Then, majestically adorned, after invoking the aid of the all-seeing God and Savior, she took two maids with her; 3 on one she leaned gently for support, 4 while the other followed, carrying her train.
- 5 She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear. 6 When she had gone through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in the full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones. He was most terrifying.
- 7 Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he looked at her in fierce anger. The queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed on the head of the maid who went in front of her. 8 Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself. He comforted her with soothing words, and said to her, 9 “What is it, Esther? I am your husband. Take courage; 10 You shall not die, for our law applies only to our subjects. Come near.”
- 11 Then he raised the golden scepter and touched her neck with it; 12 he embraced her, and said, “Speak to me.” 13 She said to him, “I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. 14 For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace.” 15 And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. 16 Then the king was agitated, and all his servants tried to comfort her.

15. Bavli Megilah 15b

ותעמד בחצר בית המלך הפנימית. אמר רבי לוי: כיון שהגיעה לבית הצלמים - נסתלקה הימנה שכניה, אמרה: (תהלים כ"ב) אלי אלי למה עזבתני, שמא אתה דן על שוגג כמזיד ועל אונס כרצון? או שמא על שקראתיו כלב, שנאמר (תהלים כ"ב) הצילה מחרב נפשי מיד כלב יחידתי. חזרה וקראתו אריה, שנאמר (תהלים כ"ב) הושיעני מפי אריה.

ויהי כראות המלך את אסתר המלכה, אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה מלאכי השרת נזדמנו לה באותה שעה: אחד שהגביה את צוארה, ואחד שמשך חוט של חסד עליה, ואחד שמתח את השרביט. וכמה? - אמר רבי ירמיה: שתי אמות היה והעמידו על שתיים עשרה, ואמרי לה: על שש עשרה, ואמרי לה: על עשרים וארבע. במתניתא תנא: על ששים.

And stood in the inner court of the king's house. R. Levi said: When she reached the chamber of the idols, the Divine Presence left her. She said, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me. Dost thou perchance punish the inadvertent offence like the presumptuous one, or one done under compulsion like one done willingly? Or is it because I called him 'dog', as it says. Deliver my soul from the sword, mine only one from the power of the dog? She straightway retracted and called him lion, as it says. Save me from the lion's mouth.

And it was so when the king saw Esther the queen. R. Johanan said: Three ministering angels were appointed to help her at that moment; one to make her head erect, a second to endow her with charm and a third to stretch the golden sceptre. How much [was it stretched]? — R. Jeremiah said: It was two cubits long and he made it twelve cubits — Some say, sixteen, and some again twenty-four. In a Baraita it was stated, sixty.

16. How Could Esther Sleep with the King?

Bavli Sanhedrin 74b

והא אסתר פרהסיא הואי! - אמר אביי: אסתר קרקע עולם היתה. רבא אמר: הנאת עצמן שאני.

But did not Esther transgress publicly? Abaye answered; Esther was merely natural soil.

Raba said: When they [the persecutors] demand it for their personal pleasure. it is different .

17. Did Esther Keep Shabbat & Kashrut?

Bavli Megila 13a

ואת שבע הנערות וגו' - אמר רבא: שהיתה מונה בהן ימי שבת.

וישנה ואת נערותיה וגו', אמר רב: שהאכילה מאכל יהודי.

ושמואל אמר: שהאכילה קדלי דחזירי (ערוך - דחזירי). ורבי יוחנן אמר: זרעונים, וכן הוא אומר (דניאל א') ויהי המלצר נושא את פתבגם... ונותן להם זרעונים.

And the seven maidens who were meet to be given to her. Raba said: [They were seven so that] she could count the days of the week by them.

And he changed her and her maidens. Rab said: [This means that] he gave her Jewish food to eat.

Samuel, however, said, it means that he gave her chinses of pork

R. Johanan said that he gave her seeds, and so it says, So the steward took away their food and gave them seeds.

18. Why Didn't Mordechai Bow to Haman?

אסתר רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז:ח

מה אמר להם מרדכי למי שאומר לו מדוע אתה עובר את מצות המלך, ר' לוי אמר אמר להם מרדכי משה רבינו הזהיר לנו בתורה (דברים כ"ז) ארור האיש אשר יעשה פסל ומסכה, ורשע זה עושה עצמו עבודת כוכבים, וישעיהו הנביא הזהירנו (ישעיה ב') חדלו לכם מן האדם אשר נשמה באפו כי במה נחשב הוא, ולא עוד אלא שאני איסגנטירין של הקדוש ברוך הוא שכל השבטים נולדו בחוצה לארץ וזקני נולד בארץ ישראל,

אמרין ליה ונימר ליה, מיד ויגידו להמן וגו' אמר לון המן, אמרון ליה זקנו הלא השתחוה לזקני, הדא ה"ד (בראשית ל"ג) ותגשן השפחות וגו' ואחר נגש יוסף ורחל וישתחוו,

היתיב ועדיין לא נולד בנימין, אמרין ליה ה"ד ויגידו להמן.

What did Mordecai say to those who asked him WHY TRANSGRESSEST THOU THE KING'S COMMANDMENTS (III, 3)? R. Levi said: He said to them: 'Our master Moses admonished us in

the Torah saying, Cursed be the man that makes a graven or molten image (Deut. 27, 15); and this wretch sets himself up as a deity. Isaiah the prophet admonished us, Cease ye from man, in whose nostrils is a breath; for how little is he to be accounted! (Isa. 2, 22). What is more, I am the elect of the Holy One, blessed be He, since all the tribes were born outside of the holy land, but my ancestor was born in the Land of Israel.' They said to him, ' Then we shall tell Haman this.' So they went and THEY TOLD HAMAN. etc. Said Haman to them: ' Say to him, " Did not his ancestor prostrate himself before my ancestor, as it says, Then the handmaids came near, they and their children, and they bowed down... and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed down" (Gen. 33, 6 f.)? ' Mordecai replied: ' Benjamin was not yet born.' They reported this to Haman, as it says, AND THEY TOLD HAMAN.

Response 3: Megilah as Veiled Criticism, a Holy Parody

19. Bavli Megilah 13a

רבי נחמיה אומר: הדסה שמה, ולמה נקראת אסתר - שהיו אומות העולם קורים אותה על שום אסתר.
 R. Nehemiah says: Hadassah was her name. Why then was she called Esther? All peoples called her so after Istahar.

20. (אסתר ב:ו) אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם הַגְּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל:

20. Bavli Megilah 12a

והשקות בכלי זהב וכלים מכלים שונים - משונים מיבעי ליה! אמר רבא: יצתה בת קול ואמרה להם: ראשונים כלו מפני כלים ואתם שונים בהם?

And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, the vessels being diverse [shonim] one from another. It should have said, in different vessels? — Raba said: A bath kol went forth and said to them, Your predecessors met their end on account of vessels, and yet you use them again [shonim]?

21. Bavli Megilah 12a

בהראתו את עשר כבוד מלכותו אמר רבי יוסי בר חנינא: מלמד שלבש בגדי כהונה: כתיב הכא (אסתר א:ד) יקר תפארת גדולתו וכתיב התם (שמות כח:ב) לכבוד ולתפארת...

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה? אמר להם: אמרו לו: אתם! - אמרו לו: מפני שנהגו מסעודתו של אותו רשע. - אם כן שבשושן יהרגו, שבכל העולם כולו אל יהרגו! - אמרו לו: אמור אתה! - אמר להם: מפני שהשתחוו לצלם.

When he showed the riches of his glorious [tifereth] kingdom. R. Jose b. Hanina said: This shows that he arrayed himself in priestly robes. It is written here, 'the riches of his glorious [tifereth] kingdom', and it is written elsewhere [in connection with the priestly garments], for splendour and for glory, [tifereth].

R. Simon b. Yohai was asked by his disciples, Why were the enemies of Israel in that generation deserving of extermination? He said to them: Do you answer. They said: Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one. [He said to them]: If so, those in Susa should have been killed, not those in other parts? They then said, Give your answer. He said to them: It was because they bowed down to the image.

22. (אסתר ד:יא) כָּל עֲבָדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹדְעִים אֲשֶׁר כָּל אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל הַחֲצַר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִקְרָא אַחַת דָּתוֹ לְהִמִּית לְבַד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת שְׂרָבִיט הַזֶּהָב וְחָנִּי וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לְבֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה נְשֻׁלָּשִׁים יוֹם:

All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but

one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.

23. (אסתר א:ח) וְהִשְׁתַּיָּה כַּדָּת אֵין אֲנִס

And the rule for the drinking was, “No restrictions”!

24. (א:יג) וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְחַכְמֵי יָדְעֵי הָעֵתִים כִּי כֵן דָּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְפָנָי כָּל יָדְעֵי דַת וְדִין:

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. For it was the royal practice to turn to all who were versed in law and precedent.

25. (אסתר ח:ח) כִּי כָתַב אֲשֶׁר נִקְתָּב בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִחְתָּם בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין לְהַשְׁיֵב:

for an edict that has been written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet may not be revoked

26. Bavli Megillah 14a

רב נחמן אמר: קרייתא זו הלילא

R. Nahman said: The reading of the Megillah is equivalent to Hallel.