



REVEALING THE HIDDEN FOR ALL ETERNITY.

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Mention in the Torah

Where do we hear about Esther in the Torah? [It says in Deuteronomy 31:18:] "And I will hide, really hide my face from them." (Talmud - Chullin 139b)

The Talmud assumes that the Torah must hint to Esther and the Purim story, even though her appearance on the stage of Jewish history did not occur until many centuries later. Yet Esther is so significant a character, and has so much to contribute to our national heritage, that she must be represented somewhere in the Five Books of Moses.

The allusion to Esther in the Torah is a description of hiddenness and despair. As a consequence of the Jewish people distancing themselves from God, God hides His face from them to the point where He is no longer felt in their lives.

Of course, God never actually leaves the Jewish people, but seemingly random and meaningless events make it appear as if He is no longer there.



The Purim story is set in such a time period. En masse, the Jewish people attended Achashverosh's seven-day feast, indulged themselves in the Persian hedonistic culture, and left Judaism behind. In Heaven, a decree is pronounced:

Satan stood before God and told Him [that the Jews sinned at the feast] and said: "Master of the Universe -- until when will you stick to this nation who remove their hearts from you?"... At that time, God said: "Why do I need this nation for whom I have done many miracles. I will obliterate them from existence..." Immediately God said to Satan: "Bring me a scroll and I will write destruction upon it." (Midrash - Esther Rabba 87:13)

The hiddenness is about to begin in earnest. For as is well known, there is no mention of God's name in the Megillah at all.

Esther's Names and Personality

*There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai, the son of Yair... from the tribe of Binyamin... He reared **Hadassah**, she is **Esther**, his uncle's daughter, because she did not have a father or mother. The girl was beautiful of form and appearance, and when her parents died, Mordechai adopted her as his daughter. (Esther 2:5-7)*

Esther first appears with two names: Hadassah and Esther. "Hadas" is a myrtle, as the Talmud (Megillah 13a) explains:

Hadassah: myrtle leaves are sweet smelling, and used as a metaphor to describe righteous people.

Esther: from the root of "hester," hidden, as she kept her words hidden (when she refused to disclose her nationality when chosen as queen). Also, it is similar to the Persian word "estehar" which means moon/crescent, a reference to her beauty; the nations would see her and say she is beautiful like the moon.

These explanations point to Esther's beauty (the sense of sight), fragrance of the myrtle (sense of smell) and the hiddenness associated with her name. Perhaps a theme will present itself where Esther will need to use all her senses to grope her way -- through the maze of hiddenness, to a sense of clarity and light.

Esther is Mordechai's cousin, so she comes from the tribe of Binyamin, the son of Rachel. As such, she shares some traits with Rachel and her various descendants. For one, she is "beautiful of form and appearance," which was also a description of Rachel (Genesis 29:17). Esther is actually considered one of the four "beauties" of the world, according to the Talmud (Megillah 15a).

Esther's silence, or ability to hide a secret, seems to run in the family as well:

Rachel excelled in the art of silence (when keeping from Yaakov the switching of Leah at her wedding). And so did all her descendants hide information: Binyamin knew about the sale of Yosef and did not tell. Shaul: "and the matter of the (coronation to) kingship he did not tell." Esther: "Esther did not tell of her birthplace or her nation." (Midrash - Breishit Rabba 71:5)

Silence, or the ability to keep a secret, is a root trait of Esther, inherited from her ancestor, Rachel, who refused to divulge Leah's secret on her wedding day. This seems to be a skill, or an art, which is not just a result of extreme compassion (as in the case of Rachel), but rather an expression of humility, modesty, and putting oneself aside for a greater cause. When one refuses to reveal private information, it seems s/he is willing to let a higher authority take control of events and not take an active role in changing the course of history.

In Esther's case, it is Mordechai's authority to which she concedes:

She did not tell of her nationality or birthplace, because Mordechai commanded her. Esther continued to do as Mordechai told her, as she had done when under his care. (Esther 2:20)

Modesty, or *tzniut* (concealing, covering up) is also mentioned as a family trait of Esther's:

In the reward of Rachel's tzniut, she merited that Shaul descend from her. And in reward of Shaul's tzniut, he merited that Esther descend from him. (Talmud - Megillah 13b)

We see Esther's personality initially taking shape as a beautiful, righteous, modest, retiring, shy and quiet young girl, who grows up as an orphan in Mordechai's house, allowing him to take charge and submitting to his authority.

She had absolutely no interest in assuming a position of royalty, or of making herself public or obvious in any way:

When Esther's turn arrived... to come to the king, she didn't ask for anything. Whatever Hagai... the guard of the women said, she did, and Esther found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her. (Esther 2: 15)

Esther's approach was the opposite of the other women: They wanted to beautify themselves before the king, but Esther preferred to be looked down upon, so that she could quickly return to the house of Mordechai. (*Menot HaLevi*, Rabbi Shlomo Elkabetz)

Children of Rachel vs. Amalek

It is interesting to note that each time the Jewish people confront Amalek, the archenemy of the Jewish people, the battle is led by a descendant of Rachel's sons Yosef or Binyamin. The first battle -- the Jewish people facing Amalek after leaving Egypt (Exodus 17:9) -- was fought by Yehoshua, the son of Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim, the son of Yosef. The second time was fought by King Shaul, the son of Kish, from the tribe of Binyamin (1-Samuel 15:1-3). And in our story, Esther and Mordechai, from the tribe of Binyamin, confront Haman, the Amalekite.

It seems there is a specific compatibility between the children of Rachel and defeating Amalek, the grandson of Esav.

Rachel was always meant to be Yaakov's wife, as opposed to Leah who was initially destined to marry Esav. As a result, her (Leah's) descendants don't have the necessary strength to be Esav's spiritual nemesis. (Tifferet Zion - Breishit Rabba 73:5)

The Midrash (Tanchuma - Ki Tetze) describes a moral struggle between Esav and the sons of Rachel. Esav can claim against all the tribes that they are no better than he, since they also wronged their brother, by selling him into slavery and conspiring to kill him. Yet this claim doesn't hold water with regard to Yosef (who was sold) and Binyamin (who was not around at the time of the sale).

In general, it seems that the descendents of Yosef and Binyamin are destined to fight and overcome Amalek throughout the generations. Specifically, Mordechai, from the tribe of Binyamin, has a distinct aversion to bowing down to Haman,

while the other Jews rationalized that the danger outweighed any halachic difficulties. As the Midrash (Esther Rabba 87:9) describes:

Mordechai said: "Moshe warned us in the Torah: 'Cursed is the man who makes a statue'... This evil man (Haman) makes himself into an idol! Especially I [should not bow], since I was born in the home of the king (i.e. all the tribes were born outside of Israel, and my ancestor was born in Israel)."

Immediately, this was reported to Haman, who sent back: "Your grandfather Yaakov bowed down to my grandfather [Esav]."

Mordechai answered: "Binyamin was not yet born at that event."

Mordechai claims he had special reason to stand his ground against Haman: He was born in the "palace" -- God's home, the Land of Israel. His only boss can be God Himself. Furthermore, Haman's excuse regarding Yaakov bowing down to Esav years earlier was not applicable to Mordechai, since his ancestor Binyamin was not part of that subjugation.

Esther's Path to Assertiveness

In the Purim story, Esther is taken forcefully to the king's palace. "And Esther was taken to the house of the king" (Esther 2:8). She certainly has no interest in being queen, and even though all the other women decorated and prettied themselves in order to find favor in the king's eyes, Esther remained hidden in Mordechai's house (for three years) until she was finally found and forced out by the king's officers. Even then "she did not request anything" to make herself more desirable.

This must have been a dark, devastating event in her life, especially according to the commentaries which state Esther was actually married to Mordechai.

"Every day Mordechai walked in front of the palace." Mordechai said: "Could it be that this righteous woman should be married to such a despicable man? Maybe something will happen to the Jewish people in the future and she will be in the position to save them." (Mechilta Beshalach - Amalek 52)

Mordechai felt that if such a tragic occurrence were to happen to such a righteous girl as Esther, something must be brewing in Jewish destiny to necessitate it. Yet Esther doesn't have the benefit of such a hint. She is just spending her days and months in the palace, and -- as commanded by Mordechai -- silently guarding her identity and trying to practice Judaism in secret. Her relationship with Mordechai is not public and she communicates with him through a messenger, one of her servants.

Mordechai becomes aware (through prophecy) of the serious decree against the Jewish people in Heaven and the corresponding decree sent by Haman and Achashverosh to destroy every Jewish man, woman and child. He tears his clothing and wails in the streets of Shushan, "crying a loud and bitter cry" (Esther 4:1). Esther hears about Mordechai's strange behavior and sees it as completely uncharacteristic of him and of their tribe. "The queen was very shaken" (Esther 4:4). She sends him clothes to wear and tells him to remove his sackcloth. Esther is not used to such public displays of emotion; Binyamin is the tribe who excels in keeping things silent and hidden. To rip one's clothes and walk through the streets screaming is extremely inappropriate.

When Esther is unable to persuade him to calm down, she asks what happened and Mordechai sends the message:

The son of happenstance (Amalek) has come upon us, as it says (Deut. 25:18), "who has chanced upon you on the way." (Midrash Esther Rabba 8:5)

Mordechai tells Esther that Haman is a descendant of Amalek and poses a serious threat to the Jewish people. He asks Esther to "go to the king and beg and request for her nation." Esther at first answers with hesitation: "Everybody knows that if a man or woman goes to the king uninvited, the law is that he be killed. And I have not been called to the king in 30 days" (Esther 4:11, paraphrased).

Esther assumes that she will soon be called to the king, and then she can make the effort to help. Esther did not sense the urgency of the matter, given that the decree was not to be carried out until 11 months later, in the Hebrew month of Adar. Esther figured she had time to act, and why put one's life in jeopardy unnecessarily?

Mordechai replies with a harsh, almost threatening warning: "Don't imagine you might escape in the house of the king out of all the Jews. Because if you are silent now, relief and salvation will come to the Jewish people from another place, and you and your father's house will be lost." (Esther 4:13-14)

It seems that Mordechai is trying to impress upon Esther the imminence of the disaster and the scope of the tragedy, though he cannot convey through Hatach (the messenger) all the details of his prophetic information. He also clarified to Esther that although modesty and silence are normally important traits, there is a time and a place where one has to speak up and take assertive action.

By way of a hint, he told her that her father's house was responsible for the tragedy because (King Shaul) didn't get rid of Amalek completely, and it is her mission to fix this mistake. (Menot HaLevi, Rabbi Shlomo Elkabetz)

Esther didn't take long to get the message. From here on, her personality takes a turn. She becomes the initiator, the active leader, the decision maker and commander. No longer does she blindly execute Mordechai's orders, rather she orders him herself:

"Go and gather all the Jews... and fast for me for... three days and nights, and I and my maidens will do the same. And I will go the king, not according to the law. And if I am lost, I am lost." And Mordechai passed (transgressed) and did everything Esther commanded him to do. (Esther 4:16-17)

"Three days and nights:" these are the dates 13, 14 and 15 of Nissan. Mordechai sent her: "But isn't one of those days the first night of Passover?" She sent back: "Elder of Israel, if there are no Jewish people left, for whom is Passover?" Immediately Mordechai heard and admitted she was right. (Esther Rabba 8:7)

"And Mordechai passed:" He transgressed, i.e. he fasted on the first day of Passover. (Talmud - Megillah 15a)

Esther concluded that all the Jewish people have to unite in order to avert this catastrophe. So Esther commanded Mordechai to transgress the Torah laws of eating matzah, drinking wine and celebrating the Seder night, and to instruct the entire Jewish people to do the same! Esther is a prophetess and as such can

command to break a Torah law on this one-time basis. From here on, she takes upon herself the mantle of prophecy and acts with the decisiveness and courage befitting a queen.

Risking Her Life

By choosing to accept Mordechai's challenge of going to the king unannounced and telling him about the plot to eradicate her nation, Esther was putting her life at risk for the sake of the Jewish people. But she was doing more than that.

"I will go to the king, not according to the law. And if I am lost, I am lost" (Esther 4:16). [Esther was saying:] "As I will be lost from my father's house, so I will be lost from you, [Mordechai]." (Talmud - Megillah 15a)

According to one opinion in the Talmud, Esther was actually married to Mordechai. Despite having been *forced* to live with Achashverosh, Esther retained her status as a married woman and -- according to Jewish law -- would be permitted to resume being Mordechai's wife as soon as the Achashverosh episode were over. However, at this turning-point, Esther now plans to *willingly* choosing to approach Achashverosh. She fears this will automatically change the relationship from passive to active, and will consequently forbid her -- as an adulterous woman -- from ever returning to her husband, Mordechai. With the words "I will approach the king, not according to the law," Esther is referring not only the law of the kingdom, but to Jewish law as well.

Esther takes the double-risk, physically and spiritually, for the sake of the greater cause. "If there is no Jewish nation, for whom is Passover?" The entire Torah is for the Jewish people. If they are at risk of annihilation, what other considerations can possibly apply? Esther now sees herself as a catalyst for the redemption. She is no longer as a girl from a specific family with her own individual set of circumstances. She is taking responsibility for the nation.

Making a Plan

Esther doesn't proceed flippantly. She is determined to save the Jewish people in the most effective way. First, by having the entire nation fast for three days and nights, she sets the stage for God's mercy and compassion. Then, only on the third day, does she dress up in royal clothes and approach the inner chamber of the king.

Rabbi Levi said: "As Esther approached the house of idols, the presence of God left her, she said, 'God, Oh God why have You left me' (Psalms 22). Could it be that You judge me as premeditating and willing, instead of as one who is coerced to transgress?" (Talmud - Megillah 15b)

The Talmud shows us the inner workings of Esther's heart: plunged into complete darkness and not feeling God alongside her. She doesn't have a clue whether what she's doing is approved in the eyes of Heaven. Maybe God considers her act inappropriate? Her prophecy fails her when she needs it most.

Physically, too: Esther is going to the king on the third day of fasting. What she most have looked like! She is truly risking her life by going to him in this state. But she understands that the "natural" is not a factor in this equation of salvation. Esther is completely convinced that the situation -- so severe and clearly Heaven-sent -- demands a miraculous turn-about. Esther purposely doesn't wait around for the king to call her on his own and for nature to play itself out.

Prophet and Strategist

That night, Esther invites Achashverosh and Haman to a party at her house. At the party, she invites them to another party the next day. Why is Esther behaving this way? Why not rush to get her request over with as soon as possible?

The Talmud and Midrash offer many answers to this question – 12, in fact. But one shows Esther bent on finding a solution to the root problem (not just the symptom), and places her among the great leaders and strategists of the Jewish people:

So that the Jewish people will not say: "We have a sister in the house of the king" and consequently will not beg wholeheartedly for mercy. (Talmud - Megillah 15b)

Esther realized that in order to bring about God's compassion, the Jews would need to realize there is no one else upon whom to rely. If they felt that Esther could succeed on her own, they might half-heartedly pray, fast and repent -- while deep in their heart relying on Esther to save the day. However, after three days of fasting and praying, if the rumor spread that Esther seemed to befriend the enemy, inviting him to parties and not even attempting to save them, then

the Jews would wake up, take responsibility for the dire state of the nation, and realize that "We have no one to rely on except for our Father in Heaven."

Also, Esther may have been waiting for some sign from God that this was the right avenue to take. She was still in the dark, acting purely on the basis of her own understanding, and knowledge of God's love from previous experience. But right now, nothing pointed out to her that God was with her and that He would back up her attempt to overcome Haman.

That night, between the first party and the second, Esther received the sign she was waiting for. The sleeplessness of the king prompted him to recall Mordechai's favor of years before. This "coincided" with Haman's approach to the palace, which led to the famous leading of Mordechai through the streets of Shushan in royal garb on the king's horse. Amazingly, Haman, the second in command, was honoring his arch-enemy, the Jew, causing himself such humiliation in the process! This was the miraculous sign that Esther, to show her that at this moment, the redemption had begun.

Although she had strategized, Esther was not certain that inviting the enemies of the Jews to a party was the right way to go. Nor could she know that Achashverosh would react favorably to her. There was a distinct chance that this tactic would arouse his jealousy, allowing him to assume that she liked Haman personally. In such a case, the king would have them both executed. This was a risk she was willing to take, since if that's how things played out, Haman's decree would also be annulled and she would be saving her people from destruction.

Esther was so busy praying and conversing with God at this second party, that when asked to name the evil executor of the "final solution," she inadvertently pointed to the king himself:

"An evil man and an enemy is this bad Haman" (Esther 7:6). Rabbi Eliezer said: "This teaches that she pointed at Achashverosh [even as she said: "Haman"] and an angel came and pushed her hand to be directed at Haman." (Talmud - Megillah 16a)

Esther was acting now as a prophetess, speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth, focusing intently on her goal of reaching a spiritual turn-about which would cause the physical destiny to change as well. She was so aware that real salvation lay only in the heavenly courts that she didn't even realize she was

pointing at the person she was speaking to, since in reality, he was an evil enemy as well and she was speaking to God. Natural events and circumstances were just tools to approach "the King of all Kings" and beg for His mercy and compassion.

And so it was: The wicked Haman fell onto Esther, angering the king, who immediately ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows which he had built for Mordechai. It had all come full circle.

Happy Ending

After the showdown at Esther's party, the demise of Haman, the reformation of the decree which allowed the Jews to defend themselves in any future war, the incredible victory of the Jewish people over their enemies, and the final hanging of Haman's 10 sons, there was yet another momentous event: The Jewish people reached such a high level of recognition and appreciation of God that they reaccepted the Torah out of love:

The Torah was (initially) forced upon the Jewish people, as God held the mountain above their heads... Rava said: "However, they accepted it later out of choice, in the days of Achashverosh, as it says (Esther 9:27): 'The Jews accepted and kept all the words'." (Talmud - Shabbat 88a)

Esther asked to write down this record of events in a scroll. God's hidden but unique supervision had to be set down in print, for generations to come, so the nation would have an understanding of how to relate to God in times of complete darkness and despair. What happens when everything looks bleak and you can't find God anywhere, when you don't know if He is approving of your actions or not, or even feel the tiniest spark of holiness or spirituality? That is when you must place your trust in God, and go forward relying on your inner voice of clarity and reason knowing that God never leaves His nation. It is then that you must do everything possible to reestablish the lines of communication between God and the Jewish people.

The Sages agreed with Esther's assessment, and established a holiday in her merit and a scroll in her name, which will exist for eternity:

"And the days of Purim will not pass from amongst the Jews, and their memory will never cease from their descendants." (Esther 9:28)

All the books of the prophets and all the writings are destined to be cancelled out in the days of the Messiah, except for the Megillah of Esther which -- like the Five Books of Moses and the Oral Law -- will never be nullified." (Maimonides - Megillah 2: 13)

Esther's and Eternity

It is hard to see the happy ending for Esther, personally. She remains married to the Persian hedonistic King Achashverosh, she never returns to Mordechai (if in fact she was married to him), and in any case never goes back to living a normal Jewish life with all that entails. She is recorded as being the Queen of Persia for years to come and the mother of the next Persian King Daryavesh, who eventually allowed the Jewish people to return to Israel and begin rebuilding the Temple and their independent lives in the Holy Land. Esther is destined to be the Jewish representative in the royal household for the rest of her life, helping her people from afar, saving them initially from destruction and then supporting their cause, spiritually and nationally.

Esther sacrificed everything for the bigger cause: The opportunity to live among the people she loved and even her own spiritual fulfillment in this world (and as far as she was concerned, in the next as well), for the cause of good and for the nation of Israel.

In his book, *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner explains why certain holidays will cease in the messianic era, except for the story and holiday of Purim. He compares it to two people walking in the dark, each with a mission to find their friend in the darkness. One uses a flashlight and quickly finds his acquaintance, but the other, without the benefit of a light, is forced to use his other senses. Through listening carefully, feeling his way through the obstacles, and even sniffing the air for subtle nuances of scent, he finally learns to recognize his friend. When the sun comes up, the first fellow no longer would need his flashlight and discards it as unnecessary. However, the second person, who has groped his way through the darkness, has developed a skill in the process and sensitized himself to unique aspects that he'd never have realized had he not been lacking his eye-sight. Therefore, for him, even when the sun has risen, he retains the internal richness he has gained, and the relationship with his friend benefits from the intimacy that was reached as a result of the nocturnal experience.

Esther had to walk through the dark to find God, without the benefit of open miracles and signs, huge flashes of inspiration or insight. No plagues, splitting of seas, pillars of clouds and fire, or even flasks of oil lasting for eight days. For her, the darkness continued for a lifetime.

But she taught herself and the Jewish people skills which they could use throughout the years of exile and hiddenness: Place your trust in God, to know with a conviction and clarity that God is listening, even when He is deeply hidden. Unite as a people and act to arouse His mercy -- even risk your life -- knowing that He will respond to save His people.

This sensitivity she developed within herself and the level to which she elevated the Jewish people, will remain within our collective psyche throughout the generations and will enrich us even in the messianic era. In that great era of light and clarity, all the other holidays which posed as mere flashlights throughout the years will no longer be necessary. They will fade into insignificance. Purim and Esther's message, however, will illuminate for eternity.