

# A LESSON FROM QUEEN ESTHER

*by Rabbi C. P. Scheinberg*

The Midrash tells us that in the future all the Jewish holidays will be nullified except for Purim. The Talmud says that although the final redemption will be even more miraculous than the Exodus from Egypt, the miracle of Purim -- which basically revolved around the personalities of Mordechai and Esther -- will never be forgotten. It was the unique courage and boldness of Mordechai and Esther together that make them the stars of the beautiful story we read in the Megillah. Since all of us are going through hard times today and there isn't a person who isn't struggling, a little insight into the characteristics of Mordechai and Esther might be a great help to us in our times of tribulation.

The very names "Mordechai" and "Esther" are symbolic for our times. The name Mordechai in Aramaic consists of two words: "mera dachya," a spice that diffuses fragrance only after it has been processed. As for Esther's name, we are told, "And he [Mordechai] had reared Hadassah, she is Esther" (Esther 2:7).

Why are two names mentioned? Was her real name Esther, with Hadassah being some kind of nickname, or vice versa?

She actually had both names, and both have deep meaning. Hadassah stems from the word "hadas," myrtle. Esther was similar to the hadas in that she had a deep olive-green complexion. We also know that the leaves of this plant have a very sweet fragrance that can only be released when the leaves are bruised and crushed. As a matter of fact, some people use the crushed leaves for spices during Havdalah [on Saturday night]. Just like the hadas, which is only fragrant when it is bruised and crushed, so too was Esther's potential brought out to its fullest by her hard life.

## GUARDING A SECRET

The name Esther is related to the word "hester," meaning hidden. When we look deeper into the Megillah, we see something remarkable. For nine years, until Haman's downfall, Esther guarded the secret of her ancestry. She never told anyone that she was a Jewess. Examining her situation, we

know that as the wife of Achashverosh she was constantly pressured to reveal the truth. Yet she withstood this pressure. Why?

The Midrash explains that Mordechai realized there was something unique in Esther's becoming the queen. He knew that she was a righteous woman and that it had to be Divine providence that she became the wife of the non-Jewish king, Achashverosh. Mordechai realized that God had something in store for the Jewish people and that Esther would be instrumental in saving them. Mordechai was aware of the impending calamity that would befall the Jews and foresaw that Esther would be the one through whom they would be saved.

Had she revealed her ancestry, she would have defeated this purpose. She therefore carefully guarded her secret until the proper time. The [famous commentator] Ibn Ezra explains that if Esther hadn't kept her secret, she would not have been able to observe her religion (Esther 2:10). Since Achashverosh did not know she was a Jewess, she was able to observe her religion in secrecy.

Other reasons are given, but in all cases, there was a sound reason for Esther doing this outstanding act of guarding her secret for nine years. This is due to a character trait that Queen Esther inherited from [our matriarch] Rachel, who likewise did not reveal or give any indication to Jacob that she was not the person he was marrying, and so he married Leah first (see Genesis 29). Esther inherited this quality of silence and discretion, which Rachel had shown under such tremendous pressure.

This incredible silence is the outstanding virtue that made Esther queen. She boldly and courageously kept her secret while under terrific pressure from a king and an entire nation. Esther did not dare reveal anything, for she knew that her silence was necessary for the salvation of the Jewish people. She knew that there would come a time when she would have to tell, and that there was a divine purpose in store for her.

## **PRESSURE COOKER**

Esther had perfect self-control. The ability to be queen over herself is what made her queen over the world.

Self-control stems from the powers of the soul, which all of us possess. The Talmud tells us that a person's greatness or inferiority is recognizable when he gets angry. The logical person does not lose control of himself. It's like a pressure cooker that has a little hole on the top to release the pressure. If you didn't have that little hole, the pot would explode. One should not bottle up his

emotions, because that will cause mental anguish. However, although you have to speak, your tone of voice and how you say things make the difference.

Building a [successful life] requires self-control and knowing how and when to speak. We sometimes lose control of ourselves and out of anger, say things that we later regret. Many times the regret does not rectify the damage that was done.

Let us learn the lesson of self-control and silence from the queen whose name was Hadassah and Esther. Hadassah, the one who suffers, was Esther, the hidden one, who kept silent about her ancestry for nine years in order to redeem the Jewish people.

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