

THE ESSENCE OF ESTHER

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

With Purim coming, Women in Judaism reflects on its essence, by taking a deeper look at Queen Esther. Our sometimes misconstrued image of her - often instilled in us as children - is of a beautiful woman, lucky enough to be chosen as queen of the vast Persian empire, who later becomes heroine of her own Jewish Nation. In fact, much of this picture is inaccurate. The Book of Esther substantiates the fact that, from the moment Esther was taken into the palace and for several years prior, her life was terribly difficult.

The following study explores what really happened to Esther. It portrays a chapter in the life of a Jewish woman who endured great hardship, yet ultimately turned a catastrophic situation for herself and her people into an astounding story of personal growth and national salvation.

According to the Book of Esther and its commentaries Achashverosh, king of Persia, announces his search for a new queen in the third year of his reign, after having done away with his previous queen, Vashti. The search is, in effect, a call for participation in a lurid beauty contest open to any girl in the kingdom. Esther does not come forward. She in fact goes into hiding, hoping to insure she will not be summoned to the palace. When after four years - in the seventh year of his reign - Achashverosh still has not found a wife, he sends agents to every province in the kingdom, to root out the eligible women who have not voluntarily appeared at court. Esther is discovered and forcibly enlisted as candidate for queen ("...Esther was taken to the palace, under the charge of Hegai, guardian of the women" (2:8)). As with any other candidate, she is drafted into the king's harem, receiving a full year of officially proscribed beauty treatments before her appointment to appear in front of Achashverosh. Whereas many other hopefuls might take full advantage of the cosmetic benefits the palace offers, Esther requests nothing beyond the minimum treatments thrust upon her (2:15). In other words, Esther does everything in her power to avoid being selected as queen and forced to live with a king who is not Jewish and who openly hates the Jewish people. Nonetheless, this is precisely what happens. Achashverosh chooses Esther. Her integrity, substance and modesty, obvious to him from the start, must have contributed to her exquisite beauty inside and out.

A RELUCTANT, RIGHTEOUS QUEEN

As a Jewess struggling in exile, Esther understandably rejects the luxury and power of life in the very palace that oppresses her people. Judaism is the essence of Esther and she has no desire to live under further duress by having to maintain her Jewish observance in secret, as wife of Achashverosh. In addition, according to one opinion Esther is already married to Mordechai, himself

a righteous Jew, a prophet and the leader of his generation. Had Esther been marriageable, Achashverosh would nonetheless not have been her choice. Besides the fact that he is not Jewish, Achashverosh is a despot - a man of poor character who hates the Jews, more than does Haman. As a politician he is impetuous, impressionable and not to be trusted. Corroborating this perspective on his character, commentaries tell us that Achashverosh either purchased the throne or obtained it through Queen Vashti.

The Book of Esther reflects this idea, by referring to Vashti as "queen" Vashti (1:11) and to Achashverosh, simply as "Achasheverosh," omitting the title of "king" (1:1).

As queen, Esther hides her religious identity and maintains her Jewish practices - keeping kosher and observing the laws of Shabbat and family purity - in secret. As a person deeply connected to God she wonders, as does Mordechai, why she has been placed in such a difficult situation. Once Haman's decree against the Jews is publicized (3:-15), however, it becomes clear that Esther is to be instrumental in saving her people.

ESTHER BEGS TO DIFFER

Upon hearing of Haman's decree, Mordechai puts on sackcloth and publicly mourns the plight of the Jews (4:1). Esther learns of Mordechai's actions and surmises that something has happened to the Jews on a national level. She arrives at this conclusion, because Mordechai would otherwise mourn in private, in response to some personal misfortune. Esther sends him clothes, suggesting to Mordechai that he cease his public demonstration and allow her time to advocate for the Jews from within the palace. When Mordechai rejects the clothing (4:4), Esther sends her confidante, Hasach, to him to find out why. Hasach returns to her with full details of Haman's plot, in addition to a request from Mordechai that Esther appear immediately in front of Achashverosh to plead for her nation.

Esther disagrees with Mordechai's strategy on several levels. First, she assumes that the Jews are safe for the time being, since the document containing the verdict against them is not scheduled to take effect for nearly a year. Second, her hesitation to appear uninvited is based on a well known rule that an individual arriving unbidden at court risks being put to death, ("All the King's servants and the people of the King's provinces are well aware that if anyone, man or woman, approaches the King in the inner court without being summoned, there is but one law for him: that he be put to death; except for the person to whom the King shall extend his gold scepter so that he may live (4:11). Esther's reticence is not a result of cowardice or self-preservation. Rather, she feels that by abiding by court rules and waiting until Achashverosh asks for her, she will gain a diplomatic edge and, thus, a stronger chance of saving her people.

Mordechai and Esther both understand that the Jews face a spiritual crisis (otherwise God would not have Haman to have moved ahead with his plans), but their understanding of its exact nature differs, given that Mordechai has more information about the situation at hand. While Esther advocates quiet diplomacy, Mordechai recommends the Jewish people respond to their plight on a national

level. Esther has been cloistered in the palace and only later has access to details from Mordechai, ("... Esther summoned Hasach, one of the King's chamberlains whom he had appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordechai, to learn what this was about and why." (4:5)). Mordechai understands that the verdict against the Jews is God's response to a mistake they made - a spiritual stumble - when, back in the third year of the king's reign, the Jews attended his royal banquet, in spite of seeing that the party included a display of Jewish vessels plundered from their destroyed Temple. In addition, the licentious atmosphere expected at the banquet rendered it inappropriate for Jews. Nonetheless, the Jews attended along with every other nation under the auspices of Achashverosh, out of fear that it would have been dangerous to decline.

Mordechai understands that, being the Jews of his generation are on a very high spiritual level, God expected them to come forward in defense of their values, rather than join the banquet. God's response is Haman, a descendant of Amalek, a nation focused to this day on the destruction of the Jews. Amalek is threatened by the Jewish belief in God, since its own belief system is based on arbitrariness, purposelessness and chance. Thus, Amalek sustains an eternal hatred for and a desire to undermine Jewish faith by wiping out the entire Nation. Amalek's tactic is to permanently detach the Jewish people from God by destroying them physically, even at the risk of destroying itself in the process. Amalek stands for the type of person who will defend his negative values, even to his own detriment. This idea of self-sacrifice is where the Jews fell short, when they attended the king's banquet. Mordechai knows that the presence of Amalek, in the persona of Haman, is God's call to His people for repentance through fasting, prayer and acts of faith.

In keeping with his understanding, Mordechai encourages Esther to risk appearing unbidden at court to plead for the Jews (4:8), thereby demonstrating her total faith in God's protection. It is precisely this type of action - and not quiet diplomacy - that would deliver the Jewish people. Further, if the Jews were saved diplomatically, they might never recognize the hand of God as a singular force in their salvation. This failure to recognize Divine Plan would give Amalek the upper hand as the Jews' physical foe and spiritual nemesis.

A SPIRITUAL BREAKTHROUGH

Esther heeds Mordechai's advice, contrives a plan that undoes Haman and ultimately becomes a heroine of the Jewish people. While Esther's story is impressive on the level of intrigue, bravery and adventure, it is made eternal by her self-sacrifice and unmitigated faith. Esther remains a role model not because of her external beauty and not because she was queen of a powerful empire, but because of her inner fortitude and devotion. Her example stands before us as we confront today's exile-specific dilemmas between faith and reason; Judaism and assimilation; personal comfort and self-sacrifice.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

How would you, our cyberspace student body, counsel an individual who finds herself in an

environment with a set of values different from her own? Our next Women in Judaism class will be a compilation of your thoughts. Please respond to Lkohn@torah.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

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