

QUEEN ESTHER: THE MERIT OF THINGS HIDDEN PART I

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

WAITING FOR A BLESSING; WAITING FOR THE TRUTH - AN ANECDOTE

We start with a story that highlights the essence of Esther's ability to discern truth in the midst of material and spiritual distraction. Although Esther does not appear in the story, we can begin to understand Esther through the story's emphasis on clarity, patience and persistence within seemingly absurd circumstances. Told each Purim by the Chiddushei HaRim (R' Yitzchak Meir of Ger, 1799-1866), the tale is set in the time of the Baal Shem Tov (R' Yisrael Ben Eliezer, 1698-1760), when an unfavorable decree threatens the lives of the Jewish people in a particular city. The townspeople come to the Baal Shem Tov asking that he pray for them. He responds by sending them to another small town seeking a "Reb Baruch," for a blessing that will ensure their safety. The men spend several days looking for Reb Baruch. Finally, they find a man named Baruch who is not a rabbi, but a drunkard. The men keep him from drinking until he is sober enough to fulfill their request for a blessing, after which he promptly falls asleep.

On returning home and hearing the decree against their town has been nullified, the men ask the Baal Shem Tov how a drunk could give such a powerful blessing. The Baal Shem Tov responds that Baruch had once risked his life to save a fellow Jew. In return, G-d decreed he would be able to successfully bless others. Baruch unfortunately misused his privilege in one way or another and, in order to minimize the chance this might happen again, G-d decided to keep him perpetually drunk. If, however, someone seeking a blessing had the patience to wait for him to sober up, Baruch would still be able to bestow a blessing. Given that the townsmen committed to wait until Baruch was coherent, his blessing to them came true.

ESTHER'S SECRET - HER HIDDEN JEWISH LIFE

Commenting on the above story, the Chidushei HaRim used to say that Purim - like Reb Baruch - has the power to fulfill our wishes, if we are able to transcend the material diversions of the festival, which include food, drink and costume. Esther faces a similar challenge, surrounded as she is by the amenities of palace life, while maintaining her Jewish faith. As queen, she has access to the riches of an entire kingdom and can choose to give up her identity for the sake of luxury. Instead she keeps Torah in secret and, ultimately, risks her life in order to save her people.

At great personal cost, Esther manages to operate on two levels while in the palace of Achashveirosh - she masquerades as a Persian ruler, and quietly continues to live as a Jew. Her

name - Esther - means "to hide," reflecting her ability to appear one way, while truly being another. (Another name for Esther is "Hadassah" - one of the four species bundled together on Sukkot. Because of its sweet smell, the hadassah symbolizes Torah knowledge and the beauty of righteousness. Esther exemplifies these qualities).

ESTHER'S CHARACTER - A JEWISH WOMAN'S HIDDEN BEAUTY

The Megillah tells us that Esther is unaffected by her own physical beauty and that she is, in fact, extremely modest. Once in the palace as a candidate to marry king Achashveirosh, Esther has one year's access to the latest and most elaborate beauty treatments. While other female contestants indulge, Esther accepts only the minimum proscribed treatments. She does not aspire to either the title or the comfort that are soon to be thrust upon her. Instead, Esther wants only to understand why G-d has placed her in such a difficult position, and what service He wants of her. As such, Esther uses her modesty to maintain her clarity, successfully avoiding the distractions of vanity.

Commentaries extend this observation beyond the Megillah, associating Esther's behavior with the Jewish woman's innate modesty as well as commitment to give rather than take. In Esther's case, she is concerned only with how best to use the palace resources to save her own people. Never does she exploit the wealth and opportunity at her disposal for her own personal gain.

ESTHER AS A HIDDEN VEHICLE FOR REDEMPTION

Esther's secret Jewish life in the palace is exemplary. She maintains kashrut by claiming special dietary needs for her health. She keeps Shabbat, in addition to the rest of the mitzvot. The Midrash tells us that, while in captivity as a Persian queen, when Esther prays for Jewish redemption she reminds G-d that she has kept the Torah, and particularly the Jewish woman's mitzvot of family purity, Shabbat candle lighting and challah baking.

Esther risks her life to maintain her Judaism. She ultimately triumphs, in great part, because she knows when to speak out and when to remain silent. Thus she is praised for keeping quiet - for hiding what is precious to her until it is to her and her people's benefit to reveal the truth.

The very fact that Esther behaves with such honor - especially under life threatening circumstances - paves the way for her role as heroine. Her ability to hide the truth until the perfect moment is the basis for her success. Our next class will further explore this quality by looking backwards at the "legacy of quiet" Esther inherits from her ancestors and forward towards its relevance for today's Jewish woman.

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