

ESTHER DID NOT REVEAL HER PEOPLE OR HER KINDRED

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

INTRODUCTION

In previous years, we have taken a broad look at the Megilah, examining issues of its inclusion in T'nakh as well as the overall miracle which courses through the narrative.

This year, I would like to focus our attention on one of the central characters in the text, the heroine for whom the scroll is named. We will begin our essay with an inquiry into Esther's comportment as detailed in Chapter 2; before resolving some of the difficulties in that selection, we will analyze some of her actions that play a pivotal role in our salvation.

When we are first introduced to the future queen of Persia, we are told that she has two names: Hadassah, Hi Esther - (Hadassah - that is, Esther). In previous years we have directly presented the cultural context for these two names - her proper name, Hadassah, and her Persian name "Esther" which some have associated with Astarte, the goddess of fertility. (Mordechai's name is, similarly, related to Marduk, the god of creation in the Babyonian pantheon). Truth to tell, this is only one of several approaches suggested by Haza"l to resolving her "double-identity". This year, we will utilize another theory advanced in the Gemara:

R. Yehudah says: Hadassah was her name — Why then was she called Esther? Because she concealed [mastereth] the facts about herself. (BT Megilah 13a). The concealment to which R. Yehudah refers is explicit in the verse that describes Esther's behavior in the "spa" during the twelve months of preparation for her meeting with the king:

Esther did not make known her people or her kindred... (2:10).

Why didn't Esther let on that she was from a Judean family? The text immediately informs us - thereby creating more confusion:

...for Mordekhai had charged her that she should not tell.

The question now reverts to Mordekhai - why did he command her to keep her identity a secret?

This royal secrecy is reiterated later in the second chapter:

Esther did not make known her kindred nor her people; as Mordekhai had charged her (v. 20).

We now have two questions - why did Mordechai command her silence, and why is this behavior (and antecedent command) repeated in the narrative?

II

THE RISHONIM

The medieval commentators were bothered by her deliberate silence.

Rashi suggests that Mordekhai's charge was intended to lessen Esther's chances of being chosen to fill Vashti's seat:

"That she should not tell": so that they will say that she is from a degraded family and will send her away; for if they find out that she is from the family of King Sha'ul, they will hold on to her.

Rashi (and the Malbim, who adopts this approach) accepts the notion that he charged her with silence to avoid being selected as a result of "family connections".

This line of thinking is premised on an association between Esther and Sha'ul which, although prominent in the Midrashic development of Esther, is nowhere to be found in the text. The premise rests on the identification of "Kish" (2:5) as the father of Sha'ul - but if that is indeed the selfsame "abu Sha'ul" intended in the verse, why jump back so many generations and avoid the "star" himself? In any case, it is clear that the text didn't intend to highlight her "Sha'ul-connection"; introducing it into the thinking of Mordekhai seems forced.

A somewhat similar approach is put forth by the medieval Midrash Panim Aherim:

Why did Mordekhai command her not to tell? Because he was fleeing from any position of power or greatness, Mordekhai thought: If she identifies me as the one who raised her, they will put me in a position of honor.

Whereas Rashi points to the "yichus" helping Esther in her selection, this Midrash suggests that once Esther would be crowned, her relationship with Mordekhai would catapult him into the political limelight - a position he was loathe to embrace. Parenthetically, since this comment is associated with the first (pre-selection) mention of her silence, it assumes that Mordekhai was confident of Esther's success at being chosen to fill Vashti's seat.

The Targum Esther (c. 7th-8th century) raises another possibility - that Mordekhai was concerned that Vashti's demise may have been brought about as a result of her flaunting her genealogy. If Esther reveals her royal (Shaulian) ancestry, it may irk the king into similar action.

Neither of these approaches, taken independently, resolves the problem of repetition. (The Targum Sheni [c. 8th century] associates the second mention of Esther's silence with the previous verse that notes a second congregating of maidens. This enigmatic assemblage, after Esther is crowned, is Midrashically explained as part of Ahashverosh's attempt to get Esther to reveal her lineage. The Targum Sheni notes that "in spite of the second congregating of the maidens, Esther continued not to reveal...")

According to Rash (and Malbim), once she has been chosen, why not identify herself? According to the first citation from the Panim Aherim, her continued silence is understandable but unnecessary to restate.

R. Avraham b. Ezra proposes three explanations for Esther's silence.

- 1) Some say that Mordekhai acted incorrectly in commanding Esther not to reveal her nation, since he was afraid that the king wouldn't take her as queen since she was an exile.
- 2) Others say that through prophecy or a dream he knew that the salvation of Israel would come through her
- 3) What is proper in my eyes is that Mordekhai commanded her in order that she be able to observe G-d's Law so that she should not eat improperly slaughtered meat and that she should observe the Sabbaths and the servants would not suspect anything. For if the matter (her identity) would be known, perhaps the king would force her [to violate the law] or would kill her because she was taken against her will.

Each of these explanations is difficult. The first is premised on two notions - that Mordekhai's intent was to promote Esther's candidacy, something which not only has no support in the text but which may be subtly contradicted by the description of Esther being "taken" by the king (more on this below). The second premise is that Mordekhai erred in his judgment here - something that is challenged by her presence in the palace at the necessary time to effect salvation (more on this, too, later on).

The second approach is built on the first - that Esther's silence was part of Mordekhai's strategy to help her be selected as queen. But Mordekhai's statement, five years later, that "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14) indicates a new awareness on his part, not the fulfillment of a dream or vision.

Indeed, Ibn Ezra himself rejects both of these approaches (perhaps due to the challenges raised here) and prefers the third.

His final approach is not without its obstacles. Although there are opinions in Haza"l that Esther observed Shabbat, there is no indication in the text itself that Esther observed the law while in the palace - indeed, her participation (at her own initiative) in the feasts and the surprise registered by all assembled when she revealed her identity militates against her surreptitious observance.

Regardless of how one might defend any of these three explanations, the repetition between v. 10 and v. 20 remains an enigma. If Mordekhai was trying to promote her, why keep silent after being selected? And if his concern was for her to be able to maintain her ritual practices, why mention the silence before that was an issue - i.e. before her selection.

One might respond that in any case she would need to maintain the silence both before and after (in

the first two approaches, to make sure that she wouldn't be "Vashtied", and in the third, so that she would be left alone even during her "spa" time), why mention it twice?

Levenson (Esther, OTL, p. 61) suggests that the two mentions of Esther's silence serve a literary purpose, framing the entire selection process and setting it off from the ongoing Mordekhai story. He even notes a switch in terms from the first verse to the second:

et 'Amah v'et Molad'tah (her nation nor her family - v. 10)

Molad'tah v'et 'Amah (her family nor her nation - v. 20)

And suggests that this chiasmus gives the sense of "deliberate bracketing" i.e. that the author deliberately framed the story by setting an A-B-story- B-A frame.

While this approach is somewhat attractive, if its sole intention was to bracket the "Esther-selection" narrative, the first verse would have been better placed before v. 9 (the description of how everyone in the palace took a shine to Esther). In addition, there is another difference in the wording between the two verses which points us away from the direct association that Levenson would have us read.

IV

MEGILAT ESTHER AND LITERARY ALLUSIONS

In many of our essays, we have pointed to allusions in one text that help illuminate another. The underlying assumption (which is a predicate of all Midrashic literature) is that the sensitive reader, noting the analogous language, parallel phrasing etc. will draw the two narratives, personalities, prophecies (and so on) together, finding information in each which will supplement the other. In some cases, this helps us understand a particular character more deeply and assay the evaluation of the text as to his behavior. An example of this comparison is the many comparisons between Gid'on and Ya'akov (which must wait for another opportunity). In other cases, personalities are drawn together so that we may see the greatness of one over the other - case in point, Mosheh and Yehoshua (see V'shinantam 5/16).

While these literary allusions are found throughout T'nakh, they are most pronounced in Megilat Esther, for two reasons.

Megilat Esther is one of the latest books of T'nakh, likely completed no earlier than the fourth century BCE (see Esther 9:28). As such, there is nearly a thousand years of T'nakh on which to draw, including many heroes and villains to whom the members of our "cast" can be compared and against whom they can be contrasted.

The second reason for the proliferation of allusions in Esther is its very nature. Ibn Ezra suggests that the reason that God's Name was omitted from the text was to prevent the pagans who would also be reading it from substituting idolatrous names for haKadosh Barukh Hu. In other words, it was understood that this text would also be read by other nations (as at least part of it was translated into

all the languages of the Empire - see 10:2). As such, the Megilah contains many allusions that only a sensitive Jewish reader would pick up. The Megilah might be described as a precious stone encased in a somewhat pedestrian setting - the more that the stone is removed from the setting, the more beautifully it shines. References to earlier T'nakh characters highlight the heroism of our protagonists - and emphasize the dastardly nature of our enemies - in ways that someone not conversant with T'nakh would never see.

In earlier essays, we have pointed out that the terms used in the detailed description of Ahashverosh's splendor and wealth utilizes terms which evoke the Mishkan and Mikdash, serving as a subtle but powerful critique of the Jews who remained in Babylonia after Cyrus' announcement that "all who have God with them should go up" to rebuild the Mikdash and resettle Judea.

In this essay, we will focus our attention on events in the T'nakh that are alluded to in Chapter 2.

V

MEGILAT ESTHER AND THE PATRIARCHAL EGYPTIAN NARRATIVES

When we speak about the Sippurei haAvot b'Mitzrayim - (the patriarchal narratives in Egypt), there are really three periods that are under discussion. First and foremost is the period immediately preceding the Exodus; preceding that is the Yoseph cycle of stories. The reason that we distinguish between these two is not only the bibliographic placement (B'resheet vs. Sh'mot), but also the thematic focus. Whereas the Yoseph stories are oriented to the fortunes of a small family, the Sh'mot narrative describes the travails and eventual salvation of a nation.

The Yoseph narratives share a number of parallels with the Esther story. The story of an exile from Israel, eventually rising to the position of Mishneh laMelekh (second to the king) in a foreign court, receiving the ring of the king and riding in his chariot - while still beloved only to "most of his brethren" - all point to a clear analogy between Yoseph and Mordekhai.

The critical difference lies at the end of each story. Yoseph abjures his brothers to anticipate God's redemption that will provide the opportunity to return to the Land. Mordekhai says nothing of the sort - indeed, he is introduced to us as an exile (2:5) and we never again hear about the Land or Yerushalayim. (see Rosenthal's article in ZAW 15 pp. 278-284).

There is yet another patriarchal narrative in Egypt - Avraham's brief sojourn in the land of the Pharaoh (B'resheet 12:10-20).

Yair Zakovitch (Mikra'ot b'Eretz haMar'ot pp. 65-67) notes that the phrase: VaTukah ha'ishah beit Par'oh (and the woman was taken to the house of Pharaoh - B'resheet 12:15) is a nearly perfect parallel with VaTilakah Esther el beit haMelekh (and Esther was taken to the house of the king - Esther 2:8). Indeed, the "Pu'al" form (vaTukah) is typical of early T'nakh language; in later T'nakh Hebrew (2nd Temple period), this form is replaced by the Niph'al (vaTilakah). Besides these verses, there are a high number of parallels, both linguistic and thematic, which support the notion that the

author of Esther was deliberately associating the heroine to our mother, Sarah. (Surprisingly, Zakovitch omits one clear allusion to the Sarah story - the identification of 127 provinces under the rule of Ahashverosh which evokes Sarah's 127 years [B'resheet 23:1]. Note that R. Akiva did pick up on this association - see Esther Rabbah 1:8].)

Zakovitch notes 10 parallels:

- 1) Both stories involve an Ivri/Yehudi who is in exile (Avraham: Mordekhai)
- 2) The exile is accompanied by a female relative (Sarah: Esther)
- 3) Just as Sarah is described as Y'fat Mar'eh (attractive - 12:11), so is Esther Y'fat to'ar v'tovat Mar'eh (2:7)
- 4) The taking of each to the king's palace is presented in similar language, as above.
- 5) In both cases, the woman hides her identity as per the command of the exile (B'resheet 12:12: Esther 2:10)
- 6) The woman is taken to be the wife of the king (B'resheet 12:19: Esther 2:17)
- 7) In each case, there is a threat against the entire nation (Avraham's death - see B'resheet 12:12 - would be the end of the nascent nation)
- 8) Through the merit of the woman the man hopes to save the entire nation (Sarah's lie will save Avraham: Esther will approach the king to annul the decree)
- 9) The king learns of the relationship between the exile and the woman (Pharaoh learns through a dream: Esther reveals her relationship to Mordekhai)
- 10) Those who would harm the exile are harmed (the plagues against the house of Pharaoh: the victory of the Jews in Persia)

Zakovitch is quick to point out several significant differences between the two stories which serve to underscore part of the message of the Megilah - of course, we wouldn't recognize these contrasts without the many parallels outlined above:

- 1) Sarah does not become the queen
- 2) Avraham and Sarah return to the Land
- 3) Sarah's lie is outright, whereas Esther's silence is, at most, deceptive
- 4) Avraham's concern is only for himself; whereas Mordekhai worries about the entire nation
- 5) In B'resheet, the confrontation is with the king himself
- 6) Avraham leaves Egypt with great wealth; the Jews assiduously avoid taking from the loot of the

war against the Persians. (9:10,15)

Perhaps this is why R. Me'ir interpreted Esther's relationship with Mordekhai as more than adoptive daughter:

And when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her for his own daughter. A Tanna taught in the name of R. Meir: Read not 'for a daughter' [le-bat], but 'for a house' [le-bayit - i.e. a wife]. (BT Megilah 13a)

This exposition further strengthens the parallels between the two stories, highlighting the recurring theme of the dangers inherent in entanglement with the foreign court while in exile.

VI

THE THIRD EGYPT-PERSIA CONNECTION

Avraham Shama', in the wonderful collection of articles published in memory of Dasi Rabinowitz z"l (Hadassah Hi Esther, Alon Shvut, 1997), points to yet another stage of the patriarchal narratives in Egypt which recurs, thematically and linguistically, in Esther.

When the infant Mosheh was cast into the water, we learn of a particular interest paid to his welfare by sister Miriam:

And his sister stood far away, l'Dei'ah mah ye'aseh lo (to know what would be done to him.) (Sh'mot 2:4)

Mordekhai's concern for Esther echoes this image:

And Mordekhai walked every day before the court of the harem, laDa'at et Sh'lom Esther (to know how Esther was), uMah ye'aseh bah (and what was done to her.) (Esther 2:11)

Besides the clear linguistic parallels, these two are substantively analogous:

- 1) In both cases, there seems to be a near-resignation as to the fate of the "watched" one;
- 2) In both cases, the "watched one" was taken to the king's palace and his/her fate was unclear for a while;
- 3) In both cases, compassion/admiration was stirred in the hearts of the onlookers (Pharaoh's daughter: the courtiers)
- 4) In both cases, the entry into the palace was the first glimmer of salvation for the people.

In other words, we have to see Mordekhai's watching of Esther - and his command for her to be silent regarding her lineage and their relationship - as a function of a fatherly-type concern.

Shama' points us to an interesting parallel between the two mentions of her silence which takes us several steps closer to a solution:

(v. 10-11): *Esther had not revealed her people nor her family; for Mordekhai had charged her that she should not tell. And Mordekhai walked every day before the court of the harem, to know how Esther was, and what was done to her. (umah ye'aseh bah)*

(v. 20): *Esther did not reveal her family nor her people; as Mordekhai had charged her; for Esther did the command of Mordekhai, (...Esther 'Osah) as when she was brought up with him.*

Both mentions are followed by the behavior of one of the family members (Esther/Mordekhai) - in the first, Mordekhai's observation of Esther from outside the court, in the second, Esther's fidelity to Mordekhai's commands. Both of these "activities" are described using the verb 'Asoh (as noted).

In the first mention, the emphasis is on the actions towards Esther; in the second, it is the behavior of Esther as reflecting Mordekhai's instructions.

There are two other distinctions between the two mentions of Esther's silence. In the first, she is described as lo Higidah - in the past imperfect ("she did not reveal"); in the second ein Esther Magedet - in the ongoing present ("she would not tell"). In addition, as noted above (citing Levenson), the text inverts the order of what she kept secret; in the first, pre-selection silence, she is described as not telling about her people nor her family; in the second, her family is mentioned before her people.

VII

RESOLVING ESTHER'S "DOUBLED" SILENCE

We can now revisit our original question - why was Esther silent (i.e. why did Mordekhai command her so) and why is it mentioned twice.

All of the approaches raised before understood her silence to be ongoing and motivated by one consistent concern. The change in grammar and the order of her discretion suggest two independent motives behind Mordekhai's command(s). Shama' suggests that a close look at the context and wording behind each command - along with what we know from the rest of the Megilah - provides a clear explanation for each charge of Mordekhai. The rest of our essay is built on his insightful explanation.

When Esther was taken - forcibly (as we saw earlier via the parallel with Sarah) - Mordekhai's main concern was for her welfare, as a foreigner, exile and Jewess. The rest of the Megilah points us to a great proliferation of either Judeaophobia or simple xenophobia throughout the kingdom; how else could Haman count on sufficient support in the Empire to destroy the Jews in one day? A Jewess in the palace undoubtedly was at risk - perhaps for her life - would her identity become known. This is why the text in v. 10 reports that lo Higidah Esther - she didn't tell (at a particular time, when asked) - this was a temporary situation, born of an inevitably temporary circumstance (waiting for the results of the contest). This is also why the immediate action mentioned is Mordekhai's daily observation to see what they would do to her. This is also why he commanded her chiefly to keep her Jewish

identity ('Amah*) a secret, and only secondarily her family.

Once she was chosen, Mordekhai, as a believing and knowledgeable Jew, must have seen the hand of God and associated her rise to that of Yoseph (the only earlier model of success in the foreign court). Just as Yoseph saw himself as sent to the court in order to save his brothers (B'resheet 50:20), similarly Mordekhai must have sensed that Esther's rise to prominence was for a greater purpose which was not yet clear.

Mordekhai was known, publicly and in the court, to be a Jew. Note that when Mordekhai reports to the king, through Esther, about the plot cooked up by Bigtan and Teresh, it is recorded in the king's chronicles as an act of "Mordekhai haY'hudi" (see 6:2,10). Mordekhai evidently felt that whatever God's purpose in promoting Esther to the monarchy might be, he would need to guide her from outside.

That Mordekhai was known to have some sort of role as advisor to the queen was clear to all - it was Esther who reported, in his name, about the plot. In addition, Esther freely sent an agent to confer with him in front of the palace. For him to continue to charge and direct her, their familial ties would need to be discrete. If people were under the impression that he was appointed to her stewardship because of his insight, wisdom, experience and so on, his position would be fairly secure and unquestioned. If, on the other hand, people were to know of their blood ties, the assumption of nepotism would delegitimize him and he might be removed from his necessary perch.

Thus, in the second mention of her silence, the focus is on her fidelity to Mordekhai's every command - and she is described as ein Magedet - implying ongoing, permanent behavior. This also explains the switched priorities - here, the main issue is keeping her moledet (family) a secret, thus it is placed before 'Am (people).

I would like to suggest an alternative (or additional) explanation for Mordekhai's second command. Besides his role as her advisor (which I'm not nearly as convinced of), Mordekhai may have felt that there was a value in having a "mole", someone under "deep cover" in the palace. Unlike Yoseph's Egypt, the Persian Empire clearly had a great share of Jew-haters (as above). Mordekhai may have felt that the time would come when Esther would play a critical role in helping/saving the Jews. That could be effective only if her identity would be kept secret until the critical juncture. Then, with proper timing, her revelation would stymie any attempt at hurting her people. In order to do so, Mordekhai, who was known as a court Jew, would have to distance himself from Esther and she would have to be silent about their relationship in order to keep her own identity a secret until the right time.

This is the gist of Mordekhai's compelling argument to Esther:

Perhaps it is for a time such as this that you were made a monarch.

VIII POSTSCRIPT

Following the explanation presented above, we find that both the circumstances of the terrible threat of Haman and the wondrous salvation which we celebrate on Purim are buried within the details of Mordekhai's commands to Esther to be silent.

His first command, out of concern for her safety, reflects the terrifying potential for anti-Semitism within the court; his second command carries the seeds of salvation, placing our heroine in position, years later, to stop that hatred from achieving its dastardly ends.

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