

The Meaning of Myrtles: Understanding Esther's Other Name

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Names in tanach are highly significant. Sometimes the pesukim themselves explain the meaning of a name and sometimes Chazal or the later commentaries unpack it; either way, though, a name is more than just the accepted way to refer to someone. It is something deeper: an expression of a dominant personality trait, a prayer for the future, or an encapsulation of the time and place of a particular life. This essay will attempt to uncover some of the layers of meaning in Esther's other name: Hadassah. Literally, it is the feminine of hadas, myrtle. But as we shall see, it means much more than that.

Hadassim in Chazal

Megillas Esther introduces our heroine, saying that Mordechai took care of "Hadassah who is Esther" (2:7). What are we to make of these two names and their relationship? We find the following interpretation in Chazal (Megilla 13a):

Rebi Meir said Esther was her name, and why was she called Haddasah? Because the righteous are called hadassim.

רבי מאיר אומר: אסתר שמה, ולמה נקרא שמה הדסה - על שם הצדיקים שנקראו הדסים

Esther's name derives from the fact that myrtles symbolize the righteous.¹⁰⁴ But that only begs the question: in what way are tzadikim and hadassim comparable? Furthermore, there are many symbols for tzadikim. What unique aspect of the righteous do hadassim symbolize? The answer to this second question lies in Rebi Meir's proof text. The equation of hadassim and tzadikim comes from a prophecy in Zechariah (1:8) which depicts a man riding a red horse, standing amongst myrtles. The gemara (Sanhedrin 93a) explains that the man on the red horse represents Hashem who wanted to turn the world into blood. However, when Hashem saw the

tzadikim, Chananiah, Misha'el, and Azariah, as represented by the hadassim, He was appeased and did not destroy the world.

Thus, we see from the proof text that hadassim represent those tzadikim whose merit protects and sustains Klal Yisrael in galus, even when they have sinned and no longer deserve Hashem's loving mercy. Esther, indeed, was such a tzadik. She was righteous in a time of galus, when most of the Jews were straying from the proper path. Similarly, through her actions and merit, she ultimately saved the nation at a time of great danger. Thus hadassim are not a general symbol for all tzadikim, but specifically for the tzadikim of galus. They represent people like Esther, and Chananiah, Misha'el, and Azariah, who led Klal Yisrael in difficult times and saved them from both physical and spiritual calamity. This is the most basic level of meaning to Esther's name of Hadassah: she was the tzadik of Klal Yisrael in a time of darkness.

We find that the Gemara employs the symbolism of the myrtle in a fascinating parallel on the individual level. Famously, the gemara (Sanhedrin 44a) declares that "even though a Jewish person sins he remains Jewish." In other words, no matter how low a person falls or how far he veers from the Torah, he will always remain Jewish. His inner neshama can never be totally extinguished. Less known, though, is the parable the Gemara gives to express this idea. It states:

Rebi Abba said it is just as people say "A myrtle that stands among reeds is still a myrtle, and a myrtle it is called."

אמר רבי אבא: היינו דאמרי אינשי אסא דקאי ביני
חילפי אסא שמיה, ואסא קרו ליה.

Here we find the gemara employing hadassim to represent that spark of kedusha that can never be destroyed in a Jewish soul. Just as a myrtle is always a myrtle no matter its surroundings, so too a Jew is always a Jew no matter his actions. However, the same could have been said of any plant or flower, so why did Rebi Abba use a myrtle to express this idea? With the previous sources in mind, though, we can see that this is precisely what hadassim represent in the words of Chazal. It is the same idea as developed above, simply expressed on a parallel plane. In times of darkness, be it national or personal, Hashem ensures that a flicker of kedusha, a point of light will remain to keep the connection to Him alive. Just as the nation will always have at least a few tzadikim to nourish it even in the darkest of times, so too each individual will always have within himself some untarnished holiness to sustain himself even in periods of sin and distance from Hashem. Chazal saw this fundamental spark symbolized in the hadassim. Esther represented this spark of holiness in the exile in Persia; thus, she was appropriately named Hadassah.

An Eternal Covenant

What is the source for this fundamental point of kedusha, on both the individual and national level? How can we be certain that the nation will always have tzadikim, and the individual will never totally destroy his neshama? Ultimately, both of these points derive from the same source: the eternal covenant, the bris, between Hashem and Klal Yisrael. Hashem chose us as his people and promised that we would be His forever. Hashem will never totally turn His back on us and walk away; thus, we know that even if our relationship might falter, we will always be able to return to Him. There will always be the hadassim amongst us, those tzadikim who keep the relationship alive even in times of distance. On the personal level, the bris between Hashem and

Klal Yisrael endows each Jew with kedushas Yisrael. Moreover, just as the bris is eternal, so too the kedushas Yisrael of each person is eternal. It can never be destroyed. This is the source for that indestructible spark of kedusha, as represented by hadassim, in each and every Jew.

This eternal bris between Hashem and Klal Yisrael is also a major theme in Purim. In the introduction to his Mishnah Torah (after his abbreviated listing of the mitzvos), the Rambam, tangentially, describes the essence of Purim:

The prophets with the court established and commanded to read the megilla in its time in order to mention the praises of Hashem and the salvations He performed for us and that He was close to our pleas, in order to bless Him and praise Him, and in order to make it known to the future generations that it is true what He promised us in the Torah (Devarim 4:7) "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Hashem our God is near us whenever we call out to him?"

הנביאים עם בית דין תקנו וצוו לקרות המגלה בעונתה כדי להזכיר שבחיו של הקב"ה ותשועות שעשה לנו והיה קרוב לשועינו, כדי לברכו ולהללו וכדי להודיע לדורות הבאים שאמת מה שהבטיחנו בתורה (דברים ד:ז) כי מי גוי גדול אשר לו אלהים קרובים אליו כי"י אלהינו בכל קראנו אליו.

While others have stressed the focus on tefillah in this statement, I believe we see an additional idea. Why will Hashem always listen to our prayers? It is, as the pasuk which the Rambam quotes implies, because we are His people. He chose us eternally to be His nation, and therefore no matter the situation, even if we are not fully deserving, Hashem listens to our tefillos. The context of the Rambam's source is Moshe's speech to Klal Yisrael in which he reminds them of their bris with Hashem, that Hashem chose them as His people, and that they should not stray from the covenant. The Seforno explains this pasuk as follows, "Hashem is close to us whenever we call out to Him, and this demonstrates that He chose us from amongst all of the nations."

In the times of the original Purim, we had already sinned as a nation, resulting in the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and exile from Eretz Yisrael. We didn't learn our lesson, but continued to stray in Persia, attending Achashverosh's party and bowing down to Haman. Yet when our enemies stood up to destroy us, Hashem heard our tefillos, accepted our teshuva and saved us, ultimately returning us to a rebuilt Beis Hamikdash in Israel. Hashem didn't turn His back on us. Despite years of misdeeds and sin, He mercifully heard our cries, as He promised he would. According to the Rambam, this is the central idea of Purim. The holiday and megillah stand as everlasting testimonies to the fact that Hashem chose us as his people in an eternal covenant, and thus He will never be too far to hear our prayers.

With this understanding, we can appreciate another comment of the Rambam. Based on medrashim, he writes:

All of the books of the prophets and writings will become void in the times of the messiah except for Megillas Esther, for it will last like the five books of the Torah and the laws of the oral Torah which will never become void. Even though all memories of trouble will cease as it says (Yishayahu 65) "for the earlier troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes,"

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר הרי היא קיימת כחמשה חומשי תורה וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן בטליו לעולם, ואע"פ שכל זכרון הצרות יבטל שנאמר (ישעיהו סה) כי נשכחו הצרות הראשונות וכי נסתרו

*the days of Purim will never be annulled as it says (Esther 9)
"and these days of Purim will not pass from amongst the Jews
and their remembrance will not cease from their descendants."*

Rambam Hilchos Megilla 2:18

מעניי, ימי הפורים לא יבטלו
שנאמר (אסתר ט) וימי הפורים האלה
לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא
יסוף מזרעם
רמב"ם הלכות מגילה ב:יה

Even though all of the other books of Nach will become obsolete on some level, and even though all of the other holidays will cease, the book of Esther and the holiday of Purim will last forever. Rav Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav (at the end of his insights on Chumash), notes that the pesukim in the megillah (9:27-28) imply that this was part of the Jews' acceptance at the time of the miracle. They specifically accepted upon themselves to celebrate Purim in thanksgiving to Hashem forever, even past the time that other holidays would no longer be celebrated. Why was it necessary or even fitting for Klal Yisrael to accept upon themselves such an everlasting obligation? Based on what we have explained, a central idea in Purim is the eternal covenant between Hashem and us. Specifically, we are recognizing and thanking Hashem for His promise that we will always be His people and that no matter how long or hard the galus may be, we will always be able to return to Him. Therefore, it is very appropriate that in recognition of Hashem's eternal promise to us, we respond in kind with an eternal holiday of thanksgiving which like Hashem's promise will never become void.

Yeshayahu's Hadassim

In his prophecies of consolation, Yishayahu reassures Klal Yisrael that although they may be exiled, Hashem will ultimately redeem them. In these exalted lines (found in the haftoras for Parshas Ki Teitzei and mincha of a fast day), Yishayahu says "For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great mercy I will gather you back... Mountains may depart and hills shake, but my kindness will not depart and my covenant of peace will not shake" (54:7, 10). Moreover, Klal Yisrael does not have to worry that these prophecies will remain unfulfilled, "for as the rain and snow fall from the sky and do not return there without watering the ground, causing it to sprout and grow... so too my word which leaves my mouth will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve for what it was sent" (55:10, 11). Hashem's covenant and His assurance of redemption remain binding forever. In one of the peaks of this powerful, dramatic section Yeshayahu describes the ultimate miraculous return to Zion.

You will go out in joy and you will be led out in peace. Mountains and hills will burst forth before you in song and all of the trees of the field will clap their hands. In place of the thorn brush, cypresses will grow; in place of the nettles myrtles will grow. It will be for Hashem a memorial, an eternal sign that will not be cut off.

Yeshayahu 55:12-13

כי בשמחה תצאו ובשלום תובלון
ההרים והגבעות יפצחו לפניכם רנה
וכל עצי השדה ימחאו כף: תחת
הנעצוץ יעלה ברוש ותחת הסרפד
יעלה הדס והיה לה' לשם לאות
עולם לא יכרת:
ישעיהו נה:יב-יג

Yishayahu chooses the imagery of hadassim as the symbol of the eternal bris which guarantees our redemption. This, in turn, brings everything together. We see that hadassim not only represent the indestructible point of kedusha in Klal Yisrael and every individual Jew, but they also symbolize our eternal bris with Hashem which is the ultimate source of it all. From a

different perspective, Yeshayahu employs hadassim to symbolize the bris of the future redemption, and Zechariah uses hadassim to represent the tzadikim of the galus who ensure that redemption. Similarly, Chazal teach us that these are the ideas behind Esther's name, Hadassah. We are not the first ones, though, to connect these dots between Yishayahu's hadassim with Zechariah's hadassim with Esther and Purim. Here we return full circle to the gemara which already makes these connections explicit. It homiletically explains the pasuk above as follows:

In place of the "nettles" – in place of Vashti the wicked the granddaughter of Nevuchadnezer the wicked who burnt the House of Hashem... "myrtles will grow" this is Esther the righteous who is called Hadassah, "a memorial for Hashem" this is the reading of the megillah, "an eternal sign that will not be cut off" this is the holiday of Purim.

Megilla 10b

תחת הסרפד - תחת ושתי הרשעה בת
 בנו של נבוכדנצר הרשע, ששרף
 רפידת בית ה'... יעלה הדס - זו אסתר
 הצדקת, שנקראת הדסה... והיה לה'
 לשם - זו מקרא מגילה, לאות עולם
 לא יכרת - אלו ימי פורים
מגילה י'

In these few lines, the gemara beautifully weaves together many of the ideas discussed above: the everlasting nature of Purim, Esther the tzadikes of the galus, and the symbol of the hadas. With just this one passage of gemara, it is impossible to see the significance of all of these connections, but hopefully with the background and explanations of above, we have uncovered at least some of its depth.

Why Hadassim?

We have tried to demonstrate that hadassim in Tanach and Chazal symbolize the everlasting bris between Hashem and Klal Yisrael which expresses itself in the fact that each individual can never lose his kedushas yisrael, the nation will always have tzadikim, and no galus can make us too distant for tefillah and redemption. The original question remains: why were hadassim, as opposed to any other plant or flower, chosen for this symbol? What makes the hadassim uniquely fitting to represent these ideas? We shall suggest several reasons that make hadassim the perfect symbol.

In the context of Sukkos, the Torah (Vayikra 23:40) refers to hadassim as "ענף עץ עבות". The word "עבות" is a difficult one. Rashi, based on the gemara (Sukka 32b) understands it to mean chain-like. He therefore explains that this phrase refers to branches that are "woven like cords and ropes – this is the myrtle." The gemara puts it this way, "a braid that resembles a chain – this is a hadas." In other words, the hadassim with their overlapping leaves that continuously cover the entire branch resemble links in a chain or a braided rope. This is how the Torah describes and identifies the hadassim. This resemblance to a chain or woven rope, with its associations of strength and continuity, make it an appropriate symbol for the unbreakable bris that extends over the never ending chain of Jewish generations.

In a famous interpretation, the medrash (Vayikra Rabba 30:12) compares the four species that we take on Sukkos to four different types of Jews. The hadassim which have a fragrant smell, but no taste, parallel those Jews who perform the mitzvot and other good deeds, but do not study or know the Torah with any depth. There are the pure and simple Jews who don't know the details of halacha very well and have not studied the classics of hashkafa and machshava that

reveal the meaning of the mitzvot. They simply perform good deeds in purity and holiness because deep down they know that is what Hashem wants of them. This basic impulse implanted by Hashem in our neshamos, to do what is good and right is that same indestructible point of kedushas Yisrael discussed above. The pure neshama deep within every Jew that impels him to do that which is proper and correct is the same spark that can never be totally destroyed. Thus, hadassim, with their fragrance and no flavor, paralleling good deeds without a deep understanding, make a fitting symbol for the spark of a neshama a Jew can never lose.

There is another level of significance to the fact that hadassim are characterized as having a beautiful fragrance. The B'nei Yissaschar (Purim Ma'amar 2) points out that the sin of eating from the etz hada'as involved all of the senses except for one. The pesukim describe that Chava saw the tree was beautiful, she listened to the words of the nachash, she took the fruit in her hand and ate it. However, we do not find in the Chumash or anywhere in Chazal that the sense of smell was involved. In other words, the B'nei Yissaschar writes, our sense of smell is the only sense that remained pure and untainted from the first sin. He uses this idea to explain many ideas in Chazal, but it fits beautifully into the themes we have developed as well. If our sense of smell represents that point of purity that remains inside of us, and hadassim are identified primarily with their aromatic quality, then hadassim become a perfect symbol for the purity and kedusha in each Jewish neshama that can never be lost.

Purim reaffirms our everlasting covenant with Hashem. No matter how far we fall or veer in the dark galus, we will always have tzadikim, talmidei chachamim, and leaders who will teach and inspire us until we merit the promised redemption. Similarly, on a personal level, each of us will always have an indestructible spark of purity and holiness deep inside of ourselves. Therefore, whether it's one mistake we keep repeating or a whole pattern in our life that seems to constantly entrap us, we know that we will always have the ability and strength within ourselves to make amends and change for the better. Even regarding someone who seems to have strayed completely from the proper path, the gemara declares, "ישראל הוא", "He is Jewish"! All of these ideas are central lessons of Purim, and all of them are wrapped up in the symbol of hadassim. Thus, it is the perfect name for the heroine of Purim: "Esther she is Hadassah."