

# Genetics & Epigenetics<sup>1</sup> in the Purim Miracle

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The *megilla* states the following about Mordechai's lineage:

*There was a **Judean** man in Shushan, the capital, whose name was Mordechai, son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish, a **Benjaminite**.*

**Esther 2:5**

איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו  
מרדכי בן יאיר בן שמעי בן קיש איש  
ימיני.  
אסתר ב:ה

The Talmud, noting that the verse seems to refer to Mordechai as both a Yehudi and a Yemini, comments:

*He is called a Judean, implying that he is from the tribe of Judah and he is called a Benjaminite, implying that he is from the tribe of Benjamin? ... Rabbah bar bar Chana said in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi: His father was from Benjamin and his mother from Judah.*

**Megillah 12b**

קרי ליה יהודי אלמא מיהודה קאתי,  
וקרי ליה ימיני אלמא מבנימין קאתי  
... אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי  
יהושע בן לוי: אביו מבנימין ואמו  
מיהודה.  
מגילה יב:

Mordechai's genealogy traces back to his paternal line from Binyamin and his maternal line from Yehudah. The traits that Mordechai inherited from his father and his mother express themselves in his refusal to bow to Haman:

*All of the king's servants that were in the king's gate bowed down and prostrated themselves before Haman because that is what the king ordered, but Mordechai would not bow down and wouldn't prostrate himself. The servants of the king that were in the king's gate said to Mordechai: why are you violating the commandment of the king? As they told him [to bow] every day and he didn't listen to them, they told Haman to see whether Mordechai's word would stand for he told them that he was a Judean.*

**Esther 3:2-4**

וכל עבדי המלך אשר-בשער המלך  
כרעים ומשתחוים להמן כי כן צוה לו  
המלך ומרדכי לא יכרע, ולא ישתחוה.  
ויאמרו עבדי המלך אשר בשער  
המלך למרדכי מדוע אתה עובר את  
מצות המלך ויהי כאמרם אליו יום  
ויום ולא שמע אליהם ויגידו להמן  
לראות היעמדו דברי מרדכי כי-הגיד  
להם אשר-הוא יהודי.  
אסתר ג:ב-ד

<sup>1</sup> **Epigenesis:** The regulation of gene expression without rendering the DNA sequences. The modification of future behavior of the offspring by the gestational mother even if she is not the genetic mother, through chemical processes that turn parts of the genome off and on at strategic times. The epigenetic instructions can be inherited by future generations.

The king ordered all to bow to Haman but Mordechai would not because he was a **Yehudi**— from the tribe of Yehudah. The Midrash elaborates:

*They said to [Mordechai]: You should know that you are going to cause us to be killed. He responded: Because I am a Yehudi. They said: But we find that your ancestors bowed to his (Haman's) ancestor (Esav) as it states (Bereishis 33:3) "And they bowed seven times." He said: Benjamin, my father, was in his mother's womb at the time and he did not bow and I am his descendant as it states, "A Benjaminite," and just as my ancestor didn't bow, I too will not bow and will not prostrate myself.*

**Yalkut Shimoni, Esther no. 854**

אמרו לו הוי יודע שאתה מפילנו  
בחרב ... אמר שאני יהודי, א"ל והרי  
מצינו אבותיך שהשתחוו לאבותיו  
שנאמר וישתחו ארצה שבע פעמים,  
א"ל בנימין אבי במעי אמו היה ולא  
השתחוה ואני בן בנו שנאמר איש  
ימיני, וכשם שלא כרע אבי כך אני  
איני כורע ולא משתחוה.  
ילקוט שמעוני, אסתר ס' תתרנד

Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman was based on his being a descendant of Binyamin who didn't bow down to Esav while he was in Rachel's womb. The epigenetic contribution of Rachel should be noted. The abhorrence of idolatry as described in the Torah (Bereishis 31:34) was Mordechai's genetic or epigenetic inheritance from Rachel via Binyamin.

Mordechai's self-identification as a "Yehudi," heir to the genetic traits of Yehudah ben Yacov, offers additional insights into his behavior as leader of the Jews facing world-wide annihilation—the threatened Final Solution. The tragedy that befell the family of Yacov after the decision to sell Yosef into slavery in Egypt is recorded in the Midrash:

*R. Shmuel bar Nachman opened [with the verse (Yirmiyahu 29:11)] "Because I know the thoughts." The tribes were busy with the sale of Yosef, Yosef was busy wearing sackcloth and fasting, Reuven was busy wearing sackcloth and fasting, Yacov was busy wearing sackcloth and fasting and Yehudah was busy finding a wife and Hashem was busy creating the light of the Messiah.*

**Bereishis Rabbah 85:1**

רבי שמואל בר נחמן פתח כי אנכי ידעתי את  
המחשבות, שבטים היו עסוקין במכירתו של  
יוסף, ויוסף היה עסוק בשקו ובתעניתו,  
ראובן היה עסוק בשקו ובתעניתו, ויעקב  
היה עסוק בשקו ובתעניתו, ויהודה היה  
עסוק ליקח לו אשה, והקב"ה היה עוסק  
בורא אורו של מלך המשיח.  
**בראשית רבה פה:א**

The family of Yacov was despondent, crushed by the tragedy of the enslavement of Yosef. Remorse, guilt and hopelessness characterized the psychological condition of Yacov and his sons. All except Yehudah, who bore the most responsibility for the decision to enslave Yosef to an Egyptian master. Yehudah left home to seek a wife! Hashem took note and decided it is time to prepare for the Messiah!

Instead of bemoaning the fate of the family, Yehudah rose from the ashes to start again. Many raise a family with the lessons of the past as a guide for the future. Hashem took note of Yehudah's fortitude and decided that he should be the progenitor of Moshiach. Indeed, so it was. The hand of Hashem led Yehudah back to Tamar; to father her twins, Peretz and Zerach. Peretz, the son of Yehudah and Tamar, was the antecedent of Dovid, King of Israel, from whom will arise Moshiach ben Dovid.

Mordechai, the “Yehudi,” the “Yemini,” carrying the genes and epigenes of Yehudah and Binyamin, assumed the leadership of the Nation of Hashem to lead them from darkness to light.

The lessons of Purim are many. Halacha joins Medrash to remind us that Megilas Esther is not only a record of a historical event in the life of our nation. It also defines and evaluates nationhood. The “story of Purim” reaches a climax when Mordechai instructs Esther to risk her life by entering the palace without being summoned—a violation of a royal decree punishable by death. An axiom of Torah law is that human life is of infinite worth. One life cannot be sacrificed to save another life. Why did Mordechai violate this axiom in his instruction to Esther? This question is the subject of a responsum by the first chief rabbi of Israel, Hagaon Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, recorded in *Mishpat Kohen* no. 143. In a dispute with R. Zalman Piness, Rav Kook declares that it is forbidden to risk one life even to save many lives (if life is of infinite worth, one infinity equals all infinity). He dismisses the evidence from Esther’s risking her life to save many lives, by noting that the nation of Israel is more than the sum of its parts. Haman’s plan was to destroy the nation of Israel so that it would cease to exist. Rav Kook notes:

*It is self-evident that [when the survival of] the nation of Israel [is endangered], there is no need for a ruling of a beth din [to permit sacrificing one’s life to save our nation].*

מסברא פשוט הוא דלכלל ישראל א"צ היתר ב"ד.

This principle is enumerated by the great *posek* of generations past, Rav Yechezkel Landau:

*Esther was different because she was saving the entire nation of Israel from Hodu until Kush. We cannot equate saving a group of individuals to saving the entire nation of Israel, young and old.*

**Noda B’Yehudah, Tinyana, Yoreh De’ah no. 161**

ואסתר שאני שהיתה להצלת כלל ישראל מהודו ועד כוש ואין למדין הצלת יחידים מהצלת כלל ישראל מנער ועד זקן.  
נודע ביהודה, תנינא, יו"ד ס' קסא

Indeed, Jewish nationhood is of greater worth than the infinite worth of the many. The two should not be equated.

The nations of the world understand the significance of nationhood. Countries where Jews live in freedom refuse to acknowledge our claim to Jewish nationhood. Indeed our nationhood is under attack today as “in the days of Mordechai and Esther.” “Think tanks” analyze the possibility of a Middle East without the State of Israel, whose existence asserts our claim to Jewish nationhood.

Our sages added to the statutory *tefillos* [prayers] on Purim an expression of our thankfulness for Hashem’s protection of *Am Yisrael* during “the days of Mordechai and Esther.” Implied is our fervent prayer for His continued protection. This *tefillah* must be joined with our personal commitment to support the State of Israel, the manifestation of Jewish nationhood in our time.