

THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER TORAH TO-GO®

Established by Rabbi Hyman and Ann Arbesfeld

February 2013 • Purim 5773



A Project of Yeshiva University's
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Featuring Divrei Torah from

Mrs. Nechama Price

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Rabbi Dr. Moshe D. Tendler

Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Weinberg

**Plus collected insights from members of the
Masters of Arts in Biblical and Talmudic
Interpretation program at Stern College for Women**



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With great joy it is my privilege to announce that the “The Torah To-Go®” series has been endowed by Rabbi Hyman and Ann Arbesfeld in loving tribute to Ann’s parents Benjamin and Rose Berger z”l. We gratefully recognize that their partnership makes possible the opportunity for Yeshiva to share Torah with tens of thousands of people both through the Abraham Arbesfeld Kollel Yom Rishon and Millie Arbesfeld Midreshet Yom Rishon and now through Torah To-Go. While a special tribute reflecting the lives of Benjamin and Rose Berger z”l and honoring the Arbesfeld family is being prepared for the Pesach issue of Torah To-Go, we are thankful for their support making this and future issues of Torah To-Go possible. May we continue to grow from strength to strength together!

The holiday of Purim and the Book of Esther have several unique features that make this book of *Tanakh* and this holiday distinct from all others:

1. The Book of Esther is the only book in *Tanakh* that does not have the name of God mentioned in it.
2. The Rambam writes in the Laws of Megillah and Chanukah (chap. 2: 18) the following: *All the Books of the Prophets and those of Ketuvim (Books and the Sacred Writings) will cease [to be part of the canonized text] during the messianic era except the Book of Esther. It will continue to exist just as the Five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah that will never cease. Although ancient troubles will be remembered no longer, as it is written "The 'troubles of the past are forgotten and hidden from my eyes. (Isaiah 65:16), the days of Purim will not be abolished, as it is written: "These days of Purim shall never be repealed among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never cease from their descendants" (Esther 9:28).*
3. Many rabbinic masters translate *Yom ha-Kippurim*, the Hebrew name for the Day of Atonement, as a play on words. They suggest that the name means *Yom Ki-Purim* - The Day of Atonement should be like Purim (see the comments of the Vilan Gaon in *Likutei HaGra* (Warsaw) p. 308 and the writings of Rav Hutner in the *Pachad Yitzchak* (Purim, *inyan* 6:6, 8, 11, 21: 1). What is the connection between the Day of Atonement, the most solemn day of the year, and the day of Purim which is marked by joy, laughter, the exchange of food and drink, and the mandate to feast?

The Rambam gives special notice to the Book of Esther, recognizing that its role will continue even during Messianic times, for this book of the Bible is the key to bringing the Messiah. Nowhere in the Megillah do we see Mordechai or Esther receiving direct instructions from Hashem. Yet, their courage and tenacity is based on their commitment to the values of Torah; their actions are not predicated on inspirational prophecy but something more important: an inner conviction to the norms and mores of Judaism. What will bring the Messianic days and what will be celebrated in its eternal era? It is the capacity to transform reality through the inner voice of Torah ideals that the Jew must feel in his/her heart. The Book of Esther may not have God's name in it but the experience is so critical and so transformational that the Rambam suggests that it will be celebrated even after the coming of the Messiah. The spiritual connection between Purim and the Day of Atonement is not predicated on similar ritual practices but on the recognition that *Yom ha-Kippurim*, is a successful religious experience ONLY when the spiritual connection that the Jews in the Book of Esther were able to discover and act upon, a personal

and communal rendezvous with God, occurs on our High Holidays. The "at-onement" with God that happened in Shushan, the ability for the community to feel God's presence in their very beings is the same transformative experience that we wish for ourselves on the High Holidays.

It is with this spirit that we must engage in the reading of the Book of Esther, considered eternal for its precious message; as we each search for a purposeful life. As Mordechai tells each of us (Esther 4: 14), we dare not be silent in our lives for we have the wonderful opportunity to each shape our own destinies, that of the Jewish people, and the world community.

We at Yeshiva hope that the Torah found in this printed and virtual sefer will serve to enhance our Purim, inspiring us to integrate some of the holiday's messages into our daily lives.

Purim Sameiach,

Rabbi Kenneth Brander

The David Mitzner Dean, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

Secret Identities

Mrs. Nechama Price

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Megilat Esther is full of secrets. Esther is secretive of her identity and her relationship to Mordechai. She masks her intentions behind hosting the king at two parties. In fact, Esther's hiding of her true identity is reinforced in the very sequencing of the verses of our *megila*. Before she's selected as queen, the *megila* records her secret (Esther 2:10), and repeats it just after her elevation to queen, just 10 verses later (Esther 2:20). And it's not just Esther; other instances in the story abound! The king is secretive of the identity of whom he intends to honor when he solicits advice from Haman. Haman hides his true intentions of taking revenge on Mordechai from the king. It seems everyone in the *megila* has secrets!

It is no surprise that the *sefer* itself is called Megilat Esther, the *megila* of hidden things, and that the heroine (whose true name is Hadasah) is named אסתר (from the word סתר-secret).¹ This focus on secrecy demands that we understand the reason for her—and all of the other—secrets in the *megila*, and what messages are being conveyed.

To help us in this endeavor, let's start by taking a look at the role of secrets in other episodes in Tanach. By appreciating the role of secrets in those stories, we might gain insight into their role here in our *megila*.

Personal Benefit: Spouse or Self?

The Spouse's Goals

One of the earliest episodes of secretive behavior involves Sarah Immeinu. Twice in Bereishit, Sarah maintains an alias (Avraham's sister), rather than her true identity (Avraham's wife).² This occurs when Avraham and Sarah, in times of famine, leave Israel and travel to Egypt (Bereishit 12) and in Grar (Bereishit 20), respectively. Why was she secretive? The Torah tells us the reason—Avraham feared for his life. He feared that if the Egyptians knew she was his wife, they might kill him to get to her. At least at face value, the secrecy was for *his* safety and protection.

The similarities between this story and our *megila* could offer us insight into Esther's secretive nature. Sarah and Esther are both described as very beautiful women,³ taken against their will by a foreign

¹ The Gemara (*Megilah* 13a) explains that because she hid her identity, she is called Esther.

רבי יהודה אומר: הדסה שמה, ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה, שנאמר אין אסתר מגדת את עמה. R. Yehuda said: Her name is Hadasah and why is she called Esther? Because she would conceal her information as it states "Esther would not speak about her nation."

² Ramban (Bereishit 12:11) even adds the possibility that they used this plan in every place that they visited. Only twice, though, was it worth mentioning in the Torah. In the other instances, the plan worked, so no need to retell the story.

³ Sarah: "Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon." Bereishit 12:11

Esther: And the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look upon. Esther 2:7

king for marriage,⁴ and both keep their identities secretive prior to, and after, they are taken by the king. It is possible that Esther modeled her behavior after Sarah, and for a comparable reason—to protect Mordechai. Mordechai, the court Jew, knew of many enemies who wished to harm the Jews. In that regard, it is reasonable that Mordechai kept his own Jewish identity a secret to avoid danger to his life. Only after Haman discovers Mordechai's Jewish identity (Esther 3:4-6), are all the Jewish people in danger.

In fact, it may not have only been Esther who mimicked the behaviors of the Avot. Mordechai, too, appears to emulate the behavior of Avraham Aveinu. Like Avraham, who tells Sarah what to do, Mordechai is the one to tell Esther to hide her identity (Esther 2:10, 20). Further, Mordechai's motives may have contained the same goals as Avraham's. Rashi informs us that Avraham's plan contained two goals: saving his life and gaining wealth.⁵ Focusing on the latter, the Netziv adds that Avraham's primary goal was attaining a position of power in the country. Similarly, Mordechai may have thought that hiding Esther's identity could better facilitate his rise to nobility (via Esther's increased stature). If so, the ensuing plot in our *megila* validates Mordechai's idea. First, he utilizes his access to Esther to inform the king of the plot of Bigtan and Teresh. Second, at the end of the *megila*, he is given the ring of the king and becomes second in command.⁶

The secrecy of Esther and Mordechai, when viewed through the prism of the experience of Sarah and Avraham, highlights the importance of secrecy in helping someone else. In these cases, it was Esther and Sarah helping Mordechai and Avraham. However, other stories from the Navi highlight a different dimension to secrecy—protecting one's self.

Secrecy for Self Preservation

Two stories in the Navi highlight the role of secrecy as a method of self preservation. The first, the episode of David's apparent erratic behavior in front of King Achish; the second, the secret powers of Shimshon's hair.

As David is fleeing from Shaul, he runs to the land of the Plishtim, intending to remain there undetected. Unfortunately, King Achish discovers David in his land and captures him. To avoid almost certain captivity, David acts in a bizarre fashion, thus tricking the King into believing he was not actually David. Acting this way leads to David's release (Shmuel I 21:11-15).

Shimshon is a personality with many secrets who lives during the period of the Shoftim. His most unique secret is the "magical" power of his uncut hair: it gives him incredible strength. While the Plishtim are unaware of his secret, his hair is left untouched and Shimshon is safe. As soon as he tells Delilah about the source of his strength, she cuts off his hair and the Plishtim capture him.

⁴ Sarah: And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Bereishit 12:15

Esther: Esther was taken into the king's house. Esther 2:8

⁵ Rashi is relating to the double language in the *pasuk*: "למען ייטב לי בעבורך" (that it may be well with me for thy sake) and "והייתה נפשי בגללך" (and that my soul may live because of thee). He writes "למען ייטב לי בעבורך - יתנו לי מתנות, And that my soul may live because of thee—they will give me gifts.

⁶ It is also possible that Avraham's plan was to ensure that he survives, so that he can subsequently save Sarah by rescuing her from the palace in the middle of the night. Similarly, R. Avigdor Kohen Tzedek writes that Mordechai's plan was to break into the palace and save Esther, and therefore she had to keep her identity secret, so that no one would connect her to Mordechai and be suspicious of him (R. Avigdor Kohen Tzedek, Esther 2:10).

These stories offer insights into understanding the secrets of Esther. Both she and David are in precarious situations, separated from the rest of the Jewish nation, and taken by the king of a foreign nation. David hides his true identity in order to save his life; so does Esther. Knowing how whimsically King Achashverosh kills people in his lands (such as his first queen, Vashti), when taken to the king, Esther fears for her life.⁷ Therefore, Esther realizes she must keep her identity as a Jew a secret. This might explain why Esther is terrified when she finally reveals her identity to the king. Considering David's experience, Esther recognizes the value of secrecy in protection from foreign kings.

Shimshon's story, though, offers a different insight. Specifically, that story highlights the danger of sharing a secret too early and to the wrong person. Shimshon reveals the source of his strength, his life-long secret, to a woman he loves. She, in turn, reveals his secret to his enemy and has him killed. Esther is terrified with sharing her secret even to Achashverosh (thus asking the Jewish people to fast for three days before revealing her nationality to the king), for fear that it could lead to her enemy, Haman, finding out.⁸

Together, these two stories focus on the use of secrets for self-preservation. However, there are other episodes where secrecy is used for broader personal gains.

Personal Gain

When Shaul HaMelech is about to start the final battle with the Plishtim, he desires to communicate with Shmuel (who had already died). When meeting with the *ba'alat ov*, the woman with powers to summon the dead, he does not identify himself as Shaul. In fact, Shaul resorts to dressing up as a commoner (Shmuel I 28:8-12). Why the hidden identity? Shaul had previously ruled that anyone caught practicing magic in his kingdom would be killed. Nobody, knowingly in the presence of Shaul, would openly bring Shmuel up from the dead. What would Esther learn from this episode with Shaul? The answer is the simple usefulness of secrecy for personal gain.

Returning back to stories of secrecy in Sefer Bereishit, Leah Immeinu hides her identity by pretending to be her sister Rachel in order to marry Yaakov (Bereishit 29:23). On its face, this is clearly for her own selfish benefit. Similarly, years earlier Yaakov Aveinu hid his identity from his father Yitzchak (pretending to be his brother Esav) in order to gain the *bracha* of his father (Bereishit 27:24). Again, at face value, Yaakov is secretive for his own benefit. Considering Esther's experiences, she, too, might be secretive for her own benefit, to marry the king.⁹ Possibly, she worried that being openly Jewish would hinder her ambitions. After being selected

⁷ This is suggested by Ibn Ezra 2:10, who explains *מפני שכל היהודים היו נבזים בעיני המלכות*, since all Jews were despised by the king, Mordechai was scared for her safety.

⁸ Both Shimshon and Esther maintain other secrets. On the way to marry his first wife, Shimshon kills a lion and sees bees making honey inside the carcass. The *pasuk* points out that he keeps this a secret and uses it as a riddle on his wedding day, thus challenging all his guests to figure out his riddle (Shoftim 14:6). So too, Esther keeps her plan of accusing Haman a secret until the perfect moment to reveal her secret where there would be gain for her.

⁹ This is a *machloket* between Rashi and Ibn Ezra (Esther 2:10). Rashi asserts that Esther's secret was to ensure that she would not be chosen as queen. By not revealing her family, Achashverosh would assume she is from a lowly family and that she is too embarrassed to identify her background. However, Ibn Ezra claims that she wanted to be chosen as queen, and kept quiet in order to ensure that she was chosen!

queen, she retains her secret to maintain favor with the king.¹⁰ Unlike Vashti, who was rebellious and disagreeable, Esther seems willing to make herself into whatever Achashverosh wants her to be, without any ties to any other people.¹¹

There may be a different way to understand the stories of Leah and Yaakov, and their relevance to Esther. Both Leah and Yaakov are secretive, or deceitful, about their identity, just as noted above. However, their intentions may not have been selfish at all. Rather, their goals were for the good of the Jewish people. They considered their actions necessary as part of the historic destiny of the people. Clearly, Esther could have seen these behaviors of secrecy to protect the destiny of the Jewish people and modeled her plan accordingly.

We will now point our attention to other situations—where people clearly act in secrecy for the good of the Jewish people in Tanach—and how they might impact our understanding of the stories in our *megila*.¹²

Helping the Jewish People

As Shmuel Aleph draws to an end, David pretends to be an ally of king Achish, promising to help fight Shaul and the Jewish people (Shmuel I ch. 29). In reality, David was masking his true intention of *saving* Shaul and the Jewish people. His plan was to turn on his “ally” Achish when the battle was to begin, and to fight on behalf of the Jewish people.

Similarly, Esther wanted to be queen not just for her own prestige, but to help the Jewish people by being in a position of influence. For that matter, many Jewish leaders in Tanach serve the Jewish people by being in the palace of the (non-Jewish) king, including Yosef and Daniel. By suggesting she attempt to speak to the king on behalf of the Jewish people, Mordechai is simply reminding her of this responsibility (Esther 4:13-14).

Although Esther may have learned from David about the value of secrets, the truly similar personality and experiences to Esther was Yosef HaTzaddik. Both are described as good looking, using very similar language. (Bereishit 39:6; Esther 2:7). Both are orphaned—Yosef lost his mother and Esther is orphaned (Bereishit 35:19; Esther 2:7). Both are “jailed” before they meet the king—Esther is forced to remain in the palace as she prepares for her meeting with the king, whereas Yosef is actually jailed. Both have personalities that are charming and find the favor of others (Bereishit 39:4,21; Esther 2:9,15,17). Their personalities enable them to attain meaningful positions in the palace of a foreign king. Both keep their identities secret until a specific point in time when they reveal it to ensure the safety and survival of the Jewish people. Yosef reveals his identity in order to bring his family down to Egypt, and feeds them during a famine and saves them from starvation. Esther reveals her identity in order to save the Jewish people from destruction at the hands of Haman.

¹⁰ Rabbeinu Bachya (Esther 2:10) furthers this point: she keeps her secret to allow her to maintain ה' תורתה in secret. Since no one knew she was Jewish, no one realized that she was observing kashrut and Shabbos. If they knew she was Jewish, they may have stopped her from doing this.

¹¹ See Rabbi Dovid Forhman's book: *The Queen You Thought You Knew* pg. 39.

¹² Ralbag (Esther 2:10) observes that Mordechai knew she was going to save the Jewish people in the future, and that she needed to keep her identity a secret in order to be able to do that.

All these other instances of secrecy in Tanach add dimensions of understanding Esther's quest to maintain a private identity. From Esther's helping Mordechai, to her helping herself, to her helping the Jewish people, we have seen how secrecy adds layers of meaning to our understanding of the *megila*.

However, there is altogether a different approach to the *megila*. Rather than treat the secrets as the focus, let's consider the possibility that they are there to highlight Esther's growth and change. The secrets are not the goal, but they allow us to view Esther's growth from the quiet, passive character, to one of action and bravery.

Secrecy and Passivity against Action & Bravery: ונהפך הוא

The entire Purim story can be characterized by the words ונהפך הוא! Everything in the *megila* turns on its head—from the start of the story to its end. Of course, the biggest change in the *megila* is Esther! She is extraordinarily passive at the outset. She doesn't share her identity. She refuses all makeup and any preparation for the king. She doesn't say anything as she waits to see the king for three months, waiting dutifully to be summoned. Mordechai practically yells at her in order to coax a response from her when the Jews appear to be in trouble. Esther's passivity could be what is hinted at in her name, אסתר; her real identity is **hidden** because her passivity almost leads her to miss out on her destiny.

She's not alone in being naturally passive, as this personality trait commonly expresses itself among people from Shevet Binyamin. In fact, Binyamin in Bereishit never performs any actions at all! He allows his father to negotiate his ability to go down to Mitzrayim. Upon being accused of stealing the golden goblet, he offers no defense, rather Yehudah has to stand up to Yosef. Throughout Bereishit, the only action that Binyamin does is to cry on his brother Yosef after Yosef reveals himself and cries on Binyamin first (Bereishit 45:14).

So too, Shaul, who is from Shevet Binyamin, is extremely passive during much of his reign. When he is told that he is going to be king, he hides from his destiny, like Esther. After Shmuel anoints him privately, Shaul doesn't reveal the secret to his family (Shmuel I 10:16). When the day comes for him to be chosen publicly, Shaul is hiding in a closet (Shmuel I 10:22). Even after being anointed king, he continues to act this way. For instance, he allows the Jewish people to pressure him, thus preventing him from waiting the full seven days for Shmuel to come before fighting the Plishtim (Shmuel I 13:11). He acquiesces to the Jewish people's plan to spare king Agag and the animals of Amalek (Shmuel I 15:24). Similarly, he proves too fearful to act when Goliath threatens the Jewish people (Shmuel I 17:11).

Esther, like those others from her Shevet Binyamin before her, hides from her destiny. She hides in her home until she is taken by the king's soldiers. She does nothing to make herself more desirable to be chosen by the king, but against her will, he does select her. She does nothing in the palace, hiding away from the world, until Mordechai coerces her to do something.

It is precisely in this context—of fear and passivity—that the secrecy plays the role of ונהפך הוא, and highlights the enormous change that Esther experiences. She practically changes her entire personality! She becomes an active Esther! She saves Mordechai from Haman, who had plans of hanging him. She approaches Achashverosh to save the Jewish people from death. She even

returns to Achashverosh a second time to get permission for the people of Shushan to fight their enemies for an extra day. She writes the story of Purim and creates the holiday of Purim! All of this activity is the complete contrast to the Esther we know from the earlier parts of the story described above.

In sum, passive Esther follows directions and does what she is told. She hides her identity because Mordechai tells her to *אָשֶׁר לֹא-תִגִּיד* (Esther 2:10). Reinvented and active, the new Esther tells others what to do. *וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא*! Mordechai now listens to her and does what she tells him to do *וַיַּעַשׂ, כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר* (Esther 4:17).

Esther is providing us with *וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא*! The message to us is clear. Purim is the day to break out of our inaction and become people of action, who do the right things and help others. People should be inspired to fight their inner selves, which tells them to sit back and let others take active rolls, and finally, for us to all rise to our full potential as Esther modeled for us in the Purim story.

Esther Hamalkah:

The key to unlocking another layer of the Purim story¹

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The following questions, which may seem obvious, hold the key to unlocking some of the great mysteries in Megillat Esther.

- 1) Why did the *megilla* include at the beginning the story of Vashti and her party and the punishment she subsequently received? We could have simply missed out this detail, as the focus is on the king getting a new wife and not really on the details of the “old” wife. Why is Vashti relevant to the whole story?
- 2) Why does Esther think that she will only be able to change the mind of the king at a wine party?
- 3) Why did she invite the king to both parties and not make the whole revelation at only one party?
- 4) Why did she invite Haman to both parties and not just speak to the king alone at the first party to plead for her people?
- 5) Why did Esther keep her Jewish identity so secretive, even after she is crowned as the queen?
- 6) Why is Haman made to belittle himself while leading the horse of Mordechai, as commanded by the king?

In order to answer all of these questions with one basic idea, it is important to recognize that throughout the *megilla* there is a “*mila mancha*”—a key word that appears over and over again. This is the word “*hamalkah*”—the queen. Either the use of this word or its omission in certain key places in the story will give us a new and deeper insight into the whole story and the focus of the *megilla* as we are to understand it.

To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on.

Esther 1:11

לְהַבִּיאַ אֶת – וְשֵׁתִי הַמְּלָכָה. לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ
— בְּכֶתֶר מְלָכוֹת: לְהִרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים
אֶת – יָפִיָּהּ, כִּי — טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא.
אֶסְתֵּר אִיא

Vashti was one of the four women who “had rulership in the world”—Vashti, Jezebel, Ataliah and Shmirmith (wife of Nebuchadnezer) (*Esther Raba* 1:9). She shows incredible independence,

¹ This article is based on a shiur I heard in London in 1991 given by Dr. Meir Gruzman of Bar Ilan University while he was on a sabbatical break in the UK. His lecture on Megillat Esther absolutely changed my perspective on so many issues in the *megilla* and I will try to convey his ideas with the nuances that I received from this wonderful teacher.

not only in having her own party but also in refusing to appear before the king when summoned to his party. According to Rava (*Megilla* 12b) she even verbally abuses her husband by calling him “her father’s stable boy.” He doesn’t know how to react when she refuses to appear and he calls together his seven-man council to decide what to do about Vashti, as he is unable to make such a decision on his own. When we see her description in chapter one, it is always with the extra word “*hamalkah*” to show us who really had the power in the kingdom. Her husband was able to be who he was because of her and she never let him forget it.

But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s commandment by the chamberlains; therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Esther 1:12

וּתְמָאן הַמְּלָכָה וַשְׁתִּי, לְבוֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ,
אֲשֶׁר, בְּיַד הַסְּרִיסִים; וַיִּקְצַף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד,
וַתִּמְתּוּ בְּעֵרָה בּוֹ.

אסתר א:יב

Her refusal to appear is presented with the phrase “*vatema’en hamalkah Vashti*” to stress her position and ability to refuse his demand without any reservation whatsoever.

If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus, and that the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

Esther 1:19

אם - על - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב, יֵצֵא דְבַר -
מִלְכוּת מְלָכָיו, וַיִּכְתַּב בְּדִתֵי פָּרַס -
וּמְדֵי, וְלֹא יַעֲבוֹר: אֲשֶׁר לֹא - תִּבְּוֹא
וַשְׁתִּי, לְפָנַי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ, וּמִלְכוּתָהּ
יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ, לְרַעֲיֹתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה.

אסתר א:יט

However, when Memuchan advises the king to remove her from her powerful position, the word “*hamalkah*” is deliberately left out and her name Vashti is mentioned alone, to signify her loss of power and royalty. The power of the word “*hamalkah*” is now established and we can now move forward to Esther’s struggle in coming to terms with this title and the implications it carries.

The task is set to find a new queen. The king is determined not to have another Vashti, who has a long royal lineage, and he is looking for a queen who will be beautiful to look at but no more than that. She will listen to his commands without reservation and have no personal aspirations beyond those of pleasing her husband. We now understand why Esther keeps her background secret. She is a direct descendant of King Saul, as explained by Chazal, and if the King’s servants would know this, she would never come into consideration in the search for a new queen. She is presented as an orphan; she has no father or mother אָב וְאִמָּה, —and this is exactly what the king wants. The king chooses her but when he makes the celebration party it says:

Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther’s feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.

Esther 2:18

וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁתֵּה גְדוֹלָה, לְכָל - שָׂרָיו
וְעַבְדָּיו - - אֶת, מִשְׁתֵּה אֶסְתֵּר; וַהֲנַחָה
לְמַדְיָנוֹת עֲשָׂה, וַיִּתֵּן מִשְׂאֵת כֶּיִד הַמֶּלֶךְ.

אסתר ב:יח

Her title of “*hamalkah*” is noticeably absent to show his acceptance of her on his terms. She has to keep her background quiet otherwise her whole rise to power would have ended. The end of chapter two refers to Esther constantly without the title of “*hamalkah*” to stress this crucial point.

In the next few chapters, when Esther is on her own or with Mordechai, she is called “*hamalkah*,” as she knows her lineage and that she is of royal descent, and that she is not just a “pretty object” belonging to the king. She is not satisfied with her present situation and begins the process of establishing her true credentials with the king. In chapter four, as she is in conversation with Hatach and with Mordechai, it is without the title of “*hamalkah*” in order to show her current position and that she is heeding the command of Mordechai not to reveal who she really is, even though this is very hard for her.

Haman’s decree has now been made and all of Shushan is in mourning. Mordechai tells Esther that the time has finally come to reveal to the king who she really is so that the decree can be annulled.

and who knows if this is the moment for which you have arrived at being the queen.

Esther 4:14

ומי יודע — אם - לעת פְּזֹאתָ, הגֵּעֵתָ לְמַלְכוּתָ.
אסתר ד:יז

However, the situation is dangerous and requires careful planning to succeed. This is where the idea of the parties becomes a crucial part of the story.

Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her “royalty,” and stood in the inner court of the king’s house, over against the king’s house; and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter.

Esther 5:1-2

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּתָהּ, וַתַּעֲמֵד בְּחִצְרוֹ בֵּית - הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית, נֹכַח בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ; וַהֲמֵלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל - כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ, בְּבֵית הַמַּלְכוּתָהּ, נֹכַח, פְּתַח הַבַּיִת. וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת - אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה, עֹמֶדֶת בְּחִצְרוֹ - נִשְׂאָה חוֹ, בְּעֵינָיו; וַיִּוָּשֶׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר, אֶת - שֵׁרְבִיט הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ, וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר, וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשֵּׁרְבִיט.
אסתר ה:א-ב

Esther is not just wearing “royal clothing,” she is also showing her royal “charisma” (which is why it says she wore “royalty” and not “royal clothing”). The king senses this change and when he allows her to draw near he calls her “Esther” without the royal title. He is saying to her that he is royalty and she isn’t and she should remember this. She touches the scepter as “Esther,” but he is curious as to her appearance now and to the sense of “royalty” that he perceived from her.

Then said the king unto her: “What wilt thou, queen Esther? for whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be given thee.” And Esther said. “If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.”

Esther 5:3-4

גַּ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ, מַה - לָּךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה; וּמַה - בְּקִשְׁתֶּךָ עַד - חֲצִי הַמַּלְכוּתָהּ, וַיִּנְתֵּן לָּךְ. וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר, אִם - עַל - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב - - יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן הַיּוֹם, אֵל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר - עָשִׂיתִי לּוֹ.
אסתר ה:ג-ד

She accepts her current status as shown in verse four but she still wants to show him that she is a person of authority, so she invites him to party number one. Just as Vashti showed independence by making her own party, so too does Esther want to show the same independence. She invites Haman as well, to give her more credence and to show the king that she is a real queen who can invite the two leaders of Persia to her party. The scene is set for her chance to reveal all.

Another reason to invite Haman is to give the king some cause for suspicion that Haman has designs on Esther behind his back and wants to depose him. In the Talmud (*Megillah* 15b), Rava raises this possibility and that she hopes to make the king hate Haman as a result of these suspicions.

Then the king said: "Cause Haman to make haste, that it may be done as Esther hath said." So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine: "Whatever thy petition, it shall be granted thee; and whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be performed."

Esther 5:5-6

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ - - מִהֲרוּ אֶת - הַמֶּן,
 לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת - דְּבַר אֶסְתֵּר; וַיָּבֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ
 וְהַמֶּן, אֶל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר - עָשְׂתָה
 אֶסְתֵּר. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר בְּמִשְׁתֶּה
 הַיַּיִן, מָה - תִּשְׁאַלְתִּי וַיִּצְטַח לָךְ; וַיִּמָּה -
 בְּקִשְׁתֶּךָ עַד - חֲצֵי הַמַּלְכוּת, וַתַּעַשׂ.
אֶסְתֵּר ה':ה-ו

The king has clearly not accepted her credentials at this point and she realizes this. She is forced to wait and have a second party, by which time she hopes that her royalty will be recognized and the hatred toward Haman from the king would have its effect. This is a dangerous game to play and she is prepared to die *al Kiddush Hashem* [sanctifying God's name], if necessary, in the attempt to save herself and her people.

At this point, something totally unexpected happens. Haman calls all of his family together to gloat over his successes. The king must have been suspicious of this, especially when Haman refers to the invitations from Esther. His spies are everywhere and he gets a report of the gathering at Haman's house.

Haman said moreover: "Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and tomorrow also am I invited by her together with the king."

Esther 5:12

יב וַיֹּאמֶר, הַמֶּן - - אִפְּ לֹא - הִבִּיֵּא אֶסְתֵּר
 הַמֶּלֶכָה עִם - הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר -
 עָשְׂתָה, כִּי אִם - אוֹתִי; וְגַם - לְמָחָר אֲנִי
 קָרוּא - לָהּ, עִם - הַמֶּלֶךְ.
אֶסְתֵּר ה':יב

Haman refers to her as "*hamalkah*," and this must have stoked the suspicions of the king even more than before. Haman recognized her royalty, which Ahasuerus is questioning, and this can only create more intrigue in the mind of the king.

Ahasuerus cannot sleep and he keeps thinking about the second party approaching and the threat to his kingship. His feelings toward Haman have deteriorated. He was also aware that Haman was very antagonistic toward Mordechai, as expressed at the family gathering. Maybe Mordechai will be the solution to the problem of Haman for the king and he calls to see his personal file. He finds that Mordechai saved his life and went unrewarded. The king suspects that Haman hates Mordechai specifically because he saved the king's life before and he now plans to neutralize the influence and power of Haman, with Mordechai's help. When the king hears that Haman is waiting to see him, he can only guess that this is a further stage in the potential overthrow of the king and he must do something about it. He confirms his suspicions from Haman's request to wear kingly garments and ride on the king's horse, and he decides to immediately bring Haman down by getting Mordechai to be rewarded through Haman's suggestion. This sends Haman home with a downcast feeling and the king asserts his upper hand

as he wished. All of these events, from Haman's family meal onward, were unexpected, but they all give Esther greater credibility and a chance of ending Haman's evil plan at the second meal which follows immediately.

So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine: "Whatever thy petition, queen Esther, it shall be granted thee; and whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be performed." Then Esther the queen answered and said: "If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request."

Esther 7:1-3

וַיָּבֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן, לְשִׁתּוֹת עִם - אֶסְתֵּר
הַמֶּלֶכָּה. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר גַּם בַּיּוֹם
הַשֵּׁנִי, בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן - - מָה - שְׂאֵלֶיךָ
אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלֶכָּה, וְתִתְּנֵנִי לָךְ; וּמָה - בְּקִשְׁתֶּיךָ
עַד - חֲצֵי הַמְּלָכוּת, וְתַעֲשֵׂה. וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר
הַמֶּלֶכָּה, וַתֹּאמֶר - - אִם - מִצָּדִיק חַן
בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְאִם - עַל - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב:
תִּתְּנֵנִי - לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשֵׂאלֶתִי, וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִי.
אֶסְתֵּר ז:א-ג

The second meal begins. The king is now calling Esther "hamalkah" to show that he is the one to convey such a title on her and not Haman, who had called her this title at his family gathering. Even though the king is still showing some resistance at the beginning of the meal and calls her "Esther" without her title, from now on the requests and responses are from Esther "hamalkah," and this is repeated over and over by the King. He even loses the interpreter who was between them and talks to her directly, as a sign of equality (as noted by Rabbi Avahu in *Megilla* 16a.) She can now finally reveal who she really is and ask for the survival of her people. She explains to the king that he will lose so much more than what he gained from the 10,000 *shekalim* which he was originally given by Haman to kill the Jews. She tells the king that Haman is the arch enemy and Haman is frightened before the king and Esther "hamalkah."

Haman is shocked before the king and queen.

Esther 7:6

וְהָמָן נִבְעַת, מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶכָּה.
אֶסְתֵּר ז:ו

The king now understands that his suspicions of infidelity against Esther were unfounded and he goes outside to calm down. Haman now asks "Esther hamalkah" for mercy as he also senses her true royalty, and he even falls onto the couch upon which Esther is sitting (without the title "hamalkah"). This is his attempt to remove from her the status of "hamalkah" by his actions here and show that she is just a "regular" woman and nothing special. The king comes back, and his response is crucial:

Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king: "Will he even force the queen before me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

Esther 7:8

ח וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יָשָׁב מִגַּנְזַת הַבַּיִתָּן אֶל - בַּיִת
מִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן, וְהָמָן נָפַל עַל - הַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר
אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ, וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ, הֲגַם לְכַבּוֹשׁ
אֶת - הַמֶּלֶכָּה עִמִּי בְּבַיִת; הֲדָבָר, יֵצֵא
מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ, וּפְנֵי הָמָן, חִפּוּ.
אֶסְתֵּר ז:ח

The king shows total acceptance of her real status of "hamalkah" and orders Haman's death.

During the rest of the *megilla*, whenever the king addresses her, he calls her "hamalkah" as a sign of total recognition by the king of her royal origins and position. However, when she describes her own part in the salvation of the Jews, out of modesty and humility she refers to herself just as

“Esther,” to show that she was prepared to be “*hamalkah*” for as long as was necessary to thwart the plan of Haman, after which her regular status returned in her own eyes. For example:

And Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews ... Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew.

Esther 8:3, 7

ותוסף אסתר, ותדבר לפני המלך, ותפל,
לפני רגליו; ותתחנן - לו, להעביר את
- רעת המן האגגי, ואת מחשבתו, אשר
קשב על - היהודים... ויאמר המלך
אחשוורש לאסתר המלכה, ולמרדכי היהודי:
אסתר ח:ג,ז

When she now addresses him she uses her simple name with no additions, as a sign of humility and *tzniut*. He still refers to her as “*hamalkah*” as she is now firmly established in his eyes as the new royalty coming from a royal past, the house of Saul.

After looking at the *megilla* using this tool of the *mila mancha* [key word] of “*hamalkah*,” we can now answer all our original questions.

1. Vashti is mentioned to show the power of the term “*hamalkah*.”
2. Esther invites the king to a party to begin to assert her independence as the new “*malkah*.”
3. The first party was not yet the time to reveal her origins as the king had not yet accepted her real status as “*hamalkah*.”
4. Haman is invited to both parties to expose him as a traitor against her and her status as “*hamalkah*” as well as a schemer against the Jews. The king’s suspicions against him are also increased by this plan.
5. She kept her identity secret until the eleventh hour, because she needed to feel that the king would accept who she really was and not reject her because of her *yichus*.
6. The story of Haman and Mordechai with the horse is to put Haman in his place and confirm the king’s suspicions against Haman, which eventually lead to his demise and the salvation of the Jewish people.

The use of this type of analysis has opened up so much of the story and the real nature of what happened. We know that Esther remained *hamalkah* and had a child with the king, who became Darius the Second of Persia (*Vayikra Rabbah* 13:5) and who allowed the Second Temple to be completed (*Ezra* 6:15).

We also know that the rabbinic tradition is to see allusions in the word *melech* to God’s part in the whole story in terms of the *nes nistar* (hidden miracle) of the Purim story. We can now add the extra dimension of analyzing the word *hamalkah*, which also brings out the incredible depth and power of the story. This increases our true sense of appreciating God’s hand in the story even more than before.

Let us hope that we will be inspired by this story to see the *yad Hashem* [the hand of God] in everything that happens to us as a nation and increase our wish and desire to see the Third Temple be built speedily in our days.

Genetics & Epigenetics¹ 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

¹ **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.

Maintaining Peace of Mind in a High-Speed World

Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Weinberg

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The story is told of a Jew, who raced down the street as the early morning sun rose behind him. As he ran, he crossed paths with the saintly R' Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov who innocently inquired if the fellow needed any assistance. "I am racing off to work to secure my *parnassah* [income]," replied the clearly irritated fellow. The *tzaddik* of Berditchov gently replied, "What makes you so certain that you are running toward your *parnassah*? Perhaps your livelihood lies in the opposite direction and with each successive step you move further away from where you need to be?"¹

We live in a very fast-paced world. Fast food,² high speed technology³ and quicker ways to communicate and travel⁴ are just a few of the countless innovations that provide our lives with greater comfort and luxury. Yet while our high-speed world offers greater convenience to many aspects of our lives, the toll it takes on the Jewish mind and spirit is substantial.⁵ Already the

¹ For a similar idea, see *Eretz Tzvi* (Rav Aryeh Tzvi Fromer Hy"d), *Parshas Toldos* (pg. 39) for his parable of the swift-footed horse travelling in the wrong direction. He applies it to Esav's attitude toward the *bechorah* [birthright] and his (perhaps wise) decision to sell it lest it lead him astray.

² See the *Imrei Kodesh [HaShalem]* (pg 5.) of Rav Uri of Strelisk Zy" a to *Parshas Vayeira* (18:5) on the spiritual significance of eating slowly and with peace of mind.

³ Certainly there are great spiritual gains and lessons to be culled from our modern-day technological advancements. The *Chofetz Chaim* in his work *Shem Olam [Chasimas HaSefer]* (pgs. 180-183) offers a novel explanation as to the development of devices such as the telephone and the camera in his time. In his *HaTorah ViHaOlam (Parshas Bereishis;* printed in 1955), R' Nissim Telushkin shares an important *mussar* lesson that can be derived from the invention of a television. Last, in more recent years, Rav Moshe Wolfson Shlit" a dedicates space in his *Emunas Itechah, Parshas Pekudei* (pg. 311), to explain the impact of automatic doors (!) in our understanding and approach to *tefillah*. The *Chofetz Chaim* is also quoted [see *Koveitz Maamarim vi'Iggros* (volume 1, pg. 304) of R' Elchonon Bunim Wasserman Hy"d; the newly published *Moreh Tzedek* (speeches of Rav Avraham Yaakov HaKohein Pam (pgs. 40-41); as well as the *Sefer Chakima BiRamiza* in the *Pesach Davar*, pgs. 2-3] as having explained the increasing speed of the functions of our world by comparing it to the harried "erev Shabbos preparations" as the world prepares itself for the "yom she'kulo Shabbos" with the arrival of Mashiach.

⁴ In *The Great Chasidic Masters* by Avraham Yaakov Finkel (Pg 84) he quotes: "Rabbi Menachem Mendel [of Rimano] would complain, 'Before there were highways, you had to interrupt your journey at nightfall. You would spend the night at an inn where you could calmly recite psalms and open a holy book, and talk about Torah thoughts. Now you rush along the highways day and night, and you have no respite.'"

⁵ The secular world has also come to question the dangers of our fast-paced society. See, for example, the opening chapter "Why is Speed so Bad" of the 2008 book by Pulitzer Prize winner Howard Rosenberg and Charles Feldman entitled *No Time to Think*. The chapter begins with a quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—"They stumble that run fast"—and goes on to explain the many mishaps that arise from the absurd speed of our media. Namely, careers and more important, lives are ruined by new reports that are simply wrong, but are made available in the

wisest of men, Shlomo HaMelech, warned of the great danger that lurks in the shadows of a hasty existence:⁶

Have you seen a man who is hasty in his affairs? There is more hope for the fool than for him.

Mishlei 29:20

חזית איש איך בדבריו, תקוה לכסיל ממנו
משלי כט:כ

Following the lead of Mishlei, the Piasezener Rebbe (R' Kalonymus Kalman Shapira Hy"d) cites R' Yisrael Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760, founder of the Chassidic movement) who notes that the message of Shlomo HaMelech is in fact alluded to in the Torah itself. The Baal Shem Tov uncovers an important insight by looking beyond the surface of the verses of *kerias shema*; the twice-daily acceptance and reminder of our commitment to Hashem and His Torah.

Our Master the Baal Shem Tov explained the verse "and you shall be swiftly banished"⁷ as implying that one must lose his hastiness. Namely, that one should operate with peace of mind and without impulsivity.

Hachsharas Avreichim – Chapter 9

ומרן הבעל שם טוב זצוקל"ה איתא על הפסוק "ואבדתם מהרה", שצריך האדם לאבד את המהירות, עכ"ל. היינו שיהיה דעה מיושבת ולא במהירות...
הכשרת אברכים - פרק ט

What exactly is the great danger that lies beneath the surface waiting to ruin he who acts with haste? Must we truly believe that the service of our Creator is threatened simply by trying to keep pace with the world around us?

The Proper Pace for *Tefillah*, Torah Study and Mitzvos: Less Can Be More

Perhaps the answer lies in the struggle of the harried mind to properly focus and maintain concentration. Arguably the backbone in our service of Hashem is *kavanah*, the willful and meaningful intent that is expected to accompany our every action. Chazal remind us that in the World of Truth, we will not be judged solely for the quantity of our mitzvos; rather, our heavenly account will be carefully scrutinized for quality as well. The Mishna shares with us the oft-overlooked general principle (which in turn is applied in other contexts throughout *Shas*):

The Torah uses the [same] term, "a satisfying aroma to Hashem," regarding the [expensive] animal burnt-offering,

נאמר בעולת בהמה "אשה ריח ניחוח" (ויקרא א'), ובעולת עוף "אשה ריח

race to be the first to "break the news." For many insightful examples and studies, see the newly published (2012) *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay* by Frank Partnoy.

⁶ Many terms are used throughout Tanach, Chazal and in later Torah works to describe the process of "doing something quickly." Some expressions, such as *zerizus* [zeal], carry an obvious positive connotation. See Rashi to Bereishis [Vayeira] 22:3, based on Gemara, *Pesachim* (4a) regarding Avraham's praiseworthy *zerizus* in performing *akeidas Yitzchak*. Additionally, see Rashi to Shemos [Bo] 12:17, based on the *Mechilta* for our general attitude toward mitzvos being done "immediately upon reaching one's hand." Other terms imply a negative hastiness or destructive impetuosity. While a full (and proper) treatment of the many terms are beyond the scope of this essay, we will try to present, in broad terms, the negative aspects of doing things (too) quickly and the impact upon one's peace of mind.

⁷ In context, the *pasuk* refers to the expulsion of the Jewish people from *Eretz Yisrael* for failing to follow Hashem and by straying after foreign gods.

regarding the [less costly] burnt-offering of fowl and regarding the [least costly] fine flour offering. **This teaches that [there is no difference] between the one who offers much and the one who offers little, as long as he directs his heart to Heaven.**

Menachos – Chapter 13, Mishna 11)

ניחוח" (ויקרא א'), ובמנחה "אשה ריה
ניחוח" (ויקרא ב'), לומר לך: אחד
המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין
לבו לשמים.
מנחות – פרק יג, משנה יא

Very often, we mistakenly define success in terms of quantity while greatly disregarding and discrediting the value of quality. While the personal nature of *kavanah* may make it difficult to offer precisely-defined halachic guidelines, the *poskim* do render some halachic decisions that seek to outline an objective standard. It is interesting to note the very direct relationship between the speed with which one acts and the corresponding ability to carry out the mitzvah properly. Even a small sampling of the rulings found in *Shulchan Aruch* and its commentaries serve to sufficiently establish a clear halachic position.

When it comes to a general approach to *tefillah*, the *Shulchan Aruch's* position could not be more clearly stated:

It is better to recite fewer supplications with intent, than to recite many without intent.

Shulchan Aruch – Orach Chaim, Chapter 1, Paragraph 4

טוב מעט תחנונים בכוונה, מהרבות
בלא כוונה.
שולחן ערוך או"ח סימן א, סעיף ד

The *Magen Avraham* references the above mentioned Mishna (*Menachos* 13:11) as the source for this ruling.⁸ Elsewhere (*Orach Chaim*, 51:8), *Shulchan Aruch* adds that the paragraphs of *Pesukei DiZimrah* should not be said quickly but in a gentle manner. *Mishna Berurah* (51:20) further rules that one should be mindful not to skip or swallow a single word; rather, the words should “flow (carefully) from his mouth as one who is counting money.”

One of the most practical ways to ensure that the above standards are met is simply by allotting ample time for *tefillah*. *Magen Avraham* (53:5) establishes, albeit for a different purpose, one half hour as the proper amount of time to recite the *tefillos* from *Baruch SheAmar* through *Yishtabach*. It seems that those who sought to uphold these standards were met with some opposition. In an impassioned and heartfelt letter to his chassidim, the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, *Iggeres HaKodesh*, Epistle 1 pleads with his followers to spend an hour and a half on Shachris.⁹

⁸ See the *Levush* and *Sefer Chassidim* (#315) for related comments and additional *pesukim* which express this idea.

⁹ “And now once more I put forth my hand a second time with an additional explanation and a twofold request, extended and proposed to all men of the chassidic brotherhood, those who are near and those who are far, to undertake the following: **On all weekdays, businessmen — who do not have so much time — should not step down before the Ark [to lead the congregation in prayer]. Only those who ... at the morning service are able to pray at length for at least about an hour and a half on all weekdays.** One of them should step down before the Ark, chosen by lot or by consent of the majority [of the congregants] ... [This arrangement is] **not to be changed, I beg and beseech you!**” Regarding the origin of the *Baal HaTanya's* deep appreciation for the importance of *tefillah*, see *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik*, by Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff (volume 1, pgs. 145-146). Rav Soloveichik would relate the story of the *Baal haTanya's* decision to go to Mezeritch instead of Vilna. Additionally, Rav Soloveichik would lament the fact that we have lost, what he calls, “the art of prayer.” In a lecture to the Rabbinic Alumni of Yeshiva University in 1973, Rav Soloveichik stated: “Today it is no more than a mechanical performance. True prayer is

While such a lengthy weekday Shachris may seem unfathomable in relation to the standards established in many of our shuls, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994), in his notes to the *Iggeres HaKodesh*, helps us to retain a more proper perspective on the matter. He reminds us that the Gemara's statement (*Berachos* 32b) that, "the early chassidim would spend a full hour in *tefillah*," refers to the Amidah (Shemoneh Esray) alone!¹⁰

Yet despite the substantial demands the halachah places upon us to increase our God awareness, it is not without a bit of sympathy and understanding. Even the early authorities were well aware of the struggles we face in maintaining concentration and focus in *tefillah*. This sentiment is clearly felt in the ruling of R' Moshe Isserles (1520-1572) with regard to concentration during Shemoneh Esray. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 101:1) rules that ideally, all *berachos* of Shemoneh Esray must be recited with *kavanah*. In fact, the first *berachah* of Shemoneh Esray is of such great significance that failure to concentrate during its recitation demands repetition. However, Rema comments that in our times the practice is not to repeat, as it is likely one will fail to have intent a second time. If Rema in the 16th century was already sensitive to the struggle of maintaining *kavanah*, we can only imagine what he would make of the myriad distractions we face today.

It is important to note that the original ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch*, which urges us to adopt a "less is more" approach, is by no means limited to *tefillah*. *Mishnah Berurah* (*Orach Chaim* 1:12) clearly states that, "the same is true for Torah study, for before Hashem, all depends (solely) upon doing that which one is capable of doing." Rav Yehuda Ashkenazi in his *Be'er Heitiv* glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch* directs us to the work *Mekor Chaim*¹¹ of R' Chaim HaKohen of Aram Tzova, student of R' Chaim Vital, who likewise expands the lesson of the *Shulchan Aruch* to include Torah study.¹² In *Mekor Chaim* he writes:

Chazal explain that one will be asked [after life in this world], "did you establish set times for Torah study?" He will not be asked, "How much Torah did you study?," because better is the deliberate study of five chapters with pleasantness than ten [chapters] with pressure...

Mekor Chaim – Volume 1, Chapter 1, Paragraph 4

וכבר נת' אצלי ממשחז"ל ששואלים לאדם
קבעת עתים לתורה ואין שואלים ממנו
כמה תורה היה למד שלכן מה טוב לאדם
ללמוד ה' פרקים במתון ובנעימה יותר
מעשרה בנחוצה...
מקור חיים – חלק א, סימן א, סעיף ד

more than this. It is an attitude, a state of mind, creating a mood and temperament for the worshiper. It is an exciting experience and an adventure!" It is critical that rabbinic leadership dictate the standards and educate the masses in this matter. In the newer editions of Rav Yehonosan Eybshutz's *Yaaros Devash*, a heartfelt letter from Rav Eybshutz to the Av Beis Din of Kenigsberg appears. In it he wrote: "Often the congregation is reciting the Kaddish of Aleinu while I am still in the middle of the Amidah. While the young ones mock and laugh at me, I act as one who is mocked but does not respond, for these moment of *tefillah* is the finest portion of all of my labor."

¹⁰ See the teaching of Rav Tzaddok HaKohen of Lublin in his *Tzidkas Tzaddik* (#8) where he seems to understand the Mishna (*Berachos* 30b) that the earlier generations, because of their sanctity, only required an hour to prepare for prayer—we would likely need much more time to prepare properly!

¹¹ *Elya Rabbah* (s.k. 5) refers to it as *Tur Barekes*, a name that appears on a later volume of the same work.

¹² Additionally, *Be'er Heitiv* directs us to similar comments made by the *Soles Belulah*. This sefer is part of a two-volume work entitled *Divrei Chachamim* by R' Yosef Leib Pochovitzzer. The first section is called *Daas Chochmah*, which contains essays on a range of Jewish philosophical topics. The second part is a halachic work entitled *Mekor Chochmah*, which is accompanied by additional notes referred to as *Soles Belulah*. The comment that the *Be'er Heitiv* referred to appears on page 19 of the 5452 edition.

To support his assertion, *Mekor Chaim* paraphrases from the *Midrash Rabbah*'s explanation of Koheles (4:6), "Better is one handful of pleasantness than two fistfuls of labor and vexation of the spirit." The Midrash¹³ explains that, "better is the one who learns two *sedarim* [orders] and is fluent in them, than one who learns [more] and is not."¹⁴

An even broader and nearly all-encompassing application of this principle is found in the *Chayei Adam* of Rabbi Avraham Danzig (1748–1820). In his section on the laws of care and consideration in the performance of mitzvot, he expands the *Shulchan Aruch*'s concept to all mitzvot and bolsters his position by offering a glimpse through the lens of his personal experience.

"He who guards a mitzvah will know no evil," that is to say, when one intends to perform a mitzvah, he should not do so suddenly, rather he should wait and contemplate well how to perform it ... I have examined this through my personal experience: when I perform a mitzvah very suddenly, I fail to do so properly. Therefore, one must be careful about this.
Chayei Adam – Section 68, Paragraph 25

"שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע" (קהלת פרק ה, פסוק ה), ר"ל שמחויב כשירצה לעשות איזו מצוה לא יעשה אותה בחפזון ובפתאום, רק שישמור וימתין (כמו "ואביו שמר את הדבר") ויתיישב בדבר היטב איך יעשה... ונ"ל שזהו ג"כ מש"כ "ושמרתם את המצות" ... וכבר בהנתיב בסיון שכאשר עשיתי מצוה בפתאום לא קיימתי כראוי, לכן צריך לזהר בזה.
חיי אדם הל' זהירות במצוות, כלל סה, ס' כה

The essence of this principle is perhaps best captured by R' Yehudah HaChassid in his *Sefer Chassidim* (#366), which succinctly concludes a related discussion, "better [a mitzvah performed] once *lishmah* [for the sake of heaven] than one thousand [times] without intent."

Purim: A Restoration of *Menuchas HaNefesh*

With this understanding of the need for a more slow-paced, deliberate, and contemplative existence at the core of authentic Jewish living, we can begin to explore a theme that runs throughout Megillas Esther. In its 10 short chapters consisting of a mere 167 *pesukim*, the *megillah* takes us on an absolute emotional roller-coaster ride. Tranquil moments are quickly overturned, and on more than one occasion, great heartbreak leads very suddenly to great joy.¹⁵

The *megillah* begins by introducing its reader to Achashveirosh, a king whose dominant grasp over the civilized world is hardly matched by another in history.¹⁶ We encounter Achashveirosh

¹³ See *Koheles Rabbah* (*Parsha 4*). This Midrash is even more explicit in its message in *Vayikra Rabbah* (*Parsha 3*).

¹⁴ In *Perek Kinyan Torah* (*Avos 6*), "yishuv" is identified as one of the 48 qualities through which Torah is acquired. While some interpret it as a reference to "diligence in learning" (some in fact cite an alternate text "yeshiva," as taught in *Avos 2:7* — "increased *yeshivah* [leads to] increased wisdom"), Rashi defines "yishuv" as meaning "yishuv hadaas." *Tiferes Yisrael* (in his first of two explanations) likewise defines "yishuv" as having peace of mind and being unrushed in one's speech. See *Midrash Shmuel to Avos* as well. The list of 48 also includes the related quality of one who is "*misyashev libo bi'talmudo*." See *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* (19:2), *Meged Givos Olam* (volume 2, pg. 11) and *Divrei Yisrael* (*Modzitz*) to *Parshas Miketz* 41:49, for some practical advice in maintaining a calm demeanor and peace of mind while studying Torah.

¹⁵ It is important to note that while the full story of Purim spans many years, the *megillah*'s presentation makes it seem like it happened rather quickly. Perhaps it is to impress upon us the message we are exploring in this essay.

¹⁶ *Meseches Megillah* (11a) identifies him as one of three (along with Achav and Nevuchadnezer) who ruled under the entire "arch" of the heavens (see Rashi there, as well as *Aruch* under the entry "*kaf*"). This assertion is supported

relishing in his newly acquired state of tranquility after a protracted period of great anxiety. On the opening *pesukim* (1:2-3) of the *megillah*, the Gemara comments:

It says in the Megillah, "In those days, when the king sat..." [implying, when he first sat]. However, it is written immediately after, "In the third year of his reign." Rava said: What is the meaning of "when he sat"? After his mind was put at ease...

Megillah 11b

"בימים ההם כשבת המלך" (אסתר א, ב), וכתיב בתריה "בשנת שלוש למלכו" (א, ג)? אמר רבא: מאי כשבת - לאחר שנתיישבה דעתו.
מגילה יא:

What was the source of his newly found peace of mind, a feeling that would inspire a 187-day celebration of such grand proportions? Yirmiyah the navi had foretold that the Jews would be redeemed from their Babylonian exile after a period of 70 years. However, the prophet failed to clearly delineate the precise starting point for calculating that period of time. Adding to Achashveirosh's stress was the fact that Belshatzar, the last Babylonian king, had erred in his calculation of the 70 years and it had cost him his life.¹⁷ Hoping to avoid a similar fate, Achashveirosh acted cautiously and with great patience to shield himself from error. Several years into his reign, he felt that he had indeed corrected the mistake of Belshatzar and viewed his good judgment as being worthy of national celebration. With the passing of the 70 years and the Jewish people still a subject nation, Achashveirosh assumed that the Jewish God had forsaken His children and that they would never be redeemed. One can only imagine the feelings of utter despair, fear and tension pulsing throughout the broader Jewish community at that time. The promise of redemption that had likely carried their spirit throughout the Babylonian exile was, or so it appeared, shattered. This image of a gratified Achashveirosh seated peacefully upon his throne, as a despondent Jewish nation desperately clutches a dying dream, is the backdrop upon which the story of Megillas Esther unfolds.

But what served as the "cause" and what was the "effect"? One would assume, and logic dictates, that Achashveirosh's newly found confidence is what created the feelings of despair among the Jewish people. But perhaps we can suggest just the opposite. Perhaps it was the emotional state of *Klal Yisrael* that generated the good feelings that now reverberated in the heart and mind of Achashveirosh. It was their loss of faith in Hashem's promise of redemption, and the subsequent abandonment of their own tranquility, which allowed Achashveirosh to acquire his new perspective. The sacred works of Chassidus and Jewish thought teach us that failure to practice

by the *Midrash Aggadas Esther* (1:2) but appears to be contradicted (as Radal notes in his commentary) by *Midrash Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* (chapter 11), which states that Achashveirosh ruled only half of the world. See *Midrash Tehillim*, which posits that the extent of his rule fluctuated at various points of his reign. Additionally, *Ben Yehoyada* (*Megillah 11a, d"h Hodu*) notes that his complete rule was limited to the bulk of Asia but certainly did not extend to Europe, Africa, China or the yet-to-be-discovered America. See the comments of *Chida* in *Lev Dovid* (chapter 29) regarding Jews living in Spain and Africa, which were beyond Achashveirosh's reach at that time. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin in his *Chut Shel Chesed* commentary on Megillas Esther (pg. 84) sees Achashveirosh levying taxes over the land and the sea (10:1) as further proof of his all-encompassing rule. Regarding the kingdoms and reign of Shlomo, Sancheirev, Daryavesh and Koresh, see the continuation of the *Gemara Megillah* (11b). As to the omission of Alexander of Macedonia (generally referred to as "Alexander the Great"), see Tosafos (*Megillah 11a*) who notes that the *Baraisa* only lists those who are mentioned in Tanach.

¹⁷ *Meseches Megillah 11b*.

and maintain a uniquely Jewish character trait causes that very same quality to shift into the hands of our enemies.

Support for this notion, and precisely in this context, can be found in R' Shmuel Borenstein of Socatchov's work *Shem MiShmuel*.¹⁸ The *Midrash Rabbah* on Esther (Parsha 1) records that the angels inquired of Hashem, "How can it be that King Achashveirosh sits peacefully and rejoices while the *Beis Hamikdash* lies in ruin?" Hashem replied by informing the angels that the Jewish people were deserving of punishment for having violated Shabbos. In explanation of the Midrash, *Shem Mishmuel* quotes from his father, the *Avnei Nezer* (R' Avraham of Socatchov), who explains that it was our failure to extract the unique spiritual qualities of *menuchah* [rest] and *oneg* [enjoyment] from the Shabbos experience that allowed the nations of the world to rob us of those qualities.

This idea is by no means limited to the Purim story. We likewise find a basis for this concept by analyzing a description of the shifting powers in Mitzrayim, the root of all exile. The *pesukim* express Pharaoh's rise to power and the increasing difficulties of *Bnei Yisrael* with the phrase, "a new king rose to power in Egypt" (Shemos 1:8). *Sfas Emes* (Shemos 5631) notes in the name of his grandfather, R' Yitzchak Meir Alter,¹⁹ that Chazal in the Midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:10) seem bothered by the inappropriate use of the word *chadash* [new]. How can the Torah describe Egypt as being graced with a *new* king and *new* decrees if the entire concept of *hischadshus* [renewal] is unique to the Jewish people? Was not our fledgling nation created and charged with the clarion call of "*hachodesh hazeh lachem*" [this month is for you] (Shemos 12:2) with all of its implications? Is the Jewish nation not compared to the moon, whose light traverses endless cycles of renewal, as opposed to the nations who are compared to the unvarying sun?

Rav Gedalyah Schorr in his *Ohr Gedalyahu* summarizes the *Chiddushei HaRim*'s teaching:

Bnei Yisrael lacked the proper spirit of renewal, [in that] they said, "let us be like the Egyptians." Therefore, their failure to properly use this spirit of renewal, which had descended upon the world solely for their sake, provided the Egyptians with the strength to take it from Bnei Yisrael.

Ohr Gedalyahu – Parshas Bo, pg 47

כי על ידי שהיה חסר לבנ"י כח ההתחדשות, שאמרו נהיה כהמצריים, ולא השתמשו ברוח ההתחדשות שיורד לעולם במיוחד לבנ"י, היה בכח של המצריים לקחת זה ההתחדשות השייך לבנ"י...
אור גדליהו – פרשת בא, עמ' 47

Many similar examples of this principle are found within the sacred writings of our sages.²⁰

¹⁸ *Shem Mishmuel to Parshas Shemos*, Year 5671 (pg. 5) and *Parshas Ki Seitzei*, Year 5671 (pg. 134).

¹⁹ First Gerrer Rebbe, known by the name of his works, *Chiddushei HaRim*. This insight is also found in *Chiddushei HaRim al Hatorah, Parshas shemos* (pg. 82).

²⁰ For a sampling of further examples of this principle, see (in no particular order): Footnote to *Ohr Gedalyahu, Parshas Korach* (pg 133) in explanation of Rabbi Akiva Eiger's exceptionally large portion in Torah; *Leket Amarim* of R' Yaakov Meir Schechter Shlita, Volume 1 (pg. 75) regarding fear of Heaven; Biography of Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz (Feldheim, pg. 269) in explanation of Mishlei 4:2; *Chasam sofer—Drashos* (volume 1, *Drashah to Zachor* from 5554); *Eish Pinchas* (teachings of Rav Pinchas Hirschsprung, pgs. 99-100); Rav Nosson Scherman's introduction to the Artscroll Youth Illustrated *Yonah* and *Halekach Vi'Halivuv* of R' Avrohom Schorr Shlita, *Chanukah* (pg. 147).

That which is borrowed must eventually be returned, and this principle holds true in the spiritual world as it does in its physical counterpart. Achashveirosh's attempt to ease his troubled mind lasts for just a few short *pesukim* before it becomes abundantly evident that he lacks any lasting connection to true inner serenity. His true character is most accurately captured by Chazal in their explanation of the imagery of a bear, to which the Persians are compared in Daniel's dream (Daniel 7:5). The Gemara (*Megillah* 11a) highlights three comparisons, one of them being that Persians, like bears, "have no *menuchah*." Achashveirosh, their king and leader, is certainly no exception to this rule.²¹ This becomes apparent almost immediately as Achashveirosh is so easily unnerved by Vashti's refusal to appear at his command. Achashveirosh "became very enraged" as "his wrath burned within him" (1:12), and he does not hesitate to accept the guidance of Memuchan to remove Vashti permanently. In response to this action and others, Chazal (*Megillah* 15b) very precisely label Achashveirosh as a "*melech hafachfachan*," a fickle-minded king, whose impulsive decisions are soon-after regretted (2:1).²²

But who is the mysterious Memuchan and why is Achashveirosh so quick to accept his counsel? The Gemara (*Megillah* 12b) notes that despite holding the seventh and *final* spot on the list of the king's closest advisors (1:14), Memuchan is *first* to voice his opinion on how to deal with the insolent Vashti (1:16).²³ Chazal critique his boisterous behavior and note that a simpleton is quick to speak before those far wiser than he. But perhaps more important, Chazal identify this hasty individual as none other than the infamous Haman (*Megillah* 12b).²⁴ Having refocused our attention from Memuchan to Haman, our question still begs an answer: What lies at the root of the bond that ties the spirit of Achashveirosh to the wicked Haman?

We first encounter Haman (by that name) at the beginning of the third *perek*, where he is described as a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king conquered by Shaul HaMelech (I Shmuel 15:9). With such an introduction to Haman's ancestry, we can immediately recognize Haman as a fitting partner for the impetuous Achashveirosh. Only a glimpse toward the history of Amalek is needed to observe a picture of anything but tranquility. Amalek appears in the Torah and writings of Chazal as *the* nation that comes to upset the status quo, particularly in times of calm. Their improbable and lowly ambush of the Jewish people, while the nations of the world were still reeling from reports of the miraculous redemption from Egypt, highlights their reckless nature. In truth, much of their outlook is perhaps drawn from Esav, the grandfather of the individual known as Amalek, whose shortsighted and quickly brokered sale of the *bechorah* speaks volumes to his unsettled soul. Haman is merely the latest and arguably most threatening spokesman of the evil empire of Amalek.

²¹ Maharal notes in several of his works that the *melech* [king] of any nation is the all-encompassing representation of his people. Hence, *melech* backwards is *kulam*, alluding to the entirety of his people.

²² Elsewhere, the Gemara (*Megillah* 12a) presents a dispute between Rav and Shmuel if Achashveirosh was generally a wise (*pike'ach*) or foolish (*tipeish*) king.

²³ *Gr"a* in *Divrei Eliyahu* (pg. 337) wonders how Chazal derive from here that "a boor leaps to the front." Perhaps only the opinion of Memuchan is quoted by the *megillah* because his advice was accepted by the king? *Gr"a* explains that since it is evident that he is in the presence of the other officials, the seemingly excessive "*lifnei hamelech vi'hasarim*" alludes to his boorish behavior.

²⁴ Not all agree that Haman was Memuchan. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* (Esther #1051) and *Targum* (Esther 2:1) the king executed the advisors when Achashveirosh's wrath had subsided (Esther 2:1).

Haman's sudden rise to power among the officers of Achashveirosh (3:1) should be a source of great delight, yet for Haman, peace of mind remains out of reach. Like Achashveirosh before him, Haman's great success is overshadowed by Mordechai's refusal to bow (3:5), and Haman becomes noticeably enraged. His response is a shameless plot to destroy Mordechai along with his fellow Jews—men, women and children alike. Partnering with the like-minded Achashveirosh seems all too obvious at this point and Achashveirosh is most accommodating as he hopes to relieve himself of further headache. Lots are drawn, the decree of annihilation is recorded, and copies are distributed widely. With the date of destruction nearly a full year away, it is worthwhile to note that the "couriers went forth *hurriedly* by order of the king" (3:15), implying a transfer of Achashveirosh and Haman's inner turmoil upon the already distraught Jews. It seems that Achashveirosh and Haman have finally solidified their state of internal harmony. The *perek* concludes with Achashveirosh and the sinister Haman enjoying their good fortune over a soothing glass of wine as the city of Shushan looks on in a state of total bewilderment (3:15). As the wicked relax while the Jewish nation panics, one is left with the impression that the tables have been irreversibly turned. The king and his trusted accomplice have freed themselves of their own restless nature, and have successfully captured the *menuchah* of the Jewish soul. But despite Haman's ability to bring greater tranquility upon Achashveirosh and himself, Haman can only wear the outer trappings of tranquility for so long. It will not be very long before his true character emerges and his peaceful state of mind unravels.

Already concealed within the infamous lottery scene, from which the entire holiday draws its name, are signs that even in his most powerful moments, Haman cannot achieve a deep, inner equilibrium. How, in fact, was the lottery performed? The *megillah* (3:7) offers but a single *pasuk* to describe a lot that was cast, "before Haman,²⁵ from day to day, from month to month." *Midrash Esther Rabbah* (7:11) describes the process of selection; first Haman attempted to select the day of the week, then the month and last, the heavenly constellation under which he would carry out his scheme. But a remarkable and lesser known detail of the lottery emerges from the *Midrash Talpiyos* compiled by R. Eliyahu HaKohen of Izmir. Under the entry for "Haman" we find:

The Commentators describe the lot as being performed with cubes marked with dots on four of its (six) sides. The side with three dots had four dots on its underside, and the side with six markings had a single dot opposite it ... Haman cast the dice three times and rolled 1-3-3 corresponding to Agag (אגג, the Amalekite king). He rejoiced to see that he had come out on top. He turned over the dice to see that which was below and saw 4-6-4, corresponding to Dovid (7

והמפרשים זכרונם לברכה, פרשו, שהגורל שהפיל היה על ידי חתיכת עצם מרבע בנקודות מארבע רוחותיו ובלע"ז דאדו, והפור היה, מן הצד שיש שלשה נקודות מהצד התחתית יש ארבע נקודות, ומן הצד שיש ששה נקודות יש בתחתית נקודה אחת, באופן, שאם תפיל שלשה פורים ויהיו למעלה בשניהם בכל אחד ארבע נקודות ובאחד ששה נקודות, אם תהפכם לראות הנקודות שיש בתחתיתם תמצא בשנים שלשה נקודות בכל אחד ונקודה אחת באחד, באופן שלמעלה שהם ארבע וארבע וששה הוא מנין דוד, ולמטה שהוא שלשה שלשה ואחד הוא מנין אגג,

²⁵ Rashi acknowledges the unidentified individual who actually cast the lots but notes that he remains unknown. *Gr"a* in his commentary to Esther explains "before Haman" as meaning that Haman knew the Jewish people are not bound by *mazal*. Therefore, he picked the month that he felt would be best for *his* strength, not their weakness. See *Talei Oros* on Megillas Esther (pgs. 130-133) for additional explanations.

7-), king of the Jewish nation) [implying that the Jews would be under his control]. Yet in doing so, he overturned his fate, leaving himself below and Dovid above.²⁶

Midrash Talpiyos – Entry for “Haman”

והמן בגורל זה הפיל שלשה פורים ונפלו באופן שלמעלה יצאו מנין אגג, ושמוח כי עלה למעלה, רצה להפכם מה למטה מהם, ומצא מנין דוד, נמצא דבהופכם נשאר הוא למטה ודוד למעלה וכו'.
מדרש תלפיות – ענה "המן"

Instead of delighting in the prediction of good fortune expressed by his lots, Haman is *still* agitated. He anxiously overturns the dice, “just to see” and confirm that which he already knows. But as the *Midrash Talpiyos* implies, his overly zealous nature is his undoing. Perhaps this serves as a defining moment for Haman; he reveals his true inner nature as he foils his own plan. Like the erratic roll of the die, Haman very quickly finds himself spinning out of control and struggling to break his downward spiral.

As the story proceeds, Haman tries desperately to maintain his calm demeanor but is constantly angered by Mordechai's refusal to bow or even stand before him (5:9). His wife and friends suggest that he build a gallows to deal with Mordechai and encourage him to present his suggestion to the king in a timely fashion (5:14). But as Haman internally senses his race against time, he cannot wait until morning and hurries to appear before Achashveirosh, who himself is in the middle of a sleepless night (6:4)! After offering advice on how to best reward one who “the king desires to honor” (6:6), Haman is told to, “**hurry**, [and] take the attire and the horse as you have said, and do all this for Mordechai the Jew who sits at the king’s gate” (6:10). After swiftly carrying out the king’s mission with a heavy heart, “Haman **hurried** home, despondent and with his head covered” (6:12). Upon arriving home, Haman’s wife begins to warn him that he is destined to fail (6:13), but can hardly finish her advice as the king’s chamberlains arrive and Haman is again “**hurried** to the banquet which Esther had prepared” (6:14). After being exposed at Esther’s banquet as an enemy of the queen and her people, it is but a matter of moments before Haman is hanged on those very same gallows he had prepared for the righteous Mordechai. As Haman’s meteoric rise and fall comes to its close, the Jewish nation’s peace of mind, which had been so suddenly lost, is quickly restored to its rightful owners.

The Jewish nation, a people whose very survival has defied all odds, would not easily relinquish a trait that is central to their very essence. They emerge as the victors in this epic battle to maintain peace of mind, overcoming the threats of annihilation mounted against them. Such hope can only be found among a nation whose every move is guided by Torah. As Dovid HaMelech wrote in Tehillim (19:8), “*Toras Hashem temimah meshivas nafesh*” — “*The Torah of Hashem is perfect, restoring the soul.*” Not only does Torah study require *yishuv hadaas*,²⁷ but connection to Torah creates a greater sense of inner tranquility. It therefore comes as no surprise, that Chazal identify a reacceptance of the Torah, as part of *Klal Yisrael’s* response to their miraculous salvation and “restoration of their soul” (see *Shabbos 88a* with Rashi).

²⁶ See R' Yosef Chaim of Baghdad's works *Ben Ish Chayil (drashos)* and *Keren Yeshua* for further explanations of the *Midrash Talpiyot* and an alternate version from the Chida.

²⁷ See the *Hakdamah* to Rav Elazar Menachem Mann Shach's *Avi Ezri* (volume 2; *Nashim* and *Kedushah*) whether Torah is best studied with “*af*” [see *Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:12*] or with peace of mind.

Lest we mistakenly believe that the *menuchah* achieved at the end of the *megillah* is merely incidental, Mordechai proclaims the message loud and clear.

Mordechai recorded these events and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Achashveirosh, the near ones and the distant ones, [charging them] to observe annually the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and its fifteenth day, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and the month which had been turned about for them from one of sorrow to gladness, and from mourning to festival; to observe them as days of feasting and gladness, and sending delicacies to one another, and gifts to the poor.

Esther 9:20-22

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֵּכָי אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה; וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל כָּל הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַקְּרוּבִים וְהָרְחוֹקִים. לְקַנֵּם עָלֵיהֶם לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר, וְאֶת יוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ: בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה. פְּיָמִים אֲשֶׁר נָחַו בָּהֶם הַיְהוּדִים מֵאֲבִיבָיהֶם, וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה, וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב; לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם, יְמֵי מְשִׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה, וּמְשָׁלַח מְנוּחַת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ, וּמִתְּנוּחַת לְאֲבִיבָיִם.

אסתר ט:כ-כב

Mordechai did not assign the physical salvation to be the focus of the Purim celebration. *Sfas Emes* draws our attention to the great emphasis Mordechai placed on the *menuchah* that was achieved in overcoming our adversaries.

Why did Chazal establish the Yom Tov of Purim on the day the Jews rested [from battle] if the primary salvation was achieved through the military victory? Amalek's attack against Bnei Yisrael is rooted in their desire to negate tranquility ... and to prevent Bnei Yisrael from achieving tranquility. Therefore, the tranquility that emerged after the battle was a greater victory than the military battle itself.

Sfas Emes – Purim 5646

מה שקבעו עיקר היו"ט ביום המנוחה ואומרים שעשה נסים בזמן הזה. הגם דלכאורה עיקר היה נצחון המלחמה. אכן תכלית מלחמת עמלק ימ"ש הוא לבטל המנוחה. כמ"ש אשר קרך בדרך. כמ"ש והיה בהניח כו' תמחה כו'. נמצא שעיקר רדיפת עמלק שלא לבוא אל המנוחה. וזה האות שבאו אל המנוחה הוא עדות על מחיית כחו של עמלק. ובזאת המנוחה מחו אותו יותר מבמלחמה. ולכן כתיב ונוח מאויביהם והרוג כו' שבמנוחה זו הרגו אותו.

שפת אמת – פורים, שנת תרמ"ו

The tapestry of the *megillah*, whose delicate threads appeared ready to unravel along the way, emerges finely woven together: each thread in its proper place. As we attempt to relive the Purim miracle in our times,²⁸ may we find both the time and strength to slow down just a bit. If we can find a way to absorb this timeless message into our own lives, we will undoubtedly see that good things come to those who wait...

²⁸ See the Ramchal's *Derech Hashem* – section four, chapter seven, paragraph six.

Collected Insights from Members of the Masters of Arts in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation Program at Stern College for Women

Megillat Esther: Challenging Fate¹

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SCW, MA 2014

Megillat Esther is all about fateful events: being in the right place at the right time (or in the wrong place at the wrong time), or being privy to information that might just save the king's life and cause him to be indebted to you, the savior, (or incurring the wrath of a person both powerful and vindictive). At the end of the third chapter of the *megilla* we read of one such fateful event, one which could mean destruction for all of the Jews under Ahashverosh's reign. Haman, with the king's approval, sends out a letter to enact a murderous decree against the Jews:

... Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahashverosh, the people of Mordechai. But it seemed contemptible in his eyes to lay hands on Mordechai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordechai; In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahashverosh, they cast pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. And Haman said unto king Ahashverosh: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither do they keep the king's laws; therefore it would not profit the king to suffer them." And

וּבְקִשׁ הָמָן, לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר
בְּכָל-מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--עִם מֶרְדֵּכַי. בַּחֹדֶשׁ
הָרִאשׁוֹן, הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ נִסָּן, בְּשַׁנַּת שְׁתַּיִם
עָשָׂרָה, לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: הִפִּיל פּוּר הוּא
הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הָמָן, מִיּוֹם לַיּוֹם וּמִחֹדֶשׁ לְחֹדֶשׁ
שְׁנַיִם-עָשָׂר--הוּא-חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר. וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן,
לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--יִשְׁנֹו עִם-אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֹד
בֵּין הָעַמִּים, בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוֹתָהּ; וְדַתֵּיהֶם
שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל-עָם, וְאֶת-דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים,
וְלְמֶלֶךְ אֵין-שׁוּנָה, לְהַנִּיחָם. אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב,
יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם; וְעָשְׂרַת אֲלָפִים כֶּסֶף-כֶּסֶף,
אֲשֶׁקּוּל עַל-יְדֵי עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה, לְהַבִּיא, אֶל-
גַּנְזֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ. וַיִּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-טַבַּעְתּוֹ, מֵעַל יָדוֹ;
וַיִּתְּנָהּ, לְהָמָן בֶּן-הַמְּדִתָּה הָאֲגָגִי--צָרָר

¹ Based on a lecture from Dr. Shmuel Wygoda at Migdal Oz for Purim 2009/5769.

the king said to Haman: "The silver is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seem good to you."

Esther 3:6-11 (JPS Translation)

הַיְהוּדִים. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהָמָן, הַכֶּסֶף נָתוּן לָךְ;
וְהָעָם, לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ.

אסתר ג:ו-יא

In the following chapter, we find that Mordechai already knows the contents of the fateful letter written at the end of the third chapter. Mordechai therefore goes to Queen Esther to tell her to appeal to the king to annul the decree, but she refuses because she knows that King Ahashverosh had not recently called her into his chamber. Esther protests: " כל-עבדי המלך ועם-מדינות המלך " (ibid. 4:11)—"Everyone knows that he who comes into the king's chamber without being called upon, his fate ('*dato*') is to be killed!"

The theme of determinism (*dat*, i.e. law, or justice) appears throughout the book of Esther. Some examples among the many in the *megilla* are: when Queen Vashti refuses to appear before King Ahashverosh, the king wonders how to respond—" כדת מה לעשות במלכה ושתי" (1:15); when the king throws a grand party for the city of Shushan, the drinking is described as "והשתיה כדת" (1:8); in the king's search for a new queen, each woman is brought to Ahashverosh after "מקץ היות לה כדת הנשים" (2:12); when the decree against the Jews is written, the *pasuk* says "בשושן הבירה, בשושן נתנה, והדת נתנה, the decree was given out in Shushan the capital" (3:15), and that exact phrase is repeated when the decree goes out for the Jews to avenge themselves against their attackers.

Dat is deterministic in the sense of "this is how it is supposed to happen, and so it will be." In a life according to *dat*, one conforms to reality for the sake of reality, in a mode of passive acceptance. One might not be pleased or find particular value in the way things are at present, and yet one will accept reality as it is without a struggle. When Haman returns home "mourning and having his head covered" (6:12) his wife Zeresh says to him, " אם מזרע היהודים מרדכי אשר " (6:13). Why? Because Zeresh accepts the principles of determinism (*dat*)—that is the way it is set to be, and you, Haman, cannot change your fate nor that of the Jews.

Esther rebels against the staunch determinism displayed by Haman and his wife Zeresh. Esther goes to Ahashverosh "אשר לא-כדת" (4:16). In doing this, Esther displays a non-deterministic worldview, and with the declaration "אבדתי, וכאשר אבדתי, if I perish, I perish," (ibid.) she in effect says: "I am ready for whatever comes, as I have seized my fate in my hands." We see that Mordechai, too, is active in the face of an undesirable reality. For example, at the end of the *megilla* we read of how Mordechai co-opts the people of Persia's paganistic mode of revelry with excessive food and drink among the wealthy, transforming their way of celebrating into one that includes a ritual act of *matanot la-eyyonim*, giving to those who do not have. The poor do not have, but the act of charity is a statement that an individual has the power to change that reality by giving to them, and thus changing their fate.

Megillat Esther is a story of fate, but it is also a story of the meeting of two opposite worldviews with their opposite reactions to fate, represented in the characters of Haman and Zeresh on the one hand, and Esther and Mordechai on the other. Haman and Zeresh live by *goral*, fate, assuming that once laws have been put in motion, no one can or should escape their consequences. Esther and Mordechai act against the accepted *dat*, taking their fate and the fate of their people into their own hands with the belief that a dire reality need not be accepted out of hand.

Our sages (Talmud Yerushalmi, *Megilla* 1:5) teach that in the future, when all the books of the Bible will become invalid, Megillat Esther will remain valid. Why is this so? Megillat Esther will remain even after all other books are lost because its story is one that espouses non-determinism, and not accepting reality for reality's sake. As such, in the past and into the future, Megillat Esther will not be relegated to the rules of fate.

Ester 1 and Ester 2

Ms. Mitzi Steiner

SCW, MA 2014

Many are familiar with the image of Adam I and Adam II as developed by Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik in his work *The Lonely Man of Faith*, in which he contrasts the portrayal of Adam in the first chapter of Genesis as the “majestic man, of dominion and success,” who rules over the land, with the Adam of the second chapter, “the lonely man of faith,” who submits himself to the will of Hashem. Yet far fewer are aware of the *sicha* of Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein, in which he puts forth a similar dichotomy for the character of Ester in the *megillah*.¹ It is this contrast between Ester I at the start of the *megillah*, a passive and naïve young woman, with Ester II, the active savior of the Jewish people that emerges by the end of the *megillah* that I would like to explore here.

Ester arrives on the scene of the *megillah* as an entirely passive personality. While living under Mordechai's roof, she is dependent on him for her well-being and is treated as his child. Once taken to the palace, Ester attempts to avert the fate of an unwanted marriage by remaining unnoticed; while the other women hurry to beautify themselves, she meekly awaits her turn for the king. She submits herself to the orders of Mordechai (“ואת-מאמר מרדכי אסתר עשה”, Esther did the commandment of Mordechai”; Ester 2:20) and of the royal officers (Hegai, *srus hamelech*) and refrains from making any of her own demands. Thus, Ester I is, as her name connotes, hidden, her birthplace and nationality a secret even from those closest to her.

Yet by the close of the *megillah*, Ester transforms into an active and powerful figure. Ester's remarkable transition occurs when Mordechai informs her of the impending decree of death upon the Jewish people. Urged by Mordechai to take action, her eyes are opened to the suffering of her people and of her unique powers as queen. Suddenly, it is Ester who is giving directions,

¹ Rabbi Dr. Aaron Lichtenstein, “*Ki Im Hacharesh Tacharishi Ba'Eit HaZot- HaDa'agah LeK'lal Yisrael*,” (5766) available at: www.etzion.org.il/vbm/update_views.php?num=3160&file=/vbm/archive/11-lioro/20light.rtf

instructing the Jewish people to gather and fast. She beseeches Hashem in prayer, seeking divine salvation from the impending doom of her people (*Ester Rabbah* 8:7). So too, she strategizes to have the mortal king, her husband Achashverosh, recognize Haman's evil plan and to overturn his decree. By the end of the *megillah*, it comes as no surprise that it is she who requests of the sages "*kitvuni l'dorot*," to be inscribed for generations, and that the story is recorded by her hand (*Megillah* 7a). Thus, Ester II sees the suffering of her people and, recognizing her ability to respond to their pain, chooses to become their unlikely savior.

The transformation from Ester I to Ester II was spurred by a sense of responsibility for her brethren's misfortune and recognition of the great responsibility that comes with power. Just as Ester understood the need to take an active role in the deliverance of her people, so too we must recognize when times call for us to respond to suffering. By constantly asking ourselves whether we have adequately responded to the cries of those around us, we too, with Hashem's help, will be able to answer the divine call to serve as active participants in the course of history.

Remaining Strong in the Face of Failure

Ms. Galit Wernick

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It is no secret that Judaism is a demanding religion, so much so that at times it asks something of us that seems impossible. It is at these moments that we require the strength to remember our overwhelming commitment to always keep it even if sometimes we may fail. In the fourth chapter of *Megillat Esther*, Mordechai asks Esther to appear before the king even though the king has not called her. We are told that in doing so, Esther would be risking her life. Ultimately, Mordechai is able to convince Esther, despite her better judgment. She asks Mordechai to gather the Jews and tell them to fast for three days. She says that she and her maidens will do the same. Then she tells him "ובכן אבוא אל-המלך, אשר לא-כדת, וכאשר אבדתי, אבדתי," and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish." (*Esther* 4:16) Using a very literal understanding of the passage, Esther is telling Mordechai that she will do as he asks and approach the king illegally. She is telling him that she is willing to suffer the consequences of breaking the law.

God's name is not mentioned in the *megillah*, and whenever it says "king" (without Achashverosh's name) it could also be referring to God (*Ester Rabbah* 3:10). Therefore, using a less literal reading of the verse, when it says "so will I go in unto the king," it is referring to God. The Gemara, *Megillah* 15a, notes that when Esther said "not according to the law," it was a reference to the fact that she felt she was violating Torah law by willingly approaching Achashverosh. Yet this did not deter her from approaching God. She felt she could still have a relationship with God despite her perceived wrongdoing. This verse is not endorsing violating the law in difficult times. However, it is teaching us that even in trying times, when we have moments of failure, we should not be deterred from approaching God. After these moments, we should know not to despair and continue to uphold our commitment to God and His laws.

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