

# Secret Identities

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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).<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> taken against their will by a foreign

<sup>1</sup> 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."

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> Possibly, she worried that being openly Jewish would hinder her ambitions. After being selected

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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*.<sup>12</sup>

## 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.

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

<sup>12</sup> 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. *וְנִהְפֵךְ 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 *וְנִהְפֵךְ 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.