

Hope Amidst Despair

Rabbi Reuven Garrett¹

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When we consider transformational moments in Megillas Esther, the beginning of the sixth perek, describing the events of the night Achashveirosh is unable to sleep, seems like a natural choice. It is over the course of this night that the king's mind begins to turn against Haman. And it is by Haman's injudicious responses to Achashveirosh's questions on that night that he (unwittingly) begins to dig his own grave.

However, what makes the events of "that night" so powerful is the fact that they were not entirely transformational. That night only heralded the flowering of seeds that had been planted long before. The clearest example of this comes with the decision Achashveirosh makes to honor Mordechai the next day. That honor was not for something Mordechai had recently done, but was a reward for Mordechai's warning to Achashveirosh years earlier about the threats to Achashveirosh's throne. Of course, part of the miracle of Purim is that Mordechai's good deed bore fruit as the threat to the Jewish people was at its utmost.

This does not change the fact that the events of "that night" turned chiefly on events that had taken place many years before. And this is not the only example: even Achashveirosh's growing anger at Haman over the course of the sixth perek as the two discuss the reward to be given to the "man whom the king wishes to honor" is as much a function of Haman's long-standing arrogance and Achashveirosh's shifting favor as it is a fundamental change in the Megilla's tone.

For a truly transformational moment—one that represents not just a change in tone, but a shift in substance—it is possible that we really have to turn to the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth perakim, where the Megilla describes Esther's decision to approach Achashveirosh. From one perspective, it seems like this should be an easy decision to make: Esther is in the right place, at the right time, and certainly seems to be in a perfect position to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people. But from the lengthy back-and-forth Esther has with Mordechai in the fourth perek, and from the trepidation with which she approaches the task in the fifth, it is clear that this was far from an easy decision. To fully understand both the difficulty of this decision and Esther's strength in making it, we really have to go back and examine Chazal's understanding of why the Jewish people were threatened with destruction at the hands of Haman in the first place.

The Gemara (*Megilla* 12a) tells us that one reason for the threatened destruction of the Jews was their participation in the great feast of Achashveirosh that is described at the beginning of the Megilla. The Gemara does not elaborate further on the nature of this sin. However, both the Gemara and the Midrash Rabbah (*Esther* 1:15) suggest that the feast was, at least in part, intended to celebrate the fact that Achashveirosh's command to cease the reconstruction of the

¹ Rabbi Garrett is a second-year student at Yale Law School.

Beis HaMikdash had now achieved permanence. Ending the reconstruction had been one of Achashveirosh's first acts upon becoming king; now, three years into his reign, he felt comfortable enough that his decree had achieved its aim that he was ready to celebrate.

And celebrate he did. The Gemara relates that Achashveirosh both used the utensils taken from the Beis HaMikdash and wore the clothes of the Kohen Gadol during the party to memorialize the apparent finality of his decree. In other words, the Gemara is saying, the glamour of Achashveirosh's party was intended to celebrate the permanence of the Beis Hamikdash's destruction. Against this background, the accusation the Gemara levels against the Jews for participating in Achashveirosh's party is a harsh one: by joining in what was implicitly a celebration of their own downfall they had, on some level, abandoned any hope of return.

Esther stands as the perfect foil to this attitude. When we are first introduced to Esther by the Megilla, her personality is defined in part by the fact that she barely has family. As the Gemara (*Megilla* 13a) explains, she never knew her parents: her father died before she was born, her mother died in childbirth, and she was brought up entirely by Mordechai. Esther's selection as queen just cemented the totality of her distance from her heritage. The fact of Esther becoming queen is particularly ironic when you consider that she was a descendant of Shaul HaMelech, the king from whom G-d stripped the rights and responsibilities of kingship. For Esther to then become queen – not of her own people (who Mordechai told her not to identify with) but of the Persian Empire – only emphasizes that loss.

As Rav Yitzchak Hutner points out in his *Pachad Yitzchak* (number 19), this background is why Mordechai's efforts to challenge Esther to intervene with Achashveirosh, read simply, ring so hollow. For Mordechai to tell Esther—an orphaned child of a discontinued royal house—that her failure to speak with Achashveirosh will result in “her and her father's house being lost,” (Esther 4:14) seems only to emphasize what is already fact. Given the context, what sort of motivational tool is that?

However, it is possible to read Mordechai's words not as the sword hanging over Esther's head if she fails to confront Achashveirosh, but as a comment on what is at stake in her choice. Read against Esther's background, an absence of hope for the future is, in some sense, a reality. Her past is a story of loss, and making an appeal to Achashveirosh will not free her from remaining his queen in the future. In fact, just the opposite is true: Chazal (*Megilla* 15a) say that Esther's comment to Mordechai at the close of their conversation (4:16), “*ka'asher avaditi avaditi*” —“as I was lost I will be permanently lost” —is putting into words Esther's recognition that by approaching Achashveirosh of her own will, she is permanently binding herself to him.

Thus, what Mordechai may really be saying is: Esther, you of all people understand what it means to be in a position without hope and without a firm past or future. But this is exactly the question you have to confront as you make your decision: does the fact that you have no firm basis for hope also mean that you have no responsibility to the future?

The twenty-second perek of Tehillim is interpreted by many commentaries to describe the experience of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash. David HaMelech's cry “*Keli, Keli, lama azavtani*” — “my G-d, my G-d, why have You forsaken me?” —records the

feeling of the Jewish people in exile, to all appearances abandoned and without connection to the G-d of their forefathers. But according to the Gemara (*Megilla* 15b) it is also refers in particular to Esther's experience as she approached Achashveirosh. The Gemara turns on the words at the beginning of the fifth perek that describe Esther as "standing in the chamber before the king's house." Since we know where Esther was going, why tell us she was almost there? The Gemara explains that the *Megilla* is hinting to the fact that Esther halted just outside the king's throne room because, just then, she felt *Ruach HaKodesh* (divine inspiration) depart from her. According to the Gemara, the reason for the departure was because the room was full of idols. However, Esther clearly felt at that moment as though G-d had abandoned her at her moment of need, and so, the Gemara says, she began to mouth the words from Tehillim: "*Keli, Keli, lama azavtani,*"—why G-d, have You deserted me?

By emphasizing the very real sense of despair Esther felt as she approached Achashveirosh, the Gemara connects Esther's approach with the experience of the Jewish people in exile. It also connects her choice to approach Achashveirosh with the choice the Jewish people faced when they were asked to join Achashveirosh's party years before. The Gemara never suggests that *Ruach HaKodesh* returned to Esther after she entered Achashveirosh's throne room. And yet Esther steps forward anyway, and, by approaching Achashveirosh with her request, she ultimately saves the Jewish people.

Perhaps the closest parallel to Esther's act is Yosef's decision to reject the advances of the wife of Potiphar. If Esther's history gave her some reason to feel distant from her heritage, Yosef's experiences certainly would have given him just cause to doubt the continued relevance of his past. And, much like Esther, Yosef occupies a position of apparent power, which he also knows leaves him fully exposed to the shifting winds of his master's favor. Like Esther, Yosef had every reason to despair and give in to Potiphar's wife. In fact, according to some opinions in the Gemara (*Sotah* 36b), he almost did. And yet, like Esther, even as he touched the depths of despair, Yosef never let go of his abiding sense that, despite the real reasons for despair, there remained hope for the future.

In closing, it is interesting to note that, while the power of Esther's commitment certainly secured the future of Klal Yisrael, it did much to redeem the past as well. As the Gemara (*Megilla* 16a) explains, after Esther revealed herself, Achashveirosh began treating her as an equal. After hearing her lineage, Achashveirosh stopped looking at Esther as a commoner who had ascended to the throne. As a descendant of Shaul HaMelech, she herself was royalty. But in a very real sense, Esther does not just descend from that royal house. She atones for it. For where Shaul wavers in his commitment by acceding to the will of the Jewish people not to kill the Amalekite king Agag—Esther is strong. And, perhaps more important, where Shaul sees the end of his kingship and responds to the news with despair, Esther is able feel that deep despair—and yet find hope for the future.