

Mordechai and Esther: The Evolution of a Relationship

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There was a Jew in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai ... And he raised Hadassah, who is Esther.

Esther 2:5-7

איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמם מרדכי ... ויהי אומן את הדסה היא אסתר.

אסתר ב:ה-ז

Esther did not reveal her nationality or her lineage because Mordechai commanded her not to reveal it.

Esther 2:10

לא הגידה אסתר את עמה ואת מולדתה כי מרדכי צוה עליה אשר לא תגיד.

אסתר ב:י

From the first mention of Mordechai's name it is clear that he is the hero of the story. Our custom is for the entire congregation to recite the verse describing Mordechai. Hadassah, who is Esther, is mentioned in terms of her relationship to him. She is totally submissive to him and follows his instructions without question. When she is taken to the king's palace, Esther, as commanded by Mordechai, does what Hagai, who is in charge of the women, tells her. Even when chosen as queen, what is important is what Esther doesn't do. Listening to Mordechai, she doesn't reveal her nationality or background.

The pattern is clear: active Mordechai and passive Esther. When Esther does speak to the king about the plot to kill him, she does so on behalf of Mordechai. Mordechai discovers the plot and is the only one courageous enough to refuse to bow down before Haman. The Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74b, justifies Esther living with a non-Jewish king by seeing her role as passive (אסתר (קרקע עולם היא).

Esther said to respond to Mordechai ... And Mordechai left and did exactly as Esther had commanded him.

Esther 4:15-17

ותאמר אסתר להשיב אל מרדכי... ויעבור מרדכי ויעש ככול אשר צותה עליו אסתר.

אסתר ד:טו-יז

At the critical moment when Mordechai turns to Esther and admonishes her for doing nothing for the Jewish people, the roles begin to shift. Initially, Esther is removed, apparently personally safe, since Haman does not know that she is Jewish. Mordechai challenges Esther to respond as

the Queen of Persia. Based on the earlier parts of the Megillah, we would have expected Mordechai to outline the strategy that Esther should employ to influence the king.

Yet there is no indication that he played any role in advising her. In fact, Esther gives instructions to Mordechai. Once Esther agrees to act, she alone has to determine how to reduce the power and influence of Haman. Esther is no longer passive. She emerges as the heroine of the story.

Strikingly, at the turning point, when Haman goes to the king to gain approval to hang Mordechai, the reversal does not include any action by Mordechai. Haman was forced to dress Mordechai in royal clothing and make a proclamation about him, but Mordechai is the object and the Megillah doesn't record anything he said.

From that moment Esther and Mordechai are partners in the leadership, with each having a different role to play. It is Esther's intervention that leads to the king giving authority to Mordechai. In the dialogue between Achashveirosh and Esther it is clear that she has mastered the art of getting him to listen to her instructions while not threatening his authority.

And Mordechai wrote these things and he sent letters to all of the Jews ... And Esther the queen, daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew wrote all of the acts of power to confirm the second letter of Purim.

Esther 9:20, 29

ויכתוב מרדכי את הדברים האלה וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים... ותכתוב אסתר המלכה בת אביחיל ומרדכי היהודי את כל תקף לקים את אגרת הפורים הזאת השנית.
אסתר ט:כ, כט

After the victory, Mordechai, the religious leader of the community, proclaims the holiday of Purim. For unclear reasons a second letter is needed to gain full acceptance of Purim. This second letter has to come from the two of them with Esther's name appearing first.

One can view this transformation from two equally correct perspectives. One can focus on Esther's growth and ability to take on a leadership role. She emerges as a model for Jewish women. Her commitment extends beyond the story as she sacrifices her desired way of life by remaining married to Achashveirosh, a gentile and a foolish king. The survival of the Jewish people depended on her and she rose to the occasion.

Alternately, one can focus on the mentor-student relationship. Mordechai is clearly Esther's mentor. Initially, the pupil depends totally on the teacher. But Mordechai and Esther understand that the goal has to be for the pupil to become independent. Esther faces a challenge where she must initiate to be successful. There was no direct lesson that could be applied. When one reads the Megillah for the first time one expects Esther to plead for her people at the first party. Her insight into the character of her husband, realizing that it was necessary to increase his apprehension in order to ensure that he would turn against Haman, is brilliant.

The emergence of a woman and a pupil as a savior of the Jewish people is a lesson that should motivate us to bring out the hidden potential that is within us.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Smilowitz, a quiet yet strong leader, a gentleman who was a model of integrity.