

# Mordekhai, Son of Yair

Everyone loves a hero; we glorify them and recount epic sagas telling of their great deeds and valor. But, truth to tell, who is the greater hero? The person who was born to greatness or the individual who fought against his own internal weakness and overcame obstacles to act heroically? Our tradition seems to favor the latter. “Even a completely righteous person cannot stand in the place of a true penitent.”<sup>1</sup> R. Yehuda haNassi averred that the “great” Eliezer b. Durdia was able to “acquire his world” in one moment of absolute turnaround.<sup>2</sup> Despite this tradition, we prefer to see our heroes, Biblical, classical and modern, as having been born as angels. We love to read of their spiritual and academic achievements from their youngest years.

In this spirit, many will read the story of Mordekhai and Esther as a tale of two unblemished heroes, who infiltrate Ahashverosh’s court in order to save the Jews. Megilat Esther, however, tells a different story, one that speaks to us and allows these giants of our history to serve as true role models. Hagiography makes the hero inaccessible and impossible to emulate. How can any of us strive to be an Avraham Avinu if he never took a faulty step on his way to eternal greatness? How can David, our king, inspire purity of spirit in the rest of us if he never fell — and then got up, dusted himself off, and resumed his valiant march to assume his vaunted place in Jewish history?

Mordekhai is introduced as follows:



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אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבְּיֵרָה וְשָׁמוֹ מְרֻדְכַי בֶּן  
יָאִיר בֶּן שְׁמַעִי בֶּן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה  
מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה  
מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה ...

*There was a Judean man in Shushan, the fortified city, his name being Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shim’i, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who was exiled from Yerushalayim, with the emigres that were exiled with Yekhonyah, king of Yehuda...*

**Esther 2:5-6.**



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Although the Midrash interprets the names of his forbearers as appellations accorded to Mordekhai himself, the simple *peshat* is that the text is listing his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. This should catch our attention. We are accustomed to being introduced to characters in Tanakh with, at most, a patronym. Introducing three generations of ancestors is unusual and begs an explanation. In addition, the names

Kish, Shim’i and Ya’ir are Hebrew names common to the Rahelite tribes. Divrei Hayamim I, 1-10, demonstrates that names were common to particular tribes. We aren’t surprised to learn that this Benjaminite had a Ya’ir, Shim’i and Kish in his family tree. But what are we to make of the name Mordekhai, which has no antecedents in any Israelite tribe? Haza’l were sensitive to this anomaly and suggested that Mordekhai had a Hebrew name — Petahya<sup>3</sup> — implying that Mordekhai was his “secular” name. Indeed, modern scholarship is nearly unanimous in maintaining that Mordekhai was not only a secular name, but a pagan name, a form of Marduk, the head of the Persian pantheon (adopted from the Sumerian tradition). Why is a Jew, a member of Binyamin, identified by such a name? A related question may be posed about the unidentified *asher* at the beginning of v. 6 — who was it that was exiled from Yerushalayim?

Following the best historic records available, Xerxes (the likely “Ahashverosh” of our Megila) ruled from 485-465 BCE, which places our story as beginning (in the third year of his reign) approximately 115 years after the exile of Yekhonya. The simplest explanation for all of

this is as follows: Kish, Mordekhai's great-grandfather, was exiled with the aristocracy and artisans with Yekhonyah. Mordekhai was a second/third-generation Persian Jew, born and raised in exile. As history attests — even as recent as the 20th century — Jews typically maintain cultural ties to the “old country,” including names, language etc. for two generations. It is typically the third generation of emigres that successfully assimilate into a new culture (if it will have them). This is well-documented from every exile in which Jews have been welcomed — witness the Eastern European immigration to the United States in the last decades of the 19th century through World War I. Shloimo begat Jonathan, whose son was William. William's son, sadly enough, was likely as not to be Chris. This would explain why the text traces Mordekhai's roots so far back — to explain how a notable Jew who will become our hero has such a name.

This explanation is bolstered by the interactions between Mordekhai and his co-workers in the king's court. Mordekhai was already a worker in the gates of the king no later than 479 BCE when Esther was taken into the palace. He had free access to the outer courtyard and was able to keep tabs on her welfare. His refusal to bow to Haman took place in 473 BCE, the 12th year of Ahashverosh's reign (Esther 3:7). In other words, he was working in the palace for at least six years, day in and day out. As indicated by the passage in 3:4, his co-workers were unaware of his identity as a Jew until he told them. For someone to be an observant Jew and keep it from their closest co-workers and neighbors is a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

Much the same is the apparent read of Esther/Hadasah. We are introduced to Mordekhai's cousin by both of her names. Whereas Hadasah is a clearly Hebrew name, Esther seems to fall into the same category as Mordekhai. In spite of the Midrashic associations with the Hebrew root *s\*t\*r*, the name is of clearly pagan provenance and is a form of Astarte, the goddess known throughout the near east. Like Mordekhai, her identity as a Jewess is kept discreet for at least six years — during her 12 months of preparation and the first five years of her rule. It is only when Haman's plot is about to be foiled that she steps forward and identifies herself as a member of that nation targeted for ethnocide. Unlike Mordekhai, in whose case we had to infer from his words to his fellow courtiers that his Jewishness was not visible, Esther's secret is a matter of black-on-white text: “Esther did not reveal her nation nor her family...” (Esther 2:10 and again in 2:20). How was Esther able to hide her dietary restrictions and everything else that goes along with observance from the many people who surrounded her on a constant basis?

If we read the Megillah as a story about two cousins who operate incognito to save the Jews, we are forced to ignore some texts, overreach on others and, perhaps most significantly, miss what may be the central point of the story. If, on the other hand, we read the text as it is, we are presented with two exiled Jews who have assimilated into the culture, have Persian names and are able to “pass” in the most powerful court in the world without anyone being aware of their identities. When they arrive at a crucial juncture — a *parashat derakhim* — in their lives, they make the difficult choice to step

forward, embrace their identities and risk life and limb on behalf of Am Yisrael. Mordekhai's powerful words sent to Esther:

כִּי אִם הַחֲרֹשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רָחוּ  
 וְהַצִּלָּה יִעֲמֹד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית  
 אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הַנֶּעֱתָ  
 לְמַלְכוּת.

*If you be silent at this time, salvation will arise for the Jews from another source and you and your father's house will be destroyed...*

**Esther 4:14**

It is these persuasive words that generate the metamorphosis of Esther, the passive queen into the active Jewess. For the first time in the story, she takes the reins and initiates actions that ultimately lead to Haman's downfall and to salvation. Beyond the immediate redemption, her actions impel a wholesale change in the way that the Jews are perceived by their countrymen and, no doubt, by themselves. Jewish identity was no longer something to hide behind Persian clothes and Babylonian names. Judaism was embraceable and a source of pride for all — and therein lay the true *ge'ulah*.

This is not a story about perfect people; it is much more than that. We celebrate a crisis that pushed two Jews to shed their garments of exile and proudly don the crowns of royal Jews.

## Endnotes

- 1 BT *Berakhot* 34b.
- 2 BT *Avodah Zarah* 17a; note that R. Yehuda haNassi wept when he made this exclamation; viz. BT *Yevamot* 64a.
- 3 Mishna, *Sheqalim* 5:1.