

Purim – Megillat Esther
When Did Esther Become Queen?

Simon Wolf

As is stated by the Megillah itself, one of the themes of the Megillah is “V’NaHaFoch Hu (וְנִהְיֶה פֹּחַ הוּא),” the sudden reversals of fortune, turns in fate. “And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month which is the month of Adar, when the king’s command and edict were to be executed; the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had hoped to prevail over them; the opposite happened (וְנִהְיֶה פֹּחַ הוּא), and the Jews prevailed over their enemies.”¹ “On the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them (אֲשֶׁר נִהְיָה לָהֶם) from grief to joy, and from mourning to festivity...”² While some may consider this theme to be a leitmotif in the Megillah, it seems to be a much more central element of the message of the Megillah. It is not simply ironic that the scheduled date of the Jews annihilation turned into their moment of ascendancy and produced for them a holiday for the ages. The sudden changes in destiny, events, people’s standing and their emotions throughout the Megillah are not simply happenstance. Rather, the message of the Megillah is that Purim is the celebration of God’s intervention in history to unseat what people see as foregone conclusions; nothing can be taken for granted. The speed and the enormity of the change in the story only serves to further emphasize how precarious the assumption of any self-evident truth can be. While the name of the holiday, “Purim (Lots),” would seem to convey the opposite message, it in reality helps to accentuate the fragility of any person or situation through portraying perceived outcomes as being determined by randomness and uncertainty, as if one has no control over the result. This idea is so eloquently expressed by Shmuel’s mother Chana, “There is none as holy as God, for there is none beside You; There is no rock like our God...”³ The bows of the mighty are broken; And the faltering are girded with strength.⁴ Men once sated must hire out for bread; while men once hungry cease to be so. While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many becomes bereft...⁵ God impoverishes and enriches; He casts down, He also elevates.⁶ He raises the poor from the dust, lifts the destitute from the dunghill, to seat them with nobles and to grant them seats of honor. For

the pillars of the earth belong to God; He set the world upon them...”⁷ This might also connect to the practice of becoming inebriated on Purim.⁸ People generally present an aura of being poised and in control of themselves, their environment and their destiny, but they need to realize that in the end it is all a façade since in reality it is all in God’s hands. On Purim, the alcohol helps one to come to this recognition by causing one to feel the sensation of losing control. This instability in turn engenders one to surrender themselves to God. No one is promoting drunkenness as a positive ongoing state of being, but the experience once a year can hopefully inculcate the individual for the remainder of the year with the message of the Megillah as to the fallibility and feebleness of man. The result of this recognition will be a higher sensitivity to and appreciation of one’s dependence on God.

The most prominent example of “V’NaHaFoch Hu (וְנִהְיֶה פֹּחַ הוּא)” in the Megillah is the see-sawing fortunes of Haman and Mordechai. The higher one soars, the deeper the other one descends. Mordechai goes from sitting in the gate of the king to pariah due to the rise of Haman’s political star. He is then pulled out of his mourning to be gallivanted around in royal garb by the same Haman who is planning Mordechai’s demise. After this small interlude, Mordechai returns to his grieving with dim prospects as the powerful Haman has him in his cross-hairs. Then just when Haman reaches the pinnacle of his political career and Mordechai is destined to be hanged, suddenly everything changes and before one knows it, Haman is on the gallows and Mordechai has replaced Haman as the most powerful man in the kingdom.

One would have thought that on a smaller scale, the fortunes of Vashti and Esther would follow a similar pattern. Vashti’s fall from grace would result in Esther’s ascending the throne. While this may be true from a bigger picture standpoint, upon looking at the matter more closely, it seems that there is a nuanced difference between Vashti’s demise and Esther’s rise which might speak to something much more significant.

In the beginning of the Megillah, after partying and drinking for six months, King Achashverosh throws an additional party for seven days for those

¹ ובשנים עשר חדש הוא חדש אדר בשלושה עשר יום בו אשר הגיע דבר המלך ודתו להעשות ביום אשר שברו איבי היהודים לשלוט בהם ונהפוך הוא אשר ישלטו היהודים המה בשנאייהם: (אסתר ט, א)
² כימים אשר נחזו בהם היהודים מאובייהם והחדש אשר נהפך להם מגון לשמחה ומאבל ליום טוב לעשות אותם; מי משתה ושמתה ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאביונים: (אסתר ט, כב)
³ אין קדוש כיקוק כי אין בלתך ואין צור פאלקינו: (שמואל א ב, ב)
⁴ קשת גברים חתים ונקשלים אצרו חיל: (שמואל א ב, ד)

⁵ שבעים בלחם נשכרו ורעבים חדלו עד עקרה ילדה שבעה ורבת בני אמהלה: (שמואל א ב, ה)
⁶ יקוק מוריש ומעשיר משפיל אף-מרומם: (שמואל א ב, ז)
⁷ מלכים מעפר דל מאשפת ירים אביון להושיב עם-נדיבים וכסא כבוד ינחלם גי ליקוק מצקי ארץ יגשת עליהם תבל: (שמואל א ב, ח)
⁸ אמר רבא: מיחיב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי (מגילה ז:); אני לא נוקט עמדה הלכתי או מעשי בענין של השתייה בפורים

present in the capital city Shushan. On the seventh day, when the king is well plied with wine, he asks his advisors to bring Queen Vashti in her royal finery before him so he can parade her before all those gathered to show-off her tremendous beauty. Chazal commenting on the verse, "to bring Queen Vashti before the king adorned in her a royal diadem (בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת), to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a woman of beautiful appearance,"⁹ suggest that Achashverosh's request was that Vashti appear unclothed before the men's party with nothing but her crown.¹⁰ They deduce this from the fact that Achashverosh unnecessarily mentions that the queen should come adorned in her crown since the queen by definition would be adorned in her diadem for public appearances. Therefore, they conclude that he must have been asking that she solely be adorned in the crown. The continuation of the Midrash makes it clear as why Achashverosh took such offense to Vashti's rejection. Her snub included the following message to Achashverosh, "[you] the stable hand of my father, my father could drink a thousand times more than you and still hold his wine better than you...I am the daughter of Belshatzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnetzar...and you are a commoner, who would not even rank as a quaestor to run before my father's chariot..."¹¹ The Midrash that portrays Achashverosh's request that Vashti appear before the party in nothing but her crown is not necessarily suggesting that this was Achashverosh's actual request, but highlighting the fact that Vashti's only value to Achashverosh was her royal lineage. Similarly, Vashti's response indicates that she felt empowered to reject the overtures of her husband because she was the queen and Achashverosh was the king at her behest, through marriage. That is why he took such offense to being rebuffed and why deposing her was seen as such an important act towards solidifying his hold on the monarchy.

Vashti's name occurs in the Megillah ten times, all of which are found in the first two chapters of the Megillah. Interestingly, Vashti's name appears together with the title queen (מלכה) in six out of those ten instances.¹² After scanning the first two

chapters, one can discern a pattern – the first six times she is titled Vashti HaMalka and in the latter four instances she is called simply Vashti.¹³ The transition happens in the verse which describes her deposition as the punishment befitting her insubordination. "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Achashverosh. And let your majesty bestow her royal state upon another woman who is more worthy than she..."¹⁴ Without her royal pedigree, Vashti was a nobody and once Achashverosh felt secure in his position she no longer carried any value to him. Therefore, when she played her "royal" hand a little too far, Achashverosh disposed of her.

Given the theme of "V'NaHaFoch Hu (וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא)," one would expect Esther to be the inverse of Vashti and follow the same pattern in reverse. Prior to her coronation she would be known simply as Esther and after her ascending the throne she would be known as Esther HaMalka. Esther's name appears fifty-five times in the Megillah. As would be expected, in the eight instances she is mentioned prior to becoming queen, she is known simply as Esther.¹⁵ Though surprisingly, after becoming queen, Esther does not gain the title of Malka within the Megillah and continues to be known simply as Esther. Until the fifth Perek in the Megillah, Esther is only referred to as Esther HaMalka once and that is by Mordechai when he discloses to her the traitorous plot of Bigtan and Teresh. This seems to indicate that Esther never really became an active queen. Given the fate of her predecessor, it is not surprising that she kept a low profile and did not exercise her royal influence or position. Her passivity was exactly what Achashverosh was seeking; a perfect antidote to the all too active and assertive Vashti. This also explains Esther's tremendous reluctance to appear unsolicited before Achashverosh to intercede on behalf of the Jews. Such forward and demanding behavior would be reminiscent of Vashti's deportment and that could very well irk the king and result in serious negative ramifications for Esther as well.

⁹ ביום השביעי קטוב לבי המלך ביום אמר למהוּמין בדתא חרבונא בגתא ואבגתא זתא וקרלס שבועת הסריסים המשרתים את פני המלך אחשוורוש: להביא את-ושתי המלכה לפני המלך בכתר מלכות להראות העמים והשרים את-פניה קיטובת מראה היא: (אסתר א, יא)

¹⁰ אמר רבא: יום השביעי שבת היה, שישאל אוכלין ושותין, מתחילין בדברי תורה ובדברי תשבחות. אבל אומות העולם שאוכלין ושותין - אין מתחילין אלא בדברי תיפלות. וכן בסעודתו של אותו רשע, הללו אומרים: מדיות נאות, והללו אומרים: פרסיות נאות. אמר להם אחשוורוש: כלי שאני משתמש בו אינו לא מדיי ולא פרסי אלא כשדיי, רצונכם לראותה? - אמרו לו: אין, ובלבד שתהא ערומה. (גמ מגילה יב,; אסר רבה גיג,)... אמרו לו א"כ תבא ערומה שכן הוא אומר להביא את ושתי המלכה, ולא היה עליה כלום אלא כתר מלכות... (ילקוט שמעוני אסתר רמז תתרמט)

¹¹ ויקצף המלך מאד, אמאי דלקה ביה כולי האי? אמר רבא: שלחה ליה: בר אהוריריה דאבא! אבא לקבל אלפא חמרא שתי ולא רוי, והוא גברא אשתתי

בחמריה. מיד וחמתו בערה בו. (גמ' מגילה שם)... ויקצוף המלך מאד מאי כולי האי דלקה ביה חמתיה ואזלא, אמר רבה שלחה ליה בר אהוריריה דאבא לקבל אלפא חמרא שתי והוא גברא אישתתי בחמריה מיד וחמתו בערה בו. ועוד שלחה לו שוטה טפש אם ביינך יצא לברך דע כי אני ושתי המלכה בתו של בלשצאר בנו של נבוכדנאצר אותו שהיה מתקלס במלכים ורוזנים נעשו מאומה לפניו שכן הוא אומר והוא במלכים יתקלס ורוזנים משחק לו, לא היית קקסדור לרוץ לפני מרכבת אבי, ואלו היה אבי קיים לא נשאת לי, ואתה מבקש להכניסי ערומה (ילקוט שמעוני שם)

¹² אסתר פרק א פסוקים ט, יא, יב, טו, טז, ז

¹³ אסתר א, יט ופרק ב פסוקים א, ד, ז

¹⁴ אם-על המלך טוב יצא דבר מלכות מלפניו ויכתב בדתתי פרסי ומדי ולא יעבור אשר לא-תבוא ושתתי לפני המלך אחשוורוש ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה הטובה ממנה: (אסתר א, ט)

¹⁵ אסתר פרק ב פסוקים ז, ח, יא, טו, טז, ז

That all changes with the opening Pasuk of the fifth chapter. "On the third day, Esther adorned herself in royalty (וּתְלַבֵּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת) and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, facing the king's palace, while the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room facing the entrance of the palace.¹⁶ As soon as the king saw Esther Hamalka (אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה) standing in the court, she won his favor. The king extended to Esther the golden scepter which he had in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter."¹⁷ For the first time in the Megillah, Achashverosh addresses Esther as Esther HaMalka and from hereto forward¹⁸ both Achashverosh and Haman relate to her as a "royal" queen, rather than just as the wife of the king. A dramatic transformation transpires at the moment when Esther "cloaks herself in royalty (וּתְלַבֵּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת)."

The fourth Perek of the Megillah ends with some of the most emotional, dramatic and resounding words and moments of the Megillah. Mordechai makes a fervent plea to Esther to use her position in the palace to intercede on behalf of the Jews, "...do not delude yourself, that of all the Jews you will escape their fate by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps this is the whole reason you have attained a royal position."¹⁹ Esther's acceptance of Mordechai's challenge is a clear turning point in the Megillah, but it is also a dramatic development in Esther's character.

Until that moment in the Megillah, as noted, Esther was an unassertive wife of the king. That passivity was not limited to her role as queen, but characterized her more general demeanor. The following verse is emblematic of Esther's character in the beginning of her reign as queen. "Esther did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had instructed her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai's bidding, as she had done when she was reared by him." Esther lived a happy fairytale-like existence where she let others take

responsibility for her decisions, and upon entering the palace she began to live a self-absorbed life in an ivory tower shielded from the reality plaguing her brethren. The turning point in Esther's character is when she accepts Mordechai's challenge. At that moment, she turns the tables and instead of taking orders from Mordechai, she instructs him as to what he needs to do. "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast..."²⁰ And in another case of "V'NaHaFoch Hu (וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא)," in this instance, it is Mordechai who "...went about and did just as Esther had commanded him."²¹ In addition, at that moment, Esther finally reaches outside of herself to empathize with the fate of her nation and places her national responsibility above her personal comfort when she declares, "...then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!"²⁰

When Esther "cloaks herself in royalty (וּתְלַבֵּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת)," it is describing Esther's rising to the occasion and assuming the true mantle of royalty and leadership. She transforms from simply Esther to Esther HaMalka when she takes personal responsibility for her destiny and at the same time she broadens that lot in life to include not only herself, but her entire nation. That is true royalty and marks the coronation of Queen Esther. At the moment Esther turns herself into royalty, she is blessed with God-given grace²² – not the grace of obsequiousness that characterizes the Esther who became the wife of the king,²³ but rather the grace of leadership and royalty – which is reflected in the way that Achashverosh and Haman now relate to her as Esther HaMalka. The story of the Megillah and the holiday of Purim²⁴ give us a moment to reflect on our lives and to face the challenge of Mordechai and hopefully rise to the occasion like Esther. God should bless us with the ability to transform ourselves (וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא) into true royalty of God (לְלבושׁ מַלְכוּת)²⁵ – strong enough to take responsibility for our destiny and brave enough to see beyond ourselves.

Purim Sameach and Shabbat Shalom

¹⁶ וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתְּלַבֵּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת וַתַּעֲמֵד בַּחֲצַר בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֹהֲלֵהוּ יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ בְּבֵית הַמַּלְכוּת נֹכַח פֶּתַח הַבַּיִת: (אסתר ה, א)

¹⁷ וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עֹמֵדֶת בַּחֲצַר נְשֹׂאָה חֹן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׁטַח הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת-שַׂרְבִּיט הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשַּׂרְבִּיט: (אסתר ה, ב)

¹⁸ אסתר המלכה מופיעה 14 פעמים בתוך המגילה וכשלוש עשרה מתוכם נמצאים מפרקי ה והלאה. ולמרות שאחרי זה גם השם אסתר מופיע לבד בלי השם תואר מלכה, ביחסי אנשים כלפיה היא מוגדרת כאסתר המלכה.

¹⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֳּכָי לְהִשָּׁב אֶל-אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-תְּדַמִּי בְּנִפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל-יְהוּדִים: כִּי אִם-הִחַרְשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רֹחוֹ וְהִצִּילָה יַעֲמֹד לְיְהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית-אֲבִיךָ תֹאבְדוּ וְיָמִי יִדְעַע אִם-לְעַת כְּזֹאת תִּגְעַת לְמַלְכוּת: (אסתר ד, ג-ד)

²⁰ לָךְ כְּלוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאַל-תֹּאכְלוּ וְאַל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה יוֹם גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרָתִי אֲצוּם כֵּן וְכֵן אֲבֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבֹדְתִי אֲבֹדְתִי: (אסתר ד, טז)

²¹ וַעֲבַר מֶרְדֳּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר: (אסתר ד, יז)

²² וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עֹמֵדֶת בַּחֲצַר נְשֹׂאָה חֹן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׁטַח הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר אֶת-שַׂרְבִּיט הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשַּׂרְבִּיט: (אסתר ה, ב)

²³ וְהִגִּיעַ תִּרְאֵתָהּ בַּת-אֲבִיחַיִל דָּד מֶרְדֳּכָי אֲשֶׁר לָקַח-לָוּ לְבַת לְבָוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא בְקִשָּׁה דְבָר כִּי אִם אֶת-אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הִגִּי סְרִיסֵי-הַמֶּלֶךְ שִׁמְרֵי הַנְּשִׂים וְתִהְיֶי אֶסְתֵּר נְשִׂאת חֹן בְּעֵינָי כָּל-רְאִיָּה: ...וַיֹּאֲהֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל-הַנְּשִׂים וַתִּשְׂאֶת-חֹן וַחֲסֵד לְפָנָיו מִכָּל-הַבְּתוּלֹת וַיִּשֶׂם קֶטֶר-מַלְכוּת בְּרֹאשָׁהּ וַיַּמְלִיכָהּ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתָי: (אסתר ב, טו-יז)

²⁴ ובמיוחד ההדגשה בפרים על האמפוטיות לזולת דרך המצוות של משלוח מנות ומתנות לאבינים ושמחת ריעות

²⁵ וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כְּהִיָּם וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ... (שמות יט, ו)