



TORAT ZION: ON THE VALUE OF VICTORY IN EXILE

The most precious resources are the ones that are most limited. From one's financial choices to how one decides to spend one's time, these questions reveal much about our personal character and life's mission. One of those resources is political capital. There are only a certain number of times one can ask a favor of someone else. What we expend political capital for, especially with those in seats of real power, is a reflection on what we value most.

In Tanach, there are two parallel situations in which we read about Jewish heroes who stood before a powerful king seeking grace for the Jewish people.

One is in the Book of Nechemia. Nechemia was a trusted advisor in the inner court of the Persian king

Artechshasta. Upon hearing of the sorry state of affairs in Jerusalem — the walls were in ruins and the Jewish residents left unprotected — Nechemia put his own security in jeopardy and came forward and asked the king to rebuild Jerusalem.

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל מַה זֶה אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ
וְאַתְּפַלֵּל אֵל אֱ-לֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם. וְאָמַר לַמֶּלֶךְ אִם
עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם יִיטֵב עֲבֹדְךָ לְפָנָיִךְ אֲשֶׁר
תִּשְׁלַחְנִי אֶל יְהוּדָה אֶל עִיר קְבָרוֹת אֲבֹתַי
וְאֲבָנֶנָּה.

The king said to me, "What is your request?" With a prayer to the God of Heaven, I answered the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, to rebuild it."

Nechemia Chapter 2

The king agrees and the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt.

Interestingly, the story of Purim takes place some time before Nechemia, and the state of Jerusalem was similarly in ruins. And once again we read of a Jewish hero who risks his life by asking the king for a favor.

In fact, there were two favors that Esther asked. The first was to save the Jewish people from the evil decree contrived by Haman. The Persian king Achashverosh agrees and the Jewish people were permitted to defend themselves and defeat their enemies. The second favor took place the day after the first request was already fulfilled to save the Jewish people. Once again, Esther appears before the Persian king, Achashverosh, and once again the king offers to grant her request:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר הַמְלֵכָה בְּשׁוֹשׁן הַבֵּיָרָה
הֲרִגוּ הַיְהוּדִים וְאֲבַד חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וְאֵת

עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן בְּשָׂרָר מְדִינֹת הַמְּלֶכֶךְ מֶה עֲשֶׂה וּמֶה שְׂאֵלֶתָּה וַיִּנְתֶּן לָהּ וּמֶה בְּקִשְׁתָּהּ עוֹד וְתַעֲשֶׂה. וְהִיא אָמְרָה אֶסְתֵּר אִם עַל הַמְּלֶכֶךְ טוֹב יִנְתֶּן גַּם מִחֶרֶץ לַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוֹשׁוֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדַת הַיּוֹם וְאֵת עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן יִתְּלוּ עַל הַעֵץ. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמְּלֶכֶךְ לַהֲעֲשׂוֹת כֹּן וְהִנְתֶּן דַּת בְּשׁוֹשׁוֹן וְאֵת עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן תִּלְּוּ. וַיִּקְהִלוּ הַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוֹשׁוֹן גַּם בַּיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וַיְהִיגוּ בְּשׁוֹשׁוֹן שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וּבְבִזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת יָדָם.

The king said to Queen Esther, "In the fortress Shushan alone the Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman. What then must they have done in the provinces of the realm! What is your wish now? It shall be granted you. And what else is your request? It shall be fulfilled." "If it please Your Majesty," Esther replied, "let the Jews in Shushan be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake." The king ordered that this should be done, and the decree was proclaimed

in Shushan. Haman's ten sons were impaled: And the Jews in Shushan mustered again on the fourteenth day of Adar and slew three hundred men in Shushan. But they did not lay hands on the spoil.

Esther Chapter 9

Esther requests that King Achashverosh allow the Jews to root out more enemies in the capital Shushan. Achashverosh agrees and this is the reason that walled cities celebrate the holiday of Shushan Purim on the 14th of Adar.

Esther's second request is particularly noteworthy. One can readily understand why her first request was to save the entire Jewish people from the evil decree of genocidal destruction. But by the second time Achashverosh offered to grant her a request, the Jewish People were

already saved. Esther could have asked for anything. Keep in mind, Jerusalem was in ruins at the time. But instead of asking for Jerusalem, Esther asked for greater security for the Jews in the diaspora.

The scene and language in Nechemia and in Esther are nearly identical. In both stories, two loyal Jews are asked, "what do you seek." The parallelism is deliberate, these two stories are in conversation with one another. Of the two stories, Esther is clearly the aberration.

Nearly all of Tanach is focused on Israel. Even those stories that took place outside of Israel are facing Israel, yearning towards our homeland. In a number of sources, we see an ambivalence towards Esther. The Gemara teaches that there was some hesitation by Chazal to include Esther

CORE TORAH VALUES

Yeshiva University is a unique ecosystem of educational institutions and resources that prepares the next generation of leaders with Jewish values and market-ready skills to achieve great success in their personal and professional lives, endowing them with both the will and wherewithal to transform the Jewish world and broader society for the better.

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TORAT EMET

אמת
TRUTH

We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.

The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.

The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.

TORAT CHAIM

חיים
LIFE

We believe in bringing values to life.

Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.

When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.

TORAT ADAM

אדם
INFINITE HUMAN WORTH

We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.

Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.

The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.

TORAT CHESD

חסד
COMPASSION

We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.

Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.

TORAT ZION

ציון
REDEMPTION

We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.

In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.

The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.

within the larger canon of Tanach. Even upon accepting Esther and the holiday of Purim as obligatory, one Sage thought that we cannot sing Hallel on this day because it was a salvation that happened outside the land of Israel. Perhaps most acutely in its subtle criticism of Esther is the opinion recorded in the Talmud Yerushalmi that explains why walled cities who celebrate on the 15th of Adar are defined by the time of Yehoshua bin Nun, when the Jewish people entered into Israel.

רבי סימון בשם רבי יהושע בל לוי חלקו כבוד
לארץ ישראל שהיתה חריבה באותן הימים
ותלו אותה מימות יהושע בן נון.

Rebbe Simon in the name of Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi explained that in order to accord honor to the Land of Israel, which was destroyed at the time of Purim story, they defined walled cities based on the time of Yehoshua bin Nun. Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:1

We cannot set the ruling by the time of Achashverosh, because at the time, there were historically walled cities in Israel that were in ruins. It is not difficult to hear a cry in the Talmud Yerushalmi to “give honor to Eretz Yisrael,” a sentiment that the Purim story seems to be lacking.

With this background, one can understand that Esther taken together with Nechemia, especially in the context of all of the stories of Tanach, contains an essential life lesson.

The absence of Israel from the Megillah frames the entire story as a galut story and a galut victory. The

final redemption is missing. But that, in fact, is the point: A galut victory is still a part of the geulah, our collective redemption. What happens in the Diaspora matters. It matters not only to the Jews living there but matters in the greater story of the Jewish people. The story of Esther and Mordechai, which is not just a story of Jewish survival but a story of Jewish values being lived and spread throughout the world, is also part of redemption. That Mordechai does not bow to idols or seats of power, that Esther risks her life for the Jewish People, that we celebrate by spreading good will to our neighbors and caring for our poor are all messages that are essential to Jewish life.

Even in exile, we remain tethered to the ultimate redemption. Even in exile, we can experience redemption and move history forward.

But the story of Esther needs to be contextualized by Nechemia and the rest of Tanach. Even in exile, we remain tethered to the ultimate redemption. Even in exile, we can experience redemption and move history forward. A part of the redemption story, a part of our canon, includes the slow and subtle bending of our national trajectory

even if that redemptive arc takes some time to reach our ultimate end. That even removed from Israel, we must remain connected to our redemptive stories. Esther without Nechemia is an impoverished story, but Tanach without Esther is missing the integral nature of her Diasporic story and, in a larger sense, *our* exilic stories.

Much of life can feel disconnected from our own personal final destinations. Our professional lives, our religious lives, our family lives continue to evolve and emerge throughout our lives. We have not yet reached our destination. Life itself can feel exilic. Esther is a reminder that even in galut, an exilic victory is still a part of the redemptive story. Esther pleaded to be included in Tanach and it is a plea that echoes in each generation. We ask that our stories, no matter how far removed from the eventual geulah shleimah, have the dignity and merit to be canonized within the larger story of the Jewish people. When the story of Esther was canonized, in a larger sense, each of our galut stories were included as well. The greater canon of the Jewish people gathered all of our particular stories to be included within the grand narrative of kneset Yisrael — an enduring reminder that even our galut victories are included in the great unfolding narrative of our collective geulah.



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