



ESTHER AS PARAGON OF SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE: RAV LICHTENSTEIN'S READING OF ESTHER RECONSIDERED

If the final verse in the Megillah draws our attention to the stature Mordechai achieved in the royal court, there can be little question that Esther is the true heroine of the work that bears her name.

As developed in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's seminal essay, "If You Remain Silent at this Time: Concern for the Jewish People,"¹ Megillah Esther may be understood as the story of a radical transformation of a passive, naive, orphaned young woman into an assertive, fearless defender of her people, whose story and whose holiday will never be forgotten.²

It was Esther, after all, who was responsible for the stature that



Mordechai achieved.³ It was Esther who commanded that Mordechai gather the Jewish people for three fateful days of fasting and prayer, so pivotal for the salvation of the Jewish people.⁴ And indeed, it was Esther who was responsible for the

inclusion of her story in Tanach, and of Purim as a holiday on the Jewish calendar, passionately appealing to the Chachamim of her time, "*keva'uni l'dorot...kitvuni l'dorot.*"⁵

This reading is not mere literary analysis but replete with halakhic significance. According to many Rishonim, the fact that women are obliged in the positive, time-bound mitzvot of Purim is not only because they were threatened by Haman, but rather, "*af hen hayu b'oto ha'nes,*" in the sense that Esther was the primary human mover behind the miraculous salvation of our people.⁶

As such, great emphasis must be placed, as we prepare for Purim, on a rigorous study of Esther's

spiritual development. In the text of the Megillah, we are introduced to the events that unfold in ancient Shushan in a rapid fashion, so that we can take greater note of the hidden Providential hand guiding all that transpires.

And yet, the events of the Megillah actually played out over many years: Vashti is removed as queen in the third year of Achashverosh's reign;⁷ Esther is installed as her replacement in the seventh year of his reign;⁸ Haman ascends to power only some five years later,⁹ when the crucial events of the Megillah play out.

Upon further reflection regarding the extended timeline of these events, we are compelled to ask ourselves a fundamental question: How did Esther manage to survive so many years in the palace, not only in the physical sense of the term, but psychologically and spiritually as well? What sustained her through the long days, months, and years in the court of the depraved and debased ruler of Persia? Let us revisit, certainly with nothing short of reverence, Rav Lichtenstein zt'l's thesis that Esther's years in the palace, until the moment of crisis, are defined by a fundamental passivity.

We can scarcely imagine the sense of despair that Esther had to overcome during those long and lonely years in a palace where she lived daily with the knowledge that her husband was a violent and primitive drunk, who had killed her predecessor in an inebriated rage, and whose carnal desires were utterly insatiable.¹⁰ And yet, even in those dire straits, Esther was a paragon of spiritual resistance.

Chazal,¹¹ who posited a relationship between Mordechai and Esther that went far beyond that of an adoptive

father and daughter,¹² provide us with an image of spiritual heroism almost unrivaled in all of rabbinic literature:

שהיתה עומדת מחיקו של אחשורוש וטובלת
ויושבת בחיקו של מרדכי.
*She would arise from Achashverosh,
immerse herself, and return to
Mordechai.*

While this *tevilah* was likely not technically required,¹³ Esther purified herself from the repeated coercive acts that the bestial Achashverosh performed upon her, finding a reservoir of spiritual courage in the mitzvah of *taharat hamishpacha* to resume her life of sanctity with Mordechai.

This commitment, in Chazal's telling, to the sacred patterns of *taharat hamishpacha*, is hardly an isolated element of Esther's five years in the palace before the rise of Haman, even if, by far, it is the most dramatic.

Indeed, Chazal equally portray Esther as making heroic efforts to observe Shabbat, with Esther utilizing the seven ladies in waiting in rotation to track the arrival of Shabbat.¹⁴ Similarly, even though, according to one view, Esther was deliberately fed non-kosher foods in the palace, she, as Tosafot assert, categorically refused to eat such foods.¹⁵

What emerges, in aggregate, is an alternative conception of the early Esther. To be sure, in the moment of crisis, as Rav Lichtenstein depicts, Esther must be spurred to action by Mordechai's trenchant rebuke regarding her apparent lack of concern for the Jewish people, *al tidami v'nafshech l'himalet beit ha'melech mi'kol ha'yehudim* — Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace.

And yet, what prepared Esther to make the ultimate sacrifice for her people, "*ka'asher avaditi, avaditi*,"¹⁶ — if I am lost, I am lost — both with respect to her life and her union with Mordechai, was perhaps the years she had already spent cultivating a sense of spiritual dignity under the most adverse conditions imaginable.

We have, then, not a passive young maiden, the "*tabula rasa*" of Rav Lichtenstein's depiction, but a model of deep spirituality, albeit privately expressed. The transition that Esther must then undergo is perhaps better defined as understanding that her spiritual heroism must now transcend the individual realm — her heroic though necessarily private efforts to maintain Shabbat, kashrut, and elements of *taharat ha'mishpacha* — be brought to bear on the destiny of an entire people.

Small wonder, then, that after Esther has fully internalized the needs of the hour, in order for her private spiritual heroism to manifest itself publicly, she calls for three days of intensive communal prayer and fasting. This hardly seems the natural response of a young and passive woman who was heretofore bereft of spiritual gumption. On the contrary, it is a classically formulated response, employing both *ta'anit*, *teshuvah*, and *tza'akah* as crucial elements of any legitimate halakhic approach to crisis.¹⁷

If, as Chazal asserted, the impetus for the crisis of the Jews of Persia was their spiritual desiccation, *nehenu m'seudato shel oto rasha* (they participated in the feast of Achashverosh),¹⁸ *she'lo asku ba'Torah* (they didn't study Torah),¹⁹ *al am dal-dalim min ha-mitzvot* (lax in mitzvah observance);²⁰ and their

salvation was accompanied by a spiritual renaissance, *orah- zo Torah, simcha- zo yom tov, sasson- zo milah, v'yekar- elu tefillin*²¹ — “light” refers to Torah, “happiness” refers to the festivals, “joy” refers to circumcision, “and splendor” refers to tefillin — it stands to reason that this spiritual rejuvenation could only have been mediated via a leader whose greatness was indeed measured in her unflagging commitment to Torah, under the most adverse conditions.

This recasting of Esther’s transition leads to a tantalizing new understanding of the message of Megillat Esther. For all of Esther’s private spiritual heroism during five dark and long years in the palace, her true greatness was yet to reveal itself. When Haman and Achashverosh threw down the gauntlet to the Jewish people,²² and Mordechai helped Esther understand that she alone could be the Divine agent of the salvation of her people, she was equal to the awesome task placed in front of her.

It was precisely the acts of spiritual conviction that Esther undertook, day after day, month after month, year after year, that enabled Esther to cross her own personal Rubicon on behalf of her people, when circumstances demanded it from her.

In this sense, a new dialectic emerges: insofar as Esther guarded, with unsurpassed tenacity, the strictures of Torah in the den of debauchery that was the Persian palace, they, in turn, guarded and fortified her.

Replete with intrinsic significance, every mitzvah she performed during her years in the palace also played an instrumental role, developing the spiritual fiber so essential to her even more impressive heroism later in the Megillah.

If it was later to be said that Waterloo was first won on the fields of Eton, the Esther who is every iota the deserving heroine of her eponymous scroll was not the product of a radical epiphany in a moment of crisis alone. Rather, she may be better understood as a spiritual paragon, forged over time in a personal crucible of over five years, steeled for the singular moment for which, indeed, she had become queen.

Endnotes

1. *By His Light*, Lichtenstein, Aharon. Translated and edited by Reuven Ziegler. Maggid Modern Classics, 2017. Available online at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/if-you-remain-silent-time-concern-jewish-people>.
2. Esther 9:28. See Rambam, *Hilkhos Megillah V'Chanukah* 2:18, regarding both the eternal nature of the megillah and the observance of Purim.
3. Esther 8:1-2.
4. Esther 4:16.
5. *Megillah* 7a.
6. See Tosafot to *Megillah* 4a, as well as comments of Ritva and Rashba ad loc.
7. Esther 1:3.
8. Esther 2:16.
9. Esther 3:7.
10. See *Megillah* 13b, with Rashi ad loc., regarding the connection between the depth

of Achashverosh’s carnal depravity and the assassination plot of Bigtan and Teresh.

11. *Megillah* 13b.
12. R. Meir’s view (*Megillah* 13a) was that Mordechai and Esther were married, אל תקרי לבת אלא לביה.
13. See Rashi (ibid).
14. See *Megillah* 13a, “*she’haita moneh bahen yemei Shabbat*.”
15. See *Megillah* (ad loc.), as well as Tosafot s.v. *kidlei d’chazirei*.
16. See *Megillah* 15a, “*ka’asher avaditi mi’beit abba, kach oved mimcha*.”
17. Esther’s response could be considered nothing short of paradigmatic from the standpoint of Rambam. See *Hilkhos Ta’anuyot* 1:1-3.
18. *Megillah* 12a.
19. *Megillah* 11a.
20. *ibid*.
21. *Megillah* 16b.
22. See *Megillah* 14a, with regard to the relationship between Haman and Achashverosh, and their mutual enmity of the Jews. See also *Megillah* 16a, which interprets Esther, upon reciting the words “*ish tzar v’oyev*”, as referring to Achashverosh and not Haman. This is of course confirmed by the only other occasion in which Achashverosh is mentioned in Tanach outside of the Megillah, when he enacted a policy preventing the Jewish people from constructing the Mikdash (Ezra 4:6).



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