



## “THERE ONCE WAS A MAN:” SINGULARITY AND SOLITUDE IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

One of the most troubling verses in *Megillat Esther* has nothing to do with the terrible decree Haman enacted. It has to do with five simple words that can be easily overlooked: “In the capital Shushan lived a Jew (*ish Yehudi haya b’Shushan ha-bira*) by the name of Mordechai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite” (Est. 2:5). We are introduced to Mordechai as if he were the only Jew living in Shushan, as if no other inhabited the king’s capital city or perhaps any of the 127 provinces in Achashverosh’s vast empire. Mordechai asks that Esther initially hide her identity. This further cements the eerie sense that Mordechai was singularly alone as a man of faith in Persia, much the way that visitors touring countries once dense with Jews might be introduced to a city’s very last Jew.

This description is disquieting because much later in the narrative, in chapter eight, Shushan is suddenly filled with Jews celebrating permission to defend themselves: “And in every province and in every city, when the king’s command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them” (Est. 8:17). Being Jewish was suddenly so desirable that others, for either genuine or opportune reasons, wanted to convert. In the next chapter, we also meet Jews battling for their very lives: “Throughout the provinces of King Achashverosh, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the

fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples” (Est. 9:2). Again, the Jews in strength and number outpaced their Persian enemies. Where were all these Jews in the opening chapters of the book?

While many of the classic commentators, like Rashi and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, are notably silent about the word ‘*ish*’ in our verse, R. Yosef ibn Yahya draws attention to the uniqueness implied in the term: “It suggests [one] great in quality.” It’s not that Mordechai was the only Jew but that his personality, leadership, and righteousness made him stand out among his coreligionists.

Another likely explanation is that there were other Jews in Shushan and its environs at this time, but this

detail is not the story's central interest. Instead, the narrative positions one man against another as archetypes. The Talmud highlights this explanation by contrasting the 'ish,' in our verse, Esther 2:5, to its appearance in a later verse, Esther 7:6: "A man [ish] who is an adversary and an enemy, this evil Haman."<sup>1</sup> Mordechai as a man is contrasted with Haman as a man; this distinction pits goodness against evil, light against darkness, and wisdom against might. Elsewhere, the Talmud reads 'ish' as a word that implies extraordinary and unusual strength.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is another reading of this five-word expression that invites us to pause, to notice, and then to experience a moment of intentional disequilibrium when we listen to the story on Purim. Mordechai was not only a man but *the* man in the Megilla because he alone was acutely aware of his status as an exile, as we read in the verse that follows; he "had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah,

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which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon" (Est. 2:6). This description modifies and amplifies Mordechai's identity as someone who was profoundly shaped by the experience of exile. In so doing, the verse captures the solitude of Jewish identity in the diaspora. In Persia, without the collective Jewish national framework that confers dignity and distinctiveness to every individual, each Jew in the diaspora is inherently and existentially alone with his or her own faith.

This combination of conviction and vulnerability is a continuous feature of an exilic existence for committed Jews throughout history. Life is different when Jews have political autonomy. Contemporary Israeli philosopher, Micha Goodman, for example, names four components of identity that make life in the State of Israel profoundly Jewish: location, the nationality of its Jewish citizens, its calendar, and its language, Hebrew. As a result, authenticity in Israel becomes the very air that Jewish citizens of the State inhale. Not one of these factors exists for Jews in the diaspora.

To be a Jew in the diaspora requires deliberate effort and the creation of communities of intention because the national structures that support Jewish identity are notably absent. Sometimes Jewish communities reflect such a high degree of conscious creation that those living in them may dismiss how characteristic calendar and language, for example, are to one's identity. Over time, diaspora Jews may even risk believing that such

scaffolding is unnecessary to their Jewishness, as is sadly true for many Jews living in America today.

Those in the diaspora — we — cannot rely upon an organic, natural sense of Jewishness that is as foundational to national existence as breathing. Goodman notes of diaspora Jews that, "... precisely because Judaism is not indigenous, they have to create communities in which it can be practiced. Precisely because Jewish continuity is not assured, they have to fight for it. For the Chosen People, Judaism can never rest. For the Choosing People, it is a constant battle to keep it awake."<sup>3</sup>

Decades earlier, Rabbi Soloveitchik described the absence of this collective spirit in the diaspora as a source of profound loneliness and the State of Israel as a nation alone:

*The aloneness of the Jewish people today is very pronounced. The existence of the state dovetails with this aloneness... the aloneness of the Jewish people is one of the clear signs of the nation which exists as a chosen nation. The aloneness is a result of the election [of the Jewish people]. A great individual is lonely. Moses, our teacher, was lonely. A great nation is lonely. This is part of the covenant that God established with the Jewish people. That is part of what makes it unique. A lonely individual is creative. A lonely nation is also a creative one.*<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the Megilla, Mordechai was cloaked in a faith ignored or misunderstood. Mordechai, in exile, could not and would not fit in. He chose to embrace his differences and not renege on his commitments. This



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dissonance is the source of heartache, but, as Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, it may also be the source of Mordechai's creativity and his ambition. Lacking a supportive, collective, and autonomous existence, Mordechai had to forge a covenantal community of purpose and piety alone.

By the end of the book, however, Mordechai was successful beyond his wildest dreams: "For Mordechai was now powerful in the royal palace, and his fame was spreading through all the provinces; the *man* Mordechai was growing ever more powerful" (Est. 9:4). The term '*ish*' repeats itself here to let us know that Mordechai was the same man with the same values at the beginning of the book and at its end. He did not erase his spiritual distinctiveness, neither when facing persecution nor when robed in Persian splendor. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that we can achieve greatness wherever we are: "Israel does not negate the diaspora, because Judaism is a matter of holy lives as well as holy places."<sup>5</sup>

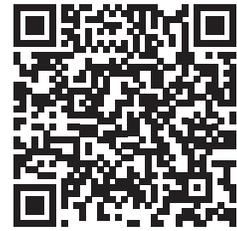
But diaspora success has a cut-off.

There are only three verses in the last chapter of the scroll, as if the happy ending in Persia is itself short-lived. The book leaves us wondering if feeling lonely in the diaspora is not only our fate but is also and ironically a prerequisite for sustaining spiritual wholeness. "There is nothing inevitable about Jewish identity in the diaspora," writes Rabbi Sacks, "and there never was. In Israel one is Jewish by living in a Jewish state, surrounded by a Jewish culture and Jewish institutions. But elsewhere, being Jewish means going against the grain, being counter-cultural."<sup>6</sup>

Could it be that the true spiritual danger of life in the diaspora is not feeling alone; it is paradoxically when we stop feeling alone?

### Endnotes

1. BT *Megillah* 12a.
2. JT *Megillah* 2:4:2.
3. Micah Goodman, *The Wondering Jew: Israel and the Search for Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale, 2020), p. 99.
4. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "On Israel, the Diaspora and Religious Issues,"



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*Community, Covenant and Commitment*, Toras HoRav Foundation (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2005), p. 233. This was part of an interview conducted by Levi Yitzhak Yerushalmi with the Rav that was published in *Ma'ariv* on September 15, 1975.

5. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought After the Holocaust*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 108.

6. Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? (Elstree, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994), p. 38.

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