

A Feminist's Look at Esther

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FEMINISTS COMMITTED TO JEWISH TRADITION have been taking a new look at Scripture and midrashic writings in search of female role models which might inspire the modern Jewish woman. The problem is twofold: not only are there too few female personalities who have played important roles in our tradition, but those few whose role was considered appropriate enough to be accorded a permanent place in Jewish tradition do not necessarily act in ways which inspire the modern woman. The female figures are nearly always secondary to the male "stars," often having acquired power by being the wife/sister/daughter of the central male figure, and not in their own right. Of course, past generations cannot be blamed for molding role models which expressed the reality and expectations of their own world. However, understanding this does not make the female role models we have inherited any more adequate for women today. Esther does provide such a model if we look carefully at the text and analyze the pertinent *midrashim*.

From a systematic study of the verses in the *Megillah* which refer to Esther, it is clear that she combines two very different personalities in one woman during the course of the story. Esther of the beginning of the *Megillah* (Esther 1) plays the typical feminine role. Yet, at a certain point in the story, as we shall see, she "snaps" out of the dream world she has been in, and assumes a role which is good enough for any feminist (Esther 2). Esther 1 is passive, obedient, dependent and silent. Esther 2 is active, assertive, tactful, independent, and holds political power in the real world.

We are first introduced to Esther only by way of Mordekhai. Verses 5 and 6 in chapter 2 (2:5, 6) tell of Mordekhai's lineage, which marks his place in a well-known family and sets the historical background for the coming story. Two verses later we are told of his cousin, Esther, whom he takes in to care for, after she is orphaned. Esther 1 is introduced as being of striking appearance and charm, and the reader is reminded of this several times in the chapter.

In verse 2:7 we read the following description: "The maiden was shapely and beautiful." The description in this verse seems out of place and clearly interrupts the sequence of the sentence in which it is placed. The verse in its entirety reads as follows: "He was foster father to Hadasah — that is, Esther — his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful and when her father and mother died, Mordekhai adopted her as his own daughter." The interruption by the author, who notes her beauty while in the midst of de-

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scribing her familial situation, may be understood as an alternative explanation for Mordekhai's taking her into his home.

It is possible that there were two traditions of Esther's relationship to Mordekhai, which were merged together. One version may have claimed that she was his foster child, probably reading as follows: "He was foster father to Hadassah — that is, Esther — his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother, and, when her father and mother died, Mordekhai adopted her as his own daughter."

The other version may have seen her as being Mordekhai's wife, probably reading something like this: "Hadassah — that is, Esther — his uncle's daughter, was shapely and beautiful, and Mordekhai took her as a wife." The Hebrew verb, "lekakha," translated literally as "he took," is used many times in the Bible in connection with marriage, and the translation "adopted" does not hold within it both the possibilities suggested by the Hebrew verb "took." The Hebrew "*bat*," meaning "daughter," will read "*bayit*" if merely one letter ("yod") is added to it, changing the meaning from "daughter" to "house," which in rabbinic language also means "wife" (B. *Megillah* 13a).

It was not a problem for the author to combine both traditions, since marriage between a well-off male and his niece or younger needy cousin was encouraged. The relationship between spouses under such circumstances was surely far from being equal. Hence, the image of Esther as derived from the introducing verse is set: young, beautiful and totally dependent on her provider (foster father or husband) Mordekhai.

Shortly thereafter we are told that Esther found favor in the eyes of Hagay the "guardian of women." Verse 2:9 reads: "The girl pleased him and won his favor." But in case we have doubts about a eunuch's taste in women, we are soon informed that she found favor in all eyes, for 2:15 reads: "Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her." No wonder Ahashverosh, the king, was also immediately attracted to her, as the *Megillah* reads in 2:17: "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins."

Esther 1 was not only beautiful, as we have been informed in different verses, but she also had other virtues of an ideal woman: she was obedient and followed instructions given to her by her providers. The *Megillah* states in 2:10: "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordekhai had told her not to reveal it." Her image as well disciplined is further reinforced in verse 2:20, which reads: "But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordekhai had instructed her." And in case we are not yet sure about who gives and who takes orders in their relationship, the *Megillah* informs us that "...Esther obeyed Mordekhai's bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage."

After Esther was taken to the palace under the wing of Hagay, she makes no demands on her new temporary provider. When offered "anything" before going to the king, Esther had no demands or requests other

than whatever Hagay wished to give her. Thus, 2:15 reads: “She did not ask for anything but what Hagay, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women, advised.”

The *Megillah* emphasizes Esther 1’s passivity by the unusual use of the passive form of certain verbs. In 2:8 and 2:16 the *Megillah* uses the rare form “vatilakakh,” translated as “she was taken.” This form of the verb emphasizes the fact that she had no active part in what happened to her. In 2:11, Mordekhai, in his concern about her, was worried about what would be done to her. The words of the *Megillah*, “*ma yey’aseh ba*,” translated as “what was happening to her,” again mark the fact that she had no control over her situation.

Esther 1’s image is derived not only from what the author tells of her, and the form of language used to do so, but also through what the author does *not* tell of her. In chapter two (excluding verse 22) Esther says nothing and does nothing. Many events take place around her: kings have conquered lands, feasts have been held, people have risen to power and fallen — while Esther 1 simply IS. She is moved from place to place like a pawn, never taking control of her life, always being acted upon. She was raised and cared for by Mordekhai (taken as a wife?), taken to the palace by the king’s men, provided for by Hagay and sent off to the king, to be loved and crowned by him.

The first time the *Megillah* makes reference to her as an active being capable of speech is in 2:22: “And Esther reported it to the king in Mordekhai’s name.” Yes — she spoke! But not her own words. Esther 1 is simply an emissary who passes on the words of one man (Mordekhai) to another (Ahashverosh).

In chapter three, the wicked plan to be rid of the Jews is spelled out. Haman, Mordekhai and Ahashverosh therefore feature prominently, whereas Esther, who is far from the political realm, is not even mentioned. This chapter ends with the verse which ironically contrasts the light-heartedness of Ahashverosh and Haman with the desperation of the Jews of Shushan. “The king and Haman sat down to feast, but the city of Shushan was dumbfounded.” “The city” obviously does not include Esther, who evidently was totally ignorant of the situation. Chapter four opens with the description of Mordekhai and the Jews mourning outwardly. Everyone knew what was happening except for Esther 1 in the palace harem, who knew nothing. Mordekhai and the Jews took to fasting, weeping and wailing, and all lay in sackcloth and ashes. But still Esther knew nothing.

When told of Mordekhai’s inappropriate dress, she was extremely distressed. In 4:4 she is finally moved to take action. But what kind of action? “She sent clothing for Mordekhai to wear, so that he might take off his sackcloth.” The typical Jewish mother makes sure that everyone is properly dressed! How narrow-minded could she possibly have been to send clothes for Mordekhai before investigating the matter!

Viewing the situation from Esther 1’s position, it is clear that she had

every reason to be upset after her attempts to dress Mordekhai failed. She would not stand for such nonsense! Strong language is used to express her fury. Verse 4:5 reads as follows: "Thereupon Esther summoned Hathakh, one of the eunuchs whom the king had appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordekhai to learn the why and wherefore of it all." The author has successfully put Esther 1 to shame by mocking her concern and anxiety over the wrong issue.

Mordekhai sends word for Esther to take action. In 4:8, verbs of action are squeezed together giving the impression of an anxious Mordekhai. "He also *gave* him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. He *bade* him *show* it to Esther and *inform* her, and *charge* her to *go* to the king and to *appeal* to him and to *plead* with him for her people" (emphasis added).

In 4:11 Esther responds to Mordekhai and disappoints the reader completely. "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him (or her) — that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days." To make a long story short, Esther's reply was, simply, "I can't do it!"

Yet, how could she have responded otherwise? How could Mordekhai have expected this pretty little obedient woman, born and bred to please others, to act and take the lead when needed?

The furious Mordekhai retorts with harsh words. In 4:13, 14 we read: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life 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." Mordekhai was saying, in other words: "Don't hide away in the home!"

"Don't be silent!"

"If you stay quiet now, you will lose your part in history, and you *do* have a part to play!"

It was this severe response from Mordekhai that shook Esther 1 into her new mode. The change that overcame Esther is so striking, that it is quite clear that the author of the *Megillah* was fully aware of this transformation, and intended us to notice it. Esther 2, who will be featured until the end of the story, was the complete antithesis of Esther 1. She was assertive, active in the political realm, and full of self-confidence.

Esther saw herself as the savior of the Jewish people of her day. She called for her people to fast and pray for her for three days. Verses 4:16, 17 read: "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day." This call for a general three day fast and prayer on her behalf is evidence that she was

full of self-confidence after realizing her important role in saving the nation.

In verse 4:17 we notice that the relationship between Esther and Mordekhai has changed dramatically. Esther no longer takes orders from her cousin, but, rather, she issues them and he obeys, as 4:17 reads: “So Mordekhai went about the city and did just as Esther had commanded him.”

From this point to the end of the story all cards are in Esther’s hands. She did not, as far as we know, consult with Mordekhai about how to approach the king and what tactics to use to arouse his emotions. If anything was hinted to Esther by Mordekhai, it was to arouse the king’s mercy by begging — “to appeal to him and to plead with him.” But Esther 2 needs no help from Mordekhai. She ignores this tactic and chooses her own: Instead of arousing the king’s mercy, she successfully stirs his rage and anger against Haman.

Mordekhai is not the only one left in the dark about her plans. Ahashverosh himself seems quite baffled, guessing that there is something more to her generous invitations than simply a social occasion. Hence he asks: “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled” (5:6). On the second night, Ahashverosh urges her again: “What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled” (7:2).

Contrary to the generous offer made to Esther 1 at the beginning of the *Megillah* by the guardian of the harem, “*whatever* she asked for would be given her to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace” — which really referred only to anything that could make her more attractive — the offer made to her now, by the king, although only *half* the kingdom, reflected real power.

Haman’s begging mercy from Esther when the king was enraged attests to the fact that he knew very well the power she held. Verse 7:7 reads: “While Haman remained to plead with Queen Esther for his life.”

Ahashverosh in 8:1 gave Esther official power over the house of Haman, and Mordekhai was promoted because Esther had revealed their relationship. “That very day King Ahashverosh gave the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther. Mordekhai presented himself to the king, for Esther had revealed how he was related to her.” Mordekhai, here, is introduced to the king as her relative, in contrast with the beginning of the *Megillah* where Esther was introduced to us through Mordekhai.

Although Mordekhai now wears the king’s ring, he still takes orders from Esther. In 8:2 we read: “The king slipped off his ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordekhai, and Esther put Mordekhai in charge of Haman’s property.”

Esther 2 understood that dealing with Haman was not enough, and

she acts further. Esther approaches the king once more to request the annulment of Haman's plan. As before, she needs no encouragement from Mordekhai to take action. Her position in the hierarchy of the palace is such that she feels free to approach the king even without being called. What is more, when speaking to the king, she takes the liberty of offering her own advice on how to go about cancelling the evil decrees. In 8:5 we read: "If it please Your Majesty . . . let dispatches be written countermanding those which were written by Haman."

Interestingly enough, we learn from verse 8:7, through Ahashverosh's response, that Mordekhai had been standing with Esther before the king. But the author of the *Megillah* did not think that his presence was of great importance. Mordekhai stands in the shadow of Esther 2.

The next conversation between Esther and Ahashverosh indicates a significant change in her status and in the relationship between them. After the *Megillah* records at length the battle and the victory of the Jews (the first ten verses of chapter nine), the author turns to focus on the happenings of the palace. Thus, 9:11 reads as follows: "When the number of those slain in the fortress Shushan was reported on that same day to the king, the king said to Queen Esther . . ." Was she at his side all the time? Did he send for her? At any rate, she does not need to be granted permission to join his company.

The king turns to her with a strange question. "In the fortress of 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." Ahashverosh apparently felt that the queen was not yet completely satisfied. Indeed, he almost begs her to tell him what else she wants done. When she finally reveals her request, she speaks in a more authoritative tone than before. Earlier, in 8:3, 4, the author records the following: "Esther spoke to the king again, falling at his feet and weeping, and beseeching him to avert the evil plotted by Haman the Agagite against the Jews. The king extended the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose and stood before the king." The language she used indicates their relationship: "If it please Your Majesty, and if I have won your favor and the proposal seems right to Your Majesty, and if I am pleasing to you . . ." In 9:13 she simply says: "If it please Your Majesty . . ."

As opposed to Esther 1's ignorance of political events, Esther 2 understands that the Jews of Shushan will need an extra day of fighting, and that the sons of Haman must be eliminated. And so she requests this and it is immediately granted.

Both Esther and Mordekhai were active in recording and institutionalizing the events: Esther, however, was the main motivator, as suggested by the use of the feminine singular form of the verb in 9:29, *vatikhtov*, ("and she wrote"), when referring to both her and Mordekhai. Verse 9:32

attests to the same point: “And Esther’s ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll.”

The story of Esther is the story of many women. Esther needed a severe jolt to snap her out of the conventions of her upbringing. This jolt may come from within, or from society itself (in our case — Mordekhai), which makes conflicting demands on women. As in the case of our story, society, too, raises women with certain expectations and then is surprised when they cannot fulfill other adult roles. The author of the *Megillah* clearly puts forth the argument that it is not only she as an individual — but society as a whole — who prospered from the irreversible change that Esther underwent. It is interesting to note that she was able to transform so thoroughly in so short a time — which proves that Esther 2 had really been present in potential.

Yet, Esther need not be seen only as a “woman.” She was a person who underwent a change in personality, allowing certain latent characteristics to appear. Anyone, regardless of gender, who has found or is still seeking to discover their specific capabilities, their special role in life and the contribution that they can make to the community around them, can identify with Esther. Esther can, and should be, a role model for any reader, not only for female readers. Just as the traditional male heroes are not necessarily seen as males, but as great “people,” by the same token, female heroines ought to be presented and understood as “people” who are also “women.”

A study of how the rabbis in the midrash dealt with Esther’s character is no less important, and for our purposes perhaps more so than the *Megillah* itself. Midrash often takes the liberty of portraying personalities in quite a different manner than is found in Scripture. Among others, David’s character was altered from “bloodshedder” to “poet;” Jacob the deceiver became the image of truth.

In our case, two Esthers exist in the *Megillah*, and either choice by the midrash would have been valid. In view of the image of Esther portrayed at the beginning of the *Megillah*, we would easily have accepted a midrash explaining away her new image and attributing all initiative to Mordekhai. Allowing one’s imagination free reign, an imaginary midrash might read as follows: “So Mordekhai went about (Hebrew, *vaya’avor*) and did just as Esther had commanded him (4:17); what is the meaning of *vaya’avor*? It was taught that Mordekhai went before her (Hebrew, *avar lefaneha*) in her dream. For Esther did nothing and said nothing before being instructed to do so by Mordekhai.”

Such a midrash would obviously have eliminated Esther 2, and critics would have had to say: “The rabbis were bothered by the assertiveness of Esther 2 and explained it all as a continuation of her obedience.” But no! Close perusal of the midrash suggests that its authors were quite happy with Esther’s new image.

The Talmud says (*Megillah* 15 a) that the holy spirit accompanied her as she went to see Ahashverosh.

Now it came to pass on the third day that Esther put on royalty. Surely it should say royal apparel. Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: "This tells us that the holy spirit clothed her."

The rabbis in this midrash have credited Esther 2 with being at the level of those who received *ruah hakodesh*. The rabbis' claim here is that she has been ordained from above and given approval for all the actions she will take in the future. Interestingly, the rabbis clothe her with the holy spirit only three verses after I claim that she was "snapped out" of her initial character, which correlates perfectly with this analysis. In 4:15, 16, she commands Mordekhai to gather the Jews and pray for her. In 4:17 he carries out her orders, and in 5:1 she sets out to see the king. With her first assertive action the rabbis gave their approval. However, as interesting as the midrash might be, there is nothing unique about it. Although infrequently, our tradition does take account of women prophets.¹

A most extraordinary midrash is recorded in the Talmud² which reads as follows:

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying "Commemorate me for future generations." They replied, "You will incite the ill will of the nations against us." She sent back the reply, "I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia." Rab and Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Habiba record: Esther sent to the Wise Men, saying, "Write an account of me for posterity." They sent back an answer (and refused) until they found a verse written in the Torah (Ex.17:14).

Both traditions attest to the fact that Esther sent word to the elders of the Jewish community and demanded to be commemorated or recorded for future generations. The elders were reluctant to do so. One concern was that her story might arouse the hatred of the nations. Esther argues back, telling them that she is already recorded in general history. The second concern was to find a Biblical — that is, a Divine — source teaching that they must record her story. They overcame that by rabbinic exegesis on the verse regarding the Divine command to record the story of Israel's historical enemy, Amalek (from whom, Haman had descended): "Write down this history as an [eternal] memorial in the book. . . ."

The image of Esther demanding to be recorded and arguing with the rabbis on this matter is quite fascinating. She is portrayed not only as the savior of her people, but also as the one responsible for the celebration of the event by all future generations. The elders, in this midrash, are portrayed as weak — afraid of what the nations will think, or as ignorant of the Torah — struggling to find the proper source for what was later accepted as the right thing to do.

Another midrash recorded in the Talmud along these lines reads:

"Fast for me and neither eat nor drink three days." The three days appointed for fasting were the 13th, 14th, and 15th of Nissan. Mordekhai sent

back word complaining that these days included the first day of Passover, to which she replied: “Jewish elder! Without an Israel, why should there be a Passover?” Mordekhai understood and replaced the Passover festivity with a fast (*Esther Rabba* 8:6).

In this midrash, the three day fast which Esther demanded fell on Pesah. Esther must have known this and must have been very confident of her Divine task to demand that the Jews fast on the Seder night. Even after being challenged by Mordekhai on a halakhic basis, Esther held her ground and came up with an excellent response, explaining to him that if the Jews did not desecrate this Pesah, they might not live to observe another. The midrash either understood her to base her instructions on the ruling: “They have made void the law because it was a time to work for the Lord” (Mishnah *Berakhot* 9:5), or on the ruling “Desecrate. . . one *Shabbat* so that he can keep many *Shabbatot*” (B. *Yoma* 85 b). Mordekhai, when hearing this argument, accepted her instructions.

Picture this fantastic situation as portrayed by the midrash: In the great city of Shushan, all Jews were commanded *not* to perform the Seder ceremony; *not* to drink wine, *not* to eat *mazah*, etc., but rather to fast and pray for Esther, who will soon save the people.

What amazing courage and authority have the rabbis attributed to Esther in these two *midrashim*! The *Megillah* portrayed her as an outstanding political figure and communal savior. The rabbis went even further and attributed to her the characteristics which were important in their eyes. They portrayed her as an halakhic authority. Although she was not one of the elders — as was Mordekhai, according to the midrash — she argues with them and they accept her rulings.

Esther’s image, as portrayed by the authors of the *Megillah* and the midrash, can be of great inspiration to those who are dissatisfied with the feminine role models which exist in the Jewish tradition. The case of Esther is only one example of existing traditions which must be studied and pursued if we believe and expect Judaism to continue being a “living” religion for all its followers — men and women!

NOTES

1. See B. *Megillah* 14 a.
2. B. *Megillah* 7 a.