

Esther and Mordechai: Partners in Salvation

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The story of Megillat Esther introduces a number of strong, powerful characters, chief among them the characters of Esther and Mordechai. While the title of the megillah implies that the hero of the book is Esther herself, some contemporary scholars have suggested that the real hero of the megillah is Mordechai. Perhaps a better approach is not to look for a single hero, but to recognize that both Esther and Mordechai play pivotal and necessary roles. In fact, this is explicitly stated in the midrash and implicitly suggested by parallels between Esther and Mordechai and other biblical heroes. Hence, a central message of the megillah may be the importance of partnership between the sexes in leadership.

Esther leaves her community and her only known relative, Mordechai, hides her true identity and risks her life to live in the palace of Ahashueros and to be his queen. While these were all courageous acts, Esther's role as the savior of the Jewish people comes into question in chapter 4 of the megillah when it becomes apparent that she has no knowledge of the decree that Ahashueros and Haman have issued to annihilate the Jews. Esther learns about the decree from Mordechai, who asks her to go to the king and beg him to rescind the decree. Esther, however, responds tentatively, averring that she could not possibly go to the king without being summoned, since by law, anyone who visits the king uninvited will be put to death. While Esther has a right to be concerned, especially since Ahashueros had no qualms about putting his first wife to death, where is her courage? Is this not the reason she has secretly infiltrated the king's closest circles, to protect her own people? Mordechai reminds Esther that her life is in just as much danger as the lives of her fellow Persian Jews and perhaps this *is* the reason she has been made queen, and she agrees to do as he asks. It is this section of the megillah which leads some readers to argue that Esther does not stand out as a model leader. One scholar even argues that "[t]he very act of saving the Jewish community from destruction by Haman stems not from Esther's initiative but from Mordechai's orders."¹

The strongest evidence to suggest that the true hero of the Purim story is indeed Mordechai and not Esther comes from chapter 9 of the megillah. In this section, Mordechai's new political position is elevated at the expense of Esther's role in the salvation of the Jews. In chapter 9, the megillah describes the respect that the Jews began receiving in Persia, because "the fear of Mordechai had fallen upon them. For Mordechai was now powerful in the royal palace... and the man Mordechai was growing ever more powerful."² Here, the focus is on Mordechai as a savior. He is the one who sends out a decree about the holiday of Purim and while Esther sends out a second decree, it only confirms what Mordechai had already written.

Reading these sections of the megillah alone, one could concede that Esther does not demonstrate impressive leadership qualities. However, the rest of the megillah offers an alternative view of Esther's abilities. Beginning with the end of chapter 4, Esther's initiative and creativity are clear. After Mordechai persuades Esther to approach the king, she takes action. She instructs him to gather the Jews and declare a fast to help guarantee her survival. She independently arrives at the plan to invite the king and Haman to her parties. And she arranges events at those parties to ensure that the king turns against Haman by making it appear as though Haman was attempting to seduce her. Moreover, in chapter 8 of the megillah, Esther visits the king a second time, without being prompted or threatened, and convinces him to rescind his decree that had declared that the Jewish people should be destroyed.

From the *peshat* (plain-sense) reading of these different portions of the megillah emerges an inconsistent picture of the relative positions of Esther and Mordechai as leaders and heroes. While chapter 4 and chapter 9 of the megillah leave the reader questioning the extent of Esther's leadership role, the other sections reinforce the idea of her as the savior of the Jews and the hero of the story. Sources from elsewhere in the Bible and from the midrash help resolve this ambiguity by characterizing Esther and Mordechai as equal partners in achieving the Jews' salvation.

Several midrashic sources portray Mordechai and Esther as playing parallel roles. The megillah itself lacks explicit references to religious acts on the parts of Esther and Mordechai, other than fasting; yet, Esther Rabbah 8:7 describes the prayers of Mordechai and Esther.³ While this midrash may be attempting to add a religious dimension to the megillah, it also highlights the similar roles played by these two protagonists. Although the content of the prayers differ, both Esther and Mordechai pray with passion that God save the Jewish people from destruction. Moreover, the midrash says that before she prays, Esther puts on clothes of mourning and sprinkles ashes on her head, just as Mordechai does in chapter 4 of the megillah.⁴ Both the juxtaposition of Esther and Mordechai's prayers, as well as the mirroring of Mordechai's actions by Esther in this midrash, establish their shared role as spiritual leaders. By portraying her as deeply committed to saving the Jews, this midrash compensates for Esther's seeming lack of leadership initiative in chapter 4.

Additionally, while chapter 9 of the megillah portrays Esther as secondary and Mordechai as the main hero, the midrash describes them as equals in their powerful political positions.

מה המלך מוניטה שלו הולכת בכל הארץ כך מרדכי מוניטה שלו הולכת, ומה מוניטה שלו?
5
מרדכי מכאן ואסתר מכאן.

Just as is the case for a king, that his coinage is distributed throughout the entire land, so too Mordechai's coinage was distributed. And what was his coinage? Mordechai [was depicted] here [on one side] and Esther here [on one side].

While the midrash admittedly does compare Mordechai to the king, the description of the coinage suggests an equality between Mordechai and Esther's political roles. The phrase "Mordechai here and Esther here" makes it sound as though they were ruling hand-in-hand.

One final midrashic source sums up this perspective. The last part of the following biblical verse, which comes from Jacob's blessing to Benjamin upon his deathbed, is understood by the midrash as referring to the story of Esther and Mordechai. The verse reads:

בְּנֵימִין זָאֵב יִטְרֹף בַּבֹּקֶר יֵאָכֵל עַד וְלַעֲרֵב יַחְלֹק שְׁלָל:

Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning he consumes the foe, and in the evening he divides the spoil.

The midrash on this verse explains:

ולערב יחלק שלל זה מרדכי ואסתר שעמדו להם לישראל בגלותם שהוא דומה לערב וחלקו שלל של המן⁶

“And in the evening he divides the spoil,” this refers to Mordechai and Esther who stood up for [to defend] Israel in their exile, which is like evening. And, they divided the spoil of Haman.

The midrash interprets the biblical words “And in the evening he divides the spoil,” as a reference to both Mordechai and Esther, who together defend the people in their exile. Once again, the language of the midrash depicts an equal partnership. In the eyes of these three midrashim, Esther and Mordechai together are the heroes of Purim.

This perspective, that Mordechai and Esther worked as partners, is further reinforced by the book of Esther itself, albeit in a more subtle way. Often, in biblical studies, the paralleling of language and themes between two or more biblical stories can shed light on the meaning of a biblical narrative, or may help the reader to gain insight into the biblical characters. In this vein, there are many parallels between the language and motifs of the book of Esther, the story of Joseph in Genesis and the book of Daniel. Some of these comparisons also shed light on the nature of Mordechai and Esther's leadership roles in the megillah.

There are some well-known similarities between Esther and Joseph. Both Esther and Joseph are separated from their families and live in a foreign court. Both characters are described as beautiful and form a close relationship to the foreign king. Also, both characters have a Hebrew name (Hadassah and Yosef) and a name in the vernacular of their home country (Esther and Safnat Paneach). However, there are several parallels between the characters of Joseph and Mordechai as well. Both Joseph and Mordechai are dressed in royal clothing and receive the king's ring, a sign of the authority bestowed upon them.⁷ Mordechai and Joseph both provide crucial information to the king (Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams and Mordechai reveals the treachery of the two eunuchs). The megillah's allusions to Joseph do not relate to Esther or Mordechai alone, but rather both characters share traits with him.

The same holds true for parallels between the megillah and the book of Daniel. Esther's character has similarities to Daniel's, the hero of his book. Like Esther (and Joseph), Daniel is a Jew who lives in a foreign court and becomes close with a foreign king. Like Esther, he attends banquets which

consist of much drinking. He too, has a Hebrew (Daniel) and foreign name (Belteshazzar). But there are parallels between Daniel and Mordechai as well. Both these men have enemies who attempt to kill them, but who, in the end, are killed by the same means that they had hoped to use against the protagonist. The parallels between these stories demonstrate that the heroes of each story are Joseph in Genesis, Daniel in the book of Daniel and Mordechai and Esther together in Megillat Esther.

When one studies the megillah in its entirety it becomes apparent that Esther and Mordechai work in tandem with each other. When Esther has a moment of weakness, Mordechai provides the verbal push she needs to keep up her courage in Ahashueros' palace. At the same time, Mordechai can only achieve his ultimate position as a king-like figure and join Esther in the royal courts because Esther has convinced the king of Haman's culpability, and because *she* gives Mordechai Haman's property. It is this harmony in their relationship, already apparent in the biblical text itself and reinforced by parallels with the heroes of other biblical narratives, which leads the midrash to characterize them as equal partners who both risk their lives to protect their people. It is possible that the megillah is named after Esther because ultimately she alone uses her position of authority to convince Ahashueros to reverse his decree. However, there is ample support to show that in many ways it is Mordechai and Esther who equally share the role of hero of the book. Perhaps, then, a central theme in Megillat Esther is the partnership between Esther and Mordechai, and when we read the megillah so publicly every year we are holding that partnership up as a model for effective Jewish leadership.

¹ Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative." Pp. 79-80 in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, Alice Bach, ed. New York: Routledge, 1999.

² Esther 9:3-4, translation from the *New JPS Bible*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1985.

³ The earliest recorded version of these prayers appears in the apocrypha, in "Additions to Esther" Addition C

⁴ Esther 4:1.

⁵ Esther Rabbah 10:12

⁶ EsthR 10:13.

⁷ Many of the similarities mentioned here, between Joseph and the book of Esther and below, between Daniel and the book of Esther have been pointed out by Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary to Esther*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001 pp. xxxvii and xl.