

PURIM



מאמר אסתר Esther's Word

■ Eternal Existence

The Talmud (Megillah 7a) cites the following verse as proof that the Book of Esther was clearly written with Divine inspiration:

... וַיְמִי הַפּוּרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֹא יֵעָבְרוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַיְּהוּדִים וְזַכָּרָם לֹא יִסּוּף מִזֶּרְעָם.

*... and these days of Purim shall never cease
from amidst the Jews, and their remembrance shall
not perish from their descendants.* (Esther 9,28)

That is to say, Megillat Esther predicted more than 2,500 years ago that the Jewish nation would still today - and forever after - be celebrating the holiday of Purim! Though the many centuries since then have been filled with persecution, expulsions, pogroms and cruel decrees, the Jewish Nation still continues to commemorate and celebrate Purim. The very fact of Purim's eternity attests to G-d's stamp of approval on the Book of Esther.

Esther and Mordechai sent "a letter" – the Book of Esther – to every Jewish community in the world, in which they told the story of the great miracle they experienced. What was their special merit that this "letter" is forever remembered?

Furthermore: The Megillah was written by both Mordechai and Esther (9,29), yet it is named for Esther alone: Megillat Esther. As we read in the scroll itself:

וּמֵאִמֶּר אֶסְתֵּר קִיַּם דְּבָרֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְתָּב בְּסֵפֶר.
*Esther's word validated these Purim regulations,
 and it was inscribed in the book.* (9,32)

What is the secret of Esther's eternity hinted at by this "*word of Esther*"? In what merit is the Megillah named for her alone and not for its co-author Mordechai as well?

■ Three Edicts

We read in Megillat Esther of three edicts or ordinances, referred to by the Hebrew word *maamar*, from the root meaning "to say:"

- *Maamar hamelekh* – King Ahashverosh's edict (1,15)
- *Maamar Mordechai* – Mordechai's ordinance (2,20)
- *Maamar Esther* – Queen Esther's instructions (9,32)

Two were fulfilled, and one was not. The first, by Ahashverosh, was violated by his first queen, Vashti, when she refused his invitation to appear at his feast:

וַתִּמְאֵן הַמֶּלֶכָה וְשִׁתִּי לְבוֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ...
Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command... (1,12)

The second one was issued by Mordechai to Esther, and she fulfilled it with total dedication, though it put her at serious and dangerous odds with those around her:

אִין אֶסְתֵּר מְגִידַת מוֹלְדוֹתָהּ וְאֵת עַמָּהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מְרַדְּכָי...
*Esther did not reveal her homeland or nation,
 as Mordechai had commanded her...* (2,20)

And the third one has been fulfilled by all of Israel throughout the generations, as we saw above (9,32).

Let us study *maamar Mordechai*, Mordechai's edict, which is the only one that itself reveals the secret of why it was fulfilled. The verse states:

... וְאֵת מֵאִמֶּר מְרַדְּכָי אֶסְתֵּר עָשָׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר הִיָּתָה בְּאִמְנָה אֵתוֹ...
*...and Esther fulfilled Mordechai's bidding,
 as it was when he raised her.* (2,20)

Mordechai instructed Esther not to divulge any details of her people or homeland, not even to the king. Though she suddenly finds herself Queen of the world's superpower, she fulfills Mordechai's orders with great loyalty. It is practically inconceivable that King Ahashverosh, ruler over 127 countries, would marry an anonymous girl without a family and without a people! In fact, this was probably the most amazing open miracle of the entire story. We can only imagine how strong and intensive was the royal household's pressure upon Esther to divulge her background. Yet Esther remained totally loyal to Mordechai. Why?

Because there was trust. When we read that Mordechai *"raised"* her, the word used is from the root meaning "trust:" *b'omnah*. The same root is found in an earlier verse describing their relationship (2,7): *Vay'hi omen et Hadassah, "He raised her with trust."* Esther therefore had full confidence that whatever Mordechai told her was for her own good and protection, because his concern for her was as a father to his daughter. In fact, after she was taken to the royal harem, Mordechai did not leave her even for one day:

וּבְכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹמַם מֵרֶדְכָי מִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי חֲצַר בֵּית הַנְּשִׂיִם
לְדַעַת אֵת שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמָה יַעֲשֶׂה בָּהּ.

*Each and every day, Mordechai would walk before
the women's house courtyard to learn of Esther's welfare
and what was happening to her. (2,11)*

His concern for her, and her resulting trust in him, was the assurance that his instructions would be followed.¹

■ Queen Vashti's Refusal

Standing in direct contrast to the relationship of trust and caring between Mordechai and Esther was the bad blood between King Ahashverosh and Queen Vashti. While Mordechai spent his days showing concern for Esther, the king was busy only with building up his image before his ministers and servants. He threw a party that lasted no less than a half-year for just one reason:

בְּהִרְאוֹתוֹ אֶת עֵשֶׂר כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ וְאֵת יְקָר תִּפְאָרַת גְּדוּלָתוֹ...

*Showing the wealth of the honor of his kingdom
and the glory of the beauty of his greatness... (1,4)*

1. See the following article in this volume, *Special Soul, or Nameless Subject?*, for an in-depth analysis of why Mordechai was so insistent that Esther not divulge her nationality.

Ahashverosh wished only to glorify himself. Even when it appeared that he wished to aggrandize Vashti, we see that his goal was really only himself. When the king ordered that she be brought to his feast, he explained:

לְהַבִּיא אֶת וְשֹׁתֵי הַמֶּלֶכָה לְפָנַי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֹתֶר מַלְכוּת,
לְהַרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת יָפִיָּהּ ...

*To bring Queen Vashti before the king with a royal crown,
to show the nations and the ministers her beauty...* (verse 11)

His objective was not at all to have the ministers respect or admire Vashti. It was all about himself – to show that this most beautiful woman was his, and under his servitude. He insisted specifically that she be brought with her crown, to prove that her crown was subservient to his own, and that even she, with her royal background, was among his subordinates. Ahashverosh clearly had the need to prove his worth; our Sages said that Vashti was a granddaughter of the wicked King Nevuchadnezzar of Babylon, while Ahashverosh was merely his stable-keeper.

From a careful reading of the verses we can further deduce that Ahashverosh's invitation to Vashti was not an honorable one, but rather rude and degrading. We read, for instance, that he gave the order "**to bring Queen Vashti before the king**" (1,11). He wanted her "brought in," as if she were an object that he could send and transport from place to place. In contrast, Esther later used a very different term for a similar situation. In her message to Mordechai, she said:

וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לְבוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים יוֹם.

*And I have not been called to come to
the king for thirty days now.* (4,11)

Esther uses words showing that for her, the royal summons takes into account her will as the invitee - as opposed to the uncaring phrase "**to bring her**," which implies being brought by force.

Even the wicked Haman, when he bragged to his friends and relatives that he had been summoned by Queen Esther, used her terminology:

...וְגַם לְמָחָר אֲנִי קָרוּא לָהּ עִם הַמֶּלֶךְ!

*And tomorrow, as well,
I am called to the queen with the king.* (5,12)

When Vashti received the summons, i.e., this *maamar* of Ahashverosh (1,15), she knew she was not being brought for her own benefit, but rather so

that the king could use her to demean her royal family, and so she refused. At the same time she emphasized that her claim to the throne was intrinsic and natural, based on her royal lineage, and not due to Ahashverosh:

וּתְמַאֵן הַמְּלָכָה וְשִׁתִּי לָבוֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ...
 ...and I will thus come to the king

Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command... (1,12)

She is referred to here as “Queen Vashti,” and not, as Ahashverosh called her (verse 11), “Vashti the Queen.” The placement of her title before her name shows that she was born into royalty, and was not granted it by Ahashverosh.

The palace of Ahashverosh is replete with general distrust all around. Vashti, too, does not trust the king's motives, as evidenced by her refusal to come. The royal ministers convene to determine her sentence:

...עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא עָשְׂתָה אֶת מַאֲמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ...
 ...regarding that which she did not fulfill the

maamar of King Ahashverosh. (verse 15)

■ Esther's Bidding

We jump now to the end of the Scroll of Esther, after the Jewish People have been miraculously saved from the royal decree, instigated by Haman, for their destruction. Queen Esther and Mordechai send out letters to all the Jews in Persia, instituting the holiday of Purim for all generations. There was no thought among the Jews of the world that Esther was interested in self-aggrandizement; they had full trust in her that whatever she did was for the sake of the Jewish Nation and its future. She earned their confidence in the merit of two brave and fateful deeds that she carried out, during both of which she courageously risked her life to save the Jewish Nation.

She first told Mordechai that, as per his instructions, she would go to King Ahashverosh to plead for her people. This was a totally illegal and potentially dangerous act, for the king had not summoned her:

... וּבְכוֹן אָבוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא כִדַּת, וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי.

*... and I will thus come to the king
 not in accordance with the law,
 and if I perish, I perish.* (4,16)

“*Not in accordance with the law:*” This tells us everything we need to know. For it is clear that in the capital city of Shushan, the concept of law and order was critically important. The word דת, meaning “law” or “practice,”

appears no fewer than 20 times in various forms throughout the Megillah. Everything was done precisely according to law. For instance, when Vashti was taken out to be executed, it was not done capriciously, but in full accordance with proper procedure:

כִּי כֹּן דִּבֶּר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְפָנָיו כָּל יְדַעֵי דַת וְדִין... כְּדַת מַה לַעֲשׂוֹת בַּמַּלְכָּה וְשָׂתִי ...
The king spoke to the wise men [about Vashti], for this was his practice, to turn to those who knew law and judgment... as to what should legally be done to Queen Vashti... (1,13-15)

On this backdrop, it is clear how dangerous it was for Esther to act “*not in accordance with the law*” when she decided to go on her own to Ahashverosh. The fact that this is the only instance in the Megillah in which this term is used in its negative form emphasizes the danger of violating the law, and the extent of Esther’s willingness to sacrifice herself for her people.

Esther’s second heroic deed occurred when she asked Mordechai to gather Shushan’s entire Jewish population and have them fast for her for three days. She planned to participate as well: “*I and my handmaidens will also fast in this manner.*” (verse 16)

For Esther to go without food for three days was practically suicidal – and not only for health reasons! We recall the intense preparations each maiden underwent before the selection process for Vashti’s replacement:

... שֵׁשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים בְּשֶׁמֶן הַמֹּר וְשֵׁשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים בְּבִשְׂמִים וּבַתְּמָרוֹקֵי הַנָּשִׁים.
... six months with myrrh oil, and six months with perfumes, and with the ointments of the women. (2,12)

Now, some years later, Esther comes uninvited, and after three days of fasting! We can imagine how she looks: certainly not the picture of health, and far from beautiful. Will Ahashverosh keep her as his queen under such conditions? Will he even allow her to live??

In the event, he did extend his scepter to her, precisely because he was shocked at her appearance. He felt that something extremely grave must have occurred, given both how she looked and the fact that she came without having been called. He asks with concern:

מַה לָּךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וּמַה בִּקְשָׁתְךָ?
What is it, Queen Esther, and what is your request? (5,3)

How great, then, must have been his wonderment when she responded

with an invitation: “*May the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have made for him?*” (verse 4) The king hides his astonishment and gives the orders to fulfill Esther’s wish.

At the party itself, together with Haman and Esther, the king again asks what she seeks. Again, Esther responds in a calculated and unexpected manner: “*May the king and Haman come to a [second] party that I will make for them tomorrow? – and tomorrow I will do as the king has commanded.*” (verse 8)

Under the circumstances, a hot-tempered and erratic king such as Ahashverosh could certainly have decided on the spot to rid himself of this woman who seems to be toying with him and portraying him as feeble and pliable. But once again the unexpected occurs. He catches himself and begins to contemplate some searing questions: “Could it be that Esther would be willing to endanger her life over a small banquet? What does it mean that she keeps on inviting my highest-ranking minister to these intimate, high-level gatherings? Could a plot be underway to unseat or assassinate me?”

Our Sages in the Talmud expressed the imminent sense of danger of those moments as follows:

R. Yehoshu ben Korcha said [that Esther planned to be extra nice to Haman, hoping that] “Ahashverosh would suspect and then kill both of us.” (Megillah 15b)

Esther was well prepared for the real possibility that she would be executed – all in order to have the decree against her people rescinded.

But Esther’s self-sacrifice for her fellow Jews does not end here. By deciding to go to the king on her own, Esther essentially cuts herself off from the Jewish Nation forever. She is now actively taking on the role of Ahashevrosh’s wife, whereas until now, she had been forced to be with him against her will. We know this from the manner in which Esther prepared, or did not prepare, during the original selection process:

וּבִהְגִיעַ תּוֹר אֶסְתֵּר בֵּית אַבְיָחַיִל... לְבוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ,
לֹא בִקְשָׁה דָבָר כִּי אִם אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֹאמֶר הַגִּי סְרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ...

*And when it came the turn of Esther to come before the king,
she didn't ask for anything [to beautify herself],
except for that which the king's eunuch said. (2,15)*

All the other maidens asked for special make-up and perfume, but Esther took no initiative in this regard. Why? Because she wished to make it clear that she was there totally against her will, and that she wanted no part of it. But now, given her latest actions, the People of Israel understood that Queen Esther was sacrificing herself and her future on behalf of the Nation and the future of its sons and daughters.

Am Yisrael believed and trusted in Queen Esther, the orphan lass who was prepared to sacrifice herself on their behalf. They knew that her motives in eternalizing the Purim holiday stemmed not from self-interest or desire for eternal fame, but rather the opposite: She wanted to remind the Jewish People for generations to come that their existence is always at risk, and that they must maintain their internal unity and strengthen their faith in Hashem their G-d. This can be accomplished via the annual reading of the Book of Esther.

The People of Israel obligated themselves forever to “*preserve and maintain these days of Purim*” (9,27-28), in accordance with “*Esther’s word*” (verse 32). They also called the scroll that recounted these events for future generations the **Book of Esther**, in recognition of her role as the emissary of Divine Providence in saving Israel:

...וימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם.

*...and these days of Purim shall not be revoked
from amidst the Jews, and their memory shall not cease
from their descendants.* (verse 28)

