



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

To Be A Jewish Woman Like Esther

Rabbi Soloveitchik would regularly offer an analysis of Megillat Esther and its messages prior to the festival of Purim. After the death of the Rav's beloved wife, who passed away on the fast of Esther, the Rav presented shiurim in her memory around the day of the *yahrzeit*. It is fitting that the following ten teachings, gleaned from these talks, focus on a woman's unique character in light of Esther's dramatic role in the Purim story.

1. **Shlichut:** "Do not imagine that you can escape to the king's palace from the fate of all Jews" (*Esther* 4:13). Here, in Mordechai's urging of Esther, we encounter the notion of *shlichut*, the doctrine of assignment. Every individual is assigned a task which he must implement. Esther understood this and accepted her mission. (Megillat Esther Mesorat HaRav p. 86). In this vein, the Rav quoted Rav Kook's interpretation of the Yamim Noraim prayer: "My Lord, Before I was created I was worthless, and now that I indeed have been created, it is as if I were not created." Rav Kook explained this meditation as follows: Hashem, you know that had I been

born in an earlier generation, in an earlier era, I would have been worthless, unable to accomplish my specific assignment. Yet, I have accomplished so little of my present assignment, I am likewise unworthy of having been created even in this generation. (Derashot HaRav, pp. 50-51) We are charged to find our calling and fulfill our mission.

2. **Sacrifice:** Esther is the very finest symbol of sacrificial action. "On the third day, Esther dressed herself in royalty" (*Esther* 5:1). The Rav commented: "Judaism dislikes cowardice or the exaggerated caution that tells man that he must not begin unless he knows for sure that he will be able to finish." Esther risking her life was logically unwarranted. But she was inspired to do that which was her responsibility and that which she intuited was the most noble response. She risked her life for the nation of Israel. (Ibid, pp. 92, 93)

3. **Chen:** "And Esther carried a grace in the eyes of all who saw her" (2:15). The Hebrew word *chen*, refers to the attribute of charm, in contradistinction to beauty. *Chen* is radiated from the divine presence within a person. We find the same term *chen* employed in the Yosef story. The two clauses, "The Lord was with Yosef" and "Yosef found grace in his [master's] sight," said the Rav, constitute an equation: Yosef found grace in Potiphar's sight *because*

God was with him. The same is true of Esther. She carried grace with everyone because God was with her (Megillat Esther Mesorat HaRav, p. 70, p.73). This notion is evidenced again in the following situation: “And the king loved Esther more than all the other women...” (Esther 2:17). Achashverosh was fascinated by something mysterious he could not grasp. He felt somehow instinctively, intuitively, that she was not an ordinary woman. “When he was in her presence, he felt that his whole being was more exalted, advanced, elevated to a greater height.” This was the potency of Esther’s *chen*. (Ibid, p. 72)

4. Steadfast Faith: Asked the Sages, “Where is there an allusion to Esther in the Torah?” The Talmud answers: “And I shall hide (*haster astir*) My countenance

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on that day (*Devarim* 31:18) (Talmud Chulin 139b). Even during the non-prophetic era, at a time when the divine countenance is hidden (*hester panim*), man is summoned to carry on, to undertake difficult tasks courageously and implement them to the best of his ability. Esther was paradigmatic of the unrelenting faith and resolute devotion of a Jew that is evinced even when circumstances appear dark and gloomy. (Ibid. p.89)

5. **A Teacher of Prayer:** Esther taught Mordechai and the Jews how to pray and how to fast in times of distress and crises. In the spirit of Chana who also taught the entire Congregation of Israel how to pray and how to confront God with petition - “Many important rules can be derived from the verses in relation to Hannah’s prayer” (*Berachot* 31a) - Esther taught us how to pray as a community when disaster strikes. However, Esther’s prayer alone does not fully capture the remarkable complexity of her character. She is a woman of cunning who has the skill to meticulously strategize. Esther is able to exercise her intellectual ability and concurrently sustain the purity of heart to pray and act humbly and childlike before the Almighty. Her expertise in playing this double role is why, said the Rav, the Megillah is named for Esther. (Ibid, p. 91)

6. **Tzniut:** The Megillah goes into great detail telling us about the beauty treatments, the ointments and sweet perfumes that the women received before displaying themselves before Achashverosh. We learn about Chegai and Sha’ashgaz who oversee the maidens and concubines. The Megillah, said the Rav, purposefully

portrays the promiscuous, orgiastic life of Persian upper society, with the King at its head. They had lost all standards of decency. Esther was different. Esther did not ask for any extra beauty treatments. She refused to subject herself to the treatments, unless Chegai compelled her. Yet, “she carried grace in the eyes of all who saw her.” She had within her something divine (Ibid, pp.70-71). The opening episode of the Megillah makes this point most vividly in the context of Vashti being summoned to the court in a way that belittles her dignity. By contrast, a woman, in Judaism, is treated with utmost sensitivity and Jewish law seeks to protect her dignity and honor. (Ibid, p.60)


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7. **Man and Woman:** Both man and woman play integral roles on the historical stage. Both male and female are created in the image of God. Both are endowed with dignity and majesty. Both are called on to be in service of God. Mordechai and Esther are reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah. The assignments were equally important but by no means identical. Regarding the Jewish people’s founders, the name change to both of them involved the addition of a letter from God’s name, signifying

that they will share a spiritual role. “Not only did man and woman achieve human dignity at creation, both in God’s image, but they also attained together, and only together, covenantal sanctity.” (Man of Faith, p. 86)

8. A Woman’s Capacity: Man and woman, prototypically, have unique traits and particular roles. The Rav suggested that a man often is the one to have an “intuitive flash” or a particular insight and vision. In the case of Megillat Esther, it is Mordechai who takes note of the situation and reacts. However, the Rav suggested that when it comes to implementation, “the woman is the master.” The implementation of a plan is something that takes cunning, strategizing, and execution. This is the forte of the woman. This is what the sages meant when they said, “Woman was endowed by the Holy One, blessed be He, with supplemental intuition, *bina yeteira* (Nidda 45b). Esther takes on that role. She is more decisive and has better practical judgment. There is a striking transition in the storyline where Esther no longer is being guided by Mordechai. Mordechai listens to her. (Ibid. p.92).


9. A Day of Introspection: “And so shall I come before the king...”(Esther 4:16). The day of Purim encapsulates not only joy and celebration but a time of terror and anxiety. Esther was well aware of the high stakes for the Jewish people. She fasted and called on the nation to fast with her. The fast of Esther that we observe today is not just an add on to the festival but “is a genuine Purim day.” It reflects the foreboding fear and prayers of the Jews that must




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characterize the experience of observing Purim. (Ibid. pp.90-91). It is striking that on the evening of Purim, when Megillat Esther is read, the community is still fasting. Even on Purim itself we integrate a modicum of the foreboding mood that is suitable to mark the day (Ibid, xiv). The common feature of Purim and Yom Kippur, which is famously noted by the Zohar, is that they both call for divine compassion and intercession, a mood of petition arising out of great distress. (Ibid, p.90)

10. **Morning Has Broken:** Esther herself is called *Ayelet HaShachar* in the Gemara (*Yoma* 29a). *Ayelet Hashachar* refers to the rise of the morning star at the very beginning of dawn. “The inception of dawn is very subtle. When one looks towards the east at the earliest moment of dawn, the slow brightening of the sky is not even perceptible. At the very moment that the Purim salvation was incubating, one could only see an evil...”. This imagery is reminiscent of the turning point in the Megillah (Esther, chapter 6). The verse describes a night for the Jewish people which was dark and foreboding when suddenly “the sleep of the king was disturbed”(Esther 6:1). However, the night did not give way to the morning light quickly. It took time for circumstances to unfold in a positive direction. Events were orchestrated in a way that very slowly led to redemption. (Ibid, p.162).

The Rav quoted the Talmud Yerushalmi

(Berachot 1:1): Rabbi Chiya Rabba and Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta were walking in the Arbel Valley early in the morning, and they saw the light before the break of dawn (*ayelet hashachar*). Rabbi Chiya Rabba said to Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta: This is how the redemption of Israel will be: At first it will be little by little, but then it will become stronger...At first Mordechai sat at the Kings gate (Esther 2:22) and then, “Haman took the garments and the horse (Ibid 5:11). Then Mordechai returned to the king’s gate (Ibid 6:12) and “Mordechai left before the king in royal garments” (Ibid 8:15). Finally, “The Jews experienced light and joy” (Ibid, 8:16).” In a word, the story of Esther not only recounts a momentous event in Jewish history but in reading the Megillah we demonstrate our faith that Divine providence will bring the ultimate redemption in a similar fashion (*Mipninei HaRav*, p. 284).

May the *geulah shleimah* come soon. ■

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