



ESTHER

Prophetess. Queen. Redeemer...Orphan

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WHAT WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO SACRIFICE TO save your family? What about your entire nation? Would you be willing to give up everything that you hold dear and to live in virtual isolation in order to save everyone else? In essence, that's exactly the choice that Queen Esther faced.

One of the most famous – and most dramatic – moments in Megillas Esther comes when Mordechai sends a message to Queen Esther informing her about the evil decree that Haman has just had passed against the Jewish people, calling for their utter destruction, and instruct-

ing her to go before Achashveirosh and use her influence to intervene and try to save everyone. Esther initially pushes Mordechai off, explaining that spontaneously appearing before the king without being summoned would mean certain death for her. Mordechai famously responds that perhaps Hashem had put Esther in precisely the position that she was in (ie. queen) for this very reason, assuring her that if she didn't do it then someone else would be appointed to save the Jewish people in her place, but that she would not survive as a result, regardless

of how protected she may have felt being in the seeming safety of the palace. Apparently convinced, Esther agrees to go and asks that Mordechai organise the Jewish people to fast for three days on her behalf before she does so.

But what if there was more to Esther's response and reluctance than we realise? What if her initial hesitation had less to do with risking her life and everything to do with losing something that meant much more to her than her life?

ALONE IN THE WORLD

The Megillah says, "And [Mordechai] reared Hadassah, she is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, because she did not have a father or mother, and the child was beautiful of form and good to look upon; and when her father and mother died, Mordechai took her for a daughter."¹ Why does this verse need to repeat the fact that Esther did not have a father and mother?

Rashi explains² that it comes to teach us that Esther did not have a father or mother even for a single day, and our Sages explain that Esther's father died after her mother became pregnant with her and that her mother died during childbirth. A man becomes a father from the time that a woman becomes pregnant with his child, but a woman only becomes a mother after the child is born because the entire time that the child is in the womb of the mother, it is considered like a part of the mother's body and not like a separate entity. Only when the foetus goes out from the mother's body is a woman called "mother". Because the foetus has no physical connection to the father during the pregnancy, the man, therefore, unlike the woman, is immediately called by the name "father".³ Esther never knew the love of a parent for even one day, never called anyone mother or father, raised by and cared for entirely by only one person, her cousin, Mordechai.

DAUGHTER...OR WIFE?

Our Sages also explain⁴ that Mordechai did not literally take Esther for a *bas*

(daughter) as the verse quoted above states, but for a *bayis* (a house) – a play on the Hebrew word *bas*, adding a single letter, yud, to change the word from *bas* to *bayis* – meaning that Mordechai married Esther, the word *bayis* being understood as referring to a man's wife.⁵ Our sages also derive that Mordechai married Esther from the unusual words and wording of the above verse. Some base it on the language of “take” – ie. it doesn't say that Esther “was” a daughter to Mordechai, but that he “took” Esther for a daughter, alluding to the language of the verse⁶ in the Torah concerning marriage, “When a man takes a wife.”⁷ Some derive it from the extra Hebrew word *lo* (“for him”), connecting it to the same extra word contained in the verse⁸, “...made for him a helper opposite him”, which refers to Hashem having made a wife for Adam HaRishon, the first man.⁹ And some derive it from the fact that it says *l'bas* (for a daughter) instead of *k'bas* (like a daughter).¹⁰

So why does the Megillah only hint about this significant fact? Why doesn't it explicitly say that Mordechai married Esther? Since Mordechai wrote Megillas Esther during the reign of Achashveirosh, he did not want to reveal that Esther was his wife, thereby humiliating Achashveirosh and almost certainly changing Achashveirosh's positive feelings towards him from love to hatred.¹¹ It also uses the word *bas* because Mordechai's original intention was only to raise Esther as a daughter, not to marry her. It was only much later, when she was older, that he wanted to marry her.¹²

IT HAD TO BE AN ORPHAN

While literature is full of famous fictional orphans – be it Heidi, Pollyanna, Oliver, Clark Kent, or even more recently, Harry Potter – Queen Esther was truly the first real life orphan to “save the day”. Following our initial exile in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), our Sages taught that there would be four exiles: (1) *Bavel* (Babylonia), (2) *Madai/Paras* (Media/Persia), (3) *Yavan* (Greece), and finally (4) *Edom* (Rome). The events of Purim deal with the second exile, the exile in

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Madai/Paras. Hashem told the Jewish people that the redeemer of the exile in *Madai/Paras* would be an orphan. The Midrash tells us that, following the destruction of the first *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple), Hashem said to Israel¹³, “You cry and you say before me, ‘We are orphans, without a father.’ I swear by your lives, the redeemer who I will raise up for you in *Madai* will also not have a father or mother.”¹⁴

Besides being family, Mordechai raised Esther because he suspected from the very beginning, when he saw that she had neither father nor mother, that she would be the redeemer. When she was later taken into the palace – a completely unnatural event, as, according to our Sages¹⁵, Esther was either 40 years old, 75 years old, or even as old as 80 years old when Achashveirosh chose her to be his queen from among all of the many young, beautiful women brought to him from across his vast empire – Mordechai saw again through *ruach hakodesh* (divine inspiration) that Esther indeed would be the redeemer.¹⁶

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

When we think of kings and queens, we have these romantic images of them sitting side-by-side on their thrones, crowns upon their heads, regal gowns and garments draped over them, flowing down stairs before them, perhaps even holding hands as people come to address them and beseech them. But, in Shushan, where Achashveirosh sat on his throne, that's not how it was at all! The Megillah tells us that even when Esther was queen, she continued “to do as Mordechai told her to, as she had when she was raised by him”. Our Sages explain that this refers to the fact that, even as queen, Esther would rise from the lap of Achashveirosh, go to the *mikvah* (ritual bath) and immerse, and then return home to Mordechai's embrace.¹⁷

It would seem that Esther only stayed

in the palace with Achashveirosh when she had to, when Achashveirosh called for her, but other than those times, she lived with Mordechai – and, having been raised by him, who would even think it strange? But, how was it even possible for her to remain married to Mordechai and to return to him time and time again after she had been with Achashveirosh¹⁸ Because Achashveirosh had taken her against her will and every time she was called by Achashveirosh it was always against her will. All of this is crucial to understand why, in fact, Esther was so reluctant to appear voluntarily before Achashveirosh.

MORDECHAI'S INSTRUCTION AND ESTHER'S ODD RESPONSE

After Mordechai instructs Esther to go before Achashveirosh and plead for her people, Esther appears initially reluctant to go – but she doesn't say simply that she won't do it, that she won't go – instead, she quotes the law to Mordechai explaining that anyone who appears before the king without having been called can be put to death and noting that Achashveirosh hadn't called for her in 30 days. Her response is simply bizarre. After all, Mordechai was a senior advisor to Achashveirosh and was regularly found at the king's palace. Surely he was intimately familiar with how things operated there, especially the protocols and procedures associated with speaking to the king. Did Esther really need to explain to Mordechai what the law was regarding appearing before the king uninvited? Esther even prefaces her comments by saying that everyone throughout the empire knows the law – it was a matter of common knowledge!

Mordechai and Esther – husband and wife – were communicating via messengers. They had to be extremely careful with what they said, if not completely cryptic. Esther even feared they were



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being watched, going so far as to send, after their first few communications, someone other than Hasach, her normal messenger, so Haman's men wouldn't take notice of their increased messaging back and forth.¹⁹ But, some say that the reason Esther had to send a different messenger was precisely because Haman's men did take note of Hasach's repeatedly going back and forth between Esther and Mordechai that day, so Haman had Hasach killed!²⁰

Our Sages give various explanations for what Esther had in mind by her strange reply. One reason given is that, by mentioning that she hadn't been called by Achashveirosh in 30 days, she was asking Mordechai what the hurry was? Haman's decree, passed in the first month of the Hebrew calendar, Nissan, would only be carried out eleven months later in the last month of the Hebrew calendar, Adar. Esther was saying, "Achashveirosh hasn't called for me in 30 days, so surely he'll call for me soon and then I won't have to go voluntarily

and risk my life!"²¹ (And some say that it was Hashem who had made the delay so long since the last time Achashveirosh had called for Esther so that she would be endeared to him even more when she eventually did come before him!²²) It wasn't that Esther wasn't willing to plead to the king on behalf of herself and her people; she just wanted to wait a bit. The obvious question though is why was Esther suddenly not eager to follow Mordechai's instructions? What motivated her to suddenly disobey him?

WHY WAS ESTHER RELUCTANT TO GO?

The law against not approaching the king without being called applied to everyone equally, including even the

queen. For Esther, however, the penalty for going without being called would be so much worse than for anyone else in the entire empire, as she would lose more than just her life – she would lose her life as she knew it.

As noted previously, as long as Esther was forced to be with Achashveirosh, she could return to her husband Mordechai. Once she approached Achashveirosh willingly – and her voluntary, unforced appearance before him would mean that the situation had radically changed, that she was now choosing to be with Achashveirosh willingly – she could never be with Mordechai again, forever forbidden from returning to his home, her home, and being his wife.

After Esther eventually agrees to go before Achashveirosh, breaking the law and risking her life, she asks that Mordechai instruct the people that they should fast for her. But then she adds at the end of her request, "...if I am lost, I am lost."²³ The gemara²⁴ brings the unspoken thoughts of Esther behind what she meant by this strange, repetitive expression. "It would not be as was customary on all of the other days. Until now, I have been with Achashveirosh because he forced me to be with him, but, from now and hereafter, I will be doing so willingly and if I am lost, I am lost; just as I am lost to my father's house, so too I will be lost to you [ie. to Mordechai]."

Here was Esther – not Esther the queen, not Esther the prophetess, but Esther the orphan – viewing things through the eyes of an orphan, afraid of and tremendously pained by being abandoned yet again, having first been lost to the home of her parents, before she could even call them mother and father, and now to be lost yet again to the home of her husband, never to be able to re-

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turn to him. It was more than her life she feared losing – it was the only home that she had ever known, that she would ever know, and everything that came with it. The man, who had been like a father to her and who had then been a husband to her, the only love she had ever known in her life, would be lost to her forever.

And here was the *Gadol HaDor* (the leader of the generation), Mordechai, seeing beyond their personal family crisis and recognising that this was the very purpose for which his wife had been born, the very reason why she had been taken into the palace and made queen in the first place – as he had recognised years before when she was originally chosen by Achashveirosh, that it could only mean that she would one day be in a position to save the Jewish people. Now was that time and there was no time to waste, no matter the personal price that had to be paid.

STILL AN ORPHAN

In choosing voluntarily to appear before Achashveirosh, everything would be irreparably changed – this was the reason for Esther's reluctance to go straight away and do as Mordechai instructed. In the end, Esther sacrificed everything she had, everything and everyone she loved, to save the Jewish people. She lost everything just so that they could survive – so that we could survive – finding herself, in the end, as she had come into the world, entirely alone.

I once saw an incredibly raw and honest social media post by Sarah Rivkah Kohn, the founder of a support group for orphans called LINKS (previously profiled in these pages, see *LINKed Together*, September 2017, Issue #110, page 112), who was herself orphaned, losing her mother when she was young. (In Jewish law, a person has a status of being an orphan whether he has been orphaned from either his father or his

mother.) The post reminds us that no matter how old, even after being blessed with having her own family, an orphan always feels an emptiness and a pain that we truly cannot appreciate. Her words can, perhaps, help give us an inkling of the pain that Esther must have felt at that very moment – and every moment thereafter:

“I may be in my 30s, but I’m still an orphan. Years may go by and, thank G-d, life fills with joy, but deep down...I’m a little orphan. I will feel like all the amazing people in my life can never be my mother. I will feel lonely and sad at the most beautiful times in my life as I want to so badly to share those moments with my mother.”

Today’s trigger? My daughter’s play. I’m heading into a room filled with proud mothers and grandmothers. My incredible sister-in-law is driving an hour-and-a-half to join and is schlepping my mother-in-law. I’m beyond grateful. And (not BUT) I still want to scream and kick and get my mother into that room...” **LU**

¹Esther 2:7

²Megillah 13a

³Megillas Esther Mesivta (hereafter, “MEM”) on Esther 2:7 citing the Maharal

⁴Megillah 13a

⁵See eg, Yuma 2a and 13a (referring to Vayikra 16:6) beiso zu ishto

⁶Devarim 23:13 (emphasis added)

⁷MEM on Esther 2:7 citing the Sifsei Chachamim

⁸Bereishis 2:18

⁹MEM on Esther 2:7 citing the Melo HaOmer

¹⁰MEM on Esther 2:7 citing the Chida

¹¹MEM on Esther 2:7 citing the Etz Yoseph

¹²MEM on Esther 2:7 citing the Ralbag and the Maharam Chalava

¹³Eicha Rabah 5:3

¹⁴MEM citing Rabbi Elisha Galiko

¹⁵Bereishis Rabbah 39:13

¹⁶Rashi on Esther 2:11

¹⁷Megillah 13b

¹⁸See Tosafos on Megillah 13b for a discussion of how it was possible for Esther to return to Mordechai without having to wait the three months that would normally be required.

¹⁹MEM on Esther 4:10 citing the Malbim

²⁰MEM on Esther 4:12 citing the Targum

²¹MEM on Esther 4:11 citing the Alshich

²²MEM citing the Maharal

²³Esther 4:16

²⁴Megillah 15a