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**Purim as a Model for Survival in a Dangerous World**  
By Steve Israel and Noam Zion

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## Introduction: Modeling the Megillah

Jews have for millennia defined their lives by a response to their textual tradition. They have, in a sense, attempted to live their texts, seeing them both as an ideal model for their lives and practical guide to survival – physical, spiritual and ethical - in a dangerous world. *Hafoch ba hafoch ba d'kulei ba* – “Turn over the text (like one plowing the earth over and over) for everything is contained within.” The text has had a very central role in defining the parameters of Jewish life throughout the ages. It has of course been a source of intellectual and moral inspiration for Jewish ideals and for a messianic vision of how good the world could become. However it has also been used as a recipe for real life in an unredeemed world.

For example, when Jacob/ Israel arrived in Eretz Israel with his four wives and many children he encountered his angry brother Esav's 400 armed men advancing towards him. As the rabbis note, we must learn lessons for life in this world from Israel's three simultaneous strategies for survival. He prayed to God for help, he sent a generous bribe to his brother and he divided his camp to prepare for flight as well as for battle and thereby ensure that at least a remnant would live on.

For example, court Jews like Joseph, Daniel and Nehemia are part of the genre of Esther and Mordechai finding ways to take initiatives within imperial courts that help the Jewish people. Yet each faces the need to assimilate court culture and still draw a line past which they will not go and put their lives on their lines for their principles.

It is in that spirit that we turn back now to the text of the Megillah, to see how Jews manage in an oppressive world of imperial politics. The fact that the text is extraordinary in its seeming silence about God allows us to glimpse more subtle questions of the workings of the real world, than those with which we are presented in other “more theological” biblical texts which are constructed around God's miraculous intervention as the tool of salvation.

In Part Three, we will examine two other atypical features of the Megillah. Firstly it deals centrally with women, their roles and their actions. Secondly, it is a rare story of the Jewish political situation in the Diaspora. We see the Jews confronting issues of minority status that will occupy them for thousands of years and which continue to occupy them today. These two subjects, the political strategies available to women in a male dominated world and the political strategies available to Jews within a cosmopolitan Diaspora, have much in common. Both the woman in a patriarchal society and the Jew in Diaspora are underdogs, outsiders, who must live a life of deception and manipulation in order to negotiate the dangerous society in which they are so vulnerable.

The essential questions that we need to examine here are the following:

What can we learn from the Megillah regarding the way that women and Jews – the underdogs who are relatively politically powerless – should live their lives?

What strategies and traits do the powerless need to act in a hostile political world?

What is the price they pay for surviving and even succeeding in this oppressive society whose values are at odds with their inner moral compass?

When must they compromise and where shall they draw the line not to be crossed?

Can the powerless actually gain power? What is necessary both internally and externally to bring about such a transformation? Is a real revolution of values possible in the world of male imperial politics in which they live?

It is quite clear, from even a cursory look at the Megillah, that the position of both “the woman” and “the Jew” are transformed during the course of the story. Esther’s rise to power presents a clear theme of transformation on the one hand, (as, by the way, does Vashti’s humiliation and downfall). In addition, the Jews are transformed from a people who need to hide their identity in order to be accepted, to a people who control central positions of power. The last sentence of chapter eight in which we are told that many people of other nationalities became Jews because of their fear of the Jews, says it all. Both the Jews as a people and Esther as a woman (and as a Jew) totally transform themselves (or are transformed – that is a question which needs to be examined) from powerless to powerful in the course of the story. Since, indeed, both Jews in general and Jewish women in particular, have seen more than their share of powerlessness during the long years of their existence, the Megillah is centrally concerned with the question: how can powerlessness be transformed into power? What is the key to transformation, both individual and collective?

There is another question that comes out of this. We have said that both Esther and the Jews are transformed by the end of the story. They have what appears to be real power as a result of the Megillah’s events. But we have to ask whether their position has been changed temporarily as a result of the story or whether real structural change has developed that makes a repeat of the story after another generation or two, impossible. In other words, is what we see a real revolution or is it simply a change of circumstance as a result of some very specific factors? That remains to be examined.

This chapter will thus be divided into two sections. The first section will deal with the empowerment and transformation of Esther as a model for the individual Jew with special emphasis on her role as a model for Jewish women. The second section will focus on the empowerment and transformation of the Diaspora Jew in a hostile world.

## Section One: The Woman's /Jew's Predicament in an Oppressive Society and The Empowerment and Transformation of Esther

**Mediated Interchanges between Esther inside the palace and Mordechai outside the palace, at the king's gate.** (Esther 4:1-17) from *Esther* by Timothy Beal (p 57-58):

### **First Interchange (4:1-4)**

Mordecai approaches the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes; Jews are lamenting in a similar fashion throughout Persia (vv. 1-3)

Esther hears about Mordecai, is distressed, and sends clothes to wear instead of sackcloth and ashes (v. 4a) Mordecai refuses her offer of clothing (v. 4b)

### **Second Interchange (4:5-9)**

Esther sends Hathach to learn what is happening and why (4: 5-6)

Mordecai reports everything to Hathach and sends back a copy of the decree, in order to charge

Esther to go to the king (4: 7-9)

### **Third Interchange (4:10-14)**

Esther sends Hathach to tell Mordecai that she cannot go to the king without risk of the death penalty (4: 10-12)

Mordecai sends back to Esther: "Do not think that you will escape. . ." (4:13-14)

### **Fourth Interchange (4:15-17)**

Esther sends reply to Mordecai, issuing him commands ("go, gather . . . fast") and indicating her intention to act on behalf of the Jews (4:15-16)

Mordecai departs and does everything Esther commands (4:17)

Timothy Beal continues:

"Esther 4:1-17 marks a **crucial turning point** in Esther's relation to Mordecai within the narrative as a whole. Up to this point, the **distance** between them, as well as the distance between Esther and her (former?) people, the Jews, appears to be growing.

As she rises within the Persian political order, Mordecai and the Jews find themselves in deeper and deeper trouble within that order.

At the same time, up to this point the text has stressed that Esther has continued to be **obedient** to Mordecai, "just as when she was brought up by him" (2:20; see also 2:10).

In this episode, as the **distance** between them is narrowed (but nonetheless continues to require mediation), **the chain of command-obedience is reversed**, so that by the end of this episode we find Esther in charge and Mordecai doing "everything as Esther had ordered [or 'commanded'] him" (4:17).

This episode can be outlined as a series of **mediated interchanges between Esther inside the palace and Mordecai outside the palace, at the king's gate**. As this outline makes clear, the **words** between Mordecai and Esther are sandwiched between the **actions** of Mordecai.

## The Predicament –Esther 4: 1-7

Mordechai confronts Esther with a crisis that she could not have foreseen requiring a change of strategy, personal values and identity for which she has not been prepared either as a woman or a Diaspora Jew. The **World of Ahashverosh** has been one of social climbing that for a woman meant playing an obedient, demur, supple, party-going, ego-stroking beauty to every male and for a Jew meant hiding one's identity. But the **World of Haman** has taken advantage of Ahashverosh's egotistical, indifferent amorality to promote the immoral mission to bring genocide on every Jew in the Empire. Now Mordechai demands that Esther be mobilized to fight this evil mission backed indiscriminately by the authority of the Empire, the king.

What **obstacles** stand in Esther's way to empowerment as a woman and as Diaspora Jew?

- 1- **In terms of national or religious identity, the woman is often the "free radical"** (using a chemistry metaphor) who can combine with any man without regard to ethnicity or religion. They follow their husband's identity in biblical practice and that absolute priority of male cultural dominance is carried to an extreme in Ahashverosh's first decree after Vashti's disobedience: "Everyman should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people" (Esther1:22). Hence women are not expected to fight ideological, religious or national battles – especially not against the identity and interests of their husbands.
- 2- As an orphan Esther's **trauma** has been one of loss, of loss of paternal protection and the need to find older males to adopt her. She has learned to find favor in the eyes of Mordechai, of Hegai overseer of the house of virgins, and Ahashverosh. She represents symbolically all of Israel exiled from Judea and from God. So why should she risk what she has gained in a world with no one to fall back on?
- 3- Success has been earned by learning from **Vashti's negative example**. No disobedience, no male-ego-threatening behavior that might shame those men in power, no violation of court etiquette, no insistence on personal honor, on bodily integrity or self-ownership in the face of male instinctual drives or male showing off of female trophy wives.
- 4- The rewards of life are the result of **obedience to men of authority** and so far there has been no conflict between obedience to Mordechai and obedience to court law, but **the crisis of dual loyalty**, of conflicting interests of host empire and hosted alien residents is now Esther's personal dilemma, of birth family versus husband's clan.
- 5- Esther has **no experience of decision making**, let alone political action based on analysis of the world.
- 6- Esther has **no theology or ideology** allowing her to understand that the world could be different and that there may be greater forces to help in that transformation.
- 7- **Jewish identity has been associated with exile, powerlessness, loss of parents, and need to hide in order to get ahead**. So how can Mordechai change his mind and expect her to act independently in the name of her Jewish community against her new-old status as dependent female?
- 8- **Yitz Greenberg (*The Jewish Way*)** enumerates the undesirable but typical responses of an acclimated Diaspora Jew to a message about genocide approved by the absolute ruler. Using the model of Jewish responses to the rise of Hitler, he shows it is not enough for Mordechai just to reveal the evil plans of Haman. He must nurse in Esther an activist response. Generally Jews respond like others to a horrific decree with denial ("It can't happen here, we are too well accepted and they are too concerned for rational self-interest to forfeit such a valuable resource), fright, shock, self-blame, flight (denial of solidarity or lack of courage) and/or abject pleading. But how

does one evoke resistance and willingness to protest as well as catalyze the development of a strategy to outmaneuver Haman and build coalitions.

- 9- Haman has been pursuing **a policy of intimidation and centralizing of all power in his own arbitrary hands**. All must bow down to him, no one has access to the paranoid king, and a tall hanging tree is prepared for the main dissenter – Mordechai – so that all can see what his and all resisters' fate will be.

## **Martin Samuel Cohen – Esther Commentary<sup>1</sup>** **“Have greatness thrust upon ’em”**

**Chapter Two.** Moderns approaching the second chapter of Esther as a focus for ruminative consideration will want to ask themselves specifically about the ways we do and do not allow ourselves to be buffeted along by the inexorable flow of events that carries us along through every hour of every day of our lives. .. **How do we know in life when to stick to our guns and when to bow to circumstance?** ... The modern reader comes away from a careful reading of this second chapter feeling queasy. Aren't moral values supposed to be immutable? Shouldn't our ethical values be the unmovable rocks to which the affairs of our lives are tethered? Aren't we supposed *never* to abandon our principles merely because the possibility of some future gain presents itself or because the specter of some as-yet-unspecified dividend our action may yet yield appears on the distant horizon? Or are there really times when the correct action involves stepping outside our normal moral standards and hoping for the best?

What the second chapter of Esther suggests, disorienting a lesson though it may be, is that moral decisions have always to be anchored not only in what one knows of the past, but also of what one knows of the future. But since no one can say with certainty what the future will bring, there is of necessity a certain amount of arbitrariness involved in even the simplest ethical decision. **Stepping aside from even the most basic moral norm for the greater good invariably involves the possibility that one is totally wrong, that the alleged good will never present itself, that one will have abandoned one's principles for nothing.** And layered over all that is the risk of error, the possibility that the good one imagines might come of one's action is simply not good *enough* to justify the compromise under consideration.

**The notion that moral living is more like skating across a mostly frozen pond than hiking deliberately down a well-trod path in the woods is not something any of us wants to hear.** We want our moral lives to be delivered up to us on a platter of neatly arrayed values, ideals, and principles. The last thing, in fact, that most moderns want to know is that moral living requires an endless willingness to evaluate and re-evaluate our principles, basing the unending reconsideration of these issues not only in the light of what we think the world should be *like* but also in the light of what we know the world actually to be and what we imagine the world might yet become. Sensing ourselves obliged endlessly to weigh even our simplest decisions, never feeling safe merely to mimic our own prior behavior, always feeling called upon to act decently and kindly based on the specifics of the moment—this endless cycle of consideration and reconsideration is the forum in which the truly ethical among us live their lives. Even considering these truths makes most people slightly nauseous. Truly accepting them, however, means concomitantly accepting the obligation never to act automatically, not even when facing a situation one has encountered a thousand times previously. That is the precise definition of living morally, but is it a challenge moderns can actually meet?

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<sup>1</sup> copyright, not for dissemination, selection from forthcoming book on five megillot

**Chapter Four** | Well-known, if regretfully overquoted, is the familiar line from Twelfth Night about how some are born great and some achieve greatness, but how others only eventually “**have greatness thrust upon ’em.**” Less often cited, however, is the simple injunction, “**Be not afraid of greatness,**” that leads into Malvolio’s celebrated observation and expresses the basic concept of which the more famous quote is both justification and a kind of midrashic elaboration. Together, however, both the initial injunction and its subsequent rationalization pave the way for the “real” thought the Bard wishes to impart and does impart immediately afterwards. “**The Fates open their hands,**” Shakespeare says to us all through the medium of Lady Olivia’s hapless steward, “**let thy blood and thy spirit embrace them.**”

The opening verses of the fourth chapter of the Megillah are suffused with **the misery of impotence.** A pogrom has been announced, the murderous, annihilative point of which has not been even slightly shaded or toned down for public consumption. If anything, in fact, just the opposite was the case: the publicized point of the impending Aktion was specifically *not* to punish, to intimidate, or to threaten, but actually to exterminate the entire Jewish population “including the children and the elderly, even infants and women.”

And thus presented to us as a glimmer of hope is a door that is also not a door, **an avenue of salvation that the sole citizen in a position to travel down must do so at the risk of her own life.** The reader wonders how this will all play out, but the more important detail is that the Mordechai neither invents nor discovers the door, but simply notices it where it was waiting unnoticed all along. And, indeed, the real importance of the complicated and unlikely story of how Esther became queen of Persia, told at length earlier in the Megillah, is now revealed. And when **Mordechai poses his most famous of all rhetorical questions (“Who knows if the real reason you were elevated to royalty was not all along so that you be in this precise position of potentially pivotal power at this specific moment in your people’s history?”)**, no reader has to wonder what the correct answer is. Of course, we all now realize that that is precisely why she is in place in the palace...and why the story line barely nodded to the almost indescribable inappropriateness of a Jewish girl entering a contest to become queen of Persia that she could only conceivably win by surrendering her virtue to a oafish king the narrator has no compunction about presenting as an profligate idiot and as a sot. And we also now understand why the narrator seemed so thrilled to report to his readers about the decision of a hithertofore honorable woman willingly to enter into a forbidden marriage and why he sounded neither censorious of her choice nor, frankly, even formally ambivalent about its moral worth. Moderns reading along will want to respond to the unexpected possibility of salvation that presents itself garbed in the queen’s willingness to risk her own safety for the sake of her people’s by asking themselves if they feel themselves to be similarly situated in the larger narratives of their **own lives not arbitrarily or accidentally but as part of some pre-ordained and purposeful, if largely indiscernible, plan.** ...

[But] we think of ourselves as free agents possessed of the ability to chart our own way in life. ... And then we read Mordechai’s question and find its reverberations, to say the least, unsettling. Esther, we agree instantly, was in that specific place because of the great good she was about to be able to accomplish. Are we situated in our lives for similarly undisclosed reasons that will only reveal themselves at the precisely correct moment? The way a modern answers that question will depend on that person’s feelings about the whole concept of destiny and fate, about the power or basic unreality of karma, of kismet itself. .... **We want God to have maneuvered Esther into place, but we bristle, or most of us do, at the thought that we too have been guided into being who we have become...and for a specific reason we either will or will not embrace at precisely the right moment.** And yet there is something intensely seductive about feeling ourselves imbued with purpose

imposed from without, about feeling part of the divine plan for humanity as focused through the details our own personal lives. The pleasure of feeling that way is undeniable...but can moderns truly believe it?



## The Call to Action – Esther 4: 1-17– How does Mordechai teach Esther Empowerment?

- 1- Mordechai before marshalling verbal arguments speaks a language of action: Mordechai models **public protest** and demonstrates this is a matter of life and death. He speaks to Esther in **the language of clothing** which has been her realm of expertise and choice. But he reverses the significance of clothing – no longer a way to hide emotions and identity and to please a party-goer wishing to escape from unpleasant issues of state. Now his clothes express emotions and draw attention to the most unpleasant aspects of political life. The public protest shows other courtiers who are likely discontented with the rise of Haman and the need to show obeisance to him that one can take a stand. He becomes public lightning rod for other potential allies who are potential opponents to Haman. Like Avshalom criticizing King David at the gates of Jerusalem for lack of justice, Mordechai prepares the ground for revolt or coup.
- 2- Mordechai is also modeling **public** self-abasement as an appeal typical of prayer to God when a catastrophe threatens (such as in the city of Nineveh in the Book of Jonah). He shows his solidarity with all the Jews all over the empire who are also dressed in sackcloth. Esther by contrast is inside the **palace**, not outside; she is protected but also disconnected and she does not dress like Jews or reveal her identity with them. But she will soon learn from Mordechai to fast and wear sackcloth while the whole community **fasts in solidarity** with her.
- 3- Then he approaches the precinct of the palace where no one may come in clothes of mourning that might disturb the king's carefully crafted party atmosphere. **Mordechai shows no fear for his personal safety as he threatens to violate the court etiquette as he will ask Esther to do.**
- 4- Esther is terribly disturbed (Esther 4:4). Why? Perhaps because she is afraid someone will connect her with this public protest and blow her cover. Perhaps Mordechai is threatening to inform on her as he informed on Bigtan. Clearly he acting in an way **incomprehensible** to Esther who is used to his conservative and diplomatic advice showing deference to the king's laws and interests and honor.
- 5- We can read more generously the motivations of Esther and Mordechai. Mordechai is saying: **if you love me, then you must do something.** I am putting my life on the line and I ask you to act if not for the cause then out of identification with me. Esther seeks to dissuade Mordechai from this inappropriate dress. But he refuses as he refused to bow to Haman. So **Mordechai demonstrates courage in action and stubbornness in negotiations that he wants Esther to emulate.** His **brinkmanship** will be model for Esther later on. Mordechai may recall Moshe's stand against God at the Golden calf when he says: wipe me out of your book if you will not join me to save the people. Both place their lives on the line for the people while threatening God/Esther with the loss of their most important ally. .
- 6- Then Mordechai offers political insider knowledge about Haman's bribe and his decree. For Esther to be empowered she needs knowledge which has been Mordechai's calling card and Esther is used to conveying information to Ahashverosh as she does about Bigtan. But here Ahashverosh already knows because he approved the bribe and the decree. **Knowledge is what empowers** but it also makes one face the full danger of the situation and difficulty of the challenge. Esther is no longer a protected little orphan. **She is being treated as an adult.**
- 7- Yet Esther falls back on her obedience to court etiquette and on to the **common knowledge** (as opposed to the political insider's knowledge of Mordechai). "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 provinces in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him – to be put to death" (Esther 4:11). Esther knows what everyone says, opinion, law, but not what could be different, how laws and policies change, what really determines power, not behind the scenes influence which is the area where she will be asked to take action. Yet she knows there is loophole – "only if

the king extends his golden scepter may the person live." So Esther knows there is a space to maneuver.

- 8- Now Mordechai who has sought to show Esther what can be done, how one can protest and defy social expectations. But now he reverses direction to close options. He suspects her of imagining herself safe in the palace. So Mordechai seeks to close off her escape route. **Don't imagine you can hide your identity and save your life by separating off from Jewish identity and using royal protectsia.** Married or not, hidden or not, your fate and the Jews is the same. No individual identity or destiny is possible. This is a difficult case to make because Esther has in fact it would appear successfully escaped Jewish society, Jewish identity and even her own orphan status by hiding her identity just as Mordechai taught her to do! Mordechai forces Esther to abandon the former strategy of **dual loyalty** to Mordechai and to Ahashverosh. Now she must choose one over the other; she must choose her family of origin or family of choice..
- 9- So Mordechai reinforces the objective argument by appealing subjectively to **the guilt of an orphan.** "You will be lost and with you your father's house" (Esther 4:14). Your identity as daughter is more powerful than as wife. Your father is dead but his memory is not lost. You may live as a hidden Jew, but neither your identity nor his will be preserved. This is of course a powerful Biblical motif as we hear from the orphan daughters of Tzelophad: "Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he has no sons" (Numbers 27:4).
- 10- Then Mordechai introduces **the "another place" factor.** You can help but even without you we the Jews will be saved – somehow (Recall the coup that I revealed). Then you who think you are the only one who will be saved, will be lost. Not very convincing in terms of a realistic analysis of forces that are visible. But it suggests to Esther that there is **another world** - different from the social climbing world of Ahashverosh, the anti-Semitic one of Haman, and the astrological one. This is a world of Jewish protectsia. It depends on human effort and Esther could help but not only on human effort. One way or another Jews will survive. Zeresh acknowledges an even more explicit belief in this mysterious force which for her is genetic – "if Mordechai before whom you have begun to fall is of Jewish *zera* = stock, seed, then you will certainly fall before him to your ruin!" (Esther 6:13). Here is an alternative causal system calling for different behaviors, values and virtues. Yet is so amorphous. Why not make an explicit argument for God as ruler of history who defends the Jewish minority that cannot defend itself? That is such a typical Biblical belief, even in Second Isaiah of the Persian period. (See the next point).
- 11- Esther is now caught in **double bind**, damned if she does and damned if she doesn't. So Mordechai offers a way out, world without certainty and clarity, an alternative world on the basis of which he asks Esther to act. As a good courtier in the wisdom literature tradition, he returns to the theme of knowledge. We have heard from the **"knowers of times (astrology) and of the laws and precedents"** (Esther 1:13), we have seen Haman rely on casting lots to divine the timely opportunity to kill the Jews, we have seen Mordechai's knowledge about the political intrigues of the court and Esther's common knowledge about court etiquette. But to our surprise Mordechai appeals not to knowledge or to faith but to possibility in realm without certainty: "who **knows**, perhaps you have attained this royal position just for a **time** like this" (Esther 4:14). The "knowers of times" says Mordechai never know but they can act on the possibility that what they have gained was not gained merely by their own efforts or by luck or by astrology but by destiny and for **destiny.** Yet turning opportunity into reality depends on feeling called and **acting in uncertainty as if this were a calling.** In others Esther is not risking her hard-won position for an extraneous goal but actualizing its meaning **as a gift and as a responsibility. Empowerment in a world without prophesy or obvious miracle requires the power to interpret and to wager one's life on one's interpretation, on one's identification of "calling" in world without full fledged prophets.** That is the sophisticated appeal of Mordechai to bring the phrase *mi yodeia* also in Jonah 3:9 and II Sam. 12:22 when David and the people of Nineveh fast without any confidence that they will be able to arouse Divine mercy to revoke a decree.

12- Finally, **Mordechai empowers Esther by learning to defer his own advice to hers.** Initially Mordechai treats Esther as an obedient messenger as she was in informing Ahashverosh about the coup attempt. Mordechai ordered Hatach to show her the decree, to reveal her identity (*lehaggid*) and to obey his command (*Itzavot*) about going directly and immediately to the king to beg for mercy for people. But later he defers to Esther's first act of planning and decision-making – to fast and then beguile the king in rich apparel and only much later to reveal her identity. Then Mordechai accepts this role reversal and rushes off to obey her "just as Esther had commanded him" (Esther 4:17). **He teaches her that older men can obey strong-willed women when they take responsibility and demonstrate equal courage and greater wisdom in the ways of the world.**

### **Esther's Transformation: The Birth of Character**

As Michael Fox notes in *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*:

"The scroll bears Esther's name for she is central...**Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments**...Her dynamism stands out in relief against the static nature of the other character...She develops in three stages, from passivity to activity to authority." First she is "taken." Her docility reflects gender and position, not individual choice or personality. "Esther is putty – not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation." Second she begins to act after Mordechai convinces her. Then she becomes an authority figure to whom the king comes to ask her for her orders. Vashti maintains her integrity by refusing to be shown off and to obey the king's orders, but Esther achieves real authority and gives the orders to the king, even when wrapped in ritualized deference.

"The book of Esther links the issue of national salvation to human character. It raises **the question of whether a person of dubious character strength and (initially) unclear self-definition can carry the burden of national salvation.**

Esther becomes a judge (in the sense of the Book of Judges) without the benefit of the Spirit of the Lord. She is leader whose charisma come not in sudden divine imposition of spirit but as a result of a difficult process of inner development and self-realization. **The Scroll affirms the potential of human character to rise to the needs of the hour whatever means or devices the situation demands.**" (Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*)

Esther is not merely "convinced" to change her behavior but she is transformed inwardly and in her whole world outlook. The beauty queen becomes the heroic savior. The story is one of **liminal crossing** of borders even though Esther has not left the palace and Mordechai has not entered the court. The eunuch himself is ambiguous in his sexual. gender status represents this crossing as Hatach crosses back and forth negotiating between these two struggling figures. Even Esther's initial reluctance can be read positively as the necessary and typical self-doubt and fear for personal survival of any great prophet like Moshe in his calling at the bush (Exodus 3-4). Only then could Moshe/Esther change their relationship to Pharaoh/Ahashverosh who had adopted/married them and begin to negotiate and to make demands on them.

Paradoxically, Esther's transformation, which is reflected in her active role and in her revision of Mordechai's plan for rescue, relies on **deep psychological process of letting go of control.** "I will come to the King – in violation of the law – and if I am lost I am lost" (*kasher avaditi, avaditi* - Esther 4:16). In parallel language Jacob says: "If I am orphaned of my children, I am orphaned of my children" (*kasher shakolti, shakolti* - Genesis 43:14). Jacob had been traumatized with the loss of Joseph and Simon (and perhaps Rachel) whom he sent out on the road and were lost. Jacob could not

let go of Benjamin to accompany Judah to Egypt, rather he accused the brothers of "orphaning him." But when faced by this guilt over past misfortune and paralyzed further risk taking, Jacob learned to take initiative again from Judah who took the burden of responsibility for what might happen to Benjamin and from a new attitude to fate that whatever will be will be. So too Esther decided to release the illusion of total control, to rely on the skepticism of *mi yoseia* about God's providence, and to acknowledge that she could live with whatever loss her risky adventure would cause. Both Jacob and Esther then gave orders how best to entreat the king/viceroy upon whose fate their lives depended which was even better than the initial requests made by Judah and Mordechai. **Action originates then not with confidence in Divine deliverance or the security of an astrological system of determinism or even in fear of Mordechai's threat that Esther and her father's house would be lost. It begins with accepting the worst scenario as realistic and saying I have nothing more to lose and perhaps, who knows) something to gain.**

Now Esther, beyond her paralyzing concern for his own survival and advancement in the court where people are always coming in and leaving in disgrace, rising and falling, becomes a *shaliach*, an envoy of her people, a political leader rather than a career officerholder. Now that she has seen Mordechai convince her to make a fateful choice, now she must maneuver Ahashverosh to choose loyalty to her over loyalty to Haman. Revealing her identity after Haman got the king's approval to destroy her people – men and women - will be political dynamite and she must find a way to make it blow up in Haman's face, not her own. Esther is now ready to play with explosives – and the fuse is simply to admit publicly that one is a Jew.

So Esther is now ready for her "**coming out of the closet party**" after a difficult process culminating in their days of fasting and reflection. How does she let them know she is a Jew after all the prejudices about Jewish disloyalty and insurrection dispensed by Haman. Rabbi Steven Greenberg, Orthodox rabbi, gay man and political activist, once suggested Esther's fast be declared national coming out day and all Jews would fast in solidarity with those homosexuals afraid to come out of the closet and then the homosexuals would announce their hidden identity in an atmosphere of group support.

### **The Identity Crisis of Esther and Moshe**

This arduous calling dialogue between Mordechai and Esther resembles in some ways God's calling to Moshe (Exodus 2-3-4). Both Moshe and Esther are **liminal characters whose divided identities and orphan-status open them to identity confusion as well as to their task as negotiators between the Jewish people and the rulers who determine their fate.** Both Pharaoh and Haman plot Israel's genocide out of fear for their disloyalty. In fact the Koran places Haman in Pharaoh's court.<sup>2</sup> Both make rhetorically sophisticated speeches to convince their constituency of this policy by demonizing

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<sup>2</sup> Haman appears in the Qur'an a few times, but here are the two most important places where Haman, Pharaoh and the tower of Babel are conflated.

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And Pharaoh said: O chiefs! I know not that ye have a god other than me, so kindle for me (a fire), O Haman, to bake the mud; and set up for me a lofty tower in order that I may survey the god of Moses; and lo! I deem him of the liars.

40:36-37

And Pharaoh said: O Haman! Build for me a tower that haply I may reach the roads of the heavens, and may look upon the god of Moses, though verily I think him a liar. Thus was the evil that he did made fair-seeming unto Pharaoh, and he was debarred from the (right) way. The plot of Pharaoh ended but in ruin.

the Jews as traitors (Exodus 1:8-9). Both lose their parents on the background of national catastrophe (Esther belongs to the exile of King Yechoyachin, 597 BCE). Both are adopted. Both are hidden – physically or their identity – because of the outside world yet they end up in the palace adopted or married into royalty. Both see their brothers persecuted and must decide to act when they have a choice to ignore the situation and protect their privileged and protected position in the oppressor class. Both act in violation of the ruler’s orders and live in fear of the king’s retaliation. Both show much reluctance to be called and come up with excuses but in the end they became the leading mediators of their people’s needs to the enemy ruler in whose home they found refuge. However Moses is instructed by God, won over with miraculous signs, represents God and performs supernatural miracles to convince Pharaoh. But Esther is convinced by a human being without any signs and wonders and performs no supernatural miracles and persuades rather than threatens the king to get her way. Moshe persuades Pharaoh’s advisors but not stubborn Pharaoh, while Esther persuades the king who retracts his loyalty to his chief advisor. The inner drama of choosing an identity and out on the line at personal risk is common to these two liminal characters. Timothy Beal, who suggests this parallel, believes that the Megillah sets the major events in Nisan to invite the reader to compare and contrast the Exodus redemption with the Megillah redemption (Beal, p. 49). It is essential to both dramas that the central character can choose to hide or ignore the ethnic identity but nevertheless chooses to identify publicly despite the potential loss of status. No one recognizes Esther or Mordechai as Jews in Persia – whether by dress or racial characteristic or observance or language - until they announce that identity.

### **Yoram Hazony – Megillat Esther as Primer for Nationalist Jewish Politics**

In his suggestive political interpretation of Megillat Esther entitled *The Dawn* (referring to Esther who is identified by the rabbis with the morning star), Hazony, head of a neo- Conservative think tank in Jerusalem associated with Binyamin Netanyahu and sponsored by republican philanthropist Ron Lauder, treats the book as a Machiavellian *The Prince*. He derives three principles that combine faith in Divine destiny and belief in an unpredictable fate or *fortuna*.

- (1) **Diversified Investment in an uncertain World.** Machiavelli teaches that the rages of the goddess Fortuna are like "an impetuous river" that when turbulent all flees and cannot stand, but when quiet you can build "dykes and banks." That is the case with the king's rage and Haman's. However one can build allies by doing political favors (informing for king on Bigtan v Teresh; planting a favored compliant Jewish queen in the palace), not because you are a master plotter with a Elders of Zion conspiracy but just in case you need a favor or a friend. One must always collect intelligence to preempt surprise developments, so Mordechai is always in the know.
- (2) **The Principle of Boldness.** After preparing allies and making investments, one must be willing to risk all at the moment that seems most auspicious. Being conservative and keeping low profile is not always enough. Sometimes you must counterattack and **wager life on a bold move.** Mordechai ultimately protested publicly hoping to generate support for Esther and courtiers disenchanted with Haman, even though it was great risk, departing from his previous collaborationist strategies of wooing those in power. As Machiavelli wrote using a chauvinist gender image : "It is better to be impetuous than cautious, for fortune is a woman who lets herself be overcome by bold force rather than proceeding civilly."
- (3) **The Principle of Faith,** which Machiavelli lacks completely. Rescue will come to the Jewish people one way or another in unexpected ways so we must not despair. Divine destiny may be calling us to act, as Mordechai explains to Esther that her position might have been granted just for this opportunity to act. **Yet God provides opportunities to**

**manipulate reality for good and for survival, but not miracles that make reality melt away with human ingenuity, courage and investment.**

## **EXERCISE: Moments Of Truth: Esther's Inner Transformation and Mordechai as her Catalyst**

The aim of this exercise is to examine the issue of crucial “turning points” in our lives using the example of Esther.

### **Posing the Problem**

**Martin Buber**, one of the great religious thinkers of the twentieth century, used to talk about what he termed a “**moment of truth.**” Such a moment occurs for most people, only very occasionally, perhaps once or twice in a lifetime. A moment of truth is a moment that occurs when an individual is called upon to respond to a certain situation. It is a situation that comes upon him and her, unplanned, very suddenly. It is a moment that demands a moral decision on the part of the individual. There is a right response and there is a wrong response from a moral point of view and the individual knows it well. If he or she makes the right response, it will become clear immediately. The person will know that the right decision has been made. If the person makes the wrong decision, it will continue to haunt him or her, perhaps forever. The decision reflects on the kind of person that someone is or wishes to be.

In facing this fateful dilemma on which one's whole identity and destiny depend, there are often significant people who help us to define the choices and way the consequences. Mordechai serves as such a catalyst for Esther. He had adopted her as a young orphan, encouraged her to hide her origins when summoned to the king's beauty contest and had watched over her from afar. But now he posed her a terrible dilemma that would transform her from an obedient sweet child into an adult leader.

It was when Mordechai approached her and demanded that she make a decision to intervene that Esther faced *her* moment of truth in the Megillah's story. It occurred when she tried to evade the difficult responsibility that Mordechai thrust upon her. Mordechai said she must plead for her threatened people and Esther replied with evasion by claiming that everyone knows the rules of the palace – no one can initiate an appeal to the king without immediately being killed. But Mordechai would not let her hide behind what is accepted in palace protocol, he exposed her timidity as self-protective and made the awful choice clear – she can help save her people or be lost along with her father's line. Who knows if she has not come to power precisely for this purpose? The ultimate question for Esther is what she does with whatever power and position she has managed to gain. To save herself or to try and save her people – that is the question she is asked. It is a moral question and her answer will reveal the kind of person that she is.

There was only a “yes” or a “no”. A negative answer would mean the refusal to identify, the refusal to stand up and claim connection. It would mean the acceptance of the fact that when she weighed herself on the scale with the people as a whole balanced on the other side of the scale, she would be putting her own good before that of her people. She knew this well. She knew that there was no one else who had the same chance as she to avert the decree. Here she was, a protected child, who had never really been tested, who lived a charmed and privileged life in the royal court, surrounded by luxuries of all kinds: the only price she had had to pay was that of denying her connection to her people. Up until this point, living in the palace, probably eating unkosher food, celebrating no Jewish rituals and sleeping with a pagan, and hiding her real name and national identity, does not seem to have bothered her overmuch. And now, this demand. A positive answer meant, in all probability, losing it all – everything that her life had given her, and perhaps losing her life as well. It just was not fair! We can imagine all this going through her mind, weighing her answer to Mordechai in the

balance. This was her moment of truth. In Part One, we examined this moment in terms of Esther's faith. We now examine it from the point of view of her own personal transformation.

## **Preface to the Class: Defining a Moment of Truth.**

Explain the concept of moments of truth. Suggest that moments of truth are some of the most difficult and most important moments that any of us can go through. They are crucial moments that define our life and our growth as individuals. The reason for their power is that by definition, moments of truth are complex decisions which demand that we weigh up our personal good against a greater good. Ask them to think of cases that they have heard about where people were in such a situation. An example might be the "righteous gentiles" at the time of the Shoah, or perhaps the firefighters in New York at the time of the collapse of the Twin Towers. Maybe they know personal cases that have affected people whom they know.<sup>3</sup>

N.B. We are not talking here about *their own* moments of truth. That comes later. Talk about the examples that they bring up.

## **Text Study and Class Discussion.**

Turn now to Esther chapter 4. Read it together, step by step, asking the following questions as you progress.

### **The Predicament – Esther 4: 1-7**

Define the new situation that Mordechai describes – Haman's decree and bribe - and why Esther needs to respond.

- How is this issue different from any other Esther has faced in her life?

### **The Call to Action – Esther 4: 8**

- How does Mordechai make it clear to Esther in his own behavior that this is a terrible crisis? Note that he makes a public protest that endangers his own life by wearing sackcloth in or near the palace gates.
  - What does Mordechai demand and why is that such a problematic request if Esther is the beloved Queen?
  - What information does Mordechai give Esther to help her analyze the situation and come to the conclusion he suggests?

### **The Dilemma – Esther 4: 11**

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<sup>3</sup> See *A Different Light: The Hanukkah Seder and Anthology* by Noam Zion that contains more than twenty contemporary profiles in courage, many of which have moments of truth.



- Why is it such a crucial moment and such a difficult one for Esther? What makes it so difficult?
- How do you see Esther’s “Jewish identity” up to this moment? What sort of a Jewish life she could have been living inside the palace. Did that appear to have bothered her?
- What independent decisions has she made up to now in her life? Has she been a leader up to now or a mere figurehead queen?

Suggest that in fact her identity as Jew and as leader has been very undeveloped.

### **The Persuasion - Esther 4: 12-14**

- How does Mordechai try and persuade Esther?

Note that Mordechai has given objective evidence (the decree and amount of bribe) and demonstrated the urgency of the threat (by publicly protesting). Now he plays on her guilt or her responsibility to her father’s house (recall that Esther is an orphan from the royal family of King Saul) and perhaps implicitly to him as the man who brought her up. He also closes off her assumed escape route – “remaining silent” - for then she will be lost. Perhaps he means that hiding her identity now she will be lost to her father’s house. Then he reassures her that the situation is not hopeless because the Jews have other sources of relief and that maybe it has been her destiny to rise to queen just in order to act this way. She will not be risking her status but fulfilling her destiny. But he only offers this notion as a possibility not a certainty. Esther still must make the decision and Mordechai is a catalyst to her own thinking and faith.

- Ask two students to role play the dialogue between Esther and Mordechai.

### **Hevruta Exercise: Caught on the Horns of the Dilemma – Making an X Ray of Esther’s State Of Mind**

- In pairs, the students should do the following exercise. Ask them to draw a largish circle. In the circle write the words: “A positive response to Mordechai”. Make a list of the factors that push Esther to give a positive response to Mordechai and depict each factor as an arrow outside the circle facing inwards. Make a list of the factors that push Esther to give a negative answer to Mordechai and depict them as arrows outside the circle facing outwards. It is good to use different colours for each set of arrows. In addition, the more important the factors in Esther’s calculation, the larger should the arrows be. Important factors are represented by larger arrows. Less important factors are represented by smaller arrows.

One chevruta should present their picture. Others should comment. Additional factors should be added from other people’s diagrams. Suggest that this gives us an X ray of Esther’s state of mind at this moment. Is it clear which way she is going to “jump” or is this a real two-sided dilemma? By definition, if it was so clear, this would not qualify as a moment of truth.

Ask someone to speak in first person representing an “internal monologue” for Esther showing the confusion in her mind at this moment. Others may add more ideas.

## **Optional: Sharing Our Own Moments Of Truth**

- At this moment make a transition to the lives of the members of the class. Give them a few minutes to try and identify such a moment in their own lives or lives of friend. . Emphasize that these don't need to be life and death issues. Sticking up for an isolated person despite the knowledge that it might well bring ridicule and unpopularity is one example that might be relevant to them. Defending someone who is being bullied despite the risk of being beaten up is another one. Did they ever face such a dilemma or help another face up to such a hard decision as Mordechai helped Esther? (It might be helpful to put on quiet music in the background to aid their concentration).
- Let those who are willing to, share their moments. If the atmosphere is sufficiently supportive and the students who share seem open, ask them if they still think of the moment today and how they view their own decision or lack of it.

## **EXERCISE: Esther's Strategies: From Vulnerability to Power**

### **Texts: Esther 5-6-7-8**

The aim of this exercise is to examine the strategy of Esther and to assess her success in working within the system in order to effect significant change.

### **Posing the Problem**

Esther has moved from a submissive, reactive strategy of survival by finding favor in everyone's eyes to an aggressive, proactive plan for taking power and changing the balance of power fundamentally. Still, Esther seems to have stayed within the same system of imperial power politics. She has not transformed the rules of the game or led the Jews back to political independence in Israel.

We might define Esther's final goals as follows:

- To set Ahashverosh against Haman and have Haman removed if possible
- To cancel the edict that Jews will be killed.
- To establish herself and Mordechai as court leaders and Jewish leaders
- To educate the Jewish people to defend themselves and to show solidarity with one another
- Perhaps, to create an alternative model for politics not based on sex, liquor, money and ego

What plan, if any, did Esther use in order to bring down Haman and to reverse the decree of destruction? Once she was "on board" and had decided to throw her lot in with the Jewish people, what resources did she have to "play with" to establish her self?

There are those who say that Esther behaves like a girl who has no real plan and that she blunders through until, more by luck than by judgment, with the help of a large number of coincidences (God? Fate? Chance?), things work out for the best. There are others who say that she was a clever planner and schemer who managed to manipulate the various characters into the positions that she wanted them to occupy and that is how victory was achieved. Let us examine the scenarios.

### **Group Study of Esther's Tactics: Seven Steps on a Risky Road to Success**

Esther's political path in the arcane world of Persian politics is told in chapters 5 to 8. We identify six crucial stages on the way to her goals. Begin the class by analyzing the first together and then divide groups to follow her career in chevruta. What difficulties does Esther face at each stage? What options does she have? How does she succeed? Does the end justify her means? .

Ch. 5: 1. What, if anything, do you think that Esther might have done at this moment to maximize her chances of success? [We are not told but she must have done something. It is clear that she is planning this move very carefully!]

Ch. 5: 3-4. Why does Esther not say anything other than to invite the two men to a banquet? Why did she not come out with her request of the king then and there? Why is she procrastinating? Is it a question of fear?

Ch. 5: 6-7. Why does Esther delay her request again? Why does she invite the two men to yet another banquet? What could another banquet achieve that the first one had not achieved? Why is she procrastinating? Is it a question of fear?

Ch. 6: 1. What is happening here? Why can't the king sleep? Is it just coincidence? Why, if he can't sleep, does he, of all things, ask for a book of the acts of his reign to be brought before him? Why does he suddenly focus on the question of the previous plot against him? Is it possible that Esther's plan has anything to do with this, or is the only explanation chance, fate or divine intervention?

Ch. 7: 3-4. Why is it now that Esther comes out with her request? Had she thought yesterday that the situation might substantially have changed by today? How do you explain the precise make up of her speech? What tactics does she use, if any, to ensure the success of her plan?

Ch. 7: 7-8. What is all this about? Is it coincidence, or is this too, in any way, part of the plan?

Ch 8: 3-5. Explain Esther's behavior in this scene. Is this spontaneous emotion or do you think it is a calculated part of the plan? What do you think her plan said at this moment, and which tactics was she using to get her way?

Ask the students whether they can see a pattern? Ask them to create a flow plan for Esther based on what they have just read.

Read the political analysis offered by Avraham Arazi ( Purim pp.159-161 in *פתיח ופתיחה* edited by Rabbi Menachem and Devorah HaCohen). Arazi argues that there is a minimum of chance and a maximum of planning involved. The main points are as follows:

When Ahashverosh sees Esther, he realizes that it must be something incredibly serious that has caused her to risk her life to speak with him. His curiosity is piqued. Esther had gambled on that.

When he hears her request and realizes that she has risked her life to invite him to a mere small private party, he is very surprised and even more curious. When he hears there is one other guest invited, Haman, he starts feeling that something strange is afoot. Why is Haman the only guest invited? He starts to suspect that maybe something is afoot between the queen and his chief courtier. It may be even worse than a mere romantic connection. At least on Haman's side, if he is so close to the queen already, maybe there is the possibility of a putsch. The ancient world was full of such things and Ahashverosh himself had survived at least one such attempt on his life. His response to Esther, for the second time, in the banquet, offering her half of the kingdom is perhaps now a little desperate, an attempt to cement her firmly to his side!

Esther's response is clever and deliberate. She knows that the king is desperate and she promises him a response – in another twenty-four hours, enough time for a jealous and threatened husband and monarch to drive himself into a frenzy of suspicion and desperation! Moreover, she feeds the king's jealousy and fear by a subtle change in wording. Whereas her first invitation had been phrased in the singular "May the king (and Haman) come to a banquet that I have prepared for **him**", now the wording was plural: "May the king and Haman come to a banquet that I will prepare for **them**".

No wonder that the king cannot sleep. This is no coincidence! This is Esther's plan. With her knowledge of male fears and male egos, she has played her cards very well. And by the same token it is no coincidence that the king wants to see the record of the last court plot that was hatched against him. This part is perhaps fortuitous but it was a clear result of the paranoid fear and jealousy that Esther had placed in the king's mind by her deliberate plan.

From now on, the plan unfolds easily. The king comes to the second banquet almost at his wits' end, praying that he will succeed in bringing Esther round to his side and more than ready to believe the worst about Haman. It is now, and only now, that Esther is willing to express her wish. The king at this point is completely ready to believe the worst of his courtier, despite the fact that objectively, he has no reason to be angry with Haman for the plan against the Jews: after all, it was the king who authorized the plan in the first place.

Just to make sure that the story continues according to plan, Esther exploits the king's departure from the room to consider what he must do, in order to create a compromising situation which will once again play on the king's worst fears regarding Haman.

This, in a nutshell, is the reading that makes the whole story comprehensible as a rationale plan. Whether or not this is the real explanation of Esther's behind-the-scenes activity we leave to the judgment of the students. The argument, by the way, is not new. The Rabbis made a number of similar suggestions as they read the text. Nevertheless, here it is stated in a full and comprehensive form. If indeed it succeeds in penetrating to the "real" story behind the text, then we must say *לך תלך תלך'kol hakavod'* to Esther for political strategy. She puts our modern politicians to shame!

### **Summarizing: Esther the Mastermind**

Ask the students the following questions:

Do you like the image of Esther presented by Arazi?

- Do you find his argument convincing?
- Could someone studying in your school develop these traits and skills? What courses or experiences would have to be added to produce more Esthers?
- Is that the kind of woman or man towards whom we should be educating? Perhaps Jewish education puts too much emphasis on culture, religion and ethics and not enough on survival and leadership skills for the real world?

## **Section Two: Constructing the Anti-Semite Constructing the Image of the Jew and Reconstructing the Empowered Jew**

### **Introduction**

If we focused up to now on the predicament of Esther, we now look to the Megillah to provide us with another potential model for the Jewish community as a whole. There is no other book in the Tanakh that is so suggestive of the vulnerability of the Jewish community to the foibles and malice of imperial politics as the book of Esther (though it belongs to a whole genre from Joseph to Daniel and Ezra). The dependence on the courtier Jew and his influence at court was clearly relevant for the long period of Diaspora history right up to the beginning of the modern democratic age

In the age of reason and liberal democratization there was a hope that politics would be more rational and ethical and that individuals would be judged as individuals. The defeat of both Nazism and Soviet communism reinforced that hope. However the rise of anti-Semitism in new and old international forms and the revival of particularist nationalism and fundamentalist religious groups raise old issues once thought to be on the wane. Politics of ego, of self-interest and manipulation seem as vital as ever underneath the façade of democracy.

Therefore the predicament described in the Megillah seems again hauntingly relevant for our period when Jews are very active in shaping the democratic politics in the West and in the U.N. On one hand Jews must contend for influence in world where ego and self-interest are the rule and on the other they must face renewed malice and virulent propaganda from anti-Semitic forces (right-wing white supremacists, Black Muslims, New Left, radical feminists, radical and even moderate Moslem nations in the United Nations that shape Third World opinion, media and Western policymaking). Not only are minority Jewish communities exposed but the whole state of Israel begins to look vulnerable to the same kind of politics that brought Haman to power. The real threat of terrorist violence as well as genocidal war requires constant struggles over image as well as coalition building. For these reasons, the Megillah is an excellent prism to examine certain dilemmas of Diaspora living which have bothered Jews throughout the world and in certain ways, continue to bother the Jewish world today. The State of Israel does not seem to be exempt from these issues as a tiny nation-state within a system of nation-states and dependent on the outcome of regular elections in the United States and constant opinion polls that shape and are shaped by the media. In this section, we focus on the politics of survival as a vulnerable minority in an essentially hostile world.

## Images of Haman: Constructing the Anti-Semite Constructing the Image of the Jew

How does the Jew imagine his most venal enemy? In constructing Haman's image one also offers an analysis of the problem to be solved which must be objective if it is to be effective but also a way of reinforcing one's own identity in a hostile world by maintaining one's essential difference from the stereotyped enemy.

Haman's image may be understood under at least six rubrics:

(1) **Psychological syndrome.** Haman is an **insecure megalomaniac** who insists that everyone must bow down to him and that he be raised above all others. Even one refusal to honor him becomes an obsessive challenge that ruins his mood, his ability to enjoy other sources of satisfaction (Esther 3:15; 5:9). It is not racial hatred or uncontrolled rage but **an obsession for total control fed by a paranoid fear of any dissent.** Haman must have total confirmation of his status by total subordination all those around him. Unlike Ahashverosh who initially is happy to invite everyone to his party to do as they like and thus to praise him for his magnanimity, Haman must have everyone bow to him, though this is not tied to any plan he wishes to execute or to any ideology. Michael Fox<sup>4</sup> argues that Haman is unique among Israel's Biblical enemies in having **no motive beyond the psychological need for control and adulation.** While Pharaoh is objectively threatened by demography and concerned for national self-interest and while Amalek seeks spoils, Haman is all about revenge that will reconfirm his absolute psychological control. It is just **hurt pride.**

Jonathan Magonet adds a sociological root to Haman's enormous anxiety which makes him so totalistic in his demands for respect. Haman is an Agagite, not a Persian. Like the Judeans he is a **social outsider** and may be desperate to prove he is an "insider" by projecting on to and exterminating another outsider that reminds him by analogy that he is still merely an outsider. It is his own ambivalence about identity not his real fear of the Jews that triggers the genocidal plot. It is his own difference that their difference reminds him of, so he must eradicate their difference to prove his sameness with the new construction of an all-inclusive and homogenous Persian imperial identity

“For Haman too is insecure, part of minority group, relying on on his wealth or other keys to power to maintain his position, ready to invent a scapegoat to insure the continuance of his power. **Haman is nothing more than the alternative face of Mordechai, a distorted reflection of the same character.**”<sup>5</sup>

Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe fascist antisemitism as a **projection**: “The portrait of the Jews that the nationalists offer to the world is in fact their own self-portrait.”<sup>6</sup>

(2) **Character flaw.** Haman can also be seen as a typically **flawed character in the world of courtier** in the Wisdom Literature mode, who lets anger, ambition and pride upset wisdom and restraint. He is both a **fool** and a **wicked** office holder. Shemaryahu Levin argued that the Megillah is not about Biblical morality but about Wisdom literature's courtly ethics of pragmatic success which enshrine stock character types. Michael Fox suggests that the chief character flaw is **vengeance for hurt pride.** So the Megillah strikes at Haman most effectively not by describing him as a villain but as a bungling fool, a shamefully silly man lacking wisdom and self-control even though initially his fine speech to Ahasverosh led him and the reader to believe in his cleverness.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, p. 181

<sup>5</sup> Magonet, *The Rabbis' Bible*, p. 175

<sup>6</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 168

“We can imagine how a person such as the one created in this book would feel about the way he is depicted. Haman would not be bothered by being shown to be deeply evil, but he would be mortified to be revealed as **an impulsive bungler**. I am reminded of **Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator***, a satirical attack on Hitler, which showed the Fuhrer to be not only evil and dengerous but aslo a gesticualting screeching, frenetic ninny.”<sup>7</sup>

(3) **Rational, amoral political climber**. Haman has set his sights on the emperorship. He is a gifted court rhetorician who knows how to play court politics and to use money for bribes while raising money by pillage. Manipultaing the Jew as scapegoat canard, he establishes the king's and hence his own absolute heirarchical power. Yoram Hazony in *Dawn* argues for Haman's and Ahahsverosh's poltical acumen as well as ambition.

(4) **Honor/Shame Ethos** determines his behavior and thinking. Both in the sexual politics of deposing Vashti that leads to a decree to subordinate all women to prevent them for laughing at men and in the court politics of putting down Mordechai that leads to a decree to wipe all the Jews there is the same dynamic. Men to women and high officials to lower ones have an honor differential that when voilated generates enormous shame as well as fear of anarchy.

(5) **Ethnic Vendetta**. Haman the Agagite acts acording ot the ethnic ethos of multi-generational feuds between Jew and Amalek. The past must be righted, redeemed as it is relived, so Amalek, Haman, is an age-old enemy with whome there can be no comprmise.

(6) **Battles of Civilization**. Haman represents not just interests but **ideologies** or even **theologies**. Amalek fights God's throne in the world. Haman throwing lots represents luck or astrology or fate against moral choice and justice. Haman represents self-deification as idoltray as opposed to acknowledgement of God as king of king of kings. Yoram Hazony argues that Haman represents a tyrannical, monolithic, top-down political control as opposed to a multi-national multi-cultural empire of local initiative and consultation and cooperation. The name of the holiday “**Purim**” should not be read as a statement – “The Lottery” – but as an ironic rhetorical question – “Was this a story of lots or of Divine destiny and moral choice?” Obviously the latter. Abraham Cohen<sup>8</sup> argues:

This holiday is called Purim “in order to pardy it. It portrays a course of causality, only to invert it..the very name of the holiday, Purim, indicates the centrality of this inversion. Purim, which ... affirmed the operation of chance and fate in the universe becomes for the jew, the anti-chance symbol, the symbol of that which God so readily controls to *His* ends..Purim is the appellation of a probelem, aporblem bioth ancient and contemporary. Do chance and determinsim rule supreme int eh universe, or does God?”

That is partially recognized by Zeresh herself when she declares: “if Mordecahi before whom you have already begun to *fall* is of Jewish seed, you will not stand aginst him, but will surely *fall* before him” (Esther 6:13). The falling of the lots is countermanded by falling before Mordechai. While Zeresh attributes this to ethnic determinism, the Megillah points to Divine dstiny and human moral choice.

## **The Worlds of Haman and Ahashverosh – Complements or Continuum?**

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Fox, *ibid*, p. 183

<sup>8</sup> *Hu Hagoral*: “The Religious Significance of Esther,” *Judaism* 23 (1974) 94



When the Jews construct their world according to Megillat Esther, they need to draw a line between radical evil, uncompromising genocidal enemies – Haman the Agagite, Amalek – and indifferent, amoral but pragmatic politicians like Ahashverosh. The wicked vengeful enemy is not the identical with the foolish and insensitive hedonist. The problem of the world of the Megillah is that Ahashverosh is easily manipulable by Haman, so amoral indifference to human fate or at least to Jewish fate is a prerequisite for Haman's success in making the king his ally, his almost unconditional rubber stamp. However that is also the key to salvation – or at least temporary relief – since Esther and Mordechai can in theory and do in fact win over or maneuver the king making him their ally and their supporter. No one tries to win Haman over, to end the feud, to convince the “enemy of the Jews” to become their collaborators.

Yet as Timothy Beal notes with acuity, the king and his vizier are not really so different. They are not just different but complementary figures and values systems but they are on a qualitative continuum that makes them hard to distinguish. True only Haman is an Agagite committed probably to endless battle with God and Israel, but the king's values and personlaity are almost identical to Haman's as the **literary parallels** of Esther 1 and Esther 3, of Mehuman and Haman, of Vashti's public refusal to obey and Mordechai's, of the king's rage and Haman's rage and of the two ghastly exaggerated legal responses of this one instance of trivial insubordination. **“The narrative pattern and details of the conflict between the king and the “other woman” Vashti suggest parallels between the dynamics of sexism and anti-Judaism.”** (Timothy Beal, Esther, p. 43):

- One person's personal affront to a ruler leads to a general imperial decree against all in the same category (woman, Jew – the people of Mordechai)
- One insult is understood as a threat of general anarchy as argued by an eloquent rhetorician (Mehuman, Haman)
- Personal rage is assuaged not by an immediate reaction but by a carefully considered policy change
- The experts of the times (*yodei ha- itim*) confirm one decision and the casting of lots the other decision, suggesting an astrological affirmation
- Each ruler is insistent that no violation of their prerogatives may be overlooked
- Each are confronted by stubborn but mysterious refusal to obey that they can make little sense of and cannot negotiate (Vashti and Mordechai's decisions are not explained, though Mordechai's has something amorphous to do with being a Jew)
- Ahashverosh finally realizes that Haman wants to be king, both have ambitions to rule and cannot allow another to compete or share power

Of course there are also differences. Ahashverosh never makes his own decisions but assents to his advisors .

Even more disturbing is the **parallels of Haman and Mordechai** that suggest they are on the same continuum of values, even though Mordechai has control of his emotions in a way that Haman does not. Mordechai cares about others while Haman does not. The dialectic of similarity and difference between these three characters is a subtle drama for the reader.

## **EXERCISE: What Is Haman's Problem with the Jews? The Pernicious Art of Propaganda**

### **Texts – Esther 3:8 and Medieval Commentators**

The aim of this exercise is to examine critically the predicament of the Jewish community in a hostile world when faced with an ideological enemy with no humanist ethical self-restraint.

### **Posing the Problem**

One of the best-known passages in the Megillah is Haman's description of the Jews to Ahashverosh in Esther 3: 8.

*There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the nations in all the provinces of your kingdom, who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of other people, and they do not obey the king's laws. [It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them].*

וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ יֵשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפֶּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכֹל מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתֶיךָ וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכֹּל עַם וְאֵת דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עוֹשִׂים וְלְמֶלֶךְ אֵין שׂוֹה לְהַנִּיחֵם.

It has been noted correctly that this is an interesting mix of the truth, the half truth and the falsehood. As the comment proceeds it descends increasingly into the realm of the false. It is clear why the sentence has received so much comment through the ages. Not only does it contain the true seeds of the Jewish dilemma as a minority group in a majority culture, but it also contains the basis of many anti-Jewish accusations that have been made throughout the ages. Indeed many of the commentaries that have been written on the verse have indeed tended to reflect the timeless nature of Haman's remark by making reference to contemporary situations and contemporary charges. Let us now proceed to examine the comment and the issues that it brings up.

### **Group Work: Presenting the Jews to an Outsider**

Divide the class up into three thirds (within each group chevruta pairs will do the actual preparation). All three groups will have the same task. They have to describe the place of the Jews in the society and politics of their country (America, Canada etc.) to a person who has never heard of the Jews (such as an exchange student from Africa or China). The students have only two sentences to do so, and they cannot exceed forty words.

The difference between the three different parts of the class is as follows. The first group has to describe the Jews favorably. The second group, to describe the Jews unfavorably and the third, to do so objectively (i.e. neither favorably nor unfavorably).

Let all the "favorable" groups read out their sentences. Discuss (and write up) the central things that are said in order that the report sound favorable. Then do the same for the second part of the class and for the third part. Compare the positive and negative points that have been made. How similar are they? Do they talk about the same things or totally different aspects of the Jewish situation? Are there things that are said in both the favorable and unfavorable groups, but which have been twisted or "spun" by the group in question? How were these things seen in the objective group?

Now give the first two parts of Haman's comment, (not including the advice to the king). Analyze the phrases used: which group would the different phrases fit into? Take each phrase in Haman's description of the Jews, separately. How would you assess Haman's comments for the Jews at that time (basing yourselves on your knowledge of Jews in general in the pre-modern world)? Is there any justice in his comments or is it all slander and negativism?

## **Text Study: The Art of Political Propaganda and the Medieval Commentators**

Esther 3: 8 is a master speech of partisan description that has much to teach us of the art of propaganda.

*There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the nations in all the provinces of your kingdom, who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of other people, and they do not obey the king's laws. [It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them].*

וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ יִשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפֶּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכֹל מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתָי וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל עַם וְאֵת דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלִמְלַךְ אֵין שׂוּהָ לְהַנִּיחֵם.

It is clear that this is a shortened version of what would really have happened in such a situation. No king would condemn an entire people to death after hearing a mere two sentences. This has allowed many commentators to put their own, more expanded versions into Haman's mouth. We bring some examples here. You may present the issue of Haman's propaganda using these medieval commentators **or** a speech placed in the mouth of Haman by a Rabbinic midrash:

### **Medieval Commentators:**

**Levi ben Gershon** (Ralbag - Gersonides) said the following.

*[Haman] informed [Ahashverosh] that they were one people and for this reason he ought to fear them because they were always of one mind. He also informed him that "they were dispersed and scattered among the peoples" and because of this it would be more feasible for them to stir up trouble against the king because they could seduce the people among whom they lived, away from the king. Furthermore "their customs are different from those of all other people". This is to tell us that their customs and laws do not resemble those of any other nation which makes it easy for them to act against the kingdom and against the peoples in whose midst they live. He also informed him that "they do not keep the king's laws." That is to say, they do not carry out his decrees and for this reason they are like rebels against the kingdom.*

**Shlomo Astruc** made a similar set of points.

*They do not eat and drink with us and do not worship like we do. They do not obey the laws of the king, even those which do not contradict their own faith. One must beware lest they multiply and when a war breaks out, unite with our enemies and cause all the countries, especially those furthest away from you to rebel. This would be easy for them because there are some of them in every city.*

**Shemariah of Crete** used a different argument.

*Haman's words are undoubtedly the words of a man who enacts legislation for the king and the entire kingdom, and all look to him to remove any obstacles that would stand in the way of the observance of any of the laws. Therefore he said to the king that it has come to his knowledge that there is one people in his kingdom which denies every religion and all the gods of the nations and scorns them all. In addition, they do not follow the laws of the king. They do not worship and believe in the same gods that the king worships and believes in. Were they only in one place, perhaps I could tolerate and overlook them, but this nation is scattered and dispersed throughout the entire kingdom and constitutes a great stumbling block and obstacle for all the believers. It would be extremely damaging to the king to leave them be, because all the nations will learn to scorn idols and to make light of them...*

**OR**

### **Haman's Speech – Midrash Esther Rabbah**

The Midrashic work Esther Rabbah places an enormously long speech in the mouth of Haman. We bring an excerpt here.

*You may judge what they [the Jews] are from the way they treated poor Pharaoh in Egypt. When they went down to Egypt, he received them with kindness and settled them in the best part of the land and supported them in the years of famine and fed them with the fat of the land. When he had palaces to build they built them for him. With all this he was not able to make them loyal. They made a crafty plan...and then they ran away...*

*Moses had a disciple named Joshua who was very cruel and merciless. He led Israel into the land of Canaan and not only did he take their land but he slew thirty one Canaanite kings and divided their land among the Israelites and he showed them no pity and those whom he did not want to kill became his slaves...*

*The first king they had was Saul and he went and fought against the land of my ancestor Amalek [according to tradition Haman was a descendant of Amalek] and slew a hundred thousand of their horsemen on one day and had no pity on man or woman, on babe or suckling, but killed them all...*

*After this they had a king named David who destroyed and exterminated all other peoples without mercy...After him came his son Solomon who built for Israel a certain building called the Temple. They had certain things in it and when they made war they used to go into it and do some magic there, and when they came out, they used to slay and lay waste without end. As a result of their great prosperity they rebelled against their God who had grown old and Nebuchadnezzar came and burnt their Temple down and carried them off their land and brought them among us. And still they have not changed their vile ways and although they are in exile among us, they mock us and our religion.*

**Esther Rabbah on Esther 3:10**

**אסתר רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז ד"ה יג אם על**

באו וראו מאותו עני **פרעה** מה עשו כשירדו למצרים קבלם בסבר פנים יפות והושיבם במיטב הארץ וזן אותן בשני רעבון והאכילם כל טוב שבארצו, פלטרים היו לו לבנות והיו בונין שם, בכל זאת לא היה יכול להם ולא עוד אלא שבאו בעלילה ואמרו לו (שמות ה') לזבוח לאלהינו נלך דרך שלשת ימים אח"כ נשוב, אם רצונך השאילנו כלי כסף וכלי זהב ושמלות והשאלום כספם וזהבם וכל הבגדים הטובים שלהם, וטענו כל אחד כמה חמורים שלהם לאין מספר, עד שנצלו את מצרים הה"ד (שם/ שמות/ י"ב) וינצלו את מצרים וברחו להם...

...  
משה פרנס שלהם, היה לו תלמיד אחד יהושע בן נון שמו והיה אכזרי עד מאד ולא היה לו רחמים...  
ועוד מה עשה תלמיד של אותו האיש משה הכניס את ישראל לארץ כנען ולא די שנטל את ארצם אלא שהרג מהם שלשים ואחד מלכים וחלק את ארצם לישראל ולא חמל עליהן ואותן שלא בקש להרוג היו לו לעבדים...

...  
והיה להם מלך ראשון שאול שמו והלך ונלחם בארץ אבי אבא עמלק והרג מהם מאה אלפים פרשים ביום אחד וגם לא חמל על איש ועל אשה ולא על עולל ויונק ואיני יודע במה הרגם...

...ואחר זאת היה להם מלך אחד דוד בן ישי שמו, והיה משחית ומכלה את כל הממלכות ולא היה חומל עליהם שנאמר (שם/ שמואל א' כ"ז) ואיש ואשה לא יחיה דוד, ועמד אחריו שלמה בנו ובנה להן לישראל בית אחד וקרא לו ביהמ"ק ואיני יודע מה היה להם בתוכו, כשבאין למלחמה נכנסין בתוכו ומכשפים בתוכו וכשהן יוצאים ממנו הורגים ומחריבים את העולם, ומרוב טובה שהיה להם מרדו באלהיהם ועוד שהזקין אותו אלוה שלהם, ובא נבוכדנצר ושרף אותו בית שלהם, והגלם מעל אדמתם והביאם בינינו, ועדיין לא שנו מעשיהם המכוערין, ואע"פ שהם בגלות בינינו מלעיגין אותנו, ואת אמונת אלהינו

### אסתר רבה (וילנא) פרשה ז ד"ה יג אם על

The first two commentaries are more political in tone and the third source focuses on the threat to religion. The fourth, Midrashic, source combines the religious and the political but does so very carefully, giving a negative mirror image of the history of the Jewish people. It is clear that all of these comments were influenced by things that people were saying about the Jews in the different times and places where they were written.

We suggest that you bring two or three of these sources and analyze them for their different arguments. Why might they be stressing different things? Suggest that they might have been influenced by the contemporary charges against the Jews in different times and places.

Ask the students to put a speech into Haman's mouth influenced, if possible, by the things that people have said about the Jews in modern times. For example, how might a Jew writing a commentary in Nazi Europe have phrased his comments? What might a Jew living in present-day America say?

List on the board the main points that come out of the contemporary Haman's mouths.

## Contemporary Propaganda: Using the Web

Ask students to surf the web looking for anti-Israel or anti-Semitic propaganda. Analyze the motifs both verbal and visual. Is it easy to distinguish between truth and falsehood? Can a completely factually correct report still be used for propaganda to create a stereotype that the negative behavior is typical of the Jew?

Examine Nazi propaganda on the Jews.

## Fighting Haman on his own Turf

Divide the class into task groups. The task of each group is to write a letter or article of response to a newspaper or website etc that has reported on the speech of a contemporary Haman making the points presented above.

Mordechai in his public protest and Esther in her backstage politics offer two responses to anti-Semitism. The groups should choose either approach or suggest other models and prepare a campaign to counter the effect of Haman on the typical Ahashverosh. It may be a letter to editor or lobbying speech to a congressman or counter-propaganda in visual or verbal form.

- They need to identify the enemy and its accusations and stereotypes of the Jew as well as to pick a third party active in politics who is neutral and may be swayed either way by Haman and Esther's or Mordechai's arguments.

## EXERCISE: The Intermarriage Issue

The aim of this exercise is to weigh up the issue with which the Megillah presents us regarding intermarriage as an acceptable tool in political survival.

### Posing the Problem

We have emphasized that Esther is a model for recommended Jewish behavior. We say this implicitly every time that we encourage our children to dress up as Esther and to bear her name. However there is one very difficult question with which we have to deal in the Megillah the moment we see Esther as a model. This is the issue of the intermarriage of Esther. Esther is married off to Ahashverosh early on in the story before the crisis between Haman and the Jews develops, and, at least, in the story, nobody appears to have any problem with this fact. That might or might not surprise us. The Torah itself is full of intermarriage. Some of the key “stars” of the Torah, such as Joseph and Moses himself, married out and the second ranks of biblical figures reveal other examples such as Judah and Shimon. The Rabbinic tradition assumes what the text does not reveal, namely that all of the spouses converted to Judaism, and lets these generations off with the reasoning that the prohibitions only come about with the revelations at Sinai.

Our main source prohibiting intermarriage comes in the book of Devarim, Deuteronomy. Here we are told the following regarding the seven nations of idolaters in the Land of Israel:

*Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. ...For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people, his treasured possession.*

#### Deuteronomy 7: 3-6.

- (ג) וְלֹא תִתְחַתֵּן בָּם בְּתוּךְ לֹא תִתֵּן לְבָנוּ וּבָתוּר לֹא תִקַּח לְבָנֶיךָ:  
(ד) כִּי יִסִּיר אֶת בְּנֵךְ מֵאַחֲרַי וְעָבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְחָרָה אַף ה' בְּכֶם וְהִשְׁמִידְךָ מֵהָרָ:  
(ה) כִּי אִם כֹּה תַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם מִזְבְּחֹתֵיהֶם תִּתְצוּ וּמִצִּבְּוֹתֵיהֶם תִּשְׁבְּרוּ וְאֲשִׁירֵיהֶם תִּגְדְּעוּן וּפְסִילֵיהֶם תִּשְׂרֹפוּן בְּאֵשׁ:  
(ו) כִּי עַם קָדוֹשׁ אַתָּה לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּדָבָר בָּחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְהִיּוֹת לוֹ לְעַם סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה  
(דברים פרק ז)

Strictly speaking, the prohibition is with one of the seven specific pagan nations that inhabited the land when the Israelites entered. Nevertheless, in later parts of the Bible, it came to be repeated for all pagan groups. The episode concerning intermarriage that has most become burned into the collective Jewish memory concerns a well known episode that occurred in the early generations of the second Temple period. When Ezra the scribe returned from Persian Babylon and found that many of those Jews who had returned prior to him had intermarried with the local inhabitants, he realized that the situation was intolerable and had to be changed. As a result Ezra decreed that those who had indeed intermarried must send away their partners. In a dramatic speech to the Jews of Jerusalem, he gave the order. And the book of Ezra finishes with a long list of the Jews who had intermarried and were obligated to send away their wives, starting with the priests, the leaders of the people and continuing down to the ordinary Jews.

There is no question that the Ezra episode is seen as a turning point in Jewish history. We are told that the Jews swore eternal loyalty to the Torah which was read out to them in a series of dramatic public readings and this is traditionally seen as the beginning of a new chapter in the Jewish story. More than in any other event in Jewish history, the connection between intermarriage and collective sin was made

completely clear. Now, it may be that the Megillah was written or describes an era roughly contemporaneous with this Ezra story.

But how do we reconcile the difference between Ezra and Deuteronomy on one hand and Megillat Esther on the other?

One defensive explanation was that Esther was forced into the marriage and there was no choice at all, something which is hard to justify by the plain meaning of the text.

A second explanation was that the whole thing was divinely ordained since God needed Esther in place when Haman made his plan. Rashi represents this point of view, for example, when he says in his commentary to Esther 2: 11:

*Mordechai said that the only justification for this righteous woman to be taken to sleep with Ahashverosh was that she would eventually rise up to save Israel.*

#### **Rashi**

If we take out the theological argument of predestination and we take away the argument that she was forced into intermarriage with the king, we are left with a couple of very difficult questions. It is clear that it was extremely lucky that Esther was queen when the problem with Haman developed into crisis. Presumably, without Esther in the strategic position that resulted from her marriage, the fate of the Jewish people would have been sealed. Does this then justify her marriage as a Jew to a non-Jew in retrospect? What should Esther or Mordechai have done when they found that she was to be the queen?

It is not as if there was no choice. The medieval scholar Avraham Saba, himself the victim of terrible persecution in Portugal, who was familiar with issues of intermarriage and conversion, forced and voluntary from his own experiences was very specific on the subject of the intermarriage.

*Now when Mordechai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever has a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass or even to take her to another kingdom. And if he could do neither of these things, have we not seen with our own eyes during the expulsion from Portugal, when sons and daughters were taken by force and converted, that Jews strangled and slaughtered themselves and their wives...They would take their sons and daughters and fling them into pits to kill them or would strangle or slaughter them rather than see them committing idolatry. So why did not Mordechai do one of these things that the simplest Jews in Portugal did? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act [and give up Esther to the authorities] ...His heart was like a lion's and yet he surrendered to the enemy all that was dear to him. She too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with him.*

#### **Avraham Saba**

### **Class Activity: The Trial of Esther and Mordechai for Promoting Intermarriage with Pagans**

Put Esther and Mordechai on trial for bringing the Jews (and God's name) into discredit through Esther's marriage to Ahashverosh. Prosecutors, defending counsels, witnesses (including Avraham Saba), judges, should be chosen together with relevant characters from the story including of course, Esther and Mordechai. The preparation can be done prior to the class or time can be given in class, in which case roles have to be found for everybody. No defense can be made on the basis of things that could only be known subsequently. It is legitimate for Mordechai to offer an argument which includes reference to the unpredictability of life in Persia and his feeling that he felt that marriage



would be of potential use to the Jews if things got worse. It is also legitimate for him to say that he felt that if Esther was chosen, it would be seen as a sign from God. It is not legitimate for him to use a retrospective justification involving Haman.

Conduct the trial with all those who are not playing characters taking the role of the jury. At the end, the jury should decide and the judge should sum up.

## **A Debate on Intermarriage Policy**

After the trial, we suggest a general debate on the following motion.

**This House Believes That Some Young Jews Should Be Encouraged To Marry People With Political Influence, Including Non-Jews, In Order To Safeguard Politically The Future Of The Jewish Community And The Jewish People.**

The subject should be prepared and debated either formally, with proposers and opposers who are chosen in advance, or by getting half of the class to prepare each side. In this second case, it is possible to change the people representing each position during the whole debate.

- Sum up the issue, asking the group how they see the Megillah in the light of the two parts of the activity. Has anything changed in their perspective?

## **EXERCISE: Zionism and Diaspora Politics after Haman**

The aim of this exercise is to use the Megillah story in order to examine and critique the Diaspora story from a Zionist point of view.

### **Posing The Problem**

We leave the Megillah with the following reality. Haman has been defeated and is gone from our picture. Esther and Mordechai are the acknowledged heads of the Jewish community and are people with great influence at court. Esther is queen and Mordechai second only to Ahashverosh. (10:3). The community is clearly thriving and, if this were a fairy story, one would suspect that the conclusion would tell us that “they all lived happily ever after”.

*But what has really changed in substantive terms from the beginning of the story to the end?* The Jews are in Persia ruled over by an autocratic king whose personality we know is such that he can be swayed by the slightest breeze. They have more power than at the outset, to be sure, but we have just witnessed how easily that can change. Haman had fallen and, in theory, Mordechai could go the same way. It is important to remember what we so often tend to forget: Mordechai had not risen, nor had Haman fallen, because of any moral reason, because of the triumph of good over bad. The switch had occurred because of factors such as personal jealousy and paranoia on the part of the king, with a great deal of chance thrown in as well. There had been no institutional change that strengthened the position of the Jews in Persia. If the Megillah shows us the precariousness of Diaspora life, life after the Megillah remained just as precarious as it had been previously.

A theological interpretation of the book might suggest a different conclusion, namely that God was standing behind the Jews of Persia and that therefore their success was assured. If God had delivered them out of the hands of one Haman, that could be repeated any number of times. The problem with this picture is that it is refuted by Jewish history. Whatever one’s belief system regarding God’s existence and interaction with the world, it is hard to make a strong argument for divine action in history by looking at Jewish history. For every Purim story – i.e. a story of the semi-miraculous rescue of a community from the brink of disaster, there are far too many counter stories. We have already mentioned the fact that many communities instituted a local Purim in memory of a local event in which the community was unexpectedly saved from disaster. But the local Purims in Spain, for example, (of which there were several) need to be seen against the larger story of murder, massacre and expulsion which represents the last chapters of the Jewish story in Spain. Similarly, local Purims in Central and Eastern Europe need to be seen against the background of pogrom and holocaust which punctuated and finally ended, the great community story there.

Thus we are, it seems, left with the unmistakable conclusion that the Megillah story ends with a large question mark hanging over the future of the Persian community. Instead of the “happy ending” that, perhaps, we would like to perceive, we are left with uncertainty and a great deal of serious food for thought.

There are a number of major questions that need to be considered in this context. What conclusions should the Jews draw from their miraculous escape? If the Persian Jews simply draw the conclusions that life can go on as usual and that now that Haman is out of the way, their future situation is guaranteed, one can suggest that this is an inadequate response. It might be that there are acceptable answers that can be sought within the borders of the Persian Empire. Plenty of Diaspora Jews over the

years have sought institutional safeguards in their countries that are aimed at preventing random violence from threatening their communities.

However, there are many Jews in different parts of the world who have come to the conclusion after a serious bout of violence that they need to move to a more promising social and political climate. Was this on anyone's agenda in the post-Megillah Persian Jewish community? Lastly, it can be questioned whether in the larger picture of Jewish history, moving from one place to another was anything but a short term panacea for a wounded community. In most places in the world, a Jewish community fleeing to some new land, would as often as not meet violence in their new place if they stayed there long enough! Around seven or eight hundred years ago, Jews fled Ashkenaz in large numbers because of the dreadful post-Crusade violence and moved to Poland. After a couple of centuries of relative calm, enormous violence broke out which would ultimately engulf the Polish communities. Jews who fled from Spain at the time of the expulsion would meet violence in Portugal, in North Africa and in Italy within a relatively short time.

Looking at the whole of Jewish history, there is only one group who had a substantially different response to the questions of the precariousness of Diaspora existence. These are the Zionists, who came to the conclusion that the whole idea of life in the Diaspora was basically untenable. Piecemeal reforms in a potentially hostile world where the Jews were by definition, a minority, could guarantee nothing, they said. Moving from one Diaspora environment to another that looked more promising, in search of safety, was an illusion. Sooner or later, instability would lead to violence in even the most promising of places. There was something inherently hostile about Diaspora or "galut" they said. The only way out of the perpetual dilemma of Jewish life in exile, was to leave it behind. The exile – the Galut – must be eliminated. The way to do that was to eliminate the Jews from out of the Galut by an act of liberation, before the life in Galut eliminated the Jew physically. These were the Zionists and we now examine what would have happened if the Zionists had met the Persian Jews.

## **Group Introduction: Defining Terms**

Put two words on the board: **exile** and **home**. Ask the group to contribute associations for both words. Ask the group members to write a definition of the two terms that includes at least three words from the different lists.

Share some of the responses. Sum up the two ideas. Ask if all know the traditional Hebrew word for exile (Galut). Ask them to compare and differentiate the word with another word often used by Jews to talk about the same thing (Diaspora).

## **Text Study**

Now give out to the group the following text excerpts. In pairs, the students have to try and understand them, and answer these questions.

*The Jews are the only example of a small, exiled and forever hated people that stood fast and never surrendered...Resistance by a small people for so many centuries to so many powerful enemies – to refuse to surrender to historic destiny – this...is the essential significance of Jewish history of the Galut...*

*Galut means dependence – material, political, spiritual, cultural and intellectual dependence – because we are aliens, a minority, without a homeland, rootless and*

*separated from the soil [of our land] ... Our task is to break radically with this dependence and to become masters of our own fate – in a word, to achieve independence...*

*[In the Galut] the Jews are a minority, subordinate to and dependent upon the will of the majority. The majority might give the Jewish minority equal rights or it can restrict its rights and the Jewish minority is helpless to make its own decision in the matter. The status of the Jewish minority is not decided by itself and does not depend on its own will and capacity alone.*

*In the Galut, Jews, as Jews, are human dust, whose particles try to cling to each other perhaps more than the members of other peoples in similar circumstances... In every country where they are allowed to do so, the Jews create their own free frameworks and organizations for Jewish activities and self expression. But these frameworks have neither obligatory force, nor comprehensive scope, nor vital content.*

What does the writer think about Jewish life in the Diaspora?

Why do the texts speak of the Galut rather than the Diaspora? What are they trying to say?

What do you think the writer believe about the future of the Jewish people?

How convincing do you think the writer is? How good a case does he make?

- What sort of person is the writer? Can you guess any information about him? Can you guess who he might be?

The answer is **David Ben-Gurion**. The excerpts are actually taken from two different speeches and articles of his. Go through the answers with the group and explain the Zionist idea behind the texts.

In pairs, the group should imagine that Ben Gurion is a critic and he is reading “Megillat Esther”, a new novel of Jewish life in Persia two and a half thousand years ago. Imagine that this is a popular new novel that is being read enthusiastically all over the Jewish world and is reaching a large audience of young Jews. Write Ben Gurion’s critique of the book that he is writing for the magazine of the Zionist movement.

- Read some of the critiques. What is the writer’ opinion of the book? What are the criticisms that he makes? What does the group feel about his point of view when applied to the book of Esther?
- Now in pairs or small groups, a dialogue should be prepared between Ben Gurion and Mordechai or Esther which happens *at the end of the Purim story*. What would Ben Gurion say to Mordechai and how would Mordechai respond? Imagination is needed!
- Play out some of these dialogues and use them as a basis to sum up the Zionist critique of the end of the Purim story where the Jews sit back in a much better situation but without any institutional change.
- Ask the group the following questions.

- What do you think of the Zionist critique?
- Is Ben Gurion fair in his criticism of the Persian Jews? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Do you think that the response of the Persian Jews after the end of the Megillah should have been to count their blessings, say בִּרְכַת הַגּוֹמֵל, and leave the country immediately for their own sovereign state? Do you think that, in this respect, there is any message in the Zionist critique when applied to the Jews of today? Why? Why not?

## **Appendix: EXERCISE: The Political Art of Arthur Szyk**

Arthur Szyk is one of the more extraordinary Jewish artists to have come out of the twentieth century. He was in many ways very much a creature of that century. Both in his life and in his art he reflected the world-changing events of the century, the century which completely transformed the Jewish people and ushered in the world we know today. There is a debate among critics to what extent Szyk can be called an artist. The Times of London once said that his art was “among the most beautiful ever produced by the hand of man”. Others see him as a commercialist who cheapened art by using it in “lowbrow” ways. The reason is that he put his art in the service of a number of different causes and therefore is seen often as little more than a propagandist. We will not enter here into the discussion,

other than to say that for those who see it as legitimate and perhaps important that artists are engaged with the world in which they live, Szyk represents a classic example of that tendency. The artist engaged. As he himself said:

*An artist, and especially a Jewish artist, cannot be neutral in these times. He cannot escape to still lifes, abstractions and experiments. Art that is purely cerebral is dead. Our life is involved in a terrible tragedy and I am resolved to serve my people with all my art, with all my talent, with all my knowledge.*

He said that in 1934, outraged at the rise of Nazism, but it was the motto that characterized him for the previous twenty years.

In technical terms, it might be more accurate to see Szyk, first and foremost as an illustrator. He took ideas or texts and created a visual representation of them. He was also a first-rate illuminator of texts very much in the manner of the classic medieval scribes who laboured endlessly to illustrate their manuscripts.

1.



Szyk, was born in 1894 in Lodz, Poland (then part of Russia). It was on his return to Poland after studying art in Paris that he started to be drawn increasingly into Jewish themes and Jewish causes. The sufferings and pogroms experienced by the Jews of Poland at the end of W.W.I. clearly moved him and helped mobilize him, consciously, to put his art in the service of the Jewish people. For the rest of his life, until his death in 1951, he was always working for the people and for those causes and values that he identified with the best of his heritage. He fought with his pen for freedom and equality between the world's different races as a whole. He fought against fascism, for Zionism, for the right of the Jews to leave Europe before the war and their right to leave the D.P. camps and go to Palestine after the war. He fought for American engagement in the war (he became a celebrated and much loved cartoonist and propagandist – in the best sense of the word) - and against British mandate

policies that restricted immigration to Palestine. As such he is both a Jewish artist and a universal one.

In the course of his work as a consciously Jewish artist, he illustrated many of the greatest stories of the Bible. Among these was the Megillah which he illustrated twice, both times in the classic manuscript style mentioned above. The first time was in 1925 when he produced a French version of the Megillah and the second time was in 1950 when he produced a Hebrew version. Both versions were consciously produced out of a sense of Jewish suffering and out of a wish to react in some way to that suffering. They are both remarkable works, but the events of the twenty five years that separated the two versions, left their mark on his treatment of the subject in no uncertain terms. It is this that we wish to examine here. Let us open with a picture from the 1925 book.

2.



In this picture we see Ahashverosh conferring with Haman. The king is on the left of the picture and Haman stands before him, in a slightly deferential posture. They are dressed in gorgeous robes full of the colour which marked so much of Szyk's work when he was illustrating the classic Hebrew texts. Both men are imposing, and they wear the Assyrian beard associated with the period. They look like leaders of the time and place as they have come down to us in some of the statuary of the time. Their images adorned many of the pages of the Haggadah, casting an imposing and dignified presence over the proceedings even as the text undermined much of that dignity as the story unfolded.

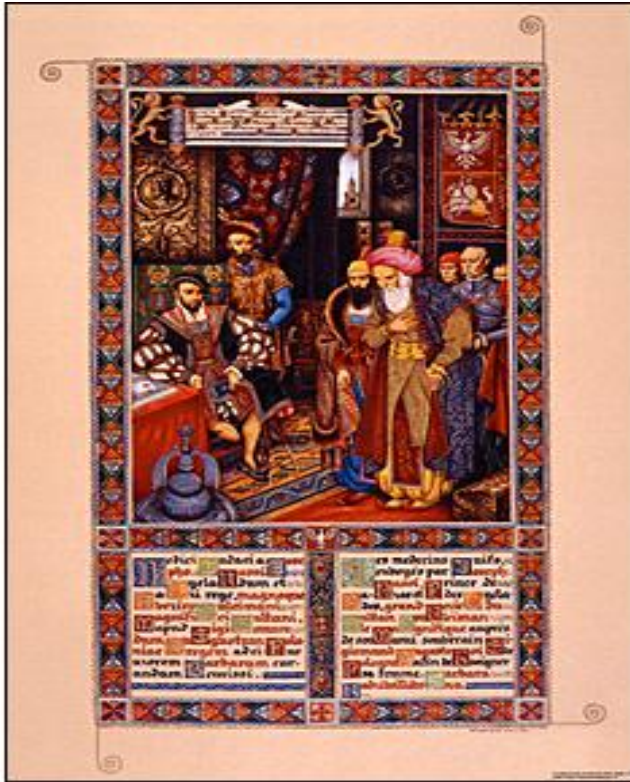
One of the last pictures in the book shows Haman on the gallows viewed from a distance. In the foreground sits Ahashverosh on his throne, and next to him sits Esther with a serious faced Mordechai standing on the left in the foreground. Right up to the end, both Ahashverosh and Haman – even in this gallows picture – retain great dignity. Haman hangs but he cuts a grave and imposing figure, even on the gallows. The picture is perhaps hopeful. There is a sense that in the aftermath of the danger, there is a possibility of rapprochement, between Jews and Persians. The latter are a serious people, who have proved themselves capable of turning on the Jews, but that can be put behind both peoples. With determination, the two peoples can go forward to their mutual benefit. Jews, for all that they have gone through, can create for themselves, with the benevolence of the king, Ahashverosh, a better future in the land.

This was not a false hope, for Szyk in these years. Just a year after publishing his first Megillah, a coup in Poland brought Marshal Pilsudski to power and Szyk supported Pilsudski, believing that there was a possibility of Jews and Poles continuing positively their long common history. It was now that he embarked on a large and ambitious project. Over four years he worked on an illuminated manuscript, which he wrote and published in several languages, the text of which was the Jewish charter of Boleslav of Kalisz, the first Polish ruler to give the Jews a bill of rights. Szyk illustrated the charter predominantly with scenes of Jewish-Polish co-operation over hundreds of years, showing how the Jews had contributed to the development of Poland. Despite the terrible treatment of the Jews during the previous decade, Szyk believed that they could go forward and continue their productive role in Poland under a benevolent ruler.

The three pictures below are all taken from this work. The first and the second portray respectively Jewish doctors in the medieval period treating a Polish ruler and Jewish sailors loading Polish agricultural produce on to a trading ship, with the business transaction between the ship owner and the land owner taking place in the bottom right corner of the picture. The third picture showing Boleslav on his throne, granting his charter of rights to the Jews, reflects the same sentiments as the previous picture of Mordechai, Esther and Ahashverosh. Just like in ancient Persia, the people could go forward as long as death and its would-be perpetrators were swinging on the gallows in the background and a strong and benevolent ruler was in charge.

4.





5.



6.

However, by the time he produced his second Megillah, in 1950, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, things had changed.

Let us begin by looking at the parallel picture to the one we looked at previously in which Haman swings on the distant gallows. Esther and Mordechai are sitting in state. Ahashverosh is nowhere to be seen and the symbols of state are very much present in and around the figure of Esther. She holds the royal scepter and to the right of her head there is a kind of tapestry which displays all the symbols of Jewish sovereignty. In Hebrew are written the words אסתר המלכה underneath a royal crown and next

to them there are two lions with crowns on their heads, the symbol of Jewish sovereignty. Mordechai has one hand vaguely gesturing in the direction of the gallows. The meaning here is inescapable. This is not a call for Jewish life among the nations among benevolent rulers. It is a call for the Jews to seize and create their own sovereignty. The non-Jews have no place in the sovereign Jewish future. Pilsudski had long gone, his place taken by anti-Semites and fascists who brought Poland to the brink of Nazism before the Germans invaded. The Jews themselves, those Jews whom Szyk had hoped would be the participants in a new relationship with the inhabitants of Poland, were dead. The experiment had failed. Now was the time for a new experiment, one in Jewish rule.

The differences between the two versions of the Megillah were more pronounced than that however. Let us look at the depictions of Ahashverosh and Haman in the 1950 Megillah. We recall that in the earlier version they had been elegant and dignified figures, serious and imposing. In 1950 he showed Haman and Ahashverosh portrayed as fat, greasy, decadent and indolent. In addition, a careful inspection of Haman's clothing will reveal two sorts of swastikas, one on a badge on his hat and the other as part of the design of the fabric of his coat. Nothing could be further from the picture of the two men in 1925. If we examine two other portrayals of Haman in the 1950 work we see the same consistent pattern.

9.



10.



In the left hand picture, we see Haman leading Mordechai and on the right we see a picture of Haman on the gallows, this time from close up with the artist, Szyk staring at him while he eats an **ארוז החרן**! In both cases the Nazi symbolism is clear, replete with death's head belt as well as swastikas.

Both of these pictures show Jewish victory but perhaps the clearest depiction of victory over the Hamanic foes is in this rather wonderful picture from 1948.

11.



Here we see Mordechai (he is identified as such by the title that Szyk gave to his picture) reading the final words of the Megillah in the land of Israel surrounded by Chalutzim, working the land and with the weapons to defend their labour and their lives. By the time the Jewish state was declared, Szyk's interpretation of the Megillah was crystal-clear. Haman and Hitler were part of a chain, a chain thousands of years long, of enemies of the Jewish people and the only way to break that chain, or at least to respond to it, was to see the enemies for what they were and to create a situation of sovereignty where those enemies could no longer hurt the Jews. It is interesting, and perhaps not surprising, that Szyk's brand of Zionism was Jabotinsky's Revisionism, which emphasized military strength above all else as the key to the Jewish future.

One of the fascinating aspects of Szyk's 1950 Megillah was his black and white illustration for the opening and closing end pages of the book. In an extremely elaborate sketch of a magnificent scroll container, Szyk weaves in the words from the Pesach Haggadah: שלא אחד בלבד עמד עלינו לכלותנו אלא שבכל דור ודור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו והקדוש ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם.

It is an interesting interposing of a different text into the external framework of the Megillah and ideologically it connects to a quote that appears a couple of pages later when we get to the title page of the book, for here we find a banner attached to the head of a monstrous creature with the familiar words from the books of Shemot (17:14) and Devarim (25:19).

“Wipe out the memory of Amalek .. Do not forget!”

Haman is of course seen as a descendant of Amalek (because the word Agagite that describes him is seen to connect in to Agag the Amalekite king who was saved by a merciful Saul), but over and above that, what we have here is the old and familiar tradition of conflating all our enemies into one and seeing them all as various incarnations of Amalek, the ultimate enemy of the Jews, who, according to the Tanach, we should have wiped out.

Thus for Szyk in 1950 – not necessarily in 1925 – it is clear: the ideological bookends of his reading of the Megillah will borrow the piece from the Haggadah (another work which he illustrated in no less extraordinary a fashion) and together with the identification of Haman as Amalek and the Nazis, will underlie the message for the Jews of his generation. The ultimate victory will be that of the Jews, but only when they and the world learn the lessons of the Megillah and the Jews are enabled to have their own sovereign state in their own land.

## **EXERCISE: Entering The World Of Arthur Szyk**

The aim of this exercise is to analyse different “takes” on the Megillah, to examine the question of the continuity of hate against Jews through the memory of Amalek and of course to introduce them to the wonderful art of Szyk.

- Give a very brief introduction to Szyk, just enough to stimulate their curiosity. Explain that he drew two versions of the Megillah, in 1925 and 1950 and that they are going to compare the two.
- In small groups give them copies of pictures 2 and 3 (1925) and 8, 9 and 10 (1950) without telling them anything about the pictures. They need to work out which pictures belong to each Megillah, give reasons for their decisions and suggest what changes of attitude Szyk went through in the years between the two versions.
- Bring everyone together and collect responses. Talk about the differences between the two. The one that is most clear is the Nazification of Haman, but talk too about the way that Ahashverosh and Haman are portrayed.
- Now bring in picture number 7 (Esther and Mordechai with Haman on the gallows) and compare with the equivalent picture from 1925 (number 3). What are the different messages that the pictures give? What is Szyk trying to say? What future did he see as viable in 1925, which was not an option for him in 1950? As part of this bring in some or all of the three pictures that he drew on the basis of the Kalisz charter (4,5, and 6) and examine their significance. Without the judgement of hindsight, was it a reasonable conclusion for him to draw from the Megillah? Bring in number 11 (Mordechai and the Chalutzim) to illustrate his 1950 conclusion. How do they feel about that as a 1950 conclusion?
- Bring in number 12 and 13 (his Pesach quote and his Amalek quote), one by one, explaining each quote and its significance. What is he saying by using them as his “bookends”? Why is he using a Pesach quote for Purim? Why is he using the Amalek quote(s)? Do they think that this is a good conclusion to draw from the Megillah? Why? Why not?
- If they were artists illustrating their own Megillah in North America of today, would they draw it more in terms of the 1925 version or the 1950 version? Why? Would they use the two quotes as their bookends? If so, why? What statement would they be making? If not, what kind of a quote (from the Jewish classics) would they bring instead? Why? What ideological statement would they want to make about reading the Megillah in America?

## **FINAL EXERCISE: Rewriting the Megillah!**

The aim of this exercise is to sum up all the work that has been done on the subject of the Megillah. It can be used after any of the sets of exercises in the three parts of the booklet, or after work on all the parts.

- After going through all or some of the themes and exercises in this booklet, we suggest a final exercise, which is aimed at bringing things together. The students, (in pairs?), are asked to write their own shortened version of the same story. They should understand that different generations have written their own version of the Megillah, in traditional, theologically motivated texts, or in modern secular poetry and prose. In a sense we can say that each generation has rewritten the Megillah according to its own understandings, insights and sensitivities. This process of Midrash is one of the things that most mark the Jewish attitude towards texts. It has been seen as a legitimate activity within the Jewish world for thousands of years. We are now asking the students to take part in this timeless Jewish activity.
- They should use some of the following questions as their guidelines. If there are students who wish to use non-literary techniques such as art or music, they should be encouraged to do so.

What changes would you put in to your Megillah in the light of all the things that have been discussed?

- Would you change the picture of the different characters?
- Would you bring the element of faith more to the fore?
- Would you change the ending of the story?
- Would you show Esther's intermarriage in a different way or, for example, do what some of the sages did, portraying her as a victim of royal force, when they rewrote their version of the story in their commentaries or Midrashim?
- Would you do what later generations do and put into Esther's mouth, all sorts of prayers to God which are singularly absent from the Megillah itself? (They can be found in the Additions to the Book of Esther, which are in the Apocrypha, the collection of Jewish texts from the late second Temple period).
- What exactly is your Megillah? How would you make this text yours?

**Vashti and Esther by Arie Navon**



## ***Kavanot / Reflections on a Day for Parody***

### **On the Deeper Significance of Humor**

A person is known by one's laughter. Talmud Eruvin 65 b

Even he who fears nothing, fears laughter. Nikolay Gogol,

A new joke acts almost like an event of universal interest; it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory. Sigmund Freud

The monuments of wit survive the monuments of power.  
Francis Bacon

As to Hitler being funny, I can only say that if we can't sometimes laugh at Hitler, then we are further gone than we think.

Charlie Chaplin about his movie *The Great Dictator* (pre-Holocaust)

#### ***Yiddishe Gelechter:***

Jewish laughter contains so much pain.  
When weeping is of no help,  
one laughs as much as he can,  
although the heart would cry with pain.

We keep laughing as long as we live.  
Let your laughter sound far.  
Hope that time is near when you will laugh  
from the depths of your heart always.

Rikle Glaser, poem written in Vilna Ghetto

One should not fight dictators,  
One should ridicule them.

Bertold Brecht, left wing German playwright

Comedy is a rebellion

against hypocrisy, against pretense,  
against falsehood and humbug and bunk and fraud;  
against false promises and base deceivers;  
against all evils masquerading as true and good and worthy of respect.

It is therefore the role of comedy to put to the test whatever offers itself as piety.

Zero Mostel, actor who played *Fiddle on the Roof*



## **Saudi Government Daily: Jews Use Teenagers' Blood for 'Purim' Pastries February, 2002**

*In an article published by the Saudi government daily AZ-Riyadh, columnist Dr. Umayma Ahmad Ahmad AZ-Jalahma of King Faysal University in AZ-Dammam, wrote on "The Jewish Holiday of Purim. " Following are excerpts of the article:*

### **Special Ingredient For Jewish Holidays is Human Blood From Non-Jewish Youth**

"I chose to [speak] about the Jewish holiday of Purim, because it is connected to the month of March. This holiday has some dangerous customs that will, no doubt, horrify you, and I apologize if any reader is harmed because of this."

"During this holiday, the Jew must prepare very special pastries, the filling of which is not only costly and rare - it cannot be found at all on the local and international markets."  
"Unfortunately, this filling cannot be left out, or substituted with any alternative serving the same purpose. For this holiday, the Jewish people must obtain human blood so that their clerics can prepare the holiday pastries. In other words, the practice cannot be carried out as required if human blood is not spilled!!"

How is it done?"

"For this holiday, the victim must be a mature adolescent who is, of course, a non-Jew - that is, a Christian or a Muslim. His blood is taken and dried into granules. The cleric blends these granules into the pastry dough; they can also be saved for the next holiday. In contrast, for the Passover slaughtering, about which I intend to write one of these days, the blood of Christian and Muslim children under the age of 10 must be used, and the cleric can mix the blood [into the dough] before or after dehydration."

"Before I go into the details, I would like to clarify that the Jews' spilling human blood to prepare pastry for their holidays is a well-established fact, historically and legally, all throughout history. This was one of the main reasons for the persecution and exile that were their lot in Europe and Asia at various times."

"This holiday [Purim] begins with a fast, on March 13, like the Jewess Esther who vowed to fast. The holiday continues on March 14; during the holiday, the Jews wear carnival-style masks and costumes and overindulge in drinking alcohol, prostitution, and adultery. This holiday has become known among Muslim historians as the "Holiday of Masks."

## Imagining Esther's First Visit to King Ahashverosh's Harem: With a Little Help from the History of the Forbidden City in Beijing China

### *Picking a Lucky Lady*

If ceremonial and administrative duties occupied most of the emperor's working hours, then behind the high walls of the Forbidden City it was the pursuit of pleasure which occupied much of his attention during the evenings. One of the imperial bedtime systems was to keep the names of royal wives, consorts and favorites on **Jade tablets** near the emperor's chambers - sometimes as many as 50 of them.

### *Keeping Track*

By turning the tablet over the emperor made his request for the evening, and the eunuch on duty would rush off to find "the lucky lady." Stripped naked and therefore weaponless, she was gift-wrapped in a yellow cloth, and the little bound-footed creature was piggybacked over to the royal boudoir and dumped at the feet of the emperor; the eunuch recorded the date and time to verify legitimacy of a possible child:

### *Health First: Eternal Youth*

Aside from having fun, all this activity had a more serious purpose - prolonging the life of the emperor. An ancient Chinese belief that frequent sex with young girls could sustain one's youth even motivated Mao Zedong, Communist ruler of Red China, to follow the same procedure.

### *An Unlimited Expense Account*

Financing the affairs of state probably cost less than financing **the affairs of the emperor**; keeping the pleasure dome functioning drew heavily on the resources of the empire: During the Ming Dynasty there were an estimated **9000 maids of honor** and **70;000 eunuchs**, serving the court:

In addition there were the **royal elephants** to maintain: These were gifts from Myanmar (Burma).

Periodically the- elephant keepers embezzled the funds intended for elephant chow: When this occurred; the ravenous pachyderms went on a rampage.

### *Elephant Shampoo and Cosmetics*

While pocketing this cash was illegal, selling elephant dung for use as **shampoo** was not - it was believed to give the hair that extra sheen. Back in the harem the cosmetic bills piled up to 400,000 taels of silver. Then, of course, the concubines who had grown old and were no longer in active service were still

As for the palace eunuchs the royal chop was administered at the Eunuch Clinic near the Forbidden City, using a swift knife and a special chair with a hole in the seat. Mutilation of any kind was considered grounds for exclusion from the next life, so many eunuchs carried their appendages around in pouches believing that at the time of death, the spirits would be deceived into thinking of them as whole.

## **Esther's Challenge: "Who Knows?" Playing the Actor in the Drama of Being**

by Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: Israel and Revelation*, p. 1-2

Man is not a self-contained spectator. He is **an actor playing a part in the drama of being** and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed **to play it without knowing what it is**. It is disconcerting even when accidentally a man finds himself in the situation of feeling not quite sure what the game is and how he should conduct himself in order not to spoil it; but **with luck and skill** he will extricate himself from the embarrassment and return to the less bewildering routine of his life.

Participation in being, however, is not a partial involvement of man; he is engaged with the whole of his existence, for participation is existence itself. There is no vantage point outside existence from which its meaning can be viewed and a course of action charted according to a plan, nor is there a blessed island to which man can withdraw in order to recapture his self. **The role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision or the edge of freedom and necessity.**

**Both the play and the role are unknown. But even worse, the actor does not know with certainty who he is himself.**

The Socratic irony of ignorance has become the paradigmatic instance of awareness for, this **blind spot at the center of all human knowledge** is about man. At the center of his existence man is unknown to himself and must remain so, for the part of being that calls itself man could be known fully only if the community of being and its drama in time were known as a whole. Man's partnership in being is the essence of his existence, and this essence depends on the whole, of which existence is a part. Knowledge of the whole, however, is precluded.

## The Fast of Esther: National "Coming Out" Day

Rabbi Steve Greenberg, participant in *Trembling before G-d* the movie about homosexual Orthodox Jews once suggested that the Fast of Esther become a National Coming Out Day for anyone with secrets who has been afraid to reveal them. A fast day he felt was appropriate for relating to this painful and self-reflective process of owning up publically to what the community has made seem shameful and having the community embrace this revelation thoughtfully.

### Unmasking the Purim Characters by Steve Greenberg

**Purim is about concealment. More specifically, it is about movement from the covert to the overt.** There is a sustained tension between what characters are and what they seem to be that moves the plot forward. It is the careful unraveling of disguises that makes for salvation.

The major characters are **all Marranos disguised in costume**. They all struggle to manage a powerful public persona while hiding an inner secret that, if revealed, would seem to undo them. By the end, everyone is unmasked.

**King Ahashverosh**, according to tradition, was not of royal blood; he had married into Persian royalty. Vashti was the true Persian princess and, because she refuses to take off her royal robes, she is banished or killed. She is the only one who refuses to dress up -- or in this case down -- as something she is not. Ahashverosh has risen to royal power, but he is not royal material. He is a foolish, pompous lush dressed in royal robes. He is also terrified of being challenged or used - and that is exactly what happens anyway.

**Esther and Mordecai are closet Jews.** Each is fearful of the consequences of being found out. Mordecai warns Esther not to reveal her identity. The people perceive Esther as a lovely Persian woman who has become a Persian queen. Mordecai is a statesman who is known in the king's court. He does not flaunt his Jewish identity.

**Haman** is the scoundrel who, like Esther, is in the right place at the right time. Like the king, he rises to power without any merit. **His secrets are his bloated ego and his hunger for royal power. Haman conceals all this from the king, including his irrational hatred of Mordecai.**

**The turn in the plot occurs when Mordecai is forced to choose between his inner and outer identities.** Is he a Jew or a Persian noble? If he refuses to bow down to Haman, he will almost certainly lose his status among the Persian elite. If he bows, he understands that he will lose his inner Jewish self. In this moment of reckoning, Mordecai recognizes himself as a Jew and refuses to bow. The story isn't clear as to how Mordecai's secret is found out. Someone tells someone who tells Haman that this rude fellow is a Jew, and Haman begins his plot to avenge himself of Mordecai and his people.

**Unmasked, Mordecai realizes that he must turn his secret inside out. He must now bear witness to the inner truths.** He sits at the gate of the palace in sackcloth--congruence between the man and his clothes, a boldly public expression of an internal state of affairs. **Mordecai's naked protest sets in motion the unmasking of Esther, then of Haman, and finally of Ahashverosh.**

*What does all this drama between revealed and concealed selves say to us?*

Of course, the Book of Esther could be read as a midrash on Jewish life in the diaspora. How we play hide and seek, **how we reveal and conceal ourselves as Jews, is a diaspora story.**

But there is also a more personal journey described. In many ways, **we are all Marranos**, hiding behind our various masks and robes.

*What can we glean from Esther to help us manage the interplay between our inner and outer lives? Can Mordecai teach us something about the search for wholeness?*

At the end of the story, all the inner truths come to light. As the story unfolds, there seems to be a **redemptive quality in self-expression**. When all is revealed, Esther becomes a powerful queen and Mordecai becomes the king's most trusted counselor. Even Ahashverosh seems to achieve a more royal demeanor. Each of these full identities was achieved by reconciling the inner and outer persons.

**The story is also about the need to protect a life apart from the public eye.** As Esther enters the king's palace, Mordecai warns her not to reveal her identity. Later he commands her to do so. It seems that there is a right and a wrong time to reveal the self. Perhaps the story is about the dynamics of identity that cannot escape a tension between expression and inhibition. **We are who we are not only by our self-revelations, but by our careful nurturing of a private world.**

As well, not all inner lives are equal. Haman uses disguise for singularly destructive ends and is ultimately destroyed by his inner self. Haman falls on Esther's couch, revealing more than an urge for power. Mordecai is revealed by his principles, Haman by his libido. At the perfect moment, Esther reveals herself as a Jew and saves the Jewish people. Though the war between the inner and outer worlds is over, there is no clear victory of one self over another. Instead there is a new and diverse wholeness, **an integration of mask and man.**

The rabbis describe the God of the Book of Esther as a hidden God, a **playful God** who dances in between the revealed and the hidden, patient and waiting for the right moment to burst forth. So we, too, find our journey, in both inward and outward movements. Often we work behind the scenes nurturing a life apart, a sense of privacy and clarity. And **when the moments come to stand for one's inner truths, for principles, or for one's people, then we must turn inside out and witness, loud and proud and sure.**

**Divided No More!**  
**The Stages of Growth in Movements for Social Change**  
**Or**  
**Queen Esther and Rosa Parks**

**By Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach***

The genius of social movements is paradoxical: they abandon the logic of organizations so that they can gather the momentum necessary to alter the logic of organizations. Both the civil rights and women's movements had to free themselves from racist and sexist organizations in order to generate power. Then, with that power, they returned to change the lay, and the law, of the land.

If we want a movement for educational reform, we must learn to embrace this paradox. We must also learn the logic of a movement, learn how a movement unfolds, partly so that we can know where we are located within it, partly so that we can help it along.

I see four definable stages of development.

**Stage 1.** Isolated individuals make an inward decision to live "**divided no more**," finding a center for their lives outside of institutions.

**Stage 2.** These individuals begin to discover one another and form **communities of congruence that offer mutual support and opportunities to develop a shared vision.**

**Stage 3.** These communities start **going public**, learning to convert their private concerns into the public issues they are and receiving vital critiques in the process.

**Stage 4.** **A system of alternative rewards** emerges to sustain the movement's vision and to put pressure for change on the standard institutional reward system.

. We may discover that if one is on an inner journey, one is on the threshold of real power - **the power of personal authenticity** that, manifested in social movements, has driven real change in our own time. When we know that such power is within our reach, we may be less tempted to succumb to organizational grid lock, less tempted to indulge ourselves in the sweetness of despair.

#### **AN UNDIVIDED LIFE**

The starting point of a movement, though silent and barely visible can be described with some precision. It happens when isolated individuals who suffer from a situation that needs changing decide to live "divided no more." **These people come to a juncture where they must choose between allowing selfhood to die or claiming the identity** and integrity from which good living, as well as good teaching, comes.

Many of us know from personal experience how it feels to live a divided life. Inwardly, we experience one imperative for our live: but outwardly we respond to quite another. This is the human condition, of course-our inner and outer worlds are never in perfect harmony. But there are extremes of dividedness that become intolerable, when one can no longer live without bringing one's actions into harmony with one's inner life. When that happens inside of or person, then another, and another, and another, in relation to a significant social issue, a movement may be conceived.

The condition to be overcome by living divided no more has specific etiology. We inhabit **institutional settings**, including school and work and civic society, because they harbor opportunities that we value. But the claims those institutions make on us are sometimes at odds with our hearts - for example, the demand for loyalty to a corporation, right or wrong, versus the inward imperative to speak truth. That tension can be creative, up to a point. It becomes **pathological** when the heart becomes a wholly owned subsidiary of the organization, **when we internalize organizational logic and allow it overwhelm the logic of our own lives.**

To live divided no more is to find a new center for one's life center external to the institution and its demands.

### **The Rosa Parks Decision**

The decision to live an undivided life, made by enough people over a long enough period of time, may eventually have social and political impact. **But this is not a strategic decision, taken to achieve some political goal. It is a deeply personal decision, made for the sake of one's own identity and integrity.** To decide to live divided no more is less a strategy for attacking other people's beliefs than an uprising of the elemental need for one's own beliefs to govern and guide one's life. **The power of an authentic movement lies in the fact that it originates in naming and claiming one's identity and integrity - rather than accusing one's "enemies" of lacking the same.**

I call this the **Rosa Parks decision**, for she is our most vivid icon of the undivided life. Indeed, she is an icon we must continue to hold before us, for the movement she sparked still has far to go. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks decided to live divided no more - decided that she could no longer act as if she were less than a full human being, the way institutional racism had defined her. She decided that she must act instead on her heart's knowledge of her own humanity. So she did a simple thing: she sat down in the whites-only front section of a segregated bus and refused to yield her seat to a white man.

By choosing an undivided life I implicitly acknowledge that the institution would not have had power over me if I had refused to go along with it. My immediate problem

*What drives the decision to live divided no more, with the risk it entails? How do people find the courage to bring inner conviction into harmony with outer act, knowing that when they do, the force of the institution may come down on their heads, risking the loss of image or status or security or money or power?*

The difference between the person who goes to the back of the bus and one who decides to sit up front is probably lost in the mystery of the human heart. But in Rosa Parks and others like her, I see a clue to an answer when you realize that you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed.

When the police came to Rosa Parks on the bus and informed her that they would have to put her in jail if she did not move, she replied, "You may do that." It was a very polite way of saying, "How, could your jail begin to compare with the jail I have had myself I all these years by collaborating with this racist system?"

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## COMMUNITIES OF CONGRUENCE

The decision to live an undivided life, however powerful its motivation, is at first a frail reed. It needs **continual reinforcement** because the person who makes it soon begins to feel anxiety and self-doubt naturally so, for we live in a culture that tells us a divided life is sane but an undivided life is foolish at best and irresponsible at worst.

The undivided life is foolish because if you let others know what is going on inside, they may reject and injure you, so it is better to keep your feelings tucked away. It is irresponsible because if you reveal your inner truth, you can no longer perform your duties dispassionately, so it is better to play your role and keep personal truth hidden away.

In the **second stage of a movement**, people who have chosen the undivided life but still feel shaky about it come together in **communities of congruence** whose first purpose is simply mutual reassurance. In company with others who are on the same path, these people are helped to understand that "normal" behavior can be crazy but that seeking integrity is always sane.

In the movement sparked by Rosa Parks, these communities of congruence found a home in the black churches. Throughout the South, churches served as gathering places for people who needed to know that they were not alone in choosing an integral life. But the churches offered more than physical space where people could meet. They offered conceptual space where the substance of the movement could be developed and sustained.

Here is the second function of communities of congruence: to help **people develop the language that can represent the movement's vision**, giving that language the strength it will need to survive and thrive in the rough-and-tumble of the public realm. When discourse begins among people who have recently freed their souls, the language feels fragile - **the fragility that comes when we talk about dreams in a society obsessed with practicality or about community in a society obsessed with competition or about risk taking in a society obsessed with playing it safe**. People who use such language, the language of the heart, need a place to practice it.