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A Nice Jewish Girl in a Place Like *That*?
The Evolution of Esther in Rabbinic Literature

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the biblical character of Esther through rabbinic literature. Surveying nearly 1800 years of commentaries to the Megillah, certain midrashim and exegeses are highlighted based on their creative and sometimes shocking refashioning of Esther. Other commentaries are chosen more for what they divulge about the rabbis' own contexts than for what the interpretations reveal about the character's development. The first chapter investigates the identity of Esther, based predominantly on her introduction in the second chapter of the Megillah. The next chapter reveals how and why the rabbis chose to make this seemingly a-religious character into a pious and modest heroine. The third chapter exposes the explicit midrashim and commentaries based on Esther's sexuality and her relationship with both Mordecai and Ahashverosh. The final chapter ties together the midrashim to reveal how Esther fares as a heroine. Through this study, the evolution of Esther from a questionable biblical character into a proud and strong Jewish paradigm is clearly seen.

Acknowledgements

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Sandra Goldstein *z"l*, who used to dress up as her favorite character for Purim - "Esther's Runner Up." In my book, though, she was second to none.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....1

Chapter One: What's in a Name?.....6

Chapter Two: A Woman of Valor (Esther as an Observant Jew)..... 28

Chapter Three: All the Queen's Men.....52

Chapter Four: Will the Real Hero Please Stand Up?.....77

Conclusion.....110

Bibliography.....113

Introduction

The characters in the Hebrew Bible are often flat, two-dimensional representations of people. Rarely are the characters' underlying motivations provided to the reader of the text; their thoughts and inmost feelings are absent, rendering the personae *caricatures* more than characters. The rabbis, though, in their creativity and ingenuity bring these biblical characters to life. They make them real, relevant, and often, the rabbis form them to be repositories for Jewish ethics and considerations.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the character of Esther. At the first introduction, Esther appears as a bizarre persona and an unlikely hero in the Bible. This orphan, under a relative's care, becomes part of an unfolding plot that delivers her to the royal kingdom in Persia. Having hid her identity for a number of years, Esther reveals herself in time to save her people from destruction, and empowers the Jews to defend themselves.

A number of questions are raised by Esther's character as represented in the Bible. We know very little of her, and of what we do know, she may not be the role model one would hope for in a Jewish text: She seems to have participated in a "beauty pageant" of sorts, married out of the faith, and hid her Jewish identity. Simply by looking at her character in the biblical text, Esther is hardly more than an immodest, assimilated Jew who rises through the ranks by means of her sexuality and beauty. Esther separates from the Jewish community, and only when her own life is threatened,

does she reveal her true identity. Esther is a successful Diasporic Jew with no considerations of God, Israel or the observance of Jewish Law or custom.

Biblical critics have sought to understand the character of Esther in the Bible through their methods of literary analysis. The Scroll of Esther has been labeled "ironic," "carnivalesque literature" and even "burlesque humor."[1] The characters are represented as foils for one another, as direct counterparts created to add to the extreme and unreal nature of the story: Mordecai the righteous versus Haman the evil; Vashti the rabble rouser versus Esther the obedient. Furthermore, many biblical scholars doubt the authenticity of the plot and seek to understand the evolution of the story through comparative analysis of some of the first expansions of the text, namely the Apocryphal Additions to the Scroll that are included in the Septuagint. For biblical scholars, the Scroll is a story that can be dissected and analyzed; for the rabbis, this story was a fixed part of the Jewish canon. The rabbis, no doubt, did not look at the Scroll simply as a comedy; rather, they worked within the bounds of the text in order to make sense of the Scroll, the characters, and sought to discover why this unusual story was included in the corpus of biblical literature.

The rabbis did not have the luxury of dismissing the story as carnivalesque. Such literature does not make it into the Bible. For the rabbis, there must have been something greater in the Scroll, some rationale for why the story became part of the Hebrew Bible. The rabbis then delved into the text, to unleashed their discoveries and reconfigured the story to their satisfaction. Midrash is one of the most effective ways the rabbis elucidated the text. By employing hermeneutical methods such as *gezerah*

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[1] See Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) and the introduction in Adele Berlin, *JPS Bible Commentary to Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

shavah (interpreting one passage in the Bible based on its understanding elsewhere in the text), *notarikon* (understanding words to be acronyms of longer phrases), *gematria* (numerology of words), and word plays or puns, the rabbis are able to extract *from* the text and read *into* the text answers to their concerns and issues. Some of the midrashim are fanciful, bawdy and outrageous; some are based on the philology or grammar of the text; and some are thematically based.

The rabbis from the tannaitic period on have commented on the entire book of Esther, but they paid particular attention to the title character, as she had the most room for expansion. Interestingly, most of the compendia of rabbinic texts on the Scroll, and later publications of that material, do not focus on Esther herself. Some of the relevant research on the Scroll and its parallel expansions include the evolution of all the characters, with no specific insight into Esther. Most research deals with the entirety of the Scroll, the plot and the celebration of the holiday, instead of the title character. This paper, then, will focus on how, through the rabbis' creative manipulation of the Scroll, the character of Esther evolves throughout time and text. Through this study, too, we will be made aware of what ethical and relevant concerns the rabbis had in their own time and place, and how Esther (the character and the Scroll) addressed those issues.

My methodology is first to investigate the biblical narrative in light of the extant critical scholarship. I will highlight gaps in the text and issues within the narrative that draw the attention of the rabbis. Each chapter will deal with a different aspect of Esther's character that the rabbis explore in detail. Beginning with her identity and introduction, the chapters will focus on how the rabbis recreate Esther into a model Jew and leader. I will focus on how Esther is transformed from a secular, intermarried

beauty queen, into a modest and observant moral heroine who is more than just a pretty face. The direct translations of the texts are mine, unless otherwise noted. The transliteration technique used is the general purpose style, and the abbreviations employed are those delineated in the SBL Handbook of Style.[2]

A limitation of this paper is the need to survey the literature. For nearly two thousand years, the rabbis have commented on the Scroll of Esther, leaving a plethora of material and exegesis. Thus, the extensive material requires selective treatment. This paper will highlight commentaries from the tannaitic period, the talmudic period, early and late Medieval periods and the modern era.[3] Being aware of the different chronological strata of the material, specific reference to the time and place of composure will be made when it is relevant. The rabbis were not writing in a vacuum; their time and place necessarily affected their understanding of the Scroll. There is, however, another issue intrinsically related to the rabbis' contexts. That is, much of the midrashic material on Esther is itself composite and repetitive. The early midrashim most likely have a common, shared origin and similar exegetical assumptions.[4] The expansions of the text themselves evolve over time, producing the variant midrashim we have today. The differences among the midrashim, then, relate not only to the span of centuries over which they were composed, but also to the specific realities the

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[2] Patrick H. Alexander, et al., eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999).

[3] For a bibliography see Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 245 n. 63. See also Meir Zlotowitz, *The Book of Esther: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (New York: ArtScroll Press, 1976), 138-46.

[4] Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) 1:20. Segal's three-volume commentary is perhaps the most useful tool in investigating the midrashim on the book of Esther. Segal methodically researches the bulk of midrashim on the Scroll as found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Meg.* 10a-17b. His translation, critical notes and overviews are markedly helpful in understanding the purpose of the midrash and the relationship these commentaries have with other parallel texts.

commentators faced in their time and place. Some of the issues themselves are shared, but the reactions to those concerns vary. It is through both the similarities and the differences in interpretation and expansion of the Megillah and Esther's character and attributes that we can understand how and why Esther and the Scroll remained relevant throughout the ages.

Esther is by far the most dynamic character in the Megillah, and is thus open to the most expansive evolution in the commentaries. It is my hope that this paper will in part show the evolution of the midrashim themselves based on the context of the rabbis, as well as the evolution of the particular character of Esther in rabbinic texts into a hero they, and we, can admire.

Chapter One: What's in a Name?

> There was a Judean man in Shushan, the capital, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei the son of Kish a Benjamite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the group of exiles that was exiled with Jeconiah, the King of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, had exiled. And he had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was of comely form and of comely appearance, and when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her to himself as a daughter (Est 2:5-7).

When the reader is first introduced to one of the main characters of the story, indeed the character after which the scroll is named, a full chapter has elapsed and only later is she identified. Within this brief introduction, the reader finds out that the character is an orphan, being raised by her cousin, and that she is attractive. The reader is also told her name, but even that simple point is not so simple. In the biblical text, our heroine has two names, Esther and Hadassah. According to the principle of interpretation maintained by Rabbi Akiva in the second century, nothing in the biblical text is insignificant. "Everything must therefore be interpreted – every seemingly superfluous or redundant word or even letter, every repetition, everything in the text, was sacred and had its purpose."[5] For the rabbis who commented on the Scroll of Esther, this double appellation was far from insignificant. The plethora of material on this topic developed over the centuries gives more clues about the main character as the rabbis read her, and not without their contradictions.

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[5] Bernard M. Casper, *An Introduction to Jewish Bible Commentary* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 34. R. Hillel was the first to devise a list of seven rules for exposition that were later developed by R. Ishmael into 11 principles, and then expanded to 32 rules by the time of R. Eliezer ben Jose of Galilee. R. Akiva's methods were the most extreme, and often under scrutiny by R. Ishmael for being overly excessive. The sheer number of explanations of this peculiar double appellation, however, shows that R. Akiva's method here is not excessive.

By employing exegetical techniques such as *gezera shavah* and word plays, the rabbis deconstruct her names and ascribe characteristics related either grammatically or thematically. In *b. Meg.* 13a, the sages attempt to harmonize Esther's two names, and clue the readers into what kind of a person she was, or rather, what kind of a person the rabbis recast her to be. There are two strains of thought in the Talmud regarding the name of this character, one believing her real name is Esther, and the other strain, that her true appellation is Hadassah. By exploring and unpacking both strains of thought, one may see the extent of how much the rabbis invested in their rereading of the character. In the Talmud, R. Meir taught that her true name was Esther, but that she was called Hadassah in order to convey her righteousness. He supports this belief with a proof text from Zech 1:8 that "he stood among the *hadassim* in the shadow," where the *hadassim* represent "the righteous ones" in the prophecy.[6] "R. Meir's explanation would seem to be the most logical, for she is only referred to as Hadassah in the beginning of the *Megillah* – when she is first introduced, so to speak – whereas, in all other verses she is referred to as Esther."[7]

The midrash on Ps 22:3 also refers to the name Hadassah being given to Esther as a result of her righteousness, and connects the label *hadas* as well to Mordecai in that he "brought up Hadassah (righteousness)" (Est. 2:7), with the same textual support from Zech. 1:8.[8] One other referent relates the name Hadassah to the quality of righteousness. In the second proem to the Babylonian Esther midrashim, found in *b.*

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[6] According to *b. Sanh.* 93a, this prophecy refers to Mishael, Hananiah and Azariah, whereas the Malbim attributes the righteous label to Shimon haZaddik in his commentary to Zechariah. See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:43, for a discussion of whether or not R. Meir uses allegory or *gezerah shavah* to prove his point.

[7] Landesman, Dovid. *As the Rabbis Taught: Studies in the Aggados of the Talmud* (New Jersey: Aronson, 1996), 127-8.

[8] *Midr. Teh.* 22:3. W.G. Braude, trans. *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 299.

Meg. 10b, we read that R. Samuel bar Nahmani opened with a quote from Isaiah 55:13, "...and in place of the brier shall arise the myrtle (*hadas*), and it shall be to God for a name." In R. Samuel bar Nahmani's stich-by-stich explication of this *petichta* verse, we come to learn that the brier represents Vashti, and in her place the one who supplants her, the righteous Esther who is called Hadassah will rise.[9]

The rabbis seem never to cease defending Esther's righteousness, as the commentaries supporting this belief postdate the codification of the Talmud by nearly a thousand years. One such compilation of midrashim includes a description of Esther as *hadas* (myrtle), in that, like the plant that does not wither in the summer or the winter, neither will Esther wither in this world nor the next. Despite her intermarriage, possible adultery and success in a gentile world, Esther's righteousness will never diminish and her fidelity to Judaism will never wane.[10] The commentators were highly sensitive to some of the issues brought about by this story, and from the moment Esther/Hadassah is introduced, we learn how many rabbis choose to read her.

The other rabbis cited in *b. Meg.* 13a who believe Esther to be her real name ascribe a different rationale for her to be called Hadassah, not suggesting that it had anything to do with her righteousness, at least not on the face of their explanations. Instead, for them, Hadassah indicates the physical or sensory characteristics of a myrtle. Ben Azzai connected the name with the visual characteristics of the plant – that of being an average height, not too tall, not too short. This view does not portray Esther as average or plain; rather, perfection and beauty to the ancients meant being well within

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[9] *b. Meg. 10b*, *Tg. Esth. II*, 2:7. See also Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 1:74-75, and Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 74-75.

[10] *Yal. Shim.* 1053. See also Yosef Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live: The Story of Deliverance in the Days of Mordecai and Esther* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2002), 114. More on the intermarriage and possible adultery will follow.

normal parameters for size, avoiding freakish or extreme measurements in either direction.[11] Ben Azzai connects this appellation with the biblical proof text that Esther is comely in appearance and form, like the perfectly shaped myrtle. R. Yehoshua ben Korcha, on the other hand, identified the characteristic of the color of the myrtle to Esther. Like the myrtle, Esther is said to have a sallow, greenish hue. Whereas most scholars agree that this was not a compliment, S.A. Yahuda claims that greenish or olive colored skin and almond-shaped eyes connote the epitome of grace and beauty in Persian culture.[12] R. Yehoshua ben Korcha's comment about her green tint ends with the uplifting notion that "a thread of grace was cast over her."[13] This justification or explanation supports the idea that Esther was not beautiful, but that she was blessed with some sort of Divine assistance,[14] and that she was not chosen for her objective good looks, but because she was imbued with grace and charm that won the favor of all who gazed upon her. For ben Korcha, Esther was not merely some beauty queen chosen simply based on her sexual or physical merits; rather, she was attractive on the inside, instilled with the kind of beauty that is timeless and sincere. Furthermore, since she was an unattractive greenish color, her enhancement and magnetism to others must have come from God. It is not the beautiful woman that obtains honor, but the woman

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[11] Segal, Eliezer. *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:45. Here, Segal supports his statement with commentary by the Maharasha on *b. Ber.* 31b and with an excerpt from Aristotle's *Poetics*. See also *Menot HaLevy* to Est 2:5-7 for a similar commentary.

[12] S.A. Yahuda,"The Meaning of the Name Esther" in *Studies in the Book of Esther*, Harry M. Orlinsky, ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 268 n.2. See this article for a discussion on the etymologies of both names and their relationship to other languages. Cf. Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:45-6.

[13] *b. Meg.* 13a.

[14] Rashi ad loc. The rabbis' view that God played the part of the Savior in this biblical story despite His glaring absence from the text will be a repeated theme throughout the commentary.

of grace,[15] and Esther was able to gain or elicit favor in the eyes of all who beheld her, but it was Esther's physical appearance that paved the way for her.

Since R. Yehoshua ben Korcha's statement directly opposes the biblical text that Esther was attractive in both form and appearance, later commentators took issue with his description of the heroine. The Vilna *Gaon* invokes God's handiwork in the debate – but in a different way. According to him, Esther was beautiful, but by a miracle she became ugly at the time of the pageant, perhaps in hopes that she would not be chosen to marry a gentile. Rabbi Elijah the Gaon of Vilna, *Gra*, weighs in as well with an attempt to clarify the comment of R. Yehoshua ben Korcha. Agreeing that Esther was indeed beautiful, as the biblical text states, he explains that once she realized that she would be queen, that she was in fact chosen, Esther became ill at the prospect and turned that sickly shade of green, the color of a myrtle. The miracle for *Gra*, however, is not that she was made ugly, but rather that God placed the thread of grace upon her, making her beautiful again at exactly the moment she needed to appear beautiful. According to him, God knew that Esther had an important, instrumental role to fulfill and she could only do that by being in Ahashverosh's palace. Still, other commentators describe her coloring as that of a shade of green like an etrog, teal, or of being a yellow hue, like the yolk of an egg.[16] These comments, too, deal with Esther's physical and emotional reaction to her uncharted future, being holed up in a harem, possibly forced to marry a gentile king and having to abandon her heritage. By reading into the name Hadassah, these later commentators are able to harmonize ben Korcha's statement of Esther turning green, and associate it with the merit and righteousness associated with

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[15] Prov 11:16.
[16] See *Tiq. Zohar* 421, and *Tosafot* to *b. Sukkah* 31b.

the myrtle by the aforementioned sages. The *Rokeach*, Rabbi Elazar of Germiza, attempted to adumbrate the two thoughts as well, that she was like a myrtle and that she was indeed beautiful. He accomplished this by claiming that she looked like the blossom or flower of the myrtle tree and that was the reason for her to be known as Hadassah as well as Esther.[17]

Regardless of these slight differences in precisely what shade Esther turned or how exactly she resembled a myrtle, the issue of whether or not Esther was beautiful, and to whom she appeared beautiful remained a major topic for the commentators. Overtly and overly sexualizing her character did not play well with the image they tried to portray of a humble, observant, Jewish orphan forced into an impossible situation where she was meant to potentially sacrifice her life and her freedom for the good of her people. By focusing on the charm and grace of the character, some rabbis find a niche to support their idea of a model Jewish woman and wife, one whose beauty radiates from the inside, one who is wrapped in grace in charm. In the biblical text, though, it would seem that Esther's beauty was the *only* characteristic that would enable her to fulfill her mission. It is precisely her beauty that enables her to be chosen as queen.

> "Esther is, on all accounts, an unlikely candidate to replace Vashti. She is an exiled Jew, a non-Persian by birth and, therefore, viewed as an outsider in the Persian kingdom. In terms of status, Esther could not be lower; she was a *female-Jewish-exile-orphan*. Esther had one quality, however, which unlocked the doors of opportunity: her beauty."[18]

It is the case in the plain text and the midrashim that Esther's grace helped her once she was inside the harem, but it is difficult to deny or contradict that her beauty guided her over the threshold. Reference to the importance of beauty is mentioned

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[17] *Rokeach*, to *b. Meg. 13a.*

[18] Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (SBLDS 165; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 59. See here for a brief discussion on the biblical motif of beauty.

three times in the biblical text, first when Vashti is summoned to parade her beauty (1:11), then again when the servants are sent in search of a beautiful replacement (2:3-5), and finally when Esther is introduced (2:7). "Her physical beauty makes her the object of a king's desire, and it leads to her ability to save her nation."[19] The rabbis cannot, and do not on the whole, abandon the fact that Esther was indeed a beautiful and sexual being. In fact, the rabbis list Esther among the four most beautiful women in the history of the world. The other three were Sarah, Rahab and Abigail.[20] Had the comment of R. Yehoshua ben Korcha been accepted, that Esther was of a green and sallow complexion, she would then have to be stricken from this list of great beauties. Who would replace her on this list, asks the Talmud: None other than Vashti![21]

Not only the nature of Esther's beauty, but her age at the time of the contest is up for debate as well. She may have been attractive in her youth, but in order to make the timeline of the biblical text make sense, Esther could not have been in the prime of her youth when she entered the beauty-contest-like search for a queen. Some commentators suggest that she was 40, 70 or even 75 years old.[22] Notwithstanding Esther's exact age, she would be too old for the contest in any event. Like the matriarch Sarah, though, Esther never lost her beauty as she aged, and "remained eternally young."[23] For the rabbis who did subscribe to the fact of Esther's beauty, the miracle

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[19] Bronner, Leila Leah. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 179.
[20] *b. Meg.* 15a, *M. Gen. Rabba* 39:23.
[21] This list of beauties follows a discussion on the prophets and prophetesses of the world, of which Esther is a part (14b). Interestingly, she is not included on the upcoming list of women who had such a degree of sexuality and power of allurement that they might lead a man to stray.
[22] *Tg. Esth. I*, 2:7; *M. Pan. Aher.* 2:63; *Abba Gor.* 18. L.B. Patton,"A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther" in *International Critical Commentary* (New York: Scribners, 1908), states that the chronological details of the plain text suggest that Esther's age at the time of the contest was between 50 and 60.
[23] Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*,179

for them, the evidence of God in the Scroll, was that she did not lose her beauty with her age. Indeed, "[R]egarding her alluring beauty, R. Eleazar [in Megillah 7a] said that she appeared to every man as a member of his own people."[24] Since no one knew from where she came, every person wanted this beautiful woman to be from his background; everyone wanted to claim her as his own. Other midrashim, too, relate that no matter where she stood, with whom she was compared, or whether the on-lookers were of this world or not, Esther caught the eye of all who beheld her. "R. Judah said: She was as a statue which a thousand persons look upon and all equally admire. R. Nehemiah said: They put Median women on one side of her and Persian women on the other, and she was more beautiful than all of them."[25] The midrash to verse 2:15, that "Esther gained favor in the sight of all who looked upon her," relates that "she obtained favor not only in the sight of all earthly beings, but in the sight of all heavenly beings as well."[26] For most of the commentators to the Scroll of Esther, her beauty was quite literally out of this world.

Returning to the discussion of Esther's true name, it is not simply physical characteristics of appearance, though, that encourage the rabbis to connect Esther with the myrtle. By using the exegetical method of analogy, some later interpretations relate Esther to a myrtle in that "just as the scent of the myrtle is pleasant, so too were her deeds pleasant."[27] The connection is made in that a myrtle appears to have no scent until its flower, leaves, or blossom is bruised or crushed. This too is telling about

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[24]Barbara L. Thaw Ronson, *The Women of the Torah: Commentaries from the Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1999), 319.
[25] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:9. This imagery of a rose among thorns will reappear in the discussion of how Esther fares during the contest.
[26] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:9.
[27] *Pan. Aher.* 2:63. See also *Tg. Esth. II*, 2:7.

Esther's character as seen through the lens of the rabbis. As uncomfortable as they were with the idea and celebration attributed to a Jewish woman marrying a gentile, Esther's actions were deemed righteous, as she released her strong fragrance under the pressure of her life's mission. "Esther seemed to have done wrong in marrying a gentile king and living in his immoral, non-kosher palace. But upon closer examination one sees that everything Esther did was completely virtuous and justified for the benefit of Israel."[28] Another reason she is likened to a myrtle relates not only to its smell, but to its taste as well. "Just as the myrtle has a sweet smell but a bitter taste, so Esther was sweet to Mordecai but bitter to Haman."[29] Here, the comment reflects not her own individual religiosity that seems to be the focus of the later interpretation of *Me'am Loez*, but rather the plot of the story and Esther's relationship to two of the strong male characters in the text. Esther rightly credits Mordecai with saving the king's life, allowing him to ascend the ranks in the palace court, and Esther ensnares Haman in his own plot to destroy her people, having him hanged on the gallows he erected for the Jews. This one woman had the potential to be bitter and sweet, depending upon the circumstances in which she found herself.

The other camp delineated in *b. Meg.* 13a about Esther's true appellation believes that her name was in fact Hadassah, but she was known as Esther for a variety of reasons – reasons that no doubt reflect her true nature, character and role, as well as expose the rabbis' world view and hope for the future. In the Talmud, R. Yehuda taught that her name was Hadassah, but that she was called Esther, "because she hid her

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[28]Rabbi Raphael Chiyya Pontremoli, *Me'am Loez*. (trans. Aryeh Kaplan; New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1978), 54. Here, *Me'am Loez* is commenting also on the interpretation in *Midrash Eliahu* by Rabbi Eliahu HaCohen of Izmir.
[29] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:5.

intents." He supports his statement with a proof text from the Scroll (Est 2:19), "Esther would not reveal her nation nor the place of her birth."[30] R. Yehuda makes a connection based on the Hebrew word, *masteret*, meaning "concealed" and ties it to the root of the name Esther. The rabbis who comment on this understanding of Esther's name suggesting concealment differ as to whether or not her secrecy would aide her ascension as queen, or be used as a means to avoid her destined role.

It is suggested that R. Yehuda and later sages made this connection in order to praise Esther's ability to keep hidden her true identity, an act that enabled the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people. This is why she is referred to in the text not as Hadassah, but as Esther, "because her discretion and fealty to Mordecai who insisted that she not reveal her background until the very last moment...led to her success."[31] Despite all that the king did in order to cajole Esther into revealing her origin and identity, she remained true to Mordecai's request to be silent. According to the story relayed in the Talmud of how Ahashverosh tried to persuade Esther to divulge her secret, the first step he took was to have a banquet, presumably to invite her family and people to celebrate her election and crowning.[32] Then the king tried offering tax breaks to her people if she would only tell, but she did not. The king then lavished Esther with gifts in order to win her over; still she remained silent about her people and her heritage. Lastly, the king called for a second round of gathering the beautiful virgins in an attempt to make Esther jealous enough to give in, and ultimately reveal to him what he desired to know. Interestingly, the Talmud suggests that it was under Mordecai's advice that the king commanded the servants round up the women again,

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[30] *b. Meg.* 13a.
[31] Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 128.
[32] *b. Meg.* 13a.

not to test Esther's dedication but to continue the search for a queen.[33] At the same time, Mordecai continued to urge Esther to keep her silence.

For the rabbis, Esther's hiding of her identity was not a sign of shame, nor was it for her own selfish advancement in a gentile world. Rather, Esther's modesty and ability to hold her tongue was a characteristic inherent in her ancestry, and passed through the generations. In an attempt to strengthen her connection with other biblical heroes and ancestors, the rabbis forge a bond among Rachel, Benjamin, Saul and Esther by their silence at crucial moments, allowing the Divine plan to come to fruition in the life of each character. The foremother Rachel was the first to put herself under the ban of silence.

> "All of the greatest of her [Rachel's] descendants forced themselves to be silent. Rachel put a ban of silence on herself when she saw her wedding presents in the hand of her sister and said nothing. Benjamin her son also forced himself to keep silence. The proof is that his stone in the high priest's breastplate was a jasper, indicating that he knew of the sale of Joseph but said nothing. *Yoshpe* (jasper) – as if to say *yesh peh* (there is a mouth), and yet he was silent. Saul her descendant – "Concerning the matter of the kingdom...he told him not (I Sam. 10:16). Esther – "Esther had not yet made known her kindred (Est 2:20)."[34]

Esther not only inherits the characteristic of modesty from her ancestors, but also accrues the merit to be a queen and a tool in the Divine plan to save the Jewish people.

Mordecai, too, was aware of this Divine plan, according to the rabbis. That was one of the reasons he instructed Esther twice to maintain her silence concerning her

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[33] In the version recounted in *M. Pan. Aher.* 2: 65, Mordecai is not mentioned. It is Ahashverosh's own idea to have a second gathering of women. In *Tg. Esth.* II, 2:19, the servants suggest this to the king. See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:69, for a lengthy discussion of the different versions of this midrash. In any event, the rabbis are trying to account for the repetition of Esther's steadfast silence and account for the king's generosity. They are also synthesizing the seemingly separate facts of a second pageant, Mordecai's appearance at the gate, and the second charge to Esther to remain quiet.

[34] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:12, Maurice Simon, transl. (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 78. *b. Meg.* 13b also recounts this chain of merit based on modesty in greater detail. For variant texts between the Babylonian and Palestinian midrashim to Esther, see Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:70-85.

origins. He knew it was his duty to facilitate the plan, even if he did not understand it, for the sake of Esther's life and the life of the Jewish people. Mordecai appears in the commentaries both as willing to put Esther in the palace, and as fighting the king's decree. If she was known to be a Jew she may have been disqualified. If it was known she was a Jew, then perhaps people would know she was 75 years old, and rejected on that basis as well. Or, if she was known to be a Jew, and descendant of the line of Saul, it may appear that her hesitancy in engaging in the pageant was reflective of her being "too good" for a king of his stature; or maybe worse, the king might be overly excited to have a wife with Esther's pedigree, and never release her from her role.[35]

Because he was blessed with prophecy, though, Mordecai knew she must go to the palace, that there was some reason for Esther to be chosen. Also knowing, however, that Ahashverosh was a Jew-hater, Mordecai was aware he would never marry Esther if he knew of her Judaism. Mordecai thus instructed Esther to keep her heritage a secret, as the marriage between her and Ahashverosh would be vital to her people's survival.[36] The fear of collective punishment of the Jews based on the one Jewish queen is part and parcel of later commentaries. The anti-Jewish sentiment reflected in Ahashverosh's behavior comes to light in a commentary that suggests that Esther, being the observant Jew she was as the rabbis understood her, would not want to have sexual intercourse with Ahashverosh while she was in a state of ritual impurity. She would then have to stave off his advances, causing the king to become sexually frustrated. Knowing she was Jewish, the king might then vent his hatred toward the Jews. If,

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[35] Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live,* 122-5.
[36] *Me'am Loez,* 59. Here, Pontremoli uses commentary from *Seder Olam* 20, Rashi to *b. Meg.* 14a, and R. Elisha Gallico (1526-1589).

however, she kept her origins a secret, she would be able to use whatever excuse for non-compliance and he would accept it at face value.[37]

Targum Sheni reflects concern for both Esther's life and the lives of the Jews in Persia. In explaining why Mordecai ordered Esther to be silent about her people, it states:

> "Because Mordekhai [sic] thought to himself, reasoning: Vashti who retained her self-respect and did not want to display her beauty to the king and (to) his rulers, (as a result of which) he judged her severely and executed her. Why then did Esther not reveal (the identity of) her birthplace? Lest the king gets angry at her and executes her as well as destroys her people from whom she descends. Therefore he ordered her not to reveal (the identity of) her people and her birthplace."[38]

This explanation follows from the understanding that the servants in search of the young beauties knew of Esther and that she was not revealing herself at the time of the search. The king's anger would then be aroused by the fact that she tried to hide and did not participate in the actions of the other women to get the attention of the servants. According to this *Targum*, the gentile girls would dance naked in the window, revealing themselves the way Vashti was commanded to. These women were then rounded up, but Esther, who did not parade naked in the window, was therefore not among those girls collected. It was only after the king issued a decree that the act of hiding merited the punishment of death did she enter the harem.[39] Esther's modesty and righteousness nearly got her killed early on, and according to Mordecai's train of thought, it might later kill her and her people if she were to be commanded to do what Vashti refused.

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[37] R. Elisha Gallico in Pontremoli, *Me'am Loez*, 59. Esther's ritual observance and intermarriage will be discussed in ensuing chapters.

[38] Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 137. The fear of the severity of Vashti's decree, given her pedigree, being transferred onto one who is without such lineage is reflected in *M. Esth. Rab.* to 1:15.

[39] Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, 136-7. Esther's willingness or hesitancy will be discussed in a later chapter.

Another interpretation that exemplifies the fear of collective punishment suggests that it was beneficial to the whole of the Jewish people that Esther kept her Judaism hidden in order that no one be given the opportunity to suggest that when Esther the Queen acted on behalf of the Jews, she was biased and selfishly motivated for her own personal interests, or that of her people, instead of acting toward the benefit of the empire.[40] Had she revealed her heritage, she would be of little use to, and indeed would cause more harm to, the Jewish people. A second commentary also serves to protect the survival of the Jewish people, but in a very different way. *Nachal Eshkol* suggests that Esther concealed her identity in order that no other noblemen would follow the king's action and seek a wife from among the Jewish people, "a disaster to be avoided at all costs."[41] These fears about the physical and spiritual survival of the Jewish people in gentile lands, and among gentile people, seem to reflect more about the context of the commentators than the nature and character of Esther. These rabbis had either personally witnessed or were recalling blood libels and expulsions, Crusades, and the Inquisition. They had full knowledge of the real fears of collective punishment, of the danger of one person's action (or false incrimination) being reflected on the whole. They were also aware of the growing interaction between the Jews and gentiles, and the dangers that situation posed, from intermarriage to hostility. Still, Esther continued to be lauded in the rabbinic literature for her obedience in concealing, and for maintaining her secret until the time was right to reveal exactly who she was.

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[40] R. Moshe Alshich, *Masat Moshe* (Venice, 1601) quoted in Deutsch's *Let My Nation Live*, 124. See also *Yal. Shim.* 1053, *M. Pan. Aher.* 2:32b, and *Agg. Esth.* 43 as to why Mordecai commanded Esther to conceal her identity.

[41] Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live*, 124.

There is yet one more connection to be made by the rabbis concerning the name Esther. Showing the close relationship the sages had with outside cultures and languages, R. Nehemiyah states that, despite the fact that her real name was Hadassah, she was called Esther because "the [gentile] nations called her by *Istahar*."[42] This appellation reflects appreciation for Esther's beauty, in that the nations of the world referred to her by a familiar name that signals their awareness of her delightful appearance. Rashi explains that *Istahar* is actually related to the Aramaic word for moon, *sihara*.[43] The *Targumim*, however, relate her name to the Greek word for Venus, *Istera*, also called "that shining or morning star."[44] An important bridge between these readings is their relationship to objects of illumination or radiance. This reflects not only Esther's character as described by the rabbis, but also the rabbis' own world view and possible messianic or redemptive hopes. "Esther was as luminous as the moon or Venus, and she brought light into Jewish lives darkened by Haman's persecution."[45] Much like the aforementioned myrtle that releases its fragrance under pressure, Esther was able to cast light upon the situation of the Jews in Persia. Once the lot had been cast, Esther rose to the challenge and her brilliance saved the people from the dark abyss of extermination.

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[42] *b. Meg.* 13a. See S.A. Yahuda, "The Meaning of the Name Esther," for comments on the relationship to Ishtar, the goddess of love (a theory first put forth by Peter Jensen), and to the Old Persian word for myrtle. Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:44-5, however, completely disregards the latter argument, and offers a reading of a Spanish manuscript that connects Esther's name with a word for sun. Segal cannot find an explanation, but this author suggests a possible connection with the word *sahar*, as a scribal error, transforming the original second root letter *tav* into a *chet*. Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 107 n. 215, suggests a connection between *sihara* and *zohar*, meaning "shining."

[43] Rashi to *b. Meg.* 13a.

[44] Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, 42, 146.

[45] Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live*, 115.

It is not just the connection with radiant celestial bodies, though, that attaches Esther with the light of redemption. The Talmud[46] ponders where in the Torah Esther is mentioned. The answer given is in reference to the verse, "I will surely have concealed my face on that day *(v'anochi haster astir panai bayom hahu)*" (Deut 31:18). The issue here, however, is that the proof text associates God's hiding with exile, not redemption. It has been explained, though, that "[j]ust as a mother who is more concerned about the safety of a child who is away from home than one who is at her side, so too, [God] shows greater concern for the Jewish people when they are in exile that when they are in their own land."[47] God, being absent from the plain text, is read into the text through Esther's name, and just as the darkness of exile is illuminated through this heroine, God and the day of redemption will one day be revealed. The rabbis who understand this are the same ones living in exile, living in the darkness of fear. By reading into the text and making the connection with the Torah in this way, their world view and hopes for redemption are revealed.

Esther is connected with another part of the Hebrew bible, but this time not by her name; rather, a correlation is made with different element of her introduction – that of her being an orphan. Esther is merited with being a part of the salvation of the Persian Jews because she is parentless. According to the midrash, when the Jews were in exile, they wept aloud, crying "Remember, God, what has befallen us…our heritage has passed to aliens… we have become orphans, fatherless" (Lam. 5:1-3). In response to their cry, God reassures them, "As you live, the deliverer whom I shall raise up for

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[46] *b. Ḥul.* 139b

[47] Ginzburg, Eliezer. *The King's Treasures: A Wealth of Commentary and Insights on Megillas Esther* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 40-2. In this commentary, it is noted that "Hadassah deliberately chose the name Esther *because* it represents the darkness of exile…"

you in Media shall have no father or mother." This orphan is Esther, for "she had neither mother nor father" (Est. 2:7).[48] By this reading, Esther had no action to do; she was chosen to be the deliverer from the outset, and the reader is introduced to her by the fact, twice stated, that she was an orphan. The Talmud clarifies why it was stated twice that Esther was an orphan by reasoning that the first time was to declare that her father died at her conception, and the second, that her mother died during childbirth.[49] Other reasons were given, aside from the Lamentations proof text, that an orphan was chosen for this redemptive role, including a call for people to put their trust in God rather than in a human. In order that people turn to God to save them, God chose their deliverer to be someone of lower status, not trusted by the masses.[50] Also, according to the rabbis, since the whole conflict between Haman and the Jews began with Amalek, and even back to Esau, someone was needed who was even more righteous in honoring one's parents than was Esau.[51] "The only one who could fulfill this requirement would be an orphan. An orphan's mourning for his parent is considered the highest possible form of honor."[52]

Going back into the characters' genealogies, the rabbis assign Esther the responsibility, too, for correcting the mistake of her ancestors, and explain that is the reason she is chosen for this role. Since Saul failed to cut off the seed of Amalek when he had the chance (1 Sam 15:9), it is said, "Just as the sword of Amalek thy

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[48] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:7.
[49] *b. Meg.* 13a. This author suggests, too, that another reason might be as a result of her double appellation. *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:5 states the reason to clarify that her parents were dead was to avoid the thought that she was abandoned by her parents.
[50] Pontremoli, *Me'am Loez*, 55.
[51] *M. Gen. Rab.* 82:14. Esau's descendants had power over the Jews because he was so steadfast in the mitzvah to honor one's parents. Haman, too, was a recipient of this merit accrued by his ancestor Esau. Cf. *Pirqe R. El* 49 as to just how much Esau dishonored his parents.
[52] Pontremoli, *Me'am Loez*, 55, commenting on *Yaarot Devash* 2.

> ancestor consumed the young men of Israel who were outside the cloud, so that their women dwelt (as) childless women and widows, so by the prayer of the women all the sons of Amalek shall be slain, and their women shall dwell (as) childless women and widows. And by the prayer of Esther and her maidens all the sons of Amalek were slain and their women remained childless and widowed..."[53]

As Esther's introduction gives the reader the basics about her character, the rabbis' interpretations flush out exactly what elements of her character led to her being chosen for this role. It is not just her ancestry, though, that assigns her merit; it is her relationship with Daniel. Many modern bible scholars have pointed out parallels in the plain text stories of Daniel (1-6) and Esther, including the similarities between beautiful and successful Jews rising to positions of power; the use of foreign and Hebrew names; characters who undergo transformative struggles; the setting of palace intrigue; the contemporaneous composition of both texts; the excessive drinking and banqueting; and the characterization of wise courtiers, among others.[54] Well before the advent of critical scholarship, however, the rabbis too connected Esther and Daniel. They did so by reading him *into* the story as they interpreted it.[55]

According to one midrash, Memucan, the king's officer who suggested Vashti's execution for her insubordination and decreed the gathering of fair young virgins in the first chapter of Esther, was actually Daniel. The rabbis are able to make this leap, as

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[53] Gerald Friedlander, transl. *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon Press, 1970), 389-390. Here, chapter 49 reflects the midrash on 1 Sam 15:33. Further comments about Esther's prayer, her maidens, and her authority will be made in later chapters.

[54] Among the many critical scholars who discuss the comparisons, see K. Larkin, M.V. Fox, S.B. Berg and S. Talmon. The story of Esther has also been compared with Joseph and the Exodus narrative.

[55] Daniel can be seen as influencing Esther's religiosity in her praying and observing kashrut, as will be discussed in the chapter on Esther's religious observances. Daniel is also frequently associated with Hatach, the messenger who serves Mordecai and Esther. Some of the midrashim are not favorable to Daniel, in that he is seen as having his power and authority cut off. Also, it is questionable whether or not Daniel is Hatach, because Hatach gets murdered and Daniel continues to prophesy according to some commentators. See *Pirqe R. El.* 50, *M. Abba Gor., Tg Esth. I, Menot haLevy, M. Esth. Rab.* 8:4 and *b. Meg.* 15a.

Memucan means "the establisher" or "the one who decrees." In the midrash, Daniel as Memucan was working to arrange Esther's position in the palace, as well as seeking to depose Vashti, fulfilling God's plan. It was in this context that R. Zecharia said: "Merit is transmitted by the hand of the worthy. By the hand of Daniel the sovereignty was transferred to Esther..."[56] Later midrashim, based on this one, explain why it was that Daniel hated Vashti and wanted her removed. According to these sources, Daniel was given a Persian wife by Belshazzar who refused to speak anything but Persian, and who was abusive and insubordinate to Daniel. He then decided to make an example of Vashti so that no other man in the kingdom would have to suffer the abuse of a woman, "so Memukhan [sic] said to himself: Now a pretense had been found to force wives to honor their husbands."[57] This too, supports Esther's characterization and appreciation by the rabbis of her subtlety and obedience. It may also serve their needs to argue against taking foreign or gentile wives, as even Daniel could not control his Persian wife. This idea may be supported by the rabbinic statement, "Who is a proper wife? She who complies with her husband's will."[58] Vashti clearly was not the proper wife, in contrast to Esther who proved to be more fitting.

Lastly, in order to fully understand the character of Esther as the rabbis read her, one must investigate how they dealt with Vashti, for it was as a result of her violent and fatal deposition that Esther was introduced and sought out in the first place. In the plain text, Vashti does not appear immoral; rather, she seems undoubtedly righteous when reading her through a modern lens. Vashti is summoned to parade her "beauty" in

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[56] Friedlander, *Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer*, 394. In most midrashim, however, Memucan is identified with Haman. See *Tg. Esth. I*, 1:6; *b. Meg.* 12b.
[57] Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, 130-1, and *M. Pan. Aher.* 2: 61. *Tosafot* to *b. Meg.* 12b comment on Daniel as Memucan, but make no reference to him having a Persian wife.
[58] *b. Ned.* 66b.

front of the king and his officers, she refuses, and is subsequently executed for her righteous indignation. In order to elevate Esther, the rabbis must, out of necessity, denigrate Vashti. While it is true that not all of the commentaries recast Vashti in a negative light, many do in order to make Esther her alter ego, in terms of beauty, righteousness and obedience. Combined with the aforementioned insolence, Vashti is also accused by the rabbis of further humiliating her husband the king by calling him a stable-boy of her father's (a servant or pawn), and further insulting his manhood by suggesting that he could not hold his liquor.[59] Ahashverosh's fury was, no doubt, a result of both her refusal and her challenges to his person, relating to both the statement that *he was very angry*, and that *his anger burned within him* (1:12).[60]

Presumably, Vashti was beautiful, as she was ordered to show off in public. But it has been suggested that her beauty did not match Esther's. Some midrashim state that Vashti refused to appear in public out of fear: that the guests would and would not find her beautiful. As Vashti replied to the king, "If they consider me beautiful, they will want to kill you and enjoy me themselves; and if they consider me ugly, then I shall bring disgrace upon you."[61] According to the sages in the Talmud, Vashti was tempted to transgress, to indulge in licentiousness, but did not appear in public either because she had a sudden eruption of leprosy, or because the angel Gabriel came down and put a tail upon her.[62] Though not explicitly stated in the midrashim, the rabbis may have sought to link Vashti's sudden affliction of *tzara'at* with an unattractive element of her character. Employing word plays, the rabbis have linked this leprous condition with

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[59] *b. Meg.* 12b.
[60] *Gra*, ad loc., explaining the repetition of the king's anger. See also *Yal. Shim.* 1049.
[61] *M. Est. Rab.* 3:14, *M. Abba Gor.* to 3:14.
[62] *b. Meg.* 12a,b.

one who slanders, gossips and speaks evil. It is also the case that the rabbis attribute this skin disorder as a punishment for selfishness.[63] By claiming that Vashti became stricken with these unsightly scales and flakes, the rabbis may be suggesting even more about her character than her appearance.

Even without these miraculous cases of sudden ugliness, a double entendre is made with the verses 1:19 and 2:4. In the original suggestion from the officers, the king was encouraged to find a more worthy wife, but as the statement is echoed later, it may be the case that they were suggesting a more beautiful wife, one who might be willing to submit to the command to parade her wares.[64] She is also likened to her husband in her immorality, as R. Berachia states that "Vashti was like a raven, adorning herself with the riches of others."[65] This is an exact quotation of R. Helbo's comment about Ahashverosh in *Esther Rabbah* 2:1. This thought is further supported in the Talmud when both Ahashverosh and Vashti are represented as immoral, "he with large pumpkins, and she with squash."[66]

What Vashti may have lacked in beauty, she did not make up in grace or charm. According to the rabbinic literature, she had royal lineage, dating back to Nebuchadnezzar, but even that was made a mockery by the sages. Vashti was recast as a Jew hater, like her ancestor who caused the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jews.[67] She also is credited with urging Ahashverosh to never allow the reconstruction of the Temple, as she demands, "Would you seek to build that which my

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[63] See commentaries to Lev 12-15 and *b. Arak.* 16a, respectively.
[64] Berlin, *Esther*, 23.
[65] *M. Esth. Rab.* 3:9. The principle employed here is that of *ribui*, an expansion of the plain text, based on the word *gam* (Est. 1:9), indicating that something else is included in the meaning. Here, it is that the description of Ahashverosh's feast applies to Vashti's as well.
[66] *b. Meg.* 12a. The pumpkin and the squash are related in character, but different in size.
[67] *Tg. Esth II*, 2:1.

ancestors destroyed?"[68] She herself was made to act out her anti-Jewish sentiments. This is seen in the sages' discussion of her punishment. She was ordered by Ahashverosh to appear naked because, "in the manner in which a man sins, so is he punished. This teaches us that Vashti the wicked would bring Jewish girls, strip them naked and make them work on Shabbat."[69] The rabbis make the connection, not solely based on her style of punishment, but also on the basis of the fact that she was called to appear on the seventh day of the banquet, corresponding to the seventh day of the week, Shabbat, when she would force the Jewish servants to work, and work naked. Her heritage of hatred toward the Jews and her abuse of the young Jewish servants are inexcusable and serve the rabbis as a perfect rationale for Vashti's demise.

Also, as opposed to Esther who gained favor in the eyes of all who beheld her, Vashti could not even gain the favor of her own husband's officials. She quite literally wronged the *wrong* people. According to a midrash on Est 1:11 when Memucan states that it is not only the king whom queen Vashti wronged, the rabbis reveal that Memucan held a grudge against Vashti for hitting him the face with a shoe, and later, for refusing to invite his wife to the banquet, causing Memucan's wife to hold him responsible for the slight, causing "husbands to be contemptible in their [wives'] eyes" (Est. 1:17).[70] Furthermore, the rabbis denigrate Vashti with labels such as "the wicked" and "that

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[68] *M. Esth. Rab.* 5:2. Also in *M. Esth. Rab.* 4:8, it states that Vashti's punishment by death was a Divine decree in that she too would bear the punishment of her father's sin, as Belshazzar was killed for defiling the Temple vessels (Dan 5:30). She had continued provoking God by defiling the vessels and dressing up in the holy vestments at her own feast (*M. Esth. Rab.* 3:9).

[69] *b. Meg.* 12b.

[70] *M. Esth. Rab.* 4:6. It is also the case that Memucan wanted his own daughter to be queen, a hope underlying the suggestion that a better wife could be found (Est 1:19).

swine," emphasizing just how much they needed to despise her character in order to appreciate Esther's grace and righteousness.[71]

When left with such a brief introduction of one of the main characters of the story, the rabbis were both forced to fill in the gaps, and were given much more literary room to create and recreate the character of Esther. She has not yet acted in the biblical text investigated; she has merely been introduced. Simply by focusing on her names, her lowly status as an orphan, and her juxtaposition with Vashti, the sages begin to recast Esther into a positive paradigm, for both Jewish women and exiled Jews alike.

[71] *M. Esth. Rab.* 4:5.

Chapter Two: A Woman of Valor (Esther as an Observant Jew)

Many scholars believe that the Scroll of Esther was originally a secular, diaspora story. As such, it has much in common with other tales of that genre, among them, its intention to instill pride in Jews living in foreign lands. A major difference between this story and that of other diaspora stories such as Daniel, Judith, or even the bibliodrama of the Joseph narrative, is the lack of religiosity with regard to the Jewish heroes of the tale. Issues of concern for the rabbis when reading the plain text center around the absence of the Divine Name, the lack of prayer, the lack of traditional modesty, the lack of endogamous marriage, and the lack of ritual or religious observances, such as maintaining dietary restrictions and adhering to ritual purity. The plain text of this story reveals no material concerning any of the abovementioned religious practices. In order for the story to function as a vehicle for instilling pride in Jews living outside the Land of Israel, the rabbis must read acts of religious observance into the lives of the Jewish characters. For them, a hero cannot succeed without God, Torah and Judaism, and the sages sometimes make painstaking efforts to imbue Esther and Mordecai with a sense of being bound to Jewish law and custom.

In order to fully comprehend the actions of Esther as recast by the rabbis, one must investigate how the rabbis read the situation and practices of the Jews of Persia at the time, and why those Jews were in such dire need of a redeemer at all. Many of the interpretations of the backdrop of the Scroll rely on the Deuteronomic principle of Divine reward and punishment. That is, the Jews are at least partially responsible for the situation at hand. An explanation of the circumstances stretches back in history to the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar. That

destruction-turned-exile was prompted by the Jews' sins. In the Talmud,[72] R. Shimon bar Yohai dialogues with his students about the annihilation aimed at the Jews in the time of the Megillah, and whether or not they deserved it. One answer given was that, yes, the Jews did deserve their impending punishment as a result of the people who bowed down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol. A challenge was then made based upon the duress they must have endured, and that they only gave in to the idolatry on a surface level, and thus the threat was also only on the surface. The proof text for this is from Lamentations 3:23, "Since he did not afflict willingly, his pain is from man." That is to say, despite their being duty bound not to bow down, God left room for extenuating circumstances, and offered the Jews a chance to place their trust in God and repent.[73] A different midrash, found in the expansion of Song of Songs, also relates the harm befalling the Jews to their return to idolatry.[74] This further complicates R. Shimon bar Yohai's position, explaining there that he did not believe that this indeed was the cause of the downfall, though others disagree. In this midrash, Nebuchandnezzar was credited with erecting an idol and calling upon 23, or just 3, representatives from every nation to worship it. In one view, 23 sinners from Israel obeyed, and in the other telling, the three chosen were Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, friends of Daniel who were subsequently thrown into the fiery furnace. Since they refused and were credited with saving that generation, they became, to some, the three pillars upon which God established the world.[75] The sages who do believe that the 23 actually bowed down to

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[72] *b. Meg.* 12a.
[73] Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 104-5.
[74] *M. Song Rab.* 7:8. Here the midrashim also echo the other reasons given for the downfall, but elaborate on the righteouness of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.
[75] Despite the debate in this midrash, this does prove to be another instance whereby Daniel and his righteous friends are read into the Esther story. The generally accepted three who make up the three

the idol, believed the sinners caused their iniquity and punishment to fall upon later generations.

Another reason given that the Jews may have been deserving of punishment related back to when they lived in the Land. Using the method of *gezera shava*, the rabbis understood "That in those days" (Est 1:2) referred back to "In those days I saw in Judah some treading wine presses on the Sabbath" (Neh 13:15). In this midrash[76] the rabbis claim that God "set 'days' against 'days,'" suggesting the rabbinic notion *midah kneged midah,* that punishment is meted out according to the severity of the sin. The sin in this case was a violation of Shabbat, and so the downfall of the Jews in the Megillah began with the feast, a fact begun with those words in the text, despite the understanding that the sin was generations earlier. One might also understand the sin of Saul, who failed to wipe out the seed of Agag the Amalekite, having a direct relationship throughout the generations, on to the Jews of Persia. Because Saul failed to utterly destroy him, the Amalekite bloodline would reign over the Jews until one was worthy enough to redeem them.[77]

Yet other explanations found in the Talmud bring the sin that caused the fall to the time of the Megillah itself, indeed to the feast itself. The students in the Talmud suggested that the downfall was a result of the Jews enjoying the feast of Ahashverosh. R. Simon bar Yohai challenges them that if that was the case, the punishment would only serve those in attendance, but that was not the plan.[78] Other commentaries, too,

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pillars are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. See also chapter two of Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrashim*, vol. 1, where he explores at length the different midrashim on "the feast."

[76] *M. Esth. Rab.* 1:10. This cannot be exactly punishment for the sin, as the downfall never fully took place.

[77] *Pirqe R. El.* 49. This was previously mentioned with regard to Esther meriting the role of redeemer, and fulfilling Saul's abandoned mission.

[78] *b. Meg.* 12a.

suggest that the feast was the place where the guilt was incurred by the Jews. Since no evidence exists otherwise in the plain text, the rabbis assumed the Jews to be included in the banquet, since it was meant for "all the people" (Est 1:5). A number of issues are raised with their presence at such an unholy event. First and foremost, Ahashverosh was believed to be using and showing off the vessels stolen from the Temple. If the Jews participated in the banquet, then the issue is raised as to whether or not they participated in the desecration of the holy vessels. The sages explain that once the Jews realized what was happening, they asked and received a separate banquet where they would not be forced to do so.[79]

Still, others claim that the transgression was that they ate non-kosher food and drank non-kosher wine, invoking the prohibition on such consumption supported by the actions of Daniel, once again, when he "made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's bread nor with the wine that he drank" (Dan 1:8).[80] According to another interpretation, the Jews were served kosher food, as supported by the phrase, "according to every man's pleasure"(Est 1:8).[81] Regardless, the Jews were ordered to be at the banquet, and it was their presence that inevitably led to the potential downfall. A midrash explains that Haman knew that God alone could save the people and the only way to cause God to be angry enough with the Jews, and refuse to save them, was to have them participate in a banquet replete with lewdness, licentiousness, and heavy

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[79] *Tg. Esth. II*, 1:4, *M. Pan. Aher.* 58, *M. Abba Gor.* 8-9.

[80] *Me'am Loez* to Est 1:5. Here it is discussed whether or not the seven day feast coincided with the 180 day feast, one in which the great leaders of Israel did not participate and fled. Upon their return, it is said that the king then held this feast in order to make them participate. This commentary also claims transgression may be that the second feast took place during the Ten Days of Repentance and the last day was actually Yom Kippur, indicating that the sin was all the more gross by attending a gentile feast on such a holy day.

[81] *Pirqe R. El.* 49. Cf. *M. Abba Gor.* 5a; *Yal. Shim.* 1048 where it is stated that the Jews were forced to eat non-kosher food. See also *Me'am Loez* where it is further suggested there that the Jews brought their own food.

drinking. The wrath they incurred nearly caused God to abandon them. In the midrash, Moses and the heavenly court intercede on behalf of the Jews in Persia, and that plea combined with the good deeds of Mordecai, was enough to persuade God from allowing Haman to fulfill his plan.[82] Despite no conformity as to why exactly the Jews were nearly annihilated, the rabbis raised the issues in their times about what the Jews' presence at the feast signaled. The rabbis used the banquet as a way to homiletically address the lack of adherence to Jewish law and custom in their day, and perhaps to continue to further separate the Jew from the non-Jew in their own time and place.

With the downfall of the Persian Jews as the background for understanding the ramifications of Esther's hyper-piety as the rabbis envisioned her, attention is now turned to Mordecai and his actions, as he was the one who raised Esther. The rabbis have much to say about Mordecai's character, and they recast him much like they do Esther. In the Talmud, the rabbis use a word play and *gezerah shavah* to explain his name, and compare him to a cypress, reflecting the finest of all aromatic scents.[83] Like Esther, too, his name is not the only way Mordecai receives merit to participate in the redemption of the Jews. He, has royal ancestry deserving of recognition as well. Connecting him to Yair, Shimei, Kish and Benjamin, the rabbis find meritorious acts within all of Mordecai's ancestors, serving as a source of merit for him. As the son of Yair, playing on the word *l'hair*, to illuminate, we find that the rabbis understand

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[82] *M. Esth. Rab.* 7:13. Interestingly, Esther's sacrifice and good deeds do not play into this midrash.
[83] *b. Meg.* 10b, playing on the similar sounds of *v'rosh,* (cypress) in Is. 55:13 and 7:19, and *rosh* (finest) of scents, in Exod 30:23. The *Targum* also reflects this with the Aramaic translation of *mor dror* (from Exod 20:33) as *maira dachya*, reflecting Mordecai's name and nature. Also on this page, R. Abba bar Kahana refers to Mordecai the righteous one described in Eccl 2:26, "For the man who is good before Him, He gave knowledge and wisdom." This method is referred to as *notarikon*, and is reflected as well in *Agga. Esth.* 2:5.

Mordecai to be "the son that brought light to the eyes of Israel through his prayers.[84] As the grandson of Shimei, playing on the word *lishmoah*, to hear, the rabbis declare that he was the one whose prayers were heard. And as a descendant of Kish, playing on the word *l'hakish*, to knock, Mordecai is referred to as the one who knocked on the gates of mercy and they were then opened to him.[85] In this particular pericope, Mordecai's merit gleaned from Benjamin is not explicitly stated, though it is explained in later midrashim in that Benjamin was the only one of the brothers who did not participate in selling Joseph.[86]

In explaining the phrase, "there was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital and his name was Mordecai" (Est 2:5), the rabbis explain this introduction to Mordecai, not by his name, but by his righteous actions. Reflecting the debate in the Talmud about Mordecai's tribal association, the Maharal explains that he was called *yehudi* because all Jews who refused to bow to the idol Nebuchadnezzar erected were called such, in relation to the Tetragrammaton Y-H-V-H; they were followers of the true God. Another commentator suggests instead that the relation of *yehudi* was to the word for praise and thanksgiving, *hoda'ah*.[87] Reflecting both his sense of gratitude and his avoidance of idolatry in interpreting this biblical verse, Mordecai is understood further as being the *only* practicing Jew in Shushan during the feast and later, while not bowing

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[84] *b. Meg* 12b. Cf. *Pirqe R. El.* 50 where Mordecai is illuminating the people through halakhah instead.
[85] *b. Meg.* 12b.
[86] *Me'am Loez* to Est 2:6. *b. Meg.* 12b instead debates whether Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin or Judah, and R. Yehoshua concludes that he was from both. This is not generally accepted, as another explanation for this Benjaminite to be called "*yehudi*" in the plain text was that he was a Jew in denying idol worship. This is the opinion of R. Yohanan, and is supported with the text from Daniel 3:12, that "*Yehudi* men came," and denied idol worship.
[87] *b. Meg.* 13a. The latter commentary is that of *Chidushei haRim*.

down to Haman who was believed to be in possession of an idol, or an image of one.[88] Being a Jew in Shushan also signified that Mordecai was a Jew both inside the privacy of his own home, in the study halls, and outside on the streets among the people.[89] This later commentary no doubt reflected the importance of proud Jewish living among the gentile masses.

Mordecai's presence in Shushan was a direct result of the exile inflicted by Nebuchadnezzar, as the plain text relates. For many of the sages, Mordecai's exile was voluntary – he chose to go with the great leaders into exile, and some suggest he even went early in order to "establish a holy atmosphere in Persia so the Jews could survive the exile there."[90] The Talmud quotes Rav as stating that the exile was of Mordecai's own accord, despite the passive voice in the plain text.[91] Later commentaries on the Talmud explain that this was suggestive of Mordecai's noble standing, denying any passivity in his actions and elevating him to the position of one who was in control at all times.[92] Other commentaries suggest that Mordecai went into exile in order to "chastise and shield [the Jews]."[93]

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[88] *Me'am Loez* to Est 2:5, and 3:3. The reference to the idol around Haman's neck is explanatory of the fact that there is no prohibition of a Jew in a foreign land genuflecting to the foreign leadership. Thus, there must have been something else that caused Mordecai to refuse to bow. See also *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:2 and 7:5, that bowing to Haman meant bowing to the idol. *Tg. Esth. II*, 3:3 includes a lengthy dialogue between the attendants and Mordecai. *b. Meg.* 19a relates that Mordecai saw that Haman had raised himself up as a god, an object of worship. *Tg. Esth. II*, 6:1, relating why the night was full of restless sleep, also includes Mordecai's rebuke of the people for having bowed down, as Haman's garment was embroidered with two idol images. While many of the interpretations value Mordecai for his righteousness, there are some that blame him for the fate of the Jews, in part because of his relationship with Shimei, as well as for incurring the wrath of Haman. See *Gra* to Est 4:1, Rashi to *b. Meg* 12b, and Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:18-9.

[89] Commentary of R. Yonatan Eybeshutz, in R. Meir Zlotowitz' *The Megillah*, 54.

[90] *Tiferet Shlomo* in Zlotowitz, *The Megillah*, 55. This act was modeled after Jacob going down to Egypt for the same reasons. See *Midr. Tanh.* Rashi to Gen 46:28, though this source states that this was the reason Jacob sent Judah down. See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2: 34-6 and Grossfeld, *The Two Targums,* 135, for a discussion on whether or not this exile was the first or the second.

[91] *b. Meg.* 13a.

[92] Gaon of Vilna and Alkabetz to 2:2.

[93] *Iyyun Yaakov* to 2:2, Cf. *Pan. Aher.* 2:63.

In order for Mordecai to be an archetype of religiosity and a paradigm for other Jews to follow, the rabbis declare that he was likened to Moses and Abraham, bringing Torah to the people and abandoning idolatry.[94] He never ate unkosher food, he walked the streets donning his tefillin and prayer shawl, and he never compromised his principles, even while sitting in a gentile royal council.[95] All of these righteous actions and observances led Mordecai to try to disuade the Jews from engaging in the king's feast. According to some sources, Mordecai issued a decree that no Jew should attend the lengthy festivities, but under duress 18, 500 Jews attended and participated.[96] There is some debate about whether or not Mordecai actually attended the feast himself, but the sages that say he did also claim that he neither ate nor drank a thing.[97] Though Mordecai is credited with being a member of the Sanhedrin and teaching children Torah, he was not always liked among his people.[98] Because of his self-righteousness and public chastisements, many of the Jews in Shushan did not appreciate Mordecai at the outset of their troubles.

> "Mordechai [sic] ...was at first unpopular among the Jews (*Megillah* 13a). Many of them opposed his 'extremist' views and instigative tactics because he seemed to be more harming, not helping to the Jewish People. However, on the inside, Mordechai's intensions were completely pure, as the *Megillah* itself testifies, "he sought the good of his people and was concerned for the welfare of all his posterity."[99]

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[94] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:2; *Pirqe R. El.* 50

[95] *Eshkol HaKofer* to Est 2:6; *Yaarot D'vash* 2.

[96] *Me'am Loez* to Est 1:5. Later commentaries (*Megillat Setarim* and *Melo HaOmer*) even claim that Mordecai warned the people of the *shatnez* (mixed fabrics) of the couches in the palace, not to mention the prohibitions on lewdness, gentile wine and bread mentioned above, n 9. See also *M. Esth. Rab.* 7:13 for the dialogue between Mordecai and the people, as well as between Satan and God.

[97] *Menot haLevy* to Est 2:5 states that Mordecai could not leave the feast, he had to publicly denounce it. *Tg. Esth. I* and R. Elisha Gallico state that Mordecai did not in fact attend, and that he may have been the only Jew who did not participate.

[98] See *Tg. Esth II*, 4:1; *b. Meg.* 13b, 16a,b; *M. Esth. Rab* 7:13, 10:4

[99] Ginzburg, Eliezer. *The King's Treasures*, 38. The Talmudic reference deals with the debate mentioned before (n. 17) that it may have been better had not Mordecai been born.

Despite the few references made to Mordecai's unusual and potentially dangerous tactics, he was still held in high esteem by the majority of commentators. He was a righteous, religiously educated and observant Jew who was uncompromising in his morals and principles, despite his residing in a gentile world.

This was the man who raised Esther, and according to some, was the only man she had ever seen before she was taken to the palace, at age 75.[100] It is no wonder, then, that she too would be observant in the commandments, and religiously and morally upright in character. "Mordecai had raised Esther from infancy, teaching her the ways of God...Mordecai took the waif into his house to give her a proper Jewish upbringing. Following the usual Jewish custom, as soon as she began to speak, he taught her how to respond 'Amen' to blessings. He then continued to raise her to be a Torah observant Jew."[101] Having a scholar function as a parent enabled Esther to develop the solid Jewish foundation she would need once she left his house. While still his ward, she was surrounded by kosher food, Torah study, and observance of Shabbat and the festivals, even if the rest of the Jewish population was understood to be lax in their religious practices. The true test of her character would come as she moved into the pagan palace, and lived with a non-Jewish man.

Esther was tested from the outset. As she was taken into the harem, she was told by Mordecai not to reveal her identity. This would inevitably cause problems for someone who needed to continue to observe Jewish rituals and practices. The rabbis begin to recast Esther as a righteous, practicing Jew, from the moment she met Hegai, the steward in charge of the harem girls. In the plain text, it states that "the maiden

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[100] Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 42.
[101] *Me'am Loez* to Est 2:7. The complex rabbinic understanding of the relationship between Mordecai and Esther will be discussed in the next chapter.

[Esther] pleased him, and she his favor, and he hastened her ointments and her portions to give [them] to her, and the seven maidens fitting to give her from the king's house, and he changed her and her maidens to the best [portions in] the house of the women" (2:9). As a result of Hegai's preoccupation and favoritism toward her, Esther was able to take advantage of the situation and procure the necessary elements in order to maintain her secrecy and live as a Jew.

According to one *targum*, Esther refused the gifts given to her, and gave them to her servants, "because Esther did not want to taste from the wine of the king's palace."[102] In another commentary, Esther was said to have not tasted the food or the wine of the gentile nations.[103] This is also found in *b. Meg.* 13a where it discusses what Esther was in fact given to eat. The disagreement focuses on how to interpret the last stich of Est. 2:9 – what were the best portions Hegai gave Esther? Rav states that Hegai gave her kosher food, presumably because not knowing her origins, it would be better to give her kosher food since anyone could eat that. Shmuel disagrees, and claims that Esther was instead served fatty pork because that was what Hegai himself considered the best portions. Again, since he did not know her customs, he was trying to be especially nice to the maiden who won his favor. On this, Rashi, too states that she did in fact have to eat the pork, but the Tosafot stated that she did not. R. Yohanan differs from both Rav and Shmuel and maintains that Hegai gave her grains, calling upon the proof text from Dan. 1:16, "And the waiter carried [home] the royal bread and the wine

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[102] *Tg. Esth II*, 2:9 in Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 136.
[103] *Tg. Esth I*, 2:20 in Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 48. It also states that she observed Shabbat and the Festivals, would watch herself during the days of separation and observed all of the precepts that were incumbent upon the women of the House of Israel, just as Mordecai had commanded her. This seems to be in response to the repetition of Mordecai's command not to reveal her identity, and serves as one of the commands in and of itself.

for their feast and gave them grains."[104] Once again, Daniel and his friends are read into the Scroll of Esther, to give her the same high level of religiosity as had the characters in the other diaspora story. "Taking her cue from [them], she ate only beans, peas, lentils, rice seeds, citrons, and lettuce brought to her by her trusted maidservants. These foods were good for her complexion, giving her face an added healthy glow."[105]

Mordecai was also available for Esther's concerns about maintaining her dietary laws. Certain commentators claim that this is why he sat in the king's gate, as it says, "And every day Mordecai would walk about in front of the court of the women, to learn of Esther's welfare and what would be done to her" (Est 2:21).[106] Another reason that Mordecai would pace in the courtyard was to check on the status of Esther's ritual purity. A midrash states that Mordecai would walk about in the women's courtyard "to inquire of her [menstrual] blood-stains and separation."[107] The image is of Esther, perhaps on a balcony, holding her garments up and allowing the wandering Mordecai down below to investigate if there is any sign of or stain from her menstrual period.

The image described above is of particular interest for a number of reasons. First, by adhering to the observance of *niddah*, of ritual purity, Esther is in effect fulfilling one of the three main rubrics of Jewish law the rabbis designated specifically for women. The laws of ritual purity are so meticulous that, even if there is a mustard-

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[104] *b. Meg.* 13a with Rashi and Tosafot *ad loc.*
[105] Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live*, 120. It is also suggested here that Esther avoided the meat entirely, giving it to the dogs or perhaps to a demon. Interestingly, Deutch calls upon the commentary of Ibn Ezra and Saadia Gaon to Dan 1:16 that these vegetarian foods may also cause the breath to stink, implying that by eating them, it further allowed Esther to avoid having to transgress another Jewish law by having to sleep with the gentile king. Her halitosis may have been an attempt to repel the king.
[106] *M. Lekah Tov* 2:11. Cf. *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:8 that suggests he protected her from witchcraft, but Rashi and others suggest that since Mordecai was given a clue about the redemption of Israel through Esther, he sought everyday to see if anything had progressed. *Tg. Esth. I*, 2:10 states that Mordecai was praying.
[107] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:8.

seed size menstrual bloodstain, a woman is deemed ritually impure.[108] She remains in that state until the day where there is no menstrual blood. On top of that, a woman should remain separated from her husband for another week. Having gone to the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, she is then permitted to her husband. Assuming as these sages did, that Esther indeed followed the laws of *niddah*, one might understand that Esther was able to go to the *mikveh* or its equivalent, and was able to base her cycle with Ahashverosh on her menstrual cycle. It is possible to understand the text this way, if one combines this reading with the rabbinic understanding that Hegai the steward was so taken with Esther that he would have allowed her anything. This, however, raises another issue in that a Jewish woman married to a gentile does not necessarily have to keep these ritual laws.

> "This [fact that Esther sought Mordecai's advice on ritual purity] is truly astounding – even though she was forced to have intimate relations with the wicked Ahashuerus, her enthusiasm for observing the *mitzvah* of family purity did not wane in the least! This attests to Esther's extraordinary level of piety, for normally continuous exposure to Ahashuerus' spiritual poison would weaken the faith of even the most devout individual...from [this] we learn Esther's zeal for *mitzvah* observance remained as strong as ever... [It] also teaches us a more subtle lesson: Normally when a person undertakes an important task, he tends to forget matters of lesser importance. Esther, however, was different – even while in the midst of risking her life and resisting the King's attempts to discover her origins, she did not overlook the observances she had learned in Mordecai's home."[109]

The implications of the question of Esther's relationships will be raised again, and further expounded in the following chapter. What is clear is that the rabbis were sensitive to the fact that there is no mention about Esther's ritual observances in the

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[108] See *b. Ber.* 31a; *b. Niddah* 72b.

[109] Ginzburg, *The King's Treasures*, 46-7. This answers the sages' question about the seemingly superfluous phrase, "just as Mordecai had instructed her" (Est 2:20). The subtle lesson is derived from *M. Exod. Rab.* to Exod 2:3, whereby it states that God does not grant eminence to a man until he is tested with an insignificant matter.

Scrooll itself, and this would simply not do if Esther was to be the paradigm of Jewish pride and survival. The purity of the family rests on the woman and her observance of the laws directed toward her; if Esther of all heroines had no concern for such practices, how could the rabbis encourage later Jews of their generation to follow their lead and hold fast to Jewish law. To the rabbis, a hero was someone who upheld the traditions and the precepts of Judaism. Thus, they went to great lengths to refashion Esther as observant of traditional Jewish law, and at the same time, based on the plain reading of the text, she followed Mordecai's command not to reveal her identity. The rabbis have Esther create this air of mystery about herself, and perhaps that is what made her so intriguing to the other people in the harem.

No one is said to have questioned her peculiar eating habits, or bathing rituals, as no one truly knew who she was or from where she came. This included her seven maidservants. The rabbis in the Talmud claim that Esther was given seven servants in order to use them to count the days of the week, in order to know when it was Shabbat.[110] This idea was further expounded to state that in order to continue to conceal her identity, Esther was in need of servants as pious as she. Thus, Esther inducts her seven maidservants into Judaism.[111] This view, though not widely accepted, can be supported by the biblical text, whereby other people were converted to Judaism at the end of the Scroll ("all those who joined them" in Est 9:27), as well as the fact that Esther and her maidens fasted together (Est 4:16). Joining the Jews was clearly not out of the question in the plain text.

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[110] *b. Meg.* 13a, though a seven day week was not part of Persian culture. See Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 53, n.110. Also, see n. 113-4 about a possible *gezerah shavah* with the word "*tov*" in Est 2:9 relating to the end of the verse in Ps 92:2, "it is a good thing [*tov*] to give thanks to the Lord..." In this, "*tov*" signifies the Sabbath.

[111] *M. Meg. Esth.* 2:9; *Tg. Esth. I*, 2:9 may support this, as her maidens are called "righteous."

Aside from this understanding, other commentaries build on the notion that Esther had seven separate maidservants in order to keep the days of the week straight, enabling her to celebrate Shabbat. Esther never knows their real names, but instead assigns each of them a nickname to give her clues about the days. "Yehulta attended her on the first day of the week, Ruq'a on the second...Genonitha on the third, Nehoritha on the fourth...Ruhashitha on the fifth...Hurfitha on the sixth and Regoitha on the Sabbath."[112]

This detailed labeling is further explained to have an associative quality; that is, Esther named her maidservants in such a way that each (Aramaic) name is reflective of an act of creation on that particular day. According to some, *Yehulta* meant "workday," signified by the relationship to the Hebrew word *hol*, indicating that maid was in attendance on Sunday, the first day. *Ruq'a* relates to the Hebrew *rekiah*, the firmament that was created on the second day, as that maid worked on Monday. Tuesday's servant, *Genonitha*, could be linked either to the Garden or to the plant life in general created on the third day. The fourth day of creation heralded great luminaries in the sky, thus *Nehoritha,* "the luminous," worked on Wednesday. *Ruhashitha* worked on Thursdays, as her name relates to movement, and the first creatures to move were created that day. *Hurfitha* relates to the "little ewe lamb," as the first beasts were created on the sixth day, Friday. The maidservant who worked on Shabbat, and only on Shabbat, was named *Regoitha*, meaning "rest."[113] In this way, Esther was able to not

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[112] *Tg. Esth. I,* 2:9 in Grossfeld, *The Two Targums*, 44.

[113] *Menot haLevy*, 71b, 75b, and Gabriel Yosef Levy, *Megillat Esther im Perush Rashi.* (Jerusalem, 1995), 37. See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). The transliteration is different between Ginzberg and Grossfeld. In Ginzberg's notes, 6:460, he explains that, in *Menot haLevy*, Alkabetz relates *Hurfitha*, the maid on Friday to the word for "rush," as people typically rush around to prepare for Shabbat. Levy agrees.

only observe Shabbat, she was able to keep her privacy, as each girl worked only her specific day. That way, the maidservant who worked on Esther's Sabbath might believe she was that restful everyday, never knowing how she truly acted during the week. All of Esther's idiosyncrasies would thereby go unnoticed, and her identity as a Jew may remain hidden. As the rabbis refashion Esther this way, she is both observant and knowledgeable in Torah.

It is further evident that the rabbis recast Esther to understand the law enough to know that if it is transgressed, troubles will result. The rabbis comment on the seemingly superfluous language in Est 4:5, where she sought to find out why Mordecai was mourning in sackcloth and ashes, as Esther "told [Hatach] to go to Mordechai to find out what *this was and for what this was*."[114] In the Talmud, R. Yitzhak relates this to the phrase concerning the tablets Moses brought down, that were written *from this side and from that side* (Ex. 32:15). Using this connection, R. Yitzhak suggests that in Esther's inquiry was a veiled reference to see if the Jews had transgressed the Five Books of the Torah.[115] Esther herself was an observant Jew, and knowing that sin leads to downfall, she pondered in what ways the Jews held responsibility for their lot.

It was not only Shabbat, however, that Esther observed. She was also concerned about, or at least aware of the Festivals – particularly Pesach. The rabbis engage this topic when Esther calls for a fast before she goes to the king to seek mercy for her people.[116] According to Rav in Talmud, Mordecai transgressed the law, and fasted on

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[114] Est 4:5, emphasis mine.
[115] *b. Meg.* 15a. See also Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 176.
[116] Est 4:15-7.

the first day of the festival of Pesach.[117] This is determined in that, if the evil proclamation was signed on the 13th of Nissan, as the biblical text states, then the three day fast would include the first day of the Festival, the 15th. The commentaries, though, do not all agree on the timing of the fast.[118] One interpretation even suggests that Mordecai waited and called for the fast after the first day of Pesach, in order to at least observe the commandment to eat matzah and drink four cups of wine at the seder.[119] Those who disagree with this reading cite the biblical text whereby Esther explicitly states that the people should neither eat nor drink (Est. 3:16). Otherwise, to the rabbis, it would seem superfluous to call a fast and then to immediately demand abstinence from food and drink.[120] Indeed, some commentaries claim that it was specifically because it was Pesach that the fast was called, in accordance with the law that one may fast on a festival to "forestall the consequences of a bad dream..., [thus] one may certainly fast to annul such a terrible decree as the Jews faced."[121] The added drama of

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[117] *b. Meg.* 15a, commenting on Est 4:17, "Mordecai traversed and did all that Esther commanded." Shmuel instead claims that he traversed the canal, presumably the one between the palace and the city in order to begin calling upon the Jews to join in the fast. *Yaarot Devash* harmonizes the two comments.

[118] Rashi *ad loc.* and *M. Pan. Aher.* 71 suggest that the fast days were the 14th, 15th, and 16th of that month, while *M. Esth. Rab* 8:7, *Pirqe R. El.* 50 suggest the fast began the day of the edict, the 13th. If the latter is the case, then the transgression of the Pesach laws would only be the command to eat matzah and drink wine on the first night. The duration of the fast is also debated. *Pirqe R. El.* 50 and *b. Yebam.* 121a suggest that the fast lasted a full 72 hours, while *Midr. Teh.* 22 suggests it is impossible for such a fast to occur, for "God does not leave the children of Israel in distress for more than three days." According to this midrash, the fast was sunset to sunrise. Some even suggest that the days of the fast were not consecutive.

[119] Alshich, commenting on v. 17 that Mordecai did "almost all that Esther commanded." He explains that *k'chol*, (like) enables the reading and that he in fact transgressed *her* order, not the laws of Pesach. This way, instead of fasting, the people could prepare for the festival.

[120] R. Elisha Gallico quoted in *Me'am Loez.* Alshich, too, agrees and suggests further that the rabbis view Nisan as the month of miracles (*nisim*), and that it will always be a good month for Jews. This is based on the expansion of Exod 12:2. It ended up a good month, month of miracles, as Mordecai was rewarded and Haman hanged in Nisan. *M. Lekah Tov* to 3:7 also makes this connection. See Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 260-3, for a lengthy discussion and table concerning the different dates when the fast may have commenced.

[121] David Feinstein, *Kol Dodi on Megillas Esther: Original Concepts, Insights and Ideas on the Book of Esther* (New York: Mesora Publications, 1995), 96-7. This law allowing the declaration of a fast on a

fasting on a holiday of freedom and deliverance perhaps enabled the rabbis to homiletically address the issue of "how the sanctity of human life takes priority over ritual prohibitions."[122]

Commenting on the Talmud, Maharal credits Mordecai with the logic needed to declare a stay on following the laws of Passover in times of great danger, and instead calls for a fast. He explains that "Mordecai based his ruling permitting the fast on simple logic. The Torah was given for the Jews to fulfill. If Haman's plot was successful and there were no Jews left, it would not be fulfilled in any case."[123] Others allow Esther to maintain her newly found sense of authority, as it was she who "commanded Mordecai." In those commentaries, Mordecai is hesitant about Esther's call for a fast, suggesting that there is no way they can ask the people to fast on a major festival. Esther then responds with a quip, reminding Mordecai that he is a leader of the people Israel, and that he should be reminded that, "if the Jews cease to exist, who then will keep the Passover?"[124] Some versions also expand this rationale that, "if Israel is destroyed, what will become of the Torah and the commandments?"[125] One midrash even goes so far as to have Esther take full responsibility for whatever repercussions might come about as a result of her command. She states as part of her reply to

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festival, derived from *b. Shab.*11a, fits well, as Mordecai had a dream in which the details of the decree were revealed.

[122] Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:263. For more about the connection between the Exodus and Purim, see Berlin, *Esther*, xxxvii. The connection can also be seen in the *piyyutim* by Yanai at the end of the Pesach seder that includes a reference to Haman's decree being issued that very night, the first night of Pesach.

[123] Maharal to *b. Meg.* 15a as quoted in Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 179.

[124] *M. Esth. Rab.* 8:7.

[125] *Pirqe R. El.* 50.

Mordecai, "Fast on my responsibility. If it be considered sinful, I take the sin upon myself."[126]

Thus, the rabbis recast Esther as both knowledgeable in Torah and custom. She is fully cognizant of the Jewish calendar, the mitzvot and the potential hazards associated with not adhering to the commandments. Understanding that she was in a unique situation, and a place of potential power, Esther claims her authority in this instance and begins to develop into the tool of deliverance she was destined to become. The rabbis focus on the plain text where this personality shift takes place, and expound upon it to include issues important to them in their time and place, namely observing Shabbat, the holidays, and kashrut.

But it is not only these observances that help the rabbis establish the fact that Esther was a pious Jew. Since God is absent in the plain text Esther seems to have no direction for her prayers, if she did indeed actively pray. For the rabbis, this is unacceptable. Esther's prayerfulness is part and parcel of her relationship to God and of her standing as a model Jew. She is not, however, the only one in the midrashim that prays; Mordecai is recast to be a model Jew as well, and as such, utterances to God are often on his lips. Upon leaving Esther and before he called the public fast, Mordecai prayed to God. It was not, however, just a prayer for deliverance; he included in his prayer an explanation for his having not bowed to Haman. Since the rabbis realized that his insolence toward Haman could be called into question, they recast Mordecai to explain in his own words why he refused to bow down. "It is fully known...O Lord of all worlds, that it was not from pride of heart or [vanity] that I acted in not bowing down to Haman, but through fear of [You]...lest I should assign [Your] honor to flesh

[126] *Maamar Mordecai* quoted in *Me'am Loez* to 4:16.

and blood and I was not willing to bow down to any beside [You]." Mordecai then continues in his prayer to ask for deliverance and Divine retribution, as well as recalls the Divine promise made to his ancestors, that no matter if the Jews are in foreign lands, the covenant will not be broken.[127] This thoughtful petition not only served to elevate Mordecai as a prayerful Jew, but it also helped explain his actions, and reassure people living outside the Land of Israel that the covenant will not be broken on account of location.

Before Mordecai prayed to God, though, he had sharp words for the Jews in Persia. He reminded them that they should wear sackcloth and ashes as did the people of Nineveh, when God was calling for their utter destruction. The people during the prophet Jonah's time repented to God and were saved; that was the hope Mordecai imbued in the people under his charge.[128] Another instance whereby Mordecai offered praises to God occurred when he was rewarded for saving the king. As he was paraded in royal garb through the streets, Mordecai offered words from the psalms. "'You have transformed my mourning unto a rejoicing for me' (Ps 30:12). You have removed the sackcloth from me and have clothed me (in) royal apparel. I will praise You, O Lord my God, my Redeemer, 'because You have not let the heart of my enemies rejoice over me' [Ps 30:2]."[129] Mordecai is thus seen as mindful of God in times of sorrow and desperation, and also in times of great gladness.

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[127] *M. Esth. Rab.* 8:6. The reference to the Divine promise is Lev 26:44.
[128] *Tg. Esth. II*, 4:1 in Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 152. See also n.6 for a discussion of the ritual for observing a public fast day and how Mordecai follows the law, and how he differs in this incident.
[129] *Tg. Esth. II*, 4:1 in Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 175. This targum also cites Mordecai praying words from the psalms upon the deliverance of the Jews. The Kohanim were described as praying as well.

Esther is also recast to be someone who prays to God for guidance, help and gratitude. She, too, calls upon the actions and the reservoir of merit left by her ancestors and reminds God of the promises made to the people Israel. That she followed Mordecai's lead is evident in a midrash whereby Mordecai reminds Esther of her need to pray. He instructs her, "Pray to God for your people Israel...Give your lips no rest from prayer, let them not cease seeking mercy from your Creator."[130] As she prepared herself for her fast, Esther removed her royal clothes, donned sackcloth and ashes and prayed. In one account of her prayer, she calls on God, the Father of orphans. She beseeches God for mercy and for deliverance for her, an orphan herself, who trusts in God. She prays for all the people, that they might be saved from the enemies that had risen against them; and she prays that Ahashverosh would look kindly upon her and be humbled.[131] In another account, Esther asks God to forgive the sins of all her people and "to listen as we call You in our time of trouble...when I come in to him [the king] let me enter in peace and leave in peace.[132]

It was not just during her fast, though, that Esther prayed. As she garnered her courage to enter the king's chambers unannounced, she stood in the royal chamber, surrounded by idols. Esther soon realized that the graven images had caused the Divine Presence to leave her, and she shouted out, "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Ps 22:2)?' Esther stood there in the palace court, opposite the Throne Room immersed in prayer. Her very standing there was in itself a prayer. Also on her lips at that moment was a prayer for the Holy Temple.... [As she started to enter] she prayed,

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[130] *Me'am Loez* to 4:14.
[131] *M. Esth. Rab.* 8:6. *Pirqe R. El.* 49 states that it was through Esther's prayer, and that of her maidens, that Amalek's seed was finally destroyed.
[132] *Me'am Loez* to 4:17.

'be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is no one to help' (Ps 22:12)."[133] Feeling that the heathen palace was a place devoid of God, Esther is described as praying fervently to restore the Holy Spirit to her being, to have the Presence with her even in the house of idolatry.

As Esther entered the king's chambers, she makes a final appeal to God to protect her as she fulfills her mission. She addresses God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Benjamin, her ancestor. She reminds God that if she is unsuccessful in playing this part mandated by Him, there will be no one left to say, "Holy, Holy, Holy (Is 6:3)," three times a day. She further prays to be saved from the foolish king as Daniel and his cohorts were saved from the fiery furnace. She wonders what more the people could do, as they had fasted and repented, donned sackcloth and ashes. Then, with beautiful knowledge of her heritage and text, she poetically recounts in detail the merit of her ancestors which should save her at her time of peril. She recalls the testing of Abraham and the binding of Isaac, and connects the binding with the bonds of the covenant. Through tears, she begs for an angel of mercy to accompany her. She prays for the merit of Abraham, the strength of Isaac, the grace of Jacob and the kindness of Joseph. Esther then beseeches God to act with the attributes laid out in Deut 5:10, the Gracious One, slow to anger, ready to forgive, the One abundant in kindness and love for those who keep His commands. She begs God to hear their prayers and to answer them. Toward the end of the prayer, Esther reminds God of the merit she has amassed:

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[133] *Me'am Loez* to 5:1, compiling midrashim from *Menot haLevy*, the *Targumim* and *Midr. The.* 22. See also *b. Meg.* 15b about the house of idols causing the Divine Presence to flee. Esther is further understood to pray to be saved from a dog [Ahashverosh]. See Maharsha and Rashi to *b. Meg.* 15b.

> "I fasted before You three days, corresponding to the three days it took Abraham to go (to the place) to tie up his son on the altar before You. You preserved the covenant toward him and said to him that whenever your descendants will come into distress, I will remember for them the binding of their father Isaac and redeem them. I fasted an additional three days, corresponding to the three (days) that Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and said: 'All that the Lord spoke we will do and accept (Ex 24:7). Now redeem them from this distress...O God, Lord of Hosts Who tries the hearts and the kidneys, remember in this hour the merit of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Do not turn away from my request nor delay (a reply) to my petition."[134]

Esther's lengthy prayer, as portrayed in this midrash, was sufficiently effective, as she was later described as having angelic accompaniment as she met with the king. God had restored her beauty, grace and charm. Ahashverosh, initially furious, was overtaken by the sight of his queen. He "rose in haste from his throne and ran to Esther and embraced her and kissed her and flung his arms around her neck."[135]

The rabbis recast Esther in the image of their ideal. For homiletical purposes, or for inspiration and connection to a Jewish biblical character living in the exile, the rabbis clothe Esther in the garb of a pious Jew. As many of the sages themselves were living in exile, they fostered a connection with Esther's character and viewed her as ripe for recreation, particularly as a symbolic representation an ideal Jew in their own situations. The story, replete with the difficulties Esther must have faced living with a gentile king in a gentile world, was understood as a microcosm of their lives as Jews in foreign lands. In order to elevate those who remain loyal to the Torah and Jewish customs, and to encourage others to follow suit, the rabbis refashion Esther to be a model Jew living outside the Land of Israel. In as much as God has not forsaken the

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[134] *Tg. Esth. II*, 5:1 in Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 162-3. This whole prayer has a different version, another aggadic supplement wherein Esther recounts distress and miracles from Egypt as well as God's fidelity to the Jewish people through all the gentile kingdoms: Babylonian, Medio-Persian, Greek and Roman. The weight of God's protection in times of exile echo throughout this manuscript. See Grossfeld, note *ee*, 162.

[135] *M. Esth. Rab.* 9:1.

covenant with the Jews, no matter where they live, the Jews must not forsake the covenant either. The sages underline this by making Esther knowledgeable in Torah and tradition, competent and steadfast in the special mitzvot assigned to women, observant of Shabbat and the holidays, and always with a prayer on her lips. For the rabbis, though, Esther's piety and faithfulness as a Jew was inchoate in the biblical text. It is not that her religiosity was absent from her person; rather, her actions and faith were hidden between the lines, and they were able to give voice to her level of observance.

Chapter Three: All the Queen's Men

Among the other issues raised about an observant Jewish woman living in a non-Jewish palace, one cannot disregard a preeminent problem: Esther was intermarried. The reality of intermarriage was a threat to the rabbis; indeed, it threatened the whole of the social fabric of Judaism. The woman in a marriage is considered to be the anchor, the one who grounds the family in the traditions of the people. In traditional circles, if a Jewish man took a non-Jewish wife, the heritage would not be passed down to future generations. Likewise, in Esther's case, she was unable and unwilling to disclose her Jewish identity, thus rendering her ability to create a Jewish home in the palace moot.

Jewish law abounds with references to the prohibition of a Jew marrying a non-Jew, particularly a heathen or an idolater. The earliest laws were Toraitic, and these prohibitions were expounded in the Talmud and later codes.[136] For the rabbis, too, it was considered a sin to intermarry. As a result, the sages engaged in a plethora of exegetical gymnastics in order to deal with the issue raised in the Scroll of Esther – that the heroine committed a great sin by marrying the heathen king. Among the varied ways they attempted to resolve the problem, most of the commentators fall into one of two categories of thought: that Esther indeed married the gentile king; or, that Esther was first and truly married to Mordecai. Exploring both these alternative explanations, Esther's sexuality, fidelity and sacrifices come to light, sometimes in a particularly graphic way. Many of the same texts, too, will be used to promote each line of thought.

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[136] Deut 7:3; Exod 34:16; Josh 23:12; Ezra 9:1-2, 10:10-11; Neh 10:31; *b. Abod. Zar.* 36b; *b. Sanh.* 81b; See also Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot,* §52.

When reading the plain text of the Scroll, one might understand that Esther, raised by Mordecai, was taken to the king's palace. As she participated in the pageant, the king became enamored with her and made her his queen. Typically, this would suggest that Esther and Ahashverosh were married, enjoying the full conjugal experiences that marriage entailed. A midrash even suggests that once the king married Esther, he did not copulate with any other woman. Esther was not one wife among many; she was the one and only.[137] A modern biblical scholar notes, however, that the plain text never explicitly mentions that Ahashverosh and Esther married. The absence of such a detail may suggest the author of the Scroll wished to avoid the issue of the intermarriage, or at least attempted to shy away from highlighting the violation.[138] Despite this omission, it was expected that the king married Esther, as she is referred to as "queen" in the latter half of the Scroll.

The situation of the intermarriage greatly disturbed the rabbis for a number of reasons. First, as previously noted, Esther's Jewish observances would be put to the test living with a heathen king. Also, since it was deemed a sin to intermarry, and since Esther was knowledgeable in Torah and Jewish law, the rabbis took issue with the fact that she would willingly engage in such a vile endeavor.[139] The rabbis were sensitive to the issues of Esther's sexuality and sexual experiences with the king as well. For some of the sages who believed that Esther indeed married Ahashverosh, there must have been some clue in the text to suggest that there was a Divine plan behind all of the seemingly horrific circumstances depicted. One commentary suggests that while Esther hid herself for four years in order not to participate in the contest, the gentile

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[137] *M. Esth. Rab.* 1:3.
[138] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 62.
[139] The meta-issues of Esther's willingness and passivity will be discussed in the following chapter.

girls flaunted themselves in front of the king's servants. God then remarked that since Esther was modest, she would be awarded with royalty.[140] Her marriage to Ahashverosh, then, had "Divine validation."[141] Also, in order to explain or justify a nice Jewish girl marrying and cohabitating with a gentile, Rashi explains in his comment as to why Mordecai was found pacing about the courtyard that "Mordecai said that the only rationale for this righteous woman to be taken to sleep with an uncircumcised gentile was that she would eventually rise up to save Israel."[142] This was not the only place that Rashi read God and the greater Divine plan into the text with regard to the intermarriage of Esther and Ahashverosh. In the Talmud, R. Chisda sought to explain why it was stated in Est 2:16 that Esther was taken to the king's palace in the Hebrew month of Tevet, when it was already mentioned that she was taken in the tenth month. R. Chisda simply states that Tevet was the month when the body derives pleasure from the body.[143] Rashi expounds upon this by stating that the choice of month was also a result of God's intervention in that, since Tevet is a winter month, the cold air would ensure that there would be maximum pleasure achieved by body to body contact.[144]

As it has already been noted that some rabbis viewed Esther as rather unattractive though blessed with Divine grace and charm that caused everyone who looked upon her to be enchanted by her,[145] there is yet another instance whereby God may have intervened on her behalf concerning the king's favor toward Esther. The

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[140] *M. Pan. Aher.* 63-64.
[141] Bronner, *Esther Revisited*, 184.
[142] Rashi to Est 2:11. See also *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:6.
[143] *b. Meg.* 13a.
[144] Rashi to *b. Meg* 13a; See also Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 132.
[145] *b. Meg.* 13a with Rashi; see Chapter Two above.

rabbis of the Talmud question why it states that "the king loved Esther more than any of the women and she found greater favor in his eyes than all the virgins (Est 2:17)."[146] Explaining the use of both words, "virgins" and "women," Rav clarifies that "when the king wanted the taste of a virgin, he tasted; and when he wanted a taste of a woman, he tasted." The difference suggests that a "woman" would be appealing in that she was sexually experienced, indeed possibly married, and a virgin would also appeal to the king for her particular, untouched virtues. Read this way, it seems that Esther was recast by certain sages to be sexually satisfying to the king, able to meet his need and desires, whatever they might be. This would not be possible for Esther, being the nice Jewish girl the rabbis construct, without help from God.[147]

The plain text suggests that the king loved Esther, even if her feelings were not returned in the Scroll nor in the midrashim. Indeed, according to the Talmud, the king continued to love Esther all her life as he did the day he married her.[148] But it was not simply her beauty, grace or charm that caused the king to feel this passion for his new queen. It may not have been her aforementioned God-given sexual talents either; rather, it may have been her physical shape that had so sexually aroused the king each and every time they were together. Knowing that Esther prayed the words of Psalm 22 on her way to visit the king, the rabbis in the Talmud take note of the colophon of that psalm which states, "*al ayyelet hasachar*." This is typically read as the "dawn star," though its literal meaning is the "hind (deer) of the morning." The sages then ask why

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[146] *b Meg.* 13a. The issue concerns the use of both *nashim* and *b'tulot*. Rav plays on the connection between *b'tulah* (a virgin) and *b'ulah* (a non-virgin).

[147] Barry Dov Wallfish, "Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis," *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 22 (2002): 311. He uses this Talmudic passage to harmonize the issue that some rabbis view Esther as being passive in her relationship with the king, though here she was apparently sexually talented. The idea of Esther's passivity will be discussed later.

[148] B. Yoma 29a.

Esther was compared to a hind, and then provide a rather explicit explanation: "To tell you that just as a hind has a narrow womb and is desirable to her mate at all times as the first time, so too was Esther precious to King Ahashverosh at all times as at the first time."[149] This midrash suggests the king and Esther had sexual relations often, despite the discomfort the rabbis had with their relationship and with the issue of Esther's modesty and piety.

Nonetheless, there is yet another midrash that explains how sexually active the new couple were. In the Talmud, the rabbis seek to explain why the king's two servants plotted to kill him (Est 2:21).[150] R. Chiya bar Abba states that one reason may be that ever since the new queen came to the palace, the servants had not gotten any sleep. Rashi expounds upon this by stating that the servants' workload became more burdensome because their sleep was constantly interrupted in order that they bring water to the king, for sexual intercourse causes thirst.[151] The connection is made between the water needed after sex and the water that would be used to poison the king. Apparently, Ahashverosh had a great need to quench his thirst, great enough to continually disturb the sleep of his servants.

There are some late midrashim, however, that claim there was no intimacy between the king and Esther until that fateful moment when she willingly went to him. The issue of the intermarriage, then, was null and void until the union was consummated. One midrash states that Ahashverosh refused to be intimate with Esther until he knew her identity out of fear that she was of a lesser class and lineage than

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[149] *b. Yoma* 29a. Other explanations are given to this comparison as well, here and in *Midr. Teh.* 22. There Esther is likened to the dawn, not the hind, being a light at a dark time. These explanations leave aside the sexually explicit readings altogether. See also, Bronner, *Esther Revisited*, 182.
[150] *b. Meg.* 13b.
[151] Rashi to *b. Meg.* 13b. See also Ginzburg, *Legends*, 6:461.

he.[152] Another, more radical approach was taken by the mystical commentary of the *Zohar*. In this bizarre midrash, God intervenes to prevent the consummation of the marriage by substituting a demon for Esther in the presence of the king. The demon would appear in the guise of Esther and perform all the conjugal duties expected of her. All Esther had to do was whisper a name of God and she would disappear from sight just as the demon appeared.[153] Thus, she never lived with Ahashverosh as his wife.

It was not just the issue of Esther's sexuality and sexual experiences with the king that bothered the rabbis; it was the issue of the intermarriage itself. The rabbis were unwilling to consider their heroine, especially as they recast her, to be an eager participant in the marriage.[154] Many of the commentators base their reading of Esther as unwilling on the use of the word *va-tillaqaḥ*, "she was taken," in Est 2:8, 10. The passive form of the verb suggests to some that Esther was taken against her will, even forcibly to the king's palace, and later, into his chambers.[155] Another commentary suggests that the reason Mordecai sat at the king's gate was that he was awaiting any opportunity to grab Esther, rescue her, and move her to safety, out of the arms of the heathen king.[156] Though the opportunity never presented itself, the comment exposes the sages' discomfort with the intermarriage and with Mordecai's seemingly non-active role in Esther's saga.

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[152] *Megillat Setarim* to Est 2:15-18.
[153] *Zohar* 3:275b-276b. This idea is further elucidated in *Tiqqunei Zohar* 20-21, where there are absolutely no sexual relations between the king and Esther. This midrash will appear later in the discussion of Mordecai's marriage to Esther, as well as in the discussion of Esther's child.
[154] The earliest concerns over the issue of the intermarriage can be seen in the LXX Additions to Esther, as described in Bronner, *Esther Revisited*, 183. Bronner cites Add. Esth. 14:15 (NEB) where Esther defends her modesty and piety by stating, "You know that I hate the splendor of the heathen, I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised or of any Gentile."
[155] Ibn Ezra to 2:8; *Tg. Esth. I*, 2:10; *Agg. Esth.* to Est 2:8. *Agg. Esth.* also brings up whether or not Esther should have sacrificed her life as not to violate her life, a topic that will be discussed further.
[156] R. Judah the Pious, *Perush haTorah le-Rav Yehudah he-Ḥasid*, I.S. Lange, ed. (Jerusalem, 1974) 133.

Whereas some of the commentaries mentioned above would have Esther avoid sexual relations with the king until Chapter Four, most commentators suggest that Esther did indeed have sex with Ahashverosh, albeit unwillingly. A serious question arises throughout the bulk of the rabbinic commentaries: Why did Esther not sacrifice her life in order not to violate the prohibition against intermarriage and subsequently profane God's name? In *b. Sanh.* 74a-b, the discussion concerns under what circumstances a Jew is to martyr himself. Couched in the debate over the major mitzvot one must not transgress even at the cost of his life, the sages relate that one should sacrifice his life rather than transgressing even a minor mitzvah in public, even at a time of great crisis. The rabbis then bring up the case of Esther who was living with a non-Jew, presumably cohabiting with him. She, then, should have sacrificed her life instead of marrying Ahashverosh. Even though no one saw Esther having sexual relations with the king, their relationship was public knowledge, even among the Jewish community.[157] Rashi suggests that she had relations with the king so as not to be killed for refusing him, but this seems to be in direct opposition to the Gemara, that clearly states she should be killed rather than sin in public.[158] Two answers are given to Esther's situation. First, Abaye suggests that the rules did not apply to Esther in that, when the king engaged in sexual intercourse with her, she laid beneath him as passive as a clod of earth. Since she did not willingly have intercourse with Ahashverosh, she was not required to sacrifice her life. Even if a woman is married, and is violated or

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[157] *b. Sanh.* 74b with Meiri. *b. Sanh.* 74a deals with the issue of marrying a non-Jew while 74b deals more with the sins involving sexual intercourse.
[158] Rashi to *b. Sanh.* 74b.

raped publicly, it is not considered a profanation of God's name, so long as she remains passive throughout the ordeal.[159]

The second response to Esther's unique situation is related to the issue of the time being one of great crisis or royal decree. The Gemara stated that even in times of royal decrees aimed at stamping out Jewish practices, one must not even violate a minor mitzvah in public. This was not the case for Esther. Rava explains that when the motivation on the part of the Gentile is for pleasure alone, the transgression does not merit martyrdom. Despite the fact that the situation was not good for the Jews at the time that Esther was taken and made to transgress the Law, the king was not aware that she was Jewish. His forceful nature with Esther, as the rabbis read it, was for his own pleasure. His motivation was personal, as he was not out to subvert Jewish practices; therefore, Esther was not required to sacrifice her own life in order not to submit to him.[160] In this case, even when Esther willingly went to the king, she committed a sin, but that sin did not require martyrdom.

The issue of sacrificing one's life in order not to transgress the law pervaded Medieval rabbinic literature. One such poignant example exists in *Eshkol haKofer al Megillat Ester*, the commentary of Abraham Saba (1440-1508). Despite the talmudic explanations, Saba could not fathom why Esther did not martyr herself, nor did he understand how Mordecai could have patiently waited while the travesty occurred. His

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[159] See *Yad Ramah, Chidushei haRan*, Rashi and Tosafot to *b. Sanh.* 74b.

[160] *b. Sanh.* 74b with Rashi. Rava maintained that Esther was not married to Mordecai, thus her transgression was not one of the three sins for which martyrdom would be required in any situation. Those sins include adultery/incest, murder, and idolatry. This passage will be revisited in the section on Mordecai and Esther being married as well. On this Gemara, *Beur haGra* also points out that since girls and women were taken from every nationality, one could not include this in the category of a Jew being forced by a gentile to transgress a Jewish law for the sake of profaning God's Name.

words reflect his personal experiences, with the memories of Jewish martyrs still fresh in his mind. He asks:

> Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had 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? Especially during the first decree, which was directed only against the children, they would take their sons and daughters and fling them into pits to kill them or would strangle and slaughter them rather than see them committing idolatry. So why did Mordecai not 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 why did he wait until they took her away? . . . This was a very strange thing. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? 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.[161]

The talmudic explanations did not convince Saba, but as Walfish points out, he could not openly defy or deny the tradition.[162] He came to accept the argument presented in the Talmud, as did most of the exegetes of his day. Despite the fact that the traditional understanding was that there was some greater purpose involved in the taking and seducing of Esther, real life mirrored much of the story and called to mind the suffering and martyrdom of Jews throughout the Middle Ages. As the rabbis read the Scroll, God intervened on Esther's behalf, but for the Jews in Medieval times, their greater purpose was to sanctify God's name rather than transgress the mitzvot. It seems as if the tension between accepting the majority opinion of the rabbis, that Esther needed not to sacrifice her life, and questioning that opinion reflects the tension between saving Jews or saving

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[161] Abraham Saba quoted in and translated by Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993),123-124.
[162] Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 124-25.

Judaism. The questions reflect the serious real-life circumstances of having to make that decision, particularly in the Middle Ages.

In Chapter Four of the Scroll, Esther girds up her strength to visit the king on her own accord. For the rabbis who understand Esther to be married only to Ahashverosh, it is her willingness at this point to enter into sexual relations with the king that causes her actions to be understood as a sin. She is aware of the consequences of her actions. The *Targum* provides an eloquent explanation of just how aware Esther is, as she responds to Mordecai's request that she see the king. "I have been praying for thirty days that the king should not ask for me and this not cause me to sin; for when I was reared by you, you used (to tell) me that every woman that has been captured of the daughters of Israel or of her own free will went to the gentiles has no inheritance portion among the tribes of Israel."[163] In going to the king on her own accord, Esther knew she would be losing her place among the Jews.

Other examples of Esther's awareness of her actions are based on Esther's words, "If I perish, I perish" (Est 4:16). Commenting on the repetition of the word "perish," one midrash explains that since Esther was already lost to her people, "it will be no great loss if I perish. If I do not go, I will be killed along with my people. In any case, I will perish."[164] Other midrashim present the repetition as a loss of both her body and her soul. When Esther was taken to the king, she was physically lost to her people, and now as she transgresses the Torah, she is sacrificing her soul for the sake of her

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[163] Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 155.
[164] *Me'am Loez* to 4:16.

people.[165] In any event, Esther now engages in what was once a compulsory act, though some might argue there was still a modicum of compulsion. For the rabbis who understand Esther as married to Ahashverosh, she was sacrificing herself in a unique way on behalf of her people.

The situation changes dramatically, though, when the sages explore and expound upon the relationship between Esther and Mordecai. Even from the very introduction of the story's two protagonists, the exact relationship between them is vague. It would appear in the plain text that Mordecai took Esther, his cousin, for a daughter; that is, he raised her in place of her deceased parents.[166] There is in fact a midrashic tradition that has Mordecai go to great lengths to raise Esther properly. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Mordecai taught Esther to observe the Torah, her tradition, and her heritage. Other midrashim state that Mordecai actually suckled the orphan when he could not find a wet nurse to perform that function for him.[167] A separate midrash even states that Mordecai's *wife* suckled the infant Esther in place of her deceased mother.[168] Both of these traditions make a play on the word "*omen*" in Est 2:7, reading "[Mordecai] suckled Hadassah," instead of the typical reading, "he had raised Esther." There could also be a connection made between the suckling and the phrase "*bat dodo*" (daughter of his uncle). The word play suggests a defective spelling

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[165] *Agg. Esth.* 44; *M. Lekah Tov* to Est 4:16; *Tg. Esth. I*, 4:16. The Talmudic and majority of the commentators read this repetition in light of the marriage between Mordecai and Esther. This will be dealt with later.

[166] The Hebrew is quite clear that Mordecai was Esther's cousin; however, many commentaries and translations have him as her uncle.

[167] *M. Gen. Rab.* 30:8, with the word *omen* suggesting a wet nurse.

[168] *Midr. Teh.* 22:3. The reference to the heretofore unmentioned wife of Mordecai may also be an attempt to avoid issues of impropriety between an unmarried Esther and an unmarried Mordecai.

of *dod* (uncle) as *dad* (breast), thereby making Esther the "daughter of his breast."[169] In either case, Mordecai and Esther seemed to have a close, but non-sexual relationship.

The plain text reads that Esther was the daughter of Mordecai's uncle (Est 2:7), but the situation is not that simple for many of the rabbis. In trying to resolve the issue of intermarriage and to determine the exact connection and relationship between the story's two human heroes, the sages created an even greater issue with regard to Esther's relationship with Mordecai. Much of the discussion of this relationship is based on Est 2:7 when the protagonists are introduced and described. After stating their basic kinship, the verse then states that the beautiful Esther was orphaned, followed by, "*leqaḥah Mordecai lo levat.*" There are a number of issues with regard to these four seemingly simple words and their context, granting the rabbis an enormous opportunity to perform their exegetical magic. Some of the commentaries are based in grammatical peculiarities, while others seem more rooted in sociology.

The earliest commentaries on this text suggest that Mordecai and Esther were married to one another. The first instance of reading the text this way comes in the translation of the LXX. In that version, verse 2:7 recounts that Mordecai took Esther as a wife.[170] The early Jewish sources, too, render their relationship as one of husband and wife.[171] In the Talmud, R. Meir, a second century C.E. Tanna, instructs people not to read the text as "Mordecai took her *levat* (as a daughter), but rather *levayit* (as a

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[169] *Menot haLevy* to Est 2:7.
[170] See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrashim*, 2:50.
[171] See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrashim*, 2:51-2. Segal notes that "within the rabbinic corpus the tradition that [they] were married... seems to be unique to the Babylonian Esther-Midrash and works deriving from it." He notes that the similarity with the LXX leads him to assume it is an "ancient exegetical position" and that the tradition's development alongside the belief that Esther was Mordecai's niece, was a "way of creating a biblical precedent for the controversial Pharasaic practice of niece-marriage."

home)."[172] R. Meir uses a proof text from 2 Sam 12:3 to support his case. In that story, Nathan's parable of a poor man and his lamb are representative of the relationship between Uriah and Bathsheba. The poor man took the lamb *levat*, as a daughter, nourishing it and caring for it; but one should expect and read the text with the understanding that the relationship was really one of matrimony, as was the case for Uriah and Bathsheba. The exegetical principle of *gezera shavah*, that a phrase used, or in this case understood, one way in Scripture can give clues to its usage elsewhere, gives R. Meir a leg to stand on, though it is not firmly based.

Many more midrashim came about to support and explain this seemingly peculiar reading. Without using the proof text from 2 Samuel, there is a rabbinic basis for reading a marriage into the relationship between Mordecai and Esther. The word "home" serves as a euphemism for "wife" in rabbinic literature. This may be seen elsewhere in the Talmud, as R. Nachman states, "I never referred to my wife as my wife, but as my home."[173] In wondering why, if the understanding was that they were indeed married, did the text not just explicitly state that fact, a later commentary brings to light a different talmudic passage that helps elucidate the relationship between Esther and Mordecai. In *b. Ket.* 59b, the Gemara states that the "purpose and desire of a woman is in three things: first, *banim* (children); second, *yofi* (beauty); and third, *takhshitim* (jewelry). The acronym of these three words spell out *bayit* (home)." The commentary then goes on to recount other midrashim from the Talmud and elsewhere that Esther lacked *yofi*, beauty, recalling that she was sallow, or green like a myrtle. Since she was without the *yod* of the word *yofi*, it made sense that Est 2:7 would not

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[172] *b. Meg.* 13a. Cf. *Tg. Esth. I*, 2:7 that uses both *bayit* and *bat*, in stating "Mordecai took her into his house and called her daughter."
[173] *b. Git.* 52b. See also Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 129.

have the *yod* in the word *bayit*, connoting a wife and home, and instead, read *bat*, daughter. The commentary states that the sages knew this to be the case, so they instructed people to read the text as it should be, that Esther was a full-fledged wife.[174] In the Talmud, though, R. Meir may not have been basing his interpretation solely on a word play. He may have been responding to a seeming redundancy in Est 2:7, that Mordecai raised her *and* took her for a daughter.[175] Both statements would appear to be relaying the same information, and thus would be deemed superfluous. One stich would then need to suggest something other than a paternal relationship from Mordecai's position; if the first half connoted Mordecai as a father figure, then the last part of the verse meant something else.

An answer to this quandary, and something that may have influenced R. Meir's claim, lies in the verb chosen for Mordecai's stewardship of Esther. The word chosen, *lakaḥ*, especially used in conjunction with two indirect objects preceded by *l-*, is suggestive of acquisition, particularly that of a wife for marriage.[176] Rashi, too, uses this as one reason for his acceptance of the earlier sages' belief that Mordecai and Esther were married. Later Medieval commentators who also ascribe to this recasting of the relationship also focus on the grammar in this verse as part of their rationale as well.[177]

Another issue with regard to the relationship between Mordecai and Esther arises from the reading of the plain text. In Est 2:7, it clearly states that the two were

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[174] *Bekhirat Avraham* to 2:7 quoted in Moshe Bogomilsky, *Vedibarta Bam: And You Shall Speak to Them on Megillat Esther* (New York: Bogomilsky, 2000) 57.
[175] See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrashim*, 2:49, n. 91.
[176] See Walfish, "Kosher Adultery," 325, n. 13. Walfish includes an extensive list of biblical examples for this grammatical structure. See also *Etz Yosef* on *M. Esth. Rab.* to 2:7.
[177] Rashi to Est 2:7 and *b. Meg.* 13a. See Walfish, "Kosher Adultery" for a lengthy discussion of Medieval commentators' acceptance of and rejection of the earlier sages' stance on the marriage.

cousins. As the modern Biblical scholar, L.B. Paton, points out, since the two were cousins, it would be likely that they were near the same age. Understanding that, it would be less likely to view their relationship as one with father-daughter characteristics.[178] This is especially convincing when Est 2:7 is investigated even closer. In the middle of the verse, it states that Esther was a "young woman (*na'arah*) who was comely and beautiful." The placement of this description troubled the rabbis. Why would the text elaborate on Esther's beauty there, and not when she is involved in the beauty-pageant? Why, some ask, would her beauty be described in the same verse as her relationship with Mordecai, if not to suggest a link between the two? In summarizing commentaries and adding some of his own, the modern commentator David Feinstein states,

> "We may assume that Mordechai's primary intention in adopting Esther was genuinely to be a father to his orphaned cousin. Nonetheless, he recognized that having her as an adopted daughter posed significant [halakhic] problems, particularly because of her exceptional attractiveness, whether it was natural or induced by Heavenly intervention. He might be subjected to temptation and there would surely be times when *yichud*, the prohibition for him to be alone with a woman who was neither his wife nor his daughter, would present difficulties. Therefore he decided that the only feasible way to be a *father* to her was to marry her."[179]

Since Esther was deemed a *na'arah*, a young woman of a marriageable age, it would seem that if they were of similar ages and because she was depicted as beautiful, it is plausible that a marriage took place.[180] Furthermore, cousin-marriage was an acceptable form of union between a man and a woman, and, coupled with the fact that it

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[178] L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 171. See also Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:50-2 for sources of the Esther-niece tradition.

[179] David Feinstein,*Kol Dodi on Megillas Esther*, 62-3. Here, Feinstein brings together the comments of Rashi to Est 2:7; *b. Meg.* 13a with Rashi, as well as adding his own interpretation.

[180] *b. Qidd.* 41a. Here it states that a man may give his daughter in betrothal when she is a maiden (*na'arah*) but not when she is a minor (*ketanah*).

would be improper and immodest for a grown man and woman to be cohabiting without being married to one another, it would seem that the proposed marriage between Mordecai and Esther is not altogether outrageous. As bizarre as the union may have seemed at the outset, by the sheer lack of obvious or blatant evidence in the plain text, the rabbis who follow this train of thought do not seem to be making a giant leap. One modern Biblical scholar even states that the plain text leans in this direction, once the parts are put together. Esther is alone, attractive and marriageable. One would expect Mordecai to marry her; what is less likely is that he would take her as a daughter.[181] Also, by supporting the notion that the two were indeed married, the rabbis were able to deflect or avoid any question of impropriety on the parts of Mordecai and Esther. They were righteous Jews who knew and practiced the letter of the Law, and the sacrifices they make for their people are only elevated by their relationship.

Inasmuch as the rabbis may have been able to downplay the intermarriage and highlight the degree of propriety of the heroes of the Megillah, by reading a marriage between Mordecai and Esther into the text they create an equally, if not more devastating issue: Esther is an adulteress. If Mordecai and Esther were indeed married to each other prior to the contest, then Esther's relationship with Ahashverosh is tantamount to adultery. Perhaps the most graphic representation of the spousal confusion lies in the comment of Rava bar Lema in the Talmud. Commenting on Est 2:20, "Like as when she was brought up with him," Rava bar Lema states, "She stands up from the bosom of Ahashverosh and goes and immerses herself and sits down in the bosom of Mordecai."[182] Perhaps in response to a seeming redundancy in the text

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[181] Beal, *Esther*, 28. See also Levenson, *Esther*, 31.
[182] *b. Meg* 13b.

between this verse in the Megillah, and earlier (Est 2:7) where it had already stated that Mordecai raised Hadassah, Rava bar Lema paints a shocking picture: Esther is recast as a woman in an awkward marital situation who resolves her issue by bed-hopping. The seeming redundancy may have suggested to Rava bar Lema that Esther continued her sexual relations with Mordecai after she was taken to the King, just as she had before she was taken.[183] Alshich picks up on this repetition as well, but chooses to focus on the phrase "with him" in Est 2:20, suggesting that this small word refers to the period of time when Esther became Mordecai's wife. Earlier on, he just raised her, but then she was brought up *with him*.

It is truly the issue of the immersion, though, that grabs the attention of many of the later rabbis. Rashi to this passage claims that the immersion could not serve the same purpose of purification for Esther's relationship with Ahashverosh, so it must have only been for beautification and hygiene. Maharsha, though, points out that there must have been some ritual purpose for the immersion, as the verb used is the one indicating ritual observance and not simply washing.[184] It was not a matter of Esther leaving one bed to go to another that bothered most of the rabbis, for they found nothing binding in the marriage between Esther and Ahashverosh. Accepting that she engaged in sexual relations with the king, most rabbis would argue that it was an act of compulsion. Recalling the talmudic passages mentioned earlier, Esther was essentially a rape victim, and thus was not compelled to sacrifice her own life instead of engaging

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[183] Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 89, n. 350. He provides a lengthy and detailed argument as to the exact meaning of Rava bar Lema's statement, even that it did not reflect v. 2:20, but rather a previous talmudic statement about Esther's ritual observances. Segal himself presents a possibility that without the immersion clause of the statement, bar Lema's quote could support the father-daughter scenario, where "sitting in the bosom" of both was paternal and not sexual.

[184] Rashi and Maharsha to *b. Meg.* 13b. The verb TBL is used instead of RHS in the Talmudic passage.

in relations with the king.[185] She also continued to be permitted to her husband, Mordecai, provided she was passive through the ordeal with Ahashverosh.[186] Since Esther was still married to Mordecai, she could be viewed as maintaining sexual relations with him. Understanding the invalid nature of her marriage to the king, and the difficulty she may have experienced trying to observe the laws of ritual purity with regard to her relations with him, Esther's "immersion" then applies to her relations with Mordecai alone. As Eliezer Segal points out, "Rava bar Lema seems to be saying simply that there is no halakhic impediment preventing her from living with both Mordecai and Ahasuerus since the marriage with the heathen Ahasuerus is no more legally binding than that of the [minor orphan] in the Mishnah. No legal act is therefore required to dissolve that union, and Esther need pay attention only to ritual questions like her state of menstrual purity."[187] Mordecai, recast as a Torah observant Jew, would be concerned with Esther's observance of *niddah*, for that was one reason the rabbis

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[185] *b. Ket.* 51b with Rashi. See also *b. Sotah* 2a and *b. Ket.* 3b, with Rashi, for a discussion of betrothed women who should not sacrifice their lives in order to maintain their virginity. Some rabbis viewed Esther as betrothed to Mordecai and not yet married. This passage then applies to that interpretation as well.

[186] *b. Sanh.* 74a-b. This passage addresses the fact that adultery is one of the sins for which a person is obligated to sacrifice her life. The Tosafot make the distinction that rape, where a woman is passive, enables her to forego her martyrdom and permits her to her husband. The issue is not of a double marriage, though, as Esther's marriage to the king was deemed invalid from the outset. Even though the sexual impropriety between Esther and the king was "public," we can assume that her marriage to Mordecai was not, or else the king would have known Esther's origins. The adulterous act was then not a public sin. A baraita on 74a also mentions a betrothed woman, not a married woman, which applies to the situation brought about by the rabbis who did not view Mordecai and Esther as yet married.

[187] Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:91. Segal bases Rava bar Lema's statement on the understanding of *b. Yoma* 108a, whereby a minor orphan is permitted to terminate a quasi-marriage at her will. If she is a daughter of a priest living in a marriage-like state with a non-priest, the issues center on her immersion and ability to eat the heave offering. Segal sees a strong connection between the *Yoma* passage and *b. Meg.* 13b. He finds the immersion merely incidental to the Esther story, being connected only through the relationship with the *Yoma* passage. Cf. Walfish, "Kosher Adultery," 326, n. 22 who does not find the ritual observance incidental at all. See also n. 18 of this chapter for another way in which the marriage to Ahashverosh was invalid. If a demon was substituted for Esther, then the marriage was never consecrated.

gave him for dallying in the courtyard.[188] From the window or balcony, Esther would show Mordecai evidence of her menstrual cycle. He would then be able to calculate when their relations would be halakhically permissible.

Until that climactic moment of the Megillah whereby Esther goes willingly to the king, she was still permitted to her true husband, Mordecai. One talmudic passage summarizes the shift in permissibility with regard to Esther and Mordecai. In discussing the situation of a captured woman who was forced into sexual relations with her captor, one opinion maintains that an Israelite woman who was raped is forbidden to her husband, since it may be understood that the act began under compulsion, but may have ended with her consent.[189] Whereas this is not the generally accepted rule for rape victims, it does reflect Esther's situation. Esther was first viewed as a rape victim, passively engaging in her obligations to the king, but in the end, her relationship with the king could be seen as one of consent. Once she willingly went to the king, she was no longer permitted to her husband, Mordecai.

This is supported, too, by the explication of Est 4:16 that states, "...then I will go to the king, contrary to the law, and if I perish, I perish." The plain text would suggest that the law transgressed would be some sort of Persian law about going to the king unannounced.[190] But Esther's word choice, *a'vo*, "I will go" [literally: *come*], connotes sexual intercourse which may be the basis for the talmudic position. The Talmud first deals with the issue of "the law." In trying to clarify what exactly is

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[188] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:8. Cf. *Menot haLevy* to 2:20 who suggests that the immersion was not simply one of ritual purity, but also to protect Mordecai from the revulsion of being with Esther immediately after she was with the gentile king.

[189] *b. Ket.* 51b.

[190] *Tg. Esth. II*, 2:16 in Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 158. See also Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:257, and *Me'am Loez* to 4:16.

contrary to the law, R. Abba bar Kahana states that it is the law of everyday; that is, every other day, going into the king was an act of compulsion, but this day, it will be done willingly.[191] According to this reading, the law of which Esther speaks is halakhah. She will be transgressing the law that provides her a way out of her relationship with Ahashverosh. Once she is a willing participant in the affair with the king, she will have violated the law and will be lost to Mordecai; she "will no longer be subject to the halakhic exemptions which attach to a married woman who is raped."[192] That is the reason some sages give for the doubling of the word "perish." First, she was lost to Mordecai when she was taken from their home, and after she transgresses the law, she will be lost to him, physically and sexually, forever.[193]

It would seem that an easy way to untangle the web of double marriage or possible adultery would be to have Mordecai divorce Esther once she is taken to the king. The Tosafot raise this possibility in *b. Meg.* 15a, expecting it to be found in the talmudic discussion. It seems clear to the Tosafot that all of the halakhic problems could easily be removed if the issue of divorce is raised there, but it was not. One answer the Tosafot themselves provided is that since witnesses are needed for a divorce, and since Esther's origins and family were to be kept secret, word of the divorce might spread all the way to the king.[194] This would in turn endanger Esther and preclude the deliverance of the Jewish people. Another answer as to why they did not get divorced is found in a comment by Moshe Alkabetz. He states that the Tosafot struggled in vain

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[191] *b. Meg.* 15a. See also Rashi to Est 4:16. As was mentioned in Chapter Two above, another interpretation of "the law" refers to the laws of Pesach that would be transgressed by the fast called by Esther.
[192] Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:257.
[193] *b. Meg.* 15a with Rashi. Here, Rashi alludes to the fact that Esther may be going willingly, but she is still acting somewhat out of circumstances beyond her control.
[194] Tosafot to *b. Meg.* 15a. See also *Menot halevy* and *Yaarot Devash* to Est 2:7 and 4:16.

to realize why no divorce occurred. In his understanding, the union and coupling between Mordecai and Esther was "a lamp unto God and something worthy and necessary in order to bring about the redemption of Israel... if he had [divorced Esther], all the heavenly host would have shed tears and Israel would have disappeared."[195] Also, it only underscores the sacrifice Esther made on behalf of her people; she gives up her body, her soul, and her heart in order to save her people.

Another way some rabbis chose to harmonize the tradition of Esther being involved with both men is to have her betrothed to Mordecai before she was taken, but never legitimately married to him. Reading the relationship this way, one can understand why Esther's beauty was highlighted as her kinship with Mordecai was established: Mordecai planned on marrying Esther but was denied the opportunity as the king's decree was announced and Esther was taken away.[196] Ibn Ezra refuses to believe that Mordecai would have risked sending a non-virgin to the contest with so much at stake, but concedes to the point that it is conceivable that Mordecai would have married Esther when she was older, because of her beauty.[197] One commentary even suggests that Mordecai married Esther in order to make her a non-virgin, in hopes that she would not be taken to the king.[198] On verse 2:7, Moses Almonsino declares, "[Mordecai] was wondering whether to marry her, but nevertheless decided to take her

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[195] *Menot haLevy* to 2:20. See also Walfish, "Kosher Adultery," 316-322, for a detailed description of the lengths to which Alkabetz went to defend the position of the Sages. Having first stated his disgust and embarrassment for the rabbis to even broach the topic of a marriage between the two heroes, he comes full circle to accept and defend the position. Other Medieval exegetes, and their opinions and positions for or against the midrash that the two were married, are included in the article.

[196] R. Elisha Gallico to 2:7. He later rejects part of this explanation based on the *Targum*'s leaning to a marital relationship.

[197] Ibn Ezra to 2:7. He is not alone in ignoring or trying to explain away the earlier sages' rendition of events. As Walfish points out in "Kosher Adultery," 312-313, "Ibn Ezra... Ramban, Ralbag and Abarbanel avoided difficult midrashim that had no textual foundation. While respect was shown for the sages and their teachings, no compulsion was felt to relate to or justify their every word." Walfish suggests further that later Medieval exegetes avoided contradicting the sages on the whole.

[198] *Me'am Loez* to 2:7

as a daughter; and she was a virgin and he did not touch her, and the impulse to have relations with her did not overcome him. This shows his extraordinary piety and perfection."[199] Regardless of how successful later rabbis were in harmonizing their predecessors' comments, the tradition took hold in the Babylonian Esther midrashim that a viable reading of the text included a marriage between Mordecai and Esther.

Aside from the ethical and halakhic issues raised with Esther's relationship with both Ahashverosh and Mordecai, there are practical issues as well. One might assume that the king would be able to tell if Esther was married, as he would be able to tell if she was a virgin or not. This concern was dealt with by the rabbis as well. As was just shown, Ibn Ezra could not imagine that Esther was not a virgin, while other commentators went to lengths to make sure she was not, to show action on the part of Mordecai to save Esther. The question as to how Esther could be married and included in the contest as a virgin can be answered with the comments to Est 2:17 that "the king loved Esther more than all the women and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins." Commentators suggest that this proves that the king included the wives of men as well in the competition.[200] Plus, as was shown above, Esther was granted the ability to act as both a sexually experienced married woman and an innocent virgin.[201] One commentator even expands the Divine intervention with regards to Esther's virginity. Finding difficulty with the marriage between Esther and Mordecai, he is yet unwilling to abandon the words of the earlier sages. In trying to harmonize how Esther could both be married and be considered a virgin, this commentator states that "a

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[199] Moses Almonsino, quoted in Walfish, "Kosher Adultery," 331, n. 63. The issue here, as with other commentaries, such as that of Joseph Ibn Yahya, was that there was no objection to the marriage, and no other redeemer for Esther.
[200] *M. Pan. Aher.* 2:33a; *M. Abba Gor.*10a; *Yal. Shim.* 2:1056.
[201] See n. 11.

miracle occurred when she had intercourse with Ahashuerus, blood flowed from her like from a virgin."[202] In trying to untangle the web of midrashim on Esther and her relationship with both Mordecai and Ahashverosh, hardly an angle goes unexplored.

One issue that is completely absent in the Megillah, but makes appearances in some commentaries and midrashim, deals with Esther as a mother. It is rare to have a heroine who is barren, so the rabbis transform Esther into a matriarch of sorts. A complication with this revision arises with regard to the paternity of the child. If Esther engaged in sexual relations with both Mordecai and Ahashverosh, who would then be the father of the child she supposedly bore? The Tosafot to *b. Meg.* 13b suggest that in order to avoid questionable paternity, Esther used a pessary as a form of contraception while she was with Ahashverosh.[203] There are midrashim, however, that suggest Esther was pregnant in the Megillah. As Esther is made aware of Mordecai's public mourning once the decree against the Jews is made known, the text states, "Esther became greatly distressed (*vatihalhal*)."[204] In trying to determine the exact meaning of the word *vatihalhal*, the rabbis in the Talmud suggest that either she began to menstruate or that she had a bowel movement.[205] Other midrashim also include the possibility that Esther miscarried.[206] Two midrashim blend these traditions, based on their location of origin. "The rabbis of there [Babylonia] say that she became menstruous, but our teachers here [in Palestine] say that she had a miscarriage, and having had a miscarriage never bore

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[202] Samuel de Uceda, quoted in Walfish, "Kosher Adultery," 331.
[203] The word used is *mokh*, a sponge. Another issue the Tosafot raise is that Esther was unable to wait the required three months after a rape to determine if she is pregnant and by whom. *M. Pan. Aher.* 1:51 and *M. Esth. Rab.*8:3 also state that Esther used contraception with the king.
[204] Est 4:6.
[205] *b. Meg.* 15a.
[206] *M. Abba Gor.* 35; *M. Pan. Aher.* 2:70 includes a statement that Esther's grief should not be considered strange in that Isaiah also had so much grief. The proof text (Is 21:3) uses the same verb.

again."[207] This idea, though, is challenged by one of the rabbis who claimed Esther used contraception with Ahashverosh. "R. Judan b. R. Simon said: The last Darius was the son of Esther; he was pure from his mother's side and impure from his father's."[208] Perhaps in attempting to make Esther a mother as well as support the idea that Ahashverosh did not have sex with any other woman after Esther, some sages declared that the next king, Darius II, Ahashverosh's heir, was Esther's child. Even some of the mystical commentaries that purported a demon substitution during sex with the king describe Esther as the mother of Darius. The rationale there is that since the demon took on Esther's image and was under her control, Darius was still considered Esther's son even if he was born from the demon.[209] This is the only child Esther is even assumed to have, but for many of the sages who do not rely on demons, the midrash serves the purpose of making their heroine a mother as well.

In trying to answer some questions, the rabbis who attempted to recast Esther in a halakhically viable way raised more issues. The complications that arose may seem humorous at times, but their ramifications could be devastating. The rabbis recast Esther not only as a Torah observant Jew, but as one who was forced to intermarry. In trying to avoid the perils that faced the Jewish community and the tears in the social fabric that can be caused by intermarriage, some rabbis negated and invalidated Esther's marriage to the king altogether by having her married to Mordecai. As was shown, more issues arose through that proposed resolution. Many exegetes had difficulties with the earlier commentaries and midrashim, but they nevertheless tried to apply the

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[207] *M. Esth. Rab.* 8:3 and *M. Pan. Aher.* 1:51.
[208] *M. Esth. Rab.* 8:3 and *M. Pan. Aher.* 1:51. See also *M. Lev. Rab.* 13:5. Darius is also considered to be the ruler under whom the reconstruction of the Temple took place.
[209] See *Tiqqunei Zohar* 421 and Deutsch, *Let My Nation Live*, 139, n. 30.

corpus of rabbinical literature to their time and place. Homiletic and halakhic opportunities came about through the sometimes uncomfortable or graphic rereading of the text. The rabbis were then able to broach the topics of the sanctity of marriage, the sin of adultery, the timely issue of martyrdom, and the painful reality of a seized woman who was raped. None of these issues were out of the context of the rabbis who expounded on the Megillah. Esther, recast and reworked, was then able to provide an illustration for all of these issues as well as making paramount the honor of putting the Jewish people as a whole above the needs or desires of the individual.

Chapter Four: Will the Real Hero Please Stand Up?

The issue of the identity of the real hero of the Scroll is intrinsically bound to the discussion of the activity and passivity of the characters. That is, who did more to save the day, or more importantly, who did more to save or redeem the Jewish people. Issues of honor, power, and moral or political authority are intertwined with how the actions of the characters are remembered and recorded.[210] Three characters vie for the title of "hero" in the Megillah: Mordecai, Esther, and God. It might seem that Mordecai is the true hero, for he is the one cheered and lauded as the Megillah is publicly read on Purim. On the other hand, the Scroll bears Esther's name. Further still, God is acknowledged as the hero in the songs traditionally sung on Purim.[211] The key to determining exactly who should be deemed the hero begins by examining each of the character's action or inaction throughout the plain text of the Scroll. In doing so, a picture begins to develop concerning their hero status. It is only through the recasting

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[210] Karen Jobes, *Esther: The NIV Application and Commentary* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1999), 138. There she points out that determining the characters' importance and status can be qualified by counting the number of times they appear in the text. In the Hebrew text, Esther and Mordecai's names appear almost equally, 55 to 52 times, respectively. Jobes also points out that the LXX magnifies Mordecai and diminishes Esther, which can be noted by her name appearing only 46 times to Mordecai's 54, despite the additional six chapters. Whereas this is not the most scientific way of examining stature and political or moral authority, understanding that the LXX adjusts the prominence of character appearance is noteworthy in that the LXX could be seen as one of the earliest "commentaries" to the Hebrew text. This chapter will look at how the Jewish commentaries reflect the shift in power or hero status.

[211] God is not explicitly mentioned in the plain text, as will be discussed later. God is, however, the subject of much of the liturgy of Purim, including the *Al haNisim* insertion into the *Amidah*, as well as the blessings before and after the reading. Notably God is also the main subject and target of praise in the two songs sung after the reading of the Megillah, *Asher Hayni* sung at night, and *Shoshanat Yaakov*, sung in the morning. In the latter, all the main characters are mentioned, save the king, but God is referred to as the Savior and Hope of all the people. Though not in the purview of this thesis, it may be interesting to compare the liturgies around the reading of the Megillah, especially the CCAR service in *The Five Scrolls* (Albert H. Friedlander, ed.; New York: CCAR Press, 1984) and the *Krovetz* insertion in the traditional service, during the cantor's repetition of the *Amidah*.

of the characters and the expounding of the plain text by the rabbis, though, that the hero emerges fully.

By reading the plain text, it would seem that Mordecai was the mastermind behind the Jews' triumph. In the Scroll, he took the orphaned Esther into his home, raised her and cared for her until that moment when she was taken to the harem. It was Mordecai, too, who overheard the plot to kill the king and informed Esther of the assassination plan. "In fact, Mordecai engineers the high point of the drama: the moment in which Esther reveals herself as a Jewess and reaches the zenith of her political achievements by overthrowing the most important man in the country – Haman. Mordecai not only guides Esther's steps but also encourages her and spurs her on."[212] Mordecai, too, was rewarded for his actions to save the king, and was subsequently given political position in Persia. Mordecai's standing as a leader among the Jews is also represented in the plain text. His title in most of the Scroll is "Mordecai the Jew," being called this six times throughout the story. "[H]e has been presented as the *representative* Jew in the story."[213] Mordecai is the public Jew, the one recognized as the representative of the whole of the Jewish people. This is further evidenced in Est 3:6, as Mordecai refuses to prostrate himself before Haman. As a result, the evil and very angry Haman then seeks to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. The target of Haman's destructive plot is then given the epithet, "*am Mordekhai*" – Mordecai's people. The plain text suggests that Mordecai was more than just a Jew in Persia; the Jews in Persia were called his people.

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[212] Adin Steinsaltz, *On Being Free* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1997), 172.
[213] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 158. The six times Mordecai's title appears are Est 5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3.

Toward the end of the Scroll, too, Mordecai gains more authority in the Jewish world as well as in the larger gentile world. After Mordecai was publicly honored by the king, the edict was passed that the Jews could defend themselves against those who might do them harm. In the larger, secular world, fear of the Jews fell upon the peoples and the Jews were elevated, "for the fear of Mordecai fell upon them; for Mordecai was great in the king's house and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai waxed greater and greater...."[214] In Jewish circles, Mordecai was the one who wrote letters *in the name of the king* and *sealed with the king's ring* twice, with permission first to fight, and then to rest and celebrate on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar. Included in the second letter, too, were the regulations for how to celebrate the victory. Mordecai proved to have the political authority to assemble the people, and the religious authority to declare the holiday. "And the Jews took upon themselves what they had commenced to do and what Mordecai had written to them."[215] The Scroll then concludes with words only about Mordecai and his greatness. His deeds alone were recorded in the king's annals, "for Mordecai the Jew was viceroy to King Ahashverosh, and great among the Jews and accepted by most of his brethren, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all their seed."[216] In the final two verses, the root *g-d-l*, "greatness," was used three times to describe Mordecai, emphasizing the point that Mordecai had both political and moral clout in the Scroll.

There are certain issues about Mordecai's actions, though, that arise when investigating the plain text of the Scroll. Modern biblical commentators are quick to

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[214] Est 9:2-3. Earlier, in Est 8:15-7, the phrase "fear of the Jews" is used to explain why some of the gentile population joined the Jews, perhaps in their fight, but usually understood to indicate that some of the people converted to Judaism.
[215] Est 9:23. Queen Esther confirmed the second letter, a point that will be discussed later.
[216] Est 10:3.

point out that Mordecai's character is flat; that is, he undergoes very little literary evolution as a character in the Megillah. He is introduced complete with royal lineage, and hardly acts in an immoral or questionable way. Mordecai does not have a character flaw or internal struggle he must face. He is loyal, direct and honorable throughout the story. In the biblical text, he serves as a paragon or a paradigm for Jews and Jewish leadership in the Diaspora. As one modern commentator points out, "...an exemplum

> is what Mordecai remains. Haman is vivid in his evil; [Ahasverosh] is predictably unstable; Esther is changeable and human and multifaceted. Mordecai is flat – always presenting one surface to the reader – and unchanging. This is a quality, not a fault: Mordecai is meant to be flat – level...or solid – a brick. His perfect wisdom, stability, and loyalty make him reliable. He continues unchanged, powerful, energetic, benevolent, issuing public epistles, and exercising authority through his station as vizier and leader. He will never surprise us...But we cannot *approach* him. His completeness, together with his taciturnity, makes him a leader at a distance. We can try to follow his example, but cannot easily identify with him."[217]

Though Mordecai may be flat as a character in terms of development, his actions or inactions are not always obvious to the reader of the Megillah. For instance, his inaction with regard to Esther being taken to the harem is curious in the plain text. Also, his defiance toward Haman, though affirmed by the author of the Scroll, leaves some questions as to his leadership style. Furthermore, though he eloquently pleads with and commands Esther to visit the king unannounced, he tells her *what* to do, but not *how* to do it. At that moment in the story, Mordecai begins to obey commands instead of issuing them. Mordecai has very little to do with how Esther eventually saves the people.

The rabbis respond to many of the issues raised by the opaqueness surrounding some of Mordecai's actions, or lack thereof. In their treatment of this character, the

[217] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 194-5.

rabbis use his "flatness" as a paradigm and imbue him with various qualities they deem important for an unchanging, stable Jew and leader. The rabbis take this ideal character and infuse it with other elements of Diaspora leadership. As previously noted, throughout the midrashim, Mordecai is a religious, prayerful Jew, active in his observance of festivals and the study of Torah.[218] In their commentaries, the Sages find lacunae in his character, particularly with regard to his emotions or thought processes, and often fill those gaps with a positive remolding of Mordecai. For instance, many commentaries suggest that Mordecai tried to hide Esther so that she would not be taken away.[219] One commentary suggests that Mordecai hid Esther, but when he was on duty at the palace gate, Esther was forcibly taken, as he was unable to be there to protect her. Yet another midrash proposes that Mordecai was active at this moment, but in a very different way. In this particular midrash, Mordecai was deemed the "right man" for the job of gathering all the women and bringing them to the King. Here, it seems Mordecai himself brought Esther to the harem. [220] The exegetical basis for this reading relies on the general principle of *smukhim*; that is, whenever a man's name immediately follows a situation described, that man is in charge of the situation. Since Mordecai's introduction follows immediately after the announcement of the decree to gather the women, Mordecai is then reread as the man in charge of the roundup. These expansions of the text seem to be in direct response to Mordecai's silence at such a pivotal moment in the plain text, albeit in distinct ways.

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[218] See Chapter Two above.
[219] *Tg. Esth. II*, 2:8; See also Malbim to 2:8. These commentaries suggest that Mordecai gave Esther up when the decree was issued that those who refused the king would be put to death.
[220] *M. Esth. Rab.* 5:4, connecting Est 2:4 to 2:5.

Mordecai's thoughts and motivations, absent in the Scroll itself, are evident elsewhere in the midrashim. As mentioned in Chapter Two, commentators suggest a number of reasons for Mordecai to be found wandering in the courtyard, beyond showing concern for Esther's welfare. He did so to advise her about religious observances, to gather information, and to protect Esther and give her comfort.[221] Some commentaries suggest that the reason for his pacing was to make sure Esther was aware, as he was, that a miracle was about to happen.[222] This shows his high level of faith and concern, and it was exactly that level of involvement and dedication that led the rabbis to suggest that Mordecai was worthy of one day leading the entire Jewish nation.[223] Another instance that shows Mordecai's emotional side occurs when the news of Haman's edict was made known, Mordecai rent his garment and wailed (Est 4:1). Though his emotions seem apparent, some deeper motivations and explanations of Mordecai's feelings were given by the rabbis. In one commentary, Mordecai cries because he knew the edict came about by his own defiance.[224] At another point in the story, when Haman was forced to give honors to Mordecai in Est 6:11, the midrash presents Mordecai as overcome with fear, instructing his fellow Jews to flee before they get caught with him.[225] The biblical text is restrictive when it comes to describing Mordecai as emotional or frail, but the commentaries seem to recast Mordecai as a more human character, one to whom the rabbis themselves can relate.

Another way in which the Sages humanize Mordecai is by giving him somewhat of a dark side, a sarcastic and almost humorous flare. This is most obvious in the

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[221] *Menot haLevy* to 2:11; *Me'am Loez* to 2:11.
[222] *Tg. Esth I*, 2:11; *Eshkol haKofer* to 2:11.
[223] *M. Esth. Rab.* 6:8; *Pirqe R. El.* 49.
[224] *Gra* to 4:1.
[225] *M. Esth. Rab.* 10:4; *b. Meg.* 16a.

midrashim surrounding the role-reversal between Mordecai and Haman, as Haman is forced to honor the Jew. In the midrash, Mordecai is belligerent toward Haman, making him wait until after Mordecai finished his prayer, before Haman could complete his task of honoring Mordecai. Mordecai then refused to wear the royal robes until after Haman bathed him. Later, Mordecai refused to wear the crown until after Haman gave his hair a trim. Finally, when Haman ordered Mordecai to ride on the horse provided by the king, Mordecai groaned and complained of being too weak to mount the horse, and ended up stepping on a bent Haman to give him a leg up.[226] The midrash does not portray Mordecai in a good light, but by engaging in the humorous recasting, the sages are able to make Mordecai more human, if less ideal.

From the outset though, beginning with the midrashim about the king's first series of banquets that ended with the killing of Vashti, Mordecai remains righteous and pious in most of the exegetical works. The commentaries based on the end of the Scroll, too, honor Mordecai as a true leader. He is understood to be the literate character, the one who writes the letters and decrees on behalf of the Jewish people. He is never out for personal gain or wealth, but is accepting of his newfound position of leadership in the court. One midrash that expresses just how humble Mordecai was, is based on Est 2:22, when he tells Esther of the plot to assassinate the king. In this retelling, three reasons are given for Mordecai to save the king: First, he hoped the king would rebuild the Temple; second, Mordecai hoped he might one day be able to influence the king concerning the plight of the Jews, something he would not be able to

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[226] *M. Esth. Rab.* 5:4; *b. Meg.* 16a. In the Talmud, biblical reference is given to justify Mordecai's strange and somewhat insulting behavior. There, it is suggested that since Haman is a adversary of all Israel, the verse that Haman employs to chastise Mordecai, that one should not be happy at his enemy's fall (Prov 24:17), does not apply. Instead, Mordecai retorts with a proof text from Deut 33:29, that he is justified in his behavior because of the command to "tread on the platforms" of the enemies of Israel.

do with the King's successor; and third, so that he would not be blamed for letting the assassination proceed.[227] This would then continue to protect the Jews, as Mordecai was aware that the nations held the Jews collectively responsible for one another. Mordecai continually has Jews and Judaism in the forefront of his mind in many of the commentaries.

Some rabbis, though, take issue with how involved Mordecai became in the secular world. Basing the commentaries on Est 10:3, that Mordecai was accepted by *most* of his brethren, the midrash states that he was not accepted by *all* of his brethren, a fact that teaches that a minority of the Sanhedrin disassociated themselves from him.[228] Rashi explains this to mean that these men took disapproved of his public office, as it took time away from his Torah study. Rashi makes this connection with the second part of the talmudic passage that states, "Great is the study of Torah more than the saving of lives." Mordecai teaches this, since Mordecai's name appears on lists of exiles given by both Ezra and Nehemiah. A major difference in the lists, however, is that Mordecai's placement drops, from sixth to seventh. His reduced status takes place at the time of the events in the Megillah, at the time his secular status rose.[229] This is not the only midrash that portrays Mordecai in an unfavorable light. Elsewhere in the Talmud the rabbis are critical of Mordecai, claiming that he was inferior to Rava bar Rav Huna, an

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[227] *M. Pan. Aher.* to Est 2:22.
[228] *b. Meg.* 16b with Rashi.
[229] See Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:445, 6:480, n. 190. See also, Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:182-6. Segal notes that this may not necessarily be condemning Mordecai for his involvement, but may simply reflect the ambivalence of religious scholarship and communal leadership. See also Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 217, who suggests that "R. Yosef's statement that Torah study is greater than saving lives should be understood in [that]...distinction must be drawn between actually saving lives which takes precedence, and accepting office which has the potential of saving lives in which, according to R. Yosef, Torah study takes precedence."

Amoraic sage.[230] This, however, may not be to disparage Mordecai, but rather to elevate Rava bar Rav Huna, as no evidence is given to discredit Mordecai in the talmudic passage. Overall, the commentaries are highly positive about Mordecai, referring to him as righteous and describing him as scholarly and pious.

Mordecai's idealized characterization in the biblical text and for the most part, throughout the commentaries, enables him to be a strong player in the story, but not necessarily the hero. In commenting on the rabbis' treatment of Mordecai, Eliezer Segal states, "Mordecai is transformed by the midrash into an idealized rabbi who fulfills the same educational, religious and administrative duties that were performed by the sages of the [t]almudic era... [it appears] likely that the rabbis were sensitive to the special place of Mordecai's generation in the evolution of the halakhic tradition, standing as it did at the transitional period between [p]rophetic and [r]abbinic authority."[231] He later states that one reason for the seemingly negative light with which some rabbis viewed Mordecai's involvement in the palace reflected "the rabbis' hesitations about their own conflicting priorities."[232] Mordecai is a leader who is given character flaws in the midrashim to make him more real, more relatable. It is these midrashim that give body to his flat character, they underscore Mordecai's leadership and religious qualities, but do not seem to elevate him to the status of hero.

Esther's evolution in the text, as well as in the expansions of the Scroll, seems to point to her as the more likely human hero of the story. "As a literary character, Esther's development is complex and progressive throughout the story in contrast to Mordecai, who shows no character development through his rise to power. This

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[230] *b. Meg.* 12b.
[231] Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:249.
[232] Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:249.

suggests that in the author's mind, Esther is the main character on whom he expects his readers to focus."[233] From the outset of the biblical text, Esther undergoes a profound change. She is introduced almost tangentially in the second chapter of the Scroll, and is initially describe in uniformly passive language. She is "taken" as a daughter to Mordecai, "taken" to the harem, and "taken" to the king's chambers. Then, in Chapter Four of the Scroll, Esther's character experiences a dramatic shift, from being passive to actively engaging in the plot. She "summons" Hatach, and "commands" both Hatach and Mordecai regarding the three-day fast. "Esther has moved from being the adopted daughter of an exile, to the winner of a beauty contest, to the queen of Persia and Media, to the pivotal figure in the crisis hanging over the Jews, able to issue effective commands to her foster father."[234] After Mordecai's persuasive argument as to her duty to her people, she willingly goes to the king, "approaches" the king, "touches" his scepter and makes her petitions. Her hesitation notwithstanding, "the notice about the death penalty for appearing before the king at one's own initiative is thus essential to the transformation of Esther from a beauty queen to a heroic savior, and from a self-styled Persian to a reconnected Jew."[235] Esther devises her own plan how to persuade the king, invites Haman and the king to two banquets and identifies Haman as the man seeking to kill her and her people. In the biblical story, Esther takes on both the man responsible for the Jewish people's danger and she takes on the administration, questioning to what extent the king himself is bound by his laws.

Her authority in the biblical text is reflected as she is referred to as "Queen Esther" most predominantly at the time of her shift in Chapter Five. Her power and

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[233] Jobes, *Esther*, 139.
[234] Levenson, *Esther*, 82.
[235] Levenson, *Esther*, 80.

authority is reflected later, as well, when Haman begs for his life in front of the queen (Est 7:7), and as she is awarded Haman's property that she willingly passes on to Mordecai (Est 8:1-2). In that way, she can be seen as an empowered woman who, in turn, empowers Mordecai. Esther's activity does not, however, stop there. She beseeches the king, not only to rescind his edict, but she even asks for a second day of killing and the impaling of Haman's sons (Est 9:13). She later confirms Mordecai's second letter to the people (Est 9:29), and it was by her command that the matters of Purim were inscribed in the book (Est 9:32). "Esther is remarkable in biblical history not only for her role in the deliverance of God's people, but for the authority she achieved to write... No other woman among God's people wrote with authority to confirm and establish a religious practice that still stands today. The importance of most biblical women, such as Sarah and Hannah, lies in their motherhood. Esther's importance to the...people is not as a mother, but as a queen."[236] At first seemingly incidental to the story, Esther later appears cunning and intelligent, even to the point where she seems manipulative and perhaps vindictive.

The evolution of Esther's character in the biblical text has been noted by a number of scholars. One scholar even notes that her personality "has evolved into the near-opposite of what it was at the start. Once sweet and compliant, she is not steely and unbending, even harsh."[237] Not all modern commentators, though, agree that Esther was the alter ego of her former self. One critic asserts that Esther was honored as a woman and a queen, but that her honor is different than that of a man's. "Hers is a

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[236] Jobes, *Esther*, 200. Though this critique is slightly idealized, it does bring forward Esther's unique statue as a woman with authority enough to create a holiday. The aforementioned midrashim, in Chapter Three, concerning Esther as the mother of Darius only underscores her hero status, as Darius was credited with being the ruler under whose authority the Temple was rebuilt. See Chapter Three, n. 208.

[237] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 203. Cf. John Craghan, *Esther, Judith, Tobit, Jonah, Ruth: Old Testament Message Series* (Delaware: Michael Glazer, Inc., 1982), 44-5. Craghan asserts that Esther is not ruthless, but rather determined, unwilling to stop when the good of her people is in jeopardy. He claims she is an admirable leader, placing high value on religious loyalty and the common good.

woman and a queen, but that her honor is different than that of a man's. "Hers is a 'muted' honor...which maintains (rather than challenges) male dominance... Esther is honored by the narrative for her 'subversive submission'...to the social structure: even while unmasking and exploiting its idiosyncrasies she still supports it. After executing her 'exceptional' assignment, she returns to her acquired status...but also to the status quo."[238] She played the role she needed to play but then reverted back to her feminine role, being a supportive wife and loyal family member. Still, despite the fact she handed over to Mordecai the authority and power given to her, Esther's command confirming the rules of Purim in Est 9:32, stands out as a marker of her true nature, and as a marker of the reversal of fortune found in the Scroll. "We have gone from a disobedient queen who is on the receiving end of a command that is not observed, to an obedient queen who is able to issue a command that is observed. The paradox is this: Vashti's insubordination renders her powerless; Esther's subordination renders her powerful."[239]

Despite all that the biblical account offers with regard to Esther's status as a leader or hero, her personality does not fully emerge in the Scroll. The sages take the opportunity to recast and remold Esther according to their desires, as they did concerning her Jewishness and righteousness. This time, they focus on her actions, her inactions, and the motivations that lie beneath. She was destined to be a hero and redeemer, according to the midrashim about her being an orphan and of royal lineage.

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[238] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 165. See also Lillian Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther Judith and Susanna*, Brenner, ed., 149-175. Klein states that Esther, a "modest female who protects her shame when possible and is shameless when necessary, is once again subsumed in Mordecai's honor." This essay, and other critiques understand the characters of the biblical story to be foils and paradoxes, outrageous personalities that add to the carnivalesque quality of the Scroll. For more on Esther as comedy, see Berlin, *Esther*, xvi-xxii.

[239] Levenson, *Esther*, 131.

She was to correct the error made by her ancestors and complete the commandment to wipe out Amalek.[240] Also, in not wanting Esther to be a willing participant in the beauty pageant, they transform her into a righteous woman bent on *not* winning the contest. One midrash even states that she hid herself away, in order that the king might find someone else he favored in the meanwhile.[241] While in the harem, too, Esther is recreated as actively maintaining her (hidden) Jewish identity through the kosher foods that she eats, her observance of the holidays, and her observance of ritual purity.[242] Her unwillingness to divulge her nationality was also seen as an attempt to throw the contest. Furthermore, in preparation for meeting Ahashverosh, Esther again remains passive, righteously passive as the rabbis understand the text. Virtually having to be forced at every turn, Esther refused the adornments provided by Hegai in Est 2:15. The midrash states, "She would take nothing that would encourage the King in any way. Hegai was shocked by her decision. If Esther went into the king with no adornment, the king might be furious, and he would be blamed. He begged Esther to take whatever she desired so that the king would not be angry. Still, she would not voluntarily take anything; she went with only that which Hegai pressed upon her."[243] Her righteous indignation during the contest led to the rabbis reading her cohabitation with the gentile king as a sort of "righteous adultery," as described in the previous chapter. Her activity and passivity with the king were hallmarks in the rabbis' attempts to recreate Esther's personality.

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[240] See Chapter One for these midrashim, as well as the ones that refer to her righteousness.
[241] *Agg. Esth.* to Est 2:8.
[242] See Chapter Two for the midrashim regarding Esther as an observant Jew.
[243] *Me'am Loez* to 2:15, *Menot haLevy* to 2:15. See also *Tg. Esth I*, 2:15.

Another instance whereby the rabbis expound upon Esther's character arises when Esther warns Ahashverosh of the assassination plot against him. There is no suggestion that Mordecai requested she share the information in his name; she does so on her own accord. For this act of humility, Esther is lauded by the rabbis. In the Talmud, it states that "one who says a thing in the name of its author brings redemption into the world, as it says: And Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai (Est 2:22)."[244] While this pithy saying may refer to the general principle of quoting one's sources, the proof text used identifies Esther as possessing the virtue of crediting the source of her information. This seed will later blossom into a reward for Mordecai, and Esther herself helps to bring redemption to the people. This is expounded in a later midrash, whereby Esther tells Mordecai not to tell of the plot himself; rather, he should let her take care of the situation. She would then be able to control the release of information, as the scribes would listen to her details and record them in the chronicles. Therefore, if the matter could not be confirmed, Mordecai would not be blamed; if it could be confirmed, based on Esther's wording of the account, Mordecai would be honored later.[245] In this midrash, Esther takes a more active role, not only being virtuous in revealing her source, but also in masterminding how and when the king ought to be informed of the plot.

This is not, however, the only place where Esther is recast as detail-oriented, or hypersensitive to the workings of a situation. It may seem from the plain text that

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[244] *b. Meg.* 15a. See also *Pirqe Avot* 6:7. See also Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:275-6, who mentions other links between Esther's humility and messianic redemption. He also points out that Esther was used as a model for her behavior in this respect in other midrashim, including *Tanhuma Bemidbar*, 22.

[245] Alshich to 2:22-23. He bases some of his commentary on the fact that the word used for "told" (*v'tomar*) is not as strong as the more conclusive *v'taged*. In this way, if the matter was not confirmed, it would be understood as a simple rumor and nothing more. It was not presented as fact in order to protect Mordecai.

Esther is completely unaware of the edict concerning the Jews, and as she finds out, she seems superficial in sending Mordecai clothing to wear over his sackcloth. According to a midrash, Esther is neither ignorant of nor indifferent to the situation, nor is she foolish to think that new clothes will solve a problem as great as the one facing the Jews. In this reading, the phrase "Esther gave him [Hatach] a commandment to Mordecai, to know what this was, and why that was" (4:5) suggest that Esther investigated the matter wholly, that she acted like a physician: diagnosing the illness and fathoming its cause before she began to treat the ailment.[246] At this same point in the story, Esther gains more authority in the *Targum*. In that retelling, Esther is more forceful with Mordecai and warns him not to aggravate Haman, for Haman was harboring within himself the ancient hatred between Jacob and Esau.[247] In both these accounts, Esther is transformed into a thoughtful planner and investigator. She does not act rashly, but carefully considers every action and consequence. This can also be seen in her reluctance to visit the King willingly.

Esther develops further in rabbinic literature as a thoughtful character in a commentary on the prayer she offers during her three-day fast. Whereas it has already been noted that Esther prayed for her own life and soul before she went to the king's chambers unannounced, Esther is also characterized as praying on behalf of the Jewish people when she called the fast.[248] Esther reconnects with her people during this symbiotic prayer time. She prays/fasts for them, as the Jews had caused this destruction to come upon themselves by eating and drinking at the king's feast. The people, in turn, will fast and pray for Esther, as she is about to break Persian law by going to

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[246] *Yosef Lekah* to 4:5. Cf. *b. Meg.* 15a.
[247] *Tg. Esth. I*, 4:10.
[248] See Chapter Two for more detailed accounts of the prayers Esther offered.

Ahashverosh unannounced, and because she now willingly goes into the king's chambers. Esther uses a passage from Talmud to support her reasoning: One who prays for his fellow, and is in need of the same thing, will be answered first.[249] Understanding this talmudic principle, Esther puts the needs of the people above hers, hoping that both parties will be answered as they each prayed for the other.[250] The midrashim about her, including the expounded prayers Esther offers as a result of her hesitancy to see the king, support her characterization as the hero of the Scroll. She did in fact have to be persuaded by Mordecai to see the king, but it was Esther who had everything to sacrifice at that moment. The rabbis understand her reluctance as a natural, human reaction to entering into a potentially life threatening and life-altering situation: Esther was risking her body, her soul, and according to some rabbis, her marriage, by fulfilling this duty.[251]

One issue that the rabbis raise in their commentaries to the Scroll is why Esther would invite Haman, the evil Jew-hater *par excellence,* to a banquet, much less to two. The Talmud provides a detailed compendium of opinions and explanations to Esther's seemingly strange actions.[252] R. Eliezer said that Esther laid a trap for Haman, as it states in Ps 69:23 "May their table be a snare before them." This proof text suggests that Esther had hoped that Haman would become drunk and belligerent, knowing that revelry at the table often brings indiscretions. Planning on Haman's vanity and intoxication, Esther thought he would boast enough to antagonize the king, putting him

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[249] *b. B. Qam.* 92a.
[250] *Me'am Loez* to 4:16; Alshich to 4:16. This is based on the peculiar phrase, "fast for me," followed by the Queen stating that she and her maidens will also fast (singular). The mutual fasting is understood as mutual prayer as well. Alshich states that her maidens did not know they were fasting for the people Israel, so the verb remains in the singular as only Esther fasted for the people.
[251] See Chapter Three for a detailed account of Esther's willingness and passivity with the king.
[252] *b. Meg.* 15b with Rashi. The rabbis deal more with Esther's motivations than with the peculiarity of two banquets.

in less than favorable standing with Ahashverosh. R. Yehoshua, on the other hand, suggests that Esther learned a lesson from King Solomon, the attributed author of Proverbs, who taught, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him" (Prov 25:21). Though Haman did not know that Esther was his enemy, she did. Though what she did can be considered righteous, she may not have known what exactly would come out of the dinner invitation, save her own vindication. In this case, unlike the others that are based more on logic, Esther here is shown to have loyalty to her family ancestry, not necessarily a logical plan. R. Meir, though, describes Esther as purely logical, stating that her reason for inviting the evil Haman to dinner was to keep him under watch; if Haman was not there when the King ordered his execution, he might be wily enough to escape his punishment. R. Yehudah, too, uses logic as Esther's prime motivation. He states that Esther wanted to prevent Haman from suspecting she was Jewish. According to R. Yehudah, Esther feared revealing her identity especially to Haman, knowing that he hated Jews. She considered that Haman might suspect her of being Jewish if he was not invited. By inviting the wicked Haman, Esther was able to conceal her identity as a Jew, for Haman knew that there were prohibitions on Jews concerning dining with Gentiles, and on Passover to boot!

R. Nehemiah follows this line of thinking, but for a different reason. He states that Esther invited Haman to dine with her and the King to avoid the overconfidence of the Jewish people, that they have a "sister" in the palace.[253] By extending the invitation to the enemy of the Jews, her people would pray more for Divine redemption, feeling that Esther had given up on saving them, and was only concerned with saving herself.

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[253] This is also reflected in *Tg. Esth. II*, 5:8, that the Jews had become too dependent on Esther, and their loyalty and dependence should be redirected to God. See also *Menot haLevy* and Alshich to 5:8-9.

R. Yose reasons that Esther invited Haman because she did not yet have a plan to get rid of him, but wanted him at hand so there would be no delay, and perhaps so that she could see his reaction as she fingered him as the one who was set to kill her. Rashi suggests that R. Yose's logic was that perhaps the king would be able to see Haman do something incriminating, perhaps trying to explain why there was a need for two feasts.

R. Shimon ben Menasia brings God into Esther's motivation, in that perhaps she did this strange deed to get God's attention so that he might perform a miracle for them. This is like R. Nehemiah's suggestion, approached from the vantage point of Divine involvement. According to Rashi, Esther is at once bringing the enemy close, perhaps creating an even more devastating situation for the Jews, and she is humiliating herself before Haman. In this way, the statement suggests Esther is not so much "fooling" God, but rather, forcing His hand into action.[254] R. Yehoshua ben Korcha takes a different route, suggesting that Esther attempted to arouse jealousy in the king. If Ahashverosh thought there was some relationship between Esther and Haman, he might have them both killed. In this way, Esther is viewed as prepared to sacrifice her life for her people. Rashi points out that elsewhere in the Talmud, there is an idea that the death of one of a decree's authors annuls the decree.[255] R. Gamliel also bases his understanding of Esther's motivation on the king. He suggests that the king was fickle, and even if she could persuade him to kill Haman, if Haman was not there, Ahashverosh might change his mind and recant the punishment. R. Eliezer the Moda'ite follows the king-as-motivation motif, and suggests that by inviting Haman,

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[254] See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:29. Segal points out that Alkabetz even suggesst that Esther's actions would so provoke God, believing she abandoned her mission, that He would strike her down as atonement for the Jews.
[255] *b. Ta'an.* 29a.

Esther provoked jealousy in the king in that Haman could be considered his equal. He also suggests that Haman's invitation would provoke jealousy in the other noblemen, in that he was invited and they were not. In this way, Haman would have enemies at every turn.

Rabbah does not offer a suggestion for Esther's thought process, just a verse from Proverbs. He states, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18). This could be interpreted that the banquet would raise Haman up so high that his fall and destruction would be that much greater. Abaye and Rava also employ a biblical reference in their statement. Quoting Jer 51:39, they state, "In their heart I will prepare their feast, and I will make them drunken, that they may rejoice and sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake up." Like R. Eliezer above, it seems Esther's motivation was to get Haman to indulge himself in drink and behavior. Like Rabbah's explanation, too, here Haman's joy would be so great that his downfall will be tremendous. Rashi points out that the proof text from Jeremiah predicted Babylonia's downfall at the hand of the Medes, a prophecy that came to fruition in Daniel 5. Here, too, a banquet is the setting for an enemy's deposition. Rava bar Avuha is the last sage to comment, but his is not a statement; rather, he is recorded as having asked the Prophet Elijah which of the earlier sages was correct concerning Esther's motivations. Elijah replied that all of the Tanaaim and Amoraim were correct, that Esther could have had all of these considerations in mind.[256] "This conclusion recognizes the complexity of Esther's motives and shows that the rabbis respected her as a planner and tactician, not merely as

[256] See Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:34-35 for a discussion about the chronology of the later Amoraim with regard to Avuha.

a tool of Mordecai or an attractive charmer."[257] The rabbis took note of a significant gap in the biblical text with regard to Esther's inner dialogue and motivation for many of her actions. They in turn sought to recreate her and be able to relate to her as a thoughtful and well-intentioned leader. None of the suggestions described Esther as self-centered, flip, or flaky; rather, for them she was dependable, aware, and committed to her task. This is particularly enlightening considering the plethora of rabbinic material concerning her beauty and sexuality.

An issue that receives much attention from modern biblical critics is Esther's appeal for both a second day of killing and the public impalement or hanging of Haman's ten sons.[258] Perhaps surprisingly, the rabbis of old do not take such issue with Esther's request. There are some midrashim, however, that do reflect concerns that were raised by her seemingly brutal actions. In the *Targum*, it states that all the Gentiles killed by the Jews on Purim were military men of Amalekite descent.[259] By highlighting the ancestry of the people killed, it stands to reason that "Esther wished to draw a clear distinction between the battle for survival, which had ended victoriously for the Jews, and the fulfillment of the mitzvah to exterminate Amalek. She wished to dedicate a separate day exclusively for fulfilling the Torah-ordained commandment.[260] What is even more telling about the *Targum*'s rendition is that Esther's request is markedly less barbaric in nature: "If it pleases the king, let permission be granted

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[257] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 72, n. 45.
[258] See above mentioned critics. See also Jobes, *Esther*, 201-2, where she discusses the universally negative terms with which the biblical Esther is described at this moment in the Scroll. Jobes points out that the author makes no attempt to justify Esther's actions, and makes a possible connection between Esther and Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of both love and war. In discussing reactions to the "darker side" of biblical leaders, Jobes also brings to light a modern opera that "laments the slaying of the [g]entiles and averts any perception of Jewish triumphalism."
[259] *Tg. Esth. I*, 9:6.
[260] Ginzburg, *The King's Treasures*, 129.

tomorrow as well to the Jews who are in Susa to make holiday and rejoicing, as it is fitting to do on the day of our miracle, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows."[261] By calling for a holiday, and not a second day of killing, Esther's request is understood as solemn, not brutal. This revision may reflect concerns about the text being read as propaganda for Jewish triumphalism or excessive cruelty.[262]

The fear of repercussions for the actions of the Jews appears in later commentaries as well. A commentary from the Middle Ages states that Esther's request for a second day was the only guarantee that the surviving enemies of the Jews would not retaliate.[263] The *Gra* comments as well that Esther's request was to let the nations know that the Jews were acting in accord with the King's desires, releasing them from potential persecution in the future.[264] This is repeated in an early modern commentary that suggests Esther was requesting a second day of killing in order to set a powerful example in Shushan, so great that the enemies of the Jews would be frightened throughout the kingdom.[265] A later modern commentator also reflects this concern as he states, "Presumably Esther had information that there were still dangerous enemies in Shushan who would be a constant source of danger to the Jews until they were totally eliminated. Indeed the number of casualties on the second day more than vindicated her suspicions."[266] Of the few commentaries concerning the public display of Haman's ten dead sons, one even suggests that Esther was not violating the toraitic prohibition of

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[261] *Tg. Esth. I*, 9:13.
[262] See *Tg. Esth. II*, 8:13 for an eloquent description of the king's edict that includes how much the Jews love every nation and how they are righteous in their request to defend themselves, so much so that no fault should be found in them. This, too, appears to underscore the actions of the Jews as just and backed by the government.
[263] *Menot haLevy* to 9:13.
[264] *Gra* to 9:13.
[265] Malbim to 9:13.
[266] Feinstein, *Kol Dodi on Megillas Esther*, 138.

leaving a corpse on the gallows overnight. Instead, this commentary understands Esther as righteous in her actions. As Esther explains, when King Saul killed the Gibeonite proselytes, his sons were hanged for six months. How much more so should the wicked Haman and his sons hang on the gallows.[267] Still, none of the commentaries find fault with Esther's request; rather, they attempt to justify her actions and requests, supporting her plea with biblical mandates and real fear of persecution.

The rabbis hardly criticize Esther for any shortcoming or flaw. She seems to develop further in rabbinic literature as a hero of the Jewish people, but at the same time, the rabbis hesitate to grant Esther sole authority concerning the people.[268] As it has been shown, Mordecai had been recast to be the leader of the people, at least in the public and religious spheres. His authority may have grown in rabbinic literature as a result of the issues raised with Esther's power in the biblical text. The sages are not silent, however, about Esther's elevated status and commanding presence near the end of the Scroll, particularly concerning the textual difficulties found in Est 9:29, "Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew wrote down all the [acts of] power, to confirm the second Purim letter." Specifically, two issues spark the rabbis' attention to this verse: the grammatical curiosity of the sentence, and the issue of the need for a second letter. The wording "*'et kol takef*" leaves room to debate if Esther

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[267] *Tg. Esth. II*, 9:24. See Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 192, for a detailed explanation of the origin of this midrash that bases itself on 2 Sam 21:1-2. Apparently, Saul is understood to have killed proselytes who had converted for the Sake of Heaven. The length of time the sons were left on the gallows is indicative of the "retributive nature of the punishment." Since Saul was not nearly as evil as Haman, the exegetical technique, *kal v'chomer*, is employed to emphasize how much more so Haman and his sons should be humiliated.

[268] See Bronner, "Esther Revisited," 194-5, who notes that the rabbis emphasize Esther's other qualities over her status as a leader. Bronner mentions the midrash in *M. Gen. Rab.* 99:3 that recognizes Esther as a powerful queen, comparing her to a wolf who seizes prey. The connection is made through Esther's ancestor, Benjamin, who is called a ravenous wolf in Gen 49:27. Bronner then comments, "this is not the meek beauty queen we are accustomed to hearing about" (195).

wrote *with* power, or *about* power, and what sorts of power that entails. The *Targum* picks up on this grammatical point and revises the text to state that both Esther and Mordecai wrote "*...this entire scroll and the power of the miracle....*"[269] Because the biblical text uses the direct object marker *et* instead of the preposition *b-* ("with") before the word for power, the *Targum* clarifies that Esther could not have written *with* power; instead, she wrote about the power of the miracle.

The sages in the Talmud also take issue with this grammatical point, but deal with it in the discussion of from what point in the Scroll must one hear the Megillah being read in order to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing it.[270] A variety of opinions are given: one must read the whole Megillah, beginning with the first verse, "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahashverosh," reflecting the power of Ahashverosh; one must begin with "on that night" (Est 6:1), reflecting the power of the miracle of Haman's downfall; one must begin with "there was a Judean man" (Est 2:5), reflecting the power of Mordecai; and, one must begin with "After these events King Ahashverosh promoted Haman," reflecting the power of Haman. Here, the Sages focus on the power of the miracle involved with each person named. Interestingly, Esther is not mentioned at all in this pericope. Instead, the sages deal with her power and authority earlier in the Talmud, based on the second stich of the verse, that Esther wrote a second letter confirming the matters of Purim and its celebration.[271]

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[269] *Tg. Esth. II*, 9:29, in Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 88.
[270] *b. Meg.* 19a with Rashi. The Mishnah states that R. Meir ruled the entire Megillah must be read, while R. Yosi states that in order for the mitzvah to be fulfilled, reading must at least commence with Est 3:1, "after these things..." The Talmud, though focuses on the "power" issue in Est 9:29 to determine from where the Megillah must be read in order to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing it.
[271] *b. Meg.* 7a.

The sages in the Talmud deal with the issue of two letters by stating that the first letter to establish Purim went to the Jews in Shushan, whereas the second letter was sent to establish the holiday in the entire world. A different opinion is offered, however, by R. Shmuel bar Yehuda. He states that Esther's letters were sent to the sages of the Sanhedrin, the Men of the Great Assembly, to establish the reading of the Megillah as a practice for all generations.[272] At first, the sages are recorded as refusing her request, based on the potential dangers it may arouse for the Jews at the hands of the nations. Publicly reciting the Megillah may incite hatred among the gentiles toward Israel, because Israel will be looked at as flaunting their victory over their enemies.[273] Esther then retorts, presumably in the second letter, that she should be preserved among her own people as she is already recorded in the annals of the Kings of Persia and Media. In that way, the public reading of the Scroll could not arouse hatred, as most nations already knew of the matter. Esther then asks the Assembly to include the Megillah in Scripture. They refuse this request, too, at the outset, but later grant her request based on a proof text in the Torah.[274] Though initially refused, Esther persisted in her request

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[272] The Men of the Great Assembly was a legislative and religious authority when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. This 120-member "supreme court" was credited with composing the *Amidah* and the final composition of certain books in the *Tanakh*. As part of that latter role, the Assembly decided which of the Writings would be included in the Hebrew Bible. Esther is then seen as requesting both the public recitation of the Scroll and for the Megillah to be included in the corpus of Jewish biblical literature. Interestingly the Palestinian Talmud Meg 1:5, mentions 85 Sages, including 30 prophets, were greatly troubled with Esther's request. This could relate to the issue that Esther's demand to establish a holiday without biblical precedent, and granting the Scroll biblical status, may be viewed as "adding to the Torah." This is clearly an issue for the rabbis, for if they add to Torah, what is to keep them from subtracting from it? See Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 53 for further discussion.

[273] Rashi to *b. Meg.* 7a.

[274] The refusal in *b. Meg.* 7a was based on the statement that the theme of Amalek's destruction should only be mentioned three times. By including the Megillah in Scripture, it will be mentioned a fourth time. After the sages investigated the matter, however, they found cause to mention it a fourth time, based on Ex 17:14, "And you shall write this as a commemoration in the book." Explicating this verse piece by piece, the rabbis state that the command to "write this" refers to the two times Amalek's fall was mentioned in the Torah, and "as a commemoration" refers to the mentioning in the Prophets (1 Sam 15:2). Therefore, the phrase "in the book" must refer to a place it should be mentioned in the Writings, namely in the Megillah. Her request is granted, though later on the page, the sages determine that the

from the Assembly to be remembered throughout history. "In this midrash it may have been the rabbis themselves who were transformed. Required to confront the model of a woman in an unusual capacity, they come to accept and value her actions."[275] At once, the Sages describe Esther insistent and powerful, handling them as she did Mordecai and the king. Later commentators suggest that the letter Esther authored included halakhic justification for her marriage to Ahashverosh so that later generations would not question it.[276] Apparently later generations still questioned and took issue with the intermarriage.

The sages in the Talmud do not deal explicitly with the fact that Esther is recorded as having written the Scroll, except to declare that what was written was Divinely inspired, and on that basis the Megillah should be included in the canon.[277] Other commentators, however, do deal with the peculiarity of both Mordecai and Esther being mentioned in v 9:29, but the verb "wrote" is in the third person singular, connoting only Esther wrote. Some suggest that Esther elaborated on what Mordecai had preciously written.[278] Rashi, however, declares that Esther completed the Scroll, though Mordecai had written it a year earlier. According to him, Esther elevated the "letter" written to a book in the canon. He bases this on the fact that the word tikhtov, and she wrote, is generally written with the first *tav* as a majuscule, a large sized character.[279] Perhaps the reason the scroll is named after Esther is based on this

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Scroll could be included as it was written with Divine inspiration. Rashi to *b. Meg.* 7a also draws a connection between "in the book" with Est 9:32, "Now Esther's order confirmed the matters of Purim and it was inscribed in the book." He states that this reflects Esther's request of the sages to include the Megillah in Scripture.

[275]Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 179-80.

[276] R. Elisha Gallico to 9:29. See also *Dena Pishra* to 9:29.

[277] *b. Meg.* 7a. The implications of Esther writing with Divine inspiration will be discussed later.

[278] Alshich to 9:29; *Yosef Lekah* to 9:29.

[279] Rashi to 9:29. See also Rashi to 9:20 where he states that Mordecai wrote the Megillah a year earlier.

understanding coupled with the statement in *b. Sotah* 13b, "a mitzvah is named after the one who completes it."[280]

A modern commentator does not so much question if Esther wrote the Scroll, but why she would have included certain events. "Since Esther herself wrote the Megillah,

> she could easily have omitted Mordecai's scathing reproof [in Est 4:14] and recorded for posterity only her noble response, "Go, assemble all the Jews..." (v. 16). However, because she understood the invaluable and eternal lessons which Mordechai's [sic] words conveyed, she faithfully recounted the dialogue in its entirety. Furthermore, she recognized the value of moral rebuke, about which the Midrash says, 'Love which is not accompanied by moral rebuke is not (true) love. Reish Lakish said: Moral rebuke promotes peace.'"[281]

Understanding Esther's motivations in this way, this modern commentator clarifies how the letters were considered words of both truth and peace (Est 9:30). By including the degrading material such as Mordecai's moral rebuke, Esther kept with the tradition that the Torah is straightforward and honest; in essence, it is Truth. Also, since the rebuke can bring about peace, her letters are understood as spreading truth and peace throughout the 127 provinces.[282]

It would be unfair and incorrect, however, to deduce that the rabbis favored Esther as the hero alone, or even that they believed that Esther was greater than Mordecai. Esther, being a more malleable character, changed in both the biblical and the rabbinic texts, but she did not act alone. In the first half of the Scroll, she was a pawn, not a real actor. Mordecai did more of the acting in both the first half of the

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[280] The Scroll was simply referred to as the Megillah, with no mention of Esther's name until the fourth century. For a concise discussion of possible reasons the Scroll was named after Esther, see Ginzburg, *The King's Treasures*, 153.

[281] Ginzburg, *The King's Treasures*, 81. The midrash he quotes is *M. Gen. Rab.* 54.

[282] An interesting midrash on the 127 provinces comes from *M. Gen. Rab.* 58:3. A connection is made between Sarah dying at age 127 and Esther, by Sarah's merit, prevailing over Haman and being given authority over the same number of provinces.

Scroll and in the parallel rabbinic literature. A change takes place, a transfer of power and authority exists between the two human heroes, and ultimately, many commentators suggest that Mordecai and Esther share the role of hero and redeemer. One place this is evidenced is in the midrash to Est 8:15, where it interprets Mordecai, clad in royal garb with a great crown of gold, to suggest a coin with Mordecai's image on one side, and Esther's on the other.[283] Another, quite detailed midrash about the sharing of power between the two human heroes is presented by Rav Moshe Alshich. He states that the need for two redeemers arose from the two sins committed by the Jewish people: For the sin of participating in the feast, Mordecai rose to shield Israel; for the sin of idolatry under Nebuchadnezzar, Esther rose to shield Israel.[284] The Jews brought about their harsh decree themselves; therefore, they needed two of their own to protect them and turn the events around. Each had merit that counteracted the fate of the Jewish people.

Still, an impressive statement by the rabbis suggests that Esther may have had even greater authority than Mordecai. In the Talmud, the rabbis include Esther among the short list of seven prophetesses of Israel.[285] The appellation is absent in the biblical text, but the rabbis read this virtue of Esther into the Scroll, particularly in Est. 5:1, that Esther "clothed herself in royalty." The sages claim this to mean Esther was clothed in

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[283] *M. Esth. Rab.* 10:12. This midrash continues to highlight Mordecai more than Esther, but the presence of Esther's image on the flip side of the same coin suggests a sharing of power and authority. A similar midrash appears in *M. Gen. Rab.* 39:11, but there the images are of sackcloth and ashes on one side and a crown on the other, depicting the two extreme positions of Mordecai.

[284] Alshich in *A Glimpse Behind the Mask: The Commentary of Rabbi Moshe Alshich on Megillath Esther* (Dovid Honig, transl.; Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1993), 29-33.

[285] *b. Meg.* 14a. The other women are Sarah, Miriam, Devorah, Chanah, Avigail, and Chuldah. See Landesman, *As the Rabbis Taught*, 153, for an interesting discussion about why the sages did not "find it necessary to identify the forty-eight prophets." He concludes that it may be that, based on the requirements prophecy, women would have more difficulty. He also brings in the Tosafot to *b. B. Qam.* 15a where they note that the lack of female prophets may be a result of the "reluctance of the people to accept them" and not a deficiency on the part of the women.

It is suggested further in the Talmud (*b. Meg.* 15a), that Mordecai may be the prophet Malachai, but that suggestion is denied. Mordecai's Dream in the "Additions" may suggest that he too had prophecy, but he is not outright called a prophet.

the Holy Spirit, a metaphor for having the gift of prophecy. A connection is also made with the "power" with which Esther wrote (Est 9:29); that is, the idea that Esther was a prophetess and that she wrote a Divinely inspired book are interrelated.

By suggesting that Esther was blessed with Divine prophecy or insight, the rabbis ultimately stripped Esther of some of her authority; that is, perhaps the rabbis are saying that Esther was incapable of accomplishing all that she accomplished on her own. Esther needed Divine assistance to be able to pull off this great ruse. The transfer of authority, honor, and power does not pass from Mordecai to Esther in the rabbinic text, but rather from Mordecai to God, through Esther. By endowing Esther with the Divine gift of prophecy is one of the many ways that the sages read God into the text, whereas He is absent or at least not explicitly mentioned in the Biblical account. For the rabbis, God (or at least God's name) had to be present in the text in order for it to be considered holy. The rabbis, with their ingenuity, find God's name in the plain text. One obvious example is in Est 4:14, where, during his rebuke of Esther's silence, Mordecai tells Esther that if she does not act, help will come from *makom acher*, someplace else. Writing in the late 11th century, Joseph ben Simeon Kara was the first exegete to explicitly mention the miraculous nature of the events in the Megillah. On this verse, he states, "When the Holy one blessed be He sees that no one is praying on Israel's behalf, He, in His Glory, saves them in their times of trouble."[286] Another place God is read into the text is in Est 5:4, as Esther invites the King and Haman to come to

[286] Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 85. Walfish notes that at the time of Kara's writing, Jews in northern France and Germany were in dire need of reassurance that God was with them, as they had been suffering numerous persecutions. Kara may be connecting *makom* with the rabbinic name for God, *haMakom*. One place where God is referred to as *haMakom* in rabbinic literature is in *M. Gen. Rab.* 68. There it states, "in circumscribing the name of God, why do we call him *Makom*? Because He is the existence (the preserver) of the world, but His world is not his existence." Later commentators, too, understand Est 4:14 to suggest that God will protect the people. Alshich on this verse, however, suggests that the "other place" is Moses in the Garden of Eden who will argue for the protection of the people.

the banquet: *Ya'vo Ha-melech V'haman Ha'yom*. The acrostic of the first letter of each word in this phrase spells out the name for God.[287] The Heavenly King is then read into the text.

In the rabbinic literature, God is not simply present. According to the sages, God is involved in every chapter, directing every turn in the story, either through causing events to happen Himself or through angels. From the punishment of the Jews because of their Sins against God and God's Law to sending an angel to give Vashti a tail in order that she would not appear at the banquet and would subsequently be deposed and killed, to even deciding the month in which Esther would be taken to the king's chambers, God's hand is controlling the events in the midrashim. Of the plethora of rabbinic material that demonstrates God's presence in the text, a few examples related to Esther will suffice.

As Esther is described as being cast with a thread of grace, that God caused her to be considered beautiful by all who looked upon her.[288] Being the one chosen by God to fulfill this mission, Esther really had only one other woman with whom to contend in the beauty contest. That woman was Haman's own daughter. In the *Targum*, it was explained that Haman had a plan to depose Vashti and have his daughter assume the throne.[289] Later in the *Targum*, during Esther's prayer before she went to see Ahashverosh, Esther reveals how Haman's plan was foiled by a Divine one. She states, "...when the maidens were assembled...Haman's daughter was there, and then it was determined from Heaven that each day she became defiled with excrement and with

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[287] Bachyai ben Asher to 5:4, quoted in Zlotowitz, *The Book of Esther*, 85. The idea that God is hidden in the word King throughout the Megillah is common.
[288] *b. Meg.* 13a with Rashi. See Chapter One for more midrashim about God intervening in Esther's physical appearance.
[289] *Tg. Esth. I*, 1:16.

urine; her mouth also smelled exceedingly offensive, whereupon they hurried her out. For this reason it fell upon me to be married to [the king]."[290] Apparently, God's manipulation of the beauty contest was more than simply making everyone find Esther attractive; He also made her only competition suffer bouts of explosive diarrhea and utter foulness.

Even at Esther's most significant moment, when she risks her life and faces the king, the rabbis attribute her success to God. In the midrashim, Esther is weak and unable to approach the king for fear of being killed. God restored her beauty and grace, which was wilted by her fast, and she was escorted into the chamber supported by the Divine spirit which gave her confidence. As she passed the hall of idols, however, she felt that the Spirit had left her.[291] After a prayer, she continued on her way. In accordance with her fears, the king was indeed initially furious with Esther's uninvited presence, but just as he was about to unleash his rage, an angel grabbed Ahashverosh and slapped him across the face and whispered in his ear that he should look with favor upon his weak wife standing before him.[292] Ahashverosh's demeanor instantly changed, and three angels helped Esther stand erect, glow with Divine radiance, and stretched the king's scepter toward her so that she could touch it, signaling the king's permission for her to be there.[293] God's angels did not stop working there. According to some midrashim, they were present at the banquet as Esther was about to finger Haman as the man out to kill her. One midrash states that Esther, in her fervor, pointed

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[290] *Tg. Esth. I*, 5:1.
[291] *b. Meg.* 15b; *M. Esth. Rab.* 9:1.
[292] *M. Esth. Rab.* 9:1, *M. Pan. Aher.* to Est 5:1, *Agg. Esth.* to Est 5:1. Cf. *Yal. Shim.* 1056:5 where Ahashverosh is reportedly blind until Esther enters, miraculously restoring his sight. This was enough to make him accept his wife's presence and grant her whatever she desired.
[293] *b. Meg.* 15b; Alshich to 5:2.

at Ahashverosh when she should have pointed at Haman. An angel redirected her accusation.[294] Other angels, in the guise of Haman's sons, were said to have felled the trees in the king's garden, the place he went for serenity, further aggravating his mood.[295] Still, another angel was also responsible for causing Haman to fall on the Queen, further infuriating the king.[296]

Sampling just a few of the instances whereby the rabbis manipulate the text to include God in the unfolding of events, it is clear that for them, God is the real hero of the Megillah. "Rabbinic literature, by emphasizing God's constant assistance, in a way diminishes Esther's personal strength and independence of action, but it also increases her spirituality, which was, after all, where rabbinic interest really lay." Esther maintains a position of honor and respect in the rabbinic texts, but when the sages rely on Divine intervention to explain how Esther could have succeeded, they begin to chip away at her hero status. The rabbis were clearly discomforted by a story of deliverance, and a holiday to celebrate that redemption, that was devoid of any explicit mention of God.

Perhaps another reason that the rabbis voraciously read God into the text had to do with diverting the people's attention away from human redeemers and redirecting their focus and faith to God. Beginning with the earliest commentaries on the Scroll, the sages faced the advent of nascent religions borne out of Judaism. First was Christianity, followed by Islam. Both of these major religions had charismatic leaders

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[294] *b. Meg.* 16a. Some commentators suggest Esther intended to blame Ahashverosh for a variety of reasons.
[295] *Tg Esth. I,* 7:7-8; *M. Esth. Rab.* 10:9. Cf. *Yal. Shim.* 1058; *M. Lekah Tov* to Est 7:7; *Agg. Esth.* to Est 7:8, *Pirqe R. El.* 50.
[296] *b. Meg.* 16a, *M. Esth. Rab.* 10:10; Cf. *M. Pan. Aher.* 2:77; *M. Lekah. Tov* to Est 7:8; *Pirqe R. El.* 50; *Agg. Esth.* 7:8 and *Yal. Shim.* 1058.

who were believed by their followers to be human redeemers, agents of God. Needless to say, these religions and their leaderships posed serious religious and social threats to Jews and Judaism. But the threat did not stop with these two religions. Throughout Jewish history, there have been Jews who have proclaimed themselves, or have been proclaimed, the messiah, particularly at times when Jews faced severe physical danger.

Beginning with Bar Kohba in 135, pseudo-Messiahs have made their debuts, threatening the fabric of Judaism, and even the safety and security of the people. The first false Messiah documented in the Diaspora made his appearance in Crete around the year 431.[297] Later, in 1146, a Persian Jew named David Alroy claimed to be the Messiah. His claim came about amidst the Second Crusade, a time when Messianism was rampant in all three religions.[298] People were no doubt searching for redemption, and in the absence of true Redemption brought about by God, Jews turned to humans who claimed to be their redeemers. One of the most notorious false messiahs was Shabbetai Zvi, who appeared in the Ottoman Empire in 1666. As the historian Jacob Rader Marcus explains:

> "The times were ripe for him: central Europe and its Jewry with it had been devastated by the Thirty Years' War; East European Jewry had been literally decimated by a series of massacres beginning in 1648. In such periods of suffering the Jewish people always looked forward to a return to a Palestine where a free Jewish state would be established that would serve as a refuge for the myriads of unassorted and panic-stricken Jews...[when Shabbetai Zvi] was proclaimed Messiah by frenzied followers and astute propagandists, he found a ready, wildly enthusiastic reception."[299]

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[297] Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Source Book* (New York: HUC Press, 1990) 225-6. This unnamed pseudo-Messiah so duped the people that many are reported to have converted to Christianity.

[298] Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, 247-50.

[299] Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, 261. See also Philip Goodman, *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988) for his chapter on Special Purims. This can be understood as a different reaction to times of distress, with communities or families celebrating their own Purims. He states, "Festivals were inaugurated not only to commemorate a timely release from tyrannical rulers, but also to celebrate an escape from such impending disasters as plagues, earthquakes

It is no wonder, then, why the sages would have deflected attention away from the human heroes of the Megillah, and highlighted God. This reality, combined with the rabbis own desires to elevate the people's faith in God, gave the sages ample opportunity to manipulate the biblical text and offer comfort and hope through homily and midrash. Esther and the Jewish people faced certain death, and God was no where to be found in the plain text. The rabbis filled in that enormous gap, encouraging the people in their own day to have faith in God, even when God seems absent.

Still, Mordecai and Esther were both human leaders and redeemers in the biblical text. Esther's evolution in the rabbinic literature in this respect proves to be much more significant. Her character in the plain text left much room for the rabbis to manipulate her into a relatable, human hero by giving voice to her actions, and explicating her motivations underlying them. All the while, though, the rabbis were clear in that no matter how strong or charismatic the human heroes were, God was behind them.

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and conflagrations...While the original Purim is observed universally, the special Purims, commemorating days of deliverance of a local Jewish community or of an individual Jewish family, have been kept only by the descendants of the members of that community or family" (14-5).

New research into these special celebrations may show that they are largely embellished, but their effect still remains. For more on actual Purim practices and how the celebrations were received and interpreted in the non-Jewish world, see Elliot Horowitz, "The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence" in *Poetics Today* 15:1 (1994): 9-54.

Conclusion

Based on the material presented here, it is possible to see the evolution of the character of Esther in rabbinic literature. A beauty queen in the Bible, Esther is later portrayed as having more grace than looks. Indeed, according to the rabbis, she may not have been beautiful at all, enabling her to be much more than just a pretty face. Whereas the rabbis do focus on her sexuality and prowess, they understand these charms and attributes as a source of power and God-given talents. She was the way she was because God intended Esther to be the hero the people needed. Esther, though, was more than a sexual being according to the rabbis. She was at once a loyal Jew, an obedient wife, a prophetess and a strong leader. She was depicted as being observant of Jewish law and custom, modest and humble. The rabbis hardly find a flaw in her character, and instead, grant her glory and honor.

The rabbis were men who imbued their re-characterization of Esther with their attitudes of the proper role for women and wives. Esther, who in the Bible may have appeared immodest, evolved into a modest, righteous woman concerned with details of piety, family purity and obedience. She acted independently, but was not wholly independent in the Bible or the midrashim. In the Bible, Esther obeyed Mordecai and was his partner in saving the people. In the midrashim, Esther worked with God as well, fulfilling her destiny. Despite being a successful intermarried Jew in the Diaspora, Esther became a model Jewish woman in the rabbinic literature. She was acculturated, but not assimilated; she was pious and regal, but not haughty or self-absorbed; she was

sexual and powerful, but not promiscuous or immodest. Her character in the plain text underwent some evolution and transformation, but it was only through the recasting and reworking of the rabbis that Esther truly evolved into a strong female Jewish leader.

A modern feminist commentator notes that "rabbinic writings are not historical documents. Highly edited over many centuries, this multivocal literature was created by men whose personal piety, individual experiences of the world, and vivid imaginations shaped an idealized social order which often had scant connection to the actual realities of Jewish life in the environments in which they lived."[300] The transformation of Esther in rabbinic literature reflects the desire of the rabbis to create an ideal hero out of the biblical character. The rabbis noticed lacunae in her personality and filled in those gaps to give her the characteristics, traits and attributes they wanted, and indeed needed her to have. Whereas Esther could be viewed as an anti-feminist, being an obedient object in relation to the men in her life, she can also be viewed as a proto-feminist. Much like the way the rabbis work with the given text to create their desired effect, Esther is recast as a subtly courageous woman, using the talents she has, and working within the bounds to affect change. Perhaps beginning as a shameful main character, she becomes an idealized leader in rabbinic literature, embodying those characteristics deemed paramount by the rabbis.

The rabbis were affected by social, religious and political realities of their time and place. Not only did they recast Esther into an ideal hero for homiletic purposes, by making her pious and modest, but they also used Esther as a source of strength and

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[300] Judith Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2000) 13. I disagree that there is scant relationship between the literature and the realities of the rabbis. Indeed, it is precisely the reality of their environs that coerce the rabbis into formulating their idealized views of the way the world should be.

inspiration in dark times. Esther became the paradigmatic potential martyr for her people. Though Esther did not die for her loyalty to the Jews, the rabbis went to great lengths to show how she risked her life and safety to save her people, all the while remaining true to the religion. Esther, too, enabled the rabbis to deflect attention away from human redeemers and return the focus to God, the true Redeemer. Esther's character in rabbinic literature knows that her strength, power, and ability to save her people come from God, and are not natural human characteristics. She is even recorded as acting in such a way that the people would become disenchanted with her in order to redirect their focus on God instead of humans. Esther is able, then, to give the Jews hope that even when God may not be apparent, He is still present and will ultimately save the people provided they are worthy.

The rabbis addressed grammatical and thematic issues in the text as well as attempted to solve the apparent irreligious or a-religious nature of the Scroll. By studying their commentaries, we learn about the rabbis and their concerns and attitudes in their day, how they related the ancient scroll to their time and place, and how modern Jews can do the same. To this day, commentary continues as Esther is revisited by traditionalists and feminists alike. Concerns over the propriety of women, the power of women, the issues of intermarriage, and the survival of Judaism continue to resound in the modern world, especially in the Diaspora. By studying and engaging both the biblical Esther and the "evolved" character in rabbinic texts, Esther (the Scroll and the character) continues to be a source of strength and pride for Jews and Judaism.

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Midrash Genesis Rabbah

Midrash Lekach Tov

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