

Shiur #12: Who is the Protagonist of Esther?

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As discussed in the previous shiur, over the course of chapter 4 Esther undergoes a transformation; her agreement to go before the king "which is against the law" represents her rejection of Persian law, in favor of the dictates of an inner Jewish law – the declaration of a fast. It would seem that the process that Esther undergoes in this scene deviates from the local narrative context – Mordechai persuading her to go before the king – and echoes in broader contexts of the development of the narrative as a whole. Even if the apparent turning point of the story takes place later on (in chapter 6), from a certain perspective, Esther's agreement should also be viewed as a "turning point" that anticipates the later, more obvious one.[1] The essence of this idea lies in the question of the identity of the "hero" of the Esther narrative.

For the purposes of this discussion, let us adopt the generally accepted definition for the literary term protagonist, or "hero," as referring to a central character in the story "who is significantly highlighted and whose actions, fate and inner world occupy the reader's attention, sometimes also arousing his sympathies." [2] In general, this character catalyzes the plot, and the narrator follows his or her movements and experiences. There may be a number of main characters in the narrative, with the narrator describing events from alternating points of view.

Sometimes it seems that, from a biblical perspective, presenting a certain character as the protagonist is not a simple matter: a human being cannot really be a "main character" in the full sense of the word, since the "main character" in the biblical narrative is always God; it is He Who generates the plot. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the protagonist of a biblical narrative also has deficiencies and weaknesses. Nevertheless, and with certain reservations, in a biblical narrative we are also able to point to a main character and, in contrast, minor characters or "extras," whose role is to assist in the development of the plot, or to illuminate the protagonist.[3]

It is not always easy to identify the protagonist of a narrative. Seemingly, it should be intuitively clear, from the very first reading (and indeed, this is often the case), but in reality it is difficult to decide, for example, whether the heroine of Ruth is Ruth herself or Naomi. This ambivalence is a product of the fact that the narrative starts by telling the story of Naomi's descent and the story of her redemption, but chapters 2 and 3 – where the turning point of the narrative takes place – follow Ruth's actions and her experiences in the field of Boaz and on the threshing floor.

Who, then, is the protagonist of Esther? This question is of great significance, for we may assume that the message of the narrative is connected to the process undergone by the protagonist (or to a process that becomes clear through his or her actions.)

Mordekhai

"He began to be a mighty man in the land" (Bereishit 10:8)

There are several factors supporting Mordekhai's candidacy as the protagonist of Esther. First, note must be taken of the manner in which he is first presented: "There was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital, named Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish – a man of Binyamin. Who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the captivity carried away into exile with Yekhonya, King of Yehuda, by Nevukhadnetzar, King of Babylon" (Esther 2:5-6). The introduction by way of a general title, followed by a more detailed name and lineage ("There was a Jewish man... named...") conveys a sense of great importance; the reader already has some sense of the centrality of the man in question (cf. "There was a man in the land of Utz, named Iyov, and that man was simple and upright and God-fearing, turning from evil" [Iyov 1:1]). The lengthy genealogical list, too – deviating from the regular manner of presentation in Tanakh, where generally only the father's name is mentioned – continues to hint to the reader that he should seek out the roots of this character, upon whom the narrative is about to focus. In fact, even the matter of Mordekhai's exile (or that of his ancestor's) from Jerusalem, which has no direct bearing on the plot, allows us to peek into the character's past; this is appropriate to a main character rather than to a minor one.

Beyond the manner of Mordekhai's presentation, it is clear that it is in the wake of his actions that most of the plot develops. It is because of his refusal to bow to Haman that the latter issues the decree of annihilation against Mordekhai's people; this in turn generates the story of the redemption. From this perspective, Mordekhai is the catalyst of the narrative, even if alongside him there are also other relevant elements.

Some readers are sure to claim that the choice of Esther as queen makes her the most obvious candidate for "protagonist." However, this conclusion does not sit well with the way in which the relevant scene is molded. Throughout the episode of Esther's selection as queen, she is passive and stands in Mordekhai's shadow. At the outset, when Esther is taken to the king's palace, we read: "When her father and mother died Mordekhai took her as his own daughter. And it was, when the king's word and his decree were proclaimed... Esther was taken to the king's palace" (2:7-8). Esther is "taken" against her will, while Mordekhai initiates and "takes." The same pattern repeats itself when Esther is taken to the king himself: "When the turn came of Esther - daughter of Avichayil, Mordekhai's uncle, who he took as his own daughter – to go in to the king... Esther was taken to King Achashverosh" (2:15-16). In fact, the portrayal of Esther in this scene repeatedly emphasizes her passivity in contrast to the active Mordekhai: "Esther did not make known her people and her nationality, for so Mordekhai had charged her, that she should not say" (2:10); "When the turn came of Esther – daughter of Avichayil, Mordekhai's uncle, who he took as his daughter – to go in to the king, she requested nothing" (2:15.)

It is specifically in this scene that the hierarchical relationship between these two characters is depicted most clearly: Mordekhai "walked about every day in front of the court of the women's house, to find out as to Esther's welfare" (2:11), and it is he who tells Esther what to say and what not to say (2:10). In case the innocent reader imagines that after Esther is taken to the royal palace and chosen as the queen, the hierarchy changes – the narrator makes it explicitly clear that the situation remains as it was: "She did as Mordekhai said, just as she had while he took care of her" (2:20.)

The centrality of Mordechai – even in relation to Esther – stands out prominently in the next scene, where Mordechai reveals the plot of the chamberlains to assassinate the king (2:21-23). There, too, it is Mordechai who catalyzes the plot; there, too, Esther merely conveys the message to the king. Indeed, Esther herself sees her role in this light: "Esther told it to the king in Mordechai's name" (2:22.)

This model continues up until the first half of chapter 4. At the beginning of this chapter, too, the narrator follows Mordechai: "Mordechai knew of all that had been done, and Mordechai rent his garments and he wore sackcloth and ashes, and he went out in the midst of the city and he cried out with a great and bitter cry. And he came up to before the king's gate, for one could not come to the king's gate wearing sackcloth" (4:1-2). Here it becomes apparent that Esther does not even know of the decrees; it appears – at least at the beginning of the scene – that Esther has exited the narrative; she does not feature here even as a minor character.

However, over the course of the dialogue between Esther and Mordechai, a turning point takes place. This is not yet the major turning point in the plot of the narrative, but it certainly is a revolutionary change in Esther's thinking and, as we shall presently see, also represents a turning point in the definition of the active characters.

Esther

"The wisdom of women has built her house" (Mishlei 14:1)

As we have seen, in the first part of the dialogue between Mordechai and Esther, the idea of "commanding" stands out prominently. Esther commands Hatakh to find out from Mordechai why he is dressed in mourning garb ("She commanded him concerning Mordechai" – 4:5, 10), while Mordechai sends Hatakh back with a clear "command" to Esther: "And to tell her and command her to go in to the king and to entreat him and to plead before him for her people" (4:8). This state of affairs reflects the same idea that we described above: Esther commands the person who is subordinate to her – Hatakh (since he is "once of the king's chamberlains, whom he had placed at her disposal" – 4-5), while Mordechai commands the person who is subservient to him – Esther (who continues to obey Mordechai's word). In this sense, this image of "commanding" sits well with the general linguistic texture of the narrative, since the relationship between Mordechai and Esther has been described twice already using exactly the same word: "Esther did not make known her people and her nationality, for so Mordechai had commanded her, not to tell" (2:10); "Esther did not make known her nationality and her people, as Mordechai had commanded her" (2:20.)

It is somewhat surprising, then, to discover how, at the end of the emotional dialogue between Mordechai and Esther, the situation is reversed: "Mordechai went off and did all that Esther had commanded him" (4:17). Suddenly, Mordechai is no longer commanding Esther; now it is Esther who commands him, and he obeys Esther's word.[4]

From this point onwards, the plot develops around Esther: it is she who invites the king and his second-in-command to the two parties that she prepares; she bringing about the hanging of Haman[5] and, later on, the cancellation of the decree: "Esther spoke further before the king, and she fell before his feet and wept and entreated him to avert the evil of Haman, the Agagite, and his plan that he had devised against the Jews" (8:3). Attention should be paid to the fact that this happens after Mordechai has once again entered the picture, after he has stood before the king and even received Haman's ring (8:1-2). We might have expected that

Haman's replacement would cancel his decrees; however, as noted, at this stage it is Esther who is the heroine; it is she who is active. Mordekhai is merely a minor character at her side: "From this point [chapter 4 – Y.G.] onwards, whatever Esther tells them, they will obey. Everyone! Mordekhai, Haman, the king, everyone – for all generations, for 'Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim...!' From this point onwards, Esther is revealed in her full feminine stature, for she – unlike Vashti, who 'refuses' – continues to weave and spin with threads of grace, magic and parties, until she achieves her aims." [6]

The relationship between Mordekhai and Esther has changed beyond recognition: "On that day King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the house of Haman, enemy of the Jews, to Esther. And Mordekhai came in before the king, for Esther had made it known what he was to her. And the king removed his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordekhai, and Esther set Mordekhai over the house of Haman" (8:1-2). The king gives the house of Haman to Esther, and she appoints Mordekhai over the house! Moreover, Mordekhai's privilege of appearing before the king and receiving his special status comes about by virtue of Esther: "For Esther had made it known what he was to her." In chapter 2, Esther "did not make known" her origins, at Mordekhai's command; now she "makes known" her relationship to Mordekhai, and therefore he is privileged – because of Esther – with a respected status and title.

Factors leading to the turning point

The literary transition with regard to the identity of the protagonist of the narrative is a reflection of the psychological turning point that the characters themselves experience. As we have seen, during the course of the dialogue between Mordekhai and Esther, we hear, for the first and last time in the narrative, motifs relating to God's Providence towards His nation ("Relief and deliverance shall come to the Jews from elsewhere"); personal destiny ("Who knows if for a time such as this you attained royal status"); fasting ("fast for me; do not eat and do not drink, night and day, and I and my maidens shall likewise fast"); and self-sacrifice ("Thus I shall go in to the king, which is against the law, and if I perish, then I shall perish"). Amidst the strong fumes of wine that pervade the narrative from beginning to end, Esther is sharply conscious in this scene and declares a fast. With self-sacrifice on behalf of her nation, Esther takes the reigns of the narrative and becomes its protagonist. Her intertwinement with the signs of Divine Providence destines her for the role of literary heroine. From this moment, the fate of the Jews will depend on her actions.[7] It is interesting that the narrator chooses to focus specifically on her, rather than on the older Mordekhai – who also holds a position in Achashverosh's regime. Perhaps the focus on Esther is related, once again, to the theme of mystery and surprise in the narrative: it is not the character whom the reader expects to be active who actually acts, but rather the young girl who is taken against her will to the king's palace.

As noted in the introduction to this series, the obvious turning point in the narrative is where Mordekhai is led through the streets riding the king's horse. But now it is clear that beneath the surface another revolution takes place – an invisible, psychological revolution that happens within Esther – and this turning point holds greater significance for the development of the plot, even if it is less easily detectible.[8]

Conclusion of the narrative – Combination of the characters

"Shall two walk together" (Amos 3:3)

Thus far we may state that in the narrative of Esther there are two characters who may be regarded as protagonists, but they do not maintain this status simultaneously. In the first part of the narrative Mordekhai should be viewed as the protagonist; in the second part it is Esther who is the heroine. In each half, the character who is not the main hero is presented as secondary to him or her. In other words, in the first half Esther is nothing more than an extension of Mordekhai inside the palace, while in the second half Mordekhai acts in accordance with Esther's instructions.

However, we cannot conclude this discussion without noting the conclusion of the narrative. From the moment when Esther presents Mordekhai to the king, the two characters become joint protagonists of the story. The king addresses them together: "King Achashverosh said to Queen Esther and to Mordekhai, the Jew... As for you [in the plural – "atem"], write as you please concerning the Jews" (8:7-8). These words serve once again to emphasize Esther's special status: "Behold, I have given Haman's house to Esther" (8:7, despite the fact that the person who is actually responsible for Haman's house [i.e., his position] is Mordekhai, the king states that he has given the house "to Esther"). But immediately thereafter we hear of Mordekhai's actions; "It was written, in accordance with whatever Mordekhai commanded, to all the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the princes of the provinces that were from India to Ethiopia – a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, each province according to its writing, and each people according to its language, and to the Jews, according to their writing and their language. And he wrote in the name of King Achashverosh and sealed it with the king's ring, and he sent letters by couriers on horseback, riding the swift horses used in the royal service, born of thoroughbreds" (8:8-10). Once again Mordekhai is "commanding." He "writes," "seals" and "sends"; he is back in action. Moreover, we now hear that "Mordekhai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout the provinces, for the man Mordekhai grew greater and greater" (9:4). It is difficult to ignore the special title, "the man Mordekhai," which takes us back (especially in the context of the present discussion) to Mordekhai's literary status at the outset: "A Jewish man." [9]

However, we should not be misled into thinking that Esther has vacated this role. The king immediately goes on to report to Esther the results of the battles, although it is Mordekhai who sends the letters permitting the Jews to defend themselves: "The king said to Queen Esther: in Shushan, the capital, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? What do you ask, that it may be granted to you; and what more do you request, that it may be fulfilled?" (9:12). Esther, of her own initiative and without consulting Mordekhai, adds another day of fighting in Shushan: "Esther said, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan that tomorrow, too, they might do according to the decree of this day, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows" (9:13).

The combination of the two characters is especially striking in the process of establishing the days of Purim. At first, Mordekhai sends a letter to all the Jews in which he asks that they celebrate for two days: "Mordekhai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far" (9:20). Immediately thereafter, Esther joins in this initiative and more letters are sent: "Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, wrote – with Mordekhai the Jew... and he sent letters to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of Achashverosh's kingdom, with words of peace and truth, to confirm these days of Purim at their appointed times, as Mordekhai the Jew and Queen Esther

had established for them, and as they had decreed for themselves and their descendants, with regard to the fasting and lamentation. And Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book" (9:29-32). The ambiguity of these verses is deliberate: whose word is it that the Jews of all the provinces ultimately obey? Is it Mordechai ("He sent letters"), or Esther ("Esther's word confirmed..."), or perhaps both of them ("Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew"; "As Mordechai the Jew and Queen Esther had established for them")? The clear implication is that Mordechai's request would not have sufficed; Esther had to intervene – perhaps even applying her royal influence – as emphasized at the end of the scene: "Esther's word confirmed these matters of Purim, and it was written in the book" (9:32).[10]

At the same time, the narrative ends by noting the unique status of Mordechai: "All the acts of his power and his valor, and the full account of Mordechai's greatness to which the king promoted him... for Mordechai the Jew was second to King Achashverosh, and great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brethren, seeking good for his people and speaking of peace to all his descendants" (10:2-3.)

We arrive, then, at the complex conclusion that in the first part of the narrative, Mordechai and Esther alternate as protagonist, while in the concluding stages they are the joint protagonists: "Chapter 9... is confusing as regards the respective authority of Esther and Mordechai. It would seem that they share power." [11]

This conclusion is of great importance for an understanding of the relationship between Mordechai and Esther, which undergoes a transformation in the narrative. At first, Mordechai is Esther's adoptive guardian: "Mordechai took her as his daughter" (2:7). As such, Esther obeys Mordechai's commands, as befitting a daughter to her father. But during the course of the narrative, Esther leaves Mordechai's protection. It is specifically the physical separation, when she is taken into the palace, that turns Esther into a whole and complex personality in her own right; this reflects a psychological separation, too: "If I perish [If I am lost] – as I was lost to my parental home, so I will be lost to you" (Megilla 15a). At the same time, this separation, and the building of Esther's personality as distinct from that of Mordechai, allows the two of them to reconnect, to relate to one another as equals, as it were. From now onwards, their relationship (retroactively) assumes a different character: "Do not read 'As a daughter,' but rather 'as a home [wife]'" (Megilla 13a).[12] Even if it happens in the "house of Haman" which Esther has given to Mordechai – i.e., within the palace – the characters meet up again as office-bearers in the administration of Achashverosh, and they are now on equal footing.

Antagonist – the king

"The weak one says, 'I am strong'" (Yoel 4:10)

It would be unfair to discuss the protagonist of Esther without making any mention of Achashverosh who "ruled from India to Ethiopia." The principal means of attempting to follow the protagonist of a particular narrative is to see who is mentioned in most of its scenes. Whom is the narrator following; whose experiences is he recording for us? According to this parameter, we cannot escape the conclusion that the protagonist of Esther is none other than Achashverosh. The narrative opens with him and a description of his kingship ("It was in the days of Achashverosh – he was Achashverosh who ruled from India to Ethiopia..." [1:1]) In the early stages of the narrative, the other important characters in the

plot are not even mentioned (Mordekhai, Esther, Haman). The end of the narrative, too, shows that it is Achashverosh's narrative that the narrator seeks to share with us: "All of the acts of his power and his might, and the story of the greatness of Mordekhai, to which the king promoted him – are they not written in the book of chronicles of the kings of Mede and Persia" (20:2.)

A superficial review of the scenes comprising the narrative likewise reveals that the king is the central character in most of them. Whether he is active himself (as in the banquets with which the narrative opens, or where he is unable to sleep at night) or merely the background to what is going on (the selection of a new queen for the king), nothing can be done in the kingdom without the king's permission. It therefore appears that everything depends on his word; there is no more obvious protagonist than he.

The bewilderment that overcomes the reader encountering the words above is no coincidence. Needless to say, there is an unfathomable chasm separating the literary form, which opens and concludes with the king, and the content of the narrative, in which it appears that king is the character who actually has the least influence over what happens. Almost every character who is mentioned in the narrative makes some or other contribution towards moving the plot along – all except for the king who, aside from a few statements (which are surprising enough in and of themselves), such as, "Quick – take the robes and the horse..." (6:10), or "Hang him upon it" (7:9), does not make his own decisions. Even at the most critical junctures for the kingdom are navigated by various advisors (Memukhan in the banishing of Vashti; "the king's attendants" in finding a new queen; Haman in the decree of annihilation; Mordekhai and Esther in the decree of salvation). Henschke is correct in noting that "the real subject of Esther is not the battle between Haman and Mordekhai at all; this battle is nothing more than a test case, by means of which the author sketches the nature of Achashverosh's kingship – i.e., mortal kingship. The king, as such, is the true subject of the Megilla, which comes to deride – by means of sharp satire – the royal pretensions of men." [13]

In this sense the description of the king's centrality should be viewed as ironic, seeking to emphasize the discrepancy between that which is expected of a king and his actual performance. We may define the king as an "anti-hero": "A person who is unable to act in the world around him, for social reasons and owing to his psychological makeup." [14] Obviously, when the character who functions in this way is the king, it raises important questions, for what is the role of the king if not to rule!?

The reader is forced to seek out another King, Who is supervising events; to seek the main protagonist who is hidden deep inside the narrative. In other words, the presentation of Achashverosh as the protagonist of Esther is, once again, part of the technique of "hidden writing," insofar as the true hero who moves the plot along is hidden in the narrative. All that remains is to describe the actions of those who seem to be the protagonists in the imaginary reality described in the narrative.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]As Fox maintains (p. 66), and in contrast to the view of Berg (p. 110.)

[2]Y. Even, *Milon Munachei Ha-Sipporet*, Jerusalem 5752, p. 47

[3]See, for example, P. Pollack, "Ha-Sippur ba-Mikra," Jerusalem 5759 [2], pp. 256-261. As to the minor character and its role in the biblical narrative, see U. Simon's important article,

"Ha-Demuyot ha-Mishniyot be-Sippur ha-Mikra'i," Fifth World Congress for Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 31-36.

[4]Beal, p. 57

[5]As Fox rightly emphasizes, Mordekhai suggests only general operative guidelines; it is Esther who works out the details of the plan (Fox, p. 200.)

[6]A. Dym-Goldberg, Ha-Tashtit ha-Omanutit bi-Megillat Ester, Bikkoret u-Farshanut 11-12 (5738), p. 289.

[7]This idea has been emphasized on many occasions in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's sichot on Ta'anit Esther. See, for example, "Divrei ha-Tzomot ve-Za'akatam," Alon Shevut Bogrim (5755), pp. 15-24.

[8]Cf: Berg, p. 110; Fox, pp. 66-67; Laniak, pp. 90-91.

[9]In between these two points in time Mordekhai was also "the man whose honor the king seeks" (6:6), while Haman, in contrast, was "the man who is an enemy and adversary" (7:6). Indeed, the Sages sensed that the description of the banquet with which the narrative opens, where we read, "To perform the will of every man" – in Hebrew, "Ish va-ish" (1:8) – hints at the two "men" of the Megilla: "'To perform the will of every man' – Rabba said: 'To perform the will of Mordekhai and Haman. Mordekhai – as it is written, 'A Jewish man...,' and Haman – as it is written, 'A man who is an enemy and adversary.'" (Megilla 12a) In other words, the roots of the battle waged by Mordekhai and Esther may be traced all the way back to the first banquet, where Mordekhai and Haman drank side by side.

[10]When we come to discuss these verses, we shall address the meaning of the covert battle that it hinted at in the establishment of the days of the festival.

[11]Berlin, p. 42. She adds that ultimately, Mordekhai appears to have a more central role in the establishment of the festival. In summary she writes: "Mordekhai and Esther are joint heroes, each making his own contribution in ways suited to their respective gender roles within the world of the biblical narrative in the Persian period" (Ibid.).

[12]Rabbi Meir, who offers this homiletic lesson, brings a further example, borrowed from the rebuke of the prophet Natan towards King David, following his sin with Bat-Sheva: "We learn in the name of Rabbi Meir: Do not read 'As a daughter,' but rather 'As a home.' Similarly, it says, 'The poor man had nothing but a single, small ewe which he had bought so that he might live; and it grew up together with him and his children; it ate from his bread and drank from his cup, and it lay in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him.' If it lay in his bosom, would this make it 'Like a daughter' to him?! [Surely not;] rather, 'Like a home [wife].' Likewise in our case (concerning Esther) – 'As a home.'" The tension noted by Rabbi Meir in the case of the poor man's lamb is obvious: how are we to understand the two contradictory images – "It lay in his bosom" and "It was like a daughter to him"? At the same time, it must be remembered that the woman involved, in King David's case, was "Bat [lit. daughter] Sheva," and it is possible that the comparison of the lamb to a daughter is meant to hint to her name. For further study of Esther against the background of the sin of David and Bat Sheva, see the interesting article by Y. Rosenson, "Massekhet Megillot," Jerusalem 5762[2], p. 185.

[13]D. Henschke, "Megillat Esther – Tachposet Sifrutit," Megadim 23 (5755) p. 63. Personally, I find it difficult to accept his extreme formulation as to "the true subject of the Megilla." As I see it, even if this is one of the Book's central subjects – as Henschke convincingly demonstrates – this need not nullify other subjects which the Book seeks to clarify and which are anchored in its principal messages. Compare the formulation of G.H. Cohen: "It seems that the author of the Megilla wants one's consideration of this non-regime to lead to the conclusion that it is not the king described in the Megilla who rules the

kingdom, but rather that the events in this kingdom are determined elsewhere" (G.H. Cohen, "Mavo li-Megillat Esther," Da'at Mikra, Jerusalem 5733, p. 8.)
[14]Even, Milon Munachei ha-Sipporet, p. 46