

## **The Mystery of the Disappearing Servant: On the Pivotal Dialogue between Mordekhai and Esther**

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In chapter 4 of Megillat Esther, we leave the Persian setting of the Megilla and encounter the "Jewish dialogue" between Mordekhai and Esther. Paradoxically, this encounter is not conducted face to face; they need an interlocutor (Hatakh). This is a literary technique of "concealment": absurdly, it is specifically in a place where two people cannot meet and a physical distance separates them that we witness the closest and most intimate encounter that takes place between any two characters throughout the entire narrative. At the same time, the interplay of closeness and distance between Mordekhai and Esther is properly characterized as a process, as we shall see presently.

Before Mordekhai persuades Esther to go to the king, the narrative presents his reaction, and that of the Jewish nation, to the decree: "Mordekhai rent his clothes and wore sackcloth and ashes, and he went out in the midst of the city and cried out with a great and bitter cry" (4:1). The "great and bitter" combination appears in only one other place in the Bible, and there too it comes along with shouting and crying. When Esav discovers that he has lost the blessings that he desired from his father, we read as follows: "When Esav heard the words of his father, he cried out an exceedingly great and bitter cry" (*Bereishit* 27:34). The Midrash Panim Acherot (version 2, *parasha* 4) explores this connection:

"[Mordekhai] cried a great and bitter cry' – at that time he put ashes upon his head and went to the gate of the king's palace, but then turned back – for 'one cannot approach the king's gate...' etc. Was Mordekhai then a simpleton, shouting like that? As if the Holy One, blessed be He, cannot hear whispers, but only shouts! Chana prayed in her heart, and the Holy One heard her whispering, for as the text says – 'Chana spoke in her heart...' and what does it say there? 'May the God of Israel grant your request!' [The following, then, explains Mordekhai's behavior:] Mordekhai cried out and said, 'Yitzchak, my father, what have you done to me? When Esav cried out before you, you heard his voice and blessed him. We, here, are being sold for slaughter by the sword!' Therefore it is written, 'He cried a great and bitter cry.'"

This is not the only allusion that links *Esther* to the story of the stolen blessings, and it seems that the significance of the parallel should be examined in a broader context. Still, in the specific context at hand, it should be emphasized that in both narratives the garment, as a characteristic of identity, plays a most important role. The symbolic reading is one of the cornerstones of concealed writing in the Bible, and a garment is frequently

perceived as possessing symbolic meaning, as one of the characteristics of some figure in the narrative.<sup>1</sup> This seems to be the case here, too.

Esav lost his blessings because Yaakov impersonated him by wearing his clothes, and Mordekhai tears his clothing when he hears of the decree. Because of his torn clothing, Mordekhai can no longer walk about at the king's gate, "For one cannot approach the king's gate wearing sackcloth" (4:2). In other words, Mordekhai relinquishes his Persian identity – the one that sits at the king's gate and plays a role in the Persian regime. By tearing his garment, Mordekhai distances himself from Persian, Shushanite existence, and suddenly stands "naked" – allowing his inner, Jewish identity to come to the fore. Esav cries out an "exceedingly great and bitter cry" when his brother uses his identity in order to receive the blessings meant for himself, and Mordekhai cries a "great and bitter cry" when he sheds one national identity and returns to his original, primary national identity.<sup>2</sup>

In this symbolic sense, Esther – who sends garments "to clothe Mordekhai" (4:4) – is not responsive to the change that has taken place in Mordekhai; she seeks to bring him back to the king's gate, to day-to-day Shushan politics. Indeed, it seems that the narrator is hinting at a veiled criticism of Esther and her reaction to what is going outside the palace.

For some reason, Esther does not know about the decree. It must be remembered that Haman's letters have been disseminated widely, and they make significant waves: "In each and every province where the king's word and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting and weeping and lamenting; sackcloth and ashes were spread for the masses" (4:3). Meanwhile, Esther – who is so close to where the action is taking place – hears nothing.<sup>3</sup> The news reaches her via her maidens: "Esther's maidens and her chamberlains came and told her" (4:4). What did they tell Esther? An innocent reading would connect this action with what was mentioned previously – i.e., they told her about "the king's word and his decree," and about the reaction of Mordekhai and the Jews to this new law. Indeed, Esther's reaction is appropriate to such news: "The queen was exceedingly shocked." But the reader immediately discovers his mistake, for Esther has still not heard of the decree. Once again, this confusion plays a

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<sup>1</sup> The motif of the garment as reflecting the concept of identity and inner change is particularly prevalent in the stories of Shaul and David. See O. Prouser, "Clothes Maketh the Man: Keys to Meaning in the Stories of Saul and David," *Bible Review* 14 (1998), pp. 22-27. Rendsburg points to the motif of changing clothing and washing, which pervades Ancient Near Eastern literature (and, he claims, the Bible), at the moment of the hero's homecoming (G. A. Rendsburg, "Notes on Genesis xxxv," *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 361-366). Symbolically speaking, we may view Mordekhai, who changes his clothing, as one who has "returned" home to his Jewish identity.

<sup>2</sup> The Midrash Mishlei (*parasha* 26) connects these two figures in an interesting way: "From a person's words you can know whether he likes you or hates you. For we find, in the case of the wicked Haman, that he speaks to Mordekhai with his mouth, but hates him in his heart, as it is written: 'Haman was filled with wrath against Mordekhai.' Likewise, 'Esav said to himself: When the days of mourning for my father draw near, I shall kill Yaakov, my brother.'"

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C.A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible, New York 1971, p. 52.

literary role. The reader is perplexed by Esther's actions: "She sent garments to clothe Mordekhai and to remove his sackcloth from upon him."

Esther's focus on Mordekhai's clothing is surprising. While it is quite reasonable that Esther wants Mordekhai to be able to return to the king's gate, so that she can meet with him there, in the wider context of the narrative – and in the symbolic context of rending a garment as an element in the process of repentance and a renewed relationship with God – her request seems out of place. We might imagine a person pouring out his heart to God over some catastrophe that has befallen his nation or his family, and then having the sexton of the synagogue coming over and chiding him for praying without a suit and tie! The whole aspect of external clothing is one of the characteristics of Persian culture and the Persian king, who is constantly seeking to "show the riches of his glorious kingdom." And here Esther – if only by inference – has become part of this culture.

The narrator hints at this critical reading by means of two allusions to earlier prophecies of public fasting: "Great mourning among the Jews, and weeping, and lamenting; sackcloth and ashes were spread for the masses" (4:3). The expression, "fasting and weeping and lamenting" is borrowed from Yoel's prophecy, as the threat of locusts lurks: "Now, too, says the Lord – return to Me with all your hearts, and **with fasting and with weeping and with lamenting**. And rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and great in kindness, and He is appeased of evil intent. Who knows – perhaps He will turn and relent, leaving behind Him a blessing: a meal offering and a drink offering to the Lord your God" (*Yoel* 2:12-14).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the expression "sackcloth and ashes were offered to the masses" hints at a prophecy of Yishayahu: "Shall such be the fast that I have chosen – a day of man afflicting his soul, hanging his head like a bulrush, and spreading sackcloth and ashes? Shall you call the likings of this a fast and a day of favor to God?" (*Yishayahu* 58:5). What is common to both of these prophecies is that they address the discrepancy between an inner process of repentance and external acts that inspire no inner resonance. The prophets recognize the importance of rending garments and the role of the ritual of sitting in sackcloth – but only if these actions are accompanied by an inner, spiritual process or, as Yishayahu emphasizes, by ethical repentance. Yoel addresses the nation with harsh words, telling them: "Rend your hearts, not your garments" – as though reminding the nation that repentance involves the laws of the heart, rather than the laws of rending garments! Both of these are classic examples of prophecies dealing with this tension between the "garment" and the heart, between the outer covering and the inner commitment, with a mending of one's ways. The reader is "referred" to both of them, a moment before he encounters Esther, shocked and hurrying to send proper clothing to Mordekhai.

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<sup>4</sup> S. B. Berg hints at this connection: *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, Missoula 1979, p. 52, note 33.

The criticism of Esther is also hinted at in her special title in this scene: "The queen was exceedingly shocked" (4:4).<sup>5</sup> Throughout the entire narrative, Esther is referred to by two names: "Esther," with no special addition, or "Queen Esther." There are only two places where she is referred to only by her royal title – "the Queen": once in this scene, describing her reaction to Mordekhai's mourning,<sup>6</sup> and again in the scene of the second party to which she invites the king and Haman, where from the perspective of the two men, Esther is manifest in her royal role: "Haman was struck with terror before the king and the queen... Do you presume even to assault the queen, in my presence at home?!" (7:6-8). In the party scene it is clear why the narrator seeks to emphasize Esther's status as queen, since this is what generates Achashverosh's anger: Haman appears to be courting "the queen" – i.e., he is a rebel against the crown! But why, when Esther finds out about Mordekhai's distress, does the author choose to call her "the queen," without her own name? He seems to be hinting that Esther has become assimilated – to some extent – within the palace, and that Shushanite thinking has slowly begun to penetrate the soul of this Jewish girl who has become the queen.

In this sense, the physical distance between Mordekhai and Esther also represents psychological distance.<sup>7</sup> Mordekhai has shed the garments of Shushan, while Esther seeks to re-clothe him in them. Mordekhai cannot approach the king's gate; he is outside, beyond the walls of the palace, while Esther is cloistered inside the palace, not even having heard of the decree.

It is against this background that the unique dialogue between Mordekhai and Esther takes place – a dialogue that is conducted via a go-between, whose very name may hint at his literary role ("Hatakh" from the root "tavekh" – the middle). The conversation is made up of three parts, as follows:

- a. "She sent garments to clothe Mordekhai, and to remove his sackcloth from upon him, but he would not accept them.

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<sup>5</sup> The verb *vatitchalchal* (in this form) appears only this once in all of the Bible. In the Septuagint it also appears in the description of the bewildered people of Shushan (3:15), and later on in Haman's reaction (7:6). Laniak comments, most appropriately, that the Septuagint translation thereby seeks to create a sense of Haman being punished "measure for measure": just as he caused great shock among the Jews, and for Esther, so he is ultimately made to suffer a shock himself (T.S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, Atlanta 1998, p. 76, note 61.)

<sup>6</sup> Some translators have not been punctilious about the literal formulation of this verse, and as a result have lost the literary hint. Thus, for example, Levenson – ignoring Esther's special title here – translates: "She was extremely agitated" (p. 77). In contrast, some versions have preserved the unusual title, for example Moore: "The queen was quite shocked" (p. 45).

<sup>7</sup> For another example of this literary phenomenon, we may consider the way in which David is presented as facing Shaul: "He stood at the top of the mountain, at a distance; there was a great stretch between them" (I *Shemuel* 26:13). As Moshe Garsiel comments, the geographical datum ("There was a great stretch between them") represents a metaphor for the psychological state of the characters themselves. The "distance" here is more than just physical space; it also represents a distant relationship and suspicion of betrayal, symbolizing the lack of faith in the possibility of a rapprochement between them (M. Garsiel, I *Sefer Shemuel – Iyun Sifrutit Be-ma'arakhei Hashva'a, Be-analogiot U-vemakbilot*, Ramat Gan 5743, p. 137.)

b. So Esther called to Hatakh... and Hatakh went out to Mordekhai... And Mordekhai told him... to show Esther [the decree] and to tell her, and to command her to go to the king, to plead to him and to entreat him for her people.

Then Hatakh came and told Esther Mordekhai's words.

And Esther said to Hatakh, and commanded him to tell Mordekhai... I have not been called to come to the king for thirty days now.

And Mordekhai was told Esther's words.

c. Then Mordekhai said to answer Esther: ... Relief and deliverance shall come to the Jews from elsewhere... who knows if for a time such as this you reached royal status?

So Esther said to answer Mordekhai: Go, assemble all of the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast for me; do not eat and do not drink for three days, night and day; I and my handmaids, too, shall fast, and so I shall go in to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I am destroyed, then I am destroyed." (4:4-16)

In the first stage, there is no conversation between the two characters. Esther sends garments for the purpose of clothing Mordekhai; this is formulated not as a request or a suggestion, but rather as Esther's plan that Mordekhai must follow. Mordekhai, for his part, likewise gives no explanation, but simply "does not accept." Seemingly, if Mordekhai wanted to speak with Esther, he could do, for a moment, the clothes that Esther has sent to him, and then return to his sackcloth and fasting. But the rending of his clothes in response to Haman's decree symbolizes the shedding of his Persian, Shushanite identity, to which Mordekhai is presently not ready to return.

In the second stage, Mordekhai and Esther converse, but there is special emphasis on Hatakh, the go-between, who facilitates communication between the two distant parties – one ensconced deeply inside the palace, while the other stands beyond its perimeter. At this stage of the conversation the idea of "commanding" is given special prominence, both on the part of Mordekhai – "To command her to go in to the king" – and from Esther's side (referring, admittedly, to Hatakh): "She commanded him to tell Mordekhai..."<sup>8</sup> At this stage Mordekhai requests Esther's intervention with the king for the sake of saving her people. The proposal is based on Esther using her connections and the special favor in which she is held. Esther, for her part, refuses, out of fear for her life; this is not unreasonable, particularly in view of the king's feelings for Esther at this particular time ("I have not been called to come to the king for the past thirty days"). It is possible that Esther is chiding Mordekhai when she tells him, "All of the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces, know that any man or woman who goes in to the king... his sole verdict is to be put to death" (4:11). Mordekhai, who is one of the "king's servants," ought to be aware of the great danger into which he leads Esther.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Concurrent with this step, she 'commands' Hatakh to go to Mordecai. When she sent her servants to Mordecai earlier she must have 'commanded' them, but only now is this keyword used in connection with her" (M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Columbia 1991, p. 59).

<sup>9</sup> It should be pointed out that these sentences are the first direct speech by Esther in the narrative. Here, for the first time, the reader encounters her voice. This is not coincidental: it is

As stated, this entire conversation takes place with the help of Hatakh, who runs in and out of the palace, carrying the characters' messages to one another. But at the end of this stage, no mention is made of Hatakh; the narrator suddenly adopts a general formulation: "And Mordekhai was told Esther's words." How was this carried out? Who conveyed to Mordekhai Esther's refusal to go in to the king? The reader is likely to fill in this gap automatically, continuing to regard Hatakh as the face behind the job of carrying messages from Mordekhai to Esther.<sup>10</sup> But if this is so, why does the narrator suddenly change style and not mention Hatakh by name? This becomes even more noticeable further on, in the third stage of the dialogue. Hatakh's absence is so palpable here that this is the main consideration for defining this stage independently of the previous one. At this stage there is a new introduction that replaces the emphasis on Hatakh: "Then Mordekhai said to answer...." At first Mordekhai "answers" Esther, and then Esther "answers" Mordekhai, with the narrator ignoring the go-between.

The erasure of Hatakh, starting from the middle of the dialogue, demands some explanation. If he is truly unimportant, then why such emphasis on him in the first part of the dialogue? And if there is some significance to the frequent mention of his presence, then why is he suddenly ignored? His disappearance is so disturbing that the Midrash goes to far as to posit that Haman had him killed, when he saw him busy on his errands: "When Haman saw Hatakh entering and leaving [the palace], he assaulted him and killed him. It is for this reason that he is not mentioned again" (*Midrash Abba Gurion, parasha 4*). The author, in fact, does "do away" with Hatakh – but why?

We are forced to conclude that Hatakh's entire purpose is to disappear in the middle of the dialogue. In other words, it is specifically because the narrator emphasizes, at the beginning, the presence of Hatakh as an interlocutor between Mordekhai and Esther, that the fact that he suddenly ignores him from the middle of the dialogue and onwards becomes the message itself. The reader looks for Hatakh and does not find him, and in not being found, Hatakh fulfills his literary role.

Who is Hatakh? Or – more specifically – what does he represent in the story? The answer lies in the manner in which he is presented at the beginning of the dialogue: "One of the king's chamberlains, whom he had placed at her disposal" (5). Hatakh represents the palace norms; he is a "chamberlain of the king," and Achashverosh has put him at Esther's service. In other words, in the first stage – in which Hatakh is mentioned over and over – Esther and Mordekhai are engaging in "Persian-Shushanite discourse." Hatakh facilitates the communications between them; their dialogue is

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in this scene, for the first time, that Esther assumes responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Raphael Breuer's suggestion seems unlikely: "Esther sought to support her words by means of direct testimony of these 'servants of the king.' Hatakh himself must certainly have been glad of his exchange" (*Megillat Esther Im Peirush Me'et ha-Rav Raphael Breuer* [translated from German by Z. Breuer], Jerusalem 5756, p. 37).

conducted through a Persian channel. Indeed, in the first part of the conversation there is nothing that distinguishes Mordechai or Esther from any other person, of any national identity. Mordechai seeks to make use of Esther's connections within the palace, and Esther is afraid for her life.

In the third stage, the conversation moves to an altogether different plane. Mordechai mentions – if only in a veiled hint – God's constant watching over His nation: "Relief and deliverance shall come to the Jews from elsewhere."<sup>11</sup> He also speaks of personal providence and individual destiny: "Who knows if for a time such as this you reached royal status?"<sup>12</sup> His answer also contains a veiled response to Esther's previous chiding: "All of the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces **know**...." In response, Mordechai intimates that even if "all the king's servants" know of this law, nevertheless – "Who **knows**" if your entire path to the royal throne was not meant for the sole purpose of your activity at this time. It is not the king's law that one has to "know" at such a time, but rather the ways of Divine Providence.

Esther, for her part, also moves to a different position – one quite foreign to the norms of the Persian palace. In striking contrast to all the banquets with which the narrative is so replete, Esther declares a fast: "Fast for me; do not eat and do not drink for three days – night and day – and both I and my maidens shall likewise fast." It is no coincidence that Esther emphasizes, "Do not eat **and do not drink**," for abstinence from drink is unheard of in the lifestyle of Shushan. At this stage of the conversation, Esther openly mentions her readiness to go against the laws of Persia: "I shall go in to the king – which is against the law." These words testify to a profound psychological shift: at the beginning of the dialogue Esther was afraid of going in to the king without his permission, because if anyone dares to do so, "his sole verdict is to be put to death." Moreover, Esther here expresses great self-sacrifice; she is ready to endanger her life for the sake of the nation: "If I am destroyed (*avadti*), then I am destroyed." Her use of the same verb that Haman used when he sought the king's approval for the destruction of the Jews ("Let it be written to destroy [*le'abbed*] them") expresses this most eloquently: Esther is endangering her life, and may die ("be **destroyed**"), in order that the nation of Israel as a whole will not be destroyed.

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<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to understand the expression "elsewhere, *makom acher*" as a reference to God (the name "*Makom*" for God only later became commonly used in rabbinical literature). The simple meaning is that salvation would come through another person, in an as-yet unknown way (Fox, p. 63). At the same time, Mordechai's certainty that salvation would come is, apparently, rooted in his perception of God's Providence over His nation.

<sup>12</sup> This is the simple interpretation of Mordechai's words. Rashi, uncharacteristically, departs from the literal meaning and views Mordechai's words as a tactical statement, referring to the possibility of going in to the king in a year's time ("*le-et ka-zot*"), before the decree is carried out: "Who knows if the king will seek you out in a year's time, which is the [appointed] time for the killing... For they were now in Nissan, and the appointed time for killing was in Adar of the next year... Will you [then] reach the same greatness that you now embody?" (Rashi, ad loc.). For a discussion of this verse and the exegetical difficulties that it raises, see for example: P. Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *AJSLL* 24 (1907-8), pp. 97-186 (esp. 137-138); L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC, Edinburgh 1908, pp. 224-225; J. D. Levenson, *Esther*, OTL, Louisville 1997, p. 81-82.

Hatakh's disappearance from this stage of the conversation symbolizes the suspension and setting aside of the norms of the Persian palace. The king's chamberlain cannot serve as the go-between for these two characters when they enter into internal, Jewish discourse. Metaphorically speaking, we might say that the motifs that appear in this dialogue cannot be translated into Persian! Hatakh could never understand them, and therefore the characters' speech is carried, as it were, from Mordekhai's mouth to Esther's ears, and from Esther's mouth to Mordekhai's ears, in unmediated fashion.

In this sense, chapter 4 is like an island in the middle of the Persian sea that flows from the beginning of the narrative to its end. On this desert island, Mordekhai and Esther stand alone, unexpectedly discussing matters of Divine Providence and mortal self-sacrifice. This is the scene in which God's concealment, so important to the narrator, is almost undone; the God of Israel comes very close here to being exposed, even if He is not mentioned by name:

"In act IV of the impending tragedy the God of the Jews is not on stage, nor is his name even mentioned. He is, however, standing in the wings, following the play and encouraging the actors, or so at least the references to sackcloth and ashes and fasting seem to suggest."<sup>13</sup>

However, it is not only from the literary perspective that this chapter should be viewed as the antithesis of the narrative's general atmosphere of inebriation. From a moral perspective, too, this chapter represents a real turning point. While Mordekhai states, "Relief and salvation will come to the Jews from elsewhere," this obviously does not indicate any secret knowledge to which Mordekhai is party. What really would have happened if Esther had refused to come before the king, out of fear for her life? The pace of the narrative and the development of its plot would indicate that the salvation of the Jews was indeed dependent on Esther's decision and her courage. God has prepared the ground for the redemption that is going to come about, and He has even ensured that the solution is in place before the problem arises: Esther has been chosen as queen; Mordekhai has demonstrated his loyalty to the king by reporting the plot by Bigtan and Teresh; on the night that is described in chapter 6 the king is unable to sleep, etc. But all of these developments collectively cannot lead to redemption if Esther fails to live up to her challenge! In her agreement to come before the king (and through her clever planning, as we subsequently see), the narrator presents Esther as fitting in with the concealed Divine Providence in the narrative. The redemption of Israel is realized only because human initiative joins with Divine planning.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the concealed writing of the narrative, indicating the hidden movements underlying the reality that is described in the text, suddenly fits in here with the plain meaning of the text, describing the palatial politics and the jealousy of the ministers.

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<sup>13</sup> Moore, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> See Amos Chakham's beautiful comment here in *Da'at Mikra – Esther*, p. 34.



In this chapter, then, Esther undergoes a process. At the beginning, the narrator hints at some criticism of Esther for a degree of assimilation within the palace norms; at the end, the "Hadassa" who is hidden inside Queen Esther – her Jewish identity – has come to the fore, expressing self-sacrifice for the sake of her nation. By the end of this scene, when Esther proclaims a fast for her nation, it testifies to a change of heart, not only a change of garment.