

Shiur #06: Presentation of Mordekhai and Esther in Chapter 2

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Aside from the issue of women and their status, there are some other important aspects of chapter 2 that warrant discussion. First and foremost among them is the presentation of the story's two main characters: Mordekhai and Esther.

Introductory Verses

Following the suggestion by Achashverosh's attendants that a new queen be chosen, the narrative deviates from the chronological continuity of the plot to introduce Mordekhai and Esther through a flashback to the exile of the Kingdom of Judea and the adoption of Esther by Mordekhai (2:5-7).[1] The Jewish division of the chapters places the beginning of a new chapter here; indeed, there are many instances in which a new unit commences with the introduction of new characters.[2] At the same time, the very fact that Mordekhai and Esther are presented after already being told that a new queen is about to be sought, serves to direct the reader towards the awareness that Mordekhai and Esther are going to be the answer to that search. While some of the natural tension that may have been aroused surrounding the identity of the new queen is thereby lost, the reader's attention is free to focus on the **manner** in which Esther is chosen. Specifically this aspect, it seems, holds an important message (for example, Esther's choice not to make use of the wide range of cosmetics at her disposal).[3]

In a statement concerning the molding of biblical narratives, the Midrash notes this phenomenon of delayed presentation, listing another three narratives in which it occurs: "And the maiden who pleases the king..." – who would be worthy of this description? Mordekhai: 'There was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital, named Mordekhai....'

Similarly, 'God saw Bnei Yisrael, and God knew' (*Shemot 2:25*) – who would be worthy of this [delivering them]? Moshe: 'Moshe was a shepherd....' Likewise, 'Shemuel said to the people: Let each man return to his city...' (*I Shemuel 8:22*) – who would be worthy [of being king, as the people had requested]? Shaul; as it is written: 'There was a man of Binyamin named Kish....' And it is written, 'Shaul and all of Israel heard the words of the Philistine, and they were terrified and very afraid' (*I Shemuel 17:11*). Who would be worthy [of responding to his challenge]? David: 'David was the son of an Efratite man....'" (*Esther Rabba, parasha 5,4*).

By bringing these four narratives together – the selection of Moshe, of Shaul, of David and of Mordekhai – the Midrash illuminates a literary phenomenon that relates to the essence of these narratives. As noted, what is common is that the presentation of each character does not appear in a vacuum. There is already some expectation on the part of the reader, which has been created prior to the introduction of the character, such that his very appearance has the effect of conveying to the reader the sense that his expectation has been answered; he then turns his attention to the character's actions and behavior, to observe how they match the expectations.

More important than the literary observation offered by the Midrash per se is the perception of Mordekhai within the broader context of these biblical narratives. In fact, all four of the characters mentioned share a profound connection: each of them appears on the historical stage as a redeemer. Moshe is destined to redeem Bnei Yisrael from Egypt; Shaul will redeem them from their oppressors, as the nation specifies in its request – "He will go out before us and fight our battles" (*I Shemuel 8:20*); David, in the context mentioned in the Midrash, will save Israel from Goliath, the Philistine; and Mordekhai will save Israel from the decree of the evil Haman.

But this is not the sum total of the connection between these narratives, and the Midrash seems to be emphasizing another important aspect of our understanding of the way in which Mordekhai is introduced. A brief review of the respective contexts reveals a great difference between all of the other saviors and Mordekhai in terms of who chooses them. Moshe is chosen by God at the Burning Bush, where he is given his task: "I have surely seen the suffering of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry as a result of their oppressors" (*Shemot 3:7*). Shaul, too, is chosen by God, for He reveals to Shemuel even before Shaul's arrival that "at this time tomorrow I shall send to you a man from the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him as leader over My people, Israel, and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have seen My people, for their cry has reached Me" (*I Shemuel 9:16*); later, all of Israel regard the choice of Shaul as God's will. David, too, is chosen by God, with an emphasis on the fact that even the prophet is not qualified to make this choice ("For a man sees [only] with his eyes, but God sees into the heart" – *I Shemuel 16:7*). Only God can know who is suited to this task: "God said: Arise, anoint him, for he is the one" (*Ibid.* 12).

But who chooses Mordekhai (and Esther); who appointed him to this task as savior? There is no prophetic declaration, nor any ceremony of dedication explaining this

choice. Moreover, the naked truth is that they are actually chosen by none other than Achashverosh! It is he who Esther pleases, and his heart that she captures.

In fact, the issue of chosenness of a person (hinted at in the delayed presentation) in question is qualitatively different in *Esther* than in the other narratives mentioned in the Midrash. Mordekhai and – more specifically - Esther, at this stage of the narrative, are set to "save" Achashverosh from his loneliness; only later on will it become clear that this private salvation paves the way for a broader, national salvation. By juxtaposing the delayed introduction of Mordekhai with the delayed introduction of the other saviors, the Midrash seems to be implying that the difference between them is only superficial. A person perceives only what his eyes can see, but God sees all the way into a person's heart, and influences it – even the heart of Achashverosh, for as it is written, "...The heart of a king [is] in the hand of the Lord, to direct it wherever He wishes" (*Mishlei* 21:11). The Midrash is hinting that the selection of Mordekhai, too, should be viewed as a Divine choice; even if it is achieved in a different manner, in a way that is concealed, it nevertheless represents the realization of the Divine will.[4] As we shall see later on (when we discuss chapter 4), one of the deeper themes running through *Esther* is the delicate relationship between human initiative and Divine decree. At least according to the above mentioned Midrash, hints to this relationship are to be found already in the way in which Mordekhai is presented, so as to match the literary model that appears with other saviors.[5]

Let us review the presentation of Mordekhai in these verses:

"There was a Jewish man in Shushan, the capital, named Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish, a man of Binyamin, who had been exiled from Jerusalem with the exile that led away with Yekhonya, king of Yehuda, who was exiled by Nevukhadnetzar, king of Babylon. He had raised Hadassa, who was Esther – his uncle's daughter – for she had no father or mother; and the girl was of beautiful appearance and of good form, and when her father and mother died, Mordekhai took her as his own daughter."

Mordekhai's genealogy is traced to the third generation: "son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish." This represents something of a deviation from the way in which characters are usually presented in *Tanakh*. In general, a character is presented by name along with the name of the father; in rare cases, the genealogy is traced back a few generations – but only where there is some significance to the identity of the patriarch who is mentioned. In presenting Mordekhai, the text takes the trouble to enumerate three generations of ancestors, but it is difficult to find any special significance that may be attached to Kish.[6] Apparently, the intention here is to emphasize Mordekhai's Jewish lineage ("A Jewish man" is mentioned even prior to his name!)[7] – his belonging to the tribe of Binyamin ("yemini"), and his (indirect) link to King Shaul ("son of Kish").[8] In other words, the narrative details Mordekhai's lineage in order to link him back to Kish – the father of Shaul. It is reasonable to assume that if Mordekhai were a direct descendant of Shaul, this would be mentioned in *Esther*. Apparently, then, he was a member of Shaul's family, but not one of his direct descendants; therefore the genealogy is traced back only

as far as Kish, with the assumption that this will suffice to arouse a clear association with the first Israelite king.

This hypothesis – that the text means to hint at Shaul through the lineage of Mordekhai – is a reasonable one, in view of the allusions to Shaul's reign that we have already encountered. Suffice it for the time being to mention the connection between "The king shall give her royal estate to another, who is better than her" (2:19) and "God has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and given it to another who is better than you" (I *Shemuel* 15:28).[9] In any event, Mordekhai is presented against the background of his connection to the family of Shaul, for he is destined once again to take up the reigns of Jewish rule – albeit in a foreign land – in the battle against Haman – Amalek.[10]

The second fact mentioned in connection with Mordekhai is that he was exiled from his land, in the exile of "Yekhonya king of Judea." Ignoring the chronological problem that this presents,[11] from the literary perspective it serves to glorify his status, since those led away in this exile were of the uppermost stratum of society. Indeed, Josephus asserts that Mordekhai was "among the leaders of the Jews." The term "exile" (*galut*) is mentioned no less than four times in the verse, leaving a powerful impression.[12] This datum, too, is of great importance for our understanding of *Esther* as an exilic narrative, and the understanding of God's Presence concealed behind the events that take place in reality - seemingly natural events that are brought about as the result of local political maneuvering.

Esther – Did Not Tell, Did Not Ask

In the previous *shiur* we discussed the literary connection (arising from the structure of the unit) between the two descriptions of Esther in chapter 2: "Esther did not mention her nation and her descent" (10), and "She asked nothing but what Hegai, the king's chamberlain, specified" (15). In both cases, Esther is portrayed in a passive light. There may be an internal connection between these two situations – at least according to certain commentators, as we shall discuss below. One of the unanswered questions in *Esther* is why Esther chose not to mention her nation and her descent. Actually, the question might be formulated more accurately with reference to Mordekhai, since the text attributes the decision to him and not to Esther (10). Why did he command Esther not to reveal her national identity? The question is even more puzzling when we consider that Mordekhai himself reveals the fact that he is a Jew: "For he had told them that he was a Jew" (3:4). This being so, why did he command Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity to those who would ask?

Among the medieval commentators there are two quite different approaches to the question, both of which touch upon a fundamental question: was Esther interested in being chosen as queen?[13] Rashi (ad loc.) explains: "So that they would assume that she was from a lowly family and send her away, for if they would know that she was from the family of King Shaul, they would hold onto her." The assumption here is that Mordekhai and Esther did not want Esther to be chosen as queen. In contrast, the Ibn Ezra, at the beginning of his commentary, brings two explanations that adopt a different assumption: "Some say that Mordekhai acted improperly in commanding Esther not to mention her

people, for he feared that the king would not take her as a wife if he were to know that she was from the exile. Others said: through prophecy or a dream he knew that redemption would come through her to Israel." According to both of these explanations, Mordekhai wanted Esther to be chosen by the king! The hiding of Esther's national identity was meant to facilitate her selection.

These opposing approaches are continued among contemporary scholars. Moore, on one hand, maintains: "Esther wanted to become queen" (27). Berlin, on the other hand, argues, "Esther was taken not of her own will, and even against her will" (83).

It would seem that this decisive question may be resolved if we look at the description of the way in which Esther was taken to the king. It is not coincidental that in both passages in which she is taken, the narrator adopts the passive case: "Esther was taken to the king's house" (8); "Esther was taken to King Achashverosh" (16). This language projects a sense of coercion: Esther is taken to the palace, as the Midrash puts it, "against her will and not for her benefit" (*Aggadat Esther, parasha 2*). This is further confirmed in light of the other passive datum mentioned in the chapter: Esther makes no attempt to anoint herself with ointments – precisely because she does not want to beautify herself, such that she will end up victorious in the competition for the heart (and eyes) of the king.

Why, then, does Esther avoid revealing her ethnic identity? I believe that Bush's suggestion is correct: the simplest explanation for Esther's avoidance of revealing her national identity is related to the basic experience shared by many people when they find themselves in a foreign country. The immediate inclination of a foreigner – especially if we are speaking of a Jew living in an anti-Semitic country – is to hide one's Jewish identity. Mordekhai, concerned for the welfare of his adopted daughter, asks her not to reveal that she is Jewish, to try to act like a local girl.[14] This sows the seeds for the background to the national struggle that is going to develop upon publication of the decrees of the anti-Semitic Haman.

But even after we have considered the various different solutions proposed to answer this question (and there are more, in addition to those mentioned above),[15] it is clear that the text itself offers no clue as to the meaning of the concealment of Esther's national identity. The reader hears nothing, either from Mordekhai or from the narrator, and it seems that the concealment of the motive plays an important role in the molding of the reader's experience in this scene. The very fact that Esther's identity is hidden is important for the story, from two different perspectives. First, this fact will play a role in the development of the plot, when it turns out that Haman and his advisors have no idea that Esther is Jewish. Secondly, Esther, in this context, represents a mirror image of the situation of the Jewish nation as a whole. At the beginning of the story they hide their Jewish identity, participating in the feasts of the Persian king ("For all the people who were in Shushan, the capital" – 1:5) and even going by Persian names (Mordekhai, Esther).[16] During the course of the narrative Esther will reveal her Hebrew identity when she stands before the king to plead for her people; reflecting back on the nation, they too will return to their identity when they decree a fast for themselves and afflict themselves.[17] In this context, the narrative emphasizes the hiding of Esther's Jewish

identity not because of its reason or purpose, but rather as the point of departure for a narrative in which the issue of Jewish identity in exile is one of the key themes to be explored throughout the text.

In the wider context of our discussion it should be noted that Esther, in this scene, also serves as a mirror image of the narrator himself. In other words, just as Esther hides her identity, so the narrator hides his theological world and its messages. The reader, encountering a key character in the story who hides her identity, enters an atmosphere of secrecy, and this itself encourages him to pay attention to Jewish hints murmuring beneath the surface of the text – even if they are garbed with the majestic cloak of the Persian palace.

"When the virgins were gathered a second time"

At the end of chapter 2, the reader is surprised to find a description of the king once again gathering virgins to the palace, even though Esther has already been chosen: "And when virgins were gathered for a second time, Mordekhai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther was not revealing her descent or her people, as Mordekhai had commanded her, and Esther obeyed Mordekhai's word as she had when she was in his care" (2:19-20). The second round of gathering virgins is most instructive as to the personality of Achashverosh who, even after Vashti's replacement has been chosen, continues to have beautiful virgins brought to his palace. But these verses, concluding the scene of Esther's selection, do not appear to be meant to provide further details about Achashverosh; rather, they seem to be emphasizing the relationship between Esther and Mordekhai.

Seemingly, the scene of Esther's selection would conclude with a distancing of Mordekhai from Esther – a distancing which, logically, would grow ever greater, now that Esther was at Achashverosh's side. In these verses, though, the narrative seeks to balance this impression on both sides. On one hand, Achashverosh is busying himself not with Esther, but rather with other fair maidens who visit his room each night in turn.[18] At the same time, Mordekhai is sitting at the king's gate. This physical proximity also leads to updates of the goings on within the palace precincts, since "sitting at the "king's gate" implies the assumption of some institutionalized public role. What exactly Mordekhai's role is not revealed to the reader; apparently, his title is not important. What is important is that Mordekhai is able to continue monitoring Esther, and indeed "Esther obeyed Mordekhai's word as she had when she was in his care." Despite Achashverosh, who has taken Esther from Mordekhai who took her as his own daughter, Esther continues to regard Mordekhai as the main authority in her life.

Thus, the narrative creates something of a distance between Achashverosh and Esther, while at the same time creating a sense of reuniting those who have been separated – Esther and Mordekhai. The realization of this complex triad will rise to the surface in the following verses, when Mordekhai tells Esther about the attempt to assassinate the king.[19] We shall address this further in the next *shiur*.

[1] As we have seen, these verses also lie outside of the concentric structure of this literary unit.

[2] Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that this division is motivated by more than mere literary considerations; rather, it appears also to be related to the centrality of Mordekhai and the honor that the editors of the narrative wished to award him.

[3] On the subject of delayed introduction of characters in the biblical narrative, see for example S. Bar Efrat, *The Artistic Structure of the Biblical Narrative*, Tel Aviv 5740, pp. 133-135; P. Pollack, *The Narrative of the Bible*, Jerusalem 5759 (second, expanded edition), p. 116.

[4] This message is especially clear in light of other characters that the Midrash could have mentioned within this literary context, such as Yiftach the Giladite (*Shoftim* 11:1); Avshalom (II *Shemuel* 14:25); etc. (These characters are in fact mentioned in a parallel Midrash: *Midrash Shemuel parasha* 13.) The selective listing of Moshe, Shaul, and David appears, I believe, to be related to the issue of saviors chosen by God.

[5] Cf. *Shemot Rabba*, *parasha* 2,4: "'And Moshe was (haya)' – Anyone of whom it is said that he 'was,' was destined to be that way: 'Behold, man has become (haya)' – he was destined to be mortal... 'And the snake was cunning' – it was destined for trouble. Concerning Noach it is written that he 'was (haya) righteous' – he was destined for redemption. Concerning Yosef it is written, 'Yosef was' – he was destined to bring and ensure sustenance. Concerning Mordekhai it is written: 'There was (haya) a Jewish man' – he was destined to save."

[6] This question is raised in the Babylonia Talmud, which goes on to propose that the names be interpreted as hints to the power of Mordekhai's prayer and to God's answer to them: "There was a Jewish man in Shushan the capital... a man of Binyamin" What is this formulation? If it is for his lineage, go all the way back to Binyamin. Rather, what is the distinction? They were all named in his honor: 'Son of Yair' – he was son who illuminated (*he'ir*) the eyes of Israel with his prayers; 'son of Shim'i' – a son whose prayers God heard; 'ben Kish' – who knocked (*hekish*) at the gates of mercy, and they were opened for him" (*Gemara Megilla* 12b).

[7] The title "a Jewish man" is mentioned in one other place in *Tanakh* – *Zekharya* 8:23.

[8] Cf. Paton, 167–68; Moore, 19–20, 35; Bardtke, 299.

[9] There is no doubt that "Shim'i" of the Tribe of Binyamin is meant to remind the reader of Shim'i son of Gera, who – in cursing King David – highlights the tension between the reign of Shaul (Binyamin) and that of David (Yehuda) (II *Shemuel* 16:5-8). Thus, the connection between the transition of the earlier kingdoms and the institution of the new "reign" of Mordekhai is strengthened.

[10] Cf. Paton, 167–68; Moore, 19–20, 35; Bardtke, 299; Berlin, 81-82.

[11] Were Mordekhai among those who had been exiled, he would already be 120 years old, and he could not have a young niece who would have been taken to the king as a young virgin. Some opinions have suggested that the narrator got his dates muddled and did not realize the improbability of this situation (Fox, 29; Moore, 27); but as Bush correctly argues: "[I]t seems at least implausible that a narrator who shows himself at every level to be so fully cognizant of the setting and circumstances of the Persian world of his story would be unaware of the general chronology of the period" (Bush, 363).

Others have proposed that the description of the exile is mentioned not in relation to Mordekhai, but rather in relation to Kish (D. V. Edelman, "Kish," *ABD* Vol. 4, p.86; E. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Esther," *BSac* 137 (1980) 99–117 (esp. p. 107); J. S. Wright "The Historicity of the Book of Esther," *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, (ed. J.B. Payne), Waco, TX 1970, 37–47 (esp. 38); some have even proposed that the exile relates to the entire list as a single unit (Gerleman, 77; Bardtke, 299). The perspective for our discussion is not the historical issue but rather the literary significance – i.e., what does the narrator gain by mentioning Mordekhai's genealogy, on one hand, and the exile, on the other.

[12] Walfish comments most appropriately that, "Two characteristics of the exile arise from the verse: the lack of sovereignty ("with Yekhonya, king of Judea"), and the departure from Jerusalem. These two elements, representing the social (lack of leadership) and geographical (distance from the homeland and its capital, distance from the site of the Temple) aspects of exile, serve as the basis for the degeneration of the nation in the first half of *Esther* and for the turnaround that takes place at its conclusion" (A. Walfish, "*Divrei Shalom ve-Emet*," *Hadassa Hi Esther*, Alon Shevut 5757, p. 133.)

[13] See at length on this question: A. Shama, "Why Did Esther Not Mention Her Nation Or Her Descent," *Hadassa Hi Esther*, Alon Shevut 5757, pp. 237-248.

[14] Bush, 368

[15] Such as the third explanation listed by the Ibn Ezra – which he himself adopts: "What I believe is that Mordekhai did this so that Esther would observe God's Torah in secret, not eating forbidden meat, and observing Shabbat, such that the royal servants would not notice it, for if the thing was known, the king might force her, or put her to death, for she was held against her will" (commentary on 2:9).

[16] This is especially striking in the case of Esther, where the text takes the trouble to reveal her Hebrew name (Hadassa), too, but then – surprisingly enough – continues to refer to her, throughout the rest of the story, by her Persian name – Esther. It should be pointed out that these are not neutral Persian names, but rather are connected to Babylonian and Persian idolatry (Mordokh and Ashtar).

[17] A lengthy discussion of this hinted-at process will be found in the *shiur* on chapter 4, and in a separate discussion on chapter 9, examining the various stages of the institutionalization of the festival.

[18] Therefore, the reader should not be surprised to discover, later on, that Esther has not been called to the king "for the past thirty days" (4:11). This in no way implies that the king has been exercising chastity and restraint.

[19] This gives some support to those who view this incident as the conclusion of the episode of Esther being taken to the king (Bardtke 93-291; Fox, 26,36, 41), but also justifies those who regard it as the introduction to the next scene, where Mordekhai informs on Bigtan and Teresh, who plan the assassination of the king (for instance, Bush, pp. 370-374.)