

Megillat Esther, Lesson 3:

The character of Esther in פרק ב and the connection to שאול המלך

Objectives

Students will see how the character of Esther is developed by the author through techniques such as naming and characterization, and appreciate the complexity of Esther's character in the Megillah. Students will also appreciate the use the author made of allusions to earlier biblical stories – in particular, of King Shaul – in developing Esther's character and importance.

Esther's introduction

Esther is introduced in 2:7, but the section is really an introduction of Mordecai, and Esther is mentioned almost as an afterthought:

ה איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי בן איר בן-שמעי בן-קיש איש ימיני. ו אשר הגלה מירושלים עם-
הגלה אשר הגלתה עם יכניה מלך-יהודה אשר הגלה נבוכדנצר מלך בבל. ז ויהי אמן את-הדסה היא אסתר בת-
דוד כי אין לה אב ואם והנערה פת-תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת.

As we discussed in Unit 1, the exile of Jehoiachin was in 597. It is likely that Jehoiachin is mentioned because it was the elites who were exiled with him; this puts Mordecai's family in elite company.

It should also be noted that Ahashverosh was king from 485 to 465. (Hebrew אחשוורוש is a good transcription of the Persian name Xšayarša (x is pronounced like ח, and š = sh). Greek does not have a ש sound, so the Greek historians wrote Xerxes (x is still ח, so this is pronounced *kherkhes*). English speakers pronounce the first x as a z, and the second as a ks, yielding *zirksees*, which of course sounds nothing like אחשוורוש. But the Hebrew is much closer to the Persian than the English is!) So of course it was not *Mordecai* who was exiled with Jehoiachin, but his great-grandfather Kish. (In other words, the אשר הגלה refers to Kish, not to Mordecai.)

The introduction of Mordecai is reminiscent of the introduction of Saul – actually, of Saul's father, *Kish* – in 1 Samuel 9:1-2:

ויהי-איש מבנימין ושמו קיש בן-אביאל בן-צור בן-בכורת בן-אפיח בן-איש ימיני גבור היל.
ולו-היה בן ושמו שאול בחור וטוב.

There was a man from Benjamin, and his name was Kish, son of Aviel, son of Tzeror, son of Bekhorat, son of Afiah, a Benjaminite and a hero. He had a son, whose name was Saul, a good young lad.

There are a number of striking similarities:

- the structure of the introduction, the name of the introduced character and then three or four generations of ancestors;
- the phrase איש ימיני;
- the name Kish
- the introduction of a secondary character in the following verse, who is said to be טוב.

In both cases, the secondary character turns out to be the more important one.

The kingship of Saul as background for the Megillah

The allusion to Saul is just the beginning. Many details in the story serve to bind the heroes of this story – Mordecai and Esther – to Saul:

1. The introduction of Mordecai is reminiscent of that of Saul, and even contains names (Shimei and Kish) known to have been names of individuals within Saul's family, as well.
2. Later in ב פרק, we read: **אין אַסְתֵּר מִגְדַּת מוֹלְדֹתָהּ וְאֶת-עַמָּהּ (2:20)**. This reminds the reader of Saul, **וְאֶת-דְּבַר הַמְּלוּכָה לֹא-הִגִּיד לוֹ** "the matter of the kingship he did not tell him" (1 Samuel 10:16).
3. Certainly the most important connection between the two, as the narrative unfolds, is that whereas Saul lost his kingship for failure to massacre Agag, king of the Amalekites (a story told in 1 Samuel 15), Mordecai succeeds by killing Haman the Agagite. Numerous writers have seen that at the root of the conflict between Mordecai and Haman is an old ethnic feud between the tribe of Saul and the tribe of Agag the Amalekite.
The claim is that the actions of Mordecai and Esther redeem the missteps of Saul, their tribesman, half a millennium ago.
4. One of Saul's early mistakes was his failure to act decisively when faced with challenges to his authority at the beginning of his reign. Instead, the text says, "he remained silent (**מחריש**)."
This is exactly the challenge Mordecai hurls at Esther in 4:14: "if you indeed remain silent (**תחרישי**)...."
5. In that same passage, Mordecai tells Esther that if she does – like Saul – remain silent, "you and your father's household (**בית אביך**) will perish." Samuel had originally told Saul that the entire nation of Israel was looking expectantly at Saul "and his father's household" (**בית אביך**). On that occasion, the nation's hopes were dashed by Saul's failures. Esther has the chance to redeem her father's household – the house of Saul.
6. In 1 Samuel 20, Saul hosts a feast on one day, and then another feast the next day (v. 27). Whereas the first one passes uneventfully, at the second the host, Saul, becomes enraged at one guest, Jonathan, for betraying him and protecting David. Jonathan concludes that **כְּלָתָהּ הָרָעָה מֵעַמּוֹ** "[Saul] definitely intends evil" (v. 7) and rises angrily from the feast (v. 34: **וַיִּקָּם יְהוֹנָתָן מֵעִם הַשְּׁלֹחַן בְּחָרִי-אָף**). In Esther, the queen hosts two banquets, on successive days; the first passes uneventfully, while at the second, the king rises angrily and leaves, and Haman observes that **כִּי רָאָה כִּי-כְלָתָהּ אֵלָיו הָרָעָה מֵאַתְּ** "the king definitely intends evil against him" (Esther 7:7).
7. In concluding his plea for action, Mordecai tells Esther that what she must bring is **רוח והצלה**. The concept of **רוח** is not one with positive resonances for Saul. "Relief" (**רוח**) eluded Saul when he was king, and he was able to achieve it only by relying on the upstart David: "David would take the lyre and play by hand, and bring relief (**רוח**) to Saul so that he had it good, and the evil spirit would depart from him. By imploring Esther to bring the **רוח** to the Jewish people, Mordecai is entreating her to rectify that which Saul could never do.

8. Finally, in the battles at the end the Jews “do not touch the spoils” (9:15). This is despite the fact that in 8:11, they were explicitly given permission to plunder their enemies. This seems to be an explicit correction of the mistakes made under Saul in 1 Samuel 15, when the Israelites, in direct violation of religious orders, brought back spoils of war from Amalek. They atone for that here by refraining from plundering when they are permitted to.

Diaspora

It seems important that the processes started by Saul are completed outside of Israel, as if to say that in the new reality, even those jobs which seem to be nation-based and relevant mostly to the old national existence in the land of Israel will now be completed in the diaspora.

Esther’s name(s) and her identity

There are a number of biblical characters who have two names, one Jewish/Hebrew and the other foreign, bestowed by the foreign ruler. For example:

- Joseph > Tsaphenath Paneah
- Daniel > Beltshazzar
- Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah > Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Joseph remains “Joseph” even after being named Tzafenath-Mishael, and Azariah are all usually referred to by their Hebrew names, as well.

Esther, too, has two names: Hadassah, which is a Hebrew word meaning “myrtle,” and Esther, which is either a Persian name, meaning “star” (*stara* in Persian) or a Babylonian name, from the goddess name Ishtar. (Note: Mordecai is from name of the Babylonian god Marduk. This does *not* mean anything about Mordecai’s religion! Anat was an ancient Canaanite goddess; Daphne was the daughter of the Greek river god; Selena and Sheila were Celtic goddesses; and so on.)

But Esther is always Esther, never again Hadassah. Hadassah is never called by her name, which raises the question of whether we really know who she is.

1. Has she changed her identity from Hadassah to Esther permanently?
2. Or has she covered up her “Hadassah” identity with “Esther” in an excellent disguise?
3. Or does she have a complex hybrid identity, represented by the two names, only one of which is used in public?

Her identity until the end will be “Queen Esther” – Persian name, Persian role – with one notable exception: at the very end of the story, after the narrative has essentially come to an end, the book reports Esther’s last act: “Queen Esther, daughter of Avihayil, wrote...” (9:29). Not since chapter 2 have we heard of Esther’s father, and there was no indication that she had thought of him, either. Yet at the end, she is not just Queen Esther of Persia, but also – in some sense – the daughter of Avihayil.