

Megillat Esther, Lesson 4:

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

Esther's character development in פרקים ד-ה

Throughout פרק ב, it is clear that Mordecai is “in charge” of Esther. He “commands” (צוה) her, and she obeys:

לא-הגידה אֶסְתֵּר אֶת-עַמָּהּ וְאֶת-מוֹלְדוֹתֶיהָ כִּי מְרַדְּכִי צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַגִּיד.

Esther did not tell of her people or her ancestry, because Mordecai commanded her not to tell (2:10).

אִין אֶסְתֵּר מְגִידַת מוֹלְדוֹתֶיהָ וְאֶת-עַמָּהּ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מְרַדְּכִי וְאֶת-מֵאֲמָר מְרַדְּכִי אֶסְתֵּר עָשָׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר הִיְתָה בְּאֲמֹנָה אֹתוֹ.

Esther was not telling of her ancestry or her people, as Mordecai commanded her.
Esther obeyed Mordecai's word, just as when she was in his care (2:20).

Her passivity is not just vis-à-vis Mordecai, but others, as well. When she is asked, as all the women are, what she wants to be given before going in to spend an evening with the king, לא בְּקֶשֶׁה דָּבָר “she requested nothing.” This is not necessarily an act of timidity, but of calculated malleability. She did not actually request *nothing*. She requested nothing *except* what Hegai, the royal eunuch in charge of the king's women, recommended. Who would know better what the king liked than Hegai?? Rather than being timid, Esther shows us here that she is willing to forego her own preferences in order to please others (other men?). It is no surprise, then, that וְיָתֵי אֶסְתֵּר נִשְׂאֵת חֵן בְּעֵינֵי כָל-רְאִיָּה “Everyone who saw her liked Esther.”

In פרק ד, a more assertive Esther emerges. First, she commands Hatach to go to Mordecai to find out why he is wearing sackcloth at the palace gate:

וַתִּקְרָא אֶסְתֵּר לְהַתָּךְ מִסְרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵמִיד לְפָנֶיהָ וַתִּצְוֶהוּ עַל-מְרַדְּכִי לִדְעַת מַה-זָּה וְעַל-מַה-זָּה.

Esther called Hatach, one of the royal eunuchs who had been assigned to her, and commanded him to go to Mordecai, to find out what this was and what it was about (4:7).

Mordecai responds in the old model of their relationship: he commands her what to do:

וַיִּגַּד-לוֹ מְרַדְּכִי אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר קָרָהוּ...וְלֹהֲגִיד לָהּ וּלְצוּוֹת עָלֶיהָ לְבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהַתְחַנֵּן-לוֹ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ מִלְפָּנָיו עַל-עַמָּהּ.

Mordecai told [Hatach] all that had happened to him ... and to tell [Esther] and *command her* to go in to the king, to beg him and plead with him for her people (4:7-8)

But this time Esther does not listen. She rebuffs Mordecai's command, insisting that she cannot and will not go in and beg for her people.

Important to note: Mordecai is here telling Esther to radically shift course. Until now she kept her ancestry secret, and now he wants her to reveal it in a bid for compassion. Esther does not accept this (until much later in the story). At this point, she wants to go in a different direction.

Indeed, Esther ends the פרק telling Mordecai what to do:

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהָשִׁיב אֶל-מֶרְדֵּכָי: לךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשָׁן

Esther said to reply to Mordecai: “Go gather all the Jews in the fortress of Shushan...”
(4:15)

And the conclusion is truly shocking in terms of the relationship:

וַיֵּצֵב מֶרְדֵּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר

Mordecai went out, and did all that Esther had commanded him (4:17).

Esther has come a long way, from being the obedient girl who does whatever she is told, to the one who is coming up with her own plans and issuing commands to Mordecai, her former guardian.

She resists both, never shedding her identity or her dignity (5:1): וַתִּלְבָּשׂ אֶסְתֵּר מְלָכוּת: (5:1)