

## Megillat Esther, Lesson 5:

### The story of Yosef as background for the Megilla

#### Objectives

Students will understand that (1) the authors of later biblical texts, including Esther, made constant use of earlier texts in Tanakh, and (2) how understanding these allusions affects the meaning of the later texts.

Jews in *galut Bavel*, especially after Persia took over, were faced with a religious/ philosophical problem: Judaism had never been a "diaspora" religion before. Searching through Tanakh for models for successful Jewish life outside of the homeland, the Jews realized that they could not use people like Samuel or David or even Moshe – who brought the people *to* the homeland. One of the few possible models was Joseph, who moved from the homeland to Egypt. Even more importantly, he was quite successful in Egypt, even in the royal court. And most importantly, he used that success to help his kinsfolk.

#### Student work

Depending on how much time is available, students should be asked to review the story of Joseph in Bereshit 39-45. Key questions:

Look at his marriage, his name, and especially the names he gave his children. How do they reflect his sense of his own identity at the time?

What was Joseph's plan for his own identity *before* his brothers arrived?

In the conversation with his brothers, what language does Joseph speak?

In his rise to prominence, Joseph had hidden his Jewish identity, even from his own brothers, although it was known to others at the court. Some in the court had used his ethnicity to try to keep him down, belittling him as a "Hebrew kid" (Genesis 41:12). But as he rose, he became more and more Egyptianized, with an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife, and an Egyptian accent.

Joseph is a challenging model, however. Until his brothers arrived, he seems to have been almost completely assimilated. He spoke Egyptian and married an Egyptian, and gave his sons names which expressed his gratitude to God for helping him to forget his past and thrive in his new land.

Esther is a character very much in the model of Joseph. Unlike Mordecai, who at the end of the story is both "the Jew" and "second to the king," Esther never emerges from the palace. The very fact that she is "Esther" is noteworthy, since we were told early on that she had another, Jewish, name – Hadassah. Unlike other Jews with both Hebrew and foreign names, however, she is never again called by her Jewish name. Joseph remains "Joseph" even after being named Tzafenath-Paneah; Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are all usually referred to by their Hebrew names, as well. But Esther is always Esther, never again Hadassah.

Furthermore, she "lives happily ever after" as the queen of Persia, forever married to a foreigner, never taking the stand that Daniel took and requesting different food, never demanding

accommodation of any kind. This is despite the fact that in chapter 9 she, along with Mordecai, ordains a Jewish holiday!

Despite the challenging parts of Joseph's biography, the author of the book of Esther did in part model his heroes on Joseph, as if to say: we can survive in the Diaspora if we act like our forefather Joseph. The plot of his story contains numerous parallels to that of Joseph's story. Consider the examples, verbal and thematic, on the handout (4.1).

These parallels were already noted by a midrash (Esther Rabbah 7:7). The question is, however, what do they do for us? How do they create *meaning*?

**Students should be asked to reflect on this and offer suggestions.**

Joseph, like Mordecai and Esther, was a Jew in a foreign court. In some ways, Joseph is the model for Mordecai's advice to Esther: keep your Jewishness to yourself, and you can really go places.

Even better, Joseph had used his deep acculturation to save the Jews. The author of Esther argues that being part of the dominant culture may actually be better for the Jews in the long run than being politically independent. We have seen in Unit 2 that the Persian Empire was a terrifying entity, because it was immensely powerful but subject to great abuses. The solution, then, is to learn how to use it. The bureaucracy could be used as a tool to help, but one had to be inside it to use it.

In sum, the controversial character of Joseph tempted and challenged Diaspora Jews centuries after his own story was written. Was he a model to be followed? How much of an overt Jewish identity could one shed in order to be in a position to utilize power on behalf of the Jews?