



REFLECTIONS ON MEGILLAT ESTHER



Yeshiva University

THE RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS-HERENSTEIN
CENTER FOR VALUES AND LEADERSHIP

In preparation for the reading of Megillat Esther, the Sacks-Herenstein Center's undergraduate and graduate scholars reflected on verses in the text that resonated deeply with them.

(ב:ו) אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה, מִירוּשָׁלַיִם, עַם־הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָהּ, עִם יְכִנְיָה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה--אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה, נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל.

“[Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, who had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.” (2:6)

Sara Cohen, Sacks-Herenstein Center

This passuk has always stood out to me—especially when hearing the Megillah read by a chazzan. Megillat Esther is chanted in a distinctive tune: sing-songy, mostly upbeat, and fast-paced. In contrast, this passuk seems to not belong; the melody is reminiscent of Eicha. We are transported from Purim to Tisha B’Av. In that shift, we are reminded of how and why the Jewish people find themselves in Bavel. It reflects the recurring cycle of exile: our rise to success, the comfort that leads to assimilation, the eventual surge in antisemitism, and ultimately, our return to God.

(ב:יא) וּבְכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹם מֶרְדֳּכַי מֵתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי חֹצֵר בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים לְדַעַת אֶת שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמָה יַעֲשֶׂה בָּהּ:

“And every day, Mordechai would walk about in front of the court of the house of the women, to learn of Esther’s welfare and what would be done to her.” (2:11)

Rivka Werner, Sacks Research Scholar, Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud Studies

The nature of Mordechai and Esther’s relationship is debated in Rabbinic literature, yet this passuk makes something important very clear: Mordechai showed up for Esther, every single day. Separated by palace walls and complex bureaucracy, he still sought to know she was okay. To me, this passuk captures what real love looks like: not grand gestures, but constant loyalty and quiet, consistent presence — caring for someone even when they don’t know you’re there.

(ד:יד) כִּי אִם־הִחַרְשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי, בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת--רוּחַ וְהַצֵּלָה יַעֲמוּד לִיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר, וְאֵת וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ; וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ--אִם־לֵעַתָּה בָּזֹאת, הַגָּעַתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

“On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” (4:14)

Arlette Anteby, Rohr Writing Scholar, Stern College

While I was hesitant to choose this passuk because it is so well-known and sits at arguably the most dramatic moment in the Megillah, choosing any other passuk as my favorite would not have felt honest. This passuk stays with me. It serves as a quiet reminder that hesitation does not excuse inaction. Mordechai’s words challenge Esther and, by extension, the reader to recognize that positions of influence almost always come with responsibility. I know that I am not always quick to act. I overthink.

I wait for clarity and certainty before stepping forward. This passuk reframes those moments of discomfort as a call to step forward rather than step back and overthink. God grants us free will not so that we remain passive observers, but so that we act, create, and shape our realities. When something truly matters, I no longer ask if I should act, but whether I am willing to.

Yosef Grauer, Leadership Scholar, Yeshiva College

In a dramatic shift in the Megilla, Esther moves from a passive bystander to the leader of the Purim story. What changed? Rav Aharon Lichtenstein points out that Esther's mindset shifted when Mordechai challenged whether she cared enough to help Am Yisrael. Rav Aharon explains, the Megilla asks us "how much of our resignation is motivated by supposed "inability" and how much is a result of the fact that we simply don't care enough?" We should all use this Purim as an opportunity to ask ourselves: How passionate are we to find a way to help Am Yisrael and are we ready to work towards a better future?

Yitzy Tanner, Sacks Research Scholar, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary

In a 1984 sicha based on this verse, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein expounded on Mordechai's message. Esther admits that the Jewish people are in distress and in need of leadership. But she doubts herself. Mordechai challenged Esther, revealing that underlying her excuses lies apathy for the Jewish people. Like Mordechai, Rav Lichtenstein challenged his students to consider whether they truly care for the Jewish people. This sicha motivated my teachers to pursue Jewish education and similarly motivates me. Instead of worrying about whether I am good enough, I try to worry whether I care enough.

Rabbi Alon Meltzer, Sacks Research Scholar, Azrieli Graduate School for Jewish Education

Mordechai warns that silence in the midst of crisis will do nothing, but God will act for his people. It is both an incredibly stark warning but also a huge leap of faith. I love this verse because it shows the very precarious situation Mordechai and the Jewish people find themselves in, and he is doing everything in his power to alter the situation. It is gritty, fluid and tactile. It is a hustle moment and it is so relevant to the time we find ourselves in now. How do we stand up, demand moral clarity, and ensure action?!

Rabbi Yitzchak Sprung, Sacks Research Scholar, Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies

In times of challenge, this verse comforts me, since salvation is always on the way. But it also forces me to confront moral challenges. After all, if I do not, will I survive? And aren't I here just in order to face up to my responsibilities? In short, this verse is a little bit of comfort and mussar (moral rebuke) at the same time. I often need one, the other, or both. And for that, I appreciate it.

Rockie Frankenthal Kluk, Leadership Scholar, Stern College

We're placed in this world as agents of God to carry out His will. Mordechai tells Esther that if she's silent, salvation will come to the Jews through someone else. God's plan will inevitably be fulfilled, we are given the choice to step forward and fulfill our role. When a daunting task comes our way, it's not random — it's given by God because we're the right person to carry it out, serving as the vessel for His will. Declining it means losing an opportunity meant specifically for us. This is encouragement to embrace our purpose to act as God's messengers.

Eli Novick, Leadership Scholar, Yeshiva College

When Mordechai tells Esther why she should go to Achashverosh, he does not say that if she doesn't do it then no one will. Instead, he tells her that if she doesn't step up the Jewish People will somehow still be saved. But she needs to step forward not to preserve her People but rather to preserve her own legacy. Mordechai teaches us that if we find ourselves in a position to lead, that means God wants us to lead. Even if someone is able to do just as good of a job.

Hannah Schachter, Leadership Scholar, Stern College

To me, this passuk is teaching us that sometimes we convince ourselves that leadership is not for us and that staying quiet is humility. That silence can be our greatest destruction. There are moments when we are placed exactly where we need to be for a reason and not to shy away, but to step up. Especially now, in the face of antisemitism, staying silent is not an option. If we do not rise to what is asked of us, God's plan will still unfold; we just have to decide whether we are part of it.

Leora Muskat Sepowitz, Sacks Research Scholar, Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud Studies

Mordechai's charge to Esther highlights the responsibility we each have to look inward, identify our strengths, and use them for the betterment of the Jewish people. At the same time, I am moved by Mordechai's assurance that redemption will ultimately come, if not through us, then from another place. It is both a charge and a comfort.

Peninah Gershman, Sacks Writing Workshop, Fish Center for Holocaust Studies

For a Time Like This

We are so used to reading about the hero's journey where one person is uniquely necessary to save the day. Mordechai tells Esther the opposite: *Ki im haharash taharishi ba'et hazot, revach ve'hatzalah ya'amod la-Yehudim mimakom aher* -- relief and deliverance will come from elsewhere if she chooses not to act to save the Jewish people. At first glance, this almost sounds like he is appealing to her ego in reverse. If she will not act, someone else will. Jewish survival does not hinge on a single person. History will move forward without her. That line strips away ego and the fantasy of being irreplaceable.

The verse then turns and asks the real question: *Umi yodea im le'et kazot higa'at la-malchut* -- who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Esther is not the only one who could act, but she is the one who happens to be here, now, in this position. This captures Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's ethics of responsibility. The question is not whether the story will end favorably, but whether she will step forward and answer the moment placed before her. This question persists through the generations.

Daniella Taub, Rohr Writing Scholar, Stern College

Mordechai's charge before Esther approaches Achashverosh to plead with him to save the Jews reframes Esther's rise to power as purposeful, not coincidental. Mordechai reminds her that her position is not just a privilege, but a responsibility. Its timeless message teaches us to see every situation as intentional and placed by God for a reason. Each role or challenge may be our own "עֵת קָדָמָה," a moment calling us to step up, take responsibility, and make a meaningful difference.

(ד:טז) לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן, וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים.

“Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days.” (4:16)

(ט:כח) וימי הפורים האלה, לא יעברו מתוך היהודים.

“And that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews” (9:28)

Ezra Sepowitz, Sacks Research Scholar, Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies

Rabbi Ari Waxman wrote a song (Lech Knos) comprised of these two passukim in Megillat Esther. Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz suggests that these passukim reflect the eternality of the Jewish people. The first passuk focuses on Jewish unity, and the second passuk - as Maimonides expresses - focuses on the eternal relevance of Torah study. As a unified people, committed to our tradition, zichron hatzarot yebutal [the painful memories will fade], and the joyful yemei haPurim will endure forever.

(ה:ח) אם מצאתי חן בעיני המלך, ואם על המלך טוב, לתת את שאלתי, ולעשות את בקשתי--יבוא המלך והמן, אל המשתה אשר אעשה להם, ומחר אעשה, כדבר המלך.

“If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request--let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do tomorrow as the king has said.” (5:8)

Ayelet Friedman, Leadership Scholar, Stern College

Although God's name is never explicitly mentioned in Megillat Esther, Chazal understand Esther's repeated use of “Hamelech” to signify a hidden cry for divine intervention embedded within her requests. This moment reframes the entire story: even when events appear to be driven by human intent and political control, the ultimate authority rests within God's control. Esther's words remind us that no matter how much power we think we possess, or how hidden He may seem, God remains present, guiding outcomes and waiting for us to turn to Him.

(ה:ט) ויצא המן ביום ההוא, שמח וטוב לב; וכראות המן את מרדכי בשער המלך, ולא קם ולא זע ממנו--וימלא המן על מרדכי, חמה.

“Then went Haman forth that day joyful and glad of heart; but when Haman saw Mordechai in the king's gate, that he did not stand up, nor moved for him, Haman was filled with wrath against Mordechai.” (5:9)

Joshua Shapiro, Sacks Research Scholar, Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies

Haman had everything a chief minister of a 127-province empire could ask for. And it still wasn't enough. In the beginning of the fifth chapter of Megillat Esther, we find Haman at the peak of his power. He was appointed as second-in-command to the king, watched the entire city of Shushan bow down to him and received the sole invite to the royal couple's party. Yet, one thing eluded him. Whenever Mordechai saw Haman, he refused to bow. And as is human nature, this single, unreachable object prevented Haman from appreciating what he did have and ultimately spurred his downfall.

(ה:יג) וְכָל־זֶה, אֵינֶנּוּ שׁוּה לִי: בְּכָל־עֵת, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאה אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי--יּוֹשֵׁב, בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ.

“Still, all this [honor] is meaningless to me whenever I see Mordechai the Yehudi sitting at the gateway to the king.” (5:13)

Ari Smith, Leadership Scholar, Yeshiva College

Haman's Hollow Self-Worth

We are given a window into the deepest parts of Haman's soul, his irremediable low self-esteem. How can Haman be incredibly powerful and wealthy and still be bothered by the disregard one simple Jew had for him? The Talmud (Megillah 15b) explains that Haman came as a poor man and Mordechai came as a rich man. Mordechai was rich because he was happy with his place in the world. Haman was poor because his self-worth was externally-dependent instead of internally rooted.

(ו:ו) וַיָּבֹוא, הָמָן, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ, מַה־לַּעֲשׂוֹת בְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חָפֵץ בִּיקְרוֹ; וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן, בְּלִבִּי, לִמִּי יַחֲפֹץ הַמֶּלֶךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת יָקָר, יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנִּי.

“Haman entered, and the king asked him, ‘What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor?’ Haman said to himself, ‘Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?’” (6:6)

David Smigel, Rohr Writing Scholar, Yeshiva College

It's a rare moment, placing the reader in the mind of someone hellbent on Jewish destruction, and this internal monologue betrays what ultimately leads not only Haman's downfall, but that of all those who have sought to destroy us across every generation. The simple, knee-jerk question, “who but me could be deserving of such honor?” exposes the ignorant ego which blinds the overzealous in their pursuits of glory and conquest. This pasuk narratively marks the beginning of the hefekeh (overturning) which faces Haman, as the grandiose plans he had envisioned begin to crumble and are turned back against him. In his fervor, he fails to recognize who the true King desires to honor and misses every sign that he will not succeed. It is a historical reminder that the arrogant will always be humbled, and the Jews will always be protected.

(ז:ג) וַתֵּעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה, וַתֹּאמֶר--אִם־מִצָּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְאִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב: תִּנָּתֶן־לִי נָפְשִׁי בְּשִׂאלָתִי, וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִי.

Queen Esther replied: “If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people at my request.” (7:3)

Dahlia Bernstein, Rohr Writing Scholar, Stern College

When reading this passuk, I hum a melody from my year in seminary under my breath. Esther's bold request of the king was sung, jumping, arms swinging, bare feet stomping on the tile. I never understood why we focused on Esther's request. The Targum Rishon explains that Esther did not look at Achashverosh when requesting salvation. Rather, she raises her eyes and gazes at the omnipotent King above her. Years later, I understand that we were begging, pleading, and rejoicing through song. This passuk reminds me that I can beseech God through music, rhythm, and dance.

(ח:טז) לַיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן וִיקָר.

“For the Jews there was light, joy, gladness, and honor” (8:16)

Nava Sturm, Sacks Writing Workshop, Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud Studies

Adar's focus on happiness is reflected in this verse. This is the joy of recognizing the way in which God shapes all of our experiences, even when His involvement does not feel apparent. Ibn Ezra comments on this verse that tzahalah (reference to 8:15) is a word that also embodies the qualities of orah [light]. Tzahalah is the experience of someone who is sitting in complete darkness and, without an intermediate stage, is thrust directly into the light, a shift which encapsulates the redemption narrative of the Purim story. We return to the words of 8:16 every time we say havdalah; woven into this text is both a reminder of and a prayer for the swiftness of God's redemption - just like the Jews of Shushan, we too can be brought from darkness into the brightest of lights.

Ilana Loskove, Leadership Scholar, Stern College

The Jews had just faced the threat of a genocidal decree and are now on the verge of a deadly war, their only chance at survival. And yet, “לַיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן וִיקָר”, they find reason to be joyous. Beyond possessing an optimistic mindset, they appreciated their new-found agency - being given the opportunity to fight back. Their fate was finally in their own hands. While they knew that intense battle lay ahead, they recognized that it was better than being powerless over their destiny. This passuk reminds us that empowerment can be a significant source of joy.

Maya August, Leadership Scholar, Stern College

During the recitation of the Megilla, the tzibbur proclaims aloud: “לַיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן וִיקָר” [For the Jews there was light, joy, gladness, and honor.] The Talmud in Masechet Megillah (16b) explains that אורה refers to Torah, שמחה to Yom Tov, ששון to brit milah, and יקר to tefillin. This moment marks the Jewish people's return to living openly as Jews, engaging in Torah and mitzvot with pride and love. Remarkably, this light appears even before the danger fully passes. The return of spiritual freedom alone is enough. That is the essence of the Jewish people: Torah and mitzvot are not just rituals, but our blueprint for life. In times of fear, we turn to Torah for chizuk- and through it, we rediscover our light, even when the world around us feels uncertain.

(יג:) כִּי מֵרָדֶכַי הַיְּהוּדִי מִשְׁנָה לַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרַב אֶחָיו דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לַעֲמֹד וְדַבֵּר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל־זֶרְעוֹ:

“For Mordechai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.” (10:3)

Uriel Sussman, Sacks Research Scholar, Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies

The Talmud points out that Mordechai was beloved by most of his brethren but not all of them (Megillah 16b). This verse reminds me that while leaders strive for broad acceptance, even Mordechai couldn't satisfy everyone.

Which verse is meaningful to you, and why?