Why Did Esther Hide Her Identity?

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I.

One of the most central questions concerning Megillat Esther is why Esther keeps her national and ethnic identity a secret - or, more accurately, why Mordekhai commands her to do so. The importance of the question arises from the fact that this matter is mentioned twice in the Megilla:

"Esther did not reveal her nationality and her descent, for Mordekhai had commanded her not to tell." (2:10)

"Esther would not reveal her descent and her nationality, as Mordekhai had commanded her." (2:20)

Even more puzzling is why Mordekhai differentiates between himself and Esther in this regard, for he himself declares openly that he is a Jew:

"And it was when [the king's servants] would speak to him day after day and he did not listen to them, they told Haman, to see whether Mordekhai's words would stand firm, for he had told them that he was a Jew." (3:4)

Why, then, does he forbid Esther to reveal that which he himself reveals?

II.

The medieval commentators discuss this question and propose several solutions.

Rashi (2:10) explains:

"'She should not tell' - in order that they would assume that she was from a lowly family and would send her away, for if they knew that she was a descendant of the family of King Shaul, they would hold on to her."

It would appear that Rashi's explanation relies on the passive expressions describing Esther's role in the quest to find a new queen - "And Esther was taken..." (2:8, 16) - and the description emphasizing her lack of effort to be selected: "And when it was the turn of Esther ... to come to the king, she asked for nothing..." (2:15).

Rashi sees verse 10 as being integrally related to this theme. Indeed, there is no doubt that the Megilla seeks to describe Esther as someone who is taken to the royal palace against her will and not for her own benefit. However, there is no hint in the text to support Rashi's explanation. Furthermore, why - according to Rashi - does Esther then continue to hide her lineage even after she becomes the new queen and rules in place of Vashti (2:20)?

Moreover, nowhere is Esther described as a descendant of the house of Shaul. Firstly, Mordekhai's ancestor Kish is not necessarily the father of Shaul. Secondly, even if he is indeed Shaul's father, the text does not seem to emphasize Esther's connection to Shaul, since it is Mordekhai whose genealogy is being traced rather than Esther, and since the verse does not read: "... son of Kish, who was the father of Shaul."

The Ibn Ezra (2:9) offers three possible explanations, the first two of which he rejects:

i. "Some say that Mordekhai was wrong to command Esther not to reveal her identity, for he feared that the king would not take her as a wife if he knew that she was from the [Jewish] captivity."

This explanation makes two claims: firstly, that Mordekhai's aim was to ensure that she would be queen; secondly, that this purpose is evaluated in a negative light.

It is difficult to find support for this interpretation in the text, and the description of Esther as being "taken" to the royal palace without any apparent effort on her part (as discussed above) appears to contradict it.

ii. "Others say that through prophecy or a dream he knew that salvation would come through her to Israel."

This explanation is built on the previous one. Both agree as to Mordekhai's purpose in commanding Esther not to reveal her identity, but they differ when it comes to evaluating this behavior. It does seem more plausible to evaluate Mordekhai's motivation favorably, since the text introduces him in a very positive light: he is a Jewish man of noble lineage, a Jerusalemite, and a man of outstanding kindness who has raised an orphan in his own home. The behavior attributed to him by this explanation - promoting Esther to the station of royalty at the price of handing her over to Achashverosh - cannot be considered worthy unless it was a one-time, exceptional decision taken for the purpose of saving Israel. This, in turn, would have to be based on some form of prophecy.

This latter explanation would seem to find support in Mordekhai's rebuke to Esther (4:15):

"Who knows if it was not for [the sake of] a time like this that you reached [a position of] royalty?"

The problem here is that his actual words imply that this possibility occurred to him just then, and was not something that was known to him previously.

iii. Therefore, the Ibn Ezra brings a third explanation:

"[The explanation] that seems correct in my eyes is that Mordekhai acted thus in order that she could observe God's Torah in secret; that she would not eat forbidden meat and would observe Shabbat in such a way that the servants would not become aware of it, for if the matter became known then perhaps the king would force her [to act contrary to her religious beliefs] or kill her, for [after all,] she was captured against her will."

Support for this view is to be found in the positive presentation of Mordekhai in the Megilla, as well as in the problems related to the previous explanations. However, these elements do not amount to proof of this explanation, for in the literal reading of the text there is no hint of Esther's care not to eat forbidden foods and to observe Shabbat. Even if all this is true, the text conceals it. On the contrary, the text would seem to suggest that Esther lives like any other member of the royal household.

III.

I would like to suggest another answer, based on a close examination of chapter 2, and in particular the immediate context of the verses originally quoted. We are told:

"Esther did not reveal her nationality and her descent for Mordekhai had commanded her not to tell. And each day Mordekhai would walk about before the court of the women's house to know how Esther was faring and what would be done with her." (2:10-11)

After Esther finds favor and grace in the eyes of the king and is selected to be his new queen, we read:

"Esther would not reveal her descent and her nationality, as Mordekhai had commanded her, and Esther carried out Mordekhai's word as she used to when she was in his custody." (2:20)

In both instances the text attributes Esther's actions to Mordekhai's command, and in both cases the text goes on to describe the behavior of one of them: in the first instance, Mordekhai's behavior ("Each day..."), and in the second instance, Esther's behavior ("And Esther carried out Mordekhai's word..."). Both times the verb used is derived from the root a-s-h (to do): first "what would be done (ye'aseh) with her," and then "Esther carried out ('osah)..."

This teaches us that Mordekhai was animated by two concerns. First, Mordekhai treats Esther like a father who loves his daughter. He is concerned for her well-being and what will become of her, and he is also concerned for her own actions and behavior. It should be noted that at first, before she becomes queen, Mordekhai's primary concern is for her welfare lest she - as a foreign girl - be treated badly. Later, when she takes the place of Vashti as queen, this possibility no longer troubles him and he begins to be concerned about what she herself will do and how she will act.

Therefore, the text at first (when she is taken to the women's house, before becoming queen) describes Mordekhai as walking about before the courtyard of the women's house to know how Esther was faring and what would be done with her. (Note the parallel to the story of Moshe Rabbeinu as a baby, and how his sister Miriam stationed herself nearby to see what would become of him. Both stories involve the captive becoming part of the royalty and eventually saving the Jewish nation.)

Against this backdrop, Mordekhai felt it would be wise for Esther to refrain from revealing her nationality and lineage, since his concern for her welfare was bound up with the fact that she was a Jewess, a stranger and foreigner. When it was her turn to be taken to the king, this concern became acute, and this explains the emphasis of the text:

"And when it was the turn of Esther, daughter of Avichayil uncle of Mordekhai - whom he had taken in as a daughter - to come to the king, she requested nothing..." (2:15)

Why does the text choose to review her lineage and her connection with Mordekhai specifically in this context? It would seem that a deep sense of tragedy underlies this reading, for it suggests a juxtaposition of "whom he had taken in as a daughter" with "and Esther was taken to King Achashverosh, to the royal palace." Whereas once she was taken in and cared for as a daughter, now she is taken by force to the king.

But ultimately, when Esther finds favor in the eyes of all who see her and she becomes queen, this problem no longer worries Mordekhai. The fact that she is popular with everyone - even though she was taken to the king against her will - is a clear sign that Divine Providence is involved, and Mordekhai views the events in this light.

There seems to be no doubt that there are echoes in the Megilla of the story of Yosef. Like Yosef, who found favor in the eyes of his Egyptian masters (Bereishit 39:4) and who is viewed favorably by the officer of the prison (ibid. 21), so Esther is regarded favorably by all. Just as in Bereishit Yosef is sold against his will and contrary to his interests, so here Esther is taken against her will and contrary to her interests. Just as Yosef - a boy of Jewish descent, a stranger in the land to which he has been sold - succeeds in all his endeavors because God is with him, likewise Esther - a young girl of Jewish descent, exiled from her homeland - finds favor in the eyes of all around her because God causes her to succeed. And just as the Freer of Prisoners brings Yosef to the position of second-in-command to Pharaoh, so He who raises up the lowly causes the crown to be placed on Esther's head. (Similar motifs are also to be found in Sefer Daniel, but a full treatment of the parallels between the stories of Yosef, Esther and Daniel is beyond the scope of this shiur.)

A profound sense of God's guiding hand enveloped Mordekhai when Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her and was selected as queen. He wondered if perhaps she could bring benefit to the Jews through her position. In his estimation, such benefit could come about only with his guidance and instruction. Like Yosef, whom God sent ahead in order to prepare a place for his father's household in order to ensure their survival, Mordekhai sensed that God had a mission for Esther, and who could know for which opportunity she had reached the position of royalty?

This explanation draws on that of Rashi, based on Esther's lack of effort to be selected, and on the Ibn Ezra's second explanation, which concludes that Mordekhai knew, through some type of prophecy, that salvation would come to Israel through her. But we propose that this knowledge did not precede her being taken to the women's house. It dawned on Mordekhai only after she became queen, and we need not rely on prophecy: this was simply his explanation of events as an act of God.

As stated, Mordekhai - whose nationalistic Jewish orientation requires no proof - believed that it was proper for him to continue serving as a guide to Esther. For this reason, he thought it better that the family connection between them not become known, in order that Esther's actions for the benefit of her nation could be carried out and would not appear to be serving anything other than the best interests of the kingdom. Although any ruler has advisors, and such was Mordekhai's position in relation to Esther, an advisor appointed in accordance with state considerations and who acts accordingly is not the same as an advisor who acquires his status through family connections. The latter will always be suspected of improper personal interests - and certainly if the person of power and the advisor belong to a foreign nation.

It is true that Mordekhai's national identity seems to be quite open and well-known: after all, he is an adult, and has some standing amongst his people. For instance, upon hearing of Haman's plan, Mordekhai tears his clothes and wears sackcloth and ashes. Then we are told that in every place where the king's word reaches the Jews, there is great mourning and sackcloth and ashes are seen in public (4:1-3). The text apparently means to demonstrate that Mordekhai's behavior serves as an example to the entire nation.

The nationality and lineage of young Esther, in contrast, were not publicly known, and Mordekhai saw fit to keep them hidden in order to keep the family connection between them a secret. In this way, he could guide her actions without arousing unnecessary suspicion.

In light of the above, we are now able to understand the fact that even after Esther is made queen she continues to hide her identity.

A close look at the text reveals a difference in the wording of the two instances where the text tells us that Esther keeps her nationality a secret.

The first time (before becoming queen):

"Esther did not reveal her nationality and her descent..." (2:10)

The second time (after becoming queen):

"Esther would not reveal her descent and her nationality..." (2:20)

The first time, the verb is negative in the past tense ("did not reveal" - lo higida), while the second time it is a medial negative ("would not reveal" - ein magedet). This is because the first phrase describes only what happened during the limited time that lapsed between being taken to the women's house and being taken to the royal palace. The second phrase describes her regular, fixed behavior from when she becomes queen onwards.

This leads us to another difference between the phrases. The first discusses "her nationality and her descent," while the second reverses the order. In light of what we have said above, we may explain as follows: before Esther became queen, the primary concern was for her welfare and her fate, since she was the daughter of a foreign nation, a Jewess. Hence the text here mentions "her nationality" first; her lineage is kept hidden only in order that her nationality will not be revealed. But after she is queen, Mordekhai's principal desire is to serve as her guide, and his main concern is that their family connection ("her descent") not be found out. Therefore, the text here mentions "her descent" first, and only afterwards "and her nationality."

IV.

Now the significance of the following passage in the Megilla becomes clear:

"In those days, while Mordekhai dwelled at the king's gate, Bigtan and Teresh became angry... and wished to harm King Achashverosh. And the matter became known to Mordekhai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther told it to the king in Mordekhai's name." (2:21-22)

This short passage contains several important elements: proof of Mordekhai's loyalty to the king, proof of Esther's loyalty to the king, proof of the propriety of the advisory relationship between Mordekhai and Esther, and the fact that Esther performs Mordekhai's word.

All of these elements, as explained above, are bound up with Mordekhai's intention in commanding Esther not to reveal her nationality and lineage.

Indeed, because of this event Achashverosh seeks to honor Mordekhai later on in the Megilla (6:6, 10-11).

V.

The above explanation of Esther's and Mordekhai's actions also fits well into the literary structure of the Megilla and its motifs.

Mordekhai's original concern for Esther arose from his fear of a plot against her because she was Jewish - and plotting against the Jews is, obviously, a central theme of the Megilla.

Mordekhai's intention that Esther continue to carry out his word as she did when she was in his custody, is also critical to the plot of the Megilla. A short while later, this intention was almost overturned when Esther might have tried to save herself, escaping the fate of her people, were it not for Mordekhai's sharp rebuke:

"Do not imagine that you can escape in the king's house from [the fate of] all the Jews." (4:13)

Had Esther not carried out Mordekhai's will, salvation could not have come to the Jews.

Thus, the verses describing how Esther hides her national and ethnic identity conceal within them both the seed of the impending destruction and the reason for salvation in the Megilla. The first verse hints at the danger, while the second indicates the reason for salvation.

VI.

Once Esther had found favor in the eyes of the king, Mordekhai had gained royal esteem and Haman was removed from the scene, once a window of salvation was opened (although the threatening sword still hovered over them), Esther could reveal that which she had kept secret until now:

"On that day King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the household of Haman... and Mordekhai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her" (8:1)

Once she revealed what he was to her - i.e., her lineage - then obviously her nationality became known as well, for the fact that Mordekhai was a Jew was well-known to all, including Achashverosh (as we see from his command to Haman, "Then do so to Mordekhai the Jew who sits at the king's gate" - 6:10). Indeed, once the status of Mordekhai and Esther was firmly established and their loyalty to the king had been proven, they could now act on behalf of the Jews openly, with royal approval:

"And you may write concerning the Jews as you please, in the king's name and signed with the king's ring" (8:8).

VII.

The conclusion of the Megilla, too, continues the theme of the direct connection between devotion to the king's success, and Mordekhai's activity on behalf of his people:

"And King Achashverosh established a tax on the land and the islands... for Mordekhai the Jew was second to King Achashverosh and a great man to the Jews, and accepted by the majority of his brethren; he sought good for his nation and spoke peace to all their seed." (10:1-3)

What is the nature of this connection?

Mordekhai, who is faithful to his people and to his God, radiates his blessing - God's blessing - onto the kingdom of Achashverosh, within whose framework he operates.

Yosef, who never wavered in his fear of God, both while in the pit and later as his position improved, and who - as a result - found favor in the eyes of his masters and enjoyed God's blessing in all his endeavors, brought benefit to Pharaoh and Egypt, was saved and rose to greatness and provided for his father's household. So too Mordekhai, with his steadfast religious and national consciousness, as a result of which Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her and as a result of whom salvation came to the Jews and they rose to greatness - he, too, brought benefit to Achashverosh and acted in the interests of his nation. A summary of this parallel is noted by the Ibn Ezra:

"The text mentions this in order to teach that [Achashverosh] succeeded in all his ways and his greatness became apparent [only] after Mordekhai became his second-in-command."

It would seem that this is, in fact, the lesson of the Megilla: even when the Jews were in a foreign land, the Holy One did not forsake them, but rather extended His mercy to them, redeemed them from their trouble and raised them to greatness, and His blessing was with them, bringing blessing also to their host country.