



Rembrandt's Esther



*Adolf Hitler banned and forbade the observance of Purim. He also declared it a capital offense for Christians or Jews to possess a copy of the Book of Esther. In a speech made on November 10, 1938, (the day after kristallnacht), **Julius Streicher** surmised that just as "the Jew butchered 75,000 Persians" in one night, the same fate would have befallen the German people had the Jews succeeded in inciting a war against Germany; the "Jews would have instituted a new Purim festival in Germany."*

In an apparent connection made by Hitler between his Nazi regime and the role of Haman, he stated in a speech made on January 30, 1944, that if the Nazis were defeated, the Jews could celebrate "a second Purim".

Seconds before he was hanged, Streicher called out "Purim Fest 1946!"

THE TEXT:

Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come to them, 27 The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all who joined themselves to them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; 28 And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed. 29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim. 30 And he sent the letters to all the Jews, to the one hundred and twenty seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasverous, in words of peace and truth, 31 To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, with regard to the fasting and their lamenting. 32 And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book."

ESTHER 9:26-32**THE PLOT: according to talmud and midrash:**

On hearing of the decree to murder the Jews, queen Esther put aside her jewels and rich dresses, loosened her hair, fasted, and prayed that she might be successful in her dangerous mission to convince the king. On the third day, she passed on to the inner court, arraying herself (with the Schechinah according to Midrash Esther Rabbah) in her best, and taking her two maids. As soon as she came abreast with the idols the Schechinah departed from her, so that she exclaimed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 32: 1).

Ahasverous attempted to ignore her, and turned his face away, but an angel forced him to look at her. She, however, fainted at the sight of his flushed face and burning eyes, and leaned her head on her handmaid, expecting to hear her doom pronounced; but God increased her beauty to such an extent that Ahasverous could not resist. An angel lengthened the scepter so that Esther might touch it: she invited the king to her banquet.

Why Haman was invited the Rabbis explain in various ways. She desired to make the king jealous by playing the lover to Haman, which she did at the feast, planning to have him killed even though she should share his fate. At the supreme moment, when she denounced Haman, it was an angel that threw Haman on the couch, though he intended to kneel before the queen; so that the king, suspecting an attempt upon the virtue and life of his queen, forthwith ordered him to be hanged.

"And Mordecai wrote... letters to all the Jews in the provinces of the king... to enjoin them to keep the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was transformed for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending choice portions to one another, and gifts to the poor."

Esther 9:20

In the second letter sent out to reinforce the customs associated with Purim, the text emphasizes that the senders were Esther and Mordecai jointly, and the style suggests that it was actually Esther who initiated it.

"Then Esther, the queen, daughter of Avihail and Mordecai the Jew, wrote ... to confirm ... to all the Jews ... these days of Purim in their appointed times, as Mordecai ... and Esther ... had enjoined them ... for themselves and their descendants ... And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book."

Esther 9:32

The two letters reveal the difference in authorship the first Mordecai alone the second with Esther. This difference betrays a possible struggle that is recorded in the Talmud concerning the canonical status of Esther's festival as well as the very legitimacy of the *iggeret* or scroll of Purim. I believe that the rabbinic resistance to Esther's plea for posterity threatened the establishment at many levels. My task is to read all these mythical characters as internalized archetypes and expose what struggle is really going inside the author/myself the reader.

TALMUD AND MIDRASH

Talmud Megilla 7 אמר רב שמואל בר יהודה: שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: קבעוני לך 7

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, Write an account of me for posterity. They sent back answer, Have I not written for thee three times — three times and not four? [And they refused] until they found a verse written in the Torah, "Write this a memorial in a book", [which they expounded as follows]: 'Write this', namely, what is written here and in Deuteronomy; 'for a memorial', namely, what is written .in the Prophets; 'in a book', namely, what is written in the Megillah

The difference [between the first and second of these opinions] is also found between two Tannaim. 'Write this', what is written here. 'For a memorial', namely, what is written in Deuteronomy. 'In a book', namely, what is written in the Prophets.

So R. Joshua. R. Eliezer of Modi'im says: Write this', namely, what is written here and in Deuteronomy; for a memorial', namely, what is written in the Prophets; 'in a book', namely, what is written in the Megillah.

Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel; [The scroll] of Esther does not make the hands unclean. Are we to infer from this that Samuel was of opinion that Esther was not composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? How can this be, Seeing that Samuel has said that Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? — It was composed to be recited [by heart], but not to be written.

The following objection was raised: 'R. Meir says that [the scroll of] Koheleth does not render the hands unclean¹, and that about the Song of Songs there is a difference of opinion. R. Jose says that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, and about Koheleth there is a difference of opinion. R. Simeon says that Koheleth is one of those matters in regard to which Beth Shammai were more lenient and Beth Hillel more stringent, but Ruth and the Song of Songs and Esther [certainly] make the hands unclean'! — Samuel concurred with R. Joshua.

It has been taught: R. Simeon b. Menasia said: Koheleth does not render the hands unclean because it contains only the wisdom of Solomon. They said to him], Was this then all that he composed? Is it not stated elsewhere, And he spoke three thousand proverbs, and it further says, Add thou not unto his words.? Why this further quotation? — In case you might object that he composed very much, and what it pleased him to write he wrote and what it did not please him he did not write. Therefore it says, "Add thou not to his words."

It has been taught: R. Eleazar said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And Haman said in his heart. R. Akiba says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And Esther obtained favour in the eyes of all that looked upon her. R. Meir says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, And the thing became known to Mordecai. R. Jose b. Durmaskith said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, But on the spoil they laid not their hands,

Said Samuel: Had I been there, I would have given a proof superior to all, namely, that it says, They confirmed and took upon them, which means they confirmed above what they took upon themselves below.

¹ In Mishnaic times, people often kept their teruma produce beside Torah scrolls, and mice would damage the scrolls in order to reach the food. To prevent this desecration of the Torah scrolls, the Sages declared that touching these scrolls is *metamei yadayim* (ritually defiles hands). This would prevent people from keeping their teruma near the scrolls, as defiled teruma must be destroyed. There was then a question regarding whether or not some of the Ketuvim, such as Kohelet and Shir Ha-shirim, were included in this edict. Thus, in this context, causing defilement is actually a sign of sanctity.

Raba said: All the proofs can be confuted except that of Samuel, which cannot be confuted. [Thus,] against that of R. Eleazar it may be objected that it is reasonable to suppose that Haman would think so, because there was no one who was so high in the esteem of the king as he was, and that when he spoke at length, he was only expressing the thought concerning himself.

Against the proof of R. Akiba it may be objected that perhaps the fact is as stated by R. Eleazar, who said that these words show that to every man she appeared to belong to his own nation.

Against R. Meir it may be objected that perhaps the fact is as stated by R. Hiyya b. Abba who said that Bigthan and Teresh were two men from Tarsis.

Against the proof of R. Jose b. Durmaskith it may be objected that perhaps they sent messengers. Against the proof of Samuel certainly no decisive objection can be brought.

Said Rabina: This bears out the popular saying, Better is one grain of sharp pepper than a basket full of pumpkins.

R. Joseph said: It can be proved from here: And these days of Purim shall not fail from among the Jews.

! שלחו לה: קנאה את מעוררת עלינו לבין האומות. שלחה להם: כבר כתובה אני על דברי הימים למלכי מדי ופרס. רב ורב חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו. בכוליה סדר מועד כל כי האי זוגא חלופי רבי יוחנן ומעייל רבי יונתן: שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: כתבוני לדורות. שלחו לה: (משלי כ"ב) הלא כתבתי לך שלישים, שלישים ולא רבעים. עד שמצאו לו מקרא כתוב בתורה (שמות י"ז) כתב זאת זכרון בספר, כתב זאת מה שכתוב כאן ובמשנה תורה, זכרון מה שכתוב בנביאים, בספר מה שכתוב במגילה. כתנאי: כתב זאת מה שכתוב כאן, זכרון מה שכתוב במשנה תורה, בספר מה שכתוב בנביאים, דברי רבי יהושע. רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: כתב זאת מה שכתוב כאן ובמשנה תורה, זכרון מה שכתוב בנביאים, בספר מה שכתוב במגילה. אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: אסתר אינה מטמאה את הידים. למימרא דסבר שמואל אסתר לאו ברוח הקודש נאמרה? והאמר שמואל: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה! נאמרה לקרות ולא נאמרה ליכתוב. מיתיבי: רבי מאיר אומר: קהלת אינו מטמא את הידים, ומחלוקת בשיר השירים. רבי יוסי אומר: שיר השירים מטמא את הידים, ומחלוקת בקהלת. רבי שמעון אומר: קהלת מקולי בית שמאי ומחומרי בית הלל, אבל רות ושיר השירים ואסתר מטמאין את הידים! הוא דאמר כרבי יהושע. תניא, רבי שמעון בן מנסיא אומר: קהלת אינו מטמא את הידים, מפני שחכמתו של שלמה היא. אמרו לו: וכי זו בלבד אמר? והלא כבר נאמר (מלכים א' ד') וידבר שלשת אלפים משל, ואומר (משלי ל') אל תוסף על דבריו. מאי ואומר? וכי תימא: מימר טובא אמר, דאי בעי איכתיב, ודאי בעי לא איכתיב. תא שמע אל תוסף על דבריו. תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ו') ויאמר המן בלבו. רבי עקיבא אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ב') ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראה. רבי מאיר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ב') וידע הדבר למרדכי. רבי יוסי בן דורמסקית אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ט') ובבזה לא שלחו את ידם. אמר שמואל: אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדיפא מכולהו, שנאמר קימו וקבלו קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה. אמר רבא: לכולהו אית להו פירכא, לבר מדשמואל דלית ליה פירכא. דרבי אליעזר סברא הוא, דלא הוה איניש דחשיב למלכא כוותיה, והאי כי קא מפיש טובא ואמר אדעתיה דנפשיה קאמר. דרבי

עקיבא דלמא כרבי אלעזר, דאמר: מלמד שכל אחד ואחד נדמתה לו כאומתו. והא דרבי מאיר דלמא כרבי חייא בר אבא, דאמר: בגתן ותרש שני טרשיים היו. והא דרבי יוסי בן דורמסקית דלמא פריסתקי שדור. דשמואל ודאי לית ליה פירכא. אמר רבינא: היינו דאמרי אינשי: טבא חדא פלפלתא חריפתא ממלי צני קרי. רבי יוסף אמר, מהכא: (אסתר ט') וימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים, רב נחמן בר יצחק אומר, מהכא: זכרם לא יוסף מזרעם. ומתנות לאביונים. תני רב יוסף: ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו שתי מנות לאיש אחד. ומתנות לאביונים שתי מתנות לשני בני אדם. רבי יהודה נשיאה שדר ליה לרבי אושעיא: אטמא דעיגלא תלתא וגרבא דחמרא, שלח ליה:

The first request of Esther was to establish the festival of Purim as a permanent calendrical feature annually (not merely temporary) however the Rabbis felt that celebrating Purim annually will cause animosity will remind the non-Jews of our slaughtering their countrymen. (Sounds a bit like Germany circa 1933).

Esther then responded by saying that celebrating Purim will not engender anti-semitism since the events were already in government documents. Maybe the court was conservative in its approach to new institutions and had to balance her plea with the other 35 minor festivals already in place (Megillat Taanit).

Her second request was for the iggeret-her letter to be considered as part of the sacred books of the bible and be canonized (the letter to now becoming a sacred text). This prompted a debate between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar Hermosa. Her argument was that Purim was unique therefore her scroll needed to be canonized, since it was eternally significant. The opposing view was that like the other 35 miracles recounted in Megillat Taanis, this event was also temporary and no longer needed to be observed. Yet we learn in the Palestinian Talmud no less that:

“In future all of the prophets and scriptures will be void but Megillat Esther will remain”

(Jerusalem Talmud Megillah 1:5)

Although the reading of the Megillah was instituted by the Rabbinic Court of this world, the Talmud tells us that this enactment was endorsed by the Court of the Upper World (Makot 23b, Shevuot 39a). The Talmud also tells us that G-d indicated to Moses that the reading of the Megillah would be continued also in the future (Megillah 19b).

So clearly the nature of this profound claim about the exalted status of this book but also clearly reflective of a deep divide in opinion.

The Babylonian Talmud relates that Esther requested permission to record the miracle of Purim in writing. The dissent was based on the verse in Proverbs (22:20) which says, "Have I not written for you a threesome (Shalishim)?" The verse implies that the defeat of Amalek may be recorded in writing only **three** times and no more.

They however, later agreed to Esther's request by deriving from a verse in the Torah that the miracle of the defeat of Amalek in the times of Esther *may* be written in a Sefer.

The verse says, "*Kesov Zos Zikaron ba'Sefer*" -- "Record this as a remembrance in the book"

(Exodus 17:14)

"Zos" refers to the defeat of Amalek described in Exodus 17:14-16 and in Deut. 25:17-19.

"Zikaron" refers to the defeat of Amalek recorded in I Sam. 15. 1-35

"Ba'Sefer" refers to the defeat of Amalek recorded in an additional "Sefer" which now meant the Book of Esther.

Since both accounts in Torah² (Exodus and Deut.) concern the same battle they are considered one account therefore the Rabbis felt it permissible to conflate the two citations into one event and record a third battle, that of Esther with Haman, another descendant of Amalek.

Meditation:

What is really going here? The written Torah and the midrashic interpretation of the semantics of the verse allow for only three battles to be recorded. In the end the rabbinic accommodation was made by the very midrashic conflating the two citations since the historical battle was identical. They allowed for history to overcome textual citation and repetition to allow the new event of Purim to remain consistent with their midrashic hermeneutic struggle and include it in the canon without violating the implicit allowable number of battles predicted in the sacred text.

I believe that the real resistance to her pleas came not because of her argument rather because of the choices she actually made “on the ground” and the “sin for the sake of heaven”. I believe that in this mythic text we too must find

² Josephus telescopes the two banquets that occurred in the Bible, again apparently to suit his Greek readers; this increases the pace of the story and eliminates the fairy tale aspect of the repeated requests. In addition, it has the effect of making Esther more assertive and less hesitant than the Biblical story.

“permission” from our own inner authority, continuously, to make the moves of innovation in the spirit that inevitably violate the status quo, the familiar, and the comforting.

Legally speaking:

Esther presented a serious problem. How could she have sexual relations with king Achasverous? According to Rabbi Meir she was married to Mordecai at the time!

The rabbis in the Talmud explain that Esther was not active. She was passive. It was Achasverous who was active; Esther had no choice. Had she resisted his advances she would have faced the same death that Vashti faced.³

Until this point Esther was not guilty of a sin. Her relations with Achaverous were always when he called her so until now Esther never went to Achasverous of her own volition. Rather, she would only go if he called for her. Because of this, she was considered a forced woman.

However later when Mordechai instructs her to enter the chamber of the king to plead she must take the initiative to go to him, she then leaves the legal category of being forced into relations with Achasverous. She now is considered consenting to be with him. This is eluded in the words that Esther says,

"I will go into the king, **not in accordance to the law**, and as I am lost, so, I must be lost."
(Esther 4:16)

Esther in effect is saying to Mordecai that she realizes that what she is doing is not correct, and she stands the possibility of being totally lost forever to Mordecai, but she has not other choice.

The rabbis explain that this is called a “sin for the sake of heaven”. In this case, Esther sinned, but not for her own benefit, but for the benefit of the entire Jewish nation. This is considered a case of *"mesirat nefesh"*, giving one's total being over for the sake of the glory of G-d.

The Talmud reads midrashically “not accordance to the law” as being the Halachah rather than the plain meaning of the king’s statues.

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³ This is similar to the case of a rapist who comes upon a married woman. If the married woman is unwilling to have relations with him, but rather is forced, she is still permitted to her husband. It is only in the case of a married woman who is desirous of extra-marital relations, that she is forbidden to her husband and according to Jewish law faces the death penalty.

Hassidut: the boundaries are challenged

In Reb Zadok's *Takanas Hashavim*, he explores the Izhbitser notion of "aveirah lishma", "sinning for the sake of heaven" as the idea that one truth maybe needed to become subservient to a higher truth even if it requires violating the norm in the process!

ואין לך עבירה לשמה גדולה מאסתר ונכתב ברוח הקודש מה שאמרה על עצמה כאשר אבדתי אבדתי דמסתמא יש בזה שם אבידה באמת מצד עבירה כזו דנבעלת לגוי ... ועל זה השיבה ואת וגו' תאבדי שיתקיים הגזירה בה כי חטאה גדול משלהם דבעל כרחם ולפנים לא נקרא עבודה זרה כלל באמת ולא טימוע בין האומות אבל היא לא חשה להצלת אבדון כל ישראל בגזירה ודאית לפניה, והיא שבה תיכף ומסרה נפשה ולא בסכנת הגוף לבד רק גם סכנת אבדון נפש דהטלת זוהמא ותכלית הטימוע בין האומות רק שהיה בעל כרחו ובזה תיקנה עצמה וכל ישראל במה שעשתה עוד עבירה חמורה כזו דליכנס ברצונה, רק שמכל מקום אינה ברצונה האמיתי כלל והוא עבירה לשמה שנחשב אדרבא למצוה גדולה כאשר קיבלתי כי על דרך זה הוא תכלית התיקון לכל חטא ואין כאן מקומו:

...And there is no sin for the sake of heaven greater than that of Esther and the sacred text written with the Holy Spirit that "if I be destroyed so be it" (Esther 4:17) meaning there would be a true destruction legally for her if she commits adultery with a heathen, for this she exclaimed let it happen! ...she came and was willing to sacrifice her soul not only with danger to her self bodily but also to her soul, for legally her dispensation might only operate under duress however here she prepared herself with a worse sin by operating and sinning willingly. This sin was not done with her true desire of course thus the sin was for the sake of heaven and was considered contrarily as a great mitzvah...

In the next text Reb Zadok compares these acts of Esther as rooted in the biblical precedent of Aaron the high priest.

ספר תקנת השבין - אות ה

ומצד האהבה יוכל להכניס עצמו לענין כזה על דרך עבירה לשמה דיעל, ולא מצינו בפירוש בתורה שדבר זה מותר רק מהתם הוא דילפינן והיא מרוב חשקה ואהבתה להצלת ישראל ולבער צורר ואויב ה' כמוהו מהעולם לא הביטה על העבירה ועל הזוהמא שהטיל כמו שאמרו (נזיר כ"ג ע"ב) שדבר זה רעה הוא אצלה, מכל מקום הפקירה גם נפשה בשביל דבר זה שחשבה אפילו אין שום היתר לדבר זה והיא תענש על זה מכל מקום מוטב תאבד היא ויאבד צורר ה' מהעולם, ועל דרך זה עשתה אסתר במה שאמרה (וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי) אסתר ד', ט"ז) היינו גם על אבידת הנפש חס ושלום על ידי מה שעשתה עבירה ברצון להצלת ישראל,

...רק גבי אהרן הכהן שנבחר לעבודה, וזכה לו על ידי עשיית העגל שהוא אדרבא עבירה ועל כן היה בוש דידע בעצמו שאינו כדאי והגון עד שאמר לו למה אתה בוש לכך נבחרת, וראיתי הפירוש דבשביל זה עצמו שאתה בוש בשביל זה נבחרת, היינו דלעבודתו אין הקב"ה משתמש אלא בכלים שבורים ומי שלבו שבור ודואג בקרבו:

וזהו מדריגת זדונות כזכויות שבעולם הזה לא כלעתיד דיבוקש העוון ואיננו כי יהיה גלוי לכל איך הוא זכות ואינו עוון כלל ואין בוש כלל, אבל בעולם הזה אין זה גלוי ומבורר לעין איך הוא כן שאף על פי שחשב

לאיסור וכוונתו מיהת לאיסורא לא יצא מכלל שוגג כנזכר לעיל דנקרא חטא ומה שמביא לידי זכויות אחר כך הוי כמו עבירה לשמה דנמי צריך סליחה וכפרה על העבירה, וכמו שביארתי לקמן (סימן י')

“And from the perspective of love one can allow himself to enter such matters via the concept of *“aveirah lishmah”* although we do not find explicit mention of this in the Torah, that taking of such liberty is permitted, however because of her desire and love for the salvation of her people, and the removal of the threat of God's enemy she did not look upon it as a sin and the filth she might cause through the immoral act...(Nazir 23b) for such was evil to her normally.

“Nevertheless she released herself to abandon for this purpose knowing there might be no dispensation for such an act and that she would be punished over it, for it would be better to be destroyed and in doing so remove the evil from the world at the same time.

“This is the meaning of : “if I will be destroyed so be it” (Esther 4:17) meaning even a spiritual death as a result of her willingly committed sin to save the people of Israel **which was seen only once before with Aaron the high priest who was chosen for the sacrificial cult and merited by his choices with the Sin of the Golden Calf as well, thinking he too was unworthy and fitting for the priesthood after the sin...until he was told “why are you ashamed for this you were chosen!” and I saw a commentary that read it as follows” for precisely this reason of the sin were you chosen!” meaning God only chooses broken vessels for His divine service so that he who has a broken heart and has spiritual anxiety is the intended meaning of the verse “the intentional sins shall be considered as merits”**

Takanas Hashavim (5)

Reb Zadok is equating Aaron's self sacrifice with Esther's since both were willing to accept the consequences of their actions despite the legal ramifications, for the sake of a higher truth so that this archetype maybe characterized by self-sacrifice despite the law for a higher truth. The motivating factor seems to be selfless love for the other. Aaron and Esther (and perhaps David and Judah) reflect this type of devotion and horizontal spirituality whereas Moses (and perhaps Joseph and Mordechai) reflect the vertical dimension of performance of the divine will alone.

Kabbalah: projecting these struggles onto the divine

In the mystical literature as seen in the Zohar all these actions are seen as arousing divine mercy in a unique way. The talmud had already noted parallels between the king's party in Chapter One of Esther and mortal supplication before the divine as well as the parallel between Esther entering the inner chamber of the king with the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies is not overlooked by the Zohar.

ספר אסתר פרק ה

“And it came to pass on the third day, Esther put on the royal dress, and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, opposite the king’s palace; and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal palace, opposite the gate of the house.”

Esther 5:1

“It is specifically on these words that the Zohar makes the comparison between Yom Kippurim and Purim: Lest you think that Esther is entering the inner chamber to conduct herself in a sordid manner, the Zohar says that Esther’s putting on the royal garb is just like the Kohen Gadol dressing in the priestly garments. She enters the inner chamber like the Kohen Gadol. In the story of Purim, when everything is “upside down”, a beautiful Jewish girl in far-away Persia enters into the inner chamber to save her people and she becomes the Kohen Gadol”

Tikkun 57b

תיקוני זהר דף נז/ב

ואיהי יום הכפורים, וכד אתקשטת קדמיה בלבושין שפירין דאינון לבושי כפרה, אתקרי ציץ דיליה, מצנפת דיליה, אבנט דיליה, איהי כלילא מארבע בגדי לבן מסטרא דימינא, ומארבע בגדי זהב מסטרא דשמאלא, בההוא זמנא דאתקשטת באלין לבושין דכפרה אתמר בה ותלבש אסתר מלכות, ובהון עאלת לפני ולפנים, הדא הוא דכתיב ותעמוד בחצר בית המלך הפנימית, ובהון נשאה חן בעיניו, ורזא דמלה וראיתיה לזכור ברית עולם, ומיד ה' שמעה ה' סלחה ה' הקשיבה ועשה אל תאחר: פורים אתקריאת על שם יום הכפורים...

“This is Yom Kippurim, when (the Kohen Gadol) is clothed in beautiful clothing, clothing of atonement: the *tziz*, the *mitznefet*, the *avnet*, the four white garments from the right side, the four garments of gold from the left side.

“At that time she (Esther) beautified herself with clothing of forgiveness. That is what is meant by the verse, “And Esther put on royal clothing.” And with these garments she entered into the inner sanctum. That is the meaning of the verse “She stood in the inner chamber of the King”. “She found favor in His eyes”- this is the mystery...immediately God heard, God forgave,...Purim is named for Yom Kippurim ...⁴

Esther enters the inner sanctum, not motivated by lust, not for money or power. She enters motivated solely by love for her people and her desire to save them; she enters as the Kohen Gadol. Esther is Haddasa, a pleasant smell, a redemptive smell like the

⁴ The Tikunei Zohar continues, and makes more comparisons between Yom Kippur and elements of the Purim story. The commentary of the Sulam understands this entire passage in reference to the exile of the Shekhina.

Ketoret.⁵ Esther's deeds were indeed beautiful, performed with purity and total self-sacrifice: she knew that willingly entering the chamber of Ahashverosh and seducing him would bear a heavy cost, in this world (for she would be unable to return to Mordechai) and in the next (for she would be guilty of one of the three sins for which one should give up their life). As in the case of Aaron, the first High Priest, Esther was prepared to sacrifice her soul for the Jewish People. Just as Aaron's sin in the episode of the Golden Calf was performed to save the Jewish People from destruction, so Esther transgressed in the chambers of Ahashverosh in order to save the Jewish People from annihilation. And in both cases, God accepted their sacrifice, understood their total devotion, spared the Jewish People because of their personal sacrifice, and elevated them both a new status: Aaron became High Priest, and Esther joined the pantheon of Jewish heroism; according to the Zohar, for at least one day Esther functioned as High Priest – just like Aaron.

The Zohar describes when it uses the technical mystical term “*ve-zeh sod*” - “this is the mystery” - that this very act represents in the divine realm the very secret of the universe the mystery of the ongoing battle within the divine between compassion and strict justice:

A recent commentator, the **Sulam** even suggests that this mystery is none other than the secret of the very exile of the Schechinah! Aaron alone (and his descendants) are given this dangerous task. Representing humanity before the possible divine rage and successfully assuaging the divine rage through selfless love. The exile of the Schechinah is the very splitting of the divine between its Transcendental role versus the Immanent.⁶

Even in the talmud it states that when Esther entered the kings palace of idolatry the Schechinah departed from her. In the Zohar passage below we see this idea stretched further in identification:

“The sages who wrote the Mishnah SAID THAT it is said of the Matron, WHO IS MALCHUT, “and His kingdom rules over all” (Tehilim 103:19), SINCE SHE RULES OVER THE KLIPOT AS WELL. THEREFORE, after Esther put on THE ROYAL APPAREL, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SECRET OF THE VERSE, “ESTHER PUT ON HER ROYAL APPAREL (HEB. MALCHUT),” Esther ruled over Ahasverous and his

⁵ Rav Zadok Hakohen of Lublin, *Liquetei Amarim*, section 16:

ספר ליקוטי אמרים - אות טז

אך באמת בני ישראל שהם הרע שבהם הוא מצד הכלים עצמם ולא מצד ההמשכה מהם ששם הוא הרע הגמור רק מצד עצמיות הכלים שם אין רע כלל, ולכן יורח ריח בגדיו ריח בוגדיו (סנהדרין ל"ז). (שגם כן מעלים ריח טוב והיינו כמו שאמרו) עירובין י"ט. (פושעי ישראל מלאים מצוות וכו' ואמרו) ויקרא רבה ל', י"ב (על הדס ריח ולא טעם כך בישראל בעלי מצוות ולא תורה, כי נר מצוה ותורה אור ונר לגבי אור כרשימו דאור לגבי עצם האור ועצמות הכלים מעלים ריח טוב ומצד האור מקיף שלהם הוא הריח טוב באמת שהוא המצוות דפושעי ישראל, אבל הרשעות שלהם נגד זה הוא חלבנה כמו שאמרו) כריתות ו' ע"ב (דכל תענית וכו' דבאגודה אחת נעשה גם זה ריח טוב ואם חסר זה גם כל הריחות לא הועילו כי כל הריחות מצד המצוות וטוב שבהם והרי יש רע גם כן ועדיין חוזר לעץ הדעת טוב ורע, אך באמת הם אחד עשר סממנים כידוע דברע יש אחד עשר כוחות ומדות אף על פי שהם רק עשר כמו שנתבאר למעלה האחד עשר הוא נגד מקור האין סוף והוא נמשך מן הכלים שהם עשר, כי כל דבר נחלק לעשר בהכרח והאחד עשר היא הרשימו דאור פנימי הנשאר כי מאחר שאינם כלי קיבול להחזיק להיות האור פנימי מתיחד בהם כמו גוף בנפש לכך אותו רשימו מן החשבון:

⁶ Interestingly it was Reb Yonasan Eybeshutz who suggested that Purim is greater than Yom Kippur since the latter heals the rift between man and God whereas Purim heals the rift between man and his fellow. *Yaarot Devash* 1:8

people, and it is said of them, "and slew of their foes" (Ester 9:16). If you say that Achasverous mated with her, heaven forbid. Though they were in the same house, SHE DID NOT MATE WITH HIM, but was like Joseph of whom it says, "And she laid up his garment (Heb. bigdo) by her" (Bereshheet 39:16). The word 'bigdo' is employed, which is derived from, "traitors have dealt treacherously (Heb. bagdu)" (Yeshayah 24:16). THIS IS HIS MOST OUTER ASPECT, WHICH THE KLIPOT CAN BE ATTACHED TO."

7. There is a great mystery here, which is why 'Esther' is derived from mystery (Heb. seter), as written, "You are my hiding place (Heb. seter)" (Tehilim 32:7), since the Shechinah hid her from Achasverous and gave him a female demon instead while she returned to Mordechai's arm. And Mordechai, who knew the explicit Name and the seventy tongues, did all this with wisdom. This is why the sages of the Mishnah stated that even regardless of this, a man must speak with his wife before he mates with her, because she might have been exchanged with a female demon.

8. This is true for a woman who comes from the aspect of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, AND AN EXCHANGE WITH A FEMALE DEMON APPLIES TO HER, but if she is from the Shechinah she remains unchanged. This is the meaning of, "For I am Hashem, I do not change" (Malachi 3:6). "I" is the Shechinah, who has no fear from the other sides, NAMELY THE KLIPOT. This is the meaning of, "All nations before Him are as nothing" (Yeshayah 40:17).

9. Wherever the Shechinah is, there are many special attributes. Hence, since the Shechinah was clothed in her, Esther was worthy of having special things done to her like Sarah, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, kept, and since the Shechinah was with her He kept her from Pharaoh. The Holy One, blessed be He even made her clothes and jewels have special qualities due to the Shechinah that was with her. For that reason, when Pharaoh came to TOUCH her sandal, THE ANGEL struck him with it, and the same happened with all her jewelry. Each jewel he would touch struck him until that defiled one left her and brought her back to her husband.

10. If this is true for her jewels, it is much more so that whoever touched her body, even her finger, for the purpose of mating, THEN, "and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death" (Bemidbar 1:51), since the Holy One, blessed be He, did not give him permission to come near her. This is the meaning of, "I am Hashem, that is My name, and My glory will I not give to another" (Yeshayah 42:8).

Zohar Ki Seitze 9.

In this comparison of Esther and Sarah both were found in the bedchamber of powerful kings and both were incarnated with the divine Schechinah thus prevailing.

The insistence of Esther came from this place of divine incarnation that allowed her the authority to confront the rabbis as well as face adversity. The double authorship of the Purim letters may well have been needed since the Jews recognized her victory over the rabbinical court by the addition of the celebration to include "and their descendants" which was omitted from the first epistle.

In Summary:

The hermeneutic moves we have taken here are from the plain meaning of the "not in accordance with the law" that Esther tells Mordecai that her action implies, meaning not the statute of the king to the midrashic reading of this as non Halachic relations voluntarily entered into by a married woman, to the notion of "*aveirah lishmah*" then on to the Hassidic reading of Reb Zadok as to the very legitimacy of the sin for the sake of Heaven to the projection of the struggle itself onto the divine as we read in the Zohar in that what is taking place in the bedroom of the king mirrors the priestly intervention with the divine evoking mercy on Yom Kippur.

These moves reveal the struggle between canon and inclusion, tradition and innovation, fear of the unknown and certainty as well as lower versus higher truths.

This journey then allows us to return to the real insistence of Esther that she be celebrated as well as incorporated into the Jewish canon. The deeper mythical reasons reveal her identity as the terrestrial counterpart of the very Schechinah. In the Zohar the Schechinah clothed herself in Esther and became incarnated as one so that the miracles could occur.

Finally we take back all these projections in our seeing the text as a mirror of the inner work we need to engage in.

We too have various voices within including the voice of authority and the voice of the inner kritik. Esther represents that free floating voice of innovation and courage as a feminine figure demanding change.

The story and its layered midrashic and mystical themes propel us annually to visit this struggle once again, in preparation for the festival of liberation, for surely we need to find Esther's courage prior to making the scary moves a slave must endure before exodus and redemption.