



From Monarch to Matriarch: Re-reading Megillat Esther in Her Own Words

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I

אסתר ט:כט

וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בְּת־אֲבִיחַיִל וּמֵרֹדֶכֶי הַיְהוּדִי אֶת־כָּל־תִּקְוַף לְקַיֵּם אֶת אַגְרַת הַפּוּרִים הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁנִיָּת:

Esther 9:29

Then Queen Esther daughter of Avihayil wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordekhai the Jew.

What if I were to tell you that the most crucial scene in Megillat Esther occurred only after its story was already complete?

In this scene, Esther Queen of Persia sits on her throne in the palace, beside her is her trusted uncle Mordekhai. Together the two begin to reflect upon and compose the miraculous tale of their life in Shushan. Precisely because their story is autobiographical, careful analysis of the Megillah reveals not only what occurred, but how Mordekhai and Esther perceived its unfolding. In hindsight, it is quite clear how they appreciated the unlikely nature of their survival, the historical significance of their accomplishment, and the ironic fashion in which their saga played out. Esther and Mordekhai carefully structure ten drama-filled chapters to demonstrate a complete *ve-nahafoch hu*, reversal of fortunes, in which Haman's plan is overturned and the Jewish people survive yet again.

However, if we dig deeper beneath the surface of this Megillah, looking beyond its basic storyline and structure, Esther's choice words contain a remarkable reference to an earlier



biblical saga that must not be overlooked. This hidden reference is not only similar to Megillat Esther, but I believe it is the template from which our story came to fruition. Hidden in the ups and downs of Megillat Esther are constant and consistent references to an earlier narrative that likely inspired Esther's life and her authorship of the Megillah. One need not notice this parallel to appreciate the story of Purim, but I will argue, once the parallel is unearthed and understood properly, our reading of Esther's Megillah will never be the same.

II

The story to which I am referring is Bereishit 24. Sarah had just died, Avraham was aging and Yitzhak was still a bachelor. Recognizing that his final task, arranging a marriage for his successor, was not yet complete, Avraham sends Eliezer, his trusted servant, in search of a wife for his son. Eliezer's journey is recorded at great length, both as it unfolded and then again in his recounting of God's graces. Comparing this chapter to Megillat Esther may seem unexpected, but the similarities between the two texts compel us to explain the link between them. A close reading reveals well over a dozen unmistakable parallels to Megillat Esther.

Consider the following textual similarities for example:

1. National Identity

Esther	Rivkah
אסתר ב:כ אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה ואת עמה כאשר צוה עליה מרדכי	בראשית כד:ד כי אל ארצי ואל מולדתי תלך ולקחת אשה לבני ליצחק:
Esther 2:20 But Esther still did not reveal the place of her birth or her people , as Mordechai had instructed her;	Bereishit 24:4 but you will go to my land and the place of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.

2. Beauty of the Central Character

Esther	Rivkah
אסתר ב:ז והנערה יפת תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת:	בראשית כד:טז והנער טבת מראה מאד...:
Esther 2:7	Bereishit 24:16



<p>The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordekhai adopted her as his own daughter.</p>	<p>The maiden was very beautiful...</p>
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3. Silence and Faithfulness

Esther	Rivkah
<p>אסתר ד:יז כִּי אִם הִחְרַשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת</p>	<p>בראשית כד:כא וְהָאִישׁ מִשְׁתַּאֲהָ לָהּ מִחְרִישׁ לְדַעַת הַהֲצִלִּים יִקְוֶה דַּרְכּוֹ אִם לֹא:</p>
<p>Esther 4:14 On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter...</p>	<p>Bereishit 24:21 The man, meanwhile, stood gazing at her, silently wondering whether God had made his errand successful or not.</p>

4. Fasting

Esther	Rivkah
<p>אסתר ד:טז וְצוּמוֹ עָלַי וְאֶל-תֹּאכְלוֹ וְאֶל-תִּשְׁתּוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּמִם כֵּן וּבִכְן אָבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כֹדֶת</p>	<p>בראשית כד:לג [וַיִּשְׁעִם] לִפְנֵי לְאֹכֵל וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲכַל עַד אִם-דִּבַּרְתִּי דַבְּרִי וַיֹּאמֶר דַּבֵּר:</p>
<p>Esther 4:16 and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law</p>	<p>Bereishit 24:33 But when food was set before him, he said, “I will not eat until I have told my tale.” He said, “Speak, then.”</p>

5. Identifying the Unknown

Esther	Rivkah
<p>אסתר ז:ד מִי הוּא זֶה וְאֵי זֶה הוּא אֲשֶׁר מְלֹאוֹ לְבוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן:</p>	<p>בראשית כד:סה וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל הַעֲבָד מִי הָאִישׁ הַלְזָה הֵלֶךְ בְּשַׂדֶּה לְקַרְאֲתָנוּ:</p>
<p>Esther 7:4 “Who is that man and where is he who</p>	<p>Bereishit 24:65 and said to the servant, “Who is that man</p>



dared to do this?"	walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master."
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Once the *terminology* has sewn these two stories together, the *structural similarities* and fundamental themes jump out as well.

1. Eliezer is sent to look for a wife after Sarah passed away. Ahashverosh seeks a wife after the execution of Vashti.
2. Avraham insists on finding a woman from his ancestral heritage. Mordekhai demands that Esther keep her heritage a secret.
3. Eliezer travels to the well where all the women gather. Esther is brought to a pageant of all the land's women, to compete for the right to serve drinks to the king.
4. Eliezer finds the unlikely woman at the first possible chance. Esther, despite her secrecy is chosen by the king without hesitation.
5. Ultimately Rivkah is the perfect woman to comfort Yitzhak after the loss of his mother. Esther comforts Ahashverosh after the removal of his queen.

Linguistically and thematically, the search for the Matriarch Rivkah and the pursuit of Queen Esther mirror one another. The question that remains: why? Alternatively, how does revisiting the emergence of Rivkah help us process the heroism of Esther?

III

Biblical parallelism is never a coincidence; particularly when the works of Nevi'im and Ketuvim mirror the Humash. The author/prophet writes with the premise that the reader is fluent in the divine text of the Humash and uses that knowledge to enhance the reader's experience of the later story. In the case of Megillat Esther there is little doubt that when Esther and Mordekhai sat together to compose their Megillah, they selected Bereishit 24 with purpose. They did so to answer the fundamental questions of their own story.

- What was the source of Esther's remarkable heroics in the face of insurmountable odds?
- How did she muster the courage to confront the King?
- Where did she devise the plan to ensnare Haman in his own rouse?
- Where did Esther hone the faithfulness to believe that an unlikely plan could secure the future of an entire people?

The answer to all these questions is... Rivkah!



Our second Matriarch was the least likely of leaders. Rivkah was brought to marry Yitzhak at a young age and was asked to do nothing more than fill a specific void in his life. Our sages identify those tasks as miraculous but they were nonetheless scripted for her. She was the woman who would prepare *hallah* from week to week, the one whose candles would illuminate their dark tents in the evenings; exactly as Sarah had done, nothing more, nothing less.

But as Rivkah matured into motherhood, she realized that the passivity she was assigned was no longer in her family's best interest. Yitzhak was blind to Esav's aggressive instincts and oblivious to Ya'akov's divine potential. In the competition for birthright, Yitzhak had chosen Esav, but Rivkah believed in Ya'akov's destiny. Confronting Yitzhak was apparently not an option; at no point would Rivkah dare enter the tent of her husband. Therefore she needed a more creative method of reaching her goal. When Esav left for the fields, Rivkah went to work. She cooked and prepared her husband's choicest feast, she disguised Ya'akov to look like someone he was not, and by the time Esav returned to his father's tent, the blessings had already been snatched from beneath him.

As descendants of Rivkah's beloved son Ya'akov (rather than Esav), we are no more the descendants of Avraham and Yitzhak then we are the beneficiaries of Rivkah's ingenuity. We may not celebrate her story enough, but Rivkah's quick thinking is the first reason we are the nation we became; the reason we are "*Beni vekhori Yisrael*" (Shemot 4:22), the heirs to Avraham's legacy.

אסתר א:יח

וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תִּאֲמַרְנָה | שְׂרוֹת פָּרְס־וּמְדֵי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶכָה לְכָל שָׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיְכַדְּ בַּזַּיִן וַקְצָפוּ:

Esther 1:18

This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty's officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation!

Fast forward to Shushan centuries later and Esther finds herself in almost the identical circumstance that Rivkah once stood! Haman orchestrated the removal of Vashti and inserted in her stead a replacement too young and inexperienced to confront the king regarding any serious matters. The Megillah reminds us multiple times that Esther simply cannot enter the king's chamber whenever she pleases. Once again, Esav has positioned himself to reap the benefits of the leader's blessing; just this time the deceitful son is Haman and the fatherly role is played by Ahashverosh. Esther is Rivkah in our version, Mordekhai is her Ya'akov. In a fashion that is best described as what our sages call "*ma'aseh avot siman la-banim*, the lives



of our patriarchs are a template for their descendants,” the script is already written for Esther reenact.

Esther dresses Mordechai in clothing for a dignitary, because his sack cloth is unfit for the moment. She invites the King to a feast that only she knows how to prepare—a feast incomplete without her adversary Haman as a guest. Much like Yitzhak was served two feasts, Ahashverosh is invited twice. Esther gently and slowly hints to the king that someone is out to get her and reveals that the parade and celebration were rightfully Mordechai’s all along. The blessings are meant not for Haman, but for Mordechai. Following the path forged by her ancient Matriarch Rivkah and against all odds, Esther secures the future of her family and of the Jewish people.

בראשית כג:

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים שָׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

Bereishit 23:1

Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.

How remarkable indeed! Rivkah is introduced as the Torah mourns Sarah’s passing, highlighting **127 years** of service alongside her husband Avraham. How could a woman be found, a girl no less, to continue her legacy of greatness? But where Rivkah’s story begins, so does Esther’s, in the land of Shushan and its **127 provinces**, all of whom received a copy of her story when she completes it. Much as Rivkah had become the heroine everyone least expected, Esther became the most powerful of Queens when the Jewish people needed her more than ever.

IV

אסתר א:כב

וַיִּשְׁלַח סָפְרִים אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ וְאֶל-עַם וְעַם כָּל־שׁוֹנֵי הָאָרֶץ לְהִיּוֹת כָּל-אִישׁ שִׁגְרָר בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר כָּל־שׁוֹן עִמּוֹ:

Esther 1:22

Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language; that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people.

There are two essential lessons that emerge from comparing the story of Rivkah with Megillat Esther that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. First is that this story is not only one of monarchy, but of matriarchy. What is the biblical prescription for a thriving marriage and



family? Zeresh, wife of Haman, is the perfect failure. The Megillah begins with the premise that wives should obey their husbands and leave their authority unchecked. This is the domestic model Haman orchestrated in the palace and the one he lived in his own home. Yet, chapter after chapter it is his wife Zeresh who facilitates her husband's demise. Esther, is not just a heroine, but a living embodiment of Rivkah's model; fighting for the future she believes in, outside the home and within. If the Humash believes that man and wife must complement one another, no two stories highlight ever so clearly the need for spouses to allow that complement to manifest.

The second lesson, perhaps the most crucial to our argument, is the need to find models of success to aspire towards. What would Esther have been without Rivkah? Where would she have drawn her creativity and her confidence? At the writer's desk in the palace of Shushan, Mordechai and Esther answer that question. Choosing to methodically recreate the story of Rivkah beneath the text of her own story, Esther tells us that without Rivkah, the miracles of Purim would never have come to fruition. The heroism of our youngest and least likely matriarch inspired Esther and continues to inspire generations of descendants to come.

V

Perhaps our analysis of the Megillah sheds light on one of Purim's most recognized customs, the *minhag* to dress in costume. Scholars, Hasidic masters and Kabbalists alike, have all posited different explanations for this universally practiced tradition. Some think it symbolizes God's hidden presence in the story, while others suggest it allows the poor to avoid embarrassment on a day of giving. However, our reading of Esther highlights the beauty of this *minhag* even more. Perhaps we dress in costume on Purim to celebrate the disguises of Ya'akov and Mordechai and the ingenuity of the women who crafted them. Moreover, we provide and exercise for our children (and perhaps ourselves) to think about the kind of people we might like to become one day.

Who are our role models? Perhaps they are soldiers who risk their lives in the line of duty or princesses dignified and beautiful; Rabbis and teachers that enlighten our minds; or clowns that brighten the smiles on the faces of the sad. On Purim we celebrate all the amazing characters that we might aspire to one day become, and we thank Esther for divulging to us the secret heroine that made her prayers a possibility. Our costumes are not an attempt at humor or levity, but rather a deep and aspirational prayer for success. Each of us can find a story, a legend, or a historical account to be inspired by. And we can live our lives with the hope that when our time comes, we too will rise to the occasion.

