

Echoes of the Past in Megillas Esther ... and their message for us

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Bereishis 23:1: And the life of Sarah was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years, the years of the life of Sarah.

Esther 1:1: ...He is Achashverosh who ruled over ... 127 provinces.

Bereishis Rabbah 58:3: Rabbi Akiva was sitting and teaching, and the people were dozing off. He wanted to awaken them, so he said, ‘Why was it that Esther ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? Let (Esther,) the descendant of Sarah who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and rule over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces.’

Sarah and Esther

Similarities:

- Hidden, but then forcibly taken to the king’s palace
- Megilla 15a. Four exceptionally beautiful women in world: Sarah, Avigail, Rachav, and Esther.
- Megilla 14a. Seven prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Devora, Chana, Avigail, Chuldah, and Esther.
- Both ‘pointed the finger’ despite their kindness: Sarah to Yishmael, Esther to Haman. (Purim teaches that we must be able to hate a kill a relentless foe, like Haman, a descendant of Amalek)
- Both worked as a team: Sarah with Avraham, Esther with Mordechai

Yosef's connection to Esther and Mordechai

- Descendants of Rachel
- Yosef and Esther are beautiful (related to Rachel's beauty)
- Two of king's servants are guilty:
Sar Hamashkim and Sar Ha'ofim, Bigsan and Seresh
- A good deed was forgotten for a long time
- Pivotal point of story relates to sleep (dream) or lack of sleep
- Rise to great power in a foreign kingdom, and are able to save the Jews
- Joseph and Esther reveal their true identities at a small banquet

Yosef	Esther and Mordechai
<p>וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־אֹכְלֵי הַשָּׂנִים הַטּוֹבוֹת וַיִּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה</p>	<p>וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל־מְדִינוֹת מַלְכוּתוֹ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נְעָרֵה־בְּתוּלָה טוֹבֹת מְרָאָה וַיִּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ</p>
<p>וַיְהִי כְּדַבְּרָהּ אֶל־יוֹסֵף יוֹם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֵלֶיהָ</p>	<p>וַיְהִי (בִּאֲמָרָם) [כְּאֲמָרָם] אֵלָיו יוֹם וַיּוֹם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵיהֶם</p>
<p>וַאֲנִי כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁכַלְתִּי שָׁכַלְתִּי</p>	<p>וְכַאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי</p>
<p>כִּי־אִיךָ אֶעֱלֶה אֶל־אָבִי וְהַנְּעַר אֵינְנוּ אִתִּי כֹּן אֲרֹאֶה בְּרַע אֲשֶׁר יִמָּצָא אֶת־אָבִי:</p>	<p>כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכַל וְרֵאִיתִי בְּרַעָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמָּצָא אֶת־עַמִּי</p>
<p>וַיִּסֵּר פַּרְעֹה אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ עַל־יַד יוֹסֵף וַיִּלְבָּשׁ אֹתוֹ בְּגָדֵי־שֵׁשׁ וַיַּשֶּׂם רֶבֶד הַזָּהָב עַל־צַוְנָאָרוֹ: וַיַּרְכֹּב אֹתוֹ בְּמַרְכָּבַת הַמִּשְׁנָה אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וַיִּקְרָאוּ לִפְנָיו</p>	<p>וְהַלְבִּישׁוּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הַמֶּלֶךְ חִפְץ׃ בִּיקְרוֹ וְהַרְפִּיבֵהוּ עַל־הַסּוּס בְּרַחוּב הָעִיר וַיִּקְרָאוּ לִפְנָיו ... וַיִּסֵּר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הָעֶבֶיר מֵהֶמָּן וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְמַרְדֳּכָי וַתִּשָּׂם אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־מַרְדֳּכָי עַל־בֵּית הֶמָּן</p>

(based on Mosad HaRav Kook)

Shaul's connection to Esther and Mordechai

- From tribe of Binyamin
- Both descended from Kish
- Haman descended from Agag (Haman Ha'Agagi), king of Amalek whom Shaul did not kill
- Shaul and people did not destroy all of Amalek; kept best animals. Megilla emphasizes 3 times that people did not take spoils
- These are chapters in war against Amalek, that is described as 'from generation to generation'

Shaul	Esther and Mordechai
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמוּאֵל הֲלוֹא אִם־קָטָן אַתָּה בְּעֵינָיִךְ רֹאשׁ שְׁבִטַי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה וַיִּמְשְׁחֶהָ הֲנֵה לְמֶלֶךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>	<p>כִּי אִם־הִתְחַרְשׁ תִּתְחַרְיִשׁ בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רְנוּחַ וְהִצֵּלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וְמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעַת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת:</p>
<p>And Samuel said, “You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel. Hashem anointed you king over Israel.”</p>	<p>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</p>

Sarah and Esther

Differences:

Sarah

1st Jewish woman in Tanach

Hashem's presence obvious

In Eretz Yisrael

Esther

Last Jewish woman in Tanach

Hashem is hidden

Outside Eretz Yisrael

Echoes of the past in Megillat Esther

(on the aish.com website in a slightly modified form)

Janet S. Sunness, M.D.

What an unusual book Megillat Esther is. On the surface, this is a story that contains no direct reference to G-D, that has the intrigue of a foreign palace and action taking place primarily at various wine parties. Yet, there is a very deliberate connection, in the text itself and in the Rabbinic interpretation of it, between Megillat Esther and earlier portions of Scriptures. This connection begins with the very first sentence of Megillat Esther. Numbers are often given great significance in Biblical interpretation, and the inclusion of the apparently superfluous information that Achashverosh ruled over 127 provinces is no exception. A Midrash describes that Rabbi Akiva asked, "How did Esther merit to rule over 127 provinces?" He answered, "Let (Esther,) the descendant of Sarah who lived 127 years (as we are told in Genesis) come and rule over 127 provinces."

One aspect of this connection of Esther to Sarah is to connect Megillat Esther back to previous episodes in the Bible in a general sense. Sarah was the first Jewish woman; Esther is the last Jewish woman described in the Bible. Most of the stories related about Sarah and Abraham take place in the land of Israel, and G-D's presence and angels' appearance are regular aspects of the narrative. Esther's story takes place in galut, in exile, and G-D's name is not even mentioned in Megillat Esther. Thus, the connection says to us that even we, in a situation of exile and of the hiding of G-D's presence (called 'Hester panim'; the name Esther derives from the same root as Hester, hidden), are in continuity with the times of our ancestors.

A second aspect of the connection made between Esther and Sarah is a direct link between these two women. Megillat Esther uses specific phrases and ways of describing events that allow us to connect Megillat Esther to other persons in the Bible. The relationship of the Esther and Mordechai to Sarah, Joseph, and Saul will be described here.

Sarah and Esther

Sarah and Esther are both included in the listing in the Gemara Megilla of the four most beautiful women. Both are described as beautiful in the Scriptures, and according to the Midrash, both women were hidden away so as not to be taken to a foreign king's palace; both were found and forcibly taken anyway. The Midrash has Esther asking G-D why he rescued Sarah from the foreign king, but did not come to her (i.e. Esther's) aid. Sarah worked as a team with Abraham to spread knowledge of G-D and Esther worked together with Mordechai to save the Jewish people; this aspect of their lives highlights them not in a role as a mother, but as a person working equally with a male counterpart. Both were prophetesses, as described in the Gemara, and Rashi quotes the Gemara saying that Sarah's prophetic abilities were greater than Abraham's. Both were kind women who were forced to perform uncharacteristically 'cruel' acts to preserve the Jews and their heritage. Sarah told Abraham to drive away Hagar and Yishmael, because she feared Yishmael's influence on Isaac. Esther was the person to 'point the finger' at Haman and cause his death. Part of Purim's message to us, in fact, is that although rachamim, or mercy, is considered one of the fundamental characteristics of Jews, it is sometimes necessary to be able to hate and kill a relentless foe such as Haman, considered a descendant of Amalek.

An interesting lesson can be learned from Megillat Esther about the value of beauty as interpreted by Jewish tradition. Vashti, Achashverosh's first wife, is described as being beautiful and is called by Achashverosh to come to his party to show everyone her beauty. Vashti is the classical one-dimensional sex object, whose entire character is defined by physical beauty. On the other hand, Esther is described in Megillat Esther as being beautiful, in even stronger terms than is Vashti. Yet, when Esther is seen by people, they see not beauty, but 'chen vachessed', grace and kindness. Esther's beauty was only one aspect of her, and permitted her other qualities to show through. In the 1970s, at a time of a more anti-traditional Jewish feminism, a number of articles appeared identifying Vashti as the true heroine, for her rebellion

against Achashverosh, while Esther used feminine wiles to effect change. While this view of Vashti as heroine went totally against the traditional Jewish view of Vashti as being tremendously wicked herself, enslaving girls and trying to destroy the Jewish people, it also denies Esther her multidimensionality. In a more modern view, we can appreciate that Esther was able to use all her characteristics, her beauty as well as her intellect, even in the most dismal of settings for her in a foreign palace.

Saul's connection to Esther and Mordechai

Saul, the first king of Israel, Esther, and Mordechai were all from the tribe of Benjamin, and were more closely related by a common ancestor, Kish. Saul's loss of the kingship of Israel was directly related to his behavior in a confrontation with Agag, the king of Amalek. Generations later, Esther and Mordechai have a confrontation with Haman Ha'Agagi, Haman who was descended from Agag. In addition to having an opportunity to save the Jewish people, Esther and Mordechai have an opportunity to redeem their tribe from their previous error.

The prophet Samuel tells Saul to kill Agag and all his people, since Amalek is an implacable foe. The people are to take no spoils. Saul is victorious over Amalek, and all Amalekites are killed except Agag the king. Also, Saul allows the people to save the best of the sheep and cattle for sacrifices to G-D. Samuel confronts Saul with his disobedience to G-D's will. Samuel says (I Samuel 15:17), "Even if you are small in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you as king over Israel." In other words, you must be able to accept yourself as a king, and view things in this perspective, not in the perspective of a humble individual. Samuel further goes on to say that what G-D wishes is not sacrifices but obedience to His word. Samuel kills Agag, but not before Agag has had an opportunity to impregnate a woman and continue the line of Amalek, according to traditional sources. The kingdom is stripped from Saul and his tribe, and subsequently given over to David and the tribe of Judah.

To me, the climactic point of Megillat Esther, both in content and in its cantillation, is the speech which Mordechai delivers to Esther to persuade her to risk her life for her people. He tells her (Esther 4:13-14), "Do not imagine that you will be able to escape in the King's palace any more than the rest of the Jews. For if you persist in keeping silent at a time like this, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether it was just for such a time as this that you attained royalty." This is a strong enough statement in itself, but it resonates with the story of Saul and the impact of Saul's lack of action on his family and tribe. Esther gets the message and immediately goes into action.

Joseph, as ruler of Egypt, and Esther and Mordechai

Joseph and the heroes of the Purim story are descendants of Rachel, and Joseph and Esther were both beautiful, with a beauty attributed to Rachel. In both stories, the Jewish hero/heroine rises to great power in a foreign kingdom, despite initial humble circumstances. In both, a pivotal point in the story occurs as a result of sleep or a lack of it. Joseph comes into the picture as the interpreter of Pharaoh's dream, while Achashverosh's lack of sleep leads to his discovery that Mordechai had saved his life and had never been repaid, the turning point of the story. Joseph and Esther reveal their true identities as Jews at a small banquet. Similar phrases are used in both stories. For example, the repeated insistence that Mordechai bow to Haman, expressed as "... And it was when they said this to him day after day and he did not heed them" (Esther 3:4), is phrased almost identically to Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction of Joseph, "...And it was when she spoke to Joseph day after day and he did not heed her" (Genesis 39:10). There are numerous examples of similar parallels, some of which are revealing for the way women were regarded in Persia. The gathering of women to be considered for the position of queen of Achashverosh is described as (Esther 2:3) "And let the King appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather together every beautiful young maiden..." and the description of the gathering of grain for the future years of famine is phrased (Genesis 41:34): " And let him (Pharaoh) appoint

commissioners on the land... that they may gather together all the food..." Joseph's rise to power gives the same progression (such as getting the king's ring, dressing in royal garments, being escorted through the capital, etc) as does Mordechai's.

The significance of connecting Megillat Esther to past portions of the Scriptures is to emphasize that G-D is with His people here as He was in the past, and will redeem them as He has done in the past. This is reflected in halacha, Jewish law, as well. This is a Jewish leap year, in which there are two months of Adar. The halacha is that Purim is always celebrated in the second Adar. According to The Book of Our Heritage by Eliyahu Kitov, this placement of Purim is so as to juxtapose one redemption (in the time of Esther and Mordechai) to another redemption (the Exodus from Egypt celebrated in the next month, Nissan). Just as we were redeemed at the time of the formation of the Jewish nation, so we were redeemed in the time of Esther, and, by implication, so we will be redeemed in the future.