



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE מכון  
OF NORTH AMERICA שלום הרטמן

## **Esther and Faith: How to Interpret Events in the Light of Divine Calling:**

***"Who Knows If It is for a Time Like This?"***

### **Political Leadership and *Emunah* in Destiny**

***Noam Zion***

#### **A. Decisive Faith: Mordechai and the Empowerment of Esther**

##### **- Finding a Window of Opportunity in a World of Uncertainty**

1. Esther 1-2-3: Esther 6:1-2 and 6:13 - The Rules of the Game in the Court of Shushan
2. Esther 4:1-17 – Mentoring a Decisive Decision

#### **B. Reflections on Decisive Moments of the Leap of Faith into**

##### **Historic Action**

3. The Human Role In The Redemption - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom and Kol Dodi Dofek - Shlihut*
4. Theodore Herzl, *Diaries*
5. Esther's Challenge: "Who Knows?" – Eric Voegelin, "Playing the Actor in the Drama of Being" in *Order and History: Israel and Revelation*, p. 1-2
6. Martin Buber: Prophetic Choice, not Predetermined Prophecy
7. Ehud Luz: Martin Buber's View of Freedom and Determinism
8. Martin Buber: *Teshuvah* - The Human Choice & Divine Choice
9. Steve Greenberg: Unmasking the Purim Characters
10. Parker Palmer, "Divided No More! The Stages of Faith in Movements for Social Change" in *The Courage to Teach*
11. Marc Schneier, "Esther and the Jewish Beanies: The Voter Registration Marches in Selma, Alabama, 1965"

- 12. Martin Samuel Cohen – Esther Commentary: “Have greatness thrust upon ’em”
- 13. William James, *The Will to Believe: The Leap of Faith*
- 14. Paula Fredriksen, “Augustine and the Search for Meaning in Narrative Time”, in *Sin*, p.118-120
- 15. David Hartman on Two Types of Hope
- 16. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Hope vs Optimism
- 17. Donniel Hartman on Solidarity and Collective Responsibility in a Godless World

**C. Megillat Esther: From Denigration to Resistance:  
Militant Self-Defense or Vengeance?**

- 18. Martin Luther: Excluding Esther from the Bible
- 19. S. R. Driver (Christian OT scholar): Vengeful
- 20. Claude Montefiore (liberal British Jew), *The Bible for Home Reading*
- 21. Rabbi Joachim Prinz: Purim in Nazi Berlin (1933- 1937)
- 22. Our Children’s Jewish Revenge May 15, 1940, by Chaim Kaplan, *The Scroll of Agony Warsaw Ghetto Diary*

**Appendix**

- 23. Big Data: Law, Randomness and Choice in Esther by Mishael Zion
- 24. Renita Weems on Vashti” Role Model: “A Crown of Thorns” from *Just a Sister Away*
- 25. *Becoming an Esther Church* by Robert Stearns
- 26. *Get A Job: Yehuda Amichai’s Father Dresses Up on Purim*
- 27. *Two Modern Thinkers: Why Is God Hidden In The Megillah?* Yoel Bin-Nun and Michael Fox

## A. Decisive Faith: Mordechai and the Empowerment of Esther - Finding a Window of Opportunity in a World of Uncertainty

‘And the king and Haman sat down to drink’ – Esther 3:15

Heydrich was in charge of the final solution of the Jews in the Third Reich. His right hand man Adolf Eichmann worked efficiently in three weeks to gather data on the worldwide Jewish population by collecting the statistics of annual Jewish yearbooks. 11,000,000 Jews were within the purview of the Nazi Empire.

Heydrich needed cooperation for the major ministries to divert war efforts for the war against the Jews. He called a meeting of key leaders for December 9, 1941, which was postponed due to Pearl Harbor, Dec 7, 1941. Then on January 20<sup>th</sup> at a beautiful villa in suburban Berlin in Wannsee all were invited for 12.00 although that was just before lunchtime. That put pressure on the leaders to finish their meeting quickly and eat. The whole meeting lasted only 90 minutes to approve Eichmann’s plan.

After the smooth and successful meeting Heydrich sat down with Muller head of the SS and Eichmann to celebrate their War on the Jews. They drank cognac, as was later reported at the Eichmann trial. As it was written, “The couriers went out posthaste on the royal mission, and the decree was proclaimed ...” And the king and Haman sat down to drink” – Esther 3:15

### 1. Esther 1-2-3: Esther 6:1-2 and 6:13 - The Rules of the Game in the Court of Shushan

### 2. Book of Esther Chapter 4 – Mentoring a Decisive Decision

א ומרדכי ידע את-כל-אשר נעשה ויקרע מרדכי את-בגדיו וילבש שק ואפר ויצא בתוך העיר ויזעק זעקה גדלה ומרה: ב ויבוא עד לפני שער-המלך כי אין לבוא אל-שער המלך בלבוש שק: ג ובכל-מדינה ומדינה מקום אשר דבר-המלך ודתו מגיע אבל גדול ליהודים וצום ובכי ומספד שק ואפר יצע לרבים: ד ותבואינה [ותבואנה] נערות אסתר וסריסה ויגידו לה ותתחלחל המלכה מאד ותשלח בגדים להלביש את-מרדכי ולהסיר שקו מעליו ולא קבל: ה ותקרא אסתר להתך מסריסי המלך אשר העמיד לפניו ותצוהו על-מרדכי לדעת מה-זה ועל-מה-זה: ו ויצא התך אל-מרדכי אל-רחוב העיר אשר לפני שער-המלך: ז ויגד לו מרדכי את כל-אשר קרהו ואת פרשת הכסף אשר אמר המן לשקול על-גני המלך ביהודיים [ביהודים] לאבדם: ח ואת-פתשגן כתב-הדת אשר-נתן בשושן להשמידם נתן לו להראות את-אסתר ולהגיד לה ולצוות עליה לבוא אל-המלך להתחנן-לו ולבקש מלפניו על-עמה: ט ויבוא התך ויגד לאסתר את דברי מרדכי:

**י** וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהִתְדָּן וּתְצַוְהוּ אֶל-מֶרְדֵּכָי : יֵאָבֵד עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹדְעִים  
אֲשֶׁר כָּל-אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבֹוא-אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-הַחֲצַר הַפְּנִימִית אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִקְרָא אַחַת דָּתוֹ לְהֵמִית  
לְבַד מֵאֲשֶׁר יוֹשִׁיט-לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-שַׂרְבִיט הַזֶּהב וְחִיָּה וְאֲנִי לֹא נִקְרָאתִי לָבֹוא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ זֶה שְׁלוֹשִׁים  
יוֹם : יב וַיִּגִּדוּ לְמֶרְדֵּכָי אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֶסְתֵּר :  
**יג** וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֵּכָי לְהֵשִׁיב אֶל-אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-תְּדַמִּי בְּנַפְשֶׁךָ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל-הַיְהוּדִים : **יד** כִּי  
**אם-הַחֲרַשׁ תַּחְרִישִׁי בְּעַת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהַצֵּלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית-אֲבִיךָ  
תֹאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לַעַת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לַמְּלָכוֹת :**  
**טו** וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהֵשִׁיב אֶל-מֶרְדֵּכָי : **טז** לָךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ  
עָלַי וְאֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לִילָה וְיוֹם גַּם-אֲנִי וְנִעְרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבֹוא אֶל-  
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבֹדְתִי אֲבֹדְתִי : **יז** וַיַּעֲבֵר מֶרְדֵּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו  
**אֶסְתֵּר :**

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly,<sup>2</sup> until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth.—<sup>3</sup>Also, in every province that the king’s command and decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing, and everybody lay in sackcloth and ashes.—<sup>4</sup>When Esther’s maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated. She sent clothing for Mordecai to wear, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he refused.<sup>5</sup> Thereupon Esther summoned Hatakh, one of the eunuchs whom the king had appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordecai to learn the why and wherefore of it all.<sup>6</sup> Hatakh went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate;<sup>7</sup> and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.<sup>8</sup> He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people.<sup>9</sup> When Hatakh came and delivered Mordecai’s message to Esther,<sup>10</sup> Esther told Hatakh to take back to Mordecai the following reply:<sup>11</sup> “All the king’s courtiers and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king’s presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.”<sup>12</sup> When Mordecai was told what Esther had said;<sup>13</sup> Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai:<sup>16</sup> “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, 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; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!”<sup>17</sup> So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.

## B. Reflections on Decisive Moments of the Leap of Faith into Historic Action

### 3. The Human Role In The Redemption - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

#### ***Festival of Freedom, p. 152-153***

History, Judaism says, cannot move or progress without the individual. God waits for man if there is something to be done. He does nothing until man initiates action. God waits for man, for a single person, to accept responsibility and initiate the process of redemption. It is strange. On the one hand, God is the *Goel Yisrael*, our redeemer and liberator; however, God wills man to become His *shaliah* [his messenger or representative or missionary] in the drama of redemption, the personalistic *shaliah* [missionary] with whom God will walk.

God will not desert him, but God alone does not want to take the initiative. The Jewish people have been waiting a long time for the Messiah - a human being like us who will initiate the process of redemption.

God wants an individual great in knowledge, in morality, in prophecy, to be a participant in the drama of redemption (*ge'ulah*). God wills man to emerge as a great being through his acceptance of the *shelihut*, - mission. Not the collective, but the individual, seizes the initiative. God was ready, the people were ready, the time had passed, redemption *ge'ulah* was possible, and God could have taken them out in a split second [from Egypt]. **But God had to wait for someone.** Immediately, Moses is mentioned: "*Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro*" (Exodus 3:1)

#### ***Shlihut* ("mission," "calling")**

The hidden core of the concept "*And God created the human being in God's image* (Gen. 1:27) places the obligation on the person to personally accept a mission [*shlikhut*] from the Creator of Worlds and to establish between them the relationship of a sender/caller [mission-giver] and a messenger.

As the Talmud teaches, legal representatives [*shaliakh*] who stand-in for those they represent must be similar to them in an important way and capable of bearing the same responsibilities [": "A person's messenger must be just like the person ". The messenger of the Holy One was created in God's image. If it is possible for Moses to be chosen to be God's messenger, then it is possible for every Jew.

**The fact that someone lives in a certain time, in a specific era in a defined place and was not born in a different period and the other circumstances - we can only understand this if we accept the essential concept that every human is a messenger. Providence knows when and how the individual (with all the limitations and personal capacities incorporated in him) can fulfill his mission; in which circumstances and conditions and in what society can this person have the ability to fulfill his personal mission?**

The Creator of the World functions in accordance with the halakha that says it is not legitimate to appoint a messenger to carry out an assignment that is beyond the capacities of the messenger; that would be a mission that is impossible to fulfill - and that would be of no validity. **Since if one appoints someone to carry out a mission, it would be proper to give the person the ability to function as the messenger, therefore, the individual is created in a certain era and place, in which the individual can effectively function for the purpose of fulfilling the mission.**

In truth, the term "angel" (*malakh* in the bible applies to human messengers and to heavenly angels... The human being is always an angel, a 'messenger.' The difference between the human who is sent and a transcendental angel is only in one detail. The heavenly angel/messenger has no choice; he must fulfill his mission, even if he does not want to, whereas the human being is a free person. The human can fulfill the mission or can choose not to fulfill his or her calling.

*Shaliakh* = Agent

*Shlikhut* = Mission

*Malakhim* = Angels/Messengers

**Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*:**

***It is the Voice of my Beloved that Knocks*** (translated by Lawrence Kaplan)

### **Missing the Moment**

If the gracious **divine bounties** which have been showered upon both the individual and the community obligate their beneficiary to perform special, concrete deeds, even if these bounties (like wealth, honor, influence, power and the like which are acquired through exhausting labor) have been bestowed upon a man in a **natural** manner, how much more so do the divine bounties which are bequeathed in a **supernatural** manner, in the form of a miracle which takes place outside the context of the basic lawfulness governing the concatenation of historical events, bind the miracle's beneficiary to God.

**God's miraculous boon of *hesed* imposes upon man the absolute obligation to fulfill the great commandment which cries out from the very midst of the miracle itself.** A transcendental commandment always accompanies a miraculous act - "Command the Israelites!" **Woe unto the beneficiary of a miracle if he does not recognize the miracle performed on his behalf, if he is deaf to the imperative which echoes forth from the meta-historical event.** How unfortunate is he who has enjoyed God's wonders if the spark of faith has not been kindled within him, if his conscience does not tremble and take heed at the sight of the extraordinary occurrence. **When a miracle does not find its proper answering echo the form of concrete deeds, an exalted vision degenerates dissipates and the divine attribute of justice begins to the ungrateful beneficiary of the miracle.**

“The Almighty sought to make Hezekiah the Messiah and Sennecharib, Gog and Magog. The attribute of justice objected: 'You performed all these miracles on behalf of Hezekiah yet he did not utter song before You? Shall you, then, make him the Messiah?’”

Judaism has always been very strict regarding the prohibition against missing the moment. It possesses a highly developed and sensitive time-consciousness and views the slightest delay as a sin. What is the gist of the Song of Songs if not the description of the tragic and paradoxical delay of the Shulammite maiden, drunk with love and overwhelmed with yearning, when a favorable moment, replete with awe and majesty beckoned to her - if not her missing that great, exalted and momentous opportunity that she had dreamed about... The beloved knocked and pleaded with her to open the door .....**She didn't open...The beloved knocked again and again...The maiden paid no heed...This moment was lost and the vision of an exalted life faded away...**

### **Six Knocks**

Eight years ago in the midst of night of terror filled with the horrors of Maidanek, Treblinka and Buchenwald... in a night of absolute divine concealment (*hester panim*)... in that very night the Beloved appeared. ... As a result of the knocks on the door of the maiden, wrapped in mourning, the State of Israel was born. How many times did the Beloved knock? It appears to me that we can count at least six knocks. ...The fifth knock of the Beloved is perhaps the most important of all. For the first time in the history of our exile, divine providence has surprised our enemies with the sensational discovery that Jewish blood is not free for the taking, is not *hekfer*. .... In general, how absurd it is to demand of a people that it be completely dependent upon the good graces of others and that it relinquish the ability to defend itself. **The honor of every community, as the honor of every individual, resides in the ability to defend its existence and honor. A people that cannot ensure its own freedom and security is not truly independent.** The third phase in God's promise of redemption is: "*And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments*" (Exodus 6:7). "Blessed be He who has granted us life and brought us to this era" - when Jews have power – with the help of God – to defend themselves! ... Let us not view this matter lightly! It is the voice of my Beloved that knocks!

#### **4. Theodore Herzl, *Diaries* (1895)**

"If you will it, it is no fairy tale."

"I have the solution to the Jewish question. I know it sounds mad. This simple old idea is the Exodus from Egypt. I can see your troubled face, as you stroke your beard and murmur, 'completely out of his head ... the poor family.'" The rabbi replied: "I could think you were Moses!"

“No one has ever thought of looking for the Promised Land in the place where it really is – and yet it lies so near. It is here, **within ourselves!** For everyone will carry over there, in himself, a piece of the Promised Land. This one, in his head, that one, in his hands, the third in his savings. The Promised Land is where we carry it. I know where the country lies - in ourselves! In our capital and our labor.”

##### **5. Esther’s Challenge: “Who Knows?” – Eric Voegelin, “Playing the Actor in the Drama of Being” in *Order and History: Israel and Revelation*, p. 1-2**

Man is not a self-contained spectator. He is **an actor playing a part in the drama of being** and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed **to play it without knowing what it is**. It is disconcerting even when accidentally a man finds himself in the situation of feeling not quite sure what the game is and how he should conduct himself in order not to spoil it; but **with luck and skill** he will extricate himself from the embarrassment and return to the less bewildering routine of his life.

Participation in being, however, is not a partial involvement of man; he is engaged with the whole of his existence, for participation is existence itself. There is no vantage point outside existence from which its meaning can be viewed and a course of action charted according to a plan, nor is there a blessed island to which man can withdraw in order to recapture his self. **The role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision on the edge of freedom and necessity.**

**Both the play and the role are unknown. But even worse, the actor does not know with certainty who he is himself.**

The Socratic irony of ignorance has become the paradigmatic instance of awareness for this **blind spot at the center of all human knowledge** is about man. At the center of his existence man is unknown to himself and must remain so, for the part of being that calls itself man could be known fully only if the community of being and its drama in time were known as a whole. Man's partnership in being is the essence of his existence, and this essence depends on the whole, of which existence is a part. Knowledge of the whole, however, is precluded.

##### **6. Martin Buber: Prophetic Choice, not Predetermined Prophecy**

“The true prophet does not announce an immutable decree. He speaks into **the power of decision lying in the moment**, in such a way that his message of disaster just touches this power.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 104

"The prophetic element is to connect the historic moment to the perspective of the future that makes a demand and also a promise. This is unique to the Jewish people among all the ancient nations. The prophet distinguishes clearly two possibilities in the developments hidden in the historical moment which are opposed. One is the divine goal and the other opposed to it. The prophet places in the hands of the human the decision whether this moment will help fulfill the divine goal or delay it. ... **There is no other people in the world that believes in the great value of the act of each and every person in humanity [to shape] the future so that the Creation will be fixed (*takana*) and redeemed by virtue of the will and the actions of humanity.** ..Moses Hess called that the spiritual act that prepares the fulfillment of the unity [of humanity] in the socialist society of the future."<sup>2</sup>

## 7. Ehud Luz: Martin Buber's View of Freedom and Determinism

"In *The Prophetic Faith*, Martin Buber shows the Prophets assuming a dialectical relationship, not accessible to rational understanding, between the divine decree and human responsibility. From God's point of view, the future is already determined; but **human beings must make decisions afresh every day as if the future were in their hands, knowing that, in the last analysis, they are subject to transcendent forces.**"

"For Buber, this was the lesson God taught the prophet Jonah, who had thought the course of history was predetermined and could not be diverted. The Book of Jonah sets out to destroy the belief in historical determinism and assert that anything is possible, both complete destruction and redemption. It is on this assumption that the prophetic notion of *teshuvah* (repentance, turning, or return) is predicated. If we do not repent, we shall certainly be lost; if we do repent, *perhaps God will have pity on us and we shall not perish,*" but "*who knows whether God will change His mind?*" (Jonah 1:6,3:9). 'Perhaps' and 'who knows' are key terms in this tale of repentance."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, "Moses Hess and the Idea of Socialism," in *Moshe Hess: His General Writings* (Hebrew) 9, 14

<sup>3</sup> Ehud Luz, *Wrestling with an Angel: Power, Morality and Jewish Identity*, 68-69

## 8. Martin Buber: *Teshuvah* - The Human Choice and Divine Choice

"Human turning and divine turning correspond the one to the other; not as if it were in the power of the first to bring about the second, such ethical magic being far removed from biblical thought - but `who knows?'"<sup>4</sup>

**In uncertainty one may be paralyzed or despair of action, unless one is forced to decide now - "if not now, when?" That is the springboard for radical action in history, but it too relies upon faith in an interpretation of the world made in the dark without sure knowledge:**

**"What is possible in a certain hour and what is impossible cannot be adequately ascertained by any foreknowledge.** It goes without saying that, in the one sphere as in the other, one must start at any given time from the nature of the situation insofar as it is at all recognizable. But one does not learn the measure and limit of what is attainable in a desired direction otherwise than through going in this direction."<sup>5</sup>

**Michael Fox notes in *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*:**

"The scroll bears Esther's name for she is central...Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments...Her dynamism stands out in relief against the static nature of the other character...She develops in three stages, from passivity to activity to authority." First she is "taken." Her docility reflects gender and position, not individual choice or personality. "Esther is putty – not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation." Second she begins to act after Mordechai convinces her. Then she becomes an authority figure to whom the king comes to ask her for her orders. Vashti maintains her integrity by refusing to be shown off and to obey the king's orders, but Esther achieves real authority and gives the orders to the king, even when wrapped in ritualized deference .

"The book of Esther links the issue of national salvation to human character. It raises the question of whether a person of dubious character strength and (initially) unclear self-definition can carry the burden of national salvation .

Esther becomes a judge (in the sense of the Book of Judges) without the benefit of the Spirit of the Lord. She is leader whose charisma come snot in sudden divine imposition of spirit but as a result of a difficult process of inner development and self-realization. The Scroll affirms the potential of human character to rise to the needs of the hour whatever means or devices the situation demands." (Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*(

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<sup>4</sup> Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, 104

<sup>5</sup> Buber, *On the Bible*, 186

## 9. Steve Greenberg: Unmasking the Purim Characters<sup>6</sup>

**Purim is about concealment. More specifically, it is about movement from the covert to the overt.** There is a sustained tension between what characters are and what they seem to be that moves the plot forward. It is the careful unraveling of disguises that makes for salvation.

The major characters are **all Marranos disguised in costume**. They all struggle to manage a powerful public persona while hiding an inner secret that, if revealed, would seem to undo them. By the end, everyone is unmasked.

**King Ahashverosh**, according to tradition, was not of royal blood; he had married into Persian royalty. Vashti was the true Persian princess and, because she refuses to take off her royal robes, she is banished or killed. She is the only one who refuses to dress up -- or in this case down -- as something she is not. Ahashverosh has risen to royal power, but he is not royal material. He is a foolish, pompous lush dressed in royal robes. He is also terrified of being challenged or used - and that is exactly what happens anyway.

**Esther and Mordecai are closet Jews.** Each is fearful of the consequences of being found out. Mordecai warns Esther not to reveal her identity. The people perceive Esther as a lovely Persian woman who has become a Persian queen. Mordecai is a statesman who is known in the king's court. He does not flaunt his Jewish identity.

**Haman** is the scoundrel who, like Esther, is in the right place at the right time. Like the king, he rises to power without any merit. **His secrets are his bloated ego and his hunger for royal power. Haman conceals all this from the king, including his irrational hatred of Mordecai.**

**The turn in the plot occurs when Mordecai is forced to choose between his inner and outer identities.** Is he a Jew or a Persian noble? If he refuses to bow down to Haman, he will almost certainly lose his status among the Persian elite. If he bows, he understands that he will lose his inner Jewish self. In this moment of reckoning, Mordecai recognizes himself as a Jew and refuses to bow. The story isn't clear as to how Mordecai's secret is found out. Someone tells someone who tells Haman that this rude fellow is a Jew, and Haman begins his plot to avenge himself of Mordecai and his people.

**Unmasked, Mordecai realizes that he must turn his secret inside out. He must now bear witness to the inner truths.** He sits at the gate of the palace in sackcloth--congruence between the man and his clothes, a boldly public expression of an internal state of affairs. **Mordecai's naked protest sets in motion the unmasking of Esther, then of Haman, and finally of Ahashverosh.**

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Greenberg, author of *Wrestling with God and men*, once proposed setting Ta'anit Esther as **the National Coming Out Day** for the Jewish community and the closeted gay Jews in order to confront the pain and guilt of hiding and shaming, and the redemptive power of self-revelation.

*What does all this drama between revealed and concealed selves say to us?*

Of course, the Book of Esther could be read as a midrash on Jewish life in the diaspora. How we play hide and seek, **how we reveal and conceal ourselves as Jews, is a diaspora story.** But there is also a more personal journey described. In many ways, **we are all Marranos**, hiding behind our various masks and robes.

*What can we glean from Esther to help us manage the interplay between our inner and outer lives? Can Mordecai teach us something about the search for wholeness?*

At the end of the story, all the inner truths come to light. As the story unfolds, there seems to be a **redemptive quality in self-expression.** When all is revealed, Esther becomes a powerful queen and Mordecai becomes the king's most trusted counselor. Even Ahashverosh seems to achieve a more royal demeanor. Each of these full identities was achieved by reconciling the inner and outer persons.

**The story is also about the need to protect a life apart from the public eye.** As Esther enters the king's palace, Mordecai warns her not to reveal her identity. Later he commands her to do so. It seems that there is a right and a wrong time to reveal the self. Perhaps the story is about the dynamics of identity that cannot escape a tension between expression and inhibition. **We are who we are not only by our self-revelations, but by our careful nurturing of a private world.**

As well, not all inner lives are equal. Haman uses disguise for singularly destructive ends and is ultimately destroyed by his inner self. Haman falls on Esther's couch, revealing more than an urge for power. Mordecai is revealed by his principles, Haman by his libido. At the perfect moment, Esther reveals herself as a Jew and saves the Jewish people. Though the war between the inner and outer worlds is over, there is no clear victory of one self over another. Instead there is a new and diverse wholeness, **an integration of mask and man.**

The rabbis describe the God of the Book of Esther as a hidden God, a **playful God** who dances in between the revealed and the hidden, patient and waiting for the right moment to burst forth. So we, too, find our journey, in both inward and outward movements. Often we work behind the scenes nurturing a life apart, a sense of privacy and clarity. And **when the moments come to stand for one's inner truths, for principles, or for one's people, then we must turn inside out and witness, loud and proud and sure.**

#### **10. Parker Palmer, "Divided No More! The Stages of Faith in Movements for Social Change" in *The Courage to Teach***

The genius of social movements is paradoxical: they abandon the logic of organizations so that they can gather the momentum necessary to alter the logic of organizations. Both the civil rights and women's movements had to free themselves from racist and sexist organizations in order to

generate power. Then, with that power, they returned to change the lay, and the law, of the land.

If we want a movement for educational reform, we must learn to embrace this paradox. We must also learn the logic of a movement, learn how a movement unfolds, partly so that we can know where we are located within it, partly so that we can help it along.

I see four definable stages of development.

**Stage 1.** Isolated individuals make an inward decision to live "**divided no more**," finding a center for their lives outside of institutions.

**Stage 2.** These individuals begin to discover one another and form **communities of congruence that offer mutual support and opportunities to develop a shared vision.**

**Stage 3.** These communities start **going public**, learning to convert their private concerns into the public issues they are and receiving vital critiques in the process.

**Stage 4.** **A system of alternative rewards** emerges to sustain the movement's vision and to put pressure for change on the standard institutional reward system.

We may discover that if one is on an inner journey, one is on the threshold of real power - **the power of personal authenticity** that, manifested in social movements, has driven real change in our own time. When we know that such power is within our reach, we may be less tempted to succumb to organizational grid lock, less tempted to indulge ourselves in the sweetness of despair.

**AN UNDIVIDED LIFE:** The starting point of a movement, though silent and barely visible can be described with some precision. It happens when isolated individuals who suffer from a situation that needs changing decide to live "divided no more." **These people come to a juncture where they must choose between allowing selfhood to die or claiming the identity** and integrity from which good living, as well as good teaching, comes.

Many of us know from personal experience how it feels to live a divided life. Inwardly, we experience one imperative for our live: but outwardly we respond to quite another. This is the human condition, of course-our inner and outer worlds are never in perfect harmony. But there are extremes of dividedness that become intolerable, when one can no longer live without bringing one's actions into harmony with one's inner life. When that happens inside of or person, then another, and another, and another, in relation to a significant social issue, a movement may be conceived.

The condition to be overcome by living divided no more has specific etiology. We inhabit **institutional settings**, including school and work and civic society, because they harbor

opportunities that we value. But the claims those institutions make on us are sometimes at odds with our hearts - for example, the demand for loyalty to a corporation, right or wrong, versus the inward imperative to speak truth. That tension can be creative, up to a point. It becomes **pathological** when the heart becomes a wholly owned subsidiary of the organization, **when we internalize organizational logic and allow it overwhelm the logic of our own lives.**

To live divided no more is to find a new center for one's life center external to the institution and its demands.

**The Rosa Parks Decision:** The decision to live an undivided life, made by enough people over a long enough period of time, may eventually have social and political impact. **But this is not a strategic decision, taken to achieve some political goal. It is a deeply personal decision, made for the sake of one's own identity and integrity.** To decide to live divided no more is less a strategy for attacking other people's beliefs than an uprising of the elemental need for one's own beliefs to govern and guide one's life. **The power of an authentic movement lies in the fact that it originates in naming and claiming one's identity and integrity-rather than accusing one's "enemies" of lacking the same.**

I call this the **Rosa Parks decision**, for she is our most vivid icon of the undivided life. Indeed, she is an icon we must continue to hold before us, for the movement she sparked still has far to go. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks decided to live divided no more - decided that she could no longer act as if she were less than a full human being, the way institutional racism had defined her. She decided that she must act instead on her heart's knowledge of her own humanity. So she did a simple thing: she sat down in the whites-only front section of a segregated bus and refused to yield her seat to a white man.

By choosing an undivided life I implicitly acknowledge that the institution would not have had power over me if I had refused to go along with it. My immediate problem

*What drives the decision to live divided no more, with the risk it entails? How do people find the courage to bring inner conviction into harmony with outer act, knowing that when they do, the force of the institution may come down on their heads, risking the loss of image or status or security or money or power?*

The difference between the person who goes to the back of the bus and one who decides to sit up front is probably lost in the mystery of the human heart. But in Rosa Parks and others like her, I see a clue to an answer when you realize that you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed.

When the police came to Rosa Parks on the bus and informed her that they would have to put her in jail if she did not move, she replied, "You may do that." It was a very polite way of saying, "How, could your jail begin to compare with the jail I have had myself I all these years by collaborating with this racist system?"

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**COMMUNITIES OF CONGRUENCE:** The decision to live an undivided life, however powerful its motivation, is at first a frail reed. It needs **continual reinforcement** because the person who makes it soon begins to feel anxiety and self-doubt naturally so, for we live in a culture that tells us a divided life is sane but an undivided life is foolish at best and irresponsible at worst.

The undivided life is foolish because if you let others know what is going on inside, they may reject and injure you, so it is better to keep your feelings tucked away. It is irresponsible because if you reveal your inner truth, you can no longer perform your duties dispassionately, so it is better to play your role and keep personal truth hidden away.

In the **second stage of a movement**, people who have chosen the undivided life but still feel shaky about it come together in **communities of congruence** whose first purpose is simply mutual reassurance. In company with others who are on the same path, these people are helped to understand that "normal" behavior can be crazy but that seeking integrity is always sane.

In the movement sparked by Rosa Parks, these communities of congruence found a home in the black churches. Throughout the South, churches served as gathering places for people who needed to know that they were not alone in choosing an integral life. But the churches offered more than physical space where people could meet. They offered conceptual space where the substance of the movement could be developed and sustained.

Here is the second function of communities of congruence: to help **people develop the language that can represent the movement's vision**, giving that language the strength it will need to survive and thrive in the rough-and-tumble of the public realm. When discourse begins

among people who have recently freed their souls, the language feels fragile - **the fragility that comes when we talk about dreams in a society obsessed with practicality or about community in a society obsessed with competition or about risk taking in a society obsessed with playing it safe.** People who use such language, the language of the heart, need a place to practice it.

**11. Marc Schneier, "Esther and the Jewish Beanies: The Voter Registration Marches in Selma, Alabama, 1965" in *Shared Dreams: MLK and the Jews*, p. 151-156**

Upon returning to Selma, M. L. King learned that Sheriff Clark and his henchmen had used cattle prods on a group of marching students. As King's voter registration campaign branched out into neighboring counties, Lingo's troopers were quick to put marchers to flight, shooting one, Jimmy Lee Jackson. While in his hospital bed, Jackson was charged with assaulting a police officer. On February 26, Jackson died. James Bevel delivered a sermon that night at Selma's Brown Chapel, expounding "on Esther 4:8, in which Mordecai warned Esther of an order to destroy the Jews, and charged her to go to the king and 'make request before him for her people.' ['I shall go to the king in spite of the law; and if I perish, I perish' (Esther 4:17).] He preached that the king now was Governor Wallace, who ran the state troopers and kept Negroes from voting. 'I must go see the king!' [Esther 4:16] he cried, and soon brought the whole church to its feet vowing to go on foot..... Be prepared to walk to Montgomery!' shouted Bevel."

On March 3, King approved Bevel's call for a fifty-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital in Montgomery, the homeland of the Confederacy, to petition Governor Wallace to end "police brutality and grant Alabama Negroes the elective franchise." At the press conference, **Bevel wore a yarmulke**, something he'd been doing since his Freedom Riding days. He sometimes explained this affectation as an outgrowth of "**his affection for the Hebrew prophets and other times as a protective device to keep himself out of jail, saying Mississippi sheriffs were so mystified by the sight of a Negro preacher in a 'Jewish beanie' they preferred to let him alone.**"

Rabbi Friedlander recalled a second march on Pettus Bridge (March 21, 1965):

"Some images stand out in my mind: Professor Abraham Heschel marching in front of me, firm and erect, the wind catching his white beard and hair. ... A Negro lady (Mrs. Foster), walking next to me, pointed out the exact spot on that highway where Alabama troopers had beaten her to the ground. 'Going all the way this time,' she smiled, and waved to some friends along the road....If nothing else, we had finally felt the living essence of the words of Amos: *Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto Me, O children of Israel?*"

As the march progressed, skullcaps became a symbol of the movement. James Bevel, as mentioned before, had worn one for several years, but now the marchers called for "**freedom caps**" of their own. The demand for yarmulkes was so great that an order was wired for delivery of a thousand caps when the marchers would arrive in Montgomery and demonstrate at the state capitol. When the group finally reached Montgomery days later, having surged to some

twenty-five thousand people, the event was heralded as the greatest day ever for the civil rights.

King led a march across the Pettus Bridge, the gateway to Montgomery. Together with John Lewis, Williams led the group directly toward a phalanx of state troopers, who had their clubs and tear gas ready. Moments later, the troopers charged the group. After that, Clark's men attacked with whips and with rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire.

## 12. Martin Samuel Cohen – Esther Commentary<sup>7</sup> “Have greatness thrust upon ’em”

### Chapter Two

Moderns approaching the second chapter of Esther as a focus for ruminative consideration will want to ask themselves specifically about the ways we do and do not allow ourselves to be buffeted along by the inexorable flow of events that carries us along through every hour of every day of our lives. .. **How do we know in life when to stick to our guns and when to bow to circumstance?** ... The modern reader comes away from a careful reading of this second chapter feeling queasy. Aren't moral values supposed to be immutable? Shouldn't our ethical values be the unmovable rocks to which the affairs of our lives are tethered? Aren't we supposed *never* to abandon our principles merely because the possibility of some future gain presents itself or because the specter of some as-yet-unspecified dividend our action may yet yield appears on the distant horizon? Or are there really times when the correct action involves stepping outside our normal moral standards and hoping for the best?

What the second chapter of Esther suggests, disorienting a lesson though it may be, is that moral decisions have always to be anchored not only in what one knows of the past, but also of what one knows of the future. But since no one can say with certainty what the future will bring, there is of necessity a certain amount of arbitrariness involved in even the simplest ethical decision. **Stepping aside from even the most basic moral norm for the greater good invariably involves the possibility that one is totally wrong, that the alleged good will never present itself, that one will have abandoned one's principles for nothing.** And layered over all that is the risk of error, the possibility that the good one imagines might come of one's action is simply not good *enough* to justify the compromise under consideration.

**The notion that moral living is more like skating across a mostly frozen pond than hiking deliberately down a well-trod path in the woods is not something any of us wants to hear.** We want our moral lives to be delivered up to us on a platter of neatly arrayed values, ideals, and principles. The last thing, in fact, that most moderns want to know is that moral living requires an endless willingness to evaluate and re-evaluate our principles, basing the unending reconsideration of these issues not only in the light of what we think the world should be *like* but also in the light of what we know the world actually to be and what we imagine the world

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<sup>7</sup> copyright, not for dissemination, selection from forthcoming book on five megillot

might yet become. Sensing ourselves obliged endlessly to weigh even our simplest decisions, never feeling safe merely to mimic our own prior behavior, always feeling called upon to act decently and kindly based on the specifics of the moment—this endless cycle of consideration and reconsideration is the forum in which the truly ethical among us live their lives. Even considering these truths makes most people slightly nauseous. Truly accepting them, however, means concomitantly accepting the obligation never to act automatically, not even when facing a situation one has encountered a thousand times previously. That is the precise definition of living morally, but is it a challenge moderns can actually meet?

**Chapter Four** | Well-known, if regretfully overquoted, is the familiar line from Twelfth Night about how some are born great and some achieve greatness, but how others only eventually **“have greatness thrust upon ’em.”** Less often cited, however, is the simple injunction, **“Be not afraid of greatness,”** that leads into Malvolio’s celebrated observation and expresses the basic concept of which the more famous quote is both justification and a kind of midrashic elaboration. Together, however, both the initial injunction and its subsequent rationalization pave the way for the “real” thought the Bard wishes to impart and does impart immediately afterwards. **“The Fates open their hands,”** Shakespeare says to us all through the medium of Lady Olivia’s hapless steward, **“let thy blood and thy spirit embrace them.”**

The opening verses of the fourth chapter of the Megillah are suffused with **the misery of impotence.** A pogrom has been announced, the murderous, annihilative point of which has not been even slightly shaded or toned down for public consumption. If anything, in fact, just the opposite was the case: the publicized point of the impending Aktion was specifically *not* to punish, to intimidate, or to threaten, but actually to exterminate the entire Jewish population “including the children and the elderly, even infants and women.”

And thus presented to us as a glimmer of hope is a door that is also not a door, **an avenue of salvation that the sole citizen in a position to travel down must do so at the risk of her own life.** The reader wonders how this will all play out, but the more important detail is that the Mordechai neither invents nor discovers the door, but simply notices it where it was waiting unnoticed all along. And, indeed, the real importance of the complicated and unlikely story of how Esther became queen of Persia, told at length earlier in the Megillah, is now revealed. And when **Mordechai poses his most famous of all rhetorical questions (“Who knows if the real reason you were elevated to royalty was not all along so that you be in this precise position of potentially pivotal power at this specific moment in your people’s history?”)**, no reader has to wonder what the correct answer is. Of course, we all now realize that that is precisely why she is in place in the palace...and why the story line barely nodded to the almost indescribable inappropriateness of a Jewish girl entering a contest to become queen of Persia that she could only conceivably win by surrendering her virtue to a oafish king the narrator has no compunction about presenting as an profligate idiot and as a sot. And we also now understand why the narrator seemed so thrilled to report to his readers about the decision of a hithertofore honorable woman willingly to enter into a forbidden marriage and why he sounded neither censorious of her choice nor, frankly, even formally ambivalent about its moral worth.

Moderns reading along will want to respond to the unexpected possibility of salvation that presents itself garbed in the queen's willingness to risk her own safety for the sake of her people's by asking themselves if they feel themselves to be similarly situated in the larger narratives of their **own lives not arbitrarily or accidentally but as part of some pre-ordained and purposeful, if largely indiscernible, plan.** ...

[But] we think of ourselves as free agents possessed of the ability to chart our own way in life. ... And then we read Mordechai's question and find its reverberations, to say the least, unsettling. Esther, we agree instantly, was in that specific place because of the great good she was about to be able to accomplish. Are we situated in our lives for similarly undisclosed reasons that will only reveal themselves at the precisely correct moment? The way a modern answers that question will depend on that person's feelings about the whole concept of destiny and fate, about the power or basic unreality of karma, of kismet itself. .... **We want God to have maneuvered Esther into place, but we bristle, or most of us do, at the thought that we too have been guided into being who we have become...and for a specific reason we either will or will not embrace at precisely the right moment.** And yet there is something intensely seductive about feeling ourselves imbued with purpose imposed from without, about feeling part of the divine plan for humanity as focused through the details our own personal lives. The pleasure of feeling that way is undeniable...but can moderns truly believe it?

### **13. William James, *The Will to Believe: The Leap of Faith***

Fitz James Stephen; let me end by a quotation from him. "What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world?... These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them.... In all important transactions of life we have to take **a leap in the dark....** If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that *he* is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. **We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage'** (Joshua 1). Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes.... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better." (James p. 735 citing *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*, p. 353)

### **14. Paula Fredriksen, "Augustine and the Search for Meaning in Narrative Time", in *Sin*, p. 118-120**

Human consciousness is dislocated, distended by living in time. Time, Augustine says, functions psychologically: its effects tell within the soul: "It is in you, my mind, that I measure time," (11.27,36). **Time is measured by its flow, its ceaseless movement from the future (one type of nonbeing, since it does not yet exist) into the past (another type of nonbeing, since it no longer exists). The future is not yet; the past is no longer.** Between these two plains of nonbeing that stretch out infinitely in either direction stands the singular reality of the present. Only the present actually *is*. Yet the present itself is inherently ungraspable:

"If we can think of some bit of time that cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moment, that alone is what we call 'present.' And this time flies by so quickly from the future into the past that it is an interval of no duration.... A present moment takes up no time." (*Confessions* 11. 15,20).

All of a person's consciousness, her ability to know and to understand, is circumscribed by and limited to this infinitely tiny, perpetually transient moment. Experience - by definition, solely in the present - ceaselessly runs between the fingers of the soul like sand. From this constant flow of atomized instances, how can a person possibly know anything, grasp anything?

To answer this question, Augustine thinks about language. **Language, like thought, like experience, like consciousness, is also intrinsically distended in time.** It too depends upon flow, **a linear passage from being (present) to nonbeing (past).** Consonants and vowels alternate to form phonemes, words follow words, nouns follow verbs. Both in its smallest units (consonants and vowels) and in its larger ones (words, sentences, and more), language works by having a beginning, a middle, and an end. (Augustine the ancient rhetorician thinks in terms of language spoken and heard, 11.6,8-11.11,3.) **Only through the integrative functioning of memory can meaning be wrung from language.** Once the end of a sound, a word, a sentence is reached, memory recalls the whole, and then interprets what the sounds convey. **Interpretation and understanding, the attainment of meaning, are thus the accomplishments of memory, whether for language or more broadly for experience itself. Meaning, in consequence, is never immediately present. It is always and necessarily mediated, retrospective, imperfect.** This tenuousness of meaning, thus, of knowing - is symptomatic, claims Augustine, of humankind's situation in time. Truth without shadows, meaning without mediation, love without conflict, will come only at history's end, when time itself is swallowed up in "the Sabbath of eternal life" (13.36,51).

## 15. David Hartman on Two Types of Hope

(from "learning to Hope" in *From Defender to Critic*, 128ff)

To begin, it is important to identify two significant types, or dimensions, of hope:

(1) **the courage to bear human responsibility, to persevere in partial solutions, and to accept the burden of living and building within contexts of uncertainty;** and

(2) the expectancy of a future resolution to all human problems.

The former might aptly be described as "halakhic" hope; the second, "radical" hope.

(1) **Halakhic hope liberates action**, for it provides a means by which to overcome the paralysis of dejection. Where our outlook is thoroughly hopeless, notions like progress and duty become meaningless, and our capacity to act is severely impaired. A prospect of attainment, on the other hand, helps generate the strength required to act. Expectancy that something new and good may occur often creates the very impetus necessary to implement one's goals.<sup>2</sup>

(2) **Radical hope** need not address itself to action. It is a mode of anticipation, **a faith** that ultimately redemption will come, in its appointed time, irrespective of what we do or don't do. It is **not expressed through action, but through inaction**, a sustained waiting that in mystical thinking is intimately associated with the messianic concept. Indeed, according to Gershom Scholem, the mystic's hope is by definition radical and apocalyptic:

**"This redemption ... is in no causal sense a result of previous history....** (1) It is not the product of immanent developments such as we find in modern Western reinterpretations of Messianism since the Enlightenment where, secularized as the belief in progress, Messianism still displayed unbroken and immense vigor. (2) It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin.... The apocalyptists' optimism, their hope, is not directed to what history will bring forth but to that which will arise in its ruin, free at last and undisguised." (*The Messianic Idea*, 10)

Scholem contrasts (2) this "**utopian**" model of hope against what he calls (2) the "**restorative**" secular messianism<sup>4</sup> of the post-Enlightenment West. In fact, both sides of this dichotomy are presented as legitimate expressions of messianic hope in a Talmudic discussion' regarding redemption. (1) **Rav** declares, "All the appointed times of redemption are over, and **the matter depends wholly upon repentance and good deeds.**" History, in other words, will not be redeemed of necessity: redemption is contingent on human action and efforts. In response, (2) **Samuel** states, "It is sufficient for the mourner to remain in his mourning." It is enough for Israel to sustain herself in history, for redemption is not dependent on successful moral renewal.

This Talmudic debate parallels an earlier one. (1) "If Israel repents," claims Rabbi Eliezer, "they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be saved." (2) Rabbi Joshua answers, "If they do not

repent, they will not be redeemed? But what will happen? God will send a wicked king, one whose decrees will be as Haman's, and then Israel will do *teshuvah* [turning, repentance]." (TB Sanhedrin 97b).

Is redemption ultimately dependent upon human choice? (1) Rabbi Eliezer proposes a vision of hope centered around human freedom of choice and the will to change. (2) Rabbi Joshua argues that God will enter the process of history. While perhaps not freeing humanity from **the need to change, God** will create conditions compelling people to **respond in *teshuvah***. In **Talmudic** thought, oppression and suffering were considered to be catalysts for moral change. God can intervene in history, then, by fashioning circumstances impelling the Jewish people to repent.

### **Reconsidering Redemption: Hope, History, and Halakha**

It should be noted that both of the above schools of thought stipulate some sort of divine provision for deliverance—for **without God's promise of salvation, there would be no certainty that even repentance would bring redemption**. Nevertheless, they do differ significantly in their interpretations of hope, human redemption, and ultimately of our relationship to history itself. (2) **Samuel and Rabbi Joshua** view national salvation as an **inevitable process**: history as we know it will eventually be transformed by a force that transcends man agency. (1) **Rav and Rabbi Eliezer**, to the contrary, understand **history as an open-ended set of possibilities dependent upon human choice and action**.

(2) To proponents of "radical" hope, however, salvation is not a process in history, but a cataclysm shattering the natural order. A Mishnaic passage reflecting this orientation paints a sobering picture of the time when the Messiah will come. Human arrogance will become great. Prices in the marketplace will soar. Vines will yield fruit, but wine will be costly. Heathens will be converted to heresy, and there will be no dissenting voice. Houses of worship will become brothels. Groups of people will wander from town to town, and none shall show them compassion. The wisdom of the scribes will become decadent, and the morally upright will be despised. The young will shame their elders. "The face of the generation shall be like the face of a dog." Father and son together will visit the same prostitute. **"On whom then shall we lean?" asks the Mishnah. "On our Father who is in heaven,"** is the response.' (TB Sotah 49b).

Thus, proponents of radical hope find signs of redemption not in the evolution of better social conditions but in utter darkness and despair. Apocalyptic notions of redemption do not encourage action toward realistic social goals, for they incorporate the essential premise that no matter how miserable life will be, God will not abandon humanity.

It is in large part due to the security of its built-in fail-safe—a reassuring "escape clause" from the seemingly interminable rigors of history—that so many religious frameworks are structured around and animated by some form of radical hope. This is why Scholem identifies progressive, "restorative" hope with modern, secular trends of thought. Thus it seems natural to ask, is it possible construct a viable religious approach without the certainty of redemption? What might such an approach look like?

I find a compelling answer to this question suggested in (1) the approach to hope voiced by Rav and Rabbi Eliezer, which gives to a kind of religious faith emphasizing progressive, restorative hope. This, I suggest, is the type of hope—and consequently the orientation toward our role in history—that halakhic Judaism primarily expresses and seeks to cultivate. When Rav asserts that redemption is dependent on *teshuvah*, he believes with absolute certainty its eventual realization; he feels the certainty of deliverance. This confidence in redemption sets into motion a liberating. Maimonides "normalized" the radical, apocalyptic vision of messianic expectancy, depicting a vision of the messianic era brought about and sustained by what I refer to as halakhic hope. "Halakhic hope," the school of thought represented by Rav and Rabbi Eliezer [and Maimonides], enhances our practical capacity to act in history.

### **16. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Hope vs Optimism**

One of the most important distinctions I have learned in the course of reflection on Jewish history is the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue, hope an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope. Knowing what we do of our past, no Jew can be an optimist. But Jews have never — despite a history of sometimes awesome suffering — given up hope. Hope is born in the belief that the sources of action lie within us. (Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, 2002, 206f)

### **17. Donniel Hartman on Solidarity and Collective Responsibility in a Godless World**

(paraphrased loosely from a lecture in Feb, 2014)

While God's hand is often identified throughout the Bible as acting behind the scenes (such as the Joseph story) and the Rabbis see God intervening at every step in the coincidences in the Megillah, I think it is important to appreciate a Godless model of Jewish political action as presented by the Book of Esther. The story shows us world of ——— accidents, life as lottery, in which Jewish life is particularly precarious, but in which the Jews do *not* turn to God in prayer but to one another in appeal for solidarity. It is not our faith in God or our observance of Divine law that saves us. We affirm our ethnic identity as Jews rather than as God's chosen people. Mordechai is not called the righteous one like Noah or Joseph, but simply the "Jew." He is praised for seeking the best interests of his people, of his seed.

Mordechai models a response to communal threats. He protests. He does not continue with business as usual but he marshals community's resources. He asks each individual to take the social, economic and political capital they have built up for their own benefit and put it at the disposal of the collective. Thus Mordechai appeals to Esther not to cut herself off from her solidarity with her people even though she has assimilated and feels secure in the palace. Jews facing persecution can either run and hide as individuals denying their identity or reassert that collective identity and call on every Jew to activate whatever power they have garnered for the Jews in crisis. Esther agrees to put her life on the line, but she expects the people to fast with her in reciprocal solidarity. The Jews may be spread out and separate as Haman claims, but here they come together. Thus the three mitzvot instituted in the Megillah

for the celebrating Purim are (1) read the megillah to relive the experience; (2) gifts to the poor because solidarity is about helping those in our community who are in need and knowing they will help us if necessary; (3) gifts to one another to celebrate the joys of collective responsibility. Personally I give some *mishloakh manot* to people in the community with whom I have had some tensions, to help rebuild social bridges.

While Mordechai threatens Esther that if she ignores his appeal the Jews will find redemption from "another place," it seems as if he is bluffing. In any case Esther does not rely on God or anything else. "If I am lost, I am lost," but I will risk all to master this situation. While power may corrupt, powerlessness or faith in Divine help without human action is also immoral for we must know how to act to save ourselves when necessary. After American Jewry failed to do all it could to save European Jewry during World War II, they have banded together to save Jews worldwide after WW II. In crisis they may overreact but better to err on the side of being hysterical and to call out every ally, than to hold back and appear more reserved and cool. Still we shall not forget that power, especially the power gained suddenly by those who were just recently persecuted, is often misused in violent excesses as in the Megillah. The value of solidarity often excludes the concern for those not among one's ethnic seed. I recall when my father took me to Professor Ernst Simon to give Purim gifts, he responded: Thank you, but you know I do not celebrate this holiday of vengeance.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless power and communal solidarity are moral and political resources not be dismissed lightly even though they can be corrupted.

### **C. Megillat Esther: From Denigration to Resistance: Militant Self-Defense or Vengeance?**

**What do you think about the lessons to be learned about power and nationalism, ethics and vengeance from Megillat Esther?**

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<sup>8</sup> The story goes that Ernst Simon would stay in Jerusalem while Purim was celebrated in Tel Aviv, but he would go to Tel Aviv on the next day on Shushan Purim while Jerusalemites celebrated. Thus he avoided the whole ugly holiday.



Arthur Szyk

### 18. Martin Luther: Excluding Esther from the Bible

The Jews much more esteem the book of Esther than any of the prophets.... The Jews "love the book of Esther, which so well fits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed." But I am so great an enemy ... to Esther that I wish it had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities .Esther they [the Catholics] have received into their canon; although, in my judgment, deserving, more than all the rest, to be excluded. (On the Jews and Their Lies, 1543, and Table Talk)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543)

**Martin Luther, Jews and Purim**, from *The Jews and Their Lie*:

They are real liars and bloodhounds who have not only continually perverted and falsified all of Scripture with their interpretations from the beginning until the present day. Their heart's most ardent sighing and yearning and hoping is set on the day on which they can deal with us Gentiles as they did with the Gentiles in Persia at the time of Esther. Oh, how fond they are of the book of Esther, which is so beautifully attuned to their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous yearning and hope. [LW 47:156].

**19. S. R. Driver** (Christian OT scholar): **Vengeful**

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What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? Since they live among us, we dare not tolerate their conduct, now that we are aware of their lying and reviling and blaspheming. If we do, we become sharers in their lies, cursing and blasphemy.

First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them the fact that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are

living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home.

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping.

Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam (Gen. 3 [:19]). For it is not fitting that they should let us accursed

Goyim toil in the sweat of our faces while they, the holy people, idle away their time behind the stove, feasting and farting., and on top of all, boasting blasphemously of their lordship over the Christians by means of our sweat. No, one should toss out these lazy rogues by the seat of their pants.

“Much fault has been found with the temper displayed in the-Book of Esther," which was "said, for instance, to breathe a spirit of vengeance and hatred, without any redeeming feature; and to be further removed from the spirit of the Gospel than any other Book of the OT [Old Testament]."

**20. Claude Montefiore** (liberal British Jew), *The Bible for Home Reading*

The true reason why we cannot regard the book of Esther as divine or inspired are, first, because of the spirit of cruelty and of revenge, so that it is not too strong to say with Dr. Adeney that 'its pages reek with blood'; and, secondly, because there is little compensation for this grave defect in any grandeur or beauty of teaching elsewhere. We can hardly dignify or extenuate the operations of the Jews by saying that they were done in self-defense. For we are told that all the officials helped the Jews, and that none durst withstand them. Moreover, the slain apparently included both women and children. There is no fighting, but just as there was to have been a massacre of unresisting Jews, so now there is a massacre of unresisting Gentiles.

**21. Rabbi Joachim Prinz: Purim in Nazi Berlin (1933- 1937)**

"Outside the synagogue in the ghetto, that is the newspapers, on the radio, in the speeches of the government people, wherever Jews lived , on the propaganda placards of the Nazi regime, in the cartoons of the anti-Semitic papers, the Jew was depicted as anon-person – ugly, immoral, uncreative, cowardly, useless and inferior.

I had to tell them from the pulpit in very single sermon that to be a Jew is to be beautiful, great, noble, and that we have right to feel superior. (It is for that reason that I understand why the black people who have been degraded and humiliated in America now say "Black is beautiful.") Sometimes I exaggerated. It was planned exaggeration.

No longer were these Jewish holidays perfunctory observances of the day. They became part of the context of danger, fear, death and hope in which we lived.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joachim Prinz: "Passover was now the great day of hope for delivery from our own Egypt. The whips which beat the naked bodies of Jewish slaves in Egypt were the very same that struck our bodies. Slavery was no longer an abstract term, foreign to the world of the twentieth century. We could now identify with the slaves for we, ourselves, were third-class citizens, and therefore slaves. Those people who had been taken from their homes and whom we no longer saw, but about whose fate we knew, illustrated the Haggadah in colors much more telling than those of the most graphic illustrations we had ever seen.:

When we read that 'in every generation one is obligated to see oneself as one who personally went out from Egypt' and 'it was not only our ancestors whom God set free from slavery,' the identification was complete. It was not historic memory. It was not history at all. It was the reality. (A Rabbi Under the Hitler Regime, excerpts from oral interview on Jan., 1969, from Oral History Division of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Institute of Contemporary Jewry)

Joachim Prinz recalled that in Berlin after 1933, "people came by the thousands to the synagogue to listen to the story of Haman and Esther," which "became the story of our own lives." To those relatively assimilated German Jews, the Megillah, read in Hebrew and then translated, "suddenly made sense," for "it was quite clear that Haman meant Hitler." When Haman's plot was announced, it bore a strange resemblance to Hitler's plot to wipe out the Jewish people ....

And not only did the long repressed spirit of vengeance reassert itself in the synagogue, but also the "frightful noises" "Never had I heard such applause in a synagogue when the names of the ten sons of Haman were read, describing their hanging from the gallows. "The little noisemakers," he recalled, "became more than toys. They were the instruments of a demonstration in the midst of frustration ".

On Purim people came by the thousands to the synagogue to listen to the story of Haman and Esther. This too became the story of our lives. It was quite clear that Haman meant Hitler.... Many came to ask me if Hitler had read had ever read the story of Haman.

Then the turning point came. Haman was demasked and exposed to disgrace and death. Never has I heard such applause in a synagogue when the names of the ten sons of Haman were read, describing their hanging from the gallows. Every time we read *Haman* we heard *Hitler*. The little noisemakers ... became more than toys. They were instruments of a demonstration in the midst of frustration. Outside in the streets and in the homes we could not talk against Hitler, but here in the synagogue there is no limit to our rejection. **No one, however, sensitive minded and objected to the passages of revenge which in a climate of peace and equality seem to have no place in Jewish life.** <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Joachim Prinz's Speech, Washington. DC, March delivered just before M. L. King's "I Have A Dream Speech" (1963) :

I speak to you as an American Jew.

As Americans we share the profound concern of millions of people about the shame and disgrace of inequality and injustice which make a mockery of the great American idea.

As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a two-fold experience -- one of the spirit and one of our history.

In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, he created him as everybody's neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity.

From our Jewish historic experience of three and a half thousand years we say:

Our ancient history began with slavery and the yearning for freedom. During the Middle Ages my people lived for a thousand years in the ghettos of Europe . Our modern history begins with a proclamation of emancipation.

It is for these reasons that it is not merely sympathy and compassion for the black people of America that motivates us. It is above all and beyond all such sympathies and emotions a sense of complete identification and solidarity born of our own painful historic experience.

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not ' the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

## 22. Our Children's Jewish Revenge May 15, 1940, by Chaim Kaplan, *The Scroll of Agony Warsaw Ghetto Diary*

Sometimes our work is done by schoolchildren. The children of our poor, with whom the streets of Warsaw are filled at all hours of the day, are not afraid even of the despotic conquerors. They remain as always – lively and mischievous. Their poverty and oppression serves to shield them from robberies and confiscations. No one will harm them. Even the conquerors' eye overlooks them: Let the Jewish weeds pine away in their iniquity. But these weeds watch every act of the conquerors and imitate the Nazis' manner of speech and their cruelty most successfully. For them this is nothing but good material for games and amusements. Childhood does much.

Once there came into the ghetto a certain Nazi from a province where the Jews are required to greet every Nazi soldier they encountered, removing their hats as they do. There is no such practice in Warsaw, but the "honored guest" wanted to be strict and force the rules of his place of origin on us. A great uproar arose suddenly in Jewish Karmelicka Street: Some psychopathic Nazi is demanding that every passerby take his hat off in his honor. Many fled, many hid, many were caught for their transgression and beaten, and many were bursting with laughter. The little "wise guys", the true lords of the street, noticed what was going on and found great amusement in actually obeying the Nazi, and showing him great respect in a manner calculated to make a laughingstock out of the "great lord" in the eyes of all the passersby. They ran up to greet him a hundred and one times, taking off their hats in his honor. They gathered in great numbers, with an artificial look of awe on their faces, and wouldn't stop taking off their hats. Some did this with straight faces, while their friends stood behind them and laughed. Then these would leave and others would approach, bowing before the Nazi with bare heads. There was no end to the laughter. Every one of the mischievous youths so directed his path as to appear before the Nazi several times, bowing before him in deepest respect. That wasn't all. Riffraff gathered for the fun, and they made a noisy demonstration in honor of the Nazi with a resounding cheer. **This is Jewish revenge!**

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A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

Our children, yours and mine in every school across the land, each morning pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States and to the republic for which it stands. They, the children, speak fervently and innocently of this land as the land of "liberty and justice for all."

The time, I believe, has come to work together - for it is not enough to hope together, and it is not enough to pray together, to work together that this children's oath, pronounced every morning from Maine to California, from North to South, may become a glorious, unshakeable reality in a morally renewed and united America.

## Appendix

### 23. Big Data: Law, Randomness and Choice in Esther by Mishael Zion

<http://textandcity.blogspot.co.il/2015/02/big-data-law-randomness-and-choice-in.html>

It's easy to underestimate the story of Esther. With its burlesque scenes, over-the-top characters and ancient court politics, it can seem uninspiring. Its setting in the child-friendly Purim and its violent ending make it seem juvenile, if not inappropriate. Yet the scroll of Esther is the Biblical book which comes closest to describing our current reality. I am not referring to Iranian plots against the descendants of Mordechai, but rather the attempt to navigate an absurd world, caught between the opposite poles of randomness and law, without divine guidance.

#### **Dat and Data: Between Randomness and Law**

Purim is - literally - the celebration of randomness. As the Scroll of Esther itself says: "That is why they named these days "Purim" – from the word Pur [=lot]". In the darkest moment of the scroll, the date for Haman's malicious plot to exterminate the Jews is determined by a random lot ("pur"). At its brightest moment, the salvation too feels random, not so much a final redemption as much as a temporary political windfall. Indeed, the whole book, with its giddy king, comedic reversals and lack of divine providential voice attempts to make readers feel like they are living in a reality governed by randomness.

The experience of randomness is magnified by its juxtaposition against the often overlooked theme of the book: Law. Throughout the scroll, though, the word used to describe law is not the Hebrew *mishpat* or *din* (justice), but the Persian form – *dat* or data. The Persian word *dat* made its way into both Biblical Hebrew and European languages. Its uses in our 21st century allow a whole new reading of the story of Esther.

In modern Hebrew, the word *dat* means not law but religion. In English, data signifies transmittable and storable information, the modern correlate of the Persian imperial *dat*. More basic than knowledge or wisdom, data is the most basic element, with a promise of objectivity and constancy. Data is a building block upon which a worldview can be built.

Today, the ascendant promise of Big Data attempts to turn the seeming randomness of life into immutable containable information. Yet in Shushan, data has failed.

At first glance, the use of *dat* is so ubiquitous that the impression is that Ahashverosh's kingdom is a bastion of rule and regulation. Historically, the Persian Empire is regarded as the earliest and most impressive imperial bureaucracy – an efficient legal system spanning from Africa to India. But it quickly becomes clear that *dat* is an empty signifier.

In Chapter 1, we are introduced to Ahashverosh's counsel of wise men, who “know law and justice” (יודעי דת ודין). The king goes through great pains to ensure that his *dat* is known throughout the kingdom – notice all those horsemen appearing again and again in the story. Haman describes the Jews as “not obeying the *dat* of the king,” and even the virgins are steeped in a regimen of myrrh and perfumes for six months, as is the “dat of the women.”

At the height of the dramatic reversal, the king himself adheres to the immutability of his own laws, as he tells Esther and Mordechai: “A document written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s signet – cannot be revoked” (Esther 8:8). The rule of *dat* is complete – and thus revealed in its absurdity. When even the king himself cannot change his own laws, you know that something is horribly wrong. Like a snake biting his own tail, in Ahashverosh's kingdom the opposite poles of law and randomness have combined into one.

Unlike data, which seeks to be a representation of what is real in the world, collected and analyzed to create information suitable for making decisions, *dat* in Shushan has become an empty signifier, an arrow pointing toward nothing at all. I would contend that this is not just a critique of Shushan’s laws, or Diasporic law, but of law as an institution. The scroll is warning us that *dat* (and by proxy, data) will not contain meaning or truth in themselves. It is what one does with them that makes the difference.

The opposite poles of sheer randomness and insipid law can easily lead one into despair, or more likely – cynicism and passivity. Perhaps this explains Esther’s deep passivity – both during the virginal pageant and in response to Haman’s decree. In fact, her success is due to her malleability and passivity, a survival mechanism that shows itself to be a powerful strategy (Esther “asked for nothing other than what Hagai, Keeper of the Women, told her to take.” “Esther obeyed the word of Mordechai just as when she was in his ward.” Esther 2:15, 20). As opposed to Vashti, who tried to take her fate in her own hands and failed, Esther is determined to ride the wave of randomness and let the chips fall as they may. She has felt the randomness of *dat* on her own body and happened to triumph. Now in the palace she has resigned herself to passivity and cynicism, hoping that the next stroke of randomness will also work out in her favor.

### **Who is this? Moments of Existential Choice**

Yet it is against the backdrop of randomness and law that the Scroll of Esther focuses again and again on personality. More than any other book, Esther is an in-depth exploration of its characters. Even as they are all stuck between the poles of randomness and law, each character – save Ahashverosh himself – is highlighted in exercising their agency. This focus on moments of choice, decision, and determination doesn't become irrelevant when faced with randomness and law, but is described as a deep response to it (reminiscent of Viktor Frankel’s response to radical evil and suffering). Each character's moment of choice is juxtaposed against the vapid

of law, *dat*, in Shushan. Meaning is derived not from *dat*, but from an existential agency enacted despite of it.

Vashti epitomizes this moment of choice by being the one who says no. She refuses to appear in front of Ahashverosh and the men of Shushan in the middle of their revelry. Elias Bickerman explains that this is in fact an existential moment for Vashti. While concubines would appear at the King's behest at parties, a queen in the Persian Empire would leave before the imbibing began. Being asked to appear "with the royal crown on her head" forced her to fight for who she was – a queen, not a concubine.

Mordechai makes two choices – each one more dangerous than the next – to refuse to bow to Haman, and to practice civil disobedience – flouting of the *dat* – by appearing in the Court wearing sackcloth and ashes. Haman too seeks to know himself. Despite trying to trap the Jews in the claws of the law, Haman finds himself doubting his own plan, and wants to hang Mordechai even before the (random) date assigned for killing the Jews. This last flirt against the randomness that he himself unleashed is the cause of his downfall. When this last ruse is discovered by the king, Haman is hanged on the stake that he himself had prepared for Mordechai.

Finally, Esther – who in chapter 4 receives a sharp wakeup call from Mordechai – decides to go to the king in a manner that is "not according to the law." Esther is urged and challenged by Mordechai, but she is not described as obeying him, she is not simply replacing one *dat* with another, as some readers would contend. In fact, once Esther agrees to take on the task of convincing the king, she is the one who dictates the terms and devises the plan, and Mordechai is the one described as "fulfilling the command of Esther." Choice will trump law – and will triumph.

The only one who never seeks to know himself is the king. Ahashverosh does all he can to avoid thinking independently and existentially. He will follow the *dat* with blinders on and will follow advisers when law offers no remedy. He will never overturn his own decision – for that would require an act of self-negation and which assumes the existence of a self to begin with. The king's lack of introspection and self-knowledge as a way to avoid any decision-making is most evident in his hurry to get rid of the king's seal, the insignia of decision-making, of authority and of power – the ring of responsibility. His is the most cynical response of all.

Understanding the functional absence of King Ahashverosh puts a greater claim of responsibility on the other characters, as Haman and Mordechai understand well. But it also shines a light on the absence of the other King. God's disappearance from the stage of history denies our characters the ability to claim that they are called by an external force. There are no prophets, no messengers of God (or of Satan), and no larger authority. There is plenty of ego, randomness, and empty law. The only thing that remains is choice.

We live in a world of ever-changing randomness and empty laws, says the Scroll of Esther. Call it Shushan, or Diaspora, or post-modernity. What remains meaningful then? Knowing oneself and

acting from that place. In our turning Purim into a celebration of the Carnavalesque, dressing up as someone other than ourselves, getting legally drunk while behaving OCD about hearing every word of an ancient scroll, we name the randomness and absurdity of life and law. But we are also called to an existential moment of facing who we really are. Caught between the harshness of data and the randomness of history, it is our existential choices that retain meaning.

**24. Renita Weems on Vashti” Role Model: “A Crown of Thorns”**  
**from *Just a Sister Away***

[King Ahashverosh’s all-male party] had become lusty. Singing and laughter had reached a feverish pitch. Private dancers and shameless frolic had been exhausted. Those who had not passed out from sheer delight began to do what intoxicated men do best: boast about women they have known. They reminisced about their first loves, their lost loves, and their secret loves. The less delirious compared notes.

Leading the pack was King Ahasuerus. All other women, he waged, paled in comparison to his wife, Queen Vashti. To prove his point, the king dispatched seven trusted eunuchs to bring the queen to him immediately, adorned with her royal crown .

What followed sent shockwaves throughout the kingdom. It was enough to sober the king: "But Queen Vashti refused to come as the king commanded . . ." (Esther 1:12). Imagine the king's humiliation! Flanked by his drinking buddies on every side — those who made a career of serving the king and obeying him, those who deferred to him in public but plotted against him behind closed doors, and those who were just there for the free wine and a good wager — the king could not afford to tolerate public insubordination, especially from a woman. Even if that woman was the queen.

Perhaps under different circumstances — in the privacy of their chambers or in a private discussion between the two of them over dinner — King Ahasuerus might have been willing to countenance his wife's defiance. Perhaps.

But in front of the men who now looked on in horror, the king had to act and to act quickly. At all costs, it could never be said that the king was hen-pecked. After all, if a man could not rule his own house — which meant his wife and children — then, surely he could not rule a whole empire.

In other words, the king's honor and ego were at stake. The private differences between a man and his wife — a man who happened to be the king and a woman who happened to be the queen of the land — became a public battle one's body and spirit — they are not necessarily demeaning, not like the request King Ahasuerus made. His demand was for his wife to come and display herself before his drunken guests.

There comes a time when even a queen has to put her royal foot down and say, "Enough is Enough".

Responding to such a debasing request would not have served the public interest and, evidently, would have violated the queen's sense of propriety. Just as the king's honor depended on his wife's unswerving obedience, Queen Vashti's integrity, before the company of women who looked upon her as a role model, depended on her courage to refuse to compromise. The queen made her decision.

Let us not fool ourselves. The Old Testament story does not suggest that Queen Vashti was unhappy being a queen, nor that she was unappreciative of the privileges which came with being a queen, nor that she despised her husband, despite his shortcomings. In the times in which she lived, Vashti, no doubt, was well aware that it was more prudent to be married than unmarried, more comfortable to be a queen than a peasant.

But Vashti's story is not simply a recounting of one of many instances in a marriage where one spouse acts insensitively toward the other, or where one inconveniences the other. Something more was at stake in the king's request than the queen's personal comfort. Queen Vashti found nothing flattering in her husband's desire to show off her beauty before his drunken guests. She refused, even in the face of banishment, to comply with his dehumanizing command.

Many women over the decades have followed Queen Vashti's example of choosing exile over compromise. The story of Queen Vashti speaks particularly to the demands placed upon women married to men in positions of public leadership. In cultures and institutions where the role of women has, by and large, been restricted to the domestic sphere; where the participation of women in decision-making has been severely limited; in these settings, what little leadership experience many women have garnered has come as a result of their roles as wives of public figures: wives of politicians, civil rights activists, ministers, actors, entertainers, and other men who have distinguished themselves. In the case of the black and other minority communities,

much of our enduring female leadership has come from the Church, particularly from the minister's wife.

For those of us raised during the age of twentieth-century feminism — where we have witnessed and been the beneficiaries of significant social, political, and economic gains made by women in both the public and private sector — it may appear somewhat old-fashioned, if not downright counterproductive, to talk about women whose status and position are a function of their roles as wives of public men, women whose power and influence are derived from their relationships with men.

Like Queen Vashti, the circumference of the power of these women has often been confined to issues that concern women. But many times in the past — and it continues often to be the case even in the present — it is precisely because of their relationships and access to certain kinds of information that these women have been able to monitor and act as advocates for policies and issues that immediately impact women. Their marriages have often provided them with the opportunities to act and speak on behalf of women in corridors often closed to women's interests. Some of the women who have made the greatest contributions in our history have been wives of public figures. Sometimes they have exceeded their husbands in talent; many times they have continued the work begun by their husbands; other times they have surpassed their husbands in popularity.

## **25. Becoming an Esther Church by Robert Stearns<sup>12</sup>**

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<sup>12</sup> (Oct. 18, 2009 in Colorado's Faith Bible Church; regional director of Reverend John Hagee's Christians United for Israel = CUFI; see Robert Stearns, *The Cry of Mordecai* (Destiny Image, 2009)

"We are the watchmen that God has placed on the walls (Isaiah 62:6) to call out for God, to move on behalf of the nation of Israel, in protecting it, in guiding it, in giving it its wisdom." (CUFI Conference, 2012)

"We bless you for choosing to obey the divine trumpet call to The Church in this hour, to be co-laborers with God for His purposes and plans to manifest in this strategic place and people" (CUFI's prayer manual, 2012)

"Esther's life and Esther's example has never been more pertinent or applicable for the people of God than it is in this moment in time. And we need to learn, and hear and receive from the life of Esther today... [She] understood what it felt like to be on the outside. Unpopular, unwanted, not accepted... There was nothing in Esther's life ... that would say "most likely to succeed." There was nothing about her that would say: "Here's someone that would be written into the pages of history. Here's someone whose life is going to make a great difference." ... She was an average, ordinary, everyday person who life had not dealt a good hand to.

But God—aren't you glad this morning that we serve a God that says: 'Your past does not equal your future.' Aren't you glad that we serve a God this morning who says: "My plans for you are greater than the plans that others may have spoken over your life." And God had a plan for Esther—she didn't fully understand it, she didn't fully see it—you may not fully see this morning, the story that God is writing over the challenges of your life, but I promise you this morning if you're here ... **God has a plan, a purpose, a destiny for your life.**

And so Esther is transported into opulence and splendor [of the king's palace], and this little orphan girl so alone and so insecure and her future has been so uncertain, now she has everything she could dream for... She's enjoying the blessings ... of the king.

While out here ... Mordecai is off in a place called Susa. And Mordecai is aware that there is trouble brewing in Susa ... that threatens all of the Jewish people. Haman has hatched his deadly plot. And over here in Susa, or Gaza, or Tehran, over here off in the distance of the land of the king's blessings Mordecai begins to try and get a message across to Esther: "Esther, there's danger for your people! Esther, I need your attention, there's problems here you really need to listen, Esther!" But Esther is here and she's just so happy. She's just so blessed. And she can't hear Mordecai's message. Oh, she hears it; but she doesn't *hear* it. Church, there is a huge difference between hearing God's voice, and hearing God's voice.

And she says: "Mordecai I really can't get involved ... and I'm sorry for what's happening over there in the Middle East... but I'm really doing fine and things are secure, the economy's good, the military is strong and I'm protected, and I'm doing well, I just can't get involved." ... WHY couldn't Esther hear the voice of Mordecai, why do we sometimes not hear the voice of the Holy Spirit warning us as we enjoy the blessings of the king?

[There are] two things that I suggest block our hearing that blocked Esther's hearing. Number one, I think Esther was **distracted**.... Esther was enjoying all the stuff; she was enjoying all the blessings.... Esther didn't realize that she had been blessed unto a greater purpose. The blessings were not simply there for her to enjoy.

*While God has blessed the American church ... we can get distracted by the stuff. And we can fail to realize, that there's a greater purpose that God is writing us into. And we've been blessed, and with blessing comes responsibility—to whom much has been given, much is required.*

The second reason I believe Esther couldn't hear the message of Mordecai, the message of the Spirit, was **denial**. I think Esther simply refused to believe that things could possibly be that bad. She simply refused to believe that it possibly could be so bad. Why? Because she worked all her life to just feel good. And she finally was feeling good and she didn't want to have to deal with the fact that there was a real threat that was finding her in the palace.... In other words she says to Mordecai: "Mordecai, I am sorry about what's happening over there with the Jewish people, but I can't get involved. If I get involved my life could be in danger." What did Esther not realize? Her life was already in danger.

*Precious American Church brothers and sisters, we had better wake up to the fact that our perceived security in America is a thin veneer. We had better wake up to the fact that Israel's battle is our battle in this moment. We had better stop being in denial and just thinking that everything's gonna continue to go on as it always has been and that we don't need to be vigilant about maintaining liberty in our nation. It is time for the Church to arise and to awaken.*

*Beloved, we are living in a moment in time where it is not popular to believe in the God of the Bible. We are living in a moment in time when it seems that all Hell itself is arrayed against those who believe in this book. And the twin forces of secular humanism on one hand, and radical Islam on the other, are assaulting the very foundations of our faith.*

So Esther is there in distraction and Esther is there in denial and Mordecai sends back this message, as I believe the Mordecai voice of the Holy Spirit is sending to us today: "Esther, do not think that because you're in the king's house—don't think because you're in America—that you alone will escape, for if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come from another place. But you and your father's family will perish. **And who knows, but that you, yes Esther, you—poorly educated, unconnected, orphaned, not qualified, average ordinary you and me, who somehow say yes to God and God somehow decides to take our yes seriously—who knows Esther, but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this**"?

And now I want to show you what has become one of my all-time favorite places in all of scripture... look at it please, the end of verse fourteen, do you see the word "this" and the question mark—"who knows that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Do you see that question mark? And then look at verse fifteen, the first word in my scripture in verse fifteen is "Then." There's the question mark and then there's the "then." And there's that little space in between the question mark and the then. And I would submit to you this morning that we are seated at this moment in time in that little space between God's question mark to us, and our answer to Him. And Esther finally allowed the voice of Mordecai to penetrate her reality and she finally understood that it was not all about her; it was about a bigger plan, a bigger purpose, a bigger destiny.

*Beloved, I'm here to tell you this morning, my prayer for you is that you will never be a nice local church. America does not need another nice, local church. What we need is an embassy for the Kingdom of God, to move and advance God's purposes and God's Kingdom in this hour because we are in a moment of extraordinary battle.<sup>13</sup>*

Life isn't always about what you choose; more often than not, it's about what chooses you."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>“ For Such a Time as This’: Reading (and Becoming) Esther with Christians United for Israel”, *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2, no. 1: (2012) 65-90

<sup>14</sup> Robert Stearns, *The Cry of Mordecai*, 204

(Evangelical Biblical methodology)<sup>15 16</sup>

## 26. Get A Job: Yehuda Amichai's Father Dresses Up on Purim

“Friedrich Pfeuffer, [a German Jew from Wurzburg and the father of the future Israeli national poet, Yehuda Amichai] was a sensitive and emotional person who cared deeply about his fellow men. For example, he knew the names of all the lonely people at the old age home. As the elderly were not able to check whether or not he was telling them the truth, Friedrich would invent messages from relatives for each lonely person to make him or her happy.

One story in particular exemplifies Friedrich Pfeuffer's unique combination of humor and true righteousness. In the 1920s, Ostjuden (poor Jews from Eastern Europe) were ostracized by the German Jews. Unwelcome in the main synagogue, they were forced to pray in a former matzot factory that had been converted into a one-room chapel. During the Jewish holiday of Purim, when it is customary to give to charity and play tricks, Friedrich went to one of his gentile friends, a barber with whom he had fought in World War I, and asked him to make him a long fake beard. Then, dressed in a typical Eastern European Jewish *kaftan* (long coat) and *streimel* (fur hat), Friedrich disguised himself as a *shnorer* (beggar), a Polish Jew trying to collect money for tzedakah. He approached many of the members of his community, but most rebuffed him, telling him to **"go to work,"** to which he replied "today's Purim." Finally, he went to the [Jewish] welfare office to ask for help, and they kicked him out. He broke the window, and a clerk called the police. Only when the police arrived did he take off his beard.

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<sup>15</sup> George Morrison, "Truth Matters," Faith Bible Chapel, Arvada, CO, sermon (May 23, 2010):

"Now, when we talk about any of these Bible characters, here's what I do and here's what you need to do, and it would be helpful in our understanding [of the role God has called us to]: we have to try and put ourselves in their place; where they find themselves when these stories are unfolding. Because you see the advantage we have, is that we see the end of it.... Here we are thousands of years removed from the incident and we see how the whole picture, how beautifully it fits together for God getting his will done and his purposes, not only for Joseph and his family, but for all of Israel and then for all of the world in which we are benefactors of that blessing.

But do you think Joseph had any idea what was taking place in his life at that moment? No! It's like you, and it's like me, there are things happening in our life right now that sometimes we throw up our hands and we say "I can't see any purpose in this whatsoever. I don't understand why this is happening to me".

Our reaction to it is negative, and we find ourselves stumbling through life trying to work it out. But that's where we have to trust, and that's why we have these messages so that we can glean from the experiences of others that have gone through it with God and we can learn ourselves."

<sup>16</sup> Sean Dubrin: "Robert Alter describes the portrayal of human nature in the Bible as caught in a 'powerful interplay' between a 'double dialectic of design and disorder, providence and freedom.'" (Art of Biblical Narrative, 12 whereby biblical narratives can be seen as 'forming a spectrum between opposing extremes of disorder and design," (Robert Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 12-13, 38)

When his identity was revealed, there was an uproar, and people begged him not to disclose the names of those who had treated the needy man badly. In this way, Friedrich Pfeuffer drew attention to the lot of the rejected Ostjuden.

While the child [Yehuda Amichai] saw his mother as "God's housekeeper," his father was God himself. As Amichai explained in an interview, he took the prayer "our father, our King" literally: "I reached the naive conclusion that if you can compare God with a father, my father could also be my God."

(Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of the Israel's National Poet*, p. 33-34)

## **27. Two Modern Thinkers: Why Is God Hidden In The Megillah? Yoel Bin-Nun and Michael Fox**

Mistaken...is the prevailing view...that the religious experience is most simple, that it doesn't know spiritual complexity...shock or pain...This popular view says that the religious experience is easy and clear, gentle and tender: that it is a stream of sweet grass for the embittered soul and restful waters for the difficult day. Actually, the religious consciousness is not so simple and easy, but is most complex, difficult and tortuous. Indeed, where you find its complexity, you find its greatness...It knows of spiritual crisis...of struggle between feeling God's distance and God's nearness...of the spirit's hesitations and doubts...and of contradictions. The mind of the [religious person] seethes with...problems and questions that will never find their solutions. - Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

We now bring two opinions of modern thinkers who have tried to answer this question. The texts are complex and the students might need help in understanding them.

*At first glance, the inclusion of Megillat Esther among the 24 books of the Tanakh, seems very strange. The Megillah seems like a secular book, in total contrast to all the rest of the biblical books. The Megillah completely ignores any aspect of holiness...Why does it give such a secular description of events? What is the goal of such a deliberate rejection of the holy?*

*All of the biblical books...are the story of God's word to mankind in general and the Jewish people specifically. They do not tell the history of the ancient world and not even the history of the Jewish people in the regular sense of the word. [That is to say that the reason for writing the Megillah cannot simply be to retell a historical event that happened to the Jews. Not all ancient Jewish history is retold in the Bible. That, in itself would not be sufficient reason for its inclusion in the Bible].*

*The scroll of Esther stands in opposition to the entire Tanakh. As opposed to the rest of the biblical books which describe the realm of God and God's supervision of the world, the Megillah portrays deliberately, in an exaggerated and very extreme way, the "realm of the reversals", (מלכות ההפך), the reversal of everything that holiness can connect with. [In the entire world of the Megillah, we seem to hear no mention of God and no mention of religious rituals of any kind. Indeed the world is a world where the conventional moral categories of God's world which appear in other biblical books, appear to be completely absent]...*

*The aim of the inclusion of the Book of Esther in the Tanakh is therefore to bring up for examination the question “who rules in the realm of the reversals”. If we had in our possession the Tanakh without the Megillah, we would know God only in every place and situation where God can be directly named. The Megillah comes to complement this deficit and to teach us that God is found secretly also in those places where God cannot be named. Here we encounter a deep issue connected with the culture of Persia. The Persian belief system divides the world up into two realms, of good and of evil that eternally battle between them. The Megillah comes to teach us ...that God directs the world even when God hides...[God does not only direct the world of good, but also those parts of the world where evil seems to rule and where at face value, there is no sign of God’s presence]. Esther teaches us that God supervises the world, even in a time when His face appears to be hidden [Esther from “Hester Panim”] from us, when we cannot discern God on the surface of things.*

*In this way, Megillat Esther completes the Tanakh. It was deliberately written in such a radically secular style to teach us that divine providence exists in places and situations far from the realm of holiness, and that God’s hand directs the world even in places where God appears to be hidden.*

**Rabbi Yoel Ben Nun** (Israel, 1990’s)

*God in Esther is indeed veiled, as the popular metaphor puts it...A veil suggests that there is something behind it and invites us to look through. But when we look through this one, we do not see the sturdy old faith that so many readers assume must be back there somewhere. We see a light but it shimmers. [In other words, instead of the clear mention of God and the way that God acts in the other biblical books – the “sturdy old faith” – we only see signs of a faint reflection of God’s presence, if we look very carefully – “a light that shimmers”].*

*This carefully crafted [ambivalence] is best explained as an attempt to convey uncertainty about God’s role in history. [There is a reason that the author of Esther has not made God a more prominent actor in the story and has drawn God, if at all, below the surface of the story, with just a hint of presence]. The author is not quite certain about God’s role in these events (are you?) and does not conceal that uncertainty. By refusing to exclude that possibility, [i.e. that God is indeed in control behind the scenes and is directing the action], the author conveys his belief that there can be no definitive knowledge of the workings of God’s hand in history. Not even a wonderful deliverance can prove that God was directing events: nor could threat and disaster prove His absence.*

*The story’s [ambivalence] conveys the message that the Jews should not lose faith if they too are uncertain about where God is in a crisis. [Since it is impossible to know for sure whether God is present, you should never discount the possibility even when things look very bleak, as they did for the Jews of Persia in the story]. Israel will survive - that is the author’s faith – but how this will happen he does not know. Events are ambiguous and God’s activity cannot be directly read out of them: yet they are not random...[The author might not be sure what to believe but he is sure that there is some kind of pattern in the world and that things such as the events of the Megillah have not happened for no reason at all].*

*When we [search carefully] the text of Esther for traces of God's activity, we are doing what the author made us do. The author would have us probe the events that we witness in our lives in the same way. He is teaching a theology of possibility. [He wants us to be aware, all the time, of the possibility that behind the world there is indeed a benevolent God that works in mysterious ways].*

**Professor Michael Fox** (USA, 1990s)

Both of these modern Jewish thinkers believe that the book and its author have things to tell us about religious faith. However, their readings are very different. Where one finds certainty regarding God's role in history and in the world, in the silence of the text, the other finds ambiguity and uncertainty. But they both believe that there is a deep theological message in the text's silence and reject a secular reading of so apparently secular a text.