

## **Esther, Queen of Theater** **Yehudit Mazur-Shlomi, Class of '27**

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“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances,” *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare.

It is common for both individuals and communities to pray for miracles. However, no miracle comes to be “just because.” Miracles happen when people work for them. Sometimes these miracles come through prayer; other times they come through fighting. And occasionally, they arrive by those who seek them using all of their means, never stepping off the very thin tightrope on which they have to balance to bring those miracles to be. One person who brings miracles through this balancing act is certainly Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia.

Over the course of the Megillah, Esther grows from a shy girl who never asks for anything to a mature and wise queen who commands the attention of everyone around her. As she evolves, she learns to use all of her means—her beauty and her sexuality, but most of all, her particular feminine wisdom—to bring redemption to her people.

Esther appears in the right place at the right time, if against her will. The Megillah doesn’t tell us if she was dragged to the palace, or if she went on her own but without real consent, like all of the other young virgins of the Persian Empire. All we know is that the Megillah tells us, “Esther too was taken into the king’s palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women” (2:8).

Esther carefully follows Mordechai’s instructions, revealing nothing about who she is, and demanding nothing. By making herself small, she wins “the admiration of all who saw her” (2:15). What does it mean that she won admiration? The midrash in Esther Rabbah (6:10) offers a few possible answers:

Rabbi Yuda says: Like that portrait that a thousand people look at and it is beautiful to them all ... The Rabbis said: “And Esther found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her”—in the eyes of the higher beings [angels] and of the lower [humans]; that is what is written: “And you shall find favor and good grace in the eyes of God and man” (Proverbs 3:4).

Ibn Ezra builds on this, explaining that when Esther “did not ask for anything,” it was a sign of her wisdom. Because she was not demanding, she was able to build favor, and through that favor, she would later be able to save the Jewish people. Even without knowing about the coming calamity, Esther almost instinctively decides to keep playing the role of a shy modest girl, allowing her to remain in the king’s good graces.

At first glance, Esther attaining the position of queen should have been a triumph. Instead, very quickly, Esther finds herself facing seemingly certain death. It seems that her position has granted her two choices, neither of which will allow her to live. Either she will be killed for being a Jew, or she will be executed for disobeying the king's decree and seeking him out without being summoned. However, by this point in the story, Esther has developed the composure and perspective to recognize that she has some power of her own. Rather than passively waiting to see what will happen to her, like she did when she was taken to the king for the first time, she devises a plan to take control of her destiny. Esther is

ready to make her own decisions for the benefit of her people, even if it means sacrificing herself. She prepares herself through prayer, but she sets her and her people's salvation in motion through action.

Esther does not pray with only herself in mind, nor does she pray alone. Realizing her potential for power, as a queen and a woman who is expected to possibly sacrifice herself, she issues an order to all of the Jews of Shushan to fast and pray, which they do. Perhaps this is the first moment where Esther realizes she can be a leader, giving her the strength she needs to go to Achashverosh.

The Megillah imagines Esther putting on a costume of sorts, hiding the fear that she will be killed and instead presenting herself as a powerful, self-possessed queen. As she prepares to go meet the king, after three days of fasting and praying, the Megillah says, “vatilbash Esther malchut” (5:1). While this phrase is usually translated as “On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel” (JPS, 1985), the exact translation should be more like this one: “Esther cloaked herself in majesty” (Metsudah, 2001). This majesty becomes a costume and a shield, allowing her to find the strength to advocate for the Jewish people.

While taking care to dress in a certain way might seem frivolous, Esther knows that every move of hers needs to be well considered. Commenting on this somewhat strange phrase, Rashi explains, “**In majesty.** Regal clothing. But our Rabbis said that Divine Inspiration enveloped her.” Echoing this, Kedushat Levi (in his section on Purim) says, “Specifically when Esther stood ‘before him’—before (the king), that evildoer—he would look at her and absorb some of the spiritual radiance (that enveloped her due to Shekhinah’s presence), and he would thereby be induced to protect the Jews’ interests.” By this moment, Esther might have lost her novelty in the eyes of a king who has unlimited access to his concubines. She is planning to make the biggest request possible of a king who has surely tired of everyone wanting things from him. Therefore, Esther must cloak herself in majesty, reminding the king why he chose her in the first place. In order to succeed, Esther must be both sexually desirable and intellectually provoking.

While at the feast, Esther shows her understanding of her precarious position by simply showing the king favor, rather than requesting anything from him. She knows that this will pique the king's interest, so she only says, “let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare **for them**” (5:8). Beyond that, she gives no sign that she wants something, much less what that thing will be.

Esther is pushing all the right buttons, having observed the character of her husband, Achashverosh, closely. As Rashi explains, Esther realizes that when she invited Haman that he would be envied by the king and his ministers, that the king would think that Haman was her lover, and that he would kill them (both Esther and Haman). Esther has created the illusion of a love triangle where none exists, which both attracts the king's interest and threatens Haman's life, along with her own. However, she believes it will lead to the desired result—saving her people.

When the second feast arrives, if this were actually a play, there would be suspenseful music and flashing lights highlighting the uncertainty and danger of the queen's risky moves. Knowing that the king is prone to anger and suspicion, Esther sets the scene perfectly. She dramatically points an accusatory

finger at Haman who, clueless and drunk, makes the worst move possible—leaning on the couch where the queen was reclining in order to beg for his life. As the Megillah tells us, “When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet room, Haman was lying prostrate on the couch on which Esther reclined. ‘Does he mean,’ cried the king, ‘to ravish the queen in my own palace?’ No sooner did these words leave the king’s lips than Haman’s face was covered” (7:7-8). And so, at this moment of climax, everything unfolds exactly as Esther—the queen, the actress, the mastermind—imagined.

However, even once Haman is taken away to be executed, Esther knows that the play is not yet finished. She doesn’t stop until she can ensure that the Jews, her people, are guaranteed safe and prosperous life in the kingdom. She makes sure the story is written down as a commemoration and warning for future generations of Jews, allowing it to become a drama that endures.

Throughout the story, Esther does not make a single false move: in the harem, as a young girl in training to be a wife, and as a queen in danger, coolly keeping her head instead of panicking. As Leah Kohn writes, “While Esther’s story is impressive on the level of intrigue, bravery and adventure, it is made eternal by her self-sacrifice and unmitigated faith. Esther remains a role model not because of her external beauty and not because she was queen of a powerful empire, but because of her inner fortitude and devotion. Her example stands before us as we confront today’s exile-specific dilemmas between faith and reason; Judaism and assimilation; personal comfort and self-sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup> Through her faith, her intelligence, and her beauty, Esther turns her womanhood, which began as a liability, into an asset, and saves the Jewish people as only she could have done.

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<sup>1</sup> Leah Kohn. <http://www.torah.org/learning/women/class23.html>