

# Queen Esther, a Hero for Our Time

A paradox of Jewish fragility and heroism.

**By Meir Soloveichik**

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A perplexing paradox lies at the heart of Purim, the holiday celebrated this week by Jews around the world. No day is more associated with Jewish joy; yet rightly understood the scriptural source of our celebration — the biblical book of Esther — proclaims a terrifying teaching.

Let us briefly review the plot. The Persian king Ahasuerus — the character in the Bible most akin to Henry VIII — is overcome by drunken rage and rids himself of his wife. In a contest eerily akin to reality shows today, he conducts a search for a new queen, ultimately choosing a beautiful Jewish woman named Esther, who is advised by her cousin Mordecai not to disclose her religious identity. Haman, the high-ranking minister to Ahasuerus, convinces the king to decree a genocide of the Jews. Urged into action by her cousin, Esther plays on the king's paranoia, engaging in court intrigue to turn him against Haman, who is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. At Esther's initiative, and with Ahasuerus' encouragement, Jews across the empire wage war against Haman's allies, and Mordecai is given the political position once held by Haman. The central ritual of Purim is the reading of this biblical book aloud in synagogue as a celebration of Jewish salvation and the defeat of anti-Semitism.

Yet as the final words are read, and joyous song erupts in the sanctuary, the careful reader realizes that the security of Persian Jewry, and of Mordecai and Esther, is anything other than assured, and that even the swift nature of Haman's fall is a reflection of terrifying political instability. In such a society, with such an unbalanced and capricious king, could not another Haman easily arise?

The disquieting conclusion of Esther's tale was eloquently described by my great-uncle, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. "If a prime minister who just yesterday enjoyed the full confidence and trust of the king was suddenly convicted and executed," he reflected, "then who is wise and clairvoyant enough to assure us that the same unreasonable, absurd, neurotic change of mood and mind will not repeat itself?" The Purim tale reminds us that a government, and the society it oversees, can turn against its most vulnerable in a matter of moments. This is why, he argued, Esther's story is no triumphal tale; on the contrary, it is "the book of the vulnerability of man in general and specifically of the vulnerability of the Jew."

That it was Rabbi Soloveitchik who understood this isn't a coincidence. As a young man in the 1920s, he had traveled from Eastern Europe to study philosophy in the University of Berlin. The city was then a center of Jewish intellectual and cultural achievement; Rabbi Soloveitchik would have met coreligionists who saw themselves as both German and Jewish, who had served the kaiser in the First World War and were patriotically committed to their country's future. They would have spoken of the Enlightenment, and progress, and religious acceptance in their society. Then that very same society embraced a Haman-figure, and the lives Jews knew in Europe disappeared forever. Small wonder, then, that a rabbi who escaped this inferno would recognize the frightening implications of Jewish vulnerability inherent in Esther's tale.

Why, then, is Purim marked as a holiday? If the conclusion of Esther is more nerve-racking than is often thought, what is the source of our joy? The answer, in part, is that it is this very vulnerability that makes Jewish heroism possible, and that is why, on Purim, we focus on the woman that gave this biblical book her name: it is Esther whom we celebrate. Precisely because of the constancy of Jewish vulnerability, we glorify Esther's initiative, courage, and wisdom to inculcate these same virtues in our posterity.

Here we must understand how different the Book of Esther is from every other book in the Hebrew Bible. In this tale no mention is made of the divine; the Jews inhabit a world devoid of revelation. Whereas in every other scriptural tale political engagements are under prophetic instruction, in the Persian court God gives no guidance to the Jews facing a terrible danger. Esther, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, faced an unprecedented question: "How can the Jew triumph over his adversaries and enemies if God has stopped speaking to him, if the cryptic messages he receives remain unintelligible and incomprehensible?"

In this sense, Esther is the first biblical figure, male or female, to engage in *statesmanship*. Previous heroes — Moses and Elijah, Samuel and Deborah — are prophets who are guided and guarded by the Divine, but Esther operates on instinct, reflecting a mastery of realpolitik. As Isaiah Berlin wrote in his essay "On Political Judgment," great leaders practice affairs of state not as a science but an art; they are, more akin to orchestra conductors than chemists. Facing a crisis, they "grasp the unique combination of characteristics that constitute this particular situation — this and no other." Esther is the first scriptural figure to embody this description, emerging as a woman for all seasons, a hero celebrated year after year.

Purim thus marks the fragility of Jewish security, but also the possibility of heroism in the face of this vulnerability. It is therefore a holiday for our time. Around the world, and especially in a Europe that should know better, anti-Semitism has made itself manifest once again. As Esther's example is celebrated, and Jews gather in synagogue to study her terrifying tale, we are reminded why, in the face of hate, we remain vigilant — and why we continue to joyously celebrate all the same.

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