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Maggid Studies in Tanakh • Stone Edition

Esther

Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile

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The Destiny Moment

> Esther told Hatakh to take back to Mordecai the following reply: "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." When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, 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. 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." Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: "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!" (Est. 4:10–16)

Esther challenged Mordecai to remove his sackcloth. He refused. Mordecai challenged Esther to approach the king. She refused. Both invitations and rejections were transmitted through a foreign source, a minor

character presumably reliable enough that neither feared exposure. The book's author, by using Hatakh to deliver very difficult and intimate news and the subsequent reactions and requests related to it, demonstrates that the protagonists trusted in his services. Furthermore, the use of a messenger for matters of such serious consequence displays the great emotional disparity between the experiences and surroundings of the one in exile versus the one in the palace. Perhaps the greatest indicator of this distance is that Queen Esther shows misplaced distress when hearing of the decree:

> 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. 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. (Est. 4:3–4)

We find ourselves relieved by Esther's agitation; it demonstrates that even in the palace, she retained a strong feeling of community and could be appropriately empathic and alarmed. But as we continue reading the verse, our feelings as readers abruptly shift. Esther was not anxious about the fate of her people but about Mordecai's wardrobe choices. As explored above, Esther sent him clothing that he refused to wear. There is only one set of clothing that Mordecai will wear from the palace; the robes he earns by the story's end. On a practical level, it seems odd that Esther had a change of clothing for her uncle on the ready. On a spiritual level, we are chagrined that Mordecai's emotional state did not itself elicit a reaction. As public as it was in the middle of the streets of Shushan, Haman's decree was totally ignored inside the palace. This striking interaction between uncle and niece is cluttered with people – maidens and eunuchs – a possible indication that Esther had one face for the public and another for the expression of her most private emotions. This is the interpretation that Gersonides favors when explaining that Esther next sent Hatakh to find out "*al zeh ve'al ma zeh*" (Esther 4:5), the why and wherefore of it all: "When she sensed that he would not accept [the clothing], then she knew that it was on account of great mourning and

immense suffering. Thus, she sent Hatakh to Mordecai to investigate what this was all about."

One opinion in the Talmud reads Esther's distress differently, seeing it as an emotional and physical sensation so intense that the anxiety hijacked her body:

> The verse states: "Then the queen was exceedingly distressed (*vatitḥalḥal*)" (Est. 4:4). The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of *vatitḥalḥal*? Rav said: This means that she began to menstruate out of fear, as the cavities, *ḥalalim*, of her body opened. And R. Yirmeya said: Her bowels were loosened, also understanding the verse as referring to her bodily cavities.[35]

On every level, Esther's distress was understandable. She feared for her uncle. She feared for her people. She feared for herself. The Sages who commented on this unusual verb, *vatitḥalḥal*, tried a lexicographical jump – *ḥalalim* – to indicate that her very body cavities had a visceral reaction to the news. This reaction could have amounted to a number of physical complications, and Rav and R. Yirmeya entertain two: menstruation or defecation. The latter might seem a more natural response, but bleeding would have other implications. Bleeding foreshadows death; menstrual bleeding is a sign that new life has not been created. From a Jewish legal standpoint, it would have engendered a sexual separation between the king and queen. Yet in this reading, more than any physical impurity on the queen's part might have been the disgust Esther had for this monster who lent his approval to her very destruction. The response of defecation suggests this level of revulsion.

A Dual Identity Further Divided

In addition to possible emotional distance between uncle and niece, a host of other issues crop up in this interaction that are interpretation

35. Megilla 15a. For whether or not it would be possible for menstruation to be brought on by stress, see Jeremy Brown, "Queen Esther, Mood, and Menstruation," http://www.talmudology.com/jeremybrownmdgmailcom/2015/11/10/sotah-20b-queen-esther-mood-and-menstruation?rq=menstruation.

worthy and create the groundwork for the impending transformation. Laniak suggests that diaspora life is defined by having a peripheral identity and that Esther experiences this marginal status twice over: "Esther, like other figures in diaspora stories, lives at the edge of two worlds: her Jewish world with its center in Palestine and the Persian world in whose center she now lives. She is marginalized in both contexts, in one by physical distance, in the other by emotional distance."[36] To highlight the internal conflict and drama of Esther's charged turnaround, the text presents several obstructions: the inability for Mordecai and Esther to communicate directly, the supposed palace bias of the intermediary that makes Hatakh potentially suspect, the rules of court life around appearance, in terms of both clothing appropriate to the palace and the presentation of court members to the king unannounced. This maze seems, to the young and naive Esther, absolutely impenetrable. Levenson adds to this mix:

> How Mordecai knows of the plot when Esther, much closer to the seat of power, does not is one mystery. Another involves the knowledge that Esther's staff obviously have of her relationship to Mordecai when her Jewishness itself is a secret. In any event, given her ignorance of the cause of his public mourning, her extreme agitation would seem to be the result not of the genocidal decree against her people, but of her embarrassment at his grossly inappropriate appearance amid the opulence of the fortified compound of Susa. Perhaps she is also discomfited by the thought that Mordecai's public demonstration of his Jewishness will eventually undermine her own persona as a Gentile queen. The effect of vv. 4–11 is thus to highlight the distance between Mordecai the Jew and Esther the Persian. A critique of Jews who fail to identify with their people may be implied here.[37]

The contrast that Levenson points to of Mordecai's knowledge versus Esther's ignorance begins the chapter and will only truly resolve when

36. Laniak, "Esther's 'Volkcentrism,'" 79.
37. Levenson, *Esther*, 78–79.

they are both fully knowledgeable. This knowledge relates not only to a detailed report on the nature and force of the decree, the cognitive understanding that Esther lacked as the chapter began, but to the metacognition of all that this means for Esther and her people. Mordecai inducted her into this knowledge incrementally, balancing fact and consequence, statements and questions. In this sense, Mordecai fulfilled his role as *omen*, a guardian to his niece, not only as caregiver but also as mentor.

That Mordecai knew of the plot and Esther did not may not be the mystery that Levenson depicts. We do not know how Mordecai knew of the conspiracy to topple the king, only that he was in the right place at the right time. As mentioned previously, Mordecai was a leader who wanted to know and so placed himself in situations and locations where knowledge was the currency. Esther, by contrast, strikes the reader as a person who embraced willful and volitional ignorance. Life may be safer and easier as the passive individual who is acted upon, a lesson she surely understood and perhaps internalized from the beauty contest. Had she wanted to know the fate of her people, she could have easily obtained the information. Levenson's observation that this scene may be a critique of those who fail to identify with their people is well taken. Fortunately for the story and its outcome, Esther would soon enough identify with the fate of the Jews. Mordecai had to tease out this identification carefully, questioning her about her own sense of self, family, community, and purpose until she was able to formulate a personal and compelling answer herself. In this process, Mordecai became not only her teacher but an instructor to all future readers.

Once the distance between the two was well established in chapter 4, Mordecai's challenge to Esther could serve as either a bridge or a more final separation. Commentators, ancient and modern, failed to ask what would have happened had Esther not accepted Mordecai's challenge. Imagining possible alternatives highlights the importance of what Esther signed on to, with a realization of all of its consequences. In this sense, she was very unlike her husband. Where his knee-jerk reaction was to say yes too quickly, often irrationally, to be loved and then get trapped by the implications of his yes, Esther's initial reaction was to say no, reflecting a more cautious and judicious approach to major decisions. Ahasuerus could not change his mind, even when it was criti-

cal that he do so. Esther was able to be persuaded through a rational process, as evidenced by the dialogue between the two that must be analyzed step by incremental step. The first phase in the conversation was Esther's initial refusal:

> Hatakh went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate; 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. 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. (Est. 4:6–8)

In Mordecai's mind, laying out the edict in documentation would have been enough to spark Esther's willingness to lead. He perhaps naively mistook information for persuasion. Esther said no. Her refusal may have shocked Mordecai. It may also have surprised Esther that a woman of her docility – she seemed to go along with all the instructions given her – would stop at this one life-threatening demand. Some may believe that Esther, enjoying the privileges of the royal class, was not eager to let them go to benefit her people. The gate separating her from her uncle in sackcloth and ash signaled two wholly distinctive universes. She had crossed to safety. Mordecai and his people were left in the hands of a cold-blooded enemy. The wall between them, embodied by the human form of an agent delivering messages, could not have been higher. Such a reading may not be fair to this young and inexperienced woman, who was only just learning the policies and politics of Shushan's sprawling palace and her infinitesimally humble place in it. The feast and tax remission days celebrating her coronation as the new queen were long past and we wonder what was running through the young queen's mind. Was her refusal an instinctive reaction of fear? Having not been summoned for a month, Esther feared she was already out of favor and that a bold request prodded by Mordecai might have her facing the same fate as her predecessor. At least Mordecai was with his people. Isolated and

unsure, Esther may have felt how little her cherished uncle understood her position.

To add to the anxiety, Josephus includes a threatening detail to the narrative as he imagined it. Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes in his telling, had men with axes to surround his throne. The message of intimidation and danger was unmistakable.[38] Bearing in mind that Esther was no longer a new bride but an "old" wife of five years who had not been summoned in thirty days, the idea of approaching the throne with this absurd request must have felt completely out of reach, literally and metaphorically. As we read the text of her rejection, we become mindful of the fast and slow pacing of the text. Mordecai is swift to come to the king's gate and urgent in his need to reach Esther. Esther is halting and long-winded in her refusal:

> When Hatakh came and delivered Mordecai's message to Esther, Esther told Hatakh to take back to Mordecai the following reply: "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." (Est. 4:9–11)

The refusal is filled with courtier jargon and is among the longest verses in the *megilla*.[39] It suggests a long-held truth about the acceptance or

38. Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:6, 469.

39. The longest verse in the scroll, at forty-three Hebrew words, is 8:9, which also happens to be the longest verse in the Hebrew Bible as well. It also contains one of the longest words in Tanakh, *haashdarpanim*, "satraps": "So the king's scribes were summoned at that time, on the twenty-third day of the third month, that is, the month of Sivan; and letters were written, at Mordecai's dictation, to the Jews and to the satraps, the governors and the officials of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia: to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and to the Jews in their own script and

rejection of leadership roles. A strong yes often stands alone as an affirmation. A no is often followed by lengthy excuses.

There is an underlying question that Mordecai assumed was answered, namely, would a woman at this time in Persia have been able to exert this kind of force and pressure on a king to do her bidding? We have already noted the role that women have played in his empire thus far. Thamar Gindin insists she would have, and that "according to Greek historians, Iranian women (of noble birth, of course) enjoyed a much higher status than their sisters in other lands, and that royal women had far-reaching influence in the king's court. This holds true in matters of life and death as well."[40] She brings as examples Atosa, daughter of Cyrus, who controlled the royal court, and Amestris, wife of Xerxes, who made her son execute the leader of a rebellion who killed one of her other sons. She was also able to stay an execution. Artemesia, queen of Caria, Greece, was an ally of Xerxes who gave him valuable advice he disregarded to his peril. Some have tried to link Esther directly with Amestris or Amestris with Vashti but either identification is improbable. Perhaps there is precedent for a woman of power in Persia to make her views known, but this seems like an imaginative stretch since Esther was young and not long in the household. One cannot assume she had any of the swagger and confidence to sway her new and intemperate husband.

Mordecai's Strategy

Rather than acknowledge Esther's fears, validate them, and calm her, Mordecai exacerbated her heightened stress. He shifted in strategy from a declarative statement to a posture of humble inquiry, punctuated by nuanced warnings:

> Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent

language." This is not surprising, since, as demonstrated above, the verse's length alone communicates the slow, winding ways of Persian government. When it comes to bureaucratic structures, where one word suffices, seven are used.

40. Gindin, *Book of Esther Unmasked*, 170.

> 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. (Est. 4:13–14)

Out of context, Esther's refusal had to be met with a multipronged approach. Unable to see her and the wrinkle in her brow or the consternation at the edges of her mouth or to observe anything other than her reaction to his wardrobe choice, he had to devise a brief and clever way to move her. He utilized multiple approaches without overtly suggesting that Esther would be guaranteed success. The first was modeling disobedience by coming to the king's gate in sackcloth. This seditious behavior did not work. He then proceeded to use the following four approaches to convince her, not relying merely on one but on the strength of them in combination:

- the argument of unity
- the argument of posterity
- the argument of history
- the argument of uncertainty

Being inaccessible at an urgent time, Mordecai needed to employ whatever rhetorical tools were at his disposal to communicate the severity of the moment and the unique opportunity that his niece had to rise to the call of leadership.

In the argument of unity, Mordecai suggested that Esther's allegiances must not be divided. She may have been in the king's house, but she was not of the king's house. Therefore, she was subject to whatever the king decreed against her own people, a people in desperate need of a heroine. Initially, this response unfairly assumed that Esther no longer saw herself as part of her nation, an odd and unsettling assumption given that she was raised by Mordecai. Yet it made sense given Mordecai's earlier instruction that she not reveal her ancestry. If her Jewish identity was so tightly concealed, Mordecai may have thus been suggesting that despite hiding her faith, she was still at risk. Mordecai's thoughtful provocation might have seemed illogical to her, confusing Esther as it

still confuses readers today. If she had thus far been successful at concealing her identity, she would likely be able to continue hiding it and get around the decree. Having told her unequivocally to be silent, Mordecai now challenged Esther to speak out suddenly and unexpectedly.

We cannot imagine Mordecai ever revealing her secret, nor should we read this as an implied threat to Esther that he might expose her. This would have forced her to come forward to the king because her life would be at risk in either instance. More likely, Mordecai understood that Esther could conceal her identity for only so long. In the new wave of anti-Jewish sentiment, she, too, would be outed eventually, and this revelation would cost her dearly. In this, Mordecai was once again giving her wise counsel, echoing a sentiment in Ecclesiastes with a royal undercurrent: "Do not revile the king even in your thought, or curse the rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature shall tell the matter" (10:20). Words travel. Esther was not safe. She could no longer trust the forces in power inside the palace. She should, thus, openly embrace the plight of her people.

In the argument of posterity, Mordecai stated outright that the Jews would be rescued come what may: "Relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter" (Est. 4:14). To that end, Mordecai asked Esther if she wanted to be a lead actor in this majestic story or not. If she remained silent, the story would go on without her, and the credit and congratulations would go to someone else. Should she decide, however, to take a leadership role, she would be remembered for posterity. Posterity may be thought of as a legacy lined with vanity; the desire to achieve immortality always assumes that one is worthy of being remembered. Vanity may seem out of place as an incentive for action until we recall what happened two chapters earlier. Esther was part of another public event: a pageant. Her outside was on display in a contest she won. Now her inside was being tested. Her uncle encouraged her to pass the test.

Mordecai also implied another test and benefit in rising to this challenge that again, initially sounded harsh: the redemption of her father's house; relief would come, "while you and your father's house will perish" (Est. 4:14). Yet Esther as an orphan did not have a father's house, making Mordecai sound unnecessarily cruel and punishing. This

is where the argument of history enters. Perhaps Mordecai was not referring to her father literally but to her ancestral or paternal home, a home that connected her to King Saul. Her uncle, who lived with the family stain that Saul had failed the Israelites for not ridding them of the Amalekite violence that birthed the likes of Haman, saw in Esther a chance to make good on the royal association generations later. Esther, by confronting Haman and securing his execution, would offer an alternate end to the family story, a much-needed corrective. The family reputation of failure would be upended by a narrative of redemption. Esther was a family ambassador; she, and only she, could reconfigure the legacy that burdened her family, her tribe, and her people. Without this, relief and deliverance would come to the Israelites, but the opportunity to redeem the tribe of Benjamin would end. Her Jewish genealogical line would be over and further marked by an inexcusable number of Jewish deaths in Persia. Yitzhak Berger makes this even more explicit and argues for a strong thematic link between the Book of Esther and the tribe of Benjamin, as described in the Book of Samuel, supporting his claim that "the author of Esther is fundamentally concerned with the reputation of Benjaminite leadership."[41]

There is, in this reading, a compelling political agenda hidden in the book's pages. "The initiatives taken by Esther and the Jews, to an even greater extent than has been appreciated, stand as reactions to unfavorable depictions of Saul; and, in the process, they counteract a running theme of Davidic moral superiority in the realm of justice and retribution."[42] The linguistic ties between the books cannot be ignored, particularly in this argument of personal history, since the expression "you and your ancestral home" appears in both Saul's and Esther's narratives. Samuel first used it elliptically when Saul lost his donkeys and sought out Samuel the seer for guidance. Samuel seemed to ignore the matter of the lost animals in favor of a much larger role for Saul as the next king, but, in a display of prophetic talent mixed with a dose of cynicism, he told Saul that the lad's work had already been accomplished: "As for

41. Yitzhak Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 626.

42. Ibid., 627.

your donkeys that strayed three days ago, do not concern yourself about them, for they have been found. And for whom is all Israel yearning, if not for you and *all your ancestral house*?" (I Sam. 9:20). Samuel, dubious of the kingship enterprise from the start, was not yearning for a king. He regarded himself as the leader but suggested to Saul that the people awaited him to take charge, linking him directly to a long line of leaders before him from the tribe of Benjamin. There is irony in this because leadership was supposed to come from the tribe of Judah.

The expression "you and your ancestral house" connects both texts even though their contexts are dramatically different. Saul found himself tossed by fate into a leadership role he neither wanted nor arguably deserved, for an undeserving people who merely wanted to be "like all the other nations" (I Sam. 8:5). The two narratives are also connected by virtue of other expressions, as Berger outlines. When Esther was agitated or confused by Mordecai's sackcloth, the text uses the unusual word *vatitḥalḥal* to describe her condition (Est. 4:4). She then announced a fast of three days. While there are many three-day periods in the Hebrew Bible, this is only one of two instances where the three days were devoted to abstention from food.[43] The only other is in I Samuel in reference to a battle of David's against the Amalekites. A servant who led David and his warriors to the enemy was sick and left without food for three days and nights by his Amalekite owner until David and his band restored him to health. The term used to describe his sickness shares the same root as the one in Esther 4.

Esther was told that salvation could be hers but that it would come regardless of her, but Saul was told by Samuel that when the kingship was taken from him, the Lord would "bestow it on another more worthy..." (I Sam. 15:28). Berger notes: "As is widely assumed, this parallel signals that while Saul lost his kingship to a 'more worthy' David, Esther will regain for the family its position of royalty, if only in the Persian exile."

Mordecai closed his plea to Esther with the argument of uncertainty: "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position

43. For more on examples and the significance of this three-day period, see Erica Brown, "The Liminality of Three Days and Three Nights," in *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Jerusalem: Maggid/OU Press, 2017), 77–90.

for just such a crisis" (Est. 4:14). Arguably, it is the question he posed rather than the declarative statements he made that pushed Esther to reconsider. The argument of uncertainty assumes that an outcome is inherently unknowable but that conditions can be created and actions taken that may lead to a desired outcome, another example of a calculated risk. The situation in Persia for Jews was not ambiguous. Nothing could have been clearer than Haman's request and Ahasuerus' accommodation to him. If Mordecai truly communicated the details of Haman's perfidious arrangement to Esther, he was placing risk against risk. In reality, Esther had nothing to lose – as a Jew herself, she could not escape the fate of all Jews. But she needed to get to the point where the arguments Mordecai made moved her from head to heart and back to head again.

From an emotional perspective, the orphaned Esther had a chance of achieving posterity and bringing respect back to her family name. If she lacked a past, she could shape a future. Mordecai closed by asking a question that Esther could not possibly answer: What are you here in this world to do? None of us know the answer to this question. In the biblical era, this gift of knowledge and purpose was given to a few prophets explicitly. Mordecai was not a prophet. He could not petition Esther in the name of God, only in the name of her people.

Fox believes that Mordecai was just as uncertain as Esther. He was not using the argument of uncertainty as a false motivation but believed that solutions were not crystallized and forthcoming:

> "Who knows" both expresses a possibility and grants that it is only that. Mordecai believes that it *might be* precisely for a time like the present that Esther has come to the throne. He raises the possibility that even before events began sliding toward disaster, some force was preparing the way for deliverance. This notion is teleological and thus assumes the working of some hidden guidance of history beyond human powers. This is not stated as a confident religious affirmation but as a possibility proffered with a hesitancy uncharacteristic of Mordecai. He is confident

> that the Jewish people will survive but uncertain how this will come to pass.[44]

Mordecai's uncharacteristic hesitancy may not be that uncharacteristic for a man of faith. Exile was long regarded in biblical literature as a punishment, a hiding of God's face, as recorded in this exhortation in Deuteronomy: "Then My anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My countenance from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, 'Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us'" (Deut. 31:17). Mordecai may have felt genuinely despondent and uncertain that God would offer help at this vulnerable time because His people may not have deserved it. Nevertheless, he proceeded.

The argument of uncertainty is compelling because it speaks to the elemental drive that humans have to control their surroundings and their futures, without necessarily disciplining or controlling their own most frightening impulses. We desire, almost demand, to know that which we can never know, to remove ourselves from doubt and to rid ourselves of the burden of that which is vague or not fully formed. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* believes that although humans try hard to escape from the human condition, they can never free themselves from it. Thus, a human being

> experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. At every moment he can grasp the non-temporal truth of his existence. But between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing. … As long as there have been men and women and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition.[45]

44. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 245.
45. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2015), 7.

Even failure can be more rewarding that uncertainty. Because ambiguity is such a treacherous condition, de Beauvoir observes two reactions to unburdening the self in doubt: either "by yielding to eternity or enclosing oneself in the pure moment."[46] These are the two impulses that Mordecai strives to uncover in his niece. What he saw in Esther's response was her enclosure in the moment. Literally enclosed in a palace, trapped and protected by its many rules, her life became momentary, focused on the fleeting importance of beauty. Mordecai appealed to the competing impulse without demanding submission. Esther could, instead of staying in the moment, yield to eternity. And she did.

Sometimes only a few words can encourage transformation. One brief conversation through an intermediary totally reshaped the lives of Esther and Mordecai and the Persian Jewish community. Fox observes the significance of this destiny moment for Esther and her people:

> At this moment, she undergoes a profound, almost inexplicable change, as if Mordecai had stirred up in her a latent sense of destiny. She now takes the initiative. In a foreshadowing of the role she is about to assume, she immediately commands Mordecai to assemble the Jews to fast for her. She has begun initiating plans of her own, and she is becoming a leader of her people. Then she declares with quiet determination, "I will go to the king unlawfully, and if I perish, I perish" (4:16).[47]

Esther fought ambiguity with submission to a mission far greater than her life: the life of her people. Hegel reminds us that it is only through such life-and-death decisions that we know who we truly are: "It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained…the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness."[48]

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46. Ibid., 8.
47. Fox, "Three Esthers," 53.
48. George Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1967), 233.

Mission Impossible

The reader is ill-prepared for the end of the scene where Esther makes a sudden and surprising shift toward duty and service, understanding the full ramifications such a decision has for her very life. Braced with the knowledge she lacked at the chapter's beginning, she was ready to take charge of both herself and others: her maidens, her uncle, and her people. Fox argues:

> In convening such an assembly and issuing directives to the community, Esther is assuming the role of a religious and national leader and doing so prior to Mordecai's own assumption of that role. She has taken control, giving Mordecai instructions, enjoining a fast on the Jews, and deciding to act contrary to law. Her resolute behavior marks a woman determined to work her way through a crisis, not one cowed into obedience.[49]

Esther as an orphan went to the home of her uncle and then to the home of the king, each time losing herself. Nevertheless, as the Talmud described this destiny moment, Esther gained self-confidence. She clothed herself in royalty; not literal clothing but a royal bearing, a bearing that reflected divine inspiration; the garments of holiness were draped across an otherworldly queen. Esther was girded with majesty:

> The verse states: "And it came to pass on the third day, that Esther clothed herself in royalty" (Est. 5:1). It should have said: Esther clothed herself in royal garments. R. Elazar said that R. Ḥanina said: This teaches that she clothed herself with a divine spirit of inspiration, as it is written here: "And she clothed herself," and it is written elsewhere: "And the spirit clothed Amasai" (I Chr. 12:19).[50]

Esther's sudden declaration of a fast marked the intensity of her newfound commitment. Where the chapter opens with the people weeping and fasting in verse 3, Esther demanded more: a three-day fast. She

49. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 200.
50. Megilla 15a.

asked this not only of herself but of all the Jews in the royal city. Interestingly, she also demanded this of her non-Jewish maidens, whose fate was bound with hers not through faith but through service. Anyone associated with Esther must feel her plight viscerally, as she did: "Go, assemble all the Jews in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day; I and my maidens will observe the same fast" (4:16). One talmudic reading of this declaration is puzzling:

> Esther sent a message to Mordecai: "Go, assemble all the Jews in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day; I and my maidens will observe the same fast, and so will I go in to the king, not according to the custom" (Est. 4:16). R. Abba said: It will not be according to my usual custom, for every day until now when I submitted myself to Ahasuerus it was under compulsion, but now I will be submitting myself to him of my own free will. And Esther further said: "And if I perish, I perish" (Est. 4:16). What she meant was: Just as I was lost to my father's house ever since I was brought here, so too, shall I be lost to you, for after voluntarily having relations with Ahasuerus, I shall be forever forbidden to you.[51]

In addition to fasting, the "new and improved" Esther would appear before the king, "not according to the custom." At face value, this means that she would breach the rules and appear without a summons. The Talmud here twists this reading and interprets Esther's change of custom with satisfying the king's lusts without her usual resistance. What could have inspired such a preposterous reading? The loss of Esther's life – "if I perish, I perish" – according to this interpretation, represented the death of her purity, a grace and modesty she maintained by not submitting to the king's advances willingly. Esther, to persuade the king to save her people, was prepared to invest more in her relationship with Ahasuerus. Bringing him closer meant that he would have more to lose if the edict came to fruition, but also meant a deep part of her would die. This reading takes the word *avadeti* from the same infinitive as "to

51. Ibid.

lose." With this new understanding of her role, she was lost to herself and would be lost to Mordecai (her supposed husband according to one talmudic opinion). The deliberate use of the word "to lose" demonstrates how Esther shed one identity for another, losing herself in a genuine attempt to finally find herself.