

## WHEN THE BOOK OF ESTHER WAS NOT YET PART OF THE BIBLE

Jewish memory has been preserved by both a written tradition, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, and an oral tradition (e.g., Talmud), which serves as the Bible's ongoing commentary.

We are told in the following Talmudic passage (from Megillah 7A) that Esther needed to lobby the Sages in order to have her story included in Jewish memory. Following are two different accounts of Esther's conversation with the Sages:

### ACCOUNT 1:

אמר רב שמואל בר יהודה: שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: קבעוני לדורות שלחו לה: קנאה את מעוררת עלינו לבין האומות. שלחה להם: כבר כתובה אני על דברי הימים למלכי מדי ופרס

Rav Shmuel Bar Yehuda said:

**Esther sent a message to the Sages:** Place me in Jewish memory for all generations!

**Sages:** Your story would incite the nations against us.

**Esther:** [It's too late for that.] My story is already recorded in the chronicles of Medean and Persian kings.

### ACCOUNT 2:

רב ורב חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו...שלחה להם אסתר לחכמים: כתבוני לדורות. שלחו לה: (משלי כ"ב) הלא כתבתי לך שלישים, שלישים ולא רבעים. עד שמצאו לו מקרא כתוב בתורה (שמות י"ז) כתב זאת זכרון בספר, כתב זאת - מה שכתוב כאן ובמשנה תורה, זכרון - מה שכתוב בנביאים, בספר - מה שכתוב במגילה.

Rav and Rav Hanina and Rabbi Yohanan and Rav Haviva taught:

**Esther sent a message to the Sages:** Write me down for all generations!

**Sages:** (attempt to refute her by quoting a verse from Proverbs)

"Behold I wrote for you a threefold lore." (Proverbs 22:20) [This lore] should be recorded **only three times** and not four.

*The rabbis are reading the "threefold lore" as three times when the Bible mentions the war against Amalek (Rashi). Amalek, the tribe descended from the grandson of Esau, is Israel's nemesis--the absolute evil whose memory we are commanded to blot out. Israel's first encounter with Amalek is when Amalek attacks from behind right after they cross the Red Sea. The war against Amalek is mentioned twice in the Torah ( Ex. 17. Deut. 25) and once in the Book of Samuel I (Chapter 15). Haman, the arch villain of the Purim story, is a descendant of Amalek. Including the destruction of Haman in the Bible would mean that Amalek is mentioned four times.*

*The rabbis resolve this issue by grouping the two citations from Torah as one, since they both refer to the occasion when Amalek attacked the Jews when they first entered the desert. With the Book of Esther included in the Bible, even though Amalek is referred to four times, there are still only three occasions when Amalek threatens to destroy the Jews and the Esther story is that third time, fulfilling the scriptural requirement of a "threefold lore."*

## THE TALMUD NAVIGATOR™

1) What are Sages' concerns with respect to including the Book of Esther in the Bible? What do you think would be Esther's reasons for being included?

2) Compare the two accounts of Esther's conversation with the Sages. What is the difference between her asking to be remembered and her asking to be "written down"?

**Purim is the only Holy day in which the protagonist must lobby for inclusion in Jewish memory.** Our next passage searches for clues within the Book of Esther that reveal that Esther is indeed imbued with the "holy spirit", a requirement to qualify as a Holy book.

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ו') ויאמר המן בלבו. רבי עקיבא אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ב') ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראה. רבי מאיר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ב') וידוע הדבר למרדכי. רבי יוסי בן דורמסקית אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר (אסתר ט') ובבזה לא שלחו את ידם. אמר שמואל: אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדיפא מכולהו, שנאמר קימו וקבלו - קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה. אמר רבא: לכולהו אית להו פירכא, לבר מדשמואל דלית ליה פירכא. דרבי אליעזר - סברא הוא, דלא הוה איניש דחשיב למלכא כוותיה, והאי כי קא מפיש טובא ואמר - אדעתיה דנפשיה קאמר. דרבי עקיבא - דלמא כרבי אלעזר, דאמר: מלמד שכל אחד ואחד נדמתה לו כאומתו. והא דרבי מאיר - דלמא כרבי חייא בר אבא, דאמר: בגתן ותרש שני טרשיים היו. והא דרבי יוסי בן דורמסקית - דלמא פריסתקי שדור. דשמואל ודאי לית ליה פירכא. אמר רבינא: היינו דאמרי אינשי: טבא חדא פלפלתא חריפתא ממלי צני קרי

(note: structural liberties have been taken in translation)

Rabbi Eliezer: Esther was uttered through the Holy Spirit! As we see [from the Megilla] "And Haman thought to himself..." (Esther 6:6)

The Talmud: That proof can be challenged! One can determine what Haman was thinking since it was well known that the king favored him above all others in the kingdom.

Rabbi Akiba: Esther was uttered through with the Holy Spirit! As we see, "And Esther was favored by all who saw her." (Esther 2:15)

The Talmud: Maybe this verse could be understood the way Rabbi Eliezer did, "That everyone viewed her as if she was one of their own people."

Rabbi Meir: Esther was uttered through the Holy Spirit! As we see, "Mordecai became aware of the plot [to dispose of Ahasuerus]" (Ibid:22)

The Talmud: Maybe this verse could be understood to mean that Mordecai did not just become aware, but that the plotters Bigtan and Teresh were from Tarsis and plotted in their native tongue thinking that Mordecai would not understand them...

Shmuel: If I had been included in that conversation (Shmuel is from a later generation.) I would have proved [that Esther was said through the "Holy Spirit] in a manner that would have been impossible to challenge. As we see: "They affirmed and they received." (Ibid 9:27) My interpretation is: **They affirmed above (in the heavens) what had been received below (on earth).**

The Talmud: Shmuel's prooftext is indeed impossible to challenge! As Ravina says, "Like the folks say, one hot pepper is better than a pile of cold pumpkins!"

### THE TALMUD NAVIGATOR™

1. How does each of the rabbis understand the Holy Spirit? (First figure out how each rabbi was using his verse as proof)
2. How is Shmuel's interpretation different from those of the other rabbis? Why is his interpretation considered unassailable?



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