

Esther, Exodus, Purim, and Passover

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At first glance, there do not seem to be close connections between the book of Esther and the Exodus, much less between Purim and Passover. A close reading of *M'gillat Esther*, however, allows for these links¹ and may reflect the intent of the author of Esther.

In the Book of Esther, the dénouement, when Haman's villainy is exposed (when the light is shone on his nefarious plan), occurs on the evening of the *full* moon of the early spring month, the fifteenth day of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, the date people generally associate with Passover. This detail may not be accidental, but rather a subtle nuance purposefully, but quietly woven into the narrative. A casual reading of Esther might bypass those overlapping facts. This article suggests that one way to interpret the book of Esther is that its author intended readers to make conscious connections between Esther and the Exodus, between Purim and Passover.

The biblical text in Esther states exactly when the plans to the attack the Jewish community were conceived. The narrative explains that Haman and his henchmen arrange their equivalent of an ancient pogrom during the month of Nisan, for it was then that the die was cast, the "*pur*—which means 'the lot'—was cast before Haman" (Esther 3:7). A short while later, "on the thirteenth day of the first month [Nisan]" the decree was issued, that in about a year's time, on a date certain, that "all the Jews" were to be massacred and their goods plundered (Esther 3:12, 13). That very day (the thirteenth of Nisan), as a sign of his great distress, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. That same day

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he informs Esther about the decree, and she comes up with the plan that will bring Haman's downfall. As part of her strategy, she commands Mordecai and all the Jews of Shushan to partake in a three-day fast. Esther and her maidens shall also observe this fast (Esther 4:1, 16). (In principle, this might mean a twenty-six-hour fast, one hour of the first day, the thirteenth, all of the fourteenth, and then an hour of the fifteenth).² "On the third day [the fifteenth of Nisan], Esther put on royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's palace." She then invites the King and Haman to a banquet that very day (Esther 5:1, 4).

This means that on the fourteenth day of Nisan, going into the fifteenth, the Jews are fasting instead of appropriately feasting and celebrating the first night of Passover, as dictated by Jewish tradition. This point is noted by the midrash collection, the *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*. When Esther commanded Mordecai to begin a three-day fast beginning that very day, the midrash explains:

These (days) were the thirteenth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth of Nisan. Mordecai said to her: Is not the third day (of the fast) the day of Passover? She said to him: You are an elder in Israel. If there is no Israel, wherefore is Passover? Mordecai hearkened to her words, and he agreed with her.³

In this midrash, Esther appropriately (but contrary to the established biblical and Rabbinic norms of feminine behavior) challenges Mordecai's response, and depending on how one reads the tone of her voice, perhaps reprimands Mordecai who is her family member (and according to several Rabbinic texts, possibly her husband)⁴ and elder.⁵ Mordecai both demurs and defers to her, something that is quite extraordinary. Esther's actions reflect a Rabbinic tradition that Miriam also challenged a decision made by her father Amram (or perhaps she reprimanded him).⁶

On some level, the text of *M'gillat Esther* takes elements of the early Exodus story and with beneficence aforethought turns them upside down. Instead of the Jews celebrating the miracle of Passover and feasting on roasted meat (Exod. 12:5–11), they are anxiously mourning and fasting. There are other ironic contrasts between these two events. In the Book of Exodus, Pharaoh has numerous warnings with repeated calamities urging him to reverse his stand; in the Book of Esther, Haman is completely taken in and

shocked at his sudden downfall. In Egypt the former slaves “despoiled the Egyptians,” taking jewels of silver and gold, and clothing as well (Exod. 12:36), but the Jews of Shushan and elsewhere refrained from taking such spoilage (Esther 9:10, 15).

Nonetheless there is a darker side to the Purim/Passover connection, both in the biblical text and in its commemoration. In Shushan and elsewhere, the Jews unleash a bloody rampage and inflict havoc upon their foes. According to chapter 9, the Jews “attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them . . . the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies” (Esther 9:2, 5). According to the text they killed over 75,800 of their foes, including Haman’s ten sons, who at best are guilty only by association. After this spectacular slaughter the Jews made a “day of feasting and merrymaking” (Esther 9:17–18). As has been celebrated for many years, Purim is a day of frivolity and rejoicing at the unexpected turn of events, including the bloody and brutal battles fought, and for some people traditionally it is a day of sanctioned inebriation.

In this way, Purim and Passover are polar opposites in terms of how they are commemorated by the Jewish community. British scholar Jeremy Schonfield contrasts the violent response reported in the book of Esther, and for many, the celebration of its occurrence in the *m’gillah* reading, with the overwhelming sense of restraint of vengeance against the Egyptians that permeates the Haggadah.

The gentle, almost forgiving, handling of the Egyptians emerges clearly in the Passover Haggadah. Not a word is spoken against them directly, to the extent that the most obvious centerpiece for such a celebration, the song of triumph sung at the [Reed] Sea . . . is absent from the Passover Haggadah. Rabbinic texts go still further, and criticize the sense of triumph altogether. When the angels prepared to join in the song of the Israelites God said ‘while my creatures drown, how can you sing?’ [BT *M’gillah* 10b; *Sanhedrin* 39b] even though the creatures in question were soldiers preparing to kill the entire Israelite nation, having already ordered the drowning of baby boys. Tellingly, perhaps, this midrash appears in the context of a talmudic discussion concerning the rituals of Purim and the manner of reading of the book of Esther.⁷

Schonfield goes on to ask, “How does the balance and humility of the Passover Haggadah work together with the gun-happy preemptive massacre at the end of the book of Esther? The two festivals are one month apart to the day, Purim celebrating escape from danger by triumph and energetic drinking, while Passover marks the memory of suffering by depriving oneself of drink [removing a drop from the wine glass for each of the plagues] to mark the suffering of one’s former enemies. On leap years the link is still closer: because of the intercalated month, Purim falls on the day on which Passover would have begun.”⁸

There are still other contrasting connections between Esther/Purim and the Exodus/Passover. Unlike the Israelites who, because of their rebelliousness and lack of faith, will not enter the Promised Land—that will come a generation later at the time of Joshua—all the Jews of Shushan and the 127 provinces of the realm of King Ahasuerus are *not* annihilated; rather they remain in place and prosper. This contrast, too, may well be part of the intent of the book.

The net results, the overcoming of danger and fear of annihilation are true with the narratives both in Esther and Exodus, even if the means to these ends differ significantly. Although it has its serious sides, the story of Esther and the celebration of Purim stresses frivolity and it has a lighthearted quality to its observance. It has a different sense than the more searching questions associated with Passover, such as the rejoicing at the redemption from Egypt and the broader implications of moving from servitude to freedom, as well as recalling this pivotal moment in the history of the Jewish people. Nonetheless, for all its lighter sides, there may well be deliberate lessons written into the *m’gillah* that invite the reader to make conscious connections between Esther and Exodus and Purim and Passover.

Notes

1. Adele Berlin refers to studies by G. Gerleman, which connect “Esther and the Exodus narrative . . . [both] recount the escape of the Israelites or Jews from a dangerous enemy and the origins of a holiday to celebrate that escape.” Adele Berlin, *Esther: The JPS Bible Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xxxvii. Reference to G. Gerleman, *Esther* (Biblischer Kommentar. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1973).

Rabbinic tradition suggests that Esther and Mordecai are prefigured in the Exodus narrative (Exod. 12:3). See William G. Braude, trans., *Pesikta Rabbati (Discourses for Feasts, Fasts and Special Sabbaths)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), *Piska* 15.25.

Many other connections between Esther and earlier biblical texts have been suggested. For a recent discussion of these connections and many other “concealed readings,” see Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winoona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

Jeremy Schonfield has written specifically on the connections between Purim and Passover. “Esther: Beyond Murder,” *European Judaism* 99, no. 1 (1999): 11–25.

2. The Rabbis offer a different explanation. “It might be thought that they had to fast continually night and day; but can people fast continuously three days and three nights, and not die? In truth, they were allowed to break their fast while it was still daylight.” William G. Braude, trans., *Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1959), Ps. 22.5. BT *Yoma* 81b suggests a three-day fast can include part of the day before and part of the day after. See also *Y’vamos* 121b.
3. Gerald Friedlander, trans., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981), chap. 50. See also *Midrash Esther Rabbah* 8.6, which suggests the fast days were the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth days of Nisan.
4. Barry D. Walfish, “Kosher Adultery: The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Talmudic, Medieval, and Sixteenth Century Exegesis” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon (London and New York: T & T Clark International, Continuum, 2003).
5. The rabbis comment on Esther’s audacity. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, trans., *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu: The Lore of the School of Elijah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), *Eliyyahu Rabbah*, 3–4.
6. As the leader of his generation, Amram divorced his wife rather than take the chance that she might become pregnant, and so cause the death of an infant son. All Israel follows suit. Miriam then observes that Amram’s decision is harsher than that of Pharaoh, because it also affected the birth of possible females, and it denied the possibility for the World to Come for any children who might have been born in the future. Immediately Amram reversed himself and remarried his wife. BT *Sotah* 12a; *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Piska* 43.4.
7. Schonfield, “Esther: Beyond Murder,” 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 17.