



Purim: Exile and Orphanhood





On Esther: A Video by Chaya Lev



 On Esther.mp4



Memory and Self in the Book of Esther

Mordechai came from a recently exiled people. Esther was orphaned as a child. How did those experiences shape each of them and impact each other?

Esther 2:5-7

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.

איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי
בן יאיר בן שמעי
בן קיש איש ימיני אשר הגלה מירושלים
עם הגולה אשר הגלתה עם יכניה
מלך יהודה אשר הגלה נבוכדנצר מלך
בבל ויהי אמן את הדסה היא אסתר
בת דודו כי אין לה אב ואם והנערה
יפת תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה
ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת

Megillah 12b

The Gemara asks: What is it conveying by saying the names of Mordecai's ancestors? If the verse comes to trace his ancestry, it should continue tracing his lineage back all the way to Benjamin, the founder of his tribe. Rather, what is different about these names that they deserve special mention? The Gemara answers... All of them are names by which Mordecai was called. He was called "the son of Jair" because he was the son who enlightened [*heir*] the eyes of all of the Jewish people with his prayers; "the son of Shimei" because he was the son whom God heard [*shama*] his prayers; "the son of Kish" because he knocked [*hikish*] on the gates of mercy and they were opened to him.

"איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה
וגו' איש ימיני". מאי קאמר: אי
ליחוסיה קאתי — ליחוסיה וליזיל
עד בנימין! אלא מאי שנא הני
תנא: כולן על שמו נקראו. "בן
יאיר" — בן שהאיר עיניהם של
ישראל בתפלתו. "בן שמעי" —
בן ששמע אל תפלתו. "בן קיש"
— שהקיש על שער רחמים
ונפתחו לו

Megillah 13a

The verse states: "And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all those who looked upon her" (Esther 2:15). Rabbi Elazar said: This teaches that she appeared to each and every one as if she were a member of his own nation, and therefore she obtained favor in the eyes of all. (To which Rashi adds: "Those who saw Esther would say out loud, 'She is one of ours.'")

"ותהי אסתר נשאת חן", אמר רבי
אלעזר: מלמד שלכל אחד ואחד נדמתה
לו כאומתו

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו
מרדכי בן יאיר בן שמעי בן קיש איש
ימיני אשר הגלה מירושלים עם הגולה
אשר הגלתה עם יכניה מלך יהודה אשר
הגלה נבוכדנצר מלך בבל



Questions for Discussion

- Exile and orphanhood are two biblical categories of people disconnected from roots and home
 - How are the two experiences parallel? Different?
 - How do they illuminate each other?
- How might Mordechai's family's response to trauma (exile) have informed his parenting?
- How might our people's experiences in exile—its challenges and what has sustained us—inform how we understand the experience of children in the foster system?

Esther Verses 2:5-6:

- Why do you think Mordecai is introduced along with three earlier generations?
- What impact do past generations have, the history and lore, on your family and you?
 - Do you have multiple families/family histories? (Adoption, blended families, etc.)
- The text tells us names of Mordecai's forebears and that they had been exiled.
 - How does family help in navigating hardship?
 - How does family help as we heal after hard and painful things happen?

Esther Verse 2:7:

- Why isn't Esther's biological family's lineage in the text?

Megillah 12b1

- How are Mordechai's traits described? How were they derived?
- If Mordecai was biologically related to his forebears, why is he still described by the rabbis with characteristics developed in relationship, not (only) genetically inherited.
- How might his family's characteristics and outlook have shaped his understanding of what it means to live in exile?
 - How do parents' personality traits and outlook influence how we navigate hardship?
 - To become masters of our own experiences and story?
- How would you describe the qualities attributed to Mordechai? How did they shape him as an adoptive parent?
- What happens in your family that influences your values and character?

Megillah 13a

- What does it feel like to be seen that way — to be claimed and included?
- How would you describe this capacity of Esther's? How might it relate to her experience as an orphan?
- Does it elicit some emotion in you? If so, what?
- How might the information missing about Esther's background be relevant in understanding this midrash? How might her being parentless impact how she sees herself? How she presents herself? How others perceive her?
- What would you imagine about Esther's sense of self based on the "evidence" here?
- How would you complete these sentences: "This quality is a blessing because..." "This quality concerns me because..."

Esther 9:31

- What forces shaped Esther as a strong self-assured woman who can rescue the present and influence the future.
 - How would you compare Meg 13a to Esther 9:3?
- Read this story as a journey of an adoptive parent and an adopted child.
 - What allowed Esther to grow into a decisive and authoritative leader?
 - From unnamed personal lineage to a formal place in her people's future lineage?
 - From seeming to belong everywhere to using that capacity to become a leader for her own people, recorded in history?

Note: You may choose to invite any students who are adopted or related to adopted people feel free to share that as they wish, but ask privately.



The Known, the Unknown, What Matters, and Why

The scholars of the Talmud look at the power and influence about Mordecai's lineage and emphasize learned qualities and characteristics over biologically inherited ones. We can explore with our students how such relationships have shaped us, with an openness to how nature and nurture impact us.

Megillah 12b

The Gemara asks: What is it conveying in the verse by saying the names of Mordecai's ancestors? If the verse in fact comes to trace his ancestry, it should continue tracing his lineage back all the way to Benjamin, the founder of his tribe. Rather, what is different about these names that they deserve special mention? The Gemara answers...All of them are names by which Mordecai was called. He was called "the son of Jair" because he was the son who enlightened [*heir*] the eyes of all of the Jewish people with his prayers; "the son of Shimei" because he was the son whom God heard [*shama*] his prayers; "the son of Kish" because he knocked [*hikish*] on the gates of mercy and they were opened to him.

מאי קאמר: אי ליחוסיה קאתי — ליחוסיה וליזיל עד בנימין! אלא מאי שנא הני? תנא: כולן על שמו נקראו. "בן יאיר" — בן שהאיר עיניהם של ישראל בתפלתו. "בן שמעי" — בן ששמע אל תפלתו. "בן קיש" — שהקיש על שער רחמים ונפתחו לו.

Esther Mastering Her Past, Present and Future

Esther was a very special person because of all the forces that combined to shape her. She was at once complex and had a core moral self, claiming her fully integrated self.

Esther 2:15

Esther obtained favor in the sight of all those who looked upon her

ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל־ראיה

Megillah 13a

Rabbi Elazar said: This teaches that she appeared to each and every one as if she were a member of his own nation, and therefore she obtained favor in the eyes of all. To which Rashi adds, "Those who saw Esther would say out loud, 'She is one of ours.'"

"ותהי אסתר נשאת חן", אמר רבי אלעזר: מלמד שלכל אחד ואחד נדמתה לו כאומתו.

Questions for Discussion

The rabbis teach that Esther has many facets, drawing on her various strengths as she desires.

- Do you think multiple identities can be hard to hold?
- Do you think being adopted helped give Esther such a textured character? How?



Sample Postcard

Recruiting Care Collective Volunteers from a Jewish HC. *Request one with your HC's info!*

Queen Esther was a Foster Child.

Jewish communities are stepping
up to help youth in foster care
find their inner royalty!



Those who saw Esther would say out loud, 'She is one of ours.'

Rashi





Purim Booth Materials

Poster (for Purim Booth)

Print out large and affix to a poster board on an easel at the booth. People come and guess for a prize.

Answer: they were all fostered or adopted.

ESTHER,
LIKE MOSES
AND RUTH,
REDEEMED
THE JEWISH
PEOPLE.

WHAT ELSE DO
THESE THREE
HEROES HAVE
IN COMMON?



2Nurture.org





Kids write responses to each question

This is related to Queen Esther and what others could see and know about her, and what was hidden until she revealed it. All kids can relate, but this can particularly shed light on kids in the foster system.

