



EXILE AND ORPHANHOOD

MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

A Second Nurture Resource for Purim

Mordechai came from a recently exiled people. Esther's parents died when she was young. Each experienced trauma. Yet, Mordechai grew up with a family and Esther did not—at least until Mordechai adopted her. We hope the following pesukim from Megilat Esther, rabbinic texts and discussion ideas will offer a meaningful exploration of the role of family in healing and prompt insights as we take steps toward welcoming youth from the foster care system into our families and communities.

Text 1: Esther 2: 5-7

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֶרְדֳּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי בֶן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עַם־הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכִנִּיָּה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל וַיְהִי אִמּוֹן אֶת־הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בַּת־דָּדֹוּ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנַּעֲרָה יִפְתָּ־תֹאֵר וְטוֹבֵת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹזוֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לִקְחָהּ מֶרְדֳּכָי לִוּ לְבַת

5)In the capital city of Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. 6)[Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was exiled along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. 7)He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was beautiful and good to behold; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.



Text 2: . Megillah 12b

מאי קאמר... הני תנא כולן על שמו נקראו בן יאיר בן שהאיר
עיניהם של ישראל בתפלתו בן שמעי בן ששמע אל תפלתו בן
קיש שהקיש על שערי רחמים ונפתחו לו

The Gemara asks: What is it conveying in the verse by saying the names of Mordecai's ancestors?The Gemara answers: A Sage taught the following baraita: 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.

Text 3: B. Megillah 13a

ותהי אסתר נשאת חן אר"א מלמד שלכל אחד ואחד
נדמתה לו כאומתו

The verse states: "And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all those who looked upon her" (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.'"



Text 4: Esther 9:31

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֶרְדֳּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי בֶן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עַם־הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכִנִּיָּה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל וַיְהִי אִמּוֹן אֶת־הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בַּת־דָּדֹוּ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנַּעֲרָה יִפְתָּ־תֹאֵר וְטוֹבֵת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹזוֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לִקְחָהּ מֶרְדֳּכָי לִוּ לְבַת

These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts and lamentations.



Text 1: Esther 2: 5-7

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?
- What kinds of lessons might he have taught Esther? 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?



Text 3: Megillah 13a

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? Why?
- What do we know about Esther? What do we not know?
- How might what's missing 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?
- You are Mordechai. You notice this quality in your daughter. How would you complete these sentences: "This quality in my daughter is a blessing because..." "This quality in my daughter concerns me because..."



Foster Care and Adoption Today

What can we draw from these texts about what humans need, or do not need, to grow? How do they shed particular light on the needs of children in foster care? Of adopted children?

If we imagine being in foster care as a kind of exile, how could adoption impact a child's integration of their lives and experiences? How might loving parents help?

Text 2: . Megillah 12b1

What is the Gemara doing here with the biblical verse?

- What made Mordechai who he was? What might we imagine as the significance of locating these personal qualities in the context of being someone's "ben". Of lineage?
- How might his family--which the Gemara brings into the picture through his similarity to their personal qualities--have helped shaped his understanding of what it means to live in exile? How do parents weave their particular personality traits into how we navigate hardship? How do they help us become masters of our own experiences?
- How would you describe the qualities attributed to Mordechai? How do you imagine they shaped him as a parent, especially an adoptive parent?



Text 4: Esther 9:31

How would you compare Meg 13 a to this pasuk?

- If we read this story as a journey of an adoptive parent and an adopted child:
- What do we "know", and what do you imagine, 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?



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- Families are supported before, during, and after the licensing and adoption processes
- Foster and adopted children have peers in our community with similar backgrounds
- The values of foster and adoption are integrated into our community culture
- Our whole community wraps around the families in support as they become foster and adoptive parents
- We will partner with the best and most well-aligned local social service partners
- We are all enriched—both by our new, young members and our growing capacity as a synagogue to support our foster and adoptive families



Second Nurture creates a community within our community — and expands our vision of what family and belonging truly mean.
- Cohort Member