Who Was Mordekhai?

Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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The reading of the Megilla stands at the heart of our Purim celebrations - both in terms of the story it recounts and as a mitzva (it is the only special mitzva for Purim over which we recite a berakha). The Megilla is named after Esther, and Chazal highlight this in their explanation that it was Esther herself who requested, "Establish me for all generations." She is the heroine of the story, and her personal drama stands at the center of the public plot with which it is intertwined. In contrast with the other characters in the Megilla, Esther develops during the course of the story. We shall concentrate here on the character of Mordekhai, who appears to be static.

We know very little of Mordekhai's background. He is clearly a man who cares deeply about those around him, and this caring is translated into responsibility. First, he cares for his cousin Esther, "for she had no father or mother," especially if we understand the Megilla to mean that he adopted her, not that he married her. Only a person who is both sensitive and caring undertakes such a complex task of "chesed."

Even if we remain uncertain that this was truly a deed of kindness on the personal level, there is something impressive in the dedication of Mordekhai who, we are told, would come every day to the gate of the royal palace to inquire after Esther's well-being. Mordekhai did not "wander about (holekh) before the courtyard of the women's quarters," but rather "walked" (hit'halekh). Rav Soloveitchik explains that this refers to an intensive "walking" (as in, "Noach walked with God"): he invests time and energy in clarifying what is going on now and in planning for the future - "to find out how Esther was (today) and what would be done with her (tomorrow)."

Even after Esther is selected as Achashverosh's new queen, we are told, "In those days Mordekhai would sit at the royal gates." What is the meaning of this "sitting?" Esther had by now achieved a very elevated status, but her fate was not entirely certain and safe. This king had only recently rid himself of a queen who had lost favor in his eyes, and the fear that Esther would meet a similar fate concerned Mordekhai greatly. These verses reveal the depths of Mordekhai's feelings of responsibility and sensitivity.

Several verses later, we encounter another of Mordekhai's traits: "But Mordekhai would not bend, nor would he bow down." If this verse stood alone we might have thought that the issue was simply a power struggle, but subsequently we learn that the reason for his refusal was that "he had told them that he was a Jew." What we witness here is a stubborn insistence on the principles of national identity and national pride (although it remains unclear whether such behavior was required from a halakhic point of view). Mordekhai could have found an excuse to bow before Haman, but he felt that the situation demanded a declaration of identity and kiddush Hashem. Here we find expression of his steadfastness as an "ish Yehudi."

In hindsight, was it good that he behaved as he did, thus endangering the entire nation? At the time, no such consideration occurred to him: the only danger that faced him was a personal one, and he was quite prepared to face this without any attempt to escape or to make excuses for himself.

But what starts out as a personal, individual matter quickly becomes a public, international issue. And here a new Mordekhai is revealed to us: he assumes leadership, while also crying, deliberating and fearing the approaching calamity. Mordekhai certainly could have found a way to save his own skin, but the message he conveys to Esther is in fact the same one that he gives himself: "Do not contrive in your heart to escape from all the Jews." As an individual so closely bound to his community, he makes every effort to remove the danger of the decree, both on the political level and by an appeal to God: "Gather all the Jews..."

These are Mordekhai's principal characteristics, and the story from here on is well known - the miraculous salvation, taking the Jews "from the deepest pit to the highest pinnacle." One would expect that Mordekhai's upright character, deep concern and resolute leadership would earn him universal acclaim. However, at the end of the Megilla, we are told that Mordekhai was "accepted by most of his peers." The gemara comments (Megilla 16b): "'MOST of his peers' rather than 'ALL of his peers,' teaching us that some of the members of the Sanhedrin parted ways with him." Chazal frequently depict Mordekhai as a great sage and a member of the Sanhedrin (for example, he understood Bigtan and Teresh's plot because he spoke seventy languages, as was required of members of the Sanhedrin). Why, then, did his some of his peers distance themselves from him? Rashi explains that the rabbis' criticism arose from the fact that after the great salvation, Mordekhai spent less time on his Torah study and assumed a position of power.

This puts Mordekhai in a new light. After Mordekhai's assumption of power, we discover not the scheming of a power-hungry politician, but rather the tremendous sacrifice of a person completely immersed in the world of Torah, who is forced to involve himself daily in the corrupted goings-on of the royal court. Mordekhai performs this out of a sense of duty, out of national responsibility and out of a highly developed awareness of communal needs.

When the storm subsides, a debate arises as to whether Mordekhai should return to the Sanhedrin and resume his occupation with Torah. With his historical perspective, Mordekhai understands that although his personal aspiration is to "dwell in the house of God," his lifestyle should not be molded only according to his personal priorities, even though these priorities are shaped by proper values. Mordekhai knows that he must assume a position that will serve his generation in that time and in that place.

And so, with a deep sense of responsibility to his nation, he closes his Gemara and goes off to the palace of Shushan. As second-in-command to the king, he will no longer be able to sit day and night in the Beit Midrash; however, he accepts the position not for the honor it brings but rather out of devotion to social and national objectives. Mordekhai remembers well the "captivity which had been carried away into exile" and which he had experienced personally (unlike others, who had only heard accounts of the destruction). He understood the dangers facing the nation, and therefore maintained - in contrast to some of his peers - that it was his duty to close his books and vacate his position in the Sanhedrin.

In parashat Va'era we find a frightening midrash on Moshe's complaint, "Why have You dealt badly with Your servant?" The midrash says, "He who involves himself with communal matters forgets his Torah learning." This applied to Moshe himself, and R. Yehoshua ben Levi testifies to experiencing the same problem. Although the Halakha teaches, "He who involves himself with communal matters is exempt from Torah," this was still a difficult issue for Mordekhai to grapple with, as it is for each of us.

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