YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PURIM 5783**

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In memory of our dear friend and supporter
Mr. Joshua Mermelstein *z"l*,
whose *yahrzeit* falls on 20 Adar.

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**“They Re-accepted It in the Days of Esther”**

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**Introduction**

The book of *Esther* is first and foremost a story. Like every good story, there is a turning point, and it is generally accepted that the turning point is Mordekhai's rise to greatness, following on "On that night the king could not sleep" (*Esther* 6:1). The significance of this passage is highlighted with a festive melody.

This is indeed the turning point on the political-national level. Upon careful reading, however, we can identify another turning point that took place three days earlier – in Esther's conduct.

At first, Esther tries to avoid fulfilling Mordekhai's instructions to speak to Achashverosh, claiming: "Whoever, whether man or woman, shall come to the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden scepter, that he may live; but I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days" (*Esther* 4:11). Mordekhai does not accept this answer, and responds: "Think not with yourself that you shall escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty?" (*Esther* 4:13-14).

This time, Esther reacts by accepting upon herself to do as Mordekhai said. She responds: "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish" (*Esther* 4:16).

 Until now, Esther claimed that she was unable to do anything, and therefore she refused to take action. But after Mordekhai's words – "for if you altogether hold your peace at this time," "you and your father's house will perish," "and who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty" – she changes her mind. This is Esther's personal religious turning point, and we will try to understand it more deeply.

**"They confirmed and accepted"**

**I. "The Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an inverted cask"**

In order to deepen our understanding of the inner change that took place within Esther, an introduction is required, beginning with a well-known Talmudic passage:

"And they stood under the mount" (*Shemot* 19:17). Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial." (*Shabbat* 88a)

This is a difficult Gemara, but the central point is clear; namely, that the people of Israel accepted the Torah not of their own free will, but under duress.

The Gemara there continues:

Rav Acha bar Yaakov said: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Rava said: Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Achasverosh, as it is written: "[The Jews] confirmed and accepted upon them" (*Esther* 9:27) – they confirmed what they had accepted long before. (*Shabbat* 88a)

In other words, a "protest" [*moda'a*][[1]](#footnote-1) exists because of the coercion that was applied at the time of the giving of the Torah; one could argue that the Jewish people are not responsible to fulfill a commitment made under such duress. However, since "they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh," the protest was cancelled and all are indeed obligated in the Torah's commandments.

The Maharal has a fairly well-known explanation according to which there was no direct coercion; rather, what the Gemara means is that when God appeared to the Israelites in fire and lightning, they had no choice in the face of such miracles but to submit to Him. In light of this, he explains the exposition of the words "they confirmed and accepted" as follows: The miracle is hidden; God does not reveal Himself in the book of *Esther*, and His name is not even mentioned in it – and yet, "they confirmed and accepted." This is the answer to that protest: It was precisely in a period of concealment that they "confirmed and accepted" the Torah, of their absolute free will.

**II. The Torah and Duress**

This is a nice explanation, but it still does not answer a big question – which the Maharal also raises – which stands in the background: If the first acceptance of the Torah, at Mount Sinai, was under duress, and thus not genuine, why did God act in that manner? What is the use of such an "acceptance"?

The Maharal answers this question as well, but in contrast to his explanation of the coercion, his answer to this question is less well known.

Before we get to the Maharal, I will briefly present a different answer to this question: Until I saw the Maharal's answer, I always assumed the answer is that God presents us with the path of truth so that we can follow it ourselves – and that even though the presentation of that path is done in an "untrue" way, with coercion, it is necessary. Had the *Shekhina* not appeared at Mount Sinai – with compulsion – we would not have known where to go.

It is important to emphasize that, according to this answer, the "acceptance" at Mount Sinai was in fact not real – and the proof is that a mere forty days after the revelation, the people sinned with the golden calf. Such a rapid fall indicates a defective acceptance.

The same thing happened hundreds of years later, in the days of the prophet Eliyahu. Eliyahu asserts before God: "You did turn their heart backward" (I *Melakhim* 18:37), and *Chazal* explain that Eliyahu was arguing that God had not performed an impressive miraculous event like the splitting of the Sea of Suf for many years, and not even like "Sun, stand still upon Givon" (*Yehoshua* 10:12) – and that if only God would reveal Himself, everyone would immediately return to Him. After that assertion, a great demonstration takes place on Mount Carmel that is very reminiscent of the event on Mount Sinai; it ends with everyone proclaiming "The Lord is God, the Lord is God" (I *Melakhim* 18:39), and Eliyahu leads the people against the prophets of the Baal.

The assembly was indeed very impressive, but the next day, Izevel threatens Eliyahu that she will do to him what he did to the prophets of the Baal. In response, Eliyahu decides to flee. Why does he not incite a rebellion and popular uprising; surely only yesterday the entire nation was on his side? The answer is given later: "And I alone was left" (I *Melakhim* 19:10). Despite the great and impressive event, Eliyahu remained alone – and in contrast to the sin of the golden calf, this time it did not take forty days, but only one night. It turns out that the entire acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven the day before was not real.

If so, what was the value of the assemblies at Mount Sinai and Mount Carmel? As mentioned, I had always thought that the answer is that in order for us to follow the path of truth, God must first present it to us, even if the acceptance of His kingdom under such circumstances is incomplete.

The Maharal, on the other hand, takes a different approach. He does not argue that in order to reach the path of truth one must encounter it under compulsion, but rather he explains that the Torah itself is fundamentally a coercion: since it is the truth, it is not subject to choice, and this is the meaning of the duress of a "mountain overturned like an inverted cask."

The Maharal is aware that there is tension, and even a certain contradiction, in this explanation, since it is clear that one must act out of free choice; the Torah itself contains an explicit obligation to *choose* the way of life over that of death. According to what he has proposed, how is free choice possible?

Here, argues the Maharal, God chose an interesting approach: At first, God opened Israel's eyes so they could see that this was the truth, and therefore they accepted the Torah. But an additional step was necessary, of rooting the truth in their hearts, which can be accomplished only through love – not fear. Therefore, over the years the coercion disappeared, as it were, and there is less revelation of the *Shekhina* – and nevertheless, "they re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh" (*Shabbat* 88a).

**Queen Esther**

1. **“For Esther did the commandment of Mordekhai”**

Following the words of the Maharal, let us return to Esther and try to explain the turning point in the *Megilla.* In a sentence – it seems that the two-step process, of coercion at first and then choice, is true not only for receiving the Torah, but also for Esther.

At the beginning of Esther's journey in the royal palace, the *Megilla* presents us with two important facts.

The first is that Esther "obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her" (*Esther* 2:15). "Obtaining favor [*noset chen*]" does not mean the same thing as "of beautiful form [*yefat to'ar*]," which is used to describe others in Tanakh. Esther was not beautiful, but nevertheless, she obtained favor. As *Chazal* put it, "Esther was greenish, but endowed with great charm [lit., 'a thread of grace was drawn about her']" (*Megilla* 13a). There was something raw, internal in her that made her bear grace, despite her lack of beauty.

The second fact is that "Esther did the commandment of Mordekhai, like when she was brought up with him" (*Esther* 2:20). Esther continues to obey Mordekhai's instructions, not like a hero but like a good girl. She did not "deteriorate" in the palace; she remained in the groove, as she had been raised, and this is truly good and important. When Mordekhai sends her a message – such as "do not forget to recite a blessing before you eat" – she listens to him, and recites the blessings. In short, she is the queen, but she continues to conduct herself as a good Jewish girl. She does as she was taught, what had been forced upon her (surely, education involves coercion).

Even now, when she finds herself in the house of Achashverosh, Esther accepts Mordekhai’s laws. She obeys. Therefore, when she hears that Mordekhai is wearing sackcloth and ashes, she is shocked and sends Hatakh, who in turn receives the following message:

Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it to Esther, and to declare it unto her; **and to command her** that she should go in to the king, to make supplication to him, and to make request before him, for her people. (*Esther* 4:8)

Mordekhai is not confused: he knows who Esther is. He knows that "Esther did the commandment of Mordekhai, like when she was brought up with him," and therefore he gives her orders – to do what he tells her to do. She is a good soldier.

And what happens next?

And Hatakh came and told Esther the words of Mordekhai. Then Esther spoke to Hatakh, and **commanded him to Mordekhai.** (*Esther* 4:9-10)

Esther commands Mordekhai. What is the content of that commandment?

All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whoever, whether man or woman, shall come to the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden scepter, that he may live; but I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days. (*Esther* 4:11)

In her usual way, Esther does not command him herself (this is important, because later she will do so). Rather she conveys to him the command issued by King Achashverosh, based on the assumption that his command overrides that of Mordekhai and therefore she will not go in to see the king.

However, in his response, Mordekhai no longer commands Esther, but "replies":

Then Mordekhai said to return answer to Esther: Think not with yourself that you shall escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty? (*Esther* 4:13-14)

Mordekhai begins with a strong statement, "You and your father's house will perish." But then he switches to a softer tone (and so does the *Megilla* reader): "and who knows" – think a little – "whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty?"

Here comes the turning point: following this, something new arises in Esther. It is not that she repents – after all, she was already a "good girl" before. Rather, she leaves the world of commandment under duress for the world of choice, and thus she answers:

Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so [*u-vekhen*]I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish. (*Esther* 4:16)

Esther does not accept Mordekhai's words without question. No more. On the contrary, she agrees that she must appear before the king, but she rejects the argument that she and her father's house will perish only if she disobeys God's commandment, while if she obeys God's command, she will also be saved. Esther says: I will, indeed, go in to the king, which is not according to the law, as is incumbent on me, but I have no guarantee that I will be saved; and if I perish, I perish.

Esther is aware that she is indeed taking a risk and may die. This is the meaning of the word "*u-vekhen*" – “and even so.” On the contrary, she says, I think there is a great risk in what I will be doing, "and yet" I will take the risk.[[2]](#footnote-2) The word "*u-vekhen*" is used in a case where a person perceives the situation in a certain way, and despite his assessment, he rises up and acts in accordance with what he thinks needs to be done: "And yet I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law." All my life, I have acted according to your commandments, and those of Achashverosh, and therefore the main problem with going in to Achashverosh is that it is not according to the law – and as stated, she rejects Mordekhai's words and concludes – and yet, even though it is not according to the law, I will go, and if I perish, I perish.

**II. “Esther put on her royal apparel”**

Esther began as one who follows orders: good orders, orders that Mordekhai gave her, but nevertheless, orders. And suddenly, something causes her to emerge from the world of obedience and take the initiative. What is the meaning of this change?

It seems that Esther's personal process can be explained in light of the Maharal's words about the national process of accepting the Torah, and from Esther we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the national process that the people of Israel underwent.

As mentioned, the Maharal asserts that there are two important elements: the Torah itself involves coercion, and in addition, one must choose life. The simple understanding is that one must fulfill both elements – sometimes one must act under compulsion, and sometimes by free choice. However, if this is the case, these two elements do not really coexist at the same time; at any given moment, one or the other must be given up. Therefore, it seems that the Maharal is referring to a single essence that captures both elements: We must accept the eternal Torah by free choice. We must do the impossible and maintain the tension: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore, choose life" (*Devarim* 30:19). This does not mean that sometimes we accept the Torah by free choice, and sometimes we accept the Torah under duress, but that the acceptance of the eternal Torah, which will exist forever, must be of our free choice.

In other words, the Torah is the only truth that exists, and one who understands that there is no other possibility has no choice – and only after understanding this is it possible and obligatory to choose the single option.

In light of this formulation, we can understand the process that Esther underwent. Esther is subject to many compulsions and imperatives, and yet she chooses to follow the true path. She does not disagree with Mordekhai about "who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty." She recognizes that God may have summoned her for this opportunity; and yet, no one forced her to act as she did and come to the king. She stood up, and truly chose on her own the moral truth that was forced upon her.

This is the novel point that *Chazal* saw in the words: "Now it came to pass on the third day that Esther put on her royal apparel" (*Esther* 5:1). Clearly she was wearing her royal clothing; why emphasize this point? It must be that it was something inside of her that changed, or as *Chazal* say, "this teaches that the holy spirit clothed her" (*Megilla* 15a).

Indeed, from that moment, from the time of that decision, Esther "wears royalty" – she stops taking orders from Mordekhai and begins to command him herself,[[3]](#footnote-3) such as "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me."

**Conclusion**

*Chazal* in their wisdom already noted the connection between the inner transformation that took place in Esther and the giving of the Torah. As mentioned, in the Gemara in *Shabbat* they take this story and turn it into a historical foundation concerning the acceptance of the Torah by the people of Israel. It seems that they too saw in this point, of the acceptance of the Torah, the uniqueness of Purim.

What is the important idea that we note in the book of *Esther*? There is, of course, the huge miracle of salvation that constitutes the heart of the story. However, Jews have been persecuted throughout history (just a generation ago, almost all of the Jews were again brought under one kingdom, with an evil king who wanted to kill them all, God forbid), and God has always saved us. The miracle of salvation in the book of *Esther* is great, but not unique.

In the book we find other matters relating to Purim – the enactment of the holiday of Purim for that generation, and for future generations, with all its laws and regulations. *Chazal* noted this as well (see, for example, *Megilla* 7), but this too is not unique. From the time of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the service of God and the development of the Torah has been progressing slowly but surely for thousands of years. Purim is an important landmark in the process, but there are many more landmarks.

In the *midrash* concerning Israel's re-acceptance of the Torah, it seems that *Chazal* wished to emphasize something else – the acceptance of a renewed Torah. Indeed, we toil in the service of God throughout the years, and for the most part it is indeed long and slow. And yet, it turns out that in the course of that service, from time to time we come to a crossroads, a test that requires putting everything on the table – and then a transformation takes place. Not a communal-public transformation like at Mount Sinai or Mount Carmel, but a personal transformation.

This is precisely the lesson that we learn from Esther, the lesson of "who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty?" After years of wandering in the wilderness, outside of Israel, in the Diaspora, we reach a point that we must ask ourselves "Who knows?" Do I continue to go with the flow and hope that it will lead to something good, or do I seize the moment? As Esther said to herself, "I am no longer a little girl," and the days are over when "Esther did the commandment of Mordekhai, like when she was brought up with him" – and from that, "And Esther put on her royal apparel."

These words should resonate with anyone who sees himself as a servant of God: he serves God under compulsion because this is the truth, but he does not truly serve God until he internalizes the idea of "who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty." I must choose what my destiny will be as a servant of God, and what I will do.

In the book of *Esther*, the turning point that was reached was not limited to Esther alone, but it affected all of Israel, who "confirmed and accepted" "what they had begun to do." Until now there had been "a great protest against the Torah," but now they "began to do." And the acceptance was of their own free will. All of Esther's life was a preparation for that moment, and thus everything changed when she woke up and internalized "who knows whether it was for just such a time that you came into royalty." For this they added an entire book to the Bible, and this is what we commemorate on Purim.

1. The term *moda'a* is used here as it is used in *Bava Batra* to denote a declaration made in advance that nullifies a subsequent legal process. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is not for naught that this is the word that *Chazal* chose to open the *Malkhuyot* blessing on the High Holidays ("*u-vekhen ten pachdekha*"). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Malbim, on the other hand, explains at length that Mordekhai was the brain behind the plan and Esther merely the executor. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)