



Jewish Identity in Galut

Confusion and uncertainty seem in-built into Purim – one of its *mitzvot* is *ad delo yada*, until one cannot differentiate between Haman and Mordechai. We read of the Jewish people being faced with annihilation and saved at the last minute. And beneath the surface, the entire story of the Megillah gives us a glimpse into the oft-flimsy fabric of Diaspora Jewry.

Up until the time of Esther, the Jewish nation had only ever dwelled in Israel. For hundreds of years the Jews were living in their land, fighting their enemies, building their kingdoms. And here, for the first and only time in the Tanach, the people of Israel as a nation found themselves on foreign lands.

Beneath the story of Haman's evil decree lies an important discussion of Jewish life in the Diaspora. How should the Jewish people behave in the many years of Exile to come? On the one hand, the prophecies of Yirmiyahu call on the people of Israel to settle in the Diaspora and not think this is a temporary period expected to pass: "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit" (Yirmiyahu 29:5). On the other hand, the prophet immediately follows with: "I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places to which I have banished you – declares the L-rd – and I will bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you" (Yirmiyahu 29:14).

As someone who was born and raised in France in the 1970s and '80s, I still remember the constant tension between the desire to be a part of the society in which I lived and the need to preserve my own Jewish identity. I think that's a tension every Jew in the Diaspora has felt at one time or another.

And that's also the tension around which the Megillah revolves.

History, of course, testifies that many Jewish communities became well-established in the Diaspora over the years. Indeed, the entire Babylonian Talmud, as its name implies, was written in exile. From pre-war European Jewry in all of its glory, and Moroccan Jewry with its extensive literature and learned sages, to the great Jewish communities today all over the world, the cornerstones of Jewish community life outside Israel were laid in the first Jewish exile, in Megillat Esther.

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At the beginning of the Megillah, we see a description of life in Shushan, ostensibly one of harmony, free of worry, sadness and mourning. The exile is forgotten, until even the Temple vessels are used for the king's feast. All peoples sit together and there is room for everyone, Jews and Persians alike.

Mordechai stands aloof from these festivities. His philosophy is that yes, we are part of life here but we must preserve our Jewish identity. Yes, we are committed to the kingdom and therefore we will save Achashverosh from Bigtan and Teresh, but we will not bow to Haman.

Mordechai understands that his actions can endanger the nation – he sees the connection between preserving Jewish

identity and the decrees of annihilation – but he seeks to arouse awareness to another danger lurking for the Jewish people in the Diaspora – a loss of identity, a loss of connection with the Jewish people, the Torah and a longing for the Land of Israel.

Esther arrives at Achashverosh's palace with the secret of her identity. She symbolizes the great challenge the Diaspora presents to the Jewish people – one can hide one's Jewish identity and even reach the highest echelons of power. However, as Mordechai tells Esther, "Do not imagine you will escape... for you and your father's house will perish." He warns Esther not that her secret might be revealed, but that if it is not revealed, even she may ultimately forget it herself.

Megillat Esther's story of salvation is not a tale of one community in a certain country during a certain period. It is a story of Jewish salvation for all generations. The Megillah continues its story even after the decree is removed, because the story of the Megillah is the story of Jewish identity in foreign lands, wherever Jews are along the continuum of history.

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