



JOINING THE JEWISH JOURNEY

Upon hearing the news of the destructive royal decree against the Jews, Mordechai sends a personal message to Esther. “He [sent] the text of the law that had been proclaimed... for their destruction... [to] show it to Esther... and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people” (4:8). Esther demurs, citing the very real risk to her life if she dares to approach the king uninvited. “All the... people of the king’s provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king’s presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death” (4:11).

It is at this moment that Mordechai speaks some of the most concurrently chilling and uplifting words ever spoken in Tanach: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from elsewhere, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (4:13-14). Esther takes Mordechai’s charge to heart, agrees to approach Achashverosh, and her actions save the lives of countless Jews in the kingdom.

I shiver every time I read Mordechai’s words. To be a Jew is to be a part of the greatest and longest running story in history. We have deep roots in the past, have been through and accomplished an extraordinary amount, and have always carried a long-term vision towards the future. But the going has frequently been tough, and it is understandably tempting to think one could save oneself by hiding from this identity.

Mordechai’s description of how G-d guides history casts these sorts of decisions in an unexpected light. There is a classic debate among the great medieval thinkers regarding how involved G-d is in the lives of most individuals. Some¹ maintain that G-d’s *hashgachah* (Divine providence) appears in even the more minor details of all of our daily lives and events. Others² contend that the lives of most people are governed by the laws of nature and normal cause and effect, with the exception of the particularly righteous. However, even those in the latter camp agree that G-d intervenes in matters that affect the fate of *Am Yisrael* as a whole. Even if it were possible to escape one’s identity, denying it would leave us on the sidelines of the forward march into a better future.

Esther looks at the situation and makes the sensible initial decision. If she goes to Achashverosh of her own accord, she will likely be killed. That is the rule. But Mordechai directs her attention away from the decrees of this earthly Persian king, and towards the rules of the King of the Universe. G-d made a covenant with our earliest ancestors and promised that *Am Yisrael* will always survive even the most difficult times. The Jewish people have a role to play in the world and in history, and will live to see our mission to its successful conclusion. That long term destiny is guaranteed.

What is not guaranteed is the fate of the individual.

The Jewish people will survive, even thrive. But what of the individual Jew? No particular person in history is necessary for G-d’s plan; someone else could come along and assume any role that needs to be played. Mordechai’s

message to Esther is she should remember it is not her royal position that best assures her safety in the long-run, but rather her participation and membership in the eternal nation.

On the day-to-day level, the theological issue of the extent to which G-d intervenes in our lives remains in question. But the message in this chapter, at the heart of the story of Esther, is one that looks to the bigger picture. We tend to think our role in *tefillah* is to *daven* for G-d to save the Jews, when perhaps in truth it is through our davening that we include ourselves in the Jewish people, who will ultimately be saved.

1 Chovot HaLevavot 3 (introduction), 4:3, 4:4, 8:3 (19th reason) and elsewhere, one reading of Ramban Shemot 13:16, etc.

2 Notably the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim 3:17–18.

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