



ESTHER'S TRANSFORMATION

One central theme of the Purim miracle is **וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא**, “And it was switched around” (Esther 9:1). Many things are switched around in the Megillah, most notably, the fate of *Am Yisrael*, but *Chazal* (Ptichta D’Esther Rabbah, Vilna Edition 9) stress one particular element about Achashverosh, **שָׁהָרַג אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי אוֹהָבוֹ וּפְעַם אַחֲרַת הָרַג אֶת אוֹהָבוֹ מִפְּנֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ**, “He killed his wife because of his loved one and on another occasion killed his loved one because of his wife.” Achashverosh kills Vashti because of his advisors, and he kills Haman because of his wife, Esther, after she charges him with the mass-extermination of her people. Haman, in an effort to save his life, turns to Esther and begins to beg (7:7) but to no avail.

This scene best captures Esther’s remarkable transformation, her own **וְנִהְפֹךְ הוּא**.

The first three chapters of the Megillah portray Esther as beautiful, quiet, passive and obedient. This is undoubtedly expressed in Esther’s introduction, “She had no father or mother, and the girl was beautiful and pleasant to look at and when her father and mother died, Mordechai took her in as a daughter” (2:7), and reinforced throughout.

The Megillah fortifies this image by noting that Esther obeys Mordechai’s command to remain utterly silent and not inform anyone of her religion or nationality (2:10–11). Esther is then taken into the palace for a special party (2:18). There, the people are deeply impressed with her beauty (2:16). The

Megillah reiterates how she remained quiet, not revealing her nationality, as Mordechai had instructed her (2:20). These descriptions reinforce our image of Esther as beautiful, quiet and obedient.

However, Esther is not just quiet and passive; she is controlled by others. She almost blindly obeys Mordechai to keep her nationality secret (2:10, 20). Additionally, she is taken forcefully to the palace (2:8), first as a prospect to marry the king and ultimately, as his wife (2:17). None of these actions appear to be of her own volition. The verse stating “And Esther was taken” (2:16) is more than a mere description of her movements; it captures who she is.

There is a stark contrast between Esther in the first (chapters 1–3) and second parts (chapters 4–10) of the Megillah. In the second segment, she is exceedingly active. Esther initiates and organizes three days to fast and mourn (4:15–16), enters Achashverosh’s inner courtyard unannounced (5:1–2), putting her life in peril (4:11), throws two parties for Achashverosh and Haman, and at the second one, accuses Haman of plotting the destruction of the Jewish people.

In her newly active role, she exerts dominance over those who had previously controlled her. The Megillah unmistakably presents her as having the upper hand.

She commands Mordechai to gather the Jews to fast (4:16), which he does, and Achashverosh can’t fulfill her needs

quickly enough (5:3, 5:6, 7:2, and 9:12). However, Esther’s accumulation of power is most unmistakably reinforced when Haman, pleading for his life, turns to her rather than to the king. Even Haman realizes Esther is now the one calling the shots. Haman begs Esther for his life because clearly she has the power. This visual illustration further reinforces Esther’s commanding role.

What precipitates this change in Esther? What motivates her to behave so differently?

The turning point in Esther’s behavior occurs immediately after a powerful conversation with Mordechai. At the climax in the narrative, Mordachai exclaims, “Do not be silent with your soul escaping from all the Jews, for if you are silent now, salvation will come to the Jews from another place and you and your father’s house will be lost. And who knows if for this moment you became queen” (Esther 4:14).

Upon hearing this challenge, Esther is deeply inspired and risks everything, including her life, to save her nation. Esther’s unparalleled commitment to *Am Yisrael* prompts a metamorphosis in her behavior. Simply put, Esther becomes who she needs to be because she has to save her people.

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