

Question 1: Reading the story of Purim, we notice that the most active protagonist in the plot is actually Mordechai, not Esther, and it is Mordechai who appears to be Haman's chief adversary. What is Esther's role in the Purim story, and why is the book named for her?

Answer: While Esther is the "title character" of the book, she is not introduced until the second chapter, after King Achashverosh declares that all the maidens in the land shall present themselves to him so he might choose a new queen. Even then, she is defined by her relationship to her cousin Mordechai:

There was a certain Jew in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordechai the son of Jair the son of Shimee the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives... And he brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on...(Esther 2:5-7).

The sages derive from this detailed lineage that Mordechai and Esther were actually descendants of King Saul, the first king of Israel (Source 1-1). This was part of the information that Mordechai instructed her not to reveal (Source 1-2).



SAMPLE

Source 1-1: Targum Yonatan on Esther 2:5 English of

Mordechai was the son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Shemida, son of Baanah, son of Ilah, son of Micah, son of Mephiboshet, [grand]son of [King] Saul, [son of Kish].

Source 1-2: Esther 2:10

לֹא־הָיָה לְאִמָּהּ לְדַבֵּר עִוֵּן עָלָיו כִּי צִוָּהּ מֹרְדֵכַי לֵאמֹר אַל־תַּגִּידִי

Esther did not reveal her people or her nationality because Mordechai commanded her not to reveal it.

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The connection to Saul has a secondary purpose. It creates an historical link: During the war between Israel and Amalek (around 1050 B.C.E.), King Saul violated a Divine command to kill Agag and had mercy on the king, who became the sole Amalekite survivor. Agag was killed the next morning by the Prophet Samuel, but it was too late. On that very night, Agag impregnated a maidservant, whose son was the direct forefather of Haman. The connection to Saul also links Esther to Saul's great-grandmother, the matriarch Rachel, both of whom are praised for their strong trait of humility, a trait also ascribed to Esther.

While there are numerous examples of Esther's humility, the most definitive one is how she is able to hear rebuke, accept it, and modify her actions without argument. When Mordechai requests that Esther go before the king and plead for her people, Esther's immediate reaction is to tell him that it has been at least 30 days since the king last summoned her and anyone who approached the king without being summoned was liable to be put to death. Mordechai chastises her, saying:

Do not think that, because you are in the king's house, you will escape the fate of all the Jews. Surely, if you are silent at this time, relief and salvation will come to the Jews from another place, and you and the house of your fathers will be destroyed. And who knows, [perhaps] it is precisely for a time like this that you ascended to royalty" (Esther 4:13-14).

Esther immediately requests that Mordechai instruct the Jews to fast and to pray for her, not daring to depend upon her own merits, and agrees to approach the king in three days time, noting that approaching the king unsummoned "*is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.*"



Esther Versus Haman

Esther's humility is juxtaposed to Haman's arrogance. From the very beginning, Haman is seen as pushing himself to the forefront. The Talmud (*Megillah* 12b) notes that Haman is also called Memuchan, the last among the seven advisors. The one who is arrogant suggests that Vashti must be killed in order to uphold the dignity of her husbands throughout the country. This is the first sign that Haman is going to be a villain. It is a character trait that is repeated often:

- (1) Haman convinces the king to declare a law that all must bow to him, and he is infuriated when Mordechai refuses;
- (2) Haman rushes home to brag to his wife that he is the only guest invited to a feast with the king and queen;
- (3) Haman believes that the king must be referring to him when Achashverosh asks how he should reward a man who has rendered a great service to the king. (He was actually rewarding Mordechai for reporting a plot against the king.)

Haman and Esther are true adversaries in this story because their confrontation is really the continuation of the battle between Israel and Amalek, a nation descended from Jacob's brother Esau. It is in the very nature of the nation of Amalek to hate the Jews. Three days after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, the Amalekites traveled a great distance in order to attack the rear flank of the Jewish people, attacking the weak and the stragglers. While the Israelites miraculously defeated the Amalekites in a one day war, their method of attack demonstrates the true nature of the Amalekites: G-d had just performed miracles for the Israelites and no nation dared to attack them. Only Amalek had the temerity to attack them from the rear.

Source 1-3: Talmud Megillah 12b

It says, "*Memuchan said*" (1:16). We learned in a Baraita: Memuchan is Haman. And why was he called Memuchan? Because he was destined [*muchan*] for punishment [to be hanged]. Rabbi Kahana said: From this we see that a vulgar fellow elbows his way to the front. [Memuchan is listed as the last of the seven officers that were consulted (1:14), yet he was the first to offer advice.]

