The Book of Esther and the Gift of Transformation

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Alana Ruben [aka Alana Ruben Free] is a writer/artist based in Israel. Her thesis “The Sacred Marriage in the Book of Esther,” included writing a novella, In the Voice of Esther. Past theatre credits include her Eden Trilogy [Beginner at Life, Fear&Desire, WhiteFire-BlackFire], and a participatory performance, Presence=Present. She is a Creativity/Life coach who leads personal development and writing workshops internationally. This article appears in issue 41 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Esther is the antidote to Eve. Unlike Adam and Eve, whose breakdown in trust and communication resulted in humanity’s collective exile—lives, relationships, and societies out of balance, Mordechai and Esther, through their creative partnership, not only saved the Jewish People, but brought joy, light, and stability to the kingdom. Esther, and specifically her intelligent rescue strategy for herself and her people, provided a psychologically wise, embodied process leading to empowerment, growth, and greater wholeness. She is the one, who by personally transforming herself, transforms the whole kingdom. *Megillat Esther* is essentially about exile and redemption —individually and collectively, and holds the secret of how to return home to ourselves and our land whole.

Encoded in the Book of Esther are the answers to many of our collective, universal questions. How do we build a more just world? What must we do to restore a sense of the sacred to our marriages, homes, and society? How do we rekindle love in our relationship with the divine after heartache and disappointments? How do we become our most empowered selves?

The goal of marital union in Judaism was never simply to procreate but to bring into the world greater *kedusha* (holiness), prosperity, and security, not just for one's family, but for all of society. The Jews’ victory in the fifth century bce and all Purim celebrations hence were the consequence of Esther’s capacity to transform herself from a passive adopted daughter, then mute wife into a woman who knows how to ask instinctually and strategically for what she needs from Mordechai, her community, and ultimately from her husband, the king.

As we read in the final chapters, Esther's transformation blessed the whole kingdom. The loyal, righteous Mordechai replaced the tyrannical, war-mongering Haman as the Prime Minister. The brave, assertive actions of Esther resulted in a more honest, transparent union and balance of power between the king and queen. And, through the constantly maturing, evolving union of Esther and Mordechai, there emerged an individuation map on how to survive and redeem ourselves from exile—move from a state of spiritual alienation and powerlessness to honest self-expression and integrity—via uprooting the seeds of distrust between men and women planted by Adam and Eve.

By the end of the *megillah*, Esther is no longer a queen in name only, a mere figurehead, *inconsequential to the king and kingdom*. Through her spiritually rich process and clever plan that will be discussed in detail, Esther becomes embodied, creative, enthroned, active, majestic, visible, articulate, prolific, and sovereign. She becomes a warrior, writer, and ruler who is loved by her people.

Equally important, by the end, not only is Esther's status changed in the eyes of the king, but Mordechai has changed as well. Mordechai is no longer "The Jew sitting at the gate of the King" but welcomed into the palace, named as viceroy. After Esther raised her standing in the eyes of the king, she used her power *to raise materially the man who raised her spiritually*. And, most importantly, in the end, together, they raise their people in the eyes of the nations, from a physically scattered, vulnerable, cowering, shameful, community of exiles, into a spiritually unified victorious, blessed tribe. Their security and status so significantly increased that other nations desired to convert, learn their laws, and join in their covenant.

What Was the Secret to Esther's Success?

Hadassah was Esther's given Hebrew name at birth. The name Hadassah reveals to us Esther's hidden potential: *Hadas* means myrtle. In the ancient world, myrtle was a medicinal plant known for its ability to heal pain and fever. Myrtle, the symbol for victory (*netzah*) in the ancient world, was strewn in the streets after military victory: "The sweet smell of victory" is the scent of *hadas*. Myrtle became associated with weddings and love as ancient Israelites would dance before the bride and groom waving myrtle. Within young Esther, we see planted her potential to heal the pain of exile, achieve victory, and assert great spiritual strength and power. These powers become activated via remembering the extra letter "heh" added to her name; activating her co-creative relationship to the transcendent.

Esther is first introduced to us as motherless and fatherless, an orphan living in Shushan, Persia. After her parents' death, Esther was adopted by her much older first cousin, Mordechai Ben Yair (Yair, meaning enlightened). Mordechai is introduced as Esther's "*oman*," guardian. "Guardian" (*oman*) is similar to the word for faith (*emunah*) and artist (*uman*). Much like artists were entrusted with creating holy vessels for the Temple, parents are entrusted with caring for and raising children, potential vessels for the divine. To be the guardian of a child is a sacred responsibility, requiring great faith in one's self, the child, and God. Mordechai's faith in Esther is returned by Esther's faith in Mordechai. Their relationship, rooted in faith and devotion to one another, was maintained through their daily connection via messengers for the many years that Esther was in the palace. Throughout the Book of Esther, we witness a man and woman, alternatively guarding over each other, raising one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

As a young girl, Esther is presented as passive. She is *taken* by Mordechai as a daughter, *taken* to the palace, and *selected* for special treatment. She is adaptive, a survivor, one who, when necessary, can either blend in with the wall mosaic or enchant the king. In the harem, she was treated like a dress-up doll, a plaything, admired for her malleability, beauty, and form.

Was it Esther's nature or survival instincts that assisted her in finding grace and favor in the eyes of all who saw her? Was she a master at playing the roles expected of her? In Jungian terms, Esther has the markings of "a fantasy woman," one who lacks a secure identity. When our Jewish identity is lacking, we quickly assimilate or lose ourselves in the projections of others. Esther could be read as a symbol of the Jewish soul within each of us who, after generations in exile, risks being exterminated or lost to assimilation, unless we gain the ability to claim fully our uniqueness and assert our identity.

How Did These Monumental Transformations Occur?

They started inside of Esther. These types of transformations begin inside of our individual souls when we commit, despite the risks, to realizing and revealing our uniqueness and personal beliefs. Esther spoke in her own defense and then for her people. She spoke bravely from her heart to the one who held ultimate power over her life and death.

Esther's husband, King Achashverosh, drove away his first wife, Vashti, when she stood for her principles. Vashti's "No" to the King cost the kingdom their queen, and all other wives their freedom of expression. The whole kingdom suffered. Partnership and national prosperity are impossible without the full participation, expression, and sovereignty of women.

The removal of Vashti changes everything not just for the women in the kingdom, but soon after for Esther, Mordechai, and the Jews. Vashti's "No" to the king's exploitative request leads to the crowning of Esther. After Esther is crowned, Haman, the spiritual offspring of Amalek, the eternal antagonist to divine order, rises to Prime Minister. Haman demands full obeisance. Haman can be viewed psychologically as the inner drive for power, the evil inclination, or doubt. Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman, his enemy, provokes a decree of genocide against all Jews.

Dressed in sackcloth and ashes, Mordechai delivers via messenger to Esther the edict of Haman and commands Esther to immediately go before the King and beseech him, and plead for the lives of her people. Mordechai does not say "plead for your own life."

Esther pauses. Esther thinks. She doesn't agree with Mordechai's plan. She does not want to be a martyr, to stupidly sacrifice her own life and achieve nothing as a result. She has lived in the palace for close to seven years; she knows the king's temper and temperament, and such a plan will most likely cost her life.

How Does Esther Change the Balance of Power?

Esther commands Mordechai to do something on her behalf: to gather their people. Esther's assertion changes the balance of power. Mordechai must obey her request before she will go before the king. Mordechai subjects his will to Esther, who until now has followed his commands.

Esther knows she will not succeed alone but needs the energetic force, prayers, and commitment of the community. Esther tells Mordechai that she has not been called before the King in *thirty days*. Esther may fear that she is already spiritually dead to the King, and her appearance, uninvited into his court, will justify him erecting her literal gravestone, and naming a new queen. Mordechai reminds her that there is still hope; she must act on behalf of her people. "Do not delude yourself into thinking that out of all the Jews you alone will be spared in the palace. Because if you keep silent at this time, relief and safety will come for the Jewish People from another place." Another "vehicle" will be provided: Do not doubt that Love, the Neshama, and the Jewish People are all eternal.

Mordechai as Esther's spiritual guardian then reminds her that this is her moment to claim her role as protector of her people. If you do not make yourself a mouthpiece, an actor, a speaker, like Moses did, on behalf of the divine will, another person will be chosen. "And who knows if it was for this moment that you became queen, arrived into royalty."

To arrive into royalty means to have achieved our full human power: experience ourselves placed firmly on the ground, capable of moving and acting in our full majesty as self-determining human beings living in alignment with divine law; using our capacity to decide, act, choose good over evil.

Esther must decide whether she is prepared to raise herself to her fullest human potential, or remain passive.

Mordechai deeply loves and believes in Esther. He is a true "*oman*": spiritual trainer and physical guardian. Esther knows that Mordechai would never ask her to go before the king if he didn't believe in her. But, more importantly, Mordechai fully grasped the spiritual risk to Esther if she doesn't reveal herself now and go.

Why Will Esther and Her Father's House Be Destroyed?

Cowardice is deadly to the soul. Not only does cowardice weaken the soul, but so does hiding weaken one's spiritual strength. Remaining in hiding will weaken Esther, and lead her to perish if not physically then spiritually. Esther's cowardly choice to "assimilate" into the palace will lead to her own self-destruction; her father's house will perish. "Assimilation" can be read synonymously with "hiding."

Mordechai reminds Esther of her full Hebrew name, *Hadassah bat Avihayil* (my father, the valiant soldier). You are the offspring of a *valiant father* and have the capacity of becoming an *eshet hayil*, a valiant woman, a soldier. Esther pauses, thinks, then sends back the following message to Mordechai: Go and gather all the Jews in Shushan and fast for me! Don't eat and don't drink for three days and nights, and I and my maidens will also fast…and then I will go to the king. She reminds him again that he's asking her to break a law punishable by death. Esther concludes: "If I perish, I perish."

Esther willingly offers herself as a vessel and representative for the much larger vessel, *kenesset yisrael*. She chooses to act *in relationship with the spiritual support of her community* but

understands her survival, first and foremost, is essential to their continuance. Mordechai, acting as her spiritual partner, rounds up the Jews in Shushan requesting that they fast on her behalf. *He is working with her*. His soul is serving the needs of her soul, and thus did “all that was commanded upon him by Esther.”

Esther begins at this moment to take possession of her power: earthly, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and creative power. Like the Kohen haGadol on Yom Kippur, Esther prepares to enter the king’s inner chamber, by joining her people in fasting. However, when she goes to make her request to the king of Persia, a volatile man, she takes a practical approach; beginning with meeting the king, face to face, soul to soul. She does not send her invitation via messenger.

What Is Esther’s Strategy?

Before meeting the king face to face, Esther spends three days meeting herself face to face; reclaiming her spiritual power as a Jew, reconnecting to her emotions, embodying her core values and spiritual aim. After fasting, prayers, and reflection, she dresses in *malkhut* (garments of royalty) and walks deliberately, confidently, mindfully to the threshold. Her husband sits, surrounded by guards, on his throne. When she arrives at the doorway, she and the King take in each other’s presence, and perhaps for the first time "Esther haMalka" is seen by the king as a queen, his queen.

Esther does not run in hysterically, falling on her knees begging for her life, because she knows that her husband is not a compassionate man. Haman and her husband are both ruthless. There is no pity in the palace. The way to her insecure, gluttonous, alcoholic husband's heart is through his stomach, chalice, and pride. She knows, like Haman, what he hungers for most is honor and respect.

When the King extends his scepter and asks, "What is your petition? What is your request? Up to half of the kingdom, I will grant to you.” Esther asks to have the honor of his company at a feast that she has already prepared especially for him and his closest confidant, Haman. Her greatest pleasure would be to receive his company at a private feast made in his honor. What husband could refuse that? Her innocent request intrigues the king, maybe even moves his heart. My wife could have anything, and all she asks for is time with me at her table. His messenger is sent at once to bring Haman to accompany the king to the feast. Before Esther approaches the king, she already has prepared the feast. Before Esther asks for what she wants, she gives.

When the King asks Esther for a second time, "Queen Esther, What is your request? Up to half of the kingdom, I will give to you," Esther pauses… is this the right time? She listens to her instincts, intuition, and says: “…if it is good for the king… come tomorrow again to a feast, and I will act according to the king's desire and word.” She feels or knows that the time is not right. Tomorrow Esther will submit her request, and do what her conscience demands. Is she taking her time or creating a space within which divine assistance may arise?

Divine assistance does arrive in the middle of the night. The king cannot sleep, and discovers the scales of justice are not balanced in the kingdom. A Jew saved his life by reporting on two traitors and was never rewarded. Now, years after the actual events, Mordechai is paraded through town in the king’s attire on the king’s horse, led by Haman proclaiming: “This is what’s done for the man the king wishes to honor.”

Soon after the events, both the king and Haman arrive at Esther's second feast in very different states of mind from the day before. The king is tired but relieved to no longer be in anyone's debt. Haman is irritable, sensing the winds shifting away from his sails. For the third time, the king asks Esther: "What is your request, what is your petition, up to half the kingdom and it shall be granted." Queen Esther, knowing her own life would be of more value to the king than the lives of the Jews, firmly asks for the right to live: "Give me MY LIFE (*nafshi*) for my request! And, for my petition, my people."

Esther is well aware that either she or Haman will be executed at the feast; only one of them will be permitted to walk out alive. Her purpose requires that she lives to fulfill her destiny as queen, save her people. She must be victorious over Haman, eradicate him and all of his followers. She does not mince words: "For we were sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, killed, annihilated.…if we had just been sold to be servants and slaves, I would have remained silent. For that, I would not have troubled you."

Curiously, Esther has neither named Haman, nor blamed the King. She has simply presented the facts. As expected, the king is infuriated! Who would have the nerve to sell his wife? Steal his property?! The king asks: "Who is this person?" Esther stares evil in the eye, points her metaphoric sword at Haman, and declares war against her enemy: "The evil Haman." Haman trembles before "the king and queen." Haman fears them as a united force. However, the king is not sure whom to believe or what to do. His heretofore "trophy-wife" is accusing his most trusted advisor. The king rises and exits to the terrace. Esther exercising her power, naming evil, liberates the king from the influence of Amalek, Haman. The king begins to regain his own individuated power.

The king steps out in a confused rage, and Haman feels the weight of judgment hanging over him. He throws himself at the mercy of the queen. Thus, instead of Esther throwing herself at the king begging for mercy, Haman throws himself on Esther pleading for his life. *A complete reversal was created by the force of Esther's strategic thinking.* When the king returns from the terrace, Haman has implicated himself by forcing himself on top of his queen. The king trusts his own sense of sight, and has evidence and witnesses to the truth of Esther's accusations: Haman is guilty. The gallows that Haman had erected in his garden to hang Mordechai are then used the same day to hang Haman. Evil succumbs to its own instrument of death.

Esther reveals to the king that Mordechai is her relative; "the one who in the past spoke well of the king." That very morning the king had heard that Mordechai had saved his life; thus the king transfers to Mordechai his ring, power, and agrees to save the lives of Esther and Mordechai. However, he says that he cannot reverse an edict stamped with the King's seal. What is written and sealed cannot be revoked.

Not deterred in her mission to save her people—just like Moshe appeared many times before Pharoah, demanding "Let my people go!"—Esther spent the next three months beseeching her husband to save her people. Finally, on the 23rd of Sivan, Esther prevails. The king relents: "Esther and Mordechai can write what they see fit and seal it with his ring." Esther, the warrior-queen, sends out an edict granting the Jewish People the right to assemble, fight, and defend themselves. "They may do to their enemies what their enemies wished to do to them."

How Does Esther Lead the Jewish People to Victory?

Esther steps into her full birthright as *Hadassah*, "the one who brings victory and healing." She prepares her people to overcome their enemies, Amalek: the force in the world seeking to cool their passion for divine service and eradicate their divine message and destiny. Each person must wage their own battle against Amalek, the inner and outer forces that prevent them from living fully, passionately, Jewishly—and must fight the narrowing forces that prevent one from growing into their potential, and returning home whole to one's self.

With the arrival of the king's new edict written by Mordechai, throughout the 127 provinces, there was light, gladness, happiness, and honor. In every city, there were celebrations bringing others into the flock of the Jewish People. Mordechai is dressed by the king in *malhut* [royal clothing]. It's a known Jungian spiritual principle that the feminine aspect strongly influences the masculine: Once Esther has differentiated herself and claimed her true identity, Mordechai must equally change; appear publicly dressed in *malhut*.

Good triumphs over evil. Light over darkness. The small over the mighty. The king is so impressed with the *powerful victory and leadership* of his queen that for a fourth time he asks Esther, "what is your request and petition." She requests to repeat tomorrow what she did today, and her request is granted.

> And the memory of these days shall be remembered and celebrated by every generation… never perish from among their descendants. And then, Queen Esther, daughter of Avihayil, wrote and ratified with Mordechai the Jew letters of Purim, for a second time, and sent to Jews in the 127 provinces, *sefarim*, words of peace and truth…Esther's ordinances…were recorded in a book.

Conclusion: How Do Esther and Mordechai Rectify Humanity?

According to a midrash, at the End of Days, we will only celebrate one holiday, Purim: a joyous day of feasting while giving gifts and charity; a universal holiday, open to all who wish to celebrate the miracle wrought through the sacred process and partnership of Esther and Mordechai, as well as the Jewish community and the divine. "In the end, Mordechai the Jew ruled alongside the king, establishing order for the Kingdom…and demanded good for the sake of his people, speaking words of peace to all of *his seed*."

We alive today are *"his seed."* Mordechai and Esther planted seeds of peace, goodness, truth, light, prosperity, and joy for future generations. The spiritual partnership of Esther and Mordechai, *clothed in their full human majesty (malhut)*, is the spiritual *tikkun* for the naked, half-covered Adam and Eve who were banished by God from the Garden of Eden. Mordechai and Esther took the responsibility upon themselves to become spiritual parents to their people in exile, and model an evolving, co-creative relationship between each other and the divine.