

Devar Torah - Scroll of Ester

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In another few days we'll be reading the Scroll of Ester. Why do we refer to it by this name? The simplest explanation is that Ester is the central character of the story – just like Ruth in the Scroll of Ruth, like Joshua in the Book of Joshua, and like Ezra and Nehemia in the books that are named after them. However, there is also another reason.

The text tells us, in chapter 9, verse 29, that the scroll was actually written by Ester herself: “And Queen Ester, daughter of Avihayil, and Mordekhai the Jew, **wrote down** all the acts of power...”. The Talmud adds that Ester asked the Sages of that generation to establish Purim as a festival for all future generations, and maintained her insistence over their objections until they agreed. This, then, is a fascinating example of the main character of a biblical story who also, according to our tradition, took the trouble to ensure that it was written down, so that its memory would be preserved for the Jewish people for posterity.

From a different perspective, we may put it thus: Ester undergoes a profound process of change and growth. As we read the account of what happened in Persia so long ago, Ester is transformed before our very eyes from a beauty queen who is passive and obedient into a leader who expresses her views firmly, issues commands, sets conditions, and fashions strategies. Thereafter she also becomes the documenter of the events and the molder of their memory for future generations.

During the course of my research for my book, “Tefillat Nashim” – or, in the English version, “A Jewish Woman’s Prayer Book”, I learned from testimonies of *converso* women from Spain and Portugal that Ester was a role model for their lives. Her image as a foreigner, forced to hide her identity but nevertheless remaining loyal to her faith, served the *converso* women as a mirror of their own situation, as reflected in many of their prayers.

More than anything else, I regard the Tanakh – the Old Testament – as a book that offers moral insight and guidance. Beyond the details of each individual narrative, the text unquestionably conveys important ideological and moral messages. How are we to understand the message of the scroll of Ester?

In at least two ways. I believe that the first message concerns the ability of a single individual – in this case, a woman – to move beyond her immediate environment, as set down for her by others and by her society, to lead, to save, and to perpetuate. She manages all of this even though she is not used to such responsibility, and is afraid of failure. If this was so in the days of Ahashverosh, then it certainly applies in our times.

The second message that I glean is the centrality of conveying our tradition from one generation to the next. As the text testifies, “So that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor their memory perish from their descendants.” This act of cultural transmission is effected through the power of the narrative, by means of telling the story. And our Sages taught that when the Messiah comes, all of the festivals in the Jewish calendar will be nullified – except for the festival of Purim. The Jerusalem Talmud, massekhet Megilla, halakha 5, teaches, “The books of the prophets and the other holy writings are destined to fall away, but the Five Books of the Torah will not fall away. And Rabbi Shimon ben Levi taught: Likewise, the Scroll of Ester and the laws will not be nullified in the future.”

I understand this teaching literally. Even in the days of the Messiah, at the end of history, there will be a central and fundamental value to the transmission of our tradition to the next generations. Because if a nation has no past, no roots, then its present is deficient, and its future is in question.

As I see it, the most important task in our generation, too – specifically in our era, with the information revolution and the multiplicity of channels for its transmission – is to nurture our unique Jewish heritage and to find new ways

that can help us to tell our stories to our daughters, to our sons, to our contemporaries and to the generations to come.