Chapter 2

The Piety of Esther

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The biblical queen Esther is a model of female devotion for Jews and Protestants and an actual saint for Catholics.[1] At the time of this writing she had even been recently newsworthy as the presumed role model of Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin.[2] As if that weren't notoriety enough for the Biblical original, her name had been adopted a few years previously by the pop superstar Madonna when she had "converted" to Kabbalism (although not to Judaism). So it was that in the fateful winter of 2008-2009 (fateful because I was writing this chapter) Toronto was festooned with handbills promoting "Can't Stop Esther" (a "multimedia Madonna extravaganza") in English lettering modified to evoke the Hebrew alphabet. Even if the actual Esther remains unfazed by such dubious attention, she must still fidget on her celestial cloud. She is the pious heroine of a book of somewhat doubtful piety.

The book of Esther is at the same time a central text and a marginal one. While it may be "among the generality of Jews, the best known of all the books of the Bible,"[3] it is also one of the most problematic.[4] While the only book of the Jewish canon the recitation of which is the sole focus of a major holiday, that holiday of Purim is itself the least typical in the Jewish liturgical year. Unlike other books so recited, which are read in an atmosphere of quiet devotion, *Esther* evokes one of carnival raucousness. While there is no other sacred text the reading of which elicits a hubbub, repeated loud interruptions of *Esther* are the norm. Indeed, special noisemakers exist for this purpose (and for no other—they make no other appearance in the synagogue in the course of the liturgical year). Special baked goods linked with the narrative commemorate the holiday, as do masquerades.

So uniquely unbridled is the festive joy of Purim that the Rabbis have ruled that the reveler may become so drunken as to be unable to distinguish the virtuous Jew Mordechai the genocidal pagan Haman. On no other day of the year do the Rabbis sanction inebriation. No doubt there are some Jews who avail themselves of this bibulous license. In both Israel and the diaspora, however, Purim has come to be primarily a holiday for children. These dress up in colorful costumes, attend the reading of the book, and gleefully swirl the noisemakers.

These circumstances in which *Esther* is read do not favor intensive thought about it. Nonetheless a serious tradition of interpreting the text does exist. In fact, relative to its length there is no other work of the Jewish canon so extensively commented upon. Indeed we could speak of a variety of interpretive traditions: proto-Rabbinic, Rabbinic, and post-Rabbinic (or simply modern).[5] All these traditions recognize (if sometimes only implicitly) the problematic status of the work. The proto-Rabbinic and Rabbinic readings are concerned to vindicate this status, i.e., to justify the somewhat surprising inclusion of the book in the sacred canon.

Modern (or lately, postmodernist) critics tend to be free of this pious concern. They rather

evince such more current preoccupations as genre.[6] They're likely to cast the unusual features of the work as displaying the virtue of originality, not recognized as such by the tradition.

We too incline to regard the work as original, and the attempts of the Rabbis to assimilate it fully to the rest of the Scriptural tradition as ingenious but not entirely persuasive. As we see it, however, the work's novelty is not merely or primarily one of genre but one of outlook: it was this new substance that required innovation also in form. While not unmindful of the contributions of recent criticism, we will attempt a reading of the work that is not so much postmodern as pre-Rabbinic. By this I mean that we will not presume the view of the book implied by its acceptance into the Jewish canon, which the rabbis have rightly regarded as incumbent on them to defend. We will not take for granted its seamless fit with the grand Scriptural narrative of God's unfailing Providence toward the Jewish people.

That the book is susceptible of this Providential interpretation is undeniable. The question is whether this is the only (or even the most) plausible one. We cannot say from what milieu the book emerged; its author is wholly unknown to us, as is its intended readership. We have only the book, and that it is a problem and even a scandal is clear enough even or precisely from the Rabbis' treatment of it. The most notorious of its many difficulties is that apart from the *Song of Songs* it the only canonical book that contains no direct reference to God, and His participation in its events is at most a matter of inference.[7] The great sixteenth-century rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague (the creator of the legendary Golem, whom tradition knows by the acronym the Maharal) went so far as to assert that the greatest of all the many miracles of the narrative is precisely that all these remain hidden. He intended this interpretation to resolve the work's ambiguities, but viewed otherwise than through the eyes of faith it might even seem to confirm these.

Surprising Persia

If there is one virtue common to all the Bible's positive characters, it is of course their piety. Esther is no exception. In this respect at least both she and the book that bears her name do fit seamlessly into the Biblical tradition. Anomalous, however, is the book's portrayal of the broader society that forms the backdrop for her piety, for that society is not idolatrous but what we might anachronistically describe as "secular."

Consider, by way of contrast, the book of Daniel, widely regarded as roughly contemporary with *Esther*. Its setting is the Babylonian Empire, the predecessor to the Persian, which is defined, as is usual in the Bible, by its idolatry. Thus it is by their refusal to join in the latter that Daniel lands in the lions' den and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in their fiery furnace. By His rescue of all four God both validates their piety and confounds the heathen.

In *Esther*, by contrast, idolatry is not an issue. It is not for their refusal to succumb to it that the Jews of Persia are objects of persecution. Indeed the Persia of the work is of no religion, unless we count as one the cult of prostration before the monarch and his officers. Although the imperial court abounds in feasts, not one of these is sacred nor is reference made to any sacred practices of any kind. We are free to surmise that in this vast multinational empire stretching from Hod to Kush each people practices its own indigenous piety, including the dominant

Persians themselves. Yet that this is not an issue in the book, that there are no official gods failure to acknowledge which incurs a lions' den or a fiery furnace, shows just how far we have come from the Babylon of *Daniel*. In fact what the book stresses about the Persian empire is its "multiculturalism." The recurrent references to the many languages spoken in the empire, and the fact that every royal edict is translated into all of them, suggests a realm in which the only element of homogeneity is the common subjection to despotism.

In short the world of *Esther* is not one of competing pieties. In this the book is unique among all the books in the canon, from those presumed earliest to those presumed latest, that feature the encounter of the Hebrews with other peoples. To be sure, Haman's indictment of the Jews before the credulous King Achashverosh inculpates them "whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws," but no mention is made of sacred laws in particular.[8] There is no suggestion that their dangerous divergence is in sacred matters rather than profane ones; the "god" that matters in the vast Persian domains is the King.[9]

Not surprisingly, then, the first question to arise in the work is that of reverence not toward a never-named Persian pantheon, but toward the King himself. The King's advisers, the seven princes of Media and Persia, succeed in magnifying the issue posed by the defiance of Queen Vashti into that of the obedience of wives to husbands generally throughout the vast spaces of the Empire. (This magnification succeeds in obfuscating the ludicrousness of the King's failure to induce Vashti to deport herself like the trophy wife—harem style—that he obviously takes her to be.) The work almost begins, then, with an example of wifely impiety—if what this last requires is perfect obedience to the husband. That in this case such obedience would require a certain immodesty of Vashti poses at the outset of the work the problem of feminine virtue.[10]

While the King and his sycophantic advisers regard Vashti's behavior as dangerously pernicious, the Rabbis commend her for her refusal to indulge the worst tradition of the Gentiles by behaving as no Jewish wife would do (nor any Jewish husband require). The work's first Jewish readers would doubtless have sympathized with her as well. They would also laugh at a supposed royal edict published in all of the languages of the empire (including, therefore, Hebrew) confirming the absolute authority of all husbands, however lowly, over wives. (Even or precisely when they command them to strip naked before the entire world, which is how the Rabbis interpreted Achashverosh's request of Vashti.) As for Vashti, who is punished by being banished from the King's presence and stripped of her regal status, we can imagine worse fates than estrangement from a husband like Achashverosh.

Esther's Sorry Descent to the Purple

If Esther is to rise, Vashti must fall. Yet it can't be auspicious to ascend to a throne whose previous holder was evicted for her feminine modesty (admittedly qualified by her expression of it in an act of very public defiance). So passive and clueless is Achashverosh that just as he required his advisers to prompt him as to how to respond to Vashti's defiance, so they must explain to him that he mopes due to his lack of a consort. "The King remembered Vashti": the Rabbis interpret this phrase as implying his regret at having banished her for her modest behavior, but it can't be said to compel this interpretation. Nor can the sequel be said to

support it: the King's command (again at the urging of his cronies) that all the fair virgins of the empire be swept up in a vast dragnet and conveyed to Susa, where he will deflower them in turn before deciding which lucky victim will be rewarded with further submission to his pleasure.

So it is a problem, for the Rabbis and for us, that it is in the context of this disgraceful competition that Esther not only enters the work but first displays her piety. This is the piety not of a Jewish woman toward God but of a Jewish daughter toward her father. For although Esther is not the daughter but the cousin of Mordechai, he has, upon her being orphaned, raised her as his daughter.[11]

Are we to understand that Mordechai is much older than Esther, having taken her in while he was an adult and she still a (young?) child? This seems likely, but remains merely implicit. (In fact as an unmarried woman Esther would have required the protection of a guardian whatever her age.) We might conjecture that the relationship of "father" and "daughter" was a close one, the more so in that we hear neither of a wife of Mordechai nor therefore of any children of his own.

In fact, however, the narrator nowhere speaks of the affection of the pair. What he does stress is Esther's unfailing obedience to Mordechai, which is to say her filial piety in the highest degree, which continues unabated even after she has passed from his household to that of the King. The submission that the King craves in his sexual relationship with his wife prevails in the filial relationship between Mordechai and Esther. As he has perfectly fulfilled the role of her father, so she accords him the complete obedience prescribed for the child. If Vashti's disobedience to her royal master supposedly posed a threat to the kingdom, how much more should the King fret over a queen who loyally takes direction but not from him.

Esther's way to the queen's throne (via the King's bed) proves as rapid as circumstances will admit. The narrator makes it clear, if with appropriate delicacy, that Esther is a knockout. Not only is she "shapely and beautiful," but she finds favor with all who play a role in disposing of her fate, even eunuchs.[12]

First, to be sure, Esther must submit, with all the other debutantes in waiting to be ravished, to twelve months spent in the House of the Women being anointed daily with fragrant oils.[13] (These were evidently a booming segment of the ancient Persian economy.) When the time comes to meet the King, however, Esther demurs on the standing offer to each candidate to take with her from the House of the Women "whatever she asked for."[14] She asks for nothing special, but defers to the judgment of her keeper Hegai. Perhaps after so many months of steeping in the Persian equivalent of L'Oréal, she is confident that she's worth it.

Inevitably, as in any fairy tale—even so wry and ironic a one—the King falls hard for Esther.[15] He promptly chooses her as his queen—evidently without bothering to sample the virgins behind her in the queue. Esther, the nice Jewish girl, is Playmate of the Year.

The Rabbis put the best face on this—the King loved Esther for her outstanding virtue, and so on—but the author does not. He merely reports it. No sooner has the King made Esther his Queen in place of Vashti than, in an ironic reminder of the fate of the latter, he holds a great feast to announce this fact.[16] We naturally wonder whether he will also command this beautiful new wife to display herself before his courtiers. Must he not do in order to erase the stain of

his humiliation at the hands of Vashti, as well as to vindicate fully the rights of the Persian husband?[17] The narrator frustrates our curiosity, telling us neither that the King so ordered nor that he did not. The Rabbis would have it that his remorse over Vashti has cured him of such grossness, but the text simply preserves its silence.

The dubiousness of Esther's marriage to Achashverosh is only aggravated by the notorious polygamy of the Persian kings. The narrative never alludes to this directly, but it does hint at it. The account of the ordeal of the virgins alludes to two "houses of the women," the first, presided over by the chamberlain Hegai, where the girls are prepared for their assignations with the King, and the second, administered by the chamberlain Shashgar, where they remain thereafter. This "second house of the women" must be a joyless place, because its inmates, having once slept with the King, must remain cloistered and know no other man for the rest of their lives. (Which is to say that they will never be able to compare the King's performance with that of a subject and find it wanting.)

Does this mean that these women remain at the King's disposal? Is this second "house of the women" a nunnery or, as is obviously more plausible, a harem? Similarly the law forbidding even the wife of the King to enter his presence except when expressly summoned, the penalty for so doing being death unless the King raises his scepter in reprieve, seems far more appropriate to multiple wives than to a single one. Not to mention that at the crisis of the plot Esther reports to Mordechai that the King has not summoned her lo these thirty days: are we to believe that this louche despot has remained celibate for that time? At best the author has grafted a pretense of monogamy on institutions that cry out to be interpreted as polygamous.

Esther is thus the grand prize winner of a sweepstakes that no decent Jewish woman should have entered. Not, of course, that participation was voluntary, or that the narrator records that any Jewish family or the community as a whole resisted it. Despotism has its privileges, and the Jews of the Persian Empire, like all its other diverse inhabitants, may simply have grown used to submitting to them. Perhaps nothing in the book confirms so vividly as Mordechai and Esther's compliance with the King's lubricious scheme that the theme of the book is not resistance to despotism but accommodation of it.[18] That Esther behaves like a loyal subject of the empire is not redeeming, Jewishly speaking: the established Rabbinic principle of *dina d'malkhuta dina*—"the law of the [local Gentile] kingdom is law"—does not apply where that law requires flouting the commandments of the Torah.

Yoram Hazony has suggested that as a Jew carried off into exile, "[Mordechai] has lost his own king and any capacity to wield power in his own defense. That is, his position . . . is essentially no different from that of the virgins. The Jews, like the virgins, have been forced to give up everything of independent value to them and are, it seems, powerless before the will of the state and its ruler."[19] Of course, that doesn't distinguish them from anyone else in the Empire. While other peoples may still inhabit their own lands, the very institution of the dragnet confirms that as subjects of a despot they all face him as naked as these poor virgins.

The Plot Thickens

Esther is a masterpiece of plotting that is both concise and intricate, as well as of comic

timing, only some of which can fall within our purview. For a book so short there is an extraordinary richness of subplots, each of which makes its crucial contribution to the plot as a whole. None of these involves Esther. Indeed, sequestered in her palace (read harem) she is unaware of anything that transpires outside it. Much then intervenes between Esther's installation as Queen and Mordechai's appeal to her to save her people. It is this last, to which we now turn as the long accepted litmus of Esther's piety and her devotion to her people.

This last is a phrase worth repeating: "Esther's piety and her devotion to her people." Are these two virtues, or one and the same one? Traditionally of course piety is devotion to God, and the Jewish people had defined itself in terms of its devotion to God. This isn't to say that it had never failed to meet this standard—quite the contrary—but that this was the standard that it understood itself to have failed. Indeed it interpreted the destruction of the northern and later the southern kingdom and with the latter the Temple in Jerusalem as divine retribution for its sins of chronic backsliding. The exile in which the Jews of Persia live, scattered amongst a vast empire whose other inhabitants are at best indifferent to them and subject to the whims of its despot, is thus a constant reminder of the failure of their piety in this primary sense.

Rabbinic Judaism preaches piety and prayer as the proper response to exile and powerlessness. It teaches resignation to the rule of the foreigner and obedience to his laws, but it looks to God for protection and ultimate deliverance. It is for this reason that Rabbinic interpreters cannot but interpret *Esther* as recounting an instance of such deliverance, and Esther and each of the other characters as actors in a drama not of their devising. To the extent that these characters do take the initiative in the work, the Rabbis cannot but interpret their behavior and above all their virtues in terms of Rabbinic norms.

What if, however—for surely this is a possible reading of the book as we have it—traditional piety cannot assure the safety of the Jews by purely human means, and God cannot be relied upon to do so by superhuman ones? Might not then a conflict exist between the restraints imposed by piety and the imperatives of national salvation? Certainly it is only at the price of flouting these restraints that Esther has risen to her lofty station, as dubious as it is extraordinary.

The unorthodoxy of Esther's situation is underlined by the orthodoxy of the community's response to Haman's decree proscribing it. Mordechai dresses in sackcloth and ashes and betakes himself to lamentation, and all the Jews scattered throughout the empire follow his example.[20] This is a traditional sign of repentance accompanied by prayer and fasting and as such an appeal for divine mercy.[21] Why, however, does the canny Mordechai appear at the King's Gate, entrance into which is forbidden to sackcloth wearers (there is evidently a dress code) thus weeping and wailing? Not because God may be presumed to stroll in that particular location. Nor does Mordechai have any reason to think, given the unchallenged ascendancy of Haman over Achashverosh at this stage of the narrative, that anyone else who frequents the King's Gate will wield the kind of influence that might lead the King to rescind his decree.

Who, then, is Mordechai's intended audience? Isn't it precisely Esther herself, whose attention he could not have captured so completely except by cutting such a sorry (and embarrassing) figure? She duly sends one of her servants to learn the reason for this uncouth commotion. Her first response is not to inquire why Mordechai is acting as if bereaved but to send him proper clothing; only after he declines to remove the sackcloth does she inquire why

he is wearing it.

It goes without saying that Mordechai cannot hope for a personal audience with the confined queen. The only means of persuasion open to him is epistolary. In response to her inquiry he sends her not only intelligence of the whole matter, but a command to intercede with the King on the Jews' behalf. As until now she has concealed her Jewish identity at his behest, now she must reveal it to save her people; in effect she has been concealing it against this day when she must reveal it. We must recall that to this point in the story Esther has always respected Mordechai's wishes.

Now, however, Esther demurs, thus throwing the plot into its first crisis. She states both the general danger of approaching the King uninvited—unless he wave his golden scepter in reprieve, the penalty for so doing is death—and the particular danger to herself, whom the King has not summoned in thirty days. (At this point they have been married for five years, which explains why his lust isn't as intense as it once was.)

Mordechai quickly succeeds, however, in stiffening Esther's resolve. Each of his three clauses conveys one stage of his argument.[22] (1.) Esther would be foolish to think that she alone could escape the decree, i.e., that her safety does not depend upon that of her people, so that she could survive by sitting this out. (2.) So too she would be foolish to think that the salvation of the Jews depends on her; if she does not work it, it will come from another quarter, while she and her father's house will perish (sc. as punishment for her dereliction: it is not the safety of the Jews but that of Esther herself and those dearest to her that depends on her resolve to help the Jews). Here Mordechai apparently refers to the certainty of divine intervention, accomplished by whatever means, but it's important to grasp the role of this claim within the work: it serves the rhetorical purpose of stimulating Esther to act, thus precluding the necessity of divine intervention. (3.) In conclusion Mordechai flatters Esther that by so acting she will serve as the vessel of such intervention, preempting the claim of others to do so.

This is a masterful performance, not least in so adroitly splitting the difference between skepticism and faith. Note the underlying agnosticism of Mordechai's final statement, which begins "Who knows . . ." It suggests that he is only too aware that the role of Divine Providence in this tale is ambiguous. Has Esther been placed in her high position in order to save her people? This is a question that can be answered only in retrospect and by her success at that lofty task. Only then will it seem plausible that the implausible sequence of events by which a virtuous Jewish maiden has become the consort of a foolish and sordid pagan despot was the work of a Providential God.

Yet even if rendered roughly plausible by such a fortunate and seemingly unforeseeable outcome, a Providential interpretation of Esther's ambiguous rise/fall is by no means certain. There is first of all the role of Mordechai in all of this. Mordechai is certainly not an adequate replacement for the Almighty, lacking as he does both omniscience and omnipotence. He is responsible neither for Vashti's fall nor for Esther's success in the competition to succeed her. Still, it is striking that the text ascribes to him no effort to shield her from her questionable fate. Might he have held his nose and welcomed her admission into so unwholesome a bed as a card to be played when necessary on behalf of the otherwise powerless Jews? Mordechai's eventual elevation to the position of the King's vizier should not distract us from the fact that

until that point in the work there has been no Jewish voice to be heard in the counsels of the King, or any non-Persian one.[23] And indeed this elevation must itself be understood as the result of Esther's influence with the King rather than the latter's recognition of Mordechai's sagacity.

And why else if not with an eye to Esther eventually playing a saving role would Mordechai enjoin her so emphatically not to disclose to the King that she is Jewish?[24] That he so commands her prior to the King's choice of her implies his fear that if so informed Achashverosh would be less likely to choose her. (But in that case, say the Rabbis, she *should* have told him. Thus obstinately do they defend that strict morality in which Esther and Mordechai falter.) That Mordechai repeats this command even after Achashverosh has chosen Esther suggests that he reasons that even now the King's knowledge of her origins would prove an unnecessary complication. He has concluded that she will be most valuable to her people as a "sleeper"—there's a pun for you.

But whether Esther's position as Queen and the way that she has played it so far is ascribable to Providence or to chance, her extraordinary charms, and Mordechai's strategizing, everything now depends on her decision as to whether she dare to brave the King's displeasure by seeking to bring her influence to bear. There is no suggestion that this decision is divinely inspired, or that the subsequent success of her effort depends on divine assistance.

In short Esther's piety, as evoked and managed by Mordechai, proves clearly decisive for the fate of the Jews of Persia; divine intervention only obscurely and indirectly so. And this piety is problematic, precisely inasmuch as it consists not so much in relying on divine assistance as in supplanting it. Esther acts *in loco Providentiae*, and only in this ambiguous sense as the agent of Providence. We might even say that Mordechai admonishes Esther that God helps those who help themselves in saving their people, while punishing those who passively stand by and rely on Him to do so.

Once persuaded by Mordechai, Esther seizes the initiative that thus far in the work has been his alone. Only at the end of chapter four does she come into her own as the protagonist of this book which after all is not named after Mordechai. For the first time she, the Queen, gives orders to Mordechai, the commoner: "so Mordechai went his way, and did all that she commanded him."[25] While it is still unclear whether God is in charge, it is now clear that Esther is. From now on she acts entirely of her own will and by means of her own devising.

Esther Ascendant

Esther precedes her visit to the King with three days of fasting, in which her maidservants (and at her command to Mordechai, the entire Jewish community) also participate.[26] This is one of the several tacit acknowledgments in the book of that Presence that is never named. (More precisely, it is one of several manifestations not of divine power but of the Jewish community as constituted by belief in that power.) Characteristically, however, the success of Esther's intervention with the King is not ascribed to any Divine guidance of her or any divine suasion of him. While in fasting Esther may have taken her cure from Mordechai and the community generally, she does not follow them in clothing herself in sackcloth and ashes. Quite the

contrary. The King (being who he is) is struck above all by her great beauty; is this the woman whom he's not summoned into his presence for thirty days now? The worldly reader must wonder for his part whether Esther's success is not due at least in part to her fasting, i.e., whether fasting becomes her.

The King not only waves his golden scepter, thus sparing Esther's life, but offers Esther whatever she wishes, even unto half his kingdom. In the event Esther asks, probably wisely, for very much less than that. (We note again that none of the particulars of her plan originate with Mordechai; it is all the fruit of her own fertile brain.) Why does she now do no more than invite the King and Haman to a banquet? And why, at the banquet, when the King repeats his half-the-kingdom routine, perhaps because he does grasp that she has something serious to ask him, does Esther still keep the cat in the bag, asking only that the King and Haman return the next night for yet another banquet?

To answer this question we must consider what could not have occurred between Esther and the King prior to her initial intrusion into the throne room or have intervened between that intrusion and the first banquet, but will intervene between the first banquet and the subsequent one, while also greatly enhancing the King's anticipation of the latter. Not even the self-inflated Haman is so obtuse as not to be the first to leave the first banquet, thus allowing the young people their privacy. This leads to a nice touch of irony: at the very time that he and his wife Zeresh are making war rather than love, plotting the execution of Mordechai to be achieved by means of the King's favor in which Haman thinks himself to be riding high, Esther is thwarting that scheme as only she can.

The chapters following the first banquet contain the *peripeteia* of the plot, for at the beginning of chapter six Haman is still riding high, while by the end of chapter seven he has already been impaled on the device he constructed with the purpose of inflicting that unpleasant end on Mordechai. His downfall is Esther's second banquet, where the King for the third time assures Esther that whatever her petition, it shall be granted; whatever her request, it shall be performed, even unto half of the kingdom. Now Esther finally unloads on Haman.[27]

The tack that Esther here takes with the King is undoubtedly effective. She twice stresses that her own life has been marked for destruction, as well as those of her people, and asserts that had she and they merely been sold into slavery, she would have held her peace, "for the adversary is not worthy that the king be endamaged." No one has ever been sure what to make of this last line, although it seems to imply that Esther's allegiance to the King supersedes her attachment to her own good and that of her people. This we are surely to take not as a statement of Esther's actual sentiments but as reflecting her opinion of what's required to persuade the royal dolt. Its effect is to stress her indispensability to him as the only person who loves him and whom he can trust. The King, conversely, becomes so furious over the plot not because it threatened the Jews but because it threatened the Queen (which it did, of course, entirely unbeknownst to Haman). Who has dared threaten the Queen? "An adversary and an enemy, this wicked Haman here."[28]

Haman, of course, has a plausible line of defense, namely that he never intended harm to the Queen at all. Because the King storms out into the garden in a rage, however, Haman is reduced to appealing for his life to Esther. (We never learn what words transpire between the two of them.) When the King re-enters the room, he mistakes Haman's position of supplication

for one of sexual assault. I say mistakes; it seems too bad to be true that Haman should respond to his mortal peril by sexually assaulting the one person who might rescue him from it. That the King misinterprets supplication for lust I take to reflect his own lubricious temperament.

At the suggestion of one of those ubiquitous chamberlains whose business it is to explain to the King what the King wants to do, Haman is hustled off to be impaled on the device that he had ordered built for the impalement of Mordechai. It's the crime that he hasn't committed that has sealed his fate with the King. Two wrongs make a right, simply because when it comes to the manipulation of the King Esther proves to hold stronger cards than Haman. She has succeeded at presenting her loyalty to her people as loyalty to the King who had been so quick to acquiesce in plans for its extermination.

Despotism Triumphant

Esther has established her ascendancy over the King in place of that of Haman; it is to her that he gives the forfeited property of Haman.[29] Esther cannot supplant Haman as vizier; but on her say-so the King appoints Mordechai to do so. To him Achashverosh gives the signet ring confiscated from Haman; now Mordechai will enjoy perfect freedom to act in the King's name.[30]

There remains the important matter of undoing the late Haman's mischief. The fall of a vizier is one thing, the reversal of his past actions another. This is not something that the King will undertake without further prodding. As Achashverosh was not particularly hostile to the Jews, but merely susceptible to manipulation by Haman, so he is not particularly friendly to them. Esther launches on a new round of appeals to the King, falling at his feet and once again receiving the crucial sign of his favor. As a result she and Mordechai receive permission to seek to undo the King's decree.[31]

Yet, as the King reminds them, royal decrees cannot be revoked. What must be done is to issue a new one, negating the first one without canceling it. This is duly done: the new decree is an inversion of the first one. It gives the Jews permission and encouragement to resist their oppressors and to treat their assailants even as their assailants had been authorized to treat them. This for one day only, the 12th of Adar, the day on which the lot had fallen and the assault upon the Jews duly decreed. And, unlike the earlier decree, this one goes out in all the languages of the empire *including* that of the Jews themselves.[32]

Nothing in the way of armed resistance occurs in this chapter. By the end of it, however, everything has changed, so far as the mood of the Jews is concerned.[33] "In every province, and in every city, whithersoever the King's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a good day. And many from among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them." Joy among the Jews, fear of them among the gentiles, because the despotism, which had previously consigned the Jews to destruction, has now rallied to their side. In similar situations earlier in the Bible, fear of the Israelites is derivative of fear of their God.[34] Here, however, fear of the Jews follows from fear of the autocracy whose support alone has made them formidable.

This becomes still clearer further on. When the day of battle arrives, "no man could

withstand [the Jews], for the fear of them was fallen on all the peoples. And all the princes of the provinces, and the satraps, and the governors, and they that did the King's business, helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordechai was fallen on them."[35] While the outcome might appear to be contingent on the luck of the battle, in fact it follows from the decree. For even without direct orders to assist the Jews, the all-pervasive imperial establishment does so, and so great is the fear of their enemies that these are beaten before they begin. In this fantasy the irresistible will of despotism comes to the rescue of the Jews in place of the irresistible will of God.

Nothing succeeds like success, especially success at killing large numbers of one's enemies. The King's reaction to learning the number of enemies of the Jews killed in Susa on that day is to say to Esther: "—and whatever you wish, it will be given you, and whatever more you may request, it will be done."[36] As Hazony notes, this is the first time in the work that "the king seeks out Esther's behest in the absence of any initiative on her part."[37] In fact Esther asks only that the Jews be granted one more day to kill their enemies, and that the corpses of Haman's ten sons (who have fallen in this first day's carnage) should be impaled like their father's on the structure of fifty cubits.

We needn't detain ourselves with the establishment of the festival or with the "coda" furnished by chapter ten, which assures us that Mordechai succeeded in combining the career of a highly successful vizier with that of a good Jew.[38] Esther, who has never been more visible than in the first half of chapter nine, and who shares with Mordechai the credit for establishing the festival, receives no mention in chapter ten, as though, the crisis once past, so is her public role.

Yet Esther will continue to sleep with the King, and even with Mordechai installed as Vizier, the Jewish community of Persia may continue to have need of a sleeper. For in a despotism even the Vizier serves only at the whim of the King, and there is no reason to suppose that the wisdom of Mordechai will enjoy an ascendancy over the King comparable to that of the charms of Esther.

So Esther's highly ambiguous piety must persist: loyalty to the most basic interests of her people—its physical survival as a community committed to observing its distinctive laws—requires her continued existence outside and therefore in contravention of those laws.

It's as a typically lazy, sensualist slug of a despot that Achashverosh can never act without advice, displays no ability to analyze the advice he receives, and is given to rages that, while towering, are strangely indeterminate and incapable of venting themselves without assistance. It's precisely in his passivity and vulnerability that he's so dangerous to the Jews, without bearing them any particular ill will. And it's for this reason that the only reliable antidote or prophylactic is—get this—a Jewish wife, not some wretched concubine but the number one wife who can so lead her husband by the nose as to bring in her wise cousin as vizier.

Could this have come to pass? In the world of the fairy tale, no problem. In the actual one known to the author and the original readers of this book, only as the result of a quasi-impossible sequence of events. We can join the Maharal and the rabbinic tradition generally in regarding the tale of Esther as true and this sequence as a series of hidden miracles. Or we can agree with Moshe Halbertal and Adele Berlin that the miracle in this case is that of comedy. For what defines comedy as a genre is wish fulfillment through the actualization of a long

series of improbabilities or even impossibilities. We learn serious lessons from comedy by reflecting on all the reasons why these things could not have happened as they did, why the world is not one in which our longings are fulfilled. Comic characters often combine irreconcilables: thus the piety of Esther coincides with her being the perfect vamp, her internal fidelity to the law with her external estrangement from it. The miraculous justification of her behavior is one means of saving it from scandal; its comic justification the other. Whichever of these one chooses, one cannot but both pity and admire Esther for descending for the sake of her people from the household of her wise cousin *Mordechai ha-Yehudi*—the only Biblical character whose epithet is simply "the Jew"—to this lascivious Gentile dolt of an Achashverosh.[39]

Notes

1. The first Esther in my life was the redoubtable principal of my Chicago public school, like so many Chicago teachers in those days an Irish spinster.

2. This occasioned much hopeful comment on the Christian right and much irate response on the secular left.

3. Rabbi S. Goldman, Introduction to the First Edition, *Megillat Esther: Hebrew Text and English Translation, with an Introduction and Commentary*, ed. S. Goldman and A J. Rosenberg (London and New York: The Soncino Press, 1946; rev. ed. 1984), 3. This edition includes a useful compendium by Rosenberg, "The Midrashic Approach to the Book of Esther."

4. That the book remained highly controversial during the early Rabbinic period is attested by a remarkable document available in English in Nachman Cohen, *Esther's Plea: Understanding the Midrashic Dispute of R. Yehoshua and R. Elazar of Modi'in* "Master the Midrash Series" (Yonkers, NY: Torah Lishmah Institute, 1999), 1-31. The dispute between these two eminent sages is related in the Talmudic tractate *Megillah* (7b ff.). The account of it begins with an imagined plea by Esther herself to the Rabbis of the Great Assembly (*knesset ha-g'dola)* in favor first of the establishment of Purim as an annual observance and then of the acceptance of her book into the canon. In each case the Rabbis object and she responds to their objection. In both cases she succeeds, but the narrator notes that the matter continued to be disputed for at least 500 years thereafter, notably by R. Yehoshua and R. Elazar in the early second century CE. In his book Cohen attempts to place the issue of the canonicity of Esther within the context of the other issues of concern to the two Rabbis and their contemporaries in an eventful and tragic period of Jewish history culminating in Bar Kochba's revolt against the Romans. It is clear from the Talmud's presentation that there were at that time some who even denied the divine inspiration of the book.

5. By proto-Rabbinic I have in mind the Septuagint, *Targum Yehonatan* (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Aramaic vernacular), an apocryphal version of the book, and Josephus' account of the Esther story in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (*ca*. 95 CE) I call these treatments proto-Rabbinic because all of them anticipate the Rabbis' determination to reconcile the book with the Scriptural tradition generally, and because all pursue that end through embellishment of the canonical version, thus anticipating the Rabbinic device of the *midrash* or amplifying gloss.

6. An excellent example of this approach is Adele Berlin's recent edition of *Esther* in the *JPS Bible Commentary* series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001). For Berlin the key to grasping the book is to recognize that it belongs to the genre of Hellenistic comedy. She here develops a suggestion of the prominent Israeli scholar Moshe Halbertal in his *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1997), 26. Berlin's edition is to be recommended for its provocative interpretation and its thorough canvassing of the recent secondary literature. Also indispensable is J.D. Levenson, *Esther, a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

7. The Rabbis offer numerous ingenious explanations for this glaring absence, which all recognize as too significant to be inadvertent. These join in ascribing it to circumstantial considerations which as such pose no difficulties for a providential reading of the work. We are told, for instance, that the author of the book was Mordechai himself, who for prudential reasons suppressed all references to God, and even that the account as it has come down to us is identical with that in the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia, where for obvious reasons no reference to the God of the Jews would be appropriate. For a compendium of explanations in a similar key see Rosenberg, "Midrashic Approach," 9-11.

8. Compare Josephus, *Antiquities* XI.212, who "corrects" this oversight of Haman.

9. For a treatment of *Esther* as primarily a study of despotism see Jules Gleicher, "Mordechai the Exilarch: Some Thoughts on the Book of Esther," *Interpretation* 28 (2001): 187-200.

10. The rabbis insist that the King's request was that Vashti strip before his throng of guests.

11. Or has he raised her as his daughter? A slight emendation in the Hebrew text (reading *l'bayit* for *l'bat)* yields the result that Mordechai took Esther not "for his daughter" but "to his house" (i.e., idiomatically, as his wife). This reading was favored

by the rabbis, who preferred to avoid at whatever cost the submission of a Jewish virgin to a heathen despot.

12. *Megillat Esther* 2.7, 2.9, 2.15.
13. *Megillat Esther* 2.12.
14. *Megillat Esther* 2.13.
15. *Megillat Esther* 2.17.
16. *Megillat Esther* 2.17.
17. Cf. *Megillat Esther* 1.16-22.
18. I owe this last insight, as I do so much else of my understanding of *Esther*, to Allan Silver, the publication of whose seminal work on the book is much to be anticipated. In another excellent forthcoming study, Alexander Green has set out to treat *Esther* "as a political work demonstrating the full precariousness of Jewish life in exile." (Green, "Power, Deception, and Comedy: the Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther," forthcoming in *Judaism)*.
19. Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*, rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000), 28.
20. *Megillat Esther* 4.1, 4.3.
21. Cf. Isaiah 58.5, Jeremiah 6.26, Jonah 3.5-8.
22. *Megillat Esther* 4.13-14.
23. Unless we regard Haman as such, given that he is described as an Agagite, i.e. a descendant of Amalek (3:1, cf.1 Samuel 15:8). As Berlin, *Commentary*, notes *ad loc*., "this is not an ethnic designation that would make any real sense in the Persian empire," and nothing otherwise distinguishes Haman's background from that of any other Persian grandee. The Amalek theme, otherwise indicated only by the fact that Mordechai is a descendant of Kish, the father of Agag's insufficiently zealous antagonist Saul, is one of the most puzzling aspects of *Esther*, which as such cannot detain us here.
24. *Megillat Esther* 2.10, 20.
25. *Megillat Esther* 4.17.
26. *Megillat Esther* 4.16.
27. *Megillat Esther* 7.3-4.
28. *Megillat Esther* 7.6.
29. *Megillat Esther* 8.1.
30. *Megillat Esther* 8.2.
31. *Megillat Esther* 8.8.
32. *Megillat Esther* 8.9; cf. 3.12.
33. *Megillat Esther* 8.15-17.
34. Cf. Genesis 35.5; Exodus 15.15-16.
35. *Megillat Esther* 9.2-3.
36. *Megillat Esther* 9.12.
37. Hazony, *The Dawn*, 209.
38. *Megillat Esther* 9.17-32.
39. The term *Yehudi* originally designated a member of the tribe of Judah (*Yehuda)*. With the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. and the dispersion of the ten "lost" tribes, only the large tribe of Judah (which gave its name to the Southern Kingdom) and the much smaller one of Benjamin remained, as well as the priests (*kohanim*) and Levites who lived among them. When the Southern Kingdom too fell, to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and its population was removed to Babylon, *Yehudi* understandably came to be applied to all. It is this word that, having passed through Greek, Latin, and French, eventually became the English *Jew*. The text of *Esther* vividly confirms this particular instance of synecdoche, for Mordechai is described in the same breath as a Jew and a member of the tribe of Benjamin, so not a *Yehudi* in its original tribal sense. That he is a Benjamite is significant in relation to the Amalek theme mentioned above (note 23).