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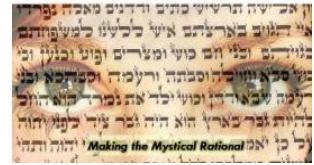
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The Real Lesson of the Book of Esther

By Ariel Bar Tzadok

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“Miracle – An effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.” (Dictionary.com)

The Jewish holiday of Purim celebrates the miraculous events that are recorded in the Biblical book of Esther. However, as is clear from the dictionary itself, a miracle is something supernatural, and the book of Esther has absolutely no descriptions of anything supernatural whatsoever. If there is nothing supernatural to the Purim story, what then was the miracle(s) of Purim?



The events recorded in the Biblical book of Esther, tells us a very involved and intricate story of political intrigue. The book of Esther reads more like a mystery story than a Biblical epic. The one thing about the book that stands out the most is that it is the only historical book in the whole Bible that does not mention God or religion, not even once. Indeed, as the story unfolds, its appears that the author even goes out of his way to avoid any mention of God and religion, even when the story suggests that such mention should be made.

The beginning of the story narrates the fall of Queen Vashti, and seems to have nothing to do with either Mordechai or Esther. While the Biblical book could have mentioned that God orchestrated the fall of Vashti, the text says no such thing. Nowhere does the text suggest that God put thoughts in her head, hardened her heart like Pharaoh, or otherwise directed her

actions. On the contrary, Vashti's fall came about due to her own choice to disobey the order of the king. Nothing *"that surpasses all known human or natural powers"* here.

When the king decides to choose a new wife, out of the hundreds of concubines that he collects, he likes Esther the most, and chooses her to be queen. Nowhere does the text say that God influenced the king's decision. Esther must have been both very attractive, and very good at pleasing the king. Would Esther have been chosen if she was not so pleasing to the king? I think not. Yet, nowhere does the text suggest that God made Esther extra beautiful, or that Heaven somehow revealed to her the Kama Sutra. Esther apparently had certain natural talents. It must take some special talents to stand out of a crowd of hundreds of desirable women, each willing to do whatever it takes to get the title of queen. This is something special, but not miraculous. Again, nothing *"that surpasses all known human or natural powers"* here.

The text continues to narrate a plot to assassinate the king. Mordechai ever so luckily is present, and turns in the plotters. Nowhere does it say that God was with Mordechai to direct him to that time or place. Maybe it was a coincidence. And, if we chose not to believe in coincidence, we cannot just make the jump to claim that the course of events was supernatural, or surpassing all natural powers. The text makes no such claims, or suggestion. Then, strangely, rather than be rewarded, Mordechai is overlooked and forgotten. Again, things sometimes just happen. This too is not outside the parameters of *"natural powers."* Lucky for Mordechai that he had a favor due him, which came into play later in the story. Was God behind all this? The story makes no such claim or suggestion.

Now, out of nowhere Haman pops up. As a high ranking government official it is only right and proper to show him respect, even if he personally is an evil individual. Respect is due to the office, not to the office holder. Yet, of all the Jewish elders, scholars, and sages of ancient Persia, only Mordechai acts outside of proper protocol to disrespect Haman.

Surely Mordechai was not the only Torah faithful Jew in the entire city of Shushan. Surely there must have been others. If there was a consensus under Torah law that it was forbidden to bow before Haman, for whatever reason, then Mordechai would have been just one of many who would refuse to violate his religious standards. Yet, there is no record of Mordechai's position being popularly accepted. Indeed, the text does not even suggest that Mordechai refused to bow because of religious reasons. According to Torah law, Mordechai is in the wrong. He is obligated to obey the laws of the land. And certainly, he is prohibited from taking actions that could endanger the safety of others, especially when such action endangers the entire Jewish population of ancient Persia.

With all this conflict and hostility brewing, still, the text makes no mention of God anywhere. Nowhere does it say that God brought these events about. For the author of the text, he is simply relating a story according to the facts. He does not do any moralizing, as was common in all the other Biblical historical books.

Haman's plot unfolds. The Jews of ancient Persia are to be liquidated. Nowhere does the text suggest that God was behind this plan. Nowhere does the text say that God was punishing the Jews for their sins, or testing their faithfulness. This plot was Haman's creation. Haman did not think up this plan for naught. He wanted to hurt Mordechai. If there was never an episode with Mordechai, there would have been no episode with Haman. And yet, God is

nowhere mentioned. God is not involved with the proceedings, at least in the eyes of the author of this Biblical book.

Brave Queen Esther approaches the king, taking her life in her hands. But is it a miracle that the king does not strike her down for her arrogance and insolence simply for desiring to see her husband? There is no arrogance or insolence in a wife wanting to see her husband, even if said husband is the king. While the king may have been busy over the last thirty days with his many concubines, Queen Esther has no such business to fill her schedule. The king can rightly understand that she would miss him, and desire his company. To extend to her his countenance, is therefore no miracle at all. It was only natural, and normal behavior from a husband to the wife he loves. Again, no mention of God is made. God did not direct the King's thoughts, or his actions. The king acted on his own, as would any other loving husband.

Queen Esther asks the king to join her for lunch. Strange that she did not invite him for dinner, and then for an "after-dinner" snack, Kama Sutra style. That kind of meal really gets a man's attention, even if he is a king. That night, the king has a dream, yet, the text does not say that God came to him in a dream. How coincidental is it that as the king is awakened, that he is sleepless that night, and that of all possible things, the record books are the things that he asks to see. How coincidental that of all the many many records that must have been in those record books that the king was able to just so happen to find the record of the unrewarded deed of Mordechai. There certainly are a number of coincidences here, and out of them all, God is nowhere mentioned. Lucky for the Jews of ancient Persia that there really is such a thing as "coincidence."

Later that day, Haman comes to Queen Esther's lunch. His plot is exposed, and he is put to death. All this seems like a natural course of events. No great miracle occurred. Everything makes logical and rational sense. Political intrigues happen every day. Plots are exposed and thwarted all the time. Nowhere is God mentioned. Nowhere does it say that prayers were either offered or answered. Haman had a really bad day, and that was all there was to it.

The Jews were miraculously saved! But were they? Was there a miracle here? What was it? No supernatural event occurred! Nothing *"that surpasses all known human or natural powers"* occurred. Nothing happened that cannot be explained as having natural causes. Some may say that the miracle was that the Jews were saved. But being saved certainly did not make them safe. There is still much more to this story.

The Jews of ancient Persia were far from safe. The decree for their annihilation was never overturned. In fact, in order to be safe, the Jews had to rise up and take matters into their own hands, and seek out, run down, and kill all their enemies. The text does not relate to us how very difficult a task this must have been. God did not miraculously strike down the enemies of the Jews. The Jews had to do this for themselves. Nowhere is God mentioned. Nothing *"that surpasses all known human or natural powers"* occurred. Indeed, no prayers of thanksgiving are offered. It was a bloody day for the Jews, and their enemies.

We all know the story. I have only referenced some of the events to make a point. Nature took its course. God is not mentioned. God is nowhere to be seen, not overtly, and not even behind the scenes. The author of the book of Esther made extra effort to leave God out of the entire episode.

So, what does this say to us? With what message shall we conclude? What message is so religious, spiritual and important that the book of Esther was chosen to become part of the Writings of the holy Bible? The message is not spelled out verbatim in words, but its message is clear to those who read the book carefully.

The message is not about God, and it is not about miracles. The message is about us human beings, and the responsibilities that we have to look after ourselves, and to address matters of our own destiny. Of course from a religious point of view God was behind all the events recorded in the Esther story, yet nevertheless God is nowhere mentioned, and nowhere to be found.

God does not need to be mentioned in order for God to be present. God's invisible Hand is always in play, whether it is seen, recognized or not. What we learn from this profound book is a profound lesson. Although God is always with us, we still very much need to be with ourselves.

We need to take decisive, proper, definitive actions to steer the course of our own destinies. When we act properly and responsibly, we can rest assured that God will then bless the work of our hands. If however, we fail to act, and wait for God to act in our place, we will grow old waiting.

The message of the book of Esther is that God works through us. When we do what is right, then what is right gets done, and God will then bless what it is that we are doing. Mordechai and Esther did not wait for God, they acted on their own. And through what they did, the Hand of God became evident, but only after the fact.

This is the message of Esther, and the reason why this book rightfully has Biblical status. The book of Esther does not speak about the greatness of God, instead it speaks about the greatness of human beings. This is the most important religious teaching.

So the one who wants God's help should remember the wise words of Benjamin Franklin, **"God helps those, who help themselves."** Mordechai and Esther learned this lesson well, and enshrined it for posterity by writing the book of Esther in the form that we have it.

God is present, no mention necessary. This is the biggest "miracle" of them all! Now, this is a message worth celebrating!

The KosherTorah School



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