

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



PURIM

This is Your Moment

Megilat Esther is the only adventure story in our Bible. It is fully self-contained. It has a beginning, middle and end. It also neither references any other part of Tanach, nor relies on material elsewhere in Tanach. It also has a dramatic turning point, and that's what I want to discuss in this piece.

And, here it is: For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14)

The JSP translation renders the words B'EIT HAZOT ('at this time') more dramatically as 'in this crisis'. And, indeed, it was crunch time. The Jewish people, probably all of whom lived in the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire, were certainly facing an existential emergency.

So, what 'time' was it? According to our tradition, it was Pesach. Haman, Persia's chief minister and our national nemesis, had just executed his PUR (casting of lots), which

determined that the Jews' demise would take place in eleven month's time. To almost everyone in the vast empire, nothing had changed. The Sun rose in the east and would set in the west, but Mordechai, a minor official in the Empire's bureaucracy, knew that everything had changed and doom loomed for the Jewish people. In spite of the joyous Festival of Freedom, he donned the sackcloth and ash of mourning.

But Mordechai did not sink into despair. He was determined to activate Esther, the reluctant queen and hidden Jewess, to represent her people before the King. A mole, in deep cover, hiding in the palace. But to activate her would require a powerful argument. Our verse is that argument.

He was dramatically declaring that this was Esther's moment, and she couldn't miss the opportunity. But how did he know that this was her time, her opportunity?

According to the Pachad Yitzchak (Rav Yitzchak Hutner), he knew this because of what God told the Jewish people at the moment of the Splitting of the Sea. God declared to the Jews (and Moshe) to be 'silent' (ATEM TACHARISHUN (Sh'mot 14:14), just like our fourteenth verse). Why should the Jews 'be silent'? Shouldn't they be praying?

Rav Hutner explains: The matter depends upon Me and not upon you, 'Concerning My children and the work of My hands, you command Me' (Yeshayahu 45). From here we learn that wherever the world itself stands in danger of annihilation, there applies the claim of 'Why do you cry out to Me?' to every person who prays. In such a case, the claim of God is forceful: The matter depends upon Me and not upon you.

There is a time for prayer, and a time for action. Mordechai is telling Esther that it is a time for action, but the action at this point is for her to plead the Jewish cause before her husband the King.

But how did Mordechai know that 'relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter', in other words a back up plan? Rav Steinzaltz suggests: The decree does not go into effect for another eleven months, and I have faith in God that He will deliver us before then.

This 'faith' is based upon the reality that the wise Woman from Tekoa tells King David about his banished son Avshalom, as reported by Rabbeinu Bechaye: when she spoke about certain calculations which God makes in His administering of His Justice. God calculates all this in order to ensure that as few souls as possible will be consigned to eternal oblivion (Shmuel Bet 14:14, again verse 14).

King David is being told that he should let Avshalom come back home, because that is Divine behavior: Forgive others. But our situation is much bigger, because the fate of the entire nation is in the balance. Mordechai is sure that 'salvation will arise from another quarter.' All of our covenants with God and promises to the Patriarchs are based upon the assurance of the eternal survival of the Jewish people.

Rav Hutner emphasizes that there are occasionally times for action which trump the time for prayer. And I'm sure that's true for Y'CHIDEI SEGULA (the few chosen individuals), like Moshe Rabbeinu and Esther HaMalka. However, for the bulk of the Jewish nation we must cry out when the situation is dire, we should listen to the S'fat Emet: Yet this is the way of all the righteous: even though they know that salvation will come, they are still able to cry out with a completely whole heart, as if they did not know at all. One who is not capable of this is not truly shown the salvation. This attitude depends upon complete faith - that each one of us nullifies all intellect before God and knows and believes that there is no contradiction in the fact that salvation comes through a person's cry, even though God will certainly not abandon the people of Israel in any case.

Mordechai is teaching Esther (and us!) about emergency behavior in emergency situations. Then he adds a difficult addendum: but you and your father's house will perish, if we decide to ignore our responsibility (either to pray or to act), then God initiates the Divine opt out plan: obliteration for the recalcitrant individual (and their gene pool). The Ralbag insists that God means that if for even one second you think that your position will save you when the rest of the Jewish nation is being slaughtered; think again. The salvation will come from another quarter, but your progeny and their DNA will not benefit from this deliverance.

Mordechai is adamant: Don't think that you are immune from the fate of the nation! Instead, you must think: Hey, this is what I'm here to do! Then go do it!

Happy Purim! 