

## Book of Esther

### Introduction

The Book of Esther is the eighth book in the Ketuvi'im (Writings) section of the Tanakh. Traditionally, the Book of Esther is also called Megillah Esther and is read aloud on the holiday of Purim.

The Book of Esther can be divided into two parts.

Chapters 1-2: The Royal Banquet and the Search for a Queen

Chapters 3-10: Haman's Rise and Esther's Triumph

### The Royal Banquet and the Search for a Queen (Chapters 1-2)

King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes) of the Persian Empire showed his great wealth and power to all the nobles and officials of the kingdom by holding a great feast. For 180 days he "displayed the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty." At the end of the 180 days the king held a seven-day banquet in his palace gardens for all those who lived in the fortress Shushan – great and small alike. The king calls forth his wife Vashti to show her beauty before all the people and the officials but she refuses. As a result the king seeks advice from his nobles about Vashti's punishment for her disobedience. Taking his noble's advice, King Ahazuerus declares that Vashti would be banished and her royal status would be given to another.

After the king's anger subsided over Vashti's disobedience his servants suggested that beautiful young virgins should be sought for the king. The king ordered all the officers in the provinces to assemble beautiful young virgins at Shushan in the harem. A beauty contest was to be held in order to find a new queen. Esther, Mordecai's adopted daughter, was chosen to be in this contest by the official of Shushan. Upon advice of Mordecai she did not reveal her people or her kindred. Mordecai, during the entire waiting period, visited the site of the harem daily in order to learn how Esther was doing and what was happening to her. During the contest it was Esther out of all the beautiful women who found favor in the king's eyes and he made her queen in place of Vashti. The "banquet of Esther" was declared, there was a remission of taxes, and gifts were presented.

During this time Mordecai was sitting at the palace gate and overheard a plot to kill the king. Mordecai informed Esther who told the king of the plot in Mordecai's name. The

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investigation revealed the plot and the plotters were killed. The entire plot and Mordecai's involvement were "recorded in the book of annals at the insistence of the king."

### **Haman's Rise and Esther's Triumph (Chapters 3-10)**

Haman was elevated to a place above all other noblemen by King Ahasuerus. When leaving through the gates the people would kneel and bow before Haman – except Mordecai. Enraged, Haman begins planning the destruction of the Jewish people. Lots (purim) are cast before Haman daily and he decided on the time to place his plot against the Jews into action. Haman goes before the king and tells him of a people who are subversive and need to be destroyed. The king, duped by Haman, ordered that the subversive people should be destroyed throughout the entire kingdom.

Upon hearing of the news Mordecai and the other Jews mourned and clothed themselves in sackcloth. Upon hearing the actions of her fellow Jews, Esther sent a servant to inquire as to the meaning of this mournful act. Mordecai informed Esther of what had occurred and begged her to go to the king. Esther sent word that if she went before the king before being summoned she was liable for death. Mordecai retorted however that if she did not do this, God would find someone else. As a result Esther called upon all the Jews in Shushan to join her and her handmaids in a three-day fast.

On the third day of the fast Esther went into the inner court of the king. Finding favor in his eyes the king welcomed her to speak with him. Esther requested that the king and Haman come to a banquet that she has prepared for them. At the banquet the king asked Esther what she desired and she again asked the king and Haman to come to a banquet the next day. As Haman was leaving the banquet he saw Mordecai who again would not bow before him. Furious, Haman took council with his wife Zeresh and his friends. His wife suggested that large gallows be built and Haman request of the king to allow him to hang Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus could not sleep that night so he had the book of records read to him. When he was reminded of Mordecai reporting the assassination plot against the king, the king asked if Mordecai had yet been rewarded. It was reported that Mordecai had never been rewarded for this deed. At this point Haman had entered the outer court as he was preparing himself to ask the king to allow Mordecai to be hanged. When Haman went before the king however the king asked Haman's opinion about what should be offered to someone whom the king wishes to honor. Thinking that the king was referring to Haman himself, Haman answered "For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal apparel be brought which the king uses to wear, and the horse that the king rides upon, and on whose head a crown royal is set; and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man therewith. Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

whom the king delights to honor, and cause him to ride on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him: Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” To Haman’s surprise the king ordered Haman to do all that he has said for Mordecai. Haman does as the king commands but he returns home mourning. Zeresh, Haman’s wife derided Haman and told him that he would not prevail against Mordecai. As the two were speaking chamberlains from the king came to take Haman to Esther’s banquet.

The king and Haman attend Esther’s banquet where again the king asks Esther her request. Esther answers that an evil has been perpetrated upon her people. The king asks who the person is that has perpetrated this evil and Esther responds that it is none other than Haman. Enraged, King Ahasuerus went out into the palace garden. Haman fell unto the couch where Esther was sitting and pleaded for his life. The king saw Haman near the queen and accused him of accosting the queen. As a result the king had Haman hanged upon the gallows that had been meant for Mordecai.

The king took the house of Haman and gave it to Esther. Esther in turn called forth Mordecai to whom the king gave his ring and dominion over Haman’s home. Esther begged for the king to reverse his edict regarding the killing of the Jews. The king told her that he could not reverse the edict but he was giving her power to write another edict as she sees fit. Mordecai called together the king’s scribes to write out another edict. This edict called for all the Jews to stand against those who would do them harm on the thirteenth day of Adar. In all the cities that received this edict fear fell upon the inhabitants and the Jews were able to save themselves from those who would do them harm. The ten sons of Haman were among those who were killed. Esther requested that the sons of Haman also be hanged upon the gallows and the king agreed.

As a result the Jews rejoiced for they had been saved. “But the Jews that were in Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore do the Jews of the villages, that dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.” As a result Mordecai sent out edicts to all Jews to continually celebrate on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar because they had been saved. Mordecai was set apart and raised above all the other officials and nobles in the kingdom. “For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren; seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed.”

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