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Unravelling the Mysteries of the Book of Esther

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An attentive reading of the book of Esther will raise various important questions that most of its readers miss. In this video, I discuss some of the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman's book, *The Queen You Thought You Knew* (<https://amzn.to/2uADF1i>).

Leave any questions you have over on my Curious Cat account:
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today, instead of answering another question, I'm going to go through the book of Esther, sharing some insights from a book I read recently, *The Queen You Thought You Knew* by Rabbi David Fohrman. Absolutely fantastic little book.

You could read through it in one or two sittings. I read through it in one and I found it incredibly insightful, also incredibly accessible and fun to read. It frames its argument as a sort of mystery or a riddle to be solved.

And as it works you through the book, everything starts to fall into place in a way that's beautiful and very elegant exegesis. I thought I'd share some of the insights that he has into some of the puzzles of the book, because the book, when you look more closely, has a number of questions that we would, if we're paying attention, that we should raise about it. So here are a few.

What is the deal with Queen Vashti? Why is King Ahasuerus bringing her forward to present her to all the kings and rulers of the nations? Is he just a boorish man trying to show off his wife or is there something more going on? That's one question. Another question is, why is the book so long? Haman is killed at the end of the seventh chapter, but you have three more chapters after that. What is all that about? Why does it continue for so long? Now the question is, why does Esther cry when she does? She cries after the death of Haman when she approaches the king at that point.

Now it would seem that that's the point where everything is falling into place and going

right. Why does she cry then? Why does she not cry earlier, but cry at this particular point? Is there something that we've missed? Why does she delay talking to the king about the threat to her people early on? She invites the king to a banquet rather than actually telling him directly about the threat to her people. Now that's strange because he says he will give her anything up to half his kingdom.

So why wouldn't she at that point, with such a greeting and welcome, why wouldn't she raise her real concern? Why does she invite him to a banquet instead of actually telling him what's on her mind? Why does Mordecai create a decree that says that the Jews can annihilate the women and the children and take all the property of their enemies? That's a fairly vicious thing to say. Why does he say that? Why does Mordecai have a victory parade before the actual victory and battle has taken place? What is that about? And then finally, why don't the Israelites take spoils? It would seem that the decree gives them the right to take spoils, but they don't. Why is that? So all of these questions are very interesting.

And you may not have noticed these before. You may have noticed these before. But Rabbi David Forman goes through the book and tries to unpack the book and show how, as you pay attention to these questions and as you start to answer these questions, a lot of things fall into place.

So let's begin with the question of Queen Vashti. What is that about? Why is Queen Vashti brought forward to present her to all the rulers of the nations? I'll read the verse in question. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mahuman, Bithsa, Harbona, Bigtha, Avagtha, Zetha and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials.

For she was beautiful to behold. So what is he doing? Well, if you look at the purpose of the king, he's got this great empire and he has all these different rulers and authorities and provincial governors and he's brought them all together. And how is he going to bring the nation together and grace this great, vast empire together? One of the main ways he's going to do that is by throwing parties, by creating a spectacle so that when these people go back to their home province, they will tell people about what they witnessed.

They will be in awe of what they saw. They will see something that represents the glory of the empire and the power of the empire. And all of this will enable them to be joined together, to find unity in this common spectacle.

Now, royalty often tends to do that. Empires tend to do that. They'll have vast parades or vast events that bring together people from all parts of the empire in a display of pomp and power and all these things that attract people's attention.

That bring people together in this common spectacle, this common vision that unites everyone. Now, this is some of the things that you see within the British monarchy, for instance, a royal wedding or a coronation. These are events that grab people's attention and represent authority, that they bring unity through common spectacle.

Now, how does the queen fit into this? The queen is asked to come to be presented to the royal official, the royal officials, the governors and all these other characters of the nations. Not to people in general, not to just the general population. And she's sent for by the chief members of the council.

She's sent for by the seven eunuchs, these people who have thrown their lot in with the kingdom, who are members of the royal court. And so she's summoned in by members of the cabinet, as it were. She's it's a very important summons that's given to her.

And she's asked not just to display her beauty, but to wear a particular item. She's asked to wear the royal crown. Now, why is this? Because the king and the queen, they represent something.

They stand for something. They stand for the nation, the whole of the empire or the nation. They are symbols, living symbols of it.

So when we talk about, for instance, the king's two bodies, the king as an individual person who has a physical body, but the king also has the nation as his body. The nation he represents, he stands for. So you can talk of the king as England, England personified or France personified.

And likewise, the queen is mother Persia. She represents the whole of the nation in its relationship with the king. And there's this bond that's supposed to be expressed, this representation of Persia's glory and beauty.

And as she's brought forward, she's supposed to stand for all of these things. But Queen Bashti does not come. She does not obey the king's summons.

And so there's a crisis. The crisis is not just that Queen Bashti as an individual wife isn't really going along with her husband. The problem is that there's a breakdown in the symbolism of the nation.

She's not actually serving her purpose of representing Persia. She's not serving as mother Persia at all. She's a wife who's just not prepared to play that particular role, that particular part.

And so what use is she as a queen? There needs to be another queen. And so there's this quest to find a replacement for Bashti. When Esther is chosen, she's chosen without any reference to where she comes from.

No one knows where Esther comes from. She keeps that her secret. Now, what might this have represented for Ahasuerus? Why might this have pleased him? Well, this mysterious girl from nowhere can stand for the whole nation.

She does not stand primarily for some provincial group. She stands for Persia as this figure who does not necessarily have a clear origin, as this figure who is just a member of the nation, a woman from the nation who's beautiful, who represents the glory of Persia, but is not from a particular people. She is not someone who is representing some particular group within the nation.

She can represent the whole. And so it's significant that she's chosen in part because she can do this. She can play this role of representation.

Now, this helps us to understand one of Esther's problems. One of Esther's problems is that if she presents herself as a member of the Jewish people who cares about their fate, who wants to protect them, then what does that do to her role as mother Persia? How can she represent Persia when she is so closely attached to one particular people? That's a problem. And so within her approach to King Ahasuerus, she has to deal with that very serious problem.

And she has to hatch a plan to avoid falling into the trap of just becoming another provincial girl, another girl who represents a particular people and can no longer stand for mother Persia. And so this can help us to understand why she delays in the way that she does. Why does she delay? And what does she do? When she goes to the king and asks for the king and is accepted by the king, and the king gives her a request, she asked for a banquet.

And she invites the king and Haman to a banquet that is prepared for him. Now, the ambiguity is significant. Who is the him? Is it Ahasuerus? Is it Haman? Which of the two? And so at this point, you can imagine Ahasuerus has a puzzled mind.

Why is Haman being invited? Who is this banquet really for? What is this banquet really about? Is there something going on between Esther and Haman? Is there some infidelity in his wife? Now that would be very serious. If the woman who was his bride, his queen, the one who's representing mother Persia, if she was in league with or if she was in an adulterous relationship with Haman, there'd be a serious problem there, clearly. And so there's this question, what is this banquet about? Why is he being invited? And you can imagine that he would ponder this within his mind, what puzzling about what this is all about.

Why is Haman being invited? And who is this feast really for? What is Esther up to? And so the seed of this big question, this question around Haman is sown within his mind. And later on, when he has a sleepless night and Haman has a sleepless night after this first banquet, it shouldn't be surprising. Why shouldn't it be surprising? Well, both of

them are left with big questions.

The king particularly, what is Esther up to? What is Haman's part in this? And so Haman, who's someone who's struggling with a sleepless night as he's irritated by Mordecai, who's not bowing to him, he goes to the king. And the king's having a sleepless night because presumably he's puzzling about Queen Esther's banquet and what that was all about. Why was Haman invited? And why is there another banquet being set for a following evening? And so as he reads through the records of Persia, he's pondering within his mind, what might this be about? And then Haman, the man of the day, comes along.

And you can imagine how the king feels when Haman presents, when he presents this question of what to do for the man that the king delights to honour. And Haman presents all these different things that should be done, riding on the king's donkey, of wearing the king's crown and all these sorts of things that represent the king's own authority. Does the king want to have the royal robe, not the royal crown, and wear a royal crest on his head? Does Haman want his job? So he's wondering, is he taking my queen? Is he taking my kingdom? Does he want my kingdom too? He seems to have desires upon this, that he should wear all my clothes, that he should go around on my royal charger and all these sorts of things.

Why on earth is Haman doing these things? What does he want this for? And so when he says it's actually for Mordecai and sends Haman out in front of him, you can imagine he wants to knock Haman down a peg or two. He thinks that Haman should be put in his place, that Haman, obviously there's something up with this guy and he should be put in his place. Now, the next banquet that's held, Esther reveals what's taking place.

She says that Haman, and this time she invites them to the feast, both of them, Haman and King Ahasuerus, for a feast that's prepared for them, not just for him, but for both of them. Now, again, why are both of them invited? What is there between Haman and the king and Queen Esther? There seems to be this triangle that's going on. And what exactly is the nature of this? Again, the king is probably wondering.

And so at the feast, Esther reveals what is really taking place. When she speaks to King Ahasuerus, she says, If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given to me as my petition and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated.

Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss. Then King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, Who is he and where is he who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing? And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. So Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

And so what does Esther do? Esther has sown doubt within King Ahasuerus' mind about the purpose of Haman. What is Haman about? And she's presented it in terms of a relationship with... There's something going on between the king, Haman and Esther. What exactly is taking place? So she's sown that question within his mind.

And then when she springs the trap, she presents it as her own life that is under threat. Her own life as mother Persia. She is the one who represents the people of Persia.

And here's this guy, Haman, who wants to threaten her and her people when she should be representing the whole people of Persia. He's got this provincial outlook that wants to just attack her as a particular person and her ethnic people. Now, that's an interesting and daring plot to have.

You can imagine that King Ahasuerus is angry at this point, very angry. His queen is being threatened. Now, he doesn't really focus so much upon the people.

The real point is the queen is threatened and he's shown that he doesn't really care that much about the Jews. He's quite willing to just sign over the rights to Haman to commit this vast genocide against the Jews. He doesn't even ask who these people are.

And so he's shown no concern for that. But he is concerned about his queen. And he's shown that already with Queen Bashti.

And he's shown it already in his response to Esther. He's concerned about his queen. And Haman is a threat to him and to his queen.

And so it's a very clever plot that Esther has at this point. But how does it work out? It doesn't work out as effectively as she would hope. Why not? Well, what happens is that the king eventually goes out and he goes into the garden.

And you can imagine that Esther is very disappointed and concerned at this point. She's played a daring hand. And is he going to call her bluff? If you think about it, Haman wasn't trying to take her life.

Haman was trying to take the life of the Jews, the life of the Jews, who were this people that were uprooted from their nation, scattered throughout the whole empire of Persia. And yet they still obeyed their own rules and customs rather than the rules of the king. Now, that's very strange.

Here's a nation that is no longer a nation, but it's still acting as if it were a nation. It's like those animals in a cartoon that run over the edge of a precipice and just stay there running in midair for a while. The Israelites haven't yet learned that they're not a nation anymore.

They're acting as if they're a nation. Now, is it worth the king's while entertaining such a

group and protecting such a group? Isn't it easier just to do away with such a group that is not going to recognize the power of Persia and the fact that they're no longer a nation? It's a very strange position to be in. And so that's the logic of Haman's decree.

The problem is that Haman could have some very good arguments in response to Esther's accusation. I mean, I'm not about attacking you, Esther. I'm just about this people.

And it seems clear to me that you're not particularly attached to this people. I mean, you're a member of the king's court. You're a member of Persia.

You're Mother Persia herself. Now, why are you attached to this particular provincial people? I don't know. I mean, it's not really about you at all.

It's not about these other people who are blending into the larger empire of Persia. It's just about these people who aren't obeying the king's customs. They're obeying their own customs.

And there are many other arguments that he could bring forward. But yet he plays his cards poorly because he is eventually, when the king comes back in, he's found in a compromising position that makes it look like he's taking the queen. And the king, you can imagine that seed of doubt has been sown in his mind.

And then the queen suggests that Haman is not actually trying to have an affair with her. Haman is trying to kill her and her people. And then Haman seems to be assaulting her.

And the king's wrath is aroused deeply. And so his damsel is in distress. His queen is in distress.

He has to act. He has to intervene. And so he's put in a position where he acts against Haman.

And at that point, there's a further piece of information that dooms Haman in that he is billed gallows for Mordecai in his house. Now, this reveals that his plot against the Jews was not just this matter of wise policy. This was personal.

This was a matter of trying to cover up his desire to kill one particular guy. And so his plot is revealed. His motives are revealed and exposed.

And then he is punished. But there's a devastating end to chapter seven. So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

Then the king's wrath subsided. Now, that's a disaster for Esther. Esther really needs the king to take action against the decree.

And yet his wrath has been expended upon Haman. All he seems to have heard was that

his queen was threatened. Get Haman out of the way and that's enough.

But yet the point that Esther was trying to get to was to save her people. Her life was not really under threat. The point was her people.

She had to protect her people. And now it seems that her plot has failed. Her plan to get the king to act and to save her people has fallen through.

And at this point, she can't act easily as mother Persia. She has to come out into the open and ask the king to save her people. Now, it's striking at this point that she comes forward to the king and the king has to raise his sceptre again.

He has, it's another dangerous approach that she has to make at this point. She's already revealed the issue with Haman and maybe the king's patience is being tested in some ways. Now, the way that the king responds, he does not say up to half my kingdom anymore.

He doesn't seem to have the same attitude towards, he's already helped her out. He's already done what, he's already saved her. Now, what's going to happen now? I mean, does she want something more at this point? And at this point, she has to come out into the open and tell him about what has happened.

He knows that Mordecai is related to her. And now he also knows, she makes clear that her people are in threat, are threatened. And she foregrounds that particular detail.

No longer that she is threatened, but her people are threatened. That's a problem because it makes it much harder for her to function as mother Persia. So once she's revealed this piece of information, the king's response is also devastating.

The king says that they have the signet ring, but the decree can't be changed. A decree of Persia can't be changed. Now, that applies not just for any decree that they might have, but for the decree of Haman.

That can't be changed. The people of the nation of the empire still have the right, still have a decree that enables them to kill the Jews, to take their property and kill their women and annihilate their women and children. Now, what are they to do about that? So Mordecai has a shrewd plan.

Not to remove the original decree, which can't happen, but to add to it. And so what they add to it is another decree. Another decree that gives the Jews the right to take the lives of their enemies, to annihilate their women and children and to take all their property.

Now, why is this decree so vicious? It needs to be vicious because it needs to go, as Rabbi David Forman argues, toe to toe with the original decree. It needs to stand up to be seen to be the equal of it. And what does this mean throughout the nation?

Throughout the empire, this means essentially there's a day of civil war that's been set.

A period of time in which these two groups within the nation can just have it out. And if you're a provincial authority, what is your place within this? How do you fit in? Now, they'll be trying to tell which way the wind was blowing. They would have the original decree, but then they would have the second decree.

What do we do with them? I mean, is this second decree just some minor amendment to the original decree, some right of self-defence? Or is it something that expresses the king's true will? And that's a question for them that they'll be asking because the big thing in a pogrom is where are the authorities standing? Are the authorities going to stand with the Jews or are they going to stand with their persecutors? And so that is the big question at this point. They can't remove the original decree, but they can present a situation where the rulers of the governors of the provinces will side with the Jews and will recognise that the king is on the side of the Jews against their enemies. And that's a very significant thing to happen.

But there's a problem that the decree doesn't seem to be enough. There needs to be something more. And so as this decree is made, there's also this verse here in verse 15 of chapter 8. Now, that's interesting.

It seems to be jumping the gun, to be celebrating before the decree has actually taken effect. Now, they still have this threat against their lives and that day hasn't yet come. So why are they celebrating at this point? Why is Mordecai dressed up in royal clothes? Well, he needs to send out a signal.

He needs to send out a signal that the king is on the side of the Jews. And if that signal is not heard loud and clear, the rulers and governors of the provinces might not side with the Jews. Well, they might just have their hands off the situation.

But if he points out very clearly through these symbolic actions that the king is on the side of the Jews, they will side with the Jews against their tormentors and their persecutors. And so it's a very shrewd plan. It's a very daring plan.

It's a very dangerous plan. It could easily go wrong. And the particular point at which it could go wrong.

Now, the Jews defeat their enemies and there is a victory. But the problem is the king could turn everything around. If the king is not willing to back things up, it could all fail.

It could be revealed that, well, the Jews weren't really supported by the king after all. It just seemed that way. It seemed as if the king was on the side of the Jews, but actually it's Queen Esther.

She overplayed her hand and she's really not in the king's good books at the moment.

And so maybe we should just allow these situations to play themselves out and not get involved and just allow the Jews to be killed by their enemies. And so this is a real problem if the king's not going to go along with it.

And so Queen Esther at the end, she goes to the king again. And she asks the king to hang the sons of Haman. I can find the verse.

Then Esther said, if it pleases the king, let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do again tomorrow, according to today's decree and let Haman's 10 sons be hanged on the gallows. So the king commanded this should be done. The decree was issued in Shushan and they hanged Haman's 10 sons.

Now, Haman's sons are already dead, but hanging them and having this extra day solidifies the fact that the Jews have been saved, that the Jews are supported against their enemies. Now, if they play this out any further, the king is clearly losing his patience with this whole situation. He doesn't really care that much about the Jews.

He's quite willing to sell them out to their enemies without even knowing who they were. He cares very much about his queen, but he cares about his queen not as an individual, not as a member of her people, but as the queen of Persia, as the one who represents Persia. And so Queen Esther has done a very daring thing and taken a serious risk and it could all fail.

But she takes that one extra day and that extra action of hanging Haman's sons and that sends the signal that needs to be sent. And at that point, the plan has succeeded. Now, why don't the Jews take any spoils? This is one final detail of the story that might be mysterious.

Well, we've already seen that the Jews were given the right to take the lives of the women and children and to take the spoils from their enemies. Why didn't they take the spoils? Well, they didn't take the spoils because Haman was an Agagite and Agag was an Amalekite. If we see in the book of 1 Samuel, the Agag was killed by Samuel.

Saul failed to kill him, failed to judge the people of Amalek. And God has said that he was in war with the people of Amalek forever and that the Jews could never take spoils from them. So they don't take spoils.

And the point of having the right to take spoils was merely to have the decree go toe to toe with the original decree. And so this is a final mystery in the book that is solved when we recognise the play that has occurred. The queen cried at the point that she did because that was the crucial point.

That was the point where all seemed lost. She had played her hand and it just had not brought what she needed. Haman was killed and her own life was seemingly saved, but not the life of her people.

And yet that extra move that she made when she took that risk of going beyond the safety of being queen, the mother of Persia, and putting herself into the open as one of her people, at that point, the people are saved. And as that plot works out and as Mordecai and Esther hatch this shrewd plan to present this appearance, this ruse that gives everyone in the nation or in the empire, this sense that the king is on the side of the, fully on the side of the Jews, it enables them to save their people. But it's a close run thing.

It could easily have failed, even at the last moment. When you read this book of Esther, I think it's helpful to step back and to think about some of the themes that arise within it. So one of the themes that we see within it is the deception of the tyrant of Haman by Esther.

The woman deceives the serpent. And this is a continual theme that we find within the Old Testament, particularly also within the New Testament to some extent. The woman deceives the serpent, the serpent who once deceived her.

And so that's a significant theme. It's also a very shrewd plot that's worked out particularly by a woman, which is very similar to the story of Ruth. Ruth is a very clever plan that's hatched by Naomi and Ruth.

And many people miss what's going on because they think it just plays out quite simply in the same way as they think about the book of Esther that way. But there's a lot going on behind the scenes. And when you pay attention to the odd details of the story, you'll see that it's not as straightforward as you might think.

Those final chapters are where the key things happen. What Haman's death is not the key event. The key event is what they do with the decree afterwards and how they overcome that situation.

A situation where all seemed lost after the death of Haman. And so I highly recommend that you read this book. There's a lot within it.

And I could go on further, but I'd probably just be rambling at this point. So I recommend you buy the book, *The Queen You Thought You Knew* by Rabbi David Foreman. And I will hopefully get back to answering questions within the next day or so.