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Esther: What Kind of a Book Is This Anyway?

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Bronfman Torah | Purim 2017

Rabbi Mishael Zion is director of the Mandel Program for Leadership in Jewish Culture, and author of Esther: An Israeli Commentary (forthcoming, 2018). He and his wife Elana just welcomed their fourth daughter, Sapir, into the world, sister to Zohar, Shai and Eliyah.

We are grateful for Mish's continued teaching in our community!

*"Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix genres."
([Jacques Derrida, The Law of Genre](#))*

A childhood friend of mine, whenever asked "How are you?", quips: "Not bad, given the genre." "Yes, but what genre is it?" I've learned to quip back, to which the responses have developed: "weak romantic comedy," "exhausting documentary" and, for a grueling few months, simply "noir."

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[What genre is it?](#) There's that moment at the beginning of a new book, film, or play where you're stumbling to figure out what genre you've been thrown into. Each genre has its way of tipping off the viewer, inviting the right kind of laughs, thrills and gasps. Some forms of art wear their genre on their sleeve, while with others the audience is taken for a ride as the creators toy with various genres. Cue the uneasy laughter evoked when a parody announces itself a little too subtly: Wait, am I supposed to laugh at that, or be horrified? Or perhaps, that slow realization that the tale we've taken at face value might just be an allegory forcing a re-interpretation of everything that has transpired thus far.

The same question can be asked when Jews around the world convene to read the Scroll of Esther this Saturday night. What genre is it anyway? Ask the people in the room, and each will respond differently (if they've bothered to stop and think about it). The answer one gives radically changes one's approach to the entire experience of Purim. Is it a tale of romance and heroism? Of sexual and physical violence? Is this a cutting political criticism, a secular manifesto or a tale of the endurance of faith. Genres are not to be mixed, as Derrida taught. So what genre is this?

As our headlines increasingly seem like quotes from the Book of Esther, one might stop and wonder about our own contemporary life: what genre is this, anyway? Our response to the world around us hinges on the answer.

Esther is surely one of the most mystifying books of the Bible. Its very presence within the holy canon raises debates and questions. A tale with no God, which focuses on the sartorial desires of a foreign king, an uneasy victory achieved in dubious ways, an unredemptive tale of redemption. Does such a tale truly deserve to be elevated above all others, second only to the Torah in its venerated annual public performance? Over the centuries, commentators have preferred to treat Esther as a riddle, a tale which hides within it a secret meaning waiting to be revealed. For surely the meaning of this book cannot simply be the topsy-turvy tale of a drunk King, an ego-driven villain and an inter-married heroine...

To me, more compelling than any one answer to this question is the opportunity to try and be aware of the many various masks the Scroll of Esther seems to be

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wearing:

Testament of Faith

Most insistent of genres is the seemingly straightforward religious school reading, claiming that Esther is not to be read any differently than Exodus. Both are national tales of religious salvation, in the glorious genre of theological history. True, it stands out a bit: If the Bible is the Biography of God, this concluding episode teaches us that in order to truly see God's actions today, we must read them into the small coincidental moments of our lives. "Esther is the end of miracles," says the Talmud, suggesting that we're at the bottom of the barrel of miraculous history, and miracles are forged from the human keen on seeing God's hidden hand working miracles all around us. Turning the Randomness of *Purim* – named for lots – into the guiding Hand of God. The key verse in this reading would be Chapter 6, verse 1: "*That night, the King's sleep eluded him*" בַּלַּיְלָהָה הָהוּא נִדְדָה נְדָדָה שְׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ. You might think you're living in a tale of political and physical randomness, but deep forces are at work to drive reality to its proper destination. The only question is: What side of history do you want to be on, the temporal kingdom or the eternal one?

The Secular Allegory

On the opposite side stands the subversive secular allegorical reading of Esther. This "megillah" (literally – exposure) of "Esther" (literally – hiddenness), exposes what is hidden in plain sight: Achashverosh is a stand-in for God. The "King of all Kings," that God which you pray to, is nothing but a fool, drunk over His own pomp and circumstance, claiming all the power in the world, but unable to change a single thing in reality. Shushan is described with metaphors of the Temple, and if you don't get the hint, read the headlines: God ain't there. At best, reality is random – off with one head, on with another. At worst, God has given his ring of power to the evil forces of the world, granting them free rein to wreak havoc. Like Esther, we Jews are orphaned in this world. Our only chance is to entice God using our bodily charms, but who knows if that'll hold his attention for very long. God is drunk and detached, it's time we fend for ourselves. Disguised as a holy book, the author here has subversively made his way into the Bible, the secular conclusion to a religious epic. The medium is the message: subvert your way into the holy, because the Emperor has no clothes (but lots of wine!).

The Vulgar Burlesque

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The Burlesque, close cousin of the farce, parody and satire, seeks to evoke laughter and relief through ludicrous treatment of its subjects. One can barely read Esther without realizing its Burlesque nature, say proponents of this genre. Don't you realize the Book of Esther is not a serious book at all, but rather a total comedy: perhaps the opulent description of a banquet that lasts six months got you, or the ridiculous imperial proclamation that wives should obey their husbands? (As one Talmudic commentator wryly commented: wives will either always obey their husbands, or never do so, but no imperial proclamation will make them change this behavior.) The megillah's love of farcical misunderstandings, its stock character archetypes whose lack of depth smacks of sketch comedy, its obsession with food, drink and sex, and its hyperbolic numerical exaggeration all invoke the burlesque. This last point is crucial for understanding the violence at the end of the tale. All the numbers throughout the Scroll are hyperbolic (50 arms length for a hanging tree? 180 days of drinking? 1000 nights of virgins paraded into the King's bedroom, after being soaked for 365 days in oil? 10,000 pieces of silver for the sale of one minor dispersed people, a sum which Herodotus tells us compares to 50% of the Persian Empire's annual budget? Suddenly, 75,000 people killed in riots just seems another crazy number...

The carnivalesque liturgical setting of Esther encourages this reading. A costumed audience, set on interrupting the mock-holy reading of this secular comedy as much as possible, the booze and the levity, all point us in the direction of the farcical reading. If only one character would resoundingly slip on a banana or something and we could all laugh heartily. Yet until he does, we're not totally laughing just yet.

From *Purim* by Esaias Baitel.

The Moralistic Wisdom Tale

Finally, in struts the straight-laced Jimini Cricket, claiming that this is a moral tale, written in the spirit of the wisdom literature of the Bible. An earthly king and a weak villain are being contrasted with the hero Mordechai, a man of virtue, who fights for his adopted daughter and for his people, and who never allows pride and power to cloud his vision. Esther is the heroine who forgoes honor and even life to do the right thing. The Scroll is not a joke, but a narrative playing out of the book of Proverbs, those which warn us against preferring flesh over wisdom. Mordechai and Esther survive because of their controlled leadership – of themselves first, and

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through that, eventually of the entire empire.

We could go on for hours, the Tarantino-esque fantastical revenge fantasy; the Zionist criticism of Diasporic life, with its unnerving tax-infused ending; the pro-diasporic criticism of the new Jewish State which threatens assimilated Jewish life in Persia... At the end of the day, it is the author of Esther who gets the last laugh. By preventing us from totally giving ourselves over to any one reading, perhaps the Megillah teaches us that we can never be quite sure what genre we're in. So what endures? Drinking with friends, supporting the poor and unfortunate among us, and reading good texts rigorously (even if we're not quite sure what they mean).

Oh, and not taking ourselves too seriously (until, that is, our turn to rise-to-the-occasion-like-Esther-did arrives).

A Freilichen Purim!

Mishael

Continue the conversation. Send Rabbi Mishael your thoughts:
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P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



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