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**Unorthodox? How Megillat Esther Justifies the Holiday of Purim** 1

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# UNORTHODOX? HOW MEGILLAT ESTHER JUSTIFIES THE HOLIDAY OF PURIM

TZVI SINENSKY

*This is the third in a series arguing that there are unexpected biblical roots for many Jewish holidays and their practices. By exploring these foundations, we gain fresh insight into many well-trodden aspects of the Jewish tradition. Read the first article in the series [here](#), and the second [here](#).*

Purim is widely viewed as the ultimate rule-breaker. Many universal halakhic categories, including cross-dressing, rabbinic violations of wearing wool and linen, and the laws of damages, are [very-nearly abrogated](#). Purim's observance on two distinct dates - 14 Adar for unwalled cities and 15 Adar for walled ones - and the ancient practice of some communities to read the *Megillah* as early as 11 Adar (see [Megillah 2a](#)), suggest that Purim departs radically from the holiday norm. More generally, its levity and drunkenness lend the day a carnivalesque character. These anomalies alone raise questions about Purim's credibility as a Jewish holiday. But even more fundamentally, as discussed extensively in the halakhic literature, the unprecedented innovation of a post-Mosaic holiday is highly questionable in its own right,<sup>1</sup> and there are hints in the *Megillah* itself that the people were slow to accept Purim as a permanent holiday.<sup>2</sup> Taken as a whole, these irregularities seem to suggest, Purim's very legitimacy seems precarious.

Quite possibly seeking to address these idiosyncrasies, *Esther* chapter nine goes out of its way to explain the process of Purim's ratification. The *Megillah* is painstaking in its depiction of Esther and Mordechai's letters urging the holiday's establishment, as well as the community's gradual acceptance. It also accounts for the distinction between walled and unwalled cities by depicting the Jews of Shushan as having rested from their battle a day later than those in other locations.

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<sup>1</sup> The Talmud ([Megillah 14a](#)) teaches: "The Sages taught in a *beraita*: Forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah, except for the reading of the *Megillah*. What is the exposition? R. Hiyya bar Avin in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Korha: If, from [Egyptian] slavery to freedom we recite songs, from death to life is it not all the more so?" The assumption seems to be that Purim is only legitimate if rooted in biblical precedent. Even more explicitly, the Yerushalmi ([Megillah 1:5](#)) states that were it not rooted in the preexisting obligation to destroy the nation of Amalek, the establishment of Purim would have constituted a violation of the prohibition against a prophet establishing a new holiday. Along these lines, most authorities, such as Nahmanides ([Commentary to Deuteronomy 4:2](#)) and Vilna Gaon (*Aderet Eliyahu* to Deut. 4:2), maintain that one who adds a holiday stands in violation of *bal tosif*. The position of Minhat Hinukh (to *Mitzvah* 454), who asserts that *bal tosif* only applies to one who adds to an existing *mitzvah*, does not reflect the predominant view.

<sup>2</sup> The second half of chapter nine lists at least three instances of the Jews having accepted Purim as a holiday: on the original occasion of the military victory, following Mordechai's letter, and following the letter jointly composed by Esther and Mordechai. Possibly, there is a fourth additional reference that appears in between the *Megillah's* reference to these two letters. This reiteration suggests that Purim's establishment required continual reinforcement. Indeed, Ibn Ezra ([9:29 s.v. va-Tikhtov](#)) notes the repetition and goes so far as to suggest that the holiday was initially accepted yet subsequently dropped for a period of time. For a brief presentation of this view, see Adele Berlin, [The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther](#) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 83.

Yet even after we finish reading the *Megillah*, questions remain. Does communal acceptance suffice to establish a new holiday? Don't Purim's unusual *mitzvot* mark it as peculiar? After all, the commandments referenced in the *Megillah* seem unusual, especially *mishloah manot*, which seems to have no precedent in any biblical holiday. Further, is Purim a completely novel holiday, or does it draw on biblical precedents, making it more palatable to the *Megillah's* readers? Possibly seeking to address these outstanding difficulties, the *Megillah* invokes analogues to other books in Tanakh. Consequently, a close comparison between *Esther* and other biblical works suggests that the *Megillah* forwards a cluster of interrelated arguments: that there is solid precedent to see communal acceptance as binding in establishing an annual observance, and that while they may appear unusual, the day's *mitzvot* (and storyline) are actually quite familiar. Ultimately, the *Megillah* suggests that its climax is even a partial actualization of the prophets' messianic vision.

*Esther* explicitly appeals to biblical precedent on just one occasion. Curiously, the verse records that "these days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordechai the Jew and Queen Esther has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations [*divrei ha-tzomot ve-za'akatam*]" (9:31). To what fasts and lamentations does this refer?

Many have seen in this verse an allusion to a historical fast day that served as the basis for *Ta'anit Esther*. For instance, Rabbeinu Tam (cited by *Rosh Megillah* 1:1) holds that the Talmud's (*Megillah* 2a) term "a time of gathering for all" refers to the Jews having gathered to fast on 13 Adar before going out to battle. According to other sources, such as *Masekhet Sofrim* (21:1) and (probably) Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Ta'anivot* 5:5), the Jews fasted in Nissan upon first hearing of Haman's decree, and it is to this fast that the verse refers.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, however, the face reading of the verse appears to have nothing to do with *Ta'anit Esther*, which is not mentioned in the *Megillah*. Instead, as [Ibn Ezra, Ralbag, and Malbim](#) (9:31) contend, the verse more likely refers to the Jews' earlier acceptance of the four fast days associated with the Temple's destruction: those of Tammuz, Av, Tishrei, and Tevet. This itself can be understood in one of two ways: [either the Four Fasts were initially instituted through communal consensus](#) following the First Temple's destruction (Ibn Ezra to [Esther 9:31](#) and [Zekhariah 8:19](#)) or, while they were initially enacted by force of rabbinic decree, they remained binding after the construction of the Second Temple due to popular acceptance (see [Rosh Hashanah 18b](#)). Either way, *Esther* claims the Four Fasts as precedent for the community's ability to impose new days of mourning or celebration.

Indeed, this reading of "the fasts and their lamentations" dovetails perfectly with an otherwise elusive section of *Zekhariah*, who prophesied in roughly the same period as the events of Purim.<sup>4</sup> Following the building of the Second Temple, which the community saw as a mere shadow of the First, the *navi* is asked whether or not the community should continue to observe the fasts associated with the Temple's destruction. Instead of answering directly,

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Rav Soloveitchik's analysis, summarized [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> This depends on the controversy concerning whether the events of Purim transpired between the First and Second Temple, or after the Second Temple had been rebuilt. For a summary, see [here](#).

Zekhariah responds rhetorically, insisting that the Jews had never fasted for God's sake but for their own. In the continuation of chapters seven and eight, echoing a common prophetic motif, he goes on to underscore the priority of ethical behavior over fasting, and concludes with a messianic vision that foresees a time when the Four Fasts will be days of celebration.

While Zekhariah never directly answers the question posed to him - whether or not the Jews continued to fast during the Second Temple period becomes a subject of debate among medieval commentaries<sup>5</sup> - the larger implication is clear: Zekhariah's scathing rebuke is rooted in the assumption that it was legitimate for the community to accept the fasts upon itself in the first place (and that, upon the Temple's rebuilding, the community can therefore determine whether or not to abrogate the fasts). The phrase "the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations," then, seeks to rebut a potential objection to the legitimacy of Purim: if the prophet Zekhariah held that the Four Fasts had achieved binding status through communal acceptance, much the same may be said for Purim.

Still other readers of the the *Megillah* may have been perturbed by the seeming unfamiliarity of Purim's *mitzvot*. To take the case of *mishloah manot*, it is widely assumed that this practice is rooted in the unique events of the Purim narrative. Perhaps best-known in this vein is the view of R. Shlomo Alkabetz who, in his *Manot ha-Levi*, explains that the purpose of *mishloah manot* is to increase unity. This represents the opposite of Haman's intention, which was to declare the Jews a "scattered and dispersed" people ([Esther 3:8](#)).

Yet a close examination of the parallels between *Esther* chapter nine and *Nehemiah* chapter eight suggests that, in fact, *mishloah manot* was viewed at the time as a quintessential holiday activity. To review, *Sefer Nehemiah* depicts a stirring moment of mass repentance. On the first day of the seventh month, the recent returnees from Babylon to the Land of Israel hear the Torah read publicly. The community comprehends the radical extent of their ignorance, and they wish to mourn. Yet Ezra and the Levites insist that Rosh Hashanah is no day for sadness. In doing so, they echo not only the *Megillah's* requirement of *mishteh* [feasting], but also *mishloah manot*:

[Ezra] further said to them, "Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks *and send portions* [*ve-shilhu manot*] to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength." The Levites were quieting the people, saying, "Hush, for the day is holy; do not be sad." Then all the people went to eat and drink *and send portions and make great merriment*, for they understood the things they were told. ([Nehemiah 8:10-12](#))

At first glance, the inclusion of *mishloah manot* in this passage seems curious. What association is there between this *mitzvah*, generally associated with Purim, and Rosh Hashanah? The generic language of the text - "for today is holy to the Lord" - suggests that there need not be a specific connection between the first of Tishrei and sending portions. Instead, as [Malbim](#) and [Ralbag](#) assert, sending portions is an integral part of typical Jewish holiday observance. Returning to the *Megillah*, the implication of this intertextual parallel seems clear: at least during that time period, *mishloah manot* was deemed an important part of

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<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the literature, see [Dr. David Hanschke's discussion](#). See also a summary of Rav Soloveitchik's analysis [here](#).

any Jewish holiday. In context, then, it is highly plausible that the Jews reading *Esther* might well have seen *mishloah manot* as carrying a rather traditional flavor.

We can similarly account for the presence of gifts for the poor as part of the institution of Purim. While not explicit in the passage in *Nehemiah* - we would hardly expect an obligation of charity on a day that is subject to the biblical prohibition against labor - *matanot la-evyonim* are a basic component of any biblical holiday. For while the terminology may be novel to *Esther*, the concept is anything but: the Torah itself links the holidays with the imperative to “leave the [crops] for the poor and the stranger” ([Leviticus 23:22](#)). In a similar spirit, the Torah urges one to celebrate the holidays with “your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst” ([Deuteronomy 16:11](#)).

Further, the *Megillah*'s seemingly unusual emphasis on the celebration of the Jews “and all those that joined them” [*ve'al kol ha-nilvim aleihem*] ([9:27](#)) may be understood in this light: the *Megillah* merely mimics the theme set forward by the Torah, which charges that you “shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” ([Deuteronomy 16:14](#); see similarly [16:11](#)). Accordingly, in formulating this requirement, Maimonides invokes the language of *Esther*: “One is required to rejoice and be cheerful on those days, along with his wife, children, grandchildren, and all his dependents” [*ve-khol ha-nilvim alav*] ([Hilkhot Yom Tov 6:17](#)).

By reading *Esther* in relation to *Nehemiah* and *Humash*, we gain new perspective on the holiday's seemingly unique observances, which would have been quite familiar to the reader. Even as they may carry unique significance in relation to the Purim story, *mishloah manot* and *matanot la-evyonim* simultaneously cloak Purim in the traditional garb of Jewish holiday observance.

Not only does the *Megillah* advocate the traditionalism of the holiday's ritual observances, but it even casts its storyline in a mode that immediately recalls familiar stories of Jewish heroism. The parallels between *Esther* and the Yosef narratives are [widely recognized](#) and need not be repeated. *Esther* also echoes many of the central elements of the book of *Daniel*: Mordekhai and Esther's influential roles in the Persian court are reminiscent of Daniel's position in Babylon; wine plays a pivotal role in both books; and Hananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah's refusal to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol parallels Mordekhai's refusal to prostrate before Haman. It is less clear why the *Megillah* underscores these parallels. While numerous interpretations may be offered, in light of our larger thesis, it appears that *Esther* means to suggest that the Purim story is not novel. Quite the opposite: it follows the familiar narrative arc of other diasporic heroes that were widely-known to its readership.

Yet the *Megillah*, beyond leaning on wide-ranging intertextual clues to stake its claim to legitimacy, takes one final step. Returning to the parallels between *Esther* and *Zekhariah*, we may appreciate a final textual oddity. Toward the book's conclusion, *Esther* stresses that that Esther and Mordekhai promulgated “words of peace and truth” ([9:30](#)). What could this possibly mean? Similarly, the *Megillah* concludes by emphasizing that Mordekhai “sought good for his nation, and spoke peace to all his progeny” ([10:3](#)). Why all the talk of peace and truth?

While the commentaries suggest many interpretations for both phrases, it is striking that in the same chapters we previously cited, Zekhariah repeatedly calls for a return to precisely these values:

Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Execute true justice; deal loyally and compassionately with one another. (7:9)

Later, he urges much the same:

These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates. (8:16)

Finally, this leads to the fulfillment of the messianic vision:

Thus said the Lord of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and peace. (8:19)

It is no coincidence that in the space of just a few verses, particularly at its conclusion, the *Megillah* twice invokes this vision of peace and truth. The implication is that Esther and Mordekhai's leadership helps the Jews come closer to fulfilling the messianic vision of Zekhariah. The protagonists bring peace to the Jewish people by fending off anti-Semites and advocating on behalf of their brethren. What is more, by ensuring that their people are protected, and, through *mishloah manot* and *matanot la-eyyonim*, that all Jews and communities feel included, Esther and Mordekhai advocate for justice and inclusion.

Taken altogether, the *Megillah's* rhetoric suggests that precisely because Purim initially appears unorthodox, the text labors to root the holiday in well-trodden biblical precedent. Taking a step further, *Esther's* conclusion implicitly transcends its defensive posture and goes on the offensive: Esther and Mordekhai not only draw on the precedent of Zekhariah's fast days, but embody the ethical character that will usher in the messianic era. Properly appreciated, the *Megillah* suggests, not only is Purim legitimate, but it is a harbinger of the very qualities that will transform the Four Fasts into "occasions for joy and gladness."

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# BLACKBIRDS

ZOHAR ATKINS

Blackbirds control our economy  
is a dog whistle  
said the rat whistlers  
in the poem, in which, you said,  
the symbolized is always superior  
to the medium.

I said the dog whistlers are right  
but that doesn't make it right  
to agree (or disagree).

I was a blackbird passing  
as a blackbird with no beak  
and too much bark.

I was a whistle blower  
ratting on language for selling us  
the false hope truth would set us free.

It's not an exaggeration to say  
correctness is a golden calf,  
while righteousness is like a god  
that tolerates no image.

I wanted to say, "More than the blackbirds have observed anti-blackbirdism  
anti-blackbirdism has observed the blackbirds,"  
but knew better.

You can take a blackbird out of [       ]  
but you can't take the [       ] out of

I'd be lying to myself if I said my skepticism went all the way down.

First they came for the bizarro billionaires  
and I spoke up.  
Then they came for the fake twitter accounts and again I spoke up.  
Then they came for the opioid epidemic  
and I spoke up.  
But when they came for me, my trial period had expired.  
Don't worry, said customer service.  
An upgrade is just the cost of a malaria net.  
So I upgraded.  
And that is why I am now speaking up

for only \$5.99/month.

In every generation, they have stood against us,  
but we blackbirds have prevailed.

And they have the gall to call our prevalence a conspiracy!

We were anti-blackbird ourselves, before there was such a thing as anti-blackbirdism.  
That is why we are so proud  
and demand that anyone who accuses us of wanting to endure is an anti-blackbird,  
since they force us to lose our focus on God and focus on anti-blackbirdism.  
On the other hand, nobody can make you lose focus on God without your permission.

Take comfort in the Lord, O ye blackbirds of little faith.  
For I have told you, O blackbird, what is good and what the language requires:  
Love love, act actionably, and fly humbly with your projections.  
The rest is commentary. Go and earn it.

Author's Note:

The bird is both a generic lyrical figure with a long history (spanning from Sappho and Ovid to Wallace Stevens and Langston Hughes), and an anti-Semitic symbol. Jews have long been characterized as birdlike, with their imagined hooked noses (portrayed as beaks) and migratory, rootless, air. Birds are the opposite of the Nazi ideal of "blood and soil," of attachment to land. Bernard Malamud's classic story, "Jewbird," canonized this anti-Semitic trope, but did so from a Jewish point of view, thus reappropriating a hateful canard and turning it into a source of recognition and resonance. This poem continues in that post-colonial tradition. Like Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, I wrote this poem as a way of speaking out of the dehumanized trope of the Jew as animal (a being whom Martin Heidegger describes as "poor in world"). That the bird in this poem is a blackbird not only pays homage to Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," but links anti-Semitism to racism. "Blackbirds" connects the history of poetry to bigotry and to the possibility of countering it. The blackbird is like the ambiguous figure of Shylock in Shakespeare, both sympathetic and grotesque.

Shortly after writing this poem, I read Jericho Brown's "[The Tradition](#)," which implicates the Western poetic tradition in the history of oppression, but also reworks it to elegize its victims. Brown turns John Crawford, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown (*zichronam livracha*) into names for flowers, but in doing so casts an eerie light on a subject that one would have otherwise thought benign, domestic, and beautiful. Paul Celan, whose parents were murdered in the Sho'ah, was a master at doing something similar with the German romantic tradition. I like to think this poem shares an elective affinity with Brown and Celan.



The impetus for “blackbirds” was a desire to work through an internalized dialectic of pride and shame, of an inherited theology of chosenness with a complicated history of degradation and power, but it was most of all a desire to meditate on the language of our popular discourse and mass culture industry alongside the language of our *mesorah* (the Jewish idiom and imaginary inherited from Tanakh and rabbinic literature). I wrote this poem as a way of weighing in on our contemporary anti-Semitism “culture wars”—not to advance an argument for what is or is not anti-Semitic, but to consider how we relate and respond to a discourse that is often confusing, exhausting, and shallow.

The poem begins casually, “New York School” style, simply as an attempt to get a grip on “what the word is,” but soon opens up into a larger enquiry into the way our inherited turns of phrase seem to over-determine how we think. The poem attempts to stare these clichés in the face as a way of finding something new.

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