



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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Beyond Purim: Power, Faith, and Freedom

“Hath Not a Jew Costumes?”

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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The biblical Book of Esther and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* are opposites. One describes the Jewish triumph over anti-Semitism, the other the anti-Semite’s triumph over the Jew. Yet there are similarities between the two tales. Both emphasize inversions, a turning of the tables, through a woman’s disguising of identity. In the Bible, the king of Persia rids himself of his wife in a fit of rage, which sets the stage for a Jewish woman named Esther to become his queen. She, in turn, under the advice of her cousin Mordecai, keeps her true origin a secret: “Esther would not reveal her people or her birth.” Haman, who hates Mordecai, convinces the King to issue a decree demanding the genocide of the Jews. Esther, at an opportune moment, reveals her Jewishness to the king, and Haman is hanged.

The Merchant of Venice also centers on a heroine, Portia, who disguises herself. Shylock the Jew lends money to the Christian Antonio, who has never made his anti-Semitism a secret. Shylock therefore stresses that if the loan cannot be repaid, he will be entitled to take a pound of Antonio’s flesh. When Antonio’s ships, the source of his funds, are lost at sea, Shylock takes him to court.

Portia, in love with Antonio’s friend, dons the garb of a male lawyer. She debates with Shylock on his insistence that the letter of the law be followed. When he refuses to relent, she utilizes the very same law against him: Shylock must indeed take a pound of Antonio’s flesh, but their contract does not allow

Shylock to spill a drop of Antonio’s blood. Portia has cornered Shylock: His insistence on enforcing the deal means he will have to give up his wealth and be condemned for conspiring against a Christian. The only way for him to avoid these dual fates is to convert to Christianity to save himself.

Both *Merchant* and *Esther* are thus tales of identity, and each features an astonishing line about Jewish identity itself. In *Esther*, the extraordinary phrase appears toward the beginning of the book: “There was a Jew, in the capital of Shushan, and his name was Mordecai.” The modern reader breezes past these words, but the ancient one would have known how shocking they are. For Mordecai was not a Jewish name, nor was Esther. Each is derived from the appellation of a Babylonian god—Esther comes from “Ishtar,” and Mordecai from “Marduk.”

These names are a sign of the acculturation of the Jews of Persia. Jackie Mason, in a routine mocking American Jews for “trying to out-Gentile the Gentiles” in their choice of names, describes how he once met a Jew named “Crucifix Finkelstein. This is amusing, but the phrase *Mordechai HaYehudi*, Mordecai the Jew, is meant to be similarly contradictory, a pagan version of Crucifix Finkelstein.

The very name demands that we ask: What is Mordecai’s true identity? What is Esther’s? Being forced to answer this question openly sets the stage for Esther to embrace her true self and to

plead for her people: “If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish.” Esther and Mordecai thus emerge as embodiments of the endurance of Jewish identity and solidarity.

Merchant makes the opposite point, in a shocking sentence that is also about Jewish identity. Portia enters the courtroom, disguised as the legal expert, and utters her opening line in her central scene: “Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?”

Of course, the audience knew well who the Jew on the stage was. Harvard’s Marjorie Garber says Shakespeare here is noting the similarities of Shylock and Antonio, since both are motivated by pecuniary concerns. Perhaps. But for the anti-Semitic society for whom *Merchant* was composed, there is another, more obvious explanation: that ideally, there ought to be no Jew at all. Portia’s entire speech in court, one of the most famous in English literature, contrasts justice with mercy and thereby Judaism and Christianity. Shylock the Jew is asked by a woman disguised as a man to be “gentle,” to ignore the letter of the law, and to pay no attention to his “bond.” This is an obvious reference to St. Paul’s description of Christianity replacing the Torah:

But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed... But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the end of the play, this “ideal” is realized. Portia—momentarily neither “male nor female”—brings about a result where the bond is dissolved and Shylock is forced to convert. There is no longer a bond, and there is no longer a Jew. All are one in Christianity. Christian mercy has triumphed over the Jewish letter of the law, resulting in Shakespeare’s “happy” ending: the evisceration of Jewish identity itself.

This plot is, of course a calumny, and a horribly influential one. “Invested with Shakespearean power and, in time, with Shakespearean prestige,” John Gross once wrote, “Shylock the Jewish

villain became part of world mythology. He may not have added anything to existing stereotypes, but as the most famous Jewish character in literature he helped to spread them and to keep them vigorously alive. He belongs, inescapably, to the history of anti-Semitism.”

We should think of Shylock as we celebrate Purim, the holiday of the Book of Esther. Though marked by levity, Purim is deadly serious: We are reminded that Haman exists in every generation and that we Jews dare not ignore our own identity. Strikingly, it was in the Venice of Shakespeare’s time that history records some of the earliest instances of Jews wearing costumes to commemorate Purim. To this day, you will find Jewish children dressed as Gentiles, taking the trappings of another identity but still reading the Book of Esther in Hebrew in the synagogue and distributing Purim gifts to their co-religionists. It is often said that the reason Jews costume themselves on Purim is to remember Esther’s initial hiding of her own identity. The truth is very nearly the opposite. We wear costumes not to disguise our identity, but rather to emphasize that no superficial sartorial selection can alter our identity—for ultimately, the central defining aspect of ourselves will shine through. On Purim, Jews don costumes and ask Portia’s question: Who is the Merchant, and who is the Jew? To this we give a ready answer, as Esther once did: Jews we are, and Jews we still remain.

In 2011, London’s Globe Theatre invited acting troupes from 67 countries to come and perform a Shakespearean play in their respective tongues. Israel’s HaBima actors chose *The Merchant of Venice*. The costumes were Shakespearean, the actors Jews. A play written in Elizabethan English was performed in modern Hebrew, a spoken language resurrected in a miraculous Jewish state. Meanwhile, leading British actors and directors publicly demanded the boycott of the Israeli troupe, even as plays were performed by representatives of despotic tyrannies with nary a murmur from the English cultural elite.

The legacy of Shylock endures; the history of anti-Semitism continues. But much to the consternation of the anti-Semite, Jewish identity lives as well.

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“Rereading Ahasuerus: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty”

BY DR. YISROEL BENPORAT

This article was previously published in The Jewish Journal, March 2, 2023, and adapted from Dr. Benporat’s chapter in the edited volume Esther in America (Maggid Books, 2020).

You’re undoubtedly familiar with the Book of Esther, but you probably haven’t thought much about what happened after the Purim story. For the first time in the history of the Jewish Diaspora, Jews enjoyed an unparalleled degree of political power. In Ezra 7:11-28, King Artaxerxes wrote a letter to Ezra expressing

unprecedented support for the Jews. This obscure passage has remained largely forgotten in the quagmire of biblical chronology. But it served as a surprisingly significant touchstone in debates about the relationship between church and state in colonial America. Most notably, Roger Williams, founder of Rhode

Island, invoked Artaxerxes as a model for religious liberty, challenging the Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts.

Before delving into this history, it's worth taking a closer look at the biblical text. In his letter, Artaxerxes begins, "I hereby issue an order that anyone in my kingdom who is of the people of Israel and its priests and Levites who feels impelled to go to Jerusalem may go with you. For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisers to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care" (7:13-14). He also expresses his support for rebuilding the Holy Temple and authorizes funds to fulfill Ezra's requests. "Whatever is by order of the God of Heaven must be carried out diligently for the House of the God of Heaven, else wrath will come upon the king and his sons" (7:23).

Additionally, Artaxerxes provides a litany of legal protections for the Jewish clergy: "We further advise you that it is not permissible to impose tribute, poll tax, or land tax on any priest, Levite, singer, gatekeeper, temple servant, or other servant of this House of God" (7:24). Finally, and most shockingly, the king grants the Jews an autonomous legal system with the power to enforce capital punishment:

And you, Ezra, by the divine wisdom you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to judge all the people in the province of Beyond the River who know the laws of your God, and to teach those who do not know them. Let anyone who does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king be punished with dispatch, whether by death, corporal punishment, confiscation of possessions, or imprisonment. (7:25-26)

There were essentially two ways of extracting political theory from this passage. Mainstream Puritans, such as theologian John Cotton, argued that Artaxerxes' involvement with Jewish affairs indicated that the state should intersect with the church and advance the cause of religion. Cotton cited the "King of Persia" in Ezra 7:23 to argue that civil law has the authority to "punish spiritual offenses" since they "provoke wrath against a civil state."

In contrast, Roger Williams opposed state compulsion of religious practice, one of the reasons why Massachusetts banished him from the colony in 1636. Williams reinterpreted Artaxerxes to argue for religious liberty. The king's "acts of favor...[did] not amount to a positive command, that any of the Jews should go up to build the Temple, nor that any of them should practice his own worship." Rather, Artaxerxes "freely permits them, and exercises a bounteous assistance to them." Instead of commanding the Jews—or any other community—to follow a particular religion, Artaxerxes merely allowed and assisted them to do so.

Williams also dismissed Artaxerxes as an idolatrous tyrant and likened the state of the Jews to "sheep in the jaws of the lion." Why, then, did Artaxerxes act so kindly to the Jews? Williams pointed to the wrath of God that Artaxerxes invoked in Ezra 7:23. Sometimes, he surmised, "it pleases God to open the hearts of Tyrants greatly to favor and further his people." But did God move Artaxerxes to enact a wider enforcement of religion, "to restrain upon pain of Death all the millions of men under his Dominion from the idolatries of their several and respective

Countries? To constrain them all upon the like penalty to conform to the Worship of the God of Israel?" Surely not. Artaxerxes' order was not state enforcement of religion per se, but rather creating the liberty of political autonomy within a religious community.

But what, you may wonder, does any of this have to do with Esther? The answer, though not suggested by Williams himself, appeared several decades earlier in the work of English explorer Walter Raleigh. In his *History of the World* (1614), Raleigh identified Ahasuerus as the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7: "His favor was exceedingly great to the Jews, as appears by the Histories of Ezra and Nehemiah, which fell in his time.... This was likewise that King Ahasuerus who married Esther." Raleigh's emphasis on the monarch's affinity for Jews paralleled his own tolerant attitude toward other religions.

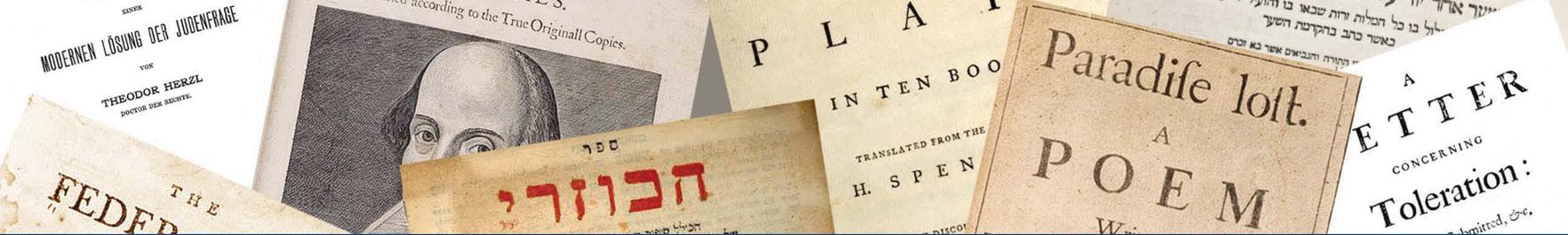
Around a century later, Puritan theologian Cotton Mather surveyed the various scholarly theories about Ahasuerus' identity in his *Biblia Americana* (1693–1728), reaching the same conclusion: "And the extraordinary favors...unto the Jews, beyond any former Kings of Persia, sending first Ezra, and afterwards Nehemiah, for the restoring of their ancient Prosperity, agree well in their having in his bosom such a powerful Advocate as Q. Esther for them." While Mather did not agree with Williams' and Raleigh's approach to religious liberty, and he had little tolerance for real-life Jews, he shared their understanding of Esther's husband.

For early modern readers, who often conflated Artaxerxes with Ahasuerus, a new redemptive perspective emerges on the biblical character. The once-tyrannical king who nearly allowed the annihilation of Jewry becomes a model for benevolent governance and, in a sense, religious liberty. As the Purim story concludes, "For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred" (Esther 10:3). With this extraordinary degree of political influence, the exceedingly pro-Jewish events of Ezra 7 fell into place.

Regardless of the historicity of this early modern reading—most modern scholars identify Ahasuerus as Xerxes I—Artaxerxes' letter and its American afterlife holds great significance. Roger Williams' reading of Ezra 7 may have inspired the lack of religious coercion in colonial Rhode Island. And the arguments of Raleigh and Mather suggest that a king capable of great evil can still have the possibility of redemption.

Jewish tradition, which identifies Artaxerxes as the son of Ahasuerus, states that the Jews reaccepted the Torah during Esther's time (Shabbat 88b). But it is also significant that Artaxerxes gave us the liberty to follow Jewish law, granting a degree of freedom to pursue our faith perhaps never repeated in Jewish history until the modern State of Israel.

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