

From India to Sudan – Holiday of Exile

Abstract: The story of the Book of Esther as the story of the people in exile.

- Examining the reality of exile in the Book
- A comparison of the Persian culture, as reflected in the Book, to the Jewish and Hebrew culture.
- Examining the Book's possible messages with regard to exile.

1. There is one people – Persian society and the Jews

- What characterizes Persian society and the court of King Achashverosh?
- What was the Jews' place in Persian society?
- How were the Jews integrated in it and what did they observe?
- What characteristics of exile exist in the story of the Book of Esther?

2. Dilemmas related to keeping and hiding identity

- Personal and national identity; when we are compelled to hide it and why?
What do we do in such situations
- What we shall observe and how we shall adapt ourselves to the environment?

3. The messages of the Book of Esther

- There are two possible readings of the Book.

There is one people – the Jews in the Kingdom of Persia

Course of the lesson:

Chapter 1

(1) Now it came to pass in the days of Ahashverosh; his is Achashverosh which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces: (2) At that time King Achashverosh reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, (3) and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. (4) For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. (5) When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Shushan. in the enclosed garden of the king's palace. (6) The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. (7) Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. (8) By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished. (9) Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Achashverosh. (10) On the seventh day, when King Achashverosh was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas— to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.



Questions:

1. How does the king mark his greatness?
2. What characterizes the culture of the royal court? What does the palace look like?
What do the people do? What are their customs?
3. What are the important values in this society? To what do they devote their efforts?



Chapter 2

(5) Now there was in the citadel of Sushan a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordechai son of Yair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish (6) who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin King of Judah. (7) Mordechai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordechai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. (8) When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Sushan and put under the care of Hegai. Esther too was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. (9) She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. (10) Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordechai had forbidden her to do so.

Questions:

1. What are Mordechai's origins? Why was it important to note where he came from? Who else was a son of Kish and from the tribe of Benjamin?
2. How many times does the 'exile' appear in this section? Why is there so much repetition?
3. What names do the characters have? What is the etymology of Mordechai? And of Esther? What is Esther's other name? Why is it not used?

Marduk – also referred to as Bel (Akkadian error for [Baal](#), the god in [Canaanite mythology](#) and also mentioned in [Bible](#)), is a god from the [Babylonian mythology](#), head of the Babylonian [Pantheon](#) and god supporting the city of [Babylonia](#).

Ishtar – the Akkadian equivalent of the Sumerian goddess Inanna and the Semitic goddess Astarte, the goddess of fertility, love and sex.

Questions:

1. How does this information cast light on the names Mordechai and Esther? What does is this choice an expression of?
2. Why does Esther hide her identity? What can we learn from this about the state of the Jews in the kingdom?

Chapter 3

(2) All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordechai would not kneel down or pay him honor. (3) Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordechai, Why do you disobey the king's command? (4) Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordechai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. (5) When Haman saw that Mordechai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.

Questions:

1. How was Mordechai different from all the other people in the court?
2. Why is Mordechai so meticulous about this precept in particular? What is the meaning of bowing down?
3. How does Mordechai explain his behavior?
4. In your opinion, was Mordechai's behavior appropriate? Was it worth risking himself and his people just to keep his identity?
5. How do the others react to Mordechai's behavior? Why does it matter to them that Mordechai bow down?

(6) Yet having learned who Mordechai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordechai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordechai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Achashverosh. (7) In the twelfth year of King Achashverosh, in the first month, the month of Nisan; the *pur* (that is, the lot) was cast in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on[a] the twelfth month, the month of Adar. {S}

(8) Then Haman said to King Achashverosh: there is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. (9) If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury. (10) So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. (11) Keep the money, the king said to Haman, and do with the people as you please.

Questions:

1. Why does Haman wish to take his rage out on the whole Jewish people? What makes Mordechai's resistance a national issue?
2. How does Haman convince Achashverosh to destroy the Jews? What are his arguments?
3. From Haman's words, what can we learn about the lives of the Jews in the kingdom of Persia? How and where do they live? What customs and laws do they live by?

Concluding discussion

1. What is the situation and status of the Jews in the kingdom of Achashverosh?
2. In which areas are the Jews integrated into the general society (names, attire, appearance)?
3. In what ways do the Jews keep their identity? (Precept of bowing)
4. What things appear to you as essential, in the sense that you would put yourselves and your surroundings at risk rather than compromise on them?
5. Where in the Book of Esther is the Land of Israel mentioned? In what context? (It is not mentioned, only Jerusalem is mentioned as Mordechai's place of origin.)
6. What characteristics of a diaspora society do the Jews have in the kingdom of Achashverosh?
7. How does this state compare to that of contemporary Jews in the diaspora?

Keeping and hiding identity

Course of the lesson:

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordechai had forbidden her to do so. (Chapter 2, verse 10)

Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordechai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew. (Chapter 3, verse 4)

Mordechai instructs Esther to conceal her identity, but he himself reveals his being a Jew.

Questions:

1. Why does Mordechai himself behave differently than what he instructs Esther?
2. Which way do you think is preferable and when?

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) a Jewish philosopher during the Enlightenment in Germany coined the expression:

Be a Jew in your home, and a man outside it

Accept the manners [customs] and constitution of the land in which you live, but adhere with all your strength to the religion of your fathers.

Bear the brunt of both the best you can!

Questions:

1. How does Mendelssohn recommend solving the problem of the Jews in the diaspora?
2. How does he suggest integrating and preserving Jewish identity?
3. What are the pros and cons of this approach?

Hiding identity – various situations

You are a delegation to youth meetings in Turkey. In light of the tense relations between the countries, you are told not to display your Israeli identity – not to speak Hebrew in public, and not to go out with Israeli inscriptions or symbols. Some delegation members think that under such conditions, the trip should be canceled: “if we are not wanted there then we shouldn’t go”, says Alon.

“But that is precisely the aim of the delegation, to create engagement and discussion”, claimed Ela.

1. What do you think? Should you agree to the condition of hiding your identity or cancel the trip?

Your brother is on a trip abroad, and has met a tourist from Kuwait; they became friends and the Kuwaiti offered him to join him and travel together in his car. Your brother wants to travel with him but is afraid to tell him he’s Israeli, because you would break off their friendship. On the other hand, if he doesn’t tell this would be discovered during the trip, from his possessions on which is written in Hebrew, or from conversation he would hear.

2. What would you advise your brother? Should he hide his identity or tell the friend and risk missing this opportunity?



Chagim Center

Home for the holidays

All of your friends are fans of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer team. You and your whole family are devoted fans of Hapoel Tel Aviv. Your friends are watching a game together; you try not to watch with them, in order not to provoke shouting and insults. Some of your friends don't even know that you are a fan of the rival team. An important game is scheduled between the two teams. One of your friends has an extra ticket to the game, in the Beitar seating.

3. What will you do? Will you go with him? Will you sit in the seating of the rival team? Will you hide your feelings during the game or express them despite the crowd surrounding you?

Your girlfriend Ronit is a religious girl who studies at a secular state high school with you. She has a friend from the other class who is secular too. She is afraid to tell her family that she is going out with Uri who is secular; afraid of her parents' and family's reaction. Her birthday party is drawing near, and Uri expects her to invite him to the party at her home. However, the secret would then be revealed or, alternately, she would have to ask Uri to conceal their relationship. Ronit consults with you what to do.

4. What would you advise her? Should she disclose the matter to her family and risk making them angry and perhaps even forbidding the relationship? Or, should she ask Uri to hide their relationship and risk getting him angry and refusing to go along.



Discussion:

1. When is it worthwhile keeping your identity and when is it a good idea to adapt to your environment?
2. What are the criteria according to which you decide between hiding or disclosing identity?
3. Is there any difference between national identity or other identities such as group affiliation? Sports fans?

Summary

One of the outstanding characteristics of exile is the need to integrate in non-Jewish society, and the dilemma where to maintain identity and where to adapt to the environment. However, this is not the only characteristic of exile. Exile also entails dependence on others and lack of independence. Mordechai and Esther succeeded in maneuvering the government and saving themselves; however, such rescue cannot be ensured when subject to the authority of capricious rulers.

What is the message of the Book of Esther?

Course of the lesson:

Explanation:

The story of the Book of Esther is different from the rest of the Bible in two aspects:

1. The story takes place in exile and not in the Land of Israel nor on the way to it; and the Land of Israel is not mentioned in the story. Only Jerusalem is mentioned in the Book, when describing Mordechai's place of origin.
2. G-d is not mentioned either. Some interpret Mordechai's warning to Esther as a hint to divine providence.

Questions:

1. Why was a book with no mention of the Land of Israel or act of G-d incorporated in the Bible?
2. What messages does the story contain? What is the main message?

Explanation: The story may be read in two different ways:

- Sanctioning the diaspora – since divine providence is everywhere. Even under the most difficult conditions of hiding and threat of annihilation, the Jewish people survive. As long as we remain loyal and sophisticated we can live anywhere and deal with any regime.

- Rejection of the diaspora – the story constitutes a warning as to what could happen to the Jewish people in exile; what could happen if it fails to take its fate in its own hands, and settle in its own land under self rule. In this case, Mordechai and Esther succeeded in warding off disaster by ruses; however, there is no guarantee that such success could be repeated. Within the rescue the lives of the Jews in the kingdom of Persia are not lived to the full, since they cannot express their religion and culture.
- Which of the two above messages seems more appropriate?
- Should we oppose life in the diaspora today as well?
- Is there any special value to life in the Land of Israel and State of Israel, or are we here just because we were born here?
- Should efforts be made to bring the Jews living abroad to Israel? Why? If they enjoy living in prosperity and feel safe there, why should they make *Aliya*?

Bonus...

Min Hamish'ol (From the Path) / Yosef Haim Brenner

Our outcry is one: We, the Jews, have no homeland. And without a country our lives are not worth living... The ghetto – this is a place where basic work is not performed and cannot be performed by us; hence, we are not connected to it, and we cannot be connected to it; hence, it cannot be our homeland, hence we cannot but feel like strangers in it.

And if there is yet hope of the curse of the ghetto ever being lifted, even just a little, and for just a small part of our nation, this will not be possible without a fundamental revolution in our lives, in our character, by creating Jewish work on land that belongs to us...



1. What is a ghetto? What defines it?
2. What causes a feeling of estrangement? Lack of connection?
3. What is the hope of being liberated from the ghetto? Is it enough just to reach the Land of Israel?
4. What revolution of personality (nature) must be made?
5. In your opinion, are we currently in a state of ghetto or liberation? Do we have Jewish labor on land of our own? (Who works in greenhouses and in agriculture in general? Who works in construction in Israel? And in nursing care for the elderly?)

