

## Ten Lessons from the Book of Esther to the Jews of October 8

The Book of Esther—one of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible—if it reflects historical events (a matter still debated among scholars), is set in the 5th century BCE, in the Achaemenid Persian Empire, in what is today Iran. It is perhaps one of the most widely known biblical narratives, retold publicly every year on Purim. And yet, in antiquity, its status was not universally secure.

The Greek Septuagint version, likely adapted for the Jewish community of Alexandria in the 2nd century BCE, adds prayers, speeches, entire sections—and even explicit references to God, who is strikingly absent from the Masoretic text. Among the more than 900 manuscripts discovered at Qumran, Esther is the only biblical book not found there, leading many scholars to suggest that it was not accepted by all Jewish sects in the Second Temple period. Even in rabbinic literature—where its sacred status ultimately stands firm—there are hints that both the sanctity of the book and the elevation of Purim to festival status were debated (see Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 5a, 7b).

Historical chronicle or palace satire, sacred scripture or subversive diaspora novella—with God hidden or inserted—the Book of Esther reached us. And for 2,500 years, it has spoken to Jews in every land. It is a political book. It is more than a tale of the wicked Haman and the righteous Mordechai, the brave Esther and the pliable King Ahasuerus. In Hebrew it is called Megillat Esther—not only “the Scroll of Esther,” but the scroll of revelation: *le-galot* (to reveal) that which is *seter* (hidden).

What follows are ten lessons from Esther—for Jews after October 7. For the Jews of October 8.

### 1. Power Has No Permanent Friends

Ahasuerus is swayed by Haman’s hatred; later he is moved by Esther’s plea and Mordechai’s loyalty. In one moment he authorizes genocide; in another, he empowers Jewish survival. Power is not loyal. It is fluid, transactional, self-interested. Jews of October 8 must remember: today’s ally can become tomorrow’s opportunist. Political affection is not covenantal love—it is strategy. We must not become acolytes or fanatics of whichever politicians, for their own interests, appear today as allies of Israel or of the Jewish people. Interests shift. Caprices intervene. Gratitude is necessary—but naïveté is fatal.

### 2. Everything Can Change in an Instant

Cyrus the Great, predecessor of Ahasuerus, was hailed as a liberator—even called “God’s anointed” in Isaiah (Isaiah 45:1). According to rabbinic tradition, Ahasuerus himself invited the Jews of Shushan to his royal banquet (Esther Rabbah 7:13). The Jews were integrated, respected, secure. And then—an edict. Sealed with the royal signet ring (Esther 3:12). A date set for annihilation. German Jews in the 1930s felt secure. Many American Jews feel secure today. History turns quickly.

Banquets become battlefields. Jews of October 8 must never say to themselves, “This cannot happen to me.” Everything can change in an instant—for ill. And sometimes, for redemption as well.

### **3. The Court Jew and the Necessity of Politics**

“Because Mordechai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus... seeking the good of his people and speaking for the welfare of all his descendants” (Esther 10:3). Politics is complicated. It is imperfect. But someone must do it. Jewish life in the Diaspora cannot rely solely on doctors, lawyers, professors, and philanthropists. We need Jews in positions of political leadership—loyal citizens committed to the common good, yet unafraid to advocate for Jewish security and dignity. Jews of October 8 must not leave their fate to chance—or to heaven alone. We must occupy seats at the tables where decisions are made. We need strong Jewish politicians in every political party, seeking the welfare of their country, of the Jewish community, and of the State of Israel.

### **4. Antisemitism Is a Virus Without a Cure**

Haman is introduced as “the Agagite” (Esther 3:1), evoking Agag, king of Amalek (I Samuel 15). Amalek attacked Israel from behind in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8–16). In Jewish memory, Amalek becomes the archetype of irrational hatred. Antisemitism mutates. It changes language, ideology, costume. It speaks Persian, Greek, Latin, German, Arabic. It becomes theological, racial, political, anti-Zionist. It wears a swastika. It waves different flags. But it does not disappear. Viruses are not eliminated by wishful thinking; they are confronted, mitigated, resisted. Jews of October 8 must refuse both paranoia and denial. Not everyone hates us. But hatred will never fully vanish from our history.

### **5. When to Hide, When to Reveal**

Esther’s Hebrew name is Hadassah (Esther 2:7). “Esther” likely derives from a Persian root related to Ishtar. At Mordechai’s instruction, she conceals her identity (Esther 2:10). Her hiddenness becomes a strategy. Her silence becomes power. Only later does revelation become salvation (Esther 7:3–4). In an age of social media bravado, some condemn Jews who lower their visibility in hostile environments. But Kohelet teaches: “There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Jews of October 8 must be proud always—but prudent when necessary for personal safety and strategic wisdom. There are moments to be Hadassah. There are moments to be Esther.

### **6. From Object to Subject**

At the beginning of the scroll, Jews are objects of royal decrees. Others define their fate. Throughout much of Diaspora history, Jews were subjects of papal bulls, royal charters, expulsions, and conditional toleration. Mordechai changes that. He acts. He organizes. He influences. He writes counter-decrees (Esther 8:8–10). Zionism is the transformation of the Jew from object to subject of history. The State of Israel is the institutionalization of that transformation. Jews of October 8 must

reject historical passivity. We are not a problem to be managed by others; we are a people called to shape our own destiny.

## **7. The Legitimacy of Self-Defense**

“The writing that is written in the king’s name and sealed with the king’s ring may not be revoked” (Esther 8:8). The genocidal decree stands. It cannot be annulled. But a second decree authorizes the Jews “to assemble and defend their lives” (Esther 8:11). The threat is not erased; resistance is legitimized. From Max Nordau’s *Muskeljudentum* to Jabotinsky’s “Iron Wall,” from Hashomer and Bar-Giora to the Haganah and the Israel Defense Forces, modern Jewish thought internalized Esther’s lesson: survival requires strength. Jews of October 8 must remember that hatred will not disappear by decree. We have not asked for the responsibility of self-defense—we have assumed it. Through Israel and through organized communal security across the Diaspora, we defend ourselves and, when necessary, fight back.

## **8. The Danger of Generalization**

Haman declares: “There is a certain people... whose laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not observe the king’s laws” (Esther 3:8). One Jew refuses to bow—and an entire nation is condemned. The text does not explain Mordechai’s motives. Was it theological conviction? Personal pride? Political miscalculation? The rabbis debate. What matters is that individual behavior can have collective consequences. Jews of October 8 must act with integrity—“to find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and man” (Proverbs 3:4). We cannot control hatred, but we must not provide easy pretexts. We must emulate the wise, strategic Mordechai of the palace—subtle, intelligent, working behind the scenes—not a reckless posture that endangers an entire people.

## **9. Memory and Joy**

“Remember what Amalek did to you” (Deuteronomy 25:17). Before Purim we read this passage on Shabbat Zachor. And the scroll commands that these days “should be remembered and observed in every generation” (Esther 9:28). Purim institutionalizes memory—and joy. Mourning is transformed into celebration. Vulnerability becomes ritual resilience. Jews of October 8 must remember October 7. But we must also dance again. To survive is not enough; we must live. We must transform pain into ritual, memory into covenant, so that 2,500 years from now our descendants will still remember—and still celebrate.

## **10. For Such a Time as This**

Mordechai tells Esther: “If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place... And who knows whether it was for such a time as this that you attained royalty?” (Esther 4:14). God is hidden in Esther. No seas split. No plagues fall. Providence works through courage, timing, and human decision. Each of us stands somewhere for a

reason—economic influence, political voice, social reach, intellectual authority. For Jews of October 8, silence is not an option. Perhaps your education, your career, your platform—your very biography—were preparing you for this moment. History does not ask whether we are comfortable. It asks whether we are ready—ready to stand up for our people, our nation, our faith, our community.

## **Conclusion**

The Bible is eternal and sacred not only because of its authorship, but because it serves as a prism through which each generation interprets its reality. According to Martin Buber's reading, Esther reflects a moment of greater spiritual and intellectual maturity in Israel's history. In Genesis and Exodus, the people require constant divine intervention, like a child dependent on its parents. By the 5th century BCE, divine presence was hidden; the people must act without overt miracles, without prophetic thunder, without visible revelation. Esther is a political guide for Jewish life in the Diaspora—its dangers and its opportunities.

Yet today we inhabit a reality different from that of Shushan. Esther unfolds in Persia—modern-day Iran—without a sovereign Jewish state. There is no kingdom of Israel in the narrative, only Diaspora leadership navigating imperial power. Today, we have the State of Israel. Each Purim we read Megillat Esther; each Yom Ha'atzmaut we reread Megillat Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Declaration of Independence. The Talmud teaches that in the days of Purim the Jewish people reaffirmed what had been commanded at Sinai centuries earlier (Shabbat 88a). Nearly eight decades ago, the State of Israel politically reaffirmed that same covenantal responsibility in sovereign form.

To refuse to bow before enemies. To seek strategic alliances without illusion. To avoid blind trust in temporary friendships. To reveal strength through the IDF when necessary and to conceal strategy through intelligence when required. To accept that Israel will always have adversaries—but will never again request permission to defend Jewish life.

The Book of Esther remains a guide. Not only for the Jew of October 8—but for a sovereign Jewish state that has learned, at last, that history does not protect the weak. It tests the prepared. And the modern State of Israel stands as the living answer to that ancient scroll: no longer merely surviving decrees written by others, but writing its own destiny.