

Judaism, Atheism and the Book of Esther

By [Amir Afsai](#)

Megillat Esther recounts the story of the Jews' deliverance from Haman the Agagite, chief minister to Ahasuerus, King of Persia-Media. Haman plots to annihilate the Jews of the kingdom because of a recurring incident in which Mordecai, a Jewish attendant in the King's court, refuses to kneel before Haman as he passes by. Ahasuerus hands Haman the royal seal, whereupon an edict is promulgated throughout the kingdom instructing its subjects to prepare for the Jews' slaughter in eleven months' time. By the third month, however, a series of extraordinary coincidences and ironic reversals of fortune results in Haman's falling victim to his own scheme. The festival of Purim, the narrator reports, was established as a time of feasting and gaiety for the Jews to commemorate these events – "the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy and from mourning into a good day."

Scholars are divided as to the historical authenticity of the story related in Megillat Esther. Some reject it altogether, others consider it an exceedingly embellished story that nonetheless preserves certain elements of truth, and still others maintain that it is historically sound through and through. More recent scholars have taken an interest in the Scroll's unique narrative, stylistic features. Sophisticated plot devices, such as suspense, hyperbole, irony, and humor, place the Scroll in a class of its own as a work of Biblical literature and invite the question of what the context was surrounding its composition. Significant deviations of the Septuagintal version from the Masoretic text have also been a focus of study. Were additions made to the Greek translation to render it more religious, or were portions removed from the Hebrew version to make it less religious? While these dimensions of Megillat Esther are intriguing in their own right, an additional question has stood out in its persistence and in its relative magnitude against all others: Why is God not mentioned in all of the Hebrew Book of Esther? And how came it that a godless book was selected for inclusion in the Jewish canon, especially considering that other and more overtly religious texts were left out?

The traditional Jewish answer to the puzzle of God's absence from the Book of Esther is that He is not absent at all. Not only is He not absent; God's presence is evident at the subtextual level throughout the story. In the first place, there are moments in the text when the narrator alludes – unambiguously, as it were – to God's involvement in the story. Why else would Mordecai defy Haman if not out of reverence to God? Who else could Mordecai be referring to if not God when he assures Esther that "relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place"? What else could be the object of Esther and the Jews of Shushan's fasts but to implore God's mercy? In the second place, the coincidences scattered throughout the story – insignificant at first blush but crucial as the story unfolds – are altogether too improbable to be written off as happenstance. That Queen Vashti should happen to defy the King and that Esther the Jewish orphan should subsequently happen to be appointed queen in her stead – coincidence or providence? That Ahasuerus should happen to suffer from insomnia and hear that Mordecai saved him from a conspiracy just as Haman is on his way to ask the King to have Mordecai hanged – coincidence or providence? That in a book that does not mention God's name, the name of the heroine should so closely resemble the Hebrew word for "hiddenness" – coincidence or providence?

The faithful reader can decide for him- or herself the extent to which God is implicated in these scenes. But even supposing that the author of Megillat Esther did intend for the allusions and coincidences to act as clues to God's involvement in the story, why did he choose such a roundabout manner of suggesting it? What motivation could he have for speaking in riddles and going so far out of his way to conceal God rather than openly meting

out to Him His due credit? In no other Biblical story – *The Song of Songs* and, perhaps, the story of Joseph being notable exceptions – is God not an integral part of the picture; or even if He is not, His influence is still a clear frame around it. So it is that in the Torah proper, God is in direct communication with the protagonists and the reader has unmediated access to His words, while throughout the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* God is more abstract and it is usually only through His impact that His presence can be detected. In Megillat Esther it is neither. God's voice is not heard, nor can His will or influence be ascertained. Why?

A novel approach to this question is offered by Michael V. Fox in his *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2001). Fox takes the position that the author of Megillat Esther is teasing the reader, leading him on – luring him in one direction, only to turn him back disappointed time and again. The reader, Fox proposes, is being forced to contemplate for himself the question of God's presence in the world. It would be perfectly natural were God to be woven into the Scroll's narrative, and indeed there are those who weave God in a priori for so are they compelled by their faith; but in doing so they are missing the author's overarching message. The function of the allusions, coincidences and reversals of fortune is to provoke us to grapple with the question, *Is or isn't God with us?* It is in the subtle insinuation of that question that the genius of Megillat Esther lies.

If Michael V. Fox is correct in his insight, then one way or another, knowingly or through redactor oversight, what is underlyingly a treatise on agnosticism made its way into the Jewish canon sometime early in the first millennium when the Tanakh was finally shut and sealed. One explanation for the Scroll's inclusion is that it may, by the time the *Ketuvim* were being sealed, have become *the* text for celebrating the holiday of Purim, and the Sages merely gave their stamp of approval to a custom that was already in wide practice among Jews. Such a practical rather than religious consideration may also have been behind the Sages' inclusion of another highly unorthodox and godless text, *The Song of Songs* – a book for parts of which “erotic poetry” is an appropriate appellation but whose sacredness was rationalized ex post facto as being an allegory for God's intimate relationship with Israel. An alternative possibility for Megillat Esther's inclusion in the canon is that the Sages so took it for granted that God was in the story that its text-level godlessness was not an issue at all. The faithful, after all, trust that God is operating behind the scenes even in times of war and misery; a fortiori, He is there during times of triumph and jubilation. Finally, a third possibility, though admittedly the least likely, is that the Sages, or a faction among them, were cognizant of the Scroll's heretical ring, and out of identification with it, or tolerance of it, opted to give it a place in the canon.

In the end, it matters less what the background was to Megillat Esther's inclusion in the Tanakh. With the reality being that it is there, what matters is taking stock of the fact that the Tanakh is a far more pluralistic body of literature than its reputation would have it. That a book calling into question God's role in history – potentially even God's existence – is part and parcel of the Jews' legacy undermines the convention that the Orthodox school is the exclusive keeper of the faith and that reformative and skeptical streams are necessarily acting from a place outside the boundaries of Judaism proper. The topographical map of Judaism as projected by the Book is not a homogeneous plain; rather, it is replete with contours and curves, undulating slopes and shifting land shapes. Indeed, it is this diversity and adaptability that has been the secret behind Jewry's survival and vitality over so many and such troubled centuries, and it is what makes life in the modern-day Jewish commonwealth dynamic and exciting.

Since Mishnaic times, the word *epikorus* has been a pejorative tag pinned to the collars of Jews who challenged rabbinical dogma or cultivated a lifestyle at variance with prevailing religious norms. Yet Zionism, the movement for Jewish national rebirth, was spearheaded largely by *epikorsim*, with Chaim Weizmann going so far as to proclaim,

“[T]here is no synagogue in Judaism.” In the 1600s, Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated by the rabbis for his religious skepticism. Today, secular Judaism prides itself in its contribution through him to Western philosophy and to the Enlightenment. In 2005, speaking at a March of the Living ceremony in Auschwitz, former Israeli Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau mentioned atheism alongside cancer, AIDS, violence, crime, terrorism, and the atomic bomb as one of the foremost enemies of humanity. A poll conducted in 2006, however, revealed that nearly a third of Jews in Israel do not believe in God as He is typically defined. The communication breakdown in contemporary Israeli society between the official rabbinical establishment, on the one hand, and secular Jews with a genuine commitment to their heritage on the other, often takes on the semblance of a contra dance where the two sides face each other and occasionally crisscross one the other’s path but seldom meet and lock arms in the middle. It is not at all clear on whose side of the court the author of Megillat Esther would place himself, should he be asked to choose today. Conceivably, he would refrain from deciding at all and prefer instead to answer with ambiguous replies.

Not only secular Jews are made to feel alienated from their roots. Gentiles who identify with the Jewish people, who wish to embrace Jewish history and Jewish values as their own and formally join the Jewish nation as *giyyorim*, are confronted with demands on the part of the rabbinate of which some are in tension with modernity. When Ruth the Moabite tells Naomi, “For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God,” etc., it is not the discrete components of her pledge that are important but the broader message of loyalty and shared destiny that arises therefrom. This should be the chief criterion when weighing the case of a prospective convert, not his or her level of halakhic observance or faith in God. The belief in Jesus as the son of God, or in Muhammad as the seal of the prophets, is incompatible with Judaism, even in its most secular forms; but the lack of belief in God is not. Judaism and agnosticism are not mutually exclusive positions, and Judeoatheism is not an oxymoron. If the Book reflects shades and colors in between the diametric poles of belief and heresy, then so should the People of the Book. Even a position as historically contemptible as atheism has a legitimate place in the collective Jewish experience, for it has a place in our canon.

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