

If You Keep Silent- A Conversation with Esther

**Written by the Rev. Lee Bluemel for Purim
The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
March 12, 2017**

"...if you remain silent at this time... you and your father's household will perish..."

"I will go to the king, contrary to the law, and if I perish, I perish."

-The Book of Esther, 4:14, 16

I was at the coffee shop yesterday waiting in line for some tea, when I heard someone call out "Thank you, Esther!", and the woman behind me in line said, "No problem! You're welcome!"

I turned and saw behind me this striking woman, radiating confidence, calmly commanding all the attention in the room.

I thought to myself, "Could it be?" Then she smiled at me... and I said, "Esther? *Queen* Esther?"

(ESTHER) "Yes? I'm Queen Esther- *THE* Queen Esther. I'm just grabbing a coffee before I head out to another synagogue. Busy time of year for me you know." She winked.

I said,

"Wow- what an honor to meet you! My name is Lee. Say, is there *any* chance you'd have a few minutes to talk? I'm a minister at a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and I'm just learning all about you, and it would be SO helpful if you could answer a few questions before our service tomorrow."

She said sure, that she needed a break and was happy to chat, so I paid for her coffee and a Hammantashen cookie and we found a table and sat down. She said,

(ESTHER) “So, tell me. What would you like to know?”

(Rev. Lee) “Well,” I said, “Do you mind if we start at the very beginning?”

For starters, how did you and Mordecai end up in Persia, in the capital city?

(ESTHER) Our great-grandparents had been exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar II. So Mordecai and I were 4th generation Persian Jews. Mordecai was my cousin- quite a bit older than me- so he raised me after my parents died.

(Have you noticed that a lot of stories for children have orphans as main characters?)

Anyway, I was pretty well assimilated.

I could “pass” for your average Persian.

Mordecai was a little more into the old religious customs...

like that whole wearing sackcloth and ashes business, and wailing out loud, outside the palace gates when he was upset. I almost died when I heard about that. What a scene!

Of course, he had his reasons. Haman *was* going to kill us all. Haman had an irrational, deadly hatred of Jews, and Mordecai lit the fuse when he refused to bow down to him.

(Rev. Lee) *Do you think it was foolish of your cousin to refuse to bow down?*

(ESTHER) Was it foolish? Perhaps.

But Haman might have tried to kill all the Jews no matter *what* Mordecai did.

You see, Haman was a descendent of Agag, King of the Amelkites, who were ancient and bitter enemies of Israel.

His anger went deeper than being mad at Mordecai. That was just the excuse.

I have to say, I respect my cousin.

Everyone else was bowing down to Haman, acting as if he deserved respect,

but meanwhile you could tell he had no moral center.

Sure enough— *he* was the mastermind behind the planned genocide of every Jewish woman, man and child.

So no, I don't think it was foolish of Mordecai to refuse to bow down to him. He was resisting hate the best way he knew how. I think it was brave.

(Rev. Lee) A lot of folks think YOU were brave.

(ESTHER) Yeah, well, a lot of folks didn't expect much of me to begin with! No one expected me to be a Jewish heroine! I mean, let's be honest—I was a beauty queen who married a Gentile. I didn't even let on to anyone that I was Jewish. I was living in a palace! I'd sold out! I was married to a king!

(Rev. Lee) Yeah... about that.

Why did you marry the king in the first place?

(ESTHER) You've got to understand—I lived at another time. My story took place about 400 years before Jesus of Nazareth was even born! The ancient world was sexist. Girls were valued according to their beauty, and some were married off at young ages. Women couldn't make as much money as the men. In some faiths, all the religious leaders were men. Most political power was in the hands of men, and men controlled the military. I mean, it must be so hard for you to imagine, but believe it or not, *these things were true* way back then!

In my world, I had no choice but to obey the king's orders. When he summoned all the young women to the palace, I had to go. My strategy was to manipulate the power structure to my advantage, to gain some power within the existing structure- in order to change it.

If I had not become Queen, I would have been powerless within Persian society.

Not only was I female, but I was a member of an ethnic minority.

If you're a member of a minority group,
you have to figure out how to make your way in society.

You have to figure out how to make your way
when some folks will hate you for no good reason.

Some will ignore you. Some will lie about you.

Some will think that prejudice no longer exists and if you say something, you're just a whiner.

But as a minority, unless you have allies—and even when you do—
you are always at risk for persecution and oppression.

At least that's the way it was way back then.

There was a lot of misinformation out there about us.

Think of some religious minority in your nation...

maybe the Hindus, or Pagans, or Muslims.

If Jews make up about 1.8% of the U.S. population, what do Muslims make up?

About 1% of the U.S. population? And Hindus about .7%?

How much does the average citizen know about those faiths?

If someone wanted to spread rumors about one of them,
maybe saying that they'll only follow their own laws- not the nation's laws-
how easy would it be for that rumor to gain traction?

How easy would it be for ordinary citizens to get suspicious
and start to turn their backs on people? It might be easier than you think.

***(Rev. Lee) Speaking of turning one's back on people,
were you tempted to turn your back on your people?
When Mordecai begged you to talk to the king, were you tempted to keep silent?***

(ESTHER) Yes, of course I was.

Remember, the king was a loose cannon! He was so mercurial.

He didn't have much impulse control. He was unpredictable, impulsive, given to rages.

And he drank too much. Oh my gosh, the drinking and the banquets!

That man spent so much money on banquets!

Do you know there is more talk about banquets in my story than the entire rest of the Bible combined? So that's whom I was dealing with.

Not only that, but he could be pretty foolish.

His advisors would tell him things, and he wouldn't ask questions, or think for himself. So everything depended on what sort of mood he was in.

If he'd been in a bad mood, a lot could have gone differently and my story would have had a bad ending.

I mean, *thank goodness* the king had insomnia that night and decided Mordecai was a good guy, before I had to break the news about the whole Jewish thing!

You've got to understand, I wasn't living in a democracy like you. It's not like we had an independent Congress who would stand up to him, like you do. Nope, whatever the king said, everyone agreed with. If you crossed him, he would try to ruin you. No one opposed him.

So I had to be really smart.

I knew if I didn't figure out the right way to go about all this, I would likely be killed. And a dead Queen can't help anybody.

Since I knew that the King reacted emotionally, not rationally, I knew the best way to appeal to him was through his emotions. I used my beauty to my advantage. I got the King to invite me into his chambers by posing outside the door, where he could see me.

Then I made sure I got him on *my* territory by inviting him to dinner at *my* place, where I plied him with his favorite food and wine, so he was in a generous and happy mood.

Finally, I used Haman's pride and greed against him. Haman was so full of himself that he never suspected I would accuse him of anything. Most people don't invite their enemies to dinner.

Now, it might be hard for *you* to imagine politicians who could be influenced by beauty or fancy dinner parties. It might be hard for you to imagine politicians who could be susceptible to pride or greed, *but back in the old days*, that's what it was like.

(Rev. Lee) So, if you were going to give folks like me advice today, what would it be?

(ESTHER) I'm not sure I have advice, but I did learn a lot about myself.

First, I learned to pay attention.

I was so busy with my life in the palace,
and so sheltered from the reality that most people live with,
that I didn't even know what was going on!
I didn't know about the executive order to kill the Jews
until my cousin let me know about it.
And maybe I wouldn't have acted even then, if it didn't affect me.

I *hope* I would have, but I don't know.

I'm not sure I understood back then how we are all connected.
So these days, I *at least* try to pay attention to the different voices around me.

Second, I learned that I have to fight my tendency to think someone else will take care of things. I never considered myself an activist, or someone who would protest anything, or someone who would lobby the government. But then I realized I *did* have something to say, and I *did* have something to protest about, and if not me, then *who* would do it? And if not now, *when*? So I learned to use my voice and stand up for what I believe in.

Third, I learned that telling my story-
or the stories of people I love- is a way to change minds.

You might be facing some huge existential threat.
In my day, it was genocide. In your day, it might be climate change or nuclear war.
Whatever it is, you have to break it down for people and *make the story personal*.
And if you don't know anyone personally affected by a problematic executive order,
maybe it's time to go out and meet them.

Finally, I learned that I need to feel supported by other people.
The only way I had the guts to go forward
was because I knew all the Jews in the city were with me.

Well, speaking of Jews,
I have a 3rd and 4th grade class at the synagogue to meet. Thank you for the coffee!

(Rev. Lee) Wait-- just one last thing before you go!

I noticed your story is the only book in the Bible with no mention of God.

What's up with that?

(ESTHER) Ah. Well... You did say you're Unitarian Universalist, right?
Then maybe you'll understand this.

Some people say that the story is all about God acting through me
to accomplish God's purpose.

Other people say the story is all about human courage and solidarity.

I don't know if it matters that much if you put the emphasis on God *or* on humans.
What matters, it seems to me, is that when all seemed lost,
good people banded together and a few of us took great risks
on behalf of the wider community. And things did change.
There was a sudden and unexpected turn of events that allowed life to flourish.

Maybe that's true for the times you live in, too.
You'll have to ask your congregation about it, and let me know."

And then, suddenly, she was heading for the door.
"Thanks Esther!" I called out. She smiled and winked again.

And with that, let the people say, Amen.