

Esther Among the Muggles

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In describing the hero's quest, Joseph Campbell outlines the elements which are woven into the mythic fabric of so many narratives: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (1971, p. 30). This is familiar stuff: the journeys of Odysseus, Luke Skywalker, Moses, and Pinocchio, to name a few seekers, all share some of these elements. So do Queen Esther and Harry Potter.

Both the *Kadosh Barukh Hu* and J. K. Rowling know what makes for a gripping story: take an orphan, afflict him or her with *tsorris*, and watch the true mettle of the hero emerge. The eternally enchanting Book of Esther and books of the Harry Potter saga depend on similar elements to cast their magic spell: questions of parentage, identity, abandonment, separation, initiation, the presence of a mentor/nurturer, and a reconnection to one's people.

Parentage: Harry Potter is thought to be a poor relation by his social-climbing aunt, uncle, and cousin, the dastardly Dursleys; in fact, his parents were matinee idols for the wizard world. Esther is no trailer trash either. We learn in Esther 2: 5 that Cousin Mordecai's kinfolk were carried off into exile from Jerusalem, therefore they are among the nation's elite. We also note that

Mordecai, comes from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that produced the courageous Nahshon. "For this reason, Benjamin the righteous one was granted the privilege of playing host to the Divine presence (i.e., the Sanctuary was built in his territory, as it is stated (in the Mosaic blessing, Deut. 33:12), 'and He dwelleth between his shoulders'." (Talmud Sotah 36b) In the recitation of Mordecai and Esther's genealogy, the name Kish evokes the memory of King Saul's father. Kish, "a Benjaminite, a man of substance..." His son was "an excellent young man, ...a head taller than any of the people" (I Samuel 9:1-2)

True identity is hidden: Both Esther and Harry Potter go undercover. Esther becomes a mole in Ahasuerus's court. *K'shima, ken hi*: "Esther" means the hidden one. Harry Potter doesn't know his identity until he is told that his parents were famous wizards.

Abandonment: Esther and Harry are orphans. (Please refer to Jacques Lacan's seminal essay on this theme, *Les Narratifs d'Abandonment: Superman et L'Orpheline Annie*.)

Separation: In order to fulfill their destiny, each of our heroes has to undergo a separation. Esther, like Moses, has to spend time in the palace among foreigners. Being an outsider allows the hero to see more clearly where his or her allegiance lies. Harry's separation is in reverse: he must be separated from the Muggle world at Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in order to find himself.

Initiation: While Esther must summon up the courage to face the imperious King and the conniving Haman, Harry too is beset with tests: passing exams, ducking his nemeses, Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape, winning at Quidditch, and fighting for his life against the demonic forces marshaled by Lord Voldemort.

Mentor/Nurturer: Heroes of myth are blessed with mentors who protect them along their journey. Harry is fortunate to have many: Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black, and Hagrid the Groundskeeper. Esther has Mordecai, who really extends himself for his ward. "R. Yudan said: At one time Mordecai went around among all the nursing women, but just then he could not find one for (the infant) Esther. So he himself gave her suck, for as R. Berekhiah and R. Abbahu declared in the name of R. Eliezer, milk came to him and he was able to give her suck. When R. Abbahu cited this tradition before an assembly, the assembly laughed derisively at what he had to say. But he asked: 'Does not a Mishnah affirm this?' R. Simeon ben Eleazar says: Milk of a male is ritually clean. Makhshirin 6:7 (Genesis R. 30:8) 'Nuff said.

Abandonment, Initiation, and Reconnection: Harry is constantly confronted with flashes of memory of his dead parents. I have it on good authority that after the seventh book, one for each year of boarding school, there will be an apocalyptic battle [see Esther 9] culminating in an otherworldly moment when Harry finally reunites with them. We the readers know from the very first chapter that Harry is the archetype of the "lowly-shepherd-learns-he-

is-a-king's-son. Esther's decision to "join the shepherds" is more reluctant.

Finally embracing her destiny, Esther's reconnection to her people is poignantly rendered by the rabbis:

"O Lord God of Israel who are Ruler from of old and did create the world, help now Your handmaid who has been left an orphan without father or mother, and is like a poor woman begging from house to house. So I pray for Your mercy from one window to another in the palace of Ahasuerus. And now, O Lord, grant success to Your humble handmaid here and deliver the sheep of Your pasture from these enemies who have risen against us, for nothing can hinder You from saving, whether with many or with few. And please, father of orphans, stand at the right hand of this orphan who trusts in Your lovingkindness, and make this man (Haman) mercifully disposed towards me, for I am afraid of him, and cast him down before me, for You bring low the proud." (Esther R. 8:6)

The Book of Esther has all the elements of a great spell-binder (with apologies to H. P.): It is a *bildungsroman* crossed with the "Perils of Pauline," a gripping tale with the unbeatable combination of rich characters and a spectacular setting, a palace described in detail which seems more akin to Homeric epics than in the spare prose of *Tanakh*. Like Harry Potter, Esther's story has clear demarcations between the good guys and the bad guys, the stuff of myth and imagination, affording welcome relief to us who live our lives in the long shadow of ambiguity. (Campbell, J. [1971]. *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. NY: Meridian.)