

Handout

Historical Context and Excerpts from the Purim Story

Cast of Characters for These Selections from the Book of Esther

- Hatach – a servant who can act as a go-between for Mordecai and Esther.
- Mordecai – Esther’s cousin or uncle, raising her; Jewish minority in non-Jewish Persian majority.
- Esther – given name: Hadassah. Jewish. Chosen from among a harem, or group of women in the king’s court, to be his queen. No one is allowed to approach the king without being summoned, and Esther is no exception.
- King Achashverosh – non-Jewish Persian king.

Historical Context for the Purim Story

While there are differing views on the origins of the Purim story, Jews had been living in Persia (modern-day Iran) since the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the first temple there in 586 BCE. Even before the Babylonian conquest of Judea, Jews were captured and brought to Persia. The number of Jews in Persia increased during the fifth century as they endured a series of expulsions from Judea (the southern kingdom in the land of Israel). Around 537 BCE, some Jews were allowed back to Judea under the Persian king Cyrus, but many remained in Persia because the king granted Jews religious freedom. The events of Purim were said to have taken place between 400 and 500 BCE, which places Esther’s family in Persia for a few hundred years.¹

In this selection, we are zooming in on one piece of the story to identify where we see the theme of blending in and standing out.

¹ Rabbi Ronald H. Isaacs, “[The History of Purim](#),” My Jewish Learning website, excerpted at source with permission from *Every Person’s Guide to Purim* (Jason Aronson, Inc.).

Excerpts for Text Study

Blending In:

Up until now in our Purim story:

Esther, a Jewish woman, earns her place as queen of Persia, having taken the advice of her cousin Mordecai. At the same time, Haman, an advisor to King Achashverosh, has written an edict plotting the Jews' destruction. Per Mordecai's instruction, Esther has kept her Jewish identity hidden until now. However, Mordecai has hope that Esther's voice could save the Jewish people of Persia, and he passes word through a servant, Hatach, to Esther, who is kept away from the public in the palace.

"[Mordecai] bade [Hatach] to inform Esther of the edict, and charge her to go to the king and plead with him to save her people.

When Hatach came and delivered Mordecai's message to Esther, Esther told Hatach to take back to Mordecai the following reply:

'All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.'

When Mordecai was told what Esther had said,

Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: 'Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace.

On the contrary, *if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish.* And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" ([Esther 4:8-13](#)).

Esther decides that Mordecai is right and that whether or not she keeps her silence, she too will die on the day the edict has stated that the massacre would take place. Esther

appeals to the king's affinity for lavishness and feasting by hosting parties until he grants her permission to speak.

Standing Out:

"Queen Esther [said to the King]: 'If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request.

For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. *Had we only been sold as [servants], I would have kept silent; for [if we were not condemned to die], it is not worthy of the king's trouble"* ([Esther 7:3-4](#)).

The Purim story ends with the King having granted Esther's wish to save the Jewish people in Persia, and the victorious event is a celebrated holiday.