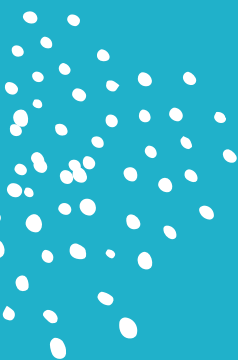




BOOK OF ESTHER: THE POWER OF FAMILY IN OUR LIVES

A Second Nurture Resource for Purim in the Classroom



I. Introduction

Consider the importance of preceding generations in Jewish life and texts (it's why we are called to the Torah with our parents' names). We honor the impact of one generation on another, leading to us today, and our children in the future. This impact comes from genetic heredity and also from relationships, life exposure and experience. We all have them all, in some form, but for some of us each influence stems from different sources. This is true in adoption. This is true of Esther.

Even though Mordecai was likely (although not definitely) biologically related to his forebears, he is still described by the rabbis with characteristics developed in relationship, not necessarily genetically inherited.

Esther, who is adopted by Mordecai, is disconnected from her biological family, and may not even know who they were. Yet she becomes a strong self-assured woman through her relationship with her father, as well as decidedly influential on their future generations—on all of us here!

You may choose to invite any students who are adopted or related to adopted people feel free to share that as they wish.

Inform students that this is our first introduction to Mordecai.

II. Texts and Discussion

Part A: Introductions to Mordecai and Esther:

Where and Who They Come from: What's Known, What's Unknown, What Matters—and Why

Esther 2:5-7:

(ה) איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי בן יאיר בן שמעי בן קיש איש ימיני (ו) אשר הגלה מירושלים עם הגלה אשר (הגלתה עם יכניה מלך יהודה אשר הגלה נבוכדנאצר מלך בבל (ז) ויהי אמן את הדסה— היא אסתר— בת דדו כי אין לה אב ואם : והנערה יפת תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת

(5) There was a Jew in Shushan the capital by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. (6) [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. (7) He adopted Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.



Look at Verses 5-6:

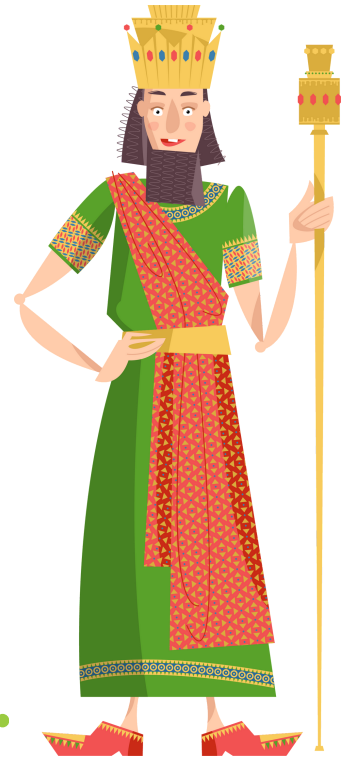
Why do you think Mordecai is introduced along with three earlier generations?

In this one pasuk (sentence), it says that Mordecai is from the Tribe of Judah, “a Jew” (אִשְׂרָאֵלִי) and from the Tribe of Benjamin, “a Benjaminite” (בִּנְיָמִינִי). What are some ways in which those can both be true?

- Who is your family and how did you come to be?
 - What impact do past generations have on your family and you?
 - Do you have multiple families/family histories?
 - (Adoption, blended families, etc.)

The text tells us names of Mordecai’s forebears and that they had been exiled.

- How does family help during traumatic times?
- How does family help as we heal after hard and painful things happen?



Look at Verse 7:

Esther is kept shrouded in mystery.

(Nothing about Esther’s first family is written other than one hint.)

Why isn’t her biological family’s lineage in the text?

- Is it known to Esther and/or Mordecai, but just not the reader?
- If so, why would it be known, but not recorded?

If Mordecai doesn’t know about Esther’s background:

- Why doesn’t he know?
 - How does information get lost sometimes?
- Is he curious? Does he have questions?

If Mordecai knows about Esther’s background:

- Does he keep them secret?
 - If so,
 - Why?
 - What does that imply about the experience?
- If he is open with Esther about her background:
 - If so,
 - What might be important about sharing that background?
 - What might be hard?
 - What might be beautiful?

Does Esther have curiosity about her own past?

- If so,
 - Does she ask Mordecai to tell her what he knows?
 - Why or why not?

Do you wonder about Esther’s past?

- If so, are you hesitant to ask?
 - Why or why not?
- Would your answer be different if Esther were here in the room?
 - Why or why not?



Part B. What Formed Mordecai from His Past?

The scholars of the Talmud look at the information given about Mordecai and use it to explore the power and influence of parents and lineage on who we become. They emphasize learned qualities and characteristics over biologically inherited ones. We can explore with our students how our relationships with our parents/ grandparents/others have shaped us, with an openness to how biology imbues us—whether that lineage is from our “primary” family or from a different biological lineage that could be known or unknown.



Talmud Bavli, Megillah 12b:

מאי קאמר אי ליחוסא קאתי ליחוסיה ואזיל עד בנימין אלא מאי שנא הני תנא כולן על שמו נקראו בן יאיר בן שהאיר עיניהם של ישראל בתפלתו בן שמעי בן ששמע אל תפלתו בן קיש שהקיש על שערי רחמים ונפתחו לו

The Gemara asks: What is it conveying in the verse by saying the names of Mordecai’s ancestors? If the verse in fact comes to trace his ancestry, it should continue tracing his lineage back all the way to Benjamin, the founder of his tribe. Rather, what is different about these names that they deserve special mention? The Gemara answers: A Sage taught the following baraita: All of them are names by which Mordecai was called. He was called “the son of Jair” because he was the son who enlightened [heir] the eyes of all of the Jewish people with his prayers; “the son of Shimei” because he was the son whom God heard [shama] his prayers; “the son of Kish” because he knocked [hikish] on the gates of mercy and they were opened to him.



According to this text, what kinds of traits did Mordecai derive?

- How do you think he came to share those family characteristics?
- How might that be similar to or differ from physical traits like coloring or height?
- Why do you think the rabbis talk about the human qualities—and not the physical characteristics—Mordecai received from his father, grandfather and great-grandfather?

(Not to mention—and not mentioned!—the women who were important in each generation.)

Are there characteristics that parents seek to imbue in their children?

- How do parents decide what those are?
- How might they cultivate those traits?
- What happens in your family that gives you your values and character?
- Are human qualities passed down through DNA or through relationship? Or both?



Part C. Esther's Influences from Her Past and Her Present —and How She Shapes the Future

Esther was a blend of influences—that we know about through knowing her and her adoptive family, into which we have much more insight. We also see how Esther became a hero of her people—a people she may or may not have been born into—and how she is meaningfully recorded into her people's history.



Esther 2:15:

ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראייה

“And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all those who looked upon her.”

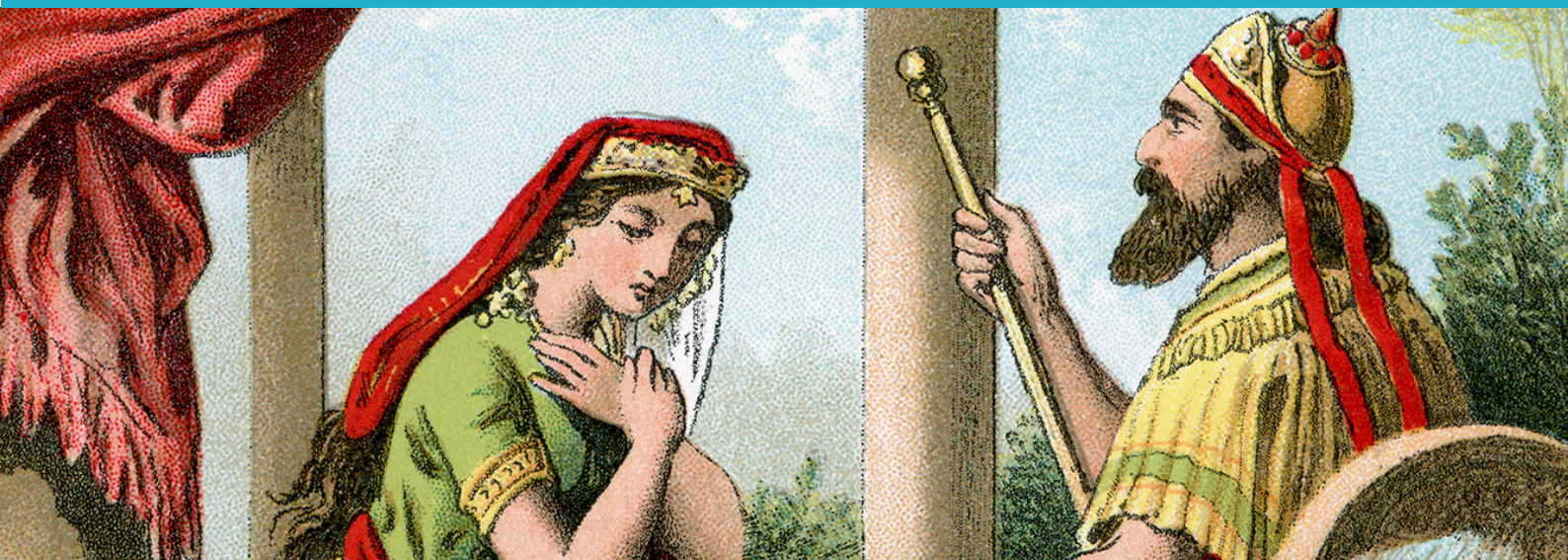
The scholars of the Talmud (B. Talmud, Megillah 13a) interpret that verse:

ותהי אסתר נשאת חן אר"א מלמד שלכל אחד ואחד נדמתה לו כאומתו

Rabbi Elazar said: This teaches that she appeared to each and every one as if she were a member of his own nation, and therefore she obtained favor in the eyes of all. To which Rashi adds: “Those who saw Esther would say out loud, ‘She is one of ours.’”

The rabbis teach that Esther has many facets of herself and can draw on her various aspects and strengths as she desires.

- People who were adopted hold two lineages at the same time and can take after both.
 - Do you think sometimes multiple identities are hard to hold?
 - How do you think the challenges might hold us back?
 - How do you think the challenges might help us grow?
 - Do you think being adopted helped give Esther such a textured character?
 - How?
 - Esther could connect to anyone yet—the lowest and the highest—also had a solid sense of her core self.
- Could Esther have used her ability to find elicit a sense of belonging anywhere to blend into Persian royalty and disassociate from her Jewishness?
- If so, why didn't she?



Esther was a very special person because of all the forces that combined to shape her. She was at once complex and had a core moral self, claiming her full integrated self.

- For example, Esther was a Jew and the Queen of Persia at the same time.
 - Why does she hold all of herself, even if that means facing danger?
 - Is it possible to deny part of yourself?
 - If so, what might you lose?
 - What might you gain?

The rabbis teach that Esther has many facets of herself and can draw on her various aspects and strengths as she desires.

- Esther became the master of her own story, growing into such a special person by integrating all that comprised her.
 - Was that a long process?
 - Is there ever an end to that kind of growth?
- Can a person grow into themselves alone?
 - If we need other people, how do they help us?
 - What helps you to grow?
 - What helps you when there have been big changes in your life?
- Do things sometimes feel unspeakable?
 - If so, how do we make the unspeakable speakable?
 - How does speaking, conversation and growing our stories in relationship—especially with a parent—help us to grow?
- The Book of Esther is a story:
 - How does story-telling help us grow and gain self-awareness?
 - There are stories in which one person shares and another person listens.
 - How might that help us grow?
 - There are stories that are told, even created, in relationship?
 - What's an example of this between family members?
 - How might these help us grow?

Our community can be a place in which fostering and adoption are a norm. This means integrating foster care and adoption, and their subtexts, into the classroom so that our children who were adopted see themselves and their experiences reflected in what it means to be Jewish—that they are not grafted onto the Etz Hayyim, but from its roots.



- Our community can be a place in which fostering and adoption are a norm. Whether you want to foster, adopt, or be part of our community support system, there is a role for you.
- Families are supported before, during, and after the licensing and adoption processes
- Foster and adopted children have peers in our community with similar backgrounds
- The values of foster and adoption are integrated into our community culture
- Our whole community wraps around the families in support as they become foster and adoptive parents
- We will partner with the best and most well-aligned local social service partners
- We are all enriched—both by our new, young members and our growing capacity as a synagogue to support our foster and adoptive families



Contact: Talia Green, Director of Programs

Info@2Nurture.org | 323-377-7223

www.2Nurture.org