**A Summary of the Book of Esther**

The Book of Esther opens with a description of an enormous 180-day party thrown by King Xerxes (Achashverosh

As the days of feasting draw to a close, he summons his wife, Vashti, to show off her beauty. But Vashti refuses to come and the king, following his ministers’ advice, has her banished.

As time passes, Xerxes the ministers propose that he find a new queen via an elaborate beauty contest of all the kingdom’s beautiful maidens. From all over the 127 provinces, beautiful women are brought to the palace for the king to select his new queen.

In Shushan, the capital city, lives a beautiful Jewess named Esther (also called Hadassah). She is an orphan who was raised by her cousin, Mordecai, one of the leaders of the Jewish people in exile. When they come to take her to the palace, Mordecai, insightfully instructs her not to reveal that she is a Jewess or who her family is.

Esther is deemed the fairest of them all. “The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she carried charm and favor before him more than all the other virgins, so he placed the royal crown on her head, and made her queen in place of Vashti”(Esther 2:17).

While Mordecai does not reveal his relationship to the new queen, he frequents the palace gates to hear news of Esther’s wellbeing. One day he overhears two men plotting to murder the king and he quickly sends word to Esther, who reveals the plot to the king in the name of Mordecai. The plotters are caught and executed, and Mordecai ‘s name and deed are written in the king’s Book of Chronicles.

In the meantime, Xerxes appoints Haman the Agagite as Prime Minister (the king’s second in command) and issues a decree that all should bow to him. Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman, as he will bow only to his God.

Mordechai’s refusal infuriates Haman. Already driven by his of the Jewish people, Haman goes to King Xerxes and asks for permission to destroy the Jews. He presents the issue to the king as a matter of loyalty, saying “There is a certain people, scattered and spread out among the peoples in all the states of your kingdom, their laws are different from other peoples and they do not observe the king’s laws, so it is not worth it for the king to leave them alive” (Esther 3:8). They might after all plot to overthrow the king.

The king agrees and issues an edict to all 127 provinces saying that on the 13th of Adar, the Jews in all the provinces are to be exterminated and their property kept as plunder.

Upon hearing this vile edict, Mordecai dons sackcloth and ashes. He quickly sends word to Esther that she must go to the king and stop this horrible decree from becoming reality. Esther, however, is afraid to approach the king. It is known that anyone who approaches the king without being summoned faces the chance of death. But Mordecai sees the bigger picture and tells Esther “Do not imagine that [you can] save yourself in the king’s palace from the fate of all the Jews. For if you indeed keep silent at this time, relief and salvation will come to the Jews from another source, and you and your father’s household will perish. And who knows that but for a time like this you are in a royal position?!”(Esther 4:13-14) Summoning all of her courage, Esther agrees to go to the king but she first asks Mordecai to request all the Jews to fast for three days and repent for their own sins while praying for the heavenly decree against them to be reversed.

With great trepidation and dressed in her most beautiful robes, Esther approaches King Xerxes. As she walks towards his throne she prays that God has taken into account the three days of fasting and repentance and has nullified His decree against the Jews.

Seeing the beautiful queen, the king holds out his golden scepter, a sign that she is welcome in his court, and offers to grant her any request. Modestly, Esther requests only that the King and his Prime Minister Haman join her for a private feast. Pleased at her minimal request, which shows him that she was a wise choice as queen, the King agrees. Haman is summoned and the three dine together. At the end of the feast, the king once again tells her to ask whatever she would of him and she only requests that the king and Haman join her for a second feast on the following day.

After the private feast, Haman sets out for his home well pleased with the great favor shown to him by the queen. On his way, however, he passes Mordecai, who once again refuses to bow, reigniting Haman’s fury. By the time Haman reaches his home, he is crazed with anger at Mordechai’s refusal to bow – after all, he is Haman, second to the king and so beloved even by the queen!

He tells his wife, Zeresh, and his gathered friends “Even Queen Esther did not bring anyone else with the king except me, to the feast she prepared, and tomorrow as well, I am invited to her feast with the king. All this is worth nothing to me, every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate!”(Esther 5:12-13) . Zeresh, who equals her husband in wickedness, suggests that Haman immediately build a gallows on which to hang Mordechai personally. This Haman does, with the assistance of his ten sons.

That night, King Xerxes is unable to sleep. After tossing and turning, he calls for his ministers to bring him the Book of Chronicles and read it to him. The section is read that recalls the great service rendered to him by Mordecai for uncovering the plot on the king’s life and Xerxes realizes that he has never rewarded Mordecai.

Just as the king is deciding how to best reward a man who has saved his life, Haman enters. He has come, after building the gallows, to ask the king for permission to hang Mordecai. Before he can speak, however, the king asks his opinion on how the king can best honor a most loyal subject. Thinking that the king is referring to him, Haman suggests that the king dress the subject in the king’s finest robes and have him led around town on the king’s steed. Pleased with the suggestion, he orders Haman to dress Mordecai in the finest royal robes and to lead him around Shushan on his best stallion.

After returning home feeling thoroughly humiliated, Haman is summoned to the palace to dine with the King and Queen. As the banquet comes to a close, Esther tells the king that someone seeks her death and the death of her people. Outraged, the king demands to know who this man is. Esther reveals her identity as a Jew and identifies Haman as the archenemy. Overcome by anger, the king went out to “the garden orchard, while Haman stood up to plead for his life from Queen Esther…The king then returned from the garden orchard to the wine feast chamber, [just as] Haman was falling on the couch on which Esther was lying. The king said, “Does he also intend to assault the queen in my presence here in the palace?!'” (Esther 7:7-8) The king will not be placated, and Haman is hanged from the very gallows that he built for Mordecai.

Xerxes now sees the damage that his late Prime Minister has caused and appoints Mordecai as his new Prime Minister. The very first edict that Mordecai and Esther issue grants the Jews the right to defend themselves against those who try to harm them.

When the 13th of Adar arrives, the Jews successfully defeat their enemies throughout the provinces, although in Shushan the battle continues throughout the day of the 14th of Adar. The ten sons of Haman are killed and their bodies are hanged publicly. When their enemies are vanquished, the Jews celebrate their survival with great feasts, thus the 14th (outside of Shushan) and the 15th are the days for celebrating Purim.

Mordecai the Jew was King Xerxes viceroy, the leader of the Jews, and accepted by most of his brethren, promoting his people’s welfare and preaching peace for all their descendants” (Esther 10).

Important Characters in the Book of Esther

Interesting facts:

Mordecai: A descendant of King Saul (from the tribe of Benjamin), was a prophet and a member of the Sanhedrin (the supreme court) in Jerusalem before the exile. He was considered one of the greatest Torah leaders of his generation and the Jews in exile looked to him for guidance.

Esther: Esther was a prophetess who possessed exceptional beauty and modesty. Esther was actually her Persian name, her Hebrew name was Hadassah, which means myrtle branch. She lived in the palace of the king without revealing her Jewish identity, which is alluded to by her Persian name

Haman: Haman is introduced as an Agagite, referring to his lineage as a descendant of Agag. Agag was the last king of Amalek, the national archenemy of the Jewish people. While the Amalekite nation was destroyed by King Saul (Samuel I), Saul disobeyed God’s commandment and had mercy on Agag, allowing him to live. When the prophet Samuel heard of this he was furious and killed Agag himself, but the damage was already done, for Agag had enough time to sow the seeds of future generations. For more information on Agag and the Amalekites, click here. Haman was married to Zeresh and they had ten sons and, according to the Midrash, one daughter, as well. His ten sons were hanged and his daughter committed suicide.

Zeresh: The wife of Haman is considered to be equal in wickedness to her husband, and similar in her hatred of the Jews.

Reference:

<https://njop.org/resources/holidays/complete-guide-to-holidays/purim/a-brief-synopsis-of-the-book-of-esther/>