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The Book of Esther and Jewish Politics: Lessons for Today?

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1. Daniel 1: 1-21

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. **2** And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God; and he carried them into the land of Shinar to the house of his god, and the vessels he brought into the treasure-house of his god. **3** And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz his chief officer, that he should bring in certain of the children of Israel, and of the seed royal, and of the nobles, **4** youths in whom was no blemish, but fair to look on, and skilful in all wisdom, and skilful in knowledge, and discerning in thought, and such as had ability to stand in the king's palace; and that he should teach them the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. **5** And the king appointed for them a daily portion of the king's food, and of the wine which he drank, and that they should be nourished three years; that at the end thereof they might stand before the king. **6** Now among these were, of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. **7** And the chief of the officers gave names unto them: unto Daniel he gave the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abed-nego. **8** But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's food, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the officers that he might not defile himself. **9** And God granted Daniel mercy and compassion in the sight of the chief of the officers. **10** And the chief of the officers said unto Daniel: 'I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces sad in comparison with the youths that are of your own age? so would ye endanger my head with the king.' **11** Then said Daniel to the steward, whom the chief of the officers had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: **12** 'Try thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. **13** Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the youths that eat of the king's food; and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.' **14** So he hearkened unto them in this matter, and tried them ten days. **15** And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer, and they were fatter in flesh, than all the youths that did eat of the king's food. **16** So the steward took away their food, and the wine that they should drink, and gave them pulse. **17** Now as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. **18** And at the end of the days which the king had appointed for bringing them in, the chief of the officers brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. **19** And the king spoke with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore stood they before the king. **20** And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his realm. **21** And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.

2. Daniel 3: 1-30

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits; he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. **2** Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent to gather together the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up. **3** Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. **4** And the herald cried aloud: 'To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, **5** that at what time ye hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king hath set up; **6** and whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.' [...] **6** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king: 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer thee in this matter. **17** If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, He will deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and out of thy hand, O king. **18** But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.' **[S]** **19** Then was Nebuchadnezzar filled with fury, and the form of his visage was changed, against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; he spoke, and commanded that they should heat the furnace seven times more than it was wont to be heated. **20** And he commanded certain mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace.[...] **27** And the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, and the king's ministers, being gathered together, saw these men, that the fire had no power upon their bodies, nor was the hair of their head singed, neither were their cloaks changed, nor had the smell of fire passed on them. **28** Nebuchadnezzar spoke and said: 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who hath sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word, and have yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. **29** Therefore I make a decree, that every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill; because there is no other god that is able to deliver after this sort.' **30** Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon.

3. Daniel 6: 1-23

1 And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old. **2** It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty satraps, who should be throughout the whole kingdom; **3** and over them three presidents, of whom Daniel was one; that these

satraps might give account unto them, and that the king should have no damage. **4** Then this Daniel distinguished himself above the presidents and the satraps, because a surpassing spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. **5** Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find occasion against Daniel as touching the kingdom; but they could find no occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. **6** Then said these men: 'We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him in the matter of the law of his God.' **7** Then these presidents and satraps came tumultuously to the king, and said thus unto him: 'King Darius, live for ever! **8** All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the ministers and the governors, have consulted together that the king should establish a statute, and make a strong interdict, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any god or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions.[...] **17** Then the king commanded, and they brought Daniel, and cast him into the den of lions. Now the king spoke and said unto Daniel: 'Thy God whom thou servest continually, He will deliver thee.' **18** And a stone was brought, and laid upon the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet, and with the signet of his lords; that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. **19** Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting; neither were diversions brought before him; and his sleep fled from him. **20** Then the king arose very early in the morning, and went in haste unto the den of lions. **21** And when he came near unto the den to Daniel, he cried with a pained voice; the king spoke and said to Daniel: 'O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?' **22** Then said Daniel unto the king: 'O king, live for ever! **23** My God hath sent His angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me; forasmuch as before Him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.'

4. Antonin Scalia, Holt v. Hobbs 2015

Religious beliefs are categorical. You know, it's "God tells you."

5. Esther 3: 1-9

1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. **2** And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed down, and prostrated themselves before Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not down, nor prostrated himself before him. **3** Then the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai: 'Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?' **4** Now it came to pass, when they spoke daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's words would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew. **5** And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not down, nor prostrated himself before him, then was Haman full of

wrath. **6** But it seemed contemptible in his eyes to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordecai; wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. **7** In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. **8** And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus: 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them. **9** If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.'

6. Esther 2: 7-20

7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter. **8** So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was published, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the castle, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. **9** And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her ointments, with her portions, and the seven maidens, who were meet to be given her out of the king's house; and he advanced her and her maidens to the best place in the house of the women. **10** Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not tell it. [...] **16** So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. **17** And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. **18** Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king. **19** And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, and Mordecai sat in the king's gate-- **20** Esther had not yet made known her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him

7. Esther 4: 7-14, 16

7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and the exact sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them. **8** Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to

show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her; and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him, for her people.[...] **10** Then Esther spoke unto Hathach, and gave him a message unto Mordecai: **11** 'All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live; but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.' **12** And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. **13** Then Mordecai bade them to return answer unto Esther: 'Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. **14** For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish; and who knoweth whether thou art not come to royal estate for such a time as this?' [...]

16 'Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.'

8. Esther 6: 6-10

6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him: 'What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?'--Now Haman said in his heart: 'Whom would the king delight to honour besides myself?'-- **7** And Haman said unto the king: 'For the man whom the king delighteth to honour, **8** let royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and on whose head a crown royal is set; **9** and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man therewith whom the king delighteth to honour, and cause him to ride on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him: Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour.' **10** Then the king said to Haman: 'Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate; let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.'

9. Esther 7: 5-8

5 Then spoke the king Ahasuerus and said unto Esther the queen: 'Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?' **6** And Esther said: 'An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman.' Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. **7** And the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden; but Haman remained to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king. **8** Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the

place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king: 'Will he even force the queen before me in the house?'

10. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, (Harvard UP, 1992, pp. 234-5)

"The breadth of the range of God's exclusive political authority profoundly affects the political power of human institutions... If one accepts the more inclusive definition, then the possibility of involving the community in the realpolitik among the nations of the world vanishes from the theological standpoint. ...

It was the tension between the political ideal of the kingdom of heaven and the realpolitik that brought the Israelites to demand of Samuel...that he give them a king so that they would be like the surrounding nations... And the kings that followed did indeed make treaties again and again with the great powers in the region...The failure of the politics of the prophets is inherent in the uncompromising requirement of God's exclusivity in the political realm, and this results in the nation's repeated need for some mediating agency."

11. Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow* (Yale UP, 2012 p. 100)

"*Do nothing*: this is the prophetic idea of a religiously sanctioned foreign policy, and it constitutes the prophetic challenge to the kings of Israel and Judah, who were as likely as Assyrian kings to rely on the strength of their hands and the wisdom of their counselors. Stay out of international politics, which belongs to God alone and to his instruments—who are also, mysteriously, his enemies. Only he can oppose and overthrow them, in his own good time."

12. Kings (Melachim) 11: 1-10

1 Now king Solomon loved many foreign women, besides the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; **2** of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel: 'Ye shall not go among them, neither shall they come among you; for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods'; Solomon did cleave unto these in love. **3** And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. **4** For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not whole with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. **5** For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the detestation of the Ammonites. **6** And Solomon did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father. **7** Then did Solomon build a high place for Chemosh the detestation of Moab, in the mount that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestation of the children of Ammon. **8** And so did he for all his foreign wives, who offered and sacrificed unto their gods. **9** And the LORD was angry with

Solomon, because his heart was turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared unto him twice, **10** and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he kept not that which the LORD commanded.

13. Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, p. 117

"The people do not save themselves; they are saved by Esther's beauty and courage. Escape from doom is a piece of luck, not likely to be repeated."

14. Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, p. 120

"Seek the peace of the city" is a political maxim, but what it suggests is a very limited political agenda. It doesn't invite the exiles to seek the peace of a certain sort of city, one whose customs and standards might match those of a certain sort of people. No, any city will do, so long as the Hamans of this world are powerless within it and there are Mordechais and Esthers who can intercede for the Jews. What is likely to be best is an imperial and cosmopolitan city, ruled with authority. So far as Babylonia was concerned, the exiles had and could have no larger political ambitions. They hoped for a return to Jerusalem, but Jeremiah's purpose in writing his letter was to persuade them to do nothing more than hope. And once the return had been accomplished—with the help of Cyrus, no Davidic king—those exiles who declined to go back, preferring their Babylonian houses and gardens, had nothing at all to hope for except "peace." Insofar as they could, they obeyed the laws of the foreign kings who were, apparently, chosen by God to rule over them.

15. Benjamin R. Hertzberg, "Minority Politics in the Hebrew Bible" *Polity* 47:3 (July 2015), p. 415

The presence of both books in the canon suggests that the Jews need to remain open to both models of minority politics—in much the same way that the Hebrew Bible does not conclusively prioritize either the Abrahamic or the Mosaic covenants. The Jews at times may need Daniels, who are willing to risk condemnation and punishment by publicly standing up to majority rules and practices, as well as Esthers, who strategically violate aspects of their religious commitments in order to ensure the perpetuation of their people. The difficult question is how to determine the appropriateness of one minority political approach over the other.

It is striking that Daniel and his companions risk only their own lives, while in Esther, the future of the entire Jewish community is at stake. Perhaps, then, the appropriateness of the politics of conviction (versus the politics of compromise and responsibility) depends in part upon the

severity of the political issue in question. Minorities ought not compromise their values unless the stakes are unusually high and include the elimination of a people.

In addition, the canonization of the two texts suggests that it is important for minority groups, when developing and enforcing identity boundaries, not to exclude potential Daniels or Esthers. A group that patrols its membership for orthodoxy too vigorously may stifle the development and affiliation of people like Esther, who can advocate for the minority within the halls of political power. Similarly, a minority group that thinks only instrumentally or strategically about its relationship with majority political power may inadvertently deprive itself of the resources—for example, a widespread sense of solidarity and group pride—that a politics of conviction can supply. In short, it is important for Jews to have both models available for the community to take up.