

Exodus, Esther, and the Maccabees in Conversation: “They Tried to Kill Us; We Survived; Let’s Eat”

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Perfect vacuums don’t exist—even in the deep reaches of space. Texts are not written in a vacuum any more than their authors live hermetically sealed lives apart from society and all other literature. Every text bears the marks of external influence. Certainly texts are shaped by their author’s worldview and personality, but also by other texts. They may bear evidence of influence of another text, allude to another text, or be in conversation with another text, responding to issues it raises.

Contemporary literature is replete with examples of texts whose appreciation depends on the reader’s familiarity with an earlier text. John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (1952) is not fully comprehensible without knowledge of the Eden story in Genesis (chapter 2) that so deeply influenced Steinbeck. *East of Eden* is replete with signs¹ pointing to the biblical account of the first family. In Steinberg’s novel, Eden is transferred to Salinas Valley, in northern California.

Poststructuralist Julie Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” in 1966 to describe an author’s borrowing and transformation of a prior text or a reader’s recognizing or referencing one text while reading another. As David Blumenthal wrote in a review of Daniel Boyarin’s *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, “The Bible, including the Torah, is no exception; hence, it is a severely gapped text—repetitive, self-contradictory, and ambiguous.”² Boyarin

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holds that all midrashic texts are tapestries of conscious and unconscious citations of earlier discourse, both biblical and midrashic.

Deuteronomy, Psalms,³ and Prophets⁴ frequently reference the Exodus. Clearly, the authors knew some form of the story and it informed their thinking and writing. Judy Klitsner, in *Subversive Sequels*,⁵ examines biblical stories that not only reflect earlier stories, but also subtly undermine them.

My purpose is to explore a case of biblical intertextuality, in which the Book of Esther is in conversation with the story of the Exodus, undermining and overturning the fundamental premise of Exodus (chapters 1 through 15) concerning the nature and source of redemption. The Books of the Maccabees enter the conversation, aware of the perspectives of Exodus and Esther. The Sages, inheritors of this lively conversation, then work out a Rabbinic perspective on redemption and Jewish agency in the world.

We are all familiar with the old saw that Jewish holidays have the same theme: "They tried to kill us; we survived; let's eat." This refrain applies to Chanukah, Purim, and Pesach. We celebrate them in that calendric order, but historically, their stories are written in the opposite order. The Book of Exodus was set down in writing by the end of the sixth century B.C.E. The story of the Exodus is our foundational myth, explaining our national origin, purpose, and trajectory as a people. The story of the Exodus informs everything that comes afterward. Its message of redemption becomes the central theme of Jewish prayer and longing, its story the paradigm for future redemption. The author of Esther (written in the fourth or third century B.C.E.) surely knew the story of the Exodus intimately. I hold that the author of the Book of Esther offers a radically different and undermining message concerning redemption, expressing fundamental disagreement with the central message of the Exodus tale. In the fullness of time, the story of Chanukah, as filtered through the apocryphal Books of the Maccabees and the Rabbis' Talmudic perspective, sought to reconcile these antithetical views. My examination will be along the lines of literary motifs and themes, as well as character and plot details.

The Exodus narrative and the Book of Esther have much in common. Both the Exodus and Esther take place in foreign lands. Neither Egypt nor Persia is a location Jews associate with good memories. Exodus, Daniel, and Esther make clear that Egypt and Persia are dangerous places for Jews.⁶ In both locals, the Jews are a

minority, there at the pleasure of a king who is initially benign, but then officially initiates a genocidal plan that terrorizes the Jewish population.⁷ In Exodus we are told that the Jews lived as honored guests, the extended family of Joseph, for many years, until “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8), meaning he did not remember or recognize the good Joseph had done for Egypt. In Esther, the Jews live more or less comfortably in Persia until the king’s prime minister, Haman, turns against them because Mordecai refuses to recognize Haman in the manner Haman demands. Both Pharaoh and Haman argue that the Jews are a dangerous cancer in the midst of the body politic, a fifth column that cannot be trusted:

[Pharaoh] said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.” (Exod. 1:9–10)

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them.” (Esther 3:8)

The suggestion in both cases is that given half a chance, the Jews will rebel and overthrow the throne or join those with a similar aim. In Exodus 1:10, Pharaoh explicitly articulates the fear that the Israelites will grow numerous and form a fifth column. Haman (Esther 3:8) hints at the very same thing: These people could turn against us and seize power or minimally side with our enemies. Such a danger must be eradicated; the foreigners that present such a danger must be eliminated. In each case a plan is initiated by royal edict:

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, “When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.” . . . Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.” (Exod. 1:15–16)

On the thirteenth day of the first month . . . The issues were ordered in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet. Accordingly, written instructions were dispatched by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women. (Esther 3:12–13)

Both Pharaoh and King Ahasuerus authorize genocide.⁸ The pharaoh of Egypt commands the midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill all the Hebrew baby boys as soon as they emerge from the womb. King Ahasuerus signs Haman's decree authorizing a far more extensive genocide: the people of Persia are to murder all the Jews—"young and old, children and women"—on the fourteenth of Adar. Esther evokes the genocide of Exodus, taken to a higher level; where the Egyptians seek to kill the baby boys and thereby slow down the birthrate of the Hebrews, and possibly eventually destroy them, the Persian edict seeks to kill the entire population at once. For both communities, the situation is dire.

In both stories, a hero arises from amidst the people. The Jewish identity of both is disguised; both masquerade as royalty. Moses, born to Jochebed and Amram, is secreted for three months and then sent floating down the Nile in a reed basket with no markings to identify him. Under his sister Miriam's watchful eye, he floats into the path of the compassionate daughter of Pharaoh, whom the Rabbis honor with the name Batya ("daughter of God"). Moses is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (Exod. 2:6–10) and raised in the palace of the Pharaoh himself, the very man planning the genocide of Moses and his people, the Hebrews. He is a prince of Egypt, though he is a Hebrew and not an Egyptian. Esther's story has many parallels. Esther is adopted and raised by her uncle Mordecai. She enters the king's palace to participate in a beauty contest, but conceals her Jewish identity at Mordecai's behest. In the harem, preparing for her audience with the king, Hegai, guardian of the women, supervises Esther. Hegai takes a particular liking to Esther and takes exceptionally good care of her (Esther 2:8–9). King Ahasuerus chooses her as his queen, never knowing that she is a Jew. Esther lives in the palace with the very man who set his seal on a decree to annihilate her and her people, the Jews. Esther is the queen of Persia though she is a Jew and not a Persian.⁹

Both Moses, prince of Egypt, and Esther, queen of Persia, become members of the royal family, their Jewish identity a secret.

Each is poised to act on behalf of his or her people. Both express extreme reluctance to assume their roles. Moses protests to God that he lacks both speaking skills and credibility with the people.

But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?" . . . But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoke to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exod. 4:1, 10)

Moses fears failure and the wrath of his people. Esther fears failure and death at the hands of an angry king. Esther protests to Mordecai that she cannot initiate a visit to the king because such an act is against palace protocol and might result in her death (Esther 4:11). God does not permit Moses to escape from his mission, but reassures him that he will enjoy assistance from his brother, Aaron, as well as divine backup. Mordecai merely tells Esther she has no choice: If she doesn't risk her life, she'll surely lose it anyway. There is no divine backup for her: the risk is total, and herein the story of Esther takes its first major departure from the Exodus.

In the Exodus story, Moses is God's mouthpiece, proclaiming to Pharaoh what God instructs him to say. God is the planner. Moses helps to carry out the plan. Esther, however, conceives the scheme to seduce King Ahasuerus in order to save her people. Although Mordecai urges her to act, as God urged Moses, the scheme is hers, and she speaks her own words. She is not a prophet, but she is unquestionably a hero of epic proportion; her ingenuity and courage save the Jews.

In both stories, the enemies of the Jews die in great numbers, yet there are no casualties among the Jews. Exodus reports:

The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horse-men—Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exod. 14:28–29)

We do not know how many Egyptians died that day; Esther, however, explicitly enumerates the Persians who died—again without a single Jew reported being injured:

And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king’s command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power. Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples . . . So the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies. In the fortress of Shushan the Jews killed a total of five hundred men . . . the Jews in Shushan mustered again on the fourteenth day of Adar and slew three hundred men in Shushan, but they did not lay hands on the spoil. The rest of the Jews, those in the king’s provinces, likewise mustered and fought for their lives. They disposed of their enemies, killing seventy-five thousand of their foes; but they did not lay hands on the spoil. (Esther 9:1–2, 5, 15–16)

If we’re keeping a tally, the total is 75,811, including Haman and his ten sons (Esther 9:10–17). It is in this aspect of the stories that we begin to see clearly what separates them: God battles for the Israelites at the Reed Sea, as acknowledged in *Shirat HaYam*, which describes God as a warrior and deliverer.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said:

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;
 Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.
 The Lord is my strength and might;
 He is become my deliverance.
 This is my God and I will enshrine Him;
 The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.
 The Lord, the Warrior—
 Lord is His name!
 Pharaoh’s chariots and his army
 He has cast into the sea;
 And the pick of his officers
 Are drowned in the sea of Reeds. (Exod. 15:1–4)

The powerless Israelites witness God’s might, but do not share in God’s agency or glory. They are the passive recipients of God’s redemptive power.

The Jews of Persia, however, battle for themselves. The text is most explicit on this point:

So the Jews struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies. (Esther 9:5)

The Jews of Persia have will, agency, and power. They do not appeal to God. They neither wait for, nor depend on, God to fight their battle and save them. The Jews of Persia defend themselves, vanquish their enemies, and are their own deliverers.

With so much in common, the stories differ in their most central tenet: the nature of redemption. Who has the power to bring redemption to those who are in grave danger and drastic need? The story of the Exodus sets the baseline, the paradigm: Only God can redeem. God, who is creator and sovereign, is the sole redeemer in the universe. Pharaoh can enslave, but only God can liberate. Pharaoh can instigate genocide, but only God can save the Hebrews. Esther responds to this unilateral claim by asserting that Jews are not only capable of effecting their own salvation, but even more: Ultimately, they are responsible for their own redemption. They cannot rely solely on God. They must act shrewdly and forcefully on their own behalf.¹⁰

For the Exodus, redemption comes by God's hand, according to God's schedule. Israel remains in slavery four centuries¹¹ until God chooses to redeem them and bring them in freedom to Mount Sinai, there to enter into a covenant with God. Israel is entirely passive throughout the redemption and until they reach Mount Sinai. Moses is a mouthpiece and helps organize the people to march out of Egypt at the prescribed hour, but Moses does not bring redemption. Only God does.¹²

In the Book of Esther, in contrast, God is not mentioned. Not once. Mordecai tells Esther she is her people's only hope, and instructs her to go to the king. Esther, recognizing the risk, is frightened, but she overcomes her fear to conceive a clever plan to use her feminine wiles to bewitch the king. Her plan succeeds brilliantly. She secures the king's attention and affection toward the end of entrapping Haman and overturning the decree concerning the Jews. While Esther does not succeed at the latter—because decrees bearing the seal of the king are insoluble—she secures

an additional decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves against attackers, which they do handily.

Both stories recount immense death and disaster. The Ten Plagues wreak havoc on Egypt, the tenth bringing about countless deaths. Pharaoh's horsemen and charioteers drown in the Reed Sea. Moses holds his arm out over the sea (Exod. 14:26) but we are to know that it is primarily God's *yad hagdolah* (great hand) (Exod. 14:31) that ultimately accounts for the deaths of Israel's enemies. The Book of Esther ends with the massacre of Persians who attack their Jewish neighbors. Remarkably, only Persians die in the fierce and bloody hand-to-hand combat—not a single Jew is reported to have been killed. These Jews have the power to defend themselves, not only with their heads (Esther's wits and Mordecai's grit) but also with brute force: their hands brandish the weapons.

What is at stake? Just about everything. What does redemption mean? Do we wait for God to save us? Do we exert our own agency and fight for ourselves? What can and should we expect from God? What should and can we expect of ourselves? Esther offers a corrective to the God-centered redemption of Exodus that envisions the nation entirely passive. The Jewish nation may have arisen from slavery, but Jews are no longer in bondage and possessed of a slave mentality, needing someone else to battle for them. They are clever, they conceive plans on their own, they operate as a unified community,¹³ and they fight their enemies with their own hands.

The dates of Passover and Purim may also provide a clue. Exodus instructs the Hebrew slaves concerning animals they are to slaughter and whose blood will mark the lintels and doorposts of their homes when the tenth plague arrives. The instructions also include an admonition to sacrifice paschal lambs each year in commemoration:

Your lamb shall be without blemish, a yearling male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month [Nisan] and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they are to eat it. They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. (Exod. 12:5–7)

The lambs are sacrificed at the end of the fourteenth day of Nisan, at twilight.¹⁴ The following day, the fifteenth day of Nisan, is the first day of the festival of Passover. Esther tells us that the Jews in the cities of the Provinces fought their enemies on the thirteenth of Adar, and rested and celebrated on the fourteenth day (Esther 9:17). But the Jews of Shushan fought on both the thirteenth and fourteenth and rested and celebrated on the fifteenth (Esther 9:18). Purim is celebrated yearly on the fourteenth of Adar except in walled cities, where it is celebrated on the fifteenth. It is curious that Purim precedes Passover by one month and one day, as if its message of Jewish activism is meant to overshadow the coming festival of Passover, lest Passover deliver a message of utter passivity and inactivity in the face of danger to the community.

The third festival in the “They tried to kill us; we survived; let’s eat” troika is Chanukah. The Maccabean Revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century B.C.E. was an attempt by a segment of the Jewish population to wrest control of the Land of Israel from the Hellenists of Syria who controlled the country, re-establish Jewish sovereignty, and replace the Hellenized priesthood with priests “untainted” by Hellenism. The Maccabees did not wait for God to save them. They initiated a revolt against their Greek overlords. Many who took up the fight took up arms, fled to the hills, and hid in caves and grottoes, engaging in guerilla warfare with the Hellenistic occupiers. The Book of I Maccabees from the Apocrypha tells us that the king’s troops in Jerusalem learned of the revolt and prepared to attack the Jewish rebels on Shabbat:

And they [the king’s officers] said to them, “Enough of this! Come out and do what the king commands, and you will live.” But they said, “We will not come out, nor will we do what the king commands and so profane the Sabbath day.” Then the enemy hastened to attack them. But they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding places, for they said, “Let us all die in our innocence; heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly.” So [the Syrian king’s soldiers] attacked [the Jewish rebels] on the Sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of a thousand people. (I Macc. 2:33–38)

Mattathias’s followers suffered devastating losses because they refused to fight on Shabbat. We are not told, however, that

Mattathias pleaded with God to protect the Jews from their enemies. Rather:

When Mattathias and his friends learned of it, they mourned for them deeply. And each said to his neighbor: "If we all do as our brethren have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth." So they made this decision that day: "Let us fight against every man who comes to attack us on the Sabbath day; let us not all die as our brethren died in their hiding places." (I Macc. 2:39–41)

Mattathias does not look to heaven to fight his battle. His model is more akin to the human-agency model of Esther, rather than the God-centered model of Exodus. The Maccabees arrive at their own decisions and take decisive action; they do not expect miracles from heaven to save them from their enemies, though they will credit heaven after the fact.

Both I Maccabees and II Maccabees strongly hint at this linkage with Purim particularly in connection with Nicanor, the Syrian-Seleucid general who died in the battle of Bet Horon in 161 B.C.E.

Now Nicanor went out from Jerusalem and encamped in Beth-Horon, and the Syrian army joined him. And Judas encamped in Adasa with three thousand men. Then Judas prayed and said, "When the messengers from the king spoke blasphemy, thy angel went forth and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand of the Assyrians. So also crush this army before us today; let the rest learn that Nicanor has spoken wickedly against thy sanctuary, and judge him according to this wickedness." So the armies met in battle on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. The army of Nicanor was crushed, and he himself was the first to fall in the battle. When his army saw that Nicanor had fallen, they threw down their arms and fled. The Jews pursued them a day's journey, from Adasa as far as Gazara, and as they followed kept sounding the battle call on the trumpets. And the men came out of all the villages of Judea round about, and they outflanked the enemy and drove them back to their pursuers, so that they all fell by the sword; not even one of them was left. Then the Jews seized the spoils and the plunder, and they cut off Nicanor's head and the right hand that he had so arrogantly stretched out, and brought them and displayed them just outside Jerusalem. The people rejoiced greatly and celebrated that day as a day of great

gladness. And they decreed that this day should be celebrated each year on the thirteenth day of Adar. (I Macc. 7:39–50)

Nicanor and his men advanced with trumps and battle songs; and Judas and his men met the enemy in battle with invocation to God and prayers. So, fighting with their hands and praying to God in their hearts, they laid low no less than thirty-five thousand men, and were greatly gladdened by God's manifestation . . . And the man who was ever in body and soul the defender of his fellow citizens, the man who maintained his youthful good will toward his countrymen, ordered them to cut off Nicanor's head and arm and carry them to Jerusalem . . . and he cut out the tongue of the ungodly Nicanor and said that he would give it piecemeal to the birds and hang up these rewards of his follow opposite the sanctuary . . . And he hung Nicanor's head from the citadel, a clear and conspicuous sign to every one of the help of the Lord. And they decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—which is called Adar in the Aramaic language—the day before Mordecai's day. (II Macc. 15:25–27, 30, 33, 35–36)

As in the Book of Esther, both accounts in the Books of the Maccabees catalogue the numbers of the enemy who fell in battle. Both accounts record the death and dismemberment of the general Nicanor. I Maccabees claims that Nicanor was the first to fall in battle and that his head was hung out in Jerusalem; we are reminded that Haman was the first enemy of the Jews of Persia to die and his impaled body was hung in Shushan for all to see (Esther 7:9–10). The date recorded in both accounts for the victory is the thirteenth of Adar, just one day before Purim. The author of II Maccabees, putatively Jason of Cyrene, even specifies that it precede "Mordecai's day" by one day (II Macc. 15:36). The people's celebration is accompanied by a decree that this date should be celebrated yearly, much as we find in Esther (9:20–23, 31).

Both I and II Maccabees mention God. In Adasa, Judas prays to God and attributes their victories thus far to God's inspiration. He speaks figuratively of an angel who defeated 185,000 Syrian soldiers, but he does not expect God to fight the battle. He knows that victory depends on the courage and fortitude of his fighters. For the author of II Maccabees it is sufficient to say that Judas invokes

God and prays, without recording the words he uses. For both authors, God is inspiration, not warrior.

With the Books of the Maccabees, we find a balance between the God-centered and God-only redemption of Exodus, and the humanly fought and wrought redemption of Esther. The Rabbis will go further and work out a partnership between God and Israel.

Chanukah and the War of the Maccabees are mentioned only in passing in a few *mishnayot*.¹⁵ Their primary treatment in the Gemara is found in BT *Shabbat* 21b. The discussion begins with the requirement to light lamps and instruction concerning how that obligation should be fulfilled. Here we find a famous disagreement between the schools of Hillel and Shammai concerning counting up or counting down the days, the connection between the lamps and the bullocks sacrificed on Sukkot, and consideration of the danger of placing Chanukah lamps by a window. When the Rabbis finally come to recounting the reason for Chanukah, they tell us only this about its historical underpinnings:

What is the reason for Chanukah? For our Rabbis taught: On the 25th of Kislev begin the days of Chanukah, which are eight, during which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils in it, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they [the Hasmoneans] searched and found only one cruse of oil which possessed the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient oil for only one day's lighting; yet a miracle occurred there and they lit [the lamp] for eight days. The following year these days were appointed a Festival with the recitation of Hallel and thanksgiving. (BT *Shabbat* 21b)

If one presumes that the Rabbis had at their disposal both I and II Maccabees,¹⁶ they may have been walking a fine line between lauding the victory of the Maccabees (as expressed in II Maccabees) and warning against their excesses and abuse of power. One could also argue that the Rabbis' explication of Chanukah derives from their reading of II Maccabees, in particular the second letter in the first chapter:

Those in Jerusalem and those in Judea and the senate and Judas,
To Aristobulus, who is of the family of the anointed priests,
teacher of Ptolemy the king, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting,
and good health.

Having been saved by God out of grave dangers we thank Him greatly for taking our side against the king. For He drove out those who fought against the holy city. For when the leader reached Persia with a force that seemed irresistible, they were cut to pieces in the temple of Nanea by a deception employed by the priests of Nanea. For under pretext of intending to marry her, Antiochus came to the place together with his friends, to secure most of its treasures as a dowry. When the priests of the temple of Nanea had set out the treasures and Antiochus had come with a few men inside the wall of the sacred precinct, they closed the temple as soon as he entered it. Opening the secret door in the ceiling, they threw stones and struck down the leader and his men, and dismembered them and cut off their heads and threw them to the people outside. Blessed in every way be our God, who has brought judgment upon those who have behaved impiously. (II Macc. 1:10–17)

If the account in BT *Shabbat* 21b is influenced by, or modeled on, the second letter (II Macc. 1:10–17), we might conclude that the Rabbis meant to affirm the Maccabees. Yet if they had I Maccabees at their disposal, why did they not include more of the history of the war to evict the Hellenists and the Hellenistic priests? This would have served as a stronger endorsement of the Maccabees and promoted Jewish agency in the world.

Did the Rabbis intend to erase memory of the War of the Maccabees because the facts of history would suggest that God does not fight our wars for redemption and we must fight them ourselves? The emphasis on the “miracle” of the cruse of oil seems to suggest that the miracle is the hand of God. Perhaps the Rabbis seek to eclipse the memory of the war because the Hasmoneans, having claimed to be the true heirs to the Davidic throne and the Priesthood, combined the offices of king and High Priest. They proved themselves as corrupt as their predecessors within only a few generations. It is not necessarily the case that the Rabbis want to suggest that only God fights Israel’s wars, and only God alone and unaided works salvation for Israel. Their treatment of Chanukah might be read as a polemic against the Hasmoneans.¹⁷

In fact, the Babylonian Talmud does not speak in one voice about redemption. A variety of opinions are expressed concerning whether redemption is worked solely by God or not.

The Sages of Babylonia live in *galut* (exile) and yearn for *g'ulah* (redemption). The Talmud records a conversation about the merits and dangers of living in the Land of Israel during the time of the writing of the *Bavli*. We are presented with a teaching that, "One should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a town the majority of whose inhabitant are idolaters, but no one should live outside the Land of Israel, even in a town whose majority are Jews, for whoever lives in the Land of Israel is considered to have a God, while whoever lives outside the Land of Israel is considered as one who has no God" (BT *K'tubot* 110b–111a). This might strike us as a most peculiar thing for Sages living outside the Land of Israel to teach. Not surprisingly, it is not the only opinion expressed:

R. Zeira was evading Rav Yehudah because he [R. Zeira] wanted to go up to the Land of Israel, but Rav Yehudah had expressed [the opinion]: Whoever goes up from Babylon to the Land of Israel transgresses a positive commandment, for it says in Scripture, *They shall be carried to Babylon, and there shall they be, until the day that I remember them, says the Lord* (Jeremiah 27:22). And R. Zeira [how does he explain that text]? That text is written [to refer] to the vessels of service [for the Temple in Jerusalem]. And Rav Yehudah [what is his response]? Another text is written: *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field [that you neither awaken nor stir up love until it please]* (Song of Songs 2:7). [The Rabbis interpret Song of Songs as speaking of the love relationship between God and Israel. Rav Yehudah understands this verse to say that Jews should not attempt to rebuild the Land of Israel, or even move there, until it pleases God to end their Exile in Babylonia.] And R. Zeira [what is his response]? That [Song of Songs 2:7] implies that Israel shall not go up by a wall [i.e., all at the same time, en masse. This, in turn, implies that individuals *may* go up to the Land of Israel]. Rav Yehudah [how does he respond]? [There is] another [instance of] *I adjure you* written in Scripture [he refers to Song of Songs 3:5 and applies it to individuals just as he applied Song of Songs 2:7 to the Jewish people as a whole]. And R. Zeira [how does he respond]? That text is required for [an explanation] like that of R. Yose ben R. Chanina who said: What was the purpose of those three adjurations? [There is a third instance of *I adjure you* in Song of Songs 5:8.] One—that Israel shall not go up like a wall [i.e., en masse, hence leaving open the possibility for individuals to go up to the Land of Israel]. Two—through it the Holy One blessed be God adjured Israel not to rebel against the nations of the world.

Three—through it the Holy One blessed be God adjured the idolaters not to oppress Israel overmuch. (BT *K'tubot* 110b–111a)

R. Zeira, while justifying the decision of an individual to move to the Land of Israel, conveys the teaching of R. Yose b. R. Chanina that God promulgated three rules for Israel in the aftermath of the Destruction of the Second Temple that have come to be understood this way:

1. The people may not move to the Land of Israel as a national movement, but individuals may move there for their individual spiritual fulfillment.
2. Israel is forbidden to rebel against the nations, which means they cannot recapture the Land by force. Rather they must accept their punishment and remain in *galut* until God—and God alone—brings them back to the Land.
3. The nations are forbidden from persecuting Jews excessively.

In light of reading Esther as an intertextual response to the Exodus, R. Yose's formulation sounds like a "throwback" to the earlier model of redemption: redemption comes from God's hand alone, at a time determined by God alone, through a means facilitated by God alone.

Anti-Zionists, and particularly Neturei Karta, hold to R. Yose's rules. Every Shabbat in *Musaf*, when they recite *u'mipnei chatoteinu galinu mei'artzeinu* ("because of our sins we were exiled from our Land"), they understand it to forbid the hastening of the coming of the Messiah. Until God chooses to forgive Israel, Jews must remain in *galut* and are forbidden from actively working toward a third Jewish commonwealth, a goal that will be achieved only by the Messiah in God's time. Therefore, any attempt by Jews to build a Jewish State, or even hasten the coming of the Messiah, is a violation of God's will. Even more, violation of the three rules is tantamount to rebellion against God.

The Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moses Sofer, 1762–1839), ideologue of the Chareidi Movement, expanded this thinking and concretized it as a broad overarching principle of Jewish life. He chose the rallying cry of the Chareidim: *chadash asur min haTorah b'chol makom u'v'chol z'man* ("Anything new is forbidden by Torah in any place and at any time"). Sofer lifted this phrase from

Mishnah Orlah 3:9¹⁸ out of context. The Talmud refers to agricultural laws of the new grain crop and says nothing about new ideas or behaviors, let alone the establishment of a third Jewish commonwealth. Armed with this anti-modernity, anti-change battle cry, and a narrow interpretation of the rules in BT *K'tubot* 111a, the Chatam Sofer fueled Jewish inaction much like that described in Exodus when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt.

The Babylonian Talmud is vast and multi-vocal, and as we might expect, it contains a wide spectrum of views. Torah reports that as the Israelites stood on the shores of the roiling Reed Sea, the Egyptians advanced against them. The Israelites, terrified and sure they would die, said to Moses:

“Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” (Exod. 14:11–12)

Moses responds by telling the people they have nothing to fear. God will save them:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground. And I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them . . . Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exod. 14:15–17, 21–22)

Who parts the Reed Sea? Is it Moses who lifts his rod and holds it out over the water? Or is it God? The text is murky here. We could certainly argue that God wants the people to believe Moses has a hand (literally) in parting the Sea, but that would call into question a traditional interpretation of God’s anger at the incident at Kadesh, where Moses strikes the rock twice (Num. 20:11). One common interpretation holds that God’s anger is provoked

because Moses makes it appear *he* brings forth the water, rather than God.¹⁹

Standing at the shore of the Reed Sea, we are positioned at the threshold of the master narrative's paradigmatic moment of redemption. At this pivotal moment, Torah itself is ambiguous concerning who works the greatest miracle of all, the miracle that once and for all saves the Israelites from the Egyptians. The Rabbis are keenly aware of this ambiguity. Not only do they *not* rush headlong to plug the dike and assure us that it was God alone, and Moses played no significant role in the drama, they pry the hole open further. In BT *Sotah* 36b–37a (echoed in *Sh'mot Rabbah* 21:8) we find a discussion of what happened "behind the scenes" of Torah, just before the waters parted. R. Meir describes the tribes competing with one another to descend into the Sea.²⁰ R. Yehudah disagrees and says that precisely the opposite happened: No tribe wanted to enter the Sea first, so Nachshon ben Amminadab²¹ jumps into the water. The churning waters pull him down and he begins to drown. Presumably, others follow him and are drowning, as well. R. Yehudah continues:

At that time Moses was engaged for a long while in prayer, so the Holy One Blessed be God said to him, "My beloved ones are drowning in the sea and you prolong prayer before Me?!"

Moses replied to God, "Lord of the Universe, what else is there in my power to do?"

God replied to him, *Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm etc.* (Exodus 14:15–16). For that reason Judah was worthy to be made the ruling power in Israel, as it is said: *Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion* (Psalm 114:2). Why did Judah become God's sanctuary and Israel his dominion? *Because the sea saw [him] and fled* (Psalm 114:3). (BT *Sotah* 37a)

The purpose of R. Yehudah's interpretation is to establish the legitimacy of Judah's preeminence among the tribes of Israel. In the course of doing so, however, R. Yehudah renders Moses' role more explicit: Moses asks God what else can he do besides pray, and God tells him precisely what to do, affirming that Moses has power to at least partner with God to split the Reed Sea.

The midrash in BT *Sotah* depicts a partnership between God and humanity. Redemption comes about when we work in concert with the Divine. This seems a fitting place for the conversation to rest.

An examination of literary themes and motifs, as well as character and plot details, in Exodus and the Book of Esther, reveals that the two stories have much in common. So much, in fact, that I would hold that the author of Esther is keenly aware of the Exodus story and attempting to rewrite a portion of its theology: the claim that redemption is entirely dependent upon God and that Israel is the passive beneficiary of God's salvation. In fact, Esther makes a strong case for human action in the absence of God's intervention. Redemption is not restricted to God's domain: The Jewish people are responsible for themselves and to some degree, their fate. It is a radical attempt to subvert the Exodus message about redemption. While it is not surprising that the author of Esther knew the Exodus story, it is significant that Esther is in conversation with Exodus and expresses a starkly and adamantly oppositional view concerning so fundamental an issue.

Exodus and Esther exemplify the two poles of redemption: completely God-dependent and completely independent of God's intervention. The Books of the Maccabees join the conversation by straddling the line: God's power is acknowledged but not relied upon, except in the sense of seeking support and approval from God. Yet God receives credit after the fact.

The Talmudic Sages "reread" the Exodus in midrash and aggadah. The Rabbis, who experience God as more distant than their ancestors, express views that waver between the two poles, but largely seek a comfortable median position: They claim human partnership with God in the redemption from Egypt, but warn against future efforts to hasten the coming of the Messiah. In their account of Chanukah, it is possible that the tale about the cruse of oil is intended to both attribute the victory to God and at the same time signal their approval of the Maccabees' efforts.

In the modern age, the Rabbis' ambivalence has spawned two diametrically opposed views of the Messianic Age. The Chareidim, relying on an interpretation of BT *K'tubot* 110b–111a, conclude that Jews may make no effort whatsoever to promote their own redemption or resurrect the Third Jewish Commonwealth. On the other end, liberal Jews have embraced the notion that Jews can and should enter history as God's partners in bringing redemption

closer and have applied this understanding to peoples and situations outside the Jewish domain.

For most of the Jewish world, our efforts toward redemption, inspired by God's vision, are sacred. God's contributions to our endeavors are divine. The goal is still redemption, but we need not be passive victims of the vicissitudes of life and world events; God grants us agency to forge our own destiny and pursue the future that our tradition tells us is paramount: redemption for ourselves and for the world. "They tried to kill us; we survived; let's eat."

Notes

1. In the sense that Ferdinand de Saussure used the term in his explication of semiotics: words, images, names, etc., that stand for something or evoke another text.
2. David Blumenthal, review of *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, by Daniel Boyarin, *CCAR Journal* (Summer/Fall 1997): 81–83.
3. For example: Pss. 77:16–21, 78:12–16, 105:23–38, 114.
4. For example: Hosea 13:4–6; Isa. 43:16–17, 50:2; Mic. 6:4.
5. Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009).
6. The complex reality of history is likely otherwise. II Kings 25:26 and Jeremiah 43:5–7 note that Judeans took refuge in Egypt following the destruction of Judah in 597 B.C.E. and the ensuing assassination of Gedaliah. The less nuanced stories of Exodus, Daniel, and Esther reflect an ethos that Israelites/Jews are safest in their own land and at risk in foreign lands.
7. Haman conceives, plans, and oversees the implementation of the genocidal plan to kill the Jews of Persia. He convinces the king of its political value and adds financial enticement. However, it is only with the king's acquiescence, and in turning over the signet ring to Haman, that Haman can set the plan into action. See Esther 3:5–11.
8. The term "genocide" was coined by Raphael Lemkin (1900–1959) following the Holocaust. In 1948, the United Nations approved the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, defining genocide: "Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a. Killing members of the group; b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d. Imposing measures intended to prevent

births within the group; e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” Experts agree that the defining characteristic of “genocide” is the intent to destroy all, or part, of a particular and defined group of people. It is, perhaps, anachronistic to apply the term “genocide” to an event (and particularly an event described in literature) that occurred long before the term came into existence to describe modern events. However, it seems applicable under the assumption that phenomena occur in history and in the human imagination even before precise descriptive terms are coined for them.

9. The parallel between Moses and Esther is not complete. When Moses approaches Pharaoh, he does so as an outside agitator, having shed his Egyptian identity and assumed the identity of a Hebrew. When Esther approaches Ahasuerus, she does so as an insider, still pretending to be a Persian. It could be argued that Mordecai is the “outside agitator” of Esther, but since it is Esther’s carefully considered plan that results in the salvation of the Jews, I credit her with the role parallel to that of Moses.
10. There are other readings. In a private communication, Rabbi Howard Apothaker shared a different view: “The saving of Moses, for the Exodus story, is the first act of redemption, and explicitly so. His salvation from the water is balanced on the other end of the tale by the Egyptians drowning in the water. Moses, the central figure in salvation, was saved completely by human planning and human agency. Now it is true that the rest of the story sets up God as the only hero; but that is because it is one God—YHWH—against another—Pharaoh. The story in Esther is not God vs. God, but the second-in-command—Haman—vs. the person who will become the second-in-command—Mordecai.” I would respond that the salvation of Moses from the Nile and the salvation of the Israelites at the Reed Sea neatly bracket the story, but the thrust of the story, taken in its entirety, is God’s redemption of Israel with “a strong hand and an outstretched arm.” If we read Esther as the story of battle between two seconds-in-command, this does not obscure the distinction between the God-centered Exodus redemption and redemption through human agency in Esther.
11. Genesis 15:13–14 records that slavery in Egypt will last 400 years. Exodus 12:40 calculates the length of time Israel was in Egypt as 430 years.
12. To reinforce this idea, traditional formulations of the Haggadah mention Moses but once, lest one mistakenly think that Moses affected redemption for the Jewish people.
13. In this regard, the account of the Wilderness wandering records many acts of dissension and numerous rebellions.
14. See also Lev. 23:4; Num. 9:1–5, 28:16.

15. *Bikurim* 1:6; *Rosh HaShanah* 1:3; *Taanit* 2:10; *M'gillah* 3:4, 3:6; *Mo-eid Katan* 3:9; *Bava Kama* 6:6.
16. It is likely that the Rabbis had access to a version of I and II Maccabees on two counts. First, their account of the restoration of the sacrifices appears to be taken from I Maccabees 4:50 and II Maccabees 10:3. Second, Gerson Cohen argues that the tale of Hannah and Her Seven Sons, found in II Maccabees 7, served to craft a Rabbinic model of martyrdom, evidence of which is found in *Eichah Rabbah* 1:16, no. 50; *Gittin* 57b; *P'sikta Rabbati* 43:180; and *Seder Eliyahu Rabba* 30:151. Gerson Cohen, "Hannah and Her Seven Sons," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 7:1270–1271.
17. Gedalyahu Alon argues that it is most definitely not a polemic against the Hasmoneans in "Did the Jewish People and Its Sages Cause the Hasmoneans to Be Forgotten?" in *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnus Press, 1977): 1–17.
18. [That which is doubt] as [whether it is] *orlah* is prohibited in the Land of Israel but permitted in Syria. Outside the Land one may go down and purchase [from a non-Jew], provided one has not seem him gathering it. If a vineyard is planted with greens, and the greens are sold outside of it, these are prohibited in the Land of Israel but permitted in Syria. Outside the Land, one may go down and gather ["mixed seeds" of the vineyard] provided one does not gather with [one's own hand]. "New produce" is prohibited by the Torah in all places; and *orlah* is a halachah; and "mixed seeds" is one of the enactments of the scribes. *Mishnah Orlah* 3:9.
19. Num. 20:9–11.
20. R. Meir's argument, backed up by Psalm 68:28 and Deuteronomy 33:12, is offered in order to explain a geographic anomaly related to the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple in Jerusalem was built on land within the territory of the tribe of Judah, with the exception of a small stretch of land upon which the Holy of Holies stood that belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. Hence the Holy of Holies stood on Benjamin's land, and the rest of the Temple stood on Judah's land.
21. R. Yehudah responds to R. Meir's explication of the location of the Temple by telling us that Nachshon ben Amminadab, the head of the tribe of Judah, entered the water first, thereby earning the tribe of Judah preeminence among the tribes of Israel.