



# liquid courage

*Why did Esther live undercover? What is the meaning of wine, wine, and wine again?*

## The First Secretary of State

Madeleine Albright, who passed away exactly one year ago, was the first woman to serve as the Secretary of State of the United States. She was not only the first woman, but also the first Jewish woman to hold this position. The first Jew to serve in the role was Henry Kissinger, but she was the first Jewish woman. She was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, to Jewish parents who converted to Christianity in order to escape anti-Semitic persecution.

Interestingly, in her own words, she only discovered her Jewish ancestry at the age of 59 when she was appointed as the Secretary of State. Her family escaped the holocaust by finding refuge in London, and three out of her four grandparents perished in the Nazi death camps. It's hard to believe that such an accomplished and educated woman, who previously served as the US ambassador to the UN, "did not know" about her Jewish ancestry.

This reminds me of Queen Esther, who also "did not know" about her Jewish ancestry. When Esther was chosen by the king's officials to be taken to the palace, she did not reveal her identity, because Mordechai had instructed her to do so.

## Why Did She Hide?

Why did Mordechai instruct Esther to conceal her Jewish identity? In

the story of the Megillah, Mordechai himself is portrayed as a proud Jew, to the extent that his Jewish pride is what led him to refuse to bow down to Haman, ultimately bringing about the decree against the Jewish people. Why did he instruct Esther not to reveal her identity?

According to commentators, Mordechai advised Esther to keep her Jewish identity a secret as a practical measure. If she had revealed her identity, it would have been difficult for her to observe Jewish practices in the palace since the king would not have allowed her to practice her religion. Therefore, Esther entered the palace as a non-Jew and claimed to be a vegetarian, which allowed her to keep kosher. Keeping Shabbat was also easy for her, as she was not required to do any work.

But the big question is: how did Esther manage to hide her identity if she came from the house of Mordechai the Jew, and was therefore definitely a Jewess? How did she manage to convince the King that she herself was not Jewish?

The Akeidas Yitzchak explains something fascinating in his commentary on the Megillah (Esther 2:22): “They knew that she was taken from the house of Mordechai, but he said that he was the adoptive father, and he did not know who her parents were. He had adopted her since she was beautiful... Therefore, they didn’t bother her about her identity. If her adoptive father didn’t know, why would she know?”

Esther could have argued, “It is true that Mordechai adopted me and raised me as a Jew, but I don’t know who my biological parents are.” And it is very likely that she did not look like a Jewish girl anyway, as the Talmud says, “To each and every one it appeared as if she were from his own nation” (Megillah 13a).

Not knowing Esther’s origin drove the king crazy, especially in the context of royal lineages where ancestry is of utmost importance, as

the legitimacy of the king comes from his heritage in the royal family. Achashverosh himself did not come from a royal family (Megillah 12b); his legitimacy was derived from his wife, the daughter of Belshazzar and granddaughter Nebuchadnezzar (the Babylonian king who destroyed the Temple). Now, after the death of Vashti, the king was left with nothing. Furthermore, it was beneath the dignity of the king to marry a woman from a family of low social status. Therefore, he was greatly troubled by his inability to uncover her true background.

And so, for seven years, Esther lived undercover in the royal court, until the moment came when Haman rose to power, and as part of his megalomania, gave an order that everyone must bow down to him.

## **The Wine Feasts**

As the story continues, Mordechai, as a Jew, did not bow down because Jews bow only to the Almighty and not to anyone else. This angered Haman; he decided to rid the world of the entire Jewish people, and he convinced the king to issue a decree to annihilate them all in one day. Mordechai heard about the decree, tore his clothes, wore sackcloth and ashes, and “went out into the city and cried out with a loud and bitter cry.” (Esther 4:1)

When Esther heard about Mordechai’s behavior, she inquired about the commotion. Mordechai informed her of the latest developments and instructed her to go to the king and plead to save her people. Essentially, Mordechai told her: “The moment has come, now is your time to reveal to the king who you are and which people you belong to, and plead before him to save your people.”

Esther was afraid to go because she had not been summoned to the king for thirty days, and anyone who appeared before the king without prior invitation was liable for the death penalty. However, Mordechai sent her a message saying that he believes she was chosen to be queen for this very reason: “Who knows whether you have attained

royalty specifically for a time like this?” Perhaps this is why her soul was brought into the world!

After three days of fasting, Esther went to the king and found favor in his eyes. He asked her, “What is your request? Even half of the kingdom, it shall be granted to you.” (Esther 5:3) She didn’t ask to save the Jewish people. Instead, she began a series of parties...

“I would like to invite the king and Haman to a wine feast,” she said.

At the wine banquet, the king again asked Esther, “What is your request?” and she again invited them to a wine banquet.

The next day, at the second wine banquet, the king again asked her what her request was, and she finally said, “He wants to kill me!”

The king was alarmed and asked her, “Who is he, and where is he? Who would dare to do such a thing?” She answered, “This wicked Haman!” This was the first time the king learned that Esther was Jewish and from the family of kings, descendants of King Saul.

What is the significance of all the wine?

## **Finding the Essence**

This week, I was asked why there is a particular mitzvah to get drunk on Purim, while drinking hard alcohol is generally frowned upon throughout the rest of the year. What exactly is the difference?

The answer is, “Because all the miracles that happened to the Jewish people in the days of Achashveros were through a feast... Likewise, the matter of Haman and his downfall was through a wine-feast. Therefore, we get drunk on Purim — because the miracle came through a feast of wine.” (Avudraham). Since the miracle happened during a wine banquet, it is remembered through wine drinking.

The Rebbe brings out a deeper message: wine isn’t something that

existed in its current form from the outset, but rather grapes contain the wine within them. To release the wine, a small amount of pressure is required — the grape needs to be squeezed in order to extract the wine.

In the Megillah, Esther questions the reason for the dreadful decree against the Jewish people. The explanation is: a wine feast. Just as a little pressure is required to extract the best wine, so too with a Jew — a bit of pressure can bring out their finest traits. In the Purim story, pressure was applied, and the extraordinary quality of every Jew, their readiness to give up their life for Judaism, was immediately revealed (Purim 5739. Sichos Kodesh Volume 2, p. 266 and onward).

Among chassidism, drinking is not limited to a once-a-year occasion like Purim. Chassidim have a tradition called “farbrengen,” where they gather to speak words of Torah, sing soul-stirring chasidic melodies, and say a L’chaim. Why? Because to open up and share their deepest emotions with each other, to speak heart to heart, a little L’chaim is needed.

In the Rebbe’s words, “we see firsthand the effectiveness of a Chassidic farbrengen in arousing a fervor for Torah and active and joyous observance of mitzvot. As our sages said, ‘Great is drinking, for it brings people closer together’ (Sanhedrin 53b).”

Just as Esther uncovered her Jewish identity at the wine feast, we too, need to discover our Jewish essence in the “wine feast.” Purim is the holiday where we can uncover our genuine Jewish identity.

L’Chaim!