



Parshat Tzav
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Esther Syndrome
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If you were listening closely when we read the megillah, you might have heard something strange. At the beginning of chapter two, the talented heroine of Purim is introduced by two names. In the words of the megillah:

[And he was the guardian of Hadassah, (that is, Esther) the daughter of his uncle] (sung)

Why did she have these two names? The midrash explains that Esther was born green. Literally. Her skin had a sallow, yellowish-green tone and for this reason, she was named Hadassah—myrtle. As a little one, she looked like the plant. But as she grew older, God made a miracle for her. God concealed her green skin and made it so that anyone who saw her experienced her as the most beautiful woman in the world. That's why she was named Esther—Esther for hester—the Hebrew word meaning hidden.

When I first came across this midrash, it seemed like a dream to me. I was a sleep-deprived rabbinical student poring over texts late into the night. At that point, my under-eye circles had grown so large and dark, I thought people might confuse them for my eyes. So the idea that there was a possible miracle that people would see me and think I was well-rested and beautiful rather than overworked and tired—that was attractive! Think about what an incredible blessing it would be to have Esther's divine charm. You accidentally spill coffee on your white shirt? No problem, people just see a perfect shirt. You are feeling sick? No problem, people experience you as if you were fully healthy. Didn't get a chance to shave before your morning meeting? No worries, you'll look perfectly groomed! No matter what is going on for you, the world only experiences perfection. Pretty amazing.

Except the more I thought about this midrash, the more I began to see its dark underside. What would it be like to be Esther? To be born and to have God say, “You know what, I see that you came out a different color than everyone else. Let me fix that. I’ll make it so no one can see your green. Instead, you will look like everyone else. In fact, you’ll look better!”

After the miracle, it’s like you are living a double life. Everyone sees you and relates to you, but no one really sees you at all. Because God has hidden your greenness away, you start to think that maybe there is something wrong with being green. Maybe you should just act as if you were not green and forget about it. You start to believe that your true self should never be shared. You hide not only your skin, but also your Jewish identity, and your feelings and preferences. Soon it’s hard for you to remember who you really are. All you can easily grasp is the person the world wants you to be.

We’ve all lived some version of this. We’ve all felt the compulsion to be the person the world expects, to suppress the parts of ourselves that aren’t perfect, to make ourselves beautiful in the eyes of others. How many of us wake up extra early to put on make up and do our hair and style our clothes so we will look just so? I remember Oprah Winfrey did a show years ago where she found women who wore make up 24/7 and challenged them to take the make up off for one full week. These women were filmed going to the grocery store without make up and then, crying at home about the pain of having been seen without foundation. When I watched the show, I was shocked. How could women be so afraid of themselves? How could they believe their self-worth was so fully tied to their appearance? I was horrified; and yet, if I’m being honest, I can’t imagine going to a formal function, or to work for that matter, without my own coat of make up. I’ve got Esther syndrome!

I see this with our teens too. Have you heard of Instagram? It's a social media platform where you can post pictures and videos with short captions. For many teens, it's their primary social media outlet. They carefully curate their insta with pictures of them having fun, perfectly groomed, going on adventures, courting success. No sweatpants, emotions, or loss. This page is totally posed. But teens call it their rinsta—their real Instagram. They've got Esther syndrome!

The rinsta stands in opposition to the finsta (I'm not making this up!)—finsta is the fake Instagram account. Whereas a rinsta is perfectly curated, a finsta is spontaneous, authentic, and real. It's private—only shared with a few people—and doesn't try to create an image. If you're sick, you might post a picture of you not feeling well. If you're feeling grumpy, you could post about that too. Didn't score as well as you wanted on a test? That's a post for finsta. Finsta is a fake insta because unlike the expectations of social media, we use finsta to be real.

Fake Instagram is the real Instagram. And what we call the real Instagram is so fake. It's all backwards and confusing. Just like Esther, the more we try to curate our rinsta, the more time we spend refining our image in the world, the less we feel able to be authentically ourselves. Esther syndrome.

In 2008, Brandon Stanton was forced to confront his own version of this. He had been working as a bond trader in Chicago, fully immersed in the conventional career path the world seemed to expect from him, never having given much thought to his own preferences. But when the recession hit, he was laid off. Suddenly, there was time for him to reflect.

He realized that he was happiest on the weekends when he would go out to take pictures. He decided that instead of working in finance, he should become a photographer. So, he bought a camera and moved to New York. His family thought he was crazy. You can't just decide you're going to be a photographer. You need training, equipment and experience. But Brandon was

determined. He decided his goal was to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers going about their business. Every day, he would go out to the streets of New York to find willing subjects. He posted his pictures to Facebook and called the album Humans of New York.

At first, no one cared. No one liked his pictures or responded. But then, he started adding a line or two about each person. Then his likes jumped. It started with a few likes here and there and then, before long, he had hundreds, then thousands, then millions of followers. Today, he has more than 18 million likes on Facebook and nearly 9 million followers on Instagram. He's published several best-selling books. He's even been hired by the UN to travel around the world taking pictures. Beyond his personal success, Brandon has used his social media presence to raise more than \$6.5 million dollars for cancer patients, orphans, veterans, indigent New Yorkers, and everyday people who just need help living their dreams.

Brandon's story teaches us about the powerful blessings that can come when we are willing to be ourselves. For him, shedding the world's expectations and living his dream meant millions of dollars of accumulated wealth, transformative leadership, global connections, and profound change. But Brandon's story is not always our story. Each one of us walks around in a green skin of our own. Sometimes those skins are full of challenges, full of pain. And when we lift the veil that conceals who we really are, people don't always respond in the ways we want. Our challenge is to love ourselves for who we are, to be ourselves, no matter what.

Which brings us back to Esther. In the story, Esther is living her glamorous hidden life in the palace, when Mordechai comes to tell her what is about to happen to the Jews. Imagine you're Esther. "Uncle Mordechai," she says, "what can I do? If I go to the king, well first of all if I go to the king without his invitation he could very well just kill me for showing up uninvited. But let's say I go to the king and he lets me speak. Then what?! I say, 'oh honey, by the way, I meant to

tell you we've been living a lie. I'm not who you think I am. I'm Jewish. And I'm green. Look. I've been hiding it from you all this time because I was afraid of what you would think and how you would respond.' Uncle Mordechai, he will be *furious*. He will feel betrayed and hurt and angered. There's no way that will work! I will just be the first to die and he will want to kill everyone else even more."

Mordechai stands there with a pained expression on his face. "Esther honey," he says, "you think it's safer to keep lying about who you are? You weren't sent to this planet to live someone else's life. You were sent here on a mission. God has given you the qualities you need to succeed. מי יודע--אם-לעת-כזאת, הגעת למלכות Who knows? Maybe this is why the king fell in love with you, so that his love for you could expand to hold our whole people. Maybe this is why you are queen."

The miracle of Purim is not just that Esther saved the day. The real miracle of Purim is that Esther found the courage to be herself no matter what.

Purim is over. Let's take off our masks. No more Esther syndrome. It's time to be you.