

Trauma and Counter-Trauma in the Book of Esther

Reading the Megillah in the Face of the Post-Shoah Sabra¹

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Abstract

We catch glimpses of a culture's memories of trauma and the survival of these memories in an array of discursive formations, including narrative. By naming, shaping, and giving words to traumatic experience, storytelling becomes an act of processing—an act that seeks to make sense of and survive the many haunting associations and dissociations, which, paradoxically, signify events that exceed categorized signification. Though typically not utilizing trauma theory, scholars indirectly describe the book of Esther as taking part in this process. As Timothy Beal writes, Esther is a book “about living beyond the end,” often doing so by utilizing humour to lampoon the powers that be. However, rather than simply undermine the enemy via subversive jest, the Jews in the book of Esther eventually turn the tables completely as they call for a mass annihilation of Jewish foes. As such, the creation of a new Jewish identity—one that appropriates Amalekite power and force—becomes another glimpse of the culture's attempt to process, survive, and counter trauma. These tactics become even clearer, however, when cross-read intertextually with the celebration of Purim throughout the Shoah, followed by the solidification of the Israeli Sabra image after World War II. Whereas the celebration of Purim functioned more regularly as hidden resistance, the establishment of the Israeli Sabra created space for both revenge fantasy and revenge reality against any and all lingering “Amaleks.” Though differing in strategy, context, and, arguably, productivity, these responses nevertheless illustrate a range of survival strategies employed in the face of communal suffering. Reading the book of Esther alongside these examples of counter-trauma exposes Esther's use of humour and appropriation of enemy ideology as articulations of post-traumatic wish-fulfillment. In short, by reading Esther as haunted by the Holocaust and the creation of the post-Shoah Sabra, we may better recognize the range of survival tactics employed in the text.

Key words

Esther; Holocaust; Sabra; intertextuality; trauma; humour

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Introduction

Sociologist Kai Erikson defines collective trauma as a blow to one's collective identity and social life: "It is a form of shock ... a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared" (1976, 154). We catch glimpses of a culture's memories of trauma and survival in an array of discursive formations, including narrative. By naming, shaping, and giving words to traumatic experience, storytelling becomes an act of processing—an act that seeks to make sense of and survive the many haunting associations and dissociations, which, paradoxically, signify events that exceed categorized signification. Though typically not utilizing trauma theory, scholars indirectly describe the book of Esther as taking part in this process. As Timothy Beal writes, Esther is a book "about living beyond the end" (1997, 107),² often doing so by utilizing humour to lampoon the powers that be (see for example O'Connor 2003, 52-64; Jackson 2012, 198-220; Craig 1995; Spiegel 1995, 191-203). Through outlandish plot twists, topsy-turvy character dynamics, and exaggerated appropriation of enemy mores, Esther creates a comic counter-world in which the contextual not-heroes (Jackson 2012, 28)—that is, Diaspora Jews—become the textual heroes who overturn Persian law and survive mass extermination under Haman and the Persian King.

But stories are not static. Intertextual and poststructural approaches to narratology reveal that stories carry with them the remnants of other texts, contexts, and discourses, including those of their future.³ The purpose of this essay is to acquaint Esther with its future, including the Holocaust, and more specifically, with the solidification of the Sabra image post-Shoah. In doing so, I will illustrate the means by which Esther offers a humorous counter-narrative to imperial subjugation, and furthermore, how its appropriation of enemy mores functions as a form of counter-trauma and post-traumatic wish-fulfillment. In the following sections, I will outline in more detail the theory of trauma and how it operates in relation to cultural identity and textual traditions. I will then provide a reading of Esther that illustrates its cultural and psychological existence, particularly in relation to its proposed intertextual afterlives.

The Theory of Trauma

Suffering of the traumatized is typically marked by an erosion of personal or collective self-states.⁴ Depending on the nature of its impact,⁵ trauma can leave

² For an argument against trauma in/and Esther, see Gruen (2002, 137-48, 180-1).

³ For an introductory overview on intertextual and poststructural approaches to narrative, and scholarship associated with these concepts, see Allen (2000) and Frank (2010, 37). For more on the intertextual relationship between biblical texts and the Holocaust, see, for example, Wiesel and Beal (2000, 26).

⁴ For more of self-states, see Bromberg (2001, 12-13).

⁵ While some might experience an event as a threat to their integrity or sense of personal/communal self (i.e. trauma), others might not experience it as a threat at all. In this way, trauma becomes a relative, subjective, and even individual phenomenon, and we cannot assume too quickly that all persons respond to or make sense of trauma in the same way.

survivors with feelings of lost control and vulnerability,⁶ so much so that the “I” of a person, or the “we” of a social collective, can become unhinged. Regardless of whether a survivor remembers the trauma in great detail or suppresses the memory of it—“it” being a singular event or traumatic impacts occurring over time—she can lose, as Erikson explains, “the linked cells” of self and/or community (1976, 154). Trauma erodes one’s understanding of the world and one’s place in it, making it that much more difficult for the trauma to be effectively “grasped by the conscious mind” (Moore and Qabaha 2015, 18).

Because of these deconstructive tendencies, trauma theorists often describe traumatic events as those which are unnarratable. To use the words of psychiatrist Judith Herman, traumatic occurrences are such “violations of the social compact” that they become “unspeakable” (1997, 1). The brain cannot put *words* to what has happened, because it cannot make *sense* of what has happened. Many survivors allude to this sensation in their own storytelling attempts. As Elie Wiesel writes in the preface of *Night*:

Convinced that this period in history [the Holocaust] would be judged one day, I knew that I must bear witness. I also knew that, while I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear that it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger—thirst—fear—transport—selection—fire—chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. Writing in my mother tongue—at that point close to extinction—I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what exactly was “it”? (2006, viii-ix)

In short, because there is no story with which to compare it, no language with which to describe it, and no means by which to absorb it, trauma often resists assimilating into narrative—whether personal or otherwise.

⁶ Traumatized persons can also live in a paradoxical state of sensitivity, as explosive reactions can be paired regularly with a “numbed gray background of depression, feelings of helplessness, and a general closing off of the spirit, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm” (Erikson 1995, 184). This heightened state of sensitivity can stem from the traumatic event itself. As Judith Herman writes, “The ordinary human response to [trauma] is a complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both mind and body. [Trauma] initially arouses the sympathetic nervous system, causing the person in danger to feel an adrenalin rush and go into a state of alert. Threat also concentrates a person’s attention on the immediate situation” (1997, 34). Studies on memory similarly indicate that the brain remembers events more clearly when they are experienced under stress or anxiety. As Bremner notes, “Stress exposure results in alterations in the laying down of memory in normal human subjects. Certain events that are surprising and consequential (emotionally charged) lead to an enhancement of memory for personal circumstances surrounding the event” (1999, 218). When persons experience something traumatic, the brain associates that event with feelings of alertness. It tells the traumatized to avoid, if possible, the circumstances leading to the trauma. Of course, avoidance is not always possible, and trauma can affect people in unexpected and unforeseen ways.

Such shattering linguistic effects of trauma, however, do not necessarily end in the total, immutable deconstruction of one's personal or collective consciousness. As Herman notes, "[Such] atrocities refuse to be buried" (1997, 2). The brain becomes "possessed," as Cathy Caruth puts it, "by [the traumatic] image or event" (1995, 5). Such possessiveness often hits the traumatized belatedly and unexpectedly—typically via flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, numbing, violent enactments, or other disruptive experiences⁷—leading theorists to conclude that "traumatic symptoms have a tendency to *become disconnected from their source* and to take on a life of their own" (Herman, 34; emphasis mine). In fact, it is precisely trauma's deconstructive tendencies that leaves Caruth questioning the validity of traumatic recall experiences over others. For even though trauma erodes a process of signification, traumatized persons can experience a sense of "realness" in their unprocessed flashbacks, hallucinations, and/or other dissociative responses. Caruth thus writes that "the transformation of trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall" (1995, 153).

Despite what some may consider the beauty of a traumatized person's raw and authentic affect, recovery nevertheless requires connections to be made and stories to be told.⁸ As Herman expounds, "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (1997, 133). Because of this, she names owned reconstruction an integral part of the recovery process: "[The traumatized] must be the author and arbiter of her own story" (ibid.). In a similar vein, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander argues that, in order for a massive disruption to be rendered traumatic for a society, a narrative "claim" must be made and accepted by the larger community: "The cultural construction of trauma begins with [people's] claim[s]" and, if they are "successful, the members of originating collectivity become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event" (2012, 16, 17). While claims can also be made without such conscious effort—as Erikson notes, communal trauma can already "damage the connectivity between group members and/or contribute to a new communal mood, discourse, and ethos" at the moment of impact (1995, 190)—narrative nevertheless offers survivors the opportunity to both process trauma and construct newly integrated self-states (or newly constructed versions of a communal Self). By narrativizing trauma, communities of storytellers are offered a means by which to create a narrative that puts back together the pieces of the

⁷ Some survivors of trauma may experience dissociation (e.g., feelings of numbness, detachment from the body, disconnection between mental self-states, etc.) to such a degree that the trauma becomes hidden from the conscious mind. If this is the case, later triggers and cues may be confusing and incomprehensible. Others still may remember the trauma entirely, but dissociate from the emotions accompanying it. As Herman explains, "The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why" (1997, 34). In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association named this array of disruptive responses to trauma "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," otherwise known as PTSD.

⁸ Caruth herself agrees (1995, 153).

community that have fallen, including the ones that have torn apart the community's states of consciousness.

It is important to note, however, that while these stories function as reconstructions of traumatic experience, they need not reiterate, specifically, the events of the trauma proper. While responses/reconstructions/mournings of trauma can, on the one hand, attempt to reflect a level of historical "realness"—even if elements of that "realness" become lost through narrative (a "this is what happened" approach to storytelling)—others can take a more metaphorical approach (a "the 'realness' of the trauma can be metaphorized by ..." approach). We see examples of this latter method in the work of artist and Holocaust survivor Samuel Bak. In much of his work, Bak implements visual metaphors as a means by which to both give words *to* and offer narratives of repair *for* his and others' suffering. According to Bernard H. Pucker, in fact, it was precisely these artistic representations that "enabled [Bak] to develop responses to the present and to his memories of the past" (2008, 2). In other words, so long as there is an integration of the narrative (however that narrative is construed) into the survivors' and/or communities' consciousness, the "realness" of it can be revealed through a variety of means.

This brings us back to Esther. Although likely not a direct recording of historical events, the book of Esther nevertheless offers "affective truths"—truths that, albeit coated in fiction, still reflect a Jewish communal consciousness. Most scholars agree, for instance, that while Esther reads more like fantasy than history, the Megillah still offers us glimpses into contemporaneous Jewish political self-perception (see e.g. Beal 1997, 112). To use the words of Adele Berlin, the book of Esther "addresses the inherent problems of a [Jewish] minority people, their vulnerability to political forces and government edicts, their lack of autonomy, and their dependence on royal favor [in Diaspora]" (2004, 1625). Although Jews in Diaspora likely did not face annihilation as they do in the text proper, the text's representation of Jews nevertheless subtends a cultural and psychological existence in which Jews are the ethnic "Other"—an existence that, according to some trauma theorists, can in and of itself rupture the integrity of a Jewish communal consciousness.⁹

But Esther is also a text that offers comic relief in the face of communal rupture. In many instances, the Megillah functions as political satire, painting enemy personages (most notably Persians) as both ruthless and incompetent. Haman, as we will see, is at once the villain and the court fool, thus creating for implied Jewish audiences the notion that enemy forces cannot dictate entirely what constitutes the cultural Self (and, subsequently, the cultural "not-Self"; see Beal 1997). As Berlin adds, "The psychological release that is embodied ... in the book of Esther lends itself to ... celebrations of the communal triumph over danger"—a danger that, although familiar to the text's original audiences, can be overcome in story (2004, 1625). This does not mean, of course, that Esther represents an all-encompassing Jewish experience and/or Jewish self-perception in

⁹ See especially postcolonial trauma theorists, such as Craps (2014); Bubenechik (2013); Gandhi (1998); Ward (2013, 2015); Visser (2011); Durrant (2012).

Diaspora. As Beal so aptly puts it, “There has never been any such homogenous cultural entity as ‘diaspora Judaism,’ as the name itself implies” (1997, 112). Rather, Esther functions as one text—one narrative claim—amidst a range of texts that bear witness to Jewish life in Diaspora.

It is also important to note, though, that while Esther may have indeed provided a narrative of Jewish suffering in antiquity, post-traumatic signifiers can affect those who have not experienced the suffering firsthand. Memories of traumatic events, for instance, can be received inter- and trans-generationally, leaving traumatizing imprints upon receivers of the trauma recall. As Marianne Hirsch explains, stories of another generation’s trauma can become so affect-intensive that they can actually displace one’s own life stories: “To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness ... is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension” (2012, 5). Those who experience such “postmemories,” as Hirsch coins them, can thus find themselves both piecing together and recycling narratives that are not directly “theirs,” however seemingly distant or even incomprehensible those narratives may be.

The book of Esther has been recycled by readers in a variety of ways. Not only has the Megillah become “inextricably bound up with the holiday of Purim” (Berlin 2004, 1623)—a celebration commemorating Jewish survival, then and now—but has also been used by persons in front of the text to support the Jewish cultural experience. As Rabbi Michael Lerner remarked in the face of ongoing Holocaust postmemory, “Purim [and, with it, the Esther scroll], celebrating the victory of Jews over those who sought to destroy us in ancient Persia, [is] a psychologically healthy occasion for an oppressed people to momentarily envision a world turned upside down”—a world in which survival is possible against all odds (Lerner 2016). But there is more to story than pure imagination. As socio-narratologist Arthur Frank makes clear, human experience is contingent upon the stories that we tell. Stories tell us who we can and cannot be, who does and does not matter, and what should and should not be done.¹⁰ In his own words, “Stories animate human life; that is their work” (Frank 2010, 3).

¹⁰ Michael Lerner of *Tikkun Magazine* engages this notion as well, contending that Esther has contributed to ongoing tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. He writes: “The reading of the Scroll of Esther (Megillat Esther) concludes with two chapters detailing how Jews managed to kill off our ancient enemies, and the seeming endorsement of violence and power over others seeps into the unconscious of many Jews, making our current activity of domination seem as though it is part of the Jewish tradition. Unable to recognize the difference between Hitler and his massive armed forces on the one hand, and the individual acts of desperation as a handful of Palestinians strike out against random Israelis (deplorable acts of terror that, thank heaven, kill far fewer Israelis than Israeli traffic accidents), Jews now identify Haman with Palestinian resistance to 50 years of brutal occupation. And while Jewish mystics may interpret the traditional command to get so drunk on Purim that one can no longer tell the difference between ‘blessed Mordecai and cursed Haman’ as urging ‘transcendence of the limited categories of “good” and “evil” so that we can see the ultimate unity of all being,’ there are many other Jews today who are resisting the celebration of Purim, seeing how the so-called transcendence of good and evil may actually just be an effective way for those who live lives of privilege to ignore the suffering that they are imposing on others, a mystical path to ethical

Jewish communities have looked to Esther as a story that animates the possibility of Jewish survival. For, while the Jews of Esther in many instances represent the cultural “not-self”—the abject self, marked for extermination by government officials—they nevertheless are a people who survive in the end. The narrative for many Jewish readers thus becomes: If Jews can survive in Esther, perhaps they can survive in real life too. But the Megillah has also been used to denigrate the Jewish cultural experience. The Nazis, for instance, saw the book of Esther as a galling example of Jewish self-perception. On their reading, the Megillah brings together several “anti-Semitic anxieties,” such as the idea that Jews are a “vengeful people” who can “hide among us and be undetected” (more on this below).¹¹ The Purim holiday, with its “carnavalesque revelry,” also fed into these anti-Semitic stereotypes.¹² As a holiday that celebrates the annihilation of 75,000 non-Jews, Purim for the Nazis became a particularly astute example of Jewish savagery, and, interestingly, is the only Jewish holiday to be mentioned in the Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda film *Jud Süß* (1940).¹³

The Esther scroll is bound up in trauma. While, on the one hand, it has been used to help Jews survive the trauma of Nazi anti-Semitism, it has also been used to justify Nazi anti-Semitism. While it has given voice to Jewish communal suffering (then and now), it has also perpetuated the very suffering Jewish communities have sought to overcome. In what follows, I will outline in more detail the nuances of these multifarious bindings by cross-reading the Megillah intertextually with celebrations of Purim throughout the Shoah (by Jews and Nazis alike) and, ultimately, with the solidification of the Sabra image after World War II.

Esther, Purim, and the Holocaust

Perhaps more than any other biblical text, Esther remains haunted by the experiences of the Shoah. As Beal makes clear, the Shoah and Esther share a certain level of *betweenness* (1997, 3). To read Esther, he writes, is “to be haunted by more recent pasts that Esther could have never fully imagined” (4). Emil Fackenheim has contended similarly that the affinities shared between Haman and Hitler are “uncannily close” (1990, 61). Certainly, the horror of Haman’s request to exterminate all Jews becomes that much more salient when read intertextually with Hitler’s Final Solution. One may even put Haman’s following lines into Hitler’s own mouth: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of [the] realm ... It is not in [our interest] to tolerate them ... let an edict be drawn for their destruction” (Est. 3:8-9).

But, similar to Purim observers today, Jews throughout the Shoah still found ways for Esther to act upon them. Many continued to read the Megillah as a

blindness that comforts the comfortable (rather than following A.J. Heschel’s view that the Jewish prophetic path today must be about challenging the comfortable till they wake up to what their system of inequality, materialism and selfishness is doing to others)” (Lerner 2016).

¹¹ The quotes are taken from my anonymous reviewer, whom I would like to thank for this important insight.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Thanks again to the reviewer who directed my attention to this film.

means by which not only to participate in the Purim holiday (during which the reading of Esther is a requirement), but also to foster space for hidden resistance¹⁴ and escape the harsh realities of Nazi Germany. We see examples of this in Jewish diary entries composed under the Third Reich. Responding to the 1941 Purim celebration in the Warsaw Ghetto, Chaim A. Kaplan writes, “The book of Esther was not read in the darkened synagogues, because all public worship is prohibited; but we were happy about the defeat of the Persian Haman. We celebrated in the Zionist soup kitchen” (1965, 256). Although, he writes, participants “came sad and left sad,” they still “had some pleasant moments in between” (*ibid.*), which, according to Jo Carruthers, “gesture[s] towards the emotional relief that many Jews felt when they relived the story of Esther at Purim” (2013, 72-3).

Humour also has its place here. For in humour too, the subjugated can escape their circumstances and, as Peter Berger puts it, enter a world in which “the assumptions and rules of ordinary life are suspended” (1997, 205). Although laughter was sparse during the Holocaust, survivor Viktor Frankl nevertheless writes that:

humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds ... The attempt to develop a sense of humor and to see things in a humorous light is some kind of a trick learned while mastering the art of living. (2006, 43-4)

Indeed, Purim is no stranger to this phenomenon. In many instances, Purim celebrations during the Holocaust facilitated play and humour-driven fantasies in which the Jews could suspend the harsh realities under Nazi rule. According to Yad Vashem’s virtual press room, Zvi Hershel Weiss utilized the humour associated with Purim to “uplift the mood of his fellow Jews imprisoned alongside him” (Yad Vashem 2014). When he was a prisoner of the Ilia camp in Transylvania, he penned his own version of the Esther scroll, which was filled

¹⁴ Examples of hidden resistance abound in the Megillah, too. Rather than reference the Jews’ primary adversaries via a Persian label, the text acknowledges them by Hebrew names (*Haman*, a cognate of *hāmâh* or “noise,” and *Ahasuerus*, perhaps a cognate of *rōš* or “head”), which in turn facilitates the story’s own survival under non-Jewish nations. The name Esther, though often associated with Ishtar, the ancient Near Eastern goddess of love, eroticism, and sexual power (see Beal 1999, 28), also bears resemblance to the Hebrew root *str*, which means “to hide” or “conceal.” Whereas midrashic interpretation suggests that the use of this term indicates divine hiding (Beal 1997, 117; *Talmud Hullin*, 139b), as God is entirely absent in the Masoretic text (for comparison, see the LXX and AT Greek counterparts), *str* also refers to Queen Esther’s own hiding, which functions in the narrative as a survival tactic in the face of oncoming danger. In fact, it is precisely *because* Esther conceals her Jewish identity that she is able to earn both King Ahasuerus’ and Haman’s favor, so much so that the men attend a two-night banquet in her honour. Once she realizes that the men are wrapped around her finger—or, perhaps more appropriately, wrapped around her body—she reveals her identity and asks that the King spare her and her people. The King spares the Jews, and at the end of the narrative, the Jews mark the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar as ones for merrymaking and feasting in commemoration of their new fortune (Est. 9.19).

with a humorous amalgamation of the original narrative and the stories of his fellow campers.

The humour associated with Purim also worked to *reverse* the assumptions of everyday life throughout the Shoah. For example, the very ability to “get away” with a Purim celebration illustrated in and of itself the Nazis’ own ineptitude. For despite the Nazis’ close watch on the Jews in ghettos and concentration camps, some Jews managed to find moments in which they could venerate their customs and, implicitly, debunk the German Guard. This was doubly transgressive, in fact, as Hitler had declared it illegal to mock the Nazi party. According to the *Law Against Malicious Attacks on the State and Party and in Defense of Party Uniforms*:

Whosoever makes hostile incendiary, or belittling ... remarks about the leaders of the state or the NSDAP [Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei], or its ordinances or measures, of the sort that could undermine the trust of the people in its political leadership, is subject to imprisonment. (Quoted in Herzog 2011)

In other words, to observe an illegal holiday—in a way that mocked Hitler’s own authority, no less—enabled Jews under the Third Reich to turn Nazi expectations on their heads, if only momentarily.

The book of Esther does much the same. According to Melissa Jackson, “Unable *actually* to overthrow the powers established over them, [the Jews in Diaspora] can utilize comedy to overthrow them another way. Through Esther, the Jews can maintain their own sense of identity by making the Persians a ridiculed ‘other’” (2012, 218). We see this demarcation occur already at the beginning of the narrative. When Queen Vashti refuses to wear a royal diadem for King Ahasuerus at his seven-day drinking party, Ahasuerus and his court throw nothing short of a royal temper tantrum. In fact, he and his advisers agree to issue an edict to all of Shushan, which states that, “All wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike” (Est. 1.20). Such a decree is farcical indeed. While, on the one hand, it displays the court’s insecurities and inability to govern without dependence upon women as “fixed object[s]” (Beal 1999, 11), it also, according to Celina Spiegel, “merely restates the status quo” (1995, 195). Ahasuerus’ edict, in other words, adds nothing to the already patriarchal and androcentric norm of his kingdom. The royal men are not aware of their own ineptitude.

The focus on Persian incompetency continues throughout the entirety of the narrative. For example, when Ahasuerus asks the court official, Haman, what he should do to repay the person he “admires most,” Haman assumes that the King is talking about himself (Est. 6.6). With both pride and pleasure, Haman responds:

For the man whom the king desires to honour, let royal garb which the king has worn be brought, and a horse on which the king has ridden and on whose head a royal diadem has been set; and let the attire and the horse be put in charge of one of the king’s noble courtiers. And let the man whom the king desires to honour be attired and paraded on the horse through the

city square, while they proclaim before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honour! (Est. 6.7-9)

Little does Haman know, however, that the man Ahasuerus admires most is the Jew Mordecai—that is, the Jew who has defied Haman by refusing to bow down to him earlier in the narrative. In fact, it is precisely because Mordecai refuses to honour Haman that Haman urges the king to exterminate all Jews throughout the Persian provinces in a single day. Thus, Haman—a man who considers himself cunning, witty, and a commendable human being—is duped in the above example by his own naïveté. As Celina Spiegel puts it, Haman is “the unwitting court fool ... whose every scheme recoils on his own head” (1995, 199).

Of course, reenacting this buffoonery throughout the Shoah gave participants the opportunity to not just undermine Nazi rule, but also insert Hitler in place of the “wicked wicked Haman.”¹⁵ According to Rabbi Joachim Prinz, “Every time we read ‘Haman,’ the people heard Hitler.”¹⁶ In a similar retelling of his experience with Purim at Dachau, Holocaust survivor Solly Ganor writes: “Suddenly, we noticed ‘Chaim the Rabbi’ standing in the snow and shouting, ‘Haman to the gallows! Haman to the gallows! ... And when I say ‘Haman to the Gallows,’ we all know which Haman we are talking about!’” (2013). Indeed, for many Jewish communities, Hitler became, like Haman, another descendent of Agog, the Amalekite King who, throughout the Tanakh, is described as an enemy of YHWH and the Israelite people (see Est. 3.1; Exodus 17; I Samuel 15).¹⁷ In Jewish tradition, the term “Amalek” has come to represent not only “the enemy” within the Tanakh narratives, including those in the book of Esther, but also other “Jew Haters” throughout history. While Haman is identified as an Amalekite in Est. 3.1, Hitler throughout the Shoah became known as a modern Amalek, and remains as such today. In a Purim context, however, to reference Hitler as another Amalek does not mean to associate him solely with Haman as a fellow Jew hater, but also with one who—from an implied audience perspective—deserves to be defeated violently, year after year. For, rather than simply undermine the enemy via subversive jest, the Jews in Esther eventually turn the tables completely, as they call for a mass annihilation of Jewish foes. After Esther asks Ahasuerus to spare the Jews, the Jews hang Haman and, in the space of two days, annihilate 75,000 gentiles, including Haman’s ten sons. When the Jews inaugurate a joyous celebration in commemoration of such terror (i.e. Purim), we are certainly left to wonder if this really is the same story from a few chapters ago.

In fact, the notion that the Jews loved to celebrate in the face of gentile destruction led Hitler to enact his own Purim pranks throughout the Shoah. Echoing anti-Jewish interpretations of Esther, such as those made by Martin

¹⁵ This is in reference to a popular Purim song, “A Wicked, Wicked Man.”

¹⁶ I owe this citation to Jo Carruthers (2013, 517), who credits Elliott Horowitz (2006, 86).

¹⁷ In Est. 3.1, Haman is described as “the son of Hammengatha the Agagite,” which puts him in the same lineage as the Amalekites of I Samuel 15. Because Saul in I Samuel spares King Agag against YHWH’s orders, YHWH rejects him as king. On the Sabbath before Purim, congregations read Deut. 25.17-19, which urges listeners to remember that the Amalekites attacked the Israelites during the Exodus (see Exodus 17) and, by extension, to recall Saul’s failure to wipe out the enemy line (see also Carruthers 2013, 516).

Luther, Heinrich Ewald, and Lewis Bayles Paton (see Beal 1999, 4-8), as well as those instigated in the film *Jud Süß* (mentioned above), Hitler situated himself as the gentile victim of Jewish violence. In order to avenge Haman, his sons, and the 75,000, Hitler sought to outwit the Jews on their own holiday, and, to a certain extent, even appropriated the holiday as his own. On Purim in 1942, the Nazis hanged ten Jews in Poland to punish them for hanging Haman's ten sons (Gilbert 1985, 297-9). Likewise, on the following Purim, the Nazis told Jews in the ghetto of Piotrkow that they would exchange ten Jews for ten Germans in Palestine. This was an especially vicious prank, writes Elliott Horowitz, as the Jews, "rather than being taken to Palestine ... were taken to a nearby Jewish cemetery to be shot" (2006, 91). Hitler's vengeance against the Jews for their actions in Esther continued for years, and in 1944, he argued that "unless Germany is victorious ... Jewry could then celebrate the destruction of Europe by a second triumphant Purim festival" (Carruthers 2013, 523). In other words, Hitler, like Luther and others, associated the Jews of Esther with a violent and appalling aggression, and moreover, used such association to further his own agenda.

This reception aside, we could of course conclude that Esther the narrative is simply humorous from beginning to end. As Melissa Jackson explains, farce and carnivalesque aspects of the comic, which abound in Esther, leave room for both the frightening and the funny (2012, 198). Whereas farce refers to the ridiculous, "overstuffed" qualities of comic scenes (*ibid.*), the carnivalesque refers to the carnivalization of literature, in which the topsy-turvy, including the ridiculous and the grotesque, are highlighted (214). Recognizing the end scenes' parallels with other over-the-top descriptions in Esther, Kenneth Craig concludes similarly that the Jewish war against the gentiles of Persia is carnivalesque of the first order (1995, 136). In fact, even when the Jews perform mass murder, their vengeance is interrupted repeatedly not with descriptions of the fallen, but rather with the absurd line, "But they did not lay hands on the spoil" (Est. 9.10, 15, 16), as if to remind readers that this, indeed, is comedy. When read in this way, the narrative's inauguration of the joyous celebration of Purim in commemoration of such terror only adds to the comedic ethos of the story.

But for some, the humour here does not erase the terror—at least not fully. In Fackenheim's reading, the Jews' final reversal of fortunes is described in a way that "cannot be saved" (1990, 92).¹⁸ There are certainly reasons that many Jewish congregations today do not focus on—and often leave out—the assassination of 75,000 in their own *Purim Schpiels*. Rather than conclude that the violence at the end of Esther merely adds to the text's humorous reversals of established mores (although it does), I suggest instead that we may understand more clearly the Jewish appropriation of Amalekite force by applying a hermeneutic of trauma and reading intertextually with the construction of the post-Shoah Sabra. For, just as the slaying of 75,000 adheres in part to the Persian status quo—indeed, the only thing that is different is the fact that *the Jews* are at the power center—so, too, does the construction of the Sabra internalize elements of modern public discourse that have been used to support the systematic demise of the Jewish people. In what follows, then, I will diverge slightly from the previous conversation of Purim

¹⁸ Fackenheim is speaking most directly about the slaying of Haman's ten sons.

throughout the Shoah—and thus perform alongside Esther’s own seeming divergent end—to read the narrative’s concluding passages intertextually with the post-Shoah Sabra.

Esther and the Post-Shoah Sabra

The myth of the Israeli Sabra began in the 1930s to describe the “New Jew”—that is, the Jewish native of Palestine, rather than the lost soul in Diaspora. Over time, however, the Sabra image became much less about biology and more about a process of reform and socialization. From the 1930s to the 1960s, this New Jew became a cultural marker, or what Oz Almog describes as a “unit not by country or by birth, but rather by affiliation to the [Zionist] institution that imprinted a specific culture on their young people” (2000, 2). Sabra culture was shaped by the Zionist movement and the idea that, in order for Jews to survive in a non-Jewish world, a Jewish nation state that focused on Jewish survival needed to be established. The construction of the Palmach and later Israel Defence Forces thus took place alongside the construction and post-Shoah solidification of the Sabra myth; military victories were viewed in large part as the victories of the New Jew.

The book of Esther contributed to the making of this Israeli identity. Not only was the Sabra raised on Zionist myths commemorating Jewish victories over enemies of the people/place of Israel (e.g., Exodus, Esther, Judith, Maccabean martyr texts), but was taught that the New Jew fulfilled the promise of Esther by constructing “Jewish political power resulting in Jewish safety—all without the benefit of any divine intervention.¹⁹ The idea, Almog writes, was for the New Jew to internalize a Jewish “myth of deliverance”—to recognize that Israel’s victories are not only replays of Jewish victories past, but victories won by “the few in face of the many” (2000, 35, 37). The Esther narrative thus worked on the Sabra in profound ways, telling them that the Jewish people can—and will—rise.

Certain characteristics of the prototypical New Jew are also worth noting. The Sabra, for instance, is described in masculine terms, not only linguistically (*sabar*), but also in character. The Sabra is tall, handsome, and (above all) skillful. He²⁰ maintains a masculine physique that indicates a particular athletic and military prowess. In addition to his masculine energy, the Sabra’s skin is rendered properly bronzed, which works to mark him as a native of the Eastern Mediterranean. But the New Jew is not entirely Near Eastern. For perhaps most striking is the fact that he also has blonde hair and blue eyes. In other words, there is a bit of archetypal Aryan in him, too.

These features are certainly interesting when compared to the stereotypical images of Jews in Diaspora. As Sander Gilman writes in *The Jew’s Body*, literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries marked the Diaspora Jew as havening blackened and diseased skin. Physiognomic features, such as the big

¹⁹ I owe this insight to my anonymous reviewer.

²⁰ While at times I use “Sabra” as a plural noun, to refer to both Sabra men and women (which is more a colloquial standard, even though the female form is *sabarit*), I use the male pronoun (he) when referring to the Sabra in the singular so as to emphasize it (him) as a particularly male construct.

nose, big lips, and protruding mouth, were also thought to help persons recognize Jews as black and/or non-white without having to resort to skin pigmentation. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, Robert Knox wrote that “The African character of the Jew, his muzzled-shaped mouth and face removes him from certain other races” (quoted in Gilman 1991, 174). The Diaspora Jew was also rendered weak, ugly, and too athletically incompetent for war. Even the Jewish foot led twentieth-century thinkers to believe that the Jew could not function in the military: “The parameters of the meaning ascribed to the Jewish foot are set: Jews walk oddly because of the form of their feet and legs. This unique gait represents the inability of the Jew to function as a citizen within a state which defines full participation as military service” (Gilman 1991, 58).

Certainly, the stereotypes listed above illustrate further the power and function of humour. To characterize the Jew as black, ugly, and physically inept is to participate in a form of mockery that, in turn, shaped popular discourses concerning Jews. What is most interesting, however, is that the Sabra underwent a similar form of diaspora mockery in its own making. In many ways, in fact, we can render the Diaspora Jew a subconscious Amalek for the Sabra prototype. For example, whereas early Zionist textbooks scorned Diaspora Jews for being “passive victims” (Almog 2000, 78), they referred to Sabra leaders as the resurrected Maccabees, Mordecais, and Masada martyrs who defend themselves, fight for their land, and die as heroes (37-8). Indeed, a primary reason the Sabra myth became solidified in Zionist discourses post-Shoah was that the death of six million Jews in the Holocaust validated the belief in the passivity of the “Old Jew” and the need for a new one. Because of this, many Holocaust survivors who sought refuge in Palestine were not welcomed with open arms by the native Sabra. Some were called “human dust” or “soap bars”—thus calling in jest upon the crematorium and the rumour that the Nazis manufactured soap out of the Jews’ ashes (86-7). For reasons such as this, Ella Shohat contends that the Sabra “was conceived as an antithesis to the Zionist virtually anti-Semitic image of the Diaspora Jew” (quoted in Stratton 2000, 98).

When considering the Sabra myth in relation to trauma, however, we notice that its construction combats directly the stereotypes embedded in its own Jewish suffering. Whereas here, one may claim that the Sabra does not experience Jewish trauma, he does. For, even though the archetypal Sabra was not a direct victim of anti-Jewish violence, he was nevertheless part of a culture that carried with it generations of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. As noted above, the value of Jewish life and Jewish survival is what instigated his very creation. Many of the earliest self-identifying Sabra were real sons (and daughters) of Jews who faced real persecution. In other words, while the Sabra did not experience first-hand the trauma of the Shoah or the various anti-Semitic stereotypes surrounding it (by definition, the Sabra is born in Israel), the Sabra’s parents often did. Echoing Hirsch, Natan Kellermann writes that the tragedy many of their parents experienced infiltrated Israeli narrative to the point that it became “imprinted upon the collective unconscious [of] the [Israeli] people” (2009, 106). In fact, even for those who did not experience World War II first hand, it can “see[m] as if *that war* never really ended ... Like a traumatized person, who jumps at every loud noise, the Israeli society seems to be constantly living on the end, as if it was sitting on a

sack of dynamite waiting to explode at any time” (106, 107-8; original italics). Of course, the events of the Holocaust have also impacted Israeli life on a more conscious level. Every Yom HaShoah, countrywide air-sirens are sounded throughout Israel, inviting Israeli society to take pause and remember. These sirens are the same as those played to alert persons of oncoming terrorist attacks, thus reinforcing for Israelis not only a connection between the Holocaust and the history of terrorism in Israel, but the need to remember both as a part of their civic duty.

Holocaust postmemories contribute to a complicated dynamic of the Israeli engagement with the Shoah. While, on the one hand, the Holocaust became part of the civil religion in Israel,²¹ the Sabra, on the other hand, were trained to see themselves as also always already “better than” their persecuted predecessors—the “(despised) *Diaspora Jew[s]*” (Kellermann 2009, 111; original italics). To put it more plainly, somewhere along the way, the Sabra learned, whether willingly, intentionally, or otherwise, to see reality through the lens of the perpetrators of their trauma. While this may seem strange—particularly when taking into consideration the reason for their making—it is actually common when trauma is involved. According to psychiatrist Judith Herman, “In the absence of any other point of view, [the traumatized can come] to see the world through the eyes of the perpetrator[s]” (1997, 81). This can happen even when the traumatized are trying to overcome the perpetrators of their trauma. Patricia Hearst (now Patricia Hearst Shaw) describes her experience with this phenomenon as follows:

In time, although I was hardly aware of it, they turned me around completely, or almost completely. As a prisoner of war, kept blindfolded in that closet for two long months, I had been bombarded incessantly with the SLA’s [Symbionese Liberation Army] interpretation of life, politics, economics, social conditions, and current events. Upon my release from the closet, I had thought I was humoring them by parroting their clichés and buzz words without personally believing in them. Then ... a sort of numbed shock set in. To maintain my own sanity and equilibrium while functioning day by day in this new environment, I had learned to act by rote, like a good soldier, doing as I was told and suspending disbelief ... Reality for them was different from all that I had known before, and their reality by this time had become my reality. (Quoted in Herman 1997, 81)

Though not confined in the same way, the Sabra was nevertheless shaped in the face of unrelenting anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism that concentrated on the Jew’s body, ableism, and cultural difference. To avoid repeated trauma and/or traumatic recall meant to avoid the traditionally-despised body, ability, and cultural upbringing of the Diaspora Jew.²² Through this act of escape, however, the Sabra

²¹ The Holocaust has become part of the civil religion among secular Jews in the United States, too. A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that Jewish Americans, secular or otherwise, agree most on the importance of remembering the Holocaust for Jewish identity (Pew Research Center 2013).

²² According to Psychologist Barbara Hammer, internalized anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred are common symptoms of the traumatized Jew. Whereas avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma is a common post-traumatic response—and is even needed for a PTSD

internalized a European perspective and ideal, which mirrors the more basic process of introjection taking place in the above example.²³ As psychoanalyst Nancy McWilliams writes:

Introjection is the process whereby what is outside is misunderstood as coming from inside. In its benign forms, it amounts to a primitive identification with important others ... [For example], long before a child can make a subjectively voluntary decision to be like Mommy and Daddy, he or she seems to have “swallowed” them in some primal way ... In its problematic forms, introjection can, like projection, be highly destructive ... [U]nder conditions of fear or abuse, people will try to master their fright and pain by taking on qualities of their abusers. (2011, 112)

Fantasies of revenge and retribution similarly illustrate this process. Because the mourning stage of recovery is so difficult, many survivors of trauma experience moments of resistance to it. During this time, survivors can create revenge fantasies as a form of counter-trauma and post-traumatic wish fulfillment. For in such imaginary, they can be “rid of the terror, shame, and pain of the trauma [and] restore [their] own sense of power,” without having to resort to the mourning process and the traumatic recall it entails (Herman 1997, 189). But as Herman further writes, revenge fantasy is “often a mirror image of the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed. It often has the same grotesque, frozen, and wordless quality as the traumatic memory itself” (ibid.).²⁴ Because of this, some survivors find revenge fantasy to not work at all, as they, in the end, feel too close to the perpetrators of their trauma.

Though not fantasy *per se*, the construction of the Sabra nevertheless works similarly to that of revenge fantasy—that is, as a way to tell the world that Jews *are* strong, Jews *can* fight, and Jews *will* defeat those who attempt to hurt them. In fact, the creation of the Sabra enabled Jewish revenge fantasy, in many instances, to become revenge reality. For, even though Holocaust survivors were not always well-received in the early years post-Shoah, the Sabra myth—particularly post-Shoah and, subsequently, post-1948—highlighted the Sabra’s ability to help Jews rise above any and all lingering “Amaleks,” including Hitler, the British army, and neighboring Arabs.²⁵ As Jon Stratton explains, the Sabra post-Shoah takes on

diagnosis—she writes that Jews often display this response in an avoidance of Jewish character and customs, so as to escape stereotypical and anti-Semitic associations with them. Avoidance of traumatic stimuli often takes place at the unconscious level, and it can even teeter into an unconscious swallowing of the perpetrator’s own ideals (Hammer 1995, 208-13).

²³ In broader conversations about relationships between Zionism and Jewish self-hatred, Jewish anti-Zionists may commonly be accused of internalized anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred. Lerner, for instance, has been accused of internalized anti-Semitism (see footnote 10), as has Boyarin (see footnote 26).

²⁴ We see examples of this in modern cinema: Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*, for instance, offer counter-narratives in which the Nazis and white American slave owners are hunted and destroyed violently, much in the same way that Jews and black slaves were.

²⁵ Arabs in particular became a New Amalek for the Israeli Sabra. Social discourse during the conception and solidification of the Sabra also utilized Amalek language when referring to Arab nations. For more on the complex relationship between Arabs and the New Jew, see

“fantastic characteristics of inverted ghetto thinking ... [They] live out the fantasy of the powerful ghetto ... [They live out the] fantasmatic, utopian inversion of the European stereotype of the Jew” (2000, 97-8).²⁶

The book of Esther illustrates similar trauma avoidance and revenge fantasy. It responds to diaspora hardship by conveying via fantasy that Jews are strong, Jews can fight, and Jews will defeat those who attempt to hurt them. In so doing, however, it takes on the qualities of its own abusers, much like the Sabra archetype. Rather than simply stop the edict that called for Jewish extinction, the Jews in the narrative avoid further pain by reversing it completely. And, in the end, they rejoice over their maintained—though significantly revised—Jewish identity and Jewish successes (see Jackson 2012, 218).

Conclusion

Of course, not all self-identifying Sabra look, act, or think like the mythic prototype. I am also not suggesting here that the archetypal Sabra celebrates the destruction of his adversaries as the Jews do at the end of the Esther narrative. But if we recognize the construction of the Sabra myth as combatting the stereotypes embedded in Jewish trauma—which becomes evident when analyzing the prototypical New Jew alongside the traumatic representations of the “Old”—we can recognize the Sabra’s construction and development as undergoing a form of revenge fantasy and, in turn, the introjection commonly associated with it. The Jews in Esther also employ a variety of survival tactics in response to trauma, including, but not limited to, enacting a similar narrative of retribution. While the productivity of this response can be questioned, particularly when considering revenge fantasy as “stagnation” in the recovery process (Herman 1997, 189), the purpose here is to offer a vocabulary and a set of referents through which to unpack the imperial subversions throughout the Esther text. The utilization of trauma theory, paired with an intertextual reading that focuses on the celebration of Purim throughout the Shoah and the construction/solidification of the Israeli Sabra, enables us not only to recognize the multiple counter-traumas at play within Esther, but also—and perhaps more so—to make sense of the reversal of power and command that takes place at the end of the narrative.

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Almog (2000, 185-208); Almog also discusses the conception of Arabs as a New Amalek (189-90).

²⁶ This notion corresponds well with Daniel Boyarin’s conclusion in *Unheroic Conduct* that the creation of the modern Jewish man, which corresponds with the creation of the New Jew, goes against the grain of Jewish thought and practice by assuming a particular gentile—and Aryan—heroic. For this reason, he contends that Jews should focus less on becoming men and more on the value of “the Jewish man as a sort of woman” (1997, 273).

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