

Feminist Theology and Megillat Esther: Revealing the Hidden Torah

This paper was written in honor of  
Elga K. Stulman, אסתר בת דוד הכהן וגודל,  
as righteous and courageous an Esther as ever there was,  
on the occasion of her 70th birthday.  
May her memory serve as a blessing, and inspire us to continue her legacy of bringing  
healing to the Covenant and our world  
through her Torah and her deeds.  
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In her essay, “Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism,” Tamar Ross puts forth the concept of continuing revelation as a mechanism whereby the claims of feminism on the halakhic tradition might be addressed. Continuing revelation is certainly not a new concept. It has been used countless times to manage evolutionary changes in the halakhah which might otherwise appear contrary to earlier interpretation or even the Torah text itself. “Continuing revelation” permits those changes to be reframed in such a way that the the “new” approach does not contradict earlier revelation; rather, it is understood to be part and parcel of it.

At its core, the idea of continuing revelation solves what would otherwise be an intractable problem. How is it possible to maintain the relevance and freshness of a text-based tradition, without undermining the authority of the text? Without some notion that revelation of Torah is ongoing, the Torah would become frozen in time.

The benefit of continuing revelation -- the idea that God’s will is always being revealed in new or more refined ways throughout the course of time -- is that the system can endure critique, evolve, and yet maintain authority. The difficulty is that, without proper boundaries, the “newly revealed” aspects of God’s will can completely overshadow the Sinaitic revelation, such that the tradition is not transformed and renewed but replaced.

Nevertheless, the rabbis trusted sufficiently in the process to introduce the idea that the ever-present flow of interpretation of Torah is all rooted in the revelation at Sinai:

כשהא הקב"ה ליתן את התורה, אמרה למשה על סדר, המקרא והמשנה והאגדה והתלמוד, שנאמר וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים האלה, אפילו מה שישאל תלמיד ותיק לרב, אמר הקב"ה למשה באותה שעה, שנאמר וידבר אלהים את כל הדברים

When the Holy Blessed One was about to give the Torah, [God] spoke it to Moses in order: the Scripture, and the Mishnah, and the Aggadah, and the Talmud, as it says, “God spoke all of these words” (Exod. 21:1). Even that which a distinguished scholar will ask his teacher, the Holy Blessed One told Moses at that moment, as it says, “God spoke all of these words.”

Tanhuma (Buber), Ki Tissa, Siman 17. See also Exod. R. 47:1 (אפילו מה שהתלמיד שואל) (“Even that which a student asks his teacher, the Holy Blessed One told Moses at that time”). It is not only seemingly new answers which were revealed at Sinai, but seemingly new questions as well. In other words, the Torah covenant as revealed is a covenant with built-in difficulties -- שאלות -- and built in resolutions to those difficulties.

By implication, then, Sinai involved both a revelation and a concealment; much of what was told to Moses was not retained by the tradition at that moment, but was in some way concealed or lost, to be “rediscovered” in later generations. Thus, while all potential difficulties and resolutions are part of the Torah revealed to Moses at Sinai, they also constitute a temporarily “hidden” Torah, which will not become revealed generally until the right generation and individuals arise to ask the question and provide the answer.

Among these built-in questions are not only particular textual difficulties and narrow halakhic questions, but challenges to the authority of Torah itself. Some of these difficulties are expressed openly in the Torah, and were thus always part of the fully revealed Torah. For example, how is it legally possible that later generations who were not literally, physically present at Sinai (and therefore did not accept the Torah's terms as binding) could be bound by our ancestors' agreement?<sup>1</sup> The Torah text itself raises this concern, and provides a basis for solving it (see Deut. 5:3, 29:14).

In at least one instance, however, a fundamental problem with the Sinai covenant was introduced into the tradition by the rabbis. We read in Shabbat 88a:

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר (שמות יט), אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט) קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

“They stood under the mount” (Exod. 19:17). Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: “This teaches that the Holy Blessed One overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, well and good; if not, there will be your burial.’” Rav Aha bar Jacob said: “This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.” Said Raba, “Nevertheless, the generation re-accepted it in the days of Achashverosh, for it is written, ‘The Jews confirmed, and accepted’ (Est. 9:27) -- they confirmed what they had accepted long before.”

Rashi comments on the nature of the challenge to the Torah:

מודעא רבה - שאם יומינם לדין למה לא קיימתם מה שקבלתם עליכם - יש להם תשובה, שקבלוה באונס.

“Strong protest” in that if they are summoned to judgment, “Why did you not fulfill what you accepted upon yourselves?”, they will have an answer, “In that we accepted it under duress.”

By means of this midrash, the rabbis introduced into the Sinai covenant -- the underpinning of traditional Jewish authority -- a seemingly fatal flaw. If Israel did not voluntarily accept the covenant of Sinai, but did so only under coercion, then it cannot be said to be binding.

The midrash is introduced in response to the seemingly innocuous phrase, בתחתית ההר.

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1. Another potential problem is that our consent to the covenant of Torah was not knowingly given, because the people consented to fulfilling the Torah before they heard all of its terms: ויקח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע (“He took the book of the covenant and read aloud to the people; they said, All which Adonai has spoken, we will do and will hear”) (Exod. 24:7)

Nothing in the text seems to mandate that the ambiguity of those two words be resolved by introducing the idea of duress into the Covenant. Indeed, there are many other ways of understanding what is meant by “beneath the mountain.” Nevertheless, the rabbinic mind articulated this idea that the Israelites were coerced into accepting the terms of the Torah, thereby potentially undermining the binding nature of Torah and Halakhah.

Moreover, if we take seriously the theory of continuing revelation, this “flaw” in the Sinai covenant was not simply invented by the rabbis. It too was revealed to Moses at Sinai. The Torah covenant was fundamentally flawed, and the flaw was told to Moses. The rabbis of the midrash -- in raising the problem and in responding to it -- were simply re-revealing a known truth.

Thus the rabbis’ articulation of the problem; but what is the nature of the rabbinic response? The midrash solves the problem with reference to the book of Esther, and specifically Esther 9:27, in which the people confirm that which they had accepted before. Thus, according to the midrash, while the consent given at the moment of Sinai may have been coerced, it was later affirmed freely by a generation who did so in a moment of gratitude and love, not duress or fear (see Rashi on Shabbat 88a, בימי אחשverוש, “In the days of Achashverosh, out of the love of the miracle which had been done for them”).

In reality, however, this is not a mere affirmation of what was agreed to before. Purim is a rabbinic holiday. It is the rabbis who declare Megillat Esther to be a Divinely inspired text. Indeed, elsewhere in the Gemara, the rabbis use precisely this same verse (Est. 9:27) to self-authenticate the entire Megillah:

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ויאמר המן בלבו. רבי עקיבא אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל ראה. רבי מאיר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ויודע הדבר למרדכי. רבי יוסי בן דורמסקית אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ובזוה לא שלחו את ידם. אמר שמואל: אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדיפא מכולהו, שנאמר קימו וקבלו - קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה. אמר רבא: לכולהו אית להו פירכא, לבר מדשמואל דלית ליה פירכא.

It has been taught: Rabbi Eleazar said: “Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, ‘And Haman said in his heart’” (Est. 6:6). Rabbi Akiva says: “Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, ‘And Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all who looked upon her’” (Est. 2:15). Rabbi Meir says: “Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, ‘And the thing became known to Mordechai’” (Est. 2:22). Rabbi Yose ben Durmaskit said: “Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, ‘But on the spoil they laid not their hands’” (Est. 9:10). Samuel said: “Had I been there, I would have given a proof superior to all, namely, that it says, ‘They confirmed and took upon them’” (Est. 9:27) -- they confirmed above what they took upon themselves below. Raba said: “All the proofs can be confuted except that of Samuel, which cannot be

confuted.”

Megillah 7a.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by means of this one verse, the rabbis both redeem the Sinai covenant and usurp it. In the context of Shabbat 88a, the verse is understood to mean that the generation of Esther reaffirmed the otherwise flawed Sinai covenant; that is, we accepted the word of God as authoritative. But according to Megillah 7a, the verse means exactly the opposite: God accepted Megillat Esther (the word of the rabbis) as authoritative. Thus, the verse from Esther is part of and is itself a self-authenticating text, through the use of which the rabbis themselves acquire control.

In addition, however, the rabbis looked for a verse in the Torah which could be read to foreshadow Megillat Esther. They found such a reference in Deut. 31:18, which refers to God’s hiding of the Divine “face”: *אסתר מן התורה מנין? ואנכי הסתר אסתיר* (“Where is Esther indicated in the Torah? ‘And I will surely hide my face’”) (Chullin 139b). This text grounds Megillat Esther as a part of the Sinaitic revelation of Torah. Strikingly, it does so specifically through the medium of hiddenness -- through connecting the hiddenness of God’s face in the Torah text with the hiddenness implicit in the name, “Esther.” Usually, this midrash is understood as referring to the plain meaning of the Deuteronomy verse (i.e., that God’s presence will be hidden), made manifest in the absence of God’s name from Megillat Esther. However, given that the purpose of the midrash is to establish Megillat Esther as a revealed text hinted at in the Torah itself, the hiddenness should also be understood as referring to Torah. As set forth above, the idea of continuing revelation is based on the supposition that at Sinai, Torah was both revealed and hidden. “Esther” then becomes a code name for those parts of Torah which, while revealed to Moses at Sinai, remain hidden and as yet unrevealed to the remainder of the world. Moreover, for so long as those parts of the Torah remain unspoken and hidden away, an aspect of God is also hidden

On the other hand, the word “Megillah” suggests revelation (גילוי).<sup>3</sup> By connecting the word “Megillah” with “gilui,” we can now understand the entire enterprise of Megillat Esther as symbolizing the continuing revelation of those aspects of Torah which have remained hidden to all but Moses. “Megillat Esther” refers not only specifically to the scroll of Esther, but more generally to “the revelation of the hidden.” Thus, Megillat Esther is the perfect book with which to address the structural problems inherent in the

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2. See also Ruth Rabbah. 4:5:

רב ור' חנינא ור' יונתן ובר קפרא וריב"ל אמרו המגילה הזאת אין נאמרה מפי בית דין  
מסיני נאמרה אלא שאין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה ומניין שהסכים הקב"ה עליהם רב אמר  
קימו וקבלו היהודים לא כתיב וקבל כתיב רבן של יהודים קיבל

Rab, R. Hanina, R. Jonathan, and Bar Kappara all said: “This scroll was not composed by the Court of that time, but was said upon Mt. Sinai; there is no chronological order in the Torah.” And whence do we know that the Holy Blessed One intimated agreement with them? Rab answered: “It is not written (Est. 9:27) ‘they accepted’ (*kiblu*) but ‘he accepted’ (*kibel*). Who? The Master of the Jewish people accepted.

3. See HaAri, Shaar HaKavannot, D’rushei Chag HaPurim (מגילה לשון גילוי).

Sinai covenant and establish the basis for continuing revelation as a whole. The name itself conveys the dual aspect of Torah and the concept of continuing revelation. In short, the word “Esther” is a shorthand for aspects of the Divine word which were part of God’s revelation to Moses at Sinai but concealed from the world; “Megillat Esther” represents the disclosing of those aspects of Torah through the process of continuing revelation.

“Esther,” however, is more than the name of a book; it is also the name of a woman. Thus “Megillat Esther” points not only to the re-revelation of those aspects of Torah which were both revealed concealed from the world at Sinai, but specifically to those aspects of Torah (and of the Divine “face”) which are concealed (and by implication must be revealed) by woman.

By introducing the flaw of “duress” into the Sinaitic covenant, and then redeeming that covenant through the book of Esther and the establishment of the holiday of Purim, the rabbis did more than merely reaffirm the covenant; they radically altered it. The Torah no longer belonged solely to Moses and the prophets after him; the rabbis took control over it, asserting their own authority to shape the covenant. In doing so, however, they paved the way for another radical alteration *qua* reaffirmation -- that of women. If Megillat Esther provided the means by which the rabbis were able to “rabbinize” the covenant, it also provides the means by which we are now able (and obligated) to *feminize* the covenant.

The midrash in Shabbat 88a establishes that for the Torah to be binding, it must be freely accepted, without coercion. The rabbis’ use of verse 9:27 from Megillat Esther expressly redeems the covenant from the charge of duress, but it does so only for men. If all of us -- both men and women -- accepted Torah at Sinai only under duress, the flaw has not been fully repaired unless and until women also “buy in.” Can this be said to have happened through a rabbinic process of re-reading and re-interpreting which has excluded women?

Fortunately, the text which the rabbis chose to redeem the Sinai covenant contains within it also a source of full redemption -- that is, a redemption which includes women. Obviously, it is not merely the name Esther but the story of Esther which raises issues of women’s roles. Indeed, the issue of duress (the core challenge of the Shabbat 88a midrash) appears in the first chapter of Esther, in the context of a feast: וְהַשְׂתֵּיּאָהוּבָה כִּדְתַּ אֵין אִנֶּס (“the drinking was according to law, there was no duress”) (Est. 1:8). This seemingly superfluous comment not only raises the same issue at the heart of the rabbinic midrash, but uses the same word: legality versus duress (אִנֶּס). Moreover, in the Esther story, the statement that there is no coercion may be true of the men; it is hardly accurate with regard to the women. Indeed, immediately thereafter we are introduced to a woman who is banished because she refuses to simply obey her husband, reminiscent of the midrashim on Genesis involving Lilith. Vashti is replaced by Esther, a woman who follows commands, does not reveal or assert her own identity, and does not claim her own heritage (Est. 2:10, 20). Eventually, however, Esther can no longer keep silent (Est. 4:14); she begins to issue commands (Est. 4:17), to identify herself and her heritage, and

eventually, to generate her own Scripture.<sup>4</sup> It is through this process that all the Jews (and thereby Judaism) are saved.

More particularly, looked at in context, the verse used by the rabbis (Est. 9:27) clearly relates expressly to that which was written by Mordechai:

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֵּכַי אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת  
הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ הַקְּרוּבִים וְהָרְחוֹקִים: לְקַיֵּם עֲלֵיהֶם לְהִיּוֹת עֹשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר  
לְחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר וְאֶת יוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: . . . וְקִבַּל הַיְּהוּדִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הִחֲלוּ  
לַעֲשׂוֹת וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר־כָּתַב מֶרְדֵּכַי אֲלֵיהֶם: . . . עַל־כֵּן עַל־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הָאֲגֵרֶת הַזֹּאת וּמֵה־רָאוּ  
עַל־כֵּךְ וּמֵה הִגִּיעַ אֲלֵיהֶם: קִיְּמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ [וְקִבְּלוּ] הַיְּהוּדִים | עֲלֵיהֶם | וְעַל־זָרְעָם וְעַל  
כָּל־הַנְּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוֹר לְהִיּוֹת עֹשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַזְּמָנָם  
בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: וְהַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה נִזְכָּרִים וְנִעֲשִׂים בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר מִשְׁפָּחָה וּמִשְׁפָּחָה מְדִינָה  
וּמְדִינָה וְעִיר וְעִיר וַיְמִי הַפּוּרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַיְּהוּדִים וְזָכָרָם לֹא־יִסּוּף מִזָּרְעָם:

Mordechai wrote down these things, and sent scrolls to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far, to establish upon them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year . . . The Jews therefore assumed as an obligation all which Mordechai had begun to do and that which Mordechai had written for them . . . In view, then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them, the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. Consequently, these days are recalled and observed in every generation; by every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants.

Esther 9:20-21, 23, 26-28. The next verse, which the rabbis did not choose, is very striking:

וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלֶכָה בֵּת־אֲבִיחַיִל וּמֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי אֶת־כָּל־תִּקְוֹת לְקַיֵּם אֶת אֲגֵרֶת הַפּוּרִים  
הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁנִיָּת:

Then Queen Esther daughter of Avihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordechai the Jew.

Est. 9:29 (JPS Translation). Admittedly, the text of the verse is extremely jumbled, and its meaning is by no means clear: it is “a most confusing verse and one that introduces a passage that is so convoluted and contradictory that conjectural emendations of the text

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4. Michael Graetz, in his essay “The Passage of Time in the Book of Esther” (Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly, 1994), highlights Mordechai’s and Esther’s reversal of roles with respect to issuing and obeying orders. Initially, Esther obeys Mordechai’s commands (Est. 2:20); by chapter 4 it is Mordechai who obeys Esther’s commands. Eventually (see Est. 8:7-8, 9:29-31), there seems to be a shared authority.

have become legion.”<sup>5</sup> Jon Levenson notes that the idea “[t]hat Queen Esther would write a second letter about Purim to confirm the first, which is Mordechai’s, would make much sense.” Nevertheless, he reads the verse as saying that Esther and Mordechai were co-authors of the second letter.<sup>6</sup> This reading is certainly plausible, although it fails to account for the resulting lack of agreement between the subjects (Esther and Mordechai) and the verb (וּתְּכַתֵּב) of the verse. It also leaves unexplained the reference in Est. 9:32 to וְאֶסְתֵּר מֵאִמֵּר אֶסְתֵּר being written in a scroll. Arguably, the text could instead be read to be stating that Esther was the daughter of both Avichail and Mordechai, who adopted her as his daughter (Est. 2:7, 15). In that case, Esther was the sole author of the letter.

In any event, regardless of whether Esther is the sole author or co-author of the second letter, the verse has extraordinary implications for our discussion. Pursuant to this verse, without Esther’s written confirmation (either alone or joined with Mordechai), the letter written by Mordechai does not have “full force.” Nevertheless, the text chosen by the rabbis to ratify the Sinai covenant (Est. 9:27) clearly relates only to this first letter written by Mordechai alone. By implication, then, the rabbinic effort to redeem the Sinai covenant remains incomplete; it does not have “full force” or authority absent the “second letter” -- the one in which the woman’s voice is fully included and written down.

Moreover, the fact that this verse in particular is so garbled is itself significant. I have argued that Megillat Esther should be seen as symbolic of the process of revealing the as-yet concealed Torah, which process redeems an otherwise flawed covenant and revelatory event. I have further argued that Megillat Esther stands not only for the process of revealing hidden Torah in general, but also specifically hints that there is a hidden Torah of women which is yet to be revealed. If so, then this verse more than any other contains the hint that such Torah exists, and that for the Sinai covenant to have full force and authority the Torah of women must be revealed and included within it. The verse itself is so garbled and unclear because the Torah of women as yet remained (and remains) largely concealed, not yet fully comprehensible.

Immediately after this potent verse, the text of the Megillah continues:

וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים אֶל-שִׁבְעַת וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינַת מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ דְּבָרֵי שְׁלוֹם וְנִאֲמָת: לְקִיָּם אֶת-יָמֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּזִמְנֵיהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר קִיָּם עֲלֵיהֶם מִרְדְּכָי הַיְהוּדִי וְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וְכַאֲשֶׁר קִיָּמוּ עַל-נַפְשָׁם וְעַל-זָרְעָם דְּבָרֵי הַצְּמוּת וְזִעְקוֹתָם: וּמֵאִמֵּר אֶסְתֵּר קִיָּם דְּבָרֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְתָּב בְּסֵפֶר

Scrolls were sent to all the Jews in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the realm of Achashverosh with words of peace and truth, establishing these days of Purim at their proper time, as Mordechai the Jew -- and now Queen Esther -- has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations. And Esther’s statement establishing these

5. Jon D. Levenson, Esther -- A Commentary (Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 129.

6. Ibid, pp. 129-30.



observances of Purim was written in a scroll.

Est. 9:26-32. As with the first letter written by Mordechai, Esther's letter too is sent out in "scrolls" throughout the land, and the days of Purim are affirmed as binding upon the Jews of the day and all generations to come (cf. Est. 9:20, 23, and 27). There is, however, one difference. When the second set of scrolls is sent out (paralleling, perhaps, the second set of tablets), they contain דְּבָרֵי שְׁלוֹם וְאֵמֶת (Est. 9:30) -- words of peace and truth. By implication, the first letter -- excluding the scroll written by women -- is neither whole (שלם) nor entirely "true" (אמת).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, if the flaw in the Sinai covenant and its resolution are not merely rabbinic interpolations, but are part of a "continuing revelation," then the implications of the rabbis' choice of Esther to solve the problem are also "revealed." Megillat Esther and the holiday of Purim (with its theme of freedom from one's own identity and specifically freedom from gender) are necessary to redeem and complete the Sinai covenant. The revealed rabbinic tradition teaches us that Torah is not binding upon those who did not choose it freely; Megillat Esther, and the rabbis' use of it, suggests that the flaw in the covenant will not be fully repaired until women's voices are made a full part of the tradition. The second letter and set of scrolls have just begun to be written; until they are complete, our Torah is not yet whole or true. In using Megillat Esther to "rabbinize" Sinai, the rabbis may not have been aware that their methodology would one day suggest the need to "feminize" Sinai, and the mechanism whereby that might be accomplished; however, as the rabbis themselves concluded, אֶסְתֵּר בְּרוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ נֹאמְרָה.

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7. See also Mishnah Megillah 2:3 and R. Meir's opinion (followed in the Gemara) that to fulfill one's obligation of reading the megillah one must read it all, in its entirety.