

A hero. An inspiration. She was courageous, brave, poised, and dignified.

She was also a liar. A conspiring opportunist. A drunk, old-enough, girl who should have known better.

Which one is it? Is it all just a matter of perspective? Of affiliation? Or is there an objective truth we can discover and should proclaim?

“Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr.” By the great Miguel de Unamuno. It’s the book that often comforts me when the night stays too long, when daybreak seems an impossibility.

The central plot goes like this: When an atheist named Lázaro approaches Father Emmanuel with a plan for converting the church into a headquarters for an agrarian syndicate, Emmanuel refuses on the grounds that the purpose of religion is not to influence or resolve political issues—it is meant to provide people the hope, if not “illusion” of eternal life. In a particularly revealing passage, this atheist, Lázaro, has his first Holy Communion to the delight of his sister and the whole village. But when the sister talks to Emmanuel, she is saddened to hear that her brother did not undergo a religious conversion; instead, he is merely pretending to adhere to Catholic beliefs for the good of the village at Emmanuel’s suggestion. But good he does, for this atheist then devotes the rest of his life to the health of the village, the church, and its people. Later, the priest confides to the sister that he himself has experienced serious doubts not only about the afterlife, but also regarding the very existence of God—yet has decided that it is morally responsible to encourage his parishioners to trust that immortality exists, since it is possible that it does, and good that it would. Despite his own doubts, or perhaps because of them, he executes his duties as a parish priest in an exemplary fashion. And when Emmanuel dies, the Church collective begins to view him posthumously as a saint.¹

So, sinner or saint? Was Emmanuel a fraud? An imposter? A sinner and a liar since he pedaled around a faith for others that he himself couldn’t believe in? Or was he, because of precisely that, virtuous? Selfless? Ethical? Even, say, saint-like?

Enter Esther. Here was a woman, as we read in our text, who was brave enough to stand before a king and condemn a man employed in his very royal company. This man Haman, who had planned to not only hang Esther’s cousin Mordecai, but also exterminate the entire Jewish populace, enters the banquet hall and feasts alongside Esther as if nothing was off or afoul. He even has the audacity to casually sip on the wine she had poured while dining in the seat right next to her. It’s as if he honestly and brazenly thinks he is above all reproach and consequence. But then Esther just drops a bomb on him. She stands up, calls out “wicked” Haman by name, and then petitions for her life and the life of her people to be saved. Just think about that courage for a second. For Haman was not only one of the king’s chosen men, but was also close enough to him in chapter’s prior to be able persuade the king to go along with his sick plan to annihilate the Jews. And yet, in both of their powerful male presences, the king’s and Haman’s, Esther resisted and persisted.

Haman, though initially terrified at her accusation, astonishingly, suddenly feels emboldened and above all law. And like an entitled, privileged, piece of you know what reacts to Esther’s charge by trying to rape her. Some commentaries try to soften the language and insinuation, but when Haman “throws himself down on the couch where Esther was reclining (verse 8a)” it seems, to me at least, that his intent was clear as day. Even the king responds in common when he walks in on this despicable act saying, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house (verse 8b).”

Ultimately, in an act of perfect irony, Haman is put to death by the king, on the very same gallows that he had readied for Esther’s cousin Mordecai. And so, by consequence, Esther saves herself, her cousin, and all of her people from destruction. And it would be forever memorialized and remembered as the celebration and feast of Purim.

Now, one might think then that after all of this Esther would be revered throughout history. Both her character and personhood as well as the Biblical story and book itself. That there would be songs and tributes continually offered in her name, by all and always. But surprisingly, that wasn’t and isn’t entirely so. For even though she risked her own life and succeeded at securing the lives of many (of God’s very people), some, even amongst her own lineage, have found themselves entangled in the *rest* of the details about her life. Such as, some have critiqued Esther, both her character and the book, for never once mentioning God’s name, and thus never once adequately giving God the credit for the incredible turn of events. They further lambast that there are no prayers or sacrifices explicitly offered, nor any mention of the Temple or Jerusalem recorded. It’s as if she didn’t know how she got there, or to where she was going. Additionally, they say that Esther never seemed to follow or even acknowledge Jewish law. Namely because she eats non-kosher food, and she seems thoroughly assimilated into the Gentile world.² My friends, she *eats* and *assimilates*. Can you imagine her audacity?

One side says, she risks and she saves! But the other side says, oh but eats and assimilates!

¹ Summary taken from <https://www.enotes.com/topics/saint-emmanuel/critical-essays/saint-emmanuel-good-martyr-miguel-de-unamuno>

² From introductory notes about Esther in the New Interpreter’s Study Bible, p 689.

One commenter on the Jewish Encyclopedia website, no less, went as far to say, “She married a gentile. And a very wicked one at that. How faithful then was she to Torah and so to God - despite what she may have done positively speaking? There’s clearly different ways to look at this History...”³So, sinner or saint?

Enter Jesus. Obviously, I think, we all know of the widely varying perspectives on Christ. Was he a false prophet? A mere figment of hopeful imaginations? A sinner who worked on the Sabbath, who fiendishly exorcised demons, who hung around with the great unwashed all too visibly and too often? Or was he the Messiah? The Good Shepherd? The Son of God? The preeminent Saint?

But let’s put that aside, for what we’re concerned more with today are the words not so much about him, but the words he himself employed when educating his disciples in Mark 9:38-41. Fresh on the heels of bickering over who was the greatest amongst them, this time the disciples are seen condemning the sinful efforts of others for healing (yes, you heard me right: condemning them for *healing*) by an unsanctioned formula, and they bring their whining and complaints to Jesus. Jesus, as I like to imagine, looks them directly in the eyes and thinks, *you fools will just never understand, will you?* He basically asks them, *by what Name did these others go about their healing?* They sheepishly answer, *well, by your Name, I guess, Jesus.* And Jesus, again as I like to imagine, looks at them incredulously and says... *so, what exactly is the problem here, fellas?* Jesus succinctly and matter-of-factly tells them “whoever is not against us is for us.” Or in other words, just let other people help people, stupid. What difference does it make? What sin have they committed? Stop focusing on the insignificant and celebrate instead what they are achieving! Or would you rather them see someone else in pain, promptly leave, because they had to first come to us and ask permission for just the right way to proceed? No, we should be encouraging such selflessness, such inspiration, such courage, rather than being caught up in all the procedural red tape. For these are not sinners, they are, actually, like saints!

Sinners or Saints?

My friends, though we so often fashion our own perspective as Torah, I think we would do well by remembering that it’s just as often not. And so, on that pleasant note on one’s view and memory, I think we all might benefit to keep these points close to our hearts as we leave here today:

- 1) God works through surprising ways and imperfect creatures, all the time. All the time.
- 2) Sinners are saints and saints are sinners. None of us are perfect. All fall short. Even the best of us. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that all of us are the same. Or that everything is equivalent. For some appear to be better, and some are no doubt worse. Indeed, some are absolutely right, while others are just flat out wrong.
- 3) So there could very well be saints all around you. And sinners too! Yes, both of them even right next to you right here in these pews. Outside in different shapes. Outside in different colors. Yes, even red. And. Yes, even blue.
- 4) Esther never invoked the name of God and yet, she seemed to accomplish a heck of a lot of good. Just maybe then our friends of other faiths, or even those who hold fast to no faith at all, are capable of the same. The same good, in fact.
- 5) For just because you live by a different formula or creed, that should not mean that you are worthy of reproach or to be condemned of heresy. Especially if you are harming no one. Especially if you are only doing your civic duty, loving, and caring for others.
- 6) And to that point, you know, helping others matters. Like actually, it kind of matters a lot. It seems we often deceive ourselves, believing that God’s grace so abounds that we are required to do nothing else in life but simply open our arms wide and freely receive it in isolation. But doing, and extending that grace, in community and fellowship, with neighbor and toward stranger, my friends, is just as important. If not critical. If not even the whole point.
- 7) But don’t just do *anything* you please, oh no. Don’t go put a stumbling block before others, or, be warned, you will hang a very heavy millstone around your very neck! But do good. Do good. Tell the truth. Fight for justice. Be kind, humble, but dignified and strong in your approach. Risk everything for good. Risk even your own comforts for good, for the good of many, for the good of all.

For only then will righteousness be vindicated by her deeds. For only then shall the truth – that is, the objective Truth -- be opened and revealed to all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/967-ahasuerus>