Queen Esther to FokusIsrael.ch: “I would never hold a people responsible for the intentions of its leaders”

About the person:

The biblical Queen Esther became famous for risking her own life to save the Jewish people from annihilation. She is one of the most remarkable women in the Bible because, through her courage, wisdom, patience, and influence as queen, she changed the course of an entire people’s history. Her story is told in the Old Testament book of Esther. Esther lived in Persia in the 5th century B.C., likely during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, ca. 486–465 B.C.). After Queen Vashti was deposed, Esther was chosen as the new queen because of her beauty and grace—without anyone knowing she was Jewish. The decisive moment in her story began with the influential royal official Haman. Haman hated Esther’s adoptive father, Mordecai, because Mordecai refused to bow down to him. In his rage, Haman planned not only Mordecai’s death but also the annihilation of all Jews in the Persian Empire. He persuaded the king to issue a decree to that effect. Mordecai learned of Haman’s plan and asked Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. But this was a life-threatening endeavor. For anyone who appeared before the king without an invitation could be executed, unless the king expressly granted them mercy. Esther knew, therefore, that she might die if she attempted this. She asked Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa, then the capital of the Persian Empire, and to fast for three days on their behalf. Esther and her maidservants also intended to fast. She then invited the king and Haman to two banquets and revealed her Jewish identity as well as Haman’s plot. The king became furious and ordered Haman to be executed on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. However, since the original royal decree could not simply be revoked under Persian law, the king issued a new decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their attackers. Thus, Esther and Mordecai succeeded in averting the impending annihilation of the Jewish people. After their victory over their enemies, the Jews established the festival of Purim, which is still celebrated today in remembrance of their salvation from annihilation at the hands of Haman. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Queen Esther about courage, beauty, power, responsibility, and the salvation of the Jewish people.

Your Majesty, you are one of the first—and to this day, one of the most famous—heroines in human history. Does that surprise you?

Queen Esther: Yes, it does surprise me. I was a young woman who was simply trying to find my place in life at first. I didn’t know that my decisions would one day affect so many people. I didn’t act to become famous, but because my people were in mortal danger.

What motivated you to risk your life to save the Jewish people: fear for yourself, because you are also Jewish; Mordechai’s influence; your love for the Jewish people; your trust in God or simply your sense of responsibility and your humanity?

Queen Esther: It was probably a combination of everything. Mordecai reminded me that perhaps I had become queen precisely so that I could help at this very moment. I knew I couldn’t remain silent. That’s why I said, “If I must die, then so be it!”

How did the king react when you revealed your Jewish identity to him and then told him of Haman’s plan to exterminate the Jews?

Queen Esther: At first, he was shocked and asked who would dare to plan such a thing. So I told him that Haman was our enemy. The king became very angry. Haman was ultimately punished, and my people were given the opportunity to defend themselves.

You knew that by taking that action before the king, you were putting your own life at risk: Weren’t you afraid?

Queen Esther: Of course I was afraid! I knew I could die if the king did not extend his scepter to me. That is why I asked my people to fast for three days on my behalf. But sometimes you have to act despite your fear. My life was no more important than the lives of my people.

You became queen because of your beauty: Was that a source of regret for you, since you would have preferred to be chosen as queen for your wisdom?

Queen Esther: The king was pleased with my beauty. But I believe that beauty alone is not enough to fulfill such a task. When it came down to it, I had to demonstrate courage, wisdom, and determination. I didn’t just want to be queen; I wanted to use my position for a meaningful purpose.

Today, it’s considered degrading for a woman to be given a special position solely for the sake of her beauty. Do you understand this?

Queen Esther: Yes, I can understand that. A woman shouldn’t be reduced to her appearance. Beauty may open doors, but it says nothing about what a person is truly capable of. What matters is what we accomplish with our abilities, our voice, and our opportunities.

It’s still unusual for women to have as much influence as you do. What can women do to make this the norm?

Queen Esther: Women should become aware of their abilities, take on responsibility, and support one another. They shouldn’t let anyone convince them that important decisions are reserved only for men. I myself had to learn to speak up. Sometimes a single courageous step can make a huge difference.

What is your relationship with religion and God, anyway?

Queen Esther: My faith and my Jewish heritage are part of my identity. Even though God is not explicitly mentioned by name in the story told about me, I trusted that there was a reason I had become queen at that particular time. We fasted together before I went to see the king. For me, that meant pausing, gathering strength, and hoping for God’s help. I believe that we humans are sometimes given a task that is greater than ourselves

Ever since Haman, others have repeatedly tried to destroy the Jewish people. What do you recommend they do to counter this?

Queen Esther: Don’t let yourselves be intimidated, and never lose your sense of unity. Stand up for one another, preserve your identity, and seek out allies. Be vigilant and courageous, but don’t lose your humanity in the process. When my people were threatened, I learned that silence can be dangerous. Sometimes you have to stand up and take action.

Currently, the greatest enemies of the Jewish people are once again the rulers of Persia—which is now called Iran—but not the Persian or Iranian people themselves. Was that already the case in your time?

Queen Esther: Yes, even in my day there was a huge difference between those in power and the people who lived in the empire. Haman wanted to annihilate our people, but the Persian King Ahasuerus was not our enemy (nor was the former Shah Reza Pahlavi, nor is his son, who today leads the opposition against the mullah regime—Ed.). On the contrary: He listened to me, granted me protection, and enabled our people to defend themselves. Many officials also ultimately supported Mordecai. I would therefore never hold an entire people responsible for the intentions of individual rulers. It is crucial to distinguish between ordinary people and those who abuse their power.

Note: This conversation with King David is based on the Bible. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our goal is to use AI to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include:

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “father of the atomic bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer.

Hannah Arendt, journalist and outspoken thinker

Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews

Paul Grüninger, the St. Gallen police commander who was dismissed and convicted for helping persecuted Jews

Raoul Wallenberg, the young Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest and was then abducted and killed by the Russians

Oskar Schindler, who, as the head of a factory in Poland, saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews andbecame famous through the film “Schindler’sList”King David, who, as a young man, defeated Goliath and saved the Jews from the Philistines