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# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

*Celebrating 25 years of diversity and dialogue*

## In this issue

**We use this time of Adar I--the additional month in the leap year--to talk about Purim: from the incomplete emancipation of Esther to reflections on the Hebron massacre.**

**Next month, Adar II, *Sh'ma* will celebrate Purim.**

## The unfinished business of *megillat esther* Bea Wwyler

*Megillat Esther* illustrates, in a highly artful manner, how a totalitarian system deals with disobedience. The agitants leading to the exercise of absolute power are two individuals, Vashti and Mordechai. As a result of their provocation, *all* women and *all* Jews in the Persian empire of king Ahashverosh are victimized. The book of Esther is thus sexist and racist.

However, within the framework of the book, the Jewish problem finds a resolution with a (more or less) happy ending. The subjugation of the women, on the other hand, is not resolved. Rather, it continues to exist beyond the end of the book into our own day. This should have implications for how we celebrate Purim today.

### Individual As Community

Since in its main plot, covering three quarters of the entire text, the book of Esther narrates the story of the anti-Jewish pogrom ordained and sanctioned by the state, it is generally understood as a book with a Jewish theme. But this is only partially so. By the time the book 'turns Jewish' in chapter 3, the Persian empire is already a state in which executive power is defined by way of subjugating a whole class of society. As a response to queen Vashti's refusal to appear before the king, all women in the entire empire are commanded to obey their husbands--per royal decree.

Interestingly enough, absolute power is established as a response to the disobedience of one individual. The fact that it is the First Lady marks a first-rate scandal. The challenge towards the authority is so serious that it misleads the ruling class to abuse their power.

Vashti is dethroned and, as a preventive stroke, all within her class are subjugated. The ruling class is male. What is established in chapter 1 with reference to the woman, is repeated in chapter 3 with reference to the Jews.

Mordechai's refusal to bow before the royal authorities is met with a verdict to be hung on the gallows, and at the same time an empire-wide preventive pogrom against all the Jews is pronounced. Punishment of the individual transgressor and preventive means to avoid spreading of the challenge has become a pattern: the ruling class is male *and* Persian.

### Emancipation as Jew

Esther is the only figure who represents both discriminations. She is twice over marginal and 'other'--disobedience is thus

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predetermined! Is she going to deny her compliance as a Jew, which would be against Mordechai? Or as a woman, which would be against the king? It quickly becomes clear in chapter 4 that she is in a dilemma. If she obeys the Jew Mordechai and entreats for the Jews, she risks her life by disobeying the king, but if she complies with the royal rules, the Jews are certainly to die.

The man Mordechai puts enormous pressure on her, commanding she now exercise loyalty towards her co-religionists, otherwise she will surely disappear due to her non-compliance with his demands--and thus Mordechai induces her remarkable emancipation as a Jew. Unless she is loyal to the identity group which currently suffers the greater danger, she has no chance of survival. "I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (4:16) are Esther's words to convey that she has learned her lesson. As an emancipated Jew, she appears before the king and the entreaty for ethnic identity groups develops successfully.

### Incomplete Emancipation of Women

However, that achieved, with literally all the power in her hands at the beginning of chapter 8, she commits a tragic mistake. She hands this power over to Mordechai, so that they together finish the job of saving the Jews. In the last verse of the book, it is made very clear that the power remains entirely in male hands, namely in Mordechai's.

Esther, the liberator of the Jews, has missed the chance to liberate the women at the same time. Queen Esther has learned only one lesson: What she has learned as a Jew about discrimination is not applicable to her situation as a woman in a male-dominated world. What infringement on her dignity as a woman might make her take a similarly oppositional stand?

As a Jew, she fights for the right to self-definition. As a woman, she gets stuck in a system where others decide about right and wrong. Queen Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, in the script and language of her own husband, the king, due to her blindness about her situation as a woman. Esther's insights about how to fight subjugation come to a dead end. Her emancipation is one-sided and thus incomplete.

### Fasting Toward Full Emancipation

While Mordechai pushed Esther to emancipation as a Jew, by ironically exercising male power over her, nobody pushes her to apply her newly gained knowledge to her other discriminative situation. Vashti needs to be rehabilitated!

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**BEA WYLER is a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.**

As Jews, we have good reasons to celebrate Purim. As women, we have no reasons to celebrate since our subjugation still stands. And as female Jews--isn't there an unresolvable dilemma? Surprisingly not, for there is the Fast of Esther, night before Purim, which offers itself to reinterpretation. As Jewish women of today, we need to give it new meaning as a fast of *current* mourning for the lasting discrimination and subjugation of women, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. The time has come that we learn the lesson Esther so tragically missed.

(A fuller version of this paper appears in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, vol. 'Esther', ed: Athalya Brenner, Sheffield Academic Press, Jan 1995.) □

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→ **LAST CHANCE!** ←  
**PURIM'S COMING**  
**DEADLINE:**  
**FEBRUARY 10**  
**THINK FUNNY!**

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