

The Torah of Women's Opinions

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is the primary value of Purim as you know it? What might some new concepts of the value of Purim be given these contexts
- What might the intent of the story of Purim be vs. the actual impact of the story of Purim (on women, on Jews...)?

GOALS:

- To rethink Vashti & Ester's roles in the Purim story and reassess interpretation of her characterization(s)
- To consider women's voices as vehicles for change in our texts and in modern society

The Jews Are Coming: Esther & Mordechai

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=LVe4uPv5tIE>

Queen Vashti's Comfy Pants

Leah Berkowitz

P.8-9

"Now Hold It! Vashti scolded.

Freeze!

Could he at least say 'Thanks' or 'Please'?"

Queen Vashti found this very rude

She did not like his attitude

She told the messenger, "Please go

And tell the king that I said, 'NO.'

And if you could, please do explain:

I have my friends to entertain

I will not don my royal crown

Or change into a fancy gown.

I am not in the mood to dance,

For I am in my COMFY PANTS!"

For Discussion:

- What are some similarities between Mordechai and Ahasuerus in these two sources?
- Describe Vashti and Esther's reactions.
- Satire, humor and children's stories are often ways in which we tell uncomfortable truths. What are some of the truths in past interpretations you've experienced of Purim been? How do they compare or contrast with these?

Megillat Esther 1: 9-22

In addition, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women, in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the king was **merry with wine**, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. **But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs.** The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him. Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. (For it was the royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent. His closest advisers were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven ministers of Persia and Media who had access to the royal presence and occupied the first place in the kingdom.) "What," [he asked,] "shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?"

Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: **"Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.**

This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty's officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation!

"If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of

King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she.

Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm, vast though it is; **and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike.**"

The proposal was approved by the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people."

Summary of the Holiday of Purim by Rabbi Miriam Liebman

The holiday of Purim commemorates the story of Esther, the Jewish woman who married the ancient Persian King Achashverosh and saved her people from Haman's genocidal plot. For many, Purim is remembered best as a children's holiday, marked by dressing up in a costume. There's something fun and exciting about wearing a mask, being someone else. For kids, Purim can feel like a Jewish version of Halloween - even though it's really a closer cousin of Mardi Gras, similar to the Roman and later European topsy-turvy "carnival", where opposites and reversals are emphasized. People can masquerade as others from a different background, public drunkenness is encouraged, the Jews hang their oppressors on the gallows meant for themselves, and a woman saves the day.

Because of course, the story of Purim is far from child's play. The Book of Esther opens with a scene featuring King Achashverosh at a raucous, drunken feast, demanding that his wife, Vashti, come out and "display to the people her beauty." (1:11). Vashti refuses - whether because she's stubborn, or perhaps, given that some Jewish commentaries suggest that she was asked to come out naked, she was concerned for her integrity and perhaps safety.

Vashti is deposed for her refusal, and Esther becomes queen. However, upon taking the throne, "Esther did not tell of her people or her ancestry," on the instruction of her uncle Mordechai (2:10). Esther, as she took on the royal robes, hid an essential part of who she was. This becomes the focal point of the story, as Haman, the king's closest advisor, seeks to annihilate the Jews - because Mordechai refuses to prostrate himself to Haman. (Traditional commentaries claim that Mordechai refused on the grounds that he only bows before God.) Haman makes a plan and gets the king's approval, and the date for the disaster is set.

When Esther hears what Haman has planned, she, like Jews all over the kingdom, is frightened. Yet when Mordechai asks her to intervene, to beg the king to stop the plan, she replies that, since she hasn't been summoned by the king, she would have to risk her life to speak up - in ancient Persia, you can't just go in front of the king any time you please, even if you're the queen. But Mordechai tells Esther: "Do not think you will find refuge in the king's palace and avoid the fate of all other Jews. For if you keep silent at this moment, salvation will come from somewhere else, and you and your ancestors will perish. And who knows - perhaps it was for a moment just like this that you became queen" (4:13-14). Mordechai's words move Esther, and she tells him to gather all the Jews of the capital and fast for three days along with her. "And will go before the king - against the law - and if I perish, I perish" (4:16).

Esther winds up making a dinner for her husband, King Achashverosh, and Haman, at which she pleads her case: "I and my people have been sold - to be destroyed, murdered, wiped out." Who would do such a thing? The king asks. Haman, replies ESTher. The king orders Haman hanged (on the gallows on which he had planned to hang Mordechai), and the Jews defend themselves against their would-be attackers. By speaking up and revealing herself, Esther saves her people. The Jews then carry out a bloody battle, in which more than 75,000 people lose their lives, and in which fear of death prompts countless others to feign Jewishness.

For Discussion:

- Here we see english Megillah translation and interpretation/summary of the Purim story. Discuss similarities, differences, and any discrepancies.
- What would a modern context for Ahasuerus' actions be? How might they be described today, and how might they be interpreted?
- How is Vashti's refusal interpreted in the text? What might be another consideration(s) for her refusal?
- What is the value Ahasuerus' is asserting in his decree? What is Vashti's? What kind of impact and intent exist in this scenario?
- The story shifts in R' Liebman's summary (and in the broader *Megillah*) towards the greater Jewish good narrative. What is the intent of this? What is the impact on the women of the story?

Lindy West, "Brave enough to be angry"

The New York Times

November 8, 2017

"Not only are women expected to weather sexual violence, intimate partner violence, workplace discrimination, institutional subordination, the expectation of free domestic labor, the blame for our own victimization, and all the subtler, invisible cuts that undermine us daily, we are not even allowed to be angry about it. Close your eyes and think of America.

We are expected to keep quiet about the men who prey upon us, as though their predation was our choice, not theirs. We are expected to sit quietly as men debate whether or not the state should be allowed to forcibly use our bodies as incubators. We are expected to not complain as we are diminished, degraded and discredited...

I did not call myself a feminist until I was nearly 20 years old. My world had taught me that feminists were ugly and ridiculous, and I did not want to be ugly and ridiculous. I wanted to be cool and desired by men, because even as a teenager I knew implicitly that pandering for male approval was a woman's most effective currency. It was my best shot at success, or at least safety, and I wasn't sophisticated enough to see that success and safety, bestowed conditionally, aren't success and safety at all. They are domestication and implied violence.

To put it another way, it took me two decades to become brave enough to be angry. Feminism is the collective manifestation of female anger. They suppress our anger for a reason.

Let's prove them right."