

The Queen

Esther: No Makeup

The Book of Esther was written for the stage. Each scene is elaborately presented with a description of the setting, the decoration, the protagonists and the dialogue. There are main characters which appear in pairs: King and Queen I, King and Queen II, Queen II and Mordechai, and Haman and Zeresh. There are also groups of sevens: eunuchs (1:10), wise men (1:13), and Esther's maidens (2:9). Suspense is built as the author moves from one scene to another, developing the plot across parallel platforms: the capital Shushan, Vashti's palace, two harems, the royal court, etc. Especially intriguing is the dialogue between the king and the unsuspecting Haman (6:6-10) in which the omniscient narrator gets Haman excited, thinking of the honor the king is about to bestow on him, while the readers hold their breath, waiting for Haman's reaction as the harsh realization that the honor is intended for his archenemy dawns on him.

Vashti, No Makeup:

The tension between the king and his wife stemmed from mundane issues, common to most couples. Vashti refused to come to the king's feast because she was an independent, opinionated woman, perhaps the first biblical feminist, and would not be treated as a trophy wife. She was upset that after seven days of drinking and partying, the king suddenly recalled that he has a wife, and decided to march her off in front of his guests, displaying her as one of his possessions. The king also committed the grave mistake of not asking her personally, but rather sending his emissaries: "Queen Vashti refused to accept the royal invitation, handed to her by the eunuchs" (1:12).

A 21st century American woman might have gotten away with it, but Vashti was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and she irritated not only the king but all his advisors, who found an

opportunity to establish hierarchy in their own troubled households. Don't mourn for Vashti, though, because she was not executed, rather sent to live alone in the harem. The wise advisors wanted to have control over the raucous king and they knew that a dead Vashti would be forgotten while the existence of a living, inaccessible one, would haunt the king and make him susceptible to their suggestions.

The fall of Vashti was brought about by her self-respect and his frivolity, and it has set the stage for the great events to follow. In that part of the Megillahh we learn that the Persians are pedantic and faithful to the letter of the law. Once the king signed a decree forbidding Vashti from coming into his presence, there is no way he can overturn it. It gives new meaning and appreciation to the heroic act of Esther who presented herself to the king uninvited, because she could have been executed with no further discussion, according to the laws of Persia and Medea (4:11). As the rabbis commented in the Talmud, the first and second decree in the Megillahh helped prevent a major disaster, since people questioned the need to legislate the banishment of the queen and establishment of male hierarchy in the household. As a result, when the decree was given that in eleven months' time all Jews should be annihilated and their possessions looted, the neighboring nations preferred to wait and not take early action, as the king might come up with a contradicting decree and hold them responsible for following the first one. If not for that fear, those nations would have started immediately to oppress and ransack the Jews, who were destined to execution within the year.

Confrontational Mordechai

Following the banishment of Vashti, we read of the meteoric ascend of Haman, which reinforces the image of the king as a rich heir who does not want to bother with the daily grind of running the kingdom. He is assisted previously by the sages and the eunuchs, and now gives Haman near-total control. Mordechai, who held a position in the royal court, as part of the inclusive diplomacy of the Persian Empire, understood the true personality of Haman. He knew that Haman will never be satisfied with being the second-in-command, and that when the time will come, he will find a way to topple the king and usurp the throne.

Mordechai's involvement in the inner dealings of the royal court has already been displayed, when he exposed the plot to assassinate the king, and he was now devising a plan to stop Haman

before it is too late. Mordechai decided to draw Haman to the open and reveal his true colors. He knew that under a Hamanic regime the Jews will be the first target, because of their unique, anti-pagan religion, and their dispersion. Mordechai also understood what modern sociologists have proven recently, that in times of financial distress foreign ethnicities are viewed as taking away the sustenance of the locals. The ensuing result is ethnic cleansing, either by war and executions, or by the gentler version of mass expulsion. The expulsion from Spain and the Holocaust were stirred in great part by leaders who blamed the Jews for exploiting the local economy, and studies of the massacres in Rwanda and in former Yugoslavia have shown that foreigners with better economic status were the first to be attacked.

Mordechai played a very dangerous game. He confronted Haman publicly and declared that he will not bow to him because he is a Jew. There was no mention of idolatry or religion, only of ethnicity. If Mordechai had wanted to avoid bowing down to a human, or to idolatrous objects worn by Haman, he could have chosen to avoid encounter with the man, but that was not what he wanted. He wanted Haman to lock in on the Jews as a target and an experiment in his rise to ultimate power, and then remove him before it is too late. He relied on the adherence of ancient Persians, not unlike the Nazis, to rules and regulations, and hoped that he will have enough time to act.

Haman indeed takes the bait, and as Mordechai predicted, plans to annihilate the whole nation of the defiant Jewish courtier. The hidden hand of divine intervention appears here for a second, when Haman casts the lots, or Purim in Persian, to determine the date of the Final Solution. He casts the lots on the first month, Nissan, and sets the date to the 13th day of the 12th month, thus giving Mordechai almost a whole year to stage a counterattack. The irony, and the message, of this incident, is that grandiose plans which potentially could have succeeded, fail because of minute details, including hubris, jealousy and superstition (for more examples see *Encyclopedia Idiotica*). Even though Mordechai has a year, he wastes no time, and stages a dramatic display of grief, in order to engage his fifth column in the royal palace, his cousin Esther.

Mordechai manages to attract Esther's attention but his initial plea with her, to talk with the king and convince him to overturn the decrees, is turned down by Esther. She has been trained by him to be submissive and shy. She never demanded anything from the eunuchs who served her in the harem, and would not divulge any detail about her background and nationality. Even after her

coronation, she would follow the orders and guidance of Mordechai, who was for her a father figure. What he was asking her to do now was against the grain of his teachings and her upbringing. Mordechai realizes that maybe the path he chose for his cousin is not serving her right, and that he should have nurtured her abilities and let her develop her own personality, instead of crafting her according to his will. He changes his tone and instead of telling her exactly what to do, he asks her to take action, in any way possible. He threatens her that if she does not take action she will also perish, without being able to find shelter in the royal palace, but he includes himself in that horrific prediction: “you and your family will perish”. He is her closest family, so when he says that the family will perish, he admits failure of his message.

Esther now rises to the task, and her true persona comes to life. Instead of the submissive, shy girl, we see a confident woman who switches roles with her cousin and tells him what to do, as she is planning to take matters into her hands, in a completely different approach than the one Mordechai suggested. Esther decides to play a very dangerous game, and when she emerges victorious, we understand why the Megillah is called the Book of Esther.

Will the real Esther please stand up?

In the opening verses of the fifth chapter of the Megillah, a metamorphosis takes place. Esther transforms from a shy, obedient girl, to a confident, courageous, and manipulative queen. In what seems to the readers a suicide mission, she transgresses sacred Persian laws and approaches the king in his inner chambers, uninvited. But first she changes: **ויהי ביום השלישי ותלבש אסתר מלכות**

Some translations read: “On the third day Esther dressed with royal garb”, but the accurate translation is “with royalty”. She always wore royal garb, but this time she allowed her inner strength to shine through, and to be projected as Queen Esther, a powerful, intelligent and cosmopolitan woman, who is about to cross boundaries, defy rules and rulers and achieve her goal. When the king sees her, he is startled because he has never seen *that* woman before:

ויהי כראות המלך את אסתר המלכה נשאה חן בעיניו

"When the king saw Esther, **the Queen**, she found grace in his eyes." They were now married for the five years, but this was the first time Ahashverosh saw his wife as a queen. He is intrigued by her transformation, attracted to the power she radiates, and flattered by the fact that

she risked her life to see him. He uses his royal right to pardon her, extends his staff on his own volition, and she approaches and touches it, heart pounding but gaze confident and self-aware.

The bewitched king then asks his newly discovered Queen: What is it that you want? What was so important, so urgent, that you were willing to break all rules, transgress strict royal Persian protocol, and risk your life? Her answer, carefully planned, strikes him where he is most vulnerable: “I have prepared a feast, for you my lord, you and Haman...” She plants the seeds of doubt and suspicion in his mind; she turns Haman from a close advisor to an archenemy, very possibly plotting with her to usurp the throne. Is she a traitor? An adulteress?

The two men come to the feast, but with diametrically opposed attitudes. The king, nervous, jealous, and suspicious, is watching Haman tensely, trying to find hints to his affair with Esther and to his attempts of usurping the throne, while Haman is having the time of his life, thinking that Esther just granted him the ultimate promotion. The king again asks Esther for her wish, and she responds with an invitation to a feast in the following day, promising to reveal her request then. She leaves the king to boil in his suspicions, and Haman to gloat in his success. She is now holding the reins of a runaway chariot, the king and Haman as passengers, and the whole Jewish nation in tow, driving it on a narrow path near the abyss.

How Esther singlehandedly saved the Jewish People

That night, the king cannot fall asleep. He is convinced that Haman plans to usurp the throne and seize Esther, but is unsure what is Esther’s role in the story. He sends spies to Haman’s house and they come back with the report that a large assembly is taking place there, with all of Haman’s close friends and advisors. The king wonders how come none of his friends and faithful servants informed him of the conspiracy, and concludes that he probably did not reward his servants for their loyalty. He decides to look for an unrewarded display of loyalty, and grant it a reward so magnificent, that anyone who has some information which could benefit the king will be encouraged to share it. He commands his scribes to search the royal annals for such a favor, and they indeed find that Mordechai informed the king of the assassination plot by Bigtan and Teresh.

Haman could not have chosen a worse moment to arrive at the palace, the clickety-clack of his horse’s hoofs on the cobblestone pounding on the king’s tense nerves. When asked what honor

the king should bestow on one whose favor he seeks, Haman's dreams of royal grandeur, sustained by Esther's Machiavellian manipulations, convince him that he is the man in question. He suggests dressing the man with royal garb and marching him on a royal horse, two acts which border on treason. The author of the Megillah shows us the difference between Esther's royal garb which conveyed her inner transformation, and Haman's imagined royal garb, an external shell for a wicked soul. After the humiliated Haman marches Mordechai around town, he is rushed to attend the second feast, but this time confused and crestfallen.

Ahashverosh, sleep deprived, jealous, and suspicious, turns to the now powerful and proactive Esther, and asks one last time: "what is your request, Queen Esther?" She takes her time, states the danger in which her nation found itself, but does not name the responsible party: "we have been sold for annihilation by an evil man". The king, who knows very well that she refers to the Jewish nation, wonders if her accusation is leveled at him. Was the decree a plot by Esther and Haman to expose him as a tyrant and then get rid of him? Is she, with Haman, threatening him right now? When Esther finally identifies Haman as the culprit, the king's contained ire explodes in a volcanic eruption, and he storms out of the banquet hall to the garden for some fresh air.

As he comes back he finds Haman in an awkward position, pleading with Esther for his life, his head at her feet. The king hollers at his once loyal servant "are you scheming to conquer this territory too, my queen, in my house?" Haman is punished not for his Final Solution but because of the king's jealousy. The Megillah starts with the king's domestic problems, and so it ends. Vashti and Esther are both objectified, Vashti as a trophy wife and Esther as a territory to conquer, while the king's personal drama affects the fate of nations.

The events as described in the Megillah reinforce the importance of personal responsibility and of being proactive. The story of Purim shows us that personal and trivial issues, such as the king's marital strife, Haman's arrogance, and Esther's imaginary love triangle, can have far reaching consequences for hundreds of thousands of people.

Let us embrace this message of Purim, and search for ways to harness the power of our small acts to benefit humanity.

Happy Purim