

For progressive-minded Jews, a new take on the classic Book of Esther

Although the story - traditionally told at Purim - remains the same, changes to the rituals surrounding the Megillah reading are recommended.

Judy Maltz | Feb. 16, 2014 | 8:03 PM

An egalitarian version of the Book of Esther? If such a thing does exist, says Yizhar Hess, executive director of the Masorti Movement in Israel, this is it.

He's referring to a new, hot-off-the-presses version (in Hebrew) of the ancient story traditionally read by Jews each year on the holiday of Purim, and the first of its kind to be published by his own Conservative branch of Judaism.

This new rendition of the old classic, says Hess, reflects a desire to take into account the sensibilities of more progressive-minded Jews – those who may not feel particularly comfortable today with the way women are portrayed in the ancient story and with the way non-Jews are treated.

The Book of Esther tells the story of the Jewish queen of the Persian empire who thwarted a plan by one of her husband's top advisers to annihilate all the Jews in his empire. Esther married the king, Ahasuerus, after he had his first wife killed for defying him. At the conclusion of the story, traditionally read in synagogue on the eve and morning of Purim, the adviser Haman and his 10 sons are all killed, and the reveling Jews embark on a massacre of thousands of others.

“Let’s face it, not all elements of this story go down well these days,” says Hess.

The new Conservative-Masorti version does not include any changes to the original ancient texts, he emphasizes, but rather a special new introduction and some recommendations for changes in the rituals surrounding the Megillah reading.

So, for example, in the new Book of Esther, one of the three blessings traditionally read before the reading of the Megillah – which mentions the forefathers of the Jewish people – is amended to include a reference to the foremothers as well.

In a special section devoted to Megillah-reading customs, the new version recommends that the various portions of the book be divided up for reading among both men and women, and not be restricted exclusively to men, as common among Orthodox Jews.

The introduction also includes a discussion of some of the problematic elements of the story for liberal-minded individuals. For example, although the main female characters in the story are all strong-minded women, it notes, ultimately it is the men who decide matters.

Even more disconcerting for some these days may be the way the Jews embarked on their campaign of revenge against their fellow countrymen.

“We felt it would be a mistake not to address some of these issues,” says Hess. “At the same time, we felt it was important to explain what happened in the context of that period. For that reason, the introduction we’ve written takes both a loving and critical approach to the story.”

The Conservative-Masorti movement published its own prayer book three years ago and last year put out its own special Machzor (special prayer book) for Yom Kippur. And last year, the movement created its own “egalitarian” flag for the Simhat Torah holiday that features women on it.