

*Shalom Bayit offers you these thoughts on the Purim story. Both this commentary and the midrash within in were originally written as a drash for Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley in 2008.*

## **Vashti's Rebellion**

*By Naomi Tucker*

Who is the star of the Purim story? Esther, you say? Esther is one of the few Jewish Biblical heroines whose story is actually written down, and told again and again—and who is noted for her heroic accomplishments. There are countless other female figures written out of history, or whose names we do not even know—Lot's wife, Jephtha's daughter, Noah's wife. When my daughter was two she was given a Noah's ark toy with little figurines. In addition to all the animals she found a man and a woman doll. She knew the man was supposed to be Noah, and promptly dubbed the woman "Mrs. Noah." Mrs. Noah had a name...but we aren't taught about Nahamah. We have to re-create stories of Dina, Miriam and Lilith, or write them back in to the stories where they were "inadvertently" removed from history. And so we give great pause when we have an entire book named after one of our foremothers—the Book of Ruth which we read on Shavuot, and on Purim the Book of Esther.

It is important to note the reason why we have the book of Esther: because Esther insisted that it be so. "Esther wrote to the sages: "Establish me for all generations.... Write me down for all generations...." (Megillah 7a). Rashi says that Esther's "Establish me" means "Establish the reading of my story" for all generations, and that by "write me down" she implies that her story be documented "as a book in Torah." So we have *Magillat Esther* only because Esther demanded to be listened to and to have her story recorded for the generations to come. Yes, we need to listen to and document women's voices & stories. But must we women always be the ones demanding our voices be heard and remembered?

Of note, traditionally women are not allowed to actually *read* the Megillah, but are commanded to listen to it. Why are women obligated to hear it? Because they were "involved in that miracle." So there is some small acknowledgment of women's role, though dare I say not of women's leadership in actually making it happen—much in the way that many other female heroines and brave souls are rendered invisible in the writing of Jewish history.

### Vashti

Who, of course, in the Purim story is not remembered? Whose story is just a blip on the Purim radar screen? Yes, Vashti, of course. Let's begin with her, because she is after all the beginning of the Purim story. Although you wouldn't know it from researching the story of Purim. She is easy to miss—completely absent from most retellings of the Purim narrative.

Let us take a moment to imagine how Vashti might tell her story:

I am Vashti, Queen of Persia. Great granddaughter of Nebuchadnezer, the Babylonian emperor. You might remember my great grandfather—he was famous for destroying the Temple of the Jews, more than 50 years ago. Since I was taken by King Ahasuerus to be his consort and queen, I live in the Palace in Shushan. It is a good life. I dwell in the royal house. I attend to royal duties. Maidservants attend to me like a bee to honeycomb, with perfect attention to every detail. And while I revel in glorious moments of holding court with the King, I spend most of my days in the house of the women. Each day I am fed, entertained, dressed and undressed, and caressed by a hundred hands running themselves over me like cool water.

I have been Queen for three beautiful years. To celebrate our good fortune, King Ahasuerus has been holding feast with the princes, noblemen and servants for 100 and four score days. Now it is my turn. In the royal house, I make feast for the women—lavish, with plates piled high with the most exquisite delicacies. For the women have not partaken in the King's celebration; it was but for the princes and noblemen, soldiers and servants from across the land. And so we make our own merriment amongst ourselves. Now the time of the King's feast comes to an end. Seeing our merriment as we delight in pleasures only our own, the King pours another vessel of sweet wine and makes feast again: this time, for all the men of Shushan. For seven days in the palace garden they eat and dance and drink in vessels of gold; each more beautiful than the next.

Today is the seventh day. My heart full of joy, I am weary from the festivities. It is quiet now in the women's quarters. I lie in my hammock, draped in silks and rocked by gentle companionship. Resting.

In the soft moments after our revelry, we are startled awake by seven chamberlains of the King. The King is asking for....me. Slowly, wearily, I arise—stretching my arms to meet the day. I follow the chamberlains to the garden court. What is the King's bidding, I ask? Not fully awake, I am eager to return to my hammock. In the Garden, the King is merry with wine and feasting. I smile in his direction. Mehuman [Mee – hoo- mawn], the first chamberlain, speaks to me. "Show the King your beauty, Vashti," he commands. "Show the princes your beauty," echoes Bizzetha. I turn and face the sea of faces, still blinking from the brightness and confused by the musky din. "My Queen," booms Ahasuerus, "you have come to me. Now show us the beauty beneath your robes, for you are fair to look on. Dance for us, Vashti. The court wishes to be entertained."

My heart sinks. Cheers rise among the men and eunuchs. Thundering hands clapping. A thousand eyes piercing through me. A roar sweeps over me in a wave, and beneath me the Earth grows soft, as if it can no longer hold me. I feel my feet begin to slip.

They are shouting things I dare not repeat. As if to escape, my mind slips back a beat to the soft hammock where I lay just moments before, resting in the company of women in the dreamy afterbirth of our own feasting. I drift back another notch in time, just the day before, to a room overflowing with laughter and song and the expansiveness of hearts breaking wide open to wonder at the world. In one long breath the women spoke of kingdoms and babies, of palace gossip and the mixing of healing herbs. We dined in elegance and dreamed of peace. We held each other in beauty.

That memory...it seizes me now, gripping my melting arms and legs as if to say, that is your Truth, Vashti. Stand up tall, Vashti. What is my inner wisdom? As the chanting grows louder and I feel Harbona and Bigtha begin to tug at my silken robes, anger rises in me like fire. "Dance for us, Vashti. Remove your robes and dance for us."

ENOUGH! I shout. Silence passes over the garden court. Then in a whisper that echoes across the onyx marble pavement and against the alabaster walls, I say: "Continue with your merriment. But feast not your eyes on me, for I am not for the taking. The women, too, have feasted for seven days. I am tired now, and it is time for rest." I turn, and step towards the corridor lined with marble pillars, averting my gaze from what I know to be dumfounded stares. Behind me now, King Ahasuerus speaks:

"Vashti, you dare disobey me? I say you will dance, and so you shall."

Frozen, I turn back slowly as the crowd remains hushed. I face the man who was once my beloved, who courted me with jewels and ripe fruits and a million promises.

NO, I say. I will not humiliate myself before you, nor all of Shushan.

I turn back. And now I am walking quickly, toward the royal house where my women friends await me, to draw strength from their company for the last time.

Ah, Vashti. Thank you for giving us your voice today. You are our hidden bravery, our secret fantasy of rebellion. You are the voice of every woman who has ever been humiliated, intimidated, coerced by a man who professed to love her. You are the spirit of every woman who has ever felt a stranger's unwanted hands on her body. You are the essence of what so many women and girls wish they could do when they experience sexual harassment, assault, or the less obvious coercions from someone they know: say NO. You are one embodiment of why some men fear Kol Isha—the voice of a woman. Fear that you will be strong and powerful, that you will dare to make your body your own, that your voice will shout a resounding NO to the shame put upon you.

What in fact became of Vashti? We don't know, really. I asked a group of young children at Shabbat dinner what they thought happened to Vashti, and one of them said she was fired. When my daughter was in kindergarten, her Sunday school teacher joke that perhaps Vashti ran off to India and became a doctor and lived happily ever after. My daughter adopted that immediately as a plausible truth, and could later be overheard telling her young friends that it was really great that Vashti said no to the King, because she got to have a much better life after that.

In the text, the princes all debate with King Ahasuerus what to do about Vashti. What they argue is that (a) her refusal is an insult to all men, not just the King's authority, and (b) if they don't get rid of her, she'll infect all the other women with bad ideas. From ch1, v16-18 of the Book of Esther, 16 "And Memucan answered before the king and the princes: 'Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the peoples, that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like unto all the king's princes. So will there arise enough contempt and wrath'"

So in other words, Vashti had to be punished as a way to "teach" all the women a lesson—that no one should ever dare refuse the will of their husband. Right there in the text. "For this deed of the queen will come...unto all women..." So it's contagious, right? "to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes." The problem here, according to the princes, is not just that Vashti didn't do what she was told...but that she is a man-hating you-know-what. It is clearly stated in the text of the Megilla that her act of rebellion would make all women hate their husbands. So they propose that Vashti be banished, so that all the wives will honor their husbands. This is not just about one king's angry revenge; it is a systematic attempt to ensure that all the other women in the land will submit to the will and control of their husbands. In other words, banishing Vashti to preserve the patriarchy.

And from this we get a sweeping affirmation of patriarchy and xenophobia, concluding the first Book of Esther with the suppression of women: the king's decree that "every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people." (Esther 1:22).

Some scholars say that archetypally speaking, Vashti's punishment was the final revenge for her great-grandfather's destruction of the temple...and that therefore she is not completely "innocent victim" as we modern feminists would proclaim, since she bears the generational responsibility of the destruction of the holy temple. Is this not unlike Eve, blamed for all the evil that would follow her luscious bite of a tasty apple? Why is it that we so easily blame women for the ill done by others? How is this different from the ways that rabbis ancient and modern subtly made women the keepers of the peace in the home, and then—no surprise here—if anything went wrong in the home, such as

a husband slamming his wife into the wall for not “listening” to him, the woman seeking refuge in her rabbi would be told to fix the problem—go home and make *sh’lom bayit* – if only you’d fix him a nice supper, if only you’d be a better listener, if only you’d read his mind and figured out just exactly what he wanted before he knew it himself—all would be well.

In my many years of working with battered women, I have been asked countless times to answer the quintessential question of “why women stay” in abusive relationships. I think Vashti answers that question for us in two ways: (1) that there are dire consequences to leaving, and (2) that many women do leave anyway. The lesson we’ve all subconsciously been taught by the King’s court: leave and you will be banished. Refuse, and you will be punished. Translation: no one will ever love you again. Why would anyone want you, after all? Oh and by the way, most people won’t believe you because your ex was so well loved in the community, after all. So you’ll feel incredibly alone. But with any luck, after the 2-year divorce case in the courts you’ll hopefully have custody of your children. It’s not so bad, really. At least you’ll have your freedom.

Or the penultimate: if you leave me, I will kill you. The threat is real: more domestic violence deaths occur AFTER a woman has left the relationship: when her former partner is full of rage to no longer be able to control her—rage that she dared to challenge her partner’s authority.

Ultimately, asking “why don’t women just leave” is entirely the wrong question, because it blames the victim for the abuse that is perpetrated against her. Perhaps a better question would be, why are so many women unsafe in their own homes? Why are so many teens unsafe at parties at their own good friends’ houses? Why are so many abusers allowed to get away with their behavior? Why don’t we, as a community, stop them?

Yes it is profoundly unfair. And despite this injustice, women are leaving every day. They are struggling to be single moms, to find a job, to rebuild their lives. To find Jewish spiritual community that is not tainted by their abuser’s presence. They are struggling to be believed in a Jewish community that prefers to believe her abuser, who is after all such a mensch.

This is the price we pay for freedom? So yes, Vashti spoke up and refused to dance naked for the King and his pals. But Vashti left her community and was never heard from again. And today she is often portrayed as the evil queen in Purim stories. Is this the fate of all women who resist violence? What kind of message does that send to women?

We all have a Vashti within us: she is our inner voice that yearns to be true to ourselves, to trust our inner voice, to dare to walk our own path. The next time you hear Vashti framed as that radical misbehaving harlot, you can just pause...and give her a big Yasher Koach.

### Esther

After Vashti was banished, the King missed having a wife after all...and besides, he never got his female entertainment. So his servants offered to search for a nice virgin for him, one that would also be “fair to look on” as Vashti was described. You know, it’s sort of like Ronald Reagan and the Redwood trees—remember that quote? You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all. All the young virgins were to be gathered & given into the custody of Hegai the King’s chamberlain—who is named the “keeper of the women” in the text. Hadassah (myrtle, joy) was chosen—though she was given the name Esther (that which is hidden)—and was initiated into the house of the women in Shushan.

Interesting questions arise in terms of Esther’s role and

- how she came to be queen
- her own hidden identity
- her creative changing of laws
- her tremendous courage and daring
- women who write our own history and demand that our voices be heard

Esther's ascent to the throne is a classic rags to riches story: the poor Orphan girl who, by a blend of trickery and good fortune, is chosen to be queen after Vashti is banished. She is the good girl.

But there is a minor detail often left out of the picture: Esther didn't want to be queen. She was forcibly taken by Mordechai, our sweet innocent Mordechai who in all good faith had raised young orphaned Hadassah as his own child, to enter the beauty contest to become queen. (Esther was taken to the King's house..." (Esther 1:8). He had good intentions, that Mordechai, but also a bigger master plan: and Esther was a pawn in that plan. She had no choice but to do as Mordechai wished

Now in order to gain royal power, Esther had to hide her Jewish identity. That is an interesting role model...Assimilate in order to get what you want, or obtain societal power. Or we can see this as a depiction of the very real threat and fear faced by any member of an oppressed group trying to pass in the larger society in which we live. In either case, what is the spiritual cost of assimilation? Of hiding one's identity? Whether it is a Jew who hides their Jewishness, queer folks who hide their personal lives from friends or coworkers or biological family, a woman who pretends her marriage is picture perfect when in fact it's coming apart at the seams, or a teenager who boasts being part of the popular crowd when in fact she feels trapped by its cruelty—we all do these things for the sake of fitting in, or out of fear that we will lose our last shred of dignity or safety.

In Esther's case, we don't even know that she made an intentional choice to hide her Jewish identity. Again, it was Mordechai who told her not to tell...and so she lived his lie.

Esther won the King's favor. And not long after she was crowned Queen, she helped Mordechai save the King by delivering a message he overheard from some recalcitrant chamberlains. Mordechai uses Esther as a messenger to the King...first to relay the information about those plotting against the King, and later to relay to the King Haman's plot to kill the Jews. But it doesn't take long before Esther turns the tide, and begins telling Mordechai what to do. It is this moment, when she takes control, that we see her move into the empowered role of changemaker.

First, Esther prepares herself spiritually. As the mental preparation for bravery she demands a fast, a time of mental preparation and purification, much like Jephtha's daughter retreated to the mountain top with her women friends before she was to be killed. A moment of purity before a great risk.

Esther demonstrates incredible bravery to save her people. Approaching the King without permission or invitation is a crime punishable by death. And yet, if she doesn't try to save the Jews, she may also die, as she too is a Jew. That is either a no-win situation, or as Esther saw it, one in which she had nothing to lose. Having nothing and everything to lose is precisely the quandary faced by women leaving violent situations, as it is hard to assess which is worse: the dangers of staying or the dangers of leaving.

Esther's strategy is different from Vashti. While Vashti may be remembered for her radical pushing of the envelope—she's the systems change gal—Esther plays the inside-the-system change agent. In the end, she pushes for policy change...and working with the King, finds a creative workaround to a legal

problem. The decree to kill all the Jews cannot be withdrawn, according to law. But Esther helps craft a 2<sup>nd</sup> decree that authorizes the Jews to fight back in self defense. She found a legislative solution to prevent violence. To both Vashti and Esther, I say, Go Girl!

So as Purim approaches, let us ask ourselves: who are the Esthers, the Vashtis that we know? Who are the brave women who say no to unwanted sexual advances, who fear the power of their own husbands or partners, who can only escape public humiliation by risking their lives and communities to say NO to a tyrant who was supposed to protect them? And who are the women hiding, afraid to admit that they are living with a tyrant? As our children don masks on Purim, let us ask: what are the masks some women feel they must wear all the time, pretending to a lead happy family life? What would happen if battered women took those masks off, and named the violence against them? What can we do to make our community a safer place for them to tell their stories and get the help they deserve? What is the cost to our entire community, that violence and abuse are tolerated in our midst? And what other kinds of masks do we wear, hiding pieces of our true selves from our community of friends?

Purim is a time for celebration, for the *megillah* tells us that we were victorious on that day. As we celebrate one kind of liberation from the hands of Haman, let us not forget that it was women's strength and resistance that brought us there. I ask you to honor Vashti, punished for disobedience. To remember Esther, who lived in privilege, but at a cost. These daring and courageous women represent the difficult choices many women make each day: to protect themselves, to protect their children, to retain dignity in the face of oppression and terror.

If Vashti and Esther represent women's struggles against violence, how can their teachings be a lesson to us now?

First, we can realize that we need many different strategies. We need the radical envelope pushers and the inside-the-system change people. We need the Vashti's who focus only on their own issue in the moment—saving herself from danger—and the more public heroines like Esther, saving all the Jews. Each is equally important. Even the King's court was aware of the power of Vashti's actions to influence others, so as a role model to other women, her actions and instincts to protect her own boundaries are just as brave and important as Esther's more public heroism.

Another critical step we can take is to lift up their stories of rebellion and teach them to our children. Children learn through story. When my daughter was three and a half, she got dressed up like Queen Esther and, like so many other little Queen Esther's running around each year at Purim, readied herself to deliver *mishloach minot* to the neighbors. When she arrived with her Hamentaschen and rang our neighbor's bell, she was greeted with great delight. "And who are you?" they asked her. "I'm Queen Esther the Second," she proudly declared. "Really? Because Queen Esther the First was the real queen, and you are dressing up like her so that makes you the second?" "No, silly," my three-year-old explained, patient though a bit exasperated at our grown-up ignorance. "I'm the second queen, because Vashti was the first queen." "Oh," said my neighbor, seeming impressed. "And what do you know about Vashti?" "She had beautiful boundaries," replied my daughter. And with that, I knew I'd done something right. **Imagine the world we would live in, if all our children were raised to see women who dare as simply people who have good boundaries. If the act of saying no to something that doesn't feel right is considered a good quality. And if they, in turn, could grow up trusting their instincts, and knowing that they will always have the right to determine what happens to their own bodies.** Happy Purim everyone – it's a great day to celebrate!