The Whole Megillah: Purim, Queen Esther and Mordechai

There are five main characters in the Scroll of Esther. (There would have been six if it were like any other book of the Tanakh, but famously and uniquely, the Holy One the Blessed is not in it.) These five are the King of Persia; his wife Vashti; Haman, his second-in-command; Mordechai, a Jew in exile from the fallen Jerusalem; and the eponymous Esther, Mordechai’s niece and foster-child.

In the traditional summary of the book, the king is a fatuous, erratic man of serial inconsistency; Vashti is a haughty, mindless beauty in a harem of similar women; Haman is no less fatuous than the king but also a personification of spiteful hatred; Mordechai is a pious Jew whose merit is eternal; and Esther is the heroic queen who drives the story, saving all the Jews of Persia from extinction by being made to disappear from the narrative. We should honor her more than we do.

In my own reading, the cast of five is divided into two brave, authentic, self-aware women and three vain men willing to cause the death of tens of thousands of innocent strangers. But what exactly does she win, and what does she lose? And what exactly was Mordechai, her foster-parent thinking, to send her into this contest? Mordechai, pious man that he is, refuses to bow before Haman, so he must have some idea of the Jewish obligation to maintain human autonomy before human might. Yet he seems off the one person he is responsible for to a life of bodily utility and no human dignity. To make her degradation more certain if more “safe,” he tells her not to mention “her people.” It is unclear whether she even knows that she is a Jew like him. We may wonder whether he has given her any notion of her specific risk, or simply let her go to marry the king as any other obscure, marginal, lucky Persian girl might rush to do.

Does the text wish us to wonder why it is that piety in a man is so easily found side by side with dismissal of the equal humanity of a woman? Haman as expected offers us no need to ponder the inconsistencies of a soul; he is just an egocentric and angry man whose response to Mordechai’s refusal to bow is to convince the king to order the slaughter of every person sharing Mordechai’s religion. On hearing this Mordechai does two things, but not a third. First, he fasts and puts on shredded rags as prescribed by the religion for times of disaster such as the destruction of the Temple that has brought him to this exile. Then, he gets word to Esther in the king’s house that this has been ordered to be done to all the Jews, that she is a Jew and will not escape this order as queen, and that therefore she has to do something. Third, one thinks reading this, he should have taken his own advice and done something himself, rather than continuing to lie down in front of the palace gates in his sackcloth.
and ashes, leaving it to the only woman he
knows to save him and every other Jew.

That’s all Mordechai does. Esther on the
other hand says, “If I perish, I perish,” and
goes to stand outside the king’s chamber on
her own. Knowing that to the king she is no
more than a body, just as Vashti was no
more than a body, and knowing Vashti’s fate
as we do, she must have understood that the
price for such effrontery as to show a willful
desire of her own in the presence of the king
was worth her life. Yet there she is, and the
king, noticing her where no woman ought to
be unless summoned by him, offers her his
Golden Scepter to touch. She quickly gets
the king to hang Haman on the gallows
Haman built for the purpose of hanging
Mordechai, to replace Haman with
Mordechai as his new second-in-command,
and to give Mordechai the authority to speak
for him on all matters.

But, that is not the end of the story.
Mordechai, saved from death by Esther,
does not shed the slightest bit of his
stubbornness and passivity, even as the
king’s new confidante. When the feckless
king says, “You can tell all my kingdom that
the Jews are authorized to defend
themselves from the murderers I sent out
previously. Just don’t countermand the
orders I gave to them;” Mordechai does not
say to himself, “If I perish, I perish” and then
give the king the benefit of his counsel,
perhaps to reconsider his position that his
prior orders might in this case be rescinded.
Instead he writes a decree in the king’s
name that results in the death of about
100,000 non-Jews, deaths that serve no
purpose at all, since the king had changed
his mind.

How are we Jews today to understand this
outcome as a set of miracles, or even of the
intention of a hidden heavenly presence?
Perhaps by attending to the scroll’s
message that men, in particular Jewish
men, must attend to the minds and the
actions of women, in particular Jewish
women, if both are to live at peace in the
larger world. In addition to its other stated
functions, the mehitzah that separates men
from women in an Orthodox service
separates men from Esther. Thus Esther,
the only Jew in the scroll to act out of
autonomy and in full keeping with the gifts
of the covenant, would not be allowed to read
from it in an Orthodox service, except to
other women. How do we understand this in
a larger Jewish context, with or without a
mehitzah? The Scroll of Esther is telling us to
think about this; Esther herself teaches us
the way.

—Bob Pollack

Professor Robert Pollack and his wife Amy
have been members of BJ since 1994.

Moving Toward Vegetarianism and Sustainable Dining at BJ

The Shomrei Adamah Havurah at BJ
is working on ways to move the
congregation toward vegetarianism
and sustainable dining. Many of us believe,
for environmental and ethical reasons, that
the ideal diet is vegetarian. We believe that
Judaism demands us to be compassionate
to animals and responsible to the
environment.

The meat and dairy industries account for at
least 18% of all global warming gasses.
Approximately 99% of the animals raised for
meat, fish, and dairy products are treated
inhumanely. Are BJ members ready to go
100% vegan for Friday night dinners? We
doubt it! Consequently, we are looking for
ways to ensure that the meat and fish we
buy for communal events are sustainably
and ethically produced.

To date, we have found two sources of
chicken that are either organic and/or
ethically and sustainably produced, but they
are much more expensive than
conventionally produced chicken. At this
time, we are still looking for a good source
of sustainably produced fish. Right now,
when guests register for a Friday night
dinner they have to request a vegetarian
dinner. What if we turn that around and
require guests to request a fish or chicken
dinner? In other words, the default meal
would be vegetarian rather than fish or
chicken. Most guests would probably not
mind eating a vegetarian meal, and we
would be able to purchase fewer fish and
chicken meals.

What’s your opinion? If you are interested in
helping the Shomrei Adamah Havurah
explore ways of being environmentally
sustainable and compassionate to animals,
please contact Les at lesjudd@aol.com or
718-601-8918.

—Les Judd