

PURIM

The Whole Megillah: Purim, Queen Esther and Mordechai

t here 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

and three vain men willing to cause the death of tens of thousands of innocent strangers. The first are of course Vashti and Esther, and the last are the king, Haman and, sad to say, Mordechai. Vashti finds her voice when the king demands she do a striptease for his court as part of his half-year self-idolatrous celebration. She says no, and no means no, so she is made to disappear. Midrash says she was burned at the stake, but in any event, she pays for her autonomy and pride by being made to disappear from the narrative. We should

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 sends 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



"Esther Before Ahasuerus," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1628

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. This she does by empowering Mordechai, convincing the King to drop Haman for him.

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honor her more than we do.

Immediately the king's courtiers make sure that she has set no precedent that might threaten their own authority as husbands by declaring that "every man would be the master in his own house." As the king's own house is declared off limits thereafter for Vashti, a search of the land is ordered, to find a less uppity beauty to take her place. Enter Esther, encouraged by Mordechai to make herself available for the king's contest. She enters, and she wins.

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



"Esther Accusing Haman," Gustave Doré, 1870

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 *mehitza* 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 *mehitza*? 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.

HAVUROT

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