

Disobedience and Renewal: Women's Roles from Megillat Esther to the World-to-Come Zan Alhadeff, Class of '27

In the ancient world, built around strict gender roles, it was normal to expect women to show complete fealty to their husbands. Nowhere is this expectation clearer than in the Megillah. However, classical and contemporary midrash complicate this notion, creating a new model where women have autonomy over their own choices and creating the possibility of a redemptive future where women renew themselves.

Part I. The Royal Decree

After Queen Vashti refuses to appear before Achashverosh, the king becomes enraged. He debates with his advisors the proper punishment for her offense: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Achashverosh. For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands...” (Esther 1:16-17). The king’s advisor declares that Queen Vashti’s actions have consequences far beyond her own marriage. She sets an example for all women, raising the frightening possibility that wives might disobey their husbands. Ultimately, the king goes so far as to send a royal decree:

“Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people” (Esther 1:22).

It is surprising that the king would feel it necessary to demand that wives obey their husbands by royal decree. If they were already in a society where wives were subject to their husbands’ authority, why would such a command be necessary? And if they were not already living in a strict patriarchal system, how would such a decree be enforced? The Gemara brings a similar question in [Megillah 12b](#). The rabbis remark that it is obvious that man is the authority in his own house (i.e, “even a lowly weaver” rules over his wife). Thus, it is unclear why the king felt the need to issue this decree. Perhaps, then, [as Rava explains](#), this demonstrates the weakness of the king’s decrees, as no one took them seriously. Even in a political system where the king theoretically wields absolute power, the people must actually confer that authority by following along.

Esther Rabbah subverts the meaning of Achashverosh’s decree by highlighting its futility. “Rav Huna said: Achashverosh had a warped sensibility. The way of the world is that if a man wishes to eat lentils and his wife wishes to eat peas, can he compel her? No, she will do whatever she wants” ([Esther Rabbah 4:12](#)). According to this midrash, Achashverosh’s decree is in direct opposition to the universal custom that women eat what they like. Since the wife prepares food in the home, she would be in control of the menu and will prepare what she likes. She would not be expected to simply bend to her husband’s will in all cases. Although a man rules his household, he must not wield his authority capriciously. There are circumstances where the woman wields power, such as what she eats.

As [Perush Macharzu](#)¹ observes, “it is not possible to do everything in a marriage with arguments and strife, and the man must overcome his middot.” If the husband exercises his authority as a cudgel in the household, this may lead to constant arguments. Power also depends on the consent of the “ruled-over” for the relationship to go on peacefully. In fact, this perush places the onus on the husband to defer to his wife to reduce arguments in his marriage.

The next part of the midrash discusses the decree that every household must speak the man’s language. In a polyglot empire, there would be many cultures and languages intermingling, and husband and wife may not even speak the same language. Whose language and culture would reign supreme in the home? “Rabbi Pinhas said: Moreover, [Achashverosh] became a laughing stock throughout the world. The way of the world is if a Median man marries a Persian woman, is she to speak the Median language?” (Esther Rabbah 4:12).

According to Rabbi Pinhas, the universal custom is that husbands need to speak their wives’ language. The language of women is the language of the home. The commentator [Etz Yosef](#)² explains that women do not go out to the market and learn other languages, so the husband learning to speak her language is a practical necessity. The match will not go well if they cannot understand each other, and it is incumbent upon the husband to bridge the communication gap. They need to literally be speaking the same language.

The midrash brings a sharp contrast between Achashverosh’s “rotten way of thinking” and the “way of the world” in these two instances. Despite the king’s attempt to decree otherwise, there are circumstances when the woman’s desires or inclinations must prevail. The husband’s power in the household is not absolute.

Perhaps we might think that these concessions to the wife are simply born of necessity (How would she learn another language? Why would she cook food she despises?) instead of representing an ideal. However, the midrash shows that this is not the case by juxtaposing the vision of marriage in Megillat Esther with the partnership between God and the People of Israel:

However, the Holy One blessed be He spoke with the people of Israel in the language that they learned; that is what is written: “I am [anokhi] the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:2), an expression of *yehonekha*³ (Esther Rabbah 4:12).

Unlike Achashverosh, God knows how to speak the language of His beloved, Bnei Yisrael. The rabbis, in Esther Rabbah, subtly undermine the wisdom of Achashverosh’s decree that men must exercise authority (*serara*) in these specific ways. In contrast, God—the most powerful of all beings—speaks to the People of Israel at Sinai in a language that they can understand. God understands that power is not about control, and that relationships are most fruitful and loving when they are born of compromise.

¹ A 19th century commentary on Midrash Rabbah written by Rabbi Zev Wolf Einhorn

² A commentary on Midrash and Aggadah by Rabbi Chanoch Zundel ben Yosef

³ This conveys the sense of God showing grace, *chen* (i.e., in the Priestly Blessing).

This midrash reminds us that we must seek to make our human relationships with each other more like God's relationship with us, beginning from a point of considering the "language" of the other and seeking a common understanding. A strong relationship will not be about who has the most control, but rather, how the parties involved find a way to understand each other.

Although the rabbis in the Bavli recognize the social reality that men rule over their wives, it is clear that this power is not absolute. This system of social relationships also depends on a degree of cooperation and relative domestic peace. As we saw in the midrash, God can present a different kind of authority, which is understanding, benevolent and seeks to strengthen relationships. When God speaks to Bnei Yisrael at Sinai, it is using their language. God seeks to forge a covenant with the people, which depends on their acceptance and cooperation.

Part II: Women Writing Worlds

The idea that women are ruled by their husbands goes back to Genesis and is part of Chava's "punishment" for introducing Adam to the forbidden fruit. Are these punishments meant to be a "just-so story," describing how relationships between men and women as they are in the world came to be? And if so, is equality between the primordial man and woman actually the ideal state of circumstances?

A modern women's midrash from the Dirshuni collection ([Dirshuni II, Creation of the World, I](#)) poses the question: What would an encounter look like between God and woman, where the woman challenges her own position in society?

The woman says before The Holy One: Master of the World, is it possible for two kings to wear one crown? He said to her: Go and diminish yourself, "Yet your urge shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). She said: Master of the World, because I said something fitting, I should reduce myself and he should rule over me?! He said to her: Go and rule over your house, as it is said: "The wisest of women builds her house" (Proverbs 14:1). She replied: What is the advantage? Men also rule over the house! As it is said in "So that every man shall rule over his house" (Esther 1:22). And the Rabbis said on this pasuk: This is obvious! Even the lowly weaver is commander in his own house, as it is said: "His house is his wife."

The midrashist, Adi Blut, imagines the woman questioning the decision that "He shall rule over you" from Genesis. God responds over and over, bringing examples from Talmud and Tanakh where women are presented in a positive light, and the woman responds that men also have an advantage in that sphere.

In this part of the midrash, God quotes Proverbs that women "build"/have dominion over the house. The woman responds using our verse from Megillat Esther, that men rule over the house, i.e., men rule over their wives. God keeps offering zechut (merit) to the woman, and she keeps rejecting it. Perhaps she rejects it because in every situation, men have the same merit. Or, perhaps any merit in a world where she is diminished is not enough. At the conclusion of this midrash, Blut reimagines an aggadah from

[Chullin 60b](#). Instead of imaging God as regretting diminishing the status of the moon, her midrash depicts God as regretting that He diminished the position of women:⁴

God **saw that the moon was not comforted. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Bring atonement for me, since I diminished [the woman and made her be ruled by her husband]. And this is what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: What is different about the goat offering of the New Moon, that it is stated with regard to it: “For the Lord” (Numbers 28:15)? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: This goat shall be an atonement for Me for having diminished [the woman and gave them to be ruled by their husbands]. (Chullin 60b).**

In the original midrash in Chullin 60b, God brings atonement for the fact that He diminished the moon in favor of the sun. In this reimagining, God brings an offering to atone for the fact that He diminished the woman by making her husband rule over her. This is a powerful moment in the midrash. What could it mean for a woman’s relationship with God to imagine God regretting her diminished position? This midrash is world-building, imagining a world of Jewish text and tradition where women are powerful, and in direct conversation with God.

The Dirshuni midrash concludes with the promise of zechut for women in this world and the World-to-Come:

The Holy One gave them reward in this world, that they would guard the New Moons greater than the men. And He gave them a reward in the World to Come, that in future days, they would renew themselves like the New Moons.

In this world, the reward for women is that they observe Rosh Chodesh uniquely—the New Moon is traditionally a mini-holiday for women, and it is common for women to gather together to celebrate. In the World-to-Come, this midrash imagines women finding a measure of redemption. The Holy One gives them the reward that they would lehitchadesh, renew themselves, like the New Moon. The redemption of women in future days comes about through their own self-renewal. And like the new moon, although their face may be diminished at present, it will wax to powerful fullness.

How do we understand this potential of lehitchadesh? I wonder if part of self-renewal is activated when women write midrash, renewing the texts themselves to imagine a redemptive future. And if we still live in a world with kings and warped decrees, the process of women engaging deeply in Torah still has the potential to create a new reality. We also see in the Megillah a smaller process of redemption through writing—from Achashverosh’s decrees first for men to control their “households,” then to wipe out the Jewish people, the written word has the power to subjugate and even destroy. However, at the end of the story, it is Esther herself who writes the scroll (“And Esther the queen wrote,” (Esther 9:29)), telling the story of Purim. If we learn from the Dirshuni midrash that when women write, in the future, they have the power to renew themselves, then when Esther writes, she begins this process of redemption. In telling her own story and the story of her people, Esther can claim both her leadership and her

⁴ The parts where the midrashist revises words in the Talmudic midrash are bracketed, using the Sefaria translation: <https://www.sefaria.org/Chullin.60b.11?lang=bi>

language, the very things that Achashverosh sought to control. And now, and in the world to come, writing still has the power to build a new world.

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