

Uplifting Unnamed Women Rabbi Naima Hirsch Gelman, Class of '24

This article was adapted from the author's work on the Lilith blog in 2023.

The Talmud (Ta'anit 29a) teaches us “mi she-nikhnas Adar marbin b'simcha—when Adar begins, joy increases.” For centuries, Jews have used Adar's holiday of Purim as a day to rejoice in our triumph over our oppressor. In more recent years, Jewish feminists have honored the female heroines in the Book of Esther. And while it is always worth rejoicing in Jewish survival, we cannot ignore the more troubling undertones of Megillat Esther in its depiction of women and their sexuality.

Despite wielding some political power, both Queen Vashti and Queen Esther are stripped of their personal sexual autonomy (if they ever had it in the first place, see 2:2-4, 2:12-14). After Vashti is deposed because of her refusal to display her beauty before the king and his guests, the king becomes lonely and decrees what is euphemistically referred to as a “beauty pageant.”

Young women—specifically, virgins—are gathered from all of the 127 provinces of the realm and put under the watch of a eunuch before spending the night with the king. This is when we meet our heroine, Esther, who is quite literally taken (2:8) from her home and brought to the king's harem. As were, presumably, most, if not all, of the girls and women there.

In the harem, all the women are rubbed for six months with the oil of myrrh before their intimate meetings with the king (2:12). Myrrh was a known contraceptive in the ancient Mediterranean, understood to prevent the implantation of fertilized eggs, similar to some modern contraceptives like the hormonal IUD.¹ The “aromatic ointments” may have been used in service of pregnancy prevention as well. None of these girls and women were asked if they wanted this contraceptive treatment, but “whatever she asked for would be given” (2:13) for her visit with the king. The women in the harem had agency only in regards to sexually pleasing the king; they could determine how they went about sex with the king, but they could not opt out.

Even then, after the king “tries them out,” the women don't get to go home. Once they are no longer virgins, they are moved to a **second** harem for concubines until the king summons them again—or not (2:14). Even if they never see the king again, they are defined by their connection to him. Once you had sex with the king, it was improper to have sex with anyone else, and so these women ostensibly languished in the harem for the rest of their lives.

And while it makes narrative sense that the text doesn't tell us what happens next for these women and instead focuses on Esther's success story, I am disturbed by the dearth of midrash that tells their stories. Even in a genre devoted to analyzing and providing literary context for every word in our holy texts, the rabbis never return to the unnamed women (at least not in any well-known collection of

¹ https://www.jewishideasdaily.com/docLib/20100223_ProuserEstherArticle.pdf;
<https://provost.utsa.edu/undergraduate-research/journal/files/vol4/JURSW.Brazan.COLFA.revised.pdf>

midrashim). If we say that every person is a world unto themselves, how many worlds have we ignored by ignoring these women?

The Purim story tells us how oppressive power structures take away the human right to bodily autonomy. In Shushan, men in power made decisions about what and how women and others should act; when and with whom they had sex, when and how they got pregnant—or didn't. It is much more comfortable to remember Esther, who subverted expectations to save her people, and even Vashti, who experienced public embarrassment and sexual coercion, than to truly reckon with the stories of the women in the harem whose lives were permanently disrupted and their stories discarded.

In the world of the Megillah, the women in the harem aren't granted any individual identities. They exist solely to please the king. Whether or not they wanted to have sex with him, or were betrothed to someone else, or if they got pregnant by the king is besides the point. The narrative leaves them behind when their encounter with the king sentences them to a life they did not choose. It is our responsibility as close feminist readers of the text not to forget the destruction these women endured in service of Esther's rise to power.

We might be tempted to think of the problem of the nameless women in the harem as one that existed in the past, far away from our own realities. However, even a cursory look at women's rights around the country and the world tells us otherwise. When we remember the unnamed women in the Purim story, we also remember the women and girls today who are still not given choices. We remember not to take for granted the modern innovations that give us freedom to define our own lives, from suffrage to birth control to credit cards. The Megillah teaches us what happens when women cannot tell their own stories, when those in power choose what details are left in and which are omitted. As feminists, Purim reminds us that we must use the privileges and power we do have to lift other women up, to tell their stories on their terms.

Rabbi Naima Hirsch Gelman's journey to Maharat was sealed by her middle school female Gemara teacher, who inspired her to become a Gemara rebbe herself. While at Maharat, Naima served as the Rabbinic Fellow at the National Council for Jewish Women, was the Programming Director at the Beis Community, and taught at Hunter Hillel. She was a Va'tichtov and JOIN for Justice fellow. Naima is pursuing her master's degree in education at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education.