

The Power of Amplified Women's Voices **Arielle Krule, Class of '25**

I was born with a natural resistance to rules, a quality I see as deeply connected to my experience as a woman in the world. This resistance isn't just a matter of personality—it stems from navigating a world where women's agency is often questioned, constrained, or undermined. The rules I resist frequently intersect with gendered expectations that demand unhelpful conformity while silencing voices like mine. Our world is shaped by systems largely built by men, and as a future woman rabbi, I see it as my responsibility to critically examine these structures—both within halakha and beyond. It's important that we ask questions such as: When do we uphold certain traditions simply because “that's the way things are?” What are the ways in which we need to look more closely to uncover how particular powers shape interpretations to sustain existing systems?

There is a delicate balance between adhering to the rigors of structure and engaging deeply enough with it to recognize that that structure, when approached thoughtfully, can actually provide greater freedom. Our job is to hold that balance. As a woman in religious spaces, I've experienced the rules sometimes as a refuge and other times as a roadblock. However, by claiming space within these traditions, I've found ways to challenge gendered exclusions while staying rooted in the frameworks that nourish my faith.

As I grew into religious life, I found the stories, reflections, and sometimes even (most surprisingly) the rules handed down by our ancestors to be a safe haven amidst the chaos of the modern world. Structure, when implemented through the lens of community and inclusion, can provide grounding that enables creativity and our voices to be heard. The opportunity to be held accountable on an ongoing basis by the Jewish people? Sign me up. When viewed holistically, these strictures and structures become a way to claim space within tradition while shaping its future. Commitment at its best actually paves the way for true liberation and self-expression—our most divine selves.

Purim is a holiday that uniquely embodies this difficult balance between structure (keva) and inspiration (kavanah) overlaid with the challenge of participating in a system that does not always prioritize women's voices. It can feel complicated to assert your place at the table in a system that tells you you have no place there. Esther, a woman navigating the complexities of power in a patriarchal society, exemplifies this experience. Her agency—expressed through courage and strategic action—not only reshapes the fate of her people but also inspires me in how women can transform systems, even when constrained by them.

In Esther 9:27, we read: “The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.” After their triumph over Haman, the Jewish people could have simply celebrated their freedom. Instead, they chose to take on the responsibility of honoring their victory through structure and ritual.

A similar tension between external imposition and personal embrace emerges in the Talmud's discussion in Shabbat 88a, which explores our relationship with obligation. At Sinai, the Torah was given amidst an extraordinary display of divine power. Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa describes the Jewish people as standing under the mountain, with God holding it above them like a barrel, effectively saying, "If you accept the Torah, excellent; if not, there will be your end." This depiction emphasizes the sense of coercion at Sinai—a moment of undeniable gravity where consent was irrelevant. This conception of Sinai is all about keva. Communal desire or inspiration is irrelevant.

The Sage Rava, however, points to a transformative shift: during the time of Esther and Mordechai, the Jewish people willingly and joyfully reaccepted the Torah. This is expressed in Esther 9:27: "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them." This marks a significant transition—from external compulsion, which can feel oppressive, to internal embrace. In the time of the Megillah, the Jews find kavanah through their seeking of keva. True transformation happens when individuals can take ownership of the process, moving from a sense of imposed obligation to a deliberate, life-affirming choice.

This shift—from a choice that wasn't really a choice to embracing the mantle of relationship and obligation—offers a powerful framework for our spiritual lives. Renewal may begin as an external imposition, but true transformation blossoms when we infuse the process with intention and joy, making it wholly our own.

The theme of obligation (chiyuv) emerges as a crucial element of growth. Esther 9:27 emphasizes that the Jewish people took upon themselves and their descendants the responsibility to observe Purim, extending this dedication to "all who might join them." Shared obligations, such as observing mitzvot or supporting one another, are what build communities of meaning, reminding us that we are not alone in our commitments or struggles. Commitments, when able to be freely embraced, can serve as the very anchors that connect us to others and to Hashem. Particularly when those commitments are recognized in their greater purpose, we can begin to see ourselves as powerful authors of our own experiences.

In his commentary on Purim, the Sefat Emet, quoting Chidushei Harim (For Purim, Section 1, 5631), offers profound insight into the imagery of unity at Sinai. He writes that at Sinai, the Jewish people were described as standing "k'ish echad b'lev echad" (as one person with one heart), meaning that a deep, embodied unity was a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. I like to believe that this is also true for us in our own re-receiving of the Torah every day. Similarly, on Purim, the Sefat Emet writes, we remind ourselves of this interconnectedness through the practices of Purim—of giving of gifts given to friends (mishloach manot) and the collective fasting and prayer of the Jewish people on Ta'anit Esther (fasting). We also do this through reading our story (megillah), donating to those who are less financially secure than us (matanot l'evyonim), and gathering to prioritize joy (mishteh).

On Purim, we revisit the structures and rules we might have taken for granted. As Sefat Emet writes, this process is not only about our relationship with Hashem, but also with our community members. He focuses on the language in Megillat Esther, particularly the verse: “And they stood to save their lives” (Esther 9:15), which uses a singular expression. This mirrors how Bnei Yisrael were referred to as “70 Soul” (singular) when serving Hashem, who is one. The Chidushei Harim explains that the unity at Har Sinai, expressed as vayichan, was a preparation for receiving the Torah. Similarly, on Purim, we, as a collective, re-accept the Torah, and look forward together.

It is significant to note that this rededication to Torah, mitzvot, and, ultimately, halakha, as seen in the Gemara, happens through a woman. Esther is a young woman without socioeconomic privilege, living in a society where God’s presence is not made known to her—a woman who had to enter the very system that oppressed her to make change. Someone who is usually on the outside of power is, in fact, the one with the clarity to create a scenario that leads the Jewish people to recommit themselves.

As we celebrate Purim, may we take inspiration from the Jewish people’s journey in the time of Esther. This holiday challenges us to reflect on how transformation occurs in our own lives. How do the commitments we uphold shape our daily choices and spiritual connections? What structures in our spiritual or personal lives offer grounding without restriction? Are there structures in your life that you once resisted but now see as sources of strength and grounding?

Esther embodies a particular form of empowerment that we need to summon when our external systems and obligations may feel imposed: reclaiming our space in a world that does not create it for us. Our transformation, just like Esther’s and the Jewish people’s, will come from taking the time to take note of our structures and see when and where they can be deliberate choices. It will mean checking that our kavanah and keva are in balance.

This Purim, may we find joy and possibility in the opportunity to find both a meaningful home in our structures and the opportunity for empowerment that they present.

Arielle Krule comes from a lineage of bold women who aspired to clergy roles and served the spiritual needs of their communities. She is the founder and spiritual leader of Selah, a Jewish spiritual community for people in recovery and their loved ones. She also serves as the Director of Jewish Life and Learning at Luria Academy of Brooklyn. Previously, Arielle was a Rabbinical Fellow at the Prospect Heights Shul, a Scholar-in-Residence at At The Well, the Director of the Jewish Learning Fellowship, and the Director of the NYC CUNY Hillel Social Work Fellowship. She also worked for many years as a clinical social worker in Midwood, Brooklyn and is currently a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She is a former Wexner Graduate Fellow, UJA-Federation of New York Fellow, and ATRA: Center for Rabbinic Innovation Fellow. In 2024, she was named one of The Jewish Week’s “36 to Watch.” Arielle lives in Brooklyn with her wonderful husband, Jackson.