



Reexamining the Megillah:
A Gendered Perspective
Purim Reflections from
the Maharat Community



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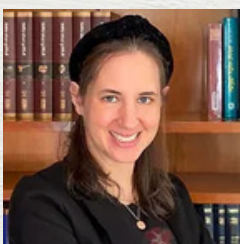
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Unveiling the Hidden Faces of Torah **Dr. Rachel Rosenthal, Talmud Faculty and Director of External Affairs**

One of the challenges of being a woman who teaches Torah is threading the needle between creating a Torah that authentically reflects the experience of being a woman without it being seen as “women’s Torah”—Torah that is only about women and only for women. Certainly, many women have much to say about the experience of being female in the realm of Torah, in the Jewish community, and in the world. But we also have so many other things that inform our experiences, and our insights extend well beyond gender. We cannot be so easily pigeonholed. In fact, for many years, I refused to teach on any topic that might relate to gender, for fear of being seen as a woman who only thinks about women. Men are never asked to speak about men’s Torah, I reasoned, so why should it be any different for me?

My teacher, Rabbi David Silber, used to emphasize in shiur that giving women the opportunity to learn was not about creating honor for those women, but rather about creating honor for the Torah. If we believe that learning and teaching Torah is at the center of what it means to be a Jew, why would we close it off to half of the population? Imagine all of the Torah that has been lost from the generations of women who were told that they had no voice in this conversation. Imagine all of the Torah that has been directed only towards women because it was created by women, even though it could enrich everyone.

At the same time, it is true that every person—no matter their gender—brings their own life experience to their learning and teaching, and gender is surely a part of it. And so we try to find a delicate balance, not hiding the ways that our gender affects our Torah, but also not wanting to magnify it. We try to create a Torah that represents who we are as people, not just as women. And yet...

This is the third reader Maharat has published in the last 18 months, but it is the first one to specifically tackle the topic of gender. There is a good reason for that. The Maharat community has so much Torah to share, and much of it is not about gender at all. At the same time, as the pieces in this reader illustrate, there are so many specifically gendered pieces to the story of Esther. It’s impossible to fully grasp the narrative arc of the Megillah without giving them attention. Indeed, there are parts of Esther’s experience that are deeply relatable to women seeking leadership roles in the 21st century. Those lessons are for everyone—taught by Esther, distilled by Maharat students and alumnae, and accessible to anyone who is lucky enough to read their words.

When Esther is reluctant to go to Achashverosh to advocate for the Jews to survive, Mordecai tells her, “Who knows, perhaps it was for a moment like this that you attained royalty?” (4:14). This is a reminder that Esther has an opportunity and a purpose, if she will accept the mantle of responsibility. So too today, as chances for women to learn and teach Torah thankfully proliferate, there is a special



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responsibility to seize the possibilities presented by this landscape. That responsibility falls at the feet of these current and future Torah scholars, but also at the feet of the Jewish community, which needs to appreciate the potential of all of these new voices and create space for them. That means not simply consigning women to talking about women, or to women. Instead, for the most fruitful Torah to come into the world, the Jewish community needs to realize that our experiences as women shape our Torah, but that that Torah is for everyone—it's just that some of its 70 faces have been hidden for too long.

“Perhaps it was for a moment like this.” This moment in Jewish history is, in so many ways, unlike any other. And it is a moment where all of Torah's faces, where all of its teachers' voices, need to be heard. Our hope is that this reader will contribute to this amplification of women's voices, not for the sake of those women, but for the sake of the honor of the Torah.

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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. This midrash reminds us that we must seek to make our human relationships with each other more like

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).

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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The Power of Amplified Women's Voices

Ilana Gimpelevich, Class of '26

The school gym was set up in a grid. The middle school girls were arranged in rows, neatly spaced out so as not to hit one another. All eyes were on the figures in white at the front: the tae kwon do instructors from the local dojo who had come to give a self-defense demonstration. The masters gave clear instructions: make two tight fists, raise them to face level for protection, position your feet into a stable stance, and release with one-two punches straight from the core. Speed! Power! Speed! Power! The master commanded the girls to yell, to put their all into the punches. The girls hung back, quietly. The master demonstrated. The master yelled. Speed! Power!

The girls tried and tried. The voices were quiet, barely louder than the conversation. The punches were hesitant, weak. The girls seemed confused. Yell? Is it a good idea to yell? Will I stand out if I yell? What does my voice sound like when it is distinct from the din of the group?

Shamefully, in too much of the world, young women are conditioned to be quiet, not to stand out, not to raise their voices. The Talmudic message of kol b'isha erva (Berachot 24a), that a woman's voice is unseemly, has real-life consequences. In martial arts, a punch coupled with a roar unlocks core energy and carries more power. The power that comes with that voice, in a fight, could save a life.

The book of Esther is unique in the Jewish canon for the ways that it is built around a woman's voice. While Megillat Rut is named for a woman, Rut's name is mentioned only 12 times in the entire book. Even the first of our foremothers, Sarah, is mentioned only 37 times in the Torah. In comparison, our Megillah mentions Esther 55 times, more than any other woman in Tanakh. The book records a woman's story in a woman's voice, saying, "Queen Esther, the daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew wrote with all their powers to establish this second letter of Purim" (9:29). Esther not only tells the story, she is also the one who puts its events in motion.

Throughout the Megillah, Esther spends a lot of time talking. She speaks to Hegai in the harem before approaching Achashverosh, she speaks to Hatach, she speaks to Achashverosh, she speaks to Mordechai, she speaks to the Jewish people, she speaks to Haman. Esther is not just another pretty face, quietly awaiting her fate. She has agency and takes responsibility. As the Megillah progresses, she finds her voice and uses it to deliver a message.

In the Megillah, two different words repeat whenever there is a dialogue and one party is awaiting a response from the other. One word is bakasha: a request, beseeching. The other word is she'elah: a question, inquiry. Tracing the appearance of each of these words, it becomes clear that Esther primarily addresses Achashverosh by employing questions, rather than pleading. Mordechai originally asks Esther to curry favor with the king, cry, plead, and beg for mercy (4:8). However, Esther chooses to use a different strategy. When she approaches the king, she enters his inner courtyard projecting strength. She does not beg; she approaches with dignity. In fact, it is Achashverosh, presuming that she has a material request to be granted, who asks. As the Megillah recounts, "The king said to her, 'What

troubles you, Queen Esther? What is your request? Up to half the kingdom, and it will be granted to you” (5:3).

Achashverosh lives in a moment when the Persian empire dominates world politics. He is a supreme ruler, with unlimited power and unlimited resources. There are 127 provinces to govern and many people to control, appease, and threaten. The royal court is a place of intrigue and scheming, where the king rules through doling out favors. He is used to being asked, not to asking. This causes him to automatically presume that Esther’s visit to the inner chambers could mean only one thing: she is here to ask for a favor of a material kind. To show his goodwill, he preemptively offers a fabulously magical amount: up to half a kingdom!

However, Esther outmaneuvers his magnanimity. She piques the king’s interest by not asking for anything, but simply issuing an invitation to a party. Achashverosh is intrigued and he hurries to be present. At the party, his curiosity gets the best of him, and he tries yet again to find out what it is that Esther requests of him. This time, however, he entertains the possibility of this being an inquiry, something that goes beyond the material wealth that he can bestow. Esther seizes the opportunity and uses the mirroring language of she’elati u’bakashati: my inquiry **and** my request.

The commentaries struggle to differentiate between these two concepts. However, I wonder if it was simply a woman’s voice, speaking to power, stating an inquiry, that was able to get through Achashverosh’s ennui. The king is unfamiliar with a request that could not be resolved with a simple financial or material allocation. Knowing this, Esther flips the script on who is in control: she asks merely for the presence of Achashverosh and Haman. It is normally the king who issues invitations to the royal banquets and requests the presence of his subjects. At those banquets, the king is the one who decides who will be favored and who will be removed from favor. Esther is no longer a petitioner, but a master of the party.

I would posit that this unusual set-up is what riles up the normally somnambulant Achashverosh: why is Esther acting as if she is in control? Why doesn’t she ask for riches or land, especially when explicitly given an opportunity? Why would Esther not resolve this situation by finally stating what she wants, letting Achashverosh grant it, thereby restoring the previous order, with the king being in charge? According to the midrash in Esther Rabbah (10:1), these thoughts would not let Achashverosh sleep, arousing his paranoia that someone was plotting against him. This causes him to call for the book of royal chronicles, which reminds him to favor Mordechai, who had previously saved his life, and the rest of the Megillah is history.

I often wonder about what it took to be Esther: living in the palace far away from the rest of the Jewish nation, hiding her identity, being at the whim of an unstable king who overindulged in drink and regularly treated women as disposable. It required nerves of steel, patience, self-negation, but also a strong inner voice and an unshakable knowledge of her identity. Esther had a unique opportunity to gain access to the king’s ear. When the moment was right, she used her voice clearly and strongly to advocate for the Jewish nation.

Back in the gym, I wish that the girls would envision Esther when they were practicing their punches. Strength and power not only need to be felt internally, but they also need to be expressed externally. Esther could not hide away in Achashverosh's palace from the decree: that would not result in the salvation of the nation. Esther had to speak up, and so do we. Unlike Esther, we are not alone. There is strength and power in numbers. When many women get together and support each other, when they speak up, loud and clear, change and salvation happen.

In recent years, women's Megillah readings have become more and more popular. The story of Esther is custom-made to be told in the female voice. I only hope there will be more and more girls training to have a strong inner core, a strong outer voice, and more opportunities to get vocal. What saved the Jewish people once will continue to be the path of salvation.

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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.

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.

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Esther, Queen of Theater **Yehudit Mazur-Shlomi, Class of '27**

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances," *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare.

It is common for both individuals and communities to pray for miracles. However, no miracle comes to be "just because." Miracles happen when people work for them. Sometimes these miracles come through prayer; other times they come through fighting. And occasionally, they arrive by those who seek them using all of their means, never stepping off the very thin tightrope on which they have to balance to bring those miracles to be. One person who brings miracles through this balancing act is certainly Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia.

Over the course of the Megillah, Esther grows from a shy girl who never asks for anything to a mature and wise queen who commands the attention of everyone around her. As she evolves, she learns to use all of her means—her beauty and her sexuality, but most of all, her particular feminine wisdom—to bring redemption to her people.

Esther appears in the right place at the right time, if against her will. The Megillah doesn't tell us if she was dragged to the palace, or if she went on her own but without real consent, like all of the other young virgins of the Persian Empire. All we know is that the Megillah tells us, "Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women" (2:8).

Esther carefully follows Mordechai's instructions, revealing nothing about who she is, and demanding nothing. By making herself small, she wins "the admiration of all who saw her" (2:15). What does it mean that she won admiration? The midrash in Esther Rabbah (6:10) offers a few possible answers:

Rabbi Yuda says: Like that portrait that a thousand people look at and it is beautiful to them all ... The Rabbis said: "And Esther found favor in the eyes of everyone who saw her"—in the eyes of the higher beings [angels] and of the lower [humans]; that is what is written: "And you shall find favor and good grace in the eyes of God and man" (Proverbs 3:4).

Ibn Ezra builds on this, explaining that when Esther "did not ask for anything," it was a sign of her wisdom. Because she was not demanding, she was able to build favor, and through that favor, she would later be able to save the Jewish people. Even without knowing about the coming calamity, Esther almost instinctively decides to keep playing the role of a shy modest girl, allowing her to remain in the king's good graces.

At first glance, Esther attaining the position of queen should have been a triumph. Instead, very quickly, Esther finds herself facing seemingly certain death. It seems that her position has granted her two choices, neither of which will allow her to live. Either she will be killed for being a Jew, or she will be executed for disobeying the king's decree and seeking him out without being summoned. However, by this point in the story, Esther has developed the composure and perspective to recognize that she has some power of her own. Rather than passively waiting to see what will happen to her, like she did when she was taken to the king for the first time, she devises a plan to take control of her destiny. Esther is

ready to make her own decisions for the benefit of her people, even if it means sacrificing herself. She prepares herself through prayer, but she sets her and her people's salvation in motion through action.

Esther does not pray with only herself in mind, nor does she pray alone. Realizing her potential for power, as a queen and a woman who is expected to possibly sacrifice herself, she issues an order to all of the Jews of Shushan to fast and pray, which they do. Perhaps this is the first moment where Esther realizes she can be a leader, giving her the strength she needs to go to Achashverosh.

The Megillah imagines Esther putting on a costume of sorts, hiding the fear that she will be killed and instead presenting herself as a powerful, self-possessed queen. As she prepares to go meet the king, after three days of fasting and praying, the Megillah says, “vatilbash Esther malchut” (5:1). While this phrase is usually translated as “On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel” (JPS, 1985), the exact translation should be more like this one: “Esther cloaked herself in majesty” (Metsudah, 2001). This majesty becomes a costume and a shield, allowing her to find the strength to advocate for the Jewish people.

While taking care to dress in a certain way might seem frivolous, Esther knows that every move of hers needs to be well considered. Commenting on this somewhat strange phrase, Rashi explains, “**In majesty.** Regal clothing. But our Rabbis said that Divine Inspiration enveloped her.” Echoing this, Kedushat Levi (in his section on Purim) says, “Specifically when Esther stood ‘before him’—before (the king), that evildoer—he would look at her and absorb some of the spiritual radiance (that enveloped her due to Shekhinah’s presence), and he would thereby be induced to protect the Jews’ interests.” By this moment, Esther might have lost her novelty in the eyes of a king who has unlimited access to his concubines. She is planning to make the biggest request possible of a king who has surely tired of everyone wanting things from him. Therefore, Esther must cloak herself in majesty, reminding the king why he chose her in the first place. In order to succeed, Esther must be both sexually desirable and intellectually provoking.

While at the feast, Esther shows her understanding of her precarious position by simply showing the king favor, rather than requesting anything from him. She knows that this will pique the king's interest, so she only says, “let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare **for them**” (5:8). Beyond that, she gives no sign that she wants something, much less what that thing will be.

Esther is pushing all the right buttons, having observed the character of her husband, Achashverosh, closely. As Rashi explains, Esther realizes that when she invited Haman that he would be envied by the king and his ministers, that the king would think that Haman was her lover, and that he would kill them (both Esther and Haman). Esther has created the illusion of a love triangle where none exists, which both attracts the king's interest and threatens Haman's life, along with her own. However, she believes it will lead to the desired result—saving her people.

When the second feast arrives, if this were actually a play, there would be suspenseful music and flashing lights highlighting the uncertainty and danger of the queen's risky moves. Knowing that the king is prone to anger and suspicion, Esther sets the scene perfectly. She dramatically points an accusatory

finger at Haman who, clueless and drunk, makes the worst move possible—leaning on the couch where the queen was reclining in order to beg for his life. As the Megillah tells us, “When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet room, Haman was lying prostrate on the couch on which Esther reclined. ‘Does he mean,’ cried the king, ‘to ravish the queen in my own palace?’ No sooner did these words leave the king’s lips than Haman’s face was covered” (7:7-8). And so, at this moment of climax, everything unfolds exactly as Esther—the queen, the actress, the mastermind—imagined.

However, even once Haman is taken away to be executed, Esther knows that the play is not yet finished. She doesn’t stop until she can ensure that the Jews, her people, are guaranteed safe and prosperous life in the kingdom. She makes sure the story is written down as a commemoration and warning for future generations of Jews, allowing it to become a drama that endures.

Throughout the story, Esther does not make a single false move: in the harem, as a young girl in training to be a wife, and as a queen in danger, coolly keeping her head instead of panicking. As Leah Kohn writes, “While Esther’s story is impressive on the level of intrigue, bravery and adventure, it is made eternal by her self-sacrifice and unmitigated faith. Esther remains a role model not because of her external beauty and not because she was queen of a powerful empire, but because of her inner fortitude and devotion. Her example stands before us as we confront today’s exile-specific dilemmas between faith and reason; Judaism and assimilation; personal comfort and self-sacrifice.”¹ Through her faith, her intelligence, and her beauty, Esther turns her womanhood, which began as a liability, into an asset, and saves the Jewish people as only she could have done.

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¹ Leah Kohn. <http://www.torah.org/learning/women/class23.html>

The Masked Divine: Finding the Shekhinah in Purim

Yali Szulanski, Class of '25

Purim is unique among the festivals of the Jewish calendar. Megillat Esther is the only story in the Bible where God's name is never mentioned. At first glance, the Megillah seems to present a secular narrative—one driven entirely by human action, manipulation, and luck. It is easy to imagine the story unfolding without the undercurrent of Divine orchestration: a queen, a villain, a people on the brink of destruction, and a miraculous turn of events. Yet the absence of God's name does not signify the absence of God's presence. Instead, it invites us to look deeper, to seek meaning in the unseen, and to find holiness amidst ambiguity.

This absence of overt Divine intervention mirrors a profound reality of human existence: the struggle to find meaning in moments of darkness, chaos, or uncertainty. Much of life is spent searching for clarity when the path ahead feels obscured, when answers remain elusive, and when our deepest questions seem to go unanswered. The story of Purim does not provide easy assurances. It does not offer miracles tied with bows or tell us that redemption will arrive in the ways we expect. Instead, it reminds us that the Divine often works quietly, hidden in the folds of everyday life, present in ways that are invisible yet undeniable.

In this way, the Megillah becomes more than a historical account; it transforms into a mirror of our own lives. God's name may not always be spoken aloud, yet moments of redemption whisper to us that we are never truly abandoned. The silence of the Divine compels us to ask: What happens when we can no longer feel God's presence? How do we move forward when the answers to our prayers come, not in the form of miracles, but through the subtle, ordinary rhythms of life? Perhaps this silence is an invitation to look for God in places we might not think to search—in the quiet strength of a friend's encouragement, the small acts of kindness that ripple through the world, or the resilience we discover within ourselves.

The Megillah reminds us that holiness is often concealed, waiting to be uncovered by those who are willing to seek it. Divine presence is not always found in grand revelations but often in the gentle unfolding of daily life. When we attune ourselves to the sacred in ordinary moments, we begin to see that God is not distant but woven into the fabric of our existence. The question is not whether God is present, but whether we are open to noticing the quiet ways the Divine speaks—through hidden blessings, whispered grace, and the spaces where light emerges from the shadows.

This is where the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the Divine, enters the story. In Kabbalistic thought, the Shekhinah represents the Divine presence closest to humanity. She dwells with us in exile, holding us in our pain and gently guiding us toward healing. The Shekhinah embodies the tension between hiddenness and presence, reflecting a world where God's face may be concealed, but the spark of holiness is never extinguished. Purim's narrative of hidden identities, unseen forces, and veiled truths resonates deeply with the Shekhinah's role in Jewish tradition. It teaches us that what is hidden is not absent; it is filled with potential. Like the Shekhinah, Esther, Vashti, and even the Purim

mitzvot—mishloach manot (gifts to friends) and matanot l'evyonim (gifts to the poor)—reveal that the concealed often holds the seeds of transformation and redemption.

Esther, whose name shares the Hebrew root *s-t-r* (to hide), is the embodiment of concealment. Her story begins with a secret. From the moment she is taken into Achashverosh's palace, Mordechai instructs her to hide her Jewish identity (Esther 2:10). This act of concealment is not merely strategic; it carries an emotional and psychological toll. Esther lives a dual reality: outwardly a queen of Persia; inwardly a daughter of Israel. This duality demands that she silence parts of herself—her heritage, her truth, and even her sense of belonging.

Esther's journey, often framed as one of bravery and self-sacrifice, takes on deeper spiritual meaning when viewed through the lens of the Shekhinah. Esther becomes a vessel for the feminine Divine, embodying qualities of nurturing, protection, and redemption. Her words, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16), reflect the Shekhinah's role as a guardian, shielding the Jewish people even in exile. Esther's transformation from a passive participant to an active savior reflects the Shekhinah's journey—working quietly within human systems to guide them toward redemption. Her ultimate decision to reveal her identity is not merely an act of courage; it is a declaration of authenticity. Through her, we learn that while concealment may sometimes be necessary; embracing our full selves is essential for transformation and redemption.

While Esther's story is central to Purim, Vashti's narrative offers a parallel model of courage. Her refusal to appear before Achashverosh and his drunken guests (Esther 1:12) is often viewed as defiance, but it is also a profound assertion of dignity. Vashti's "no" is a declaration of autonomy, reflecting the Shekhinah's demand for respect and recognition. Just as the Shekhinah insists on Her worth even in exile, Vashti reminds us of the power of self-respect.

Her actions carry spiritual undertones that complement Esther's bravery. While Esther works within the system to save her people, Vashti challenges the system outright. Together, they reveal the dual nature of the Shekhinah: nurturing yet defiant, hidden yet present. Vashti's willingness to set boundaries, demand respect, and assert her humanity reminds us that there is holiness in saying no—even when it comes at great personal cost.

The Shekhinah's presence, however, is not confined to these grand gestures. It is found in the everyday acts of care and kindness that sustain us. Mordechai's care for Esther, raising her as his own daughter (Esther 2:7), mirrors the Shekhinah's nurturing qualities. His faith in her potential reflects the Divine trust that the Shekhinah places in humanity, even when the path forward seems unclear. The mitzvot of Purim—mishloach manot and matanot l'evyonim—are further tangible expressions of the Shekhinah's presence. These acts remind us that holiness is not reserved for extraordinary moments but is embedded in the simple, generous gestures that connect us to one another. Through these mitzvot, the Shekhinah's light transforms concealment into connection and isolation into community.

The theme of concealment in Purim is not merely about what is hidden but about the potential it holds. Concealment creates a space for transformation, a spiritual gestation where something new can take root. Esther's hidden identity allows her to grow into her role as a leader and savior, a process shaped

by quiet strength and deliberate choices. Similarly, the Shekhinah, often described as hidden and vulnerable, reflects the brokenness of the world while holding the seeds of healing. This hiddenness is not a sign of weakness but of profound resilience. Like the Shekhinah, we can find strength in hidden places, transforming pain into growth and challenges into redemption.

Purim's lessons extend far beyond its story. In moments when we feel disconnected—whether from community, faith, or ourselves—it reminds us that the Divine is always near, working quietly to guide us. By leaning into acts of kindness, nurturing relationships, and finding meaning in the everyday, we can reconnect with the Shekhinah's presence.

This experience of living with a hidden identity resonates with modern struggles. Many people navigate spaces where they feel compelled to conceal parts of themselves—their faith, their values, or their true emotions. Such concealment often leads to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and disconnection. Yet Esther's story reminds us that hiddenness can also be a source of strength. Her ability to remain composed and strategic in the complexities of palace life demonstrates remarkable inner resilience.

As we don masks and celebrate this Purim, let us also reflect on the hidden parts of our own lives. What truths need to be revealed? What strengths are waiting to emerge? Like Esther and Vashti, we are called to embody the Shekhinah in our actions and choices. Through these reflections, we honor the sacred story of redemption that continues to unfold—within us, around us, and through the Divine presence that is always near.

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