

## **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.

---

*Ilana Gimpelevich is a lifelong learner and educator, always open to new fields of knowledge. Originally from Kishinev, Moldova, she holds a BA in Biochemistry (YU) and a Master's in Structural Biology (NYU). She is a founding member of New Toco Shul in Atlanta, GA. Currently residing in Richmond, VA, Ilana is involved in adult programming at Keneseth Beth Israel. She started an innovative multigenerational program, Oreg, which combines her two passions of hands-on craftsmanship with Torah learning.*