



Vashti and the Systematic Abuse of Power

“We shall stand amazed that there was a woman found at the head of the Persian empire that dared to disobey the command even of a drunken monarch.” - Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Bible Heroines: Being Narrative Biographies of Prominent Hebrew Women*

In 1878, Stowe acknowledged Vashti's defiance of King Achashverush as a “first stand for women's rights.” Like Stowe, I salute Vashti's audacious courage, and I can't help but wonder about the systemic abuse that she endured. The Megilah notes that women's powerlessness and subservience to their husbands was endemic to society. For example, Memuchan (thought to be Haman), convinces the King to send letters, a royal edict, declaring that “וְכָל-הַנָּשִׁים יִתְּנוּ יְקָר לְבַעְלֵיהֶן all wives show respect to their husbands” (Megilat Esther 1:20). The letters declared: “וְכָל-אִישׁ שָׁרָר בְּבֵיתוֹ every man should rule in his own home”(1:22). How do we honor Vashti for her strength, while condemning systematic – and in this case, state-sponsored – abuse of women.

In trying to understand how effective (or rather ineffective) the royal letters were, the Gemara (Megilah 12b) explains that they were not taken seriously by the Persian men because it was פְּשִׁיטָא/obvious that every man should wield power in his own home. “Even a lowly weaver is commander in his house!” It was obvious that no one would stand up for women, so it is no surprise that every named man in the first chapter of Megilat Esther acquiesces to and supports Achashverush's treatment of women: “Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven ministers” (1:10) and “Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memuchan” (1:14), his closest advisors. It may have been Memuchan who explicitly suggested the egregious plan for the submission of all women, but none of the other men raised any objection. These lists are indicative of the abuse faced by women that extends far beyond Vashti.

What hope did Vashti, and women in general, have to counter an entire system that gave them second class status? It is not lost on me that the story of Vashti and the plight of women ends





abruptly and without resolution at the end of chapter one. And yet, in the same Gemara above, Rava imagines an alternative possibility.

Rava said: Were it not for the first letters sent by Achashverush, which everybody discounted, there would not have been left among the enemies of the Jewish people, a remnant or a refugee (Megilah 12b).

Rava explains that King Achashverush's letter writing strategy did not have the effect for which he hoped. Just as the Persians ignored and even ridiculed the first letter, the edict for men to be the sole ruler in their homes, so too, the people did not take the second letter campaign, to destroy the Jews, seriously.

Rava imagines a world where men did not blindly follow unjust rulings. Rather, the 14 men who did not stand up to King Achashverush's abusive behavior towards Vashti were not representative of the men of Persia, men who had the moral courage to dismiss the king's misogyny and seek more equitable partnerships. The systematized abuse of power was not, in fact, systemic, and Esther emerged as the symbol of leadership. Esther represented the *kehila*: a society that could not save Vashti, but did succeed in placing a woman in the seat of power.

At Maharat, we stand up against systematic abuse and victimization. We do not acquiesce to the errors of the past and are using our collective leadership skills to end the exploitation of *aggunot*, bound women. Maharat's [Halakha in Action](#) has enabled 14 alumnae, rabbis in the field, to do what King Achashverush's 14 men did not do: take a stand and work towards eliminating abuse against women. In this case, Maharat's alumnae have met for two years to deepen their knowledge in the laws of *kiddushin* and *gittin* so that they can serve as resources to their communities on issues relating to marriage and divorce. Based on our guiding leadership model of [lilmod, l'lamed, v'la'asot](#), (learning, teaching, advocacy), the fellowship will culminate in an array of thought pieces and practical leadership advocacy to help people who are struggling with issues that come up with Jewish marriage and divorce.

Fellows will explore *halakhic* alternatives to *kiddushin*; others will offer a way for couples to





incorporate a *t'nai kiddushin*, a stipulation to the *chuppah* that says that the marriage would retroactively dissolve if a husband refuses to grant a *gett*. Others may volunteer to help organizations who are already doing the work, such as the [International Beit Din](#) or [Rate My Beit Din](#). Each fellow is working towards a sustainable communal solution. At Maharat, we not only imagine a world where the systemic abuse of power will dissipate, but one in which we rebuild that very system based on the principles of equity and respect.

