



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

CELEBRATING THE HEROIC IN JUDAISM & OUR LIVES

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“With the start of the month of Adar, we greatly increase joy.”

The most light-hearted holiday on the Jewish calendar, Purim falls on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Adar, in 2004 on March 7th (in Israel) and March 8th (“Shushan Purim”) in the Diaspora. All over the world, Jews gather to hear the saga of the holiday in the *Megillat Esther*, the Scroll of Esther, which tells how a young Jewish woman – Hadassah, also known as Queen Esther-- cleverly unmasked the machinations of the evil courtier Haman before King Ahasuerus in Persia, somewhere between 534 and 420 BCE. Thanks to Esther and her Uncle Mordecai, Haman’s plan to destroy the Jews backfired – the Jews were saved and Haman was hanged instead. Or as a Jewish-American children’s song says,

And Mordecai was singing, as Haman was a-swinging, In Shu-Shu-Shushan long ago!

One way to honor the heroism of Esther is to get to know her “soul-sisters” in the Hebrew Bible – other women who also revealed themselves to be heroes – and to consider, too, how in our own lives we ourselves may be showing similar acts of heroism that we don’t even recognize as such.

- There is **Rebeka**, who – echoing her father-in-law, the patriarch Abraham, *left the familiar, trusted her dream, and entered the unknown for the sake of a hoped-for future;*
- **Tamar**, *who took a risk to right a perceived wrong;*
- **The Daughters of Zelophahad**, *who stood up against a perceived injustice for the sake of women’s rights;* and
- **Avigail**, *who acted with wisdom and generosity, as a peacemaker.*

You may want to divide into small groups to discuss which of these women you most relate to, based on your own life-experience, your imagination, or your desire. Have women in the group chosen to leave the familiar, like Rebeka? confronted a wrong? stood up for women’s rights? served as a peacemaker? Have you known women in your life whose actions echo those of these biblical women? In what way can they serve as inspirational models for Jewish women today?

THE STORIES

Rebeka

In Genesis 24, Abraham sends his most trusted servant to Abraham’s own native land to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant comes to a well, and discovers Rebekah there, the granddaughter of Abraham’s own brother. She brings him to her home, he tells the story of



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his mission to her family, and at first it seems as if her father and brother agree to the marriage without even consulting her. But the next morning, the family tries to delay her departure – and indeed, in a manner very unusual for the times – her mother and brother decide to leave the decision whether or not to go up to Rebekah herself. *She becomes the only one of the matriarchs who is given **the choice** whether or not to leave her own native land and parental house to go to an unknown land, just as Abraham did before her* (Genesis 12:1).

They called Rebekah and said to her, Will you go with this man?
And she said, “I will.” (Gen 24:60)

Why do you think she consented to go? Did she have an adventurous spirit? Did she have a vision of what lay before her? Was she filled with curiosity about Isaac? about the land of Canaan? Was she confident? Try to imagine her mind-set as she mounted her camel and set off toward her new life.

Tamar

In the world of the Bible, when a woman is left a widow, her brother-in-law is obligated to marry her. In Genesis 38, Tamar’s husband Er, the first-born son of Judah, dies, as well as Er’s younger brother. Only one son, Shelah, is left, and according to biblical law, he is required to marry Tamar. Judah tells Tamar to wait until Shelah grows up. But the years pass, Shelah grows up, and Judah does nothing.

Rather than accept the abandonment, Tamar takes action. Just as Jacob once disguised himself to receive Isaac’s blessing, so Tamar, determined to right the wrong done her, disguises herself. She masquerades as a prostitute, and Judah, not realizing who she really is, sleeps with her. He leaves his staff and seal with her, as a pledge for future payment. But when he sends his friend to redeem the pledge, the townspeople tell him there’s been no prostitute there at all.

Three months later, word reaches Judah that Tamar “has played the harlot” and is pregnant. “Let her be burned!” says Judah. But as Tamar is brought to him, she sends him the staff and seal along with a message that the father of the baby is the man to whom that staff and seal belong. Judah recognizes them, and publicly confesses his own wrongdoing, admitting that Tamar “is more in the right than I am.”

What Tamar did put her own life in danger – yet it was she who was honoring the law, and in the process assuring the continuation of Judah’s line – and it was Judah, as he admitted, who was guilty of wrongdoing. Do you know of women who took risks to right a perceived wrong?



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The Daughters of Zelophehad

Nearing the end of their long journey in the wilderness, Moses and the Israelites stand on the steppes of Moab, where the Israelites are counted in order to determine their future holdings in the Promised Land. *But only the males are counted.* Not to be deterred by injustice, the Daughters of Zelophehad, descendants of Joseph, come before “Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly” (Numbers 27:1) and in front of everyone proclaim that just because there is no male in their family doesn’t mean they should be left out. They, too, deserve a holding in Israel! Not knowing what to say, Moses takes their demand to God, who immediately tells him that the daughters are right: “If a man dies without leaving a son,” Moses is told, the property should be transferred to the daughter.

While today we may regard even that emendation as too limiting, imagine the courage of the Daughters in the days of the Bible, facing all of Israel and demanding their rights. They were clearly among the first of a long line of women to defend women’s rights. Who else has been important to you in standing up for the rights of women? Is there a time in your own life when you found the courage to speak out?

Avigail

Married to a boorish, evil, hard, and foolish man, the “intelligent and beautiful” Avigail (I Samuel 25) hears that David has sent messengers to her husband, asking that his men be received graciously by him, and that her husband spurned them. One of her husband’s own men tells her that harm now threatens them all, but that her husband “is such a nasty fellow that no one can speak with him.” Avigail takes matters in her own hands. Loading her asses with generous provisions for David’s men, she sets off to find them, and when she does she speaks with eloquence and politic wisdom. Not only does she acknowledge her husband’s wrong, but even more importantly she urges David, for his own sake, not to spill blood needlessly. For David will be a great king, and, in the future, “when the Lord has accomplished...all the good he has promised you,” the needless spilling of blood now will trouble his spirit and make him stumble, and his courage falter. How far better it is to be a peacemaker!

And Avigail’s words speak to David’s heart. “Praised be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me!” he tells her, “And blessed be your prudence, and blessed be you yourself for restraining me from seeking redress in blood by my own hands!”

A woman with an independent spirit, Avigail understood the need to act for the sake of peace – and the moral courage so vital for true leadership. Have there been other Avigails in history? Others in your own life?