



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

by Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

8. Fast of Esther: Stop the Traffic

Context

The tradition to fast on the eve of the Jewish festival of masquerade is a show of solidarity with biblical Esther, Queen of Persia and Media. According to the Scroll named after her, the Scroll of Esther-Megillat Esther, a sovereign edict had been issued to decimate the Jews throughout the empire. Though it is forbidden to approach the King without an invitation, Esther resolves to do so, thereby risking her life on behalf of her people. In order to prepare, she commands fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes.

In the Tanakh, this was a one-time event, that took place many months before the subsequent feast of Purim. Observing the Fast of Esther each year immediately before the holiday is a rabbinic innovation. Here we focus on select portions of the Megilla that reveal problematic attitudes and practices in relation to women. We propose feminist activism on the Fast of Esther to redress gender-based oppression.

Background

Megillat Esther begins with an account of elaborate and indulgent feasting in the court of a bungling King, Achashverosh. Achashverosh rules over an [extensive empire](#) of 127 states of Persia and Media. Amidst the debauchery, the Queen, Vashti is summoned to display her beauty, perhaps naked, before the King and his revellers. When she refuses, she is summarily banished.

The royal court fears a women's uprising inspired by Vashti's defiance.

<p>וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תִּאֲמַרְנָה שְׂרוֹת פָּרֶס-וּמְדִי, אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת-דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶכָה, לֹכֵל, שְׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ; וְכַדִּי, בְּזִיווֹן וְקֶצֶף. אֶסְתֵּר 1:18</p>	<p>And this day, the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen will say the same to all the king's princes. So there will arise enough contempt and wrath. Esther 1:18</p>
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Following his advisors' counsel to put down the potential feminist movement, Achashverosh decrees that every woman, young and old, must honor and submit to her male spouse, the inviolable ruler of his house.

In order to assuage the injury to the king's machismo and appease his desire, the court decrees an imperial beauty contest by which the unruly Queen Vashti will be replaced -

<p>וַיֹּאמְרוּ נְעָרֵי-הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׂרָתָיו יִבְקֹשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נְעוּרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מְרָאָה. וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל-מְדִינוֹת מַלְכוּתוֹ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-נְעָרָה-בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיכָה אֶל-בֵּית הַנְּשִׁים אֶל-יַד הַגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֶׁ מֵר הַנְּשִׁים וְנָתַן תַּמְרָקִיָּהן. אֶסְתֵּר 2:2-3</p>	<p>Then said the king's servants that ministered to him: 'Let there be sought for the king young, beautiful virgins; and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins to Shushan the capital, to the house of the women, to the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their ointments be given them. Esther 2:2-3</p>
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The king and his appointees “gather” attractive young women from throughout the vast empire, take them from their families to the capital city, Shushan, and put them under custody of the guard over the king's harem.

Each night, Achashverosh sleeps with one young woman to test her candidacy for the throne.

<p>בְּעֶרְבַּי הָיָה בָּאָה, וּבבֹקֶר הָיָה שְׂבָה אֶל-בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנֵי, אֶל-יַד שַׁעֲשֻׁגַז סְרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ, שֶׁמֶר הַפִּילִגְשִׁים: לֹא-תָבוֹא עוֹד אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ, כִּי אִם-חֹפֵץ בָּהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִקְרָאָה בְּשֵׁם. אֶסְתֵּר 2:14</p>	<p>In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, who kept the concubines; she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and she were called by name. Esther 2:14</p>
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These verses make male sovereign entitlement explicit—to capture, transport, have sex with, control, and confine women according to *his* pleasure. There is no resistance expressed in the text.

Among the women “gathered”, Esther was a Jewish refugee whose ancestors had been sent into exile at the time of the destruction of the First Temple and Jerusalem. Even with the return of some of the exiles to the Land of Israel and the building the Second Jerusalem Temple, many Jews remained in Babylonia.

In Achashverosh's round-up of the young women, Esther “is taken.”

<p>וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֶל-יַד הַגִּי שֶׁמֶר הַנָּשִׁים אֶסְתֵּר 2:8</p>	<p>Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. Esther 2:8</p>
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The activity of *taking* women, transporting them across borders, forced sex, and confinement is known today as *trafficking into prostitution*. A March 2014 report, “[Prostitution, trafficking and modern slavery in Europe](#)” by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination states,

Trafficking in human beings is a hideous human rights violation and one of the most lucrative activities for criminal organisations worldwide. . . . In Europe, trafficking for sexual exploitation is by far the most widespread form: an estimated 84% of victims are trafficked for this purpose.

Here is a contemporary [personal account](#) of a woman, Grace, trafficked from Nigeria to Germany -

<p>A “trolley-man” accompanied me and a bunch of other women being taken to various countries in Europe to a hotel to organize our travel documents. I was given the passport of an African woman from a different country and then transported with another woman to Germany. Once I arrived, I was told that my debt was 50,000 euro (around 67,000 USD) which I realized would take a very long time to repay. My family’s contact then told me that to pay the debt, I would be working as a prostitute in brothels (which are legalized in Germany). It was then that I realized that my family’s contact was a madam. I refused and called my parents to explain what was happening, but they told me to obey her and do whatever she told me to do. I didn’t have any papers and didn’t know my rights. She said that if I asked anyone for help, I would be deported, so I didn’t think I had any choice but to become a prostitute. In Nigeria, we respect Germany. I didn’t even think that they did this as a job in Germany; in Italy and Spain, we know there is prostitution. My mother begged me to do what they said. I cried every time a man slept with me, because I was brought up Christian. Back in Nigeria, the father of my son had raped me, and this reminded me of that over and over. I worked day and night for months, doing everything they asked me, in order to get the money for my madam;</p>
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and every day I cried. If I came home (I lived with my traffickers) without enough money, my madam would seriously reprimand and abuse me. And, after servicing clients, I would often have to wash dishes and take care of the children in the house. I worked for seven months and was told by my various employers that I had to have sex without condoms when asked. Men demanded sex without condoms. At a well-known legal brothel, the owners told me directly that I had to have sex without condoms, otherwise I would be fired. The owners would ask the clients afterwards if they were happy, if I willingly serviced them without a condom. My madam wanted me to do it without a condom. She said that I was no better than the other girls, and I should do what the brothels wanted to earn more and pay her back. I wouldn't be able to pay off the debt if I couldn't work, so I did it. The women here are so desperate for money that they don't care about AIDS—people here are ready to die. This is blood money, and it was killing me, too. Seven months after I started, police carried out a check on the brothel and they asked me if I was working there voluntarily. I was very scared and, remembering the oath I had sworn before leaving Nigeria, I said "yes." They looked over my papers and, realizing they weren't mine, arrested me and took me to the immigration detention centre. While there I became sick, vomiting, and was brought to a hospital. I found out then that I had AIDS. My madam managed to track me down after I left the hospital and told me that I had to continue being a prostitute to pay for the remaining debt, which she said was still more than half of the 50,000 euro. I refused and she started threatening me and my family back home, who begged me to comply. By then, I had become acquainted with [Solwodi](#), and they helped me to get settled and exit prostitution. I refused to go back to my madam and eventually reported her and her accomplices to the police.

I am very mixed up now. Sometimes I have high hopes for the future and other times I feel very beaten down. I do not want to go back to Nigeria and I know I would be at risk there. I have a partner now who accepts me for who I am and the support of Solwodi, which makes me happy. However, I wish people would tell parents that it is good to educate girls and get them proper job training, rather than sending them into prostitution. A child is a gift of God, whether it is a man or a woman.

Women are not slaves and traffickers should stop taking other people's children. No one should be forced; buyers, pimps and traffickers are killing human beings and spreading sickness. They should prostitute themselves if they want money! Some people are paying 90,000-100,000 euro to buy people. Stopping the sex industry would be the best, it should not exist—that's blood money!

When I was in the sex industry, I prayed that someone would take me away. If men would be charged, given severe punishments, it would stop.

Megillat Esther demonstrates a process—applicable historically and today—by which culture makes women into sexual commodities.

The king expects to display his spouse as an attraction at the banquet.



"Woman is an object through whom the male subject fulfills himself; her beauty is a measure of him," writes Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, NY, Vintage, 1989, 248).

The court expresses disdain for Vashti when she resists men's expectations of nakedness and obedience. Fearful of women's power to unlock patriarchal control, the court proposes to enforce male supremacy in all households, subordinating all women to their male spouses' will by decree. Today, the West uses subtler but no less coercive methods (see the

advertising image).

Innocuously dubbed a "beauty" contest, the king's proxies round up and take young women from their homes to a harem where they are primped for sex, and held in captivity. Ultimately, Esther ascends to the throne. Following her uncle Mordecai's instructions, she is secretive about her Jewish identity. When the threat of destruction is imminent, he prompts her with a powerful motivational statement –

מִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם כְּעֵת כֹּזֵאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמוֹכְרוֹת

“Who knows whether it is for a moment like this that you have attained your power?” Esther 4:14

Esther transforms from a passive object of her fate, to a commanding force who ultimately takes responsibility for the destiny of her people. Risking her own life, she confronts the king about the edict he has sealed to destroy the Jewish People throughout the empire.

Let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request; for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain and to be annihilated. (7.3-4)

I suggest that we read Esther's plea as a reference not only to her people, Jews, but to her people, women. She herself had earlier been confined among a harem of women, selected and primed for sex with the king. She recognizes oppression doubly, as woman and Jew.

During the days preceding her meeting with King Ahashuarosh, Esther declares a fast in solidarity with her as she incubates her strategy to foil Haman's evil plan to destroy her people.

<p>לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו של ששת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי, אצוים כן; ובכן אבוא אל המלך, אשר לא כדת, וכאשר אבדתי, אבדתי אסתר ד:טז</p>	<p>Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me. Neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my women folk will fast as well; and so will I go into the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.' Esther 4:16</p>
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Let us call for activism against trafficking in women and prostitution on the Fast of Esther. As in Persia, while many of us feast on the sumptuousness of our material blessings, treacherous acts of inhumanity are plotted and implemented. Esther's process of revealing her hidden identity and the imminent violence of the empire partake of the Purim theme of unmasking the concealed. Esther's fast creates a unique convergence of spiritual and political, an opportunity to inspect and strategize against evil.

I urge that we mobilize to free women from the subjugating bonds of prostitution and trafficking. From the grass roots of individuals and their communities through to national institutional leadership, every Jewish organization, its members, rabbis and presidents can give voice and power to this struggle to assert the dignity and moral integrity of humanity. According to our will, Ta'anit Esther, the Fast of Esther which precedes Purim, can become a compelling Jewish moment uniquely sanctified for solidarity with oppressed women.

Literally absent from the written text, divine force is concealed in Esther's own name and activism. Fasting, let us collectively steel our resolve to struggle with the brutality with which Purim engages us, to manifest our own power to undo contemporary networks of violent desecration. May we honor the inspiring legacy of Esther. Fast!

Observances, Practices and Resources

The Fast of Esther extends from dawn to dusk on the eve of Purim. If the date occurs on Shabbat, the fast is observed instead on the Thursday before Purim.

See Wendy Amsellem's essay, "[Vashti & Esther: A Feminist Perspective, The Mirror Has Two Faces.](#)"

See the [lyrics](#), and [listen](#) to this song about Vashti and Esther, "She Said 'No!'" by Margot Stein, Rayzel Raphael, Bayla Ruchama, and Juliet Spitzer.

I welcome you to recite this intention I composed for the Fast of Esther:

Intention for the Fast Esther

Holy One

Who blessed Esther with the strength and courage to transform plots of evil and desecration

Steel our own resolve to foil the abuse of power where gender and race are tools of oppression

"For how can I bear to witness the disaster that befalls my People?" (Esther 8:6)

May we dismantle the structures that render all creatures vulnerable to capture and exploitation

May we affirm the fullest humanity of women and men, girls and boys

May we face the opportunities that our unique life proposes with dignity and righteousness

May we unmask the hidden power of our being to perform acts of sacred service

Who knows whether it is for a moment like this that you have attained your power? (Esther 4:14)

Sorrow and misery shall flee

Joy and gladness shall we achieve

May the *Shekhina*, Divine Presence, dwell among all people

Amen

Bonna Devora Haberman(c)1998

In 1999, Sweden officially and legally recognized that prostitution is an institution of inequality.

Prostitution and trafficking for sexual purposes represent a serious obstacle to social equality, gender equality and the enjoyment of human rights. Most of the victims are women and children, but men and boys are also being exploited. . . .

Efforts to combat prostitution and trafficking must proceed from a judicial, social and gender equality perspective and be based on the human rights principle. Sweden's commitments in the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN serve as a basis for government policy in this sphere.

The Action Plan focuses specifically on the protection and support needs of individuals at risk, and states that such a perspective is to be integrated in all government work. Special measures are to be taken on behalf of children and young people.

Sweden's visionary law-makers proved that it was possible to adopt a radically new approach to prostitution, shifting the focus from those prostituted to criminalizing the exploiters, traffickers, procurers, and sex buyers. What might then have appeared as ideological or moralistic regulations are now recognised as important tools for countering trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation. Learn about the Swedish approach:

- See Max Waltman's, "[Criminalize Only the Buying of Sex](#)" and the *New York Times* "Room for Debate" on the topic.
- In her paper, "Swedish Anti-Trafficking Policy," Isabelle Johansson soberly evaluates both theory and practice.
- This paper, "[Sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality.](#)" by the Directorate General of the European Parliament evaluates the tremendous human rights, gender equality effectiveness of the Swedish innovation in a broad perspective.

Questions for Discussion

What if any parallels exist between the power men exercise over women in Megillat Esther and in your society?

How are beauty standards in our societies related to women's experience of self-worth, the commodification and sexualizing of girls and women? Explore the extent to which you experience pressure to conform to such standards, and/or convey them to friends, children, relatives, colleagues. Consider diet and nutrition, fashion, elective plastic surgery etc.

In your experience, how are women leaders judged according to their appearance? - more or less than men?

Is Esther a feminist leader? - why or why not?

What situation might motivate you to take a stand, even risk your position (or life!) on behalf of women and on behalf of Jews?

Discuss your views about the Swedish approach to criminalizing the demand for prostitution. Suggest ways by which societies can educate better to respect women's full humanity and discontinue sexual commodification and exploitation. What is your role in this feminist liberation process?

Summary of Issues

In the context of the ribald ancient imperial court of Persia-Media, the Scroll of Esther-Megillat Esther reveals assumptions about male entitlement to women, and women's sexuality. In the wake of the repression of a potential women's uprising against patriarchal power, Queen Esther awakens to her capability to represent and win the cause of her people, women and Jews whose edict for destruction has been sealed. Today, we have the obligation to confront similar degradations of women's integrity. On the Fast of Esther, we resolve to disable the exploitations of prostitution and trafficking of women and girls—grave abuses that undermine the human dignity and equality of our societies.

Methods & Observations

Reading with a feminist lens, we find in an ancient text, Megillat Esther, parallels with contemporary global human rights offenses. From beauty standards to trafficking into prostitution, the text unmasks a process by which girls and women are objectified and oppressed.

Contact

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