



## ESTHER - REVEALING & CONCEALING

### Background

The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. resulted in the exile and dispersion of the Jewish People into a wide-flung Diaspora. Some landed in the vast states of the Persian empire. About the lives of the Persian Jews and a plot to destroy them, the Scroll of Esther narrates a racy and intriguing plot. One of the protagonists, Mordechai, abides in the capital, Shushan. He is a faithful Jew and talented linguist whose hobby is espionage. Esther, the hero of the scroll, lives with him. In a misogynist and racist context, over the course of the drama, Esther emerges from quiet innocence to commanding and responsible leadership. This Scroll is read on the festival of Purim, often accompanied by lighthearted, bawdy, and macabre masquerade.

### Biblical Sources

#### The queen's insolence

י ביום השביעי כטוב לב-המלך בין--אמר למהומן בזתא חרבונא בגתא ואבגתא זתר וכרפס שבעת הסריסים המשרתים את-פני המלך אחשוורוש. יא להביא את-ושתי המלכה לפני המלך--בכתר מלכות: להראות העמים והשרים את-יפיה כי-טובת מראה היא. יב ותמאן המלכה ושתי לבוא בדבר המלך אשר ביד הסריסים; ויקצף המלך מאד וחמתו בערה בו. (אסתר א:יא-יב)

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, 11 to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on. 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the chamberlains; therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him. (Esther 1)

#### The sovereign response

לא על-המלך לבדו עושה ושתי המלכה: כי על-כל-השרים ועל-כל-העמים אשר בכל-מדינות המלך אחשוורוש. יז כי-יצא דבר-המלכה על-כל-הנשים להבזות בעליהן בעיניהן: באמרם המלך אחשוורוש אמר להביא את-ושתי המלכה לפניו --ולא-באה. יח והיום הזה תאמרנה שרות פרס-ומדי אשר שמעו את-דבר המלכה לכל שרי המלך; וכדי בדיון וקצף. יט אם-על-המלך טוב יצא דבר-מלכות מלפניו ויכתב בדתי פרס-ומדי ולא יעבור: אשר לא-תבוא ושתי לפני המלך אחשוורוש ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה הטובה ממנה. כ ונשמע פתגם המלך אשר-יעשה בכל-מלכותו כי רבה היא; וכל-הנשים יתנו יקר לבעליהן--למגדול ועד-קטן. כא ויטב הדבר בעיני המלך והשרים; ויעש המלך כדבר ממוכן. כב וישלח ספרים אל-כל-מדינות המלך--אל-מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ואל-עם ועם כלשונו: להיות כל-איש שרר בביתו ומדבר כלשון עמו. (אסתר א)

16 'Vashti the queen has not done wrong to the king only but also to all the princes, and to all the peoples, that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. 17 For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their souses contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. 18 And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like to all the king's princes. So will there arise enough contempt and wrath. 19 If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus, and that the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his kingdom, great though it be, all the woman will give to their spouses honour, both to great and small.' 21 And the word pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan; 22 for he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people. (Esther 1)

## The beauty contest

יִבְקֹשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נְעוּרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מֵרָאָה. ג וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל-מְדִינֹת מְלָכוֹתָיו וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-נְעֵרָה-בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מֵרָאָה אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיִרָה אֶל-בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים אֶל-יַד הַגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים; וַנִּתּוֹן תִּמְרָקֶיהֶן. ד וְהַנְּעֵרָה אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ--תִּמְלֶךְ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי (אסתר ב:ב-ג)

'Let there be sought for the king young virgin women fair to look on; 3 and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgin women to Shushan the castle, to the house of the women, into the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their ointments be given them; 4 and let the maiden that pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.'

וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-יַד הַגִּי שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים. (אסתר ב:ח)

Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. (Esther 2:8)

## Esther's identity secret

י לֹא-הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר אֶת-עַמָּהּ וְאֶת-מּוֹלְדֹתָהּ: כִּי מְרַדְכַי צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תִגִּיד. (אסתר ב)

10 Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not tell it. (Esther 2)

## Queen Esther

יז וַיֵּאָהֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל-הַנָּשִׁים, וַתִּשָּׂא-חַן וְחֶסֶד לְפָנָיו מִכָּל-הַבְּתוּלוֹת; וַיִּשָּׂם כֶּתֶר-מְלָכוֹת בְּרֹאשָׁהּ, וַיְמַלִּיכָהּ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי. (אסתר ב)

17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the young virgin women; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. (Esther 2)

## Edict of destruction

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ, לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ--יֵשְׁנוּ עִם-אֶחָד מִפְּזֵר וּמִפְּרֵד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתָהּ; וְדִתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מְכַל-עַם וְאֶת-דִּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלְמֶלֶךְ אֵין-שׁוּהָ לְהַנִּיחָם. ט אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם; וְעִשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִים כֶּסֶף-כֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁקוּל עַל-יָדֵי עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה לְהַבִּיא אֶל-גְּנֹזֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ. (אסתר ג)

8 And Haman said to king Ahasuerus: 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them. 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.' (Esther 3)

## Mordechai persuades Esther to resist the edict

אֶל-תִּדְמֵי בְּנִפְשָׁךְ לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ מְכַל-הַיְהוּדִים. יד כִּי אִם-הִחַרְשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת--רוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תֹאבְדוּ; וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ--אִם-לַעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת. טו וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְהַשִּׁיב אֶל-מֶרְדֳּכָי. טז לָךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם--גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן; וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבִדְתִּי אֲבִדְתִּי. יז וַיַּעֲבֵר מֶרְדֳּכָי; וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר. (אסתר ד)

'Think not yourself that you shall escape in the king's house more than all the Jews. 14 For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether you have come to royal power for such a time as this?' 15 Then Esther bade them return answer to Mordecai: 16 'Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my women will fast in like manner; and so will I go into the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.' 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him. (Esther 4)

## Esther's appeal to the king

אִם-מִצָּאתַי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב: תִּנְתֵּן-לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשִׂאלְתִּי וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִּי. כִּי נִמְכְּרָנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרוֹג וּלְאַבֵּד; וְאֵלּוּ לַעֲבָדִים וּלְשִׁפְחוֹת נִמְכְּרָנוּ הִחַרְשָׁתִּי--כִּי אֵין הִצָּר שׁוּהָ בְּנֹזֵק הַמֶּלֶךְ. (אסתר ז:ג-ד)

3 'If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request; 4 for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we

had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace, for the adversary is not worthy that the king be bothered.'

## Esther's solution

יִכְתֹּב לְהָשִׁיב אֶת-הַסְּפָרִים מִחֲשֻׁבַּת הָמֶן בֶּן-הַמְּדַתָּה הָאֲגָגִי אֲשֶׁר כָּתַב לְאֵבֶד אֶת-  
הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ. כִּי אֵיכָכָה אוֹכֵל וְרֵאִיתִי בְרַעַה אֲשֶׁר-יִמָּצָא אֶת-  
עַמִּי; וְאֵיכָכָה אוֹכֵל וְרֵאִיתִי בְּאֵבֶדן מוֹלְדָתִי. (אסתר ח)

'Let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews that are in all the king's provinces; 6 for how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?' (Esther 8)

## **Questions for Discussion**

Fear and anger about insubordination is a theme in the Scroll; these emotions motivate and empower imperial edicts. What does the response to Queen Vashti's refusal to appear reveal about attitudes toward women in Persia? Haman's anger and racism are similarly motivated by Mordechai's refusal to prostrate himself. What, if any, relationship do you interpret between sexism and racism?

How does Esther formulate her appeal to the king on behalf of her People? What is her strategy?

To what extent are gender and gender roles determinate of the action in the Scroll? What is your assessment of these roles, particularly the assumptions about beauty, sexuality, and power?

Esther dons the crown without revealing her national - religious identity. Until she faces the crisis of imminent destruction, she is passive, and abides by Mordechai's instructions. At a certain moment, she seizes the role as an empowered proponent of her People. What is the impetus for her transition? How do we nurture women's identities as responsible activists of the kind that Esther models?

## **Links for Inquiry**

The full text of the Scroll of Esther, 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation, <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et3301.htm>

Learn about *Unmasking Esther*, a textual-activist event, <http://people.brandeis.edu/~mistabra/Esther/Unmasking.html>

A variety of Purim resources, <http://www.wgbh.org/pages/pri/spirit/shows/026bibl.html>

Perspective on Esther as hero, and master of repentance,  
<http://www.yhol.org.il/features/esther.htm>

For an alternate application of Esther's heroism, "What Queen Esther Knew: Business Strategies from a Biblical Sage",  
[http://www.enterprisingwomen.com/business\\_biblical.htm](http://www.enterprisingwomen.com/business_biblical.htm)

## **Summary of Issues**

The Scroll of Esther documents the unfolding personality of a young woman living in a challenging Diaspora context. Esther emerges as one of the leaders and redeemers of the Jewish People. Taking on a responsible role involves negotiating the complexities and oppressions of gender and race. Many of these complications are bound up with fear and anger, roots of sexism and racism.

## **Methodological Matters**

Though Esther envisions repealing the genocidal edict in order to save the lives of the Jews, according to the text, the king's edict cannot be repealed. This malfunction of absolute power results in the demise of tens of thousands whom the Jews kill in order to protect themselves against their assailants - according to the king's immutable edict. To what extent is this an investigation, a questioning of the immutability of divine law? What, if any, are our limits and responsibilities to question the text and engage the Creator critically?

## **Contact**

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