**Women in Persia and Egypt**

Achashverosh’s campaign to find a new wife exemplifies his corrupt value system. Utilizing his royal power, he commands every pretty virgin in the kingdom to spend the night with him so he can select a queen (2:3, 2:14). His deplorable attitude toward women was already manifest in the first chapter, when he calls for Vashti to show off her beauty to the men of his court (1:11). In this new endeavor, women spend six months in oil of myrrh and six months in sweet smelling spices (2:12), an outrageous amount of time, highlighting the absurd immorality of the Persian court. Women are objects to be displayed and discarded after use.

Prof. Yonatan Grossman employs a good example of intertextuality bolstering this theme. Many note the abundance of parallels, both thematic and linguistic, between the Esther narrative and the story of Yosef in Egypt. Among the similarities, the phrase כנפיו ישמע היא (2:12) appears only in these two episodes. In Egypt, it describes the time it took to embalm the deceased (Bereishit 50:3). In Persia, it refers to the duration of time women were immersed in oil (2:12). According to Prof. Grossman, this equation emphasizes the dehumanization of women in the Persian court. They are treated like mummies.

The king’s advisors seem quite frightened of female independence. During the Vashti episode, Memuchan expresses fear that ignoring Vashti’s insolence will embolden all women to ignore their husband’s will (1:17) and the royal decree they send out explicitly calls for male hegemony in the house (1:22). Thus, we have a culture that objectifies women and wants them subservient to their husbands.

If so, Esther’s heroism has an ironically appropriate component. Haman, a central part of the atmosphere of the Persian court that denigrates women, is ultimately defeated by a woman. If we accept the aggadah identifying Haman with Memuchan (Megillah 12b), then Haman himself expressed this fear of independent women. After Mordechai dramatically challenges Esther to risk her safety and save Am Yisrael, Esther takes charge and begins giving directions. She instructs Mordechai to initiate a three-day fast and six months in sweet smelling spices (2:12), an outrageous amount of time, highlighting the absurd immorality of the Persian court. Women are objects to be displayed and discarded after use.

Next, Moshe’s sister enables Yochavey to nurse the baby and maintain a relationship with him. Of course, it is this baby Moshe who ultimately brings about the downfall of Pharaoh and Egypt. The very women who did not frighten Pharaoh are responsible for his demise. I believe this Biblical pattern in Shemot’s first two chapters lies behind Chazal crediting righteous Jewish women with redemption from Egyptian bondage (Sotah 11b).

In one story, a monarch did not see Jewish women as a danger. In the other, a king and his advisors viewed women as pretty objects who should be kept in their place. Both stories include heroic women who changed history and defeated evil tyrannical men. Chazal say women are obligated in the four cups of wine on Pesach night and in reading the Megillah on Purim because “women were also part of the miracle” (Pesachim 108b, Megillah 4a). While Tosafot understands that women were simply subject to the identical danger, Rashi and Rashbam interpret this source as indicating that women were the central players in the two stories. The story of Esther resembles the tale of the Jews in Egypt and the holiday of Purim emulates its older cousin Pesach in that both reveal the redemptive influence and exceptional abilities of valiant women.

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