



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 *כִּי בֵּן יִמְלֶאוּ יָמֵי* 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 as she goes to Achashverosh without permission. She cleverly uses two parties to make Achashverosh suspicious and ensnare Haman. Those who tried to keep women down find themselves defeated by a woman.

Interestingly enough, this generates another parallel to the Jews in Egypt. Pharaoh apparently does not consider Jewish females a threat, commanding that the boys be thrown in the Nile while the girls can remain alive. Perhaps the Egyptian men want a wider range of available marriage choices. However, in subsequent events, woman after woman subverts his plan. First, two midwives refuse to carry out the evil murder of innocent Jewish babies. Then a Jewish mother, against all odds, places her infant son in a *teiva* (sometimes translated as basket), holding out hope that he will somehow survive. Abarbanel suggests Moshe's father had already despaired, but Yocheved retained her commitment, courage and optimism. Pharaoh's very daughter sees the baby and decides to save and raise him.

Next, Moshe's sister enables Yocheved 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.

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau is a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Orayta. He is the author of *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggadah*.



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