

# Purim Torah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In my student days, when I used to campaign for women's rights, I thought that the Purim story was about the suffering of women. That drunk male numbskulls who got boozed up on excessive amounts of alcohol forced their smelly, priapic, testosterone-fueled bodies on unwilling, disadvantaged women.

King Achashverosh was a typical male chauvinist pig. A lazy slob, a sybaritic cross between an oriental potentate and a parasite, he probably never did a day's work in his life. He is surrounded by incompetent, sycophantic advisors who come in sets of seven. When he finds himself short of financial liquidity he looks around desperately for an easy source of income. He is impressed by Haman's scheme to kill and confiscate. He tries to buy loyalty by putting on huge lavish feasts, orgies of extravagance at which he expects his wife, Vashti, to come and perform.

One version is that Vashti had the guts to stand up to him. She risked her life—perhaps even lost it—because she refused to be treated as a second class citizen, as an object, as a beauty queen to be shown off with her body examined like a race horse or a stripper. "Good for her," I thought, "and shame on the men who think that Vashti's action threatens their pathetic manhood." They insist on a proclamation that the men must be in charge of their households and the women must obey them. Achashverosh has no mind of his own. Pussy that he is, he gives in to his pathetic advisors. Reluctantly he gets rid of Vashti (probably literally). Then he misses her, poor sap. Until his young clubbing buddies advise him to gather up all the virgins in the empire and hold a beauty competition. I liked Vashti. She had guts. She is the heroine, and she pays with her life!

Esther, on the other hand, was a poor orphan who had been bullied into becoming a passive wimp and was raised by a rigid, strict, humorless cousin. He, in a Machiavellian way, uses her body to get close to the king to advance his own political career. He's pimping her, knowing she will have to spend a night with the king with no guarantee that he will call her back. I know, he had no choice. But since when do polemics care about the facts?

Then her fate will be to join the hundreds of other concubines, used, discarded, and wasting away their lives in the seraglio. Mordechai is pulling the strings. He orders her not to divulge her origins. Anti-Semitism is everywhere. Haman was no exception. The 75,000 neo-fascists who were killed in the end amounted to a significant force. Fortunately she wins the competition and is crowned Miss Persian Empire. Even so, the addicted king keeps the virgins coming in. And as Mordechai says, there was no guarantee she wouldn't be replaced.

It is five years later. Mordechai tells Esther of Haman's decree and orders her to go to the king. But she can't if she's not been called, and she hasn't

seen the king for thirty days. Not much of a marriage if she only gets to see her husband that rarely. But then, he does have thousands of new virgins to try out. Poor Esther has to fast for three days and then risk her life. She has a plan. She invites the king to a banquet. Oh yes, he loves banquets. There she can't come right out and tell the king what an evil man Haman is, so she uses subterfuge and seduction to titillate his curiosity to the point of bursting. But she also cleverly makes the king jealous. Is Haman a competitor for her affections? He was already wondering if Haman's suggestion of dressing up in the king's clothes and riding his horse wasn't a challenge to his authority. Then when the timing is right, she comes out with it. Haman wants to kill her! The king is furious. Haman goes. Esther saves her people and gets Mordechai a promotion. She has done all this by using devious feminine wiles, whereas gutsy up-front Vashti got shown the door.

Time has passed. In our modern era women get as drunk as men and proposition basketball stars and post nude selfies and flock to see "50 Shades of Gray." Perhaps Vashti was no idealist after all. She was insulted because only belly dancers, concubines, and girls of doubtful morals attended such drunken excesses where the drink was laced with date rape drugs. Queens had their own sedate gatherings. Or did they? Perhaps they invited male strippers and models, or some sadomasochistic football jocks. The last thing they wanted were fat, drunk, smelly politicians, bureaucrats, or eunuchs for heaven's sake. She was nothing more than a Kim Kardashian who would do anything for money.

Now I began to see that the real heroine was Esther, who really had to make something of herself. It was not as if she had a choice. The virgins were rounded up because the King commanded. Try turning Putin down, and see where your body ends up! She realized that the way to win the king was not to use gimmicks, gizmos, or aphrodisiacs. She would simply use the God-given gifts she had. She stood for authenticity, for honesty, no games. She put her own life on the line for her people not just for herself.

She might have started off taking orders from Mordechai, but she soon learned to take the initiative. She reported that Mordechai had discovered a plot to kill the king and that halted Haman's meteoric rise. It was her idea to fast and to order the community to support her. It was her idea to play the king, to intrigue him, to even refuse his insistence she tell him what she really wanted. She played it all so cleverly that she won the king's confidence and became the one who gets him to do what she wants. She had an eye on power. She distributed favors to Mordechai and then instructed the Jewish people to turn the events into a national holiday and a new feature of the Jewish tradition. That's some achievement for a Jewish women, one that no one can match now, two-and-a-half thousand years later. She's the poster woman for women's rights, not Vashti.

Yes, of course, there's another story here of anti-Semitism, of prejudice and irrational hatred, of what happens when leaders are weak or drunk and abdicate their responsibility to their advisors. It's about having stupid laws, too, ones that cannot be withdrawn or overturned. And it's about the right to self-defense. We sensitive moderns might be queasy about killing the enemy, but no one asked them to attack us. The anti-Jews could have stayed at

home instead of parading down the streets of Shushan with placards proclaiming "Death to the Jews". Sometimes you need to provoke your secret enemies and flush out the hidden foe. You need spirit and foresight to win the battle.

Above all there's a spiritual message that, as Mordechai said, it is up to us to do our best, but if all else fails "help will come from somewhere else." As it does. Mordechai is no ordinary exile. He has vision, and possibly prophecy, and an understanding of the problems of the empire, the dangers the Jews face. God is indeed hidden in the Book of Esther. He gets no mention. But He is there all the time, in the background and by implication.

In every generation the most unlikely heroes emerge to save us from others and from ourselves. It is not necessarily the great rabbis who make the right decisions. Sometimes it is a good political connection, a loving relationship, a business alliance, or just a person being there at the right moment that turns the course of history. That's the miracle of Purim. Anyone can be a hero.