

# Subversive Femmes: Vashti and Esther

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The story of Purim features two queens: Queen Vashti (disgraced royal, [feminist icon](#)) and Queen Esther (beauty contest winner, covert Jewess, savior). Explore what's subversive in their stories with a *chevruta* or study partner to arrive at new insights. The term “chevruta” also means “friendship” or “companionship:” text study is inherently collaborative and relational. We suggest you take turns reading these texts aloud - in English or Hebrew.

One traditional framework for interpreting Jewish text is described by the abbreviation PaRDeS, which is Hebrew for orchard and shares a root with the English PaRaDiSe:

- Pshat (פְּשָׁט) – “simple” or the literal, direct meaning
- Remez (רִמְזָה) – “hints,” the allusions, symbols, or “read between the lines” meaning
- Derash (דְּרָשׁ) – “interpret,” comparative, interpretive meanings
- Sod (סוֹד) – “secret,” the mysterious hidden meaning, especially that moment where a new insight or revelation pops into your mind.

We invite you to dig in wherever you are interested, but stick with these texts until you hit that moment of revelation, when your mind is blown!

## Vashti's Banishment

The Purim story is told in *Megillat Esther*, Book of Esther, which is a part of the *Ketuvim* or Writings. These are found in the third section of *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible). If you're not at all familiar with the Purim story, [check out this summary](#), or visit [sefaria.org/Esther](http://sefaria.org/Esther) to read it in full.

Esther Chapter 1: verses 12-22

ותמאן המלכה ושתי לבוא בדבר המלך אשר ביד הסריסים ויקצף המלך מאד וחמתו בערה בו:

...Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the officials. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.

ויאמר המלך לחכמים ידעי העתים...

כדת מה לעשות במלכה ושתי על אשר לא עשתה את מאמר המלך אחשוורוש ביד הסריסים:

Then the king consulted the sages learned in legal procedure... “What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahashverosh conveyed by the eunuchs?”

ויאמר (מומכן) [ממוכן] לפני המלך והשרים לא על המלך לבדו ענתה ושתי המלכה כי על כל השרים ועל כל העמים אשר בכל מדינות המלך אחשוורוש: כי יצא דבר המלכה על כל הנשים להבזות בעליהן בעיניהן באמרו המלך אחשוורוש אמר להביא את ושתי המלכה לפניו ולא באה:

Then Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahashverosh. For the queen's behavior will make all wives

despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahashverosh himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.

וְהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה תֵּאֲמַרְנָה | שְׂרוֹת פָּרֶס-וּמְדִי אֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ אֶת-דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶכָה לְכָל שָׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְכָדִי בְּזִיוּן וְקִצְף:  
אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יֵצֵא דְבַר-מַלְכוּת מִלְּפָנָיו וְיִכְתֹּב בְּדַתִּי פָּרֶס-וּמְדִי וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תָבֹא וְשִׁתִּי לְפָנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ  
וּמַלְכוּתָהּ יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ לְרַעוּתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה: וְנִשְׁמַע פִּתְגָם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה בְּכָל-מַלְכוּתוֹ כִּי רַבָּה הִיא וְכָל-הַנָּשִׁים יִתְּנוּ יָקָר  
לְבַעֲלֵיהֶן לְמַגְדוֹל וְעַד-קָפוֹ:

“This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty’s officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation! If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahashverosh. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she. Then the judgment executed by Your Majesty will resound throughout your realm, vast though it is; and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike.”

וַיֵּטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ כְּדָבָר מְמוּצָן: וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כַּכְתָּבָה  
וְאֶל-עַם וְעַם כְּלָשׁוֹנוֹ לְהִיּוֹת כָּל-אִישׁ שֹׁרֵר בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר כְּלָשׁוֹן עִמּוֹ:

The proposal was approved by the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memucan proposed. Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people.

## Discuss:

1. What is subversive about Vashti’s refusal to respond to Ahashverosh’s command?
2. Why does Memucan state that Vashti’s offense is not only against Ahashverosh but also “against all the officials and against all the peoples?”
3. The final lines of this piece state that “every man should **wield authority in his home** and **speak the language of his own people.**” Why are these two decrees listed together?

## Vashti’s Subversion

The first text is from *Megillat Esther* (as above), and the second is a commentary on that verse from *Esther Rabbah*. This work of *midrash* (rabbinic commentary/interpretation) on the Book of Esther consists of two distinct parts: the first, compiled ~500 CE, provides verse-by-verse interpretations. The second, compiled ~1200 CE, retells and expands upon the Esther story. The two parts were likely combined around the 12th or 13th century.

Esther, Chapter 1, Verse 12

וַתִּמְאַן הַמֶּלֶכָה וְשִׁתִּי לְבוֹא בְּדָבָר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בִּיַּד הַסָּרִיסִים וַיִּקְצַף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמָתוֹ בָּעָרָה בּוֹ:

...Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the officials. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.

## Esther Rabbah Chapter 3: Verse 14

שְׁלַחַה וְאִמְרָה לֹו דְבָרִים שֶׁהֵן נוֹגְעִין בְּלִבּוֹ, אִמְרָה לֹו אִם רוֹאִין אוֹתִי נָאָה, הֵן נוֹתְנִין עֵינֵיהֶם לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בִּי וְהוֹרְגִים אוֹתָךְ, וְאִם רוֹאִין אוֹתִי כְעוֹרָה, אֶתְּ מִתְגַּנֶּה בִּי. רִמְזָתוֹ וְלֹא נִרְמַז עֲקֻצָתוֹ וְלֹא נֶעְקֶז, שְׁלַחַה וְאִמְרָה לֹו קוֹמִים אִיסְטְבְּלַאטִי שֶׁל בֵּית אַבָּא הֵיִיטְ וְהֵיִיטְ לְמוֹד לְהֵיִוֹת מְכַנִּים לְפָנֶיךָ נְשִׁים זֹנוֹת עֲרֻמוֹת, וְעִכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּכְנַסְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת לֹא חֲזַרְתָּ מִקְלָקוּלָךְ, רִמְזָתוֹ וְלֹא נִרְמַז עֲקֻצָתוֹ וְלֹא נֶעְקֶז, שְׁלַחַה וְאִמְרָה, אִפְלוֹ אֲנִדְתִּיקוּסִי שֶׁל בֵּית אַבָּא לֹא נִדְוָנוּ עֲרֻמִּים, הֲדָא הוּא דְכְּתִיב (דְּנִיאל ג, כֵּא): בְּאִדִּין גְּבַרְיָא אֵלֶךְ כְּפָתוֹ בְּסַרְבְּלִיהוֹן פְּטָשִׁיהוֹן. רַבִּי יוֹדֵן אָמַר בְּגוּלִיָּהוֹן, וְרַבִּי הוֹנָא אָמַר בְּמוֹקְסִיָּהוֹן. רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בַּר אַבָּא אָמַר בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי יוֹסֵקָן, אִין הִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא דֵּן אֶת הַרְשָׁעִים בְּגִיהָנָם אֲלֵא עֲרֻמִּים, וְיִמָּה טַעַם, דְּכְתִיב (תְּהִלִּים עג, כ)

She [Vashti] sent for him [Ahashverosh] and said to him things that upset him. She said to him: ‘If they consider me beautiful, they will set their sights on taking advantage of me and will kill you. If they consider me ugly, you will be demeaned because of me.’ She alluded, but he did not grasp the allusions; she provoked him, but he was not provoked. She sent for him and said to him: ‘Weren’t you the stable boy of my father’s house, and you were accustomed to bringing naked prostitutes before you, and now that you have ascended to the throne, you have not abandoned your corruption.’ She alluded, but he did not grasp the allusions; she provoked him, but he was not provoked. She sent for him and she said: Even the opposition to my father’s house was not judged naked; that is what is written: “Then these men were bound in their trousers, their tunics, their hats” (Daniel 3:21).

**Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. What does this text say about Vashti’s refusal to respond to Ahashverosh’s command?
2. What precedent is Vashti citing?
3. What is meant by the repeated line, “She alluded, but he did not grasp the allusions; she provoked him, but he was not provoked?”

## Esther’s Subversion

These texts come from *Talmud Bavli*, the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of arguments, laws, musings, and stories, collected and then composed in Babylonia spanning roughly the third through the sixth centuries. The Talmud documents and interweaves learned rabbinic conversation and debate over a period of centuries. These texts are all drawn from the tractate/section within the Talmud called *Megillah*, which deals mostly with how we read the story of Esther at Purim. The voices collected here are specifically offering their interpretations of the first verse quoted, Megillat Esther 5:4.

**One useful piece of vocab:** A *baraita* is a quote or opinion from the rabbinic oral tradition, predating the period of the Talmud, that would have been widely known and important to the discussants in their time. One analogy in the American context would be that this is like later legal theorists quoting the Federalist Papers, which were written by some of the Framers of the Constitution, but not the Constitution itself.

**Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. What tactics does Esther utilize in each text to prepare and to explain her situation to Ahashverosh and Haman?
2. What reasons could the rabbis have for portraying Esther in these different lights?

3. What are the rabbis saying about gender roles and subversion/subversive tactics?
4. Looking at these texts is not about “finding the real story,” but about examining the biases and expectations we bring to the story. With the centuries-old rabbinic commentary in mind, what do we need to be learning from a story like this right now?

Esther 5:4

יבא המלך והמן אל המשתה

[Esther:] If it seems good unto the king, **let the king and Haman come this day to the banquet** that I have prepared for him

Megillah 15b:12

תנו רבנן: מה ראתה אסתר שזימנה את המן?  
רבי אלעזר אומר: פחים טמנה לו, שנאמר: "יהי שלחנם לפנייהם לפח"

**The Sages taught** in a *baraita*: **Why did Esther invite Haman to the banquet?**

**Rabbi Elazar says: She hid a snare for him, as it is stated: “Let their table become a snare before them”** (Psalms 69:23), as she assumed that she would be able to trip up Haman during the banquet.

4: Megillah 15b:13

רבי יהושע אומר: מבית אביה למדה, שנאמר: "אם רעב שונאך האכילהו לחם וגו'"  
רבי מאיר אומר: כדי שלא יטול עצה וימרוד

**Rabbi Yehoshua says: She learned to do this from the Jewish teachings of her father's house, as it is stated: “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat”** (Proverbs 25:21). **Rabbi Meir says: She invited him so that he would be near her at all times, so that he would not take counsel and rebel against Ahashverosh when he discovered that the king was angry with him.**

5: Megillah 15b:15

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: אסביר לו פנים כדי שיהרג הוא והיא  
רבן גמליאל אומר: מלך הפכפכן היה.

אמר רבי גמליאל: עדיין צריכין אנו למודעי, דתניא, רבי אליעזר המודעי אומר: קנאתו במלך קנאתו בשרים

**Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa says: She said to herself: I will act kindly toward him** and thereby make the king suspect that we are having an affair; she did so **in order that both he and she would be killed**. Essentially, Esther was willing to be killed with Haman in order that the decree (of murder of the Jews of Persia) would be annulled.

**Rabban Gamliel says: Ahasuerus was a fickle king**, and Esther hoped that if he saw Haman on multiple occasions, eventually he would change his opinion of him.

**Rabbi Gamliel said: We still need the words of Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i to understand why Esther invited Haman to her banquet. As it is taught in a baraita: Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i says: She made the king jealous of him and she made the other ministers jealous of him**, and in this way she brought about his downfall.

*The creators of this text study share our deep appreciation for SVARA, a traditionally radical yeshiva dedicated to the serious study of Talmud through the lens of queer experiences, which has deeply influenced how we read and teach Jewish text.*