

The Space Between Us: The Role of Place in the Purim Story

Invitations and Hosts

When receiving an invitation, it's important to know the difference between the venue and the host. Sometimes the difference proves rather inconsequential. An official invitation to a White House party does not necessarily come from the President, even if the President is hosting the party. Perhaps an underling signed the invitation, but the insignia on top of the stationary makes it perfectly clear who is truly hosting. In the workplace, we often desire to "be in the room." Everyone wants to be in the place where the decisions are made. Less attention, however, is paid to who is hosting the meeting. Once you're invited, does it even matter whose room it is? A careful analysis of the invitations throughout the Megillah may provide crucial insight for some of the discussions about space and gender that are exceedingly relevant today.

Whose Party Is This?

Vashti wanted to host her own party. Her husband, Achashverosh, indulged her — but only to a point:

גַּם וַשְׁתִּי הַמֶּלֶכָה, עֲשֶׂתָהּ מִשְׁתֵּה נָשִׁים--בַּיִת, הַמְּלָכוֹת, אֲשֶׁר, לְמַלְכָּה אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ.

Queen Vashti also made a feast for women, in the royal palace of King Achashverosh.

Esther 1:9



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Vashti could host a party for women, but only insofar as it remained an extension of the king's domain. Sure, she could have a "mishteh nashim," but it would always be considered an extension of the "beis hamalchus" — the house of the king. The Megillah seems to subtly presage Vashti's incipient desire for independence by introducing her party with the term "gam" — also. Her party was not convened on its own terms, but was a reactionary response that — just like her husband — she too wanted a party that would cement her monarchy.

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The role of host appears again prominently in the aftermath of Vashti's death, when Achashverosh searches for a new queen. Initially, the search describes the destination for the women auditioning to be queen as the "house of women" (Esther 2:3):

וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים, בְּכָל-מְדִינוֹת מְלָכוֹתוֹ, וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-נַעֲרָה-בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיירָה אֶל-בַּיִת הַנָּשִׁים, אֶל-יַד הַגָּאָה

סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים; וְנָתַן, תַּמְרֵקֵיהֶן.

Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hegeh, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics.

The moment Esther is taken, however, she discovers that the "house of women" was just a guise. Just five verses later, the title of the location "beis hanashim" is discarded, revealing the true destination — the *beis hamelech* (Megillas Esther 2:8):

וַיְהִי, בְּהִשְׁמַע דְּבַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ, וּבְהַקְבֹּץ נַעֲרוֹת רַבּוֹת אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיירָה, אֶל-יַד הַגָּי; וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֶל-יַד הַגָּי שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים.

When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther was also taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women.

Breaching the king's space remains a terrorizing prospect throughout the Megillah. Nobody, the Megillah emphasizes (see 4:18), is permitted to enter without prior invitation. It is in this space that women, be it Vashti

or Esther, lose their agency. Guests of the “House of the King” remain just that — guests. The physical environs of the king are presented within the Megillah as a telling imagery of the king’s influence and control.

Finding Our Place

Esther, seeing the pattern of special dominion exerted by Achashverosh, develops a plan. To assert her independence and agency, she realizes that she needs to carve out her own space. She hosts her *own* party. Nowhere in the description of Esther’s party does the otherwise ubiquitous term “*beis hamelech*” appear (See 5:4-5). Esther realizes that to shift from a passive pawn into an active mechanism in the destiny of her people, she needs to self-determine. In a telling act of reciprocity for Esther’s insistence of her own space, after Haman’s demise it is she who is awarded the house of Haman (8:1). Esther’s commitment to her own sovereignty, epitomized by establishing her own place, is rewarded by her receipt of the place of her enemy.

Esther is not alone in equating her autonomous space with her capacity for leadership. Devorah’s leadership is described in the context of the *tomer Devorah*, the shaded area under the palm tree where she adjudicated for the Jewish people (Shoftim 4:4). Later on, during the war initiated by Devorah, Yael vanquishes the enemy in “*ohel Yael*” — the tent of Yael. While she is described as “Eshes Chever HaKeini” — her identity marked by her husband — her place was uniquely hers. Of course, this emphasis on space as a part of female identity began with the founding women of our nation.

Rivkah, who runs specifically to her mother’s tent when Eliezer asks her if there is room for hospitality in her “father’s home,” takes her place in the Matriarchy only when she perpetuates the *ohel* of Sarah (compare Eliezer’s requests to Rivka’s actions in Bereishis 24). Repeatedly, Tanakh has shown us that women are ultimately most successful when they take charge of their own physical space. Once they establish their own home base, they can take decisive action.

So, What is Our Response?

Here too, the Megillah story is instructive. We need to entrust women with spaces in which to operate with strength. Broadly, women have the opportunity to create spaces that represent morality in areas where the rest of society has failed. In situations where absence of respect for others humans has chipped away at the very foundations of interpersonal relationships, women can build them up again. There are appropriate and effective ways for women to take leadership roles and present themselves publicly (in person and in media) and help promote the value of all people.

The example set by our matriarchs applies today. The *Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 417, elaborates on the Talmudic explanation for the practice of women to refrain from *melacha* on Rosh Chodesh. While the *shalosh regalim* parallel the Avos, Rosh Chodesh was intended as a holiday in honor of the twelve Shevatim. However, with the *cheit ha’egel*, the holiday was lost by the general population and retained by the women. *Beis Yosef* notes that since a woman is normally “*nigreres achar*

ha’ish” — follows her husband — it would have made sense that when the holiday aspect of Rosh Chodesh was withheld at the *cheit ha’egel*, it should have been withheld as a holiday from the entire population, regardless of gender. If men, in the *Beis Yosef*’s terminology, the “*ikar*” (primary), lost it, then women, as “*tafel*” (secondary), should have lost it as well. That, however was not the case. Women were given Rosh Chodesh as their personal holiday.

The language of the *Beis Yosef* is significant. Had women merely been “*nigraros*” — literally dragged along after their husbands — both in the sin and the aftermath, Bnei Yisrael would have been in a materially more compromised position. But by refusing to contribute their gold to the creation of the Golden Calf, the women saved the nation in that moment and carved out their own holiday for the future. Because they were not *tafel* to their husbands at the *cheit ha’egel*, they didn’t become *tafel* when the holiday was taken away.

Our spaces can define our agency. It is not enough for women to just be appended; they need to model the attitudes and relationships that will cultivate healthy professional, personal and religious interactions. That can only happen if women develop arenas where such behavior is celebrated. Whether it is Esther’s party, *tomer Devorah*, *ohel Yael*, or *ohel Sarah*, the spaces that women create can serve as templates for healthy ecosystems of collective growth; places where women not only invite, but also host.