

# Esther Hamalkah:

## The key to unlocking another layer of the Purim story<sup>1</sup>

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The following questions, which may seem obvious, hold the key to unlocking some of the great mysteries in Megillat Esther.

- 1) Why did the *megilla* include at the beginning the story of Vashti and her party and the punishment she subsequently received? We could have simply missed out this detail, as the focus is on the king getting a new wife and not really on the details of the “old” wife. Why is Vashti relevant to the whole story?
- 2) Why does Esther think that she will only be able to change the mind of the king at a wine party?
- 3) Why did she invite the king to both parties and not make the whole revelation at only one party?
- 4) Why did she invite Haman to both parties and not just speak to the king alone at the first party to plead for her people?
- 5) Why did Esther keep her Jewish identity so secretive, even after she is crowned as the queen?
- 6) Why is Haman made to belittle himself while leading the horse of Mordechai, as commanded by the king?

In order to answer all of these questions with one basic idea, it is important to recognize that throughout the *megilla* there is a “*mila mancha*”—a key word that appears over and over again. This is the word “*hamalkah*”—the queen. Either the use of this word or its omission in certain key places in the story will give us a new and deeper insight into the whole story and the focus of the *megilla* as we are to understand it.

*To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on.*

**Esther 1:11**

לְהַבִּיאַ אֶת – וְשֵׁתִי הַמְּלָכָה. לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ  
— בְּכִתּוֹר מַלְכוּת: לְהַרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים  
אֶת – יָפִיָּהּ, כִּי — טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא.  
אֶסְתֵּר אִיָּא

Vashti was one of the four women who “had rulership in the world”—Vashti, Jezebel, Ataliah and Shmirmith (wife of Nebuchadnezer) (*Esther Raba* 1:9). She shows incredible independence,

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a shiur I heard in London in 1991 given by Dr. Meir Gruzman of Bar Ilan University while he was on a sabbatical break in the UK. His lecture on Megillat Esther absolutely changed my perspective on so many issues in the *megilla* and I will try to convey his ideas with the nuances that I received from this wonderful teacher.

not only in having her own party but also in refusing to appear before the king when summoned to his party. According to Rava (*Megilla* 12b) she even verbally abuses her husband by calling him “her father’s stable boy.” He doesn’t know how to react when she refuses to appear and he calls together his seven-man council to decide what to do about Vashti, as he is unable to make such a decision on his own. When we see her description in chapter one, it is always with the extra word “*hamalkah*” to show us who really had the power in the kingdom. Her husband was able to be who he was because of her and she never let him forget it.

*But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s commandment by the chamberlains; therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.*

**Esther 1:12**

וּתְמָאן הַמְּלָכָה וַשְׁתִּי, לְבוֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ,  
אֲשֶׁר, בְּיַד הַסְּרִיסִים; וַיִּקְצַף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד,  
וַתִּמְתּוּ בְּעֵרָה בּוֹ.

**אסתר א:יב**

Her refusal to appear is presented with the phrase “*vatema’en hamalkah Vashti*” to stress her position and ability to refuse his demand without any reservation whatsoever.

*If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before King Ahasuerus, and that the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.*

**Esther 1:19**

אם - על - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב, יֵצֵא דְבַר -  
מִלְכוּת מְלָכֵינוּ, וַיִּכְתַּב בְּדִתֵי פָּרַס -  
וּמְדֵי, וְלֹא יַעֲבוֹר: אֲשֶׁר לֹא - תִּבְּוֹא  
וַשְׁתִּי, לְפָנַי הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ, וּמִלְכוּתָהּ  
יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ, לְרַעֲוִיתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה.

**אסתר א:יט**

However, when Memuchan advises the king to remove her from her powerful position, the word “*hamalkah*” is deliberately left out and her name Vashti is mentioned alone, to signify her loss of power and royalty. The power of the word “*hamalkah*” is now established and we can now move forward to Esther’s struggle in coming to terms with this title and the implications it carries.

The task is set to find a new queen. The king is determined not to have another Vashti, who has a long royal lineage, and he is looking for a queen who will be beautiful to look at but no more than that. She will listen to his commands without reservation and have no personal aspirations beyond those of pleasing her husband. We now understand why Esther keeps her background secret. She is a direct descendant of King Saul, as explained by Chazal, and if the King’s servants would know this, she would never come into consideration in the search for a new queen. She is presented as an orphan; she has no father or mother אָב וְאִם, כִּי אִין לָהּ, —and this is exactly what the king wants. The king chooses her but when he makes the celebration party it says:

*Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther’s feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.*

**Esther 2:18**

וַיַּעַשׂ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁתֵּה גְדוֹל, לְכָל - שָׂרָיו  
וְעַבְדָּיו - - אֶת, מִשְׁתֵּה אֶסְתֵּר; וַהֲנַחָה  
לְמַדְיָנוֹת עֲשָׂה, וַיִּתֵּן מִשְׂאֵת כֶּיֶד הַמֶּלֶךְ.

**אסתר ב:יח**

Her title of “*hamalkah*” is noticeably absent to show his acceptance of her on his terms. She has to keep her background quiet otherwise her whole rise to power would have ended. The end of chapter two refers to Esther constantly without the title of “*hamalkah*” to stress this crucial point.

In the next few chapters, when Esther is on her own or with Mordechai, she is called “*hamalkah*,” as she knows her lineage and that she is of royal descent, and that she is not just a “pretty object” belonging to the king. She is not satisfied with her present situation and begins the process of establishing her true credentials with the king. In chapter four, as she is in conversation with Hatach and with Mordechai, it is without the title of “*hamalkah*” in order to show her current position and that she is heeding the command of Mordechai not to reveal who she really is, even though this is very hard for her.

Haman’s decree has now been made and all of Shushan is in mourning. Mordechai tells Esther that the time has finally come to reveal to the king who she really is so that the decree can be annulled.

*and who knows if this is the moment for which you have arrived at being the queen.*

**Esther 4:14**

ומי יודע — אם - לעת פְּזֹאתָ, הגֵּעֵתָ לְמַלְכוּתָ.  
**אסתר ד:י"ד**

However, the situation is dangerous and requires careful planning to succeed. This is where the idea of the parties becomes a crucial part of the story.

*Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her “royalty,” and stood in the inner court of the king’s house, over against the king’s house; and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter.*

**Esther 5:1-2**

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּתָהּ, וַתַּעֲמֵד בְּחֶצֶר בַּיִת - הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית, נֹכַח בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ; וַהֲמֵלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל - כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ, בְּבַיִת הַמַּלְכוּתָהּ, נֹכַח, פְּתַח הַבַּיִת. וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת - אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה, עֹמֶדֶת בְּחֶצֶר - נִשְׂאָה חֹן, בְּעֵינָיו; וַיִּוָּשֶׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר, אֶת - שֵׁרְבִיט הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ, וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר, וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשֵּׁרְבִיט.  
**אסתר ה:א-ב**

Esther is not just wearing “royal clothing,” she is also showing her royal “charisma” (which is why it says she wore “royalty” and not “royal clothing”). The king senses this change and when he allows her to draw near he calls her “Esther” without the royal title. He is saying to her that he is royalty and she isn’t and she should remember this. She touches the scepter as “Esther,” but he is curious as to her appearance now and to the sense of “royalty” that he perceived from her.

*Then said the king unto her: “What wilt thou, queen Esther? for whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be given thee.” And Esther said. “If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.”*

**Esther 5:3-4**

גַּ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ, מַה - לָּךְ אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה; וּמַה - בְּקִשְׁתֶּךָ עַד - חֲצִי הַמַּלְכוּתָהּ, וַיִּנְתֵּן לָּךְ. וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר, אִם - עַל - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב - - יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן הַיּוֹם, אֵל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר - עָשִׂיתִי לוֹ.  
**אסתר ה:ג-ד**

She accepts her current status as shown in verse four but she still wants to show him that she is a person of authority, so she invites him to party number one. Just as Vashti showed independence by making her own party, so too does Esther want to show the same independence. She invites Haman as well, to give her more credence and to show the king that she is a real queen who can invite the two leaders of Persia to her party. The scene is set for her chance to reveal all.

Another reason to invite Haman is to give the king some cause for suspicion that Haman has designs on Esther behind his back and wants to depose him. In the Talmud (*Megillah* 15b), Rava raises this possibility and that she hopes to make the king hate Haman as a result of these suspicions.

*Then the king said: "Cause Haman to make haste, that it may be done as Esther hath said." So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine: "Whatever thy petition, it shall be granted thee; and whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be performed."*

**Esther 5:5-6**

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ - - מְהֵרָא אֶת - הַמֶּן,  
 לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת - דְּבַר אֶסְתֵּר; וַיָּבֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ  
 וְהַמֶּן, אֶל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר - עָשְׂתָה  
 אֶסְתֵּר. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר בְּמִשְׁתֶּה  
 הַיַּיִן, מָה - שְׂאֵלְתְּךָ וַיִּצְטַן לָךְ; וַיִּמָּה -  
 בְּקִשְׁתְּךָ עַד - חֲצֵי הַמַּלְכוּת, וְתַעֲשִׂי.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ה':ה-ו**

The king has clearly not accepted her credentials at this point and she realizes this. She is forced to wait and have a second party, by which time she hopes that her royalty will be recognized and the hatred toward Haman from the king would have its effect. This is a dangerous game to play and she is prepared to die *al Kiddush Hashem* [sanctifying God's name], if necessary, in the attempt to save herself and her people.

At this point, something totally unexpected happens. Haman calls all of his family together to gloat over his successes. The king must have been suspicious of this, especially when Haman refers to the invitations from Esther. His spies are everywhere and he gets a report of the gathering at Haman's house.

*Haman said moreover: "Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and tomorrow also am I invited by her together with the king."*

**Esther 5:12**

יב וַיֹּאמֶר, הַמֶּן - - אִפְּ לֹא - הִבִּיאָה אֶסְתֵּר  
 הַמֶּלֶכָּה עִם - הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל - הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר -  
 עָשְׂתָה, כִּי אִם - אוֹתִי; וְגַם - לְמָחָר אֲנִי  
 קָרוּא - לָהּ, עִם - הַמֶּלֶךְ.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ה':יב**

Haman refers to her as "*hamalkah*," and this must have stoked the suspicions of the king even more than before. Haman recognized her royalty, which Ahasuerus is questioning, and this can only create more intrigue in the mind of the king.

Ahasuerus cannot sleep and he keeps thinking about the second party approaching and the threat to his kingship. His feelings toward Haman have deteriorated. He was also aware that Haman was very antagonistic toward Mordechai, as expressed at the family gathering. Maybe Mordechai will be the solution to the problem of Haman for the king and he calls to see his personal file. He finds that Mordechai saved his life and went unrewarded. The king suspects that Haman hates Mordechai specifically because he saved the king's life before and he now plans to neutralize the influence and power of Haman, with Mordechai's help. When the king hears that Haman is waiting to see him, he can only guess that this is a further stage in the potential overthrow of the king and he must do something about it. He confirms his suspicions from Haman's request to wear kingly garments and ride on the king's horse, and he decides to immediately bring Haman down by getting Mordechai to be rewarded through Haman's suggestion. This sends Haman home with a downcast feeling and the king asserts his upper hand

as he wished. All of these events, from Haman's family meal onward, were unexpected, but they all give Esther greater credibility and a chance of ending Haman's evil plan at the second meal which follows immediately.

*So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine: "Whatever thy petition, queen Esther, it shall be granted thee; and whatever thy request, even to the half of the kingdom, it shall be performed." Then Esther the queen answered and said: "If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request."*

**Esther 7:1-3**

וַיָּבֵא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן, לְשִׁתּוֹת עִם - אֶסְתֵּר  
הַמֶּלֶכָּה. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּר גַּם בַּיּוֹם  
הַשֵּׁנִי, בְּמִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן - מָה - שְׂאֵלֶיךָ  
אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלֶכָּה, וְתִתְּנֵנִי לָךְ; וּמָה - בְּקִשְׁתֶּיךָ  
עַד - חֲצֵי הַמְּלְכוּת, וְתַעֲשֵׂה. וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר  
הַמֶּלֶכָּה, וַתֹּאמֶר - - אִם - מִצָּדִיק חַן  
בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְאִם - עַל - הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב:  
תִּתְּנֵנִי - לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשֵׂאלֹתַי, וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשֹׁתַי.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ז:א-ג**

The second meal begins. The king is now calling Esther "hamalkah" to show that he is the one to convey such a title on her and not Haman, who had called her this title at his family gathering. Even though the king is still showing some resistance at the beginning of the meal and calls her "Esther" without her title, from now on the requests and responses are from Esther "hamalkah," and this is repeated over and over by the King. He even loses the interpreter who was between them and talks to her directly, as a sign of equality (as noted by Rabbi Avahu in *Megilla* 16a.) She can now finally reveal who she really is and ask for the survival of her people. She explains to the king that he will lose so much more than what he gained from the 10,000 *shekalim* which he was originally given by Haman to kill the Jews. She tells the king that Haman is the arch enemy and Haman is frightened before the king and Esther "hamalkah."

*Haman is shocked before the king and queen.*

**Esther 7:6**

וְהָמָן נִבְעַת, מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶכָּה.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ז:ו**

The king now understands that his suspicions of infidelity against Esther were unfounded and he goes outside to calm down. Haman now asks "Esther hamalkah" for mercy as he also senses her true royalty, and he even falls onto the couch upon which Esther is sitting (without the title "hamalkah"). This is his attempt to remove from her the status of "hamalkah" by his actions here and show that she is just a "regular" woman and nothing special. The king comes back, and his response is crucial:

*Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king: "Will he even force the queen before me in the house?" As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.*

**Esther 7:8**

ח וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יָשָׁב מִגַּנְזַת הַבַּיִתָּן אֶל - בַּיִת  
מִשְׁתֵּה הַיַּיִן, וְהָמָן נָפַל עַל - הַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר  
אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ, וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ, הֲגַם לְכַבּוֹשׁ  
אֶת - הַמֶּלֶכָּה עִמִּי בְּבַיִת; הֲדָבָר, יֵצֵא  
מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ, וּפְנֵי הָמָן, חִפּוּ.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ז:ח**

The king shows total acceptance of her real status of "hamalkah" and orders Haman's death. During the rest of the *megilla*, whenever the king addresses her, he calls her "hamalkah" as a sign of total recognition by the king of her royal origins and position. However, when she describes her own part in the salvation of the Jews, out of modesty and humility she refers to herself just as

“Esther,” to show that she was prepared to be “*hamalkah*” for as long as was necessary to thwart the plan of Haman, after which her regular status returned in her own eyes. For example:

*And Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews ... Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew.*

**Esther 8:3, 7**

ותוסף אסתר, ותדבר לפני המלך, ותפל,  
לפני רגליו; ותתחנן - לו, להעביר את  
- רעת המן האגגי, ואת מחשבתו, אשר  
קשב על - היהודים... ויאמר המלך  
אחשוורש לאסתר המלכה, ולמרדכי היהודי:  
**אסתר ח:ג,ז**

When she now addresses him she uses her simple name with no additions, as a sign of humility and *tzniut*. He still refers to her as “*hamalkah*” as she is now firmly established in his eyes as the new royalty coming from a royal past, the house of Saul.

After looking at the *megilla* using this tool of the *mila mancha* [key word] of “*hamalkah*,” we can now answer all our original questions.

1. Vashti is mentioned to show the power of the term “*hamalkah*.”
2. Esther invites the king to a party to begin to assert her independence as the new “*malkah*.”
3. The first party was not yet the time to reveal her origins as the king had not yet accepted her real status as “*hamalkah*.”
4. Haman is invited to both parties to expose him as a traitor against her and her status as “*hamalkah*” as well as a schemer against the Jews. The king’s suspicions against him are also increased by this plan.
5. She kept her identity secret until the eleventh hour, because she needed to feel that the king would accept who she really was and not reject her because of her *yichus*.
6. The story of Haman and Mordechai with the horse is to put Haman in his place and confirm the king’s suspicions against Haman, which eventually lead to his demise and the salvation of the Jewish people.

The use of this type of analysis has opened up so much of the story and the real nature of what happened. We know that Esther remained *hamalkah* and had a child with the king, who became Darius the Second of Persia (*Vayikra Rabbah* 13:5) and who allowed the Second Temple to be completed (*Ezra* 6:15).

We also know that the rabbinic tradition is to see allusions in the word *melech* to God’s part in the whole story in terms of the *nes nistar* (hidden miracle) of the Purim story. We can now add the extra dimension of analyzing the word *hamalkah*, which also brings out the incredible depth and power of the story. This increases our true sense of appreciating God’s hand in the story even more than before.

Let us hope that we will be inspired by this story to see the *yad Hashem* [the hand of God] in everything that happens to us as a nation and increase our wish and desire to see the Third Temple be built speedily in our days.