

# Taanit Esther: Giving Voice to Silenced Women

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Megillat Esther begins with a demonstration of the derogatory attitude toward women that was pervasive in Persian society. In the eyes of Achashverosh and the people in his dominion, the worth of a woman was measured by her physical beauty, and nothing more. Women were granted neither independence nor a voice. Like the old saying about children, women in Persia were meant to be seen, not heard.

We see this approach towards women modeled by Achashverosh himself. He summons Vashti to display her beauty before the male dignitaries. She refuses, stirring the wrath of Achashverosh, who not only removes her from the throne, but also declares that every man assert complete authority in his household lest Vashti's actions set a precedent of "disobedience" for other wives in the kingdom.

Esther—passive, voiceless—was raised as a product of this society. The Gemara states:

*Why is she called Esther? Because she hides (masteret) her words.*

**Megillah 13a**

ולמה נקראת שמה אסתר - על שם שהיתה מסתרת דבריה. מגילה יג.

The passive language of ותלקח אסתר, Esther was taken, appears twice (Esther 2:8 and 2:16): without any initiative of her own *she is taken* into the palace of the king to compete in the tryouts for queen, and she is once again completely passive as *she is taken* by Achashverosh as a wife. Esther remains docile and silent.

*Esther did not discuss her nationality or people, as Mordechai commanded her, and she acted according to the word of Mordechai as she did when she was raised by him.*

**Esther 2:20**

אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה ואת עמה כאשר צוה עליה מרדכי, ואת מאמר מרדכי אסתר עשה כאשר היתה באמנה אתו. אסתר ב:כ

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Not only does she not speak, but Mordechai instructs her to keep quiet about her nationality. Furthermore, she does not act or express herself independently; rather, she follows strictly “the word” of Mordechai.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in the first instance in the Megillah in which Esther speaks, her words are not recorded and are not even her own:

*The matter became known to Mordechai, and he told it to Queen Esther; and Esther told the king in the name of Mordechai.*

**Esther 2:22**

ויודע הדבר למרדכי ויגד לאסתר  
המלכה ותאמר אסתר למלך בשם  
מרדכי.  
**אסתר ב:כב**

As queen, the first utterance by Esther that the Megillah mentions is her relaying to Achashverosh what Mordechai told her to say; namely, that Mordechai overheard Bigtan and Teresh plotting to kill the king. The Megillah implies that what Esther actually said is irrelevant, since her words are not recorded. All we know is that she conveyed Mordechai’s message.

The story continues and Haman begins to plot against Mordechai and the Jews, but Esther remains silent. Haman convinces Achashverosh to mandate genocide against the Jewish People, and she says nothing. Esther’s first recorded words—what she actually says—appear once Mordechai asks her to intervene on behalf of her people. Her response: I can’t. Finally, a dialogue begins. In his haunting rebuke of her silence, Mordechai tells her that the Jewish People will be saved:

*Because if you will indeed be silent at this time, then relief and deliverance will come from elsewhere, and you and your father’s house will perish and who knows if you became royalty for a moment like this?*

**Esther 4:14**

כי אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת רוח והצלה  
יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואת ובית אביך  
תאבדו ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות.  
**אסתר ד:יד**

The question was not whether or not the Jewish People will be saved; the question was: will Esther play a role? Will she remain silent—*hacharesht tacharishi*—or will she raise her voice in protest of the impending genocide?

This, of course, brings us to the turning point in the Megillah. Esther finally springs into action. She instructs Mordechai – *she* instructs *him!* – to gather the Jews of Shushan and fast for her well-being:

*Go, gather all the Jews in Shushan and fast for me*

...

**Esther 4:16**

לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי  
...  
**אסתר ד:טז**

The Malbim notes that this fast was not necessary for the salvation of the Jewish People. Mordechai already assured her that the Jews would be saved, whether through Esther’s intervention or by some other means. The only question that remained in Esther’s mind was whether or not she would survive when taking initiative to prevent the mass murder of her people. Thus, she instructs Mordechai, *tzumu alai*, fast **for me**, for my own safety and well-

being. Mordechai follows Esther's lead—a completely different approach than before—and fulfills her instructions.

The call for a community-wide fast reflects a cultural shift, which contrasts with the prevailing attitude toward women with which the Megillah began. Esther is no longer defined as an object, a thing of physical beauty. She develops a voice and individuality; her words and actions mean something and make a difference. She is not passively taken into Achashverosh's chamber, but actively invites herself in. She is not simply spoken to, but speaks herself.

Most significantly, what empowers Esther, what provides her with the strength and fortitude to take a stand, is the knowledge that the Jewish community stands with her and is concerned for her welfare. In contrast to the debasement and objectification of women by Persian society, the Jews of Shushan fast for Esther as their leader, their spokesperson, when she takes initiative and risks her life for the Jewish community. Furthermore, their solidarity—*lekh kenos et kol haYehudim*, go, gather all the Jews—is key to her success, since the Jewish community must stand together in rejection of the derogatory attitude toward women which was pervasive in Persian society.

Esther chose not to remain silent, which is a lesson for us whenever we face threats and challenges. The Gemara in *Taanit* (11a) exhorts us to “pain ourselves” with the pain of the Jewish community. In the famous battle between the Jewish People and Amalek shortly after the Exodus from Egypt, in which Moshe raised his hands to ensure victory as the Jewish warriors kept their eyes heavenward, the Gemara notes that Moshe made a point to cause himself discomfort. While Moshe could have sat on a cushioned chair or pillow while raising his hands all day long, he chose to sit on a hard rock, because he wanted to feel and identify with the pain of the Jews who were engaged in serious battle. The Gemara concludes:

*One who pains himself with the community will merit to join in the community's consolation.*

כל המצער עצמו עם הציבור זוכה ורואה בנחמת ציבור.

However, the Gemara explains that, regarding one who is otherwise righteous but ignores the suffering of the Jewish People and continues eating and drinking without regard to their pain, such a person will “perish.” So too, if we apply the teaching of the Gemara to the Megillah, had Esther remained silent and complacent in the royal palace, she and her father's house would have perished, just as Mordechai warned. Standing idly by is simply not an option.

Taanit Esther has been recognized as International Agunah Day by several *agunah* advocacy organizations for the past two decades. *Agunot*, as victims of domestic abuse, are denied by their estranged husbands not just a *get*, but their independence and their voice. Not only is a husband's refusal to issue a *get* a violation of halakha, but, as a pattern of controlling behavior, *get* refusal is emotionally, psychologically, socially and spiritually abusive. Victims of domestic abuse are denied their self-worth and their ability to express themselves independently of their controlling spouses. *Agunot* are undoubtedly such victims.

Taanit Esther is designated as International Agunah Day because, like Esther's plea for support from the Jews of Shushan, we turn to the Jewish community to give voice to *agunot*, to assert their right to freedom, and to rally in solidarity with them through their suffering. In his famous

institution of communal sanctions, Rabbeinu Tam decreed that the Jewish community should fight *get* refusal by shunning a recalcitrant husband and applying social pressure against him (see *Sefer Hayashar, Teshuvot* no. 24). The Jewish community is charged with standing shoulder to shoulder—*lekh kenos et kol haYehudim*, go, gather all the Jews—to demonstrate that we will not tolerate this abuse within our midst.

The salvation of the Jewish People, both in the Megillah and for *agunot* throughout the world who suffer in agonizing limbo, is ultimately in the hands of G-d. The Jews of Shushan fasted for Esther, and we fast on Taanit Esther, to demonstrate our unity and concern for the suffering of fellow Jews and to invoke Divine mercy. There could be no better date on the Jewish calendar than Taanit Esther to reflect on this message of our responsibility to take action on behalf of Jewish women who are abused and silenced, just as the Jews of Shushan did for Esther.

May G-d soon bring us all מאפילה לאורה ומשעבוד לגאולה, from darkness to light, and from oppression to salvation.