

# The Role of Vashti in the Purim Story

**T**he Mishna, *Megillah* 2:3, records a dispute regarding how much of the Megillah must be read:

מהיכן קורא אדם את המגילה, ויוצא בה ידי חובתו--רבי מאיר אומר, כולה; רבי יהודה אומר, מ"איש יהודי" (אסתר ב,ה); רבי יוסי אומר, מ"אחר הדברים האלה" (אסתר ג,א).

*From where must one begin reading the Megillah in order to fulfill one's obligation? R. Meir says one must read the entire Megillah. R. Yehuda says [one must begin no later than] "there was a certain Jewish man..." (2:5). R. Yosi says [one must begin no later than] "After these events" (3:1).*

The unspoken question that the tannaim in this Mishna allude to has been frequently asked by modern readers — what was the point of including chapter one [or, according to R. Yosi, chapters one and two] in Megillat Esther? The basic plot of the Megillah details the threats to, and the salvation of, the Jewish people. The Megillah could have begun with the rise of Haman and any necessary background information could have been added there. R. Yehuda and R. Yosi see the opening of the Megillah — the ostentatious display of the wealth of the Persian monarch, the great banquet that goes on, month after month, the story of the deposing of Vashti the Queen after the public humiliation that she caused the king, the selection of a new queen — as non-essential, at least *be-di-avad* (post-factum).



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The halakhah at the end of the day requires us to read the entire Megillah.<sup>1</sup> If we focus on the plot alone, we realize that it is not really possible to conceive of the Megillah without the initial narratives, just as it is not possible (Rashi's famous question at the start of his Bible commentary notwithstanding) to conceive of starting the Torah in the middle of Parashat Bo and leave out the entire Sefer Bereishit.<sup>2</sup> Megillat Esther is a creative tour de force, richly detailed and chock full of literary tricks that scholars, particularly in recent decades, have been uncovering and noting with no apparent end in sight.<sup>3</sup> Our focus here is the episode involving Queen Vashti who, in 1:9-12, is summoned to appear before the king and his guests at the royal banquet and refuses to do so. Only these details are provided. The remainder of chapter one describes the reaction of the king and his advisers to the shocking refusal by the queen, but Vashti's role in the story essentially begins and ends with those four verses. What do they teach or allude to? What light do these verses shine on the dénouement of Esther's story?

## The Midrashic View of Vashti

The text tells us virtually nothing about Vashti other than that she was beautiful and that, clearly, she had more than a little backbone. The meaning or derivation of her name is uncertain.<sup>4</sup> As with other minor characters in the Megillah, Vashti is not introduced with any biographical or genealogical data. Here the midrashim step in. Vashti was, we are told, the daughter of Belshazzar<sup>5</sup> and the granddaughter of Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Babylon who destroyed the First Temple.<sup>6</sup> Nevuchadnetzar is, from the perspective of Chazal, among the most wicked of men.<sup>7</sup> In tying Vashti to such a man, Chazal hinted at their assessment of her. They did not give her much credit for defending human dignity. As Michael Fox observed, the rabbis "thoroughly approve of feminine reserve ... but they could not believe that a gentile — the granddaughter of King Nebuchanezzar — would have shown true modesty."<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Vashti, Achashverosh, in the midrashic view, was a commoner who began his career in the royal stables. When his father, Darius, wrested

control of Babylonia from Belshazzar, Vashti was selected as Achashverosh's wife.<sup>9</sup> Thus Vashti provided a veneer of legitimacy for the new royal family. The difficulties (not to speak of internal inconsistencies) in the midrashic reading of the historical record are not our issue here. It is true that Darius, the father of Xerxes, was not a descendant of Cyrus the Great, and that might be the nugget of history behind this particular midrashic tradition.

The Megillah tells us that while Achashverosh was hosting his second party for the male citizens of Shushan, Vashti was hosting a party for the women [Esther 1:9]. Here, too, details are supplied by the aggadah. Vashti took the women on a tour of the private chambers of the King to satisfy their prurient curiosity. The tour may also

have given the women an opportunity to engage in illicit relations.<sup>10</sup>

As for Achashverosh's drink-infused demand that Vashti appear at his party so that he could show her off, the midrash once again fills in the blanks. Vashti was required to appear in the nude — that was the manner in which the king wished to display her beauty following some banter with some of his guests. And, the Gemara tells us, Vashti would have ordinarily agreed to her husband's demand were it not for the fact that she had developed leprosy (or sprouted a tail).<sup>11</sup> By this interpretation, Vashti's refusal was not based on the impropriety of her husband's demand but on the contingency of her condition.<sup>12</sup> The midrashim, then, provide a backstory identifying Vashti as a hater of Jews who was punished appropriately and

replaced by Esther, who goes on to save her people. Vashti, under this view, is the anti-Esther.

### Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary critics, though, reading the Megillah without the midrashic additions, have suggested alternative understandings of the Megillah as a whole and of its various characters, including Vashti. While their textual inferences are noteworthy and appreciated, their conclusions seem to fall short of the mark in explaining the role of Vashti in the Megillah. Adele Berlin, for instance, argues that Megillat Esther must be read as a farce and that we "cannot appreciate the story fully unless we realize it is meant to be funny. The subject of the farce is the Persian empire and



Persian court where a ‘major policy decision,’ the annihilation of the Jews is made casually, but a small domestic incident, Vashti’s non-appearance at a party, becomes a crisis of state, with all the bureaucratic trappings that can be mustered.”<sup>13</sup>

While it is certainly plausible to read the character of Achashverosh as a fool and that of Mordecai as a wise man, labeling all of the characters as “types” ignores the growth of Esther. When we first meet Esther she is a passive young woman, an orphan under the protection of her cousin. She is dragged off to the palace and she continues to listen to the various people who give her advice. In the course of the story, she becomes a brave, confident courier who is thrust onto the largest of stages and performs as an expert. Berlin’s reading also

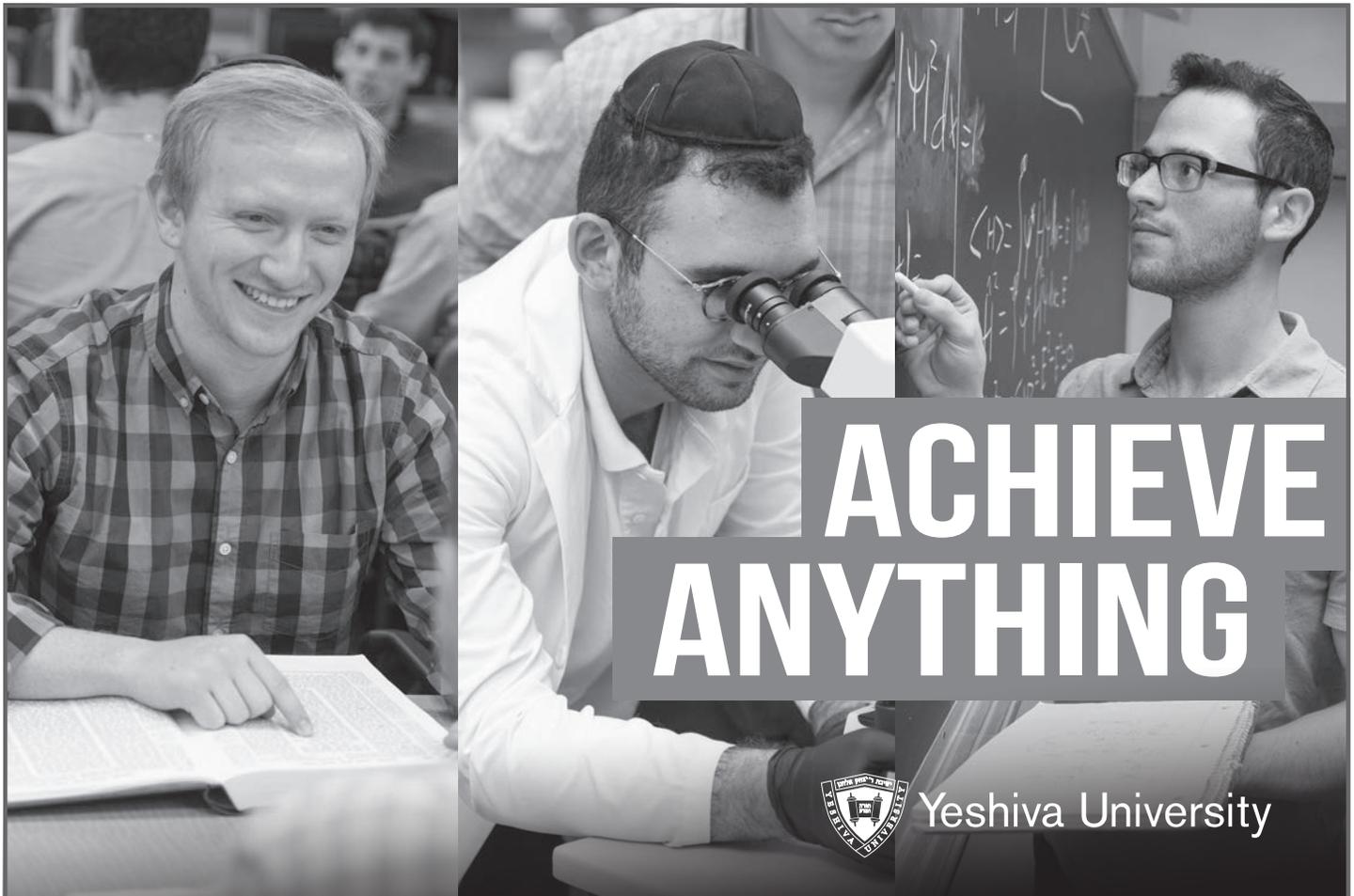
reduces Haman to “an archetypal comic villain ... not darkly evil” of whom we “are not meant to be threatened” since “he is doomed from the start.”<sup>14</sup>

Berlin’s reading also does not take into account the history the Jews have had with the Amalekite forbears of Haman, nor with the centuries of anti-Semitism that have followed. Berlin feels that the nature of the festival, the holiday of Purim, is the main force behind the book and is content with classifying the book as one of comedy with the message that “all is right with the world.” But is that all that a book of Tanakh should be? To affirm that all is right with the Jews? To sum up Megillat Esther as a feel-good farce ignores the more serious themes and dark elements that exist alongside the admittedly comical and farcical

elements. These themes include the survival of the Jewish people in exile, struggle with foreign cultures and mores, the end of the age of miracles and facing down anti-Semitism. Farce does not quite do justice to the Megillah.

Timothy Beal, another contemporary, acknowledges the farcical nature of Megillat Esther, but also sees it as a “strange ... sometimes deadly serious book of questions” that arise in the context of exile.<sup>15</sup> The main question of the book, in his view, is one of identity. Beal argues that “the book of Esther reflects a context in which the traditional means of self-construal have lost their meaning.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Beal, Purim teaches us “to recognize, and even to celebrate, the otherness within us that we so



often try to repress or hide” and as such, the holiday of Purim is not the force, or “reiteration of Esther,” but is a “it is a survival of Esther.”<sup>17</sup> Beal sees Vashti as an object to the male subject, a “special object, a quintessential something to bounce off in order to remind him of how solid he is.” She is “the grounding for his own identity” whose refusal to come “reveals the male subject’s special and highly problematic dependence on her as fixed object.”<sup>18</sup> Vashti refused “to come into the king’s presence to be the object of the pleased male ogle” and as a result she “will never again be present, and someone more pleasing [presentable, objectifiable] will fill the space left by her.”<sup>19</sup> Vashti, in short, was written out of the palace, and written out of the Megillah. Her absence, Beal contends, leaves the reader “in the company of Persian fools, at the center of whom is a dangerous power vacuum called the king” and that we “mourn the blank space left by Vashti.”<sup>20</sup> “The role of Vashti is thus one of a palimpsest, a story that is written, then erased, and then a new story is written over the old, erased one ... Vashti will survive her own end in the narrative. She will haunt the rest of the story. The story of Esther and Mordecai never shakes her memory.”<sup>21</sup>

For Michael V. Fox, it is not merely the character of Vashti that proves haunting — it is the entire story that revisits every year as he hears the Megillah read in shul:

*Indeed, I relive its truth and know its actuality. Almost without an effort of imagination, I feel something of the anxiety that seized the Jews of Persia upon learning of Haman’s threat to their lives, and I join in their exhilaration at their deliverance. Except that I do not think of ‘their’ but ‘my’ ...*<sup>22</sup>

He notes the anti-Semitic horrors of the twentieth century — the pogroms in Russia, the murders in the Ukraine, the “Persecutor of the Jews — now not vizier but supreme leader” who almost realized “Haman’s goal to ‘slaughter, slay, and destroy all the Jews, young and old.’”<sup>23</sup> The literary forces of the narrative help him believe that there will be relief and deliverance for the Jews, even when God appears to be hidden.

Like Berlin and Beal, Fox comments on the tone of humor and farcical elements present in the opening scene. Rather than dictate the tone of the entire book, the comical opening, in Fox’s reading, causes “the audience to lower its guard” and thus compounds the shock as “we see pride, egoism, royal instability mutate into murderous hatred and sinister scheme.”<sup>24</sup> The role of Vashti becomes important since “even a scanty presentation of a character can be suggestive of a larger quality and the author’s attitude toward it ... a literary figure does not exist in isolation ... the actions and experiences of one figure, even when these do not affect the outcome of the main action, alter the reader’s understanding of other parallel characters.”<sup>25</sup> Fox suggests that we try to understand Vashti by pairing her with characters “with whom she is contraposed in conflict” like the men of the court and those with whom she is in “correspondence,” like Esther.<sup>26</sup>

### **Vashti’s Influence on Mordecai and Esther**

Indeed, Vashti’s role in the Purim story can be understood by pairing her with other characters. However, unlike Fox’s conclusion, a closer look at the text dealing with Vashti

and her fateful choice helps us understand how her example may have influenced Mordecai and Esther. The more surprising comparison is with Mordecai. Vashti embarrassed the king in the presence of his boon companions: Mordecai publicly snubs Haman by refusing to bow to him in the presence of a group of gossiping courtiers. Both offenses result in international edicts that are enacted by the king and publicized by runners dispatched throughout the empire. Vashti insults her husband, and suddenly all women are suspected of despising their husbands and commanded to show their spouses honor.

לֹא עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ, עֲוֹתָהּ וְשִׁתֵּי הַמֶּלֶכָה ...  
 כִּי-יָצָא דְבַר-הַמֶּלֶכָה עַל-כָּל-הַנָּשִׁים, לְהַבְזוֹת  
 בְּעֵלְיָהֶן בְּעֵינֵיהֶן: בְּאֶמְרָם, הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ  
 אָמַר לְהַבִּיא אֶת-וְשִׁתֵּי הַמֶּלֶכָה לְפָנָיו--וְלֹא-  
 בָּאָהּ. .... וַיִּשְׁלַח סִפָּרִים, אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת  
 הַמֶּלֶךְ--אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ, וְאֶל-עַם  
 וְעַם כָּל-שׁוֹנוֹ: לְהִזוֹת כָּל-אִישׁ שָׂרָר בְּבֵיתוֹ,  
 וּמְדַבֵּר כְּלִשׁוֹן עַמּוֹ.

*Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only ... For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not... for he sent letters into all the king’s provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people.*

**Esther 1:16-17, 22**

The root b-z-h appears both in the description of Vashti’s alleged offense against her husband, and in Haman’s reaction to Mordecai’s snub (Esther 3:6). Mordecai insults Haman and

suddenly all Jews are suspect of treason against the king.

ישנו עם-אחד מפורז ומפוזר בין העמים, בכל מדינות מלכותך; ודתיהם שנות מכל-עם, ואת-דתי המלך אינם עשים, ולמלך אין-שנה, להניחם. אם-על-המלך טוב, יפתב לאבדם.

*There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed.*

### **Esther 3:8-9**

The money belonging to the Jews will be taken from them and used to enrich Haman's coffers.<sup>27</sup> The plot similarities between Vashti and Mordecai underscore their common goal to uphold human dignity and freedom of

conscience in the face of tyranny and oppression. Vashti knew that no good could result from her appearance at a drunken, all-male party. Her options were not promising. She could acquiesce to the command of the king, lose her dignity and help him lose his as well (which would no doubt anger him at a later time). Or she could refuse on principle, angering the king and exposing herself to a harsh consequence, but maintaining both her dignity and that of the king. Faced with a lose-lose situation, knowing that one way or another she was doomed to fall, she opts to fall with dignity and refuses to appear.

While it would seem that Mordecai had no prior compunctions about bowing to Achashverosh, the elevation of Haman as the key political adviser to the king made prior behavior

[bowing] a non-option.<sup>28</sup> As Yoram Hazony notes:

*As long as Achashverosh took decisions through broad consultation with a range of advisers, there was every reason to hope that the laws ... of the Persian state would tend towards at least the roughest approximation of a just settlement among the competing perspectives ... in the empire. Haman's installation ... suppressed the search for a greater truth on the part of the state; henceforth it would become that defined by the perspective and desires of a single man, Haman. Since it would be his desires rather than truth which would now determine right and wrong for much of mankind, his elevation transformed him (and Achashverosh as well) into a usurping god ... an idol. To serve his whim would be as service to the Canaanite gods, for whom men had*



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to their lose-lose situation? Because God orchestrated a different outcome. Vashti needed to be replaced, but not before teaching us what ordinarily happened in Shushan when one stood on principle. Her story gives us a greater appreciation of the salvation of the Jewish people as a whole and specifically of Mordecai. It also provides insight into Esther's reasoning for trying a more diplomatic approach. Yet even while Esther learned from Vashti's story to confront the king in a more soft-spoken manner, we can't lose sight of the fact she risked her life in confronting the king and it was only through God's providence that she was successful.

Vashti appears only briefly in the Megillah but, like a palimpsest, she leaves behind traces. On one level, she is "an object lesson for other women throughout the king's dominion, to keep their places in the household economy."<sup>32</sup> But more to our point, she emerges as a major influence on Mordecai and Esther, and as the key for our understanding of the challenges they faced and overcame.

## Endnotes

- 1 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 690:3.
- 2 Jon D. Levinson [Esther: A Commentary, London/Louisville, 1997], 1, is surely correct that Esther is a complex piece of literature "with few and perhaps no scenes that could be omitted without damage."
- 3 Among the works which I examined while thinking about Vashti were Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991; Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary Esther*, Philadelphia, JPS Society, 2001; Charles D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora: Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther*, Berlin/New York, Walter DeGruyter, 2003; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*, London/New York:

Routledge, 1997; Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*, Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000; S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 [1963], pp. 419-455, Jeffrey Cohen, "Vashti, The Unsung Heroine," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:2, 1996, 103-106; and Yonatan Grossman, *Esther: Scroll of Secrets*, Israel: Maggid Publishers, 2013 [Hebrew]. But the list of articles and books about the Megillah goes on and on.

4 The name is often said to mean "beauty" or its equivalent, but that is apparently an anachronism. J. Dynely Prince, "Note on Vashti," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Boston, 1914 33:2, p. 87-90.

5 *Esther Rabbah* 3:5.

6 TB *Megillah* 10b. These identifications are tied in with the chronology sketched out by the rabbis, many of whom saw the events of the Megillah as taking place between the destruction of the First Temple and the construction of the Second. Belshazzar [or Bel-shar-usur], historically, was the son of Nabonides, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. [Amelie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources of the Achaemenid Period*, London: 2009].

7 See *Sanhedrin* 92b and various other references.

8 Fox, p. 164

9 TB *Megillah* 12b; *Esther Rabbah* 3:14; *Yalkut Shimoni Esther* 1049.

10 TB *Megillah* 12a.

11 TB *Megillah* 12b.

12 See Fox, p. 165.

13 Berlin p. xix.

14 Berlin, p. xx.

15 Beal, p. 49.

16 Beal, p. 111.

17 Beal, p. 124.

18 Beal, p. 21.

19 Beal, p. 23.

20 Beal, p. 26.

21 Beal, p. 29

22 Beal, p. 11.

23 Beal, p. 12.

24 Fox, p. 25.

25 Fox, p. 167.

26 Fox, p. 167.

27 Berlin notes that "according to Haman, the Jews were not currently providing any income to the king" and understands that the king is not only giving Haman "authority over the Jews" but also "permission to keep any tribute he collected from them." [Commentary on Esther 3:11, p. 42]

28 There are many midrashim that help to explain why Mordecai refused to bow. One is *Esther Rabbah* 6:2, which suggests that Haman wore an idol around his neck so bowing to Haman would be, in fact, idolatry. *Esther Rabbah* 5:9 suggests a prior altercation between Mordecai and Haman and places both Haman and Mordecai in Jerusalem at the beginning of the construction of the Second Temple. When the enemies of the Jews disputed the right of the Jews to begin construction, both sides agreed to send messengers to the king to resolve the issue. Haman was chosen to represent the enemies; Mordecai was chosen to represent the Jews. On the journey, Haman ran out of food and begged bread from Mordecai. Mordecai agreed to share his rations with Haman, on the condition that Haman become an indentured servant of Mordecai's. Haman agreed and the document of indenture was written on the bottom of Mordecai's shoe. Many years later, in Shushan, when Haman would walk past Mordecai and expect that Mordecai would stand up and bow down, Mordecai would extend his foot, displaying the sole on which the document was written. This filled Haman with rage. If the first midrash gives Mordecai a warning that there would come a time when he would need to take a stand, the second midrash helps to explain the personal nature of Haman's revenge.

29 John Goldman, *A Lion in Winter: A Comedy in Two Acts*. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1966.

30 S. Talmon, (1963). "Wisdom" in the *Book of Esther*. *Vetus Testamentum*, 13(1937), 419-455.

31 Rav Yoel Bin Nun, "*Megillat HaHephech*" in *Hadassah hi Esther*, p. 52, 54 [Hebrew]

32 Beal, p. 25.