

# The Sacrifice of Esther

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**A**S KING DAVID LAY DYING, HIS ADVISERS made one last effort to comfort him by bringing a virgin to his bed (I Kings 1:1). The Shunammite woman, as she was known, later became an object of competition between the royal heirs. Adoniah, King Solomon's half-brother, asked for permission to marry her. Solomon indignantly refused, declaring "Why request Abishag the Shunammite? ... Request the kingship!" (I Kings 2:23) — as if to say that a man is not truly the king of his castle unless he possesses the right woman.

That women are symbols of a man's power is hardly a new theme. A recognition of this power lust lay behind the original Biblical prohibition on kings having many wives (Deuteronomy 17:17). So it is hardly surprising that the Book of Esther opens with King Ahasuerus, the ruler of 127 provinces, seeking a new virgin wife to replace the defiant Queen Vashti — whom he had killed, say the sages (Esther Raba 3), because of her refusal to publicly demonstrate her subservience to him. Vashti's murder was justified as necessary to maintain order in the land, since the example of the queen's defiance "will make all wives despise their husbands" (Esther 1:17). Hence the queen was executed so "that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people" (1:22), linking men's mastery over their wives with the motif of national pride. Patriotism, in this rendering, is a function of the oppression of women.

Even more curious, however, is Mordechai's relationship with the woman in his life: Esther, who was his cousin and, many claim, also his wife (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 13a). When King Ahasuerus orders that beautiful young virgins be brought to the palace to compete for a chance to replace Vashti, Mordechai jumps at the opportunity to get a foot in the royal door. Esther herself has no voice here, no opinion and no status. She is simply grabbed by one man and presented as an offering to a more powerful one. Unlike Vashti, she offers no protest. We know nothing of what she wants — or, for that matter, what she's like. She has been silenced by Mordechai and remains silent within the palace, especially about her Jewish origin, "for Mordechai had told her not to reveal it" (2:10). Given the fate of the previous queen, there's good cause to wonder about Mordechai's zest in turning his cousin/wife over to a mercurial, megalomaniac wife-killer like Ahasuerus. This point is especially compelling because Haman and his grim designs have not yet entered the picture. At the time of the beauty contest, there

was a greater threat to queens than there was to Jews.

This was not the only instance in which Mordechai placed Esther's life in peril without endangering his own. At the moment of truth in the Purim story, when Ahasuerus heeds Haman's advice and declares open war on the Jews, Mordechai commands Esther to "go to the king and ... plead with him" for her people (4:8). Esther, speaking for the first time in the book, implores him to reconsider,

for everyone knows that "if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him — that he be put to death" (4:11).

But Mordechai is deaf to her plea. His final comment in this exchange has been the subject of debate throughout the ages. " ... If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And, who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (4:14). Although this passage eloquently expresses the Jews' eternal hope that God is orchestrating their history, Mordechai (unlike the Prophets, for example), is unsure about this tenet. "Who knows?" he muses, while at the same time chiding Esther for not acknowledging her own insignificance, when weighed against the commonweal. He thus successfully convinces

her, himself and subsequent generations of Jews that to enter the lion's den was her fate.

Poor Esther is a woman imprisoned and exploited by two men. Mordechai, a Jewish leader liked by "most of his brethren" (10:2), prances about town on the royal steed wearing royal clothes (6:11) and becomes a pillar of the community, while Esther is stuck in the palace, a bound concubine forever.

Purim is a captivating tale of Jewish salvation at the hidden hand of God. Yet it is as much about the domination of women as it is about national deliverance, and we must ask ourselves why the two seem to go hand in hand. We should also wonder whether risking the life of another, while guarding one's own, is a Jewish value. And finally, although the Jewish people have reason to rejoice over the outcome of the affair, isn't it curious that our annual revel lacks even a tinge of sadness that deliverance came at the price of a woman's freedom? ●

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