

Esther (Part 2)

Saying “No” to Power

The book of Esther begins with the story of Queen Vashti. Vashti’s husband, King Ahasuerus, summons her to dance for him and his buddies at a banquet. She refuses and is subsequently deposed. Vashti is dismissed, in part, because she embarrassed the king in front of his friends. This is a reversal of role expectations: men humiliated women, not the other way around.

Many readers see Vashti as a feminist hero for this decision. In the context of Esther’s larger narrative, Vashti’s decision might be an example of how *not* to maintain one’s good graces in court. If one’s goal is to “get stuff done” within an absurd royal bureaucracy, it seems direct confrontation is not the best approach. Esther, by contrast, avoids direct confrontation as queen. Although Esther does not take a stand *against* the oppressive forces, she still manages to save her people. Dr. Vayntrub suggests that being queen entails “tolerating humiliation for a greater purpose” [4:05].

What’s in a name?

The characters’ names in this story are somewhat suggestive. The names Esther and Mordechi, for example, sound like the names of Babylonian gods Ishtar and Marduk. Esther is also not the main character’s Hebrew name: that’s *Hadassah*, meaning “hide” or “conceal.” Esther/Hadassah’s dual name mirrors her dual persona as she represents one thing to her people and another to the diaspora. This speaks to the “ambivalence” of Jewish identity and experience in diasporic life.

God, Gender and Diaspora

God is never explicitly mentioned in the book of Esther. A Rabbinic reading might say that “God is everywhere, but God is concealed.” Yet there are no coincidences in Esther. Everything seems to happen because of the characters’ own agency and decision-making. Others read this story within its second temple period context, saying that God is not actually present here, but is instead in Jerusalem with the temple and God’s people.

The text centers female characters and agency within the plot, which can be interpreted through a feminist lens. It is possible, however, that the book of Esther uses gender more so as

a model to talk about “otherness” in Jewish diasporic life. Jewish experience is at the center of this text, as well as the kinds of strategies and anxieties that are required to live as a subordinate. It is a story of negotiating oppression and, ultimately, survival.