



Fast for Esther's Activism

Bonna Devora Haberman

The costumed revelry of our Purim celebrations masks our discomfort with the Megilla of Esther. One layer of the text objectifies women as sexual commodities: the disdain for Vashti, the "beauty" contest, the harem. Even Esther is implicated by her participation in the perpetuation of what seems to be a denigrating systemic misogyny. Criticisms of both the sexism and the violent excesses recorded in the text are familiar, yet rarely is any connection made between them. Let's read the Purim story together with a contemporary parallel drama "against the grain."

The absurd monarch, Achashverosh, makes a mockery of himself and his debauched court. Fearing women's insurgence as an outcome of Vashti's refusal to appear naked at his party, he follows his advisors' counsel to banish the queen. Accordingly, he calls for every woman, young and old, to submit to her husband, the inviolable ruler of the house. Haman's racism follows imminently upon the heels of the King's sexism. Indeed, the root of Haman's wrath against Mordechai and the Jews parallels the King's fury against Vashti and the women: Both Vashti and Mordechai refuse to submit to degradation before authority. Disdain for and subordination of women are pre-conditions for the progression toward violent evils which threaten to prevail under the jester-King. As the macabre, vain and fickle circumstances unfold at the interminable banquets, the text successively strips away masks of delusion about authority and reveals intolerable vulnerabilities.

Insurgent against this backdrop, Esther reveals her premeditated intentions. She manifests the hidden divine force from which she derives her name. Esther's indomitable commitment to creation, to life, and to humanity is reflected in her appeal to recall the edicts of violence. At her own peril, she petitions the King to revoke the scrolls which mandate the destruction of the Jews, her people (8:5). Even the King, however,

has no power to revoke his own seal. His only recourse is to seal new orders allowing the Jews' self-defense if and when they are assaulted (8:11). The bloody ninth chapter is an inevitable outcome of the immutability of the King's phallic/fallable decree. While Esther's feminist solution was to deconstruct the text and leave the body intact, the monarch's solution was to destroy the body and maintain the text. The violent outcome is a perverse inversion, a mockery of immutability, and a displacement of the sacred from the sumptuous banquets of the powerful.

On Sunday, January 11th, 1998, the *New York Times* ran a front page story about the global crime trade in young Eastern European women who are being sold into prostitution. The article highlighted Israel as a prime destination, quoting a proud Israeli pimp in Tel

Aviv who earns extraordinary profits through brutal abuse of women. The NYT article was based upon a report commissioned by the Israel Women's Network. The report documents smuggling, fraudulent papers, and collaboration between police and brothel owners, in addition to routine beatings and sexual abuse – some of the methods by which the young women are disciplined into enslaved prostitution.

One of the most profoundly relevant statements is made by Esther herself: "Let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request; for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain and to be annihilated" (7:3-4).

I suggest that we read Esther's plea as a reference not only to her people, Jews, but to her people, women. She herself had earlier been confined among a harem of women, selected and pruned for sex with the King. She recognizes oppression doubly, as woman and as Jew.

During the days preceding her meeting with King Achashverosh, Esther declares a fast in solidar-

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ity with her as she incubates her strategy to foil Haman's evil plan to destroy her people. I call for activism against trafficking in women and prostitution on the Fast of Esther. As in Persia long ago, while many of us feast on the sumptuousness of our material blessings, treacherous acts of inhumanity are plotted and implemented. Esther's process of revealing her hidden identity and the imminent violence of the empire utilize the Purim theme of unmasking the concealed. Esther's fast creates a unique convergence of the spiritual and political, an opportunity to inspect and strategize against evil.

Due to the attention we have begun to focus on trafficking during this past year, a number of initiatives have been set up. Women's shelters, however, do not want to take these often desperate women due to the financial and security burdens they impose. Furthermore, women who want to testify against the traffickers are still unprotected. An ABC *Prime Time* video incriminating one of the pimps has been forwarded to the police to work against traffickers. The Israel Women's Network staff advises that programs be developed to directly help these women. More globally, interventions to overcome the unconscionable social, economic and familial conditions which render such oppression possible and profitable are required.

I urge that we mobilize a Jewish movement to free women from the subjugating bonds of prostitution and trafficking. From the grassroots level of individuals and

their communities to the national institutional leadership, every Jewish organization, its members, rabbis and presidents can give voice and power to this struggle to assert the dignity of humanity and the moral integrity of Israel. According to our will, *Ta'anit Esther*, the Fast of Esther which precedes Purim, can become a compelling Jewish moment uniquely sanctified for solidarity with oppressed women. Literally absent from the written text, divine force is concealed in Esther's own name and activism. Fast-ing, let us collectively steel our resolve to struggle with the brutality with which Purim engages us, and to manifest our own power to undo contemporary networks of violent desecration. May we honor the inspiring legacy of Esther. Fast!

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Tax-exempt donations to Israeli efforts may be sent to the New Israel Fund, earmarked for "Trafficking of Russian Women Project, The Israel Women's Network": New Israel Fund, Suite 500 1625 K Street, NW, Washington DC 20006.

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