

WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

International Day of Study

LEADER'S GUIDE

Background Reading for Children's Sessions

The scroll of *Esther* is found in the section of the Bible referred to as *Ketuvim* or Writings. It is one of the *Hamesh Megillot* (Five Scrolls), consisting of *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Lamentations*.

The scroll of *Esther* is thought to have been written sometime between 400 – 300 BCE when the Jews were living in Babylonia, then part of the Persian Empire.

Biblical scholars suggest that the King Ahashverus of the *megillah* was Xerxes (486-465 BCE), although most agree that the story itself should be regarded more as a novella than history.

Summary of *Megillat Esther*

The story begins in the third year of the reign of the Persian king Ahashverus during a 180-day party he has thrown for his officials. The king decides to culminate this grand banquet with another seven-day feast for the city of Shushan and he orders Queen Vashti to attend this feast so that all the people may appreciate her beauty. She refuses and she is removed from her position as queen.

A contest is proclaimed to find a new queen. In the seventh year of the reign of Ahashverus, Esther is chosen to replace Vashti and another banquet is held to celebrate Esther's selection as queen. Esther is a young Jewish woman who had been adopted by her cousin Mordecai. No one in the court knows that she is Jewish because Mordecai told her to conceal that information. Esther and Mordecai are able to communicate with each other through the help of Hegai, the chief eunuch of Ahashverus' harem.

In the twelfth year of the reign of Ahashverus, Haman, the king's highest official, is angered by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him. So he tells the king that there is a people dispersed throughout the empire who have separate laws and do not follow the king's laws. Haman argues that the king should not tolerate these people and should exterminate them. Haman receives permission from the king to destroy the Jews.

The date for the massacre is set by the casting of lots. The lots are cast on the thirteenth day of the first month, Nisan, and the lots determine that the massacre will take place on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar.

Mordecai and the Jews of Persia respond to the decree by donning sackcloth and ashes, fasting and weeping bitterly. Mordecai orders Esther to go to the king and plead for her people. Initially, Esther refuses saying that anyone who appears before the king without having been summoned will be executed. Mordecai convinces Esther to go to the king by arguing:

- She will not escape the massacre just because she lives in the palace.
- If she refuses to help her people, help will eventually come from another source and her family will not survive.
- Perhaps she reached a royal position for just this purpose, to save her people.

Esther consents and demands that the Jews of Shushan fast for three days before she approaches the king. On the third day, Esther goes to the king's inner court, he sees her and immediately she wins his favor. Esther hosts two banquets for the king and Haman. At the second banquet she begs the king to save her people from their enemy, Haman.

The king, in a fit of rage, sentences Haman to death. Esther learns that the king cannot revoke the edict allowing for the destruction of the Jews but the king does enact an edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves against all their enemies. According to the story, the Jews kill more than 75,000 enemies without one Jew dying.