

International Day of Study

A Day in the Life of the Harem

“Good Girls Don’t Go to Men’s Parties”

Leader’s Guide

PART I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Life in the Harem

To those of us familiar with the tales of *Scheherazade*, the harem conjures black-eyed beauties dressed in exquisite brocade outfits and delicately filigreed jewelry, lounging on tasseled pillows or dangling their feet in bathing pools. The women are guarded by an imposing array of slightly rotund but muscular eunuchs who stand silently at the doors and windows, preventing anyone from entering or exiting.

While this exotic image is intriguing, it is, for the most part, a figment of the Western imagination. What do/or can we know about this elusive institution?

- All ancient Near Eastern societies practiced polygamy (more than one wife), and they all provided some manner of separate housing for them. The women’s sections of the monarch’s household often had hundreds of wives and concubines.
- In antiquity, the term for the women’s residences varied. It was called the women’s house in the Bible (*beit ha-nashim*); the women’s section in Byzantium (*gynecaea*). The use of the term “harem” in modern Bible translations is anachronistic.
- The actual term “harem” is probably relatively late, after the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE. It is derived from the Arabic *haram*, which means *unlawful, protected, or forbidden*. [For example, the sacred area around Mecca and Medina is *haram*, closed to all but the Faithful.] Its secular usage refers to the separate protected area of the household where women, children and servants live in security. *Harem* can also refer to the women themselves, or can be the term for *wife*. However, we do not know precisely when it became the common usage for women’s protected living quarters.
- Under Islam the harem (or whatever it was called) underwent a number of significant changes. As a heavily Islamicized institution, it became the social and cultural agency by which male heads of households circumscribed the lives of their women.
- Most knowledge of harem life today is derived from the period of the Ottoman Empire (15th– early 20th centuries.) In these harems, women were wholly excluded from public life. Seclusion was prescribed for two reasons: principally for the preservation of the regal line, and for the Sultan’s control of his women’s sexuality. The life of a woman (particularly the slave and concubine or “odalisque”) in the Sultan’s harem was virtually worthless, and any minor infraction could, and did, result in her death.

Where do the popular conceptions of harem life come from?

- Today many of our misconceptions about this institution derives from Western European travelogues (17th – 19th centuries) that formed the conceptual foundations for 19th century Western art and romance novels.
- Today, it is acknowledged that prevalent conceptions derive, on the most basic level, from culturally biased Western “orientalist” tendencies specifically constructed to demean and trivialize non-Western cultures. In representations of life in the East, whether in the guise of history, anthropology or the arts, non-Western societies were characterized as primitive and uncivilized. Its men were criticized for (both!) hyper and hypo masculinity, and its women were depicted as sexually promiscuous and uninhibited. This is evident in the popularity of highly eroticized harem scenes in nineteenth century art and literature.

What has recent research on the harem revealed about the institution?

- Rather than viewing the ancient harem solely as a social convention of a patriarchal society (and a means of controlling women), it can be viewed, in many instances, as an instrument for social welfare. The king, as the father (so to speak) of the country, was responsible for the young women under his domain. He would, for example, bear economic responsibility for daughters of slain army officials or noblemen whose deaths preempted them from providing dowries for their daughters. The king, therefore, took them into his “harem” in order to protect and care for them.
- Marriage was a common means of creating alliances between the ruler and the landed aristocracy and gentry, as well as foreign rulers. (For example, King Solomon was reputed to have acquired hundred of wives for just this reason.)
- Multiple wives was a primary means to demonstrate wealth and power.
- In antiquity, women’s lives were not as secluded as they came to be under Islam in the Middle Ages. Some wielded tremendous power within the palace hierarchy, especially the king’s mother.
- Eunuchs also wielded great power within the palace hierarchy. As guardians of the king’s women, they not only engaged in court intrigue, but many were able to have fulfilling sex lives because they could not endanger the purity of the royal line.

Why do we know so little about this institution?

- Generally, there is very little documentary evidence from the Persian period.
- With few exceptions, women were essentially illiterate. There is scant written evidence from inside the harem walls.
- The literate class in antiquity (a very small percentage of men) even if inclined to write about women, would not have been permitted inside the women’s residence.
- In general, women were devalued; their daily lives were not considered important to write about.

PART II: LEADER'S GUIDE

OBJECTIVES

- Participants will discuss the inaccurate conceptions about harem life and the origins of these images.
- Participants will highlight passages from the book of *Esther* that deal specifically with the women's quarters in the palace.
- Participants will read the passages contextually, gaining insight into various aspects of harem life.

TOPIC I: MODERN IMAGES OF THE HAREM

Question: *When we think about the harem, what words or images come to mind?*

[Write answers on the board or a large sheet of paper.]

Question: *Where do you think these images come from?*

[Distribute text sheet. Ask participants to look at the images and discuss what they see. After discussing the artistic images, read text #1 aloud.]

Text #1

...It is a world in which all the senses feast riotously upon sights and sounds and perfumes; upon fruit and flowers and jewels, upon wines and sweets, and upon yielding flesh, both male and female, whose beauty is incomparable. It is a world of heroic, amorous encounters...Romance lurks behind every shuttered window; every veiled glance begets an intrigue; and in every servant's hand nestles a scented note granting a speedy rendezvous...It's a world in which no aspiration is so mad as to be unrealizable, and no day proof of what the next day may be. A world in which apes may rival men, and a butcher may win the hand of a king's daughter; a world in which palaces are made of diamonds, and thrones cut from single rubies. It's a world in which all the distressingly ineluctable rules of daily living are gloriously suspended; from which individual responsibility is delightfully absent. It is the world of a legendary Damascus, a legendary Cairo, and a legendary Constantinople...In short, it is the world of eternal fairy-tale—and there is no resisting its enchantments.

B. R. Redman, *Introduction to The Arabian Nights Entertainments* (1922)

Discussion Question: *What do you think about these images? Are they accurate?*

Briefly summarize some of the important points from background information.

- origin of the term “harem”
- the transformation of the harem under Islam
- most of our information is late (the Ottoman Empire, 16th – 19th centuries)

- “Orientalist” tendencies among Westerners have constructed negative images of non-Western societies that became popularized, particularly in art and literature.

Leader: *The images that we embrace today about the harem are largely an invention of the Western imagination.* [Give time for this statement to sink in. Allow *brief* discussion]

TOPIC II: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HAREM LIFE

Leader: *Reading the scroll of Esther, we can look for some hints about the institution of the harem.* [Read texts and discussion questions. Be sure to include the bulleted information in your discussion.]

Text #2

Esther 1:9-12 In addition, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women, in the royal palace of King Ahashverus. On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahashverus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the people and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the eunuchs.

Discussion Question: *Why do you think Vashti refused to attend the banquet?* Solicit answers. In addition, offer the following points:

- Generally, in antiquity, men and women did not dine together. Vashti held a banquet for the women, and the king held his own for “all the people in Shushan, high and low alike.” This meant men.
- The only women who attended public banquets were the king’s concubines, the lowliest status in the harem hierarchy. Demanding the queen to attend a public function was a humiliation and demeaned her royal rank.
- As queen, Vashti’s assertion of independence would not result in a death sentence – as it did with women of lower status – but perhaps banishment from court, or even more humiliating, replacement by another queen. The text doesn’t really tell us what really happened to her.
- In the Sultan’s harem (Ottoman period), disobedient women had their hands and feet bound, they were stuffed into sacks and drowned.

Text #3

Esther 2:17-18 The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. The king gave a great banquet for all his officials and courtiers, ‘the banquet of Esther.’

Discussion Question: *Was Esther actually at this banquet? While it was called “the banquet of Esther,” it’s not clear that she was in attendance.*

TOPIC III: THE EUNUCH

Text # 4

Esther 2:8-10 When the king’s order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the king’s palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women. The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king’s palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem.

Leader: *From this passage, what can you infer about the role of Hegei, guardian of the women?*

- guardian/protector of the women in the harem
- tutor and provider for women
- political wheeler-dealer; forms alliances within the harem hierarchy

Some facts about the eunuchs and their roles in the harem:

- Principally, eunuchs served as guardians in the harem because their inability to reproduce guaranteed the purity of the monarch’s bloodline.
- Contrary to conventional wisdom, some eunuchs (depending on the type of surgical procedure) were able to engage in sexual activity, without the ability to reproduce.
- There were many types of procedures that went from complete removal of *all* male sexual organs (*sandali* or *castrati*), to removal of the testicles only.

In the latter case, eunuchs were capable of sexual function (but without procreation) and there are many accounts of eunuchs who engaged in physical relationships with members of the harem, or even had wives.

- Because eunuchs could leave the confines of the harem, they were major procurers of a variety of aphrodisiacs and sex paraphernalia that women sought to improve their skills (and presumably, their popularity with the male heads of household). Eunuchs were also reputed to be both conversant and highly skilled in all types of sexual matters.
- Since Islam prohibits castration, non-Muslim slaves and men captured in war were castrated in order to serve in harems.
- Many eunuchs rose to highly elevated positions within court hierarchies through alliances with powerful women in the harem. They were often rewarded with royal favors, land and property and women.

Text #5

Esther 4:4-10 [On the decree] When Esther's maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated. ...Thereupon Esther summoned Hatach, one of the eunuchs whom the king had appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordecai to learn the why and wherefore of it all...When Hatach came and delivered Mordecai's message to Esther, Esther told Hatach to take back to Mordecai the following reply:...When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther.

Leader: Esther used the eunuchs as go-betweens with Mordecai. In so doing, the eunuchs ingratiated themselves to the new queen, gaining power and status within the court.

TOPIC IV: THE BIG NIGHT

Question: *What does the text tell us about Esther's preparation for the big night?*

Text #6

Esther 2: 12-14 When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahashverus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics, and it was after that that the girl would go to the king), whatever she asked for would be given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. She would go in the evening and leave in the morning for a second harem in charge of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, guardian of the concubines. She would not go again to the king unless the king wanted her, when she would be summoned by name.

- Preparation was intensive: six months of beautifying themselves with cosmetics, oils, perfumes, etc. Myrrh was considered to have the power of an aphrodesiac.
- Hegei was Esther's adviser, giving her whatever she needed, and instructing her about how to get the king's attention.
- The text is explicit that Esther engaged in sexual relations with the king. She was transferred from the harem of the virgins, to the harem of the concubines – those who were no longer virgins. Her status was diminished (virgins trump concubines), and she is told that her services are no longer required unless she is specifically requested by the king.

Final Discussion Question: *How would you characterize the women of the Purim story?*