

International Day of Study

Midrash Texts

Text A

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 12b (Commenting on Esther 1:10 and 1:12 “**on the seventh day the king’s heart was merry with wine**”.... “**and Queen Vashti refused.**”) We are told that contrary to the text, Ahashverus kills Vashti in a drunken rage. The Talmud goes on to assure us that she deserved to die, not because she refused to appear naked before the king but because she used to strip Jewish girls and make them work naked on Shabbat. So that means her punishment is not random but “measure for measure”—as she sinned, so was she punished.

(commenting on Esther 1:12 “**...and Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s behest...and his anger burnt within him.**”) We learn that the reason Vashti did not appear before the king naked was not out of modesty nor because the request insulted her status, but rather because she had leprosy, and (in a later passage) because she in fact had a tail placed there by the angel Gabriel.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbos 53b plus a gloss of Tosefot Yeshonim (commenting on *Esther* 2:7 “**and he was a nurse for Hadassah, she is Esther, his cousin for she had no father and mother.**”) When Mordecai adopted the newborn Esther—her mother had died at her birth and her father had died at her conception—he could not find a wet nurse. God miraculously caused milk to gush from Mordecai’s own breasts and he nursed her.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 13a (commenting on *Esther* 2:7 “**...and he raised Hadassah, who is Esther...**” connects the name of Myrtle—English for Hadassah—to her appearance.) Esther was of average height and greenish complexion, (which is why she was named Myrtle, a greenish plant of average size). The rabbis explain that her greenish coloring was a result of the pain she felt at being taken into Ahashverus’ court. The rabbis add, however, that she still appeared beautiful to those looking at her, implying that others did not see her inner pain.

(commenting on *Esther* 2:7 “**And when her father and mother had died, Mordecai took her as his daughter**”.... Esther was not Mordecai’s adopted daughter, as the text states, but rather his wife. The rabbis take the liberty to read the Hebrew word for daughter (*bat*) as *bayit*, which in Mishnaic Hebrew can mean ‘wife’.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 13b (commenting on *Esther* 2:20 “**...and the bidding of Mordecai, Esther did.**”) The rabbis tell us that Ahashverus would force Esther to have sex, after which she would bathe and then to consult with the rabbis to see if she was ritually impure or pure; if the rabbis agreed that she was ritually clean, she would then go to Mordecai’s bed.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 14b The rabbis interrupt the discussion of Esther with a discussion of the seven women they deem prophets—Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther. This section actually ends with an indictment of women who take too public a role in the community. [Note: This commentary exposes some deep ambivalence about women. The indictment seems especially ironic in commentary on a book about a bold heroine who deliv-

ers her people using her wit, daring and public position. What if Esther had not put herself forward in a public way?]

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 15a; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 74b; Zohar The rabbis comment that Esther’s marriage to Mordecai should mean that her engaging in extra-marital relations with Ahashverus makes her forbidden for sex with her husband Mordecai, but they reason that because she is not having sex with the heathen king willingly, she is still available to her husband.

And speaking of sex, we are assured that Esther does not enjoy sex with the king. In **Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 74b** “**Abbaye said, ‘Esther was like the ground’**”(i.e., totally passive). In the Zohar (**Ra’ya mehema Ki Tetzei 3:276a**, the mystical work composed in 13th century Spain), Esther never actually has sex with Ahashverus. Rather, a female spirit doubles for Esther so that she is not physically involved. Regardless of whether Esther is there in the flesh or not, or whether she is engaged in sex or remains passive and non-responsive, the rabbis tell us that Ahashverus was certainly satisfied. **Babylonian Talmud Yoma 29a** tells us, “Just as a female deer is always enticing to her mate, so did Esther arouse Ahashverus’ passion at each meeting as if it were the first time he was with her.”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 15b (commenting on *Esther* 5:2 “**And when the king noticed Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and the king extended the golden scepter to Esther.**”) The rabbis posit that three angels accompanied Esther into the dangerous court of the king when she goes in uninvited and by so doing risks the king’s displeasure and even death. Of the three angels, one was there to hold her head high since she was physically exhausted from her days of fasting; a second was there to enhance her and make her especially charming to the king, and the third angel stretched the king’s scepter out to touch her hand. The rabbis continue discussing exactly how far the angel stretched the scepter—the hypotheses range from two to two hundred units.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 16a (commenting on *Esther* 6:11 “**Then Haman took the garments and the horse...**”) We learn that Mordecai spent his time at the palace gates of the town teaching Torah to his disciples.

Text B

Esther 2:9 **And the maiden pleased him** [Hegai, the keeper of the women] **and she won his favor, and he hastened** [to bring] **her ointments and her portions to give** [them] **to her, and the seven maidens fitting to give her from the king’s house, and he changed her and her maidens to the best** [accommodations] **in the house of the women.**

Text C

B.T. Megillah 13a (commenting on *Esther* 2:9) **And the seven maids** [fitting to give her from the king’s house] The Talmud explains: Rava said: For Esther would count the days of the week through them to keep track of which day was the sabbath. Her seven maids worked in rotation, each one assigned to a specific day of the week. Thus when “sabbath” maid arrived, Esther knew it was the sabbath.

The verse continues: **And he changed her and her maidens...** The verse implies that Hegai, the custodian of the maidens, did something special for Esther and her maids that he did not do for

the other maids. There is a dispute as to what this special favor is. Rav said: that he [Hegai] fed her Jewish [kosher] food and Shmuel said: that he fed her fatty hog bacon. And Yohanan said: [that he fed her] seeds. And similarly it says regarding Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah: *So the steward took away their food and gave them seeds.*

Text D

Ibn Ezra (a 14th century exegete living in Islamic Spain) did not hesitate to reinterpret thorny rabbinic commentaries. When it comes to Vashti's tail, for instance, Ibn Ezra softens the ridicule factor of this description by re-interpreting it metaphorically. He clarifies that "having a tail," meant that Ahashverus simply saw her as ugly.

Moses ben Isaac Halayo (another medieval commentator) expands on Ibn Ezra: a "tail" was the metaphoric justice meted out by Gabriel. In this way, both commentators soften the hostile and potentially misunderstood *midrashim* of the talmudic rabbis. In the Middle Ages, such reinterpretations were not unusual.

Zachariah ben Saruk continues the reinterpretation and remarks that God had given Vashti the idea that she was "treated as a tail" by the king since he sent the lowly eunuchs to escort her, demeaning her by making her walk behind them—like their tail.

Text E

Genesis 39:10 When she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her request to lie beside her to be with her...

Esther 3:4 When they spoke to him day after day and he did not listen to them, they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's resolve would prevail, for he had explained to them that he was a Jew.

Genesis 41:34-37 Let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers (*p'ka-deem*) over the land and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years be gathered and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine that will come upon the land of Egypt so that the land may not perish in the famine. **The plan pleased Pharaoh** and all his courtiers.

Esther 2:3-4 Let your majesty appoint officers (*p'kee-deem*) in every province of your realm. Let all the good-looking virgins be gathered at the fortress Shushan in the harem under the supervision of Hegei, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases your majesty be queen instead of Vashti. **The plan pleased the king** and he acted upon it.

Genesis 43:14 And May El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you that he may release to you your beloved brother, as well as Benjamin. As for me, **if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved.**

Esther 4:16 Go assemble the Jews who live in Shushan and fast on my behalf. Do not drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king though it is contrary to the law and **if I am to perish, then I shall perish.**

Genesis 44:34 For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not find my father grieving.

Esther 8:6 For how can I bear to see the despair that will befall my people. How can I bear to find my community destroyed?

Genesis 41:42-43 And Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand and dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He made him ride in the second chariot and they cried before him "Abreck." Then he placed him over all the land of Egypt.

Esther 6:11 So Haman took the garb and the horse and arrayed Mordecai and paraded him through the city square, and he proclaimed before him, This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!"

Esther 8:2: The king took off his ring which he had taken from Haman and gave it to Mordechai and Esther put Mordechai in charge of Haman's property.

Text F

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 13b: In those days while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh became angry...and they planned to assassinate King **Ahashverus**. The Gemara notes: Reb Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Reb Yochnan, The Holy One Blessed be He, caused a master to be angry with his servants in order to fulfill the will of a righteous man. And who was this righteous man? Joseph. As it says, and there with us was a Hebrew youth...And conversely the Holy One, Blessed Be He, caused servants to be angry with their master in order to perform a miracle for the righteous man. And who was this righteous man? Mordecai. As it is written, **and the matter became known to Mordecai.**

Text G

Psalm 22

For the Conductor on the *Ayelet Hashachar*, A song of David
My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? So far from saving me, from the words of my roar?
O my God! I call out by day and you do not answer; by night there is no respite for me.
Yet you are the holy one, enthroned upon the praise of Israel.
In You our father's trusted, they trusted and You delivered them.
To You they cried out and were rescued; in You they trusted and were not shamed.
But I am a worm and not a man, scorn of humility, despised of nations.
All who see me, deride me; they open their mouths, they wag their heads.
Reliance on God! He will deliver him! He will save him for He desires him.
Because you drew me forth from my womb, and made me secure in my mother's breasts.
I was cast upon You from birth, from my mother's womb you have been my God.

Be not aloof from me for distress is near, for there is none to help.
 Many bulls surround me, Bashan's mighty ones encircle me.
 They open their mouths against me like a tearing roaring lion.
 I am poured out like water, and all my bones become disjointed.
 My spittle is dry like baked clay, and my tongue sticks to my palate. In the dust of breath you set
 me down.
 For dogs surround me, a pack of evildoers encloses me like a lion on my hands and feet.
 I count all my bones; they look on and gloat over me.
 They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.
 But you God, be not far from me. My strength hasten to my assistance
 Deliver my soul from the sword, my only one from the grip of the dog.
 Save me from the lion's mouth as you have answered from the horns of *Reimim*
 I will proclaim Your Name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise You.
 You who fear God, praise Him. All of you, the seed of Jacob, praise Him. Be frightened of him, all
 you seed of Israel.
 For He has neither despised nor loathed the screams of the poor, nor has He concealed His face
 from him, but when he cried to Him for help He heard.
 You are the cause of my praise in the great congregation. I will fulfill my vows before those who
 fear Him.
 The humble will eat and be satisfied, those who seek God will praise Him. May your hearts be
 alive forever.
 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn back to God. All the families of nations will bow
 down before You.
 For the kingship belong to God and He rules the nations.
 They will eat the fat of the land and bow down; All who go to the dust will kneel before Him, but
 He will not revive his soul. By the seed that will serve Him the Lord will be proclaimed to the
 They will come and tell of his righteousness to the newborn nation, that which He has done.

Text H

Psalm 23

A song of David: God is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 In lush meadows He lays me down. Beside tranquil waters He leads me
 He restores my soul. He leads me on paths of justice for his Name's sake.
 Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me. Your
 rod and your staff, they comfort me.
 You prepare a table before me in full view of my enemies. You anointed my head with oil, my cup
 overflows.
 May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life,
 And I shall dwell in the house of the