

The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen

By Rabbi Bea Wyler

The following is Rabbi Wyler's imagined alternate conclusion to *Megillat Esther*:

Chapter 11

Esther recognizes her subjugation as a woman, inasmuch as she herself and her 'people' (i.e. other women) are concerned. After a period of fasting, she takes steps to change this situation. Since private dinner parties have been a successful means in the previous case, she once more issues invitations for one or two dinners in her private chambers. Her guests this time are her husband King Ahasuerus and her cousin Vizier Mordecai, the present holder of all the power in the empire. Both men are receptive to Esther's suggestions— they, too, have learned their lesson. The king again offers her, in imitation of the first case, half the empire. Esther accepts it so that from now on, women would have their own opportunity to share responsibility for the welfare of the state.

Chapter 12

Esther sends out a decree, signed by the king and herself, in all languages of all the provinces, allowing women to gather, organize themselves and stand up for their human rights— in imitation of 8.11 (but not that bloody, please!). The goal of this last decree is of course not the subjugation of men, but the removal of the subjugation of women. The book ends with Queen Esther offering amnesty for her predecessor, ex-Queen Vashti and inviting her for a festive banquet. Vashti's rehabilitation is celebrated with an empire-wide feast for the whole people, men and women alike. Esther gives Vashti the diadem as a sign of acknowledgement of the latter's achievements as spokesperson for human dignity and, in addition, honors her by appointing her as queen's personal adviser.

All this is certainly *midrashic* wishful thinking. Far be it from me to suggest such a bold emendation of the text— after all, the book of Esther has been part of the canon for a long time. But Scripture in its timelessness should speak to today's readers too, as it actually does in a fairly strong way to many people. The book of Esther bears a rich lesson, which is worthy of embrace. From a Jewish point of view, does it not teach that courageous initiative at the right moment in the right form and setting are crucial for God to eventually grant intervention? The book, however, does not speak to me only as a Jew, but also as a woman. On this count the message is not such a happy one. As Jews, we have good reasons to celebrate *Purim*, as described in 9.21-22. As women, we have no reasons to celebrate, for, following 1.22, our subjugation still stands. We are still struggling for our rights as human beings and our place in public life. And as female Jews, the Esthers of the Esther novella, does not the story present to us an unresolved dilemma? Surprisingly, that is not necessarily so! In fact, the Jewish calendar already has a commemoration day, right before the feast of *Purim*, which is called 'the Fast of Esther' (*Ta'anit Esther*). But since it is one of the 'minor' fast days of the liturgical year, its observance has largely fallen out of practice. I think that, as Jewish women, we need to reinterpret the Fast of Esther. We can give it a new meaning, as a fast of current mourning for the lasting discrimination against and subjugation of women, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Esther fasts (4.16) because she has come to terms with the danger of being a Jew who is deprived of the freedom to simply be and live like a Jew. As Jewish women, we ought to fast in our own time because, even though things have drastically changed for the better in the past thirty-four decades or so, we are still deprived of the complete freedom to simply be and live like women, the way women are: with all our peculiarities, skills, beliefs and rights.