

# Vashti's Banquet

*The "Other" Megillah*

## Introduction

In truth, Megillat Esther has precious little to say about the ill-fated Vashti.

What to do with this obstreperous wife? In adding flesh to the bare bones of the Vashti saga (and to pave the way for the virtuous new Jewish queen), the rabbis wove fanciful accounts of the ill-fated first queen's materialism, arrogance and vanity. What follows is adapted from rabbinic texts on Megillat Esther.

## The Invitation: Girls Night Out

Vashti sought to emulate her husband's example, even in the point of exhibiting treasures. She displayed six storage chambers daily to the women she had invited as guests; and she did not shrink from dressing herself in the most lavish garments of the high priests.

Because the "weak sex" is subject to sudden attacks of indisposition, the banquet was given in the halls of the palace so that the women could withdraw quickly to adjoining chambers.

The gorgeously ornamented apartments of the palace were more appealing to feminine tastes than the natural beauty of the royal gardens because "women would rather sit in a beautifully appointed room and wear grand apparel than eat sumptuous food."

Nothing interested women more than to become acquainted with the interior decoration of the palace "for women are curious to know such things." Vashti gratified their desire, showing them all of the rooms, describing everything as they viewed it: "This is the dining hall, this is the wine-room, this is the bed-chamber..."

## The Command: Boys Behaving Badly

Esther 1:10: "On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzeta, Harbona, Bigta, Abagta, Zetar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus 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 women. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him..."

*From: Midrash: Esther Rabbah, BT Megillah 12b*

Ahasuerus and his drunken companions rounded out the banquet with racy conversation. The Persians bragged about the charms of their women while the Medes bragged that none were superior to their own. The "fool" Ahasuerus spoke: 'My wife is neither a Persian nor a Median, but a Chaldean, yet she excels all women in beauty. Do you need to be convinced?' 'Yes!' shouted the company who were deep in their cups 'so that we can *properly* judge her natural charms. Send for her that she should appear naked before us,' whereupon Ahasuerus agreed to the shameless challenge.

## **The Deconstruction of Vashti or Uppity Women Finish Last**

The rabbis were clearly conflicted by Vashti's behavior. While on the one hand they could not approve of the king's humiliating demand, neither could they sanction her open defiance of her husband, which might inspire other women to assert their independence.

The rabbis solve this problem by condemning Ahasuerus (the non-Jew) as foolish, and by reproaching Vashti, the vixen, who gets her just deserts.

*Esther Rabbah, BT: Megillah 12b*

There was a reason why this interruption of the feast took place on the Sabbath. Vashti was in the habit of forcing Jewish maidens to spin and weave on the Sabbath, and to add to her cruelty, she would force them to strip naked. It was on the Sabbath, thus, that Ahasuerus made his demand, and Vashti's renowned cruelty encouraged the king to make the same demand on her.

Vashti recoiled from the king's demand, but not because she was revolted by it. She reveled in the opportunity to indulge in carnal pleasures once again, for it was exactly a week since she had given birth to a child. But God sent the angel Gabriel to disfigure her: signs of leprosy appeared on her face and other parts of her body. It was her vanity, not her integrity, that prevented the arrogant Vashti from appearing before the drunken court. To further mar her beauty, the angel Gabriel gave Vashti a tail.

### **If that was not enough....**

The death of Vashti was not undeserved. It was she who had prevented the king from allowing the Jews to rebuild their Temple. "Will you rebuild a structure," she said reproachfully, "that my ancestors destroyed?"

*How can we rehabilitate this woman who chose loss of power and public humiliation over material comfort?*