

WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Simchat Megillat Esther



The Women's League Megillah was commissioned in 2014, the initiative of then President Rita L. Wertlieb. The scroll was written and decorated by Rabbi Hannah Klebansky, one of the first women to serve as a sofer, or scribe. Rabbi Klebansky, who made aliyah from Russia as a young girl, is a member of the Rabbinical Assembly.

The scroll is a *Hamelech megillah*, meaning that the word *hamelech* (the king) is the first word of each column. The megillah's illustrations incorporate the Women's League logo, as well.

The olivewood megillah case was created by the Iranian-born Israeli artist Sara Tamir.

THE SIMCHAT MEGILLAT ESTHER materials offer a variety of learning experiences.

MIDRASHIM (From the Women's League DAY OF STUDY FOR MEGILLAT ESTHER)

In this material, the Rabbis create fanciful stories about the characters and events in the Esther story. While some midrashim might seem comical to the modern reader, the Rabbis' intentions were serious: to recast the characters as models of Jewish piety, reflecting the Rabbinic worldview and practices from a much later era.

LIFE IN THE HAREM (From the Women's League DAY OF STUDY FOR MEGILLAT ESTHER)

Esther features two strong female personalities, and by association, the harem in which they resided. Very little is known about this ancient female institution, but the Book of Esther provides a brief glimpse into some of the customs.

RETHINKING PURIM: WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS AND JEWISH TEXTS. This material focuses on the biblical text as it pertains to creating healthy, supportive relationships: developing a strong voice, cultivating a strong sense of self, striving for parity. (Reprinted, courtesy of Jewish Women International)

Section I: Megillat Esther

Manuscript use, production and illumination history

A scroll of Esther (Heb. *Megillat Ester*) is a manuscript copy of the biblical Book of Esther which tells the story of the salvation of the Jews in the Persian Empire. Today the Scroll of Esther is universally known as the Megillah, not because it is the most important of the five scrolls, but due to its immense popularity, the prominence that is given to its public reading, and the fact that it is the only one of the five biblical Megillot (Esther, Ruth, Kohelet, Eikha, Shir haShirim) that is still generally read from a parchment scroll.

Its principle liturgical role is to be read in synagogues during the evening and morning services on Purim – on the Jewish calendar, the 14th of Adar.

The Megillah must be read standing and from the scroll, not by heart. During the reading, there are four special verses, called "verses of redemption" (*pesukei ge'ulah*), which are traditionally said aloud by the congregation and then repeated by the reader. [Esther 2:5, 8:15-16, 10:3]

When chanting the four verses (Esther 9: 7-10) listing the ten sons of Haman, the custom, mentioned in the Talmud (Megillah 16b), is for the reader to chant the names in one single breath to signify that they died together. Another reason is that we want to avoid the appearance of gloating over their fate, even though it was deserved.

Beginning in the Talmudic period it became customary to write a Megillat Esther on a parchment scroll and the rules governing its production are basically the same as those for a Torah scroll.

Since the early modern period, Jews throughout the Diaspora have decorated megillot and embellished their cases. Commissioned by individuals but read publicly in the synagogue, they lay at the intersection of personal ritual and synagogue life. The cases vary in materials and the overarching aesthetics of embellished megillot are indicative of their makers' culture and aesthetics, and of the patrons who commissioned them, and of their host communities.

Professor Shalom Sabar, of the Hebrew University, one of the world's foremost specialists in manuscript illumination, describes the history of decorated Esther manuscripts in the Encyclopedia Judaica:

It is not known when and under what circumstances artistic embellishment of Esther scrolls began. The earliest extant illuminated Esther scrolls emanate from 16th-century Italy, commissioned by well-to-do Italian Jews. Cylindrical or polygonal cases were often made to house such scrolls, often provided with a crank handle to roll the parchment through a vertical slot. Cases were made of copper, tin, and wood, but fine silver and some ivory cases have survived as well.

The decoration and illustration of Esther scrolls, mostly by unknown Jewish artists, reached its height during the 17th and 18th centuries, in Italy and other countries in Europe, particularly Holland. The great demand for an illustrated megillah led the makers to produce engraved scrolls, printed from copper plates, while the text was still copied by hand, as

required by Jewish law. Some of the best-known engraved Dutch megillot were produced by the Jewish engraver Shalom Italia (1619–1664?), born and raised in Italy.

The decorative programs of Esther scrolls usually depict the Esther story in great detail, one episode after the other. The episodes usually refer directly to the text column in the center, but often include midrashic elements. The narrative scenes are often set in exquisite landscapes or contemporary buildings. Other forms of decoration include architectural elements, allegorical representations, nude putti, the signs of the Zodiac and the twelve tribes, heavenly Jerusalem, and scenes that reveal the daily life of the Jews of the time, particularly scenes related to the celebration of the festival.

Outside Italy and Holland figurative representations in megillot appear among the Ashkenazi communities in German-speaking lands: Germany, Austria, Bohemia, and Moravia. Many of the attractive megillot from these lands were produced by the scribe-artists of the so-called "Moravia School" of Hebrew illumination (for example, Aaron Wolf Herlingen of Gewitch or Meshullam Zimmel of Polna). Noteworthy are also the fine silver cases from these lands, at times engraved with the Triumph of Mordecai or other central episodes in the Esther story. Some figurative scrolls are also known from Poland and France (Alsace).

Examples of decorated megillot are extant from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, and Morocco, where they were mainly decorated with floral, architectural, or other decorative designs. Megillot from former centers of the Ottoman Empire were often housed in ornamental silver cases – megillot from Istanbul in exquisite gold-plated silver cases made in a delicate filigree technique. In other lands of Islam and the East, decorated megillot were not as common. Notable are the colorful megillot of Baghdad, which feature in large capitals along the upper border a long list with the genealogy of Mordecai (tracing him back to Abraham) and contain Haman's genealogy, upside down, going back to "wicked Esau."

The art of the illustrated scroll, which declined in the 19th century, was revived in the 20th by artists of the Bezalel School, [and] Ze'ev Raban (1890–1970) in particular, who created megillot with images showing the influence of Persian miniatures mixed with Western-Orientalist symbolic elements. Side by side with the new hand-illuminated megillot, graphic artists in the Land of Israel joined efforts in issuing colorfully decorated printed Esther scrolls, which were far less expensive and thus popular, especially in the early days of the young state. With the improvement of the conditions of life and renewed interest in Jewish tradition in the late 20th century, young artists, including women, revived the art of the hand-illuminated megillah.

Section II: Midrash Study Texts

Introduction to Midrashim on the Book of Esther

Megillat Esther is the subject of centuries of midrashic interpretation. One of the earliest sets of midrashim is found in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah 10b-17a. Megillat Esther is the only complete book interpreted in the text of the Talmud itself. Most of these ancient midrashim were composed before 200 CE, reflecting a very ancient perspective about Jewish life, and particularly attitudes about women.

Esther Rabbah (a compilation of midrashim on Esther) was compiled in the 10th century CE, but it includes many midrashim written 600 years earlier a time of despair and national longing under Roman rule.

The Rabbis created midrashim to elaborate on the biblical text and/or to deal with thorny theological issues, to rectify seeming discrepancies or inconsistencies in the narrative itself, and even to reconcile the sometimes troubling behavior of biblical heroes with the laws of the land.

The midrashim often serve a didactic function by reinterpreting, explicating, and elaborating biblical texts to derive relevant moral lessons. Every superfluous word was fair game for explication; the Rabbis used every possible linguistic tool to elucidate a text. The most minute details offered the opportunity for creative exegesis.

Over time, the Rabbis have used the tool of midrash to draw out and examine the women in our holy texts, sometimes to condemn and sometimes to rescue. Many biblical women are nameless, others voiceless, and so midrash has been used to hear them speak, to give them motives, to explain cruel fates.

The following midrashim of Megillat Esther are meant to provoke as well as amuse. They have been selected to reinforce the ways in which midrash has been used to render a text consistent with the sages' own theological views. But most especially, these midrashim are meant to open the conversation for new voices in the room, which is the very heart of the endeavor of midrash.

Esther Transformed

The early rabbis use midrash to make sense of the court-burlesque quality of the story. Esther is, after all, a part of our sacred scriptures and for the ancient rabbis it is essential that the story be recast so that the characters in the story are vigilant in upholding rabbinic values and that laws of the Torah are maintained.

Yet, nothing in the text describes Esther as a model of religious piety or modesty, so how do the rabbis “rescue” her behavior? And what are we to make of Vashti? In some ways, Vashti may even be thought praiseworthy because she refuses to obey a request she finds untoward, and by so doing, loses her throne.

Think about the story. What are some of the problems that the rabbis confront when reading this text? Some answers are:

- There is intermarriage between Esther and the king that the text never criticizes.
- Esther uses sexual allure to get what she wants.
- Esther sleeps with an uncircumcised heathen and the text does not criticize her.
- Esther never prays or mentions God’s name: in fact no one, not even Mordecai, mentions God. Even when the Jews are saved in the end, God is not mentioned.

- The issues of non-kosher food and drink and not keeping Shabbat are problematic.
- The whole book has a Hellenistic tone of raucous excess.
- The characters are silly rather than compelling, characteristic of burlesque and comedy.
- The Persian Empire was known for its tolerant policy for those living within the empire, so the story seems improbable.

The rabbis solve most of these theological and moral concerns through their fanciful and engaging Talmudic midrashim from Tractate Megillah. (Keep in mind that Esther is the only biblical book that is fully analyzed and commented on in the Talmud.) The inventive emendations from Tractate Megillah 10b-17a are a provocative and inventive story re-told, adding imaginative layers to this entertaining story of court intrigue peopled by exaggerated villains and heroes.

The rabbis' mission, to make the text reflect the Judaism that they espoused, meant "expanding" on almost every line, making the villains ridiculous and idiotic, the Jews exemplars of Torah law, faith, devotion and prayer.

Leader: Ask individuals to read these midrashim aloud, one by one, and for each midrash, to ask themselves:

- What problem in the text might have motivated the Rabbis to create this midrash?
- How does the midrash change the biblical story?

BT Megillah 12b: "on the seventh day the king's heart was merry with wine.... and Queen Vashti refused." (Esther 1:10 and 1:12)

Contrary to the text, Ahashverus kills Vashti in a drunken rage. The Talmud goes on to concur 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.

"and Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's behest...and his anger burnt within him." (Esther 1:12)

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.

BT Shabbat 53b plus a gloss of Tosefot Yeshonim: "and he was a nurse for Hadassah, she is Esther, his cousin for she had no father and mother." (Esther 2:7)

When Mordecai adopted the newborn Esther -- her mother had died in childbirth 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.

This bizarre midrash might be saying something about Mordecai's being the sole influence on Esther, nourishing her physically as well as morally -- that in mother's milk there is an irrevocable bond, that she was untouched by heathens.

BT Megillah 13a: "...and he raised Hadassah, who is Esther..." (Esther 2:7)

The name Myrtle, English for Hadassah, is connected 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.

“And when her father and mother had died, Mordechai took her as his daughter” (Esther 2:7)

Esther was not Mordechai'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'.

.... And speaking of sex, we are assured that Esther does not enjoy sex with the king.

BT Megillah 13b: “...and the bidding of Mordechai, Esther did.” (Esther 2:20) Ahashverus would force Esther to have sex, after which she would bathe and then 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 Mordechai's bed.

BT 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 feminine hero who delivers her people using her wit, daring and public position. What if Esther had not put herself forward in a public way?

BT Megillah 15a; BTalmud Sanhedrin 74b; Zohar

The rabbis comment that Esther's marriage to Mordechai should mean that engaging in extramarital relations with Ahashverus makes her forbidden for sex with her husband, but they reason that because she is not having sex with the heathen king willingly, she is still available to her husband.

BT Sanhedrin 74b “Abbaye said, ‘Esther was like the ground’”(i.e., totally passive).

In the *Zohar* (*Ra'ya mebema 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. Regardless of whether Esther is there in the flesh or not, or whether she is engaged in sex or remains passive, the rabbis tell us that Ahashverus was certainly satisfied.

BT 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.”

BT Megillah 15b “*And when the king noticed Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and the king extended the golden scepter to Esther.*” (Esther 5:2)

The rabbis posit that three angels accompanied Esther when she goes uninvited into the king's court and by so doing risks his displeasure and even death. One angel was there to hold her head since she was exhausted from her days of fasting; a second was there to 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.

Esther the “Torah True” Jew

Now that we have read the free and fanciful hand with which the rabbis enhance the text, we’ll look at one midrash in detail to see how the rabbis solve one of their pressing problems: how did Esther manage to keep Shabbat and keep kosher while she lived in the palace? For the rabbis it was essential that she did, unsupported as that notion is by the story itself. Remember, they construct a world of rabbinic Judaism from this text without apology or excuse.

In the following midrash, the rabbis provide answers to the following questions:

- In the hostile and foreign environment of the palace of the king, or the harem of the king to be more precise, how does Esther keep track of the days of the week so that she will know when to observe Shabbat? And, while we’re at it, how is she able to observe Shabbat without being detected?
- How is Esther able to eat only kosher food in this world of unrestricted food and wine?

Cleverly the rabbis look to Esther 2:9 to find the answers. Can you? Read the verse before reading their inventive reply. Can you use this verse to prove that Esther kept kosher and kept Shabbat?

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.

Here’s how in **BT Megillah 13a** the Rabbis prove that Esther observed Shabbat:

“...and the seven maids [fitting to give her from the king’s house]. 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 Hegai fed her 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.*” (This is a reference to the Book of Daniel, and their refusal to eat non kosher food.)

In answer to the first question -- how does Esther kept Shabbat -- the commentators explain: If Esther were not working one day of the week, it would have aroused suspicion that she was a Jew. She therefore assigned each maid a day of the week on which they were to serve her, so six of them thought Esther worked on their assigned day.

The maid she assigned to the seventh day was told that Esther never worked, so her being idle on that day was not considered out of the ordinary to that particular maid. (The rabbis are not troubled by the possibility that the maids might talk with each other and discuss Esther’s habits.)

As to the dispute about what Hegai’s special favor is: Rav says that Esther would receive kosher food from Hegai even at the risk of being discovered a Jew. This idea is rejected by Shmuel and Yohanan.

Section II: 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*) and 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 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 derive 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?

In many instances, the harem can be viewed as an instrument for social welfare. The king, as the

"father" 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. The king took them into his harem to protect and care for them.

Marriage was a common means of creating alliances between the ruler and the aristocracy and gentry, as well as with foreign rulers. King Solomon was reputed to have acquired hundred of wives for just this reason. Multiple wives was a primary indication of 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. 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 so 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 enough to write about.

This material was prepared by Lisa Kogen, *Education Director*.

Additional information about Purim can be found on the Women's League website, www.wlcj.org:

- Day of Study for Megillat Esther
- Vashti's Banquet: A New Women's Celebration
- The Hiddur Mitzvah Project
- Creative Judaic Arts

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