

Nir Menussi

## Royalty Becomes Her

### The Scroll of Esther as Post-Feminist Manifesto

Translated by Shelly Karzen

The Mishnah says: “He who reads the Scroll of Esther retroactively did not fulfill his obligation”.<sup>1</sup> From the standpoint of Jewish law, “retroactive reading” means reading out of order, say from end to beginning. But the founder of Chassidic movement, Rabbi Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov, offered a more novel interpretation: reading the Scroll of Esther retroactively means reading it as a historical document, a description of past events that are irrelevant to our times. A person who reads the book in this manner, not recognizing that it is eternal and relevant in our times just as much as it was in the past – did not fulfill his obligation to read the scroll!<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways to read the Scroll of Esther as relevant to our times: as an illustration of how Divine Providence operates in a world in which the Creator has hidden His face from us; as a parable on mankind’s self-idolizing and how it may lead to its downfall; or as a call to fight for what is right and just even when fate seems to be working against us. But among the many lenses through which the scroll can be read in modern eyes, one in particular lends itself so naturally to the task that it simply begs to be taken up: the lens of *feminism*.

### The Word of the Queen

The obvious details linking the Scroll of Esther to feminism are twofold: a) that it is one of the only two books in the Tanakh which bear the name of a woman (the other is the Scroll of Ruth); and b) that the woman in question effects the desired turnabout from tragedy to joy in the scroll. But what makes the connection far stronger are several expressions appearing in the introductory chapters, regarding the rebellion of Vashti. These are so reminiscent of the claims heralded by the feminist revolution in recent generations, they literally seem to have been written today.

Let us review the introductory story of the Scroll. When the Scroll opens we are introduced to the court of Ahasuerus, monarch of the Persian Empire. His court comes across as the idiomatic extravagant court of old. Ahasuerus lead a life of excessive power, arrogance and boastfulness, and to crown it he convenes a lavish feast in his palace in order to show off “the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty”.<sup>3</sup> On the seventh day of the special feast held for the residents of the capital city, Shushan, when his heart was merry from wine, Ahasuerus commands his seven chamberlains “to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was fair to look on”.<sup>4</sup> The Scroll does not

---

<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Megillah 2:1.

<sup>2</sup> Keter Shem Tov (5759 edition) addendums letter *kuf*.

<sup>3</sup> Esther 1:4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 11.

explicitly say so, but our Sages read between the lines: “in the royal crown” means donning that article of clothing exclusively.<sup>5</sup>

Vashti refuses, and her refusal is the first dramatic event in our story, the first deviation from the prevailing order of things. It’s also the point at which the scroll begins to touch upon our topic—women’s struggle for recognition and independence. We are witnessing here the revolt of an opinionated woman holding liberal views against the male establishment. Vashti, we could say, is the women’s liberation movement first whistleblower (or maybe gragger-rattler?) to reveal that something is rotten in the state of Persia, and her refusal is the trigger that propels the scroll forward.

As is typical for a power-hungry king, Vashti’s refusal enrages Ahasuerus and he goes ballistic. He consults his seven wise men, the ministers of Persia and Media as to how to respond to the queen’s rebellious act. The last of the ministers, a certain Memucan, proposes a solution, but not before he volunteers a sociological analysis of the implications of the revolt:<sup>6</sup>

Not only the king has queen Vashti wronged, but all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus. For the word of the queen will spread unto all women to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. And this day the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard the word of the queen will say the like unto all the king’s princes, and enough contempt and wrath will arise.

Memucan, who emerges as an ideologue of patriarchy, shrewdly recognizes that, as we define it, “the personal is the political”: “*Not only the king* has queen Vashti wronged, but *all* the princes and *all* the peoples... For the word of the queen *will spread unto all women...* will say the like unto *all* the king’s princes,” etc. If the revolt will not be dealt with swiftly and severely, Memucan advises, it will generate a feminist revolution throughout the kingdom, which will endanger the entire patriarchal regime. By the way, in a book in which a prominent recurring phrase is “the word of the king”, the fact that the expression “the word of the *queen*” appears here twice is noteworthy. Serving here as a code word for the revolution Vashti is threatening to spark, it provides a subtle allusion to the power of women which may subvert that of men.

The final sentences of this passage also seem to have been written especially for the feminists of our time to dissect<sup>7</sup>:

And when the decree the king shall make be published throughout all his kingdom, great though it be, *all the wives will give to their husbands honor, both to great and small...* and he sent letters into all the king’s provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that *every man should be the ruler in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people.*

The first italicized phrase clarifies that all women must honor their husbands regardless of their status, i.e., including cases in which the husband’s status is lower than the wife’s (as was the case

---

<sup>5</sup> BT Megillah 12b.

<sup>6</sup> Esther 16:18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 20:22.

with Ahasuerus, himself, who was a commoner who married the granddaughter of King Nebuchadnezzar<sup>8</sup>). This directly relates to the feminist assertion that it is not acceptable that a woman with knowledge and talent should be automatically discriminated against in relation to a man who has less talent. Instead, equal opportunity should prevail. The second italicized phrase is reminiscent of the feminist assertion that patriarchal society controls women by means of the language it uses, its “male discourse”, which stifles and silences women’s independent thinking and unique expression.

We can perceive Ahasuerus’s palace as a microcosm of patriarchy, of a “man’s world” in which woman is no more than an ornament, and which preserves its control by repressing any hint of revolt from the female ranks.

### A Trojan Horse Named Esther

Ahasuerus’ anger subsides with time, but Vashti cannot be brought back. When the king’s officials go out to find him a new wife, they are careful not to repeat the mistakes of the past. This time, they look for a woman with a personality opposite to Vashti’s: a submissive and obedient woman who will serve as model loyal wife throughout the kingdom. Interestingly, of all the women they gather, the one who finds the most favor in their eyes and is chosen to become the king’s new wife is a Jewess: Hadassah, also known as Esther.

The Esther who arrives at the royal palace initially seems to meet exactly the expectations of the Ahasuerus’ patriarchal officials: she is an obedient woman who is neither brazen nor rebellious, and she cooperates with her captors. Above all, Esther is a *quiet* woman: she makes no requests, does not insist on speaking her native language against the law, and in fact, it appears she does not even open her mouth. The first active verb ascribed to her after three passive descriptive terms (“and she was taken... and she was found to be good... and she found grace”<sup>9</sup>) in *abstaining* from speech: “And Esther did not reveal her nation and her birthplace”.<sup>10</sup> This kind of woman, the officials are confident, will pose no threat of a rebellious, feminine voice that will overturn the palace.

How is it that of all the multitudes of women throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus, the woman most suited for the patriarchal palace of Ahasuerus is a Jew? The answer is simple: it lies in Esther’s Jewish education. Esther was brought up on verses such as “The honor of the daughter of a king is completely internal”<sup>11</sup> and “Her husband’s heart safely trusts in her,”<sup>12</sup> and on the adages of the Sages “Who is a worthy woman? She who performs the will of her husband”<sup>13</sup> and “It is a man’s way to conquer, and it is not a woman’s way to conquer.”<sup>14</sup> Even though Ahasuerus is not really her husband and took her against her will, her lack of opposition stems from the ideals of humility and lowliness she was raised on, as well as on her faith in the Almighty, the belief that we should accept every measure that He measures out to us in life with gratitude.

---

<sup>8</sup> BT Megillah 10b.

<sup>9</sup> Grammatically, “and she found favor” is not a passive verb, but its meaning is passive.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 10.

<sup>11</sup> Psalms 45:14.

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 31:11.

<sup>13</sup> Tana Devei Eliyahu Raba 9.

<sup>14</sup> BT Yevamot 65:2.

As we know, however, Ahasuerus, Memucan and the rest of the palace officials had a big surprise coming to them. The quiet and obedient Jewess turned out to be nothing less than a Trojan horse, smuggling into their patriarchal sanctuary a feminine force that would subvert the order of the palace, bring about the downfall of the Chief Minister and preempt his devious plans. But the men were not the only ones in for a surprise. Esther herself must discover that within her lie powers of both faith and daring she never knew existed. At the moment of truth, when Mordecai informs her what is happening and tells her, “for if you remain silent at this time”<sup>15</sup>, a deep change overtakes Esther. She ends her silence, takes her life in her hands and makes her voice heard.

In other words, *Esther turns out to be more dangerous to the patriarchal palace than her predecessor Vashti*. We can even say that Esther is a sort of improved version of Vashti, who succeeds in accomplishing—or at least starts to succeed—where Vashti tried and failed: to refuse to accept the decrees of the king as fate, to oppose them and turn them around. The Jewish femininity personified by Esther, it turns out, cannot be summed up by the Tanakh verses or adages of our Sages about the submissiveness of the woman and her obligation to obey her husband. As her name hints, there is much more to Esther than meets the eye, and when her concealed aspects are revealed, they can revolutionize the familiar order of gender roles.

### Feminism of Chaos, Feminism of Rectification

The idea of Esther being a kind of rectified version of Vashti appears in the Sages’ commentaries on the Scroll of Esther. Our Sages interpret a verse in Isaiah as alluding to four of the Scroll’s protagonists—Haman, Mordecai, Vashti and Esther—as follows<sup>16</sup>:

“Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, and instead of the nettle shall come up the myrtle.”<sup>17</sup>

“Instead of the thorn”: Instead of the wicked Haman, who turned himself into an idol to be worshiped, as it say [regarding the idols] “and upon all *thorns*”<sup>18</sup>... “shall come up the cypress [*brosh*]”: this is Mordecai, who is called the head [*rosh*] of all the spices...

“And instead of the nettle [*sirpad*]”: Instead of the wicked Vashti, the daughter of the son of wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who burned the lining of [*saraf refidat*] the House of God... “shall come up the myrtle [*hadas*]”: this is the righteous Esther, who was called *Hadassah*...<sup>19</sup>

Read simply, this Midrash describes the two major role replacements that took place in the palace of Ahasuerus in the Scroll: wicked Queen Vashti was deposed and righteous Queen Esther sat on her throne; sometime later, the wicked Haman was hung and the righteous Mordecai took his position.

---

<sup>15</sup> Esther 4:14.

<sup>16</sup> BT Megillah 10b.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 55:13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 7:19.

<sup>19</sup> The comparison of Esther to Vashti doesn't go without saying. In the short recital we say upon completing the reading of the Scroll, the phrase "blessed be Esther" is contrasted with "cursed be *Zeresh*".

However, On a deeper level, and in light of what we said above about feminism and patriarchy, we can propose the following explanation for this Midrash: our Sages are here contrasting not only Haman with Mordecai and Vashti with Esther, but also *two sets of models of femininity and masculinity*: a negative version personified by Vashti and Haman, and positive version personified by Esther and Mordecai. The Midrash is thus offering us a view of the Scroll as a documentation, and possibly an outline, of the process by which negative masculinity and femininity are replaced with more rectified models of them. In the verse and in the Midrash, the rectification of masculinity precedes the rectification of femininity, but in the Scroll itself, the order is the opposite. In fact, it is the rectified feminine figure (Esther) who brings about the rectification of masculinity (the replacement of Haman with Mordecai).

Let us focus on the rectification of femininity. In what respect can we refer to Vashti as the personification of negative femininity and to Esther as the personification of positive femininity?

When we read the Scroll of Esther we feel a natural empathy for Vashti. What is more understandable than refusal to comply with a degrading and humiliating edict to display your beauty before a pack of drunken men? For this reason, it is at first difficult for us to identify with the idea that Vashti represents a negative form of femininity. We must, however, take note of two key factors. The first is that Vashti's feminist rebellion failed. She herself was deposed and possibly executed, and the patriarchal edicts that she protested were only exacerbated. In other words, Vashti represents a type of feminism that does not manage to achieve its goals. It does not succeed in settling into the vessels of this world. It threatens the masculine hegemony in a manner that only strengthens its negative aspects. In Kabbalistic terms, this is a feminism of *tohu* (chaos), the opposite of *tikun* (rectification), one that leads to a "breaking of the vessels" and comes to no fruition.

It is worthwhile to add the words of our Sages regarding Vashti. The Sages' exegesis of the Scroll paints a portrait of Vashti as decadent and wicked, just like Ahasuerus and Memucan. They tell us that she abused her Jewish maidservants, and that her women's feast was geared for debauchery just like that of her husband<sup>20</sup>. According to our Sages, Vashti's refusal to come to Ahasuerus's feast had nothing to do with distaste for appearing in the nude. On the contrary, it would have been an opportunity for her to demonstrate her beauty. But just at the crucial moment, she was afflicted with leprosy<sup>21</sup> (or according to another version, grew a tail; obviously, both these images merit deeper understanding). According to this depiction, Vashti is a negative model of femininity regardless of the measure of success of her rebellion.

If Vashti personifies the feminism of chaos, externalized and uncouth, in addition to which it does not even succeed, then Esther must personify a form of rectified feminism: feminism that expresses a more refined, sophisticated femininity and that succeeds in engendering lasting change. But what is this feminism and what is its secret?

---

<sup>20</sup> BT Megillah 12a-b.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, *ibid*. If Vashti represents a type of feminist uprising, then both explanations—the more common, according to which she did not want to appear in the nude, and the explanation of our Sages according to which she actually did but the leprosy prevented her from doing so—represent two approaches to modesty common to feminism: the first that opposes to objectification of a woman's body, and the second which has no objection in principle, and even supports it as part of women's liberation, opposing it only if it is accomplished with coercion.

## Antisemitism and Misogyny

Before answering this question, let us turn our attention to Memucan, the mysterious minister who initiated the dismissal of Vashti.

The Scroll does not mention Memucan after the introductory story, but our Sages reveal an amazing fact about him: Memucan, they claim, is none other than the wicked Haman. Before king Ahasuerus “promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite and advanced him and set his seat above all the ministers that were with him”<sup>22</sup>, Haman was the junior minister, Memucan, the least of the seven ministers of Persia and Media. The synthesis of these two characters explains why Ahasuerus suddenly promotes Haman for no apparent reason: he was rewarding him on his good advice to replace Vashti with Esther.

The explanation according to which Memucan is Haman sheds new light on a number of things. First, we can learn that a long time before Haman brought about his own downfall by erecting a 50 cubits high gallows for Mordecai, he sealed his fate by being the catalyst for Esther’s introduction into the royal palace. The woman who was supposed to be the insurance policy safeguarding his male hegemony, turned out to be the indictment that brought about his downfall.

Second and more interesting, identifying Haman with Memucan creates an *affinity between the antisemitism of the former and the misogyny of the latter*. On the surface, Haman’s antisemitism, directed at Mordecai, and Memucan’s misogyny, directed at Vashti, are two separate topics in the Scroll. But when we dig a bit deeper, we see a clear parallel between the two episodes: Just as Vashti rebels against the king by refusing to come to his feast, so Mordecai rebels against Haman by refusing to bow down to him. Just as Ahasuerus’ response is “his anger burned within him,”<sup>23</sup> so “Haman was filled with anger”.<sup>24</sup> And just as the response to Vashti’s uprising was a royal edict directing the men in all the countries to rule unreservedly at home, so the response to Mordecai’s uprising was a royal edict directing the nations in all the states to kill the Jews unreservedly.<sup>25</sup>

When our Sages combine the personae of Haman and Memucan, they are taking these similarities to their mutual starting point. The two hatreds, they show, stem from the same source, “the first of the nations,”<sup>26</sup> who is apparently also the first of the patriarchs, *Amalek*.

It fits. Amalek, we remember, “goes after the stragglers”<sup>27</sup>: he strikes the physically weak, those who are walking behind everyone else and who are, in this world, the most vulnerable. Women, like Jews, are the “weak sex”, the one easy to subjugate. Jews, like women, are the “least of all the nations”, the ones it is easy to persuade the king to wipe out.

Perhaps this is why the nation of Israel is in many places considered feminine in comparison to other nations. In our sources, this idea appears in the expression that *Knesset Israel*, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Esther 3:1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 1:12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 3:5.

<sup>25</sup> In both instances, the expression “every state according to its writings and every nation according to its language” repeats itself.

<sup>26</sup> Numbers 24:20.

<sup>27</sup> Deuteronomy 25:18.

Congregation of Israel is like “a she-lamb standing between seventy wolves”<sup>28</sup>. It is also expressed in the Talmudic characterization that Israel uses a lunar calendar (the moon symbolizes femininity) while most nations use a solar calendar (symbol of masculinity),<sup>29</sup> and more. In non-Jewish sources, we have Christian typology defining Judaism as “Israel of the flesh”, a feminine aspect, and Christianity as “Israel of the spirit”, a masculine aspect. Typifying Judaism as feminine engendered a known Medieval folk tale, a type of “blood libel” if you will, that Jewish men have a menstrual cycle. We can say that throughout history, Israel served in many ways as the battered wife of the West. An essential part of Christian doctrine said that Judaism must continue to exist, but as a lowly nation, in order to prove that they are no longer God’s chosen people.

In light of this affinity between misogyny and antisemitism, is it surprising that the woman who chosen to replace Vashti was a Jewess? If Judaism is considered feminine, then the Jewish woman is, in a certain respect, the quintessence of femininity. Indeed, it is not the Jewish woman Esther who provoked the great antisemitic indictment in the Scroll—on the contrary, she found favor in the eyes of all who saw her—but the Jewish man Mordecai, who was unwilling to bow before Haman (just as the person who provoked the patriarchal indictment was the non-Jewish woman, Vashti; if Judaism and the nations of the world are feminine and masculine, respectively, then the problems stem from the opposite gender within the nation: the Jewish man and the non-Jewish woman).

Our Sages went to great lengths to make Vashti a promiscuous evil-doer. Now, as if to counter-act it, they elicit within us a renewed empathy toward her, as a fellow victim of Haman’s persecution. This strengthens the idea that Vashti’s rebellion need not be altogether done away with, but rather rectified.

### **And She Touched the Head of the Scepter**

Let us return to our story: what is the difference between the *tohu* negative feminism of Vashti and the *tikun* positive feminism of Esther? How does the latter succeed where the former failed?

The answer is this: Esther’s rebellion against the masculine system in which she operates is done a measured way that does not break its vessels. On the one hand, she definitely rebels: she appears before the king “against the law”, against the rules of the royal game. But on the other hand, she does so without completely breaking those rules. She conveys to the masculine system that she does not intend to uproot its foundations and overthrow it. Instead, she intends to work within its framework. In this manner, she successfully infiltrates the male hegemony and changes it. Her approach is encapsulated in the beautiful verse, “and Esther robed herself in royalty”<sup>30</sup>. The robe of royalty has two meanings: it is both the masculine royalty by whose laws Esther plays, and her own internal royalty which for the first time begins to emerge.

The thin rope which Esther treads is expressed by her willingness to do exactly what was decreed after Vashti’s rebellion: to give honor to her husband and to speak his language, the language of the male establishment. Time and again she says, “If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if it

---

<sup>28</sup> Esther Raba 10:11.

<sup>29</sup> BT Sukkah 29:1.

<sup>30</sup> Esther 5:1.

seems good to the king”. Twice she invites him to a banquet—Ahasuerus chief hobby. But this conduct, which on the surface may appear insufferably ingratiating and compliant, allows Esther to reveal what she had always concealed: her nation and origin: “For we were sold, my nation and I”. Esther’s willingness to speak the language of the royal palace empowers her to make her voice heard and reveal her mother tongue.

More than anything else, Esther’s wise tactics are symbolically illustrated by her touching the head of Ahasuerus’s scepter the first time she enters his courtyard. The scepter is, of course, the distinct symbol of the masculine monarchy. When Esther touches its head, she simultaneously confirms the establishment that surrounds her, while taking the first step to undermine it. Her prostrating herself before the king’s feet is precisely what allows her to tread around them.

Hassidic commentaries expound upon the precise differences between the first time Ahasuerus extends his scepter to Esther,<sup>31</sup> when she comes to invite him to the feast, and the second time he does so,<sup>32</sup> when she comes to request the removal of Haman’s decree.<sup>33</sup> While the first time it is written, “and she touched the head of the scepter”, the second time it is only written “And the king extended the golden scepter to Esther”, without mention of her touching it. We learn from this that the second time, the extension of the scepter does not describe the turning of the scepter toward her, but rather, *its passing into her hands*—the transfer of the rod of kingdom from Ahasuerus to Esther. In other words, the first time, the authority is in the hands of the male king and the woman only touches its head. But the second time—which is a direct result of the first—the scepter passes from the man to the woman.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the entire Scroll can be read as the story of the transfer of the royal authority from king Ahasuerus to queen Esther. This idea is expressed in a beautiful custom, to write the scroll so that every column begins with the word *ha-melech*, “the king” (this can be easily accomplished since the word occurs dozens of times), except for the final column, which is set to open with the word *ha-malka*, “the queen”.

At its beginning, Esther’s feminism seems like the opposite of negative feminism. In other words, it seems decidedly un-feministic. But it gradually metamorphoses and is revealed to be an incomparably sophisticated version of feminism, made all the more radical by virtue of its moderation.

## Mothers and Daughters

When embarking on this course of action, Esther is following in the footsteps of her mothers, the Jewish women of the Tanakh who already before her performed small and great revolutions in the masculine they lived in, not by rebelling against it but through prudently affirming it and operating within it.

---

<sup>31</sup> Esther 5:2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 8:4.

<sup>33</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi, *Torah Or*, 93:4, beginning with *vayoshet hamelech*.

<sup>34</sup> Thus, the second time it is also written “and Esther rose and stood before the king”: the extension of the scepter brings her upright and she stands.

The first notable example is perhaps Sarah our Matriarch. Sarah was a faithful wife who did all that her husband Abraham requested of her (for example, risking her life on two separate occasions by pretending to be his sister<sup>35</sup>). However, at a decisive junction in their family's path God said squarely to Abraham, "All that Sarah will say to you, listen to her voice"<sup>36</sup>. God appointed Sarah to be the arbiter of their fate, and it was incumbent upon Abraham to nullify his will to hers.

In our times, Sarah inspired a wondrous Hassidic concept<sup>37</sup>. The famous saying of our Sages quoted above, "Who is a worthy woman? She who performs the will of her husband"<sup>38</sup>, was given the following novel Hassidic interpretation: First, instead of reading the first word *keshera*, "worthy", it is read *k'Sarah*, "like Sarah". The question thus becomes, "Who is the woman who is like Sarah"? The answer is likewise re-read, this time to mean something even more radically different: "She who *performs* [*osah*] the will of her husband" can be read as saying, "She who *makes* the will of her husband". The entire adage thus becomes: *Who is the woman who is like Sarah? She who makes—* who inspires, shapes and influences—*the will of her husband!* This turns everything on its head: while in the straightforward reading the woman is below her husband and is subject to his will, the Hassidic reading has her standing *above* her husband while his will is subjected to *her*. This explanation does not contradict the literal meaning, but rather builds an additional level of understanding upon it: by affirming the masculine authority of her husband, the wife is able to sneak into his heart, rise above him and affect his will.<sup>39</sup>

Another example is found in one of the most remarkable stories of the Bible, that of the daughters of Zelophehad.<sup>40</sup> The story details how five very intelligent women, the daughters of an enigmatic man named Zelophehad who died without leaving a male heir, bring about the re-writing of the laws of the Torah—online as it were, like a web page which updates as you're browsing it—and to the legislation of a new and revolutionary law which allows women to inherit and own a portion of land. The daughters of Zelophehad did not break the vessels or the rule of the masculine Torah world. Instead, they brought forth their revolutionary petition within its framework: "And they stood before Moses and before Elazar the Priest and before the princes and all the congregation at the door of the Tent of Meeting".<sup>41</sup> So well-argued were their case, that Moses was at a loss for words and was forced to present it before God himself, who promptly replied, "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right".

Esther is the heiress of Zelophehad's daughters in an even deeper way. The daughters' story may be said to embody the unofficial planting of the first seed of the Oral Torah (considered to be the

---

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 12:12; 20:2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 21:12.

<sup>37</sup> Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *Shechinah Beineihem*, p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Tana Devei Eliyahu Rabah 9.

<sup>39</sup> The image of Sarah hovers above the Scroll of Esther from the very first verse. The number of states over which Ahasuerus ruled, "seven and twenty and one hundred states" is identical to the number of years that Sarah lived: "And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years". This affinity is noted by our Sages, who say, "May Esther, the daughter of the daughter of Sarah who lived 127 years, come and rule over 127 states" (Breishit Rabah 58:3). By exchanging Vashti's method for Sarah's, Esther replaces a rebellious (*soreret*, written with a *samech*) woman, to a ruling (*soreret*, written with a *sin*, like Sarah) woman, inverting the decree of "every man shall be the ruler [*sorer*] in his home".

<sup>40</sup> Numbers 27:1-11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 2.

Torah's feminine side, evolving from below to above through the study of the Congregation of Israel) within the confines of the Written Torah (the Torah's masculine aspect, descended from above to below at Mount Sinai). If so, then the Scroll of Esther embodies the official sprouting of the Oral Torah above ground. The Scroll took place and was written during the Babylonian Exile, in the exact same time that the Great Assembly was established, the first generation of Sages who developed and consolidated the Oral Torah. The Talmud homiletically explains the Scroll's expression "they [the Jewish people] fulfilled and accepted" to mean "they fulfilled what they had already previously received"<sup>42</sup>: the Torah, which was coerced upon them at Mount Sinai was now accepted willingly and with their consent.

Why does this method of feminine revolution work? Is it only because it is more sophisticated or sly than the brazen, in-your-face rebelliousness of Vashti? No: if the affirmation that Sarah, the Daughters of Zelophehad and Esther gave to their masculine surroundings had been strictly lip-service, the falsehood would have been plain to see and would have foiled their plans. Their success lies in the fact that, truth be told, there's real value patriarchy. It isn't wholly evil. A balanced, stable society needs a strong element of classically masculine/paternal leadership, which knows how to establish authority, use force, relegate duties, set goals and accomplish them. Much of this can be performed by women, but even then it still needs to be inspired by men. The problem with patriarchy begins when it is not complemented by the opposite element, by a feminine/maternal dimension which balances it, renders it more flexible and attentive to the subtle shades and changing moods of reality, and generally rounds its pointy corners. Much of this can be performed by men, but still needs to be inspired by women.

The candid affirmation that positive feminism conveys towards the masculine establishment, alongside its alert criticalness of it and active efforts to change it, are the secret of its success where its negative counterpart failed.

## Two Closures

The Scroll of Esther can be seen as constructed on two concentric circles, drawn by the two decrees of Haman-Memucan in its opening chapters: the decree that husbands will rule over their wives and the decree calling for the annihilation of the Jews.

The Scroll says, "A decree written in the name of the king and sealed with the ring of the king cannot be repealed". In Hebrew, the word "ring" (*taba'at*) comes from the same root as nature (*teva*): the king's decrees seem to be etched into nature itself. Both patriarchy and antisemitism present themselves as the natural order of things. But it turns out the king can issue counter-decrees: the Jews are given permission "to gather and defend their lives", and an unbelievable reversal of fortunes takes place: "and it was overturned, and the Jews ruled over their enemies".

But what about the first decree, regarding women's subjugation to their husbands? When the Scroll ends, it appears that only the second circle receives closure, while the first remains open.

But in truth, the first circle closes also, though in a more subtle, implicit way. By becoming queen, infiltrating the palace, affecting the king's will, subverting Haman's plan and finally replacing him

---

<sup>42</sup> BT Shabbat 88a.

with Mordecai, Esther has effectively achieved what Vashti unsuccessfully set out to do in the beginning: subvert and transform the seemingly unshakable patriarchal regime. The reason this circle doesn't close with a symmetrical counter-decree is that it doesn't have to: unlike antisemitism which needs to be unequivocally fought and eradicated, the patriarchy shouldn't be overthrown, simply put in check and balanced. Wives need not cease from giving honor to their husbands; the husbands just have to give them honor back.

The twin circles of the Scroll of Esther are a reminder that the struggle of Jews for redemption and the struggle of women for redemption are intertwined. Both are rooted in Amalek, the subjugator of the weak. The commandment Purim comes to remind us of, to erase the memory of Amalek, wouldn't be fulfilled until both redemptions are achieved.