

#MeToo – Shabbat Zachor

It is so good to be back with our congregation again after my ten wonderful weeks of sabbatical! One of the things that this time away allowed for me to do was to spend Shabbat visiting different synagogues in the Boston area and beyond, and although I experienced some lovely davening and met some terrific people and picked up a number of interesting insights and ideas to bring back to our shul here in Wilmette, I always felt just a little bit homesick on those Shabbat mornings this winter - so far away from this place which is our community and my spiritual home. No one lingers over Kiddush lunch quite like we do here at BHBE, and no one celebrates happy occasions quite like we do here at BHBE, and certainly no one has a Torah processional quite like we do here at BHBE! I missed our congregation very much these last few months and am so happy to be back together again with all of you.

Over the coming weeks I hope to share various pieces of my time away – the shuls I visited, the books I read, the exciting travels I had in Australia and New Zealand – but this morning is Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat before Purim, the Shabbat when we're reminded of the story of Esther, the story of Vashti, and this year more than any other in recent memory there is quite a lot for us to think about together. So we'll come back to Zachor in just a little bit, this Shabbat of Memory that immediately precedes Purim, but first I'd like to talk about the Purim story itself and particularly to explore its opening chapter.

It all begins, as it so often does, with a party, and drinking, and a bunch of powerful men who believe themselves to be beyond reproach. In the case of the Megillah, the party is no ordinary party – it's a 180-day celebration of the glory of ancient Persia consummating in a week-long imperial banquet, and the drinking is so excessive that its only rule is (and I quote) "No restrictions!" (Esther 1:8). On the seventh day of this royal bacchanalia, when the king is "merry with wine," he orders seven eunuchs to

bring his wife, Queen Vashti, wearing her royal diadem “to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman” (Esther 1:10, Esther 1:11). Often when the story of Esther is re-told, it is said that Vashti was ordered to come dance before the king – making her seem an object of entertainment – or to come present before the king – making her seem an object of affection – when the stark truth of the Biblical text is far less generous. Vashti is simply beautiful, and her beauty - much like the 127 provinces under King Ahasuerus’ command - brings glory to him and showcases his power; the king is a man in possession of many shiny and precious objects that can be trotted out at will, and his wife is the very shiniest of them all. We notice that the text itself never indicates that Vashti is called to appear naked before the king – it is the rabbis of the midrash many centuries later who take the detail of her royal diadem to mean that she must be wearing this item alone and nothing else. And yet, clothed or not, we certainly cannot fault Vashti for being reluctant to come before a crowd of men who have been drinking without restraint for seven days straight. She refuses to obey her husband’s command, and the King is furious.

It is bad enough that Vashti is deposed of her duties, and even worse that her successor is chosen by means of a beauty contest – young virgins from across the land even given cosmetics in order to properly compete for the King’s affection - but the reason for Vashti’s removal from royal office is the feminist straw that breaks the camel’s back. King Ahaseurus is not simply hurt or angry or embarrassed by Vashti’s actions but he sees them as an affront to his power as her husband, an affront that will ultimately set the example for how all women will come to behave towards their husbands – as if they have the freedom to express their own opinions and desires, to have the temerity to say “no.” As it says in Esther 1:17-18: “For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all

Your Majesty's officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation!" Queen Vashti is ordered never again to enter the king's presence so that women will take her experience as a cautionary tale and "all wives [will] treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike" (Esther 1:20). Beware the woman who dares speak truth to power!

Perhaps you're starting to see why Vashti happens to be one of my favorite characters in all of Tanakh (Bible), a feminist hero - in my opinion - who is even willing to risk her wealth and high status in order to protect her safety and dignity, for she must be well aware of the consequences that will surely come from daring to refuse the king. But what do we make of Esther, the traditional heroine of this story, whose savvy and courage ultimately save the Jewish people from destruction albeit largely through the use of feminine wiles? To be sure, when judged by modern standards there is what to question in the choices that Esther makes in this megillah which bears her name. We might criticize her entering a contest so shallow in the first place, especially if we imagine that news of Queen Vashti's fate was made public, as it likely was to set the proper example, meaning that Esther knew exactly the kind of man over whom she was competing for the privilege of marriage. We might also wonder about Esther's secrecy when it came to matters of identity, carefully concealing her Jewish roots rather than proclaiming her faith proudly no matter the cost. Finally, Esther is - essentially - a seductress who manipulates the king by overwhelming him with her good looks and party-making skills. She is, quite literally, a trophy wife!

And yet, it is more than likely that if Esther hadn't made exactly the choices that she did in this story, the Jews would have been destroyed - standing on feminist ceremony and refusing to enter a beauty contest would have denied her any chance at the throne; revealing herself as a Jew too soon would have disqualified her as a possible match for the king. Esther used the tools that were available to her - her smarts and gamesmanship, her courage - for we remember that she was willing to risk even her very

own life in order to save the Jewish people, and yes, her beauty, to ultimately outwit the most powerful men in the land and protect the Jews from extermination. Perhaps the essential ends justified the somewhat questionable means used by Esther throughout the Purim story. Perhaps Esther and Vashti are simply two different kinds of feminist icons – one who stridently calls out wrong for what it is and the other who more quietly and diplomatically works towards right.

Some of you will know my general approach to Jewish texts that are difficult. On the one hand, it is unfair to evaluate ancient words and stories by modern values and norms, to hold the Bible accountable to the same standards of morality and decency that exist today. Shushan didn't know from gender equality or harassment or sexual consent; in the ancient world women were considered property and kings reigned supreme. If it's only in the last few months that the #MeToo Movement has even started to make inroads here in modern day America at questioning the power dynamics between men and women, certainly it is anachronistic to imagine King Ahasuerus sitting down to find his intellectual equal to be the next queen or himself being deposed after subjecting Vashti to degrading treatment. We must locate the Biblical narrative in the context of its own time rather than judging it exclusively by the ethics of our own.

And yet, I believe that we read the Bible not primarily as liturgy or history or even collective memory but rather as allegory, as a collection of stories that convey essential lessons about how we are to behave in this world, what we are to value, the kinds of relationships we are meant to aspire towards, and the ultimate purpose we are to serve as human beings during our limited lifespan. The Bible is meant to impart sacred wisdom, and so when we encounter texts that go against what we now believe to be right and just, we have an obligation to call out these cases and learn from their negative example. Shushan may not have known from gender equality or harassment or sexual consent, but it is irresponsible to

read Megillat Esther this year of all years, in the shadow of Weinstein and Wynn and Porter and so very many others, without acknowledging the tremendous damage to women contained within it. It is, as so many are, a story about misused power.

And so we arrive this morning at Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Memory which immediately precedes Purim. Zachor is so named for the command contained within its special *maftir aliyah* from the Book of Deuteronomy, “*Zachor et asher asah l’cha Amalek* – Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear” (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). Wicked Haman, arch-villain of the Purim story, is said to be a descendent of Amalek which is one of the reasons why this particular text is read on this Shabbat just before the holiday. But genealogical similarities are not the only things that connect these two awful men.

Amalek is seen as the ultimate enemy and evil-doer of Jewish history precisely because of what is recounted in the words from Deuteronomy that I just quoted. While plenty of other nations struggled with the Jews and gave fair fight, Amalek was cowardly and opportunistic and took advantage of unfair weaknesses, attacking the Jews when they were already depleted, from behind, and picking off the women and children at the back. Amalek went for the civilians, as it were, and not for the soldiers. He breached rules of law, etiquette, and morality by specifically targeting the vulnerable.

Haman, too, lacked the courage to fight the Jewish people openly and honestly but rather hid behind the protection of an easily manipulated king in order to have his way. And it is for this reason that our Torah reading for Shabbat Zachor concludes, “Therefore when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion,

you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deuteronomy 25:19). Haman and Amalek are men who misuse their authority to prey on the defenseless, as the Jews, unfortunately, are at the particular moments in which both men encounter them. But it will not always be this way, the Torah reminds us, and when we are safely ensconced in a land of our own, our enemies soundly defeated and our people finally enjoying a moment of sovereignty and triumph, we must use this newfound muscle to wipe out Amalek and all those like him. Those in positions of power have a responsibility to fight the ones who use power badly. This is the ultimate lesson of both Purim and Amalek – be sure to take the wicked ones down so they can no longer use strength as a tool of abuse.

There is, of course, a paradox in Shabbat Zachor – we are to remember to blot out the memory of Amalek, to “not forget” to make sure he is forgotten. Jewish tradition has developed a very clever way of embodying this command – we drown out the name of evil Haman with noise and gagger on Purim night, simultaneously remembering and forgetting him at the very same time. While we want to erase the reputation and influence and reach of those who violate others, and while their victims may certainly wish to forget the terrible pain that they’ve caused, we can never, ever afford to forget the actions of those who do great wrong. Memory is one of the things that keeps us working tirelessly for justice.

I look forward to seeing everyone tonight for our annual Purim Spiel, on Wednesday evening for dinner, megillah reading and other holiday festivities, and next Sunday for our much-anticipated carnival and children’s activities. The theme for Purim 2018 here at BHBE is superheroes, and I’ve heard through the grape-vine that Wonder Woman and Superman may be flying around Wilmette this week using their powers to fight evil and bring good to all the fine people of our community. As we welcome and celebrate these special visitors, I hope we’ll remember two other great heroines as well – a courageous

queen who saved her people through savvy and an outspoken woman before her time who dared to say
no.

Chag Purim Sameach – a very happy Purim!

Shabbat Shalom.