

Of Esther and Righteous Women:

Bridging Purim and Pesach

I.

As we transition from Purim to Pesach, we take note of all that connects these two holidays. First, and foremost, the critical events of the Megillah took place on Pesach, with Haman casting his lot on the thirteenth of Nissan, and Esther calling for a fast on the first days of Pesach, in a radical departure from the normal dictates of a festive Yom Tov, approaching the king, and ultimately, bringing about Haman's demise, all on Pesach itself.

Second, in a year such as the current one, where there would be a choice of observing Purim, in theory, in the first Adar, or the second Adar, or perhaps both, the conclusion of the Talmudic debate is that Purim, despite the general principle of not foregoing an opportunity to perform a mitzvah, אין מעבירין על המצוות, we delay our observance of Purim until the second month, so that we may experience these redemptive days, one from death to life, the other from slavery to liberation, in conjunction with one another, כדי לסמוך גאולה לגאולה.

Finally, and relatedly, it was the view of no less an authority than Rashi that the Talmudic mandate, "when Adar enters, we increase our joy", does not conclude with Purim, but actually continues through Pesach.

II.

And yet, perhaps there is no more substantive connection between Purim and Pesach than the defining role women played in these holidays. And, strikingly, they played this role despite having been grossly underestimated, in both cases, by the adversary of the Jewish people, in both cases.

To proceed in chronological order, let us begin with Pesach. Pharaoh, in determining that the Jewish people were a threat, first instructed the midwives, and subsequently, upon their heroic refusal, his entire nation, to kill the Jewish baby boys, and to allow the women to live. As noted by the Ramban, the intention was obvious; Pharaoh could not even conceive of a threat which might come from the Hebrew women. He thought he would simply assimilate them into the Egyptian populace.

As he quickly learned, the opposite was in fact the case. As our Sages noted long ago, the source of spiritual resilience of the Jewish people during the period of our national bondage was of course, the righteous women, those who refused to be broken, who lifted the spirits of their husbands, **בשביל נשים צדקניות נגאלו אבותינו ממצרים**. First, it was the midwives, then it was the brave sister Miriam, watching over her younger brother like a hawk, and finally, it was Pharaoh's own daughter, who brought the future savior of the Jewish people into the very palace itself.

Pharaoh overlooked the spiritual resilience and strength of the women all around him, and ultimately, paid the highest of prices.

Shifting to Purim, Megillat Esther, as we call it- not Megillat Purim, or Megillat Mordechai, or Megillat Shushan- is ultimately the story of an

orphan girl who discovers that strength within herself to trust enough in the Guardian of Israel to confront the emperor of the world's largest kingdom, and to save her people. But, what makes this all the more remarkable is that, just like Pharaoh's dismissal of the spiritual strength of the women all around him, Esther's story takes place in a similarly myopic context.

The entire first chapter of the Megillah revolves around a power struggle between Achashverosh and his wife, Vashti, who he wishes to degrade and expose to the drunken men gathered at his party. When she refuses, he is convinced by Memuchan that her act of defiance against his drunken act of deviance would translate into an empire wide defiance, with women rising up against their husbands and asserting control over their own households, **כי יצא דבר המלכה על כל הנשים להבזות בעליהן בעיניהן**, and, given this threat to male hegemony, an edict was required to establish male domestic dominance, **להיות כל איש שרר בביתו**.

Little could Achashverosh have recognized that in eliminating Vashti, he was setting the stage for the arrival of a woman who would not only assert herself in the palace, but who would redefine the policy of an entire empire.

Esther's assertiveness not only shapes the Persian empire, but halakhic practice as well. It was Esther who insisted that the Sages of her generation canonize her work, and establish the holiday of Purim, and it was her perseverance in this regard, which was ultimately responsible for the affirmative adoption of both: **ומאמר אסתר קים דברי הפורים האלה ונכתב בספר**, both the holiday, as well the canonization of her work as part of the sacred writings, Tanach.

We look forward tomorrow evening to hearing what I'm certain will be an erudite and inspiring presentation of some of these very themes from Dr. Tammy Jacobowitz, at our second annual Sara Lamm Dratch community lecture, graciously sponsored by Tamar and Yigal Gross, to provide a forum for female scholars in Judaic studies to share their learning and wisdom with the community.

III.

And yet, this theme, which is as old as our national emergence itself, of the spiritual fortitude of women, which stretches from the sands of Egypt to the Persian empire, across millenia, is something that we have been blessed to experience not only on an annual basis, but truly, all year long

The remarkable women of this community, who are responsible for so much of our growth and revitalization, just truly outdid themselves in this most recent Mishloach Manot campaign. The exquisitely beautiful Shoshanat Yaakov theme was the envy of the town, I'm happy to say, we are so deeply indebted to all of the women of this community for their dedication and devotion to all aspects of our congregational life. I continue to encourage more and more to become involved in the Sisterhood. There simply is no way to overstate its centrality to our overall mission, and you all have my personal gratitude, and that of the entire community.

IV.

In a broader sense, there is something ineffable about how this historic trait of Jewish women and their spiritual resolve, from the righteous woman of Egypt to Esther and beyond, continues to manifest itself in our own day and age.

Being part of that mesorah, daughter after mother after grandmother, woven across the generations, belonging to what the Rav referred to as the *Torat Imekha*, is something that I deeply wish for every single young girl who grows in this congregation to feel, as much as I want it for my own daughter.

Pharaoh never internalized the concept at all, he kept on insisting that religious life was to be occupied by men alone, **לכו נא הגברים ועבדו את ה' כי**, let the men go forth and worship the Almighty, he told Moshe and Aharon. Moshe's timeless response, **בבנינו ובבנותינו נלך**, that we are carried forward into the future by children of both genders, rings out across the generation.

בבנותינו נלך: we will go with our daughters.

The boundless faith of Jewish women throughout the ages is an unsurpassed legacy and a priceless heritage, a wellspring of pride and a profound responsibility.

It is a special insight, as our Sages noted, **בינה יתירה בנשים**, as Sarah's prophetic capacity surpassed even her illustrious husband, as did that of

Samson's mother, the wife of Manoach, and it is the foundation of all of our prayers, whose laws and mores were derived from the prayers of the righteous Chanah, and whose very impetus was Rebecca turning to the Almighty in her own time of distress, **ותלך לדרוש את ה'**.

It is the paradigm of joining the ranks of our faith itself, as uttered by Ruth, your nation is mine, and your God is mine also, **עמך עמי ואליקיר אלקי**, even as it is a source of deep Torah wisdom, as Deborah taught the people, and as Bruriah taught her own husband, the illustrious Rebbi Meir, about the power of redemption and repentance, **יתמו חטאים מן הארץ ורשעים עוד אינם**.

It is an unwavering devotion, which faltered not even when the panicked men constructed the Golden Calf, and a spiritual aspiration, manifested by the women who led the donations to the Mishkan, **ויבאו האנשים על הנשים**, and embodied by the daughters of Tzelafchad, **למה נגרע**, in their collective insight and sincere desire to honor their father and more deeply attach themselves to the Land of Israel by requesting their rightful inheritance.

It is an unsurpassed modesty, **ותקח הצעיף ותתכס**, and **מנשים באוהל תבורך**, even as it is a tenacious and indomitable will to provide, **ממרחק תביא לחמה**.

It is a ferocious concern for one's home, **צופיה הליכות ביתה**, even as it is a hand stretched forth in generosity, **כפה פרשה לעני וידיה שלחה לאביון**.

It is self-sacrifice at the highest level, as Rebecca said, let the curse fall upon me, my son, **עלי קללתך בני**, and Esther reaffirmed, **וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי**.

It is a promise kept, with young Miriam watching over her baby brother floating along the Nile, and it is a vision fulfilled, when Miriam the grandmother leads the women in song after the splitting of the sea.

It is, and always has been, the source of our national survival.

It is our past, it is our present, and sure as the day, it is that which singularly guarantees our future.