

Rabbi Keren Gorban

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I remember the first time I heard Debbie Friedman's "Vashti's Song." It was the summer of 2000 at Kutz Camp, the Reform Movement's high school leadership camp. Up to that point, I had been taught that Vashti was the evil queen to King Ahasuerus in the Purim story. So, I was surprised to hear a song about Vashti that didn't vilify her. Instead, Debbie Friedman portrayed her as a woman making a choice to avoid a situation that would have been uncomfortable and objectifying.

Since then I have been captivated by Vashti's treatment in the Book of Esther and in later texts. She gets a bad rap just for saying, "no" to her husband, who demanded her attendance at his men-only drinking party while she was busy hosting her own party. How dare she!

Poor Vashti gets no support from anybody. The men call for her to be banished or executed so that women across the vast Persian Empire will learn that they can't get away with objecting to their husbands' demands. Then hundreds of young women line up to take her place, effectively saying that they'll do what Vashti wouldn't and affirming the men's expectation of obedient and submissive wives. It's this sort of context—one in which men create a system to protect their status and women uphold that system to succeed in a man's world—that makes reaching a place of parity and egalitarianism so difficult.

Though a great deal has changed over the past 2,500 years or so, we nevertheless have inherited a social system that prioritizes male authority, power, and leadership (also wealth, able bodies, and light skin, among others). In too many ways to count, we all participate in upholding these priorities and this system, whether intentionally or subconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, actively or passively.

We uphold this system when dress standards disproportionately focus on women and girls. We uphold this system when we joke about "who wears the pants" in a relationship. We uphold this system when we respond to what a man says even though a woman said the same thing moments earlier. We uphold this system when we say things like "I had that experience, but it didn't bother me" or "I didn't have that experience with that person, therefore they couldn't have done it." We uphold this system when we worry that men will have to be ultra-careful with what they say and do lest it be misconstrued. And, frankly, we uphold this system when we think women act too much like men and need to be "taken down a notch," or when we think men act too much like women and need to "man up," or when we think folks who identify as genderqueer or gender non-conforming or non-binary need to pick a side and stick with it.

Too often, we treat our social system like a zero-sum game: improvement on one side means loss on the other. If Vashti wins the right to choose, men lose the power to control women. If women's salaries increase, men's salaries decrease. If women stand up against inappropriate behavior, boys can't be boys. Smashing the patriarchy means that men will have to be subordinate to women in a new system of matriarchy, right? No!

Feminism, the #MeToo movement, and more are about trying to create a system that values the good that each person says and does rather than valuing the luck of birth. It's about wanting a social structure that treats every person as being created in the image of God. It's about wanting a social structure in which we share in each other's successes and benefit from them rather than succeeding because of another's failure. It's about wanting a social structure that upholds honesty and integrity, kindness and compassion, responsibility and respect. In honor of Purim and National Women's History Month, is this really too much to ask?