

Does Vashti deserve to be a feminist icon?

In the story of Purim, Vashti is King Ahashverosh's queen. He asks her to come to him so he can show her off to his guests. She refuses, so he sacks her and makes Esther queen instead. For this action, she has been viewed as a feminist icon:

- Harriet Beecher Stowe, 19th-century American author and abolitionist, calls Vashti's action "the first stand for women's rights."

- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 19th-century American suffragist and social activist, says Vashti "added new glory to [her] day and generation...by her disobedience; for 'Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.'"

- Michelle Landsberg, contemporary Canadian Jewish feminist and social activist, not only extols Vashti but even pans Esther:

Saving the Jewish people was important, but at the same time [Esther's] whole submissive, secretive way... was the absolute archetype of 1950s womanhood. It repelled me... Vashti [on the other hand] ... had dignity. She had self-respect. She said: "I'm not going to dance for you and your pals."

So, is Vashti a feminist role model? And is Esther just another docile woman who slept her way to the top, an obedient and subservient wife whose strategy for saving Israel involved just praying and fasting, getting the king drunk and arousing his jealousy?

Let's examine first what the Bible says about Vashti:

And Vashti, the queen, made a banquet for the women in the royal palace which belonged to king Ahashverosh...

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded [his] seven eunuchs... to bring Vashti, the queen, before [him] with the royal crown, to show the people and the princes her beauty, for she was beautiful to look on.

But Queen Vashti refused to come... and the king was very angry...

And the king said to the wise men... "What shall we do to the queen, Vashti, according to law...?"

Memucan answered... in the presence of the king and the princes:

"Vashti, the queen, has wronged not only the king, but also... all the people... for [now]... women will despise their husbands when [they shall learn] that the king... commanded... the queen to be brought to his presence, but she did not come. All the ladies of Persia and Media will do

likewise... and there shall arise too much contempt and wrath... [So let] the king... command... that Vashti's position [be given to] another [woman] who is better than she. And when the king's decree... is proclaimed... all the wives shall honor their husbands..."

And the king did accordingly... [Then he ordered his officials]... to bring all the young virgins... of Shushan, the capital, to the harem... so he could [pick a queen] instead of Vashti... Mordechai... brought up Esther, his uncle's daughter, [whom he had] adopted... and [she] pleased [the king], and won his favor [and he made her queen]. [Esther 1:9-2:9]

So, the main issue was fear that women might lose respect for their husbands and refuse to obey them. Now, what does the Talmud say about Vashti?

First, who she is:

The wicked Vashti [was] the [descendant] of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar who burnt... the House of the Lord. [Meg. 10b]

(Vashti was the great-granddaughter of King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, the granddaughter of King Amel-Marduk and the daughter of King Belshazzar. After her father's murder, King Darius of Persia gave her in marriage to his son, Ahashverosh.)

Second, how beautiful she is:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world: Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther. According to the [rabbi] who says that Esther was fallow, Vashti should be inserted in place of Esther. [Meg. 15a]

Third, the details of her refusal to obey:

[The Bible says:]

On the seventh day, where the king's heart was merry with wine. [Esther 1:10]

Was then his heart not merry with wine until then?

Rav said: The seventh day was Shabbat, when Israel eat and drink. They begin with discourse on the Torah and with words of thanksgiving [to God]. But the nations of the world, the idolaters, when they eat and drink, they only begin with words of frivolity. And so it was at the feast of that wicked one. Some [guests] said, "The Median women are the most beautiful", and others said, "The Persian women are the most beautiful". So [King] Ahashverosh said to them, "The vessel that I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see her?"

They said, "Yes, but she must be naked."

... [This was] measure for measure, because the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on Shabbat...

And the queen Vashti refused. Let us see. She was immodest, as the Master said above, and both of them had an immoral purpose. Why, then, would she not come? Rabbi Yosei ben Hanina said:... She contracted

leprosy. In a Baraitha, it was taught that [the angel] Gabriel came and put [an unsightly] tail on her.

Fourth, how she belittles her husband:

[The Bible says:]

And the king was very angry. [Est. 1:12]

Why was he so enraged? Rava said: [Vashti] sent him back [the following] answer: "You [are just the] son of my father's steward! [Ahashverosh was the steward of Belshazar, father of Vashti]. My father drank wine in the presence of a thousand [see Book of Daniel, Dan. 5:1] and did not get drunk, [but you] lose your senses with [a little] wine." Straightaway, his wrath burnt within him.

Fifth, how the Jews do not wish to get involved:

[The Bible says:]

And the king said to the wise men. [Est. 1:13]

Who are the wise men? The rabbis...

[The king] said to [the rabbis]: Put [Queen Vashti] on trial for me.

They said [to themselves]: What shall we do? If we tell him to put her to death, tomorrow he will become sober again and he will ask for her from us. Shall we tell him to let her go? She will lose all her respect for royalty. So they said to him: Since the Temple was destroyed and we were exiled from our land, counsel has been taken from us and we do not know how to judge capital cases. Go to Ammon and Moab who have remained in their places...

[Meg. 12b]

What does the Midrash add about Vashti?

First, the arguments she presented to her husband the king:

-[The Bible says:]

To bring Vashti the queen before [him] with the royal crown. [Est. 1:11]

...She asked permission to wear at least as much as a girdle, like a harlot, but they would not allow her. [Her husband] said to her: "You must be naked." She said, "I will come in [even] without a crown [then]."

[He replied]: "If you do, they will say: 'She is [just] a maidservant.'"

[Esther R. 3:13]

-[The Bible says:]

But the queen, Vashti, refused. [Est. 1:12]

She remonstrated with him very forcibly, saying:

"If they consider me beautiful, they will want to enjoy me themselves and kill you; and if they consider me plain, I shall bring disgrace on you."

But he was blind to her hints and insensitive to her slings.

She then sent [another] message to him: “You used to be [just] the stable-boy of my father's house, and you were used to bringing naked harlots, and now that you have ascended the throne you have not abandoned your evil habits.”

He was still blind to her hints and insensitive to her slings.

She then sent [a third] message to him: “Even those condemned by my forefather's house were not punished naked, as it says:

Then these men [Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah] were bound in their cloaks, their pants, [their robes,] etc. [before being thrown in the fiery furnace.] [Dan. 3:21]”...

[Esther R. 3:14]

Second, how much the king loved her:

Rabbi Yochanan said: All the years from the time when Vashti was killed till Esther became queen, the wrath of Ahashverosh did not subside...

When did it subside? When Haman was hanged. [Because Haman, who was none other than Memucan, [Meg. 12b] had ordered Vashti's death and the king was mourning for her.]

[Esther R. 3:15]

Third, how little the king thought of the Jews:

-[The Bible says:]

What shall we do... according to law? [Est. 1:15]

Rabbi Yitzhaq said: [To think that] that swine [Vashti] is treated according to law, and a holy nation [such as Israel] not according to law, but with cruelty! [Ahashverosh condemned all the Jews to destruction without bothering with any laws.] [Esther R. 4:5]

Fourth, what a fool the king was in thinking he can control women:

-[The Bible says:]

And he sent letters to all the king's provinces... that every man should rule in his own house, and that it should be proclaimed according to the language of every people. [Est. 1:22]

Rabbi Huna said: Ahashverosh was utterly devoid of sense. [In decreeing that every man should rule in his own house, an utter impossibility.] If a man wants to eat lentils and his wife wants to eat beans, can he force her? Surely she does as she likes.

Rabbi Pinchas said: And not only that, but he made himself a laughingstock. If a Median marries a Persian woman, is she to speak Median? If a Persian marries a Median woman, is she to speak Persian? [Of course not! The man will learn to speak her language.] [Esther R. 4:12]

Fifth, the bad effect of drunkenness:

-Wine separated Ahashverosh from Vashti... , as it is said:

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine... [Est. 1:10]

The result of that was that he became enraged with her and killed her.
[Esther R. 5:1]

-[Ahashverosh] gave the order and they brought in [Vashti's] head on a platter. [Esther R. 4:11]

Sixth, that the king later recognized that Vashti was right:

[The Bible says:]

[King Ahashverosh...] remembered Vashti [and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.] [Est. 2:1]

To wit, [he remembered] that he ordered her to come before him naked, that she refused, that he had been enraged with her, and that he killed her. Later he began to feel remorse, because he realized that she had acted properly...

And finally, that God punished Vashti for her treatment of the Jews:

[If Vashti acted properly] why did she suffer this fate? Because she would not allow Ahashverosh to give permission for the building of the Holy Temple. She said to him: "Do you seek to rebuild what my ancestors destroyed?" [Esther R. 5:2]

So, we learn from all this that Vashti was the great-granddaughter of the king who destroyed the First Temple, that she was very beautiful and intelligent, that she mistreated Jews, and that she prevailed on the king not to allow the Temple to be rebuilt. For this, tradition considers her an evil person. But nowhere does it say she was wrong in not obeying the king. We can conclude, then, that tradition considers it possible to be both evil and a feminist icon.

Chag sameach.