



It happened in the days of Ahasuerus—that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. In those days, when King Ahasuerus occupied the royal throne in the fortress Shushan, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all the officials and courtiers—the administration of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the provinces in his service. For no fewer than a hundred and eighty days he displayed the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty. At the end of this period, the king gave a banquet for seven days in the court of the king's palace garden for all the people who lived in the fortress Shushan, high and low alike. [There were hangings of] white cotton and blue wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and purple wool to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl, and mosaics. Royal wine was served in abundance, as befits a king, in golden beakers, beakers of varied design. And the rule for the drinking was, “No restrictions!” For the king had given orders to every palace steward to comply with each man's wishes. In addition, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women, in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. (For it was the royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent. His closest advisers were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven ministers of Persia and Media who had access to the royal presence and occupied the first place in the kingdom.) “What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?”

Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers, “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahashuerus. For the Queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahashuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the women of Persia and Medea, 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!

“If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Medea, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahashuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she. Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm, vast though it is; and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike.” Some time afterward, when the anger of King Ahashuerus subsided, he thought of Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

(Esther Chapter 1)

Questions:

1. What do we learn about Vashti from the text? What questions arise about her from what *isn't* in the text?
2. How do you imagine the conversation at the women’s party before, and after Vashti was asked to appear?
3. How do you interpret Vashti’s action?
4. Is Vashti’s punishment “fitting” to her “crime”?
5. Who exercises power in this piece of the story, and how is that power wielded?

****Vashti:** “beautiful” in Farsi/Persian

Classical Midrash

ALSO VASHTI MADE A WOMEN’S PARTY IN THE ROYAL PALACE THAT BELONGED TO KING AHASHUERUS The Gemara questions why she held the feast in the royal house, a place of men, rather than in the women’s house where it should have been. Rava said in response: The two of them had sinful intentions. Ahasuerus wished to fornicate with the women, and Vashti wished to fornicate with the men. This explains the folk saying that people say: He with pumpkins and his wife with zucchinis, indicating that often a man and his wife engage in similar actions. *-Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 12a-b*

ALSO VASHTI MADE A WOMEN’S PARTY she fed them kinds of soup. Rabbi Yitzhak said: She fed them kinds of sweets. **IN THE ROYAL PALACE:** she situated them in spacious rooms because a woman’s way is to cause damage. Or: **IN THE ROYAL PALACE** – she situated them in decorated houses, as Rabbi Avun said: A

woman prefers decorated houses and decorated garments more than eating fatted calves. Or: **IN THE ROYAL PALACE** – she situated them in her reception hall, saying that if the husband of one of them would seek to rebel, his wife would be inside and he would not rebel. - *Esther Rabbah 3:10*

TO BRING VASHTI THE QUEEN BEFORE THE KING WITH THE CROWN ROYAL (Esther 1:11) . . . when the other nations eat and drink, they turn to lewdness. So here, one said, “The Median women are more beautiful,” and the other said, “The Persian women are more beautiful.” Said that fool {Ahasuerus} to them: “The vessel which I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Would you like to see it?” They replied, “Yes, but she must be naked.” “Very well,” he said to them, “let her be naked.” R. Phinehas and R. Hama b. Guria in the name of Rab said: She asked permission to wear at least as much as a girdle, like a harlot, but they would not allow her. He said to her: “It must be naked.” She said, “I will come in without a crown.” [He said]: “If so, they will say, ‘She is a maidservant.’” Then she [a maidservant] might put on royal garments and enter? R. Huna said: A subject must not put on royal garments.¹

Esther Rabba 3:13

BUT VASHTI REFUSED... AND THE KING WAS ANGRY, HIS FURY

BURNED IN HIM Vashti sent and said to him things that upset him. She said to him: ‘If they consider me beautiful, they will set their sights on taking advantage of me and will kill you. If they consider me ugly, you will be demeaned because of me.’ She alluded, but he did not grasp the allusions; she provoked him, but he was not provoked. She sent and said to him: ‘Weren’t you the stable boy of my father’s house, and you were accustomed to bringing naked prostitutes before you, and now that you have ascended to the throne, you have not abandoned your corruption.’ She alluded, but he did not grasp the allusions; she provoked him, but he was not provoked. She sent and she said: ‘Even the opposition to my father’s house was not judged naked;

- *Esther Rabbah 3:14*

BUT THE QUEEN VASHTI REFUSED TO COME (Esther 1:12). The Gemara asks: Since she was immodest, as the Master said above: The two of them had sinful intentions, what is the reason that she did not come? Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina said: This teaches that she broke out in leprosy, and therefore she was embarrassed to expose herself publicly. An alternative reason for her embarrassment was taught in a *baraita*: The angel Gabriel came and fashioned her a tail.
-*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 12a-b*

THE KING WAS VERY ANGRY AND HIS FURY BURNED WITHIN HIM

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: At that moment, The Holy One blessed be God said to the angel appointed over fury: “Descend and blow wind into his belly, and fan his embers, and cast sulfur into his furnace!” Rabbi Yoḥanan said: All those years, from the moment that Vashti was killed until Esther entered, the fury of Aḥashverosh did not abate.

...When did his fury abate? When Haman was impaled; that is what is written: **“They hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai, and the King’s fury abated.”**
- *Esther Rabbah 3:15*

He [Memukhan] said to him: ‘My master the king, let the word emerge from your mouth, and I will bring in her head in to you on a platter.’ “And let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be repealed...”

- *Esther Rabbah 4:9*

Ahasuerus said to [his wise advisers]: Judge [Vashti] for me. The Sages said in their hearts: What should we do? If we say to him: Kill her, tomorrow he will become sober and then come and demand her from us. If we say to him: Let her be, she has scorned royalty, and that cannot be tolerated. Consequently, they decided not to judge the matter, and they said to him as follows: From the day that the Temple was destroyed and we have been exiled from our land, counsel and insight have been removed from us, and we do not know how to judge capital cases, as they are exceptionally difficult.

-*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 12b*

EVERY MAN SHOULD WIELD AUTHORITY IN HIS HOME This is not the way of the world: if a man wants to eat lentils, and his wife desires peas, he cannot force his will upon her. Rather, she acts as she wishes. Similarly, Ahasuerus acted inappropriately when he attempted to compel Vashti to obey him.

- *Esther Rabbah 4:12*

Contemporary Midrash

Excerpts from Vashti (~1894)

...all waiting stood the chamberlains

To hear the Queen’s reply.

They saw her cheek grow deathly pale,

But light flash’d to her eye:

“Go, tell the King,” she proudly said,

“That I am Persia’s Queen,

And by his crowds of merry men

I never will be seen.

“I’ll take the crown from off my head

And tread it ‘neath my feet,

Before their rude and careless gaze
 My shrinking eyes shall meet.
 "A queen unveil'd before the crowd!—
 Upon each lip my name!—
 Why, Persia's women all, would blush
 And weep for Vashti's shame!
 "Go back!" she cried, and waved her hand,
 And grief was in her eye:
 "Go, tell the King," she sadly said,
 "That I would rather die."

**

She heard again the King's command,
 And left her high estate;
 Strong in her earnest womanhood,
 She calmly met her fate,
 And left the palace of the King,
 Proud of her spotless name—
 A woman who could bend to grief,
 But would not bow to shame.

[Francine E.W. Harper](#) (1825-1911)



[Vashti's decision was] a first stand for woman's rights....we shall stand amazed that there was a woman found at the head of the Persian empire that dared to disobey the command even of a drunken monarch.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bible Heroines (1878)

That every living soul has an inherent right to control its life and activities, and that woman equally with man should enjoy this opportunity, had not dawned upon the consciousness of the men of the times of Ahasuerus.

Vashti stands out a sublime representative of self-centred womanhood. Rising to the heights of self-consciousness and of self-respect, she takes her soul into her own keeping, and though her position both as wife and as queen are jeopardized, she is true to the Divine aspirations of her nature.

- *Lucinda B. Chandler, The Woman's Bible, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1895)*

If Vashti were not punished, her decision could be the start of a major revolution. Other women might look to her as their model; her example would then empower them to rebel against the domination of their husbands. She was cast off because was an enormous threat to the patriarchal status quo....

Vashti "wins" by losing. She triumphs over patriarchal domination and control.

Alice L. Laffrey, An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective (1988)

Although Vashti and Esther never meet, the relationship between them is integral to understanding the events of the Book of Esther. Vashti disappears by the end of the first chapter, but she casts a long shadow over the rest of the book.

As we encounter Vashti in chapter one, we learn the following about her: She is beautiful and headstrong. She throws a good party. She refuses to have her appearances before the king regulated solely by his desires. For this last offense, Vashti pays dearly, losing her crown and incurring perpetual banishment from the king's presence. At the close of chapter one, it is clear that a woman in Ahasuerus's court would do well to be dutiful and to come before the king as he commands. The essentiality of female obedience is further confirmed by the final verse of the chapter in which a missive is sent to all of Ahasuerus's subjects reminding them in no uncertain terms that "every man must rule in his household."

By contrast, Esther is presented ... as the model of docility, an exact antidote to Vashti...she was chosen to be queen since she represented the antithesis of Vashti's persona. Esther's position, her identity and quite possibly her life are all closely tied to her obedience to the king. In this moment of fate, Esther looks into her mirror and discovers that she does not look quite so different from Vashti after all....like Vashti, she will appear before the king only when she decides that the time is right—in this case after three days of fasting. Instead of following Mordechai's suggestion and simply making her petition, she will throw a series of parties as Vashti did. In order to succeed, Esther realizes that she must take on aspects of the repudiated former queen.

Of course, we do not actually know why Vashti refused to appear before the King...In any event, Vashti's disobedience brings her career to an abrupt end and her fate is quite deliberately meant to serve as an object lesson to women everywhere. As Esther marshals her strength to save her nation, she must revisit the experiences of her shunned predecessor and learn from them. Esther is more calculated, more subtle, (more divinely inspired) and ultimately far more successful than Vashti. Yet, in order to triumph, Esther must confront the image of Vashti and incorporate (or perhaps discover) the attributes of Vashti in herself.

- Wendy Amsellem, *Vashti and Esther: A Feminist Perspective* (2010)



When we unite Esther who ends up as a powerful queen with Vashti who by the end of the story is absent and therefore powerless, we can begin to grasp the necessity of balancing the need to exercise power with the need to share it. -Rabbi Tamara Cohen

Vashti/Esther Flag, designed to wave during reading of Megillah, bells attached. Produced by the Ma'yan Women's Project, JCC of Manhattan.