

RETHINKING purim

WOMEN, RELATIONSHIPS
& JEWISH TEXTS

jwi

Rethinking Purim:

Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts

a project of



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Shalom Colleagues and Friends,

On behalf of the JWI Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community we are pleased to re-issue this wonderful resource, ***Rethinking Purim: Women, Relationships and Jewish Texts***. The guide is designed to spark new conversations about iconic relationships by taking a fresh look at old texts. It combines respectful readings of classic texts with provocative and perceptive insights, questions and ideas that can help shape healthier relationships. We hope it will be warmly received and widely used throughout the Jewish community.

We are grateful to our many organizational partners for their assistance and support in distributing this resource in preparation for the observance of Purim. We deeply appreciate the work of the entire Clergy Task Force and want to especially acknowledge Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, project manager and co-editor of this guide. We also thank our Task Force members Rabbi Ben Greenberg, Rabbi Ari Lorge, Rabbi Nicole Roberts, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin and Cantor Deborah Katchko-Grey for their participation in this project.

Please visit jwi.org/clergy to learn more about the important work of the Task Force. We welcome your reactions to this resource, and hope you will use it in many settings.

With best wishes for a Purim that combines levity and *limmud* (study),



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The Goal: Conversations about Relationships

Jewish women today are making a new kind of ‘noise’ on this noisy holiday by using it as a time to speak out against abusive relationships. In this guide, we aim to go a step further: We ask what Purim can teach us about *healthy* relationships. We focus mostly on the intertwined stories of Esther and Vashti to help us learn more about what such relationships can look like in the 21st century.

Based on our reading of *Megillat Esther*, JWI’s Clergy Task Force chose what we consider to be three ingredients for healthy intimate relationships that nevertheless require a fair amount of fine-tuning as they unfold over time.

- VOICE
- STRENGTH
- POWER

Although the topic of healthy relationships is a serious one, we hope that, in the spirit of Purim, you’ll find time to throw a simple costume together, grab a *grogger*, and head for a nearby community whose topsy-turvy reality is completely intentional, and short-lived.

Hag Purim Sameach,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum" with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum on behalf of JWI’s Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community

FAQs and Facilitator Tips

Q: How can this guide be used?

A: Our dream is for the guide to be used as a part of Purim discussions, in homes, on campuses, in synagogues – wherever and whenever people gather together to share the holiday. Invite a group of friends for a festive Purim meal that includes guided conversations about relationships, in addition to *hamentashen* and delicious food! Incorporate discussions in your book clubs, synagogue groups, or as topics for informal *dv'ar torahs* or rabbis' sermons. On the Fast of Esther (the day before Purim) use the conversations in the guide to reflect on the relationships in your life.

Q: Why doesn't the guide follow the order of the story in the *megillah*?

A: We deliberately took a thematic approach to the story instead of a sequential approach.

Q: Is this guide for women only?

A: No, men are often part of the equation of a healthy relationship, and we hope they'll join the conversation!

Q: What is the recommended amount of time for the program?

A: Forty-five minutes to an hour will allow you to introduce the guide, read one text and commentary, and begin a conversation. An hour to 1 ½ hours would allow you to select readings from each of the three themes and have substantial conversations about each of them. If the group is really engaged, you can always plan to continue the discussion at a later date.

Q: What if the group would like to read the full Hebrew texts?

A: This guide is designed to be accessible to everyone. The first line of every text is written in Hebrew, followed by the full English text. The full texts in Hebrew can be found in PDF form at jwi.org/clergy.

Q: What needs to be done before the discussion takes place?

A: Simply assign one person the responsibility to read the entire guide and to select the texts and commentaries that will be used for discussion. Alternatively, a more informal, free-flowing discussion may be fitting depending on the nature of the group. Either way, make sure each participant has a guide to follow.

Q: What is the format for the program?

A: Once everyone is seated, the 'leader' should quickly recap the story of Purim, explain the goals of the program, the themes that will be discussed, and, briefly, some reasons for sharing this resource. Participants may be asked to think of the name of someone in whose honor or memory they want to devote this study. Ask for volunteers to read the text and the commentary out loud. Use the accompanying prompts to begin the conversation and encourage everyone to participate. If a prompt doesn't lead to a vibrant conversation, move on to the next.

Q: Are there guides like this one for other holidays?

A: Yes, the "Rethinking" series also includes guides for Shavuot, Sukkot and Shabbat. Please contact Deborah Rosenbloom with any questions or feedback at drosenbloom@jwi.org.

Theme: Voice

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapter 1:12

יב ותמאן המלכה ושתי לבוא בדבר המלך אשר ביד הסריסים ויקצף המלך מאד ונתמתו בערה בו:

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command...

Commentary by Rabbi Ben Greenberg

In the story of Purim we encounter two powerful women, Vashti and Esther. Compared and contrasted to each other throughout the ages, in traditional Jewish thought Esther is lifted up as an exemplar of good intention and behavior. Her voice is seen as heroic, rightfully so. Vashti, however, is refracted through our classical texts as someone who used her position and her voice for nefarious purposes. The Talmud, for instance, inserts additional layers of context into the story to demonstrate Vashti's evil intent (Megillah 12b).

But instead of comparing the wickedness of Vashti to the goodness of Esther, let us amplify each of their voices as unique and independent responses to their challenging circumstances. Vashti, faced with the prospect of a humiliating moment of exposure, used her voice to say no. Affirming her own dignity, she sacrificed her position, her privilege, and her power. Esther, who sensed at the beginning of her reign how fragile her hold on power really was, wrestled at first with the choice to lift up her voice. Ultimately, she chose to use it, in her own way.

Each of us will face times in our lives when we must decide how to use our voice in our relationships. Do we assert ourselves? Do we accommodate the other? Do we attempt to strike a balance between bold assertiveness and careful diplomacy? Each way is an authentic expression of who we are in that moment. As free agents, we must choose the voice that has the most integrity for us at that time. We need not use each other's decisions as foils for our own decisions. We can lift each other up by respecting the individual ways we each use our own voice.

Rabbi Ben Greenberg is the director of adult engagement at Central Synagogue in New York City. He has worked at UJA-Federation of New York, as a congregational rabbi in Colorado, and as the campus rabbi at Harvard Hillel. He lives with his family in the Bronx.

Conversations

1. Would you be willing to describe a time when you felt that your most authentic voice was (or was not) heard by your partner?
2. Is it difficult for you to strike a balance, in Rabbi Greenberg's words, "between bold assertiveness and careful diplomacy" in your most intimate relationships? If so, what obstacles keep you from finding that balance?
3. Have you personally had a 'Vashti experience', sacrificing your position, privilege, and power in order to affirm your own dignity? Have you had an 'Esther experience'?

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapter 4: 11 – 16

יֵאָדָעְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְעַם־מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹדְעִים אֲשֶׁר כָּל־אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יָבֹא־אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ . . .

11 All the king's courtiers and the people... know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him – that he be put to death....

Commentary by Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum

It seems a bit strange: in megillat Esther [the scroll of Esther], Esther does not speak until near the end of Chapter Four, almost halfway through the story. The scene unfolds this way: her cousin Mordecai has been pacing desperately in sackcloth outside the palace; Esther becomes agitated on hearing this news but her response is to dispatch him some different clothes, not to find out for whom he is mourning. When she learns that he has refused the clothes, she sends one of her staff back to him to find out why. The servant returns to her with a copy of Haman's decree for the annihilation of the Jews and Mordecai's plea: Esther must go to the king and plead with him for her people. At this point Esther speaks her first words in the megillah: "Everyone knows that, on pain of death, no one may enter the king's presence without being summoned. Only if the king extends the golden scepter may such a person live, and I myself have not been summoned for the past thirty days."

We can well understand her reluctance, even passivity, in the face of great danger. Surely Esther knows what has happened to her predecessor Vashti for using her voice to contradict the king. Yet five verses later Esther speaks again: "Assemble all the Jews in Shushan and fast on my behalf; then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law – and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" What brings about such a dramatic change of heart? Between her first and second reactions, Mordecai sends her a strongly-worded and rather puzzling message: "Do not imagine that you, among all the Jews, will escape with your life by living in the palace. If you remain silent at a time like this, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. Perhaps you have attained royalty for just such a time as this."

The megillah is silent about how Esther suddenly finds such enormous courage; so, too, are the texts of the midrash, which often fill in the Bible's gaps and silences. One of them, however, imagines Esther praying at the end of her three-day fast, just before approaching the king: "You, O Father of orphans, stand at the right hand of this orphan, who trusts in Your compassion. May this man have mercy on me, for I fear him. Abase him before me, for You abase the proud." (Esther Rabbah 8:7) Maybe this is how it always is for someone who knows she's not in a healthy place: after the passivity comes the leap of courage, followed by fear, followed by naming the fear, followed by more courage. Steadier courage.

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum is the project manager and co-editor of JWI's holiday guides written by its Clergy Task Force. She served as a congregational rabbi in Princeton, NJ before emigrating in 2013 to Israel, where she has been helping to build up Women Wage Peace, a grassroots movement of tens of thousands of Israeli women.

Conversations

1. Does any aspect of this part of Esther's story feel familiar to you?
2. Think about the experience of not responding fully to someone close to you whose suffering was as obvious as Mordecai dressing in sackcloth. What held you back? Would you handle the situation differently now?
3. Has anyone ever told you a modern equivalent of "Perhaps you have attained royalty for just such time as this"? What was your reaction?

Theme: STRENGTH

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapter 1:17

יִזְכֹּרְנוּ דְבַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל-כָּל-הַנָּשִׁים לְהַבְזוֹת בְּעֲלֵיהֶן בְּעִינֵיהֶן בְּאַמְרָם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ אָמַר לְהַבִּיא
אֶת-וְשֵׁתֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ לְפָנָיו וְלֹא-בָאָה:

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.

Commentary by Rabbi Ari Lorge

Megillat Esther begins with the curious story of the banishment of the prior queen, Vashti. Her drunken husband, King Ahasuerus, orders Vashti to come before him and his court wearing the royal diadem so that he can show off her beauty. Our tradition understands this to mean that she was to come wearing only the crown. Regardless, in this moment, Vashti chooses to say no. And this is the act for which she is condemned.

Vashti's story captures the theme of strength: it is exactly the idea of female strength that the King and all his advisors fear. "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." If the queen of the Persian empire can refuse the King's whims and demands, what will stop other women from acting on their own needs, wants, and desires rather than those of their husbands or fathers? The ability of Vashti to empower other women in the kingdom through her attempt to gain autonomy is given as the reason why she must be banished. The strength she has found is dangerous precisely because it might inspire other women to find and use their own; it is seen as a challenge to the status quo. In the end, the strength of women is repressed: the men are terrified to think what could happen if the women in their kingdom are free to act for themselves.

We may believe that we've come a long way from Shushan, but have we? Aren't many of our current debates still centered on the same fear of female strength and empowerment? What will happen if women have the right to choose for themselves whether or not to have an abortion, access birth control, or refuse a sexual encounter? Vashti, finding within herself the strength to say 'no' to her husband and king becomes a casualty on the road to empowerment. Her banishment leaves us with the question, what kind of heroism can we expect from the next queen, likely chosen for her more subservient nature?

Rabbi Ari Lorge, cofounder of Reyut: The Jewish Campaign for Healthy Relationships with his twin sister Sari Lipsett, currently serves New York City's Central Synagogue as associate rabbi. He co-chairs JWI's Clergy Task Force with Rabbi Marla Hornsten.

Conversations

1. Have you ever had to say no in a relationship about a boundary that was crossed?
2. Are there other places in today's world where you see the issues mentioned above at play?
3. The megillah assumes a world where women cannot say 'no'. In fact, it assumes a world where women are not asked at all. How can we create relationships in which each person has a voice?

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapter 7:1 – 3

א וַיָּבֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן לְשִׁתּוֹת עִם־אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה

1 So the king and Haman came to feast with Esther the queen. 2 And the king said again to Esther on the second day at the wine banquet, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. What is your request? It shall be fulfilled, even to half of the kingdom." 3 Then Esther the queen answered, saying, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life and the life of my people be given by my asking and entreating."

Commentary by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin

The Kotzker Rebbe once asked an honored visitor: "Why was humankind created? Why are we humans here on earth?" The visitor replied: "Each person is created to work on their spirit, to repair their soul." "No," railed the Kotzker. "That's selfish idolatry. That's not why G-d put us here on this earth. We were created to keep the heavens aloft."

Our lives, the Kotzker teaches us, are not about ourselves alone. We must engage in the struggles and injustices of the world. We keep the heavens aloft by our deeds of caring and goodness. Esther grew to realize this, to see that the world around her would collapse if she did not do her part to hold it up. She saw that she grew stronger by defending others and that she, herself, would be saved only by saving the world around her. To hold up the heavens for others is to hold up the heavens for ourselves.

This teaching about our purpose on earth is captured in Proverbs 10:25: "The righteous are the pillars of the world." This does not mean we will never make mistakes, never shirk our duty and never falter. We all have our moments of fear and weakness. Though Proverbs 10:30 promises, "The righteous of the world never stumble," Rashi, the medieval French commentator, offers a comforting clarification: "The righteous may stumble, but when they do, they don't stay down. They get right back up again."

And in that momentary lapse, the world will not crumble, because just as we bore the weight of the heavens for others, others are now holding the heavens aloft for us.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin founded the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network and the Baltimore Orchard Project, which both grow and distribute food to the needy. Her publications include *The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life Cycle Events* and *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: a Jewish Spiritual Companion for In- fertility and Pregnancy Loss*. She is a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force and served as a consultant to COEJL, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. She received her ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Conversations

1. Can you share a personal experience of using your strength to hold the heavens aloft in an intimate relationship, and of having the heavens held aloft for you?
2. When you stumble, who supports you, emotionally and spiritually?
3. How do you get perspective in moments of hardship so that you come to feel that 'this too shall pass?'

Theme: POWER

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapters 8:9,11; 9: 29-30

ט וַיִּקְרְאוּ סֹפְרֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּעַת־הַהִיא ...

כט וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בְּתֹאבֵי־חַיִל וּמִרְדְּכָי הַיְהוּדִי אֶת־כָּל־תִּקְוָהּ לְקַיֵּם אֶת אַגְרַת הַפּוּרִים הַזֹּאת ...

8:9, 11 *So the King's scribes were summoned... and letters were written at Mordecai's dictation... to this effect: the King has permitted the Jews of every city to assemble and fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force together with women and children, and plunder their possessions.*

9:29-30 *Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew. Dispatches were sent to all the Jews... with words of peace and truth.*

Commentary by Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray

In Chapter 8 of the megillah, King Achashverosh gives permission to the Jews to “fight for their lives” if they are attacked. It also gives them permission to “destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force together with women and children, and plunder their possessions.” This harsh decree is dictated to the King's scribes by Mordecai and then broadcast through all 127 provinces of the empire. In the next chapter, a new letter is sent out, this time written by Esther, containing “words of peace and truth.”

Looking at the second line of the Hebrew (above) from the megillah, we see that the first letter [taf] of the first word, tichtav – “and she wrote” – is larger than the others. Some of our sages explained that, just as taf is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet so the story of Esther is the last of the miracles included in the Bible; thus the taf should be emphasized. But this is not the last mention of Esther in the story nor is it the last place where the letter taf is used to begin a word in the megillah.

Perhaps it is time to offer a different interpretation, one that emphasizes the power of what Esther' wrote. In an intimate relationship, physical violence is never the answer, yet we all know that words can be used like weapons – they may uplift but also destroy, bring us hope or crush our spirits. It can be difficult to speak truthful words in ways that maintain peace, especially during a fight or time of great stress. Let us strive to be like Esther in choosing words of “peace and truth,” accepting that relationships need both, in delicate balance, in order to flourish.

Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray, a fourth-generation cantor, serves Temple Shearith Israel in Ridgefield, CT. She is an international vice president of cantors for Women of the Wall, the founder of the Women Cantors' Network in 1982, and a member of JWI's Clergy Task Force.

Conversations

1. Generally speaking, do you personally tend to use more words of truth or of peace at home? How about your intimate partner?
2. Some commentators have claimed that “peace and truth” is really about “equity and honesty” and that the phrase actually refers back to a passage in the prophet Zechariah about how to celebrate new holidays. What is your explanation for why the megillah introduces a second letter into the story with words of peace and truth in it?

Text • Megillat Esther • Chapter 1:10-12

י בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לְבַהֲמִלְךָ בֵּינוֹן ...

On the 7th day, when the king [Achashverosh] was merry with wine, he ordered... the seven eunuchs in attendance... to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the people and officials, for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused...

Commentary by Rabbi Nicole Roberts

The Book of Esther frequently suggests connections between power and attire – one’s outer garments, jewelry, or royal accoutrements. For example, the transfer of a signet ring indicates a transfer of authority (3:10; 8:2), and proper garments are required to physically approach people or places of royalty (4:2-4; 5:1-2). So, one might ask, why wouldn’t Queen Vashti wish to flaunt her high social standing by parading with her crown before the king’s guests?

Today, we take pride in Vashti’s refusal: she will not submit to being presented as a mere object in someone else’s possession, a ‘trophy wife’ – you go, girl! Yet the Talmud recounts the story differently, offering a more nuanced understanding of Vashti’s refusal. Here, the king boasts to his guests about how beautiful his queen is, and, as proof, they request to see her naked (B. Megillah 12b). When she refuses, Achashverosh becomes incensed; he had expected her to oblige. This story presents a more painful scenario than the biblical account. It is a scenario all too common in abusive relationships: one partner threatens to expose the other’s nakedness — a weakness, a very personal fact or feature, a vulnerability, or a secret shared in confidence and trust — to “people and officials” who have no business knowing such intimate details about the individual concerned or about the relationship. Vashti’s act of refusal ensures that what properly belongs behind closed doors and between two intimate partners remains safe from inappropriate exposure. Stripping her of her clothing in front of others would have left her not only physically vulnerable, but emotionally betrayed, shamed, hurt, and unable to trust. To parade her “naked” in public is to disempower her, depriving her of the dignity that an intimate relationship is meant to afford. In refusing, she affirms that a relationship should be a place of trust and confiding, not an opportunity for self-aggrandizement and the exercise or flaunting of power.

Rabbi Nicole Roberts serves as rabbi at North Shore Temple Emanuel in New South Wales, Australia and as treasurer of the Council of Progressive Rabbis of Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. She received her ordination from the Hebrew Union College and has recently joined JWI's Clergy Task Force.

Conversations

1. How does your relationship with your partner empower you? How does it make you vulnerable?
2. Have you ever felt exposed or embarrassed by something a partner shared about you in public or to a relative? What was his or her intention in doing so, and what was the impact on you? On your partner? On those who heard?
3. Consider these same questions with respect to your other (non-partner) relationships, i.e., with family members, friends, and co-workers.

Acting on Our Learning

From *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of our Fathers, Chapter 1:17 we learn “The essential thing is not study, but action.” Here are a few ideas that we hope will inspire you to take the next step, even as conversations and exploration of healthy relationships continue.

4. Donate the cost of any meals you forgo on *Ta’anit Esther* [the Fast of Esther, a day before Purim] to a domestic violence shelter in your community.
5. Collect professional clothes to donate to a battered women’s shelter or a homeless shelter, or a local chapter of Dress for Success.
6. Invite a judge, attorney, counselor, survivor, social worker, or representative from a battered women's shelter to speak about her/his experience with domestic violence issues and prevention.
7. Provide this short guide, *Embracing Justice: A Guide for Jewish Clergy on Domestic Abuse*, 2011 Updated Edition, to your rabbi and cantor and encourage them to speak openly about the importance of healthy relationships. The guide is located at www.jwi.org/clergy along with other resources for clergy.
8. Encourage your youth group leaders and teachers to facilitate JWI's healthy relationship programs for teens, *When Push Comes to Shove, It's No Longer Love*; *Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships: A Conversation on Dating, Friendship, and Self-Esteem*; and *Good Guys: Partnership & Positive Masculinity*. (Learn more about JWI's healthy relationship programs at jwi.org.)
9. Become an advocate for legislation that promotes the well-being of women and girls by joining JWI's action network and learn more about our organization and work at jwi.org.
10. Make a contribution to support JWI's programs and projects that work to end gender-based violence, promote financial literacy and economic security, and celebrate women's leadership, at jwi.org.



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JWI is the leading Jewish organization working to end violence against women and girls in the U.S. and worldwide, and empower women through leadership development and financial literacy. Our advocacy and programmatic initiatives work to ensure economic security and end domestic violence, dating abuse, sexual assault on college campuses, gun violence and human trafficking. JWI convenes the Clergy Task Force on Domestic Abuse in the Jewish Community and the Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition, which advocates at the national level for anti-violence legislation.