

The Pardes PURIM

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Models of Religious Affirmation – Certainty, Skepticism, and Acceptance

Leon Morris

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Our time is marked by great uncertainty. For many of us, contemporary theology is less about what we know to be true with absolute certainty, and more about religious ways of organizing and conceiving the world. We reflect upon God's reality and our conception of 'the good life' while being keenly aware of all that lies beyond our full comprehension. We seek to connect with the other, to form communities of shared purpose, and to feel a sense of genuine continuity with the Jewish past. Many of us hunger for a sense of commitment and obligation that allows us to move beyond (but not entirely reject) our doubt and scepticism in order to give our lives a sense of deeper meaning and purpose. The Rabbis' expansive reading of **Esther 9:27** may provide us with just such an approach.

The Megillah tells us:

The Jews fulfilled and accepted along with their descendants and all who might join them – to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

קימו וקבלו היהודים עליהם ועל זרעם ועל כל הנלויים עליהם ולא יעבור להיות עשים את שני הימים האלה ככתבם וכזמנם בכל שנה ושנה

The double words of "kiymu v'kiblu – they fulfilled and accepted" – is applied by the Rabbis well beyond the acceptance of this new holiday of Purim. A well-known Talmudic *aggadah* connects those two words with a deliberately literal understanding of the description of the children of Israel encamped at Mount Sinai awaiting revelation in Exodus 19:17, "And they took their places at the foot of (literally, underneath) the mountain."

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 88a


Rav Abdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One of Blessing held the mountain over them like a bell jar and said: If you accept the Torah, fine. If not, this will be your grave. Rav Aha bar Jacob said: Nevertheless, they accepted it in the time of Ahashverosh, for it is written (Esther 9:27), "The Jews fulfilled and accepted..." That is, they fulfilled (in the days of Mordecai and Esther) what they had already accepted (at Sinai).

א"ר אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם א"ר אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלו בימי אחשורוש דכתיב (אסתר ט, כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר

A contract entered into by coercion should not be valid. This profound Talmudic teaching resolves the problem. It states that if the acceptance at Sinai was based upon the threat of death, then there must be another case of when the Torah was accepted without coercion for the covenant to be properly enacted. That later reaffirmation and acceptance occurred in the days of Mordechai and Esther.

The book of Esther's theology stands in sharp contrast to most of the Hebrew Bible. God is hidden in the book of Esther, and the sort of obvious salvific miracles that characterize the Bible seem, at first glance, to be absent. What could it mean then for the people of Mordechai and Esther's generation to have fulfilled the Torah? And how is such a fulfillment different from acceptance? Perhaps their kind of religious affirmation is a model for us. Theirs was an assertion that the Torah could indeed be fulfilled in a context so very different from Sinai, a time when God seemed hidden and God's voice more difficult to perceive.

For many of us, it is obvious that the power of a coercive acceptance is long gone, and that the basis of religious authority has changed. The sacred nature of our central texts for many of us is conceived of in radically different ways. From this reality, a new way must emerge that enables us to re-embrace Torah and mitzvot. The Talmud's interpretation of Esther 9:27 can speak to us anew. While we no longer experience the mountain being suspended above our heads, we – like the generation of Esther and Mordechai – long for a real and lasting fulfillment that connects us to the generation that stood at Sinai.

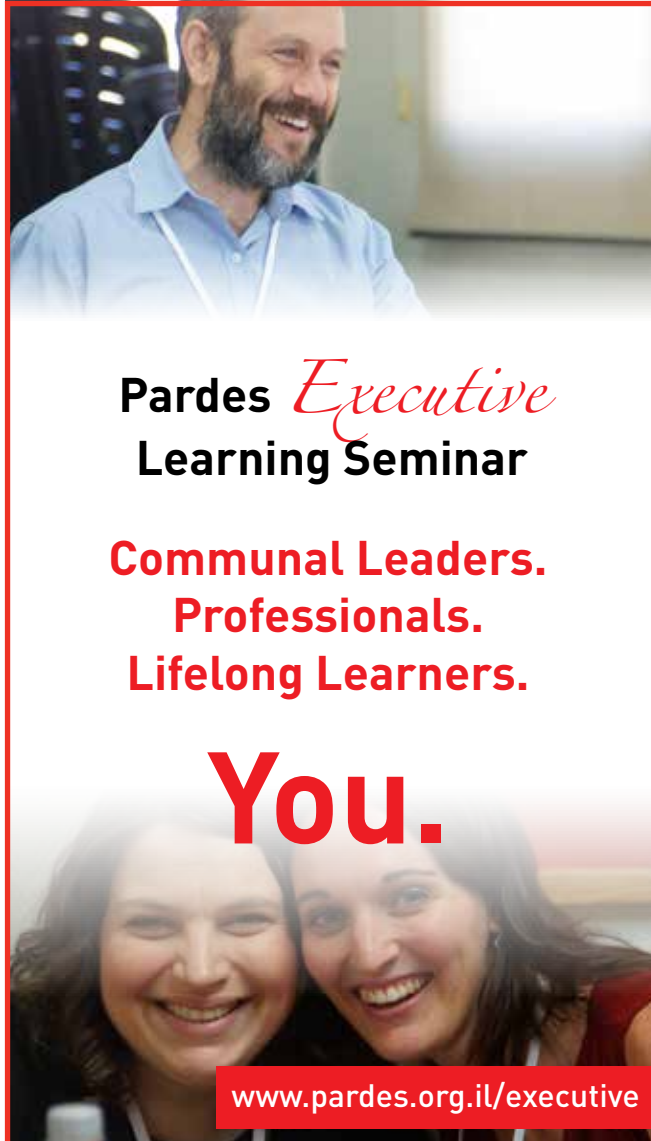


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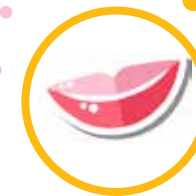
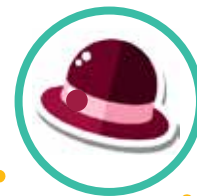
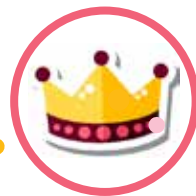


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Vashti: Vixen or Victim?

Aviva Lauer Golbert

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Vashti is not the hero of the Purim story. Taking a poll about who *is* the hero, you will get responses that range only from Esther to Mordechai, to Harvona the Eunuch and maybe even God. But the name Vashti, first wife of Ahashverosh and then deposed queen of Persia, will not be among them. But is Vashti one of the *villains* of the story? She is not counted, in our triumphant singing, alongside Haman or his evil wife Zeresh as a character to be cursed.

So, what do we think about Vashti? What is her role in the Megillah? What are we meant to feel for her or about her?

If you closed your eyes for a moment and asked yourself that question, the instinctual answer would probably quickly hit you in the gut: we don't like Vashti. She makes us uneasy. Maybe the thought of her makes us sad, or even puts us on edge. In terms of the literary nature of the narrative, that is probably her real purpose: to provide an underlying current of anxiety and even fear. For if Ahashverosh can so blithely dispose of one wife, he can, with the angling of a scepter, do the same to our heroine, Esther. And if he can forget about Vashti in the blink of an eye, he can also be expected to turn a blind eye to the Jews of his empire.

If we move away from the original text, though, there are a wealth of midrashim that deal with Vashti. And as is often the case, there is great dissonance among them in their treatment of the very same character. Why is this so? Why might one midrash retell the biblical story in one way, and another in a completely different one?

Our first text is from the **Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 12a-12b**. It tells the story of the infamous party during which Vashti meets her unhappy fate:

“Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house” (Esther 1:9). Shouldn't it have said, ‘the women's house’? — Raba said: Both Ahashverosh and Vashti had promiscuous intent...

“On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine” (Esther 1:10). Was his heart not merry with wine until then? — Rab said: The seventh day was Sabbath... And so it was at the feast of [Ahashverosh], the wicked one. Some [of the merrymakers] said, The Median women are the most beautiful, and others said, The Persian women are the most beautiful. Said Ahashverosh 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.

For a person receives measure for measure. We learn that the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on Sabbath. So it is written, “After these things when the wrath of the king Ahashverosh abated, he remembered Vashti and **what she had done and what was decided against her**” (Esther 2:1). As she had done, so it was decreed against her.

“And the queen Vashti refused” (Esther 1:12). Since she was immodest, as was said above, that both of them had promiscuous intent, why then would she not come? — R. Jose b. Hanina said: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her. In a Baraita it was taught that Gabriel came and fixed a tail on her.

Who is Vashti in this telling? She is a vixen. She is a brazen, disgusting, immoral orgy-maker. She not only makes her Jewish servants work on Shabbat, but humiliates them sexually. She is an abuser, just like her awful husband. And in return, she is turned ugly, dirty, leprous, and animal-like.

However, **Midrash Esther Rabba Parsha 3, Siman 14** tells a rather different story:

“And Queen Vashti refused” (Esther 1:12). She sent and said things to him that would touch his heart.

She said to him: If they see me as beautiful, they will want to take advantage of me and kill you. And if they see me as ugly, you will lose face because of me. She hinted, but he didn't take the hint. She stung him, but he didn't get stung.

She sent and said to him: You were [merely] the stable attendant in my father's palace! And you used to bring naked whores [into the barn]. Now that you're the king, did you not change your ways at all?? She hinted, but he didn't take the hint. She stung him, but he didn't get stung.

She sent and said to him: Even my father's convicts weren't subjected to being judged naked... “And the king become greatly incensed, and his anger burned within him.”

Here, Vashti is a valiant character. When her husband commands her, terrifyingly, to appear naked in front of his many, many drunken courtiers, she appeals to his pride. She appeals to his emotions. She tries reverse psychology. She appeals to what she hopes is his deep-down sense of what is right and wrong.

Unfortunately for her, her great efforts are not rewarded. But she has endeavored intrepidly, and she can certainly be admired for that.

Why the discrepancy? How can it be that in our first *midrash*, Vashti is seen in the basest light, while in the second, her acumen and smarts shine through?

A hint to an answer can be found in our first *midrash*, found in the Babylonian Talmud. Vashti is called “Chaldean” – a synonym at the time it was written, in the yeshivot of Babylonia, for Babylonian. Vashti represents the non-Jewish woman, the Babylonian siren, the female who might entice our boys to do wrong, the promiscuous girl walking around the streets of Pumbedita. She is a serious threat. So the *darshanim*, authors of the midrash, must vilify her. Keep her far away by saying how appalling and disgusting she is.

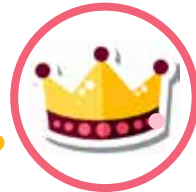
In our second *midrash*, on the other hand, developed in *Eretz Israel*, Vashti is seen as much less of a threat. She is not beloved, necessarily – in some *midrashim*, she is the daughter of the destroyer of the Temple. But she isn't a vilified whore, either. She isn't a vixen. She is a well-rounded character with deep human emotions. She is actually impressive in a certain sense. She stands up for herself against Ahashverosh. She is worthy of kudos for that.

In terms of Vashti, the dissonance of the different midrashim is one of place. A place – Babylonia – where she is a threat, where she is too close for comfort, vs. a place – *Eretz Israel* – where she isn't there every day, parading by your window, threatening your sons with assimilation.

Who is Vashti *today*? Who is she for you? The precedent of the ancient *midrashim* empowers us to ask this question anew in every age.

In my own imagined narrative, the deposed Vashti supports Esther's efforts from the dark, dank dungeon in which she is ensconced. She feeds Esther bits of information and offers advice that she, having been the queen for so many years, is privy to. Sometimes I even imagine that Mordechai is the courier between the two women: the two queens of Persia.

* Thanks to Dr. Tamar Kadari, of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, who originated this theory.



Purim and Peoplehood

Zvi Grumet

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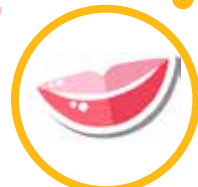
After Haman's decree, Mordechai pushes Esther to risk everything and go to the king. She devises a most complex plan, which succeeds beyond her wildest dreams. Haman is hanged and the Jews are ... um... allowed to fight back. Let's get this straight. That does not sound like a resounding victory! Esther did not manage to cancel the royal decree calling for the elimination of the Jews, nor the financial incentives for individuals who participated in the mass murder. She merely gained the right of self-defense! And what would have happened had Esther not earned the right to fight back? Do we imagine that Jews would have sat there waiting for the hyped-up hordes to slaughter and despoil them?

The answer apparently lies in a single word – להקהל, to join together (8:11). Mordechai and Esther initiated a summons to unity; their decree was a call to their brothers and sisters to undo their divisions and come together. Indeed, it was specifically this unity which Esther understood would undo Haman's decree. To be sure, without Esther's intervention, individual Jews would have fought back on their own, but alone, they would have never survived. Esther legislated for them the right – and the royal sanction – to organize themselves into a self-defense force. When they heeded that call, “no one could stand in their way for their fear had befallen upon all the nations” (9:2) – anyone attacking them would have to consider the possibility that the aggressor could become a victim.

Esther's call cuts to the core of one of the underlying themes in the story. When Haman first approaches the king, he presents the Jews as scattered and disunified amongst the nations of the Persian Empire (3:8). Why this was relevant to Haman is a different story, but for our purposes his words betray an uncomfortable reality of a fragmented people. Truth is, Esther's initial hesitation to approach the king despite the imminent danger to her people (4:11) exemplifies just how deep was the lack of sense of mutual responsibility. It is only Mordechai's impassioned (and threatening!) plea that moves her to action.

When the post-victory celebrations began, it became clear that these were not simple victory parties. In successive waves, including grass-roots initiatives generated by the people and legislative attempts by Mordechai (see 9:17-22), the form of the celebration began to emerge – and that form insisted on building layers of community. The first layer (9:18) was with one's closest friends and family, with whom one would have a party (involving drinking!) and merriment (משתה ושמחה). In the second wave, those outside the nuclear friends were invited to join the meal via remote control, by sending them food from their own meal (משלוח מנות) which they could share (9:19). This expansion meant that multiple groups were effectively sharing in each other's meals, strengthening the communal bonds which they were learning to develop, and which were pivotal in the success of their campaign. The third layer of celebration insisted that even those with whom one had no prior associations, the social outcasts, the impoverished – they all needed to be included in the community and in the celebrations (מתנות לאביונים). They were to be given funds to be able to purchase their own meals and build new communal groups (9:22).

The festive meal we have today, the food parcels we send to friends, and the money we give specifically to be used by the underprivileged on Purim to have their own festive meal, are all halakhic expressions of the communal theme echoing in the background of the Megillah. And they remind us that the strength of our people today and tomorrow is impossible without extending our embracing arms to concentric circles of Jews – from our closest friends to those with whom we normally have no contact.



Fear, Certainty and Wonder

Mike Feuer

Rabbi Mike Feuer teaches Striving for the Divine, Rav Kook and Jewish History at Pardes.

When the rumors of the decree against the Jews first entered the king’s harem, Esther wanted to make them go away. The streets are filled with the wailing of the Jews, they are wearing sackcloth and fasting in their distress. Whereas Esther begs Mordechai to continue as normal, to remove his sackcloth, Mordechai responds by commanding Esther to go and plead before the king. No wonder Esther hesitates and in her terror reaches for what appears the best defense – certainty.

“All the king’s courtiers and the people of the king’s provinces 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.” Esther 4:11

If there were hope, Esther might take the risk, but this plan has only one outcome. Everyone knows it. Safety lies in silence, intervention means joining her people in ruin. Mordechai will understand; he cannot mean to condemn her to death. Such clarity is a rare comfort.

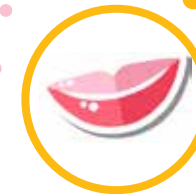
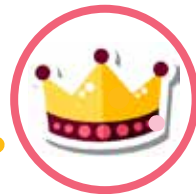
Mordechai’s reply is his only explicit statement in the entire megillah, and it can teach us much about certainty, hope and fear. He knows that Haman is also feeling certain at this moment. Haman’s confidence rests not on power and wealth, which he cannot even value so long as Mordechai stands before him (5:13), but rather on a random *pur* – a lottery. Haman has cast his lot, sure that it means the Jews’ destruction, and Esther in her terror agrees.

We might expect Mordechai to turn the tables on his enemy, offering Esther miraculous faith in place of his fatalistic certainty. It is easy to believe that she is queen at this moment only to bring about salvation. His words do begin with certitude, but they are not calculated to calm. Mordechai tells Esther that “... relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place...” but adds a warning that this general hope is no guarantee of personal safety. On the contrary, silence means certain death, but “...who knows whether you did not come to royalty for just such a moment as this?”

It sounds like the worst motivational speech ever. Everything will be fine without you, but refusing this risk will destroy you, and “who knows” - maybe that is why you are queen right now. Or maybe not.

Haman and Esther both believe they know exactly what will be, which offers her the illusion of safety and him a sense of power. Mordechai knows redemption will come, but not from where. He is certain of an existence which is a promise, but not a guarantee; and so he is always looking at what a moment might be, not what it will. Certainty might offer Esther a sense of security, but it cannot save her. To be certain means shrinking the world to fit our understanding, leaving no room for the Infinite. Mordechai’s question invites Esther into a world too big to know. He is confident that if she can hold her fear and uncertainty, Esther can taste an unbounded existence. Only this has a place for redemption.

This is the revolution of Purim, opposing fear not with certainty but with wonder. Esther accepts and absorbs Mordechai’s message, and buoyed by unknown possibility, clothes herself in majesty and takes a chance. By risking hope over certainty, Esther casts her own lot. It is this gamble, as much as any other, that gives Purim its name.



How to Give, How to Receive - or Giving is Receiving

Nechama Goldman Barash

Rabbanit Nechama Goldman Barash is a member of the Pardes faculty and is a Yoetzet Halakha and sought-after teacher in Jewish marital law and sexuality.

Purim is filled with five *mitzvot* to be fulfilled in the night and the day: Hearing the Megillah at night and again in the morning, giving charity to the poor, having a Purim feast and, *mishloach manot*, or giving portions of food to friends and neighbors. Dressing-up and drinking are also part of the ritual celebration of the day so that the combination of *mitzvot*, costumes and revelry creates a holy carnival-like atmosphere. Each *mitzva* is meant to bring meaning to a day dedicated to remembering our national salvation within our communities and families.

The *mitzva* of *mishloach manot* is perhaps the most unique in that it requires giving portions of food to our friends, in addition and distinct from the *mitzva* to give charity to the poor. However, for many, it sits uncomfortably. There is a challenge to giving horizontally. Give too extravagant a gift and people feel challenged or inadequate. Give too little and people feel disgruntled. Several years ago, Tablet Magazine published an article by Tova Ross in which she described the ritual as leading to “Mishloach Manot Wars” and gave some over-the-top examples of the lengths people go to creatively express themselves with costumes, themes and gift giving that for some, can turn a beautiful concept into a nightmare of competition and expense.

The Talmud in **Megillah 7a** defines the *mitzva* as follows:

One must give two portions (of food) to a friend, and two gifts to two poor people.

The word *manot* translates to portions, in plural, which requires giving more than one portion of food. However, this is often misunderstood to mean two different portions of food with two different blessings. In fact, it could be the same portion doubled in size or alternatively, two different foods but of the same type. Finally, one need send only one *mishloach manot* to one friend while one must give the equivalent of two charity donations to two different poor people. In short, the basic requirement to fulfill the *mitzva* is fairly modest. In reality people often given dozens of *manot* to family, friends and neighbors, going well beyond the letter, and possibly the spirit of the law.

The Talmud is well aware of the psychology behind giving and receiving. One of my favorite excerpts of Talmud can be found in Megillah 7a-b (based on the version in the Babylonian Talmud manuscripts and Jerusalem Talmud) and has such deep insight that it could be written today.

It begins with an interaction between Rabbi Judah Nesiya and his colleague Rabbi Oshaya. Rabbi Judah comes from a very wealthy home.

Rabbi Judah Nesiya sent a leg of a calf born third to its mother and a jug of wine to Rabbi Oshaya. The gift is a handsome one by all standards. A large piece of a particularly soft, tasty meat and a large bottle of wine is enough to enhance any meal. Nonetheless, Rabbi Oshaya sends back to Rabbi Judah: “You have fulfilled the *mitzva* of giving gifts to the poor.”

Rabbi Oshaya is not satisfied with the gift. In his opinion, although this might represent the gift that Rabbi Judah should be giving to poor people, it is certainly not what he should be giving to his friends. The story continues. Rabbi Judah accepts the barbed response and at this point sends back an entire calf born third to its mother and a barrel of wine. The story now has closure as Rabbi Oshaya sends a final message “through this you have fulfilled the *mitzva* of sending gifts one to the other.” Rabbi Oshaya felt slighted and mistreated. The generosity of Rabbi Judah’s response in sending a completely new and very expensive *mishloach manot* shows that he understands Rabbi Oshaya. In this short story which surprises us by taking place between two rabbinic sages, we find out that no one is immune to the disappointment and tension that results when we receive gifts that fall short of our expectations. This anxiety – over giving and receiving – continues into the next story:

Rabba, who has become the head of the Talmudic academy in Pumbedita sends *Mishloach Manot* to his colleague Marei bar Mar through his student and nephew Abaye: He sent a sack full of dates and a cupful of roasted flour. Abaye, in a wonderful narrative aside, says: “Now, Marei will say if a farmer becomes the king, the basket does not descend from his neck.” Abaye recognizes the perceived insult in the *mishloach manot*. Now that his uncle is in a public leadership position, his gift-giving, even in a ritualistic context, will be carefully scrutinized. Rabba, in contrast, has not yet internalized the difference his appointment to academy head makes, particularly with regard to the caliber of his *mishloach manot*, and continues to send the gift that was his standard prior to assuming the leadership. Marei’s response is swift and sharp:



Marei bar Mar sent back to him a sack full of ginger and a cupful of long peppers. Abaye continues his role as narrator and comments: The master (Rabba) will now say: “I sent him sweet (food items) and he sent me pungent (ones).” Marei bar Mar’s *mishloach manot* serves as a rebuke both in its sharpness and in its deliberate choice of delicacies more expensive than Rabba’s modest gift.


The pressure of how much to give often clouds a potentially meaningful *mitzva* either with pettiness when we receive something perceived to be inadequate or alternatively, inadequateness when we receive a gift that is far beyond our ability to reciprocate.


In a final story, the Talmud relates that Abaye bar Avin and Rabbi Hanina bar Avin would exchange their meals with each other. This approach, of the two brothers exchanging meals, encapsulates perhaps, the real spirit behind the ritual. Each brother feeds the other a meal fulfilling both the *mishloach manot* and the festive meal requirement and saving on expense and external competition.


On Purim, the *megillah* instructs us to turn these days into “gladness and feasting and holiday, and of sending choice portions to one another.” It is when we allow the essence of joy to come from the giving and when we open ourselves up to truly share what we have with the other, that we can elevate and transform the day into true celebration as described and inscribed by Queen Esther.


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