

Shiur #05: Esther Is Taken to the King: The Treatment of Women

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Chapter 2 opens with the king sobering up: "After these things, when the fury of King Achashverosh had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done, and what had been decreed for her" (2:1). It is no coincidence that the narrator emphasizes the king remembering both "Vashti and what she had done" as well as "what had been decreed for her," for there is a disturbing lack of proportion between what she did (a personal conflict between the royal couple) and that which was decreed in light of this episode (a whole new law for the kingdom). Midrash Abbat Gurion expresses this well: "When he sobered up from his wine, he asked for her [Vashti]. They told him: You put her to death. He asked them: Why? They answered: You told her to come before you naked, and she did not. He said to them: I acted badly; but who advised me to put her to death? They said to him: The seven princes of Persia and Mede. Immediately he had them put to death, and it is for this reason that they are not mentioned again." (Midrash Abba Gurion, parasha 2.)

It is the king's attendants who suggest the selection of a new queen. As we have pointed out previously, just as the banishing of Vashti from the palace is effected at the advice of the king's counselors, so too the new queen is brought in at their suggestion, with the king merely acceding to their advice. Attention should be paid to the fact that the attendants do not suffice with a general proposal, "Let there be sought for the king a virginal maiden of good appearance, who may reign instead of Vashti," but go so far as to set out the entire selection process in great detail: "Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, and let them assemble every virgin of good appearance in Shushan, the capital, at the house of the women, in the custody of Hegai, the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women, and let their ointments be given" (2:3). The fact that the attendants must delineate the procedure for choosing a new queen – noting even the identity of the chamberlain who will be responsible for them until their selection, and who will distribute perfumes to them – cannot but cause the reader to smile: apparently, the king cannot determine even the technical details of the process; even these must be stipulated by his attendants.

In the scene of the selection of the new queen we discern with particular clarity the discrepancy between the overt praise and the covert criticism. The narrator's attitude towards women is one of the key issues of the narrative. As we have already noted, since at the beginning of the story a decree is issued by the king (at Memukhan's suggestion) to the effect that every woman must perform her husband's wishes, the narrator has already drawn the reader's attention to the relations between men and women; thus, this subject should not be regarded as one worthy of debate only in a feminist context. The attitude of the Persian royalty towards women is a central motif in chapter 2.

The plain reading of the text gives rise to a sense that the author is aggrandizing Achashverosh as ruler of the entire kingdom and as providing the young women of the kingdom with every sort of benefit. This impression is first created by the attendants' suggestion that the king should appoint officers "throughout all the provinces of his

kingdom," and that they should bring to the royal palace "every virgin of good appearance." According to the perception of royalty prevalent in the ancient world, a king prided himself on a multiplicity of wives. Here, we are being told, the king has much power and can use his authority to gather a great many women.

Actually, the gathering of the women reflects not only the king's power but also, as noted, his generosity: the king showers all the young women brought to the palace with perfumes and ointments. Just as we are told, in the description of the first feast, that the king commands his servants "to perform the wish of each and every person," so now "whatever [each girl] would state, would be given to her to accompany her from the house of the women" (2:13). And just as every man was free, at the first feast, to choose which wine he wanted to drink, so now the assortment of women's ointments are offered to each and every girl. This is meant to give honor to the king, since – owing to his impressive greatness – the girls are required to perfume themselves for a lengthy period, but at the same time the author would seem to be creating a warm atmosphere of admiration towards the king – at least with regard to his extreme generosity.

On the other hand, a reader who is open to the hidden reading will sense the biting criticism that pervades the entire chapter. The author's criticism of the way in which the new queen is chosen is hinted at, as in many other instances throughout the narrative, by means of allusion to a different narrative describing a search for a companion for the king. When we read the attendants' suggestion it is difficult not to be reminded of a similar piece of advice offered by the servants of King David, in his old age: "His servants said to him, 'Let a virgin be sought for my master, the king, that she may stand before the king and be his servant, and she shall lie in your bosom, that my master the king may be warm'" (I Melakhim 1:2). There, too, the attendants propose that a "virginal maiden" be selected to come to the palace; there, too, the king agrees and his emissaries pass "throughout the borders of Israel," seeking a "fair maiden" (verse 3).[1 ]

While the two episodes share some similarities, the reader is required to pay attention to the fundamental difference between the two images. Since Achashverosh seeks a maiden, the king's officers go off to gather "every virginal maiden of good appearance to Shushan, the capital, to the house of the women" (2:3); out of this group the king will choose whichever one he fancies (after spending one night with each of them). In contrast, the proposal of David's servants is that the king's emissaries should go all about the country seeking a fair maiden; the one whom they deem suitable shall be brought to the king's palace. This difference is not a trivial one – especially from the perspective of the women themselves. The women who are taken to the palace and ultimately are not chosen as queen will not be able to return to their families, nor will they be able to marry someone else. After each has had her encounter with the king, they return "to the house of the women" (2:14), where they will live as the king's concubines. The personal tragedy of each of them is obvious; each woman can only live in hope that one day the king will remember her and call upon her again, for another one-time encounter ("She would not come back to the king unless the king desired her and she was called by name" – 2:14).[2]

The association with the alternative image – the finding of a companion for King David – invites criticism of Achashverosh and his treatment of women. As the story of David demonstrates, the process could have been undertaken in a different way.[3]

The narrator's discomfort at the plight of these women is also conveyed by means of a veiled reference to Yosef's suggestion to Pharaoh as to how to handle the years of famine. The comparisons between the two narratives are so numerous that we are forced to consider the significance of the connection between them in general.[4] At the same time, each separate allusion also offers its own contribution. Thus, with regard to our present discussion, the authors seems to censure the king by echoing the language that Yosef uses in presenting his proposal to Pharaoh:

Yosef's proposal (Bereishit 41:34-37):

"Let Pharaoh act to appoint officers over the land  
And let them gather all the food of the good years that are imminent  
...under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities  
And the thing was good in Pharaoh's eyes"

Proposal of Achashverosh's attendants (Esther 2:2-4):

"Let the king appoint officers over all the provinces of his kingdom  
And let them gather every virginal maiden of good appearance  
To the hand of Hegai, the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women  
And the thing was good in the king's eyes".

From the perspective of this comparison, the reader senses that the king treats the maidens like grain that must be gathered. The "gathering" of the women from every place to the palace, where they are "kept" in the hand of Hegai, indeed arouses an image of collecting objects, or a store of food for times of need. And just as the purpose of the reservoir of food is to serve as a "store (guarantee) for the land" (Bereishit 41:36), so the reader imagines that the king collects a great number of women to serve as a "store" or "guarantee" in times of need.[5]

But all of the above does not exhaust the veiled criticism of the king. It reaches its climax in a further allusion that is integrated into the description of the gathering of the women. All those who are brought to the royal palace are required to prepare for their encounter with the king for an entire year: "Six months with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet fragrances and women's ointments" (2:12). A continuous reading serves to weaken some of the shocking impact of this piece of information. For an entire year the girls had to sit in a fragrant bath and to apply ointments to their bodies. More accurately, after six months there would be a brief respite as the candidate moved from a bath of "oil of myrrh" to a bath of "fragrances and women's ointments." As in a caricature, where the artist exaggerates the size of some part of the subject's body in order to emphasize it, so the narrative extends the period of perfuming to a full year so as to highlight the lack of proportion inherent in the situation; it arouses smiling derision. In order to go in to the king and spend a night with him, these Persian virgins are forced to spend an entire year of their lives soaking up fragrance and applying ointments. The intention here may be a testament to the megalomania of Achashverosh and to the Persian concept of royalty;[6] in any event, it is certainly a testament to a perverted view of women.

It is within the exaggerated preparations of the Persian girls that we discover the additional allusion mentioned above. When we read, "And when the turn of each maiden arrived to come to King Achashverosh, after she had undergone the women's regulation for twelve months (for so were their days of anointing fulfilled)" (2:12), we are once again reminded of the story of Yosef – this time, specifically, the description of the treatment meted out to

Yaakov's dead body by the Egyptian physicians: "Yosef commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father, and the physicians embalmed Israel. And forty days were fulfilled for him, for so were the days of embalming fulfilled, and the Egyptians wept for him for seventy days" (Bereishit 50:2-3). The expression "For so the days of ... were fulfilled" appears nowhere else in Tanakh. It is therefore clear that this is an intentional allusion, especially since the context is similar: it is the end of a specific period ("twelve months"; "forty days"), set down by standard custom. Attention should be paid to the fact that the connection here is more than merely linguistic; there is also a similarity in terms of content: in both cases a body is immersed in oil for a prolonged time.

I imagine that there is no need to elaborate on the significance of this connection. The very comparison between the girls of Shushan and bodies being embalmed hints at the sharp criticism that the author of Esther directs towards Achashverosh and his treatment of women. The narrative hints to us that Achashverosh treats the girls as bodies, and nothing more.

In fact, the structure of the chapter as a whole highlights the absurdity of the scene. The story of the search for a new queen appears to have a unified literary structure, within which several of the fundamental themes of the chapter are clarified. The boundaries of this unit are quite clear: it begins with the king's servants proposing that a replacement for Vashti be sought, and it ends with the phrase, "And he made her queen instead of Vashti." But this outer framework includes an entire, sophisticated structure. We shall divide the chapter into two parts and arrange them on either side of the central axis (i.e., concentric parallel: A-B-C-D-E-F-e-d-c-b-a):[7]

A. Search for a replacement for Vashti:

"The maiden who pleases the king shall reign instead of Vashti"

¶2 5-8: verses of presentation – insertion of an image from the distant past, presentation of Mordekhai and Esther: "And when her father and mother died, Mordekhai took her as his own daughter"[8]

B. Esther is taken to the king's palace:

"Esther was brought to the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women"

C. Esther finds favor in the eyes of Hegai:

"And the girl pleased him, and she obtained kindness on his part"

D. Esther's passivity in relation to Mordekhai:

"Esther did not mention her people or her descend, for so Mordekhai had commanded her... Mordekhai walked about before the courtyard of the house of the women"

E. The manner in which each girl is brought to the king:

"And when the turn of each maiden arrived to come to King Achashverosh... whatever she specified would be given to her, to bring with her"

F. Entry to the king:

"In the evening she would go, and in the morning she would return"

e: The manner of Esther's entry to the king:

"And when Esther's turn came-

d. Esther's passivity with Mordekhai in the background:

) - "the daughter of Avichayil, the uncle of Mordekhai, whom he had taken as his own daughter) to go to the king, she requested nothing"

c. Esther finds favor in the eyes of all who behold her:

"And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who beheld her"

b. Esther is taken to Achashverosh:

"And Esther was taken to King Achashverosh, to his royal house"

a. Finding a replacement for Vashti:

"The king loved Esther more than all the women... and he made her queen instead of Vashti"

The corresponding expressions in the two halves of the story point to the connection between them (for example, "She shall reign instead of Vashti" – "He made her queen instead of Vashti" [A-a]; "Esther was taken..." [B-b]; "And when ... turn came" [E-e], etc.). The structure as a whole revolves around that one-time encounter with the king ("In the evening she would go, and in the morning she would return") for which the girls have prepared themselves for an entire year.

The literary structure of this scene hints to several messages concealed beneath the formal framework of the narrative. First, of course, we must point out the profound contrast between Esther and the other beautiful girls who are candidates for the title of queen. The narrator elaborates at length as to the possibilities for esthetic enhancement at the disposal of these girls. The detailed description, focusing on the length of time they spent anointing themselves with different oils and fragrances, is altogether foreign to regular biblical style; clearly, the narrator seeks to recreate the Persian atmosphere for his readers. In this culture, the quantity of makeup that each girl applies to her face, and the amount of time spent anointing the body with oil of myrrh, are matters of state importance. In other words, the very focus of the narrator on this perspective of the Persian superpower is itself a judgment, an expression of criticism and also of scorn. In any event, while the other girls take advantage of the extensive opportunities for beautification, concerning Esther we are told, "She requested nothing." The contrast between "When the turn of each girl arrived" and "When Esther's turn arrived" (E-e) is a conflict of principle, reflecting the world of the respective characters and their values.[9]

In contrast to Esther's passivity, she achieves instant, dizzying success. The description of her success, too, assumes special significance in light of the structure, and here we emphasize two developments. Firstly, Esther starts off by finding favor in the eyes of Hegai (verse 8), later – in the corresponding section of the second part of the story – this situation progresses to one in which she finds favor in the eyes of "all who beheld her" (verse 15). Secondly, there is an interesting development in the framework of the narrative. Initially, the attendants propose that "the maiden who will be pleasing in the king's eyes shall reign instead of Vashti" (4). It is no coincidence that the selection is formulated in such a way as to make the decision rest upon "the king's eyes"; after all, as we shall see from the continuation of the story, the physical beauty of the woman is indeed the decisive factor in the king's decision. However, the literary conclusion of the scene introduces a new verb, unusual in the Shushan context: "The king loved Esther more than all the women" (17.)

In light of all of the above, it is surprising to discover Achashverosh suddenly "falling in love" with one of the girls. I believe that this says something about Esther. Through her modesty and simplicity (15) she succeeds in drawing the king's attention to her personality, and not just to her outer beauty. Esther, it seems, can cause even the drunken, womanizing Persian king to fall in love. Let there be no mistake: Esther herself is truly beautiful, as the narrator states at the outset ("The girl was of beautiful form and of good

appearance" – verse 7). But it is not this power that awards her first place in the competition over the king's heart.

Thus, then, in addition to the allusions aimed at arousing criticism of the king's treatment of women, the structure of the unit – presenting the exertions of the women in beautifying themselves – encourages this criticism.

The structure of the unit and the texture of its wording also hint at the tragedy that Esther experiences. According to the simple reading, the maiden who is ultimately chosen to be the new queen in Shushan should be very happy. It is something of a Cinderella story, where a girl of the humblest origins may suddenly find herself installed in the royal palace. At the same time, the author hints to a psychological trauma that is taking place beneath the surface. This unit mentions Mordekhai twice, both times in juxtaposition with a description of Esther being taken to the king. First, when she is taken to the palace, we read: "And when her father and mother had died, Mordekhai took her for his own daughter. And it was, when the king's word and decree were heard... that Esther was taken to the king's house" (7-8). Later, when it is Esther's turn to go in to the king: "And when the turn of Esther arrived (the daughter of Avichayil, uncle of Mordekhai – who had taken her as his own daughter) to go to the king... then Esther was taken to King Achashverosh" (15-16). The first mention of Mordekhai does not warrant any special attention; it is part of the exposition mentioned at the opening of the scene. In presenting him, alongside Esther, the text is simply introducing us to the main characters, who will be assuming an important role in the rest of the plot. But the repetition of Mordekhai's name and his relationship to Esther is most surprising. Why does the narrator need to tell us again that he "took her as his own daughter"? What does this piece of information have to do with Esther going in to Achashverosh? The key to this puzzle is hinted at in the repeated use of the verb "l-k-ch" (to take), which features both in the relations between Esther and Mordekhai ("Mordekhai took her as his own daughter"; "whom he had taken as his own daughter"), and in the relations between Esther and Achashverosh ("Esther was taken to the king's house"; "Esther was taken to the king").[10]

The use of the same verb draws the reader's attention to the concealed tension between these two "takings," and to the personal tragedy that Esther experiences when she is taken to the king's house. The verb "l-k-ch" itself has several meanings in biblical language. Sometimes it expresses, as Ben-Yehuda defines it, "Holding something in one's hand; removing it with one's hand from the place where it was lying, and placing it within his own boundaries for some time." [11] However, in other instances it refers to "marrying a woman; betrothing her that she might be his wife." [12] In our case, both meanings fit in with the general context: Achashverosh takes Esther to his palace, and as we know this "taking" in itself will lead him to marry her. The text juxtaposes these "takings" with Esther's previous experience of being "taken," by Mordekhai. The Midrash, too, proposes that the expression "l-k-ch" should be understood as hinting to marriage, by interpreting the end of the verse – "As his own daughter" (le-bat) – as a hint to the word bayit, meaning household – often a reference to a wife. "We learn in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: Do not read 'le-bat,' but rather 'le-bayit.'" [13] On the basis of the literal text, it is difficult to accept this interpretation, since the text explicitly mentions that only "virginal maidens" are brought to the palace (2:3). [14] However, it is entirely possible that the idea proposed by the Sages has a reasonable basis in terms of the norms of the period. In the ancient world it was accepted that if an adult man adopted a young daughter, when the time came they would marry. Thus, for example, Nachor adopts his orphaned niece, Bilha, by marrying

her (and correspondingly, according to the Sages, Avraham adopted Sara, who was none other than Yiska – his own orphaned niece). The same idea arises from the metaphor of the foundling girl in Yechezkel 16 where, after the adoptive father has brought up the girl who was abandoned in the field, he marries her[15]. This being the case, it is possible that the textual expression, "who had taken her as his own daughter" does indeed seek to support this association in the mind of the reader, hinting that Mordekhai's adoption of Esther was an act that was meant to lead to their marriage.

Either way, the psychological and cultural trauma experienced by Esther as she is taken from Mordekhai's home to the royal palace is highlighted through the use of the identical verb (l-k-ch), indicating the tension of the transition between these two worlds. In this way the author creates two levels of reading, which in turn give rise to two contradictory feelings: on one hand, the reader rejoices at the success of this simple girl in capturing the heart of the king; at the same time, though, he hints that the reader should regard the event as tragedy and should identify with Esther's distress at being torn from her uncle-adoptive father, Mordekhai.

These contradictory feelings find interesting realization in the matter of Esther's refusal to divulge her origins. We shall discuss this further in the next shiur.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]A.B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ke-Peshuto II*, Berlin 1900, p. 262; S. Zelevsky, *Aliyat Shelomo li-Melukha*, Jerusalem 5741, pp. 40-44; A. Frisch, "Esther vs. Kings," *Mechkarei Chag 3* (5752), pp. 27-28.

[2]The term "desiring" (ch-f-tz) is mentioned several times in Esther in connection with the horse: there, the person in whom the king "desires" is placed upon the horse and they "call" before him, "So shall be done to the man..." etc. Here, too, the king "desires" in a certain person, leading him to "call" upon her by name. In both instances, the perspective is that of the king, and therefore the reader is easily lulled into believing that the king's desire is something of real importance and value. However, in both cases the narrator hints that it would be better for the person concerned were the king not to "desire" in him or her, as we shall see later on in our discussion of Chapter 6.

[3]Another difference between the two is that even after the right woman is found, concerning David we are told: "The king was not intimate with her" (I Melakhim 1:4.)

[4]We shall devote a separate discussion to this topic. For now the reader is invited to review the article by M. Gan, "Esther Viewed Through the Perspective of Yosef in Egypt," *Tarbitz 31*, 5722, pp. 144-149, and the Introduction to the *Da'at Mikra* commentary on Esther, composed by G.C. Cohen (Jerusalem 5734), pp. 12-14.

[5]See on this topic, and on the narrator's scorn for the reign of Achashverosh, in D. Henshke, "Esther – Literary Costume," *Hadassa Hi Esther*, pp. 93-106.

[6]As a comparison we may refer once again to David. Preparations for an encounter with him consist of one thing only: "Feign to be a mourner, put on mourning apparel, and do not anoint yourself with oil, but be as a woman who has mourned for many days for the dead" (II Shemuel 14:2). See Rabbi A. Bazak, "And if I perish, I perish," *Hadassa Hi Esther*, 42-46.

[7]Compare the division proposed by Bush, which, while differing from the one presented above, does note some of the important connections within the various sections in the chapter (Bush, 360.)

[8]These verses of introduction, or presentation, are not part of the plot, and therefore may be viewed as lying outside of the closed structure of the chapter. Further on we shall address these verses in their own right.

[9]This is integrally related to the question of whether Esther actually wanted to be chosen by the king, or whether in her heart of hearts she would prefer to be rejected. We shall address this question at length in the next shiur, when we discuss Esther's refusal to reveal her nationality.

[10]As often happens, some of the translations fail to convey this play on words. Thus, for example, in Moore's translation we find: "Mordecai adopted her... Esther was also taken to the palace" (Moore, 16). We also find the opposite: translations in which the proper sense of the first verb is preserved but the second is changed. The classic King James edition proposes: "Whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter... that Esther was brought also unto the king's house".

[11]A. Ben-Yehuda, *Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, vol. V, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, p. 2729.

[12]Ben-Yehuda *Ibid*, pp. 2730. See also BDB, 544.

[13]Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 13a. This reading is likewise reflected in the Septuagint: "Whom he had taken as his wife" (some opinions maintain that the authors of the Septuagint based their translation on the Sages' suggestion that the word be read "le-bayit," and therefore they translated the expression as hinting at a wife. (P. Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *AJSLL* 24 (1907-1908), p. 116).

[14]See further on this subject in M. A. Zipor, "When Midrash Met Septuagint: The Case of Esther 2,7," *ZAW* 118 (2006), pp. 82-92.

[15]Admittedly, the expression "virginal maidens" does not necessarily have to be understood as referring to the women's physical state; it could, rather, quite reasonably be understood to mean "single women who had reached maturity" (G.J. Wenham, "Betulah: A Girl of Marriageable Age," *VT* 22 (1972), pp. 326-248.) Still, it is clear that the women concerned are single!