

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Purim Heroines

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I did not wear the crown and satiny dress, or stand in line for the beauty pageant. Queen Esther was not a role model I—or many other children—could choose. Later, in the academy, I understood that Esther's subterfuge and seduction were the strategies of the weak, the politics of the minority. In Jewish settings, I found joy in singing along with the children as they restored Vashti to her rightful place, chanting the ebullient song: "She /said/ 'no' to the king; she said 'no' to the king!"

Let's consider a different Esther. A film called *The Last Marranos* brought me crypto-Jewish secrets from a remote village in Portugal. Women observed there had a tradition that conflated the story of the Exodus with that of Queen Esther. Perhaps these descendants of crypto-Jews preserved in Esther a memory of Doña Graçia Nasi. This historical sixteenth century Portuguese Jewish woman, so important in her time as to have been called "la Señora" (Lady Graçia), was a great protector and patron of crypto-Jews who left Portugal in their escape from the Inquisition.

Another Esther: for some scholars and Jews who have identified as gay, as queer, or as transpeople, the crypto-Jewish Esther has become a symbol that dignifies or sacralizes the experience of survival in a hidden identity, and points to the salvific power of self-revelation.

This week of Purim, while acknowledging both Vashti and Esther, I would draw our attention to Memucan. When Vashti said 'no' to the king, Memucan advised him to strip her of her power, lest the princesses of Persia and Media follow her lead(ership) (Esther 1:16–20). Memucan understood that historical change could be catalyzed by even one important woman—one person. Esther or Vashti, the story of Purim teaches a lesson: it all depends not only on whether we can vanquish Haman or Memucan, but also on whether we act on what he knew. One individual can lead, and by example change the course of history.

To view the video that inspired this commentary, visit jtsa.edu/torah

References:

The Last Marranos. Directed by: Frédéric Brenner and Stan Neumann. (1991).

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"She said 'no' to the king", Margot Stein, Rayzel Raphael, Bayla Ruchama, Juliet Spitzer (1988)

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פרשת ויקרא תשע"ו
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Creating I-Thou Moments that Strengthen Relationships, and Communities

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Semikhah, ordaining of clergy, is on my mind these days as we move closer to my first JTS ordination as an associate dean. No longer the person receiving *semikhah*, this time I am privileged to help ordain new clergy.

How do we mark the moment when individuals who have studied Torah seriously for years move from being civilians to being people entrusted with the title Rabbi or Cantor? This meaning of *semikhah* can be understood as "reliance": By naming someone a rabbi or cantor, we as a community say we rely upon their judgment, learning, and ethical compass. We name them as our authority for interpreting Jewish law and bringing Jewish tradition to bear in moments of question and crisis.

In Parashat Vayikra we repeatedly encounter a different use of the term *semikhah*. In this case, a variety of sacrifices are offered, and we are instructed to perform *semikhah* on an animal about to be sacrificed. This means that the *kohen* (the priest) places his hands on that animal's head, with pressure and thoughtfulness. Through this intense individual connection, the intention or sins (depending on the type of sacrifice) of the human are transferred to the animal that will be sacrificed. Through this encounter we pause to let the purpose of the sacrifice sink in. We might even consider ourselves, to use Martin Buber's paradigm, to be transforming the relationship from an I-It relationship, where the other party is just an instrument for me to obtain what I want, to an I-Thou one, where the other is truly valued and connected to as a unique individual. In this case we understand ourselves to be elevating this offering to being in relationship with us, rather than being the object of whatever type of representative offering we have assigned to it.

Though we usually think of sin-offering *semikhah* and ordination *semikhah* as entirely different uses of the word, perhaps they have something in common,

something that can inform how we imbue ordination with deeper meaning. Perhaps what we are saying when we give someone *semikhah* is that we set them aside and, with intention, we turn them into a *keli kodesh*, a holy vessel. We are transforming them from students and objects of education to full-fledged partners and leaders. Together they, through their learning, and we, their teachers and community, transform them into new beings: beings that can bring their learning, judgment, and leadership to the issues of the day.

In other words, there is a choreography of the *semikhah* of sacrifices that can inform how we perform the *semikhah* of ordination. It can encourage us to carve out a moment of time—to place the hands on the head—and be together in the brief moment as “I” and “Thou.”

On a weekly basis, when those of us who are parents bless our children at the Shabbat table, we also create this choreography of *semikhah*. We place our hands on the head of each child and bless the child. When this is done with *kavanah* (intention and focus), the rest of the world evaporates for a moment; we are able to focus on the child before us and on the blessings that call on God to watch over our children, keep them safe, and shine God’s light upon them. We are with them in an I-Thou encounter, gently and lovingly pressing our blessing and love into their head.

We see another I-It turned I-Thou relationship in Megillat Esther, which we will read this coming week on Purim. As Esther frets in the palace, wanting to attract the King’s attention in order to alert him to the fact that Haman plans to kill her people, she stands in the courtyard waiting to be recognized. The way the king indicates that he has seen her and is willing to enter into a relational encounter with her is by extending his golden scepter to her, which she touches (Esther 5:2). For a moment they are held together, focused on each other, in relationship, pausing and addressing (though the King does not yet know it) a sacrifice—this time, the one she is making to save her community.

What all three of these moments of relationship—priest and animal; parent and child; Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus—have in common is that time nearly stands still for the deep encounter. Everything outside of them evaporates for a moment, and there is physical contact—either hands placed on the head or a scepter linking the parties. They separate themselves from the world to concentrate on their connection and purpose.

One thing we know about leadership is that it must be continuously cultivated. To receive ordination *semikhah* and consider oneself to be a finished leader is

foolish and dangerous. One way that we strive to prepare our students to reconnect with their moment of *semikhah* and reaffirm their commitment to religious leadership is through our field education program. This program includes significant participation in processing and mentoring groups. We train our students to reflect regularly on their own actions, motivations, and behavior. They are paired with mentors, seasoned rabbis and cantors who have their own well-developed reflection practices. We believe that each of us is a work in progress and that the practice of reflecting must be life-long.

Our hope is that we are training our students to become rabbis and cantors who constantly seek out opportunities to gather with colleagues so they can pause and metaphorically place their intention and attention on each other. I like thinking of this as recommitting to the path of religious leadership and reaffirming the *semikhah* moment.

Communities can also play a role in enabling their clergy to pause, focus on their leadership, and ensure they can take on the role of community leader fully and healthfully. This can be through creating a framework for them to participate in ongoing supportive programs, or ensuring that they earn and take sabbaticals.

This year as we prepare to gather in the courtyard at JTS, joyfully celebrating that we have trained and helped develop a new generation of religious leaders for the Jewish community, I will be thinking about how we make that moment of *semikhah* sacred. How can we literally or figuratively press each graduating student’s forehead and convey a sense of strength, support, accompaniment, and clarity? How will we create a moment that will stand frozen in time for them, to which they can return to find their center when leading is difficult? And how can we help them, in that moment, to commit to many other moments of self-discovery and reflection as they continue to serve the Jewish community and the world?

These sacred moments of I-Thou relationship can be the linchpins of a religious life. May this year’s *semikhah* ceremony be one that inspires many more of these moments for our new rabbis and cantors and for their communities.

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