



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.

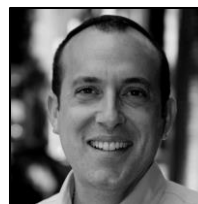
Another Esther: for some scholars and Jews who have identified as gay, as queer, or as transpeople, the crypto-Jewish Esther has become a symbol that dignifies or sacralizes the experience of survival in a hidden identity, and points to the salvific power of self-revelation.

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
www.jtsa.edu/purim-heroines

Tetzavveh 5780
 Shabbat Zakhor

תצוה תש"ף
 שבת זכור



The Sound of the Bells

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At the core of Parashat Tetzavveh is a detailed description of the clothing worn by the officiants who will perform ritual service in the sacred space known as the Tent of Meeting (and later, the Temple). In the same way that holy space must be constructed differently from common space, so too must the priests and High Priest be "separate" from the common people. It is for this reason that Torah commands the fabrication of special clothing. Think of it as a holy uniform for holy ritual.

First we read the detailed description of all of the sacral vestments required by the High Priest: the ephod, breastplate, robe, frontlet, tunic, headdress, and sash; and then the parashah turns its attention to the special apparel of the ordinary priests. While each description of the various appurtenances is enticing and aesthetic in its own right, most striking and tantalizing to the senses is the hem of the robe worn by the High Priest. Exodus 28:33-35 teaches,

"On its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die."

Why does Torah emphasize the chiming of these golden bells?

Not surprisingly, there are a number of explanations of these bells. Rashbam (Rabbi Shemuel ben Meir) explains that since the High Priest is the only one who may be present when performing the ritual of atonement, the bells chime to signal to others that they must leave the sacred space. The prooftext for Rashbam is found in Leviticus 16:17 which states, “when he [the High Priest] enters the sacred space to make atonement, nobody else will be in the Tent of Meeting until he comes out.” For Rashbam, the bells are needed to express a message to humans.

Nahmanides (Ramban) presents a different view in his commentary, explaining, “God commanded the sounding of the bells so that the priest enter before his Master as if with permission. For one who comes into the King’s palace suddenly incurs the penalty of death, just as we find with King Ahashverosh (Esther 4:11)” In other words, Nahmanides makes the argument that the golden bells serve as a means of announcing one’s presence to God before entering God’s sacred place. Writ large, these commentaries focus on different audiences: either the bells are for other humans (Rashbam) or they are meant for God (Ramban).

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor Hacohen provides an alternative reading arguing that the bells represent how we as individuals relate to God in our soulful lives. Inspired by the portion of the verse which says that the “sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary,” he asks the question “when a person approaches holiness in their lives, is s/he required to raise her/his voice (especially with regard to prayer) or is it better to whisper and employ a more modest voice?” In response, Hacohen turns to two modes of prayer represented by Rabbi Shelomo of Karlin and Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin.

When Rabbi Shelomo of Karlin prayed with his devotees, he encouraged them to pray from a place of passion—employing heartfelt crying out to God and ecstatic body movements. During prayer, he would even cry out, “Bring the fire! Bring the fire!” Their prayer was chaotic, stormy, loud, and expressive. In contrast, Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin taught his followers to pray with a *kol demamah dakah*, “still small voice.” (cf. 1 Kings 19:12) He encouraged his devotees to learn the

discipline of tending to and nurturing the soulful fire that burns within the confines of one’s soul; and then expressing it in a modest, understated way that is true to one’s self but subtle and modest to others.

Jews pray in a multiplicity of ways—between the poles expressed by Rabbi Shelomo and Rabbi Yisrael. While there are Jews that comfortably locate themselves with one or the other—tending toward loud expressive prayer on the one hand or more modest, restrained demeanor on the other—the majority of us embrace the shades of grey in between. There are times in our spiritual lives when we need to call out with a full voice, and other times when we need to embrace that still, small voice inside of us.

Perhaps the models represented by these two modes find their resonance in the introvert / extrovert tension. Extroverts derive energy from connecting passionately with others and being surrounded by people, noise, and energy; introverts on the other hand need their own space. And though introverts may express themselves with a “still, small voice,” their modesty should not be misinterpreted as apathy or indifference.

Rabbi Shelomo and Rabbi Yisrael (and extroverts and introverts) represent two complementary ways of engaging with the world and expressing one’s unique voice. But more than that, I see this as not only reflecting postures toward prayer but also postures on interfacing with life and our world. We need both—not only in the world of spirituality but also in the larger world—especially when it comes to politics, social issues, American Jewish life, and the State of Israel.

Every single one of us journeys through life with a “hem of golden bells.” These bells are indeed unique to each and every one of us. The challenge we are faced with is finding the proper way for the sound of these bells to be heard. The voice of these bells needs to be heard by others, by God, and, perhaps most importantly, by our inner selves. Parashat Tetzavveh gives us the gift of thinking about how we want our special voice heard in the world. To not accept this challenge is to deprive ourselves and others of a precious vehicle toward expressing the unique Image of God inherent in each of us.