

Part Four
“SPEAKING OF WOMEN”:
A STUDY OF GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH THE BOOK OF ESTHER
By Steve Israel and Noam Zion

Introducing the Booklet

Introducing the Subject

Introductory Exercise: How Do You Feel About the Image of the Beautiful Woman in Contemporary Society?

Introducing the Megillah:

Passive and Perfumed - Shushan's Women As A Model For Today?

Exercise: Preparing For the King

Exercise: Through Buber's Eyes

Exercise: Women As "It"

Supplementary Exercise: Deepening The Issue: Are You Being Harassed?

Supplementary Exercise: Judging The Beauty Contest

Exercise: And What Do the Women Say?

Exercise: And What of the Boys?

Postscript: But What If It Just Feels Good?

Exercise: Ahashverosh Unmanned

Exercise: Looking For The Man! A Mixed Media Exercise.

Exercise: The Ultimate Supermodel - Esther Or Vashti?

Exercises: Women On The Make – Representations of Esther and Vashti in Art

Final Exercise: Choosing The Model Woman

Introducing the Booklet

The What...

In this booklet we attempt something new: we aim to examine one of the principal modern issues that we believe needs to be examined in the modern world and in the modern Jewish school, the issue of gender roles and specifically gender roles for women and the related issue of the relationship between the sexes. That in itself is not necessarily new. However, what we attempt to do here is to examine the question using a specific text as our jumping-off point. The text in question is Megillat Esther, and it is a text that we have already examined in a separate booklet.

The difference here is that the text becomes the basis for the various examinations that we perform in order to get into our subject rather than itself standing at the centre of the examinations themselves. In other words, the text, while emphasised and examined time and time again throughout the booklet, functions to a large extent as a trigger to get to the subjects that we wish to examine. At the centre of the booklet is the subject of gender: it is reached via examinations and explorations of the text of the Megillah.

The Why...

There are several reasons that we can suggest for doing this. First and foremost is our belief that the world of Jewish learning should be aimed as much at character formation and moral development as at the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge. So often the former is abandoned in favour of the latter and we see both as equally important. Therefore, it seems to us that in an ideal world the two should be combined inextricably so that the subjects necessary for moral development are introduced through the classical texts in such a way that the students are pushed to confront those subjects as they learn the texts. The way that the text of the Megillah is presented here will, it is hoped, bring the students to confront centrally the issue of gender and sex roles that plays so much on the minds of today's students.

Secondly, such an approach, it is hoped, will enable the students to grasp the relevance of the texts and the way that close examination of the heritage can repay the student (of all ages!) with insights that can help them understand the world in which they live and navigate through it. This is not necessarily to be done by using classical texts that say "good things" and present positive values in the minds of the educators. That in itself is valid and important but we believe that it is not the only way to use texts. Some of the texts might have to be "midrashically mined" or "reconstructed" so as to reveal the ideas that the students must grapple with. Some of the approaches might be critical of the texts. And some approaches might indeed use the texts as triggers or spring-boards to enable the subject in question to be seriously studied.

Thirdly, it is clear to use that there are subjects such as sex and gender roles and the basis of relationships that every student is going to confront and deal with because the

subjects are part of their world. The lucky few will receive the opportunity to do so in a structured and carefully controlled and supportive environment. The vast majority will not. These latter will make their decisions, often unconsciously, through a variety of different influences, including television and the media, social pressure and sheer ignorance. We want to suggest that the approach outlined above will not only help them to confront the issues carefully, with guidance and structure, but will allow them to do so in a way which places Jewish texts and ideas among the central influences.

The How...

The approach taken here is not the one that reflects how things are generally done in most day schools (or other formal frameworks). Rather, the approach reflects much more the assumptions of informal education which put values and students in the centre, and use stimulating materials of all kinds to examine the issue in question. For that reason, it might be outside the normal purview of most Jewish studies teachers who are on the whole trained to concentrate on the text in terms of knowledge and skill. Therefore it is our suggestion that the sort of thing that we are advocating in this booklet should perhaps be “team-taught” by the Jewish studies and social studies teachers working together.

In addition, it might be that the usual time periods of school studies are constricting for many of the things that are proposed here. It might be that a reorganization of time into a number of special study days or half days would be worth considering in order to maximize the effectiveness of this particular form of teaching. There are many different exercises that are offered here. They are offered in a certain order which, while based on thought, is to an extent almost arbitrary in the following sense. The subject can be approached from different directions and there are all sorts of possible jumping-off points. We have tried to create a logical order in which ideas and concepts are slowly built up but given educators might want to turn over the material and approach it in a different order, allowing, obviously, for the need to connect in the different activities and show a logical internal order. In other words, it would certainly be possible, for example, to use the last exercise, which places Esther on trial for providing a questionable model for girls and women, as the trigger for the whole examination, and to work backwards (or sideways) from that.

We have tried to be as creative as possible in this booklet using all sorts of different techniques including very centrally, the use of art. We think that in a world where multiple intelligences are a recognized part of the vocabulary of education, it is important to work as widely as possible through the use of many different techniques in order to bring as many students in to the learning process as possible.

To use this booklet it is essential to remember that this is an attempt at Jewish values education. We have written elsewhere the following, which is part of our educational credo.

The questions we ask are open ended. Ultimately, in all cases, whatever ideas we suggest, it is clear that the answers have to be given by the students themselves in order for the search for meaning to be authentic. We believe that the students must always be respected as they struggle to make up their mind as to how they see the

world around them, as young people, as Jews and as human beings. Our task is to challenge them, to suggest ideas that we think need to be considered and to invite them into the world...that we are presenting. Their task is to “take the baton and run”, to confront the questions and to try and decide where they stand within the great Jewish conversation into which we are inviting them.

If this is true in general, how much more so is this true in a booklet in which our objective is to challenge the students to develop a value response to the complex and confusing world in which they find themselves.

We have already said that many teachers might feel uncomfortable – not to say bewildered - by the approach taken here. It does not conform to what most teachers (especially, although by no mean exclusively, teachers of Jewish studies) have been trained to do. There are those who will feel that the approach is far away from what they normally do. There will be others who will feel more comfortable, seeing it as nearer the way that they like to structure their classes. For all teachers, we suggest that you read this booklet with an open mind, without feeling initially the weight of responsibility of “How on earth would I do this???” and simply try and open up and enjoy.

בהצלחה!

Introducing the Subject

The last thirty or forty years has seen what purports to be a revolution in the way that male and female roles and the relationships based on those roles are understood by Western society. When modern feminists started to develop a wide audience for their ideas, it was assumed by many that it was only a matter of time before those ideas, which for many women in particular, were so obvious and persuasive, became an accepted part of the world around them.

To a certain extent, at least outwardly, much of this appears to have happened. Feminist rhetoric, at least in its more moderate forms, has indeed been taken on board by large parts of the population who see themselves standing for a modern progressive social order. However, a deeper look will reveal that not all is simple in Eden. Firstly, in our politically correct world, there is often a difference between the progressive agendas espoused outwardly by many and the inner attitudes that many embrace. In addition, as the world attempts to come to terms with the possibility of new roles for women and new models of relationships between the sexes, it should be born in mind that there are few areas of life where real feelings run so deep. The attempt to overturn, or at least to seriously adjust, a model that has been the dominant model for human behaviour for almost all of recorded human history is very difficult. Cultural ideas that have been the practice for thousands (millions!) of years cannot be changed without a great deal of ambivalence and insecurity on the part of those in the changing societies – including many who on a cerebral level at least, accept the proposed changes. In addition, there is the as yet unresolved issue of the role of biology in the creation of different roles for men and women.

It is hardly surprising that it is easier to talk about new agendas than to bring them to fruition and acceptance. This, by the way, is probably true for almost as many women as men. The debate over feminist agendas and women's roles in society and in relationships has been as fierce among women as between women and men.

The world of the student is also extremely confused. The student is surrounded by sex as a central ingredient of popular culture, in ever more provocative ways. Almost all of the popular media place women in a central role, dictated by the commercial possibilities of increasing sales by appealing to men's fantasies. Sexuality and sexual fantasy is an ever-present part of the world of the student and unlike the situation a generation ago, it is almost impossible to put blinkers on the students and to usher them into a "safer place". Social pressure to be cool is, as always, extremely strong and sexuality plays a more and more central role in the defining of the "cool". More often than not, warning signs against permissive and automatic sexuality are seen to be held up by authority figures who are increasingly remote and irrelevant as "moral signposts" for the average student. For many students the world of "teachers and school" and the world of "Judaism" are examples of institutions which have little of meaning to say to them. Their representatives, even when liked and respected on a personal level, are seen as representing a different generation whose norms and opinions are out of step with modern times.

For these reasons, we believe that it is essential to raise issues in an enlightened and open fashion in the schools. This booklet attempts to examine certain aspects of the world of sex and gender and to help the students slow down and ponder, reaching for positions that can help them examine, slowly and seriously, the complex issues in question. How should Jewish girls act in modern society? What is the model for Jewish womanhood? How should boys and men act towards girls and women? What lies beneath the common male need for control of women in a relationship? The list is not exhaustive, by any means, but it does attempt to address and open up some of the central questions. Its agenda is not to come to specific conclusions in one direction or other (although we have some clear opinions and inevitably they will reveal themselves from time to time). The agenda is to encourage the students to find *their own* conclusions. The vehicle for doing this is the Megillah.

Without further ado, let us prepare ourselves to enter the world of men and women in Shushan.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE¹: How Do You Feel About The Image Of The Beautiful Woman In Contemporary Society?

The aim of this introductory exercise is to start thinking about the situation of gender roles in society in general, before we go on to examine the specific case of women in the Shushan of Ahashverosh.

- Divide the class into boys and girls. Subdivide each group into small groups.
- Give one of the following four situations to one small group of boys and one of girls.
 - What do you think of the fact that beautiful women are often used to sell beautiful cars?
 - What do you think of the fact that in most offices, it is expected of more women than men that they make the coffee and serve the food when there is an important meeting?
 - What do you think of the fact that women are expected to wear makeup in order to appear truly beautiful whereas the same demand is never made of men?
 - What do you think of the fact that women appear in many beauty contests where the major thing that is being assessed is the beauty of their bodies according to the criteria of male judges?
- Give each group a few minutes to develop a position. Now take the parallel groups of boys and girls and sit them together to discuss their responses to the same question.

Class Discussion

- After a few minutes, bring everyone together and discuss, not the issues themselves, but whether there were any differences in the way that the girls and the boys reacted to the same question. Whether there were or were not, examine the question whether or not one would expect differences of opinion, and why. Ask whether in society, on the whole, women's perspectives on what is desirable are more accepted than men's perspectives? Or is the opposite true? Which way does society really work? Ask whether there has been change in this regard during their lifetimes? Ask for examples of how they see society working more for the benefit of women or men? Do they still live in a "man's world" or is it a world that is organised for the equal benefit of all? Can they bring examples from their own world to support one opinion or the other?

¹ **N.B. Some of the following exercises are written on the assumption that the class is a mixed sex class. If this is not so, you will need to vary some aspects of the specific technique.**

Introducing The Megillah: Passive and Perfumed - Shushan's Women As A Model For Today?

We now move over to ancient Persia. What is the situation of women in the world of Ahashverosh? How much control do they have over their own lives? How can they respond to the situation in which they find themselves? These are some of the crucial questions that a reading of the Megillah throws up to us, and to which we will try and respond in this section.

The world of Ahashverosh presents us with a typical, almost stereotyped version of a patriarchal male society where the orders are given – and the social order created and controlled – exclusively by men. Women sit inside the male web and are presented as objects for male perusal. In the classic scene that opens the Megillah, it is clear that the task of the women is essentially to appear as both an ornament and a possession – a symbol of the wealth and fortune of the king. In such a situation it is clear that all the essential decisions are controlled by men. The only real freedom that women appear to have is the right to refuse the status that is imposed on them by their men by refusing to acquiesce in the "property market" that is shown to be the dominant mode of interaction between men and women at the royal court. This is of course the major significance of Vashti's refusal to appear before the king.

Vashti is punished because at a certain point, she refuses to play by the rules, the rules that specify that the woman is essentially a play-object meant for the use of the man who wishes to display his wealth and possessions. Up to now she presumably has played by these rules and has lived up to the king's expectations in this regard because otherwise it is hard to understand the king's sudden wrath and equally hard to understand how she would have survived as queen up to now. This conduct of Vashti's is significantly seen as threatening the male domestic status. "They [the noble women of Persia] will despise their husbands...there will be no end of disrespect and discord" (Ch. 1:17,18).

On the other hand, in refusing to play the game according to the rules as demanded, Vashti might gain her dignity but she loses her power and her throne. She is doomed to eternal exile from the royal court and presence and her throne is to be given to someone "better than she" (Ch. 1:19). This will preserve the social fabric of the kingdom in terms of the desired interaction between husbands and wives – "all the wives will give honour to their husbands, both high and low" (1:20). The message is clear. The "better" candidate – the lucky winner – will be a person who understands much better than Vashti, the rules of the game, and will be determined to play according to those rules. Social revolutionaries will not get very far in the royal lottery. The qualities desired will certainly include beauty and personal attractiveness, but they will include passivity and compliance as essential ingredients too. It is important to note that the royal marriage is explicitly seen as a model for interactive behaviour throughout the kingdom – throughout all of Ahashverosh's kingdom with its 127 states.

Within this context it is clear that for those women and girls who are unwilling to take the route of Vashti and lose everything for the sake of an abstract principle of justice and dignity, there is only one way to advance and to create a decent life for themselves. That is to play within the framework of rules constructed by the men and presumably to try and create a little autonomous space for themselves within that male preserve. The question is how? Is it possible for women to find their own place in a world which has denied them any possibility of independent power which does not come to them through the agency of men?

The answer seems to be contained in the question. The only way that women can find a space for themselves in this world, a space that they can try and expand to the point where they will achieve some independent power that they can use for their own purposes, is precisely through the agency of men. One of the ironies that underlies the story of the Megillah is the suggestion that ultimately women can gain power, but they can do so only by following a policy of ingratiating themselves within the male society through an exploitation of their femininity or at least that picture of femininity that the men in the society value. Esther gains power, but she does it by playing according to the very strict rules of the game. Any power that she gains is a direct result of the fact that it is granted to her by the male power, Ahashverosh. Even the one time that she goes against the rules and approaches the king at her own initiative is done out of an express understanding that it is the king's prerogative to deny her approach and to demand her death.

Thus we see that, ironically, in a male oriented society such as that of Shushan, women can gain some measure of autonomy and power by acquiescing to the demands of the men, and by creating themselves in the image of the male desire that fuels the men in their relationships with the women that they (think they) control.

A caveat: While we have contrasted Vashti and Esther, emphasizing their opposed responses to the demands of harem life, others have read them as parallel women of strength. Consider the view below before continuing:

Professor Lori Lefkowitz of the Kolot Women's Center at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College writes: The traditional opposition of Esther and Vashti ignores the interpretation that the characters are more similar than different and enforces the tendency in Jewish textual interpretation to atomize women and divide them from one another. Vashti and Esther are both figures who are understood to have political power and influence. Both break the rules. Both say "no" for the sake of what they believe is a higher purpose. One important reason for Vashti in the story is to show the reader and Esther what can happen if you don't follow the rule to appear before the king when called and only when called (that is, not to appear when not called). Esther follows Vashti's example, fortunately, with greater success (so pretty, in spite of how down she feels, that the king "touches the royal scepter"!) I would suggest somehow that resistance to unjust authority—albeit played out in terms of displaying the body—is a feature of female heroism in the book overall, a feature shared by both female characters. Moreover, even if the later tradition does not approve of Vashti, there is no indication that the text itself has anything but admiration for her.

In this section we will attempt to look at the mechanisms that men demand of women and women accept in order to climb the ladder and to gain some kind of protective shelter in the context of marriage. We must remember that while the king's "beauty contest" might well be one of a kind, this marriage is seen as the model that other households are expected to follow in terms of the essence of the married relationship. Thus an analysis of some of the aspects of the royal demands on potential candidates for the position of queen, can be expected to shed light on the position of women in general in the society of Ahashverosh's empire.

We will see some of the steps taken in order to prepare the candidates and will try and understand what happens to the women both in the minds of the men of the court and perhaps, in their own minds too. We will suggest that undergoing the long preparation for royal acceptance, is likely to produce what might be called a "harem mentality" among women whose hope for security and position in society is predicated almost completely on their being seen as desirable by their would-be husbands. We will try and understand some of the dynamics of this "harem mentality" in terms of its functioning as a survival strategy

for disenfranchised women. Finally, we will make the jump to our own society in order to examine whether we can find remnants of this mentality today – including among the students.

Our aim is to confront the question: how far have we really come from the streets of Shushan and the days of the Megillah?

EXERCISE: Preparing For the King

The aim of this exercise is to examine Esther's state of mind and experience prior to meeting the King.

Posing the Issue

There is a fascinating contrast between the Esther at the start of the story and the Esther who appears at the end. The Esther at the end of the story is a self-possessed woman, confident and capable of ruling. Esther at the beginning of the story is essentially completely passive. Throughout chapter two, up to, including and past the time when she is crowned as queen, we hear only of a totally passive and compliant woman for whom decisions are taken by others. There are decisions made for her by Mordechai, by Hegai and by Ahashverosh, the three men who dominate the narrative at this point, and we hear not of a single decision that she makes for herself. Even when she gets the one chance to make a decision, when she is asked what she wants to take with her from the royal harem in order to make a good impression on the king, she elects to take nothing. And while this is traditionally seen as being a sign of her innate modesty and good character, it can just as easily be a sign of her essential passivity. If no one makes a decision for her, she seems incapable of making one for herself.

The very language that is used about her is largely passive. We hear that she is taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai (v.8). He provided for her...assigned to her and moved her (v.9). She does what Mordechai tells her to do and does not do what he does not want her to do. There is an interesting question underlying the text: what would there be, other than her beauty, to recommend a girl like Esther, so passive and compliant, so that she won the favour of everyone who saw her (v15)? Apart from her beauty (presumably something she had in common with the other girls who made the final selection process), one suspects that it is her very conforming with the demands of the society – women should be quiet, modest, passive and compliant – the very opposite of the hated Vashti, that would gain Esther the approval of all. Certainly, we hear no other expression of her personality. It seems unlikely that she was the "life and soul of the party" in Hegai's harem. Most interestingly, we hear nothing of Esther's inner life, her thoughts, her feelings, her reactions towards what ultimately was an incredibly extreme set of developments – a radical turning point - in her own life.

One suspects that she could not have been opposed. Presumably, Mordechai would not have forced her to do something to which she was totally opposed. But outside of that we are at an absolute loss to work out her reactions. What was she looking for? What was she hoping for? Did she hope to be chosen? If so, why? Any attempts to read her loyalty to the Jews into the story at this point are clearly anachronistic. Presumably, she had no desire to save the Jews – the Jews are not in danger yet. To say that she wanted to be there in order to save

the Jews should danger develop is perhaps the basis of a good midrash, but it hardly reflects a serious reading of the story.

The only plausible suggestion would appear to be that she indeed hoped to be chosen because it would open up a new life to her, a secure and protected life for this orphan Jewish girl. It might provide a basis for her that would assure her a security in the future that had been so clearly lacking in her life up to now. It might even be that since her sole security in life at this point was clearly connected with her uncle, Mordechai, she was preparing herself, as best she could, at Mordechai's behest, for the day when he would no longer be there to support her.

In order to ensure this better, more secure future for her, she was going to do everything in order to be chosen. She was going to act the way that Persian men liked their women, beautiful, quiet, demure, passive - she would turn herself into the sort of ornament that would stand her in good stead at the royal court, in the competition for the ultimate prize. One may suggest that she had heard of the reasons for the fall of her would-be predecessor, and this had made it clear, beyond any shadow of doubt, what the characteristics of the winning candidate would be likely to be. It seems likely that all this was welcome indeed for the young girl, since it seems that those very characteristics would be those that came most naturally to her. It is possible to construct a sophisticated "conspiracy theory" that would have a naturally assertive Esther demurely adopting the winning formula for a Queen's behaviour right from the beginning of the story, but we can probably dismiss this as far too cynical. Among other things it would make the author of the Megillah into a fellow conspirator since he pictures her as such right from the beginning.

No. We suggest that this passive girl happens to have the winning characteristics as her natural inheritance. Beauty, modesty and compliance – this would seem to represent the winning combination to get her accepted as the king's favourite, and guarantee a life of security, a life free from worry, for ever – as long as she remembers to play by the rules.

Comparative Text Study

- Let us examine a number of moments in the process of Esther's election and rise to the position of queen.
1. *...Esther also was taken to the king's palace. (Ch. 2:8)*
 2. *...[Esther] was entrusted to Hegai who was in charge of the harem. (v.8)*
 3. *The girl pleased him and won his favour. (v.9)*
 4. *Immediately he provided her with beauty treatments and supplied her with special food. (v.9)*
 5. *He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem. (v.9)*
 6. *Before a girl's turn came to go into King Ahashverosh, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. (v.12)*

7. *Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. (v.17)*

8. *So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (v.17)*

These scenes are the relevant ones in the text for understanding the whole process of Esther's election to queen.

- Divide up the class into eight groups, give one of the above eight steps to each group and ask the members of each group to write (collectively) a diary entry for Esther reflecting on the phrase or sentence. The entry should not be too short. It should be serious and reflect what they understand to be Esther's reactions to and feelings about the particular events recounted in the phrase or sentence.
- Each group should read out their entry and explain why they think that this is the way that Esther would be feeling at this moment.
- After going through the various stages, discuss with the group what they think Esther's aims would be throughout this entire process (from step one). List them on the board. On the assumption that she was at least a willing partner in the whole process, what exactly did she want to achieve? Why?
- Let us examine a number of moments in the course of the election process for a new queen from Ahashverosh's point of view. We bring the words of the text.

1. *...When the anger of King Ahashverosh [at Vashti] had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. (Ch. 2:1)*

2. *Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Shushan. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." The advice appealed to the king and he followed it. (vv. 2-4)*

3. *When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Shushan and put under the care of Hegai. (v. 8)*

4. *Before a girl's turn came to go into King Ahashverosh, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. (v.12)*

5. *She was taken to King Ahashverosh in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tevet, in the seventh year of his reign. (v. 16)*

6. *Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. (v.17)*

7. *So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (v.17)*

8. *And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet for all his nobles and officials.* (v.18)

- Using the same eight groups, do a parallel process for these verses, writing a diary entry for Ahashverosh at each stage of the proceedings.
- After reading the entries and going through the various stages, discuss with the group what they think Ahashverosh's aims would be throughout this entire process (from step one). List them on the board. What exactly did he want to achieve? What sort of a queen was he looking for? Why? If they have not come up, introduce for discussion the words "passive" and "compliant". Would these be important aspects for Ahashverosh? Why? Perhaps bring the Vashti episode as an example of a model of queen that the king clearly did *not* want.
- Looking at the aims of the two figures as they are listed, discuss the questions whether at this stage of the story, Esther and Ahashverosh suited each other. What was it that each one wanted, and what was it that each one got? Discuss how the group thinks that each would have perceived the other.

EXERCISE: Through Buber's Eyes

The aim of this exercise is to examine the question of relationships and the quality of romantic interactions through the prism of the Megillah's story.

Posing The Issue

One of the greatest of all Jewish thinkers in the last hundred years was surely Martin Buber. Buber, who made his name as a thinker in pre-Holocaust Germany, came to Israel before the Holocaust and established himself as one of the premier theological thinkers of the age. As a religious thinker, Buber developed an idea of a desirable relationship with God, by using a model of human relations that was based on the concept of dialogue. We will briefly sketch his penetrating idea of human relationships before we use his framework of thought to examine the relationship between Esther and Ahashverosh, following on from the previous exercise. This will allow us to go beyond the Megillah and address issues of human relationships within the world of the students.

Buber's starting point in his analysis of relationships was the traditional idea that inside every human being there is an image of the Divine. He believed that if we can recognise and remember that idea in our relationships with other people, we will necessarily treat them differently. He distinguished between two types of relationships: I-It and I-Thou. In I-It relations, an individual is related to in an instrumental way: s/he is valued in as much as s/he performs a function for another individual. The individual isn't seen as a whole but rather in a very specific light. For example, a teacher may see Bob, his/her student, as 'student' and not as Bob – boy, age 16, child, brother, student, guitar player, cousin, friend, who has just been through a difficult experience, etc. – all the aspects of Bob that make him who he is.

The same goes for a patient, a sales clerk, a parent, a friend who accompanies one to a party; all these are examples of people who can be viewed and related to as fulfilling a specific function for someone at a specific time.

Those same people, however, can be related to differently, in an I-Thou way. An I-Thou relationship sees the person as a whole; not as a tool to fill a need, but as he or she is, as a complete human being. According to Buber, both types of relationships are necessary, but the moments of relating on the basis of I-Thou (and they do appear as moments, as all relationships inevitably turn back to I-It at some point) are most significant and worthwhile and are something which we can strive for in our own relationships.

All inter-personal relationships are intended here, but special place can – and must – be given to romantic and, most especially, sexual relationships. We said previously that according to Buber, we should ideally strive to relate to others as complete persons, not as individuals who fulfill a certain need for us, but, ultimately, as representations of the Divine. We can use this value as our measuring rod, and create a sliding scale of more appropriate and less appropriate sexual activities. The more an individual is relating to another as a whole person, as a Thou, the more worthy is the sexual behaviour. The more an individual relates to another as simply a means to satisfy his/her needs, the less worthy is the sexual behaviour.

In concrete terms, for example, a person who dates another just to 'look good' in front of his/her friends, and to make an impression, is using that other person. A person who flirts with many people to bolster his/her own ego is using those other people for his/her own needs. These behaviours would not measure high by our measuring rod. Conversely, a person who exhibits true care and concern for another, is sensitive to his/her feeling, needs, hopes and anxieties and treats him/her with respect, **would** rank high by our measuring rod.

The contemporary Jewish thinker, Eugene Borowitz, developed Buber's ideas in this respect in his book, Choosing a Sex Ethic. In this book he charts out general guidelines for appropriate sexual activity. He works out a continuum from least appropriate to most appropriate, using the criteria presented above. The different categories he presents may be summarised as:

1. *Personal Satisfaction* – which focus only on the individual's own needs, desires and feelings.
2. *Mutual Consent* – which takes both partners' wishes into account; here, there isn't necessarily an emotional bond between the two partners, but both are happy to participate.
3. *Friendship* – which presumes mutual consent plus existence of an emotional bond between the two partners.
4. *Love*
5. *Love for life* – traditionally, marriage.

There is a qualitative difference in the relationships between the partners as we move up the continuum. At the lowest level, 'Personal satisfaction', we see one person being used as a means to satisfy another's needs and desires. On the highest level, 'Love for life', we see a

relationship which includes moments of I-Thou interactions, a relationship where true caring and trust exist, where a commitment between the partners has been forged not only for the present, but for the future as well.

The question we now wish to deal with is the relationship between Esther and Ahashverosh. To what extent is theirs an instrumental "I-It" relationship, (a level 1 relationship according to the classification worked out by Borowitz), where each partner fills a certain need for the other, and where each values the other for what they can give them, rather than for whom they really are?

Discussion And Group Analysis

- Ask half the class (as individuals) to write (or draw!) a picture of Esther as they think Ahashverosh sees her at the time of her crowning. Ask the other half of the class to reverse the process and to describe or draw Ahashverosh as they think that Esther sees him at the same time. **[If your class is a mixed class and there are more or less equal numbers of boys and girls in the class, it might be interesting to let the boys take the first task (Esther through the eyes of the king) while the girls see things through Esther's eyes. Equally interesting might be the experiment of dividing each perspective between a mixed group of boys and girls and seeing if there is any difference between the way that members of each gender group read the situation].** After they draw or describe their character, they should write a series of key words, principally adjectives, that describe, in their eyes, the way that their character perceives the other.
- Ask a few volunteers to read or show their ideas. After they do, make a list of the key words that they suggest. Ask other students to throw out additional words that they think should go on the list. Discuss the words as they come up and if there is disagreement in the class about whether to include a certain word in the list for the way one character regards the other, vote whether to retain it or not.
- Now introduce the ideas of Buber that have been mentioned above. (We deliberately did not bring Buberian texts which are both difficult linguistically, obtuse conceptually and diffuse in terms of finding one statement where he brings the idea clearly and succinctly). Explain the ideas clearly. Explain the idea of the ladder or hierarchy of relationships which stems from Buber's ideas but which was developed by Eugene Borowitz. Explain the five different levels suggested above.
- Ask the class to characterise the relationship between Esther and Ahashverosh, from both character's point of view regarding the other, according to the list of key words worked out previously and the Buber/Borowitz criteria. To which of the five levels would they assign the relationship? Is the level different for the two characters or is it the same? Do the students believe that there is potential for a much higher place in the hierarchy of desirable relationships for Esther and Ahashverosh's relationship? Why? Why not? Is the relatively instrumental "I-It" situation that presumably characterises their view of each other, necessarily illegitimate? Why? Why not?

EXERCISE: Women As "It"

The aim is to examine how women are seen in society both then and now, and to see to what evidence there is for the idea that societies, even today, tend to see women in largely "I – It" terms.

Posing the Issue

We have already examined the way that Esther (as representative of women in general) is seen by Ahashverosh. We have suggested that she is seen essentially as an ornament for his courtiers (and for the king himself). We have suggested that she is expected to be passive and compliant, grateful for her good fortune in having "made it" to the top of society. If she is dissatisfied with her lack of independence, she is certainly expected to hide it. She is meant to be seen as being at the beck and call of the king. We suggest, moreover, that by the time that the girl becomes a queen, she has ceased to be herself and has become little more than an object, an appendage to the king's person, a piece of royal property with which the king can do as he pleases. If she does not play her role to perfection in the expected way, she is instantly disposable. She has no independent voice. She has ceased to be a real live three-dimensional person, with her own whims and desires and personality. She has been made over into an object.

The whole preparation process has played a large part in this as well. The candidates for queenship arrived at the royal court as real people and through a carefully crafted process, involving beauty treatments, special foods, oils, perfumes and cosmetics, they were turned into wax dolls according to the royal standards of beauty. The girls that finally appeared before the king, had been made over into an image of beauty dictated by male societal standards of the time. On the basis of each girl who appeared initially at court, a whole new persona has been grafted. She cannot even smell like herself!

We know too little of the way that beauty was seen (by men) at that time to know precisely how men liked their women. Did they like their women plump or lean? With long hair or short? Covered up or uncovered? With dark hair or blonde? These are standards that have changed according to time and place? If Renaissance men liked their women on the plumpish side, twenty first century men, appear to have adopted a taste for a thinner model. We are now obsessed with blonde, but other societies have seen the mystery of dark hair and skin to be alluring. The one thing that all societies seem to have in common, however, is that those who made the rules, those who decided on what was desirable and what was not, what was in and what should most definitely be out – were, overwhelmingly, men.

Let us examine this process with the students through a series of exercises. Some or all can be used.

Discussion And Magazine Exercise

- Start by revisiting the process of preparation that each girl-candidate had to pass through. (Ch. 2: vv.9,12). Ask the following questions.

- Why was such a process necessary? What was the point of it?
- Who or what dictated the precise ingredients of the process? Who would have dictated that it was six months of oils and six months of perfumes and cosmetics? Who would dictate which oils, which perfumes and which foods?
- What were all of these things chosen to do and why?
- What would these things tend to do to the girls who had come to the court in the hope of being chosen as queen? Would it make them more or less like what they really were like? The closer they came to the royal standards and the further they moved from the real people that they were, would it increase or decrease their chance of being chosen?
- Suggest the idea that the aim was to remake the girls over to standards of beauty prevalent at the time. Discuss where standards of beauty came from in Ahashverosh's Shushan. Who made the decisions that affected the way that beauty and femininity were perceived? Discuss whether the societal standards of the time regarding what is desirable in women had more to do with male fantasy or female reality. Ask whether the women were seen as objects or as full three dimensional personalities.
- Now address the question whether any of the reality of Shushan in this regard can be found in today's society. How far have things really changed? Bring arguments for and against the idea that things have changed since the days of the Megillah.
- Prepare in advance a series of glossy magazines – women's fashion magazines, general women's magazines, cinema magazines, People magazine etc. etc. We won't suggest that you bring in pin-up magazines although the truth is that they make the point in the strongest possible way! In small groups, the students should examine the magazines and try and work out what the standards of beauty and femininity are that are being promoted here. What are the messages that the society – represented by the magazines – are giving to women? Are women expected to be themselves or are they supposed to make themselves over in specific ways? What is the ideal woman? Why?
- Go back to the Buber "I-Thou" and "I-It" categories. Were women in Shushan, "thous" or "its"? And what of women today?

SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISE: Deepening The Issue: Are You Being Harassed?

This is a letter that appeared in a magazine of Penn University students in 2001. The writer, Jennifer, a student of engineering, was troubled by something that she saw around her on her campus.

- Let the students read the letter and write a response to the writer.



[Tuesday, Sept. 25, 2001]

Letter to the Editor

T-shirts perpetuate idea of women as objects

I am saddened and disappointed by several shirts I have seen worn around campus. One shirt has the word "beerfest" fading into "breastfest." The other had the name of a fraternity and on the back said, "Do you know where your girlfriend is?" and the final shirt said, "Freshmen girls: get them while they're skinny."

These shirts send the message that women are not only objects, but that their value as women increases only as their "eye-candy" appeal increases. Why is it acceptable in our society to undermine the intrinsic value of a person's soul by basing self worth on outward appearance? I hope that one of the lessons learned from the recent terrorist attacks is that we value people because of our heartfelt relationships with them and because of our greater connection in society.

These women referred to on the shirts are people's daughters, best friends, sisters, or girlfriends. As much as I do not want these shirts comments applied to me, I am livid that they are being applied to women who I love dearly. Men, you should all be upset as well.

Please, do not allow such shirts and mindsets as these to be considered right or even normal. Human value is worth so much more.

Jennifer Stick

SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISE: Judging The Beauty Contest

The aim of this exercise is to bring the participants to reflect on the meaning of the beauty contest, a popular modern day form of entertainment, and to evaluate the institution for themselves.

Posing The Issue

Beauty contests are a popular form of entertainment. Women enter the contests willingly and they are enjoyed by a mixed audience. Society relates to them as a harmless and pleasant form of leisure-time activity and sees as “spoilsports” anyone who criticizes them. But there certainly are questions that can be asked about such contests and we would like to ask them here. The questions relate, once again, to the “objectification” of women, the tendency to turn women into objects, for public perusal. In a world in which such entertainments are seen as harmless and popular, how far are we really from the days of Shushan? Certainly the audience is different – at least before the choice is made. In Shushan, the idea was that the king was the real audience before the choice was made while everybody else would enjoy the woman or women and their beauty and charms after the choice had been made. In the modern era, many people get to enjoy the contest itself. It is possible to say – and there are many that say precisely this – that as long as the women take part voluntarily there is no problem in the contest. It is all “harmless fun”. But we have to ask whether it is a healthy exercise to ask women to parade their flesh, before a largely ogling audience, after months of preparations with diets and beauty preparations – just like Shushan!

Let us get behind the scenes in a real beauty contest and see things through the eyes of one of the contestants. We bring here a balanced account of the proceedings from the point of view of a participant who has no axe to grind in her description of a respectable contest in which she played a part. In 2002, in Gomel, Belarussia, an annual beauty contest took place. One of the contestants, Alina Koloskova, gave an extensive interview in an article and we bring it here. Significantly, the article was published by a Russian agency who looked for spouses in the western world for local women. Alina was signed up with the agency in the hope of landing a western spouse and being able to leave Belarussia. Soon after the article was published, we are told, Alina got what she wanted. She became engaged. We bring the whole article here.

The Beauty Contest



On the 17th of May in Gomel the competition "Miss Gomel 2002" was held. It was a great event in the life both of Gomel and the Gomel region. It was a great pleasure for our agency to appear as one of the sponsors of this holiday of beauty. 20 of the most charming ladies of Gomel aged 14-24 participated in this competition. One of these ladies was the member of our agency. Her name is Alina Koloskova. We have recently met Alina and she told us about the competition in her own words. She shares her worries and feelings before and after the competition. Some secrets behind the scenes, that are always hidden from a stranger. Today we have a chance

to get to know all this straight from her.

The idea to participate in the competition "Miss Gomel 2002" came to Alina very suddenly. One day, while walking along the street in our city, she met a friend of hers. Her friend had already decided to become a participant in this event. Alina immediately decided that she wanted to enter the contest herself. In 1998 she had entered a similar contest. Her parents agreed with Alina's decisions, as well as her friends and acquaintances. She felt that with this support, she could do quite well.

According to Alina's words the process of making a choice of the participants was very interesting for Alina because if she were chosen, it would suggest that she was better than the other girls.



On the 27th of February the agency "Gratsia", that was responsible for choosing the participants, arranged the final run-through of the ladies. Out of many the applicants, 20 final contestants were chosen. Alina was one of them. The ladies were examined by the agency specialists and they were given certain tasks. Most of them were told to lose some centimeters in these or those parts of their bodies. The girls were told that disregarding the agency demands may cause them to be removed from the competition. Alina had

to lose three centimeters in hips and waist. She did it easily. She lost 7 cm in waist and 5 cm in hips. To achieve these results she was doing shaping, jogging and when it got warmer riding a bike for the months that remained before the competition.

So as to look well during the competition the girls were having three lessons a week at the agency starting from the 28th of February till the third of May. They were rehearsing all the details. After the third of May the lessons were held every day from 1 p.m. till 10 p.m. including holidays, weekdays and days off. According to Alina's words it was a very tough time. In addition to the daily rehearsal, they also had consultations with cosmetologists and hairdressers. They helped the girls to find their own style.



The main rehearsal was held on the 16th of May, and everything was meant to look the same as during the competition itself. The atmosphere was very tense. The girls were worrying and nervous. The rehearsal was held in an empty hall but there was the feeling that an audience was present. The stage was already fully prepared and all the action didn't look like the previous ones. The screens that were hiding the sight of what was happening on the stage, were already placed as well. Before that the girls used to see the other participants' entries, but now they had to orient themselves on the music only. That was the main difficulty. The other difficulty was that they had to walk and move gracefully with high-heeled shoes on. At the



rehearsals they used to wear more comfortable shoes. The tense atmosphere didn't influence Alina, it only made her concentrate. Alina was one of the oldest participants. That is why she tried to calm down the other girls, and to clear the air. This day the girls were rehearsing in the agency till 11 p.m. After that they gathered at one girl's house to have a party and to relax a little.



And at last the 17th of May came! They woke up at 8 a.m. Then the visit to a hairdresser so as to have their hair done. When I asked her what she was thinking about during the visit to the hairdresser's, Alina said very simply: "The ache in my back caused by all curlers in my hair."



And only at 11 a.m. when she came back home from the hairdresser's she felt the first waves of anxiety. Her mother was worrying too but tried to support her. While at home she made adjusted her cosmetics. Then at 1 p.m. there was

another visit to the hairdresser's to have the rest of the haircut done. And after that, the make-up.

At 3 p.m. all the girls arrived to the agency. Alina came with her mom and the hairdresser. Every participant was busy with herself. At 4.40 p.m. all of them were gathered together. That was the moment when everybody felt that the whole event was going to start. Everyone was overfilled with excitement. Behind the scenes the atmosphere was crazy what with the participants' frenzy, everyone's nervousness, the stage director's remarks, and crowds of sponsors with flowers and gifts. When the tension reached its limit, someone opened a bottle of champagne and the girls drank it for good luck. It helped to relax for some moments, but when they heard the first sounds of music that was opening the show, all the tension returned. The girls, hardly breathing with excitement, stood in a line according to numbers. The designers were busy with the last corrections before the entry.



The show-group "Cocktail" was opening the show. When they finished the girls' turn was. And here was the first entry at last!

The first entry consisted of two parts. The participants were divided into two groups of 10. First went the one group, then the second. Every girl should appear on the stage twice. The first entry was one by one, when every participant was meant to walk along the whole stage alone and disappear behind the stage. Then they would all appear together. But something unexpected happened: Alina went behind the curtain to look for her second dress. She completely forgot about the second part of the contest, what is called "the whole view". She already took off her first dress and didn't put on the second one yet when suddenly she heard her friend's voice: "Alina, the whole view!" Running to the stage she managed to button her dress and went to the stage. The whole audience noticed nothing.



Alina said that during her first entry she noticed practically all her friends and acquaintances in the hall. They were smiling and applauding to her. And it helped her much. "When the audience is supporting you, you feel a great burst of positive emotions and feel like smiling. Everything should be natural, especially your smile."- said Alina.

Then there were other entries, the shows of the other groups that were participating in the competition.

Now everyone was preparing for the swim suit competition. Many of the ladies are afraid of this section of the contest, and it the part that the audience loves



most. Behind the curtains, there was much activity. The guard was standing near the door not allowing any strangers to come in. The stage director was giving the final remarks, and he was very nervous. The girls were changing and not looking at the photographers who were walking back and forth.



And so the entry in the bathing suits. It is the most pleasant moment and the favorite part of the competition for Alina. When I asked her why, she said: "Because of the song "Lady Marmalade" from the movie "Moulin Rouge", the great mood, support from the audience, and because the opportunity to display yourself in this part is higher than in the other

ones."

Next was the talent competition. After it the audience felt that they had seen not only the demonstration of the swimming suits, but also a show of some "sexy girls" dressed in stockings and corsets as it was in the movie "Moulen Rouge". However, this was not vulgar – that was the best part of it. In this part there are no specific postures and motions. You should move as you wish. The truth is that the entry in the bathing suits is the most decisive for the jury and the audience. That is where a



girl needs to be at her best



After the entry in the bathing suits there was a break. During the break the jury struck a balance, trying to choose the winners in different entries. Some girls were very agitated and one of them was even crying. During the break the participants were changing and fixing their hair. The next entry was in wedding dresses. It was not decisive at all because the jury had already come to the conclusion. But it was the most beautiful part and all the participants loved it very much.

During the break I met Alina. I wished her good luck and said that we were all supporting her. And we took a picture.

The music started to play and the girls appeared on the stage. The audiences started to shout and to cheer. The hall was filled with applause and enthusiastic shouts. The girls dressed in the wedding dresses were wonderful! The audience was delighted! The participants



walked along the stage and after a short break appeared there again for the award ceremonies.

Alina's opinion about the whole process of awarding: "From the participant's point of view the moment of awarding is the least interesting one. Everything is already decided. It is interesting only for the audience, but not for the participants. By the ceremony of awarding I was terribly tired: that is why while standing on the stage I was thinking that in 30 minutes I would take off that heavy wedding dress and have a party with my friends, that would last for the whole night. And at last, for the first time during the whole month I would have a chance to have dinner after 7 p.m., to drink a glass of champagne and to relax."



I asked Alina: "What were you hoping for?" And she said: "Only to become Miss Gomel. Not less. I already got an experience in this kind of competitions in 1998. I took into the consideration all the mistakes of the previous competition and did my best to win, but the jury had another opinion. Well, it was their right."

Here there are some other questions about the competition, and to my mind they are interesting.

Me: "What do the girls think while walking along the stage?"
Alina: "While walking along the stage the only thought the girls have is not to fall down. This is the most terrible thing."

Me: "How did you feel during the competition?"
Alina: "I was feeling free and convivial during the competition."

Me: "What does this competition mean to you?"
Alina: "The competition is the opportunity to feel the moment of being on the stage, of being watched and to hear the applause."

Me: "What is your opinion about the level of the competition this year?"

Alina: "I think the organization, the direction and the stage direction were all fine, but the most important thing is that the girls were very beautiful."

Me: "Was your life changed after the competition?"
Alina: No, the only exception is that after the report in the news program on TV many acquaintances called me and said a lot of nice things."

Me: "Why did you participate in this competition?"
Alina: "I now have something to tell my children and my grandchildren. And it will be very interesting for



me to remember the whole event, to see the pictures and the video in the future."

Reading And Responding Through A Letter

- The students should read the interview article carefully, and in small groups should discuss their responses to the article. The discussion should focus on the following questions:
 - What do you think was the aim of the organizers of the contest?
 - On the basis of the article, how do you think the contestants were treated?
 - How do you think the contestants were seen by the audience?
 - On the basis of the article, what do you think were the characteristics that the audience and the judges were most looking for?
 - Do you see such contests as a legitimate and healthy form of entertainment? Why? Why not?
 - The women in the contest all agreed voluntarily to take part. Does this affect your answer to the previous question in one way or another?
- After the discussion has finished, each student should write a letter to Alina. What is it that they want to say to her? Somewhere in the letter they should relate to the subjects of the previous questions.
- Ask volunteers, both girls and boys if the class is mixed, to read out their letters. If all the answers seem to be in one direction, ask whether there are other opinions and encourage those who hold contrary opinions to express them.
- Sum up the content of the letters and the variety of responses that were heard. Explain the nature of the website on which the article was found, and the fact that Alina at this time was looking for a western husband, presumably, like many Russian women, looking for comfort and security out of Eastern Europe. Add that according to the site, at some time after the contest, she "won" the real contest. She found a spouse. Does this sound like anyone familiar?

EXERCISE: And What Do The Women Say?

The aim of this exercise is to see to what extent women have internalised the standards of the male world and how they feel about the whole question.

Posing The Problem

One of the things that characterise our age and society when fashion, cosmetics, plastic surgery etc. are bigger industries than ever before, is that many women have become part of the machinery of dictating standards of femininity and beauty in a way that has never happened to the same extent in other times and places. How can this be explained? How has it happened that in our time, the objectification of women, which almost by definition is essentially a male process, created by men for men with women as the vehicle for male desire and fantasy, has become a whole industry where women themselves are very active? This is the issue that faces us here.

Large And Small Group Discussions

- Divide off the boys and the girls. Ask the boys and girls in small separate groups of five or six people in each group, to discuss the following questions.
 - How does the group react towards the idea that women should try and make themselves over in the light of fantasies and standards which are essentially male?
 - Is it a healthy thing for the society? What does the society tend to gain or to lose?
 - Is it a healthy thing for the men? What do men tend to gain or to lose?
 - Is it a healthy thing for the women? What do women tend to gain or to lose?
 - Bring each two of the small groups together, one of boys and one of girls, to present their reactions to each other.
 - Now have a report from each "double" group. Did the boys and girls see things totally differently or did they feel the same way on any of the issues? Are the boys and girls far apart in their feelings towards the whole phenomenon? If they are a long way apart, ask the boys how they feel regarding what they heard from the girls and ask the girls how they feel regarding what they heard from the boys. If they are not a long way apart, ask if this is surprising. How can one explain the fact that they are not far apart?
 - Now bring in the same magazines as were examined last time. Distribute them to groups of students. This time, however, turn to the page where the staff of the magazine – the editors, sub-editors etc. are mentioned. Examine the balance of

women and men. It will be clear that many of the people who are most in control of the content of the magazine are women.

- Ask the group as a whole, starting, in a mixed class, with the girls: How has it happened that in our time, the objectification of women, which almost by definition is essentially a male process, created by men for men with women as the vehicle for male desire and fantasy, has become a whole industry where women themselves are very active? You might want to use some of the ideas in the following article from the University of Texas computer website that describes the objectification of women in advertising and the way that many young women particularly identify with the depictions of women as essentially sexual objects. See:

http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~onderdonk/Spring309/TV_ADS_Group/Jessica.html

- Go back to smaller single-sex groups. Give each group the following statement and ask them to discuss it and to decide how true – if at all – they think that it is.

In Esther's time, it is clear that many women, for necessary reasons, lived by the "harem mentality", a mentality that states that women must conduct themselves in such a way as to make themselves most desirable to men. To do so is to be accepted into society and to find social and economic security and protection. This is what Esther did to a large extent. To a large extent, women continue to do the same thing today. They continue to try and "buy" security and protection by recreating themselves in the image of male fantasies. They continue to live by the "harem mentality".

- Reconvening in the big group, let each group, starting with all the groups of girls (in a mixed class) present their responses. Once again, examine whether or not there is a gap between the girls and the boys. Ask those who agree, why they think that it happens. Finally, ask generally how many of the group agree that the statement reflects a certain contemporary reality – either boys or girls – think that it is a good thing. Ask those who do to explain. Ask those who don't to explain why they disagree.
- Finish by asking the members of the class to write down a final statement regarding how everything they have thought about in the last session or sessions makes them feel. Are there any decisions that they would like to try and make for themselves. If they want to share their answers, they should be encouraged to do so.

EXERCISE: And What Of The Boys?

The aim of this exercise is to examine whether the phenomenon that we have talked about is restricted to girls and women. Are the boys subjected to some of the same pressures and how do they respond?

Posing The Problem

So far we have referred to the issue of depersonalization and “objectification” only in terms of women. Taking our cue from the Megillah we have focused on the issue that has been most prevalent in human history and that is the question of women being pushed by male norms to transform themselves into sexually and socially appealing objects, in the hope of gaining comfort and security. This emphasis, we feel, is as it should be.

However, it would be naïve to ignore that in recent years especially, aspects of this phenomenon have started to enter the world of men. Here we wish to focus in on the phenomenon of what might be called the objectification of the male body. This phenomenon in its current form, is a relatively recent development and has a great deal to do with the growth of mass-media, including cinema, and the increase in commercial pressures and advertising. Despite the relative newness of the phenomenon, there is no question that boys and young men today are under great pressure to make themselves over in the image that society demands of them, and we will now devote some time to an examination of this phenomenon.

Small Group And Full Group Discussion

- Divide the group into boys and girls. Subdivide the two groups into smaller groups. Give each small group a large sheet of poster-sized paper and markers or other art supplies.
- Ask all the groups to draw an outline of a male body on their paper. Now each group has to fill in their body outline on the paper with any constellation of words and artwork that answers the following question.

For the boys: *What do we think girls look for in a boy (as a potential partner)?*

For the girls: *What do we look for in a boy (as a potential partner)?*

The answers should include physical, mental and psychological, emotional and social characteristics. They can include reference to dress and outward appearance, body-type and anything else that is seen as relevant.

- After a few minutes, put a boy-group and a girl-group together to compare their posters and their answers. They must be prepared to listen hard rather than argue. Their job is to listen to what the other “side” is saying.

- Open up a general class discussion. Ask for some reports from the groups. Make a double list of the major things that came up in the two sets of groups. Were the answers similar in the two sets of groups? Are the two lists alike? Ask whether anyone heard anything that surprised them when they encountered the answers of the other sex group.
- Now ask the boys if they feel any of the same pressures to make themselves over in a certain way for the favourable opinion of girls, in a similar way to the manner in which we have heard that women have had to do this for men? What are the ways in which they feel most pressures? How do they feel about these pressures? Are they happy about them? Do they accept them as natural? Do they feel that they pay any sort of a personal price for the demands that are made of them to appear as a certain kind of a boy in order to be accepted by girls?

It would be wonderful to run this above discussion in small mixed-sex groups. However, it might well prove too intimate and therefore too threatening. The larger forum might make it easier. In any forum, it is not an easy subject!

- You might want to use some or even all of an interesting article/interview with author Susan Faludi after the appearance of her 2001 book, “Stuffed: the Betrayal of the American Man”, on the pressures of being male in twenty first century America. It appears at the following web address.

<http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=1031>

- Finally, ask the boys, if they could choose one specific thing that they feel they need to do or change in order to be accepted as attractive by the other sex – something that is not really “them”- and they were told that they can simply forget about it, it really is not important, what would that thing be?
- Would any of the girls like to respond?

Postscript: But What If It Just Feels Good?

We have talked of the problems of what might be called here, the “Esther syndrome”, the practice of presenting ourselves as we are really not, covering up certain aspects of self and remaking ourselves over in an image that is felt to be more acceptable to a prospective partner. We have talked over whether this is an issue just for girls and women as it basically was in Esther’s time and have suggested that boys and men have increasingly been drawn into the syndrome in recent decades. It has been suggested that there are many aspects of the process which can be seen as fundamentally negative. But does the fact that when we dress up and use make-up or other cosmetics to create a romanticized version of “the-we-that-we really-are”, according to the standards dictated by a depersonalizing society, we are, in a sense, losing aspects of our real personality and humanity, mean that we shouldn’t do it at all? Is a person necessarily being false to him or herself, whenever he or she dresses up to go on a date or puts on perfume or after-shave because it smells better than any of us do naturally? Is there a thin red line separating the legitimate and the illegitimate on this issue, such that on one side of the line a person can still see themselves as being authentic and

genuine, while on the other side of the line, they become some false and fantasized version of self, which must be seen as being beyond the pale of acceptability from a moral point of view? Is it not O.K. just to want to look nice?

The issue is very complicated since all of us in some ways have accepted and internalized for ourselves, norms that were originally created by others for their own reasons, reasons to do with depersonalization, fantasy or commercial considerations. Many of these norms seem to us today to be very reasonable. We feel better when we look nice than when we don't so why not try and look nice? Men smell better with after-shave and women with perfume – both smell better with perfumed soap – so why not use it (as long as it is not too strong, in the which case it can seem tacky and cheap)? Who wants to smell bad just for the sake of authenticity? But what about people who spend an hour in front of a mirror before a date? Is that acceptable? And if it is, what about two hours? What about women who shave legs and armpits because it has been dictated as more feminine to do so? Is there not something “unauthentic” about that?

This of course brings up a further issue that we have not directly touched. We have assumed that some kind of authenticity in a person – a keeping close to self – is good whereas a radical departure from the self for the sake of others – a flight into unrealistic fantasy is bad. But is a fantastic departure from self necessarily bad? Perhaps one criteria that could be examined relates to the question for whom is one presenting a fantasy? Is there a qualitative (moral?) difference between a person who wants to present a fantasy of themselves because they think that it will help them be accepted by the “other”, and a person who simply and idiosyncratically wants to be different? These are complicated issues indeed and we certainly cannot deal with them all here. But we mention them, because we believe that these are questions that at some point need to be examined in relation to the issues that have been brought up here.

We are reminded of the famous quote of Rabbi Zusia of Annopol just before his death.

If they ask me in heaven why I wasn't Moshe Rabbenu, I'll know what to say. But if they ask me why I wasn't Zusia, to that I will not have an answer.

Sometimes we just have to accept that it's important to be yourself.

EXERCISE: Ahashverosh Unmanned

We have talked extensively of the power of men and the powerlessness of women and at first glance the Megillah shows us a world in which, on a human level at least, power over women is held by men. Ahashverosh specifically seems to be the embodiment of absolute power, over all his subjects but most specifically over women. Queens come and go throughout the text of the Megillah, and women are summoned and dismissed at the king's whim. The king is seen as the embodiment of power, a veritable god in a godless world.

A closer look at the relations between the sexes suggests however, a rather different reading, which is relevant for the world in which we (and the students) live today. It seems clear that Ahashverosh has a weakness, an Achilles heel, a secret point of vulnerability, which causes him a great deal of anxiety. This is precisely his relations

with women. For all his mastery, for all his omnipotence and his rule over 127 different states, twice in the story he becomes very unnerved. One would expect this vulnerability to be exposed at the time of the unmasking of the palace plot by Bigtan and Teresh, but in both the places where the plot is mentioned, the king shows no real concern, (other than in the second case, over the question of Mordechai's reward). The two places where the king shows real anxiety are precisely those cases where he has reason to suppose that he has lost his control over two of his wives. His concern at Vashti's refusal is couched in terms of anger but there is no question but that underneath the surface there is a kind of panic betrayed by the subsequent discussion between the king and his courtiers. One might think that the concern here is only social, lest control over the population be undermined by the behaviour of Vashti, but the second case suggests an extra dimension of concern.

In chapter 7, we have the wonderful scene in which the king misinterprets Haman's begging Esther for his life, seeing it as a sign that the queen is betraying him and that his control over her has evaporated. He has lost control over his *own* queen in his *own* house (v.8). Rocked by the revelation, he condemns Haman to death.

Here it is clear that reasons of state are not at the top of the king's list. His anger and fear here are far more raw and more personal than reasons of state would justify. It is the second time that this all powerful king reacts to losing control over the people over whom in theory he should have most control, his own wives! And it is precisely at this moment, we suggest, that the king comes face to face with the reality of his own impotence. For all his wealth and his power over life and death, the king cannot even control his own wives. It has happened now (he thinks) not once but twice. He has been bested by a woman, betrayed in his own bedroom. It is here that the king's deepest vulnerabilities are perhaps called forth. He can order life and he can order death, but he cannot order love.

Ultimately, it can be suggested, Ahashverosh demonstrates in his own personal story, that weakness and vulnerability to which even the most powerful men tend to be subject. Since his deepest need is for love and acceptance, like all of us, the rejection by those who are seen as the best guarantee or proof of that love, his wives, is the most painful blow of all. The understanding that his power has its limits among the very people who hold the key to his deepest needs, is the hardest blow that he could possibly receive, harder even than the treachery of Bigtan and Teresh or of Haman. It is this disdain – or what he feels to be disdain – on the part of those who are responsible for affirming his success and supporting his ego needs, that undermines his confidence and emphasizes his vulnerability and his ultimate mortality.

Such a reading suggests an interesting shedding of light on another scene. Perhaps the strongest illustration of the king's power in the whole of the story is the scene in which Esther approaches Ahashverosh in the knowledge that his refusal to forgive the breach of protocol will cost her her life. Traditionally we see the scene through Esther's fear. She is shown as approaching the king with all the fear and trepidation of her own mortality. At any moment her life might end and it is hardly surprising that later sources added the idea of her swooning to the original biblical text.

From Esther's point of view for sure, it is the moment at which the power relationship which she knows characterizes the relations of the king, not just with her but with all

his subjects, is most clear. She comes to him like a beggar at the door, and hopes desperately for a favourable outcome over which she believes she has little or no control. This moment of powerlessness represents one of the scenes in the story which has most exercised the imagination of artists through the ages. It is hardly surprising. The drama inherent in any meeting between power and powerlessness is compelling and fascinating. We bring here eight examples of how different classic artists have chosen to portray the scene. We will describe each of them only briefly, since these pictures are a trigger to the analysis that follows rather than standing at the centre of that analysis as the last set of pictures did. After the analysis of the pictures and what appears to be the artists' readings of the dynamics of the scene, we will go back and examine it through the prism of the idea of male vulnerability mentioned here. All eight pictures portray exactly the same scene.

1.



CLAUDE VIGNON (1593-1670).

Vignon was French but worked mostly in Italy. His work was marked by very expressive use of colour and a rich encrusted brushwork. His characters in this painting, which hangs in the Louvres, are dressed in conventional European dress. His Esther, a young woman and not terribly individuated, bows before Ahasuerus who sits majestic on his throne. As in many of the pictures, the height of the throne will express the power relationships between the two central figures. Esther looks straight ahead or slightly down. Her bow merely emphasizes the fact that she is not looking at the man who can pronounce her death whenever he wants. He looks down because he is seated on a high throne but one can perhaps trace an extra element. His

eyelashes seem to propel his gaze down in a rather patronizing way rather like someone who looks over the top of his glasses to belittle another person. As far as the picture as a whole is concerned, the presence of children and animals soften the moment and take away much of its threatening character.

2.



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SEBASTIANO RICCI (1658-1734)

Ricci was one of the figures most responsible for the revival of Venetian painting from the early 18th century. A very colourful figure, involved in great scandals and numerous affairs, his art has been called “dramatic, sumptuous and vivid”.

His picture, executed in the last years of his life, captures the moment when the king leans forward and touches the young and pretty Esther with his scepter. This picture has more drama than the previous one. The king seems a more threatening figure. It is easy to imagine a man like this not touching his scepter to Esther. In the background some kind of a court pageant swirls around. In the middle of the scene, we have a similar setting to the Vignon. Vaguely European architecture (Roman?) and a high throne. Esther is supported here by a pair of maidservants and could well be close to fainting. She certainly seems more threatened here than in the previous picture (despite the presence of a dog)!

3.



NICOLAS POUSSIN (1594-1665)

Poussin was born in Normandy but spent most of his life as a painter in Rome. He is considered the most important of the French classical school of artists.

One of the most striking features of this painting is the wonderfully executed fabrics which drape the main figures. Purple, yellow and red dominate the painting. We see here Esther actually in the act of fainting. She is supported by two helpers. Without their help she would surely fail. However, the scene itself seems far from threatening. The throne is of a completely different nature to that we have encountered in the two previous pictures. It is low and lacking the monumental style that we have already met. It allows eye contact despite the fact that at this particular moment, Esther is hardly in a situation to take advantage of this. The elderly men to the side of the throne look on with kindly and supportive expressions. But the most extraordinary feature of the painting is surely the character of Ahashverosh. This is Ahashverosh as a kindly Zeus or a classical philosopher king. His scepter might look like a spear but he looks like a man more at home in the library than on the battle field. Poussin has really taken the sting out of the potentially threatening moment and the only drama is supplied by Esther fainting in front of a group of kindly observers!

4.



PAOLO VERONESE (1528-1588)

Veronese, an Italian painter and younger contemporary of Tintoretto (who supplies the next picture) was famous and much honoured in his own time. His paintings are often marked by palatial splendour and he was very talented in his ability to depict series of figures on a canvas without creating an overly busy effect. His Esther is bathed in light, an effect heightened by the white “Roman” temple behind her. This fact alone draws the viewer’s eyes to the right of the picture and towards Esther. One hardly notices the figure of Ahashverosh, who stands, scepter outstretched at the left side of the picture, without a visible throne. The drama is all centred on Esther. She stands with eyes closed, standing with the help of her maidservants, seemingly trying to overcome her fear and the tendency to faint. Ahashverosh looks not at all threatening and according to the picture and the characters as they are portrayed, it is difficult to understand whether there is actually anything for Esther to worry about. Her fear seems internal without much connection with the external situation.

5.



JACOPO TINTORETTO (1518-1594)

Tintoretto, a Venetian artist, bestrode the late 16th century scene and had a great (and some say paralyzing) influence on the art of Venice over the next few generations. He was well known for his dramatic creations, his use of light and shadow and the dynamism of his characters. Here however, the scene has something of the stilted character of a staged drama. The characters stand around talking to each other and almost ignoring the interaction between the king and his queen. Ahashverosh hardly cuts a majestic figure as he leans forward to hear the remarks of the queen. It all looks very staged. Esther is giving an oration, but it clearly does not grip the rest of the onlookers. The king himself leans forward from his low Poussin like throne. Like the Esther of Veronese, this Esther seems to have nothing to fear. Unlike Poussin's Esther however, she seems not at all intimidated. This is one Esther who has no intention of fainting away!

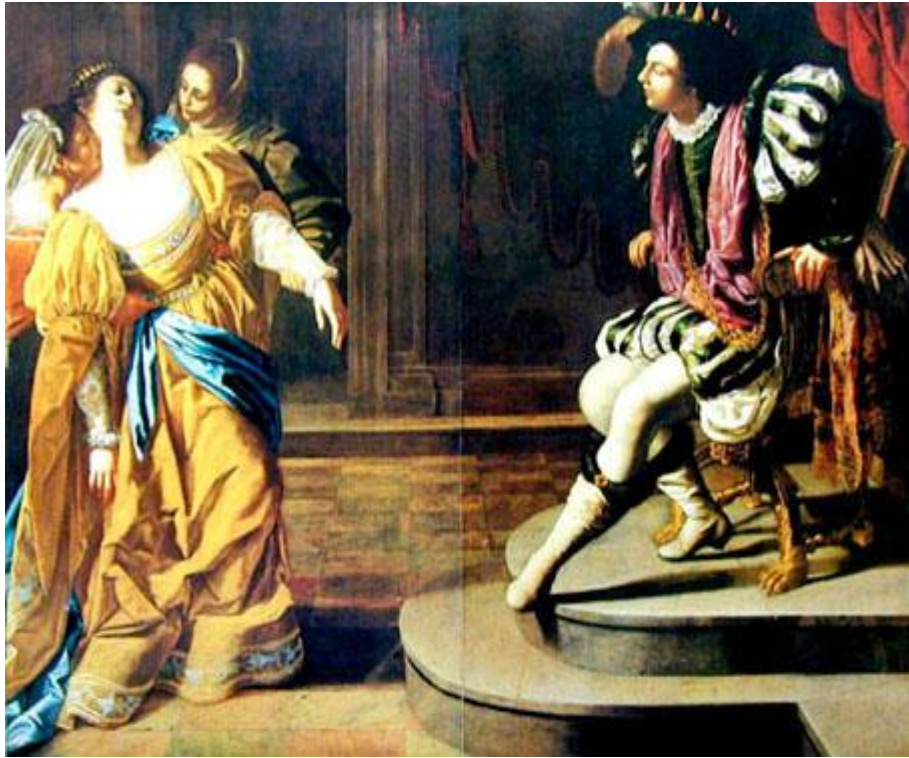
6.



BERNARDO CAVALLINO (1616-1656)

It is said of Cavallino, the elegant Neapolitan painter of the early 17th century, that many of his paintings, mostly small scale religious works, evoke a feeling of melancholy. This may well be said of this interesting scene. This shows an interaction between a passionate Esther and a seemingly most receptive Ahasuerus. There is no threat here. On the contrary, there is an intimacy between the two principals, that we have not seen in any other picture. This seems like a portrayal of a passionate conversation between two young people who have strong emotional feelings for each other. Almost Esther and Ahasuerus through Romeo and Juliet. The throne not only lacks the hard majesty of stone: it is softened by cloth and fabric of deep romantic red.

7.



ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI (1597-1651)

This wonderful seventeenth century large (almost seven feet by nine feet) painting is by the enormously talented Italian woman artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, the most famous woman painter of her time. She must have identified with the subject of the Megillah. Like Vashti and like Esther, she was conscious of the fact that she lived in a male dominated world and thus, at a natural disadvantage to her contemporaries. She would have known well that for a woman to succeed it was necessary for her to make the most of her moments in order to seize her opportunities.

We will talk about this in more detail in a future exercise below so let us just say here that once again we have a reversion to a seemingly non-threatening model of depiction. The king is not only dressed like a dandy: he is also extremely young, and the clean shaven youthful face does not seem unpleasant although it is hard to say whether it is inviting. The clothes and the boots are impressive but they are soft. The throne is of the sort that we have encountered in the paintings by Poussin and Tintoretto. This is not a relationship, which on the face of it is based on power and on fear.

8.



GUSTAVE DORE (1832-1883)

This picture is in the instantly recognizable style of one of the greatest of all nineteenth century book illustrators, the French Gustave Dore. Dore who lived and worked in the mid to late nineteenth century was attracted to biblical subjects and drew hundreds of pictures illustrating biblical scenes. He was perhaps the most well-known of biblical illustrators and his pictures, most of which were engravings, framed the biblical experience in visual terms for generations of readers. We will look below in more detail at this picture, too and therefore will allow ourselves just a brief comment here. This is interesting because while the throne is neither particularly imposing nor threatening, the whole scene is. It is easy to understand how a woman like Esther could be intimidated by the ordeal of having to enter a totally male sanctum, even if accompanied by a maid or two. The fact that the interaction with the king is not direct but rather has to be conducted by intermediaries is also something that is not calculated to make things easier. Here the faint can be believed!

.....

We have seen eight versions of the classic scene and the variations between them are fascinating. We can suggest that there are three basic models that the artists have drawn on. One model (Vignon, Ricci, Dore) exploits the full inequality of the interaction. The king is distant and lofty, and the power relationship is clearly supported by the objective situation. A second model (Poussin, Veronese, Gentileschi?) takes away the objective physical basis of the power relationship (height, distance) but leaves Esther intimidated to the point of fainting. The third variation (Tintoretto, Cavallino, Gentileschi?) does not show the power relationship

either through objects or through Esther's internal feeling of terror but substitutes a completely different relationship between an unintimidated Esther and a non-intimidating king.

However one reads the scene, there is no question that the potential for terror on Esther's part certainly exists. This is a meeting between absolute power and absolute powerlessness, mitigated only by factors such as Ahashverosh's feelings for Esther and her ability to use her wits to turn the power relationship around.

But let us recall the suggestion made earlier. If Ahashverosh has got feelings for Esther, the reality of the scene is very different from model number one or number two. If the king loves Esther in any way, then what we do not see underneath the externals of the scene is a very different dynamic, where the power to a large extent lies with Esther (whether she knows it or not). She has the power to reject the king and we suggest that that ability gives a secret strength to the woman that overturns what looks like the external power relationship and replaces it with a reality where the man is dependent on the woman and the woman holds a great deal of the cards. The real power, we suggest, in so many male/female relationships lies with the woman since the man, so often unused to real intimate relationships, becomes dependent on the woman for a feeling of confidence and self-worth where it really counts – on the inside. Ahashverosh can swagger his way through the pages of the Megillah. His courtiers and his subjects might see him as the pinnacle of power and glory, but on the inside where it really counts, the people who hold the keys to his feelings of self-worth are the two women who can hurt him where it really counts and where he really cares.

If this is so, then it suggests that contrary to appearances, women have a lot more power than the externals of society would lead us to expect. Men, to a large extent, become the prisoners of their own need for intimate acceptance and in a heterosexual relationship, it will always be women who control that. It also perhaps explains why to so many men, manliness is equated with the ability to "control your woman" and why, inside the traditional patriarchal family or couple relationship, so much energy is invested in creating the trappings of male control. Male control mechanisms are needed when the man is worried about his control of the situation, not when he is not concerned. Let us examine some of these ideas with the students and see if they make any sense to them, either in relation to the world of Shushan or to the world in which they themselves live.

EXERCISE: Looking For The Man! A Mixed Media Exercise.

The aim of this exercise is to examine ideas of manliness and masculinity in relationships, both in the world of Shushan and in the world of the students.

This is a long and involved exercise. This is one of the places mentioned in the introduction where we suggest examining the possibility of putting a few hours together into a mini-Seminar as Purim approaches and doing this exercise as a mixture of Jewish studies and social studies with the co-operation of all the relevant teachers in running the exercise.

- Tell the students that you wish to examine the dynamic of the interaction between Esther and Ahashverosh at the beginning of chapter five of the Megillah. Ask each student to prepare him or herself by reading through any relevant pieces in the first four chapters (prior to the interaction). Let the students, individually or in pairs, write an intimate diary entry for Esther the night before she approaches the king.
- Share some of the results. How worried is Esther? Why is she so worried? Is her anxiety justified? List the points that come up on the board.
- Ask the students whether all the power in the coming interaction lies with Ahashverosh or whether Esther too has some power. If she does, what is the source of that power?
- Now ask the students, singly or in pairs, to draw or portray in some way, the meeting between the two that opens chapter five.
- Compare some of the drawings or pictures that result. Examine the power relationships that are hinted at by the students' drawings. What is the distance between the two? How high is the king? Does he look down on Esther? How does Esther look? How does Ahashverosh look?
- Select some of the paintings that we brought earlier. Present them to the students and ask what each one seems to be saying about the relationship between Esther and Ahashverosh. Make sure to draw at least one picture from each of the three categories (we suggest leaving out Artemisia's picture because it is ambiguous), moving from the first category, through the second and on to the third. After analyzing each one, ask the students whether it seems a good interpretation of the text or not.
- Sum up with them how they see the power relationship between Esther and the king. Who really calls the shots? Ask again, if relevant, does Esther have any real power? If she does, what is the source of that power?

- Read together Ch 7 vv. 5-8. Ask the students why the king is so bothered. Is he only bothered by Haman's actions or is he also bothered by the possibility that Esther is fooling around behind his back?
- Suggest the following scenario. The king is bothered because he feels very strongly for Esther and he feels deeply threatened by the possibility that she likes someone else more than she loves him. He feels very vulnerable despite the fact that ostensibly, on the face of things, he has all the power and Esther has none. (He can send her to the gallows together with Haman if he so desires). Is this reading a plausible and acceptable reading of the text? Why? Why not? Whatever the answers that come forth, lead into a discussion based on the previous analysis around the following ideas.
 - The source of male and female power in relationships.
 - The vulnerability of men to the possibility that they are not intimately accepted by their partners.
 - The fact that in many male societies, manliness is equated with the ability to "control your woman".
- Discuss whether the students are aware of social groups where that last idea is indeed the norm. If they do, ask why this should be?
- Ask boys and girls what their ideal of manliness is and discuss the ideas and images that come out. How is this relevant to the Megillah (remind them of the scenes with Vashti in chapter one)? How is it relevant to them?

EXERCISE: The Ultimate Supermodel - Esther Or Vashti?

Texts: Esther 1-2 and Reflections of Michael Fox and Tamar Biala.

The aim of this exercise is to assess different potential models of behaviour and attitude for women who need to act successfully in an oppressive male society.

Posing The Problem

Each generation reads its texts differently. Each generation tends to assess the behaviour of its central textual characters in different ways according to the way in which the readers of that generation see the world around them and react to its idea and its values. Vashti is a case in point. Readers have assessed her very differently at different times in history but there is no denying that the overall opinion of Vashti has tended to be fairly negative. There are many traditions that criticise her quite harshly and see her behaviour and her personality in negative terms. Esther on the other hand, has gone down generally as one of the great heroines of Jewish history and has received an almost overwhelmingly positive assessment.

However, in the last generation, under the influence of feminist thinking, the scales have been tipped, to a large extent, in a different direction. Vashti has been held up by many as an example of proud dignified womanhood, who was prepared to pay the price for refusing to be humiliated by a hostile male world which wished to turn her into an ornament, ignoring her essential humanity. Esther has tended to suffer in comparison. Where Vashti refused, Esther complied. Where Vashti walked out of the system, Esther rushed in. Where Vashti stood up for her identity as a woman, Esther hid her own identity and passively complied with the system. Feminist thought, on the whole, has tended to dethrone Queen Esther and recrown Queen Vashti.

There are those who respond to the charges, taking up the cause of Esther and refusing to be sidetracked. They see the feminist critique of Esther as inspired by a modern political agenda which is both anachronistic in the case in point and ultimately irrelevant to the real task of the story which was to save the Jews. They point to the victory of pragmatism (Esther) over ideology (Vashti). They point to Esther's success (not only does she save the Jews but she ends up with more real power than Vashti would ever have had) and, by comparison, to Vashti's failure. They might claim that Vashti's goal of defending and promoting her ego and her social status may not be different in principle than Ahashverosh, while Esther is not concerned with self-aggrandizement but with helping her people. .

The issue is important to us today. How should women act in what is still, in many ways, a man's world? Which of these two women, if either, represent the way that

should inspire us, the way that we should seek to emulate? Which of the two beautiful women, Esther or Vashti, is the our preferred supermodel?

- Ask the students now to think of the world of the Megillah (Esther 1-2). Would they characterise that as a “man’s world”? Can they bring examples from the Megillah to support their opinion? Is there any difference between the perception of male and female students? Is this world fundamentally similar to ours?
- Read and respond to the view of Tamar Biala, contemporary religious feminist in Israel:

As in the Megillah, so in our world, patriarchal norms still rule. Our world bears a striking resemblance to the feast in Ahashverosh’s court. In our world, too, women are invited to parties and talk shows to show off their beauty. If they refuse to co-operate, they are put aside for others [who are more compliant]. Vashti’s sexuality is controlled by the men around her. In our world, the “royal court” is often found within the home...and the control of women is an issue that touches all of us. Men control women but not only women. They also control, cruelly and painfully, men who are weaker than them. Men are conditioned to use and to need a society based on hierarchy. The fantasy of being at the top of the totem pole or next to it, is the fantasy of being immune to humiliation by others and to the fear that they will discover who I [the man] really am, vulnerable and frightened...like all people, in need of contact with others and in need of help from others. On the altar of hierarchy, then, are sacrificed not only women and weaker men but the soft parts of the soul, those that cry out for contact. **Tamar Biala**

- What does she mean when she says “patriarchal norms”?
- What does she mean when she says that “Our world bears a striking resemblance to the feast in Ahashverosh’s court” or that “in our world, the royal court is often found within the home”? Do you agree?

Hevruta Text Study Of Esther 1-2: Evaluating The Two Female Heroines – Vashti Versus Esther

- Ask the students to divide into pairs to make a comparison of Vashti and Esther in terms of the way that they attempt to negotiate their way in this world in Esther 1-2. Ask them to study the story carefully and to examine each of the two characters in terms of the following headings.
- What is the problem or problems that each one has to respond to as they would define it?
- What is their attitude towards solving the problem? What are the personal values that are expressed in their attempt to solve the problem?
- How successful are they in solving the problem?

- What do each of the two women represent for you?

N.B. This will take much time to do properly. Maybe give the class the task as individual homework and give them class time in pairs afterwards to compare responses.

Class Discussion Of Comparison Of Vashti And Esther

Share the answers and put up on the board the major points that come out of the discussion:

- Ask the group to try and explain feminism and together with them attempt to come to a very general definition which is accepted by all.
- Ask them whether according to the definition of feminism that they have developed, Esther or Vashti has behaved in the more praiseworthy fashion. Put up on the board the positive and negative points (if there are) that exist for both characters from the perspective of feminism.

Compare Tamar Biale's view below with Professor Michael Fox's subsequent summation of the recent feminist critique of Esther (which he subsequently opposes).

*While at first sight, the central story [of the Megillah] appears to be the story of the Jewish people and the change in its fortune, in the light of the centrality of the women characters in the Megillah, it may really be about **their** survival as women in a patriarchal world. Megillat Esther very cleverly describes how it is possible to break this hierarchy characterised by discrimination among sexes, economic classes and ethnic groups.. The character who represents the most successful challenge to the system is Esther, who chooses to fight it in a totally different way to that of Vashti...[Vashti chooses public protest that aggravates male fears and forces a do-or-die confrontation. In effect she leads not only to her own downfall but to a more repressive regime that orders all wives to obey their husband's whims in the whole empire. Esther's graceful kindness to servants like Hegai and to competing women contestants and to the ever vulnerable and childish Ahashverosh offers a non-confrontationalist model. Esther knows how to take advice from others, while Vashti rebels. Vashti makes her life and-death stand on her right to her own party, while Esther speaks up to save her people as well as to serve the king's interests]. Esther teaches us...not to escape [the challenge] and not to try and save yourself in your own fortified palace, but...to take responsibility and to ask others to do the same...And even if you are at the top of the totem pole, to dare to show your more vulnerable side, and to request help from others.*

Tamar Biala

[As opposed to Vashti, Esther] gets her way through deceptive and [roundabout] means...Esther is totally unaware of [God] and not inspired by religious faith...Woman's independence is repudiated by the example made of

Vashti, a repudiation Esther fails to oppose...The author fails even to credit Esther with any particular zeal in her desire to save her people...She is pretty, obedient, silver tongued and somewhat manipulative, using placatory language and ingratiating formulas. She waits patiently and obediently until the king gives permission for an audience and only then speaks. Though the king invites her to make her request, she procrastinates. Her example teaches that aesthetic grace paves the way for woman's success, whereas man's power comes from ethical fiber. It is true that she outwits two rather stupid males and victory is due to Haman falling into the trap, but the pivotal moment occurs in a bedroom scene. She acts not as [God's] agent but as her uncle's.

Michael Fox

- ❑ List the different claims for and accusations against Vashti and Esther and explain each one with reference to the narrative.
- ❑ What are the character traits attributed to Esther by each writer.
- ❑ These are both feminist readings of Esther. Given your understanding of feminism why is Biale's reading of Esther so positive and why is the view summed up by Fox so negative?
- ❑ Which viewpoint do you think is sounder from a feminist viewpoint, according to the class definition which was agreed on earlier?
- ❑ Ask the girls in the class: in their opinion should women today take Vashti as a role model or Esther? Or perhaps they should take something of both? What, if anything, would they like to take from each character? Do the boys agree?

EXERCISES: Women On The Make – Representations Of Esther And Vashti In Art

We stay with the characters of Esther and Vashti but take things in a slightly different direction, employing the medium of art.

We have suggested that one of the sub-themes of the Megillah relates to the issue of the status of women. We have seen that in the Megillah women rise or fall according to their acceptability to the male mores and criteria of the time. We have suggested moreover that if a woman wanted to be successful in terms of her position in society, she would need to appear to conform to the male standards of the period – as defined by the court. The court – and the king within the court – would set the tone for the kind of woman that would be able to rise in society. Royal taste, by definition in a society like this, was hard to fault. We have talked of what we suggest that royal taste in women actually was – some kind of a mixture of beauty and passivity and we have suggested, moreover, that, at least in the early stages, Esther must have appeared an ideal candidate for the job, as opposed to Vashti, who, at least by the end of her tenure, was clearly far from fitting the ideal model. But how was that taste – positive and negative – seen by other, later, generations? One way of examining this is by turning to the work of artists through the generations.

The subject of Megillat Esther has attracted many artists and illustrators over the years and invariably, they have depicted Esther – or, to a lesser extent, Vashti – according to their own reading of the story and their own belief about the ideal woman (or perhaps, in Vashti's case, the opposite). If they have seen Esther as the ideal, then the picture that they have drawn of her would tend to reflect that ideal, as it existed in their society in their own time. If they have seen Vashti, as reflecting an opposite set of values, as the type of woman, for example, who endangers society, then they would tend to draw her according to their view of what such a woman would look like in their own time. This is not to deny that certain artists might indeed be making a social criticism through their paintings and criticizing the standards of their own society. It is perfectly possible for an artist to picture an idealized version of Vashti, seeing the type of woman pictured as preferable to the more “virtuous” models accepted and praised within contemporary society. In other words, a specific artist might well be much more attracted by his Vashti than by his Esther! Whatever the case, it might be suggested that in the different artistic portraits of the women of the Megillah, we have a number of statements about ideal or non-ideal women at different periods and in different societies.

It is worth reflecting what lies behind the ideal models elevated by different societies in different time periods. Why is it for example that at certain times, societies have like their women plump while at other times they have liked their women thin? Why is it that at some periods, the model woman has been mature while at other times she has been little more than a nymph? Why is it that in certain societies at certain

times a woman is more prized the more she is covered up with clothing while in other times or places she is seen as more ideal the less she is covered up? All these are good questions that one might want to think about while viewing the “feminine ideal” in the art of the story of the Megillah.

We shall now proceed to look at some of these portrayals and try and suggest what the artist was trying to say about the women in question and what this might say about ideals of femininity. It might be added that since the majority of the artists are men, we are on the whole seeing male ideas of femininity. However, in the pictures that we bring, we have included a number of female artists and we think that what they have to say is particularly significant.

Images Of Vashti

We bring here six portrayals of Vashti and we will examine them briefly one by one, suggesting interpretations that you, of course, are welcome to evaluate differently.

1.



The first picture we bring is by a contemporary American Christian artist, Olivia Cameo Lewis, who produced an unusual and original insight into Vashti in this 1999 painting. Lewis, a profoundly religious woman, paints many biblical scenes avoiding the sweet sentimentality that characterizes much modern “religious art”, Christian or Jewish. Her Vashti is caught in a moment of conflict. This is the moment in which she has to decide whether or not to accede to the king’s demand. The moment has

been painted by a number of artists, but always Vashti is shown surrounded by the king's servants who have been sent to bring the queen. Most often Vashti is seen as a woman who has made her decision and knows exactly where she stands. But Lewis' Vashti is caught – in total isolation – at the very moment of decision. This, we can suggest, is a woman who is tortured by the decision that stands before her. She knows the price that she is going to pay if she goes against the king's decision, and she knows the humiliation that she will have to undergo – presumably not for the first time – if she agrees to his wish. She is a woman who is caught in the very process of weighing up her options. She is also black. Presumably, that is Lewis' way of talking about a person with no social status in the society other than what she has gained through her determination and her beauty. If she says no to the king, she will be thrust back, ignominiously, into the ghetto from which she came.

The fact that she is shown in isolation makes us feel great sympathy for her. She is a woman caught in a tragic bind. The Vashti portrayed here is a deeply conflicted woman. She is no harpy, all nails and teeth but rather a sensitive woman who has been pushed about as far as she can go. She has little strength left – most of her weight is being supported by the door, and next to the door, despite her height and her rather statuesque build, she seems frail and close to collapse. It might be that she has already made the decision and is caught, evaluating the end of the career in the palace. Her status, her house and perhaps even the beautiful royal dress, all will be taken from her. This seems a serious and introspective woman. Vashti is sad.

2.



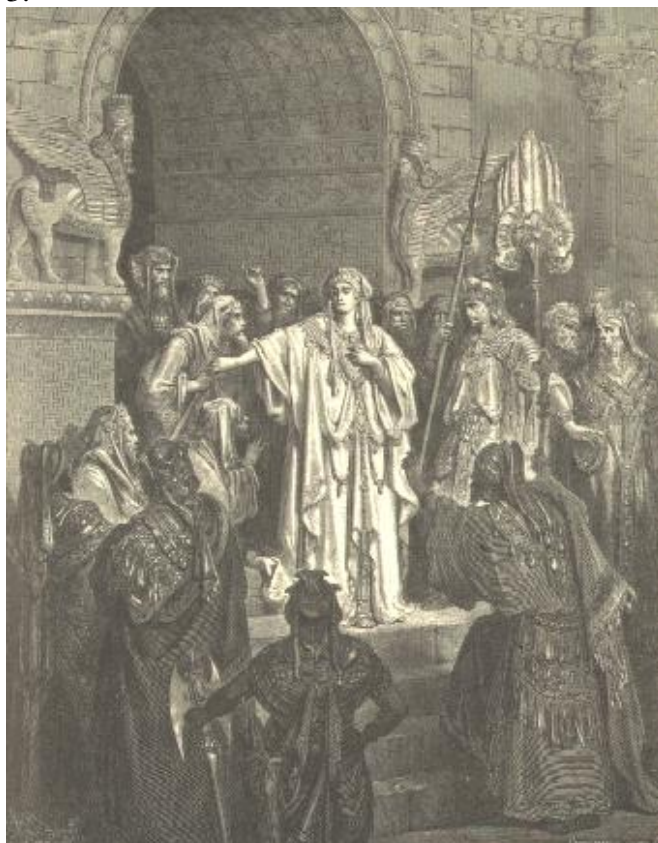
Our second picture is strikingly different. This 1890 painting, named “Vashti deposed” is by the minor English Victorian painter Ernest Normand, well known for his lurid harem scenes, never too reluctant to undress a body when the occasion arose. Like many of the European painters of the mid to late 19th century, Normand placed many of his paintings in an exotic oriental setting. Exoticism seems to have been the name of the game since the Oriental school fed the western European hunger for the foreign which at that time was associated with the East. The Vashti painting fits very

much into this oriental hunger, but the subject matter here – while not perhaps the stuff of great art – is compelling. This Vashti is shown after the decision. We know this both from the title and from the fact that even if Vashti herself exudes nothing much more than a fairly empty and bored sensuality, her servant, at the bottom of the couch, seems on the point of despair, far more so than her mistress.

This Vashti looks like an early twentieth century movie star (Mary Pickford et al), and she looks about as emotionally stricken as most of the Hollywood starlets of that time. She looks around her with the vague air of one who is wondering where her next entertainment is coming from rather than one who has struck a blow for principle against tyranny. On the other hand, she exudes a definite sensuality. The picture might be more convincing if it was a boring afternoon in the palace any time before the fall. One can suggest that this is a perfect illustration of the idea mentioned earlier, that this sensuous woman represents the artist's fantasy - this is the real ideal woman after the stifling bourgeois mores of late nineteenth century Victorian Britain.

Perhaps there is one thing going for the painting, however. If we have suggested that one of the main tasks of the women of the palace – from the queen downwards, was to look beautiful and to act as if they were tremendously grateful to the king for all his bounty, this queen could no doubt be the consummate actress. This could well be the Vashti that Ahashverosh would have been very happy with, a decoration of a woman, who would add to the stir of his court and could be depended on to put on a show when needed. It looks less like a woman of depth, with the potential for putting the good time behind her and taking a stand on an issue of principle. It looks like Vashti enthroned, rather than Vashti deposed.

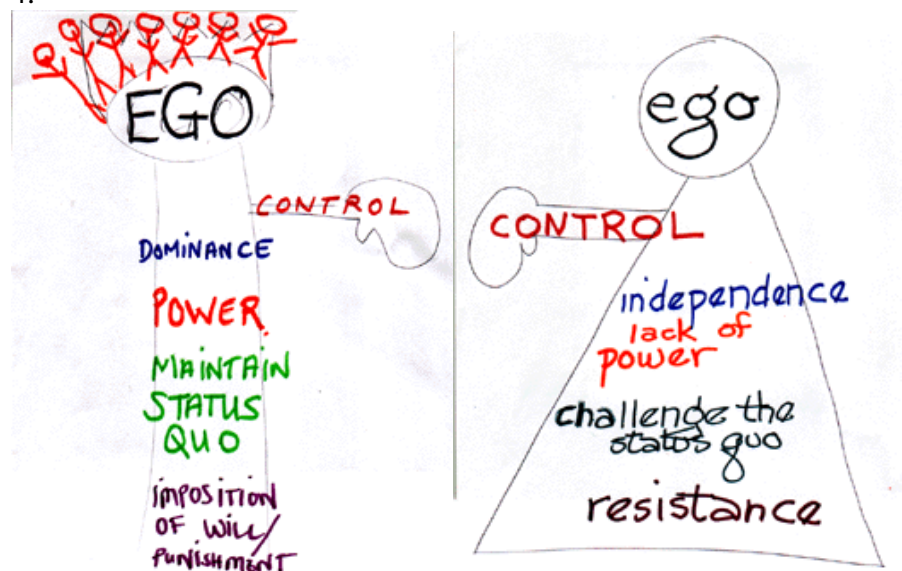
3.



The third Vashti picture is considered a classic. This picture is the work of the French artist and illustrator, Gustave Dore, whom we have already met. We mentioned that Dore who lived and worked in the mid to late nineteenth century was attracted to biblical subjects and drew hundreds of pictures illustrating biblical scenes. He was perhaps the most well-known of biblical illustrators and his pictures, most of which were engravings, framed the biblical experience in visual terms for generations of readers. He drew several pictures which illustrate the Megillah and the one we have brought here is his Vashti picture which he entitled “The Queen Vashti refusing to obey Ahashverosh”.

It is, once again, a very interesting picture of Vashti, totally different from the other two that we have encountered. This is a classic picture of a proud and upstanding Vashti, prepared to stand up and make a public scene, declaring her principles for the whole world to hear – or more precisely for the world of men because all of the characters in this scene are male. No scene could be imagined which would be more public than this one. Vashti stands at the gates of the palace and denounces the society for all of its ills. This is Vashti as biblical Prophetess. Her whole demeanour points to it. With one hand she points to her breast or her heart, the place of her innermost truth. With her other hand, she nobly thrusts back her accusers: she remains calm and statuesque: they are hysterical and a little grotesque. She is dressed in white, clothed in light. They are the forces of darkness. She represents liberty and they, the forces of reaction. She represents the future and they represent the past. This in a sense, is a great public political picture as opposed to the two others that we have seen. This is Vashti the Queen.

4.



This is an interesting modern take of Vashti (on the right) compared with Ahashverosh (on the left). The scene, pictured as a confrontation between them, was drawn by Beverley Goodman and Jonathan Witkin, two members of the Pottsville Pennsylvania Reconstructionist congregation, Ohev Tzedek. Despite its cartoon character, this too is a serious statement and once again, a political statement. This comes very close to the interpretation that we suggested at the beginning of part four,

where we attempted to analyse the role of women in terms of a power struggle with a male establishment where women have only very limited weapons.

Here we suggest that what we have, is, in a sense, a sketch of the classic power struggle where Ahashverosh and Vashti stand for MAN and WOMAN or perhaps for ALLMEN and ALLWOMEN (there are lots of CAPITAL LETTERS on display here!). The characters have no individual faces: they have no individual personalities in this match up. Or to put it more accurately, their private individual personalities have no importance. It is not the personal struggle that is important here but rather the CAUSE. The personal politics between the two are clearly part of wider power politics. Vashti represents a genuine threat to the status quo while Ahashverosh is that status quo and will clearly crush Vashti as a threat that undermines his entire kingdom with its social structure dictated by the king. The social structure of the kingdom is depicted by all the little figures standing on the head of the king. They are dependent on him and as such are there supporting the king in his fight against Vashti. Significantly, the queen stands alone. Despite her high position in the kingdom, she has no independent power and no independent support system. There might in theory be women in the empire who would support her but they are never seen. Any support that she has is quiet, passive and private. The confrontation is male and very public (as we saw in Dore's picture). Perhaps it is significant that whereas in the king's case all the words that represent what the whole struggle is about are in capital letters, in the queen's case, only the arm that faces the king is in capitals. The rest of the words, more internal to the queen, are in small letters. Despite everything, there is a certain private side to the woman that we do not find in the king. The king and the queen face off against each other with what looks like a pair of boxing gloves. This is a fight, a contest, and like a boxing match, it is public.

5.



This last portrayal of Vashti is clearly also a modern one and if not particularly skilled artistically it is nevertheless interesting because of the source from which it comes and the way that she has been portrayed. This is a source that comes from a Chabad website, and as such it represents the most traditional Jewish take on Vashti. This is only the second Jewish version of Vashti that we have brought and the previous one, number 4, came from the Reconstructionist movement, a movement which has put on

its banner the need to reevaluate and overturn the traditional position of women in (Jewish) society. So this Chabad picture and attitude stands alone among the positions that we have brought, representing a traditional Jewish take coming from an organization that sees itself standing for traditional Judaism.

This Vashti is fascinating. She is pictured as an extremely unattractive and negative woman. In the best tradition of fairy tale caricature she comes to us as a direct and recognizable continuation of a tradition that includes, for example, Cinderella's ugly stepsisters. She is pockmarked and blemished and negative and unsavoury. Why on earth any man would want anything to do with a woman like this, is a question that the picture doesn't answer. How on earth a woman like this would be able to have made it to queenly status when the major criterion is beauty, is another question left unanswered. And nor do these questions have to be answered, because a representation like this goes far beyond the rational and represents a clear moral statement. Vashti is bad. She must be got rid of, not because she represents a challenge to the status quo (there is no political statement here), but rather because she must make way in the story to the woman who will represent the good – Esther.

The Chabad take represents one central stand of Jewish reaction which right back in the Midrash tended to see Vashti as the incarnation of evil. Masechet Megillah shows her as a woman with low moral standards who made her Jewish maids work for her naked on Shabbat. One tradition in the same source sees her as refusing Ahashverosh's request to appear before him (in the nude!) because she was suffering from leprosy and this presumably is hinted at in the picture by the fact that her skin is covered with spots.

6. We will conclude briefly with a look at the Israeli cartoonist, illustrator and theatre designer, Arie Navon, who illustrated a fine Megillah. Navon, who was born in the early years of the twentieth century and lived right to the last years of the century, was essentially impressionistic in the way that he illustrated the story, but the speed of his line and the caricatured style that he used should not blind us to the fact that he had a fine eye for the story and its detail and many of the pictures that he sketched expressed a personal statement. In his picture of Vashti, he shows her rejecting the suggestion of the seven servants of Ahashverosh who came to call her to the king.

The striking thing about this Vashti is her stature. She dwarfs the seven "sarim" – eunuchs, who are seen to be pallid and characterless and totally lacking the temperament and personality of Vashti. She is seen as a woman of strong personality who dwarfs in all senses the featureless eunuchs. Vashti is angry. Her face registers the insult that she feels that she has received from the king's servants. One hand seems ready to swat the eunuchs whom she seems to view as not much more troubling than an annoying insect for whom she has only disdain. It is not clear from the picture whether she is aware of the larger issues. This is not the political Vashti that we have seen already a couple of times. Nor is it the thoughtful and tortured Vashti, caught in her vacillation as in the first picture. This Vashti seems to be acting spontaneously and perhaps impulsively to the offer. Those poor eunuchs are receiving her wrath and feeling her insult. Without any real individuality of their own you know that all they want is to get away from the fierce tongue-lashing that they are getting and get out of the picture and back to their master as soon as possible.

Images Of Esther

Let us now change our focus and examine a number of images of Esther. Wherever possible, we bring a parallel to the pictures of Vashti, in order to produce more insights from comparison. As such we bring pictures from Normand, Dore, Navon and Chabad. In addition we bring three other Esthers (plus a cute little extra picture to round things out).

1.



We start off with our first Renaissance painting. It is the work of the Italian painter Andrea del Castagno and was one of a series of nine large pictures entitled “The Cycle of Famous Men and Women” that he painted around 1450. The nine pictures were painted to adorn niches of a nobleman’s villa at Legnaia and now hang in the Castagna gallery in Florence. The nine paintings were divided into three series of three: they represented Florentine military commanders, Tuscan poets and writers (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio) and three women, of whom the only biblical character was Queen Esther. It is clear that the nine figures are chosen not just for their fame but also because they are seen as role models – larger than life characters who should always be before the eyes of the villa’s occupants to provide them with inspiration. Only part of the Esther figure has survived but it is a very striking figure indeed. In general Castagna is seen as a representative of the high Renaissance always at pains to

bring out the noble in a character without sacrificing the deeply human. From this point of view he must be seen as an outstanding representative of Renaissance humanism and the series of nine portraits in general and the Esther painting specifically, bear this out very well.

Esther here is not a young woman. She is already a queen and indeed appears to bear herself with all the dignity of her queenly station. She is portrayed as a woman of enormous natural nobility, a woman perhaps of reserve but she has great intelligence in her face and it is clear that she understands the task for which she has been chosen. She appears to be waiting for her opportunity to intervene and there is no question that she has made her conscious choice to act as a representative of her people. A hint of a quiet smile plays over her lips, but it is slightly twisted into a wry line as if she is well aware of a certain humour in the scenario that she is about to unfold. She has about her the look of a Madonna but a very human one at that and it is interesting that Castagna chose her as the only Biblical representative of his series. While remaining a woman, she is also a model and one which emphasizes the greatest virtues of womanhood. She is not a happy woman but rather one who is conscious of the fact that she has been called for a higher purpose.

2. In our second picture we encounter once again Ernest Normand, the kitschy and rather “Hollywoody” lover of majestic oriental scenes. This picture, entitled Esther Denouncing Haman, is very different in many ways to his Vashti and is all the more illuminating for that.

Firstly, if Vashti was portrayed in a semi-private moment, with only a servant girl to hand, Esther’s denunciation is almost a public act. In the Megillah it might appear as though only Haman and Ahashverosh were privy to the scene of the denunciation, here (not implausibly, perhaps) there is an audience of servants and courtiers who turn it into a much more public act, heightening the drama of the moment. The scene is set in a part of the royal palace which bears witness to the cult of personality that accompanies the Persian state. Great statues of Ahashverosh loom over the scene.

All of the main characters are caught at moments of dramatic gesturing. Esther has clearly chosen her moment well and intends to milk it for all it is worth. Dramatically, she extends her hand with an outstretched finger pointing at the cowering villain. The moment might have all of the truth of an early silent epic film but it is nevertheless significant that Esther, the heroine, is dressed in white in great contrast to everybody else in the picture, and, in addition, to the black garbed Vashti in Normand’s other portrayal. This Esther is virtuous. She is pretty but lacks the sensuousness of Vashti. She also lacks the gravity, the maturity and the dignity of the Castagna figure. She kneels in deference to the king but her accusation is clear and assertive and we suspect, much rehearsed. There is little spontaneity in this scene. Rather it is a dramatic tableau: the figures could stay frozen in their present positions and the biblical moment would be illustrated for posterity!

3.



We now return to the classic illustrations of Gustave Dore and encounter here a picture that we brought above, one of two of his illustrations of scenes starring Esther. This, his “Esther before Ahashverosh” shows the moment when she dares to approach him. The episode of her swooning is not mentioned in the Megillah itself but appears in the Midrash and in the Greek additions to the Book of Esther in the Apocrypha.

This Esther is a young woman without the self-possession of the Renaissance Esther on the one hand or of Dore’s own Vashti on the other. This is Esther defenceless and vulnerable inside a very male world, the world of the king’s palace. Her body is supported partly by Ahashverosh’s attendants and one gets a sense of how much would be demanded of a young woman for her to be able to penetrate inside this inner sanctum of male rule. She has apparently not fainted entirely since she still is able to point a finger (towards Haman?), but she looks as if the gesture has cost her all that she has. Interestingly, despite the title (and the Biblical suggestion) that she stands before Ahashverosh, in reality she is very far away from him and she is not confronting him at all. Her whole body is turned away at an angle that suggests that she has to deal with a number of intermediaries before she can so much as approach the king. He, on his throne, is far removed from her. It seems that in the moment caught in the picture, he has risen from his place on the throne at the far end of the room, in reaction to her faint. The use of light shows clearly that Esther and Ahashverosh are the major players in this scene, but it is not clear that she herself is wearing white clothing as she does in the Normand picture or in Dore’s portrayal of Vashti. Esther, is not portrayed here as a woman who has yet attained great character and one is curious to know whether what we have here is a statement of preference of Vashti by Dore.

4.



This picture we have also seen. It is the large seventeenth century (almost seven feet by nine feet) painting by the enormously talented Italian woman artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, the most famous woman painter of her time. She must have identified with the subject of the Megillah. Like Vashti and like Esther, she was conscious of the fact that she lived in a male dominated world and thus, at a natural disadvantage to her contemporaries. She would have known well that for a woman to succeed it was necessary for her to make the most of her moments in order to seize her opportunities.

It was not only as an artist that she was at a disadvantage. She was raped at the age of eighteen and when her attacker was brought to trial she was tortured to test the truth of her testimony. She passed the ordeal successfully but paid a price in terms of stigmatization throughout her life. Perhaps because of this, she was drawn to strong female figures and many of her paintings take as their subject women of the Hebrew Bible such as Susanna, Judith, Bat-Sheva, Jael and here, Esther.

This is in many ways an extraordinary painting. To mention only one aspect, we have here a young dandy of an Ahashverosh (in good medieval European costume), hardly the threatening figure normally depicted. The scene portrayed here is analogous to the Dore scene above, but what a difference in treatment. Here we have a dramatic and direct confrontation between Esther and the king. The king is immediate and accessible, not separated by space and numerous intermediaries from the figure of Esther. Art historians are divided as to how to interpret the incident portrayed here

but we bring a fascinating and convincing analysis of the painting from the American Jewish artist, Richard Mcbee.

Artemisia has treated this midrashic swoon in a very creative and unusual manner. Esther's arm is extended out, almost pleading for the king to assist her. Her "artful" collapse is well calculated. While she might seem vulnerable to this dandy king (that depiction itself is telling), she is in fact very much in control of the situation. Her head is tilted back at an angle, her eyes closed and eyebrows arched in theatrical abandon. Until we notice that only one knee has given way to throw her off balance we might have thought she would soon end up on the floor in a heap. She originally swoons out of abject fear of the king's anger (remember, she approached the king without permission) and yet has turned this into a way of controlling him, manipulating him and actually causing him to rise in her presence. Artemisia has found a singular place in the story of Esther where a mere woman can control events normally quite beyond her...Artemisia Gentileschi found a way as a woman artist to protest the unfair treatment of women in the 17th century and the brutality of her rape and the attendant trial. Her source of strength and the substance of her resistance was in the courage of great Jewish women. She painted them with verve and insight, frequently providing psychological depth and tension to women caught in situations where they were forced to act decisively.

According to this analysis, Gentileschi's Esther uses cunning and imagination to gain the upper hand in a world in which women had very few choices open to them. Power could be obtained by those who worked within the system and learn to use whatever opportunities came to hand in order to advance themselves and their causes. It was true for Artemisia Gentileschi and it was equally true for Esther.

5.



This is the counterpart to the Chabad version of Vashti. This is Esther: and we see many of the same characteristics that we saw earlier. This is Esther in the tradition of Cinderella and Snow White. Incidentally, without making too strong a point of this, it is interesting that this is a most un-Jewish and un-Persian depiction of a Jewish heroine. In a similar fashion to the way that early Zionist propaganda tended to take very Aryan figures as its prototypical models for Jewish workers and pioneers, here Chabad has drawn on Disney type images to create its ideal. And this Esther is indeed an ideal. She is blonde as opposed to Vashti's darkness but she projects a quiet purity totally absent from the Vashti model. She looks intelligent and shrewd, perhaps contemplating her next move, but she lacks any of the power suggested by some of the previous portrayals. Ultimately, she remains...an illustration in a book, without a life of her own beyond the page. A soulless ideal.

6. We now come to another parallel picture, this time of ArieH Navon and in this picture he has illustrated Esther presumably at the time when she is in the middle of getting her beauty treatments in anticipation of her prospective audience with the king. There is an interesting parallel between the two pictures. In the Vashti picture, Navon showed Vashti in relation to the seven eunuchs of Ahashverosh. They stood subdued in a line and submitted themselves to the queen's anger. Here once again we have a portrayal of the main figure, Esther in relation to seven other figures. These are seven women, presumably Esther's maids and attendants. So far we have two parallel views but at this point the pictures diverge and contrast with each other. The seven maids of Esther are portrayed *around* her. Most of them are pictured within the framework of the large figure of Esther herself. They are in one way or another, part of her. They do not stand against her: they do not stand apart from her. They stand, rather, as a complement to her.

Maybe this is Navon's interpretation of the phrase that "Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her" and maybe this is some kind of a comment about sexual politics. According to this latter possibility, Vashti will always be in an essentially adversarial position towards the world of men, while Esther, as a woman, will tend to be in a position of support and mutuality with other women. Men and women compete: they are on two different sides of the power divide. Women do not ultimately stand in a relation of competition with each other. Even when it appears that they do, as in the beauty contest attempt to win the king's favour, in the last analysis, they are all in the role of some kind of victim. Their real interests lie in their standing together. A comparison of the figures of Vashti and Esther as they are drawn by Navon, tends to suggest this kind of analysis too. Vashti is all lines and angles. Esther is more curved, softer. Where do Navon's sympathies lie? We might be tempted to say that both Vashti and Esther have his sympathies. He is on the women's side.

7. The seventh picture is taken from a children's book of Bible stories put out in the mid-1960's by two Italian writer/illustrators, Giama and Giorgio Sansoni. The full page pictures that illustrate the stories have a touching naivety and the particular picture that they have drawn to illustrate the Esther story is a good example of this. The picture illustrates Esther waiting to approach Ahashverosh. She stands alone in a nervous anticipation as if to steel herself for the ordeal that lies ahead. She stands totally still, as if breathing deeply in an attempt to calm herself. She looks like an athlete on the track calming him or herself as they try and disengage themselves from their surroundings in an effort to gain maximum concentration before the race. Total silence reigns: Esther is totally isolated. The attempt will succeed or it will fail.

For this Esther, there are no wiles or plans that she has prepared. This is not the scheming Esther of Artemisia, resorting to her last game, or the confident planner of Castagno. This is an Esther who is beyond guile – or perhaps one should say that she has not reached it. Because she is a child – a complete and utter child.

And that is the beauty of the Sansoni version of Esther. They have drawn her as perhaps we all should if we were not clouded by years and years of reading and rereading, of hearing interpretations and of knowing the outcome. If we were to hear

the story for the first time, it may be that this is how we would or should see her. For in the story, the most convincing reading of all is perhaps, that she is only a naïve and innocent child, plucked from a protected home environment and suddenly thrust into a situation that is totally beyond her. She is really no more than a child in a grown up game. Even when Mordechai comes and makes his demands that she works for the people, she is still a child, of whom the demand is made that she acts like an adult. The truth is that she is far from the sophisticated woman of Castagno or even the young woman that appears in some of the other pictures. She is a child and here, we see her for the first time exactly like that. Her hair is done in a sophisticated fashion, but look underneath the hair to that face – that still unformed face – freckles and all. So naïve, so empty of guile, thrust into a situation that maybe only the mature woman of Castagno might be able adequately to deal with. She tries to make herself look grown up and sophisticated. That is her act of concentration, her attempted act of transformation. Young Esther.

8.



And, finally, there is this cartoon “Dry Bones” picture by Kirschen who for years has produced cartoons for the Jerusalem Post. This is the Jewish People’s once-a-year Queen Esther, the Esther of a thousand beautiful and sticky kids, who want to win the pageant and be chosen, just this once, as the winner. Most of these are six years old and if we talked about a young Queen Esther, we did not mean this young. But it is the one that makes us go “Oooh” and Aaah” every year as we watch the kids dress up for the pageant.

Using Art To Sum Up Esther And Vashti

So here we have all sorts of different images of ideal and non-ideal Esthers and Vashtis. We have seen how diverse the images are. From the walls of a medieval Florentine villa to the webpage of Chabad, we have encountered all sorts of different takes on the women in question. All the Esthers, each in their own way, are virtuous. Some of the Vashtis are too.

We suggest here some dozen exercises that we think can be done using the pictures. Take elements of them, combine and divide them to produce the exercises that are right for your class and the issues that you wish to bring up.

- Choose a series of Esthers or a series of Vashtis. Ask the students in small groups to discuss them and put them in order. Don't tell them in order of what. Let them choose the criteria for putting the pictures in order. See what they choose and let them present their choices to the group.
- Ask them which of the Esthers is most ideal in their eyes. Ask what makes each one ideal to some extent in the eyes of the artists or illustrators. Ask what each artist or illustrator is trying to say through their portrayal of Esther.
- Ask which scene, or which phrase, they think each of the Esthers or each of the Vashtis is meant to convey. Let them put them in chronological order according to the story, explaining why they are making these choices.
- Look at the pairs of Esther and Vashti that we have brought, that of Dore, of Normand, of Chabad, of Navon. Let them try and get into the head of the artist and suggest the general "take" that each artist has on the story and on the two women involved. Can they identify with one of the "takes"?
- Let each individual choose one of the characters and write – or prepare – an internal monologue of what they think is going through the woman's mind at that moment.
- Discuss the inner woman and the outer woman for some of the portrayals. Do they think that there is a difference between the way that the woman in the picture is trying to portray herself, to the way that she is feeling that she really is, on the inside.
- Ask about feelings of loneliness, of alienation, of fear that the different characters are feeling. Who is the most lonely? The most terrified? Why? What is she going through at that moment.

- Talk of different ideals. What is the ideal of Castagno, as opposed to the ideal of Chabad? And what of the Esther of Navon or of Artemisia? Why are all of these ideals? Suggest that to an extent both Esther and Vashti have become Rorschach tests for certain models of women. People find the Esther or the Vashti that they want. Why?
- What is the dilemma of Lewis's tormented Vashti? Can the students think of a comparable dilemma that they have encountered?
- Examine the portraits done by women and compare them with some of the others. Do the women show any special or different trend in their parshanut of the story? Can one talk about a woman's point of view here?
- Which of the portrayals do they read as feminist portrayals? Are there any that are anti-feminist? Let them read McBee's analysis of Gentileschi's Esther. Do they find it plausible? Do they find it convincing? Do they see any similarity between McBee's analysis and between the picture of Lewis's Vashti mentioned above?
- Which ultimately is the students' Esther and Vashti? Let them pick and choose between the different elements of the different characters. Do they take the moral repulsiveness of the Chabad Vashti, or the heroic prophetic stance of Dore's Vashti or Normand's rather decadent sensuality? If they were to draw their Vashti and Esther, what would they take from the different depictions and what would they add for themselves that is not in any of the portrayals.
- Let them do it. Remind them that they don't need artistic talent to draw these women, especially if you see them standing for ideas rather than just individual personalities. Remind them of the "Reconstructionist" Vashti. Let them draw their characters and explain exactly who they are.
- Let the students equip themselves with a range of magazines. What is the model of beauty (female and male) that is put forward by society today? What are the elements? Why do they think that these are the models of beauty? What, if anything, does it say about their society?

FINAL EXERCISE: Choosing The Model Woman

We come now to our last issue and for this we go off at a certain tangent, touching issues that we have already dealt with but from a new point of view. The aim of this exercise is to investigate the image of the woman as a manipulative person who has evolved behind-the-scenes strategies that attempt to achieve goals by underhand means.

Posing The Issue

The image of the woman as a person who gets what she wants by a mixture of coy helplessness and behind-the-scenes manipulation that is carefully aimed at achieving her goals is one of the most famous and insidious archetypes that exist in literature. We see it most clearly in the creation story of Adam and Eve. We see it a number of times in the patriarchal stories in Genesis (Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Tamar) and the picture continues down the Biblical texts (Delilah and Bat Sheva to mention but two of the most obvious examples). And we see it in so many stories of world literature where it appears as one of the most common of archetypes. The woman is invariably pictured as wily and cunning, and willing to manipulate the honest and straightforward male counterpart in a series of behind the scenes moves that are aimed at achieving her goals. We often see the woman using her bodily charms as part of her armoury of weapons. The woman is often seen as a threat, capable of undermining even the most vigilant of men. She is beautiful and alluring, but ultimately threatening and capable of wreaking chaos in the world. Many of the classic Christian texts develop this picture of woman, taking it to such an extreme that marriage is seen as weakness and Christian holy men – priests – are urged to celibacy rather than being undone by the wiles of women and distracted and separated from their true calling of serving God. We see the same mechanism working in Judaism in the development of the whole Lilith myth in Rabbinic literature and folklore.

The image is certainly brought to perfection in the story of Esther. Vashti as we have noted is punished because at a certain point, she refuses to play by the rules that she should have understood and internalised, those rules that we have talked about in the previous exercises. Esther however, in contrast, works in the completely opposite way and she does so by the aforementioned mixture of presenting herself as helpless and passive, while (in the last part of the story) ultimately scheming to gain her ends through a series of intimate boudoir scenes. She uses her femininity as a weapon: initially it is a weapon for self-advancement. At a certain point it becomes a weapon for a larger cause, saving the people.

A number of questions come out of this scenario and it is to these that we now turn.

Esther On Trial

Using the book of Esther as our departure point, let us look at some of these questions.

- The technique to be used here to bring up some of the issues is to put Esther on trial for perpetuating a stereotype which brings women into disrepute. She will be accused by a group called the "Vashtians" who have decided to bring her before the court of history on the above charges.
- Half of the class should be Vashtians: They must prepare the charge sheet against her and prepare the speeches that will accuse her of bringing women into disrepute. Esther is not a desirable model. It is morally wrong and damaging to women to present her as such. The main points that the Vashtians should consider are these.
 1. Women need to assert themselves and stop trying to behave like men want them to behave.
 2. Esther let herself be made into a sexual ornament – an eternal stain on the pride of women.

3. Esther's behaviour re-enforces a stereotype as old as Eve in which women are perceived as being hypocritical and deceitful in the pursuit of their goals.

4. When Esther went into the royal house as a candidate for the vacant position of queen, she was only thinking of herself and her own needs. She was ignoring totally the needs of women around the world who need to put an end to all forms of male oppression and manipulation of women as objects.

5. For thousands of years, men and women, Jews and non-Jews have been reading the story of Esther and seeing her as a heroine and as a model for women's behaviour. This is negative and works against the best interests of women.

6. Till today many Jews encourage their daughters to dress up once a year on Purim as Queen Esther, thus helping internalise a negative pattern of behaviour of women best achieving their goals through behind the scenes manipulation which involves an appearance of helplessness and passivity covering up for hypocrisy and deceit.

- The other half of the class are Estherians. They must prepare the defence of Esther against the Vashtians, destroy the credibility of the charge sheet against her and present her as a worthy champion of womankind and an equally worthy model for Jewish behaviour. The main points that the Estherians should consider are these.

1. Vashti failed. She kept her dignity but not her crown and was ultimately relegated to the side-lines of society where she could have no influence.

2. You need to know how to play the game to gain what you want – either for yourself or for any goal that you designate as desirable.

3. In a world where women essentially were powerless, the first task of women was to ensure their own survival and protection. If the way to this ran through the royal bedroom, then so be it.

4. Esther is a worthy champion of women and Jews, together. She was not manipulative. Rather she was pragmatic. One of the great things about women is that they tend to be more pragmatic than men who are ruled by absolute truths that inflate egos and create quarrels and ultimately wars.

5. Esther should not be seen as a model for women and Jews alone. Her way should be hailed as a way forward for all humanity. The world would be a better place if more people behaved like Esther and less like Vashti.

6. It is Vashti who has done a terrible disservice to womankind through her reinforcement of the idea of the woman as an obstinate shrew and man-hater, fighting obstinately to spread discord among men and women.

- Each group should see the other group's six points as well as their own and must prepare to defend themselves against the charges that they know that the other group might make against them. The groups are responsible for speeches, rebuttals, artwork and propaganda posters and slogans and perhaps even songs to support their case. One of the Estherians should be Esther and one of the Vashtians should take

the role of Vashti. They do not need to lead their sides but will at the very least be expected to speak up for themselves and give testimony.

- Run the trial, with yourself (and other staff?) as judges. Allow as many people as possible to talk.
- At a certain point, when you feel that the trial has run its course in terms of its own dynamics, turn it into a discussion on the issue, where people can say what they feel. Is there any truth in the charge that Vashti's behaviour provides a more honourable model for women?
- Raise the issue of the manipulative woman as a stock figure and an archetype in the literature and the traditions of the world. Ask where it is found in the Jewish tradition (Eve, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, Tamar, Delilah and Bat Sheva to name just some of the major ones).
- Raise too, any or all of the following questions that emerge in the course of considering the issue.

1. First and foremost, is this popular "harem mentality" strategy, so well depicted in the book, a reflection of reality? Is this really how women tended to behave?

2. If this is not a caricatured picture but indeed a reflection of reality, is this a result of a survival strategy developed by women in order to use their talents in a world where they are powerless to use conventional means to gain their ends (virtually all those conventional means are the sole preserve of the male)? In other words, is this "harem mentality" - the seemingly helpless woman who manipulates the male through the use of her feminine wiles - the only available strategy to a woman in a world in which her power is almost totally at the mercy of her male dominated surroundings?

3. On the other hand, might this not represent, at least partly, a male fantasy of the woman? If we take into account the fact that almost all the great archetypal texts of the ancient world where the picture was first formulated, were, as far as we know, written by men, maybe what we have here is not female reality but a male projection of a reality that does not really exist except inside the mind of the (male) observer?

4. Whether or not it started out as a female reality or a male fantasy, has it become in time a model of female behaviour as women have internalised the archetype and have developed it? As we survey the behaviour of women in the world that we see around us, do we have evidence that women have internalised the "Esther" picture and modify their behaviour according to the suppositions of the "genre"? In other words, is this manipulative picture a model for women's behaviour?

5. If it is indeed a popular model of woman's behaviour, why should this be? Is it a result of the same reality mentioned before where the road to power for many women passes through the bedroom? Is this really the way that our world runs today? Or is it, as some have suggested, a result of women's need to be loved and the belief that this is the best way to ensure their success in attaining their goal?

- Finally, raise the question – initially to the girls in the class and only subsequently to the boys - whether they think that Esther should serve as a model for Jewish girls and women and whether it is a good thing that Jewish girls dress up as Esther. If they think that Esther is a good model – ask the question: what, precisely, is she a good model of? In other words, what are the characteristics for which Esther should be honoured? What should we be trying to pass down if we dress up our daughters as Esther?
- This can be done either in straight discussion or in an extended role play where a number of parents are discussing how they want to dress their kids up for this year's Purim carnival. One of the parents has decided that his or her daughter should go as Esther while another parent has a daughter who wants to be Esther. One militant mother, overhearing this, challenges the other two parents, claiming that Esther is a poor model that absolutely should not be encouraged. Maybe Vashti or Devorah would be a better model. Other parents weigh in with their opinion. Every so often you, the teacher, can "freeze" the action and swop some of the actors with different people of the "audience". It is a good technique to conclude this activity.