



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5773 By Nancy K. Kaufman

The holiday of Purim is based upon the biblical story of Esther, which many scholars believe is a feminist tale. Both women in the story—the Jewish heroine Esther and King Achashverosh's previous wife Vashti—are courageous, outspoken, savvy, independent risk-takers.

Esther and Vashti represent two strong women with two different approaches to power and authority. Queen Vashti gives a banquet for women and refuses to come at the king's command. Her ability to say "no" is unusual in those times and provokes anger from the king and his magistrates. Esther, in many ways, appears more compliant, but is also more strategic in her approach to the king. Unlike Vashti, she stands back and waits to be noticed. Her actions are not taken out of self-interest, but are in the interest of her people.

Many historians and scholars pit Vashti against Esther when recounting the story, but I don't think it's necessary to disparage one woman's character in order to support another's style. The truth is these two women can both serve as role models for other women throughout the world that face difficult challenges and choices.

Vashti could have chosen to follow the king's orders and present herself (probably in the nude) before the king "in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at." (Esther 1:10) Rather, she disobeys this command, loses her crown and is banished from the kingdom but maintains her dignity and her self-esteem.

Esther, who wins a beauty contest to become the new queen, faces a different challenge. She does not rebel in the way Vashti does, but she chooses to be an advocate for her people, risking her favored status in order to save her nation. Esther succeeds through her cunning and creativity and active choice to use the system to her advantage.

Taken together, these women represent different styles of leadership and challenges to authority—to different ends. Vashti chooses to openly rebel and defy the king's order and while she preserves her own integrity, does not succeed in effecting lasting change, as the king just moves on to find another beautiful woman to possess. In contrast, Esther submits herself to the king's whims for a submissive female, yet quietly develops a plan that not only advances her own personal position but saves her people, as well. In the final analysis, they are both women of action who stand up for what they believe in by either challenging authority or by manipulating authority to alter the course of events. Both put aside their fears about their own fate in order to take action to change the status quo.

With all of the challenges faced by women around the world today, we are more than ever in need of models of powerful female leadership. Of the over one billion people in the world defined as the extreme poor (people who earn less than one dollar a day), 70 percent of them are women.¹ In communities throughout the developing world, these women are expected to do most of the agricultural work and in many places they cannot hold property even though they farm the land. They have little control over their reproductive lives and they often are victims of

¹ "Facts on Women at Work," *International Labour Organization*, 27 October 2003. Available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_067595.pdf.

domestic violence or sex and labor trafficking. About 52 percent of the 67 million children around the world who are not in school are girls.² And, in too many places, rape has become a weapon of war.

But, the good news is that there are many Vashtis and Esthers in communities throughout the world who are standing up to authority and taking action on behalf of women's rights. Many outstanding women leaders are profiled in *Half the Sky*, the book and documentary created by *New York Times* reporter Nicholas Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn. And countless others are working in community-based organizations supported by AJWS. In Senegal, for example, thanks to a 12-year organizing effort of a long-time AJWS grantee, Tostan, there is a ban on female genital cutting in over 2,000 villages and support for this change from the government. And there are women throughout the world finding routes out of poverty through micro-credit loans, empowerment programs and education—proving again and again that when given the resources, women are able to make change for themselves, their families and their people.

While courageous women around the world are, like Vashti and Esther, standing up and making a difference, they could be doing even more, with our help. Whether you choose to support them through organizations like AJWS or National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)—which seek to empower women and girls to improve their lives—or through other means, the important thing is that when we celebrate Purim, we remember and emulate the examples set by Vashti and Esther so many years ago.



Nancy K. Kaufman is the chief executive officer of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms.

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² "The Gender Gap," *The World Bank Education Statistics Newsletter*, Volume V, Issue 1, August 2011, page 2. Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTEDSTATS/Resources/3232763-1197312825215/EdStatsNewsletter22.pdf>.