

JEWISH ORTHODOX
FEMINIST ALLIANCE

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Winter 2003—Adar 5763

Volume IV, Issue I

*From Our President:***Esther Unmasked** By Carol Newman

At the beginning of *Megillat Esther*, we might well wonder why Esther was given naming rights for the work at all. If anything, it seems to be the book of Mordecai, who shapes his own destiny and that of his people. Or perhaps the book of Haman, villain that he is.

But Esther? Who is she? Even her name is obscure. The *MeAm Lo'ez* says that it comes from the root "satar" meaning "to conceal"—"almost as if [Mordecai] had named her 'Anonymous.'" Wendy Amsellem also notes in her article "The Mirror Has Two Faces" that when we are first introduced to Esther she is passive and submissive. Not only is her name anonymous, her character seems merely a foil for her more charismatic relative. She is constantly being "taken," not moving under her own power. And we do not even hear her voice when we are told in Chapter 2, verses 19, 20:

"...אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה ועת עמה כאשר צוה עליה מרדכי..."
Esther did as Mordecai instructed.

But *Megillat Esther* is the story of one woman's transformation and how it brought about a nation's salvation. In Chapter 4, we encounter the beginning of a more visible Esther. When she hears from her servant girls and attendants that Mordecai is in the courtyard dressed in sackcloth, she sends clothes for Mordecai to put on but "he would not accept them." (4:4) Again we hear her voice as she summons Hatach, one of the king's attendants and she instructs him to go to Mordecai and investigate. What was happening? And for what reason? When the attendant returns, he brings back Mordecai's instructions. But they are received now by a changed Esther, a queen, who gives orders of her own. She tells Mordecai to "go and gather all the Jews in Shushan, and all of you fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, day and night, and I and my girls will similarly fast. With that I will go to the king in violation of the law, and if I perish, I perish." (4:15,16) In verse 17:

"...ויעבר מרדכי ויעש ככל אשר צוהה עליו אסתר."
We come full circle as Mordecai leaves the courtyard to do all that this brave, new Esther has instructed him to do.

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Don't Miss the Next JOFA Mission to Israel
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This issue is
dedicated in memory of
Esther Farber, z"l

Another Esther

Esther Farber was a pioneer Orthodox feminist, initiated at the First National Jewish Women's Conference, 1973. She stayed the course, working continuously to enhance Orthodox women's lives.

Esther kept growing all of her life. She helped plan the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy, 1997, and served as coordinator, running the whole enterprise from her apartment.

Her work for JOFA was legion. As Journal chair, she was integral in the decision to make each issue a document of substance – of information, debate, and learning.

As vice-president, she served on the executive committee which entailed weekly meetings. Her work on this and other committees was characterized by creative ideas and balanced judgment.

Publicist by training and perfectionist by nature, Esther contributed her many talents to creating PR for every JOFA project. Esther put in endless hours behind the scenes, enabling others, seeking no credit for herself.

A founder of Riverdale Women's Tefilla 25 years ago, Esther was among the first Orthodox women to

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A Season For Change By Blu Greenberg

By the time you read this article, I will have stepped back from the presidency after 6 years and welcomed my successor, Carol Newman.

Carol was a founding member of JOFA and served as vice-president and member of the executive committee since its inception. She has been a major force in making JOFA the organization it is today. Carol co-chaired the program committee of our last two international conferences, which produced the stellar programs for which JOFA is known. She has chaired or sat on numerous other committees including the JOFA calendar, JOFA Watch, Shabbat T'lamdeini, the Tu B'Shvat Seder and more. She has been an active member of the Journal committee; with Esther Farber's illness, Carol stepped in and single-handedly produced this issue. She brims with ideas. Her great strength is that she sees the big picture yet is also totally hands-on in every project she undertakes. JOFA will grow, flourish and take new turns under her leadership, and on behalf of my colleagues on the board, I offer her our congratulations and full support.

Six years is not a long time in the history of an organization but it is JOFA's entire life and a good deal of my own during this past decade. JOFA was born, as most Jewish organizations are, in the intimacy of a dining room. Flushed with the success of our first conference on feminism and orthodoxy and beginning to plan the second, a small group of women discussed the idea of creating an organization to continue the work and to create an address for others struggling with these issues. Being married to a man who built and carried several organizations in his life, and aware that the burdens grow in direct ratio to the enthusiasm, I, like others, was a bit hesitant. But thankfully, a force greater than ourselves decreed that we go forward. In retrospect, JOFA was inevitable. If this small band of women had not created it, some other band would have. It was simply the right moment in history to work for an historic tikkun within Orthodoxy, the full dignity of women in Torah and tradition.

Sitting in my small office now, with its precious view of the Empire State Building turret, looking through my files and dealing with correspondence, I reflect on the last six years with a jumble of emotions: wonderment, that so much has happened in the community in a relatively short time, a good deal of it catalyzed by JOFA; pleasure, as a flood of memories of the activities and contacts that go into building an organization wash over me, the thousands of

*"In retrospect,
JOFA was inevitable."*

conversations and meetings, plans carried out and plans aborted, the inner workings of a board with strong personalities, the loyalty and talents of professional staff, the wonderful surprise as people step forward on their own initiative with ideas, interest and support; anxiety, over the never ending tasks of fund-raising; and painful recall of my mistakes which, knowing myself, will probably stay with me longer than the successes.

Like most presidents who step down, I must admit to certain feelings of ambivalence. Though I never intended to stay beyond one two-year term, somehow it stretched into three terms. Yet, even though the transition is long overdue, I am leaving with a combined sense of regret and relief. Regret, because there is so much more I wanted to do during my tenure, and because being president of an organization that always seems to be flying forward is actually quite a heady experience. Relief, because I know that every institution needs new energy and talent to keep it growing, fresh, and relevant. Relief again, because personally, I have long wanted to return to my writing. Being among those who need clear space and time for the sustained process of writing books, I have longed for a

week or month uncluttered with organizational matters. With the death of my beloved son, JJ, I now feel an even greater urgency to write, though the decision to step back from the presidency long preceded his untimely death.

It is tempting here to look back. But keeping faith with the mission of the Journal – to serve as a place for exchange of ideas – I want to look forward at what I personally believe are the four major challenges to JOFA in the years ahead:

1. **Defining the paradigm of equality in Orthodoxy.** I see this as the most significant challenge, perhaps so because I am the classic transition woman: conditioned in my youth by both halakha and society to very clear gender role delineations, then powerfully informed in adulthood by the culture's new definition of equality as sameness or interchangeable roles. What are we, as Orthodox Jewish feminists, women and men, moving towards in the construction of our

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relationships and our institutions? What are the limits? For me, the paradigm has always been one of allowing for 'distinctive-but-equal' roles. I continue to believe that as long as it does not serve as cover for inequity, distinctive-but-equal is a unique feminism that halakhically shaped Orthodox feminists can contribute to society. But increasingly, I must admit that the boundaries are unclear, that many of the differentiations I once thought secure or unyielding seem to be falling away; also that many other committed Orthodox women and men whom I respect think quite differently about role distinctions. So I must ask myself and my friends the question that has been often asked of me during the past three decades, "How will Orthodox feminism be different from general feminism in, say, 25 years?" No longer are the answers I have given in the past adequate.

The second part of the paradigm question is this: if Orthodox feminism pulls forward at a particular speed, will it be pulling away from community at the very moment that the center of modern orthodoxy has come to accept the basic tenets of this revitalizing movement within its ranks.

So the first task, as I see it, is to open the theoretical discussion of paradigm and against that backdrop, to think

through every new role and its implications. Creating facts on the ground, as JOFA has been remarkably able to influence others to do, may not be enough for a solid, communally integrated future.

Implicit in these remarks is the underlying conviction – proven by history – that halakha can both inform and validate through the interpretive process. Halakha can take many paths as we walk ahead.

"More has to be done to bring men into the enterprise."

2. **Creating a fair feminism.** This means, primarily, the greater inclusion of men. In truth, JOFA has sought to do this, beginning with the very first conference and its abundance of male speakers and welcome of male participants. This was a conscious decision taken by its planners, not to repeat the error of slowing down the process by not partnering with men from the outset.

Still, more has to be done to bring

men into the enterprise – men brought in on the discussion of paradigm, men on the board, men included as we create women's ritual and inclusive language. I have been to simhat bat and bat mitzvah ceremonies where women have all the lines, a situation we would not quietly accept in reverse at a brit, bar mitzvah or wedding ceremony. Even at JOFA's Tu B'Shvat women's seder, we had not thought of including men, as the Ma'ayan Women's Seders now do. I agree that there are occasions for separate events for genders, times for separate boards, spaces for separate rituals, but in general, the operating standard for a fair feminism as we go forward should be Hillel's dictum, paraphrased; "Do not do unto another gender or class what you would not have done to you." In sum, distinctive-but-equal must always work in tension with a fair feminism.

3. **Partnership with the rabbis.** JOFA has assembled a wonderful list of what we lovingly call, "JOFA-friendly rabbis" Happily, I can report that this list contains names of the most distinguished and influential rabbis of modern Orthodoxy, and even a few of the haredi community. Still, the list is a fraction of rabbinic leadership everywhere. We must broaden our reach, finding ways of cooperating on some issues if not on

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Esther/Vashti Flags from Ma'Yan:

The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan's exhibition: "A Different Purim Sound: Waving Flags and Ringing Bells."



Artist: Beth Shepard Peters

Esther/Vashti Flags from Ma'Yan:

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Artist: Rochelle Rubenstein



Artist: Melissa Dinwiddle

Another Esther

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leyn Torah. She was proud that her father, a great grandson of the Chasam Sofer, taught her trup. In turn, she proudly prepared many girls for bat mitzvah. Her final student, granddaughter Elianna, will become bat mitzvah in April, in Israel where she lives. Esther taught her trans-Atlantically, via camera and Internet, a treasured experience for both.

Esther Farber was a woman of great goodness and kindness. Gossip was simply not on her lips. Though outgoing and friendly, she was modest to the core. She focused attention on others, not on herself. She kept old friends forever. She had no envy in her and she took pleasure in other peoples' good fortune.

Esther was brave and courageous. To look at her these last few years, one would not have suspected that she had been on dialysis for three years, had undergone multiple surgeries, including two kidney transplants. She always looked elegant and though she sometimes walked slowly, she walked with dignity, grace and beauty.

Esther would not allow illness to take over her life. During the years on dialysis, she continued to work daily at her UJA-Federation job.

She possessed a zest for life, a remarkable get-up-and-go quality. When her first donated kidney failed and she was again at death's door, her attitude was not "look what I have to go through again," but rather "how lucky I am to find a replacement so fast!"

Esther loved her life and felt blessed with good fortune, especially her family. She is survived by her husband, Charles Gold, three sons — David, Steven and Rabbi Seth Farber, three daughters-in-law, and 10 grandchildren.

For the deep friendship and collegiality that have been cut, we feel bereft. And for the model and inspiration that her life was to all of us, we feel great gratitude.

Te'bay zicbra baruch. ■

Hester Esther: The Hidden Heroine By Gail Katz

The performance of the *mitzvah* of reading the Megillah on Purim is characterized by a number of distinctive customs. The scroll from which the text is read, for example, is folded to look like a letter in order to recreate the experience of reading an actual proclamation. The somber tune of *Eicha* (Lamentations) is used to sing the verses that describe the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem and Mordecai's state of mourning after learning of Haman's decree, similarly emphasizing the performative aspect of the Megillah reading. Most unusual of all, however, is the practice of interrupting the reading by making noise to blot out the very sound of Haman's name each of the fifty-one times it occurs in the Megillah. Thus, the seemingly straightforward practice in our synagogues today of *miqra megillah* involves not only reading the biblical Purim story, but reenacting it as well, much as the *haggadah* is both a retelling and a reliving of the redemption from Egypt.

Among these *minhagim* is the custom that four verses are first read aloud by the congregation and then repeated by the reader. The four verses are:

"Now there was a Jew in the city of Shushan whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite." (Esther, 2:5).

"Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the King, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Shushan shouted and rejoiced." (Esther, 8:15).

"For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor." (Esther, 8:16).

"For Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was powerful among the Jews and popular with his many kindred, for he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his descendants." (Esther, 10:3).

These four verses can be viewed as a compressed version of the central narrative of the story of Purim. The first introduces the hero, Mordecai. The second and third verses describe Mordecai's personal victory over

Haman and the parallel triumph of the Jewish people over their enemies. The fourth and final verse, which describes Mordecai's importance in the royal court, reaffirms the possibility of a safe and meaningful Jewish existence in *galut*.

Typically, we think of Esther as the heroine of Purim, and by extension the savior of the Jewish people. Indeed, the book which details the story of Purim bears *her* name. Moreover, Rashbam (Samuel b. Meir, 12th c. France), commenting on the talmudic ruling (Megillah 4a) that "all are obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of reading the Megillah," explains that women have an equal obligation in this instance because the miracle of Purim occurred "by the hand of a woman," i.e. Esther (cited in Tosafot *loc. cit.*). The same view is reiterated centuries later by Joseph Caro (*Beit Yosef, Orach Hayyim*, 689).

*"The miracle of
Purim occurred "by the
hand of a woman.""*

Despite the fact that Esther is widely acknowledged as the champion of Purim, the four verses that the congregation reads aloud relate only to Mordecai, and depict *him* as the hero of the story. According to Abudarham (David b. Yosef Abudarham, 14th c. Spain), that is in fact the very point: the congregation recites these verses as a way of honoring Mordecai. And why does Mordecai deserve such honor? "Because," Abudarham insists, "the essence of the miracle occurred by *his* hand." (*Purim*, "Ketav even"). Although the Megillah is named for Esther and at least one *halakha* has developed around the fact that Esther and her actions constitute the essence of the miracle of Purim, the custom nonetheless developed to honor Mordecai during *keriat ha-Megillah*.

Abudarham, citing Saadiah Gaon (10th c., Iraq), mentions an alternate custom prevalent in Spain according to which the congregation would say only two verses aloud, "For the Jews," and "For Mordecai the Jew." This *minhag* is interesting because it omits the two verses most directly concerned with Mordecai's personal victory. "For the Jews" describes the good fortune that befell the Jewish people, and logically would be a verse that the entire congregation would read aloud. It is also the only one of the four verses that does not mention Mordecai by name. And "For Mordecai the Jew," as the final verse of Megillat Esther, would be recited aloud in any case – Abudarham explains that the final verse of a *megillah* is generally said aloud in order to rouse the congregation before reciting the concluding *berakha*. Thus, unlike the common practice today, the *minhag* described by Saadiah Gaon does not highlight the role of Mordecai as hero, and, accordingly, conforms to our usual understanding of Esther as the main character of the Purim story.

Our current practice of reading the full four verses aloud lauds Mordecai as the hero of the story of Purim in another way as well. Besides these four verses, the only other time the congregation makes an audible sound during the reading of the Megillah is at the mention of Haman's name. The custom of making noise at the sound of Haman's name may in fact be viewed as a mirror reflection of the custom of reading the four verses about Mordecai out loud – just as Haman is audibly acknowledged by the congregation as the villain of the story, so too is Mordecai publicly acclaimed as the story's hero. Taken together, these *minhagim* actually present a fundamental reinterpretation of the story of Purim, one that narrows the story to a personal conflict between two male characters and, in so doing, eclipses the traditionally important role played by Esther.

Keriat ha-Megillah, as practiced today, involves active congregational participation to tell the story of Purim. Multiple versions of the story can be

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Esther/Vashti Flags from Ma'Yan:

The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan's exhibition: "A Different Purim Sound: Waving Flags and Ringing Bells."



Artist: Judith Margolis



Artist: Dalya Luttwak

Zila Milta and Women's Megillah Reading By Channa Lockshin

According to the Gemara, women are both "*chayavot bemikra megillah*," obligated to read the megillah, and "*kesherim likrot et hamegilah*," valid megillah readers.¹ However, some later halakhic authorities bar women from reading megillah for men.² Some maintain that women's obligation is on a lower level than that of men, a position that remains a controversy even among contemporary poskim.³ Other rishonim, and achronim after them, maintain that there are reasons other than lesser obligation that prevent women from reading megillah for men, or even for other women. One of these concerns is expressed in the term *zila milta*, literally, "the thing is degrading." This term is introduced by the Tosafot (12th century France), adopted and expanded by the Korban Netanel (17th century Germany), and then quoted by the author of the Mishna Berurah (19th century Poland). Since the Mishna Berurah is a central work in contemporary psak, it is worth examining this term to determine its meaning and its halakhic implications.

The term *zila milta* seems to have two different but related meanings in classical halakhic literature. *Zila milta* appears

in fifteen contexts in the gemara. All but one of those contexts refer to cases where an individual's dignity is injured or threatened. For example, a man who is supporting his father is not allowed to feed him the tithe reserved for poor people – even though his father could qualify as a poor person – because it is *zila milta*; it is beneath the father's dignity for his son to treat him as a charity case.⁴

Although in that case *zila milta* is treated as a serious concern, rabbinic texts do not always treat this type of *zila milta*, concern for individual dignity, as a valid consideration. In Bava Batra, Rav instructs recently impoverished people to take a demeaning job in order to be able to support themselves, "*ve-al tomar zila bi milta*" – "and do not say, 'it is beneath my dignity!'"⁵ One is expected to waive *zila milta* for the positive value of supporting oneself. In Masechet Shevuot, a scholar who knows testimony is told not to go to court if it will be undignified, *zila milta*, since the judge knows less than he does.⁶ Poskim comment on this that if the scholar is willing to go despite the indignity involved, it is permitted and praiseworthy for him to go.⁷ Here too, the

positive value of bringing justice overrides *zila milta*.

In one place in the gemara, *zila milta* does not refer to something that offends personal dignity, but to something that is an affront to ritual. The gemara says that sanctifying a blemished sacrifice, something which is biblically prohibited, is *zila milta*.⁸ This use of *zila milta* appears in a few other contexts in the literature of the Rishonim. For example, Rashi calls appointing a king of impure lineage (also a biblical prohibition) *zila milta*, and a geonic work calls improper treatment of tefillin *zila milta*.⁹ This type of *zila milta* is a more serious matter – it is not an injury to the pride of an individual, which the individual can be encouraged to tolerate, but an offense to Jewish ritual. However, this use of *zila milta* refers to something which is already halakhically problematic, and *zila milta* is just an additional problem, or perhaps a justification of why those things are forbidden by halakha.

When someone says that women reading megillah is *zila milta*, what does he mean? Is it the first definition, insulting the dignity of an individual, which

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The Mirror has Two Faces: An Exploration of Esther and Vashti

By Wendy Amsellem

Although Vashti and Esther never meet, the relationship between them is integral to understanding the events of Megillat Esther. Vashti disappears by the end of the first chapter, but she casts a long shadow over the rest of the book.

As we encounter Vashti in chapter one, we learn the following about her: She is beautiful and headstrong. She throws a good party. She refuses to have her appearances before the king regulated solely by his desires. For this last offense, Vashti pays dearly, losing her crown and incurring perpetual banishment from the king's presence. At the close of chapter one it is clear that a woman in Achashverosh's court would do well to be dutiful and to come before the king as he commands. The essentiality of female obedience is further confirmed by the final verse of the chapter in which a missive is sent to all of Achashverosh's subjects reminding them in no uncertain terms that "every man must rule in his household."

By contrast, Esther is presented at first as the perfect foil to Vashti. Whereas Vashti was willful and independent, Esther is passive and submissive. The reflexive use of the Hebrew word "LaKaKH" is constantly applied to her. She is "taken" in by Mordechai as a foster daughter, "taken" to the king's harem, and "taken" before the king. She does not reveal her identity at the palace, "for Mordechai had commanded her not to tell." She requests nothing at the harem, only accepting whatever Hagai, the king's eunuch, chooses to give her. Even after she is crowned queen, we are told that Esther continues to obey the commands of Mordechai as she had done under his care. It is no surprise that Achashverosh loves Esther. She is the model of docility, an exact antidote to Vashti.

Esther understands very well her role

as Achashverosh's queen. When Mordechai commands her to appear before the king and intercede on behalf of the Jews, Esther responds that EVERYONE knows that those who appear before the king unbidden are condemned to die. She has learned from her predecessor's fate that the queen's job is to come when she is called. Mordechai insists to Esther that it is her responsibility to plead for her nation.

This is a moment of crisis for Esther. She is caught between conflicting obediences to her foster father and husband. In addition, to come before the king unsummoned is an abnegation of her role as Vashti's replacement. She was chosen to be queen since she represented the antithesis of Vashti's persona. Esther's position, her identity and quite possibly her life are all closely tied to her obedience to the king.

In this moment of fate, Esther looks into her mirror and discovers that she does not look quite so different from Vashti after all. She takes matters into her own hands and stands up to both sources of authority. Esther assumes control of Mordechai's plan, changing and amending as she sees fit. Like Vashti, she will appear before the king only when she decides that the time is right— in this case after three days of fasting. Instead of following Mordechai's suggestion and simply making her petition, she will throw a series of parties as Vashti did. In order to succeed, Esther realizes that she must take on aspects of the repudiated former queen.

Of course, we do not actually know why Vashti refused to appear before the King. It could have been out of modesty as the midrash in Esther Rabbah suggests. Or as Talmud Bavli Megillah describes, she may simply have been unhappy with her appearance that day

(a sudden case of leprosy according to Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina or the surprise sprouting of a tail according to a beraita). Perhaps she was being capricious. Perhaps she was a proto-feminist fighting for a sense of independent integrity. In any event, Vashti's disobedience brings her career to an abrupt end and her fate is quite deliberately meant to serve as an object lesson to women everywhere.

As Esther marshals her strength to save her nation, she must revisit the experiences of her shunned predecessor and learn from them. Esther is more calculated, more subtle, (more divinely inspired) and ultimately far more successful than Vashti. Yet, in order to triumph, Esther must confront the image of Vashti and incorporate (or perhaps discover) the attributes of Vashti in herself.

As Orthodox feminists, we are constantly confronted with taboo images of dangerous women from whom we are told to distance ourselves. A is too radical, B has gone too far, C has made too many enemies. We struggle to draw our borders, to be open and yet traditional, free and yet constrained within halacha. Purim is a holiday in which we explore and challenge our boundaries. We dress up as other people. Some of us drink to the point where differences become blurred. In the spirit of this holiday and following the legacy of our ancestor Esther, I encourage us to reexamine whom we emulate and from whom we shy away. We may discover as Esther did that we are not so different from those whom we fear and that the most important lessons can be learned from the unlikeliest of teachers. ■

Wendy Amsellem completed the Drisha Scholar's Circle and is currently pursuing a PhD in rabbinic literature at NYU

"לִיהוּדִים הִיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׂמְחָה וְשֵׁן וִיקָר."
"For the Jews there was light, happiness, joy and honor."

(Megillat Esther 8:16)

Esther Unmasked

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Like Esther, women have also been "satar"—concealed. Not out of any master plan but because for years women's roles have centered around the private sphere. Increasingly, though, women are taking on more public roles as well. We have Talmud scholars, Talmud and Bible teachers, *yoatzot* and *toanot*. We have women who have served as presidents of their synagogues and principals of their schools. And these new public roles have, in turn, influenced our private lives. Women in the home also have a new visibility. Many have chosen to bless their children on Friday nights along with their husbands. Many share the *mitzvot* of *kiddush* and *motzi*. What incredible change and growth I have witnessed in my lifetime! But there is still so much more to be done. The story of Purim provides a powerful example of how women can take a more active role. At the end of *Megillat Esther*, after all the instructions are given, we see something new and quite extraordinary: Mordecai and Esther work together, as equals, to create the holiday of Purim. "Queen Esther, daughter of Avihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with full authority confirming this second letter of Purim." (9:29) So along with the many lessons we can take from the *Megillah*, perhaps there is yet another: Great things can happen when Jewish women and men have the courage to change, to grow and to do it together.

Happy Purim! ■

Esther/Vashti Flags from Ma'Yan:

The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan's exhibition:
"A Different Purim Sound: Waving Flags and Ringing Bells."



Artist: Anna Kocherovsky



Artist: Sophia Rosenberg

Hester Esther

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reenacted. For example, according to Rashbam and Joseph Caro, it is the deep running tradition that recognizes Esther as the heroine of Purim that explains the Talmud's insistence that women are obligated to read the *Megillah*. And no doubt such a view has also left its mark in the very name

by which we refer to the biblical text, i.e. *The Scroll of Esther*. The *minbagim* discussed above, however, offer a different version of the story, one that shifts attention away from Esther and focuses on Mordecai's involvement in the story. The multiple readings of *Megillat Esther* discussed here point to the active and important role readers play in shaping the meaning of texts. Such a role poses both opportunities and challenges for the responsible

reader, as the story of Purim is complex and multifaceted. The reader must be able to engage the text and explore the hidden and diverse dimensions of the story. ■

Gail Katz is an associate with the patent law firm of Fish & Neave in New York. She is an alumna and on the board of Drisha

Zila Milta

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can be waived or overridden, or is it the second definition, an improper treatment of Jewish ritual that cannot be altered or waived?

Although the Korban Netanel gets the concept of *zila milta* from Tosafot, they use the term in completely different ways. The Tosafot introduces the concept of *zila milta* in the context of mixed Zimmun.¹⁰ Tosafot says that although men and women are equally obligated in Grace after meals, women cannot lead a mixed zimmun, perhaps because of *zila milta*, which he states is similar to the case of megillah. Here it is clear that Tosafot sees *zila milta* as a concern that exists when there is nothing ritually wrong with the act. Also, the language in the Tosafot Rosh makes it even clearer that this *zila milta* refers to individual dignity: "*zila bebo milta baanashim sbeyotzloom nashim*" – it is degrading for men to have their obligation performed by women. So here *zila milta* is only an issue of personal dignity.

The Korban Netanel starts with a completely different assumption, which is that women's obligation is on a lower level than men's. He then proceeds to use *zila milta* as a reason why women cannot read for a group of women (the position quoted by the author of the Mishna Berurah).¹¹ Here there is no problem of dignity – presumably it is not beneath a woman's dignity to have another woman read for her. Korban Netanel is referring to the second definition of *zila milta*: disrespect for ritual. Having a public megillah reading where the reader is someone who is less ritually fit, someone whose obligation, according to him, is only to hear and not to read the megillah, is an affront to ritual – *zila milta*.

In conclusion, our understanding of *zila milta* depends upon our understanding of women's obligation to read megillah. If we follow the poskim who say that women have a lesser obligation to read megillah, than *zila milta* is a serious concern; it may be disrespectful to the mitzvah of megillah reading to have it performed by someone whose obligation is incomplete. However, if

we follow the poskim who say that women are obligated on the same level as men, then *zila milta* is a non-ritual concern about individual men's dignity, a concern which could potentially be outweighed by more important values, such as the value of building a more inclusive and equal society. ■

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- 1 Megillah 4a, Arakchin 2b-3a.
- 2 For example, the Behag, the Rach, and the Ran. A comprehensive list of the positions of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* on this issue is in Rabbi Avi Weiss's article, "Women and Megillah."

- 3 Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Yehaveh Da'at 3:51) holds that women's obligation is equal to that of men but some hold that it is a lesser obligation. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Hayyim* 689:1) mentioned both opinions.
- 4 *Kiddushin* 32a.
- 5 *Bava batra*...
- 6 *Shevuot* 30b.
- 7 The Rambam says that the scholar should preferably not go (*Edut* 1:2). However, the *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch* say only that the scholar is exempt if he does not wish to go (*Choshen Mishpat* 28:5). The Radbaz (responsa, 4:119) says that it is preferable to go and testify.
- 8 *Temurah* 7a.
- 9 *Rashi Sotah* 41b s.v. *Egropba*, *Sheiltot Parashat Bo* #45.
- 10 *Sukkah* 38a, s.v. *Be'emet Amru*.
- 11 *Korban Netanel* megillah chapter 1 mem and nun, *Sbaar Hatziyum* #13 in *Shulchan Aruch Orach Hayyim* 689.

Season for Change

...continued from page 3

others. We are a group that respects the chain of tradition. Even as we press forward for women to become an increasing part of the structures of authority, we must bend our efforts to seek broader cooperation, setting aside insult or rebuff, celebrating gains and new cohorts, keeping in mind that beneath gender issues, we all share one common desire: for Orthodoxy to survive and flourish.

4. Education as empowerment. This is an obvious goal. Yet, some have tried to separate and even pit against each other women's learning and women's activism. But the two are inseparable, interdependent, each nurturing the other. The leadership of orthodoxy in the future will come from learned and learning women, as it has from learned men in the past. But it will also come from politically wise Orthodox women, as it is now beginning to come. And both groups must support each other and be supported by a community that understands the interface between the two. Happily, there is a small but growing number of women who have internalized both roles, and these will surely be the great leaders of coming generations. But the lesson to be gained by Everywoman is to keep learning, for learning is not only its own spiritual reward but also the means

of giving credentials to women to become quality religious leaders in our community.

As JOFA is not a "dinner organization" at which inaugurations and good-byes take place, this JOFA Journal is the place for offering my thanks. I feel great gratitude to my extraordinarily hard-working, faithful colleagues on the Board, each one of whom has become a beloved and treasured friend, and those bonds will not diminish in my changed capacity; to our amazing executive director, Robin Bodner, whose professionalism and radiant warmth make her a joy to work with; to Andrea Levin, associate director and loyal friend who carried JOFA through its hardest and best times; and to Carol Newman, for deepening her commitment to JOFA by taking on the role and responsibilities of the presidency.

Albeit inadequately, I thank my husband and children, for without their support I could never have taken on this responsibility. More than support, Yitz has been my best sounding board and greatest source of advice and encouragement all these years.

And I thank all of you, readers of the JOFA Journal, members and supporters of this organization, old personal friends among you and new ones, through this common commitment we share. You make it all worthwhile.

Six memorable years...what a privilege! ■

Jofa's Mission Statement

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halacha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halacha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

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