

Purim: A Study Guide on Women's Issues
Fighting Misogyny
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Purim is traditionally a time in which Jews partake in frivolity and excessive eating and drinking. We celebrate the triumph of Mordecai and the Jews over Haman and his attempted genocide. However, underneath the light-hearted nature of the holiday are more serious themes. Purim tells us the story of two women whose basic human rights have been threatened: Esther for her Jewish heritage and Vashti for her gender. Just as the Book of Esther disturbs us for how Vashti was exiled for standing up for her personal rights, so must we consider the plights of women all over the world, who fight for equal protection and bear the brunt of effects of poverty.

We encourage you to use these Jewish texts and study questions to consider our Jewish values that speak to the issue of women's rights and fighting against a reactionary worldview of women.

Text 1: Vashti's "Crime"

<p>And Memucan answered before the king and the princes: 'Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the peoples, that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like unto all the king's princes. So will there arise enough contempt and wrath. If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment that...all the wives will give to their husbands honour, both to great and small...' And the king did according to the word of Memucan..for he sent letters into all the king's provinces...that every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people. -Esther 1:16-22</p>	<p>על לא, והשרים המלך לפני, (ממוכן) מומכן ויאמר, השרים-כל-על כי: המלכה ושתי עושה, לבדו המלך אחשורוש המלך מדינות-בכל, אשר, ים-העמ-כל-ועל בעליהן להבזות, הנשים-כל-על המלכה-דבר יצא-כי את להביא אמר אחשורוש המלך, באמרם: בעיניהן תאמרנה זהה והיום. באה-ולא--לפניו המלכה ושתי, לכל, המלכה דבר-את שמעו אשר, ומדי-פרס שרות, טוב המלך-על-אם. וקצף בזיון, וכדי; המלך שרי ולא, ומדי-פרס בדיתי ויפתב, מלפניו מלכות-דבר יצא, אחשורוש המלך לפני, ושתי תבוא-לא אשר: יעבור ונשמע. ממנה הטובה לרעותה, המלך יתן ומלכותה; היא רבה כי, מלכותו-בכל יעשה-אשר המלך פתגם קטן-ועד, ללמדו--לבעליהן יקר יתנו, הנשים-וכל המלך ויעש; והשרים, המלך בעיני, הדבר, וייטב--המלך מדינות-כל-אל, ספרים וישלח. ממוכן קדבר ועם-עם-ואל, ככתבה ומדינה מדינה-אל כלשון ומדבר, בביתו ררש איש-כל להיות: כלשונו עמו</p>
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1. According to the book of Esther, what is the crime that she committed? What is the fear that the princes and officials have?

2. What is the attitude of women expressed by this text? What are the dangers of this view? How can it influence society?
3. Do we see any of these kinds of attitudes in our society? In what ways do they pop up (religiously, culturally, socially)?

Text 2: Another Model-- the Daughters of Zelophehad

<p>Then drew near the daughters of Zelophehad...And they stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes and all the congregation, at the door of the tent of meeting, saying: 'Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not among the company of them that gathered themselves together against the LORD in the company of Korah, but he died in his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he had no son? Give unto us a possession among the brethren of our father.' ... And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: 'The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: thou shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren; and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them.' -Numbers 27:1-7</p>	<p>וְלִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי וְתַעֲמֹדְנָה...צִלְפְּחָד בָּנוֹת וְתִקְרַבְנָה פְתַח--הָעֵדָה--וְכָל הַנְּשִׂאִים וְלִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֵן אֱלֶעָזָר הַהִי--לֹא וְהוּא בַּמִּדְבָּר מֵת אָבִינוּ. לֵאמֹר, מוֹעֵד-אֵהָל--כִּי קָרַח-בַּעֲדַת, יְהוָה-עַל הַנּוֹעְדִים הָעֵדָה בְּתוֹךְ אָבִינוּ-שֵׁם יִגָּרַע לְמָה. לֹא הָיוּ-לֹא וּבָנִים, מֵת בְּחַטָּאוֹ בְּתוֹךְ, אַחֲזָה לְנו-תְּנָה; בֵּן לוֹ אֵין כִּי, מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ מִתּוֹךְ בָּנוֹת, כֵּן. לֵאמֹר הַמֶּלֶךְ-אֵל, יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר. אָבִינוּ אָחִי אָחִי בְּתוֹךְ, נִחַלְתָּ אַחֲזָה לָהֶם תִּתֵּן נָתַן--דְּבָרָת צִלְפְּחָד לָהֶן, אָבִיהֶן נִחַלְתָּ-אֶת וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ; אָבִיהֶם</p>
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1. What are the daughters of Zelophehad asking for? What does God command Moses do?
2. How does this attitude towards women differ from what we see in the book of Esther? What implications does this attitude have for how we treat women in our society? How can we ensure this happens?

Text 3: A Modern View

The histories of the women in the Bible were nothing if not those of women ferociously pioneering for the rights of females. The print reflects those histories. They fought for, among other things, women's right to own property, women's inheritance rights, women's struggle against abuse, and on and on. -Joan Snyder, Statement on "Our Foremothers"

1. What does Joan Snyder believe the women in the Bible were fighting for? What did they symbolize?

2. How can we continue their fight in our society? What areas in our society still need advocacy on behalf of women's rights?