

Purim: A Study Guide on Women's Issues
Women's Rights
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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 how they relate to human rights in general.

Text 1: Memucan, Women's Oppression, and Genocide

A Tanna taught: Memucan (King Achashverosh's advisor who told him to exile Vashti) is the same as Haman, And why was he called Memucan? Because he was destined [mukan] for punishment. -*Megillot*, 12b

Do we learn from the Megillah that those who will not treat Jews as human will also not treat women as human? That Haman and Memucan are the same oppressor because they do the same oppression? ... And that just as the oppression of women and of the Jewish people is intertwined, so their victories are intertwined? That the victory, the freedom of the Jewish people will only come with the victory, the freedom, of womankind? -Arthur Wascow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, 126

1. What is the significance behind the association of Memucan and Haman?
2. What are the similarities between oppression of women (Memucan) and genocide (Haman)? How are they different? What does this imply about the link between human rights and women's rights?

Text 2: Laws and Rights

Even though a father has permission [from the Torah] to betroth his daughter while she is a minor to anyone that he wants, it is not right for him to do this. Rather, the sages have commanded that a man should not betroth his daughter while she is a minor. Rather, she must become an adult and

בתו לקדש לאב רשות שיש פ"ואע
לכל נערה וכשהיא קטנה כשהיא
כן לעשות ראוי אין שירצה מי
אדם יקדש שלא חכמים מצות אלא
שתגדיל עד קטנה כשהיא בתו את

say, "To so-and-so I wish to be married." -Maimonides, *Mishnei Torah*, Laws of Marital Relations, 3:19

רוצה אני בפלוני ותאמר

1. What does Maimonides do to the law about underage women in the Torah? What law is binding?
2. Why does Maimonides overturn the law in the Torah? What value is more important?
3. What principles do we hold regarding women's rights that are of primary importance, even over our sacred documents?

Text 3: A Modern View

It is not enough to say that Judaism views women as separate but equal, nor to point to Judaism's past superiority over other cultures in its treatment of women. We've had enough of apologetics: enough of Bruria, Dvorah, and Esther; enough of Eshet Chayyil (traditional song about a woman of valor)! -Ezrat Nashim, "Call for Change," (Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement: 14 March 1972).

1. What frustrates Ezrat Nashim about Jewish attitudes towards women in the 70s? What does she view as the solution to this problem?
2. In what ways does this text reflect a modern sensibility about women's rights? In what areas do we still need to fulfill this vision? How can we take action to accomplish this?