

Esther and Vashti – Women in the Book, and in our Lives

The lesson plan for the fifth grade deals with women—their image, status and role—in the story of the Book of Esther and in our lives today. The lessons shall deal with the images of Vashti and Esther, analyze their behavior and evaluate their achievements. In addition, we shall examine the model of femininity in the Book, and compare it with our own present society.

1. Vashti and Esther – Women of the Book

Characterizing the image of Vashti and Esther and how they are regarded in the Book. What was the status of women in Persia? What character traits were they judged for? What could they do? What models do Vashti and Esther represent, respectively? What is the difference between them? What is the message of the Book to women?

2. Women in today's society

Analysis of women's status in our society through the prism of advertisements and television programs;

3. Feminine models

Women in history and in the present: what is a leading, heroic woman?



Vashti and Esther – Women of the Book

Vashti – the Book of Esther A

(9) Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Achashverosh. (10) On the seventh day, when King Achashverosh was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas— (11) to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. (12) But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. (13) Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times (14) and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom. (15) According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. She has not obeyed the command of King Achashverosh that the eunuchs have taken to her. (16) Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Achashverosh. (17) For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, King Achashverosh commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. (18) This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen’s conduct will respond to all the king’s nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.





(19) Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Achashverosh. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. (20) Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest. (21) The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. (22) He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Questions

1. What did Vashti do while the king was holding his banquet? How does this act say about her position and power?
2. What does Achashverosh order Vashti to do? What does he want to do with her? How does he treat her?
3. Why do you think Vashti disobeyed the king? In your opinion, did she know the risk involved in her disobedience?
4. What is Memukan's claim towards Vashti? What does he claim will happen?
5. Does Vashti's status as queen help her or cause her to fail?
6. What can we learn from this section about Vashti's character? What kind of a woman is she?





Esther (1) – The Book of Esther 2

(2) Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. (3) Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women 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. (4) Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. (5) Now there was in the citadel of Sushan a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordechai son of Yair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish (6) who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin King of Judah. (7) Mordechai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordechai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. (8) When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Sushan and put under the care of Hegai. Esther too was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. (9) She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. (10) Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordechai had forbidden her to do so. (11) Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. (12) Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Achashverosh, 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. (13) And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.





(14) In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. (15) When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordechai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. (16) She was taken to King Achashverosh in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. (17) Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ... (20) But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordechai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordechai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

Questions

1. How is Esther characterized? What are her outstanding qualities?
2. By virtue of what does Esther receive preferential treatment from Hegai?
3. What is the criterion / characteristic according to which the queen is chosen?
How does this attest to her role and status?
4. Why is Esther chosen to be queen? What traits of hers help her be chosen?
5. What do you think of the way in which the queen is chosen? Are these important traits?





Esther (1) – The Book of Esther 4

(1) When Mordechai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly [...] (2) But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. (3) In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. (4) When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordechai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. (5) Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordechai and why. (6) So Hathak went out to Mordechai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. (7) Mordechai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. (8) He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Shushan, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. (9) Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordechai had said. (10) Then she instructed him to say to Mordechai: (11) All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king. (12) When Esther's words were reported to Mordechai: (13) Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape:





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(14) For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Questions

1. Who does Esther listen to? Who has influence on her?
2. What is important to Esther? Why does she send clothing to Mordechai? Who and what is she concerned about?
3. How does Esther respond to Mordechai's demand? Why does she refuse to go to the king?
4. From Esther's reply, what can we learn about the queen's status?
5. From this section, what can we learn about Esther's character?





Esther (2) – The Book of Esther 4-5

(15) Then Esther sent this reply to Mordechai: (16) Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Shushan, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. (17) So Mordechai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

(1) On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. (2) When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. (3) Then the king asked, What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you. (4) If it pleases the king, replied Esther, let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him. (5) Bring Haman at once, the king said, so that we may do what Esther asks. So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. (6) As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted. (7) Esther replied, My petition and my request is this: (8) If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question.





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Questions

1. How does Esther behave, after Mordechai's warning?
2. How do relations between Mordechai and Esther change? Who gives orders to who?
3. What does Esther do towards her meeting with the king? Why does she prepare in this way?
4. What does Esther do after the king agrees to fulfill her wishes? Why doesn't she disclose her request right away?
5. How does Esther use her femininity to get what she wants? What do you think of Esther's use of her beauty and femininity?
6. What kind of woman is Esther? What characterizes her in this section?





Esther (2) – The Book of Esther 7–8

(1) So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, (2) and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted. (3) Then Queen Esther answered, If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. (4) For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king. (5) King Achashverosh asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he – the man who has dared to do such a thing? (6) Esther said, an adversary and enemy! This vile Haman! Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. (7) The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. (8) Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house? (9) Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, A pole reaching to a height of fifty cubits stands by Haman's house. He had it set up for Mordechai, who spoke up to help the king. (10) So they hung Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordechai. Then the king's fury subsided.

Question: how does Esther behave during the banquet? What qualities does she apply?





Chapter 8

(1) That same day King Achashverosh gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordechai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her. (2) The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordechai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate. (3) Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. (4) Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him. (5) If it pleases the king, she said, and if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. (6) For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family? (7) King Achashverosh replied to Queen Esther and to Mordechai the Jew, Because Haman attacked the Jews, I have given his estate to Esther, and they have hung him on the pole he set up. (8) Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked.





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Questions

1. Who granted Mordechai his status?
2. Why is the ring passed on to Mordechai and not to Esther? What does this say about the status of women and their influence?
3. What does Esther's repeated appeal to the king (verse 3) attest to? "Esther again pleaded with the king"? Why does Esther not just make do with what she is given? Who and what is she concerned about?
4. At this stage, who is telling Esther what to do?
5. When new qualities come to light in Esther in this section?

Concluding discussion

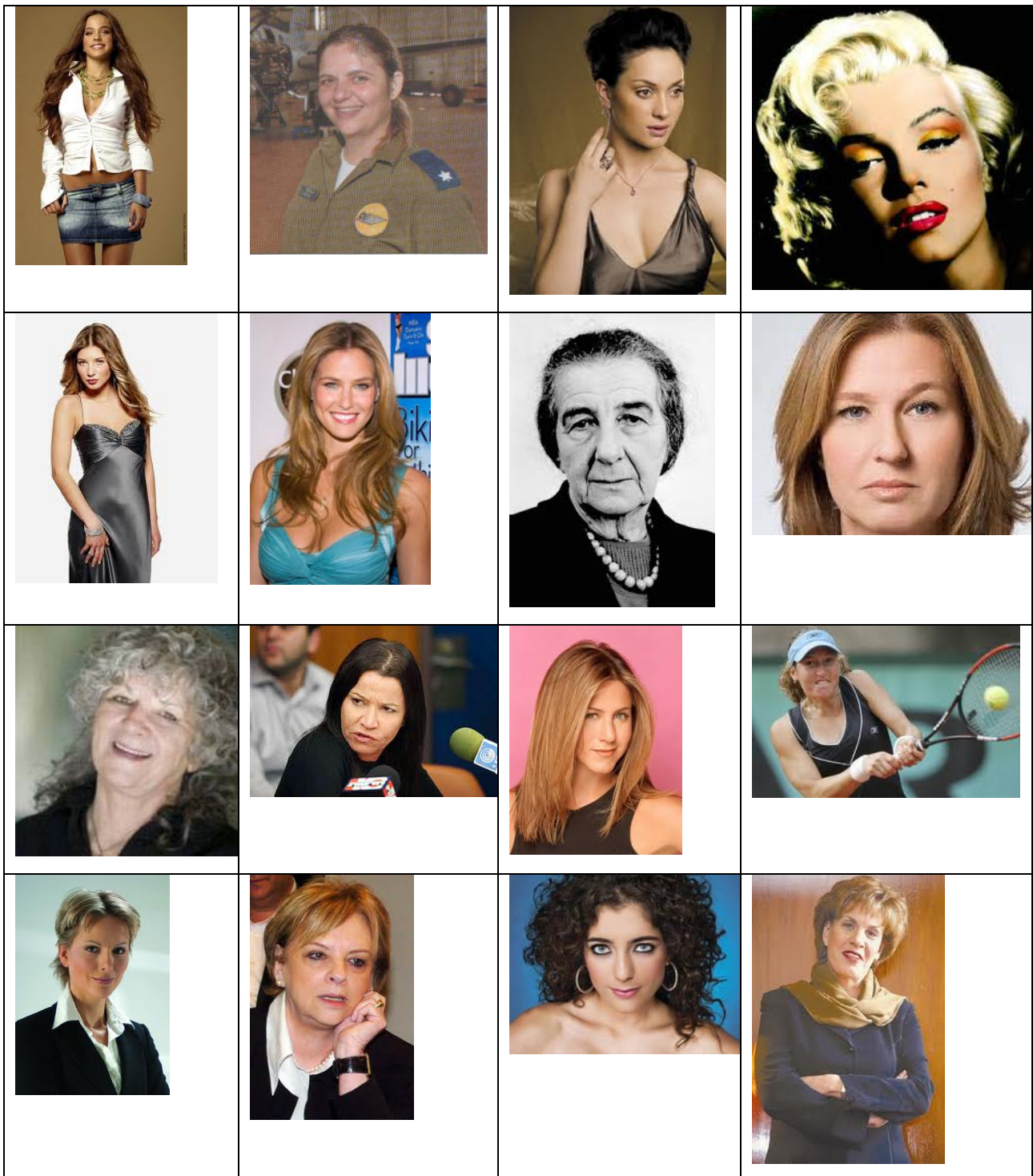
1. What are Vashti's and Esther's personality traits?
2. How do they compare with each other? (Similarity with regard to beauty and power; difference – Vashti is direct and blunt whereas Esther is subtle and sophisticated; Vashti does not agree to use her beauty whereas Esther does).
3. What qualities would you wish to adopt from each of them?
4. What was the status and role of women in Persia? How does it compare to their status and role in our society?





Women in our society

- Check who the familiar, successful and famous women in our society are.
- Could you connect a name to each picture?





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1. Anastasia Michaeli
2. Tzipi Livni
3. Adi Himelbloy
4. Galia Maor
5. Roni Dalumi
6. Golda Meir
7. Shahr Pe'er
8. Marilyn Monroe
9. Agam Rodberg
10. Jennifer Aniston
11. Anna Aronov
12. Ada Yonat
13. Alice Miller
14. Shelly Yachimovich
15. Dorit Beinisch
16. Bar Refaeli



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Discussion:

1. How many of the women in the pictures are you familiar with?
2. What do those you are familiar with have in common? Age? Profession?
3. Who are the three most successful and most famous of them?
4. Who are they? What do they deal in?
5. What characterizes them?
6. What are the qualities required of women in order to succeed? How do they differ from the qualities required of men?
7. Who would you like to emulate when you grow up? Why those women?
8. What influence do society, friends, television and advertising have on our choices?
9. Who are the women portrayed as successful on TV? What qualities do they possess?
10. How does our society compare to that of Persia in the times of the Book of Esther?
11. What powers and possibilities do women have today, that they did not have then? What limitations do women still have in society? Why?
12. Were you aware that salary gaps between men and women in Israel are such that women make only 64% of what men do? Why do you think there is such a difference? What can be done in order to narrow it?

Women leaders

1. Opening game – women leaders / heroines Divide the class into two groups. The teacher will specify (out loud) a certain area such as sports, science, the military, political leadership, literature, economics–business, film–making. Each group will be asked to name a hero or a leader in that category. The groups take turns in naming, until one of the groups can't name a figure. After 2–3 rounds, an instruction is added: only women can be named.
2. Brief discussion – why is it much harder to find leading women than men? What does that say about our society?
3. Female figures – what distinguishes them and what do I take from them? Distribution according to figures. Each student shall choose a figure he or she identifies with or admires.
4. Discussion:
 - What is unique about the figure you chose? Why did you choose her?
 - What qualities does she have that make her a leading figure?
 - What in her life story qualified her to lead?
 - What qualities of hers would you define as 'feminine'?
 - Do you see any difficulty in combining femininity and leadership or being a role model? Or perhaps femininity helps to accentuate exemplariness?
 - What qualities of these figures would you like to adopt? (If you had to choose from among three qualities)