

Purim On Precedent Rabba Sara Hurwitz - President and Co-Founder

In many ways the first chapter of Megillat Esther is a miniature version of the drama that gets played out in the first half of the megillah. Instead of the Jewish people being the minority, and Mordechai refusing to abide by the law of the land, it is women who must submit to their husbands, and Vashti who rebels. And, instead of Haman sending out edicts to warn the Jews of their minority positions, it is Memuchan - who the midrash says is actually Haman, who sends out warnings to all the women (1:17)

ישלח ספרים אל-כל-מדינות המלך אל-מדינה ומדינה ככתבה ואל-עם ועם כלשונן להיות כל-איש שגר
בביתו ומדבר כלשון עמו: (פ)

Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language, that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people.

But unlike the resolution - the dramatic ending - the v'hanofachu, for the Jews becoming the leaders and saviors, where is the grand fix for the plight of the minority women?

I want to posit that Esther not only changed the story of the Jewish people, but she created precedent for me, you, and thousands of women before us to shatter the paradigm and emerge as a leader.

In Chapter 5:1 we read:

ויהי ביום השלישי, ותלבש אסתר מלכות, ותעמד בחצר בית-המלך הפנימית, נכח בית המלך; והמלך יושב על-כסא מלכותו, בבית המלכות, נכח, פתח הבית

On the third day, Esther put on royalty (kingship) and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, facing the king's palace, while the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room facing the entrance of the palace.

Esther stepped into her role as a leader the moment she made the courageous decision to save the Jewish people from Haman's destruction. It was at that moment that she didn't just put on royal clothing, but she stepped into power, accepting her authority as not only a Jew but also as a woman.

As the **Malbim on Esther comments (Igeret HaPurim) 5:1**

"And Esther put on royal apparel..." (Esther 5:1)

ותלבש אסתר מלכות, המלכות לבשתה ויהי כמדה, עד שכל רואיה הכירו כי לה יאות המלוכה ע"ד (איוב כ"ט:י"ד) צדק לבשתי וילבשני

She wore "royalty" and it became an attribute (מידה), such that all who saw her recognized how suitable the monarchy was [on her], as it says, "I clothed myself in righteousness and it robed me" (Job. 29:14).

Esther had the moral courage to realize that stepping up, at great risk to her life and status, was imperative to the future of the Jewish community, as well as to women writ large. She recognized her power and she stepped into it, learning to actively lead. The story is named for her "The Book of Esther" not "Achashverosh" or even "Mordechai" as it was this very moment when she saw herself as a leader that shaped the destiny of this story.

Perhaps the story of women serving men continued for many, many more centuries but Esther propelled us forward, giving us the courage to bask in leadership. Her willingness to step into royalty, into leadership, has helped shift and shatter paradigms, inspiring women in every generation to stand up against discrimination and injustice.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009.

In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.

She and husband, Josh Abraham, are parents to Yonah, Zacharya, Davidi and Natan.