

## The Book of Esther for six readers

1. Narrator
2. King Akhashverosh
3. Esther/Hadassah
4. Mordecai
5. Haman
6. Supporting characters: Memukhan, eunuchs, servants, Zeresh

**NARRATOR:** During the third year of the reign of King Akhashverosh (akh-ash-VER-osh) of Persia, the king hosted a sixth-month banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, etc., etc., etc.

During the last seven days of the banquet, the king decided he wanted to close the banquet with a grand finale. When the king's mind and stomach were full of wine, he commanded seven eunuchs to bring his beautiful Queen Vashti before him with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to his honored guests. Queen Vashti refused the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. The king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him.

The king consulted his seven favorite wise men — Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukhan — the seven leading princes of Persia and Media. He asked them what he should do about Queen Vashti's conduct during the banquet. Speaking on behalf of the others, Memukhan said ...

**MEMUKHAN:** Your majesty, the queen's conduct will become known to all the women of the kingdom. They will look with contempt on their husbands by saying, "King Akhashverosh commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come." All the women from the most noble princess to the lowliest peasant will presume to treat their husbands even worse than Queen Vashti treated you, my King.

Therefore, if it pleases the king, let an irrevocable royal edict be issued in the laws of Persia and Media, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Akhashverosh, and let the king give her royal position to a more worthy woman. The king's edict, as a law of the Medes and the Persians, will cause all women to give honor to their husbands, great and small.

**NARRATOR:** The king took Memukan's counsel and sent letters to all 127 provinces in his kingdom from India to Ethiopia to every people according to their language. The letters said every man should be the master in his own house.

After the king's anger subsided, he remembered

his decision about Vashti. His attendants, wishing to distract the king from any regret over Vashti's dismissal, said ...

**ATTENDANT:** My king, call upon your servants to find the most beautiful young virgins in the kingdom and have them brought to Susa. The eunuch Hegai can take custody of them since he is in charge of the harem. He'll make sure they have access to the best cosmetics and perfumes. Then let the young lady who pleases the king from this contest replace Vashti as queen.

**NARRATOR:** The king liked this idea, so he did it quickly.

Now while the king was planning a beauty contest to replace Vashti, there was a man who lived in Susa, one of the Yehudim called **Mordecai**, the son of Yair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a descendant of Benjamin. His family had been taken into exile from Yerushalayim with Yeconyah king of Yehudah, in the days of Nebukhadnezzar the king of Babylon. He raised his beautiful young cousin **Hadassah** as though she were his own daughter. Also known as **Esther**, she was rounded up along with many other beautiful young women in the king's search for a new queen.

**Esther** was brought to the king's palace and placed in Hegai's custody. She quickly garnered Hegai's favor and lacked nothing in her beauty preparations, including seven maidens to attend her every need. **Esther** and all her competitors were subjected to the same beauty regimen: six months with myrrh and six months with spices and appropriate feminine cosmetics.

When a woman was ready to see the king, she would visit him in the evening. The next morning, she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Sha'ashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and summoned her by name.

**Mordecai** nervously waited for news of the fate of **Esther**, for he had told her not to reveal her true heritage.

When her turn came to meet the king, she presented herself to him exactly as Hegai advised

her, and she won the king's heart. Four years after Vashti had been expelled from the palace, Persia had a new queen.

The king put the royal crown on the head of **Esther** and hosted a seven-day banquet to celebrate his new-found joy.

While **Mordecai** was sitting at the king's gate, he overheard Bigtan and Teresh, two of the king's officials, plotting to assassinate King Akhashverosh. He brought this information to Queen **Esther**, who notified the king of the plot. After a complete investigation, the men were hanged for their conspiracy.

After this time, King Akhashverosh promoted **Haman**, the son of Hammedata of Agag, as prime minister of the entire kingdom of Persia. The king commanded all his subjects to bow to **Haman** as they would to the king, but **Mordecai** refused to bow down or pay homage to **Haman**.

This act of defiance alarmed Mordecai's friends. It also caught Haman's attention. Haman's solution to Mordecai's act of defiance wasn't limited to punishing **Mordecai** for his transgression. **Haman** set his heart on a final solution: kill all the Yehudim in the entire Persian empire, from India to Ethiopia. That was his plan.

In the first month, called Nisan, five years after **Esther** became Queen of Persia, **Haman** cast his *Purim* — Hebrew for instruments of determining chance — to choose the month and day to kill the Yehudim. Then he presented his plan to the king.

**HAMAN:** There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of the Persian empire. Their laws are different from those of all other people, and they do not observe the king's laws. So it is not in the king's interest to let them remain. If it is pleasing to the king, let it be decreed that they be annihilated. I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the king's treasuries to offset the costs.

**NARRATOR:** The king gave **Haman** his signet ring and the authority to carry out his plan as he outlined and told **Haman** to keep his money.

Then the king's scribes wrote the decree just as **Haman** commanded. It was translated into all the languages of the empire and sent to every province. It was written in the name of King Akhashverosh and sealed with the king's signet ring. The decree said to destroy, to kill and to annihilate all the Yehudim, both young and old, women and children, in one day, the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, which is the month Adar, and to seize their possessions as plunder. The decree was issued at

the citadel in Susa as well. While the king and **Haman** sat down to drink and make merry, the city of Susa was in confusion.

When **Mordecai** learned of the decree, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went all over the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, Yehudim followed his example with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

The queen's maidens discovered the distressing behavior of **Mordecai** and notified **Esther**. She sent for Hathakh, one of the king's eunuchs. She asked Hathakh to go to him and discover the source of his terrible distress.

**Mordecai** gave Hatakh a copy of the king's edict and told him to give it to the queen. The queen read the note and ordered Hatakh to send her reply.

**ESTHER** (to Hatakh): It is well-known that it's a death sentence for any man or woman to come to the king's inner court without an invitation, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. The king has not summoned me for a month.

**MORDECAI** (to Hatakh): Do not imagine the king's palace or his many guards can shelter you from the fate of all the Yehudim. If you remain silent now, relief and deliverance will arise from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?

**ESTHER** (to Hatakh): **Mordecai**, go, assemble all the Yehudim who are found in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will do the same. Then I will go to the king, which is against the law. If I perish, I perish.

**NARRATOR:** So **Mordecai** went away and did just as **Esther** had commanded him. After three days, she prepared herself, dressed herself in her royal robes and went — unannounced — to the king.

When the king saw Queen **Esther** standing in the court, the king favored her and extended the golden scepter toward her. So she came near and touched the top of the scepter.

**KING:** What is troubling you, Queen **Esther**? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom, it shall be given to you.

**ESTHER:** If it pleases the king, may the king and **Haman** come this day to the banquet that I have prepared for them.

**NARRATOR:** The king was so curious and intrigued about the request of **Esther**, he called out to his servants ...

**KING:** Bring **Haman** quickly that we may do as **Esther** desires.

**NARRATOR:** Later at the banquet, the king and **Haman** enjoyed the queen's feast. The king asked a second time ...

**KING** (to Esther): What is your petition, for it shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done.

**ESTHER:** My petition and my request is this: If I have pleased Your Majesty, and if you are inclined to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and **Haman** come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then, I will do as the king asks.

**NARRATOR:** The king left her banquet excited and curious about what the next day would bring.

**Haman** left her banquet glad and pleased of heart until he saw **Mordecai** of Yehudah at the gate, still refusing to bow before him. **Haman** did not let his anger control him. He went home to tell his family about what happened at the palace that day.

**HAMAN** (to Zeresh): **Esther** the queen hosted an exclusive banquet she had prepared. Only the king and I were there, you know. Tomorrow, she is hosting a second banquet for just the king and me. Yet all of this does not satisfy me every time I see **Mordecai** of Yehudah sitting at the king's gate.

**ZERESH** (to Haman): I have an idea to settle your heart. Have a pole 75 feet high made tonight. Tomorrow morning, ask the king's permission to have **Mordecai** hanged on it. Then go joyfully with the king to the queen's banquet. Think of it as a down payment for what is to come.

**NARRATOR:** This idea pleased **Haman** very much, and he was able to go to sleep happily. The king, on the other hand, had a bad case of insomnia. Like a classic workaholic, the king asked his servant to read to him from the book of records, the chronicles. When the reader got to the account

of how **Mordecai** thwarted of the assassination plot, the king asked his servant ...

**KING:** What honor or dignity has been bestowed on **Mordecai** for this?

**SERVANT:** Nothing has been done for him, your majesty.

**KING:** Is anyone in the court?

**NARRATOR:** The servants found that **Haman** was in the court, well-rested after a good night's sleep. So the servants brought him to the king.

**KING:** What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?

**NARRATOR:** **Haman** thought to himself ...

**HAMAN** (whispering): Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?

**HAMAN** (out loud): My king, for the man whom the king desires to honor, let one of the king's most noble princes bring a royal robe that the king has worn and place it upon the man. Allow the honored man to ride a horse the king has ridden. A royal crown should be placed upon his head as well. Then have the king's noble prince lead the honored man on horseback through the city square, proclaiming before all of Susa, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor."

**KING:** Take the robes and the horse as you have said, and do this for **Mordecai** of Yehudah, who sits at the king's gate. Do not fall short in anything you have said. Do it quickly so we don't miss the queen's banquet this afternoon.

**NARRATOR:** After **Haman** had fulfilled the king's command, he went home heavy-hearted. He told his wife, Zeresh, and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

**ZERESH:** If **Mordecai**, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Yehudah, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him.

**NARRATOR:** Before **Haman** had a chance to respond or think about his wife's warning, he was summoned by the king's servant to attend Esther's second banquet. As the banquet was coming to an end, the king asked the question that was on Haman's mind as well.

**KING:** What is your petition, Queen **Esther**? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done.

**ESTHER:** If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me as my petition, and my people as my request. We have been sold — I and my people — to be utterly annihilated. Now if we had only been sold as slaves — men and women — I would have remained silent, for the trouble would not be commensurate with the annoyance to the king.

**KING:** Who is he, and where is he, who would presume to do this?

**ESTHER:** A foe and an enemy is this wicked **Haman**!

**NARRATOR:** The king left the room to try to cool his anger. **Haman** stayed behind and fell upon the queen's couch to plead for his life. When the king saw this, he said ...

**KING:** **Haman**, will you even assault the queen while I am in my own house?

**NARRATOR:** As the word went out of the king's mouth, a servant put a hood over the head of **Haman**. Then Harbonah, one of the king's eunuchs, said ...

**EUNUCH HARBONAH:** There's a pole in front of his house 75 feet high. Apparently, he made it to hang **Mordecai**, who spoke good on behalf of the king!

**KING:** Hang **Haman** on it!

**NARRATOR:** So they suspended Haman on the shaft that he had built for **Mordecai**. Haman's position as prime minister was given to **Mordecai**, and his household goods was given over to **Esther** and **Mordecai** as an inheritance.

But this is not the end of the story. **Esther** went before the king again — unannounced. The king, again, granted her mercy; he extended the golden scepter to **Esther**. So she arose and stood before the king.

**ESTHER:** If I have found favor before you and the matter seems proper to the king, please revoke the letters devised by **Haman**, the son of Hammedata, a descendant of Agag. He wrote them to destroy the Yehudim who are in all the king's provinces. How can I endure seeing the calamity that will befall my people? How can I endure seeing the destruction of my kindred?

**NARRATOR:** The king called in **Mordecai** and said ...

**KING:** Behold, I have given the house of **Haman** to **Esther**, and I had **Haman** hung on the pole because he had stretched out his hands against the Yehudim and against my queen. Now you write to the Yehudim as you see fit, in the my name, and seal it with my signet ring. A decree written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's signet ring may not be revoked.

**NARRATOR:** This was a couple of months after Haman's decree had been sent out. **Mordecai** wrote a response with the king's signet ring, which went out to all the provinces of the empire. This new edict granted the Yehudim in every city of the Persian empire the right to assemble on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month. They could defend their lives, to destroy, kill and annihilate the entire army of any people or province that might attack them and to plunder their spoil, on that one day in all the provinces of King Akhashverosh.

The Yehudim celebrated the new edict from the king. When the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month came, the Yehudim mastered their enemies. Even all the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors and those who were doing the king's business assisted the Yehudim, because the dread of **Mordecai** had fallen on them. The Yehudim were victorious over their enemies and killed over 75,000 of them. The Yehudim did not lay their hands on the plunder. The king granted the Yehudim an extra day to finish the job.

The Yehudim celebrate this holiday with rejoicing, feasting and sending food to one another and gifts to the poor. Then Queen **Esther** and **Mordecai** recorded this account and obliged Yehudim to celebrate the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> days of Adar annually. On those days, the Yehudim ridded themselves of their enemies. Their sorrow turned into gladness, and their mourning to feasting.

*Condensed by Tammy Quackenbush, Hallel Fellowship (<http://hallel.info>), 2009.*