



# Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

FEBRUARY 2021

## *Beauty and Statesmanship in the Book of Esther*

### Biblical Beauty and the Esther Aesthetic

BY DR. SHAINA TRAPEDO

*The following excerpt is adapted from Dr. Trapedo's chapter "The Esther Aesthetic and Jewish Beauty Queens in Early Twentieth-Century America" in the Straus Center's new volume Esther in America, edited by Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern.*

**Esther appears last in a long line of beautiful biblical women** who play various roles in shaping the history of the Jewish people from Eden to exile. Among others, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Tamar, Rahab, Abigail, Bathsheba, Job's daughters, and Esther are all described as *yafeh* (beautiful), the Hebrew term used to signify a pleasing or attractive physical appearance. While *yafeh* remains an abstract concept—never assigned a specific shape, skin tone, eye position, or nose structure—most often ascribed to women, it is a unisex adjective also attributed to male figures including Joseph, David, and Absalom.

In Esther's case, the perception of beauty, and its function in ranking one human being over another, is activated by her multicultural context. Within Ahasuerus' vast kingdom, spanning 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia wherein "each people [speaks] in its own language" (1:22), the Jews were a displaced minority. Given the volatile political landscape of Ahasuerus' empire, it's not hard to imagine how prejudice and xenophobia might have reared their heads within the harem, and evaluations of phenotypes may have been charged by bias and bigotry. The *Me'am Loez*, an early eighteenth-century anthology of rabbinical commentary, breaks down the logistics of the expansive search, positing that each province conducted a local contest among all of its "beautiful young maidens" (2:3)

and sent the regional winner on to the capital as a representative. In this manner, all of the women who were gathered and presented to the king were considered the most beautiful by the conventions of their local communities.

Although Esther ends up receiving the crown, the Talmud suggests that her character was more lovely than her countenance. While R. Meir says that Esther was given the Hebrew name Hadassah (2:7) "after the designation of the righteous who are called *hadasim*" (myrtles), Ben Azzai argues that Hadassah signifies Esther's stature as neither "tall nor short, but of average height, like a myrtle. While no consensus is reached on Esther's physical attractiveness, the *megilla* affirms that "Esther obtained *hein* (grace) in the eyes of all who beheld her" (2:15). R. Elazar explains that this verse "teaches that [Esther] appeared to each person as a member of his own nation," as it is human nature to "find members of [one's] own nation to be the most appealing."

R. Elazar's exegesis, and early Judaic hermeneutics more broadly, anticipates the definition of beauty proposed by eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume in his essay "On the Standard of Taste": "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person



may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others.”

Esther’s predecessor, Queen Vashti, whose name is derived from the Old Persian word for “beautiful woman,” is also described as beautiful (*yafeh*) in the *megilla* (1:11), though commentators spill much ink in painting the two women as foils. In the Midrash, Vashti is cast as an immoral and vain exhibitionist. When Ahasuerus summons Vashti to appear in nothing but her crown, the *megilla* relates that “Queen Vashti refused to come” (1:12), which has led to many scholars reclaiming Vashti as a proto-feminist. Nevertheless, the midrashic view maintains Vashti’s beauty was skin-deep; the commentators deliberate on Vashti’s apprehension about presenting herself in this exposed manner—either because it feels beneath the dignity of a queen or because her confidence wavered—but conclude that the only reason she disobeys the king is a sudden outbreak on her skin causing disfigurement.

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Self-adornment and physical refinement are not rejected wholesale in the narrative. Esther prepares for her unsolicited visitation to Ahasuerus, an action punishable by death, by praying and fasting for three days. Dramatic irony draws the contrast between the two women into sharper focus: Vashti was executed for refusing a summons and now Esther enters unbidden at her own peril. In addition to spiritual preparation, the *megilla* notes that “Esther put on her royal robes” (5:1) and commentators elaborate on the transformation: “She dressed herself in bejeweled robes and a dress woven of the finest silk bedecked with fine African stones. She placed her golden slippers on her feet and royal crown on her head...[and] God illuminated her face like the sun.”

Although Esther initially seems artless in ornamentation, she is keenly aware of the rhetorical efficacy of appearance, particularly an alluring one. Through regal self-fashioning, Esther owns her role as Ahasuerus’ chosen queen, the symbolic female representation of the future of the Persian Empire. In response, the king grants “up to half the kingdom” to the clandestine Jewess (5:3), ultimately enabling her to shift his favor more positively toward her own people. While the *megilla* highlights beauty’s capacity for destruction and redemption—as well as the complex relationships between surface, substance, and subjectivity—it also shows that hazards lie not in beauty itself, but in its application.

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## Hiding Behind Lincoln

BY JONATHAN FENSTER

*The following excerpt is adapted from Straus Scholar Jonathan Fenster’s article which appeared in Compass Journal in November 2020.*

**Just as one wonders why Esther waited so long to ask** King Xerxes to save the Jews, one may wonder why Lincoln took so long to emancipate the slaves. Lincoln was unequivocal about his disdain towards slavery, yet the Emancipation Proclamation was only implemented two years after he began his presidency. Lincoln, like Esther, knew that he needed to plan

meticulously in order to be effective. Lincoln knew that he never would have been elected if he declared his intention to emancipate the slaves during his campaign for the presidency. Furthermore, the legality of emancipation was not so simple. Lincoln actually believed that it wasn’t within his constitutional right to emancipate the slaves without either a change in the

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law or military necessity. As the nation began to fall apart, Lincoln decided that it was his responsibility to issue the proclamation in order to save the Union.

There are two religious themes that played major roles in some of the challenges that both Lincoln and Esther faced. During Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, he said that, "I claim not to have controlled events. God alone can claim it." At the end of the same paragraph, Lincoln solemnly says that "the war came." Lincoln suggests that it is as if providential forces brought the Civil War and aided the Union in eliminating slavery. Ultimately, those same providential forces allowed Lincoln to win the war, but he was just acting as a messenger of God. While Esther was hesitant to make her request to King Xerxes to save the Jews, Mordecai explained to her that, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and rescue will arise for the Jews from elsewhere" (Esther 4:14). The logic Mordecai used was the same logic that Lincoln used as an emancipator. There is great risk in taking action, and still God will work through us to save us. The only question was, would it be through Esther and Lincoln or someone else.

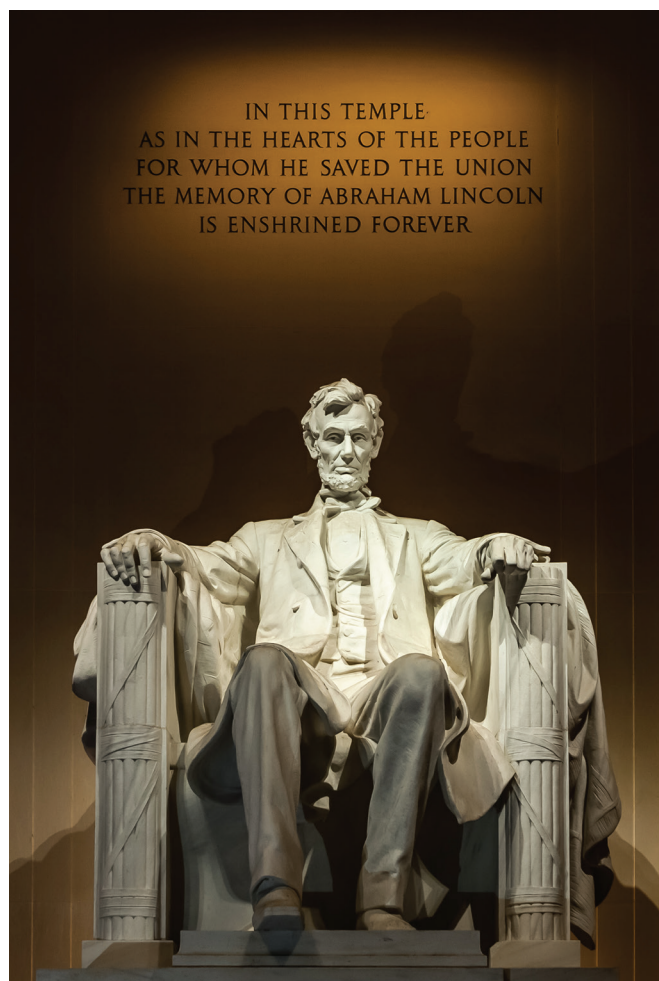
Less than two weeks before the Emancipation Proclamation would be issued, Abraham Lincoln was greeted by Rev. William Weston Patton. Patton, who thought slavery was profane, quoted the Book of Esther to Lincoln and described the verses in which Mordecai told Esther to seize her moment and to petition the King. Patton then went on to compare Lincoln's situation to hers, "[We] believe that in Divine Providence you have been called to the Presidency to speak the word of justice and authority which shall free the bondman and save the nation." Lincoln responded to Patton by saying that "Whatever shall appear to be God's will I will do." Lincoln with his vast biblical knowledge was surely echoing Queen Esther in her response to Mordecai, as she said to him, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

The parallels between Queen Esther and President Lincoln as manifested by their personal lives and political careers are striking. Each grew up in imperfect homes, and yet managed to

ascend to great positions of power. Esther and Lincoln risked their lives when faced with their own unique political dilemmas, and they relied on their own immense forethought, fortitude, and faith to succeed. Whether Lincoln consciously sought to emulate Queen Esther will never be conclusively known, but behind every challenge that Lincoln faced, Esther hid.

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