

COSTUMES, IDENTITY, AND JEWISH WOMEN'S HISTORY

Lesson plan for adult women

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Queen Esther and Bella Abzug: Costumes, leadership, and identity,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/feb07/>.

As women, we grow up surrounded by messages about how we are expected to act and look. Both the biblical story of Purim and the historical narrative of Bella Abzug raise important questions about our appearance, our personas, our costumes and our dress—and how we make choices of how to project ourselves to the society in which we live.

The Purim story is rich with messages about women and their roles. Esther is a powerful woman who designs and implements a plan for saving her people. Esther's persona of being an obedient beauty helps her to attain success. Vashti is also a powerful woman, but she has a different narrative. She openly defies the king, refusing to let her body be used to please the whims of her husband and his court. She holds on to her integrity, but she must suffer the consequences. Both women have made choices in difficult circumstances.

Bella Abzug's life story also teaches us lessons about women's roles in society. Bella Abzug was a central figure in the emergence of second wave US feminism. Abzug contested society's expectations for women in order to battle for justice directly and publicly. Her appearance, manner, and words all communicate a message of liberation. She refused to hide her strength, intelligence, love of life, and fury.

The biblical stories of Esther and Vashti, and the biographical story of Bella Abzug, raise multilayered questions about how we choose to dress and the roles we adopt for ourselves as women living in today's society. In this lesson

we will explore some of these questions and see what these stories have to teach us.

1. Read the excerpt from the *megilla* together. It is listed as “Text One” on the **TEXT SHEET** at the end of the lesson plan.

- What did Vashti do that got her deposed? How did King Ahasuerus use Vashti’s punishment as an example for all the wives of his kingdom?
- Why do you think Esther decided to enter the king’s beauty contest?
- What does Esther do to merit becoming the queen?
- Is Esther’s appearing before the king without being summoned in chapter 5 courageous?
- Is Esther manipulative or is she strategic?
- If discrimination against women didn’t exist, would women need to be manipulative?

Do you identify with either woman?

2. Consider – what is the role of clothing in masking and revealing identity in the book of Esther?

- The midrash explains that Vashti refused to appear before the king at his party “in her crown and displaying her beauty,” because that meant in her crown and nothing else. Is being naked more or less revealing of our true selves than being clothed? How does our clothing help us to become ourselves, or to promote an image of ourselves which we like?
- Vashti challenged the belief that women’s value is in their looks. Have you ever challenged this belief? What costs did Vashti pay? What do you imagine are the costs of challenging this idea today?
- In Persia, in the 5th Century BCE, women could be banished or killed for not obeying their husbands. What similar injustices do women face today, either in the US or around the world? Do you see domestic

violence and trafficking in women as part of the same continuum of issues that Esther and Vashti faced in the *megilla*?

3. **Review** Bella Abzug's biography at <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/abzug/bio.html> and read the introductory essay for this *Go & Learn* lesson (<http://www.jwa.org/teach/golearn/feb07/>). [Either the group can do this together or the leader can do this in advance and share findings with the group.]
4. **Read** together the story of how Bella Abzug began to wear hats. It is listed as "Text Two" on the **TEXT SHEET** at the end of the lesson plan.
5. **Compare** Esther and Bella Abzug's models of leadership. Esther uses her beauty to attain her position, and does not directly state her needs. Rather, she manipulates the king into seeing Haman for who he is, in order to get the evil decree repealed. Abzug, on the other hand, stated her goals loudly and clearly, and accomplished a lot through her own direct actions. However, she was often called "irritating" and "brash."

As a woman in the 21st century, you have a choice of what model to follow. For centuries, most women employed Esther-type strategies. Now there are many women in public who follow Bella Abzug's model, but many of them are still plagued by the same negative adjectives following them around.

- Which model speaks to you, if any? Have you encountered any other models which are more appealing?
- How do you think women who are currently in politics are characterized in the media?

6. **Answer** the following questions about how this all relates to each of your lives:

- What's your history of clothing choices?
- What is your relationship with wearing makeup?
- How does your age affect your choices in how you dress?
- How does dress allow you to accomplish your goals?
- Do you ever choose to visibly identify as a Jew or to hide that identity?
- Have you ever had a similar experience to Abzug, in which you had to put on a particular costume in order to be taken seriously as a professional? How did that feel?
- What are the different roles you play in your life today, and what are your costumes for each one? (i.e. mom, executive, young professional, etc).
- When does choosing an appearance of conformity support your bigger goals?
- What clothes would a female liberation leader wear today?
- If you did not have to worry about what others thought about you, what would you wear?

7. **Read** this story about Bess Myerson, the only Jewish Miss America to date: (from http://www.jwa.org/this_week/09/08/Bess_Myerson/)

Just months after the shocking revelations of the Holocaust's devastation of European Jewry, Bess Myerson was crowned the first (and still only) Jewish Miss America on September 8, 1945.

Her victory was seen by many as a symbolic statement of America's post-war rejection of the crimes and prejudices that ravaged Europe as well as a representation of the vitality of the American Jewish community. Raised in a Jewish cooperative in the Bronx, Myerson was unfamiliar with the anti-Semitism that confronted her throughout the pageant. Myerson refused to adopt the suggested less-ethnic pseudonym, Beth Merrick. "It was the most important decision I ever made," she recalled. "It told me who I was, that I was first and foremost a Jew."

Myerson received a scholarship award accompanying her title, but she did not receive automatic acceptance. Three of five sponsoring companies withdrew their support from her post-pageant tour, and there was little demand for Myerson on the speaker circuit frequented by past winners. When an invitation to speak at a country club was revoked because of her religion, Myerson began to distance herself from the usual pageant scene, and instead began lecturing at schools and other venues about discrimination and the consequences of prejudice, under the sponsorship of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

- How does it make you feel to know that there was a Jewish Miss America? How do you think Jewish women are seen today in the United States? Are Jewish looks seen as beautiful?
- What do the biblical character Esther and Bess Myerson have in common and how are they different?

8. Conclusion

The *megilla* and the biographical stories of Bella Abzug and Bess Myerson, raise questions that help us examine our own identities, roles, and choices of dress. As we read about these powerful women, we can consider our current roles as women in contemporary society and how we want to project ourselves. We can think about how to reveal our true selves in different ways and at different times, as we also think about the real challenges that women face in society today.

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Text Sheet

for the *Go & Learn* lesson “Costumes, Identity, and Jewish Women’s History”

Text 1: Highlights of the biblical scroll of Esther, excerpted and adapted from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation* – electronic version of Second Edition (Varda Books, 2002).

Chapter 1:10-13, 15-22

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered the seven eunuchs in attendance to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him.

Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. “What,” [he asked,] “shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus?” Thereupon Memucan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: “Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen’s behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty’s officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation! “If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she. Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm, vast though it is; and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike.” The proposal was

approved by the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memucan proposed. 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.

Chapter 2:1-4, 7-10, 12-13, 15-17

Some time afterward, when the anger of King Ahasuerus subsided, he thought of Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. The king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti." The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it.

[Mordecai] was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter. When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women. The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem. Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it. When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics, and it was after that that the girl would go to the king), whatever she asked for would be given her to take with her from

the harem to the king's palace. When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her. Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Chapter 3:13

Accordingly, written instructions were dispatched by couriers to all the king's provinces to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar— and to plunder their possessions.

Chapter 4:1-2, 4- 11, 12-16

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly, until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth.

When Esther's maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated. She sent clothing for Mordecai to wear, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he refused. Thereupon Esther summoned Hathach, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He bade him to inform Esther, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people. When Hathach came and delivered Mordecai's message to Esther, Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordecai the following reply: "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is

but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live.

When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!”

Chapter 5:1-4, 6-8

On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel 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. As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor. The king extended to Esther the golden scepter which he had in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. “What troubles you, Queen Esther?” the king asked her. “And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you.” “If it please Your Majesty,” Esther replied, “let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him.”

At the wine feast, the king asked Esther, “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” “My wish,” replied Esther, “my request—if Your Majesty will do me the favor, if it please Your Majesty to grant my wish and accede to my request—let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare for them; and tomorrow I will do Your Majesty’s bidding.”

Chapter 6:6-11

Haman entered, and the king asked him, "What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor?" Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?" So Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king desires to honor, let royal garb which the king has worn be brought, and a horse on which the king has ridden and on whose head a royal diadem has been set; and let the attire and the horse be put in the charge of one of the king's noble courtiers. And let the man whom the king desires to honor be attired and paraded on the horse through the city square, while they proclaim before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!" "Quick, then!" said the king to Haman. "Get the garb and the horse, as you have said, and do this to Mordecai the Jew, who sits in the king's gate. Omit nothing of all you have proposed." So Haman took the garb and the horse and arrayed Mordecai and paraded him through the city square; and he proclaimed before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!

Chapter 7:2-4

On the second day, the king again asked Esther at the wine feast, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Queen Esther replied: "If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated.

Chapter 8:1-2, 15-16

That very day King Ahasuerus gave the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther. Mordecai presented himself to the king, for Esther had revealed how he was related to her. The king slipped off his ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai; and Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman's property.

Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries. The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.

Text Two: Bella Abzug and her hats

From Bella Abzug, Interview with Global Education Motivators, April 24, 1997.

When I went to represent my law firm anywhere -- I was a young kid just out of college -- I said, "How do you do? I'm Bella Abzug from the law firm of such and such," and people would say, "Yes, fine, fine, sit down." So I'd wait and nothing much would happen, so finally I'd clear my throat and say, "I'm Bella Abzug from the law firm of such and such," and they'd say, "Yes, we know, but we're waiting." I'd say, "What are we waiting for?" And they'd say, "We're waiting for the lawyer." They thought I was the secretary. So I had this identity crisis.

I went home and discussed it with my husband, Martin. In those days professional women wore hats -- and gloves, so I put on gloves and a hat. And every time I went anywhere for business, with the hat and gloves, they knew I was there for business. And I jokingly often say, as you can see, I've taken off the gloves. But I like wearing hats and I continue to wear it. When I ran for Congress and got to Washington, they made such a fuss about the hat instead of what was under it that I didn't know whether they wanted me to take it off or keep it on. I decided that they wanted me to take it off, which made me determined to keep it on.