



Our [Meaning Women's] Book-of-Esther Problem

A 12-PAGE LILITH FEATURE BY RABBI SUSAN SCHNUR

“And the King sent letters to all the provinces, saying, ‘Every man shall rule in his own home.’”

(chapter 1:22)

When is the last time you read the first two chapters of The Book of Esther? I mean really read them? They are so patently a polemic against women that it’s painful to think of Jews (especially young ones) at synagogues all over the world on Purim enjoying this dangerous induction into woman-hating.

Vide, chapter 1:16-22, in which one of the King’s officers responds to the fact that Vashti has refused to appear nude before a palace full of drunken males:

“It is not only the King whom Vashti the Queen has wronged, but also all the officials and all the people in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the Queen will come to the attention of all women, making their husbands contemptible in their eyes, by saying: ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the Queen to be brought before him but she did not come!’”

“And this day the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the Queen’s deed will cite it to all the King’s officials, and there will be much contempt and wrath.”

“If it pleases the King, let there go forth a royal edict from him, and let it be written into the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not revoked, that Vashti never again appear before King Ahasuerus; and let the King confer her royal estate upon another who is better than she. Then, when the King’s decree which he shall proclaim shall be resounded throughout all his kingdom—great though it be—all the wives will show respect to their husbands, great and small alike.”

This proposal pleased the King and the officials, and the King did according to the word of Memuchan [his officer]; and he sent letters into all the King’s provinces, to each province in its own script, and to each people in its own language, to the effect that every man should rule in his own home.

Sitting in the synagogue, its standard-issue annotated prayer book in my lap (the ArtScroll Family *Megillah*, edited by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz), I scan the midrashic commentaries in the margins, which only add insight to injury. For example: “Vashti refused [to appear nude before the men], not because of modesty. The reason for her refusal was that God caused leprosy to break out on her, and paved the way for her downfall.” Whew. My teenage son leans over and whispers, “How about gang rape? Do you think something was wrong with Vashti because she didn’t like gang rape?” When I saunter, newborn each year, across the

RECLAIMING PURIM:

p. 22

The Erotic History of the Hamantasch

p. 25

Esther, Vashti and Carol Gilligan

p. 28

Four Purim Upgrades to Introduce Right Now!

p. 28

Purim as “Holy Body Day”

“What?” I say to my 80-year-old mother, sitting next to me in synagogue. “Your *Megillah* is missing the commentary that talks about the terrifying threat of violence that accompanies male substance abuse?? Let me see that copy you’re using!” She shooshes me.

pages of Rabbi Zlotowitz’s dependable marginalia, it’s like meeting up again with an old friend. “Thank you, Reb Z.,” I want to tell him, “for your spiritual largesse. For your misogyny and insensitivity, and for the constancy of your commitment to the moral low ground.” Sitting on my right is my very Conservadox 80-year-old mother who is also — not oxymoronically—a longtime board member of a women’s domestic violence shelter. “What?” I say to her, sensing that she’s getting hot under her collar, “Your *Megillah* is missing the commentary that talks about the terrifying threat of violence that accompanies male substance abuse?? Let me see that copy you’re using! *What?* It doesn’t mention the sexual sadism and degradation implicit in the King’s pimping??” She shooshes me.

My 10-year-old daughter elbows my husband and points to a midrashic note that explains that the King wanted Vashti to come to his party naked except for the “royal crown.” “Gross,” she synthesizes brilliantly. A moment later she adds, “That’s like what they did at that fraternity at Colgate. Vashti’s harem girls need to get together and do a ‘Take Back the Night’ like we do at camp. Hey, I’ve got an idea! Why don’t we do a ‘Take Back the Night’ right here in the middle of the *Megillah* reading?”

I whisper back, “Actually, that’s a clever idea.”

Soon we’re on to a section of the *Megillah* which describes the captivity rites in the girls’ harem, “*six months of anointing with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and feminine cosmetics,*” after which each girl goes to the King “in the evening” and “the next morning she would return to the second harem.” I look over at my pre-pubescent daughter and see that she’s again reading the helpful commentary: “*Having consorted with the King, it would not be proper for them to marry other men. They were required to return to the harem and remain there for the rest of their lives as concubines.*” Again I thank Rabbi Z. for the exquisite sharing of his knowledge of ancient Persian sex etiquette as well as his pornographic fantasies, and for causing me to sink into this personal trough of sarcasm and bitterness, which I hate.

What are contemporary Jews *supposed* to make of a religious text that dishes up such disturbing garbage? Most

Jewishly committed women I know, even feminists, solve the problem of these offensive narratives (rabbinic and biblical) by fighting valiantly to stay in denial. So, okay, we feel upset for a minute, but then we think, achh, Purim, it only comes once a year, *don’t start. Just don’t start.* Shoosh yourself.

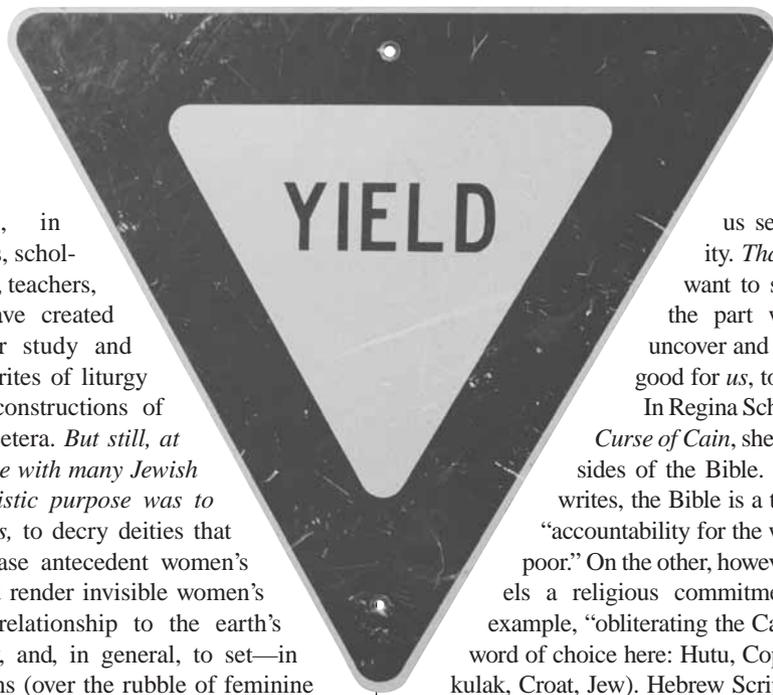
When, though, I wonder, will women finally create a morally defensible re-write of these chapters? Why aren’t we insisting that our synagogue communities cheer and stomp their feet at the mention of Vashti’s name? She is a foremother in the best sense of the word—assertive, appropriate, courageous. My educated supposition is that the full moon of Adar—now the date for Purim—used to be a pagan occasion for autonomous women’s rites that could not be reined in by men, and that these chapters, therefore, represent one of Purim’s many core ‘reversals;’ that is, they represent a male revolt against women. Yeah, I think, looking around the room, but why does it feel like our row in the synagogue is the only one that gets this?

As the children around me flail their *graggers*, I think about how participating in this public reading of the *Megillah* represents our complicity in the degradation of people, and about how I, for one, should figure out how not to sanction this anymore. I think back a decade or so to the year when the Hebrew day school principal gave all the “beautiful Esthers” (that is, every single female child in the costume parade) Barbie dolls. (I tried, but failed, to engage our rabbi in a discussion about this.) And then I remember the year after that, and the year after that, and the year after that . . .

Nineteen years ago, in these LILITH pages, Cynthia Ozick dropped an early feminist bomb: She called the disenfranchisement of females within Judaism “mass loss,” “the amputation of half its potential scholarship.” There is no “Jewish genius,” she said, only a Jewish “half-genius,” which is not enough for the people who claim “to hear the Voice of the Lord of History. We have been listening with only half an ear, speaking with only half a tongue, and never understanding that we have made ourselves partly deaf and partly dumb.”

Since then, we women have worked hard to be repre-

The foremothers of Esther, Eve, Sarah and Miriam *were* female deities. There was once a theological language and sets of rites that uplifted women and brought us self-esteem and authority.



sented, *as females*, in Judaism: We are cantors, scholars, mothers, *davenners*, teachers, writers, rabbis; we have created female institutions for study and prayer, egalitarian re-writes of liturgy and texts, feminist reconstructions of Jewish foremothers, etcetera. *But still, at the base of it all, we live with many Jewish texts whose core agonistic purpose was to censure women's rituals*, to decry deities that uplifted females, to erase antecedent women's history, to derogate and render invisible women's intimate empowering relationship to the earth's cycles and generativity, and, in general, to set—in concrete and steel beams (over the rubble of feminine experience)—the foundations of patriarchy. It is high time for women and sympathetic men to be challenging this, to be educating ourselves, for example, in the pre-biblical Zeitgeist, so that we can best remediate some morally reprehensible Jewish texts (not only, of course, in relation to women).

Doubtless some of us female rabble-rousers have already been called 'pagans,' 'idolaters' and 'polytheists' for our attempts to unearth the women-positive rites, attitudes and theology that lie crushed beneath Hebrew Scriptures. These accusations are, of course, silly, but they intimidate us nonetheless because we have internalized, after all, our dispossession.

Let me say that Jewish women seeking feminine antecedents don't "*believe* in the goddesses" whose pentimenti can be seen behind some Jewish texts (like Ishtar, for example, Esther's namesake, who lurks behind the holiday of Purim), nor do we fail to recognize the developmental importance of monotheism. We are saying something different (that has nothing to do with 'worshipping idols'): that we are no longer willing to throw out the pink-ribboned baby with the bath water. The foremothers of Esther, Eve, Sarah and Miriam *were* female deities—Ishtar, Lilith, Meri, the Queen of Heaven and others. There was once a theological language and a set of rites that uplifted women and brought

us self-esteem and authority. *That's* the pentimento we want to scratch away at, that's the part we are clamoring to uncover and reclaim . . . so that it's good for *us*, too.

In Regina Schwartz's new book, *The Curse of Cain*, she struggles with the two sides of the Bible. On the one hand, she writes, the Bible is a text that has a humane "accountability for the widow, the orphan, the poor." On the other, however, it's a text that models a religious commitment to genocide—for example, "obliterating the Canaanites" (fill in your word of choice here: Hutu, Copt, Cherokee, Muslim, kulak, Croat, Jew). Hebrew Scriptures were also fairly committed to the cultural genocide of the feminine—because the latter threatened the nascent, ever-shaky and castratable Israelite patriarchy. The Hebrew God's human male "children," in Scriptures, are fairly consistently defined against inferior others, including us females.

All of this is just to say that the *Megillah* is a good example of a Jewish text that's deeply interested in this idea of insider vs. outsider. Not only is Haman an outsider, but so are women and women's natal theological families: that is, our sustaining myths, our bodies, our primordial connection to nature, our female initiations. That's all off limits. To this day, text-sanctioned history means that it is "heresy" for women to inquire after "our" side of the family, after "our" side of the past. In some ways, the Hebrew Scriptures is an intimidating, ungenerous book, and its self-interested defenders can be ungenerous and intimidating, too.

So, dear readers, *hazak v'ematz*, be strong and take courage. As Mordechai once said to Esther (chapter 4:14): "If you persist in keeping silent at a time like this . . . you and yours will perish. And who knows whether it was just for such a time as this that you attained your elevated position?"

And Esther looked him straight in the eye and answered, "Gotcha."



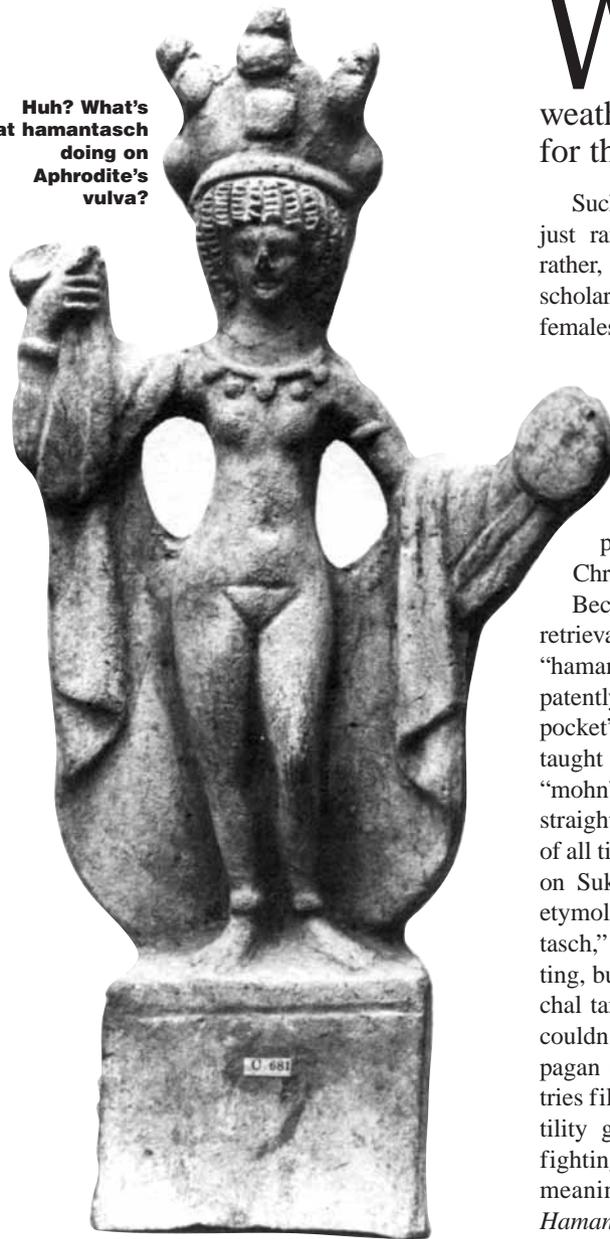


From Prehistoric Cave Art to Your Cookie Pan:

TRACING THE HAMANTASCH HERSTORY

by Susan Schnur

Huh? What's that hamantasch doing on Aphrodite's vulva?



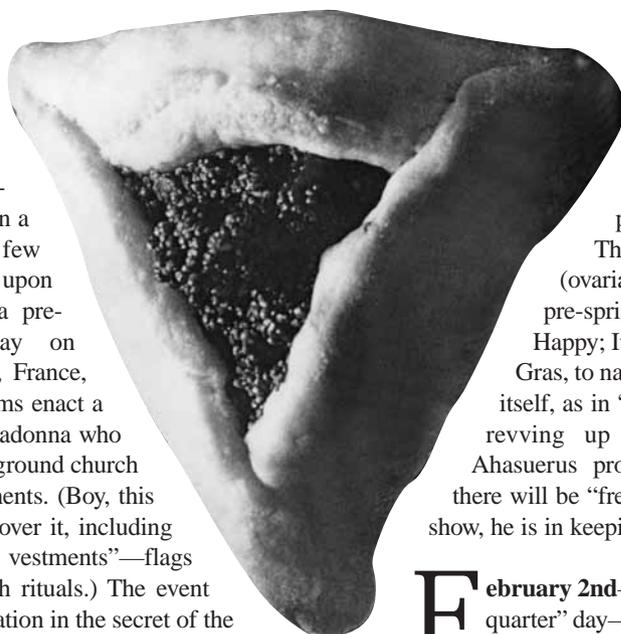
Why do witches “cackle?” Why is there a folk belief that groundhogs foretell weather? Why was Jonah in the whale for three days?

Such details of ancient story and folk belief are not just random whimsical embellishments. They are, rather, significant windows into *something*, clues for scholarly treasure hunts. Indeed, if we trace back females who “cackle” in October, “three days” spent in dark places, or the origins of February 2nd (Groundhog Day), for example, we find meaningful etiologies that give us a whole enlarged context for the desiccated leftovers that come down to us. Often these “clues” lead us to pre-patriarchal, woman-positive themes which lie buried beneath Judeo-Christian overlays.

Because I have a particular interest in such retrievals, I’ve always been piqued by the word “hamantasch”—on account of its etiology being so patently phony. A hamantasch is *not* a “Haman’s pocket” (or “Haman’s ear”) as most of us were once taught in Hebrew School, but a German-derived “mohn” (poppyseed) “tasch” (pocket). Okay, that’s straightforward—but why do we eat them on Purim, of all times, a pre-spring full-moon festival? Why not on Sukkos or Tu b’Shvat? Genetically engineered etymologies, like the corrupted “Haman” in “hamantasch,” sometimes bespeak ordinary cultural forgetting, but at other times they signify intrusive patriarchal tampering—that is, the Judeo-Christian fathers couldn’t get folks (generally women) to give up old pagan customs (perhaps like eating triangular pastries filled with poppyseeds; or baking loaves for fertility goddesses), so they joined ‘em rather than fighting ‘em—tacking on a more Jewishly syntonic meaning: not poppyseed pockets at all; rather *Haman’s* pockets!

FROM WHEN GOD WAS A WOMAN, BY MERLIN STONE. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

A hamantasch is *not* a Haman's pocket.
That's phony. It's a cosmic womb—a triangle with dots (seeds) inside.
It represents something sacred *and* female.



For me, the hamantasch question took on a new urgency a few months ago when I happened upon a travel article describing a pre-spring “Christian” holiday on February 2nd, in Marseilles, France, in which thousands of pilgrims enact a processional with a Black Madonna who is brought out from an underground church crypt dressed in green vestments. (Boy, this one has “pagan” written all over it, including “underground” and “green vestments”—flags for vernal gestation-and-birth rituals.) The event is, of course, a ritual participation in the secret of the earth’s abundance. (Hang on — this is, as unlikely as it may seem, connected to hamantaschen.)

February 2nd is Groundhog Day, a goofy little American holiday that I, for some reason, have always gotten a big kick out of. Imbolc to pagans, Candlemas to Christians, February 2nd is a midway point (six weeks in either direction) between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. (These four yearly mid-point days between solstices and equinoxes are called “hinges” or “cross-quarter” days.)

One of the ancient tales that was invented to explain the mystery of why vegetation dies in the winter and is miraculously reborn in the spring is that Demeter (the goddess of all that grows) would not stop crying for her daughter Persephone, who had been abducted into the Underworld (death). But on February 2nd, halfway between winter’s beginning and spring’s beginning, Demeter’s loving old nursemaid, Baubo, decided to make Demeter laugh to insure that spring would return. She lifted her skirt, exposing her genitals and making lewd gestures. (You can actually find Baubo, in this position, as an apotropaic gargoye above some European church doorways.) Laughter, as we know, restores balance, *and can be transformative*; thus the Earth is transformed, and spring (and Persephone) returns.

The nursemaid Baubo (meaning “belly,” as in belly laughter) is a forerunner of our own Bubbes, old easygoing

grandmas who leaven life’s problems for us and reassure us. The myth of Baubo is the seminal (ovarian) one behind many “laughing” pre-spring holidays: Purim (as in “Be Happy; It’s Adar!”), Carnevale and Mardi Gras, to name a few. (The word “February” itself, as in “febrile,” refers to sexual heat, a revving up for spring’s fertility. When Ahasuerus proclaims, in the *Megillah*, that there will be “free” drinking followed by a girlie show, he is in keeping with the seasonal theme.)

February 2nd—the six-week “hinge” or “cross quarter” day—is an ancient weather divination day which comes down to us, via Pennsylvania Dutch immigrants, in the form of Groundhog Day: the kismet day on which Punxsutawney Phil either sees or doesn’t see his shadow, thus predicting *six more weeks* (that is, a “hinge”) of either winter or spring. Imbolc/Candlemas is an age-old time of taking omens for the coming season (particularly in relation to weather—the determinant of feasts or famines): reading dice, tea leaves, fires, all sorts of things. (The word “Purim,” of course, shares these origins. Meaning “lotteries or “chances,” it refers to Haman’s fortunetelling, “casting lots” in order to know which day and which month were augured for killing Jews.)

So how are groundhogs connected to hamantaschen? Seen in pre-historic art (often on the walls of caves—that is, Earth wombs), groundhogs are ancient symbols of the deities of regeneration. Groundhogs come up, post-hibernation, from the underground (like, say, Persephone), prefiguring the Earth’s fertility. Found in European iconography as long ago as the 5th millennium B.C.E., they are symbols of fecundity: hedgehogs, lozenges, dots in the center of triangular enclosures, toads, bull heads—these are familiar pictograms for regeneration, for that which (or She who) controls the life cycles of the entire natural world.

Baking “bread goddesses” was yet another ancient fertility rite. Some modern Purim traditions include baking small breads filled with hard-boiled eggs (Morocco); filling deep-fried pastries with nuts and oozing honey (Egypt), and eating figs and pomegranates.

A parthenogenetic goddess—that is, one who creates life out of herself (she later surfaces in the Christian idea of the Immaculate Conception)—the Regeneratrix is self-fertilizing (some suggest that this goddess held sway before the role of fathers was understood; women’s ability to give birth and nourish children from our own bodies being the ultimate sacred mystery, like that of Earth herself!). Ancient petroglyphs and amulets often render this cosmic womb as a triangle with dots, or seeds, inside!



the worship of Ishtar (from whom Esther is derived) included ritual offerings of “baked cakes” (cooked “under the ashes”), against which Jeremiah, 7:17-18, famously rails. (“Don’t

you see what they’re doing? The women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven?”) Sarah, at a sacred grove (Genesis 18:6), makes cakes as a fertility offering (see Savina Teubal’s *Hagar the Egyptian*) right before the text tells us that she “will have a son.”

Thus to return to this “Christian” holiday in southern France . . . the Black Madonna is feted (the color black is an Old European symbol of fertility and Mother Earth; poppy seeds, I do believe, also happen to be black), after which *people eat cookies baked especially for that day*, called “navettes,” or boats. A *navette* (traceable to the pre-spring Barge of Isis and/or Mary Magdalene’s little boat) is shaped like a *petit pain* roll with a slit in the middle (like barley, also a fertility symbol) so that it looks (hold on!) like labia majora.

Reading about these *navettes*, I had, yes, a eureka experience in relation to the true herstory of the hamantasch. I realized that lots of religious rites once involved “vulva cakes” in various suggestive shapes and sizes: round with pricked dots, or replicas of great pudenda placed on altars, or barley-shaped (or filled with barley, or figs and honey), or generative triangles, or “bread goddesses,” or, in ancient Greece (according to scholar Ross Kraemer), baked “phal-li” and “cunni” (genitals fashioned out of pastry) that may have been eaten as part of fertility rites. Of course,

So . . . can I prove that hamantaschen are contemporary sacred vulva cakes? No. But it certainly makes academic and gut sense to me: that parthenogenetic (self-fertilizing) hamantaschen—pubic triangles traditionally filled with black *seeds*—are pre-spring, full-moon fertility cookies, suggesting the potency of female generative power, and heralding women’s and the Earth’s seasonally awakening creativity.

Therefore . . . roll ’em, fill ’em, bake ’em, eat ’em, send ’em to friends, eat your friends’, let them eat yours, feed ’em to your husband. On the full moon of Adar, the hamantasch, God willing, should not be mistaken for a mere cookie or for Haman’s tricorn hat. Hamantaschen are our, and Earth’s, bodies, revered as an ultimate metaphor for the divine Creator. They were (and, given the right ritual, could once again be) sacred, representing women’s capacity to birth and to nourish, from our own holy bodies.

So, from my Baker’s Secret cookie sheet to yours . . . hey, on some level, this is all stuff that we all already knew.

Be happy! It’s Adar!





The Womantasch Triangle: Vashti, Esther and Carol Gilligan

(A DEVELOPMENTAL LOOK)

by Susan Schnur

The figures of Vashti and Esther, clearly in origin full-moon pre-spring relatives of the ancient mythological lifecycle goddesses, come down to us, in the Book of Esther and in rabbinic midrash, so disfigured and devalued that it is hard to know how to begin resurrecting them.

But let's start with Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, whose research shows us that females' self-esteem is highest before puberty, but then we turn into women, males enter our consciousness, and it all goes to hell.

FIRST VASHTI

In the Book of Esther, Vashti is that pre-pubescent Gilliganesque girl—self-confident and self-determining (who does what's right for herself and says "no" to the boys), but she is punished for her assertiveness, and she therefore "grows up," as it were, into Esther, a female who submits much more graciously to patriarchal domination. The rabbis take an almost erotic delight in hating Vashti and they kill her off (Lilith redux); the midrash lasciviously describes Vashti's head "brought before the King on a platter." Ahasuerus is neatly freed up to start all over again with the new, young trophy wife named Esther.

So where does Vashti, the dead girl, go? The Book of Esther has at its thematic core the same ancient fertility myths in which one goddess or another serves metaphorically to explain winter's death and spring's resurrection. If Vashti were, for example, Demeter's daughter Persephone (instead of being Esther's disowned 'daughter'), she would go down to Hades and then eventually rejoin her mother on

Earth. If she were the young Inanna, she would remove herself from ordinary life (the *Megillah's* harem is a distorted echo of this), and descend into the Underworld, where she would sacrificially rot on a peg, be transformed, and return to Earth a larger, wiser, more creative goddess—no longer patroness of fertility alone, but also of death and resurrection, the new ruler of the now-conjoined Earth, Sky and Underworld. From the Underworld, one returns bearing gifts—not *shalach manos*, mind you, but gifts only acquirable *down under*: Wisdom, Letting Go, Awe and Gratitude.

Inanna's "rotting" is an initiation into understanding the inexorable cycle of life—that each one of us is born, ages and dies, only to be born again from the earth in some new form—maybe as humus, maybe through our children. *Death is a part of life*. Vashti, in parallel fashion, makes a sacrifice in Hell (in this case, the palace) too: she says "NO"—understanding full well that she will suffer terrible consequences. But unlike Inanna, the wisdom Vashti derives from her self-determination is confiscated by the text and never conveyed to her 'daughters.' Vashti's resurrection is that she exits, stage left, only to be replaced in the next act by a freshly minted queen with a new name and no memory.

Let's imagine, say, that Vashti had been a part of the ancient Greek women's ritual of the Thesmophoria. She would not, then, have resurfaced solely as a "head on a platter" at the King's supper club; rather, she would have encountered an "older sister" in the Underworld, someone who came before her and is wiser, and who inducts *her* into wisdom. But the *Megillah* keeps its significant women isolated from one another, erasing any suggestion that there might be significant female interaction. (In Esther's case, of course, the text goes so far as to make her an orphan.) Hardly anything, as we know, is as scary to patriarchal men as two women alone in a room together. *Vide*: Lilith and Eve, Sarah and Hagar.

The fullness of human development depends on Esther circling back to the girl within (Vashti) and carrying her into womanhood.

DANCING NUDE

Queen Vashti is summoned by the King to dance nude, in a clear bastardization of fertility myths. Queen Inanna, for example, to jump-start spring's fertility, herself summons King Dumuzi, ordering him to "plow my vulva!"

Vashti's King, on the other hand (not, like Dumuzi, epithetically called "caresser of the navel, caresser of the soft thighs") functions on a stage with no mythological overtones, and the text Vashti finds herself in—a repudiation of Inanna's—seems to take particular sadistic pleasure from disempowering and humiliating her. Vashti's agency is reduced to her ability to say "NO" when the King orders her, a Playboy bunny, to strip before a mob of drunks at his house party.

What's in it for Vashti? She dies—the assertive girl-child dies, the one who is not afraid to be assertive, not afraid to displease the males. The *Megillah* kills off not only Vashti, but the whole cycle—death, rotting, rebirth, the whole awakening, empowering experience. It's a deliberate theft, a humiliation. She doesn't get to re-emerge as a woman. *There ain't no journey at all!*

To borrow a phrase from the writer Deena Metzger, "In a sacred universe, she [Vashti] is holy; in a secular universe, she [Vashti] is a whore."

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

The Demeter-Persephone myth expresses an interesting cultural compromise: the emotional centrality of mother-daughter bonds (hence Persephone gets to spend a part of each year with Demeter) and the inevitable severing of that bond when the girl grows up. (Persephone, raped by Hades, eats a seed—ahh, shades of the hamantasch!—and must stay with Hades, Lord of the Underworld, during the other part of the year.)

In the *Megillah*, however, Vashti is, of course, punished, and is not allowed—ever—to bring her laundry home to Mama Esther's house. Esther's early debutante world coarsely compartmentalizes women, too. Like cattle in a cattle chute, each girl arrives from Harem A, spends one night with King Ahasuerus (chapter 2:14) and then returns, via chute, to Harem B.

Keeping mothers and daughters apart finds resonance in the story of Zeus and Metis. The pregnant Metis gets tricked by Zeus into becoming small, at which point Zeus swallows her. When the baby, Athena, grows to adulthood, she emerges from her father's head—with no sense that she had ever had a mother who might have taught her anything, or, in any way, 'birthed' her. In this way, women's stories, too, get 'swallowed' by patriarchal ones like the *Megillah*. Vashti is 'swallowed' up by the story—to keep Esther from picking up any bad habits.

JUST SAY YES

Who among us, as a teenager, hasn't had Vashti's experience of saying "NO" to a boy and getting punished for it? Really, though, what if Vashti had said "YES"—follow *that* storyline out. Poor Vashti was double bound; it's lose/lose.

And a final Vashti question: What if the text had let her grow up? *When Vashti dies, we girl readers die with her*, every goddamn Purim—warned not to take good care of ourselves. Frozen in Vashti-land, banished. What if we let Vashti talk, follow her story? What if we imagine what she might have gone on to do besides getting transmogrified into Esther? What if we let her become *herself*?

In a sacred universe, she would not be treated like an object by abusive men, she would not be forbidden access to her sister, mother, daughter, be forbidden to take her transformative journey. In a sacred universe, she would be holy.

THEN ESTHER

Purim's origins, scholars generally agree, derive from an ancient full-moon pre-spring Persian holiday; Esther is descended from the Babylonian Ishtar (who derives from Inanna) and Mordechai from the Babylonian Marduk. (These gods are allied against the Elamite goddess, Vashti, and the god Humman, that is, Haman.) Ishtar, a universal lifecycle goddess, also rules the morning star and evening star, so Esther's Hebrew name, Hadassah, means "myrtle," which has *star*-shaped flowers, and leaves which are vulvate or boat-shaped, again that fertility symbol that goes back over 30,000 years to engravings on cave walls.

Ishtar was a virgin-warrior, and Esther can be seen as a translation of that—compared to Vashti, she's a virgin, and she's a warrior for her people. Ishtar is also the moon goddess, her story described in the moon's phases (for example, an absent moon depicts Ishtar losing her clothes on the way to the Underworld). In the *Megillah*, the Queen's being ordered to appear in the King's "underworld" nude is a corruption of this.

In the process of mythological assimilation, Ishtar and Isis, over time, take on each other's traits. Esther's capacity to overturn the Jews' fate (the death warrant *fatwa* put on Jewish heads by Haman) derives from Isis's famous capacity to keep death away from her faithful followers. And Isis's well-known boast, "I will overcome Fate," which she proceeds to do, is echoed in Esther's valiant statement ("If I perish, I perish," chapter 4:16) which the Queen utters when she appears before Ahasuerus *without* his royal permission. Esther, like Isis, overcomes fate, because the King, against the odds, stretches out to her his golden scepter, thereby allowing her to live. For many women, this part of the *Megillah* tells a deeply moving Jewish story about female courage.

But unlike the goddess Ishtar, who has power in her own

**The Seated Lady
of Pazarzik,
Stone Age.**

right just like a male god, the less ancient Esther (like the Virgin Mary, who can intercede with God but who *isn't* God) can only intercede with the King, but has no power for herself.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

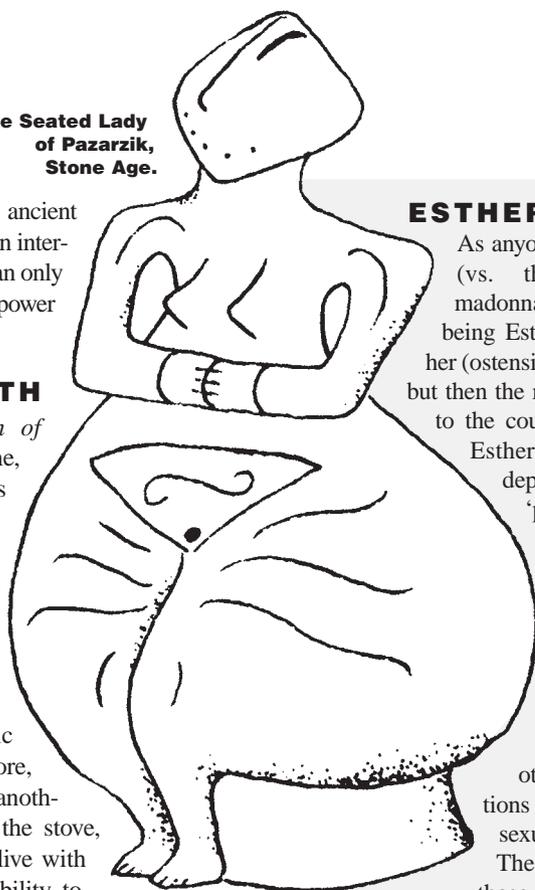
Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, argues that, over time, the “Great Goddess, whose powers are all-encompassing (mother, warrior, creator, protector), loses her unified dominion, and becomes split off into separate goddesses.” Vashti and Esther are heiresses to this split.

Of course, the split becomes a male projection. Men seek the erotic from one source (Vashti, the whore, the mistress), and nurturance from another (Esther preparing banquets at the stove, mother, wife, madonna). Women live with this split, and we thus lose the ability to connect our own sexuality, our own bodies, to the sacred, to the universe.

For women today, the real loss is not as much the suppression of female rites, as it is the *deprivation of consciousness*. In other words, it is the rare woman these days, in hating her body, who even *thinks* to make a connection between her body and the Earth's body, her breasts, vulva, thighs and the Earth's, her seasons and cycles and the Earth's. This is a big loss, both in terms of our self-esteem and sense of well-being, and in relation to women's sense of spiritual connection.

Inanna's sacred erotic experience which brings on April's showers and May's flowers devolves, in the Book of Esther, into Vashti as whore. Queen Esther becomes adored by the rabbis, but Vashti gets split off as a dirty body, coarse nature.

If you have any doubts about the propagandistic effectiveness of Vashti's utter demonization in rabbinic misogynist texts, here's an experiment. This Purim at synagogue, count how many girls dress up as Vashti (zero; just a guess). Ask the little Esthers why they aren't dressed up as little Vashtis. Write down their answers. Ask what Vashti did to make her so “bad.” (My daughter's friends generally reply that Vashti “said NO to the King.” We discuss whether it is bad to say ‘NO’ to males. Does that mean you should say ‘YES’ to males? Etc.) Invite all the little Esthers to your next Rosh Hodesh event, and help them burn all their old misguided answers in a big black cauldron. Call the event “We're All Witches” (all right, “We're All Sisters” will do).



ESTHER'S ANOREXIA

As anyone who has been on the idealized (vs. the devalued) side of the madonna/whore split knows, it's no picnic being Esther, either. The male rabbis love her (ostensibly because she saved her people), but then the rabbis piggyback other virtues on to the courageous lass just to confuse us: Esther's tiptoeing wifely style, her dependence on the King, her title of ‘prophetess’ (which is very odd, given that the *Megillah* is a highly secular book).

Most creepy of all, though, is the rabbis' lewd, peeping Tom-ish interest in exactly *how* Esther is beautiful. In the midrash, they literally quantify and rank her beauty vis-à-vis other Jewish women, and descriptions of the exact quality of Esther's sexual appeal take up many pages.

The rabbis sound remarkably like those classic fathers of anorexic girls

who feel compelled to comment to their daughters, “You've gained weight at college,” or “Your roommate's a knockout.” These contemporary Esthers, as we all know, get their sad revenge.

EARLY SPRING: HEALING THE SPLITS, CIRCLING BACK

Vashti and Esther, of course, are in coalition, not opposition. The journeys of females—Isis, Demeter, Inanna—are not journeys to find answers, *they are journeys to gather something together, to make things whole*. Even the Shekhina, the female aspect of the Jewish God, gathers up lost souls. Isis gathers up the parts of Osiris. Demeter searches for her daughter. Our themes, as contemporary women, are the same: to restore something that has been separated, to reconnect body and soul, to reunite Vashti and Esther, to integrate and reclaim the feminine that has been lost or abandoned in human history.

Esther must circle back to carry Vashti across the threshold into telling her story. And it is not just the girl's story that must be retold and reheard, it is also our mothers' stories—Vashti, Esther, and *their* mothers' stories, Ishtar, Demeter, and all the rest.

To be nourished with only male images of what's female and what's divine and what's Jewish is to be badly malnourished.

So let us reclaim the womantasch, and tell the **whole** *Megillah*.





The Once and Future Womantasch:

CELEBRATING PURIM'S FULL MOON
AS "HOLY BODY DAY"

by Susan Schnur

What is a hamantasch? A sacred vulva filled with black seeds. A food, source of nourishment, which we make with our hands reflecting our (women's) felt sense of self-containment, of creativity and generativity.

Ancient images of goddesses reveal that certain parts of the body—breasts, vulva, belly, buttocks—were believed to be holy, combining biological functions with processes of spiritual transformation. Hamantaschen remind us that the image of the female body was humanity's first conceptualization of the workings of the cosmos. The Earth was a mother, fecund like us.

Patriarchal writings speak of women's bodies as "empty vessels"; the hamantasch, however, represents revering our bodies as metaphors for creation. The word "humiliation" comes from the Latin root *humus*, meaning earth. In the mind/body split of patriarchy, we somehow have become humiliated, instead of uplifted, by our association with the living earth.

What is a womantasch? The same as a hamantasch.

And the black seeds in the womantasch? As the seed has within it the inherent power to root, grow, flower and fruit, so we have "power from within." We reject the notion of "power over"; and we recognize instead that each of us is part of the creative being who is the universe herself.

When do we eat hamantaschen? At Purim, as Earth herself awakens from dormancy and begins again her sacred spring cycle of life. We honor the Earth's body *for it is our own*. The sacred is not to be found on a pilgrimage. It is within us. If we treat our bodies as enemies, we doom ourselves to experiences of an amputated God. Let Purim be a celebration of body-positive spirituality, of praising the Earth's sacred

NEW!! IMPROVED!!

Four Easy Purim Upgrades

 **At the Purim Carnival:**

Set up a dunking booth in which every time Vashti says 'NO!' the *King* gets dunked.

 **In Hebrew School:**

Use Purim as a time to teach some sex ed. around the issues of male coercion and female compliance. Call the event "Hooray! Vashti said 'NO!'" ("Hooray! Vashti said 'YES!'" is way too advanced.)

 **In your Sholoch Manos Baskets**

[Purim goody bags traditionally exchanged with friends and neighbors]: Stick in some "women's assertiveness" literature (or the 800 number of your local women's anti-violence hotline) and title it "Helpful Hints from Vashti."

 **During the Megillah Reading:**

Ask the rabbi to read the first two chapters of the *Megillah* (the Vashti Chronicles) with the genders switched upside down so that the story becomes a polemic against men. This should provide a nice lesson in empathy.

Adrienne Rich calls our relationship to our bodies “women’s fundamental problem.”



**Performance art by
Anne Gaudin and
Denise Yarfitz,
1978–1981.**

vulva, and our own. It is not just the female body that demands respect and affirmation, but, by extension, it is all living things.

What is Holy Body Day?

Esther Broner, in her novel *A Weave of Women*, creates a counter-holiday (which Purim implicitly is) in which we “women pray that we be restored to our own Temple.” Broner proclaims our thighs as the pillars of the Temple. We conclude Holy Body Day with food [a sacred vulva cookie would be appropriate] and Broner’s prayer: “Blessed art thou, O Mother of the Universe, *from whose body we descend*, who has kept us alive, nourished us and brought us to this season.”

Purim is called the ‘upside down’ holiday. For example, Haman gets hung instead of Mordechai; we get drunk instead of staying sober.

In the ‘upside down’ vein, let’s reclaim the full moon which has not really been reclaimed by Jewish women—though it’s opposite, the new or absent moon, Rosh Hodesh, has been. In all probability, the implications of the full moon frighten men. The full moon, upon which many Jewish holidays fall (not incidentally), represents women’s power—the mother at the height of strength—capable maturity personified.

The classic full moon personages include Astarte (whose name becomes, upside down, the spring holiday of Easter) and even Tiamat (who, in Genesis 1:2, gets reversed into a common noun). The full moon is woman’s time for choices, births, deaths, fulfillments. The power to create and to feel abundant is immense.

Historically, men ridiculed women for “lunacy,” but that is another way in which Purim is upside down. Raising your hamantasch, sing Peter Sodeburg’s eco-feminist song: “And the full moon is her vagina spread wide. And the new moon is her waiting womb, every possibility waiting to grow. And the old moon is her empty womb, with a whole wide world

of possibility, every possibility returning home.”

Have you ever made one humongous womantasch—that is, one that represents the sacred vulva of the Earth herself? No, but this is an idea just waiting to be put in the oven. Okay, in our imagined woman’s

circle, let’s put the humongous hamantasch in the center, and, from our ‘grounded’ understanding of life’s necessary cycles, let’s recite the following (from Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature*): “The Earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am, how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know.”

During some future Purim, this giant hamantasch can help us connect the abused body of the Earth with the abused body of women—the two are, of course, deeply connected.

Is there a psalm to recite on Purim’s full moon? Try Psalm 23, which you can monkey around with so that it becomes, “The Earth is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

“Who will plow my vulva?” Perhaps you have never asked this question, but the old mythological Queen of Heaven does ask it in a 4,000-year-old text (translated in *Inanna* by Sumerian scholar Samuel Noah Kramer and storyteller Diane Wolkstein). Inanna *loves* her body, and she presents an image of pride that has much to teach women today. The text says, “When Inanna leaned back against the apple tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold. Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself.”

Starhawk writes that in this text “the erotic power of woman is seen as a force that generates good for all the community. The image of a young woman frankly praising her own vulva is hard for us to comprehend in a world in which women are conditioned to hate their bodies.”

Inanna lives in a world “in which there is no conceivable reason why she should hesitate to express and rejoice in her

The spiritual challenge is not to transcend our female bodies (as if they were prisons), but to realize that our bodies can be temples of the sacred.

beauty.” And since we now understand the springtime and fertility connections between Purim’s Queens and Inanna, let’s look at the text:

My vulva, the horn/The Boat of Heaven/ Is full of eagerness like the young moon./ My untilled land lies fallow.

As for me, Inanna/ Who will plow my vulva?/ Who will plow my high field?/ Who will plow my wet ground?/ As for me, the young woman,/ Who will plow my vulva?/ Who will station the ox there?/ Who will plow my vulva?

Dumuzi replied: “Great Lady, the king will plow your vulva./ I, Dumuzi the King, will plow your vulva.”

Inanna: “Then plow my vulva, man of my heart!/ Plow my vulva!”

This text goes on to speak of the springtime fertility that occurs because of this passion. “*At the king’s lap stood the rising cedar. Plants grew high by their side. Grains grew high by their side. Gardens flourished luxuriantly.*”

Ask your woman’s Purim circle: Can you imagine what it would be like if we worshipped a god who said stuff like this? If women’s assertiveness and sexuality were sacred? How would that change our place in the world?”

Okay, so all we have left on Purim of this suppressed and forgotten world is Vashti’s body as a source of humiliation—and, of course, the womantasch.

It sounds like it makes sense to redeem Purim—the pre-spring, full moon time of split, denigrated womanhood (that reflects that deeply rooted biblical conviction that women are Other, are inferior)—into a time of re-sanctifying our bodies. Yes, this holiday has been waiting for us, like a seed hiding in a hamantasch, waiting to re-emerge.

The hamantasch’s three corners have often been treated allegorically. Any feminist ideas? How about recalling together that in the beginning there were three Muses (one for each corner of the hamantasch): Meditation, Memory and Song. Let’s create a ritual in our women’s circle, in relation to our bodies, that invokes all three. (For example, a *memory* that speaks to our relationship to a specific part



Astarte (Canaan, 1500-1000 B.C.E), suggesting, once again, why boys build towers and girls bake enclosures.

of our body.)

Adrienne Rich calls our relationships to our bodies, women’s “fundamental problem.” For some of us, before our bedroom mirrors (or in therapy), we privatize a punitive relationship to our body. Isolated from other women, we think we are the only ones. Rich, who always says it best, talks about the “ignorant body:” “How in this ignorant body/ did she hide/ waiting for her release/ till uncontrollable light began to pour/ from every wound and suture/ and all the sacred openings....”

How can our “ignorant bodies” be healed by light that comes *from the inside*, from our sacred openings?

Around the circle, let’s pass a small framed picture covered with a cloth. As the picture reaches each one of us, we say, “Help me, great mother, full moon of Adar, wherein reside Vashti and Esther together, to carry no shame, to love and revere my body, and its sanctity.” Lifting the cloth to see the great mother, Sanctity Embodied (is the picture going to be a painting by Botticelli?, an ancient Venus of Willendorf?), instead what we see is: *ourselves in the mirror.*

The womantasch serves as a reminder that the sacred is near. Our female body is but a wonderful mirror—held to the great Mystery.

So the hamantasch is a trace-memory. Yes, an affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed within it. Spirituality is about embodiment and grounding, not about altered states of consciousness. As the writer Morris Berman puts it, it is about ordinary experiences (not fancy ones), about presence and self-remembering; not about charisma (which is *easy*).

The challenge is not to ignore our female bodies (and think we’ve ‘transcended’ them), but to recognize that sacralizing our bodies is a necessary first step in our search for what’s holy. Internalizing the values of Holy Body Day, we realize how accessible other ideals suddenly become: wholeness, unselfish love, creativity, spontaneity. God’s pleasures can be quite ordinary, actually—making womantaschen together, eating them, sending *sholoch manos* to Abe Maslow.

