

# PURIM PRUDENCE

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

The Talmud (Megilla 12a-b) discusses the large party thrown by King Achashverosh and his wife Vashti. "Megillas Esther states 'So Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house.' Shouldn't the Megillah have said (that Vashti made the party in) 'the women's house?' Raba said: Both of them [Achashverosh and Vashti] had an immoral purpose.... Megillas Esther later states 'And the queen Vashti refused (to appear without clothes before Achashverosh and his guests.)' Let us see. She was immodest, as the Master said above, that both of them had an immoral purpose. Why then would she not come? Rav Yose ben Chanina said: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her.

Vashti and Achashverosh were cut from the same cloth, the Talmud tells us. Both of them were immodest, flashy people who desired to draw attention to themselves. Preservation of their own dignity was not a concern as long as they were the centers of attention. Both Achashverosh and Vashti threw elaborate parties so that they would be the center of attention. Achashverosh wanted people to be awestruck by his opulent and lavish display of wealth. Vashti wanted people to be dazzled by her beauty. Both of them wanted people to indulge in the worst forms of debauchery, so that the guests would enjoy themselves at their hosts' expense.

Considering the fact that both Vashti and Achashverosh were far from prudish, why then did Vashti refuse to appear in the nude before Achashverosh and his guests? The Talmud states that she had been plagued with leprosy. Her beauty was marred, and she would not make a laughing stock out of herself just to satisfy her boorish husband's desires.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz, shlit"a, asks why the Talmud had to reach the conclusion that she was plagued with leprosy? Yes, the Talmud initially states that Vashti was immodest and immoral. She was not above making a display of herself in front of the woman of her empire. But, perhaps that was as far as she would go. Vashti was not so debased that she would appear nude in front of the men of the empire. Maybe she was somewhat immoral and immodest, but not to the extent that she would satisfy her husband's outlandish request!

Rav Leibowitz answers that the Talmud, by its answer, is merely acknowledging a fact of human personality. Once a person allows a bad character trait to permeate their being, reigning in that trait is next to impossible. Once a person allows himself some degree of freedom from restriction, total freedom of restriction is sure to come. Vashti was immodest and immoral. Her immodesty was part and parcel of her personality. The Talmud is perplexed by her refusal to appear without clothes in front of the king - this was not out of the pale for her. She threw a party for the point of showing

herself off, so why should she not want to do this further? The only answer that could possibly explain this out-of-character refusal is that she developed some affliction that diminished her beauty, which made her not want to appear in front of anyone. This is the only possible reason why Vashti would act out of character.

The ability to temper one's self and not indulge, as illustrated by Vashti, is extremely difficult. It is written in the name of the Ariz"al that there is good reason why the holiday of Yom Kippur is also referred to as "Yom Kipurim." "Yom Kipurim" means a day like Purim. Yom Kippur is only like Purim, similar to Purim, but not exactly the same as Purim, the Ariz"al said, because the celebration of Purim contains within it some aspects that are loftier than Yom Kippur.

Rav Shlomo Brevda explains that these lofty aspects of Purim are possibly related to the difference in how the two holidays are celebrated. Yom Kippur is spent fasting, and Purim is spent feasting. A story is related in which the Chasam Sofer was told about a certain individual who many considered holy and pious, as he often fasted and refrained from eating. The Chasam Sofer replied that anyone could fast. However, the one who eats with pure intent, for the sake of fulfilling G-d's dictates, without a hint of indulgence, he is the one that is praiseworthy, holy and pious.

On Purim, we have the obligation to eat, drink, and be merry. However, this merriment is not for the purpose of whetting our palate nor for satisfying our cravings. We do not celebrate because doing so makes us feel physically good. We celebrate because this is our obligation. The celebration should make us feel spiritually good. Temperance is not easily accomplished. As evidenced by Vashti, restraint, for some, is impossible. However, on Purim, prudence and moderation must rule. We must rejoice, but for the purpose of praising G-d. We eat and drink, and we may enjoy doing such. However, our underlying motivation must be a pure sense of devotion to G-d and that motivation must shine through. Because this balance between celebration and self-restraint is so difficult to achieve, Purim actually contains an element of the celebration that is loftier than Yom Kippur - the maintenance of this equilibrium.

*Chag Purim Same'ach!*

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