Queen Esther: A Feminist?

Mrs. Tzipah Wertheimer / Queens College

Purim celebrates a female savior of the Jewish people – Esther. Alongside her uncle Mordechai, Esther successfully annulled the worst decree placed upon the Jewish people.

Was Esther a feminist? Was Megillat Esther ahead of its time in attributing so much glory to a woman?

Esther was summoned to the palace for one reason, and one reason only – her physical beauty. The King was immediately drawn to her for her beauty and thus she became the wife of the most powerful man in the world. It’s actually pretty insulting, if you think about it. A young woman who eventually saved an entire nation who was clearly bursting with talent, intelligence and much more was chosen for her high position simply because of the way she looked. Though she accomplished great things – it’s hard to pass Esther off as a typical feminist.

Esther’s beauty was her greatest asset, in the eyes of the king. She knew him to be a drunk, racist ruler. She was not impressed by wealth and grandeur. She asked for seven maids to attend her daily needs. She didn’t actually need seven maids – what she really needed was a calendar. She needed a way to keep track of Shabbat and she did so by calling for a different maid for each day of the week. She hid her righteousness behind the mask of beauty and materialism.

The evil Haman successfully initiated a decree to annihilate all the Jews throughout all the lands under the dominion of King Ahchashveiros – ostensibly the entire world. The decree stated that the entire nation should be destroyed on one particular day – the 14th day of the month of Adar. The Jews were trapped in both time and space. There was nowhere to run – no country existed that was not under the dominion of King Ahchashveirosh at that time. There was no time to escape – the entire attack was meant to take place at one time.

Esther had to act – there was no other choice. She knew that she had been placed by G-d in the royal palace and she knew that it was her duty to the Jewish nation. The king valued her beauty
above all else – yet her immediate course of action was to fast for three days which would obviously diminish her beauty.

Before meeting the king, for the first time, she had prepared herself by bathing in oils and perfumes for a full 12 months. Now she would be fasting, making herself appear weak and less attractive. It was time to come out of hiding from beneath her outer beauty; it was time to tap into her true essence. Esther’s fasting was for the purpose of repentance and indeed she instructed Mordechai to gather all of the Jews in prayer and repentance as well.

The decree was annulled and the Jewish people were saved. Esther’s outward beauty had nothing to do with it. It was her sincere prayer and repentance as well as that of the Jewish people that broke the decree.

I don’t know if Esther was a feminist – I suppose it depends on how you define feminist. Esther was a young woman with a very important mission. G-d blessed her with beauty and I would imagine that she realized how beautiful she was. None the less she never relied on her looks or measured her self-worth by the fact that she was chosen to be the wife of the most powerful man in the world. She was humble – not self-conscious. Her actual power was based on the fact that she knew that she was, so much more than the wife of the king, so much more than a beauty Queen – she was a spiritual leader! Esther was humble yet confident, secluded yet thoroughly involved with her people. She maintained spiritual clarity amid utter materialism.

Esther never got confused; she never confused her true essence with her costume. Esther recognized G-d in everything. We can take a lesson from Esther to increase our sensitivity and regularly recognize the divine. There is a Hebrew phrase, hashgacha protis that we say when the small details in our day to day fall into place perfectly.

Hashgacha protis means personal divine providence. For example you need to speak with a specific person about an important matter and you run into them incidentally. You could greet them with a quick hello or you could say, “hashgacha protis, I needed to speak to you.” People might think you’re a little silly if you go around declaring “hashgacha protis” all over campus, but on Purim we have license to be a little silly.

Recognizing hashgacha protis in our daily lives is akin to recognizing the divine within the mundane it’s like a peek behind the mask. Maybe it’s like recognizing the pages of html code
that create a beautiful website. While real beauty might be visible on the surface – there is so much more when we tap into the essence and recognize the divine.

L’chaim