

Queen Esther: A Heroine for Our Time?

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/queen-esther-heroine-our-time>.

Introduction

Queen Esther is the title character of the Book of Esther, which appears in the third section (*Ksuvim*, "Writings") of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). Esther has been praised and reappraised throughout Jewish literary history. Understood by some as a passive figure who dutifully follows her uncle's advice and thereby saves the Jewish people, she has been interpreted by others as a hero who risked her own life to save her people from mass destruction. Some modern feminist writers rejected her as a model of female acquiescence to male power, in contrast to the more rebellious Queen Vashti who appears at the beginning of the Book of Esther. Still others see Esther as a victim of a patriarchal system, putting forth her best effort while limited by societal constraints. She has been hailed as noble, criticized as an emblem of women's subjugation, and held up as a victim of sexual violence to be pitied rather than scorned. This kit fosters conversation about the ways that the character of Esther has been interpreted in modern Jewish culture, and raises the question of whether or not Esther can be seen as a role model for women today.

Subjects

Feminism, Jewish Holidays, Religion, Tanakh, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- This [article](#) by Sidnie White Crawford from the Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia offers an overview of the biblical Book of Esther. Teachers may also find it useful to compare the Hebrew Bible version of Esther to the Greek version included in the Apocrypha, discussed in an [article](#) by Carey A. Moore. Teachers may also wish to consult Tamar Mer's [compilation](#) of Midrash and Aggadah about Esther.
- Teachers may decide to turn to this [lesson plan](#) by Allyson Mattanah, also published by the Jewish Women's Archive, which differentiates between the leadership styles of Esther and Vashti in the biblical narrative and compares them to figures in the American labor movement of the early twentieth century, or this [lesson plan](#), which explores the concept of costume in leadership through the figures of Queen Esther and the activist and politician Bella Abzug.
- The following books may help teachers to contextualize interpretations of Esther over the course of Jewish history: Aaron Koller's *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* contextualizes the Book of Esther as a political work, examining it through the lens of ancient Judaism; Barry Dov Walfish's *Esther in Medieval Garb* describes the role of the Book of Esther in the intellectual and cultural life of Jews in the Middle Ages; Adele Berlin's *JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* offers a line-by-line commentary on the original Hebrew Bible text with supplemental essays; *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* offers essays that take a number of approaches, from textual criticism to rabbinic interpretation to modern commentary.
- Teachers may find it particularly useful to read about feminist interpretations of the Book of Esther, and in particular the ways in which Vashti and Esther have been taken up as different kinds of role models for contemporary women, or how Vashti has been heralded as the feminist heroine of the story. Much has been written on the topic. We recommend these articles: Susan Schnur's "[The Womantasch Triangle](#)"; Ashley Ross's "[The Feminist History of the Holiday of Purim](#)"; Alina Dain Sharon's "[Feminism and Purim: Reflections of Female Religious Leaders Across Denominations](#)," which collects opinions on the Book of Esther from a number of women rabbis.
- Note to the teacher: each of the resources in this kit offers a very different reading of the character of Esther. Students are encouraged to compare these various Esthers as possible role models for modern Jewish women. One possible exercise to facilitate this process, after working through a number of resources, would be to ask students to role-play various versions of Esther in conversation with one another, perhaps with students having semi-improvised chats with each other in groups of two or three. In doing so, they would be encouraged to explore such questions as: who is Esther as this particular author or artist sees her? How does the creator of the text in question understand Esther's role in the Megillah? How much agency



does she have, and how much courage? What does she value, and how does she act on her values?

Resources

1: Biblical verses, the Book of Esther.

This biblical book relates the story of Esther, a young Jewish woman living in the Persian diaspora, who saves the Jewish people from genocide. King Ahasuerus, the hapless ruler of Persia, chooses Esther to be his queen because of her beauty, not knowing that she is Jewish. Ahasuerus ultimately approves the plan of his vizier, Haman, to kill all the Jews in the kingdom, this plot emerging from Haman's damaged pride in a power struggle with Esther's cousin Mordechai. Esther follows her cousin's advice and risks her own life to plead with the king on behalf of her people. As a result of Esther's request, and the revelation that she herself is Jewish, Haman is executed and the Jews are given permission to defend themselves. The Book of Esther, said by many scholars to have been written in the fourth century BCE, contains the origin story for the Jewish holiday of Purim.

The included excerpts highlight key moments in which the character Esther asserts herself as a heroine. Students may also be asked to read the entirety of the Book of Esther, which would be useful for getting a richer understanding of the character, and perhaps to prepare their own list of four or five verses demonstrating Esther's heroism.

Suggested Activity: Based on their reading of these excerpts from the Book of Esther, ask your students to put together a table of arguments, with a column for "pro" and a column for "con," illustrating how Esther may or may not be heroic.

Source: Esther 2:15,20, 4:13-16, 5:7-8, 7:2-6, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1917. Source sheet compiled by Jessica Kirzane and Michael Yashinsky using sefaria.org, 2017.

2: Essay excerpt, Grace Aguilar's "The Character of Esther," 1845.

Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) was an English-Jewish author, educator, and religious reformer whose books were translated into French, German, and Hebrew, and distributed across the British Empire, Europe, and the United States. She is considered a pioneering Anglo-Jewish writer, who advocated for Jewish rights in the secular political world and for women's rights within the Jewish world. Despite her struggles with illness and her early death at the age of thirty-one, she was a prolific writer. In the attached excerpt from her work *The Women of Israel*, Aguilar explains what she finds admirable about the character of Esther, praising her for her expression of ideal femininity, traits that she felt prevented her from being considered a true "heroine," but did allow her to fulfill her destiny of saving the Jewish people.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the passage and discuss: in what ways does Aguilar see Esther as a role model for modern women? How does this resonate with students' own readings of the Book of Esther? What kinds of values about femininity does Aguilar's reading support? In what ways do students appreciate this portrait of Esther and in what ways does it bother them?

Source: Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel: Volume 2: Or, Characters and Sketches from the Holy Scriptures, and Jewish History*. (Cambridge University Press, 2010 (Originally published in 1845.)) p. 161-163, 167.

3: Poem, Else Lasker-Schüler's "Esther," 1913.

Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945) was a German-Jewish poet and author of prose fiction and plays, as well as a flamboyant figure in literary cafés and salons frequented by German Expressionists. She was known for her unconventional behavior and her public readings complete with costumes and acoustic effects.

"Esther" was published in Lasker-Schüler's collection *Hebräische Balladen (Hebrew Ballads)* in 1913. Drawing from her imagination of the Orient, the book contains poems on biblical figures. In this poem, the author portrays Esther as holy and faithful to God, even while living among non-Jews. She depicts Esther as beautifully embodying an authentic form of Jewishness and describes her as a role model for other Jewish women.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss: what does the poet find admirable about Esther? Who else from the Book of Esther is mentioned in the poem, who is left out, and how does this impact the representation of Esther? What moments from the Book of Esther do you think inspired this poem? How does Lasker-Schüler's representation of Esther compare to other representations of the character the students have studied?

Source: Else Lasker-Schüler, "Esther," translated by Janine Canan, from *Star in My Forehead: Selected Poems by Else Lasker-Schüler*. Translation copyright © 2000 by Janine Canan. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Holy Cow! Press, www.holycowpress.org.

4: Poem, Itzik Manger's "The Queen Comes to the King" from "Songs of the Megillah," 1936.

Itzik Manger (1901-1969) was a Yiddish poet and essayist who was known as a sort of witty "folk bard" of his people. Born in the multiethnic city of Czernowitz, he was an avid reader of world literature and especially of the German Romantics. His most productive period as a writer was from 1928 to 1938, when he lived in Warsaw and produced volumes of poetry, edited a literary journal, and invented a new genre, which he called *Khumesh-lider* (Bible poems), in which he rewrote Biblical stories as modern ballads with characters living in contemporary Eastern Europe. His *Megile-lider*, from which the excerpt below was taken, was a continuation of this project. In Manger's adaptation of the Megillah, Esther had been planning, prior to her marriage to Ahasuerus, to elope with a journeyman tailor named Fastrigosso. But upon being instructed by Mordecai to enter the beauty contest of King Ahasuerus, and then becoming his queen, she is forced to use her body and romantic charms in service of her people. In the passage below, Esther offers her plea to save her people from destruction in the form of pillow talk, making explicit the extent to which Esther must employ her sexuality as a tool for her people's salvation, at great personal cost.

The original Yiddish version of the poem ("*Di malke kumt tsum meylekh*") may be found on pages 35-36 of **Manger's book**, digitized by the Yiddish Book Center and freely downloadable as a PDF. Do consider printing out the poem in Yiddish should students have some ability to access it in the original, even if they are only able to sound out some of the words.

The last words of the poem are **the first words of the Book of Esther**. With the first word repeated, as Manger has it, it would mean, "And it came to pass... and it came to pass... in the days of:".

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the passage and answer the following questions: in what way does this reading change your understanding of Esther, if at all? What adjectives would you use to describe Esther in this passage? Do you think Manger sees her as heroic? Do you think he judges her harshly? Is there anything about Esther in this passage that makes her a strong role model? What other texts in this kit do you feel most closely share Manger's assessment of Esther?

Invite your students to write their own poetic adaptations of the scene wherein Esther pleads on behalf of her people (**Esther 7**). How do they imagine it, and the character of Esther, similarly or differently to Manger?

Source: Itzik Manger, "The Queen Comes to the King" from "Songs of the Megillah," in *The World According to Itzik: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Leonard Wolf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 48-49.

5: Illustration, Marc Chagall's "Esther" lithograph for Verve Bible, 1960.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was a Russian-French modernist painter who earned fame as one of the preeminent Jewish visual artists of the twentieth century. He was known for his fantastical style drawing on Jewish folk motifs. Chagall created two series of works on the Bible, the first after completing a visit to the Holy Land in 1931. The second was a series of 24 lithographs (including "Esther," below) published by the Parisian artistic and literary magazine *Verve* in 1960. He chose scenes from the Bible to illustrate, focusing on encounters between God and humanity in which the subjects are flawed human beings called to face the divine.

This illustration of Esther represents Esther 2:7: "And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look on; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter" (JPS translation).

Suggested Activity: Have your students study the image and choose a few adjectives to describe Esther's character, as Chagall seems to see her. If the students have at this point looked at a few other texts discussing Esther, have them identify which of these texts they think best accords with Chagall's representation of the character.

Source: Marc Chagall, "Esther," 1960, Lithograph for *Verve*, Paris in *Illustrations for the Bible*. Teriade, Paris. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

6: Song and Lyrics, Elizabeth Swados's "Esther Invincible," 1988.

Elizabeth Swados (1951-2016) was an American playwright, composer, and director of socially conscious, experimental musicals.

Her eclectic work combined popular and high culture, and themes of feminism, politics, and mental illness. She also wrote on Jewish themes, in works such as "The Haggadah: A Passover Cantata" and "Jerusalem," an oratorio adapted from poems by Yehuda Amichai. In "Esther: A Vaudeville Megillah," later included in Swados's CD "Bible Women," "Esther Invincible" rescues her people from planned genocide. The act takes on contemporary relevance through allusions made to the Holocaust. The songs in this performance were accompanied by a narration based on Elie Wiesel's Purim lecture, "Beauty and Commitment."

Suggested Activity: Have students listen to the song and read the lyrics. Ask your students: how does Swados represent Esther as a warrior, and as a woman? Does she see these as contradictory, or complementary terms? Does Swados represent Esther as admirable? Which, if any, of the other representations in this kit, does this version of Esther most closely resemble?

Ask your students to describe the musical setting itself. Is the music strident and fierce? Is it feminine? What do they think of the voice heard on the song? Does the singer sound resolved? Angry? Worried? After listening to the song a few times, you may ask theatrically- or musically-inclined students to try to sing the song, making (and explaining) their own choices about how to interpret and perform it.

Source: Elizabeth Swados, "Esther Invincible," originally performed in "Esther: A Vaudeville Megillah" (New York: Broadway Play Pub., 1989), included on *Bible Women* (Milan: 1995), CD.

7: Tambourine, Betsy Teutsch's "Queen Esther the Riveter," circa 2007.

Betsy Teutsch is an artist specializing in Judaica and Hebrew calligraphy. She has created several designs of tambourines in homage to the prophetess Miriam, who is said to have played the instrument as she led Israelite women in dance after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds described in the Book of Exodus. This tambourine presents an image of Rosie the Riveter as Queen Esther (or, perhaps, of Queen Esther as Rosie the Riveter). The borrowed illustration of Rosie the Riveter (a symbol of the women who worked in factories producing arms, munitions, and vehicles for the war effort) was an icon of American women's patriotism during World War II. It was created through a government campaign aimed at recruiting female workers, and has since become a cultural icon of the American feminist movement and a symbol of women's strength and determination. By depicting Rosie the Riveter as Queen Esther, Teutsch draws attention to the boldness and courage of the figure of Esther, while also criticizing more traditional, passive, or domestic takes on the character of Esther.

Suggested Activity: Invite your students to create their own portrait or collage merging a modern figure or role model with the image of Esther. What value is there in this kind of overlaying of icons? How does the process impact our understanding both of the contemporary woman and of Esther? For each figure chosen by a student, consider which aspects of Esther, and of the figure, are highlighted or complicated or celebrated by the merging?

Students may also be asked to caption their image with a relevant verse from the Book of Esther (whether in Hebrew or a language of translation), possibly adapted to their take on the character, as Teutsch has done. She captions her image with an adaptation of a quotation appearing in [Esther 6:9 and 6:11](#), "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor." Haman proposes that princes of the realm proclaim this statement before him as he parades on horseback through the capital city, but he instead is forced to proclaim it before Mordecai as the latter is given that honor. In Teutsch's adaptation, the verse becomes, "Thus shall the queen do who delighteth to honor her People." Students can consider how Teutsch has changed the original verse and why.

Source: Betsy Teutsch, "Queen Esther the Riveter" tambourine, circa 2007. Reproduced with permission from Betsy Teutsch.

8: Literary midrash excerpt, Norma Rosen's "After Esther," 2009.

Norma Rosen (b. 1925) is a novelist whose work explores being a Jew and a woman in contemporary urban America. In fiction and essays, she examines ethical and social issues in Jewish identity and feminism. Her collection *Biblical Women Unbound*, from which this excerpt is taken, is a series of rebellious midrashic rewritings of biblical texts about women. In her version of Esther's story, she draws a portrait of Esther as a victim of rape whose victimization by the king was condoned by her own people in exchange for their survival.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the excerpt and discuss the following questions: What is the "truth" that Rosen brings to light in this passage? Who, if anyone, is to blame? What connection does the power dynamic she presents have to the greater tapestry of Jewish history and contemporary Jewish society? According to Rosen, what role does Esther play in her titular book—is she a hero, a role model? Is anyone?

Source: Norma Rosen, "After Esther" in *Biblical Women Unbound* (Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p. 178.

9: Mosaic, Lilian Broca's "Queen Esther Revealing Her True Identity," 2006.

Lilian Broca is a Canadian-Jewish artist who works in painting, drawing, and mosaic art. This image comes from her series of mosaics about the development of the character of Esther as she assumes the role of leader of her people.

Broca describes the mosaic as follows:

"This is the last mosaic of the Series in chronological order. A mature and confident Queen Esther in her most expensive and beautiful attire is removing the mask (the symbol of her secret identity) revealing an intelligent and self-assured leader. On the table, a 'rhyton' (Persian gold or silver drinking vessel) is knocked over, spilling its red wine contents. The wine symbolizes the spilled blood of the Hebrew people as planned by Haman. The plotted genocide is now averted through Queen Esther's disclosure to her husband, King Ahasuerus, of Haman's evil design. In this mosaic my intention is to 'iconize' Queen Esther as a paragon of supreme leadership, loyalty, wisdom and vision. In a patriarchal society, this unique figure succeeded in bringing peace through accommodation, cooperation, and negotiation. Her hero status enables her to become a role model for all women, then and now."

Suggested Activity: Have your students examine the mosaic and discuss the following questions: which texts in this kit, if any, would this mosaic best illustrate? How would you describe Broca's representation of Esther? What characteristics of Esther does the artist bring out? After they have examined the image, have them read Broca's description of it. Does her description match how they perceived the image?

Invite your students to create their own texts about Esther (poems, short stories, visual art, etc.) based on their understanding of the character. Which characteristics of Esther do they choose to bring to the fore? Do they represent Esther as a strong leader? A victim? A martyr? Or something else?

Source: Lilian Broca, "Queen Esther Revealing her True Identity," 48" x 33" Iridium smalti, gems, gold tessera, gold leaf on panel, completed August 2006.