

Nevertheless, She Persisted
Esther and Kamala Speak
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Beacon UU Congregation
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When I was a girl, attending Sunday School at Beth Shalom synagogue in Pittsburgh, one of the highlights of the year was the annual Purim Play, or *shpiel*. One girl from each class was chosen to play Queen Esther and one boy was chosen as evil Haman, and we would parade down the aisles of the Sanctuary.

The girls wore long white dresses and gold paper crowns; the boys donned black outfits, three cornered hats, and mascara mustaches. In relatively modern times, the popularity of these Purim *shpiels* and the boisterous audience reaction they engendered, spilled over into the actual synagogue celebration of Purim when the scroll of Esther is chanted in Hebrew (the whole *Megillah*, as its known). This year, Purim occurs on February 25^t

There is an ancient tradition derived from Torah that one is supposed to “blot out” the mention of Haman as a form of enduring spiritual punishment and disgrace for his actions. Therefore, synagogue attendees attempting to “blot out” Haman’s name will literally shout, catcall, boo and swing noisemakers, called graggers, to drown out the name of Haman as it is read.

If it were only so simple in these strange and disturbing times of female senators being shouted down, rampant sexual abuses, attempts to squash reproductive rights, and the ongoing denigration of women in our culture. If we only all had graggers for the modern-day Hamans!

I suppose you could say that women and their allies across gender lines have been swinging one very large and loud gragger, as participants in the *#metoo*, *#TimesUp* and *#I’mspeaking* movements. For many, the Women’s March on January 21, 2017, which involved millions of people worldwide, drew a line in the sand– I was there in DC in my pink knitted pussy hat - a reference and response to the President’s vulgar brag about what he’s able to grab because of his celebrity. I believe Queen Esther might have shown up, too, as she does, in her own way, in the Purim story from the Book of Esther in Hebrew Scriptures. The *Megillah* has many layers, but I’ll break it down to a simple outline.

- King Ahasuerus dethrones Queen Vashti because she defies him.
- Esther is an orphan who is crowned queen after winning a contest based on beauty and sexual prowess....but the King is not aware she is a Jew.

- Mordecai (Esther's Uncle/or perhaps, cousin) uncovers a plot to kill the king and reports it.
- The King promotes Haman to the position of vizier, making him more powerful than all the other officials.
- Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman [a close confidant of the king].
- Haman seeks to destroy the Jews after his run-in with Mordecai and receives approval.
- Mordecai appeals to Esther to save her people. Esther approaches the king (even though she has not been summoned – a major no-no) and invites him and Haman to a banquet.
- Mordecai is honored for having saved the king's life. Esther entertains the king and Haman, and invites them to a second banquet.
- Esther pleads for her people at the second banquet. She accuses Haman of treachery.
- The king grants Esther's request and condemns Haman to die on the gallows that he had built for the Jews.
- The Jews have to defend themselves anyway throughout Persia [against those following out the decree to destroy the Jews].
- The holiday of Purim is established.
- Mordecai advances to a position of importance.
- Esther has saved the day and is forever remembered for her courage to *un-silence* her voice and claim her identity.

One could argue that Esther is like the woman in Marge Piercy's poem *Unlearning to Not Speak* (which we heard earlier):

"She grunts to a halt
 She must learn again to speak
 Starting with I
 Starting with We
 Starting as an infant does
 With her own true hunger
 And pleasure
 And rage."

The new social *speaking-up* movements have harnessed this hunger, pleasure and rage in effective, visible, and crucial ways. Systemic misogyny, sexual assault and harassment are not new, subjugation of and violence against women are not new, either. These phenomena have happened in the workplace, home, bathrooms, schools, churches, Hollywood and Washington, DC for as long as women have attempted to take up space and men have sought to overpower them.

So, it's quite noteworthy that women who have been acculturated to keep quiet, deny the truth, internalize it, and swallow the shame are *unsilencing* themselves and saying #TimesUp or #I'mSpeaking Famous women like our new Vice President, Kamala Harris and regular gals across racial lines lead the way, shining a light on the essential interconnectedness between female and male liberation.

Several years ago, I was privileged to hear the author Susan Faludi speak in Pittsburgh. She is well known for her first book, published in 1991, called Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women. Her thesis – that various groups were aligned in an assault on feminism. It was widely reviewed, praised by some and also subjected to harsh critiques. Faludi recognized the link between her findings in Backlash (which won the National Book Critic's Award) and the plight of American men when she wrote her second book called Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man, in 1999.

In an interview with *Mother Jones* magazine, Faludi remarked, "I don't know how you can be a feminist and not think about men. In order of women to live freely, men have to live freely, too. Being a feminist, in the true sense, opens your eyes to the ways men, like women, are imprisoned in cultural stereotypes." And, this problem is systemic and pervasive. My colleague, the Rev. Emily Wright-Magoon agrees, writing:

"We must learn to see sexism and toxic masculinity in the same way we see racism and white supremacy, it is the air we breathe. It is our conscious and unconscious behaviors. This is on all of us, so the cure is on all of us, too." As a culture, we do not need to be defined by abusive misogyny, a place where locker room talk is brushed off, boys are subjected to a "shame-hardening process" that prevents the development of empathy, and where girls are taught to be slim and submissive and that their worth resides in beauty and sexuality, rather than intelligence or grit."

I didn't have a "Hippie Grandmother" like the one in Reeve Lindbergh's picture book for children, but I did have an exceptional role model for resilience and persistence in my own Grandma Esther (lucky coincidence on the name this morning!) I was a tomboy in my early years, yet the pressure to conform to soul-crushing gender norms was activated in my adolescence, as it was for my brother, my son, and my daughter.

Then, as now, both the female and male paradigms in our culture are painfully broken. As a result, cis-gendered men are often ill-equipped to access the emotions, resources, and responses needed to transform toxic masculine norms in our culture to healthy ones. Is it any wonder, then, that those who claim non-binary gender identities trigger intense animosity and even, violence, from cis-

gendered men? If female liberation cannot occur without male liberation, then trans liberation cannot occur without both. With effort, I believe we can shift into a culture where, to paraphrase Judy Chicago, “both men and women (and everyone!) will be gentle and will be strong.”

Let’s remember that these imprints are long-standing and undergird the religious right’s oppression of women. In Hebrew Scripture, women like Esther were property. This is why the widowed Ruth famously chose to follow Naomi into a new and strange place, rather than go back to Moab and be given to her brother-in-law.

Prior to the advent of Judeo-Christian beliefs, goddesses prevailed in Pagan spirituality. They were revered. Do you know the famous image of St Patrick beating at snakes with a staff? The symbol of the goddess is the snake and that much-celebrated image represents 4th century Christianity beating the goddesses out of the Celtic earth-centered belief system. Or, at least attempting to, and they succeeded over time. It was challenging to convince Pagans to give up the goddesses, so they built abbeys on top of sacred sites, most notoriously the one honoring Brigid. Under Patrick’s tutelage, she was transformed from a fertile goddess into a chaste saint.

The early Church Fathers also had a hand in demonizing women, associating them with the flesh and evil tendencies (Eve got that ball rolling). Men, on the other hand, were linked to the superior faculties of mind and reason (and closer to the image of God, to boot). Thanks to Tertullian and his cronies, thousands of women have been burned, stoned, drowned, and disowned for supposedly going against prevailing male-dominated Western religious doctrine. Sadly, we’ve seen this in Islam, as well (another Abrahamic faith).

Alice Walker unearths this deception in her poem *Pagan*:

“I laugh to see this was our religion all along,” she laments.

Hidden even from ourselves,
taught early not to touch the earth.
Years of white gloves,
straight seamed hose. Being good girls.
Scripture like chains,
dogma like flies,
smiles like locks and lies.”

The #metoo movement, the Women’s march and other groups seek to bring attention, awareness and repair to this systemic and deeply-rooted dysfunction. It is an *intercessory* movement.

Let’s explore what is required to be an effective intercessor and return to Queen Esther as our model. First, she is open to the needs of her people, but also

has to go through a transformational process to become an intercessor, and so do we. And she has to be brave. She needs to be grounded in order to transcend the protocol of the court and risk the king's volatile temper and his rampant egotism to approach him of her own initiative, without being summoned. She has to *persist*.

You may recognize my sermon title today from a now-legendary event in Congress during which Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts went to the microphone (without being summoned) to quote a letter from Coretta Scott King denouncing Jeff Sessions as a racist during his confirmation for Attorney General.

Social media roared, using Mitch McConnell's words in a rallying cry against what they saw as an attempt by a powerful man to silence a woman who was speaking her mind. His words: "*She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.*" The imagery of a man silencing a woman struck some as all too common, and his language rang familiar with many women who had their own stories of being silenced. "*Nevertheless, she persisted*" served as a #hashtag –ready motto for women at the ready to break barriers and stop being shushed.

More recently, during the Vice Presidential debate in October of 2020, Mike Pence consistently interrupted his opponent, Kamala Harris, a female person of color. Finally, Harris turned to him and said, "Mr. Vice President, I'm speaking." Then, she had to repeat herself over more interruptions. Of course, the line went viral as women everywhere were able to recall incidences of being talked over by men.

Yes, women interrupt too...I work on that, myself. Yet studies show that women are interrupted by men 33% more when they are speaking with men. We recall Speaker Nancy Pelosi's rejoinder to President Trump's attempts to interrupt and undercut her, too: "Mr. President, this is my time and I control it." The sensation of the Biden inauguration, poet Amanda Gorman, tells us during a TED talk she gave during her student days at Harvard, that using your voice is a political choice.

Uncle Mordecai urged his niece, Esther, to persist, too, and make that choice. He raised and perhaps pricked her consciousness. He warned Esther against self preservation, cautioning her that if, in her efforts to save herself, deliverance for her people arose from another place, Esther's silence would not save *her* in the end. Then Mordecai confronted her with these now timeless words that resonate in the spirit of every leader, female or otherwise, challenged to fight for justice and to work on behalf of others. He says, "...and who knows but that you have come to the royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Mordecai's next challenge also resonates for us as members and allies of "speaking-up." He lifts up the truth that the intercessor cannot truly tell another's story until she gets in touch with her own and sees their interconnectedness.

Mordecai charged Esther with reviewing her own life story, for though she was a Jew living incognito, her personal story, her very being, was inextricably linked to the story of all the Jews of the Diaspora. By marshaling her courage, freeing her tongue, and telling her story, she would also be telling the very story of God and his people (herself, included). Holocaust Remembrance Day took place this past week, on January 26th, and it's a sad truth that we require this yearly reminder about the cost of silence in the face of evil, and that we cannot be silent again...never again.

My colleague, the Rev. Erika Hewitt addresses the cost of silence, telling us: "Silence is dynamic: it *does* things. When silence becomes a living character in our personal narratives, it's often an accomplice to a power imposed over another." "What does silence gain us?" Hewitt asks. "What does silence cost? These days, most of the women I know are grappling with rage. It stems from the ways we've been violated and from having to question or validate what our souls know to be true. I believe that our rage is also rooted in how complicated it is to break silence: to open all of the secrets in all of our broken hearts."

"But silence does break; truth seeks the light. Our secrets are beginning to breathe fresh air again and noticing they're not alone. That healing is partly fueled by the half-life of rage... but even more, we're unraveling silence because so many of us have determined that our power *with* one another is greater than the power someone once had over us."

In her book, Leading Ladies , Transforming Biblical Images of Women's Leadership, the author, Jeanne Porter, notes that "successful interventions are timely and effective. "To intervene," [Porter reminds us] "means to step into a situation and alter its direction, its course or its dynamics."

Ultimately, Esther's story reminds us of the power of empowerment. The intercessory leader must be able to communicate across the divide in order to empower people – the end result of helping people fight for themselves. Regardless of your gender, ask yourself whether you have you been placed or called to intercede and *un-silence* your voice as part of these burgeoning movements? Some of you have been placed, like Esther, in positions of influence or connection.

You are where you are for a reason; perhaps it is to serve as a leader, as a persistent advocate or activist. Perhaps you are in the position to challenge an oppressive process in your community or create opportunities for change. Perhaps you are raising a child and can impact future generations and how they embrace healthy gender paradigms. I believe we have all been placed to listen to each other's stories and heed the voices shouting "Enough" or quietly uttering "Me, too."

Together, may we risk vulnerability, risk being known, risk pain, risk no being believed, risk leaving the shadows and stepping into the light, risk being brave.

May we swing our graggers, noisily and in solidarity, joining our “brave” together. For, as Tess Gallagher reminds us in her poem, *Refusing Silence*,

“There are messages to send.

Gatherings and songs.

Because we need to insist.

Else what are we for?

What use are we?”

So, may we rise. Shalom, Blessed Be, Blessed We, and Amen.

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