



ACHASHVEIROSH'S BEAUTY PAGEANT: WHAT IS TRUE BEAUTY?

The Gemara, in *Megillah* 12b, tells us that Achashveirosh became very drunk on the 187th day of his party along with many of his officers. Their discussion devolved into an argument about the most beautiful women in the world, with some claiming they were found in Medes while others claiming that they were from Persia. The king himself got into the fray by saying that his wife was from Bavel and was more beautiful than anyone else's. If his officers wanted to see her, he could prove it. They agreed, but added a request that was truly shocking: they did not want her to wear her queenly clothing, which would set her apart from everyone else. Achashveirosh drunkenly agreed, but Vashti



herself refused and embarrassed Achashveirosh publicly, which led to her demise.

Why would the officers have said such a thing to the king? Who would do that and expect to live?

Maharsha (Rav Shlomo Eidels) says this suggestion came from the king himself, not the people. Achashveirosh told them that it was not the clothing and jewelry that made Vashti look beautiful; she had an amazing natural beauty. To prove it, he offered for her to appear without those clothes, and they all agreed. But this answer is hard to understand in the context of our Gemara.

Ben Yehoyada (Rav Yosef Chaim of Baghdad) says this discussion took place away from the king, but he overheard it. Once Achashveirosh suggested a beauty pageant, everyone knew they were in trouble. If he asked them to bring their wives in and he found someone he liked, he

would have her husband killed and take her for himself. They had to stop the conversation before it got out of hand, so they suggested the following: “Your majesty, this will be impossible to judge! Because the queen has access to the best clothes and the best makeup and jewelry, she will appear more beautiful than all our wives combined, but of course that would be impossible.” But lo and behold — Achashveirosh thought that was a great idea — level the playing field and we will judge them all at the same time!

The Vilna Gaon and the sefer *Yosef Lekach* (Rav Eliezer Ashkenazi) both say Achashveirosh wanted to make a parade, embarrassing the queen tremendously by making her walk through the crowd of partygoers at the front gate all the way to the throne room. Perhaps the king was upset at her for something she had done, and this was her punishment.

Was Vashti really a good person when she refused to participate in this beauty pageant? Was she a true *tzanua* (modest person) who would not even consider doing such a thing? Ibn Ezra says that these kinds of parades were common in the lands of Edom even in his time, and in fact, *Torah Shlaimah* (Rav Menachem Kasher) says this was done at all parties at that time. Vashti, however, was from a nation that did not do this, and she considered herself to be above such requests. She might have done such a thing on her own, but not at the request of others, even if the request came from the king.

So, what happened? Why would she not accede to the king’s request? Rambam says in his explanation to the Megillah that really, Vashti was excited and happy to participate in this beauty pageant, but at the moment she got

herself ready to go to the king she saw either a tail sticking out of her forehead (which was probably a huge pimple) or a form of skin disease on her forehead, and she was very upset that she would not prove herself the most beautiful of the land. He says Vashti was the only one who saw this “tail” or “leprosy.” Her friends saw nothing at all.

Malbim points out that there is a story behind this story. Everyone

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thought Achashveirosh’s claim to the throne was through his wife. She was the daughter of Belshazzar, the previous king of Babylonia who had been defeated by Achashveirosh’s father Cyrus I. The consolidation of the Persian, Mede, and Babylonian kingdoms was through his marriage to the princess of Babylonia. People considered Achashveirosh to be a usurper who simply married the right person. Perhaps people even said that aloud at the party behind the king’s back! He wanted to show that he became king by his own power, and that Vashti meant absolutely nothing to him — she was simply part of his harem and nothing more! She was Vashti Hamalka — first Vashti, and

only then the queen because she is married to me, not the other way around! When the opportunity to shame her before the whole kingdom presented itself, he took advantage of it immediately.

Meam Loez says it is possible Achashveirosh had the Jews in mind here. He knew they were sitting by themselves at his party, and he wanted them to sin. He had been trying this whole time to wear down their resistance and make them do things they should not be doing, but because of Mordechai’s influence, he had been unsuccessful. If he could get Vashti and some of the other pretty women to flaunt themselves, perhaps that would cause all the Jews to sin! His mistake was that he did so in an unflattering manner, which was clearly *hashgacha pratis* (Divine providence), so the Jews would continue to stay to themselves.

Of course, such things as beauty pageants and embarrassing people publicly are anathema to the Jewish soul. We hear the details of this story and we should feel disgust toward such a terrible husband and king. Beauty is a gift Hashem gives us to utilize in our service to the Creator in the best way possible, never to be used to “prove” our superiority or to cause others to sin. May we all understand the true beauty Hashem has granted us, so we merit seeing the true beauty of G-d in the World to Come.