



# FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

## Purim: Power, Sex Work and Trafficking in Megillat Esther

### How to Use this Publication

*From the Sources* is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to read the texts and use them in your community to teach and take action. **Use *From the Sources* to:**

- **Learn with others.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises.
- **Enrich your own learning.** This resource aims to inspire thought-provoking and challenging perspectives on the holiday texts.
- **Teach.** Invite others to share in this learning. Use it as the basis for a *dvar Torah* or to motivate action in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.

### Introduction

On Purim we read in the Book of Esther:

#### Esther 2:1-4; 2:8 (Purim Megillah)

Some time afterward, when the anger of King Ahashverosh subsided, he thought of Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. The king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti." The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it.... When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women.

#### אסתר ב:א-ד, ב:ח

אחר הדברים האלה כִּשׁן חַמַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ זָכַר אֶת נִשְׁתֵּי וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשְׂתָה וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁרָתָיו יִבְקָשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נְעָרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מִרָאָה: וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל מְדִינוֹת מְלְכוּתוֹ וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת כָּל נְעָרָה בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מִרָאָה אֶל שׁוֹשֵׁן הַבִּירָה אֶל בֵּית הַנְּשִׂיִם אֶל יַד הַגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שִׁמְר הַנְּשִׂיִם וַנִּתֵּן תְּמָרוּקִיהֶן: וַהֲנַעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ תַּחַת נִשְׁתֵּי וַיִּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן . . . וַיְהִי בַּהֲשָׁמַע דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וַנִּתְּנוּ וּבַהֲקַבֵּץ נְעָרוֹת רַבּוֹת אֶל שׁוֹשֵׁן הַבִּירָה אֶל יַד הַגָּי וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל יַד הַגָּי שִׁמְר הַנְּשִׂיִם:

The story of Purim is often told as a sweet fairy tale of good and evil, with beauty pageants, parties and a parade to give it flair. But the story of Purim includes evidence of the abuse, exploitation and trafficking of women—details often glossed over during the holiday. As we read about the rounding up of women for King Ahashverosh’s review, we hear echoes of contemporary sexual servitude. However, many women who engage in sex work today do not think of themselves as sexual slaves. Women who become involved in sex work regularly cite lack of alternative employment options as motivation for their decision. The story of Esther gives us the opportunity to reflect on the circumstances that propel women into sex work and the tension between agency and sexual exploitation in the Megillah and in our time.

**Melissa Ditmore, “Sex Work, Trafficking: Understanding the Difference”**

The trafficking of women and children into sexual slavery is undeniably a gross abuse of human rights. Like all trafficking, it involves coercion or trickery or both.... By the same token, treating sex work as if it is the same as sex trafficking both ignores the realities of sex work and endangers those engaged in it. Sex workers include men and women and transgendered persons who offer sexual services in exchange for money.... Sex workers engage in this for many reasons, but the key distinction here is that they do it voluntarily. They are not coerced or tricked into staying in the business but have chosen this from among the options available to them... A national anti-trafficking law enacted in 2000 recognizes “severe forms of trafficking” as a modern form of slavery that involves a broad spectrum of workers and industries. In this interpretation, trafficking is clearly distinguished from voluntary sex work and thus avoids the absurdity of equating the fear and suffering of a trafficked person with the typical working conditions of voluntary sex workers. These conditions are often far from ideal, but nevertheless they are far removed from debt bondage or enslavement.

- What distinctions does Ditmore make between trafficking and sex work? Do you agree?
- Given Ditmore’s distinctions, how would you characterize what happens to the “beautiful young virgins” in the Megillah? Does how you characterize Esther’s journey to the palace change the way you read the Purim story?

The following two texts offer different perspectives on the agency of women in the sex industry.

**Arpha Norta, Empower Foundation, Speech at International AIDS Conference, Toronto, 2006**

Do you know that there are 100,000’s of women doing sex work in Thailand? In the world there are millions of us. Every one has parents or children or families. We fund our young sister’s study at university, we pay for our children’s schooling, we support our uncle to travel overseas to work, enable our older brother to join military service, and provide for our parents to go to the hospital if they are sick. This is one level of sex worker leadership... within our families. Usually if a man is looking after his family in this way, we call him “the head of the family,” don’t we? Yet I also do all this... will you call me “head of the family”?

**Interview with Donna Hughes, “The New Abolitionist Movement,” *The National Review*, January 2006**

During the late 1990s, almost all the media stories were about how empowering prostitution was, how much money the women made, how pimps were disappearing, how women were independent businesswomen, and how women in India were forming unions and collectives to fight for their rights as sex workers. The utopian vision that prostitution could be turned into a form of legitimate work for women by empowering victims and organizing unions ruled in all U.N. meetings, feminist conferences, and a number of government offices.... Slowly that is changing. Media stories are increasingly describing prostitution rings in which women and girls are beaten, raped, and enslaved. That may sound more depressing, but to me it is much better because it’s the truth.

- What position does the Empower Foundation take on sex work? How can sex work be linked to empowerment?
- Why does Hughes think that the truth is quite different from what she calls the “utopian vision”?
- How does this debate about sex work inform our understanding of the Esther story?

<p><b>Esther 4:13-14, 16</b></p> <p>Mordechai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”</p> <p>[Esther said to Mordechai:] “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish.”</p>	<p><b>אסתר ד:יג-יד, טז</b></p> <p>וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֳּכַי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל אֶסְתֵּר אֵל תְּדַמֶּי בְּנַפְשֶׁךָ לְהִמָּלֵט בַּיַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל הַיְהוּדִים: כִּי אִם הִחַרְשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֶּה אֶת רְנוּחַ נְהַצְלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית אָבִיךָ תִּאבְדוּ וְמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לָעֵת כֵּן אֶת הַגְּעֵת לְמַלְכוּת: לֶךְ כְּנוּס אֶת כָּל הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְעַל תּוֹ אֲכַלּוּ וְנָאֵל תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם גַּם אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא כִדָּת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אָבְדַתִּי אָבְדַתִּי</p>
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<p><b>Rashi on 4:16 (commenting on the words: “contrary to the law”)</b></p> <p>And the Midrash Aggadah [explains] “contrary to the law” to mean that until now, I was coerced [to cohabit with him], but now [I will do so] willingly.</p>	<p><b>רש"י אסתר ד:טז אשר לא כדת</b></p> <p>ומ"א אשר לא כדת שעד עתה באונס ועכשיו ברצון:</p>
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- Do you agree with Rashi’s assertion that Esther is initially coerced and then willingly cohabits with the king?
- Reflecting on Esther 4:13-14, does Mordechai’s speech to Esther before she acts “willingly” change the way you think about her decision to approach the king? Why is it important for Rashi that Esther acts willingly? Do your views on whether sex work can be voluntary inform your answer? How?



The tensions around sex work and women’s empowerment play out in U.S. policies on development and foreign assistance. Many policymakers who believe that all sex work is inherently coercive promote abolishing sex work to free the women who engage in it. In May 2003, the U.S. Congress passed the United States Leadership against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria Act (otherwise known as the U.S. Global AIDS Act), which launched the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The U.S. Global AIDS Act includes a stipulation, known as the “anti-prostitution pledge,” that bars the use of federal funds to “promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution.” As a result, organizations receiving U.S. funding are forced to adopt organization-wide positions opposing sex work. This legislation is still in effect under the Obama administration.

<p><b>President George W. Bush, National Security Presidential Directive, February 2002</b></p> <p>The United States opposes prostitution and any related activities, including pimping, pandering, and/or maintaining brothels as contributing to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons. These activities are inherently harmful and dehumanizing. The United States Government’s position is that these activities should not be regulated as a legitimate form of work for any human being.</p>
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Others who embrace a more complex perspective of a women’s agency amidst constrained choices are focused on protecting the rights of sex workers, to make the conditions of sex work safe and its wages sustainable.

<p><b>Samantha Power, “The Enforcer,” <i>The New Yorker</i>, January 2009</b></p> <p>In the view of professional sex workers and some human-rights organizations, it is not prostitution itself that harms women but, rather, the refusal to treat prostitutes as legitimate workers, leading police to repress, extort, and assault them, and making it difficult for them to obtain health services. Sex workers in countries such as India and Thailand had begun to organize, gaining access to condoms, health services, literacy and vocational programs, and loans. In some cases, sex-worker unions had barred police from brothels.</p>
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As a result of the “anti-prostitution pledge,” organizations that receive U.S. funding are unable to support the efforts of sex workers to secure their rights.

- Why do you think that the “prostitution pledge” characterized sex work as “inherently harmful and dehumanizing”? Do you agree with this perspective?
- How does this perspective link trafficking and sex work? How do you think this position might affect women in the Global South?
- How does the Samantha Power text differ from the “prostitution pledge”? How do you think this position might affect women in the Global South?
- What insights can the Esther story give us into this debate?

## Conclusion

Women continue to be trafficked and forced into sex work against their will. Regardless of whether they have chosen their occupation, sex workers are often especially vulnerable to violence, victimization by police and stigmatization by society. Criminalization of sex work can often drive sex workers underground and make them more vulnerable to abuse. Lack of access to health services puts them at risk for diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and lack of negotiating power often means they cannot take measures to protect themselves from health threats (e.g. demanding that their partners use condoms).

The Book of Esther conveys a complicated story of choice and agency, oppression, power and resistance. Globally, women continue to act in constrained environments, limited by economic injustice, social norms and lack of access to adequate education and health care. In these situations, some women engage in sex work to gain power and earn livelihoods.

The story of Esther points to the complexity of sex as a means of empowerment. On the one hand, the story ends with Esther recording her experiences to convey to future generations:

וּמֵאֵמֶר אֶסְתֵּר קִיַּם דְּבָרֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְתָּב בְּסֵפֶר:

“And Esther’s ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll” (Esther 9:32).

In a similar vein, the Empower Foundation characterizes its work as “try[ing] and find the space in society to stand up and be heard.”

On the other hand, after Esther’s final party, she is nearly silent for the remainder of the book that bears her name, as Mordechai’s voice becomes more influential in the palace. On Purim, we encourage you to work toward a world in which marginalized women face less constrained choices and have the opportunity to stand up for their rights as Esther did.

**To access a supplementary resource which provides in-depth analysis on the theme of sex work, agency and women’s rights, please visit [www.ajws.org/fts](http://www.ajws.org/fts).**

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