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Too Many Years Lost in History:
Biblical Characters Break Their Silence on Their Sexual Assault

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Los Angeles, California

March 13, 2025
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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to all those who have helped me bring this capstone project to life.

To my capstone adviser, Dr. Kristine H. Garroway – for your wisdom and guidance throughout this project. Thank you for pushing me to think critically and for welcoming this creative approach to our texts.

To my partner, Matthew – for your unwavering support and love throughout the dreaming, writing, and editing process. Thank you for keeping me fed and caffeinated, and encouraging me to take breaks when I needed them.

To my therapist – for your listening ear and compassion as I processed these characters and their stories. Thank you for holding space for me week after week as I navigated the challenging realities of these texts and this project.

To my village – thank you for your friendship, kindness, and countless pep talks that have motivated me through this work.

Introduction

> *"Adultery, rape, the people going astray: these violations are not just violations of commandments; they are violations of various identity-constructs of "Israel" and they become tests of definition in a text that is anxious about who this story is about, and whose story it is anyway" (Schwartz, 1999, 347).*

Throughout Jewish texts, sexual intercourse and misconduct have been identified implicitly and explicitly. With and without consent, the stories of both female and male characters in the text and their sexual encounters have often been told around them, with little to no dialogue of their voice included.

"It should be no surprise that the violence of rape emerges in the biblical narrative, alongside every other form of evil. But how the ancient world regarded rape is very different from our present day understanding" (Tucker, 2014, 71). Taking into account the different points in history during which these narratives were written down, there is an extent to which modern readers must interpret the stories through the lens in which they were written. Yet the tools of modern exegesis provide us with the opportunity to tell the stories from the standpoint of voices that are quieted and silenced in the original text.

The figures given voice here are Dinah, Joseph, Tamar, Abishag, Vashti, and Esther. These six characters, spanning the TaNaKh from Genesis, to 2 Samuel, to 1 Kings, to the book of Esther, have commonalities and differences among them. Dinah and Tamar's stories use the same language, (*vayish'kav otah vaye'neha*) and are avenged by brothers; Abishag and Vashti experienced different forms of exploitation in the presence of more people than just their aggressor; and Joseph and Esther's traumas are glossed over and their stories are often glorified in Jewish spaces today.

Inspired by the hit musical, "Six," about the six wives of King Henry VIII of England, the following presents a series of monologues in which individual narratives are rewritten from

each character's own perspective. "The importance of recognizing the biblical narrator as a figure telling a slanted story has been undervalued" (Bach, 1999, 351); by replacing the biblical narrator with first-person accounting, agency can be restored to these characters who were wronged as they share how the events unfolded from the character's point of view.

Formatting Note

Each character begins with a number of notable verses in Hebrew and English. Translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. After the verses, there is a textual analysis based on academic research. Each character then has a section titled "In Her/His Words," in which they are depicted as telling the story from their first-person perspective. This section is in the form of creative writing inspired by the textual analysis that precedes it.

The majority of this document is written in Times New Roman font. The sections that are written from the perspectives of individual characters are formatted in different fonts to symbolize the different voices that are speaking.

Dinah

Genesis 34:1-3

וַתֵּצֵא דִינָהׇ בַּת־לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לִרְאוֹת בִּבְנוֹת הָאָרֶץ: וַיַּרְא אֹתָהּ שְׁכֶם בֶּן־חֲמוֹר הַחִוִּי נְשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ
וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ וַיְעַנֶּהָ: וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַּת־יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַבׇ אֶת־הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל־לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ:

[1] Dinah, the daughter that Leah bore to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land.
[2] Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, the head of the land, saw her [Dinah] and took her and humiliated her. [3] His being clung to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he fell in love with the young woman; he spoke to the young woman's heart.

The story of Dinah is one that has been debated thoroughly by scholars, interpreters, and religious leaders for generations. The key to the disagreements surrounding this young woman and her fate lie in the last word of Genesis 34:2: *vay'aneha* from the root *'innâ.* According to BDB, when used in this instance, the word is a verb meaning to humble a woman by cohabiting with her. This root when used as a verb has numerous translations for what it could be, ranging from "answer, respond", to "be afflicted". In her exploration of this word, Alison L. Joseph argues that we can read *'innâ* as a social shaming, with "the potential to lower Dinah's value as a non-virgin" (Joseph, 2026, 668). The varying meanings give lens to the questions around Dinah's fate at the hands of Shechem. The root, *'innâ*, is used multiple times throughout the Hebrew Bible in places where there is no evidence or circumstance to indicate any sexual transgression. Most notably, it is used when God declares to Abraham that his children will be *'innâ,* or afflicted, in a foreign land for 400 years (Cifers, 2022, 57).

The language used in verse 3, *vaye'ehav* and *vay'daber 'al lev*, suggest a more positive outlook on the overall situation. The expression that ends verse 3, *vay'daber 'al lev hana'ar,* can be translated as "he spoke to the young woman's heart," suggesting an affectionate approach by Shechem towards Dinah. According to Fewell & Gunn, "in our present context…the expression, "he spoke to [her] heart," indicates both Shechem's action and Dinah's positive response. This

positive response also depicts a change in Dinah's role. In verse 2, the woman is an object who is seen, taken, and laid with, whereas in verse 3, "the woman becomes for Shechem a real person: his soul clings to *Dinah*, he loves *the young woman*, and he speaks to *the young woman*'s heart" (Fewell & Gunn, 1991, 196-197).

While the translation of the verb, *'innâ*, has been debated by many modern midrashic writers, what is clear is that Dinah is noticeably silent throughout the story. She performs physical actions; "And Dinah went out…to see…" (Genesis 34:1), but does not speak or hear. Despite the change in her position from being viewed as an object in verse 2 to a person in verse 3, Dinah's silence is unexpected when compared to other women in the Book of Genesis and in the house of her father, Jacob. Despite "operating within a culture in which men were legally dominant, certain women in Genesis…are presented as speakers and agents, complex characters with their unique motives and desires" (Cifers, 2022, 59). So why doesn't Dinah call out for help? One commentator suggests that she had no voice "because the members of her household did not listen to her and didn't engage her in conversation" and therefore behaved as though she was a mute (Lubitch, 2022).

Unlike her brothers who had each other as companions, Dinah was the lone daughter in the house of Jacob and likely became used to being on her own without any peers her own age. This isolation left her vulnerable to the unknowns of society that surrounded her.The isolation Dinah experienced as a child in Jacob's house likely contributed to her wandering out to explore the land. Research in the modern Western context shows that children who grow up isolated from their peers may have delayed development of interpersonal skills, which, when considering Dinah's circumstances, could result in her inability to advocate for herself and her needs (Kumar et al., 2023).

Perhaps, Shechem's presence was welcome because Dinah was so used to being ignored amidst the hustle and bustle of the household with her twelve brothers. Or maybe she was so shocked by a man approaching her, she was too stunned to do anything. Maybe Dinah, knowing that her entire life up until then had been alone, knew that there was no one to come to her aid. Dinah did not cry out when approached by Shechem; maybe because she had no voice, but maybe because she felt that no one would hear her cries.

Dinah: In Her Own Words

I have to hand it to Anita Diamant; she really put my story on the map. And she said it well - "...I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim" (Diamant, 2005, 1).

I was sandwiched in between everything else happening around me. The only daughter, my father didn't pay much attention to me and my mother and aunts saw me as simply another set of hands. I didn't get to hang out with many kids my own age and no one really cared where I was or what I thought. In the Biblical text, my name is mentioned a quick eight times and I'm never given the chance to speak. It's often assumed that I didn't have a voice because I was *just a girl*. They called me נער and ילדה, talking around me and for me, but never directly to me. No one ever cared to ask how I felt about the entire situation.

You want to know if I loved Shechem? What does it matter!? My brothers sure didn't stop to care before they deceived Shechem, his father, and their entire city. Their only care was ravaging the city beyond repair; they just used me to justify their actions.

And what's worse? In the same verse that tells of Simeon and Levi entering the town, the text has the nerve to remind everyone that they were Jacob's sons, but that they were "brothers of Dinah" (Genesis 34:25)! People tend to think that my brothers were well intentioned with their so-called "revenge," but I was already hurt and humiliated. Don't loop me in with their bad choices – I sure didn't ask for them to go and make it ten times worse!! To those of you who might say "what was she wearing? Was she asking for it?" I say, SHUT UP! You don't know what you're talking about.

We had just arrived at our new home, a little plot of land right outside the city of Shechem. I snuck out to explore the area, maybe even to find other girls my own age! I had never really had any friends my own age besides some of my brothers, but they were treated differently and I was always excluded. So I went out to try and make some friends, and met a man named Shechem. I didn't really know how to talk to someone outside my family, much less a MAN from outside my family!. He was nice to me! At least, I think he was. In all

honesty, I'm not sure what happened. Everyone around me assumed he did things to me that I didn't want, but I don't know what I'm supposed to think. As soon as everyone started freaking out, it was like I was coached into telling a story I didn't fully understand. I got confused with what my brothers were saying–they didn't ask for my side of the story, and at this point it's been so long that I don't really remember the order of events.

What I do know is that my voice was erased from the Biblical text and my story slipped in between the stories of my father's. I am a victim–a victim of my brothers' actions, a victim of blame for the murder of a whole city, and a victim of my consent being taken away from me. Whether that is consent for sexual activity or consent for telling my story, I don't know that we'll ever really know.

Joseph

Genesis 39:7

וַיְהִ֗י אַחַר֙ הַדְּבָרִ֣ים הָאֵ֔לֶּה וַתִּשָּׂ֥א אֵֽשֶׁת־אֲדֹנָ֖יו אֶת־עֵינֶ֑יהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵ֔ף וַתֹּ֖אמֶר שִׁכְבָ֥ה עִמִּֽי׃

[7] It was after these things that the wife of his master lifted her eyes toward Joseph and said, “lie with me”.

Genesis 39:10

וַיְהִ֤י כְדַבְּרָהּ֙ אֶל־יוֹסֵ֣ף י֔וֹם ו יֽוֹם וְלֹא־שָׁמַ֥ע אֵלֶ֖יהָ לִשְׁכַּ֣ב אֶצְלָ֑הּ לִֽהְיוֹת֙ עִמָּֽהּ׃

[10] She spoke to Joseph day after day, but he did not obey her request to lie with her, to be with her.

Known earlier in Genesis 37 for his special coat, Joseph’s clothing again becomes a focal point of Genesis 39 as he is confronted by Potiphar’s wife and her sexual advances towards him. While the results of the encounter end up with Joseph in jail, this serves as an important turn in the story as it is while in jail that Joseph gains his credibility as a dream interpreter (Genesis 40) and is eventually elevated to his role alongside Pharaoh (Genesis 41).

Nelly Furman writes, “In this episode [chapter 39], Joseph’s piece of attire is the mediating object between divergent desires. Here, one garment suggests a male and a female text, two gender-marked readings” (Furman, 1999, 120). In the story of Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife, Joseph’s singular article of clothing becomes the crux of a far-too-common “he said, she said” narrative. Furman continues by arguing “If we were to listen solely to the words of Potiphar’s wife, as the servants and her husband do, without the leading comments of the narrator, the abandoned garment would stand for his desire and her refusal. The narrator…lets us know that Joseph had on previous occasions rejected her advances [Genesis 39:10] and that her story is fictional, a total fabrication” (Furman, 1999, 120). The lack of witnesses in the house on that fateful day has continuously raised questions among rabbis for generations. Adin Steinsaltz considers that the “certain day” refers to a festive occasion, and therefore everyone in the household had gone out to partake in the celebrations while Joseph, as a faithful servant,

remained in the house (Steinsaltz, 2019, Genesis 39:11). With less clarity, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* contemplates, "Why does Joseph go inside when no one else is around, when he knows the mistress should be inside and waiting to pursue him, as she does "day after day"? What is the unspecified "work"? And where are all the household members? The text is ambiguous, as is Joseph's behavior" (Eskenazi, 2008, 222).

The clothing of Joseph is a strong motif throughout the Joseph narrative, each time signaling a change in his status. His first item, *k'tonet pasiym*, is a floor length tunic, given to Joseph by his father Jacob as a symbol of his great love for his son (Genesis 37:3), which results in his selling off into slavery by his brothers. In his encounter with Potiphar's wife, the clothing is identified as *bigado,* and he will be sent to prison for his accused actions. Later, when preparing to meet Pharaoh, Joseph changes from his prison clothing into *sim'lah*, a covering garment (Genesis 41:14) (Brown et al., 1996, 971) as he prepares to ascend to power in Egypt.

At first glance, the item that Joseph abandons in Potiphar's wife's hands, *bigado*, is a more generic term for garment or covering. However, when used in its verbal form, *b.g.d.* is translated as treachery or deceit (Brown et al., 1996, 93). The language used here transforms it from being a generic garment to being used as a sign of his accused treachery. He releases it into Potiphar's wife's hands, leaving behind any honor he had previously held in his master's household. From Potiphar's perspective, the abandoned garment gives validity to his wife's story; the Biblical narrator's use of language here affirms this. This second tunic in Joseph's narrative holds the potential for a threefold meaning: to Joseph, the clothing represents his innocence; to Potiphar's wife, as a reminder of her rejection; and for Potiphar, evidence of Joseph's guilt (Furman, 1999, 125).

While Potiphar's household sees Joseph as guilty, Jewish texts understand Joseph in different ways including wise, strong, and queer. Some rabbinic literature perceives him as an exemplar: hardworking, sober, God-fearing, and able to resist forbidden fruit (Goldman, 1995, 37), such as Potiphar's wife. Joseph's wisdom can be understood as strength of character which comes from his ability to resist and overcome the temptation placed in front of him.

The differing understandings of the situation between Joseph and Potiphar's wife is seemingly less complicated than other biblical narratives discussed here. However, all of our biblical stories are told from one perspective. Reflecting on her own biases, Furman argues, "the position of the biblical narrator is no more "neutral" than that of the feminist reader" (Furman, 1999, 125). This can be expounded on when we consider the biblical narrator's apparent advocacy for Joseph's innocence. Genesis 39:10 reiterates the imbalance between Joseph and Potiphar's wife; "She spoke to Joseph day after day, and he did not obey her request to lie with her, to be with her." The biblical writer is relating to the well known trope of the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers. However, different from the wife in the Egyptian story, Potiphar's wife presents as melodramatic. She is eager to tell her story to anyone who will listen and is determined for Joseph to be punished due to what she views as his betrayal of her. Despite her position as the wife of his master, or perhaps because of it, Joseph maintained his honor and fought the temptation by not succumbing to her wiles.

It is even more notable when we consider Joseph's age and lack of experience with his sexuality. "[A rabbi] was once asked by a young matron: Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, with the hot blood of youth, could act thus?" [i.e. reject the offer of the wife of his master]. Hard put to it, the Rabbi shrewdly answered that since the Torah had not scrupled to report the whole truth about sinners like Reuben and Judah, why should it have hesitated to tell it

about Joseph–if, in fact, he had succumbed" (Yohannan, 1968, 16). This further supports the argument that Joseph was indeed innocent and Potiphar's wife used her power over him when she was rejected and her own ego was bruised.

Joseph's unfortunate encounter with Potiphar's wife isolated him further than he already was since arriving in the foreign land of Egypt. His assault resulted in his imprisonment, which subsequently led to his eventual rise to power alongside Pharaoh and the continued journey of his family and people throughout the Torah.

Joseph: In His Own Words

Why couldn't everyone just leave my clothing alone?! It was one thing when it was my brothers who were tormenting me, but I honestly thought I had caught a break when I made it to Egypt. It wasn't an ideal scenario, but at least I had gotten away from the wrath of my brothers and their never-ending jealousy.

Potiphar was kind of like a father to me. Sure, he was my owner. But without him, I would have been left to die in the pit my brothers put me in! I had a good enough life in Potiphar's house–I wouldn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. When his wife first approached me, I responded to her with respect as is due to the lady of the house while staying firm in my refusal to approach her. For a few days, I was sure to always have other people around when I encountered her so that she couldn't try anything. But then I got lazy, sloppy, whatever you want to call it; I forgot to double

check that there were other workers around. She caught me in a hallway and cornered me, demanding I lay with her.

For just a fleeting moment, I wondered what would happen if I succumbed to her demands. I hadn't been with anyone before, and she was clearly eager to be with me. But at that same, brief moment, I imagined everything that I had garnered for myself since being sent away from my homeland disappearing. I knew that giving into Potiphar's wife would likely mean being kicked out of his house…or maybe even worse.

The moment of consideration passed quickly and I shook myself back to reality–I had to get out. I was bigger than she was, yet she still had me trapped against a wall. As I shuffled my way out of her hold, she grabbed my tunic! I tried to get it out of her grip, but didn't want to miss my chance to escape. Once I made it out of the house, I heard her screaming and saw her servants running towards her. Knowing she was going to blame me, I prayed that Potiphar would see through his wife's ruse. My prayers weren't answered, and I was sent to prison. I was back how I started in Egypt: no job, no family, and no clothes.

Much like my sister, Dinah, I was all alone, with no one around to witness what took place. My encounter with Potiphar's wife was sandwiched in the middle of a Torah portion; with the rest of the portion being retold year after year, while my trauma gets pushed off to the side. Potiphar's wife, as the woman of the house and therefore, my slave owner, had every right

to seduce any of the servants and slaves in her household–we were the ones who didn't have the right to refuse. Most people looking at the story today assume that because I'm the man, I couldn't have been assaulted. But they couldn't be more wrong.

Tamar

II Samuel 13:11-12

וַתַּגֵּשׁ אֵלָיו לֶאֱכֹל וַיַּחֲזֶק־בָּהּ וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ בֹּואִי שִׁכְבִי עִמִּי אֲחוֹתִי: וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַל־אָחִי אַל־תְּעַנֵּנִי כִּי לֹא־יֵעָשֶׂה כֵן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אַל־תַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַנְּבָלָה הַזֹּאת:

[11] But when she drew near to him to eat, he caught hold of her and said to her, “Come lie with me, my sister.” [12] But she said to him, “Don’t, my brother. Don’t force me. Such things are not done in Israel! Don’t do this vile thing!”

II Samuel 13:14

וְלֹא אָבָה לִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹלָהּ וַיֶּחֱזַק מִמֶּנָּה וַיְעַנֶּהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ:

[14] But he was not willing to listen to her; he overpowered her and humiliated her.

II Samuel 13:19

וַתִּקַּח תָּמָר אֵפֶר עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ וּכְתֹנֶת הַפַּסִּים אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ קָרָעָה וַתָּשֶׂם יָדָהּ עַל־רֹאשָׁהּ וַתֵּלֶךְ הָלוֹךְ וְזָעָקָה:

[19] Tamar put dust on her head and rent the floor length tunic she was wearing; she put her hands on her head, and walked about, screaming loudly as she went.

There is no grey area: the term “rape” is what happened to Tamar at the hands of her half-brother, Amnon (*Office of Public Affairs | An Updated Definition of Rape*, 2012). In II Samuel 13:12, she explicitly says “no” and the narrator describes Amnon’s actions using the same language as in the story of Dinah, “וַיְעַנֶּהָ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ”, (II Samuel 13:14), Amnon humiliated her.

Hidden in II Samuel 13, the story of Tamar is another example of sex as a significant and recurring theme throughout the David narrative. Beginning with David taking both Abigail and Bathsheba as his wives through death and the conquering of another nation, it should come as no surprise that those in his household, including David’s son Amnon, see his behavior as normal and something to aspire towards. Thus, Amnon learns from his father how to see what he wants and to take it, with no regard for the consequences that will impact others. Amnon, having become infatuated with his half-sister, Tamar, is encouraged by his kinsman Jonadab, another

man in the House of David, to entrap Tamar in his room. Amnon, feigning illness, then asks his father, King David, to send Tamar to nurse him. These three men, all of the House of David, are all implicated in Amnon's rape of his half-sister.

The House of David, known for its military might, is in a moment of respite following the description of the Israelite victory over the Ammonites. Immediately after David and his troops return to Jerusalem (II Samuel 12), the men are likely enjoying their spoils of war. The rape of Tamar takes place with this scene of gluttony and zealousness setting the backdrop for men seeing what they want and taking it. An ongoing theme in the David narrative is that of the political and military history with sexual scenes interspersed; specifically the stories of Tamar and Bathsheba. The interwoven nature of these seemingly unrelated themes suggests that Israel's struggle for national definition is indeed tied in with their sexual conquests, both through incest and external partners. Parallel to one another, "Israel's war with the sons of Ammon is a war of definition, the sexual violations are tests of definition, for in both, Israel's borders–who constitutes Israel and who does not–are at stake." Further, "there is no question that owning sexual rights to a woman (or stealing them…) confers power in patriarchy" (Schwartz, 1999, 343). By pairing the stories of military strength and sexual immorality, the text gives legitimacy to the sexual impropriety.

As Tamar begs her half-brother not to assault her, she says "אַל־תַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַנְּבָלָה הַזֹּאת", meaning "do not do such a vile thing!" The term used here is *nābāl,* from the root n-v-l, when used as a noun means senseless or disgraceful folly, especially of sins of unchastity (Brown et al., 1996, 615). As a verb, it is found in the texts of both Tamar and Dinah, as well as the sexual violations found in Judges 19 and Jeremiah 23 (Schwartz, 1999, 345). Elsewhere, including Deuteronomy 28:26 and Isaiah 13:45, *nābāl* is translated as corpse or carcass (Brown et al.,

1996, 615), suggesting a strong connection between someone who has experienced an act of *nābāl* or is identified as *nābāl* who may also be perceived as a representative of death, or an uncleanness resulting in removal from society. Tamar's plea to Amnon might be best translated as her fearing for such an immoral act that could kill her socially or leave her as a metaphorical carcass to be devoured.

The story of Tamar is often excluded from common Jewish teachings. One reason for this can be found in Mishnah Megillah 4, which states, "The incident of Tamar (Genesis 38) is read and translated…the incident of David and Amnon (II Samuel 13) is neither read nor translated." While the original development of the Haftarah cycle is an ongoing discussion among scholars, it is clear that the story of Tamar is excluded from the Haftarot read on a regular basis. Megillah 29b, in a discussion of the schedule of the Torah readings, suggests that a Haftarah should "resemble" the Torah reading of the day. This is the case for many Torah/Haftarah pairings including Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) with Song of Deborah (Judges 5). While there are possible pairings with Tamar's story, such as Genesis 34 and the story of Dinah, the Haftarah readings from the book of II Samuel all speak to David's military strength and his leadership of Israel. It would seem that despite the logical pairings for the story of Tamar, her narrative has been written out of public reading and acknowledgment from the beginning.

Tamar: In Her Own Words

Growing up in the house of David, it wasn't uncommon for me to see the idiocy of men around me. I was mostly able to avoid it by keeping my head down and spending most of my time with the women of the house. When my half-brother, Amnon, requested that I care for him in his time of sickness, I was keen to oblige as the

request came to me through our father, the king. I was known for the delicious cakes I had learned to make and was happy to share them with my ailing brother. When I arrived at his chambers, I was surprised to see that he didn't necessarily look sick…more like he was in distress. Regardless, I did as I was asked and prepared the cakes for him. Once they were ready, things took a turn.

He sent everyone out of his chambers, leaving us alone for the first time ever. He requested that I feed him–it felt like an odd request since he didn't seem that sick, but I complied anyway. When I approached him with the cakes, he immediately grabbed me; the cakes dropped to the floor as he demanded that I lay with him. His eyes had grown dark with desire and need in a way I had never seen before. I cried out, begging him not to do such a terrible thing, but he wouldn't listen. He ignored my cries of fear and shame; refusing to consider the implications his disgraceful actions would have for each of us if he went through with his vile actions. I sobbed and screamed as his strength of body and determination overpowered me.

When he finished and saw how disgusted I was, something changed in his eyes; he immediately kicked me out and refused to take responsibility for his actions. As much as I didn't want to stay, I knew that it would be even worse to leave and be seen as a tainted member of society, unable to be married. Again, Amnon refused to hear a word of it. He called in an attendant to get rid of me and I ran out, wailing and tearing my dress, in an attempt to force all those in David's house to see my shame.

No one who heard my cries in David's house seemed surprised by what

happened. My own brother, Absalom, knew what had happened without me telling him and knew that it was Amnon who had defiled me. His behavior was perfectly aligned with that of our father, David, and most of the men within his household. My brother took me in and protected me when I had nowhere else to go, for the rest of David's house was ridden with people who seemingly approved of Amnon's actions, giving power to the patriarchy that ruled the royal household.

Amnon was *nabal*, a word with many meanings that seem to perfectly describe him. His actions were vile and he was foolish to think he could get away with violating me: two years later, Absalom avenged my assault by killing our half-brother.

But I too became *nabal*, an outcast. I was secluded in the safety of Absalom's house: forlorn and alone, unable to seek prospects for a husband or family of my own. My seclusion persists today–my story lives in the Biblical text, but only if one goes searching for it. The chapter depicting my shame is not included in any of the cyclical readings of the text. Not that I *want* it to be rehashed time and time again, but I would appreciate not being completely ignored and seemingly written out of history.

Abishag

1 Kings 1:1-4

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַיְכַסֻּהוּ בַּבְּגָדִים וְלֹא יִחַם לוֹ׃

King David was old, advanced in his days, and they covered him with clothing; he did not feel warm.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ עֲבָדָיו יְבַקְשׁוּ לַאדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ נַעֲרָה בְתוּלָה וְעָמְדָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וִהְיִי־לוֹ סֹכֶנֶת וְשָׁכְבָה בְחֵיקֶךָ וְחַם לַאדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ׃

His servants said to him, "Let a young, adolescent girl be sought for our lord, the king, and she will stand before the king and be of service to him; and she will lie in your bosom and warm our lord, the king."

וַיְבַקְשׁוּ נַעֲרָה יָפָה בְּכָל גְּבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּמְצְאוּ אֶת־אֲבִישַׁג הַשּׁוּנַמִּית וַיָּבֹאוּ אֹתָהּ לַמֶּלֶךְ׃

So they sought a beautiful young girl from all the territory of Israel and they found Abishag the Shunammite and brought her to the king.

וְהַנַּעֲרָה יָפָה עַד־מְאֹד וַתְּהִי לַמֶּלֶךְ סֹכֶנֶת וַתְּשָׁרְתֵהוּ וְהַמֶּלֶךְ לֹא יְדָעָהּ׃

The girl was exceedingly beautiful and she became the king's attendant and she served the king, but the king did not know her.

Hidden in the first verses of 1 Kings, Abishag the Shunammite plays a peculiar role in the David narrative. Towards the end of his life, King David is depicted as an old man who is unable to find warmth despite the layers of blankets and clothing that covered him. His servants, seeking a way to please and comfort their king, suggested that a young adolescent girl be brought to him to warm him and lay in his bosom. Brought in from the village of Shunam, near the Jezreel Valley, Abishag is described in the text as "exceedingly beautiful" and is brought to the king's side where she "served the king, and the king did not know her [intimately]" (1 Kings 1:4). The text does not tell the reader anything about her time with King David beyond this; when Bathsheba approaches the king a few verses later, Abishag is notably present for their interaction (1 Kings 1:15). The text appears to then cast her aside until after the death of King David at the beginning of the next chapter. After Solomon is anointed as king, Adonaijah son of Haggith seeks to take Abishag as his wife. Solomon reacts so strongly to this request that Adonaijah is

killed and that is the last mention of Abishag the Shunammite (1 Kings 2:17-25). Solomon's adverse reaction here indicates that by allowing Adonaijah to marry Abishag, Adonaijah may have more legitimacy to the kingship. This suggests that Abishag, from her role as attendant to King David, may represent a significance and proximity to the kingship that Solomon does not want Adonaijah to have access to.

Both Abishag's stint as David's warm body and her not-so-almost marriage to Adonaijah depict a young girl who is spoken of and about, but never speaks or is spoken to. She is objectified in the most literal use of the term as she "comes to function as a pre-electricity electric blanket to warm the aging David" (Hawkins & Stahlberg, 2009, 122) and later is used as a pawn in an attempt to seek political power. "Her scriptural life is transitory indeed: she is brought in for one man, is nearly reassigned to another, and is then textually abandoned. What are we supposed to make of her?" (Hawkins & Stahlberg, 2009, 128). She is a young girl who has no agency: she has been pulled from her home to attend to the bedside of a dying king, and then gets swept aside when the second man to take interest in her is killed. "As usual, Abishag's feelings are not an issue. We do not know what becomes of her after this episode. We hear of her no more" (Bellis, 2007, 140).

The lack of information found in the text surrounding Abishag leaves commentators and interpreters to fill in the gaps and write her story around her. The earliest filling-in of her story is found in Tractate Sanhedrin, in which the Sages of the Talmud give Abishag a deeper character arc. Sanhedrin 22a tells a narrative in which Abishag seeks to marry David, which, if successful, would eventually result in her becoming a widow and having the ability to remarry after his death–- rather than the Biblical text in which her role is undefined and her eligibility to be married after his death is unclear. The Talmud continues with David rejecting her request for

marriage based on the argument that he has reached the maximum number of wives and cannot marry again (Sanhedrin 22a). However, interpreters speculate that this imagined rejection may not have been solely based on his number of wives, but also due to his physical inability to consummate a marriage with Abishag in his later years. On the contrary, the Talmudic rabbis imagine a scenario in which Bathsheba continued to maintain a power over him; he was enamoured with her beauty and was still able to have intercourse with her despite his old age (Sanhedrin 22a).

It is notable that the only attributes commentators had to elaborate on was the knowledge that Abishag were in regard to her physical appearance as "exceedingly beautiful." She is characterized simply by her youthful adolescence and subsequent marriageable age as well as her place of origin; otherwise she is an object moved around. "Unlike Lot's wife and the Levite's Concubine, whose transformation from human to object is concurrent with death, Abishag is at once both a person (a living human being) and an object (a mantle or blanket)" (Hawkins & Stahlberg, 2009, 122). Through her seesawing as human and object, she occupies a unique space as "unknowable" (Hawkins & Stahlberg, 2009, 140), to both readers lacking information about her and to David himself. The text is explicit that David, with his reputation for knowing everyone sexually, did not know Abishag.The final phrase of verse 4 can be translated "rending the imperfect verb *yeda'ah* sexually and modally: 'but the king could not have sex with her'" (Parker, 2020, 547). The unknowns about her, both literally and metaphorically, create a blank slate for Abishag's story; she becomes whatever interpreters want her to be (Hawkins & Stahlberg, 2009, 123).

Abishag: In Her Own Words

"Avishag? Don't have that name, sorry." "Abishag? Don't have that one either." This isn't the interaction when I try to find some tourist souvenir with my name on it. This is the story of my life pretty much whenever anyone goes looking for my name and story.

People don't even know I exist. I don't have the name recognition that people like Dinah, Joseph, and Esther do, but I was literally brought into King David's palace as a "young adolescent girl" to keep an old, dying king warm. Everyone seems to say that it's fine because the text says that he wasn't intimate with me, but that doesn't mean everything–or anything-was okay.

My existence in the biblical text hinges on the fact that I was a young, pretty girl. No other details about me seemed to matter when King David's men found me and brought me to his bedside. When they took me from Shunam, it wasn't clear if I would be getting married or sold off to the highest bidder. I was young, but old enough to understand that I wouldn't be coming home ever again. Once in his palace, I waited on him and served as a warm body for him. I knew no one in the house of David and was completely vulnerable. I was quite literally meant to provide body heat to comfort him in his old age, regardless of my own physical comfort with the situation. The worst day of being with King David was when Bathsheba came to see him. She came in with such determination and strength that I didn't even have time to slip out of the chambers before she began to speak. I found myself stuck in a conversation I had no part of without any exit route; I backed myself into a corner to stay out of the way. I was amazed at Bathsheba's confidence and the prowess she had

at speaking with the king.

I wondered if I would ever be like her, but you'll never know. Following my stint as a human space heater, I'm almost completely written out of narrative. There's a brief moment where it seems I might be able to get my happily ever after with Adonijah, but Solomon, who took over as king, refuses, and that's the last time I'm mentioned.

Now I know that my story doesn't seem as sexy or intriguing as those of others in the house of David, but to completely ignore my existence? Even the Women's Haftarah Commentary on *Haftarat Chaye Sarah* removes me from the narrative by instead focusing the entire entry on Bathsheba, despite my verses being a part of the haftarah!

Reflecting on my insertion and subsequent erasure from the text, the best word I can think of to describe my experience is displaced. I never got my happily ever after, despite being brought into close proximity to the monarchy. Instead, I was used to serve at the beck and call of an old military leader turned dying king and then left to fend for myself, vulnerable and displaced, with no one to turn to, and no one to know my name.

Vashti

Esther 1:7-8
וְהַשְׁקוֹת בִּכְלֵי זָהָב וְכֵלִים מִכֵּלִים שׁוֹנִים וְיֵין מַלְכוּת רָב כְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ: וְהַשְׁתְיָה כַדָּת אֵין אֹנֵס כִּי־כֵן ו יִסַּד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל כָּל־רַב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כִּרְצוֹן אִישׁ־וָאִישׁ:

[1] Royal wine flowed as it would for a king, in vessels of gold, and in other varied vessels. [2] The rule for drinking was "no constraints" for the King established that everyone in his house [his servants] should do what pleased each and every man.

Esther 1:11-12
לְהָבִיא אֶת־וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת לְהַרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת־יָפְיָהּ כִּי־טוֹבַת מַרְאֶה הִיא: וַתְּמָאֵן הַמַּלְכָּה וַשְׁתִּי לָבוֹא בִּדְבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיַד הַסָּרִיסִים וַיִּקְצֹף הַמֶּלֶךְ מְאֹד וַחֲמָתוֹ בָּעֲרָה בוֹ:

[1] [the King ordered his servants] to bring Vashti the Queen before the King in her royal diadem for her beauty to be seen by the people and the officials, because she was pleasing to the eye. [2] Queen Vashti refused to go by the King's orders as given by the eunuchs. The King was greatly angered and his fury burned inside him.

Seen as a secondary, or even tertiary, character in the Purim narrative, Queen Vashti's story often gets glossed over during the retelling of the Story of Esther. Always viewed in comparison to Esther, Vashti's actions as queen paved the way for Esther to rise up and become queen. The celebration of Purim is popular among adults and children alike; there's the opportunity to dress up, carnivals, and all around merriment and fun. But the story of Purim is much darker and more challenging than these modern celebrations would suggest. In describing these two "Courageous Queens," PJ Library writes, "Esther and Vashti both stood up for themselves–and their beliefs, in different ways. Vashti by refusing to compromise her values to appease the king and Esther by revealing her true identity to save the Jewish people" (*Courageous Queens: A List of Vashti and Esther Stories*). While explaining the two queens in this way is age-appropriate for children, the erasure of the realities of the Book of Esther go much further. Concluding with a mass murder, the story told in many adult-settings cuts out the horrific end rather than confronting the darker and more challenging points.

Before Vashti is introduced in the text, Ahasuerus is giving a banquet for the officials in his kingdom; a land that can best be described as degenerate and debaucherous (Gill, 2003, 5). He declares that there will be "no constraints" on drinking the royal wine. Seemingly simultaneously, Queen Vashti is throwing a banquet for women in the royal palace. She is then summoned to Ahasuerus' banquet for him to show off her beauty while wearing her royal diadem. Though text does not elaborate on her attire, rabbinic commentators have suggested that the text is alluding to the summons meaning that Vashti is meant to appear wearing *only* her royal diadem and nothing else (see Esther Rabbah 3 and Megillah 12b). There is no evidence in the Book of Esther to support this interpretation, but the emphasis on the royal diadem has provided clear enough context for interpreters and readers to draw their own conclusions. The Talmud expands on the details of Ahasuerus' feast, stating, "some [men] said: The Median women are the most beautiful, while others said: The Persian women are the most beautiful. Ahasuerus said to them: The vessel that I use is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Do you want to see her? [The men] said to him: Indeed, as long as she is bare" (Megillah 12b).

Ancient rabbis attempted to explain Vashti's refusal. As a granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the king who took the Jews into captivity in Babylon, Vashti was viewed by ancient Jewish commentators in a particularly critical light (Meyers, 2001, 167). Some speculated that she suddenly broke out in leprosy or sprouted a tail (Megillah 12b), while others suggested that Vashti's actions were meant to benefit the king. *Esther Rabbah* 3:14 proposed Vashti as a wife who, maybe as a self-preservation tactic, appeared to be concerned with her husband's status; "She said to him: 'If they consider me beautiful, they will set their sights on taking advantage of me and will kill you. If they consider me ugly, you will be demeaned because of me.'"

Without Vashti's own perspective, modern commentators have found a number of possible reasons for her actions. Perhaps Vashti recognized that such a demand from her husband could only be issued in his complete intoxication; her refusal in the moment was based on the belief that when he sobered up, he would understand how crude his command had been – or maybe he would forget the whole thing all together! (Grossman, 2011, 46). Separately from the king's intoxication, Vashti was aware of her own position and status in the land as well as maintaining it. "By coming to the king's party, Vashti would lose face, she would degrade herself to the position of a concubine" (Bickerman, 1967, 186).

Regardless of the motivations behind her actions, her refusal raised red flags among the king's eunuchs. They feared that Vashti's defiance as queen would set the wrong example, making other women throughout the kingdom believe that they too could disobey their husbands (Gill, 2003, 4). At the urging of the eunuchs, the king sent out an edict to emphasize that "every man should wield authority in his own home" and that all wives should treat their husbands with respect (Esther 1:20, 22). In this regard, Vashti can be viewed as the scapegoat for the king to "tighten the reins on the women in the kingdom" as well as a scapegoat to "make way for the king to get another wife" (Gill, 2003, 7-8). Scapegoat or not, Vashti's defiance is unique in the biblical text; contemporary interpretations create space for her to be lifted up as a heroine, similarly and maybe even more so than the usual heroine of the Purim story, Esther. Twentieth century commentator Jeffrey Cohen writes:

> Queen Vashti must have been a rare woman to have retained her sense of dignity and morality to the extent that she was prepared to endanger her life by refusing her lord and master's bidding to show off her body to the assembled throng (Cohen, 1996, 105).

Heralded by Cohen as a "woman of true courage and valor," he argues that no criticism could truly be raised against Vashti. In comparing the two queens of Persia, Cohen argues "while Esther vacillated before undertaking moral action, and had to be persuaded to stand up for her people, Vashti acted decisively as a moral exemplar of the highest order" (Cohen, 1996, 106).

Her banishment from the palace is presented on the surface as just that–banishment. Many rabbinic commentators have suggested that rather than be banished from the kingdom, Vashti is actually killed. This may explain the king's reaction of "remembering" Vashti at the start of the second chapter, but making no move to bring her back into the palace.

Vashti's story and brave actions span just the first chapter of the Book of Esther, with her name being recalled only in the king's comparison of new queens in the second chapter. Mentioned just ten times by name, Vashti's own heroic behavior paved the way for Esther to become queen and be exalted as a heroine. Renita Weems argues that the king's experience with Vashti may have softened him; when Esther appears at his inner court, he is more open to listen to her (Weems, 1988, 108). Without Vashti, the story of Esther would not be possible.

Vashti: In Her Own Words

Y'all, we need to have a serious talk. Do you realize that my husband literally said "no restrictions" for drinking, got himself drunk beyond belief, and then got mad at ME when I didn't want to be around him?! Seriously!?

I was simply minding my own business, enjoying a beautiful banquet for the women, drinking and eating the best food and wine that a queen could acquire, when I was summoned by my deadbeat husband. In his drunken stupor, he wanted me to wear my royal diadem to really show off all of my beauty to his equally drunk friends. Don't get me wrong, I love an opportunity to show off my royalty. As a granddaughter of the

great Nebuchadnezzar, I'm used to living a life of a certain level of luxury that marrying a king–even one as lame as Ahasuerus–affords me. But even in my own slightly tipsy state, I knew that responding to his summon would be a recipe for disaster and nothing good would come of it. At least when I was with my ladies, we were all drunk, happy, and unconcerned for our safety. I wasn't trying to be a "feminist," I was simply trying to keep myself safe from the drunken raucousness of Ahasuerus and his friends.

The text that tells this story really glosses over the details. I'm mentioned a mere ten times despite the fact that I am the QUEEN of Shushan; I'm made to be an example for all the women in the land for how not to act. The king's subjects, seeing the king's impaired drunken state, convince him to issue a royal decree about wives treating their husbands with respect. Now, I'm not saying that he wouldn't have done it himself if he were sober, it's entirely possible that he would have. But he was definitely encouraged by his subjects, probably to make sure that their own wives wouldn't dare disobey them.

I want to set the record straight: at no point did I grow a tail or break out in leprosy. Those rumors, spread by, you guessed it–men!– are simply excuses. The rabbinic commentators were probably looking for any possible reason that a woman would dare defy her husband and the best they could come up with was that I had a sudden physical abnormality. This couldn't be further from the truth. During my banquet, I was looking as beautiful as ever. I refused to have my beauty degraded by a bunch of sloppy, drunk men who wanted to see me dance like a circus animal. It's funny to me that y'all can't even figure out what exactly happened to me. You tell kids a story of how I was asked to dance and then kicked out because I said no. That's a nice, PG-version of my reality. I wasn't just kicked out of my home. I was expelled from the kingdom…maybe even expelled from the earth permanently (if you get what I'm saying).

Sure it's a little unclear, but that's because no one ever thought to ask about my side of the story.

What I really can't wrap my head around is why, of all things in this story, you modern celebrants love to fixate on the drinking. We've seen first-hand the danger of drinking in excess and you continue to not only read about it every year, but celebrate the holiday with alcohol galore! What gives?

And I feel bad for the girl who came after me–Esther. Can you imagine being brought in to replace *me?* One could never. From what I've heard, she was a real risk taker. I like to think I laid the groundwork for that. Apparently she actually asked Ahasuerus for help with something. Seriously? Clearly she didn't grow up in a royal household. But it seems like she was smart. When she did approach Ahasuerus, she made sure he didn't have all of his friends around. Just a few of his closest ones. Probably safer for her that way. In contrast to my experience, her disobedience turned into her gaining more access to power and having a whole book named after her!

Esther

Esther 2:2-4

וַיֹּאמְרוּ נַעֲרֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ מְשָׁרְתָיו יְבַקְשׁוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ נְעָרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מַרְאֶה: וַיַּפְקֵד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים֙ בְּכֹל־מְדִינ֣וֹת מַלְכוּת֔וֹ
וְיִקְבְּצ֗וּ אֶת־כׇּל־נַעֲרָה־בְתוּלָ֛ה טוֹבַ֥ת מַרְאֶ֖ה אֶל־שׁוּשַׁ֣ן הַבִּירָ֑ה אֶל־בֵּ֤ית הַנָּשִׁים֙ אֶל־יַ֣ד הֵגֵ֔א סְרִ֖יס הַמֶּ֣לֶךְ שֹׁמֵ֣ר הַנָּשִׁ֑ים וְנָתוֹן
תַּמְרֻקֵיהֶֽן: וְהַנַּעֲרָ֗ה אֲשֶׁ֤ר תִּיטַב֙ בְּעֵינֵ֣י הַמֶּ֔לֶךְ תִּמְלֹ֖ךְ תַּ֣חַת וַשְׁתִּ֑י וַיִּיטַ֥ב הַדָּבָ֖ר בְּעֵינֵ֣י הַמֶּ֑לֶךְ וַיַּ֖עַשׂ כֵּֽן׃

[2] The king's servants who attended to him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. [3] Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every state of your kingdom to gather the beautiful young virgins to the palace of Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king's official, the keeper of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. [4] Let the young girl who is pleasing to Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti." The proposal was pleasing to the king and he implemented it.

Esther 2:9

וַתִּיטַ֤ב הַנַּעֲרָה֙ בְּעֵינָ֔יו וַתִּשָּׂ֥א חֶ֖סֶד לְפָנָ֑יו וַיְבַהֵ֣ל אֶת־תַּמְרוּקֶ֗יהָ וְאֶת־מָנוֹתֶ֛הָ לָתֵ֥ת לָ֖הּ וְאֵת֙ שֶׁבַע֙ הַנְּעָר֣וֹת הָרְאֻיֹ֔ת לָתֵ֖ת לָ֑הּ
מִבֵּ֣ית הַמֶּ֔לֶךְ וַיְשַׁנֶּ֥הָ וְאֶת־נַעֲרוֹתֶ֖יהָ לְט֥וֹב בֵּית־הַנָּשִֽׁים׃

The girl was pleasing in his eyes and won his favor, he hastened to give her her cosmetics and her portion, as well as the seven maids who were due to her from the king's palace, and he gave her and her maids kindness in the harem.

Esther 2:17

וַיֶּאֱהַ֤ב הַמֶּ֙לֶךְ֙ אֶת־אֶסְתֵּ֔ר מִכׇּל־הַנָּשִׁ֖ים וַתִּשָּׂ֣א־חֵ֣ן וָחֶ֗סֶד לְפָנָ֛יו מִכׇּל־הַבְּתוּלֹ֖ת וַיָּ֣שֶׂם כֶּֽתֶר־מַלְכ֑וּת בְּרֹאשָׁ֖הּ וַיַּמְלִיכֶ֥הָ תַּ֖חַת
וַשְׁתִּֽי׃

[17] The king loved Esther more than all the women and she carried his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Eventually celebrated as the queen who saved the Jews of Persia, Esther was brought into King Ahasuerus' harem shortly following the removal of Vashti as queen and her subsequent banishment from Persia. Ahasuerus demonstrates his power and prowess by gathering many girls from across his kingdom in pursuit of his new queen. To prepare the girls for their audience with the king, there is an emphasis on the pampering that takes place in the harem. The girls spent "twelve months in an alien harem dedicated to the sole purpose of preparing for the king's pleasure" (Darr, 1991, 165) in anticipation of their single night they will each spend with him. Grossman writes, "the author seems to be creating a warm atmosphere of admiration for the

king, at least with regard to his generosity" (Grossman, 2011, 58). The indulgence shown to the girls can be seen as contrary to the king's earlier decree in which every woman is ordered to perform her husband's wishes, showing the strong split between men and women and their respective roles in the society of Shushan.

While Esther's age is unclear to the reader, it can be understood that she was a girl of marriageable age (Parker, 2013, 60). Esther 2:1-3 describes the "girls sought as either *na'rot* or *betulot*. Yet once they arrive at Susa, these teenage girls are to be deposited in the house of women (translated in the NRSV as "harem"), where they are readied for sex" (Parker, 2020, 552). Their lack of choice in the matter is no fairytale. Described as "pleasing in [the king's] eyes," Esther quickly received the king's favor and was elevated to the role of queen. As queen, she received special kindness while living in the harem. To modern readers, a harem may be perceived as a degrading situation. Given the time period in which the narrative takes place, a harem was likely viewed as an acceptable means of gaining power (Bellis, 2007, 193). It also guaranteed housing and protection, two valuable things a man could provide a woman during this time.

Esther's story draws strong parallels to the story of Avishag (Grossman, 2011, 58). Though the specific circumstances surrounding their stories differ, each young, virgin girl was brought to the king to spend a night in his presence. They each then retreat to the harem as concubines in hopes that they will be called upon again. This repeating narrative attempts to erase the individuals from the story as they are sent back to the harem among the rest of the girls and women. While Avishag's story is often forgotten, this attempted erasure was less successful with Esther. Esther, through her navigation of the Shushan royal palace, manages to make a name for herself, only after she is urged to do so by Mordecai. Gill asserts that "not only is

Esther stripped of her virginity as a young woman, but she is also stripped of her identity as a Jew." Gill continues, arguing, "All of this is done in order to further the desire of her uncle Mordecai to gain proximity to power" (Gill, 2003, 7). The Biblical text does not explicitly demonstrate this suggestion, but it is clear that Mordecai rises to his own position of power thanks in large part to Esther's role as queen; a role that she was given after being, for lack of a better word, sacrificed to the control of King Ahasuerus. Esther is used as a pawn by both Ahasuerus and Mordecai, with each man positioning her as they see fit to get what they want and believe they are entitled to. She is characterized as God-fearing, but she does not appear to be driven significantly by her religious faith outside her decision to fast for three days. Even "in her most desperate circumstance, she is not described as appealing directly to Yahweh" (Fuchs, 1999, 79).

Her primary concern is ensuring her own survival and continuity, but ends up redeeming an entire branch of the Jewish people (Fuchs, 1999, 79). At best, the story in the Book of Esther is one of female resilience and bravery. But in reality, it aligns more as a story of the misuse of women for national aims and religious acceptance (Gill, 2003, 7).

Esther: In Her Own Words

Everyone loves to make assumptions about "the girl who saved her people," pretending they know me and my story. But really, they don't realize that I was just a kid when I was taken from Mordechai's home and sent to live in the harem of the King of Shushan. For all of us who were up for the job of queen, they refused to tell us what had happened to the last queen, Vashti. Of course we heard rumors, but some of it

seemed truly outrageous; did the king really demand that she show up naked to dance for him and his friends? That seems a little far-fetched.

Regardless, I wasn't thrilled to be there. I only went because I had to–all the eligible women in the kingdom were required to. I was surrounded by all these other girls, but since I couldn't tell them I was Jewish, I just kept to myself. We spent what felt like forever getting ourselves pampered and ready for our meeting with the king. I had never seen so many cosmetics before in my life! When it came time for my night, I did my best to make a good impression even though I was so nervous. What if he didn't like me? Or, maybe worse, what if he did? I heard the stories from all the other girls after their own nights with him–some good and some bad. I took mental notes about the things they shared, making sure to do what they said he liked and not to do the things they said made him mad. Clearly, whatever I did worked! He liked me so much that he made me his queen. The other girls were jealous, but also relieved. I think it took some of the pressure off of them...but then the pressure was on me!

Mordechai didn't help ease the pressure I felt as I figured out what it meant to be queen. As things in Shushan became worse for the Jews, he insisted that it was *my* job to save the Jewish people. How was it my job?! I was just a girl who somehow had become a queen! I was completely alone in this task that had somehow become my responsibility. Mordechai could only visit me occasionally, the other girls from the harem still didn't know I was Jewish, and it's not like Ahasuerus and I talked much.

Who else could I turn to? I had tried turning to God, but you know who wasn't there for me either? God! Modern Jewish interpreters love to make up their own reasons why God is absent from my book; they use it as a way to argue that God is always present even when you don't know it. But you know what? I looked for God and came up empty. Put into a royal position "just for this moment" and all by myself.

I had heard the rumor that Vashti had taken things into her own hands, so I figured I'd try something similar: a banquet on my own terms. There was no happily-ever-after, but Ahasuerus did take the news of my religion way better than I expected him to. His pal Haman, however, was outraged. Haman had never really warmed to me the way the king did…I guess I wasn't his type. But when I told Ahasuerus that I was Jewish, he only cared about keeping me as his queen. He agreed to not only protect my people, but to give Mordechai a job as well. Haman was so mad about the whole situation that he yelled at Ahasuerus, who, showing his angry side, had him killed.

Like I said, it wasn't the happily-ever-after that I had dreamt of. I eventually found my footing as queen and managed to keep the Jewish people safe. My story gets told year after year as this big celebration of me saving the Jews of Shushan, which isn't false. But let's be clear: I was brought to the king as a young girl and things happened to work out in my favor, and in the favor of the Jewish people. If I was just a

kid when I saved the Jews, maybe anyone who wants to can be a hero too! But I wouldn't recommend having to spend time in a king's harem to do so.

Conclusion

For these six individuals, their stories have previously been written for them without their involvement or consent. “What has been traditionally studied as “history” is really the history written by the winners, the dominant societies; the record of the male-dominant, authoritarian, and war centered societies” (Bach, 1999, Introduction, xiii). Considering the storytelling found in the Hebrew Bible comes from this “winners” perspective, it almost comes across as unsurprising that the majority of the characters explored in this project simply disappear from the narrative following their sexual abuse. In the stories of Dinah, Tamar, and Abishag, readers are introduced to their character, we bear witness to the sexual encounter and the subsequent outcome of the action before the character slips into oblivion and the text continues on without them.

For Joseph and Esther, their stories do not echo this pattern. Rather, each of their narratives continue beyond their sexual experiences. What makes them so special for their stories to continue? They each take on positions of responsibility in the foreign courts in which they find themselves, making names for themselves outside the predetermined assumptions of their fates by aligning politically with non-Jews (Hertzberg, 2015, 408). By maneuvering themselves to be included in non-Jewish/Israelite society, they manage to solidify their positions as more than an anecdote to skim over.

We cannot allow the Biblical narrator to dictate whose stories we tell and whose voices we hear. Rather, we must continue to look deeper into the text and draw out the experiences of all individuals who have been silenced throughout our text and beyond.

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