

Torah Insights Gleaned from Megillat Esther

by Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

The Change in the Status of Women

We live in changing times. Especially, the role of women is in transition, and constantly evolving. The fact that I am travelling the world and leaving my husband and family is in itself quite revolutionary, compared to times in the not so distant past. The status of women has changed drastically in the last few generations. Even for the most traditional, ultra orthodox, conformist, there are new options available in education and career opportunities for women. The ability of women to participate in all levels of society is paralleled by their tremendous desire to learn Torah seriously on the deepest level. Women's *Midrashot* (Yeshivot) are opening and expanding all over the world and women's written Torah scholarship is found in every Judaic bookstore.

Redefining Our Roles

In spite of all the positive changes for women in the modern world, the new times have also evoked much confusion. Women are struggling with the difficult task of how to balance a career with being a homemaker and mother. The divorce rate is higher than ever and rapidly escalating. Some women find themselves frustrated by trying to emulate men instead of tuning into our own unique feminine contribution. Many find it difficult to accept certain *halachot* which seem to confine women.

Esther, the Moon and Me

There is an innate connection between the moon and the feminine attributes. Therefore, more and more women all over the world have begun to pay tribute to the moon and their own femininity by celebrating *Rosh Chodesh*. The world is evolving to become more feminine in its very nature. The heroism of war and competitive masculine modes are gradually yielding to incorporate more feminine models of behavior. Outward accomplishment through the mode of action is being challenged by inward fulfillment through the mode of feeling. The importance of peace, patience, active listening, and unconditional love are all female qualities, which are becoming more and more dominant in the world.

Feed Your Mind!

Rebbetzin Chana Bracha's first book, *Women at the Crossroads:*

A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion, is now available at www.berotbatayin.org.

A Little of Bat Ayin in Your Hometown!

Rebbetzin Chana Bracha will be on her international speaking tour from February 7-25. Check www.berotbatayin.org for details!

Rabbi Lazer Brody: A Woman's War with Amalek

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From New to Full Moon

Esther serves as a powerful role model for true Jewish Feminism. The personality of Esther evolves from being passive, obedient, dependent and silent, young, beautiful and totally dependent on her provider foster-father or husband: Mordechai; to growing into her fullest glow, by becoming active, assertive, tactful, independent, and holding political power in the real world. True Jewish feminism is encapsulated in the shift of Esther's character from reflecting new moon at first (*Megillat Esther* 1-4:15), followed by her waxing to the limelight in all the glory of the full moon (*Megillat Esther* 4:16 - end). Her evolving personality from a small point to full moon reflects the change of women's status in the world throughout the last two centuries.

The Return of Women's Light Reflect the Return of the Shechinah to Israel

The *Leshem* (Dayan Eliashiv's grandfather) compares this world with its diminished light to the new moon. Thus, the subdued state of the woman in this world reflects the fact that the *Shechinah* is in exile. Revealing the *Shechinah* in the world goes hand in hand with increasing the light of the moon and the feminine mode of consciousness. We are now in a state of transition between exile and *geulah*. We are on the verge of a new dimension of reality. This is why the status of women is changing so drastically. The female light is increasing, as the *Shechinah* gradually becomes more and more revealed in the world. The quintessence of the feminine light is embodied by the process of giving birth. Just like a woman in labor must hold back her compelling urge to push before the right moment when she is ready to give birth, we need to learn from Esther not to push our light forward before its time.

Esther or Hadassah?

The name Esther, besides meaning hidden, also derives from the word *Istahar* – as beautiful as the moon (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 13a). Esther's modesty and ability to hide her identity parallels the hidden light of the moon. Also her name Hadassah, which means myrtle, refers to her outstanding modesty as the leaves of the myrtle cover its stem. Just like the moon grows from a small point to a full light, Esther evolved from a minute glimmer to become the leading light of the Jewish world. Two abilities in particular enabled Esther to prevent a threatening holocaust. Through her wisdom of proper timing, together with her ability to understand the psyche of Ahasverus, she knew exactly how to incite him against Haman. These powers are drawn from the moon which rules the night, the subconscious and the world of dreams. It is not coincidental that Esther's clever scheme took place on that fatal night, at the time of the moon's dominion causing the King's sleep to wander, when the destiny of the Jews was reversed. In Esther's merit "*The Jews received light, happiness, joy and glory*" (*Megillat Esther* 8:16).

The Rebirth of Esther and the Moon

When Mordechai propelled Esther forward to plead with the king, she hesitated: "I have not been called to come before the King, these last thirty days" (*Megillat Esther* 4:11). It is known that "The King" without the name Ahasverus attached, alludes to Hashem in the entire *Megillah*. Perhaps the "thirty

days” refers to the thirty days of the moon-cycle. Esther was saying that she was reflecting the moon at the end of her cycle. Her light was extinguished as the moon before its rebirth. The sky is always the darkest before the birth of the new moon. During this time of complete darkness it is very difficult to have *emunah* (faith), and perform mitzvot. Esther felt insufficient energy and courage to plunge down into the abyss of coming before the king. When she finally shone forth, as the moon reborn, a new reality was conceived for the Jewish people.

Contracting Her Light to Shine Forth

The *Megillah* repeats how Esther followed the command of Mordechai both when she was dependent on him for her livelihood and shelter, as well as when she enjoyed the privileges of a full-fledged queen, completely independent of Mordechai (Compare *Megillat Esther* 2:10 with 2:20). Even as a queen in her own right, Esther chose to respect and obey Mordechai in the exact same way as when he raised and supported her. This provides a powerful role-model for Jewish women today. In the past, we had no choice by following the leads of husbands and Rabbis, since we were dependent on them for everything, from teaching us the laws of the Torah to providing us with our basic needs. Today, this reality has changed. Both learning Torah and earning a living are available to women no less than to men. By freely choosing to nevertheless “obey” male leadership, we are humbly carrying on the *tikun* (rectification) of overcoming the ego, which began when the light of the moon was diminished. Esther’s willingness to surrender is what enabled her to shine forth in all her brilliance, when she became the Divine channel to make the crucial decision to fast on Pesach and command Mordechai to get all the Jewish people to follow her command (see *Megillat Esther* 4:17 with Rashi).

True Feminine Light Reflects the Building of the Temple

Women’s diminished light of Torah in the past centuries reflects the contraction of the moon. This light is being returned to women manifold, as Esther was able not only to prescribe new eternal Torah holiday, but moreover to add a new book to the Tanach. She also caused the entire Jewish nation to accept upon themselves the Oral Torah with love. Esther’s contribution took place at the transition point between the first and second Temple period. Likewise today, when Israel is in transition prior to the building of the third and final Temple, it is the Torah contribution of women, which will enable the final stage of the world’s evolution. The final redemption will happen not through women emulating the Torah of the men, but through Jewish women expressing their true feminine hidden light of the moon.

Internal Jewish Feminism

The argument of Esther with the Rabbis where she demands that her book be recorded is quite fascinating (*Babylonian Talmud Megillah* 7a). She is portrayed not only as the savior of her people, but also as the one responsible for the celebration of this event as the holiday of Purim by all future generations. Her confronting the Rabbis was not out of rebellion, to show that she knew better. Her prior respect and obedience proved that she was now empowered to speak solely by her profound understanding of the necessity to perpetuate the *Megillah*’s vital message and save the future of the Jewish people.



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The Rise of the Feminine Consciousness

Esther teaches us the greatness and importance of the feminine mode of Divine service. Without trying to take the spotlight for herself and force her presence on the world, she was able to accomplish so much more for the Jewish people and the universe as a whole. By reaching inwardly, towards the inner recesses of her soul, where the feminine indwelling presence is hiding, she was able to affect world transformation. We need to reframe the work of the feminist movement, which has been focusing on the external. From its onset, it strove for equality between the sexes, liberating women economically and socially. Women refused to play back stage. No longer did they want to be diminished to “the small light.” They wanted to prove that they could do everything men did and even better. Today we have come full circle. By realizing that trying to emulate the role of the men, is in reality to take upon ourselves their curse of “*In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread.*” Moreover, trying to emulate men, shows that we feel insecure and inferior about our role as women. Let us honor G-d, and ourselves by tuning into our true feminine purpose. Let us not give power to our insecurity as women by looking for external affirmations through titles like “Rabbi,” and validation through “equal” participation with the men in the synagogue service and Torah reading. Have you ever heard of men complaining about the unfairness of their inability to get pregnant and breast-feed? Esther and the moon teach us about the inner hidden strength of the feminine way. The reflective and more receptive mode of moon-consciousness expressed in *tefilah*, meditation and right-brain creativity, such as art and music is becoming more and more dominant in the world as the light of the moon is evolving towards its fullness. By tuning into our unique way as women, we will be able to carry the world to its ultimate *tikun* of uniting with the *Shechinah* – the Feminine indwelling presence.



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About Us



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Rebbetzin Chana Bracha, a native of Denmark, is the Founder and Director of Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. She holds a Bachelor of Education in Bible and Jewish Philosophy from Michlala Jerusalem College for Women, and a Masters of Art in Jewish History from Touro College. For more than a decade, Rebbetzin Chana Bracha has taught Bible studies with special emphasis on women's issues in Israel and the United States. She creates curricula emphasizing women's spiritual empowerment through traditional Torah values. Rebbetzin Chana Bracha has a married son and two granddaughters, and lives with her husband and younger son on the land of the Judean Hills, in Israel. Her first book, Women at the Crossroads: A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion, is now available for purchase at www.berotbatayin.org.

Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin – Holistic Torah Study for Women on the Land of Israel

At Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, we weave together Torah studies with creative spiritual expression, connecting with the Land of Israel, and healthy, organic lifestyles. In the heart of the Judean Hills, with its serene beauty, our students experience an approach to Judaism that bridges mind, body and soul. Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin is designed as a micro-community within the Village of Bat Ayin where women of all ages and backgrounds engage in intense Torah learning as part of an integrated, participatory approach to Torah living.

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