

THE WHOLE MEGILLAH

A Purim Spiel for Grown-Ups

by Jenny Lyn Bader

THE WHOLE MEGILLAH: A PURIM SPIEL FOR GROWN-UPS

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Author's Note

This acting edition contains two versions of the same play:

- a play “for grown-ups”
- a much shorter play for kids

Both plays can be enjoyed by a range of ages.

Ever since I was a kid myself, I've loved the story of the legendary Queen Esther whose heroism has inspired many a Purim play. As this one goes into print, I must acknowledge Esther and a few other people:

It was the late playwright Wendy Wasserstein who first got me thinking seriously and comedically about Purim, when she invited me to co-write another *purimspiel* with her years ago for a Jewish Museum event.

I'm very grateful to Congregation B'nai Keshet in Montclair, New Jersey for suggesting to Ari Laura Kreith that she find a Purim play to direct, and to Ari for then pursuing the idea that I should write it.

Special thanks go to Rhona Silverbush for always being willing to share her knowledge of Torah and commenting on drafts like the sages would; to Daniela Varon for her manuscript wisdom; and to Madeleine Berkowitz H for her ongoing sage commentaries.

—Jenny Lyn Bader

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THE WHOLE MEGILLAH was first performed at the Actors Temple (Rabbi: Jill Hausman; Board President Carol Ostrow) in New York City on March 17, 2023, in a staging directed by Jenny Lyn Bader, with the following cast:

ESTHER.....Meredith Starkman
AHASUERUS.....Jamen Nanthakumar
MORDECAI.....Jon Krupp
VASHTI.....Miriam Kulick
MEMUCAN/GUY READING MEGILLAH.....Jeremy Rishe
HAMAN.....Jason Guy
ZETHAR.....Evan Maltby
HEGAI.....Will Nolan

It was presented in partnership with the Jewish Theatre Circle, with curation by Cindy Cooper, Jessica Feder-Birnbaum, and Dana Leslie Goldstein. Alfie Berkowitz played the horse and was an audience plant.

An earlier version of the play, created for online performance, was commissioned by Luna Stage in West Orange, NJ and presented on February 27, 2021. It was directed by Ari Laura Kreith. The cast was:

ESTHER.....Meredith Starkman
AHASUERUS.....Pun Bandhu
MORDECAI.....Jon Krupp
VASHTI.....Danielle Skraastad
MEMUCAN.....Rajesh Bose
HAMAN.....Jason Guy
ZETHAR.....Evan Maltby
HEGAI.....Will Nolan

The Production Stage Manager was Joey Yow. The Zoom facilitator was Alex Oleksy. Stage directions were read by Jenny Lyn Bader.

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The Zoom version of the play was first seen on February 25, 2021 in an online production created by B’nai Keshet Synagogue in Montclair, NJ and directed by Ari Laura Kreith. The technical producer was Matt Sitkoff. The cast was:

ESTHER.....Jenny Kravat Solomon
AHASUERUS.....Noah Kupferman
MORDECAI.....Zachary Lipner
VASHTI.....Laura Wald
MEMUCAN.....Betty Jagoda Murphy
HAMAN.....Amos Kamil
ZETHAR.....Daniel Brenner
HEGAI.....Melissa Schaffer

Stage directions were read by Dinah Hendon.

All three scripts for *The Whole Megillah* — both stage versions in this volume and the earlier version written for digital performance — received developmental readings at the Playwrights Gallery, featuring performers including Matt Biagini, Jean Brookner, Joey Brenneman, Faith Catlin, Karen Eilbacher, Fengar Gael, Meghann Garmany, Ginger Grace, Savannah Guthrie, Jason Guy, Alinca Hamilton, Cary Hite, Melissa Hurst, Olivia Kinter, Brian Linden, Carole Monferdini, Amanda Salazar, Deborah Savadge, Scott Schafer, and Sarah Sirota.

THE WHOLE MEGILLAH: A PURIM SPIEL FOR GROWN-UPS

THE WHOLE MEGILLAH

CHARACTERS

2W/1M/5-6 any gender

ESTHER *aka Hadassah*

AHASUERUS aka ACHASHVERUS aka King of Persia

MORDECAI, *Sanhedrin* member

VASHTI, Queen

MEMUCAN, Chief Advisor

HAMAN, Agagite

ZETHAR, Servant

HEGAI, Lady/Person-in-Waiting

GUY READING MEGILLAH (played by actor who plays Memucan*)

**Or not - see script for instructions for dividing roles*

PLACE: Shushan, a hot spot in the Persian Empire

TIME: Ancient times, give or take, circa 470 B.C.E.

THE WHOLE MEGILLAH

SCENE 1

Actors are wearing everyday clothes and chatting. ACTRESS PLAYING ESTHER runs onstage, possibly down aisle through audience, and addresses ACTOR PLAYING AHASUERUS.

ACTRESS PLAYING ESTHER. Hey, it's time for the Purimspiel!

ACTOR PLAYING AHASUERUS. [Real Name of Actress Playing Esther], did you say a "pornspiel"? That sounds interesting!

ACTRESS PLAYING ESTHER. Not "porn"! *Purim!* The holiday!

ACTOR PLAYING AHASUERUS. I just thought you said "porn."

ACTRESS PLAYING ESTHER. Of course you did. I'm talking about the Megillah!

ACTOR PLAYING AHASUERUS. Sorry. The Megillah does get a little raunchy. Which part are we doing?

ACTRESS PLAYING ESTHER. We're doing the whole megillah!

Can you please get ready? C'mon guys, we're supposed to be in Shushan back in ancient times! *(Cast goes to prop table/area and gets props, e.g. AHASUERUS may get a crown and wineglass, ESTHER a mask and cup of dice, MORDECAI dice and a robe, ZETHAR a tray, MEMUCAN a quill pen and a hat, VASHTI a crown, mask, and wineglass, HEGAI a scarf and mask, HAMAN a three-cornered hat and business cards, and so forth. And we're in ancient Persia...)*

SCENE 2

Actors face out and address the audience as they begin the story.

ESTHER. It all started with the king's celebration...

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AHASUERUS. *(Toasting:)* Any great leader has to have great ideas. And my great idea was... to throw the best party ever given. Everyone is invited! Everyone!

MORDECAI. When the king says “everyone,” he thinks he means everyone, but that doesn’t include the Jews. He just means the people of the majority religion. You know, the big popular religion of our time... Zoroastrianism.

VASHTI. When the king says “everyone,” he doesn’t mean women. Even the queen. I threw my own party.

ESTHER. During all the parties, I was at home with my uncle, like usual. We were playing backgammon because you know. When in Persia. *(Esther takes a cup of dice and shakes it.)*

MORDECAI. The thing about playing backgammon with my niece, is she rolls dice like no one I’ve ever seen...If she needs a seven, she rolls it. Double sixes? She gets them. But if she feels you need to win, she can make herself lose. And suddenly you can get the best rolls of your life! Oy, is it fun! *(Mordecai rolls dice.)*

AHASUERUS. You know what’s fun? A banquet that lasts many days. *(He drinks... everyone might dance for a moment.)*

HEGAI. The women were having a great party. Though the queen was not in the greatest mood...

VASHTI. Uch! Why do parties put me in a bad mood? Let’s see. Probably because when I was a small child, my father ruled Babylonia. And he gave an epic feast.

MEMUCAN. People say that at that feast, a hand appeared out of nowhere and wrote some words on the wall in Aramaic that foretold the end of the kingdom!

HEGAI. Yikes.

VASHTI. Mm hmmm. And then my dad was killed because Babylonia fell to the Persians. So parties are not my favorite. I was already annoyed before this whole thing started. It just felt like something bad was gonna happen...

ZETHAR. *(Holds up a serving tray or drink, facing the audience.)* The king’s party should be fun, but I’m just here to work. *(Haman grabs food/drink off tray, perhaps sipping and putting it back.)*

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HAMAN. (*Evilly:*) And I am just here to *network*. Here's my card. (*Hands out a business card or two.... The cards may say his name in large letters but we don't see that until he says it out loud:*) I'm Haman.

SCENE 3

The king's party. The king hums or sings a few bars of a pop tune or riff and everyone dances... Actors playing characters not at this party can wear masks and join in. As others dance, Ahasuerus calls out to Zethar.

AHASUERUS. (*Sloshed.*) Hey you!

ZETHAR. Me?

AHASUERUS. You! Third servant on the left! I have a message for you to bring to The Vag. Err: Vash.

ZETHAR. "Vash"?

AHASUERUS. Vashti. The queen. You know. That spicy little turtledove of mine.

ZETHAR. Okay.

AHASUERUS. Here, I want to give her a very specific message... (*Loses his thought.*) Hold on, I'll remember in a moment. I forgot what I was thinking. I've had so much wine! Oh, I've got it! (*Whispers to Zethar, as Zethar nods.*) Say it back to me. (*Zethar whispers to Ahasuerus as Ahasuerus nods.*) Great! And now, I have something to say to everyone! (*Ahasuerus clinks his goblet.*)

MEMUCAN. Everyone, please settle down, the king has something to say!

AHASUERUS. It's at a time like this, when we're all making merry, that I hear a small voice inside me saying something important... and that little voice wants to be listened to... and it says... "More wine!" Repeat after me! More wine! More wine! Everyone! (*Guests chant "more wine." They or an audience plant can get audience to chime in.*)

EVERYONE. More wine! More wine! More wine!

AHASUERUS. This party was all going as planned... until a few minutes ago...when I saw one of the guests walk out of that door!

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People! Do you leave a six-month celebration followed by a seven-day banquet just because it's the seventh day?

EVERYONE. Noooo!!!

AHASUERUS. (*Now super-wasted:*) No! And no one can leave because I am now gonna throw another party, inside of this party! Just you wait! Woo-hoo! Everyone drink! (*Everyone drinks. Even Zethar grabs a goblet and starts to raise it to his mouth.*) What are you doing?

ZETHAR. (*Freezes with goblet mid-air.*) You said everyone drink.

AHASUERUS. Not you! You're bringing that message to the queen! Run! (*Zethar runs, maybe up aisle or off into the wings.*)

HAMAN. Excuse me, your highness. I beg a thousand pardons but um...

AHASUERUS. Who are you?

HAMAN. Currently assistant to the assistant to your assistant advisor. But I'm ready for more. Here's my card.

AHASUERUS. (*Reading card:*) "Haman."

HAMAN. ...That's me. You knew my father.

AHASUERUS. Who's that?

HAMAN. (*It's "Hammedatha" but he says it funny.*) Hammadetha.

AHASUERUS. Did you say "Hammer of death"?

HAMAN. Hammadetha.

AHASUERUS. Oh! Hammadetha! Beautiful name. I know that guy. Hammadetha The Agagite, right?

HAMAN. Yes! Hammadetha the Agagite!

AHASUERUS. Remind me, what's an Agagite again?

HAMAN. We are the descendants of King Agag.

AHASUERUS. Huh! I could've sworn you were a whole nation. No?

HAMAN. No.

AHASUERUS. Mind. Blown. So there's not a lot of Agagites.

HAMAN. Just me and my sons. We're the last of the Agagites. Also the last of the Amalekites. I'm a little sensitive about it. But I'm trying hard to make a name for myself.

AHASUERUS. So you're the descendent of a king, and your people have no more kingdom, and now you want a promotion in my kingdom.

HAMAN. Yes! You see my plight!

AHASUERUS. Mmm. That sounds hard. But I've also been drinking.

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So I'm kind of thinking sideways? And Memucan is here, he's my most trusted advisor. So I'm good for now. Excuse me, I have to make an announcement. Hey everyone!

EVERYONE. Yeaaaah!

AHASUERUS. I toast to all of you. And don't go away, just wait here for my extra-special announcement for the next amazing event at our party-inside-the-party! *(The party-goers dance off.)*

SCENE 4

Zethar enters on the other side from where he started.

ZETHAR. *(Jogging around looking lost.)* How do I manage to do this? How can I not find a party? It's only supposed to be 50 cubits from... Pull it together, Zethar, it should be right around here. *(Hegai enters.)*

HEGAI. Who goes there?

ZETHAR. I! I go here! I'm here!

HEGAI. State your purpose.

ZETHAR. I have a message!

HEGAI. What's the message?

ZETHAR. I have a message for the queen from the king. It's urgent. He's sloshed. And keeps making announcements. And there's been a lot of merriment. Way too much merriment. I need an audience with the queen. Please help.

HEGAI. I'll get her. *(Hegai exits. Zethar paces, nervous. Vashti enters.)*

ZETHAR. Queen Vashti! Your royal Highness!

VASHTI. Do I know you?

ZETHAR. I work in the court. My name is Zethar.

VASHTI. I don't need to know your name. I just want to make sure you're not a trespasser or spy. You say you have a message from the king. Do you have the royal seal from his signet ring?

ZETHAR. Uh... I do not.

VASHTI. So how do I know that your message is really from the king?

ZETHAR. He's really enjoying his banquet.

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VASHTI. You've just described all the men in the banquet hall right now.

ZETHAR. Um. I believe he referred to you his "spicy little turtledove"?

VASHTI. Yeah, that's him. What does he want? A few of my girls to go do a little dance? I guess I could spare a few...

ZETHAR. No. Actually, he wants you.

VASHTI. Me.

ZETHAR. Yes. He wants you to come to the party so he can show off your beauty to his guests. While wearing the royal diadem.

VASHTI. And?

ZETHAR. And what?

VASHTI. And what else should I wear?

ZETHAR. Oh that's it. He specified, nothing but the royal diadem.

VASHTI. He wants me to walk in there naked?

ZETHAR. No, no, no, he wants you wearing the royal diadem!

VASHTI. Do you know what a diadem is?

ZETHAR. ...No?

VASHTI. Because it's a turban with jewels on top.

ZETHAR. Oh! Gosh. I thought it was more of a bedazzled frock or something... I'm so sorry. He's been drinking for seven days. He's not really himself.

VASHTI. So he's super-wasted.

ZETHAR. Yeah he's had a few.

VASHTI. Uh huh. And now that you know what a diadem is... what do you think of this royal request?

ZETHAR. I don't have any opinions, I'm a servant.

VASHTI. I'm telling you to have an opinion.

ZETHAR. Okay! Then, it's really not a request, it's... more of a command.

VASHTI. And do you think it would be a good idea for me to obey this command?

ZETHAR. I don't think. But if you're telling me to think? You might get in some trouble.

VASHTI. Mm hm. If I don't do it, I get into trouble. But if I do, I'm going in there in a hat...

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ZETHAR. And shoes... I'm sure he wouldn't mind you wearing shoes... That stone path is extremely hot right now...

VASHTI. Walking in a bejeweled hat, maybe shoes, into a room of a hundred men who've been drinking for seven days. That might get me into some big trouble too.

ZETHAR. Yeah, I could see that.

VASHTI. And everyone's there.

ZETHAR. Oh, one guy left. That's why he wants you to make this big entrance so badly. To make sure everyone stays, he wants to throw another party *within* the party.

VASHTI. And the new party would revolve around this. *(She indicates her body.)* You tell the king: I'm not obeying.

ZETHAR. Not. Obeying. Got it. *(Vashti exits.)* And now I'm literally the bearer of bad news. *(He runs off.)*

SCENE 5

As Zethar runs back to the king's party, Ahasuerus is dancing and humming music. Memucan and Haman are also dancing. Zethar enters and watches the dancing. Ahasuerus spots him.

AHASUERUS. You're back! Excellent! *(Calls to Memucan:)* He's back! *(Shouting to the crowd:)* Are you all having fun? You having fun? *(An audience plant or partygoer may shout "Woo-hoo!")* I so want you to have fun. Which is why I'm pleased to introduce a very special guest... *(He indicates the entrance where Zethar just came in.)*

MEMUCAN. I don't see her.

ZETHAR. Can I talk to you a moment, sire?

MEMUCAN. We're listening.

ZETHAR. Um. May I speak to you alone for a moment?

AHASUERUS. Memucan is my closest advisor. Memucan can hear anything that I hear.

ZETHAR. The queen said no.

AHASUERUS. What? That's all she said?

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ZETHAR. Well, first she demanded to see your signet seal, which I didn't have, eek, but then when I convinced her the message was from you? She said no.

AHASUERUS (*Shocked*) "No"?! (*Haman is now eavesdropping, leaning in to hear better.*)

MEMUCAN. No one says no to the king.

ZETHAR. The queen doesn't want to show up here and be paraded around wearing only a royal diadem.

MEMUCAN. Ah.

AHASUERUS. (*Furious*) The whole point of a party like this is to say yes! How can she say no? To me, the host?

ZETHAR. (*Terrified*) May I umm... be excused, sire?

AHASUERUS. Yes, of course. We are a merciful ruler! (*As Zethar runs away, Ahasuerus turns to Memucan.*) What should we do to the queen?

MEMUCAN. Well your highness, in fairness, I understand why a woman wouldn't want to walk into a roomful of drunken men wearing only a headdress.

AHASUERUS. And of course shoes, she would need shoes to get here.

MEMUCAN. And of course shoes. The problem is: it sets a bad example.

AHASUERUS. About how she treats me!

MEMUCAN. Women all over the kingdom might start disobeying their husbands, even over more reasonable requests, and there would be... total chaos!

AHASUERUS. Yes! This isn't about me! It's much bigger and deeper.

MEMUCAN. Exactly.

AHASUERUS. Because my wife should do anything I ask her, even ridiculous things, so other wives will do regular everyday things for their husbands!

MEMUCAN. Yes!

AHASUERUS. So how do we make that clear to everyone here?

MEMUCAN. Everyone here? Oh no. We have to make it clear to the whole kingdom!

AHASUERUS (*Realizing:*) Because she's actually embarrassing me in front of millions of people!

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MEMUCAN. Indeed. We need to send a letter to every local governor of every one of your 127 provinces... expressing outrage over this event.

AHASUERUS. Yes! And what should be done to the queen herself?
(Haman decides to insert himself into the conversation.)

HAMAN. You know, I have a three-cornered hat I carry around for just such decisions! I put lots into it and draw them. There's "exile," "defenestration," "execution," oh so many options. Execution is generally my favorite.

MEMUCAN. Who is this guy? *(Ahasuerus has no idea, which is clear from his reaction.)*

AHASUERUS. Chief advisor, what do we do about her?

MEMUCAN. We just take away her crown and all her royal trappings. Make her a commoner!

AHASUERUS. Oh, that'll drive her crazy! She can't stand commoners! I like it.

HAMAN. A commoner! In a way, the worst punishment of all.

MEMUCAN. Sorry, who are you?

HAMAN. I'm an assistant advisor, under consideration for a promotion. My name is Haman.

MEMUCAN. I am Memucan.

HAMAN. I feel I can learn so much from you, Memucan. May I help you write this letter?

MEMUCAN. Oh, I have a letter written for every occasion. I just need to tailor this one... *(Takes out a letter, then produces a quill pen — or gets one from Zethar. Memucan makes a few notes, tweaking the letter.)*

There. And I'll have it translated into all the other languages of the empire over the next three days and it'll be ready to go by the weekend.

HAMAN. I'm happy to assist with those logistics. *(Memucan hands Haman the letter.)* Your highness, I couldn't help but notice your servant had trouble delivering your message to the queen because it didn't have a signet seal. Can you please imprint this letter?

AHASUERUS. You learn quickly, Agagite. I'm promoting you! You can be the assistant to the chief advisor, Memucan!

HAMAN. Thank you!

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AHASUERUS. Wait, if Vashti's demoted... I can't be married to her. I'll need another wife!

MEMUCAN. Of course, sire. I can send for one.

AHASUERUS. (*Glumly.*) Oh, that's no fun. The princesses that get delivered from other kingdoms... they've traveled for miles by donkey, and they're sweaty and they have an old boyfriend somewhere else and they're never excited to be here. Not that anything like that has ever happened. (*Haman has a new drink — and pours something into it.*)

HAMAN. Memucan, boss, I got you another drink.

MEMUCAN. Thanks so much, but the king made us each a golden goblet individually designed and reflecting our interests. Mine has grapes and cats and —

HAMAN. This is the best wine. Just take this one. (*He hands Memucan the wine cup, not a golden goblet but simpler, maybe a red Solo cup.*)

MEMUCAN. Mmm. Smells good...

AHASUERUS. I don't want a foreign princess. I'd like to find a local girl, exquisitely beautiful, but doesn't realize it... very clever, but willing to say I am... brilliant in the bedroom, though she's never been in the bedroom before! A virgin. Just intuitively brilliant in the bedroom. And: fun to play games with.

MEMUCAN. Games?

AHASUERUS. (*Suggestively.*) You know. Games. I like games.

HAMAN. What kind of... games?

AHASUERUS. I'd rather not say. Let's just say... games.

HAMAN. How would you like to locate this second wife?

AHASUERUS. Hmm. I don't know. (*Turns to Memucan, who is drinking from the cup Haman gave him.*) What do you think, Memucan? (*Memucan snores.*)

HAMAN. I think he had one cup too many.

AHASUERUS. Oh dear. I better promote you again. You are hereby associate chief advisor!

HAMAN. Thank you, sire! You won't regret it. Now let's get you a new wife who wants to be here. What about making women compete for your affection? You said you like games... maybe games of humiliation? A wet tunic contest?

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AHASUERUS. A contest! Good idea. I just have to figure out what kind of contest will bring a woman willing to make a long-term commitment to adoring me.

HAMAN. Long-term commitment...hmm... The contest could take an excruciatingly long time...?

AHASUERUS. Say more. (*Ahasuerus follows Haman off...While Memucan's head pops up, post-nap:*)

MEMUCAN/GUY READING MEGILLAH. Now Memucan, the Chief Advisor, is out cold. (*switches hats or takes off large hat to reveal kipah*) So I'm not him now... [if two actors play these roles, change "So I'm not him now" to "Oh, hi"] I'm just a guy reading the Megillah in the Jewish biblical year of [insert current biblical year]. Also known as [insert current calendar year]. (*GUY READING MEGILLAH picks up Megillah and stares:*) And I'm in shock. I heard they had a beauty contest but this... Look what's happening at Mordecai and Esther's house! This is *not* what I remember learning in shul... our heroine is getting invited to live in... a harem? (*He watches the next scene.*)

SCENE 6

Hegai is at Mordecai and Esther's house.

ESTHER. What do you mean you're rounding up the women?

HEGAI. Every virgin in a 1200-mile radius is required to participate in the empire-wide beauty contest. You're a virgin, right?

ESTHER. Of course!

HEGAI. Then take a bag with anything you might need this year. Come with me.

ESTHER. This *year*? How long can a beauty contest take?

HEGAI. We have to give you twelve months of beauty treatments before we dare present you to the king: six months oil of myrrh, six months of perfumes and cosmetics.

ESTHER. (*Startled.*) Beauty takes that long?

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HEGAI. Oil of myrrh can be very slow-acting.

ESTHER. I had no idea.

HEGAI. And between you and me? He wants it to take a while because this time he wants a wife who.... um... what's the best way to put this?

ESTHER. (*Guessing.*) A wife who smells really good?

HEGAI. A wife who... doesn't get easily bored.

ESTHER. Ah.

HEGAI. And who also smells really good! (*Beat.*) You'll love it! At the harem of the citadel, we have all the latest beauty potions.

ESTHER. (*Alarmed:.*) Nice.

HEGAI. You don't seem very excited about this.

ESTHER. It's just a little sudden.

HEGAI. Well, I've got the order, and it has a royal seal on it, everything does now, there's a new guy working for the king who likes to make everything very official and final. He's become chief advisor since Memucan kept inexplicably falling asleep at meetings. And you better listen to him — what's your name?

ESTHER. Esther.

HEGAI. Like a fertility goddess! That'll go over well. Be outside in five. I gotta go get the virgins next door. (*Hegai exits. Mordecai enters.*)

ESTHER. Uncle! She wants me to be in a yearlong beauty contest.

MORDECAI. Hadassah, you better go, or it'll look suspicious.

ESTHER. But our tribe—

MORDECAI. Our tribe has survived worse than a beauty contest.

ESTHER. But the book of proverbs says the Lord made everything for a purpose. And I'm sure that purpose is not cosmetics.

MORDECAI. Just do me a favor, don't go quoting the book of proverbs when you're there. You need to try to fit in. And obviously don't tell them your real name. "Esther" is considered a very cool name here in the Persian empire. I spent a long time picking it.

ESTHER. I think Hadassah is a nice name.

MORDECAI. In some places. Just go with "Esther" here.

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ESTHER. Okay. But our people —

MORDECAI. Our people keep getting exiled and persecuted everywhere we go. Now you want to get disqualified before the contest even starts?

ESTHER. No. But are you going to be okay? Who's going to keep house and make your meals?

MORDECAI. If I don't feel like cooking, I'll just order in some Chinese.

ESTHER. Oy vey.

MORDECAI. Don't say that in the palace. Say "Ah me"!

ESTHER. "Ah me"! Got it.

MORDECAI. There's a lot of prejudice out there. Just let them meet you as a person first.

ESTHER. I'm moving into a harem in a citadel. You think they'll see me as a person?

MORDECAI. You know me, I think a lot of things. Overthink. And still, I know nothing.

ESTHER. But at least you know what you don't know.

MORDECAI. Exactly.

ESTHER. Oh Uncle. What will you do when I'm gone?

MORDECAI. I'll find something to do. Study a foreign language.

ESTHER. You already know 68 foreign languages!

MORDECAI. Yeah, but I'm behind. The rest of the *Sanhedrin* [*pronounced Sahn-heh-DREEN*] know 70.

ESTHER. Sixty-eight isn't enough?

MORDECAI. You never know when you'll need those last two.

ESTHER. Who's gonna play backgammon with you?

MORDECAI. I can play with some of the other *Sanhedrin*. It won't be as fun. Don't worry, if I miss you I can always stand by the palace gate and try to peek.

ESTHER. That's a little weird, maybe don't do that. (*He nods.*) Bye, Uncle! (*She exits.*)

MORDECAI. Bye, Esther! Be good!

GUY READING MEGILLAH. Yes Esther, be good! Because this is *bad*. That nice Memucan guy was forced into retirement I think because

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he was being poisoned, there's this other guy making trouble in the kingdom, you don't know when you're gonna see your uncle again, and yep, you're living in a harem.

SCENE 7

The harem. Hegai enters.

HEGAI. (*Harried.*) Who's next for a beauty treatment? Next!

ESTHER. Um. Me?

HEGAI. So what's it gonna be? What's your poison?

ESTHER. I don't know what you mean. I came here a few weeks ago when you got me, and I've just been sitting around until they gave me this appointment. Am I supposed to have something with me?

HEGAI. You're each allowed to have requests for fragrances and looks and you all have 'em. One can't live without jasmine, or lily of the valley, the next one needs narcissus petals right now... You're all so high-maintenance! Just because you're pretty, doesn't mean you know about cosmetics! I've spent years studying botany, alchemy, aroma. But no, everyone's got a thing.

ESTHER. I have no "thing."

HEGAI. You don't have a favorite cosmetic treatment?

ESTHER. I've never had a cosmetic treatment. I've never even worn makeup!

HEGAI. What oils did your mother use on you?

ESTHER. My mother died when I was little. Both of my parents did.

HEGAI. Oh, sweetheart. I'm so sorry.

ESTHER. My uncle raised me, he's one of the *Sanhedrin*—

HEGAI. A what?

ESTHER. It's like a supreme court justice. So, we mainly talk about books and play backgammon. I have no opinions about oils. If I had a question about law, I'd go to him, he's a legal expert. But you — seem to be a beauty expert.

HEGAI. Yes! That's what I am! An expert! Why does no one recognize that?

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ESTHER. I think you should decide. About all my treatments.

HEGAI. You are so smart.

ESTHER. I just know what I don't know.

HEGAI. So, we're gonna do this treatment for six months, and the next one for another six months, and then you're going to have your private audience with the king, and at that point you can add any final request you want — favorite color dress, jewelry, anything.

ESTHER. No. I couldn't. It's entirely up to you.

HEGAI. Oh honey! (*Touches Esther's hair approvingly.*) The king's not gonna know what hit him! (*They exit.*)

GUY READING MEGILLAH. I always learned in Hebrew school she was just incredibly beautiful, but I guess that's not enough. According to scripture, you have to do beauty treatments for a year... and there's no way to call home. A lot of time later, Mordecai hasn't heard from Esther, and he's going a little nuts! He drops by the palace.

SCENE 8

One year later. Zethar is walking by when Mordecai stops him.

MORDECAI. Hey, there's a rumor going around that something's finally happening with the beauty contest? I know someone who's been in there for over a year.

ZETHAR. There's a dinner tonight with the finalists. You may be able to see them if you stand right next to the palace gate.

MORDECAI. Thank you.

ZETHAR. Your friend's been there a year?

MORDECAI. Longer. My daughter. Adopted daughter. Really my niece.

ZETHAR. It's been very competitive. Lots of devastating rose ceremonies. The finalists are so lucky.

MORDECAI. I don't know about the rest of them, but she's always been lucky.

ZETHAR. Oh yeah? I —

MORDECAI. Shhh.

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ZETHAR. What?

MORDECAI. The palace guards are saying something. I'm listening.

ZETHAR. But they're speaking — gibberish.

MORDECAI. Shhh!!

GUY READING MEGILLAH. *(Reacts as he reads the scroll.)* Huh. Mordecai hears the guards talking about the king. *(Worried.)* Wait, where is the king? Oh, here he is... inside the palace! *(Scrolls further and gets out of the way...)*

SCENE 9

Ahasuerus enters with Hegai following.

AHASUERUS. Oh Hegai, I'm getting so tired of this contest. Having to make small talk about essential oils, sleeping with a different woman every night, not feeling any real connection with any of them.

HEGAI. In that case, I know who you should meet next. This is Esther.

AHASUERUS. "Esther," like a star? *(Hegai nods. Esther enters.)*

Oh yes, she is. *(Hegai backs away and then exits.)*

ESTHER. Good evening, your highness.

AHASUERUS. You are — glittering.

ESTHER. Oh, I'm not really glittering, I just had a really long beauty treatment.

AHASUERUS. No, I think it's coming from you.

ESTHER. Thank you very much.

AHASUERUS. And you're so polite... Come over here! Sorry, I mean, "please" come over here. My manners aren't as good as yours because everyone always obeys me. When you're king, you don't really learn to say please or thank you. I'm working on that.

ESTHER. Oh it's easy. Whatever you're saying, just add it.

AHASUERUS. Thank you. You smell really good.

ESTHER. Thank you.

AHASUERUS. You're welcome! Where are your things?

ESTHER. I didn't bring anything except for what Hegai set aside for me already. I trust her.

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AHASUERUS. Respect for authority. I like that. *(Suggestively.)* Do you... play any games?

ESTHER. Games?

AHASUERUS. Games.

ESTHER. I play backgammon.

AHASUERUS. Backgammon's my favorite game!

ESTHER. It is? I've never heard that!

AHASUERUS. I've told nobody! Because I didn't want to meet a girl who was pretending to like backgammon for my sake! *(Moved.)* I wanted to have a genuine common interest!

ESTHER. I used to play backgammon every day with my guardian.

AHASUERUS. You're an orphan?

ESTHER. Yes.

AHASUERUS. Wow. You're like a character in a book! Orphan. Virgin. Glittering star named star. And you like backgammon too...?

ESTHER. Love backgammon.

AHASUERUS. I can't believe this is happening.

ESTHER. And you're so different than I imagined.

AHASUERUS. What did you imagine?

ESTHER. Um.

AHASUERUS. I command you to tell me.

ESTHER. I will. But do you want to try to say that more politely?

AHASUERUS. Yes! Thank you. Please tell me. What have you heard?

ESTHER. Some people say you're mean. That you were mean to—

AHASUERUS. Ah, the former queen. She was impossible. I was a little mean. But I'd been drinking a huge amount. And I realize now, I can't handle that. A little wine with dinner but not a bottle every hour. I've stopped that.

ESTHER. It's so important to know your limits. *(A moment as they look at each other. Then he has a thought.)*

AHASUERUS. So, do you want to...?

ESTHER. Do I want to...?

AHASUERUS. You know...

ESTHER. I think I know but I'm not...

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AHASUERUS. Oh come on. We've waited long enough. Don't you want to... play backgammon?

ESTHER. Yes! *(They go offstage.)*

GUY READING MEGILLAH. Here the Megillah skips time... and now it's the next morning... Mordecai is waiting by the Palace Gate.

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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