ESTHER IN AMERICA

THE SCROLL'S INTERPRETATION IN AND IMPACT ON THE UNITED STATES

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understood their villains as modern Pharaohs and Hamans.[59] Perhaps less intuitive and made clearer through historical sources is how biblical narratives are selected and personalities are summoned at particular moments. The renewed attention paid to Esther in the final decades of the nineteenth century indicates the all-important need to calibrate historical memory and contemporary trends to form meaningful interpretation.

59. See, for example, Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776–1865," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York, 1982), 39–58.

The Esther Aesthetic and Jewish Beauty Queens in Early Twentieth-Century America

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After a six-month nationwide search, doe-eyed and dark haired nineteen-year-old beauty Katherine Spector was crowned "Prettiest US Jewess" in front of a crowd of 22,000 people in Manhattan's Madison Square Garden on Purim day, March 11, 1933, at the annual "Queen Esther" contest sponsored by the Jewish National Workers' Alliance. As "Queen," Spector won a trip to Palestine and was expected to make several public appearances like her predecessors of former years. However, the New Jersey native's reign was short-lived. A gossip column published in the *Daily News* asserted that Spector was not actually a "girl" as the contest rules stipulated. She was accused of being a fraud who was "secretly married," which

resulted in Spector, and the "Queen Esther" contest, being shrouded in scandal for years to follow.[1]

Female beauty contests can be traced back to ancient myths and legendary tales – from Paris' judgment that sparked the Trojan War[2] to Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights* to Cinderella folklore – and seem to have always invited scandal and censure.[3] In addition to hosting a variety of obvious social ills including objectifying women and indulging the male gaze, relegating a woman's worth to looks over intellect or character, and perpetuating unrealistic and non-diverse standards of beauty, pageants also problematize notions of race, ethnicity, and nationhood in claiming that a single female body can represent the ideals of an entire people or community.

The story of Esther, crypto-Jew turned Persian queen, is intricately bound up with questions of appearance versus authenticity, the construction of female subjects, and the formation of national identity. Set during the Babylonian exile when the Jews were living under the control of King Ahasuerus, also identified as Xerxes I, who ruled the

1. Spector, who was an accomplished musician and performer pursuing an acting career, sued the News Syndicate Co. Inc. for libel when Ed Sullivan ran a story in the *Daily News* "imputing unchastity to her" (claiming she was the common-law wife of one William Shemin), thus sabotaging the valuable publicity she received from the contest that was widely publicized throughout North America. While the jury found that Spector was "falsely charged with a secret marriage and false abandonment... and leading a dual existence," and awarded her $11,500 in damages to her personal health and for lost earnings from potential endorsements, engagements, and stage and motion picture opportunities, the trial judge, Justice Kenneth O'Brien, overturned the jury's verdict on the grounds that the "verdict was grossly excessive and disturbs the conscience of the court; her damages were purely fictitious" and that the "conclusion reached was the result of matter not in the record and undoubtedly by reason of bias and prejudice." Seven years later, in 1942, Spector won on appeal at the Supreme Court of NY.
2. According to Greek mythology, when the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite vie for a golden apple inscribed with the words "fairest one," Zeus directs the case to prince Paris of Troy, a reputedly excellent judge of beauty. Each goddess bribes Paris to find in her favor and ultimately Paris accepts Aphrodite's offering of Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in the world and wife of the Greek king Menelaus. The Greeks' attempt to retrieve Helen leads to the Trojan war.
3. See, for example, Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, 1999).

Persian Empire from 486 to 465 BCE,[4] the so-called beauty contest in the second chapter of the *megilla* provides the means for Jewish salvation against the threat of genocide. Following Queen Vashti's dismissal on account of her disobedience, a nationwide search is launched:

> Let there be sought for the King beautiful young maidens; and let the King appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together every beautiful young maiden to Shushan the capital to the harem... and let their cosmetics be given them. Then, let the girl who pleases the King be queen instead of Vashti. (2:2–4)

Mordecai is quick to call Esther's attention to pageant politics when he warns her not to reveal "her people or her kindred" (2:10). In order to not arouse prevailing antisemitic sentiments, Esther is advised to conceal her Jewish heritage. While it is possible for Esther to have practiced Judaism in private and make no outward show of observance, what about physical markers of her identity? Did Esther "look Jewish"? To what extent does Jewish identity conform to notions of race and ethnicity? As we come to learn, the success of the heroine – and her people – rested on the verisimilitude of her outward appearance as a Persian (pageant) queen.

And yet, it could not be clearer that Esther was a reluctant contestant. Twice the *megilla* tells us that Esther was "taken" (*vatilakaḥ*, 2:8, 16), implying she was brought to the capital against her will. The Midrash takes this redundancy to signify that Esther initially went into hiding when the edict was first announced and forcibly brought to the harem. During the ensuing twelve-month preparation period, Esther did not indulge in the cosmetics, apparel, and treatments offered like the other women, and was again coerced into appearing before the king when it was her turn to do so. Nevertheless, King Ahasuerus "set the royal crown upon her head" (2:17).

4. For more on the historicity of the Esther story and Ahasuerus' identity, see Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Malden, 2008), David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield, 1984), and Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (New York, 2003).

For many scholars and modern readers, Esther's selection is cause for mourning, not celebration – a personal tragedy for a young Jewish woman compelled to martyr her modesty to a pagan despot. Yet Mordecai reads her appointment as divine providence: "And who knows whether it was just for such a time as this that you attained the royal position?" (4:14), prompting biblical commentators to unpack Esther's exceptional allure as a virtue that granted her access and influence she would never have had otherwise.

Being placed on a pedestal feels like the last thing the biblical heroine would have wanted; nevertheless, the deployment of Esther as a paragon of Jewish female beauty became widely popular in Jewish communities around the world in the 1920s and '30s. "Esther pageants" in the early twentieth century grew into a diasporic phenomenon that can be traced from Palestine into Europe and South and North America. During the period historians have called the Age of Mass Migration (1850–1914), America absorbed more than 30 million immigrants, including nearly 2 million European Jews. The estimated number of Jews in New York went from 60,000 in 1880 to 1.3 million by 1914, when World War I impacted US border policy.[5] The *megilla*, which captures the Jews' struggle to preserve tradition within the framework of "modern" life under Persian rule, must have resonated loudly with American Jewry. Like during the time period of the Babylonian exile, Jewish immigrants were confronted with the challenge of ensuring the continued existence of a nation with no territory, appointed leader, or central place of worship. Would ethnic survival be dependent on maintaining insularity or was there a successful way to integrate into civic life and avoid the hazards of assimilation? How does one prioritize familial, religious, and national obligations when they compete with each other?

Such concerns were even more complicated for American Jewish women at the turn of the century as suffragists gained momentum and the influx of women into the workforce granted unprecedented

5. See Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffery G. Williamson, *The Age of Mass Migration* (Oxford, 1998); and Gur Alroey, "Jewish Migration, 19th Century to Present," in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness (Oxford, 2013).

financial independence. As social historian Kathy Peiss argues in *Hope in a Jar*, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the puritanical associations of cosmetics with the "painted faces of actresses and prostitutes" were being replaced by the modern sensibility that makeup was a medium of self-realization and expression while the melting pot of America further destabilized the belief that the ideal face was "defined by pale skin and blushing cheeks."[6] Just like the Italian, Irish, Greek, and Slavic immigrants who arrived in the US between 1880 and the Immigration Act of 1924, Eastern European Jews who came ashore were also not considered white.[7] For Jewish women seeking agency and belonging, the possibility that one's identity could be altered with lipstick, mascara, and powder was as compelling as it was contested.

During this era of Jewish relocation and reinvention, how are we to understand the popularity of "Queen Esther" beauty contests across America? Were they civic displays of Jewish pride honoring Esther's legacy or acts of assimilation designed to parallel icons like the Miss America pageant inaugurated in Atlantic City in 1921?

I suggest that it is precisely at this moment of Jewish national instability in the early twentieth century that the Esther text was perceived to be of critical importance for American Jewry, and I believe it continues to bear relevance in discussions of countenance, character, and American identity today. Unlike any other biblical narrative, the Book of Esther offers a model of a people who do not have the luxury of relying on God's presumed favor and instead shape their own destiny based on merit, ingenuity, and self-reliance consistent with the American dream. In what follows, I offer a brief exploration of how female beauty is defined in the context of the Esther narrative, how the appropriation of Esther's image reveals more about Jewish social anxieties of the time than the biblical narrative itself, and to what extent beauty might be understood as a Jewish virtue.

6. Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (Philadelphia, 2011), 28 and 39.
7. See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (Rutgers, 1998).

BIBLICAL BEAUTY AND THE ESTHER AESTHETIC

Esther appears last in a long line of beautiful biblical women who play various roles in shaping the history of the Jewish people from Eden to exile. Among others, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Tamar, Rahab, Abigail, Bathsheba, Job's daughters, and Esther are all described as *yafeh* (beautiful), the Hebrew term used to signify a pleasing or attractive physical appearance.[8] While *yafeh* remains an abstract concept – never assigned a specific shape, skin tone, eye position, or nose structure – most often ascribed to women, it is a unisex adjective also attributed to male figures including Joseph, David, and Absalom. As exotic strangers passing through Egypt, Sarah, Rebecca, and Joseph's beauty arouse the desire of authority figures, implying a connection between beauty and sexuality, but also power, privilege, and possession.[9]

In Esther's case, the perception of beauty, and its function in ranking one human being over another, is activated by her multicultural context. Within Ahasuerus' vast kingdom, spanning 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia wherein "each people [speaks] in its own language" (1:22), the Jews were a displaced minority.[10] Given the volatile political landscape of Ahasuerus' empire, it's not hard to imagine how prejudice and xenophobia might have reared their heads within the harem, and evaluations of phenotypes may have been charged by bias and bigotry.[11]

8. On the use of *yafeh* in the Hebrew bible, see Robert L. Hubbard, "The Eyes Have It: Theological Reflections on Human Beauty," *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997): 57–72; Hannah K. Tervanotko, "Gendered Beauty: Observations on Portraying Beautiful Men and Women in the Hebrew Bible," in *'So good, so beautiful': Studies into Psalms, Ethics, Aesthetics, and Hermeneutics brought together in Honour of Dorothea Erbele-Küster* (Gorinchem, 2015), 42–52.
9. See David Penchansky, "Beauty, Power, and Attraction: Aesthetics and the Hebrew Bible," in *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics* (Atlanta, 2013), and Luke Ferretter, "The Power and the Glory: The Aesthetics of the Hebrew Bible," *Literature and Theology* 18, no. 2 (June 2004): 123–138.
10. Esther's "people" are exclusively referred to by the ethnoreligious term *Yehudim* (Jews) rather than *Yisrael* or *benei Yisrael*, which never appear in the *megilla*. On the use of the term "Jew" as a marker of ethnic and religious identity from antiquity to the present, see Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick, 2016).
11. According to the *Midrash Rabba*, Esther's selection was, in part, a punishment to the Persian women who "used to speak contemptuously to the Jewish girls, saying that they were so ugly and that no one would look at them" (5:3).

The *Me'am Loez*, an early eighteenth-century anthology of rabbinical commentary, breaks down the logistics of the expansive search, positing that each province conducted a local contest among all of its "beautiful young maidens" (2:3) and sent the regional winner on to the capital as a representative. In this manner, all of the women who were gathered and presented to the king were considered the most beautiful by the conventions of their local communities.

Although Esther ends up receiving the crown, a more fitting title might have been Miss Congeniality, as the Talmud suggests that her character was more lovely than her countenance. While R. Meir says that Esther was given the Hebrew name Hadassah (2:7) "after the designation of the righteous who are called *hadasim*" (myrtles), Ben Azzai argues that Hadassah signifies Esther's stature as neither "tall nor short, but of average height, like a myrtle."[12] R. Neḥemya claims that Hadassah acquired the Persian name *Esther* because it approximates the Aramaic word for moon (*saḥara*), a common expression of beauty; yet R. Yehoshua b. Karḥa infers Hadassah was "of greenish complexion, like a myrtle," quite inconsistent with the fair pallor of the moon. He adds, however, that Esther was "endowed with a touch of grace by God, which made her appear beautiful to the nations and Ahasuerus."[13] While no consensus is reached on Esther's physical attractiveness, the *megilla* affirms that "Esther obtained *ḥein* (grace) in the eyes of all who beheld her" (2:15). R. Elazar explains that this verse "teaches that [Esther] appeared to each person as a member of his own nation," as it is human nature to "find members of [one's] own nation to be the most appealing."[14]

While Plato and Aristotle's definitions diverge, both theorize beauty as objective, located in the proportions and arrangements of external forms that exist independent of an observer. Although Esther's ability to gain favor in the eye of *every* beholder suggests a universal appeal consistent with classical aesthetics, rabbinic literature affirms the inter-subjective nature of physical beauty, ever informed by social and

12. Megilla 13a.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.; *Maharsha* to Megilla 7a.

cultural preferences and biases.[15] Rather than unifying disparate groups in recognition of a singular ideal, Esther's profile becomes a palimpsest upon which viewers narcissistically project their own physiological features. R. Elazar's exegesis, and early Judaic hermeneutics more broadly, anticipates the definition of beauty proposed by eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume in his essay "On the Standard of Taste": "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others."

Esther's predecessor, Queen Vashti, whose name is derived from the Old Persian word for "beautiful woman," is also described as beautiful (*yafeh*) in the *megilla* (1:11), though commentators spill much ink in painting the two women as foils.[16] In the Midrash, Vashti is cast as an immoral and vain exhibitionist. When an argument breaks out over whether Persian or Medean women are more beautiful, Ahasuerus boasts that his wife is Babylonian, making her the fairest of them all, while also posing the female body as an artisanal domestic product. In objection, the courtiers reply that even the ugliest woman adorned as a queen looks attractive, which inspires Ahasuerus to summon Vashti to appear in nothing but her crown in order to end the debate once and for all. The *megilla* relates that "Queen Vashti refused to come" (1:12), which has led to many scholars reclaiming Vashti as a proto-feminist.[17] Nevertheless, the midrashic view maintains Vashti's beauty was skin-deep; the commentators deliberate on Vashti's apprehension about presenting herself in this exposed manner – either because it feels beneath the

15. In his *Daf Yomi* column on Nedarim 66, Adam Kirsch concludes that beauty "meant a long head, fine and smooth hair, wide eyes, small ears, a full nose, thin lips, flat stomach, and narrow legs" for women in the talmudic era ("The Talmud's Guide to Jewish Feminine Beauty," *Tablet Magazine* [2015], https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/belief/articles/daf-yomi-138).

16. On the Persian origin of Vashti's name, see Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (New Haven, 1995), and Karen H. Jobes, *Esther: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 66.

17. See Tzvi Sinensky's chapter, "Vashti Comes to America," in this volume.

dignity of a queen or because her confidence wavered – but conclude that the only reason she disobeys the king is a sudden outbreak on her skin causing disfigurement.[18]

Investing in beauty for the sake of self-indulgence, distraction, and shaming others is displayed as antithetical to Jewishness in the Esther narrative, though self-adornment and physical refinement are not rejected wholesale. Esther prepares for her unsolicited visitation to Ahasuerus, an action punishable by death, by praying and fasting for three days. Dramatic irony draws the contrast between the two women into sharper focus: Vashti was executed for refusing a summons and now Esther enters unbidden at her own peril. In addition to spiritual preparation, the *megilla* notes that "Esther put on her royal robes" (5:1) and commentators elaborate on the transformation: "She dressed herself in bejeweled robes and a dress woven of the finest silk bedecked with fine African stones. She placed her golden slippers on her feet and royal crown on her head... [and] God illuminated her face like the sun."[19] Although Esther initially seems artless in ornamentation, she is keenly aware of the rhetorical efficacy of appearance, particularly an alluring one. Through regal self-fashioning, Esther owns her role as Ahasuerus' chosen queen, the symbolic female representation of the future of the Persian empire. In response, the king grants "up to half the kingdom" to the clandestine Jewess (5:3), ultimately enabling her to shift his favor more positively toward her own people.[20]

While Esther's ethnic ambiguity works to the Jews' collective advantage, others perceive it as a threat. Martin Luther famously refused to offer commentary on Esther's eponymous text, perhaps because he

18. *Me'am Lo'ez* (1:9–12).

19. *Me'am Lo'ez* (5:1).

20. Esther has become the prototype for a woman who mobilizes beauty, timing, and proximity to power to influence leaders in support of the Jewish people and/or traditional (biblical) values. Most recently, during her vice-presidential campaign in 2008, former beauty pageant winner Sarah Palin was paralleled with Queen Esther by supporters; see Michael Joseph Gross' *Vanity Fair* article "Is Palin's Rise Part of God's Plan?" (https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2010/10/sarah-palin-as-queen-esther-201010). For more on the Esther paradigm in American politics, see Tevi Troy's chapter in this volume.

saw her as literalizing the antisemitic metaphor of the Jew as a deceptive prostitute, which he articulates in *Against the Jews and Their Lies* (1543): "[L]et us suppose that somewhere a pretty girl came along, adorned with a wreath, and observed all the manners, the duties, the deportment, and discipline of a chaste virgin, but underneath was a vile, shameful whore.... What good would her fine obedience in observing outwardly all the duties and customs of a virgin's station do her?" While Luther's anxiety about the duplicity of external appearances is directed at the Jews, it applied more broadly to ongoing debates about artificial observance and "true believers" in sixteenth-century Reformation Europe.

Luther's hostility was embraced by German Protestants in the late nineteenth century and fed into racial constructions of Jewishness that emerged in the period, such as the best-selling antisemitic text *Les Femmes d'Israël* (1898) which includes a lengthy discussion of French actress Sarah Bernhardt as an example of the mythic Jewess, whose bewitching beauty conceals a degenerate core.[21] The same physiognomic features that contributed to Bernhardt's global celebrity – her thin frame, pale skin, "Hebraic" nose, and frizzy red hair – become markers of the unhealthy and dissimulating body of the Jew which is taken up in the "race science" used to legitimate differences between Aryans and Jews in the twentieth century.[22]

While the *megilla* highlights beauty's capacity for destruction and redemption – as well as the complex relationships between surface, substance, and subjectivity – it also shows that hazards lie not in beauty itself, but in its application.

21. Nazi propaganda drew directly from Luther's writings in the 1930s when his 1543 treatise was reprinted and even held up at rallies. See Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington, 2012).
22. Negative perceptions of the Jewish female body are still operating in the twenty-first-century film industry, as evidenced by the experiences of actors like Emmy Rossum, who has been vocal about the antisemitism she's experienced as a Jewish celebrity, and Winona Ryder (born Winona Laura Horowitz), who has been encountering Jewish stereotypes in the film industry since the 1990s. Rossum shares that casting agents defensively qualify their disbelief that she "doesn't look Jewish" as if it were a compliment, and Ryder has lost roles for looking "too Jewish," yet has also been told, "Wait, you're Jewish? But you're so pretty!" (https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/winona-ryder-says-mel-gibson-asked-her-is-she-was-an-oven-dodger).

COMPETITION OR CONNECTION? QUEEN ESTHER PAGEANTS IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

In 1872, another kind of "beauty queen" was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in the Polish shtetl of Krakow. By the turn of the century, Chaja Rubinstein had built an empire and earned worldwide renown as Madame Helena Rubinstein, cosmetics entrepreneur, art patron, and philanthropist, credited with creating the modern beauty industry.[23] In contrast to her long-time rival Elizabeth Arden, whose brand hinged on social elitism, Rubinstein's company leveraged her identity as an international connoisseur catering to women of all ages and complexions. In 1915, Rubinstein opened her first New York salon after establishing posts abroad in Australia and throughout Europe. By the 1930s, the Helena Rubinstein Corporation offered hundreds of cosmetic products and a multitude of beauty treatments, from creams, lipsticks, and hair colorization to skin analysis, light therapy, and deportment classes. When Rubinstein relocated her New York salon to a space not far from Arden's famous red door on Fifth Avenue in 1928, she ran an advertisement in *Vogue* that read: "These new Maisons de Beauté are the response to an expanded demand: A demand for a new type of beauty which is not a type at all, but is a perfection aimed in every detail toward the expression of individuality."

As evidenced in the African, Oceanic, and South American art collection Rubinstein amassed, and the marketing campaigns she ran that claimed to provide "secrets of the orient" and featured icons of the Italian Renaissance, Rubinstein "championed a multicultural identity and a nonhierarchical assessment of beauty" that reflected America's diversity in the early twentieth century.[24] Although Rubinstein considered herself a non-practicing Jew, Kathy Peiss argues that Rubinstein's Jewish identity heightened her sensitivity to the "varying beauty needs and skin types of women of different ethnic origins." In *War Paint*, a monograph on the Arden-Rubinstein rivalry, Lindy Woodhead notes that while Rubinstein adopted the name Helena as homage to the

23. See Michèle Fitoussi, *Helena Rubinstein: The Woman Who Invented Beauty* (Sydney, 2012).
24. Mason Klein, *Helena Rubinstein: Beauty Is Power* (New Haven, 2014), 20.

legendary Greek beauty, in keeping her Jewish surname, the queen of cosmetics stood in opposition to the antisemitism and racism of her day.[25]

It is against this social and historical backdrop that we must view the rise of national beauty contests in America, and the Queen Esther pageants that gained popularity in the 1920s and '30s, when makeup meant modernity and investing in physical appearance was considered a form of female empowerment and expression. The decade following World War I also saw an increase in protections for minority populations and the rights of all peoples regardless of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion. Under these conditions, modern Jewish culture began to flourish, and even before Esther's reputation was borrowed for beauty contests, the biblical saga of the bold and beautiful diasporic Jew captivated a range of public audiences.

As reported in the *Chicago Tribune* on March 16, 1913, a cast of 350 Jewish schoolchildren were to perform the "Great Pageant of Esther" the following Sunday in honor of the Purim festival to a public crowd of 2,000; the showcase would stage the epic story in pantomime, dance, and song and be directed by Miss E. C. Erlich, a local award-winning writer. In 1915, at the largest open-air event of its kind in Selig (now Luna) Park in Los Angeles, a cast of over 100 presented the "Pageant of the World's Birth," a dramatic spectacle representing six impressive biblical scenes, involving animals from the park's zoo, including "Queen Esther in her glory," organized by the Roosevelt Auxiliary to benefit United Spanish War Veterans.[26] A similarly large-scale "Queen Esther pageant" featuring nearly 200 "children, old men and beautiful women" was announced in the *Washington Post* in August 1923 as a fundraiser for local community playgrounds in the Alexandria/DC area.[27] While the performative afterlives of Esther are difficult to trace in early twentieth-century America, these headlines suggest her famed beauty and character were creatively represented through the arts and channeled in the spirit of public service.

25. Lindy Woodhead, *War Paint: Madame Helena Rubinstein and Miss Elizabeth Arden* (Hoboken, 2003), 108.
26. "Pageant of the World's Birth: Spanish War Veterans Plan Brilliant Spectacle," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1915, p. II 1.
27. "Elaborate Preparations for Queen Esther Pageant Next Month for Playground," *Washington Post*, August 5, 1923, p. 15.

The appropriation of Esther's legacy for female beauty competitions, however, would prove a more complicated matter.

In *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World*, Sarah Banet-Weiser shows that the rise of beauty events that crowned an individual body as representative of American national identity was hardly a linear or uncontested development.[28] Miss America, the longest-running beauty contest in the US, can trace its roots back to the 1920s when newspapers selected "Inter-City Beauties" from mailed-in photographs, and those winners went on to various competitions, including the one held in Atlantic City in 1921, organized, in part, to attract tourists at the end of the summer season. Over the next few years, other beauty contests at the local and national levels emerged, including the International Pageant of Pulchritude in Galveston, Texas, which would become the precursor for the Miss Universe contest. As displays of civic pride, prominence, and modernity, organized competitions spread like wildfire throughout Palestine, South America, and Europe.[29]

In 1929, Erzsébet Simon, a blond-haired, blue-eyed Hungarian Jew, won the Miss Hungary competition before going on to win the first annual Miss Europe beauty pageant. Although Simon was invited to compete in the Miss Universe pageant in America later that year, antisemitic responses and messages of moral import from religious figures (including Bishop Christopher Edward Byrne of Galveston where the contest was to be held) led to Simon's withdrawal.[30] However, Lisl Goldarbeiter, who considered herself a practicing Jew, won the title of Miss Austria out of 1,200 contestants that same year and did travel

28. Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley, 1999). See also Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago, 1984).
29. On the use of Queen Esther pageants to advance the Zionist agenda abroad in the early twentieth century, see Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern, "Who's the Fairest of Them All? Women, Womanhood, and Ethnicity in Zionist Eretz Israel," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 11 (Spring 5766/2006): 142–163, and Adrina Brodsky, "Electing 'Miss Sefaradi' and 'Queen Esther': Sephardim, Zionism, and Ethnic and National Identities in Argentina, 1933–1971," in *The New Jewish Argentina* (Leiden, 2012).
30. In his letter to Simon, Roman Catholic clergyman Byrne described the competition as a "vulgar advertising stunt" that jeopardized the modesty and self-respect of the young participants.

to Texas with her mother in 1929, despite the letter she too received from Bishop Byrne. Goldarbeiter, who had the fair complexion of her father and dark hair of her mother, won the title of Miss Universe by a unanimous decision, yet she also faced the ugliness of antisemitism when she returned to Europe and eventually withdrew from public life.[31]

As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, national beauty contests "offer a glimpse at the constantly changing and always complicated stories about the nation itself: Who counts as part of the nation? What does it mean to be a specifically feminine representative of a nation? How are social concerns – such as racism, multiculturalism, and 'family values' – mediated in and through women's bodies on a public stage?"[32] I believe these questions were just as present and perhaps even more politically charged when Esther was chosen as queen of Persia in the fourth century CE. The establishment of "Queen Esther" beauty contests for young Jewish women abroad and in America at the turn of the century seems contrary to the biblical heroine's ethos; Esther was an unwilling participant who concealed her Jewish identity, while the young women participating in these events donned their Jewishness as well as their evening attire.

In surveying historical records, Philip Goodman finds that the Purim Association of the City of New York organized yearly philanthropic balls that often included the presentation of a "Queen Esther" beginning in the late 1880s.[33] The Jewish Education Association of Indianapolis sponsored its first annual Queen Esther contest in 1912, which continued to run for over twenty years. While records are limited, contests within the Jewish community of the greater New York area scaled up as pageant culture in America steadily grew. Starting in 1929, the Jewish National Workers' Alliance hosted its first Queen Esther Pageant timed to coincide with the festival of Purim, which sought to

31. See Ro Oranim, "How Anti-Semitism Robbed the Jewish Miss Europe of her Crown," *The Librarians* (2018), https://blog.nli.org.il/en/miss_europe/. See also Péter Forgács' documentary "Miss Universe 1929" (Mischief Films, 2006).

32. Banet-Weiser, 2.

33. Philip Goodman, "Purim Association of the City of New York (1862–1902)," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* 40, no. 2 (December 1950).

find "the most beautiful of the Jewish girls of the Country." Photographs were received over a period of several months and popular vote determined which girls would travel to New York to appear before a panel of twelve judges. Fannie Rachel Moses of Brooklyn was chosen as "Queen Esther" and runner-up Esther Manischewitz of Cincinnati received the title "Lady-in-Waiting." The geographical distance represented by the winners contributed to the notion of a dispersed yet unified American Jewish community, while the prize – a free trip to Palestine – further underscored the contest's nationalistic objectives. The following year, the same event was held at Madison Square Garden and featured a performance by star-of-the-Yiddish-stage Stella Adler supported by a company of acclaimed Jewish actors and twenty ballet dancers, much like the pomp and circumstance that had come to embellish contests like the Miss America pageant. In terms of their similar social agendas, the Queen Esther pageants likewise used this platform to show that the Jewish community also produced beautiful, service-oriented citizens, as typified by their chosen "queen."

By the time Katherine Spector was crowned "Queen Esther" in 1933, beauty contests worldwide had become increasingly contested spaces. Once seen as opportunities for women who had recently become consumers of fashion and cosmetics to participate in a new form of physical self-realization and social freedom (in many ways consistent with the ideals of the suffragist movement and the first wave of feminism), this pop culture trend drew outrage from all sides. From within the Jewish community, religious dissenters saw the practice of displaying and judging female bodies as an abomination of Jewish values and a debasement of Esther's character. In January 1930, Rabbi Kook sent a letter to Mayor Dizengoff urging him to cancel the "monster of the selection of a beauty queen from among Eretz Israeli Judaism" which had been part of the annual Tel Aviv Purim festivities since 1926.[34] Feminist critics were less concerned with modesty and more outraged by the commodification of the female body that pageants allowed and the social control men exercised over women by perpetuating restrictive beauty

34. See Nina S. Spiegel, *Embodying Hebrew Culture* (Detroit, 2013), 48.

ideals.[35] While a few "Queen Esther" pageant fundraisers unaffiliated with Jewish institutions continued into the late 1930s, opposition from women's groups, combined with the financial difficulties of the Great Depression, impeded all beauty contest organizers throughout America for the next several years.[36]

It is possible to read the short-lived Queen Esther pageants coordinated by American Jews during this period not as acts of assimilation, but as acts of self-preservation and aspiration: like the biblical ingénue who successfully negotiated living in different realms of presentation, perhaps Jewish immigrants could script a similar "ending" for themselves as foreign inhabitants who not only gain protection from their host country, but achieve acceptance and prominence. At the same time, hosting contests designed to parallel an American cultural practice yet restrict participation to Jewish women allowed communities to outwardly validate their claims of national inclusion on the basis of beauty without forfeiting the security of insularity. While the risks and affordances of that representation are constantly shifting, Esther's legacy pushes us to keep asking ourselves where, how, and why we seek belonging.

Bess Myerson's selection as the first and only Jewish Miss America winner in 1945 offers a fraught response to these questions. For Banet-Weiser, Myerson "represented the thousands of people for

35. See Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago, 1984), and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York, 2002). For a recent reflection, see Lauren Collins, "Miss America's History-Makers and Rule-Breakers," *New Yorker* (August 31, 2020), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/09/07/miss-americas-history-makers-and-rule-breakers.

36. For instance, pastor Rev. B. L. David of Liberty Baptist Church "cordially invited [its] members and friends to witness ... 'The Coronation of Queen Esther' [in which were] several princesses contesting for the crown" before a panel of community judges formed by "some of Atlanta's best leading citizens," in an announcement printed in the May 15, 1938, *Atlanta Daily World*. The following year, the *Los Angeles Times* announced the "first annual Queen Esther Ball ... under the direction of Henry Bellows, writer and producer associated with Cecil B. De Mille," sponsored by the Merchants, Manufacturers and Professionals Club and designed to benefit the Los Angeles Sanitarium; the event, to be held at the Ambassador hotel, would be "climaxed by the crowning of Queen Esther I, who will be selected from among 64 'princesses,' each nominated by separate social, fraternal or philanthropic groups" (*Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1939, p. A24).

whom American soldiers were fighting. Beautiful, talented, the daughter of immigrants, she was living proof of or testimony for the reliability of the American Dream. Her body, identified publicly as Jewish, situated Myerson as a specific site for displacing a nation's troubles, anxieties, and guilt."[37] Of course, there are many degrees of separation between tolerance and acceptance, and several public figures and industries refused to recognize Myerson's title. When Myerson became the target of open antisemitism, she partnered with the Anti-Defamation League and used her public platform to spread the message "You Can't Be Beautiful and Hate," actively aligning beauty with moral virtue.

To some degree, I see the Miss America pageant's decision to eliminate the swimsuit portion of the century-old contest in 2020 as a symbolic step closer to an "Esther aesthetic" and the biblical heroine's lasting impact toward a definition of beauty that creates unity without dissolving differences. In shifting focus from outward aspects of the female body to voice, poise, and civic purpose, the modern-day pageant moves closer to a leadership competition, advancing a definition of beauty that holds space for women of all backgrounds while operating on the metric of *ḥein* (grace). At a time when Jewish life is more diverse than ever – from Eastern Europe to Ethiopia and beyond – and in an America that is profoundly divided on issues of race, religion, and equality, perhaps Esther has been positioned all along "for such a time as this" – teaching us that beauty, like any privilege, is one that must be used in the service of others.

37. Banet-Weiser, 158.