



# **The Esther Story for Grown-Ups**

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# Outline of the Purim Story

- King Ahasuerus dethrones Queen Vashti.
- Esther is crowned queen after winning a beauty contest.
- Mordecai (Esther's cousin) uncovers a plot to kill the king and reports it.
- King Ahasuerus promotes Haman, making him more powerful than all the other officials.
- Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman [a close confidant of the king].
- Haman seeks to destroy the Jews after his run-in with Mordecai.

# Outline of the Purim Story

- Mordecai appeals to Esther to save her people. Esther approaches King Ahasuerus and invites him and Haman to a banquet.
- Mordecai is honored for having saved the king's life. Esther entertains the king and Haman, and invites them to a second banquet.
- Esther pleads for her people at the second banquet. She accuses Haman.
- The king grants Esther's request and condemns Haman to die on the gallows that he built for the Jews.
- The Jews defend themselves throughout Persia [against those following out the decree to destroy the Jews].
- The holiday of Purim is established.
- Mordecai advances to a position of importance.

# Historical Background

- Xerxes I reigned in Persia from 485-465 B.C.E. (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.).
- The Book of Esther was composed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.
- Some parallels to other Ancient Near East stories, particularly regarding names of characters.



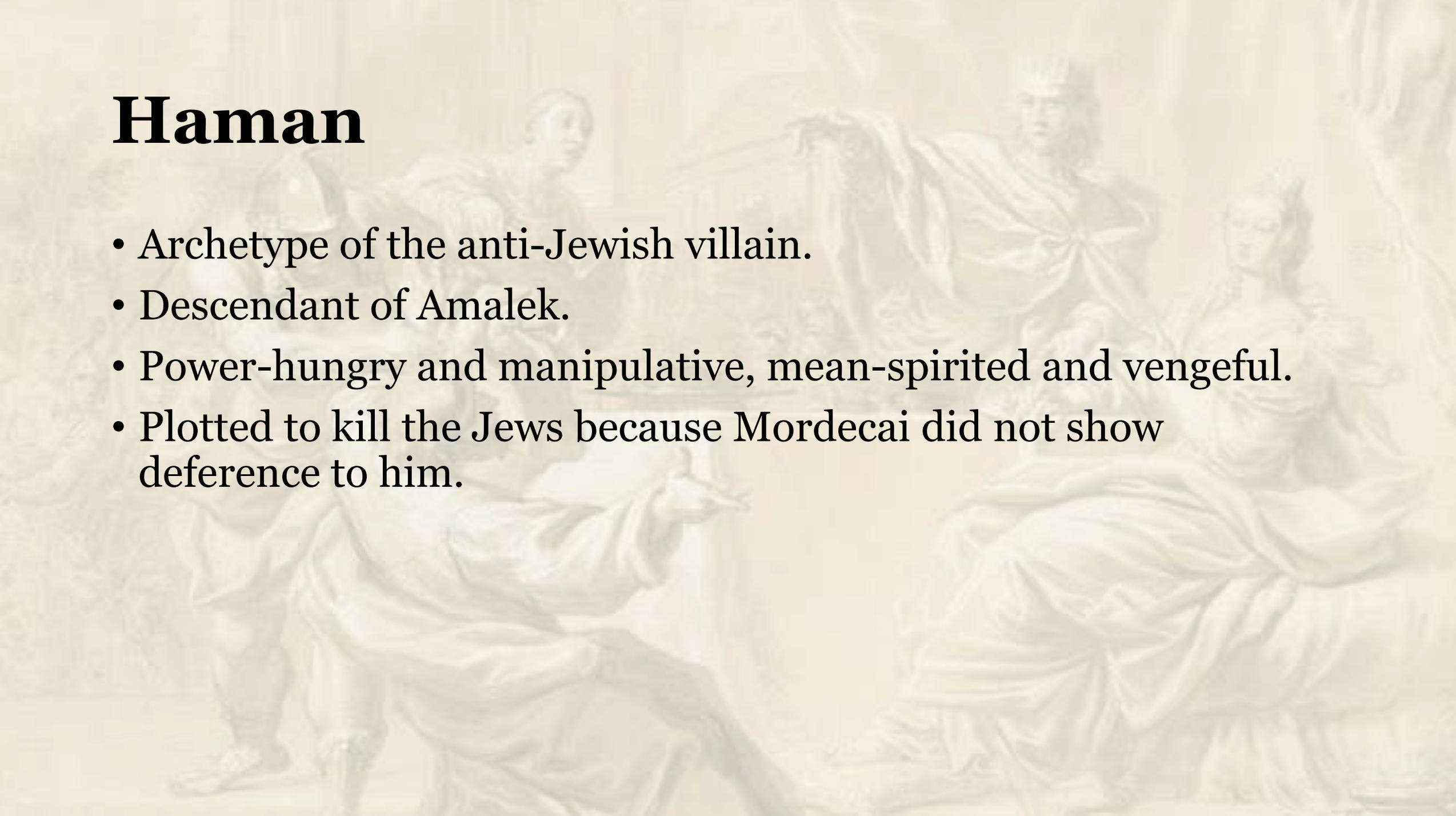
# Vashti

- First wife of King Ahasuerus of Persia.
- Summoned to appear before the king and his courtiers wearing (only) her crown.
- Her summons and response make the king look foolish.
- She revealed how easily the king could be manipulated by people in his circle.
- She refused and was banished.

# Ahasuerus

- A silly and vain ruler with enormous power and no control.
- Ruled from India to Ethiopia.
- More concerned about how he looked than the results of his actions.
- Easily manipulated by anyone with whom he came into contact.

# Haman

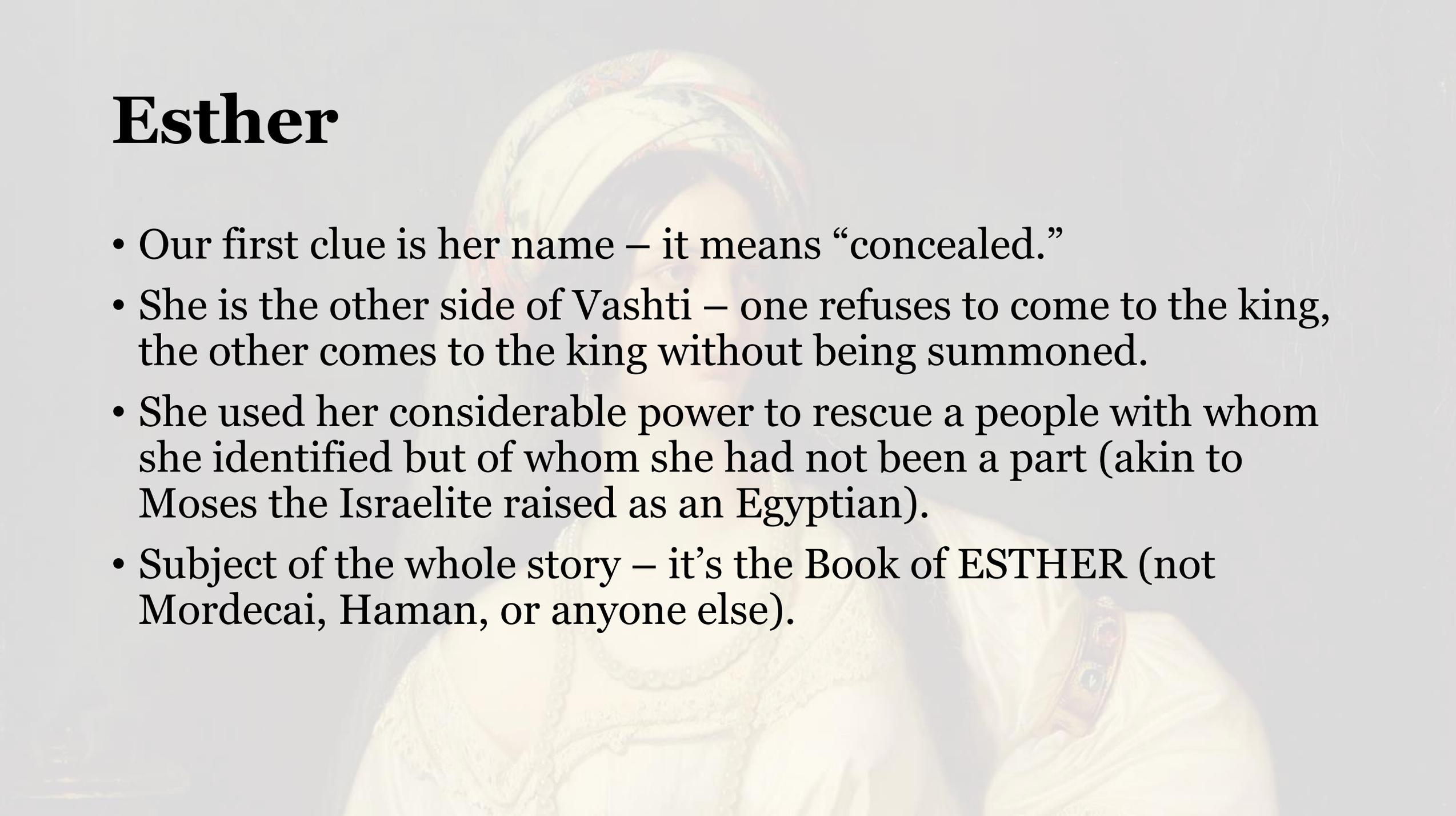


- Archetype of the anti-Jewish villain.
- Descendant of Amalek.
- Power-hungry and manipulative, mean-spirited and vengeful.
- Plotted to kill the Jews because Mordecai did not show deference to him.

# Mordecai

- An example of a Jew with great secular authority (akin to Joseph in the Torah).
- Smarter and more strategic than Haman.
- Not running for his dinner – running for his life.
- Cousin of Esther, whom he sets up to help with his pro-Jewish/anti-Haman plan.

# Esther



- Our first clue is her name – it means “concealed.”
- She is the other side of Vashti – one refuses to come to the king, the other comes to the king without being summoned.
- She used her considerable power to rescue a people with whom she identified but of whom she had not been a part (akin to Moses the Israelite raised as an Egyptian).
- Subject of the whole story – it’s the Book of ESTHER (not Mordecai, Haman, or anyone else).

# The Experience of the Diaspora

- Where is God?
  - Esther 4:13-14: Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter (מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר), while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”
- How much does our experience as Jews depend on external factors, and what can we do about those?