Introduction There is a question that quietly hums beneath the surface of the Megillah, one that readers have sensed for generations even when they haven't quite found the words for it: What is the real connection between Esther and Vashti? On the surface, the answer seems almost too simple one queen exits the story, and another enters. Vashti refuses the king's command and is deposed; Esther is chosen from among all the women of the empire to take her place. One is Persian royalty; the other is a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. One acts with defiance; the other operates through concealment and strategy. They never share a scene. They never speak to one another. And yet, the more deeply we read the Megillah and its surrounding rabbinic literature, the more we sense that these two women are profoundly, even mysteriously, intertwined. This is the question we are going to explore together today, drawing on a rich constellation of traditional sources. We will look at the plain text of the Megillah itself, including [Esther.2:17] and [Esther.2:7], and then dive into the depths of Talmudic discussion in [Megillah.12a:19] and [Megillah.12b:5]. We will also engage with the illuminating commentary of the Daf Shevui on Megillah, particularly [Daf Shevui to Megillah.13a:17], and [Daf Shevui to Megillah.15b:19], as well as the Steinsaltz commentary on [Steinsaltz on Esther.2:17] and [Steinsaltz on Esther.2:9]. Together, these sources will help us see that Esther and Vashti are not simply sequential characters they are two poles of a single moral and spiritual drama about identity, power, concealment, and the courage it takes to act in a world that does not invite women to speak. So let us begin. Let us read slowly, and with open hearts. Contextual Foundation The Book of Esther is unusual in the Hebrew Bible for many reasons. God's name does not appear in it. It is set entirely in the diaspora, in the Persian court of Shushan. Its heroine is a woman, and its plot turns on the actions of women not just Esther, but also Vashti, whose act of refusal sets the entire machinery of the story into motion. Without Vashti's "no," there is no vacancy for Esther. Without Esther's concealment and eventual revelation, there is no salvation for the Jewish people. These two women bookend the Megillah's central drama, and understanding their relationship requires us to think carefully about what each of them represents. Jewish tradition has never been content to leave the Megillah at its surface level.

The rabbis of the Talmud, the medieval commentators, and modern scholars like Steinsaltz have all recognized that the Megillah is a text saturated with irony, hidden meaning, and theological depth. The very hiddenness of God in the text mirrors the hiddenness of Esther herself her identity concealed, her Jewishness undisclosed, her true self operating beneath layers of Persian identity and royal costume. And if Esther is a figure of concealment, then Vashti who refuses to conceal herself, who says no when commanded to display herself is in some ways her mirror image. There is also a broader theme here that touches on the nature of Jewish life in exile. How does one survive, let alone thrive, in a world where your identity is dangerous? How much do you reveal? How much do you hide? When do you speak? When do you remain silent? Esther navigates all of these questions across the length of the Megillah, and Vashti, in her brief but pivotal appearance, raises them in a different register. The connection between them, as we shall see, is not merely narrative it is deeply human. With this context in mind, let us turn to the sources themselves. Source Analysis We begin where the text itself places the connection most explicitly. In [Esther.2:17], the Megillah states: "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti." The phrase "instead of Vashti" is deceptively simple. In Hebrew, the word is tachat which can mean "instead of," "in place of," or even "beneath." Esther does not merely succeed Vashti chronologically. She steps into the space that Vashti's refusal created. She wears the crown that Vashti declined to wear on her own terms. The text insists on this connection by naming Vashti explicitly at the moment of Esther's coronation, even though Vashti has been absent from the narrative for an entire chapter. Why mention her here? Because the author of the Megillah wants us to hold both women in mind simultaneously. The commentary in [Steinsaltz on Esther.2:17] draws our attention to something remarkable: "It is surprising that in Persia and Media a woman who was not of royal blood would be selected as queen." Esther's selection is, by the standards of the ancient Persian court, extraordinary. Vashti was presumably of noble or royal lineage she was already queen when the story begins. Esther, by contrast, is an orphaned Jewish girl, raised by her

cousin, with no political pedigree whatsoever. As [Esther.2:7] tells us: "He was foster father to Hadassah that is, Esther his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter." She is doubly marginalized: a woman and a Jew, an orphan and a foreigner. And yet she becomes queen. This reversal the lowly elevated, the powerful removed is one of the Megillah's central theological gestures. But what was it about Esther that made her so compelling to Ahasuerus? The commentary in [Steinsaltz on Esther.2:9] notes that Hegai, the keeper of the women, recognized Esther as "a serious candidate for the role of queen," suggesting that her appeal was not merely physical but somehow royal an ineffable quality of grace and suitability. And yet [Daf Shevui to Megillah.13a:17] offers a more provocative reading. The commentary explains that the Talmud, citing Rav, reads the double praise of Esther that she was "above all the women" and "above all the virgins" as an allusion to her capacity to be everything to everyone: "She could provide Ahashverosh with the experience of being with a virgin and she could also provide him with the experience of being with the married woman. Again, she can also be whomever someone else wants her to be." This is a startling interpretation, but it points toward something profound about Esther's character: she is, above all, a woman of radical adaptability and concealment. She does not present a fixed, legible identity. She is fluid, hidden, multifaceted. This is her survival strategy, and it is the quality that most sharply distinguishes her from Vashti. Vashti, by contrast, is defined by her refusal to conceal herself on the king's terms or rather, her refusal to display herself on his terms. In [Megillah.12b:5], the Talmud focuses on the verse: "But the queen Vashti refused to come." The rabbis are fascinated by this refusal. Why did she refuse? The Talmud offers several explanations, including the famous tradition that she was afflicted with a skin condition, or that she was commanded to appear wearing only her crown that is, naked. Whatever the reason, Vashti's "no" is an act of self-preservation and dignity, even if the text does not frame it that way. She refuses to be displayed. She refuses to be reduced to her body. And she pays for this refusal with her queenship, and perhaps her life. Now consider [Megillah.12a:19], which examines

the feast that Vashti threw for the women of the palace: "The Gemara questions why she held the feast in the royal house, a place of men, rather than in the women's house, where it should have been. Rava said in response: The two of them had sinful intentions." This is a striking rabbinic move. The Talmud, in characterizing Vashti as sinful, seems to be working against any simple heroization of her. She is not a straightforward feminist icon in the rabbinic imagination she is a complex, morally ambiguous figure whose feast in the men's quarters signals something transgressive. And yet, even in this critique, there is a kind of backhanded acknowledgment of her power: she is capable of crossing boundaries, of occupying spaces not designated for her. In this, she and Esther are more alike than different. The theme of concealment which connects Esther to Vashti through contrast is explored at length in [Daf Shevui to Megillah.13a:18]: "Esther was adamant about not revealing her birthplace. This is a major theme in the book of Esther and the rabbis emphasize it here. Only later on, at the feast she throws to save the Jews, will she dramatically tell the king who she is." This slow, strategic revelation is the spine of the Megillah's plot. Esther's concealment is not cowardice it is calculated wisdom. She understands that her power depends on maintaining mystery, on not being fully known until the moment is right. Vashti, in her refusal, was also refusing to be fully known or rather, refusing to be reduced to a known quantity, a body to be displayed. Both women are navigating the same treacherous waters of a court where women's value is defined by visibility and display. They simply navigate it differently. This brings us to one of the most dramatic moments in the Megillah, explored in [Daf Shevui to Megillah.15b:19]: "Esther invited Haman to her feast so that Ahashverosh would think that the two of them were having an adulterous relationship. The king would kill them both and thereby save the rest of the Jews. This highlights Esther's willingness to martyr herself." This interpretation is breathtaking in its moral complexity. Esther's plan, according to this reading, was to sacrifice her own reputation and possibly her life in order to save her people. She weaponizes the court's assumptions about women and sexuality, turning the male gaze into an instrument of justice. Compare this to Vashti, who refused to be weaponized by the male gaze at all.

Together, these two women represent two different responses to the same oppressive structure: refusal and subversion. Neither is purely heroic; neither is purely passive. Both are deeply human. Finally offers a deeply personal and humanizing portrait of Esther's situation: "Esther was married to Mordecai when she was taken into the house of Ahashverosh. She would have relations with Ahashverosh, bathe and then go and have relations with Mordecai. To be honest, I find this a disturbing image, but I imagine that it may reflect a woman who was taken into the harem of the king, but still was able to maintain her relationship with her husband." The commentator's honesty here is itself instructive. Esther's life in the palace was not glamorous it was a life of profound compromise, of navigating impossible loyalties, of maintaining an inner life beneath an outer performance. And this, perhaps, is the deepest connection to Vashti: both women were subject to the absolute power of a king who treated women as property. Both resisted, in their own ways. Esther's resistance was slower, more hidden, more strategic. Vashti's was immediate and visible. But both were acts of human dignity in a world that did not easily permit it. Practical Insights What do these two women have to teach us today? Quite a lot, I think and the sources we have explored point toward several practical and spiritual insights that remain urgently relevant. The first insight is about the multiplicity of survival strategies. As [Daf Shevui to Megillah.13a:17] suggests, Esther's greatness lay partly in her ability to be "whomever someone else wants her to be" not as a loss of self, but as a strategic deployment of adaptability. In our own lives, we are often forced to navigate environments that do not fully welcome who we are. The question is not whether to adapt, but how to adapt without losing the core of what matters. Esther adapted her outer presentation while maintaining her inner loyalty to Mordecai, to her people, to the truth she would eventually speak aloud. Vashti, as seen in [Megillah.12b:5], chose the path of non-adaptation, of refusal. Both paths carry costs. The Megillah does not tell us which is better. It tells us that both are real, and both are human.