

THE MEANING OF VASHTI'S TAIL

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One of the most famous and perhaps bizarre midrashim concerns Vashti's refusal to enter Achashverosh's feast. Esther 1:12 reads, "And Vashti refused to come at the word of the king." Bavli Megillah 12b asks why she refused and provides two answers: (1) she was plagued with some sort of skin disease or (2) the [angel] Gabriel came and made for her a tail. It is the second of these interpretations I want to focus on. Where did the rabbis get the idea that Vashti grew a tail?

The Maharsha, a 16th century Polish rabbi, connected the idea of Vashti's tail with a midrash on God's creation of woman (Bavli Berakhot 61a). According to one interpretation of Genesis 2:12, the word we usually interpret as "rib"—as in "And Adonai fashioned the rib that he had taken from man"—should be interpreted as "tail." In other words, God created Adam with a tail and then removed that tail in order to create woman. The Maharsha is using this text to prove that the Hebrew word in Bavli Megillah, צנב, really means "tail" and not "growth" or "appendage" as other, more rationally minded medieval interpreters suggested. But in my opinion the comparison between Vashti's tail and Adam's gets to the heart of the meaning the rabbis actually intended with this midrash.

"Like Candlewick in Pinocchio, Vashti's animalistic nature, her unrestrained sexuality, becomes manifest in her body itself. She begins to grow a tail."

A "tail" is one of the key features that distinguish human beings from animals. Indeed, evolutionary biologists believe that our human ancestors had tails (and human fetuses still have tails for a period of about four weeks). Humans "lost" their tails when they began to walk upright and no longer needed the tail for balance. Thus the loss of a tail signifies the transformation of non-human mammal into human mammal. The "tail" is symbolic of our animal nature, and a human that grows a tail is an animal-like human.

Thus, according to this midrash, Adam's "animal" nature, his tail, is removed from him and transformed into woman. This is obviously a male-oriented, even misogynistic midrash, one which views Eve as coming from Adam's animal side. I will address how I approach this issue in a moment. But for now, we can understand why Vashti grew a tail. To the rabbis, Vashti is representative of unbridled sexuality. She makes a party for the women in the royal house where, she, like her husband, intends to engage in licentiousness. Achashverosh's advisers request to see her naked. Vashti was known to strip Israelite women naked and watch them work on Shabbat (all of this can be found in Bavli Megillah 12a-b).

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This midrash is misogynistic for the unbridled potential sexual nature of all human beings is embodied only in women. Achashverosh does not grow a tail. As still too often happens in our society, men (the rabbis composing the midrash) blame women for men's own inability to control their sexual urges. Nevertheless, the idea of this tail, if we neutralize it in terms of gender, i.e. men have, or can have, tails too, still resonates. All human beings, not just women, still have the potential for unbridled, unrestrained sexuality. Indeed, despite our evolutionary development, we retain the potential to have tails (and for a few weeks in the womb, we really do). Culture, wisdom, and Torah in the broadest senses of these words, serve to remove those tails, to bring out the more

elevated aspects of our sexual desires. In Jewish thought, human beings are not to deny sexuality, and indeed Esther, the heroine of our story, has a sexual side to her personality. But she does not grow a tail. Human beings are to channel their sexuality to the holy arena of marriage, to acts of commitment and love where the sexual act may be physically similar to the act in which all animals engage, and may be enjoyed by human beings as it is enjoyed by all creatures, but where the context of this sexuality provides it with an entirely different meaning. That, in its essence, is how I understand the meaning of Vashti's tail.

