

- “Energy” and Jewish Mysticism  
*Elliot B. Gertel with responses by Alfredo Borodowski, Barbara Breitman, Pinchas Giller, Lawrence Kushner and Shaul Magid*
- The Practice of Birth Control in the Book of Esther  
*Joseph H. Prouser*
- Artificial Hydration and Nutrition  
*Leonard A. Sharzer with responses by Elliot N. Dorff and Avram Israel Reisner*

# CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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## “As is the Practice of Women”

### The Practice of Birth Control in the Book of Esther<sup>1</sup>

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*Joseph H. Prouser*

#### 1. To the King’s Bed

The Book of Esther weaves the tale of King Ahasuerus’ quest to replace his unresponsive queen, Vashti. The profligate monarch engages in sexual intercourse on a nightly basis, each night with a young virgin who, the following morning, is unceremoniously relegated to the concubines’ quarters, from which, typically, she does not return to the king’s bed. As the young women await their appointed encounter with the king, they undergo a peculiarly regimented process of preparation:

כדת הנשים שנים עשר חוש כי כן ימלאו ימי מרוקיהן ששה חדשים בשמן  
המר וששה חדשים בבשמים ובתמרוקי הנשים

As is the practice of women, twelve months, for that is the period required for application of their ointments: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with aromatic herbs and with women’s ointments.<sup>2</sup>

William Albright observes that “the commentators have been understandably very chary about speculating on just what this may have meant actually.”<sup>3</sup> Such exegetical wariness is unfortunate, as this verse is crucial to a fuller understanding of Esther.

#### 2. Myrrh Oil

If, as Albright and the Jewish Publication Society translation, among others, propose, the procedure described is to be understood as merely cosmetic, aimed at beautification and fumigation, the year-long process seems an exces-

sive undertaking. Myrrh oil, however, while prized for its aromatic quality, had a more specific use in antiquity which suggests that more than superficial results are being sought. “Myrrh was a component of many anti-fertility potions in ancient and medieval Western medicine.”<sup>4</sup> An ongoing regimen of myrrh mixed with wine (a beverage which notoriously abounds in Ahasuerus’ court) was specified when “Soranus, antiquity’s foremost writer on gynecology . . . described procedures he thought would inhibit conception.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to its properties as an oral contraceptive, Soranus specifically discussed the use of myrrh as an abortifacient agent when used as a pessary (a vaginal suppository or ointment).<sup>6</sup> So applied, myrrh functioned as an emmenagogue, inducing menstruation even with the presence of a fertilized ovum.

The Kahun papyrus, dating to 1850 B.C.E., describes a male contraceptive cream, of which myrrh appears to be the active ingredient.<sup>7</sup> The resulting ointment is rubbed on the penis prior to intercourse. Sexual contact presumably effected the same result as the pessary prescribed by Soranus, unless the ointment was intended as a spermicide.

Pliny the Elder<sup>8</sup> discusses the contraceptive effect of myrrh, as well, as does Scribonius Largus<sup>9</sup> in his medical treatise.

### 3. The Myth of Myrrha

The association of myrrh (botanical name, *Commiphora myrrha*) with contraceptive practices is—quite literally—rooted in Greek mythology.<sup>10</sup> The goddess Myrrha is said to have been condemned to an abusive and incestuous relationship with her father, Theias (also given as Thesis or Cinyras), the legendary King of Assyria. Theias ravaged his daughter in drunken fits at the direction of Aphrodite, who was angered by his refusal to worship her. Myrrha is eventually saved from her father’s murderous advances when the gods transform her into a myrrh tree. The droplets of gum resin that seep from the tree (and from which contraceptive oil is extracted) are said to be Myrrha’s tears.<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to the etiology conveyed by the myth, “the plant became a rescuer of daughters caught in the distress of incest,”<sup>12</sup> by providing them with, at least, a measure of reproductive protection.

The Book of Esther bears striking resemblance to this antecedent Greek myth. Esther’s Hebrew name, Hadassah—that is, “Myrtle”—like “Myrrha,” is shared with a plant known for its contraceptive qualities. Myrtle was, significantly, Aphrodite’s “sacred flower.”<sup>13</sup> Myrtle is frequently prescribed by no less a physician than Hippocrates, both as a pessary and in oral abortifacients, in his medical treatise, *Diseases of Women*.<sup>14</sup> Both myrrh and myrtle continue to serve as anti-fertility agents. “Two recent studies on birth control, one on early modern England, the other on Germany, report numerous instances where women were taking the same plants as their medieval counterparts.”<sup>15</sup>

Like Myrrha, the heroine of the biblical narrative is also engaged in a sexual relationship which violates social taboos and religious norms. In regard to Esther’s coronation, H. L. Ginsberg asserts that “only pedants will object

that in actual history an ancient Persian king could take concubines from all over the empire but was limited to the royal family (the Achamenids) and the seven princely families in the choice of queens.”<sup>16</sup> The objection is hardly pedantic! Reinforcing the biblical character’s literary link to the Myrrha myth, the relationship of Ahasuerus and Esther is, from both partners’ perspectives, a forbidden union.

Esther’s drunken liaison, Ahasuerus, is cast as ruler of a vast Persian empire. Persia supplanted the much earlier Assyrian empire over which Theias is said to have reigned—judging from his attacks on Myrrha, with similar insobriety.

Esther’s life, like that of the Greek goddess whose biography she mirrors, is placed in mortal danger through an edict of her royal husband—albeit at the behest of his vizier, Haman. The specter of rape is subtly introduced into the biblical narrative when Ahasuerus rages at his erstwhile minion, discovered in a compromising position on Esther’s couch: “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?!”<sup>17</sup>

Haman is executed for his abortive plot against Esther’s people and for the sexually suggestive position in which he is discovered appealing for her mercy. Whether the biblical text is to be understood as reporting that Haman was hanged on a gallows or impaled on a stake is a question to be debated by translators. In either case, the Hebrew *etz*<sup>18</sup> is suggestive of the tree which became the instrument of Myrrha’s deliverance.

The absence of God’s name is a well-known element of the Book of Esther. This discreet deletion is quite understandable in a book with such ribald literary sources. The attentive early reader of Esther, however, recognizing resonances of the Myrrha myth, would infer from its literary genre that Esther and her people’s deliverance by “*etz*” was similarly the result of divine agency.

### 4. “With Aromatic Herbs and With Women’s Ointments”

In addition to myrrh oil, Esther 2:12 mentions “aromatic herbs.” A wide variety of such herbs were employed as contraceptives in antiquity and, indeed, in contemporary Latin America and the rural United States. Among these herbal substances, all ointments to smear on the mouth of the uterus, are:

1. old olive oil, or
2. honey, or
3. cedar resin, or
4. juice of the balsam tree [*Commiphora opobalsamum*], alone or together with
5. white lead, or
6. salve with myrtle oil and white lead, or

7. before coitus with moist alum, or
8. galbanum . . .

According to Soranus, ‘such of these things as are styptic, clogging, and cooling cause the orifice of the uterus to shut before the time of coitus and do not let the seed pass into its fundus.’<sup>19</sup>

To this list must be added the now extinct plant silphium. Perhaps the earliest herbal product used to inhibit fertility, silphium is depicted on a Cyrenian coin of the fourth or fifth century B.C.E., which “shows a seated woman touching the plant with one hand while the other points to her genitals.”<sup>20</sup>

Today, similarly, “synthetic products manufactured from diosgenins include human sex hormones”<sup>21</sup> extracted from derivatives of wild yams for use in birth control pills. Seeds from Queen Anne’s Lace are still commonly used with some success as “morning-after” contraceptives in rural America.

An herbalist in the mountains of western Virginia . . . met several women who were well aware of such contraceptive plants, and a student at North Carolina State University told him that in her home state of Indiana seeds from Queen Anne’s Lace were what ‘naughty girls’ used to keep from getting pregnant.<sup>22</sup>

Castor oil, best known as a common liniment or laxative, “is also used as an ingredient in contraceptive creams.”<sup>23</sup>

An effective contraceptive would be a desirable commodity in the context of the prolific sexual escapades ascribed to Ahasuerus. Such a capability would, furthermore, explain the lack of any royal progeny. Ample family data are provided for both Esther and Haman; the latter’s wife and ten sons are enumerated by name. In the absence of contraception, Ahasuerus’ high incidence of intercourse and his multiple partners make his lack of offspring remarkable.

The twelve-month process of herbal ointment application is, apparently, administered with particular care, as suggested by Esther 2:8. “Esther also was taken into the king’s palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the maiden pleased him and won his favor; and he quickly provided her with her ointments.”

The medicinal intent of the virgins’ lengthy application of herbal ointments is subtly suggested by the verse itself: *כי כן ימלאו ימי מרוקיהן*—“That is the period required for application of women’s ointment.” This verse echoes the language of Genesis 50:3 describing the process of embalming Jacob—*כי כן ימלאו ימי החנטים*—“That is the period required for embalming.” This expression appears only in these two verses. In Genesis, the embalmers are explicitly identified as physicians. The similar language in Esther suggests that the process being described there, too, is a medical procedure reflecting carefully prescribed protocols.

No medical professionals are required in Esther because familiarity with

the contraceptive properties of herbs such as myrrh oil is a body of “knowledge passed down through generations of women, but not physicians.”<sup>24</sup> The selection, preparation, and application of contraceptive substances were for many generations, quite literally, *dat ha-nashim*—“the practice of women.” The twelve-month process, while possibly exaggerated, may reflect a regimen linked to the monthly menstrual cycle. Perhaps a lengthy period would be specifically required to achieve sufficient effects in young virgins, who would have had no previous need for such conditioning. Perhaps, too, a conservative, gradual process would allow a cumulative pharmacological impact, while avoiding the toxic effects risked by higher dosages.

## 5. Rabbinic Literature

The similarities between Esther and Myrrha are reinforced by rabbinic literature, perhaps reflecting a period at which the literary connection between the two narratives was more readily recognized. Regarding Mordecai’s relationship as adoptive father to Esther, Tractate Megillah records: *ובמות אביה ואמה*—“And when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.”<sup>25</sup> A Tanna taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: Read not ‘for a daughter’ (*l’bat*), but ‘for a house’ (*l’bayit*—i.e., as a wife).<sup>26</sup>

The blurring of Mordecai’s roles as surrogate father and mate call to mind Theias’ acts of incest. Speculation as to the spousal relationship of Esther and Mordecai is treated even more explicitly. *אמר רבה בר לימא שהיתה עומרת מחיקו*—“Rabbah bar Lema said: Esther got up from Ahasuerus’ bosom, immersed, and lay in the bosom of Mordecai.”<sup>27</sup>

This assertion elicits remarkable discussion among the Tosafot: *ואם תאמר והיא לא היתה שם הבחנת שלשה חדשים שהרי בכל יום היה אותו רשע מצוי אצלה וייל לא היתה שם הבחנת שלשה חדשים שהרי בכל יום היה אותו רשע מצוי אצלה וייל*—“If you say (in objection to Rabbah bar Lema’s statement) that the three-month waiting period (required before remarriage and intended clearly to establish matters of paternity) had not elapsed (and should have been indicated) as that wicked one (Ahasuerus) availed himself of her (sexually) on a daily basis, one could answer (that this was unnecessary) since she used a *mokh* (i.e., a contraceptive absorbent sponge or tampon).”<sup>28</sup>

This Tosafot evokes the legend of Myrrha by portraying a sexual liaison between a surrogate father and his adopted daughter . . . and by asserting the use of contraceptive measures in the context of this relationship. That is, Esther’s use of a *mokh* with Ahasuerus, it is asserted by the Tosafot, actually facilitated her marital (and sexual) availability to Mordecai!

To the growing body of parallels linking the biblical narrative of Esther and the Greek myth of Myrrha must be added a popular etymology of Mordecai’s name: *מרדכי שנקרא ראש לכל בשמים שנאמר ואתה קח לך בשמים*—“Mordecai, is called the chief of all spices, as it is said: ‘Take choice spices, flowing myrrh’—and ‘flowing myrrh’ (*mor dror*) is rendered by the Aramaic Targum as *Mor Dachbi*.”<sup>29</sup> Like Myrrha and

Esther (Hadassah, i.e., “Myrtle”), Mordecai’s name is also related to that of a contraceptive herb!

## 6. Shushan

The contraceptive motif in Esther is further reinforced by the setting of the narrative in the Persian capital of Shushan. The city and seat of royal power shares its name with that of a familiar flower, the lily, or perhaps the rose. Plants of the lily family used for their contraceptive properties include False Solomon’s-Seal (*Smilacina racemosa*)<sup>30</sup> and Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*).<sup>31</sup>

The rose (*shoshanah*) has its own connection to the Myrrha myth. “The Greeks held that the red rose came from the blood of the goddess Aphrodite whose foot got stuck on a thorn while trying to help Adonis,”<sup>32</sup> the son born of Myrrha’s incestuous union with Theias!

## 7. Casting “Pur” and the Monthly Menstrual Cycle

The date selected with such care by Haman for the destruction of the Jewish people is intriguing. “*Pur*—which means ‘the lot’— was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month.”<sup>33</sup> The ravaging of the Jewish community is scheduled for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (Adar). With Esther’s intervention, the Jewish community is empowered to protect and defend itself on the thirteenth and fourteenth of the month. In a book rife with allusions to contraceptive technology, it must be noted that the thirteenth (and fourteenth) of the month—the date on which Haman determined to demonstrate his political virility—correspond to the most fertile period in a 28-day menstrual cycle, the 48 hours before ovulation typically occurs. It is at this point that the menstrual cycle’s proliferative phase concludes and the secretory phase commences.<sup>34</sup> That Haman’s projected attack, scheduled for the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, is announced on the thirteenth day of the first month<sup>35</sup> reinforces the significance of the timing. As in the regulation of the ovulatory process, it is on the thirteenth and fourteenth of the month that “Hadassah” (myrtle—or its contraceptive counterparts) serves a crucial, determinative function. As a result, the plot conceived by Haman—although carefully scheduled for the most auspicious “time of the month”—does not come to fruition. Undone by a woman exercising personal responsibility, and so safeguarding her bodily integrity, Haman loses all potency, as his prescient wife, Zeresh, is, understandably, first to recognize as inevitable.<sup>36</sup>

## 8. “These Days of Purim”

In this context, even the origin of the name “Purim”—the holiday legitimated by the canonicity of the Book of Esther—merits renewed consideration. Notwithstanding the etymology offered by the biblical text itself,<sup>37</sup> it

seems likely that “Purim” derives from the root *“prrr”*—meaning “to frustrate, to fail” or, in the passive voice, “to be made ineffectual.” Thus, Proverbs 15:22, *hapher makhashavot b’ein sod*—“Plans are foiled [*“prrr”*] for want of counsel.” To this and similar attestations of this verb should be added the expression *v’tapher aviyonah*, in Ecclesiastes 12:5. The Revised Standard Version renders the phrase, perhaps allegorically, “and desire fails [*“prrr”*].” Brown-Driver-Briggs explains this verse as “figurative of failing sexual power.”

Thus, “Purim” [*“prrr”*] is not merely the “Feast of Lots;” it is the “Feast of Fruitless Plots”—as in the formulation of Isaiah 8:10, a verse aptly quoted in traditional Purim song: *אל יקום כי עמנו אל*—“Devise a plot—it shall be foiled [*“prrr”*]; conspire together—it shall not succeed, for God is with us!” The Book of Esther’s pre-occupation with contraception reflects Israel’s secure faith—duly celebrated on Purim [*“prrr”*]<sup>38</sup>—that it will succeed in protecting itself from the most dire consequences of ravaging attacks, rendering apparently powerful detractors ultimately ineffectual [*“prrr”*].

## 9. Contraception in the Canon: The Function of Esther

T. H. Gaster identifies Esther’s literary genre as “simply a piece of romantic fiction” which “cannot possibly represent historical fact.”<sup>38</sup> Somewhat less dismissively, H. L. Ginsberg asserts that “the Book of Esther may be described . . . as a mock-learned disquisition to be read as the opening of a carnival-like celebration.”<sup>39</sup> The carnival atmosphere is magnified by the recurrent themes of sexuality and contraception woven into the fabric of the biblical narrative. The religious, moral and, indeed, halakhic implications of a biblical heroine who not only effectively practices contraception, but whose very name is based in contraceptive herbal remedies, are tantalizing but, alas, beyond the scope of the present study. Just as disquieting to some religious circles will be the fact that the earliest readers of Esther within the Jewish community were presumed to have sufficient familiarity with the practice of contraception—its mechanics as well as its literary history—to appreciate the nuanced structure and themes of this unusual biblical book. Parents and religious educators may wonder at how a literary work of such obviously mature subject matter has evolved into a favorite among schoolchildren! Pious and “gastronomic” Jews alike may wish to ponder—from a more informed perspective—the Purim custom of consuming pastries with poppy-seed filling: opium, a poppy derivative, is known as an herbal contraceptive (more precisely, an emmenagogue) of considerable potency.<sup>40</sup>

These questions notwithstanding, the practice of contraception and, specifically, Esther’s apparent use of contraceptive herbs and ointments, serve an important narratological function. The recurrent contraceptive imagery in Esther bespeaks the strength and control she exercises over affairs of state and Jewish national survival. Although confronted with powerful men who would exploit her sexually, and from whom the threat of bodily harm is readily

apparent, Esther manages to protect herself and her people. The Scroll of Esther is thus allegory as national autobiography: the story of a Diaspora Jewry regularly threatened with rapacious assaults by hostile neighbors and historic foes. By shrewdly regulating her own fertility, Esther embodies the spirit of the Jewish people which, with worldly wisdom and regal bearing, adopts a defiant posture of self-determination, allowing no earthly power to direct its fate and future. Fertility, after all, is chief among God's covenantal promises to Israel. Furthermore, bestowing or withholding the blessing of fertility is, throughout the biblical corpus, otherwise treated as exclusively in God's purview. By arrogating willful personal control over this divine prerogative, and in a biblical book in which explicit reference to God is uniquely and conspicuously absent, Esther exemplifies the need for exercising human responsibility in securing Israel's destiny.

The titillating imagery with which the Book of Esther elevates the empowering message of self-determination and human responsibility to an article of faith, accounts—in no small part—for the enduring popularity of the Book and the holiday it purports to establish: ימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו ומזרעם לא יסוף מזרעם—מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם—“And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, nor shall their commemoration come to an end among their seed.”<sup>41</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandmother, Esther Malka Appelstein, who died on Ta'anit Esther 5704. Family lore concerning Esther Malka's personal piety contributed to my interest in the biblical book that bears her name. She was the mother of one son and eleven daughters.
2. Esther 2:12.
3. William Albright, “The Lachish Cosmetic Burner and Esther 2:12,” *A Light Unto My Path* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), p. 31.
4. John M. Riddle, et al., “Ever since Eve . . . Birth Control in the Ancient World,” *Archaeology* (March/April 1994), p. 35.
5. John M. Riddle, “Ancient Recipes to Avoid Conception,” *Archaeology* (March/April 1994), p. 32.
6. John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 47–48.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
10. See Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), pp. 104–120. Compare David Kravitz, *Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Crown, 1975), p. 160.
11. *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1977), p. 396.
12. John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, p. 58.
13. David Kravitz, *Who's Who in Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Crown, 1975), p. 28.
14. John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, see pp. 76–77.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
16. H. L. Ginsberg, *The Five Megilloth and Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), pp. 84–85.
17. Esther 7:8.
18. Esther 2:23, 5:14, 6:4, 7:9–10, etc.
19. John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, p. 30.
20. John M. Riddle, “Ever Since Eve . . . Birth Control in the Ancient World,” *Archaeology* (March/April 1994), p. 30.
21. Steven Foster and James Duke, *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), p. 204.
22. Peter A. Young, “Wisdom of the Ancients,” *Archaeology* (March/April 1994), p. 2.
23. *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1997), p. 69.
24. John M. Riddle, “Ever Since Eve . . . Birth Control in the Ancient World,” *Archaeology* (March/April 1994), p. 34.
25. Esther 2:7.
26. B. Megillah 13A.
27. B. Megillah 13B.
28. *Ibid.*, Tosafot ad loc., “Tovelet.” For a discussion of the *mohk* and, specifically, this Tosafot, see David M. Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law* (New York University Press, 1968), pp. 170–175.
29. B. Megillah 10B, citing Exodus 30:22. See also Chullin 139B.
30. Steven Foster and James Duke, *A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), p. 32.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
32. *Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Herbs*, p. 422.
33. Esther 3:7.
34. See William F. Ganong, *Review of Medical Physiology* (Stamford, CT: Appleton and Lange, 1999), pp. 414–418.
35. Esther 3:12.
36. Esther 6:13.
37. Esther 3:7.
38. T. H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1952), pp. 215–216.
39. H. L. Ginsberg, *The Five Megilloth and Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), p. 83.
40. John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, pp. 84, 105, 124.
41. Esther 9:28.