



# Rosh Hodesh Adar

Thursday, February 19, 2026 @ 5:15 pm

Program Facilitator: Rachel Howe

Introductions and Opening Blessings	Page 2
Framing & Questions	Page 3
Vashti // Esther	Page 4
Lillith // Eve	Page 5
The Jewish Mother // the Yiddishe Mama	Page 6
The JAP // the Shikse	Page 7
Closing Poem	Page 8



## Introductions and Opening Blessing

Introduce yourself! We invite you to use your first name and your mother's first name. It doesn't matter if your mother isn't/wasn't Jewish.

### Blessings:

*Barukh atah Adonai  
Eloheinu melekh ha'olam  
shehehyanu vekiyemanu  
vehigi'anu lazman hazeh*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהֵחַיְנוּ וְקִיְמָנוּ  
וְהִגִּיעַנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה

Blessed are you, Adonai, our God, sovereign of the universe who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season

May it be Your will, my God and God of my ancestors, to be gracious to me and to all my family and to give us, and all Israel, a good and long life. Remember us with goodness and blessing, and grant us salvation and mercy. Grant us abundant blessing, and fortify the places we call home. May Your Presence dwell among us as we gather here today. May we be blessed with wise and learned disciples and children, lovers of God who stand in awe of You, people who speak truth and spread holiness. May those we nurture light the world with Torah and good deeds.

Hear the prayers I utter now in the name of our mothers Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. May Your light, reflected in these candles, surround us always. And let us say, Amen.

*Commentary on this blessing by LilyFish Gomberg:*

The reference to children in the blessing can apply to biological or adopted children, and it can also apply to anyone we nurture and teach within the community, the next generation of Jews we collectively hope to inspire.

The prayer is intended to be inclusive, speaking to our shared responsibility in helping to shape the future of the Jewish community.

In Sanhedrin 99b, Reish Lakish says, "Anyone who teaches someone else's child Torah is regarded by the Torah as though they have made them." R. Elazar adds that it is as though the teacher has "made" the child in terms of Torah, highlighting the importance of the role of teaching and mentorship in Jewish life.

## Introduction

Adar brings us the holiday of Purim and two archetypes of womanhood in Judaism who act as foils to one another: Esther and Vashti.

Many traditional interpretations of these women have come through the lens of patriarchy — both male and internalized female patriarchy. They are often presented in opposition: one woman embodies what women are “supposed” to be, and the other embodies what they should not be.

At the heart of these archetypes is not only sexism but also anxiety about Jewish continuity and assimilation. What happens if Jewish women do not listen to Jewish men? What happens if we do not birth Jewish babies? Vashti and Lilith are often framed as outsiders — not fully Jewish — representing negative qualities Jewish women should avoid. Their foils represent the characteristics Jewish women are encouraged to strive for.

## Discussion questions (for later)

- What galls you about this archetype?
- What excites you about this archetype?
- Do you identify personally with this archetype in any way?
- What do these archetypes say about gender relations in Jewish society?
- What do these archetypes tell us about how Jews see themselves and how others see Jews?
- Why do you think we see portrayals of difficult women again and again in Judaism?

## Vashti // Esther

In Megillat Esther, Vashti is the first wife of the Persian King Ahasuerus. During a lavish banquet, Ahasuerus orders his seven eunuchs to bring Vashti before him wearing her royal crown to display her beauty to the officials. Vashti refuses.

His counselors warn that her defiance will encourage women throughout the empire to disrespect their husbands. As a result, Ahasuerus issues an irrevocable decree: Vashti may never again enter the king's presence, and her royal position will be given to "another who is better than she."

Her role has been debated since midrashic times. Was she a brave proto-feminist hero? Or a vicious anti-Semite who forced her attendants to dance naked and only refused the king because she had a rash from leprosy? Women continue to debate her — in feminist circles and Hasidic circles alike.

Esther — brave, pure, cunning, and obedient to her uncle Mordechai — is positioned as the hero and as Vashti's foil. Importantly, Esther ultimately reveals her Jewish identity and saves her people from Haman's decree.



<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/vashti-midrash-and-aggadah>



## Lilith // Eve

Whenever women are blamed for leading men to sin, we are harking back to Eden. The offensive notion that a woman provokes rape or molestation by how she dresses also traces back to this logic. This mentality contributes to ideas like kol isha and modesty laws. Both Adam and Eve are punished, but Eve is told, “and he shall dominate you.”

Lilith originates in Babylonian demonology. She was viewed as a demon especially dangerous at life-cycle moments: onset of menses, pregnancy, menopause. She was said to come at night with the wind, to seduce unwitting men to create demon children, and to endanger babies and newborns. She is depicted as sexual and dangerous.

She appears once in Tanakh, but folk amulets and incantation bowls show she was part of Israelite cosmology.

Around 1000 CE, a text attributed to Ben Sira (likely satirical, as it seriously discusses topics such as masturbation, flatulence, and sex with animals) includes a story of Lilith as Adam’s first wife. In this version, she refuses to be dominated by Adam. Since both were created from dust, she sees them as equals. Rather than submit, she leaves Gan Eden. For this, God turns her into a demon who cannot bear her own children and must wander the earth.

Modern feminists have reclaimed Lilith as a heroine — in Lilith magazine, Lilith Fair, and other feminist spaces.



<https://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=set&id=36489>

## The Jewish Mother // the Yiddishe Mama

The Yiddishe Mama is a balabusta (a good homemaker). She may be anxious, but not malicious. She overfeeds you and gets involved — but out of genuine care. Whether remembered from the Old World or imagined in America, she is a bridge to tradition, morality, and religion.

She was personified on radio and television by Molly Goldberg in *The Goldbergs*, sometimes described as “ethnically denuded.”



<https://www.radiohalloffame.com/the-goldbergs>

The “Jewish mother” stereotype reflects anxiety about assimilation. As Jews rise into suburban middle-class life, she seeks status and fulfillment through her children — especially because she does not work outside the home.

“She became the scapegoat for Jewish ambivalence and anxiety about assimilation, simultaneously representing those Jewish traits that seemed to resist acculturation and held responsible for the materialism that came with success.” (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/battling-stereotypes-of-the-jewish-mother/>)

Because this archetype was amplified by Jewish male comedians, writers, and producers — including Philip Roth — it can be seen as a projection of Jewish men’s fears in a changing secular society where Jewish identity could disappear through intermarriage and assimilation.

The stereotype intensified during the women’s liberation movement, functioning as pushback against women’s increasing autonomy.

## The JAP // the Shikse

The Jewish American Princess' (or "JAP's") precursor was the "Ghetto Girl," an archetype from the early 1900s–1920s: an immigrant woman who worked in factories or other menial labor. She was seen as hardworking, yet caricatured as favoring *ungapatchke* — overly ornate, flashy clothing — heavy makeup, and a loud, pushy demeanor.

The JAP makes her first appearance in the 1970s and gains visibility on college campuses in the 1980s, where Jewish women were explicitly barred from sororities and subjected to violent signage and graffiti.

One example of the vile language used at the time: "At Cornell University... a fraternity set up two booths. In one, an inflated life-size doll bearing the sign 'Slap a JAP' was positioned; sponges were offered to all who cared to hurl them. At another, a large female head with an open mouth was featured. Here, the sign urged, 'Make her prove she's not a JAP — Make her swallow.'" (<https://lilith.org/articles/from-jap-baiting-on-campus/>)



Both the JAP and Jewish Mother stereotypes shape how Jews and non-Jews view Jewish women. Many younger Jews distance themselves from these stereotypes — sometimes distancing themselves from Jewish identity altogether.

Focus groups show that non-Jews often associate negative traits with these archetypes and seek distance from Jews because of them.

*For Vashti*  
*An ode to difficult women*  
By Rachel Howe

She would not dance for the king.  
She would not move to the back of the bus.  
She would not take the doctor's word for it.  
She was difficult!

When I was a kid, my grandfather used to say, Rachel don't let no one spit in her cereal. I was difficult then and I'm difficult now. My mother was a saleslady's worst nightmare. My brother and I used to cower behind racks of pants until she got the return or the sale she wanted. You should have heard her on the phone when the insurance company tried to get out of paying my sister's hospital bills. Man, was she difficult.

My grandmother came to the US on her own grandmother's dime. The old lady wanted a housekeeper, but my grandmother refused. She went to business school in secret and moved out. My grandmother got married, but divorced the guy when he wouldn't let her work. And then she started a nursing home. She was beyond difficult.

For the fat actresses, the wicked witches, and the sluts,  
For Martha Stewart and Leah who would not marry second,  
For all the women who won't take no  
and won't say yes when they mean no.  
For all the women who burp appreciatively, unapologetically  
At their own cooking  
Thank you for being difficult.

And to all the women who won't straighten their curly hair  
Or dye it blond  
Or diet.  
To all the women who would rather read than clean,  
Run than shop,  
Eat than starve.  
To all the women who shout back when you harass them on the street.  
I dance to your difficult, red bleeding beat.

Picture Vashti, rumba hips, no deodorant, liked her grapes, her figs, her slave boys. We all know her king was a fool. Somebody had to run the castle. Who had time to drop the edicts, the schedules and menus, the betrothal arrangements for his majesty's many sons? Vashti would not dance for the king. She was replaced. She was difficult.