

Esther, Queen of Persia

A Fairy-tale?

Iranian stories do not start with "Once upon a time;" they rather start with, "Once there was a person, and then there was no one."

In a dark winter night, when I was about six years old, my grandmother told me the story of Esther, the Jewish Queen of Persia. My grandmother, Tavous, whose name means Peacock, the symbol of the Persian crown, sat cross-legged on a Persian carpet. Once in a while, she freed one leg to reach over to the samovar, pouring us tea in clear hourglass *fenjans*. I put a sugar lump between my back molars, transferring the date-color tea to a glass saucer, blowing on it before noisily sipping from it. Life was good. I didn't know that the prized sugar lumps would create many cavities in my back teeth many years later. Then, I felt secure with my grandmother by my side, a matriarch, a symbol of our traditions.

*Yeki bood, yeki nabood*, my grandmother started, there was once a person, and then there was no one. Once there was a beautiful young virgin named Esther, an orphan in care of her uncle. Uncle Mordekhai said, "The king is looking for a new wife. I am taking you to the palace to be viewed. You'll compete with many exotic beauties, but if you win, who knows, maybe you'll be able to help your people in time of trouble."

And when Esther was indeed chosen as the Shah's prize, her uncle told her to stay demure, silent, to hide her Jewish identity.

I had seen pictures of Persian kings during the Achaemenid dynasty on copper trays, silver sugar bowls, and the stone walls of Persepolis, their palace which was a short distance from my city of birth, Shiraz. I had seen their carved images—long curly black beard and hair, sitting in high bejeweled chairs, stern, unsmiling, powerful, frightening—and yes, majestic and beautiful.

"Why did she go?" I asked. "I would have not gone."

"That's impossible," my grandmother said. "When a king decrees, the citizens obey."

"Even now?" I asked her.

"Even now," she answered.

Not a good proposition, I thought. I would have not wanted to be one of the many in a harem, losing my freedom to silk costumes, gold and precious stones—what trappings! Queen Esther was afraid of speaking to her own husband, and that husband of hers didn't treat his other wife, Vashti, with love, respect or compassion, divorcing her, sending her away after she refused to dance for her husband's guests, after she refused to be cheapened and humiliated. That wasn't a fairytale—not a "Happily Ever After" kind of a story. It was a frightening tale of helplessness for a young girl; the story remained with me throughout the 23 years I spent in Iran.

Children are self-centered; I worried about myself. I asked my grandmother that night, “What about me? What would you do if the Shah came for me? You would hide me, right?”

“No,” my grandmother replied. If a king wants you, then you obey; you go. To save many, one person’s life is not important. This was around the time the Shah of Iran married his beautiful queen, Farah. We didn’t have TV stations in Shiraz to watch it, but the walls of the city were plastered with their wedding pictures. In the absence of TV, a movie about their wedding was being shown in the theatre closest to the Jewish quarter, where we lived at the time. The tickets were expensive; I couldn’t see it. But pictures of the beautiful bride with her white taffeta wedding gown, a diamond tiara, and a very very long silk train, surrounded by numerous flower girls my age, were plastered everywhere.

The bride, our new queen, had been studying architecture in Paris when the Shah’s son-in-law, who was in charge of students abroad— yes, son-in-law, because the Shah was that much older—saw the young woman with a bright future and plucked her for his father-in-law, the king. That was the way it was done. The Shah had given his young daughter to the man to gain his support; he returned the favor with another young woman—or at least that’s the way I saw it. Women were commodities.

As the country celebrated their wedding, as young girls were awed by white lace, jewels and glitter, I shuttered. She should have said, “No.” She should have studied architecture in Paris, but then, she too didn’t have a father; no male figure—as was needed those days— to protect her. Similarly Farah’s uncle facilitated her transfer to the Shah’s palace by introducing her to the Shah’s son-in-law. To be a queen— was irresistible, I guess. She couldn’t foresee her husband’s demise, exile, two children lost to suicide. Maybe her mother, a widow, had persuaded her, the way Mordechai had spoken to the young fatherless Esther. “You must do this. This is for the family, for me, for your people.”

Very much like the Sheherzad of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, selfless, self-sacrificing, Queen Esther’s story still haunts me. When 12 years old, I had a chance to make pilgrimage to her shrine in Hamedan, my mother’s birthplace. My uncle who accompanied us, told me that there was a passage underneath that led to Jerusalem, a passageway to escape just in case of trouble. I was in trouble. I was approaching puberty. My mother had been married off at age 13. I wanted to be in that dark passage underneath the shrine, finding my way out of Iran. I couldn’t of course. The door to the basement was tightly locked. Instead, I knelt by the lattice carved ornamental piece on top of Esther’s grave, stared at her resting place below, and prayed for Queen Esther’s help, prayed that she would help me find a different destiny than hers.

As an Iranian Jewish woman, I am thankful that her heroism saved me and my daughters. Otherwise, we would have not been here; otherwise, I wouldn't be able to tell you this story. I took Queen Esther's legacy to heart. I left Iran not to be subjected to the tyranny of one powerful man after another, Haman or Khomeini. I had to leave the country not to be in mercy of one Shah or another, Akhashverosh or Mohammad Reza Shah. What kind of a king would be so fickle to accept the murder of all Jews under his rule? What kind of a king would ask the victims to defend themselves without the help of his soldiers? That's another legacy I would rather not have—that of blood we had to shed to save ourselves because the king did not protect his people. Similarly, the Shah I knew, the king who married the beautiful Farah, didn't stay in Iran during the 1979 Revolution to protect us. He took his money and his jewels and his jumbo jet and let my family and many others fend for themselves.

This Purim, I would like to wish for all of us to be safeguarded from all unbridled kings, Akhashverosh, Khomeini, The Supreme Leader, Khamenei— and their viziers: Haman, Ahmadinejad. There were once; let them be no more.

For all Jewish girls and young women, may you live without the worry of being sold physically and spiritually in order to save yourself and your people. May you be your own queen and not a helpless princess of a fairy-tale.

Chag Purim Sameich.