

Women Who Spark Change: Then And Now

Source Sheet

QUEEN ESTHER

Background: In Megillat Esther, after Haman orders and publicizes the decree to annihilate the Jewish people, Mordechai sends word to Esther and asks her to go to the king and save the Jewish people. Esther hesitates, but after some motivating words from Mordechai, she instructs him:

לך פנוס את־כָּל־הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ עִלַּי וְאַל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאַל־תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם גַּם־אֲנִי וְנִצַּרְתִּי אֲצוּם כִּן וּכְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָכַדְתִּי וְכִאֲשֶׁר אָבְדַתִּי אָבְדַתִּי:

“Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!”

Megillat Esther Chapter 4 Verse 16

Discussion Questions:

- Why does Esther call a communal fast? Do you think it made an impact? Why or why not?
- How does Esther strategically approach the King later in the [Megillah](#)?
- There are many ways to take action in times of crisis, including political advocacy, community organizing, education or raising awareness, and fundraising. Which of these strategies does Esther use to spark change and save the Jewish people?



Scroll of Esther,
Italy, 1617
The National Library
of Israel

Esther's call for a communal fast is a custom that has continued to this day. In 1945, toward the end of World War II, rabbinic leaders from around the world joined together and wrote a proclamation that, Wednesday, March 14th, shall be a day of fast and prayer for "the termination of the war, and for the safe return of our sons and daughters." They also requested that during the week leading up to March 14th, the public refrain from activities of leisure and entertainment, and that on the fast day itself, Jewish businesses and transportation would stop. This call was part of a community organizing effort to address the needs of Jews at the end of the War.

On October 12th, 2024, Hadar Institute in New York City called a communal fast day for the hostages in Gaza. According to the [Times of Israel](#) more than 600 rabbis and Jewish leaders signed on to participate.

In November, 2024, Rabbi Avidan Freedman drew a circle around himself at "Hostage Square" in Tel Aviv and declared that he would not step outside it or eat before the Red Cross visited the hostages held in Gaza. According to [this article in the Forward](#), Freedman said: "I felt like I needed to do something a little bit insane." He drew inspiration for his protest, he said, from Honi Ha'Ma'agel, also known as "Honi the Circle-drawer," a Jewish sage from the first century CE who sat inside a circle in hopes of ending a drought. But it is also reminiscent of the actions of Mordechai in the Purim story:

"When Mordecai learned all that had happened, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly, until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth. Also, in every province that the king's command and decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing, and everybody lay in sackcloth and ashes."

Esther, 4:1-3

Discussion Questions:

- Sometimes creating awareness or community organizing involves abstaining from something rather than "doing" something. Can you think of other examples of this in history or modern times?
- Do you think a communal day of fasting or a communal day of prayer can spark change today? Why or why not?



Call for a Fast Day
The National Library of Israel

HENRIETTA SZOLD

Read Henrietta Szold's biography or [resource cards](#) to learn about her impact.

The Life of Henrietta Szold

Henrietta Szold was born in Baltimore, Maryland on December 21, 1860 to Rabbi Benjamin and Sophia Szold. She began her career as a teacher, and her compassion for others was apparent early on, when she opened a night school for Russian Jewish immigrants in the United States. At the same time, she pursued an academic career as an editor at the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) and was the first woman to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). In 1898 she was the only woman elected to serve on the executive committee of the Federation of American Zionists.

During her first visit to Israel in 1909, Szold saw a need for improved health and sanitary conditions and decided to devote her life to promoting the health, education, and welfare of the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish population in Israel). In 1912, she founded Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America and Hadassah's first project was the inauguration of an American-style visiting nurse service. The organization funded hospitals, a medical school, dental facilities, infant welfare stations, soup kitchens, and other services for the residents of Palestine.

In 1932, Szold immigrated to Israel. In addition to her work with Hadassah, she was appointed director of Youth Aliya (Aliyat HaNoar) and was responsible for the absorption of children and youth who had escaped to Israel from Nazi-occupied Europe. Due to the incredible role she played in these children's lives, she was named the "Mother of Youth Aliya."

Szold was a valuable member of the Jewish National Council (Va'ad Leumi) in Israel and, through this leadership position, managed to vastly improve social services. In addition, she co-founded Ichud, a political party in favor of a binational solution and Arab-Jewish unity.

Szold died in 1945 at the age of 85 at Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus. Despite having no family or children of her own, her funeral was attended by thousands of mourners, and she was subsequently memorialized in various ways. An illegal immigrant ship that sailed from Greece to Israel with 500 immigrants, including 180 babies, children, and youth who had survived the Holocaust, was named after her in 1946; a number of streets throughout Israel were named after her; and Kibbutz Kfar Szold was established in her honor. In addition, Mother's Day (or Family Day as it is now known in Israel) is held in Israel on the 30th of Shevat—the Hebrew anniversary of her death. Henrietta Szold's legacy continues today with the wonderful services that the Hadassah Medical Center provides to thousands of patients every year.

Discussion Questions:

- What types of action (political advocacy, community organizing, education or raising awareness, or fundraising) did Henrietta Szold use to spark change?
- What did she accomplish that the Jewish community or Israel continues to benefit from today?
- With the categories of political advocacy, community organizing, raising awareness, and fundraising in mind, what are some actions you can take to spark change and bring the hostages home?



Henrietta Szold ►