

WRJ CENTENNIAL



Devar Torah

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

Esther: One Woman and the Survival of the Jewish People
Book of Esther

Mention the name of Esther, and we all envision a heroine. So it is fitting that during our Centennial year, we think about Esther, whether during Purim when she plays her leading role or at any other time of the year when she serves as a role model for women to step forward to make a huge difference, especially in the WRJ world!

Let us first think about Purim. Synagogues around the world gather to celebrate Purim, helping children of all ages observe Purim by celebrate how Queen Esther of Persia, a Jew, acted to save the Jewish people. When the Book of Esther as recorded in the *megilah* is traditionally read, groggers (noisemakers) loudly twirl at the mention of evil Haman's name, blotting out even the sound of his existence; *hamentaschen* (triangular pastries) are eaten as a symbolic victory of good over the evil Haman, who wore a triangular hat. Dressing in costumes representing Queen Esther, King Ahasuerus, Vashti, Haman or Mordecai makes Purim especially fun for both adults and children.

How do sisterhoods celebrate Purim? Many congregations are entertained by the singing and antics of religious school students. Sisterhoods often join with religious schools to produce carnivals for children and/or with brotherhoods to sponsor masquerade balls for adults. Sisterhood women often join other congregants to offer creative Purim Shpiels (funny plays). Many sisterhoods offer delicious Purim treats for children of all ages.

In some locations, sisterhoods provide *mishloach manot* (gifts of food) to the homebound and/or to Jewish soldiers or food shelters as part of their social justice work. Some sisterhoods have successful fundraisers selling and delivering gift baskets laden with delectable snacks and small trinkets to congregants.

When Purim has come and gone, we can continue to do the work we do because one woman, Esther, stepped forward, took a risk, and made a difference.

During our Centennial year, WRJ will be honoring the many Esthers of local sisterhoods. WRJ Centennial Unsung Heroines will be featured on the WRJ website for their dedication to making a difference without expecting the limelight or the microphone. These are the women who work

tirelessly for sisterhood but never crave honor. The Esthers of sisterhood might be a long time member who always steps forward and says “yes” when sisterhood seeks volunteers. The Esthers of sisterhood might be a young mother who is juggling her family’s needs, while serving as a sisterhood leader. The Esthers of sisterhood might be a woman who has survived a devastating illness, and turned her challenge into hope for someone else. The Esthers of sisterhood might be a woman who has lost her partner and finds sisterhood an outlet for her time and skills. [note to speaker: If your sisterhood has already designated its Unsung Heroine, this would be a good place to acknowledge her and her accomplishments.]

Within WRJ, we cannot celebrate Esther without remembering the important work of two very important WRJ leaders: Dr. Jane Evans (Executive Director, 1933-1977) and Eleanor Schwartz (Associate Director 1959-1976, Executive Director 1977-1992).

NFTS Past President Constance Kreshtool (1981-1985) writes, “Both Jane Evans and Eleanor Schwartz were creative and inspiring leaders during their years at the helm of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, now Women of Reform Judaism. But lost among their many accomplishments and not to be forgotten are Jane’s anti-war position and her strong commitment to peace that pervaded all her work, and Eleanor’s part in the creation of the National Federation of Temple Youth, now North American Federation of Temple Youth, that had her fervid support during her entire career.”

And, so, throughout time, Esther and women like Esther have made a huge difference in the life of the Jewish people. We conclude our first hundred years building on the inspiration of the past Esthers; we begin our second hundred years on the hope of our future Esthers. At this juncture of both the past and the future, may we always know that we are *Stronger Together*. Amen!

This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.