

A LITTLE
BOOK OF **ESTHER** אֶسְתֵּר

Notes on her earthly & heavenly relations

ISHTAR queen of the night

APHRODITE goddess of love

VENUS star of the spring sky



she rises from the ocean
drawn from the waters



Ludovisi throne, Greek c. 460 B.C.E.

2



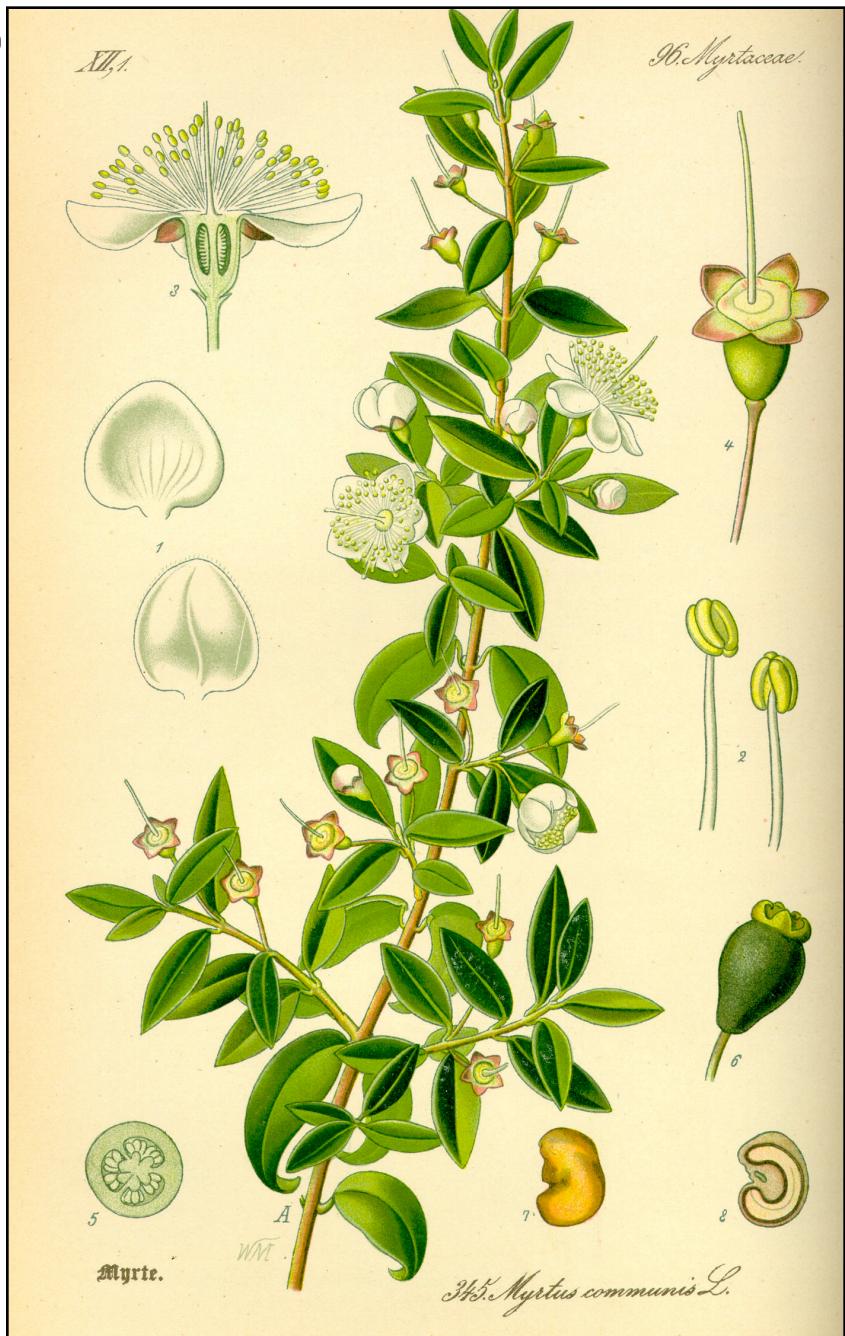
terracotta, Hellenic circa 200 B.C.E.

Botticelli wasn't the first to see Venus emerge from a shell. Whether she flies with shell-wings or helped by swans and Cupids, she loves her Myrtle wreath.



anon. drawing from late classical vase

Its fragrant star-like flowers and glossy leaves are both sweet and bitter: Myrtle is purifying as well as *aphrodisiac* -- a word rooted in Venus's Greek name, Aphrodite. Myrtle is love medicine, sacred to the goddess of love & beauty.



The Hebrew word for Myrtle is **Hadas**. **Hadassah** is the original Hebrew name of the legendary Jewish beauty Queen **Esther**.

1885, Prof. Dr. Otto Wilhelm Thomé

THE FEAST OF PURIM is based on the *Megilla* or Scroll of Esther, a legendary text set in ancient Persia (Iran). Unlike most sacred Jewish texts, *Megillat Esther* does not mention God's name; which is appropriate, since it ends with the unholy slaughter of tens of thousands of "enemies" by Jews who have just been saved from a similar fate, making the *Megillah* itself, like the many parodies it inspired, a kind of over-the-top Purim *shpil*. It is a fantastic tale of a Jewish queen whose name is almost identical to Ishtar's, an avuncular hero whose name resembles Marduk's and a King based on Xerxes II. On Purim we drown out the villain's name with raucous noise. We are encouraged to masque, dance and drink till we can't tell the difference between the hero and the villain.



Carnivale, Mardi Gras and Purim are modern examples of masked revels with global and prehistoric roots.

5



Was Henrietta Szold a wild dancer? This sedate photo taken in her fifties offers no clue; but Szold does embody the visionary, healing aspect of the divine feminine. She and 37 other women founded Hadassah in New York, Purim, 1912. Hadassah established a free clinic in Jerusalem that still provides health care to all in need. Never a biological mother, Henrietta was a beloved "Mother of the Yishuv," who rescued thousands of children from Nazi Europe. With Judah Magnes and Martin Buber, she supported the establishment of Israel as a bi-national state. If Szold were alive on Purim 2015, on Hadassah's 103rd anniversary, she might well be launching peace initiatives between Israel and Iran, aka Persia, legendary realm of Queen Esther aka Hadassah.

6

Remember Vashti? Her refusal to dance naked for the King and his cronies sets the Megilla's plot in motion. She risks her crown and her life rather than being humiliated by her royally drunk husband. Who decides to conceal or reveal our bodies? How demure or daring can we be? Believed to be the first weavers, women still make most of the cloth we wear, but who cuts the cloth? From Eden to purdah, catwalk to pole-dance, who dresses and undresses us? A masquerade is a good time to ask. A woman asserting her freedom to choose what she wears or doesn't wear might trigger a Megilla or an uprising.



Vashti as depicted in 18th century Megilla



The humiliation of a woman by soldiers who removed the *hijab* she wore over her bra and jeans sparked the largest women's protest in Egyptian history.

7

The Book of Esther is the tale of an obedient, beautiful girl who agrees to conceal her religion in order to marry the King, but then realizes she can only save her people by revealing her identity: She fasts and meditates and resolves to come out of the closet. In a school Purim *shpil* the year “Oklahoma!” was a Broadway hit, Esther sang, “I’m as Jewish as blintzes in sour cream cream, gefilte fish is my favorite dish!” Esther is a coming out queen—and a foodie.

For centuries, rabbinical scholars passed long winter nights pondering how this nice Jewish heroine managed to observe her religion while passing as a Gentile monarch. “How did she keep track of days to keep the Sabbath?” *She had seven lady’s maids, each one identified with a different day of the week.* “And how did she keep kosher while keeping her religion secret?” *She was a vegetarian.* “What did she eat?” *Chickpeas!* So chickpeas became traditional Purim fare, including many delicious old Persian recipes. I can imagine Esther and her seven maids enjoying a different one for every day of the week.



But we all know Queen Esther’s *favorite dish* was . . .

8

...*Hamantashn*, triangular pastries filled with poppy seeds and honey or fruit preserves are eaten on the last full moon before Spring Equinox, at a festival of masquing and drunken revelry. This feast celebrates two beautiful, brave women—proud, defiant Vashti and radiant Esther, a queen of disguises with a striking resemblance to ancient goddesses of sexual love and fertility.

Don’t tell me this has anything to do with Haman’s hat!



text © 2012 jerusha Reprinted erev Purim, Adar 5775, March 2015