



The holiday of Purim celebrates the saving of the Jews in Persia from the genocidal plans of Haman. Through the wisdom and grace of Mordechai and Esther, God being behind the scenes doing the really good stuff, and despite Haman's scheming, certain death was replaced with victory, security and religious freedom. Haman is an obvious predecessor to Hitler and the Purim story occurs in the Diaspora, so Purim has always resonated deeply with Diaspora Jews. We, too, live far from Israel in an assimilated environment.

Though we enjoy great privileges, we recognize that our fortunes could change in an instant under the wrong political or social conditions. We, too, have to seek God's presence in a world where (S)He is hidden. Unfortunately, most Jews only know about Purim costumes and hamentaschen. But there is much more to know! The best solution to this problem is to get involved with learning more about your Judaism (like, say, at MJE), so you can learn anything and everything you ever wanted to know about our religion, its holidays and its values. For starters, continue reading!

When is Purim?

Purim begins: Nightfall on Saturday, March 23

Purim ends: At nightfall on Sunday, March 24

The Story of Purim

As told in the Scroll of Esther (Megillat Esther), the Persian Jews who lived in the period between the First and Second Temples (ca. 500 BCE) were nearly destroyed by the nefarious plot of Haman, a descendant of the Amalekites, who are the perpetual enemies of the Jews. Queen Esther, a nice Jewish girl, was selected to replace Vashti, who was disposed of by foolish King Achashverosh in a drunken rage. Haman, infuriated by Mordechai's refusal to bow down to him, decides to annihilate the entire Jewish people and convinces Achashverosh to send out a decree that all the Jews will be killed on the 13th of the month of Adar. Esther, who has concealed her Jewish identity since she came to the palace, now has to summon the courage to take her case to the king. After three days of fasting, she appears in the royal court and invites both Achashverosh and Haman to two parties. When she finally reveals that Haman plans to kill the Jews would result in Esther's death as well, the king hangs Haman on the gallows Haman himself had erected for Mordecai. Though Achashverosh still refuses to rescind the genocide decree, he permits a new decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves, which they do, under Mordecai's direction. The holiday of Purim is celebrated the day after that battle, celebrating the peace after the battle. Although the megilla never mentions the name of God, there are subtle references to His involvement in the story. The night before Esther's party, the king cannot sleep and discovers (while being read to as a remedy for insomnia) that Mordecai has already saved his life once. This, and other nuances, show the hand of God subtly influencing events. Mordecai and Esther recorded the story of Purim so that it would live on among the Jews, which is why we still celebrate and read about it today.

The Mitzvot of Purim

1) THE FAST OF ESTHER

Esther commanded the Jews to fast for 3 days before she appeared before the king to plead for him to cancel Haman's plan. Luckily for us, we only fast the day before Purim. This year, the

Fast of Esther in NYC is, Thursday March 21

Fast begins: 5:44 AM

Fast Ends: 7:40 PM.

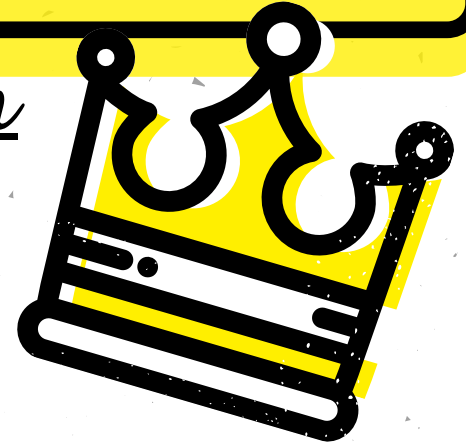
It is appropriate to have a solemn day of prayer (before Haman's plans were undone) before entering into the joyous celebration of Purim. Some say we fast on that day because we had to fight a war and lives – both ours and theirs – were lost.

2) THE READING OF THE MEGILLA (SCROLL OF ESTHER)

Esther and Mordechai were convinced that Purim was critically important for the future of the Jews and that "these days should be remembered and done in every generation, every family, every country and every city and that these days of Purim should never pass away from the Jews and their memory should never cease from their children." (Esther, chap. 9) They petitioned the Men of the Great Assembly to require the megilla to be read publicly each year, as if it were an urgent letter sent from the capital city announcing that we were saved from certain death. In these uncertain times, it is good to remember that God has our backs and will save us from genocidal maniacs, of which there seem to be no shortage.

The megilla should be heard by every Jew twice, once in the evening and once in the morning of Purim. It should be read in a minyan (quorum of 10) with blessings and must be read from a kosher scroll. One should not talk during megilla reading, try to hear every word, and not be distracted during the reading. Where it is customary to boo Haman's name and use graggers (noisemakers), it is not considered an interruption, as long as it's not overdone. The reading is considered a form of the joyous Hallel prayer (Psalms 113-117) and so Hallel is not said on Purim.

See schedule below for megilla reading times in Manhattan



**MJE Megilla Reading & Purim Celebration:
Saturday, March 23 @ 8:45 PM
Buy Tickets: <https://bit.ly/mjepurimparty2024>**

3) GIFTS TO THE POOR (MATANOT LA-EVYONIM)

One of the specific enactments (see Esther 9:22) made in regard to Purim was to give special gifts to the poor (minimum 2 gifts to 2 poor people) so that no person lacked the means to have a special Purim feast. Some have a custom not to turn away any person who asks for assistance on this day. Some authorities say the mitzva is only fulfilled on the day of Purim itself, so special groups collect money for distribution on Purim day.

MJE Suggests Donating To Oneg Shabbat- <http://www.onegshabbat.org/>

Oneg Shabbat began as a Bat Mitzvah project in 1998 to provide Shabbat and Holiday food to those in community who are unable to provide for themselves. Growing from a small organization feeding a handful of people, today we service over 100 families every week and on the Jewish holidays.

In cooperation with local establishments, meals are prepared and delivered in a respectful manner which insures the dignity and privacy of those we serve. ONEG SHABBAT recipients can choose between receiving prepared meals delivered to their home, or a credit to shop in local stores. This ensures the recipients' anonymity, allowing them to be treated in the same manner as are other customers.

If you give charity money to any of the MJE Educators the night before, we will make sure it is delivered on Purim day. [There is also a custom to give a half shekel, which was a Jewish communal tax given once a year during Temple times. Though both are used for charitable purposes, they should be given separately. Half shekels will be available on Purim night as well.]

4) DELIVERIES OF FOOD (MISHLOACH MANOT)

In Esther 9:22, it also mandates that Jews send prepared foods to their neighbors and friends to increase the joy and unity among Jews. The minimum requirement is to give two kinds of food (say, a fruit and a chocolate bar) to one person, but many have the custom of creating elaborate packages. While this is a beautiful idea, there is no need to overdo it.

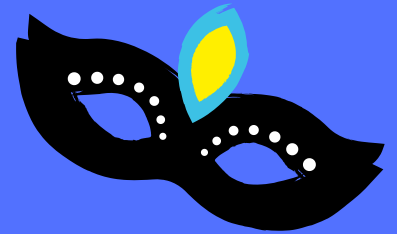
5) RECITING A PRAYER OF THANKS ("AL HA-NISIM")

We insert a special prayer of Thanksgiving in the Amida (Silent Devotion) and in the Grace after Meals on Purim day. This prayer summarizes the Purim story and thanks God for allowing Haman's plans to be thwarted.

6. PURIM FEAST (SEU'DA)

Jews are known to mark special days with food, so that no spiritual joy should lack its physical counterpart. Esther specifically required that Purim be a day of "feasting & drinking". The Purim meal should be a complete and lavish one, including bread and the Grace After Meals. It is also customary to make merry at the meal, telling jokes & performing humorous skits etc. Among the observances of the day is to become too "drunk" to tell the difference between Haman & Mordechai (or two people dressed as them). While some people scrupulously observe this precept, others content themselves with a glass of wine and/or a short nap. While both are legitimate practices, one must surely be aware that excessive drinking carries other serious risks, both as far as transgressing Jewish law & one's personal welfare.

One should start the meal on Purim day with enough time to enjoy most of their meal and wine before nightfall.



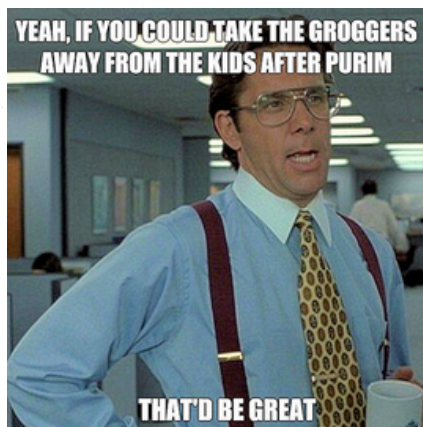
Other Customs of Purim

1) COSTUMES

It is customary to dress up on Purim, based on the theme of "v'nahafoch hu," that everything was turned upside down on Purim. The Jews were going to be destroyed, but they were saved. It was going to be a day of mourning and death, but it was flipped into a joyous celebration. In addition, God's role is hidden in the story of Purim. Though God is clearly in control, His/Her presence is never clearly felt. God is, so to speak, in disguise, using Esther and Mordechai to channel divine benevolence to the Jews. In other words, by dressing up, we affirm that God is sometimes hidden in our lives, but that just as we can see behind the costume if we try, we can also see the hidden face of God.

2) PURIM TORAH/PURIM SHPIEL

The humor and lightheartedness of Purim is found in intellectual ways as well. Many have the custom on Purim of creating elaborate Purim shpiels, singing funny songs and poking fun at everything in existence. Among some, this resembles Saturday Night Live or stand-up comedy with a Jewish twist, but among the Yeshiva crowd, the humor is often more high-brow. There have even been several ersatz Talmudic tractates published – such as Masechet Bubbe Ma'aseh ("the Tractate of stories your grandmother told you") – which look and sound just like regular Talmud, but much funnier.



MJE Purim Events

MJE
manhattan jewish experience

UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMS & COSTUMES

WEDNESDAYS @ 7PM | 131 W 86TH ST

MAR 13 - THE STORY OF PURIM
MAR 20 - LESSONS FOR THE ISRAEL & GAZA WAR

WITH RABBI
MARK WILDES

20s & 30s
MJE
manhattan jewish experience

FREE
DRINK

PRE-PURIM HAPPY HOUR

COCKTAILS & COSTUMES

MONDAY, MARCH 18TH | 5-8PM
THE GEM SALOON | 375 3RD AVE

A WILD WEST PURIM PARTY

SATURDAY, MARCH 23RD
8:30 PM

131 W 86TH ST - 10TH FL
COSTUMES ENCOURAGED!

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Purim Feast & Celebration

Join MJE for Megillah reading followed by a delicious catered Royal Persian Purim feast and top shelf open bar

Sunday, March 24th | 5:00 PM | 131 W 86th St, 10th Fl

Costumes Encouraged!!

Rabbi Mark & Jill Wildes Rabbi Moshe & Shana Davis Aaron & Leora Blustein

Seize the Moment!

Rabbi Mark Wildes

Irena Sendler of Warsaw Poland died on May 12, 2008 at the ripe age of 98. During the Second World War, Irena got permission to work in the Warsaw ghetto as a plumbing and sewer specialist but she had an ulterior motive. Irena smuggled Jewish infants out of the ghetto in the bottom of her toolbox and in a burlap sack, which she kept in her truck, for larger children. Irena kept a dog in the back of her truck that she trained to bark when the Nazi soldiers let her in and out of the ghetto. The soldiers wanted nothing to do with the dog and the barking covered the children's noises.

Irena managed to smuggle out and save 2500 children and infants.

In the Purim story, after Haman's edict to annihilate all the Jews in ancient Persia is announced, Mordecai goes to Queen Esther for help. He shows Esther a copy of Haman's decree and asks Esther to go before King Achashverosh to plead the case of her brethren. Esther tells Mordecai she cannot simply appear before the King unsummoned and that she has not been called to the King's chambers for 30 days. When Mordecai hears Esther's hesitancy, he famously responds: If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place...and who knows, perhaps you became royalty for this very moment (Megilat Esther 4:13).

Immediately upon hearing this Esther springs into action. She tells Mordecai to gather the Jews of Shushan to fast on her behalf and executes a plan which ultimately turns the tables in favor of the Jews.

What is it about Mordecai's statement that motivates Esther to act? By saying "salvation will come from another place" he seems to be letting Esther off the hook. If Mordecai's goal was to inspire Esther to act, why would he tell her that if she failed to do her part, God would save the Jewish people anyway?

Mordecai was a man of faith. He believed God would never allow the Jewish people to be destroyed but by telling Esther: who knows perhaps you became royalty for this very moment, he was informing her that by embracing her situation she could fulfill the purpose of her becoming Queen.

...who knows, perhaps you became royalty for this very moment, is a phrase that should resonate with each of us. Even if we aren't Kings or Queens, we are all placed within certain environments and situations and we all have a specific purpose and mission in this world. That mission is different for each of us and we are therefore placed within different circumstances to accomplish that purpose.

The Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1746, Padua, Italy) wrote that every person's life predicament is their challenge. A poor person is challenged to see if he can be satisfied with the little he possesses, and a rich person is tested to see if he becomes indifferent to the plight of the poor. Each of us comes into the world with certain abilities and deficiencies and the life situations in which we find ourselves provide us with the unique opportunities we need to perfect our area of deficiencies and develop our unique potential.

But we must act. Simply being in the situation isn't enough. To develop ourselves into the people we were meant to be, we must seize the moment and take action. Mordecai was telling Esther: you've been elevated to the position of Queen but the spiritual perfection you can realize from this situation will only be realized if you act – if you go before the King and intercede on behalf of your people. Irena Sendler was just a plumber in Warsaw, but she seized upon the opportunity which her unique situation presented. In doing so, she not only saved countless Jewish lives, but she may have also fulfilled her own Divine purpose and mission in life.

We may find ourselves stuck in some kind of dead-end job but maybe, just maybe, we were supposed to be there, at least for some time, to be challenged in some new way or perhaps to meet someone we otherwise would never have encountered. I have a classmate from law school who hated his first law job except for the opportunity it gave him to meet this new co-worker with whom he was assigned to work. My friend, who was Sabbath observant invited his co-worker to his home for a Shabbat meal. The co-worker, who had never experienced Shabbat, loved the experience and came back for more. The two became friends and began studying Torah together on a regular basis. Within a year, my friend left the firm but eventually his co-worker became Sabbath observant. That's not why my friend originally took the job, but maybe, just maybe that's why he was supposed to work there, at least for that period of time. As Mordecai told Esther: who knows, perhaps you became royalty for this very moment.

The lesson of Purim is that there are no coincidences in life. In fact, the root of the word Purim is pur which means lottery – Haman determined the day to annihilate the Jews by drawing from a lottery. Life may often feel like a lottery, things may appear coincidental or as though they are happening by simple chance, but the message of Purim is that everything happens for a reason. Our task is to realize the growth opportunities presented to us and like Esther, seize upon those opportunities to actualize our unique potential.

Happy Purim!

The Therapeutic Joy of Purim

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l

There is a unique law in the approach to Purim. *Mishe-nichnas Adar marbim be-simcha*: "From the beginning of Adar, we increase in joy." It is stated in the Talmud (Taanit 29a), and is based on the passage in the Megillah (Esther 9:21-22) in which Mordechai sends a letter throughout the land instructing Jews "to observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth day, every year – the days on which the Jews obtained rest from their enemies and the month which for them was turned from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday."

This in turn refers back to the text in which Haman decided on the timing of his decree: "In the first month, the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of Achashverosh, they cast pur (that is, lots) before Haman from day to day, and from month to month until the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar" (Esther. 3:7).

The difficulties though are obvious. Why an entire month? The key events were focused on a few days, the thirteenth to the fifteenth, not the whole month. And why *simcha*? We can understand why the Jews of the time felt exhilaration. The decree sentencing them to death had been rescinded. Their enemies had been punished. Haman had been hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai. Mordechai himself had been raised to greatness.

But is joy the emotion we should feel in perpetuity, remembering those events? The first warrant for genocide against the Jewish people (the second if one counts Pharaoh's plan to kill all newborn Jewish males) had been frustrated. Is *simcha* the appropriate emotion? Surely what we should feel is relief, not joy. Pesach is the proof. The word "joy" is never mentioned in the Torah in connection with it.

Besides which, the Talmud asks why we do not say Hallel on Purim. It gives several answers. The most powerful is that in Hallel we say, "Servants of the Lord, give praise," – meaning that we are no longer the servants of Pharaoh. But, says the Talmud, even after the deliverance of Purim, Jews were still the servants of Achashverosh (Megillah 14a). Tragedy had been averted but there was no real change in the hazards of life in the Diaspora.

It seems to me therefore that the *simcha* we celebrate throughout the month of Adar is different from the normal joy we feel when something good and positive has happened to us or our people. That is expressive joy. The *simcha* of Adar, by contrast, is therapeutic joy.

Imagine what it is to be part of a people that had once heard the command issued against them: "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day" (Est. 3:13). We who live after the Holocaust, who have met survivors, heard their testimony, seen the photographs and documentaries and memorials, know the answer to that question. On Purim the Final Solution was averted. But it had been pronounced. Ever afterward, Jews knew their vulnerability. The very existence of Purim in our historical memory is traumatic.

The Jewish response to trauma is counterintuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends. While the story is being told, you make a rumbustious noise as if not only to blot out the memory of Amalek, but to make a joke out of the whole episode. You wear masks. You drink a little too much. You make a Purim spiel.

Precisely because the threat was so serious, you refuse to be serious – and in that refusal you are doing something very serious indeed. You are denying your enemies a victory. You are declaring that you will not be intimidated. As the date of the scheduled destruction approaches, you surround yourself with the single most effective antidote to fear: joy in life itself. As the three-sentence summary of Jewish history puts it: "They tried to destroy us. We survived. Let's eat." Humour is the Jewish way of defeating hate. What you can laugh at, you cannot be held captive by.

I learned this from a Holocaust survivor. Some years ago, I wrote a book, *Celebrating Life*, to write my way out of the depression I fell into after the death of my father, *zikhro livracha*. It was a cheer-you-up book, and it became a favourite of the Holocaust survivors. One of them, however, told me that a particular passage in the book was incorrect. Commenting on Roberto Begnini's comedy about the Holocaust, *Life is Beautiful*, I had said that though I agreed with his thesis – a sense of humour keeps you sane – that was not enough in Auschwitz to keep you alive.

"On that, you are wrong," the survivor said, and then told me his story. He had been in Auschwitz, and he soon realised that if he failed to keep his spirits up, he would die. So he made a pact with another young man, that they would both look out, each day, for some occurrence they found amusing. At the end of each day they would tell one another their story and they would laugh together. "That sense of humour saved my life," he said. I stood corrected. He was right.

That is what we do on Purim. The joy, the merrymaking, the food, the drink, the whole carnival atmosphere, are there to allow us to live with the risks of being a Jew – in the past, and tragically in the present also – without being terrified, traumatised or intimidated. It is the most counter-intuitive response to terror, and the most effective. Terrorists aim to terrify. To be a Jew is to refuse to be terrified.

Terror, hatred, violence – the dark forces that are currently ravaging country after country in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia – are always ultimately self-destructive. Those who practise them are always, as was Haman, hoisted on their own petard, destroyed by their very will to destruction. And yes, we as Jews must fight antisemitism, the demonisation of Israel, and the intimidation of Jewish students on campus.

But we must never let ourselves be intimidated – and the Jewish way to avoid this is *marbim be-simcha*, to increase our joy. The people that can know the full darkness of history and yet rejoice is a people whose spirit no power on earth can ever break. Purim sameach. Elaine and I wish you a Purim full of joy