

Purim

A Deeper Look

The Meaning of Purim

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 and the behind-the-scenes machinations of God, 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, though, try reading the following summary:

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 Amalekhites, 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's 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 he 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. You can access the whole story online in Hebrew and English here: <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt3301.htm>

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. The fast is observed on the day preceding Purim. If Purim is the Sabbath, the fast is pushed back to the preceding Thursday.

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. The fast begins at dawn and concludes at nightfall.

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 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.

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. If you give charity money to any of the MJE Rabbis 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) 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 and 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 and performing humorous skits etc. Among the observances of the day is to become too “drunk” to tell the difference between Haman and 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 and one’s personal welfare.

6) 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.

Other Customs of Purim

1) Costumes

It is customary to dress up on Purim, because of 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.



Have a meaningful and fun Purim!

**“For the Jews there was light and joy
and happiness and glory”
(Esther 8:16)**