

Torah Basics

Purim – Feast of Esther



Biblical and Historical Background

Therefore they called these days "Purim," from the word "Pur" [lots]. Therefore because of all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and that which had come to them, the Jews established, and imposed on themselves, and on their descendants, and on all those who joined themselves to them, so that it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to what was written, and according to its appointed time, every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memory of them perish from their seed...The mitzvah of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book. (Esther 9:26-28, 32)

Purim (pronounced *Poor-EEM*) is named for the lots cast by Haman to determine the day of destruction for the Jews (Esther 3:7). Following God's miraculous deliverance, the Jews established the feast of Purim as an everlasting remembrance of God's mercy. The date chosen for the feast was the anniversary of the two days in which God gave the Jews peace from their enemies—the 14th and 15th days of the Hebrew month of Adar. The feast is one of rejoicing, and includes the traditional foods as well as costumes and plays.

Holiday Traditions and Symbols

The name "Esther" is somewhat of a mystery, but it is likely derived from a Hebrew root word meaning "to hide." In looking at the story of Esther, it becomes apparent that it tells about many "hidden" things. Esther's identity as a Jewess and the relative of Mordecai is *hidden*, her purpose in approaching the King is *hidden*, the plot against the king which Mordecai discovers is *hidden*. The most important thing that is *hidden*, however, is never mentioned in the text at all. It is the name of God. Just as His name is hidden, so His hand is hidden in the affairs of men. Although we do not see Him, He is always at work bringing about the fulfillment of His

will. This idea is reflected in many of the Jewish traditions of the Purim celebration.

Hidden Things. The foods of Purim reflect the idea of *hiddenness*. Traditional foods include not only Persian specialties, but always foods with something "hidden" in the middle—meat pastries, hamentaschen (filled cookies), and special Purim challah (Sabbath bread with a filling in the middle, sometimes also with raisins mixed in the dough). Traditional Purim costumes continue this theme of things "hidden," as the real identity of those in costume is hidden (at least in fun).

Generosity and Charity. The three Purim activities specified in the book of Esther are feasting, giving to the poor, and giving gifts of food to friends (Esther 9:22). Usually, each family gives at least one gift (usually money) to a charity of their choice. Each family also prepares a Purim "basket" (can be a bag, a plate, or any container, really) for at least two friends or neighbors. The Purim baskets contain special treats such as hamantashen and other sweets, fruit, homemade breads, etc. Delivering the baskets is a fun Purim afternoon activity and is always done in costume.

Silliness! Purim is traditionally a celebration characterized by hilarity—the sillier, the better! One fun tradition at a Purim party is to select a "Purim Rabbi." It is his job to spend the evening spouting Biblical and Talmudic wisdom—always out of context and always a little twisted in order to gently poke fun at someone or something.

The Whole Megillah. One activity that is almost always included is a public reading of the whole Megillah (scroll of Esther). Children come equipped with noisemakers and, upon every mention of the name "Haman," they make as much noise as possible. This is to remember God's intention to "blot out the memory of Amalek" (Ex. 17:14). Some adults put the name "Haman" in their shoes, and then stomp their feet at every

Hebrew and Yiddish Purim Terms to Know:

Grogger: A Yiddish word meaning "rattle." A Purim noisemaker used to drown out the name of Haman during the reading of the Megilla.

Hamentaschen: A Yiddish word meaning "Haman's Pockets." Refers to the traditional Purim treat: a triangular cookie or pastry with filling in the middle.

Matanot le'evyonim: Hebrew phrase meaning "gifts for the poor." A tradition on Purim is to give gifts to charities that help the poor.

Megillah: A Hebrew word meaning "scroll." Used most often to refer to the scroll of Esther, read in its entirety on Purim. Also refers to several other short books associated with certain festivals and observances (such as Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, associated with Unleavened Bread and Sukkot, respectively).

Mishlo'ach manot: Hebrew for "sent-out portions." Refers to the gifts of food traditionally brought to friends and family on Purim. Mishlo'ach manot are often placed in baskets and carried to the homes of the recipients by children in costume.

Purim: Pronounced "Poor-EEM." Hebrew word for "lots."

Purimshpiel: A funny play re-telling the Purim story.

Se'udah: Hebrew for "feast" or "celebration." A traditional *Purim Se'udah* is a huge meal, and includes both hamentaschen and wine.

mention of his name. The whole process can take awhile with all the interruptions, but it is a fun tradition that ensures the children's attention all the way through the story!

Two Days. Purim consists of two days, Purim and Shushan Purim. Traditionally, everyone celebrates Purim, while only those living in ancient cities that once had walls celebrate Shushan Purim. However, there is nothing wrong with celebrating both days even for those who live out in the country!

One approach is to have a family celebration one night and a Purim party for a crowd on the other night.

The Celebration

Purim is usually celebrated with a reading of the Megillah and a short play that retells the story of Esther in a humorous way. In the afternoon, everyone gathers for a special feast.

The Feast

The food on Purim traditionally follows the theme of things hidden, by containing ingredients that are hidden in the middle. Common choices include samosas or kreplach (meat pastries), Purim challah (with or without raisins), and hamantaschen.

Purim Blessings

*(recited before reading the
Megillah)*

*Baruch atah Adonai
eloheynu melech ha-olam
sheh-assah nissim
l'avoteynu
ba-yamin ha-hem
bazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You,
O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who performed
miracles
for our fathers
in the days of old
at this season

*Baruch ata Adonai
eloheynu melech ha-olam
sheh-hechianu v'ki'manu
v'higianu lazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You,
O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who has kept us in life,
and has preserved us,
and enabled us
to reach this season.