

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Purim

A Three Part Series

By Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon

Even as Winter blows and snows around us, we anticipate the arrival of Purim with joy – this year on March 16-17! Before we get too crazy, in the next few weeks, I will be teaching both in writing and on the Bimah about this fun, amazing and “humorously spiritual” holiday. Here is the first of several articles, in which I offer the following summary and analysis of Purim. Remember: *Purim is not just a holiday for children.*

Part I. Is Purim Fact, Fantasy or Farce?

"Believe it...or not!" The Talmudic Rabbis had some serious problems with the celebration of Purim, and the Scroll of Esther itself:

- 1) Unlike in Exodus and other redemptive stories, God is never mentioned directly in this tale of redemption.
- 2) The wild, ecstatic holiday celebration seemed too close to pagan springtime revelries, not to mention that the names of Esther and Mordechai are suspiciously close to Persian deities Marduk and Ishtar. (Purim may even have been borrowed from the Persian New Year festival Nowruz, which falls this year on March 22).

They solved the first problem by pointing to a verse (Chapter 4:14) wherein Mordechai writes to Esther: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter (Hebrew: Makom), while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” The Hebrew word Makom ("Place") is a well-known euphemism for the Divine. In other words, they suggest, God was working *behind the scenes through people* to bring about redemption.

They simply got around the second question by adapting the holiday into Jewish life. Like the popular celebration of Hanukkah, the Rabbis realized that the people's voice would have to prevail. The events of the story certainly rang true for Persian and other Diaspora communities - whether or not they really occurred exactly as the book relates. Living under Roman tyranny and later empires in the Middle Ages, Jews found in Purim a safe way to poke fun at their high and mighty oppressors, knowing (hoping) that someday they too would disappear. So the Rabbis looked deeper into the meaning of Purim, and they too found that such a holiday was needed alongside the more serious events of our history. Instead of fighting the popular will, they instituted the following mitzvot and customs for Purim:

1. **The Fast of Esther** - the day before Purim, to remember that events might not have turned out so well, and show our worthiness to be rescued.
2. **Hearing the Megillah or Scroll of Esther**: all ages and genders, and abilities must hear the story read, blotting out the name of Haman.
3. **Mishloach Manot** - homemade gifts of food to friends. One must give food of two different kinds (i.e. fruits and cookies) to two different friends.
4. **Mattanot le-eyyonim** (Charity to the poor) - to show our contrition and gratitude, and our awareness of other people's oppression.
5. **Ad lo Yada** - becoming so crazy (not necessarily drunk!) that one cannot tell the difference between "blessed is Mordechai" and "Cursed is Haman."

And so, Purim arrives to us today, along with centuries of additional customs and changes such as:

- **Purim Shpiel**, or farcical play on the story, which probably had its origin in medieval farces;
- **Haman-tashen** or "Haman's pocket cookies" which were probably based on popular foldover cookies in Europe. Since they were often filled with poppy seeds, called “mun,” in Yiddish they were called “muntashen.” Somebody thought up the clever pun of calling them **homuntashen**.” Sorry, the villain probably didn't wear a 3-cornered hat!
- The **gragger** was a popular noisemaker (they still use them at some sporting events in Europe!)

Following the custom of Esther, through the ages many Jewish communities from England to Poland to Yemen have declared their own local "Purims," marking an annual feast whenever they were spared from violence or legal oppression in some remarkable manner. This holiday still speaks to us today.

But is the story factual or fabrication? Or is it a satire based on real events? After all, there is no mention in Persian records of a King Ahashverosh, Queen Vashti, Haman, Esther, or Mordechai, nor is there any record of a Jewish queen. However, most Persian Jews will tell you that it absolutely happened, and that is their tradition – in fact, they probably lobbied hard for the rabbis to canonize the Book of Esther in the Bible. Still, we have no independent records of such events, especially an outright battle between Jews and the forces of "Haman." In the 1920's, Professor Jacob Hoschander suggested that the king of our story might have been based on Artaxerxes II (403-358 BCE), and that "Vashti" ("beauty" in Persian) represented his queen Stateira, who was murdered in a palace intrigue. While avoiding the question of whether Haman really existed, he suggests that Haman represented a reactionary political-religious view threatened by changing times. According to this theory, the true threat to this power came not from the small Judean population, but from the rising Zoroastrian religion, which, like Judaism, opposed pagan idol-worship. This would have made the two groups natural allies. Fearful that Jewish opposition would set a bad example for the larger class of Zoroastrians, someone like Haman might have singled the Jews out for violent reprisals. But before his plot could succeed, he fell from power - perhaps we will never know why...

Finally, why do we dress up like Haman on the one hand, yet "blot out his name" on the other? On a psycho-spiritual level, "Haman" represents that part of all of us that is prejudiced, negative, or simply fearful, the "evil impulse" within. As we increase our joy and revelry, so we blot out its power over us. We laugh in the face of Evil, mocking it and removing it from our souls. Would that it were so...

As newsman Edward R. Murrow used to say: "And that's the way it is."