



Purim

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18 DOORS

Unlocking Jewish



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When Is The Holiday Of Purim?

Purim comes in the late winter or early spring, during the twelfth month of the Hebrew calendar, *Adar*. When Haman drew his lots, the date selected for the massacre was the 13th of Adar. Instead of commemorating the scheduled massacre, we celebrate Purim on the 14th of Adar, focusing on the unraveling of the plot.

What Is The Story Of Purim?

The story of Purim is a story found in the *Book of Esther*, part of the Hebrew Bible. At Purim, it is read from *Megillat Esther, the Scroll of Esther*, and it goes something like this:

Three to five hundred years before the Common Era, a large and prosperous Jewish community flourished in Persia. Mordechai, a Jew, was a trusted advisor in the court of King Ahasuerus. One day, the King banished his queen, Vashti, for refusing to appear naked before his guests, as he had commanded her. Esther, the niece of Mordechai, was selected by the King to be his new queen after taking part in a beauty contest.

to bow only to God), Haman plotted to kill all the Jews in revenge. Haman felt slighted by Mordechai a second time and, in addition to planning to massacre all of the Jews in the empire, he specifically built gallows from which to hang Mordechai.

Even though Esther had hidden her Jewish identity, Mordechai convinced her to risk her life by revealing the truth to the King. She not only did this (revealing that they were intermarried!), but foiled Haman's evil plot. The King decreed that Haman would be hanged on the gallows built for Mordechai and gave Jews the right to defend themselves against future attacks. The King, noting that he owed Mordechai a favor for an earlier event, then appointed Mordechai as the new Royal Vizier.

When Mordechai refused to bow down before Haman, the Royal Vizier (because Jews are allowed



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Purim

is a Jewish Halloween, a Jewish Mardi Gras and a secular New Year rolled into one. And it is not just a holiday for children who immediately know that anything with a costume will be fun. All Jews are commanded to be silly and celebrate the ancient victory against their adversaries by giving gifts of food to friends and to the poor.

What Does The Word Purim Mean?

“*Purim*” is a Hebrew word that means “lots,” as in “lotteries.” It is the plural for the word “*pur*” which means “lot.” In the story of the holiday, we learn that Haman drew a lot in order to choose the day on which the Jewish people would be massacred.

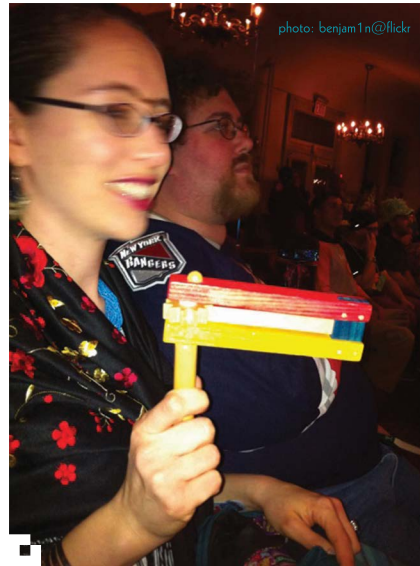
How Is Purim Celebrated?

Jews around the world have celebrated by dressing up as both the heroes and villains of the Purim story, as they chase away their winter doldrums. Purim brings all kinds of silliness for the entire Hebrew month of Adar. You will often see buttons or posters with the words:

Be Happy, It's Adar!

Jews are commanded to hear a public reading of the story of Esther (this commandment is known in Hebrew as *k'riyat ha'megillah*). The reading is performed with a distinctive melody on both the evening and morning of Purim. This trope or melody differs from the notes used for chanting Torah on Shabbat and other holidays; it is not used for any other reading from the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). The story is often read by clergy and congregants wearing costumes and using funny voices for the different roles. There are numerous ancient customs associated with the reading, one of which is reciting the names of Haman's ten sons in one breath. Children and adults dressed in masks and costumes are reminded to make enough noise to blot out the name of *Haman* every time it is read from the scroll. Pots and pans, horns and drums are all good noisemakers, but the best noise comes from wooden or metal Purim noisemakers called *graggers*.

Many congregations put on Purim *shpiels* – lively plays that place the Purim characters into pop culture settings or current affairs, including spoofs of political figures and media personalities. Since the 10th century, sarcastic, anti-authoritarian performances, mockery and dressing up have provided a forum for boundary crossing on issues of gender, sexuality, authority and relations with the secular world. Some synagogues raise funds for charities with carnivals, costume parties and casino nights, since gambling and drinking to excess, generally forbidden by Jewish law, are encouraged



on Purim. The Talmud instructs us to drink until we are unable to tell the difference between “*blessed be Mordechai*” and “*cursed be Haman*.”

Lessons Of Purim

The themes of Purim include overcoming oppression and growing pride in one's religious identity; the gifts of intermarriage; the strength of women; and the roles of bravery, luck and hope in bringing redemption.

Some see Esther's hiding of her Jewish religion, and later decision to reveal it to her spouse and community, as an allegory for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals who hide their sexuality and/or gender identity and later “come out.” The LGBTQ community may find strength in Esther's example to fight for liberation and overcome oppression. On a lighter note, there's the fun as well: another activity generally forbidden by Jewish law, cross-dressing, is encouraged on Purim.

On Purim, the whole Jewish community celebrates a woman who married a non-Jew! Not only is her intermarriage celebrated, but we thank her for doing it, and consider Esther a hero!

For many, Vashti, the first queen we are introduced to in the Purim story, is also a hero. She stood up to her husband, choosing not to be a mere “play thing” for the amusement of the King and his guests.

There are also serious lessons hidden within the celebrations. The story of Purim teaches that the world is a changeable and sometimes dangerous place for Jews and minorities. This story promotes community support and cohesion as one way to overcome oppression. Purim is a great opportunity to discuss other ways communities can work together to overcome suffering.

The Book of Esther presents children with a model of a Jewish heroine who is not only a beauty queen but a real human being, a person who, despite her fears, acts to help her people. Older children know that, despite the happy ending of the Purim story, the victory did

not last; many “Hamans” far more terrible have risen up against the Jews. And yet, the message is still relevant; we are still here telling the story. The ultimate triumph belongs to the living.

Purim Foods

Traditional Purim foods are sweet. Jews of Eastern European descent (Ashkenazi Jews) make a three cornered pastry called *hamentaschen* (“Haman’s pockets”). Originally filled with poppy seeds, they are also available with jams or chocolate in the center. Jews of Spanish descent (Sephardic Jews) make *Orejas de Haman* (“Haman’s Ears”), which are fried pieces of dough, shaped to look somewhat like an ear, made with orange blossom water and orange peel and drizzled with rich sugar syrup.

It is commanded in the *Book of Esther* (9:22) to observe Purim as “*days of feasting and gladness, and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*”

We share sweets with friends and neighbors through a custom known as the “sending of portions” or *mishloach manot* in Hebrew and *mishloach manos* (often shortened to *shalach manos*) in Yiddish. This reverse “trick or treat,” where families prepare goodie bags, is a sweet way to share our holiday with others. That same commandment tells us to distribute charitable donations of money or food to the poor as well. These “gifts to the poor” are known in Hebrew as *matanot l’evyonim*.

photo: erimansill.blogspot.com



Celebrating Purim With Children

Purim is a favorite holiday for children. Synagogues and Jewish community centers sponsor carnivals, costume contests and parades. Jewish schools and preschools create masks and noisemakers. Attending a Purim event annually can be something the children look forward to all year.

Purim can be a great excuse for being creative with your children! Try these suggestions to prepare for the merriment of the holiday with kids (and adults) of all ages:

Make masks and crowns using glitter, feathers, metallic paper, plastic “gems,” etc.

Create a cast of stick puppets to act out the Purim story.

Make hamentaschen and have a bake-off with friends, or buy hamentaschen from several different bakeries and have a tasting.

Make a three-cornered Purim plate for hamentaschen.

Give each child a new gragger every year and keep them in a special Purim box.



photo: am.org



18Doors mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

18Doors offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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