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# PURIM

## HANDBOOK



ALEPH INSTITUTE - NORTH EAST REGION

# Foreword

The holiday of Purim, the merry festival of limitless joy, begins this year on **Thursday evening, February 25**, and continues on the following day, Friday, February 26, until the commencement of Shabbat. This most joyful holiday celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people in the fourth century BCE from Haman's plot to annihilate all the Jews, who were then living under the dominion of Ahasuerus, Emperor of the Persian Empire.

Esther and Mordecai are the major heroes of the Purim story. When Haman's plot became known, Queen Esther—who was herself Jewish—advised the Jewish sage Mordecai to rally the Jews in prayer and repentance, while she adroitly engineered Haman's downfall at a party with the king. She then prevailed upon the king to empower the Jews to defend themselves against those who sought to destroy them. On the thirteenth of Adar, battles were fought throughout the empire. The following day, the fourteenth of Adar, became a day of celebration for the Jewish victory over their enemies.

Most of the Purim story unfolded in the Persian capital, the ancient walled city of Shushan. There the battles lasted for two days and the Jewish victory was celebrated on the fifteenth of Adar. Mordecai and Esther consecrated these two days for posterity as the festival of Purim—on the fifteenth of Adar in ancient walled cities, such as Shushan and Jerusalem, and on the fourteenth of Adar everywhere else.

The following pages are filled with fascinating Purim teachings coupled with practical guidance, geared to delight, inform, and inspire, and thereby enhance the Purim experience.

Purim presents a pause for reflection on the miracle of Jewish survival, a marvel too large to go unnoticed by non-Jewish thinkers. For example, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, wrote regarding the Jews: "This people is not eminent solely by their antiquity, but is also singular by their duration, which has always continued from their origin till now. For whereas the nations of Greece and of Italy, of Lacedaemon, of Athens and of Rome, and others who came long after, have long since perished, these ever remain, and in spite of the endeavors of many powerful kings who have a hundred times tried to destroy them . . . they have nevertheless been preserved (and this preservation has been foretold)."

Purim was an early chapter of this continuously recurring miracle, for its story continues to this very day.

Best wishes for boundless joy,

***Rabbi Moishe Mayir Vogel***



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# THE STORY OF PURIM

## GUIDE TO JEWISH MONTHS REFERRED TO ON THIS TIME LINE

### Nisan

Defined by the Torah as "the month of spring," it corresponds to late March or early April on the secular calendar. As the month of the Exodus, it carries the distinction of being the "first month" of the Jewish calendar, although Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is observed on the 1st of Tishrei, which is the seventh month from Nisan.

### Tevet

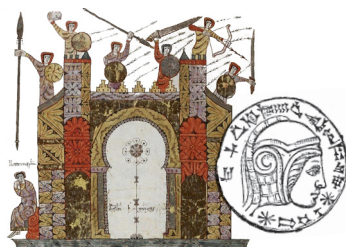
The fourth month of the Jewish year, or the tenth month when counting from Nisan. Described by the Talmud as the coldest month of the year, it corresponds to December–January on the secular calendar.

### Av

The tenth month of the Jewish year, or the fifth month when counting from Nisan. Corresponds to July–August on the secular calendar.

### Adar

The sixth month of the Jewish year, or the twelfth month when counting from Nisan. On Jewish leap years, which occur seven times in each 19-year cycle, there are two months called Adar—Adar I and Adar II. In such years, the festival of Purim is observed in the second Adar.



### 434 BCE

**The first exile:** The Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem and exiles the Judean king Jehoiakim, and many of Judea's princes and sages, to Babylonia. Mordecai is among the exiles.



### 430 BCE

**The prophecy:** The prophet Jeremiah prophesies that the Babylonian Exile will last 70 years.

### 371 BCE

**The return:** The Persian emperor Cyrus issues a proclamation calling on the Jewish people to return to their homeland and rebuild the Holy Temple. Some 42,000 return to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Most remain in exile, dispersed across the Persian Empire.



### 370 BCE

**Building of the Holy Temple disrupted:** The Cuthians, then living in the north of Israel and antagonistic to the Jews, succeed in disrupting the rebuilding of the Holy Temple.

BCE

470

460

450

440

430

420

410



### Av 9, 423 BCE

**The destruction:** The first Holy Temple is destroyed, and the Jewish people are exiled to Babylonia.



### 372 BCE

**The fall of Babylon:** The Babylonian empire is conquered by the Persians.



### 369 BCE

**Ahasuerus becomes emperor of Persia:**

The new emperor sides with the Cuthians against the Jews and issues a decree halting the building of the Temple.



### 366 BCE

**Ahasuerus's feast:** To celebrate the 3rd year of his reign, and his belief that the deadline for Jeremiah's prophecy had passed without fulfillment, Ahasuerus throws a feast for all the residents of his capital, Susa. Mordecai warns the Jews not to attend, but many disregard his warning and enjoy the banquet.

**Vashti deposed:** On the 7th day of the banquet, Ahasuerus, in a drunken rage, orders the execution of queen Vashti for her refusal to obey his order that she display her beauty to the revelers.



### 363 BCE

**Esther is taken to the palace:** As part of Ahasuerus's search for a new queen, Mordecai's cousin and adopted daughter, Esther, is taken to the king's harem.



## Nisan 13

**Haman's plot:** Haman, whom Ahasuerus appointed as his prime minister, is enraged when Mordecai refuses to bow to him, resolves to annihilate the Jewish people, and casts lots to decide the date of their destruction. Haman convinces Ahasuerus to issue a decree that all Jews—men, women, and children—be killed on the 13th of Adar of the following year. Mordecai entreats Esther to intervene with the king on behalf of her people.



## Nisan 15

**Esther approaches the king:** After three days of fasting and prayer are proclaimed by Mordecai at Esther's behest, Esther risks her life by entering the king's throne room unbidden and invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a private wine party. At the party, Esther refuses to reveal her request to the king, promising only to reveal it at a second wine fest.

## Nisan 16

**The turnaround:** Haman prepares a gallows on which to hang Mordecai. But in the course of a sleepless night, Ahasuerus discovers that Mordecai had saved his life from an assassination plot and has never been rewarded. When Haman arrives at the royal palace, Ahasuerus orders him to dress Mordecai in garments and parade him through the streets of Susa, proclaiming: "So shall be done for the man whom the king desires to honor!"



**Haman's downfall:** At the second wine party, Esther accuses Haman of plotting to destroy her and her people. The king orders that Haman be hung on the gallows that he prepared for Mordecai and appoints Mordecai to replace Haman as his prime minister.



## Nisan 23

**Second decree issued:** Ahasuerus maintains that Haman's decree, which bears the royal seal, cannot be revoked. Instead, he issues a second decree empowering the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies.



## Tevet, 362 BCE

Esther is crowned queen of Persia

357 BCE / NISAN

390

380

370

360

350

340

330

356 BCE / ADAR

## Adar 13

**The fight for survival:** In battles fought throughout the kingdom, the Jews are victorious against those who attack them in an attempt to carry out Haman's decree.



## Adar 14

**The celebration:** The Jews throughout Ahasuerus's kingdom celebrate their victory over their enemies. But in the capital Susa, the battles continue for an additional day.

## Adar 15

**The celebration in Susa:** The victory is celebrated by the Jews of Susa one day later than in the rest of the empire.



## 353–349 BCE

**The Holy Temple is rebuilt:** Seventy years after the Holy Temple's destruction and 18 years after its rebuilding was halted, King Darius II, the son of King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther, allows the building of the Second Temple to resume. The Temple is completed four years later.



## Adar, 355 BCE

**Purim is instituted:** Esther records the story of the miracle, and the Megilah ("Scroll of Esther") is included in the Holy Scriptures. Mordecai and Esther proclaim the festival of Purim, instituting that each year the miracle of the Jews' salvation be commemorated on the 14th of Adar by reading the Megilah, sending gifts of food to friends, giving charity to the poor, and feasting and rejoicing. In walled cities, such as Susa, the festival is instituted to be observed on the 15th of Adar.



# The Living Megilah

The Purim story is not simply a slice of our distant past; it is relevant and applicable to our present-day lives. This section provides an abbreviated sketch of each chapter of the Megilah, with an eye toward the lesson that each chapter might offer us in the here and now.

## Chapter 1



King Ahasuerus of Persia celebrates his ascension by throwing a 180-day party for his officers, followed by a weeklong feast for all citizens of his capital, Shushan. The setting is extraordinarily lavish—“White and violet linen hangings fastened with fine white and purple cords to silver rings on marble pillars; gold and silver couches . . . golden cups, plentiful royal wine. . . .”



*And it was in  
the days of  
Ahasuerus...*

Disaster strikes at its climax: Queen Vashti refuses to parade before the guests, and an inebriated Ahasuerus orders her execution.

### LESSON

Ahasuerus had one admirable trait, although he perverted it for negative ends: when he was set on a goal, he went all out, investing all his time, resources, influence, determination, and creativity. Ahasuerus serves as a royal reminder that when we set our minds on doing something good, we should harness all our talents, resources, and energies to accomplish our positive goal in the best way possible.

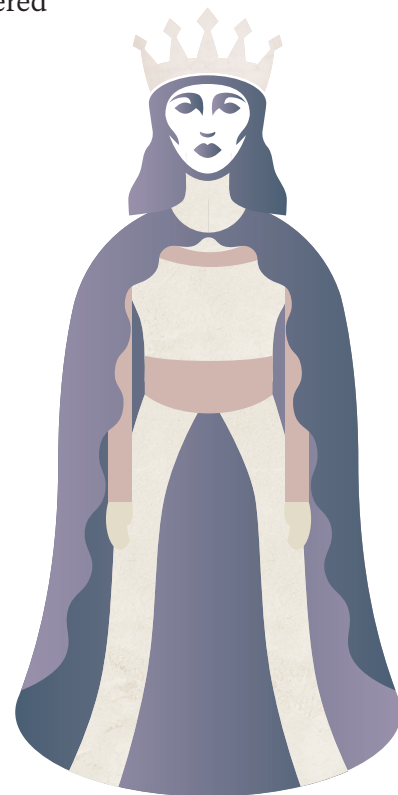
## Chapter 2



Ahasuerus seeks a new queen, dispatching officials to find beautiful women. The Jewish leader Mordecai, living in Shushan, is raising his doubly-orphaned cousin, Esther. She is noticed by the queen-seekers and taken to Ahasuerus's beauty pageant. Ahasuerus selects her as queen, but she follows Mordecai's advice to conceal her Jewish origins. Mordecai overhears a plot to assassinate the king; he reports it to Esther, who alerts the king. The king is saved, the conspirators are executed, and Mordecai's deed is entered into the royal records.

### LESSON

In ancient times, orphans were grossly overlooked, their futures written off prematurely. Esther is an orphan, but she rises to surprising greatness and—as we soon discover—becomes her people's savior. Each individual has the potential for great accomplishment. We must be Mordecais—reaching out to help those around us realize their potential.





## Chapter 3



Ahasuerus appoints Haman as viceroy; all must bow before him. Mordecai, however, “would neither kneel nor prostrate.” Haman is enraged, vowing to exterminate the Jewish leader with all his brethren. Haman casts lots (*pur* in ancient Persian, hence the festival’s Hebraic-Persian title, Purim) to select a final date for his evil plot. The lots land on the thirteenth of the month of Adar. Haman approaches Ahasuerus: “There’s a peculiar people scattered and separated among the nations across all the provinces of your empire. . . .” He casts them as useless and harmful, and Ahasuerus permits their annihilation. An edict is dispatched across the empire ordering preparations for total genocide.

### LESSON

Haman described the Jews as “scattered and separated.” He was correct not only in the geographical and societal sense, but he also highlighted a tragic internal flaw—the Jews were disunited, split into factions. The remedy arrived when Esther ordered Mordecai to gather all the Jews as one—ostensibly for communal prayer, but equally to reconstruct their internal unity. Discord and disunity leaves us vulnerable, incapable of operating effectively in the face of challenge. Harmony not only affords collaboration but elicits G-d’s greatest blessings and salvation.

## Chapter 5



Esther fasts and prays for three days. Feeble, famished, fearful—she enters the throne room. Ahasuerus extends his scepter, a signal that his queen be spared execution. “What is your wish?” She simply invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a wine party with her alone. Granted. At the party, Ahasuerus repeats, “What is it that you seek from me?” She again deflects, inviting Ahasuerus and Haman to a second private party. Meanwhile, Haman constructs gallows that tower over Shushan to hang Mordecai.

## Chapter 4



The Jews hear of the impending slaughter. They are plunged into terrified

mourning. Mordecai implores Esther to intercede with Ahasuerus—“Perhaps you reached your royal position for just such a crisis.” Esther refuses: by law, an unsolicited visit to Ahasuerus, even by his queen, risks probable execution. Esther eventually agrees to risk her life with a condition: Mordecai must gather all the Jews of Shushan to pray and fast together for her success.

### LESSON

Esther hesitated, fearing a death trap. Mordecai disagreed; the opportunity was clear to him: Why else would G-d have forced her to become queen? If she received a crown, it must be to accomplish something unique. In this sense, we are all Esther: our particular education, resources, talents, experiences, positions, or influence, are golden crowns—divine calls—to accomplish something special. Heed Mordecai’s timeless plea: go for it!

### LESSON

For her fateful meeting with Ahasuerus, Esther compromised beauty and health with fasts and tears. True, she followed basic protocol—glittering dress, sparkling tiara, and glistening eyeliner—but in her mind she stood primarily before G-d, the ultimate power, bearing spiritual gifts of prayer, fasting, and good deeds. We must similarly strike a delicate harmony between mortal efforts to meet our goals and connecting with G-d, the source of our success.

## Chapter 6

On the eve of Esther's second party, Ahasuerus suffers insomnia. He orders the royal records read to him, hears how Mordecai foiled his assassination, and notes his failure to reward Mordecai. Haman paces outside the palace, waiting to request permission to hang his foe—the same Mordecai. Sleepless Ahasuerus hears of Haman's presence, orders him inside, and solicits advice on bestowing honor. Haman imagines Ahasuerus refers to him; he recommends parading the subject throughout Shushan wearing the king's garments and crown. Ahasuerus orders Haman to personally lead Mordecai thus attired and to announce, "So shall be done to the one the king wishes to honor!" Haman is horrified but must obey. He then stumbles, distraught and disheveled, into Queen Esther's second party.

### LESSON

Jewish law instructs the synagogue reader to raise his voice at the start of this chapter—for herein lies the miraculous turning point. To the audience, however, the

miracle might appear invisible. No sea is split. No bread falls from heaven. All they hear is that Ahasuerus cannot fall asleep.

But that is precisely the miracle. Phenomena we consider natural, including breathing, waking, speaking, succeeding, and even sudden insomnia, are a series of miracles that we often take for granted. Seek G-d in the natural and you will live a life of miracles.



## Chapter 7

At the party, Esther agrees to share her request with the curious king. She informs him that the nation Haman seeks to destroy is her own and makes her appeal—"If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, and if it pleases the king, may my life be given me in my petition and my people in my request." Ahasuerus is outraged. He orders Haman hanged on the gallows that Haman built with Mordecai in mind.

### LESSON

The key to Esther's argument is her equating herself with her people. Ahasuerus cherished her qualities, so she argued, "I am a Jew! I am a product of the traditions that Haman claims makes Jews despicable. If I am worth sparing, so are they." We each have similar opportunities. If we are proud of our Jewish identities, the people who know us and respect us will recognize that our people are decent, moral, generous, modest, thoughtful, and lovable individuals.



## Chapter 8



Esther begs Ahasuerus to retract the annihilation decree, but Ahasuerus does not retract decrees. He suggests creating countermeasures. Esther and Mordecai decree that Jews have rights to defense, weapons procurement, and preemptive assault on mortal enemies on the day slated for their annihilation. The conflicting decrees provide armed battle as the only means of rescue, but for the jubilant Jews, the news is sheer salvation—“light and joy, gladness and honor.” The general population is equally struck by the awesome reversal, and “many of the people of the land became Jewish, for the awe of the Jews had fallen upon them.”

### LESSON

“Many of the people of the land became Jewish.” That is a shift in perspective we must all adopt. Instead of being a “person of the land”—being obsessed with “the land,” meaning, materiality and corporeal pleasures and needs, we should adopt a “Jewish” lens and realize that everything comes from G-d; everything on Earth has a spiritual core and exists for a divine purpose. This perspective allows us to live with “light and joy.”

## Chapter 9



The thirteenth of Adar! Armed enemies emerge, but armed Jews spring to defend themselves and score a resounding victory. Haman’s loyalists are centered in Shushan, where Esther receives royal permission to press the battle for a second day, until the job is complete. Mordecai records these events and joins Esther in establishing the festival of Purim: “Observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor.” The Jews universally “fulfilled and adopted” these traditions. As Mordecai predicted, they are observed until today—“These days are recalled and observed in every generation.”

### LESSON

The phrase “recalled and observed in every generation” refers to our obligation to hear the Megilah on Purim. This accompanies three additional practices mentioned in the verses: (1) enjoying a festive meal; (2) sending food gifts to friends; and (3) charitable donations. When we celebrate Purim, we engage in four practical things, each with its own set of particular laws and customs. We don’t suffice with inspiration. We must always seek to translate feelings and thoughts into practical and measured action.

## Chapter 10



The saga closes with “Mordecai the Jew” firmly installed in the palace in Ahasuerus’s service. He receives the adulation and approval of his people.

### LESSON

When Mordecai is first mentioned in the Megilah, he is labeled “the Jew.” At the saga’s close, he is again called “the Jew.” The message: he brought his Judaism with him to the palace instead of leaving it at home. The Megilah insists that the Jews are “Mordecai’s people.” In every place, era, and circumstance, we should bear our identity overtly and our heritage proudly. It complements all that we do and will eventually attract applause.

### LESSON SOURCES

**Introduction** *Keter Shem Tov*, Appendix 100; *Likutei Sichot* 6, p. 189

**Chapter 1** *Sichot Kodesh* 5733:1, pp. 410–412

**Chapter 2** See *Esther Rabah* 6:7

**Chapter 3** *Sefer Hasichot* 5748:1, p. 1:292

**Chapter 4** *Torat Menachem* 5722:2, pp. 199–203

**Chapter 5** *Likutei Sichot* 1, pp. 214–215

**Chapter 6** *Darkei Moshe*, Orach Chayim 690; *Torat Menachem* 5725:3 p. 63

**Chapter 7** *Torat Menachem* 5729:2, p. 39

**Chapter 8** *Likutei Sichot* 36, p. 267

**Chapter 9** *Avot* 1:17

**Chapter 10** *Likutei Sichot* 6, p. 381

# The *Mitzvot* of Purim

DEED & THOUGHT

To commemorate the miracle of Purim, Mordecai and Esther instituted four observances by which the events and their significance are “remembered and reenacted in each and every generation” (Esther 9:28).

## READING THE MEGILAH



DEED

On Purim eve, and again on Purim day, we read the Megilah (“the scroll”)—the biblical Book of Esther, written by Esther and Mordecai, that recounts the story of Purim.

## THOUGHT

The Book of Esther is the very last book to be included in the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, the events of Purim signify the close of an era in Jewish history: the age of prophecy and open miracles had come to an end. In the words of the Talmud, “Just as dawn marks the end of the night, so does Esther mark the end of miracles.”

But wouldn't it make more sense to equate the era of divine revelation with “day,” and a time of divine concealment with “night”? It would seem that the Book of Esther represents a “sunset” rather than a “dawn”!

In truth, however, the thousand years from the Exodus to Purim were a time when our faith in G-d derived not from an inner conviction and understanding, but from the fact that G-d was openly communicating with us and overwhelming us with miraculous demonstrations of His truth. Time and again we strayed from our covenant with G-d, requiring more revelations and more miracles to set us straight. On Purim, however, we recognized the presence of G-d *within* the workings of nature—in every detail and “coincidence” of our lives, rather than only in supranatural interventions. As a result, our commitment to G-d became constant and immutable. Ostensibly, this was a time of darkness and concealment; in truth, it marked the dawn of a new day in our journey as a people.

## SENDING FOOD PORTIONS TO FRIENDS (*MISHLO'ACH MANOT*)

2

DEED

Send a minimum of two ready-to-eat food portions to at least one friend (in practice, many go beyond this minimum requirement and prepare elaborate food baskets to send to a wide circle of family and friends). This action increases the joy of the festival and promotes friendship and fellowship within the community.



## THOUGHT

When Haman approached King Ahasuerus with his plan to annihilate the Jewish nation, he described us as a people who are “scattered and divided among the nations in all the provinces of your kingdom” (Esther 3:8). Haman's derogatory words contained a kernel of truth: the Jewish people were plagued by divisiveness and conflict, and this is what empowered our enemies to plot our destruction.

The key to our salvation lay in reasserting our unity. When Mordecai charged Esther to risk her life to intervene with the king, Esther's response was, “Go and gather all the Jews . . .” (Esther 4:16). So each year on Purim we send gifts of food to each other, highlighting the fellowship and friendship between us.



# 3 GIFTS TO THE POOR (MATANOT LA'EYONIM)



## DEED

Give gifts of money to a minimum of two needy people. Giving charity is a mitzvah every day of the year, but this observance is unique in two respects: (a) on Purim we are obligated not only to assist those who ask for our help, but also to actively seek out the needy; (b) ordinarily, we try to ascertain that those seeking financial assistance are in fact needy of it and not impostors, but on Purim the rule is, “Whoever stretches out their hand, we give to them.”

## THOUGHT

The Midrash states regarding the *mitzvot*: “A human being will instruct others to do something but not do it themselves. Not so G-d: what He Himself does, that is what He tells the people of Israel to do.”

On Purim, G-d, too, “upgrades” His gifts to us in these two ways. He grants us the blessings of life, including those which we do not ask for or even do not know to ask for. And He bestows these blessings without limit or reservation, regardless of how deserving we are.

## SOURCES

**Reading the Megilah** Talmud, Yoma 29a; Rabbi Yonatan Eibenschutz (1690–1764), *Yaarot Devash* 2:2

**Sending Food Portions to Friends** Rabbi Shlomo Alkabets (c. 1500–1580), *Manot Halevi* 9:16–17

**Gifts to the Poor** Jerusalem Talmud, Megilah 1:4; *Shemot Rabah* 30:9; The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), *Torat Menachem* 5747:2, pp. 605–607

**Feasting and Drinking** Talmud, Megilah 7b; *Tikunei Zohar* 21. Rabbi Shne’ur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), *Torah Or*, *Megilat Esther* 95d–96a

# FEASTING AND DRINKING

## DEED

Enjoy a lavish meal, which also includes inebriating drink. The Talmud states that a person should drink on Purim “until they do not know the difference between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordecai.’”



## THOUGHT

Purim and Yom Kippur are both associated with “casting lots.” The *Zohar* even states that the name *Yom Kippur* can be understood as meaning “a day like Purim.” But Yom Kippur is a fast day, while on Purim we satiate the body with food and drink in a manner surpassing all other festivals.

Both extremes, however, are consistent with the idea of “casting lots.” Throughout the year, our relationship with G-d is primarily guided—but also limited—by reason and logic. But on Purim, we relive the time when we “cast our lot” with G-d in a suprarational fashion, as we were prepared to give our up lives rather than renounce our Jewishness—notwithstanding the fact that G-d’s presence in our lives was hidden from us. And on Yom Kippur, we likewise connect to the core essence of our bond with G-d—a bond that transcends all reason and logic and, thus, survives and ultimately rectifies all sins and betrayals.

The difference is that on Yom Kippur, our transcendence of the normal and the rational is expressed by rising above the everyday features of physical life. On Purim, we accomplish something even greater: we discover our suprarational bond with G-d not by transcending the body, but in the celebration of our physical lives as Jews.

# Purim Customs

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## A FESTIVAL THAT STANDS ALONE

It is ancient practice to counter the mention of Haman's name—when it is read from the Megilah—with a cacophony of noises. This is typically achieved by swinging a handheld noisemaker—*grager* in Yiddish (apparently from the Polish, *grzęgarz*). A halachic publication from the year 1204 records an early iteration of this custom among the Jews of France and Provence: children write Haman's name on two pebbles and bang them together, thereby erasing and drowning out his name simultaneously.



## SHARING JOY AND JUDAISM

It has become widespread Purim practice for Jews to encourage and assist their fellow Jews in fulfilling the observances of the day. In a now-ubiquitous image in Israel, army bases across the country are raided (with permission) by bands of joyous Purim merry-makers, who facilitate the soldiers' observance of the four *mitzvot* of Purim. Around the world, countless individuals visit hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and so on, to share the festivities with Jews in these places. For many of us, it is more practical to reach out to our neighbors, coworkers, or friends, and offer a hand in celebrating the joy of Purim. Be it in the army, the hospital, or the workplace—experience the joy of bringing joy to others!

## COSTUMES, CALIBRATION, AND KRAKOW'S CHARACTER

It is customary for children (and even adults) to dress up on Purim and masquerade, apparently to increase the celebratory mood—although a wealth of symbolism lurks behind this practice.

One insight offered by Rabbi Moshe Chagiz (1672–1750) is that the Talmud records that in the years preceding the Purim saga, many Jews turned to idolatry, but only out of fear of aggression; in other words, their frightful lapses of faith were but a “costume” and “mask.” Our own Purim costumes are a corrective call to reexamine the distinction between our true selves and the façades we sometimes erect due to external pressures.

Rabbi Moshe Isserlis (1530–1572) passed away on the 33rd day of the Omer. Accordingly, his official eulogizer sought to highlight thirty-three of his praiseworthy characteristics. In the course of research for a final quality, he encountered an elderly citizen who described the great sage personally roaming Krakow's Jewish quarter on Purim evening to remind his feasting brethren to recite the evening services. Most of Krakow was unaware that this annual Purim fixture was in fact their esteemed rabbi—because he made his rounds in costume.





## THANKSGIVING PRAYER

The Talmud instructs us to add a paragraph to our Purim prayers and Grace after Meals describing the Purim miracle and applauding G-d for His salvation. The text that we insert today is mentioned as early as the eighth century, in Rabbi Achai Ga'on's *She'iltot*—authored in Babylonia as the first extant post-Talmudic Torah publication. Its complete text appears in the ninth-century prayer book authored by Rabbi Amram Ga'on.

In select branches of liturgical tradition, this paragraph includes a petition for G-d's continued salvation. However, most communities deliberately omit such a petition. One of the arguments against requesting further deliverance is that we rightfully insert the Purim thanksgivings into the penultimate blessing of the Amidah, which focuses entirely on expressing gratitude. It is widely considered inappropriate to smuggle petitions into thanksgiving prayers. Therein lies a lesson for life: At times, we must pray and strive to better our lives, but we equally require moments to reflect on our blessings and express gratitude. Our requests should be forcefully focused, and our gratitude should remain utterly unreserved. To mingle the two is to undermine both.

## WINE AND CLARITY

The Talmud notes the importance of drinking wine during the festive Purim repast. It then remarks that the festivities ought to climax to a point that one confuses “cursed is Haman” with “blessed is Mordecai.”



This is astounding: Are we to slur the distinction between good and evil? Here is one of several solutions: It is a common human fallibility to construct paradigms of good and evil that are off the mark. We adopt certain values as absolute “Mordecais” and extend our unfettered blessing to their propagation, when, in reality, they are undeserving of our blind approval. We shun other ideals, considering them cursed “Hamanites,” when they are actually positive and beneficial. The true and sacred joy of Purim empowers us to cut through misconception and calibrate our inverted paradigms. On this day, we can begin to bless that which is truly good, but which we rejected as we would Haman himself—and to discard matters that undermine our soul's mission, but which we erroneously embraced as salvation-inducing “Mordecais.”

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## SOURCES

**Hammering Haman** *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 690:17; *Sefer Hamanhig*, Laws of Megilah 18; Daniel Sperber, “Erasing Haman's Name,” *Shana Beshanah*, 2012, pp. 203–212

**Costumes, Calibration, and Krakow's Character** Mahari Mintz, *Responsa* 15; *Elah Hamitsvot* 543; Talmud, Megilah 12a; *Lev Ha'Ivri* 1:2

**Thanksgiving Prayer** Talmud, Shabbat 24a–b; *She'iltot Rav Achai Ga'on*, 26 (Mirski edition, p. 169); *Tur, Orach Chayim* 682

**Wine and Clarity** Talmud, Megilah 7b; *Sichot Kodesh* 5730:1, p. 610

# Symbolism of Hamantashen

## SEED DIET

We eat pastry pockets stuffed with seeds in a nod to Queen Esther's faithfulness to her traditions. She eschewed the Persian palace's nonkosher cuisine and survived on a seed diet. Like her, we find a creative way to consume them.



## SHOCK THERAPY

In Hebrew, Hamantashen are *aznei Haman*—"Haman's ears"—a reference to Jewish ears that perked in panic when Haman plotted genocide. The Jews had been largely noncommittal about Judaism but were now all ears to listen to G-d.



## AN EAR TO RUIN

*Aznei Haman*, Haman's ears, are a culinary laugh at the divine intervention that compelled Haman to heed an outrageous idea: His family urged him to construct gallows for Mordecai, the king's most loyal advisor. They had his ear, but they actually had his head—when the king threw a tantrum and hanged Haman on it instead.

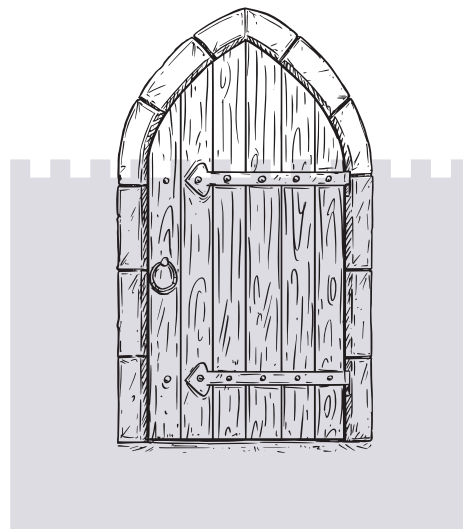
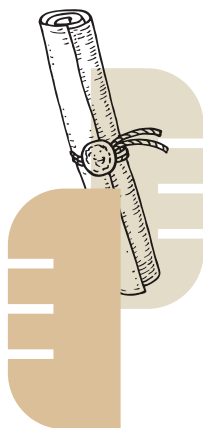


## FATHOM THE FILLING

Unseen from the exterior, it's the filling that makes the Hamantash. It reminds us that the miracle was largely unseen; the masses considered it natural for the king to grant Queen Esther's request to spare the Jews. Only those inside the kings' court—who peered beyond the pastry—recognized the miracle of a tyrant who never backed down agreeing to rescind a decree.

## COURIER COOKIES

Pastries were pivotal in producing Purim: Jews across the Persian Empire struggled to believe that the king had agreed to murder every innocent Jewish adult, youth, and infant. Mordecai resorted to describing the king's cruel nature in messages buried in baked goods to avoid detection.



## HAMAN FOR LUNCH

We eat sesame or other seeds—*mahn* in Yiddish. *Mahn* sounds like, and its Hebrew letters interchange with, the name Haman. We mark our miraculous victory by eating our foe—for the vanquished are referred to as swallowed by the victor.



## TYRANTS CRUMBLE

Haman was a powerful oppressor, positioned to annihilate every last Jew. But G-d is our redeemer; He cripples the powerful and neutralizes their threats. In Hebrew, “feeble” is *tash*. Hence the *Haman-tash*, “Haman-crippler.”

## SOURCES

**Seed Diet** Rabbi Chizkiyah da Silva, *Peri Chadash, Orach Chayim* (Amsterdam, 1730), 695:2

**Shock Therapy** Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani, *Zera Shimshon, Megilat Esther* (Mantua, 1778), p. 56

**An Ear to Ruin** Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani, *Ibid.*, p. 53

**Fathom the Filling** Rabbi Yisrael Iser of Ponevezh, *Menuchah Ukedushah* (Vilna, 1864), p. 48

**Courier Cookies** Rabbi Yisrael Iser of Ponevezh, *Menuchah Ukedushah* (Vilna, 1864), p. 48

**Haman for Lunch** Rabbi Yitschak Lipitz, *Sefer Matamim* (Warsaw, 1910), p. 87

**Tyrants Crumble** Rabbi Avraham Eliezer Hirshowitz, *Otsar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun* (Pittsburgh, 1917), p. 126

Traditional

## Hamantashen



YIELDS APPROX. 40 HAMANTASHEN

Adapted with permission from  
the *Spice and Spirit Cookbook*

## RECIPE

### Ingredients

4 eggs  
1 cup sugar  
½ cup oil  
1½ tsp. lemon juice  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
5 cups flour  
2 tsp. baking powder

### Fillings

Raspberry or apricot preserves,  
or poppy seed filling

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Beat eggs and sugar.

Add remaining ingredients, and mix well.

Divide dough into four parts.

Roll out the dough very thin (about 1/8 inch) on a floured board. Flour the rim of a 3-3 ½ inch cutter or glass and cut out circles.

Spread about a tablespoon of filling in the center of each circle. To shape triangular hamantaschen, pinch sides toward the center.

Bake on a well-greased cookie sheet at 350°F for about 18–20 minutes or until slightly browned.

Note: if glaze is desired, brush with beaten egg.



# Tidbits and Teachings

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## A HIDDEN HAND

The book of Esther is anomalous in the biblical canon for failing to contain any explicit reference to G-d. It offers numerous allusions to the King of the Universe but these are deciphered indirectly, through interpretation. Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra (1092–1164) maintained that its authors—Mordecai and Esther—expected the Persian intelligentsia to reproduce this work for their libraries, and to exchange any reference to G-d with the titles of their own pagan deities. They chose abstention over desecration. Yehudah Loew of Prague (c. 1512–1609, known as “Maharal”) observed that the Purim salvation was not born through an overt miracle; only if we connect the dots do we discover G-d hovering behind events to orchestrate the perfect rescue. To reflect G-d’s decidedly hidden hand, references to G-d were woven into the text in the form of allusions and acronyms, rather than via overt mention.



## MULTIPLICITY OF PURIMS

In almost every era, Jewish communities faced devastating dangers—decrees of death, expulsion, and the like. It became customary, in instances where grave dangers gave way to unexpected reprieve or sudden salvation, for the affected community to mark the date annually as a Purim, replete with joy, thanksgiving, charity, feasting, and retelling the story. For instance, the Greek city of Lepanto (Nafpaktos) was seized from the Venetians by the Ottomans in 1499, leaving the Jews of the city in mortal peril. There is no surviving description of the danger and rescue, save for the fact that Lepanto’s Jews marked their miraculous salvation with an annual “Purim of Lepanto” on the eleventh of Tevet. We know of this because Rabbi Moshe Alashkar (1466–1542) recorded contemporary queries of Jewish law he faced as a result: Must families fresh to Lepanto join the locals in observing this holiday? Conversely, should individuals who abandon the city celebrate Purim of Lepanto in their new locations?

## A FESTIVAL THAT STANDS ALONE

A curious Midrashic passage teaches that in the era of ultimate redemption, every Jewish holiday besides Purim will be “nullified.” This astonishing statement upsets the Torah’s promise that Jewish law will never be abrogated. Besides, why does Purim merit exclusive immunity? Like many a Midrashic remark, this is a cryptic wink at a mystic reality: Jewish festivals are not born of convention. They reflect moments when G-d is far more revealed and relatable, and this divine closeness awakens our joy. Such revelations will not cease with the arrival of the Redemption, and no festival will be canceled. They will, however, become “nullified,” meaning that their uniqueness will be rendered invisible—just as a candle’s glow is hardly noticed beside a furnace, its radiance nullified by a larger light. In that blessed era, we will enjoy an overtly close relationship with G-d; each day’s revelations will equal or outrank that of a festival. But not Purim. This holiday will remain a wonder. The self-sacrifice of the Jewish nation in remaining faithful despite the certainty of extermination that remaining Jewish would bring touched G-d to the core. As a result, the bonding G-d offers on Purim is too intimate to be outshone, even in an era overflowing with revelation.

## PURIM UNCHANGED

Would you care to travel back in time to witness a Jewish community of yore? We are permitted a tantalizing glimpse of Purim celebrated in seventeenth-century Morocco, thanks to a non-Jewish English author, Lancelot Addison (1632–1703), a chaplain in the English army stationed at Tangier who recorded his study of the country’s Jews in his 1675 *The Present State of the Jews*. Part of his quaint description of Purim reads: “In the celebration of this feast, they at present use these Ceremonies: First they light up great store of Lamps, that thereby they may testify their joy; and read over the Book of Esther; At which, both the women and children are bound to be present. Who at the naming of Haman, make an hideous noise, beating with their hands, and stamping with their feet. . . . When they come out of the Synagogue, they fall to eating and drinking; and are therein much more liberal at this, than any other time. And they have a Rule, that at the Feast of Purim they should drink till they cannot distinguish between, *Cursed be Haman, and blessed be Mordachee*. At this Feast, the Rich supply the Poor with Wine and Viands. . . . At this Feast also they salute one another with presents, and bestow large Alms upon the Needy.”

## TRUE ACCEPTANCE

The Talmud surprisingly insists that the Jews of Moses’s era failed to willingly accept the Torah from G-d at Sinai, and only did so a millennium later during the saga of Purim. Rabbi Shne’ur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812) sheds light on this puzzling presumption, pointing out that the Jews who received the Torah had experienced an unparalleled outpouring of divine love—the miracles of the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea, and their supernatural arrangements in the Sinai Desert. This ceaseless divine hugging of a traumatized nation triggered an automatic response to accept G-d’s Torah in return. Their acceptance was driven by the external influence of G-d’s overt care for them. Without it, perhaps they would not have accepted the Torah. The Jews freed themselves forever from this implicit allegation during the Purim episode. For the first time since their national birth, they were entirely exiled from the Promised Land and simultaneously persecuted and designated for wholesale genocide. No displays of divine love. G-d had closed His eyes and broken His promises, or so it seemed. Nevertheless, *all* the Jews *willingly* chose to go to the grave as faithful Jews. True acceptance. Which is precisely what G-d was waiting for.



## SOURCES

**A Hidden Hand** Ibn Ezra, introduction to Megilah; *Or Chadash* 6:11

**Multiplicity of Purims** Responsa Maharam Alashkar 49

**A Festival That Stands Alone** *Midrash Mishlei* 9:2;  
*Likutei Torah—Torat Shmuel* 5626, p. 29

**Purim Unchanged** *The Present State of the Jews: Wherein Is Contained an Exact Account of Their Customs Secular and Religious* (London 1676), pp. 179–180

**True Acceptance** Talmud, Shabbat 83a; *Torah Or, Megilat Esther* 98d

# An Immortal Scroll



A copper engraving by French monk Augustin Calmet (1672–1757) depicts Purim festivities in 1720 Amsterdam: Haman's name (colloquially rendered "Aman") is carved into a large stone, which is brought into the synagogue to be smashed by children clutching smaller stones. The engraving also depicts children pounding a bench with hammers.

The National Library of Israel

Holocaust survivor Reuven Jamnik commemorates Purim 1946 in the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp by reading the story of Purim while dressed up (per the custom of masquerading on Purim) in his concentration camp uniform.



Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem



Italy, 1944, during World War II. Corporal Nathaniel Leiderman reads the Megillah for American Jewish service members. Rabbi Captain Aaron Paperman, a U.S. Army chaplain, is standing to his right.





This Megilah from Ferrara, Italy, is one of the earliest extant, dating back to the year 1616. It features lavish marginalia depicting Esther's story as illuminated by Midrashic sources, along with faunal and floral motifs.



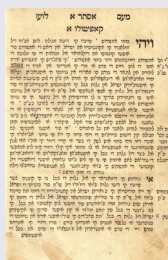
Yad Vashem Artifacts Archive, Jerusalem

Avraham Hellmann brought this Megilah when he was taken to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. He read from it on every Purim until his deportation to Auschwitz. His wife Charlotte survived the war, and the scroll now bears her inscription, telling its story.

A mid-18th-century Megilah, believed to have originated from the Alsace region. The text is arranged into a series of circles, each surrounded by colorful illustrations and some fanciful creatures. Try to find the unicorn!



Joods Historisch Museum, Amsterdam



Commentaries on *Megilat Esther* appear in many languages. Rabbi Raphael Chaim Pontremoli's commentary on Esther, printed in Izmir (in 1864) as a part of the *Me'am Lo'ez* series of biblical commentary, is written in Ladino using Hebrew characters.



Printed in Poland, this 1816 edition of *Tsenah U're'ناه*, a classic Yiddish Torah reader, also contains a Yiddish language rendition of *Megilat Esther*.



Some believed this commentary on *Esther*, written in a Maghrebi dialect of Judeo-Arabic and printed in Livorno in 1759, to be from the great Maimonides. The consensus today is that it was written by a different sage.



In the introduction to his *Mechir Yayin*, presented here, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis (1530–1572) writes that he composed this commentary on Esther while waiting out an epidemic in 1556, having fled Krakow and being unable to perform the regular Purim traditions. At the end of the work, he notes that he sent this book to his father on Purim as *mishlo'ach manot*.

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