

# PURIM

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## The Story of Purim

King Ahashuerus, great ruler of Persia, once gave a banquet for his subjects. When Queen Vashti refused to entertain the guests, she lost her crown. A beauty contest was held to select Vashti's successor. The winner was a Jewish woman, Hadassah, whose Persian name was Esther. Brought to the king's court by her uncle Mordecai, she became the new queen.

It was Mordecai's custom to sit at the gate by the palace. One day he overheard two men, Bigthan and Teresh, planning to kill the king. He reported it to Esther and the plot was foiled, but the king was not made aware of what Mordecai had done for him.

About the same time, Ahashuerus made Haman the Agagite prime minister of Persia. This was a position of great power, and all who saw Haman were supposed to bow down before him. When Haman passed by the gate to the palace, however, Mordecai refused to bow, since Jews pay homage only to God. Haman was furious and decided to destroy all the Jews of Persia in revenge. He drew lots (*purim*) to fix the date, then convinced the king, through bribery and anti-Semitic slander, to sanction his evil plan.

Mordecai told Esther of the decree, and she decided to go directly to Ahashuerus to save her people. This was very dangerous, for anyone who went to the king without being summoned faced immediate execution. Still, Esther went and invited the king and Haman to a dinner which she would prepare. Both the king and Haman accepted.

That night the king could not sleep, so he read from the book which chronicled the events of the kingdom. For the first time, he learned about the assassination attempt which Mordecai had thwarted and decided to reward him. He asked Haman how a man whom the king wished to reward might be honored. The prime minister imagined *he* was being honored and thus described an elaborate parade in which the man, dressed in royal robes, would be led through the city on horseback. The king was thrilled with the idea and commanded Haman to lead Mordecai through the city in just such a procession.

Haman angrily carried out the king's order and arrived at Esther's dinner party more determined than ever to exterminate the Jews. But it was not to be. Esther revealed she was Jewish, that Haman planned to destroy her people and begged Ahashuerus to reverse the order of genocide.

It was too late to cancel the edict. Too many Persians were already preparing to attack Jewish communities. A new decree went out, empowering the Jews to fight and defend themselves.



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Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Mordecai was named the new prime minister. The Jews defeated their attackers and were saved. And the fourteenth day of Adar was set aside as a day of feasting and joy, a time for giving gifts to friends and charity to the poor, a time for remembering how the Jewish people had resisted and defeated a villain who had sought their annihilation.

## Is the Story of Esther True?

Most probably not. Some scholars hold that Purim co-opted and "Judaized" the popular pagan carnivals of that era. Jewish leaders could not stop people from feasting and parading, so instead they validated the practice in a Jewish historical framework.

The second theory affirms that Esther was written during the time of the Maccabean revolt (165 BCE). In the flush of victory, say these scholars, the book was created to reinforce the national mood of confidence in deliverance.

A third hypothesis is perhaps the most interesting. The Babylonians had a New Year celebration where they believed their gods, Marduk and Ishtar, cast lots to determine each individual's fate. Then, say these scholars, the elements of this pagan festival were borrowed, rewritten and transformed into Purim, with Marduk becoming Mordecai, Ishtar becoming Esther and lots (*purim*) playing a pivotal role in the plot.

No one theory is universally accepted, however, and the real origins of Megillat Esther remain a mystery.

Purim is viewed by tradition as a minor festival. Its elevation to a major holiday in the eyes of the Jewish people was a result of the Jewish historical experience. Over the centuries, Haman became the embodiment of every anti-Semite in every land where Jews were oppressed. Jewish communities throughout the world, when delivered from tragedy, often wrote their own *megillot* and celebrated local Purims. The emotional power of the holiday increased in every generation, moving one anonymous ancient Jewish writer to remark: "When all the other books of the prophets and writings are forgotten, the Book of Esther will be remembered." The significance of Purim, then, lies not in how it began but in what it has become - a thankful and joyous affirmation of Jewish survival against all odds.

# THE CELEBRATION

## Making Noise at Haman's Name

This custom has fascinating Biblical origins. Exodus 17 describes a bitter battle in the wilderness between the Israelites and the soldiers of King Amalek. Although Israel prevails, the Torah records God "saying" to Moses: "Write this for a memorial in the book ... I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens." (Exodus 17:14). In Deuteronomy 25:19, the curse on Amalek is repeated: "You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget." The sense of the passage is clear. God is telling the children of Israel that the descendants of Amalek will always be their enemies and thus to "blot them out."

Indeed, history proved that to be true. Many years later, Agag, then king of Amalek, became a bitter foe of the Jewish people, a slaughterer of women and children. In fact, King Saul was dethroned for sparing Agag's life after Israel's military victory over the Amalekites. The prophet Samuel executed Agag, and the name of Amalek was "blotted out."

Turning to Esther 3:1, we see that Haman is identified as "the son of Hammedatha the Agagite," in short, a direct descendant of Amalek! It is reasonable to assume that the author of Esther deliberately forged a bond between Amalek and Haman so as to accentuate Haman's evil character. Remembering the ancient injunction to "blot out" Amalek's name, the Jews proceeded to do just that—not by violence, but through noise.

## The Origin of the Gregger

Gregger comes from a Polish word meaning "rattle." Beginning about the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Jews in Europe sounded the gregger whenever the *megillah* mentioned the name of evil Haman.

The gregger was by no means the only way Jews expressed their glee at Haman's downfall. Jews of Talmudic times burned Haman in effigy. Thirteenth century European Jews drew Haman's picture or wrote his name on stones which they banged together. Others wrote his name on the soles of their shoes and stamped them on the ground. Still others would write Haman's name on a sheet of paper and erase it.

## Costumes

Purim borrowed freely from the pagan carnivals of ancient times and later from the Roman carnivals. About the 15<sup>th</sup> century, European Jews adapted the gala costumes and processions of these carnivals for Purim. Dressed in colorful masks and attire, children would march through town, parading in joy from street to street.

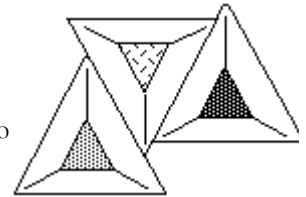
## Purim Spiels

Purim plays, or Purim spiels, originated about the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. Some of these slapstick spoofs became classics in the community where they were first performed. Many of the original manuscripts have been preserved. Jews of today write their own scripts, which are just as humorous and enjoyable as the creations of the past.

### Grandma's Hamantaschen

Hamantaschen originated in Europe. The term derives from two German words, *mohn* (poppy seed) and *taschen* (pockets). The association with Purim was solidified by substituting the name Haman for *mohn*. Some hold that Hamantaschen symbolizes the three-cornered hat that Haman wore.

6 oz. Cream Cheese  
2 cups Sifted Flour  
½ lb. Butter (1 Stick)  
Large Jar Fruit Preserves or Solo  
Filling (do not use jelly)  
¼ cup Powdered Sugar



Cream together butter and cheese. Gradually stir in flour. Chill thoroughly (1 to 2 hours) until ready to bake. Roll out the dough until thin. Cut out with the rim of a small glass. Put the circle of dough on an ungreased cookie sheet. Place a dollop of jelly in the middle of the circle and fold the sides into a triangle. Pinch closed. Bake at 350° for 10 minutes or until slightly browned. Cool and sprinkle with powdered sugar.

## Gifts and Charity

The Book of Esther 9:22 enjoins Jews to "make days of feasting and gladness and to send gifts to one another (*mishloach manot*), as well as gifts to the poor." It is typical of Judaism that, even during a holiday of revelry, we remember others, especially those less fortunate than ourselves. It is customary to send two gifts to at least one friend and to give a single gift to at least two poor people. Even the poorest Jew is expected to share with others. Thus we learn that *tzedakah*, at all times and in all places, is a religious duty.

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