

Purim

Quick Reference Sheet

Purim: Purim means “lots.” In the story of Esther, the fateful day when anyone could kill the Jews and take their property was decided by throwing lots.

Time of Year:

Usually mid-March, a month before Passover. Purim is on the 14th day of the 12th Biblical month, Adar. In leap years, Adar is preceded by a thirty day intercalary month named Adar I. In a leap year, Purim is celebrated in the second month, Adar II.

The 15th of Adar is called “Shushan Purim.” It commemorates the battles between the Jews and their enemies which were extended for an additional day in the ancient walled city of Shushan. Today, the only city in which Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar, besides Shushan, is Jerusalem. The 15th of Adar is also a day of joy and celebration in those places where it is not observed as the actual Purim.

Scripture References:

The Book of Esther

The Story:

The story of Purim is recorded in the Book of Esther. Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire where a plot had been formed to destroy them. Haman, royal vizier to King Ahasuerus, planned to kill all the Jews in the empire, but his plans were foiled by Mordecai and Esther, who had risen to become Queen of Persia. The day of deliverance became a day of feasting and rejoicing and has been celebrated ever since.

Themes:

A book of the Bible where God is never mentioned

- The only other book of the Bible that doesn't mention God is the Song of Songs. Though the story of Esther mentions fasting and praying, God's Name, or any reference to Him, is omitted. The underlying message is that even when life is at its worst, and you feel like you're all alone, God is actually at work behind the scenes.

A celebration of victory over those who seek the Jews' destruction

- Haman has become a symbol of an enemy of the Jewish people. Celebrating Purim is an opportunity to remember the persecution that people do currently suffer and have suffered in the past.

A time of feasting and rejoicing

- It is customary to feast, drink and engage in much rejoicing. The festive Purim meal commemorates the feast which Esther arranged for the King and Haman.

A time of giving gifts and remembering the poor

- It is customary to give gifts of food to one another and to give gifts to the poor. Even the poor should offer gifts to those less fortunate than them, for, there is no greater joy than making the hearts of the poor, orphaned or widowed happy.

Messianic Significance:

• Though it is true that the Gospels do not mention Purim, and thus a direct connection is not made between Purim and our Messiah, if the miracles of Purim had not taken place, the Messiah would never have been born to a young, Jewish girl in Bethlehem. Perhaps the silence in the Gospels regarding this festive season echoes the theme of God's name not even being mentioned in the Book of Esther. God is at work in miraculous ways even when He is not seen.

Traditions:

It is customary to:

- Read the Book of Esther out loud. The audience twirls groggers (noise-makers) or boos every time Haman's name is mentioned in order to stamp out his name so that it cannot even be heard. The Book of Esther is read to publicize the miracles of Purim.
- Be festive and rejoice.
- Send gifts of food to one another (food that can be eaten without further cooking or preparation).
- Give gifts to the poor (traditionally, two gifts of any type: money, food, drink or clothing to two people).

Other:

- It is customary to wear holiday clothing or costumes. Donning a costume reminds us that although God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, He was still present.
- The day before Purim is a minor fast day (fasting from sunrise to nightfall) called "The Fast of Esther." (If the fast would fall on the Sabbath, the fast is observed on the preceding Thursday.) Fasting is a reminder that we do not prevail because of our physical strength, but we prevail only when we lift our eyes to heaven that we may receive mercy.
- A special prayer ("Al ha-Nissim"—"For the Miracles") is inserted into the Amidah during evening, morning and afternoon prayers and is also included in the "Grace after Meals." The text is as follows:

And we thank You for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, for the saving acts, and for the wonders which You have wrought for our ancestors in those days, at this time. In the days of Mordechai and Esther, in Shushan the capital, when the wicked Haman rose up against them, and sought to destroy, slaughter and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants, and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to take their spoil for plunder. But You, in Your abounding mercies, foiled his counsel and frustrated his intention, and caused the evil Haman planned, to recoil on his own head, and they hanged him and his sons upon the gallows.

- It is customary to give three coins in "half" denominations of the local currency, e.g., three half-dollar coins, to charity, to commemorate the half-shekel that each person contributed as his share in the communal offerings in the time of the Holy Temple. This custom, usually performed in the synagogue, is done on the afternoon of the "Fast of Esther," or before the reading of Esther.

Foods:

- "Hamantaschen:" the Haman's pocket cookie or Haman's hat cookie. The Jews make their enemy into a cookie, and therefore celebrate the sweetness rather than the bitterness.
- Vegetables. Eating vegetables is in commemoration of the fact that Esther ate vegetables when she was in the King's palace.
- Meat and wine. These are two elements of the traditional festive meal.

Scripture Readings:

On the Sabbath before Purim, special readings are held in the synagogue: the Torah portion called Zachor ("Remember"), Deuteronomy 25:17-19, and the Haftarah portion, 1 Samuel 15:2-34. In the morning service of Purim, the special reading is Exodus 17:8-16.

ועל הנסים
For the Miracles