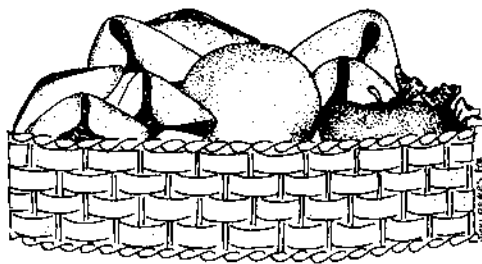


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PURIM—THE JEWISH MARDI GRAS

O once there was a wicked wicked man
And Haman was his name, Sir.
He tried to murder all the Jews,
Though they were not to blame, Sir.
O today we'll merry merry be
O today we'll merry merry be
And nosh some hamentaschen.



PURIM is a fun-filled Jewish holiday that takes place on the 14th of the Hebrew month of *Adar* in the early spring (February or March). Jews celebrate with silliness and abandon. It is a time to dress up, to repeat silly rhymes, to hear the *Megillah*—the story of Purim—and to party.

Purim is based on the events found in the biblical Book of Esther. Esther was a Jew who risked her life to stand up against Haman, the closest advisor of the Persian King Ahashuerus. Encouraged by her uncle Mordechai, Esther convinced the king to turn against Haman.

The name of Purim is understood to be derived from the word “*pur*,” which means “to draw lots.” In the biblical story, the evil Haman drew lots for the date and time that the Jews were to be annihilated. However, when Haman died *on that very*

day, the day was transformed from “one of grief and mourning, to one of pure joy” (Esther 9:22) for the entire Jewish people.

The story of Purim depicts how Jews have lived in a non-Jewish environment and survived against a powerful government. One might ask: Is the story of Purim factual? Time, dates, places, and names may or may not be. The events cited in the Book of Esther are understood to have taken place in Persia around the fifth century B.C.E.

However, the Purim message—that Jews can overcome a hateful enemy against tremendous odds—is as important in our day as when the holiday of Purim was first celebrated. Jews have struggled with Haman and Hitler and other fanatics, yet the Jewish people still survive.

GREETINGS

“*Hag Sameach*—Happy Holiday” is the greeting for Purim.

HOME TRADITIONS

Preparations

The home customs of Purim come from the Book of Esther:

And Mordechai wrote these things and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the King Ahashuerus to remind them to keep the fourteenth of Adar, and the fifteenth the same, the days in which Jews had rested from their enemies and the month which was turned from sorrow to joy, from mourning into a good day. Then they should make days of feasting and gladness, of sending portions one to another and gifts to the poor (Esther 9:20–22).

One of the special customs of Purim is the giving of *Mishloach Manot*, simple gifts. When preparing these treats to give to friends and relatives, it is fun to make baked goods or homemade crafts that are easy to prepare and deliver. (See “Activities.”)

Equally important as giving to friends and family is giving to the poor. This is known as *Matanot L'evyonim*, gifts for the needy. It's especially thoughtful to give gifts in person. Instead of simply sending a check to an agency, also visit a home for the aged, volunteer at a food pantry, or spend a day helping new immigrants.



A “GOODIE” ALTERNATIVE

This year for Purim, due to the economic realities of the country, instead of spending money on baskets of Purim treats, I decided to give an equivalent donation to Mazon—the national Jewish organization to feed the hungry (2940 Westwood Blvd., Suite 7, Los Angeles, CA 90064). As my children enjoy personally delivering mishloach manot to our friends and neighbors, I came up with the following plan:

From a local candy store I bought several chocolate bars (about 2 inches × 4 inches in diameter) with the words “Happy Purim” and a gragger and mask molded on them. The store wrapped the bars (one for each household) in clear plastic and tied a little blue ribbon around the bars.

Then the children made a card with the aid of a computer program. The cover, decorated with champagne and a piece of cake (the program

doesn’t have hamentaschen designs), said: “What’s Purim Without Goodies?” The inside explained that we were giving a contribution to Mazon this year in honor of the recipients. (We included Mazon’s address in case anyone else also wanted to contribute.)

We made copies of the card, folded each one, and punched a hole in the top left-hand corner. We then tied the card to the wrapped candy bar by pulling the ends of the ribbon through the punched hole.

The result was a beautiful miniature gift that the children could still deliver and which received tremendously favorable comments. (This also provided a mathematics lesson as we calculated how much money to donate in honor of each household and the total contribution.) So wasn’t this a “goodie” alternative?

—P.Z.M.



Purim is in effect the Jewish Mardi Gras. It gives children and adults a safe and sanctioned occasion to dress up. Many children and adults spend weeks planning their coming year’s Purim costumes. Sometimes folks appear as the lead characters in the Esther story; others dress as contemporary political and social figures. People wear costumes to the temple Megillah reading and to Purim parties. Do up your face, put on a hat, and have a blast!

Evening

As the celebration begins with the onset of the evening, a simple dinner is served at home. However, no candles are lit. Why? Purim is a holiday with no restrictions on work; it is not a day of rest. After dinner, the celebration continues with the Megillah reading at temple.

Daytime

During the late afternoon of the day of Purim, several hours after the morning service, families may gather for a *Seudat Purim*, a festive meal. This can be a time for Purim skits, songs, and imaginative children's plays. Enjoy the lightness and ease of this celebration in your home.

SYNAGOGUE TRADITIONS

Shabbat Prior to Purim

The Shabbat prior to Purim is known as Shabbat Zachor, in which the Torah portion recalling the actual exodus is read. After the Jewish people escaped from Egypt they were attacked by surprise. The warrior Amalek and his nation tried to destroy the Jews at their most vulnerable moment—physically weak and demoralized after the years of slavery in Egypt.

The biblical text cites an important command: “Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (See Deuteronomy 25:17–19, Exodus 17: 8–16.)

Amalek was intent on destroying the Jewish people. In addition, Amalek encouraged others to destroy the Jews as well. The Jewish tradition responded: Blot out Amalek! Wipe out and forget the eternal enemy of the Jews, and yet, in reality, Jews cannot forget.

Haman, the evil scoundrel in the Book of Esther, was believed to be a descendant of Amalek. Both Haman and Amalek were intent on destroying the Jews. Yet the Jewish people survived those tyrants and many more.

So on Purim at temple when the Megillah is read, Jews continue the tradition of blotting out Amalek—they stamp and scream each time the name of Haman is pronounced.

The Megillah

The holiday's pivotal ritual is the reading of the Megillah, the Book of Esther. It is read twice: once during the evening service and once the following morning.

The Megillah is a handwritten scroll, similar in style to the Torah, except that, in contrast to the Torah, the Megillah can be an illuminated manuscript.



SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

A Yiddish phrase you may have heard is “A ganze megillah!” The ganze megillah is a long, involved story, and could be used to refer to a *long, highfalutin story that is as curious as the Purim tale itself. Keep this phrase in mind and use it accordingly.*



The Megillah text is chanted to musical notes unique to the holiday. It is usually sung by a cantor, congregant, or Hebrew school student. Many synagogues ensure that people understand this important book by also reading it out loud in English.

If you come to a synagogue for the first time during Purim, you might think all order has been abandoned by the Jewish people. Every time the name of Haman is read, people boo and hiss, scream and bang. *Graggers*—noisemakers—are used to blot out the memory. In the past in some European cities, the name of Haman was written on stones and every time the name was mentioned the stones were banged together.

In some congregations, when Esther is mentioned the congregants applaud or shout “Hurray!” Some bring flowers and throw them when Esther is named.

Children and adults are in costumes, and frequently wine and other libations are in evidence. Look out for careening clowns, scary monsters, futuristic space creatures, rough-and-tough cowhands, and your “favorite” political figures.

Many synagogues celebrate Purim with large carnivals a few days before or after Purim. This adds to the Mardi Gras-like atmosphere of the holiday and is frequently used to benefit the synagogue as a fund-raising event.

INSIGHTS

No God in the Text

It is curious that although the Book of Esther is biblical, nowhere in it is God’s name mentioned. The Book of Esther is a tale of a woman cleverly saving her people.

Purim stresses the message that human beings must work for their own survival. God does not pull the strings from on high to change the social and political circumstances, but God will quietly imbue people with strength to survive against unbelievable odds.

Despite conditions where the greater numbers seem to overpower the few, Jews learn not to despair but to act. It is human action that is validated.



On Addictions

Purim is a “strange” holiday, one in which the world is turned upside down. Determination overcomes power, weakness overcomes military strength, the few overturn the many.

Historically, Jews have been bound by rules that govern behaviors of every waking moment. The Purim command to drink oneself into oblivion so that we cannot recognize the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordechai,” was a topsy-turvy custom that emphasized the topsy-turvy nature of Purim.

This drinking was in direct contrast to expected behaviors for Jews regarding the consumption of alcohol. Alcohol is provided for in Jewish custom—albeit in moderation—as one way by which holidays and Shabbat are welcomed.

In the past, when alcohol addiction was not as recognized a problem in all segments of society as it is now, Jews could easily participate in this one-day drunken abandon. Today Jews struggle with alcoholism as do other peoples.

Judaism should reconsider the emphasis on drinking at Purim in light of the possible consequences of this behavior. By changing this focus, we can encourage individuals to overcome self-destructive behaviors.

Today we can blot out the names of Amalek, Haman, and Hitler by talking about the terrors and learning to cope with the pain rather than obliterating ourselves in denial. This dialogue recognizes the distrust and disappointment that exists between different people and can bridge those gaps. Continued dialogue between Jews and other nations and religions is a healthy way to cope with anti-Semitism.

ACTIVITIES

1. It is fun to participate in the custom of *Mishloach Manot*, the giving of gifts to family and friends on Purim. If you have the time and inclination, bake *hamentaschen* (the special three-cornered Purim pastry usually filled with prune, jelly, or poppy seeds) or make crafts projects. For those with limited free time, gifts of simple purchased items delivered in a basket or a notice that a contribution has been given in someone’s honor are equally good ways to participate in this tradition.

Many folks enjoy decorating the boxes and bags in which the gifts are sent. Some people fill colored paper plates with goodies and then staple the ends of the plates to look like *hamentaschen*. Others use fancy “lunch bags” and staple the top of the bag to come to a point as if it were the top corner of the *hamentaschen*. Still others fill elaborate wicker baskets with all types of breads, pastries, and liquor.

2. Parents and children together can decide what *Matanot L’evyonim*—gifts for the

poor—will be given to whom. This is a valuable lesson in determining what is a gift, what we give, and how we feel when we give to others in need.

3. The Book of Esther highlights a Jewish female leader. Parents and children together might research the ways that the following women and others have contributed uniquely to Jewish life and survival: the biblical leaders Rebecca, Yael, and Deborah; the historical personages Bruriah and Gluckel; and the modern heroes Golda Meir, Bella Abzug, Sally Priesand, Sally Ride, and Barbra Streisand.

4. Write a modern Purim story. Include poetry, music, humor, and rap in your delivery. Present it to family and friends on Purim. Your skit might be a radio broadcast, interview, spoof of current government officials. Be wild and have fun!

5. Younger children will enjoy making puppets to illustrate the Purim story. Use paper bags or socks. Decorate with felt, pipe cleaners, buttons, yarn, and feathers. Bring your puppet to the Megillah reading.

6. Much of Purim is theater. Go to a play as a family. Discover how a play is developed from a story line, story to scene development, development to delivery. Explore the power of the life on stage and link that experience to the drama of the Purim story.

7. Get into the arts. Make graggers that can be used to blot out Haman's name. Masks can add to your costume; use papier-mâché, foil, or cardboard.



MAKE THAT MASK!

So someone wants to be Esther or even Haman? A simple papier-mâché mask can be started a week ahead of time:

1. Use a ball or balloon as a base as you shape foil paper over it into the image of a face with eyes, nose, hair, etc. Keep it simple.

2. Make a liquidy paste out of flour and water. Dip strips of newspaper into the paste. Drain the strips and place them on the foil. Cover all sections, leaving holes for the eyes and mouth. Let

the mask dry for a day.

3. After it is dry, use poster paints to paint the face with all its details. Again, let it sit for a day.

4. Paint white glue on the inside of the mask to secure its shape and let it dry. The following day, to protect the mask, paint white glue over the face of the mask. Paint only one direction, as the underlying paint may smear.

5. With a cape or jacket you, my dear, are off to a great Purim!



8. Illustrate your own Megillah scroll using modern or historical art forms: woodcuts, silkscreen printing, calligraphy, line drawing.



9. Visit collections of Megillah scrolls and note the variety in their illustrations. The art forms reflect the time and place of origin, the cultural influences, the types of available materials. What does this tell us about Jews in those times and places?

10. Purim provides an opportunity to begin discussion of anti-Semitism with children. Being prepared for the realities of life in the world can be a powerful shield against unexpected hurt. In this process, parents can raise awareness of the need to develop inner Jewish strength and pride.

For discussion ideas, look to the relationship between Mordechai and Esther: Why does Esther initially hide her Jewish identity? How does her uncle Mordechai encourage her development of Jewish pride? When do we experience similar feelings? How can we express our hopes and fears about being Jewish? Would you consider Esther a significant Jewish hero?

11. For another source of discussion topics, read together the young adult book *The Night Journey* by Kathryn Lasky (New York: Puffin Books, 1986). In this story, thirteen-year-old Rachel's great-grandmother tells how as a nine-year-old she came up with the plan to help her whole family escape from the Russia of the czar, a more modern-day Haman. The story includes reversible Purim costumes (for disguises) and gold coins (for border guard bribes) baked into hamentaschen.

RECIPES

HAMENTASCHEN (HAMAN'S EAR OR POCKET)

DOUGH:

½ lb. margarine, at room temperature

8 tsp. sugar

¾ cups sifted flour

2 tsp. baking powder

¼ tsp. salt

3 tsp. orange juice



2 eggs (or 4 egg whites)

2 tsp. vanilla

FILLING:

1 jar prune or poppyseed filling

¼ cup chopped nuts

sugar and cinnamon

Cream the margarine and sugar. Sift the dry ingredients and add to margarine and sugar mixture. Mix well. Add the eggs, orange juice, and vanilla. Knead until dough is formed and divide it into 6 sections. Refrigerate until chilled.

Roll out a section of dough onto a floured board. Use a glass as a cutter for forming circles for the hamentaschen shapes. Put a teaspoon of filling into each circle and fold into a triangle by pinching the edges together. Repeat for remaining five sections of dough. Bake in 325-degree oven for 25 minutes.