

# CEREMONY & CELEBRATION

FAMILY EDITION

WITH RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל



Educational content provided by Dr. Daniel Rose together with The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

## Purim in a Nutshell

**PURIM IS** the Jewish carnival of happiness, commemorating the rescue of the Jewish people during the ancient Persian Empire from the evil Haman (a descendant of the Jewish arch-enemy, Amalek) who tried “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day,” (Esther 3:13). The story is recorded in Megillat Esther. The word “*purim*” means “lots” in ancient Persian and became the name of the festival because Haman drew lots to determine when he would carry out his plot.

### THE STORY

The Persian Empire of the 4th century BCE extended over 127 lands, and Jews were spread across the Empire. When King Achashverosh had his wife, Queen Vashti, executed for failing to follow his orders, he arranged a beauty pageant to find a new queen. A Jewish girl named Esther found favour in his eyes and became the new queen, but she hid her nationality.

Meanwhile, the Jew-hating Haman was appointed Prime Minister of the Empire. Mordechai,

the leader of the Jews, refused to bow to Haman, which was in defiance of the royal decree. Haman was furious, and he persuaded the King to issue a decree ordering the destruction of all the Jews on the 13th of Adar, a date randomly chosen by drawing lots.

Mordechai urged Esther to confront the King and inform him of Haman’s plans. Esther, although reluctant at first for fear of her life, agreed. She asked Mordechai to gather all the Jews in Shushan and convince them to spend three days repenting, fasting, and praying to God. On the third day, Esther invited the King and Haman to join her for a feast. At a second feast, Esther revealed her Jewish identity to the King and accused Haman of attempting to destroy her people. Haman was hanged, Mordechai was appointed Prime Minister in his stead, and a new decree was issued, granting the Jews the right to defend themselves against their enemies.

On the 13th of Adar, the Jews mobilised and killed many of their enemies. On the 14th of Adar, they rested and celebrated. In the capital



city of Shushan, they took one more day to finish the job, and so in areas which have been 'walled cities' from the time of Joshua (like Shushan), Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar instead of the 14th. Today, this only applies to the city of Jerusalem, which celebrates "Shushan Purim" the day after all other Jewish communities.

## HOW WE CELEBRATE PURIM

There are four *mitzvot* on the day of Purim, and they all begin with the letter M (or *mem* in Hebrew). These are:

- The reading of the **Megillah** (the Book of Esther), which tells the story of the Purim miracle. We listen to the Megillah-reading once on the night of Purim and then again on the following day.
- **Matanot La-Evyonim** – giving money gifts to at least two poor people.
- **Mishloach Manot** – sending gifts of two kinds of ready-to-eat food to at least one person.

- **Mishteh** – a festive Purim feast, which often includes wine or other intoxicating beverages (*Seudat Purim*).

There is a general spirit of liveliness and fun on Purim that is unparalleled in the Jewish calendar. It is also customary for children especially (but adults also if they desire) to dress up in costumes. This is because the role of God is hidden in the story of Purim (and in fact even the name of God is starkly missing from the Megillah).

A traditional Purim food is *Hamantaschen* (three-cornered pastries bursting with sweet fillings such as poppy seeds). "*Taschen*" means "pockets" in Yiddish and German, but some believe these pastries represent Haman's favourite three-cornered hat, and in Hebrew we call them "*Oznay Haman*", meaning "Haman's ears"!

On the day before Purim (or on the Thursday before, when Purim is on Sunday), it is customary for those over Bar and Bat Mitzvah age to fast. This commemorates Esther leading the people in fasting and praying to God that He save His people.

## Points to Ponder

1 What is the message behind dressing up on Purim? How can we take this message to heart in our everyday lives?

2 The word "*purim*" means "lots", which might imply that the destiny of the Jewish people is random. How is the message of the festival of Purim the opposite of this?

3 What do the four *mitzvot* of Purim have in common with each other? How is this connected to Purim?

## Purim for Our Time: The Therapeutic Joy of Purim

**THERE IS** a unique law in the approach to Purim. *Mishe-nichnas Adar marbim be-simcha*: "From the beginning of Adar, we increase in joy." This is stated in the Talmud (Ta'anit 29a) and is based on the passage in the Megillah (Esther 9:21-22) in which Mordechai sends a letter throughout the land instructing all Jews "to observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth day, every year – the days on which the Jews obtained rest from their enemies and the month which for them was turned from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday."

This in turn refers back to the text in which Haman decided on the timing of his decree: "In the first month, the month of Nissan, in the twelfth year of Achashverosh, they cast *pur* (that is, "lots") before Haman from day to day, and from month to month until the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar" (Esther 3:7).

The difficulties are obvious. Why do we increase our joy for an entire month? The key events were focused on a few days, the thirteenth to the fifteenth, not the whole month.

And why is this a time of *simcha*? We can understand why the Jews of the time felt exhilaration. The decree sentencing them to death had been rescinded. Their enemies had been punished. Haman had been hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai, and Mordechai himself had been raised to greatness.

But is joy the emotion we should feel in perpetuity, remembering those events? The first warrant for genocide against the Jewish people (the second if one counts Pharaoh's plan to kill all newborn Jewish males) had been frustrated. Is *simcha* the appropriate emotion? Surely what we should feel is relief, not joy. Pesach is the proof. The word "joy" is never mentioned in the Torah in connection with it.

Besides which, the Talmud asks why we do not say Hallel on Purim. It gives several answers. The most powerful is that in Hallel we say, "Servants of the Lord, give praise," – meaning that we are no longer the servants of Pharaoh. But, says the Talmud, even after the deliverance of Purim, Jews were still the servants of Achashverosh, still living in exile, under his rule (Megillah 14a). Tragedy had been averted but



Why do we increase our joy for an entire month?

there was no real change in the hazards of life in the Diaspora.

**REFLECT:** Is it possible to command the emotion of joy? How does Purim try to ensure that we experience this during the festival?

It seems to me therefore that the *simcha* we celebrate throughout the month of Adar is different from the normal joy we feel when something good and positive has happened to us or our people. That is *expressive* joy. The *simcha* of Adar, by contrast, is *therapeutic* joy.

Imagine what it is to be part of a people that had once heard the command issued against them: “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews – young and old, women and children – on a single day” (Esther 3:13). We who live after the Holocaust, who have met survivors, heard their testimony, seen the photographs and documentaries and memorials, know the answer to that question. On Purim, the Final Solution was averted. But it had been pronounced. Ever afterward, Jews knew their vulnerability. The very existence of Purim in our historical memory is traumatic.

The Jewish response to trauma is counter-intuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends. While the story is being told, you make an unruly noise as if not only to blot out the memory of Amalek, but to make a joke out of the whole episode. You wear masks. You drink a little too much. You make a Purim spiel.

Precisely because the threat was so serious, you refuse to be serious – and in that refusal you are doing something very serious indeed. You are denying your enemies a victory. You are declaring that *you will not be intimidated*. As the date of the scheduled destruction approaches, you surround yourself with the single most effective antidote to fear: joy in life itself. As the three-sentence summary of Jewish history puts it: “They tried to destroy us. We survived. Let’s eat.” Humour is the Jewish way of defeating hate. What you can laugh at, you cannot be held captive by.

**REFLECT:** How do joy and humour help us deal with tragedies, both in our personal and national life?

I learned this from a Holocaust survivor. Some years ago, I wrote a book called *Celebrating Life*. It was a cheer-you-up book, and it became a favourite of the Holocaust survivors. One of them, however, told me that a particular passage in the book was incorrect. Commenting on Roberto Begnini’s comedy film about the Holocaust, *Life is Beautiful*, I had said that though I agreed with his thesis – a sense of humour keeps you sane – that was not enough in Auschwitz to keep you alive.

“On that, you are wrong,” the survivor said, and then told me his story. He had been in Auschwitz, and he soon realised that if he failed to keep his spirits up, he would die. So he made a pact with another young man, that they would both look out, each day, for some occurrence they found amusing. At the end of each day they would tell one another their story and they would laugh together. “That sense of humour saved my life,” he said. I stood corrected. He was right.

**REFLECT:** How can humour be the ultimate defence against those who wish to take away our freedom and destroy us?

That is what we do on Purim. The joy, the merrymaking, the food, the drink, the whole carnival atmosphere, are there to allow us to live with the risks of being a Jew – in the past, and tragically in the present also – without being terrified, traumatised or intimidated. It is the most counter-intuitive response to terror, and the most effective. Terrorists aim to terrify. To be a Jew is to refuse to be terrified.

Terror, hatred, and violence are always ultimately self-destructive. Those who use these tactics are always, as was Haman, destroyed by their very will to destruct. And yes, we as Jews must fight antisemitism, the demonisation of Israel, and the intimidation of Jewish students on campus. But we must never let ourselves be intimidated – and the Jewish way to avoid this is *marbim be-simcha*, to increase our joy. A people that can know the full darkness of history and yet rejoice is a people whose spirit no power on Earth can ever break.

**REFLECT:** What role do you think joy has played in the survival of the Jewish people throughout Jewish history?



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## From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks zt”l

**I AM** proud to be part of a people who, though scarred and traumatised, never lost their humour or their faith, their ability to laugh at present troubles and still believe in ultimate redemption, who saw human history as a journey, and never stopped travelling and searching.

I am proud to be part of an age in which my people, ravaged by the worst crime ever to be

committed against a people, responded by reviving a land, recovering their sovereignty, rescuing threatened Jews throughout the world, rebuilding Jerusalem, and proving themselves to be as courageous in the pursuit of peace as in defending themselves in war. 

**Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 219**



## Points to Ponder

**1** How are humour and faith connected?

**2** What is the “ultimate redemption”? Have we reached the “ultimate redemption” yet?

**3** What lessons can we learn both from Purim and from our ongoing journey through Jewish history, as referenced in the second paragraph?

## Purim for the Young (and Young at Heart!)

### Chidon on the Chag (A Quick Quiz)

1. What does the word “Purim” mean?
2. What date did Haman select (via casting lots) for his planned execution of the Jewish people?
3. Which book of Tanach tells the story of Purim?
4. What are the four *mitzvot* of Purim?
5. What does the congregation traditionally do when they hear the name Haman during the reading of the Megillah?
6. Why do we have the custom to dress up on Purim?
7. How many provinces did King Achashverosh rule over?
8. What were the names of the two guards who plotted to kill the King?
9. What is a *hamantaschen* and what does the word mean?
10. What was Esther’s Hebrew name (Esther was her Persian name)?
11. How many times is God mentioned in Megillat Esther?
12. When do we read the Megillah?
13. When and what is Shushan Purim?
14. What was King Achashverosh’s first wife called?
15. Why do we fast on the 13th of Adar?



## It Once Happened on Purim...

**THERE IS** a story of a man named Eddie Jacobson that reminds us of the role Esther played in the Purim story. Eddie was an ordinary Jewish guy from the Lower East Side of New York. When Eddie was a child, his parents moved to Kansas City and there he met a boy named Harry. Soon they became close school friends, did military service together during the First World War, and decided that when the war was over, they would go into business together. They set up a clothing store in Kansas City, but the business was not a great success and soon they drifted apart. Eddie Jacobson went on to become a travelling salesman, selling clothes. His friend, Harry S. Truman, took a slightly different route and landed up as President of the United States.



Eddie Jacobson (left), with his friend, former President Harry S. Truman

In 1947–48, the Jews of the world needed the support of the United States of America for the state of Israel to be proclaimed and recognised. The State Department was against it and advised the President not to support the creation of the State of Israel. Jews and Jewish organisations tried their utmost to see the President in the White House, and every single attempt was refused. Even the leader of the Zionist movement, Chaim Weizmann, the man who would become the first President of the State of Israel, was refused a meeting.

As time became desperate, somebody remembered that Harry S. Truman had a childhood friend called Eddie Jacobson. So they reached

out to Eddie and asked if he could get the President of the United States to meet with Chaim Weizmann. So Eddie phoned up President Truman and said he had to come and see him. Truman's officials tried to block the meeting, but Truman said "This is my old friend, Eddie, from school, Eddie, from the Army, Eddie, from our shop together! How can I not see this man?"

When Eddie arrived at the White House, Truman said "Eddie, you can talk to me about anything, except Israel." "Okay", said Eddie and he stood in the Oval Office, in front of the President of the United States, and began to cry. "Eddie, why are you crying?" asked the President. Eddie pointed to a marble statue in the room and asked, "Who is that, Harry?" "That's my hero, Andrew Jackson", Truman replied. "You really admire this man?" asked Eddie. "Yes." "And he had an influence over you?" "Yes" said Truman. Then, said Eddie, "I have a hero. His name is Chaim Weizmann. Harry, for my sake, please meet this man." Harry looked at Eddie and he knew that he couldn't say no to his old friend. That is how Chaim Weizmann got to see President Harry S. Truman, and that is how America voted in favour of the creation of the State of Israel. If they had not voted, Israel would not have been brought into being. What's more, Harry S. Truman made the United States the first country in the world to recognise the State when David Ben Gurion pronounced it.

Towards the end of the fourth chapter of Megilat Esther, we find Esther telling her uncle, Mordechai, about all the problems there might be in interceding with King Achashverosh regarding the fate of the Jewish people. Mordechai listens and then responds to her with the famous words, *Im haharash tachrishi, ba'et hazot revach v'hatzlah ya'amod layehudim mimakom acher*, "If you are silent and you do nothing at this time somebody else will save the Jewish people." *U'mi yodeia im l'et kazot, higa'at lamalchut?* "But who knows, was it not for just this moment that you became a Queen, with access to King Achashverosh in the royal palace?" Just like Eddie Jacobson and Esther HaMalkah, Hashem is calling on each of us, saying there is a reason why we are here, because He has something for us to do, something that only we can do.



*That is how Chaim Weizmann got to see President Harry S. Truman, and that is how America voted in favour of the creation of the State of Israel.*



### Points to Ponder

- 1 What did Esther and Eddie have in common?
- 2 Do you think they should be celebrated for their roles or were they just carrying out God's plan?
- 3 Do you have a sense of what your calling is? How will you know it when you see it?



## The Great Purim Scavenger Hunt

One of the themes of Purim is the hidden role God played in the story of Purim, and this is the reason why we have the fun tradition to dress up (“hiding” ourselves) in costumes on Purim. This is also one possible meaning behind the name “Esther”. In this special Purim scavenger hunt, your task is to discover the following Purim objects which are “hidden” somewhere in this *Purim Ceremony & Celebration Family Edition*.



MEGILLAH



HAMANTASCHEN



MORDECHAI



MATANOT LA-EVYONIM



RA'ASHAN



ESTHER



MISHLOACH MANOT



MASK



HAMAN



SEUDAT PURIM



CLOWN



ACHASHVEROSH

## Educational Companion to the Questions

### PURIM IN A NUTSHELL

1. God's name is conspicuous by its absence from the Purim story. He is not mentioned at all in the text of Megillat Esther, and God plays no explicit role at all in the narrative. However, it is implicit and understood that all the intricate twists and turns of the story are engineered by God. This is the faith that Jews have about our lives. Even when it is not obvious, we have faith that God is backstage, engineering His plan for our lives. We dress up in costumes both to experience the joy and levity of the festival, and to remember that God was hidden in the story, yet very much present. When there are difficult times in our lives, or even (and perhaps more importantly) when life is going well, we must have faith that God is pulling the strings, that there is a larger picture, and even if we cannot see or sense the role God is playing, we have faith that He is always involved.
2. Lots are a cruel and random way to decide on the fate of a people. Perhaps this was Haman's message to the Jewish people. 'There is no meaning to your national life. It is all random and there is no one protecting you or guaranteeing your destiny.' Haman was proven completely wrong when God intervened in history, saving the Jews in dramatic (yet hidden) fashion. The message of Purim is that there is destiny, and God is behind the scenes ensuring it. There is nothing random about history!
3. All four *mitzvot* strengthen community and the relationships between people. Perhaps we can say that this was another victory of the Jewish people over their adversary Haman. The emphasis on community and unity within the Jewish people is devastating to our enemies, and the key to our strength.


### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS ZT"L

1. Both humour and faith are an expression of the freedom contained in our hearts, despite those who may wish to take away our external freedom. Survivors of the Holocaust (like Viktor Frankl and Edith Eger) often speak about the Nazis stripping away every freedom and vestige of dignity, but they could not take away people's freedom to choose *how* to respond and frame their experiences. Edith Eger called this “the choice” which is the name of her famous book.
2. The ultimate redemption is the messianic age, when humankind will enter the final period of history which will be one of peace for all. Judaism believes this has yet to happen in history, and that this is proven by the suffering and evil that still exists in the world.
3. Despite not experiencing an “ultimate redemption” (the Jews were still under the authority of Achashverosh after Haman had been defeated, and Mashiach had not yet arrived) the joy of Purim tells us that redemption is a journey that must be travelled until the end. Yet there is much reason for joy on the way. Every day there are reasons for gratitude and joy. That is one of the messages of Purim and modern Jewish history testifies to this. Despite the dark period of the Holocaust, the modern miracle of the establishment of the State of Israel occurred just a few years later, and although the redemption of Israel is not yet complete (we still need to fight for its very existence), there is still so much joy to be experienced and to be thankful for.

## IT ONCE HAPPENED ON PURIM...

1. Both Esther and Eddie felt that they were average people without any particular power or influence. True, Esther became the Queen with some limited influence (that she ultimately used to her and the Jewish people's benefit) but she probably felt like a nobody, an inconsequential Jewish girl who was picked off the street by random coincidence (or Divine destiny) to be the King's wife. Eddie was an unremarkable Jewish travelling salesman from Kansas. Yet they both changed the course of Jewish history, recognising their moment when it came, and playing their small role to help their people.
2. This is the classic question when a person achieves great things that we believe are part of the Divine plan. Can they celebrate their achievement, or does all credit go to God? The message of the Purim story in particular, and Judaism in general, is that both exist concurrently. Esther and Eddie must be commended and celebrated for their courage and initiative and for the role they played. But the message of Megillat Esther is that God is always behind the scenes, pulling the strings, making sure His plan for history is fulfilled.
3. Some people sense their calling in life from an early age, and for some, like Eddie, it comes in an instant, much later on in life. Our mission could be to make an impact continuously, through a career, or activism, in small moments and kind acts, or in one single moment where we have the opportunity to change history, like Eddie and Esther. It is our responsibility to always look for this mission. And to answer God's hidden call.

## CHIDON ON THE CHAG (A QUICK QUIZ)

1. Lots (like in a lottery).
2. 13th of Adar.
3. Megillat Esther. 
4. The four *Mems*:
  - a. **Megillat Esther** (reading the Megillah).
  - b. **Matanot La-Evyonim** – (gifts to the poor).
  - c. **Mishloach Manot** – (sending gifts of food).
  - d. **Mishteh** – A festive Purim feast.
5. Make a loud noise (for example booing, stamping their feet or using a noisemaker known as a *ra'ashan* or *gregger*).
6. To remind us that God was "hidden" in the Purim story, pulling the strings from backstage.
7. 127.
8. Bigtan and Teresh.
9. *Hamantaschen* are three-cornered pastry treats which could represent Haman's three-cornered hat, ears or pockets.
10. Hadassah.
11. He is not mentioned at all.
12. On the evening and morning of Purim.
13. This is the day that Jerusalem celebrates Purim. It falls on the 15th of Adar, the day after Purim for the rest of the world.
14. Vashti.
15. To remember the three-day fast Esther proclaimed in response to Haman's plan to destroy the Jews.



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