

The PURIM Handbook

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FASTING before FEASTING

Insights on the connection between the
FAST OF ESTHER AND PURIM

by Rav Mendel Weinbach

THE FAST

Why do we fast on Ta'anit Esther before feasting on Purim? Let us go back thousands of years to find the answer. Picture the scene.

Jews throughout the Persian Empire prepare themselves for the battle against the forces of Haman. Thanks to the intervention of Queen Esther they have been granted royal permission to defend themselves against their Amalekite enemies bent on genocide.

But why are they fasting?

The answer lies in what took place almost a thousand years earlier. Moshe instructs his disciple Yehoshua to mobilize the forces to battle the Amalekites, who ambushed the nation just liberated from Egyptian bondage. He also declares a fast as a means of gaining Heavenly support.

Moshe thus sets an example for all generations to total dependence on G-d, an example which was emulated by Jews fighting against the Amalekites of their day a thousand years later.

In the Reading of the Torah on Purim we relive that first war with Amalek. After appointing Yehoshua as military commander, Moshe, accompanied by his brother Aharon and his nephew Chur, ascends to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield. The prayers of this sainted threesome for Heavenly assistance set the pattern for the prayer which will be offered by community elders throughout the generations on fast days in times of trouble.

But Moshe is also doing something else to help achieve victory. He raises his hands, inspiring his warriors to look Heavenwards and put their faith in

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FASTING before **FEASTING**

G-d. Only when his hands are up does the Army of Israel prevail, and when he tires he is supported by Aharon and Chur until final victory is gained.

Now let us see how this crucial lesson of total dependence on G-d is applied a millennium later. Queen Esther is charged by Mordechai to risk her life by making an uninvited appearance before the king. She is to plead for her people, whose survival is threatened by the royal decree instigated by the wicked Haman for genocide in the Month of Adar. Eleven months before the date set for that tragedy she prepares herself for that fateful meeting by calling for a three-day fast by all the Jews in the capital city of Shushan. Although it would seem that she should make every effort to maintain her attractiveness in order to find favor in the eyes of the king, she also fasts for three days, making it necessary for Heavenly angels to support her and enhance her appearance when she meets the king.

Is this not an echo of Yehoshua's soldiers fasting and looking Heavenward as Moshe prays for them?

We come full circle in this fasting cycle eleven months later when, on the 13th day of the Month of Adar, the day set for the "final solution" of Haman's "Jewish problem", the tables are turned as the Jews destroy their enemies. Once again the Jewish fighters are fasting, and it is on this day that Ta'anit Esther is ordained by our Sages as a reminder that G-d responds to the repentance and prayers of those who turn to Him.

To feast on Purim in celebration of our deliverance from the genocidal plot of Haman without first fasting on Ta'anit Esther would be an incomplete experience. It is not sufficient to recall the miracle without reflecting on what made us

worthy of it.

The Hamans of today once again pose a serious threat to our people. Only by our putting our faith in G-d, and appealing to Him with the repentance and prayer which saved us in the days of Moshe, Yehoshua, Mordechai and Esther, will we be worthy of a Purim miracle in our own day.

THE FEAST

Purim is a veritable cornucopia of paradoxes that ignite the imagination of both scholar and layman. But perhaps the greatest challenge of all is posed by this requirement to indulge in drink to the point of losing the faculty of discernment. How, ask the commentaries throughout the generations, can we be commanded to invite that very intoxication which is so roundly reviled in both Scripture and Talmud? And why such a puzzling standard of non-discernment?

Just to set the record straight regarding the halacha, it is the consensus of the authorities that literal fulfillment of this requirement is limited only to those who are capable of doing so without impairing their ability to fulfill all of the *mitzvot* connected with the festive Purim meal (washing hands, blessings before and after, etc.), or without inciting them to improper conduct. For most people it is sufficient to drink more than is their custom and to achieve the level of fuzziness suggested by the Talmud through a drink-induced nap.

But our original problem still remains. Why encourage excess drinking altogether, and why set a goal of such enigmatic nature?

The answers, of course, lie in an analysis of the Purim story as recorded in *Megillat Esther*. The events chronicled in this Divinely inspired

THE PURIM HANDBOOK

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FASTING_{before} FEASTING

document cover a decade of history, from the grand banquet in which Queen Vashti meets her downfall until the miraculous turnabout of a Jewish nation threatened with genocide overcoming its enemies thanks to the intervention of Queen Esther. From the perspective of historians and political analysts it is virtually impossible to see any link between the events separated by so many years and so many political developments. What connection can possibly be surmised between the drunken domestic quarrel between Achashverosh and Vashti in the third year of his reign and the same king's submitting to Esther's entreaties in his twelfth year? Chapters, if not volumes, could probably be written about how Haman's meteoric rise to power and the geopolitical upheavals of a mighty Persian Empire on the threshold of a challenge from the ascendant Macedonians affected the fickle monarch's decision-making process in first sanctioning genocide and then rejecting it.

But historians are capable of dealing only with tangible links. The Divine Author of history, however, reveals to His chosen people in *Megillat Esther* that there is a powerful connection between events separated by so much time. The Divine Healer prepared the cure before the illness by removing Vashti in favor of Esther even before He sent the plague of Haman's genocidal decree to alarm His sinful people into repentance. The clue to this linkage is *wine* — the wine that brought a king to a drunken rage against a rebellious queen, and the wine that another queen, concealing her Jewish identity, served both husband and enemy at the climactic banquet where she successfully pleaded for her people's salvation.

If the link is wine then it is wine that we must indulge in beyond our habit in order to remember and reflect upon this invisible thread that weaves such disparate events into a miraculous tapestry of

Divine intervention. And the level of our indulgence must be one that rejects the normal approaches of discernment, abandons the logic of social and political analysts and seeks the Divine hand in the workings of history.

Until he can no longer distinguish between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordechai." Many interpretations have been offered as to why this particular criterion has been chosen for determining the desired level of inebriation. On the simplest level it is a reference to a song of praise we sing after the reading of the *Megillah* and which we repeat in our festive meals, and it is a challenge to the drinker to keep the lyrics in order when his spirits are so high.

In a deeper sense, however, we may suggest that there are two levels of thanksgiving when a person is saved from disaster by Divine intervention. One is *hoda'ah* — thanks — and the other is *hallel* — praise. The visceral reaction of the survivor is to thank Heaven. But if asked whether he would have preferred to never have been exposed to the danger, his response would invariably be "Yes!" He would prefer to completely forget that it ever existed. Only after serious reflection does he realize that the danger he faced was a gift from Heaven to wake him up and redirect him. It is then that he sings the praises of G-d for having provided him with such an educational experience.

On Chanukah we offer both *hoda'ah* in the form of the *Al Hanissim* prayer and *hallel* in the recital of *Hallel* for eight days. On Purim the reading of the *Megillah* is our *hallel*, for it teaches us to appreciate the value of the danger as well as the salvation.

"Cursed is Haman" refers to the danger, "Blessed is Mordechai" to the salvation. When one drinks enough wine to link all the events in the *hallel* of our *Megillah* he no longer discerns between the values of the two.

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A Second Chance

A Second Chance

Reaccepting the Oral Law on Purim

by Rav Nota Schiller

Although at Sinai the Jewish People had to be forced into accepting the Torah, the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) teaches that the Torah was accepted again willingly at the time of the Purim miracle. This is alluded to in the verse “*Kimu v’kiblu haYehudim*” (Esther 9:27) — “The Jews ‘established’ and ‘accepted’ ” — in as much as it should have said “*Kiblu v’kimu*” — “they ‘accepted’ and they ‘fulfilled’ ”. This indicates that at the time of the Purim miracle they were now ‘establishing’ something that had already been ‘received’.

The Midrash Tanchuma indicates that though at Sinai they had initially said “*na’ase v’nishma*” — we will do and we will hear — that was only in regard to the Written Law, whereas pertaining to the Oral Law they were intimidated and overwhelmed by its vastness and depth and needed coercion into accepting it.

It would follow then that the *mitzvot* of the day of Purim should be thematically connected to reaccepting the Oral Law. These are:

- Giving a ‘*machtzit hashekel*’ (half-shekel) prior to Purim
- Reading of the Megillah
- *Mishloach Manot* - Sending Delicacies to one another

- *Matanot L’evyonim* - Gifts to the poor
- The Purim Seudah (Festive Meal)
- The custom to drink more wine than one is accustomed to

The Half-Shekel

Many commentaries point out that the *machtzit hashekel* is to remind us that we are only a part of a whole — that we need each other. The content and methodology of the Oral Law work with extraordinary condensation and terseness, necessitating participatory elucidation by the learner. As is noted in the Mishna, interactive learning with another — “*dikduk chaverim*” — is a prerequisite for acquiring Torah, especially the Oral Law; and the Written Law (Tanach) is incomprehensible without the Oral Law.

The Megillah

The Megillah of Esther symbolizes the paradox of “*hester*” — that which is hidden, like the covert miracles of the Purim story. Our challenge is to be “*megaleh*” — to reveal — what is implicit in the text. Such is the challenge of applying the Torah methods of the Oral Law to the written text in order to render the hidden revealed.

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A Second Chance

Sending Delicacies & Gifts to the Poor

As the mitzvah of *mishloach manot* can be fulfilled by sending two food items to the Rothschilds or the Bronfmans, clearly our obligation does not originate in their need. It is rather the fostering of friendship, the declaration of kinship that is inherent in the act. A facilitator of *dikduk chaverim*.

Even more so for the materially poor or intellectually/spiritually poor who need our assistance and await this helping hand. The Mishna calls a Torah scholar a “*chaver*” — literally “friend” — since by definition he is a friend to every Jew.

Purim Seuda

Chazal teach that engaging in festive meals promotes cordiality and friendship which results in connecting hearts.

Yet the intellectual enterprise of the Oral Law remains a supreme challenge of the mind and heart. The Chazon Ish points out that this toil of mind and soul is what purifies and elevates the Jew. Hence the root paradox of human existence wherein we are required to treat the challenge as if it is dependent on us yet ever be cognizant that only the Almighty makes it happen.

So, on this day of reacceptance of that Oral Law that had intimidated and frightened the people because of its immensity and intricacies, at this very moment we “sacrifice our mind on the altar” (through the drinking) to declare that ultimate

spiritual and intellectual attainments require help from Heaven.

How well I remember returning late at night from the Yeshiva to our two-family home in Brownsville where my great uncle who lived in the adjoining apartment had built a basement to rent out for parties. Half way up the block I could determine whether it was a gentile party or a Jewish (invariably secular as there weren’t many observant Jews in the immediate area). If it was a gentile party they were already out in the street by the time I was returning, beating each other up. A few drinks and it was inevitable. If it was a Jewish party, however non-halachic, still the hidden Jew surfaced and the guys would be inside the basement hugging each other.

Chazal teach that the “quality” of a person can be determined by “*Kiso, Kaso, Koso*”. This means (in order) his attitude and management of: his money, anger and drinking.

Kiso — *machtzit hashekel, shalach manot and matanot l’evyonim*.

Kaso — students of Torah must perform go through a process of confrontation and hostility in presenting and defending their ideas (even a father and son). However they don’t leave the Beit Midrash until they have been bonded in kinship.

Koso — the seudah and the imbibing facilitating that camaraderie.

Happy Purim!

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by Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz

The Mitzvah of Machtzit Hashekel

The Talmud in Megilla recounts that G-d knew that Haman would try to destroy the Jewish people by giving Achashverosh 10,000 talents of silver. Therefore, in order to countermand the effect of Haman's *shekalim*, G-d gave us our own mitzvah of contributing the "half-shekel", and we give ours first (starting from Rosh Chodesh Adar). The meaning of this passage is somewhat obscure. How do our *shekalim* protect us from the *shekalim* of Haman? Do we still need that protection after thousands of years? Are we offering G-d a bribe? And the bribe is not even going to the same source anyway (i.e. Achashverosh).

To understand this, we need to delve into the source of Haman's power over us. In Megillat Esther, Haman states to the king: "There is a nation that is *scattered* and *separated* among all the provinces of your kingdom". The Book of Esther does not contain an explicit mention of the name of G-d. Nevertheless, there is a tradition that every time the word "*melech*" is stated, it refers not only to the flesh and blood Achashverosh but also the ultimate King of Kings — G-d. Thus, in any verse that describes Haman talking to the king, there is a "lower" meaning and an "upper" meaning. The lower meaning is flesh and blood: Haman speaking to flesh and blood Achashverosh. The deeper, mystical meaning is that the evil force which Haman represents (the power of Amalek) is declaring something to G-d.

We can apply this concept to the above-quoted statement of Haman about the Jewish People and understand it on two levels. On one level, the physical Haman is declaring to Achashverosh, "Don't worry about killing the Jews; they are scattered, dispersed and numerically insignificant. No one will rise to defend them and they are powerless to defend themselves". At the same time, on the mystical level we understand this verse as the power of Amalek proclaiming to G-d: "The Jewish people are unworthy of Divine Protection and love because they are

scattered and *separated* among themselves. They are polarized, in dissention, filled with endless rivalries and *sinat chinam* (groundless hatred). They are not deserving of Your assistance, and should therefore be destroyed by Haman's decree." The external Amalek has no power over us unless we have within us an internal Amalek, and this internal Amalek — our eternal Achilles heel — is none other than our own *sinat chinam*, lack of unity and absence of a deep heartfelt *ahavat Yisrael*. What Benjamin Franklin said about the new American republic is even more true about Am Yisrael: "We must hang together or we will surely hang separately."

If the spiritual flaw within Klal Yisrael that made us vulnerable to Haman was disunity and dissention, this is why Esther's first response to Mordechai had to be "let us *gather* all the Jews together." This is why Purim, which celebrates the defeat of the external Amalek, puts such a premium on building bonds of friendship and love through *shaloch manot* (gifts of food) and *matanos l'evyonim* (charity to the poor). We celebrate the defeat of Amalek by resolving in our own lives to eradicate the root cause of its power. And finally, this is why the *machtzit hashekel* can countermand and annul the power of Haman's *shekalim*.

Machtzit hashekel is a great lesson in unity and interdependence, and this can be seen in two different respects. First, it represents the idea of *equality* — everyone must give the same. "The rich cannot give more and the poor cannot give less." Why is that? We can understand why you can't give less — the Torah establishes a minimum that everyone must reach. But what is wrong with giving more? If I wanted to give extra money to a shul or a yeshiva, would they turn me down? And yet the Torah is just as insistent that the rich give no more than the absolute requirement.

The lesson here is that when it comes to service of G-d, rich and poor stand before the Almighty with full

equality. As long as we do the best with whatever resources we have, even if objectively we may be doing less than the other fellow, we stand equally cherished by our Creator. Indeed, five dollars given by a person who is poor may be even more significant than a million dollars given by a multibillionaire. G-d looks at our struggles and our sacrifices. How much of an effort did we put forth — *l'fum tza'ara agra* (“according to the effort is the reward”) (*Pirkei Avot*).

This is true not only in the financial realm. “Rich” and “poor” can encompass the whole range of physical, mental and spiritual attainments — intelligence, strength, energy and organizational skills. Each of us is blessed with unique talents and abilities, and instead of being envious of the abilities that others have that we may lack, all of us need to be attuned to our special gifts. We need to focus on our unique potentials, to appreciate who we are and what we can become, and to remember that as long as we try to be the best that we can be with the abilities that G-d has given us we stand before G-d equal to the greatest millionaire and even equal to the greatest *tzaddik*.

Thus, by stressing the *equality* of “rich and poor”, however those terms are defined, *machtzit hashekel* contributes to a respect and a love for the uniqueness of each Jew as well as an enhanced appreciation for oneself, which in turn eliminates the jealousy, envy and one-upmanship that so often poison human relations.

But there is a second way that *machtzit hashekel* builds unity — not only by stressing our uniqueness but also our *interdependence*. Something that is one-half is by definition incomplete and defective, and can only achieve wholeness by being joined to another half. No Jew can truly serve G-d fully unless he is joined to the Community of Israel.

This can be proven by a simple numerical calculation. There are 613 commandments in the Torah: 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. According to our Sages each positive commandment corresponds to and provides spiritual life for a particular bone in the body, and each negative commandment does the same for the sinews and ligaments. If a person is lacking even a single mitzvah, therefore, there is something missing from his spiritual makeup. However, this raises a

serious problem. There has never been and will never be a Jew, no matter how righteous, who was able to keep all 613 *mitzvot*. Some are only for men, some for women, some for *kohanim*, many apply only in the Land of Israel, and a large number cannot be done by anybody when there is no *Beit HaMikdash*. No matter how great a person might be, standing alone there is simply no way his relationship to G-d — a relationship that depends on fulfillment of *all* of the 613 commandments — can be anything other than incomplete, truncated, and defective.

Nevertheless, this is true only if I stand before G-d as an individual. To the extent I link myself to Klal Yisrael with bonds of unity and love, a Klal Yisrael which is a transcendent eternal entity with a past, present, and future, the *mitzvot* of any segment of that entity become my *mitzvot* because I am part of that whole. The *mitzvot* of the men become the women's, the *mitzvot* of the women become the men's, the *mitzvot* of the *kohanim* become the *mitzvot* of us all, and even the *mitzvos* of the past that we can no longer keep — like *korbanot* — become our *mitzvot*.

This occurs when we link ourselves to the holy Community of Israel, which as a cosmic entity had been able to keep them. Thus, while it is technically true that “I” cannot keep 613 *mitzvot* and “you” cannot keep 613 *mitzvot*, “we together” are able to do so through our connection with bonds of love and friendship to Klal Yisrael. Ironically, therefore, unity and *ahavat Yisrael* are not only matters of benevolence, altruism and concern for others, but are actually necessary for selfish reasons. Even if my only concern was for myself (which of course it shouldn't be), unity is essential for my own spiritual welfare.

These then are the two lessons of *machtzit hashekel: equality and interdependence*. These lessons are to recognize the uniqueness and indispensability of our role in the formation of a Jewish society, to realize how much we count and how much we are needed — and at the same time we need to recognize our interdependence and how much we need to be connected to others. And if it was the attitudes of the *machtzit hashekel* that gave us the wherewithal to defeat Haman in the time of Achashverosh, it will be those same attitudes that will give us the strength to defeat the modern successors of Haman who try to destroy us up to this very day.

by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

one for ALL

An individual's responsibility to help others

The story of Purim is a real roller coaster. It contains almost everything required for a "good read". It has intrigue, murder, a sensitive and wise hero, a cold and evil antagonist, a powerful king, a beautiful queen, parties galore, an assassination attempt and plenty more.

And yet, the fact that the Megillah is included in Tanach is not merely an indication that it made it onto the "Shushan Times Best Seller List," but rather that it contains powerful and personal messages for every single Jew in every single generation. In fact, one of the wonders of the Megillah is that every year new messages come to light and its eternal significance is emphasized anew. As I was studying the Megillah this year I was hit by a seemingly insignificant piece of narrative that takes place. Mordechai is patiently explaining to Esther why it is imperative that she risk her life and attempt to have an unscheduled audience with Achashverosh. After presenting his very compelling argument, Mordechai adds "And who knows if it wasn't for this moment that you became the queen?"

They may sound innocuous but those words are very sharp, perhaps even sarcastic and acerbic. What possessed Mordechai (our sensitive and wise hero) to be quite so severe? Because he wanted to

stress in the clearest possible way to Esther that it is G-d who is in charge of destiny. In other words, Mordechai is saying, "What do you think? That being the queen will save you from the approaching genocide? Well, think again!"

Esther hears those words and understands the message.

And that should give us all pause for thought. What about us? Do we hear our messages or do we ignore them and continue on our merry way without too much thought as to who is running our world and what is required of us? In Ethics of the Fathers Hillel says, "In a place where there are no leaders, strive to be a leader". Hillel is teaching us that someone has to take responsibility, and if there is no one prepared to do so, then you be the one.

But there is a deeper, more personal meaning hidden behind the words. Very often, when one is in private there is a feeling that if I can't be seen it does not really matter too much how careful I am, not in my relations to other people and not with my relationship to G-d. Hillel wants us to know that nothing could be further from the truth. In public and in private we must strive to reach a level of symmetry where the inner persona and the outer one reflect the same character. And it is that lesson that Mordechai is conveying to Esther. Esther is

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oneforALL

being told that it is not enough to feel the pain and the sorrow of the Jewish People in public. That same anguish must be apparent in private as well, to the point that she must be prepared to give up her life, if necessary, to save them.

There is a story told about a small town in Siberia, where once a father and a son came to the Rabbi, each one laying claim to the one coat in the house. The father stayed home while the son went off to work each day. The father said that he needed the coat; otherwise he would freeze to death as there was no heating in the house and the walls were insufficient to keep out the winds. The son, on the other hand, claimed that his need was far more pressing because he was out working all day in the exposed fields. The father retorted that as the son was working after a while he would warm up and not need the coat anyway. The son replied that even though their house was full of unplugged holes it was still preferable to be indoors as there was always some shelter to be found. The Rabbi, being unsure as to who should have the coat, told them to come back two days later when he would give them an answer. On their way home both the father and the son begin to assess the claim of the other one and they came to the realization that perhaps the other was right after all. So, on their return to the Rabbi two days later, they were still arguing, but this time each was claiming that the other one should take the coat!

On hearing both of them present their cases once again, the Rabbi asked them to please wait. He left the room, only to return almost immediately

with a coat that he gave to them, telling them that now they would each have a coat to wear. Of course, both the father and the son thanked the Rabbi profusely and began to leave. As they got to the door the son turned around and asked the Rabbi why he hadn't just given them the coat two days ago. The Rabbi answered that when they were both fighting because each one thought that he needed the coat more, the Rabbi thought to himself that he also needed his coat. But when they returned with each one wanting to manage without the coat, the Rabbi thought to himself that he could also manage without his coat!

That is the significance of the seemingly severe and extraneous sentence that Mordechai added when speaking to Esther — “And who knows if it wasn't for this moment that you became the queen?”

It's not enough to say “I'm okay”. The Jewish People are all interconnected with each other and there can be no such thing as one person shirking his responsibility because he thinks that the effect will be negligible. Purim and the Megillah are teaching us that even though we seem to live in a world where very few of us are prepared to accept responsibility, we are not released from our accountability to ourselves and to the Jewish People. We must learn that in Judaism “each to their own” is an anathema.

And that sounds like a very powerful message for this Purim: If I don't take responsibility, even if I think that I am under-qualified, who will?

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The

LAST

The humor in the sudden
'reversal' of the Purim story

LAUGH

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

When Sir Donald Wolfit, the last of the great English actor/managers, was lying on his deathbed, one of his young actors said to him: "Sir Donald, after a life so filled with success and fame, dying must be hard."

To which Sir Donald replied: "Dying is easy; comedy is hard."

They say a coward dies many times. The same must also be true for comedians.

Any actor who has stood in front of an audience, and watched a line that he practiced for weeks clang helplessly to the floor to roars of silence, will appreciate Sir Donald's sentiments. Comedy is hard because we don't really understand what makes people laugh. We know what's funny because we laugh at it. But trying to distill the essence of comedy into a set of principles or laws is not so easy.

One of the basic elements of comedy is incongruity. Seeing a king wearing a red clown's nose is funny. Seeing a clown wearing a red nose isn't.

Underlying this aspect of incongruity is a deeper idea — absurdity. We expect the world to have a certain natural order of events. When these events are suddenly turned upside down, the result is comic.

Which brings us to another element of comedy —

sudden reversal. Comedy depends on the mysterious quality of "timing". The information that will make the audience laugh has to be revealed in a certain time-frame. Too quickly, and the laugh is stifled before it's born. Too slowly, and the joke is 'telegraphed' — people see it coming and it dies its own death.

PERFECT TIMING

One of the most notable aspects of the Purim story is 'hippuch' — sudden reversal. Haman has his gallows ready to hang Mordechai. The letters decreeing the 'final solution of the Jewish problem' have been sent out in all 127 languages to the far corners of the Persian Empire. In a split second, everything was turned upside down.

The only difference between tragedy and comedy is the ending.

The Purim story is a comedy in the classic sense. All seems set for disaster and in an instant everything is turned on its head. This combination of total reversal and perfect timing gives Purim its special flavor of joy.

COMEDY VERSUS RIDICULE

Most of what passes today for comedy is in fact ridicule. Where is the real comedy that fills our mouths with laughter?

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It seems that in a world that accounts cynicism as wisdom, we have lost the genuine article of real comedy. Like some 'invasion of the body-snatchers', comedy has been abducted and in its place sits ridicule grinning like an imbecile.

Jews have always been known for their humor. It's as if the world recognizes that there is something particularly Jewish about humor and that humor is part of the essence of Judaism. But how can something as serious as religion tolerate something as light as humor?

Humor doesn't have to be light. It doesn't have to lead to scoffing, to derision. Comedy is a serious business.

Jewish humor is about the absurd. It's about the human condition itself. It's about living in a world that seems to make no sense:

Belorussia, mid-winter. Temperature: 45 degrees below zero. Moishe and Shloime are lying shivering in their tattered coats on two iron beds. Moishe said to Shloime: "Shloime, close the window, it's cold outside."

"Moishele, and if I close the window, it will be warm outside?"

Groucho Marx in a letter resigning from a golf club that didn't let in Jews. *"Dear Sir, I do not wish to be*

part of a club that will have me as a member."

Behind every Jewish joke there's a Jewish tear. A wry bittersweet feeling of two thousand years of exile. Tears of sadness. Tears of joy.

In the Psalm, *Shir Hama'alot*, that we sing after a festive meal, there is a line that yearns for the coming of Mashiach: "Then will our mouths be filled with laughter..." When the Mashiach comes, he will come in an instant, and things will be totally turned upside down.

Just like Purim, he will come in crisis, in catastrophic reversal — *hippuch*. His coming will not be through gradual improvement. He will come in the darkest hour — which is always just before the dawn.

The bittersweet humor of the Jewish People will then be transformed to a sweet-sweet humor. There will no longer be an elegiac quality to it. Ridicule will be deposed from its throne of idiocy. Our mouths will be filled with laughter. It will be a laughter of discovery, a laughter of total realization. Then we will see how all the pieces in this Comedy of the Absurd called Life fit into place.

Then we will laugh the last laugh.

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by Rabbi Richard Jacobs

COSTUME CUSTOM

The origin and reason for masquerades on Purim

When you walk the streets of Jerusalem, or the Jewish area of any town in the run up to Purim, you see the shop racks full of costumes, the masques of masquerade hanging in display, adorning arcade mannequins. “Mordechai” and “Esther” joust for attention with mutant ninja turtles and Spiderman; Kallah (bridal) dresses and “Torah scrolls” alongside fairies and Winnie the Pooh.

Dressing up on Purim is a long-standing custom; the earliest record is found in the writings of the Mahari Mintz, a late 15th century Italian Rabbi and scholar. He writes that on Purim it is permitted for a man to dress up as a woman and vice versa, and it is clearly implied that this is a custom that is well established in his day.

Which begs the question: *Why* do we wear costumes on Purim?

There are a number of different reasons. A mask and costume hide the identity of the wearer. From the outside not only can you not tell who the individual wearer is, you don't have any insights into their nature whatsoever. Maybe behind the mask, no matter how far they appear to be from Torah, is a Jew, a family member, “one of the tribe”.

One of the deeper reasons for this custom is that the entire miracle of Purim was clothed in natural happenings. The events of the Purim story happened over a period of years and are seemingly unconnected. There isn't even an explicit mention of G-d's name in the Megillah. In fact the very name of the Megillah — “Esther” — hints to the hidden nature of the miracle. When the Talmud asks “Where do we see a hint to Esther in the Torah?” it answers with a verse from Deuteronomy (31:18) “*v'Anochi haster Astir Panai*” (“and I will surely hide My Face”). The word “Esther” means “hidden”.

Within the Megillah there are a number of “dressings up”. Vashti remains attached to her attire despite the demands of Achashverosh. Esther doesn't reveal her people — no one knew where she was from nor realized she was Jewish. People who saw her thought she was from their (foreign) nation. Mordechai wore sackcloth in mourning for his people and was later dressed in the clothes of the king.

To take another approach, what is at the root of Amalek's hatred of the Jewish People? Amalek is the direct descendant of Esav, and it is with Esav that we first encounter the idea of clothes concealing that which is within. Esav is the archetypal “wolf in sheep's clothing”. His outward behavior was that of a *tzaddik*, while his inner drives were pure evil. In contrast, Yaakov's righteousness was so concealed that even Yitzchak didn't recognize it until Rivka revealed it. Yitzchak was going to give the special blessing to Esav. At his mother's instigation Yaakov, wearing Esav's clothes, preempted Esav and went to Yitzchak with the food that Rivka had prepared. On a superficial level, Yaakov's behavior seems deceptive. On Purim we dress in different clothes to show that Yaakov did not commit a sin, and even though he wore the garments of Esav, Yaakov is indeed “blessed”.

On a more practical note one of the *mitzvot* of the day is giving charity to the poor. Receiving charity can be devastatingly embarrassing for someone. When they are in fancy dress, however, no one can see their face, and they are not recognized, thus sparing the embarrassment.

Finally, as we all know, dressing up is fun and adds to the *simcha* and the joy of the Purim celebrations, and Purim is a day for celebration!

MEGILLAH

Q&A

1. How many countries did Achashverosh rule over?
2. How many days did the first feast last?
3. What are the names of Achashverosh's two servants who plotted to kill him?
4. How did Haman choose the date that he did for killing the Jews?
5. How many people did Esther invite to her parties?
6. What did Mordechai receive with the hanging of Haman?
7. Why is this holiday called "Purim"?
8. How many different mitzvot do we fulfill on Purim?
9. Which two tribes are mentioned in relation to Mordechai?
10. What do we add to our regular *Shmone Esrai* and *birkat hamazon*?
11. What portion of the Torah is read on Purim morning?
12. Why is Haman referred to as "Ha'agagi"?
13. How many wine banquets are mentioned in the Megillah?
14. How much should one drink in celebration of Purim?
15. In which city did all the Megillah events take place?
16. What was the proclamation made by Haman as he led Mordechai on parade?
17. Who informed the king about the gallows which Haman had prepared for Mordechai?
18. Which cities celebrate Purim on 14 Adar and which on 15 Adar?
19. What is the name of the fast day preceding Purim?
20. How many days did Esther and the Jews of Shushan fast in order to deserve a miracle?
1. 127 (*Esther* 1:1)
2. 180 (*Esther* 1:4)
3. Bigtan and Teresh (*Esther* 2:21)
4. With a lottery (*Esther* 3:7)
5. Two: Achashverosh and Haman (*Esther* 5:4 and 5:8)
6. Haman's house (*Esther* 8:3)
7. Because of the "Pur" (lots) cast by Haman (*Esther* 9:26)
8. Four: 1) Reading of the Megillah, 2) Sending gifts to friends, 3) Giving gifts to the poor, 4) Feasting with food and drink (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 690, 695, 696)
9. Binyamin and Yehuda (*Esther* 2:5)
10. *Al Hanissim* (*Orach Chaim* 693, 695)
11. Parshat Amalek – *Shmot* 17:1-9 (*Orach Chaim* 693)
12. He was descended from the Amalekite King Agag who was slain by the Prophet Shmuel (Book of Shmuel I 15:32-33)
13. Four (*Esther* 1:3, 1:5, 5:5, 7:1), two thrown by the king and two by Esther.
14. More than he is accustomed to drinking and, if he can maintain his sobriety, to the point where he cannot distinguish between "Cursed by Haman, blessed be Mordechai." (*Orach Chaim* 695)
15. Shushan (*Esther* 1:2 and repeated throughout the Megillah)
16. "This is what is done for the man whom the king honors." (*Esther* 7:11)
17. Charvona (*Esther* 7:9)
18. Cities that were walled from the days of Yehoshua (Yerushalayim as an example) read on the 15 Adar, others on 14 Adar. (*Orach Chaim* 685)
19. Taanit Esther (*Orach Chaim* 686)
20. Three days and nights (*Esther* 5:15)

LAWS *of* PURIM

TIMES

- Purim is preceded by the Fast of Esther, which begins at dawn on the 13th of Adar and continues until nightfall. When the 13th is on Shabbat (like this year), the Fast of Esther is observed on the preceding Thursday. It is forbidden to eat and drink on this day (one may, however, wash, and wear leather shoes).
- In unwalled cities, Purim is celebrated on the 14th of Adar, from night to night.
- In cities with walls dating from the days of Joshua, Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar, as it was in Shushan, the capital of Persia; hence the name, Shushan Purim. Jerusalem is a walled city and most of its suburbs are also considered part of Jerusalem regarding this law.

READING OF THE SCROLL OF ESTHER

Kriat Hamegillah

- The Scroll of Esther is read publicly in the evening and on the morning of Purim.
- It must be read from a scroll written in accordance with halachah.
- The reader and the audience must have intent to fulfill the mitzvah of reading and to fulfill the obligation of the blessings before and after.
- It is customary to make noise when the name of Haman is mentioned.
- It is forbidden to speak from the time of the blessings before the reading, until the end of the blessings after the reading.
- Ideally the scroll should be read in the presence of a minyan.

PRAYER Tefillah

- The prayer '*Al Hanissim*' is added in the Silent Prayer (*Shmoneh Esrei*) and in Grace after Meals.
- If one forgot '*Al Hanissim*' one does not repeat the prayer or blessing.
- During the morning service (*Shacharit*), the Torah is read.
- The prayer of repentance, *Tachanun*, is not recited, nor is the prayer *Lamenatzeach*.

GIFTS TO FRIENDS *Mishloach Manot*

- One is obligated to give at least one gift to one

fellow Jew. The more the better.

- The gift must consist of at least two items of food, ready to eat.
- It is preferable to send the gift via a third party.

GIFTS TO THE POOR *Matanot L'evyonim*

- One is obligated to give a gift of money, sufficient for one meal, to at least two poor people. The more the better.
- Funds must be available on the day of Purim. (No post-dated checks.)
- It is preferable to take care of this obligation early in the day.
- The gift may be given to a third party in order to distribute on the day of Purim.
- More should be spent on gifts to the poor than on gifts to friends (unless they are also poor).

THE FESTIVE MEAL *Seudat Purim*

- It is obligatory to partake of a festive meal on the day of Purim.
- It is customary to eat food with seeds - e.g., *Hamentashen* with poppy seed filling.
- One should drink more wine than one is accustomed to.
- It is correct to invite guests, especially the needy.
- The conversation should be focused on words of Torah.

CUSTOMS *Minhagim*

- Many have a custom to dress up in costumes.
- It is customary to give charity to all who ask.
- Some produce amusing Purim plays.
- Some also present amusing *divrei Torah*.
- It is customary to visit the homes of one's Rabbis and teachers.
- One should start studying the laws of Passover on Purim.
- It is correct not to engage in business or work on Purim.
- At the afternoon service before Purim it is customary to give three coins (preferable with the number $\frac{1}{2}$ on them) to charity in memory of the three "half-shekels" given to the Temple.

PURIM TIMELINE

Square ■ - in Megillat Esther / Circle ● - not in Megillat Esther

- **3338** (422 BCE)
 - Destruction of 1st Temple - Tisha B'Av
 - Nebuchadnezzar
 - Jeremiah, Ezekiel
 - Prophecies of destruction and exile, Prophecies of return
 - Babylonian Exile, Daniel and Ezra

- **3387** (373 BCE)
 - Proclamation of Cyrus, Return to Israel
 - Persian Empire
 - Minority returns to Israel with Nehemiah in Nissan

- **3389** (371 BCE)
 - Foundations laid for Second Temple

- **3390** (370 BCE)
 - Persians stops construction

- **3395** (365 BCE)
 - Feast of Achashverosh in the third year of his reign
 - Queen Vashti, granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar slain for defying the king

- **3399** (361 BCE)
 - Tevet - Esther becomes queen in the place of Vashti
 - Mordechai appointed to king's gate
 - Bigtan - Teresh plot
 - Promotion of Haman

- **3401** (359 BCE)
 - Renewal of settlement in Israel, including Golan and East Bank

- **3404** (356 BCE)
 - Nissan 13: Haman casts lots; sends out letters; Mordechai sends message to Esther; three day fast begins
 - Nissan 15: On third day of fast Esther comes before the king; Achashverosh and Haman attend Esther's banquet
 - Nissan 16: Haman leads Mordechai through Shushan streets; Joins king at second banquet and is hanged after being exposed

- **3405** (355 BCE)
 - Adar 13: Jews turn the tables by subduing their enemies; ten sons of Haman slain in Shushan the Capital
 - Adar 14: Jews in Shushan destroy their enemies; bodies of Haman's sons hanged. Jews in other cities rest and celebrate
 - Adar 15: Jews in Shushan rest and celebrate

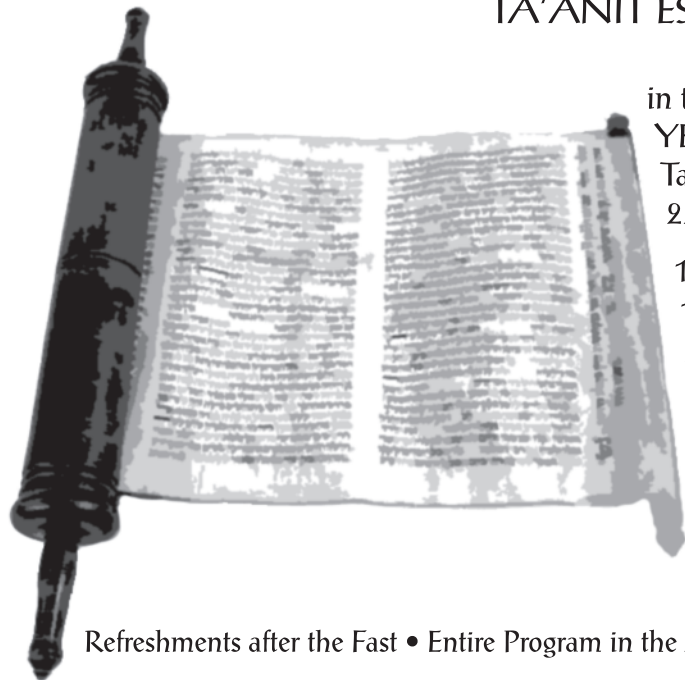
- **3406** (354 BCE)
 - Writing of the Megillah and its acceptance as part of Tanach

- **3408** (352 BCE)
 - Second Temple completed 70 years after destruction
 - The Great Assembly, Shimon HaTzaddik
 - Alexander of Macedon
 - Establishment of Prayers, End of Prophecy

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