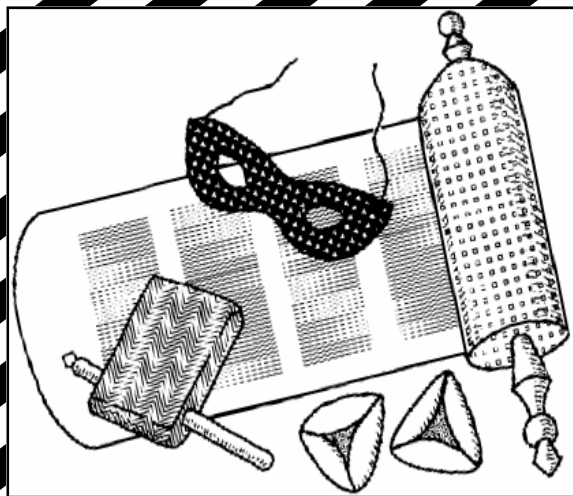


PURIM NOTES

A COMPANION TO



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Purim, the zaniest of all the Jewish holidays, is also the first holiday developed in the *Diaspora*. It is celebrated on the 14th & 15th of the Jewish month of Adar with carnivals, costumes, festive meals, and the reading of the *Megillah* (Book of Esther), which commemorates the saving of the Jewish community over 2000 years ago in Persia, by Mordechai and Esther.

Purim Notes was compiled to unlock the power of this holiday and to serve as your companion as you engage with tradition. We hope that this booklet will deepen your connections to the themes and rituals of *Purim*, and make the holiday come to life in a way that helps you ask new questions and find new layers of meaning and wisdom.

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Note: All words that are in italics and underlined will appear with a definition in the glossary found at the end of this volume.

THE ~~WHOLE~~ MEGILLAH Abridged

The Cast:

<u>Ahasuerus:</u>	The Quick-Tempered King
<u>Vashti:</u>	The Beautiful & Independent Queen
<u>Mordechai:</u>	The Righteous Jewish Hero
<u>Esther:</u>	The Courageous Jewish Heroine
<u>Haman:</u>	Evil Advisor to the King

The role of God in this performance will be attempted by several members of the cast.

On *Purim*, we read the *Megillah* (Book of Esther). The *Megillah* tells us that Esther is a beautiful Jewish orphan being raised by her uncle Mordechai in Shushan, the capital of Persia, about 2500 years ago during the exile of the Jews in Babylon. The land is ruled by King Ahasuerus, who is well-meaning, but somewhat bumbling and often drunk. The King's chief advisor is the contemptible Haman.



Ahasuerus is angered when his wife, Queen Vashti, refuses to come and 'show her beauty' to the men at his party. For this defiance, she loses her crown (and according to some readings, also her head!) and King Ahasuerus begins to search for a new wife. Esther enters the King's beauty contest, wins the contest, and marries the King. Mordechai advises Esther to conceal her Jewish identity from everyone in the court and she complies.

THE ~~WHOLE~~ MEGILLAH

Abridged

Meanwhile, back at the royal court, Haman is coercing everyone in the kingdom to bow down to him. However, Mordechai refuses, as a Jew only bows down to God. Haman, as you may well imagine, is not pleased. As punishment for Mordechai's disobedience, he decides to hang all of the Jews and draws lots to determine a date of execution.

Mordechai begs Esther to expose Haman's evil plot to Ahasuerus and save the Jews. She replies that she cannot enter the King's chambers without invitation, as doing so would threaten her own life. (She hasn't quite forgotten about the unceremonious dumping of Vashti). But when Mordechai reminds her that it could be for this very opportunity that she has risen to power, Esther finally agrees to help.

Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a feast, where Ahasuerus asks his new bride what he can give her. He even offers her half of his kingdom. Esther tells him that he can reward her by saving her people, the Jews. Ahasuerus becomes furious and makes Haman the victim of his own plot by hanging him and his sons on the very gallows that they had constructed for the Jews. Thus, the Jews save themselves, and Mordechai and Esther establish *Purim* for future generations.

THE REAL ENDING THEY NEVER TOLD YOU IN HEBREW SCHOOL

In Hebrew schools all around America, teachers and rabbis leave out the real ending of the story. The true ending is a bit more gruesome than 'Everyone lived happily ever after.' After Haman and his sons are killed, the Jewish community, along with Esther's help, goes on a military rampage to destroy all those who sought to destroy them. In the end, the Book of Esther reports that the Jews went on to kill an additional 75,000 of their 'foes.'

PURIM: THE UN-YOM KIPPUR

Not only is *Purim* the opposite of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) in terms of the calendar (one comes in the fall and one in the spring), but while Yom Kippur emphasizes denying oneself all bodily pleasure, *Purim* encourages us to eat, drink and be merry. Understanding the tension between these two holidays yields an important lesson about the Jewish approach to spirituality and holiness.

The *Zohar* (central book of Jewish mysticism) explains that on *Purim*, one may accomplish through bodily **pleasure**, what one can accomplish on Yom Kippur through bodily **affliction**. In other words, Judaism is not satisfied by saying that one can only achieve an elevated sense of spirituality through holidays and rituals of denial like Yom Kippur. Rather, Judaism requires us to have both experiences, believing that sometimes we also find spirituality in the world of pleasure, in eating, drinking and laughing.



Who's behind the Haman mask?!

According to tradition, Haman was a descendant of *Amalek*. In the *Torah*, it is stated that when the Jewish people fled Egypt, they were attacked from behind by the people of *Amalek*, who have come to be seen as the personification of all that is evil and destructive in the world. Thus, the struggle against Haman in the story of *Purim* represents the Jewish priority of fighting against that which is evil and destructive in this world.

WHAT HAPPENED TO GOD?

It is not incidental that the Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that never explicitly mentions God. In fact, the Book of Esther has no burning bushes or split seas, and can be read as a godless tale of political intrigue and suspense. Yet the Rabbis understood the *Purim* story differently. They said that God was indeed present, but rather than overtly interfering with the course of daily life, God remained hidden, orchestrating all of the events from behind the scenes.

This point is developed in rabbinic literature, in which the Rabbis connect the Book of Esther to the *Torah* itself. Towards the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, God speaks to the Jewish people about the future, saying: “And I shall surely hide My face on that day...” The Rabbis understand that this verse is actually a reference to the Book of Esther.



The Hebrew word ‘*haster*’ means ‘to hide’; ‘*haster*’ and ‘Esther’ are phonetically alike. Thus, the Rabbis see a reference to Esther in this Biblical phrase that speaks of the ‘hidden face’ of God. From this perspective, the central theme of the whole Book of Esther is that God’s presence may seem to be hidden and not obviously apparent. This means that both in the *Purim* story and in our lives, we may need to dig beneath the surface in order to discover the Divine that is all around us.

Fun Fact: The only time the word *kosher* is used in the *Torah* is in the Book of Esther.

WHAT MASKS DO YOU HIDE BEHIND?

Purim's theme of hidden identity is most evident in the creative and elaborate costumes worn during its celebration. Just as Esther concealed her Judaism from King Ahasuerus (as we just learned, the name Esther comes from the Hebrew word '*haster*,' meaning 'to hide'), and just as God is masked in the Book of Esther that we read on *Purim* (God's name is never mentioned!), we too mask our true selves for an evening of revelry.

Jewish communities often organize lavish and festive carnivals during *Purim*. These carnivals provide opportunities for people to come together, show off their costumes, and partake in the merriment of the holiday.



WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE...?

What are the benefits of concealing our identity? What does it mean to hide behind a mask and give others a false perception of who we are? Although on *Purim* we literally cover our faces, are there situations in your everyday life—at school or work, in relationships with friends or loved ones—where you also mask your true self? *Purim* is a time when we can reflect upon who we are on the inside and outside, and make sure that while we may be slightly inverted on this holiday, we are as sincere and genuine as possible in our own lives.

DRESSING UP ON PURIM: JEWISH BOYS IN SKIRTS?

The tradition of masquerading on Purim was first written down by Rabbi Judah Mintz, of Padua, Italy, in the early 16th century. Rabbi Mintz was responding to inquiries about whether or not wearing costumes on Purim was a transgression of the Torah, as it states in Deuteronomy 22:5:

A man's item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's garment; whoever does such a thing is an abhorrence unto Adonai.

This law had always been regarded as a precautionary measure for a man who might be tempted to dress up as a woman in order to get closer to other women and possibly commit adultery. But Rabbi Mintz, based on interpreters of Jewish law before him, concluded that on Purim the prohibition of 'cross-dressing' was not a legal violation since it was solely for the purpose of merrymaking. He therefore encouraged the Jews of Padua to wear their costumes and enjoy the holiday.



WANNA GET WASTED?

In almost every chapter of the *Megillah*, one character or another can be found drinking heavily at a party. In fact, the word ‘party’ (*mishteh*) appears more times in the Book of Esther than it does in all of the other books of the Bible combined! The *Megillah* concludes with Mordechai instructing the Jewish people to observe these days as “*yemei mishteh v’simcha*” (“days of drinking and rejoicing.”)

In the *Talmud*, the Rabbis explain that “It is one's duty to make oneself fragrant [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordechai.’”

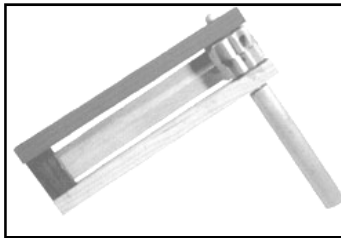


The Hebrew word used here is ‘*le-vasumei*’ and is often translated as ‘to get mellow,’ or ‘to drink.’ It has the same root as ‘*besamim*,’ the aromatic spices that we smell during *Havdalah* when the Sabbath is over.

Therefore, many interpret this to mean that as part of our *Purim* celebration, we must get drunk enough that others around us will smell the alcohol. More importantly though, we must get drunk enough to be incapable of distinguishing between the hero and the villain of the *Purim* story.

THE ORIGIN OF THE GROGGER

On Purim it is traditional to spin a toy called a grogger, or, in Israel, a ‘ra’ashan,’ during the Megillah reading. The Yiddish word grogger comes from the Polish ‘grzegarz,’ meaning ‘rattle’ or ‘noisemaker.’ Whenever the reader utters the name ‘Haman,’ we crank up our groggers to drown out the sound of his name and the name of his ancestor Amalek, who attacked Israel after the Exodus from Egypt, as the Torah states that the “memory of Amalek is to be blotted out” (Deuteronomy. 25:19) from this world.



THE GROGGER & THE DREIDEL

Did you ever notice that on both Hanukkah and Purim we find ourselves spinning toys? On Hanukkah though, we spin the dreidel from above, while on Purim we spin the grogger from below. Why?

Some say that on Hanukkah God took an active role in saving the Jewish people by causing true miracles—a small group of fighters defeated a massive army; a little bit of oil in the Temple burned for eight days when it should have only burned for one. On Purim, God is not mentioned at all; rather, the people saved themselves from annihilation—Mordechai overheard and foiled a plot to murder King Ahasuerus; Esther used her title and influence to reveal Haman’s evil ways to the King. Thus it seems that on Hanukkah, salvation came from the divine, and so we spin the dreidel from above, whereas on Purim, salvation came from ordinary people, and so we spin the grogger from below.

PURIM & SOCIAL JUSTICE

As much as it is about rejoicing, *Purim* is also about giving, both to our friends and to strangers. We read from the Book of Esther, 9:22:

*The same days on which Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief to joy and from mourning to festival, they were to observe them as days of feasting and merry-making, and as an occasion for **sending portions** and **presents to the poor**.*

Sending portions

Jews are obligated to send “portions” to one another called ‘*mishloach manot*.’ These often take the form of festive gift baskets, filled with at least two ready-to-eat food items, and they are delivered to friends and strangers on the day of *Purim*.



Presents to the poor

Jews are also obligated to send “presents to the poor” called ‘*matanot l’evyonim*.’ Traditionally, every Jew is responsible for giving at least two gifts to at least two poor people. Gifts usually consist of food or money.

Further reasons for giving...

Poor people who cannot afford to prepare a feast on *Purim* may be too proud to seek assistance, and therefore the food they receive from strangers ensures that they will be able to enjoy at least one meal on the holiday.

PURIM & SOCIAL JUSTICE

Judaism teaches that social justice should be an integral component of our daily lives, holidays included. As much as we are commanded to rejoice on Purim, we cannot do this without recognizing the suffering that happens in the world, and without doing our part to alleviate that suffering.



In the Book of Esther, Esther and Vashti both were rendered defenseless largely because of their gender status—Vashti when she refused to strut her stuff for her husband King Ahasuerus and subsequently lost her crown, and Esther as the King’s new subordinate ‘trophy’ wife—but both found the courage to stand up for themselves in the face of great danger. Thus Purim alerts us to fight for gender equality and not let women fall victim to abuse or prejudice.



Also in the Book of Esther, Haman plotted to destroy the Jewish people because they refused to bow down to him. Thus Purim calls upon us to advocate for civil rights like freedom of religion and speech, as well as to battle discrimination against nations and ethnicities.

Purim reminds us that things are not what they seem; although we may enjoy peace and prosperity in our own lives, much of the world is not as fortunate.

UNMASKING THE PURIM HEROES

Were Mordechai and Esther assimilated Jews?

Today, Purim is a quintessential Jewish holiday. To every little boy and girl who masquerades on Purim, Mordechai and Esther are arch-heroes of Jewishness. But a good case can be made that Mordechai and Esther, too, may have been quite integrated in Persian life and that Purim is the holiday brought to you by assimilated Jews.



What kind of Jews were Mordechai and Esther? First, there is the matter of their names. Esther's name probably is derived from Ishtar, a Babylonian goddess, and Mordechai's name from Marduk, a Babylonian god. Equivalent names today might well be Mary and Christopher. Of course, committed Jews in open societies also adopted gentile names. My parents, Orthodox Jews, wanted an Anglo-Saxon name for their little son, Yitzchak, so they named me Irving. But Christopher!

Then there is that Miss Persia contest. Esther was entered into a competition to become queen by marrying a gentile king. Imagine that the president of the United States gets divorced and there is a nationwide beauty contest whose prize is marriage to the president. From this we can infer that Esther was a Jewish woman with strong connections to the non-Jewish world.

The Megillah tells us that, at Mordechai's instruction, Esther did not reveal her people or her origins while she lived at the king's court. What did she eat? How did she celebrate the Sabbath? The Rabbis of the Talmud recognized the problem, and while some claim Esther had secret arrangements to keep the Sabbath and kosher food laws, others conclude that she did not act very Jewishly.

UNMASKING THE PURIM HEROES

Adaptation was the key to a Jew's ability to rise, and often it was the price of admission. Thus, the 'court Jews' (to whom the community turned, over the later course of Jewish history, to intercede with the ruling powers when Jews were in trouble) were typically half-gentile in their ways of living. When Mordechai asked Esther to plead with the king, she vacillated at first—just the reaction one would expect from a marginal Jew who was reluctant to lose her place in society.

Mordechai did stand up to Haman, but his refusal to bow does not make him a traditional Jew. 'Non-Jewish Jews' such as Spinoza, Freud, and Marx used their outsider status as a source of creative insight to become critics of the Establishment. It is equally plausible that—like Leon Blum of France and Benjamin Disraeli of England, whose marginal Jewishness led them to work for a new political order—Mordechai also opposed Haman's emerging tyranny.



Mordechai and, after some initial hesitation, Esther responded not only by defending their principles but by reaching out to all Jews and rallying the community to self-defense and self-affirmation. They saved the Jewish people and wrote a glorious page in Jewish history.

The above analysis is deliberately provocative, even overstated. The evidence points to Mordechai's and Esther's being devoted Jews—usually it takes that type to risk their lives to save their people.

The point of this exercise is to underscore one of the deep lessons of *Purim*: never write off assimilated Jews. They come out of the historical closet in the greatest crises and when they are least expected. (Adapted from Rabbi Irving Greenberg)

THE PURIM SCHPIEL

Sarcastic, humorous, and iconoclastic entertainment has become a universal component of the *Purim* celebration. Although written evidence of the *Purim schpiel* (Yiddish for play) exists in Europe only from the 14th century, *Purim* entertainment is likely of ancient origin as well.

A *Purim schpiel* is actually a dramatic presentation of the events outlined in the Book of Esther. In relatively modern times, the *Purim schpiel* has evolved into the presentation of humorous skits not just about the story of *Purim*, but also about leaders and well-known people in the community. The *Purim schpiel* often takes a look at politics as well, with various global figures playing the roles of heroes and villains. By offering a sardonic commentary, the *Purim schpiel* presents a Jewish version of political justice in the world.



The biting content of *Purim schpiels*, commonly bordering on erotic and profane, and the socializing, ridicule, dressing up, and carousing surrounding them provide an important forum for boundary-crossing on issues of gender, sexuality, authority, and relations with the non-Jewish world. Through satires of the original story in the Book of Esther, *Purim schpiels* provide an essential and fixed measure of creative release exploring some of the Jewish community's most heated topics.

(Adapted from www.myjewishlearning.com)

SING A SONG OF PURIM

Hag Purim

The holiday of Purim is a great day for the Jews!	Hag Purim, hag Purim Hag gadol layehudim
There are masks, noisemakers, singing and dancing!	Masekhot, raáshanim, Shirím ve-rikudim
Come, let's raise the roof with our noisemakers!	Hava-nar'isha rash, rash, rash Ba-ra'ashanim
On the holiday of Purim we send one another presents:	Hag Purim, hag Purim Ze leze sholchim manot:
Tasty foods, sweets, pastries and confections.	Mata'amim, m'tookim, Oogot v'ma'adanim
Come let's raise the roof with our noisemakers!	Hava-nar'isha rash, rash, rash Ba-ra'ashanim

Questions for Consideration:

Did you know that at the time of *Purim*, Jews were living both in Persia and in Israel? The community living in Persia was so wealthy and comfortable, they chose to stay in *Diaspora* and not move back to Israel. Is this information relevant to Jews living in America today? How does the *Purim* story portray the *Diaspora* community? How does the *Diaspora* community pictured here resemble or differ from our own?

HAMENTASCHEN RECIPE

Hamentaschen mean ‘Haman’s hats’ and are the triangle-shaped cookie that Jews eat during Purim time.

Ingredients:

- 2/3 cup butter or margarine
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup orange juice (no pulp)
- 1 cup white flour
- 1 cup wheat flour
- Various preserves, fruit butters and/or pie fillings.



Blend butter and sugar thoroughly. Add the egg and blend thoroughly. Add OJ and blend thoroughly. Add flour, 1/2 cup at a time, alternating white and wheat, blending thoroughly between each.

Refrigerate batter overnight or at least a few hours. Roll as thin as you can without getting holes in the batter (roll it between two sheets of wax paper lightly dusted with flour for best results).

Cut out 3 or 4 inch circles. Put a tablespoon of filling in the middle of each circle. Fold up the sides to make a triangle, overlapping the sides as much as possible so only a little filling shows through the middle.

Squeeze the corners firmly, so they don't come undone while baking. Bake at 375 degrees for about 10-15 minutes, until golden brown but before the filling boils over!

Traditional fillings are poppy seed, prune, apple butter, pineapple, apricot preserves, and cherry pie filling.

GLOSSARY

Adar: The 5th month of the Jewish lunar calendar year.

Amalek: A nation that attacked the Israelites in the desert when they were fleeing their captivity in Egypt; seen as the embodiment of evil in the world.

Diaspora: The dispersion of Jews outside the land of Israel.

Dreidel: A spinning top that is used for games during Hanukkah.

Grogger: Yiddish for ‘rattle’. It is the noisemaker used whenever Haman’s name is mentioned during the ritual reading of the Book of Esther on *Purim*.

Hanukkah: A Jewish holiday that usually occurs in December that commemorates the rededication of the Temple by Judah Maccabee.

Havdalah: The ceremony that marks the end of the Sabbath on Saturday night; it includes blessings over wine, spice and fire.

Kosher: A term literally meaning ‘fit’ or ‘appropriate’ which refers to food that may be eaten according to Jewish law.

Megillah: Literally, ‘scroll’; refers to the Book of Esther.

Purim: From the Persian/Hebrew word ‘*pur*’, which means ‘lot’. Haman drew lots to determine a day for the execution of the Jews.

Talmud: Primary text of Jewish law, containing a wide array of rabbinic teachings.

Torah: Five Books of Moses; the first five books of the Hebrew Scripture known as the *Tanach*.

Zohar: The most central work of the Jewish mystical tradition, dating from the late 12th century.

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