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### Purim: Origins, Traditions, and Meaning

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton

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### Purim: Origins, Traditions, and Meaning

Judaism is a complex religion to which other traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, owe much credit for its influence on their histories. One thing that sets Judaism apart from, for instance, Christianity, is its high esteem of various holy days, festivals, rituals, and other related events. While Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter have become commercialized and are widely celebrated even among nonbelievers, Jewish holidays have maintained their position in Jewish culture as something unique and special to that people group. While a criticism of Judaism may be its leaning toward legalism, their intense worship of their God through their various traditions is admirable. Additionally, the outsider will find that Jewish holidays are not always solemn or serious. For instance, Purim is known as the most joyous and celebratory of all of the Jewish holidays. Despite its uncertain origin, it has a rich history in scripture and has greatly impacted Jewish culture in the areas of food, clothing, the performing and visual arts, and even the use of money.

To begin, Purim is typically celebrated over the course of two or three days during the Jewish month of Adar, which falls roughly around March. The 13th day of the month is the Fast of Esther, the 14th day is Purim, and the 15th day is known as the Purim of Susa or the Shushan Purim (Schauss 237). The holiday celebrates deliverance of the Jews, particularly the deliverance of the Jews from the hands of Haman, the antagonist in the book of Esther of the Jewish *Tanakh* or the Christian Old Testament. In fact, the book of Esther provides the foundation of the entire

holiday of Purim. This stands in contrast to other Jewish holidays, such as Pesach, Shavuot, Tishoh B'Ov, and Sukkot, which borrow from Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes, respectively, but are not dependent on these books for their existence.

In order to understand Purim, one must understand the story of Esther. The book of Esther takes place near Babylon in Persia, specifically in the Elamite capital of Susa during Jewish captivity (Hill and Walton 346). The story begins with King Ahasuerus's dissatisfaction with his wife, Queen Vashti, for disobeying him. He seeks a new wife, holding a pageant of sorts to pick one. Esther was included among the women of the pageant. She hid her Jewish identity, as it would prevent her from marrying this Babylonian king and may also result in her murder. Her beauty caused her to be chosen as queen, and it is through this position of influence over King Ahasuerus that Esther is able to save the Jews. Essentially, a vizier of the king, Haman, desires to exterminate the people group, and, when Esther's uncle, Mordecai, finds out, he is able to tell Esther and request her help. From there, she wins favor with the king and informs him of Haman's devious plan, requesting that the Jews are spared at the risk of her life. The king obliges and her people are saved while Haman, in turn, is the one killed for his murderous actions.

To provide additional context, it is noteworthy that Esther never mentions the name of God (Schauss 239). Rather, it is a story alluding to his work behind the scenes. Further, it appears to be taking place in the fifth or fourth century BC, although there is debate as to when it was written. Some would say that it was written centuries later, as the earliest known manuscripts are from well into the AD period. On the other hand, the detail and type of content included as well as the language with which Esther was written would place it as early as previously suggested, or, at the latest, in the second century BC (Hill and Walton 346).

While the story of Esther is indeed inspiring, there is a lot of controversy not only regarding the date of its writing, but also over the historicity of the book, its origins, and the origin of Purim alongside it. First, Esther is debatable in the reality of its events. It is certainly no debate that the book has historical origins, as the author is clearly intentional about verifying facts of the story (Hill and Walton 350). For instance, he or she details complex aspects of the court system and government as well as referencing specific court records for the audience to analyze. However, Esther is also different from other historical books in that it does have an incredibly detailed narrative that reads as an entertaining story (Hill and Walton 351). Even so, Esther being written in the form of a narrative does not necessitate that it is not historical. Many scholars would have it that, even though Ahasuerus may be identified as Xerxes, given the inability of some characters, like Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti, to be located in any other record or literature, the book must simply be a story (Hill and Walton 350). Moreover, one scholar argues that the timeline given in Esther would unrealistically place Mordecai at over 112 years old at the time of these events, that the system used for choosing wives is not an accurate portrayal of history, and that the origins of some of the words used in the book (such as the *pur* of Purim) are not found in any known language (Gaster 4).

The confusing history of Esther is intertwined with that of Purim. Essentially, it is unknown whether Esther brought forth the celebration of Purim, or if Esther was written for a pre existing festival which became Judaized into the Purim recognized today. There are many theories as to its origin. First, it is likely that Babylonian mythology is woven throughout the book of Esther given its context as well as the characters' names resembling those of Babylonian gods (Schauss 238). Specifically, a Babylonian tale called Farwadigan details the working of Queen Istar to save the people of Marduk from certain destruction by the people of Baga, an

event which was celebrated during Adar (Gaster 10). Otherwise, it may have developed with another pagan nation or culture before becoming Judaized (Gaster 4). Some say the later chapters of Esther were written after Purim was adopted to justify using a pagan holiday in Jewish tradition (Gaster 353). The earliest mention of Purim outside of Esther is the 1st century BC and there is no information on it prior in the Bible (Gaster 6). While this creates quite an issue, additional theories of the source of its conception prevail. Some scholars believe it may have been associated with the victory of Judah the Maccabe over General Nicanor on the 13th day of Adar in 161 BC, which is celebrated in Greek tradition (Gaster 7). However, despite the shared date with the Fast of Esther, there is no cultural relationship between this event and Judaism, there are no female characters to relate to Esther, and this theory does not explain the Babylonian origin of Esther. Purim may also originate with the Babylonian New Year festival, but this is celebrated in Nisan, not Adar, and is all about unrelated Elamite gods (Gaster 8-9). The last common theory is that textual errors in the Septuagint led to the name Purim from the Persian All Souls festival (Gaster 9). The issue with this is that it places a lot of weight on a simple translation error, and the holiday itself has little to no relation to the events described in Esther. Of course, if Esther is historical and not a narrative, it is perfectly reasonable to believe that Purim did originate with the book and is an original Jewish holiday (Hill and Walton 353).

Regardless of the veracity of all of the aspects of Esther, it is a reliable book that may have intentionally been written as a parable or historical fiction even if it did not actually happen. Overall, the themes and ideas throughout Esther are clear, and these themes are what has caused Purim to become as beloved a tradition as it has. First and foremost, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai has come to represent the greater controversy between the Jewish nations and all opposing forces that have sought to destroy it over the years (Schauss 240). Purim itself is

entrenched in a culture taken by stories of this constant battle and subsequent deliverance from it. For instance, the Hasmonean period which saw the writing of Esther in Persia and the beginning of Purim also saw the books of Judith and 3 Maccabees written in Palestine and Alexandria, respectively, bringing about Hanukkah and Nicanor Day (Schauss 253). In the case of Judith, Judith was favored by Nebuchadnezzar's general Holofernes, who was going to destroy Palestine and the newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Schauss 241). She then beheaded him after luring him away (Schauss 242). In 3 Maccabees, Nicanor is defeated by Judah of Maccabee before he can harm the Jews, and is then beheaded by the people group (Schauss 248). Given the popularity of these stories, which all detail the Jews being delivered from certain death by an individual, it is not unlikely that the themes celebrated in Purim were already at play before Esther was written (Schauss 250). In fact, it is theorized that early Jewish leaders opposed Purim given pagan roots before it was associated with scripture (Schauss 251). It may also have been politicized as a rival holiday by the Hasmoneans with Nicanor Day, supported by the Pharisees (Schauss 252). Even so, Purim was first called Mordecai Day in celebration of Mordecai's leadership during the time (Schauss 251). As it evolved, it quickly surpassed the aforementioned Hanukkah and Nicanor Day as the most joyous and beloved holiday of deliverance (Schauss 253). Purim is one of the only, if not the only, Jewish holiday that is not severely religious and solemn. Rather, it allows the Jewish people to celebrate in glee the more light-hearted aspects of life.

Aside from the joy it brings to the Jewish community, the themes of deliverance throughout Esther and Purim continue. Purim is a bold statement that Jews will continue strong and rejoice. One scholar states that, "Purim will not die as long as prejudice and hatred of the Jew exist anywhere in the world" (Schauss 255). Purim stands out for many reasons. It is unique when compared to events like Hanukkah in that it is actually commanded in scripture while

Hanukkah is not (Klein 232). Further, it gained popularity because of its representation of antisemitism in the character of Haman. This celebration unites the Jews and encourages them to stand strong in their faith against those who seek to destroy them (Klein 232-233). Such a theme is continued from the tradition of animosity with Amalek, as Haman is believed to be a descendant of Amalek (Klein 233). The failure of both Amalek and Haman to destroy the Jews is celebrated. Even verses discussing the sons of Haman in Esther are believed to signify that his entire bloodline died with him (Klein 235). Ultimately, Purim exists to display that Jews ought not despair even in the worst circumstances, but can have joy (Klein 240). Jewish holidays often came into being to address current events, and Purim did just that, creating a culture of joy amidst tribulation (Schauss 253).

Even among smaller communities and families, Purim can be celebrated in a more personal way. The name Purim signifies Jewish deliverance. Purim means “lots,” commemorating the fact that Haman chose the day to destroy the Jews by lot (Gaster 3). Thus, special purims may be celebrated among small groups when a personal disaster is averted (Schauss 255). The most well-known special purim happened in Egypt in 1524 when a local governor rose up against the sultan. The Jews remained faithful to the sultan and, when the governor threatened the Jews with eradication, an uprising overthrew his efforts. The community now celebrates a purim on the 28th of Adar, when the governor was beheaded. Similarly, the Wintz Purim of 1614 celebrates the arrest of Wintz Hans Fettmilch and his followers. Fettmilch was a leader of a movement against the Jews, invading the Jewish ghetto with intention to destroy it (Schauss 256). He and his followers were arrested, and a purim is now celebrated on the 20th of Adar, the day they were sentenced. Finally, a famous family purim was the Gunpowder Purim of 1804 in which an explosion in eastern Europe killed 31 people on the 15th

of Kislev, but everyone in the Danzig family survived, leading to a purim celebrated on that day within that family.

Really, the origin with Purim is uncertain, and no perfect theory can be made (Schauss 252). Regardless, Purim, known as a “spring masquerade, a festival of play and frolic, merriment and mischief, abandon and wine-drinking” has always been popular among Jews (Schauss 250). It is at this point that various traditions associated with Purim can be discussed, beginning with food. The Fast of Esther, celebrated on the 13th day of Adar, replaces Nicanor Day as a major holiday and serves as a preparation for Purim, encouraging reverence for it (Schauss 266). The Fast of Esther is not always recognized despite being the day before Purim and significant to the story of Esther (Klein 233). While other festivities occur during this day and will be explained later, the aspect of fasting is typically only practiced by Persian Jews with great care, particularly given their proximity to Esther’s Babylonian and Persian setting in space and time (Schauss 258). They fast with as much devotion as one would on Yom Kippur. Even those who are sick fast on this day. However, the Jews of Eastern Europe generally do not partake in this at all (Schauss 260). For them, while the Persian Jews never knew of Nicanor Day, it was celebrated before the Fast of Esther came into being, resulting in a lesser esteem for strict practice (Schauss 267). The day is still celebrated and activities for Purim are still done, but fasting is not a central aspect of it. These Jews may rely on four public fasts held throughout the year to practice that discipline (Klein 233). In fact, whether a fast is undergone or not, Purim is primarily about joy, festivity, and merriment. As a result, feasting is one of the most central aspects of the holiday, which is, after all, also known as the *feast* of lots. For Jewish communities, the time preceding Purim is spent preparing sweets and desserts for the festival (Schauss 257). It is said that Purim comes second only to the seder dinner of the Passover in being the most major meal and family



reunion in Jewish tradition, comparing to the American Thanksgiving dinner (Gaster 57). For S'fardim Jews, an afternoon service is held on Purim with a feast for neighbors and friends to gather together with various delicacies in tow (Schauss 257). In Eastern Europe, the feast is after evening prayers, and the feasting continues onto the following day, which is the Shushan Purim, sometimes referred to as the Day of Joy, as families exclusively eat leftovers from the event called Purim crumbs (Schauss 262). The children even get an additional day off of school for this! Finally, this food is often shared among communities, as *shalach-manot*, sharing food with others, is a part of almost every festival in Jewish tradition (Schauss 267).

While food is clearly significant to Purim as a whole, there are specific dishes found in association with Purim. Most famous is *hamantaschen*, which means something like “Haman’s pouch” (Gaster 57). *Hamantaschen* is a German dessert, originally called *mohn-taschen*, meaning “poppy seed pouch” before the Jewish community adopted it and inserted the pun (Schauss 270). As it was originally named, *hamantaschen* is usually baked with poppy seed and is described as a three-corned cake (Schauss 260). The three corners hold some significance, as legend has it that Haman wore a three-cornered hat (Schauss 270). Further, the three corners sometimes celebrate the three patriarchs. *Hamantaschen* is considered the only special food of Purim, as it is as inseparable from Purim as *Matzah* is from Passover (Gaster 58, Klein 239). While this dessert is sometimes called “Haman’s ears,” *kreplach* is a similar food given the same name. *Kreplach*, like *hamantaschen*, is a three-cornered pastry of sorts, but it is filled with meat (Schauss 260). Once again, it is of German origin, and it is normally eaten whenever beating occurs (Schauss 270). For instance, it is also eaten during Yom Kippur when men are flogged, during Hoshano Rabbo when willow branches are beaten, and then here where Haman is beaten. The beating of Haman dolls is thought to originate with writing his name on stones and rubbing

it off, and has since erupted into multitudinous ways to disgrace his memory (Schauss 265). In addition to *kreplach*, beans are typically eaten more than other dishes during Purim, as it is said that Esther, wishing to maintain Kosher, could not eat anything but beans and peas in the king's court (Schauss 271). Salted beans, then, are often called *bab* or *bab-belech*. Other typical dishes include *krupfen* or Berlin pancakes, which are like jelly-filled doughnuts, and *roskas* or *bourekas*, which are crescent-shaped cakes (Gaster 58). Drinking is frequent too, and, for S'fardim Jews, Purim brings a lot of wine and brandy to the community (Schauss 257).

While food is one of the most important festivities during Purim, arts like music are significant too. There is not specific music for Purim, per say, but there is lots of chanting, singing, reading of poetry, and even simply noise-making that occurs. To address the lattermost of the list, noise-making stands before all other auditory traditions as the most recognizable facets of Purim. As will be later discussed, readings of the book of Esther are conducted from a scroll, called the *Megillah*. It is during these readings that Jews stamp their feet, which the S'fardim are known for, that Jews make tin and wooden noisemakers, which the East Europeans are known for, and that Jews shoot off fireworks, which the Persians are known for (Schauss 257-258, 260). All of these traditions and many more are a part of the greater goal of cursing Haman. Every time Haman's name is mentioned in the reading of Esther, people stomp, scream, shout, beat their fists on walls, whirl around noisemakers, and shoot off fireworks so that his name can be heard (Schauss 258). In most Jewish communities, the noise is deafening, signifying nothing but rage against Haman. The noisemakers even have names, often being called *klappers* or *greggers* (Gaster 49). This is thought to have originated with a pagan festival of nature, which said that noise deterred evil spirits seeking mischief (Schauss 264). In addition to the hatred of Haman, Persian Jews have Purim songs, and in multiple sects of Jews there is a

lot of dancing, singing, and clapping involved in festivities (Schauss 257-258). These events often take place both on the Fast of Esther and the actual day of Purim (Schauss 262). Readings are chanted to a traditional melody, and, often as various blessings and poems are recited by the gathered community, the goal is, once again, to create deafening noise (Gaster 49-50). The blessings often read tend to jump back and forth between blessing the protagonists of Esther and cursing the antagonists. The joyous cheers and the hateful jeers should be so loud that blessings and curses are indistinguishable from one another (Gaster 51). Finally, children often go door to door like carolers during Christmas time singing for money for themselves (Gaster 59).

Children singing for money actually is not the only door to door event that occurs. Purim features a surprising large amount of theatrical events and drama to add to its rich host of traditions. On the aforementioned Day of Joy, for instance, Eastern European Jews go from one household in the community to another to reenact the story of Esther (Schauss 262). All the actors are men despite women being central to the story, and there are usually costumes of fake beards, paper crowns, and wooden swords used to play various characters. In some communities, there is a phenomenon known as a Purim-Rabbi, which is a popular jokester in the group who is chosen to provide satire on any topic he likes and even roast the real Rabbi (Schauss 269)! In addition to these fun, light-hearted traditions, the plays and dramas of Purim seem to be taken very seriously, although they are still silly and relaxed. There are entire lists of plays that have been written for the sole purpose of performance during Purim. For instance, one example is “The Debate Between the Wise Man and the Fool” in which the man and the fool argue about who is greater until they reach a compromise and share their wisdom and riches with one another (Gaster 60). Most of the plays, however, are centered around dramatically retelling stories from throughout the *Tanakh* (Gaster 68). Most popular, of course, are stories from Esther. One such

play is called *Achashverosh Spil*, which means Ahasuerus Play, and is a reenactment of the story of Ahasuerus.

Finally, among the realm of art, there are many arts and crafts that the Jewish community produces during Purim. The aforementioned noisemakers may be considered among these, but most prevalent are little dolls intended to be Haman. In Persia, in particular, children spend the days preceding Purim sewing together a doll stuffed with straw (Schauss 258). The fate of these dolls is bleak, as they are usually hung or burned on Purim. For instance, it is common practice for the dolls to be stuck on a pole in the center of town, doused in oil, and then set on fire as children chant, "Haman, the wicked," over and over (Schauss 259).

Clothing is surprisingly a large part of Purim as well. First of all, as a holiday of joy and merriment, clothing worn is always bright and colorful, even to the point of being gaudy and overwhelming (Gaster 51). During the Fast of Esther and Purim, Jews go to the synagogue decked out in festive clothing (Schauss 257). In some communities, if festive clothing is not worn, wearing regular weekday clothes is normal, and no formal dress is required (Schauss 261). Purim is also known as a masquerade, and whatever clothing is not colorful is usually a costume. Both children and adults masquerade in various communities. Men might wear their coats inside out or carry random objects like brooms (Schauss 257). Children, on the other hand, go as far as to paint their faces. These masquerades are likely original to Purim rather than borrowed from similar events, such as the Christian Carnival, potentially originating with a pagan belief that the masks served as safeguards against evil spirits (Schauss 268). The tradition today may reference Esther's need to hide her own Jewish identity, and costumes are comparable to that of Halloween. It is usual to dress as one of the heroes of the story like Esther or Mordecai, or to wear secular costumes of positive characters or themes. Lastly, clothing is involved with Purim

in one other notable way. Whatever shoes are being worn, it is common to write Haman's name in chalk on the sole of the shoe just so that Haman's name is trampled underfoot (Gaster 54).

The way money is used during Purim is also significant, and there are a handful of traditions centered around giving. In almost every community, there is some sort of recognition of the original tax Jews were to pay to the temple (Schauss 257). Essentially, in reference to the half-shekel temple tax, Jews are to donate a coin to charity. The S'fardim Jews set aside their coin on the Fast of Esther to give the next day. In Eastern Europe, Jews are expected to give three coins while saying "half-shekel" three times (Schauss 261). Oftentimes, if an individual is too poor to contribute, the leaders in the synagogue will give him the coins to then donate back to them. In some traditions, there are three separate plates for giving, each representing a different thing (Gaster 49). The first plate is for giving alms for the poor, the second is for the maintenance of buildings and events in the community, and the third is to purchase earth from Palestine, considered sacred, to be buried with the dead. Even the scroll used to read Esther, the *Megillah*, is sold so that proceeds may be given to charity. Now, money is not just involved in giving, but children are also gifted money for Purim (Schauss 258).

In the end, what is truly the most significant aspect of Purim is its foundation in scripture. The Jews recognize this in many ways, primarily through readings of Esther throughout Purim and the weeks surrounding it. In Persia, for instance, there is devout study of Esther by the community in the weeks preceding Purim (Schauss 257). Children and teenagers are very involved, and they are to transcribe the book of Esther for Purim. Usually, in all communities, the Sabbath before Purim is highly significant. It is sometimes called a Sabbath Zachor, or Sabbath of Remembrance, in which poetry and scripture is read in preparation for Purim (Gaster 79). Sometimes, this Sabbath is far more exciting and lively than usual, with sermons given to

capture the festive spirit of the holiday (Schauss 258). In fact, the two Sabbaths before Purim, or sometimes after, are continually used for celebration of Purim (Schauss 265). Usually, the book of Esther is read on the Fast of Esther and on Purim itself, and is followed by readings of various poems and blessings (Schauss 264). Three blessings usually read are a praise to God for commanding the reading, a praise to God for the miracles he worked in Esther, and the reading of a customary benediction which reads as follows, “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the world who has kept us in life and preserved us and enabled us to reach this season” (Gaster 49). It does not have to be read by a Rabbi, but often is read by someone of high esteem within the community. It also must be read from the *Megillah*, which is the book of Esther written out on a scroll with a quill just like other scrolls from the *Tanakh* would have been written (Klein 234). Additionally, it is best to read it in Hebrew rather than any other language. Also unique is that women are required to be at these readings given the fact that Esther is about a woman who played a key role in the deliverance of the Jews (Gaster 55). Also of note is the fact that there are often readings from other passages, like from 1 or 2 Samuel, to capture the animosity between the Jews and Amalek, the supposed forefather of Haman (Schauss 260).

Overall, Purim is unique and exciting, standing out among other Jewish traditions for being fun and frivolous. For instance, there are no religious rituals or ceremonies involved other than the reading of scripture (Schauss 264). Further, while there is a command to celebrate Purim in the book of Esther, no specific rules are given. While many of the traditions may have begun as a result of Esther being written, many of them may have also come from preexisting pagan holidays. Either way, the holiday is all about the deliverance of the Jews from their enemies, celebrated with feasting, the exchanging of gifts, and revelry.

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