

Some Thoughts on Purim

Notes by Tim Hegg

Purim (פורים), meaning “lots,” celebrates the victory which God gave to the Jews when it appeared that Haman, an evil officer in the Persian court, had gained the authority to attempt their mass destruction. The book of Esther is the biblical account, and lays the basis for the yearly festival.

At the end of the book of Esther, after summarizing the events which had taken place, the following is found:

Therefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. And because of the instructions in this letter, both what they had seen in this regard and what had happened to them, the Jews established and made a custom for themselves, and for their descendants, and for all those who allied themselves with them, so that they should not fail to celebrate these two days according to their regulation, and according to their appointed time annually. So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews, or their memory fade from their descendants. (9:26-28)

The two days referred to are explained in the biblical account: the rural Jews celebrated on the 14th of Adar, while the Jews living in Susa (the capital city of Persia) celebrated on the 15th of Adar. Some orthodox communities still make this distinction between those living in unwalled cities, and those living in walled cities, but generally everyone celebrates Purim on the 14th of Adar.

There are four mitzvot (commandments) connected with the festival of Purim by the ancient Rabbis: 1) reading the story of Esther (called Megilah Esther, מגילת אֶסְתֵּר, “scroll”), 2) engaging in festivity and rejoicing, 3) giving/sending gifts to one another, 4) giving/sending gifts to the poor.

These mitzvot or obligations have been carried out in various ways throughout the centuries of Jewish history. Because of the requirement to read the story of Esther, it became tradition to write the biblical book on its own, small scroll and to refer to it as *Megillat Ester*, “the Esther Scroll.” Many of these were decorated with ornate initial capitals and other decorative art and are treasured as art pieces.

One tradition when listening to Esther being read is to drown out the name of Haman whenever it is read with noise and “booing,” etc. This is based upon the commandment of Deut 25:

17 “Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt,
18 how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.
19 “Therefore it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget.

Since Haman is an Amalekite (on the connection to Agag, king of the Amalekites—cf. Esther 3:1), the fulfilling of this commandment to “remember to blot out the name of Amalek” is fulfilled by blotting out the name of Haman when the story is read.

Special noise makers, called “groggers” are made for this purpose. They are a weighted stick on a handle that, when rotated, causes a gear to snap a noise-making stick, creating a ratcheting sound. But any noise-maker, including one’s voice, can be used to drown out the name of the enemy, Haman.

The festivity and rejoicing is carried out in a traditional meal on the afternoon of the 14th in which there are often skits and songs of a festive nature. Many congregations begin their festivities on the evening which begins the 14th, reading the *Megilah*, eating together, and encouraging the children to dress up and come prepared for games, skits, and whatever seems appropriate for a party. It is common to see carnival type games for the kids to produce the festive atmosphere.

A Talmudic note (b.*Megilot* 7b) indicates that from the standpoint of some of the sages “it is the obliga-

tion of each person to be so drunk [on Purim] as not to be able to tell the difference between ‘Blessed be Mordechai’ and ‘Cursed by Haman.’” This was, of course, greatly disputed by other Sages and variously interpreted, but all came to realize that such a statement was obviously an exaggeration and simply tried to emphasize the festive nature of the day. The point of the Talmudic injunction was that each person should give in to honest celebration and festivities. But being drunk is something in which fools engage. The point is simply that those who would otherwise not be inclined to “party” should give way to the festive nature of the day.

The giving of gifts to each other (מְשֻׁלוֹחַ מָנוֹת, *mishloach manot*) and giving gifts to the poor (מַתָּנוֹת לְאֶבְיוֹנִים, *mattanot le‘evyonim*) are carried out individually or family to family.

Traditional foods are: Hamentaschen (three-sided cookies); *suf goniot* (light, fluffy donuts); other sweets

Some Background on the Book of Esther

1. The inclusion of the book as part of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture was disputed, primarily because:
 - the Divine Name is not found in the book, and thus it’s sacred nature was questioned (Persian king mentioned 190 times in 167 verses; God as King not mentioned once by name!)
 - Esther marries a non-Jew, which was forbidden in the Torah
 - She is known by a pagan name (Esther probably is derived from *Ishtar*, Babylonian goddess)
 - Esther appears to engage in other non-Torah activities: eating non-kosher food; inability to live as a Jewish woman; etc.
 - the “drink feasts” described in the book seem out of place from a Jewish perspective
 - Esther could be viewed as living as a non-Jew (she hides her identity until the end of the story)
 - the Book of Esther adds a festival not mentioned in the Torah (prophets cannot create new *halachah*)
 - Note expansions in other versions, particularly the Lxx (Septuagint) recensions
 - Note that no evidence of the book of Esther is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls: calendar issues
 - early Christian fathers opposed to it because they described it as “judiazing” (cf. 8:17)
 - ultimately, however, it was recognized as inspired history, and included in the Canon
2. Esther = Hadassah (myrtle)
Xerxes = Ahasuerus (486-465 BCE)
Mordecai - name related to Marduk (?)

Meaning

1. God can use even someone who may appear as insignificant to accomplish great things, if that person is willing to dedicate himself or herself to God
2. God is faithful to His people, Israel. He miraculously guards them and maintains His promises to them.
3. Prayer is powerful: Esther calls for a fast, and the result is ultimate victory for her people.
4. The enemies of Israel will inevitably fail. The promise to Abraham remains intact.
5. The haughty will be destroyed; the humble will be exalted.
6. In the end, faith always “wins the day.”
7. God works in ways we often cannot imagine. What He requires of us is humble obedience and trust in Him.
8. We exist because of God’s favor, not because of our own goodness.