

Observing Purim

Introduction

Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction in the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I, as recorded in the Book of Esther. Held on the 14th and 15th days of the Jewish month of Adar, it is celebrated by feasting and merriment, almsgiving, sending food to neighbors and friends, and chanting the text of Esther. Although this is not a time appointed by God for remembrance, it is perhaps the most joyous day of the Jewish year, with masquerades, plays, and drinking of wine even in the synagogue.

In 2015, Purim is celebrated on March 5th & 6th.

Setting

The story of Esther takes place in Sushan, an ancient royal city of the Persian Empire, approximately 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf in modern Iran. It is the traditional burial site of the prophet Daniel. The events took place in approximately 465 BCE after the Jewish people were allowed to return to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity by King Cyrus.

Significance for Today

The Book of Esther is a story of teamwork that shaped a nation and a study of survival of God's chosen people. The relationship of Esther and Mordecai vividly portrays the unity that Yeshua prayed for His disciples to experience. The success of their individual roles, even their very survival, depended upon their unity.

The Book of Esther reminds us that God destroys those who try to harm His people. From this we are reminded that He is faithful to destroy HaSatan and that His sovereign purposes ultimately prevail.

The Book of Esther has been called the 'secular' book of the Bible. It is the only book that does not mention or even allude to God. However, His imprint is obvious throughout. Esther's spiritual maturity is seen in her knowing to wait for God's timing to make her request to save her people and denounce Haman. Mordecai also demonstrates maturity in seeking God's timing and direction for the right time to have Esther disclose her identity as a Jew.

As we have been learning as we discover the Jewish roots of our faith, having a firm foundation of the Tanakh opens the Brit Hadashah up to a deeper understanding of our faith.

Jewish Observance of Purim

1. **Listen To the Megillah:** To relive the miraculous events of Purim, we are to listen to the reading of the Megillah (the Scroll of Esther) twice: once on Purim eve and again on Purim day.
2. **Give to the Needy (*Matanot La'evyonim*):** Concern for the needy is a year-round responsibility; but on Purim it is a special mitzvah (commandment) to remember the poor. Give charity to at least two, (but preferably more) needy individuals on the day of Purim. Giving directly to the needy best fulfills the mitzvah. If, however, you cannot find poor people, place at least several coins into a charity box. As in the other mitzvahs of Purim, even small children should fulfill this mitzvah.
3. **Send Food Portions to Friends (*Mishloach Manot*):** On Purim we emphasize the importance of Jewish unity and friendship by sending gifts of food to friends. Send a gift of at least two kinds of ready-to-eat foods (e.g., pastry, fruit, beverage), to at least one friend on Purim day. Men should send to men and women to women. It is preferable that the gifts are delivered via a third party. Children, in addition to sending their own gifts of food to their friends, make enthusiastic messengers.

4. **Eat, Drink and be Merry:** Purim should be celebrated with a special festive meal on Purim Day, at which family and friends gather together to rejoice in the Purim spirit. It is a mitzvah to drink wine or other inebriating drinks at this meal.
5. **Special Prayers (*Al HaNissim*, Torah reading):** On Purim, we recite the *Al HaNissim* prayer in the evening, morning and afternoon prayers, as well as in the Grace After Meals. In the morning service there is a special reading from the Torah Scroll in the synagogue.

"And (we thank You) for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds, for the saving acts, and for the wonders which You have wrought for our ancestors in those days, at this time – in the days of Mordecai and Esther, in Sushan the capital, when the wicked Haman rose up against them, and sought to destroy, slaughter and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar and to take their spoil for plunder. But You, in Your abounding mercies, foiled his counsel and frustrated his intention, and caused the evil he planned to recoil on his own head, and they hanged him and his sons upon the gallows."

6. **Torah Reading of "Zachor":** On the Shabbat before Purim, a special reading is held in the synagogue of the Torah section called *Zachor* ("Remember" – Deuteronomy 25:17-19), in which we are enjoined to remember the deeds of (the nation of) Amalek (Haman's ancestor) who sought to destroy the Jewish people.
7. **The Fast of Esther:** To commemorate the day of prayer and fasting that the Jewish people held at Esther's request, we fast on the day before Purim, from approximately an hour before sunrise until nightfall.
8. **The "Half Coins" (*Machatzit Hashekel*):** It is a tradition to give three half-dollar coins to charity to commemorate the half-shekel that each Jew contributed as his share in the communal offerings in the time of the Holy Temple. This custom, usually performed in the synagogue, is done on the afternoon of the "Fast of Esther," or before the reading of the Megillah.
9. **Purim Customs: Masquerades and Hamantashen:** A time-honored Purim custom is for children to dress up and disguise themselves-an allusion to the fact that the miracle of Purim was disguised in natural garments. This is also the significance behind a traditional Purim food, the *hamantash*-a pastry whose filling is hidden within a three-cornered crust.

Summary of the Story

The Book of Esther tells of the deliverance of the Jewish people of Persia from destruction and of the institution of the feast of Purim as the annual commemoration of this event. Esther is an orphaned Jewish maiden raised by her older cousin Mordecai. (As an aside, there is some dispute amongst the various Bible translations as to whether Mordecai was Esther's uncle or cousin. Irrespective, she was an orphan and Mordecai raised her as his own daughter.) She is selected from among the most beautiful maidens of the Persian Empire to be the queen of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I), replacing the banished Queen Vashti. Angered by Mordecai's refusal to pay him homage, Haman, the king's ambitious chief minister, plots to destroy Mordecai and all his people. He persuades the king to issue an edict authorizing a massacre of all the Jews in the realm on the ground that they do not keep the king's laws. Mordecai urges Esther to persuade Ahasuerus to rescind the decree. Esther, risking execution by appearing unbidden before the king, exposes the intrigues of Haman, whereupon Ahasuerus orders Haman hanged and appoints Mordecai as his chief minister. The king then reverses his edict, allowing the Jews to destroy their enemies throughout the empire. On the appointed day, they carry out a bloody vengeance. Finally, to celebrate their delivery, Mordecai and Queen Esther decree the annual feast of Purim.