



Purim פורים

Purim is a Jewish holiday celebrated on the 14th of the month of Adar. In Jerusalem (being a city with a surrounding wall during the biblical era) it is celebrated on the 15th of Adar.

The name **Purim** is the Hebrew plural form of the word "Pur" פור which is a lot (a raffle).

In the Bible book (scroll) of **Esther** אסתר we read the story of the Persian King Ahashverosh אחשוורוש (Ahasuerus). History researchers tend to identify him as Xerxes I, a son of Darius and of Atossa (the daughter of the great founder Cyrus I, as the king in the years 486 - 465 b.c. . The historians argue that the name of the King Xerxes is similar to the Hebrew name Ahashverosh. Further, his character in the book of **Esther** suits the description by the Greek Historian Herodotos. The archeologists found a Babylonian document mentioning a Persian Finance Minister of that time called Mardocha / Merodach. This name resembles the name of **Mordecai** מרדכי, the Jew, who was the central figure next to the queen **Esther** in the Book of **Esther**. The original name of **Esther** was Hadassah הדסה. The word Esther sounds in Hebrew similar to the word Hester הסתר meaning a hidden place. This is mentioned because initially **Mordecai** instructed his niece to keep it secret, that she was Jewish. In the Bible Book of Ezra עזרא in chap. 4, verses 4 - 7 the description fits the decrees of Haman from the Book of Esther. But the Bible translation, "The Septuaginta" and the Jewish historian Joseph Ben Matityahu (Josephus Flavius) tended to identify the king mentioned in the book of Ezra as Darius the Second, who was the son of Xerxes.

The fateful date is called **Purim** because Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagites, the Vice King, manipulated the King to authorize him (Haman) to command that by law all the Jews in all the 127 countries under the rule of the King of Persia and Maday should be killed on the 14th of Adar. The Bible deliberately tells us the name of the father of Haman (the Agagagite). The fact that he descended from the Agagites means that he descended from the Amalekites. Agag was the name of the Amalekite

On the 13 of Adar all Jews in the capital city of Shushan held a third fasting day in prayer that the Jewish queen **Esther** would be able to prevent the Jewish nation from annihilation. **Esther** risked her own life by telling the King that she herself was Jewish and should actually be killed with all her people according to the evil law manipulated by Haman.



The Book /scroll of **Esther** has a happy end of survival and the right for self-defense for the Jewish people throughout the Kingdom on one hand. On the other hand the King commanded that Haman and his family were executed instead of the Jews. Haman had mainly intended to hang **Mordecai**, the Jewish leader. In other words the day which was planned for ending the Jewish existence throughout the Kingdom turned out to be a day of Jewish survival, self-defense and recognition.

Once again miraculously the people of Israel, the Jewish people survived a murderous attack by Amalek עמלק. Amalek was, as we recall from the Torah, the first nation to attack the children of Israel in spite of the fact that they were refugees fleeing from the slavery in Egypt. Since then Amalek is a synonym of those in history who tried to annihilate the Jewish people.

Therefore the miracle of the survival of the Jewish people in the book of **Esther** always reminds Jews throughout history and where ever they stay of the dangers and threats by the descendants of Amalek. The survival of **Esther**, **Mordecai** and the Jews in the Persian Kingdom 2500 years ago is a source of hope for the Jewish people ever since.

Traditions and customs associated with Purim:

The day before Purim, the 13th of the month of Adar, is called "Ta'anit **Esther**" תענית אסתר. (The fasting day of **Esther**.) Ta'anit is a fasting only during the day. Literally "Ta'anit" means a suffering. It is the name for a fasting only during the day. (In Hebrew there is a distinction between two kinds of fasting days: "Ta'anit" - fasting only during the day. "Zom" צום - fasting during day and night. For example: Yom Kipur, is called a "Zom", and not a "Ta'anit", because it is a fasting of day and night.)

Traditional prayers:

The Shabbat before **Purim** is called "Shabbat Sachor" שבת זכור because in the synagogue the weekly portion reminding of Amalek is read. (See the weekly portion BeShalach בשלח in the book of Exodus, chap. 17, verse 8 / 16 and the weekly portion "Ki Tezeh" כי תצא in the book Deuteronomy, chap. 25, verses 17 - 19.)

4. **Donations to the poor.** As **Mordecai** commanded it

king at the time of King Saul of Israel. (See further explanations below, under the Holiday traditions.)

As we are told in the book of **Esther**, **Mordecai** heard about the law, informed his niece the queen **Esther** about it. **Esther** courageously managed to get from the king the permission for the Jews to defend themselves against the attacks commanded by Haman. The lawful command of Haman itself could not be annulled because it had been approved and sealed with the ring of the king.

Some special prayers of gratitude like the famous "Halel" (praise, a recitation from Psalms 113 - 118) are not read in **Purim** because the events took place outside of the land of Israel.

There are four "Mitzvoth" related to Purim:

1. The reading of the book of **Esther**. In Hebrew the book of **Esther** is called "Megilat **Esther**" מגילת אסתר, the Scroll of **Esther**. It is very important to take part in a public reading of the Scroll of **Esther**. The unusual importance is manifested for example in the fact that also women are obliged to read the scroll of **Esther**, because also the women were rescued. In many other cases women are officially not obliged to participate in celebrations and readings in a Synagogue when a fixed timetable is associated with it. This general guideline relieving women from some duties is based on the tradition that women fulfill at the same time other important family services.

2. A festive meal of **Purim**. (סעודת פורים Seudat Purim) Traditionally people should have a special meal and drink wine, even a lot of wine. One is encouraged to drink a lot of wine to remind of the wine party which Esther made for the king and Haman during which she told the king of the deadly intention of Haman and managed to get the permission for survival.

3. Mishloach Manoth משלוח מנות. It is a tradition based on the text of the book of **Esther**, chap. 9, verse 19. "

¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another. ²⁰ And **Mordecai** recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

remained a Jewish tradition to give a donation to the needy people on the **Purim** day in order to illustrate the gratitude to the LORD who saved the Jewish people from Amalek, from Haman and from the later Amalek descendants who persecuted the Jewish people.



- A famous custom of the **Purim** holiday is to let the children dress up in a carnival fashion. Originally the dressings should remind of the different 127 countries of the kingdom of Persia and Maday.
- During the reading of the scroll of **Esther** whenever the name of Haman is mentioned everyone should make noises for example to rattle with a maraca. The idea of it is to symbolically fight the memory of Amalek.
- **Purim** food: It is a joyful tradition to eat sweet baked food. The custom is to have triangular **Purim** cookies filled with marmalade or poppy seed or dates etc. The **Purim** cookies are called "Osney Haman" אוני המן. One may wonder how come that a popular **Purim** cookie is named upon Haman whereas his name should actually be erased from history... Some culinary historians explain that in Europe when Jews spoke Yiddish, they called the cookie filled with poppy "eine Mohntasche". The sound resembles the words "a Haman Tasche", which is the name of a poppy filled cookie. ☺

In a leap-year (Shana Meuberet שנה מעוברת) there are two months called Adar (Adar 1 and Adar 2). The actual **Purim** Holiday is celebrated in the second Adar. In the first Adar there are reminder days on the 14th and 15th which are called **Purim katan** פורים קטן (little Purim). It is a happy holiday but most of the customs of **Purim** are not implemented.

I am grateful to the famous Israeli Cartoonist **Moshik**



משיק מירקטורית

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