

The Joy of Purim – JewishClarity.com

Let's begin with an obvious question. Why is the holiday called "*Purim*" (a drawing of lots)? Why doesn't it have a name which is related to one of the main themes of the day, like "Salvation," "*Teshuva* (return to G-d)," "Unity," "*Kabalat HaTorah* (receiving the Torah)," etc.?

It is important to remember that Purim is a Rabbinical holiday. While all of the Torah holidays, like Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, are fundamental to being Jewish, the Jewish people existed for almost a thousand years without Purim. What happened to make Purim an essential part of the Jewish year and Jewish life? In order to understand this, we need to see where and how it fits into Jewish History.

Before the destruction of the first Temple, we seemingly **had it all** — our own land, physical unity, *Beit HaMikdash* (the Temple in Jerusalem), prophecy, daily miracles, etc.

Then **we lost it all** with the *Churban* (destruction of the Temple).

Purim played a key role in helping the Jewish people to be able to deal with this new reality of *churban* and *galut* (destruction and exile).

The *Gemara* highlights a verse in the Torah (*Dev. 31:18*) as a hint to Purim — "*V'anochi hasteir astir pani bayom hahu al kol hara'ah asher asah, ki fanah el elohim acheirim* — And I will **surely hide My face** on that day for all of the evil that they [the Jews] did, since they turned to other powers."

A key to understanding Purim is, therefore, this idea that Hashem is hiding His face and playing a role specifically behind the scenes.

To appreciate this, let's go through an overview of the Purim story.

Purim From A-Z

- a. The *megillah* opens with King Achashverus making a huge party.
- b. While he is drunk, he orders his queen Vashti to perform for his guests. And when she refuses, he has her killed.
- c. The king is then convinced to choose a new queen through a large competition.
- d. When Esther is forcibly taken from Mordechai's home to participate in this "contest," Mordechai tells her to be sure not to reveal her Jewish background.
- e. Remarkably, Achashverus ends up selecting Esther as his queen. But she is careful to conceal her Jewishness, just as Mordechai had instructed.
- f. Bigson and Seresh, two of the king's servants, plot to assassinate the king. Mordechai overhears this and reports it to Esther, which thwarts the plan. It is duly recorded in the king's chronicles that Mordechai saved the king's life.
- g. Haman then rises to a position of power through his close relationship with the king.
- h. The king orders everyone to bow down to Haman. Everyone, including the Jews, complies with this demand, except for Mordechai who refuses to do so.
- i. At least partially out of anger at Mordechai, Haman plots to destroy all of the Jews. Based on a drawing of lots (*purim*) which is done on the **13th of Nissan** (the first month of the Jewish year), the day chosen for the destruction of the Jews is the **13th of Adar** (the twelfth month, exactly 11 months later). Achashverus agrees to Haman's plan, and sends out a decree authorizing the murder of every Jewish man, woman, and child.
- j. When Mordechai hears about this, he sends a message to Esther, imploring her to intercede on behalf of her people.

- k. Esther suggests that it may be better that she wait to speak to the king until he himself summons her, since it is a capital offense for anyone to approach the King uninvited.
- l. Mordechai seems to be concerned that Esther is not taking this decree against the Jews seriously enough. He tells her that if she is unwilling to risk her life for the Jewish people, then the Jews will ultimately be saved through some other source, but she and her entire household will be destroyed.
- m. Esther then agrees to approach the king, but requests that the entire Jewish people fast and cry out to Hashem (along with her) for three days straight (the 13th, 14th, and 15th of *Nissan*).
- n. Esther approaches the king on the night of the 15th of *Nissan* (“*Seder* night”) and he ends up sparing her life. Having no idea what request could be so important for Esther to have risked her life to speak with him, the king offers to grant her up to half of his kingdom. Esther asks only that he and Haman should both attend a private banquet of hers the next day (i.e., still on the 15th of *Nissan*).
- o. During the banquet, the king repeats his offer to give Esther up to half of his kingdom. She again asks only that he and Haman should both attend a second banquet on the next day, this time on the 16th of *Nissan*.
- p. Between these two private royal banquets, while Haman is feeling on top of the world, he runs into Mordechai who, once again, refuses to bow down to him. This makes Haman so angry that he decides to build a tall gallows, and request immediate permission from the king (before the second banquet begins) to hang Mordechai.
- q. During that same night between the two banquets, the king can’t sleep. He ends up reading the royal chronicles and realizes that, although Mordechai had saved his life a number of years previously (from the plot of Bigson and Seresh), he had never been properly rewarded.
- r. Right then, early in the morning of the 16th of *Nissan*, Haman arrives to speak to the king about hanging Mordechai on the tall gallows he just built.
- s. However, before Haman has a chance to make his request to the king about hanging Mordechai, King Achashverus orders Haman to put Mordechai on the royal horse, and to lead him around the city, all the while giving him great honor, as a long overdue reward for Mordechai having saved the king’s life.
- t. Right after this tremendous disappointment and humiliation for Haman, and just when Haman had begun to strategize anew with his wife and advisors how they could still take revenge on Mordechai, Haman is rushed off by the king’s servants for the second banquet (the day of the 16th of *Nissan*).
- u. It is during this second banquet, that Esther finally reveals her Jewish identity, and confronts Haman for trying to kill her and her people.
- v. The king then goes out to the garden to try to gather his thoughts, and discovers the tall gallows which Haman had built especially to hang Mordechai (the very person that the king now realizes had previously saved his life). Meanwhile, as Haman approaches Esther to plead for his life, he trips and falls directly on top of her. At this point, the king enters the room from the garden, and orders that Haman himself be hung on the gallows that he built.
- w. Mordechai is then given both Haman’s estate as well as Haman’s position in the kingdom.
- x. Following one more appeal by Esther, the king issues a new decree, allowing the Jews to fight their enemies on the 13th of *Adar* (still almost a full eleven months away).
- y. The Jews fight and defeat their enemies on the 13th of *Adar* and celebrate their victory on the 14th, except for the Jews in Shushan that defeated their enemies on the 13th and 14th of *Adar* and celebrated their victory only on the 15th.
- z. Purim was, therefore, established as a holiday to celebrate our miraculous victory and survival — on the 14th of *Adar* in most cities, and on the 15th of *Adar* in all cities that were walled like Shushan.

A Pattern Emerges

The distinctive pattern that permeates the entire Purim story is the lack of obvious open miracles. There was rather an incredible series of what could be seen as extremely “fortunate

coincidences.” While each detail seen separately was not necessarily significant, as a group these details were what saved the Jewish people from destruction.

This has really set the tone for all of Jewish history since then, particularly what we call the Seven Wonders of Jewish History (see article), as well as the remarkable events in modern-day Israel.

Probability vs. *Hashgacha* (Divine Supervision)

The term Purim, referring to the **lottery** that Haman threw to determine the best time to destroy the Jews, tells us that the concept of probability must be central to the holiday. The whole Purim story grapples with how we should view what appears in our lives, or in the world, as probability or randomness. The message of Purim is that Hashem transcends and controls what we generally perceive as *teva* — the “laws of nature” — and, therefore, there is no such thing as probability or randomness at all. And if we are able to keep this awareness that everything which occurs is really the *hashgacha* of Hashem, and necessarily for our ultimate good, then we will be able to maintain the true *simcha* (joy) of Purim all throughout the entire year.