

17.03.2016 PURIM – © Article by Ari Lipinski

Purim is a Jewish Holiday which is celebrated on 14th of the month of Adar. In Jerusalem, as a city surrounded by a wall, Purim is celebrated on 15th of Adar.

The name “Purim” is in Hebrew the plural form of the Bible word “Pur”, which means “lottery”.



In the book Esther we read the story of the Persian King Ahasuerus (“Achashverosh” in Hebrew). The historians view Ahasuerus as Xerxes I, who was in power from 486 B.C. till 465 B.C. The historians based their conclusion also on the argument that the two names sound familiar, and that the events, more or less, match the same historic period. Fundamental for them are the writings of the reliable, well known Greek Historian Herodotus. His “chronicle”, is compatible with the events described in the Bible, in the Book of Esther. Archaeologists found an ancient document mentioning a Persian finance minister with the name of “Madocha”, who was in office at the relevant time. His name resembles the name of the biblical Mordecai (“Mordechai” in Hebrew), who is a central figure in the book of Esther. The original name of ‘Esther’ was Hadassah. ‘Hadassah’ means Myrtle. The name “Esther” sounds in Hebrew similar to the Hebrew word “Hester” which means “concealed”. In the book Esther we read in chapter 2, verse 10 that Mordecai told Esther to keep her nationality secret. In the book of Ezra in chapter 4, we find further evidence and references for the decrees of Haman as we know from the book of Esther. These decrees were directed against the Jews and called for fighting them. The Septuagint (the bible translation into Greek), and the famous Jewish historian Joseph Ben Matityahu (Josephus Flavius) tended to identify King Ahasuerus as Darius II, who was the son of Xerxes.

The specific date of Purim is mentioned because **Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite**, who

was the deputy of the king, manipulated King Ahasuerus to authorize a decree allowing to kill all the Jews in the 127 countries of the Persian Empire, on the very day of the 14th of the month of Adar.

The Bible specifies the names of the ancestors of Haman. He descended from the tribe of the Amalekites, the king of whom was Agag at the time of the Jewish King Saul. From the book of Samuel, we learn that the Prophet Samuel publicly executed King Agag after King Saul failed to do it.

In the Book of Esther, we read that Mordecai found out about the deadly intention of Haman and urgently informed Queen Esther about it. Esther succeeded in getting the permission of King Ahasuerus to permit the Jews to defend themselves against the pogrom arranged by Haman. At the time, it was not possible according to Persian law to repeal and nullify a law signed and sealed by the king. Therefore, the ordered anti-Jewish genocidal decrees, which had been already distributed by Haman, could not be cancelled. The only way out was to decree a permit for the Jews for self-defense. Since the self-defense permit was the latter of the two, it signalled to the population everywhere, that it expressed the final valid wish of the king. Queen Esther risked her life when she approached King Ahasuerus on her own initiative without having been invited by him. As we know, she managed in a tactically clever manoeuvre to make clear to the king that the murderous decree made by Haman would imply killing her as well, due to her being Jewish.

The book of Esther has a “happy ending”. The Jewish people were allowed to defend themselves, in order to survive. Furthermore, Haman and his sons were hanged on the high tree he had prepared for Mordecai. In summary, we may say, that the day of the planned extermination of the Jewish people became the day of their survival, their self-defense and their recognition. It also fosters the notion of religious liberty and tolerance of diversity.



Once again, the people of Israel could miraculously repel a vicious attack from the side of Amalek. From the book of Exodus, we know that the tribe of Amalek was the first one to attack the children of Israel, who

had just recently fled slavery in Egypt. The Amalekites did not have any reason whatsoever for their aggression. Since then, the term “Amalek” became the synonym for those who want to exterminate the Jewish people. It is one of the important lessons from the Book of Esther; it illustrates the virtue of survival of the chosen people of Israel despite all plots and conspiracies that various descendants of Amalek try to implement throughout history. The miraculous survival of Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people in the Persian Empire 2,500 years ago is a source of hope and inspiration, not only for the Jewish people but for everyone who cherishes and aspires the liberty of religion. It is a book of profound and timeless protest against genocidal efforts worldwide.

Special Thoughts in the Book of Esther

- **The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible in which God or the name of the LORD is not mentioned, not even a single time! We wonder: why?**

This extraordinary phenomenon requires an explanation.

It is a classical case for the principle in Bible studies, which I often refer to in my Bible commentary book: While reading a Bible text one should not only pay attention to the explicit text, but should simultaneously look carefully for what is probably missing in the text. In the book of Esther conspicuously God is not mentioned. Therefore, this calls for an attentive search for a good reason for such an unusual literary measure.



The famous Bible expositor, **Rabbi Abraham Ben Meir Ibn Ezra** from Tudela in North Spain (1089 – 1167), included in his introduction to the book of Esther a ground-breaking explanation why the name of God is missing in the book of Esther. His idea left a sustained mark on many later interpretations as well:

Ibn Ezra refers to chapter 9, verse 30 in the book of Esther “He sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, *namely*, words of peace and truth.” Ibn Ezra tried to put

himself in the position of Mordecai when he had written the messages to the 127 counties in the Persian Empire under Ahasuerus. Ibn Ezra first paid special attention to the requirement to translate the royal decree into 127 languages. Then Ibn Ezra came to the striking insight that Mordecai was obviously afraid that the gentile and pagan translators would surely translate any mentioning of God into the idolatrous names of their idols. If this happened, the whole idea of the miracle of the God of Israel saving the people of Israel would have been perverted into a glorification of false gods. So, Ibn Ezra deduced, in this wonderful and wise conclusion, that Mordecai intentionally and systematically avoided any mention of God in order to prevent that the pagan translators would twist the central idea of his message. A further consideration of Mordecai must have been, Ibn Ezra explained, not to risk a provocation regarding the Persian emperor. Explicitly glorifying the God of Israel could have been misinterpreted as a suspicious subversive activity.

The famous Israeli contemporary Bible expositor, **Amos Chacham** (1921-2012) contributed in his encyclopaedic article about the book of Esther, further support for the explanation of Ibn Ezra. Amos Chacham became world famous as the winner of the first International Bible Quiz initiated and organized by Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. This International Bible Quiz took place in 1958, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the State of Israel. Amos Chacham amazed the jury and the audience by proving that he knew the whole Bible text and vast commentaries by heart. Chacham elaborated that one could better understand Mordecai in his effort to “hide” the name of God by reading in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy (Devarim)



in chapter 31, verse 18: “But I will surely *hide* My face in that day because of all the evil which they will do, for they will turn to other gods.” (NASV)

Chacham went on to point out another striking aspect of the book of Esther, which also fosters the Ibn Ezra explanation for the extraordinary absence of the name of God in the book of Esther. Chacham counted almost 200 mentions of the word “king”. Chacham suggested that Mordecai’s subtle method in mentioning the king so many times was to ostensibly pay respect to the Persian king. But mainly, all the Jewish readers of his message at the time (and even we, to this very day) realize the conspicuous asymmetry: The “king”, who was mentioned almost 200 times, but was not in charge of events. He was rather maneuvered and even manipulated by other figures, like Vashti, Haman and Esther. And, the King of kings, God, who was not mentioned by name, was the very one guiding and controlling the events. Chacham showed us, that the superficial and ostensible presence of the Persian king by the many mentions of his title, was no indication of his control and power. In sharp contrast to this, God was omnipresent even though he was not mentioned by name. The very hiding of the name of God was designed by Mordecai to lead those readers who were well versed in the Torah (namely the Jews), to understand the implicit message even if it was written only “between the lines”. It was a subtle indication to the general concept that the “gods” made out of metal, stone or wood, even though being visible, were not in control. But God, the God of Israel, who is not physically visible to man, is the omnipotent power guiding the events.

• **Why didn’t Mordecai bow before Haman?**

In the book of Esther in chapter 3, verse 2 we read:



1 Rumanian stamp illustrates Rembrandt’s Esther painting.

“All the king’s servants who were in the king’s gate would kneel and bow down to Haman, because the king had commanded that Haman be honored in this way. Mordecai, however, would not kneel and would not bow down.” (ISV). The Bible expositors ask, of course, why did Mordecai

behave like that in explicit disobedience to the law. The first reply we find in the writings of most Bible commentaries is that, most probably, Haman held either a sceptre, or had some article of clothing, or a necklace on which some idolatrous symbol was marked. Mordecai did not bow before Haman, nor kneel before him in order not do so before a pagan idol. He followed the 10 Commandments.



The Bible expositors indicate another plausible reason for Mordecai’s refusal to bow and kneel before Haman: In order to understand the forthcoming argument one should first read Chapter 2, verse 21 “At that time when Mordecai was sitting in the king’s gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, among those who guarded the threshold, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus.” (ISV) This very sentence in the original Hebrew version contains a unique grammatical formulation, which the translations into other languages cannot successfully convey. Even though **two** persons, Bigthan and Teresh, are mentioned, the verb “conspired” is conspicuously conjugated in the Hebrew **singular** form “קִצְפוּ”. No translator has successfully transferred this meaning into other languages.

”יָמִים הָהֵם, וּמְרֹדֶכַי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ; קִצְפוּ בְּגִתּוֹ וְתֵרֶשׁ שְׂגִי-סְרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, מִשְׁמַרְי הַסּוֹף, וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ לְשַׁלַּח יָד, בַּמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ.”
 From this we should learn that behind the **two** implementers of the intended assassination, there must have been another **single** person, who remained hidden in the background. If we analyze who the potential beneficiary from the assassination of king Ahasuerus could be, it certainly would not be the two simple bodyguards. The person who could gain the most from such an event, would logically be the deputy of the king. That was Haman. Now, we better understand that Mordecai, who discovered the plot in the first place, most likely suspected that Haman was the conspirator behind the two assassins.

Traditions and Customs of the Purim Holiday: The Fast of Esther:

The day before Purim which is the 13th of the month of Adar, is called "Taanit Esther" (תענית אסתר). It means the Fast of Esther. Actually the Hebrew word for a "fast" is "Tzom" (צום). The difference is that on a "Taanit" the fasting is only during the day hours. Actually, "Taanit" means a torturous suffering, not a fast. Since the fasting is only during the day, it stands for suffering. A "Tzom" is a fasting of day and night. The "Tzom" begins in the evening before the fasting day, since the counting is based on the first chapter of the book of Genesis. In the week of the Creation, each day began in the evening before.

The "Taanit Esther" reminds of the instruction of Esther to Mordecai in chapter 4, verse 16. The Fast of Esther commemorates the courage of Esther in going to the garden of the king without being invited in advance. Such an action could be punishable by death, unless the king mercifully signals a retroactive permission. Ahasuerus graced Esther with the permission. So, she could invite him and Haman to the crucial meetings, which led to the rescue of the Jewish people.



Traditional Prayers:

The Shabbat (Saturday) before the Purim holiday is called "Shabbat Zachor" (the Shabbat of Remembrance). On this Shabbat in the Synagogue, a special reading is added to remind of Haman the Agagite by reading from the book of Exodus, chapter 17, verses 8 – 16 and from Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verses 17 – 19. By this reference to the vicious attack by Amalek on the children of Israel, which was miraculously repelled by God, the correlation to the defeat of Haman the Agagite (who was a descendant of Amalek) is established.

The special Hallel-Prayer (praise) quoting Psalms 113 – 118 is not read on Purim because the miracle

did not happen in the promised land, it took place in the exile of Persia.

Four Mitzvoth (commandments) relating to Purim:

1. Public reading of the Scroll (book) of Esther.

The Scroll of Esther is called in Hebrew "**Megilat Esther**". One of the special traditions highlighting the reading of "Megilat Esther" is that the obligation to participate in the public reading includes women. Normally women are exempt from time table related duties of ritual service due to the ancient expectation that women were traditionally in charge of the household and the preparation of the meals for the whole family. But in the special case of the miracles of Purim - due to the leading role of Queen Esther - women have to be present in the public reading, signifying the courage and leadership of Esther, which was crucial for the rescue of the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. This inclusion of the women in the ceremony is an important contribution to elevate the role and the position of women in Jewish society.

2. The Purim Meal (Seudat Purim)

It is customary to have a festive meal in the evening beginning the Purim Holiday after reading the Scroll of Esther. This meal should include sweets and wine, to remind of the "banquet" to which Queen Esther invited Ahasuerus and Haman, in order to uncover the genocidal conspiracy of Haman against the Jewish people. It is even not forbidden to become intoxicated.

3. "Mishloach Manot" (the delivery of Purim baskets):

In the book of Esther in chapter 9, verses 19 and 22 we read: "Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another." ... "As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into celebration: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor." "Mishloach" means delivery. "Manot" means food Portions.

4. Presents and Donations to the Poor and Needy:

According to the above mentioned verse 22 it is a commandment, an obligation, to give presents and/or donations to the poor people during the Purim time. The reason is to make sure that they will also

joyfully participate in the holiday. So the poor too can focus on thanking God for rescuing the Jewish people from the murderous plan of Haman.

Purim customs:

- **The Purim Ratchet (in Hebrew: Raashan)**

During the public reading of the Scroll of Esther, it is a most popular tradition to make a lot of noise each time the name of Haman is mentioned. It is customary to use all kinds of **ratchets** for this purpose. The idea is to joyfully and noisily celebrate the overcoming of the Haman plan. Of course, this custom is enormously enjoyed and implemented by the children who are happy to be permitted to shout and make any kind of noise they think of. They greatly enjoy this liberty.



- **Purim Katan (in Hebrew: The Little Purim Holiday):**

In a Jewish Leap Year (“Shana Meuberet”) the calendar has two months of Adar: Adar 1 und Adar 2. (For example, the Jewish year 5,776 is such a leap year.) In such a year the actual Purim holiday is celebrated on the Adar 2. In order to remind of it already on the 14 of Adar 1 the so-called Purim Katan takes place. It is a happy day, but most of the Purim customs are skipped until the 14th of Adar 2.



- **Purim costumes:**

One of the famous customs characteristic for Purim is the kind of carnival, which includes dressing up in costumes. This tradition should remind that the Jews were dispersed in 127 countries of the Persian Empire. Naturally this habit makes Purim one of the most popular holidays among children.

- **The Purim meal:**

In the festive Purim-meal it is a central tradition, beyond drinking wine, to eat special Purim cookies called “**Oznei Haman**” (**Hamantash**). They have a triangular form and may contain poppy seed or prunes, nut, date, apricot, raspberry, raisins, apple, fruit preserves (in a lekvar style), cherry, fig, chocolate, dulce de leche, halva, or even caramel or cheese etc..

