

# Purim

Purim is a Jewish holiday celebrated on the 14th of the month of Adar. The name Purim is the Hebrew plural form of the word "Pur", which is a lot (lottery or raffle). In Jerusalem (being a city with a surrounding wall during biblical times) it is celebrated on the 15th of Adar. In a leap-year ("Shana Meuberet") 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 is called Purim katan (little Purim). It is a happy holiday but most of the customs of Purim are not implemented.

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.E.) The historians argue that the name of King Xerxes is similar to the Hebrew name "Ahashverosh" (in English Ahasuerus or Xerxes I). Further, his character in the book of Esther suits the description by the Greek Historian Herodotus. The archeologists found a Babylonian document mentioning a Persian Finance Minister of that time called Mardocha / Merodach. This name resembles the name of Mordechai מרדכי, the Jew, who was the central figure next to queen Esther in the Book of Esther. The original name of Esther was Hadasa הדסה. The word Esther sounds in Hebrew similar to the word "Hester" הסתר, meaning a hidden place. This is mentioned because initially Mordechai instructed his niece to keep secret that she was Jewish. In the Bible book of Ezra in chapter 4, verses 4 - 7 the description fits the decrees of Haman from the book of Esther. But the Bible translation, "The Septoaginta" 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 המן 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 Agagite). The fact that he was descended from the

Agagites means that he was descended from the Amalekites. Agag was the name of the Amalekite 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, Mordechai heard about the law (initiated by Haman) and informed his niece Queen Esther about it. Esther courageously managed to get from the king the permission for the Jews to defend themselves against the attacks decreed 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.



On the 13<sup>th</sup> 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 save 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 ending of survival and the right for self-defense for the Jewish people throughout the Kingdom. And the King commanded that Haman and his family were executed instead of the Jews. Haman had mainly intended to hang Mordechai, the Jewish leader. In other words, the day which was planned for ending 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. Amalek was, as we know from the Torah, the first nation to attack the Children of Israel in spite of the fact that they were refugees fleeing from 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 wherever they stay of the dangers and threats by the descendants of Amalek. The survival of Esther, Mordechai and the Jews in the Persian Kingdom 2,500 years ago has been a source of hope for the Jewish people ever since.

**There are four "Mitzvot" 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 women are also obligated to read the scroll of Esther, because the women were also rescued. In many other cases women are officially not obligated 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 other important family tasks and rituals at the same time.

**2. A festive meal of Purim.** ("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 king's permission for self-defense.



**3. Mishloach Manoth.** It is a tradition based on the text of the book of Esther, chapter 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." (King James Bible 2000)

**4. Donations to the poor.** As Mordechai commanded it has remained a Jewish tradition to give donations to the needy on the Purim day in order to illustrate the gratitude to the LORD who saved the Jewish people from Amalek, from Haman and from later descendants of Amalek who persecuted the Jewish people.

**Traditions and customs associated with Purim:**

**Traditional prayers:**

The Sabbath before Purim is called "Shabbat Zachor" because in the synagogue the weekly portion reminding of Amalek is read. (See the weekly portion "BeShalach" in the book of Exodus, chapter 17, verse 8 -16 and the weekly portion "Ki Tezeh" in the book Deuteronomy, chapter 25, verses 17 - 19.) 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.

**The custom of dressing in colorful costumes:**

A famous custom of the Purim holiday is to let the children dress up in costumes. Originally the costumes should remind of the different 127 countries of the kingdom of Persia and Maday.

**The tradition of making noise at the mention of the name of Haman:**

During the reading of the scroll of Esther whenever the name of Haman is mentioned everyone should make noises, for example to rattle a "Ra'ashan" (ratchet). The idea is to symbolically fight the memory of Amalek.





**Traditional 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 "**Osnei Haman**" (literally "Haman's ears") or hamantaschen. One may wonder how a popular Purim cookie is named after 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 "Haman Tasche", which is the name of a poppy filled cookie. 😊