

EDMOND J. SAFRA
SYNAGOGUE

PURIM 5781

PURIM

5781-2021

Thursday, February 25 – Fast of Esther

Fast Begins by.....	5:26 AM
Shahrit.....	6:30 AM and 7:30 AM
Classes.....	following each minyan
Minha (with Tefillin).....	5:05 PM
Arbit	6:00 PM
Fast Ends.....	6:04 PM
Megilla Reading.....	6:15 PM
Late Megilla Reading.....	8:00 PM

Friday, February 26 – Purim Day

Shahrit - First Minyan.....	6:30 AM
First Megilla Reading.....	7:00 AM
Shahrit – Second Minyan	7:30 AM
Second Megilla Reading.	8:00 AM
Women’s Megilla Reading	9:30 AM
Candle Lighting	5:24 PM
Shir Hashirim.....	5:10 PM
Minha.....	5:25 PM
Kabbalat Shabbat and Arbit	Following

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the year 3318 (approx. 442 B.C.E.) Nebukhadnessar became the king of Babylon.

Despite the fact that the Jews living in Judea had themselves witnessed the exile of the other ten tribes by the Assyrians, they nevertheless were not especially moved to improve their actions and their day-to-day lives. Idolatry and adultery continued to be rampant, and corruption plagued the Royal family and their circles.

Repeated attempts by G-D to warn His people through the prophets to change their ways and to be honest, to be sincere, and to love and uphold justice, failed. No longer were there simply warnings, but prophecies of doom and destruction were heard in Jerusalem. These prophecies, however, had no effect; they were like music falling on deaf ears. And in fact, a year later in 3319 Nebukhadnessar conquered Judea, which was then ruled by King Yehoyakim. Thus the Jewish State became a vassal state of Babylon.

In order to assert greater control over Judea, Nebukhadnessar exiled King Yekhoniah of Judea in 3327 (approx. 433 B.C.E.), and with him, many sages and Torah scholars.

The final phase of Nebukhadnessar's domination of Judea occurred in the year 3338 (approx. 422 B.C.E.), twenty years after ascending the throne. The destruction of the Temple, the end of the First Jewish State, and the exile of the Jewish nation, marked the decline of Jewish principles and statutes, no more Jerusalem, no more Temple, no more priests, no more feasts.

However, hope never died in the heart of the exiled Jews because the Prophets promised that the exile would last only 70 years. The only question was, from whence would these 70 years be counted?

After the defeat of Babylon at the hand of the Persians and the Medes, the Persian Empire grew more powerful. In the year 3392 (approx. 368 B.C.E.) Ahashverosh became King of Persia. His empire extended from Hodu (India) to Cush (Ethiopia); he reigned over 127 provinces. After reigning for three years, Ahashverosh decided to make a feast celebrating his reign and the end of the period, which in his calculation, marked the falseness of the prophecy and the frustration of the Jewish hope of return to Zion. However, he mistakenly counted the 70 years from the exile of Yekhonia rather than from the destruction of the Temple.

And so the story of Purim begins...

THE STORY OF PURIM

On the seventh day of his feast when the king was drunk, he ordered Queen Vashty to appear before him in order to show off her beauty to his guests. Queen Vashty refused. The king was filled with anger at her refusal, and after conferring with his advisors, he imposed the death penalty upon Vashty.

When the wrath of King Ahashverosh subsided he remembered Vashty and felt lonely. His advisors recommended that he find a new bride by gathering every beautiful young maiden at the king's palace. The king would choose the girl that he wished to be queen. This advice pleased the king, and he decreed that it would be implemented.

There was a Jewish man named Mordekhai, who had been exiled from Jerusalem by Nebukhadnessar together with King Yekhonia. He lived in Shushan, the capital city, where he reared his cousin Esther, who was an orphan. Esther, who was beautiful and very refined, was gathered together with the other maidens as a candidate to replace the queen. When the king saw Esther, she pleased him greatly, and he immediately fell in love with her. Without thinking twice about it, he crowned her queen, and made a great banquet celebrating their marriage. Following Mordekhai's orders, Esther never revealed her identity as a Jewess and as a cousin of Mordekhai. At this time Mordekhai overheard the royal officers, Bigtan and Teresh, plotting to

kill the king. Mordekhai reported the scheme to Esther, and she in turn, informed King Ahashverosh of the plot. Mordekhai's loyalty was recorded in the Royal Chronicles.

Following these events, Haman the Agagite, became the king's favorite from among all the other ministers. The king commanded that everyone bow and prostrate themselves before Haman. But Mordekhai, as a Jew, never bowed down before Haman. Haman was enraged by Mordekhai's actions and sought vengeance against the entire Jewish people living in the kingdom of Ahashverosh. He convinced the king of the benefits of his plan to exterminate the Jews of the realm. The king was naïve enough to give him his official ring to seal the royal decree. Haman cast a Pur (lot) to determine the exact date for executing his revenge. The extermination was to take place in the 12th year of Ahashverosh's reign on the 13th day of the month of Adar. As word of this tragedy spread, great mourning befell the Jewish people.

After learning all that had happened, Mordekhai tore his clothes and cried loudly and bitterly throughout the city of Shushan. He asked Esther to intercede with the king and to appeal and plead with him to save her people. After hesitating about doing it, since Ahashverosh did not know that she was Jewish, Esther accepted this responsibility. She told Mordekhai: "Go assemble all the Jews in Shushan and fast; do not eat or drink for three days, night and day."

On the third day, Esther dressed in her royal garb, stood in the foyer outside the king's chamber, waiting for permission to enter. When the King saw her, he immediately invited her into his chamber and asked her, "What is your request my dear queen, and it shall be granted to you." Queen Esther replied that she would like to invite him to attend a dinner with Haman at her palace.

That evening the king and Haman went to dine at Esther's palace. Once again the king asked the queen to state her request. Esther answered that she would do so when they returned the next day for another dinner.

Haman, who left the dinner in a happy mood, encountered Mordekhai on his way home and became infuriated. At home he gathered his friends and relatives and discussed the situation with them. They advised him to build a 50 foot gallows on which to hang Mordekhai. This suggestion pleased Haman, and he ordered the gallows to be built.

That same night, the king was unable to sleep, so he ordered that the Royal Chronicles be read before him. In it, it was recorded that Mordekhai had saved the king from the plot of Bigtan and Teresh. The king asked whether Mordekhai was ever rewarded for his action, and his servant replied that none was given to him.

Suddenly, Haman entered the palace to inform the king of the plan to dispose of Mordekhai. But the king, seeking his advice on the matter of rewarding Mordekhai, without naming him, asked Haman, "What should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman, thinking he was the one to whom the king was referring, responded, "The king should dress the man with the royal robes, crown him with a royal crown, mount him on a royal horse, and have a royal officer parade this man on the streets proclaiming before him: "This is what is done to the man whom the king wishes to honor."

The king then ordered Haman to hurry and do this to Mordekhai the Jew, without leaving anything out. Haman, disappointed and sorely shaken, obeyed the king's command. Later that afternoon, Haman was rushed to attend the dinner that Esther made for himself and the king.

At the dinner, Ahashverosh once again asked Queen Esther to state her request. Esther replied, asking that her life and the life of her people be spared, for the person sitting next to the king, has planned to slay, destroy, and annihilate both herself and the entire Jewish people, to which she belongs. Ahashverosh was enraged. Harbona, an officer of the king, informed Ahashverosh that Haman built a 50 foot gallows on which to hang Mordekhai. The king ordered that Haman be hung on it.

That same day, Ahashverosh gave his royal seal to Mordekhai and Esther to do whatever they pleased to reverse the actions of Haman, short of annulling the decree itself. They wrote to all the Jews living in the 127 provinces, that on the 13th day of Adar, that very same day in which their destruction was decreed, they may defend themselves legally against all their enemies and against all those who threaten them. The Jews greeted the news with joy and gladness.

"And many from among the peoples of the land converted to Judaism out of fear." When the 13th day of Adar arrived, the Jews organized to defend themselves against their enemies, and on the 14th day they celebrated their freedom and salvation. In Shushan, the Jews defended themselves on the 13th and on the 14th of Adar. They

killed the ten sons of Haman the Agagite and all those who plotted against them. On the 15th day, the Jews of Shushan celebrated their freedom and salvation.

In the aftermath of these events, Queen Esther and Mordekhai wrote to all the Jews in the entire Kingdom of Persia, to establish these “days of Purim” as days of feasting and celebration and for sending delicacies to one another and giving gifts to the poor. These days were called Purim because of the Pur (the lot) that Haman had cast to destroy the Jews. All the Jews willingly accepted Mordekhai and Esther’s ordinance with great joy. “And Mordekhai the Jew became the Viceroy to King Ahashverosh; he sought the good of his people and was concerned with the welfare of his posterity.”

“The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor...”

REFLECTIONS ON THE MEGILLA

After reading the story of Purim certain fundamental questions arise.

Why should such events have had to happen?

Before attempting to address such a question, it is necessary to establish the fact that one cannot answer the question with complete certainty, since we do not know G-D’s Divine plan. But one can attempt to analyze the situation in a meaningful and instructive way, since we believe that G-D interacts with his people according to their actions. One should begin looking at the moral and religious standards of the Jews of Persia.

Many Jews were misled by Ahashverosh’s calculation of the end of the 70 year period. They began to doubt G-D’s promise and the fulfillment of the prophecy of the “Return to Zion.” Frustration, despair, and disbelief, pervaded their lives to such a point, that some questioned their loyalty to G-D. Those feelings drove them to believe that they were forsaken, that their home was now Persia, that there would be no Second Jewish Commonwealth in Israel, and that they owed nothing to G-D. The Midrash tells us that the Jewish leaders pleaded with their people not to attend Ahashverosh’s feast, for its intent was the desecration

of G-D's name. Ahashverosh profaned the Temple's utensils by using them in his feast in order to demonstrate to all, that redemption and return to Zion would never occur.

But the Jews did not listen to Mordekhai and his colleagues. They participated in the king's celebration which marked the supposed victory over the G-D of Israel. Jewish participation was the cause of G-D's ire, which required that punishment befall the Jewish people. And yet, in G-D's goodness, this celebration was also the beginning of the master plan to redeem them. As our Hakhamim taught us, **הקדים רפואה למכה**, G-D prepares the healing potion before inflicting the wound. During this same celebration, Queen Vashty was condemned to die, thereby allowing another queen to take her place, from whence the salvation would come.

Of all the persecutions and salvations which befell the Jewish people, why was this one established for all generations to remember?

The events of Purim were considered so important by our sages that they had to be recorded for posterity and commemorated as a holiday. We learn in the Talmud that Esther wrote to the sages asking them to establish the days of Purim for "all times". They replied, "Do you seek to arouse the jealousy of nations against us?" She answered, "I am already inscribed in the Royal Chronicles of Media and Persia." The meaning of her response is that the Gentiles realized that this was a miraculous event which had to be recorded. How much more so, that the Jews should record and observe them.

Purim thus stands as a remembrance for all times, to demonstrate that when the Jews were at the brink of desperation and disbelief, G-D answered their prayers and allowed them to experience His salvation. This historical event was especially important, because it gave rise to the spirit and energy which resulted in the building of the Second Temple, thereby establishing anew the Jewish Commonwealth under G-D's Divine guidance. The Hakhamim placed such importance on Megillat Esther, that they included it as part of the Biblical canon. They also declared that it was written with Divine spirit.

Why is G-D's name absent from the Megilla?

The absence of G-D's name from the entire Megilla has been a question which was asked throughout the generations. Our Hakhamim addressed it and offered several answers.

The rabbis found an allusion to Esther, **אסתר**, and Purim in the To-

rah, from the verse **ואנכי הסתר אסתר פני**, (Deuteronomy 31:18). As Rashi explained, the rabbis noted from this verse that in the days of Esther, the Divine countenance will be concealed. It was the Jewish people who had created the distance between themselves and G-D by neglecting and disobeying G-D's commandments and by lacking belief in His Supreme Omnipotence. They created conditions that separated them from the Divine presence and allowed a barrier to conceal His existence from them. But G-D was there, as though hidden behind the scenes, yet fully responsible for all that had happened.

The Purim miracle occurred at the end of the Babylonian exile. This was a time when G-D chose to be hidden behind a curtain of concealment; a time when G-D did not want to reveal His presence to a doubtful people. However, He remained in the background and was there for those who wished to seek Him out. Hence, the story of Purim was a hidden miracle. Miraculous events are a complicated area with which to deal. On one hand, miracles can be rationalized, explained and misinterpreted. On the other hand, reliance on miracles alone can actually dilute belief, because it desensitizes man's ability to see the hand of G-D in nature.

The message to us in the absence of G-D's name is to stress that at this point, "when the period of open miracles had ended," we must never forget, and always remember, that the hand of G-D is present and directing our lives through natural events.

Historically, Hakham Abraham Ibn Ezra, the famous Sephardic scholar and Bible commentator, explains that when Mordekhai wrote the Megilla, he purposely omitted G-D's name, lest the idolatrous Persians, upon seeing G-D's name, replace it with the name of their gods, which would have misled Jews and Gentiles alike. Therefore, Mordekhai, in his wisdom, decided to omit it.

What is the connection between the use of the term Haman the Agagite and the term Mordekhai the Jew?

These terms recall a series of historical events which demonstrate the eternal war that exists between the Jewish people and the Amalekites. The first event took place during the time of Moses. The Amalekites were the first nation to attack the newly-formed Jewish nation after their exodus from Egypt. They attempted to demoralize the Jews spiritually, and annihilate them physically. Since that time, the Jews were commanded to remember that this conflict is an eternal one, which will continue until such time that Amalek will no longer exist in the world. The second confrontation between the Jewish people and the Amale-

kites, took place during King Saul's reign. Saul waged war against the Amalekite king, Agag. However, he did not strictly obey G-D's command and he spared Agag, thus allowing his seed to continue, from whom Haman was descended. Thus the Agagite line continued this confrontation and upheld the malicious intentions of the Amalekites towards the Jews.

By emphasizing the nationalities of both Mordekhai and Haman, the Megilla teaches us that the events of Purim are part of the ongoing confrontation between the Jewish people and the Amalekites. It is interesting to note that at this time in Shushan, the Amalekite (Haman) was defeated by a descendant of Saul, Mordekhai the Jew.

This emphasis also shows us that the forces of goodness and mercy represented by Mordekhai the Jew, ultimately prevailed over the forces of evil represented by Amalek and Haman. G-D himself promised that as long as Amalek is alive, the Divine providence is restricted in the world. Therefore, it is the duty of the Jewish people to do battle against the forces of evil. This is exactly what Mordekhai did. By overpowering Haman, Mordekhai and the Jews succeeded in allowing G-D's providence to shine forth, making these days the happiest in the Jewish calendar.

SELECTED LAWS, CUSTOMS, AND TRADITIONS OF PURIM

תענית אסתר - Esther's Fast

One should fast on the day before Purim in remembrance of the fast that Queen Esther and the Jews took upon themselves as they prayed to succeed in their battles.

This year the fast falls out on **Thursday, February 25**. The duration of the fast is from the break of dawn to nightfall. (**5:26 am – 6:04 pm**)

- Boys below age 13 and girls below age 12 are not required to fast.
- Pregnant and nursing women are not required to fast.
- Sick and very weak people are not required to fast.
- Washing face, hands, and feet and even showering with hot water is permitted.
- In case of discomfort one may rinse his/her mouth with mouthwash.

קריאת המגילה - Reading of the Megilla

The Missva of reading the Megilla on Purim is incumbent upon every Jewish man and woman. Children who have reached the age of understanding (approximately 9 or 10 years old) are encouraged to read it too. One should do all he can to fulfill this commandment. This Missva is to be performed twice. The first time is on Purim eve, and the second time is during the day of Purim (anytime between sunrise and sunset).

The reading should be from a proper scroll. If someone does not have a scroll, he or she should listen to the reader who is reading from one. Under no circumstances should the scroll be replaced by a printed book.

The listener who is following the reading from a Megilla, can read from it quietly along with the reader, but if he or she is following from a book, one should not read from it but follow the reading silently.

The reader may read on behalf of all those people present, providing that he is 13 years old or above, and that it is understood that he is doing it on their behalf.

Before reading the Megilla three blessings are recited by the reader only: 'Al Mikra Megilla, Sh'assa Nissim, and Shehehiyanu. During the daytime reading, the Shehehiyanu blessing is omitted, provided that it was recited the night before. At the conclusion of both the night and daytime reading, the reader recites the blessing of Harab Et Ribenu after the reading. The listener should not recite the blessings but only answer Amen.

No interruption is allowed during the reading of the Megilla. There is an obligation to hear every word of the Megilla.

One is not allowed to eat before the reading of the Megilla. Therefore, supper and breakfast should be eaten only after the reading. It is customary for the listeners to recite the following five verses aloud which are then repeated by the reader:

Chap. 2:5

Chap. 6:1

Chap. 8:15 and 16 Chap. 10:3

It is customary to stamp one's feet only the first and the last time Haman's name is mentioned, and not during the other times. Care should be taken to hear each and every word of the Megilla.

During the Prayer ('Amida) and the Blessings after the Meals (Birkat Hamazon) one should recite 'Al Hanissim and Bimei Mordekhai. If a person forgets to recite this addition, it is not necessary to repeat the Prayer or the Blessing after the Meals.

מתנות לאביונים - Gifts to the Poor

- It is incumbent upon every Jewish man and woman to give one gift to two different poor persons. Money may be given in lieu of the gifts, if it is as valuable as the gifts.
- Husband and wife can join together to give the gift in their name.
- Children under 13 are not required to give these gifts, but they may join their parents in doing so.
- If there are no poor people available, one can give it to any needy person or institution.
- The gifts or money have to be given during Purim day and not at night.
- One may fulfill the Missva by giving food to needy people.

משלח מנות - Sending of Food to Friends

- Men and women should send at least two varieties of food to at least one friend. Here also, the entire family can join together in fulfilling the Missva.
- The food must be sent during Purim day, and not at night and must be received on Purim day as well.
- The person receiving Mishloah Manot must know who sent it to them.
- One fulfills their obligation only if they send food that may be consumed by the recipient. For example, if one knows that the recipient may not eat sweets, they may not send them sweets, etc. This would also apply to foods that you know the recipient may be allergic to.
- A mourner is obligated in this missva but should send simple food such as meat and fish, rather than sweets and confections.

פורים סעודת - The Purim Feast

- There is an obligation to have a feast during the day of Purim and not at night. Those who follow the practice of the Kabbalists are

meticulous to have their meal in the morning. One may begin their feast during the daytime and extend it into the nighttime, if necessary. In such a case, the 'Al Hanissim paragraph is still recited in the Blessing after the Meals. The entire family should join and celebrate the victory of the Jews against Amalek (Haman).

- Festive mood is appropriate on Purim, and one may drink to the point where he or she is unable to distinguish between “Blessed Mordekhai” and “Cursed Haman”, as long as it does not impair you. Don't drink and drive!
- According to one's custom and tradition, one may or may not work on Purim. However, it is recommended to refrain from doing day-to-day work.
- It is customary to wear holiday clothes in honor of Purim.

זכר למחצית השקל - Half a Shekel

- Some have the custom to give three silver half-dollars to sedaka (charity) in remembrance of the half shekel given for the expenses of the Holy Temple.
- This obligation is incumbent upon males twenty years of age and older. Some hold that one is obligated from thirteen years of age and above. If someone mistakenly gave before the age of twenty, he should continue doing so, because we do not stop someone from doing a Missva once he has started.

*“THIS IS THE DAY THAT G-D HAD MADE FOR US.
WE SHALL REJOICE AND BE GLAD...”*



EDMOND J. SAFRA
SYNAGOGUE

EDMOND J. SAFRA SYNAGOGUE
11 EAST 63RD STREET NEW YORK, NY 10065

TEL: 212-754-9555 • FAX: 212-754-6211

WWW.EJSNY.ORG • INFO@EJSNY.ORG