

A Purim Message from Rabbi Berger

"Venhahapoch Hu!" – "and it was all reversed!"

Purim is filled with reversals. This time last year, our lives were certainly very different. Wearing masks used to be about fun, merriment and laughter. This year – not so much. We are waiting eagerly for another reversal.

Purim is a holiday of festivity and celebration. It is often a day of indulgence. As the sages relate: Haman tried to destroy our bodies, and so we celebrate with our bodies. We drink. We laugh. We celebrate. We focus on our own joy. We focus inward, on personal happiness. This year, we do need to take care and make sure that we feel happy. We hope that you are able to experience such personal joy this Purim. But, while Purim asks us to feel great joy, it asks us to do more than this, too; it also asks us to share joy. There are two mitzvot of the day – gifts to those without, and mishloach manot, the sending of delicacies to friends. These mitzvot ask us to brighten the days of others, to add to the joy and happiness of others. We see this lesson from one of the foods that we eat on Purim -- the hamantaschen.

Although nowadays you can find hamantaschen filled with practically any type of filling, the classic hamantash was always filled with poppy seeds. Indeed, the very word "haman" is a pun and can refer to poppy seeds (mohn in Yiddish), and the Yiddish word "tash" means pocket. Thus, "hamantaschen" means "poppy-seed-filled pockets." This is in line with the classic explanation given in the Code of Jewish Law for eating hamantaschen on Purim.

The Code of Jewish Law states that one should eat a food made out of seeds on Purim in memory of the seeds that Daniel and his friends ate in the house of the king of Babylon. In the book of Daniel, the verse states, "And he gave them seeds." But what does Daniel eating seeds have to do with Purim? The Talmud explains that Hatach, Queen Esther's faithful messenger in the Purim story, is none other than Daniel, who was earlier taken into captivity during the Jewish exile and was forced to work in the palace for the monarchy. During that time, Daniel kept kosher by eating various forms of beans and seeds.

The Talmud says that Esther also kept kosher and survived on various beans and seeds that were brought to her by none other than Daniel. This is referred to in the Megillah text as "manot." Daniel, the seasoned, adjusted captive, brought packages – manot – to someone else in need. And thus the idea for mishloach manot was born. Hamantaschen is a reminder of this act of selflessness.

Mishloach manot is an act of kindness. By sending gifts of food to our friends and neighbors, it tells them that we are thinking about their joy and happiness. In times when we've all had more than enough of alone time and social distance, these mitzvot help us rebuild vital social connections to one another. More than that, they help us discover the joy we can help create in others is some of the deepest happiness that life can bring.

Wishing you all the happiness and joy. Stay safe out there,

Rabbi Stephen Berger