

The Ingeniousness of Purim

By Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas
(JTA)

The Purim festival, centered on the reading of the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther, is one of the strangest and most interesting Jewish holidays. It is serious, because it deals with the problem of anti-Semitism, but it is also silly because we celebrate it with merry-making.

The Megillah we read does not mention the name of God. The service is in the synagogue, which should be conducted with respect and decorum, yet is accompanied by laughter, hooting and noise-making. There really is no mystery in this, for Purim actually is a mirror of life and the Jewish people: ups and downs, laughter and tears, fears and hopes, triumphs and failures.

The basic story, of course, is that the Persian official Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people simply because, in his own words, "they were different." He almost succeeded, but the day was saved by Jewish Queen Esther, who pointed out Haman's hatred and false accusations to the King. What could have been a tragedy turned out to be a triumph, and potential mourning was turned into popular merry-making.

Note that the salvation came through a woman. Because of this, one of the commandments of Judaism is that the public reading of the Megillah in the synagogue should be attended by women.

The Hadassah organization, now celebrating its 75th anniversary, was founded on Purim. Since the Hebrew name of Esther was Hadasah, Henrietta Szold, the founder, logically picked this as the name of the new Jewish organization which was to be devoted to saving the Jewish people.

The Megillah is a parchment scroll that traditionally is read on the evening and morning of the festival. It was written in the manner of a Torah scroll. Some Megillot have a special style: The text is divided so that every column begins with "hamelech" (the king). As it is read, it is folded like a letter of dispatch to commemorate the fact that letters, at first, were sent to notify the country of the destruction of the Jews.

It has long been a tradition to "razz" Haman throughout the reading. This is done through making noise whenever his name is uttered by the reader of the Megillah. The "grogger" is the usual instrument. It has various manifestations of wood, silver, tin, etc. Generally, it makes a loud clanging or clacking sound. In Israel it is the object of many art forms.

Other instruments may also be used to drown out Haman's name — horns, pots and spoons, kazoos, wooden blocks. In the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, congregants used a blacksmith's hammer and anvil. In other places, people wrote Haman's name on the bottom

of their shoes and stamped him out.

This all is done to give literal meaning to "blotting out" the name of Amalek (the code name for the anti-Semite) while making sure, in the strange paradox commanded by Deuteronomy (25:19), that we "do not forget." In Eastern Europe it was the custom to test a new pen by writing the word "Amalek" and then crossing it out.

Of course, no Jewish holiday could be complete without attention to food. The paradox here is that the day before Purim is known as "Taanit Estayr" (the Fast of Esther). It is in remembrance of Esther's request to Mordechai that Jews fast for three days and pray for her. But this is followed by a "seudah" (feast) which features kreplach — dough filled with meat or cheese.

The most distinctive food for Purim is hamantaschen, a triangular pastry filled with poppy seeds, prunes, apricots and other foods. Some people say that the triangular shape is a reminder of the Persian hats worn by the courtiers such as Haman. In Italy the pastries are known as "orecchi di Haman" (Haman's ears).

Although Jews emphasize sobriety, it is proper to drink alcoholic beverages on Purim. By tradition one is permitted to drink to the point where one confuses the distinction between "blessed be Mordechai" and "cursed by Haman."

Gifts of baked goods, fruit, almonds, etc., are customarily sent in small packages or decorated baskets. This tradition is called "Misloach Manot" (sending presents). The poor are not to be forgotten.

Masked balls, parties, plays, parodies and carnivals are part of the Purim celebration. In Tel Aviv there is a huge parade featuring floats, clowns and bizarre costumes.

Judaism acknowledges through the observance of Purim that the urge for retribution is normal — especially for a people that has known more than its share of the cruel vicissitudes of history.

Nevertheless, the urge must be no more than fantasy — to be indulged through the noise, tumult, costumes, drinking and play-acting that are part of the Purim celebration. It is neither a spirit to be sanctified nor a program for action. Purim thus helps us cope with the burdens of our history while we rejoice in our survival.

The Midrash says that even if all of the other holidays disappeared, Purim should remain. Why? Perhaps no other holiday reminds us of the risks of powerlessness, the dangers of assimilation, the need to overcome the mentality of victimization and the dignity of every Jew like Mordechai who refused to bow to anyone but God.

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for what has been done in our name, even if those who did it were our most bitter enemies".

Tid-Bits

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Senate confirmed Henry Grunwald to be U.S. ambassador to Austria. He was confirmed by voice vote without debate. Grunwald, 65, was born in Austria, and left Vienna in 1940 to flee the Nazis.

VIENNA (JTA) — Former Chancellor Bruno Kreisky of Austria has admitted he erred when he proposed Kurt Waldheim for the office of United Nations secretary general in the early 1970s.

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Lawyers for Anne Henderson Pollard have filed suit with the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington in an attempt to reverse federal district court Judge Aubrey Robinson's Dec. 6 ruling denying Pollard

medical treatment by her family doctors. Robinson is the same man who told the Pollards he could not tolerate the word "Israel" in his presence.

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel will eventually own the Voice of America radio transmitter the U.S. is building in the Arava region of the Negev. Under the agreement with the U.S., formally endorsed by the Cabinet on Aug. 3, 1986, the facility will revert to Israeli ownership 25 years after it goes into operation, at no cost to Israel.

MIAMI (JTA) — A black and a Jewish newspaper here have launched an experimental year-long inter-ethnic dialogue in print that may be unique in the U.S. The two weeklies began sharing publishers' columns, opinion pieces and news items. The columns will appear quarterly.

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