

The Jewish Center

Holiday Guide to Purim

Typical of a long line of persecutions which our people in the Diaspora have endured and survived, Purim tells the story of a grudge by the royal counselor Haman against Mordechai, a Jew in Shushan of Persia. In typical bigot's fashion, Haman indicts the entire Jewish people to King Ahasuerus as a danger to the stability of the regime. Lots (*Purim*) are cast and the date for the massacre of the Jews is set for the 13th of the month of Adar. After the intervention of Queen Esther, a cousin of Mordechai, the King promulgates a new law, authorizing the Jews to organize and defend themselves.

The Festival takes its name from the Hebrew word *pur* (lot) and is celebrated on the 14th day of Adar, following the 13th – the Fast of Esther – when the Jews fought for their survival. During the difficult and dark days of our history, celebrating Purim renewed our trust in deliverance from the many dangers faced by our people. The holiday has always been characterized by celebration, feasting and wearing of costumes and masks. At the mention of the name Haman, during the reading of the *Megillah* (the Scroll of Esther) in the synagogue, it is customary to stamp one's feet, bang sticks together or use noise-makers to blot out the name. In some communities in Europe, men would write Haman's name on the soles of their shoes, so that by the stamping, his name would be erased during the *Megillah* reading.

The *Megillah* – the story of Esther and Mordechai – is read aloud in the synagogue in both the evening and morning service. The names of Haman's ten sons, executed with their father, are read in one breath, to lessen the appearance of gloating or satisfaction over their death.

A special Tractate of the Talmud, named *Megillah*, details the observances and joyfulness of the Holiday. We observe seven mitzvot on Purim: read the *Megillah*; exchange gifts; make charity; read Torah; recite the prayer *Al HaNissim* ("For the miracles which You gave...") in the synagogue service and in grace after meals; a festive meal (of course) and refrain from mourning and from fasting.

Here at The Jewish Center, festive *Megillah*-reading services complete with costumes are held for participants of all ages, from nursery classes to adults. We also participate in the giving of *Shalach Manot* baskets to our friends and neighbors and to people in need. These usually contain treats such as candy and *Hamentaschen* – the triangle-shaped pastries filled with sweet jam which, according to tradition, are shaped like Haman's hat, or in Hebrew *oznei Haman*, Haman's ears. Please consult TJC's newsletter or the website for details on the scheduling of our Purim festivities.