



To help enrich your appreciation of the upcoming holiday, Kolel is happy to provide this “fact sheet.” We hope it helps you prepare both spiritually and physically. Please feel free to study with us any time at www.kolel.org or at any of our classes at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, the Bathurst Jewish Community Centre, or the Family Resource Centre at the Promenade. You can reach us at 416-636-1880 ext 255.



PURIM

WHAT IS IT?

A joyous holiday celebrating the victory of the Jews over a decree of annihilation put out by King Ahashverosh and his evil advisor Haman. Pronounced “Poor-im.” The word “Purim” actually means “lots” and refers to the lottery that Haman used to choose the date for the massacre.

WHY IS IT?

Purim is a historical holiday with no ties to the agricultural cycle. The heroes of the story are Esther, a beautiful (and smart!) Jewish woman, and Mordecai, who raised her as his daughter. Esther was taken to the house of Ahashverosh, King of Persia, to become part of his harem. The villain of the story is Haman, a proto-typical “anti-Semite” who hated the Jews. Haman plotted to destroy the Jewish people, and because she was part of the royal family, Esther was able to save them. Purim is a story of intrigue, deception, assassination, a foolish king, a wise and beautiful queen, and a hateful villain.

WHEN IS IT?

The 14th of the Hebrew month Adar, which usually falls around March. In walled cities since the time of Joshua, like Jerusalem, it is celebrated a day later on the 15th of Adar, and is known as Shushan Purim.

WHERE IS IT FROM?

The Book of Esther (which is in the Tanach, in the Five Megillot) describes the entire story and records the command to send gifts, have days of feasting and joy, and give special tzedakah. Later the Talmud, mostly in Tractate Megillah, details the rules for its celebration, including permission to dress in costume and even get drunk! (So drunk that one cannot distinguish between “blessed in Mordecai” and “cursed is Haman.” Of course today, with the terrible dangers of drunk driving and the abuse of alcohol, we promote drinking in moderation!)

WHAT DO WE DO?

There is a tradition to fast the day before Purim (“the fast of Esther”) which recalls the fast Esther made before meeting with the King to plead for the Jews. The primary ritual on Purim is to hear the story read from the Megillah (“scroll.”) There is a party-like atmosphere with people in costumes. Every time the name Haman is read, people hiss, boo, and use noisemakers called “graggers” to drown out his name. Carnival-like celebrations with games and treats are held in the community. “Mishloach-manot” (“shlach manos” in Ashkenazi/Yiddish pronunciation) are gifts of two or more food delicacies delivered to at least one person on Purim. “Matanot l’evyonim” are gifts to the poor, special tzedakah given on this holiday. Purim lends itself to parody and humour. It is the day on which we are allowed to make fun of ourselves, our enemies, even our sacred institutions. We are invited to stray from our normal behaviour, participate in “controlled chaos” and create an outlet for healthy questioning of our lives while symbolizing the paradox of what is “hidden” and what is “revealed” in our world.

WHAT DO WE EAT?

Pastries called hamentaschen (meaning Haman's pockets; called in Israel Oznei Haman- Haman's ears) which are triangular and filled in the middle with sweet fruit or poppy seed fillings. It is also a custom to eat kreplach or filled dumplings. The midrash teaches that when Esther went into the palace, in order to avoid eating non-kosher food, she only ate seeds and legumes, giving rise to the tradition of eating poppy seeds, and dishes with beans and chickpeas.

WHAT DO WE SAY?

Although Purim is not a “chag” with the sabbath-like restrictions on work we still say “chag sameach” but add the word “Purim” to say “chag Purim sameach” and refrain from ordinary business out of respect for the holiday.