

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living  
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### Topic: Purim

**Key Idea:** The festival of *Purim*, which derives its name from the word *pur* (lot), is celebrated on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Adar. Cities that were walled in ancient times celebrate a second day of Purim called *Shushan Purim*. The celebration of *Purim* is associated with costumes, merrymaking and noise, and is sometimes described as a Jewish version of Mardi Gras, which provided a respite from the serious and often difficult aspects of Jewish life. The Babylonian Talmud tractate *Megillah* discusses various *mitzvot* observed on *Purim*, including the reading of *Megillat Esther* (the biblical Book of Esther); the exchange of food delicacies among friends (*lishloach manot*); giving charity to the poor (*matanot l'evyonim*); and partaking of a *Purim* feast (*seudat Purim*). Mourning and fasting are forbidden on *Purim*, but the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar is observed as a dawn to dusk fast known as the Fast of Esther (*taanit Esther*). A *Purim* version of *Al-haNissim* is added to the *Amidah* and to the *birkat ha-mazon* (grace after meals).

*Megillat Esther* was one of the last books added to the *TaNakh*, and is the only book of the Bible that has not been found among the scrolls found near the Dead Sea at Qumran. The biblical book provokes some interesting theological questions, particularly why God's name never appears in it. Rabbinic discussions of the book deal with how God manifests His presence in the world, and suggest that God is "hidden" in the *Megillah* ("Esther" can be translated as "I will hide") but acting behind the scenes. *Megillat Esther* also deals with perennial themes such as anti-Semitism, fluctuating levels of Jewish political power and powerlessness in the diaspora, and Jewish communal responses to disaster and joy. The nineteenth century Jewish historian Heinrich Grätz assigned the authorship of Esther to an adherent of the Maccabean party in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. Most contemporary Jewish Studies scholars believe that *Megillat Esther* is a historical novella whose author, date and place of composition are unknown, but most likely was composed sometime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE in Judea, not in Persia. Since the date of Purim falls usually within the week of the vernal equinox, and the ancient Iranian year began at the vernal equinox, Purim may have originally been observed as the Persian New Year festival (*Noruz*). The Maccabee victory over the Seleucid general Nicanor fell on the thirteenth day of Adar, according to the first century Judean author Josephus, who reports that Jews celebrated this victory every year.

#### **Our discussion of the texts:**

**Text 1: Esther 9:20-32.** The biblical account of how Purim became a festival and how it was to be observed.

**Suppl. text: Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 12, Chapter 10:5 (c. 160 BCE).** The defeat of the Greek general Nicanor during the Hasmonean wars.

And when Nicanor came down from the citadel unto the temple, some of the priests and elders met him, and saluted him; and showed him the sacrifices which they offered to God for the king: upon which he blasphemed, and threatened them, that unless the people would deliver up Judas to him, upon his return he would pull down their temple. And when he had thus threatened them,

he departed from Jerusalem. But the priests fell into tears out of grief at what he had said, and besought God to deliver them from their enemies. But now for Nicanor, when he was gone out of Jerusalem, and was at a certain village called Bethoron, he there pitched his camp, another army out of Syria having joined him. And Judas pitched his camp at Adasa, another village, which was thirty furlongs distant from Bethoron, having no more than one thousand soldiers. And when he had encouraged them not to be dismayed at the multitude of their enemies, nor to regard how many they were against whom they were going to fight, but to consider who they themselves were, and for what great rewards they hazarded themselves, and to attack the enemy courageously, he led them out to fight, and joining battle with Nicanor, which proved to be a severe one, he overcame the enemy, and slew many of them; and at last Nicanor himself, as he was fighting gloriously, fell: - upon whose fall the army did not stay; but when they had lost their general, they were put to flight, and threw down their arms. Judas also pursued them and slew them, and gave notice by the sound of the trumpets to the neighboring villages that he had conquered the enemy; which, when the inhabitants heard, they put on their armor hastily, and met their enemies in the face as they were running away, and slew them, insomuch that not one of them escaped out of this battle, who were in number nine thousand. This victory happened to fall on the thirteenth day of that month which by the Jews is called Adar and by the Macedonians Dystrus; and the Jews thereon celebrate this victory every year, and esteem it as a festival day. After which the Jewish nation were, for a while, free from wars, and enjoyed peace; but afterward they returned into their former state of wars and hazards.

**Text 2: Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 1:5.** Concerns expressed by the Sages about the establishment of Purim as a Jewish holiday.

**Text 3: Babylonia Talmud, Megillah 4a.** The rabbinic *mitzvah* of reading *Megillat Esther* on Purim.

**Text 4: Babylonia Talmud, Megillah 7a.** The customs of sending presents of fine foods to friends and neighbors (*lishloach manot*) and giving gifts to the poor (*matanot l'evyonim*).

**Text 5: Babylonia Talmud, Megillah 7b.** The consequences of overindulgence at a Purim feast.

**Text 6: Irving "Yitz" Greenberg. Purim: The Re-enactment.** The evolution of the observance of Purim.

**Text 7: Babylonia Talmud, Megillah 14a.** Why Hallel is not recited on Purim.

**Text 10: Jerusalem Talmud, Megilla 1:5.** A rabbinic debate over whether or not the *halakha* will be obsolete in the messianic era.

**Text 8: Michael Shashar. On Purim.** Perhaps the events of Purim never actually happened and the story and observances were developed in order to justify the observance of a pagan holiday which Jews had adopted and Judaized.

**Text 9: Rabbi Julie Pelc, From Reverence to Revery.** Regardless of the origins of the holiday, Purim's importance in all generations is its central message of salvation in the face of oppression and persecution.