



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Tetzaveh/Shabbat Zachor/Purim 5766**  
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**Shalom!**



### **Introduction**

With all the celebrating and liquid excess that sometimes accompany the holiday of Purim that will occur on Monday night and Tuesday of the coming week, it may be useful to take a "sobering" look at the holiday.

On Purim, things get all turned around. It's a theme of the day. Maybe that's why Jews do things on Purim they don't do all year long. They make lots of noise in the synagogue. [Of course, you never do that!] Some drink so much that they don't know who's the good guy and who's the bad one. [Ditto!!] They even put on costumes and masks. [Well, some of us wear masks all the time. We just don't admit it.]

In keeping with this turnabout theme of Purim, let's do something people usually don't do on or about Purim. Let's get serious. Seriously! You see, we shouldn't conceive of Purim as being a Hebraic Mardi Gras, a Jewish mutation of New Year's Eve and Halloween. There's got to be more to this holiday. Of course, there is. You expected it, didn't you? Well, like a hamantasch, here are three Purim points -- sober ones. No joke.

I. Drowned out by the noise at the Megillah reading are Purim's other prescribed activities: the Fast of Esther, sending food to friends, giving gifts to the needy, and joining together for a joyous, yet religiously oriented meal. Okay, we've had a long, bitter history of suppression. It's natural to want to rejoice at an enemy's defeat. But that's not the thrust of a single Purim mitzvah! Look at the list. It suggests, rather, a drawing together among Jews -- a call for unity and community at all levels, in all ways, among all economic classes, with family, friends, and strangers.

Maybe this suggests an answer to Purim's unasked question. Why did Purim occur? Why did the Jews find themselves in a position of utter destruction? It isn't only God who has to be "One," but also God's people. Early Rabbinic commentaries suggest discord among the Jews of Esther's time. Some Jews chose to go to the King's party. They drank and took part in the "fun." Jewish

moderation and decency went out the window. Other Jews saw the dangers and stayed away. But they didn't reach out to their fellows. Instead, they chose to separate themselves from the others - for the sake of their own religious preservation. Mordechai and Esther understood we are all in the same boat. They cared enough and loved enough to extend themselves, even to the point of endangering their lives. Therefore, they could bring the Jews back into one cohesive and viable community. They formalized the lesson by instituting rituals and activities that foster Jewish unity. These rituals create within us a common Jewish memory, warm friendships, and caring behaviors. They work.

2. Did you know that Megillat Esther is the only book of the Bible in which God's name does not appear? There's absolutely no clear mention of God's presence or role. But look closely. You can see God's hand. As the Talmud says, "God creates the cure before the illness." Vashti falls. The King sends out ludicrous decrees. Esther becomes queen. Mordechai saves the King's life. The King owes him big time, but forgets. All this before Haman ascends to a position where he can do us harm. And on just the right night the King can't sleep and is reminded he owes Mordechai. And just after Haman accidentally trips, the King returns to Esther's chamber to see Haman fall on her ... couch. And another advisor points out that Haman was about to execute the King's friend, Mordechai. Ah, sex and politics. His Majesty smells a conspiracy and destroys the enemy of the Jews. We may not always see the hand of God too clearly, but it is there, even in our times. Have faith.

3. Megillat Esther is the last book canonized in the Bible. Because it takes place in the Diaspora, it's full of lessons for Jews on how to survive in a Diaspora environment where we don't have the power of our own government. Its suggestions include that:

- We must be alert always to what is happening around us.
- We should negotiate when we can and act quickly when we can't.
- We should develop alliances. Mordechai heard the plans of the assassins and later of Haman and acted through friends.
- We can be in the world, but we don't have to act like everyone else in it. "There was a Jewish Man who lived in the castle of Shushan [Esther 2:5]." Mordechai's greatness was that he wasn't only a good Jew at home, in the synagogue, or with fellow Jews, but also in the streets and royal offices of Shushan. He didn't leave home without it!

Megillat Esther also tells us that:

- There are times to wear masks, and times to take them off.
- There are times to bow and times to stand tall.
- We need to know that there are times to forgive and times when we cannot.

And its last verse hints that no matter how successful we may be or want to be on the outside, our Jewish home and family must come first. They are our havens.

See, there's much more to Purim than noise, graggers, and hamantaschen. But did you really think I could let you get away without one Purim joke?!!

Moishe was a waiter at Max's Delicatessen for forty years. He was a fixture. But like all good things, he dies.

His friends want to say one last goodbye, so they organize a séance. The medium says, "Just give a knock on the table like you used to do to get his attention -- and he will appear." So they knock on the table. No Moishe. They knock again. No Moishe. They start to call his name and yell. Suddenly he appears with a towel over his arm. "So where were you," they demanded, "when we knocked and knocked?"

"It's not my table."

The joke may not have anything to do with Purim, but I think it's funny. Okay, so maybe they ordered a prune hamantasch.



### **Questions for Your Family's Discussion**

1. What are the ritual similarities between Purim and Passover? What can we learn from them?
2. The story of Purim talks about an active Jewish community living in what is now Iran over 2500 years ago. Does this story relate to what is going on in the world today – not just the Jewish world?



### **Some Texts to Wrestle With**

During the story in the Book of Esther, Mordechai sends Esther to intervene with King Ahashverosh on behalf of the Jews of the kingdom:

*Mordecai bade them to return and answer Esther: Do not think that you will escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if you hold your peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but you and thy father's house will perish. And who knows whether you attained royal office for such a time as this?*

- Esther 4:13-14

- What is the author saying about how one's position in society or government should be used?

As the holiday of Purim is established, the Book of Esther states that:

*they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.*

- Esther 9:22

Matanot L'evyonim – gifts of food to the poor – remains an important observance of this holiday. How are the poor helped to observe other holidays such as Pesach?

### **Towards an Action Agenda**

1. Our Purim holiday commemorates the saving of the Jews of the Persian Empire. But there are also Purim-like holidays that are observed by local communities and by families who experienced and survived threats against them. Learn about these by going to [Local Purim celebrations](#)
2. Unfortunately, the anti-Semitism displayed by Haman in the Purim story continues to exist today. Recently, several attacks (including one instance of torture and murder) against Jews have taken place in France. Learn about this at [French anti-Semitism](#)



***Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!***

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

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