

Purim: Commonly Asked Questions



Purim, or the Feast of Lots, is a joyous holiday that recounts the saving of the Jews from a threatened massacre in Persia. The faithful Jew, Mordecai, and his niece/ward, the beautiful Esther, save the Jews from King Ahasuerus' evil grand vizier, Haman. An excellent source for the detailed story is www.myjewishlearning.com.

Why is Purim called the "Feast of Lots"?

This holiday is certainly an example of the saying, "they tried to kill us, they didn't succeed; let's eat!" The evil Haman *cast lots* to determine the day he would hang the Jews. Esther saved us from Haman and we celebrate by feasting.

I don't see God mentioned in the story, why not?

This question puzzled the ancient rabbis also. God is never specifically mentioned. The rabbis taught that God is hidden in the story. God brings about the salvation of the Jews like a puppeteer from behind the scene.

Why do we make Hamantaschen?

Hamentaschen means "Haman's hat" and recalls Haman's three cornered hat. In the same way that we eat fried foods at Chanukah to remind us of the oil in the temple, we eat hat-shaped cookies to remind us of the story of Purim.

What are mishloach manot?

The phrase means "sending of portions" and it is a basket of food, often fruit and cookies, given to friends, loved ones and especially to the poor. We are supposed to give these baskets to assure that everyone has food for the feast of Purim.

Can I give a Purim basket to my non-Jewish grandparents/cousins/neighbors?

Certainly! It is always appropriate to share food with others, especially the poor. It is a great way for kids to teach loved ones about the holiday. *Mishloach manot* are supposed to express love and caring so give them to anyone you love.

What are the home based customs of Purim?

Making hamantaschen and Purim baskets and *seudah*, a festive meal.

I've heard that you're supposed to get drunk on Purim, is that true?

The rabbinic command is to drink until you don't know the difference between Mordecai and Haman. But rabbis do not support out and out drunkenness. Traditional Jews opt for a daytime nap which substitutes the oblivion of sleep for the confusion of intoxication.

What are the synagogue based customs of Purim?

At Purim the scroll of Esther is read aloud, telling the entire story of Purim. This is a loud and participatory event with congregants booing or cheering, and whirling groggers (noise makers) to drown out the name of the evil Haman. Many communities have a Purim shpiel, a play telling the story of Purim with jokes, songs and silliness. Purim carnivals focus on games of chance. All these events can be attended in costume. Typically children dress up for synagogue Purim activities.

Fun fact: Just as Jews in America have changed Chanukah from a minor holiday to a major holiday to stand up to the big American holiday, Christmas, Jews in Iran (Persia) have made Purim a major holiday to stand up to the big Iranian holiday, Nowruz.

More information for interfaith, intercultural families can be found through Building Jewish Bridges, (510) 845-6420 x11 or www.buildingjewishbridges.org.

