

Beyond Purim: The History of the Jews of Persia

The Jewish community in Persia, now known as Iran, has its origins tracing back to the 6th century BCE, beginning during the First Temple period. This community was established during the First Exile when Jewish groups settled throughout Babylon and Persian territories, including Hamadan and Susa. These settlements are historically documented in the biblical books of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel. Over the subsequent 500 years, the Jewish community in Persia expanded, although the Arab Muslim conquest in 642 CE introduced state-sponsored Islam, affecting the socio-political standing of Persian Jews.

By the 19th century, the community faced challenges such as forced conversions and discrimination, prompting a significant number to migrate to Israel and embrace Zionism. Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran was home to approximately 80,000 Jews. The revolution led to a mass emigration of Persian Jews, who left behind considerable assets. Following the revolution, Iran cut diplomatic ties with Israel and has since supported anti-Jewish terrorist groups.

Despite these challenges, Iran's Jewish population of approximately 9,000 remains the largest in the Middle East outside of Israel.

Purim Ideas for Everyone

- Give a gift of food containing at least two items to a neighbor.
- Make a donation to an organization that stands against anti-Semitism.
- Host a Purim meal and print out some Purim songs, games, or props from pjlibrary.org/purim.
- Visit a local Purim carnival or Purim *shpiel* (funny, dramatic, community Purim play). Most synagogues host these events on Purim itself or the Sunday before/after, and welcome community members.
- Read an article analyzing Purim's modern implications from the Shalom Hartman Institute at hartman.org.il/topic/purim.
- Search for a Purim playlist on Spotify.

Learn more about PJCC's Jewish programs and events at pjcc.org/jewish-life.



The PJCC is proud to be a part of the Koret Initiative on Jewish Peoplehood. We are honored to present this program through the Taube Center for Jewish Peoplehood at the PJCC.



Peninsula Jewish Community Center
800 Foster City Blvd., Foster City, CA. 94404
650.212.PJCC (7522) | pjcc.org

JLIFE_A2003



Purim פורים

Sundown, Thursday, March 13–
Nightfall, Friday, March 14, 2025

Complete Cliff Notes of the Purim Story

by Rabbi Laurie Matzkin,
PJCC Chief Jewish Experience Officer

- Our story begins in Shushan, capital of ancient Persia, currently southwest Iran, around the 5th Century, BCE.
- King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes of Persia, dethrones and exiles Queen Vashti for refusing to dance in front of his court.
- Esther is crowned queen after winning a beauty contest, with her Jewish identity still hidden.
- Mordechai, Esther's cousin or maybe uncle, who serves in the court, uncovers a plot to assassinate the king and reports it.
- Mordechai's kindness is recorded and noted by the king.
- King Ahasuerus promotes Haman to Royal Vizier, making him more powerful than all the other officials. Haman has been planting anti-Semitic ideas to the king about the threat of this "strange Jewish people" who have different beliefs and practices.
- Mordechai refuses to bow before Haman, who wants totalitarian-style obedience from anyone in his path. Mordechai follows Jewish tradition in that one should only bow to God, in both body and spirit, rather than human kings.
- Haman becomes obsessed with destroying the Jews after his run-in with Mordechai.
- Mordechai appeals to Esther to save her people by interceding between the king and Haman. This would necessitate her "coming out" as Jewish and increasing her personal risk.
- Esther approaches King Ahasuerus and invites him and Haman to a banquet.
- Mordechai is honored for having saved the king's life. He is invited to wear the royal garb and ride the royal horse through the court square, led by a furious and embarrassed Haman.
- Esther invites the king and Haman to a second banquet, where she exposes both Haman's plot and her own Jewish identity and pleads for her people.
- The king grants Esther's request and condemns Haman to die on the same gallows that he built for Mordechai.
- The Jews defend themselves throughout Persia, as the royal decree of genocide against the Jews can apparently not be annulled. Mordechai advances to a position of importance in the court.
- The holiday of Purim is established on the 14th and 15th days of the month of Adar, in memory of the courage of Mordechai and Esther. Customs include hosting a celebratory festive meal, sending edible gift baskets to neighbors, donating to charity, and reading the scroll of Esther to hear the full story each year.

What stands out to you as a lesson of the Purim story?

Purim is the quintessential story of enemies who sought to destroy the Jewish people. We rejoice in our victory, yet also contemplate how precarious our existence when we are at the mercy of others. As we celebrate the courage of Mordechai and Esther, we remember that miracles are made by people who act valiantly in the face of danger. The story of Purim hinges on Haman's hatred of the Jews as "other," as not having the right to belong and live in his land. As hostility and fear of people who are "not our kind" has become normalized in our time, the Purim story serves as a warning to all of us of how quickly personal grudges can spiral into violent and dangerous plans.

Like Mardi Gras, Purim invites wild merriment and wearing costumes and masks. It's also a day of reversals, in Hebrew "*nahafoch hu*." Haman wants to hang Mordechai on the gallows, but he is the one hanged; Esther hides her Jewishness and then takes off her "mask" and reveals her true identity. Ultimately, the masquerade of Purim reminds us not to judge people by their external presentation, but to look behind the mask and see each person as they truly are.

A Purim Teaching for a Topsy-Turvy World

Rava said, "A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he is so intoxicated that he does not know how to distinguish between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai."

—Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 7b

The Purim story functions on multiple levels. On a historical level it is a clear warning of the dangers of mixing power and prejudice. It also serves as a literary parable to illustrate how a society functions without the safeguard of clear moral parameters. This teaching posits that Haman's evil is so clear that there is no way to justify it in a rational, sober, mindset.

Although Purim is a fabulous time to be festive, all of us would be well-served to keep our wits about us and stay true to the cause of supporting peace, security, and freedom for all communities.

How We Celebrate

Purim is the most joyous day of the Jewish calendar. It is observed by hearing a celebratory public reading of *Megillat Esther* (Scroll of Esther). When Haman's name is read, people boo, hiss, and make noise, often with the aid of noisemakers (*grogger* in Yiddish or *ra'ashan* in Hebrew), in order to blot out the villain's name. It is customary to dress up in costumes, wear masks, and to engage in revelry even in synagogue! During the day, people make a sumptuous festive meal with plenty of alcohol and eat *hamantaschen* (Haman's pockets in Yiddish) or *Oznei Haman* (Haman's ears in Hebrew). These triangular pastries filled with jam or poppy seeds are meant to resemble Haman's hat or, some say his ears. Purim *shpiels* (dramatic readings or plays) poking fun at the Purim story are performed, and many communities hold carnivals, emphasizing the playful element of the holiday. On Purim it is also customary to give charity to the poor and send gifts of food to friends and family.