

Eat, Drink, and Be Holy: The Holiday of Purim

On its surface, the holiday of Purim is fairly straightforward, characterized by an atmosphere of joy and celebration. We are required to eat and to drink; we parade around in outlandish costumes; and we make loud noises that can hardly be described as dignified.

Still, beneath its almost too obvious guise of merriment, Purim is marked by a seriousness of purpose equal to that of the most solemn holiday. We are required to perform a variety of *mitzvot* -- and from each we learn an important lesson.

One of the most important things we learn from Purim is that no person can exist alone. We share with others not only our daily lives but our hopes and dreams as well. Hillel taught: “*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibbur* -- Do not separate yourself from the community.” In each of the *mitzvot* we perform on Purim, we learn something new about the concept of sharing.

Reading the *Megillah*

Each year, we are required to listen to the complete reading of *Megillat Esther*. We are instructed to listen to every word and to do this twice -- evening and morning. Surely, if the Rabbis simply intended that we become familiar with the story, they would not have mandated that we listen to it *that* often and *that* carefully. Perhaps, in attending these public readings, we are being taught the value of sharing with the entire community recognition of, and appreciation for, our collective triumph over adversity.

Defeating Haman was a shared enterprise. Mordechai and Esther led the way, supported by the prayers of the entire Jewish people. In every generation, there are those like Haman who prey on people's basest fears in order to maximize their own power. Confronting such evil must be a shared responsibility. While one group may be singled out for harsh treatment, it is the responsibility of all good people to fight against this kind of tyranny.

Mishloah Manot

Each year, increasing numbers of Jews are discovering the wonderful Purim custom of sharing food with friends and neighbors, giving at least two types of food to at least two recipients. The *mitzvah* of *mishloah manot* is based on the verse in the *Megillah* instructing us to “send portions one to another” (9:22). Some people bake *hamantaschen* and other goodies, while others send food packages through their synagogue. Use this opportunity to spread Purim cheer to those who might not otherwise receive such gifts. Consider bringing some brightly decorated baskets to seniors, to the homebound, to newcomers, or to those whose families have moved away (your rabbi can provide you with names).

Matanot L'evyonim

Based on the injunction in the *Megillah* that on Purim we must “send gifts to the poor”(9:22), the holiday affords us a special opportunity to share our good fortune with those in need. Gifts can be given directly, e.g., bringing food and clothing to a homeless shelter, or indirectly, through an organized charity. It is important to keep in mind that whatever additional *tzedakah* we give throughout the year, donations must still be given on Purim itself. How important is this *mitzvah*? As Maimonides writes in his *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhos Megillah 2:17)*: “It is better for a person to increase gifts to the poor than to increase his feast or the *mishloah manot* to his neighbors. There is no joy greater or more rewarding than to gladden the heart of the poor, orphans, widows, and strangers. For by gladdening the hearts of the downtrodden, we are following the example of the Divine.”

Seudat Purim

Few things are more pleasurable than sharing a celebratory meal with our families. Happily, the *Megillah* tells us that Purim should be a time for feasting. This year, approach the Purim *seudah* with the commitment we bring to preparing the Passover *seder*. Wear special clothing (off-beat costumes are definitely permitted); prepare special foods; and learn Purim songs. Try hard to arrange your work schedule so there is sufficient time to relax and enjoy the meal fully.

*Written by Lois Goldrich
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Finally, in the spirit of Purim parodies, we offer our “Top Ten” reasons for celebrating this unique holiday:

1. Making noise in *shul* is a *mitzvah*.
2. Levity is not reserved for the Levites.
3. If you’re having a bad hair day, you can always wear a mask and no-one will know who you are.
4. Purim is easier to spell than the Hebrew name for the Festival of Lights.
5. You don’t have to *kasher* your home and change all the pots and dishes.
6. You don’t have to build a *sukkah* and eat outside.
7. You get to drink wine and you don’t have to stand for *Kiddush*.
8. You won’t get hit in the eye by a *lulav*.
9. Mordechai - 1; Haman - 0.
10. You can’t eat *hamentaschen* on Yom Kippur.

(Courtesy of Kenneth Goldrich)

THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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