

פּוּרִים

# Purim Traditions from the Lands of the Galuyot

## Sources

*Esther's Legacy: Celebrating Purim Around the World.* Ed. Barbara Vinick. (Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America & Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University, 2002)

*The Purim Anthology.* Ed. Philip Goodman. (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949)

*Sefer Hamoadim.* Tel-Aviv: Agudat 'Oneg Shabat (Ohel-shem) 'al yede Devir, 1952-57)

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## PURIM IN IRAN

The story of the Megillah took place in what is now Iran, which gives the holiday a special significance here. When asked how long there have been Jews in Iran, Iranian Jews answer, "From the time of Mordechai and Esther." They used to make pilgrimages to the alleged tomb of Mordechai and Esther, located at Hamadan, said to be the site of the biblical Shushan. It lies on the great trade route which connected Europe to China. According to one tradition, a person could escape to Israel through a passageway under the tombs. Inside the building you can see the only Hebrew inscriptions in all of Iran.

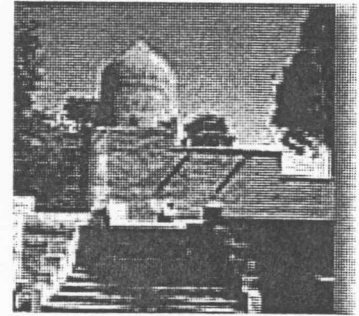


Image from  
[www.irancaravan.com](http://www.irancaravan.com)



Image from  
[www.bamiam.net/Iran/Hamadan.html](http://www.bamiam.net/Iran/Hamadan.html)

The Purim season begins with Shabbat Zachor. In Iran, it was distinguished not only by its special Torah reading, but also by the singing of special songs dealing with Purim and Haman. The children would lead the singing, after the Torah reading and again after the haftarah.

The worst winds of the year, similar to tornadoes, would come at the Purim season. Jewish parents called it "the wind of Haman," and said it was Haman going away.

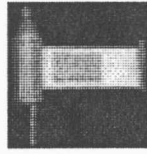
The fast of Esther was almost as important to Iranian Jews as Yom Kippur, perhaps because it was a reminder of how Jews had survived in Iran. Families ate a big breakfast at five o'clock in the morning, and then everyone fasted. Purim was every child's first fast, because it is shorter than the Yom Kippur fast that begins the evening before.

On Erev Purim the children would make an effigy of Haman, and at night they would pour oil on it and set it on fire. While it burned, they would circle it, chanting in Arabic, "This is Haman and Purim; and the basket is on his head." The basket could be a reference to Joseph's interpretation of the baker's dream, where the basket on his head was an omen that he would be hanged. When the effigy was completely burnt, but there were still flames, some of the children would jump across the flames, sometimes competing to see who could jump highest. This custom may stem from a Purim game mentioned in the Talmud [Sanhedrin 64b], in which children would jump over a fire built in a pit, or they would walk across a brick wall with a fire burning on either side of it. In Iran, people also waved sparklers, set off small firecrackers, and fired pop guns in the street, all probably also derived from the ancient custom of playing with fire on Purim. There was a general atmosphere of carnival.

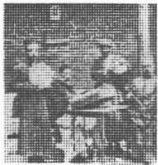
Purim, rather than Hanukkah, was the time children received gifts and money, perhaps because it falls near the Persian New Year. It was also a tradition for an engaged man to give gifts, called *Purimi*, to his fiancée. Sweet treats for Purim included *halvah* and *ghosh-hill*, elephant ears.

The megillah was read three times: in the evening, in the morning, and again in the evening of Purim day, in observance of Shushan Purim.

## PURIM IN IRAQ



Purim was a joyful holiday in Iraq. It was called *Ein el Majallah*, Arabic for "Holiday of the Megillah." Men and boys went to the synagogue to hear the megillah, while women and girls stayed home and prepared special foods for the Purim feast, as well as sweets to give to friends and to the poor. Families showed their wealth by the size and quantity



of pastries they offered. If a girl was engaged, it was customary for the bridegroom's family to bring Purim pastries and sweets to her family. There were also community activities, including dancing and drinking by the men. Purim was the only time of year when drinking was a prominent part of celebrating. Children wore colorful costumes, and entertainers went from house to house playing Purim songs.

People studied and read the megillah sitting around a table, so they banged their fists on the table to blot out Haman's name.

[Images from [www.babylonjewry.org.il](http://www.babylonjewry.org.il).]

## PURIM IN NORTH AFRICA

### ALGERIA

Children would bring plates of pastries from house to house, including cigar-shaped goodies filled with almond paste that were dipped in honey when eaten, and *makrout*, an Arabic specialty with layers of semolina and crushed dates fried in oil, also eaten with a honey sauce. There were also madeleines and macaroons. [*Esther's Legacy*, memoir of Madeline Cohen]

Many wax candles were lit for the Purim meal. Children were invited to light candles as on Hanukkah.

### MOROCCO

Families would make a big doll out of clay and hang it on the outside of the garden wall. They would explain to all that this represents Haman, the persecutor of the Jews, and they would invite everyone, including non-Jewish neighbors, to throw darts at him.

Mishloach manot were exchanged between parents and children and among children and their friends. Rather than sweets, they exchanged gifts of jewelry and perfume.

In the synagogue, when the hazzan called out *Baruch Mordechai*, "Blessed is Mordechai," the congregation answered *Arur Haman*, "Cursed is Haman." On Purim day, people brought a handkerchief filled with coins to the synagogue, and the money was distributed to the poor. Even the stingiest in the community would participate.

For the *seudat Purim*, the Purim feast, they would bake challot with whole hardboiled eggs inside. When they sliced and ate the challah, they would say that they were tearing out the eyes of Haman.

### TUNIS

All the schoolchildren participated in burning an effigy of Haman. Beginning at Rosh Hodesh Adar, the older children would save money in school to buy colored paper and rags to make their "Haman." Younger children made small "Hamans" out of paper. On Purim the students were excused from school for half the day. All the townspeople gathered at the school and stood around a large bonfire. The children all went up and threw their "Hamans" into the fire, and then they beat the burning Haman with special sticks. After all the Hamans had been thrown into the fire, salt and sulfur were added. Everyone stood around the fire, hitting the burning Hamans with sticks and shouting, *Baruch Mordechai, arur Haman*, "Long live Mordechai, cursed be Haman; *Bruchah Esther, arurah Zeresh*, "blessed be Esther, cursed be Zeresh."

### LIBYA

Two or three weeks before the "real" Purim, two other Purims were remembered in the synagogue in Libya: *Purim Burghul* and *Purim Sharif*. There were no actual celebrations of these days, but everyone heard about how the Jews of Libya had faced extinction in the past, and had been saved.

Purim itself was a joyous day. Everyone went to the synagogue in the evening and again on Purim day. Children wore costumes and put on performances based on the Purim story or on incidents from the history of the Jews in Libya. All day long, children would deliver plates of *mishloach manot*, going from house to house. They would bring to three needy people in the community and also to family and friends. There were usually *debla*, a kind of fried dough, served with honey sauce; *makrout*, with a semolina crust and ground dates inside, baked and eaten with another honey sauce, and sweet *bourekas*.



**Debla**, one of the many popular Purim sweets

Picture from <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/JewsofLibya/LibyanJews/museum/food.html>

Late in the day, the youngsters threw an effigy of Haman into the fire and jumped over the fire, competing to see who could jump highest.

Reference: *Esther's Legacy*, memoir of Vivienne Roumani-Denn.

## EGYPT

Children waited impatiently for Purim, when they would wear costumes, play with new toys, and fill their piggy banks with gift money. Older teenagers socialized on field trips to parks outside the city.

Young men rode through the Jewish street on horses, camels, or donkeys, to recall the verse "and they brought him [Mordechai] on horseback through the street of the city."  
[*Megillat Esther* 6:11]

Women baked for two weeks before the holiday, producing a tremendous variety of sweets, including *mamoul* filled with ground dates or crushed nuts; *kaak*, like small bagels, either sweet or toasted crisp with salt like a pretzel; sambousek made with a yeast dough filled with cheese, egg yolk, and mint; *basboursa* like baklava; *kenafa*, thin noodles cooked a little, filled with nuts and honey, and rolled up. Families would exchange plates and trays of goodies, which took days to consume afterwards.

Reference: *Esther's Legacy*, memoirs of Frida Shomer Bakal and Desire Sakkal.

## PURIM IN BUKHARA

The ground would usually be covered with snow at Purim. A large snow-Haman was built next to the synagogue. He might have charcoal eyes, a carrot nose, and a piece of a beet for his mouth. A "gold chain" made of melon peels was his sign of office, and he wore a broken pot on his head. After the Purim se'udah, the entire community gathered around the Haman. They made a large fire around it, of wood, rags, and paper. They sang, and watched until Haman melted in the heat and disappeared completely.



## PURIM IN INDIA

The first mention of Jews in India is in the first line of *Megillat Esther*, which reads, "It happened in the days of Ahashverosh, he who ruled from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces." In Marathi, the language the Bene Israel mostly speak, Purim is called *Holi cha San*. *Holi* is the Hindu festival that celebrates the onset of spring at about the same time. Both the festivals celebrate the victory of good over evil.

During the reading of the megillah in the synagogue, congregants would knock loudly against the wooden benches to show their contempt at every mention of the villain Haman. After the reading, the festivities really started. Children and young people would dress up in fancy costumes, act out the story of Purim and award a prize for the most authentic costume. Adults would enjoy an evening of jokes, humor and social drinking, enough that they could not distinguish between *arur Haman* and *baruch Mordechai*.

The woman of the house would prepare cookies from walnuts, almonds, and peanuts, and a special sweet savory called *Puran Poli*, a mixture of boiled gram, molasses, and cardamom powder which is ground together and used as a filling for wheat dough. The dough is flattened into a thin, circular flat bread and then baked on an open skillet.

Meanwhile, the children would make a life-size effigy of Haman with a rope round its neck. They would take this around the neighborhood shouting, "String up Haman and let him face death." Not only the Jewish children were involved. All the neighborhood children, whether Christian or Hindu or Moslem, joined in, showing the secular nature of the country and its acceptance of all religious practices – not just tolerance, but acceptance.

Reference: *Esther's Legacy*, memoir of Noreen Solomon Daniel.

## PURIM IN YEMEN

Yemenite Jews would make a big wooden horse and on it put a Haman scarecrow, made with two crossed pieces of wood as the frame and dressed in old clothes. Then they would sing, "Here comes the unfortunate Haman." At the end of Purim day, they would pour gasoline on the doll and burn him.

Alternatively, they would make a straw dummy and make it ride on a live donkey, or they would put the Haman figure in a wooden cart pulled by a donkey. They would parade from one house to another, singing "thus shall be done to the wicked Haman." At each house people would give the children treats and curse "Haman," beat him, or throw stones at him.



[Image from [www.torah tots.com](http://www.torah tots.com)]

The Haman was then hung from a high tree in the courtyard of the synagogue, where it was taunted, and people threw stones and arrows at it. At the end of Purim, the doll was taken down and burned. Finally, they would take the ashes and throw them in all four directions while saying, "Seize the corners of the earth, and shake the wicked out of it." (Job 38:13).

Yemenite Jews also used native plants for at Purim. They would find a cactus with many branches, spread them out like heads in a row, and call it "the 10 sons of Haman." Another plant they would call Zeresh. On the holiday they had two ways to dispose of these "enemies." One way was to bury Haman and his sons in one "grave" and Zeresh in another one. The other way was to throw darts at them, so that they would leak the milky juice from inside. They would say that these were the tears of Haman begging for forgiveness, but he didn't deserve it.

They also make models of Mordechai riding on horseback with Haman leading him.

An important aspect of Purim was to help the poor – to give them flour and other staples and also sweets. Women made the food, including *malawah*, fried dough; *lahouch*, a spongy pita with a lot of holes; *jachnun*, a kind of dough rolled with butter, *zalabia*, triangles of dough fried like doughnuts, dried fruits, including dates and raisins; almonds, dried peas and corn. The food was put on trays and covered with napkins for delivery. People went from house to house shouting "*Arur Haman, baruch Mordechai!* Damn Haman, Bless Mordechai!" The men would sit around with the water pipe after the celebrations, chewing qat, something like hashish. There was a joke that if a woman wanted something from her husband, this was the time to ask him! [Reference: *Esther's Legacy*, memoir of Ayelet Edry Cohen and Sarah Solomon Edry.]

The privilege of reading the Megillah used to be bought by donating oil and wax for the synagogue, and the reader also hosted the Purim se'udah. As a general rule, men who had been married during the previous year were the purchasers, and the honor was shared between two of them. When there were several bridegrooms who could not agree which of them would have the honor of making the donation and of reading, the Beit Din ruled that the honor should be put up for public auction, and go to the highest bidders, who must then bring the oil and wax they had bid.



Before the reading of the megillah, the congregation recited selected verses in praise of G od, such as 'אֶזְכֹּר תְהִילָת ה' 'חֲסִדֵי ה' "I will recount the kind acts of the Lord, the praises of the Lord." [Isaiah 63:7]. When it was time to read the megillah, the hazzan called out in a loud voice: "Blessed be so-and-so, the Bridegroom." The reader then stood up and took the Megillah, opened it and said, *Birshut rabotai*, "with your permission, Sirs," and they would answer, "With the permission of Heaven!" Then the reader said the brachah and began to read. The reader recited one half of the verse. The congregation whispered it after him, and then said the second half of the verse out loud.

The reading of the Megillah was divided between two bridegrooms. One read the first half, through the verse where Mordechai tells Esther that perhaps she has reached her royal position just for a crisis like the present one. [Chapter 4, verse 14] Then the hazzan called the second reader. The second bridegroom repeated the formula of requesting and receiving permission and then continued the reading.

At the morning reading of the Megillah, the order of the bridegrooms was reversed; the reader who began the Megillah the night before now read the second half, and vice versa.

During the reading, both evening and morning, it was the custom to light ten wax candles in a circle, representing the ten sons of Haman.

Reference: *The Purim Anthology* edited by Philip Goodman (JPS, 1949).

During the reading of the megillah in the synagogue there was total silence. Even children listened seriously. There were no noisemakers, no commotion around Haman's name. Ideally, every person had an individual megillah. The well to do had a kosher megillah written on parchment; others have a paper copy. At end of the reading there is a responsive exchange between the reader and the listeners:

READER:

אָרוּר הָמָן *Arur haman*

אָרוּרָה זֶרֶשׁ *Arurah zeresh*

בְּרוּכִים יִשְׂרָאֵל *Bruchim yisrael*

CONGREGATION:

בָּרוּךְ מֹרְדֵּכַי *Baruch Mordechai*

בְּרוּכָה אֶסְתֵּר *Bruchah Esther*

אָרוּרִים אוֹיְבֵינוּ *Arurim oyvim*

Reference: *Sefer Hamoadim*.

## PURIM IN BULGARIA

Apart from the official Purim, there used to be celebrations of twelve different Purim feasts in different areas of Bulgaria. For example, in Vidin, a city on the Danube, a local Purim was celebrated in October or November to commemorate the rescue of the Jews during the Turkish Empire. After a Jewish doctor was accused of poisoning the local ruler, the indignant Turkish population of the city threatened to kill the Jews. Happily, on his deathbed the ruler announced the Jewish doctor to be innocent and the Jews were saved. No wonder that Purim was one of the very few Jewish Seasons of Joy celebrated in Bulgaria, even during the totalitarian regime.

Reference: Esther's Legacy, reminiscence of Tania Reytan

## PURIM FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWS IN ISRAEL

Ethiopian Jews followed Biblical Judaism. Because they were cut off from the rest of the Jewish world, they did not know of the developments of the Rabbinic era, nor were they familiar with the Book of Esther. Ethiopian Jews do not celebrate the holiday of Purim as such; however, in some households, they observe the Fast of Esther. Everyone above the age of seven fasts for three days.

The following vignette tells about the experience of one Ethiopian child, a girl named Belaenish, whose family had emigrated to Israel.

All the members of Belaenish's family participate in the Fast of Esther. Although most of Belaenish's classmates do not fast, she does not dare stop fasting to participate in their festive meal. Belaenish has learned about Purim in school. But when she tells her father how they celebrate Purim in Israel, he argues that this is a disparagement of the holiday's sanctity. He forbids her to wear a costume. When she asks for money for the class party two days before the holiday, her father goes to the school. He tells her teacher his poor opinion of the Israeli Purim tradition. But in spite of his opposition, he agrees to prepare a package of mishloach manot.

Belaenish is not happy at the class party. She wants to participate, but feels guilty because she knows her father is opposed to this. Her family does not go to synagogue on Purim. Her father reads the Scroll of Esther in Amharic, which she has brought home from school. She and her sisters spend the day watching television.

Reference: *Esther's Legacy*, reminiscence of Shalva Weil.

**Activities:**

1. Use the sephardic arch die at the TRC to create backgrounds for retelling and illustrating Purim story
2. Have children prepare noisemakers or have them write Haman's name on the bottom of their shoes. Read the megillah in Hebrew or English. Try to trick the children by reading very fast, very quietly, etc., so that kids need to listen very carefully in order not to miss "Haman." For maximum Hamans, read chapter 3. For no Hamans at all, read chapter 1 or 2.
3. Prepare a Purim recipe from your edah.
4. Hear how the megillah is read by your edah. In the TRC Music Center there is a booklet of Purim melodies from various edot. (See the list on the following page.) Ask someone to learn the music from your edah and to sing it with the students.
5. Dealing with hate and aggression. The Purim traditions of many edot involve making images of Haman and then violently abusing and destroying them. Is this a healthy response to feeling picked on? A response we would recommend to our students? For instances of group persecution (Haman wanted to destroy ALL the Jews), or also for instances of feeling singled out for abuse by classmates or family members? Etc.