

### Context

*Purim is the festival that is most frequently depicted in documentaries about Jews, because it is one of the few festivals when filming is permitted, and it makes for very colourful TV to see extremely drunk people in fancy dress. But it may give a slightly skewed impression of the priorities of Jewish life! In early Reform and Liberal communities Purim was largely removed from the cycle of festivals, in part at the horror of the final chapters of the Book of Esther. Many still feel uncomfortable with its celebration. In this article **Rabbi Fabian Sborovsky** of Menorah Synagogue in south Manchester explores both the positives and negatives that many of us experience at Purim.*

### Content

#### On Purim, things are not always as they seem

For those who grew up involved in a Jewish community, Purim evokes childhood memories of tasty *sufganiyot* (jelly doughnuts) and *hamantaschen* (purim pastries), dressing up in imaginative costumes, happy carnivals and Purim spiels (comic plays and dramatization). There is also the unforgettable joy of making a big racket at synagogue during the public reading of the Megilah whenever Haman's name was mentioned. Like many childhood memories, however, the story of Purim can also remind us that at times things are not always exactly as we imagine them to be.

Purim is a joyous holiday that commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from Haman, the royal vizier to King Achashverosh in the ancient Persian Empire. The story is recorded in the Biblical Scroll of Esther; *Megilat Esther*, as it is called in Hebrew, which narrates the story of Haman's plan to kill all the Jews in the empire, but his plans were foiled by Mordechai and his cousin (who was like an adopted daughter) Esther, who had risen to become Queen of Persia. The fateful day destined for destruction instead became one of deliverance and a day of feasting and rejoicing. On that day a new holiday was decreed for perpetuity, as it is written, "[...] 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).

Ever since, Purim is celebrated with *mishloach manot*, exchanging gifts of food and drink, *mattanot la-avyonim*, giving to the poor, by eating a celebratory meal known as *se'udat Purim* and enjoying all sorts of wonderful treats. Other practices include dressing up in masks and costumes, and rejoicing in community, including drinking wine or other alcoholic beverages for the adults. Central to the celebration is the above mentioned public recitation of the Megilah, with Haman's name being 'blotted out' with groggers (noise makers) and other loud noises (a total of 54 times!).

Over the years as I have read as well as listened ever more closely to the megilah's narrative, not only listening out for Haman's name to come up, my attitude to the celebration changed. The Purim narrative became ever more complex and challenging when compared to the innocent Cinderella-like associations of the story from my childhood. I thought it very puzzling that God is not even once mentioned in the entire biblical scroll. My respect for Vashti grew as I came to realize that she was in effect banished early in the story for refusing to be humiliated by exposing herself to drunken men, powerful as they were.

Esther's situation, enlisted to the king's harem as a young virgin, seemingly chosen for purely superficial reasons and dependent on the king's shifting whims, became much less glamorous and all the more troubling.

Most challenging was the part in the Megillah's narrative when the Jewish attacks with the sword and killing included not only the enemy who sought their downfall but also their seemingly innocent women and children as well. Could these be the reasons why the drinking of wine on Purim is encouraged to the point where one, as the Talmudic statement attributed to a sage named Rava says, "can no longer distinguish between *arur Haman* ('Cursed is Haman') and *baruch Mordechai* ('Blessed is Mordechai')"? (Megillah 7b).

On the other hand however, I also became aware of other more positive and richer aspects of Purim. For one, Esther and Mordechai's examples teach us that even under difficult conditions people can make the best of their circumstances. After all, Esther may not have chosen her personal circumstances but neither did she remain a passive victim in the state of affairs that surrounded her. Her daring actions and bold initiatives, together with those of Mordechai, ultimately saved the Jews. She is also a positive role model; she demonstrates that it is possible to be thoroughly acculturated to the surrounding culture and system, yet retain one's unique Jewish identity and affirmation as a distinctive people. In fact it was *because* Esther and Mordechai were a part of the wider dominant society that she was ultimately able to save herself and her people.

This year I came across a book by Dr. Norman Cohen titled *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing and Identity*. In it, Dr. Cohen raises another crucial aspect. Purim, he claims, provides us with the hope that the garments we put on at times only to mask our present realities, can reveal the deep-seated consciousness of our potential for change, and our ability to bring happiness and fulfilment to our lives.

Purim gives us a festival that is boisterous, almost teen like, and an opportunity to embrace our silly side. It can also be an opportunity to ask ourselves some very difficult questions about misogyny, power and violence. In many communities the violence of the last few chapters has simply been omitted, to preserve the joy and silliness of the festival, but perhaps Purim is also asking us to consider and challenge the darkness that too much power, as well as too much alcohol, can generate.

## ***Contemplation***

*While many people cite the obligation to drink heavily on Purim, we can be less confident in remembering to assert the mitzvot that appear in the final chapters of Megillat Esther. In Esther 9:22-27 we learn that Jews were instructed by Mordechai and Esther to send gifts of food to one another, and to the poor, and so today the custom is to send gifts of food to friends, and usually money to ensure a poor person might fully enjoy celebrating Purim with a full meal. While many of our celebrations focus on costumes, drink, and children, ensuring that all in the community are empowered to participate and that those with less means are able to celebrate too, is an important value often missed in the frivolity. Yet even the frivolity can have a deeper meaning. Can we reveal something useful about ourselves by turning things upside down and perhaps connecting with parts of ourselves we usually suppress?*