



Halachah Guide: Purim

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Machatzit HaShekel: The Half-Shekel

Before Purim, we customarily contribute to tzedakah three coins which are minted as "half" coins, such as half-dollars. Preferably, the coins we use should each contain at least 9.6 grams of pure silver. This commemorates the annual half-shekel donation required of adult men for the coming year's communal korbanot. We do it before Purim because we are taught that the Jews' half-shekel contributions defeated the money Haman gave to Achashverosh.

This custom is generally understood to include men from the age of 13, and many adult women do it as well. Many adults give on behalf of their children; some even give on behalf of a fetus.

This is normally done on Taanit Esther; we plan to have a basket holding three qualifying coins available for this on Thursday March 21. Each person makes a contribution and picks up the coins, acquiring them, and then fulfills the custom by donating the coins.

Taanit Esther

Traditionally, we fast on the 13th of Adar. Some suggest this commemorates the Jews' three-day fast before Esther went to Achashverosh; others say it commemorates the way the Jews fasted when they fought to defend themselves on the 13th of Adar. This year, because the 13th of Adar is Shabbat, we fast on the preceding Thursday, March 21st; the fast starts at 5:33 AM and ends at 7:44 PM.

There are medical exceptions on Taanit Esther for people who have difficulty fasting, and particularly when it is moved up as it is this year. Please reach out, ideally in advance, to discuss any questions regarding fasting.

One may use inedible mouthwash. We do not bathe enjoyably. One who has difficulty swallowing necessary medication without water may drink the minimum amount of water needed to swallow the medication. One who mistakenly eats should still complete the fast.

One who intends to wake up before dawn to eat should declare that intention, at least mentally, before going to sleep. One who did not declare it may still drink before the fast begins. Note that one who is having a meal of bread or *mezonot* products should begin more than 30 minutes before the fast begins.

One who is not fasting omits *Aneinu*. One says *Avinu Malkeinu* even if not fasting, and even alone.

Parshat Zachor

On the Shabbat before Purim (March 23 this year) we read Parshat Zachor, commemorating Amalek's attack against the Jews in the desert. We associate this with Purim because Haman was a descendant of Agag, a king of Amalek. There is a biblical mitzvah to hear this reading, at least for men and possibly for women as well.

Ending Shabbat, Starting Purim

One may not prepare for Purim on Shabbat; this includes bringing costumes to shul. (However, Megillat Esther is not muktzeh, and one may read from it during Shabbat itself.)

Shabbat ends at 8:01 PM. After that one should daven Maariv, or at least say "Baruch HaMavdil bein kodesh l'chol" ("Blessed is the One who distinguishes between the sacred and the mundane"), before preparing for Purim.

Havdalah is recited after Megillah reading; one should not eat until after Megillat Esther and Havdalah. One who must eat before Megillat Esther should recite Havdalah first, and should not eat more than a small snack.

Al HaNisim

On the 14th of Adar we observe Purim. As part of our celebration, we recite Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon and Shemoneh Esreih, on Purim night and during Purim day. We do not recite Al HaNisim on Shushan Purim, but if a meal begins on Purim and continues beyond nightfall, one does recite Al HaNisim. One who forgets Al HaNisim in Birkat HaMazon or Shemoneh Esreih does not go back or repeat them.

Megillat Esther

We read Megillat Esther on Purim night at Maariv, and again on Purim day. It is important for all adults, as well as children who are of age to understand that they are fulfilling a mitzvah, to hear Megillat Esther read. (We will distribute goodie bags before the Purim night reading in the main shul to help the children.) The mitzvah is to hear the entire reading, beginning to end.

When the megillah is read by someone who has not yet fulfilled the mitzvah, the reader recites three berachot before megillah, having everyone in mind. If the reader has already fulfilled the mitzvah then the listeners recite the berachot themselves; women end the first berachah with "lishmoa megillah."

For the daytime reading, we keep in mind that the Shehechyanu berachah applies for all of the day's mitzvot – megillah, the Purim feast, matanot la'evyonim and mishloach manot.

When the megillah is read with a minyan, each person recites a concluding berachah afterward. If there is no minyan, there is no berachah recited, but everyone recites the "Asher Heini" paragraph found in the siddur.

Seudat Purim: The Purim Feast

One of the mitzvot of Purim is to have a feast on Purim; it should be bread-based, and non-vegetarians should ideally eat meat or fish. The majority of the meal should take place before sunset.

The Talmud says that as part of the Purim feast, one must "*levasumei*" until he does not know the difference between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordechai." In certain contexts, the word "*levasumei*" means to become sweet or joyous, which is taken to mean intoxication. Some halachic authorities ruled against this statement, but Rambam codified it, saying to drink wine to the point where one becomes *shikor* (a word with a spectrum of meanings) and falls asleep. This is also brought in the Shulchan Aruch.

However, halachic authorities prohibit any drinking (Purim or anytime) which a) is dangerous for the drinker or others, or b) leads to a state in which one loses control to the point of trespassing Halachah and/or desecrating Hashem's Name. A moderate path, approved by the Rama and Mishneh Berurah, is to drink minimally at the Purim Seudah, and then fulfill the state of intoxication by taking a nap after the meal.

Worth noting: Adults in the presence of young children should be extremely careful in drinking more heavily than is normal. Immature children cannot differentiate between when adults are in control and when they are not, cannot comprehend the dangers associated with alcohol, cannot accept the idea that adults can do what children are not permitted to do, and cannot understand the difference between Purim and the rest of the year.

Matanot La'Evyonim: Gifts to the Needy

Megillat Esther (9:22) instructs us to give gifts to at least two needy people on Purim day. Each gift should be sufficient to purchase a Purim meal. One may donate to a fund/ in advance, for distribution on Purim. One who cannot find needy people on Purim may designate matanot la'evyonim and hold it until an opportunity arises.

We are usually required to investigate a tzedakah recipient or fund before giving a gift that would reduce our tzedakah for others. [There is an exception where the need expressed is dire and immediate, as in a request for a meal.] However, on Purim we are instructed to increase people's joy and to give gifts of money and portions of food. Therefore, most halachic authorities rule that one should give to anyone who asks.

Mishloach Manot: Giving portions of food

We distribute gifts of food to each other on Purim day, as was done on the original Purim (Esther 9:19), and then in ensuing years by Mordechai's instruction (9:22). With this we increase our sense of unity, and ensure that others are able to enjoy a Purim feast. We give two foods to at least one recipient; ideally, each portion should be large enough to provide for an independent Purim feast and should be ready to eat. A beverage (other than water) is acceptable as a portion. Mishloach manot should be sent, or at least received, on Purim day.

Husbands and wives are obligated to send their own gifts of mishloach manot, and not to rely on each other's gifts. However, one may ask a spouse to deliver mishloach manot as one's agent. Children who are old enough to understand that they are performing a mitzvah should send their own mishloach manot.

Even though the mitzvah of sending mishloach manot is joyous, a mourner is still obligated to send them, and even during shivah. However, a mourner should not send items like wine and special delicacies, which involve extra joy.

One should not send to someone who is within the periods of required mourning for a parent or other relative r"l. However, a mourner who receives mishloach manot is not required to refuse them. One may send to a mourner's immediate family members, where the sender has a relationship with them. One may send to a needy mourner as a form of tzedakah.

While mishloach manot is a beautiful mitzvah, one who must restrict his Purim expenditures should put more toward matanot la'evyonim than to mishloach manot.