

Laws and Customs of the Purim Season

A Brief Overview

By Rabbi Elie Buechler

The following is an overview of the practices, customs and halachot unique to the Purim season. **This year, we have incorporated additional guidelines for Purim during Covid.**
Purim Sameach!

Parshat Zachor On the Shabbat before Purim, there is a Biblical obligation for everyone to hear the special maftir that gives the Shabbat its name, that of Parshat Zachor (Devarim 25:17-19). It describes both the commandment to remember the evil that the Amalekite nation perpetrated against the Jews on their way out of Egypt, and to obliterate their name in future generations. In order to fulfill the obligation, one must hear every single word read in public, so make certain to arrive at shul in time! For those who have pre-registered, Parshat Zachor will be read at about 10:15 AM.

Taanit Esther Taanit Esther is the fast that commemorates the three day fast observed by the Jews in the Book of Esther. Rabbinic tradition indicates that this fast took place on the first three days of Pesach, but since fasting on Pesach is virtually never permitted, the fast was linked to Purim instead. This year, Taanit Esther is observed on Thursday, February, 25. The fast begins at 5:23 AM and ends at 6:12 PM. If one is attending a late Megillah reading, one may eat snacks before hearing the Megillah.

Machatzit HaShekel Machatzit HaShekel refers to the biblically ordained annual donation of a silver half shekel by Jews. This money was collected during the month of Adar and was used for upkeep in the Temple, specifically for communal sacrifices. It was collected from all people, but was obligatory on all males above 20 years of age. Today, this mitzvah is commemorated on the afternoon of Taanit Esther, at or before Minchah, or at the latest, on Purim morning.

The Mitzvah is performed by contributing at least \$1.50 in exchange for three silver coins in the basket, though many people give more than that amount. **This year, we will donate the money without lifting the coins.**

Matanot L'Evyonim The most important mitzvah of Purim, giving gifts to the poor is the way the Jews celebrated their victory over Haman. Note that this obligation is independent of the Machatzit haShekel, and it must be performed on Purim day itself. The amount given should be sufficient to assist at least two different poor people with their Purim meal. Checks made out to the Rabbi Leo Jung Memorial Fund earmarked "Matanot L'evyonim" that are received before or on Purim itself will be distributed to the poor on Purim day.

Reading the Megillah It is incumbent on every man and woman to hear the Book of Esther read in the evening and the morning. Please check the Purim schedule for times of minyanim and Megillah readings, indoors and outdoors. One must hear every word of

the Megillah both times, so if a word is missed, one should quickly read it quietly to oneself, even if following along in a Chumash or printed Megillah, and then catch up to where the Megillah is being read. One should make every effort to hear the Megillah in person.

As we all surely remember, Purim last year was a time of great uncertainty. Without the benefit of vaccines or masks or social distancing, public gatherings were ill-advised. As such, prominent halakhic authorities took the courageous step of permitting those at home to hear the Megillah via phone or zoom. Given where we are today, those same authorities are much more reluctant to rely on last year's leniency. Thanks to the guidelines we have set in place and to which we have scrupulously adhered, there have not been any known cases of virus transmission in our shul. Our goal has been to create an environment that is as safe as possible and we encourage you to join one of our services – either indoors or outdoors – to hear the Megillah.

Having said all of this, we of course recognize that there are those who will not come to shul to hear the Megillah. In particular, if you are (a) in quarantine or (b) have not yet been vaccinated and (i) are above a certain age or (ii) have an underlying medical condition, we will be making a livestream option available for anyone who needs it. Ideally, one listening at home should follow along from a hand-written Megillah. For any questions, please consult with Rabbi Levine.

Al Hanissim A special Purim text for Al Hanissim is included in all prayers, as well as Birkat Hamazon. If it is forgotten, one is not required to repeat the prayer in question.

Torah Reading On Purim morning, we read of the attack on the Jewish people by the Amalekites, and how Moshe led the Jewish people to victory (Exodus 17:8-16).

Mishloach Manot One must send a minimum of two different prepared/cooked foods, in generous portions, to at least one other Jewish person. If one's funds are limited, it is better to fulfill the minimum requirement for Mishloach Manot and donate more to Matanot Le'Evyonim.

Purim Seudah It is a requirement to have a festive meal for Purim. One should eat bread, and the meal should ideally contain meat products. Generally the seudah is eaten in the afternoon. **Because Purim this year is on Friday, ideally one should eat the seudah before midday, 12:10 PM. If one has no choice but to eat the seudah in the afternoon, one should begin no later than plag minchah, 4:34 PM. One should be careful to follow all Covid guidelines for the Seudah.**

Drinking on Purim Because wine played an important role in the miracle of Purim, it plays a role in our celebration of it as well. To fulfill this requirement, one should drink slightly more wine at the Purim Seudah than one normally does at a meal, and then, if possible, take a short nap. In our observance of Purim, we must consider the unfortunate reality that alcohol abuse has become a serious problem and conduct

ourselves accordingly. Moreover, drinking other alcoholic beverages does not fulfill the requirement to drink wine. Indeed, the Chafetz Chaim writes (Biur Halacha, OC 695:2): “We are not commanded to reduce ourselves to levels of drunkenness, but rather to rejoice in a manner that will lead us to the love of God.” In our community, which is blessed with so many wonderful children, safety and responsibility must be given priority. As a matter of Torah and secular law, alcohol must not be given to minors, and adults should take special care on Purim to consume alcohol minimally and responsibly.

Torah Study and Prayer Purim is a day of joy that is celebrated through merrymaking and laughter. However, in some significant ways, Purim is no joke. The Talmud tells us that the Jewish people re-accepted the Torah on Purim, and therefore, even with all the other mitzvot one must perform on Purim, it is a most auspicious and effective day for Torah study. Moreover, many classic sources tell us that Purim represents a special opportunity for one’s prayers to be answered.

PURIM SAMEACH TO ONE AND ALL!