

Dear Friends,

Purim is a holiday of laughter, and celebration—we dress up in costume, we play pranks, we make jokes, and many of us drink more than we are accustomed to the rest of the year. Purim is also a holiday of obligations—there are four distinct mitzvot that every Jew must fulfill during the 24 hours of Purim. Balancing these two sides of the holiday is not always easy. In the best of circumstances, it can be a challenge to properly fulfill all the mitzvot of Purim while also embracing the holiday's spirit of joy and levity.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes both aspects of Purim more difficult. Last Purim, while the pandemic had already hit New York and other communities, here in St. Louis we were still holding public Megillah readings, and hard as it is to imagine right now, not yet requiring masks or social distancing measures. This Purim, we are in a very different situation. In spite of the beginning of vaccine rollout, and some reduction in the rate of new COVID-19 cases in Missouri, the numbers and the risk remain high. The precautions that are necessary in order to protect ourselves from the virus, will necessarily have an impact on the way we observe this holiday, as they have every holiday for the past year.

Despite the challenges, I believe it is still possible for us to not only fulfill the mitzvot of Purim, but also to capture the feeling of Purim as well. However, we might have to get a little creative and change our usual approach in order to do so. In this message, I will speak briefly about each of the mitzvot of Purim, and the days leading up to Purim, with attention to adaptations that may be necessary in light of this year's unique circumstances. As for capturing Purim's spirit of community and fun, I encourage everyone to participate in the [Bais Abe Purim celebration on Saturday night, February 27](#) (see flyer for details), as well as our first-ever [Mishloach Manot Purim fundraiser](#) (the deadline for signups has been extended to Sunday February 14). If you would like to do some more in-depth study about Purim, I encourage you to attend [Law & Lore](#), a two-part series that I will be teaching on Zoom at 7pm this Thursday and next.

### **Parshat Zakhor**

Each year on the Shabbat preceding Purim, we read Parshat Zakhor (Devarim 25:17-19), in fulfillment of the mitzvah to remember what Amalek did to us when we were leaving Egypt. According to some opinions this Torah mitzvah is only fulfilled when we hear this passage read out loud from a Torah scroll in a minyan. For this reason, those who are able to attend a minyan where they can hear Parshat Zakhor read out loud should make every effort to do so. If it is impossible for someone to attend services to hear Parshat Zakhor read, either because of quarantine restrictions, or their own medical risk, there are a few options:

- 1) One who is unable to hear Parshat Zakhor may fulfill the mitzvah by reading the passage out loud with the proper trope from a printed Chumash. However, this only works for those who are able to read the passage in Hebrew with proper trope.
- 2) One can hear Parshat Zakhor read out loud from a Torah scroll at a different time. For the sake of those who will be unable to hear Parshat Zakhor in shul, we will read Parshat Zakhor out of a scroll immediately following the Bais Abe Megillah reading on Purim evening. This reading will also be livestreamed (but not recorded) for the benefit of those who cannot hear it in person at [baisabe.com/streaming](http://baisabe.com/streaming).
- 3) Those who miss both of these readings can rely on hearing the Torah reading in shul on Purim morning, which describes Amalek's actions.
- 4) One can wait until Parshat Ki Teitzei, when we read Devarim 25:17-19 in the course of the weekly parsha. This will take place on August 21 this year.

The latter two options are less ideal than the first two options. Best of all is to hear Parshat Zakhor in synagogue, as this fulfills the mitzvah according to all opinions.

### **Machatzit Hashekel**

It is a custom to give three half-dollars to tzedakah in the days before Purim, in memory of the half-shekel gift that each person was required to give to the Temple. We will have half-dollars available to purchase for the purpose of donating them back to the shul, at services for Taanit Esther and at services and Megillah readings at Bais Abe on Purim. The money we collect will be donated to individuals in need in our community.

### **The Fast of Esther**

On the eve of Purim, the custom is to fast from dawn until after the Megillah reading at night. We will hold fast day davening at Bais Abe on Thursday February 25 at 6:30am, including an abbreviated Selichot service and Torah reading. We will also hold fast day Mincha services, including Torah reading at 5:30pm, prior to the Megillah reading.

### **Reading the Megillah**

It is a mitzvah to read the Megillah twice on Purim, once at night and once during the day. Bais Abe will be holding Megillah readings, at which all our usual COVID safety protocols will be observed. We are holding one reading immediately following Maariv at 6:15pm on Thursday night, and one Friday morning after 6:30am Shacharit services. For those unable to attend the 6:30am reading, we are also offering a reading Friday afternoon following Mincha at 4:15pm.

Because attendance will be limited to those who can safely fit in the room with social distancing, we are asking those who wish to attend to pre-register. If all the available spaces fill up, we will work on setting up alternative locations and times so that everyone who wishes to is able to fulfill the mitzvah.

Ordinarily, the Megillah must be heard in person. However, in extraordinary circumstances, someone who is not able to attend a public Megillah reading, and is not able to read from a kosher scroll for themselves, may rely on hearing a live Megillah reading over the internet. For this reason, we will be livestreaming the evening and morning Megillah readings (the late afternoon Megillah reading will not be livestreamed). Bais Abe's livestream Megillah readings are intended for those who are under quarantine or have been advised not to attend this type of gathering by a healthcare provider. Anyone who is in any doubt about whether they attend should speak to a rabbi about whether it would be appropriate to rely on the livestream Megillah reading.

### **Matanot La'evyonim (Gifts to the Poor)**

It is a mitzvah to give gifts of food or money to at least two different poor people on Purim. Even a poor person is obligated to give gifts to others. Ideally these gifts should be of a quantity of money sufficient to allow a person to buy a meal with. It is preferable to spend less on the Purim meal and Mishloach Manot, if necessary, in order to give more to Matanot La'evyonim.

While these gifts can be given directly to a poor person, you can also donate money to Bais Abe with a note that it is for Matanot La'evyonim, and I will distribute it to the poor on your behalf. Online donations and checks must be received in the Bais Abe office by noon on Thursday February 25 to guarantee they will be distributed on Purim day. I will also be collecting cash donations at the Megillah readings Thursday night and Friday morning for distribution later that day.

This year has been a difficult year for everyone. Even as more people in our community are

experiencing financial need, many people are not in a position to give as much as they have in previous years. Moreover, the limited nature of our gatherings makes collecting contributions for Matanot La'evyonim more challenging than usual. For this reason, I ask those of you who can afford to do so, to give even more than your normally would to support members of our community in need.

### **Mishloach Manot (Sending Food to Friends)**

It is also a mitzvah to send at least two items of food to at least one friend. These items should be two different types of food, and should both be ready to eat, requiring no additional preparation. During this time of social isolation, sending gifts of food can be an important way of connecting us with other members of our community without risking gathering together in one place.

I encourage everyone to participate in the Bais Abe Shallach Manot fundraiser. You can participate for as little as \$10. However, even those who participate in this fundraiser should still send two items of food to at least one friend in fulfillment of the mitzvah.

### **Seudat Purim (Festive Meal)**

It is a mitzvah to have a festive meal on Purim. Normally we share this festive meal with others. This year, when shared meals outside our household bubbles are not possible, it is worth bearing in mind that part of the idea of Mishloach Manot is that by sending food to others, we are including them in our own feasting. As you eat your Purim seudah alone, or with your family, make a point of eating some of the Mishloach Manot you received and take a moment to think of the people that sent them to you, as well as the people to whom you sent Mishloach Manot. It is also a good idea to arrange to share this meal with others over Zoom, to increase the sense of connectedness and festivity.

Normally, we are not supposed to have a proper meal after midday on a Friday, so as not to spoil our appetite for Shabbos dinner. However, because the Purim meal is obligatory, it supersedes the prohibition against sitting down to a meal after midday on Friday. Nonetheless, the custom, at least for Ashkenazim, is to have the Purim meal in the morning when possible. Those who are unable to have the Purim meal in the morning, may do so later in the day.

### **Drinking Alcohol**

The Shulchan Arukh (OH 695:2) states (quoting the Talmud) that we are obligated to get so drunk on Purim that we don't know the difference between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordechai." In his gloss, R' Moshe Isserles (the Ramo) explains that it is sufficient to drink a little more than one is used to drinking; the important thing is that whether we drink a lot or a little, we are doing so for the sake of heaven. It goes without saying that those who cannot safely drink alcohol because of addiction or any other medical issue, must not drink on Purim. For the rest of us, we should remember there is no obligation to binge drink. Moreover, we should bear in mind the second part of the Ramo's comment that what counts is our motivation. There is nothing holy about using Purim as an excuse to indulge to excess. Whether we drink a lot, a little, or not at all, it can be holy, as long as our intention is to fulfill the mitzvot of Purim and enter into the spirit of the day.

If you have any questions about Purim this year, please don't hesitate to contact me.

May we all merit to experience joy and laughter this Purim in spite of all the obstacles we face, and may we soon see an end of this plague so that next year we can celebrate properly together in person!

Purim Sameach!  
Rabbi Garth Silberstein