

Mordecai Told Them to Celebrate Annually the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Days of Adar

9: 20-22

DIG: Why do some say Purim is not really a holiday? What was the purpose of Mordecai's letter to the provinces? How often did Mordecai say the feast should be celebrated? Why? When do Jews celebrate Purim today? How do those in walled cities at the time of Joshua celebrate differently from those unwalled cities? In what three ways do those who love the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob celebrate Purim today? What kind of special food is eaten on Purim?

REFLECT: What event in your life has turned sorrow into joy? Do you celebrate it? Do you share it with others? Purim is a day for giving ... to one another and the poor. What prompts you to give to others? Especially the poor? What relief from your enemies have you experienced lately? What relief are you still seeking?

The Torah did not establish the Feast of Purim because it was Mordecai who recorded these events (9:20a). Rabbi Rashi understood the phrase these events as referring to the whole book, and considered Mordecai to have been the author of Esther. But the words need not have this meaning, and a better translation would be, "the following words." Because it was not a Levitical holiday designated by Moses, some said it was not really a holiday. But the rabbis had a saying: the flu is no illness and Purim is no holiday.

And Mordecai sent a letter to all the Jews in each province of King Ahasuerus, near and far concerning the observance of Purim (9:20b). This is a different letter than the one he had sent earlier (8:9) to the provincial officials informing them that the Jews had the right to defend themselves against attack. This letter was sent solely to the Jewish people. He had great authority and the efficient postal system made good communication possible.

Mordecai resolved the possible conflict over what day the celebration was to occur by declaring that both days should be celebrated. As soon as Mordecai heard that the fourteenth had seen celebrations all over the empire, but the Jews in Susa celebrated on the fifteenth, he solved the possible disagreement. They were to celebrate the feast annually on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar (9:21). After this

verse we would expect another verse giving the law of Susa Purim that those who dwell in walled cities keep the fifteenth of Adar. This law is not explicitly stated in the *Megillah*, but is implied in verses 19 and 21. The rabbis determined that cities walled since the days of Joshua were under the obligation to observe Purim on the fifteenth of Adar. The Talmudic Tractate *Megillah* also gives instructions for observing the Feast of Purim; the roll of Esther was to be read in unwalled cities on the eleventh, twelfth and either the thirteenth or fourteenth of Adar and in walled cities on the fifteenth.

Once established, Purim was to be celebrated annually on two consecutive days. This can be understood in one of two ways. Either all Jewish people everywhere were to celebrate on both days, because originally a part of the Jewish community had celebrated on each day, or Jewish people should celebrate Purim on the one day appropriate to where they lived, whether in a walled or unwalled location. Today, Jews around the world celebrate Purim on one day, Adar 14, except those living in one of the cities traditionally considered walled at the time of Joshua, which include Jerusalem, Hebron and Jericho, where Purim is celebrated on Adar 15.¹¹⁴

Future generations would be given an annual reminder of the wonderful deliverance from extinction. For it was the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration (9:22a). No religious ceremonies are required. It is represented as a secular festival, in keeping with clearly non-religious tone of the narrative. This remains the essential character of the festival in Judaism. The most significant addition to the customs required is the reading of the roll, *the Megillah*, of Esther.¹¹⁵

He wrote them to observe the feast in three ways. First, they were to make them days of feasting and joy, not fasting and sorrow; secondly, they should give presents of food one to another, instead of having their possessions taken away; and thirdly, they should send gifts to the poor (9:22b). The rabbis teach that gifts should be given to at least two poor people (Talmud). Various Jewish holidays have special foods associated with them and Purim is no exception. The Purim foods are based on this verse. There are five different foods customary on these days of feasting.

The most customary food is a triangular pastry known as *hamantashen*. No one really knows where this word came from, but there are three suggested meanings. Some believe it means "Haman's hat," which was a three-cornered hat; some believe it means "Haman's pockets," which were stuffed with bribes; and some believe it means "Haman's ears," because

his ears were supposedly cut off as punishment. The *hamantashen* is a Jewish pastry that is shaped in a triangle. Initially, it was filled with poppy seeds, but later it was also filled with prunes. Today, both poppy and prune *hamantashen* are eaten on **Purim**.

A second customary **food** for **Purim** is called *kreplach*. It is like Jewish ravioli, or pasta filled with chopped meat and mixed with spices such as onion or garlic. It is also a three-cornered pastry that is eaten on **Purim** eve. The chopped meat symbolizes being flogged, because there was an old custom of flogging oneself before **Purim**.

A third customary dish is beans, cooked with salt, because it was believed to be the diet that **Esther** survived on in the court of **the king**. The Jewish tradition is that **she** ate this food so as not to break any kosher laws.

A fourth customary meal for this feast is turkey. This is based upon its Russian and Hebrew name. In Russia, turkey is called *the cock of India*; in Hebrew it is called *the chicken of India*. The Hebrew word for turkey and the Hebrew word for India is the same. Turkey is eaten to remember that **the king** ruled from Ethiopia to India.

The fifth food is called *keylitsh*. This is the Jewish egg bread, also eaten on the Sabbath. It is a large, braided loaf of white bread, but this one is decorated with raisins, and the top is braided with long strands. The strands are wide and high in the middle but narrow and low at both ends to symbolize the long rope used to hang Haman.¹¹⁶

This custom of sending **presents of food**, the Hebrew word *manot*, to friends and neighbors of **Purim** also symbolizes what God has destined for His people. The Hebrew word *manot*, translated **presents of food** in **9:22b**, is the same word translated **portion** in **Psalm 16:5**, where we read: **LORD, you have assigned me my portion (*manah*) and my cup; you have made my lot (*goral*) secure**. In the Hebrew poetic parallelism of this verse, *manah* in the first colon is used to refer to the same destiny as *goral* in the second colon. But the Hebrew word *manah* has a second meaning to refer to choice morsels of **food**. For example, in **Second Chronicles 31:4**, Hezekiah commands that **portions of food** be given to **the priests** and Levites so they can minister before the LORD without having to work in the fields. **He ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion [*manah*] due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Torah of ADONAI**. As a result, the use of the word *manah* in **Esther 9:22** forms a play on words, as the Jews send these **portions of food (*manot*)** to one another to celebrate their **portion (*manah*)** allotted (*goralam*) by God.¹¹⁷