

Purim - Making Merry with Mordy

Few holidays in the Jewish calendar are celebrated in as joyous a manner as Purim. Winter is on its final leg; people are beginning to emerge from the warmth of their homes; and the rich blue of the nearly-spring sky beckons us all to rejoice in the renewal of life following the threat of extinction.

In broad lines, the story of Purim is quite simple: Esther is presented to the Harem of King Ahashverosh by her cousin, Mordechai, who had raised her like a daughter. Mordechai refuses to bow down to Haman; Haman wants Mordechai and his people killed. Esther, by now a favorite of the king, fasts for three days (threat of extinction, commemorated by the Fast of Esther, just before Purim), then supplicates the king on behalf of her brethren. The king is swayed, puts Haman to death, and places Mordechai in his stead (political succession, rebirth, the promise of life). The following day, we all celebrate (put on disguises and get drunk).

Tales from the Diaspora

Abroad, Purim tells the story of a courageous Jewish woman who enters into a mixed marriage, but remains loyal to her people in times of trouble. This is the story of a people in exile, threatened by anti-Semitic rulers who are beaten and destroyed, thanks to Jewish wit, tenacity (Esther reportedly entered the King's chamber unannounced - a transgression punishable by death) and perseverance.



The hypothesis that Purim is not originally a Jewish holiday but one adopted from surrounding host-nations

is somewhat strengthened by the fact that similar pagan cultures were also adopted by Christians. The ancient Egyptian Spring festival of Osiris, the ancient Greek annual celebration of Dionysus (where floats were apparently used for the first time in history), and many other celebrations of the defeat of winter by spring, all found their way into Mardi Gras (Shrove Wednesday), the Venice Carnival and the medieval Feast of Fools, during which people staged mock Masses and blasphemous impersonations of church officials. In general, most European cities stage a fancy-dress carnival of some kind in the period before Lent.

Dress 'em up & roll 'em out

Purim is celebrated by children in fancy dress costumes - many of them traditionally in the guise of the story's principal characters. The book of Esther (Megillat Esther) is read aloud in the synagogue, congregants making loud noises whenever the name of Haman is mentioned; and we all eat Hamentaschen, a baked stuffed biscuit shaped as Haman's triangular hat or (in Hebrew) ears. . . We also exchange packages of food and drink with our



neighbors (Mishloach Manot), and are commanded by the Talmud to drink until we can not tell the difference between Haman and Mordechai (i.e. quite drunk!). The term in Hebrew is Ad lo yada (until we cannot tell), and that is the name given to the annual Purim parade that takes place in Israel

every Purim. Carnivals around the world are characterized by processions, aimed at drawing the people out into the streets in joyous celebration, and Purim is no different. The first masque parade held in Israel took place in 1912, organized by a school teacher from the Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. It grew into a major event under the leadership of pioneer filmmaker, Baruch Agadati. In 1932, a competition was held to find a name for the parade, and out of 200 proposals, that of the writer Y.D.Berkovitz - Adluyada - won. As in Medieval times, and in keeping with the irreverent nature of the festivities, caricature floats of Herzl and Ben-Gurion usually reign prominent. During those first years, Tel Aviv Mayor Meir Dizengoff rode the parade astride a white horse and wearing a wide-rimmed bowler hat. The tradition dwindled between 1948 and 1955, when it was resurrected; however, it never quite achieved the popularity of those first years, and smaller annual parades have replaced the national event in various cities. Of those, the largest is by far the Adluyada in Holon - a suburb of Tel Aviv. Each year, the parade is held under a different title. Past themes have included, "Children of the World Want Peace" and "Children's Stories". Hundreds of marchers and floats include jazz bands, youth organizations, horse riders, cheer-leaders and -one year - Russian dancers inside Babushka dolls. Another place to observe the Purim Parade is Caesarea, where the tradition was renewed 7 years ago. A large percentage of the town's inhabitants - senior citizens and kindergarten children alike - actually take part in marching the 2-kilometer route. Here, too, themes lead the game, with last year's "Travel through Time" encompassing dinosaurs, Noah's Ark, robots, flower children and aliens.

In Ra'anana, 1500 school children, teachers and parents march down the city's main street in costumes, upon floats, and accompanied by school and municipal bands. In Tel Aviv, the renewed Adluyada has usually taken place along the streets of the Hatikva Neighborhood Market. Organized by acting schools, marchers are mostly comprised of acting students in make up, clowns and fire-eaters.

