

**“In a time to come, all the festivals are destined to disappear, yet Purim will remain”  
(Ialqut Shim’oni, Mishle, 944)**

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A Talmudic saying describes with certainty the atmosphere surrounding the period of Purim: “Rav Yehudah ben rav Shemuel said... so when the month of Adar starts, joy increases” (TB Ta’anit 29a). Commentator Rashi explains that the reason is linked to the great wonders that took place in that month and the next. First, the Jews were saved from Haman’s destruction order; thirty days later, freedom from Egyptian slavery is celebrated with Passover (Pesach). Although the weather is still harsh, the first warm days help with winter frostbite. In the ghetto of Rome, those suffering from the cold wished that “the ointment of Purim” would soon arrive, with its joy, mild weather, and good food. In the weeks before Purim, when the Shrine was still standing, important public initiatives were undertaken for the Easter pilgrimage. Above all, the half-shekel tax was collected. Already provided for in the Torah, this tax covered the Temple’s needs for all the public sacrifices planned during the year. All the communities of Israel, including the diaspora, were called to contribute. Under Roman rule and after the fall of Jerusalem, Emperor Titus advocated this two-drachma tribute in favor of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which took the name of *fiscus judaicus*.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for mentioning it here is a teaching that links the precept of the collection of shekels from the entire people of Israel with Haman’s intent. Indeed, in order to persuade King Ahasuerus, Haman proposes to confiscate from the Jews as many as ten thousand silver plates (in Hebrew, *lishkol*, same root as shekel), to be poured into the royal coffers. According to the masters, this threat also materializes because of the Jewish nation’s internal divisions. According to Resh Lakish, the half-shekel collection announced in the first ten days of Adar, before Purim, works as a sort of antidote: this merit would contribute to the failure of Haman’s evil design. To prepare the ground for Purim and its wide-ranging ritual and conceptual implications, on the Saturday before Purim a public reading takes place, mentioning the passage on the attack by Amalek and his army against the new people who have just come out of Egypt, heading toward the promised land (Exodus, 17: 8–14). On that occasion, supported by Providence, Joshua and his men managed to stop the enemy. In a few verses, Moses asks to preserve the memory of what Amalek did, with the latter becoming an archetype of the enemy moved by unjustified hatred for the Jews. “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along your way out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all those who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. ... you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” (Deut. 25, 17- 19). The fight against the Amalekites was punctuated by other crucial moments recounted in the books of the previous Prophets, such as the episode of King Saul fighting against King Agag (Samuel 1, ch. 15). The Talmudic midrash reconnects the figure of Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, to the lineage of ‘Amalek. This creates a common thread between the two moments preceded by tragic consequences, then both marked by salvation. As is known, Hebrew months derive from the Babylonian ones. Most of the biblical books mention

them with a progressive number from one to twelve, or as in the Book of Esther, both with an ordinal number and a name. Adar is the last month of the Jewish year as per the Torah, where Nissan is considered as the first month and coincides with spring, the season Passover falls in. The lunisolar system of the Hebrew calendar contains about ten days fewer than the Gregorian calendar. For this reason, seven times in a nineteen-year cycle, a thirteenth month called “second Adar” is inserted to guarantee that Passover falls in spring. When this happens, Purim and all the other related rituals are celebrated in second Adar, thus safeguarding the multiple connections with the Easter rites. Before Purim comes, a fast is observed from dawn to dusk, in memory of the three-day fast Esther suggested all the Jews of Shushan to observe. This was to prepare the very delicate meetings with the king in which Esther would ask to stop the decree of annihilation. Although it is not mentioned in the Talmud, the fast can be considered a deeply rooted custom, which still leaves room for indulgence under special circumstances. The code of Zedekiah ben Abraham HaRofeh of the Anav family, composed in thirteenth-century Rome, narrates, in the name of Rav Shlomo, that one year, with Purim falling on a Sunday, the fast was anticipated to Thursday, so as not to overlap with the Shabbat and Friday preparations. A woman had asked to fast the following day, Friday, because she would be busy with a long horseback journey, for a meeting with a dignitary. The master prescribed that the rule, although it was a matter of custom, did not allow for any exception (Shibole ha-leqet, 194).

וּמְיָמֵינוּ הָאֵלֶּה נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר

### **These days should be remembered and observed in every generation... (Esther 9:28)**

Many local customs and traditions revolve around the four rabbinical precepts that characterize this festival.<sup>2</sup>

The reading of Esther’s megillah.

Eating a large meal in honor of Purim.

Give two food items to at least one companion.

Allocate a gift to at least two people in need.

קְרִיאת זוֹ הַלֵּילָא

### **The Reading of the Megillah is the Authentic Praise of God (TB Megillah 14a)**

The reading of the megillah was originally allowed from the 11th of Adar and until the 15th of Adar, anticipating it or postponing it based on the day of the week on which Purim fell. This favored the villagers who went to the larger cities for market days on Mondays and Thursdays (Mishnah Megillah, 1:1). Today, everyone reads on the 14th, in the evening and in the morning, except in walled cities. In fact, since the time of Joshua (the conquest of the promised land), they have celebrated the next day as a tribute to the land of Israel and Shushan. In the city of Persia where the story is set, the Jews were granted an extra day to defend themselves, laying down their arms and celebrating on the 15th of Adar (for this reason it is called the Purim

Shushan festival). The tradition has remained intact to the present day and is applied in the city of Jerusalem and a few other centers of Jewish life, inside and outside the borders of Israel. Listening to the megillah from a parchment scroll, handwritten with very clear letters, is a precept of rabbinical origin; however, the Talmud indicates that it was held in such deep consideration that the study of the Torah was interrupted. Even the priests engaged in temple worship interrupted their service to fulfill this commandment. The megillah is read in synagogues, but in Italy the custom of organizing readings in private homes has also coexisted with the reading in temples for a long time, especially to give women and children the opportunity to participate in an intimate way. In this domestic setting, created for the benefit and delight of family members, in less recent times translations of the story were read, such as the well known sixteenth-century vernacular paraphrase by rabbi Mordecai Dato from Emilia-Romagna.<sup>3</sup>

In the temple, the audience listens to the officiant and follows the story with the help of a written text, so as to avoid distraction and to be able to appreciate its content. In the Book of Esther, the name of God is never mentioned. Nevertheless, the hidden direction of events and the Divine determining the release of the people who had been condemned to suffer the infamous decree, submissively supported by the king, emerge in a veiled way. It is, therefore, a case of *astarot panim*, concealment of the divine face, of human difficulty in finding God's action in history, especially with respect to His people's fate.<sup>4</sup> The strength of the Book of Esther also lies in the progressive emergence of divine orchestration. We are talking about an unveiling that figuratively coincides with the custom to completely unroll the parchment and fold it before the reading, then let it slowly appear in the light, symbolically, as salvation. The audience is not passive; the story's key points are underlined with a livelier melody, recited by the officiant, and repeated in chorus:

“Now there was in the citadel of Shushan a Jew ... named Mordechai” (Esther 2:5)

“That night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him” (Esther 6:1)

“... So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordechai...” (Esther 7:10)

“When Mordechai left the king's presence, he was wearing royal garments... And the city of Shushan held a joyous celebration... For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness, and honor” (Esther 8:15 -16)

“... Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim, and it was written down in the records...” (Esther 9:32).

The colorful miniatures that enrich the megillot facilitate the adults' active participation and the children's attention. This tradition was widely developed in Italy between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Shalom's Sabar's essay in this catalogue). In compliance with the duty to erase Haman's memory, every time his name is pronounced in the story, the crowd stamp their feet, beat on the benches with utterances of disapproval such as boos, or use

noisemakers. Inside the temple, in private homes, and in any other environment in Jewish neighborhoods, mask-wearing is widespread. Over the centuries, there has been major debate on whether wearing masks was licit. Among the masters who expressed consent, it is certainly worth mentioning Yehudah ben Eliezer Ha-Levi Minz, head of the rabbinical academy of Padua (fifteenth century). Those in flexibly opposed include Shemuel Aboab rabbi in Venice (seventeenth century).<sup>5</sup>

לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יְמֵי מִשְׁתֵּה וְשִׂמְחָה וּמְשֻׁלוֹת מְנוּת  
אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְּנוּת לְאֶבְיֹנִים

**... to observe the days with feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor (Esther 9:22)**

### **The Banquet**

The meal is consumed throughout the day and is also the most intense moment of conviviality and joy. Mordechai sends letters to the Jews residing in the 127 states of Persia, with the invitation to celebrate Purim as “days of feasting and joy” (Esther 9:22). Several banquets take place in the entire story: those of King Ahasuerus for his ministers and for the people, that of Queen Vashti, and then the two banquets organized by Queen Esther. Together, they constitute the plot of the story and offer the inspiration for interpretative keys. The Purim meal revolves around food and wine, which in Jewish culture is as much a vector of joy as of sacredness. Ravah in the Talmud declares that “a person on Purim is obliged to get drunk to the point of not distinguishing between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman” (TB Megillah, 7b). The masters obviously accepted this statement with a pinch of salt and limit its scope, allowing only moderate and not unrestrained consumption. In honor of Purim, the table is filled with all kinds of foods. All Jewish communities preserve intimate traditions in which the consistent influences linked to the places of origin and coexistence, in a contamination among the cultures to which they belong, contribute to creating the most varied food kaleidoscope. It is worthwhile, here, to mention the list of twenty-four delicacies contained in the Massekhet Purim of Kalonymos ben Kalonymos (fig. 2), who lived in Rome between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They include tortoli (honey cookies), tortolicchi (Purim logs), mostaccioli biscuits, maccaroni, ducks, and partridges, and the late rich collection of delicacies known as Sparsciandata, probably also composed in Rome at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. Food is also the protagonist of numerous poems in Jewish Italian dedicated to Purim, which enlivened the conviviality of the young and the old. These poems have recently been rediscovered and recovered. Among the best known, dating back to the early eighteenth century, are Diamo gloria al creatore (Let’s give glory to the creator), containing the reference to bussolai biscuits and the sugared almonds of the Padania-Venetian Jewish tradition;<sup>7</sup> Wual viva nostro burino (Long live our folk), sung by the Jews of Livorno, mentioning different wines and liqueurs; another is Fate onore al bel Purim (Honor beautiful Purim), which mentions dozens and dozens of delicacies and characteristic sweets widely appreciated among Italian Jews.<sup>8</sup> Purim was the occasion when children prepared plays and, in the most educated contexts, presented the guests with riddles and short

parodies, or even actual hilarious comedies.<sup>9</sup> It was and is not unusual to remain at the table until dusk and eat significant amounts of food. Among the Roman Jews, after a lavish meal, they would say, in a playful and irreverent way, *rillegrete ma comme che è Purimme!* (Rejoice, place, it is Purim! The term *macomme*, meaning place, alludes to the toilet).

### **Food for a Companion**

During the day, at least one Jew must be given two food items. No minimum amounts are mandated, although obviously the more generously one acts, the better. The source of this precept is the same, i.e. the Book of Esther. Different hypotheses have been formulated about the motivation of this commandment. The aim is to create a harmonious and supportive bond among community members. In the first part, the story underlines that minister Haman identified the Jews in the 127 provinces as a “scattered and divided” people. According to some, this weakening of cultural identity, also expressed by the non-Jewish name of the protagonists (Esther by the goddess Astarte, and Mordechai by the god Mardukh) justified the punishment, i.e. the looming danger then foiled thanks to teshuvah, and the recovery of identity. Another interpretation of the Book of Esther is the attempt to attack the Jews physically rather than spiritually. Haman had planned their physical destruction and did not seek, as at other times in history, their assimilation or conversion to a different faith. For this reason, the religious response focuses on the concrete aspect of food and material life, both in the banquet and in the sharing with one’s companions. Those who do not have sufficient means can simply exchange food for the banquet, so the commandment is fulfilled. Finally, remember that the emphasis is on the last precept, i.e. charity towards the needy, which we will see shortly. In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides states that it is good to be generous when fulfilling this last precept, at the cost of reducing the gifts sent to friends or even sticking to foods prepared for the feast. True joy is achieved when the poor, orphans, and widows are made happy, thus realizing the most authentic divine presence, as it is said (Isaiah 57:15): to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite (*Hilkhhot megillah*, 2:17).

### **Gifts to the Poor**

A gift must be given to at least two poor people. The gift, which may consist of cash, must be given according to principles of respect and discretion in the first place. The best way to abide by the Tzedakah, which symbolizes social justice rather than mere almsgiving, is by maintaining double anonymity—of both those who give and those who receive. Although the offer must be commensurate with the means available, it must not be symbolic, but a concrete help, to give anyone the opportunity to rejoice with a dignified lunch. This aspect is so central that, in the Talmudic debate, the option of reciting the megillah on Saturday is ruled out. On this day, as is known, donations are not allowed. Rav Iosef suggests, as a motivation, that “the eyes of the poor are all turned at the time of reading the megillah” (TB Megillah 4b). The commandment provides for a search for recipients. One cannot be content to give only in case someone asks. It is possible, indeed preferable in any case, to make the donation through a representative, or by paying an association or action group that undertakes to send the recipient the sum on the day of the feast. According to some, the peculiarity of the

Tzedakah of Purim consists of the gift being a concrete obligation, a sort of debt that must be honored that day; it cannot be postponed, reduced, evaded. There is a debate as to whether non-Jewish poor are included. There is no doubt that the Tzedakah can be addressed to anyone in need. However, some believe that the character of this offer is special and reconnects to the bond of nation, understood as a community that shares beliefs, rites, and traditions as manifestly transmitted by the story of Esther and her exegesis. However, this should not be a limitation, but may be the impetus to donate also to poor non-Jews, without prejudice to the minimum prescribed basis. Purim is, as a whole, a healthy reaction—a human reaction, we might say—to ourselves and the whole world.<sup>10</sup> The right response to the threat that the Jewish people have encountered in history must include, in addition to defense, a significant activity that spreads along several lines, all standing for the principles for which one fights: joy of life, pride, and protection of one's belief, the value of brotherhood, and helping those who have been left behind.

### FOOTNOTES

1 Samuele Rocca, *In the shadow of the Ceasars: Jewish Life in Roman Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), p. 267.

2 For an overview of the festival and its many aspects, see Elihau Kitov, *Sefer Hatoda'a*, vol. 2 (Milan: Morashà, 2006).

3 Giulio Busi, *La istoria di Purim io ve racconto. Il libro di Ester secondo un rabbino emiliano del Cinquecento* (Rimini: Luisè Editore, 1987).

4 Roberto Della Rocca, *Con lo sguardo alla luna. Percorsi di pensiero ebraico* (Florence: Giuntina, 2015), p. 90.

5 Zohar Hanegbi, "Usi di Purim nella halakhà e nell'arte," in Daniel Sperber, *Minhaghè Israel*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Mossad harav kook, 1998), p. 192 (in Hebr.).

6 Ariel Toaff, *Mangiare alla giudia* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011).

7 See *Yezameru zeqenim 'im néarim bi-s 'udat purim*, Venice, c. 1690 (in Hebrew and Italian Jew with Hebrew letters); Paolo Fornaciari, *Fate onore al bel Purim* (Livorno: Erasmus, 2005).

8 See *Shir nahe bakhurim...*, Venice, 1698 (in Hebrew and Italian Jew with Hebrew letters). 9 See Umberto Fortis, *Il ghetto in scena. Teatro giudeo-italiano del Novecento. Storia e testi* (Rome: Carucci, 1989).

10 See Rav Jonathan Sacks, <https://rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/purim-family-edition/>