

PURIM: BASIC CONCEPTS AND LAWS

by Chaim Coffman

The Month of Adar

The Talmud (Ta'anis 29a) tells us that "Just as from when the month of Av enters, we minimize our happiness, so too from when the month of Adar enters, we increase our happiness." In Adar, the nation of Israel was saved from annihilation. The Jewish people, who lived throughout the empire of Achashverosh, were faced with certain death. Through a miraculous turn of events, this threat was removed and the Jews were saved. There was celebration everywhere. The Jews renewed their commitment to Torah. It was a time of overwhelming happiness. Our souls experienced a redemption: the Jews were threatened with death as a punishment for their sins, and because they repented, they were saved. The Jews raised their commitment to G-d and the Torah to new levels. It is for this spiritual redemption that we celebrate throughout the entire month of Adar.

Parshas Zachor

The Shabbos that precedes Purim is called Parshat Zachor. Zachor means to remember and the maftir aliya (the last one of the seven people called to the Torah) is read "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way, upon your departure from Egypt... You shall erase the memory of Amalek from the heavens, you shall not forget." The Sages tell us that "remember" means orally and "You shall not forget" means at heart. In order to fulfill the commandment, we read this passage from a Torah scroll, once every year, on the Shabbos before Purim so that wiping out Amalek is adjacent to the wiping out of Haman, a descendant of Amalek. Even though parshat Zachor is a positive command bound to time which women are normally exempt from, nonetheless women should try and make every effort to come to shul.

The Fast of Esther

The Fast of Esther is the day before Purim on the 13th of Adar. The fast is observed in memory of the Fast observed by Mordechai and Esther and all of Israel. It was on that same day that the enemies of the Jews had planned to subjugate and destroy them. The fast is called by Esther's name because she was the one to request the observance of a fast to Mordechai as it says, "Go and gather all the Jews who are found in Shushan and fast over me, and do not eat and do not drink three days, night and day; and I and my maidens will also fast thus." (Esther 4:16). Don't worry, the fast we observe is not for a three day period, nor is it on the same date. The original fast was observed by Esther and the entire Jewish people on the 14th, 15th and 16th of Nissan, immediately after Mordechai was

informed of Haman's decree and of the letter of annihilation which Haman wrote on the 13th of Nissan. We fast on the 13th of Adar in memory of the day of the mobilization for war against the enemies.

The Half-Shekel

On the 13th of Adar during Minchah (afternoon prayers), it is customary to give three halves of the coin which is the basis of the local currency. This money goes to the poor. The reason for the half-shekel is in memory of the half-shekel that was given when the Temple still stood and whose collection was announced on the first of Adar. In Israel, people generally use three 1/2 shekel coins while in America, people generally use three half dollars. In a place which has no coin designated as a half-shekel, it is customary for the gabbaim (sexton) to bring three halves of silver coins which are issued elsewhere, and to give these coins in exchange, to anyone who makes his contribution in the coins available to him. After performing the mitzvah, one gives the three half-shekels to the gabbaim so that others may also be able to observe the custom properly. What does one do for other members of the family, such as his wife and children? One gives the half-shekel for each of the members of the household including, in the case of a pregnant woman, for the unborn child. Others have the custom to pick up the three coins as many times as one has children. The reason we use three half-shekels is that the term *trumah* (contribution) is mentioned three times in the Torah portion of Ki-Tissa, in the account of the mitzvah of the half-shekel.

The Days of Purim

Purim can either fall on the 14th of Adar or the 15th of Adar, depending upon where you live. The reason for this is because the Jews of Shushan originally observed the festival on a different day than the Jews who lived elsewhere. In the other provinces the Jews waged war on the 13th and observed the 14th as a day of festivity and rejoicing. The Jews of Shushan waged war during the 13th and 14th of the month and observed the 15th as a day of festivity and rejoicing.

Therefore, Purim celebrated on the 14th of Adar is called Purim of the Open Cities while Purim on the 15th of Adar is called Purim of the Walled Cities. In our days, the only city that has the status of Shushan and therefore celebrates Purim on the 15th is Jerusalem. In a number of other places, the scroll of Esther is also read on the 15th of Adar because of a doubt. In those communities, the essential observance of Purim is fixed for the 14th of Adar (since this is when everyone reads the Megilah) and though the reading of the Megilah is repeated on the 15th, the bracha which precedes the Megilah reading is not recited.

The Observance of the Day

There are four mitzvot which on Purim: the reading of the Megilah, festivity and rejoicing, the sending of gifts and gifts to the poor.

- **Reading of the Megilah:** One is required to read the Megilah both by day and night. One may read the Megilah all night until dawn and from sunrise til sunset. If one has read the megilah even before sunrise, but at least after dawn, he has fulfilled his obligation to read the Megilah. Both men and women are obligated to hear the Megilah.

2. **Feasting and Rejoicing:** It is a mitzvah to have a sumptuous meal on Purim, including meat dishes and wine. This feast must be held during the day. When Purim is in on Erev Shabbos (the day preceding Shabbos) (as it is in Jerusalem in 5758) one must begin his meal early in the afternoon before Mincha (afternoon prayers) in order that one finish early enough so as to have a good appetite for the Shabbos meal.

The miracle of Purim came through wine. Vashti's downfall and Haman's downfall came through a wine feast! There is also a custom to drinking til intoxication as our Sages tell us, "A person is obligated to drink on Purim til he no longer knows the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Modechai." If one fears that he may be harmed by excessive drinking of wine or come to levity thereby or even forget the required brachot one is required to make, drinking excessively is forbidden.

3. **Gifts for the Poor:** One is required to give at least two gifts to two poor people on Purim, in other words, one gift to each. Even a poor person who subsists on charity is required to perform this mitzvah. This obligation can be fulfilled through food or drink or even clothing. The gift should be a sufficient gift to buy bread. The gifts to the poor are given during the day, usually after the reading of the Megilah.
 4. **Gifts to one another:** One must give a gift which consists of two portions to another person. Men and women are included in this mitzvah. The food must consist of something edible or drinkable without further cooking or preparation. One may send meat, fish, cooked pastry, wine and other beverages. These gifts should be sent to as many people as one chooses but they should be sufficient to convey regard for the recipient. If at all possible, these gifts should be sent by messengers, rather than delivered personally because the Megilah uses the word mishloach (sending).
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