

WHAT IS PURIM? SOME BACKGROUND FOR THE CURIOUS

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

When we think of the ancient world we think of civilizations like the Egyptians, Persians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. We think of cities like Antioch, Alexandria, Babylon and Rome; of rivers like the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates; and of rulers like Ramses, Hammurabi, Xerxes and Alexander. The truth be known, for many of us this jumble of names is a historical stew of people and places that has little, if any, meaning. At the same time, for Jews of another epoch, Jews who were Jews just like we are, these names and places were as real to them as Warsaw, Berlin and Stalin were to our great-grandparents, and as alive as Chicago, Miami and Saddam Hussein are to us.

The story of Purim is set in an era that saw the Jewish people sovereign in the land of Israel. That same period was witness to the end of their sovereignty, and the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. And the immediate events that surround Purim are the defeat of those same Babylonians at the hands of the ascendant power from Media and Persia. The defeat of the Babylonians brought the Jews under the rule of Darius the Mede, Cyrus the Persian, and eventually Achashverosh, ruler of the vast Persian Empire, and co-star of the Book of Esther.

A Thousand Years in Three Pages (Or Your Money Back)

The following chronology, followed by a brief historical overview, will provide a working knowledge of the major events that precede and surround the story of Purim. Far from exhaustive, this section is meant only to provide general historical context in the place of general historical fuzziness.

Event	Jewish Date	Julian Date
Abraham and Sarah	2080	1671 bce
Egyptian slavery begins	2332	1428 bce
Exodus and Torah at Mt. Sinai	2448	1312 bce
Jewish People enter Israel	2488	1272 bce
First Temple built	2935	825 bce
First Temple destroyed and Babylonian exile begins	3338	422 bce
Purim events	3405	355 bce
Second Temple built	3408	352 bce
Miracle of Chanukah	3622	139 bce
Second Temple destroyed and Roman exile begins	3830 / 70 ce	Babylonian Talmud compiled 4260

/ 500 ce First Crusade 4856 / 1096 ce Expulsion of French Jewry 5155 / 1475 ce Spread of Chassidism 5532 / 1772 ce First Zionist Congress 5657 / 1897 ce Rebirth of Israel 5708 / 1948 ce Persian Gulf War 5751 / 1991 ce 10,000 scholars and leaders exiled to Babylonia 3327 / 434 bce Nebuchadnezzar and Babylonians destroy Temple and exile Jews 3338 / 372 bce Media and Persia join forces to conquer Babylonia 3388 / 372 bce Cyrus becomes king of Persian empire 3390 / 371 bce Achashverosh ascends throne of Persian empire 3401 / 360 bce Haman becomes prime minister of Persia; Esther becomes the queen 3404 / 356 bce The miracle and victory of Purim occur; Mordecai is the new prime minister of Persia 3405 / 355 bce Saddam Hussein declares himself to be the *new Nebuchadnezzar*, attacks Israel, and is defeated in the Gulf War which ends on Purim 5751 / 1991 ce

Making a Little Sense of History The Jewish people, led by Joshua, entered the land of Israel in the year 1272 BCE. After settling and developing the land and establishing both a monarchy and a sophisticated legal and judicial system, the construction of the First Temple was begun in the year 832 BCE by King David, and completed in the year 825 BCE by his son, King Solomon. The First Temple stood atop the Temple Mount for 410 years. During that time a vibrant Jewish community flourished in the land of Israel with Jerusalem and the Temple as its spiritual, cultural and political center. In the Near Eastern world that surrounded Israel, empires in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia vied for power and prestige. After the allied forces of Egypt and Assyria failed in their attempt to conquer Babylonia, the Babylonians, with Nebuchadnezzar as their king, became the preeminent regional power. The Babylonians controlled the trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, amassed enormous wealth, and became the overlords of numerous cities and peoples. It was this Babylonian superpower headed by Nebuchadnezzar that employed its army to conquer Jerusalem and destroy the Temple on the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av (commemorated as Tisha B'av). With the destruction of Jerusalem began the period of Jewish history known as the Babylonian Exile. The Jews who survived the Babylonian onslaught were taken in humiliation to Babylon. There, with time, they were able to build a vibrant Jewish community and were, to a great degree, afforded the ability to conduct their religious and communal lives with a good deal of social independence. Some fifty years after the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, King Darius of Media, and King Cyrus of Persia embarked on a campaign that sought to subdue much of the Near and Middle East, including Babylonia. Shortly after Babylonia fell, Cyrus became the king of the entire Persian-Mede Empire, and as such inherited the Jews of Babylonia as his subjects. Having been slaves in ancient Egypt, sovereign in Israel during the First Temple period, defeated and exiled by the Babylonians, the Jews were now subject to the rule of one of the greatest empires ever to appear on the stage of history--that of the Persians. It would be that empire, and those kings, Cyrus and his successor Achashverosh, who would provide the stage, setting and landscape upon which the story of Purim would unfold. The Book of Esther in a Nutshell REVERSAL OF FORTUNE The story of Purim, as told in the Book of Esther, is the firsthand account of a turn of events that constituted a dramatic reversal of fortune for the Jewish people. The Book of Esther was written by Mordecai and Esther, two of the three central figures in the story. The third player in this real-life drama is Haman. Haman is a man whose hatred for the Jewish people fueled his meteoric rise to power in the court of

King Achashverosh, and who sought to use the leverage of his position to bring about the extermination of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. In the end, it was a combination of Mordecai's wisdom, Esther's courage, and G-d's subtle and consistent support that saved Persian Jewry from the closing jaws of a hate-driven leadership, and an all too willing population of accomplices. A Layered Turn of Events True, on the face of things we find an astonishing turn of events. Haman's rise to power is the impetus behind a royal decree granting the citizenry of Persia the freedom to rise up and slaughter their Jewish neighbors. Yet, unbeknownst to Haman and Achashverosh, the king's own wife, Esther, is a Jew. At just the right moment, Esther deftly plays her hand. She reveals the truth of her identity, fingers Haman as the would-be henchman prepared to annihilate her and her people, and wins the king's favor. Esther's interceding leads to the execution of Haman and a second royal decree enabling the Jews of Persia to be saved. At the same time that these events were unfolding, another reversal was also taking place. The Book of Esther opens with the description of a lavish one-hundred-and-eighty-day feast that King Achashverosh hosted, for all his officials and servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobility and provincial officials. This feast culminated in a final week of festivities, for all the people who were present in Shushan the capitol¹, the aristocracy and the commoner alike. But this feast was more than an ancient precursor to Mardi gras. The Talmud informs us that there was a poignant theme to this party, a theme that struck at the heart of Jewish identity, and consciousness. This feast not only marked the third anniversary of the reign of King Achashverosh, it also marked seventy years since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Achashverosh was keenly aware that the Jewish prophets had foretold the end of the Babylonian and Persian exile after seventy years and he took these prophecies very seriously. Achashverosh, however, miscalculated the precise time when the seventy years began and drew the mistaken conclusion that the Jews would now languish in utter despair, and that the land of Israel and the once glorious Jewish nation would become permanent gems in his own crown of glory. To celebrate the certitude of his dominion over the Jews, Achashverosh staged an elaborate party where he donned the priestly garments plundered from the Temple. Likewise, the uniquely beautiful Temple vessels, which had become a part of the Persian treasury, were proudly displayed for all to see. And of course, Achashverosh invited the Jews. And they came, and they enjoyed the celebration. But how could they? Was this feast not the equivalent of a theme park being built on the site of Auschwitz, and inviting Jews to come and enjoy the attractions? True, when the king extends an invitation you can't say no. But enjoy the experience! How? Somehow, in a relatively short period of time, Jews had become desensitized to the meaning of their history. On some level, the Jews of Persia had lost sight of where they came from, and what they could again achieve. They accepted the mediocrity of the present. Their memories faded and with them a critical degree of sensitivity and commitment. They participated in the feast and enjoyed themselves. Then came Haman, and the threat of annihilation. Again the Talmud informs us of another dimension to the turn of historical events. It seems that the imminence of Haman's intentions were the catalyst for a reawakening of Jewish sensitivities. After all, the spark that ignited Haman's fury was a confrontation with Mordecai the Jew. For after Haman was elevated to his position of power, everyone in the kingdom would

bow down and prostrate themselves before Haman. To enhance the homage paid to himself, Haman wore the image of a deity around his neck. This calculated step lent a religious significance to the ceremonious bowing. Yet, there was one person who bowed to no men, and who acknowledged no deities. This was Mordecai, and Mordecai would not bow down or prostrate himself. And since Mordecai was a Jew, Haman railed against all the Jews, and Haman sought to kill all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, who were in the kingdom of Achashverosh. And when he sought to sell his plan for the final solution of the Jews in Persia to the king, Haman had only to point to their Jewishness: Their laws are different from every other peoples. Beneath the surface, the Book of Esther is about an era in which the sensitivity of Jews to their own Jewishness was on the wane. Ironically, there arose at that same juncture an enemy who hated the Jews specifically because of their Jewishness. And, as the Talmud goes on to tell us, the Jewish response to their enemy was not to run from the scourge of their Jewish identity, but to realize that nothing in the world was more precious to them than their very Jewishness. So as we reach the end of the Megillah, we find the words, The Jews had light and joy, gladness and honor. The sages in the Talmud tell us that these words not only represent a reaction to the downfall of Haman, but also are a reference to a renewal of their commitment to being Jews. Light represents a fresh commitment to studying the wisdom of the Torah. Joy, gladness and honor represent a reinvigorated attachment to the holidays and other observances like circumcision, and the wearing of tefillin. The Jews of Persia had now come full circle. Where once they were so casual about their Jewishness that they could enjoy a party celebrating their own physical and spiritual downfall, now events had brought about a fresh appreciation of Jewish life. On the surface, the story of the Jews in Persia could have been about any people who escaped near annihilation at the hands of their Persian hosts. Yet, aided by the vision of our sages, we are able to see that beneath the surface lays the story of a uniquely Jewish struggle to maintain a passionate sense of identity amidst a host culture that was at times welcoming and, at times threatening. When Jewish lives were threatened specifically because they were Jewish lives, the Jews of Persia realized that not only did they want to live, but more than anything else they wanted to live as Jews.

Five Questions People Ask About Purim (I) Question: Why do people wear costumes on Purim? Answer: The concept of wearing clothing other than one's own, and of concealing one's identity, is a recurrent theme throughout the story of Purim. In fact, the origins of this idea predate the events of Purim itself. The Talmud asks a strange question: Where is there an allusion to Esther in the Torah? A strange question because the Torah was written almost a thousand years before Esther lived. The Talmud answers by quoting the verse, *And I [G-d] will surely hide my face.* (Deut. 31:18). The Hebrew word used in the verse for hide, is *esther*. The name Esther literally means to hide or to conceal. And isn't that the purpose of a costume, to hide one's face? Examples of hidden identity and costumes in the Purim story: 1) When Esther and all the other candidates to become queen were brought to the palace, they were given their choice of clothing, jewelry and make-up to wear when they presented themselves to the king. 2) After being chosen as queen, Esther concealed her identity as a Jew. 3) Mordecai's identity as the one who saved the king's life was hidden from the king until just the right moment. 4) King Achashverosh ordered Haman to dress

Mordecai in royal garments and parade him through the streets of Shushan. 5) Haman's identity as the would-be murderer of the king's wife was hidden even from Haman himself. Insight: I. Costumes and Clothing People tend to be exceptionally careful about the clothing they wear. After all, who isn't aware that clothing makes a statement about who we are? Likewise, we understand that clothing is only one form of adornment. By belonging to particular clubs or groups or organizations we also adorn ourselves. Our affiliations, and associations make a statement about who we are. So, too, our furniture, our cars, the magazines we subscribe to, and the music we listen to; all are outer manifestations of our inner selves. On Purim we radically alter our most fundamental form of outer expression. We replace our regular clothing with a costume. In so doing we hope not to exchange one costume for another, but to penetrate beneath the outer layers, and discover a hidden essence. On Purim we dress as someone we could never be a king, a queen or even as Haman the Jew hater. Stripped of our usual attire, no longer able to rely on the externalities of clothing to define us, we are free to explore a very personal inner world. Masquerading has a paradoxical way of allowing us to see who we really are. By putting on a face that is not and never could be mine, I am able to look within and ask myself, who then am I? Were we to take as much pain to be what we ought, as we do to disguise what we are, we might appear like ourselves without being at the trouble of any disguise at all. Francois de la Rochefoucauld II. Costumes and Laughter We all have an alter ego, a part of us that would like to be something we are not. This alter ego is an inner adversary that would only foil our best attempts at becoming who it is we genuinely want to become, and achieving what it is we want to achieve. At times it seems that we are forever locked in a struggle: it's us against ourselves. My teacher, Rabbi Noah Weinberg of Jerusalem, used to tell us that on Purim we should dress up as our alter ego and laugh. You want to devote your weekends to bettering your community but you feel like going fishing. Then dress like a fisherman, and laugh at yourself. You want to be there when your kids need you, but you feel like watching a good movie on television. So dress like a couch potato, and laugh. Laughter comes when a predictable sequence of events suddenly produces the unexpected. You order a piece of pie for dessert and the waitress gives it to you right in the face. Ha, ha, ha. Two of you are walking down the street and one of you suddenly trips--ha, ha, ha. There is also another side to laughter. It cuts things down to size. We have all been witness to the cruelty of a group of children mocking a lone child. How crushed and small that child must feel. At the same time there can be a constructive side to this dimension of laughter like when we get too serious about things or overly absorbed in our work, or ourselves. At these times, laughter is therapeutic. It cuts things down to size, and helps us gain some much-needed perspective. Haman built a gallows upon which to hang Mordecai, and suddenly Haman himself is hung on those very gallows. The thirteenth day of Adar had been decreed as a day of destruction for the Jewish people; and in a flash it became a moment of salvation. Purim is a time for tapping into the power of laughter. We realize that no matter how bleak things seem, we must never give up hope. And when we dress like our alter ego, like a couch potato, a beauty queen or president of the United States, we laugh, and cut our nemesis down to size. III. Costumes and Freedom From Fear There is no fear as debilitating as the fear of, what will people think? We become stifled, and stilted when we just can't allow

ourselves to be ourselves. All because we are afraid of what people will think. In this vein, a costume can be liberating. All you need is a mask and some old clothing and no one will ever know who you are. Suddenly you are free to be yourself. You can go around telling corny jokes and making people laugh, if bringing smiles to people's faces is what you would really like to do. Or, you can spend time visiting a nursing home, if warming lonely hearts is what you are really all about. You can be a king, and treat your wife like a queen, or a horse and give all the neighborhood kids a ride. You can be anything else you really want to be, but aren't, because of what other people will think. And, if you do it right on Purim, you just might find that you no longer care as much, about what other people think. (II) Question: Where does the name of the holiday Purim come from? Answer: When Haman wanted to choose a date to execute his planned destruction of the Jews, he engaged in the practice of casting lots to determine the most auspicious time. The casting of lots was a type of astrological device used to predict the nature of particular dates based on the day, the month, and the position of various constellations. The Hebrew word for *lot* (as in lottery) is *pur*, and serves as the basis for the word Purim, which literally means *lots*. Haman was a master of these astrological-based arts and concluded that the thirteenth day of the month of Adar was well suited to his plans. A close look at the text of the Megillah reveals that a lot (*pur*) was cast in the presence of Haman. Haman himself did not cast the lots; rather some unknown character did it for him. This ancient role of the dice is the veneer of history. A faceless hand, an arbitrary flick-of-the-wrist, and suddenly hundreds of thousands of Jews are scheduled to die. How cold the irrational whims of history seem to be; how utterly pointless. Still, even in the face of countless horrors, the Jewish people live on. And as we live, we thrive, and as we thrive, we do so with dignity and honor; proud and grateful to be Jews. What is the secret of our perseverance? The secret lies in our rejection of an arbitrary reading of history. No, we don't pretend to understand everything that happens, yet we shun both cynicism and despair when we can't read the headlines on the tragic events that dot our history. ----- On Monday, October 10th, 1994, the Israeli public was informed that Nachshon Waxman had been captured by Hamas terrorists. By Friday he was dead. During the Shiva (seven day mourning period), rabbis, politicians and army generals all emerged from their visits with Nachshon's parents, Yehuda and Esther Waxman, with the same sentiments. We came to comfort and strengthen the Waxmans; instead, we were comforted and strengthened by them. Ask anyone who was there that week and they will tell you that the Waxmans were able to emotionally unite the people of Israel to a degree it hadn't felt for years. Yehuda and Esther are both religious children of holocaust survivors. He grew up in Rumania and she in Flatbush. They met, married and settled in Israel. As parents, they raised their sons to be devout and learned Jews, loyal and courageous soldiers. During the week of the kidnapping, the Waxmans appealed to all of Israel to transform their country into one massive synagogue; and everyone responded. For a week the entire country seemed to stand silent in prayer. Each morning the newspapers printed a notice indicating the special prayers that were to be recited that day. Each day schools across the country set aside time to pray for Nachshon. Each day synagogues that had few regular visitors during the week were packed for hours on end. A friend of mine was in a cab in Jerusalem that week. The secular Israeli cab driver handed him a prayer book

“I can't pray while I'm driving, he said, but you can. The Yediot Achronot, one of Israel's largest daily newspapers wrote that an entire secular country prayed in the depths of its heart for the rescue of Nachshon Waxman. Late on Friday afternoon, shortly before the country was sent reeling from the news of Nachshon's death, hundreds of thousands of women responded to Esther Waxman's request to light an extra Shabbat candle for Nachshon. In the end, Esther comforted her people, "Prayers don't get lost," she said. "Jews prayed for 2,000 years to return to Israel. Our generation made it back. Eventually the time comes for the fulfillment of prayers." ----- What does it take to respond with dignity in the face of horrible tragedies? Some would say that all it takes is the blind faith of a simpleton. Yehuda and Esther Waxman in our time, like Mordecai and Esther in their time, showed us that what it really takes is courage. The courage to believe in the Jewish people, and the Jewish dream. That one day the veneer of history will crumble, that prayers will be answered, and that goodness will ultimately prevail.