

WHY WE DO? PURIM

With Summary of Halachot Purim

"Why We Do" is a new series on foundational Jewish knowledge, offering insights into the reasons behind our practices. Understanding these reasons brings purpose, meaning, and excitement to what we do.

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WHY WE DO - PURIM

Why do we celebrate Purim?

Purim is celebrated to commemorate one of the most dramatic and miraculous salvations in Jewish history, as recorded in the Book of Esther, also known as the Megillah. The story takes place during the reign of King Achashverosh of Persia, who ruled over 127 provinces. During his reign, Haman, a descendant of Amalek and the king's wicked advisor, devised a plot to annihilate the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. Haman's hatred for the Jews was sparked by Mordechai, a prominent Jewish leader, who refused to bow to him, recognizing that bowing to Haman would be tantamount to idolatry.

Haman cast lots (Purim means "lots") to determine the date for carrying out his genocidal plan and manipulated King Achashverosh into issuing a decree for the destruction of all Jews—men, women, and children—on the 13th of Adar. With the decree sealed and unchangeable under Persian law, the Jewish people faced an existential threat.

Despite the dire situation, Mordechai and his cousin, Queen Esther, acted with faith and courage. Mordechai rallied the Jewish people to repentance, prayer, and fasting, recognizing that their salvation depended on Divine intervention. Esther, at great personal risk, approached the king uninvited a move that could have cost her life and skillfully orchestrated a series of events to expose Haman's plot. At a series of royal banquets, Esther revealed her Jewish identity and accused Haman of planning to exterminate her people.

The turning point came when King Achashverosh, enraged by Haman's treachery, ordered his execution. Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai. Though the original decree could not be revoked, the king issued a new decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies. On the 13th of Adar, the Jews successfully defeated their attackers, and on the 14th, they celebrated their victory. In the city of Shushan, the fighting extended to the 14th of Adar, and the celebration took place on the 15th. Thus, Purim is celebrated on the 14th of Adar in most places, while cities that were walled during the time of Yehoshua, such as Shushan and Jerusalem, observe it on the 15th (known as Shushan Purim)

Purim is a day to remember:

1. **Hashem's hidden hand:** Although God's name is never mentioned in the Book of Esther, His providence is evident in the series of events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people.
2. **Jewish unity:** The miracle of Purim reminds us of the power of unity and collective prayer during times of crisis.
3. **The reversal of fortune:** Purim highlights the theme of redemption and how everything can change in an instant, as symbolized by the casting of lots (Purim in Hebrew means "lots") that Haman used to determine the date of the Jews' destruction.



WHY WE DO - PURIM

Why do we Give Machatzit HaShekel?

The custom of giving Machatzit HaShekel is a remembrance (Zecher) of the half-shekel donation that every Jew contributed annually to the Beit HaMikdash for communal sacrifices (Rama 694:1). Although this mitzvah no longer applies, we continue the practice for several reasons. First, it serves as a reminder of the Beit HaMikdash, keeping the mitzvah's memory alive (Mishnah Berurah 694:4). Additionally, the Torah refers to the half-shekel as "Kofer Nefesh" (atonement for the soul) (Shemot 30:15), making this act a source of merit and protection. The Midrash also connects it to Purim, stating that Hashem preempted Haman's bribe to Achashverosh with the Jews' half-shekel donations (Megillah 13b). Moreover, the equal contribution of all Jews symbolizes unity and shared responsibility (Ramban on Shemot 30:15). Today, the money is given to tzedakah, often supporting Torah scholars or the poor, reinforcing Jewish values.

Why do we read the Megillah?

We read the Megillah, also known as the Book of Esther, on Purim to recount and relive the miraculous events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people during the Persian Empire. The public reading fulfills the mitzvah of publicizing the miracle (Pirsumei Nisa), reminding us of Hashem's hidden hand in orchestrating the downfall of Haman and the triumph of the Jewish people. Mordechai and Esther themselves established this annual mitzvah, as the Megillah states, "And these days shall be remembered and kept throughout every generation..." (Esther 9:28). By reading the Megillah, we express gratitude to Hashem for His protection and strengthen our emunah (faith) in recognizing His guidance even when it is not overtly apparent, as seen in the unique absence of His name in the text. The dramatic reversal from destruction to salvation inspires immense joy and celebration, making the Megillah central to Purim. This mitzvah is fulfilled both at night and during the day, ensuring the story's lessons are fully absorbed and remembered.

Why do we give Mishloach Manot?

We give Mishloach Manot on Purim, as commanded in the Megillah, to fulfill the verse: "And send portions to one another and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9:22). The mitzvah involves sending at least two food items to one friend to foster unity, friendship, and joy among the Jewish people. During Haman's time, he accused the Jews of being a divided and scattered nation. By giving Mishloach Manot, we actively counter that claim by demonstrating love and solidarity with one another.

This act also ensures that everyone has sufficient food to enjoy the Purim seudah (festive meal) with joy and dignity. Mishloach Manot serves as a practical and symbolic way of enhancing unity within the community, spreading the festive spirit, and reminding us that collective strength and mutual care were central to the salvation of the Jewish people during the Purim story.



WHY WE DO - PURIM

Why do we give Matanot La'Evyonim?

We give Matanot La'Evyonim (gifts to the poor) on Purim to fulfill the commandment mentioned in the Megillah: "And send portions to one another and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9:22). This mitzvah ensures that even the less fortunate can celebrate Purim with joy and dignity, partaking in the festive meal and the happiness of the day. Purim is a time of collective gratitude and joy, and helping those in need allows everyone to feel included in the celebration.

Giving to the poor on Purim also reflects the values of kindness, generosity, and unity, which were critical to the salvation of the Jewish people during the time of Esther and Mordechai. By performing this mitzvah, we emulate Hashem's kindness and demonstrate our responsibility to care for one another, fostering a sense of community and shared joy. This act of giving amplifies the spirit of Purim as a time of unity.

Why do we have a Purim Seudah?

We have a Seudat Purim (Purim feast) to commemorate the salvation of the Jewish people during the time of Esther and Mordechai and to fulfill the commandment mentioned in the Megillah: "to observe them as days of feasting and joy" (Esther 9:22). The joyous meal is a central part of the celebration, reflecting the relief and happiness that followed the miraculous reversal of events when the Jewish people were saved from Haman's decree of annihilation.

The Purim feast is also an opportunity to express gratitude to Hashem for His hidden miracles and providence, as the story of Purim demonstrates how Hashem worked behind the scenes to bring about the salvation. Through the seudah, we celebrate our survival as a nation, our unity, and our faith in Hashem's continuous protection.

The festive meal is typically filled with joy, song, and celebration, including traditional foods and wine, as a way to increase happiness and elevate the spirit of the day.

Why do we bang when hearing Hamans name?

The custom of banging, stomping, or making noise when Haman's name is mentioned during the Megillah reading has its origins in Jewish tradition and folklore. It is a way of symbolically expressing disdain for Haman, the wicked villain of the Purim story, and rejecting his evil intentions. Haman sought to annihilate the Jewish people, and this custom allows us to publicly demonstrate our rejection of his legacy and all he stood for.

The practice is rooted in the Torah's commandment to remember and obliterate the memory of Amalek, the nation from which Haman descended (Devarim 25:19). By making noise whenever Haman's name is read, we are figuratively "blotting out" his name and erasing his memory.



WHY WE DO - PURIM

Why do people get drunk on Purim?

The practice of drinking on Purim stems from the Talmud (Megillah 7b), which states: "A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until they do not know the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed is Mordechai.'" This custom is meant to enhance the joy and celebratory nature of Purim, reflecting the extraordinary salvation that the Jewish people experienced during the time of Esther and Mordechai.

The deeper reason for this practice lies in the theme of Purim itself. The story of Purim is one of hidden miracles, where Hashem's name is not mentioned in the Megillah, yet His guidance is evident throughout. By drinking, we symbolically transcend our usual boundaries of logic and understanding, recognizing that Hashem is in control even when His presence is concealed. The blurring of distinctions represents our faith that everything, even events that appear bad (like Haman's decree), ultimately serves a divine purpose.

However, this mitzvah is not an excuse for excessive or inappropriate behavior. Many authorities emphasize that the obligation can be fulfilled by drinking slightly more than usual or by drinking enough to feel joy and then falling asleep, which symbolizes the state of not distinguishing between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordechai." The goal is to celebrate in a way that enhances spiritual joy and connection, not to lose control or engage in behavior that contradicts the sanctity of the day.

Why do we wear costumes on Purim?

The custom of wearing costumes on Purim symbolizes several key themes of the holiday. First, it reflects the hidden nature of Hashem's miracles, as the events of Purim unfolded through natural means, with Hashem's name never mentioned in Megillat Esther. Costumes serve as a reminder that things are not always as they seem. Additionally, they recall how Esther concealed her Jewish identity in the palace (Esther 2:10) and how Mordechai was dressed in royal garments (Esther 6:8-11), highlighting the theme of disguise and revelation. Another significant reason is "V'Nahafoch Hu" (reversal of events)—just as Haman's plans were unexpectedly overturned (Esther 9:1), costumes symbolize transformation and the unexpected nature of Purim. Some sources suggest that dressing up was also a way to help the poor receive tzedakah anonymously, preserving their dignity. Lastly, Purim is a time of great joy and celebration, and wearing costumes adds to the festive spirit, allowing people to express creativity and break social barriers in a lighthearted way.



Summary Of Halachot Of Purim

Parashat Zachor (זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק)

- Read on the Shabbat before Purim (Parashat Zachor – Devarim 25:17-19).
- It is a Torah obligation to hear this once a year (Orach Chaim 685:7).
- Men are obligated. Women and children over the age of Chinuch should try and hear it as well

Ta'anit Esther (תענית אסתר – Fast of Esther)

- Fast is observed on the 13th of Adar (unless it falls on Shabbat, then moved to Thursday).
- Pregnant/nursing women and weak individuals are exempt (Rama 686:2).
- If one must eat, it is preferable to wait until after Megillah reading.

Machatzit HaShekel

What is Machatzit HaShekel?

- A custom to give charity in remembrance of the half-shekel donation that was given annually to the Beit HaMikdash for communal sacrifices (Rama 694:1).
- Today, the money is given to tzedakah.

When is it Given?

- Erev Purim (before Mincha).
- Some give it on Ta'anit Esther or anytime before Purim.

Who is Obligated?

- Customarily given by men above Bar Mitzvah.
- Some have the minhag for women to give as well.
- Many also give on behalf of small children.

How Much to Give?

- Three coins of half the local currency (e.g., half-dollar coins in the U.S.), symbolizing the three mentions of "Terumah" in the Torah (Mishnah Berurah 694:5).
- Sepharadim give the value of half a biblical shekel (~9.6 grams of silver).

Who Receives It?

- Given to tzedakah, ideally to support Torah scholars or the poor.



Summary Of Halachot Of Purim

Reading the Megillah (קריאת המגילה)

Obligation:

- Both **men and women** are obligated to hear the Megillah twice:
 - Once at night
 - Once during the day (Shulchan Aruch 687:1).

When to Read?

- **Night:** After tzeit hakochovim (nightfall).
- **Day:** From sunrise until sunset. (Shulchan Aruch 687:1)

Berachot Before Reading (at night and day):

1. על מקרא מגילה.

2. שעשה ניסים לאבותינו.

3. שהחיינו. Is only recited at night, Ashkenazim recite it by day also. (Rama 692:1.)

When **שהחיינו** is recited one should have in mind all the other mitzvot of purim. (Mishna Berurah 692:1)

Beracha After Reading (if with a minyan):

- הרב את ריבנו

Eating Before Megillah:

- **No eating before Megillah reading** (night and day) to ensure it is not forgotten.
- A small snack (kabetzah) (around 56 grams) is allowed if one finds it difficult to fast until the Megillah reading.
- If necessary, someone who feels very weak and may become sick may eat a full meal, but only after appointing someone to remind them to hear the Megillah.
- Sephardim: May appoint a reminder and eat a snack (but not a full meal) before Megillah reading.
- This applies equally to men and women, as both are obligated in Megillah reading.

Other Halachot:

- If one misses a single word, they have not fulfilled their obligation.
- If reading for oneself, one must read from a kosher Megillah scroll (Orach Chaim 690:3).
- Children who understand the story should hear the Megillah.



Summary Of Halachot Of Purim

Mishloach Manot (משלוח מנות – Sending Gifts to Friends)

Obligation:

- Send at least **two types of ready-to-eat food to one person** (Shulchan Aruch 695:4).

When to Send?

- **Only on Purim day**, after Megillah reading.

Who Must Give?

- Men send to men, women send to women (Rama 695:4).
- A married couple should send it separately (Mishna Berurah 695:25).

Other Details:

- Can be delivered through a messenger. Some say one should at least send one through a messenger.
- A mourner must send and can receive “real food” like meat, and vegetables (Just not sweet). Ashkenazim hold that one shouldn't send to a mourner (Rama 696:6).

Matanot La'evyonim (מתנות לאביונים – Gifts to the Poor)

Obligation:

- Give **money** or **food** to **two poor** people (Shulchan Aruch 694:1).

How Much?

- Enough for a basic meal (Rambam, Hilchot Megillah 2:16).
- **Preferably, give generously—better to spend more on this than on Mishloach Manot or Seudah** (Rambam 2:17).

When to Give?

- **Only on Purim day**. If given earlier, it must be re-given on Purim.
- Fine to give before to organizations if it is distributed on Purim Day.

Who is Obligated?

- **Everyone**, including women and children.
- Funds should go **directly to the poor** or to a **trusted gabbai tzedakah**.



Summary Of Halachot Of Purim

Purim Seudah (סעודת פורים – Festive Meal)

Obligation:

- Have a **special meal** with **bread** and preferably **meat** (Rama 695:1).

When to Eat?

- During **Purim day**, ideally in the afternoon.
- One who has his meal at night has not fulfilled his obligation.

Purim Seudah on Friday

Since Shabbat begins at sunset, one must stop eating and drinking at that time and may only resume after Kiddush.

Timing Options for the Seudah:

There are three options for when to start the meal:

- **Best option** – Begin the Seudah before midday.
- **Second-best option** – Begin before nine halachic hours into the day.
- **Last-resort option** – If necessary, one may begin anytime before sunset, but should limit bread consumption.

If the Seudah Continues Into Shabbat

If the meal extends past sunset and one wants to continue eating:

- Cover the bread on the table.
- Pour a new cup of wine.
- Recite Kiddush for Friday night, omitting Borei Pri Hagefen (unless no wine was previously drunk).
- Eat a Kabetzah of bread to establish the meal as a Shabbat meal.

Once these steps are followed, the meal may continue.

Birkat HaMazon Guidelines:

- If no bread was eaten within 30 minutes after sunset, say Al Hanisim but omit Retzei.
- If bread was eaten after 30 minutes past sunset, both Retzei and Al Hanisim should be included, but Al Hanisim is said at the end of the Harachamans, not in its usual place.



Summary Of Halachot Of Purim

Drinking on Purim:

- The Gemara (Megillah 7b) says to drink until one cannot distinguish between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordechai."
- If one going to end up violating or degrading any halacha such as Birkat HaMazon, one should not get drunk. (Chayeh Adam 155:30)
- That being said, the Rama (695:2) writes that drinking a little more than usual and sleeping fulfills this.
- Women are not required to drink as much.

Other Details:

- Al Hanisim is added in Birkat Hamazon (if forgotten, don't repeat).
- Some extend the meal into the night, but the main part must be during the day.

Al Hanisim (על הניסים) in Tefillah & Birkat Hamazon)

- Added in Shemoneh Esrei (Modim) and Birkat Hamazon (Nodeh Lecha).
- If forgotten, do not repeat the prayer (Rama 693:2).

Purim in Yerushalayim – Shushan Purim & Purim Meshulash

In Yerushalayim, Purim is on the 15th of Adar (Shushan Purim).

• If the 15th falls on Shabbat, Purim is observed over three days (Purim Meshulash):

- **Friday:** Megillah reading (also Thursday night) & Matanot La'evyonim. (No Al Hanisim.)
- **Shabbat:** Al Hanisim & special Torah reading.
- **Sunday:** Mishloach Manot & Seudah. No Al Hanisim.

