

Video Clip: The Story(ies) of Purim

Iran and other communities

Purim is a post-Biblical holiday that recounts the rescue of the Jews of ancient Persia. It has become the model for the ongoing recollection and celebration of other occasions of rescue from local persecutions. And still it has a special connection to the Jews of Iran, ancient Persia, where the story of Purim took place. Today, there is one Star of David visible from space. Designed by a Persian Jew, it sits over the tombs associated with Mordechai and Esther in Hamedan, in modern day Iran. Since the time of the Persian Empire and until today, Persian Jews have made pilgrimage to the tombs – their unique and direct connection to Jewish history.

Topics

1. The importance and significance of religious spaces
2. History as stories, what are the stories that last, can we rewrite history?
3. Customs of Purim
4. Outgrowths of Purim

Background

The story read in the Megillah holds particular importance for the Jews of modern-day Iran. We know there have been Jews in Persia since the times of Cyrus who is noted in the Book of Ezra and in the Cyrus Cylinder as having allowed Jews to return to their homeland.¹

In the story of Purim, here is no historical consensus as to who exactly was Achashverosh – Xerxes or Artaxerxes – or if Esther was Amestris.²

The Jews, mostly of the tribe of Judah, were living in the Persian Empire, in approximately the sixth and fifth centuries CE. They had built themselves a name, living a good life for the most part; they had businesses and homes and they had some connection to power as we see with the feast where Jews were invited and that Mordechai foiled a plot to kill the king. Pieces were falling into place to ultimately have “one of their own” with direct access to the king and that is when Esther is chosen to be queen.

Esther, the original crypto Jew, hid her Jewish identity not far from the city of Mashad, in today’s Iran, that 2000 some years later had a thriving community of crypto-Jews. Jews have been living in that region continuously, some at better times and some at less. Overall, the story of Purim seems to start at a time when Jews were part of high society, integrated into the empire, and with many rights. It took one man, Haman to jeopardize that relationship, and it took our crypto-Jew to come out of hiding and save the situation.

¹ Note: The names and dates of the Persian kings in the video are translated based on generally accepted research, although in the Septuagint, the name Achashverosh is translated to Artaxerxes who followed Xerxes in the line of kings.

² <https://www.thetorah.com/article/if-achashverosh-is-xerxes-is-esther-his-wife-amestris>

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Today we hear of people hiding their mezuzahs across the world or taking off anything that identifies them as Jewish, while in Iran Jews today are publicly identifying as Jews³. Is it possible that the story of Esther is relevant today as it has been throughout the ages? A story of a young woman's resilience, a nation coming together to support her, the strength of a leader to stand up for what is right, and the ultimate destruction of the enemy.

Persian Jews stayed connected to the story of Purim for centuries, as they would make pilgrimage to the site believed to be the burial spot of Mordechai and Esther. Tradition holds that after the story we read about in the megillah, Esther and Mordechai moved from Shushan (the capital of the Persian Empire at the time) to Hamedan, the site of the royal summer resort. They spent their final years there and are said to be buried in the spot commemorated to this day as Esther's tomb. The site was a point of Iranian national pride when in 1971, they commissioned Jewish architect Yassi Elias Gabbay to renovate the centuries-old structure.

The traditional celebration of Purim occurs on the 14th of Adar (usually in March) in most places and on the 15th of Adar in specific walled cities. Celebrations of Purim share several common traits in all Diaspora communities:

- The reading of the megillah (Scroll of Esther) which recounts the story of Mordechai and Esther's roles in the deliverance of the Jews of Persia from near destruction at the hands of the villainous courtier Haman.
- Offering charity
- Eating a festive meal
- Sending edible gifts (mishlo'ah manot) to at least two friends
- Dressing in costume and participating in political, cultural and religiously-oriented parodies are part of the jubilant celebrations that mark the holiday.

The story of Purim, however, is not reserved for the Persian Jewish community. In addition to the universally celebrated Purim, other Purim celebrations were often celebrated locally to commemorate the redemption of a community from some local danger or a natural disaster. Sometimes, the celebration involved the deliverance of one family and combined celebrations of community and family.

The local Purim (Purim Sheni or Purim Katan) was sometimes recorded in a scroll that was read on the anniversary of the incident. Both Ashkenazim and Sephardim have recorded local Purims over the centuries. Over 120 such Purims have been preserved throughout the Jewish world.

Examples from Eastern Europe include:

- Purim Vinz took place in Frankfurt, Germany to commemorate the return of the Jews to Frankfurt in 1616 after their expulsion at the hands of one Vincenz Fettmilch. A scroll, Megillat Vinz, comparing Fettmilch to Haman, was recited in Hebrew and Yiddish.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHV1QUs-BA4> PBS report from 2019; <https://youtu.be/OvclHla18aw?si=oovh5YGq4ZTwuZQj> a JUTD program with Michel Gordon who visited Iran in the early 2000s; <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/irans-jews-in-the-crosshairs/> since October 7; see posts by Karmel Melamed that claim that Jews are treated very poorly in Iran today

- Another local Purim from the 17th century, the “Curtain Purim,” originated in Prague where celebrations occurred to commemorate the rescue of a Jewish official in 1622 threatened with hanging as a result of a false accusation of hiding stolen curtains.
- The “Plum Jam Purim”, celebrated on the 10th of Adar, commemorated the rescue of the Brandeis family in Mlada Boleslav, Bohemia, falsely accused of trying to poison the Christian population with plum jam in 1731.

Examples from Sephardic communities include:

- Purim Saragossi or Purim Syracuse derives from a local incident which occurred in either Saragossa in Spain or Syracuse in Sicily. In the Purim of Saragossa, a near catastrophic pogrom is averted through a miracle. According to tradition, the King of Aragon would require that the Jews of the city of Saragossa would receive him when he visited with their Torah scrolls in adorned wooden cases. One year the local Jews decided that this was unbecoming and decided to parade the scrolls without the Torahs in them. A Jewish courtier who had converted to Christianity revealed the Jews’ intentions to the King who decreed that if this were indeed the case, he would kill all the local Jewish males, confiscate their property and enslave the women and children. The night before the processional the local shamash had a dream in which he was advised to return all the torahs to their cases without telling anyone of his deed. When the Torah cases were opened by the King the next day, the torahs were all in place and the Jewish community was saved and the evil courtier was hanged. A scroll, Megillat Saragossa, was composed and read for centuries by descendants in Greece, Sicily, Salonica and Syria. The incident itself dates from the thirteenth century. In Salonica it was celebrated by the Sicilian Jews who had been expelled from Syracuse in 1492. The Megillat Saragossa was published in a special edition in 1874 in Jerusalem.



- Purim of Cairo, or Purim Mitzrayim commemorates the rescue of Jews in 1524 from destruction. The story is recounted in the special Megillat Purim Mitzrayim, read in both Hebrew and in Arabic.

- In 1538, Tangier, and by extension, the whole of Morocco, was threatened by the invasion of the Portuguese King Sebastian. This was precisely the time the Inquisition was being inaugurated in Portugal. The Portuguese king fell in battle near Tangier on August 4, 1538, leaving the crown of Portugal empty and paving the way thereby for the union of Spain and Portugal. To commemorate the victory of the Moroccan King Moulay Abd el-Malik over the Portuguese king and resultant rescue from the occupation of Morocco by Portugal the Purim de los Cristianos, a.k.a Purim Sebastiano or Purim of Tangier, was introduced. It is still commemorated in a Sephardi congregation in Canada where a special Megillah and various poems are read.

Sephardic Purim Traditions:

- In Salonica and the Balkans on the Sabbath preceding Purim, the Sabbath known as “Sabbath of the Brides” children were given sweets in the shape of specific items, i.e. baskets and sewing implements for girls, watches and hammers to hit Haman for boys. These items were made of sugar. Effigies of the Purim personalities appearing in the scroll of Esther were also distributed, much to the delight of children. This custom was elaborated upon in the nineteenth century, with schoolteachers creating a large sugar effigy of Haman which was hung from the ceiling in the classroom. Students would bang Haman with their hammers with gusto. Apparently, this custom was based on ancient Near Eastern Purim traditions.
- In nineteenth-century Balkan communities such as Kastoria, children would prepare an effigy of Haman that was suspended on gallows in the synagogue courtyard. Elsewhere, including Libya, the effigy was made of wood and was burned in the synagogue courtyard.

Questions for Discussion

1. Purim is a holiday based in the diaspora – in the Persian Empire which spanned quite a distance.
 - a. What is the significance of physical places in a religion that lived in multiple diasporas?
 - b. Read the introduction to Malka Z. Simkovich’s book, *Letters from Home: The Creation of Diaspora in Jewish Antiquity* (Eisenbrauns, 2024). What is the significance of the Land of Israel as the center of Jewish law and nationality? How does that manifest itself in a holiday that is created in the diaspora?
2. Is it cultural appropriation to make a local Purim? Does that enhance or diminish the connection to the greater Jewish narrative?
3. What is the significance of sacred spaces? Does it matter if they are not exactly in the right location?
 - a. If these are not the actual tombs of Mordechai and Esther, is there still a special significance to the spot?
 - b. Check out some sites on Diarna.org and choose a site to discuss and research.
4. What’s in a story? Purim is a holiday based around stories – and we know that today the spin on different events is what becomes the “truth”. In 2017 the Iranian Foreign Minister gave a spin on the Purim story saying that Ahashverosh was the hero https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/iranian-spin-on-purim-persia-saved-the-jews-didnt-want-to-kill-them-484009#google_vignette. How do we define the truth in the context of history? History goes to the victors – what defines an objective history?

5. Esther was a crypto Jew as she did not reveal that she was Jewish. What are the parallels with that and the Bnei Anussim of the Iberian Peninsula, or the Mashadi Jews?

Suggested Readings

<http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/106/>

Landy, Yehuda. *Purim and the Persian Empire: A historical, archaeological, and geographical perspective*. Philipp Feldheim, Jerusalem: 2010.

Mancus, Jacob Ruæer, and Marc Saperstein. "The Cairo Purim 1524." *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791*, Hebrew Union College Press, 1999, pp. 70–75. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd58td4.18>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025.

Full text available here of Megillat Mitzrayim available here:

Margoliouth, G. "Megillath Missraim, or the Scroll of the Egyptian Purim." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1896, pp. 274–88. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1449838>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2025.
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