

Purim Educators Background

Passport to Peoplehood

Jews are a multicultural people who live around the world.

Big Ideas

1. Purim is a holiday that provides an opportunity to consider the complexities of identity—from what is visible to what is often hidden from view but is of vital importance.
2. Esther is a role model not only of bravery but also of cultural agility and competence.
3. Purim is the only Jewish holiday that takes place specifically outside Israel. This stresses the importance of diaspora in Jewish life, culture, and identity.

Once a year, at Purim, familiar faces are hidden behind masks and costumes, daily norms are turned on their heads, and seriousness takes a back seat to frivolity and fun. Despite this air of frivolity, or perhaps because of it, Purim offers the opportunity to explore the challenges we face when it comes to identity, inclusion and race. The story of Purim and the rituals of the holiday speak directly to contemporary sensibilities and provide us with some important lessons for living in a diverse multicultural world.

The Story

The basic story of Purim is told in the biblical book of Esther, also known in Hebrew as "the Scroll" (Megillah). In the story, the ancient Persian empire is ruled by King Achashverosh who from his palace in the city of Shushan. Disappointed by his first queen, Vashti, Achashverosh selects Esther to be his new queen. Esther has been told by her uncle Mordechai to hide her Jewishness, so the king does not know that his new queen is Jewish. At the same time, Achashverosh approves his advisor Haman's plot to kill the Jews. Alerted to the danger and asked to intercede by Mordechai, Queen Esther appeals to King Achashverosh. The Jews are saved and Haman is hung.

On the surface, it is a simple story of good and evil but, seen through the lens of diversity, the story takes on new and deeper meanings.

Understanding the Book of Esther Through a Multicultural Lens

In the biblical story, Achashverosh's kingdom is vast, stretching over 70 nations from India to Africa. People of many backgrounds and religions live under his rule, including Jews, and he is

Purim Educators Background

glad to host all at his palace. Achashverosh comes to value Mordechai as an individual because Mordechai saved the King's life, but he is unaware of the value of the Jews as part of his multicultural empire. Often, individuals from a minority group are accepted because they are seen as exceptional, not as representative of their group as a whole. And so, even as Achashverosh celebrates Mordechai, he gives the go-ahead for the annihilation of the Jews.

It is important to note that while we sometimes assume that the existence of a community made up of people from many backgrounds is a sure way to combat narrowness and exclusion, a multicultural community is not a guarantee against baseless hatred or discrimination. King Achashverosh ruled over many people and yet he does not think twice about annihilating an entire community whose only sin is being Jewish.

Esther, the hero for whom the biblical story is named, is a complex character. Born to a prominent Jewish family, she hides her Jewish identity to become queen. It was not seeing Esther's Jewish identity that created the disconnect for Achashverosh when it came to giving permission to Haman for his plan of destruction. King Achashverosh misses an essential element of her identity, her Jewishness. And yet, as important as her Jewishness is, it is not the totality of who she was. Perhaps had he only seen Jewishness she might never have qualified to be queen a role she was clearly more than capable of fulfilling.

All of us have elements of our identities that are immediately visible to others and elements of our identities that are hidden. Esther's ability to conceal her Judaism allows her to navigate the politics of the palace community. This is something many Jews have had to do throughout time: conceal their Judaism in order to survive.

In addition to being a hero who saved our people, Esther is a role model who demonstrates the capacity to code-switch. Code-switching is a term that comes from the linguistic ability to switch languages depending on the need and context. But it has come to also mean the ability to change how we behave and act in different situations.

As a leader who knew how to function in the royal court as well as be a spiritual leader for her people, Esther models the code-switching that is so often incumbent on racial and ethnic minorities and reminds us that it can be a useful skill. Because of that skill, she was able to live and operate in the palace and when the Jewish people needed someone to intercede with King Achashverosh, she was called upon to represent her entire community.

Purim Educators Background

In our daily lives, every one of us, to greater and lesser degrees, learns to navigate different social and cultural settings, putting forward or concealing elements of who we are. For people of color, being seen as only who you are on the surface is a common problem. It is important to note that those who belong to minority groups often have to switch their behavior and terminology to fit into the majority context.

Within the American Jewish community where people of color are a small percentage of the population, skin color can be a primary way people are seen. Often they, like Esther, are called upon to represent the entirety of their people whether they want to or not. We all want what Esther finally achieved—to be seen as full and complex individuals who stand on our own as well as part of a group.

Ultimately, the redemption of the Jews serves not only as an omen of good fortune but also as a reminder of the folly of any society that does not value all its people. Among the many nations, the Jews as a group were singled out because of one element of their identity, their religion. This is a reminder that we need to be able to see people for who they are and not judge them negatively for being different; otherwise, we will be no better than Haman.

The tradition of drinking until one does not know the difference between Haman and Mordechai also holds a lesson to us all. In the simple telling of the Purim story, Haman is bad and Mordechai is good. But it is rarely that simple. In Jewish tradition, we believe that we all have the power to change for the good but also the potential to be bad. If we are careless, are not deliberate about our choices and behaviors, we have the potential to discriminate against 'the other.' Anyone of us has the potential to be either a hero or a villain depending on the choices we make.

Purim Traditions and Persian Jews

Though the Passover story begins in Egypt, the story of the Exodus takes as its goal the escape from Egypt and the return to the Promised Land. The Book of Esther by contrast takes place in Persia and makes no mention of longing for or returning to the land of Israel. The Book of Esther stands alone in the Bible as a tribute to Jewish life in the diaspora, and is a reminder that Jewish life outside of Israel goes back to biblical times.

While the historicity of the story told in the Book of Esther is complex, it is important to note that to this day the tombs of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordechai can be found in Iran. The tombs are located in the city of Hamdan which according to some is at the same place where

Purim Educators Background

the ancient city of Shushan once stood. Through the centuries the tombs have served as a place of pilgrimage for Persian Jews.

Purim Foods

It is notable that the theme of hiding even permeates Purim foods. Throughout the world it is common to find foods that have a hidden culinary element to mirror the hidden identity in the Book of Esther. Among Persian Jews, Ghotab cookies filled with almonds and rose water make an appearance. Among Ashkanazi Jews, hamantaschen (from the German and Yiddish *mun-taschen* poppy seed pockets) hide a multiplicity of fillings inside cookie dough. Italian Jews ate tortellini where the filling was hidden inside the pasta. It is worth considering what other hidden foods might work for the holiday or might be added to the menu today.

In addition to the focus on hidden foods, there is a strong thread around the world of eating our enemy. The list of traditional foods eaten during the holiday is extensive and fascinating. In Germany the common mun-taschen, poppy seed pocket, a common three sided treat became the model for the Hamantaschen that today has Jews around the world eating Haman's hat or alternatively his ears as in Hebrew the cookies are called *Oznei Haman* Haman's ears. Haman's ears, *Orecchie di Aman*, took the form of a thin wine flavored rectangular cookie pinched at the top to look like an animal's ear. Throughout the Sephardi world there are fried cookies that are called Haman's ears, each a little different but all keeping with the general theme. There are also lentil based dishes through the Middle East and North Africa which recall the vegetarian diet that Queen Esther is said to have followed to ensure that she adhered to the laws of kashrut when living in the palace.

Purim Around the World

Purim is a holiday that lends itself by design to merriment. Jews around the world celebrate by following the three basic Purim traditions, reading the megillah, giving mishloach manot (gifts of food) and providing matanot l'evyonim (monetary gifts to the poor). Delivering mishloach manot, which literally means "sending of portions" in Hebrew, also offers a chance to drop by for a visit with friends. The idea behind this tradition stems from the notion that Purim is meant to be a joyous holiday, and sharing these food gifts ensures that everyone will have enough to celebrate with.

It should be noted that the Jews of Ethiopia, who lost their connection to the rest of the Jewish people in ancient times before the holiday of Purim was established, did not celebrate Purim for many years. Since their reconnection with other Jews in modern times, they too now celebrate the holiday though it is not their historic tradition.

Purim Educators Background

Historians believe that the modern custom of wearing costumes on Purim began among Italian Jews who took inspiration from the costumes as the carnivals at Lent in Venice. The practice of wearing masks or dressing up resonated with the theme of hiding that is central to Purim and was adapted as a Jewish custom. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, costumes at Purim were a dominantly European custom that also made its way to the United States. It was not prevalent among Jews in the Middle East or North Africa. Today, wearing costumes on Purim has become a global Jewish tradition.

While wearing costumes is a great way for people to explore identity and consider alternative visions of themselves or take on new persona, it is also important that the playfulness of the holiday not be marred by offensive costumes. Dressing in blackface (a white person making their skin purposely black) or as an Asian with exaggerated slanted eyes plays into negative stereotypes that stand against the values of the holiday. Costumes that reflect discriminatory tropes from the broader culture should be discouraged not only because they may offend but also because they represent the very idea that Purim is trying to push back against, baseless hatred.

The Purim “Spiel” or Purim play which comes from the Yiddish word to tell a story, also began as an Eastern European custom. Today it is common throughout North America for communities to stage plays that frame the Purim story, sometimes in a modern context in a comic fashion.

Historically throughout the Middle East and North Africa, Haman was often resurrected and destroyed. It was common in these communities to create drawings or effigies of Haman that were poked or prodded during the reading of the Book of Esther and sometimes pulled apart. The effigies would be hung, dragged through the streets, or burned during the celebrations. These practices allowed for the destruction of the enemies of the Jews in a symbolic fashion.

While joy is universal, its expression and experience over time is not. What makes people happy at Purim has varied over time and even within individual communities. Moreover, the expressions of joy at Purim are folk customs and traditions which have not always been recorded in the official accounts of the holiday celebration. This means that in trying to catalogue the variety of ways Purim has been marked by Jews throughout the world and throughout time, often relies on personal recollections which can vary even when they come from the same community.

Purim Educators Background

The range of memories highlight the creativity and play that unite the celebrations. Some Persian Jews seem to have made the holiday into a particularly big celebration. It is noted that in modern times it is common to use of fireworks to make the holiday festive. Still others note that Purim in Persia was a minor holiday only the beginning of the season that ushers in Passover. There are those who recall children riding horses and donkeys through the streets in Egypt in homage to the ride of pride that Mordechai took when King Achashverosh honored him. In Iraq, women cooked the Purim feast while men and boys went to synagogue. Then there were parties for all. There are those who recall French Jews writing the name of Haman on rocks and sitting in the synagogue and banging the rocks together when Haman's name was read out loud. In Italy the effigy seems to have also made an appearance where it was hung in memory of Haman's fate. Italian adults would ride through the streets while the children would reenact the battle for Jewish survival by throwing nuts at one another.