

Video Clip: The Story(ies) of Purim

Iran, North Africa, 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 Mordehai 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.

Suggested Implementations

Jewish Holidays

1. Purim

Jewish History

1. A research project on notable locations from Jewish history and what they are today (see Diarna Geo-Museum)

Philosophy/Hashkafa

1. Discussions of the importance of religious spaces (Western Wall, Rabbis' graves, etc.)

Background

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 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 But the story of Purim comes after, revealing a more complex relationship. After the Jews survived a decree that threatened to decimate the nation, they remained in modern-day Iran and had their ups and downs with the ruling powers. However, they 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 move 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 national pride when in 1971, they commissioned Jewish architect Yassi Elias Gabbay to renovate the centuries-old structure.

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) 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.
- 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 deriving from a local incident which occurred in either Saragossa in Spain or Syracuse in Sicily. 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

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 Ahashverosh is translated to Artaxerxes who followed Xerxes in the line of kings.

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 the Purim Saragossi 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. Precisely at this 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 the effigy was made of wood and was burned in the synagogue courtyard.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of physical places in a religion that lived in multiple diasporas?
2. If these are not the actual tombs of Mordechai and Esther, is there still a special significance to the spot?
3. Is it cultural appropriation to make a local Purim? Does that enhance or diminish the connection to the greater Jewish narrative?
4. What is the significance of sacred spaces? Does it matter if they are not exactly in the right location? Check out some sites on Diarna.org and choose a site to discuss and research.

Suggested Readings

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

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

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