

# *PURIM*

A Question of Glasses  
and Happy Endings

by Rabbi M. Polakoff

The American Jewish  
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# PURIM

## A Question of Glasses and Happy Endings



*When Noach started planting, Satan came and stood before him, saying “What are you planting?” Said Noach “a vineyard, whose sweet fruits produce wine that cause the heart to rejoice.” Said Satan “Let us be partners in this vineyard.” “Yes,” said Noach. Satan then brought a lamb and slaughtered it under the vine. Then he did the same, one after another, with a lion, a pig and a monkey, sprinkling their blood throughout the vineyard. That is why when a person drinks one glass of alcohol he is timid and innocent like a lamb, then when he drinks two glasses he is strong like a lion, thinking that none are as strong as he. When a person drinks three or four glasses, he acts like a monkey who dances around uttering vile words, completely out of control. But when a person drinks too much, he acts like a pig, wallowing in the mud and polluting himself in filth*

*(Tanchuma, Noach*

**Make no mistake.** I have brought up Noach because it will help us understand the **Purim** holiday. After all, among all of the things that we have learned as inherent in the people of Israel, one of the most important ones was overcoming tragedies. And Noach has been the undisputed precursor of all the survivors. When it comes to tragedies (or comedies?), the **Purim** holiday is just the most fitting one.

You should not be afraid either. Satan, whose literal translation is “hindrance,” has been present for several centuries in Jewish sources. However, he has been absolutely devoid of all the “satanic” nature that he acquired slowly and patiently outside the Hebrew tradition. He is just a mythical heavenly figure, a member of the court of angels that assists G-d in his divine management, and who is entrusted with very special tasks. In this case, the task consists of teaching us to keep count of the glasses we drink. It is an essential lesson in **Purim**.

*Let us begin, then ...*

## THE LAMB: Uncle Mordechai

I know you know me, but in any case, allow me to introduce myself a little more formally. Even if I was born into a Jewish family, my name, Mordechai, is of Babylonian origin, and it is closely connected to the name of the god Marduk, a hero who was fairly popular in the whole of the Babylon area at the time.

I am a descendent of the Binyamin tribe; that is why they call me yish yemini, and my family was banished from their land into exile as early as Nebuchadnezzar's time. Among my ancestors is Kish, the father of the first king of Israel, no less—King Shaul—. As you probably know, Shaul had fought a fierce battle against the people of Amalek and its King Agag, which is why it should not be surprising that this fight reappears constantly from the very exile from Egypt until these days, since Haman is a direct descendant of Agag and Amalek. We will get to them later...

It has fallen to my lot to brush up on the story of **Purim** for you in a few lines. There is no point in devoting too much time to this, as the story is part of the least understood best-seller ever: the Bible. That is why we will not look at this subject in greater detail.

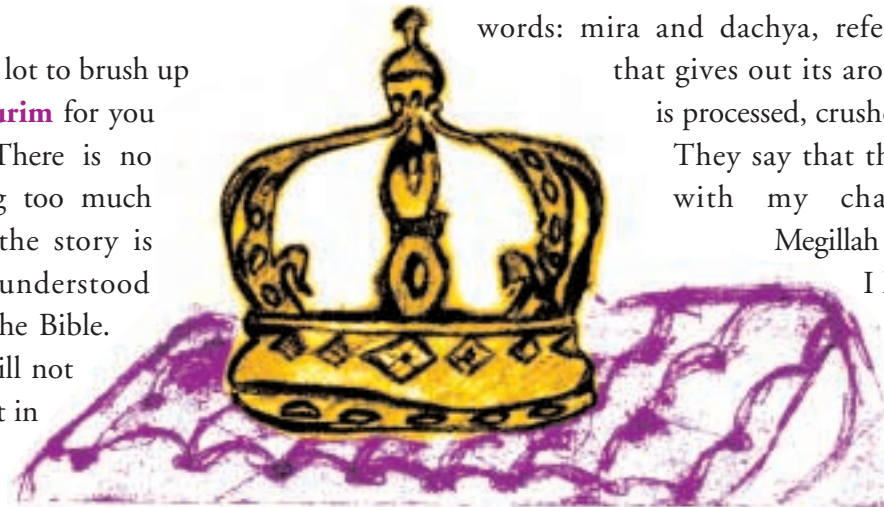
I could summarize the story like this: A wicked Persian Prime Minister (an ancestor of Saddam, maybe?) decided to cast lots to set the day on which he would exterminate the Jewish people. Within 24 hours, he got the approval of King Achashveirosh, the monarch of the most powerful empire of the time.

A few days later, not only did the plot fail, but Haman was also hanged and his public enemy number one (that is, me) took on his position. And it was all due to a series of mixups, mainly involving women, which combine the beauty of my cousin Esther with acts of betrayal, plots, banquets and wine.

So we are back where we started: with wine. Actually, my name, Mordechai, according to what our sages suggest very imaginatively, comes from the combination of two Aramaic words: mira and dachya, referring to a spice that gives out its aroma only when it is processed, crushed and crumbled.

They say that the same happens with my character in the Megillah because, although

I have a complicated start, it ends with me in my prime. And the same happens



with the vine, in order to become wine.

Let us not forget that, in fact, the problems started when I refused to prostrate before Haman. There followed the deep-seated anti-Semitic axiom that claims that any individual action of a Jew that is interpreted as offensive for anyone with a certain amount of power should be used to justify the punishment (and/or extermination) of the whole of the Jewish people. And so it was.

But bear in mind that it is not that I refused to bow down out of insolence or pride. I did it out of my deepest humility. That is why I am glad that when this book was translated into Greek in the Septuagint, someone took the time to add a few lines describing my innermost feelings (and Esther's too). My prayer was included word for word: "It is clear and known before the throne of Your glory, Lord of the Universe, that it has not

been out of insolence or arrogance that I did not bow to Haman the Amalekite, but that my fear of You has given me courage to not bow to him, because I fear You, Lord of the Universe. I have refused to do so to avoid putting Your glory before that of men, and I will not bow before anyone except You, for who am I to not bow before Haman? To save Israel I would be willing to kiss the soles of his feet and the dust therein."

That is why it does not upset me that I am compared with a lamb here. Because it has to do with the humility and calm with which I had to gradually accept my circumstances, knowing that, ultimately, help would come from "some province," as I said in the [Megillah \(4:3\)](#).

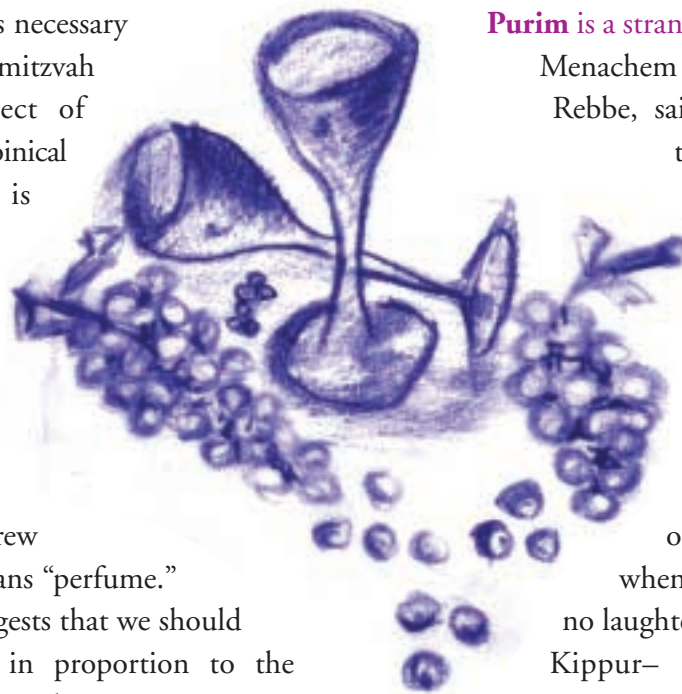
And when you are a lamb, you begin drinking one glass of wine. You heard Satan already. And I am telling you this because, as you may well



remember, bringing up an excerpt from the Talmud tractate that evidently deals with the **Purim** holiday (*Masechet Megillah 7b*), the Shulchan Aruch (Jewish law code compiled by Rabbi Joseph Caro in the 16th century) instructs us to drink so much on **Purim** that we can no longer distinguish between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman (*Orach Chaim 695:2*).

The proposal itself is interesting. But the number of drinks necessary to observe this odd mitzvah has been the subject of several pages and rabbinical generations. That is because the limit is very blurry: on that very page of the Talmud, the verb used to describe this state of “intoxication” is “lebasumei,” a Hebrew word whose root means “perfume.”

It is as if the text suggests that we should drink just a little, in proportion to the amount of perfume that a person wears. However, a few lines later we are told that Rabah got so drunk that he killed Rabbi Zeira. It is clear that sometimes there is no need to take the words of the Talmudic text too literally, and that it may be wiser to interpret the rabbinical trope about the



distinction between good and evil after the fashion of Abudraham. This chacham claimed that, since in Hebrew the phrases “cursed Haman” (arur Haman) and “blessed Mordechai” (baruch Mordechai) have the same numerical value if we add up the value of each of their letters using the Gematria technique, it is evident that the alcohol level should only slightly exceed a person’s capacity to figure out the result, which amounts to 502.

**Purim is a strange holiday.** So strange that even Menachem Mendel MiKotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe, said that during a **Purim** feast there are more opportunities to transcend than during the Neilah on Kippur.

It is no wonder the Zohar--the most outstanding work in Jewish mystic literature, reminds us that precisely the day which is the ultimate opposite of **Purim**, the day when there is no feast or kiddush, no laughter or costumes --the day of Yom Kippur-- is originally called Yom HaKi**Purim** in the Torah. Why? Because it is ki **Purim**, i.e. “like **Purim**,” almost like **Purim**, but not quite.

*We will have to go one step further to begin to understand it ...*

## THE LIONESSE: Queen Esther

We are increasing the level of joy and the number of glasses we are drinking, but we are about to take a spill. Once again we are skating on thin ice, we are walking the tightrope where the story of the Megillah –and of humankind– takes place.

So now the story's heroine, the “queen of the jungle,” comes into the picture. She is the one who risks her life for her cubs (her people) and says without hesitating “If I perish, I perish” (4:16). She is the one whose name carries a great deal of the holiday's depth: Esther.

Hers is another name of Babylonian origin, tied to that of Ishtar, the symbol of erotic love in the Near East. This is probably the tradition that the Talmud picked up when it stated that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in the world (if you want to know who the other three were, see Megillah 15a).

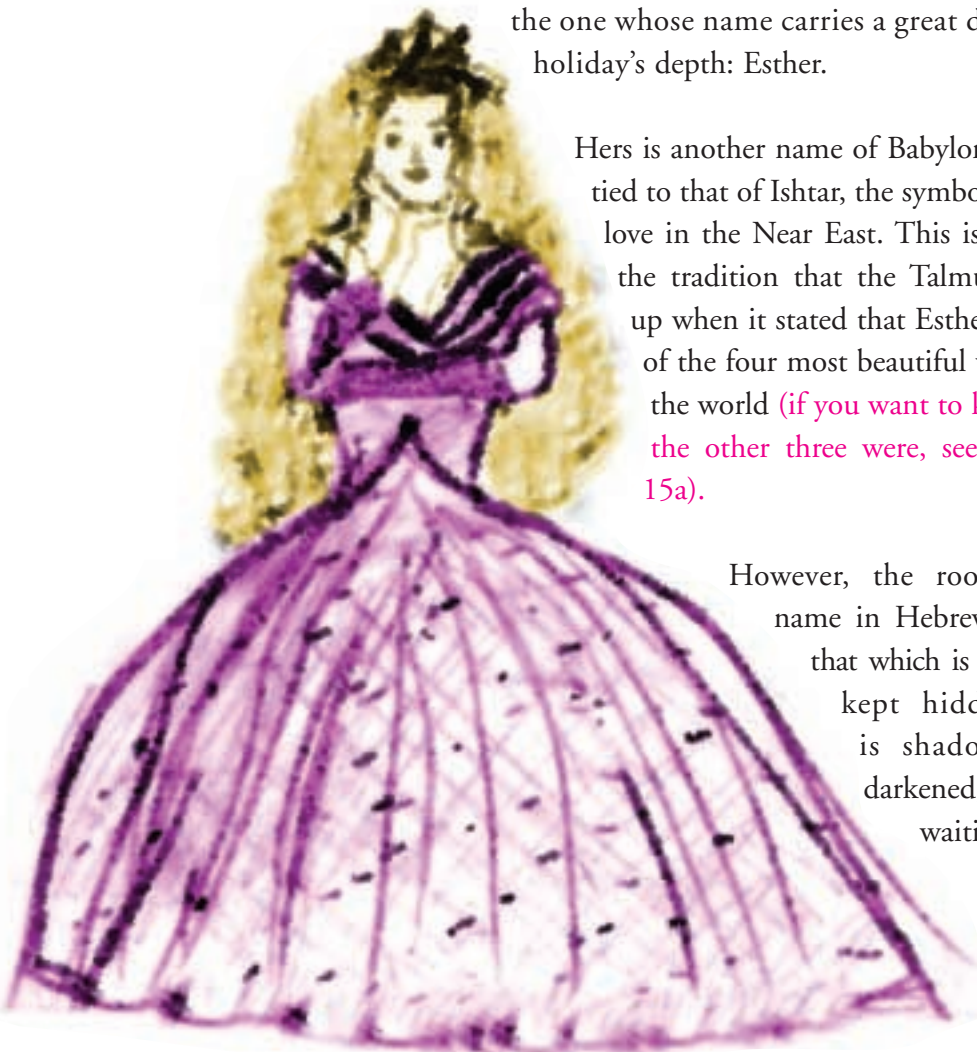
However, the root of her name in Hebrew denotes that which is concealed, kept hidden, that is shadowed and darkened, perhaps waiting to be

uncovered. It is no coincidence then that the word megillah, which means “scroll” because of the way in which this and other books are laid out, also has the same Hebrew root as disclose, reveal. Therefore, Megillat Esther does not only mean “Esther's scroll” but it can also be read and translated as “The Disclosure of what is Hidden.” This mention alone would deserve a drink. But this is only the second one (as you see, we are preparing the ground for Pesach). Let us make way for the queen, then.

How do I, Esther, fit into this story? Mostly due to Vashti, King Achashveirosh's wife, who he had made queen of his jungle (and indeed, that kingdom and its court were a jungle!). It occurred to the king that during one of his famous banquets, his wife should make a majestic appearance wearing her royal crown. That was not a problem. The problem was that Vashti refused.

Our audacious exegetes of the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni explained the reason for such a slight: It seems the command required that Vashti should parade in public wearing just the crown and nothing underneath! If I had been her, I would have refused too.

What happened after that, you already know: the Miss Persia contest and the usual recommendation from my uncle that I should not reveal my ancestry, and the appointment of Haman as Prime Minister,





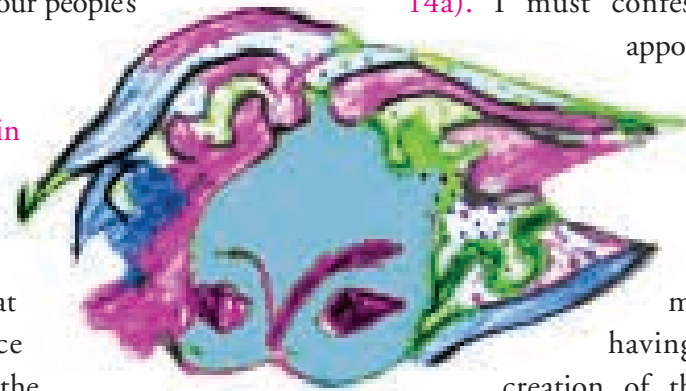
his confrontation, first with Mordechai and then with the whole of the Jewish people, plus the “happy ending.”

What I am not so sure you know is that Vashti’s name also has the Hebrew root of lishtot, a verb that, not surprisingly, means “to drink.”

Let us drink some more from our people’s fountains of wisdom.

Even in the Talmud (Chulin 139b) there are questions about a mention in the Bible that predicts what happened on Purim, or that hint at my own presence conclusively. And searching the Torah text like detectives, we find verse 18 in chapter 31 from the book of Deuteronomy, or Devarim.

What does it say there? “And I will surely hide my face,” a divine way of saying that G-d will not care (at least explicitly) about the fate of His people. Of course, the phrase is set in the context of a revelation to Moshe, in which he is warned that due to the coming transgressions of the people of Israel, G-d will forsake humankind to some extent.



Note that if we read the passuk (verse) in Hebrew, we come across the words Aster astir et panai. Did you hear that? Aster astir. That is my name! Even more so in the Torah, which is written without vowels! The one who realized this immediately was Rashi, the greatest Bible commentator, who explained that such concealment would be seen “in Esther’s time.” Maybe this is why the chachamim finally included me in the list of the seven prophetesses registered in Israel (Megillah

14a). I must confess that I liked this appointment much better than the other, as beauty per se is pretty ephemeral.

Another thing that makes me proud is having taken part in the creation of this holiday’s mitzvot, which I see fit to review with you now.

Do you remember that, in order to avoid the implementation of the decree ordering to wipe out our people, I asked all the Jews to fast (Esther 4:16)? Well, this is the basis of the Taanit Esther, or “Fast of Esther,” which is observed from dawn to dusk on the 13th day of Adar, before the start of the Purim celebration.

If you look at verse 22 in chapter 9, you will find it says “[the month] had been transformed for



them from one of sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, to make them days of feasting, rejoicing, sending food portions one to another and giving gifts to the poor.”

Here, condensed into one single verse, we find three of the four main **Purim** mitzvot.

Firstly, there is the idea of feasting. Mind you, it isn't like the banquets in Achashveirosh's court, but rather a way of preparing such feasts symbolically. That is why this mitzvah (precept) about having two seudot (“festive meals”), in the evening and at noon, is complemented by the other two precepts.

The next one is called mishloach manot in Hebrew, and it refers to sending food portions to our neighbors, friends and/or relatives. It is customary to prepare a small basket with two or more sweet snacks or other ready-to-eat foods, which help create a shared feeling of rejoicing at salvation.

The gifts to the poor, or mattanot la-eyyonim, are motivated by the idea that no festivity is complete if there are people who cannot celebrate

it. That is why on **Purim** it is usual to give money as tzedaka to at least two people, so that we don't become isolated from the rest of society, especially those who are most in need, at a time of celebration and joy.

The remaining mitzvah is precisely the one that instructs us to listen to the reading of Esther's Megillah both in the evening and in the morning, preferably from a scroll handwritten by a scribe. Actually, this precept is also insinuated at the end of the Megillah, when it says that all that happened was written in a book, and we are asked to remember and celebrate these events over the generations.

It is not my business to address the subject of the noise and costumes, so others will take care of it.

**Purim** Sameach!





## THE MONKEY: King Achashveirosh

“When a person drinks three or four glasses, he acts like a monkey who dances around uttering vile words, completely out of control.”

So says the Midrash Tanchuma. And it is surely a faithful portrayal of the King of Persia and Media that ruled over 127 provinces and states, from India to Ethiopia.

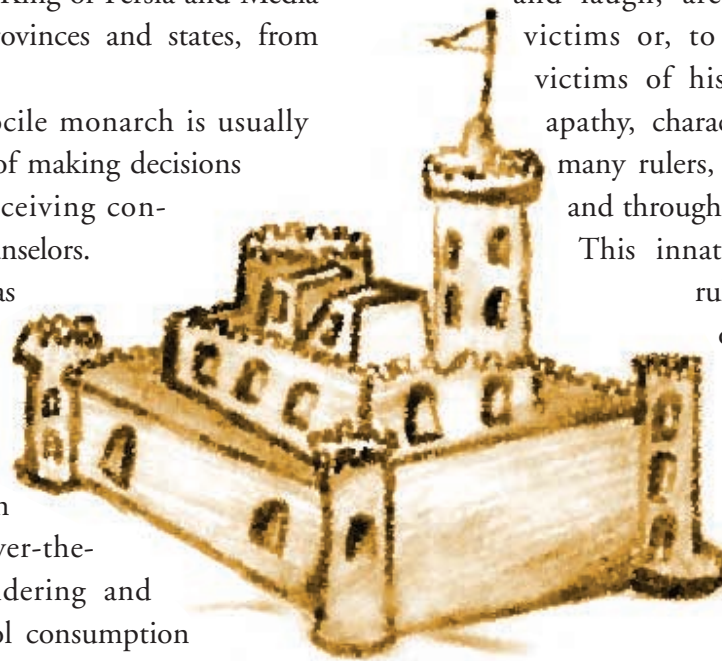
This capricious and docile monarch is usually portrayed as incapable of making decisions on his own without receiving constant advice from his counselors.

He was known as Khshayarshan in Persian and as Xerxes in Greek.

The translations into English call him Ahasuerus. His reputation

as ostentatious and over-the-top spender, of squandering and extravagance, of alcohol consumption and partying, added spice to his dictatorial regime, as the kingdom’s important decisions were made in an atmosphere of informality, disarray and irresponsibility, always under the influence of never-ending alcoholic drinks.

If historians are correct, we’re talking about the son of Darius I, who ruled for around 20 years, between 486 and 465 BCE, since many facts in his biography coincide with what is told in the Megillah. Among these are the building of an enormous palace in Shushan, the ruling over 127



satrapies, his well-known liking for throwing banquets and the generosity with which he would give gifts galore.

Having introduced the monarch, we have to set one thing straight. We, who now dance and laugh, are simply his intended victims or, to be more precise, the victims of his great disinterest and apathy, characteristic features of too many rulers, down through the ages and throughout the world.

This innate inclination of some rulers to follow the example of that king also gave rise to small-scale and varied local **Purims**, when there were only failed attempts and there was redemption for the Jewish people. There are numerous examples, but we can mention those that stand out: the Castile **Purim** in 1339 with Gonzales Martínez “as Haman” or the Ditto **Purim** in 1705 with Khalil Pasha. Other “**Purims**” commemorate the death of anti-Semite agitators such as Fettmilch (in Frankfurt, 1616) or Aginsky (Ritova, Lithuania, 1863).

As the old Yiddish saying goes: **Purim iz kain iontevenit**, i.e. “**Purim is not a holiday**,” in the traditional meaning of “**holy-day**”. That is because there is a



general atmosphere that is somewhat reminiscent of Achashveirosh's royal palace but in such a way that it feels like a game or a comedy play rather than real life.

Hence the habit of dressing up, a custom that, although it is probably a sign of the medieval times and a result of being in contact with

Italian Carnivals, is rooted in the dual concept of "hiding/revealing."

There is an explicit intention to prove that what you see is not necessarily what you get, as the costume or the mask doesn't let us discover the true personality of the person wearing it.

This is made clear by the fact that the name of G-d isn't mentioned in any verse, which is unusual for any biblical text.

This lightness that has always prevailed on **Purim** also upset several neighboring peoples who, in their own terms, have sought to wipe the joy out of this holiday. The Christian Church itself didn't accept the book of Esther as part of their biblical canon until the year 397. In fact, it was only included after introducing a few

corrections and additions that took the edge off it (such as Mordechai's tefila, reproduced above). At any rate, the accord didn't last long, since Martin Luther (the same one who urged people to set synagogues on fire with the Jews in them) found this text hostile, because "it is extremely Judaizing and shows too much perversion by the gentiles."

The practice of censoring **Purim** has been repeated across several European cities across the centuries, though maybe the most surprising fact in this regard is that this practice even caught on within some sectors of our own people. From 1790 in Germany till 1938 –when Schalom ben Chorin, an important leader of the reformist movement, proposed the outright elimination of **Purim** and the Megillah from the Hebrew calendar and canon– there had been other attempts (fortunately by small groups in all the cases) to subdue or soften "Jewish chauvinism." Evidently, Achashveirosh has never monkeyed around without company.

**Now we arrive at the final glass. Do you think it will have a bitter aftertaste?**

## THE PIG: Haman the wicked

Isn't it fitting to call him "pig"? Granted, it is offensive, but on the other hand, he deserves it. As Satan warned Noah, at this stage, when a person drinks too much, he acts like a pig, "wallowing in the mud and polluting himself in filth." What we still have to find out is what and where are the mud and the filth.

Let's begin by saying that it is due to Haman that this holiday is called **Purim**. The word pur, or puru, is apparently of Persian or Acadian origin and it means "lots," because it was by drawing lots that he set the date on which the king should exterminate that annoying people to which Mordechai belonged. It is clear by now that not many things in the Megillah were the luck of the draw.

Since pieces of broken clay inside an urn were probably used to determine the results, the Hebrew term perur may be connected to this



old practice. It denotes a small lump of something broken, such as a stone or a vase.

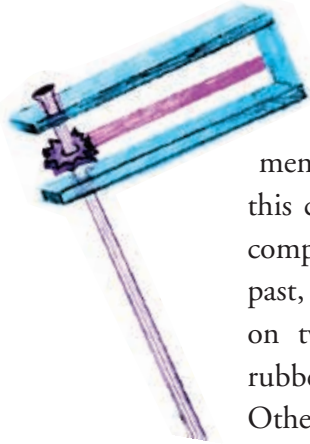
Even the Greeks used a similar method with what they called ostracons, i.e. pieces of clay with names written on them that designated the people who would be ostracized if their piece was picked.

But going back to Haman, it is hard to imagine that the draw hadn't been rigged in order that the date in question would fall at an opportune moment. And it seems that around the month of Adar, the Persians had a pagan festival called Anahita (others say that this was the **Pravadigan** celebration), which made it a perfect setting for inciting people to hatred of the Jews.

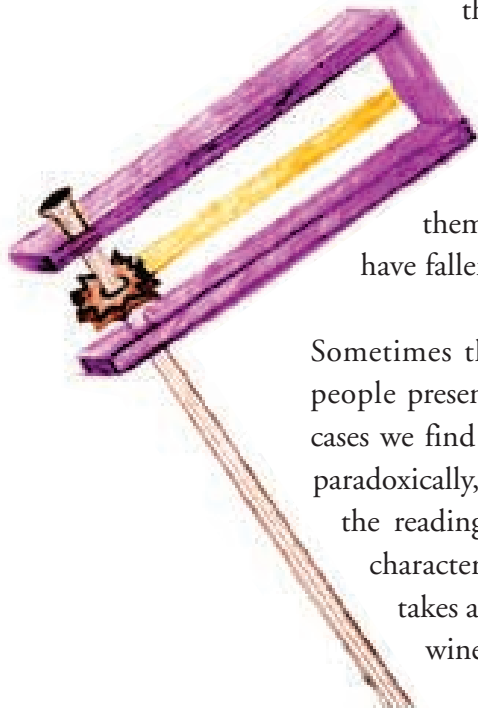
In any case, Haman was, as we said before, a direct descendant of Amalek, who already at the time of leaving Egypt became the archetypal enemy of the people of Israel.

Therefore, it isn't surprising that the Torah commands us directly to eradicate his memory (**Devarim 25:19**).

This is the origin of the gragger, or ra'ashan (noisemaker),

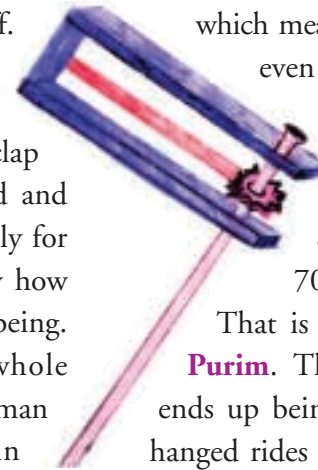


which is always present during the reading of the Megillah, to be rattled the 55 times that the name of the villain of the piece is mentioned. However, it is interesting to learn that this custom wasn't the only one used in order to comply with that verse in Deuteronomy. In the past, there were people who wrote Haman's name on two pieces of stone which were hit and rubbed together until the name wore off. Others wrote it on the soles of their shoes and stepped on the ground until all trace of it was gone. There were some who would clap their hands to avoid the name being heard and some who used a hammer, decorated specially for the occasion, and this is probably how the gragger later came into being.



Even more, there were whole communities that made Haman dolls and burnt them in bonfires, while others crucified them. For obvious reasons, both customs have fallen into disuse.

Sometimes the noise was too annoying for the people present or for the authorities, and in both cases we find historical evidence that proves that, paradoxically, making noise was prohibited during the reading of the Megillah. This is a typical characteristic of **Purim**, where everything takes an unexpected, sharp turn, as if all the wine was spilled.



And here too lies the most profound element of **Purim**. That is why it is no accident that, as the Talmud says: "When wine is let in, a secret is let out" (*Eruvin 65a*). Because what can turn a man into a drunken pig is the same thing that can make him a fount of wisdom, and that may be why in the Gematria the word yayin ("wine") is equivalent to number 70, the same value as the word sod, which means "secret." Rashi, the commentator, even says that this last passage implies that he who can drink wine and keep a secret at the same time is considered as competent as the Sanhedrin (the council made up by 70 elderly men).

That is why everything is "topsy-turvy" on **Purim**. The man who prepared the gallows ends up being hanged. The one who was to be hanged rides triumphantly upon the horse of the man who intended to have him hanged. The soon-to-be slain Jews finally kill their enemies. And the list goes on...

It is amazing to find that the same passage from Devarim that instructs us to eradicate the memory of Amalek (and consequently, of his descendent Haman), ends by saying "Do not forget!" How can we eradicate a memory in order to not forget it? It is to be expected that if a memory is eradicated, it won't be recalled again.

What is left, then, to eradicate? And subsequently to remember? Perhaps we have much to be



grateful to Haman for, as he reminds us of that which we shouldn't forget. Every now and then, it also seems we need to wallow in our own filth in order to become aware that even if we've hit rock bottom, we can reach for higher ground.

Finally, **Purim** is also the holiday that, in Israel and in the whole of the northern hemisphere, marks the end of the winter and heralds the beginning of the spring. And it is in spring that the magical scene of masks and costumes unfolds, because nature's revival is a revelation of the hidden miracle of inexhaustible life that, even though it was there, couldn't be perceived.

Life is reborn when what was hidden and what was manifested intertwine and is revealed. When what was so dark lights up. As it is written in the Megillah (**Esther 8:16**), layehudim haita ora v'simcha: "for the Jews there was light and happiness."

May there be light and happiness for all of us too on this **Purim**.