

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Halakhot of Purim

### I. Overview

Subsequent to the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.E.) the Persians defeated the Babylonians in war (538 B.C.E.) and became the ascendant power in the Middle East. The northern tribes of Israel had already been exiled by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. Most of the remaining remnant of Israel, essentially the tribe of Judah together with Benjamin, had been exiled from the land of Israel by the Babylonians and now lived in the huge Persian Empire. The setting of *Megillat Esther* is in the city of Shushan, capital of Persia, during the time period between the Babylonian exile and the Return to Zion (later during that sixth century B.C.E., perhaps 516 B.C.E.). The *megilla* contains an account of a major attempt during that epoch to annihilate the Jewish People, men, women and children, undertaken by Haman, chief advisor to King Ahashverosh. In a beautiful narrative it describes Esther's ascension to becoming queen, Haman's reason for his diabolic intent (the steadfast refusal of Mordechi, a Jewish leader, to bow to him), details of the decree, and the amazing confluence of events including Queen Esther's intervention that brought about the miraculous saving of the Jewish People. Their extraordinary victory over their enemies was achieved on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, days ever since celebrated as Purim.

### II. Prior to Purim

1. On the Shabbat before *Rosh Hodesh Adar*, or on *Rosh Hodesh Adar* itself when it falls on Shabbat, we read *Parashat Sheqalim*. After the regular Torah reading for that day, we read about the past requirement of contributing a half-sheqel, originally

toward construction of the Mishkan, and subsequently toward the service performed in it, later transposed to that of the Temple. Since Haman proposed to pay 10,000 sheqalim to the king's treasury to destroy the Jewish People, this misvah has been seen as symbolizing our intentions to counteract the negative intentions of the enemies of the nation.

2. On the Shabbat immediately before Purim, after the regular Torah reading, we read *Parashat Zachor*. This portion calls upon Israel to remember what Amaleq did to us upon our leaving Egypt, while we were traveling in the desert, fatigued and weary. Unprovoked, Amaleq perpetrated evil acts against Israel, specifically attacking the stragglers and weak, having no fear of G-d. We are told to eliminate Amaleq - understood to represent evil-doers - from the world. (On *Shabbatot* following Purim we read *Parashat Parah* and *Parashat Hahodesh*.)

3. Adar 13, usually the day before Purim, is *Ta'anit Esther*, a day commemorating the fast the Jewish People observed, according to tradition, to prompt repentance when battling their enemies. When Purim falls on Sunday, the fast is observed on the Thursday before, Adar 11.

4. From the entry of the month of Adar, anticipating the coming of Purim, to be followed by Pesah, we increase joyousness and happy events.

5. One going on a trip to where he does not expect to find a *megilla*, should try to take a *megilla* with him. If not practical, he may read the *megilla* from *Rosh Hodesh Adar* onwards, but without a *berakha*. Nevertheless, the other misvot of Purim should be fulfilled on Purim day.

### III. Reading of the *Megilla*

1. Both men and women are required to read or hear the *megilla* read from a kosher *megilla* scroll twice on Purim, once at night and again during the day.
2. The misvah of reading the *megilla* is more properly fulfilled in the presence of a congregation in order to participate in publicizing the miracle (*pirsume nissa*). If one cannot come to the synagogue or otherwise participate in a *minyan*, he/she may read it or hear it read individually.
3. ***Berakhot***: Three blessings are recited on the *megilla* prior to the evening reading:
  - a) *'Al Mikra Megilla* (for the reading itself)
  - b) *She`asah Nissim La`abotenu* (mentioning the miracles Hashem performed for our fathers)
  - c) *Shehehiyanu* (expressing gratitude that Hashem has kept us alive to participate in this occasion).

One blessing is recited at the conclusion of the reading, *Harab et Ribenu* (acknowledging that it was Hashem who fought our battles).

The same blessings are recited for the daytime reading except for *Shehehiyanu*. If one omitted *Shehehiyanu* in the evening it should be recited in the day.

4. The *berakhot* before the reading are recited even when the *megilla* is being read individually (that is to say, without a *minyan*), whereas the *berakha* at the conclusion of the reading is only recited in a *minyan*.
5. The same *berakhot* are also to be recited by or for women who are reading or hearing the reading without a *minyan*. If ten women are hearing the reading together, although it doesn't constitute a '*minyan*' for other rituals, it is *pirsume nissa* and the concluding *berakha* is also recited.
6. One holding a kosher *megilla* scroll may read along with the *hazzan*. One who does not have a kosher *megilla* scroll should not read along but listen

to every word said by the *hazzan* and have in mind to fulfill his/her obligation. It is important the *hazzan* be one who enunciates each word clearly.

7. Every person who reads Hebrew should preferably have at least a printed text of the *megilla* in front of him/her to follow along quietly. If one misses some of the words read by the *hazzan*, it is permitted to read them from the printed text and catch up providing this is only done with a minority of the *megilla*.

8. From the recitation of the first *berakha* until the conclusion of the last *berakha* there should be no talking or interruptions. Stamping feet during the reading is disturbing and inappropriate and should not be done. Very young children or those with noise-making toys, who will possibly create a disturbance and interfere with the fulfillment of the misvah, should not be present in the synagogue during *megilla* reading. If such children are in the synagogue, a baby-sitter should be provided in another area.

9. Unlike the case with the Torah, it is permissible to directly touch the *megilla* scroll when reading (with clean hands of course).

10. Since in the *megilla* the text is termed a "letter," it is a widespread custom that as a page is read it is not immediately rolled up as is the case with a Torah scroll. At the conclusion of the reading it is rolled up before beginning the concluding blessing.

11. The time for reading the *megilla* in the evening begins at '*set hakokhabim*' (the appearance of stars), the time that the fast ends. One should not eat until performing the misvah. As the day concluding with '*set hakokhabim*' is usually *Ta`anit Esther*, it may be that one is hungry or thirsty. If necessary, one may have a light snack before the reading.

**IV. *Mahasit Hashekel*** - It is customary to give a half-shekel or half-dollar to charity for each family member before or on Purim, in commemoration of the misvah of *mahasit hasheqel*.

## V. *Mishlo'ah Manot*

1. Each man and women must send a food gift composed of at least two types of food or drink that may be used for that day's festive meal to at least one person. The primary purpose of this misvah is to increase friendship between people. To some extent it may also provide for some needy.
2. It is praiseworthy to send *mishlo'ah manot* to many people and to send portions according to the standards of the giver, increasing harmony and amity in the nation.
3. At least the primary food gift that one sends to fulfill the misvah must be sent and received during the day of Purim.
4. The misvah is not fulfilled by sending money.
5. A mourner is required to fulfill the misvah of *mishloah manot*. Others do not send to the mourner but may send to a spouse or other member of the family.

## VI. *Matanot La'ebyonim*

1. In addition to *mishlo'ah manot*, during the day of Purim we must give food, substance or monetary gifts to at least two poor people or their representatives.
2. If one can afford it, it is appropriate to give to many more than the minimum two poor people or their representatives.
3. On Purim, we are not very particular with the recipients of charity – “Whosoever extends his hand, we give him.”

## VII. *Seudat Purim*

1. Everyone must partake of a festive meal on Purim. This misvah is not fulfilled at night but only during the day.

2. As the miracle of Purim came about through festive banquets with drinking of wine, to some extent the Purim *seuda* should have such a quality, including alcoholic beverages for the adults. The Talmud states that one should become so joyous until he doesn't know the difference between “Cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordechi.” Whatever interpretation is given to this statement, and there are many, it is absolutely clear that one may only drink to the extent that he doesn't violate a *halakha* and is able to recite *birkat hamazon* and relevant prayers with proper concentration.

## VIII. Prayers

1. In the *amidah* of Purim and in *birkat hamazon* we recite *`al hanissim* followed by *Bimeh Mordechai VeEsther* in their proper places as specified in all *siddurim*. If one forgot to recite them, he does not repeat the *amida* or *birkat hamazon*. If one remembered before having mentioned Hashem's name in the *berakha* following them, he may “return” and say them at that spot and then proceed from there. One who remembered too late, but still in the *amida* or *birkat hamazon*, should insert them at the end of the *amida* before *`oseh shalom* or in the *harahman* portion of *birkat hamazon*.

2. *Tefillin* are donned on Purim.

3. *Hallel* is not recited on Purim. Some Talmudic sages say the *megilla* takes the place of *Hallel*. Others say *Hallel* is reserved for miracles that occur in the Land of Israel (subsequent to having originally entered the land). Others explain that we didn't achieve freedom on Purim to be fully “servants of the Almighty,” but remained under the rule of Ahashverosh in exile.

4. *Tahanunim* are not recited on Purim and Shushan Purim. There is no *musaf* on Purim.

5. Before *arbit* and in *shahrit* we recite Psalm 22. Here, the psalmist is in a grievous, life-threatening situation from his enemies and is ill from the troubles

besetting him. He recalls G-d's saving intervention on behalf of the nation in the past and His caring for him from birth and is able to overcome his despair with prayer that obviously leads to salvation. The Sages applied this psalm to Haman's attempt to annihilate the Jewish People and Mordekhi and Esther's endeavors that brought salvation.

6. In *arbit*, the *megilla* is read after the *amida* followed by "*ve'ata qadosh*." In *shahrit*, it is read after the Torah, just before *ve'ata qadosh*. (The verse of "*veata qadosh*" is from the psalm we read on Purim (Psalm 22:4), and immediately follows the verse which the Talmud links to the *halakha* of reading the *megilla* by day and night.) On Saturday night, the blessing '*boreh me'oreh ha'esh*' is recited before the reading.

7. There are three *olim* to the Torah on Purim. The portion read - from *Parashat Beshalah* - speaks of Joshua's battling and weakening Amaleq. It contains the famous scene of Moshe on the mountaintop. When his hand was raised Israel was ascendant, when lowered, Amaleq was ascendant. The Mishnah (R.H.3:8) explains this as an allegory meaning that when *Bene Yisrael* turn their hearts to Hashem, they are successful, otherwise they are not.

## IX. General Halakhot

1. Purim is celebrated on Adar 14 in most of the world. In order to commemorate the one-day-later celebration of Shushan, where the battle continued for a second day, cities that were walled (like Shushan) when Joshua led the nation into the land of Israel (for example, Jerusalem), celebrate Purim on Adar 15.
2. It is prohibited to fast or have eulogies on Purim.
3. Public aspects of mourning are suspended for the day similarly to Shabbat. This is one of the cases where *Shulhan Arukh* codifies the *halakha* differently in two different chapters. We follow the later, lenient codification.
4. Working is permitted on Purim except in those places that have a specific custom not to work. In any event, doing business by buying and selling merchandise is permitted.
5. It is permitted to have weddings on Purim.

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