



The Story of Purim

Persia, fifth century BC. In the ancient city of Shushan, King Ahasuerus sends away his queen, Vashti, for publicly disobeying him. Vashti refuses to come to a banquet when the king asks her to. King Ahasuerus banishes Vashti from the kingdom. The king decides to look for a new queen.

While the king looks for a new queen, he falls in love with Esther, a Jewish orphan who was raised in Shushan by her cousin Mordechai. Mordechai works for King Ahasuerus, and once saved his life from two servants who were plotting to murder him. Mordechai warns Esther to keep her Judaism a secret from the king, which she does.

King Ahasuerus gives Haman, the Agagite, a special position in the palace, placing him above all the other princes in the kingdom. Haman does not like Jews, especially Esther's cousin, Mordechai. Mordechai refuses to bow down to Haman, because to do so would be going against Jewish law. Haman takes this as a great insult, and decides to get rid of all the Jews in the Persian Empire.

Esther finds out about Haman's plan for the Jews. Mordechai pleads with Esther to help her people. Esther wants to help, but she's in a tough spot—she can't ask for the king's help unless he invites her to spend time with him. Esther has not been invited by the king in over a month, and to go to him without an invitation would mean risking her life. After three days of fasting, Esther bravely goes to the king and invites him to a feast she has prepared.

King Ahasuerus agrees to feast with Esther. He is not angry with her for coming to him without being asked. In fact, he says, "Whatever you ask, Queen Esther, it shall be granted you, even to the half of my kingdom." Esther asks if Haman can join them at the feast as well. The king agrees.

After the first night of feasting, Esther invites the king and Haman back for another celebration the following evening. The king agrees to come. Meanwhile, Haman is plotting to kill Esther's cousin Mordechai on a gallows he built near the palace.

That same evening, the king is reminded of the time that Mordechai saved his life from two servants. Mordechai was never rewarded for this. Concerned, the king calls Haman to his chamber and asks, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?"

Haman thinks to himself, "The king must be talking about me!" He tells the king to dress the man in royal robes, with a royal crown, and parade him around the streets on his royal horse. The king agrees and tells Haman to coordinate all this for Mordechai. Haman is shocked and embarrassed, but does as he is told.

On the second night of feasting, the king is so pleased with Esther that he again tells her, "Whatever you ask, Queen Esther, it shall be granted you, even to the half of my kingdom." After this, Esther bravely tells the king that she is Jewish and that her people are about to be destroyed at the hands of Haman.

King Ahasuerus is angry that the Queen's people are being threatened. He orders for Haman to be executed on the very same gallows he constructed for Mordechai. He then gives Mordechai a special position in his court, and protects all of the Jews by royal order. Mordechai is paraded around the streets in royal robes, and the Jews are saved because of Esther's bravery.

Purim, which literally means "lots," is the holiday in which we celebrate Esther's bravery. It is a mitzvah (commandment) to listen to the story of Purim chanted from *Megillat Esther* ("The Scroll of Esther") and to hear every word. We spend the day in celebration and give away Mishloach Manot, baskets of food and gifts. It's a really festive holiday. We wear costumes, have fun parties, and eat hamantaschen (cookies made in the shape of Haman's hat). A fun tradition on the holiday is to perform a *Purim spiel*, a satirical show either dramatizing the Purim story in a humorous way, or just a funny skit on any theme. It is customary to make loud noise with a noisemaker called a *ra'ashan* in Hebrew, or *grager* in Yiddish, every time Haman's name is mentioned, in order to blot out Haman's name. Part of the holiday also includes giving gifts or charity to the poor, called *matanot l'evyonim* or *tzedakah*.