

# PURIM

The festival of Purim is based on the story in the book of Esther celebrating the Jewish queen of Persia who saves her people from annihilation. While the historical accuracy of this story is questionable, its metaphorical meaning – Jewish deliverance from destruction – remains current and relevant.

The directive to observe Purim on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar is found in Esther 9:20-22, where the Jews of Shushan are told to observe “days of feasting and merrymaking,” to send “gifts (*mishloach manot*) to one another” and to give “gifts to the poor (*matanot la’evyonim*).”

The primary observance of Purim is the reading of the Megillah, which generically means scroll but usually refers to the scroll of Esther. It is during the reading of the megillah that merrymaking takes place as the congregation noisily reacts to the names of the story’s characters. It had been customary to drown out only the name of the arch villain Haman with noisemakers (*groggers*) and jeers, but over the past few years, new customs have evolved to celebrate the female heroes of the story, Esther and Queen Vashti.

In Israel Purim has enjoyed a nationalist revival, with streets filled with costumed children, carnivals and parades. In North America, many synagogues sponsor Purim carnivals, communal meals (*seudot Purim*) and Purimschiels (plays).

But feasts and merrymaking are only one part of the command to observe Purim. another command, to give gifts to the poor, is an important opportunity for acts of *tzedakah*. In his code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides discusses the Purim mitzvot, and elaborates on gifts to the poor:

On the 14th [or 15th] of Adar it is a duty. . . to make them days of gladness, feasting, of sending portions to friends and gifts to the poor... One is duty bound on the day of Purim to distribute (gifts) to the poor. One must not give to less than two poor people, giving to each one a present or money or a cooked dish or some other kind of food, as it is said ‘gifts to the poor’, i.e. (at least two gifts to two poor persons.)

Purim money may not be diverted for any other charity.

It is better to increase the gifts to the poor than to make for oneself a big meal or to send more portions to friends, for there is no greater or nobler joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers. He who makes the heart of the unfortunate to rejoice resembles the Divine Presence, as it is said: ‘to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones’ (*Isaiah 57:15*).



## JEWISH HOME BASICS

Megillat Esther

Groggers

Masks

Flags

## Words of Hiddur Mitzvah

David Wachtel

Hiddur mitzvah is equally important when it comes to the written word. Because of the sacred nature of the Torah scroll and the admonition to “neither add nor subtract” (Deuteronomy 12:32) we refrain from decorating the scroll itself. Still, we engage expert scribes for our Torah scrolls who use only the finest parchments, the choicest quills and the most superb inks. We dress the scroll in a beautiful manner. The aversion to decoration seems to have applied equally to all biblical books at the time when all books were in scroll form. Later, when written in book form (codices), the restriction on illustration no longer obtained. There are examples of elaborately decorated biblical codices from as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Still, when the books of the Bible were copied in scroll format for liturgical use, they remained undecorated. Sometime in the late Middle Ages scribes began to decorate one particular work within the biblical canon, the scroll of Esther (Megillat Esther). The oldest fragments of decorated megillot are from 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain and the earliest known completely decorated Esther scroll was created in Venice in 1564 by a woman named Estellina.

Why did decorations first appear in Esther scrolls? The answer may lie in the curious absence of God’s name in the entire text. Whether this factor spurred its rapid growth, megillah decoration flourished during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as these scrolls were embellished with floral and geometric ornamentation. Artists began to include illustrations around the borders, presenting a visual interpretation of the written word. Sometimes they incorporated not only representations of the story but also visual references to rabbinic commentaries on the text. The major European centers of production for these scrolls were Italy, the Netherlands, Bohemia, Moravia, and Germany.

Decorated scrolls first appeared in North Africa, as well as in Iraq and Iran, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To protect their valuable megillot, and to add another medium for creative expression, Jews commissioned cases for them, fashioned out of a wide variety of materials: silver, ivory, wood, and to a lesser extent gold.

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, a scribe named Aryeh Leib ben Daniel left his native Poland and eventually settled in Italy. He supported himself by writing exquisitely decorated megillot, characterized by alternating text columns with full length images of the characters in the story. In at least two examples, one in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary and the other in the Braginsky collection, a separate benediction sheet accompanies the scroll. In an inscription, Aryeh Leib proclaimed that he employed his “beautiful pen” in fulfillment of the biblical verse: *Zeh Eili ve’anveihu*. In addition, Aryeh Leib admits that he literally has “adorned” God within the text of scroll by emphasizing the four letters yod, hey, vav, and hey when they appear in consecutive words. Those four letters form the sacred name of God, which, as noted above, is absent from the text. In so doing, Aryeh Leib ben Daniel of Goray succeeds in fulfilling both the spirit and the letter of the biblical verse from which we derive our obligation to beautify the commandments.



Blessings for reading the megillah by Aryeh Leib ben Daniel, 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Collection of The Library, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

## Judaic Mosaics

### VASHTI — ESTHER FLAGS

In order to enliven Purim celebrations and acknowledge the power and presence of women in Megillat Esther, many have adopted the custom of bringing colorful flags, decorated with bells and ribbons, to the megillah reading. Waving the flags at the mention of Esther and Vashti creates a counterpoint to the jarring and strident sounds of the traditional groggers originally used to banish Haman's presence and expand on Mordechai's heroic role in the story. Instead the flags emphasize the softer, more subtle approaches of both Esther and Vashti, and not the dichotomy between them.

The idea of the flags was first conceived by Ma'ayan, the Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan, in order to remove the focus from "cursed" Haman and "blessed" Mordechai. Instead, the flags are a catalyst for paying greater attention to both the masculine and feminine points of view as well as to the possibility of harmony between Jews and non-Jews.

Because Esther and Vashti both have a place on the flag, the concept of good queen vs. bad queen no longer applies. Instead the flags model a new style of collaborative, informed, and assertive leadership. Additionally, both figures show how much can be gained by listening rather than by antagonizing, a lesson that certainly was not adopted by most of the men in the story. And finally, both women bring individual traits that support the ultimate success of Esther in saving the Jews of Persia.

Create your own flag and imprint it with your own point of view and style using interesting materials, colors, imagery, themes, and musical accessories.

### GROGGERS

According to tradition, at the mention of Haman's name, we should make a great noise to fulfill the curse *yimach shemo* (May his name be erased or blotted out).

The custom of making noise with a grogger has an old but uncertain history. In the Middle Ages in Ashkenaz, children would write Haman's name on stones or pieces of wood and bang them together to drown out his name.

The groggers or noisemakers (*ra'ashanim* in Hebrew) possibly emerged from this custom. Several wooden ones remain from 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany with metal or wooden gears that rattle when the grogger is swung around, and like the decorated stones of Ashkenaz, they are decorated with sayings and Purim symbols.

Anything that makes a noise can fulfill the mitzvah. There are no specifications other than that it should make enough noise. Groggers can be any shape, filled with anything that rattles such as beans, beads, balls, or pebbles. They can have bells attached. Most groggers are mass-produced metal, but other more costly ones can be one-of-a-kind, crafted of precious materials. Some antique groggers even have extensive filigree work.

In recent years, Esther bracelets have joined the noisemaking paraphernalia. Charm



Artist: Susan Fischer Weiss  
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tenthousandvillages.com

or bangle bracelets replicate the beautiful bracelets that the queen might have worn to gain the king's attention. When Haman's name is mentioned, women wave their arms to make noise with their jewelry asserting their role in erasing Haman's name. Sephardic women wear *ghorayebah* cookies baked in bracelet form, while listening to the megillah. After clicking them against each other to make noise, they then eat the cookies as one of the newer ceremonial foods of the holiday.

To combine the commandment to feed the hungry and provide *matanot le-eyyonim* (presents to the poor) some synagogues ask their congregants to bring boxes of pasta and rice to use as noisemakers, which are then donated to a local food bank.

## MASKS

Purim masks have a long and rich history.

The Hebrew word for mask is *masekhah*, similar to the Italian *maschera*, the English *mask*, and French *masque*. All derive from *maska*, which in medieval Lombardy meant a "dead person" because masks were often used during funeral rites.

In ancient Egypt, masks were placed on mummies for their journey to the afterworld. Also in the ancient world, women used masks in fertility rites, and limestone masks – some as old as 9000 years – have been discovered in Israel. Masks were central to ancient Greek theatrical performances and religious festivals. Masks later became popularized during German *Fastnacht* and Italian *Carnivale*. The custom of donning masks and costumes on Purim was first reported in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Provence, an area of southern France and northern Spain with a large Jewish population.

Since concealment is a major theme of the Purim story, masks have come to play an important role in the holiday regalia. But whether a mask fulfills the function of celebration and revelry or is a symbolic nod to Esther's dangerous act of concealment, they are always fun and festive.

## *Creative Judaic Arts Projects*

### WATER BOTTLE GROGGER

#### Materials

Empty 8 or 12 oz plastic water bottles, labels removed, keep caps

Tacky Glue

Felt or sticker appliqués

Cut paper pieces from magazines

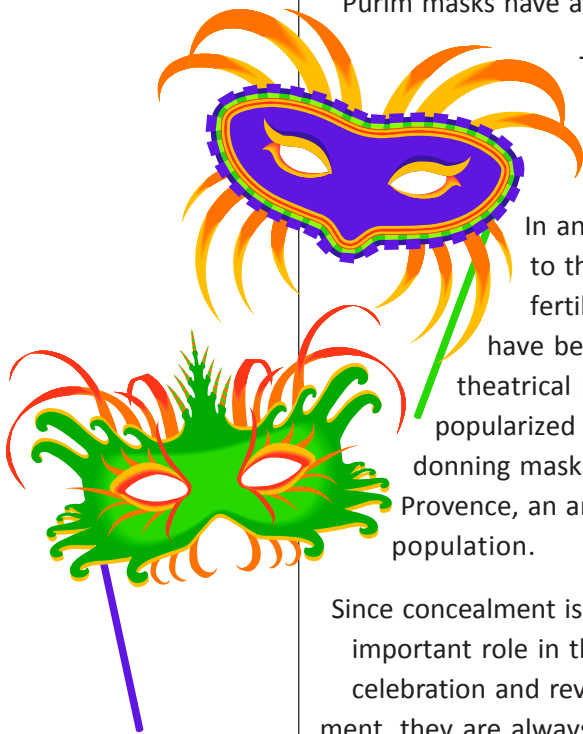
Colored tissue

Scissors

Card stock

Paint markers

Rattles (beans, beads, pebbles, etc.)



## Directions

Decorate the bottle using a variety of materials. Paste designs using either Tacky Glue or the peel-away sticker designs available in craft stores. Pre-cut felt appliques work best when applied with Super Tacky Glue. You can also use paper mosaic pieces cut from magazine advertisements or from colored tissue.

For the megillah characters, sketch the design and paint their dress using markers on card stock. Paste the characters around the body of the bottle.

Once you have pasted the mosaic design to the bottle, cover with clear contact paper. This will keep everything in place and protect the finished product.

Fill with a small handful of rattles: dried beans, small wooden or plastic beads, bells, small pebbles. A legend suggests that ten rattles be used to represent Haman's ten sons who were punished with their father.

Close the bottle with its cap and add ribbons and streamers.

## HALF-FACE MASK

### Materials

Half face masks (available at any party store)  
Decorating supplies such as lace, feathers, streamer, sequins, glitter  
Tacky Glue  
Card stock  
Scissors

### Directions

Start with the half mask and then let your imagination take over. When decorating, be sure that the eye opening is clear.

Enhance the area around the edge of the mask by gluing pre-ruffled lace or feathers.

Cut card stock to create a turban or crown and glue to the upper portion of the mask.

Create different noses or bird beaks by pasting folded card stock to the nose area. If you choose to be a bird, decorate the upper and lower portions of the mask with feathers or feather-like pieces of paper.

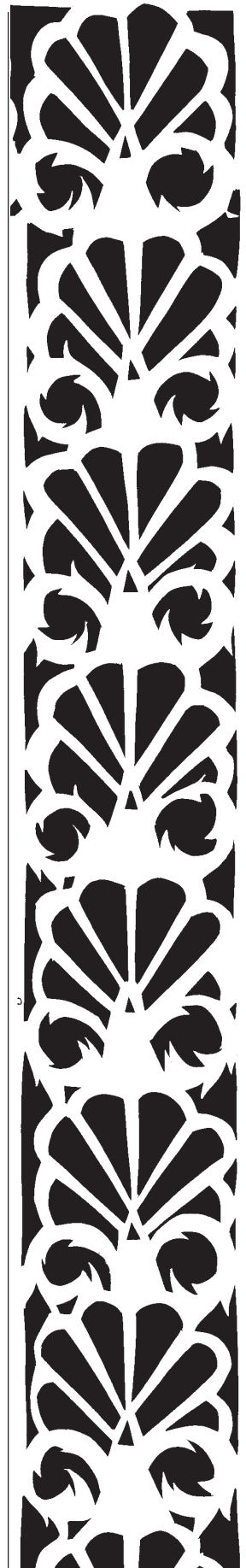
Decorate the body of the mask with sequins, glitter or any other applique material.

Create a larger eye around the opening by painting a clown's eye.

## *Judaic Mosaic*

### VASHTI'S BANQUET: A NEW WOMEN'S CELEBRATION

In the first chapter of Megillat Esther, Queen Vashti gives a banquet for women in the royal palace. It soon becomes clear that King Ahasuerus has other ideas and dis-





Vashti, from *Megillat Esther* by J.T. Waldman (JPS)

patches his eunuchs to bring Vashti to his party. When Vashti refuses she is banished, thus making room for Esther to enter the king's harem and make her mark on the history of the Jewish people.

Vashti may be the first recorded woman to just say "no!" From today's vantage point, we can only guess that she was so empowered because of the presence and support of the other women at her banquet.

Over the past several decades, with boundless originality and resourcefulness, Jewish women have been seeking new and imaginative ways to create rituals that are personally meaningful.

Not all of these observances need be serious and heavy handed. With this in mind, and especially since the dictates of Purim enjoin us to celebrate with fun and frivolity, Women's League has created its own festive celebration. Vashti's Banquet recreates the queen's fabled harem banquet with a clearly modern twist.

We all harbor fantasies about the harem thanks to *The Arabian Nights* and the films of Cecile B. DeMille, but there is no written account from the ancient world about life in that segregated world. In this new festivity, you can use your imagination to recapture the atmosphere of joyfulness and triumph that must have surrounded Vashti and her companions. The women-only guests can experience the sisterhood of ancient Persia with activities we know from anthropology and literature that women enjoyed: food, music, belly dancing, story telling, and beauty secrets.

This program appeals to women of all ages. Rather than a vestige of women's subjugation by men, the harem can be seen as the quintessential women's space – where they lived together, mourned together and danced together. As women recover voices from the past, they create new forms of celebrating, thereby bonding with each other in the very real present.

### VASHTI'S BANQUET IN YOUR COMMUNITY

This should be an event that extends the boundaries of your imaginations. Encourage women to come dressed in caftans, jeweled shirts, harem pants and lots of jewelry.

#### Stage I: Planning

Gather a committee to set a date, find a venue, and create a budget.

Plan publicity in stages: save the date; invitations, flyers; mailings two and one month prior. See the Sisterhood Planner for a full publicity campaign.

#### Stage II: The Event

**Food:** Find a caterer (or cook) who prepares Middle Eastern food. Decide whether meat or dairy, buffet or finger food. Have platters of dried fruits and nuts around the room.

**Decorations:** Replicate your imaginary harem. Ask a party planner or someone creative in your sisterhood to design the space. Include draped fabrics, rugs, pillows, and costume jewelry (from a party store).

There are several excellent Middle Eastern women's musical groups who have produced wonderful cds:

Pharaoh's Daughter  
pharaohsdaughter.com  
Divahn  
divahn.com

**Jewelry:** You can purchase very inexpensive beads for use, both as costumes and for decorations. The best buy is from a website that specializes in Mardi Gras trinkets: [www.toomeys-mardigras.com](http://www.toomeys-mardigras.com).

**Entertainment:** Find a female group to perform Middle Eastern music with authentic instruments or use CDs, belly-dancers, story-tellers, fortune tellers.

**Beautifying secrets:** Invite a cosmetics or skin-care home sales representative to offer advice and merchandise (Mary Kay, Avon, Ahavah). Ask local merchants for samples. Find a henna specialist and a manicurist for nail painting (not full manicures).

**Books:** *Megillat Esther* by J.T. Waldman (JPS) can be used for a variety of teaching and storytelling activities.

## *Creative Arts Projects*

### **ESTHER & VASHTI BRACELET**

#### Materials

- 18 inches Stretch Magic Bead and Jewelry Cord
- 22 inches 3 mm satin ribbon
- Letters to form a name or word, e.g. Vashti, Beauty, Esther
- 24 pony beads, 6 x 9 mm
- 7 bells 12mm silver or gold
- Narrow masking tape

#### Directions

Gather letters to spell name or word (it is unimportant how many letters).

Gather enough pony beads to make the combination of letters and beads total 30. Divide the beads in half.

Start by stringing the name/word on the ribbon and bead cord. Slide to center.

String a bell on either side of the word with ribbon only. The ribbon is longer than the cord and once the bells are strung, pull them out evenly so that they dangle below the bracelet. A small piece of masking tape on the end you are not working on keeps the beads from dropping. Replace as necessary.

String 3 or 4 beads onto both the ribbon and cord.

String a bell with the ribbon only.

String another 3 or 4 beads onto both the ribbon and cord.

Continue until you have six bells and the 30 beads/letters strung.

Tie the two ends together with a square knot (a double one is best). Leave enough of an end so you can push it into the last two or three beads to hide it.

String the seventh bell onto the ribbon and tie the ends into a small bow.

Created by the Board of  
Jewish Education/Marshall  
Jewish Learning Center

<http://www.bjehicago.org/>

## *Recipe*

### **HAMAN'S EARS – ELEPHANT EARS – PALMIERS**

These very delicious and easy treats enjoyed by French (and North African) Jews are much less labor intensive than hamentaschen.

The ostensible connections between Haman and ears is interesting although at times a tad gruesome. From ancient times, cutting off ears (cropping) was a common punishment for a variety of offenses. The arch-villain of the Purim story, Haman, is thus depicted (and eaten!) in these delicacies.

#### Ingredients

- 1 cup sugar, divided
- 1 sheet frozen kosher puff pastry thawed (Follow instructions for thawing.)

#### Directions

Sprinkle a surface with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup sugar; open puff pastry sheet on surface. Sprinkle with 2 tablespoons sugar. Roll into a rectangle, 14" x 10". Sprinkle with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup sugar to within  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch of edges. Lightly press into pastry.

With a knife, very lightly score a line widthwise across the middle of the pastry. Starting at one short side, roll up jelly-roll style, stopping at the score mark in the middle. Starting at the other side, roll up pastry to score mark. Cut into  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch horizontal slices.

Place cut side up 2 inch apart on parchment paper-lined baking sheets. Sprinkle lightly with 1 tablespoon sugar. Bake at 400 degrees for 12 minutes. Turn pastries over and sprinkle with remaining sugar. Bake 5 minutes longer or until golden brown and glazed. Remove to wire racks to cool completely. Store in airtight containers.

For information about organizing Houses for Change and to order undecorated boxes, see: [www.familypromise.org/housesforchange](http://www.familypromise.org/housesforchange)

or contact

Mark Wasserman, project coordinator  
markwboca@gmail.com or  
561.699.5116

## *Tikkun Olam Project*

### **MISHLOACH MANOT/TZEDAKAH BOXES**

Houses for Change™ — Kids with homes helping kids without

Houses for Change is an innovative educational project especially suited to Purim. Organize this arts and crafts activity with the children at your synagogue, with congregation families and sisterhood members. It is an experiential project for all ages.

Using their imaginations, participants decorate pre-ordered boxes to look like a house. Use the boxes for mishloach manot and ask recipients to reuse them as tzedakah boxes. At a specific date, collect the saved money for a communal donation to a homeless organization, food bank or related organization.

Houses for Change is an opportunity to teach about hiddur mitzvah, tikkun olam, tzedakah, and the message of the prophet Isaiah to feed the hungry and house the homeless. The project also can be done at Sukkot, Chanukkah or anytime of year.

