



Around 486 BC, a Persian ruler by the name of Xerxes I inherited the throne of Persia from his father, Darius I. This is the same Persian ruler who fought the Spartans at Thermopylae, soon thereafter sacked Athens and whose navy was defeated, by combined Greek forces, at the Battle of Salamis (on or about the 29th of September in 480 BC).

Xerxes was known—by himself and by others—as “The great king.” The “Daiva Inscription,” at Persepolis, describes this ruler with these words:

I am Xerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing many kinds of men, king in this great earth far and wide, son of king Darius, an Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan stock.

Modern scholars believe the Hebrew translation, of Xerxes’ name, was Ahasuerus (or Ahashverosh). In other words ... it is Xerxes who plays a key role in the story of Purim.

What is Purim? In the Akkadian language, the word “Pur” means “lot.” The plural of “Pur” is “Purim” (or “lots”). In this sense, the word “lot” is equivalent to a pebble, or something else which one would throw on the ground, to make a chance decision.

In the story of Purim, a man named Haman cast lots to pick a day on which to ...

Well ... let’s not get ahead of the story. Before we meet Haman, we need to meet Esther.

Esther was a Jewish girl, living in Persia, when Ahasuerus was king. She was there because her people had been taken captive to Babylon (beginning around 597 BC). This is known as the “Babylonian Exile” in Jewish history.

Babylon itself fell, around 539 BC, when Cyrus the Great—a Persian king (and Xerxes’ grandfather)—conquered it. Cyrus allowed the Jewish people in Babylon to return to their homeland and to rebuild their destroyed temple in Jerusalem.

Some of the Jews stayed behind, however, and continued to live in Babylon (which—due to Cyrus the Great—had become part of the Persian Empire). Esther, and her older cousin Mordecai, were two of the Jewish people who stayed behind.

One day Ahasuerus / Xerxes I called a banquet to celebrate himself and his great victories. At this banquet, he demanded that his Queen, whose name was Vashti, show herself to all the guests. When she refused his command, the King got rid of her.

Now without a Queen, the King ordered his minions to search for a replacement. Among others, they found Esther, who did not reveal that she was Jewish.

The King found Esther to be the best of all the women he had seen and made her his Queen. He did not know that she was Jewish.

Mordecai, who wanted to look after Esther, did his best to “hang around” outside the King’s palace. This allowed him to overhear a plot against the King, which he revealed to the authorities.

As a result of Mordecai’s efforts, the plot against the King was unraveled and the plotters were executed. At this point, Mordecai was not rewarded for saving the King’s life.

Another man, however, continued to receive the King’s favor. His name was Haman, and he had a very high-ranking position.

Consumed by pride and overblown self-confidence, Haman demanded that everyone had to bow to him every time he passed by. Mordecai, a Jew who believed it was wrong to bow to any human being, refused to bow.

Enraged by Mordecai’s intransigence, Haman asked the King if he could punish not just Mordecai—by putting him to death—but all of Mordecai’s people ... meaning all of the Jews.

The King agreed that his high-ranking minister could do this and a decree was issued. To help him decide the

day on which these mass executions would occur, Haman cast lots.

Once his [casting of lots](#) revealed the day of execution, Haman ordered a set of gallows to be erected (on which Mordecai would soon die).

Mordecai heard about the calamity that was about to end not just his life but the life of all the Jews, including Queen Esther's. Mordecai urged Esther to tell her husband about the true impact of his decree.

To learn what happened next, have a look at this video clip which playfully summarizes the story of Purim and explains its impact.

The story of Purim also has a philosophical point-of-view. This video clip summarizes the story from that standpoint.

For whatever reason, the King could not rescind his order against the Jews. To protect the Jews from mass execution, however, he allowed Mordecai and Esther to issue another decree which allowed the Jews to [protect themselves](#).

This protection ended-up not just with the death of Haman—who died on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai—but also Haman's sons and many other individuals. The Jews, however, were spared.

Thereafter, the Jewish people have celebrated their delivery from what would have been certain death. This festival, where people often dress-up in various costumes, has become a joy-filled holiday known as "Purim." Some people liken it to a Jewish Mardi Gras.

Purim—which is a one-day celebration, from sunset to sunset—occurs in March, about a month before Passover. In 2016, Purim occurs on March 23-24 (which coincides with the 2016 Easter season).

The image at the top of this page, which dates to circa 1470, depicts a manuscript illumination from *Maimonides' Mishneh Torah*. Beyond its colorful beauty, the illustration—likely created by an artist in northern Italy—was produced around the time that dressing-up in costumes for Purim was first reported in Rabbinical literature.

We [learn more about it](#) from Dr. Hannah Pressman, Communications Director at the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies (University of Washington in Seattle):

This is the opening page for Sefer Zemanim (the Book of Holidays). It shows the holidays of Sukkot and Purim, characterized by mixed dancing and costumes.

This is the earliest depiction of people wearing costumes on Purim, and in fact it dates to approximately the time this tradition is first mentioned in rabbinic literature (or perhaps even earlier than the written sources).

Click on the image for a full-page view.

For a different way to learn the story of Purim, here's a poem by [Miriam Newell Biskin](#) (online via [The Jewish Magazine](#)):

The Story of Queen Esther

*Once there lived a king of everlasting fame;
Ahasuerus was his name.*

*A warrior brave, with conquest bold,
He brought home jewels and wealth untold.*

*Strong and handsome, a man of pride,
He took Vashti as his Queen and bride.
But she spurned his love on every hand,
And shamed him throughout the Persian land.*

*Until in anger, he, shouted, "Get thee from me,
This is my order---my kingly decree."
And to his counselors, he cried aloud,
"Get me a damsel, not so proud,
Beauteous of face and heart and mind,
Forever fair, forever kind."*

*So maidens were brought from many lands,
From across green seas and golden the sands.
But not one was pleasing to the mighty king,
Not one to give his heart and ring.*

*But then came a dark-eyed Jewish maid,
Soft of face and manner staid;
Gentle and sweet as the myrtle flower,
With only beauty as her dower.*

*But she won the heart of the mighty king
And to him she was wont to bring
Happiness in each small hand,
And there was joy throughout the land.*

But Esther's heart felt little gladness,

For her people's plight filled her with sadness,
As she prayed that some day they could all go free
To return to their homeland across the sea.

In the meantime, in places where he could see and hear
Her Uncle Mordecai was near,
Waiting like a sentry at the palace gate
Always watchful of his dear niece's fate,

This child he had raised as his very own
From the time she was a babe, left all alone.
So it was, he heard a pair of assassins discuss
An horrendous plan to murder Ahasuerus.

Off he hurried to warn this girl,
The kings' new and cherished wife
So she could sound the warning,
To save her husband's life.

Thus, the traitors did not live to draw another breath,
Hung immediately for plotting their sovereign's death.
But before there was even a moment, a time for all to rejoice,
Old Mordecai brought to Esther news of another voice.

Said he, "There is a man here in the noble throng
One who plots late and long
One who hopes to wrong the Jews
One who plans some evil ruse.

Already he concocts all kinds of lies
Stories mean to vilify
The Jews--pouring slander into the king's ears
Magnifying doubts and terrible fears."

"But, Uncle," said Esther, "What is you want of me?"
"My child," said he, "Only you can make our plea.
Convince him that this calumny is a dreadful lie,
So that none of your people will have to die."

"But," she said, "I must wait until the King sends for me,
Even a Queen cannot call upon His Majesty."

"My child," said Mordecai, "Haman's orders will be carried out nonetheless,
Time is a luxury we do not possess;

He has ordered the slaughter of the Jews without delay
On the twelfth month, the thirteenth day."

"Then, pray for me, uncle, duty says I must comply:
I will go to my royal husband even if I die."

For thee days, Esther fasted and prayed
That this horror would be stayed;
Then Esther, the Queen, donned her royal robes
To seek an audience with the king,

Who smiled and said, "I will grant any wish of thine... "
She replied, "Sire, bring your minister Haman and come to dine."
"What an honor," Haman confided to his wife,
Still planning the end of Mordecai's life.

Ordering a gallows seventy-five feet high
Blotting out even the sunshine in the sky.
Then the King recalled that in a day just gone by
His life had been saved by old Mordecai.

"We have done little to repay this man," he said to the assembled throng,
"Then certainly now, we must right this wrong."
He then called Haman and put the question thus,
"How do we honor a man who has done good things for us?"

Haman could not dream that anything was amiss,
And replied with eager emphasis,
"Give him royal robes and a royal crown and a steed for him to ride
As he moves about the country right by your majesty's side."

"Then take the robe and the crown and the steed
To Mordecai...for I have decreed he be rewarded for his noble deed."
Still bitter, Haman did not dream that any thing was amiss
As he was forced to honor his nemesis.

He still dreamed of being blessed by the King
With power and glory and everything:
But when they gathered at Esther's table to eat and dine,

She bowed in supplication, "Sire, please answer a puzzle of mine."

*"You may ask of me anything you wish, my dearest wife,
You may half my kingdom, even my life."*

*"My lord," she cried, "What if a man in whom you put trust
Should bear false witness --what is just? "*

He stared down at her tearful face,

"This, my child, would be a complete disgrace..

Who would do such a heinous thing ?"

*"And, Sire, much to your everlasting shame,
Haman orders death for my people in your name."*

The orders flew fast and to Haman it was clear,

That the treachery was out, and his end was near.

And soon he was hanged from that gallows, seventy-five feet high,

That he had built for old Mordecai.

And all through Persia, as they heard the news,

There was fasting and feasting for all Jews

Marking that fourteenth of Adar as a festive holiday

A time to rejoice with wine and song in every way.

Credits:

[Image online](#) via Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Purim-A-Joy-Filled-Holiday>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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Media Stream



Conquests of Cyrus - Founder of the Persian Empire

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