



Purim in the Holocaust

The Miracle of the Rescue

Lea Roshkovsky



Esther embarked on the fateful plan to save her people...

- Several blessings are recited prior to reading the *Megillah*.
- Several blessings are recited following the reading of the *Megillah*.
- “*Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who pleads our cause, judges our suit, and avenges our wrong, who provides retribution to all who hate our soul, and on our behalf deals out punishment to our adversaries...*”



Esther embarked on the fateful plan to save her people...

- The day turned from a day of calamity into a day of redemption.
- The atmosphere is linked to the rescue of the Jews.
- The fate of the Jews changed from bad to good.



Purim Throughout History

- Throughout the ages, Jewish communities developed Purim in the Diaspora during times of trouble
- During the years of exile, the Jews drew comparisons between Haman and the oppressor of their time.
- Naturally, they compared Haman and Hitler.
- Jews are permitted to avenge Haman.



Several central commandments:

Reading the *Megillah*.

- Exchanging Purim gifts (*mishloach manot*), making noise with a rattle (*ra'ashan*), giving to charity.
- A meal (*Seudat Purim*) in which it is customary to joke, drink wine and rejoice – in order to bring people together and unite them.
- Other customs – costumes, *venahafochu*, *Purim shpiel* (comic play).



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

“A few weeks before Purim, 1943, rumors suddenly spread that they were gathering the Jews from all the surrounding villages in order to take them to the Vilna Ghetto... Deep in their hearts, the people knew that that was the first step toward the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto.”



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

“In the evening, crowds of Jews rushed to the reading of the *Megillah*. The synagogue on the street of the butcheries was packed to the point of bursting. There was darkness and gloom everywhere. Next to the *bima* (platform) there was a small candle burning. The people stood crowded together and, as if from a great distance, the voice of the reader reached their ears:



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

“ ‘...who didst work miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season...’

And the ancient verses, which the people had repeated automatically for so many years, suddenly took on a living meaning in that room. It seemed as if some mysterious voice was breaking through and rising up from under the ground:



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

“ ‘Gather together and fight for your lives. Destroy and kill and eliminate every army, nation and country that besieges you.’

Goldenberg, the teacher, is making a speech: ‘Pull yourselves together, please. Make an effort to keep going. The months and weeks until the downfall of *Haman* are few.’ And he sings ‘*Shoshanat Yaacov*’ (The Lily of Jacob) with the entire congregation.



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

‘Thou hast ever been Israel’s salvation, and their hope in every generation...’ “

“Suddenly a voice rises up from the gloom of the *Bet Midrash*:

‘Jews, let’s not allow our spirits to drop. Let’s sing Hatikva.’



Purim in the Vilna Ghetto

And the whole congregation sang *Hatikva* as a prayer, verse after verse, once, twice, three times, with mysterious enthusiasm, with great intent, like the prayer of a soul before in departs...”

- M. Dvortsky, *Jerusalem of Lithuania in Revolt and in the Holocaust*.



Symbol of the Reversal of Fate

- Throughout the Shoah, celebrating Purim represented the hope of turning a similar fate into redemption.
- Hitler was considered a descendant of *Amalek* and *Haman*, and that inspired hope for a future victory.
- *“And you shall turn this month from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to a holiday.”*



Testimony

“...And so, one night, when we recalled that old saying, “when Adar enters, there is great rejoicing,” we decided to prepare secret Purim festivities, according to faith and the law.



Testimony

“And with my last vestiges of strength, I labored for several days to gather all kinds of paper refuse from around the camp yard, whether it was a torn memo from the people in the office of the Nazis, a piece of thick, coarse paper from a sack of cement, or a page from a Nazi comic book whose margins were blank and could therefore be used.



Testimony

“I collected all of this with extreme care because I had decided to write the *Megillat Esther* from memory on these bits of paper..



Testimony

“We divided the papers among a few people in the group. We only had one pencil, or I should say, not pencil – just the black lead from some breakable pencil used by craftsmen and carpenters. The pencil passed from one hand to the next.



Testimony

Each person wrote down a few verses from the *Megillah* from memory, since each of us was eager to take part in the great religious duty of writing the *Megillah*.



Testimony

“... At the end of the fast of Ta’anit Esther, we all gathered at the predetermined time in the attic of the barracks. The excitement that we felt was palpable, and some of the other prisoners in the camp approached us: ‘We also want to take revenge on the wicked *Haman*.’



Testimony

“Their dull eyes sparkled with a last flash of faith and hope.

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Testimony

“ Their dull eyes sparkled with a last flash of faith and hope.

We began the reading of the *Megillah* late at night for fear that our wonderful plan would be discovered by the murderous guards. “



Testimony

“ It was clear to us that according to the law, we could not bless the reading of the *Megillah*, since the ‘*Megillah*’ had been copied by us with trembling fingers on to a bunch of unmatched pieces of paper. However, the reading itself evoked sublime elation and great fervor in us.”



Testimony

“And the main thing: when we finished reading the *Megillah*, we broke into the song ‘*Shoshanat Yaacov* (The Lily of Jacob) rejoiced and was glad.’ With this song in our mouths, we burst out in a whirlwind of dancing. It seemed to us that the whole Buchenwald camp was holding its breath and listening to us, trembling: ‘Accursed be *Haman*, who sought to destroy me; blessed be *Mordechai, Mordechai* the Jew!’ “



Testimony

“The next day we got up again and dragged our feet like the day before and the day before that. Even so, we felt as if something in the camp’s atmosphere had changed because we had dared to read ‘Accursed be *Haman*,’ and it was quite obvious to everyone who this ‘*Haman*’ referred to, and our terrible hardship was eased more than a little.



Testimony

“That same day, we experienced the joy of Purim in an even more tangible way than Avraham-Eliahu, the most energetic man in our group, came to sweeten our ears with a big secret:

‘The Ukrainian capo, that stupid, evil guy, whispered to one of us today: *‘Hitler kaput’* – Hitler’s lost!’ ”

Jacob Frankel – *Those Who Did Not Surrender*, vol 2.



Testimony

“Of course we didn’t have a calendar, and we could not know when each festival took place. In the factory, there was a foreign calendar in which there were drawings of the moon, when it was new or full and so on. So I made a calculation and I realized that Purim was approaching. I tried to find a way to celebrate the festival in this Vale of Tears.”



Testimony

“In the yard, I found a small, but whole, potato. I peeled it, cut it into slices and baked it on the small stove that we had used as a hot plate in the winter. Those slices were *mishlochei manot* for my good friends.”

- Bina Grunwald, *Lights in the Darkness*, Maori Or, 1998, pp. 61-63.



■ Why was observing holidays – even in thought and not in practice – so important?



Questions

- What is the mental process the Jews underwent from the time they entered the synagogue until the conclusion of the reading of the *Megillah*?
- What was the reality and what was the contribution of the reading?



Questions

“When Adar enters, there is great rejoicing.”

- How did the people in the testimony manage to do this, despite the reality of the Holocaust?



Questions

- What were the inherent dangers?
- Why did they observe the *Megillah* reading anyway?
- What were the stages the prisoners went through in order to observe Purim?
- Why was it that daring to read out loud “accursed be *Haman*” changed the prisoners feelings, though their difficult routine continued?