

Reaching Out Strengthens Us Within.

We're all familiar with the old quip – how do you reduce Jewish history into just nine words?

Answer: They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!

Of course, food does play a significant role in all our celebrations. There are traditional meals and omens associated with all of our festivals – even special meals going into or out from fasts. Some, like matzah on Pesach are a mitzvah recorded in the Torah. Others like oily foods on Chanukah or dairy foods on Shavuot are long standing customs.

On Purim we traditionally eat Hamentaschen – which are supposed to be reminiscent of the three-cornered hat worn by Haman or perhaps his pointy ears. They are a delicious custom, but the four essential mitzvot of Purim are also all directly or indirectly focussed on food.

The root mitzvah of Purim is the reading of the **Megillah** in the evening and the morning. It tells the whole Esther and Mordechai, Achashverosh and Haman narrative. It begins with banquets and unfolds over a series of dinners. It concludes with the victorious Jews proclaiming a feast and a holiday.

The three other mitzvot which come out of the Megillah are directly focused on food.

They are 1) **Mishte**, a festive banquet for ourselves; 2) **Mishloach Manot**, the sending of at least one gifts of two types of food to friends and 3) **Matanot Le-Evyonim**, gifts of charity to the poor. The essence of charity is also sustenance, so that poor people can also participate in the celebration of the festival. These gifts can be money or food. Gifts should be given to at least two poor people. Incidentally, the mitzvah is not fulfilled by giving Purim money to other charitable causes. All these mitzvot should be performed on the day of Purim, itself, which is learned from the Rabbis from the verse (Esther 9:22) that Mordechai and Esther proclaimed them *days* of feasting.

In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides writes "It is better for a person to increase his gifts to the poor than to make a larger meal or give more mishloach manot gifts to a friend." Maimonides continues with an explanation; "for there is no greater and more beautiful joy than gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, and widows. One who gladdens the hearts of the

unfortunate is likened to the Shechina (the Divine Presence), itself."



It is an interesting halacha. It actually sets our priorities. Of course, we have to fulfil all the mitzvot we are able. But we know that halacha cares about how much time, energy and resource we put into our mitzvot observance. Maimonides spells out; When we are looking to fulfil the mitzvot of Purim a big boozy banquet or lavish parcels of food sent to choice friends are not the ideal. Hashem would rather that we raise the spirits of the poor through our tzeddaka.

Making needy people happy – and our extending our reach to them has a dual consequence. Their happiness and sustenance are one element – but making us into more compassionate people – more Godly people is the goal. When we celebrate our redemption through our own parties and gifts exchanges with friends we celebrate what Hashem has done for us and we feel good. When we give charity and make others feel good – we become agents of Hashem himself – and there can be no greater celebration.

"They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!" marks our celebration of survival in the past.

They tried to kill us. We live to give – that is the essence of godliness – it is the key to our survival in the future. It is the giving that will bring our redemption.

Celebrate with enthusiasm and gusto. Enjoy all the mitzvot with your family, friends and community. But make a special effort with matanot le-eyonim. It turns darkness into light and sorrow to rejoicing.

Looking forward to seeing you at our various Megillah readings. Thanks to the many volunteers who help arrange them and who prepare the leining.

Please do try to enable everyone to fulfil the mitzvah properly by hearing every word. Also, please can we encourage our children to put sweet wrappers in the bins!

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom and a Purim Sameach.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeremy Lawrence".

Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence