

A Purim Primer

Laws of the Jewish Holiday
in a Simple and Concise Language

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By Rabbi Yochanan Schnall

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בס"ד

אשירה לד' כי גמל עלי

I am indebted to my wife for all the patience and support she continues to have for me.

Thank you my dear reader, for without your interest this pamphlet would not exist.

Much thanks as well to the Minneapolis Community Kollel for their resources.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to be a quick review of some pertinent laws relevant to this time of year.

It was formulated for those who do not have the opportunity or resources to study the laws in detail.

Many of these laws and sources are from the sefer:

שליט"א by R' Moshe Mordechai Karp הלכות חג בחג

If you have any feedback, positive or negative, please share it with me at yochanan.schnall@gmail.com.

Feel welcome to make copies of this pamphlet for free distribution

Adar 5773

BEFORE PURIM

❖ **Taanis Esther: The Fast of Esther**

Taanis Esther is a fast day that takes place before Purim. It commemorates Hashem's response to our fasts and prayers during the Purim miracle.¹

- Taanis Esther is usually the day before Purim. This year, since Purim is on a Sunday, Taanis Esther takes place the preceding Thursday (February 21st).²
- Those who are ill, pregnant, nursing, elderly or infirm should consult a rabbi since they may be exempt from fasting.³
- The fast begins at dawn.⁴
- This year, the fast concludes 50 minutes after sunset or 41 minutes afterwards if necessary.⁵

❖ **Machatzis Hashekel: The Half Shekel**

During the days of the Beis Hamikdosh (Temple), Jewish adult males were obligated to contribute a half-shekel coin to the Temple fund. These monies were used to pay for sacrifices and other public needs. After the Beis Hamikdosh was destroyed, this mitzvah is commemorated with a similar contribution to the poor. Since the original collection began during the month of Adar, the obligation is fulfilled either on Taanis Esther before mincha or on Purim before the megillah reading.⁶

- Since the original obligation was to give a half-shekel, it is customary to give a coin that has the word "half" in its name.⁷ In the United States, half-dollar coins are used.
- Traditionally, each person gives three coins.⁸
- The money used for Machatzis Hashekel should not be from funds that have already been designated for charity.⁹
- The obligation applies to Jewish males; in some communities, it is the custom for women to give as well.¹⁰
- There is a dispute over at what age the requirement begins- either at bar mitzvah, or upon turning twenty.¹¹
- Fathers give on behalf of their sons who do not have their own source of income.
 - Some fathers have the custom to give on behalf of their sons who are under bar mitzvah as well. One who adopts this custom must continue with it every year until his sons are of age to give for themselves.¹²
- Since people do not usually have half-dollar coins available, synagogues often provide them in the collection plate. One "purchases" the necessary amount of half-dollars by paying for them with common currency. After placing the payment in the plate, the coins are picked up (in order to halachically acquire them) and replaced in the plate in fulfillment of the mitzvah.¹³

PURIM

❖ **Purim Decorum**

- In honor of the Purim holiday, it is proper to clean the home and make the beds just as it is done in honor of Shabbos.¹⁴
- It is also proper to dress in nice, Shabbos clothing¹⁵ (unless you will be in costume ☺).
 - Before going to a synagogue, be aware that in many communities only children dress up. You may want to find out in advance what is done at the location that you will be attending.

❖ Reading the Megillah

There is an obligation to listen to the reading of the Megillah twice on Purim- once at night and once during the day.¹⁶

- One must hear the entire text as it is read.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is not necessary to understand it to fulfill the mitzvah¹⁸.
- The reader must be reading the megillah from a kosher scroll.¹⁹
 - If there is absolutely no megillah in the city and it is impossible to travel to a place that has one, the text should be read from a Chumash. In this case, no blessings are recited.²⁰
- All in attendance should have their own individual text from which to follow the reading. (This does not have to be a megillah scroll.) If a word was not heard correctly, it should be read quietly from the text.²¹
- It is customary to bang and make noise when the name of Haman is read.²² The reader should pause until after the noise subsides.²³
- Four verses are customarily read aloud by the audience ahead of the reader (2:5, 8:15-16, 10:3).²⁴
- The reader should attempt to read all the names of Haman's ten sons (starting with the last three words of 9:6 through the first three words of 9:10) in one breath²⁵. Many congregations have a custom to read these names aloud ahead of the reader.²⁶

Blessings

- Three blessings are recited before the megillah reading and one after it. They are recited by the reader on behalf of all in attendance.²⁷ The blessings can be found in a siddur or in a chumash near the megillah text.
- The audience stands while the blessings are recited.²⁸
- The third blessing is Shehechyanu- the blessing that is said before performing an annual mitzvah. When Shehechyanu is recited before the daytime reading, it also refers to the additional annual mitzvos that will be performed Purim day (mishloach manos, matanos l'evyonim and the Purim meal). As the blessing is recited, the reader and the congregation should bear this reference in mind.²⁹
- The after-blessing is only recited in the presence of a minyan.³⁰
- If the reading is exclusively to benefit women (the reader has already fulfilled his own obligation), one of the women in attendance represents the group and recites the blessings out loud. She concludes the first blessing with "*Lishmoah Megillah*" instead of "*Al Mikrah Megillah*".³¹
- Be prepared! On Purim evening, immediately after reading the Megillah, the congregation recites a *piyut* acrostic. It is found in a siddur after the blessings over the megillah reading. The *piyut* concludes with the lyrics of "*Shoshanas Yaakov*" which are sung together by the congregation.

Who is Obligated

- All adults over bar/bas mitzvah have the obligation to listen to the megillah reading.³²
- Mature children who can stay attentive throughout the entire megillah reading are also required to hear it.³³
- Younger children are also encouraged to come to hear the megillah but only if they can remain quiet throughout the reading. **Children who may disrupt their parents or others from hearing the Megillah should not be brought to shul at this time.**³⁴

Timing of the Mitzvah

- The reading for Purim evening should not begin earlier than nightfall (fifty minutes after sunset³⁵). If this is difficult, a rabbi should be consulted.³⁶
- The Purim day reading should not begin before sunrise.³⁷ If this is difficult, it may begin after dawn³⁸ (seventy-two minutes before sunrise).
- To ensure that the mitzvah is not forgotten or delayed, once the earliest evening and morning times of the mitzvah have arrived, it is prohibited to begin a significant, absorbing activity until after hearing the megillah. Some examples are studying, napping, eating or beginning a project³⁹.
 - If necessary, one may perform these activities if another person is appointed as a reminder to hear the megillah⁴⁰. Even then, eating a meal is only permitted if it is essential for one's health.⁴¹

❖ Matanos L'evyonim: Gifts to the Poor

On Purim, there is an obligation to give charity to at least two poor people. When performing this mitzvah, sensitivity to others must remain paramount. It is advisable to give through your rabbi.

Basic Obligation

- There is much dispute regarding the minimum value one must give. According to many opinions, it is the value of one meal.⁴² Today, this is approximately five dollars for each poor person.⁴³
 - This ten-dollar minimum (five dollars for each person) cannot be given from monies previously designated for charity.⁴⁴
- A poor person is defined as someone who has great difficulty providing for his or her basic family needs.⁴⁵
- Giving food or other items that are equivalent to the minimum value fulfills the obligation as well.⁴⁶
 - To this end, one can give a poor person a regular mishloach manos basket that is worth at least five dollars with the intention that it should be for matanos l'evyonim instead of mishloach manos. (Of course, to preserve the recipient's dignity this intent should not be expressed.)
- An additional obligation on Purim is to give charity to anyone who asks for it. On Purim, we do not question the integrity of the claims of those in need.⁴⁷
 - A person's intuition is still very important regarding how much to give whom.
- **One should sooner increase spending money for matanos l'evyonim than on mishloach manos and the Purim meal.**⁴⁸

Timing of the Mitzvah

- Matanos l'evyonim is distributed on Purim during the daytime.⁴⁹
 - If the recipient received it before Purim, it is questionable if the obligation has been fulfilled.⁵⁰
 - One may entrust money with a rabbi before Purim with the understanding that the rabbi will act as the donor's agent and distribute it on Purim.

Who is Obligated?

- All Jews over bar/bas mitzvah are obligated in this mitzvah. This includes children who are supported by their parents.⁵¹
 - There is discussion among the authorities if a wife who is supported by her husband must give independently. It is a good practice for her to perform this mitzvah and give ten dollars of her own money.⁵²

❖ Mishloach Manos: Sending Food to One Another

All Jewish people are obligated to give gifts of food to one another in order to increase happiness and friendship during the Purim holiday. These gifts are called mishloach manos.⁵³

Basic Obligation

Only one mishloach manos is necessary in order to fulfill the obligation.⁵⁴ Therefore, the following rules need to apply to just one mishloach manos. All additional ones do not have any rules.

- It must consist of a minimum of two portions of food⁵⁵.
 - These portions do not have a minimum size, but they should be respectable enough to be served to a distinguished guest.⁵⁶ For example, less than a whole orange would not be served, but a quarter of a pineapple is sufficient.
 - Contrary to popular misconception, both foods may have the same blessing.⁵⁷ (For example, giving two portions of cake fulfills the obligation even though both portions require the “*mezonos*” blessing.)
 - According to some opinions, the food should be ready-to-eat without requiring any further cooking, baking or other forms of preparation.⁵⁸
 - Some opinions state that the two foods should reflect the wealth and status of the giver and recipient. In line with the above, it is a good idea to give at least one mishloach manos that reflects this.⁵⁹
- Ideally, it should be delivered via messenger.⁶⁰ This can be another member of the giver’s or recipient’s family- even a child under bar or bas mitzvah.⁶¹
- Giving “in lieu of mishloach manos” cards does not fulfill the obligation and it is unlikely that contributing money to “communal” mishloach manos fulfills it either. When participating in these charity drives, be sure to give at least one regular, individually owned mishloach manos as well.⁶²

Who is Obligated

- Every independent Jewish adult is obligated in this mitzvah.
 - There is discussion among the authorities whether those supported by a husband or parent are also obligated. People in these circumstances should ideally give at least one mishloach manos of their own.⁶³
 - Children under bar/bas mitzvah who are old enough to comprehend the concept of the mitzvah should also give mishloach manos to at least one other person.⁶⁴
- Mishloach manos are not sent to mourners through the thirty-day period. In many communities, they are also not sent to someone who is in the extended year of mourning⁶⁵.
- Whether a mourner is “sitting shivah” or in the remaining year of mourning, he or she sends just one, modest mishloach manos.⁶⁶

Timing of the Mitzvah

- This mitzvah is performed on Purim during the daytime.⁶⁷ It is proper to give at least one mishloach manos soon after the conclusion of the shacharis prayers and the megillah reading.⁶⁸
- If they were delivered before Purim, it is questionable if the mitzvah was fulfilled.⁶⁹

❖ The Purim Meal

All adults over bar or bas mitzvah are obligated to eat a celebratory *fleishige* (meat) meal during Purim day.⁷⁰

- The meal should include many relatives and/or friends.⁷¹
- Once children are of age to comprehend the concept of this mitzvah, (usually about five or six⁷²), they are also obligated to participate⁷³.
- One should be sure to pray mincha before the meal begins.⁷⁴ It is also proper to study some Torah before the meal.⁷⁵
- The majority of the meal should be eaten before sunset.⁷⁶
- It is also proper to have a smaller, festive meal the night of Purim.⁷⁷ During this meal, some have a custom to eat a variety of beans and seeds in commemoration of Esther's diet while she resided in King Achashverosh's palace.⁷⁸

Drinking Wine

- On Purim, it is a mitzvah to drink wine until one becomes confused between "Blessed is Mordechai" and "Cursed is Haman".⁷⁹
 - The appropriate way to fulfill this obligation is to drink a little more than usual and fall asleep. While asleep, these phrases will surely be confused.⁸⁰
- **If a drunken state will cause one to behave in a way that causes chillul Hashem (desecration of G-d's name), the entire purpose of this mitzvah is defeated. We drink on Purim in order to bring ourselves and others closer to Hashem- not further away from Him.**⁸¹

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- ¹ Mishna Berura 686:2
² Shulchan Aruch 686:2
³ Rema 686:2
⁴ Shulchan Aruch 664:1
⁵ Igros Moshe Orach Chayim volume 4 #62
⁶ Rema 694:1
⁷ Rema 694:1
⁸ Rema 694:1
⁹ Ba'er Haitaiv 694:2
¹⁰ Magen Avrohom 694:3; see Kaf Hachayim 694:27
¹¹ Mishna Berura 694:5
¹² Mishna Berura 694:5
¹³ See Biur Halacha 694 "v'yeish"
¹⁴ Mishna Berura 695:3
¹⁵ Rema 695:2
¹⁶ Shulchan Aruch 687:1
¹⁷ Mishna Berura 690:48
¹⁸ Shulchan Aruch 690:8
¹⁹ Shulchan Aruch 690:3
²⁰ Shulchan Aruch 691:10
²¹ Mishna Berura 690:19
²² Rema 690:17
²³ Mishna Berura 690:60
²⁴ Rema 690:17
²⁵ Shulchan Aruch, Rema 690:15
²⁶ See Mishna Berura 690:52 !
²⁷ Shulchan Aruch 692:1
²⁸ Sha'ar Hatziyun 690:1
²⁹ Mishna Berura 692:1
³⁰ Rema 692:1
³¹ Mishna Berura 692:11
³² Shulchan Aruch 689:1
³³ Shulchan Aruch 689:1
³⁴ Shulchan Aruch 689:6 see Mishna Berura ad loc.
³⁵ Igros Moshe volume 4 end of #62
³⁶ Shulchan Aruch 692:4
³⁷ Shulchan Aruch 687:1
³⁸ Mishna Berura 687:6
³⁹ Mishna Berura 692:15
⁴⁰ Mishna Berura 692:15
⁴¹ Mishna Berura 687:16
⁴² See Hilchos Chag B'chag 14:4

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- ⁴³ This is what I have heard from R' Shmuel Fuerst שליט"א
⁴⁴ Mishna Berura 694:3
⁴⁵ This is what I have heard from R' Shmuel Fuerst שליט"א
⁴⁶ Mishna Berura 694:2
⁴⁷ Shulchan Aruch 694:3
⁴⁸ Mishna Berura 694:3
⁴⁹ Mishna Berura 695:22
⁵⁰ See Biur Halacha 694 "lishnei"; Magen Avraham 694:1
⁵¹ He is no worse than a poor person who is obligated see Hilchos Chag B'chag 14:5
⁵² see Hilchos Chag B'chag 14:5
⁵³ Shulchan Aruch 695:4
⁵⁴ Shulchan Aruch 695:4
⁵⁵ Shulchan Aruch 695:4
⁵⁶ Aruch Hashulchan 695:15
⁵⁷ See Shulchan Aruch 695:4 where it mentions two pieces of meat as an example
⁵⁸ Mishna Berura 695:20
⁵⁹ Biur Halacha 695 "chayav"
⁶⁰ Mishna Berura 695:18
⁶¹ Da'as Torah 695; see Hichos Chag B'chag chapter 13 note 13
⁶² See Hichos Chag B'chag 13:15 regarding partners who send. Here, the foods do not even belong to the senders at all- they belong to the organization!
⁶³ See Hichos Chag B'chag 13:11
⁶⁴ See Hichos Chag B'chag 13:11
⁶⁵ Rema 696:6; Mishna Berura 696:21
⁶⁶ Mishna Berura 696:17
⁶⁷ Rema 696:14
⁶⁸ See Hichos Chag B'chag 13:1
⁶⁹ Ba'er Heiteiv 695:7
⁷⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Rema 695:1,2; regarding fleishigs, see Shulchan Aruch 696:7
⁷¹ Mishna Berura 695:9
⁷² Mishna Berura 128:123
⁷³ See Chayei Adam 66:2
⁷⁴ Rema 695:2; Mishna Berura 695:8
⁷⁵ Rema 695:2
⁷⁶ Rema 695:2
⁷⁷ Rema 695:1
⁷⁸ Mishna Berura 695:11
⁷⁹ Shulchan Aruch 695:2
⁸⁰ Rema 695:2; Mishna Berura 695:5
⁸¹ Biur Halacha 695 "ad"