

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Purim

Queen Esther's story from ancient Persia, and the many local Purims that Jewish communities created to remember their own rescues.

WHEN

The 14th of the Hebrew month of Adar, in February or March. Jerusalem celebrates on the 15th, called Shushan Purim.

THE STORY

The Book of Esther tells how Queen Esther and her cousin Mordechai saved the Jews of the Persian Empire from Haman's plot.

CUSTOMS

Reading the *megillah* (scroll of Esther), sending gifts of food, giving to people in need, and a festive meal.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

More than 100 "local Purims" are known, in which communities gave thanks for their own escapes from danger.

Purim is the only biblical festival whose story takes place entirely outside the Land of Israel, in the royal court of ancient Persia. For Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, that story has always felt close to home. Iranian Jews call themselves "Esther's Children," and for generations they visited the tomb in the city of Hamadan that tradition identifies as the burial place of Esther and Mordechai. Across the region, families celebrated with their own melodies, songs, and sweets, and many communities added Purims of their own.

How Purim is celebrated

- **Reading the megillah.** The Book of Esther is read aloud in the evening and again in the morning. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities have their own melodies for the reading. Ladino speaking Sephardic Jews pronounce the villain's name "Aman."
- **Mishloah manot.** Friends and neighbors exchange gifts of food, often trays of homemade sweets.
- **Matanot la'evyonim.** Gifts to people in need are a central part of the day.
- **Se'udat Purim.** A festive meal brings family together in the afternoon.
- **Costumes.** Dressing up likely began in Italy in the fifteenth century. In some communities, such as Iran, costumes were not a traditional custom at all.

Two meanings of "Purim Katan"

1. In a Jewish leap year, Purim moves to the second month of Adar, and the 14th of the first Adar becomes a minor day called Purim Katan, "little Purim."
2. The same name, along with *Purim Sheni* ("second Purim"), is used for the local Purims described below.

Local Purims: remembering our own rescues

When a Jewish community survived a serious threat, it often marked the anniversary as a new Purim. Following the model of the Book of Esther, some communities wrote their own scroll telling the story, read it in the synagogue, recited prayers of thanks, shared a festive meal, and gave to charity. Local Purims arose in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the Ottoman world. Most faded after the mass migrations of the twentieth century, but they remain a powerful record of how communities remembered their history and gave thanks.

COMMUNITY	NAME	DATE	WHAT IT REMEMBERS
Cairo, Egypt	Purim Mitzrayim ("Purim of Egypt")	28 Adar, 1524	The fall of Ahmed Pasha, an Ottoman governor who rebelled against the sultan, imprisoned Jewish leaders, and threatened the community. A <i>Megillat Mitzrayim</i> modeled on the Book of Esther told the story. Egyptian Jews observed it into the twentieth century.
Morocco (Tetuan, Tangier)	Purim de los Cristianos, or Purim Sebastiano	1 or 2 Elul, 1578	The defeat of King Sebastian of Portugal at the Battle of the Three Kings. Jews had feared that a Portuguese conquest would bring forced conversion. Some northern Moroccan families still remember it.
Tripoli, Libya	Purim al Sharif	23 or 24 Tevet, 1705	The end of a siege of Tripoli by the ruler of Tunis. (Sources differ on the exact date.)
Tripoli, Libya	Purim Burghul	29 Tevet, 1795	The fall of Ali Burghul, who seized Tripoli in 1793 and ruled harshly, with heavy taxes on the Jewish community.
Baghdad, Iraq	A local day of deliverance	11 Av, 1733	The lifting of a siege of Baghdad by the Persian ruler Nader Shah.
Sarajevo, Bosnia	Purim de Saray	Early Heshvan, 1819 or 1820	Jews, Muslims, and Christians together won the release of Jewish leaders, including Rabbi Moshe Danon, held for ransom by the local pasha. Bosnia's small Jewish community still marks the day.
Ottoman Sephardic cities	Purim Saragossa	17 Shevat	A legend of an informer who falsely claimed the community's Torah cases were empty. Despite the name, scholars place the story in Syracuse, Sicily. Exiles carried it to Izmir, Istanbul, and Thessaloniki.
Casablanca, Morocco	"Purim Hitler"	2 Kislev (1940s)	Relief after the Allied landings in North Africa in November 1942 ended Vichy French rule and the threat of Nazi occupation. A Judeo Arabic scroll retold the events in the style of the Book of Esther.

Main sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Purims, Special"; Posen Library; Jewish Review of Books; JTA; NJOP; Chabad.org; University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies. Where sources disagree on a date, both are given.

Community by community

Iran

Families prepared lavish platters of sweets, and engaged couples traditionally exchanged Purim platters. Favorites include *halva* flavored with rosewater and saffron, and *nan e berenji*, rice flour cookies topped with poppy seeds. After 1979, many families placed new emphasis on the Fast of Esther.

Sources: Tablet; Aish (Jacqueline Saper); My Jewish Learning

Iraq

Iraqi Jews bake *sambusak*, turnovers filled with spiced chickpeas, along with *hadgi badah*, almond and cardamom cookies, and *kleicha*, date filled pastries. A nineteenth century megillah from Baghdad shows Mordechai's family tree at the top and Haman's written upside down at the bottom.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; Reconstructing Judaism; University of Washington

Syria (Aleppo)

Aleppo families serve stuffed artichokes and stuffed chicken at the Purim feast, and fill gift trays with *eras b'ajweh* (date crescents), *simsemyeh* (sesame candy), and baklava.

Source: Orthodox Union

Morocco

Moroccan Jews bake a round bread with whole eggs held in place by crossed strips of dough. The eggs are playfully called *ojos de Haman*, "Haman's eyes." Communities also have their own melodies for the megillah.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Times of Israel

Libya

Families sent a *sefra*, a silver tray of homemade sweets covered with an embroidered cloth, which came back filled with treats in return. The tray might hold *debla*, fried pastries shaped like roses, and almond cookies.

Source: Jewish Journal (Tabby Refael), based on community recollections

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

Families sang *koplas de Purim*, rhymed songs in Ladino retelling the story of Esther. Bakers made *folares*, hard boiled eggs wrapped in dough, jokingly called "Haman in jail." Purim photos show children dressed in Ottoman style clothing.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Kurdistan

Kurdish Jewish women celebrated *Leil Purim*, a women's gathering by the river on the eve of Purim, where they applied henna to one another.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Yemen

Purim was celebrated with the megillah reading, festive meals, and gifts. The Jews of San'a also kept a local Purim of their own on 18 Adar, its origin now unknown.

Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica

Common misconceptions

- **"Hamantaschen are the Purim cookie."** They are an Ashkenazi tradition. Every community has its own Purim sweets.
- **"Purim Saragossa is from Spain."** The scroll spells the city "Saragosa," but scholars identify it as Syracuse in Sicily.
- **"Local Purims were about Jews against their neighbors."** Several remember help from Muslim and Christian neighbors, as in Sarajevo, where people of all three faiths worked together to free the hostages.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, and Yemenite Jews are usually called Mizrahi, and many Syrian Jews identify as Sephardic. "Sephardic" refers to communities descended from the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

Words to know

Megillah *Hebrew*

"Scroll." The Book of Esther, read aloud on Purim.

Mishloah manot *Hebrew*

Gifts of food sent to friends and neighbors.

Matanot la'evyonim *Hebrew*

Gifts to people in need.

Ta'anit Esther *Hebrew*

The Fast of Esther, the day before Purim.

Shushan Purim *Hebrew*

Purim on the 15th of Adar, celebrated in Jerusalem.

Purim Sheni *Hebrew*

"Second Purim," a local Purim marking a community's rescue.

Koplas de Purim *Ladino*

Rhymed songs that retell the Purim story.

Folares *Ladino*

An egg baked in dough, "Haman in jail."

Sambusak *Judeo Arabic*

A filled turnover, beloved in Iraqi homes.

Sefra *Libyan Judeo Arabic*

A tray of Purim sweets exchanged between families.

Bringing Purim to life

In the public school classroom

- Read the Book of Esther as literature: a story about a minority community, identity, and courage in a diaspora empire.
- Use a primary source: compare a passage from the Book of Esther with the *Megillat Mitzrayim* of Cairo (Posen Library).
- Build a timeline and map of the local Purims, and discuss how communities choose what to remember.
- Explore Purim foods as culture, following school allergy rules (many recipes use nuts and sesame).
- Do not have students perform the megillah reading, blessings, or prayers. Approach the violence in Esther chapter 9, and Holocaust era history such as Casablanca's Purim, in an age appropriate way.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Learn a Sephardic or Mizrahi megillah melody, or sing a Ladino Purim song such as "El Dia de Purim."
- Make folares, sambusak, or a Libyan sefra tray for mishloah manot.
- Study a local megillah and write a class "scroll" about a moment your community is grateful for.
- Invite Iranian, Iraqi, Moroccan, or Libyan families to share Purim memories.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: What did Purim look like in your family's home? What sweets were on the tray?
- Read *A Persian Princess* together with young children.
- Fill a tray with a sweet from a community other than your own and share it with a neighbor.
- Record an elder's Purim memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think communities wrote their own scrolls instead of simply remembering events in other ways?
- What does it mean that Purim's story takes place in a diaspora? How might that have spoken to Jews living across the Middle East and North Africa?
- Many local Purims were forgotten after families migrated. What stories would you want your community to remember, and how?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Persia and the Story of Purim (Jewish Tapestry, 4 minutes)

youtube.com/watch?v=TYM8Jy2-orA

"El Dia de Purim," by Sarah Aroeste (an animated Ladino song, 3 minutes)

youtube.com/watch?v=thT9MdZlxRU

Without Persia, What Is Purim? Hybridity and the Festival of Esther (UCLA lecture by Catherine Bonesho, for adults)

pourdavoud.ucla.edu/media/videos/without-persia-what-is-purim-hybridity-and-the-festival-of-esther

Read

A Persian Princess, by Barbara Diamond Goldin, illustrated by Steliyana Doneva (Apples & Honey Press, 2020). Picture book.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-persian-princess

Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houman Sarshar (Jewish Publication Society and the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002).

sdjewishworld.com/?p=58361

Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence, by Elliott Horowitz (Princeton University Press, 2006). For teachers.

press.princeton.edu/node/52617

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Sephardic Legacy Reawakens at Every Corner," by Nesim Bencoya Izmir's synagogues, including a historic photo of the city's Purim festival.

distinctionsjournal.org/sephardic-legacy-reawakens-at-every-corner

"Modeling Authenticity," by Stephanie Ives Begins with a school Purim video that mocked Sephardic culture, and what educators can learn from it.

distinctionsjournal.org/modeling-authenticity-how-schools-can-integrate-diverse-jewish-voices

Explore online

Sephardic Purim Customs from the Old World to the Pacific Northwest (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-purim-customs-from-the-old-world-to-the-pacific-northwest

Purim Unmasked: Purim Art and Artifacts from Around the World (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/global-judaism/art-artifacts-customs-purim-around-the-world-shalom-sabar

Purims, Special (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0016_0_16198.html

The Scroll of Egypt (Megilat Mitsrayim) (Posen Library)

posenlibrary.com/node/6041

Empty Torah Cases and "Little Purims" (Jewish Review of Books)

jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/6727/empty-torah-cases-and-little-purims

Sarajevo Jews celebrate a second Purim (JTA)

jta.org/2023/03/06/global/sarajevo-jews-celebrate-a-second-purim-for-centuries-they-werent-alone

Are Esther and Mordecai Buried in This Iranian Tomb? (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/esthers-tomb

Purim Foods (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/purim-foods

Purim and Persia: teacher guide, grades 8 to 12 (Jewish Educator Portal)

educator.jewishedproject.org/content/purim-persian

From JIMENA

JIMENA's Jewish Iranian Resource Guide (Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit)

sepharditoolkit.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/JIMENAs-Jewish-Iranian-Resource-Guide.pdf

Culture and Holidays video collection

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the Encyclopaedia Judaica; the Posen Library; the Jewish Review of Books; JTA; NJOP; Chabad.org; the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; My Jewish Learning; Tablet; Aish; the Jewish Women's Archive; Reconstructing Judaism; the Orthodox Union; the Times of Israel; Jewish Journal; and UCLA's Pourdavoud Institute. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.