

## **Why is Purim Given a Plural Name?**

Byline:  
Rabbi Alan Yuter

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**QUESTION:**

Why does the minor Jewish holiday named "*Purim*," which means "lots," occur in the plural, and not "*pur*," which means one singular lot? How might we make sense of this singular holy day's plural name?

**ANSWER:**

This question was addressed in a public lecture delivered some twenty years ago by my revered teacher, *Hakham Yosef Faur, zt'l*. His presentation struck roots in my psyche, and this paper is my response and reaction to my mentor's insight.

*Hakham Faur's* understanding was that Haman relied upon a *pur*, a single *goral*, and that Haman is presented as a sophisticated, urbane "tea leaf" reader who thinks that he is able to control the fates. There is however one *pur*, unrecognized by Haman. Who is the King of and over mortal kings, the Creator and controller of everything, including the *pur*, the lot of fate that Haman mistakenly believes he is able to manipulate, control, and exploit to his advantage. In Biblical thought, not recognizing God is the essence of evil (Psalms 4:4, 14:1), because the moral law is also the Creator's will (Psalms 92:5-7).

The plural noun "*purim*" suggests there is indeed a *pur* that is unknown to and unrecognized by the pagan Persian population of Shushan, the fortress city, and therefore goes unmentioned by the Persians described in the Esther Scroll. This *pur's* power is infinitely more potent than the *pur* supposedly manipulated and controlled by Haman. God's name is not mentioned in the Esther Scroll because the Haman's of the world do not and cannot take God's presence and prescriptions into account. After all, pagan populations inhabit a social world in which might makes right because there is no supreme Judge of Whom they are aware or any judgmental framework by which they might ever be held to account. The word *melech* king in the Esther Scroll refers directly to Ahasuerus, better known to non-Hebrew readers of the Esther Scroll as Xerxes, [a] a character who has no apparent double or obvious adversary, [b] who is described with stative/intransitive and passive verbs, and who shows minimal concern with the affairs of state but a lot of attention to women and alcoholic drink.

While Esther's persona parallels Vashti and Haman and Mordecai are clearly observable, contending adversaries, Emperor Xerxes, the larger-than-life king of kings, has no apparent recognizable, or readily identifiable double.

The Esther Scroll's omniscient narrator artfully contrasts the drunken, sexually excitable human king who presents himself as omnipotent, because his decrees are so powerful that even Xerxes himself is unable to rescind them [Esther 2:1 and 8:8]. The ultimate King is the King who is active in history but hidden from view by those who are unable to see because they are blinded by their worldly lust for power, prestige, and beautiful women. The divine King's name cannot be mentioned in this context because this King is the King who, whether pagans know it or not, reigns far above mortal emperors' field of vision. This King will not be noticed by pagans who are unable to sense the divine King's existence, presence, or providence. This King also sanctifies Israel with the Torah's commands, which Esther and Mordecai sincerely and devoutly try to observe. Not understanding or appreciating why Jews do what they do or why they are so different than other people, Haman seeks King Xerxes' permission to destroy Persia's Jewry.

[a]nd Haman said unto king Ahasuerus: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, their laws differ from those of every people, they do not uphold the king's laws; and it is no not worthwhile for the king to let them be" [Esther 3:8].

Haman here addresses "the [human] King" by appealing to what will in the 19th Century C.E. emerge as the core doctrine of secular anti-Semitism. Jewry is dispersed, their mores are strange, causing discomfort to the local population by dint of Jewish deviance, and the Jews do not observe the human king's laws, expressing thereby a disdain for the non-Jewish society's mores, conventions, and expectations. After all, the king commanded that everyone bow in homage to Haman, and Mordecai refuses to comply with this royal edict [Esther 3:2]. It is no accident that the Hebrew word "*nekhar*" is cognate to the Akkadian "*nakarum*," with both adjectives sharing the semantic sense of "different" and "hated." Both Haman and his human king, Xerxes, regard human beings as assets that are both exploitable and expendable because they are not viewed as carriers of the divine image which mandates respect for human dignity (b'Berachot 19b and elsewhere).

From Sumer's Bilqamesh to the Akkadian Gilgamesh to Greek tragedy of late antiquity, ancient pagan cultures all maintained that there are natural forces to which even the gods, portrayed in these ancient epics as the forces in and of nature, are constrained to defer. Fate is a blind power that often thwarts humanity's efforts. This is the *pur* that Haman thought he possessed and whose power he believed that he controlled. But the Esther Scroll subtly suggests that there is indeed a force as unseen as Xerxes is obscene, Who is more active and powerful than the human king is passive, inept, and impotent, and Whose omniscience and omnipotence are the polar opposite of Xerxes' ignorant impotence. By manipulating the human king, Haman sought to control and manipulate the locus of power in Persia, which is the only *pur* that Haman perceived with his own finite, malevolent eyes.

What neither Xerxes nor Haman perceived was the reality of the one and only unseen King Who sees everything, the King who endowed humanity with human dignity, Who does not tolerate treating other people as mere instruments waiting for exploitation. This perspective reflects the *pur* power that keeps Mordecai informed [Esther 2:22, 4:1] regarding what he needs to know.

The holiday is called *Purim* because there is a lot, or *pur*, in addition to the *pur* controlled by Haman, that indeed determines one's fate. Haman and Mordecai both possessed lots, or *purim*. Because Haman needs to see in order to believe, he lives in the moment to satisfy his lust for power and honor. Haman's Biblical ancestors were, after all, the Amaleqites, who are destroyers, plunderers, and scavengers. Haman's behavior exemplifies this "tradition." What Haman fails to consider is that just as Haman's power is in his access to Xerxes' ear, it does not occur to him that Esther may also be able to manipulate Xerxes' fears, because on a night that Xerxes cannot sleep, he commands that the royal chronicles be read to him; he is reminded that Bigtan and Teresh were plotting a *coup d'etat* against him, Mordecai thwarted the plot, yet was not rewarded for the service he provided the crown [Esther 6:2-3]. Xerxes is here being reminded of his actual ineptitude and the fragility of his reign. When Haman approaches the king's court in the middle of the night to request that Mordecai be executed, an approach grounded not in prudence, but in hubris, the reader infers why Xerxes, the inept king, could not sleep and how the unseen, divine King employs the power of providence for the faithful [Psalms 145: 17-19].

Purim's message is that for Haman, the human condition is subject to blind fate which, through expert cunning, may be manipulated for personal advantage, while for Mordecai, the human condition can be improved by living and applying the Torah informed faith. In stark contrast to Haman, Mordecai believes in order to see.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 reminds its readers that there is nothing new "*under the sun*." This is the *pur* that Haman mastered. But Mordecai answers to a reality above the sun! The material world that humans inhabit may be understood by description, unchangeable rules of nature, and science. It is by accepting the normative reality that is "above the sun," the Torah from [but no longer in] Heaven, that sanctifies its adherents. Reality "*under the sun*" is the reality that "is." Reality that is "above the sun" is the realm of what *ought* to be, of morality, of value.

Indeed, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 defines the salvific formula by which religious Jews guide their lives:

"The end of the matter [=when all is said and done], everything having been heard, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the entire man.

For every deed God will bring to judgment: for every hidden thing, whether good or bad."

**Byline:**

Rabbi Alan Yuter is rabbi emeritus of B'nai Israel, the Modern Orthodox synagogue of Downtown Baltimore. He and his wife now live in Jerusalem, where he is a lecturer at Torat Reeva.