Why is Purim Given a Plural Name?

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by Rabbi Alan Yuter

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 Ahashuerus, 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.