

Waycross, Georgia

PURIM CUSTOMS

BY HARRY CUSHING

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Traditionally, Jewish life has been sober and temperate. The Hebrew calendar abounds with many festive days, but history has given sobriety to the Jewish observances. The centuries of persecution and the uncertainties of life in the ghettos of Europe put spiritual restraint upon the Jew. Even his happier holidays have been celebrated with rigid disciplines amid austere elements. But, there were times during the year when the Jew was gay and carefree. This was especially evident during the celebration of Purim.

He may have been restrained all through the year, but on Purim he gave vent to his pent-up emotions. Throughout the year the life of the Jew was serious and free from lighthearted moments, but on Purim he allowed himself a short period of escape, one day in the year when he felt free to permit himself the luxury of indulging in the gayer side of life.

Not unlike all other Jewish holidays, Purim has given rise to various social customs. Foremost of these is found in the Book of Esther itself where is prescribed "the sending of portions one to another and gifts to the poor." Here, too like the customs of many other holidays special foods became a prominent feature of the observance. The custom developed in the course of centuries is to send delicacies, sweets and dainty foods to neighbors and friends and to make gifts to charity.

The gifts to the poor usually consist of collections before the Megillah reading. It is customary, in the Synagogue, to have a plate or special collection box, "Kuppah," into which the congregants toss their contributions. These gifts are intended to represent the ancient "Machtzit Hashekel," or half of the unit coin of the realm. Today, these collections in American synagogues are usually turned over to the Jewish National Fund for its manifold projects in Israel.

Since Purim is a joyous holiday, it is celebrated with feasting. The special festive meal is known as "Se' udat Purim," the Purim feast. The Sudeah usually is held towards the evening of Purim day (Megillah 7B). In connection with the feasting, there has developed a unique type of pastry which has become symbolic of Purim's historic event. The name of this special delicacy differed in various countries. In Germany it was known as "Hamantaschen" or "Hamanohren." In Italy it was called "Orrechi d'Haman." In Hebrew it is called "Aznai Haman."

Drinking Encouraged on This Occasion

Alcoholism is a social problem seldom found among Jews. How-

ever, excessive drinking on Purim is actually encouraged by the Jewish authorities. The basis for this is the fact that the whole miracle of Purim was occasioned through wine: Vashti lost her crown because of a wine feast and Esther donned it in her stead; Haman set his downfall at the wine banquet arranged by Esther. Oddly enough, the Talmud (Megillah 7B) states on Purim "a man should mellow himself with wine until he knows not the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' or 'Blessed is Mordecai.'" There is no better invitation to getting drunk than this peculiar statement. However, Rabbi Moses Isserles, who wrote the famous glosses to the "Schulchan Aruch," points out that the rabbis did not insist that one must get drunk, but to merely imbibe enough beyond one's usual capacity so that he will fall asleep, and because he is slumbering, not know the difference between "Cursed is Haman" and "Blessed is Mordecai."

The Talmud relates an unusual narrative about Rabbah and Rabbi Zera who spent a Purim feast together. They became mellow, and Rabbah arose and cut Rabbi Zera's throat (apparently without killing him). On the following day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. The following year, Rabbah said to Rabbi Zera, "will you come and we will have the Purim feast together?" He replied: "A miracle does not take place on every occasion."

It is to be remembered that in ages past, Jewish life did not draw the line between religious and secular activities. Thus, there are found sacred Hebrew hymns as wine songs for Purim. There are various humorous jingles which were sung in the synagogue on Purim.

Because no severe lines were drawn between the sacred and the profane, on Purim, boisterousness played an important part in the Synagogue Megillah service. (Continued on Page 21)

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