



## Purim Needs a Fast, This Year and Always

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Drawing on collective Jewish wisdom and the personal experiences of Hartman's network of North American and Israeli research fellows, faculty, rabbis, and Jewish communal professionals, our new blog [Notes for the Field](#) offers guidance, inspiration, and support for navigating the challenges facing the Jewish people today.



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Many educators and community leaders are asking: what should we do about Purim? How can we celebrate? What should we do with our children? Cancelling Purim celebrations altogether is—as we might say in *halakhic* terms—“a decree that the public cannot abide.” But celebrating as we usually do is also not an option. More than 130 Israeli citizens are still being held in terrible conditions by Hamas, while tens of thousands of others have been uprooted from their homes and are now living as refugees in their own country. Our soldiers are still on the battlefield, and our family members and fellow Jews are mourning loved ones killed in war and relatives killed on the roads, in the fields, or in their homes on October 7.

It seems to me that Taanit Esther, the Fast of Esther, which started many years after Purim was first established as a Jewish holiday and remains relatively minor, may offer at least part of a solution to our quandary of how to mark Purim this year and in the years to come.

### **From a day of Joy to a day of Fasting**

*Megilat Taanit*, a text first composed at the end of the Second Temple period, briefly describes the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar as a holiday called the Day of Nicanor. Material added to the text at a later date explains that this was the day when the Hasmoneans defeated the Greek general Nicanor during the Maccabean revolt: “And when the hand of the Hasmonean house attacked, they descended into its troops, and were killed until they reached its relatives.... And they cut off his head and chopped off his limbs, and hanged them against the Temple.... The day that happened was decreed as a holiday.”

Thus, at the end of the period of the Second Temple, the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar was a joyous day and certainly not a day of fasting. But ultimately, the Day of Nicanor —like a few other minor holidays that appear in *Megilat Taanit*—disappeared during the *Tannaitic* period.

The first evidence we have for the custom of fasting on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar in commemoration of Esther’s fast appears in sources dating to the eighth century, during the period of the *Geonim*, after both the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud* were completed. Thus, for example, Rav Achai Gaon wrote in a *teshuvah*:

Whether it is in cities, villages or towns, all fast on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar, as Rabbi Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak said: “the 13<sup>th</sup> is the time for all to gather, as it is said: ‘And the rest of the Jews who are in the king’s countries gathered and stood up for their lives on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar” (Est. 9:16). And what does gathering mean? Fasting.”

In short, the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar went from being a celebratory day on which fasting was forbidden to a day on which fasting is required. Strikingly, though, the text of Rav Achai Gaon suggests he is not

creating a new practice but describing an existing reality. The question of when and where the 13th of Adar first became a day of fasting remains a mystery.

## **What are we fasting for?**

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides explains the purpose of other fast days, particularly those associated with the destruction of the Temple. These are, he writes,

days when the entire Jewish people fast because of the calamities that occurred to them [in that time], to arouse [their] hearts and initiate [them in] the paths of repentance. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors, which resembles our present conduct and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve [our conduct], as it is stated: “And they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors” (Lev. 26:40).

This text suggests that the purpose of fasting is not commemoration of the past but instead to awaken the human heart to soul-searching, introspection, and reform. Fasting looks directly at the present, at our inevitably flawed reality, and seeks to correct it in anticipation of an ideal future. Our memories of the past are mirrors that remind us that we are no better than our ancestors, and the disasters caused by their sins may come upon us as well.

Maimonides does not discuss the purpose of Taanit Esther in the *Mishneh Torah*, but perhaps this explanation could also apply here.

There are ostensible differences between the destruction of the First and Second Temples and the story of Purim. The former were preceded by long processes of strife and discord, iniquity and sin, as evidenced by both the Bible and rabbinic literature, while the book of Esther does not describe the Jews as sinful or explicitly indicate that Haman's decree came upon Israel because of their evil deeds. On the contrary, the Jews are presented as innocents who are unjustly persecuted by “an adversary and an enemy.” So why should the fast that commemorates Queen Esther’s fast be about soul-searching? What would be the evil deeds of our ancestors that remind us of our own evil deeds, leading us to confess and correct our ways?

## **Against war**

I would like to suggest a possible answer to these questions by examining several Jewish sources that express reluctance about going to war, even when it is a just defensive war, such as that of the days of Mordechai and Esther.

I'll begin with the first book of Chronicles, which explains why King David did not build the Temple with these words from God to David:

But the word of the LORD came to me, saying: Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars; thou shalt not build a house unto My name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in My sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build a house for My name; and he shall be to Me for a son, and I will be to him for a father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel forever. (22:7-10)

These verses describe David as having shed blood during the wars in which he saved Israel from their enemy's hand. The Bible, which praised David for killing Goliath and thus saving Israel from bondage to the Philistines in the first book of Samuel, now teaches us that this same act came at a high and grave cost: David cannot build the Temple. These verses do not ban war, or condemn it as unnecessary violence. But they do not glorify war either; they dare only to point out its price: "Your hands are full of blood." True, there was justice in the war David fought, and his battles were grand—but blood is blood is blood; because you shed it, you can no longer pray with a pure heart, and you cannot reach the highest sacred realms.

The violence of war has no place in the perfected, complete, and pure world that the Temple will reflect or symbolize. One cannot swing an iron sword even on the stones that need to be carved to build the altar in the Temple, much less on another person, even for the most justified of reasons.

A similar complexity can be found in rabbinic literature. In tractate Shabbat 6:4, the Mishnah addresses the question of whether it is permissible or forbidden to carry weapons on Shabbat for anything other than the purpose of protection:

A man may not gird himself with a sword, a bow, a triangular wooden shield (*tris*), a round wooden shield (*alah*), or a spear. And if he went out [with them], he is liable for a sin-offering. R. Eliezer says: They are ornamental to him. The sages say: They are unbecoming to him, as it says: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift sword against nation, and they shall not learn war anymore" (Isa. 2:4).

In this text, Rabbi Eliezer claims that just as it is permissible to go out adorned with jewelry on Shabbat, it is permissible for a man to go out on Shabbat armed with weapons, i.e., weapons should be considered in the same category as jewelry. However, the sages reject this position, claiming that weapons are not jewels that adorn and beautify, but rather, they are derogatory to

man. As evidence, they bring the prophet Isaiah's messianic vision. Like Chronicles, the sages do not deny the need to use weapons altogether. They understand very well that a world without wars is a distant, utopian dream. But this distant dream offers a way to determine our values in the present, and the rabbis rule that even when we are forced to carry a weapon on our shoulders, it belittles us. Humankind is denigrated by its need for weapons to solve its problems and conflicts.

## **Why do we fast?**

Inspired by these ideas, I would like to create a new interpretation of Taanit Esther as a balance to the celebratory nature of Purim. According to the book of Esther, Purim celebrations were fixed on the dates when the Jews finally stopped "gathering up... to stand up for their lives" (8:11). Even though some sources regard the "gathering up" mentioned in the scroll as indicating a day of fasting, its contextual meaning is organizing to kill the enemies. This suggests that the day of fasting prior to Purim was set in memory of the terrible war that took place on that day. A war that, despite being a justifiable act of defense, was still a war.

We are denigrated by every war. We should mourn for every war. We mourn first and foremost for the fallen among our people and for all who love them. But we also mourn for war simply because it involves bloodshed. This is reflected in the choice to mourn even a war in which we prevailed, such as the war right before the first Purim celebration. Only after fasting to remind ourselves of the terrible pain of war can we also rejoice at our victory.

Fasting right before a celebration allows—not unlike the proximity of Israel's Memorial Day and Independence Day—for a range of emotions: sadness and joy, grief and celebration. Thinking of Taanit Esther together with Purim allows us to avoid binary thinking about the holiday. It is not a question of whether or not we should celebrate Purim this year as we always do. Instead we must recognize that there [a time to cry and a time to laugh, a time to grieve and a time to dance](#), by fasting on Taanit Esther and celebrating on Purim.

## **The Taanit of War**

We should embrace this balance not only when we are in the midst of war, as we are this year, but in the future as well. I believe that the tension between fasting before Purim and celebrating on Purim itself reflects the fundamental tension inherent in winning a war. Victory in any war brings with it exhilaration, joy and pride, but it also entails the sorrow and distress, the pain and the eulogy for the horrors of every war. It is our duty to live this tension, to carry it as a burden day by day, hour by hour, and to express it by observing a day for fasting before we celebrate Purim. This is an educational and social need of the highest order, and Taanit Esther holds broader and deeper significance than it ever has before.

In the old days, when the people of Israel were in exile, Taanit Esther may have seemed a little strange: why mourn and what for? The soul-searching that the fast inspires concerns aggression and violence; what could that really mean for a people “divided and scattered among the nations,” lacking a military and, with it, the need take stock of its power and war? Today, when the people of Israel have regained the strength to fight, this soul-searching is necessary. It is something we must do as we shape the path of our nation.

Taanit Esther allows us to talk to our children about the complexity of having and using power. It can serve as a kind of “temple in time” for recognizing that war is war is war, and it is horrible. Even when we emerge with the upper hand, even when we are most cautious, war leads to the shedding of clean blood. In every war, even one at the end of which we celebrate our victory with all our hearts, we must be tormented and mourn for war itself and its costs.