

Jeremy Rosen - Can We Take Purim Seriously

- As you said, you've got to understand the text. There's no point in jumping and if you don't know the text.

- Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

- So maybe it'll be interesting to do text, but I dunno how many people have got the concentration for it. So maybe we should have a look at doing, I don't know, let's have a look. We could do, maybe we could do two sessions. We're just looking for a session, let's have a look at what will work. Listen, it's one minute past two, should we catch up maybe this evening, later this evening or tomorrow? Evening, or when you get to L.A., whatever it is, I'm around.

- You and I'll chat. I'll call you. Are you home in the evenings?

- Yeah. I am.

- Tomorrow evening will be good 'cause I'm going to be home and quiet.

- Okay, very good.

- I'm having my second vaccine tomorrow, so if I'm not too sick, you and I can chat.

- Okay, very good.

- Alright, open up Shauna, will you? And I'll say hi to Jeremy then.

- [Shauna] Yes. Yes. People are joining. So whenever you're ready to do your little introduction, go ahead.

- Are we ready to start? We'll start. Purim. Everybody loves Purim. Everybody knows about Purim one way or another. But there are so many different ways of taking it. Let me start, if I may, by just going over the basic story before I start looking at things academically, religiously, critically. Because the Book Esther could be seen as history or literature, it can be seen as poetry of comedy. And, of course, it can be seen as an important religious text. Now the very name Mordecai and Esther conjure up, of course, the major Babylonian gods of Marduk and Astarte or Ishtar, but that doesn't mean to say that because there were mythical characters these guys weren't real in some way, just as, should we say, somebody in America today called Christopher doesn't mean to say they're related to the founder of Christianity, or Mary to the Virgin. So let me start with the story.

The story starts off on the face of it with this king of the Persian Empire that runs from India all the way to the Mediterranean and down to Egypt: 127 states. Now this number 127 is very

interesting 'cause it occurs in the Bible when talking about how old Sarah was. Sarah was 127 years old. Is that an accident, coincidence? Or is it really already setting the tone for a document about the role and the influence of a woman? Anyway, this king, we don't know yet who he is, I'm going to come to that a bit later, called Ahasuerus, Ahasuerus, wants to cement his grip on the empire. And he thinks the way of cementing his grip is by having feasts, massive feast. First of all, this feast for all the outlying princes and all their assistants, and it's for 180 days, and they're drinking, and they have a wonderful, wonderful time. And then having finished that, he wants to have another festival, another huge big booze up for all the people in Shushan in the capital. And it is described as being a place in the palace where wine is flowing everywhere. But interestingly enough, there's no limitation on how much you drink, and similarly there's no limitation if you don't want to drink. Wine features very, very heavily here. And what also we notice is that the palace is divided into three sections; the inner palace, the courtyards, and the garden.

There is different seating for different groups, different people. So we've got a very heavy class system going on here. But they're all having a wonderful time. And in the middle of this drunken orgy, this king decides he wants his queen to come in and show her beauty. He says, "I want her to come in showing her crown." Does that mean she had to come in nude and only with a crown or show her wonderful dress? And Vashti the queen refuses. The first example, I think we have, of a woman saying no: the beginning of the Me Too era. We don't know the whole of the background, it's not even told whether when he demotes her he kills her or throws her into exile or anything, just that he removes her because she dares to stand up to the king. And the king is very disturbed by this whole thing. And all his advisors around him say to the king, "You know, you can't let a woman get away with this, "what will happen to us?" And so this king of the Persian Empire sends out documents to everybody, to everybody in their language, in their state, wherever they are saying, "The man has got to be the boss of this house. "The women have got to obey him, "and they must speak whatever the husband's language is." Well, that's interesting for several points of view.

First of all, because it shows there was a lot of intermarriage at that time between the different people in the different states. And we know that that was the policy of both of Persian and of Greek upper classes to want to cement their control over an area by marrying into the local people. And yet the king is insisting that the woman's got to do what husband says. That shows such incredible insecurity. So in addition to being a drunk, he's insecure. And then having kicked out the Queen, he's got to find a new one. And it's interesting that it's the young men about town suggesting, "You know King, what you should do "is gather in all the virgins and choose somebody." So all the virgins are gathered in. And this is an opportunity not just for the king, but for all the young bloods driving around Shushan the capital in their Ferraris and clubbing away. And the arrangement for selecting a wife, this beauty competition, is that they should spend a year in cosmetics before they get anywhere near the king. So they've got to go through oils, and make up, and probably cultural education in how to appeal to the king, and each person then, girl, when she comes in, is going to spend a night with the king.

We can guess what they're going to go up to, and there's absolutely no guarantee that after a night of trial the king is going to be particularly happy with her or not. And after that night, she doesn't go back home free, she ends up in the harem. And this situation is one in which we are suddenly introduced to a nice Jewish family, the family of Mordecai, who was in exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, who has this niece or this adopted daughter, or some people even say a wife, except, as they wanted virgins, it seems unlikely. And he tells her, "I want you to go in for this competition, "but I don't want you to tell anybody you're Jewish." Esther goes into this competition, she's handed over to the gardener and the keeper of the women, and she goes through this process of beautification. And then every girl goes in, could take whatever she wants to spend the night with the king, and music, artifice, dancing, whatever it is, and aphrodisiacs. Esther is the only one who doesn't take anything, but she asks for the advice of what the king would like. And she goes in by herself.

And it seems that the fact that she wasn't trying any tricks, she was just being an honest, good person who had a wonderful discussion with the king during the night, and that he chose her, he fell in love with her and that was it. Meanwhile, Mordecai, the uncle, is sitting in the gates of the palace, and it so happens that he is able to overhear because he speaks different languages, Bigthan and Teresh, two men in the inner palace who are plotting to kill the king. So this flushes out a situation of an insecure king, a drunken, boozy guy who isn't in control of very much, whose authority is indeed being challenged. Mordecai saves the king. And the king at this moment decides to appoint this new prime minister, Haman. Haman's an interesting character, come back to discuss him more. Haman, the son of Hammedatha Agagite, is suddenly promoted to the top job, and he expects everybody to bow down. Mordecai refuses to bow down, and as a result Haman is very, very angry. He discovers that Mordecai is a Jew, oh, until then he didn't know. So clearly the Jews in the Persian Empire weren't wearing special clothes or anything like that, and then he says, "Well, I'm just not going to get rid of this guy, I'm going to get rid of all Jews. "They're all as bad as each other. "Find one bad and it's just one bad, it's the lot, "we're going to kill them."

And so he goes in to see the king and he says to the king, "Look, I know you're short of cash, "I've got a solution, I'm going to, "there's a people here amongst, "living in the Persian Empire, "who don't keep your religious rules. "They're different to anybody else. "They keep themselves separate." All the tropes of anti-Semitism that we're familiar with today, Haman suggests to the king. Which, again, in one way is strange because the Persian Empire, we know like the Greek Empire, didn't matter what religion you had, didn't matter where you were from, so long as you accepted the authority of the king. So he comes in with this story, but then he really says, "And you know something, if you really want, "if you let me get rid of them, "I can confiscate all their property "and hand it over to you, "and or as long as you pay my expenses, "you'll be a rich man." The king's very happy with this. And he agrees. And he takes off his ring and signs to Haman, get rid of the Jews. Again, what kind of king is so insensitive to who his people are that he thinks he can just get rid of, wipe out a whole lot of them. Or is he so interested in money that what he does is he wants the cash. It's very, very strange to understand what was going on through his mind if we take this as a serious story.

But nevertheless, he agrees. Haman casts lots, and this is where Purim comes from. The name Pur is a lot, you know, so which is the right day, the feng shui of his time that I can kill the Jews? He finds a day, gets permission from the king and sends out messengers saying, "We've got to kill all the Jews." Jews hear this, they're distraught. Don't know what to do. Mordecai, his reaction is to start crying in public. "This is terrible. We can't have this happen." He's not an appeaser, this Mordecai. And he goes around wearing sackcloth and ashes in front of the gates of the palace where you're not allowed to come wearing shabby clothes. Esther just hears that Mordecai is behaving badly in the street, she doesn't know why. No word has reached her in the inner sanctum of what Haman is up to. And so she then sends messengers to Mordecai to find out what's going on. Mordecai tells her about this terrible decree. And Esther says, "Well, this is terrible. "What am I going to do about this?" And he says, "You've got to go to the king." She says, "I can't go to the king. "The rule here in this country is that if you go "into the palace without getting an invitation "you're going to be put to death, "unless the king puts out his golden sceptre and touches it, "in which case he allows you to come in. "So I don't know if I can live or die." Mordecai comes and says, "You better do this. "Because if you don't, we're all finished. "And if you think that this is the end of the story, "I want you to know somehow or other "we're going to be saved by some other source."

"We don't know what, but we will. "But you, you are going to perish. "The individual Jew may perish, "even though the Jewish people won't." Well, she calls a fast for three days, three nights, gets everybody in the community to join her, and then she goes into the king, risks it all, and the king sees her there and he says, "Ah, happy memories of when we last met together," of course has this massive, massive harem, so he can't get round to them all very regularly. He invites her in and says, "What do you want? "Anything I'll do?" At this point Esther decides strategy. So the first thing she does is she tells the king that she will want him and Haman to come to a party that she's going to lay on for them, "More wine," thinks the king, "that's good fun," and then she'll tell the king what she wants. And that's what happens. Haman and the king come to the party. The king says again, "What would you like?" And she says, "I'll tell you tomorrow." So she's really stringing this out.

Tomorrow is going to come and they're going to meet again. And then you have a nice little interlude, typical, if you like, of Shakespeare, a bit of music, a bit of comedy in the middle, an interlude. And in this interlude, the King Ahasuerus can't sleep at night. And the way he gets to sleep is by having somebody read the Chronicles of the Persian Empire to him. So Persian Empire's Chronicles are being read out to him, and he's dozing over until they come to that bit about Mordecai and Bigthan and Teresh. And he said, "Oh, that's interesting. "I don't remember that. What happened? "Did we reward Mordecai in some way?" And the guy who was reading it out says, "No, you didn't do anything." "Oh," he says, "I've got to do something." And at that moment, Haman comes into the palace. Haman is so angry about this Jew Mordecai, he is complaining to everybody about it, his wife has said to him, "Listen, you are the top man, build a gallows in your garden "and we'll hang Mordecai up on it. "And go and ask the king, "the king agrees to anything you say, "particularly if the money's involved. "Why don't you go and do

that?" So Mordecai comes in to the palace of the king just at the moment when the king hears this about Mordecai.

And he says to Haman, "Tell me Haman, "if there was somebody in my regime "who I really wanted to reward, "'cause they're such a good person, "what can I possibly do?" And Haman thinks, "Well, he must be referring to me "'cause I'm the top guy, and he's doing everything I ask." So Haman says, "You know what I'd like, "I'd like you to take the royal clothes. "I'd like you to take the royal crown. "I'd like you to dress this man in all his outfits, "get him to ride on the horse or the king's horse "and get one of his lower ministers to conduct him "through the streets saying, "'This is what the king does to somebody he really values.'" "What a good idea," said the king. "What a great idea. "So I want you to take more Mordecai, "dress him up in my gear, "put him on my horse and lead him through the streets." What was Haman thinking? I think what Haman was thinking was, "Listen, somebody dressed like this looks like the king, "the persona of the king. "Maybe this could be a coup d'etat. "Maybe I could take everything over for myself." But it didn't quite work out that way.

And so poor Haman has to bring Mordecai through the streets, bring him to home, and then he goes back to prepare for the feast he has to have in the evening. But he is really feeling down because his wife and his children are saying to him, "This is a bad sign, back to luck and good fortune. "Your wheel of fortune has gone round and it's coming down. "And if it's Mordecai, "and Mordecai has managed to get the upper hand on you now, "you are done for." Well what can he do? It's time to go to the palace. He goes to the palace. He gets there, and then the king says to Esther, "What can I do for you?" And she says, "I want to live. "Don't kill me, don't kill me and my people. "I wouldn't mind if you'd simply declare "that we are enslaved, but to kill us all?" And the king says, "What the heck are you talking about? "Who is this man who would do such a terrible thing?" Hello? Was he completely drugged out when he took his signet ring off and signed everything to the king? Didn't he know what was going on?

Well, she turns around and says, "It's Haman. "It's that man." "Wow!" Says the king. He goes out into the garden, furious and angry. And at that moment, Haman realise he is in trouble, he falls on the couch and he begs for his life from Esther. The king comes back from the garden, he sees the Haman lying on top of the couch. He says, "What you tried to rape my wife in my own house, "you can't be serious." And at that moment, he's taken out on the advice of Harbona, he taken out to this gallows that he is built in his own garden, and he's hung up and strung up on it. That's not quite the end. Because then Esther goes to the king and says, "But King that's very nice, thank you. "You've got rid of Haman, "you've given me his palace, and you've promoted Mordecai. "But what about the rest of us? "Your decree is still there. Take it back." And Ahasuerus says, "Oh, I can't do that. "Once a king gives a decree, it's there forever. "Can't be changed, too late." That's a very weird kind of attitude, although you could argue people infallibility isn't that different? "But anyway, so I can't take it back." "

All right says Esther, fair enough then, "at least let us defend ourselves. "We're not going to lie down like lambs and accept this." "Okay," says the king, "you can defend yourself. "So he sent

out all these messages in every language "to every country, to every part of the Empire, "and they say, "You Jews, you can defend yourselves." Comes the date of killing of the Jews, the non-Jewish world has a problem. Which version of the orders do we take seriously? Do we kill them? Do we not kill them? Some Jews suddenly realised Mordecai and Esther were in control of the palace said, "Oh, we'd better side with them." And so it was only those, if you like, excessive Ku Klux Klan, fanatical anti-Semites, who are now going to decide to try and kill the Jews because they're given a way out. They don't have to, nobody's forcing them to. But nevertheless, there are people in Shushan who do that. Shushan's a big city. And yet on the first day of the decree only 500 people amongst the whole of the non-Jewish population, which have been hundreds of thousands decide to attack the Jews. And the Jews defend themselves and kill 500. Esther goes back to the king and said, "They're still there, can we have another day?" "Sure," said the king, "you have another day and another 300." But out of hundreds of thousands, that's not very many.

Meanwhile, in the states across the country, there are 75,000 who decide we want to get rid of the Jews and grab their property and keep it all for ourselves, and they meet a sticky end. Although, again, several times the Megillah emphasises that Jews did not touch the spawn, they didn't take anything at all, they simply defended themselves pure self-defense. But nevertheless, you had basically this attempt of those who wanted to kill the Jews, to kill the Jews. The majority didn't. After all, this is an empire of millions, and we're only talking about 75,000. The Jews are saved. And as a result, Mordecai the Esther make decrees, and their decrees are, "Now we have to celebrate. "We have to celebrate that we have survived. "And how are we going to celebrate how we survive? "We're going to have feasts. "We're going to drink and be merry. "But more important, we're going to be charitable. "We're going to give presents to everybody. "We're going to be nice. "We're going to show that love conquers, "we don't want hatred and violence, "we want love and goodwill to everybody."

Interestingly enough, they had to repeat the decree several times because, as always, the Jews were divided. Those who were on the right, those who were on the left; those who were religious, those who were not religious; those who wanted to celebrate and those who didn't want to celebrate. And even at the end of this whole thing, it says in the Megillah that Mordecai was only accepted by some of the Jews, not by all of the Jews. You would've thought they'd all come together for this, but not a chance of it. Times haven't changed my ideas, it's just as bad now then as it was now, and now as it was then. But there you have the basic story. Is this serious or is it not? There is so much humour running through it. It's such a funny situation. The problem is, let's start off on purely a religious level. What can be the religious message here? Well, one of the interesting things is the name Esther also means hidden. And Esther, as I mentioned when we were talking about the Kabbalah, is a very important theological idea that God in a sense sometimes hides and we can't find Him, and sometimes comes out into the open. And so interestingly enough, God's name is not mentioned at all in the whole of the Megillah, no mention of God at all.

There are two possible references. The reference when Mordecai says to Esther, "Listen, if you

don't help us, , that somehow salvation will come to us from some other source, a divine source that you might die. So that could be a hint at it, could be the hint that God is working behind the scenes pulling the strings. But, of course, the other message is the message that unfortunately there are bad people everywhere, and you've got to be prepared to deal with them. Now let's come to the historicity. When is this supposed to have happened? Now, if it's talking about the Persian Empire that comes after the Babylonian Empire, it comes after Nebuchadnezzar. After Nebuchadnezzar, several of them died. After Belshazzar's Feast when the Medes come in. And then after that when the Persians come in, King Cyrus comes in. And then after that you've got a series of kings, you've got Xerxes, you've got Artaxerxes, you've got Dariuses. All of them by and large were pro Jewish.

So I can't imagine that any of those would've been agreeable to get rid of the Jews. Some were more than others. Some supported the Samaritans against the the Jews who came to rebuild the temple. But nobody, there's no evidence at all. And not only that, but Cyrus, King Cyrus in the Cyrus , which you can see in the British Museum, says in black and white, "I don't care what religion you worship "so long as you accept my authority." So this doesn't sound very much like what was going on in the Persian Empire, although such a massive empire, there're other parts. So not only that, but according to the Megillah, Mordecai came to Persia with the first exile of Jeconiah in 609. There were several exiles after Jeconiah, and the last one, Zedekiah was in 586. If Mordecai came with the first one, and that was in 600. And by the time you go through Nebuchadnezzar, you go through one and two, and you go through Belshazzar, and you go through Cyrus, and you come to the possible candidates Xerxes or Artaxerxes, we're well over a 100, 150 years. So did Mordecai live that long?

And not only, but the rabbis also suggest in the Talmud that Vashti was the daughter of Belshazzar, Belshazzar's Feast. So that makes it even more complicated as to what the actual date was. And scholars have argued for a long time as to who the king would be. Interestingly enough, the most pro-Jewish king after Cyrus was King Darius. Darius lived about 425, which is a reasonable time. And Darius is the king who actually sent a letter to the Egyptian priests near the Aswan Dam in Elephantine saying, "Stop getting in the way of the Jewish garrison "who want to celebrate Pesach. "Let them celebrate Pesach "otherwise I'm going to give you hell." So there's this constant record during this time of Persian leaders being pro Jewish. So that's problem number two, about when the date actually happened. It could be anywhere between about 500 if it did happen, 500, 400, somewhere down there before the Greeks came in, Alexander the Great, and got rid of them.

Then we have another interesting question here. The other interesting question is: how come there is no mention in the Israelite community and in that version of the Talmudic tradition of Esther and Mordecai? Purim isn't there. It seems that Purim initially was only a Persian community celebration, not one in the land of Israel. Maybe because the snobs in the land of Israel didn't like the diaspora then, maybe they thought they didn't deserve another one. And, yet, interestingly enough, it's not until much later that it seems that Purim was universally accepted within the whole of the Jewish community to the extent where the blessings we make

on Purim are blessings that we make and say, God has commanded us. And the book of Esther is part of the biblical canon. So it certainly ended up, 2000 years ago, as being universally accepted by everybody. Question was, why was it still considered a bit iffy at that moment? Well, one reason would be because relations between the Jews and the Greeks was, and the Persians was so good, they didn't really want to rake up an issue of an attempt to destroy all the Jewish people, and therefore they wanted to play down this whole issue. And not only that, but the idea of Jews killing non-Jews was a bit off the table until, of course, the Romans went to the other extreme. But even then the Romans, they insisted that the Jews should not celebrate Purim in public. This didn't look appropriate. This might be trying to whip up feelings against the Romans and lead to another rebellion. And then of course later on the Christians were terribly upset about the idea of Jews killing non-Jews. And actually several emperors in East and the West actually forbade the Jews celebrating Purim.

But then the question, of course, is: what were they doing that was so offensive? Well, they were doing two things. One of them is, they were burning effigies of Haman and people thought, this is an effigy of Caesar, or maybe this is an effigy of Jesus, and so that was a problem. And so in a sense Purim was driven underground and into the homes rather than the public era. And that's something else I'm going to come to shortly when we talk about the Persian-Jewish community today. But nevertheless, it becomes clear that there was opposition amongst the rabbis of the Talmud to the story as it comes down. How can a nice Jewish girl spend a night with a non-Jewish king? And we don't know what kind of food she had. Was it kosher food? Was it not kosher food? Did Mordecai bring in supervised food to the palace? And, again, there was complaints about Mordecai. Why didn't he bow down? What's wrong with bowing down if it's to save your life? And they say, "Ah, well that's because Haman had an idol in front of him." But not really, there was a lot of opposition to this idea of Haman not bowing down, Mordecai not bowing down.

All the more so since the Talmud quotes, "Well, look, Jacob bowed down to Esau. "And Rabbi Judah, the Prince, "who was the head of the Jewish community in Israel "at the time of the Roman Empire, "he was very pliable and flexible "when it came to dealing with the Romans "and bowing down and treating them with respect. "So why shouldn't you? "Mordecai seems a bit out of sync with our tradition?" And that's why there was some question as to how traditional this story was. What's also interesting is that Haman is described as Agag. Agag, who was Agag? He's the Agagi. Now, Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul. And, you know, the Torah has already said that the Amalekites were worse than any other one of the tribes they encountered. Because you can understand if the Canaanites objected to them coming, they were coming to attack their land. But the Israelites went way round the Amalekites to avoid conflict with them, and they weren't coming to their land anyway. And yet when they came out of Egypt, weak, ill-disciplined, uncontrolled, not ready, the Amalekites attacked. And they didn't only attack from the front, they attacked from the back.

They took the weakest, and those who were ill and sick and the women and children, and they attacked. They were the worst of the worst. And so the Torah says, "Always remember Amalek.

"Never forget there are people "who will hate you for no good reason." So clearly the fact that the author of the Book of Esther calls Haman, Agag, an Agagite, is he's making a link between Haman, and he is making a link between Haman and the Amalekites. And this underlines the idea that this was an intentional message, a continuing message of the danger. Now if, it's interesting, if that both the Christians and the Romans were objecting to Purim because Purim looked like being a negative assault on them by these outlying Jews. Why is it that in the Persian Empire, and when the Persian Empire changed into becoming a Muslim Empire, and the Jews of Persia were the only Jews who lived under the Shiite, and the Shiite Muslims were far more aggressive to the Jews than the Sunni, and they gave them by and large a much rougher time. Not only that, Jews were not allowed to ride on a horse. And in the story of Esther, you have a Jew riding on a horse. Even into the early 20th century, Jews were not allowed to ride on horses, and they didn't have civil rights.

And yet Jews in Persia went on celebrating Purim. But one thing they never did, they didn't celebrate Purim in public. Now interestingly enough, in the city of Hamedan, Hamedan in Persia, there still is today the tomb of Esther and Mordecai. And not only Jews, but non-Jews go on pilgrimages to that holy site. And although it's true that Jews can't, in Persia, mention Israel or Zionism or in any way show their support or anything like that, and if they dare do it, they're in trouble. Nevertheless, by and large, they are tolerated. And indeed, even that ghastly man, Ahmadinejad, contributed funds to a Jewish school. But they have to remain quiet, the Jews of silence. And that's why, for example, the Jews of Persia initially never had any of this fancy-dress business or going out into the streets because they had to be dressed like Muhammadans. They had to look like them, and so not be so different in their outer fancy dress. But interestingly enough, as you probably know, the Iranians, though very strict Shiites, don't like to be called Arabs. The Arabs are a different group.

Muslims, we don't like them so much. Don't call an Iranian an Arab, he'll be furious. And interestingly enough, the Iranian attitude is that, listen, this guy Haman wasn't a Persian. He was either an Agagite or he was an Arab. It was this guy who brought in anti-Semitism, we're not anti-Semitic. So we don't object to this story 'cause this isn't in any way casting aspersions on us Persians. So we see how everybody can interpret the events and the story in a very different way. Now, similarly: carnival. There were carnivals at about this time of the year, Purim time, talk about Venice, throughout the European Christian world, but there were also carnivals in the Zoroastrian world. So this was our Jewish carnival, time to let our hair down and have fun before the spring and the harvest and a lot of hard work. So all these things came to play into this tradition of Purim. And yet, interestingly enough, as you move through enlightenment into the beginnings of the reform movement, the reform movement, Geiger, sort of Abraham Geiger, very important founder of the reform movement, wanted to scrap for Purim altogether. He says, "We live in a civilised world now. "We don't have anti-Semitism anymore. "We've been given our freedom. "We don't need it."

And ironically, that's what happened. Amazingly, of course or not surprising, given history, the reform movement has come back from that and, of course, joins in it, much as anybody else

does join in it. But it shows you how times influence, conditions influence the whole story here. So what do I see in the end as the point? Doesn't matter the historicity, it doesn't matter who wrote it or when or what, this has been part of our tradition for well over 2000 years and probably two-and-a-half thousand years. And it's an opportunity for us to remember that there are problems in life, there are people who don't like us for no good reason and we should be on the lookout. But it shouldn't drag us down, it shouldn't make us bitter. We celebrate Purim with fun, with happiness, with charity, with goodness, enjoying life: be happy, not sad. So whether you dress up or you don't dress up, whether we eat hamantash, which I don't like, or you eat the Persian koloocheh, which I do love, which is lovely and which doesn't have poppy seed. Whether you dress or you don't, or you get drunk or you don't get drunk, that's another discussion altogether, it's a happy occasion, and we should be happy for it and celebrate it. And with that, I will end and pass it over to you for any questions you want to ask. Thank you. Now, let me get my share screen up, and we'll see the questions. No, it's not there. Chat.

- [Shauna] The Q & A, Jeremy.

- The Q & A, I'm sorry, Sarah.

- [Shauna] No, it's okay.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: Okay. Sandy Landau: "Didn't the kings "in those days have lots of wives? "So wouldn't he have just chosen a different one "from the harem?"

A: Yeah, that's a very good question. Why did he need any new ones? I don't get that. On the other hand, those of you who are familiar with Africa will know that Lesotho has a king to this day. And every year a whole bunch of nubile virgins dances bare breasted in front of him, and from them he chooses a new wife. So the idea that kings have the right to choose to replenish their harem is an old idea. But not only that, but not only that. but in addition, in those days, people, kings married for political reasons. King Solomon, if you remember, had 700 wives, 300 concubines, and he had them there because that was a form of cementing an alliance.

Q: How many did he have sex with? How often?

A: Don't know. If there were 1,000 of them and he did go through every one, it'd be once in a year. So why did he need any more? I think it was another way of showing off, another way of having another car in your garage or another home on an island, it was their way of showing off in those days. But there's other possibility, and that is he had all these women, but he was looking for a companion. He was looking for somebody who would giving good advice or have a good relationship, and that's why he went for Esther. There must've been other more beautiful, sexy women, but I think he wanted more than that, he wanted somebody who would add to his stock of advisors.

Q: Dr. Cohen postulates: "Ahasuerus had Vashti killed. "Is there any evidence for that? "Any evidence Lucille?"

A: There's no real evidence for anything here. I value Rabbi Dr. Jeffrey Cohen and he knows what he's talking about and he is a great guy, but in all these things, yes, that's a midrash which says that there is a midrash which talks about she making fun of the king because he really was a bumped-up stable yard guy. There are all kinds of midrashim traditions, books and books of them. But midrashim don't even, in a sense, try to be historical, they try to convey a message, they try to, they're tools of education rather than historical accuracy. Answer live.

Q: "When was the Megillah written and by whom?"

A: Well, it certainly wasn't written at the early period before Babylon, of course, 'cause there was no event then. It's not included in the Samaritan Bible, which is very similar to our Bible. We really do not know. But there are words in the Book of Esther, which are Persian words, , the advisors of the king. And so it definitely looks as though it was written somewhere in the Persian Empire. But the Persian Empire lasted for a very long time. And after Parthian Empire, the Jews of the Persian Empire have existed longer and continuously than any other Jewish community anywhere else in the world. But dating, we don't know. We don't know the dating at all. And that's why you have on the one hand scholarship and academic study that try to find a dating, and the religious which say, "No, we accept it on face value. Why shouldn't you? Which is no different in a way to Shakespearean scholarship in which do we accept the folio as it is and we don't ask who wrote it or who contributed or when or what the changes were, or do we go into the scholarship of how it came about. I believe there's room for both? There's room for an academic approach, and there's room for, I believe this lovely story is part of our mystical tradition, if you like, our non-rational tradition.

Q: Joseph Kahan: "When do you celebrate Purim? "Is it a carnival? Do you fast?"

A: Okay, when do we celebrate? Now according to the Megillah, there are two days of celebration. There's the 14th for everybody and the 15th for Shushan Purim because Shushan Purim, any city as old as Shushan went, had to go another day. So there were two days of Purim and those of you who are in Israel will know, that on the first day everybody's celebrating Purim down on the coastal plain or in Bnei Brak, and all the Jerusalemites take their buses down there to have a good drink up and a booze up and enjoy themselves. Then they go back the following day up to Jerusalem and all the Bnei Brak guys in Tel Aviv go up to Jerusalem to booze it up a second day there. That's because Jerusalem, according to tradition, dates back to the time of Joshua and Jericho. In the diaspora, we don't have that, we only have one day, which, on this occasion, is going to be on Friday. We also have a tradition of a fast, not the three fast days of Esther, but the fast on the day of Esther, which is not like a fast on the night before, but a day fast, short day fast in winter. And that's how we celebrate it. How do we celebrate it? Well, first of all we read the Megillah, we read it in the evening and in the morning. You can do it

on Zoom, there are plenty of Zoom Megillahs going round. Then the main party is on the day of the Adar on the day of Purim itself. And the party consists of food and drink, but you have to send presents rounds. You live, if you live in a, whether it's the ghettos of New York or Jerusalem or indeed Golders Green, you'll see these kids going around with presents to take to their neighbours and with gifts to the poor and a lot of drinking. And although the Talmud says, "You should drink to the point of merriment." You should lower, if you like, your resistance don't be so uptight.

There are some people who say, "No, you've got to really get so drunk "you can't tell the difference "between Mordecai is cursed and Haman is blessed." And so unfortunately, particularly in certain sectors of the community, there's a lot of drunken revelry and I think disporting in an unseemly way, which I don't think brings much credit to our community. And therefore I think the celebration at home if you want to get drunk, is more appropriate than in public. So that's how we celebrate it. And you can find it going on all round the Jewish world to this very day. This year it's going to be a bit difficult. Last probably was the last time, when we as a community, my community, got together to read the Megillah, but we couldn't because they were already beginning to talk about the COVID. We didn't have a party, we didn't have any public celebrations: it was a quick reading, quick in, quick out, and then back home to begin the lockup. So I dunno what's going to happen this year, but I think it's beginning to unwind so hopefully it will.

Q: Okay, Teddy: "What about the conspiracy that Mordecai overheard? "I thought he told Esther about the plot kill the King. "I'm getting confused. "It seems the miracle of the oil lasted eight days "is the made-up story that?"

A: The eight days, that's a story about Hanukkah. That's a story about Hanukkah, the eight days. It's not a story about Esther and Mordecai. Yes, Mordecai did get the message to Esther about the, Bigtan and Teresh and she told the king and the king acted on it.

Q: "What's the connection "between Yom Kippur and a day like Purim?"

A: Hey, that's a great question. There is a tradition which says in the midrash, much later on, that all the festivals, when the Messiah comes. When the Messiah comes, all the festivals will be scrapped and we won't need it anymore because we'll be so close to God we won't need the ritual to keep us going. But the one festival that will remain will be Purim. And why Purim? Well, because Yom Kippurim, the day of Kippur, Kippur ends with the word rim, Purim. And the explanation given is that when the Messiah comes, we will be so close to God, we won't need this. And therefore Yom Kippur will turn into a day of enjoining, rejoicing and being happy in the beauty of the Messianic era. And therefore we will turn, we'll turn agony into joy.

Thank you, thank you very much Sharon for that.

Thank you Fran.

Valerie, not a question but lovely exhibition story. Thank you Valerie. Thank you, thank you. I don't think that's Valerie I know, but thank you.

Q: "Who wrote the Megillah?" answer live.

A: We honestly don't know. We don't know. But we know we've had it in our possession for thousands of years as it is, even though we don't know who wrote it.

Q: Tony Ives: "Do you have any idea "how many Jews there were at the time, "and were they mostly in one city or area?"

A: How many Jews were there at the time? It's very difficult to know. We know that the Jews were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire, which is where Iraq Kurdistan was. They were scattered into Babylon, into Persia, up to Afghanistan, maybe for them further on, some people say to India. It's very difficult to know. I mean it's difficult to know the exact population. For example, the Roman Empire, it is speculated of about 100 million, the Jews were 1% at that time, very difficult to know. We know that roughly speaking the size of Babylonia where they were taken back was something like half a million by tradition. But, again, it's so difficult to know the numbers, numbers have changed like calendars have changed. So it's purely speculative. But certainly the Jews were so well established and everybody knew about them, it wasn't they were kept secret. Throughout the Roman Empire, throughout the Persian Empire, throughout the Greek Empire, Jews were known as one of the important cultures of the time, far more than today. And they were a bigger percentage than we are now, largely because of attrition and persecution and assimilation because Jews have always assimilated. I mean even the story of Esther and Mordecai implies a certain degree of assimilation into the Babylonian Empire and the Babylonian times that we wouldn't understand today.

Thank you.

Ah, Mswati not Lesotho. Thank you Tony for putting me right. I keep forgetting that. I know I get corrected so many times and I can't forget it because Mswati sounds so much harder to remember than Lesotho. But thank you very much for putting us right. Don't mention Lesotho.

Q: "Where did the dressing up tradition come from?"

A: Dressing up tradition, it might have come from Zoroastrianism, the early Persian tradition of fire, of light and darkness, the forces of evil and the sources of sin, but most people think it really emerged in Europe as a response to the carnivals dressing up in clothes, disguising yourself. Again, the excuse given is back to this idea of satyr, of hidden, what is disguised. God is disguised, we don't know him, and so we act with the role of disguising. But I think it's a result of carnival, and at that time of the year, because that's a time when we do have a carnival. The reach up before lent, the serious period of the month before Easter. So I think that's probably

where it comes from.

Q: Romain: "Does the story have to be so laborious? "Does the story have to be laborious?"

A: Well that's literature. Remember they didn't have Facebook and books and literature and other things in those days. That was their form of entertainment. The longer it went on the better. Which probably explains why in those days the services took so much longer. And now we tend to prefer to cut them down because we'd rather be in homes. In those days, homes were very often dirty, smelly, hovels, the only nice place to be was in a synagogue. So let's spend as much time in the synagogue as we possibly can. Now we'd like to go home and have a nice meal and relax in a nice clean atmosphere. So I think it was a time of the time of the Crusades that this idea of taking a long time over celebrating everything. But, you know, reading the Torah a long time, all holy books do.

And again, Tony Lachman has come back to me and he says, "Swaziland." Well, good, I'm going to write this down so I don't make the same mistake a second time. Thank you very much.

Q: Neil and Jan Cooper: "Megillah Esther is the only biblical not found "in the Cairo Geniza." "Megillah Esther is the only book not found "in the Cairo Geniza, can you comment?"

A: That's a very good question. In one sense you could say that shows in one way how limited it was, not so accessible as others. The other argument could be that Megillah, the Megillah, was the one thing everybody had. It was expensive to have a whole Sefer Torah, but a little Megillah you could have. And Megillah, because it wasn't treated, the one that we have handily, it didn't have to be so accurate and therefore if there were stains it didn't matter, you could correct it, and you didn't have to throw it onto the, into the genizah or to bury it as we did in the West.

Q: So Martin Bellman you say, "707 years old when she gave birth to Isaac, "how long did biblical year last?"

A: Again, that's an excellent question. We can't know.

Q: Did Methuselah live 900 years?

A: In Babylonia there were three different calendars. There was a calendar based on months, so a year was a month. There were calendars based on seasons, so a season was a year. There were calendars based on a year starting in the spring and calendars on a year starting in the autumn, and so it's impossible to tell. In one way it makes sense to say if you divide 900 by 4 it comes to a reasonable amount. But remember even in the calendars we have, we've had all these different; the Julian, the Gregorian calendar and the Muslim calendar and the Jewish calendar, and very often dates gets confused. So the answer is, I don't know. Either you accept it at face value or you say this doesn't make sense or you say it doesn't matter, what matters is the message. "It's the message that is medium," says Marshall McLuhan.

Q: Danny Wilson: "Am I right in thinking Rabbi Akiba is descendant of Haman?" "Am I right, Akiba was descendant of Haman?"

A: Yes, there's a midrash to that effect. He was a, midrash that he was a convert. There are all kinds of midrashim, but you know, it's a midrash. There's a famous statement that says, is a pedagogical tool. It's a tool of attracting attention, of making something come alive, of making it, you know, avoiding being boring: challenging and stimulating. And so it's a tool of education, it's not a tool of historical accuracy and therefore you don't have to find an answer. That's why so many midrashim conflict with each other and so many rabbis disagree. It's wonderful to disagree and have our different points of view. Some of us are rational, some of us are mystical, and we choose the explanation that resonates with us.

Q: Molly Weaver: "I'm not Jewish, "don't know how Purim is celebrated, "could you elaborate a bit?"

A: Yes, I tell you how we celebrate it. It's not like Shabbat, Sabbath or festivals where we don't do work, it's a normal working day in one sense. But on the evening, on the evening before we gather in a synagogue and we read the story of Esther. The following morning we read the story of Esther a second time, the morning service. Kids and adults get dressed up in a fancy dress and they go round from house to house, bringing gifts and presents, giving charity. And then they sit down for a huge big communal meal, a whole meal by family in which there's music and singing in which people come in asking for charity and they're welcomed in and the door isn't slammed in their faces. And there's generally a lot of drinking, but, you know, ideally under control. And it's a very happiest, the happiest day of the year. The happiest day of the year is Purim for us.

Q: Leigh Ella: "Do we know what happened to Esther afterwards? "Does she disappear from history?"

A: She's not even mentioned in history, we don't, and yet, as I said to you, there's an ancient tomb in Persia of Mordecai and Esther, which goes back thousands of years. But like many of these tombs we don't know when they were built, and we don't know if any real archaeological evidence of what's under them or who belongs there, usually not at all. But nobody really wants to go digging into the tomb of Hebron or into Leah's grave to see if anybody's there or not.

Q: Rachel Friedman: "Are any Persian coming from Mashhad?" Answer live.

A: Yes Rachel, I got your email, thank you. And I've just been too busy to reply. There are tonnes of Mashhadis. Not so much in New York, but there are, but just outside of New York there is a very big Persian community on Long Island called Great Neck. And in Great Neck there are all kinds of Persians and different Persian synagogues. And the Mashhadi Jews have a synagogue of their own. And the Mashhadi Jews were stricter than the other Persian Jews

because as you know, in 1830 the Mashhadi Jews were forcibly converted in Persia by the Shiites, and for a whole almost generation, they had to be outwardly totally Muslim. They had to go to the mosque, they had to drape Muslim. All their marriage documents were written in, marriage ceremonies were written in Persian. They had to be totally outwardly non-Jews. And it was only a generation later they were able to come back out. And when they came back out and revealed themselves, they became more strict than any other Persian community. And even looked down on them and even didn't want to intermarry with them 'cause they thought the rest of the Persian community were a bit iffy. And there's even part of that today. So, yes, there are lots of Mashhadi Jews. You are not alone. There are huge, big, successful community all around the Persian world, but particularly in Great Neck, where you have a Mashhadi synagogue and you can find out more about it on the internet.

Q: "How did Esther avoid having children?"

A: Well, I don't know if we did. I mean there's no record. So maybe she did, maybe she didn't. Maybe she wore contraceptives, I don't know. One of the mysteries of history.

Q: Lauren Blatt: "The midrash gives Vashti a bad rap. "Vashti a bad rap. "Is there a reaction to her independence?"

A: Well, it gets a bad rap in several ways. One version that Talmud says is, "She didn't want to come naked." She was used to belly dancing, but so happened she came out in a rash. Another version said, "She grew a tail." Another version says, "She wasn't going to be humiliated "by displaying herself in an audience of ordinary peasants." She was an aristocrat, why the hell was she going to? And another version says, "No, she was an aristocrat, a princess. "She wasn't going to allow this king, "this fat slob of a drunken male chauvinist pig, "to humiliate her in public." So she was a protestor. We don't know. We can only speculate. And I like to speculate. And much of what I've been telling you today is speculation, but it's my speculation.

Q: "I understand there's an Egyptian version "that's parallel to the book of Esther. "Are you able to comment on its significance?"

A: Yes, there are lots of stories, Egyptian stories, that are common to all cultures. There are flood stories, there are creation stories, there's a story of a baby found in a bulrush in Egypt. There are stories of princesses marrying kings and being able to, like Nefertiti, make sure that the husband didn't make bad decisions. And when he did make bad decisions, were able to rectify them. And people borrow, literature borrows from other literature. And people all the time, even nowadays, write books based on what other people have written and borrow and pinch or whatever word you want to use, stories from somewhere else. So yes, there are all these, kind of, number of stories coming up. It's just we have our version, and our version is our tradition just as every religion has its tradition.

Q: "For a number of years," Hindi says, "I taught Persian students of ESL in the beginning of

March we celebrate Nowruz." That's right, that's the New Year's celebration. "A few of their customers still dress up in costumes, "have spin on the streets, "deliver food to the poor, remind me of Purim."

A: Indeed, and many of the Persians of my community celebrate Nowruz too, so there's a lot of exchange in communities. Although there was a lot of tension, there was a lot of interaction between them. For example, on the one hand, until relatively recently, Persian Jews could not go out when it rained because under Shiite law, wet transferred impurity, as indeed it did in the Talmud. And the Jews were then going to spread impurity around. Jews were not allowed to, as I mentioned before, ride on horses. They had to be bowed down to the Muslims when they passed. They couldn't put money into a Muslim's hand. They had to put it down on the table and a Muslim would pick it up. And you look at those things and you say how humiliating. And yet you speak to Persians of that generation, they say, we had wonderful relations with the Muslims, with the non-Jews. We did business with them, we were friendly, we were invited to each other's homes. So everywhere you have different narratives and people have their own experiences and a lot of the Persians now have forgotten this. But many of my Persian community still are very nostalgic about Persia, they love Persian music, they take every opportunity. We have Persian gardens here in America. And so they're very proud of their Persian heritage to this day, even though they miss the Shah, 'cause he was so good to them and they're not very happy with Khomeini or with the current regime.

Q: "Why is the first time Yehudi used?"

A: The term Yehudi is a late arrival and its term, before then the children of Israel were called B'nei Yisrael . Or they belonged to which tribe; they were called Judea, Judah Tribe, Simeon Tribe, Reubenites, all these different tribes. They were also called Ivrim, Ivri, which means to pass over from one to another, which is the origin of the term Hebrew. Abraham is described as an Ivri. And there were tribes, non-Jewish tribes called Hapiru. Some people say at the time were called Hebrews, but we don't know. But Yehudi was, remember that the Jewish community in Babylon was set up exclusively initially by the Jews taken from the Kingdom of Judah. The kingdom of the other tribes had been sent into exile, into Assyria. So it was only the Judeans with the Benjaminites who were left around Jerusalem when the Babylonians came and Nebuchadnezzar came and took them back. So they were all Jew from the tribe of Judah in Babylon. So in Babylon they were called Judeans. And when the Judeans were allowed to go home to Israel, it was the Judeans who were there. So that's why the term Jew emerges out of Judeans. And its first mention is in Greek, the Ioudaios are based on the tribe of Judah. And that time all tribes basically merged into one except for the Kohanim and the priests who remained nominally a separate group but came under the rubric of the Judeans. So it's back to Babylon. What actually-

- Jeremy?

- Yeah,

- Jeremy, sorry, it's Wendy, it's me. I'm just going to, I have to jump off now. I don't know how much time you've got and there are so many questions. It's up to you. How much time do you have?

- I'm happy to carry on. So you disappear and get on with all, I don't know how you cope with all this, Wendy, with all the stuff you have to do, but I'm happy to go on.

- Thank you Jeremy. Okay, so Shauna will be on and yeah, I have to get onto, I've got to get onto a Guggenheim board call. So thank you very much.

- It's a pleasure, Wendy.

- Thanks to everybody for participating. Thanks Jeremy. Bye. Thank you Shauna.

Q: Shoshana. Hi Shoshana. "How would we celebrate Haman's demise 2,500 years ago "when Hitler succeeded him in modern times?"

A: Answer. "How would we celebrate Haman's demise 2,500 years ago "when Hitler succeeded in modern times?" Listen, ever since Haman, there have been Jews who have, non-Jews who have burnt Jews at the stake, who have tortured us, who have killed us, who have raped us, who have assaulted us, it's never ended. So we go on celebrating. I hope that this is the last that, you know, Hitler was the last one, I hope. But sometimes I wonder, I don't know what would happen. There could be a change if, you know, if some sort of aggressive either right wing or religious fanatical movement takes control of the world using modern technology, how do we know it won't happen again? I would never say it won't happen again. I hope it doesn't. And people like to say never again. But as you can see, people forget that very quickly, and it doesn't stop people wanting to destroy Israel. I mean, we live now and there are people saying, "Kill the Jew, get Israel, destroy Israel." So believe me it hasn't finished, it's going on. So that's why we keep on mentioning it, remembering it.

Q: Karen and Harvey: "Are there any remembering the Holocaust "focused on the fact that we survived as a people?"

A: Yes, there is, there are several important books that have been written. One famous one by Rabbi Teichtal, who himself perished in the Holocaust. Others who came afterwards who have said, "Yes, we, remember that whatever horrible things happen, "never to give up hope, "always to try to look on the bright side of life "and to realise that humans are a mess."

Q: You know, the old question, where was God at? I think it was Fackenheim who said this, "Not where was God at Auschwitz, "is where were human beings at Auschwitz?" And you know, there's a lot of truth in that. "How, not when you, what does that mean?"

A: Answer live. How, what, when you? I have no idea what that means. Sorry, I can't answer that one unless you want to come back and clarify.

Q: Anthony Tiber: "Were not all your Amalekites killed by Saul? "If so, how could? "Were all that Amalekites killed by Saul? "If so, how could Haman be an Agagite?"

A: Excellent question. They were. On the other hand remember that a lot of Canaanites survived pretty well despite the instructions to get rid of them. And so either you could say some people managed to escape, or you could take the idea that using the term Amalekite, was merely a metaphor or a symbol to keep the idea going and not meant to be taken historically. But good question.

Q: "Some communities have their own Purim "to celebrate deliverance from attack."

A: Oh yes, that's very right. There are lots of different Purims. There's a famous Purim in France, there was a Purim in Persia. There have been lots of other Purims in specific communities, but there was no other Purim that was accepted universally and with the same authority.

Q: "What was the first time Yehudi used."

A: In Babylon. That was the first time. Answer Live.

Q: "Why do Ethiopian Jews not celebrate Purim?"

A: Because the Ethiopian Jews, by and large, only accepted biblical instructions, biblical laws. There's no law in the Torah saying you must celebrate Purim. And this is one of the reasons why there was some disagreement as to whether they were originally Jewish or whether they were, if you like, converted by Christians to a kind of a Christian version of Judaism. Because in the early years, many Jews were Christians and Christians were Jews, it was very difficult tell the difference between them. And it was the Christians who in a sense sort of said, "You don't need to bother with "many of the biblical traditions." But Ethiopian Jews decided to. But no, this is, again, proof of the fact that Purim was not universally accepted everywhere.

Peter Hunter: "Thank you for a brilliant talk." Thank you very much. I appreciate this.

Q: We've mentioned Janet Hyman's. Why the Fast of Esther? Answer live. Why the Fast of Esther?

A: 'Cause I think it's another way of reminding, listen, don't overdo things. Don't overdo things. I mean even in happy occasions. And so, you know, there is this famous aphorism that even at the happiest times there's always something serious, at the serious times there's always something good, which actually is the origin, the origin of breaking a glass at a wedding. People

think it's to remember the temple. But if you look in the Talmud, it doesn't say that. The Talmud says that at a wedding, and his daughter brought a precious glass and smashed it 'cause he thought they were getting out of control. And he says, "I want you to know "tremble in, rejoice in trembling." In other words, never overdo it, always realise there's another side, but don't forget the other side.

Q: Dan: "Why the Fast of Esther?"

A: Fast of Esther because Esther fasted for three days.

Q: Thelma: "I heard a theory of Purim is "an adaptation of earlier Persian folk tale."

A: It may well have been, it's possible. We don't know. Just as the flood story in the Torah might be a copy of an earlier one. Didn't mean to say there wasn't a flood. So possibly so.

Sylvia Greenspan: "Really enjoyable." Thank you very much Sylvia. Ah, my love. Thank you Sylvia, and my love to the family. I was just thinking about your family actually, thinking about my time in Glasgow, but that's on next Sunday evening. Take care. My regards to everybody.

Q: David Barrett: "There's an opinion prerecorded "after the second temple. What do you say?"

A: Look, it's possible. It's possible, but I think we don't know for certain, maybe it was an oral tradition that wasn't written down till later. A tradition passed down by word of mouth. Because remember in those days a lot of traditions were passed down sitting around the campfire at night, and songs and poems that people heard and repeated, and sometimes different people repeated them in different ways. Which is why in the Talmud itself trying to record the tradition of the previous 500 years had so many people saying, "No it wasn't like this, it was like that." Or "I remember it differently." That's how traditions get passed on and how they are misheard. I'm sure you've heard the the famous World War joke about in the trenches where they had lost communication, had to send messages on by word of mouth from the frontline back to headquarters. And the frontline's first message was, "Going to advance, send reinforcements." And by the time it got back to headquarters, they decoded it as saying, "Going to a dance, send three and for pence." And that's a joke of course. But there are plenty of stories of mishearing and mispassing on tradition. "Is there something something unsavoury "about celebrating Haman's noisily.

"We don't do that with Hitler." Well, actually, I think we ought to do it with Hitler, frankly, but thank God we don't read about Hitler, so don't remind too much. It's fun, whole lot of Jewish tradition is to make it fun for kids, to make kids remember this as part of the education. And so this is something meant for kids. My father tried to low cut it down because it dragged out the reading of the Megillah. And he said, "I only want you to make a noise "when you mention Haman's name in full, "not just every time it mentions Haman." And some people do cut it out, but nevertheless that's why we do it and have it as a custom. It's not an essential part. And if you

don't do it it's no bad thing, but it's a matter of personal choice. Answer live.

Q: "Why do we hear the Megillah twice?"

A: Interesting question. Why do we repeat it twice? And the usual answer is, because it's done on a working day and some people are working might miss the evening or might miss the morning. It might not be convenient. That's why we want to make sure that everybody gets a chance to hear the Megillah. Because it is described as , to make everybody know what a great miracle we had. So we do a double reading in case you missed it.

Q: "How did the Persian community celebrate it?"

A: Very similar. I mentioned this before but I'll go back again, very similar to the way we, the Ashkenazi celebrate it, except they have different food naturally, and I think it's a lot better, but that's a matter of personal taste. But all the same things, the same Megillah they read, the same giving presents, the same this that, the same everything. It's much the same. Music is different, dress might be different, but essentially it's the same.

Q: Esther Blackman: "Thank you very much, "and happy Purim to you." "Purim celebrate in the Middle East as well?"

A: Oh yes, absolutely, it's celebrated in the Middle East, in every Jewish community. But as you know, in every community there are those who celebrate it more than others, some who don't, some who are more committed to tradition some are else. But, yes, wherever you have Jews who keep the tradition, it is celebrated.

Q: "Are there similar stories about other groups of people?"

A: Yes, there are. There are always celebrations about how women rescue a society or a community or everything like that. So yes indeed there are similar stories of salvation because human nature repeats itself and human history repeats itself.

Jillian Horowitz: "Swaziland in 1972." That's lovely, it was lovely. Thank you very much.

Q: "I've heard Ethiopian Jews did celebrate Purim. "Could you comment?" Answer live.

A: Yes, as they were more exposed to Jewish tradition when they came into contact with it, mainly in Israel, than they did celebrate Purim, but not before.

Q: Lucille Kearney: "Apocrypha Septuagint "have slightly different story including Esther's Swoon." "Apocrypha Septuagint had slightly different stories. "regarding Esther's Swoon. "So 70 rabbis in separate rooms. "Why was the rendition different from the Masoretic text?"

A: Well, first of all, yes, the Apocrypha has different books which are not included in the Bible, which do have different versions and there were other books written. But the accepted version, which is the version in the Masoretic text, is the Masoretic text, which, in fact, was finalised in the Talmudic period. The story of the Septuagint is slightly different. This was in the reign of Ptolemy in the first century BCE, when he arranged for a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in order to go into the Alexandrian Library and the tradition that we have, he put 70 rabbis in 70 different rooms so that he would see that they were all giving a legitimate translation. And they all came out with the same translation except for seven words, which they slightly altered the meaning to be less brutal.

So instead of raping, it was something like taking advantage of or lying with, instead of something impure, they first said something not quite pure. Minor variations, but it shows that there were different wording, minor differences, in our text because of the Dead Sea Sects, so it was passed it down through scribal error. But all these were combined into the official Masoretic text, which is the text we've had for the last 2,000 years, and which all bibles now have as the same text. Translation is a different matter. Translation is always subjective. The King's James translation is very different to the other translations done both by Christians and by Jews until this day. If you look in the Jewish, whether it's the JPS version or the ArtScroll version or any other version, you won't find two translations of the Bible into English that are identical. Because in the famous Latin words: "That any translation is a betrayal," because it's subjective.

Q: Thank you Lydia. "What about the rattle? "Haman's name is mentioned "just to keep the kids interested? The rattle, the grager, to make a noise and other things.

A: Yes, that's something which came in somewhere in Europe at some stage. Originally it was wood, and then it went onto metal, and now it's special claxons. So anything that makes a noise. But a grager is yes, an important part of the tradition.

"I still think there's a Persian community in Bel-Air." Oh huge. L.A.'s Jewish community is bigger than the the New York Persian community here. Very, very big, most definitely. And there they have also this whole range of different Persian communities; some Persians have joined the reform, they're conservative, they're modern orthodox, they're very old orthodox, Mashhadi. So, oh yes, plenty of Jews all around the place in Persia, in California, in Los Angeles and indeed in Texas, and Florida. They're making a comeback.

Q: "Where's the noise come from the grager."

A: Look, the grager was originally a mediaeval way of sticks, of scaring off the devil. It was common throughout Europe to make this noise and having these noise machines and either to smash glass and to smash pots and pans to scare off the devil. And so that came in as a custom into Judaism to mention it with who's the devil? Haman's the devil, let's mention it with him.

Q: "I have heard several times that Darius "was son of Esther and Ahasuerus, can you comment?"

A: There is no evidence. People like to say that, and I've heard that, and I've heard that Darius has had a Jewish wife: no documentary evidence. Does that mean it's wrong? No. It's just that we don't know.

Q: "Does an make a noise "when Haman's name is mentioned in the Megillah "does make a ?"

A: Yes it does. Some people make more, some people make less, but it's still part of the custom.

Q: "You refer to giving charity "two types of food and drink at least one person." Where does the definition of giving gifts and charity?

A: The Talmud and the Talmudic literature and the Halakha, the Shulchan Aruch, they all mention that it's got to be the two items of food, drink and food to each person. So that's an ancient tradition going back in our history 1,000 years. Answer live.

Q: "Was Esther's son Darius?" Sherry Miller.

A: As I mentioned before, maybe yes, maybe no, no evidence.

Q: "How did Esther maintain her Judaism in the palace? "What could she eat? "Was she in fact married to Mordecai?"

A: I mentioned, we don't know. The Talmud says there are three different opinions. One opinion is she actually had she actually had pork crackling. Another is she had, she was vegetarian. A third version is that Mordecai smuggle kosher food in. We don't know whether she kept her Judaism or not. Maybe she didn't. And in a way this shows that salvation to Judaism come from people who are not religious. And it can come from anybody if they help the Jewish people or if they help the state of Israel survive, they are doing something very helpful to our survival and we should be grateful no matter how religious or irreligious they are.

Q: "Purim customs, are you going to do it too? "And if yes, will it be?"

A: The straight answer is, I used to do it. I used to do it and there are still pictures of me when I was headmaster of the school in England dressed up as a caveman and doing various other things. I don't do it anymore, I'm getting a bit too old for that. But I join my son and his children, and they all get dressed up in all kinds of different things. Anything from Superman to Haredi rabbis with on their heads. So it's still very much a point and particularly in very religious circles, the adults do it just as much as the children do.

Q: Why is never mentioned in the book of Esther?

A: A very good question and one of the reasons given is, it's there to show that sometimes it's not just overtly religious but it's subtly in hidden religion that can be very valuable. And God doesn't always work in this way. It could well be that the scribe of a person who wrote it down was not a priest, didn't think he was in a purity state to write down God's name. 'cause you have to write God's name in a very special way. Even today. Go to the mikveh, make sure your pure beforehand. There could be any one of the theories.

Thank you Karen. Thank you. Thank you Wendy.

Q: "If Persians were not antisemitic, "why did Mordecai tell her to hide the fact "she was a Jewess?"

A: Great topic. Judith thank you. Yes. That's a very good question. The Persians in general were not, but there must have been some people who were, and he was worried about it.

Thank you Judith.

Q: Zigmund. "Why is it that you come to hear "the Megillah twice?"

A: I've answered that. Why twice already.

Q: "Why does Iran hate Israel so much?" Answer live.

A: Unfortunately there is a lot of hatred, not just in Persia. Look at Iraq. Iraq used to have the biggest, and the richest, and the most powerful Jewish community for thousands of years. It's now non-existent. And it's basically political. It's because of the political opposition to Zionism, which is not just political. Remember under Islam Jews were dhimmiS, they were second class citizens. And so when your second class citizens suddenly beats you, that's offensive. And not only that, in Islam there was the idea of dar al-Islam, this is property which territory conquered by Muslim belongs to Muslims. It's holy to Muslims and we can't have non-Muslims there. And certainly not if these non-Muslims are beating us up, which is highly offensive. And that's what they hate. It's an offence to their, a more proper their sense that this is our land, we don't want anybody invading it. And that's why they call us some imperialists, and they don't realise that they invaded our territory to begin with, 'cause either their first. But they like to say we are imperialists because that's fashionable now.

"Hamantash is a Yiddish word. Hamantaschen: don't have hamantaschen is a Yiddish word." They have other words for it, and it's made up basically of pastry and fruit, and sweets and sugary stuff. And it's much nicer than hamantaschen in my humble opinion.

Q: What's the example, physical remnants of the Megillat Esther?

A: Well, the earliest one we have of actually a full document is 1,000 years old. And in fact I was just sent a copy of an old Persian one, which is hundreds of years old. But I'm sure there are others that I'm not aware of in different archives in different places.

Thank you Solgen T.

Q: Is Megillah identical for everybody?

A: Answer live. Yes. Ever since the Masoretic text of nearly, what's it, 2,000 years old, everybody Ashkenazi has exactly the same text of the Bible. There are minor variations in the prayers, but not very big ones, small ones: a word here and a word there, a line here and a line there. But when it comes to the books of the Bible, everybody has the same text. We've answered the story of Esther's, it was done.

Thank you, Yvonne.

Q: Sophia Gwen: Herzliya is an old age home for Mashhad Jews.

A: Yes.

Jonathan and Janet. Hi, love to see you here. Thank you very much.

Jill : Is there anything Haman-

- [Shauna] Sorry Jeremy to interrupt, would you mind just taking one or two more questions, and then would you mind wrapping up?

- Okay. No, sorry.

- Thank you.

- For getting carried away. My fault. I'll take one from Philip.

Q: "King didn't want to know about Haman's plans, he gave Haman a licence to do what he wanted. He distanced himself from the deeds like senior Nazi leaders."

A: Absolutely. The idea of when the shit hits the fan, if you'll excuse my appearance, expression. Everyone said, "I didn't know I was obeying orders. "It wasn't me." And that's human nature again.

So thank you very much everybody. And next week I'm onto Spinoza.