



## THE MEGILAH TIMES

**M**asechet Megilah opens with an unusual division of the Purim celebration:

מגילה נקראת בי"א בי"ב בי"ג בי"ד בט"ו.  
*Megilat Ester is read on the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th [of Adar].*

Why are there are so many days of Purim, and why is this enigmatic halacha chosen to open the Masechet?

Megilat Ester itself sets two dates for the observance of Purim (9:21): All walled cities read the Megilah on the 15th to commemorate the miraculous victory of the Jews of Shushan, which was celebrated on that day in Shushan. Cities that are not walled celebrate on the 14th, the date that Jews in the rest of the empire celebrated their victories.

Why must this celebration be bifurcated? Why don't we all celebrate

**RAMAZ**  
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on the 15th, when the war was completed for everyone, regardless of the exact times of the individual battles?

The Mishna teaches that the halacha further divided this holiday and established a different date for people who live in the suburbs. This is because these communities had difficulty gathering a minyan or a person to read Megilah. Therefore, they were able to read on “market day,” that is, the Monday or Thursday prior to Purim, which can be as early

as the 11th. This is alluded to in the Megilah, which instructs us to read the Megilah “*bizmanehem*” (in their times), indicating multiple times (9:31). Thus, the Megilah is read on any of five different days depending on the community.

The unity surrounding the Jewish calendar is nearly miraculous. Given the disparity of views on almost every issue in our religion, it is a marvel that all Jews celebrate all the Jewish holidays on all of the same days, regardless of which country of origin they descend from. Thus, it is striking that we disunify ourselves by design on this particular holiday.

The themes of unity and diversity are not apparent on the surface of the story, but are noted by many commentators. Haman called

attention to the fact that the Jewish people are a “nation that is spread out and scattered among the nations” (3:8) when he suggested their annihilation to Achashverosh. When Ester began to lead her resistance, she instructed Mordechai to “go and gather all the Jews” (4:16) in a unified way. This subtle allusion to the growing unity at that time seems to highlight a most fundamental element of the Jewish experience: when we are faced with an anti-Semitic attempt to annihilate us, we demonstrate the strength of our unified identity. Haman might have mistakenly thought that the Jews who peppered the kingdom saw themselves as individuals who had little in common with each other, and who would not stand up for one another. He may have calculated that in each neighborhood his army could strike the few Jewish residents. He later discovered that an attack on one would be seen as an attack on us all; his threat in any one of the 127 countries would be of concern to all Jews, including the Queen. This miscalculation led to his demise and the victory of the Jewish people.

Purim is linked to Shavuot as the day of the affirmation of the acceptance of the Torah (*Megilah* 7a). That day was also a moment of unusual unity. The Torah records each of the steps of our travels through the desert, described in the plural form of “*vayisu*” (they travelled) and “*vayachanu*” (they camped), with the exception of the encampment of the Jewish people at Har Sinai (*Shmot* 19:2). Rashi cites the midrash that highlights this change and attributes it to the fact that all of the other encampments were filled with divisiveness and complaints, while only this one was “as one person with one heart.” This

seems to be an overall critique of the divisive Jewish behavior at all other times, like children who constantly bicker and fight with each other, and whose parents threatened that they must not misbehave at Har Sinai. Minimally, we take pride in our unity at Sinai for the most important moment of Jewish history. However, this can also be read as a more positive reflection of the mission statement of the Jewish people: We are to welcome diversity of thoughts around all issues

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of life and of the Torah, with one exception: we are all to accept the Torah itself.

In the same way, the *Megilah* alludes to the fact that the Jewish people were scattered and of varied minds. We do not all practice in the same ways and do not think as one. Nevertheless, in the face of anti-Semitism we will immediately demonstrate the fact that we are indeed “*keish echad*” as one person, and stand up for each other without a moment’s delay. Similarly,

the *Megilah* closes with the fact that only most of the Jews “held from Mordechai” (“*ratzuy lerov echav*,” 10:3). Many of his contemporaries disagreed with his approaches to halacha and to Haman. There is room for debate, but not at the moment of attack and crisis. *Masechet Megilah* opens with the disparate days of Purim to highlight the fact that our strength is in our celebration of our diversity, which also accentuates our profound unity at the most critical moments.

Thus, Purim and Shavuot are linked in that they are the two greatest moments of unity in the Jewish calendar, and represent the two factors that unify the Jews: the Torah and anti-Semitism. This year our community witnessed moments of incredible unity that centered around these two timeless realities. The Daf Yom Siyum Hashas was celebrated by world Jewry in the most unified way. This was by far the largest gathering of Jews in the history of the United States and it was a moment when all Jews put aside our differences in order to celebrate our most central value, *keish echad, belev echad*.

Similarly, the acts of anti-Semitic terror that have plagued us have also highlighted the fact that all Jews stand by each other, regardless of denomination or sect. As Moshe Dovid Ferencz told one shiva visitor from outside of his Jersey City community, “we are all one heartz” (heart).

May we experience our unity in times of joy and in celebration of our Torah.