

Purim

() = boo for Haman / Cheer for Esther

[Trying on fancy dress]

I think I need some help here. I'm trying to think what to wear to a fancy dress party on Thursday. I'll tell you about it.

In year 5 we have recently been learning about space. We have learned about the way the Earth travels around the Sun in a journey that takes 365 1/4 days. Of course, we call that length of time a year. We learned that as the Earth travels around the Sun the light and warmth of the Sun strikes us in different ways and because of this we experience seasons. In our country the seasons are Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring. Each season has its own special features and, for many people, its own special times. For Christian people, for example, Winter brings Christmas, Spring brings Easter.

Well, as many of you know, I am Jewish and for me the turning cycle of the seasons has a different rhythm. Winter to me means, not Christmas, but Chanukah, and spring brings me, not Easter, but the festival of Passover... and this week, just when we are caught between the cold, dark winter and the new life of Spring, together with Jews everywhere, I shall celebrate Purim.

At Purim Jews really do celebrate. It's a time for eating and drinking and for fancy dress. On Thursday evening my family and I will go to the synagogue for the Purim service and all the children, and not a few of the adults will be in fancy dress. Like religious services in almost any religion there will be prayers, and then we shall read the megillah. The megillah is the story of Purim, the story I'm going to tell you now.

It's the story of a rather foolish king, an evil prime minister and a brave woman and you can read all about it in the bible, in the Book of Esther.

The King was called Ahasuerus and he lived in Persia (what we now call Iran) about 2500 years ago. He had a Vizier (these days we would call him a prime minister) called Haman who was a very nasty piece of work indeed and he is the villain of the story. When his name is mentioned in the story every one in the synagogue will make as much noise as they can for a few moments so that we don't hear the name. Children often bring rattles and other noisy things or boo and stamp when Haman's name is mentioned. Maybe you'd like to do the same. You could boo whenever you hear Haman's name.

Well, at the beginning of the story Ahasuerus had decided to have a huge party and invited all the top men in the kingdom. The first few days of the party were great fun but after a week the King started to get bored. To liven things up he sent for his Queen, who was called Vashti, to come and show all his friends how beautiful she was, but she said, "No".

Ahasuerus was so mad that he sent the queen away and told her never to come back. She was probably lucky to escape with her life. He was sorry afterwards, of course, but once he had made a rule he was not allowed to change it, so he decided to find a new queen. His advisors suggested having a competition to find the most beautiful young woman in the country - a sort of beauty competition. The winner would be the new queen.

Now Esther was a Jewish girl who lived in the capital city of Shushan. Her parents had died and she lived in the house of her cousin, Mordechai, who treated her as if she was his own daughter. Of course Esther is the Heroine of the story so you can cheer when you hear Esther's name just as you boo for the villain, Haman (). And of course Esther () was beautiful and she won the competition and became the new queen.

But her cousin, Mordechai had advised her that it would probably be better if she didn't mention that she was Jewish, so she didn't.

Mordechai often came to the palace to get news of how his cousin, Esther(), was getting on and one day, while he was hanging around at the palace gates he overheard a couple of the palace guards plotting to kill the King. Mordechai told Esther (), and she told Ahasuerus, who had the men arrested. This event, like many others was written down in the king's book of records, but Ahasuerus didn't get round to thanking Mordechai (I told you he wasn't too bright).

Now Haman () was a very stuck up and boastful sort of a person. He had first come to the palace as the court hairdresser but had managed to work his way right to the top, and he decided that since he was the second most important man in the kingdom everyone should bow down as he passed and he issued an order telling everyone to do just that. And everyone did .. everyone, that is, but Mordechai. He refused, saying that he was a Jew and Jews only bowed to God, not to people. Was Haman () angry? I'll say he was. He was FURIOUS!! So, what did he do? He went to the king and he said, "Your Majesty. There are a group of people living in this land who are dangerous. They don't obey your laws, but obey only the rules they set themselves. Surely they should be dealt with?"

Ahasuerus asked Haman () what he suggested for dealing with this menace to society.

"Well, King," said Haman () "You should make a law saying that on a day of my choosing the loyal people of the kingdom should take up swords and spears and attack the Jews and kill them all, men women and children - the lot. Why don't you give me your ring and I will sort it all out for you." He needed the ring because the king used it to sign laws. The laws wer written, not on paper (which hadn't been invented yet) but on clay, and the ring had the kings mark on it so that he could press it into the clay to sign the laws. It was called the royal seal.

The king agreed to Haman's () suggestion, especially when Haman () promised to pay ten thousand talents of silver into the king's treasury. So he handed over the ring and Haman () set about his evil plan.

First he chose a day by drawing out a calendar on the ground and throwing stones on it to see which day they landed on. The day chosen was the 13th day of the twelfth month which in the Jewish calendar is called Adar. At that time the word for a stone was pur and more than one stone were purim. And then he sent out the laws telling everyone to rise up on that day, kill all the Jews and take all their money and possessions.

Of course the Jews in Persia were horrified but they were unable to run away. Mordechai spoke to Esther () and told her what was going on. Living in the palace she had not heard the bad news.

"What can I do?", she asked her cousin.

"You could ask the king to dump this rotten law, of course," said Mordechai. "If only I could," replied Esther (), "but nobody, not even me, can go to see the king unless he sends for them, and he hasn't sent for me for the last 30 days. If anyone goes in to his room without being sent for they are put to death immediately, and that would not help any of us!" She thought for a moment.

"There is just a slim chance," she said, "If someone goes to the king uninvited and he decides to let them in he will point his golden sceptre at them and then they're safe.... But he never does." She was silent for a moment more. "It's a million to one chance, she said but it might just work. But you'll have to help me," and she explained to Mordechai that she needed some moral support. She said that she would fast for three days and asked that all the Jews in the country should do the same and then on the third day she would risk going to the king.

So that's what happened. After going without food for three days Esther () dressed herself in her very best royal robes and went to knock on the king's door. You can bet she must have been pretty nervous. But she is the Heroine of our story, although she didn't know it at the time, and the king was actually pleased to see her and held out his golden sceptre so she was allowed to live.

"What is it, my queen?" said Ahasuerus. "Just ask and it shall be yours, even if it's half the kingdom." (He really must have been pleased to see her!)

"No," she said, "I would just like you and Haman () to come to a banquet which I am preparing tomorrow."

"Great!", said the king, "A party. Of course we'll come."

Haman () was really chuffed. He ran home to tell his wife that the queen had invited him to a banquet, but he couldn't really enjoy himself while that Mordechai, whom he hated more than anything, was still around. So he decided to build an enormous gallows 50 cubits high and have Mordechai hanged on it. He ordered the gallows to be built and set off to ask the king's permission to hang Mordechai.

That night the king couldn't sleep. "Read me a story", he commanded his servant and the servant read to him from the king's book of records. Now as luck would have it he read the bit about Mordechai saving the king's life. "Has Mordechai been rewarded?" asked the king.

"Not as far as I know", said the servant.

So Ahasuerus sent for an advisor and who should be outside but Haman (). "Ah, Haman () Just the chap" said the king, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?" asked the king.

"He must mean me", thought Haman () and he said, "Have him dressed in clothes which the king has worn and set upon a horse which the king has ridden with a royal crown on his head, and let one of the king's greatest nobles lead him through the streets announcing "Thus shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour."

"Great idea," said the king, "See that you do that for Mordechai. Oh, and you be the one to lead him." And Haman () had to do as he was told.

Now the next day at the banquet when food had been eaten and wine had been drunk and the king was in a good mood, Esther () said to him, "My king, please spare my life."

The king was puzzled and asked her what she was talking about. So she told him, "I and my people have been sold to be exterminated, slain and destroyed."

The King was angry to hear this. "Who has done this?" he roared.

"Haman", she replied. The king was speechless with anger and rushed out of the room. Our villain, though, realising he was in deep trouble, stayed behind. He threw himself at the queen's feet to plead for mercy. Unfortunately for him he landed on her lap! Just then the king came back and seeing Haman () apparently attacking the queen he ordered his immediate execution. Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai.

Mordechai became Vizier and although the king couldn't change Haman's () evil law he allowed to Esther () and Mordechai to make a new law commanding the Jews to defend themselves, which they did successfully. When the 13th of Adar was over most of the Jews had survived and most of their enemies hadn't. Mordechai and Esther () commanded that on the 14th day of Adar each year Jews should celebrate the feast of Purim and 2 1/2 thousand years later we still do.

So Haman failed, but he wasn't the first person to try to exterminate the Jews and he wasn't the last. And Jews are not the only people who have been attacked because of their religion or their race. There are still places in the world today where evil people are trying to destroy people because they are different.

But what is it that Jews celebrate at Purim? It's not the deaths of our enemies, for no death is a matter for celebration. What we celebrate is freedom, the right of people, of whatever faith or race, to live free from the fear of attack and as we celebrate we remember that not everyone in the world yet has that freedom.

I'd like you to just close your eyes for a few moments and think ... We don't know if the story of Esther is really true but we do know that there have been many Hamans in the history of the world and many Esthers who have opposed them.