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Purim:
Celebrating Unity: How the Four Mitzvot Bring Us Together
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It was a beautiful spring day in Jerusalem. I was walking with my husband through the center of town and marveling at the experience. People were spilling out of the synagogues, shops, restaurants, and bars in particularly jovial moods, often wearing interesting attire while singing and dancing along their way. We were carrying a bag of treats from friends we just shared a meal with, and another bag with treats to give out to other friends who we had yet to see. The homeless man on the corner was not being ignored, but rather consistently given money. What day was it you ask? Purim!

While Purim is often thought to be a Jewish Halloween or Mardi Gras, filled with fun and costumes its roots go much deeper and can be used to really embrace our unity, while also having fun.

Purim commemorates the moment in Jewish history of near annihilation by Haman in the ancient Persian period, as recounted in the Book of Esther (*Megillat Esther*). On the 13th of Adar the Jews fought back and killed those who would have killed them, and on the 14th they celebrated. *Megillat Esther* clearly tells us of what this celebration looked like, and then tells us in verse 9:22 how to do so for generations to come: "Observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor."

The Babylonian Talmud spends a lot of time in tractate *Megilla* explaining the holiday, its timing, and the mitzvot associated with it, based in part on the verse above. To observe them as "days of feasting and merrymaking" we have a festive meal (*seuda*) with our friends and family filled with fun foods and spirits. We send one another gifts that are specifically two ready to eat foods, so that we can enjoy and spread the merriment to others. We give presents to the poor, not only the giving of *tzedaka* (charity) that we may give the rest of the year via organizations, but really to the less fortunate in our communities directly. Additionally, we make sure to read/hear *Megillat Esther* (preferably in a public place) to recount this story.

Purim is not a day laden with being in synagogue or saying many additional prayers. It is a day of coming together with our physical community. Remembering that while having relationships with God are important, so too are the relationships with one another. While we can read *Megillat Esther* in a synagogue or other formal setting, we can also gather together in any public space a nursing home, an office building, or even a park for the reading. Wherever there are Jews, there can be a reading. Purim is a great time to see friends and family who live



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in different communities and to celebrate together by exchanging ready to eat foods or having a full celebratory meal. It is a great time to remember the needy in our community in a practical and tangible way. Not to simply make a monetary donation to an abstract cause, but to really get outside of our four walls and reach those in our community who may not have any walls.

Whether you view these mitzvot as obligations or suggestions, let them inspire you to think bigger this year and find ways to unite with the broader community, at JCC Manhattan, in New York City, and throughout the world.



Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez combines her personal, professional, and educational experiences to establish meaningful Jewish experiences and connections wherever she goes. She currently serves as the Community Camp Ambassador for the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, working to increase the number of children attending Jewish overnight summer camp by stewarding a scholarship and incentives program, coordinating community marketing, and serving as a central camp resource. Rabba Melissa holds undergraduate degrees in Psychology & Social Behavior and Sociology from the University of California, Irvine and received a Masters in Social Work with a health care concentration from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.