

# The Fast of Esther: A Time for Communal Gathering and Solidarity

## Source Sheet

### QUEEN ESTHER

**Background:** In Megillat Esther, after Haman orders and publicizes the decree to annihilate the Jewish people, Mordechai sends word to Esther and asks her to go to the king and save the Jewish people. Esther hesitates, but after some motivating words from Mordechai, she instructs him:

#### Megillat Esther Chapter 4 Verse 16

לֵךְ כְּנוּס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשָׁן וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְאֶל-תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וַיּוֹם  
גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבוּא אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-כִדַּת וְכִאֲשֶׁר אֶבְדַּתִּי אֶבְדַּתִּי:

*“Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!”*

#### Discussion Question:

- Why does Esther call a communal fast? Do you think it made an impact? Why or why not?
- How does Esther strategically approach the King later in the *Megillah*?
- There are many ways to take action in times of crisis, including political advocacy, community organizing, education or raising awareness, and fundraising. Which of these strategies does Esther use to spark change and save the Jewish people?

### THE CUSTOM OF THE FAST OF ESTHER

The dramatic turnaround of the Purim story occurred on Adar 13 (the default date for the Fast of Esther): this is the date that Haman had set aside for killing the Jews and instead the Jewish people turned around the decree of their enemies.

Later on in history, the 13th of Adar, the day before Purim, was set as a day of fasting, called *Taanit Esther*: The Fast of Esther. Sometimes, such as this year, it is observed on the 11th of Adar, which in 2024 is Thursday, March 21st.

This fast, unlike other fasts, does not commemorate the destruction of the Temple and is considered a *minhag*, a custom, not law. It is not mentioned in the Talmud, however it is mentioned in the Midrash and other later sources from the days of the Geonim. The traditional practice is to refrain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset. According to the custom, we fast to pray for life, to ask for forgiveness and to plead to be saved from danger.

## THE FAST OF ESTHER IN 2024

This year, many Jewish leaders find extra meaning and significance in the ritual of the Fast of Esther and have called upon Jews around the world to observe a day of fasting, even when it's not part of their usual practice. Not as a religious act, but as a Jewish act of communal solidarity.

### 1. Dr. Ruth Calderon, Israeli activist and former Member of Knesset, posted on February 21st, 2024:

"I and my maidens will observe the same fast" (Esther 4:16)

"I grew up with the tradition of fasting only on Yom Kippur. But this year, as we get closer to Purim, I don't see any other way to observe Purim other than to fast. I invite all women (and men) to fast on Ta'anit Esther, in solidarity with the female and male hostages, and in prayer for the safe return of all of our soldiers back home. And for peace unto Israel."

### 2. Rabbi Ido Pachter, Ne'emanai Torah V'Avodah, posted on February 26th, 2024:

"We have one communal fast on the Jewish calendar which is not a commemoration of the destruction of the Temple. It is one fast which is all about solidarity. "Fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days" commands Esther to Mordecai in preparation for her approaching King Ahasuerus in order to plead for mercy for her people. And so it was. An entire people fasted for one woman whose life was endangered, under the threat of a non Jewish ruler.

This is the source of the name of "Taanit Esther", the "Fast of Esther", which the people of Israel have fasted every year on the eve of Purim. While the sources of this fast are not totally clear, the name associated with it brings us to the story of the Megillah and the character of Esther in the palace of King Ahasuerus.

In Jewish law, this fast is less stringent than the other fasts, so much so that even someone who is mildly ill is exempt from fasting. But this year, it takes on new meaning, more relevant than ever, that in my opinion makes it more stringent than all the other fasts. For me, this year, this is the fast of Romi from Kfar Vradim, of Doron from Kfar Azza, of Arbel from Nir Oz, of Amit from Ashdod, of Carmel from Be'eri, of Noa from Be'er Sheva, of Naama from Ra'anana, of Karina from Jerusalem, of Daniella from Petach Tikva, of Agam from Holon, of Shir from Nir Oz, the fast of all the women who are still being held in the evil captivity of Hamas and G-d knows what they are going through there.

I pray and hope that by the time Purim comes, they will be released. Them, and all of the male hostages, and of course, the Bibas family, including children Ariel and Kfir. But if not, this year, Taanit Esther, which is on Thursday, the 11th of Adar Bet, March 21, should be their fast. The entire Jewish people should gather together on this fast, a fast of solidarity and deep concern for the plight of our sisters and brothers.

Not only the synagogues should be full of people praying, tearing open the gates of heaven in pleas and requests. The entire Israeli society should take upon itself to fast on this day. Not as a religious act, and not as a political act, but as a Jewish act, in the language of Jewish tradition. Since Queen Esther in Shushan, Persia, until this very day, when our sisters and brothers are in need and mortal danger, we fast in order to identify with them. We forgo our breakfast and our lunch, feeling just a bit of the hunger and weakness, in order to feel, even slightly, in our own bodies, what they are going through for over 140 days. This is solidarity."

## 2. Dr. Elana Stein Hain, Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, March 18, 2024:

“But this year, no exhibition is necessary because hunger and decline are our reality. I fast not only because of what the future might look like, but because of what the present looks like. One hundred thirty-four hostages remain in Gaza, willfully ignored by humanitarian organizations, malnourished, brutalized, traumatized and even murdered. Families of Israeli soldiers cannot eat or sleep out of their sense of deep worry and dread. They shuffle through their days hoping for no news. And, as a God-fearing Jew, even as someone who supports the war to defeat Hamas, I dare not ignore the hunger of children in Gaza, considered expendable by their “leadership” and caught in the crossfire. All these people will be in my prayers and my hunger pains as I fast.

And lastly, the confluence of this year’s calendar offers an opportunity: Ta’anit Esther falls during the month of Ramadan. This week will witness Jews and Muslims, people of faith, fasting for one overlapping day...May this overlapping moment of Ta’anit Esther and Ramadan be a clarion call to all Jews and Muslims who refuse to be enemies, despite their differing loyalties; who can be character witnesses for one another. I truly admire Muslims and Jews who are doing their best to maintain a form of coexistence within a crucible, and I will have them and their efforts in mind as well, even while being strong in my convictions and my responsibility to my people. My understanding of what it means to be a religious Jew demands it.

These are my added layers of meaning for this year’s Ta’anit Esther.

I invite you to join me in adding them to your own as well.”

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### Discussion Question:

- Sometimes creating awareness or community organizing involves abstaining from something rather than “doing” something. Can you think of other examples of this in history or modern times?
- Do you think a communal day of fasting or a communal day of prayer can spark change today? Why or why not?