

## A Modern Mordecai: Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Purim

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This week, over March 16 and 17, we celebrate the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim, which means “lots”, is a minor Jewish holiday that commemorates the saving of the Jewish people of Shushan in Persia in the 5th century BCE from a proto-Hitler figure, as recounted in the Book of Esther.

Haman who was the royal vizier to King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I or Artaxerxes I) was plotting to exterminate all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them.” (Esther 3:8)

Haman chose to draw lots to determine the most propitious month and day for launching his attack on the Jews hence why the festival is called Purim.

Fortunately, Haman’s plans were foiled by two Jews, Mordecai and Esther, who had become the Queen of Persia. The tables were turned, Haman was exposed the Jews defeated their enemies marking the day with rejoicing and feasting.

God is nowhere mentioned in the story but is believed to be working behind the scenes in delivering the Jewish people from harm.

There is no British equivalent today, but Purim can be likened to the Venice Carnival or Mardi Gras. It is celebrated by public recitations of the Book of Esther, usually in synagogue, during which we are instructed to blot out the name of Haman by booing and making a loud noise when it is heard during the reading. We exchange gifts of food and drink and give charity to the poor.

Other customs include dressing up, wearing masks, performing skits, and holding a public celebration. We eat pastries called *hamantaschen* (“Haman’s pocket”) and are encouraged to drink enough alcohol to become moderately tipsy. Purim is a time to let our hair down.

To quote the old joke about Jewish holidays, “They tried to kill us, we survived, now let’s eat!”

But there is a more serious side to Purim, one which has contemporary resonance. The story of Purim is of a despotic leader seeking to eradicate the Jewish people for no other reason than prejudice but who are saved by the timely interventions of two of those people.

In Ukraine today, we witness a country in which many Jewish and other people reside being menaced by a despotic leader. Jews have lived in Ukraine for centuries but have been decimated by successive regimes, culminating in the tragic events of the Holocaust when 900,000 Jews were killed by the Nazis together with their Ukrainian collaborators.

Ukraine is now led by a Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose grandfather fought against the Nazis during World War II but whose family were murdered in the Holocaust. Some have called him a “modern Maccabee” but in light of the festival of Purim, we may call him a modern Mordecai.