Purim

MARCH 20, 2019

HISTORY AND MEANING

Purim is one of the most joyous holidays on the Jewish calendar. Purim is considered a time of Jewish unity, and acts of generosity are performed during daylight hours. The story of Purim is found in the Book of Esther, the “Megillah.” Purim commemorates the victory of the Jewish nation over the king of the Persian Empire, Ahasuerus, in the fourth century BCE. Haman, the king’s prime minister, plotted to destroy the Jewish nation because it would not comply with the dictates of the kingdom. His plan was foiled by Queen Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, who spoke with the king and ultimately saved the Jews from extermination. The name “Purim” means “lots” and refers to the lottery that Haman used to choose the date for the massacre of the Jews, which never came to pass.

TYPICAL OBSERVANCES

- Purim is preceded by a fast, commemorating Esther’s three-day fast in preparation for meeting with the king.
- The “obligation,” or “mitzvah,” is to hear the Book of Esther read aloud. It is common to hear a reading of the Book of Esther (the “Megillah,” or scroll), during which the name of Haman is drowned out by booing, hissing, stamping feet and rattling “graggers” (noisemakers) whenever it is spoken in the service.
- There is a festive meal that includes challah, meat, wine and singing. Some people give “mishloach manot,” which are portions of food sent as presents, typically including sweet, triangular pastries known as “Haman’s ears,” or hamantaschen, a three-sided, filled cookie/cake representing Haman’s hat, and other sweet treats.
- Sometimes costumes are worn to recognize God’s hand in the miracle, which was disguised by natural events that took place.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THE VANDERBILT COMMUNITY

- Staff members should be aware of Purim and the celebratory nature of the evening meal.
- While students are not automatically excused from class for this observance, they may work with their faculty members to make accommodations. Graduate and professional students must refer to their own school and departmental vacation policies and calendars for more specific information.
- Staff members may request paid time off or alter their work schedule for this observance. Support their preference to take leave for their religious observance.

RESOURCES FOR MANAGING WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

People feel many types of emotions during the holidays—joy, peace, stress and depression, to name a few. Whatever you feel, know you are not alone, and Vanderbilt has resources to help you through these challenges.

Faculty, Staff and Postdocs
Work/Life Connections-EAP
(615) 936-1327
vumc.org/health-wellness/work-life

Students
Office of Student Care Coordination
(615) 343-9355
vanderbilt.edu/carecoordination

This resource is part of a toolkit created by Equity, Diversity and Inclusion to highlight religious and cultural observances that members of our community may practice. This toolkit is not meant to be exhaustive, but instead to provide a general overview of how we can support staff, faculty and students. We continually refine this information and welcome your suggestions.

For more information, please contact Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at edi@vanderbilt.edu. For more information on the university’s policy on religious holy days and observances, contact the Office of the University Chaplain & Religious Life, at religiouslife@vanderbilt.edu or Human Resources at human.resources@vanderbilt.edu.

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