

A Carnival of Holy Joy for Every Generation: Why Purim Always Matters, Especially now!

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Have you ever wondered how stories, laughter, and communal play reveal deeper truths about human existence? If so, then you will be fascinated to see you are not alone. I find inspiration in this regard with the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), who spent much of his life thinking through these deeper truths and how they affect our humanity. Living through political repression and personal hardship, Bakhtin developed the idea of the “carnival” as a social and spiritual force: a moment when the world turns upside down, hierarchies loosen, and ordinary people taste freedom from the rigid structures of daily life. Carnival, for Bakhtin, was not frivolity but revelation—an eruption of truth through humor, parody, and collective joy. Sound familiar?

Everybody knows that Purim channels this carnivalesque energy, but with a distinctly Jewish purpose. Instead of chaos for its own sake, Purim uses inversion to reveal hidden truths: that vulnerability can become strength, that joy can be an act of resistance, and that holiness sometimes arrives disguised in humor, costumes, and noise. Where Bakhtin’s carnival suspends the ordinary world, Purim transforms it. It invites every generation—children, teens, adults, and elders—to step into a story where human courage and divine possibility meet in surprising ways.

This is why Purim is not merely a children’s holiday or a comic interlude in the Jewish year. It is a profound spiritual practice built around five mitzvot that cultivate devotion through joy, generosity, and moral imagination. When we approach these mitzvot not as obligations to complete but as pathways to overflowing Judaism, they become tools for renewing our communal and personal spiritual lives. So see the fivefold Purim challenges below:

Challenge 1: Invite someone who hasn’t come in a while to join you for the Megillah reading and share the story together.

Megillat Esther remains the beating heart of Purim. The story of Esther is a drama of hiddenness—God’s name never appears, miracles are absent, and redemption unfolds through human initiative. When we gather across generations to hear the Megillah, we rehearse the art of noticing courage in unlikely places. Children delight in the groggers, teens lean into the theatricality, adults listen for political nuance, and elders hear echoes of resilience from their own lives. The Megillah becomes a shared mirror, reflecting back the truth that every generation must learn to act with bravery even when the divine feels concealed.

Challenge 2: Choose someone outside your usual circle and send them a simple, heartfelt Purim gift.

The second mitzvah, mishloach manot, strengthens the bonds that hold a community together. At its simplest, it requires

sending two ready-to-eat foods to one person. But its deeper purpose is to cultivate connection, gratitude, and reconciliation. In a world where relationships can fray under the pressures of time, distance, or misunderstanding, Purim offers a gentle, joyful way to repair and renew them. A small package of treats becomes a bridge—between neighbors, between generations, between people who may not have spoken in a while.

Challenge 3: Make a Purim-day donation to a local food pantry or social service agency, and involve children or teens in choosing where it goes.

The third mitzvah, matanot la’evyonim, ensures that Purim joy is shared widely. The holiday insists that celebration is incomplete unless everyone can participate. This is one of the most radical aspects of Purim: joy is not a private possession but a communal resource. Perhaps even volunteer at the Dayton Foodbank. Giving to those in need on Purim day is not charity; it is solidarity. It is a declaration that our joy expands when others are lifted up.

Challenge 4: Host or join a Purim meal where each person brings a dish that carries a story, and share those stories as you eat.

The festive meal, the seudat Purim, is the fourth mitzvah, and it transforms eating into a spiritual discipline. The Talmud teaches that “one who increases in joy is praiseworthy,” and the Purim feast is a chance to practice that increase. It is not about excess but about presence—about gathering with others to celebrate survival, resilience, and the possibility of transformation. When we share stories, laughter, and food, we enact the truth that joy is a communal art.

Challenge 5: Choose one concrete act of justice or compassion this month and dedicate it to counteracting cruelty.

The fifth mitzvah, remembering Amalek, grounds Purim’s joy in moral seriousness. Amalek represents cruelty, indifference, and the targeting of the vulnerable. Remembering Amalek is not about vengeance; it is about vigilance. It calls us to oppose hatred in all its forms and to cultivate moral courage in our daily lives. Purim joy is not escapist—it is joy that strengthens our resolve to build a more just world.

All of this helps explain a remarkable teaching in the Talmud: that in the messianic era, when most holidays will fade, Purim alone will remain. Many commentators suggest that Purim endures because it teaches a form of faith that does not depend on miracles. It trains us to find holiness in the ordinary, to act with courage even when God feels hidden, and to cultivate joy as a spiritual practice. In a redeemed world, we may no longer need reminders of divine intervention, but we will always need the spiritual muscles that Purim strengthens—joy, generosity, solidarity, courage, and the ability to reveal light in places of concealment. This year let us be more curious about Purim, and consider why it is not limited to merely being defined as a kid’s carnival. Purim is a rehearsal for redemption, a celebration that transforms rather than suspends the world, and an invitation to live with overflowing Jewish joy.