

“Celebrate” by Jennifer Kathleen Phillips

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There are twelve months in the Hebrew calendar beginning with a full moon: Nisan, Iyar, Sivan, Tammuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Marcheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar I (in a leap year) or Adar / Adar II. I have chosen to write about the Jewish Festival of Lots, known as Purim, as the first in a series of writings about Jewish festivals and their relevance for us today. Purim is commemorated on the 14th or 15th day of Adar which occurs during our February or March.

On the 28th February in the fourth century BC, two decrees written by a Jew called Mordecai in the name of King Ahasuerus were put into effect and the Jews were allowed to defend themselves and vanquish their enemies instead of being destroyed, which was what Haman, the king's grand vizier had schemed. This deliverance for the Jewish people came about because of a young Jewish girl whom God had gifted with great beauty, good sense and leadership qualities such as courage and the humility of considering other's requests and advice. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah (myrtle), her Persian name, Esther (star). You can read her "Cinderella" story in the Biblical book called "Esther."

Esther was a person who might have been considered a "nobody." She was born into a race of people exiled from their own land to serve another people. Her parents were dead and her cousin Mordecai had adopted her. She was also a female in a patriarchal society so one would expect her power and prospects to be limited. On top of this she and her people were faced with legalized genocide. Yet for such a time as this, God found in her a servant leader willing to sacrifice her life for her people. There are many other Biblical

accounts of God choosing despised, weak or powerless people and raising them up to fulfil His purposes, some as honoured leaders or prophets and God still does this. The God who was with His people then can now, through the Spirit of Jesus, be God in us, empowering us to do the same kind of works that Jesus did.

"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

In Proverbs 18:16 there is a timeless truth that says a man's gift makes room for him and brings him before the great. This is what happened in Esther's case. Her gift of beauty brought her before the king, who chose her above all the other beauties, to replace Vashti, his existing queen, who had disobeyed his drunken whim to let all the men gaze upon her. But beauty is not the only gift Esther had and needed in order to maintain her position. Although she was a beautiful queen, the King tired of her at a time when a battle of power was going on between Haman and Mordecai resulting in the legalizing of genocide against the Jews. Mordecai informs Esther about the situation, warning her that her privileged position as queen would not save her. Esther then takes the lead, calling upon her people to gather together and to fast with and for her before she acts. Thus prepared, God gifted her with the wisdom to outwit her enemies and to defeat the enemies of the Jews. She became the head and not the tail, which is something God promises those who listen to His word (Deuteronomy 28:13). Mordecai wrote in Esther with additions 10:9 that the Lord had saved his people; the Lord had had done great signs and wonders and rescued them. Esther

and her people appealed to God with fasting and God delivered them from their enemies. God still performs signs and wonders today revealing His great problem solving ability to those who seek Him wholeheartedly.

Queen Esther's cousin Mordecai was given a position of power in the King's court and backed by Esther's authority they were able to instigate an annual holiday, "Purim" to be celebrated with feasting, drinking, gladness and giving of gifts or food to one another and presents to the poor (Esther 9:22). It was a festival inaugurated to remind the Jews of the day that Haman had chosen, by the throwing of dice (lots), to let the enemies of the Jews destroy them. It was a reminder too that the evil purposed against them had backfired and they had been saved from their enemies. Purim was also a time to remember how their

sorrow had been turned into gladness and their mourning into happiness (Esther 9:22).

We may not celebrate Purim like many Jews do, because they've escaped persecution, but we have been saved by God from and for many things. Setting aside time to remember and celebrate your salvation is more than a healthy lifestyle choice or a red tick on your activities! It is something the Biblical writers repeatedly encourage God's people to do. We were created for rejoicing (Isaiah 65:18).

You may like to celebrate like Esther and Mordecai did or with the following kosher Jewish meal by Prangnell, who writes that vegetarian or fish that have removable scales and fins and foods containing poppy seeds along with pastries and plums can be eaten during Purim.

Seared Tuna with Tabouleh and Chickpea Salad

Modern Jewish language, culture and cuisine can be divided into two strands, Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Sephardi cooking often includes herbs, olive oil, garlic and lemon and the spices from North Africa, Asia and the Middle East, their original homeland. Tabouleh is a popular salad in Sephardi areas. In this recipe it is served with marinated tuna.

SERVES 4

Mix 2 tablespoons of the olive oil with the smoked paprika and rub it over the tuna steaks. Set aside to marinate. Meanwhile, make the tabouleh. Put the bulgar or couscous in a bowl and pour over the boiling fish stock. Cover with cling film and leave for 10 minutes, then fluff up with a fork. Mix in the herbs, spring onions, tomatoes and chickpeas, stir in 50ml (3 tablespoons) of the dressing and season to taste.

Heat the remaining olive oil in a non-stick frying pan, add the marinated tuna steaks and sear over a very high heat for 1 minute on each side, until lightly browned on the outside but still rare inside. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To serve, divide the tabouleh between 4 plates and place the tuna steaks on top. Drizzle with the rest of the lemon dressing.

3 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon smoked paprika
4 x 150g (5-ounce) tuna steaks

FOR THE TABOULEH AND CHICKPEA SALAD:

6 tablespoons bulgar (fine cracked wheat) or couscous
150ml (2/3 cup) boiling fish stock
1 bunch of flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped
2 tablespoons finely chopped mint
4 spring onions, finely sliced
2 plum tomatoes, deseeded and diced
200g (1 cup) canned chickpeas, drained
200ml (scant 1 cup) Lemon Dressing

Three-cornered poppy-seed pastries called Hamantashen are eaten to symbolize Haman's hat after the following blessing:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of universe, creator of all kinds of food.

The megillah (scroll) of Esther is read after the following blessing:

"Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments, and commanded us concerning the reading of the Megillah. Blessed are you, Lord

our God, king of the Universe, who keeps us alive, who supports the unfolding of our uniqueness, and who has enabled us to reach this season. Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of universe, who worked miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this time."

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