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Purim: The Jewish Carnival
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Most Jewish worship occurs in reverence and solemnity: reverent reading of the Torah on the Sabbath, solemn fasting on the Day of Atonement, going without bread and other yeast products on Passover, and serious prayers intoned each day. But the Purim festival, which begins March 1, temporarily turns that reverence upside down.

The usual seriousness is exchanged for silliness, noisiness and frivolity. For a single day, worship becomes "carnival."

As is so aptly illustrated by the festive scene in the Disney movie "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," carnival refers to the idea of a topsy-turvey day, when kings are treated like the lowliest peasant and vice versa. This reversal happens in a festive atmosphere of revelry, noise and celebration. Everything is treated as the reverse of what it should be -- to the accompaniment of great humor.

Purim celebrates the rescue of the Persian Jews from a destruction orchestrated by Haman, an advisor to the ancient Persian king, Artaxerxes. According to the Biblical book of Esther, this plot was foiled by a young Jewish woman named Esther and her uncle Mordecai; their efforts not only averted the slaughter, but resulted in the death of Haman and his fellow conspirators. As a reward, Mordecai became the king's closest advisor and Esther, now married to Artaxerxes, and the Jews lived peacefully ever after.

The carnival-like reversal takes place between the solemn adults and the exuberant children. In a typical worship service, pious, reverent adults dominate and children must be quiet and behave. In Purim, the children

dominate. They dress up in costumes representing key figures in the story. Special food is prepared, with sweets and cakes that children and everyone else enjoy. But the reversal becomes most apparent when everyone sits down for the reading of the Biblical book of Esther.

At first all are quiet, as with typical Scripture reading. But when the name of Haman is first mentioned, the seriousness vanishes. The children, and those young in heart, stamp their feet, whirl their noisemakers, and boo -- all in an attempt to drown out the name. This outburst invariably covers over the Scripture reading. The "pious" members of the congregation then try to silence those making the noise. This encourages yet even more noise, and finally the "pious" give up. Any air of solemnity has now disappeared, and the reading continues with great humor.

As in a melodrama, the name of villain, Haman, is continually booed, while the names of the heroes, Esther and Mordecai, are cheered. For one night a year, carnival reigns in worship. The children rule and the pious are ignored.