UNPACKED FOR EDUCATORS

Educator's Guide

Esther in America

Queen Esther might be a costume of choice on Purim for young Jewish children around the world, but she is also known for inspiring America and its citizens for hundreds of years. In fact, the presence of her name is revealed when examining episodes in American history ranging from colonists rebelling against England to New York City's most recently elected mayor. Indeed, the story of Queen Esther – the heroine of the Purim story – continues to provide motivation and joy to people of all stripes and ages around the globe.

Resources prepared by Dr. Neil Rubin and the UED Education Team

Link to video: https://unpacked.education/video/esther-in-america/

Big Ideas

1. Characters and statements from the Purim story continue to crop up at significant times in American history and life.
2. One of Mordechai's most famous lines from the Purim story – "maybe you were brought here for just this reason" – is now a motivational phrase in American life.
3. Stories from the Hebrew Bible have outlasted entire civilizations, giving people an opportunity to better understand themselves, their shortcomings, their victories, and their future.

Essential Questions

1. Why is Esther such a powerful force for an array of figures in American history?
2. How has the Purim story motivated people in America from slaves to authors to politicians?
3. In what ways does the Purim theme of "things are not what they seem" come true in American life. (In answering, think of the people whom the theme inspired.)

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Review Questions

1. The Purim story takes place in:
    - Israel
    - Baylonia
    - **Persia**
    - Egypt

2. A key theme of the Purim story is:
    - Make sure the opposite doesn't happen.
    - **The opposite happened**
    - Things will play out as expected
    - The opposite is possible

3. True or false: On Purim, Jews are commanded to give food to the poor and small money to their children.
    - True
    - **False**

4. American colonists compared King George III to:
    - Haman
    - **Ahasuerus**
    - Mordechai
    - A visiting king who would soon leave

5. When did the Purim story's lessons make an impact on people living in America?
    - **Prior to the 1776 Revolution**
    - During the 1776 Revolution.
    - When Martha Washington became a national favorite
    - During the Civil War

6. What did anti-slavery advocates want southern women to do?
    - **Be inspired by Queen Esther**
    - Inspire their husbands to be like Mordechai
    - Fight "the Haman" in their society
    - Encourage slaves to read the Purim story

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7. What does the line “Maybe you were brought here for just this reason” inspire people to do?
    - Engage in deep reflection
    - Repent for harming others
    - Find allies for a national cause
    - **Take action in an urgent matter**

8. Who told Abraham Lincoln “maybe you were brought here for just this reason”?
    - General Ulysses S. Grant
    - Mary Todd Lincoln
    - **A pastor**
    - A freed slave

Discussion Questions

1. **Esther’s continued inspiration:** The video discussed how the model of Esther served as an inspiration for people to take action for a cause they believed in, ranging from abolitionists fighting slavery to white women in the south defending the same cause.
    - How can two polar opposite groups use the same model as inspiration for action?
    - What does it mean if the model of Esther is used to defend fighting for an unjust cause?
    - When else in American or Jewish history might other diverse people have been inspired by Esther’s example?
2. **The opposite happened:** When thinking of the phrase “the opposite happened,” list as many times as possible in the Purim story where one thing was expected but another occurred? (If needed, peruse this link to the Purim story for general understanding.)
3. **What is it about Esther?** Why do you think the character of Esther has resonated so strongly in general American history? What does she represent and how did that apply to the people she inspired?
4. **What it means for American Jews:** Glean 3-4 lessons from the Purim story. In what ways – beyond what was in the video – how are they relevant for your community and/or American Jews today?

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5. **Heroic women:** Contrary to today, in the Purim story, women were second-class citizens in that they were subject to their husband's demands. Yet, some contemporary Jews from all streams of Jewish life see heroic acts by both Vashti and Esther. Why do some today view both lead female characters in the story as heroes?

6. **"Maybe you were brought here for just this reason":** Mordechai's famous line to Esther has been quoted numerous times in American history to spur people to action. Look at this line in context in the Esther Story. Why do you think these words specifically inspired Esther to act? What about these words continued to inspire people to step up throughout the generations (from Abraham Lincoln to Eric Adams)?

Learning Activities

1. **Lesson plan** - Lesson plan on Esther in America

2. **Leading women leaders:** Have students compare and contrast the biographies of some leading women during American history; examples include Betsy Ross, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony and Eleanor Roosevelt. (There are others.) In groups, have students analyze the biographies in light of what they know about Queen Esther in the Purim story. How might these leading women's lives fit and not fit the profile of Queen Esther?

3. **Unexpected endings:** Have students choose two different times in American Jewish history to research in which "the opposite happened." Examples to search for include: Grants Order # 11, Aaron Sapiro's lawsuit against Henry Ford, Judge Nathan Perlman asking gangster Meyer Lansky for a favor, and Sen. Joseph Lieberman observing Shabbat while a vice presidential candidate. Ask students to discuss the following in either a reflective essay or in a short presentation: What did the episodes change for American Jews? Why were those outcomes initially unlikely? What did each say about American Judaism in that era?

4. A modern-day call-to-action: Have your students read this article by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein of Yeshivat Har Etzion, "Esther's Moral Development - And Ours".
    - What differences does he note about Esther's character before her discussion with Mordechai and afterward?
    - How does he use the Purim Story and Mordechai's line to Esther of "Maybe you were brought here for just this reason" as a call to action?
    - What are modern scenarios where you could see this line being used to inspire people to step up?

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5. **Kahoot**: Play our Kahoot about Purim story in America!

Reflection Questions

1. **An unexpected response:** Think about when you had a positive response from someone that wasn't expected. How did it create "the opposite" view for you of the person and/or situation? Why did it surprise you and how – if at all – did it change your view of the person. Examples might include telling someone their joke or language was inappropriate, or even telling a teacher, parent or other authority figure that you disagreed with their decision.
2. **What bothers you today?** The United States faces incredibly complicated questions with no easy fix – dealing with refugees, fighting hate of ethnic groups (Jews and others), improving public schools, stemming gun violence and so much more. Taking inspiration from Esther and Mordechai, list five ways that you – alone or with others – could at least bring attention and your ideas to the issue.
3. **Looking at ourselves:** The Purim story is complex – particularly the lead characters such as Esther and Mordechai. List what you consider to be the top 3-5 values for each. Share times when you have used such characteristics.
4. **A call-to-action:** In the Purim story, Mordechai's famous line to Esther of "Maybe you were brought here for just this reason" inspired Esther to put her people first and risk her life to save the Jewish nation. On a smaller scale, share a time where you felt conflicted about taking action and then felt inspired to step up and put the needs of others before your own. What changed your mind? What was hard about this decision?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:
    - The Meaning Behind Purim Hamentaschen
    - The History of Jewish Life in America
    - The Purim Story
2. Stuart Halpern, Esther In America
3. Jenna Weissman Joselett, Having A Ball On Purim
4. Zev Eleff, How Skits And Satire Brought Purim Merriment To America
5. The Jewish Educator's Portal, Purim Resources

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