

2021 Laurels' Challenge

Can't Quite Prove It Challenge: The Haman Pinyata

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How do you prove that something that, apparently, didn't exist, actually did exist? In this case, that Jews in Period celebrated the festival of Purim with a Haman pinyata.

First, a little background. Purim celebrates the events of the biblical Book of Esther, the failed attempt by Haman, vizier the ancient Persian Empire, to kill all the Jews in the Empire. The plot was defeated by Mordechai, a leader of the Jews, and his niece, Esther, the beautiful new wife of the King. The King ordered that Haman be hanged and gave Mordechai Haman's place in court.

Purim, held on Adar 15 on the Jewish calendar (February or March), is the Jewish carnival holiday. Since the Middle Ages Jews have worn masks and costumes¹, and they have held feasts² and performed comedic plays.³ Jewish Law *requires* that Jews should drink until they can't tell whether someone is saying, "Blessed be Mordechai" or "Cursed be Haman" (Tractate Megillah 7b)⁴. And they obliterate Haman.

Obliterating Haman

Three lines of biblical text are the inspiration for this obliteration:

- "Thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek" (Deuteronomy 25:19). Esther 3:2 describes Haman as a descendent of Amalek;
- "The name of the wicked shall rot" (Proverbs 10:7); and

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Endnotes

Goodman, Philip. *The Passover Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1949), pp. 326-7.

² The word "mishteh" (banquet) appears twenty times in the Book of Esther, as many times as it appears in all the rest of the Jewish Bible. Goodman, p. 369. In Esther 9:22, Mordechai says that Adar 14, the day when Haman wished to kill the Jews be changed to one of joy, celebrated by feasting. Purim Feasting gave rise to a distinct form of cooking and baking among medieval Jews. The feasting, Se'udat Purim, continued until late at night. A 14th century Italian parodist listed 24 different dishes prepared for a Purim feast. Among these were all kinds of dishes prepared of meats and pastries. Greenstone, Julius H. *Jewish Feasts and Fasts*, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1946), p. 163)

³ The Talmud mentions certain spectacular entertainments and buffooneries, which must have been very common on Purim (see Tractate Sanhedrin. 64b; Tractate Megillah. 7b). In geonic times the dramatization of the story of Esther was a well-established custom among the Jews of the Orient. Similar amusements are reported of the Jews of other countries during the Middle Ages. The drama "Esther" by Solomon Usque and Lazaro Gratiano (1567) was the first Spanish drama written by a Jew. Deutsch, Gotthard and Malter, Henry. "Purim Plays", *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, available online on May 7, 2021 at jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12449-purim-plays.

⁴ The Jewish alphabet is also the Jewish numbering system, with each letter having a value from 1 to 400. Gematria is a system that compares the numeric values of the letters in a word or phrase. Words or phrases with the same value are said to be equivalents. The value these two phrases, *Baruch Mordechai* and *Aror Haman* both have a value of 502. Similarly, the words *ha-melech* "the King" and Haman both have a value of 90. Goodman, Philip, p. 357.

- “Then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten” (Deuteronomy 25:2); in Hebrew, *v’hayah eem bain hakevot harshah.*” The final letters of the first three words of this quote spell out the name Haman (H-M-N), while the remainder of the quote suggest that the man “deserves to be beaten.”⁵

Leon Midena (16th century Venetian rabbi) wrote that “[w]hile the Book [of Esther] is being read, there are some that, as often as they hear Haman named, they beat the ground and make a great murmuring sound in token of cursing him and eradicating his name.”⁶

In period, Haman’s name was written on flat stones or pieces of wood with flour or chalk. These were banged together to erase the name.⁷ People also wrote his name on the soles of their shoes or on the floor and erased it by stamping their feet.⁸ Sephardic [Spanish] Jews hit a hammer on the floor in memory of the hammer used to build Haman’s gallows.⁹ The grogger, a wooden or metal noisemaker based on a rasp turning against a wheel, was introduced in German and French synagogues in the 10th century.¹⁰ In all three cases, the noise was only made when Haman’s name was read.

The custom also arose of lighting a candle to represent Haman or a set of candles representing his ten sons at the start of the reading of the Megillah (the Book of Esther).¹¹ The candle(s) burned brightly at the start, but then melted away as the story was read. In the 14th century, Rabbi Eleazar of Worms compared this to the practice of witchcraft, burning a candle to make a wax image of a victim for torture, and it was stopped thereafter.¹²

There are numerous records of active obliteration of Haman outside the synagogue.

“As early as the fifth century in the region near Antioch, it was the custom of the Jews to gather in the synagogue courtyard in a happy, untidy procession. Sometimes they went outside the city gates, carrying a dummy representing Haman, whom they hanged in effigy and burned in a bonfire. Around the fire, they sang, told jokes, and traded insults.

In 408, Emperor Theodosius II ordered the Haman bonfires stopped and accused the Jews of using the Haman story to camouflage a reenactment of the Crucifixion. But the Jews could not bring themselves

⁵ Goodman, p. 322. Finding “H-m-n” in the third verse (and using it to justify beating Haman) is first cited in *Minhage Maharil* by Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Mölln (c. 1365-1427).

⁶ Goodman, p. 324. The diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) described the noise during the reading of the Megillah in the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in London as “deafening.” Gaster, Theodore Herzl. *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (New York: Henry Shuman Publisher, 1950), p. 50.

⁷ Doniach, N.S. *Purim or the Feast of Esther: A Historical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), pp. 70-1.

⁸ Dobrinsky, Herbert C. *A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1986), p. 383.

⁹ Dobrinsky, p. 387.

¹⁰ Goodman, p. 211, citing Roth, Cecil. “Down With Haman,” *American Hebrew*, February 19, 1937.

¹¹ Doniach, p. 81.

¹² Ibid., p. 73.

to give up their holiday. In 415 word spread that they were using Christian children instead of effigies. A pogrom [riot/massacre] followed which wiped out a large portion of the local Jewish population and their bonfires with them.”¹³

The custom was also popular during the Geonic period (9th and 10th centuries). A gaonic responsum says that “[f]our or five days before Purim, the young men make an effigy of Haman and hang it on the roof. On Purim itself, they build a bonfire into which they cast the effigy while they stand around joking and singing.”¹⁴

In his *Masekhet Purim (Tractate of Purim)*, Kalonymous ben Kalonymous (1287-1377) mentions that the Roman Jews “made merry round a puppet representing Haman, which was set on an elevation, amid shouts of vengeance and blowing of trumpets. This custom was called ‘Ira’, which is the Italian for vengeance.”¹⁵

A 14th century scholar described how people would ride through the streets of Provence holding fir branches and blowing trumpets around a puppet of Haman which was hanged and later burnt.¹⁶ Similarly, in *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* Israel Abrahams describes how Italian Jewish fathers and sons conducted tourneys “in which the boys fought on foot with nuts as pellets, while their fathers rode on horseback through the streets, flourishing wooden staves and, to the blast of horns and bugles tilted at an effigy representing Haman, which was subsequently burned on a mock pyre.”¹⁷

Pinyatas

The Italian word “pignatta” (from which the Spanish “pinyatas derives) means "fragile pot." Originally, pinyatas were fashioned without a base, and they resembled clay containers for carrying water. Pinyatas most often resembled seven pointed stars. The round center represented Satan, and the seven points represented the Seven Deadly Sins.

Pinyatas originated in China, figures of cows, oxen, and buffalo covered with colored paper that were smashed as part of the New Year’s celebration. They were brought to Europe from China by Marco Polo in the early 14th

¹³ Sandrow, Nahma. *A History of Yiddish Theatre*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2nd edition, 1997) pp. 2-3. Available online on May 7, 2021 at www.google.com/books/edition/Vagabond_Stars/ABnQTU7xYJ8C?hl=en&gbpv=1&kptab=getbook&bsq=pages%202-3. And Haim, Abraham and Kushner, David, “Antioch”, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, second edition, volume 2. p. 202. [www.jevzajcg.me/enciklopedia/Encyclopaedia%20Judaica,%20v.%2002%20\(Alr-Az\).pdf](http://www.jevzajcg.me/enciklopedia/Encyclopaedia%20Judaica,%20v.%2002%20(Alr-Az).pdf).

¹⁴ In the Middle Ages the custom arose of people writing to a well-known, but distant rabbi for a decision when a legal question under Jewish Law could not be resolved by local rabbinic authorities. That rabbi’s response was called a responsum, and collections of the responsa of a number of well-known Period rabbis still exist. This quote is from a Gaonic responsum found in the Cairo geniza, quoted by Ginzburg, Louis. *Gaonica*. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1909, volume II), pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ Davidson, Israel. *Parody in Jewish Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), p. 21.

¹⁶ Gaster, Theodor Herzl (2007). *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition: Feast of Lots – Feast of Lights*. (New York: Schuman Press, 1950), pp. 66–67.

¹⁷ Abrahams, Israel, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Atheneum, 1958). p. 378.

century. And they were quickly adapted to celebrations of Lent. The first Sunday of Lent became “Pinyata Sunday” in Italy and the fiesta, “Dance of the Pinyata”, when the custom spread to Spain,¹⁸

The burning of Judas is an Easter-time ritual that originated in medieval European Christian communities, where an effigy of Judas Iscariot was burned. The Judas effigies might also be flogged, hanged, or exploded (fireworks).¹⁹

In Spain, Portugal, and Mexico, Judas effigies, made as grotesque as possible and garbed in uncouth attire, would be sold on the street on Good Friday. The figures would be hung from rooftops and then set afire on Holy Saturday.²⁰

Conclusions

So why didn't the obliteration of Haman come to include Haman pinyatas? Smashing a pinyatas was fun, and the Judas pinyatas were flogged, hanged, and burned, just as the Haman effigies were.

The reason, I think, is that the pinyata was quickly introduced into the Lenten and Easter celebrations, becoming an overtly and obviously Christian item. This was at a time when anti-Semitic feelings were on the rise in Spain, riots, accusations, loss of rights, and, eventually, expulsion in 1492. There were increasing anti-Semitic feelings in northern Italy and central Italy, as well, and these were even stronger in the south which was partially controlled by Spain. The Spanish Expulsion of the Jews in 1492 applied to Spanish controlled Sardinia and Sicily. When Spain gained control of Naples in 1510, the expulsion was enforced there as well, extending to most of southern Italy by 1541. In Venice, the first ghetto was established in 1570.²¹

There already was a history of accusations that the Haman effigy was being used to mock the Crucifixion. A Haman pinyatas would be inviting a negative Christian reaction: riots, possibly even public burnings or expulsions. It was just too big a risk in the original Middle Ages, and so no documentation of such a pinyatas exists to be found.

The Current Middle Ages are most definitely NOT a time of intense religious sentiment. Moreover, the pinyata today has lost its religious symbolism and “most participate in the *game* [emphasis mine] solely for fun.”²² That being the case, use of a Haman pinyatas at a Purim-themed event, at least, would be a case of what the heralds of the SCA might call “A Step from Period Practice” (SPP) The Standards for Evaluation of Names and Armory

¹⁸ The information on the origin and history of the pinyata came from the Diocese of Cleveland, “History of the Piñata.” This information was available online on May 7, 2021 at www.dioceseofcleveland.org/files/resources/history-of-the-pinata-v2.pdf.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, “Burning of Judas.” Available online on May 7, 2021 at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_of_Judas.

²⁰ Taylor, C. Bryson, “Hanging Judas in Mexico” in *The Book of Easter*, the Right Reverend W. C. Doane, editor; drawings by George Warton Edwards. (New York: The McMillan and Company, New York, 1910), pp. 25-26.

²¹ Strassmann, Andy (Ha-Khazar, Gideon), “Timeline of Medieval Jewish Political Conditions and Fighters.” This is a detailed site on medieval Jewish history, and it was available online on May 8, 2021 at medievaljews.org/timeline/. A separate version of the timeline itself can also be found as a table in Strassman, Andy, “Medieval Jewish Fighters”, *The Compleat Anachronist #184* (Milpitas, CA: The Society for Creative Anachronism, 2019), pp. 5-9.

²² The Diocese of Cleveland, “History of the Piñata.”

(SENA) define a Step from Period Practice as “an element not found in period, core style armory that we nonetheless allow.”²³ There is no pattern of using European artifacts other than tools and general, everyday artifacts in period armory, but SCA arms using such artifacts have been registered. So too, the use of such an artifact, in this case, a Haman pinyata, as a feature at an event should be considered an acceptable step from period practice.²⁴

The Haman pinyatas is an artifact that *could* have appeared in Period, although there are good reasons why it did not. And, besides, hanging one at an event, with attendees taking turns trying to smash it would be fun.²⁵

²³ SCA *Standards for Evaluation of Names and Armory*; A.1.A.1 “Core Style Rules.”

²⁴ SCA *Standards for Evaluation of Names and Armory*; A.2.B.4.c “Other European Artifacts.”

²⁵ I have to admit that for ten years from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, I was event steward for a Purim event run by my home shire. We had a Haman pinyata each year, and the attendees certainly seemed to enjoy smashing them.