

Esther

Xerxes was King of Persia from 486-463 B.C. In the third year of his reign, he gave a great feast which was for over 100 days. Towards the end of the feast, he sent for the Queen, Vashti, to show how beautiful she was. However Queen Vashti refused to appear. Xerxes declared that Vashti would never enter his presence and no longer be his queen as she had set a bad example.

He sent messengers out throughout his Kingdom to find beautiful maidens, from whom he could pick a new Queen. In the royal household, there was a Jewish man called Mordecai who had a cousin called Esther whom he brought up as a daughter. He had instructed her not to reveal the fact that she was Jewish. She was selected along with many other women to undergo 1 year's beauty treatment: 6 months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics. After a year, the maidens were sent before the King who picked Esther to be his new Queen.

A little later, Mordecai learnt of a plot by Bigthana and Teresh to assassinate the King. He told Esther who reported it to the King. This was investigated and the two officials were hanged.

Xerxes made one of his officials, Haman, chief of all his ministers and commanded everyone to bow before him. Mordecai refused to do this. Haman became very angry and decided to get his revenge on Mordecai and his people. He issued a decree and set a date for everyone to rise up and kill Jewish people throughout the Kingdom. Mordecai told Esther, who decided to go and speak to the King. If she appeared before him, uninvited, he could have her put to death. However, he stretched out his golden sceptre towards Esther. She invited the King and Haman to dine with her the following evening. Haman was pleased and ordered the gallows to be built to hang Mordecai and his family from.

Meanwhile Xerxes could not sleep and searching through the records, discovered that Mordecai had uncovered a plot against him. Mordecai had not been rewarded for this. Xerxes asked Haman what should be done for a loyal servant. Haman, thinking that the King was talking about him, suggested that such a person should be proclaimed a hero and dressed in royal robes. This is what the King did for Mordecai.

Haman was dismayed. The next evening as they were dining together, the King asked Esther what her request was. She explained that her people were about to be attacked and wiped out. The King asked who was responsible for this and she named Haman. Haman was shocked. The King went out into the garden while Haman begged Esther. When the King returned, it looked as if Haman was being too friendly to Esther. Haman and his ten sons were hanged from the gallows, which he had built to hang Mordecai.

Xerxes issued another decree allowing the Jewish people to defend themselves against anyone who attacked them.

The Jews celebrate this festival which they call Purim.