

Introduction

The highlight of Purim is the communal reading of Megillat Esther. In addition to being one of the core *mitzvot* of the day, many customs from medieval to modern times have sprung up around the reading that make it participatory, exciting, and dramatic. One such custom¹ is the reading aloud of four verses² from the Megillah by the congregation before the reader reads them.³ The main halakhic parameter that surrounds this practice is to be sure that after the congregational recitation, the Megillah reader repeats the verse, so that all present hear those verses read from a Megillah scroll.⁴

Background to the Custom

While the earliest mentions of this custom give no reason for it, reasons are introduced over time. They include: generating joy among children⁵ and adults,⁶ maintaining the children's attention to listen to the Megillah,⁷ helping keep children and adults awake during the reading,⁸ educating children,⁹ and publicizing the miracle of Purim (*pirsumei nisa*).¹⁰ There is no single or straightforward answer to why the four verses we read aloud were chosen. Clearly they are seen as framing the deliverance of the Jewish people, as many sources refer to them as "verses of redemption (*geulah*)."¹¹ Some more specific explanations for the choice of these verses include: they speak about the glory of Mordechai and the miracle happened through his agency,¹¹ and these verses mark the beginning, conclusion, and essence of the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people.¹² Although the four verses recorded by the Rema are the most widely accepted, medieval sources note that not all communities have this custom at all, that there is some variation in the choice of verses, and that every community can follow its own custom.¹³

Contemporary Expansion of the Custom

While the Rema's choice of verses certainly points to critical moments in the Megillah narrative, it omits any mention of Esther--Mordechai's partner in delivering the Jewish people and the namesake of the Megillah. From the Megillah itself to the Rabbinic literature about the story, Esther is indisputably recognized as a partner to Mordechai in realizing the deliverance of the Jewish people. Esther's role as a critical partner in the rescue and redemption of the Jews makes her mention an appropriate addition to the verses read aloud. Verses honoring Esther and highlighting her role belong alongside the verses that highlight Mordechai's role in the essence of the deliverance of the Jewish people. In keeping with this understanding, over the last decade, a number of communities have adopted this practice of reciting verses about Esther aloud, most recently including some segments of the Orthodox community.¹⁴ This practice leaves the existing custom intact and expands it. The inclusion of these additional verses read aloud should generate joy in our communities and afford the Megillah's listeners a chance to celebrate the participation of both key human players in the redemption of the Jewish people, highlighting both Esther and Mordechai as courageous role models. May our expansion of this time-honored custom, and the impact of learning from these powerful characters, help us find our own contributions toward the ultimate redemption and a better world.

¹ The Ashkenazic custom is recorded by the Rema in the Shulkhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 690:17.

² Anywhere from two to five verses depending on the custom across time and subcommunity.

³ For an excellent treatment of this custom and a suggestion of additional verses to read, see "Repeating Verses During the Megillah Reading", by Julia Andelman, found at <http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/repeating-verses-during-megillah-reading>.

⁴ Mishnah Berurah 690:58.

⁵ Mahzor Vitry 245.

⁶ Manhig Laws of Purim.

⁷ Hagahot Maimoniot Laws of Purim 1:7.

⁸ Children – Sefer Haminhagim Laws of Purim Hagahot Hagahot 45; Adults – Avudraham Laws of Purim citing Mishmeret Hamoadot.

⁹ Levush 689.

¹⁰ Kol Bo Sec. 45.

¹¹ Avudraham ibid.

¹² Levush ibid.

¹³ Orhot Hayyim Laws of Purim 30.

¹⁴ See "A New Purim Hero?", by Audrey Axelrod Trachtman, at <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/blog/the-torch/2014/03/12/a-new-purim-hero/>.

Suggested Additional Verses to Read Aloud

In principle, any verses that seem to fit the loose criteria – verses that are part of the redemption process of the narrative and/or that awaken joy and attention – could be chosen. A number of suggestions have been made for this expanded custom. One suggested arrangement of the verses to read aloud is below,¹⁵ with other options added in the footnotes.

Introduction to Mordechai – 2:5

A Jewish man lived in the fortress Shushan by the name of Mordechai, son of Ya'ir son of Shim'i son of Kish, a Benjaminite.	אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבֵּיִרָה וְשֵׁמוֹ מֵרְדֳּכָי בֶן יְאִיר בֶּן שִׁמְעִי בֶן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי:
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Introduction to Esther – 2:7

He was foster father to Hadassah – that is, Esther – his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was striking and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordechai adopted her as his own daughter. ¹⁶	וַיְהִי אִמְנוֹן אֶת הַדַּסָּה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בַּת דָּדוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעָרָה יִפְתַּת תֹּאֲרָה וְטוֹבַת מְרָאָה וּבְמוֹת אָבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחָהּ מֵרְדֳּכָי לוֹ לְבַת:
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Moment of Paramount Joy at Redemption – 8:15-8:16

And Mordechai went out from the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries. ¹⁷ The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.	וּמֵרְדֳּכָי יֵצֵא מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת תְּכָלֶת וְחוּר וְעֻטְרֹת זָהָב גְּדוּלָה וְתִכְרִיךְ בוּץ וְאַרְגָּמָן וְהָעִיר שׁוֹשֵׁן צְהִלָה וְשִׂמְחָה: לְיְהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה וְשִׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן וַיִּקְרָ:
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Esther's Continued Impact – 9:32

And Esther's ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll.	וּמֵאִמֶּר אֶסְתֵּר קָיָם דְּבָרֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַנִּכְתַּב בְּסֵפֶר:
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Mordechai's Continued Impact – 10:3

For Mordechai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred.	כִּי מֵרְדֳּכָי הַיְהוּדִי מִשְׁנֵה לְמֶלֶךְ אֲחֻשׁוּרוֹשׁ וְגְדוּל לְיְהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרַב אֲחִיו דִּרְשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדָבַר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל זָרְעוֹ:
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¹⁵ Translations based on New JPS Edition.

¹⁶ Others have suggested that this first additional verse should be 2:17, which details Esther's ascent to a position of power. The approach argued for in this article, that the verses read aloud reflect the beginning and end of the deliverance, prefers 2:7 because it is the very beginning of Esther's role in the story even if it is not the beginning of her position of power.

¹⁷ The story records no image of Esther at this moment. Two options of complementary verses have been suggested. The first is verse 4:16, the moment in which Esther's willingness to risk her life begins to turn the tide of the fate of the Jews in Persia and beyond. The second is verse 5:1, the moment when Esther actualizes that plan by standing in front of Ahasuerus. The verse explicitly describes her wearing royal garb, a visual and thematic parallel to Mordechai's stand as he departed from Ahasuerus in 8:15. While each of these verses highlights a powerful moment in the Megillah – indeed, the turning point to redemption – one wonders why no such verse has been customary until now. What stands out most about the choice of verses we traditionally read is their placement towards the very beginning and end of the Megillah, what the Levush describes as “the essence of the beginning of the miracle and its end.” There is something powerful to the congregational call at the opening of the Megillah as we meet the characters, and at the end as we celebrate their achievement. In the middle, we sit and listen as the story unfolds. This approach accords as well with the most often cited explanation for the custom, which is that the verses are read aloud as an expression of joy. We are joyous as we meet the characters, and we are most joyous at the actual moment of deliverance. The center of the Megillah is actually quite tense as the fate of the Jewish people hangs in the balance. We take in that drama quietly and with uneasiness as we imagine ourselves in that place and time with the threat of annihilation looming.