NB: the words in red appear on the screen, you may want to omit reading some of them.

The Story of Purim

Our story takes place in a land called Persia, which is roughly where we would find Iran today.

But this story happened a long time ago, when Kings ruled the land and before countries were formed.

Shushan was the capital of Persia which was ruled by King Ahashverosh, a lazy

king who preferred to have parties for days rather than actually think about laws and ruling his

kingdom. He let others do the thinking for him. One of his chief thinkers was Haman. But more

about him later.

During one of his never-ending parties, the King called for his wife, Queen Vashti. He wanted

her to dance and show off her beauty for all of the king’s friends. But Queen Vashti refused—she felt her body was private and not for showing to strangers. Her refusal embarrassed and angered the king so much that he took her crown and threw her out of the kingdom!

The king, now alone and lonely, held a contest among all the young women in the kingdom to find a new wife. A beautiful Jewish woman named Esther, entered the contest because her uncle Mordecai encouraged her. ”After all, to have a Jew in such proximity to power could only be a good thing!” When the king saw Esther, he was mesmerized by her beauty and chose her to be his queen…but he didn’t know that she was Jewish. And Esther didn’t tell him either. At least not yet.

Once Esther moved into the palace, Mordecai liked to stay nearby, sitting outside the palace gate. One day, while sitting there, he overheard two of the palace guards plotting to kill the king. Right away, Mordecai reported the news and the two guards were caught and punished. Mordecai was a hero! This was written down in the king’s official record book.

Now, back to Haman. Because the king was not really interested in doing his job, he promoted Haman to do the work for him, so Haman became his most powerful advisor—more powerful than anyone else in the land. Haman was pretty full of himself and  liked to walk around the Kingdom and make everyone bow to him. Everyone did so, except for Mordecai, the Jew. “I will never bow down to a human person.” This incensed Haman so much that he vowed not only to destroy Mordecai, but all of the Jewish people too!

Haman hatched a plan: “There will be a great massacre—a genocide of all the Jews.” But on what day would this happen? Haman then drew lots—Purim—to choose the day: the 13 th of the month of Adar. Haman went to the king and told him:  “There is an evil people in this land

who will not bow to you. Decree that the Jews should be killed!” And the king, who didn’t like to think for himself anyway, agreed.

When Mordecai heard the decree, he  immediately called for Esther, begging her to speak to the king on behalf of her people. But Esther was afraid. “I could be killed if I speak to the king without an invitation!”  But her uncle  implored her, “Esther, if you are silent and say nothing to the king, it’s as if you’re agreeing with the decree.

A person who stands silently by is responsible for the tragedy. (Rashi) You can use your privilege and your position to save your people—and yourself. Maybe this is the reason why you became queen.”

The king had a restless night. He couldn't sleep. He called his servant to read to him from the chronicles of his kingdom and heard the story of how Mordecai saved his life by reporting the plan of those guards, but saw that Mordechai had not yet been rewarded. The king summoned Haman and asked him:  “how is a hero in the kingdom

to be rewarded?” Haman, thinking this hero was himself, answered:  “He should be paraded around the kingdom in the finest robes and on the finest horse.” The king liked this advice and ordered Haman to parade Mordecai, the Jew, around the kingdom. (Haman fumes.)

In the meantime, Esther decided that the best way to tell the king that she is Jewish, and that Haman was planning to kill her along with all of her people was to throw a lavish party, because everyone knew how much the King loved parties... and to invite not just the king, but also Haman!  Once at the party, Esther gathered all her courage to tell the king everything.  She declared: “There is a person in your palace who wants to destroy me and all of my people.” The king demanded to know who would do such a thing. “Him! HAMAN!” Esther declares.

The king was furious. He granted Esther’s request—instead of the Jews being killed, Haman would be hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai! The Jewish people were  saved!

From then on, the holiday of Purim was established and is celebrated on the 14 th day of the month of Adar, (14 Adar) to remember when the Jews acted with courage and spoke up for justice. We celebrate by sending food and treats to friends--mishloach manot--and giving gifts to the poor--matanot la’evyonim. We eat 3-cornered cookies, hamantashen, that look like Haman’s pointed hat. We celebrate with costume parties and we wear masks…because you never know where you might find the face of God hiding in plain sight.