

# Seudah at the Improv

Purim Seudah 2025

Welcome to the Allen family Purim Seudah tasting menu: five courses, each with a different Purim theme, reflected in the food. This year we added a new element. Each course has a bit of improv, designed to spark some thought.

Sending out this menu is my way of sharing my seudah with you in spirit. I hope you enjoy, and I hope it sparks some inspiration for your own seudah.

Rebecca Allen

## Course One: Welcome to the Party. Enjoy it!

On the menu: Bread for Hamotzi. Salatim. Deconstructed Salad, with toppings and dressing on the side.

**The Idea:** We begin our Purim seudah the way the Megillah begins, with Achashverosh's party, which was a feast awash in good food and alcohol. Unlike at our Seudah, however, the butlers doling out the wine at Achashverosh's seudah were none other than Haman and Mordechai. If we imagine wine as a filter through which we view the world, we might ask ourselves what type of wine was being offered by Haman, and what type of wine was being offered by Mordechai. This course is an invitation to create your own plate thoughtfully, both physically and metaphorically.

**The Scene:** Achashverosh consolidated his power by moving his capital to Shushan, and showing off his tremendous wealth with a national party. Along with everyone else, Jews were forced to attend the party in support of the King. At the same time, Achashverosh made a big show of allowing everyone to follow their own custom in the way they ate and drank—as long as they did it at his table, and under his auspices. Among the treasures he chose to show off at his party were the captured vessels from the first Bet Hamikdash.

**The Improv:** Two Jewish participants are sitting next to each other at Achashverosh's party. One is happy to be there. After all, there's a new king in town who cares enough to provide kosher food at his party. He values Jewish culture by showcasing our ancient national treasures. The other Jewish guest obviously has the opposite opinion. He feels

that being forced to be part of the depraved Persian society is definitely not a good thing, and seeing the stolen vessels from the Bet Hamikdash crudely put on display just highlights how much we've lost. They are not pleased to be sitting next to each other, and when one of them spills wine on the other, an argument breaks out between them. (Perhaps Haman and Mordechai rush over to refill their drinks and help clean up?) How does their argument end?

### Course Two: What does it mean to be queen?

*On the menu: "Queen Cakes" (British name for cupcakes). But these queen cakes are not what you would expect them to be. They are mini potato kugels with pastrami bits inside, in a pretty cupcake wrapper.*

**The Idea:** This is a cupcake that is not a cupcake, and which tastes like a kugel. It's also a kugel which is more than just a kugel, with a surprise inside. It's an invitation to think about the roles you play, if you play them as expected, and what it means to choose to play them the way you do.

**The Scene:** The biggest drama of Achashverosh's party was Vashti's refusal to appear. What really went down? The Chachamim see Vashti and Achashverosh as two peas in a pod. Perhaps they were made for each other, both great lovers of a good party, and never one to turn down a drink? Was this just one drunken idea that took a wrong turn? Not according to Malbim, who sees Achashverosh as a ruler set on proving that his legitimacy as king was not dependent on his wife, who just happened to be the daughter of Balshazzar and heir to the previous kingdom. When Achashverosh throws a party to showcase his own personal wealth and power, and insists his wife appear naked, is this perhaps a way to prove that she was nothing more than a trophy wife?

**The Improv:** Vashti's party, where there is a sudden knock on the door. It's a low-level courier, asking her to appear at Achashverosh's party...naked. Who is Vashti in that moment? Is she a drunken party girl who can't believe what's happening to her? An experienced power broker, fighting for her status? Maybe a bitter woman who lost everything when her father Balshazzar was killed, and who drinks to wash away her sorrows? There were a few messages that went back and forth between Vashti and the King. What messages does Vashti send as she tries to avoid appearing at Achashverosh's party?

### Course Three: Smells Like Something

On the menu: Fragrant Jasmine Rice with Thai Chicken Skewers and Spicy Oil

**The Idea:** The Gemara asks, "Where in the Torah do we find a hint to Mordechai?" The answer is in Shemot 30:23, in the words "*mor dror*" which the targum translates as "*mor dechi*." Mor is a spice that is part of the *shemen meshicha*, the special oil prepared by Moshe to anoint the Mishkan, the Kohanim and the Kings. It's an oil that elevated what it was applied to and played an important role in moving history forward. In honor of this elusive oil, we have a dish that is exotic and fragrant but also possibly a bit of an acquired taste. It's an invitation to consider that sometimes we can't appreciate the true "taste" of events, opinions or even people right away.

**The Scene:** Mordechai's introduction in the Megillah is a bit confusing. He seems to come both from the tribe of Judah *and* from the tribe of Benyamin. Megillah 12b offers two opposite opinions about why this might be. One opinion is that both tribes were trying to claim Mordechai as their own. The other is that, at the time of the Megillah, and in response to Mordechai's incitement of Haman, both tribes were being blamed by Am Yisrael for having produced him. There was a debate about whether it was proper to put the lives of all Jews in danger in order not to bow down to Haman. Was a strong stance against *avodah zara* exactly what this scattered and depressed nation needed to lift itself up spiritually and merit a return to Eretz Yisrael? Or might we argue that bowing down to a megalomaniac no one really thought was a god doesn't really count as *avodah zara*?

**The Improv:** Two Jews, a father and a son, are in a room that looks out on the street. One of them excitedly describes what he sees: Mordechai is refusing to bow down to Haman! He very strongly supports the move, cheering him on and praying for him. The other feels the exact opposite way. This is the first step to ruin, and Mordechai is clearly doing the wrong thing and endangering the nation. One of them wants to go support Mordechai. Does he end up going in the end? What do they say to each other?

### Course Four: A Pairing of Opposites

On the menu: Franks in Blankets and Spinach Bourekas

**The Idea:** Like two items wrapped in puff pastry, once they are both Persian royalties, Achashverosh and Esther look similar on the outside. Of course their insides tell a different story. Achashverosh definitely views himself as the top dog. But there's not much

that's nourishing about him. Esther, who is linked to the color green by Chazal, has a more humble, more nourishing inside. This course is an invitation to consider how you might represent your own inside. (In the spirit of Purim, you could ask the absurd question, if I was a *boureka*, what type would I be? :) )

**The Scene:** Who was Esther, really? From where did she get her strength? She spends five silent years, alone in the palace, never telling anyone about her heritage. Then, like a sleeper cell, she steps into motion at just the time that Am Yisrael needs her. And she has Ruach HaKodesh! The Chachamim connect her to the color green. Does this mean she was reserved by nature, like the small hadas plant, which made it easier for her to stay silent all those years? Or perhaps green was understood by the chachamim to be a middle, balanced color, and Esther's secret strength was the ability to understand exactly what was needed in each situation, whether that was silence or speech. Was Esther by nature a strategist? A realist? A mystic? What guided her?

**The Improv:** In order to communicate with Mordechai, and not arouse suspicion, Esther asks a loyal messenger, Hatach, to take messages back and forth. There is an opinion that Hatach was actually Daniel, who was saved from the Lion's den. There is also an opinion that he knowingly risked his life when he chose to accept this job, and he was ultimately killed by Haman in the process. Act out the private conversation between Esther and Hatach, as Esther decides how she will react to Mordechai's request to risk her life and approach the King unannounced.

### Course Five: Am Yisrael Pi

*On the menu: Pecan Pie and Chocolate Liquor*

**The Idea:** This year, Purim is on 3.14, also known as Pi day. Who can resist ending the seudah with a pun? In this case, the particular liquor and pie that I chose are connected to beautiful members of our nation who were killed on October 7 (you can find the recipe for the pie here: <https://tasteslikehome.co.il/?recipes=eliakim-libmans-nut-pie-cutouts>). It's a reminder that Am Yisrael is timeless. We are connected not only to those around us now, but also to everyone who came before us, and everyone who will come after. In addition, the Pecan pie is one unit, but made up of so many different nuts, each retaining their own individual shape. I find comfort in thinking about how our unity is built through our individuality, and how Hashem's guiding hand and love for us is clear, even in the midst of national disasters and internal disagreements.

**The Scene:** After all the drama of the Megillah story, the last three perakim of the Megillah wind down with a good number of technical details. And then it all ends with this pasuk: "For Mordecai the Jew was viceroy to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews and accepted by most of his brethren; seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all their descendants." It appears that Mordechai's numbers in the polls were high...enough? Why was there still controversy surrounding Mordechai? Perhaps there were those who felt the whole thing was Mordechai's fault to begin with, for being "too religious"? Perhaps some felt that he was too connected to power, and too political? Perhaps some were just jealous? Perhaps, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests, this reflects respectful disagreement between the Sages of Eretz Yisrael, of which Mordechai was one, and the chachamim of Bavel? In any case, it's worth noting that the Megillah ends with Mordechai's focus in the face of the controversy: caring for others and fostering peace.

**The Improv:** Let's return to our father and son from before. It's two years later, and they are now excitedly preparing to celebrate the new holiday of Purim for the first time. After two years, and everything that's occurred, how have they changed? Do they still disagree, or are they now in agreement with each other? What do they think about everything that's happened and what do they hope for the future? Can they even imagine that they will soon be given permission to rebuild the Bet Hamikdash, or is that what they are expecting and looking forward to? And what do you think the theme was for their first Mishloach Manot ever?