

Coronavirus Disrupts Joyous Purim Festivities

Purim is traditionally one of the most joyous Jewish holidays, but some celebrations in Israel and hard-hit parts of the United States are being scaled back or canceled due to the coronavirus threat.

One of the biggest jolts has come in the city of New Rochelle, a few miles north of New York City, where the rabbi of the Young Israel synagogue has the virus. The synagogue has been shut down by health authorities and all its Purim festivities canceled. Dozens of families from the community are in self-quarantine after learning last week that one congregant, a 50-year-old lawyer, had tested positive for the virus.

Young Israel's rabbi, Reuven Fink, wrote an open letter informing congregation members that he subsequently tested positive for the virus and urged them to comply with health officials' orders regardless of the hardships.

"There are some positive elements that can be found in looking at our predicament," he wrote. "It slows down the pace of our frenetic lives. ... Maybe we always wanted to find time to learn Torah."

In the Seattle area, where most of the coronavirus deaths in the U.S. have occurred thus far, Temple Beth Am canceled all in-person Purim programming from Sunday through Tuesday. It planned to send videos and recordings of the services and celebrations to congregation members.

Another Seattle synagogue, Temple De Hirsch Sinai, canceled a Purim carnival scheduled for Sunday. It was sending resources to children in its preschool and school so they could celebrate at home.

In normal times, Purim is characterized by joyous synagogue gatherings, colorful costumes and raucous street parties. The holiday marks the victory in ancient times of Persia's Jews over Haman, an adviser to the king who wanted them killed. According to the story, a mass execution is averted when Queen Esther, who had previously concealed her Jewish faith from the king, tells her husband about Haman's plot. In the end, it is Haman who is killed.

In Israel, the arrival of the coronavirus produced a subdued holiday atmosphere. The government has banned gatherings of more than 5,000 people, resulting in cancellation of Israel's best-known Purim parade, in the city of Holon near Tel Aviv. Other public celebrations have either been canceled or scaled back.

The restrictions did not stop schools across the country from holding their traditional costume parties on Sunday, the last school day before the holiday. The most popular costume theme this year seemed to be coronavirus—with many children dressed up as doctors and rescue workers or imitating the thousands of people living in forced quarantine, wearing surgical gloves, robes and masks.

For observant Jews, it is customary to attend readings of the book of Esther at synagogues, where people in costumes shake noisemakers every time the archvillain Haman's name is read. Singing, dancing and drinking are also common.

In Israel, with more than 20,000 people ordered into home quarantine after possible exposure to the virus, many synagogues are livestreaming the reading of the book of Esther—known to Jews as the *megillah*—so that people could watch from home. Some synagogues were holding multiple readings at different times to limit the size of the gatherings. Worshippers also have been told not to kiss Torah scrolls and to refrain from the custom of kissing their hands after touching a *mezuzah*, a small box containing a prayer

scroll posted on doorways.

“Judaism celebrates the value of life before the ritual aspect,” said Rabbi Kenneth Brander, president of Ohr Torah Stone, a network of 27 Jewish educational and social service institutions. Working with Tzohar, a modern Orthodox organization that does outreach programs to secular Jews, he said they together are sponsoring 533 Purim services that are expected to serve some 50,000 people.

“The whole idea of Purim and everything going on with the coronavirus are really consistent with each other, because Purim was a time of insecurity,” he said. “That’s what we celebrate, the fact that we can overcome adversity.”

In New Rochelle’s Westchester County, 45 student volunteers from a Jewish secondary school were fanning out in teams to read the *megillah* on Monday evening and during the day Tuesday outside the homes of about 120 families from the community who are quarantined.

The boys were recruited by the Westchester branch of Chabad Lubavitch, an Orthodox Jewish Hasidic movement

Many of the isolated families may not have the traditional handwritten *megillah* scroll, said Rabbi Motti Seligson, Chabad Lubavitch’s media director.

“These volunteers are coming out to help them participate in the holiday and let them know they are not forgotten,” he said.

New Rochelle’s Beth El Synagogue canceled some youth-oriented celebrations scheduled for Monday evening and planned to livestream the *megillah* reading so congregants could watch from home. Some synagogues in New York City canceled Purim carnivals that had been planned for the weekend.

At Manhattan’s Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, Rabbi Sharon

Kleinbaum said Purim services, the *megillah* reading and a 1980s-themed party were still on track to take place Monday night, although anyone feeling sick was urged to stay home.

Kleinbaum said the synagogue, one of the largest in the country with a primary mission of serving LGBTQ people, has a history of resilience

“Our synagogue went thru the AIDS crisis—we know what it is to live with a plague,” Kleinbaum said. “We’ve had this commitment to having services even when only a few people show up, and we’ll continue having them until we’re told to shut down.”

In areas less affected by the outbreak, many synagogues kept their programming on track; for example the Purim carnival at Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, California.

“I know other communities have made other decisions that I think fairly reflect their thinking,” said the synagogue’s rabbi, Noah Farkas. {eoa}

Associated Press Religion Editor Gary Fields in New York and AP correspondent Josef Federman in Jerusalem contributed.

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