

# Fast of Esther Sources

# תענית אסתר מקורות

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## Biblical Sources

In the biblical book of Esther, the 13th of Adar, eventually Ta'anit Esther, is mentioned not as a fast day, but as the day that was marked as the day of the Jews' destruction – which was turned into a day of revenge:

(א) וּבִשְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ הוּא חֹדֶשׁ אָדָר בְּשִׁלּוֹשֶׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם בּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הִגִּיעַ דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ לְהַעֲשׂוֹת בְּיוֹם אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְרוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הַיְהוּדִים לְשִׁלוֹט בָּהֶם וְנִהְפְּוּ הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְטוּ הַיְהוּדִים הַמָּנֶה בְּשִׁנְאֵיהֶם :  
(ב) נִקְהְלוּ הַיְהוּדִים בְּעָרֵיהֶם בְּכָל מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ לְשַׁלַּח יָד בַּמְּבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָם וְאִישׁ לֹא עָמַד לְפָנֵיהֶם כִּי נָפַל פְּחָדָם עַל כָּל הָעַמִּים :  
עַל הָעַמִּים :

*Esther 9:1. And in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and his decree drew near to be executed, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, though the opposite happened, that the Jews had rule over those who hated them;  
2. The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt; and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people.*

Some halakhic sources, however, root their understanding of the origin of the practice of fasting on the 13th of Adar (12th Adar for walled cities) in Esther 9:18, “they were assembled together:”

(יח) וְהַיְהוּדִים (וְהַיְהוּדִים) אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן נִקְהְלוּ בְּשִׁלְשֶׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וּבְאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְנוֹחַ בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֶׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה :

*9:18. But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day of the month, and on the fourteenth day; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.*

Some hold<sup>1</sup> that the Fast of Esther stems from the fast mentioned in Esther 4:16-17:

(טז) לָךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת כָּל הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן וְצוּמוּ עִלַי וְאֶל תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לֵילָה וְיוֹם גַּם אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר לֹא כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי :  
(יז) וַיַּעֲבֹר מֶרְדֵּכָי וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוְתָה עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר :

*4:16. Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my girls will fast likewise; and so will I go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish. 17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.*

<sup>1</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 686:1

However, rabbinic scholars agree that this fast corresponds to the 14th, 15th, and 16th of Nisan (the eve, day one and two of *Pesakh*). See Esther 3:7.

## Rabbinic Sources

There are no explicit references to the Fast of Esther in the Mishnah or Talmud.

In *Megillat Ta'anit*, a Tanna'itic book compiled at the end of the Second Temple period (found at the end of *Masekhet Ta'anit* in contemporary Talmud editions), the 13th of Adar is listed as **יום נקנור** The Day of Nikanor. This was a day of celebration for the Hasmonean victory over the army of Nikanor.<sup>2</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, the observance of these dates was nullified. In the Ge'onic period, this day was transformed into the Fast of Esther. This is especially interesting as *Megillat Ta'anit* listed days on which one should *not* fast.

*Masekhet Soferim*<sup>3</sup> (14:4) also excludes fasting on the 13th of Adar “because of Nikanor and his men.” In *Soferim* 21:1, there is mention of a Palestinian (Jewish) tradition of fasting on three days after Purim: Monday, Thursday, Monday<sup>4</sup> after Purim in commemoration of the three days fasted by Esther.

## Ge'onic Sources

The eighth century *She'iltot* of R. Achai (Gaon) of Shabha provides the first record of the 13th of Adar being the Fast of Esther. In *Parashat Vayakhel* 67, he quotes the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 2a) of R. Shmuel b. Yitzhak who said, “**ייג זמן קהילה לכל היא**” “The 13th [of Adar] was the time when all [the Jews] assembled,” and also refers to Esther 9:18, “But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day of the month.” R. Achai Gaon explains that these gatherings were for the sake of prayer and fasting. On this same source in the *Gemara*, R. Asher b. Yehiel quotes Rabbeinu Tam also saying that this “assembly” was a time of fasting and praying.

שאלתותת ויקהלת סימן ס"ו : מאי קהילה? יום תעניתא. ומאי יום כניסא?<sup>5</sup> שמתכנסים ויושבים בתענית ומבקשים רחמים.

R. Achai Gaon says that the observance of the Fast of Esther occurred even in the time of the Mishnah. Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, on his commentary to the *Mishnah Torah* (*Ta'anit* 5:5), says, “even if this teaching is not accepted as historical fact, we can glean from it that in Rav Achai's time, shortly after the conclusion of the Talmud, the fast was already a long-standing tradition.”

<sup>2</sup> See Abudraham, *Seder Tefilat haTa'anit*.

<sup>3</sup> *Maseket Soferim* is an extra-canonical tractate to the Talmud, written around the 8<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>4</sup> According to *Masekhet Ta'anit*, this is a common pattern of fasting.

<sup>5</sup> The use of תענית “fast” and כניסא are learned from an exegetical comparison with Esther 4:16, where both of these roots are used.

## Medieval Sources

In the *Mishnah Torah* (*Ta'aniot* 5:5), Rambam accepts the custom of fasting, and says:

משנה תורה ה: ה: ונהגו כל ישראל בזמנים אלו להתענות בשלשה<sup>6</sup> עשר באדר זכר לתענית שהתענו בימי המן שנאמר (אסתר ט': ל"א) דברי הצומות וזעקתם, ואם חל שלשה עשר באדר להיות בשבת מקדימין ומתעניין בחמישי שהוא אחד עשר, אבל אחד מארבעה ימי הצומות שחל להיות בשבת דוחין אותו לאחר השבת, חל להיות בערב שבת מתעניין בערב שבת, ובכל הצומות האלו אין מתריעין ולא מתפללין בהן תפלת נעילה, אבל קורין בתורה שחרית ומנחה בויחל משה, ובכולן אוכלים ושותין בלילה חוץ מתשעה באב.

*Mishnah Torah* 5:5: And in these times, the entire Jewish people follow the custom of fasting on the 13 of Adar.” and on the 13th of Adar<sup>7</sup>, in commemoration of the fasts that [the people] took upon themselves in the time of Haman, as mentioned [in Esther 9:31]: “the matter of the fasts and the outcries.”

If the 13th of Adar falls on the Sabbath, the fast is pushed forward and held on Thursday, which is the eleventh of Adar. If, however, any of the [dates of] other fasts fall on the Sabbath, the fasts are postponed until after the Sabbath. If [the dates of] these fasts fall on Friday, we should fast on Friday.

On all these fasts, the trumpets are not sounded<sup>8</sup>, nor is the Ne'ilah service recited. The passage Vay'khal<sup>9</sup> is read from the Torah, however, in both the morning and the afternoon services. On all these [fasts], with the exception of Tisha B'Av, we may eat and drink at night.<sup>10</sup>

The *Maggid Mishnah*<sup>11</sup> (Rabbi Vidal deTolosa, 14th c. Spain) says on this halakha, that the obligation to fast on these days is a custom accepted by the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple.<sup>12</sup> This obligation will be binding until, according to Rambam, the building of the Third Temple.

מגיד משנה, תעניות ה: ה: ונהגו כל ישראל וכו'. תלה רבינו ענין במנהג לפי שנתבאר בגמרא שם שבזמן שיש שלום דהיינו לכשיבנה בבית המקדש הן לששון ולשמחה אין שלום ואין גזרה ידועה על כל ישראל רצו מתעניין רצו אין מתעניין חוץ מתענית תשעה באב הואיל ונכפלו בו צרות. ועכשיו נהגו הכל כמו שאמר רבינו והרי הן חובה על כל ישראל עד שיבנה בבית המקדש :

The *Maggid Mishnah*, although he notes that the Talmud does not mention this fast, also says that the source for this fast is the midrashic reading of נִקְהָלוּ – “and they assembled”<sup>13</sup> – of Esther 9:18.

<sup>6</sup> Some manuscripts have a ו before the word בשלשה, thus rendering the meaning: “And the entire Jewish people follow the custom of fasting at these times and on the 13th of Adar.

<sup>7</sup> This halakha immediately follows a related discussion on how there are four fasts alluded to in Zechariah 8:19 (see Rosh HaShanah 18b): 17th of Tammuz, Tisha b'Av, Third of Tishrei (*Tzom Gedalia*), and the 10th of Tevet. In halakha 5:3, Rambam discusses these four other fasts.

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the daily closing service in the Temple.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning Exodus 32:11.

<sup>10</sup> Translation from Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, *Mishneh Torah / Rambam ; turgam mi-hadash le-Anglit 'im mekorot vehe'arot*, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> A super-commentary to the *Mishnah Torah*.

<sup>12</sup> Touger, p.81.

<sup>13</sup> *She'iltot*, on *Megillah* 2a. See above.

מגיד משנה, תעניות ה: ה ונהגו כל ישראל וכו'. תלה רבינו ענין במנהג לפי שנתבאר בגמרא שם שבזמן שיש שלום דהיינו לכשיבנה בבית המקדש הן לששון ולשמחה אין שלום ואין גזרה ידועה על כל ישראל רצו מתענין רצו אין מתענין חוץ מתענית תשעה באב הואיל ונכפלו בו צרות. ועכשיו נהגו הכל כמו שאמר רבינו והרי הן חובה על כל ישראל עד שיבנה בבית המקדש :

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 687) says that one fasts on the 13th of Adar, but if Purim falls on Sunday, one fasts the preceding Thursday. This is because one would not fast on Shabbat or Friday, in honor of Shabbat. There is also a reference to the ancient practice of fasting on three subsequent days after Purim (Monday, Thursday, Monday)<sup>14</sup> as a remembrance of the three-day fast that Esther undertook in chapter four of *Megillat Esther*. There is not, however, any mention that people still practice this.

מתענים בייג באדר ואם חל פורים בא' שבשבת מקדימים להתענות ביום חמישי. יש מנהגים ג' ימים (ימי בה"ב שאחר פורים) זכר למענית אסתר.

The Ramah, Moshe Isserles (1530-1572), in *Orach Chayim* 686:2, rules far more leniently about who is obligated to fast on Ta'anit Esther. Indeed, his gloss on *Orach Chayim* 687 (cited above) says, "and this fast is not obligatory." "ותענית זו אינה חובה" Perhaps this leniency is because of "the special status of this fast vis-à-vis its unknown origin. In 686:2 he cites special concessions to nursing mothers, pregnant women, and even to people experiencing eye aches. He does, however, support continuing the observance of the fast.

In *Sefer HaManhig*, Rabbi Avraham ben Natan mi Lunel (12th c.) questions: "why do people fast on the eve of Purim, and not according to what Esther did (see Esther ch. 4), because we do not fast three days day and night [as Esther did], for the days when Esther fasted were on Pesach, as it says, "So Mordechai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him."<sup>15</sup> This teaches that he spent the first day of Pesach fasting, as is proven by the verse: 'and Haman was hung on the 17th of Nisan' which is hinted at by the verse: 'and Haman ended on *mokharat*'<sup>16</sup> of Pesach. Rather, the fast is on account of that the Jews of Shushan assembled (Esther 9:18), as was explained in the Yerushalmi and also by Rabeinu Hananel.

ספר המנהיג לאב"ן הירחי, הלכות מגילה כא: ומה שנהגו להתענות ערב הפורים, לא לדבר תענית אסתר, שהרי אין אנו עושים שלושה ימים (צום) לילה ויום, ועוד, כי אותם (הימים שצמה אסתר) בפסח היו, שנאמר: ויעבור מרדכי ויעש ככל אשר צוותה עליו אסתר<sup>17</sup> מלמד שעבר יום א' של פסח בתענית, כאשר מוכיחים הפסוקים והמן נתלה ביי"ז בניסן, זכר לדבר וישבות המן ממחרת הפסח. אלא (הצום) על שם שנקהלו היהודים אשר בשון ביי"ג בו, ונקהלו להתענות, וכן פירשו בירושלמי וכן פירש רבנו חננל.

<sup>14</sup> See *Soferim* above.

<sup>15</sup> That is, that since Mordechai did the fast right then, and since we know that the evil decree was issued on the 13th of Nisan (Esther 3:12) and the decree was delivered "posthaste" (3:15), the fast must have occurred during Pesach, which begins on the 14th of Nisan.

<sup>16</sup> This is a midrashic reading of Joshua 5:12, which literally reads: "the manna ceased the day after." Instead of reading the manna, *ha-man*, it is read Haman. Additionally, *mokharat* is understood as another word for Pesach, as in Lev. 23:15: "and you should count from the day after 'the Shabbat'" - in this context, the text is referring to Pesach, because it is counting the 50 days until Shavuot.

<sup>17</sup> Esther 4:17

Rabbi Tzidkiyahu HaRofe (1230-1300, Italy), author of *Shibbolei HaLeket* (194) emphasizes that the minor status of this fast. He says that his teacher said that “this fast day is not from the Torah, and it is not from the words of the Sages, rather it is merely a custom. Because, behold, the fast of Mordechai and Esther happened during Pesakh.” However, he says that one should fast so that they do not “separate themselves from the community.”

תענית זה אינו מדברי התורה ולא מדברי הסופרים אלא מנהג בעלמא, שהרי תענית של מרדכי ואסתר היה בימי פסח... ואף על פי כן אתיר לאדם לפרוש מן הציבור.

## Modern Sources

The *Mishnah Berurah* 2<sup>18</sup> (*Orach Chayim* 686) claims that the fast of the 13th of Adar included a public fast as part of the military preparations.

R. Shlomo Ganzfried, late 19th c., in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (141:2), also says that the people gathered in order to pray for God to have compassion upon them and to help them as they were about to go to war. He notes that the universal commemoration of this fast makes us aware of how God “sees and hears each person’s prayer in his time of distress when he fasts and repents to God with all his might, as He did on behalf of our ancestors in those days.”

Additionally, R. Ganzfried emphasizes that “in any case this fast is not such an [important] obligation, like the four biblically prescribed fasts<sup>19</sup> and therefore one can be lenient in its [observance] in a time of need....”

והיו צריכים לבקש רחמים מאת השם י"ש שיעזרם. ומצאינו שכאשר היו ישראל במלחמה תענו שיעזרם השם... ולכן קבלו עליהם כל ישראל יום זה לתענית ציבור ונקרא תענית אסתר כדי לזכור שהבורא י"ש רואה ושומע תפילת כל איש בעט צרתו, כאשר יתענה וישוב אל השם בכל לבבו, כמו שעשה לאבותינו בימים ההם. ומכל מקום אין תענית זו חובה כל כך כארבעה תעניות שכתובים במקרא, ולכן יש להקל בו בעת הצריך...

<sup>18</sup> According to Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Practice*, p. 234

<sup>19</sup> See note 7 above.