

Customs Declaration: The Origins of Minhagei Purim  
*Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman*  
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VINNews reports:

Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Aviner, the rabbi of Beit El and head of the Ateret Kohanim yeshiva, has called on Israelis not to eat hamantaschen this year, in the wake of a significant hike in their price in Israel. Rabbi Aviner wrote that: a) there is no source for eating hamantaschen, b) they are unhealthy, and c) the price has risen steeply.

Regarding the source for hamantaschen, Rabbi Aviner writes that there is no early source for such a custom, and even though all kinds of explanations were given for the custom, they cannot establish the custom. The actual source for the term has nothing to do with Haman's ears, but rather a stuffed pastry containing poppy seed and known in German as *mohntaschen*, which became confused with hamantaschen.

As for the prices, in Israel a kilo of hamantaschen used to cost between 30-50 shekels, but currently the price has reached NIS 140 in some stores. Rabbi Aviner cites the Mishnah Brurah (242) who says that "if the fishmongers are hiking the prices, it is correct to make a ruling not to buy fish for a few weeks until the price returns to normal." Thus there is a basis for not purchasing even a religiously required food like fish for Shabbos if the price has risen beyond the means of average people, and certainly hamantaschen can be boycotted if their price rises so steeply.[1]

We have previously discussed the application of the Tzemach Tzedek's responsum[2] (the original source of the passage in the Mishnah Brurah cited by Rav Aviner) to gourmet Chanukah doughnuts.[3] In this article, we discuss another Ashkenazi Purim custom with decidedly murky origins, which has also been criticized—in much stronger terms—by some Sephardi *poskim*: the wearing of masks and costumes.

The first mention of this custom is in a responsum of R' Yehudah (Mahari) Mintz, written about six centuries ago. One aspect of the custom was already quite controversial at that time: the wearing of women's clothing by men and vice versa, in apparent violation of the Torah prohibition against doing so. The Mahari Mintz notes that this was done in the presence of "many *gedolim* and *chassidei olam*" who did not object to it, and he accordingly justifies the practice on various grounds,[4] but subsequent *poskim* are divided on whether there is really any satisfactory justification for cross-dressing on Purim. The Rama in his Darchei Moshe concludes that although there are some grounds for leniency, it is nevertheless "good to be stringent and to serve Hashem with joy, and for there to be rejoicing with trembling." [5][6] In his glosses to the Shulchan Aruch, however, the Rama cites both opinions and merely notes that the minhag follows the lenient opinion, without further comment.[7] The Mishnah Brurah, commenting on

the latter statement of the Rama, records the stringent position of numerous later authorities.[8]

About a century and a half ago, an even more provocative objection was raised, claiming that the custom originates from the observance of Carnival, a Christian festival that falls around the time of Purim.[9] Some thinkers reject this connection as preposterous:

But our minhag did not come from the Roman Carnival. It is not that we believe that cultural diffusion does not exist. We do. But its application must be tempered with rational precision and reason. We must always display a cautious intellectual approach. Scholars who know what Klal Yisrael is actually all about, know that this particular type of cultural diffusion is about as likely as eggnog consumption and Xmas caroling affecting the behavior of Yeshiva boys on Purim. It simply would not have happened. End of story. The apperception of the Roman Carnival in Torah circles was beyond the pale of acceptable activity even to mimic. This cannot be the source—especially so close to the time of Rav Yehudah Mintz, who sanctioned its use.[10]

But R' Meir Mazuz maintains that while there are some allusions to and bases for the custom in Jewish sources,

These are merely hints and [non-explicit] references, but no true source for the custom exists, and it is nearly certain (*karov levadai*) that it evolved from the customs of the non-Jewish inhabitants of Europe on their holidays, where they arrange Carnival festivities and men disguise themselves as women and women as men, and they sink into the fifty gates of impurity, as is known...

Rav Mazuz subsequently clarified that he did not call for the abrogation of the custom (despite it being “a late custom of our Ashkenazi brethren” which “is not mentioned at all by the *Rishonim*”), but merely to warn against giving it outsize importance and emphasizing it over the more important mitzvos of Purim. In the course of his earlier discussion, he urges the reinstatement of the traditional custom of burning Haman in effigy, which dates back to the Gemara,[11] as explained by the Aruch,[12] which had been practiced “throughout the Sephardi diaspora until our day,” but which has lately been forgotten and abandoned in favor of the costume practice.[13]

[1]After Significant Price Hike, Rabbi Aviner Says: Don't Buy Hamantaschen This Year. VINnews. (Original Hebrew version: HaRav Aviner *Bikriah: Al Tochlu Oznei Haman*. Srugim.)

[2]Shu"t Tzemach Tzedek (Krochmal) *siman* 28.

[3]Too Much Dough: Can Doughnuts Be Overpriced? Bais HaVaad Halacha Journal. Dec. 10, 2021.

[4]Shu"t Mahari Mintz *siman* 16.

[5]See Tehillim 2:11.

[6]Darchei Moshe O.C. end of *siman* 696.

[7]Shulchan Aruch *ibid. se'if* 8.

[8]Mishnah Brurah *ibid. s.k.* 30. Cf. Bach Y.D. *siman* 182; Taz *ibid. s.k.* 4;

Knessess Hagedolah O.C. *siman* 695 Hagahos Bais Yosef s.v. *Levishas Hapartzufim bePurim*; Ba'eir Heiteiv O.C. *siman* 696s.k. 13; Shu"t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 5 *siman* 14; Moreshet Maran-Minhagei Purim.

[9]Wikipedia contributors. Carnival. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Carnival&oldid=1072131935>.

[10]R' Yair Hoffman, Purim Costumes-A History, Reasons, and Origin. The Yeshiva World.

[11]Sanhedrin 64b, "*kemashvarta dePuraya*."

[12]Aruch *erech* שו"ר.

[13]Vekaneh Lecha Chaveir, *siman* 103-*Minhag Hatachposet* BePurim.