Fast of Esther

Sources

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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:

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:”

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 hold¹ that the Fast of Esther stems from the fast mentioned in Esther 4:16-17:

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.

¹ 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 נקמר** (The Day of Nikanor). This was a day of celebration for the Hasmonean victory over the army of Nikanor. 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*\(^3\) (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\(^4\) after Purim in commemoration of the three days fasted by Esther.

**Ge’onim 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, “**יום זומן קהילה לכל יא**” “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.

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.”

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2 See Abudraham, *Seder Tefilat haTa’anit*.
3 *Masekhet Soferim* is an extra-canonical tractate to the Talmud, written around the 8th c.
4 According to *Masekhet Ta’anit*, this is a common pattern of fasting.
5 The use of **תענית** “fast” and **כניסה** 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:

Meshaneh Torah: ונהגו כל ישראל בדומינא אלול ותענותו בלעיצה ושאני מבוארין הכהנים זכרות ואסתר: "In these times, the entire Jewish people follow the custom of fasting at these times and on the 13th of Adar." and on the 13th of Adar, 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, nor is the Ne’ilah service recited. The passage Vay’khal 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.

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 ניקלו – "and they assembled" – of Esther 9:18.

6 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.
7 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.
8 This refers to the daily closing service in the Temple.
9 Beginning Exodus 32:11.
10 Translation from Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, Mishneh Torah / Rambam; turgam mi-hadash le-Anglit ‘im mekorot vehe’arot, 1986.
11 A super-commentary to the Mishnah Torah.
12 Touger, p.81.
13 She’ilot, on Megillah 2a. See above.
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) 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.

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.” 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.’ 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’ 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.
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.”

Modern Sources

The Mishnah Berurah 2(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 fasts19 and therefore one can be lenient in its [observance] in a time of need....”

18 According to Klein, A Guide to Jewish Practice, p. 234
19 See note 7 above.