When it comes to Jewish holidays, people most likely have heard of Hannukah, the high holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and Passover — the holiday in which people retell the story of Exodus.

People may not have heard of Purim, which starts on sundown Thursday, Feb. 25 and ends on sundown Friday, Feb. 26.

Cantor David Barash of Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun says it’s a fun and festive holiday that congregations around the state are creatively celebrating in the pandemic. He describes the Purim story in a nutshell:

In the 4th century B.C., the Persian empire was a dominate force in the world, extending from India to Eastern Europe.

After a man named Mordecai refused to bow to a royal vizier, named Haman, because his Jewish faith said that he would only bow before God, Haman created a plan to kill all Jews living under Persian rule. Hearing of his plan, the Queen of Persia, Esther — a closeted Jewish woman, invited Haman and her husband, the king, to a feast. There she reveals that she is Jewish and under Haman’s plan she would be killed. The king is enraged and ends Haman’s plan by having him hung.

After Haman is killed, Mordecai is promoted to Haman’s position and helps Esther write a new decree giving Jewish people the freedom to protect themselves from all enemies.

This event in Jewish history became a holiday called Purim, which celebrates the triumph over the attempt to genocide the Jewish people. It is celebrated, in most places, on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Adar.

Barash explains that Purim is celebrated through four mitzvot, or commandments:

1. Listening to a reading of the Megillah, also known as the Book of Esther, which retells the story of Purim
2. Giving to those in need
3. Exchanging food gifts with family and friends
4. Holding a festive feast

Because of the pandemic, Barash says Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun has created COVID-19 safe ways to celebrate the holiday. Instead of gathering together to do a reading of the Megillah, they are doing a live broadcast online. In past years Barash has adapted the story to different music ranging from Billy Joel to *Les Mis*, this year their [performance will be *Grease*-themed](https://www.ceebj.org/event/purim-spiel-and-megillah-reading.html).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrzCRJAX4Zc&feature=youtu.be>

“Based on the music of *Grease* with character avatars incorporating the faces of our cast on the screen, so those little avatars are going to move all around the screen with the faces of our cast telling the story,” says Barash.

To give to those in need, the Cantors of Wisconsin are matching donations up to [$1,800 to the Hunger Task Force in Milwaukee](https://www.hungertaskforce.org/Give/Cantors-Friends-Purim-Party/).

“Just as Esther is the hero of Purim, and the book is named after her, we can all be heroes as well during this pandemic and help those in need,” he says.

Barash says people won’t be getting together in large groups to hold a feast to follow COVID-19 guidelines, but that family and friends can still exchange gifts of food with each other to stay connected. Traditional gifts include Hamantaschen, a triangle shaped cookie with a delicious filling.

“Hamantaschen, it’s a cookie in the shape of Haman’s hat with three corners filled with apricot jam, poppyseed jam, chocolate chips, anything that’s tasty you could put in the middle of it,” he says.

Barash says it’s important to remember that even through difficult times like the pandemic, it’s important to find ways to celebrate and remember the lessons taught by the events of Purim.

“Against all odds, [Esther] rose up and saved the Jewish people, approached the king and exposed Haman, we can also, even when it’s difficult, we can rise up and do something good for other people,” he says.

There will also be virtual Purim events at [other local congregations](https://www.jewishchronicle.org/2021/02/10/wisconsin-to-do-purim-virtually/) Thursday night, including Megillah readings and special events like an [ABBA-themed Purim shpeil](https://www.cong-shalom.org/event/a-night-with-abba--a-purim-shpiel-with-shalom.html) at Congregation Shalom, and a [Paw-rim Patrol celebration](https://www.congregationsinai.org/purim/)for kids at Congregation Sinai.