

The Once and Future Womantasch:

**CELEBRATING PURIM'S FULL MOON
AS "HOLY BODY DAY"**

by Susan Schnur

What is a hamantasch? A sacred vulva filled with black seeds. A food, source of nourishment, which we make with our hands reflecting our (women's) felt sense of self-containment, of creativity and generativity.

Ancient images of goddesses reveal that certain parts of the body—breasts, vulva, belly, buttocks—were believed to be holy, combining biological functions with processes of spiritual transformation. Hamantaschen remind us that the image of the female body was humanity's first conceptualization of the workings of the cosmos. The Earth was a mother, fecund like us.

Patriarchal writings speak of women's bodies as "empty vessels"; the hamantasch, however, represents revering our bodies as metaphors for creation. The word "humiliation" comes from the Latin root *humus*, meaning earth. In the mind/body split of patriarchy, we somehow have become humiliated, instead of uplifted, by our association with the living earth.

What is a womantasch? The same as a hamantasch.

And the black seeds in the womantasch? As the seed has within it the inherent power to root, grow, flower and fruit, so we have "power from within." We reject the notion of "power over"; and we recognize instead that each of us is part of the creative being who is the universe herself.

When do we eat hamantaschen? At Purim, as Earth herself awakens from dormancy and begins again her sacred spring cycle of life. We honor the Earth's body *for it is our own*. The sacred is not to be found on a pilgrimage. It is within us. If we treat our bodies as enemies, we doom ourselves to experiences of an amputated God. Let Purim be a celebration of body-positive spirituality, of praising the Earth's sacred

NEW!! IMPROVED!!

Four Easy Purim Upgrades

▼ **At the Purim Carnival:**

Set up a dunking booth in which every time Vashti says 'NO!' the King gets dunked.

▼ **In Hebrew School:**

Use Purim as a time to teach some sex ed. around the issues of male coercion and female compliance. Call the event "Hooray! Vashti said 'NO!'" ("Hooray! Vashti said 'YES!'" is way too advanced.)

▼ **In your Sholoch
Manos Baskets**

[Purim goody bags traditionally exchanged with friends and neighbors]: Stick in some "women's assertiveness" literature (or the 800 number of your local women's anti-violence hotline) and title it "Helpful Hints from Vashti."

▼ **During the
Megillah Reading:**

Ask the rabbi to read the first two chapters of the *Megillah* (the Vashti Chronicles) with the genders switched upside down so that the story becomes a polemic against men. This should provide a nice lesson in empathy.

Adrienne Rich calls our relationship to our bodies “women’s fundamental problem.”



**Performance art by
Anne Gauldin and
Denise Yarfitz,
1978-1981.**

vulva, and our own. It is not just the female body that demands respect and affirmation, but, by extension, it is all living things.

What is Holy Body Day?

Esther Broner, in her novel *A Weave of Women*, creates a counter-holiday (which Purim implicitly is) in which we “women pray that we be restored to our own Temple.” Broner proclaims our thighs as the pillars of the Temple. We conclude Holy Body Day with food [a sacred vulva cookie would be appropriate] and Broner’s prayer: “Blessed art thou, O Mother of the Universe, *from whose body we descend*, who has kept us alive, nourished us and brought us to this season.”

Purim is called the ‘upside down’ holiday. For example, Haman gets hung instead of Mordechai; we get drunk instead of staying sober.

In the ‘upside down’ vein, let’s reclaim the full moon which has not really been reclaimed by Jewish women—though it’s opposite, the new or absent moon, Rosh Hodesh, has been. In all probability, the implications of the full moon frighten men. The full moon, upon which many Jewish holidays fall (not incidentally), represents women’s power—the mother at the height of strength—capable maturity personified.

The classic full moon personages include Astarte (whose name becomes, upside down, the spring holiday of Easter) and even Tiamat (who, in Genesis 1:2, gets reversed into a common noun). The full moon is woman’s time for choices, births, deaths, fulfillments. The power to create and to feel abundant is immense.

Historically, men ridiculed women for “lunacy,” but that is another way in which Purim is upside down. Raising your hamantasch, sing Peter Sodeburg’s eco-feminist song: “And the full moon is her vagina spread wide. And the new moon is her waiting womb, every possibility waiting to grow. And the old moon is her empty womb, with a whole wide world

of possibility, every possibility returning home.”

Have you ever made one humongous womantasch—that is, one that represents the sacred vulva of the Earth herself? No, but this is an idea just waiting to be put in the oven. Okay, in our imagined woman’s

circle, let’s put the humongous hamantasch in the center, and, from our ‘grounded’ understanding of life’s necessary cycles, let’s recite the following (from Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature*): “The Earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am, how we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know.”

During some future Purim, this giant hamantasch can help us connect the abused body of the Earth with the abused body of women—the two are, of course, deeply connected.

Is there a psalm to recite on Purim’s full moon? Try Psalm 23, which you can monkey around with so that it becomes, “The Earth is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

“Who will plow my vulva?” Perhaps you have never asked this question, but the old mythological Queen of Heaven does ask it in a 4,000-year-old text (translated in *Inanna* by Sumerian scholar Samuel Noah Kramer and storyteller Diane Wolkstein). Inanna *loves* her body, and she presents an image of pride that has much to teach women today. The text says, “When Inanna leaned back against the apple tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold. Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself.”

Starhawk writes that in this text “the erotic power of woman is seen as a force that generates good for all the community. The image of a young woman frankly praising her own vulva is hard for us to comprehend in a world in which women are conditioned to hate their bodies.”

Inanna lives in a world “in which there is no conceivable reason why she should hesitate to express and rejoice in her

The spiritual challenge is not to transcend our female bodies (as if they were prisons), but to realize that our bodies can be temples of the sacred.

beauty." And since we now understand the springtime and fertility connections between Purim's Queens and Inanna, let's look at the text:

My vulva, the horn/ The Boat of Heaven/ Is full of eagerness like the young moon./ My untilled land lies fallow.

As for me, Inanna/ Who will plow my vulva?/ Who will plow my high field?/ Who will plow my wet ground?/ As for me, the young woman,/ Who will plow my vulva?/ Who will station the ox there?/ Who will plow my vulva?

Dumuzi replied: "Great Lady, the king will plow your vulva./ I, Dumuzi the King, will plow your vulva."

Inanna: "Then plow my vulva, man of my heart!/ Plow my vulva!"

This text goes on to speak of the springtime fertility that occurs because of this passion. "At the king's lap stood the rising cedar. Plants grew high by their side. Grains grew high by their side. Gardens flourished luxuriantly."

Ask your woman's Purim circle: Can you imagine what it would be like if we worshipped a god who said stuff like this? If women's assertiveness and sexuality were sacred? How would that change our place in the world?"

Okay, so all we have left on Purim of this suppressed and forgotten world is Vashti's body as a source of humiliation—and, of course, the womantasch.

It sounds like it makes sense to redeem Purim—the pre-spring, full moon time of split, denigrated womanhood (that reflects that deeply rooted biblical conviction that women are Other, are inferior)—into a time of re-sanctifying our bodies. Yes, this holiday has been waiting for us, like a seed hiding in a hamantasch, waiting to re-emerge.

The hamantasch's three corners have often been treated allegorically. Any feminist ideas? How about recalling together that in the beginning there were three Muses (one for each corner of the hamantasch): Meditation, Memory and Song. Let's create a ritual in our women's circle, in relation to our bodies, that invokes all three. (For example, a *memory* that speaks to our relationship to a spe-



Astarte (Canaan, 1500-1000 B.C.E.), suggesting, once again, why boys build towers and girls bake enclosures.

cific part of our body.)

Adrienne Rich calls our relationships to our bodies, women's "fundamental problem." For some of us, before our bedroom mirrors (or in therapy), we privatize a punitive relationship to our body. Isolated from other women, we think we are the only ones. Rich, who always says it best, talks about the "ignorant body:" "How in this ignorant body/ did she hide/ waiting for her release/ till uncontrollable light began to pour/ from every wound and suture/ and all the sacred openings...."

How can our "ignorant bodies" be healed by light that comes from the inside, from our sacred openings?

Around the circle, let's pass a small framed picture covered with a cloth. As the picture reaches each one of us, we say, "Help me, great mother, full moon of Adar, wherein reside Vashti and Esther together, to carry no shame, to love and revere my body, and its sanctity." Lifting the cloth to see the great mother, Sanctity Embodied (is the picture going to be a painting by Botticelli?, an ancient Venus of Willendorf?), instead what we see is: *ourselves* in the mirror.

The womantasch serves as a reminder that the sacred is near. Our female body is but a wonderful mirror—held to the great Mystery.

So the hamantasch is a trace-memory. Yes, an affirmation of the female body and the life cycle expressed within it. Spirituality is about embodiment and grounding, not about altered states of consciousness. As the writer Morris Berman puts it, it is about ordinary experiences (not fancy ones), about presence and self-remembering; not about charisma (which is *easy*).

The challenge is not to ignore our female bodies (and think we've 'transcended' them), but to recognize that sacralizing our bodies is a necessary first stop in our search for what's holy. Internalizing the values of Holy Body Day, we realize how accessible other ideals suddenly become: wholeness, unselfish love, creativity, spontaneity. God's pleasures can be quite ordinary, actually—making womantaschen together, eating them, sending *sholoch manos* to Abe Maslow.

