What would Purim be without our beloved hamantaschen? They’re an age-old tradition, but what exactly is the origin of these delicious Purim treats? Why do we eat them on Purim, and what do they represent?

As their name implies, it seems they are connected to the defeated villain of the Purim story, Haman.

One of the oldest mentions of a Purim treat referred to as oznei Haman, Haman’s ears, is from Italy in the 1500s, in a skit written by Yehuda Sommo. Although oznei Haman in Modern Hebrew are synonymous with hamantaschen, this may have been a reference to another, lesser-known Purim pastry, hamen-ohren, literally “Haman’s ears.” Unlike their triangular cousins, hamen-ohren have no filling, and are actually shaped like ears. Although there is a myth that Haman’s ears were cut off before he was hanged, there is no documentation to verify this. Merely hearsay...

In Yiddish, hamantaschen means “Haman’s pockets.” (Although the correct singular form of the word is hamentasch, most English speakers use the plural form interchangeably; i.e., “I ate a chocolate hamantaschen” presumably to allow themselves to actually consume more than one.)

The word hamantaschen may be symbolic of the money Haman gave to Achashverosh in exchange for permission to kill the Jews, taken from his own “pockets” or “pouches.” Perhaps it is also a reference to the Hebrew, יִשָּׁם, to weaken, symbolizing the weakening of Haman. Alternatively, the original name may have been man-taschen, literally “poppy-seed pockets,” with the ha being added on later. Ha ha!

Why the three-sided shape though? A simple explanation is that folding and baking dough around a filling to form a pouch, such as dumplings, was a common form of Ashkenazi baking. A well-known legend brought by the Sefer HaMoadim explains that Haman had a three-cornered hat. The Midrash says that when Haman recognized the merit of the three Avot, his strength...
immediately weakened. Perhaps these three corners are a reference to our Patriarchs. Archeological documentarian Simcha Jacobovici claims that the shape of the hamentaschen is similar to the shape of the die used in an ancient Babylonian game, suggesting they represent the die that Haman cast to determine the date of extermination of the Jews.

What about the filling? Although chocolate, jam – and in Israel, date spread – are some of the most popular fillings today, hamentaschen were originally filled with poppy seeds. The Beit Yosef wrote that “Some say one should eat a food made out of seeds on Purim in memory of the seeds that Daniel and his friends ate in the house of the king of Babylon.”

The Midrash explains that, just like Daniel, Esther refrained from eating the non-kosher delicacies in the royal palace, and instead ate only seeds and legumes. In commemoration, hamentaschen are filled with poppy seeds.

Of course, we all know that Purim is all about revealing what is hidden beneath. The sweet-filled hamentaschen may represent the sweetness hidden beneath the surface.

Another traditional Ashkenazi Purim food is krepelach, meat-filled dumplings often served in soup. Ashkenazim customarily ate krepelach on Purim and on erev Yom Kippur, showing the deep connection between the two holidays (Yom Kippur is also known as Yom haKippurim, which can also be read as “the day which is like Purim”). The custom of eating krepelach on Purim is mentioned in the 1400s by the Leket Yosher and later by the Bach, the Taz, and the Shelah.

But back to hamentaschen – Ashkenazi Jews are not the only ones to make Haman-related foods for Purim. Moroccan Jews also have a traditional Purim food – a bread called boyosa, also known as “Haman’s eyes.” Two hard-boiled eggs in their shells are baked into the middle of the dough, giving the appearance of eyes. Bulgarians traditionally ate a pasta dish on Purim called caveos di aman – “Haman’s hair.” Nanbrangi, poppy seed-coated cookies eaten on Purim in many Persian communities, are also known as “Haman’s fleas.” Syrians have their own version of “Haman’s fleas,” called simsemiyyah, using sesame instead of poppy. Turkish and Greek Jews had a custom of eating long, thin biscuits known as “Haman’s fingers.” There may be evidence of other communities eating some of Haman’s other body parts, but I think we have enough baking to do for Purim!

Bon Appetit!