This article looks at the Jewish Holiday of Purim, and how the food associated with Purim is seemingly out of character for usual Jewish customs. Usually, Orthodox Jews are exceptionally strict about food consumption. On Purim, however, it is customary for Jews to make “shalech mones”, or portions of food, and send them to each other. These food gifts typically contain pastries, sweets, and beverages. Orthodox Judaism places enormous emphasis on the laws of Kashruth, which carefully define what they can and cannot eat. Part of keeping strictly kosher involves knowing exactly where their food comes from. Yet on Purim, it is difficult to determine where the food originates, especially since many people “recycle” their food gifts (they send what they received from one person, scramble it around, and send it to another person). The sending of shalech mones isn’t just about food though, the shalech mones also represent social relationships within the community. For example, people with similar levels of wealth and status trade their food evenly, but shalech mones are given freely to the poor as well as to the sick and to the elderly. Single men are also given shalech mones without the expectation that they will return the favor.

Another important aspect about the shalech mones is that for the most part, the women are in charge of this mitzvah (good deed). Generally in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, women have a lower status than men, but for this holiday, Queen Ester is the hero of the tale, and women are recognized---even if it’s only for their work in the kitchen. Another peculiarity about Purim is the glorification of getting drunk. While normally Judaism stresses the difference between good and evil, it is customary on Purim to drink until one does not recognize the hero of the story from the villains. The author attempts to provide an explanation for all of these, what she refers to, as “excesses”. Orthodox Jews always go above and beyond the rules of the Torah, and take extra precautions to make sure that they cannot, even accidentally, disobey a law. The discussions concerning food distributions and the dramatization of social interactions on Purim mirror the many debates and the social hierarchy in everyday life. So while it may seem that these Jews are acting out of character, really, they are just reinforcing their usual codes of conducts but in a new manner.

This article, although interesting and informative, was a bit misleading. The introduction makes it appear that these practices of Purim apply to all Jews, while really, only a small percentage of Jews in the United States are Orthodox. Shuman also uses terms like “religious” and “observant” synonymously for Orthodox. Non-Orthodox Jews do not always appreciate these terms, because we believe that we are religious and observant in our own way---just a different way than the Orthodox. Since I grew up in a Jewish community, it was interesting to see an outsider’s perspective on our customs. Although I knew Purim was an unusual holiday, I never tried to analyze why it was so different.