

How the Mitzvot of Purim Unmask Us

Every year on Purim we encounter a halacha that confuses and confounds us, and for many, offends our sensibilities. The joy of Purim can be hampered by the dread of pervasive drunkenness that, if done incorrectly, can change the mood of Purim from *simcha shel mitzvah* to *simcha shel holelut* (an empty, selfish exuberance). My goal in this article is not to present a halachic analysis of the concept of drinking on Purim, but a hashkafic approach to this mitzvah, as well as its limitations.

Truth be told, it is bizarre to have a mitzvah that promotes drunkenness, since as a whole it is considered to be an unsavory, if not outright prohibited, behavior.

As the Rambam writes in *Hilchot Deot* 5:3:

וכל המשתכר הרי זה חוטא ומגונה ומפסיד
חכמתו, ואם נשתכר בפני עמי הארץ הרי זה
חילל את השם.

Anyone who gets drunk is a sinner, is repulsive and causes himself to lose his wisdom. If one gets drunk in front of the masses, then it is a desecration of Hashem's name.

When discussing the idea of getting drunk on Purim, Rabbi Yosef Karo in the *Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 695, puts it in even stronger terms:

חייב אינש לבסומי בפוריא לא שישתכר
שהשיכרות איסור גמור ואין לך עבירה גדולה



Rabbi Joshua Strulowitz

Judaic Studies Faculty

YU High School for Girls, Holliswood, NY

מזו שהוא גורם לגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים
וכמה עבירות זולתן.

*"One is obligated to get intoxicated on Purim": This does not mean to actually get drunk, because becoming intoxicated is completely prohibited and **there is no greater sin than that**. It causes sexual immorality, murder and many other sins.*

CENTRAL EST. 1948

The concerns about intoxication are not trivial. They are written in stark and alarming language. How then could it not only be allowed, but become a mitzvah one day out of the year?

Rav Moshe Isserles, in his gloss on the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 695:2, attempts to find a happy medium when he writes:

ואחד המרבה ואחד הממעיס, ובלבד שיכוין
לבו לשמים.

Whether one drinks a little more than usual or a lot more, it is vital that his intention only be for the sake of Heaven.

While the Rama is sending the message that abusing alcohol for illicit reasons is not a mitzvah, how can there be an action that is a mitzvah if done with the

correct intentions, but a severe sin if done for the incorrect reasons?

In an attempt to better understand this concept, let's look at an oft-quoted Gemara in *Eruvin* 65b (translation is based on Rashi):

בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר: בכוסו, ובכיסו,
ובכעסו.

In regards to three things we can tell the quality of someone's character: How he handles himself when drunk, if he acts honestly in his financial dealings, and if he is excessively harsh in his anger.

These three elements are a window into the soul, showing a person's true nature. We are often skilled at putting on a good face and showing our best selves to the world, but once intoxication, money or anger are involved, the real person emerges from behind the mask.

In that vein, it speaks to a prominent theme of Purim: the true face emerging from behind a masked identity. In fact, we see the true form of many characters in Megillat Esther by their interaction with *koso*, *kiso* and *ka'aso*.

Koso (Intoxication)

The first element is intoxication, which plays a major part of the Purim story. The entire episode begins with the following verse in Esther 1:10:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כָּטוֹב לֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּיַיִן אָמַר
לְמַהוּמָן ...

On the seventh day, when the King's heart was merry with wine, he said to Mehuman...

The story of Purim really begins with Achashverosh's demand for Vashti to parade herself in front of a large crowd, and her refusal to do so. Why was his intoxication a necessary component of the story? The Gemara, in *Megillah* 12b, explains that in Achashverosh's drunkenness, his conversation devolved into vulgarity, which ultimately led to him bragging about his wife's beauty and attempting to drag her out in front of the masses to showcase his prize. His intoxication brought out his essence, and it was not flattering.

The Gemara's description is very telling:

שישראל אוכלין ושותין, מתחילין בדברי תורה
ובדברי תשבחות. אבל אומות העולם שאוכלין
ושותין - אין מתחילין אלא בדברי תיפלות.
When Jews eat and drink, they begin with words of Torah and praise to Hashem. However, when the nations of the world eat and drink — they begin with words of immorality.

This contrast between how Jews and non-Jews behave in celebration can serve as a model to understanding our central question. On Purim, we demonstrate our essence, and contrast it with the essence of Haman and Achashverosh. In the *Megillah* (9:22) we learn of three quintessential mitzvot of the day: *mishloach manot*

(sending of gifts), *matanot la'evyonim* (charity), and *mishteh* (feasting).

Each of these mitzvot shows that every Jew's goal is to act exactly the opposite of Haman and Achashverosh. The idea of getting drunk on Purim is to show our true essence, and that it is different than Achashverosh's. However, as the Rama says, if one does not do so for the sake of Heaven, then not only has he not fulfilled any mitzvah, he has demonstrated that he is no better than Achashverosh.

Kiso (Money)

As Haman makes his case to destroy the Jews, he offers 10,000 silver talents to sweeten the pot (Esther 3:9). It is unclear if Achashverosh accepts the offer (3:11), but Mordechai does reference the monetary amount (4:7) and Esther tells Achashverosh that her people were "sold" (7:4), which may indicate that Achashverosh did in fact accept the bribe. Many assume that the reason Haman felt the need to offer money was to offset Achashverosh's concern that if the Jewish people were killed, he would lose their tax revenue.

The repulsive idea that money was a primary factor in the decision to commit genocide highlights the importance that Haman and Achashverosh placed on money. In contrast, the mitzvah of *matanot la'evyonim* is meant to show our relationship to money. In fact, the *Shulchan Aruch* writes (*Orach Chaim* 694:3) that we should give freely on Purim, and that we should give to any and all who ask for tzedakah. We are showing our essence in how we behave with our money, and that it is the exact opposite of the greed of Haman and Achashverosh.

Ka'aso (Anger)

The *Megillah* 3:5 makes it clear that Haman's downfall begins with his anger:

וַיֵּרָא הָמָן כִּי אֵין מְרַדְּכֵי כָרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לּוֹ
וַיִּמְלֵא הָמָן חֲמָה.

And Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to him and he became filled with rage.

Haman was the second most powerful person in the world. The ruler of the largest empire the world had ever seen relied on him for advice. Why couldn't he overlook a perceived slight from an ordinary citizen? Why did he decide to make all-out war with Mordechai's nation when they posed no threat to him or the empire?

Because Haman, to his core, was a petty, bitter and vindictive man. His anger consumed him to the point that it was all he could focus on. As the Gemara, *Megillah* 19a, explains, Haman became obsessed with the Jews because of Mordechai's refusal to bow to him, and this obsession resulted in his and his family's demise. Clearly, Haman's true colors are revealed from his anger.

On Purim we do the opposite. We give *mishloach manot*, gifts of food to one another. Instead of relating to each with anger jealousy and conflict, we promote peace and unity with gifts and show that we are the exact opposite of Haman.

Ultimately, our goal on Purim is to unmask our true souls and show the purity we hold within. May we always approach Purim with that mentality and allow it to define our Purim celebrations.