

“When Adar Enters, We Increase Our Rejoicing”

Parashat Terumah

February 17, 2018

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Today is the second day of the month of Adar. The Talmud teaches us: “*mi-shenichnas adar, marbim b’simcha*” -- “When the month of Adar begins, we increase our joy, or our rejoicing.”

Now, those are two different translations. “Joy” is an emotional state. “Rejoicing” is an action we engage in to create or to maintain that.

So, which is it: Joy? Or rejoicing? That raises a basic question: Is it really possible to increase joy?

Sure, we could imagine increasing our rejoicing. But can we actually *will* ourselves to be joyful, when, for example, we’re feeling sad? Is that possible?

I want to come back to that very heavy question in a few moments. In the meantime, let me tackle two other questions: “Why?” and “How?” Why is this the time to increase our joy or rejoicing? And if we’re supposed to do that, how shall we go about it?

First, why?

Well, just about everyone who knows about this expression (*mi-shenichnas adar, marbim b’simcha*) will tell you why: Adar is the month in which Purim comes. Purim is observed on the 14th day of the month of Adar, on the night of the full moon of the month. In anticipation of that, we start our rejoicing even earlier -- two weeks earlier -- at the beginning of the month.



And that makes sense. Purim is a joyful holiday. On it, we celebrate the miraculous deliverance of our people. We might have been exterminated. Instead, we triumphed over our enemies. It's a holiday characterized by *relief*: we came *this close*, yet it didn't happen. Instead, as we read in the Megillah -- i.e., the Book of Esther that chronicles the story -- "*la-yehudim hay'tah ora v'simcha v'sasson v'kar*," "And the Jews had light and joy, gladness and honor."

So it makes sense that we should think about celebrating, and maybe even *do* some celebrating or rejoicing, even two weeks before. But *how*? How do we do that?

Well, how do we celebrate Purim? And I don't mean what do we actually do on Purim, but *what does Jewish law tell us* we're supposed to do on Purim?

The answer is that we're supposed to do **four** things on Purim. First, (1) **read the Megillah**, word for word, beginning to end. We're supposed to read it in the evening, and read it again in the morning. We do that here, of course, each and every year. The reading of the Megillah is so important, Rambam says, that we drop just about everything to fulfill it. Priests offering sacrifices in the Temple should stop to hear the Megillah. Scholars should put aside their texts to hear the Megillah. There's only one *mitzvah* that we don't put aside to hear the Megillah. (Let me get back to that later. Stay tuned.)

What are the second, third, and fourth mitzvot? Well, it's to do what the Jews in Persia did when they found relief from their threat of annihilation, what we are told in the Megillah itself -- see Esther 9:22 -- to do in subsequent generations:

First, it's to have a festive meal, a *se'udah*. That makes it into a day of "*mishteh v'simcha*" -- "drinking and rejoicing." Traditionally, this is done with a leisurely, festive meal on the afternoon of Purim. *Frum* Jews observe this practice that way; more liberal Jews tend to take elements of the feast, such as the drinking and revelry, and spread it over the whole day, beginning with the Megillah reading on the eve of Purim, and continuing on, and on. The custom of having a *shpiel* on Purim, of drinking after the Megillah reading -- these are all a part of the obligation to engage in revelry.

The next two practices, the final two *mitzvot*, often are discussed together, but they're actually two separate practices. The first is to serve food -- at least two kinds of food -- to someone else. This is called *mishloach manot*. The phrase comes from Esther 9:19: "... sending portions of food to one another." Hence, a minimum of two portions should be sent to at least one person. But, as Maimonides instructs us, "*v'chol ha-marbeh, ... harei zeh mishubach.*" "But all who increase their fulfillment of this mitzvah are deemed most praiseworthy."

The last *mitzvah* is called, "*matanot la-eyyonim*" -- "gifts to the poor." That is, giving at least two gifts to at least two people.

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Now, of all these four *mitzvot* -- reading the Megillah, eating a festive meal, giving foods to friends, and giving gifts to the poor -- which is the one most likely to generate joy? If we knew that, we would know what we should be doing during the first two weeks of Adar to fulfill the directive to increase our rejoicing.

Well, listen to what Rambam says in the Mishnah Torah, his Code of Jewish Law, regarding these last three *mitzvot*. Regarding any of them, we could certainly increase our spending, our expenses, right? We could have a *more festive meal*, we could give *more mishloach manot*, we could give *more money to the poor*. What should be our priority?

Well, listen to what Maimonides says: (*Sefer Z'manim*, Book of Seasons; Laws of the Reading of the Megillah, Ch.2, Law 17):

"Mutav l'adam l'harbot b'matanot la-eyyonim mil'harbot b'seudah, u'v'mishloach manot l'rei'ehu." -- "*It is preferable for a person to increase his/her gifts to the poor than to increase his/her feasting or increase his sending portions to others.*"

"Sh'ein sham simchah g'dolah um'pho'ara elah l'sameach lev any'yim v'ytomim v'almanot v'gerim."

“For there is no greater, more glorious, joy than bringing joy to the hearts of the poor, the orphan, the widow or the stranger.”

Note: in Rabbinic society, all these were understood to be natural recipients of charity.

“She’ha’m’same’ach lev ha-umlalim ha-eleh,” -- “For one who brings joy to the hearts of these unfortunate ones,” “domeh l’shechinah, she-ne-emar” -- is akin to God’s sheltering presence, as it is written, “l’ha-khayot ruach sh’falim u’l’hakhayot lev nidkaim” ... [And thus says the One whose name is Holy:]’ “I dwell on high, in holiness. And yet, also with lowly of spirit, in order to revive the spirits of the lowly, and to revive the hearts of the discouraged.””

That passage actually answers several questions for us.

This past week has been a truly grievous one. Within our own community, we lost two young people in a car accident that took place last Saturday evening. This hit our community very hard. 1,200 people gathered for the funeral of our own Talia Newfield, *aleha ha-shalom*, may peace be upon her, on Tuesday. And the funeral service for Talia’s friend, Adrienne Garrido, is taking place right now, as we speak, at the St. Joseph’s Church in Needham, and then at the Unitarian Church.

And our entire community has been horrified at the terrible loss of life in Broward County, Florida on Wednesday. Seventeen people, including many children, were gunned down by a former student, who used an AR-15 rifle that he purchased legally a year ago.

The question could be asked, *How can we be thinking about joy or rejoicing?* It seems so *in-apt!* And to a certain extent that is true. After all, a few minutes ago I mentioned that we should drop just about everything to go and read the Megillah on Purim. But I did mention that there is one *mitzvah* that we should not forego.

That is the *mitzvah* called, *met mitzvah* -- the *mitzvah* to tend to the remains of a corpse that has been abandoned. It’s a law in our tradition that if we come upon a

dead body that is unattended, we must drop everything to attend to it. That takes precedence even over the reading of the Megillah.

By extension, I would say the same about comforting mourners. As I imagine everyone knows, we Jews don't customarily sit *shiva* on Shabbat. We don't hold funerals on Shabbat. Non-Jewish people do; witness Adrienne Garrido's funeral being held today. Were I a friend of Adrienne, I would try to go to that funeral today -- as I said to the mother of one of Adrienne's classmates. This is the day her family has set aside to receive well-wishers. Therefore, it would be a great *mitzvah* to be a well-wisher. So yes, comforting mourners does indeed take precedence.

To get back to our first question, can we really will ourselves -- or anyone else -- to be happy? The answer of course, is no. But Rambam reminds us that when we reach out and offer help to the bereft, the discouraged, the depressed, the unfortunate ... -- not only can we offer them some relief, but *we ourselves can experience joy.*

But Maimonides' comment teaches us something very significant. Offering help to the unfortunate not only raises their spirits, it raises our own spirits. And although it isn't possible to will ourselves to simply jump back from sorrow, it is possible to perform acts of loving kindness that can raise spirits. And that is imperative to do during these two weeks leading up to Purim. We should be raising everyone's spirits, as best we can, so that all of us, together, can rejoice on Purim.

For joy, in the Jewish tradition, is not an individual experience, it's a **collective** experience. The miracle of Purim wasn't an individual miracle, it was a **collective** one. Even if we ourselves might be feeling low, it's an act of communal solidarity to share not only the woes of a community, but it's celebrations as well.

By reaching out to others, by lightening their load, we lighten our own, and we strengthen the bonds of community that allow us to feel the joy that comes from being a part of a caring, compassionate community; a caring, compassionate people.

Shabbat Shalom.