

Purim Torah.

This month, we celebrate Purim—a holiday on which we are commanded to drink to the point when we cannot tell the difference “between cursed Haman and blessed Mordecai.” (Megillah 7b) This commandment, though, is a late one. It seems that our ancestors of the early years of the Common Era (C.E.) were not familiar with such customs.

In the days of the Second Temple and after its destruction, Jews were focussed on the commandments to read Megillah and to retell the story of our rescue from certain destruction. It was the Jews of Babylonia who seem to have introduced some of the more frivolous customs into the observance of Purim. Two main factors can be traced to the Babylonian Talmud: “Purim-Torah” and the encouragement of drunkenness.

What is Purim-Torah? It is a playful way of interpreting Torah text using some far-fetched methods of Talmudic logic, and plays on words, in order to reach absurd conclusions.

An exceptional passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Hullin 139b) serves as a model for subsequent Purim-Torah. The passage relates how a visiting rabbi was challenged to find references to Mordecai, Esther and Haman in the Torah. The sage responds to the riddles with audacious, clever puns. For example, ignoring the traditional vocalisation, he finds an allusion to Haman in Genesis 3:11: “Is it from (*hamin*) the tree...” (also hinting at the villain’s hanging); and to Esther in Deuteronomy 31:18, where God says, “I will surely hide (*haster ‘astir*) my face” (recalling Esther’s refusal to disclose her origins to the king). The rabbi finds reference to Mordecai in Exodus 30:23: Flowing myrrh (*mor-dror*) [which the Aramaic translation renders *mira dachia* which words both in spelling and in sound resemble Mordecai]. Perhaps this is also a reference to Mordecai being a leader and superior character, as the spices are referred to as ‘*rosh*,’ choice.

Later customs of wearing masks and costumes were probably influenced by similar customs in the surrounding secular world such as the German *Fastnacht* celebration and the Italian carnivals. After these customs became popular, the idea of dressing up became linked with the idea of God’s “hiding His face” as found in the Talmud!

As we can clearly see, the Rabbis knew how to have fun. They even incorporated the fun into the customs of the holiday. In fact, they took their fun so seriously, that they made Rabbinic commandments concerning how to celebrate. Some later authorities were uncomfortable with the commandment to get drunk (and certainly today we recognise that drunkenness is not a virtue!) Maimonides re-interpreted the ruling to refer to drinking only enough to fall asleep.

Some authorities understood that the Talmud rejected the commandment. They arrive at that conclusion from this Talmudic anecdote:

Rava and Rabbi Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became drunk, and Rava arose and cut R. Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. Next year he said, Will your honour come and we will have the Purim feast together? Zera replied: A miracle does not take place on every occasion. (Megillah 7b)

However we choose to celebrate and fulfil the commandments of Purim, we should keep these principles in mind: have fun, stay safe, and remember to rejoice in the miracle that is our continued Jewish survival.

Chag Purim Sameach!