

Should you get drunk on Purim?

Purim is almost upon us! That's when we Jews remember and celebrate our narrow escape from annihilation at the hands of the evil Haman in ancient Persia. We hear the Megillah being read, we shake our groggers and stomp our feet when we hear the name of Haman, we watch a Purim spiel, we exchange *mishloach manot*, we wear colorful costumes, and we eat a *seudah*, a festive meal that includes delicious hamentashen pastries, usually with prune, apricot, or poppy seed filling. (My favorite filling is bitter orange marmalade, but that's just me.)

There is another tradition on Purim, and that is to drink so much alcohol that you no longer know the difference between "Blessed be Mordechai" and "Cursed be Haman". In Hebrew, "Until you no longer know" is "*adloyada*". Every year on Purim, Israel has a funny parade in the streets, called "*Adloyada*", with a carnival atmosphere befitting drunkenness.

Does the Jewish tradition really enjoin us to get drunk on that day? Is it really a commandment, given that Judaism generally frowns on drinking too much? Let's explore the matter in detail.

The injunction is found in the Talmud, Tractate Megillah. This is what it actually says:

Rava said: "A man must get so drunk on Purim that he no longer knows the difference between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordechai". [Megillah 7b]

The rest of the passage is quite surprising:

Rabbah and Rabbi Zera got together for the Purim feast. They got drunk and Rabbah slaughtered Rabbi Zera. The next day, Rabbah prayed and revived Rabbi Zera. The next year, Rabbah invited Rabbi Zera again for the Purim feast. But Rabbi Zera replied, "[No, thanks,] a miracle may not happen every time". [Megillah 7b]

So, is getting drunk a commandment, or is the murder story that comes right after it meant to cancel it and warn against the dangers of drunkenness? Let's hear what our commentators said on the matter. It is clear that most of them are uncomfortable with the literal interpretation of the Talmudic injunction and try to soften it.

Some report the injunction to get drunk without elaboration. Examples are the Rif, from 11th-century Morocco [on Megillah 3b]; the Rosh, from 13th-century Germany; Tur [on Orach Chaim 695:2]; and even Yosef Caro, from 17th-century Israel, in his authoritative Shulchan Aruch, or Code of Jewish law. Yet, interestingly, the same Rabbi Caro, in his *Bet Yosef* commentary, rejects the literal interpretation and concludes that one should merely drink a tad more than usual.

Some simply ignored the injunction. Works from the Gaonic period (~500-1000 CE) do not mention this passage at all, perhaps implying it may be disregarded. [Shimon Kayara , Halakhot Gedolot, ed. Venice 40b-41a; Halakhot Ketuvot, ed. Margalit, pp 85-87]

Some believe the murder story was meant to cancel the injunction to get drunk, considering that the story comes right after the injunction. Among them are Rabbenu Ephraim of Kala Hamad, a student of the Rif's; Abraham ben Yitzhak of Narbonne, from 12th-century Provence, [Sefer ha-Eshkol]; and the Bakh, from 17th-century Central Europe [on Orach Chayyim 695].

Others, such as the Tosafot and the Meiri, say the injunction refers to a popular song with a lot of verses such as: "Blessed be Mordechai", "Cursed be Haman", "Cursed be Zeresh [Haman's wife]", "Blessed be Esther", "Cursed be all the evil doers", "Blessed be all the Jews", etc. They conclude that, because there are so many verses, it does not require much drinking to begin to get the verses wrong. [Tosafot and Me'iri cite Jerusalem Talmud; song is in Machzor Vitry, p 217; also Sefer Abudraham Hashalem p 209.]

Why get drunk on wine in particular? Some say that that is because the miracle of Purim was achieved with wine. Drunkenness allowed King Ahashverosh to be swayed by Esther. [Magen David, Orach Chayyim 695:1, Abudraham and Chayyei Adam]

Maimonides, from 12th-century Egypt, says:

How does one fulfill the obligation of the Purim feast? One eats meat and prepares a beautiful meal as best he can afford, and drinks wine until he becomes drunk and falls asleep. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Megillah 2:15]

The Rema, from 16th-century Poland, interprets that to mean that there is no need to become very drunk. One simply drinks just beyond what he is accustomed to, and fall asleep. Asleep, he can obviously no longer distinguish between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordechai”! [Glosses on Shulhan Arukh, Orach Chayyim 695:2]
Rabbi Yehiel Epstein, from 19th-century Russia, agrees in his authoritative Arukh HaShulchan. [Arukh Hashulchan OH 695:3]

More generally, Maimonides warns:

When one eats, drinks and rejoices on a festival, he should not drink too much wine or engage in levity or lightheadedness and say he is doing this to obey the commandment to rejoice. Drunkenness, excessive laughter, and lightheadedness are not rejoicing, but rather debauchery and foolishness." [Hilchot Yom Tov 6:20]

Others say that one must not drink if it will interfere with the proper performance of commandments, which takes priority:

If one believes that drinking on Purim will interfere with his performing any mitzvah, such as reciting the Birkat Hamazon, Mincha, or Maariv, or that he will behave in a boorish manner, it is preferable that he not drink at all, so as not to become inebriated. [Biur Halacha on OH 692:2]

Still others say that “until” really means “up to that point”. It is merely an upper limit on drinking. You may therefore not drink at all, or drink only up to that point, but no further. [Sefer ha-Meorot on Megillah 7b; Korban Netanel to the Rosh on Megillah 33b]

Some say it means drinking until one can no longer add up the gematria of “Arur Haman” and “Baruch Mordechai” in his head. (They are both equal to 502, by the way!) [Darkhei Moshe, OC 695:1] For many math-challenged people, this may mean not drinking at all!

Some even say that the injunction is just a Purim joke, as befits the holiday! It reads like a Purim spiel. A rabbi cutting the throat of a friend and colleague whom he invited to dinner? A miracle restoring

him to life? A disingenuous invitation for the next year as if nothing had happened? All this is surely a joke.

Some say only those who enjoy getting drunk and are used to it must follow the injunction, but not those who know drinking will hurt them.

[Yosef ben Moshe, Germany ~1470, in Leket Yosher, ed Freimann, OH 156]; Kaf Hachayyim to OH 695,16]

Some even get personal and say that Rava, the rabbi who issued the injunction to get drunk, may have required getting drunk because it helped his business. Indeed, the Talmud informs us that he was a vintner [Bava Metzia 73a], that he traded in wine [Berakhot 56a], and that he liked to drink wine even on Pessah eve [Pesachim 107b].

Others say it means until you can't decide which is the greater miracle: The defeat of Haman or the victory of Mordechai [Biur HaGr"a; Yad Efraim; Aruch Hashulchan; Mishna Berura]

Others say you must get drunk just enough to no longer be able to thank God for the salvation of Purim. [Taz on OH 695:1; Mishna Berura]

Some borrow a saying from the Talmud:

You may do much or you may do little. It is all one, provided you direct your heart to heaven. [Menachot 110a; Berachot 17a, 5b]

They say it implies that he who drinks a lot and he who drinks a little are equal as long as they direct their hearts to heaven. [Kaf Hachayyim]

At any rate, all commentators agree that no one should ever drink beyond the level permitted by health and proper behavior.

Chag sameach and lechayyim!