

## Between Purim And Passover: Survival and Tolerance (1998)

Can different types of Jews be a part of the same community? According a recent report, a fringe group of ultra-orthodox Rabbis known as the Union of Orthodox Rabbis declared Conservative and Reform Movements to be “not Jewish”. Although this pronouncement was made by a fringe group, we have to wonder: can different types of Jews be a part of the same community?

I’d like to approach this issue by examining some similarities shared by the holidays of Purim and Passover. (No, starting with the letter “P” doesn’t count). Both of these holidays celebrate the redemption of the Jewish people. And both teach lessons about the relationship between survival and tolerance.

One similarity between Purim and Passover is the emphasis on charity. For both holidays, there are specific charities to ensure that the poor can celebrate the holiday properly. On Purim, the book of Esther directs people to give “matanot l’evyonim”, “gifts to the poor”, which the poor can use to celebrate Purim properly. On Passover, the Mishnah (Pesachim 99b) tells us that even the poorest person was outfitted with four cups of wine for the Seder. Even though wine is a luxury item that we wouldn’t normally distribute to the poor, we provide it poor people on the eve of Passover so they can celebrate the Seder properly. There is also a custom to collect “maot chittim” “money for wheat”, which was distributed to poor people to supply them with wheat for Matzo and money for the Passover Seder.

Another similarity is that both holidays emphasize the involvement of children. On Purim, there is a custom to bring young children to hear the Megillah reading (Tur 689). Children dress in costumes and make noise with graggers when Haman’s name is mentioned. On Passover, the entire Seder is structured to get the children to ask questions (Pesachim 109a, 115b). The “four questions” which start the Seder, are recited by the youngest child present. The “afikomen” game, where a piece of Matzo is held “ransom” by the children of the home, is meant to keep the children involved and excited throughout the Seder.

What is the meaning of these similarities? Since both Purim and Passover celebrate survival and redemption, we have large, festive meals. Great care is taken to include all members of the community. On both holidays, hospitality is featured. Even though children are not expected to participate in these holidays until they are older, an exciting, child-friendly atmosphere is created to involve them. The needy, who normally cannot afford these lavish holiday meals, are provided with all their needs. This is because survival includes the entire community, no matter what age or tax bracket. And when celebrating survival, we want to make sure we celebrate as a community, uniting everyone together.

However, if creating a sense of community is the theme of Purim and Passover, a final similarity is quite puzzling. Purim and Passover are the only Jewish holidays that are celebrated on different days by different groups. Purim is celebrated by most communities on the 14th of Adar, and by comm in walled cities on the 15th of Adar. The Passover Seder is celebrated on the 15th of Nissan. However, in ancient times if one could not bring a Passover sacrifice in time for the Seder, they could bring it on the “Second Passover” which was observed a month later, on the

15th of Iyar. If the purpose of these holidays is to create a sense of community, that every last person is included, than why do they allow for such division, for different groups to observe the holidays on different days?

I think the answer is that in order to have community, we must have tolerance. Unity is possible if we don't demand unanimity. Passover and Purim are community holidays, but we have to realize not everyone in the community is alike. And so the two holidays that emphasize community, are the ones that emphasize diversity as well. Unity and tolerance go hand in hand.

This lesson about unity is profoundly important to our people today. As an Orthodox Rabbi, I certainly have enormous disagreements with the Reform and Conservative movements. I do not accept the arguments of those who relativize the differences between our movements, and see us as two sides of the same coin. Realistically, the differences between Orthodoxy and the liberal movements are far too profound to be considered a minor dispute. However, despite these large differences, we can still unite together as one people, if we treat each other with love and tolerance. Unanimity is impossible; people will always have many different opinions. However, we can disagree, without being disagreeable. This is the message of Purim and Passover: A real community must have the flexibility to encompass many different types of people.