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Is Inebriation Really a Mitzvah? Purim & the Journey to Oblivion

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ז עמוד ב

אמר רבא: מיחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי. רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום, קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא. למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה. לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי! - אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 7b

Rava said: One is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until one does not know the difference between “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordekhai.”

Rabbah and Rabbi Zera had the Purim feast together. They became intoxicated. Rabbah arose and slew Rabbi Zera. The next day, Rabbah prayed for mercy and revived him. The next year, [Rabbah] asked him [Rabbi Zera]: “Let Master come and we will have the Purim feast together.” Rabbi Zera answered him: “Not every time does a miracle occur!”

בית הבחירה למאירי מסכת מגילה דף ז עמוד ב

...ומ”מ אין אנו מצווין להשתכר ולהפחית עצמנו מתוך השמחה שלא נצטוינו על שמחה של הוללות ושל שטות אלא בשמחה של תענוג שנגיע מתוכה לאהבת השם והודאה על הנסים שעשה לנו ומה שאמר כאן עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי כבר פירשו קצת גאונים שממה שהזכיר אחריו קם רבא שחטיה לרבי זירא נדחו כל אותם הדברים.

Beit Habehira by Rabbi Menahem Meiri (1249 – c. 1310, Provence)

In any case, we are not commanded to get drunk and denigrate ourselves during this time of joy, for we have not been commanded [to experience] joy in the form of disgrace and stupidity. Rather, [we experience] the joy and delight that comes from a love of God and a thankfulness for the miracles that God bestows upon us. And that which is written: “Until one can discern between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai,’” some Geonim explain this in light of that which follows, namely, that Rabbah rose and slew Rabbi Zera. This story comes to trump what comes before it.

ספר כלבו סימן מה

וחייב אדם לבסומי בפוריא: לא שישתכר שהשכרות אסור גמור ואין לך עבירה גדולה מזו שהוא גורם לגלוי עריות ושפיכות דמים ולכמה עבירות זולתן אך שישתה יותר מלימודו מעט כדי שירבה לשמוח ולשמח האביונים וינחם אותם וידבר על לבם וזו היא השמחה השלמה.

Sefer Kol Bo, Laws of Purim, Ch. 55 (Composed in Provence in early 14th century)

And one is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim: One should not get drunk – for inebriation is completely forbidden. There is no greater sin than this for it causes forbidden sexual relationships, murder, and many other sins. However, one should drink a little more than usual in order to increase happiness and also to create happiness and comfort for the poor. This is full happiness.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים סימן תרצה סעיף ב

חייב אינש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי. הגה: ו"א דא"צ להשתכר כל כך, אלא שישתה יותר מלימודו (כל בו) וישן, ומתוך שישן אינו יודע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי. (מהרי"ל). ואחד המרבה ואחד הממעט, ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 695:2

(R. Joseph Karo, 1488-1575, Turkey & Tz'fat; Gloss by R. Moses Isserles, 1525-1572, Poland)

R. Karo: One is obligated to drink on Purim until one does not know the difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." **R. Isserles:** And there are those who say that one need not get too inebriated, rather, drink a little more than usual and sleep, for during sleep one is unable to make the distinction. And whether one drinks heavily or drinks a small amount - intention toward heaven is required.

משנה ברורה סימן תרצה ס"ק ד

ועיין בא"ז דמ"מ יראה להיות זהיר בענין נט"י וברכת המוציא ובהמ"ז ויהיה שמחה של מצוה.

Mishnah B'rurah, note 4 to 695:2 (R. Israel Ha-Kohen Kagan, 1838-1933, Poland)

And it is shown in Aliyah Zuta that, in any case, one must be careful [to have intention] for washing of the hands, the blessing over bread, and the blessing after the meal. There should be joy in fulfilling these mitzvot.

Jewish Answers to Real Life Questions, page 95.

(Bradley Shavit Artson, Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies)

Dear Rabbi:

I am an alcoholic who has managed to stay sober for the past five years. During that time I've also become more religious. A friend just told me that it is an obligation to become drunk on Purim. Is this true?

Frank, New York

Dear Frank,

It is true that there is a rabbinic saying that on Purim one should be so drunk that it's impossible to distinguish between "blessed is Mordechai" and "cursed is Haman." The intent of this rule is to encourage the kind of exultant joy that Purim represents. Everyone should rejoice on this holiday, and one good way to do it--for many people--is to get a little bubbly. There is no requirement to get drunk, and it needs to be said that being drunk would make it impossible to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the reading of the Megillah. So drinking a bit to encourage revelry is fine; drunkenness is not required.

For the recovering alcoholic, there is a larger issue at stake: It is also a principle of Jewish law that health concerns override ritual requirements (*sakanta hamura m'isura*). Someone who is struggling against alcoholism risks losing control by drinking any amount of alcohol. In such an instance, one is obligated not to drink. But you can still find ways to enjoy the revelry and giddiness of Purim. Wear a costume, prepare a Purim *shpeil*, nosh a hamantashen, and be the designated driver for some of your shul-going friends! Simhat Purim!

עד דלא ידע: Drinking on Purim

Posted on: Wednesday March 7, 2012

By David Golinkin, President, Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies

Note: A version of this article originally appeared with the title Just How Drunk Should a Jew Get on Purim? in Insight Israel: The View from Schechter, Jerusalem: 2003, pp. 27-30.

The Jewish people throughout history has always opposed drunkenness. That is the message of the stories of Noah and Lot (Genesis 9 and 19) as well as of the book of Proverbs (23:30-35). According to our Sages, Nadav and Avihu were killed because they were drunk (*Leviticus Rabbah* 20:9 and parallels), drunkenness leads to forbidden sexual relations (*Ketubot* 65a and *Numbers Rabbah* 10:3) and "there is nothing that causes a person greater lamentation than wine" (*Sanhedrin* 70b).

As a result, it is difficult to fathom the primary Talmudic source related to drinking on Purim (*Megillah* 7b):

Rava said: a person must get drunk on Purim until he cannot distinguish between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai." Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira made a Purim feast together. They got drunk. Rabbah stood up and killed Rabbi Zeira. On the morrow, Rabbah prayed for him and revived him. The following year, Rabbah said to him: "Come, let us celebrate the Purim feast together!" Rabbi Zeira replied: "Miracles don't happen every day!"

Rava's statement begs an explanation. Rabbi David Abudraham (Spain, 14th century) explained that the Sages required drinking on Purim since all of the miracles in the days of Ahashverosh occurred at drinking parties (*Sefer Abudraham*, pp. 209-210). On the other hand, Rava was a vintner (*Berakhot* 56a and *Bava Metzia* 73a) and clearly liked to drink wine (*Pesahim* 107b). As for the strange story, Rabbi H. Z. Reines suggests that the entire episode is a Purim joke (*Hadoar* 5737, p. 266)!

Whatever the simple meaning is, it is clear that the *poskim* (halakhic authorities) throughout the generations felt very uncomfortable with Rava's demand to get drunk on Purim, and therefore each *posek* tried to circumvent the requirement. Here is a sampling of their rulings:

1. Rabbeinu Ephraim (North Africa, 11th century) claimed that the story comes to cancel out Rava's statement and therefore one should **not** get drunk on Purim.^[i]
2. Rabbi Alexander Zusslin Hacoen (Germany, 14th century) explained that "ארור המן" "cursed be Haman" equals "ברוך מרדכי" "blessed be Mordechai" in *gematria* – they both add up to 502! – and it requires less wine to become that intoxicated?^[ii]

3. Rabbi Yosef Haviva (Spain, 15th century) wrote that one should say funny things so that the beholders will think that one cannot distinguish between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai."^[iii]
4. Maimonides (Egypt, 12th century) rules that "he drinks wine until he gets drunk and falls asleep..."^[iv] and this ruling was adopted by Rabbi Moshe Isserles in the *Shulhan Arukh* (Poland, 16th century).^[v]
5. Rabbi Netanel Weil (Germany, 18th century) explained: " 'until' – up to and not including, because otherwise he would reach the drunkenness of Lot."^[vi]
6. Rabbi Aaron of Lunel (Provence, 14th century) commented "that he should drink more than his normal custom in order to rejoice greatly **and to make the poor rejoice** and he shall comfort them ... and that is true joy."^[vii] This is the most original interpretation: that the purpose of drinking on Purim is to help us fulfill the *mitzvah* of *mattanot la'evyonim* (alms to the poor) and not simply to get drunk.
7. Finally, Rabbi Menahem Hameiri (Provence, 14th century) said: "In any case, we are not commanded to get drunk ... for we were not commanded to engage in debauchery and foolishness, but to have heartfelt joy which will lead us to the love of God and to gratitude for the miracles which he performed for us."^[viii]

In recent years, we have witnessed a marked increase in the use of wine and alcohol on Purim. This increase has led, in turn, to an increase in traffic accidents and injuries. These are the ways of Noah, Lot and Ahashverosh – not of the Jewish people throughout its history. The *poskim* understood this significant difference. That is why they ruled: "heartfelt joy," yes, "debauchery and foolishness," no.

May we remember this crucial difference both on Purim and throughout the year.