

SOBERING STORIES FOR PURIM

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

One of the customs associated with Purim is drinking at the Purim feast. This custom serves as a commemoration of the essential role wine played in the miracle of Purim: For example, Vashti was killed because of the intoxicating effects of wine, which allowed Esther to become queen, and at a wine party, Esther was able to turn the tables on Haman. The Talmud (Megillah 7b) states "One is obligated to drink (alcohol) on Purim until one does not know the difference between "Blessed is Mordechai" and "Cursed is Haman." As drinking to excess seems out of place with the norm of Jewish practices, this directive is explained in many ways. Some explain that the "until" is not to be interpreted as an expression of inclusion. Rather, the drinking is to be until the point of incapability to differentiate, exclusive of that state. Others explain that the inability to differentiate arises because one falls asleep from drinking alcohol, and it is in that state one should fulfill this commandment. Whatever the interpretation, all agree that the drinking has to be done with the intent to praise G-d for His miracles and thank Him for saving us. If this is kept in perspective, the celebration can be a truly joyous one, both spiritually and physically.

Rav Elazar Rokeach of Amsterdam was a respected confidant of the Queen of Holland. One year, on Purim, the Queen learned that the dikes around Holland were in danger of collapsing, posing a serious threat of flooding to the entire country. She sent messengers to Rav Elazar, requesting that he pray on behalf of the entire country. Rav Elazar, who was in the midst of his Purim feast, heard the request, and the messengers returned to the Queen. Immediately, he ordered that many more bottles of wine, of the finest wines, be brought to his table, and instructed all those at his home to partake of them and to rejoice. Soon, all were engaged in drink and song, celebrating Purim to the fullest. Later that evening, the Queen wanted to let Rav Elazar know that the dangerous situation was over. When the messengers bearing this message arrived at Rav Elazar's house, they were shocked: Everyone was singing, feasting, and drinking! The messengers immediately returned to the Queen, who was taken aback at this report. She sent a message to Rav Elazar: "I thought that when you heard the terrible news, you would proclaim a fast day, call for mass prayer, act in a way that was illustrative of how dire the situation was. How, then, could you go about your merriment when you knew that the entire country was in peril!"

Rav Elazar explained that "The best way to appease G-d is to do His will. When we listen to His word and fulfill His dictates to the fullest, He acts to us in similar fashion and grants us our requests. On this day, we have the holiday of Purim. We were commanded to rejoice and celebrate. I figured that the best way to ask G-d to help us was to obey His word to the best of my ability. I therefore

celebrated today for the honor of G-d, to the best of my ability. In this way, I hoped that in the merit that I fulfilled G-d's wishes today, so too would He fulfill ours. And indeed, that appears to have happened."

Although we are commanded to engage in merriment on Purim, this commandment does not supersede others. The Rem"a was worried that because his fellow Jews in Krakow were drinking to celebrate Purim, they might forget to recite Ma'ariv, the evening prayers. To assure that this did not occur, he used to go visit the residents of Krakow after nightfall, when the Purim feasts were concluding. The Rem"a would knock on an individual's door, and request water so he could wash his hands. He would then say to himself, yet loud enough that his hosts could hear, "Oh, I need to go pray Ma'ariv!" He went from house to house, repeating this act, to provide a gentle reminder that everyone should not forget, due to the merriment, to pray Ma'ariv.

As with all celebrations in Jewish life, our happiness is not complete because we are in exile, and the Bais HaMikdosh, The Holy Temple, remains in ruins. Rav Nosson Adler used to recite Psalm 137, "Al Naharos Bavel," on Purim. This psalm speaks of our exile and how we will always lift the memory of Jerusalem above our moments of joy. He explained that we have a long standing tradition to temper all moments of joy with the remembrance of the destroyed Jerusalem. Therefore, on Purim, when we have a commandment to celebrate, this custom is not abandoned and we must remember the sad state of the Jewish nation. However, he added that we need to be sure that we raise the memory of Jerusalem above our happiness at the peak of our joy - the time when we are still intoxicated during the Purim feast.

May this be a most joyous Purim for everyone, and may it be the last one we have to spend in exile!
A Freilichin Purim!

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