

UNSETTLED LAW: DRINKING ON PURIM

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The history of Torah acknowledges that there are times that ordinary halacha hits a brick wall. Better yet, it reaches the edge of a cliff. Were we to proceed further along the same course, we would fall off. Somehow, halacha tolerates the idea that the only way to soldier on at such unusual, special times is by abrogating the law. Our system of halacha allows for *horo'as sha'ah*, temporarily permitting a violation of the law in order to save the greater part of the Law. Halacha recognizes the legitimacy of granting such licenses. It recognizes the need for emergency procedures, and sees them as exceptions that are part of the larger halachic system.

Although sanctioned by halacha, actions permitted by these temporary waivers cannot be considered to be the equals of ordinary mitzvos. Something discomfiting and distasteful remains – even though there we are instructed to act upon them, and there is no guilt associated with them. Still, the activity has been touched by *aveirah*, and that makes following them not so comfortable. We participate in it in the same manner as we are instructed to throw a small piece of meat to a hungry stray dog, and immediately hit it with a stick, to ensure that it won't continue to follow us.^[2] We want to do the right thing, but the point is to be rid of something we don't want around us as well.

The source of this fact of life is Amalek, and the disconnection with truth with which he afflicts us. It should therefore be no surprise that on the day we mark our triumph over him, we engage in a practice that belongs in the realm of *horo'as sha'ah*. Drinking beyond our usual, restrained intake plunges us into the world of the physical – not a place we ordinarily go. Here, too, the very practice accomplishes a greater good. It chokes the *sitra achra*, freeing us from its grip.

The mitzvah of wiping out Amalek belongs to this category as well. We fulfill it through keeping our hatred of him alive, and resorting to bloodshed to vanquish him. Those are not admirable, desirable traits and actions. Yet, they must be taken up to achieve the Torah's goal. We are not given an alternative. We follow Hashem's instruction – but we feel wounded by the process.

With this we can understand the strange behavior of Shaul before the battle with Amalek. According to Chazal,^[3] Shaul wrestled with himself concerning the planned extermination of so many people. How could it be, he told himself? The Torah demands the performance of an elaborate ceremony of absolution when a single murder victim is found. How dear human life is to Hashem! How could He ask us to destroy an entire people? Thousands of years later, however, we have a hard time

understanding how Shaul – picked directly by Hashem to be the king - could second-guess HKBH, rather than obey His direct command!

Shaul did not act inappropriately. He understood the point of *horo'as sha'ah*, the times we are asked to act in a manner inconsistent with ordinary Torah behavior. He understood that the war against Amalek required his involvement with hatred and bloodshed. Had he deadened himself to the incongruity of what he was asked to – if he forged ahead without experiencing the moral difficulty - he knew that he would not be fulfilling Hashem's expectation.

Every mitzvah is sourced in unity; every *aveirah* in separation and disunion. A mitzvah can and should be performed with the united wills of body and soul. An *aveirah* is never performed with such unity; the soul can never approve. *Horo'as sha'ah* is unique as a commanded activity that nonetheless cannot be performed with internal concurrence and pleasure. The tension persists between the joy of carrying out Hashem's instruction, and the displeasure of having an *aveirah* turn into the basis for a mitzvah. Shaul involved himself in this tension by shunning the hatred and bloodshed, even as he prepared himself to carry it out nonetheless.

Shaul's error was one of degree. Any resistance has to be measured. Should it be excessive, even in the slightest, the results can be catastrophic – as they were for Shaul.

The descent into *chomriyus* that is the mitzvah of drinking on Purim has its limit. Once a person does not know the difference between *baruch Mordechai* and *arrur Haman*, he is relieved of further obligation. That is because once he senses the *baruch* in everything, he has defeated the separation and disunion brought on by Amalek.

At that point, there is no longer any need for a *horo'as sha'ah* aimed at defeating Amalek.

1. Based on Mei Marom, Shemos, Maamar 81
2. Shabbos 155B
3. Yoma 22B