

# THE TRUE PURIM EXPERIENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*They got up early the next day and offered burnt-offerings and brought peace-offerings. The people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to make merry. (Shemos 32:6)*

This Shabbos is Shushan Purim Katan. This means that had it not been a Jewish leap year, it would be Purim, at least for those people living in cities whose walls date back to the time of Yehoshua bin Nun. However, being Shabbos, they would celebrate Purim on Sunday instead.

But, even though it is not Purim until next month, it is still a holy day today, or rather, an even holier day, since it is also Shabbos, and a time for additional joy. It is a time to make merry, as the verse above mentions, except not in the way that the people of the golden calf did. Their party led to their deaths; ours has to lead to a higher level of spiritual existence.

This is different from the oneg of Shabbos and the simchah of Yom Tov. On Shabbos there is a mitzvah of oneg, to do those activities, or to eat those foods, that give us physical pleasure, provided that they can be used to increase our sense of oneness with God, and our appreciation of the holiness of Shabbos.

Though we partake of physical pleasures on Yom Tov as well, the mitzvah is one of simchah, that is, to get into an intellectual mindset that throws us back to Temple times. This is why eating meat and drinking wine is more of a mitzvah of Yom Tov, because the meat is an allusion to the sacrifices that were brought up to the Temple of Yom Tov, and the wine alludes to the libation that accompanied the sacrifices.

However, mishteh is a different experience, as is Purim. For, as the Leshem explains, the holiday of Purim is rooted in the sefirah of Chochmah—Wisdom—which is why it is the last holiday to go. Even after Yom Kippur no longer requires a special day to access its holy light in the eighth millennium, Purim will still be a unique time. Only in the ninth millennium will the light of Purim shine everyday, at a very advance stage of Olam HaBah—the World-to-Come.

This means that when Purim occurs for us now, a spiritual portal opens up that allows us access to the light of the ninth millennium, the light of the sefirah of Chochmah. This is not true for Shabbos, which gives us access to the light of the seventh millennium for a day, or Yom Kippur, which gives us access to the light of the eighth millennium for a day.

Purim, it seems, is the World-to-Come incognito. Indeed, so-much-so that many people who

celebrate it miss the portal altogether, either because their celebration of Purim more closely resembles the one in this week's parshah before the golden, or their Purim is so subdued it could almost be confused for Yom Kippur.

What is the key to unlocking the true Purim experience?

The Talmud says regarding a child in the womb about to be born:

*A candle is lit on his head and he is able to see from one end of the world until the other end ... There isn't a better period for a person than these days ... They teach him all of Torah ... and as he enters the world, an angel hits him on his mouth and he forgets it. (Niddah 30b)*

Forgets it? Completely? What was the point of teaching the unborn child all of Torah in the first place if not for it to enter the world already knowing all of Torah, at least on some level? If so, then what was the cause of forgetfulness, and why must a person undergo this process?

Almost everyone has seen a picture of a fetus in the womb, suspended in liquid, dormant. If we didn't know better, we'd think that the baby, even just moments away from delivery, wasn't alive, God forbid. Yet, as the baby enters the outside world, all of a sudden it wakes up, and in a big way. As it gasps for air it cries, and it continues to cry until it finally calms down.

From that point onward, life outside the womb is nothing like it was on the inside. The body that was dormant is now very much alive, demanding attention, stealing the show to such an extent that it can be quite easy to forget that it is merely a house for the soul inside of it. In fact, as the baby becomes a child, then an adolescent, then a teenager, and finally an adult, the prominence of the body become even stronger as the need for independent survival increases the involvement of the body in everyday affairs.

"I remember those days in the womb," the soul says with a sad fondness. "Those were the days when the body was neutral, and we didn't have a physical care in the world! In fact," the soul continues, "I was the main event, as angels came down and shared the entire Torah with me, greatly enhancing my relationship with God and my sense of self."

"But then came birth," the soul continues, with a sense of sad withdrawal. "All of a sudden, I had no one to talk to ... no one with whom I could share my knowledge and experiences. When I want to speak, I have to do it through a body that can't even talk intelligently. When I want to pursue greater spiritual heights, this body to which I am attached, and which feeds off of me for survival, chases after the material world instead. It should be asking me for directions in life, but instead I am forced to follow its every whim!"

It's like interviewing a brilliant man, who happened to bring along his agent. Even though you pose the questions to the brilliant man, the agent always jumps in and answers instead, obviously not to

the same degree that his client would, given the chance. Even the genius gets frustrated, because though he keeps opening his mouth to answer a question, he can't a word in edgewise.

Likewise, the soul would like to speak, but every time it tries to, the body jumps in and steals the show, usually misrepresenting it. How many times the soul must cringe when it hears what the body has to say on behalf of both of them. How often the soul must want to escape and run the other way when it sees what the body is up to, and the way it is behaving.

*I created the yetzer hara and I created Torah as its spice. (Kiddushin 30b)*

A spice can work in one of two ways. Either it can enhance the taste of something that is weak, or it can weaken the taste of something that is strong. This is why the rabbis chose the word 'spice' to refer to Torah, and not something more vague. They are indicating that Torah can be used to either spiritually strengthen a person where they are weak, or to weaken the yetzer hara when it is too strong, and in some cases, even neutralize it for a period of time.

For example, the mitzvah of tefillin puts a person in a spiritual frame of mind that makes it easier to think like God, as does the learning of Torah. Other mitzvos create an environmental change, such as Shabbos and Yom Tov, that have the same effect on a more public scale. They create a tefillin effect in an all-encompassing way, allowing a person to reach greater heights of spiritual consciousness, neutralizing the body at least to the extent that it is forced—depending upon how seriously one takes Shabbos and Yom Tov— to take a break from mundane activities for about 25 hours.

But I have been a lot of Shabbos tables, and on many occasions, the body still fought to steal the show. For Shabbos to really work, everyone has to be on the same spiritual page, or close to it. Otherwise, while some of the people at the table are trying to have a spiritual experience, others keep trying to turn the Shabbos table into a more mundane, week-like activity.

Shabbos is a compromise between the body and the soul. The soul says to the body, like a mother might say to her complaining child, "If you behave yourself, I'll feed you well." The soul tells the body, "You let me do my thing on Shabbos, and I will reward you with things that you like to do, like eating good food, for example."

But, just as a child has difficulty keeping his word sometimes, being a child, the body can also have difficulty sticking to its part of the bargain, even though the soul has, and still on Shabbos act occasionally below par. I have witnessed first hand at my own Shabbos table how easily things can become undone, and the next thing you know you are struggling to resume a higher level of spirituality befitting Shabbos.

In the cartoons, when someone acted out of line and didn't respond to polite insistence, they bopped the person on the head, after which he usually saw stars, heard birds chirping, and became totally submissive to the commands of others. The hit on the head neutralized the personality of the

obnoxious person until only his most basic functions were working, allowing everyone else to behave more naturally.

We may not knock the body out on Purim by hitting ourselves over the head, but we do it with wine instead. The point of wine on Purim is to neutralize the body, so that it steps aside for a period and lets the soul be itself. With the proper amount of wine, a body seems content just to sit around and feel good.

Of course you have to be careful. Sometimes a body can get so drunk that it becomes even more obnoxious than it was while sober. How many people have had to carry their friends home, forced to listen to all kinds of abuse while the person remained without his senses? How many Purims have been ruined by people who drank for drinking's sake, and became drunk to the point of ridiculousness, if not worse. Instead of Purim, it was the golden calf revisited.

To help myself recall the point of the drinking on Purim, and to prepare myself for a holy experience, I drink from my Shabbos Kiddush cup. In fact, I set up my first drink as I do for Kiddush on Shabbos, and make a declaration, before drinking the wine, what I intend to accomplish through the drinking. Then, completely focused and with a tremendous sense gratitude to God for allowing me to celebrate another Purim, I make my brochah very slowly and with a tremendous amount of concentration.

I also begin my mishteh—drinking feast—with an agenda, what I hope to spiritually accomplish that day, even preparing certain material to refer to, if necessary. With my body neutralized, I plan to access that heavenly knowledge, as much as possible, that angel shared with me inside the womb. With the source of my forgetfulness on the sideline, it is far easier to recall what I was once taught.

And lastly, it is important to surround yourself with like-minded people, friends and family that can either give good divrei Torah or listen to them, or ideally, both. With these elements in place, the rest of Purim seems to take care of itself, and the feeling of pure simchah is tremendous.

I know I have been successful if, by the end of Ma'ariv that night, after I have sobered up and Purim has clearly moved on for another year, I feel a sense of spiritual accomplishment. If everything has gone right, then I will have gained valuable insight into life that day, and that is what I will take away even after Purim has passed.

For, when God sees people acting like souls, celebrating life for the sake of becoming more God-like, then He opens up His well-springs of wisdom for the souls that have gained their freedom, if only temporarily, and thirst for soul-knowledge. It is such knowledge that allows a soul to grow, to become rectified, and stronger to the point that even the body is forced to move up a spiritual notch or two.

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