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## Purim

### The Purim Drunk

By Yanki Tauber

#### Question:

Are Jews actually supposed to get drunk on Purim? I understand there is a statement in the Talmud to that effect, but perhaps it is not to be taken literally? It seems such an unJewish thing to do! Surely there are other, more refined and more spiritual ways of celebrating and showing joy!

#### Answer:

The source of this practice is a passage from the Talmudic tractate Megillah (7b):

*Rava said: A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai"*

The issue of whether and how Rava's statement should be implemented in practice is a matter of disagreement between various Halachic authorities. The question, however, is not what Rava means, but whether or not the Talmud contains another opinion, contrary to Rava's (see Ran and Baal HaMaor on Talmud, Megillah 7b; Bach and Beit Yosef on the Tur, Orach Chaim, 695).

Many of the greatest Halachists follow Rava's ruling. Maimonides writes: "What is the obligation of the [Purim] feast? That one should eat meat ... and drink wine until he is drunk and falls asleep from drunkenness" (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah, 2:15). The Rif, Rosh, Tur and Shulchan Aruch all cite Rava's dictum without any qualification. The Rama, on the other hand, comments that "There are others who say that one need not become that drunk, but rather that one should drink more than is one's custom." The Rama concludes: "Whether one drinks more or drinks less, the main thing is that his intention is for the sake of Heaven."

To summarize: All Halachic authorities are unanimous in ruling that it is a mitzvah to drink, and drink to excess, on Purim, though there are differences of opinion as to whether the obligation is to get as drunk as



Rava enjoins, or to a lesser degree. In any case, the concept of becoming intoxicated on Purim to the point that one's reason is totally incapacitated is a legitimate Halachic position, which requires understanding and validation regardless of whether or not it is accepted in practice.

Our grandparents knew that *shikker is ah goy*--Jews don't get drunk. How, then, do we reconcile the Halachah to get drunk on Purim with our understanding of the kind of life that the Torah commands us to lead? Can we allow ourselves to relinquish control over our behavior one day a year, or even once in a lifetime? Can we abnegate our awareness of the difference between good and evil for even a single moment?

The drunk that most people know (from TV, the neighborhood bar, or, unfortunately, in their own homes) is a vulgar and often violent creature. Is this because drinking generates vulgarity and violence? Obviously not. What excessive drink does is cloud the intellect and incapacitate cognition, freeing the passions of the heart from their internal jurist and regulator. The drunk who beats his wife also desires to beat her when sober; it is only that when sober, his mind is capable of recognizing the folly of the deed and of controlling his behavior. The drunk who shouts obscenities in the street is only expressing thoughts and urges he harbors all the time, but which he usually has sense enough to keep to himself.

But if the intellect stems what is worst in us, it also stymies what is best in us. We all know the feeling of being unable to "find the words" to adequately convey our thoughts, which are so much more subtle than the words and idioms available to us in the languages in which we speak and write. But reason itself is a "language" which captures but an infinitesimal fraction of what is sensed and felt by our deepest selves. To live a rational life is to filter our essentially supra-rational self through the constricting lens of reason. To confine our relationship with G-d, our people, and our family to the realm of the intelligible is to repress all but a finite facet of their infinite depth and scope.

For 364 days a year, we have no other choice. Our mind must exercise complete control over our emotions and behavior, lest the animal in us rage rampant and trample to death all that is good in ourselves and our world. Furthermore, we need the mind not only as guardian and regulator, but also as facilitator of our highest potentials. It is the mind that navigates the workings of nature, enabling us to sustain and improve our lives in the service of our Creator; it is the mind that recognizes the goodness and desirability in certain things and the evil and danger in others, thereby guiding, developing and deepening our loves and aversions, our joys and fears; it is with our minds that we imbibe the wisdom of the Torah, allowing us an apprehension of the divine truth.

If the mind does all these things within the finite parameters of reason, concealing galaxies of knowledge with every ray of light it reveals and suppressing oceans of feeling with every drop it distills, it remains the

most effective tool we have with which to access the truths that lie buried in the core of our souls and reside in the subliminal heavens above.

But there is one day in the year in which we enjoy direct, immediate access to these truths. This day is Purim. The Jew who rejoices on Purim--who rejoices in his bond with G-d without equivocation--has no need for reason. For he is in touch with his truest self--a self before which his animalistic drives are neutralized, a self which requires no medium by which to express itself and no intermediaries by which to relate to its source in G-d.

The Jew who rejoices on Purim no longer requires the mind to tell him the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai"; he is above it all, relating to the divine truth that transcends the bifurcation of good and evil. For the Jew who rejoices on Purim, the mind is utterly superfluous, something which only encumbers the outpouring of his soul, something which only quantifies and qualifies that which is infinite and all-pervading. So he puts his mind to sleep for a few hours, in order to allow his true self to emerge.

### **The Marriage Broker**

I once heard a parable that explained the mitzvah of getting drunk on Purim in the following way:

A time-honored institution in many Jewish communities is the *shadchan*, or marriage broker. The *shadchan* is more than a "dating service"; he is a middleman who accompanies the deal from its inception all the way to its conclusion. He meets with the respective families, notes their desires, demands and expectations, and presents them with a proposal. He then presides over the negotiations, convincing each side to make the concessions required so that the deal can be closed. Then the boy meets the girl, and the *shadchan's* work begins in earnest. The boy wanted someone more beautiful, the girl wanted someone with better prospects. The *shadchan* explains, cajoles, clarifies and exaggerates; he gives long speeches on love and what is important in life. He succeeds in arranging a second meeting and then a third. More meetings follow, and the engagement is formalized. In the critical months between the engagement and the wedding, the *shadchan* advises, encourages, assuages doubts and heads off crises.

Then comes the wedding. The bride and groom stand under the canopy, and the *shadchan* is the proudest man in attendance. At this point, the *shadchan* is discreetly taken aside and told: "Thank you very much for what you did. Without you, this union could never have been achieved. Now take your commission and get out of our lives. We don't want to see you ever again."

In the cosmic marriage between G-d and Israel, the intellect is the *shadchan*. Without it, the relationship could not have been realized. But there comes a point at which the *shadchan's* brokering is no longer

needed, for something much deeper and truer has taken over. At this point, the *shadchan's* continued presence is undesirable, indeed intolerable.

Purim is a wedding at which the *shadchan* has been shown the door, a feast celebrating the quintessential bond between G-d and Israel. There are "drunks" at this feast who have achieved a state of cognitive oblivion; but in no other way do they resemble the stereotypical drunk.

You will not see them hurling fists, insults or obscenities at each other, or slobbering over their domestic troubles. You will see outpourings of love to G-d and to man. You will see pure, unbridled joy.

You will see people who are disciplined and aware: not with a discipline imposed by the watchdog of reason, not with an awareness brokered by the mind, but with a discipline and awareness which derive from the uninhibited expression of the spark of divine truth that is the essence of the human soul.

**BY YANKI TAUBER**

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