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Purim

Purim & Alcohol

Do I have to get drunk on Purim?

By Tzvi Freeman

Question:

I'm going to sound like a nerd, but I'm not. Do I have to drink on Purim?

Response:

Purim is not about drinking. Purim is about being drunk with sincere happiness.

Traditionally, Jews have celebrated Purim by drinking a little extra wine at their Purim feast with friends, and if that gets you there, then it's the halachically prescribed way to do the mitzvah. If all drinking does is make you sick or do stupid things, then it goes against everything that Purim is about.¹ If you are planning to drive, or you know that drinking can otherwise get you in trouble, then alcohol might as well be pork juice.²

So, what's the whole story with people drinking on Purim? Why is Purim the holiday that's not just happy, but totally, insanely nuts?

Here's the story, straight and simple: Two and a half thousand years ago, the Jews in Shushan were delirious with joy. We're not talking just happiness, but an explosive, spontaneous mass celebration that nobody had ever experienced since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. So they wanted that for all generations, Jews should experience the same ecstatic celebration that they felt then.

Why were they so insanely happy? Not just because they were finally rid of Haman's antisemitic thugs who had been harassing them for an entire year. It was deeper than that. It was because they had withstood an awesome challenge and came out with flying colors.

You see, this was the first time Jews had experienced antisemitism as an exiled nation. They had been picked out from all the other conquered peoples of the Persian empire for persecution because they were,



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well, just different. Any of them could have easily escaped that persecution and threat of annihilation just by deciding to be *not* different. By saying, hey, I'm just another Persian citizen. Speak Persian. Eat Persian. Do Persian stuff. Worship Persian idols. Simple. Like they say, why beat 'em when you can join 'em?

And why shouldn't they have joined them? They had already gotten the boot out of the Promised Land. And at that point, the prophet Jeremiah had told them the exile was going to last 70 years. Well, they had counted the 70 years, and everyone figured it was up. And they were still in exile.

Worst of all, only a few years back they had actually started returning and rebuilding in Jerusalem, by royal decree. And then, after just one year, the whole project was axed by a new king's royal decree. You know what it's like when you see the light at the end of the tunnel—and then it goes out? Or, what if that light turns out to be a locomotive coming at you at full throttle?

Which is just how things looked then. The entire nation was under threat of termination, extinction and utter annihilation. And G-d is nowhere to be found. So it would have been a simple, excusable, knee-jerk reaction for those Jews to say, "Look, He abandoned us, so why shouldn't we abandon Him?"

But they didn't. Every last Jew stood up and said, "I'm a Jew and I'm proud! Haman and his thugs can do what they want! I was born a Jew, and I'll die one too!"

As you can imagine, they were fairly stressed out that year. But then comes the big civil war where Haman's thugs come out in full force, and whaddayaknow, the Jews fight back and are miraculously saved! They see the G-d of Israel is still on their side! So they break out the champagne and celebrate. Deliriously.

In many ways, Purim was like a second birth for the Jewish People. The first time they were born was at the foot of Mount Sinai, when they heard G-d telling them, "I'm your G-d; you are My people. Now, this is what you have to do . . ."

At that time, they didn't really have much choice. I mean, here's a G-d who just liberated you from slavery amidst fantasmic miracles and hi-tech wonders, fed you bread from the sky and water out of a rock. And He's choosing *you* for His people, with a promised land of milk and honey to boot. Who could turn down such an offer?³

But this time was the real birth, the true bonding of the Jewish people with one another and with their G-d. Because this time they had every excuse to cop out. And they didn't. This time was for real.

So, that explains the wild celebration. When the Jewish nation was born the first time around, everyone was also pretty euphoric. They say that at every word G-d spoke, the souls of those Jews took flight.

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Special angels had to be appointed to stuff their souls back into their bodies each time. If that was so back then, you can imagine the euphoria when they were born for real this time around. And the Jews of Shushan wanted you to feel that exhilaration, that rapture, that jubilant ecstasy and bliss, every year again and again.

Okay, so how are you going to get there? You've got your own worries and concerns around your neck, anchoring you down and nailed into a body on earth. You need to break out. You need to be set free to fly in the ecstatic, egoless joy that they felt then.

Well, in the Talmud, Rava gives this advice for transcending the ego: "A person has to get drunk on Purim until he cannot distinguish between 'cursed is Haman' and 'blessed is Mordechai.'"⁴ That works for some people, especially those so high on their Jewishness already. Like they say, "Wine goes in and secrets come out."⁵ Some people's secret self is pretty holy. But the rest of us . . . well, we all know our own secrets.

Fortunately, there are alternatives.⁶ Some pretty good ones, too. Keeping in mind that you have to: a) give gifts to two poor people, b) give a food package to one friend, and c) celebrate a Purim feast (with a few *l'chaims*), here are some enhanced methodologies for an ultimate Purim:

- Snap on a bright red nose, a curly purple wig and a lunatic smile. Drop into a retirement home or hospital and make an utter fool of yourself, just to cheer up all the lonely people. Nobody has to ever find out who you are. If you visit the psychiatric ward, just make sure you have a way to get out when you're done.
- Hire a clown and offer to be his sidekick. Go with him to the local children's hospital. Take along a pack of lollipops. Go wild.
- Fill a shopping cart with groceries for a whole family. Drop in unexpected on some jobless immigrant family who can't pay their rent. Fill up the fridge and write a check for the rent. Leave some toys for the kids.⁷
- Dress yourself up along with your kids in full Purim gear. Run around your neighborhood the entire day delivering Purim packages (*mishloach manot*) to Jewish neighbors who've never heard of the whole thing. Continue until you collapse on the couch at the end of the day. Do this two years in a row, and you will transform your neighborhood.

I'll bet, if you put your mind to it, you can think of way more. Or maybe don't use your mind. On occasions like this, you might get further losing your mind a little. All in a good way.⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. Proof that you do not need to drink comes from Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, a sage of the Mishnah. Rabbi Yehudah taught that we are obligated to drink four cups of wine at the Passover Seder, even if it makes us sick. He said about himself that he drank all four cups even though that made him so sick that he was incapable of drinking any wine until 51 days later, on Shavuot. Apparently, then, as those who deal with halachah point out (Shaloh, Shaarei Teshuvah), he couldn't have drunk any wine on Purim—since then he would be unable to drink on Passover, which is only 30 days later. This is cited as proof that on Purim, unlike Passover, the drinking in and of itself is not a mitzvah. There *is* a mitzvah to be drunk—but there are other ways to accomplish this, as explained later.
2. In the words of Orchot Chaim, cited by Beit Yosef (Orach Chaim 695:2): “To be thoroughly drunk is completely forbidden. There is no greater sin than this, for it leads to adultery, bloodshed, and many other sins besides. Rather, you should drink a little more than you are accustomed to.”

And here is Maimonides, discussing drinking on other holidays: “When a person eats and drinks on a festival, he should not get pulled into the wine and laughter and frivolity, saying that the more of this, the greater the mitzvah of rejoicing on a festival. For drunkenness and too much laughter and frivolity are not rejoicing, but wild and stupid behavior. We were not commanded to be wild or stupid. We were commanded to rejoice, because this is a way to serve the Creator of all things, as it says ([Deuteronomy 28:47](#)), ‘Because you did not serve the L-rd your G-d out of joy and with a good heart when you had everything.’ This teaches that serving G-d must be with joy. But it is impossible to serve G-d in the midst of mockery, frivolity and drunkenness” (Mishneh Torah, Hil. Yom Tov 6:20).

3. See Talmud, Shabbat 88a, where the rabbis claim it was downright coercion. They even go so far to say that the acceptance at the Torah at Mount Sinai was outright iffy due to this legal technicality—if not for the authentic, fully volitional acceptance on Purim.
4. Talmud, Megillah 7b. Cited as the halachah in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 695:2.
5. “Wine” (*yayin*) and “secret” (*sod*) have the same numerical value (*gematria*) in Hebrew.
6. Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Hil. Megillah ve-Chanukah 2:15) provides this option: “What are a person’s obligations at this feast? One must eat meat and prepare a fine meal according to what one can afford. One should drink wine until he is drunk, and fall asleep in his stupor.”
7. A final note from Maimonides, near the end of the laws of Purim (2:17): “Better that a person should increase his gifts to the poor on Purim than to expand his Purim feast and gifts of food to his friends. For there is no greater and more beautiful celebration than to make happy the poor, the orphan, the widow and the immigrant. One who rejoices the hearts of these sorrowful people is similar to the Divine Presence, as the prophet says ([Isaiah 57:15](#)), ‘To revive the spirit of the downtrodden and to revive the heart of the oppressed.’”
8. On all the above, see Likkutei Sichot, vol. 31, p. 177.

BY TZVI FREEMAN



Rabbi [Tzvi Freeman](#), a senior editor at Chabad.org, also heads our Ask The Rabbi team. He is the author of [Bringing Heaven Down to Earth](#). To subscribe to regular updates of Rabbi Freeman's writing, visit [Freeman Files](#) subscription.

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