



Purim & Parshat Ki Tisa - 14 March 2025 Shabbat times start 5:47 finishes 6:55

Rabbi Yanky 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 concept of becoming intoxicated on Purim 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.

The Purim Drunk

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.

An El Al passenger jet from New York to Tel Aviv was suffering through a severe thunderstorm. As the passengers were being bounced around by the turbulence, a woman turned to a rabbi sitting next to her and with a nervous laugh asked, "Rabbi, you're a man of God. Can't you do something about this storm?" To which he replied, "Sorry, I'm in sales, not management."

Miriam Feinstein decided to take up meditating and she was always preaching its benefits to her husband Moishe. That's why when he suddenly started asking some questions about it, seemingly expressing interest, she got excited that they could share this experience together.

"You don't have to close your eyes, Moishe," Miriam explained. "You can keep them open and focus on something like a candle or a spot in front of you."

Moishe nodded thoughtfully. "Could it be a TV?"

The brotherhood at congregation Beth Israel was having a poker night and when Barry Coleman arrived he was astonished to find his friend Allan playing at a table with a few men and of all things – a dog.

"This is a very smart dog," Barry said to Allan in disbelief.

"Not so smart," Allan replied. "Every time he gets a good hand he wags his tail."

Story time

Tired, starved, and downtrodden, we Jewish prisoners plodded into the barracks where we spent a few miserable hours on hard bunks before another day of backbreaking labor. We were too exhausted to think, but when our minds wandered back to times long gone, we could not help but wonder if it had all been a dream. Would we ever live again as we once had, before our parents and children had been murdered, and we were dropped into an unending hellish existence where death seemed to be a welcome (and inevitable) reprieve? It was Purim eve, but what was there for us to celebrate in the German concentration camp of Gross-Rosen? Suddenly, one of us leaped down from his small space on the bunk and began an impassioned speech that will forever remain in my memory:

"My fellow Jews," he called out, "dear brothers in suffering! Today is our Purim, when we remember the miracles G-d did for our ancestors. He who dwells in Heaven saved our nation from being decimated. The enemy fell into the pit that he himself had dug. Today we once again have a double-edged sword pressed against our necks. Our enemies are trying to destroy us, but do not allow terror into your hearts! The Haman of our day, Hitler and his lackeys, will not be able to overcome G-d's chosen nation. The eternity of Israel will not lie. The bells of freedom are already ringing in the distance. We will yet live to see justice meted out against our enemies, just like our ancestors in Shushan of old. Be strong, brothers, the Jewish nation lives on!"

Beads of sweat appeared on his face. His lips trembled, his eyes glistened, but he said no more.

Then another prisoner jumped down from his bunk and took his place next to the orator. Sweetly, with a voice laden with nostalgia and hope, he sang the words of the blessing said after the Megillah reading, in which we thank G-d "Who fights our battles and pays comeuppance to our mortal enemies."

As the rest of us absorbed the last echoes of the tune, the two men lithely climbed back into their spots on the tiered bunking and silence reigned once again.

In our minds, we were blissfully transported back to the happy Purims of years past, but we knew the joy would not last.

The following morning, the block commander stormed into the barrack: "Cursed Jews!" he shouted. "Last night someone here spoke disparagingly of our Führer. Tell me who it was! If I do not know who it was, you will all be punished before the day is done!"

His words were met with defiant silence.

His face appeared angrier, and his voice became louder. "Dirty Jews!" he called out shrilly. "I am giving you 10 minutes to identify last night's speakers. Make no mistake about it, your lives are on the line."

Ten minutes passed, and no one uttered a word.

"Run, swine, run!" the commander barked, and we Jews began to run as fast as we could, while the guards rained down a shower of rifle butts and whips upon our heads and backs. "Quick, quick," they shouted as rivers of blood spurted from our heads and our arms. Our backs sagged and our feet ached.

But we had only one fear: that last night's brave performers, who had gifted us with hope and courage, would give themselves up in order to save us from further suffering. One even tried to run out of line to identify himself, but his neighbors didn't allow it. "No, no," they hissed with clenched teeth, "Stay strong. We are all responsible for one another."

I have no way of recalling how long this went on, because every moment felt like eternity. We ran with our last strength, panting, with no air to breathe. Our tongues hung out, and tears mingled with sweat on our cheeks. But no one even considered rattling on the heroes of the previous night.

Yes, even the prisoners of Gross-Rosen merited their own Purim miracle—two miracles, actually: That no one dropped dead from the diabolic run we were forced to endure, and that we all had the courage to keep the identity of those two men secret.

Inspiration for the nation

The world is absurd. Ugly absurd. To repair ugly absurdity, you can't just be normal. You need an alternative absurdity. A beautiful absurdity.

We call it "divine madness." Divine madness means dancing like a fool at your friend's wedding because you love him so much. Divine madness means walking out of a busy office where everybody needs you on Friday afternoon so you can light Shabbat candles on time.

Divine madness means driving back and forth every day to take your kid to a Jewish school even though there's a good public school just down the street.

It means acting the clown on Purim, visiting the sick, the elderly, and the confined instead of going to work or to school that day.

Yes, it's crazy. But, hey, did you really think normal people are going to save the world?

Parsha Summary

The name of the Parshah, "Ki Tisa," means "When you take" and it is found in Exodus 30:11.

The people of Israel are told to each contribute exactly half a shekel of silver to the Sanctuary. Instructions are also given regarding the making of the Sanctuary's water basin, anointing oil and incense. "Wise-hearted" artisans Betzalel and Aholiav are placed in charge of the Sanctuary's construction, and the people are once again commanded to keep the Shabbat.

When Moses does not return when expected from Mount Sinai, the people make a golden calf and worship it. G-d proposes to destroy the errant nation, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. Moses descends from the mountain carrying the tablets of the testimony engraved with the Ten Commandments; seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then returns to G-d to say: "If You do not forgive them, blot me out from the book that You have written."

G-d forgives, but says that the effect of their sin will be felt for many generations. At first G-d proposes to send His angel along with them, but Moses insists that G-d Himself accompany His people to the promised land.

Moses prepares a new set of tablets and once more ascends the mountain, where G-d reinscribes the covenant on these second tablets. On the mountain, Moses is also granted a vision of the divine thirteen attributes of mercy. So radiant is Moses' face upon his return, that he must cover it with a veil, which he removes only to speak with G-d and to teach His laws to the people.