

Drunk on Purim

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the most distasteful aspects of Purim are the hordes of drunken acolytes throwing up on the streets of religious ghettos around the world. To make it worse, they claim to be doing this in the name of religion. From the Bible onwards, the wise have excoriated drunkenness. It is an impediment to priests performing, to people praying, and an affront to human dignity. It reduces us to a complete lack of self-control and is a desecration of everything genuine spirituality reveres. If "wine gladdens the heart of man", drunkenness destroys it. Pleasure is good. But it is a feature of the physical world in general that any pleasure taken to extremes cloys, and drunkenness is the most obvious.

Yet the Talmud says that a person should drink so much wine on the day that he can no longer distinguish between "Let Haman be cursed," and "Let Mordecai be blessed." There is some debate about the Aramaic word used. Normally in the Bible and later, the Hebrew word for a drunk is Shikur. Here the Talmud uses the Aramaic Besumeh, which is used for such things as being merry, perfumed wine, or spices. But these are unlikely to befuddle the mind to the point of irrationality. And the Talmud itself describes an occasion when one drunk rabbi killed another on Purim, which led, unsurprisingly, to a reaction!

Nevertheless, the command to drink on Purim found its way into medieval Jewish law—even though the glossaries add that it is better not to get drunk. The rational Maimonides is clear about priorities:

"Rather a person should increase the amount he gives to the poor than the amount he spends on food and drink, and presents to friends. Because there is no greater nor more glorious joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and strangers [perhaps read refugees], for assisting the desperate and the run-down is the equivalent of greeting God personally."

On my first Purim in Israel in yeshiva as a teenager away from home, I got drunk twice. The novelty of Shushan Purim was something we didn't have in the Diaspora!. The first day I was at the home of a very correct and dignified religious man. I sneaked extra shots of cherry brandy until I found myself lying on the floor underneath the table. His stern rebuke soon brought me to my senses. On the second day I was invited into the home of the head of the yeshiva, and once again I disgraced myself. Staggering out of his home, I fell down the steps and ended in the gutter. He sent his son to tell me that this was not the way a real yeshivah student should behave on Purim. Suitably chastened and embarrassed, I have never got drunk since. I have often felt merry, even a little high on an expensive malt. But never to the point of losing control. And if I fainted after a glass of wine on one hot Israeli

day, it was only because I drank on an empty stomach and after a long hike. No significant rabbi I have ever encountered has got drunk (at least not in my presence).

Let me see if I can find anything to say in favor. Chasidism has indeed argued that alcohol loosens one's inhibitions in matters of the spirit. We are uptight and reserved by nature. In order to overcome this inhibition, a shot or two or three of vodka might encourage us to relax and dance and thus find ourselves closer God. But if drink were the way to encounter the Divine, then the bigger the drunk, the greater the saint! I don't think so. Otherwise we might as well all take drugs and kid ourselves it helps us reach heaven. No doubt Timothy Leary would agree. I suppose being a drunk and an addict, then, should qualify one as pious. Drinking on Purim is a mitzvah, but only in so far as it can lead one to confusion, spiritual uncertainty perhaps. Not malfunction or throwing up.

There is, I agree, a stage in between sobriety and drunkenness, and that is a sense of wellbeing in which one feels grateful for one's blessings, at ease in the world, generous and warm to one's friends and those less fortunate. When one might forget one's troubles and anxieties and relax in the sense that there is a God in heaven. Order in the world might be possible after all. In other words to "always look on the bright side of life." I think that is precisely what the rabbis meant about drinking to the point where one wasn't sure who would best for the world in its present condition. Sometimes (very rarely), a rigid, unsympathetic hand can be better for discipline.

There is a lot of bad stuff out there. People who want to kill, to swindle and defraud, and to grab as much as they can for themselves. There are others who so believe they are right that they wish to impose their beliefs and systems on others, regardless of the means they use to do so.

Now Donald Trump might remind some of you of Achashverosh. Except of course he is a teetotaler. He is certainly not a Haman, though some idiots claim he is worse. And Ivanka might turn into Esther, though she doesn't really fit the part. But his fumbling, braggart personality reminds me of an oriental potentate who believes he is God's gift to mankind. And although he cannot himself be blamed for the revolting racists and anti-Semites who have come out of the woodwork, no one seemed to bother when similarly mentally challenged lefties worked their dogmas under a different regime. Nevertheless, there is as sense at the moment of a loss of order and direction.

Purim reminds us of regime change. Of the possibility of a different order. Things are not always what they seem to be. Only time will tell. No, I do not wish to compare the two situations. But I do believe that every now and again one needs change, even revolution. One needs to have the old certainties challenged. Purim is a festival of over-turnings. I have been conscious for a long time of the arrogance of the dogmatic left and its bias against Jewish rights of self-determination. But I cannot identify with much of the right-wing mindset. I dislike excessive social control and dependency. And I despise right-wing selfishness and greed without concern for the poor and the weak. I am caught in the middle. I do not like politics or dogmatic

politicians of any sort.

I don't think either side is completely right or wrong. There is good and bad in both. In the absence of perfection, let there be cycles of change. Usually the system that does better wins out. Chaos can be good. I do not despair. There are enough checks and balances to ensure that the extremes will be modified. The reality of power is sobering and limiting. One simply cannot ride roughshod over everyone forever.

I will drink (in moderation) on Purim, knowing that if we fight for what we believe in, for tolerance (which goes both ways), for our values, it is preferable to have hope and happiness to despair. You never know when a Haman will arise, but equally you never know when he will fall. There are few certainties in life. But having Purim helps! However, if there are some who think that being drunk is how they are supposed to celebrate, I think they have the wrong end of the stick...and the sick.