



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Today's Torah

Purim

February 25th (Sundown) - 26, 2021 | Adar 14, 5781

Inside Outside, Upside Down

By: Rabbi Cheryl Peretz

Associate Dean

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

American Jewish University

Purim is our annual Jewish carnival, a day of overflowing silliness and celebration. We dress up in costumes, make fun of ourselves, and laugh and revel as we recount the story of Haman, Mordechai, Queen Esther, and King Achashverosh. There really is no limit to how much we can sing, dance, and laugh - all in an effort to celebrate with intense joy and merriment. And, in perhaps one of the greatest acts of silliness, the debate about the role of getting drunk ensues throughout the generations of Jewish literature and Jewish communities.

The Talmudic sage, Rava, proposed that a person is obligated to be so inebriated (literally, spiced) on Purim *ad d'lo yada*, until that person cannot distinguish between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai. (Talmud Megillah 7b)

This is such a strange mandate with little explanation and a huge load of baggage. Is it really possible that the intention is to encourage drunkenness? After all, the biblical stories of Noah and Lot showed the ill effects of drunkenness, and the Talmud itself posits “there is nothing that causes a person greater lamentation than wine” (Talmud *Sanhedrin* 70b). Certainly, opposition and discouragement to over drinking came well before the modern awareness and sensitivity to addiction and alcohol abuse. So, why would the Sages instruct us to get drunk, when earlier Jewish teaching clearly object to the associated lack of control?

For centuries, Jewish legal sources debated the meaning of this pivotal statement wondering the extent to which this really was intended as an invitation to overindulge. Some point out that the miracles of the story involve wine - the banquet of the king and the meal Esther hosts during which Haman's evil plot to kill the Jews is exposed. Therefore, they say, we drink wine to recall those miracles even as we avoid getting drunk. Amongst these are some who do rule that this is intended exactly as it is written and others who say a l'chaim is in order, but not intended to be unlimited.

Maimonides, for example, suggests the intention was never for Jews to get spiced or rip-roaring drunk on Purim or any other time. Rather, he says, the idea is that one should have a celebratory drink and go to sleep. While asleep, he continues, it would be impossible to know the difference between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai.

For a moment, I want to return to the Talmud to dig a bit deeper for immediately following the statement of Rava, there is a brief story that seems to point out the very dangers of drinking:

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira once had a Purim feast together and became intoxicated. Rabbah arose and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira! The next day, Rabbah prayed and revived him (Rabbi Zeira). The next year, as Purim approaches, Rabbah says "Let master come and we will have the Purim feast together." Rabbi Zeira replied: "Not every time does a miracle occur."

(Talmud Megillah 7b)

Are we really to believe that one killed the other in a drunken stupor, realized what he had done, asked God for help, revived him, and then the next Purim, invited him to join him again for a meal? No wonder Rabbi Zeira responds with the equivalent 'If you think I am going to another Purim meal with you, you better think again!!!' Actually, it is hard to imagine they would be on speaking terms at all.

So, it seems, the Talmud is exaggerating, and I might add even employing the literary device of satire to make a point, and Rava's original statement is a suggestion to lead to the discussion and NOT a statement of expected behavior. This is certainly not the only place the Talmud seems to introduce satire and hyperbole as pedagogical tools. Here, the Talmud introduces this unfathomable story not about how much we should drink, but to remind us of how stepping into *ad d'lo yada*- the state of not knowing distinctions – actually helps remind us of deeply religious ideals of faith, miracles, and resurrection, 'a miracle doesn't happen every time.' It was true then and it is true now. Still, we seek (and even experience) the miraculous, we look towards God, and we pray for eternal connections to those who have left this world.

The entire story is of Purim is a subversive one about how Jews disrupted the decree against Haman's evil plot. The victims became the victors, and the oppressors, Haman and his family, were punished. So, for one day each year, we also become subversive - turning ourselves and the world inside out, upside down and even on its head. In so doing, we too look to emerge with greater appreciation for humor, faith, and an everlasting connection to the Holy Blessing One. Only then will we be able to do the work of the fully living on the day after Purim, the next day and all the days following.

Happy Purim.

Rabbi Cheryl Peretz is the Associate Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of American Jewish University, where she also received her ordination. Rabbi Peretz has written chapters for two books, is a contributing writer to the Jewish Journal's *Table for Five*. She also holds her MBA in Marketing Management from Baruch College, and helps bring those skills and expertise into the operational practices of rabbis and congregations throughout North



America. Rabbi Peretz also serves as the Associate Dean of the Frankel College of Rabbinic Studies in Germany.

Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. In addition to providing holiday inspiration, we are pleased to offer you continuing access to a vast library of Ziegler Torah commentaries on each weekly Parashah throughout the entire Torah cycle. To delve deep, please click [here](#).

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310-440-1218
www.aju.edu/ziegler

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®
Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.
View this email [online](#).

15600 Mulholland Dr.
Los Angeles, CA | 90077 US

This email was sent to rob.evans@aju.edu.
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

emma®