



RABBI ELIYAHU SAFRAN

GUEST PURIM DVAR TORAH



PURIM

When Ignorance is Bliss

An Insight into the Celebration of Purim

We Jews have been accused of many things over the centuries but not valuing knowledge, and not striving to distinguish between good and evil have not been amongst them. The rabbis devoted a great deal of their energy and thought to highlight the contrasts in life, specifically between right and wrong, good and evil. Our teachers have taught us that we are buffeted by our good and bad inclinations, always pulling or pushing us in one direction or another. Our commandments and rituals strengthen us to listen to the good. We distinguish time, separating Shabbat from the other days of the week, holding on to its sacredness and goodness above all other days. We praise God in the morning *minyán* for “creating light and fashioning darkness”, highlighting that even in the natural world, there are separate and distinct entities.

Even while we acknowledge clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, we are wise enough to know that it is not always a simple matter to distinguish between them. Just as the dawn or dusk, when light and dark become confused, there are times when it is difficult to distinguish the contrasts and distinctions in our physical and spiritual worlds. It is exactly when discerning between good and evil is most difficult that our efforts become most determined. Knowing that the distinctions are not always clear, we dedicate

ourselves to seeking the boundaries of the competing entities in life and to ensure that we stand guard on the right side of the borderline.

All Jewish law and tradition supports us in this effort. Almost all. On Purim, we are confronted by a seeming contradiction. On Purim, a blurring of this boundary between good and evil is commanded. In the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b) Rava said, “It is one’s duty (*levasumei*) to be intoxicated on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between *arur Haman* (cursed be Haman) and *barukh Mordechai* (blessed be Mordecai).

How could our rabbis who were always so vigilant about encouraging decent and respectful behavior during every moment of our lives simply remove all boundaries and limits so that we might become so intoxicated on Purim that we cannot tell the difference between *arur Haman* and *barukh Mordechai*?

What, realistically, is a Jew to make of such a duty? Certainly, there can be no merit in drunkenness for its own sake. While wine plays a prominent role in our rituals and *simchas*, overindulgence is never encouraged. Chazal’s intent could not have been to have Purim become a showcase for drunkenness and vulgarity. Our drunkenness, if that is what is commanded of us, must be a means to an end; but even if we argue that the drunkenness

has some merit, the ends remain likewise troubling – to confuse good and evil in the personages of Haman and Mordechai!

There are those who would interpret the duty so that a genuine blurring of good and evil is not the true intent. They suggest that one should drink to the point of being unable to calculate the *gematria* of “*arur Haman*” and “*barukh Mordechai*”, aware that they share the numerical value of 502. Or they might suggest that one should drink only to the point of not being able to recall which came first; the curse on Haman or Mordechai’s rise to be Achashveirosh’s viceroy.

These and other attempts of “explaining away” the directive are dissatisfying.

The answer to our conundrum cannot be discovered by skirting the issue. Just as the essential contradiction and confusion of the command for drunkenness on Purim confounds us, so it is within that contradiction that we find its value and meaning.

Looking directly at the command to lose our ability to distinguish between good and evil on Purim, we must ask, Why? While several explanations for the directive to become so intoxicated that we cannot distinguish between *arur Haman* and *barukh Mordechai* exist, ultimately, the command directs our attention not to the issue of good and evil, but to the unity of the Jewish people. The inability to distinguish between villain and hero speaks most profoundly to the need within the Jewish community to remove distinctions so that we can experience and know genuine equality and respect for every member of the community.

Just as God is One, so too is the Jewish people. We embrace God *as a community*. It is for this reason that true happiness for Jews is only possible when there is unity amongst the Jewish people. Absent an embrace of our unity, we will

always be diminished by festering anger, angst, and anxiety. Yet, our lives and dealings are too often defined by pettiness, jealousy, misunderstanding and disrespect toward our fellows.

There can be no greater blessing for Jews than unity, and no greater curse than discord. Yet, despite the clear blessing of unity, we are too often defined by our divisions rather than our common purpose. How timely then, that Purim, with its joy and lessons of community, is before us! How good it is that the ultimate purpose and focus of this, the happiest of Jewish holidays, and of its central source, Megilas Esther, is to create and reinforce unity and harmony among Jews!

The lesson of Purim is to embrace the entire Jewish community; not only those Jews whose observance is like my own but also those whose practice is “far distant”, who come “stretching out their hand” and by doing so, ask me for my understanding and generosity.

On Purim we must reach out to one another; all who “stretch out their hand” must be responded to. If only for this one, marvelous day, we must get beyond our stubborn refusal to acknowledge others who are “not like us”. If only for this one day, we must reach out to anyone and everyone in the Jewish community.

Anyone can embrace one who is like him. The challenge is to share the Purim *seuda* with someone who is different. Yes, *even those who are as different to one another as Haman is to Mordechai!* Certainly, if the command is to be unable to distinguish between these two, one can see past any differences that exist within the community so that we all embrace unity.

Ad d’lo yada!

So, the intent of Chazal’s challenging directive becomes clear; not to encourage drunkenness but to facilitate a bond and love between Jews.

Stop labeling your “friends” as Mordechai and your “enemies” as Haman! On Purim, we are to become intoxicated... not with wine but with love for our fellow Jew! We are to forget our ill will toward those who are not “just like us” and embrace them as fellow Jews. On Purim, we are called on to eliminate the animosity (*arur Haman*) we have for fellow Jews, and to simultaneously free ourselves of the jealousy (*barukh Mordechai*) we feel for those who have achieved what we have not. On Purim we are challenged to transform the Hamans in our lives into Mordechais, just as we are commanded in Torah that precedence be given to one’s enemy in the law of unburdening an overladen donkey. “It is preferable to force one’s evil inclination (to not hate a fellow Jew)”

Becoming intoxicated on wine is easy. As we know only too well, any fool can do it. The greater challenge is to become intoxicated with love and compassion. Does not this “intoxication” speak more powerfully to what it means to be a Jew in a Jewish community?

On Purim, we belong neither to those who berate Haman or who extol Mordechai. On Purim, we are equal in our life mission to uplift and respect every Jew, without regard to his status or station in life. ■

Rabbi Dr. Eliyahu Safran spent many years in the rabbinate as well as in educational leadership positions. He also served as Vice President of Communications and Marketing of OU Kosher. His most recent volume is “Something Old, Something New - Pearls From the Torah”

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