

Purim

Opening Thoughts

One of the four main mitzvot of Purim is the mitzva of the seuda – the feast. The feast personifies the joy of the Jews from Achashverosh's kingdom following their victory over their enemies, a joy that expresses days which were transformed from grief to joy and from sorrow to festivity. This mitzva is unique among the mitzvot of the day as other mitzvot of the day can be fulfilled through it. By exchanging plates of food at the feast with another person, one can fulfill the mitzva of Mishloach Manot (gifts of food to another). By giving out parts of the feast or inviting a poor person to the feast, one can fulfill the mitzva of Matanot LaEvyonim (gifts to the needy).

In addition, we are commanded to drink in this feast, as the Rambam says "What is the obligation at this meal? To eat meat and arrange a fine feast according to one's means, and drink wine until one is drunk and falls asleep of drunkenness" (Laws of Megilla and Chanuka 2:15).

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 695:2) rules according to the words of the Talmud that one must drink until he doesn't know the difference between the damned Haman and blessed Mordechai. The Mishna Berura (ad loc 4) writes that before one becomes drunk, he must thank God for both these things – that Haman fell from his greatness and his decree was not realized and for the rise of Mordechai from a man sitting in sackcloth at the city gates, to a man whose name became known throughout the kingdom.

During the feast we stop running around doing the day's mitzvot and customs – Mishloach Manot to friends and acquaintances, giving gifts to the poor and needy, preparing masks and costumes, and we have a chance to sit, eat and drink. A chance to be with family and friends, enjoy the joy of the festival and discover the secrets of the world through the wine. And ultimately, a chance to give thanks for the abundant miracles in those days at this time.

With prayer that the verse will come true for us as well: "and these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memory of them perish from their seed" (Esther, 9, 28).

Sources and Questions for Discussion

The name of the holiday

Wherefore they called these days Purim, after the name of pur (=lot). (Esther 9:26)

- What name would you give the holiday instead of Purim and why?

Concealed Divine Presence

Where do you find Esther in the Torah? "Va'anochi haster astir" (And I will surely hide My face, Deuteronomy 31:18) (Tractate Hulin 139b)

- Why is it important to find a source from the Torah for Esther and the festival of Purim?
- Did you have something happen in your life which was difficult to understand at the time, but now turned out to be hester panim, concealed Divine Presence?

Ma Nishtana

Why is this day different from all other days?
For on all other days we eat and work, but on this day we only eat & drink.

For on all other days we drink water or alcohol but not wine, today is only wine.

For on all other days bread is sufficient, but on this day no Jew has less than a royal feast.

For on all other days we eat and drink until satiated, but on this day we gorge and guzzle until drunk.

(The Haggadah of the Drunkards, Venice, 1552)

- In what other ways is Purim different from other days of the year and the other Jewish holidays?
- How do these differences help us celebrate Purim?

Unity

When the People of Israel are united, Amalek cannot overcome them and were only able in Refidim [when they were disjointed]. That is why Haman informed on them that there is "a certain people scattered and dispersed", that is, their strength is only in their unity and now they are scattered and disjointed. (Sfat Emet)

- What can we do to bring unity to the nation?
- Why do you think unity is important?

Mordechai's intention

And I believe that Mordechai never fathomed the possibility that he [Haman] would attack the People of Israel and that the king will allow them to be killed and destroyed for no reason... but he was not concerned for himself, as he wanted to be a martyr of God (Radbaz' Responsa 1, 284)

- Was Mordechai correct in not bowing down to Haman?
- Are there principles for which it is right to endanger oneself and others?

