

How Should Jews Party?

Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

*Rabbi, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun
Representing the members of the Chag Hasemikhah 5720, celebrating the 50th anniversary of
becoming musmakhim.*

With all the noise-making and frivolity that attend a public reading of the Megillah it is easy to miss something that is actually quite extraordinary.

The text of the Megillah describes how the Jews from the outlying communities (excluding Shushan) celebrated on the 14th day of Adar.

Days of drinking and joy, and the exchanging of food gifts.

Esther 9:19

יום משתה ושמחה, ומשלוח מנות איש
לרעהו.
אסתר ט:יט

Isn't there something missing? *Simcha, mishteh, and mishloach manot* - where is *matanot la'evyonim*? It's not there. *Matanot la'evyonim* is mentioned only in verse 22, where the three celebratory aspects of Purim are brought together for the first time: a festive meal, exchanging food gifts, and giving gifts to the poor. Why was it omitted in verse 19?

I believe the answer is that the first verse describes how the Jews of that day, who experienced the miracle of Purim in their own lives, celebrated immediately, on the spot, by rejoicing with physical pleasures. They had parties and feasts and exchanged gifts, but they never thought of associating *matanot la'evyonim* with their celebration. That idea was communicated to them by Mordechai, who in verse 20 is described as writing to the Jews and telling them how to celebrate Purim in the future. It was he, as a teacher of *Torah sheb'al peh*, and as a member of the Men of the Great Assembly, who instructed the Jews that they have to associate celebration with charity, something which they never thought of on their own.

There is, of course, a simple reason for this. It is not a normal response for people who are rejoicing over a wonderful event in their lives to do anything more than celebrate themselves and perhaps involve friends in the celebration. It is a lesson of rabbinic tradition that links charity with every celebration and that teaches us that no joy is ever complete unless and until it is shared with those who do not have joy.

This Jewish trait is not a natural one for us; it is not inborn; it is rather an acquired characteristic. We have learned from Torah that we must share our happiness. We cannot simply indulge ourselves in our joy. Every *simcha* must involve *tzedakah*.

Maimonides codifies this and emphasizes the primacy of making the poor happy in our celebration of Purim.¹

It is better to spend more on gifts to the poor than to spend more on the Purim meal and mishloach manot, for there is no greater and more splendid joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the widow and orphans, and converts, for the person who gladdens the heart of these downtrodden people is likened to the Divine Presence.

Rambam Hilchot Megillah 2:17

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים
מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו,
שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא
לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים,
שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה
לשכינה
רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ב:יז

The implications of this idea which Mordechai taught to the Jews and which our Torah emphasizes in connection with Yom Tov go far beyond Purim. What this means is that every time we celebrate something in our own lives - a birth, or a bar or bat mitzvah, or a wedding, or an anniversary, we ought to be giving *tzedakah* as part of the celebration. I know of one family which has a tradition from their grandparents that whatever they spend on a simcha has to be matched with an equal amount given to *tzedakah*. That is how a Jew should celebrate. Indeed, that's what makes a celebration authentically Jewish.

Many people, unfortunately, have not learned this lesson. On many occasions I have spoken to a family which has just celebrated a great simcha and asked the family for a gift to UJA, or to the congregation, or to some other worthy cause, only to hear the response "Rabbi, I am sorry that I can't give this year; I have just married off a child and it was a huge expense." Mordechai tells us that precisely when one undertakes an expense of this kind one should give his or her best to *tzedakah*.

In terms of textual analysis, did the Jews of Persia get the message which Mordechai was trying to convey? Did they understand that their self-indulgent celebration at the moment of deliverance was not sufficient and that *tzedakah* had to be part of such a joyous occasion? Apparently they did, for the Megillah tells us (9:23) that they accepted upon themselves "What they had begun to do and what Mordechai had written to them." They understood, they got the message and they fulfilled it.

What Mordechai taught us, however, is more than how to celebrate; he also taught us when to celebrate. Note verses 20 and 21 where Mordechai wrote to all of the Jews in all of the provinces to impress upon them the need to make the 14th day of Adar and the 15th day of Adar permanent celebrations, *b'chol shana v'shana*. Thanking God for deliverance is not a one-time occurrence. We do not thank Him and then next year ask "God, what can You do for me now?" We are obligated to thank God for our deliverance on the anniversary of each miracle which He performs for us.

Mordechai, of course, learned this principle from Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. He taught us that it applies to Purim as well. The Talmud then derives the same principle for the celebration of Chanukah. *L'shana acheret*, says the Talmud, the next year, the Jews made a Chanukah celebration with Hallel and thanksgiving.

This is why, for example, Israel Independence Day should be a religious holiday, as should Yom Yerushalayim. It is not enough that we were grateful to God once, back in 1948 or 1967 when

¹ Maimonides repeats this idea in his Laws of Yom Tov when he discusses how to rejoice on a festival.

the miracles occurred. People must gather in synagogues as they do on Purim and Chanukah and recite Hallel from year to year, reliving the miraculous deliverance of our immediate past.

There is also an implication here that one should celebrate not only our national joys but also our personal ones on a regular basis. Perhaps there is a religious principle in celebrating the anniversary of our marriage and remembering each year - if not each day - to say thank you to God for granting us a good marriage and, while doing so, to thank one's spouse for the same thing. This may very well be a fulfillment of the principle of Purim as taught to us by Mordechai: to say thank you *b'chol shana v'shana*.

Finally, Mordechai not only taught us how to celebrate as a Jew - to associate celebrations with *tzedakah* - and when to celebrate - every year - but he also taught us, as a general principle, the proper way to thank God when one experiences any kind of deliverance. There is fundamentally one way, and that is by becoming more committed Jews, by observing God's law and by accepting His commandments.

The Talmud interpreted the words *kiy'mu v'kib'lu* as meaning that the Jews fulfilled after Purim what they had previously accepted many years before, namely, the Torah. They reaccepted the Torah voluntarily and happily. Originally, they may have been forced to accept the Torah by the drama of Mount Sinai; now, after the deliverance of Purim, they joyously reaffirmed their commitment to Torah. This is an authentic Jewish response to deliverance through God's goodness. After the miracles, after the celebrations, even after the *tzedakah*, we say thank you to God by trying to be better Jews. When God has done good things for us we respond by *davening* better, by keeping Shabbos more enthusiastically, by learning more Torah, by taking on a new mitzvah as a response to the *chesed* which God has done for us.

I have seen many Jews respond to great events in their lives in this way. There are Jews who start to come regularly to shul after the birth of their first child, or after the wedding of a child, or simply after surviving a difficult illness. Their response to God's *chesed* is part of the lesson that we have all learned from Mordechai.

Mordechai taught us how to celebrate, by sharing our happiness with others who do not have the same joy. He taught us when to celebrate - on every anniversary of a great event. He taught us how to say thank you to God, through increasing our *kabbalat ha-Torah*. Without Mordechai's lesson Purim could very well have degenerated into a Jewish counterpart to St. Patrick's Day with which it is always closely associated in the calendar. We could have ended up only being drunk and not doing the Jewish things. Because of Mordechai's teachings Purim is different and, most important of all, we are different. Our Sages tell us that eventually all of the festivals commemorating Jewish tragedy and triumph will ultimately be abolished, but Purim will remain forever. As the text says, "These days of Purim will never pass from among the Jews and their remembrance will never cease among their descendants ..."

Why Purim of all the festivals? Why must this celebration among all of our celebrations remain forever? Perhaps because our observance of Purim, as ordained by Mordechai, is more than simply a formula for a holiday. It is nothing less than a design for how to lead a Jewish life and how to relate to God's blessings in this world. That design should - and will - never go out of style.