

Self-Nullification through Inebriation

Henny Youngman once said: When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.

All jokes aside, the dangers of alcohol are quite alarming. Alcohol plays a role in 60% of all fatal burns, drownings and homicides, 50% of severe traumas, and 40% of fatal motor vehicle accidents, suicides, and falls. People who drink regularly are at greater risk for liver disease, heart disease, bleeding from the stomach, depression, sleep disorders and several types of cancer. An astonishing 17 million Americans fall into the category of alcoholics, men and women who are simply unable to quit drinking, irrespective of the harm it causes them and others.

Yet the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 695:2, quoting the Gemara in *Megillah* (7b), writes that a person must imbibe alcohol and get drunk on Purim, intoxicated until they lack the cognitive clarity to differentiate between the righteous Mordechai and the wicked Haman. Although

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the Rama dissents, arguing that the mitzvah can be fulfilled through other means, many, in practice, adhere to the *Shulchan Aruch's* approach. Purim has thus become synonymous with unfettered indulgence in alcohol, a day of wild revelry and unruly rejoicing.¹

Many of us enjoy the festive atmosphere that alcohol on Purim facilitates. But how many of us have ever stopped to think just how out of character it is, how incongruent this mitzvah is with Judaism's overall mindset and approach? Our religion is generally very cerebral and structured, quite measured and balanced. Copious consumption of alcohol would seem to be antithetical to its values. Furthermore, given the aforementioned health risks of alcohol, excessive drinking on Purim would seem to violate the Torah's mandate of "*v'nishmartem m'ode l'nafshosechem*" (Devarim 4:15), the directive to protect one's own health and wellbeing. Why then did the Chachamim feel compelled to institute this strange mitzvah? What is going on here?!

We're all quite familiar with the basic points of the Purim plot. But how many of us know the backstory and

recognize the historical underpinnings behind the clash of Mordechai and Haman? Purim wasn't the first round of their fight. Over five hundred years earlier, Mordechai's ancestor King Shaul had been commanded by G-d to wipe out the nation of Amalek. On the precipice of success, Shaul decides that it would be inhumane for him to kill Agag, the King of Amalek, whom he had taken captive. In a moment of misplaced mercy, he spares Agag, who lives long enough to father a son, the great-great grandfather of Haman. Due to his deviation from G-d's directive, Hashem takes away Shaul's kingship, giving it to Dovid Hamelech instead.

In his *Sichos Mussar* (Purim 5731), Rav Chaim Shmulevitz poses the following question: What was it about Shaul's sin that was so egregious that necessitated him being punished so harshly? After all, Dovid Hamelech also sinned on multiple occasions and yet G-d allowed him to remain King! Rav Shmulevitz explains that Shaul's mistake stemmed from the value he placed on his own reasoning, the misplaced notion that somehow his own personal ethos could be more just and merciful than G-d's. G-d had explicitly ordered Shaul to kill Agag,

yet in Shaul's eyes this command seemed cruel and antiquated, out of touch with the norms of decent society and polite company. And so Shaul, thinking he knows best, decides to deviate from G-d's directive and spare the life of Agag, an act that ultimately spawned Haman and almost spelled death for the entire Jewish nation. Shaul's sin necessitated his removal from the throne, for his sin stemmed not from a fit of passion, like Dovid's, but rather from a far more sinister source, the delusion that he knew better than G-d, that his own conscience, rather than Hashem's command, was the ultimate moral compass.

Many of us know the famous *Tikunei Zohar* no. 21, which draws a connection between Yom Kippur and Purim. While many explanations have been proffered, I would like to suggest my own. Both Yom Kippur and Purim are days of repentance, festivals of forgiveness. Each year, as we sit down at our Purim seudah, we begin a process of teshuvah, one that reaches its climax at the height of our inebriation. The directive to become intoxicated until we cannot differentiate between Haman and Mordechai is not a call to engage in frivolity, but rather to utilize alcohol to inhibit our reasoning abilities, to submit and serve G-d through

faith alone. The Purim story came about through Shaul's sin, through his placing his own reasoning above G-d's will. Each year, we strive to fix Shaul's mistake by following the Sages' command to get drunk, to impair our cognitive abilities and take a leap of faith, to trust that G-d knows best.

Yet it is not only as atonement for the past that we must inculcate this outlook in ourselves, but also in preparation for the future. The battle with Amalek is not over. A day is coming when we will have to reject our own reasoning and personal qualms and follow G-d's command to utterly destroy Amalek. It is through inebriation on Purim that we seek to instill appreciation of such an attitude within us.

We live in a generation in which the sacred is synonymous with the self, in a world that deifies personal autonomy. In today's society, man's own opinions and moral compass are given credence over his Maker's. One needs to look no further than the story of Shaul to learn the dangers of such an attitude. The *Midrash Tanchuma, Metzora*, teaches us that Shaul, who was merciful to the cruel, was ultimately cruel to the merciful. An individual who lives life based on a personal value system, rather than by G-d's concrete commands, can easily

oscillate from caring to callous, from empathetic to apathetic.

As we sit down to our Purim seudah, let us remind ourselves of the following: first and foremost, of the dangers of alcohol. We must drink judiciously, responsibly, serving as proper examples and role models for our family and friends. If we know based on past experience that our behavior under the influence is substandard, we should not drink excessively, but rather follow the Rama's approach, drinking a small amount of wine and then going to sleep. Second, whether we choose to imbibe or not, let us recognize the message and purpose of such intoxication and the potential for atonement that it provides. For through the nullification of our egos, opinions and personal value systems in favor of G-d's; through *kimu v'kiblu*, reaccepting the Torah's outlook and way of life (Esther 9:27 and *Shabbos* 88a), we will surely merit to see salvation, as the Jews did in Shushan so many years ago.

Endnotes

1. Editor's Note: There is no halachic imperative to drunkenness or intoxication on Purim day (Rama, 695:2, *Mishnah Berura* 695:5, and *Beur Halacha s.v. Ad De'lo Yada*) and with so many young adults we keep our Yeshiva campus dry on Purim.

