



PURIM JOKES AND SHPIELS

As a school principal, one of the most difficult conversations I have each year is trying to explain to new non-Jewish faculty what a Purim shpiel is and why they should accept how they are depicted.

I have a much less successful conversation each year when trying to explain to students what the goal of a Purim shpiel should be and what the proper boundaries of its humor are.

In order to think about this issue, we must also consider what the goal of humor is in general and why jokes, shpiels, grammen and the like have come to be particularly associated with Purim.

We know, of course, that the days of Purim are *yemei mishteh v'simcha* — days of revelry and joy. The simcha of Purim is clearly different from the simcha of other holidays. The mitzvah



to drink on Purim is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the mitzvah of *simchas Yom Tov*, which is also expressed through the drinking of wine. However, the concept of *ad d'lo yada*, of becoming drunk to the point of diminished cognitive ability, is a completely different type of spiritual/emotional experience than the simcha of Yom Tov expressed through the joyful sharing of wine and meat at the Yom Tov table.

Moreover, *simchas Purim* has long been associated with the breaching of halachic and general religious norms. Not only is drunkenness itself normally considered impermissible, the idea of aspiring to “not knowing” seems anathema to our high religious

aspirations. Rambam famously begins the *Guide for the Perplexed* with the question: How could eating from the Tree of Knowledge be a sin if attaining knowledge is the highest of religious goals? Beyond this, the Gemara, *Megillah* 7b, introduces the obligation to drink on Purim in conjunction with a story in which Rabbah actually murders R. Zera while drunk on Purim and, while Rabbah does R. Zera the favor of resurrecting him, he does not seem particularly repentant. Indeed, this story is what led some Rishonim to conclude that we are not supposed to actually get drunk on Purim (see Ran, *Megillah* 3b). Skipping forward generations, the Rama (OC 696:8) notes that several halachically questionable Purim practices had developed by his time in the 16th century, including the wearing of opposite-gender clothing and stealing other people's items as

part of Purim jest. Putting aside the debate about whether these practices are in fact permissible on Purim, what is clear is they had become widely practiced on Purim.

Having established that the type of simcha we experience on Purim is more mischievous and boundary-breaking than on other days, we still need to understand why. Why are this type of simcha and these types of boundary breaches associated particularly with Purim? What do they have to do with the Megillah or the events and salvation of Purim? And, to return explicitly to our original question, does the Purim shpiel and related Purim humor fit into this acceptable Purim practice and why would it be particularly relevant to Purim?

Before advancing a theory as to why we do these things on Purim, and when done right, why they can be important and positive aspects of our Purim celebration, it is important to note the strong opposition to the Purim shpiel that does exist.

In several teshuvos (e.g. *Yechaveh Da'as* 5:50) and in *Yalkut Yosef*, *Hilchos Purim*, Rav Ovadiah Yosef

decries this custom of directing jokes at Rabbanim, which violates the commandment to not degrade a *talmid chacham*, or when directed at other people, to embarrass them in public. These sins are among the most egregious of transgressions and even according to those who permit some of the practices mentioned by the Rama, mocking people in Purim shpiels can in no way be permitted. Rav Ovadiah calls on all who are able to do what they can to root out this widely held custom, and he admonishes those who sit passively and watch without protest. In a particularly sharp turn of phrase, Rav Shlomo Aviner, when asked in an interview about whether the Rama's possible allowance of stealing on Purim means that the shpiel is allowed, said, "Oy! How the yetzer harah works overtime to permit the forbidden!"

Without delving too far into the halachic details, there are differences between the cases that are possibly allowed by the Rama and outright mockery. In terms of wearing opposite-gender clothing, there are those who generally permit it in instances in which the clothes are not

being worn for the purpose of being like the other gender. For instance, a woman who wears her husband's jacket because she is cold is clearly not trying to dress like a man. So too, in the context of costumes in a cultural setting in which costumes are the norm (such as on Purim), it is not considered a violation to dress as the opposite gender. Similarly, in a setting in which snatching other people's items as a prank has become part of the normal celebration, *hefker beis din hefker* — the concept that allows rabbinic authority to transfer property, especially in light of prevailing custom — can be applied to render this snatching not really stealing at all. According to these views, Purim does not really allow for the breaking of any halachic requirements; rather, only practices that are technically permitted, despite their approximation of a prohibition, were ever allowed.

These strong objections being noted, the custom is very widespread, and I, as I am sure many others, have seen many great *talmidei chachamim* listen to, enjoy and appreciate even some very sharp and biting grammen and shpiels. So what can be made of this



practice and its connection to Purim?

Two themes of Purim can help us understand the role of humor on Purim.

First, there is often a deeper truth lying behind events than what is readily apparent. This theme is expressed in the name Esther, which alludes to the hidden presence of God in guiding the fate of the Jewish people, even in exilic times. The practice of drinking on Purim, as exemplified by the notion of *nichnas yayin yatza sod* — when one drinks wine secrets emerge — is a manifestation of the idea that there are deeper meanings behind reality than are readily apparent. The initial failure of the Jews in Shushan to see the deeper truths and to be taken in by the glitter and gold of their new position in the Persian Empire is what led to the catastrophic decree of Purim. It was also the method of Purim's salvation, through the hidden hand of God guiding Haman's lots to the date primed for redemption.

Humor can play a similar role in helping people notice and pay attention to truths that often remain concealed. One way of understanding what makes something funny is that a joke reveals an uncomfortable truth that normally cannot be said, but it does so in a manner — such as exaggeration or word play — that makes it socially acceptable to be revealed. There is more than a grain of truth in the aphorism, “behind every joke is a grain of truth.” Allowing ourselves to look at our faults and foibles and to honestly face what we see in the mirror, even if it's a funhouse mirror, is an important step in the self-reflection necessary for growth.

Ironically, humor, which twists

reality, is a powerful tool in helping people see behind the mask and develop an honest assessment of themselves, their institutions and their communities. Haman too, by holding up a grotesque, distorted reflection of the Jews, by calling out the *am echad* — the unified nation of One — *mefuzar umforad bein ha'amim* — as a scattered people mixed among the nations — helped the Jews realize the gap between how they were acting and what they truly were. Humor, when used correctly, can facilitate a refreshingly honest, deep look at the truth of what really is and, as such, is an *avodah* perfectly attuned with the spirit of Purim.

Humor is a powerful tool in helping people see behind the mask and develop an honest assessment of themselves, their institutions and their communities. When used correctly, it can facilitate a refreshingly honest, deep look at the truth of what really is and is an *avodah* perfectly attuned with the spirit of Purim.

A second theme of Purim is that the forces we think are running the world are an illusion. Throughout the Megillah, the word *hamelech*, the king, ostensibly refers to Achashverosh; but Chazal tell us that *HaMelech* is really God. God's name is not mentioned in the Megillah, but God is always there.

The king we see is really a foolish puppet playing a part without any of the power he presents himself as having.

Satire, the form of humor employed in most successful Purim shpiels, is made for exactly this goal. Satire tears down the carefully cultivated images of the powerful. Understanding that God controls all leads us to realize that all human power needs to be checked so we never allow ourselves to be confused about the true source of this power. It is not uncommon for institutions and people to take themselves and their power very seriously. Sometimes adherents also grant an almost complete, unassailable perfection to their leaders. On Purim, the custom has become to subject even the *roshei hayeshiva* to satire. This *avodah* ensures that no matter how revered, no person is ever elevated to a divine stature. We remember that while there are many *melachim*, there is and can only be one *HaMelech*.

To be sure, on most days of the year, maintaining the highest standards of honoring our chachamim is of paramount importance. After all, *k'vod chachamim* is associated with *k'vod Shamayim*, but it cannot be mistaken for *k'vod Shamayim*. On Purim, we have the opportunity to expose the human frailty of even our loftiest institutions, and by doing so, reveal the true absolute power of God.

As Yeshayahu (5:15-16) tells us,

וַיִּשַׁח אָדָם וַיִּשְׁפֹּל-אִישׁ וְעֵינָיו גְּבוּהִים תִּשְׁפֹּלֶנָּה
וַיִּגְבֶּה ה' צְבָאוֹת בַּמִּשְׁפָּט וְהָאֵל-הַקָּדוֹשׁ נִקְדָּשׁ
בַּצִּדְקָה.

Yea, man is bowed, And mortal brought low; Brought low is the pride of the haughty And the LORD of Hosts is exalted by judgment, The Holy God proved holy by retribution.