

Drinking on Purim

Drinking is not Kosher

Today, we are well aware of the dangers of excessive drinking, alcohol addiction, and bingeing. There are strict laws regarding distribution of alcohol to minors and driving under the influence of alcohol. Yet at least once a year, on Purim, observant Jews behave as if there is no tomorrow and no responsibility, drinking beyond intoxication and with no age limits. There are those who extend the practice of intoxication to Simhat Torah, and the Lubavitcher Hassidim used to similarly drink when meeting with the Rebbe, on what is called farbrengen. As a matter of fact, the Rebbe was concerned about that and issued an edict allowing his followers only one drink per farbrengen. The disciples, however, circumvented the Rebbe's edict, and produced bottles of "neinziger", a 90% proof alcohol, of which one drink equaled a bottle of Vodka.

I believe that it is obvious that if one cannot rejoice with the Torah and Jewish holidays without alcohol, there is a serious flaw with his understanding or practice of Judaism, yet as happens every year, this coming Purim, many observant Jews will drink non-Kosher wine, or maybe I should say, many observant Jews will non-kosherly drink wine. There is no way to justify, in the name of Jewish law or practice, excessive drinking, and it is not enough to assign a driver for the after-Seudah drive home.

Let me tell you some personal stories. I grew up in the core of Haredi Jerusalem, among Sephardic Hakhamim and Hassidic Jews, followers of the Rebbe of Belz and the Rebbe of Ger, who both lived in my neighborhood. On Purim, you could see seven-year old boys smoking and teenagers holding drinks. When I was in Yeshiva, I have experienced it myself at the Seudah at my rabbi's house, as the rabbis and fellow students encouraged me to keep drinking. I look back at that scene with horror, but back then it felt good. I felt giddy and funny, the center of attention, and as a friend told me the next day, when I woke up in my bed in dorm, I spoke for hours, threw up at the rabbi's house during prayers, and passed out. I decided to never fall again in that trap, but it happened one more time. Years later, when I was married with children, we were invited to a Seudah with a friend who was a seasoned drinker (he passed away at a young age of liver complications). He dragged me into some kind of a drinking match, and by the evening I behaved in a way that endangered my life. The next day I promised my distraught wife, who had to take care of two babies and a third, grown-up one, that this will never happen again, and thank God I have kept my word and I rarely drink at all.

But the story which should really worry of all us is that of a classmate of my son in Yeshiva Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn. That teenager was drinking on Purim night at the Yeshiva (even though the "mitzvah" to drink is only during the day), in a party attended and supported by the rabbis and the staff, when he decided to slit his wrists. Luckily, Hatzolah of Flatbush is located just around the corner from the Yeshiva and the boy was saved, but this could have ended terribly.

This is exactly the kind of danger which irresponsible drinking can breed and which no one can accurately anticipate. This is also the reason many rabbis, whose voice was ignored, warned against excessive drinking on Purim. Those rabbis mentioned to their followers that the same

statement in Talmud: “one must get drunk on Purim until he cannot distinguish between Haman and Mordechai”, was followed by the story of one rabbi who slaughtered his colleague during a Purim Seudah. The story overrides the statement, they wrote, and therefore any teacher, parent, rabbi, or educator, who promotes drinking on Purim is committing the grave sin of ignoring reality and dodging responsibility.

Where are the Rabbis?

When this article was first published, I have received many emails expressing gratitude for addressing the problem of alcoholism in the name of religion. Some of the readers wrote in greater detail:

Very appropriate and very nice. If only all rabbis would heed your words. Our son... once got very drunk at the Purim festivities at Yeshiva University at the behest of his friends. He was so disgusted the next day that he never touched another drop of wine or alcohol for the rest of his life...

Hear! Hear! I am very grateful to you for spreading the message for sobriety. I just celebrated one year in AA and I thank God every day for giving me the faith and the strength to become a better person. I am also encouraged to see at meetings so many Community people of all ages in recovery and improving their lives and relationships. The... organization in our community has saved innumerable lives apart from mine...

Amen! And in another horror story of the excessive drinking in "Kiddush clubs" on Shabbat, in a "tradition" passed from father to son, I know of a young man who is permanently and profoundly disabled due to drunken behavior "Lichvod Shabbat" and other stories with similar dynamics...

What is unsettling in all these responses is the indication that rabbis and community leaders are not doing enough to acknowledge and stop this terrible practice. As I mentioned yesterday, it is not enough to assign a driver and to have Hatzolah crews on call. The rabbis must raise the same furor as they do when a package is mistakenly marked as kosher, or when the boundaries between the genders are breached.

The role of the rabbi is to constantly assess information and find ways to help his congregants and the greater community. Standing idly by when we know that people are hurt by excessive drinking and reckless behavior is a sin. It is clearly stated in the Torah (Lev. 19:16): לֹא תַעֲזֹב עֵלֶיךָ רֵעֶךָ

We should also have in mind that many of these drinking parties are in direct violation of federal and state laws. Let me share with you a personal story. When I lived in Brooklyn in 2001, my son, who was thirteen at the time attended Mesivta Chaim Berlin. He called me, terrified, to pick him from the Purim party at the Mesivta after a drunk student slit his wrists (luckily, Hatzolah of Flatbush is across the street and the boy was saved) . I had no idea that the Purim party at the Yeshiva included alcohol, but the hosts of rabbis and teachers knew very well! And drinking age

in NYC is 21 years. If your children's school or Yeshiva allows underage drinking, or if such behavior is allowed at your synagogue, then the headmaster, principle, or rabbi, is a social host who falls under this category:

A "social host" is anyone who knowingly, or should have known, there was an underage drinking party on property they own, lease or otherwise control.

What this means is that if you allow a minor to drink, you could be:

- *Cited or arrested*
- *Fined \$1,000 or more*
- *Sent to jail for up to six months*
- *Required to do up to 32 hours of community service*
- *Billed for law enforcement services*

How are we comfortable entrusting our children's education and our own spirituality to people who may be considered criminals by American law? In their defense, we must assume that they are unaware of the law. We know, however, that "ignorance of the law excuses no one". This statement is well known to all rabbis, and they always use it to ensure their followers that God will hold them responsible for transgressing laws they are unaware of. So let us all make an effort, in the days remaining before Purim, to get our rabbis and teachers well informed, and to test their sense of responsibility.

Ask your rabbi and your school's administration to issue an unequivocal statement against drinking on Purim. You might want to focus on excessive or underage drinking. In any case, let us get something done. If it could save one life, or save one person from injury or emotional trauma, it will be worth it.

If you encounter resistance on Halakhic grounds, here is a source you could quote:

ט"ז [טורי זהב], על אורח חיים סימן תרצה, סעיף קטן ב: ויש אומרים שאין צריך להשתכר כו'. והא דאמר רבא בגמרא, עד שלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי, נדחתה מימרא זו כיון שבגמרא מביא על זה דרבה שחטיה לרבי זירא, שמע מינה מסקנת הגמרא שאין לעשות כן. כן כתב בית יוסף בשם הר"ן בשם רבינו אפרים

Turay Zahav [TAZ], on Shulhan Arukh, Orah Haim, 695:2: Some say there is no need to get drunk. The Talmudic statement of Rava, that one must get drunk until he cannot distinguish between Haman and Mordechai has been overruled, since the Talmud immediately quotes the story about Rabbah, who slaughtered Rabbi Zeira while under the influence. This proves that the conclusion of the Talmud is that one is not allowed to get drunk. So wrote Rabbi Yosef Karo in his Bet Yosef, in the name of Rabbenu Nissim and Rabbenu Ephraim.

We Found the Rabbis, but Where is Judaism?

This article was originally published in installments, and in response to the chapter: “Where are the Rabbis?” I have received references to statements released by the OU and Agudath Israel every year, before Purim, warning that drinking is not a Mitzvah. One rabbi referred to my claim that the rabbis are not doing enough as libel, and even offered several links to prove that the rabbis are aware of the problem and are trying to solve it.

The first link was an article from the Jewish Star, reporting on a conference in 2010 in which, for the first time, a Rosh Yeshiva spoke out against excessive drinking. When addressing the Talmudic imperative to drink until losing the ability to distinguish between Haman and Mordechai, the rabbi explained that the requirement is that one should drink more than he is used to, to the extent that he would not be able to follow the congregation when reading the song “Shoshanas Yaakov”. The rabbi’s answer should have been that the “imperative” is invalid and was rejected already in the Talmud! In addition, anyone who had experienced intoxication knows that a fair amount of alcohol is required to cause you to lose the place in a song.

In the same article appears the following quote from Chabad.org:

“The site continues to list support for drinking from the Shulchan Aruch, as well as the commentators Rif, Rosh and the Tur, who all cite a Talmudic imperative to get drunk... To summarize, all Halachic authorities are unanimous in ruling that it is a mitzvah to drink, and drink to excess, on Purim, though there are differences of opinion as to whether the obligation is to get as drunk as Rava enjoins, or to a lesser degree.”

The second link was to an announcement made by Agudath Israel regarding drinking on Purim. Unfortunately, in order to open or download the file one needs to register, which does not attest to an attempt to reach everyone. However, a Google search yielded the following gems from a 2015 Lakewood, NJ, publication, instructing parents how to watch for their drunk teens:

Teen Safety

Purim is a day where teenagers are participating in seudahs and parties without parental accompaniment. The level of supervision that would be wise on Purim is simply not practical for obvious reasons. However, parents need to remember that they are still responsible for their teen’s safety even on a day like Purim.

Tips to ensure the safety of teenagers on Purim:

- *Make sure the teenager is going around with a partner or with a group*
- *Make sure there is a non-drinker to drive your teen around*
- *Know a basic schedule of where and when they expect to be throughout the day and have him/her check in with you throughout the day*
- *If your teenage seems to be too drunk or in an unsafe environment, see to it that he is brought to your home or another safe place. If*
- *If your teenager seems very unwell, seek emergency attention immediately.*

Anyone who knows the orthodox community, knows that there is no such thing as “no parental control”. If the teenager is not with his parents, he is with his rabbis and educators who act as adoptive parents. Alcohol is not conjured out of thin air for those teenagers. It is served by conscientious, Torah-observant adults. This shocking list, and the whole article, amount to nothing more than a cover-up and a cope-out. The rabbis should have called for children to remain with their parents and families, and celebrate Purim in a wholesome, meaningful way.

The last link was to an article about warnings issued by the OU. Here again, I was not able to see the original document, but from the description it seems that the focus is on safe driving. It is true, though, that the NCSY holds only alcohol-free events.

The concluding argument of the rabbi who claimed that the orthodox organizations are fighting the phenomenon of excessive drinking was this:

There is a limit to how much rabbis can influence the community. We should continue doing what we can. I only object to the implication that since the problem exists, rabbis are at fault. I blame parents more than rabbis.

I agree that there is a limit, but many questions remain open: Are the rabbis doing all within their power? What about Simchat Torah and spirit-based Shabbat Kiddush (AKA Men’s Club) in many synagogues around the country? What measures are taken against rabbis and organizations who keep promoting drinking? Are they referred to treatment, defrocked, or excommunicated? Just as scientists fighting a disease do not consider it a success until it is eradicated, so rabbis cannot rest on the laurels until this plague disappears.

The greater concern, however, as one of my colleagues wrote, is that:

Alcoholism, or Substance Use Disorder (SUDs) is not a problem, it’s a sign (symptom) of one. It is the outward manifestation of an underlying illness of the soul.

Blaming the parents is ignoring the fact that the parents are also a product of the same educational system, and that those parents continue to be influenced by their community rabbis. What we witness here is a form of Judaism that has dangerously veered off course. A life of Torah observance should be meaningful and purposeful, along the ideas of logotherapy presented by Viktor Frenkl in Man’s Search for Meaning, but it seems that many orthodox Jews live in an existential void. An essential component missing in today’s Jewish education and lifestyle, is a sense of purpose and fulfillment. What we need is a shift in our educational direction. Instead of insisting of seven different subjects in Judaic studies in schools and enforcing prayers with policing methods, we should offer a curriculum based on morals and values. That curriculum will guide students towards assuming responsibility and caring for others outside the Jewish community, nurturing a true sense of reciprocal giving and social commitment, and eventually providing inner joy and satisfaction, rendering dependence on joy-inducing substances obsolete.

There is much to be said and done, but we can conclude for now that as long as substance abuse is a problem for observant people in the mainstream, and not only in the fringes, it means that

our understanding and practice of Judaism is lacking, and that a concerted effort is needed to address the problem at its roots.

Happy Purim

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

On Taanit Esther

Q: What is the origin of Taanit Esther, and why is it the only fast day to be moved to an earlier date in some cases?

A: Let us start with a brief review of fast-days in the Hebrew calendar: Tishre 10th, Yom Kippur, is mentioned in the Torah. Tishre 3rd, Teveth 10th, Tammuz 17th (the 3 minor fasts), and Av 9th, all have some biblical source and are related to the destruction of either the First Temple or both temples. Adar 13th, Taanit Esther, is first mentioned in the 8th century, some 1200 years after the events described in the Book of Esther, by Rav Aha Meshabea, the head of the Pum-Bedita school in Babylonia.

The Mishnah (Rosh HaShana 1:3) says that messengers were sent to notify the diaspora of the new month of Av, so people could celebrate the ninth of Av accurately. The Talmud (18:2) asks why were they not sent for the months of Tammuz and Teveth as well. The answer suggests that in the time of the Mishna the three minor fasts were not celebrated:

בזמן שיש שלום - יהיו לששון ולשמחה, יש שמד - צום, אין שמד ואין שלום, רצו - מתענין, רצו - אין מתענין

At times of peace, those dates are joyous occasions; at times of persecutions, they are fast days; at times when there is neither peace nor persecution, people have the choice whether they wish to fast.

The Talmud adds that this rule does not apply to the ninth of Av because many disasters occurred on that date during the destruction of both temples.

Had we followed the statement of the Talmud, we would have to celebrate today only Kippur and the Ninth of Av, since for the last seventy years, though peace is still a distant dream, we do not live at times of persecution. The problem is that it is hard to change old practices, even when the instructions for change are in plain view. Those instructions were always ignored by claiming that the Jews are still persecuted. It is true that there are anti-Semitic incidents, terror attacks, and animosity towards Israel, but they do not qualify as שמד – persecution, according to the Talmudic definition.

The Fast of Esther is first mentioned in the Sheiltot of Rav Aha (VaYaqlhel, 67). Rav Aha comments on the statement in the Talmud that all Jews gathered on the 13th of Adar, and says that gathering means fasting. The gathering the Talmud refers to is the one mentioned in the Megillah as the day the Jews waged war against their enemies. The conversion of the 13th of Adar, from a day of military campaign to a day of fasting and praying, is an inevitable result of

Jews living under foreign rule and trying to avoid suspicions that they celebrate military victories or that they entertain hopes of independence.

In the same section, Rav Aha explains that the fast day moves to the previous Thursday if it falls on Shabbat, because one is not allowed to fast on Shabbat, and not even on Friday because of Shabbat preparations. Other fast days, he says, will be postponed to Sunday because they commemorate disasters, but the Fast of Esther commemorates a miracle and therefore could be moved to an earlier date.

In the 12th century, Rabbenu Tam (quoted by R Nissim on Megila 2:1) comments that there is no mention in the Talmud of the Fast of Esther, and that it is probably a way to commemorate the battle against the enemy of the Jews.

Finally, an essential problem with the rationale of the Fast of Esther is that the bible clearly states that fasting on a day of battle is wrong (I Sam. 14:24-30). When King Saul fought the Philistines, he forbade his soldiers from eating all day. His son Jonathan, who did not hear the admonition, ate wild honey he found in the forest. When told by his soldiers of his father's decree, he answered:

עָבַר אָבִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְאִי־נָא כִי־אָרוּ עֵינָי כִּי טַעַמְתִּי מַעֵט דְּבַשׁ הַהֵוא. אִם־כִּי לֹא אֶכֶל אָכַל הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה מִשְׁלַל אִיבֵיו
אֲשֶׁר מֵצָא כִּי עָתִידָה לֵא־רִבְתָּהּ מִכָּה בַּפְּלִשְׁתִּים

My father caused us great damage. See how much better I feel now that I ate the honey. If all our soldiers would have eaten today, our victory would have been much greater.

Wishing you a meaningful fast and a Happy Purim

Rabbi Haim Ovadia