



SIMCHAT PURIM: FAKE IT 'TILL YOU MAKE IT

רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי איבסום קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה לשנה אמר ליה ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי אמר ליה לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira held the festive Purim meal together. They got drunk, and Rabbah “killed” Rabbi Zeira. The next day Rabbah prayed for Rabbi Zeira, and he was revitalized. The next year, Rabbah said to him: “Let us hold the festive Purim meal together.” Rabbi Zeira said to him: “Miracles do not occur every hour.”

Megillah 7b

One of the hallmarks of Purim is intense physical celebration. There is no other Jewish holiday that comes so close to encouraging adherents to “party” to excess. There is even a directive in



the Talmud for a man to become so “inebriated on Purim that he cannot distinguish between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai.’”¹ The Rambam specifies that the Purim festive meal must include the consumption of meat and to “drink wine until he gets drunk and falls into a drunken sleep.”² While the poskim³ discourage actual drunkenness, the concept of drinking wine influences the nature of how we celebrate, even

while we remain sober.

When we think about a celebratory holiday that most epitomizes simcha, or rejoicing, Purim seems to be the obvious choice. It is interesting to note, however, that simcha is a major component of the *Shalosh Regalim*,⁴ and yet the type of joy differs markedly from the wildness of Purim. The Rambam specifically cautions against making our Yom Tov celebration too “Purim-like”:

כשאדם אוכל ושותה ושמה ברגל לא ימשך בין ובשחוק וקלות ראש ויאמר שכל מי שיוסיף בזה ירבה במצות שמחה ... ואי אפשר לעבוד את השם לא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך קלות ראש ולא מתוך שכרות.

“When one eats and drinks and rejoices on the festivals, he must not overindulge in wine, in frivolity, or in

lightheadedness, saying that whoever intensified these activities intensified the mitzvah of simcha, happiness ... it is impossible to serve G-d through frivolity, lightheadedness, or drunkenness."

Hilchot Yom Tov 6:20

Rav Soloveitchik: "Fake It 'till You Make It" Simcha

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik⁵ notes this comment of the Rambam and the seeming contradiction between the expected behaviors on Purim and the *Shalosh Regalim*. The Rav explains that there are in fact two different types of simcha that manifest themselves in the cycle of the Jewish year.

The simcha of the *Shalosh Regalim* celebrates the deep connection that we are privileged to have with our Creator. This type of simcha is "a quiet, meditative experience,"⁶ a focus on an inner feeling, in which the physical acts of celebration are encouraged as a means of achieving an enhanced level of unity with Hashem. Our Yom Tov goals should be in the realm of *cheshbon hanefesh*, a personal

accounting regarding our spiritual progress on this earth. This joy is a "deep-seated *experience* of joy, which expresses itself in a state of being, an existential awareness. The awareness of joy is awareness that our existence has a purpose, that there is self-fulfillment and commitment to a great objective. There is meaning to life."⁷

What, then, is the simcha associated with Purim? The Rav explains that the happiness of Purim is a completely external one. He introduces it in almost negative terms:

*It has nothing to do with a feeling of tranquility, serenity, or peace of mind. It is not an inner experience. It is more active — as if I were happy. Sometimes we see people acting as if they are happy, but it is a false sense. People try to deceive themselves and deceive others and somehow give the impression as if they were happy, while they are in fact very unhappy and depressed. And this concept of happiness was introduced for Purim.*⁸

In the Rav's construct, the *simcha* of Purim is notably fake, or at least

shallow. It is not the "You shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d"⁹ of the *Shalosh Regalim*. The joy of Purim is not the experience of existential awareness that is the Yom Tov, but rather the production of a mood or an emotion. It is a joy that does not emphasize the "*lifnei Hashem*" of the Yom Tov experience.

Why is this so? Rav Soloveitchik explains that Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot all commemorate aspects of a permanent change that our nation experienced. Pesach celebrates our ancestors' transition from slaves to free people, Shavuot recalls our becoming bound in an eternal covenant with G-d, and finally, Sukkot highlights the further change of the people as they adopted the manner and mindset of the great nation that was our destiny.

Purim, on the other hand, represents instability. The Gemara explains why no Hallel is recited on Purim:

הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי אחשוורוש אכתי עבדי
אחשוורוש אנן

Can we say "Praise, O servants of the



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Lord,” who are no longer servants of Achashveirosh? We are still the servants of Achashveirosh.

Megillah 14a

The story of Purim is marked by uncertainty. There is famously no reference to G-d’s name in the Megillah. The story of Purim follows a king who can’t make up his mind, and responds impulsively to the suggestions of his advisors — be it to kill Vashti, issue Haman’s decree against the Jews, or even to kill Haman at the request of Esther. At the conclusion of the story, the Jews still find themselves under the rule of an unpredictable monarch. As Rav Soloveitchik writes:

There was no sense of security. The miracle was incomplete. There was hatzalah, salvation, but no ge’ulah, redemption ... What happened on Purim was not of a permanent nature. They were saved, of course. However, no one could guarantee that the next day the same story would not repeat itself. That is why there is no Hallel.¹⁰

In an environment marked by lack of clarity, where we are unsure of our status and standing, where we wonder aloud if “never again” really means never, we cannot experience the type of joy marked by the sense of purpose, closeness, and contentment we feel on the *Regalim*. This is why we celebrate the miracle on a purely external level. When we do not feel joy internally, we must compensate by acting superficially joyful. This is the unique type of simcha that is the hallmark of Purim. The “as if I were happy” celebration of Purim manifests itself in the drinking and eating we are obligated to do, as well as in the identity-altering costumes and plays of the day. Things are not what they seem because we are recognizing that the salvation, while certainly

from Hashem, is not complete: “The victory is not final; the triumph is not decisive; a repetition is possible. That is why we cannot equate the celebration of Purim with *simhat ha-regel*, the joy of the Festival.”¹¹

Educational Implications: An Action Approach to Chinuch

Inherent in the Rav’s approach to *simchat Purim* is the surprising importance of actions and rituals, even when they don’t seem to fit the circumstances. We generally try to “read the room,” understand the prevailing mood, and then act accordingly. Here that mood is dark, and exile and uncertainty are the prevailing themes. If we are trying to inspire ourselves and our children to embrace the simcha of Purim as something that is beyond hedonistic overindulgence, it becomes difficult to overlook the seeming dissonance between the mood of the day and the directive to celebrate.

Perhaps we can address this challenge by taking a step back and considering the purpose and power of action in the Torah tradition. The *Sefer HaChinuch* in Parshat Bo enumerates mitzvah after mitzvah regarding the Korban Pesach. For each, the stated goal is the same: recalling G-d’s kindness in rescuing us from Egypt. The Chinuch wonders if there is really a need for so many different reminders of the Exodus. He explains that the underlying philosophy behind these mitzvot is that actions have unique power:

דע כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו. ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע... ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב, ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות.

You must know that a man is acted upon according to his actions; and his heart and all his thoughts always follow after the actions that he does — whether good or bad ... from that which is not for its own sake comes that which is for its own sake [as opposed to being for personal gain]; for the hearts are drawn after the actions.”

Sefer HaChinuch mitzvah no. 16

When teaching Torah, a *mechanech*, teacher, must balance the content and skills being taught with the equally important goal of inspiring the *talmid*, student, to grow. The process of growth is tricky for anyone, and particularly so for adolescents. A frequent conversation around Jewish ritual brings up some variation of the question of why we should daven or learn Torah if we don’t feel any meaning associated with that action.

Perhaps the educational lesson of the simcha of Purim is that it actually holds the key to spiritual growth. Purim is a holiday of *galut*, and it does not give our people a lasting change or solution to our troubles. Yet it is specifically on Purim that Chazal directs us to celebrate in an extreme manner fundamentally different from the *Regalim*. Chazal are reminding us about the power of actions. When we do a mitzvah, even if there is no corresponding feeling of inspiration or meaning on the inside, it has an impact on us. People often seek inspiration and are eager for that magical moment when the stars align, the rays of sun shine through the clouds, the angelic music plays, and finally we can proclaim that we are inspired and **now** ready to act. The Torah flips that formula on its head.

The Talmud learns from the inner and outer gold covering of the *Aron* that “**any Torah scholar whose**

inside is not like his outside is not considered a Torah scholar.¹² The fact that Chazal use the phrase of *tocho k'boro* (our inside should resemble our outside) and not the opposite also indicates that the direction of growth follows our external actions and travels inward, not vice versa.¹³

How do we inspire our children? Purim provides us with an unlikely but powerful template, one that focuses on encouraging participation, even if it is not immediately accompanied by meaning. Practically speaking, the action approach to growth on Purim provides us with some illuminating takeaways for educating and parenting our children:

1) Moments Matter: As Chip and Dan Heath discuss in their book *The Power of Moments*, experiences can be crafted to be memorable and have an impact. This means that a religious activity, be it a Shabbat table in the home or a chagigah in school, should be “game planned” in advance to formulate the steps that will encourage maximum participation and as a result, achieve maximum impact.

2) Family Traditions: Family rituals are important. They are even

more significant when they relate to religious observance. Is there a funny song that the family always sings at the Pesach Seder? A moving Havdalah? These actions are ultimately important in strengthening the connection our children feel toward their yiddishkeit.

3) Action!: As educators and parents, we can sometimes get stuck on determining the proper way to convey the reasoning behind our religious actions. It is of course important to have and transmit a strong background for why we do things, but the action-oriented simcha of Purim reminds us that we shouldn't let that hold us back from giving our kids impactful experiences, and if need be, let the reasons come later.

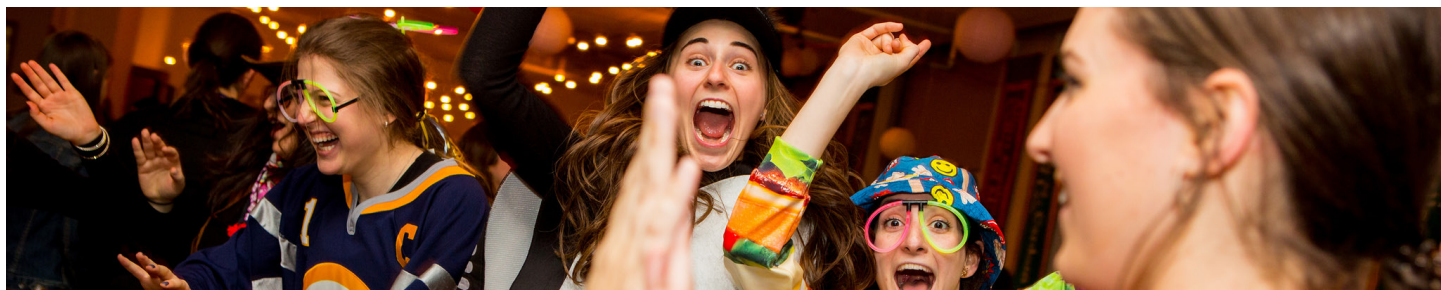
4) Don't Give Up: If the key to growth is the impact that our external actions have on our inner soul, then we must maintain confidence and faith that our efforts to engage our children in Jewish actions and experiences will ultimately bear fruit. The Kotzker famously teaches¹⁴ on the verse in *Shema* that directs us to place Hashem's words “upon your heart,” that our mission is to continue to teach and add lessons upon our hearts and our children's hearts, because we know that at some point,

the heart will eventually open and the meaning will be internalized. Working with children means playing the long game. While the impact of these experiences may not be felt until further down the road, Purim reminds us that, through action, inspiration will eventually emerge.

Purim Sameach!

Endnotes

1. *Megillah* 7b.
2. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:15.
3. Rama, *Orach Chaim* 695:2, and *Mishnah Berurah Beur Halacha* ad loc.
4. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:17.
5. *Days of Deliverance*, 2007.
6. *Ibid*, p.95
7. *Ibid*, p.99.
8. *Ibid*, p.96.
9. *Vayikra*, 23:40.
10. *Ibid*, p.101.
11. *Ibid*, p.105.
12. *Yoma* 72b.
13. Rav Elimelech Biderman, *Torah Wellsprings Parshat Mishpatim* 2019.
14. Rabbi Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism*, p.152.



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