

“Ad De’lo Yada”

An Elucidation of the Obligation of Intoxication on Purim

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One of the most unusual laws of Purim relates to the apparent requirement to become intoxicated during the Purim festival:

Rava said: a man is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he does not know the difference between “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordechai”

Megilla 7b

אמר רבא מיהייב איניש לבסומי
בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן
לברוך מרדכי
מגילה ז:

This halakha has engendered tremendous interest and discussion as it seems to represent the only time that there appears to be an actual requirement for drunkenness in Jewish law. While later authorities explain that outright drunkenness is not an imperative, and a little drinking and drowsiness certainly suffices (see Rema, 695:2, and Biur Halakha ad loc., s.v. “Ad De’lo Yada”), the requirement not to be able to differentiate between Haman’s curse and Mordechai’s blessing remains puzzling.

There are a number of different explanations given to explain this precept. For example, some authorities (see Magen Avrohom, 695:3) explain that the Gematria (numerical value) of the phrases *ארור המן* and *ברוך מרדכי* are identical (502). Thus, one should drink until he is sufficiently groggy to become unable to render this calculation. The obvious question, however, is that if the obligation requires that a person not appreciate that the numerical value is the same but rather think that the calculations are different, the wording of the halakhic obligation should be *עד דידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי* – that one should drink until he mistakenly does discern a difference (at least in Gematria) between the two phrases.

Perhaps we can offer a few alternative approaches. One possible approach is based on the Mishna in Berachos which states that:

Just as one is obligated to make a blessing of “Hatov Ve’HaMeitiv” upon happy tidings, so too one is obligated to make a blessing of “Dayan HaEmes” upon bad tidings

Mishna Berachos 54a (as explicated by the Gemora in Berachos 60b)

חייב אדם לברך על הרעה
כשם שמברך על הטובה
ברכות נד.

The ascendancy of Haman, and his attempt to exterminate the Jewish people, certainly comprised bad tidings. By contrast, Mordechai’s resistance and his successful efforts to thwart Haman constituted good tidings for the Jewish people. The principle evoked by the Mishna in Berachos is that both bad tidings and good tidings are worthy of making a blessing since we appreciate that both what we perceive as bad and as good emanate from Hashem, and כל דעביד – all that is done by Hashem is for the best (Berachos 60b).

Accordingly, the Gemora in Pesachim (50a) notes that in the World to Come, there will be no separate benediction upon bad tidings, and that the appreciation of the goodness of Hashem in all matters will be so intensely appreciated that the happy blessing of “HaTov Ve’HaMeitiv” will be recited on all tidings (see Maharsha ad loc.).

Since the holiday of Purim is a holiday that celebrates the victory of the Jewish people during a time of exile that helped pave the way to the completion of the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and, as the Rambam writes (Hilkhos Megilla 2:18), the observance of Purim will be the only event of past deliverance that shall be remembered for all eternity, it is appropriate during the Purim celebration to bring ourselves into the state of euphoria that we will experience during the eschatological age at which time we will recognize that even ארור המן – that which appears to be a curse – is also something to appreciate in the same manner as ברוך מרדכי – that which is more obviously a blessing. Accordingly, we drink on Purim עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן – until we are able to experience this ideal sense of appreciation.

A second approach can be traced to a verse at the beginning of Megillat Esther (1:8) which describes the great feast prepared by King Achashverosh for his subjects in Shushan, the capital city:

And the drinking was according to the law, without coercion; for so the King had ordered all of the officers of his house that they should do according to every man’s pleasure

translation from Art Scroll

והשתיה כדת אין אנס כי כן
יסד המלך על כל רב ביתו
לעשות כרצון איש ואיש

The Gemora (Megilla 12a) comments:

Rava said – the words איש ואיש connote that the drinking was served in a manner to satisfy the pleasure of both Mordechai and Haman.

לעשות כרצון איש ואיש - אמר רבא: לעשות כרצון
מרדכי והמן, מרדכי - דכתיב איש יהודי, המן - איש
צר ואויב

Thus, Rava who articulated the rule that one must drink on Purim until he cannot discern the difference between *ארור המן* and *ברוך מרדכי* also interpreted the verse in Megillat Esther concerning the non-coercion with respect to drinking at the feast of Achashverosh as pertaining jointly to these same two individuals.

The author of *Yeynah Shel Torah* quotes an explanation that Mordechai and Haman both were pleased, for separate reasons, that the drinking was not coerced. Mordechai was pleased because the Jews were not forced to partake of the wine from the feast of Achashverosh. Haman, on the other hand, was pleased because he knew that if the Jews did partake of the wine of their own free will, they would be subject to Divine punishment.

Perhaps this Midrash, which equates Mordechai and Haman in terms of their shared desire that the drinking of the wine at the feast of Achashverosh not be coerced, constitutes the ultimate source of the halakha that one should become intoxicated until he can no longer differentiate between *ארור המן* and *ברוך מרדכי*. Through the institution of the observance of *חייב איניש לבסומי* – of the obligation to drink wine in order to perform a mitzvah, the *ארור המן* becomes identical with the *ברוך מרדכי*. In other words, the very act of intoxication which would have fulfilled the evil plans of the accursed Haman during the feast of Achashverosh, becomes transformed on Purim into a mitzvah worthy of the blessing of Mordechai!

We may suggest one more variation of this explanation. The Hagahot Maimoniyot in his comments to the Rambam on *Hilkhot Megilla* (2:15), makes the observation that although the Rambam writes that there is an obligation to drink wine and become drunk during the Purim feast, this is not an absolute obligation but simply a *מצוה בעלמא ולא לעכב* - a fulfillment of a mitzvah that is non-mandatory in nature. Based on this understanding, the identification of *ארור המן* with *ברוך מרדכי* becomes even more pronounced. At the original feast of Achashverosh, Haman's objective was that the Jews would choose to drink, while Mordechai's objective was that the Jews would choose not to drink. In the current mitzvah celebration of our own Purim feast, the two options remain available – both to drink and not to drink, according to the Hagahot Maimoniyot. Thus, *עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי*, could be interpreted as indicating that the degree of intoxication remains *אין אנס* – non compulsory, in the same way that the *ארור המן* and *ברוך מרדכי* were identical in endorsing the notion of non-compulsory drinking during the feast of Achashverosh.

A final insight emerges from the *Gemora in Gittin* (57b): *מבני בניו של המן למדו תורה בבני ברק*. Haman had descendants who converted to Judaism and learned Torah in B'nei Brak. The ultimate victory of Purim was manifested through *קיימו וקבלו היהודים (מגילת אסתר ט:כז)* – קיימו (שבת פח)., the re-affirmation by the Jewish people of the acceptance of *Torah U'Mitzvot*. Perhaps the greatest capstone of this achievement was that the accursed Haman – *ארור המן* - who had sought to erase the Torah through the destruction of the Jewish people, had descendants who joined the ranks of *ברוך מרדכי* in perpetuating Torah. Fittingly, Purim presents us with a special opportunity *לבסומי ביינה של תורה* – to share the fragrance of Torah learning at *Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan* (RIETS) and the high level of Torah erudition of the outstanding fellows in the Kollel Elyon. Under the supervision of the *Roshei Kollel*, Rabbi

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