

Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary

The Status of Yom Purim in Rambam's Mishneh Torah

The relationship between the individual mitzvot of Purim and the general quality of the day constitutes one of the overarching questions regarding the nature of Purim and our celebration of it. To what degree are the mitzvot of the day isolated actions performed against an otherwise profane backdrop; alternatively, might the mitzvot of Purim stem from the day's character as a *yom mishteh vi'simcha*, a day of feasting and rejoicing, or, maybe even, a *yom tov*? This essay will analyze Rambam's development of this central issue by investigating his novel presentation of Purim's various facets. In some cases, identifying a prior source for Rambam's positions and formulations proves elusive, while in other cases, Rambam overtly modifies or seemingly contradicts his Talmudic foundation. A common trend, though, unifies all of these instances and depicts Rambam's distinctive approach toward our central question.

I. Issur Melakha

Rambam presents the potential existence of an *issur melakha* — prohibited labor — on Purim in a nuanced fashion: *melakha* is permitted, yet unqualifiedly inappropriate and ultimately unproductive:



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ומותר בעשיית מלאכה ואע"פ כן אין ראוי לעשות בו מלאכה. אמרו חכמים כל העושה מלאכה ביום פורים אינו רואה סימן ברכה לעולם.

Labor is permissible [on Purim] but nevertheless, it is not proper to perform labor. Our rabbis stated: anyone who performs labor on Purim doesn't see success from it ever.

Hilkhhot Megillah 2:14



Rambam's position seems problematic when assessed against the Talmud's background discussion. The Talmud (*Megillah 5b*) struggles with the question of whether *melakha* ought to be prohibited on Purim. Historical precedent offers contradictory signals,

since R. Yehudah ha'Nassi himself planted trees on Purim; on the other hand, Rav cursed an individual whom he observed planting flax, permanently terminating the flax's growth. Adding to the complexity of the matter, the Talmud cites Rav Yosef's halakhic derivation of an *issur melakha* from the phrase "yom tov" in the verse's description of Purim's original celebration — "*simcha, u'mishteh, vi'yom tov umishloach manot...*" — rejoicing, feasting, holiday, and gift giving (Esther 9:18).

Three resolutions seek to resolve the tension between sources. According to the first suggestion, an *issur melakha* applies on the observed day of Purim, either the 14th for city-dwellers or the 15th for residents of walled cities; however, it doesn't apply on the alternate day. R. Yehudah ha'Nassi celebrated Shushan Purim and was, therefore, permitted to plant on the 14th of Adar. Alternatively, *melakha* is permitted, in principle, on both days of Purim since the later verse, which describes the establishment of the holiday (Esther 9:22) replaces

the term “yom tov,” with *matanot li’evyonim*, indicating that the “yom tov” quality failed to gain traction and acceptance within the nation; nonetheless, certain communities adopted an *issur melakha* as their communal norm, and Rav’s curse reflected local communal practice. R. Yehudah ha’Nassi planted trees on Purim due to his community’s preservation of the baseline standard. Finally, it is possible that R. Yehudah ha’Nassi’s community adopted the more ambitious standard of *issur melakha*, but R. Yehudah ha’Nassi’s planting for the construction of a wedding canopy for *simchat chatan vi’kallah* was consistent in spirit with *simchat Purim*.

Rambam’s qualified position that *melakha* is permitted, but universally inappropriate and unproductive, seems to contradict all three approaches in the Gemara. According to the first approach, *melakha* is absolutely prohibited, while according to the second and third approaches it is purely the function of communal practice. Rambam’s view that *melakha* is permitted, but deemed unconditionally inappropriate, seems baseless. Furthermore, the inner logic of Rambam’s view is difficult irrespective of his source. If the “yom tov” quality of Purim was rejected, the roots of *melakha*’s inappropriate character are obscured.

II. Seudah

Rambam introduces several novel features in his presentation of the Purim meal (*seudat Purim*):

כיצד חובת סעודה זו שיאכל בשר ויתקן
סעודה נאה כפי אשר תמצא ידו. ושותה יין עד
שישתכר וירדם בשכרותו.
What are the obligations of this meal?

One should eat meat and prepare a nice meal in accordance with one’s financial means. And one should drink wine until one becomes drunk and sleeps from drunkenness.

Rambam incorporates the consumption of meat within his definition of the mitzvah, but simultaneously omits any requirement to eat bread. Moreover, Rambam surprisingly includes drinking wine within the *seudah*’s framework. Rambam’s basis for requiring wine consumption is, undoubtedly, Rava’s statement (*Megillah* 7b) that one should drink wine until one doesn’t know the difference between the blessing of Mordechai and the curse of Haman — which Rambam treated as a halakhic norm. The inclusion of this norm as part of the *seudah*’s framework, though, is not apparent in Rava’s words. What is additionally striking about Rambam’s core definition of the *seudah*, is the subjective standard that he sets for its fulfillment. Typically, obligations to eat and drink have quantifiable measures that determine whether one has properly fulfilled the mitzvah. With respect to *seudat Purim*, though, Rambam introduces an ascending scale depending on the individual. A “nice meal” should be prepared “in accordance with one’s financial means.” Likewise, the quantity of wine necessary to cause one to fall asleep in a drunken stupor would seemingly vary between people. Rambam’s innovative features of *seudat Purim* — the inclusion of meat and wine, the omission of bread, and a subjective, ascending-scale definition for fulfilling the mitzvah — are without an immediately apparent source.

III. Mishloach Manot and Matanot li’Evyonim

The Talmud (*Megillah* 7a) establishes objective measures for the necessary number of gifts and recipients for the fulfillment of *mishloach manot* and *matanot li’evyonim*: Two portions must be delivered to one individual for *mishloach manot*, and two gifts must be given to two poor individuals for *matanot li’evyonim*. Rambam’s presentation of both halakhot modifies the Talmud’s definition. He writes:

וכן חייב אדם לשלוח שתי מנות ... וכל
המרבה לשלוח לריעים משובח ... וחייב לחלק
לעניים ביום הפורים. אין פחות משני עניים
נותן לכל אחד מתנה אחת.

One is obligated to send two items ... if one sends more [than the requirement] to friends, it is praiseworthy ... One is obligated to give charity to the poor on Purim, one must give a gift to not less than two poor individuals.

Hilkhhot Megillah 2:15-16

In both instances, Rambam converts the Talmud’s quantifiable measures into minimum standards. With respect to *mishloach manot*, the praiseworthiness of the gesture is commensurate with the number of gifts and people one delivers to. The escalating quality of the mitzvah is even more pronounced with respect to *matanot li’evyonim*, where Rambam includes an aspirational quality in his initial basic definition — “not less than two poor individuals.”

The expansive scope of *matanot li’evyonim*’s distribution relates to which individuals qualify as deserving recipients, in addition to the number of individuals who are given to. Rambam adopts an exceedingly accommodating standard. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 78b)

states “*ein midakdekim bi’davar*,” we don’t adopt a calculated approach with respect to money collected for *matanot li’evyonim*. Rambam (*Hil. Megillah 2:16*), based on the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Megillah 1:4*), interprets that funds should be distributed to anyone who stretches out their hand, without inquiring further about the individual’s financial standing and deservedness. Although Rambam’s approach seems well-rooted in earlier sources, this attitude seems risky or even reckless. If funds were collected for distribution to *evyonim*, how can *gabbaim* appropriate money to those who may not qualify?

IV. Purim’s Aspirational Standards

The common strand unifying each of Rambam’s novel positions and formulations is the aspirational quality of Purim. In each instance, there exists a basic definition that sets a minimum standard, but one that can be subjectively and ambitiously built upon. Rambam’s opening formulation of Purim’s many facets helps unearth the underlying motive behind Purim’s aspirational standards:

מצות יום י"ד לבני כפרים ועיירות ויום ט'
לבני כרכים להיותן יום שמחה ומשתה
ומשלוח מנות לריעים ומתנות לאביונים.

The mitzvah on the fourteenth for the city-dwellers and on the fifteenth for residents of walled-cities is for it to be a day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor.

Hilkhhot Megillah 2:14

Rambam’s remarkable opening definition sets the tone for the ensuing halakhot. There is no mitzvah to eat a *seudah* nor is there a mitzvah to send *mishloach manot* or *matanot li’evyonim*, per se; rather, the mitzvah

is to engage in these activities in order to transform an ordinary, routine, profane day into “a day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor.” The mitzvah, in his definition, is “for it to be a day of...” The mitzvah activities that we perform do not exist against a profane backdrop nor do they stem from a day whose already established character is one of a *yom mishteh vi’simcha* or a *yom tov*. The relationship is reversed such that engagement in these mitzvah activities transform the day’s character and create the extraordinary out of the ordinary.

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With this orientation, Rambam’s innovations share a common internal logic. The day is inherently profane and routine, and, hence, *melakha* is permitted; however, it is inappropriate because of the aspirational motif that seeks to transform the day into a *yom mishteh vi’simcha* or, possibly, even a *yom tov*. The inherently profane nature of Purim is possibly responsible for Rambam’s extreme view (*Hil. Aveil 11:3*) that *aveilut* is fully applicable on Purim — “*nohagin bahen kol divrei aveilut*.” Rambam’s definition of *seudah* draws upon the mitzvah of *simchat yom tov*, which is defined by meat and wine too. Rambam, unlike

other opinions, believed that the mitzvah of *simchat yom tov* still finds biblical expression even following the destruction of the Beit ha’Mikdash through the consumption of meat and wine: “There is no simcha other than with meat, and there is no simcha other than with wine” (*Hil. Yom Tov 6:18* based on *Pesachim 109a*). The aspirational definition that Rambam introduces into the various mitzvot of the day all reflect this goal of transforming the day’s quality. Discrete mitzvah actions are quantifiable and can be objectively defined. The goal of Purim’s mitzvot, though, is to transform its quality of time. Toward that end, the transformation of the day’s quality as a “day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor” is commensurate with the degree and extent of one’s investment.

The mitzvot’s goal-oriented focus of transforming the day’s character might be responsible for Rambam’s willing accommodation to anyone who extends their hand for *ma’ot Purim*. A process-oriented approach would treat the funds collected for *matanot li’evyonim* as earmarked for that mitzvah alone, and any distribution to an undeserving individual as a complete misappropriation of the money. All of the day’s mitzvot, however, are aimed at a common goal, the creation of a “*yom simcha umishteh*.” If the distributed funds qualify as *mishloach manot* rather than *matanot li’evyonim*, the shared primary goal might remain unaffected.

V. Matanot li’Evyonim and Rejoicing in God’s Presence

The aspirational quality of Purim day finds greatest expression in one’s

investment in *matanot li'evyonim*, surpassing both the importance of enhancing one's *seudah* "in accordance with one's financial needs" and the praiseworthiness of embellishing one's *mishloach manot*. Rambam explains:

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו. שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים. שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים.

It is preferable to give additional gifts to the poor rather than increase one's meal or deliver additional tributes to friends because there is no greater joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the converts, for one who gladdens the hearts of these distressed people is comparable to the Divine presence...

Hilkhot Megillah 2:17

The value expressed here is strikingly parallel to Rambam's description of *yom tov* (*Hil. Yom Tov* 6:18), where he places a great emphasis on providing to those in need in order to fulfill *simchat yom tov*.

Rambam's terminology, as well as the religious value of including less fortunate individuals in one's

celebration, are shared in the contexts of both Purim and *yom tov*. At the same time, the inverse relationship between Purim and *yom tov* is also captured in this very comparison. On *yom tov*, we are bidden to celebrate before God — "You shall rejoice before Hashem, your God" — and as part of that celebration, the verse continues, we are commanded to include individuals facing difficult challenges and compromised circumstances: "you ... the Levi within your gates, the convert, the orphan, and the widow amongst you" (Devarim 16:11). Hashem is the paradigm of compassion, mercy, kindness, and selfless giving, and, as a result, celebration in His presence must express itself through appreciating the source of one's bounty and through selfless giving. On Purim, the relationship is inverted. Whereas on *yom tov*, "rejoicing before Hashem" translates into acts of selfless giving, on Purim, acts of selfless, boundless giving create a "rejoicing before Hashem." By acting selflessly, empathetically, and kindly toward impoverished and downtrodden people, the divine quality of man comes to the fore: "one

who gladdens the heart of these unfortunate individuals is comparable to the Divine presence," as the Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Megillah*. The celebration of Purim is thus transformed into a "rejoicing before Hashem."

For this reason, *matanot li'evyonim* surpasses *seudat Purim* and *mishloach manot* in its aspirational quality and its ability to transform the character of the day. It, more than the others, can infuse the day with a *yom-tov*-esque quality of "rejoicing before Hashem." The "yom tov" quality (Esther 9:19) that was featured in the initial celebration of Purim was not rejected when it was later replaced by *matanot li'evyonim* (Esther 9:22) in the establishment of Purim as a holiday. Purim seeks to remind us that living in Hashem's presence and leading a divinely inspired life ought not be reserved exclusively for the *kedushat ha'zman* of the *yamim tovim* or for the *kedushat ha'makom* of the Beit ha'Mikdash. Even the ordinary can be made extraordinary and the profane into a quasi-"*yom tov*" when we tap into the divinity embedded in our humanity and engage in boundless, selfless giving to others.

