



# WHEN IGNORANCE IS BLISS: THE ANTINOMIANISM OF PURIM AND SHIRAS HAAZINU

## A Halacha That Defies the Spirit of Conventional Halachic Norms

One of the most enigmatic practices cited in *Shulchan Aruch* is the Talmudic dictum known as “*ad de’loyada*.” חייב אדם לבסומי בפוריא עד - “One must become intoxicated on Purim until he can no longer distinguish between ‘Cursed be Haman’ and ‘Blessed be Mordechai’” (*Megilla* 7b), which, taken at face value, requires one to imbibe until becoming “stone-drunk.” The Rama (*Orach Chaim* 695:2), in apparent deference to the potentially devastating consequences inherent in a literal compliance with this halacha, cites a view that the

obligation may be discharged by drinking more than one is accustomed and falling asleep. The *Mishna Berura*, citing *Pri Megadim*, recommends that Rama’s protocol be adopted as standard practice.

Notwithstanding Rama’s “scaled down” approach to fulfilling *ad de’loyada*, the underlying rationale for this halacha remains elusive. The requirement to imbibe and engage in a degree of inebriation is starkly at odds with the Torah’s ubiquitous calls for restraint and moderation within the realm of physical pleasures. Similarly, the purposeful diminution of one’s conscious waking faculties for no apparent reason other than simply producing a state of slumbers seems,

as a matter of religious imperative, equally incongruous.

Commentaries over the ages have grappled with these questions and have suggested several explanations. These include the following:

1. Many of the pivotal events in the Purim narrative were associated with lavish feasts accompanied by drink (i.e. the banquets of Achashveirosh, Vashti, and Esther). Consequently, “partying” on Purim carries within it an element of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle).
2. Unlike Chanuka, where the Jews encountered religious persecution, Haman’s attempt at

genocide posed a solely physical threat. Accordingly, the Purim commemoration stresses elements that are distinctly physical.

I would like to suggest a new interpretation for *ad de'loyada* in light of the background and literary structure of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, the poetic exultation which Moshe Rabbeinu was instructed to teach B'nei Yisrael as one of his final tasks before departing the world.

### Shiras Ha'azinu: An Overview

The backdrop for *Shiras Ha'azinu* can be found in the following pesukim that appear toward the conclusion of Parshas VaYeilech (Devarim 31:16-21):

(טז) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה שָׁכַב עִם אֲבוֹתָיִךְ וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנְהוּ אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהֵי נֹכַח הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא בָּא שָׁמָּה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְעִזְבוּנִי וְהִפְרָ אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתּוֹ: (יז) וְחָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעִזְבוּתִים וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנַי מֵהֶם וְהָיָה לְאֹכַל וּמִצָּאָהוּ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא עַל כֵּי אֵין אֶלְקֵי בְּקִרְבִּי מִצָּאוֹנֵי הָרְעוּת הָאֵלֶּה: (יח) וְאֹנְכֵי הַסֵּתֶר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כֹּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: (יט) וְעַתָּה כְּתָבוּ לְכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וּלְמַדָּה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְחָה בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנְיֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כ) כִּי אֲבִיאֲנֹךְ אֶל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם וְבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבַשׁ וְאָכַל וְשָׂבַע וְדָשַׁן וּפְנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְעִבְדוּם וְנִאֲצָוּנִי וְהִפְרָ אֶת בְּרִיתִי: (כא) וְהָיָה כִּי תִמְצָאֵן אֹתוֹ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְעַתָּה הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְפָנָי לְעֵד כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זֶרְעוֹ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת יְצִרְוֹ אֲשֶׁר הוּא עָשָׂה הַיּוֹם בְּטָרְם אֲבִיאֲנֹךְ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי:

*Hashem said to Moshe: Behold you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land, in whose midst it is coming, and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will flare against it on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them and they will become*

*prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?' But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did for it had turned to gods of others. So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel, place it in their mouth, so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the Children of Israel. For I shall bring them to the Land that I swore to their forefathers, which flows with milk and honey, but it will eat, be sated, and grow fat, and turn to gods of others and serve them, it will provoke Me and annul My covenant. It shall be that when many evils and distresses come upon it, then this song shall speak up before it as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring, for I know its inclination, what it does today before I bring them to the Land that I have sworn'.*

These pesukim depict a dark chapter of Jewish history replete with intense suffering (רעות רבות וצרות), “Many evils and distresses” – v. 17) and characterized by *hester panim*, the concealment of the Divine Countenance (v. 17-18). The state of *hester panim* is described as being a direct consequence of the nation’s turn to idolatry, which was preceded by overindulgence in material pleasures (ואכל ושבע ודשן), “It will eat, be sated, and grow fat” – v. 20). All of this would be borne out in the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, which Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu to record and teach B'nei Yisrael as a lesson for posterity.

The chain of events recounted in this series of pesukim form a distinct theme within *Shiras Ha'azinu* that can be readily discerned in a cursory reading. After extolling Hashem’s love for B'nei Yisrael, as demonstrated by His providing for their every

need and comfort, the song foretells how the Jewish nation’s exposure to material pleasure would eventually lead them to rebel: וישמן ישרון ויבעט, “Jeshurun became fat and kicked” (Devarim 32:15) - and substitute their allegiance to Hashem for the worship of alien gods. The *shira* goes on to recount how the Jews’ embrace of idolatry would cause G-d to hide His countenance: ויאמר אסתירה פני מהם, “And He said, ‘I will hide My face from them’ (v. 20)). This state of *hester panim* would be accompanied by great suffering entailing dreadful consequences for both young and old (v. 21-26).

### Hashem’s “Unconditional Guarantee”

Despite its harsh tone, *Shiras Ha'azinu* concludes on a positive note not explicitly spelled out in Parshas Va'Yeilech — namely, Hashem’s subsequent defense of his people as manifested by His wreaking vengeance upon Israel’s enemies for spilling the blood of His servants (v. 35-43).

(לה) לִי נָקָם וְשִׁלְמִם לְעַת תִּמּוּט רַגְלֵם כִּי קָרוֹב יוֹם אִידָם וְחָשׁ עֲתֹדֶת לְמוֹ: (לו) כִּי דִין ה' עִמּוֹ וְעַל עֲבָדָיו יִתְנַחֵם כִּי יִרְאֶה כִּי אֶזְלַת יָד וְאָפַס עֲצוֹר וְעֹזֹב: (לז) וְאָמַר אֵי אֱלֹהֵימוֹ צוּר חֲסִיוֹ בּוֹ: (לח) אֲשֶׁר חֶלֶב זִבְחֵימוֹ יֹאכְלוּ יִשְׁתּוּ יַיִן נְסִיכִם יִקּוּמוּ וְיַעֲזֹרְכֶם יְהִי עֲלֵיכֶם סִתְרָה: (לט) רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹקִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאַחִיהָ מִחֲצָתִי וְאֲנִי אֲרַפָּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מִצִּיל: (מ) כִּי אֲשָׂא אֶל שָׁמַיִם יָדִי וְאֲמַרְתִּי חִי אֹנְכֵי לְעֵלָם: (מא) אִם שְׁנוֹתַי בְּרַק חֲרָבִי וְתֹאחֲזוּ בְּמִשְׁפַּט יָדִי אֲשִׁיב נָקָם לְצָרֵי וְלִמְשַׁנְּאֵי אֲשִׁלֵּם: (מב) אֲשִׁפִּיר חֲצֵי מַדָּם וְחֲרָבִי תֹאכַל בְּשָׂר מַדָּם חֶלֶל וְשִׁבְיָה מִרָאשׁ פְּרָעוֹת אוֹיֵב: (מג) הֲרִנְיִנוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ כִּי דָם עֲבָדָיו יִקּוּם וְנָקָם יִשִּׁיב לְצָרֵיו וְכִפֵּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ *Mine is vengeance and recompense, At the time that their foot falters. For the day of their disaster is near, and destiny rushes upon them. When Hashem will vindicate*

His people, He will relent regarding His servants, When He sees that their might is gone, and none is saved or assisted. He will say: “Where are their gods, the rock in whom they sought refuge, who ate the fat of their offerings and drank their libation wine? Let them rise up to your help, and let them be a shield unto you! See, then, that I, I am He; There is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from My hand. For I raise My hand to heaven And say: ‘As I live forever, if I whet My flashing blade And My hand lays hold on judgment, vengeance will I wreak on My foes, and upon those that hate Me shall I bring retribution. I will make My arrows drunk with blood— As My sword devours flesh— Blood of the slain and the captive, because of the earliest depredations of the enemy. O nations, acclaim His people! For He will avenge the blood of His servants; He will wreak vengeance on His foes, And cleanse the land and His people.

The Ramban, in his closing comments to *Shiras Ha’azinu*, notes that this divine gesture appears to be

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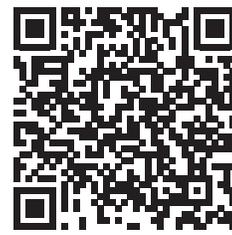
unconditional — unrelated to, and independent of, the possibility of Israel’s repentance. It is a natural response to Israel’s state of utter helplessness coupled with the specter of *chilul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem’s name). Indeed, Ramban explains, the lasting legacy of *Shiras Ha’azinu* lies in its guarantee that despite the Jewish people’s lowly spiritual state and the cycle of suffering generated in its wake, Israel will nonetheless survive, due retribution will be meted out to her foes, and atonement will be attained “*le’maan shemo*” for the sake of G-d’s holy name.” This comforting message, concludes the Ramban, serves as a profound and powerful testament to the future redemption. In Ramban’s immortal words:

והנה אין בשירה הזאת תנאי בתשובה ועבודה, רק היא שטר עדות שנעשה הרעות ונוכל, ושהוא יתברך יעשה בנו בתוכחות חימה, אבל לא ישבית זכרנו, וישוב ויתנחם ויפרע מן האויבים בחרבו הקשה והגדולה והחזקה, וכפר על חטאתינו למען שמו. אם כן, השירה הזאת הבטחה מבוארת בגאולה העתידה על כרחן של מינין.

*Now, there is no stipulation in this song regarding repentance or service of G-d; rather, it is a testimonial document that we will commit evils and emerge whole, and that the Blessed One will act toward us with wrathful rebukes, but will not obliterate our memory, and He turn back and relent and exact retribution from the enemies with His harsh, great and mighty sword, and He will atone for our sins for His Name’s sake. Hence, this song is an explicit assurance of the future redemption despite the wishes of the heretics.*

### Parallels Between Purim and Shiras Ha’azinu

The Purim narrative, in fact, closely shadows the theme of *Shiras Ha’azinu*. The story is set in the Persian Diaspora



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during a period characterized by *hester panim*, which, as foretold in *Shiras Ha’azinu*, was a direct consequence of the Jews’ endemic embrace of idolatry during their stay in the land of Israel. The parallel between the *hester panim* described in *Shiras Ha’azinu* and that of the Purim story is implicit in the Talmudic statement which finds scriptural allusion to Esther’s name in the verse אסתיר פני – “And I will surely have concealed My face from them” (Devarim 31:18; *Chullin* 139b) which, as noted, refers to the events recounted in *Ha’azinu*. Additionally, the verse, אמרת - “I had said, ‘I will scatter them, I will cause their memory to cease from Man’” (Devarim 32:26), found in *Shiras Ha’azinu*, may well be a reference to the danger of physical oblivion that loomed over the Jewish people in the wake of the decree of Achashveirosh. Understood in this light, the sudden and miraculous turn of events in the Purim narrative, culminating in the Jews’ taking revenge against their enemies, represents not a divine

deliverance in response to sincere repentance, but rather a fulfillment of the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu* that when all else fails, G-d ultimately intervenes on behalf of His people, saves them from the brink of annihilation, and ensures that justice is meted out against Israel's foes.

### Overindulgence and the “Slippery Slope”

This parallel between Purim and *Shiras Ha'azinu* may lie at the heart of the “partying” nature of Purim and its jarring inconsistency with mainstream Torah sensitivities. Inasmuch as *Shiras Ha'azinu* specifically identifies indulging in physical pleasures as being the initial stage of a potential “slippery slope” leading to *hester panim* and the grave troubles generated in its wake, it is perhaps ironically appropriate that Purim, whose very essence serves as validation of the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, entails an obligation to engage — for this one day — in atypical revelry, in order to symbolically affirm that although such tendencies normally pave a dangerous path of *hester panim* fraught with calamity, suffering, and despair, the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu* forever stands as a guarantee

of divine protection. In a similar vein, the Rama's advocating slumber precipitated by drink as an enactment of *ad de'loyada* conveys the symbolic message that even when the Jewish people find themselves “asleep” and hence, most vulnerable, they may rest assured that *הנה לא ינום ולא יישן שומר ישראל* — “The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers (Tehillim 121:4), as expressed in the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*.

### Purim and Yom Kippur: Two Models for the Eradication of Evil

This analysis may shed light on the striking observation of the Arizal highlighting an association between Purim and Yom Kippurim, the latter of which can be constructed to read “*Yom Ki-Purim*” “a day like Purim.”

At first glance, these two days could seemingly not be further apart! Upon further analysis, however, we can discern a common symbolic theme of “vanquishing evil,” as expressed in overcoming the *yetzer hara* (the Evil inclination) in the case of Yom Kippur and the victory over Haman, descendant of Amalek, on Purim. Consequently, the polar tendencies that characterize Yom Kippur and

Purim—the former marked by self-denial and increased vigilance, the latter by levity and letting down one's guard—may perhaps correspond to the two sections in the Torah that speak of the eradication for Amalek, the personification of evil. In Parshas Ki Seitzei (Devarim 25:19) the Torah instructs: *תמחה את זכר עמלק*, “You shall erase the name of Amalek,” placing the onus upon the Jewish nation. By contrast, in Parshas BeShalach (Shemos 17:14), the Torah emphasizes *מחה אמחה את זכר עמלק*, “I shall obliterate the name of Amalek.” The model of Yom Kippur, on the one hand, corresponds to *תמחה את זכר עמלק* which demands ongoing vigilance in the struggle against evil. This approach is clearly in sync with the dominant Torah norm of limiting and controlling excesses. The Purim model, on the other hand, is patterned after that of *מחה אמחה את זכר עמלק*, symbolizing periods when the Jewish people find themselves “asleep,” helplessly mired in sin and trapped in the clutches of evil with no recourse of defense. At times like these, the guarantee of *Shiras Ha'azinu* emerges in the form of divine intervention to overcome the forces of evil. May we all merit to witness the eradication of evil, whatever the means, speedily in our days.



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