



14 Adar



Celebrating at KCT

Saturday Evening, March 19, 2011



KEHILLAT CHOVEVEI TZION SHABBAT AND PURIM SERVICES

March - April 2011

Adar II - Nisan 5771

Shabbat Shekalim		Services	Candles
Friday	March 4	6:00 PM	5:28 PM
Saturday	March 5	9:00 AM	
Shabbat Vayikra			
Friday	March 11	6:00 PM	5:36 PM
Saturday	March 12	9:00 AM	
Shabbat Zachor			
Friday	March 18	6:00 PM	6:43 PM
Saturday	March 19	9:00 AM	
Erev Purim			
Megillah Reading			
Saturday	March 19	8:00 PM	
Shabbat Parah			
Friday	March 25	6:00 PM	6:51 PM
Saturday	March 26	9:00 AM	
Shabbat HaChodesh			
Friday	April 1	6:00 PM	6:58 PM
Saturday	April 2	9:00 AM	
<i>Rosh Chodesh Nisan</i>	<i>April 5</i>	<i>Begin Pesach Preparations!</i>	
Shabbat Metzora			
Friday	April 8	6:00 PM	7:06 PM
Saturday	April 9	9:00 AM	
Shabbat HaGadol *			
Friday	April 15	6:05 PM	7:13 PM
Saturday	April 16	9:00 AM	

*** Happy Anniversary to the entire Kehillah Mishpacha!**



Proclaiming the Holiday of Purim Megillat Esther 9:1-4

Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them.) The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Achashuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people. And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordechai fell upon them. For Mordechai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.

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The Holiday in Overview:

Its Meaning, Words and Practices

(Drawn from the writings of Rabbi Stanley Asekoff, of Congregation Bnai Shalom in West Orange, NJ)

The start of the month of Adar (this year, Adar II begins on March 6-7) is a reminder to commence the merrymaking in anticipation of the holiday of Purim. This famous Rabbinic statement indicates the wonderfully happy overtones attributed to the entire month of Adar.

SHABBAT ZACHOR (March 19 this year). The Shabbat immediately prior to Purim is called Shabbat Zachor (the Sabbath of Remembrance) because, on this Shabbat, it is customary to read a special section from the Torah (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) that instructs us to remember what the Nation of Amalek did to the Jewish People as they were fleeing from Egypt - they attacked them and attempted to destroy them, singling out the rear of the column of marchers where the elderly, frail, and weak were gathered. God says that He will surely wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heavens. This is read prior to Purim because of the tradition that Haman was descended from Amalek, along with a special Haftorah Zachor haftorah (I Samuel 15:2-34) which discusses G-d's command to King Saul to destroy the people of Amalek.

TA'ANIT ESTHER (The Fast of Esther, Thursday, March 17). It is customary to observe a daytime fast (from sun-up to sun-down) on the day before Purim (or if it falls out on Friday, to observe the fast two days before Shabbat) in commemoration of the Fast observed by Queen Esther prior to her appearance before Achashuerus to intercede with him in behalf of her people.

MEGILLAT ESTHER (The Scroll of Esther) is the Biblical book containing the story of Purim. We actually read the story in the synagogue on Purim from a parchment scroll, being very careful to rattle the graggers whenever the name Haman is mentioned, but only then. The mitzvah is to hear all of the words of the megillah.

MACHATZIT HASHEKEL (The half-shekel . . . be sure to see the special section elsewhere in this booklet!). This refers to the half shekel that was collected in ancient days for the upkeep of the

Temple in Jerusalem. It is a reminder of the custom that developed and is mentioned in Megillat Esther of giving gifts of money to the poor on Purim. *(It is the KCT long-standing custom mid-way through the Megillah reading, that all attendees - men, women and youngsters - contribute exactly one dollar, not more, not less, as our fulfillment of this precious custom.)*

RA'ASHANIM (Graggers) are noise makers used during the reading of the Megillah every time the name of Haman is mentioned to fulfill the Biblical statement that God would wipe out the name of Amalek from under the heavens. The Hebrew word for gragger is *Ra'ashan*.

MATANOT LA'EYONIM (Gifts for the poor). In ancient Persia, the Jews celebrated Purim by giving gifts to the poor, from which is derived the custom that we should put at least two coins of the realm into at least two different tzedakah "pushkes" at the conclusion of the reading of the Megillah.

MISHLOACH MANOT (Sending food gifts) to friends is a Purim tradition also derived from the Megillah. We read that the Jews of Persia celebrated Purim by sending such gifts to their friends. On Purim day, we send at least two plates containing at least two different kinds of foods to at least two friends. Some make this gift even more elaborate, in baskets with decorations, and several additional types of foods and drink.

PURIM GELT (Purim money) refers to the custom of giving two coins to any child who brings Mishloach Manot to our homes on Purim day. Chanukah gelt is derived from Purim gelt and in recent years, the latter seems to have been gaining in popularity.

SHUSHAN PURIM Shushan was the capital city of Persia. Because the Jews of Shushan were saved one day later than all the other Persian Jews, and consequently celebrated Purim one day later, it has become customary that all Jews living in cities that had walls surrounding them in the days of Joshua celebrate Shushan Purim. So the Jews of Jerusalem, for example, celebrate Purim one day later.

DRESSING IN COSTUME on Purim has become a venerable custom. Why costumes? As a reminder that although God's presence in the Purim story was not mentioned, He was there, in disguise, so to speak, and it was He who helped Esther and Mordechai save the Jews.

OZNAY HAMAN (Haman's Ears in Hebrew and in Yiddish HAMANTASHEN - "Pockets of Haman") are the three cornered pastries containing a variety tasty fillings, such as mon (poppy), apricot, cherry, and prunes. They remind us of the three cornered hat worn by Haman, the villain of the Purim story. The original name for this pastry was "muntashen", "mun" being the Yiddish word for poppy seeds, The Hebrew name "Oznay Haman" is taken from the older name "Haman Ohren" (Haman's ears).

SE'UDAT PURIM-THE FESTIVE PURIM MEAL is a special, celebration meal eaten late on Purim Day close to sunset and continuing through until dark. It commemorates the festive meals that took place in Shushan, the capital of Persia, on Purim Day when the Jews were saved from Haman's plot of destruction.

To Remember . . . And Not To Forget

The special Shabbat which precedes Purim, Shabbat Zachor, derives its name comes from the opening word of the special maftir reading "Zachor." Deuteronomy 25:17-19: *Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt-how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!*

Are Jews Still Commanded to Blot Out the Memory of Amalek?

By Rabbi David Golinkin, President of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem.

On Purim, we are rightly appalled by the fact that Haman wanted to destroy the Jewish people. Yet we seldom notice that we were commanded to do Amalek, in Exodus 17, which we read on Purim morning, and Deuteronomy 25, which we read on

In the Haftarah of *Shabbat Zachor*, the Prophet Samuel orders King Saul to "attack Amalek, spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!" (I Samuel 15:3). In other words, we are instructed to commit genocide. This is morally problematic in and of itself; it is doubly problematic after the Holocaust.

During the biblical period, we were attacked by many peoples. What was so awful about Amalek's attack? Why blot out the memory of Amalek, as opposed to other peoples who have attacked us throughout history?

Some rabbis say that Amalek deviated from the norms of war. They attacked a defenseless bunch of slaves on the road, just for the sake of attacking them. They had nothing to gain from the attack since the Israelites had just left Egypt; it would lead neither to improving their reputation as warriors nor to significant spoils. It was an unjust war motivated by hatred.

Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Sofer (Hungary, 19th century) emphasized the words "undeterred by fear of God" (Deut. 25:18). If Amalek attacked the Israelites immediately after God redeemed them from Egypt with signs and wonders, it shows that they had no fear of God. That is why Exodus says that with Amalek from generation to generation (Exodus 17:16). It is, so to speak, a war between God and Amalek.

Despite the biblical commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek, a number of rabbinic sources express clear discomfort with this commandment, which led to allegorical interpretations of the commandment to destroy Amalek. The Zohar says that Amalek is Samael or Satan, while in Barcelona (ca. 1300) there were commentators who said that Amalek means *Yetzer Hara*, or the evil inclination. In other words, we are commanded to blot out Satan, or *Yetzer Hara*, not a physical people called Amalek.. Indeed, the commandment to blot out Amalek is omitted entirely by two of the most important codifiers of Jewish law -- Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher in his *Tur* (Spain, ca. 1340) and Rabbi Yosef Karo in his *Shulhan Arukh* (Safed, 1556).

Nonetheless, there were many important rabbis who ruled that Amalek still exists and that we are still commanded to remember their deeds and to destroy them. This was the opinion of Maimonides in his *Sefer Hamitzvot* and *Mishneh Torah* and of Rabbi Pinhass Halevi of Barcelona in his *Sefer Hahinukh* (13th century). Indeed, many rabbis identify Amalek with a specific people such as the Christians and the Armenians. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik and others say that anyone who hates the Jewish people is from the seed of Amalek e.g. the Nazis, the Soviets, Nasser and the Mufti. More recently, Rabbi Jack Riemer has written that the Muslim fundamentalists are Amalek.

Personally, I identify with the discomfort expressed above regarding the commandment to destroy an entire people, despite the gravity of their original deed. I agree with the many rabbis throughout history who eliminated this mitzvah from their codices or who said that there are no longer any Amalekites in the world. We have seen above just how dangerous it is to identify your current enemy with Amalek. The identification changes from country to country and from place to place and it is even used by Christians against us!

Though it would seem that the Amalek story is entirely negative in nature, I would like to conclude with two positive, ethical lessons which we can learn from the Amalek passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

In *Pesikta d'rav Kahana*, Rabbi Banai explained that Amalek's attack was a *punishment* for unethical behavior. Thus, the message of the story is not hatred but *repentance*. In order to prevent another Amalek, we must behave ethically.

Finally, we shall cite Prof. Nehama Leibowitz. What was the dreadful sin of Amalek, as opposed to other peoples who fought with Israel? Because only of him is it written: "undeterred by of God". In all four biblical passages which use this expression, the litmus test for "fear of God" is the attitude to the weak and the stranger. Amalek is the archetype of the Godless, who attack the weak because they are weak, who cut down the stragglers in every generation.

In our day, this is perhaps the most important message of the Amalek story -- not hatred of Amalek but aversion to their actions. In the State of Israel, there are many strangers and stragglers -- new immigrants, foreign workers, as well as innocent Arabs and Palestinians. Some Jews learn from the story of Amalek that we should hate certain groups. We must emphasize the opposite message. We must protect "the stragglers" so that we may say of the State of Israel: "surely there is fear of God in this place".

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The 60-Second Megillah

Adapted from "One Hour Purim Primer," by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf.

CHAPTER 1 -- KING ACHASHVEROSH THROWS A PARTY

A lavish six-month celebration marks the third year in the reign of Achashverosh, king of Persia. Queen Vashti refuses the king's request to appear at the celebration and display her beauty for the assembled guests. The king's advisors counsel that Vashti be replaced with a new queen.

CHAPTER 2 -- ESTHER BECOMES THE QUEEN

Across the Persian Empire, officials are appointed to identify beautiful candidates to succeed Vashti as queen. A Jewish girl, Esther, the niece of Mordechai, is brought to the capital of Persia as one of the candidates. Mordechai tells Esther to conceal her identity. Esther is chosen to be the queen. Mordechai learns of a plot to overthrow the king. Mordechai informs Esther, Esther tells the king, and the plotters are hanged.

CHAPTER 3 -- THE RISE OF HAMAN

Achashverosh appoints Haman to be his prime minister. All bow in homage to Haman. Mordechai consistently refuses to bow to Haman. An enraged Haman vows to kill all the Jews of Persia. Haman prevails upon Achashverosh to destroy the Jews. A royal edict is disseminated throughout Persia. The 13th of Adar is designated as the date to exterminate all the Jews and plunder their possessions.



CHAPTER 4 -- ESTHER'S MISSION BECOMES CLEAR

Mordechai tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of public mourning. Mordechai sends a copy of the decree to Esther and asks her to intercede with the king. Esther replies that to approach the king without being summoned is to risk death. Mordechai tells her that she has no choice. Esther tells Mordechai to ask the Jews to fast and pray for three days before she will approach the king.

CHAPTER 5 -- ESTHER'S STRATEGY, HAMAN'S FURY

King Achashverosh receives Esther and grants her virtually any request. Esther's request: that the king and Haman join her at a banquet. After the banquet, Haman sees Mordechai who once again refuses to bow. Haman's wife, Zeresh, suggests that Mordechai be hung, and the gallows are prepared.

CHAPTER 6 -- THE REVERSAL BEGINS

The king can't sleep and asks to hear the royal chronicles. For the first time, the king learns of the assassination plot that Mordechai had revealed. That same night, Haman comes to see the king about hanging Mordechai. Before Haman can speak, the king tells Haman to honor Mordechai by dressing him in royal garments, to place him on a royal stallion and to personally lead him through the streets of Shushan, capital of Persia.

CHAPTER 7 -- REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

At the second banquet, Esther reveals her identity and announces that she and her people are about to be murdered. Esther identifies Haman as her arch enemy. The king has Haman hung on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordechai.

CHAPTER 8 -- THE REVERSAL IS COMPLETE

Mordechai is named prime minister to replace Haman. A second royal edict is promulgated empowering the Jews to fight and kill anyone who would try to harm them.

CHAPTER 9 -- THE HOLIDAY OF PURIM IS ESTABLISHED

On the 13th of Adar, a day that had been designated for Jewish destruction, the Jews are victorious over their enemies. The 10 sons of Haman are hung. The 14th and 15th of Adar are designated to celebrate the salvation. These are the days of Purim. Mordechai initiates the Purim practices -- consisting of a festive meal, the exchange of gifts of food, and the giving of monetary gifts to the poor.

CHAPTER 10 -- MORDECHAI AND PERSIA

Persia, with Mordechai as prime minister, flourishes. The role of Mordechai in the history of the Persian empire is recorded in the king's chronicles.

Purim and its Four Mitzvot: The Sending of Gifts(Mishloach Manot)

The four mitzvot associated with Purim are:

The Reading of the Megillah (Mikra Megillah)

The Festive Purim Meal (Seudat Purim)

Sending Gifts (Mishloach Manot)

Gifts to the poor (Matanot l'Evyonim)

This explanation is extracted from The Book of Our Heritage by Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov

Mishloach Manot:

It is obligatory to send a gift which consists of at least two 'portions' to another person. Both men and women are included in this Mitzvah.

Only what is edible or drinkable without further cooking or preparation, is considered a 'portion.' One may therefore send cooked meats or fish, pastry goods, fruit, sweets, wine and other beverages. And it is the more praiseworthy to send portions to as many friends as possible. Even better, however, is to give more gifts to the poor than to friends.



One of the most popular food items that has been used for this Mitzvah is the Hamentash, a calorific (fattening) concoction consisting of dough shaped into the form of a triangle [with just two possibilities allowed - exactly sixty degrees in each angle or an isosceles right triangle - just kidding!], with filling of various kinds.

Even a poor person is required to fulfill the Mitzvah of 'Mishloach Manot.' If one is unable to do so directly, he may exchange his own food for that of his friend; both of whom would thus fulfill their obligations. The Mitzvah of Mishloach Manot may not be fulfilled with money, clothing and the like, but only with foods or beverages.

It is proper to send portions sufficient to convey regard for the recipient. One should not send an item so minute as to be worthless in the eyes of the poor.

If at all possible, these 'portions' should be sent by messengers, rather than to be delivered personally. And though it is said of all other mitzvot: 'It is more of a Mitzvah if done personally, than if done through a messenger,' this Mitzvah is different. Since the term, 'Mishloach Manot' (the sending of portions), is the term used in the 'Megillah' the proper procedure for fulfilling the Mitzvah, is to do so by messenger. Nevertheless, if one delivers his Mishloach Manot personally, he still fulfills his obligation.

The Mitzvah of Mishloach Manot should be performed by day.

A mourner is free of the obligation, but some hold that it rests even upon him, except that one in mourning should not send gifts which would be a source of rejoicing.

The Mitzvah of Mishloach Manot and the giving of gifts to the poor, during the days of Purim, are prescribed in order to recall the brotherly love which Mordechai and Esther awoke among all Jews. When there is inner unity among Jews, even the wrongdoers among them become righteous.

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Plays and Carnivals . . .

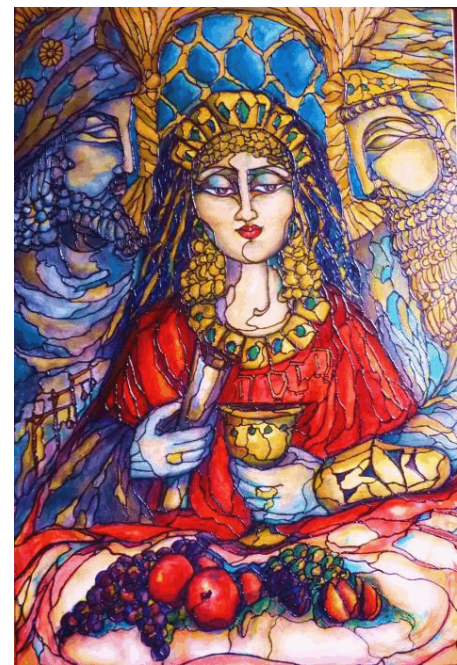
Creative ways that fulfill the religious obligation to have fun on Purim

Written by Rabbi Daniel Kohn, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, who was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1991. He is the author of several books on Jewish education and spirituality who currently writes and teaches throughout the San Francisco Bay area.

The joyous nature of the Purim celebration often carries a serious message behind the smile. The Purim Shpiel often takes a look at world politics with various world leaders playing the roles of heroes and villains. By offering a mocking commentary, the Purim Shpiel presents a Jewish version of political justice in the world.

Despite the relatively minor nature of the festival of Purim, it has assumed far greater proportions and significance in popular Jewish culture. It is often celebrated as if it were a major Jewish holiday. On the surface of it, the events of Purim--recounted in the biblical book of Esther--are about a near catastrophe in ancient Persia. The Jews, about to be attacked, end up turning the tables on their enemies and end up the victors. Therefore, the date of Purim became an opportunity for celebration of this miraculous turn of events.

Early on, the Talmud records that Purim was a date of celebrations and riotous parties. In the Talmudic tractate entitled *megillah*, the ancient Rabbis passed along a longstanding tradition that in order to celebrate the victory of Purim, everyone is supposed to drink alcohol and reach the point where they are "unable to differentiate between the phrases "Bless Mordecai. While the dictum of consuming alcohol may not be palatable to everyone today, drinking (at least for the adults!) and merriment remain a traditional aspect of Purim celebrations.



© The artist, Rae Chichilnitsky

Even though Purim is a religious opportunity for young and old to celebrate together, the celebration of Purim has been commonly relegated to a children's event. Many synagogues today celebrate Purim by holding a Purim fair or carnival. This is an opportunity to set up booths with games, give prizes, and serve holiday food. And the highlight of any Purim celebration is the Purim Shpiel.

The Purim Shpiel . . .

Shpiel is a Yiddish word meaning a "play" or "skit." A Purim *shpiel* is actually a dramatic presentation of the events outlined in the book of Esther. Featuring the main characters, such as

King Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Esther, and the wicked Haman, the Purim *shpiel* was a folk-inspired custom providing an opportunity for crowds to cheer the heroes (Mordecai and Esther) and boo the villains (Haman). It is a staple of many modern synagogue Purim celebrations for children to attend the ritual chanting of the book of Esther and Purim carnivals dressed in costumes depicting these main characters.

Often, a synagogue religious school will hold a costume contest and organize a parade of all the costumed children. While it is traditional to masquerade as characters from the story of Esther, many Jewish families celebrate Purim as an alternative to Halloween, with children dressing in non-traditional costumes and masks. There is no "right" or "wrong" costume for Purim.

In relatively modern times, the popularity of these Purim shpiel plays and the boisterous audience reaction they engendered, spilled over into the actual synagogue celebration of Purim when the scroll of Esther is chanted in Hebrew. There is an ancient tradition derived from the Torah that one is supposed to "blot out" the mention of Haman as a form of enduring spiritual punishment and ignominy for his actions. Therefore, synagogue attendees attempting to "blot out" Haman's name will literally shout, catcall, boo and swing noisemakers, called graggers, to drown out the name of Haman as it is read.

Purim shpiels have evolved over time into the presentation of humorous skits not just about the story of Purim, but also about leaders and well-known people in the community. In synagogues, members may write and act in funny skits gently mocking the rabbis, cantor, president, and other people. In Jewish religious day schools, no teacher ever escapes the mocking attention of their students in such Purim shpiels.

Purim shpiels also include popular songs sung with new, creative funny lyrics lampooning community leaders. Some congregations go to elaborate lengths in producing shpiels, sometimes writing mini-musical plays, or with some people renting expensive outrageous costumes. It is also traditional for religious leaders to deliver "Purim Torahs," which are farcical, sometimes nonsensical, sermons about ridiculous topics. Often, the synagogue bulletin for Purim will be a special joke edition with many funny, ludicrous articles.

Blowing Off Steam . . .

Dr. Jeffrey Rubenstein, a professor of religion at New York University writes that Purim is a holiday characterized by "liminality," that is, a day in which traditional social boundaries and rules of etiquette are deliberately blurred. Purim is a day to "blow off steam" for a community by celebrating this ancient escape from destruction. Therefore, it is a day of topsy-turvy antics, especially in the Purim shpiel. In addition to drinking more alcohol than usual, well-respected leaders are lampooned, children dress up as adults, and especially in Israel, men often dress up as women and vice versa. It is a day in which society as we know it is turned upside down.

But the celebrations of Purim are ultimately for a religious purpose--to celebrate the unseen presence of God who saved the Jewish community in Persia thousands of years ago. While Purim shpiels and graggers may seem to diminish the spiritual importance of the holiday, they are part of an ongoing celebration of good over evil, and a festival celebrating God's presence in Jewish history.

Until You Can Not Tell Mordecai from Haman . . .

A lighthearted look at the source of the obligation to get drunk on Purim

Written by Jeffrey Spitzer, Chairman of the Department of Talmud and Rabbinics at Gann Academy, The New Jewish High School, Waltham, Mass., and a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Does Judaism encourage drinking? In reference to Purim, the Talmud states that one is to drink to the point of not knowing the difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." In modern times, the sensitivity to alcohol abuse has caused this custom to lose popularity among many groups, while still remaining strong in others. In the spirit of Purim, this article looks at traditional definitions of what it means to drink too much. I urge anyone who reads this article to seek halakhic (Jewish legal) advice about the "obligation" to get drunk on Purim from someone who is a competent, and preferably sober, halakhic authority.

When it comes to drinking on Purim, the Talmud clearly understood what the scroll of Esther (the Megillah) was all about. In practically every chapter of the Megillah, someone is imbibing heavily at a drinking party. And the scroll concludes with Mordecai's instruction to the entire Jewish people to celebrate these days as "*yemei mishteh v'simchah*, days of drinking and rejoicing" (Esther 9:22).

An ambiguous law like that, however, would not be left unqualified by the rabbis. On Passover, precise amounts are defined so that one may fulfill the obligations of eating matzah and drinking the four cups of wine. So one might expect that the rabbis would define "days of drinking" in terms of the volume of wine or the number of hours one would be obligated to drink.

The rabbis of the Talmud paid close attention to the nature of the obligation. On Passover, the four cups of wine are for joy and for sanctification, but they also have symbolic associations with the expressions that God used for Israel's redemption. On Purim, however, the wine (or liquor) is not symbolic. It is functional. Consequently, the nature of the obligation is not defined by volume, but rather, by the effect upon the drinker.

How Drunk Is Drunk? . . .

"Rava said: It is one's duty *levasumei*, to make oneself fragrant [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between 'arur Haman' (cursed be Haman) and 'barukh Mordekhai' (blessed be Mordecai)" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b).

What degree of drunkenness is meant by this? The word *levasumei* is sometimes translated as "get mellow;" others simply say "drink." The word *levasumei*, however, is from the same root as *besamim* (fragrant spices, like those that are smelled during Havdalah at the conclusion of the Sabbath). Minimally, one must drink so that others would smell it, although if they are also drunk, who would be able to check? Maximally, one must become, to use a technical term, "stinking drunk."



Most people assume that one must become so befuddled that one can no longer distinguish between the most wicked of people and the most righteous. Some, however, have noted that the two phrases, "*arur Haman*" and "*barukh Mordekhai*" have the same numerical value according to the traditional counting of the Hebrew letters called gematria (502). This point is somewhat obscure. Are we to assume that people are sober enough to calculate the gematria of these phrases, but drunk enough to get the words confused because they have the same gematria? However puzzling, this seems to be the opinion of the 17th century halakhist R. Abraham Abele ben Hayyim haLevi Gombiner.

Alcohol and Swordplay Don't Mix . . .

Perhaps the Talmud tells the following story in order to provide some degree of clarification of Rava's requirement to get drunk: Rabbah and R. Zeira got together for Purim Seudah (the feast on the afternoon of Purim). They got very drunk, and Rabbah got up and cut R. Zeira's throat (literally, Rabbah butchered him). The next day, Rabbah prayed on R. Zeira's behalf and brought him back to life. A year later, Rabbah asked, "Would you like to have Purim Seudah with me again this year?" R. Zeira replied, "One cannot count on a miracle every time." (Megillah 7b) Cute story, but what does it have to do with how much one is supposed to drink? Traditional interpreters have four basic approaches. The most eminent sources, including the Rosh, the Tur, and Yosef Karo, simply quote Rava's statement that one "becomes fragrant" without any reference to the story of Rabbah. Presumably, R. Zeira had a hard night, but why should that spoil the party for everyone else?!

The opposite approach is attributed to the late 11th-century North African halakhist Rabbenu Ephraim ibn Avi Alragan, "Based on the story of Rabbah getting up and slaughtering R. Zeira, we reject the statement of Rava, and it is wrong to act in such a way" (quoted by the Ra"n, ad. loc.). Maimonides, however, replaces the "can't tell the difference between Haman and Mordecai" standard with one that is more easily appraised:



How does one fulfill the obligation of the Purim Seudah? One should eat meat and prepare as nice a meal as one can afford and drink wine until one becomes drunk and falls asleep from drunkenness. (Laws of Megillah 2:15)

Falls asleep? Many contemporary halakhists see Maimonides as limiting the application of Rava's "can't tell the difference..." rule; one only has to get drunk enough to fall asleep. This reading is strange. Rigorous double-blind controlled testing reports that one loses the ability to count up gematria significantly quicker than one passes out in a drunken stupor. Nevertheless, if Maimonides, who was, after all, a doctor, says that one hasn't fulfilled one's obligation until one is out cold on the floor, then maybe that should be the standard. Of course, from a public health perspective, going to sleep is preferable to picking up a sword (or car keys).

Maimonides' reading finds substantial support in the comments of the 16th-century Talmud commentator R. Samuel Eliezer ben Judah haLevi Edels, better known as the Maharsha. The Maharsha understands the story of Rabbah and R. Zeira as an example of figurative language:

It is surprising to explain this as if Rabbah actually committed this crime, but rather, it is as if Rabbah butchered him. That is to say, Rabbah urged R. Zeira to drink too much until he got sick and almost died... The words "brought him back to life" in both the Bible and the Talmud can simply mean healing. If the Maharsha's reading underlies Maimonides' ruling that one should drink until one passes out, then perhaps, against the opinion of Rabbenu Ephraim ibn Avi Alragan, the story of Rabbah and R. Zeira is meant to be indicative of normative practice (the drinking, not the swordplay).

As the Italian commentator, R. Hizkiyah ben David DaSilva points out, if the story of Rabbah were meant to indicate that Rava's rule had been rejected, then why would R. Zeira refuse to join Rabbah the following year? Clearly, R. Zeira expected that Rabbah would continue to drink heavily on Purim (Peri Hadash). Following this line of reasoning, the point of the story is that one should get drunk until one is "dead to the world." Hopefully, one also has a friend who can nurse one back to sobriety, or at least back to consciousness.

When Not To Drink on Purim . . .

More recent halakhic commentators have been somewhat more limited. The 18th-century codifier, R. Abraham ben Yehiel Michal Danzig wrote:

Since the entire miracle of Purim came about through wine, our sages obligated us to get drunk, or at least to drink more than what we are used to, in order to remember the great miracle. However, if one knows oneself, and is likely to neglect the performance of a mitzvah [commandment], such as washing one's hands before eating bread or making a blessing over food before and after eating or that one might forget to pray or might act in a light-headed way, it is better not to get drunk. (Quoted in Be'ur Halakhah 694, s.v. "Ad")

Don't get so drunk that you forget to perform any mitzvot. And count among those mitzvot the contemporary obligation to have a designated driver. Cars can be like Rabbah's sword, and one cannot count on a miracle.

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Purim Songs . . . For The Young of All Ages!

A Wicked, Wicked Man . . .

O once there was a wicked, wicked man, and Haman was his name, sir
He would have murdered all the Jews, though they were not to blame, sir.

Oh, today we'll merry, merry be,
Oh, today we'll merry, merry be,
Oh, today we'll merry, merry be,
And nosh some hamentaschen.

And Esther was the lovely queen, of king Achashverosh.
When Haman said he'd kill us all, Oh my, how he did scare us.

