

Until You Don't Know

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Raba said: One is obligated to drink on Purim until he doesn't know between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai.

Megilla 7b

This well-known directive of Raba is not, as one might have thought, to provide the threshold of inebriation on the Purim holiday. Rather, through carefully chosen words and deeply symbolic terminology, Raba is teaching of the very essence that underlies the Purim experience. In the Purim story Mordechai is the paragon of virtue and uprightness, while his nemesis Haman is evil incarnate. "Blessing Mordechai", then, is acknowledging good as such, and "cursing Haman" is recognizing evil for what it is. By reaching a state of mind that one does not know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai, one has reached a state wherein he cannot determine what is good and what is evil.¹

One could rightly ask why achieving such an anomalous state of mind is in any way desirable? The answer comes in the form of another statement of Raba concerning Purim:

Raba said, [even though the Jews accepted the Torah at Sinai in an incomplete manner], nevertheless they accepted it [wholly] in the days of Ahashveirosh,² as it states, 'the Jews fulfilled and accepted' (*kiymu v'kiblu*) – they fulfilled what had previously been accepted.

Shabbat 88a

R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein (Torah Temimah on Ester 9:27, n.27) notes that "what had previously been accepted" refers to the Sinai encounter when the Jews exclaimed altruistically – *naaseh v'nishma* – "we will do and we will listen." The Gemara (Shab. 88a) explains the greatness of this declaration: "At the moment that Israel stated *naaseh*, 'we will do', before stating *nishma*, 'we will listen', a heavenly voice exclaimed, 'who has revealed to my children the secret that the angels employ?' As it is written, 'Bless the Lord, Angels of His, mighty in strength that do – *osei* – His word, to listen – *lishmoa* – to His word' (Ps. 103:20)." The import of the Gemara is that just as the angels perform the will of God without deliberation, so too did Israel pledge unquestioning obedience by declaring *naaseh v'nishma*.

R. Pinhas HaLevi Horowitz, in his commentary Panim Yafot (Ex. 24:7), explains that "listening" implies "understanding the reason". At Sinai the Jews accepted the Torah by putting "doing" before "listening" – action before reason – and thus accepted God's will and command, without putting it to the test of their own subjective reason. This is not

¹ It is worthy to note that Raba did not instruct one to reach the state that he cannot distinguish between blessed is Haman and cursed is Mordechai; for this would be indicative of a complete loss of the senses wherein one calls good "evil" and evil "good".

² The present essay is not concerned with the details of what was incomplete in the Sinai acceptance and what exactly was made whole in Persia (for a treatment of such, please see my essay, "A Mountain Over Their Heads", http://www.divreinavon.com/pdf/CoercionAcceptance_HarKgigit4.pdf). Rather, we are herein only interested in noting that the two events together served to complete the process.

to say that their acceptance was irrational, but rather that it was based on a realization that only the Creator of the world is fit to specify what is appropriate action in His world. Only the Creator of the world is qualified to define what is good and what is evil.

As such, the *naaseh v'nishma* acceptance was precisely the counter act to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, the first couple applied their own subjective reason to determine what is good and what is evil – despite the divine command to the contrary.³ At Sinai, in contradistinction, the Jews accepted God's authority to determine what is good and what is evil – unconditionally. Based on the stark contrast underlying the two events, the Zohar (Ber. 56a, Terumah 168a) explains that the Jews at Sinai “fixed”⁴ the undoing of the original sin in the Garden of Eden.

However, as great as the Sinai moment was, the Gemara (Shab. 88a, mentioned earlier) taught that the Sinai acceptance was incomplete, only to be realized in totality “in the days of Ahashveirosh.” Essentially, the altruistic “*naaseh v'nishma*” was completed with the practical “*kijmu v'kiblu*”. The differences notwithstanding, both come to give expression to the unconditional acceptance of God's will, as opposed to the subjective rejection thereof made in the Garden of Eden.

And this brings us back to Haman and Mordechai.

The Gemara (Hullin 139b) asks, “Where do we find Haman in the Torah?” Answer: “*hamin ha'etz*”, i.e., “Is it from the tree (*hamin ha'etz*) which I commanded you not to eat of it, that you ate” (Ber. 3:11). This seemingly cheap play on words is actually invoking a profound connotation, teaching that Haman is intimately connected with the *etz hadaat tov v'ra* – the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Maharsha (*ibid.*, s.v. *moshe*) explains that the connotation is to the snake who enticed Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The snake argued that man should not subject himself to God's definition of good and evil, but rather decide for himself. Yet in so doing, man assumed the role of God. Indeed, upon man's eating from the tree, God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:22). Man had become like God in *defining* good and evil.⁵ So too did Haman presume to do;⁶ and consequently Chazal explain that Haman had made himself into a god.⁷ As such, Haman represents evil;⁸ but even more than that, he represents the human proclivity to define what is good and what is evil – and that is the ultimate evil.

The Gemara continues, “Where do we find Mordechai in the Torah?” Answer: “*mor dror*” (Ex. 30:23); again, a play on words with deep significance. *Mor Dror* is the first of the sweet spices used in the anointing oil in the Temple. This, Rashi (*ibid.*, s.v. *mor*) explains, intimates Mordechai as the righteous leader of the Sanhedrin.⁹ The Maharsha (*ibid.*, s.v.

³ R. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* [Toras HoRav Foundation, K'TAV, NJ, 2003], p. 47. R. Hirsch (Gen. 2:16, p.62).

⁴ See fn. 12.

⁵ See Abarbanel (Gen 3:22).

⁶ Esther 3:9, 3:11, 5:14.

⁷ Megilla 10b, Megilla 19a, Sanhedrin 61b; Esther Rabba (7:8).

⁸ Esther 7:6.

⁹ See also Torah Temimah, Ex. 30, n.48.

moshe) adds that the term “*dror*” – freedom – indicates that it was through Mordechai’s not bowing to idolatry that he secured freedom for his people. Idolatry is nothing but the misappropriation of God’s moral authority.¹⁰ And it is only through not bowing to man’s subjective definitions of good and evil that one can be free of the evil in this world. This is precisely why Mordechai refused to bow to Haman. Mordechai represents good, but on a deeper level he represents the human ability to accept God as moral arbiter – and that is the ultimate good.

Returning to Raba’s dictum, he taught that on Purim one is to reach a state of “not knowing”. This state is not one of intellectual incapacity. Rather “knowing”, as explained, refers to the knowledge acquired upon eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It is a “knowledge” that man was to have left in the hands of the Creator. Not knowing between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai means relinquishing the presumption of knowing, of defining, what is good and what is evil. It is not a level of intoxication, it is the quintessential level of being that man strives to achieve. It is the level of Adam and Eve before the fall. It is the level of paradise. It is the level of the angels.

Appropriately, when Raba teaches that one is to get intoxicated on Purim he uses a rare word – *levesumei* – which is normatively translated to mean “drink wine”.¹¹ This word, however, is used in the Zohar (Ber. 56a, Ter. 168a) when it teaches that, following the original sin, the world was not “fixed”¹² – *itbasem* – until Israel accepted the Torah on Sinai. Applying this understanding to Raba’s directive, we render it to mean: on Purim one is to fix the original sin of assuming to know what is good and what is evil by relinquishing one’s subjective reason in this area and accepting God as absolute moral arbiter.¹³

It may be that one can effect this “fixing”, this *itbasem*, through the *itbasem* of drinking wine – but clearly the objective of Purim is to reach the level of Israel, in those days at this time, when they attained the angelic level of *naaseh v’nishma* through *keiyimu v’kiblu*. In other words, to place our actions before our subjective reasoning and simply fulfill the will of God because it is good – that is the task of Purim. Indeed, that is the task of creation.¹⁴

Purim Samayach.

¹⁰ See Zohar (Ber. 27b): There is no [divine] command that is not [rooted in the negation of] idolatry.

¹¹ See Rashi (Meg. 7b).

¹² Peirush HaSulam (Terumah 168a) translates *itbasem*, using a shin in place of the samech, to be “sweeten”, “perfume”; on Ber. 56a he translates explicitly as “sweeten”. Matok Midvash (Ber. 56a, Ter. 168a) translates as “fixed and sweetened”; Soncino (Ter. 168a) translates as “healed”; on Ber. 56a as “put right”.

¹³ Mordechai, as the righteous leader of the generation who refused to bow to man’s morality was referred to as “*mor dror*” - sweet fragrance – which alludes to the sense of smell. The sense of smell was the only sense not tainted in the original sin (Bnei Yisaschar, Adar 1:10). And perhaps this is why Raba uses the word *levesumei* which is linguistically connected to spices (*besamim*) and the sense of smell. Raba’s message is that one is to rise above all the senses through which one sins and return to the state of man before the original sin of rejecting God’s moral authority - to unquestioningly accept God as moral arbiter.

¹⁴ The Zohar (Ber. 56a, s.v. R. *Abba*) explains that the whole of creation is dependant on acceptance of God’s moral authority. This was fixed on Sinai, and ultimately on Purim. Perhaps this is why the only holiday to be celebrated in Messianic times is Purim (Hil. Megilla 2:18) – the celebration of the fixing of the world.