



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# Purim – Truly Cherishing Torah and Mitzvot

The Talmud famously describes the giving of the Torah in a most surprising way:

“The Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain over the Jews like a barrel and said to them: ‘If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.’ ... Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it [willingly] in the time of Achashverosh, as it is written, ‘The Jews ordained and took upon them ...’ (Esther 9:27), and he taught: The Jews established what they had already taken upon themselves [at Sinai].” (Shabbat 88a)

Rav Kook first addresses the apparent coercion at Mt. Sinai, depicted by the mountain suspended above the people and the threat of burial should they refuse the Law. He rejects any reading that suggests force or intimidation intended to compel a frightened nation into meek submission. Rather, the Talmud is teaching that Torah is not a matter of choice because it is integral and essential to Jewish existence.

The evocative imagery powerfully conveys that the Jewish people cannot survive—cannot “breathe,” so to speak—without Torah. This transcends choice. One does not choose whether to breathe; survival depends upon it. So too, Jewish survival depends upon Torah. (*Ain Aya, Shabbat 88a, p. 191, piska #67*)

What, then, does it mean that there was a reacceptance of the Torah in the time of

Purim, and what is its significance?

Rav Kook beautifully suggests that while Torah is essential to a Jew, it is equally essential to discover the meaning and beauty that Torah and mitzvot bring to one’s life. In the Purim story, the Jews found themselves deeply entrenched in the flourishing culture of Persia, drawn to many of its harmful elements—such as idolatry and decadence, as reflected in the opening chapter of Megillat Esther. Only when they experienced an eleventh-hour, miraculous salvation did they rediscover how precious the Torah truly was to them. Torah and mitzvot that once came naturally had been allowed to atrophy and dissipate. Rav Kook teaches that rediscovering Torah and appreciating it in all its grandeur and profundity is of limitless value.

A beloved verse from Megillat Esther, recited weekly in Havdala, describes the joy of the Jewish people at the time of their salvation:

“The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor” (Esther 8:16).

The Talmud (Megillah 16b) suggests that each term refers to a specific mitzvah the Jews celebrated anew: “Light” refers to Torah; “gladness” refers to holidays; “joy” refers to circumcision; and “honor” refers to tefillin.

A beautiful interpretation of this teaching is that after their victory over Amalek and their remarkable salvation, the Jewish

people rediscovered the light and joy within mitzvot—mitzvot they had either neglected or performed mechanically, without vitality. Amazingly, the Talmud interprets Haman's phrase about the Jews, "Yeshno am echad..." ("There is one nation..."), to suggest that the people had grown sleepy (*yashen* = asleep) in their observance of mitzvot (Megillah 13b).

The holidays, the covenant of circumcision, the daily donning of tefillin suddenly shone brightly once again. The Jews perceived in them glimmering opportunities for connection with Hashem and profound solidarity with the nation as a whole. (See *Mei Marom, Sichot Chanukha VPurim*, Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, p. 212)

### RAV SOLOVEITCHIK AND RAV KOOK: PURIM'S SECOND-RATE DRINKING

The observance of Purim includes a law unlike any found on other holidays: the obligation to become intoxicated. Not only is this unusual—breaking from the standard model of festival observance—but it is also troubling, given that Jewish law generally disapproves of drunkenness and the loss of clarity and dignity it entails.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik notes that Purim introduces a fundamentally different concept. "The concept of joy, or *simchah*, has been modified and converted into hilarity or gaiety. Indeed, one cannot even call this joy or *simchah*." (Days of Deliverance, p. 94)

Alongside drinking, the custom of wearing masks (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 696:8) further emphasizes fun-making and lighthearted revelry.

The Rav suggests that we can better understand the underlying motif of the day by considering another anomaly: on Purim, unlike



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other festivals, we do not recite Hallel.

Why not? The Talmud offers two explanations. First, we remained "servants of Achashverosh." The political reality was unchanged; we were still vulnerable and insecure. Hallel cannot be recited when joy is mitigated and incomplete.

Second, the Megillah itself substitutes for Hallel. Yet even this answer, according to the Rav, underscores the lingering instability of the Purim narrative. The miracle did not usher in lasting redemption. Who is to say that

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others would not rise up again?

The Rav exquisitely suggests that drinking on Purim symbolizes this very insecurity. Intoxication represents a fleeting high—a superficial, short-lived mood shift. It lacks permanence. Excessive drinking on Purim highlights that the salvation of Shushan was temporary. In contrast, true *simchah* reflects being in the presence of one's Creator: "When man experiences His [God's] companionship, there is joy, in the sense of self-fulfillment." (Ibid., p. 98)

When we drink on Purim, we are, in a sense, acting out our joy. It does not reflect the authentic *simchah* celebrated through Hallel and through standing *lifnei Hashem*. There remains an underlying *galut*, an exilic dimension, embedded in Purim's observance. Rav Soloveitchik states explicitly: "We cannot equate the celebration of Purim with *simchat-haregel*, the joy of the Festival." (Ibid., p. 105)

In halachic thought, *simchah* is associated with the Jew dwelling in the Land of Israel—particularly within the borders of Jerusalem and the Beit Hamikdash. Purim, by contrast, symbolizes distance from that elevated sanctity. Its second-rate form of cheer, expressed through intoxication, serves as a stark reminder that Purim commemorates an imperfect salvation and reflects a spiritually deficient state of Jewish life.

Where, then, does the fullness of Jewish joy

manifest?

The answer—so central to Rav Kook's thought and his clarion call—is in the Land of Israel, when we are not merely surviving threats but building a nation, living authentically, and expressing our highest values. In the opening passages of Orot, Rav Kook establishes this as a foundational principle:

"It is impossible for a Jew to be attached and faithful to his thoughts, reasonings, conceptualizations, and imaginations, when he is outside the Land of Israel, compared to the quality of their faithfulness in Eretz Yisrael. Revelations of holiness, on whatever level, are clean in Eretz Yisrael according to their value, while outside the Land of Israel they are mixed with abundant dross and *klipot* (shells/coverings)." (Orot, piska #4)

The term *klipot* is a Kabbalistic concept meaning "shells" or "outer coverings." One way to understand it is as a mask—something that conceals true identity. Jewish existence in *galut* often compels a Jew to suppress aspects of his or her essence, navigating foreign cultures carefully and revealing only what is safe and acceptable. The masks worn on Purim thus reflect not only festivity, but also insecurity—life under foreign rule in a foreign land.

True, the Jews defeated Haman. There was a miracle; they were saved. Of course we celebrate. But the salvation lacked permanence and security. The complete *simchah* of *lifnei Hashem*—of standing fully in God's presence—emerges only when we build our national future in the Land and serve Him in His abode, the Beit Hamikdash. ■



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