

PURIM : JOY IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY

by David Hartman

Hanukkah and Purim are important festivals in the Jewish year even though their origins are post-biblical. These two festivals reflect our people's ability to respond to momentous events in its history after the end of the biblical era and the cessation of prophecy.

The world we had to face after the destruction of the Temple confronted our people with two profound dangers. On the one hand, our cultural identity was continually threatened by the culture of the majority surrounding us. As a numerically small and weak nation, we faced the danger of self-negating assimilation as well as the danger of self-insulating cultural separatism.

Hanukkah celebrates the heroic defiance and courage of a people to affirm its own particularity despite the attractions of the prevailing mass culture (Hellenism). The covenant was renewed on Hanukkah because we demonstrated our readiness to sacrifice everything in order to safeguard our way of life. Hanukkah organizes our people's memory around the Maccabean strength to maintain our distinct way of life in defiance of religious oppression and foreign cultural allurements.

The second danger our people faced after the destruction of the Temple was its physical vulnerability to the capricious will of political powers which dominated its destiny. How do you survive without political power? How do you survive in a world in which you are so vulnerable to powers beyond your control?

On Purim we did not face a cultural threat. The diabolical protagonist of Purim, Haman, was not concerned with our forsaking Judaism. What bothered Haman was the fact that the Jewish people would not succumb to his grandiose designs for absolute power. He hated Mordechai and his people for their refusal to prostrate themselves before his maniacal quest for power. His obsessive longing for power led to his demonic scheme to destroy a nation.

The story of Purim is a classic account of our people's confrontation with brute anti-Semitism. Our bodies and not only our spirit were threatened with extinction. Nevertheless, Haman's genocidal scheme was not realized. Purim celebrates a moment of liberation from the designs of the "Hamans" of history. Our people experienced temporary respite from exploitation and persecution. There was a profound feeling of relief and spontaneous joy when the threat of impending disaster was finally removed. After having faced imminent death, we were reborn.

Having lived at the margins of history where they were repeatedly victimized by Hamans in one form or another, Jews were fully aware of the fact that they were always vulnerable to the outbreak of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, despite the ever-present danger of persecution and radical schemes of destruction, our people was able to celebrate this deliverance from Haman - this singular, precious moment when sadness and terror were turned into singing and rejoicing.

The ways in which the festivals of Hanukkah and Purim are observed mirror the two basic threats to Jewish survival, the cultural and the physical. On Hanukkah, the dominant mood is not one expressed through costumes and revelry, but rather by 1) the lighting of the menorah as a symbolic proclamation of the renewal of our convenantal commitment, and 2) the recitation of the

Hallel-psalms of praise indicating our happiness at being able to live according to a Jewish way of life.

On Purim, however, the atmosphere is completely different. According to Jewish law, Purim is a day of rejoicing and feasting and of sending gifts to friends and to the poor. The Talmud writes that one should rejoice on Purim until one can no longer discriminate between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordechai." It is a day when the community must see to it that all its members are able to eat, drink, and rejoice so that all can celebrate the joyous moment when we were graciously saved from physical annihilation and were given the chance to taste the joy of life once again.

On Purim, we indulge the Jewish *body*; on Hanukkah, we indulge the Jewish *soul*. On Purim we dance, sing, drink and masquerade: we revel and are frivolous. Serious everyday reality is suspended. We celebrate the excitement of being alive like a child dazzled by a new gift. "Alive ... we are alive!" What a marvelous experience.

PURIM : A Godless "Holy" Day ?

Many people are of the opinion that Purim lacks a religious dimension. For example, the great Bible scholar, H.L. Ginsberg, in his introduction to Megillat Esther, remarks that :

... the observance prescribed for Purim is less profoundly religious than that prescribed for Hannukah. The Hallel is not recited; and if, on the one hand, gifts of tidbits are sent to friends and alms bestowed upon the poor, a meal, on the other hand, is eaten at home at which, as one of the rabbis puts it in the Talmud, it is one's duty to indulge in liquor to the point where one can't tell the difference between 'Cursed by Haman' and 'Blessed be Mordechai.'

... later Jews developed the customs of making noise with their feet or with an instrument every time the name of Haman is read from the Megillah, of playing a mild game of chance with tops, and of masquerading. (This last may be an imitation of the Christian carnival, the observance of the last day or days before lent as a period of merriment and carousing.) One medieval author wrote a Tractate Purim which parodies the Talmud for the sake of Purim merriment. Indeed, 'Purim Torah,' the solemn proving of absurdities by pseudomidrashic reasoning, is still a Purim pastime among people with some Jewish learning ... It is all a natural development of the Book of Esther itself. According to this work, the feast of Purim originated in the escape of the Jewish people from a threat of total annihilation. From the way the story is told, however, it is fairly evident that though its core may well be some such peril and deliverance, they cannot have happened exactly in the manner related. For the Book of Esther may be described, if one stretches a point or two, as a mock-learned disquisition to be read as the opening of a carnival-like celebration. It has been remarked countless times that there is not a single mention of God in the entire book. When Mordechai learns of the decree that the Jews are to be annihilated, he puts on sackcloth and ashes and utters a great and bitter cry; what other biblical author would have omitted to add 'to the Lord'?

When the rest of the Jewish population of the Persian Empire learn of the decree, everybody weeps and laments and lies in sackcloth and ashes; why is there not a word about their praying, about their confessing their sins and throwing themselves on God's mercy? ... So Esther asks Mordechai to instruct all the Jews to fast -- why does she avoid the word 'pray'?.. Must we conclude then, that our author was a religiously indifferent man? Not at all. The holiday whose cause he was pleading was, in his time no less than ours, not one of solemnity but of licit levity, and its story could hardly be told otherwise than in a mock-serious vein; and for this very reason he may have felt that just to intersperse notes of piety would be irreverent. If the book is read in the spirit in which it is written, all misgivings - on the scores of both credibility and spirituality - will be dissipated, the very extravagances and historical improbabilities will be relished, and the ingenuity of the plot will be admired.

This is how an eminent biblical scholar of our age evaluated Purim. Indeed, the external features of the holiday seem to support his evaluation. The Megillah makes no mention of God; instead of recitation of the Hallel psalms or any formal prayer service, the celebration calls for Purim Torah and merriment. When, however, one places the talmudic understanding of Purim alongside

Ginsberg's, one notices enormous differences in how the holiday of Purim is viewed.

The Midrash on Proverbs * contends : "If there should come a time when all holidays will no longer be celebrated, Purim will still be observed." Rav Avdimi,** asserts; "Even though the Jewish people received the Torah at Sinai, it should be understood that they were coerced, that God suspended the mountain over them and said, 'If you will accept the Torah, fine, but, if not, then here I shall bury you.'"

Consider the implications of this statement! Rav Avdimi characterized the revelation at Sinai, the central moment of Biblical history, as an event involving Israel's accepting the Torah under duress. The Amora, Raba, observes that since the covenant was entered into under duress, people might plausibly argue that they are not obligated to abide by it. If this is so, then when did the Jewish community freely enter into a genuine covenant with God? Raba's answer is: during Purim!

According to this view, Purim is the holiday on which Jews obligated themselves freely to accept the Torah. Is it not surprising that this noted talmudic teacher perceived a "carnival-like celebration," a holiday of "licit levity," as the central religious moment in Jewish spirituality?

The Jerusalem Talmud (Megillah 1:5) relates that a group of scholars and prophets questioned the validity of Purim as a genuine sacred day because of its post-biblical origin.

* see Torah T'mima on Esther 9:28

** Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88a

... for is it not written, 'These are the commandments which God commanded Moses'? ... And did not Moses teach us that no prophet will ever be empowered to institute anything new? So how could Mordechai and Esther institute Purim? They debated this problem until God enlightened them and they found allusions to the holiday of Purim in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

The Book of Esther was given to Moses on Sinai, but since there is no chronological order in the Torah, it appears after the Five Books of Moses. R. Yochanan said that the Prophets and the Writings will one day be annulled but the words of the Torah will not... Resh Lakish added that Megillat Esther will also never be invalidated.

Thus the Jerusalem Talmud equates the significance of Megillat Esther with that of the Torah. "The truth of the Book of Esther is like the truth of the Torah. Just as the Torah requires interpretation, so does the Book of Esther" (J.T. Megillah 1:1). Similarly, all the laws that pertain to the writing of a Sefer Torah also pertain to the writing of a Megilla (J.T. Megillah 1:1 and Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah 2:9). In short, the Megillah is regarded as being no less sacred than the Torah.

One might think that these talmudic statements are not to be taken seriously and view them as examples of 'rabbinic hyperbole.' It is therefore worth considering Maimonides' treatment of Purim. Maimonides was a sober rationalist and an intellectually tough-minded codifier of Jewish law. He was a demythologizer who regarded the imaginative faculty as the seat of evil behavior and who was a proponent of moderation in the satisfactions of bodily needs. Yet, in the Mishneh Torah, he formulates the mitzvah of the festive meal of Purim as follows: "One should eat meat and generally have as pleasant a meal as he can afford. And he should drink wine until he gets drunk and falls asleep" (Hilchot Megillah 2:15).

While one may argue that as a codifier of rabbinic law, Maimonides was bound to include this talmudic law in his legal code, one should pay careful attention

to the aggadic motif he uses to complete Hilkhhot Megillah. In the Mishneh Torah in general, Maimonides ends sections of laws related to a specific subject by introducing aggadic themes that elucidate the underlying meaning of the halakhic norms contained in the section in question. He completes the laws pertaining to Purim as follows:

All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, except for the Book of Esther. It will continue to be binding like the Five Books of Moses and the entire Oral Law which will never be invalidated. Even though all memory of our suffering will be erased ... still the days of Purim will not be annulled. As it is written, "These days of Purim will not pass away from the Jews and its memory will never leave their descendants" (Esther 9:25).

(Hilkhhot Megilla 2:18)

Maimonides was not halachically bound to introduce this aggadah; in fact the Ravad takes issue with Maimonides by arguing that none of the books of the Bible will ever actually be annulled. Maimonides' choice of this aggadah to complete the laws of Purim may be interpreted in terms of the implied connection between Purim and messianism.

Maimonides may be indicating that the theology of history implicit in the story of Purim should shape one's conception of messianism rather than a biblical theology of history that involves God's miraculous intervention in nature and history.

PURIM : The Spirit of Talmudic Judaism

While it is clear that Purim was considered to be a serious religious festival in the Jewish tradition, it would be intellectually dishonest to ignore the points Ginsberg raises. Why is there no mention of God in the Megillah? Why does Purim call for drinking until one can't distinguish between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordechai"? Why the masks? Why the carnival atmosphere?

These puzzling facts may be explained by interpreting Purim as a festival that points to the possibility of discovering spiritual meaning in the midst of the absurd. As such, it is not a product of biblical Judaism but rather of talmudic spirituality. You cannot appreciate Purim unless you appreciate the differences between the Talmud and the Bible. The talmudic teacher never said, "Thus sayeth the Lord..." yet Talmud was considered sacred. Talmudic Judaism produced an authentic form of Jewish spirituality not grounded in revelation. Talmudic Judaism taught Jews that the spiritual dimension of Judaism is not restricted to what God says but also involves what the Jewish people produces.

Purim did not become a significant holiday for Jews until the period of the development of the Talmud in the third and fourth centuries. Purim became the vehicle by which Jews gave expression to their spirituality when they languished under Roman rule and tasted the meaninglessness of history. Purim captures the spirit of post-biblical Judaism; it reflects the willingness of the individual Jew to trust the Jewish people to mediate his or her spiritual life.

Living with Absurdity

The Book of Esther is, in a deep sense, a painful story, for it contains elements of the absurd in its account both of evil and redemption. Both evil and redemption are fortuitous and seemingly arbitrary. Despite the arbitrariness of the events related in the Book of Esther the Talmud perceives deep meaning beneath the surface.

The story begins with a king who becomes drunk and summons his wife in order to display her before his court. Her refusal sets off a panic. Memuchan, one of the king's advisors, cannot endure this affront to authority and warns the king: "... the queen's behavior will make all wives despise their husbands.."

(Esther 1:17). The Talmud observes that Memuchan, who advises the king to have his wife killed, is none other than Haman (B.T. Megillah 12B). His paranoid response to this seemingly slight social deviation sets the stage for the events that follow.

Once sober, the king longs for a new queen. Mordecai encourages his niece to enter the “beauty contest” from which a new queen would be chosen but warns her not to reveal her people’s identity (Esther 2:10). This Jewish heroine appears on the stage of history hiding her true identity. This young attractive girl is destined to serve as the instrument for Israel’s redemption - not because of her piety or wisdom but because she answers to a foolish king’s sensual desires and fantasies.

Prior to one of Mordecai’s visits with Esther (according to the Talmud he studied Torah with her during such visits) he chances to overhear two conspirators planning to assassinate the king. He passes this information on to Esther who in turn informs the king “in the name of Mordecai” (Esther 2:22). “Said R. Hanina: Whoever reports something in the name of him from whom he heard it, brings redemption to the world” (Megillah 15a). What would have happened had Esther forgotten to mention Mordecai’s name to the king? R. Hanina’s statement points to a theology of history where the fate of an entire people can hang on such trivial details!

The Struggle Against Human Idolization

After these initial events occur, a new figure enters the story, Haman. The Midrash perceived Haman as the embodiment of diabolic evil. Haman is treated as the archetype of the person who makes himself into a god. “Because he made himself into a god,” Rashi observes, “Mordecai would not bow down to him” (Rashi on Esther 3:2). When people ask Mordecai, “Why don’t you

bow?" (Esther 3:3) he is silent. He knows in his heart that his task in history is to refuse to acknowledge any human claim to absoluteness; this task is built into his very identity as a Jew.

The spiritual meaning of Purim is reflected in the confrontation between Mordecai and Haman. Haman symbolizes the demonic power of a human being who seeks total control - whose sense of dignity hinges on being deified and worshipped by others. Haman feels confirmed as a person only when his domination and control of others are complete. Absolute subservience of others is the condition for his gaining a sense of dignity and self-worth. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Jew represents the greatest obstacle to his personal aggrandizement.

In the unavoidable clash between Haman and Mordecai we discover the rage of a human being who cannot accept his creaturehood. The source of the diabolic evil personified in Haman is the illusion that a person can gain absolute control over others. For the rabbis, Haman represented a new form of idolatry that replaced the fetishistic idolatry described in the Torah. Haman symbolizes the idolatry of Rome - the idolatry of the state that strives for absolute power. When a person feels no sense of limit, when one cannot accept one's finitude, then one's quest for absolute control warps one's entire life. This may explain why the rabbis said that Memuchan was Haman. Unable to endure any source of uncertainty and independence, he advised the king to do away with Vashti lest her act of insubordination destroy the entire myth of order and control. Pharaoh had sought the death only of Jewish male children, the rabbis observed, but Haman planned to destroy the entire Jewish people as a means to becoming God-like.

As The Book of Esther beautifully shows, the entire kingdom was prepared to bow down and to swear allegiance to Haman. Despite almost universal

obedience, the text notes, "And Mordecai would not bow down nor prostrate himself" (Esther 3:2). Mordecai refused to swear total allegiance to any human being and thereby upset Haman's quest for absolute power.

Mordecai is an historical iconoclast in the tradition of Abraham. Like Abraham, he is a breaker of idols. The idolatry against which Mordecai fights is not star worship, i.e., the deification of forces in nature; Mordecai destroys the myth of human deification. Haman embodies the delusions of a human being who cannot accept fallibility and limitation.

That day Haman went out happy and lighthearted. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the palace gate, and Mordecai did not rise or even stir on his account, Haman was filled with rage at him. Nevertheless, Haman controlled himself and went home. He sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh, and Haman told them about his great wealth and his many sons, and all about how the king had promoted him and advanced him above the officials and the king's courtiers. "What is more," said Haman, "Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king. Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate." (Esther 5, 9-13)

Haman returns home excited by his power and wealth and by his mighty position in the King's court. Everything seems to be going his way; his drive for power has achieved new momentum. He seems to lack nothing. Yet he makes the following statement to his family: "No matter how much political power I have, no matter how many people worship and adore me, when I notice the single Jew, Mordecai, all that I have becomes pointless and worthless! Mordecai's defiance shatters everything I have." Haman's ambition to become God-like is undermined by the presence of the Jew. He can enjoy nothing if there is one human being who reminds him that he cannot have absolute control. A mania of diabolic proportions grows out of a person who cannot accept that he or she is a finite creature!

The Courage to Face the Absurd

The portrait of Haman in The Book of Esther reflects a peculiarly Jewish perception of history. Suddenly, without warning, a madman rises to a position of great power. Evil enters history in the form of the absurd; its appearance is sudden and unpredictable. You can go to sleep one night and awaken the next morning to face the threat of genocide!

In one of the most powerful verses in all biblical literature, the Megillah observes: "... the decree (of genocide) was proclaimed in the fortress of Shushan; The king and Haman sat down to drink; and the city of Shusan was dumbfounded" (Esther 3:15). This single verse is a stinging indictment of humanity. "The king and Haman sat down to drink..." while a total community faced imminent destruction. In other words, decrees of genocide can be issued without the slightest sense of guilt. People can laugh and drink while knowing that children are being sent to their death. This verse describes succinctly the nature of radical evil in history. Its stark eloquence captures the potential depravity of human beings. People can commit or acquiesce in unspeakable horrors without feeling disturbed or uneasy. There is no sense of guilt at all. By making The Book of Esther as holy as the Sefer Torah the rabbis imposed an obligation upon Jews to understand the utter absurdity of radical evil.

The Book of Esther also points to the "absurdity" of redemption. The biblical story of the redemption from Egypt is spiritually uplifting because of the confrontation between prophet and king. Moses faces Pharaoh. In the story of Purim, who confronts Haman? Not a prophet but a seductive woman. Esther arouses the king's jealousy against his trusted minister by inviting Haman to a party. The Midrash offers the following explanation of why the king could not sleep (Esther 6:1) : "because-he was worried that Esther and Haman might be plotting to kill him." What an undignified way of being redeemed! What an

undignified way for disaster to be averted! A girl seduces a king and arouses him to jealousy; a man overhears a plot of assassination and the destiny of a nation changes. As the absurd can destroy so it can rebuild; as there is arbitrary evil so there is arbitrary redemption.

One may thus respond to Ginsberg's observation about the absence of God's Name in The Book of Esther by pointing out that it does not belong in a story of the absurd. You can't always pray to God when you experience the absurd; you can only feel pain. When you face the absurd you do not cry out to God; you simply cry out that it hurts. When Mordecai charges Esther with her task, he reminds her that if she does not perform it, then "Relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter..." (Esther 4:14). In the midst of the absurd you cannot articulate a theology of liberation; you can only hint at God's presence. During the sleepless nights of history when one experiences the absurd dimension of life, Jews courageously refuse to succumb to despair by affirming that there is meaning behind the apparent chaos.

In the light of this interpretation, we can explain the rabbinic statement that Jews did not freely accept the Torah at Mount Sinai but rather during Purim. Who would not accept the Torah after witnessing the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day, the earth shaking and the Lord performing marvels. Saying "yes" to God after such events did not demand a great decision of faith. According to the Mechilta on Exodus 15:2 "A mere handmaiden saw more at the crossing of the Red Sea than did Ezekiel or any of the other prophets." Declaring "This is my God" after the Egypt experience is both rational and to be expected. The crucial religious test is whether you continue to trust in God when you know history in terms of the story of Purim, a story in which prophets do not confront kings, a story in which you may have to prostitute yourself in order to live, to grovel before a bishop in order to save a Jew. Can you maintain allegiance to the God of your

fathers when you know that evil can befall you at any moment, and that its occurrence is not necessarily an inescapable part of some redemptive scheme like the 400 years of slavery which were part of God's promise to Abraham?

Biblical Versus Talmudic Philosophies of History

The biblical account of history points to an over-arching divine pattern. Suffering loses its sting and takes on meaning when it is incorporated into a grand divine scheme of history. In the talmudic tradition, however, people suffer not only because they sin, as the prophetic tradition had taught, but also *because* they seek to be loyal to Torah. For example Rabbi Akiva did not view his suffering as being in any way punishment for his sins.

Purim represents the Jewish people's courage to remain loyal to the covenant and to endure absurd evil without forsaking their covenantal identity, not because of the Bible but, as it were, in spite of it. The experience of history described in The Book of Esther does not conform to the biblical theology of history and therefore, perhaps, the Name of God does not appear explicitly in The Book of Esther. The Jewish people, in spite of their biblical inheritance of a picture of reality where God splits seas and sends manna, returned the Name of God to the Megillah by their steadfast loyalty to the covenantal relationship.

The rabbis saved Judaism by understanding that their loyalty to the covenant required them to make sense of history in the absence of the visible intrusions of the Lord of history. The rabbis taught loyalty to Torah which was not dependent upon the realization of covenantal promises or stunning divine incursions into history. They taught a loyalty that could face a tragic reality and persist. They taught us to persevere in spite of the gap between expectations and reality. Therefore, they located the authentic acceptance of Torah not at Sinai but rather during Purim. On Purim Jews accepted the Torah with a full

awareness of what it means to live in unredeemed history. They affirmed their loyalty to the covenant in spite of what they had learned about human nature. Maimonides apparently had such Jews in mind when he concluded the laws of Purim with the theme of the irrevocability of Purim even during the messianic age. Jews who can celebrate the defeat of Haman when they know from their own experience that Haman has not been defeated are people who can genuinely hope for and work towards the realization of messianism without expecting an apocalyptic transformation of history and human nature. A people that channels all its hope into the return of a biblical framework of history can lose the ability to act on its own.

The Defeat of Evil through the Joy of Life

Purim is a powerful holiday for it teaches how to live with the dream of a redeemed world while knowing full well that you live in an unredeemed world. In order to develop the Jew's ability to persevere in reality, Purim teaches how to overcome reality, how to look beyond the narrow possibilities of the given. Purim uses ecstasy as a tool to strengthen the faculties of humor and imagination. Humor can distance reality and thus enable a person to persevere despite the presence of evil. Imagination can expand one's perception of the range of the possible. Through humor one can learn to live with Haman; through imagination one can learn to perceive intimations of holiness in the behavior of Esther. These qualities flow from the wellspring of joy. Purim, therefore, discourages rational coherence in favor of unrestrained intellectual fantasy - "Purim Torah." Jews celebrate Purim with a spirited Megillah reading and a festive meal in place of an ordered synagogue service.

Ginsberg did not understand the spiritual response to the absurd expressed in ecstasy. There is no time for reasoned debate or meditation on Purim. Rational discrimination and evaluation - indispensable for living in the real world - are

temporarily suspended. On Purim, we mock the empirical world; we become incapable of distinguishing between Haman and Mordecai. Cautious fear and suspicion of others are eradicated. The law states, therefore, that on Purim one must respond to anyone who asks for help, Jew or pagan, friend or foe:

It is also one's duty to distribute charity to the poor on Purim day, "the poor" meaning not less than two persons; each should be given a separate gift - money, a cooked dish, or some other comestible. For when Scripture says, *And gifts to the poor* (Esther 9:22), it implies at least two gifts to two poor persons. *No investigation should be made of applicants for such Purim money, rather it should be given to anyone who stretches out his hand.* Nor may Purim money be diverted to any other charitable purpose.

(M.T. Hilkhos Megillah 2:16)

Everyone is invited to exalt in the physical survival of the Jewish people and to give expression to a passionate love for life. Accordingly, on Purim one ceases suspecting people or prejudging their worthiness. One loves all human beings unconditionally.

Such is the spirit of exuberant joy of the Purim experience. On the one hand, we know that Haman has not died, that our enemies still seek our destruction, that the problem of anti-Semitism has not been solved and that, in many respects, we are vulnerable. Hitler's genocidal "final solution" and its near realization are fresh in our memories. Only the naive would dare believe that Hitler has been permanently removed from the stage of history. We know full well the horror of the precariousness and vulnerability of Jewish physical existence. Yet, in spite of this tragic assessment of human history, we are able to set apart a day on which we act as if the distinction between Haman and Mordecai has been eradicated, a day on which the sober reality-bound Jew is told to transcend the rational and to affirm the joy of life despite the presence of death.

The unique character of *tzedakah* on Purim and the exuberant quality of the joy of Purim indicate the connection between joy and compassion. Joy is often understood as hedonistic abandon where one is freed from normative constraint and responsibility and free to indulge one's private whims and fantasies. This, however, is not how the experience of *simhah* (joy) is understood in Judaism.

Maimonides' statements in Hilkhot Megillah (2:17) and Hilkhot Yom Tov (6:18) are particularly revealing of the meaning of *simhah*:

It is preferable to spend more on gifts to the poor than on the Purim meal or on presents to friends. For no joy is greater or more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers. Indeed, he who causes the hearts of these unfortunates to rejoice emulates the Divine Presence, of whom Scripture says, *To revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones* (Is. 57:15).

And men should eat meat and drink wine; for there can be no real rejoicing without meat to eat and wine to drink. And while one eats and drinks himself, it is his duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul - his meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment, but a rejoicing in his own stomach. It is of such persons that Scripture says, *Their sacrifices shall be unto them as the bread of mourners; all that eat thereof shall be polluted: for their bread is for their own appetite* (Hos. 9:4). Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it, as Scripture says, *And I will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your sacrifices* (Mal. 2:3).

Maimonides does not juxtapose the mitzvah of *simhah*, שמחה with the joy associated with good food and drink, but rather with self-indulgent and narcissistic joy. Judaism rejects the joy of physical gratification when it is egocentric and expressive of one's indifference to the joy of others. Embracing others in my joy by providing the weak and disadvantaged with the opportunity to share in the joy of wine, food and song is not a moralistic imposition but

flows naturally from the experience of ecstasy and the joy of life. Joy and responsibility are not antithetical.

Although we are told to forget about Haman by drinking until we can no longer discriminate between Haman and Mordecai, we are not told to ignore the gaps separating the rich from the poor and the socially well-off from the disadvantaged. We are warned against allowing our joy to blind us to the plight of the needy and to deafen us to the cries of the lonely.

When one eats the *seuddah*, סעודה (meal) on Purim, one must be fully conscious of the fact that the meal is a *seudat mitzvah*, סעודת מצוה and that the *simhah* of the Purim *seuddah*, though great and exuberant, is enjoined on us as a mitzvah. A person who is impervious to the claims of the poor and the hungry may not participate in such a *seuddat mitzvah*.

Mitzvah and *simhah* are not incompatible but, rather, coincide to the extent that both presuppose a person's overcoming the barriers separating the self from the "other". A test of whether one has fulfilled the halakhic norm of *simhah* is whether one feels the outer-directed feelings of love and empathy for others.

The celebration of life on Purim as expressed in the temporary suspension of the anxiety caused by the ever-present Hamans of history, the lighthearted humor of "Purim Torah," the flights of imagination expressed in intellectually "playing" with the authoritative texts of the tradition, the masquerading and the general atmosphere of confusion between appearance and reality -- all these features of Purim are joined together with the norm of indiscriminating *tzedakah* on Purim.

On Purim we make contact with the child's unself-conscious joy of life. And in making contact with this child-like joy of life, we discover a new dimension of

the adult world of mitzvah; we discover a sensitivity to the needs of others born of the celebration of life. On Purim, the poor experience the responsiveness of a world not dominated exclusively by the exploits of Haman. On Purim, the poor may renew their messianic hope as a result of their experiencing the outstretched hand of human compassion liberated by the joy of life.

Our people's genius was expressed in their courage to celebrate moments of joy amidst the precariousness of human history. Purim signifies the dream that one day we will live in a world in which the passion for life will make us responsive to all human beings and that in place of their cynical, demonic yearnings for power, people will accept each other's differences and affirm their common love of life *per se* with joy. This dream is a permanent feature of our memories and hopes thanks to our people's courage to celebrate Purim in an unredeemed world.

Purim can be especially helpful for Jews living in Israel today. Purim can teach us to build a spiritual way of life in the face of the unpredictable, to carry on the struggle without victories. Jews who are able to drink "L'chaim," to write Purim Torah, to share food and drink with one another and to help those in need knowing that there are Hamans in history, can find joy and meaning despite the uncertainty of contemporary history.