Sephardic Community Alliance

Qol Ha-Qahal

קול הקהל



SCA

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In honor of our Mother, Ann Shamah

by her children Alan and Vicky Shamah,
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When did Purim become Mardi Gras?

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We have two holidays on the Jewish calendar which are not mentioned in the five books of the Torah; Hanoukah and Purim. These holidays were added later by our rabbis to commemorate events that took place during the Second Temple period. Purim has the distinction of also having Megillat Esther, one of the 24 books that make up our cannon. Purim also has a tractate dedicated to its laws in Mishnah as well as Talmud.[1]

Purim is a time of happiness, which commemorates the saving of the Jews from annihilation at the hands of Haman. As with everything else there are clearly prescribed laws and customs for this holiday and in the case of Purim, they are clearly written out for us in Megillat Esther chapter 9:

> Mordekhai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahashverosh, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

The Mishnah and gemara develop the halakhah based on these passages and our hakhamim have continued to develop these ideas over the past two thousand years. The manner in which our communities have celebrated Purim throughout this period is very well defined. For two millennia the communities of the Near-East and the descendants of Spanish Jewry have celebrated this day in the manner described in the Megillah, Mishnah, Talmud and subsequent rabbinical authorities.

[1] *By contrast Hanoukah has a very scant mention in the Talmud, in Tractate Shabbat and does not have an accompanying book in the Canon.*

Growing up, this was the way Purim was celebrated- as stated in the Megillah, with joy and happiness and always with dignity. Listening to the reading of the Megillah at night and the following morning, giving money to the needy, preparing and delivering home baked goods to relatives, friends, and neighbors and finally late in the day having a festive meal.

No one bought ready prepared candy and cookies to give out, no one got drunk, no one wore costumes, no one had music blaring from their car, no one caused traffic jams, and absolutely no one caused a *Hillul Hashem*! There were no carnivals nor Purim parties. No one ever heard of a rabbi getting dressed like Minnie Mouse and getting so drunk that he could not control his actions. Unfortunately this is what we are surrounded by today. Not only are these customs not our way, it in fact goes against our Torah! It is important that one recognize that many of these foreign practices are rooted in pagan ritual and are indeed harmful to Judaism, and not just cute practices for children.

> ***"Holidays like Purim are an opportunity for us to perpetuate our rich culture and traditions and make a qiddush Hashem."***

Masks and Costumes

Today we also see men dressing like women, and women like men. This is something that our Torah clearly forbids[2] as well as all early and late Rabbinic sources. So why do people think they can do this on Purim? Is the Torah somehow suspended for Purim?

The custom of masquerading in costume and the wearing of masks probably originated in 15th century Italy, where in all likelihood it was picked up from the Roman Carnival. The earliest Jewish source we know for it is Rabbi Yehudah Minss (d. Venice 1508). He is quoted by Mooram - Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1520-1572, Poland) -

[2] *For example Debarim 22:5: כָּל־עֹשֵׂה אֵלֶּה לא־יִהְיֶה כְלִי־גֶבֶר עַל־אִשָּׁה וְלא־יִלְבַּשׁ גֶּבֶר שִׂמְלַת אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹעֲבַת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ A man's item shall not be on a woman, and a man shall not wear a woman's garment; whoever does such a thing is an abhorrence unto the Lord.*

who says it is not forbidden even though there are those that say it is. Later, in his *Darké Moshe* he says it's better to be stringent and not wear masks and such. Even so, the *Baer Heteb, Ta"z, Bayit Hadash, Keneset HaGedolah, Debar Shemouel*, and *Birké Yosef* all say it is completely forbidden. In fact these great Sephardic hakhamim and Ashkenazic Rabbanim all wrote that so many terrible things have come about due to the masquerading, and that anyone who has the power to put an end to it, must.

As mentioned above the entire origin seems to have come from Carnival which, as is known, is rooted in ancient pagan ritual. Carnival comes from the root *carné* – flesh. According to anthropologists, *carné valé* is a sort of reversal ritual, in which social roles are reversed and norms about desired behavior are suspended. In some cases the forcing of men and women to indulge in sexual pleasures in honor of crude deities. If so this reeks of *'abodah zara* and *houqot hagoyim* and no one should be getting "dressed up."



Mishloah Manot

For centuries there was no such thing as readymade or store bought. Every woman was proud of what she made and how she made it. Purim was a time to showcase their talent and skill. As such *mishloah manot* were always trays of *ma'amool, ba'lawa*, and other homemade Middle Eastern pastries. No one questioned if these were kosher. If they were sent to you by a relative, friend, or neighbor that meant you knew, respected, and trusted each other enough to eat anything from their kitchen.

Mishloah manot was not a chore of putting together hundreds of packages to drive all around town in a rush. They were taken with respect and always with a visit. Children were always encouraged to go on these deliveries where they were guaranteed to receive Purim money - simply called "purim" or *Fooreeyé*, from the elderly. This is when Sepharadim give and receive, unlike the modern mistaken practice where gifts and presents are given on Hanukkah, to emulate the practices of the gentile neighbors. It was all about quality, not quantity, about true mutual respect, no one felt they had to give to every person they ever met.

The first readymade *mishloah manot* packages started to appear in our community around 1975. They were introduced by young men that were studying to be rabbis. It was a plain white paper box with a small grape juice, 2 *hamantaschen*, and a bag of Wise potato chips. They were looked upon in disdain. What has become of our precious custom now? Our people run to the same stores and "charitable organizations" to buy the same cheap candy? People that would never eat a Laffy Taffy end up having bowls full at the end of the day that just get thrown out with the trash. Once again transgressing the Torah which teaches us *bal tash-heet*, do not waste. In recent years we have begun to see themed *mishloah manot* and costumes. What's going on? Wake up! There should only be one theme and that is Purim and the unity of the Jewish people.

Traditionally, it should be noted, an assortment of baked goods was given. Yes they were all *mezonot*, not two different *berakhot*. The halakhah states that you have to give two different items, not two different *berakhot*.

Noise Making

Noise making is another practice that was unknown to the hakhamim of the mishnah and gemara. Even HaRamba"m and most early sources do not mention it at all. We first hear of it in 13th century France and

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Germany, and it would be safe to assume they picked this up from their non-Jewish neighbors who, as historians have documented, would be heard making noise to scare off evil spirits. It took time, but eventually this custom made its way in some degree to every Sephardic community except for the Spanish-Portuguese communities which till today do not allow any noise making during the 54 mentions of Haman's name.

Even though it made its way into Sephardic communities, the hakhamim were not happy about it. Notably Hakham Rahamim Haim Yehudah Yisrael of Rhodes wrote against it in his book *Ben Yamin* in the 1800's and he was even able to get the hakhamim of Izmir, Istanbul, and Jerusalem to sign on and agree with him, as is written in *Yafeh Laleb*. Hakham Eliyahu Hazzan of Alexandria, in his book *Neveh Shalom*, called it an "evil custom"! Sephardic hakhamim, always conscious of human dignity, as well as respect of people and property, had a very difficult time with this noisy custom. The synagogue is, in essence, Hashem's sanctuary. How could people enter it and act in such a raucous manner? Coming in with stones and hammers to bang on the wooden benches and chairs made noise but it destroyed property. That was unacceptable. The goyim that worked in the Jewish community, or simply the ones that would be passing by outside would hear this noise and look down upon the Jews and their crude mannerisms, causing a *hillul Hashem*. All this also detracted from the Megillah reading and caused people to lose out on their obligation to hear every word. As far as our hakhamim were concerned, there were no positive aspects to this new found custom and simply put it should be discouraged and stopped.



Esther Scroll, 1750
Handwritten on parchment; ink, gouache, gold and silver paint

Se'oudah

The *se'oudah*, the festive meal was always held after *minhah* and always late in the day. It was always a time to gather with family and friends to enjoy the joyous mood of the day and to thank *Boré 'Olam* for the miracles he constantly does for us. It's the only holiday where throughout the meal everyone breaks out in song. We have a wonderful collection of pizmonim that were composed especially for the Purim holiday, the events of the Megillah, and the wondrous ways in which Hashem saved *'Am Yisrael* from destruction. That is se'oudat Purim, and not what we see today, drunken revelers and charity collectors brazenly barging into people's homes and jumping around their tables.

Drinking

Drinking on Purim or getting completely drunk on Purim. What is the law? What is and what isn't allowed? What is the source for this?

We first encounter drinking on Purim in the Talmud Babli, Masekhet Megillah 7b, which states:

> Raba said: One is obligated to become inebriated [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordekhai. Rabbah and Ribbi Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became inebriated, and Rabbah arose and cut Ribbi Zera's throat. The next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. The following year he said: Will the master come and we will have the Purim feast together? He replied: A miracle does not take place on every occasion.

The statement by Raba in the Gemara is *"mehayeb inish* ***lebasomé*** *beporeyah…"* This word *"lebasomé"* is word that

most have translated as inebriated, intoxicated, drunk, etc... But is that really what it means?

The problem is that throughout the entire Torah, Nebi`im and Ketoubim we never encounter the word *"lebasomé"* as the translation of *"lehishtaker"* – to get drunk. Not in the Targum Onqelos, not in the Targum Yonatan Ben Ouziel, not in the Targum Yerushalmi, nowhere. In fact in all these places the translation of *"lehishtaker"* is *"lehitravah"* or a derivative of it.

If we look through all these Targumim we find variations of *"lebasomé"* but never for drunkenness. In fact what is it used to translate? To change something to something nicer, better, sweeter, etc... That now makes sense, by just drinking a glass of wine a person's mood and outlook change to a better one.

Never forget, the Torah prohibits drunken stupor. It is something that is completely unacceptable and violates the sanctity of mankind. You never saw or heard of any of our elders or hakhamim getting drunk on Purim. It is not done nor is it meant to be done.

Stay safe and sane and follow the dictates of our Torah which are always logical and meant to ensure a peaceful life.

"Purim Spiel"

"Purim Spiel" or "Rab Purim," another seemingly harmless custom is where Yeshiva students poke fun at their leaders and Rabbis. This is a social satire and mockery of authorities, once again something that is foreign to Judaism but a major part of Carnival. Skits are performed and students imitate and ridicule scholars and educators. Again, is there a special dispensation for the day of Purim? Do we somehow ignore or suspend the laws of our Torah in the name of *"qalut rosh"* (levity)?

Conclusion

Our heritage is centuries old and it is incumbent upon us to transmit it properly to future generations. Holidays like Purim are an opportunity for us to perpetuate our rich culture and traditions and make a *qiddush Hashem*. There is no reason that the Purim of our youth, a Purim that emulated the laws, tradition, and heritage of our families, hakhamim, and communities should now be abandoned and replaced with foreign, repulsive acts which betray the spirit of Torah and Judaism. With God's help we can focus our energies on positive actions such as teaching our children the true meaning of our Purim holiday and its misvot, how to read Megillat Esther properly, and the wonderful tunes of our pizmonim and their time honored lessons.

Rabbi Mizrachi is the co-founder of Barkai Yeshivah. Mr. Mosseri is a noted expert on sephardic minhag and a regular contributor to Qol Ha-Qahal.

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