**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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In memory of our dear friend and supporter
Mr. Joshua Mermelstein z"l
whose yahrzeit falls on 20 Adar.

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In memory of six friends and family,
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,
who have left us in the past 7 years.
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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The Mitzvot of Purim

What are the *mitzvot* of Purim aside from *megilla* reading? What are women’s obligations in them?

# A New Holiday

What are the makings of a Jewish holiday? Holidays in the Torah entail rejoicing, special additional sacrifices (*mussaf*), unique *mitzvot* of the day, and a prohibition on performing labor (other than that needed for eating). We also recite special prayers and read Scripture.

Purim is the first major Jewish holiday not established by the Torah. A *mussaf* offering or *tefillat mussaf* is thus off the table. We do read *Megillat Esther*, which may itself be a form of reciting *Hallel*.[[1]](#footnote-1) (We plan to discuss the mitzva of reading *megilla* in a future piece.) Which of the other elements of a holiday do the sages incorporate into Purim?

The ninth chapter of *Megillat Esther* describes the various stages of Purim's establishment. What begins in the year of the miracle as a victory party subsequently becomes a grassroots celebration in the unwalled cities. Inspired by these festivities, Mordechai sends letters to Jewish communities throughout the world to establish an official holiday. Eventually the Jewish people accepts the holiday as one for all their progeny from generation to generation, for each family and locale:

*Megillat Esther* 9 : 16-22, 27-28

And the remainder of Jews who were in the provinces of the king gathered [for war] and stood up for their lives and rested from their enemies…on the fourteenth of [Adar], and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing: And the Jews who were in Shushan gathered [for war] on the thirteenth and fourteenth of [Adar] and rested on the fifteenth, and made it a day of feasting and rejoicing. For this reason, the unwalled Jews who live in the unwalled cities make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar rejoicing and feasting and a Yom Tov and *mishlo'ach manot* from a man to his fellow. Mordechai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jewish people that were in all the provinces of King Achashverosh – near and far, to establish for them to make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and the fifteenth day, each and every year, as the days that the Jewish people had respite from their enemies, and the month that was reversed for them from misery to joy and from mourning to festival; to make them days of feasting and joy and sending portions from man to his fellow, and gifts to the destitute.

Note how the descriptions of the celebrations shift from stage to stage. We move from "a day of rejoicing and feasting" to “rejoicing and feasting and a festival and sending [food] portions from man to his fellow.” The victory party becomes a religious holiday, with a social bent that involves sending and sharing food. Mordechai then adds another component to Purim, concern for the poor, in the form of "gifts to the destitute." At the same time, he omits calling Purim a festival (Yom Tov). The Talmud makes note of this omission:

*Megilla* 5b

Did not Rav Yosef teach: “joy and feasting and holiday,” “joy” – teaches that it is forbidden to eulogize [on those days], “feasting” – teaches that fasting is forbidden, and “holiday” – teaches that performing labor is forbidden!... Rabba the son of Rava said:…Eulogy and fasting – they accepted upon themselves, [a prohibition on] labor they did not accept upon themselves. For it was first written “joy and feasting and holiday,” and at the end it was written “to make them days of feasting and joy,” but “holiday” is not written…And if you want, say: it is certainly the custom [not to perform labor]…

The rejoicing of Purim, as on the festivals described by the Torah, precludes eulogizing or fasting. Whereas Torah-level festivals also entail a prohibition of performing labor, however, refraining from performing labor on Purim is only a matter of custom, and does not apply to labor related to the rejoicing or to *mitzvot* in general.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 696:1

Performing labor is permitted on Purim. In a place where the custom is not to perform labor, one should not perform it. (And nowadays, the custom in every place is not to perform it)… Rema: It is permissible to perform any mitzva labor, such as writing halachic rulings, and it is also permissible to perform even full-fledged labors as needed for Purim

We have learned of several instances of women having the custom to refrain from labor to mark special occasions, during the nights of *sefirat ha-omer*, the first half-hour after Chanuka candles are lit, and Rosh Chodesh. Regarding Purim, the custom to refrain from labor is everyone's and also more widespread.

The verses allude to obligations of Purim that represent the remaining characteristics of Yom Tov, festive rejoicing and *mitzvot* unique to the day: the rejoicingand festive meal(*se'uda*, also based on *mishteh*), *mishlo'ach manot* (sending portions of food to our fellows), and *matanot la-evyonim* (gifts to the destitute). Let's take a look at these in more detail, starting with the Talmud's elucidation of the last two.

*Megilla* 7a

Rav Yosef taught: “And sending portions from a man to his fellow” – two portions to one man; “and presents to poor people” – two gifts to two people.

Rav Yosef's teaching is based on a close reading of the text. The verse talks about "a man" sending "portions" to "his fellow." Thus, at minimum, this refers to sending two portions to one other person. It also says "gifts to poor people," both in plural, so at minimum a total of two gifts to two people, i.e. one gift to each.[[2]](#footnote-2)

# Mishlo'ach Manot

What purpose do *mishlo'ach manot* serve? In the book of Nechemya, we learn of sending *mishlo'ach manot* before Rosh Ha-shana, to enable Jews who had not prepared in advance to celebrate the holiday:

*Nechemya* 8:10

And he said to them, 'go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to he who has nothing prepared, for today is sacred to our Lord and do not be sad, because rejoicing in God is your strength:

The similarity between the verses in Nechemya and Esther implies that, on Purim as well, *mishlo'ach manot* serve to enhance the *se'uda*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Therefore, one should ideally give food portions that are fully prepared and suitable for consumption at the *se'uda*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many halachic authorities also maintain that one should send two different kinds of food and/or drink.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Aside from enhancing the *se'uda*, *mishlo'ach manot* increase feelings of affinity between Jews, as Chatam Sofer explains with allusions to the *megilla*:

Responsa Chatam Sofer OC 197

[The purpose of *mishlo’ach manot* is] to increase peace and friendship, the opposite of the habit of the enemy [Haman] who said [the Jewish people are] “scattered and separated,” meaning that instead of being one nation, they are scattered and separated in disagreements. Therefore, they established *mishlo’ach manot*.

While common practice is to distribute many smaller, less significant *mishlo'ach manot*, the mitzva fulfillment should ideally be with full servings of two portions of significant food for *se'uda* (i.e. not a water bottle), so it is preferable to make an effort to send at least one such package:

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* OC 695:15

It also seems to me that with this (*mIshlo’ach manot*) it is not sufficient to send a *ka-zayit* [of food] or *revi’it* [of drink], for it needs to be a proper portion, as this is the meaning of “*manot*,” such as a piece of meat that is fitting to be served, it should be something important. And those that send small pieces have not fulfilled their obligation.

# Matanot La-evyonim

Why does Mordechai add *matanot la-evyonim* to the obligations of Purim? He may take his cue from the Torah's description of rejoicing on a festival:

*Devarim* 16:14

And you shall rejoice on your festival, you and your son and your bondsman and your maidservant and the Levite and the convert and the orphan and the widow who are in your gates:

Our rejoicing must include the more vulnerable elements of our community. A true celebration takes everyone into account. In this vein, Mordechai's addition of *matanot la-evyonim* to the observances of Purim is itself a way to increase the *simcha*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rejoicing only truly serves God when it is socially responsible. As Ritva explains, *matanot la-evyonim* on Purim are not strictly charity. Rather, they ensure that everyone can properly celebrate Purim. For that reason, we need not investigate to what extent someone is truly poor before we give them *matanot la-evyonim*.

Ritva *Megilla* 7a

We do not investigate whether he is poor and it is fitting to give him, for this giving does not stem from the laws of charity alone, but rather from the laws of rejoicing…

Along these lines, to support rejoicing on Purim, *matanot la-evyonim* should consist of either food or money (as opposed to clothes or other items), and the money should be given on Purim day itself (so that it will not be spent earlier) or to an agent or organization in advance of Purim for distribution on Purim. There is no clear minimum amount, as long as there is enough to be considered a respectable gift, roughly enough to buy a portion of food.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Given a choice between giving more *mishlo'ach manot* to one's friends or more gifts to the poor, Rambam teaches that the clear preference is to give more gifts to the poor, because true *simcha* involves all layers of society:

Rambam *Megilla* 2:16

It is better for a person to give more gifts to the destitute than to have more of his feast and sending more portions to his fellows. For there is no great and glorious rejoicing except to bring rejoicing to the heart of the poor and the orphans and the widows and the converts.

Mishlo’ach manot are meant to increase feelings of goodwill between friends and neighbors, not peer pressure to outdo each other.

In an article in *The Forward*, Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt explains why she is abandoning the growing trend of giving out over-the-top, pinterest-perfect *mishlo’ach manot* in favor of giving more *matanot la-evyonim*:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, "Since When Have $500 Mishlo'ach Manot Baskets Become Normal," *The Forward*

While the story of Esther begins with opulence — the gilded Persian palace, the tapestries, the golden vessels and flowing wine — the story ends on an entirely different note, a reminder to give matanot l’evyonim, gifts to the poor — that is, charity. The story of Esther and Mordechai is one that serves as a reminder to who we truly are: Not the drunken revelers of ancient Persia, but a people charged with altruism, with caring for those with less.

Women's Obligation

Are women obligated in the *mitzvot* of *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim*?

The Talmud obligates women in the mitzva of *megilla* based on the principle of ["inclusion in the miracle."](https://www.deracheha.org/af-hen)

*Megilla* 4a

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in *megilla* reading since they, indeed/too, were part of that miracle.

While the Talmud does not mention whether "inclusion in the miracle" extends to the other *mitzvot* of Purim, halachic consensus seems to be that it does. In his *Darchei Moshe*, Rema quotes Mahari Brin as obligating a woman in both *mitzvot* just as she is obligated in *megilla*:

*Darchei Moshe Ha-katzar* OC 695

Mahari Brin wrote…that a woman is obligated in *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim* like she is obligated in *megilla* reading…

In his glosses to Shulchan Aruch, he simply states that a woman's obligation is like a man's:

Rema OC 695:4

A woman is obligated in *matanot la-evyonim* and *mishlo’ach manot* like a man.

While women's obligation in *matanot la-evyonim* is not questioned, Peri Chadash asks how Rema can be so certain of women's obligation in *mishlo'ach manot*, given that the verse specifies "*ish*," from a man to his fellow:

*Peri Chadash* OC 695:4

This law is unclear, for "*ish*" [man] is written, and not woman. Whence does he [Rema] learn this?

Rav Ya'akov Emden responds by pointing out that the word "*ish*" does not always exclude a woman. Furthermore, the *megilla*’s phrase “the Jews enacted and accepted upon themselves and upon their progeny” (*Esther* 9:27, *kiyyemu ve-kibbelu ha-Yehudim aleihem ve-al zar'am*) makes clear that female progeny are included.

*She'elat Ya'avetz* 120

To me it seems that this is a true and straight law. Should it be that everywhere that "*ish*" is written it is to exclude the woman?...Furthermore, here it is written that the "Jews enacted and accepted [the laws] upon themselves and upon their progeny" and a woman is included without a doubt as everywhere that "*zera*" [progeny] is written, for it connotes males and females…

Married Women

Another possible explanation for the *megilla*'s use of the word "*ish*" to describe the mitzva of "*mishlo'ach manot*", advanced by Rav Ya'akov Reischer, is that inclusion in the miracle does extend to obligate women in other *mitzvot* of Purim, but with an exception regarding *mishlo'ach manot*, for married women who may find the mitzva difficult to manage.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Responsa *Shevut Ya'akov* I:41

…For certainly women were also part of that miracle, for this is the reason they [women] are obligated in reading the *megilla*. Furthermore, regarding *mishlo'ach manot* it is written “the Jews accepted it upon themselves” and women are also included. The difficulty that is raised, – that it is written "*mishlo'ach manot* from a man to his fellow," which implies a man and not a woman – is not difficult at all. For it is taught in the first chapter of *Kiddushin* (30b) that our rabbis taught "A man [*ish*] should have awe (*tira’u*) for his mother and his father" (*Vayikra* 19:3). I learn here only a man, whence is a woman obligated? When it says "they will have awe (*tira’u*)," that refers to both of them [a man and a woman]. If so, what does the word "*ish*" come to teach us? A man has the capacity to do it and a woman does not have the capacity to do it…If so, that is also the logic here. Even though a woman also is obligated in *mishlo'ach manot*, it is still written "*ish*" because he has the capacity to do it, which is not so for the woman. Thus, it makes sense that regarding *matanot la-evyonim* it is written unspecified and "*ish*" is not written, because we accept *tzedaka* from women…

Indeed, Magen Avraham notes that, in his experience, a married woman is often not careful to give *mishlo'ach manot* herself.

Magen Avraham ad loc, 14

I have not seen that people are careful about this, and perhaps this specifically refers to a widow. But if a woman has a husband, her husband sends to a number of people on her behalf. And in any event, one should be stringent [and women should perform these *mitzvot*].

Although Magen Avraham suggests that a husband might fulfill the obligation on his wife's behalf, he rules that a woman should be stringent and perform the *mitzvot* herself. Aruch Ha-shulchan, too, writes that a woman should send *mishlo'ach manot* on her own, which was common custom in his milieu.

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* OC 695:18

All women are obligated in *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim*, and even if she has a husband she is not exempt through her husband’s, for this is a mitzva that is incumbent upon her [individually]. (See Magen Avraham, and our women are scrupulous and send portions.)

At the same time, Aruch Ha-shulchan rules that while dependent children must fulfill the obligation of *matanot la-eyyonim* themselves, a married couple may fulfill their obligation together, as halachically they are considered one unit.

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* 694

Women are also included in this mitzva (of *matanot la-evyonim*), as women have the same obligation as men in all *mitzvot* of Purim. And it seems to me that a man and his wife both fulfil their obligation with the same two gifts, as they are like one entity (*ishto k’gufo* – lit. his wife is like his own body). But the son and the daughter that he provides for (lit. eat at his table) – are obligated to give themselves.

Apparently, Aruch Ha-shulchan viewed *matanot la-evyonim* in the general context of *tzedaka*, a mitzva for which a married couple, with joint finances, are typically considered a single unit, in contrast with *mishlo'ach manot*. Note that he does still obligate children of age to give their own *matanot la-evyonim*.

There is even a custom for young children to deliver *matanot la-evyonim*, although children are not normally used as agents to fulfill halachic requirements, to educate children in *tzedaka*:

Rav Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi*, *Kedushat Purim* 2

It is proper to send *matanot la-evyonim* through one’s young sons and daughters to educate them in *mitzvot*. I remember when I was young my father, a”h, would send me, and not a servant, to the poor, to teach me the mitzva. And everything was done with joy and a happy heart and modesty, so as not to embarrass the poor person.

What should a married couple do in practice?

Each spouse should give at least one set of *mishlo'ach manot* on his or her own. If the couple prefer on the whole to give their *mishlo’ach manot* jointly, husband and wife should still designate one each that is specifically their own, although either spouse can deliver it on behalf of the other.

Alternatively, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach allows for fulfilling the mitzva by giving a joint *mishlo'ach manot* from the couple or family, as long as it contains at least four portions worth of food (of at least two types), to satisfy both the husband's and wife's obligations:

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah* 24, fn. 55

From my uncle Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach I heard that the intention of Magen Avraham is for the husband to say to his wife that this *mishlo'ach manot* is from both of them, and according to this one should take care that there be two portions for each of them [four total, two each for husband and wife]

In addition to suiting common practice, this recommendation harkens back to the *megilla*'s description of the day as being celebrated by "each and every family."

Woman to Woman

*Mishlo'ach manot* increase affinity between the sender and recipient. Rema, again drawing on Mahari Brin, writes that it is inappropriate for one to send *mishlo’ach manot* to someone of the opposite gender.

Rema OC 695

…A woman should send to a woman and a man to a man, but not the opposite, that the man not come to send to a widow and bring about a situation of possible *Kiddushin*, but regarding *matanot la-evyonim* there is no concern.

It was highly unusual in Rema's day for a man to send gifts to a woman who was not his betrothed or wife, unless the gift was a matter of *tzedaka*. Rema is particularly concerned that a man would send *mishlo'ach manot* to a widow (or single woman) that might be considered *sivlonot*, nuptial gifts, and lead to a situation of halachic confusion regarding the woman's marital status. Even were a woman to give to a man, the man might then be expected to reciprocate, raising the same question.

Now, it is not clear that *mishlo'ach manot* would really halachically be considered to effect *kiddushin*, especially if it is known that they are sent for the unique purpose of fulfilling the mitzva.[[10]](#footnote-10) Additionally, nowadays in many communities, interactions between men and women are more widespread. Rav Betzalel Stern therefore argues that in those communities, *mishlo'ach manot* between a man and woman should be acceptable, since it is done for the purpose of fulfilling a mitzva and is actually less fraught than other, more commonplace personal interactions:

Responsa *Be-tzel Ha-chochma* 5:52

Perhaps in the case of fulfilling the mitzva of *mishlo'ach manot* they did not decree a prohibition from a man to a woman, for even without this people not careful about men greeting women, for we rely on the other statement of Shemuel who said that everything [of this sort can be permitted if] it is for the sake of Heaven, and Rema ruled accordingly. How much more so in the case of the mitzva of *mishlo'ach manot*.

Here, too, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, makes an interesting practical suggestion, rooted in the concept of giving *mishlo'ach manot* as a family:

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah* 24, fn. 54

…Even when a man sends *manot* on his wife's behalf to another man there is no concern here of [excess] affection, since this is [actually] from family to family…

When families include women and men, we are not concerned about which member of a family actually gives or receives the *mishlo'ach manot*. Single parent families may choose to give mishlo’ach manot as a family to avoid the problems raised by Rema. Single women and men should give their mishlo'ach manot in accordance with communal customs.

To whom should we send Mishlo'ach Manot?

When choosing to whom to give mishlo'ach manot, we should be careful not to overlook those who are new to our community, the loners, neighbors we don’t know well, or even people we don’t get along with. Rav Moshe Harari articulates this nicely:

Rav Moshe Harari, Mikra'ei Kodesh Chapter 11 note 9

In my humble opinion it is appropriate to increase the number and quantity of *mishlo'ach manot* for those people whom one has hurt or quarreled with in the past year, in order to increase love between them and restore peace. And through this, Purim can become like [Yom] Kippurim (the Day of Atonement) – atoning for sins between man and his fellow, and Israel will be one unit and not, Heaven forbid, [as Haman says in the *megilla*] a “nation scattered and dispersed.”

Women who wish to be careful to observe Rema's ruling that a woman should not give to a man, can take special care to find women in the community who might particularly appreciate receiving mishlo'ach manot.

# Rejoicing and Feasting

As we've seen, *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim* both connect the Purim *se'uda* to social responsibility. Jewish rejoicing seeks to include and support the most vulnerable members of our community.

The festive meal is an opportunity to rejoice before God with meat and wine. As Rambam points out, our celebration only truly serves God only when we open our homes to those who are destitute. (We could add those who are lonely, and even difficult to get along with.) Otherwise, it can become merely decadence and hedonism.

Rambam *Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:17-18

When one eats and drinks, one must feed the convert, the orphan, and the widow along with the rest of the unfortunate poor, but one who locks the doors of his courtyard and eats and drinks, he and his children and his wife, and does not feed and give drink to the poor and embittered, this is not the rejoicing of a mitzva but rejoicing of his belly…

In general, finding the appropriate balance between feasting and serving God in other ways, as by learning Torah, can be a challenge on a festival. On Purim, though, there is no debate that festivities must find their place.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rambam's description of the Purim feast mentions meat and wine as at *se'udat* *Yom Tov*, with an extra note about drinking:

Rambam *Hilchot Megilla* and *Chanuka* 2:15

What is the requirement of this feast? To eat meat and make a nice feast according to one’s means. And one should drink wine until he is drunk and falls asleep due to his drunkenness.

Drinking until one becomes drowsy can fulfill the Talmud's statement advocating drinking until one's ability to distinguish between Mordechai and Haman is blurred. The continuation of the passage, however, seems to undermine the statement:

*Megilla* 7b

A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he does not know the difference [between] cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai. Rabba and Rabbi Zeira had the Purim meal together, they got drunk. Rabba arose and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira. The next day he prayed and revived him. The next year he said to him, ‘Come and let us have the Purim meal together.’ He said to him, ‘Miracles do not happen all the time.’

Though its exact meaning is debated, the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira demonstrates the potentially grave consequences of drinking. Shulchan Aruch nevertheless rules that a person is obligated to become so inebriated on Purim that they do not know the difference between “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordechai.” Rema cites an approach closer to Rambam's, that one should simply drink more than usual to the point of drowsiness.

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 695:2

A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he cannot distinguish [between] “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordechai.” Rema: There are those who say that one does not need to become so intoxicated, but one should drink more than usual and sleep, and when one is asleep one cannot distinguish [between] “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is Mordechai.” Whether one [drinks] a lot or a little, he should do so for the sake of Heaven.

Rema reminds us that the point is not to drink in quantity. It is to drink in service of God. In his *Bei'ur Halacha*, Mishna Berura explains why the sages could seem to obligate drunkenness, which is usually discouraged, as a means of serving God on Purim:

*Bei'ur Halacha* ad loc

If you would say: How did the sages obligate what the Torah and Prophets describe in multiple places as a great stumbling block? And it seems that because all the miracles that were done for Israel in the time of Achashverosh were through a drinking-feast (*mishteh*) – in the beginning Vashti was overthrown through a drinking-feast and Esther was introduced, and with the entire matter of Haman and his downfall was through drinking-feasts, therefore the sages obligated that one get drunk so that the great miracle is remembered through drinking wine. And in any event, this is meant to be a mitzva, and not an absolute requirement.

While there are significant opinions that encourage inebriation, there are also many that encourage restraint. As Chayyei Adam writes:

*Chayyei Adam Shabbat U-mo’adim* 155

Nevertheless, if one knows that he will come to disregard one of the *mitzvot*, like washing hands or *berachot* or *birkat ha-mazon*, or that he will not pray *mincha* or *ma’ariv*, or that he will behave with frivolity, it is best not to get drunk, and all his deeds should be for the sake of heaven.

In a sentiment similar to Rema, Chayyei Adam reminds us that the point of drinking on Purim is for the sake of Heaven; if it is possible that one will sin when drunk, it is best to stay sober.

In this context, it is also important to note that s*e'udat Purim*, the Purim feast, takes place during the day, because the *megilla* singles out "**days** of feasting and rejoicing," not nights.

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*Megilla* 7b

Rava said: A *se'udat Purim* that one has eaten at night, he did not discharge his obligation. What is the reason? "Days of feasting and rejoicing" is written.

While one may eat the *se’uda* at any point throughout Purim day it is preferable to do so in the afternoon, after *mincha*, so that drinking does not interfere with the performance of other *mitzvot* of the day or with prayer.[[12]](#footnote-12) *“Ad de-lo yada”* does not apply on Purim night.

# Women at the Se'uda

There is little discussion of women's obligation in se'udat Purim. Perhaps it goes without saying because women are obligated in *mishlo'ach manot*, which are so closely related to the *se'uda*. Rav Meir Brandsdorfer writes that women are obligated in *se'udat Purim* as in all other Purim *mitzvot*. He adds that for this reason a woman has an obligation to eat meat at her *Purim se'uda* (what vegetarians should do is another halachic discussion), even if she will need to go to the mikveh later that night.

Responsa *Kenei Bosem* YD 102

For there is an obligation to eat meat on Purim as on Yom Tov, and it is proven from the words of the halachic authorities that women are obligated in all the *mitzvot* of Purim like men…and this is the law for *se'udat Purim*, for *se'udat Purim* and *mishlo'ach manot* are a single entity….On Shabbat and Yom Tov, the custom is for women to eat meat on the day they will go to immerse, it is clear that this is also the law for Purim…

Should women drink?

Although early halachic authorities such as Rema, Mishna Berura, and Aruch Ha-shulchan explicitly mention women’s obligations of *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim*, they do not discuss whether women have an obligation to drink on Purim. It is only recently, in the past century or so, that halachic authorities have explicitly questioned whether women should be included in this obligation.

A Talmudic discussion of whether a husband is required to provide his wife with wine has become central to modern discussions of this question. The Talmud warns that women who have too much wine behave lewdly, and suggests that a woman should drink less than a man in general, unless she is in the presence of her husband, in which case drinking a bit more is acceptable.

*Ketubot* 65a

Wines are not allotted to a woman [as part of the husband’s requirement to provide food for his wife]… A woman who is accustomed to drinking is different… Abbaye said: This is what he meant: One who is accustomed to drinking, in her husband’s presence we give her two cups, when she is not in her husband’s presence – one cup. One who is not accustomed to drinking, in her husband’s presence – only one cup, when she is not in her husband’s presence we do not give her anything …

This passage discourages women from heavy drinking, perhaps in line with lower physical alcohol tolerance overall for women than for men.[[13]](#footnote-13) It does not establish a special prohibition for women to get drunk.

In line with this passage, and general reservations about drunkenness on Purim, several halachic authorities rule that women are prohibited from getting drunk on Purim.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, *Moadim U-zmanim* 190

It seems clear that, even though women are obligated in all the *mitzvot* of the day, they are not obligated to get drunk on Purim *ad de-lo yada* (until one cannot distinguish), for it is not the way of women to get drunk. On the contrary, it is a severe prohibition, for they are not accustomed [to get drunk] even at a feast, and they may come to severe transgressions. And if it weren’t for the halachic authorities [that say otherwise] I would say that this is a good reason why we [men] are not scrupulous to keep this rabbinic mitzva to get drunk on Purim.

Rav Sternbuch points out that people who are not accustomed to get drunk are more likely to behave inappropriately when they become inebriated. He believes that women are in that category – and cautiously suggests that men may be as well.

He also seems to assume that someone seeking to drink on Purim *ad de-lo yada* will typically want to get drunk. If, however, we view drinking *ad de-lo yada* as only a bit more than what is usual for a person, there may be more room for women's drinking even on his view. Rav Eliezer Melamed takes this approach:[[14]](#footnote-14)

Rav Eliezer Melamed, *Peninei Halacha*, *Zemanim* 16

There is also a mitzva for women to increase drinking wine which causes rejoicing, but they [women] should be careful about getting drunk, for drunkenness is more disgraceful for women than for men.

Both men and women should know their limits, to ensure they are drinking for the sake of Heaven, and only a bit more than usual.

In addition to intent, the environment in which we find ourselves on Purim should also be taken into account in our decision-making about drinking. A woman who is only with other women for *se'uda*, for example, might feel less concerned about drinking, because modesty and safety concerns are different from when the drinking is in a mixed crowd.

Why is Purim sometimes difficult for women, and how can we make it better?

It's not just during the se'uda that we may struggle to direct the lively revelry of Purim to avodat Hashem. While many people love Purim exactly as it is, its customs and mitzvot can be very labor intensive, and the bulk of the efforts, especially in a family setting, often fall disproportionately on women. Single adults and people without children face their own Purim challenges, whether it’s the emotional difficulty connecting to a holiday that so often focuses on children and family, or more practical problems of finding a place to celebrate.

Crafting a Purim costume or mishlo'ach manot can take hours. Cooking a se'uda also demands time and energy. At Megilla reading, it can be difficult to hear the words or focus on them from the women's section, especially if there are children to watch over. Matanot la-evyonim can seem very remote, especially if money was sent via an agent in advance of Purim. The se'uda may feel anticlimactic, or worse, like a frat party.

What can we do with all this?

As with anything else, preparation really does build anticipation. Putting work into Purim helps create a sense of connection to it. So, too, managing our expectations can affect our experiences. When we decide how to invest in Purim, we should take into account our interests, finances, and priorities, which can also vary from year to year, and also what is realistic…

Men and women are both obligated in the mitzvot of Purim, so a family’s plans should make sure to take the halachic and spiritual needs of everyone into account. The se'uda, for example, is for everyone, not just for men.

In the lead up to Purim and on Purim itself, it's important first to figure out how each person will fulfill their basic obligations. People often get so caught up on how to make their mishlo’ach manot pinterest-worthy that they neglect the basic or stay up so late that they can’t concentrate on megilla the next morning. In the lead up to Purim and on Purim itself, it's important to choose one or two aspects or mitzvot of the holiday to specialize in, to find ways to simplify the other aspects of the holiday, and to enlist any support necessary to bring this approach to Purim to fruition.

For example, if you love learning, make a plan in advance for a half hour over the course of the holiday, even better with a chevruta, to sit down with the megilla or masechet megilla or netivot shalom on megilla, and see if there's something else you can let go of. If you love to cook and treat your friends, then focus your energies on real food mishlo'ach manot, and double up so that you can use at least two of those dishes for se'uda. If you really want to drink a bit and let loose, see if you can organize a mishteh nashim at night, or a women's se'uda during the day. If megilla reading speaks to you, choose thoughtfully where to go and how you want to participate, even if it will mean cutting down on mishlo'ach manot. If matanot la-evyonim are what you feel matters most, see if you can spend part of the day volunteering with a tzedaka organization to deliver gifts to the poor, and perhaps have a shorter se'uda.

Because it entails so many customs and mitzvot, there are many paths through Purim. With some forethought there really can be something for everyone.

The complementary *mitzvot* of Purim enable us to serve God with body and soul, as individuals and as part of a community, in gratitude for and celebration of the Purim miracle.

1. *Megilla* 14a

Rav Nachman said: Reading it is Hallel. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are some halachic authorities who rule that one must give a total of four gifts - two gifts each to two poor people (*Kaf Ha-chayyim* OC 494:7) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Terumat Ha-deshen* 111

For it seems that the reason for *mishlo'ach manot* is in order that there be for everyone enough to fulfill the *se'uda* in accordance with the law. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Magen Avraham* OC 695:4

Cooked and fit for eating. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mishna Berura 695:20

Types of food…thus is the law for drink which is fine because drinking is a type of eating…

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* OC 695:14

The matter is clear that he must send two types of food or two types of drink or a food and a drink….Rambam wrote "and so he is obligated to send two portions of meat or two types of food or two types of cooked food" )see there(. Behold that he wrote "t'o types" and it must be that that he wrote "two portions of meat" means from two types of meat. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rambam makes a similar point when he describes rejoicing on the festival.

Rambam (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:18):

Who that locks the door of his courtyard and eats and drinks with his children and wife and does not feed or give drink to the poor and those in bitter state, this is not the joy of a mitzva but rather the enjoyment of his belly. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mishna Berura* 694:2

Ideally, one must give to the destitute something that is fitting to enjoy on Purim, food or money that he can spend on Purim. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Available here: <https://forward.com/life/faith/395449/since-when-have-500-dollar-mishloach-manot-baskets-become-normal/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Chatam Sofer writes something similar

Responsa Chatam Sofer I OC 196

Since according to Torah law the husband is obligated to provide for his wife [Rambam *Ishut* 12:2]…Based on this, she is presumably considered dependent on the table [food] of others, and for this reason "*ish*" is written. But if she is not dependent, like a widow, then she is obligated. So it seems to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, a statement that the gift is merely a gift might make a difference:

Rema EH 45:1

How much more so if he says that he sends it as a mere gift [do we not consider it *kiddushin*]… [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Pesachim* 68b

Rabbi Eliezer says: A person on Yom Tov should either eat and drink or sit and study. Rabbi Yehoshua says: split it, half for eating and drinking and half for the *beit midrash*. Rabbi Yochanan said: both of them expounded the same verse[s]. One verse says "a day of assembly for the Lord your God" and one verse says "A day of assembly for you." Rabbi Eliezer thought: Either it is all for God or all for you. Rabbi Yehoshua thought: split it, half for God and half for you…Rav Yosef said: Everyone concedes that on Purim we need it also to be for you. What is the reason? "Days of feasting and rejoicing" is written regarding it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rema OC 695:2

The practice is to make *se'udat Purim* after *mincha*, and they will pray *ma’ariv* at night, and they pray *mincha* first, when it is still daytime, and most of the *se'uda* must be during the day. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We see something similar in the following (available here <https://health.gov/our-work/food-nutrition/2015-2020-dietary-guidelines/guidelines/appendix-9/> )

US Department of Health and Human Services Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020

If alcohol is consumed, it should be in moderation—up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men—and only by adults of legal drinking age. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Available here: [https://ph.yhb.org.il/category/%d7%96%d7%9e%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9d/16-%d7%9e%d7%a6%d7%95%d7%95%d7%aa-%d7%94%d7%a9%d7%9e%d7%97%d7%94-%d7%95%d7%94%d7%97%d7%a1%d7%93/](https://ph.yhb.org.il/category/%D7%96%D7%9E%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%9D/16-%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%9E%D7%97%D7%94-%D7%95%D7%94%D7%97%D7%A1%D7%93/) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)