YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Is Purim a Yom Tov? An Analysis of *Simchat Purim***

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**Introduction**

The ninth chapter of *Megillat Esther* offers a rare window into the development of new holiday. The *Megilla* first recounts the celebration of Purim immediately after the events of Purim (9:18), and then relates how both Mordechai (9:20-21) and Esther (9:29-31) sent letters to the Jewish People throughout the kingdom, instructing them regarding the proper celebration of Purim.

The Talmud (*Megilla* 7a) notes this unique phenomenon and further describes how Esther negotiated with the scholars (*Chakhamim*), arguing that Purim should be established as a holiday (*kiv'uni le-dorot*) and that the book of Esther should be canonized (*kitvuni le-dorot*).

A close look at the *Megilla* reveals that the nature and content of this new holiday appears to have evolved from one form of a Yom Tov to another. In this *shiur*, we will trace the evolution of Purim as a Yom Tov and attempt to understand the unique nature of *Simchat Purim*.

**The Original Enactment of Purim – A Yom Tov or Just Purim?**

The *Megilla* relates that after the Jews living in un-walled cities (“*perazim*”) fought against their enemies on the 13th of Adar, they dedicated the next day, the 14th, to "***mishteh ve-simcha***" (a feast and merrymaking). The Jews of Shushan, after fighting on both the 13th and 14th of Adar, dedicated the 15th to similar festivities. The *Megilla* (9:19) then relates:

That is why village Jews (*perazim*), who live in un-walled towns, observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar **and make it a day of merrymaking (*simcha*) and feasting (*mishteh*), and as a holiday (*yom tov*) and an occasion for sending gifts to one another (*mishloach manot*).**

The *perazim*, according to the *Megilla*, appear to have designated the 14th of Adar as a day of *simcha* and *mishteh*, a *yom tov*, and a day of giving gifts to others (*mishloach manot*) for future generations as well.

The *Megilla* then relates that Mordechai sent instructions to the people regarding the future celebration of Purim:

Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Achashverosh, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year— the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of **feasting and merrymaking and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor**.

This letter changes the order and content of the *mitzvot ha-yom*. According to Mordechai's letter, the people are to observe days of a *mishteh ve-simcha*. He omits the word "*yom tov*," but adds "*matanot la-evyonim*" in addition to "*mishloach manot*."

The Talmud (*Megilla* 5b) relates to this difference in the course of attempting to understand how R. Yehuda HaNasi reportedly planted a sapling on Purim:

This is because they [the Jewish People] accepted upon themselves the prohibitions against eulogizing and fasting on Purim, but they did not accept upon themselves the prohibition against performing labor. This can be proven from the fact that initially, [when Mordecai and Esther proposed the celebration of Purim, it is written:] “A day of gladness and feasting and a *yom tov*” ([*Esther* 9:19](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Esther.9.19)), and at the end, [when the celebration of Purim] was accepted by the Jewish People,] it is written: “That they should make them days of feasting and gladness” ([*Esther* 9:22](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Esther.9.22)) [whereas the term *yom tov*, which alludes to a day when it is prohibited to perform labor, is not written].

The *gemara* asserts that while initially Purim was meant to be a Yom Tov, including some form of a prohibition to perform *melakha* (labor), the people did not accept this model of Purim and its prohibition of *melakha*.

What was the nature of the original observance of Purim? What was the initial enactment, and what is the nature of the final version of Purim?

It seems that initially, the people perceived Purim as a day of "*mishteh*" and "*simcha*." While the term "*mishteh*" implies a unique celebration, clearly related to the *mishteh* of Achashveirosh described in great detail in the *Megilla* (chapter 1), the word "*simcha*" reminds us of the Yom Tov celebration (*simchat Yom Tov*). The people appear to have viewed the celebration of the 14th of Adar as a unique celebration, somewhat similar to a Yom Tov.

The *Megilla* records that afterwards, the celebrations were expanded to "a day of *simcha* and *mishteh*" and as "a holiday (*yom tov*) and an occasion for sending gifts to one another (*mishloach manot*).” Here, the Yom Tov theme is present and, as the *gemara* describes, there is an attempt to legislate an *issur melakha* (prohibition against labor). Furthermore, Purim is no longer just as day of *mishteh*; it is also characterized by *mishloach manot* given one to another, possibly in response to the Haman's description of the Jewish People "scattered and dispersed among the other peoples" (*Esther* 3:8).

Finally, Mordekhai instructs the people to observe Purim as a day of "*mishteh ve-simcha*," i.e. primarily a day of Purim, and as a days of "sending gifts to one another (*mishloach manot*) and presents to the poor (*matanot la-evyonim*)." Here, Yom Tov is omitted, but "*matanot la-evyonim*" are added.

What is the nature of the "*simcha*" observed on Purim, and was are "*matanot la-evyonim*" added, seemingly as a replacement for Yom Tov? To answer this question, we must first briefly analyze the mitzva and expression of *simchat Yom Tov*, and then compare and contrast it to *simchat Purim*. We will then offer a new understanding of *simchat Purim* and its relationship to *simchat Yom Tov*.

***Simchat Yom Tov***

The Torah commands in three places that one should “rejoice” on Yom Tov.Regarding Shavuot, the Torah says:

**And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God**, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow who are in your midst, in the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. (*Devarim* 16:11)

The Torah mentions the obligation to rejoice twice in the context of Sukkot:

**And you should rejoice in your festival**, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow who are within your gates. Seven days you should keep a feast unto the Lord your God in the place which the Lord shall choose; because the Lord your God shall bless you in all your increase, and in all the work of your hands, **and you shall be altogether joyful**. (*Devarim* 16:14–15)

The *gemara* (*Chagiga* 8a) describes how in the days of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the mitzvaof *simchat Yom Tov* was fulfilled through eating the meat of the various *korbanot* offered on the festival:

Our Rabbis taught: [It is written:] “And you shall rejoice in your feast.” This includes all kinds of rejoicings as [festival] rejoicing. Hence, the Sages said: Israelites may fulfill their obligation with *nedarim*, *nedavot*, and *maaser* *beheima*; and the *Kohanim* [fulfill their obligation with] the *chatat* and *asham*, the *bekhor*, and the breast and the shoulder [given to the *Kohanim*]. One might [think] also with bird-offerings and meal-offerings; [therefore,] Scripture teaches: “And you shall rejoice in your feast” – only with those [offerings] from which the *chagiga* can be brought. These [bird- and meal-offerings], then, are excluded since the *chagiga* cannot be brought from them. R. Ashi said: It is to be deduced from [the expression]: “And you shall rejoice”; these are excluded because there is no [festive] joy in them.

The Talmud appears to view the consumption of *korbanot* as the primary fulfillment of *simchat Yom tov.*

Does the mitzvaof *simchat Yom Tov* apply nowadays, after the destruction of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, and if so, in what way? The *gemara* (*Pesachim* 109a) teaches:

We learned in a *beraita*: R. Yehuda b. Beteira said: When the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is standing, *simcha* is only with meat, as the verse says, “And you shall slaughter peace offerings and eat them there and be joyous before the Lord your God,” and when the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is not standing, *simcha* is only with wine, as the verse says, “And wine shall gladden the hearts of man.”

This passage implies that although we can no longer fulfill the mitzvaof *simcha* through eating the meat of the *korbanot*, one may still fulfill the mitzvaof *simcha* in a different manner. Furthermore, the *gemara* (*Pesachim* 109a) states:

The Rabbis taught: A person is obligated to make his children and the members of his household happy on Yom Tov, as the verse says, “And you shall be joyous in your holiday.” And how does he make them happy? With wine. R. Yehuda said: Men with what is appropriate for them and women with what is appropriate for them. Men with what is appropriate for them – with wine. And women with what? R. Yosef taught: In Bavel, with colored clothing, and in *Eretz Yisrael*, with pressed flax clothing.

This passage similarly describes how one may fulfill the mitzvaof *simcha* through drinking wine and buying gifts for one’s spouse. Does the *simcha* achieved through drinking wine, and buying gifts for one’s family fulfill the biblical obligation of rejoicing on the festival?

Tosafot (*Moed Katan* 14b) maintain that these passages refer to a rabbinic obligation; nowadays, when the festival sacrifices (*shalmei simcha*) are no longer offered, the mitzvaof *simcha* on Yom Tov is only *miderabbanan*.

The Rambam(*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6: 17-18) disagrees, ruling that the biblical mitzvaof *simchat Yom Tov* is in force even today:

Even though the *simcha* mentioned here refers to the *korban…* included in this *simcha* is to make his children and members of one’s household joyous, each one according to his means. How? For children, one gives roasted kernels and walnuts and candies. For women, one buys clothing and pleasant jewelry based on what one can afford. And men eat meat and drink wine, for *simcha* is only with meat and wine.

There are numerous interpretations of the Rambam. For example, R. Chaim Soloveitchik explains that according to the Rambam, there are actually two types of *simcha* – objective and subjective joy. One fulfills the objective mitzvaof *simcha* through eating the *korbanot*. However, the subjective form of *simcha*, which applied both during the time of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and nowadays as well, is fulfilled in the manner described by the Rambam. Similarly, R. Aryeh Leib Gunzberg (1695–1785), in his *Shaagat Aryeh* (65), explains that "the mitzvaof *simcha* is … a general mitzvathat one is obligated to be happy on Yom Tov in all ways that he is able to rejoice.”

In analyzing the nature of *simchat Yom Tov*, R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik adds two additional points (see *Shiurim Le-Zekher Abba Mari*, vol. 2. See also *U-Vikashtem Mi-Sham*, n. 19 [pp. 210–11]). First, he explains that in the Rambam’s view, the mitzva of *simcha* is fundamentally an internal experience. One cannot observe *aveilut* (mourning) during a festival, as we shall see, because the internal happiness of *simchat Yom Tov* contradicts the internal anguish that a mourner feels. Second, R. Soloveitchik explains, the joy of Yom Tov emerges from “standing before God" (see *Vayikra* 24:40). While *simcha* has an external expression, fulfilled through eating, drinking, and merriment, the source of this joy emerges from one’s closeness to God.

***Simchat Purim***

Is the mitzva of *simchat Purim* similar to *simchat Yom Tov*? The *Rishonim* discuss this in numerous contexts, including whether Purim abrogates the observance of *aveilut* (*shiva*) and whether weddings may be held on Purim.

Regarding *aveilut*, R. Achai Gaon, cited by the Tur (OC 696), maintains that since Purim is called a day of *simcha*, like Yom Tov, if the burial is before Purim, Purim abrogates the seven-day mourning period. Almost all *Rishonim* reject this view.

On the one hand, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Evel* 11:3) rules that all aspects of *aveilut* are observed on Chanuka and Purim. On the other hand, the Rosh (*Moed* *Katan* 3:85) and his teacher the Maharam of Rothenberg disagree with R. Aḥai Gaon, but rule that one does not observe mourning customs on Purim; Purim is like Shabbat regarding *aveilut*. The Rema (YD 401:7) rules in accordance with the Rosh, that one does not observe *aveilut* on Purim or the next day, Shushan Purim, except for *devarim shebetzina* (in private). After Purim, however, the *shiva* continues.

This debate may reflect different approaches to why Yom Tov cancels *aveilut* and to the nature of *simcḥat Purim*. R. Achai Gaon apparently believes that on Purim one experiences an inner, personal joy, which in turn abrogates *aveilut*. Others disagree and maintain that the *simcḥa* of Purim is of an external nature, manifest through the *seudat Purim*, which may be powerful enough to override, but not abrogate, *aveilut*. Therefore, for example, the Shulchan Arukh rules that unlike on Yom Tov, a wedding may be held on Purim and does not violate the principle of "*ein me'arvin simcha be-simcha*.”

It would appear that while the rabbinic requirement to observe Purim does not create an obligation to experience inner joy, the outward expressions may be similar. However, even this comparison appears to fail, as regarding the festive Purim meal, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Megilla Ve-Chanuka* 2:15) writes:

What is the nature of our obligation for this feast? A person should eat meat and prepare as attractive a feast as his means permit. He should drink wine until he becomes intoxicated and falls asleep in his intoxication.

The festive meal of Purim stands in sharp contrast to the Yom Tov meal, which the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yom Tov* 6:20) describes a follows:

When one eats and drinks on a festival, he should not unduly indulge in wine, merriment and frivolity, thinking that the more anyone partakes of this the more he observes a religious celebration. Drunkenness, jesting, and levity are not rejoicing but madness and folly, and we are not charged to indulge in madness and folly, but in the kind of rejoicing that finds expression in the worship of the Creator of all things, as it is written: "Because you have not served the Lord your God with joy and with a glad heart for all your abundance…" ([*Devarim* 28:47](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Deuteronomy.28.47)). This proves that one should worship with joy, while it is impossible to serve God by jesting, frivolity, or drunkenness.

The Rambam even describes how guards were placed through the community to ensure that the festivities remained appropriate.

Therefore, it appears that the festive Purim meal differs from the fulfillment of *simchat Yom Tov*. The festive Purim meal is a *mishteh* unique to Purim. If so, what is the nature of *simchat Purim*?

**A New Understanding of *Simchat Purim* and *Simchat Yom Tov***

We mentioned above that while Purim was apparently intended to be a Yom Tov of sorts, Mordekhai's letter omits the reference to “*yom tov*,” yet adds the commandment of *matanot la-evyonim*. How are we to understand this transition?

In addition to the festive meal of *shalmei simcha* and the personal joy (*simcha she-balev*) of Yom Tov, there is another aspect of *simchat Yom Tov*. The Torah (*Devarim* 16:14) describes that happiness of Yom Tov as follows:

You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities.

The biblical mitzva of *simchat Yom Tov* entails, by definition, sharing one’s good fortune with those less fortunate. Similarly, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Yom* *Tov* 6:18) writes:

While eating and drinking, one must feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor unfortunates. Anyone who locks the doors of his courtyard and eats and drinks along with his wife and children, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the desperate, does not observe a religious celebration but indulges in the celebration of his stomach.

Here too, the Rambam notes that the joy of Yom Tov must be shared with the "stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor unfortunates."

This expression of *simchat Yom Tov* is also described in *Sefer* *Nechemia* (ch. 8), which describes how, on Rosh Hashana, Ezra reads the Torah to the people, who after a long exile had forgotten the Torah. After hearing the words of the Torah, the people began to weep. Nechemia (8:9-10) turns to the people and says:

This day is holy to the Lord your God: you must not mourn or weep … Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared, for the day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad, for your rejoicing in the Lord is the source of your strength.

Nechemia tells them they must rejoice and Yom Tov, and indeed, "all the people went to eat and drink and send portions and make great merriment, for they understood the things they were told" (ibid. 12). Interestingly, the people are told to "send portions to whoever has nothing prepared." In other words, Nechemia also describes sharing one's good fortune as an integral part of *simchat yom Tov*.

Therefore, we might suggest that although Purim is not a Yom Tov with regards to the first two types of *simcha*, the *simchat Purim* was modeled after this third type of *simchat Yom Tov*, i.e., sharing with those who do not have. Indeed, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Megilla* 2:17) writes:

It is preferable for a person to be generous with his gifts to the poor rather than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to his friends, as there is no greater and more glorious joy than to cause the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts to rejoice. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these miserable individuals is similar to the Divine Presence, as it is stated: “To revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the downtrodden” (*Yishayahu* 57:15).

The Rambam apparently maintains that the *simcḥat Purim* is manifest primarily through sharing one’s meal with others.

Based on this, we can return to our original questions and offer a new insight. Purim has two identities: It is a unique holiday, characterized by a *mishteh* and *mishloach manot*. However, Purim is also a type of Yom Tov. While originally, Purim was meant to be a day of rest, characterized by the type of *simcha* commonly observed on Yom Tov, Mordekhai realized that this model of Yom Tov was not practical. Nevertheless, Purim could still imitate other aspects of Yom Tov. It too is modeled after Yom Tov, a day of *simcha* – the type of joy shared with those less fortunate – and that is why Mordekhai added to observance of *matanot la-evyonim*.

Thus, a somewhat complex picture of Purim emerges. Purim is marked by a *mishteh* and by sending portions to other Jews in order to increase national unity. In addition, it is also a Yom Tov upon which we rejoice by distributing *matanot la-evyonim*, in the spirit of the biblical mitzva of *simcha*, which includes rejoicing with those less fortunate.