The Wildness of Purim

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

Rava said: "A person must drink on Purim until he cannot distinguish between cursed Haman and blessed Mordechai."

Rabba and R. Zeira held a Purim feast together. They became intoxicated. Rabba arose and slaughtered R. Zeira. The next day, he asked for mercy and R. Zeira was revived.

The following year, Rabba said to him: "Let the master come and we will make a Purim feast together." R. Zeira answered: "A miracle does not happen every time." (*Megilla* 7b)

Before I begin to comment on the humorous story at the end of this gemara, I must mention the possibility that it is a halakhic text and not only an aggadic addition. A major debate exists as to the extent of the obligation to drink on Purim. Some authorities understand that a person should truly become drunk. Of course, even those authorities would condemn drunkenness that leads to immoral and improper behavior. The Rema (*Orach Chayyim* 695:2) recommended that one drink enough to become tired, thus creating a situation in which one cannot distinguish between blessed Mordechai and cursed Haman. The Ba'al ha-Ma'or (on Rif 3b) understands that the whole point of the Rabba / R. Zeira episode is to reject the rule that one should drink on Purim. The gemara deliberately places this story after the halakhic discussion of the obligation to become drunk, in order to argue that the *halakha* could not obligate something with such destructive potential.

On an aggadic level, what does this story illustrate? Maharsha refuses to take this tale at face value. It simply cannot be true that Rabba killed his colleague. Instead, Maharsha suggests that Purim's wild merriment led to a situation in which R. Zeira drank too much and became seriously ill. Rabba prayed for him and he was restored to health. Even if we accept this reading, the story still illustrates the perils of alcohol, as it caused a dangerous health issue.

R. Yitzchak Hutner raises a different possibility in his *Pachad Yitzchak* (Purim, 32). He begins with the midrashic idea that at Sinai, every word of God caused the souls of the people to depart, until eventually their souls came back and the people were revived. For R. Hutner, this conveys something about the experience of receiving the Torah. In its ideal form, *kabbalat ha-Torah* serves as a transformative experience, which renders the recipient other than he or she was previously. The midrash about souls departing and returning conveys the sense of renewal brought about by the Torah.

The gemara (*Shabbat* 88a) famously views Purim as a second accepting of the Torah, done freely without the element of coercion that was present at Sinai. If so, Purim should also include this element of vitality and renewal. The death and return to life of R. Zeira indicates this novel identity achieved through the fresh acceptance of Torah in a successful Purim.

I admit that Rav Hutner may intend this interpretation more as a good homily than as the simple reading of this story. He explicitly states that he will interpret this story differently today than he does the rest of the year. In any case, let us work with his interpretation and raise a question that he does not mention. According to Rav Hutner's reading, why does R. Zeira express reluctance to come back to Rabba's party the following year?

Perhaps this kind of identity-altering experience also includes an intimidating element. Change frightens us and it might seem safer to maintain one's current Torah personality, especially if it already incorporates much of worth. If so, this story challenges us not to fear the attempt to make this holiday an acceptance of Torah with far-reaching implications for religious growth. Realizing the inner meaning of this holiday depends much more on authenticity and inwardness than on the quantity one drinks. Happy Purim!