Sobering Guidance for Purim—and Every Day

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The Talmud (Megillah 7b) quotes the opinion of Rava that a person must become drunk on Purim so as not to be able to tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai.” That is pretty drunk!

But the same passage goes on to report that Rabba and Rav Zeira became drunk on Purim, so much so that Rabba slaughtered Rav Zeira with a knife. The latter was revived only by a miracle. When Rabba invited Rav Zeira to a Purim celebration the following year, Rav Zeira wisely declined.

Some people read this passage but stop right after Rava’s opinion that one must become drunk on Purim. Thus, in some circles people really think it is a mitzvah to get drunk on Purim. This leads to foolish and dangerous behavior, sometimes actually resulting in loss of life.

Others, quite correctly, read the entire passage; they recognize that the anecdote about Rabba and Rav Zeira is a blatant refutation of the opinion of Rava. These two rabbis indeed became drunk, but this led to terrible consequences. The Talmud’s lesson is: don’t get drunk, don’t lose control of yourself, terrible things can happen if you become intoxicated.

Drunkenness is a shameful state into which no one should ever fall. Maimonides (Hilkhot De’ot 5:3) states: “One who becomes intoxicated is a sinner and is despicable, and loses his wisdom. If he [a wise person] becomes drunk in the presence of common folk, he has thereby desecrated the Name.” In his section on the Laws of Holiday Rest (6:20), Maimonides rules: “When one eats, drinks and celebrates on a festival, he should not allow himself to become overly drawn to drinking wine, amusement and silliness…for drunkenness and excessive amusement and silliness are not rejoicing; they are frivolity and foolishness.”

If one has become intoxicated, it is forbidden to pray or to render a halakhic decision. Not only does drunkenness impair one’s judgment, it demeans a person in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God.

Some synagogues allow (and seem to encourage) the drinking of alcoholic beverages during services and/or immediately after services. These “Kiddush Clubs” generally convene when the Haftarah is about to be read in synagogue. Members of the “Club” walk out on the words of the prophets, and remain outside during the rabbis’ sermons: and they drink! They later return to services for the Musaf, often reeking from the odor of whiskey. The website of a large Orthodox synagogue actually solicits sponsorships for scotch and arak, as if it is perfectly proper for synagogues to be featuring alcoholic drinks...and even to raise money this way. It seems that "kedushah" is removed from the sanctity of the synagogue so that members can imbibe at "Kiddush Clubs."

In some circles, the “Kiddush Club” concept has apparently reached new heights. People are offered a wide variety of alcoholic beverages. They compare one brand with another; they become proficient in the various blends, and they know which are the most expensive. This is a kind of hedonism and self-indulgence which shouldn’t take place anywhere, let alone in a synagogue setting.

It is right and proper for synagogues to sponsor Kiddush after services each week. This gives congregants an opportunity to socialize after the prayers have concluded. It builds a feeling of friendship and community. It offers a communal Shabbat experience for those who may be alone, or who don’t know much about Shabbat observance. It’s fine if congregants take a small drink of wine or a sip of scotch or raki. But it really is not fine if people imbibe too much, or if they pay too much attention to analyzing and discussing the qualities and ages of various alcoholic beverages.

We should strive to be connoisseurs of the spirit, not connoisseurs of the spirits.

I wish you a happy, safe and sober Purim—and a happy, safe and dignified life.

Angel for Shabbat