Drunkenness, Politics, Pessah and the Omer: Rabbi Marc Angel Responds to Questions from the Jewish Press

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Is it appropriate for just anyone to get drunk on Purim?

The Talmud (Megillah 7b) quotes Rava's opinion that one must become drunk on Purim so as to be unable to tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai." But the same passage goes on to report that Rabba and Rav Zeira became so drunk on Purim 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. Others correctly read the entire passage and recognize that the anecdote is a blatant refutation of Rava. The Talmud's lesson is: don't get drunk; terrible things can happen if you become intoxicated.

Drunkenness is a shameful state. 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."

Not only does drunkenness impair one's judgment, it demeans a person in the eyes of others and in the eyes of God. Drunkenness is an affront to one's own

dignity and an affront to the ideals of Torah.

Is Torah-true Judaism inherently aligned with conservative politics, liberal politics, a combination, or neither -- or is this the wrong way to think about the Torah?

Torah-true Judaism is inherently aligned with policies that foster love of God, respect for fellow human beings, and the wellbeing of society as a whole. We strive for a world of honesty, justice, peace, a world in which the ideals of our prophets can be realized.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880-1953), late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote of our responsibility for yishuvo shel olam, the proper functioning of a moral society. Judaism demands that its adherents live ethical and upright lives. Religious Jews must feel troubled by any injustice in society and must strive to defend and protect the oppressed. Striving to create a harmonious society is not merely a reflection of social idealism; it is a religious mandate.

Sometimes Torah values are more aligned with conservative politics, and sometimes they are more aligned with liberal politics. Our real concern isn't with political labels, but with the over-arching values that conduce to a more righteous society.

Although our concerns need to relate to society in general, we can't ignore issues that specifically impinge on Jewish life and on the State of Israel. If conservatives or liberals promote policies that are detrimental to our physical and spiritual welfare, we obviously must oppose them. If they advance bills that weaken or endanger Israel, we have the right and responsibility to object. Our universal commitment to society does not negate our particular commitment to our own wellbeing.

In spite of the many problems Torah-true Jews face, we are optimists. We believe, with the prophet Amos (8:11), that righteousness will prevail: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine in the land; not a famine for food nor a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the Lord." Amen, Kein Yehi Ratson!!

Is it proper to eat kosher l'Pesach rolls, pasta, cakes, pizza and "bread" on Pesach?

It’s best to leave it up to people to decide for themselves what they do or don’t want to eat on Pessah, as long as all the ingredients are kasher for Pessah. For those who want to add stringencies to the already stringent rules of Pessah, that’s their business. But no one should stand in judgment of others who choose not to add unnecessary stringencies. We should each worry about what’s on our own plates, not on what’s on the plates of others.

Moadim leSimha.

Is it proper to listen to a cappella music during Sefiras Ha'Omer?

The real question is: why would it not be proper to listen to such music during the Sefirah period? Although the Talmud (Yevamot 62b) reports a tradition that 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died between Pessah and Lag L’Omer, no formal mourning prohibitions are indicated for this period. Sefirah mourning practices are first reported in a Gaonic collection, Sha’arei Teshuva 278. The Shulhan Arukh (O.H. 493: 1-2) refers to the customs of restricting weddings and haircuts, but mentions no prohibition relating to music.

It seems that restrictions relating to music only developed in the Middle Ages, and not consistently throughout the Jewish world. In recent centuries, various stringencies have been added including the limitation of dancing, music, and even recorded music. Some now also wish to prohibit a cappella music. These prohibitions do not go back to the Talmud, Rambam or Shulhan Arukh. If people wish to adopt these stringencies, or if they are part of communities that consider these stringencies as obligatory minhagim, then that is their right.

But there is no fundamental halakhic prohibition to listening to music, let alone a cappella music, unless one has adopted this stringency as a minhag; or unless one follows posekim who rule stringently on this.