

Yearning for Brotherhood by Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt

„לעשות אותם ימי משתה ושמחה ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות
לאביונים”

To make them (Purim) days of festive meals and joy and the sending of portions to one another and gifts to the poor.” (Meg. Esther 9:22)

This aspect of the Purim celebration is somewhat unusual. We understand readily in the festive meal and the joy. But what prompted the sending of food to friends and gifts to the poor. They are wonderful practices anyway but what is the special Association with Purim. One might argue that the key to the salvation of Purim was Jewish brotherliness particularly the loyalty of Mordecai and Esther. In a moment of crises, these two beautiful Jewish personalities did not abandon their people or hide behind their privileged position. They risked their power, their very lives for the glory and the safety of the Jewish people. Alas, only too often do we come across members of our people who “have made it” in the non-Jewish world and who conveniently forget their “roots,” their people and its needy and troubled.

Reb Simche Sissel of Kelm, one of the great masters of the Mussar movement saw in this demonstrative brotherliness an antidote to the cruelty and callousness of Haman. He refers to the Nazarite who totally abstains from wine. According to our sages, he witnessed the immorality of the Sote, the wayward women, which is often the result of drink and levity and he reacts by becoming a Nazarite.

Reb Simche Sissel raises the questions—obviously the Nazarite is appalled by the behavior of the Sote, obviously he is a pious and modest man. What is he worried about? Why should he become so distrustful of himself that he must abstain from wine completely? The answer is, according to Reb Simche Sissel, laxity, drunkenness, immorality when rampant, make an impact on

the overall society. Even the pious feel weakened and threatened and need additional fortification to immune themselves against the corrosive influence. When a Haman, when insensitivity and cruelty hold sway, he concludes even the righteous and the kind need that little extra, that strong demonstration of friendliness, brotherliness and concern.

In a similar vein, one may see the rabbinic ruling מחייב אדם לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי

A person must imbibe on Purim to the point where he does not know the difference between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordechai.’ (Bab. Tal. Megillah 7A)

Purim brings out in us to the fullest, the ‘friend vs. foe’ syndrome. It advocates intensely the love and admiration of our own heroes and simultaneously evokes the greatest anger, hatred and contempt for our most vicious and persistent enemies, the Amalekites of whom Haman was a descendant. Whether we like it or not, these are the realities of life. We always had to fight for survival and we always faced cruel enemies. We are experiencing it today. We want peace, we want brotherhood, but we confront the implacable hatred of most of the Arab world. We must cherish our very few friends and maintain our emotional and physical readiness vis a vis our enemies. On the other hand, we must forever be mindful that ultimately we are not a warrior nation, we are not a culture of hatred, of aggression. Our dream is one of one humanity living in brotherhood under our ‘Father in Heaven.’

Possibly, therefore, the ‘ad lo yoda’ is not a ‘sheur’ a measurement in how much one must drink on Purim but rather the reverse. We must drink until we reach a point when the distinction between friend and foe is temporarily erased, when we only love, when we cherish the thought, even if it is illusionary at this point, that there is indeed one mankind with the hope and prayer that all strife and hatred be banished from the surface of the earth.