PURIM: Alcohol vs. Chesed

DRINKING IN MODERATION

An important mitsva that we celebrate on the day of Purim is the mishte, the celebratory meal of Purim. Today, Tuesday, March 7th, in the mid-afternoon, we will participate in a festive meal or se'udat Purim. At this banquet, we sing, rejoice, and convey our gratitude to Hashem for saving us from Haman's decree. It is customary to serve wine at this banquet (MT Megilla 2:15) and thus "toast" for our salvation. Consuming a little more alcohol than usual is OK, but we still must drink in moderation. Thus, the Rosh (1250-1320) wrote in his book "Orchot Hayim," "[Although alcohol is served during the Purim banquet], we should not get drunk because getting drunk is a serious prohibition. In reality, there is no greater transgression since drunkenness leads a person to act promiscuously and could even cause a person [involuntarily] to kill another person (I'm thinking of fatal car accidents that are sometimes the result of drunkenness. Y.B) or commit other [serious] similar transgressions."

DR. MAIMONIDES EXPLAINS DRUNKNESS

Maimonides (1135-1204) clarifies that the measure of the consumption of alcohol on Purim is □□□□□□ □□□□□ "until one feels drowsy from the effects of alcohol." Alcohol in moderation, makes one feel numb and tipsy, as it is a muscle relaxant with sedative effects. Maimonides clarifies in a different context that drinking alcohol in excess, as a way to stimulate drunkenness, is inappropriate behavior, and its effects can cause the most serious sin in Judaism: "Hilul Hashem" (desecration of the name of God). In Mishne Tora De'ot 5: 2, he writes, "Kol hamishtaker…getting drunk is a sin and is deplorable and makes a person lose his wisdom. And if [a Torah scholar] gets drunk in front of other people ('am ha'arets), he has desecrated the name of God (□□□ □□ □□□)."

HAPPINESS AS A RESULT OF CHESED

We, the Jewish people, should feel that we are the most privileged people in the world for having been chosen by Hashem and for having the opportunity to be closer to Him by studying His Tora and doing His will. On Purim, we also celebrate that Hashem, fulfilling His promise that He will never let the Jewish people disappear, delivered us from great danger. Our happiness must come from this awareness, not from alcohol. But what if we are not yet on that spiritual/intellectual level and need some external stimulus to be happier? What can we do to stimulate our joy on Purim? Maimonides explains that one's happiness increases when we do something for others or share what we have with those who have less. In MT Megila 2:17, he clarifies how we can become happier on Purim: "There is no greater and more sincere happiness than making the needy, the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners happy. [Because] the person who helps other people feels the happiness of imitating the actions of Hashem [middame bashekhina] as it is written, "because Hashem…revives the spirit of the poor and the heart of the oppressed" (Yesha'ayahu 57:15).

WARNING

Purim should not be used as an excuse to drink excessively, declares Rabbi Weinreb, a leader of orthodoxy in the United States. "These days, in which many of our young people are prone to experimenting with drugs or alcohol, we must warn against the dangers of alcohol abuse, especially on Purim… We are not commanded to get drunk and lose our heads; rather, we are asked to be happy in a way that increases our gratitude and love to HaShem, in gratitude for the miracles He performed for all of us."