



The Real Joy of Purim

On a July day in 1518, Mrs. Trof-fea went out into the streets of Strasbourg and began to dance. She danced for six days straight. In those six days, 34 people contracted her ‘fever’ and joined the ongoing dance. Within a month, there were hundreds of dancers on the streets of the country who had been dancing for days on end. To this day, no full explanation has been found for that dance fever. Some of the dancers writhed in pain and begged for mercy but could not stop dancing. Some explain the incident as an outbreak of mass hysteria. Many died from heart attacks, strokes or exhaustion.

A less fatal case occurred in Tanzania in 1962. Three girls started laughing at school and could not stop. Most of the boarding school students were infected with the raging laughter. The principal was forced to close the school and send the students home. The result was that the residents of the nearby villages were also infected with the laughter epidemic. 14 schools in the area were closed for extended periods, and mass laughter ceased only after a year and a half. When the three original laughers were asked what was so funny to begin with, they were unable to answer.

Dancing and laughter are not always joyous activities. Sometimes they are just a forced expression of social dynamics. It is imperative to remember this, especially during the month of Adar.

A few years ago, Israeli high school *yeshiva* students uploaded an offensive video as a promo for the upcoming Purim celebrations. Their Principal responded appropriately and canceled the celebrations. My wife asked me if, in my opinion, the punishment was not excessive. I told her I didn’t think it was excessive at all. On the contrary. In my opinion, all the revelry of Adar should be cancelled in the *yeshivas*, even in institutions where the students know better than to publicize vulgar videos.

Yes, it is accepted in our tradition that on one day a year, for a few hours, the restraints are lifted a little. But even then it’s not good to exaggerate. The Gemara tells of a Sage who drank too much, and in his drunkenness, killed another Sage (then prayed for him and brought him back to life). The Nimukei Yosef writes that a person can drink on Purim, but “should not go crazy in his drunkenness and be drawn to jest and frivolity.”

Despite this, many are very stringent about drunkenly letting go on Purim. This custom has been dressed in a cover of ideology. As if drunkenness and letting loose reveal one’s inner holiness. This is like saying we need to peel away a person’s skin to reveal his inner organs. Just as the skin is part of the body, not just a shell, self-control and restraint are intrinsic parts of ourselves. When we abandon self-control, we are less human, not more.

Still, when we drink and behave in moderation, this custom has taste and meaning, within the boundaries of Purim.

Sadly, the revelry of Adar in Israeli *yeshiva* high schools often crosses the boundaries of halacha and of respectfulness, and it is difficult to find any educational value in such festivities. Tremendous effort and enormous resources are wasted on grandiose celebrations, which are sometimes replete with vanity and insults. Some teachers are hesitant to intervene, for fear they will just be ridiculed.

The joy of youth is good and healthy. But it is good and healthy in Adar in the same framework and in the same context in which it is good in Cheshvan or Iyar. This is how the Rambam described the priorities of Purim: “It is better for a person to increase the gifts for the poor than to add to his meal and send *mishloach manot*, for there is no greater and more glorious joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, orphaned, widowed and converts.” This is the joy the Rambam believed in: caring for others and actively demonstrating responsibility for the community.

Rabbi Chaim Navon is a renowned author and educator.