



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5771 Masks and Flasks, Love and Light By Rabbi Sharon Brous

When I finally got back to my Upper West Side apartment at the end of the day the planes hit the World Trade Center and the world changed forever, there was a raging party at the Underground, a bar on my corner. I heard the pounding bass from almost a block away, and as I got closer I saw windows trembling and drunk men and women pouring into the street shouting “Carpe Diem!” Having spent the day counseling an endless stream of distraught people who walked into the synagogue desperate for a sense of stability, a way to help and answers to unanswerable questions, I was shaken by the cognitive dissonance between catastrophe and celebration.

The sudden realization of the capriciousness of life leads some to search for meaning and comfort among the faithful, while others surrender to the meaninglessness—determined to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.

Purim, considered by some the most electrifying day of the Jewish year, instructs us to do both. For one day, we come face to face with the chilling reality that no matter how hard we work to control our lives, how diligently we plan and prepare, life is dramatically and inescapably unpredictable. “Life changes fast,” Joan Didion writes. “Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” Or, in the language of the *megillah*, on a whim the Jews of Shushan saw their whole world turn upside down—“grief turned into joy, a day of mourning into a day of celebration.”¹

The reversibility of fortune, the capriciousness of life, is a message Purim shares with Yom Kippur. Known in the Talmud as *yom k'purim*, “a day like Purim,” Yom Kippur compels us to reflect on the unavoidable uncertainty of our lives. But on Yom Kippur we dive into this terrifying reality with austerity, reflection and spiritual wakefulness, whereas on Purim we respond by celebrating, imbibing and masquerading.

Our Rabbis teach that on Purim we are to ply ourselves with wine, drinking *ad d'lo yada*—until we can no longer tell the difference between “Cursed be Haman” and “Blessed be Mordecai.”² We wear costumes that simultaneously mask who we are and reveal the part of ourselves we work all year to hide. We eat, drink, dance and laugh in the face of our darkest fears—the possibility that human life and human history can change on a dime, that everything we know to be true could be a farce, that everything we love might disappear in an instant, that there is more chaos than order in the world. It is an exercise in radical spiritual destabilization. And the response is the closest Jews come to *carpe diem*—one day a year when our otherwise exacting tradition understands that sometimes drunken revelry is the only reasonable response to desperate vulnerability.

Yet Purim is more than a day of rowdy gluttony. It also dictates acts of generosity and community: “Make them days of feasting and gladness and of *mishloah manot* (sending portions of food) one to another, and *matanot l'evyonim* (gifts to the poor).”³ We embrace the confusion and moral ambiguity of Purim with a renewed commitment to social transformation, responding to the mess of life by giving our family and friends sweet gifts and by giving generously

¹ Megillat Esther 9:22.

² Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7a.

³ Megillat Esther 9:22.

to the poor. In other words, the only way to make sense of the absurd randomness of life and the social order is to honor the loving relationships that sustain us and work to address the imbalance of fortunes that leaves some with abundance and others with nothing. *Mishloah manot* and *matanot l'evyonim* come to reinforce that while we cannot control the world, we *can* control the way we live in it.

Remarkably, we learn regarding *matanot l'evyonim* that, "We [should not be] exceedingly precautious with money on Purim. Rather, we give to *everyone* who puts out a hand."⁴ Today is not the day for discernment or judgment. Give, regardless of what you fear he might do with the money. Give, not because you have determined that she deserves, but because she has asked.

This *mitzvah* acknowledges our lack of control over our destinies: Give generously today, for tomorrow it could be *you* begging for a little spare change. Give because you know in your heart that it is only an accident of history that you are here and the poor are there. Give because it would be intellectually and morally corrupt to tell the story of our people's miraculous triumph, to celebrate history's reversibility, without sharing our bounty with those who sit now on the other side of fortune.

So Purim is simultaneously an acknowledgment of life's meaninglessness and unpredictability *and* a wholehearted last-ditch effort to pierce the chaos and shatter the darkness. "There is no greater or more wonderful joy," says the Mishnah Berurah, "than to make happy the heart of a poor person, an orphan or a widow. This is how we become God-like."⁵ Even from the heart of darkness, we refuse to cede agency. We make up for God's absence in the Purim narrative by redoubling our capacity for God-like living in our own. We respond to the threat of emptiness by pouring more kindness and sweetness into the world.

May it be a day of masks and flasks and love and light for you. *Chag Purim Sameach.*



Sharon Brous is the founding rabbi of IKAR (www.ikar-la.org), a spiritual community dedicated to reanimating Jewish life through soulful religious practice that is rooted in a deep commitment to social justice. She was ordained by JTS and received a Master's Degree in Human Rights from Columbia University. Brous has been listed among the Forward's 50 most influential American Jews and Newsweek's leading rabbis. She served as a Rabbinic Fellow at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in NYC, sits on the faculty of REBOOT and the board of Rabbis for Human Rights, the rabbinic advisory board of AJWS and the Task Force to Advance Multireligious Collaboration on Global Poverty.

For more information, educational resources and the latest ways to take action:

www.ajws.org

45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018

212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/cvc.

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.

⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 694:3.

⁵ Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chayim 694:3.