



From Eden to Purim: *Simcha Shel Mitzvha*

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The Talmud asks: “*Why did the Jews of that generation deserve extermination? Because they derived pleasure [מנוה] from the feast of that wicked one [Achashverosh].*” [TB Megila 12a]

The Talmud doesn’t say “because they ate” – this the Jews could justify by claiming they were subject to royal decree and would risk their lives by refusing to attend the feast. Rather their sin was that they enjoyed the banquet and partook of it with gusto. [Pirchei L’vanon]

“Everything follows after the head” [TB Eruvin 41a] which, in our case, means Adam and Chava’s Edenic odyssey. They began in paradise, made a bad choice and got bounced from their heavenly abode. The entire course of human history is our multi-millennial journey of return.

“We are stardust. We are golden. And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”¹

To succeed in our mission we must become connoisseurs of pleasure. That was our failing, and it remains our front of tikun.

R. Shlomo Elyashuv (the Leshem) explains that the command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge included three prohibitions:² 1) Don’t eat from it, literally. 2) Don’t have relations before Shabbat (for eating is a euphemism for sexuality in the Torah). 3) Don’t try to fathom the forbidden realms (because you are what you eat, intellectually as well.) All three of these prohibitions were temporary. Had Adam and Chava managed to refrain, the “muscles” they would have developed from their effort, plus the maturity gained automatically with time, along with the spiritual updraft of Shabbat—all these tikunim would have enlightened them to the point that they could “eat” that fruit and not be shattered by its intense burst of consciousness.

Instead, says the Leshem, they ate before they could hold the light that was unleashed by their deed. It blew them away, literally. They shattered, collapsed and tumbled into the lower worlds.

What is it about these three activities (eating, sexuality and study) that links them to the mysterious Tree of Knowledge? The answer is that they are all deeds that (when conducted according to *halacha*) become mitzvot that *both* serve G-d *and* pleasure the person. This built-in mutuality of benefit makes it challenging to do them with pure intent because there’s always an element of self-interest lurking in the wings.

Most mitzvot are the opposite. The act itself is dry, neutral and, from the ego’s perspective, burdensome. The animal soul must spend its hard-earned time, energy and life juice on something that brings no immediate gratification. Consequently, whatever pleasure a person does derive from its performance is sure to be *simcha shel mitzvah* (in one form or another).³ And that’s what marks a connoisseur of pleasure—the capacity to take quiet delight from just doing good. The road to Gan Eden tracks our progress in this regard.

This PurimBurst is lovingly dedicated by Rivka Zahler-Stauber to her grandmother **Miriam bat Yerachmiel zts”l** whose yahrtzeit is on Shushan Purim. And her mother **Toiba bat Usher zts”l** whose yahrtzeit is 28 of Adar. Both are Holocaust survivors, true *tsadikot*, who rebuilt their lives here in Israel and never lost their faith in Hashem.

Every mitzvah pulls a mini burst of *God Presence*—aka, *Ohr Ein Sof*—down into the world and into the soul of the one who’s done the deed.⁴ But we must cultivate the taste buds to enjoy this rarified pleasure. Like a dog whistle that’s inaudible to human ears, we can be equally oblivious to the gift of sweet light that accompanies a mitzvah. The whole point of a spiritual path is to guide us (and goad us) to become masters of pleasure—to expand our capacity to “taste” the light that produces the *simcha* that accompanies a mitzvah. The more our pleasure buds are tuned to that frequency, the further we are along the path and the more pleasure we take in the simple day-to-dayness of life.

These three mitzvot (eating, sexuality and study) pose a challenge in this regard. They bring such visceral enjoyment to the animal soul (aka, ego) that we lose touch with the more subtle pleasure of *simcha shel mitzvah* that is also present.⁵ The problem is not our pleasure-taking. HaShem wants us to enjoy the delights of life.⁶ The problem is that we grab the gift but leave the Giver behind. Instead of orienting toward the expansive burst of *Presence* released by that mitzvah, we fixate on the relish and constrict instead. Parents place a drop of honey on their child’s first Primer and the child eagerly laps it up. But the message is that this honey marks a spot in the universe that conceals a lifetime’s supply of even sweeter *oneg* when the child begins to wonder: “What is the source of this sweetness? Who is behind it all?”⁷ Haman, as archetype, represents that force inside the psyche that laps up the honey but never wonders, “Who has provided these delights...Who do I thank for this pleasure?”

Where’s the hint to Haman in the Torah? In the verse [from the passage where HaShem rebukes Adam and Chava for eating from the Tree of Knowledge]: “Did you eat of the tree from which [*ha'min*] I commanded you not to eat?”^[Gen. 3:11]⁸

The Megilla opens with its equivalent of the Genesis story where the Jews, like Adam and Chava, ate from their equivalent of the “Tree of Knowledge” (i.e., the king’s decadent banquet with the Temple’s sacred vessels exploited for secular use). Again, the issue was not their attendance, nor even their consumption. The transgression was in the pleasure they took from the event despite its dishonoring of the Temple and the Torah and the values they hold dear. A connoisseur of pleasure takes no delight in such bitter fare.

The Megilla then recounts the life-threatening consequences of their wrong-eating—and the teshuva they ultimately did. That teshuva is where the path of Genesis and the path of Purim diverge. In Genesis, Adam blames Chava; Chava blames the serpent and no one ever really comes clean. In Purim the opposite is true.

Mordecai and Esther devise a plan of collective and individual teshuva that was so potent, it turned the story completely around.⁹

- *They call for a collective fast.* Since it was the pleasure taken from unholy eating that started the problem, so that’s where the *tikun* begins.
- *They don sackcloth and shed tears.* For teshuva to succeed in the turnabout that is its goal—that it draw forgiveness and suspend all consequences—the petitioners must demonstrate genuine remorse for their wrongdoing.
- *They unified the nation.* Unlike Adam who blamed Chava, Esther insisted that Mordecai do his own (albeit subtle) teshuva in common cause with the masses.¹⁰ Mordecai’s embrace of the people, through his admission of related (though infinitely more subtle) failings, fused the nation into a unity greater than the sum of its parts.¹¹

- *Esther*—through her preparatory meditations and life-risking visit to the King—draws down the higher lights of *tikun*, which are actually the *simcha shel mitzvah* lights of their massive and potent teshuva. That is the power, proof and definition of teshuva—it brings its initiates to an even higher place than they could reach before their fall.

In this way, Esther and Mordecai orchestrated a teshuva that not only reversed the damage of *their generation's* unholy eating but contributed to our multi-millennial *tikun* of collective wrong-eating when we, as sparks of Adam and Chava, ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

Their Purim teshuva was so potent that we celebrate it with an inebriated feast, as if to say that now, post-Purim, we have nothing to fear, for our soul has been welded to its root (the place where Israel, Torah and *simcha shel mitzvah* are one).¹² Now, post-Purim, we cannot (permanently) lose our grip on *simcha shel mitzvah*, even when we're tipsy. Look, here we are, unable to distinguish between "blessing Mordecai" and "cursing Haman"...and yet that seemingly-hedonistic state IS the mitzvah—IT IS the channel through which we access holy *simcha* on this day. The message is that even when we are farthest away we remain firmly plugged in.

But there is a deeper mystery here as well. Kabbala informs us that these lights that Esther pulled down (through her Purim exploit) come from the most hidden, inner chamber of Divinity, called RaDL"A (*Reisha D'Lo AtYada*), the *Unknowable Head*. This is where the lights of *simcha shel mitzvah* are stored, says the Leshem.¹³

It is these exalted RaDL"A lights that produce the consciousness that we strive for on Purim—the consciousness of "until you *don't know*"—that is an actual mitzvah on this crazy-wild-silly-holiest-of-days:

One is obligated to become inebriated on Purim...until you *don't know* the difference between blessing Mordecai and cursing Haman. [*Shulchan Aruch* 695:2, and *Mishna Brura* there]

It is this RaDL"A-like consciousness that distinguishes a connoisseur of pleasure, for its enlightened "not knowing..." pulls down the *higher knowing* that is a pleasure beyond all earthly delights.¹⁴ RaDL"A is the most profound state of *devekut* possible, says kabbala, and it is only available to the masses on Purim when the mitzvah of "until you *don't know*" clicks in.

On Purim the Jews officially accepted their Oral Torah—the rabbinic (and lay) interpretations that comprise the bulk of our obligations and wisdom-teachings today. In its broadest sense the Oral Torah is the accumulation of creative insights pressed from the hearts of Jews striving to live with integrity to the truths they absorbed at Sinai. The Oral Torah reveals itself through *ruach hakodesh* (as opposed to prophesy). The Talmud declares that "wisdom (synonymous here with *ruach hakodesh*) is actually superior to prophesy."¹⁵ One reason is that *chokmah* (as opposed to prophesy) is כח מה¹⁶ (literally, the power of *what*) – the revelation that comes from formulating the right question. It too begins with a "not knowing" that pulls down its higher "knowing" called *ruach hakodesh*.

Another reason is that *ruach hakodesh* is an active partnership between us and HaShem. The more fully ourselves we become the more Divine inspiration we receive. Prophets suppress their personality, *chakhamim* must develop theirs.

When a person engages in the creative endeavor called Oral Torah, they both embrace and are embraced by the Infinite *One*.¹⁷ This face-to-face mutuality of encounter called “union of kisses, breath to breath,” is pure delight for a connoisseur of pleasure.¹⁸

Our Purim celebrations reverberate back to Gan Eden and prepare us to cross that last frontier—to enjoy the world’s delights while holding fast to the *simcha shel mitzvah* that is their main attraction. We go to the gym to build our biceps and we celebrate Purim to hone our pleasure-buds. The teshuva of Purim pushed us beyond our starting point (as teshuva

From Eden to Purim					
EDEN—Gen. 2:17	Don't eat from the	Tree (reputed to be grapes/wine)	of KNOWLEDGE of	Good	and Evil
PURIM—SA 695:2	Do Drink	wine	until you DON'T KNOW the difference between	blessing Mordecai (i.e., good)	and cursing Haman (i.e., evil)

must). It initiated us into the mystery of “not knowing,” that is a prerequisite for *Ruach Hakodesh* that is the channel of Oral Torah that is the key to rectified pleasure that is the tikun of the *Eitz HaDaat* (Tree of Knowledge).

Let it be that on this holy Purim wine-fest—when the lights of RaDL”A stream through the world—that we celebrate our *knowing-that-we-don't-know* and find our true joy there. And may this blast of holy simcha make it loud and clear that we must tune our taste-buds to the *Presence* hidden there. Connoisseurs of pleasure, that must be our goal, to taste the mitzvah’s sweet, sweet light which, on Purim, means...to rock n’ roll.

¹ המיבין יבין

² ספר לשם שבו ואחלמה – הדרוש עץ הדעת – סימן ג'

³ R. Tsadok explains that *mitzvot bein adam l'chavero* have a foot in both worlds. There is satisfaction (*perot*) from the fellowship they promote, though their main reward (*keren*) is in the afterlife (as with all mitzvot). Yet, their *perot* in this world are more subtle and are themselves, a kind of *simcha shel mitzvah*. *Tsidkat HaTsadik*, #262.

⁴ Tanya, chapter 37 (and numerous places).

⁵ TB BB 17a, R. Tsadok HaKohen on this maamar, *Tsidkat HaTsadik* #174 (and hundreds of other places). The Baal Shem Tov defines subtle sin that afflicts all humans at some point or another (Kohellet 7:20, see footnote 11 below) as forgetting HaShem, even for a moment.

⁶ Rabbi Chizkiah's declaration, "A person will have to answer for everything that his eye beheld and he did not consume" (Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12).

⁷ R. Eleazar opened his discourse with the text: "Lift up your eyes on high and see, who (*mi*) created these?" (Is. XL, 26). Where is the place to direct our eyes? The place to which all eyes are turned, the place that is called, *Petah Enayim* ("Opening of the Eyes.") One who directs his/her consciousness up to this center will know that it was the most hidden and mysterious Ancient One, whose essence can be sought, but not found, that "created these." ... Zohar 1:1b

⁸ המין-העץ אשר צויתיד לבלתי אכל-ממנו אכלת:

⁹ The enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, though it was turned to the contrary and instead, the Jews had rule over those who hated them [Megilat Esther 9:1]

¹⁰ R. YYY Safrin (Komarna Rebbe), *Ketem Ofir—Commentary on Book of Esther*. Verse 4:16-17.

¹¹ Kohellet 7:20. "There is no righteous person on earth that only does good and never sins."

¹² ספר לשם שבו ואחלמה – ספר הכללים - חלק ב' ד' כא ב'

¹³ ibid

¹⁴ ספר לשם שבו ואחלמה – הדרוש עץ הדעת – סימן ג'

¹⁵ TB BB 12a.

¹⁶ *Chokhmah* (wisdom) is spelled, חכמה. Those same letters, slightly rearranged, spell כחמה (the power – כח, of what – מה)

¹⁷ Tanya chapt. 5.

¹⁸ Tanya chapt. 45, 46.