



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE

PURIM SYLLABUS

Part Two

**Glad You Could Make It To The Party!
The Strange World Of The Purim Custom**

By Steve Israel and Noam Zion

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Introduction: The Strange World of Purim

We have seen in Part One that the Megillah is a very strange document. Without any direct mention of God and with a strange almost comic tone which sometimes verges on the slapstick, the Megillah is completely unique among the books of the Tanakh. We have suggested that when you penetrate beneath the surface, there are some interesting reasons that can be suggested for the inclusion of the Megillah in the Tanakh. We wondered whether the Megillah should be kept in or out of the ultimate collection of sacred texts of the Jewish People.

We now turn to an even stranger side of the Purim story, the extraordinary collection of customs, traditions and laws that serve to celebrate Purim. Over the millennia, Purim has generated the most outlandish collection of traditions. Totally unique, once again, in the Jewish year, it represents, on the face of it, the penetration of a series of most un-Jewish - almost pagan – customs into the sober Jewish culture. We use the word “sober” advisedly, since one of the principal manifestations of Purim celebrations is, of course, the practice of drunkenness. Indeed Purim seems to resemble a Bacchanalian revelry with its atmosphere of carnival and abandonment of the usual norms of a civilized Jewish lifestyle. Is Purim-life really reflective of Jewish life or is it a most terrible aberration from that life which somehow has been swallowed up and allowed to stay in a defined place in the Jewish year? Is Purim just a time-out from Jewish ethics to let us relax and have a good time or does it offer an alternative world-view that can contribute to our self-understanding? That is the question that we will deal with now in Part Two.

EXERCISE: Party-Time!

The aim of this exercise is to examine the phenomenon of the human celebration or “party” and the values associated with this type of celebration.

Posing The Problem To Be Explored

One of the major features of the Megillah is the drinking party (משתה) No less than ten drinking parties or banquets appear in the book. In fact it is no exaggeration to say that the whole of the action of the Purim story is organized around the institution of the drinking party. The first five drinking parties are organized by the Persians, Ahashverosh, Vashti and Haman. The remaining five drinking parties are initiated by the Jews in the story. Esther organizes two such parties and the last three are the action of the Jews as a whole. From this point of view, too, the Megillah is a strange book. People live and people die, but fates are decided invariably at those drinking parties that punctuate the rest of the action. It is as if this serious life and death story is told against an atmosphere of hedonistic enjoyment.

With drinking parties comprising so much of the background (and often the foreground!) to the book, it is perhaps not surprising that the drinking party is one of the central features of the commemoration and celebration of the Purim story. It is as if we are being told that the basic narrative story that started with drinking parties (Ahashverosh and Vashti) and ended with drinking parties (Esther’s banquets) needs to be relived with drinking and partying.

Nevertheless, while this might seem natural and even predictable in the circumstances, we suggest that it begs a deeper question. *What was the purpose of the writer of the Megillah in telling the story with so much detail about the various drinking parties?* For those who see the story as historical, and seek to respond that the story is told that way because the real historical story underneath the text occurred around the drinking parties, we have to respond that this is an inadequate answer. The writer of the Megillah did not have to write of Ahashverosh’s opening drinking party, for example, in such intricate detail. Almost nowhere else in the Tanakh do we see the same attention given in a report of a banquet, even when it plays a part in the story. In Daniel (chapter 5) for instance, we have no more than a couple of sentences with a few colorful details in a scene that arguably plays no less a role in the narrative than the initial drinking party of Ahashverosh. Indeed the sort of detail invested in the description of the opening banquet is of a kind generally restricted only to the description of sacred ritual objects, like the Mishkan or the Temple. Thus we have reason to suspect that the writer of Esther put in the details of the elaborate banquet in such an unprecedented form because he wanted to make a point.

We can only guess at the point that he might have been trying to make, but we will probably not be way off mark if we suggest that it is connected with the decadence of the drinking party, and indeed of the way of life in royal Shushan. In other words, we suggest that the use of the whole drinking party motif in the basic narrative structure is essentially *ironic*, to point the finger at the decadence of the royal court. This then begs a further question. If the motif of the drinking party is ironic and critical in intention, how can we explain the idea that the Jews celebrate the downfall of their enemies in this particular story – by imitating their partying?! It is as if the wrong

conclusions were drawn from the story. A story critical of decadence where the writer took great pains to show the underlying immorality of the society that he wished to condemn, is remembered by celebrations which represent the same decadence that was seen as so problematic! Can this possibly be?

Let us begin our exploration, then, by investigating the theme of **parties and decadence**. We will begin by comparing our own party celebrations with the story of the first party in Shushan. We will then go on to examine the Purim drinking party, as it appears in our celebrations of the Chag as mandated by the Rabbis. The texts to be studied include the Megillah, Rambam and other halachic authorities and popular customs.

Preparation Before Class: Describe A Wild Party

As homework, before the class, ask the students to write an account of a party which they attended. The account should be as detailed as possible and should be a third-person fly-on-the-wall portrayal of the party. If they appear in the account, they should do so namelessly and unobtrusively. They are asked to relate to all of the following points. What was the general atmosphere? And the decor? Who was there? What did people do? How long did it last? What was the entertainment? How were people dressed? How much drinking was there? How were people behaving with each other? Did people seem to be enjoying themselves? Were there rules limiting one's behavior or requiring party participation (as there were at Ahashverosh's drinking party)? Finally, they should add a conclusion. Was it a successful party? If so, what made it successful? If not, why not?

Class Discussion

- In class, ask a few volunteers to read out their accounts of the party that they attended. As different characteristics are mentioned, list them on the board. When the conclusion – regarding whether or not the party was a success – is mentioned, write down the suggested criteria for success in a separate list.
- Discuss with the group why parties are so popular. Try and pin the students down to precise answers. What are people looking for in their parties? Is partying a basic human need? Is it a form of escapism? Does it represent a search for some form of connection and sense of community that is absent in everyday life? Or is it a positive way to celebrate an important human achievement like graduation? List the central points that come up.
- Now ask the following question. Is it good to party? Is there a kind of partying that is negative? What are the criteria for it being a good thing? For example, is there a value difference between a situation where a person lives only to party and the whole of his or her life revolves around the search for the next party, and a situation where a person parties occasionally? Is there a value difference between a party where everyone is invited and one to whom only “special people” are invited? Are there kinds of behavior that make one kind of party positive and another one negative (N.B. not “successful” or

“unsuccessful”: this is a different question)? Note down the central points that come up.

At this point, you have three lists:

- (1) characteristics of parties in general
- (2) criteria of success or failure in parties: and
- (3) criteria for “healthy” partying – what makes a party a good thing from a moral or value point of view.

Journalistic Assignments for Group Text Study: Parties in the Megillah

- Tell the group that you are turning them into journalists. Send them all to the party that appears in chapter one of the Megillah. Ask them, in pairs or small groups, to examine the text (Esther 1:1-11). They should leave out the argument between Ahashverosh and Vashti and concentrate on the party itself. Each group must return with one descriptive piece and one editorial piece.
- They should use the three lists that the class has put together. The first list should be used to help describe the party; the second list should be used to assess the success or failure of the party, (both of these are part of the descriptive piece); and the third list should be used to critique the party in an editorial piece.
- They should be given plenty of time for the task. When they are ready, a few of the descriptive pieces should be read and then you should settle down to the main issue – that of the editorials. Read out some of the editorials.
- Let this lead into a discussion of the party described. Do they think that the description was written to praise the party? Is it a morally neutral description? The answer to this might well be affirmative. Tell the class that there are many critics who see this as an ironic and critical piece. Ask the group if they have any idea why some people might reach that conclusion?
- If the group has not brought it up, introduce the question of context – the context of the Tanakh. Explain that this is a unique description in the Tanakh. Nowhere else is this level of description of externals apart from ritual contexts such as the tabernacle or the Temple. Perhaps bring in Daniel (chapter 5) as a contrast. Does this change their opinion of the author’s intention in describing the party in such detail?
- Close by suggesting that the rich detail of the piece comes out of a desire on the part of the author to criticize the decadence of royal society in Shushan.

EXERCISE: The Pros And Cons Of Drinking Parties

The aim of this exercise is to examine the Purim laws and to suggest that they need to be taken as a whole and not seen as an unconnected group of observances.

Posing The Problem

In the introduction to the previous exercise, we mentioned the point that it seems strange, at first sight that the principal way of commemorating the events of the Megillah is through drinking partying, the subject that appears to have been criticised for its decadence in the scroll itself. Let us now try and understand the logic in this.

The first point to understand is that despite the satirical way in which the subject of drinking partying is viewed in the Megillah, it is not the drinking party in and of itself that is condemned but rather the decadence and dissolution that is associated with the subject at the royal court. A life based only on drinking and celebration is inherently problematic, the scroll seems to say. Ego-centric displays of wealth that are aimed at glorifying the name of the party provider are certainly a subject for criticism. In Esther 1:4 we hear that “For a full 180 days (!), [Ahashverosh] displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty”.

The target of criticism is not the idea of drinking partying but the negative values associated with the act. Consumption that is too conspicuous is a target for satire. But drinking parties as an expression of genuine happiness are perfectly acceptable and therefore we can understand that it is seen by the author himself as a natural and understandable reaction of the Persian Jews, once the threat has passed. We can assume this because in the last section of the Megillah, we hear both how the Jews spontaneously respond to their new situation by drinking partying and celebrating (Ch. 8 : 17, Ch. 9: 17, 18,19), and how Mordechai instructs them to celebrate in that way (Ch. 9 : 22, 27-8). We can also assume this because of a very significant detail – the fact that the drinking party is only one of a series of steps that Jews are enjoined to observe in the commemoration of the Purim story. It is only when we examine the cluster of mandated observances as a package deal that we understand the Jewish concept of the Purim drinking party.

Let us examine this with the students.

Class Review From Memory

□ Ask the students how Purim is meant to be commemorated. What are the rules or halakhot of Purim (as opposed to the customs, which will be examined separately)? See if they know the main observances of the Chag which are as follows. Firstly there is a pre-Purim fast which is not, strictly speaking, one of the obligations of the day of the Chag itself, but nevertheless is a significant part of the whole Purim experience. As far as the day itself is concerned we have here four obligations:

- (1) the hearing of the Megillah (twice),
- (2) partaking in a Purim drinking party,

- (3) the sending of gifts (משלוח מנות) and
- (4) presents for the poor (מתנות לאביונים).

If there are elements from this list that need to be added, add them and explain them very briefly. Ask where these observances come from and see the relevant piece in the Megillah itself which is the basis for the various observances (Esther Ch. 9: 22, 28, 31).

Celebration And Hedonism

- Explain that you are going to start examining these “laws of Purim” by looking at the drinking party. Why is a drinking party a natural way of celebrating Purim? You might wish to refer to the last part of the Megillah where, besides the ordinance of Mordechai, we have several references to the spontaneous drinking partying of the Jews as an expression of happiness (Ch. 8: 17, Ch 9: 17,18,19). After this, ask the group if, in spite of this, they can think of something a little strange in the fact that Purim is observed with a drinking party. Remind the class of the suggestion that the author’s intention in giving so much detail of the first banquet-party was critical and satirical, to emphasize the decadence of the royal court and to indicate disapproval. Discuss the irony of celebrating through drinking partying an event where drinking partying seems to be condemned. Have Jews taken on the values of their opponents and enemies?

Text Study On Feasting

We now suggest two different alternatives, both involving text study, but each with a slightly different emphasis. Ultimately, they bring us to more or less the same place!

Approach One.

In the Middle Ages many Jews and Christians expressed their religious impulses through fasting and other ascetic practices, unlike the values typical of modern western society. Rambam, the rationalist philosopher, was very wary of hedonist partying as a mindless escapism. Let us read his cautionary halakha and then see how the defenders of the Purim celebrations, especially the 18th-19th century Hassidim worked hard intellectually to justify the extreme feasting on Purim.

1. *When a person eats and drinks and joyfully celebrates a Chag, he should not drink or laugh too much and say that whoever does this is increasing the mitzvah of joy. Too much drinking and laughter and light headed behaviour are not joy but rather empty revelry and foolishness. We were not commanded to commit revelry and foolishness but rather to behave with joy in a way that praises God. As it is said [in the list of Deuteronomic curses, you are cursed] “because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity” (Devarim Ch. 28: 47)...*

Rambam Hilchot Yom Tov 6:20.

כשאדם אוכל ושותה ושמח ברגל לא ימשך בין ובשחוק ובקלות ראש ויאמר שכל מי שיוסיף בזה ירבה במצות שמחה, שהשכרות והשחוק הרבה וקלות הראש אינה שמחה אלא הוללות וסכלות ולא נצטוינו על ההוללות והסכלות אלא על השמחה שיש בה עבודת יוצר הכל שנאמר: "תחת אשר לא עבדת את ה' אלהיך בשמחה ובטוב לבב (מרב כל)" (דברים כ"ה) ...
רמב"ם הלכות יום טוב פרק ו הלכה כ

Rambam quotes a verse in Deuteronomy 28: 47 that says that as a people we will be punished by exile from the good land of milk and honey if we do not show our appreciation to God for the gifts of the land by being happy and celebrating. Yet he is afraid that mitzvah will be misused.

- What is the intention of the verse in Deuteronomy?
- What is Rambam's fear?
- How is celebrating as gratitude (as for graduating high school or bringing in a good harvest) different from partying for its own sake?
- Do you agree with this distinction?

2. *In the days of Haman, the decree was to kill and destroy the Jews physically, rather than spiritually: even if the Jews had changed their religion, he would not have accepted them. Therefore, when they were saved, it was decided to praise God through drinking parties and joy. But on Hannukah, when the enemy wanted to destroy the Jews spiritually by converting them to another religion, then they only decided to praise God through thanking and praising rather than feasting and joy.*

Levush Malchut

- In the eyes of the author of this sixteenth century Halakhic work, how is feasting more appropriate for Purim than for any other Jewish holiday especially Hanukkah?

3. *In the description of the Chag in those days, the duty of giving gifts to the poor was not mentioned because at that point every person was full of joy over his or her deliverance from death to life and the poor person was as happy as the rich. This was not the case when the letter was written instructing the people regarding future celebration of Purim, because [in the future] there would be no happiness unless it was preceded by a drinking party. Therefore, it was necessary to send gifts to the poor in order that they would have the ability to celebrate until their joy awoke [as a result of the drinking and feasting].*

Maggid of Dubnov.

- In the eyes of the Maggid, what is the difference between drinking and eating to express joy at being saved from drinking and eating to arouse joy?

4. [In the evening prayer Hashkiveinu] “Get away Satan from before me and behind me”, refers to Purim and Yom Kippur. On Purim, Satan says to God accusingly: “Look at your people Israel – they stuff themselves and get drunk like the non-Jews”. And God replies, “Get away from before me Satan – look how my children fasted and afflicted themselves before Purim in the fast of Esther”. On Erev Yom Kippur, Satan says to God accusingly, “Look at your people stuffing themselves with food”. And God replies “Get away from behind me, Satan. Look at my children – how they afflict themselves and stand in prayer on Yom Kippur”. Thus we see that drunkenness (and feasting) on Purim and eating on Erev Yom HaKippur are ways of serving God as much as affliction and prayer.

Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev

- For the Hassidic Rebbe, Levi Yitzchak, in what way is feasting and drinking serving God?

Levi Yitzchak uses Purim and Yom Kippur to establish a principle about the religious importance of physical enjoyment for all of human life. The Hassidim in particular emphasized *avodah bagashmiut* – worshipping God through joy with a strong physical component of eating, drinking and dancing. Visit any Habad celebration and see how much whisky is served. They helped turn the tide against Jewish ascetic practices by arguing that *mara shechorah* – emotional depression, often reflected in guilt-ridden self- mortification – is the very opposite service of God.

Approach Two

- Ask if distinctions can be made regarding the acceptable and the unacceptable in drinking parties. You might want to make use of the list (the third one) from the previous exercise. What do they think makes a drinking party acceptable? Make a new list.
- Bring the following two texts from the Rambam. The first text is about celebratory feasting in general. The second text is specifically about Purim.

It is preferable to spend more on gifts to the poor (Matanaot L'Evyonim) than on the Purim meal (Seudah) or on presents (Mishloach Manot) to friends. For no joy is greater or more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the strangers. Indeed, he who causes the hearts of these unfortunates to rejoice emulates the Divine Presence, of whom Tanakh say, “To revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isaiah 57:15).

Rambam Hilchot HaMegillah 2:17

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים, שהמשמח לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר "להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים" (ישעיהו נז:טו).
רמב"ם הלכות מגילה וחנוכה פרק ב הלכה יז

[On Yom Tov] Jews should eat meat and drink wine, for there can be no real rejoicing without meat to eat and wine to drink. And while one eats and drinks oneself, it is also a duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow and other poor and unfortunate people. One who locks the doors to his/her courtyard and eats and drinks with his/he spouse and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter and soul – that meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment (Simchat Mitzvah) but a rejoicing in his own belly (Simchat Krayso) . It is of such people that the Tanakh says, “Their sacrifices shall be unto them as the bread of mourning, all that eat from it shall be polluted for their bread is for their own appetite”. Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it.

Rambam Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18

והאנשים אוכלין בשר ושותין יין שאין שמחה אלא בבשר ואין שמחה אלא ביון, וכשהוא אוכל ושותה ... חייב להאכיל "לגר ליתום ולאלמנה" (דברים טז) עם שאר העניים האמללים, אבל מי שנועד דלתות חצרו ואוכל ושותה הוא ובניו ואשתו ואינו מאכיל ומשקה לעניים ולמרי נפש אין זו שמחת מצוה אלא שמחת כריסו, ועל אלו נאמר "זבחיהם כלחם אונים להם כל אוכליו יטמאו כי לחמם לנפשם" (הושע ט), ושמחה כזו קלון היא להם שנאמר "וזריתי פרש על פניכם פרש חגיכם" (מלאכי ב).
רמב"ם הלכות יום טוב פרק ו הלכה יח

- What so angers Rambam in the description of someone locking their door when celebrating a Jewish holiday?
- What imagery does Rambam use to make the reader feel that is not only insensitive but “disgusting” to behave selfishly in this way?
- Rambam is not trying to be anti-joy. His approach is not preaching merely sober, serious, unemotional rationalism but rather trying to develop a higher form of joy. What is that joy which he connects to Isaiah 57:15?
- Can you give a personal example of having felt such a joy in helping others?
- What is the Rambam’s major distinction between a drinking party which is moral and acceptable and a drinking party which is not? Is his distinction a good one that is acceptable to you? Did it appear in the list of criteria of the group? If so, why? If not, why not? Do not let anyone get away with saying that they simply did not think of it: the answer to that, once again is “Why not”?
- We bring now a similar perspective from a contemporary Jewish thinker, Rabbi David Hartman. We take the excerpt from an essay that appears below.

The unique character of Tzedakah on Purim and the exuberant quality of the joy of Purim indicate the connection between joy and compassion. Joy is often understood as hedonistic abandon where one is freed from normative constraint

and responsibility and free to indulge one's private whims and fantasies. This, however, is not how the experience of joy is understood in Judaism...Judaism rejects the joy of physical gratification when it is egocentric and expressive of one's indifference to the joy of others. Embracing others in my joy by providing the weak and disadvantaged with the opportunity to share in the joy of wine, food and song is not a moralistic imposition on the experience of physical joy but may be viewed as an implication of the core experience of the joy of life...We are warned against allowing our joy to blind us to the plight of the needy and to deafen us to the cries of the lonely.

Rabbi David Hartman

- What is Rabbi Hartman saying about the experience of joy?
- What attitude is he implicitly criticizing?
- What does he understand as “the core experience of the joy of life”? Does Rabbi Hartman agree with the Rambam?
- Are there ways in which he goes beyond the Rambam in these quotes?
- According to the views that we have examined here, how does the cluster of mitzvot around food on Purim, balance one another out? Discuss the idea of these observances as a “package deal”.

From now on the drinking party should be seen as a central feature of the cluster of observances customs that comprise the basis of the Purim celebration.

A Suggested Summary for Both Suggested Approaches

All these various pieces point in one direction: the idea of balance between the different elements of the Purim celebration. They should not be treated as individual elements but, indeed, as a package deal for the Chag.

- As a final closure for this lesson, you might want to divide the class into small groups and get each group to design a small advertising campaign for the package of Purim observances. In the campaign, which should be aimed at the non-Purim observant part of the local Jewish community, the group must emphasize every individual element but put them over to the community as a package deal. The virtues of the Purim package are what needs to be sold!

EXERCISE: *Liv'sumei!* Underneath The Table! Jews and Liquor On Purim

The aim of this exercise is to examine the specific issue of drinking at Purim (as opposed to feasting and enjoyment) and to examine the **ambivalence of the tradition towards Purim drunkenness**. The texts are drawn from the halakhic disputes about the Talmudic term *Liv'sumei* that show that the law is not cut and dried and that halakhic decisions are directly and deeply influenced by value judgments, not merely formal positivist reading of the letter of the law.

Posing The Problem

One of the strangest aspects of Purim relates to the issue of drinking. In the Gemara we find the following comment and story.

*Rava said: One must drink [the verb is **Liv'sumei** – understood as drinking] until one cannot distinguish [עד דלא ידע] between may Haman be damned and may Mordechai be blessed.*

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira once had a Purim drinking party together, and got drunk. Rabbah got up and killed Rabbi Zeira. The next day he [Rabbah] requested mercy and revived him [Zeira]! The next year [Rabbah] said to [Rabbi Zeira]: Come, sir and let us make another Purim drinking party. [Rabbi Zeira] said: A miracle does not happen every hour [and therefore I am rejecting the invitation].

Babylonian Talmud Megillah 7b

אמר רבא: מיחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי.
רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום, קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא.
למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה.
לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי!
אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ז עמוד ב

This is the first explicit statement we have about the obligation to drink at the Purim Seudah. It follows no Mishnaic tradition and this itself is perhaps surprising, but most surprising of all is the command to get drunk. Wine is seen throughout the sources as a legitimate aid to happiness. In Psalm 104 we hear about wine “that makes a person’s heart happy” and it has been seen throughout time as an indispensable part of all celebrations including of course on Shabbat and Chagim. Nevertheless, there is a strong counter-tradition stemming already from the Tanakh itself which warns of the perils of drinking too much. The most famous stories associated with the dangers of drinking relate to Noah and Lot but they are not alone. Wine is good – but too much wine is bad! Drunkenness is frowned on throughout the tradition – except here on Purim.

Against that background, we have this extraordinary statement of the distinguished scholar Rava, who, seemingly unsolicited, comes out in praise of *Liv'sumei* at Purim which seems to mean contextually “drunkenness.” One major rationale derives from the fact that the miracle of Purim started with Ahashverosh’s drunken anger at Vashti (and in some sources, Vashti’s drunken refusal to obey Ahashverosh)! Another explanation underlines the connection between wine and happiness (as mentioned in Psalms) and notes the importance of happiness and joy in the obligations of Purim.

But what are we to make of the extraordinary story that is told immediately after Rava’s comment. A story of two “wise men” who get so drunk at Purim that one murders the other! There have been attempts by some great scholars to soften the story a little and to make it more comprehensible. Thus the Meharsha explained that Rabbah (not to be confused with Rava: both were Babylonian Amoraim and in fact at one point filled the same role as the head of the Pumbedita academy but Rabbah is a generation or so earlier), did not literally slaughter Rabbi Zeira. Rather he coaxed him into drinking so much wine that it almost brought him to death. This might be a more acceptable rational explanation of the story itself but it does not explain why the editor of the Talmud chose to put this particular story after Rava’s comment in favour of inebriation at Purim. Some scholars saw this as a sign that the obligation referred to by Rava has been cancelled and that the placing of that story there proves the point. Others maintained that a Talmudic obligation is indeed obligatory on the individual and that drunkenness is part and parcel of the Purim celebration.

We single out the issue because although it is not the only example of the strange customs that developed around Purim, it is so striking in its contrast with normative Jewish behavior during the rest of the year, that it deserves to be examined on its own.

As opposed to Rosh Hashanah when we are held responsible for every act, even inadvertent sins, and we are encouraged to be honestly self-aware, Purim requires us to lose our self-control, even our consciousness and our ability to make moral distinctions. The halakha even exempts us from damages incurred when observing this bizarre law. In addition, it might be pointed out, the question of drinking and drunkenness is, unfortunately, not an issue that is limited among many young Jews, to the day of Purim. For that reason, too, it seems a good issue to place it on the agenda.

We suggest two ways of approaching the question. The first way includes a long introduction in which the students examine their own reactions to drinking before going on to the Talmudic text. The second approach starts with the text, and takes things on from there.

Approach One: Drinking in Contemporary Society

- Write the words “**drinking alcohol**” at the top of the board. Let the whole group call out their associations for the phrase. Before each word or phrase that is called out the student is asked to say “positive”, “negative”, or “neutral”. Any associations which are clearly positive should be written on one side of the board and others which are clearly negative should be written on the other side. Words that are neutral should be written in the middle. (Recall the acronym MADD = Mothers against Drunken Drivers and your parents responses to drinking too much).

- If this topic has not already been covered in the introductory exercise where the students were asked to report on and discuss a wild party, each student should now write out a scene that they witnessed which involved people drinking. It can be about themselves or it can be a third person reminiscence. It can be either positive or negative and it must use some six or seven words from the board.
- Ask for two or three of the people who wrote positive scenes to read their pieces out and do the same for the negative pieces.
- With the help of the group, try and distinguish the positive sides of the drinking experience from the negative sides. What are the different reasons that people drink? What are the positive aspects of drinking and what are the negative ones? How thin is the line between the two situations? Is there a social value in alcohol? Is there a social danger?
- Ask them how Judaism relates to alcohol. Point out the very moderate line of Judaism which generally recognizes the virtues of alcohol in moderation and seeks to use those virtues in ritual and celebratory contexts, but completely rejects excess after the examples of Noah and Lot.
- Ask them if they know the one time of the year when Jews tend to act differently and to encourage heavier drinking. Ask them if they know what the source of the difference (on Purim) is. Introduce them to the quote from Rava, and discuss what could lie behind that. Introduce them to the story of Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira: bring in the Maharsha's interpretation of the story. Ask what on earth that story is doing there immediately after the quote from Rava (whether you accept the story at face value or in the Maharsha's rereading)? Suggest that possibly the story reflects an inner tension within the Talmudic world. One group sees unlimited drinking once a year as a good thing. One group sees it as a bad thing.
- Split the class into two. Re-divide each half of the class into a number of smaller groups. The groups on one side of the class represent modern Jewish leaders who accept the idea of drinking on Purim but believe that it should be done in moderation. The other side represents Jewish leaders who believe that for this one day of the year, it can and should be unrestricted. There is a tradition of drinking and drunkenness that has been established and it should be left alone. Give the class a few minutes to prepare the most convincing arguments that it can for the relevant position.
- Ask one group to present its positions why unlimited drinking should be allowed. Let a group from the other side respond. Start going back and forth.
- At a certain point stop the discussion. Explain to them that they are continuing here a debate that has been going on throughout the Jewish world for thousands of years. Explain the idea of a scholarly discussion over time and space through the medium of commentaries, halakhic works, ethical works and, especially, responsa literature.

Approach Two: A Scandalous Incident in the Talmud

*Rava said: One must drink [the verb is **Liv'sumei** – understood as drinking] until one cannot distinguish [עד דלא ידע] between may Haman be damned and may Mordechai be blessed.*

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira once had a Purim drinking party together, and got drunk. Rabba got up and killed Rabbi Zeira. The next day he [Rabba] requested mercy and revived him [Zeira]! The next year [Rabbah] said to [Rabbi Zeira]: Come, sir and let us make another Purim drinking party. [Rabbi Zeira] said: A miracle does not happen every hour [and therefore I am rejecting the invitation].

Babylonian Talmud Megillah 7b

אמר רבא: מיחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי.
רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום, קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא.
למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה.
לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי!
אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ז עמוד ב

- What are the two different sources brought in the Talmudic section? (Note the distinction between Rabbah and Rava who may both be Babylonian Amoraim but lived in different generations). One of the sources is a law and one is a story. How are they related?
- What does the story add to the meaning of the law?
- Is there a source in the megillah for Rabbah's ruling? Does *Liv'sumei* mean drunk or tipsy? How drunk?
- What is the humorous element in the story? Does the story support the law of Rabbah or criticize it sarcastically?

Text Study: Writing Your Own Responsum.

“R.A.D.P” Or “R.F.D.P”? Rabbis For Or Against A Drunken Purim.

Jewish law has always been a balance between general rules (code law, like the Shulchan Aruch or the Mishne Torah) and between Responsa (case law written for a particular question posed in a concrete situation). Cases become precedents that influence Codes but the case law tends to take more into account the particular issues before the judge. Now we are asking you to examine the Talmudic law and precedent reprinted above and to compare and contrast the various halachic interpretations and rulings regarding drunkenness on Purim.

- We bring here below some Rabbinic comments from different types of literature on the specific subject of Rava's words. Bring some of them up for discussion and analysis.

- What attitudes underlie the way these scholars read the Talmud?
- Which view seems most in line with the Talmudic author's intent?
- Which side of the debate do they strengthen?
- Which view of drinking makes most sense to you?
- What do you think of the individual comments?
- Which arguments do you most agree with? Which view of drinking makes most sense to you?

1. A person must drink on Purim – but must not get drunk. Drunkenness is totally forbidden and there is no bigger crime [in Judaism] because it leads to sexual sins and bloodshed as well as other crimes. But one should drink a little more than he usually does so that one should be full of joy and be able to pass one's joy onto the poor and unfortunate and comfort them...and that is the truly great happiness.

Ba'al Sefer HaKolbo. Provence 13th-14th century.

2. How should a person fulfill his obligation at the drinking party? [N.B. that the Rambam firmly explains that the obligation is only to be carried out within the framework of the Purim drinking party]. One should eat meat and prepare as good a drinking party as he can, and one should drink until one is inebriated [at which point he can indeed no longer make the distinction] and fall asleep in one's drunkenness.

Rambam, Hilchot Megillah and Chanukah. Egypt 13th century.

3. As it is plainly written: one should drink until one cannot distinguish between "Haman is damned" and "Mordechai is blessed". When one gets almost to the state of Lot, no-one should question it. After all, Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira got so drunk that Rabbah slaughtered Rabbi Zeira [and therefore there is an acceptable precedent for even the most extreme drunkenness!]

Rabbi Yoel Sirkis. Bayit Chadash. Poland 16th century.

4. One is obliged to increase in joy and eating and drinking this day. However, we are not commanded to belittle ourselves through this joy. We were not commanded to a joy of...insanity, rather to a joy of pleasure that will lead us to love, praise and thank God for the miracles that God has done for us.

Chafetz Chaim. Biur Halacha. Poland and Israel, 20th century

5. And there are those who say that if a person caused damages to his friend, due to the happiness of Purim [i.e. in his drunkenness], one is exempted from the need to pay.

The Rema. Moshe Isserles. Commentary to the Shulchan Aruch. Poland 16th century.

6. Nevertheless, we are not obligated to become inebriated and degrade ourselves due to our joy. We are not obligated to engage in a simcha of frivolity and foolishness. Rather it should lead to a love of God and thankfulness for all the miracles that He has done to us.

The Meiri. Commentary to TB Megillah. Provence 13th-14th century.

7. Why did the Babylonian Talmud use such strange phrasing as “until he cannot distinguish between “Haman is damned” and “Mordechai is blessed””? [Three suggestions are brought]:

a.) There are those who say that [in the Babylonian period] they had a song [whose verses ended alternately with “Haman is damned” and “Mordechai is blessed”] and it was a long song and a drunk person could not say the whole thing.

b.) And there are those who say that it is a question of numbers, because the numerical value of the two expressions is equal [in Gematria, both *ברוך מרדכי* and *ארור המן*] come out to the same number, 502.

c.) And the Ba’alei Tosefot [Ashkenaz 12th - 13th century] wrote that the intention is [that he will not be able to say the whole sentence] “until he cannot distinguish Haman is damned, and Mordechai is blessed, Zeresh is damned, Esther is blessed, all the wicked are damned and all the righteous are blessed.” This refers to the fact that this sentence is so long, that one will not be able to say it when drunk...But the intention is not that one should actually get drunk.

Rabbi Yechiel Epstein. Aruch HaShulchan. Poland 19th century

- In conclusion, let the students apply these sources along with their own analysis of drinking in our contemporary society to issuing a ruling in the following case:

**Shall The School Permit Seniors To Celebrate Purim With Liquor?
If The School Sees Itself As Educating To Observance Of Jewish Law,
Shouldn't The Teachers And Students Be Required To Get Drunk?
If Students Are Organizing Their Own Drinking Party For Purim, Should The
Educators At School Oppose It, Support It Or Suggest To The Organizers Of
The Purim Seudah That Limitations Be Imposed On The Amount Of
Drinking?**

- The students must explain why they have reached their conclusion and they must quote the opinions of at least two of the authorities whose arguments they have discussed.

EXERCISE: The Extraordinary Carnival World Of Purim

The aim of this activity is to try and penetrate the radical world of the customs that have developed around Purim and to understand their function.

Posing The Problem

We have talked about the question of drink and have seen that the idea of drunkenness was so foreign to the norms of the Jewish world that it caused great discomfort and debate. The truth is, however, that the element of alcohol is only one element in the cluster of strange traditions and customs that have grown up around Purim. The reason for the centrality of the debate over drink is that its place in the Talmud and the use of the word “must” or obligated (**חייב** in the Hebrew version of the original Aramaic) made it a target for debate. However, many other equally strange customs developed, without halakhic force but with the obstinate force of local tradition. Although not all of them came to be celebrated with equal force in every community, they managed to create throughout the communities of the Jewish world, a radical atmosphere which made of Purim a day without equal. It is to these that we now turn.

First and foremost among the customs was **the Purim costume**. This varied – and continues to vary till today – from the sweetness of children dressing up as Esther and Mordechai to some extreme cross-dressing between men and women, something that *did* sometimes cause rabbinic wrath as it went against an express rule of halachah.

Together with the costume comes the idea of **the mask** that we find in many communities. Often the costumed players would form **a carnival parade** and wind their way through the streets. This would be called an “*Adloyada*”, taken from the phrase most associated with the carousing and drunken antics. Some communities would appoint a special **Purim Rav**, a mock Rabbi who would often mimic the Rabbi and the leadership of the community in outrageous ways. Others would do the same. **Spooofs of holy texts** would be performed and read out to the amusement of audiences. Special **Purim players and entertainers** would walk the streets and enter the houses to entertain the population with elaborate parodies and plays. They would present their version of the Purim story – the “**Purimspiel**” – usually in a strongly spoofed up form. Often they would add similar versions of other well known Jewish stories. Special **wild Purim games** developed in different places, with children and grown ups all involved.

This wildness was echoed within the synagogue where **special noisemakers** – רעשנים – would create great cacophonies of noise every time that Haman’s name was mentioned. In some communities **stones with his name on would be smashed together** until the name disappeared. Alternatively, people would write his name on the soles of their shoes and **jump and stamp** until the name was literally wiped out. All of this took place in the ritual centre – the synagogue, not always a model of decorum, perhaps, but never as anarchic as on Purim.

This is an extraordinary collection of wild behaviors that totally appeared to undermine accepted notions of social order in the Jewish communities of the world. For all its cultural color and its rich traditions and rituals, the traditional Jewish world was an extremely conservative place where in the normal run of things, wild behavior of any kind was a reason for communal condemnation. What wildness there was, was usually seen as being the property of the uneducated classes and since the Jews prided themselves on their educational standards more than on anything, it is easy to understand the strong social sanctions against wildness. Such behavior was invariably described as being “un-Jewish.” No worse epithet could be used. But here, on Purim, everything changed. The whole social fabric was turned upside down. Things were allowed – even officially encouraged – that were inconceivable during the rest of the year. How can we explain such a thing?

A Trigger For Opening Class Discussion

- We suggest starting this exercise with the following trigger. Find one person in the class who is good at mimicking and arrange with them that you will be five minutes late for class and that he or she will sit down in the teacher’s place after a couple of minutes and mimic you, making fun of your lessons. Assure him or her that nothing will happen to them! It’s all in a good cause. Explain that after a minute or so you will come in and stand at the door, and that you want them to carry on with the mimicry, initially as if they have not seen you but afterwards in the full knowledge that you have seen them.
- Do it! The class will be totally and utterly shocked. After a minute of the last stage, stop it and thank the person who should go back to his or her place. Now analyze with the class what just happened, and talk about whether making fun of authority figures is a good thing or a bad thing. Is there a red line between the two? Where does it run? What is harmless and acceptable and what is unacceptable? What benefit, if any, accrues to a society where this happens? What price, if any, does it pay? Is there a difference if it happens in a defined blowing-off-steam framework at a set time where all know the rules of the games?
- Explain the connection to the subject. Explain that making fun of the teachers and authority figures is one of the strange Purim customs that developed in the Jewish world. It is these customs that will now be examined.

Wall Posters For Each Custom

- Place around the walls, posters with details of one Purim custom on each of them. The customs should include:-

DRESSING UP
MASKS
MIMICKING THE RABBI
APPOINTING A PURIM KING
PERFORMING PLAYS – THE PURIMSPIEL
SATIRISING THE HOLY TEXTS
A CARNIVAL PROCESSION

ADULTS AND CHILDREN PLAYING GAMES MAKING RIOTOUS NOISE IN THE SYNAGOGUE

- The students should go around and write on or underneath the posters their reactions to each of the individual customs. Finally, when they have finished they should write in their books their reactions to the idea that for one day a year, all of these things would happen together.
- Divide the class up into small groups according to the number of posters and give each group one of the posters to read and to summarize. Summarize each poster.
- Ask for volunteers to share some of the general observations that they wrote about the cluster of practices as a whole. Use these as a basis for discussion. What do they think of the practices? What effects, positive or negative, could these have had on the Jewish society? What functions might a day like this fill? What reasons can they suggest why a society might want to turn itself “upside down” in this way? What significance do they see in the fact that this would continue for one day only? How would they have felt if it had continued for a week or two every month?

Suggest the idea of Purim as an upside down world, which inverts the values of normal daily life. Perhaps there might be a value in a society changing itself round every so often, in a carefully regulated way, and providing a sense of contrast to the normal way of life. This is something that can cause people to think about the values that inform their daily lives in a community. In a culturally controlled community like the Jewish community with very careful halakhic and social norms guiding almost every aspect of daily behavior, it might be a very good thing to take time out to change the social agenda, and even to poke fun at it, before reverting to the tightness of the regular norms.

- Finally, ask the students which of these customs exist in one form or other in the communities in which they live. Which additional customs from the list would they like to adopt and to bring to the community celebrations of Purim in the coming year? If Purim is drawing close, maybe draw up a practical plan!

EXERCISE: Unmasking – Will The Real Self Please Stand Up?

The aim of this exercise is to examine from a new approach, the practice of masking and disguising ourselves at Purim in order to ask the question: When we disguise ourselves, are we hiding or revealing ourselves?

Posing The Problem

We all dress up at Purim. Dressing up is indeed one of the most common and popular of all the customs associated with Purim. In some communities it is only the children who dress up, and dozens of little Esther's and Mordechai's can be seen milling around the centers of community jostling with Superman, Barbie and a dozen other products of child fantasy. In other communities, the adults too get involved and parties and celebrations, often riotous, mark the coming of the Chag. One traditional manifestation that was seen in many communities was the phenomenon of the masked ball. People would not only dress up but they would hide themselves behind masks so that it was only possible to guess their real identity. Even today, in those communities where adults dress up, it is always possible to see some very entertaining (and sometimes scary) masks appearing with the costumes. We tend to see all of this dressing up and masking as merely a colorful custom, a harmless piece of play acting which everyone enjoys to varying degrees. However, as in the previous questions, we have to ask whether there is not something deeper that is being expressed in this activity.

The great psychoanalyst Carl Jung talked about the phenomenon of masking, but he saw it as a most serious aspect of human activity. He linked it to his general belief that all human beings wear masks in their day to day lives. He called these masks, the *persona* of an individual (from the Greek for mask) and he believed that all of us go around with an invented persona, a projection of the person who we would like to be and who society expects us to be. He believed that the role of the persona was to hide the real inner self of an individual, that inner self that somehow was seen to be inadequate for public presentation. As a result, rather than display the real self, in interactions with society, people project an invented self, the persona, that they want society to accept as the real self. The persona however, is in fact a projection of the self that the person wants to be, but believes that he or she is not.

He put it in these words.

The persona is a kind of mask, intended on the one hand to make an impression on another person, and on the other, to hide the real nature of the individual. Society expects each person to fill perfectly the role that society has assigned them. A doctor should behave as a doctor and a teacher should conform to the expectations that society has from teachers...Society, too, demands conformity to certain polite standards of behavior and this is a motivation for a suitable mask. A person's inner life is lived behind a mask. At the same time that society tempts the individual to identify with his or her mask, the individual is also influenced from inside themselves. For example, a person will sometimes project a persona of being strong and capable despite the fact that internally he or she feels weak and inadequate.

Carl Jung

Jung, then, suggests that our lives are lived within masks. The real self is seldom, if ever, revealed. This, we suggest, raises fascinating questions regarding what happens to us when we formally dress up and adopt a mask as on Purim. Which self is it that we project at that time? Are we adopting a disguise and a mask or are we actually dropping our normal disguise and letting our defenses down in a way that we would normally fear to do, because it would “unmask” us in the eyes of society? When are we more real? When we are formally disguised and thus released from the inhibitions of behaviour that normally constrain us, or when we are seemingly ourselves? It is to these questions that we will now turn and we will use two twentieth century paintings to help us in our explorations.

Analysis Of Art

- Bring to the class the first picture which is by the Belgian artist James Ensor. It is titled “Self portrait among Masks”. In this picture, the artist pictures himself surrounded by a series of grotesque masks. Show the picture to the group and ask the following questions.
- What is the artist trying to say?
- What is the reason that apart from the artist everyone is depicted with a mask?
- Why are so many of the masks grotesque? Why are the people so close together? What could he be saying about the society in which he lives?
- How does the artist see himself? Why does he not wear a mask?
- Do you think that a person that sees himself as “maskless” in a society where all others where masks is likely to be happy? How does he depict himself in the picture?
- Who is the artist looking at? Why do you think he has painted himself in this way? What is the effect on the observer of this rather disconcerting gaze? What do you think he is trying to tell us, the audience?

The assumption is that Ensor, (1860-1949) who painted this picture in 1899, felt himself to be alienated and not accepted by the society in which he lived. It is fascinating that in this period of his life, when he was finding himself increasingly rejected by both the art critics and his fellow artists, many of whom saw him at this time as talentless and strange, he turned in his work to the extensive use of masks. Painting after painting uses masks.

The masks were clearly a device that he used to express some very important and personal ideas. In the picture before us, he is perhaps saying here that he feels that he alone is trying to live a life bereft of “masks”. He is not trying to put on an effect for people nor is he trying to live the life that society approves of and expects. Rather, he is trying to live a real, honest life in a hypocritical society where he feels that everyone hides their real personality and adopts a persona of their own. In such a society, a person of truth will feel uncomfortable and out of place. Moreover, the

masks of others are cruel and predator like. They prey on others and are ready to pounce on those who are weak and different.

Some of the masks are masks of the dead. Could this be a searing comment on the people among whom the artist lived his life? He looks out straight at his audience, presumably challenging them to see on which side they come down. Are they with the masked ones, or do they too, try and live lives of truth, at a price of alienation and non-acceptance by society? Another point that is worth making: In the picture he depicts himself wearing the hat of one of his most famous countrymen, the seventeenth century artist, Peter Paul Rubens, well accepted and praised by his contemporaries.

Ensor was a failure, not accepted by his countrymen. What inner truth might the artist be giving us through the use of this motif? How does he feel about his non-acceptance and his lack of success?

- Bring to the class the second picture, the famous painting “The Scream” by the Norwegian artist Edward Munch (1863-1944). In this painting, the artist displays himself walking along a bridge at sunset. Show the picture and ask the following questions.
- What is the artist trying to say?
- Why is the picture called “The Scream”? What is the artist saying about himself? (It is accepted that the figure represents himself).
- Why has the artist not shown himself as he would have appeared realistically to observers? What is the relation of the “self” that appears on the bridge to the real flesh and blood figure that people would have observed had they been witnesses to the scene?
- Why do you think the painting has been done in such strong and dark colours?
- Do you think that there might be any significance to the two top-hatted figures walking along at the back of the bridge?

This picture, that was rejected and ridiculed by most observers and critics when it appeared in 1893, is now seen as a great and important painting. It is seen as one of the first and archetypal examples of the “Expressionist” school of art, which believed in creating a picture of the world, expressing the inner mood and psychological and emotional reality of a scene, rather than the objective “truth”. Each scene has its inner truth, composed of the emotional and psychological reactions of its characters and the duty of the artist in Expressionism is to give voice to that inner reality rather than remain faithful to the outer external reality. Munch was an intensely unhappy man, overwhelmed by feelings about the death of people to whom he was close (including his mother and younger sister, both of whom died early on from tuberculosis) and distanced from the world, unable to make satisfactory contact with people, especially women. Here he clearly shows his inner feelings at a certain moment in his life. An outer observer would have seen something very different, but for the artist himself,

this was the reality of his situation, isolated and “screaming”, a scream that no-one could hear.

What are the two pictures suggesting about the world in which we live? What have they got in common? What is different between the statements that the two artists seem to be making?

- Now bring the above piece by Jung.
- What is he saying?
- What is the difference between a personality and a persona?
- What does he mean by the phrase “A person’s inner life is lived behind a mask”?
- How does his opinion fit the two pictures that we have seen? What is the common denominator?
- Do you agree with the ideas that the three people are expressing about society?
- Can you identify with the feelings of either of the artists? Have you ever felt yourself to be in a situation close to either the pictures or to the idea expressed by Jung?

The Connection With Purim

How does all this connect with Purim? We have already examined the idea of Purim as an upside down world, which inverts the values of normal daily life. We suggested that there might well be a value in a society changing itself round and providing a sense of contrast to the normal way of life. This is something that can cause people to think about the values that inform their daily lives in a community. Here we see a specific example of this phenomenon.

If we follow Jung’s ideas, we can suggest that far from dressing up and masks representing something strange and different to the normal self, there is a way that it can be seen as an “escape into self”. In other words, if during the rest of the year, what looks like our real self is actually a carefully constructed mask or persona that we choose to present to the world, hiding our real self, the one day of the year when we dress ourselves up and behave in very abnormal ways – essentially reinventing ourselves – can be seen as a chance to reveal sides of ourselves that we normally hide. According to this idea, dressing up is a chance to reveal new and - to others - unsuspected sides of ourselves.

There are those who would argue, based on Jung, that these “true pictures of self” need to be revealed on a regular basis rather than hidden. It is the tension between hiding who we think we really are and revealing who we want others to think that we are, which is responsible for a lot of unhappiness and even mental illness. By this logic, for a society to drop its normal social masks, necessary perhaps for the

maintenance of that society as a social entity with defined cultural norms, and to express itself in a much more playful and spontaneous way, at a given defined time of the year, is a healthy gesture indeed. It might be seen as a necessary survival mechanism which allows the society to keep itself “mentally healthy” through the ability to blow off steam in well defined and socially sanctioned ways.

- After examining the two pictures and the quote from Jung through the suggested questions and mentioning the interpretations above, ask the students how on earth all of this connects with Purim. Guide them to the idea of costume and masks. Ask them the following questions. In the discussion, interpose some of the above ideas.
- When you wear a mask or a costume, do you feel that you are more yourself or less yourself? Is there a sense in which the “real you” can be revealed in costume or disguise, in a way that doesn’t happen in everyday life? Why might that be?
- Look at the two pictures. If Purim represents a step out of the persona of everyday reality, which figures in the pictures have on the Purim masks? [The answer is the two artists!] Why? In what way is this true?
- If Purim disguise is a chance for some people, at least, to be themselves, should it just be seen as harmless play or could it be seen as having wider social significance? Is it a healthy thing for a society to do this on a once a year basis? What might Jung say?

Appendix: Two More Sources

Self or Soul as Multiple, as Chameleon

I must cling with all my might to that chameleon, that chimera, that shape-shifter, my own soul; must hold on to its mischievous, iconoclastic, out-of-step clown-instincts, no matter how great the storm. And if that plunges me into contradiction and paradox, so be it; I've lived in that messy ocean all my life.

Salman Rushdie

The Self or Body Shut Up in a Case

Although Bertha was thirty she still had moments like this when she wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at nothing, simply. What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of bliss, absolute bliss! As though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe?... Oh, is there no way you can express it without being “drunk and disorderly”? How idiotic civilization is! Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?

Katherine Mansfield (b. 1888, New Zealand, d. 1923, France)

Purim: A Taste Of The World To Come?

The aim of this exercise is to explore some of the values that might be underlying this seeming anarchy of the world of the **Purim Carnival**.

Posing The Problem

All the books of the Prophets and all the Writings will be annulled in the days of the Messiah, apart from Megillat Esther. It will continue to be binding like the Five Books of Moses and the entire Oral Law which will never be invalidated. Even though all memory of our suffering will be erased...still the days of Purim will not be annulled...

Rambam: Mishne Torah: Hilchot Megilla 2:18

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר הרי היא קיימת כחמשה ימי... חומשי תורה וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן בטלין לעולם, ואע"פ שכל זכרון הצרות יבטל... הפורים לא יבטלו.

רמב"ם הלכות מגילה והנוכה פרק ב הלכה יח

Rambam suggests that Purim and the Megillah are intimately connected with the Messianic Age. But why? To explore that question let us first explore our understanding of the idea of utopia.

Free Association – Imagining Utopia

- We suggest that you put on soothing music as a background to the following task in order to increase individual concentration. One group of the students is given a few minutes and asked to write a list of words, phrases or sentences that represent their associations for a **perfect world**. The other group writes down all the **worst features of the existing society** that they would eliminate. After they finish their lists, let them work in pairs or small groups and share their visions of a perfect world. Often Utopia is arrived at by a reversal of the existing world. Purim as an upside down holiday of reversals thus becomes an intimation of the hoped for perfect world as a liberation from the structure of contemporary social structure.
- Following this, bring them all together as a group and ask for volunteers to share their ideas with the whole group. List on the board the various ideas mentioned for the perfect world of the group.
- Ask the students if any of them can link up the words and phrases on the board with any Jewish holidays. Go through the Jewish holidays, leaving out Purim for the moment, and see what links they can make. Some of the ideas might be fairly straightforward. For example if one of the phrases talks in some way about human freedom, a link can be made with Pesach. If there is some mention of respecting the earth and natural life, perhaps Tu BiShvat is a logical address. A world where each people can live with their own ideas might lead some to Hannukah. Some links may be less clear, more tenuous

and subtle. For instance, if there is a mention of people not being enslaved to their work, it might be possible to suggest a link with Shabbat.

- After all the other Chagim have been mentioned, bring in Purim. What links can they make? The most obvious ones will be links to the Megillah. Ideas of a world without racism, where groups do not hate each other, or of a world where women can make their way in the world and come to positions of power might be clear to the students. But encourage the students to go beyond the world of the Megillah and to think of the various laws of Purim dealt with three exercises ago, or the Purim customs dealt with in the last two exercises. Can they make any connections between these traditions and the idea of a perfect world (whether or not the ideas appear on the board)?
- When they have made any comments on the subject, bring in one or both of the following two texts. The first is an excerpt from the article by David Hartman that has already been brought. The second is from an academic article by Jeffrey Rubenstein, more of which is brought below.

The celebration of life on Purim as expressed in the temporary suspension of the anxiety caused by the ever-present Hamans of history, the lighthearted humor of “Purim Torah”, the flights of imagination expressed in intellectually “playing” with the authoritative texts of the tradition, the masquerading and consequent [blurring] of the conventional border between appearance and reality – all these features of Purim are joined together with the norm of indiscriminating tzedaka on Purim. [On Purim we are told to give Tzedaka to whoever requests it of us: young or old, Jewish or non-Jewish].

On Purim we make contact with the child’s unselfconscious joy of life. And in making contact with this child-like joy of life...we discover a sensitivity to the needs of others born of the celebration of life. On Purim, the poor experience the responsiveness of a world not dominated exclusively by the exploits of Haman. On Purim, the poor may renew their Messianic hope as a result of their experiencing the outstretched hand of human compassion liberated by the joy of life...Purim signifies the dream that one day we will live in a world in which the passion for life will make us responsive to all human beings and that in place of their cynical demonic yearnings for power, men will accept each other’s differences and affirm their common love of life per se with joy.

Rabbi David Hartman

- What is Rabbi Hartman saying about Purim?
- What is the significance for him of the idea of Purim as “A celebration of life”?
- What is the significance of Purim for the poor according to this association?
- Why would Purim give people a renewal of Messianic hope?

[One dimension of Purim] is the experience of communitas [a form of social interaction where structure and social norms are replaced by spontaneity and equality and where social ranks between people disappear]. Leveling of boundaries, a drive towards equality, and more immediate spontaneous relating occur on many levels throughout the holiday. The overall ethos of Purim is directed towards communitas...Lest anyone not be in the mood for rejoicing, copious [drinking] of alcohol readily inducing the appropriate disposition...Exchange of food creates a sense of mutuality and symbolizes the interrelatedness of the individuals...Drinking partying, drinking and the exchange of gifts combine with masks, costumes, parading and Purim plays to create a mood of ecstasy and release. Intoxication, drinking partying and those colorful festivities encourage spontaneous celebration, the destruction of normal protocol and an experience of communitas...Purim rituals and customs actively effect a bridging of social gaps in order to create unity and promote free-flowing inter-relatedness. These forces push together poor and rich, men and women and even Jew and gentile...Masks and costumes fully disguise the rich and poor...

Purim exists, in essence, on the margins of this world. It is a time of communitas when the normal structure breaks down, when everything is its opposite...Utopian thought, in general, pictures a liberation from constraint and structure, from power and rank, and foresees a time of harmony, equality and bliss.

Jeffrey Rubenstein

- What does Rubenstein mean by Communitas?
- What is the relation between Purim and Communitas in this reading?
- What does he mean when he says that Purim exists “on the margins of the world”?
- What connection does he draw between Purim, Communitas and Utopian thought? Why?
- What are the two sources then suggesting about the world of Purim?
- What are they suggesting about the function of this world in the framework of the structured Jewish year?
- What light do they shed on the needs of the society?
- It might be interesting to suggest a parallel with Shabbat. Although the substance of both days is very different, on Shabbat, we have an inversion of (or a reversion to) the natural order of life in the world. On Purim, we have an inversion of the normal structure of society to create a much less structured reality. Both days carry shadows of Eden and hints of the world to come. Is it

surprising, with these Messianic associations attached to both days, that they are seen as so important in the Jewish world?

- In conclusion, suggest that the world of Purim is very deceptive. It looks like an anarchic day of fun with no deeper purpose. In fact, in certain ways, it is a pre-figuration of the world to come in the Messianic future.

EXERCISE: The King's Madness

The aim of this exercise is to further explore the Messianic side of Purim.

As an additional way to amplify some of the ideas brought in the preceding exercise, we bring here a wonderful little parable by the Chassidic Rebbe, Nachman of Bratzlav, who told his followers parables about the state of the world and the Messianic Tikkun that he believed would soon come. He told the stories to his followers in an attempt to provide guidance to them and to suggest how they should behave and prepare themselves for the future.

One day the king said to his favorite vizier: "Since I am an astrologer I have seen in the stars that this year's harvest will cause all who eat of it to be seized by madness. Now then, advise me my friend, what shall the two of us eat this year?"

The vizier answered and said: "My advice is this, Your Majesty: Command that enough wheat from last year's harvest should be put aside as will fill the needs of the two of us, and we will not eat from this year's harvest at all."

The king replied, saying: "But how, oh sage, will your counsel be of benefit? What good will it do us if the two of us alone are sane and all the others mad? For then, will not all people say that we are the madmen and not they? And if you should say: Let us provide everyone with the good wheat, there is no time."

"Well then, what do you advise, your Majesty?" asked the Vizier.

The king answered and said: "My beloved friend, we have no choice but to eat ourselves of this year's harvest together with all the others and to be mad along with all the world. But I want the two of us to be different from the rest in that we at least will know that we are mad, whereas the others will not know."

The vizier asked: "Can Your Majesty tell me in what manner we are to accomplish this?"

The king replied: "I will tell you my suggestion. Let us inscribe a sign of madness upon our foreheads and whenever my eye shall fall upon you, or your eye upon me, we shall know that we are mad".

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav

Analyzing The Parable

The suggestion that the story seems to be making is the following. The world as we know it is world of madness where people behave in an irrational fashion, totally oblivious to the sane, right way of living one's life. The King and the vizier, who perhaps represent the Jewish people, decide that they too must enter this world of madness. This is necessary in order that they not be totally marginalised within human society so that they can retain a chance of influencing society from the inside. This, in

itself, is imperative in order that they ultimately be able to restore mankind to its senses – and to restore the world, to its previous pristine (Eden like) state, the act of tikkun.

Ironically, therefore, in this interpretation of the story, the state of madness is the normal world that we perceive around us. There is a need to turn society away from its present behavior which is a behavior of madness. Society needs to be brought to the consciousness that its way of life and value structure are insane. Since the two heroes who will actually bring tikkun are to be part of the world that they wish to restore, they must enter the world and become part of the madness themselves. However, they need to retain the consciousness that their behaviour is irrational and “insane”. To do this, they need signs that they will see every so often, (“whenever my eye shall fall upon you”) to remind them that they are living a life of insanity and that there is alternative reality which represents the right, sane way to live.

Class Analysis Of A Parable

- Read the story with the students, after you explain a little background to Rav Nachman and his stories as *Mashal*. Students need to know that his stories are theological parables, and that while they can be enjoyed for their surface narrative, they have deeper layers of meaning that the author intended. In addition the general subject that lies underneath all of Rav Nachman’s stories is the subject of tikkun olam. (An excellent introduction in English to this general subject is the small book on Nachman’s stories by Rabbi Adin Steinsalz).
- In pairs give them a few minutes, to suggest a decoding of the story and its symbolism.
- Starting with their ideas, move them towards the previous suggestion regarding the story’s meaning.
- After the students have understood the general interpretation of the parable, ask them if they can make any connection with the themes of Purim. Our general approach both to the Megillah and the Purim customs has been to see them as parable for the contemporary world we live in so Rav Nachman’s parable should help bring out that message more clearly.

Consider the following connections between Purim and Rav Nachman:

1. ***Yerida L’Tzorech Aliyah***. It is possible to explore the kabbalistic idea that in the Megillah, Esther and Mordechai enter the world of evil (with Esther hiding her identity in order to do so) and ultimately the two of them become the agents of the act of Tikkun and salvation for the Jewish people. Only by descending into the real world can we redeem the lost sparks according to Lurianic Kabbalah. Only by playing by the rules of the evil empire can we survive, but ultimately we must go beyond survival and attempt to transform the world as Mordechai and Esther do in the second half of the Megillah, though not in Rav Nachman’s parable.

2. **We are All Drunk but We don't Always Realize It. We are All Wearing Costumes but We don't Always Realize It.** The parable presents us with the depth of reversal of values which we experience everyday and the compromises we make with those values to survive. Externals and social pressure rule even the rulers who must find favor in the eyes of the masses especially in a democratic society. We all wear social masks that enter deep into our consciousness. Our inner values are turned upside down as if we were drunk. Purim drunkenness forces us to feel at least once a year the instability and craziness of our daily world and our lack of control even of our own behavior. The Megillah reminds us ironically that our rulers – both in society and inside our heads – often make decisions based on the strange criteria of popularity or whim. Purim places a mark on our forehead to remind us to be conscious that we are crazy even when we cannot break out of the social expectations around us.
 3. **Fantasizing an Alternative World.** Beyond the parable and back to Jeffrey Rubenstein's conception of the Purim Carnival, we might say that the way that Purim is celebrated provides a model of an alternative reality that can serve as a kind of moral compass and a prefiguration of the world to come in the Messianic age. In other words, Purim, if understood in its full depth, can provide a model (a sign, in the language of the story) of the real egalitarian and spontaneous human society (*communitas*) that represents true sanity. This should represent a reminder to the Jews that they have a task in this world and that they must never forget that the world in which they find themselves is an "insane" world, whose values they must never accept.
- Explore the ideas with them and ask the students to write down their reactions to the ideas. Share the students' reactions.

EXERCISE: A Summary Debate On The Resolution: “Purim Should Be Abolished”

The aim of this exercise is to process the material that has been covered in this section regarding the values that underlie the observance and celebration of Purim.

Reviewing The Purim Customs

- Ask the students in pairs to list as many rituals or customs of Purim as they can remember. Divide them into two sets of small groups. One set has to write reasons for the Purim traditions being seen as positive. The other set has to write reasons for the traditions being seen as negative.

Debating Purim

- Now write on the board:

In View Of The Wildness And Non-Jewish Nature Of The Celebration Of Purim In Our Community We Propose The Cancellation Of The Purim Celebrations For This Year.

- This should be run as an organized debate. Four people should have prepared the debate before the class. The proposers represent the Jewish community leaders. The debate should be run with two people proposing the motion and two opposing. Let students who prepared reasons for the customs being seen as positive attack the proposers, while those who prepared reasons for the customs being seen as negative, will attack the reasoning of the proposal's opponents.
- Finally, finish the debate and vote on the issue out of character.
- Discuss the issue and sum up the students' opinions.

Summing Up The Celebrations. Planning The Ideal Purim Party

- Organize the students to plan their own Purim party with several elements of the traditional customs as well as the laws studied above. For example, have one group prepare a satirical version of the kiddush (see the Beraishit stories of Lot and Noach for quotes) and another preparing a spoof on their Rabbis teacher. One group should plan an outlandish version of the Purim story itself, and another should consider how to incorporate the important connection with the poor. One group should prepare “Manot” and think whom they should be given to. There might be a costume party with the best Esther among the boys and the best Mordechai among the girls. Think what role Vashti should play. There should be a drinks committee planning that whole side of the party. Adverts should be sent out to the rest of the school and these adverts should publicise the reasons why it is so important to celebrate Purim and what is the real authentic way to do so!

Appendix on Purim Customs and their Rationale

Purim Seudah – The Feast of Fools

The Purim experience involves not only the hearing of the Megillah in the synagogue, but many home-based food and liquor experiences, hence its place within our book of home-Judaism around the table.

The **feasting** involves an excess of foods though particular foods are not mandated. Why should Purim be so earthy in its celebration? The threat of Haman was to exterminate our bodies, not as on Hanukkah to suppress our religion, so we respond by sanctifying life concretely. Emerging alive we celebrate the here and now for there is no sense in delayed gratification and self-restraint when the danger of Haman may return at the next casting of lots. Out of the events of a near Holocaust in Persia 2500 years ago emerged a holiday of excesses with a boundless energy for living it up in the here and now whatever the anti-Semitic threats that remind us of Haman even in our own generation. The hate that surrounded us will not poison our appreciation of life or make us withdraw into an apprehensive siege mentality. Open your house and your pantry and invite everyone to enjoy life.

Mishloach Manot – Pre-Purim Baking and Purim Day Exchange of Gifts of Food

Often in times of danger we withdraw into our inner circle to protect ourselves. However the Megillah (Esther 9:22) encourages us to reinforce Jewish solidarity and generosity for we were all implicated in Haman's plot whether rich or poor, whether more or less religious, wherever we lived among the 127 provinces from Ethiopia to India. Therefore we send gifts of food – at least **two kinds** – to all our friends so they may enjoy the Purim Seudah and share in our food and our caring as well as in our historical fate.

Pre-Purim baking takes over our kitchens in order to prepare at least two types of food for at least two different friends. This takes quite literally the plural nouns mentioned in the Megillah – Manot. In fact, each family usually bakes and gathers many kinds of food for each gift basket. These foods - ready to eat or drink for the Purim Day dinner - count for the Mishloach Manot. These portions are sent (Mishloach) via a messenger to a friend's home. The point is to express Jewish solidarity concretely by exchanging not just good wishes but concrete benefits. Giving food, as on a Shiva to a family of mourners, is another way of saying I care about you, I am giving food to reinforce the life-force in you. Many communities – synagogues or Jewish schools - provide both the food and the messengers so that anyone may send from two to ten such Mishloach Manot for a fee that is donated to Tzedaka.

Though no particular symbolic food is mandated as on Pesach, in families of eastern European origin Hamantaschen are often baked with various fillings like “ma'an” – poppy seeds or mixed fruits. Originally the word meant poppy seed (Ha-Ma'an) pockets (Taschen) but the sound of Haman's name lead to explanations like – Haman's Ears or his three-cornered hat.

***Matanot Levyonim* – Sending Money to Jew and Non-Jew Alike for their Festive Table**

Solidarity reaches out across economic lines to enable everyone to celebrate the Seudah. At least two coins are given to at least to needy persons. In fact in contrast to Haman who sought to single out the Jews as the only people “dispersed and separated (perhaps self-segregated) among the other peoples ... whose laws are different from those of other people” (Esther 3:8) and then sought to “select” them out for extermination and set all other peoples against them, by contrast, Jewish law mandates giving aid to any poor person without making any distinctions among those who ask for help whether or not they are Jews.

Purim Kiddush

In fact there is no official “Kiddush” for Purim even though drinking is a central mitzvah. Why? For Kiddush means to sanctify time. All holidays on which work is forbidden (Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah etc) have Kiddush that sanctifies them, separating them from days when work may be performed. On Purim work is permitted and so it is not a Holy Day, hence there is no Kiddush.

However as a time for farce, for satirical self- mocking, Purim has become an occasion for Jews since at least the Middle Ages, to make up their own hilarious and often ribald versions of the Purim Kiddush. References to Lot’s and Noach’s drunkenness which both ended in sexual indiscretions abound. Try writing your own.

Purim Torah as Farce: Making Fun of Sacred and Profane Alike

The Purim experience seeks to liberate our fantasy and our often ironic sense of humor as we allow selves to be sarcastic and trenchant in making fun of our enemies and ourselves.

A healthy and self-confident culture can periodically make sport of its most sacred practices. It can imagine, at least once in awhile, a wholly different kind of world – one where the last becomes first, accepted values are inverted, and fools become kings.

Yeshiva students often prepared a Haggadah for Drunks or wrote parodies on Talmudic tractates (*Masechet Shikorim* by Kalonymus ben Kalonymus , 14th century France) and even dressed up and imitated their most revered teachers in giving bogus Torah lessons. The student imposter was called The *Purim Rebbe* and this resembled the medieval Feast of fools where someone dressed up as king or pope to be paraded through the streets in farcical fashion, often to the displeasure of the actual prelate or royalty.

Excerpts from *The Feast of Fools* by Harvey Cox

Imagination opens doors that are normally closed to us. Through its power we sneak into forbidden situations, we explore terrifying territory, we try out new styles....Fantasy is “advanced imagination.” No holds barred. We suspend not only

the rules of social conduct, but the whole structure of everyday “reality.” In fantasy we become not only our ideal selves, but totally different people. We soar...But there are perils when fantasy loses its link to reason and fact. [p.62]

Human openness to a really new future is dependent on the capacity for fantasy. Fantasy thrives among the dissatisfied...where there is an element of alienation from our present society. Groups cut out of the benefits of a given society are the ones who most often dream about another.[p.64]

A liberating ritual is one that provides the formal structure within which freedom and fantasy can twist and tumble...An enormous wealth of human feelings become the material for one’s own escapades in creativity. The best analogy is a jazz combo or a Dixieland band in which spectacular innovations and individual *ad libs* can spin out. [p. 75]

Social parody: Unmasking the pretence of the powerful always makes their power seem less resistible. That is why tyrants tremble before fools and dictators ban political cabarets. [p.5]

There is a frivolousness [that teaches us no longer to take ourselves too seriously.] ... It is not some final absurdity of the universe that we must recognize; it is the relative absurdity of our efforts, something we can accept without ceasing to make an effort. [p.26]

The Feast of Fools by Harvey Cox, Harper and Row, 1969

Costumes

The costumes create a Jewish carnival atmosphere committed to turning our lives upside down. It briefly but suggestively violates usual boundaries of decorum and hierarchy, blurring and experimenting with alternative identities using masks and dress-up. While in North America in schools children generally dress up as Megillah characters like Mordechai and Esther, in Israel any identity is fair game from soldier to terrorist to Dutch girl in wooden shoes to Cinderella or the Simpsons. Invite people at the Seudah to come in costume and provide a few odd garments or hats for anyone who feels like dressing up once they sit at the Purim meal and imbibe some liquor.

Jokes

The Megillah makes fun of Ahashverosh and Haman in ways that lighten up the awful fact that the Jews are dependent on these political leaders. They are drunk, vain, their male egos are easily damaged, paranoid and dictatorial. Making fun behind their backs seems the only way to create psychological distance from them less we begin to see ourselves as they see us or simply we despair. Gallows humor of this type is typical of oppressed people whether the subjects under the Soviet regime or Jews as persecuted minority in many lands.

Ask someone to select some wonderful jokes about people in power to read aloud. Or simply choose at random from Bill Novak and Moshe Waldocks’ *Big Book of Jewish Humor* or Joseph Telushkin’s *Jewish Humor*.

The Rabbis of the Talmud were wary of sarcastic “joking around” which they called *Leitzanut*. However under special circumstances they encouraged humor at the expense of the oppressing society. They called it *Leitzanut d’Avodah Zarah*, meaning deprecating humor at the expense of the pagan society that ruled them. Here is a very poignant example of Jewish humor of this sort and its essential role in maintaining one’s sanity and keeping one’s spirits up in time of severe repression. It occurred under the Nazis in Warsaw and it also recalls Mordechai’s predicament when Haman demanded he bow down publicly or be punished:

To make fun of the Oppressor is to Liberate oneself from His Terror
Story of Chaim Kaplan, Jewish educator in the Warsaw Ghetto:

OUR CHILDREN’S JEWISH REVENGE, May 15, 1940

Sometimes our work is done by schoolchildren. The children of our poor, with whom the streets of Warsaw are filled at all hours of the day, are not afraid even of the despotic conquerors. They remain as always –lively and mischievous. Their poverty and oppression serves to shield them from robberies and confiscations. No one will harm them. Even the conquerors’ eye overlooks them: Let the Jewish weeds pine away in their iniquity. But these weeds watch every act of the conquerors and imitate the Nazis’ manner of speech and their cruelty most successfully. For them this is nothing but good material for games and amusements. Childhood does much.

Once there came into the ghetto a certain Nazi from a province where the Jews are required to greet every Nazi soldier they encountered, removing their hats as they do. There is no such practice in Warsaw, but the “honored guest” wanted to be strict and force the rules of his place of origin on us. A great uproar arose suddenly in Jewish Karmelicka Street: Some psychopathic Nazi is demanding that every passerby take his hat off in his honor. Many fled, many hid, many were caught for their transgression and beaten, and many were bursting with laughter. The little “wise guys”, the true lords of the street, noticed what was going on and found great amusement in actually obeying the Nazi, and showing him great respect in a manner calculated to make a laughingstock out of the “great lord” in the eyes of all the passersby. They ran up to greet him a hundred and one times, taking off their hats in his honor. They gathered in great numbers, with an artificial look of awe on their faces, and wouldn’t stop taking off their hats. Some did this with straight faces, while their friends stood behind them and laughed. Then these would leave and others would approach, bowing before the Nazi with bare heads. There was no end to the laughter. Every one of the mischievous youths so directed his path as to appear before the Nazi several times, bowing before him in deepest respect. That wasn’t all. Riffraff gathered for the fun, and they made a noisy demonstration in honor of the Nazi with a resounding cheer.

This is Jewish revenge!
From: THE SCROLL OF AGONY,
The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan