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## Stories with a Twist [67]

### Not Every Time Does a Miracle Occur Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b

Revised: June 2025



#### Background to Our Story (What you need to know to better understand the story)

##### Esther 9:22

כַּיְמֵי אֲשֶׁר־נָחוּ בָהֶם הַיְהוּדִים מֵאֹיְבֵיהֶם וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֵבֶל לְיוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וּשְׂמֵחָה וּמְשָׁלַח מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְּנֹת לְאֶבְיָנִים:

*as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.*

**?** What is Megillah's definition of feasting and joy?

#### Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b

אָמַר רַבָּא: מִיִּחְיִיב אֵינִישׁ לְבָסוּמֵי בְּפוּרֵיָא עַד דְּלֹא יָדַע בֵּין אַרוּר הָמֵן לְבְרוּךְ מְרֻדְכַי.

**Rava said: A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he is so intoxicated that he does not know how to distinguish between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai.**

**?** How does the Talmudic text define feasting? What exactly is the mitzvah?

**A person is obligated to become intoxicated (There are many different explanations for this halakha)**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit-Megilla. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 233.

There are many different explanations for this *halakha*. The Rambam explains that one must drink until he falls asleep from the wine and will then be unable to differentiate between Haman and Mordecai (see *Oraḥ Halakha*). *Tosafot*, based on the Jerusalem Talmud, explains that after reading the Megilla, it was customary to recite several passages relating to the characters mentioned in it, and some say that an entire poem was read (Rashash). A person will be unable to recite these texts correctly if he is intoxicated; or he will confuse male and female and singular and plural formulations (*Re'ah Duda'im*). The Rema MiPano explains that one will be unable to distinguish between: Cursed is Haman, and: Blessed is Mordecai, when he hears it.

There are several other explanations for this obligation. One is that because the numerological value is equal for the Hebrew terms: Cursed is Haman, and: Blessed is Mordecai, and one is required to drink only until he can no longer make that calculation (*Aguda*; Rav Ya'akov Weil). Another explanation is that this is an allusion to the fact that one should drink until he is unable to distinguish even between diametric opposites. Yet another opinion is that one should drink until he forgets his troubles and the hatred that exists between people, so that it is as if the rancor and struggles between Haman and Mordecai are forgotten as well.

### **A person is obligated to become intoxicated (Halakha)**

One is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he is unable to distinguish between: Cursed is Haman, and: Blessed is Mordecai, in accordance with the opinion of Rava.

Some maintain that in the wake of the incident involving Rava and Rabbi Zeira, the *halakha* is no longer in accordance with Rava's opinion, and one drinks only a bit more than he is accustomed to drink (*Taz*, citing the *Beit Yosef*; Rabbeinu Ephraim).

Some maintain that one should drink until he falls asleep, at which point he will no longer be able to distinguish between Haman and Mordecai (*Peri Megadim*; Rambam). If one damages another in the course of the Purim festivities, some hold that he is exempt from the obligation to pay (Rema). If the damages are substantial, the custom is not to exempt him (*Mishna Berura*; *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 695:2).

### **Rabba**



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit-Megilla. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 360.

Rav Abba bar Naḥmani HaKohen, popularly referred to as Rabba throughout the Babylonian Talmud, was a third-generation Babylonian amora.

Rabba was a student of Rav Huna, who himself was a student of Rav. Consequently, Rabba's approach to *halakha* was in concert with Rav's teachings. Rabba was considered the sharpest among his peers, to the extent that he was referred to as: One who uproots mountains, in contrast with his colleague, Rav Yosef, whose breadth of knowledge earned him the nickname: Sinai.

With regard to disagreements between Rabba and Rav Yosef, the *halakha* is almost always in accordance with the opinion of Rabba.

Rabba had many students, and virtually all of the Sages of the following generation studied with him. His personal life was one of great tragedy. It appears that his children died during his lifetime. He was poverty stricken his entire life, eking out a living from agricultural work. When his nephew, Abaye, became orphaned at a young age, Rabba took him in and raised him.

## Rabbi Zeira



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Ta'anit-Megilla. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 385.

Born in Babylonia, Rabbi Zeira, known in the Jerusalem Talmud as Rabbi Ze'ira, was one of the great third-generation amora'im in Eretz Yisrael. His father was a tax collector for the Persian government, who was praised as one of the few who filled that position with honesty. Rabbi Zeira ascended to Eretz Yisrael, where he entirely identified with the style of Torah study there. The Gemara relates that he fasted one hundred fasts in order to forget the Torah that he had studied in Babylonia.

Rabbi Zeira was famous for his sharp intellect, and he was the author of incisive halakhot. He was also known as an extremely God-fearing man. There are several stories related to his distinction in this area. His modesty was such that he did not even want to be ordained with the title rabbi. He relented only after he was told that with ordination comes atonement for one's sins.

The Gemara relates that he fasted one hundred additional fasts so that the fire of Gehenna would not harm him. He would test himself by entering a fiery furnace. On one occasion, his legs were scorched, and from then on he was called: The little man with the scorched legs. He was a contemporary of Rav Hisda, Rav Sheshet, and Rabba in Babylonia, and of the disciples of Rabbi Yo'hanan in Eretz Yisrael, and he engaged in extensive halakhic discourse with all of them.

Apparently, he was a flax merchant in Eretz Yisrael, and it is conceivable that he had occasion in the course of his business to return to Babylonia several times.

The text of the beginning of Rabbi Zeira's eulogy is preserved in the Talmud: The land of Shinar, Babylonia, conceived and gave birth; the land of splendor, Eretz Yisrael, raised her plaything. Woe unto her, said Reket, Tiberias, for she has lost her beloved vessel.

He had a son, Rabbi Ahava, who was a Sage in the following generation.

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b

רַבָּה וְרַבִּי זִירָא עֲבָדוּ סְעוּדַת פּוּרִים בְּהַדְּי הַדְּדִי, אִיבְסוּם, קָם רַבָּה שְׁחִטָּיה לְרַבִּי זִירָא. לְמַחַר בְּעֵי רַחֲמֵי וְאַחֲרֵיהּ.  
לְשׁוֹנָה אָמַר לֵיהּ: נִיתִי מֵר וְנִעְבִּיד סְעוּדַת פּוּרִים בְּהַדְּי הַדְּדִי! אָמַר לֵיהּ: לֹא בְּכָל שְׁעָתָא וּשְׁעָתָא מִתְרַחֲשִׁישׁ נִיסָא .

Rabba and Rabbi Zeira prepared a Purim feast with each other, and they became intoxicated to the point that Rabba arose and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira.

The next day, when he became sober and realized what he had done, Rabba asked God for mercy, and revived him.

The next year, Rabba said to Rabbi Zeira: Let the Master come and let us prepare the Purim feast with each other.

He [Rabbi Zeira] said to him: Not every time does a miracle occur (miracles do not happen each and every hour).



**Explaining the Story** - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** Why did Rabba and Rabbi Zeira feast together on Purim?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did Rabba slay Rabbi Zeira?

**?** Why did Rabba ask for mercy on behalf of Rabbi Zeira, and revived him?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did Rabba invite Rabbi Zeira to join him the following year for the Purim feast?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did Rabbi Zeira refuse the invitation?

### “The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

**!** “Not every time does a miracle occur!” Or “What we can learn about toxic people and complicated relationships from this strange story.”



Our strange story (the Rabbis of later generations still debate how to interpret it), can shed light on complicated relationships with people we love, and how to best handle them.

Rabbi Zeira's traumatic experience taught him, and all of us, something worth remembering: the best way to handle toxic people and situations and experiences with a high probability of negative consequences, is by staying away from them as much as possible.

# Purim: To Drink or Not to Drink?

Esther 9:22

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**Rabbi Moshe Isserles (The Rema)**

## §695: THE LAWS CONCERNING THE PURIM FEAST

(Contains Four Paragraphs)

*Gloss: It is a mitzvah to have a large Purim feast. (...) (1) One will fulfil /his obligation to feast on Purim/ with one feast. (...)*

1. If the Purim feast (2) was held at night one will not have fulfilled his obligation.

*Gloss: Nevertheless, one should rejoice in the night as well (3) and have a somewhat larger meal. (...)*

2. A person is obliged<sup>1\*</sup> to become intoxicated on Purim, to the extent that he will not be aware /of the difference/ (4) between, "Cursed be Haman", and, "Blessed be Mordechai (Mordecai)".

*Gloss: There are /authorities/ who say that one does not need to become as drunk as that, but he should /merely/ drink more than he is used to /drink/ (...) (5) and sleep and being asleep he will not be aware /of the difference/ between "Cursed be Haman", and, "Blessed be Mordechai". (...) Whether /one drinks/ more or whether /one drinks/ less /it is commendable/, provided that his heart's intention is /the service of/ Heaven.*

Moses Isserles (or Moshe Isserlis) (1520 (Kraków, Poland) - May 11, 1572, was an eminent Ashkenazic Rabbi, Talmudist, and Posek, renowned for his fundamental work of *Halakha* (Jewish law), entitled *HaMapah* (lit., "the tablecloth"), an inline commentary on the [Shulkhan Aruch](#) (lit. "the set table"). He is also well known for the *Darkhei Moshe*, a commentary on the *Tur*. Moses Isserles is also referred to as the Remo, Rema, or Rama, the Hebrew acronym for Rabbi Moses Isserles.

**?** What is the Rama's attitude towards the Talmudic ruling? Why does the Ramah reach that opinion?

## Purim: To Drink or Not to Drink?

By Rabbi Professor David Golinkin

Rabbi Professor David Golinkin is President of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. He writes articles on a variety of topics from the perspective of Conservative Judaism.



The Jewish people throughout history has always opposed drunkenness. That is the message of the stories of Noah and Lot (Genesis 9 and 19) as well as of the book of Proverbs (23:30-35). According to our Sages, Nadav and Avihu were killed because they were drunk (Leviticus Rabbah 20:9 and parallels), drunkenness leads to forbidden sexual relations (Ketubot 65a and Numbers Rabbah 10:3) and "there is nothing that causes a person greater lamentation than wine" (Sanhedrin 70b).

As a result, it is difficult to fathom the primary Talmudic source related to drinking on Purim (Megillah 7b): "Rava said: a person must get drunk on Purim until he cannot distinguish between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordechai'. Rabbah and R. Zeira made a Purim feast together. They got drunk. Rabbah stood up and killed R. Zeira. On the morrow, Rabbah prayed for him and revived him. The following year, Rabbah said to him: 'Come, let us celebrate the Purim feast together!' R. Zeira replied: 'Miracles don't happen every day!'"

Rava's statement begs an explanation. R. David Abudraham explained that the Sages required drinking on Purim since all of the miracles in the days of Ahashverosh occurred at drinking parties (Sefer Abudraham, pp. 209-210). On the other hand, Rava was a vintner (Berakhot 56a and Bava Metzia 73a) and clearly liked to drink wine (Pesachim 107b). As for the strange story, Rabbi H. Z. Reines suggests that the entire episode is a Purim joke (Hadoar 5737, p. 266)!

Whatever the simple meaning is, it is clear that the *poskim* (halakhic authorities) throughout the generations felt very uncomfortable with Rava's demand to get

drunk on Purim, and therefore each *posek* tried to circumvent the requirement. Here is a sampling of their rulings:

- R. Ephraim (North Africa, 11th cent.) claimed that the story comes to cancel out Rava's statement and therefore one should not get drunk on Purim.
- R. Alexander Zusslin Hacoen (Germany, 14th cent.) explained that "cursed be Haman" equals "blessed be Mordechai" in gematria - they both add up to 502! - and it requires less wine to become that intoxicated.
- R. Yosef Haviva (Spain, 15th cent.) wrote that one should say funny things so that the beholders will think that one cannot distinguish between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordechai".
- Maimonides (Egypt, 12th cent.) rules that "he drinks wine until he gets drunk and falls asleep...", and this ruling was adopted by Rabbi Moshe Isserles in the Shulhan Arukh (Poland, 16th cent.).
- R. Natanel Weil (Germany, 18th cent.) explained: " 'until' - up to and not including, because otherwise he would reach the drunkenness of Lot".
- R. Aaron of Lunel (Provence, 14th cent.) commented "that he should drink more than his normal custom in order to rejoice greatly and to make the poor rejoice and he shall comfort them...and that is true joy." This is the most original interpretation: that the purpose of drinking on Purim is to help us fulfill the mitzvah of mattanot la'evyonim (alms to the poor) and not simply to get drunk.
- Finally, R. Menahem Hameiri (Provence, 14th cent.) said: "In any case, we are not commanded to get drunk ...for we were not commanded to engage in debauchery and foolishness but to have heartfelt joy which will lead us to the love of God and to gratitude for the miracles which he performed for us".

In recent years, we have witnessed a marked increase in the use of wine, alcohol and drugs by Israeli youth due to the dual influence of Western and Russian cultures. This increase has led, in turn, to an increase in traffic accidents and injuries. These are the ways of Noah, Lot and Ahashverosh, not of the Jewish people throughout its history. The poskim understood this significant difference. That is why they ruled: "heartfelt joy" - yes, "debauchery and foolishness" - no. May we remember this crucial difference both on Purim and throughout the year.

**?** How does Rabbi Golinkin build on those who came before him?