**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden**

**as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #22:**

**Above the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil**

**Part 3**

**The Root of the Book of Esther**

**and the Holiday of Purim in the Garden of Eden**

**III**

**Until One Cannot Tell the Difference**

When we examine the nature of the days of Purim against the backdrop of all that has been said, a great difficulty arises: As we have seen, the Book of *Esther* opens with drunkenness, from which grows evil's ability to take control and cause ruin; and it ends with the removal of wine, with sobering up, with knowledge from which stems the ability to fight against evil and eradicate it from the world. In light of this, it might have been appropriate to prohibit the drinking of wine on the days of Purim for future generations, thereby expressing the unique struggle that took place at that time. However, already at the end of the Book of *Esther* it becomes clear that this is not the case: the days of Purim are established for that generation, as well as for future generations, as days of **banqueting** [= wine-drinking, *mishteh*] and gladness (*Esther* 9:17-22).

The problem intensifies when we consider the instructions appearing in *Chazal* regarding drinking wine on Purim, instructions codified as normative *halakha* (*Shulchan Arukh*, *OC* 695:2):

Rava said: It is one's duty to cheer up [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordekhai." (*Megilla* 7b)

On the face of it, this law does not perpetuate the salvation that grows out of Esther's struggle with evil. On the contrary, it perpetuates the abandonment of knowledge and reason which is the source of all the evil in the Book of *Esther.* There is no trace of any aspect of Esther's great struggle, which is entirely aimed at making the distinction between cursed Haman and blessed Mordekhai.

The answer to this question takes us beyond the verses of the Book of *Esther*. We must approach this phenomenon with the understanding that the story of the Garden of Eden stands in the background of the book and its meaning in particular, and of the days of Purim in general.

In our first *shiur* relating to Purim, we learned that in the wake of the sin of Adam and Chava we may speak of three stages in the human condition.

Before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, man lives in natural harmony with God's goodness, with no internal attraction to evil and with no knowledge that would enable man to distinguish between good and evil. Had Adam and Chava chosen to adhere to and eternalize their nature by eating from the Tree of Life, had they not denied their own nature and allowed themselves be tempted by the serpent, they would not have needed to distinguish between good and evil, for they would naturally have done what is good.

The second stage begins with the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Now that evil becomes an inner force residing within human beings, a part of them, they can no longer live exclusively in accordance with their own nature, without judgment, because their nature now has also an evil side. From now on, man must distinguish between good and evil with the help of reason, and then reject the evil and choose the good. Abandoning reason in this reality would allow evil to take control. Humanity's attempt to jump from this state to the level destined for them before the sin, to eat from the Tree of Life and to live life without distinguishing between good and evil — such an attempt would only perpetuate evil's control of man, and therefore the path to the Tree of Life is closed to them.

The second stage, the stage after the sin, constitutes a preparation for the final stage: the more a person distinguishes between good and evil, and the more one rejects evil and eradicates it, the more one brings oneself and the entire world to a reality in which there is only good.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is the goal of the Torah, which identifies evil, differentiates it from the good, guides one to disengage from and eradicate it, ultimately leading man to a world that is entirely good. In this way, the Torah elevates reality from the level of the knowledge of good and evil to the repair of the sin of Adam and Chava, and thus to the level of the Tree of Life that is above knowledge. However, in order that the attempt to rise up to life that is above knowledge not be unduly pretentious, which would reveal itself in practice as a fall to a level below knowledge — to a world that is entirely evil, wickedness and lust — the path to the level of the Tree of Life must pass through the discernment of knowledge which fights evil and causes the good to prevail.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This understanding of the various stages of reality sheds light on the meaning of the Purim holiday. The events in Persia take place in the framework of the post-sin world. In this world, the abandonment of reason on the part of Achashverosh and his kingdom, which creates a reality of vibrant life purporting to be a world that is entirely good, actually leads to a world that is entirely evil, under the auspices of the wicked Haman. Esther's struggle is to restore reason, to reestablish the distinction between good and evil, between cursed Haman and blessed Mordekhai. The struggle is crowned with victory, and this salvation is accompanied by a full revelation of reason — absolute distinction between good and evil. Evil is entirely eradicated and the good merits to live on.

Since reason's discernment is complete and the evil is eradicated, there is a special illumination on Purim from the world that is above knowledge, from the world of the future that is entirely good, from the world that belongs to the level of the Tree of Life. In order to taste this wonderful world that is beyond knowledge, we must free ourselves from that knowledge by cheering ourselves with wine: "It is one's duty to cheer up [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordekhai.'"

Countering this duty, which obligates us on Purim to reach a state of totally blurring the difference between cursed Haman and blessed Mordekhai, we find among the laws governing the reading of *Esther* what appears to be the opposite obligation, i.e., the duty to distinguish between them:

One must say: Cursed be Haman, blessed be Mordekhai, cursed be Zeresh, blessed be Esther, cursed be all idolaters, blessed be Israel. And one must say: May Charvona as well be remembered for good. (*Shulchan Arukh*, *OC* 690:16)[[3]](#footnote-3)

What, then, is required of us on Purim — to use our reason and differentiate between good and evil, or perhaps to transcend reason and cancel that distinction? In light of what we have seen above, we understand that in order to rise to the level above knowledge, we must pass through a complete clarification of reason, by differentiating between good and evil.

These stages explain the structure of the Purim holiday. Apart from the *halakha* that obligates drinking wine cited above, we find in the Gemara and especially in the *Shulchan Arukh* another *halakha* regarding the Purim feast:

Rava said: One who eats the Purim feast at night has not fulfilled his obligation. (*Megilla* 7b)[[4]](#footnote-4)

We must go through several stages before we reach the time of drinking. First we must read the Book of *Esther*, passing from the blurring of reason at the beginning of the book, to the differentiation between good and evil. After completing the reading of *Esther* we must verbally express the distinction between good and evil that is derived from the events described in the book with the statement: "Cursed be Haman, blessed be Mordekhai,” etc.

Only afterwards does the time for drinking wine at the Purim meal arrive — after the complete distinction between good and evil and the eradication of the evil, through the reading of the Book of *Esther* and the reciting of *Shoshanat Ya’akov*. Only if we can make a mental distinction between good and evil, can we reach the level that is above knowledge by way of drinking; only after reciting "Cursed be Haman, blessed be Mordekhai," can we rise up to "until one cannot tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordekhai.'"

When there is no longer any evil in the world, and when we have purified ourselves of any inner inclination toward it, there is no further need to curse it, as it no longer exists, neither outside nor inside. There remains, however, what was born of it — the holiday of Purim that comes into the world "by virtue" of Haman, a holiday on which we merit to elevate ourselves higher and higher, to the point of cleaving to the Tree of Life. Rising up above the knowledge of good and evil does not mean mixing the two together, or substituting the one for the other, as happens when one relinquishes reason before distinguishing between good and evil. This transcendence is the transcendence of full belonging to the good.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The complete struggle with the abandonment of reason in the beginning of the Book of *Esther* does not then exhaust itself in overcoming evil and restoring reason, but rather it is realized precisely through liberation from the constrictions of knowledge, true ascent above knowledge, based on adhering to the good and the Source of good.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Let us conclude with the words of the *Sefat Emet* and of Rav Kook regarding the meaning of drinking wine on Purim to the point of drunkenness, fitting words with which to complete our study of the matter:

It is stated in the Gemara: It is one's duty to cheer up [with wine] on Purim [until one cannot tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordekhai"]. I heard about this from the holy mouth of my teacher and grandfather: To rise up above the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but I do not clearly remember what he said. However, it seems that the gist of his words is that which it is stated: "A tree (gallows) fifty cubits high," these corresponding to all the levels of the gates of impurity, as there are forty-nine aspects of impurity and forty-nine aspects of purity. For the power of Amalek is found at all the levels. But in truth at the fiftieth gate of holiness, there are no two paths, but rather it is entirely good, because there is the source of unity…

Therefore it is taught that on Purim they accepted the Torah, that is, there was a revelation of the Tree of Life; and there it is said that "one cannot tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordekhai,'" for the *Sitra Achra* (Other Side)has no hold there at all, as this is the source of unity. (*Sefat Emet, Purim* 5640)[[7]](#footnote-7)

And so the Rabbi would say on Purim, when his heart was merry with wine, when his spirit sang with the wine of Torah, wine preserved in the grapes of his spirit.

Rava said: It is one's duty to cheer up [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordekhai." Until one cannot tell the difference — until one rises up above knowledge, above the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, until one reaches the glory of Adam, until one returns to the level of Adam before the sin, before the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. *Chazal* said: "Where is Haman indicated in the Torah? In the verse (*Bereishit* 3:11): 'Is it from (*ha-min*) the tree, whereof I commanded you that you should not eat?'" (*Chullin* 139b). Eating from the Tree of Knowledge introduces evil into the world — “this evil Haman” — but above the tree, before the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, there is no room for Haman in the world, his name and his memory are wiped out as if he never were. (*Mo’adei Ha-Re'aya*, p. 258)[[8]](#footnote-8)

On Purim, after we have distinguished between good and evil and eradicated the evil from the world, we merit tasting something of the special level of "until one cannot tell the difference," the level of the Tree of Life.

To life!

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. An important element in this process is the transition from an internal war between the good and evil that is intermingled in man, to the service of God through ever-growing identification with the good. This transition is discussed at length in the writings of Rav Kook, and it has become clear that it is particularly relevant to the generation of the redemption, making it increasingly more significant for our lives. See, for example, *Ma'amar Ha-dor*, in the book *Ikvei Ha-tzon*, regarding the difference between the service of one who must overcome and the service of one for whom it comes in a more straightforward manner, and between repentance out of fear and repentance out of love. See also: *Orot Ha-kodesh* III, p. 76, regarding the breaking of the will in the childish phase of human history, vis-à-vis a strengthening of the will in its mature phase. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The two modes of liberation from reason are concisely summarized in the golden language of *Chazal*: "One drinks wine and it is good for him, another drinks wine and it is bad for him. A Torah scholar drinks and it is good for him; an ignorant person drinks and it is bad for him" (*JT Ma'aser Sheni* 4:7). Drinking wine causes one to lose the capacity for reason. Ridding oneself of reason allows an individual to be taken over by the evil side within that person. Only in the case of a Torah scholar, who throughout life labors to cleave to the good and to remove every characteristic trace of evil in accordance with the Torah's teachings, does the liberation from reason bring the scholar to a level above reason, to a greater revelation of all the good within the individual. The spiritual struggle in our time, in Israel and in the world, revolves around this issue. There is a great thirst for life, and many phenomena in the world express a search for life through the abandonment of reason, through addiction to alcohol, drugs and gratifying lusts. The Torah promises that man may find life, but only through the labor of reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The source of this *halakha* is *JT Megilla* 3:7. The *Yerushalmi* before us states: "One must say: 'Cursed be Haman, cursed be his sons.' Rabbi Pinchas says: One must say: 'May Charvona be remembered for good.'"

However, *Tosafot*, *Megilla* 7b, s.v. *De-lo*, cite a more expanded version of this passage in the *Yerushalmi.* See also *Soferim* 14:6. We fulfill this *halakha* through the recitation of *Shoshanat Ya’akov*, which includes all of these statements. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This *halakha* appears in the Gemara next to the *halakha* that obligates a person to drink wine. Similarly, Rav Yosef Karo brings the two *halakhot* together in *OC* 695:2-3. These are the only two *halakhot* that he codifies regarding the Purim feast. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rava's statement, "It is one's duty to cheer up [with wine] on Purim until one cannot tell the difference between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordekhai,'" is formulated against the background of the story of Noach's emergence from the ark:

And Noach the man of the earth began, and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and became drunk… And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done to him. And he said: Cursed be Canaan… Blessed be the Lord, God of Shem…" (*Bereishit* 9:20-26)

The clear parallel gives rise to the lesson that we learn from the story of Noach: in contrast to Noach who abandons reason before he knows who is cursed and who is blessed, and thus enables Cham to sin, and in contrast to Noach, who distinguishes between “cursed” and “blessed” only after sobering up from his drunkenness, we begin with knowing who is cursed and who is blessed from the mitzva of reading the *Megilla*, and we end with liberating ourselves from reason through the mitzvaof the Purim feast. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should be emphasized that it is not our intention to say that in an ideal world knowledge has no value, but rather we wish to emphasize that the foundation upon which everything is built is not knowledge, but cleaving to the good that is above knowledge, God. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See also *Sefat Emet* 5661, s.v. *Ita.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also the words of Rav Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin (*Peri Tzadik* on Purim, no. 1):

“The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor” (*Esther* 8:16)… “Gladness” corresponds to the Supreme God, which is understanding of the heart, as it is stated: “and understanding with their heart” (*Yeshayahu* 6:10). And it is written: “and gladness for the upright in heart” (*Tehillim* 97:11), that is to say, when he straightens his heart, when he empties his heart of evil and all becomes good, then they are straight for gladness…

The mitzva of feasting and gladness correspond to what is stated, “and gladness,” which corresponds to the Supreme God, which is understanding of the heart, as we have stated. And it is written: “feasting and gladness” (*Esther* 9:18),that Israel merit gladness through feasting with wine. Even though wine causes the opposite, may God have mercy upon us, for all forbidden sexual relationships appear to him like a plain (*Yoma* 75a), nevertheless Israel merits through wine “gladness for the upright in heart,” to straighten the heart that it be entirely good, that they be glad and of good heart.

See also what he says at the end of *Poked Akarim*, s.v. *Ve-dor ha-midbar*; end of *Divrei Soferim*; *Resisei Laila*, no. 32.

According to Rav Tzadok, the people of Israel reach, by way of the wine of Purim, the level of "glad and of good heart," the level which in the first part of the Book of *Esther* is associated with Haman. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)