**“Because They Partook of the Banquet of the Wicked One”**

**Based on a sicha by**

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The Gemara (*Megilla* 12a) records:

The disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: “Why were the haters of Israel of that generation punished with [a decree of] annihilation?”

He responded: “Give your own answer.”

They said, “Because they partook of the banquet of the wicked one [Achashverosh]…’”

According to this exchange, the disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai propose that partaking of Achashverosh’s banquet is a sin so great that the terrible decree promulgated against all the Jews of the Persian Empire may be viewed as a fitting punishment. (“Haters of Israel” is a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves, as the Talmud refrains from referencing the nation directly in such calamitous circumstances.) On the face of it, this is difficult to accept. How are we to understand this equation?

It seems that the willing participation in the banquet is an eloquent testament to the spiritual state of the Jews in Shushan at the time. Shushan is a wealthy, progressive, cosmopolitan city. Most of the provinces of the Persian Empire consist of rural agricultural settlements maintaining a more traditional way of life, with a transfer of land — the source of livelihood and a symbol of life — from one generation to the next. The urban society of Shushan, on the other hand, is characterized by a more audacious and exhilarating lifestyle, with no foundation of values or tradition. Shushan is a glamorous and captivating city, at the peak of its cultural development.

This must certainly have a direct effect on the Jews of the city, too. They are assimilated into this melting pot where the most powerful influence is not ancestral roots and heritage, but rather the contemporary scene. It is a place where one’s personal identity is not defined by ethnic or national markers, and one is simply another face among “all the people who were found in Shushan” (*Esther* 1:5).

This, then, is the more profound significance of partaking in the banquet of the wicked Achashverosh. It represented a blurring, perhaps even a disavowal, of Jewish identity, in order to make a clear and unambiguous statement: We are part of “all the people”; we are full and equal subjects and citizens of Achashverosh’s kingdom.

However, the sin goes deeper than just yielding to the surrounding culture because it is easier than retaining a unique Jewish identity. The culture of Shushan is itself morally problematic. The image arising from the description of the banquet is rather shocking (*Esther* 1:3-8). For over six months (“a hundred and eighty days”!), the military and political elite of the empire feast and frolic; then, for an additional week, the entire population of the capital city is occupied with nothing more than stuffing itself with food and drink.

This is simply an orgy of physical, sensual excess, intended to satisfy the lowest of human inclinations. Furthermore, beyond the problem of what people are doing for all this time, there is the problem of what they are not doing: How are they supporting themselves? How is any useful work getting done? They are altogether oriented towards consumption and gluttony, rather than creativity and productivity. The ongoing partying clearly lacks any element of self-discipline.

The repair for the sin of the Jews of Shushan who “partook of the banquet of the wicked one” has been continued by generations of Jews throughout the millennia. The repair is effected through two opposite means: one, the Fast of Esther; the other, the Purim feast. These are two very different paths of repair, but they form an organic whole.

On the Fast of Esther, we go to the extreme of refraining from all food and drink. Through this abstention, we express our rejection of the degenerate world of Shushan, immersed in decadence and endless, mindless festivity. We separate ourselves and cleanse ourselves from the debauchery of the surroundings to which the Jews of Shushan succumb in the *Megilla*.

The Purim feast is a repair of a different sort: not a wholesale rejection of the world of festivity and banqueting, but rather a rectification of it, raising it to the level of holiness and the service of God. Here the repair and sanctification are effected through “days of feasting and gladness” (*Esther* 9:22), days of a holy nature that are meant to help a one give expression to one’s pure inner world. As Rabbi Chiya puts it in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 38a): “As wine enters, secrets emerge.”

The fast and the feast jointly hold the key to repairing the terrible sin of partaking of the banquet of the wicked Achashverosh and all that it represents.