

# ONEG SHABBAS

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## How Much to Drink on Purim?

Rabbi Drew Kaplan

I hope you've been enjoying this series on Purim-drinking, which kicked-off with a discussion of drinking on Purim Katan ("Celebrating 14 Adar I?") four weeks ago (Vol. 3, Iss. 18), then moving on to timing of drinking on Purim ("When to Drink on Purim?") three weeks ago (Vol. 3, Iss. 19), followed by "Who is to Drink on Purim?" two weeks ago (Vol. 3, Iss. 20), then on to "What to Drink on Purim?" last week (Vol. 3, Iss. 21), and now finally moving onto how much to drink on Purim for this issue.

### Talmudic Prescription

How much to drink on Purim has been a deeply vexing question in front of our rabbinic sages throughout the generations. It is certainly a struggle for the rabbis to consider Rava's famous declaration (*Megillah* 7b):

Rava said: "A person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until one does not know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordekhai."	אמר רבא: מיחייב איניש לביסומי בפורי' עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי
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While many rabbis throughout the generations have taken this practice literally, and shared it in their writings as such, including Maimonides (שולחן ערוך, משנה תורה, הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ב:ט"ו) and Rabbi Yosef Karo (אורח חיים תרצ"ה:ב), there has also been a lot of pushback against Rava's apodictic statement.

### Pushback Owing to Talmudic Story

One aspect of pushback has been considered as a result of the story that occurred on the page of Talmud following Rava's statement (*Megillah* 7b):



Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira made a Purim feast with each other, and they became intoxicated and Rabbah arose and slew Rabbi Zeira. The next day, he asked for mercy, and revived him. The next year, he said to him, "Let the Master come and let us prepare the Purim feast with each other." He said to him: "Miracles do not happen each and every hour."

רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי איבסום קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא למחר בעי רחמי ואחיייה לשנה אמר ליה ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי אמר ליה לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא

While the story took place before Rava stated it, as Rabbah (270-330) was the teacher of Rava (280-352), the literary arrangement could be understood as negating Rava's statement. Indeed, this is articulated by Rabbi Ephraim ben Yitzhak ben Abraham of Regensburg (1110-1175), as quoted by Rabbi Karo (בית יוסף, אורח חיים תרצ"ה:א):

Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven (1290-1376) wrote in the name of Rabbi Ephraim ben Yitzhak ben Abraham of Regensburg (1110-1175) that from this incident where Rabbah slew Rabbi Zera at their Purim meal that it contradicts Rava's statement and it is not appropriate to act this way.	וכתב הר"ן בשם רבינו אפרים דמההוא עובדא דקם רבה בסעודת פורים ושחטיה לר' זירא כדאימא בגמרא אידחי ליה מיימרא דרבא ולא שפיר דמי למעבד הכי
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### Perspectives on the Juxtaposition of The Story and Statement in the Talmud

To my mind, there are four different ways of reading the juxtaposition of both Rava's apodictic statement, as well as the third-century Purim incident:

1) As Rava was one of Rabbah's students, Rava learned from this incident regarding Purim-drinking and realized there had been no formal declaration about drinking on Purim (beyond the words of the book of Esther that they were days of drinking and rejoicing (Est. 9:22)), so he

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{Purim-drinking from previous page}

was inspired to articulate the normativity of this practice.

2) Despite the incident occurring in the generation prior to Rava's statement, the arrangers of the Talmud decided to place the incident following Rava's statement to contradict the expectation of Purim-drunkness, as Rabbi Ephraim ben Yitzhak ben Abraham of Regensburg articulated.

3) As Rabbi David Fried pointed out in episode 61 of *The Jewish Drinking Show*, "stories usually push back on a law rather than reinforcing it" such that, instead of saying that the incident negates Rava's statement, it actually pushes back against it, perhaps in the sense of seeing it as a cautionary tale, but not fully negating Rava's statement.

4) Another chronological perspective, similar to the first one above, is that, despite one reading Rava and being utterly astonished and thinking that it is mere hyperbole, the arrangers of the Talmudic section actually provided the story in order to demonstrate how far one might (or, perhaps, even should) take their Purim-drinking regarding inebriation.

In sum, it's not entirely clear from reading these two texts how the narrative incident necessarily interfaces with Rava's apodictic statement. Nevertheless, rabbis throughout the generations were influenced by Rabbi Ephraim ben Yitzhak ben Abraham of Regensburg's perspective.

### Is Drunkenness Even Allowed?

In addition to quoting Rabbi Ephraim of Regensburg, Rabbi Karo also quotes another earlier rabbinic author who wrote (בית יוסף, אורח חיים (תרצ"ה:א):

"a person is obligated to get drunk on Purim - not that one should get drunk since drunkenness is a serious prohibition and there is no greater transgression than this, since it leads to sexual immorality, murder, and many other transgressions aside from these. However, one should drink more than they are used to drinking."	כתוב בא"ח חייב איניש לבסומי בפורי' לא שישתכר שהשכרות איסור גמור ואין לך עבירה גדולה מזו שהוא גורם לג"ע וש"ד וכמה עבירות זולתן אך שישת' יותר מלימודו מעט
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While a prohibition exists in neither the Bible nor the Talmud against drunkenness, that rabbinic author clearly considered actions undertaken drunkenly to be deeply problematic. Despite Rabbi Karo quoting these medieval rabbis who clearly saw the story as problematic, he, nevertheless, quotes Rava verbatim in his Set Table.

### Drinking, But Not Getting Drunk

One strategy that Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (1365-1427) devised was to drink some, but not get drunk, as referenced by Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) (מפה על שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים תרצ"ה:ב):

Some say it is not necessary to become drunk so much, but rather to drink more than he is used to (Kol Bo), and to fall asleep, and while he sleeps, he does not know [the difference] between "accursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai".	וי"א דא"צ להשתכר כל כך אלא שישתה יותר מלימודו וישן ומתוך שישן אינו יודע בין אורח חיים לברוך מרדכי
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By engaging in one's Purim celebration in this fashion demonstrates that one is still taking part in the pleasure of the day, drinking more than they are used to, but not actually getting drunk. This creatively lenient perspective found favor amongst rabbis in subsequent generations, including, but in no way limited to Rabbi Elazar Rokeach (1665-1742) (מעשה רקח על הלכות מגילה וחנוכה ב:ט"ז:א), Rabbi Joseph ben Meir Teomim (1727-1792) (פרי מגדים - משבצות זהב), Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried (1804-1886) (קיצור שלחן ערוך קמ"ב:ו), and Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) (משנה ברורה תרצ"ה:ד).

### How Does One Know if They Drank Enough?

How much is enough, even if one is drinking a lot? Does one have to drink until they really cannot make the moral distinction between Haman and Mordechai, or is it just a clever turn of phrase? One suggestion referenced a poem/song that had these words and, if one slurred their words while reciting it, then they have achieved this requisite state. Another employs a type of gematria, or Hebraic numerical equivalency, in which one fails to do the proper math. Another idea is to sing a certain song with specific words. One articulation of both of these was described by Rabbi Eliyahu Spira (1660-1712) who mentioned that that some say there is a song that had a refrain of "cursed is Haman" and the next refrain was "blessed is Mordechai" and one needs to sing this song without any errors (אליהו רבה על שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תרצ"ה:ב). Whether one employs the simple need to not be able to differentiate between these two or an advanced distinction, such as either mathematical or in song, there are certainly some interesting considerations on this front.

### A Creative Understanding

A fascinatingly creative understanding of Rava's statement was considered by Rabbi David HaLevi Segal (1586-1667) (טורי זהב על שולחן) (ערוך אורח חיים תרצ"ה:א), a helpful description of which was provided by Rabbi David Fried on the 94th episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show*:

He develops this idea that there were two great acts of kindness that God performed in the Purim story: one was the downfall of Haman, which obviously entailed the rescue of Jewish people and two was after all that and promotes Mordechai and gives him Haman's house and makes him this great person throughout all the Persian Empire. "Cursed is Haman" refers to God's kindness to us in foiling Haman's plan and "blessed is Mordechai" refers to God's kindness in allowing all the greatness that happened to Mordechai and the Jewish people afterwards. "Until one doesn't know" means you're at the point where you couldn't have a theological discussion about which kindness from God is greater.

What's striking about this explanation is that he ties all of the aspects of Rava's prescription together in a meaningful way.

### Conclusion

While this prescriptive statement of Rava's to get drunk on Purim has received a lot of pushback over the years from rabbis, there exists both the ability to fulfill his prescription, as well as to wiggle out of it merely by drinking a little bit more than one is accustomed to drinking. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for Rava's articulation of celebrating Purim, which could get away from us by performing the various mitzvot of the day, but not actually seeking to enjoy the day. Having shared last week in this space that Rava is the Talmud's greatest wine-drinker, he may have made this statement in the sense of "If you're going to drink and get drunk on any number of occasions throughout the year, you have got to make sure to do so on Purim" (otherwise, you would be missing out).

However, perhaps, for those not used to drinking, much less getting drunk, perhaps the obligation to get drunk is certainly less necessary. Since Rava was an experienced drinker and may have made this statement with other experienced drinkers in mind, for those who are not as familiar with alcohol, nor with how their body handles alcohol, perhaps he, too, would urge caution. Indeed, as I mentioned two weeks ago in this space ("Who is to Drink on Purim?"), perhaps those who are less familiar with drinking may be content to do as Rabbi Isserles and others wrote, simply to drink a bit to enjoy the day, but not needing to get drunk.

However you celebrate Purim, I am wishing you a healthy, happy, and responsible Purim 😊

L'chaim 🍷