

RABBI'S MESSAGE

IN LIKE A PARTY, OUT LIKE A FESTIVAL

When I lived in the north, we had an expression about the month of March: "March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb." This, of course, referred to the weather, when the beginning of March is still in the midst of a harsh winter, and the end of the month marks the beginning of springtime. This year, the Jewish calendar makes March particularly interesting, as it begins with Purim and ends with Passover.

These are arguably two of the most popular holidays in Judaism. Coming exactly one month apart, it also feels like a progression. Both present stories that include enemies who sought our destruction. In both stories, the Jews are in danger of elimination, and in both, we emerge victorious. Also, both include an aspect of revenge. The Purim villain, Haman, is hung from the same gallows he had planned to hang Mordecai. In the story of the Exodus, Pharaoh loses his son during the 10th plague and his soldiers are drowned when the Sea of Reeds closes up after the Jews crossed into safety.

But the way we celebrate Purim and Passover is very different. Purim is a one-day, minor holiday that includes four *mitzvot*: giving gifts of food, giving *tzedakah* (charity), participating in a festive meal and hearing *Megillat Esther* (the Book of Esther). We've enhanced the celebration of Purim with costume parties, funny songs, humorous re-enactments, triangle pastries (*hamentashen*) and even the suggestion of imbibing in alcohol to excess. Passover lasts a full week and commemorates our defining moment as a people: the Exodus from Egypt and receiving the Ten Commandments. Part of observing Passover includes many restrictions on the food we consume. When it comes to alcohol, Passover specifies four cups of wine; Purim does not propose a limitation, but actually suggests getting into a drunken state so extreme as to be unable to distinguish between the phrases "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman."

There is another significant distinction between the observances of these holidays. On Passover, we make a point to diminish our alcohol even more by pouring out ten drops from our second cup of wine to acknowledge the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians. We are taught not to rejoice at the hardship of our foes. A Talmudic story recounts angels in Heaven breaking out into song when the Egyptians drowned in the sea. G-d silenced them, declaring, "How dare you sing for joy when My creatures are dying!" (Talmud, Megillah 10b and Sanhedrin 39b) In the Purim story, revenge extends well beyond Haman, and the Jewish people kill thousands in the name of defending themselves against a potential threat. Despite the necessity of the killing, Purim customs suggest no diminishment of any joy, but raucous celebrations about the deaths of many who may not even have participated in the Haman's violent plan.

Why do we acknowledge the suffering of Egyptians during Passover, but not the Persians during Purim? Perhaps that is part of the maturity of a people. Even though Passover happens long before Purim in the chronology of time, Purim comes before Passover on the calendar. While we are still fighting off winter, the survival instinct takes over. We celebrate without inhibitions during Purim, with no thought about those who were killed to insure our survival. By the time springtime comes for Passover, we have learned that vengeance is not the only way to survive. We acknowledge the suffering of others and even impose limitations on our own celebration. While we understand that violence is sometimes necessary to further the cause of justice. Passover indicates that we are growing up as a people, and ready to receive the obligations of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps Purim, the holiday of fun and games and costumes, is the time of our adolescence. It comes before Passover in the calendar, giving us a chance to mature into the people who are destined to become "A light unto the nations." (Isaiah 49:6)

I look forward to celebrating these and all the holidays with you!

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon