

Unlikely Sisters: Purim and Yom Kippur

by David Reinhart

The month of Adar, which arrived two days before the start of March in the Gregorian calendar, contains the most fun Jewish holiday: Purim! This commemoration of Mordecai, Ester and all of Israel's victory over the evil Haman is often likened to the Jewish Halloween. While it is true that we dress up in costumes, throw parties, and eat some tasty treats, this does not capture the essence of Purim. For, on Purim, we are supposed to be happy and have fun, and the resultant behavior in its most extreme form is incredible.

Yet, the celebration of Purim here in the United States pales in comparison to its celebration in Israel. Likening Purim in Israel to Halloween is an understatement. Purim in Israel is like St. Paddy's day on college campuses. Purim in Israel is like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Purim in Israel is a non-stop party for more than 24 hours that is celebrated throughout the entire country by Jews from all walks of life, from secular and Modern Orthodox Jews partying together in Mahaneh Yehudah to Ultraorthodox Jews celebrating in their yeshivot. Singing, dancing, having fun, and, yes, plenty of inebriation.

Strange as it may seem, this happiest of Jewish holidays actually has a sister holiday, Yom Kippur, the most solemn day of the Jewish year. The connection originates because of the holidays' shared use of lots, *purim* in Hebrew. On Yom Kippur, the high priest would cast lots to determine which goat was sacrificed (Rashi's commentary on Leviticus 16:8), while, in the story of Purim, Haman cast lots to determine on which day he would destroy the Jews (Ester 3:7).

In addition to this shared symbolism and action, past rabbis and scholars have likened the names of each holiday to one another. The biblical name for Yom Kippur is actually *Yom haKippurim*, and the masters of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, explained that one reading of this name is *yom k'purim*, “A Day Like Purim.”

Building off of this similarity, the Vilna Gaon, an 18th century rabbinic leader, explained that “both together make up one holy time. And in this holy time are included Purim and Yom Kippur, and it stands as half for God and half for you” (Pachad Yitzhak, Purim 8). The Vilna Gaon recognized that Yom Kippur and Purim are unique throughout the calendar year. On no other day, yom tov (a holiday) or not, are we solely and utterly solemn as we are on Yom Kippur, and on no other day are we solely and utterly happy/joyous as we are on Purim. Thus, these two seemingly separate holidays must be treated as one. They balance each other out, for life is not singularly solemn nor singularly joyous, even for a day. It is both.

This is an important fact of life for us to remember – joy and sorrow, exuberance and solemnity are cyclical and innately connected. They may not be perfect circles, occurring in regular intervals, nor is life usually at one extreme or the other. Nevertheless, even if it takes half a year or longer, we will eventually return to the joy of Purim. Chodesh Tov (Have a Good Month) and Happy Adar!