

ALCOHOL INDUCED HOMICIDE: THE CASE OF RABBA AND R. ZEIRA

1. MEGILLA 7B – THE OBLIGATION TO BECOME BLIND DRUNK ON PURIM

אמר רבא מיחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי. רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי איבסום קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה לשנה אמר ליה ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי אמר ליה לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Rava said: A person is obligated to become intoxicated with wine on Purim until he is so intoxicated that he does not know how to distinguish between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordecai’. The Gemara relates that Rabba and Rabbi Zeira prepared a Purim feast with each other, and became intoxicated to the extent that Rabba got up and murdered (lit. ‘slaughtered’) Rabbi Zeira. The next day, when [Rabba] became sober and realized what he had done, he asked God for mercy, and revived [Rabbi Zeira back to life]. The following year, Rabba said to Rabbi Zeira: Let the Master come over and let us prepare the Purim feast together. To which Rabbi Zeira responded: Miracles do not happen each and every hour, and I do not want to undergo that experience again.

2. WHAT DOES THE TORAH & TALMUD SAY ABOUT DRINKING & DRUNKENNESS?

You can find quite a number of sources in the Torah and scriptures that praise the good qualities of wine and its inebriating effect. One famous example is in Tehillim (104:51): “and wine surely gladdens the heart of man...”. However, there are a number of stories in the Torah that also appear to condemn drunkenness and the resulting out-of-control behavior. For example, the story about Noah's drunkenness (Gen. 9) and the story of Lot and his daughters in the cave (Gen. 19), among others. In Talmudic literature and the Midrashim one can also find both sides of the coin – there is both praise and condemnation. In the piece from tractate Megilla about drinking on Purim, we can see that Rava explicitly directs us to drink excessively on Purim, so-much-so that we should lose any sense of clarity, just like Lot did, as it says “he did not know when he lay down and when he got up” (Gen. 19:34).

But what about the fact that Lot is criticized for his actions, as is Noah? Similarly, in Midrash Vayikra Rabba, one opinion says that Nadav and Avihu, Ahron HaKohen's sons, were killed by God because they entered the sanctuary in a drunken state? The Talmud also explicitly condemns those who drink too much, for example Ketubot 65a: “drunkenness leads to forbidden sexual relations”; and Sanhedrin 70b: “there is nothing that causes a person greater lamentation than wine”? The thirteenth-century halachic authority, Orchot Chaim, as quoted by the Beit Yosef (author of the Shulchan Aruch), is unequivocal in his criticism of drinking too much alcohol: “inebriation is entirely prohibited [in Judaism] and there is no greater sin than drunkenness – [it is] the cause of many sins.”

And finally, how do we explain the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira? Frankly, why was Rabba not arrested and charged with murder, or at least attempted murder?

3. R. AVRAHAM BEN HARAMBAM – DELIBERATE EXAGGERATION

In his detailed article titled "מאמר על דרשות חז"ל", Rabbi Avraham the son of Maimonides deliberates over the stories in the Gemara which were obviously written in an exaggerated way. With reference to the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira, he says that the story did happen (as opposed to some stories that are recorded but did not actually happen), but that the language used to tell the story should not be taken literally:

יש מעשיות שאירעו בעולם כמו שנכתבו, אלא שדברו בהם לשון הבאי לדעתם כי לא יטעה בעל שכל, שהם דברי הבאי... כעניין שאמרו בגמ' תמיד "דברה תורה לשון הבאי", "דברו נביאים בלשון הבאי", "דברו חכמים בלשון הבאי"... כי בתלמוד ימצא הבאי לאין מספר... ודמיון החלק הזה מה שאמרו בגמרא דמגילה: "רבה ור' זירא עבדי סעודתא בהדי הדדי קם [רבה] שחטי לר' זירא בעי רחמים עליה ואחייה". פירוש שהכהו ופצע בו חבורה גדולה שקרוב למיתה, ולגודל המכה הביא שחטיה ...

4. RAMBAM (MT) & MAASEH ROKEACH – DON'T DRINK TO GET DRUNK

וְשׁוֹתָהּ יַיִן עַד שֶׁיִּשְׁתַּכֵּר וְיִרְדָּם בְּשִׁכְרוֹתָיו.

מעשה רקח: ופשט דברי רבינו שאחר שישתכר ישן כדי שלא יארע איזו תקלה ח"ו ומ"מ האחרונים ז"ל כתבו שישתה יותר מלימודו לשם עשיית המצוה והוא הנכון.

5. REMA ON SHULCHAN ARUCH – YOU SHOULD HAVE A NAP ON PURIM!

וי"א דא"צ להשתכר כל כך אלא שישתה יותר מלימודו ... ויישן ומתוך שישן אינו יודע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי...

Some say it is not necessary to become very drunk, but rather to drink more than one is used to, and to fall asleep, and while one sleeps one will not know [the difference] between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai"...

6. MISHNA BERURA, BIUR HALACHA – THE RISKS ARE TOO GREAT

חייב איניש וכו' - וא"ת האיך יחייבו חז"ל מה שנזכר בתורה ובנביאים בכמה מקומות השיכרות למכשול גדול? וי"ל מפני שכל הניסים שנעשו לישראל בימי אחשורוש היו ע"י משתה ... ולכן חייבו חכמים להשתכר עד כדי שיהא נזכר הנס הגדול בשתיית היין. ומ"מ כ"ז למצוה ולא לעכב... עד דלא ידע וכו' - וז"ל המאירי: חייב אדם להרבות בשמחה ביום זה באכילה ובשתיה עד שלא יחסר שום דבר, ומ"מ אין אנו מצוין להשתכר ולהפחית עצמינו מתוך השמחה, שלא נצטוינו על שמחה של הוללות ושל שטות, אלא בשמחה של תענוג, שיגיע מתוכה לאהבת הש"י, והודאה על הנסים שעשה לנו ... וז"ל החכמת אדם: כיון שכל הנס היה ע"י יין לכן חייבו חכמים להשתכר ולפחות לשתות יותר מהרגלו כדי לזכור הנס הגדול, ואמנם היודע בעצמו שיזלזל אז במצוה מן המצוות, בנט"י וברכה ובהמ"ז, או שלא יתפלל מנחה או מעריב, או שינהוג קלות ראש, מוטב שלא ישתכר וכל מעשיו יהיו לש"ש עכ"ל.

7. RA"N ON THE RI"F MEGILLA 3B – STORY OF RABBA & R. ZEIRA IS A LESSON FROM HISTORY

וכתב רבינו אפרים ז"ל מההוא עובדא דקם רבה ושחטיה לר' זירא כדאיתא בגמ' אידחי ליה מימרא דרבא ולא שפיר דמי למעבד הכי.

8. MAHARSHA – THE STORY MAKES NO SENSE, AND MUST NOT BE TAKEN LITERALLY

דבר תמוה הוא לפרשו כפשטיה ונראה דר"ל כעין שחטיה דאגבריה חמרא וכפייה לשתות יותר מדאי עד שחלה ונטה למות ... וקאמרי דהתפלל עליו שלא ימות מחולי זה עד שנתרפא וחי, ומצינו במקרא ובתלמוד לשון חי מלשון רפואה.

9. SHU" T CHASAM SOFER O.C. #135 – LETTER TO HIS UNCLE R. SIMCHA BUNIM GINZ-EGER, 1813

הגאון רבי שמחה בונים גינז-אייגר אב"ד מטרסדורף (תק"ע-תקפ"ט), אחיו הצעיר ועמיתו בתורה של הגאון רבי עקיבא אייגר. גאון מופלג מגדולי דורו, עמד בקשרי שו"ת רבים עם ה"חתם סופר".

הר"ן פ"ק דמגלה כתב על שם ר' אפרים, מהא דקם רבה ושחטיה לר' זירא בטל לי מאי דאמר רבא חייב איניש לבסומי וכו'. וא"כ צ"ע על הר"ף ופוסקים שהביאו להלכתא. ועל רבא גופי צ"ע דהוה בתר רבה ור' זירא ואמר חייב איניש וכו'. על כן נלע"ד, דאמרינן בשבת פרק מי שהחשיך [קניו ע"א] מזל שעה גורם מאן דהוה במאדים וכו' אמר רבה אנא במאדים וכו' א"ל אביי מר נמי עניש וקטיל ע"ש. ואפשר דהוה קודם דשחטיה לר' זירא, דאי לא תימא הכי הוא ליה למימר מר נמי שחטיה לר' זירא. והשתא י"ל דוקא רבה דאתיליד במאדים שכיחא גביה הזיקא, אבל רובא דרובא דעלמא חייב לבסומי דהיכא דלא שכיחא הזיקא שלוחי מצוה אינן ניזוקין, ולא תצא תקלה ומכשול משמחת מצותינו. ונזכה לשמוח בבית אלוקינו אמן.

10. SHABBAT 156A – BORN UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF MARS

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק וצדקן במצות האי מאן דבמאדים יהי גבר אשיד דמא אמר רב אשי אי אומנא אי גנבא אי טבחא אי מוהלא אמר רבה אנא במאדים הואי אמר אביי מר נמי עניש וקטיל.

Someone who was born under the influence of Mars will be one who spills blood. Rav Ashi said: He will be either a blood letter, or a thief, or a slaughterer of animals, or a circumciser. Rabba said: I was born under the influence of Mars and I do not perform any of those activities. Abaye said: My Master also punishes and kills as a judge.

11. LUBAVITCHER REBBE – A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE RESULTING IN ACTUAL DEATH

The story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira demands an explanation. How is it possible that one of the Talmud's leading sages performed an act that — had it not been for a miracle — would have resulted in his colleague's death? And there is another element of the story that is also problematic: Rabba's invitation to Rabbi Zeira to come again for Purim the following year. The Talmud does not tell us that Rabba repented; on the contrary, it seems he was prepared to share a Purim feast with Rabbi Zeira again despite the possibility that the events of the previous year could happen again. What is equally amazing is Rabbi Zeira's answer. He did not refuse Rabba's invitation categorically. Instead, he told him: "a miracle does not happen every moment," implying that he would have liked to accept Rabba's offer, but could not because he was not sure that the miracle would repeat itself.

There are those who explain that the story reflects spiritual concepts, but it would be wrong to say that it is merely an allegory, as it would appear that the story about Rabba and Rabbi Zeira is being quoted by the Gemara as an example of this directive being discharged, namely "a person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim...." Also, we see that Rabbeinu Efrayim uses the example of Rabba's conduct to argue that the Talmud did not accept the law that "a person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim...."

So from either perspective, it is clear that the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira is not an allegory, rather it records an event that actually took place. In which case, an explanation must be found which both interprets the story according to its simple meaning — that the two sages actually became intoxicated and Rabba caused Rabbi Zeira's death — and at the same time projects an image of the sages that is befitting their spiritual stature, one which explains how Rabba's actions can in no way be associated with murder and why it is that Rabbi Zeira would have desired to repeat the feast the following year.

Perhaps we can compare this story to another tragedy associated with excessive drinking: the death of Ahron's sons, Nadav and Avihu. The Midrash says that they died because they entered the Sanctuary while they were intoxicated. If that is indeed the case it raises a question: Ahron's sons were on a very high spiritual level. How was it possible for them to conduct themselves in such a disreputable way?

The Ohr HaChayim explains that the death of Nadav and Avihu as follows: they came so close to the sublime light with holy love, that they died because of it. Their death was equivalent to the death of the righteous. The Torah alludes to this by saying "in drawing close to God, they died," implying that their death came as a result of their drawing close to God. Now we can understand what the Midrash means to say that they entered the Sanctuary while intoxicated. Wine is always used as an analogy for the Torah's deepest secrets, reflected in the Chaza"l: "when wine enters, the secrets come out." What the Midrash means by "intoxicated with wine" is that the secrets of God overwhelmed their powers of thought, and led them to an inextinguishable yearning for God, resulting in the departure of their souls from the physical world.

Even though this is kind of an allegory, it is not completely divorced from fact. Because in addition to partaking of the Torah's mystical secrets, Ahron's sons also actually drank wine. It was because they were holy, when the alcohol released their inhibitions it spurred their spiritual potentials. Now the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira's Purim feast make's sense. Rabba and Rabbi Zeira may have drunk wine, but the Gemara is referring to the fact that they drank freely of the "wine of Torah," in other words they delved deeply into the Torah's deepest secrets. Rabbi Zeira died, his soul yearning for ultimate non-physical Godliness like the souls of Ahron's sons.

In which case, why does the Talmud say that Rabba "murdered Rabbi Zeira"? The precise word the Talmud uses for murder is "shachat". Generally, when the Talmud describes a killing, it uses the word "katal". Shachat is the term always used with reference to ritual slaughter, a "korban" bringing someone closer to God.

The name "Rabba" means "the great one," which means he had a broad intellectual capacity. The name "Zeira," by contrast, means "the small one," which means he had a more limited capacity. During their feast, while Rabba and Rav Zeira were indulging in the deepest mystical secrets — and drinking wine — Rabba was "kam" — he "stood up," which means he rose to a higher level of mystical understanding than Rabbi Zeira. And so "shachat leRav Zeira" — "he murdered Rabbi Zeira." By drawing Rabbi Zeira after him, sharing his deep knowledge and understanding with him, Rabbi Zeira, who was not at that level, was not able to keep up and his soul expired.

Rabba's responsibility for Rabbi Zeira's passing was merely an error of judgment; he thought that Rabbi Zeira could, as Rabba himself had, contain his soul despite becoming aware of these mystical truths.

And since Rabba had the power to bring Rabbi Zeira back to life, he formed the view that the expiry of Rabbi Zeira's soul in love for God was not a negative experience. That was why he invited him back for Purim the following year. But Rabbi Zeira declined the invitation. He realized that his journey, and our journey, is to serve God within the context of our material existence. He was not sure that he would be able to contain his soul in the face of the powerful secrets, and feared he would die again. "A miracle does not happen every moment," he told Rabba, and he was therefore not willing to take the risk that he would not be able to continue his life on the material plane.

The story of Rabbah and Rav Zeira is cited to support the law that "a person is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim to the extent that he does not know the difference between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed is Mordechai.'" The fact that this law is brought down by the Shulchan Aruch indicates that we must not fear negative consequences, and that Purim is a time when every person can rise to unbounded levels of love for God, and at the same time return to controlled and measured Divine service on the material plane. The heightened experience of this one day will impart energy and vitality to one's Divine service for the entire year.

12. NILI BEN-ARI, HOLOCAUST HISTORIAN, KIBBUTZ TIRAT TZVI – WORDS FROM MY FATHER

Every year on Purim, my Dad would tell this story about Rabba and Rabbi Zeira, he would then repeat all the questions it raised, and after that he would offer a Hasidic explanation – something he picked up in his youth in Galicia, Poland: "Do you know why Rabba slaughtered Rabbi Zeira? Because Rabbi Zeira poured him black beer instead of white beer." Chassidim loved to drink white beer together, and once they were merry they made sure to tell the story of Rabba and Rabbi Zeira, and by citing this strange explanation for the murder, they were really saying that the story was not to be taken literally – "it never happened and could never happen, rather it is just a fable."