

# PURIM AND ADLOYADA

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The Purim celebration has a special name, *ad'loyada*, culled from the talmudic instruction: *Chayav adam lebasumei bepuria ad'loyada bein barukh Mordecai le-arur Haman* [A man should drink on Purim to the extent that he cannot distinguish between "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman"]. That word, *ad'loyada*, has been incorporated into modern Hebrew in the sense of "carnival."

The question we may ask is: Notwithstanding the totally unexpected and heaven-sent victory of the vulnerable Jews of ancient Persia, why did the fairly sober sages of the Talmud not only condone but actually recommend that we reach such an unseemly level of *adloyada* semi-consciousness? Why miss the whole point of the celebration, being unable to distinguish hero from villain, and with our powers of discrimination and perception so dulled that the reality of the events we are commemorating is almost totally lost on us? What possible rationale could the sages have had in promoting that state of abdication of discernment?

We suggest that it is meant to symbolize and enact the precise behavior and state of mind of some of the main characters in the Purim story as described in the Book of Esther. First was the King, lulled into a state of *ad'loyada*, of inability to discern and to govern, as a result of his enslavement to a life of debauchery and drunkenness.<sup>1</sup> The opening chapters describe the 180-day banquet he threw for the entire armed forces and for all his servants. This was followed by a seven day banquet *for all the people present in Shushan, high and low alike*. They all were treated to a similar orgy of drunkenness. And what great victory or milestone in Ahasuerus' reign justified this vast expense? The answer is: It was merely to commemorate *bishnat shalosh le-molkho* [the third year of his reign].<sup>2</sup>

That potentate was clearly suffering from the *ad'loyada*, the lack of discernment syndrome, squandering his resources in the cause of personal vain-glory. The fact that Haman gained power over the Jews by offering the King

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money suggests that this King's finances were already in a not-too-healthy state, which is not surprising, given his priorities.

The next victims of the *ad'loyada* syndrome were the Jews of Persia themselves, who also lacked discernment of the dangers to their moral and religious security. According to the Midrash, they also participated willingly in the orgiastic banquets, without a qualm as to whether or not the food was kosher. Not only were they *lo yada*, lacking in discernment as to the consequences of their assimilation, but also as to the feelings of those among whom they lived. Like their brethren down the ages, they deluded themselves into thinking that they were regarded as friends, and that, if push came to shove, the general population would protest, close ranks and have the anti-Jewish legislation reversed in order to defend "their Jews."

Another example of *ad'loyada* is provided by Vashti, the King's first wife, who failed to discern the character of the man to whom she was married, never dreaming that Ahasuerus would banish his own Queen for such a minor misdemeanour as refusing to appear at his banquet.

Then there was the King's *ad'loyada* in his lack of any knowledge of Esther's Jewish identity. Most surprisingly, he made no background checks on the woman who was to become his wife and be elevated to royal rank. It was sufficient that she could win a beauty contest. His attitude on her background and other qualities was *lo yada*, a total lack of discernment or interest.

His philosophy of *ad'loyada*, of not knowing or caring about anything other than the satisfaction of his physical appetite, meant that Ahasuerus did not even bother to ask Haman which particular people he sought permission to destroy. Haman had merely described them as *am ehad* [a particular people]. Had Ahasuerus not been committed to the *ad'loyada* mentality he would have known the people to whom his wife belonged. He would have demanded to know the identity of the people whose death warrant Haman was asking him to sign. He would have frustrated Haman's designs at the very outset, saved the life of his Queen and her people, and avoided a great deal of personal vexation and national upheaval.

There was another most careless display of *ad'loyada* in the fact that Bigtan and Teresh, the plotters against the King's life, did not discern the close proximity of Mordecai when they were hatching their secret plot. According to

the Midrash, they failed to realize that Mordecai understood the rare Persian dialect they used.

Then there is Haman's display of *lo yada*, his total gullibility. He never imagined for one moment that Esther's invitations to intimate banquets with her and the King were a prelude to his being "set up" by Esther, and unmasked as the potential butcher of the Queen and her people. Likewise, when the King asked Haman's advice on how to reward someone whom the King wished to honor, Haman's *lo yada* mentality prompted him to assume that he was the only potential recipient in the entire 127 provinces of the realm.

In another respect Haman's *laissez-faire lo yada* attitude was most surprising. We are told several times that Mordecai hung around the gates of the palace daily to discern the welfare of Esther. Haman must have learnt how Mordecai had saved the King's life shortly before he, Haman, was elevated to prime minister. The incident was still being talked about. The King's servants all knew about it, and when questioned told him that Mordecai had not yet been rewarded. It was recorded in the royal chronicle that it was Esther who had disclosed the existence of the plot to the King "in the name of Mordecai." Incredibly, it did not occur to Haman to make discreet enquiries into the background of Mordecai, and seek to clarify the obviously close connection between him and the Queen. Had he done so, he would, of course, have discovered that they had once lived in the same house in Shushan, that they were related, and that they were both Jews.

It is most surprising that Mordecai's daily appearances at the palace gate did not prompt him to make the connection. It is arguable that, had Haman made such enquiries, and not been so lethargic -- so *lo yada* orientated -- he would have thought twice about attempting to harm that close relative of the Queen. He most certainly would have abandoned his dastardly plan to destroy the people from which his Queen hailed.

The popular practice of dressing up on Purim in *masekhot* [masks] also underscores the inability of the dramatis personae of that ancient tale to discern the true nature of the people with whom they were interacting, and the reality of the circumstances with which they were engaging. Furthermore, coincidence or otherwise, "Esther" the name of the heroine and the book, means, according to the Talmud,<sup>3</sup> "concealment," from the Hebrew root, *s-t-r*. There could be no more appropriate and succinct description of the root cause

of all the follies and woes that beset Ahasuerus, Haman and the royal court as a result of their machinations to destroy the Jews. The name of God does not appear in the Book of Esther. It is also "concealed." His guiding hand, however, is clearly "discerned."

And so we offer this thesis: It is the recurring motif in the Book of Esther, of people suffering from the *ad'loyada* syndrome, with their senses dulled by a combination of drink, self-indulgence and self-delusion, that the rabbis invite us to commemorate and ape. This we do by getting ourselves into a similar state, albeit of happy, measured and temporary inebriation, for the duration of the festival day.

#### NOTES

1. The Talmud (Megillah 12a-12b) depicts the respective banquets of Ahasuerus and Vashti as opportunities for lewd conduct. The trials and dangers to which the Jews of Persia were subjected are stated to have been a punishment for having participated in the debauched banquets of "that wicked man" (See: Midrash Esther Rabba 7:18).

2. *Ibid.*

3. See: Talmud Chullin 139b.

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