

They Rejoiced from the Meal of a Wicked Man

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This week the chief rabbi of Israel issued a fur ban. Rabbi Yonah Metzger, ruled that it is prohibited for Jews to wear fur skinned from a live animal. He made the ruling last week after seeing a video of animals being skinned alive at fur farms in China. Rav Metzger said: "All Jews are obliged to prevent the horrible phenomenon of cruelty to animals and be a 'light unto the nations' by refusing to use products that originate from acts which cause such suffering."

It is possible to view this prohibition as a result of the prohibition of cruelty to animals, but it is also possible to see it in a wider context.

First, another example:

Also this week, a friend (www.seforim.blogspot.com), showed me a responsum of the great authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. Rav Moshe was asked if one is permitted to eat veal. Unequivocally, Rav Moshe wrote that it is biblically prohibited to eat veal. He offered two reasons.

First, because of the way the animal is raised, it is likely that the animal develops disqualifying physical defects which elude the eye of the normal kashrut inspection. These defects cause the inner organs of the animal to become treif. Secondly, Rav Moshe argues that the animal is mistreated in the way it is raised. Although, we are permitted to eat animals and use them for our benefit, Rav Moshe says that the way veal is made crosses the line of improper treatment. It falls under the prohibition of tzaar baalei chayim, cruelty to animals and consequently is prohibited. Thus, Rav Moshe rules it is forbidden to raise, sell, and eat veal.

And yet, many of us continue to eat veal. I myself was unaware of this responsum and so in the past I ate veal. Veal is sold in our kosher supermarkets and it carries the highest and most respected levels of certification. But yet, as Rav Moshe rules, it is most likely treif.

Our desire for fur and veal despite the ethical and legal ambiguities surrounding it relates to a larger sin. It was the same sin that the Jews committed in the days of Mordechai and Esther.

The rabbis of the Talmud wonder, why is it that the Jews were threatened by Achashverosh with destruction? What did they do wrong to deserve such a punishment? After all, the Jews are threatened with destruction even though the Book of Esther does not explicitly state what their sin was.

And so the rabbis explain (Megillah, 12a), mipnei she-nehineh mi-seuda shel oto rasha; their sin was that they benefited from the festive meal of that wicked man (Achashverosh).

The Book of Esther begins with a party that Achashverosh throws for his noblemen for 180 days. This is probably one of the longest parties in the history of our world. He throws this party in order to show off his wealth and his power.

And after that, he throws another lavish party for the entire nation for one week. This party was highly ostentatious and it featured the finest delicacies of the world (kelim mi-kelim shonim). Rashi explains that one of the features of this party was that everyone was served wine that was older than them. There was also no limit to the wine that was served, ve-hashetiyah ke-dat ein ones. It was a party without limits.

Persia represents parties. It represents a society that desires gluttony and excess; it revels in extreme physical pleasure.

The sin of the Jewish people was that they were attracted to this society and so they partook in this sinful man's party. Achashverosh, was a glutton, and his kingdom was gluttonous. The Jews should have known better. They should have known that when they were mourning for their Temple, when there was so much destruction in the world, they should not have participated in gluttony.

Note that their sin wasn't that they ate non-kosher food. The food was kosher! It was that they participated in a gluttonous party.

What is the turning point of the Book of Esther? When do they begin to see salvation? Only once Esther teaches them to fix their sin of gluttony. Persia symbolizes material excess. All the women of Achashverosh's harem were allowed anything they wanted to prepare for the king, but Esther asks for nothing. Esther, the Jewess represents limitation on excess.

When Esther decides to approach the king and beg him to save her people, she first commands her people to fast for three days. This is the only time in the Torah that we see a three day fast. Where does she get the idea? She realizes that her people need to repent for the sin of gluttony.

It is often noted that Purim becomes a holiday of feasting and partying. This is true; but note the difference in the partying between the party of Achashverosh and the party of Mordechai and Esther. The partying of Mordechai and Achashverosh is moderated significantly in order to teach us to party differently than Achashverosh's Persian parties.

When Esther commands the Jewish people to observe the holiday forever she commands them to observe (9:32), "divrei tzomot ve-zaakatam, these chronicles of fasting and lamenting." • She emphasizes that the celebration must have an element of introspection and fasting. This is obviously meant to counteract the gluttonous behavior of the Persians. The Persians partied for a week; she says that the party must only be one day. And indeed, to this day we before the day of Purim we have a fast day which we call The Fast of Esther.

Mordechai instituted that we must have a feast—a seudah—on the holiday of Purim. But the feast is framed within the proper context. It is not called a feast, but a seudah. What is a seudah? This is how Rav Soloveitchik describes a seudah: "Judaism developed a new institution, the seudah. It is neither an ordinary meal nor a feast; it is more than that. It is the crucible in which the bread of man is transposed into the bread of God; it expresses the fellowship between God and man and the participation of God in all human pursuits and activities!" The animal does

not relate the eating to anything else. Man may place his natural activity in a new frame of reference. • (Soloveitchik, Festival of Freedom, 6.) The seudah is not a feast, as much as it is a prayer—a ritual service.

So too, Mordechai commands them (9:22) to observe on this holiday the mitzvah of matanot le-eyyonim, giving gifts to the poor. There is a mitzvah of celebrating a meal on Purim day and sending presents to a friend (mishloach manot), but matanot le-eyyonim is the most important of all the mitzvot. One fulfills their obligation of mishloach manot by sending food to one friend, but matanot le-eyyonim should be sent to at least two different poor people.

The standard for matanot le-eyyonim is also higher than that of mishloach manot. Mishloach manot should be portions of food that you can include in your festive Purim meal, but matanot le-eyyonim (according to some authorities) should be sufficient to provide a poor person the ability to purchase an entire festive meal.

This is a model which we can strive to reach. We should make sure that the money we allocate for sending mishloach manot is at a minimum matched by the money we give to the poor on Purim. The rabbis teach us that it is ideal to spend less on mishloach manot and much more on matanot le-eyyonim.

We might even strive to hit this model when we throw our on private parties. It might be nice for us to take upon ourselves this obligation: whenever we throw a party we should try to incorporate within all the money we spend on a party an element of giving money to charity.

This is a good way to remind ourselves of falling into the Achashverosh trap of gluttony.

Purim is known as a festive holiday; but it must be festiveness without gluttony. After all, if our festiveness is marked by gluttony and cruelty than how much different are we than the kingdom of Achashverosh?

Purim Sameach