Purim: March into the Unknown


The sages say that, “one is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know....”¹ In a different source,² the Talmud discusses the meaning of, “until he does not know.” Does this mean just until the edge of not knowing, or does it include not knowing? For example, does reaching home mean reaching the door? Or does it mean going inside? This is a general question regarding the meaning of the word “until” (עד) as it appears in regard to various laws—does it mean “up to and including,” or does it mean, “up to but not including.”

A person can drink “until he does not know”—until he feels that his head is swimming and he is losing his faculties of knowledge and wisdom. Just until that point and no further. He has touched the door of “not knowing,” but has not entered. At that point, before he is drunk, he can go to sleep and he will have performed the directive of the sages.

The Sefat Emet, however, says that the mitzvah of feasting with wine and rejoicing on Purim is to be in a constant state of feasting and rejoicing. We do not simply partake in a feast, rejoice a bit and then finish. Instead, we should continue all day long. In this case, “until he does not know” includes actually not knowing. We enter into the “not knowing” and progress from there in a never-ending process of not knowing until the end of Purim.

Why continue for so long? After all, we have already entered into the realm of not knowing. In truth, however, there are many levels of knowing and not knowing. When we drink a bit more, we discover that there is another level of not knowing and that there are always new levels. We can describe this as, “Until you do not know whether you know or don’t know.”

The Purpose of Knowing

What is the point of not knowing? On the surface, there is nothing positive about not knowing, just emptiness where the knowledge could have been. What is good about that?

The early sages say “The ultimate purpose of knowing is not to know.”³ On the one hand, we are commanded to, “Know the God of your forefathers.”⁴ But as much as we know, ultimately, we do not know (and cannot know). Even if the wisest of men would live a thousand years, he could not really know. God is the Creator and we are the

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¹ Megillah 7b.
² Berachot 26b.
³ Bechinat Olam 13:33.
⁴ 1 Chronicles 28:9.
created beings. He is infinite and we are finite. There is no commensurability between the two. We do have to strive to know. But as much as you know, you know that you really do not know. The “ultimate knowledge,” the purpose and apex of all knowledge, is to know that we do not know. This is also an unending process. We learn, understand something, and know what we did not know earlier. Then we see how much we do not know. And once again we learn and know more, and then understand even more deeply how much we don’t know.

What is the main goal of this process? Is it what we know, or is it what we do not know?

It depends when. During the entire year, the main goal is to know. We learn something and are able to develop and work with it. We cannot develop or work with something that we do not know. At most, we can sense it from afar. There is no way to enter “into” the unknown. All that we can do is hover near it. Thus, during most of the year, our “until” must be interpreted as, “Up to but not including” that unknown.

On Purim, however, this process works differently. Purim is not the time to learn something and to know it. There is plenty of time for learning with a clear head during the rest of the year. On Purim, everything is upside-down. We set aside all of our regular knowledge. Our starting point is to drink a lechaim, leave our knowledge and thought process behind, and march into the unknown. To reach the unknown and to enter further and further into its depths.

The first step into the unknown is to fully admit that we truly do not know anything. We do not understand God’s plan. We do not know what is concealed behind the different personas in our lives or on the world stage and we do not know where the next surprise will suddenly appear. Everything is unknown, one great mystery.

Moreover, we don’t even know anything about ourselves. Throughout the year, we all have our self-image—what others think about us and what we think about ourselves. On Purim, all the masks come off and we can ask ourselves, “Who am I?” Am I Mordechai? Am I Haman?”

As we progress into the unknown, we can discover the secret of Purim. Inside the unknown, there is a different type of knowledge. It is not regular, simple knowledge, but rather, a deep knowledge. To access it, one has to drink more and more.

All through the year, we say, “The ultimate purpose of knowing is to not know.” Our intellect is limited and the apex is to admit that we do not know. On Purim, however, our starting point is the fact that we do not know. From there, we reach a very profound knowledge. We discover that deep down in the soul, in the most concealed realms—we know God and we know that we are a “literal part of Him.”

Working with our regular intellect, as we do the entire year, is like reaching the gates of the Holy Temple, knowing that there is much more inside, but remaining outside. On Purim, we begin with the fact that our intellect does not understand and then we

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5 *Tanya*, chapter 2.
open the gates and enter into the Holy Temple, into the Divine Presence that dwells inside us.

This is a new understanding of, “until one does not know.” One is obligated to drink on Purim until he passes the level of “not knowing” and reaches a new state of knowledge—knowledge that can be accessed only on Purim. Lechaim lechaim.