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In the spirit of reviewing the laws of a holiday 30 days before the holiday (I don't know if it applies to Purim or not)...

Noise-Making during Megilla Reading

Question: On Purim, the degree of levity during the Megilla reading seems to be increasing from year to year. Whereas once there were only graggers and stamping after the reading of “Haman”, now there seems to be a competition for the most audacious antics. Is that in keeping with the minhag and in line with proper behavior in shul?

Answer: The Avudraham¹ is one of the earliest sources of the minhag of making noise when Haman’s name is read. Originally, people would write Haman’s name on rocks and bang them together to demonstrate that they were wiping out the name of Amalek (Haman’s ancestor). Thus, it was not a matter of noise per se, and

certainly not of mere merriment. However, in codifying the minhag and strongly arguing not to oppose it, the Rama² presents it in a manner that seems closer to the current minhag of hitting anything to make noise.

In truth, there are other established minhagim of the Megilla reading that are directed towards promoting liveliness as well. The minhag to have the congregation read four p’sukim out loud before the ba’al korei reads them is explained by the Hagahot Maimoniot³ as “just for happiness, to make the youngsters happy, and encourage them to ... listen to the reading.” The idea of scoffing whenever Haman’s name is read (resembling the modern phenomena of booing an unpopular person or statement) seems to be appropriate for the mood of Purim and in accordance with several statements of Chazal. Furthermore, the idea of reveling in a manner that is normally inappropriate is reflected in a number of halachot of Purim, including, of course, that of drinking wine well beyond the norm.⁴ In addition, a person is exempt from payment for damages he has caused during his Purim celebration, because the wildness is part of the mitzva of celebrating.⁵

¹ Cited by *Darchei Moshe*, *Orach Chayim* 690:4.

² *Orach Chayim* 690:17.

³ *Megilla* 1:7.

⁴ See *Megilla* 7b.

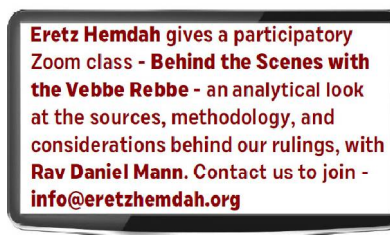
⁵ Rama, *Orach Chayim* 695:2.

We should note that the classic time for wild merrymaking is at and around the seuda. Davening is davening, and the reading of the Megilla is an important mitzva with many halachot and is a fulfillment of saying Hallel to HaShem.⁶ Thus, while the minhagim we mentioned for happiness, interest, and demonstrativeness do exist,⁷ outright levity is likely inappropriate during the Megilla reading. Thus, we would suggest to those who ask that under normal circumstances, one should follow the minhag of making noise with lively but dignified moderation.

However, one must also consider how expression of the spirit of the day has evolved, as well as the role of minhag in our communal lives. We will note two central ideas behind keeping minhagim and not criticizing them.⁸ One is that a minhag is assumed to have been initiated, or at least approved, by great rabbis. Hundreds of years ago, the minhag of making noise during the Megilla reading was presumably instituted by such scholars. While we are not aware of which, if any, leading rabbis initiated the latest antics, it is fair to say that the phenomenon is approved of, or at least allowed, by a broad cross-section of the rabbinate. We might even suggest that the original minhag

initiators, who broke the lines of strict decorum, intended that every generation and subsection of the religious community would find the balance appropriate for them. Indeed, a youth minyan or kiruv-oriented minyan for the Megilla is more likely enhanced by a livelier service than is an established, older community.

The second element regarding minhagim concerns the friction that is caused when one does not follow the local minhag. In our case, if there is a locally accepted manner of listening to the Megilla, which includes most people making some noise and a handful being more boisterous, then taking a clear stand against the latter is likely to cause hard feelings. This is not merely an extraneous consideration, but rather is at the heart of the type of communal atmosphere Chazal wanted us to maintain. As we have seen, Purim is a day on which we let people's spirits soar more freely than normal. Of course, even on Purim we should have some limits and, as usual, the local rabbi should have his finger on the community's pulse and be the main guide in these matters.



⁶ *Megilla* 14a.

⁷ Despite the opposition of some *poskim*, including the *Pri Megadim*, *Eshel Avraham* 690:21, on various grounds.

⁸ See also *Living the Halachic Process*, vol. I, pp. 32-33.