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# PURIM, LIMINALITY, AND COMMUNITAS

by

JEFFREY RUBENSTEIN

"Fever is no sickness and Purim is no holiday."<sup>1</sup> So runs a surprisingly self-reflective proverb concerning the festival of Purim, the strangest Jewish holiday.<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly the celebration of the triumph of the Jews over the wicked Haman described in the Book of Esther, at a popular level something much larger and far more complex is going on. Folk customs throughout history have always transcended the celebration of the triumph of Mordecai and Esther. Elaborate pageants, grotesque masks, drunken revelry, noisemaking, buffoonery, burning of effigies, costume parades, feasts with special delicacies, and every manner of carousing and merrymaking have characterized Purim since rabbinic times. A diverse body of Purim literature has accumulated, including drinking songs, short stories, parodies, and intricate plays. The nature of these celebrations has varied, of

1. Yom Tov Lewinski, ed., *Sefer hamo'adim* (Tel-Aviv, 1961–63), vol. 6, *Yemei mo'ed vezi-karon*, p. 30 (hereafter cited as *Sefer hamo'adim*).

2. An excellent collection of material pertaining to Purim, including descriptions of Purim customs from all over the world, legal and liturgical sources, and examples of Purim songs, parodies, and stories, can be found in Phillip Goodman, ed., *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia, 1973) (hereafter cited as *PA*). A comprehensive bibliography appears there, pp. 495–512. Another extensive anthology is *Sefer hamo'adim* (see previous note), pp. 1–325. See also Isaac Levitas, "Purim," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 13:1390–96; Henry Malter, "Purim," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 10:274–283.

course, depending on the particular time period and ambient culture. But whether we speak of dancing around a fire in tenth-century Babylonia, sophisticated dramas in Renaissance Italy, or carnival festivals in contemporary Tel-Aviv, the overall tenor of the holiday remains constant: "On Purim," asserts an oft-quoted phrase, "all things are permissible."

Scholars, long aware of the strange, almost un-Jewish character of Purim, have advanced numerous theories to explain the existence of the festival.<sup>3</sup> The historicity of Purim is generally rejected,<sup>4</sup> although some scholars maintain that a fanciful legend has been woven around a historical kernel.<sup>5</sup> Already Graetz suggested that the Book of Esther was a complete fabrication modeled on the Greek Pithoigia holiday.<sup>6</sup> The dominant scholarly trend, taking note of the similarity between the names Mordecai and Esther and the Babylonian gods Marduk and Ishtar, sees Purim as an imitation of a Babylonian holiday, generally the Sakaia festival, or as the transformation of a Babylonian myth.<sup>7</sup> A few scholars realized that accounts of the origin of Purim neither explain why bizarre rituals have always surrounded the festival nor shed light on its function in Judaism and Jewish society. They turned to anthropological theories and models to better understand the exceptional character of Purim. James Frazier grouped Purim with holidays resembling the Saturnalia and its later metamorphoses, festivities characterized by the inversion of social ranks, merrymaking, revelry, and other features that also appear in Purim celebrations.<sup>8</sup> Theodor Gaster built upon Frazier's

3. Summaries of the different theories: Solomon Grayzel, "The Origin of Purim," in *PA*, pp. 3–14; Julius Lewy, "The Feast of the 14th Day of Adar," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14 (1939): 127–131; N. S. Doniach, *Purim or the Feast of Esther* (Philadelphia, 1933), pp. 23–53; Theodor Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah* (New York, 1950), pp. 3–11.

4. Jacob Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in Light of History* (Philadelphia, 1923) defends the historical accuracy of Esther.

5. Grayzel in *PA*, pp. 10–13.

6. Heinrich Graetz, "Der historische Hintergrund und die Abfassung zeit des Buches Esther und der Ursprung der Purimfestes," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 35 (1886): 425–442, 473–503, 521–542. The author hoped to bolster the faith of the Jews during the Hasmonean revolt with the message that God delivers His people from oppression.

7. Lewy, "Feast," pp. 145–151.

8. James Frazier, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1935), 9:345–415. Frazier noted the similarities between Purim and the Babylonian Sakaia and Zakmuk festivals. In the larger context, all these festivals are types of "scapegoat rituals" often found in primitive agricultural societies. To ensure a successful harvest, these societies appointed a temporary king to impersonate the god of fertility and subsequently put him to death in the hope that he would rise

approach and viewed Purim in the context of New Year holidays. In many regions throughout the world, New Year celebrations include parading an ordinary citizen in the garb of a king, observing a fast, selection of a queen, execution of a malefactor, and distribution of gifts.<sup>9</sup> More recently Monfred Harris has focused on the reversals, disorder, and “topsy-turvy” elements of Purim.<sup>10</sup> Harris invokes the phenomenologist Eugene Fink’s account of “play” and James Faris’s study of a Newfoundland community to understand the reversals and antinormative behavior. He argues that “Purim is playing exile.” Through play, in which one assumes a fictional persona and thus functions in a double role, both in reality and in illusion, the Jew confronts his double role as Jew in exile.

The purpose of this essay is to continue these efforts toward an anthropological interpretation of Purim. Frazier, Gaster, and Harris applied anthropological models and comparative methodology with profit but limited their investigations to certain aspects of the festival, especially the reversals, and concentrated on particular types of evidence. In this study I analyze a wider range of evidence—legal sources, folklore, popular customs, accounts of actual celebrations, rituals, and liturgy—to provide an overall conceptual scheme that explains the disparate dimensions of the festival. Purim should be understood as a time of liminality as defined and described by Victor Turner. Communitas, rituals of status reversal, play, and other phenomena of liminality are readily recognizable during Purim celebrations. Although Turner’s theories are well known and probably need no rehearsal here, I begin with a brief summary in order to underscore a few points that are sometimes overlooked.<sup>11</sup>

again with renewed virility and power. Unfortunately, Frazier becomes carried away with his own argument. He suggests that at some point Jews may have actually killed a Haman-figure and conjectures that Jesus was killed by Jews precisely in this manner! See “Note: The Crucifixion of Christ,” 9:414–423, reprinted from the second edition.

9. Gaster, *Purim*, pp. 10–16.

10. Monfred Harris, “Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order,” *Judaism* 27 (1978): 161–170.

11. A note on methodology is apposite. The current trend among anthropological approaches to the study of religion eschews large-scale studies in favor of smaller, well-defined analyses. Judaism (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.) and for that matter Purim (Christmas, Ramadan, etc.) are no longer legitimate subjects for study, for there is no one, “normative,” standard Judaism, no one, normative, standard Purim festival. The Judaism of Kurdistan in 1850, or the Purim of the Jews of Fez in 1937, can be studied, but Judaism and Purim are abstractions, pure constructs in the mind of the scholar. No Platonic “Purim” exists, but only Purim as practiced by a certain community in a certain time and place. There is undoubtedly

### *Turner and Liminality*

Victor Turner studied the ritual and social processes that occur during intervals in the normally structured state of society.<sup>12</sup> By social structure Turner means the matrix of roles, statuses, and positions governed by social phenomena such as law, custom, institution, and cultural tradition. Normally social structure is hierarchical and characterized by differences in status, while social relationships are mediated by power and statute. At certain times, however, the web of normal social relationships, the structural elements, appear to dissolve. Society enters what Turner calls a "liminal" time—a "betwixt and between" or threshold period. No longer do power and privilege, status and role, law and institution determine social inter-relatedness. Society enters a "time outside of time" where alternative mod-

much merit in this trend, and methodological awareness should be admired. However, this methodological cautiousness must not be pushed to an extreme. To deny that general topics such as Judaism or Purim possess any essence is as methodologically suspect and destructive to the pursuit of knowledge as are gross generalizations and reductionism. Without broaching knotty ontological problems (much better left to philosophers), it is clear that Judaism (Christianity, Purim, Mass, etc.), no matter how varied its manifestations, can be intelligibly described, if not precisely defined. Proper methodology requires an abstract, more general model and numerous examples or case studies. Working back and forth dialectically between model and data allows the scholar to modify his model on the basis of individual studies and simultaneously to understand particular cases in light of the model.

In this paper I propose a model which sheds light on many different aspects of Purim, its festivities, customs, and traditions as celebrated in different times and places. The goal is to apply anthropological theory to elucidate a certain problem in the study of religion, not to mimic a field-worker *in situ*. I cull examples (data) from diverse centuries, cultures, and settings, since these disparate illustrations share common characteristics that give Purim an overall coherence. Does this imply that Purim fulfilled the same function and role in every society, that every community celebrated Purim in exactly the same way? Certainly not. Does it even mean that similar customs functioned identically the world over? Not necessarily. The model will suit some communities better than others. But many different aspects of Purim, varying in accord with cultural setting, time, and place, can be explained. Different Purim celebrations, heretofore considered unrelated, will be seen to possess unifying traits. Indeed, when diverse examples fall into patterns and become intelligible, a model gains more credence. The ultimate test of a model is whether it explains phenomena convincingly and thereby makes sense of what was not understood. Hopefully, more detailed studies of particular communities will both refine this model and confirm its usefulness.

12. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 94–203; *From Ritual to Theatre* (New York, 1982); *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, 1967); *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, 1974).

alities of social relatedness appear. The most common modality of social organization that takes place within liminality is *communitas*. As opposed to *societas*, or structure, *communitas* is characterized by equality, immediacy, and the lack of social ranks and roles. A leveling process brings about the dissolution of structure, the absence of social distinctions, a homogenization of roles, the disappearance of political allegiance, the breakdown of regular borders and barriers. With the suspension of status distinctions, human beings recognize the core humanity they share. Relationships are immediate and spontaneous, of Buber's "I-Thou" type. *Communitas* strives for release from daily obligations and requirements, and seeks universalism and openness. Where *societas* functions to define the differences between individuals, limit their interaction, and pull them apart, *communitas* serves to unify, bond, and transcend structural relationships. By doing so, *communitas* reminds society that at a deeper level all of its members are human and equal, despite the accepted social and hierarchical differences.

While liminal periods generally manifest themselves in terms of *communitas*, in some cases a total status inversion occurs. During ritually defined times such as the initiation of a king or a seasonal festival, the entire society may enter an overarching liminal mode when statuses, roles, and power relationships are reversed.<sup>13</sup> Members of society who ordinarily occupy positions of inferior status assume dominant positions while their typical superiors are relegated to low status and subjugation. Kings may be reviled mercilessly, nobles beaten, and higher castes forced to perform menial work. Similarly, religious structures may be "reversed": that which is taboo and prohibited becomes permitted or obligatory. The profane and the sacred invert. Rituals of status reversal remind society of the excesses perpetrated by those normally in positions of power over their inferiors. Yet they also reaffirm the usual social structure when the period of liminality ends and the normal structure sets in again. By temporarily "playing" the extraordinary, the ordinary is strengthened.

Turner suggests that these two modalities of liminality, *communitas* and rituals of status reversal, are related. Status inversion "may be regarded as a measure of the degree of drift of structure from *communitas*."<sup>14</sup> When a society underscores the excesses of those of superior status in the normal

13. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 167–203.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 168 Cf. p. 200.

social structure, that society can better recognize that it has strayed far from *communitas*. The status inversion balances things out, forces society to confront its normal structure, and prepares the ground for *communitas* to emerge in the future. Turner does not develop this idea to any great length, but it is important to mention here because elements of both *communitas* and reversals emerge on Purim. These should not be seen as contradictory phenomena but as interrelated expressions of liminality. On Purim the normal contours of Jewish society and religion are inverted. At the same time *communitas* reigns with the destruction of the regular distinctions that govern Jewish piety and society.

The exploration of liminality, reversals, and *communitas* as manifested on Purim affords an opportunity to test Turner's model. Here we may profitably examine to what extent the general model of liminality and *communitas* fits expressions of liminality and *communitas* on Purim. Our results may suggest certain refinements and modifications to Turner's overarching theory.

### *Reversals*

The Book of Esther itself expresses the motif of reversal. Mordecai saves King Ahasuerus from an assassination attempt (2:21–23), but the next verse relates that Haman, not Mordecai, is promoted to chief vizier (3:1). Haman is forced to lead Mordecai clothed in the royal purple on a horse—the very reward Haman proposed, assuming he would be the recipient. Haman is hung on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai (7:10). The king promises Haman that he will receive property plundered from the Jews, but after Haman's death his property is delivered to the Jews (3:11, 8:7). The days slated for the destruction of the Jews become days of triumph over their enemies.

And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them into their power, the opposite happened [*venahafokh hu*], and the Jews got the enemy into their power. . . . The days were transformed [*nepakh lahem*] for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. (9:1, 22)

The Hebrew root in both verses has the meaning “to overturn,” “to invert,” “to be opposite.” Thus the scriptural source of the festival, which also serves as part of the liturgy, suggests that reversals are part and parcel of the holiday. Drawn from this passage, the phrase *venahafokh hu* has become a literary theme as well as a slogan for the day, routinely called out at popular celebrations as audiences encourage actors in their dramas, entertainers in their parodies, and each other in boisterous celebrations.

The characterization of the day as one of opposites is dramatized through reversals of status. Many communities in medieval times appointed a Purim king. Typically a young boy, the king received a type of mock authority for the course of the holiday.<sup>15</sup> Sources do not detail the precise functions or powers of the king, but it is clear that he never possessed the power of physical abuse, as occurs in some cultures. Rather, the Purim king engaged in assorted merrymaking and received the respect normally reserved for the wealthy and those of high status. At the beginning of this century in Tel Aviv, a Purim queen was appointed every year at the Purim carnival called *’Adloyada*, literally, “until he does not know,” a phrase from the dictum that “one must drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between ‘blessed be Mordecai’ and ‘cursed be Haman.’” One year a Yemenite orphan received this honor. An observer related that “the joy of the Yemenites was unbounded. At last they had come into their own. They were now considered the full equals of other Jews.”<sup>16</sup> The queen held one of the lowest social statuses, being an orphan, a female, and a Yemenite, the ethnic group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. By virtue of her position of superiority, the Yemenites vicariously transcended their usual inferior status and felt equal to the rest of society.

Reversals of status occurred more frequently within the tightly knit, highly structured communities of the yeshiva and the synagogue. The rosh yeshiva (head of the academy) and leading rabbis were replaced by ordinary students who impersonated their erudite masters.

In the celebrated *yeshivot* of Telz and Volozhin, the students would elect a Purim rabbi. The rabbi was king in the *yeshiva*. He would don a long silk coat, put

15. Gaster, *Purim*, p. 66; *PA*, p. 339.

16. *PA*, p. 78, from A. S. Sachs, *Worlds That Passed* (Philadelphia, 1928), pp. 227–235.



a girdle round his waist, a fur edged cap on his head, whiskers and sidelocks, exactly like the actual rabbi or *rosh yeshiva* of the year. At the Purim feast the real *rosh yeshiva* would sit at the table like an ordinary *yeshiva-bacher* and listen to the pilpul of his pupil. . . . The chant and form of the Purim pilpul were like those of every day, but the substance and content was a burlesque on the entire daily routine of the *yeshiva*. All the weaknesses of the *rosh yeshiva* and his aides were mocked in the pupil, and the latter could clearly see in what regard his students held his erudition and what they thought of his management. Occasionally the *rosh yeshiva* had to listen to sharp caustic criticism of himself, but he would grin good-naturedly and bear it.<sup>17</sup>

The students also parodied the housewives at whose tables they ate, the spiritual “supervisor” of the yeshiva, and the wife of the rosh yeshiva.<sup>18</sup> Law and custom obligated students to rise in the presence of their mentors, never to contradict them, and to show them tremendous respect. During this reversal, not only did students and rabbis exchange places, but respect and honor became ridicule and criticism. In one case the students acted out a trial of their rabbi so insulting and inappropriate that the subsequent public outcry called it “the greatest outrage in the history of Israel.”<sup>19</sup> In another instance the antics “crossed every boundary,” and proved so embarrassing to the yeshiva that precisely what happened was never mentioned out of deference to “the honor of Jerusalem.”<sup>20</sup> Sometimes it was not students but “scurrilous individuals” who were appointed as pseudo-rabbis and commissioned to mock the real rabbis, to the great delight of the crowd.<sup>21</sup> The reli-

17. *PA*, p. 52. See also *PA*, p. 358. Cf. Y. Fishman, *Hagim umo'adim* (Jerusalem, 1944), p. 127. According to Volozhin tradition, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin instituted this custom in case he had done something inappropriate during the year but his students had not dared to point it out to him. He resigned the office of rosh yeshiva on Purim in order that the Purim rabbi would have the power to criticize him and recount to the yeshiva officials and supervisors their sins and deficiencies.

18. Zvi Singer, “Hagigat purim shel bahurei hayeshiva,” *Mahanayim* 54 (1961): 126, notes that in Worms, yeshiva students extorted wine from wealthy householders, having previously assessed how much each household could give and having received a stamped authorization from the congregation officials.

19. This and other interesting descriptions of Purim “rabbis” can be found in Shlomo Ashkenazy, *Dor, dor uminhagav* (Tel Aviv, 1977), pp 107–108.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

21. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1886), p. 447.

gious leaders, who normally enjoyed great respect, were now laughed at and ignored.<sup>22</sup>

In various places not only was a Purim rabbi appointed, but also a Purim congregation, a Purim congregation leader (*rosh qahal*), and a Purim sexton. According to Hasidic tradition, men whose roles in daily life were the complete opposite were chosen for these roles, in order to fulfill *venahafokh hu* ("the opposite happened").<sup>23</sup> The selection of men to play roles most opposite to their normal statuses embodies the desire for total structural inversion. In nineteenth-century England the functionaries of the synagogue were supplanted on Purim. The folk seized the offices of *ḥazan* (cantor) and *parnas* (leader), parodied the officials, and recited the prayers without regard to the prescribed melodies.<sup>24</sup> In Worms the first Sabbath after Purim was known as *Shabbat habaḥurim*, "the Sabbath of the Youth." Young men wore special clothes, held special privileges, sat in the seats normally reserved for elders, and could conduct services as they wished. "In short, on *Shabbat habaḥurim*, in the spirit of Purim, the young men were free to mock their elders and teachers, as well as cast aside orderly procedure in favor of confusion."<sup>25</sup> Now status in Jewish societies received concrete expression in synagogues. The wealthy held synagogue offices, received the most coveted ritual honors, and occupied the chief seats. By appropriating the offices and conducting services according to their fancy, the young men or common people reversed the normal course of affairs.<sup>26</sup> Thus the folk relegated both rabbis, who embodied religious authority and status, and synagogue functionaries, who exemplified political station, from their normal positions atop the social hierarchy. Those of superior status were reduced to low positions, while those of inferior status dressed and acted like their superiors.<sup>27</sup>

22. Ibid., p. 282.

23. 'Ora vesimḥa 'al'inyanei purim (Jerusalem, n.d.), p. 80; Yiṣḥak Alfasi, "Purim beḥevrat haṣadiqim," *Mahanayim* 54 (1961): 118–120.

24. *PA*, pp. 39–43.

25. Hermann Pollack, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648–1806)* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 189–190. Note that this behavior "in the spirit of Purim" spilled over onto the following Sabbath.

26. For a description of similar status reversals borrowed from Purim which took place on Simḥat Torah, see Abraham Yaari, *Toledot haḡ simḥat tora* (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 376–378.

27. In *Sefer haminhagim leqehilat vermes* (Worms; quoted in Menashe Unger, "Purim sameaḥ—minhag ufoklor," *Mahanayim* 104 [1966]: 22) the reversal is spelled out: "In the synagogue they [the young men] sit on the stage. During the whole year the rich [*ba'alei batim*] sit on the stage, but on this Sabbath the rich evacuate their places for the young men."

A limited status reversal takes place between men and women on Purim. To ensure the strict separation between the sexes mandated by Jewish law, women are prohibited from wearing the garments of men, and men from wearing those of women.<sup>28</sup> On Purim, however, in line with the theatrical performances and carnival atmosphere, men and women sometimes wore the clothing of the opposite sex.<sup>29</sup> An observer recounts that he observed men and women exchanging clothes in the Frankfurt synagogue, "and thus altered [they] ran around like mad."<sup>30</sup> In England "brothers and sisters dressed in each others' attire."<sup>31</sup> And in the East European academies, if Purim antics required female characters the students borrowed clothing from the daughters of the rosh yeshiva.<sup>32</sup> Law codes eventually sanctioned such behavior. One rabbinic responsum explains: "The jurists permitted masks on Purim, and a man wearing women's clothing and a woman wearing the clothing of men, and nothing is forbidden in this matter, since the purpose is merely to rejoice."<sup>33</sup> All this does not amount to a complete status reversal. Women may not lead prayers or assume the leading roles in liturgical or ritual observances. Nor do men lose their status in the synagogue or the home. Rather the reversal is manifested symbolically through the exchange of clothes. By donning the dress reserved for the opposite sex, each gender is transformed into its opposite.

The wearing of masks and masquerading, a custom prevalent on Purim, is characteristic of rituals of status reversal. Thought to have originated in fifteenth-century Italy, where Jews imitated the carnival practices of the Lenten season, the earliest reference to Purim masks dates to 1508. Adults wore grotesque masks during Purim festivities while children would go from house to house dressed in extravagant costumes, singing songs and extorting candies. Children also wear costumes to the synagogue for the reading of the Book of Esther and the evening prayers. Costumes and masks are connected to status reversal on several levels.<sup>34</sup> Children occupy positions at the bot-

28. Deut. 22:5. B. Naz. 59a.

29. Abrahams, *Jewish Life*, p. 282.

30. Quoted by Frazier, *Golden Bough*, 9:363.

31. *PA*, p. 39.

32. *PA*, p. 51.

33. Judah Minz, *Responsa* (Shklow, 1810), no. 17 (cited by Isserles to *Shulhan 'arukh*, 'O.H. 696:8).

34. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 172–177.

tom of the social hierarchy. The are powerless to resist punishments for misbehavior, live in fear of reprisals for their actions, and may be punished for infringements they do not fully understand. Masks, which, as Turner notes, often represent dangerous animals or darker powers, conceal the inferior status of the child behind a veneer of power. Minors circle the town, symbolically threatening the residents as if they were now capable of meting out punishment, as if they possessed coercive abilities. Adults are forced to tolerate wild behavior that is ordinarily unacceptable.<sup>35</sup> As one scholar noted, "Purim is unique in that it was customary for children to insult adults, and adults to accept criticism and commands from children."<sup>36</sup> Various customs gave concrete expression to this reversal. In Zakhu, Kurdistan, they called the first of Adar *segirat she'arim*, or "closing the gates." When a father came home from work, the gates to his courtyard were locked by children who refused to open them until he gave them money or a gift, and the same thing occurred on Purim eve when the father returned home from the synagogue.<sup>37</sup> In all Jewish communities children are encouraged to yell, whoop, or make noise with "groggers," types of noisemaking devices, when the name of Haman is read during the recitation of the Book of Esther. Behavior that is normally out of place in the synagogue becomes the norm. In this way adults and minors symbolically reverse normal power and status relationships.

A reversal dramatized symbolically occurs with Jews and non-Jews. An effigy of Haman was often constructed, dragged through the streets, insulted, and burned or hanged.<sup>38</sup> On one level this custom reenacts the victory over Haman described in the Book of Esther. At the same time it plays out a reversal in which Jews possess the power to punish or persecute gentiles, an inversion of the prevailing power structure. In Poland, in fact, a Christian was paid to dress up like Haman and suffer the abuse. The symbolic meaning of this act did not elude the Christian clergy, who banned the practice in

35. In Jerusalem, for example, at the beginning of this century, children were allowed to smoke cigarettes on Purim—and only on Purim. See Y. Gliss, "Mishloaḥ manot biyerushalayim," *Maḥanayim* 43 (1960): 75.

36. Menahem HaCohen, "Parpar'ot lepurim," *Maḥanayim* 79 (1963): 40.

37. Joseph Rivlin, "Purim," *Maḥanayim* 43 (1960): 18; Erich Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan: An Ethnological Study*, ed. and trans. by Raphael Patai (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 277.

38. Ashkenazy, *Dor, dor uminhagav*, pp. 91–104; Y. Lewinski, "Neqama behaman 'al yedei mishaqim," *Maḥanayim* 43 (1960): 68–72.

1743.<sup>39</sup> Apostates and antisemites regularly slandered Jews on account of this practice, charging that they actually killed a Christian, and several persecutions resulted. Eventually Jewish authorities too discouraged the tradition. Vestiges remain in the custom of writing Haman's name on a stone or the bottom of a shoe and beating it out on the ground.<sup>40</sup>

Purim is therefore characterized by reversals of status. In the sphere of religious authority, Purim rabbis replaced rabbis, and students supplanted the rosh yeshiva. As for political authority, youths or the lower classes seized the synagogue offices, honors, and seats normally reserved for the wealthy and powerful. Gender differences are symbolically reversed as men and women don the garments of the other. And status differences based on age are inverted as children dress in costume, menace householders, and run riot in the synagogue.<sup>41</sup>

### Communitas

Apart from reversals, a second dimension of liminality on Purim is the experience of *communitas*. Leveling of boundaries, a drive toward equality, and more immediate, spontaneous relating occur on many levels throughout the holiday.

The overall ethos of Purim is directed toward *communitas*. A famous proverb observes, "As soon as Adar arrives, all should be exceedingly joyful." Lest anyone not be in the mood for rejoicing, copious imbibition of alcohol readily induces the appropriate disposition. According to the law, "on Purim a man is obligated to drink until he does not know the difference

39. Ashkenazy, *Dor, dor uminhagav*, pp. 102–104.

40. This aspect, as played out during the Purim carnival in Tel-Aviv in 1928, moved one observer to the following reflection: "All the demons of antisemitism are here, all the leaders of pogroms, all the champions of the reactionaries according to their countries and nations. It seems that not one is absent—whether a commander of the enemy, or whether one who undermined the existence of Israel, whether a traitor, an apostate, or those who closed the borders of Israel, whether those who initiate new persecutions—all are exposed here as one, all displayed here to be mocked and ridiculed before the thousands who have come to celebrate the holiday." *Sefer hamo'adim*, p. 292.

41. One further example: Mitnagdim and Hasidim were known to reverse their distinctive formulas for the *qadish*. Mitnagdim added *vayismah purqanei vayikarev meshihei*, while Hasidim omitted these words in order to fulfil *venahafokh hu*. Gliss, "Mishloah manot biyerushalayim," p. 75.

between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordecai.'"<sup>42</sup> Drinking is one of the central motifs of the Book of Esther; again we see a close link between text and custom. In fact, several authorities base the obligation to drink on the episode of the dismissal of Queen Vashti, Esther's predecessor, which occurred while "the heart of the king was merry with wine" (1:10), and on the fall of Haman, which also began with feasting and drunkenness (7:1).<sup>43</sup> This obligation is generally taken seriously, and becomes a major motif in popular literature. A parody of the Passover Haggadah written for Purim bears the name *Hagada leleil shikurim*, "The Haggadah for the Night of Drunkards," playing on one of the names of Passover, *leil shimurim*, "the night of watching."<sup>44</sup> Wine and drunkenness are the themes from start to finish, up to the concluding prayer "Next year may we drink double" (as opposed to "Next year in Jerusalem"). Inebriation produces uninhibited boisterousness, frivolity, and general wildness.

Together with alcohol, feasting is an intrinsic element of Purim. On the day of Purim all must participate in a ritual feast (*se'uda*), a meal with specific ritual requirements, also mandatory for Sabbaths, festivals, weddings, and circumcisions—times of great joy. Special Purim delicacies the particular type of which varied from place to place add to the joyousness. Food also functions as a means of relating. All men are obligated to send gifts of food (*mishloah manot*) to someone else, based on the account in the Book of Esther that following the victory the days of Purim were instituted as "days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another" (9:22). In practice many more gifts are sent, and sometimes gifts received from one person are passed on to another. Exchange of food creates a sense of mutuality and symbolizes the interrelatedness of the individuals.<sup>45</sup> I do not mean that joy is synonymous with *communitas*, but

42. *Shulhan 'arukh*, 'O.H. 695:2. Some authorities, troubled by the requirement of drunkenness, rule that one only need drink more than his normal allowance in order to fall asleep, and thus he will not "know" the difference between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai." See the comment of Isserles ad loc. The obligation to become drunk derives from the Talmud, B. Meg. 7b.

43. *Magen david*, note 1, to *Shulhan 'arukh*, 'O.H. 695:2.

44. *Hagada leleil shikurim*, ed. Zevi Hirsch Sommerhausen (Brussels, 1847).

45. See A. Shuman, "Shalekh Mones—Structural Reversals in a Brooklyn Jewish Community," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 7 (1984): 61–76 (Hebrew). In various communities, and especially in Belgrade, a festive meal was held at midnight following the evening Megila reading where the participants stayed up all night drinking and visiting each other. See Joseph Rivlin, "Purim," *Mahanayim* 43 (1960): 18; Dov Noy, "Se'udat purim umita 'ameha," *Mahanayim* 43 (1960): 55–59.

that feasting, drinking, and the exchange of gifts combine with masks, costumes, parading, and Purim plays to create a mood of ecstasy and release. Intoxication, feasting, and these colorful festivities encourage spontaneous celebration, the destruction of normal protocol, and an experience of *communitas*.<sup>46</sup>

The clearest manifestations of the drive toward *communitas* are seen in the spheres of law and custom, where tendencies to break down social divisions cut across the normal propensity of Jewish tradition to classify, divide, distinguish, and keep categories apart—and herein lies the unique and idiosyncratic nature of Purim as opposed to all other Jewish festivals. At the same time, Purim rituals and customs actively effect a bridging of social gaps in order to create unity and promote freeflowing interrelatedness. These forces pushed together poor and rich, men and women, and even Jew and gentile.

Like all societies, Jewish communities had their rich and poor, and given the comparatively small size of most Jewish communities, each member knew the economic status of other members fairly accurately. On Purim this gap was narrowed through the rituals of giving charity. All are obligated to give “gifts to the poor” (*matanot le’evionim*).<sup>47</sup> Another custom developed to give money on the eve of Purim, which one authority calls a “reminder” (*zekher*) of the gifts to the poor.<sup>48</sup> Strictly speaking, one is obligated to give to but two poor men. Yet the codes consistently rule that “one must not be punctilious in this matter, but rather give to everyone who holds forth his hand to take.”<sup>49</sup> Masks and costumes fully disguise the rich and poor even during the act of giving charity. A remarkably astute insight attributed to one of the disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov formulates this subterfuge as follows:

It is a *mišva* [commandment] to obey and to dress up on Purim. Indeed, it is a great *mišva*, because in this way one cannot tell the nobleman from the poor. And therefore they [the rabbis] instituted the *mišva* of gifts to the poor on Pur-

46. The Holi festival in India, one of Turner’s examples of society-wide *communitas*, began with indulgence in marijuana to help set the mood. See Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 185.

47. *Shulhan ‘arukh*, ‘O.H. 694:1–3.

48. Avraham ben Natan of Lunel, *Sefer hamanhig*, Laws of *Megila*, § 205 (ed. Yiṣṣhak Raphael [Jerusalem, 1978], 2:248.)

49. Maimonides, *Mishne tora*, Laws of *Megila* 2:17.

im, because when people dress up, the *mišva* of charity may be performed in its most appropriate manner [*ketiquna*]. One does not know then to whom he gives, and the one who receives does not know from whom he receives, and thus no one is embarrassed to appear needy and dependent on human kindness. This is the best manner of anonymous giving, when one gives while in costume to someone else in costume.<sup>50</sup>

Anonymity and equality characterize the immediate interrelatedness of *communitas* just as status difference and well-defined ranks characterize *societas*.<sup>51</sup> Effected by masks and costumes, these qualities counteract the sense of economic difference the act of giving charity inevitably creates by identifying, objectively and subjectively, the rich and poor. Other strategies work toward this goal. It is customary that recipients not thank their benefactors,<sup>52</sup> thus denying, in a sense, their indebtedness, and obscuring the real difference between the two. Laws obligating even the poorest to give charity and “gifts to his fellow man,” and to participate in a festival feast are directed to the same end. Subject to the same commandments as the wealthy, the poor do not feel inferior. And according to one explanation, all are obligated to become drunk so as not to know whether they are rich or poor, nor be able to distinguish the rich from the poor.<sup>53</sup>

Charity allows the poor to take part equally in Purim festivities, to celebrate just as, and along with, the rich.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, masks and other strategies camouflage the difference between social classes that charity giving otherwise emphasizes. The spirit of mutual relatedness, equality, and anonymity characteristic of *communitas* results. An observer of the Palestine Purim celebration of 1938 captured this spirit beautifully:

Let the poor man eat; perhaps he will forget his poverty! Let the rich man drink; perhaps he will forget his wealth! And let the investigators, and all their

50. S. Tudor, “Hahasva’a vehahithapsut,” *Mahanayim* 104 (1966): 33.

51. Cf. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 102, 188–189.

52. *PA*, p. 385.

53. See Menahem Mendel, *Sipurei heḥag purim* (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 34.

54. The importance and effects of charity are emphasized by Maimonides, *Mishne tora*, *Laws of Megila* 2:17: “It is better for a man to be plentiful in gifts to the poor than in his feast or in his gifts to his fellow man. For there is no greater joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, orphans, widows, and converts. He who gladdens the hearts of these misfortunates is similar to the divine presence [*shekhina*], as it is written, ‘[God] revives the spirits of the lowly, [He] revives the hearts of the contrite’ [Isa. 57:15].”



investigation, the delvers and their delving pass utterly from our memory, nor let them come to mind again.<sup>55</sup>

But perhaps the best description of the effect of Purim is the folk proverb, "On Hanukkah and Purim, the poor become rich."<sup>56</sup>

Gender distinctions and the hierarchy of sexes are attenuated to a certain degree on Purim. Normally women are exempt from time-bound positive commandments, such as prayer, phylacteries, and the waving of the lulav on Sukkot. One would expect, then, that women would be exempt from the obligation to hear the recitation of the Book of Esther. However, the Talmud obligates women on the grounds that "they too experienced the same miracle."<sup>57</sup> Such a law self-consciously recognizes that normal legal principles do not apply on Purim. For the sake of inclusion, of breaking down the gender hierarchy, women receive a ritual obligation equal to men; they too appear at the synagogue as members of the community who congregate to hear the central myth of the festival.<sup>58</sup> So too the standard separation of men and women within the synagogue was broached in certain places. James Frazier, describing the Jews he observed in Frankfurt, relates that "women were allowed as a special favor to open their latticed window and look into the men's synagogue because the great deliverance of the Jews from their enemies in the time of King Ahasuerus was said to have been effected by a woman."<sup>59</sup> Neither the legal obligation nor the opening of windows amounts to the complete elimination of typical gender distinctions, but symbolically they demonstrate that Purim is an anomalous time, a liminal period in which the usual divisions and distinctions between the sexes are suspect. On the popular level, costumes and masks conceal the gender of the bearer. An observer of the Purim festivities in Tel Aviv noted that: "In effect, on Purim the boundaries between different ages and genders are blurred. They all disguise themselves in masks, they all behave wildly, they

55. *PA*, p. 162.

56. *PA*, p. 386.

57. B. Meg. 4a; Maimonides, *Mishne tora*, Laws of *Megila* 1:1; *Shulhan 'arukh*, 'O.H. 689:1.

58. In Libya, and certain other Oriental communities, the woman did not go to the synagogue to hear the reading. Her husband read the scroll for her at home following the synagogue service. Even this, however, shows that women are included in the rituals to a greater than normal degree.

59. Frazier, *Golden Bough*, 9:364.

all dance like goats through the streets.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, we noted above that the sexes used to exchange clothes on Purim, a practice at odds with the law, and only permitted by special dispensation. Again the purpose is to camouflage the distinction between men and women, to disguise status and sex. This effect bothered one rabbi, quite opposed to such customs, who lamented that:

Wives, even more [enthusiastically] than their husbands, hurry out after them, having changed their manner and appearance. They put on masks and all change clothes. All men wear women's clothing, and they put on scarves. Women, too, disguise themselves in the clothes of men to the point where no one who sees them can recognize them.<sup>61</sup>

Sexlessness, a type of anonymity, frequently occurs during periods of liminality and *communitas*.<sup>62</sup>

Of all the divisions in Jewish tradition, none is so central as the distinction between Jews and gentiles. Ironically, until modern times, the sociopolitical and theological dimensions of this separation were, for the most part, inverted. Socially Jews were a despised minority, cut off from the ambient society, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Theologically Jews saw themselves as God's chosen people, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” atop the divine hierarchy, and blessed God each morning “who did not make me a gentile.” Laws prohibiting Jews from eating the bread and cheese of gentiles and drinking their wine reduced the possibilities of social intercourse between individual members of the two faiths,<sup>63</sup> as did church laws directed toward similar ends.<sup>64</sup> On Purim, however, this separation is called into question. The Book of Esther describes how “many of the people of the land professed to be Jews” after witnessing Mordecai's triumph (8:17). This suggested that a leveling of the normal barriers between Jew and gentile may be possible on this festival. The folk distributed charity to the non-Jewish poor on Purim, especially to their gentile nursemaids and ser-

60. *Sefer hamo'adim*, p. 290.

61. Cited in A. M. Haberman, “‘Al hayayin, ve'al hayayin bepurim,” *Mahanayim* 54 (1961): 80–81.

62. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 102, 106, 188–189.

63. See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York, 1962), pp. 1–63.

64. Robert Chazan, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1980).

vants.<sup>65</sup> Rabbinic authorities protested virulently against this custom, charging that the donors did not discharge their obligation to give charity, and, what is worse, deprived the Jewish poor. Nonetheless, the custom endured. Under the Turkish regime the chief rabbis and other Jewish dignitaries sent Purim delicacies to the leading Muslims of the community.<sup>66</sup> That Esther may be recited in any language also points to a more universal spirit, a desire that even those who do not know Hebrew share in the festival.

The nature of medieval society and the efforts of both church and synagogue to prevent fraternization precluded a complete annulment of the separation between Jew and gentile. Symbolically, however, the potential was greater. Costumes, for example, not only disguise gender and age, but conceal identity and religion. Jews often dressed as characters in Esther, including King Ahasuerus and even Haman. Here, then, Jews intentionally dress like gentiles, as did Mordecai, who twice paraded through the streets of Shushan in royal garb.<sup>67</sup> But the most profound symbolic expression of the Jewish-gentile rapprochement appears in the obligation to drink to the point when one does not know the difference between “blessed be Mordecai” and “cursed be Haman.” Mordecai and Haman are the quintessential Jew and gentile—Mordecai, in fact, is called *hayehudi*, “the Jew” (10:3). The genealogies given in Esther trace Mordecai back to Kish, while Haman is known as *ha’agagi*, the Agagite (2:5, 3:1). Jewish lore identified Kish with the father of Saul, and understood “the Agagite” as the lineage of Agag, king of Amalek, whom Saul defeated (1 Sam. 15). Other traditions associate

65. See Abrahams, *Jewish Life*, p. 175; *Sidur rashi*, § 346 (ed. Jakob Freimann and Salomon Buber [Berlin, 1911], p. 169); *Mahzor Vitry*, § 245 (ed. S. Hurwitz [Berlin, 1893], pp. 210–211).

66. *PA*, pp. 369–370.

67. A gentile once asked Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschuetz (d. 1764) why on Purim you celebrate the night which follows the day of the holiday, while on other Jewish holidays you celebrate the night which precedes the day. (The festival meal on Purim is eaten during the day which follows the first night of Purim, when the festival begins, and lasts into that night. On other festivals the ritual meal is eaten on the first night.) The rabbi answered, “And why do you gentiles usually celebrate the day after the night, but on Christmas you celebrate the preceding night? But both questions have the same answer. Purim came to Israel on account of a gentile [Haman], so we practice the ways of the gentile [*anu nohagim minhag goyim*]. Christmas came to you from a Jew, so you celebrate in a Jewish way!” Menahem Hacohen, “Parpa’ot lepurim,” p. 40. This sentiment, albeit meant in the spirit of joking, actually suggests more a reversal than communitas.

Haman directly with Amalek,<sup>68</sup> the nation which attacked Israel when they first came forth from Egypt.<sup>69</sup> Amalek was the archenemy of Israel; a positive commandment still obligates all Jews to destroy the memory of Amalek. Haman, traced to Amalek, symbolizes the eternal enemy, the antithesis of the Jew, the worst of the gentile nations dedicated to the destruction of Israel. The obligation to erase this fundamental distinction through drunkenness, to confuse Haman and Mordecai, Agag and Saul, Amalek and Israel, gentile and Jew, is the ultimate expression of the leveling of oppositions in the spirit of harmony, equality, and *communitas*.

### *Law and Play*

I noted in passing a number of Purim phenomena during which the law is abrogated or suspended. Jurists gave permission to dress in the clothing of the opposite sex, normally a violation of a biblical prohibition,<sup>70</sup> for the sake of Purim joy. Status reversals demoted the rabbi or rosh yeshiva, thereby contravening the laws of respect incumbent upon students. Other such examples abound. Drunkenness, itself not *ipso facto* opposed to any law, although certainly at odds with the tenor of Jewish morality, may result in the destruction of property and inadvertent (or perhaps intentional) physical injury. Certain law codes, however, absolved inebriates of culpability. Moses Isserles notes that "some authorities say that if a man injures his neighbor as a result of too much Purim joy, he is free from paying damages."<sup>71</sup> Isserles also rules that one may wear clothes that contain certain types of forbidden mixtures of fabrics (*kelayim*).<sup>72</sup> Rabbi Judah Minz (1408–1506) observes that several rabbis "rule that any food stolen in the course of Purim joy, even without permission . . . is not considered thievery."<sup>73</sup> Not only is stealing sanctioned, but responsibility for damages incurred during thefts or drunken boisterousness is abolished. Hayyim Hal-

68. Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.6.5; *Targum sheni* to Esther 3:1; *Maḥzor Vitry*, § 249 (p. 215).

69. Exod. 17:8–16, Deut. 25:17–19.

70. Deut. 22:5.

71. Isserles to *Shulḥan 'arukh*, 'O.H. 695:2.

72. Ibid. Isserles permits *kelayim derabanan*, mixtures forbidden by rabbinic authority. Mixtures forbidden by the Torah are not permitted.

73. Judah Minz, *Responsa*, no. 17.

berstam, rabbi of Zanz (d. 1876), and his attendants used to walk along the Jewish streets and break window panes from time to time.<sup>74</sup> In German Jewish communities, communal prohibitions against gambling were lifted on Hanukkah and Purim, and games of chance, lotteries, and even dice games were permitted.<sup>75</sup> In Kurdistan young men would eat a Purim meal with young women, an event “that would not even be considered on any other day,”<sup>76</sup>

Thus far the abrogations of law are themselves sanctioned by law, a type of nomian antinomianism. But often custom outstripped law, to the dismay of rabbinic authorities. Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (d. 1630) expressed his indignation at the customs of his day:

I have seen many who indulge in wine knowing no limit. On these days of Purim they play and behave frivolously, and don't worry about praying on these days. On the contrary, they yell during the prayers prior to the reading of the scroll of Esther, and they confuse the cantor until his voice is not heard. When they eat, they indulge in whatever their eyes fancy. They don't cover their heads or think of the heavenly world where the God of Israel resides. They don't take care to wash their hands or say the blessing for the bread or grace after the meal, such that it appears to the masses that on these two days every man is permitted to cast off the yoke of Torah and the commandments, and the more crazy one becomes, the better it is. But all this is undoubtedly evil and unfortunate and a flagrant sin.<sup>77</sup>

His jeremiad laments the total indifference to the law, apparently a fairly common occurrence. He describes the general feeling that the law was suspended, that one “is permitted to cast off the yoke of Torah and the commandments.” The antinomian atmosphere pervaded the synagogue service, where the congregants either did not pray or, worse, disrupted the service. Such synagogue antics are a regular feature of Purim. Prayers are sometimes

74. *Darkei hayyim*, ed. Raphael Zimetbaum (Satu-Mare, 1939), p. 31.

75. Pollack, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands*, p. 181. The Talmud, B. Sanh. 24b, disqualifies gamblers from giving testimony, and the Midrash considers dice gamblers sinners “who reckon with the left hand, but add up with the right, and thus rob and cheat one another” (Midrash Tehilim to Ps. 26:7, trans. William Braude, *The Midrash of Psalms*, 2 vols. [New Haven, 1959], 1:364).

76. Brauer, *Jews of Kurdistan*, p. 291.

77. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei luhot habrit* (Warsaw, 1852), 3:105b.

recited to the melodies of the High Holidays, other festivals, or popular tunes. Whenever the name of Haman is mentioned during the recitation of Esther, "groggers," special types of noisemakers, are used to create a raucous din in order to "wipe out" Haman's name. This attitude is summed up best by the common proverb, "On Purim all things are permissible."<sup>78</sup>

This antinomian aspect of Purim, and actually its overall liminality, is also related to its calendrical position. Purim occurs in Adar, the last month of the year. Adar itself is somewhat liminal. Seven years out of nineteen the calendar is intercalated and contains two Adars.<sup>79</sup> Thus Adar blinks in and out of existence on the margin of the year. Purim falls on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar, exactly one month before Passover. Now Passover symbolizes not only the beginning of the agricultural year, but also the beginning of the Jewish people and the law. For Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt and the end of slavery, which enabled the Israelites to receive the Torah. The first commandments to the Israelites, in fact, concern the Passover sacrifice.<sup>80</sup> Passover, then, represents order and structure—the formation of the nation and the acceptance of law. Purim, thirty days before Passover, represents antistructure, a state prior to the establishment of society and its legal system. A sort of calendrical logic fixes Purim as a time of *communitas*, of the absence of structure and law. On Purim, or immediately thereafter, thirty days before Passover, the Talmud advises that one begin asking questions concerning the laws of Passover. In Oriental communities the Purim feast went late into the night, and early in the morning preparations for Passover were actually commenced.<sup>81</sup> These traditions recognize a specific relationship between Purim and Passover: when the disorder of Purim festivities concludes, it is time to begin the orderly preparations for Passover. Purim and Passover reenact annually in cyclical time that which the nation experienced historically in linear time, the passage from antistructure to structure, disorder to order, and anarchy to law.<sup>82</sup>

Suspension of law and norm is characteristic of *communitas*. The leveling

78. *PA*, p. 385.

79. Purim is always celebrated in Second Adar (M. Meg. 1:4), although the fourteenth and fifteenth of First Adar are also considered days of happiness.

80. Exod. 12.

81. *Sefer hamo'adim*, p. 269; Gliss, "Mishloah manot biyerushalayim," p. 75.

82. Historically, too, there appears to be some connection between Purim and Passover. See J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover* (London, 1963), p. 239.

of roles, statuses, ranks, and the overall sociopolitical framework entails the suspension of the juridical system which governs the interactions of these positions. Law supports the social structure, so the dissolution of *societas* during *communitas* entails a parallel dissolution of the legal underpinnings of that structure. Immediate, spontaneous relationships both require and effect an absence of legal dicta governing interaction. Turner has noted that the absence of private property is particularly common in *communitas*, for property is generally the basis of status differences separating the haves from the have-nots.<sup>83</sup> Private property is not abolished on Purim, nor is license given to cause harm, but rights over property, both goods and body, are not fully recognized by law. That proverb, "On Purim, all things are permissible," expresses true *communitas*, a time when legal prohibitions, obligations, and commandments are suspended, when the laws which dictate permitted and proscribed conduct between the sexes, roles, occupations, statuses, and other defined positions in the social matrix are relaxed, and when spontaneous interactions become the norm.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Purim is the tremendous creativity in the arts fostered by this festival.<sup>84</sup> Beginning in the fifteenth century, Jewish communities staged annual plays on Purim.<sup>85</sup> Jewish theater developed from Purim celebrations, and included comedy, jesting, and individual buffoonery as well as sophisticated dramas. *Purimspielers*, small bands of actors, would circulate from house to house, performing scenes from their repertoire of plays. The development of Jewish music was stimulated by Purim rituals. Purim plays often involved song and music, while songs were composed and sung at Purim feasts, and served as a prime mode of festive expression.<sup>86</sup> Besides theater and music, Purim has spawned abundant poetry, short story, dance, legend, and art.<sup>87</sup>

The most prevalent Purim art is parody, both in literature and drama.<sup>88</sup>

83. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 106, 140–145.

84. David Davidowicz, "Purim be'omanut hayehudit," *Maḥanayim* 43 (1960): 55–59; *PA*, pp. 152–248.

85. Jacob Shatzky, "History of Purim Plays," in *PA*, pp. 357–367. For bibliography, see *PA*, pp. 506–510.

86. *PA*, p. 221.

87. *PA*, pp. 153–248.

88. Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York, 1907); idem, "The History of Purim Parody in Jewish Literature," in *PA*, pp. 330–355; Mala Bitanski, "'Al purimshpiel ve'al parodim," *Yeda' 'am* 31 (1967): 9–16; Dov Noy, "Haparodim besifrut yisra'el haqeduma," *Maḥanayim* 54 (1960): 92–99; *Sefer hamo'adim*. pp. 179–201.

Preeminent members of the community are often parodied—the leading rabbis, the wealthy, and the lay leaders—but the subjects for parody are limitless. Gentiles, Jews of different communities, such as a particular sect of Hasidim, Mitnagdim, Sephardim, or Ashkenazim, or, in modern times, assimilated Jews, may be the objects of ridicule.<sup>89</sup> I have mentioned one famous literary parody, the “Haggadah for the Night of Drunkenness.” Another celebrated creation is “Tractate Purim,” a detailed imitation of the Talmud complete with apparatus, commentary, and supercommentary, in which the famous rabbis, Rabbi Bottle, Rabbi Flask, and Rabbi Drunkard, ponder ridiculous questions. One section involves a complex discussion of the biblical proofs for the obligation that not only men, women, and children, but also animals get drunk on Purim. Another proves that the biblical heroes Adam through Moses were all drunkards. Besides the parody of the Passover Haggadah, parodies have been written for other elements of the liturgy, the *Qiddush*, *Hosh'annot*, *Aqdamut*, *Selihot*, Sabbath hymns, and various parts of the High Holiday service. At the Purim feast it is customary to deliver “Purim Torah,” parodies of Torah discourses in which verses, talmudic sayings, and laws are turned on their head. One might hear, for example, a sophisticated and detailed analysis of, say, whether a roach motel requires a mezuzah, complete with pertinent legal sources and biblical prooftexts.

These types of parody are examples of play. Classic Jewish modes of expression—liturgy, responsa, Talmud, Torah discourses—are played with, changed, transformed, and turned upside-down. The traditional forms are retained. Tractate Purim with its commentary, supercommentary, and Aramaic terminology resembles a typical page of the Talmud. Parodies of the liturgy imitate the rhyme schemes and structure of traditional prayers. Even the farcical exegeses of biblical verses and rabbinic dicta found in the parodies of responsa are not necessarily precluded by the normal methods of rabbinic interpretation; midrash is notoriously flexible, and regularly wrenches verses or words from their original contexts, plays with semantics, and “rewrites” the text to serve the purpose of the exegete.<sup>90</sup> Purim parodists play with the content, allowing their imaginations to roam, combining traditional elements in novel and unprecedented ways. The theatrical play, as the

89. Shifra Epstein, “Drama on the Table: The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl,” in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without*, ed. Harvey Goldberg (New York, 1987), pp. 195–219, provides a contemporary account of such Purim parody.

90. Consider such midrashic techniques as “do not read x, but rather y.”



word “play” implies, also entails play of this sort. Even as traditional stories are retold they are embellished, modified, and transfigured.

Turner has discussed the significance of play in *From Ritual to Theatre*.<sup>91</sup> He notes that in many societies liminality involves play. When the social norm breaks down, its constitutive elements are similarly freed from their regular modes. Cultural artifacts are recombined in new ways, parodied, satirized, and turned on their heads.<sup>92</sup> Just as statuses, roles, and positions are suspended, so too is the regular organization of cultural elements. Characterized by openness and freedom, *communitas* provides the optimal setting to engage in play. Members of society play with the elements that ordinarily constitute structure, depicting potential alternatives to reality. Such play is linked to the arts, for myths, symbols, dramas, and patterns are developed to temporarily reclassify reality.<sup>93</sup> Play is a type of experiment, the subjects of which are the elements of culture, the results of which are potentially infinite. The tremendous creativity stimulated by Purim is thus readily understandable as an aspect of liminality and *communitas*. Purim is play time, when the constitutive elements of Judaism—biblical verses, mythical archetypes, law, ritual, prayers—are recombined in novel ways. “On Purim all things are permissible,” for the liberation from structure opens worlds of possibility.

Less clear, but no less interesting, is the question why Purim play almost exclusively takes the form of parody. Liminal play, in theory, can take many forms: exaggeration of specific elements of culture, monstrous or dangerous phenomena, strange taboos, unnatural relationships, orgiastic rituals. On Purim, however, parody dominates.<sup>94</sup> Rituals of status reversal bestowed no coercive powers upon the Purim kings and Purim rabbis. They engaged in humorous antics and satirized traditional authorities. *Purimspiels* involve

91. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*. See too *Ritual Process*, pp. 127–128.

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–50.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

94. I have found only one example of a Purim monstrosity. In Kurdistan they used to select a fat boy and dress him up like a pregnant woman by tying pillows around his stomach and fashioning breasts. His face was painted, a beard affixed to his chin, horns placed on his head, and a cow bell hung around his neck. Called a *lebukay*, he was led through the streets of the city by a string and taunted with various songs, such as “Dead Lebukay, you are male and became pregnant” and “Lebukay, what did you bring?/You brought Haman/Why did you bring him?/To crush his testicles.” The whole affair, however, seems to have been more amusing than frightening. Brauer, *Jews of Kurdistan*, p. 287.

elaborate parodies of various individuals or stereotypes. And the literary creations, the imitations of the Talmud, the Haggadah, and liturgical pieces, as well as the "Purim Torah" delivered at the Purim feast, are classic parodies. Now every culture has its idiosyncratic type of play, and parody may simply be the Jewish mode.<sup>95</sup> But perhaps there is more to it than this. Let me suggest two factors that may explain, at least in part, the primacy of parody as a mode of Purim play. This discussion is admittedly speculative, but to leave the question without any preliminary suggestion would be unfortunate.

Much of the predilection for parody may derive from the highly literary nature of Jewish society. Texts are central to Judaism, and knowledge of texts is indispensable for success in society. Texts loom large in daily life through prayer and study. In private letters, in everyday speech, in formal documents, and in other oral and written expressions, Jews regularly quote their inherited texts, adapting biblical verses, introducing a relevant talmudic saying, or alluding to an apposite liturgical phrase. Texts, then, are the prime cultural elements in Judaism and constitute its most important subjects—revelation, prayers, discussions of the rabbis, legends, law, and tradition. In periods of liminality, play focuses on texts. As the structures legitimated and defined by texts are abrogated in favor of *communitas*, the underlying texts too may be inverted, overturned, played with, and even mocked. The result is parody, an imitation of standard forms where the content is completely open-ended. Such play could be seen as a direct outgrowth of midrash, which one scholar has described as "a kind of joking."<sup>96</sup> In midrash words are creatively read, taken out of context, and given new meanings. On Purim this process is taken one step further, as it were, from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Nontextual Purim parody, such as the examples of the rituals of status reversal when the rosh yeshiva or community rabbi was relegated and ridiculed, requires a different explanation. Here the primacy of parody may relate to the position of Jewish society on the margins of the dominant

95. Haim Schwarzbaum, *Studies in Jewish and World Folklore* (Berlin, 1968), p. 26: "It should be pointed out that Jews show a definite proclivity towards the satiric element of life in general."

96. James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. G. Hartman and S. Budick (New Haven, 1986), p. 95.

society. Until modern-day Israel, Jews always lived within a larger society, whether Christian or Muslim, pagan or secular. Although Jewish communities were sometimes self-governing, the ability of leaders to punish, imprison, fine, or coerce their members was circumscribed. Even when the communities possessed and exerted such powers, they did so by the grace of the gentile authorities, who found Jewish self-government beneficial to their interests. Real power resided beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community. Accordingly, little potential existed for certain members of society to abuse their peers and physically harm others or slide to dangerous excess. Rituals of status reversal do not involve extreme humiliation, corporal beating, or other harsh practices known elsewhere<sup>97</sup> simply because these practices generally were not found in Jewish society at any time. Status differences, however, permeate all societies, and Jewish society is no exception. Status, or *yichus*, is a combination of wealth, lineage, and learning.<sup>98</sup> *Yichus* could be quantified accurately, and the *yichus* of every member of the community was known. High *yichus* commanded respect and received concrete expression in the synagogue, where the wealthy purchased the chief seats and controlled the distribution of synagogue honors. As for religious authorities, various laws ensured that their status was formally recognized. Students had to stand before their rabbi, defer to his judgment, and pay him the respect fitting for a master. On Purim respect becomes its opposite: disrespect, parody, and mocking. The rabbi is forced to respect his students, while they are given license of free speech normally inhibited by the laws of respect. They parody the rosh yeshiva, the diametric opposite of respect. The Purim king, for his part, makes a mockery of the normal leadership.

### *Antistructure and Alternative Structure*

At this point, it is worthwhile to step back and ponder the question raised in the introduction of whether this study can contribute to Turner's overall theory. How well does the general model suit our particular examples of liminality and *communitas*? In most of our examples, *communitas*

97. See Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 169–171, 185–189.

98. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York, 1962), p. 78.

did not entail the complete breakdown of structure. Laws were not completely annulled, the divisions between men and women never abolished, gentiles never welcomed as full members of the community. *Communitas*, rather, attacked the structure at its edges, suspending certain laws, permitting women greater access to the synagogue, including gentiles through gifts and charity. Pronounced examples of *communitas* occur mainly through symbolic action—obfuscating the difference between Mordecai and Haman, for example, dramatizes the mixing of Jew and gentile. The same is true for the rituals of status reversal. Except for the Purim rabbis of the yeshivot, Purim reversals are symbolic and partial. Men and women exchange clothes, they do not exchange roles such that women perform the synagogue rituals while men remain behind the partition. Children run riot and extort delicacies, but adults do not lose their authority completely.

This suggests that “structure” should not always be contrasted with “antistructure” but sometimes with “alternative structure.” *Communitas* does not manifest itself exclusively as the complete breakdown of *societas*. As is often the case with large-scale theories, and as some of his critics have argued, Turner’s model is too neat. To see *communitas* and *societas* as binary opposites, the former completely unstructured, the latter relentlessly institutionalized, oversimplifies the matter. Reversals may occur among particular elements of the structure but stop short of complete inversion. In certain social structures, *communitas* and liminality may forge inroads while other pillars of the social structure remain in force. There results a distortion of the normal social structure—an alternative structure—in which some elements of the social and juridical structure dissolve, others invert, and still others endure.

A quick look at a contemporary Purim observance helps to illustrate this point. Amy Shuman recently discussed the “exchange of gifts” (*mishloah manot*) ritual she witnessed in an ultrareligious community in Brooklyn.<sup>99</sup> A major focus of the festival is concentrated upon the ostensibly straightforward custom of sending gifts of food to neighbors and friends. The food itself functions not as food but as a “gift” in the anthropological sense of the term, with its full range of symbolic values. Women exert tremendous energy in the purchase of necessities, baking of delicacies, wrapping and

99. Shuman, “Shalekh Mones.”

decoration of the plates. Great effort is required to monitor the nature of the gifts: provenance must be noted so that the level of kashrut is known; the quantity, quality, and aesthetics of the food must be assessed and a commensurate gift returned; specially decorated parcels must be sent to leading rabbis and to anyone to whom a family is indebted for prior hospitality or other favors. Women are responsible for all these tasks, since they have to do with the kitchen and food, which are under the jurisdiction of women in such communities. Children generally deliver the gifts, but some women do so themselves, not trusting their husbands to deposit the appropriate parcel with its intended recipients. Shuman points out that a reversal is at work: the ordinarily private domain of the kitchen becomes the public domain and focus of the ritual.<sup>100</sup> The private activity of food preparation spills over into the streets of the community. Women, not men, carry out the ritual. However, Shuman astutely notes that a total reversal does not occur, since men and women do not exchange roles, statuses, or obligations. The kitchen remains the domain of women. Structure does not become antistructure. Rather, the nature of the ritual thrusts the role and domain of women into the center of the action. An alternative structure results even as the regular societal matrices of borders, roles, and statuses remain in place.

We must, then, analyze the particular type of festival, community, and historical setting to understand better why some elements shift into liminal modes and others stubbornly persist. Different festivals of the same community may engender distinct “alternative structures” depending on the specific nature of the festival. Turner, to be fair, concentrated on tribal societies and recognized that in more complex social structures *communitas* and liminality become somewhat institutionalized.<sup>101</sup> On Purim, for example, the law itself granted recognition to the time of liminality by sanctioning the suspension of certain laws, such as culpability for damage—what I referred to as nomian antinomianism. Still, Turner’s explanation retains *communitas* and *societas* as abstract binary opposites and casts the blame on modernity. It may be more helpful to understand *communitas* and liminality in more flexible modes that allow for alternative, and not simply anti-, structure.

100. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–73.

101. Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 107.

*Purim and the World-to-Come*

One paradox about Purim is the importance attributed to the holiday by Jewish tradition. Historically, Purim is a late holiday; its tone is secular—the Book of Esther does not mention the name of God even once. The heroes Mordecai and Esther have gentile names. Esther herself marries a gentile king, a fact that caused the rabbis great consternation. There are hints that the rabbis originally opposed the celebration of Purim. Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds contain traditions to that effect.

Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman said in the name of Rabbi Yonathan, “Eighty-five elders, including more than thirty prophets, have been unwilling to grant recognition to the Feast of Purim. They said, ‘Moses told us that no prophet should add anything to the Law from now and henceforth; and yet Mordecai and Esther desired to create and establish a new institution.’”<sup>102</sup>

There were also doubts as to the sanctity of the scroll of Esther.<sup>103</sup> In various times and places, the Jewish leadership attempted to restrain the wild Purim celebrations, ban the offensive humor of the play, and institute decorum.<sup>104</sup> Despite opposition of this nature, Purim eventually triumphed, far surpassing its sister holiday Hanukkah in importance. Many legal authorities rule that while there is no prohibition against performing work on Purim, nevertheless, work should not be done, and those who do work will never profit from their actions.<sup>105</sup> Avoidance of work raises the status of Purim to that of the Sabbath and *yom tov*. In fact, in many places it was customary to dress in Sabbath clothes on Purim.<sup>106</sup> Several sources compare Purim with the day on which God gave the Torah, and one Talmud commentator concludes, “Purim is as great as the day on which the Torah was given on Sinai.”<sup>107</sup> So too the *She’iltot*, an eighth-century code, records, “The days of

102. P. Meg. 1:5. Cf. B. Meg. 14a: “Forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied to Israel, and they neither took away nor added anything to what is written in the Torah except the reading of the Book of Esther.”

103. B. Meg. 7a–b.

104. *PA* pp. 41, 325; Michael Meyer, *Origins of the Modern Jew* (Detroit, 1967), p. 133.

105. B. Meg. 5a; Maimonides, *Mishne tora*, Laws of *Megila* 2:14.

106. Isserles to *Shulhan ‘aruch*, *O.H.* 695:2.

107. Mordecai ben Hillel HaCohen, cited in *Sefer hamoa’dim*, p. 31; *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 10:275.

Purim are as important as the day on which the Torah was given. Thus Mar the son of Rabina used to fast throughout the year except for the two days of Shavuot, when the Torah was given, and the two days of Purim, because of the miracle that happened then."<sup>108</sup> Another tradition associates Purim with Yom Kippur. Purim, according to this tradition, is more important than Yom Kippur, since Yom Kippur, or *Yom hakipurim*, is "like Purim" (*ke-purim* can be read as "like Purim")—only "like Purim," but not as important.<sup>109</sup> Yet another tradition suggests that Purim is equal to all the other holidays taken together.<sup>110</sup>

The strangest tradition concerns the status of Purim in the world-to-come.<sup>111</sup> According to several sources, "all festivals will be abolished in the world-to-come except Purim and Yom Kippur."<sup>112</sup> The Talmud relates that "in the world-to-come all the other parts of the Prophets and the Writings will lose their worth and only the Torah of Moses and the Book of Esther will retain their value."<sup>113</sup> Why should this bizarre "secular" holiday endure in the world-to-come rather than Passover, Sukkot, or even the New Year? Why does Esther alone claim the sanctity accorded the Pentateuch, the direct revelation of God to Moses?

A popular explanation suggests that the miracles performed during the advent of the Messiah will dwarf those of these other Jewish holidays. Compared with eschatological upheavals, the resurrection of the dead, and the Messianic kingdom, Passover and its plagues, Sukkot and its booths, and Shavuot with the revelation of the Torah will seem trivial and fade from memory. Purim, however, when the Jews took matters into their own hands and achieved a "miraculous" victory without divine intervention, can never be superseded by miracles brought about by God. Perhaps there is some-

108. *She'ilta for Purim*, ed. S. Mirsky (Jerusalem, 1963), no. 77, p. 215.

109. For sources, see *Sefer hamo'adim*, p. 31, and Schwarzbaum, *Folklore*, p. 367. Schwarzbaum notes that this pun was interpreted to apply to an ironic reversal of Purim. On Purim and the Day of Atonement Jews changed places. On Purim "Jews usually disguise themselves as gentiles. On *Yom Kippurim*, gentiles [=irreligious Jews termed "goyim" (gentiles)] disguise themselves as Jews, praying the whole day in the synagogue."

110. *Sefer hamo'adim*, pp. 30–31.

111. Cf. Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order," p. 170.

112. *Sefer hamo'adim*, p. 30; Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1909–38), 6:481; *Midrash Mishle* [The Midrash to Proverbs], ed. Burton Visotzky (New York, 1990), p. 66. Cf. P. Meg. 1:7, 70d.

113. P. Meg. 1:7, 70d. Maimonides, *Mishneh tora*, Laws of Megila 2:18.

thing to this explanation; it does point to a unique feature of Purim which distinguishes it from other festivals. But the uniqueness of Purim must also be sought in its liminality. Purim exists, in essence, on the margins of this world. It is a time of *communitas* when the normal structure breaks down, when everything is its opposite. The world-to-come will also overturn the structure of this world. Utopian thought, in general, pictures a liberation from constraint and structure, from power and rank, and foresees a time of harmony, equality, and bliss.<sup>114</sup> The wolf will lie down with the lamb, bear and lion will play together, Israel and the nations will unite in Messianic harmony. The world-to-come is universal love, peace, the absence of society and structure—ultimate *communitas*. Purim, the holiday of *communitas*, not other festivals, is uniquely appropriate for such a world.

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114. Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 111–113, 153.