

Dear Chavraya,

As we approach Purim, I struggle every year with that much beloved custom throughout the Jewish world to engage in so called "Purim Torah." Even in the great yeshivas, where you would think they might know better, there is mocking of Torah and of scholars, turning great teachers and teachings on their heads. Some teachers have even been known to stand on their heads, not knowing up from down, right from wrong, the blood of their wisdom rushing to their heads, light-headed and making light, engaging in such frivolity, and daring to call all of this Torah! At the risk of being a curmudgeon, I want no part of this, no Purim Torah for me. It may be well intentioned, but it quickly leads to *bitul Torah*, neglect and disrespect for Torah. It is best referred to in Yiddish, *bott'l Torah*, to fully appreciate the inherent danger. Yes, Purim Torah too often comes pouring from the neck of a bottle

While Purim Torah represents an extreme form of searching for meaning that isn't there, it is best at all times to stick with the *p'shat*, the simple, straightforward meaning of Torah. This preferred approach is illustrated clearly in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tzav*. With a simple shifting of letters, which is perfectly permissible in the service of simplifying rather than complicating, we have the word *vatz*, as in *vatz dat*. That is the essential question of Torah, of life, *vatz dat mean, vatz it all about?* I wish I had the answer, but knowing the question is at least a start. Those who engage in Purim Torah think they have the all the answers, but they don't even know the questions. Yes, I'll stick with the *p'shat*, none of this quest for deeper meaning, it just gets you lost and confused.

There is a good case in point in the special name of this Shabbos. The Shabbos before Purim is called *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbos of Remembrance. The first word of the special Torah reading for the day is *Zachor/Remember*. The last words of the special passage are *lo tish'kach/don't forget*. Contextually, yes, it is about what the bad guy Amalek, ancestor of another bad guy, Haman, did to us when we came out of Egypt. Just taking the few words by themselves, however, we have a much simpler teaching, the straightforward that applies to all of us. The *p'shat* is obvious; remember so that you won't forget because if you don't remember you will forget. In the mundane details of life, for which the Torah is so concerned, if you don't remember your lunch, you'll forget it, and then you'll be hungry. That's why the day before Purim is a fast day, *Ta'anis Esther/the Fast of Esther*. We are told that Queen Esther asked all of the Jews of Persia to fast for her when she went to the king unbidden to plead for her people. The straightforward suggests something completely different, though I don't remember just how, probably some Torah I lost one year when I allowed myself to engage in Purim Torah. In any case, because she was so nervous in going to

the king, Esther simply forgot her lunch. Remember..., don't forget! Vashti knew better, don't depend on the king for lunch..., or anything else.

Anyway, speaking of lunch, this is a tough *parsha* for vegetarians and gluten-free types. There are all the animal sacrifices and then when we finally get to the grain offerings and think we'll get something to eat, *oy vey*, we find that they are all wheat. At that point, some of us are too hungry to even think of looking any further than the straightforward, and that becomes a gift because then we see meaning we might otherwise have missed and that most try to avoid. You see, the grain offerings were to be made into *matzah*! Yes, *matzah*, just in time for Purim! This poses a very difficult dilemma, of course, so when are *hamentaschen* meant to be eaten? You can see why the rabbis tried to avoid looking too closely here.

If we stick to the straightforward, the *p'shat*, and avoid Purim Torah, there is great meaning to be found in little things, a big teaching in itself. That beloved Yiddish expression of lament, for instance, hand to the forehead, breathing out from the *kishkes*, *Oy Vey*, it is actually from the *Megillah*! Many times in the Purim story we encounter the word, *oyveyhem/their enemies*. There in the midst of so much violence is this bewildered expression of why; why can't we get along? *Oy Vey*, we shouldn't have enemies, no one should. Everyone should just be nice and make friends. *Vatz dat*, you say, well, that is the essence of Torah, Purim or otherwise.

Shabbat shalom and Purim same'ach,
Rabbi Victor